

Daide Mana



A Wisp of Smoke, Rising

-- a Story of the Cowboy Years --

The hum of the motors brought back the picture of a young man in flight fatigues, grinning wildly and patting with affection the side of the B-24 that would be our home for the next three years.

An open face, a cordial smile.

Honolulu getting small behind us as I snapped back from my reverie.



We used to call him Pinky.

We had started together on the Hump, back in '43, me, him, *Ripper* Pace and the rest.

He was an overeager flyboy from somewhere on the Massachusetts coast, just too happy to be the first to break the line of men in the family going to sea, and getting a real kick out of flying through the highest mountains of the world.

I was doing navigation on his ship.

We had our number of close shaves, fuck-ups and farcical adventures to help us grow close, as servicemen would.

After the Blast, he was relocated to Japan, while I stayed behind on the Nepalese border, and later ended up in D.C., flying a desk, with a green sticker on my file.

For services rendered.

The mail flow progressively dwindling as our lives grew further apart, I learned about his marriage to a local girl, in '48, something that was frowned upon by the top brass. I got a picture then, and one about one year later, during some kind of celebration his people had set up for him when he finally got back home.

Maybe the start of his troubles, maybe just the final twist.

Then communications ended, as it usually happens.

Sixteen years after our first meeting, I was being sent to close his file.



The Japanese cop was waiting for me as I disembarked.

Tokyo CID inspector, wearing a maroon suit and tan trench coat, he was dark-skinned, six foot tall and mean-looking; young and energetic by the look of him, but with some kind of vulnerability underlying his set jaw, and rough features that belied a fresh promotion from the broom service.

He scanned the flow of incoming passengers with a penetrating stare from under the brim of a dark fedora.

The clean-cut uniformed officer by his side carried a placard, the placard carried a name. My name, for all practical purposes.

I reached them and made myself known.

He took my DG-issue OSI paper at face value.

We shook hands and made our way to the service car waiting outside.

"I guess you want to see the place straight away," he said, as we crawled through the early afternoon traffic.

He had a harsh voice, but his English was serviceable.

I nodded.

We drove off, headed for the 'burbs.



It was a whitewashed, two story building, a little worse for use but pleasant. Much of

the surrounding blocks were occupied by anonymous wood and concrete boxes, that my guide called *machi-nami*.

This small house at least had some kind of individuality.

We stood outside the garden gate and instinctively I checked my watch. There was a big clock at the top of the building, the hands frozen at ten twenty-three.

I turned to the Japanese cop.

He nodded and opened the way through the small front yard.

There was an empty dog house and a small porch. A middle-aged man nodded twice or thrice as my guide spoke to him, then let us in.

A corridor with a wooden floor, doors with frosted glass panes, numbers written on them. The smell of wax and freshly cooked food permeated the air.

"A boarding house," the policeman explained. "Students, unmarried salarymen, sometimes a commuter staying for the working week. Upstairs," he added, nodding in the direction of the stair, "room number five. Come."

The door was sealed with paper strips. He broke them and let me pass.

The room was small but hardly cramped, a large wall closet dominating an entire wall, holding a few belongings and a rolled-up bedroll. A small radio on a low table by the window, a shelf with some photos and stuff.

At the center of the room, the floor-matting was stained a dark maroon. So were the walls, sprayed irregularly.

One carried a large stain, like a dark brush stroke.

"He lived here?"

A single room with the bathroom downstairs. I was surprised.

Our *private quarters* in Jorhat, fifteen years earlier, had been smaller, smellier and much more disreputable, but all this was....

I exhaled.

My companion was looking at me from the doorway.

Clothes hanging in the wall-closet: two suits, four shirts, two ties and a single pair of shoes. Repeatedly darned underwear and socks.

"Witnesses?"

He flicked out his notebook. "The gentleman occupying room number four heard the bangs and called the police from the phone downstairs. Then he stayed put 'til the local constable came. Apart from that," he made a sour face "nobody saw, nobody knows."

It was clearly a version not to his satisfaction.

I was in one of the photos on the shelf, standing tall and proud and young at the back of the group. Jack Pace was as grim and belligerent as ever, half a cigar between gritted teeth. Pinky was taking center stage as usual, all flash in his flight jacket and Tibetan mountain-man fur hat. Junior Dawson and the Brit, *Chubby* Wyngarde, were crouching at our feet.

A few other snapshots of his service years.

None of the pictures had been taken after 1949.

No photo of his son. None of his two wives, the petite Japanese one he had married in '48, nor the Mansfield-esque blonde from the Canadian border he had bedded and married in '50.

Bigamist.

I had photos of both, prints he had sent me and now I had added to his file, but he did not.

There were also a model P-38 and an USAF zippo lighter.

"The victim?"

The zippo worked.
No smokes in sight.
None in the suits pockets.

The inspector snapped the notes shut. "Still no leads. From out of town, most likely. Well to do, considering the way she was dressed. We are positive it was the first time she was here, but my guess is, they knew each other from somewhere. It was not their first meeting."

I had expected her to be a neighbor.
I gave him what I hoped could be interpreted as an interrogative stare.
"A girl that young does not go alone to the house of a man she has just met."
There was more to it than met the eye.
I nodded. "Maybe she was not alone."
He, too. "Maybe."

Was that amusement?

I crouched down and touched the stained tatami. I saw a pair of slippers under the table, realizing we were both still wearing our shoes. The Law did not yield to pleasantries, evidently.

I looked around once again.
Something was missing.
I stood again. Walked to the window.
Walked back to the door.
Opened the wall closet.
The cop's eyes were not leaving me, his frown deepening.
"What was the time?"

A slight moment of hesitation. "Six thirty-five in the morning."

Now he was openly studying me.
"She had spent the night here?" I asked.
Silence. "That was not in the report."

"There are some matters that are.... sensitive."

I snorted. You had to agree -- a gaijin loser pumping an underage local kid full of lead after screwing her brains out was certified hell for both them and us.

No wonder the Air Force was eager to sweep the whole under a carpet far, far away.

I looked again at the stain on the floor and remembered our New Year's Eve 1944 on the Hump, Pinky screaming *Auld Lang Syne* over the growl of the motors and the howl of the Tibetan wind, and then asking Dawson to *fill-in* for him while he broke open a bottle of highly dubious champers a Brit had sold him.

A bigamist and a child-fancier.

My friend.

"Anything else you considered sensitive and I should know?"

"No."

"I guess you picked up and filed all interesting items."

"We are no amateurs."

The tone was cutting. I had no idea of the kind of pressure that was being put on the guy, but it was not hard to guess.

"Let's get out of this place."



The road back into town was packed, and we slowed down to a crawl. I stared out of the window. Crowd. Men in black, ladies with meringue-like skirts, old women in

kimonos, kids wearing sailor uniforms.

Bicycles, a few scooters.

I was surprised at the number of unaccompanied young women out on the street this late in the evening.

"There's a lot of them," he said.

"Pardon?"

The inspector was reading my mind.

"Young women coming in from the country," he explained. "Closing the Yoshiwara was no solution."

Yoshiwara. I'd have to check.

"Are you thinking about the girl?"

"Were you not?"

In a sudden gesture, he slammed his hand on the horn and let out a short trumpet solo, to no avail. He grunted something in Japanese.

"Yeah, about the girl, and about your countryman's wife."

I avoided asking which one he intended. "I thought she was some kind of... entertainer, here or over in Yokohama."

I feared the word geisha could be somehow offensive.

He grunted.

We ground to a halt. He shrugged in frustration.

"Why are you here? Really."

"To learn what turned a fun loving rascal into a child killer. He was my friend."

He looked at me from the corner of his eye. "I see."

"And you?" I asked.

"I'm doing my duty. I'm the officer on the case."

"I see."



On the way to the morgue, I spent a short and momentous while at the embassy.

Delta Green does not make its presence known to new allies (especially if they fall in the Old Enemies category -- as most will), but with US authorities we are bound to come clean. Sort of.

As clean as possible.

A USMC sergeant in dress uniform checked my papers and directed me in a southern voice to a small unadorned office on the second floor.

The guy sitting behind the polished desk there was pretty much your standard-issue Central Intelligence Agency paper pusher, nurturing a small omnipotence complex, sitting on a thick fluffy cushion of complacency and giving the world the blessing of his Celluloid smile.

I felt once again the painful loss of OSS.

He invited me to sit and I refused just for the pleasure of contradicting him.

"Delta Green?" he said, scanning perfunctorily my documents. I was to poach in his woods, and he was not overly pleased.

Had he had any brains he would have been just scared.

He pushed the papers back at me. "I thought you died out after the war."

I picked them up. "Which one?"

This was clearly not the beginning of a great friendship.

"That stuff says I'm to give you full support."

I nodded.

"Chasing some Nazi mad scientist?" he grinned.
I ignored it. "There should be a parcel here for me."
"There's two, actually," he beamed.
Of course.

Pinky was waiting for me in the basement, in a wooden box with zinc lining, waiting for my work to be done in order to finally get back to some pretension of home, should someone accept the duty of recognizing him as family. There were photographs, of a man not young any longer, unmarked but missing the top of his head. I put those in the file and stared at the box for about ten seconds.

On my way out I picked up the parcel they had left waiting for me.

I opened it in a deserted waiting room, selected a few items, then went and handed it back, for them to keep it safely for me or the next in line.



Waiting in the hall, the CID man had discarded his trench coat and his fedora and was sitting in one of the stuffed chairs, reading a much-travelled paperback.

"Nice reading?" I asked.

He stared up, blushing, and passed a hand through his crew cut.

"I'm improving my French." He stood, still grinning sheepishly, and showed me the volume, something gallic about Cagliostro's secret, by Maurice Leblanc.

He flipped through the yellowed pages.

"This is a temporary post, for me," he confessed, as we got out in the street. The Marine nodded as I passed.

"I want to apply for a position as International Liaison Officer. INTERPOL. Paris. That's my true place, chasing international art and jewel thieves."

He laughed, loud, making it all sound as a joke, and put the book back in his coat's pocket.

"In the meantime I spend my free time with the best: Simenon, Leblanc, Futrelle."
And he laughed again.



The CID guy explained that handling dead bodies was not considered good for one's soul in Japan, and therefore the task was reserved to some special category of people.

Poor bastards.

Handling dead bodies is not good for anyone's soul in my book.

One of the guys, short and balding, was expecting us when we came, and lead us to the cold room.

"There," he said, pointing.

The body had been displayed on a stone table, a white sheet covering it, with chunks of ice in bags around it, a lamp supplementing the afternoon light filtering through a small window.

I studied the mounds and the valley in the sheet.

She was evidently in a bad shape. An air conditioner rattled in the distance.

A tang most foul hovered over the stretched body, a smell I did not immediately associate with death. It was acrid, like rotten lemon, and vaguely salty. It had a marshy, brine quality that I found naturally repulsive.

The short guy picked a corner of the sheet between thumb and forefinger and lifted it.
The stench got worse.

My guide, gulped, aghast as I was.

A fusillade of sharp, aggressive Japanese followed, and the attendant ran away.

"He's gone to fetch the doctor. Surely some kind of mishap...."

He looked closer and turned, clearly sick.

I was paid to look at it.

The body was going into a sort of extended, pervasive gangrene, slowly but steadily dissolving into unpleasant yellow-brown goo. It had impregnated the cloth under the body, and was collecting in torpid, wax-like pools at the border of the table. In one of these floated a single fingernail, upturned. Red chunks of muscle, the ribs, white and clean as china, some patches of pale skin remained, but little of the rest. It was like a statue of lumpy, melting, rotting butter, with an unpleasant wet shine to it.

A single eye, the black iris staring at the ceiling, rested on a mound of the stuff, surrounded by incongruous, luscious strands of black hair that were almost blue under the light, and the only thing left untouched by the degenerative process.

The doctor came. He took a look and it was as if someone had hit him hard in the face.

A fiery discussion ensued, the clipped Japanese sounds echoing in the tiled room. All persons involved avoided the sight of the thing on the slab.

I let them discuss the matter over and over, while I went outside for a breather.

I had been too late once again.

"They're gonna cut the thing up," he said.

My colleague had reached me.

I realized he had been repeating some kind of Buddhist prayer under his breath.

Now he lit up a badly mangled cigarette.

I turned.

The morgue was something old fashioned and depressing, white-tiles and bare lightbulbs in a light-and-dark pattern, musty basement, the air heavy with the smell of some kind of industrial-standard disinfectant.

The doctor, sweating, was hiding his features behind a mask, his assistant pushing a cart by the table. I watched him choose a scalpel, verify its sharpness under the sharp light of the lamp, slowly bend forward to look at the thing.

He lowered his hand.

And the thing screamed.



When night fell again in the land of the rising sun, we were in a smoke-filled office, a sea of nasty coffee behind us, our respective files spread on the table, racking our minds for any kind of lead. Any kind of whatever to let us think not at the basement.

The doctor had made up something or other about residual pressure in the lungs, possibly increased by gases released by the accelerated decay, pushed through the larynx by the scalpel's pressure and causing what the CID man by my side translated as "A loud gurgle".

Crap, and we both knew.

The scream had been high and horrible, and long-winded, cut short only when the assistant had finally severed the thing's throat.

"What will happen now?"

He looked at me, the mangled cheroot in his compressed lips burning bright.

"To the body, I mean?"

"They'll cremate it," he said.

He stopped walking up and down and turned to face me, slamming his hands on the table.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

I tried to look as blank as possible. "What do you mean?"

"C'mon, we are among professionals. This is not a case for your Air Force services or whatever. He was kicked out. In '52. For bigamy, and before that," his eyes reduced to slits, "he had been laid off for quite a while, before that, I suspect for marrying a Japanese. It happened all the time. It's been almost ten years. The Air Force now has nothing to do with it, wanted nothing to do with it for ages. Or maybe I'm mistaken? What's happening? Why this collaboration, when the guys in the embassy and Air Command were clearly so uncooperative?"

I shook my head.

I was tired and scared.

Very scared.

In this town, maybe on this entire island, something was happening.

Something foul and unexpected.

But he would not relent. "You went to them, and they were waiting for you," he said.

I played dumb.

"The guys that claim to sell farming machines, but would not be able to tell the front of a pig from the back of it. What are they? CIA?"

No, just suckers.

'Low profile', they called their outfit.

I spread my hands, "I'm just a grocery boy...."

He threw the butt of the cigarette in the tray and slammed his hands on the table once again. The ashtray jumped, papers slid down and spread fluttering on the floor, in a wide fan of white and yellow sheets.

"Don't mock me!"

He pointed a finger to the door. "What's that thing in the morgue? Some kind of atomic test you did AGAIN in my country? Or something else you tested in Korea this time, only now's coming here, spreading?"

"You said it yourself.... some kind of malfunction or mishap in the refrigerating system...."

He snorted, straightening up.

Shaking his head.

Indignation.

"You think you are dealing with a fool!" He turned again, the eyes wild. "I grew up here in Japan. In Tokyo. We had no relations in the country, my family could not leave the city. My father was a cop but he doubled as a stationmaster. I was here in this town!"

He closed his eyes, exhaling a long breath.

"March the ninth 1945," he said. "You remember?"

I had been snooping around in India at the time.

But I had friends in the B-29 crowd.

I remembered.

"I saw more gutted buildings and dead bodies as a boy than you ever did as a soldier. I saw the ones that were killed by bombs, and later I saw the ones that took their lives after the armistice, out of shame and humiliation. I saw the hibakusha."

He went to the window. "Nothing I ever saw" he said, slowly, "ever looked like that thing on the slab. Never. Normal people just do not decay like that. Normal dead bodies do not scream when cut up!"

He turned and he stood there, waiting for an answer.
He was a good man, the only one at hand.
So I gave him an answer.



"I do not know what's happening."

He looked dubious.

"Really. The people that sent me here do not believe in prejudiced observers. I was sent in a virgin, to better assess the situation."

A single nod. "Who are these people that sent you? CIA? FBI?"

"No, we are.... something else. Something charged with dealing with.... things. Things like that one in the morgue. We have been dealing with that kind of stuff for.... for quite a while."

He did not look too surprised at the revelation.

Again he pointed at the door, "Is that your doing?"

"No, it's not."

Hopefully.

"Then what it is?"

"I do not know. I'm here to find out."

"And once you find out?"

I straightened my shoulders, feeling a pain between my shoulder blades.

"I'll take care of it."

"How?"

I laid my unmarked Browning 9mm on the table. "This way."

He stared at it. "You were not allowed to bring that in my country."

"I did not. It was here already when I came in. So what? Am I under arrest?"

He grinned mirthlessly and dropped on his chair, crossing his arms. "Cloak and dagger, nah? And what am I supposed to do, now?"

I just shook my head.

It was late and I was tired

"You know what?" he said after a minute of silence "I want to see the bottom of this thing if it's the last thing I see."

"It might well be."

Serious. "You trying to scare me off?"

"The case is closed for you, right?"

"It was not a case from the beginning. A basic homicide/suicide, it would have died in a filing cabinet after forty eight hours. But a gaijin was involved, and some politician or other wanted something official done." He lit up another cheroot. "These masters of yours.... do they have political connections over here? In the Health Ministry, maybe?"

"I would not be surprised."

"Then maybe they just needed my legwork while you were getting ready to step in and...." He gestured, "Ah, and take care of it, right?"

"I would not be surprised," I repeated.

"And what would stop me at this point," he asked theatrically, "from lending you a hand taking care of it?"

He pulled a big '45 from a shoulder holster and placed it on the table.

I was surprised to discover he packed a weapon.

We stared at each other for a while, like poker players in a western movie.

The noises from the street drifted by us.

"Nothing," I said, finally.

The new bebop crowd in the structure liked to call those like him 'friendlies'.

Useful and expendable.

The inspector stubbed out his smoke in the crowded ashtray.

"Fine. Let's clear this mess out and call it a day, then, ok?"

He bent and collected the papers from the floor.

"Tomorrow we'll start it over again with a fresh.... hey!"

When he straightened up again, he was holding a photograph.

It was the wedding celebration picture I had brought from home - the flash of the unknown photographer catching Pinkerton looking uncomfortable in his airman blue, the woman in a red kimono with some kind of pattern to it, her face little more than a white oval in the slightly shaky frame, more people barely visible in the background.

"This is the same fucking kimono!"



It was the same fucking kimono all right.

It was bloodstained and ripped, but it was clearly the same pattern, of small butterfly-like silhouettes, black, gold and silver on the bright red fabric.

It was light, still soft where the blood had not soaked it, and smelled faintly of something I could not place.

Incense?

Or some herbs.

There was a larger pattern to it, as if the single butterflies flying across its surface were in fact tiny pieces in a much more complex picture, but the thing was too damaged for me to tell.

The same fucking garment.

Or was it?

My local advisor was adamant.

"Take a look at the fabric, at the obvious quality of the manufacture."

That was easy to tell. "First class stuff?"

He snorted. "This is clearly a Nishijin kimono. They make them in Kyoto, way south. Very fine object, special manufacture technique, sort of a trade secret, using silver and gold thread for embroidery."

His fingers danced briefly on the remains, producing a thin whispering sound from the material as he turned it again and again in his hands.

"Expensive, first class superior. They're usually sold only to a select few and are reserved for important ceremonies - such as upper class engagements, weddings, funerals too."

"How appropriate."

"Right. I told you we presumed she was from a well to do family. Now you know why. And we know from which family she came." He tapped my picture. "From this woman's family. Chances are, it's the same kimono. Literally."

I felt dizzy.

So Pinky killed a relation.

More likely screwed and killed a relation.

Did he know it?

Stuff for the shrinks.

But I saw his point. "Now we can know where the girl came from. We just have to get Pinkerton's marriage certificate and see where the lady came from."

He nodded, his eyes still on the photo.

"She's wearing it the wrong way around," he mumbled.

I saw nothing strange in the picture. "Meaning?" I asked.

"Something weird," he said, keeping his eyes on the frozen image. "Something bad."



We had some foodstuff delivered and went through the papers again.

We asked for actual newspapers of the time, too, just to see if something had been published somewhere.

Nothing.

No marriage certificate, no accessory document.

The relevant documents had been transferred to some bureaucratic limbo, somehow suspended between the US Air Force and the Japanese government, where there was no hope of retrieving them anymore.

The CID man made a few calls, bowing from time to time to the telephone, being harsh at times, being ingratiating.

NOthing.

At the end of our wits, we tentatively contacted the Kyoto silk garment manufacturers, hoping for something different from the curt denial they gave us.

We soon exhausted our scant options.

"He had a kid. A son."

I dug out the relevant pages.

We had little about the whole story. "Died in late '51. Pneumonia."

"The man was in the States at the time, right?"

Right.

Pinky had been home, living in marital bliss with his blonde pinup.

He had never met his son.

Dates, numbers, some relic in the form of an old picture or some snippets of official papers.

A chunk off a lifetime.

I started browsing through the file again, while my partner's gaze drifted towards the window and out, across the street.



Spring 1948, Pinky marries his geisha girl.

No name or other details of the woman, the papers lost somewhere in the chaos of post-war Japan.

The news had come to me as a surprise.

Not like my pal, such a hasty ceremony.

The only available picture is dark, he is too serious in his Air Force uniform, she's wearing the damn red kimono, her face an anonymous pale oval with dark stains under a complicated hairdo, the people at their sides dark shapes in the flashlight, crouching on a polished wooden floor.

Winter 1949, Pinky is back home, and having a ball.

He's the warrior boy coming back to his family and friends. A snapshot, my personal contribution to the file, catches him dancing something fast and happy with a busty blonde, having the time of his life. The rest of the people twirling around them just confused unfocused shapes; one of the overhead lights is reflected by a trumpet barely

visible in the background, its shiny halo has blackened rims caused by some optical effect.
Her name was Dorothy, like in "The Wizard of Oz".
Her yellow brick road would come to a sharp stop in a few months.
Like the signs they put on old country roads - Pavement Ends.
More relics.
A marriage certificate, from somewhere near Vegas, cheap paper hastily filled with ball-pen scrawls, the name of the best man impossible to make out, possibly the priest himself or some professional wedding accessory.
Marriage and honeymoon in one single handy package.
As Pinky marries the busty blonde February 1950 crawls in, just two months to the birth of his only son. The Japanese document is utterly unreadable to my eyes, utterly useless to my companion. No picture of neither event, both lost in the growing labyrinth that Pinky's civilian life is turning into.
Did he know about the coming of a son?
Was his trip home the escape of a man running from his growing responsibilities?
How come nothing was known about his marriage in Japan?
But then 1951 comes and everything changes.
As his sick infant son lingers at the gates of death, his Japanese wife asks the Force to track down her incommunicado husband. Medical reports, a number of telegrams, some letters on official letterhead, some not.
Everything is now out in the open.
Pinky heads home but things are getting frantic. The kid dies, the Japanese woman cuts her throat open, neither event witnessed by even the slightest leaf of official paper.
My Japanese sidekick had a word for the suicide, though.
He calls it funshi.
The suicide of the indignant.
Why did it take him so long to get back?
Why did they not try him for bigamy?
The Air Force preferring to keep a lid on it?
Then, in a perfunctory sheriff's report, the busty blonde does a runner while Pinky's in Japan and then slashes her wrists in a motel room, not far from the Canadian border, using a broken gin bottle.
We do not have a name for it.
Just a reaction to loss, to shame, or desperation.
According to the ME she had just underwent a quick-and-dirty abortion in some basement or other.
Another dead son.
The symmetry was scary.
1952 comes and Uncle Sam hands Japan back, at least nominally.
Pinky is alone in a foreign land.
All funerals done, all bodies buried.
Then limbo.
Walks in the park, probably.
Maybe the casual frequentation of the Water Trade.
Did my friend still like movies?
Alone.
No friends.
No family.
No nothing.

Then four gunshots against a kid of maybe fifteen, probably a relation of sorts, after a night of love.

Love?



I lifted my eyes from the wedding photo.

The back of my head hurt.

No hope of getting any revealing detail.

Pinky looked like the only real person in the frame, serious to the point of grimness, the others just dummies crouching there on the floor in their dark traditional dresses.

Buddhist wedding?

Shinto?

Something else altogether?

Sure the photographer had downed a few already, from the way the frame swam, gray blurred haze witnessing a shaky hand.

I turned the photograph.

No marks on the paper.

But there was a possibility.

"Do you think this could have been taken by a Force photographer?" I asked.

But there had been a time when Uncle Sam had the best cameras in Japan.

And Uncle Sam has a long memory.



It took us three days to track the place where the shot had been taken.

The guy shooting Pinky's wedding day had retired in '52, married a Nisei civilian interpreter he had met in Osaka and later moved to Hong Kong, doing magazine work and some freelancing.

Dzulinsky was the name.

Sargeant Bill Dzulinsky, USAF, ret., a Chicago-born boy with a thing for cameras.

He was like a rabid wet squid on the phone, escaping in fifteen different directions while still trying to pry out and catch all the interesting bits.

Worked for a magazine, he did, as if that was reason enough for him to try and squeeze me for news.

Which magazine?

He did not elaborate further.

A hollow grating sound kept us company on the international patch-through, like waves roaring in deep caverns.

I stuck to my story. Pinky dead of a stroke, no surviving family back home, Uncle Sam willing to shell out some bucks to the surviving Japanese relations as a pension, him being a war hero and all that.

He did not buy it, not completely at least, but was willing to give me a break.

He was vague.

The girl's name? Tomiko something. Shy girl. Very proper.

Not exactly Pinky's standard.

They'd been seeing each other for a while, at the time.

The wedding place? Someplace southeast. Someplace small and cozy. In the Boso area.

Yooroo-something.

"Pretty backwater," he said.

He remembered passing through Goi getting there.

He knew a girl there.

Or three.

Stopping for drinks.

Lots of them.

He made it clear both he and Pinky had been severely pickled at the time.

His last words hung for a long while after the line died between us.

"It was all sort of a lark, you know."

A lark.

By the time the picture had been taken, Corporal Dzulinsky was probably the only one still thinking of the whole think as a lark.

Pinky's seriousness struck me once again.

Had he just sobered, realizing in what sort of mess he was getting?

Was the grim set of his jaw a witness to his mind busily trying to find an escape route *in extremis*?



You had to admire the way this guys did things.

We had three black and whites with uniformed officers and two truckfulls of cops in riot gear thundering down the road to Chiba in three hours flat.

The plan was to get to Goi - across the bay from Tokyo - and then climb up the Yooroo river valley to the place called Yooroomachi.

We had to pull out a pre-war ordnance map to locate the cursed place, as it failed to show on more recent surveys.

There was a temple there all right, fully owned by the local landed gentry.

No records, no details.

Always been there.



A gray stone Buddha stood by the ditch, the fingers of his rosary hand gone, the egg-shaper stone head tilted to an unpleasant angle.

It reminded me of a hanged man.

Our car pulled in the lane leading to the temple and me and my partner dismounted. Bare trees stretched their branches over us, the deserted village a faint memory two miles back, lost at the end of a winding dirt road.

Muttering something, the Japanese cop straightened the stone head and bowed his own, quickly whispering a prayer.

"You can't trust people that do not have respect for traditions," he said.

I could relate to that.

"What's your plan?" I asked.

"We go pay a visit to the master of the house," he said.

He lifted his trench coat collar, caught by a sudden shiver.

"We get a look around, we get the feeling of the place."

He started walking slowly past the temple, to the house.

"Then what?"

"We demand explanations."

Very quaint.

"And should the gentleman refuse us?"

"Then we call in all the agents and start searching this place."
He stopped, turned. "Thoroughly."



But the place was dead.

The temple was a useless pile of darkened wood, strands of yellowed paper hanging from ropes at the gate.

My companion was unable to make out the signs on the door frame.

The house was in slightly better shape, but still a wreck.

We passed a falling gate and entered an overgrown garden, flat stones marking an uneasy path towards the building.

My guide shook his head, pained at the sight.

"Such a large house," he said.

The place was huge, one of those Japanese things mounted on short stilts and covering a football field.

Most of the walls and roof were still there in place, sliding doors long gone, black holes gaping at us.

"I guess we can call the kids and start searching," I said.

But I doubted we would find anything consistent.

Another dead end.

Looked like the world was always a few steps behind when it came to nailing Pinkerton's blues.

My companion nodded absentmindedly and walked back to the car.

We had left our troops two twists of the road behind, dismounting from the trucks and getting ready for the dance.

I climbed a few creaking steps and looked into the building through what once had been, I imagined, the main door.

I got the impression of a small bell tinkling in the breeze somewhere.

Otherwise, the place was silent.

I stepped in.

Some light came from holes in the broken roof, shafts of afternoon light falling from above, making darkness darker by contrast.

No furniture in sight.

A sweet, unpleasant smell in the air.

And something else.

A grating, rasping noise, coming from the inside.

Like a large cicada.

I pulled the gun out and stepped further in.

Clicking soft steps -- like a stray dogs inspecting the house and scratching the floor to get to a rat's hole.

More empty rooms.

Cobwebs hanging from the walls like ripped silk curtains.

The sound, louder now.

Closer.

The floor creaked unpleasantly as I entered a huge darkened space.

"It's been nice of you..."

I turned left, weapon lifted, finger tightening its hold on the trigger, the snout of the weapon no more than a span from Pinky's face.



"To come and see me," he finished. He smiled, ignoring the gun, and turned, stepping in the dark. He was gone.

"Hold it!"

Steps. A match was struck in the shadows, a lamp lit up.

Pinky shook his head.

"You should not be so nervous," he said.

In the lamplight he wore some gray suit, of mediocre quality, that someone had modified to better fit his spare frame. It was hard to make out his feet in the blackness.

He was not too different from my flying mate.

A little older, hairline receding. His face pale in the trembling light.

"Sorry I can't invite you to sit down," he said.

He moved to one side, clearing the light.

Something moved out of the room.

"The Japs do not have chairs, you see. Tough luck."

My mind was racing.

"Are you going to keep that thing pointing at my face forever?"

"You're dead."

"You should think otherwise, you know."

He spread his arms, feebly, a defeated gesture.

No watch, no rings on his fingers, no concealed weapon.

"I saw your coffin," I continued.

And photos and a coroner report.

Where the hell were the cops?

"I was not in it," he smiled again. "Evidently."

One full long minute passed.

I lowered the gun.

Play along.

Buy time.

Fear was trying to cut my breaths short.

"That's better," he nodded.

"You better have some first class explanation, mister, and you better give it fast."

Delta Green wanted answers.

He chuckled.

"Yeah. I'm happy you're fine, too."

He lowered his head, scratching the top of it the way I remembered him doing during our unending card games, the wind howling out on the airstrip.

"Nice flooring, eh?" he asked.

He crouched down, prodding the floor with his forefinger.

"Eighteen tatami room," he said. "That's a lot of space hereabouts, you know."

He stood.

I half expected he'd slap his hands together to remove the dust, then do the same with his left knee, but he did not, he left his arms rest by his sides.

"The tatami are placed in a spiral disposition," he explained, moving a pair of steps to the left. "Spirals are quite common in many culture, you know."

He was close to one wall. He lifted his right and slowly, carefully drew a spiral in the thick dust hanging to it.

"A sign representing evolution."

"What the hell is happening, man?"

"But actually something turning endlessly staying in one place. Like a spinning top."
He looked at me, then turned again to the wall.

I should have nailed him and asked questions later, but answers were what I'd been sent to find out.

"You can't run, you know?" he said, following with a finger the spiral he had traced himself, slowly, without taking his eyes off it.

I retreated slightly. My shoulders hit a thin wall behind me, or maybe it was a sliding paper door. It gave a little, then it stopped.

"They won't let you go, try as much as you like. I tried to," Pinky continued, keeping his eye on the floor "but there's no escaping your family."

He chuckled again.

I was not taking my eyes off him, measuring the distance, finding likely spots to hit.

The floor creaking faintly. A kimono-clad figure emerged from the darkness beyond the lamp's reach. She was short, curved and black-haired, with a face that was impossible to make out, a clear circle of chalk-like makeup.

She bowed, whispered, turned to me at his dismissive gesture.

I had the impression her stare, pinpointed by two dark circles under the black fringe of her hairdo, somehow focused somewhere over my head as she whispered what I took to be a greeting.

"Tea's all right, old man?" he croaked. He noisily cleared his throat as I gave an affirmative sign.

Then the woman retreated and was swallowed again by darkness.

"The Japanese know. Family is important to them as it was to us in the past."

The chuckle turned into a rattling laugh.

The papery sound was close, behind me.

"All this way only to get back home!"

He turned to me, the spiral forgotten.

"They made a deal, you understand? The old man in his house accepted the call from his antipodean friends. I was bargained over."

A gurgling laugh turned into a sigh.

His tone was suddenly broken, he came closer two or three steps, stopped, sighed.

"New blood for an older line.... an arranged wedding...." he was spluttering as he spoke, his mouth refusing to shape the words his brain was dictating.

"And I thought.... silly, I imagined I had eluded them!"

He laughed again.

"While this had always been my destination!"

Time was running short.

My right palm was sweaty on the black rubber of the grip.

The wall behind me seemed to move slightly.

"I'm sorry about poor Dotty, now" he sighed, apparently back in control. Dotty, Dorothy, his blonde wife. "Tell everyone I'm sorry about her. When she learned of the thing.... in her...."

Something screamed, not far away.

".... growing"

I was momentarily paralyzed but my mind was racing.

The cops.

Coming.

Questions.

"The girl....?"

He looked at me blankly for a second. Nodded.
"They wanted a second batch, you see. The first one was faulty."
The wall behind me trembled.
"So they sent Tomiko again, to get impregnated. They.... It sent her younger this time."
He let out a childish laughter. "It knew my tastes.... his."
One gunshot, another.
"But I.... he denied them...."
He looked confused, came closer.
The floor trembled.
Pinky nodded. "Your friends found the main hive," he said.
He grabbed my right, lifting it forcibly.
"Now do your duty," he said as he leaned his brow against the barrel of my gun. "Pull the fucking trigger and free your old pal from this cage for a while!"
His hand on my wrist was cold, wet, soft, subtly obscene.
As I watched him a third hand descended and serrated its long thin claws on the weapon, pulling.
I looked up.



There was an inverted female face looking down at me, solid yellow eyes running with crimson tears and a large grinning mouth filled with a forest of span-long, needle-like teeth, long strands of night-black hair falling around its paper-white features.
The thing was leaning forward to look at me while it tried to wrestle the gun away with an hand that looked and felt like the freshly-pulled root of a very old tree.
I started screaming.
A wall collapsed in a cloud of rubble, people in dirty black uniforms charging in the room, flashlights illuminating the scene, sledgehammers, truncheons and hatchets bristling. Some carried square shields.
There were more screams in the background, and the smell of gasoline and fear filled my nostrils.
Was there a silk-clad faceless shape trampled under the agents' jackboted feet?
The face reared up, roaring, and exploded as a single shot hit it square between those alien eyes.
"Run, you fool!"
I scampered away but Pinky grabbed me.
His features were melting into an unpleasant yellow goo.
His mouth blubbered something, filling with sharp teeth.
I shot him, once, twice, three times full in what was left of his face and chest.
The bullets entered him with wet sounds and he did not seem to mind them at all.
The CID man got hold of me and pulled me away as I still squeezed the trigger.
I got an impression of the headless female torso tapering into a snakelike shape, of a weird abdomen expanding in segments like the elitrae of an insect, of a number of coils slithering away in the darkness of the already burning edifice.
Then the policemen ran the thing over with hammers and hatchets and started pouring more gas on the tatami.
Light hit me as a solid fist, fresh air suffocating me and I was out.
I rolled in the grass and caught a few gasping breaths.
Steps ran around me as the boys in black cleared the premises.
I turned.

There was smoke, wood and gasoline in the air.
And screams, like somebody smothering a litter of piglets.
The Japanese inspector crouched by me, still holding his piece.
"You all right?"
I nodded, coughing.
I sat, watching the house go up in flames.
The fire roared around the pillars and through the open doors.
The roof was slowly, creakingly sinking.
A fiery shape emerged from the house, waving flame-wrapped appendages that might have been arms.
It screamed abuse in English and Japanese and Pakistani pidgin and shook its deformed fists at the sky.
I wondered how much of my friend had been trapped in that thing.
A hand silently offered me a gun.
I dropped mine, all charges spent, lifted the unfamiliar '45 and planted seven bullets in the fiery mannequin, pushing it back in its sizzling tomb with the rest of its family.
Then the roof finally collapsed.
Puffs of black oily smoke rose towards the sky.
End of the game.
"What the fuck was that thing?"
I handed the gun back. The cop shrugged.
"You're the cowboy, mister."
We stared each other in the eye for a long second.
"You know their names," he said, reholstering his piece. "I just plain kill them."



Beyond the glass wall men in grey coveralls were loading Pinky's coffin to the PanAm cargo hold.
Reflected in the glass surface, Narita was crowded as ever.
The CID man saw me to the gate and waved away the uniformed cop carrying my suitcase.
"You'll follow up this thing back home?" he asked.
"Probably," I nodded.
"All in all it was an arranged wedding," he concurred.
More ruins to explore, more houses to burn.
He pushed his hands in the trench coat pockets.
"You'll do the same here."
He shook his head. "My masters do not believe in exposing twice the same men."
He took out an envelope and showed it to me.
"My post to INTERPOL arrived yesterday."
"Off to gay Paree?"
"So it seems. Quieter post, better pay, lots of glamor." He lifted the pinkie of his left hand, "Women, too."
He cracked that weird, open-mouthed laugh of his.
I suddenly pitied the poor thieves that would cross swords with him.
"I've got a thing for you," he said.
He took out a roll of paper and handed it to me. "As a parting gift. In friendship."
It was a painting.
A weird sketch of a very dark green, almost black lizard on a stone by a pond, the

shadow of a few blades of grass falling on its body.

Old.

It had a summery feel to it, of heat and peacefulness.

There were spiky characters painted by one side.

"For good luck," he added.

I rolled the thing up, put it in my carryall.

Time for shaking hands.

I guess there was a hell of a lot of things we had not told to each other, but that was our line of busyness, or had been for a while.

He bowed rigidly.

I raised a hand.

And we never saw each other again.

[Davide Mana -- Torino, Italy -- October 2000]

Notes on "A Wisp of Smoke, Rising"

The following is a random collection of notes concerning both the contents and developments of the story on the previous pages. None of this is essential, far from it, but it might be of interest to the more curious readers.



- page 1 -

. the title comes from Giacomo Puccini's "Madame Butterfly", itself an adaptation of David Belasco's one act tragedy of the same title. Pointing out to my friend Chantal Diegoli (who loves opera and finds horror fiction not to her taste) that opera is often on a par with horror in terms of gruesome demises started me thinking about using "Madame Butterfly" as the basis for a supernatural narrative. The story went through at least three rewrites, and at one time included references to Poe's "Annabel Lee" and much more name dropping and manga in-jokes, bringing the length to almost the double of the current page-count.

. the Cowboy Years are the years of officially sanctioned Delta Green activity, after the OSS disbanding and the reorganization of P Division, and prior to the Cambodian mishap.

. In the DGML version the title was misspelled "Whisp", and all those that noticed were kind enough not to point it out.

. the cover design for this edition is the *kanji* for *yaku* (or *eki*) meaning *duty*; the small numbers around it state the stroke order in which the character must be drawn. In this sense, the whole takes a different meaning - to me at least - as the result of the meeting between Japan and the West. That's not Duty, therefore, it is how you do it. *Duty for beginners*, if you will.

It seemed appropriate.

- page 2 -

. *The Hump* is the name Allied flyers (mostly Americans) gave to the Kunmin(China)-Johrat(Pakistan) supply route through the Himalayas and over Tibet, served by B-24s during the Second World War.

. Colonel Jack *The Ripper* Pace comes from an old homegrown rpg campaign from the early '80s. My friend Valter Bevilacqua ran him with his usual zest for wanton mass destruction. He crops up in a lot of my stories and games - steampunk to space opera - wherever a military campaign is mentioned.

. "Tokyo CID Inspector" - what follows is a close and reasonable description of Inspector Kouichi Zenigata, Tokyo Police and later INTERPOL, as portrayed in the first, classic "Lupin Sansei" TV series (1971), after the eponymous Monkey Punch comic. The idea of using some manga or anime references in "Wisp" came to me as Mark McFadden observed he needed "to get more into this manga thing" in a message to DGML as I was outlining this. Most were later dropped from the final version.

. It's *nami-machi*, actually - literally *city house* - but the secret agent guy evidently got it the other way around, as I usually do, to the chagrin of my Japanese teacher.

- page 3 -

. the house with the frozen clock is the *Maison Ikkoku* (lit. *The House of the Fleeting Moment*) from the eponymous series by Rumiko Takahashi (1986). Purists might point out that the clock is two minutes early. I might point out they are missing the point.

. the gentleman in room number four is obviously the sinister and persistent Yottsuya-san from the same series. The killing took place, unsurprisingly, in room number Five, in which the protagonist of the Takahashi series will be housed through the '80s.

- page 4 -

. "Something was missing" - indeed! One full page of rather rambling and pointless narrative was cut and replaced with that single line on a whim just before posting. It works.

- page 5 -

. Yoshiwara was the "red lights" pleasures district of Tokyo. It was razed and rebuilt a number of times through history, twice only in this century - in the great 1923 quake, and again by American bombings in 1945. It was officially closed in 1957, when Japan outlawed prostitution within the national boundaries.

. "chasing some Nazi mad scientist" - reference to Operation:SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY, that took

place between 1948 and 1956 according to the official Delta Green cronology.

- page 6 -

. Georges Simenon (1903-1989), creator of Inspector Maigret, is probably the most famous and respected French mystery writer, and a Guinness record holder for the number of novels written during his lifetime (78 Maigret novels, 136 other books under his own name, plus about 300 pseudonymous efforts).

. Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941) created the character of Arsene Lupin the Gentleman Thief in 1905. The book the CID man is reading is "Secret of Cagliostro" which ~ together with Leblanc's "The Girl with Green Eyes" ~ is the basis for "Castle of Cagliostro", the award-winning "Lupin Sansei" 1979 theatrical release directed by Hayao Miyazaki.

. Jaques Futrelle (1875-1912), creator of professor Van Dusen, a.k.a. *the Thinking Machine*, was an American, and has nothing to do with France, despite the French sound of his name. Probably that's the reason why the CID man is laughing.

. handling dead bodies is indeed bad for the soul according to Japanese culture, and therefore a caste of untouchable individuals (*eta*, or *burakumin*) is charged with these (and many other) unpleasant duties.

- page 7 -

. a *loud gurgle* can indeed escape the lips of a prodded dead body due to the release of gases produced by the decay of internal organs. Screaming is another thing altogether.

- page 8 -

. on the night between March the ninth and March the tenth 1945 Tokyo was firebombed for about eight hours solid, starting at 10.30 pm; the windy weather allied itself with the thousands of tonnes of explosives, the resulting fire cancelling the most densely peopled area of the town and causing 124.711 dead (but this official figure should be increased to 197.000 according to other reliable sources).

. *hibakusha* is the word with which Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors are known.

- page 9 -

. the Ministry of Health is likely to be the *Kaishichoo*, the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Delta Green might have friends in there from the time of Unit 731 ~ the Japanese medical experimentation unit that did tests on human subjects (chiefly prisoners) during World War Two and was later granted a certain impunity after the Armistice.

- page 10 -

. *Nishijin kimono* are indeed the connoisseur's choice for ceremony garment. They are made in Kyoto following a secret technique, and could be (and sometimes are) displayed as works of art.

. kimono are always worn with the left side overlapping the right. The other way around, as in the photograph, is the way dead bodies are dressed. The last four lines of this paragraph were omitted from the DGML-posted version due to a technical glitch and are restored here for the first time.

- page 11 -

. mixed marriages of servicemen were frowned upon by the US Armed Forces according to my sources. Extremely frowned upon. Discharge for marrying a local is not such an extreme measure.

. *funshi* is the suicide of the indignant ~ the ultimate response to an extreme insult. Either David Belasco or Giacomo Puccini's librettists (Illica & Giacosa) did not know, but women do not cut their belly open, but their throat, with a *tanto* or short knife. Recently, some directors restored historical accuracy in "Butterfly" performances.

- page 14 -

. two truckfulls of riot-gear equipped cops are indeed in keeping with Lupin Sansei standards.

- page 15 -

. the yellow paper strips are *gohei* hanging from a *shimenawa* (lit. *sacred rope*) ~ meaning this place is sacred to some Shinto deity or tradition. It is not unusual in Japan for a family to own a shrine.

- page 16 -

. 18 tatami is quite a lot of space ~ about 36 square meters.

- page 17 -

. the creature described on this page is a very free and loose elaboration on the *Snake Woman* portrayed coiled around a tree in Toriyama Shien's "Hyakki Yagyō" (lit. *Nightly procession of one hundred demons*, 1776). The original monster to be featured in this story, back when it was longer and less focused, should have been a lovecraftian version of the *Rokurokubi*, a nasty snake-necked woman spirit; then, the ancient picture caught my eye and I went for more improvisation and less name-dropping. My friend Eckhard Huelshoff proposed a vegetal interpretation for the true nature of the thing, sort of an animal-vegetal hybrid ~ something that rather pleases me in retrospect.

- page 19 -

. the lifted pinkie indicates a young woman or a girlfriend in Japanese sign language.
. the black lizard is here to tie all loose ends together, and to introduce *Kurotokage*, the Japanese anti-Mythos outfit originally dreamed up by the honourable Edward Lipsett & friends. So this was a joint operation, after all.
. the writing says "*Illusions deceive. Colours circumscribe. Even divisibles are indivisible.*" (this being the seventy-second teaching from the "Centering" manuscript, 2000 b.C.).
But you'll have to trust my word on that one.



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The Tuesday Night Team is still the best gaming group in town, and a source of continual amusement and headaches ~ (clockwise around the table) Alessandro Mana, Roberta Speranza, Chantal Diegoli, Roberto Riva, Enzo Licausi and Valter Bevilacqua all somehow contributed to the above, mostly without knowing. *Grazie ragazzi!*

And the final thank goes to whoever will be so kind to read this story.
Thank you.

Davide Mana
Torino, Italy
December 2000

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