

## Dangerous up North

[During March 1958, Communist troops supposedly from North Vietnam were occupying areas inside Laos near the Laos-North Vietnam border, further strengthening Sinclair Langdon's determination to get there and report on what was truly going on. But, constantly told it's dangerous up north.]

Yvonne Cloutier wrote to Sinclair she was considering a trip back to the country to visit her mother and family in Hanoi, but wasn't sure about going to the north, especially being a French Vietnamese mix. Sinclair offered to look into the possibility for her. But, his efforts were met with resistance by the local government refusing to give an outsider any such information. He sent a note to a close Vietnamese friend asking his advice on the matter, but never received an answer back. In fact he wasn't sure the note was ever delivered. With no where else to turn, he informed Yvonne he couldn't get an answer, other than it's dangerous up north. However, Yvonne was adamant about visiting anyway.

Chancing fate, Sinclair flew to Hanoi to meet her, waiting at the airport for her to arrive from Paris. He tried not to arouse suspicion. But, kept his reporter's credentials visible to hopefully offer an explanation of why he was there.

The plane landed late in the afternoon. Sinclair waited patiently for Yvonne to disembark and clear processing, meeting her on the other side. They hugged, keeping a polite distance as they left the terminal. Since Yvonne spoke both Vietnamese and French they should be okay traveling through the city. He did not speak either language and was at a great disadvantage being here.

Climbing in a taxi, she gave the driver directions in Vietnamese as the taxi left the airport heading out of the city. Sinclair watched familiar places pass by as they traveled remembering back to the time he lived, worked and ran guns here.

"Think you would ever move back to Hanoi?" He asked.

Yvonne looked out the window.

"I don't know anymore. Two years ago, a year ago, I might have said yes. I have adjusted to my new life in Paris. It is only for my mother I am here now. Hanoi is not my home anymore. Certainly not with the Communists in control."

Sinclair sat silent waiting for her to continue. When she didn't, he spoke.

"I think I understand. But, I do miss being in Hanoi. Saigon is not the city I would have chosen to live in. Saigon does not have the feel Hanoi did before the war ended. I can't explain it, but somehow being in Saigon is so much different. Maybe the French did have some influence on the country. I don't know. But, it is nothing more than a free for all in Saigon. I can tell you as much."

The taxi stopped outside the village refusing to go any further. Yvonne and Sinclair climbed out. He retrieved their bags from the trunk. His grip and a small suitcase for her. A bit surprised at how light she was traveling. She noticed his look and said simply.

"I do not need any of my society clothes here."

Sinclair followed her down the dusty road.

Standing outside a large hooch stood her mother and when she saw him she pointed and laughingly said in her broken English

"Have you for dinner."

Sinclair smiled, still not sure if she meant as a guest or the main course.

They walked up and while Yvonne hugged her mother, Sinclair set the bags down. The little man and her aunt stood to the side. Clearly happy to see her. Hugs all around. Yvonne's mother hugged Sinclair. The little man shook his hand motioning for them to come inside. The aunt bowed.

Later in the afternoon, Yvonne stood outside the hooch pointing to the smaller one next to her mother's.

"That is ours for the next two days. The little man and my aunt will sleep in my mother's house. They have given us theirs to use for our visit."

"That how long you're staying, two days?" Sinclair nodded.

"Actually I'm leaving in three days." Yvonne turned to him. "But, we have tonight and two others before then. Do you think it will be enough time for us to get reacquainted to each other?"

Sinclair saw the devious smile on her face.

"Depends on what you have in mind?"

"My, my, whatever are you referring to Monsieur Langdon?"

Sinclair walked to the smaller hooch carrying the bags. Inside not much more than a couple of straw mats to sleep on. Yvonne stood beside him.

"We will take our meals at my mother's house. Hope your stomach can handle the local cuisine." She frowned. "Hope mine can as well. My aunt and uncle, the little man to you, have moved everything else over there for now."

At night, after a rather acceptable dinner, they went back inside their hooch. Yvonne settled into one of the straw mats having removed all her society clothes. Sinclair wondered if there were some night clothes might be the custom, but she didn't appear to be putting any on. With the openness of the hooch and the lack of privacy he wasn't sure how to proceed. Yvonne turned to face him.

"Would you care to join me?"

Sinclair shrugged his shoulders and removed all his clothes, moving over next to her on her mat. She snuggled next to him and lay there holding on. He wrapped his arm around her and held her tight. She whispered into his shoulder.

"Sinclair, do you think we will ever be together?"

"We're together now." He gently rubbed her back.

She lifted slightly bracing her hand to look at him.

"No. I mean really together. You and me. Me and you. Walking down the street together. Hand in hand. Together like lovers. Like a couple should? Can we be together always? I dream about it happening someday. But, I also wonder sometimes if it will ever happen to us. I worry the darkness will keep us apart and we will never have the opportunity."

Sinclair looked up at her, noticing her breasts glistening in the light and the seriousness on her face.

"I believe it will happen some day. And wherever we are I will take great delight in walking down the street hand and hand with you. I promise."

She reached over and kissed him.

"Let's do it tomorrow. We shall walk through the village. Together, hand in hand for all to see we are together. A couple as one."

"And so we shall." Sinclair smiled.

"Let's do it now, please." Yvonne rose up.

"Now, like this?" Sinclair looked up at her.

Yvonne picked up an Ao Dai, without the pants, moving the garment into place. She handed him a man's native dress, so he could do the same.

"This much will be enough here. The night is still warm."

"What about your mother?" Sinclair stopped her.

Yvonne put her head down for a moment.

"My mother knows how I feel about you. I believe she has known from the beginning. Well, here in the village, who I am or what I am is not important. They already know we are together. It would be foolish to think otherwise. I am safe here. No society to judge. No society to cast aspersions. My husband back in Paris. I am home. I am me here. I am safe here."

Sinclair watched her put on sandals, reaching for his shoes, but she motioned no and handed him a pair of sandals. Sinclair worked them on. Together they left the hooch and strolled side by side. Holding hands would have to wait for another day.

Sinclair watched as her plane took off, amazed at how fast those days had gone by. With some effort, they were able to spend private time together quite often. But, back to reality, he still had another hour or so for his plane to Saigon.

A North Vietnamese soldier, possibly an officer, in a sharply pressed uniform full of ribbons approached him. Sinclair waited and watched. The soldier pointed to his credentials speaking in Vietnamese. Sinclair shook his head. The soldier tried French. Once again Sinclair shook his head.

"*Parlez vous anglais?*" Sinclair offered.

The soldier slowly shook his head.

"Maybe I can help?"

They both turned to see a tall gentleman dressed in a crisp white linen suit with a large Panama hat standing to the side of them.

"I am with the consulate here and I do speak French, which he also spoke. Maybe, I can help translate for you both. Sir, I see you are a *Journaliste*."

"I work for a British paper that formerly had an office here in Hanoi, but currently I am located in Saigon." Sinclair said.

The gentleman translated for the soldier in French. The soldier nodded pointing to Sinclair's credentials and answered in French.

"The soldier wants to know what you are doing here."

"Ah, actually I'm on a personal trip." Sinclair tensed up. "I came up here to meet someone who has already left." He pointed to the runway.

The gentleman translated the response to the soldier. The soldier smiled speaking with authority.

"He says you mean the mix woman you were here with earlier?"

Sinclair slowly nodded. The soldier spoke pointing several times at Sinclair, which made him grow more anxious. Finally the gentleman translated for him.

"Basically the soldier wants to know why you are wearing your credentials if you are not working. Are you trying to hide something? Disguise your purpose here? Or maybe, cover something up?"

"No, not at all." Sinclair swallowed. "I always wear my credentials. Technically, I am always working. Even when I am on my own time. It is the nature of a reporter to do so. To observe all he sees and report."

The gentleman translated for the soldier causing the soldier to smile and nod before speaking. The gentleman translated.

"He wants to know if you are working now."

Sinclair shook his head.

"I'm waiting for my plane back to Saigon. I will be back at my office tomorrow. Then I will be working. This trip was strictly for pleasure."

The gentleman translated. The soldier nodded, speaking very softly, the gentleman nodding each time he did.

"He wants to know where you went while you were here in Hanoi. Who you were with and what did you do."

"We visited the woman's mother in a village just outside the city." Sinclair swallowed again. "The woman is an old friend of mine who lives in Paris now. She wrote me she would be visiting her mother. Would I like to come up to visit with her while she was in Hanoi. I graciously accepted."

The gentleman translated. The soldier smiled, pointing and speaking rapidly. The gentleman translated.

"He says, nice story. Is that all you can come up with? But, he'll accept your story this time. Next time, get a better story. In the future it will not be so easy to leave. The French are no longer welcome in Hanoi. Or in the North."

"Tell him I am British, not French. Because I am British, I can write what I see not what someone tells me." For the first time Sinclair felt just a shade calmer.

The gentleman translated and the soldier smiled at first then laughed out loud. The gentleman laughed with him, translating for Sinclair.

"Said he is happy you are not French. Not particularly fond of the British either. Said you need to understand, here people write what they are told, never what they see."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Sinclair smiled.

The gentleman translated. At first the soldier's face tightened up, but then he let out a loud laugh pointing at Sinclair. A moment later he reached his hand out. Sinclair shook hands with him. The soldier waved his hand in the air while he walked away laughing. The gentleman turned to face Sinclair.

"You do know the soldier was a very high ranking officer in the North Vietnamese Army. Someone definitely not to be taken lightly."

"I had no idea." Sinclair shook his head. "Why do you think he questioned me?"

The gentleman smiled and let out a breath.

"A man like him, with his power, doesn't need a reason. He basically can do what he wants. Why, he could have had you arrested if he wanted to. And for absolutely no reason."

"For what?" Sinclair looked at the gentleman. "For what?"

The gentleman continued to smile.

"For whatever reason he wants. He is that kind of person. Had you been French, I don't think you would have walked away this time. Apparently, being British didn't interest him today and decided to let you leave. I am curious he let your French mix woman friend leave without questioning." The gentleman cleared his throat. "But I must warn you. While you may think you can come and go as you please, it is not the situation anymore. You may be able to do it several times. But, the one time when you least expect, you will probably be arrested. Your British credentials might give you some consideration, but I would not count on those. The country has changed in the North. Control is getting tighter. You remember that. I've seen too many instances of just such a situation. Too many have come through the consulate looking for our help."

"Really that bad?" Sinclair asked.

The gentleman nodded.

"And getting worse. Seems the North Vietnamese officials are basically letting people come in so they can detain them later. Almost like a game. The soldier we just dealt with is one who likes to play the game. I've had far too many instances with him in the middle."

"Dodged a bullet, huh?" Sinclair gulped.

"You may very well have, figuratively and literally." The gentleman pointed. "I believe your plane is here."

Sinclair looked to where he was motioning and nodded.

"Can I ask you a question?"

The gentleman nodded.

"Might there be a chance I could get an interview? I should like to talk with you further about all you just told me. Certainly get more details from you."

"Yes, an interview could be arranged." The gentleman nodded.

Sinclair wrote his name, number and newspaper down on a piece of paper from his pad handing it to the gentleman.

"Call me anytime and we can set something up."

The gentleman took the paper from him and yelled out as Sinclair was running to catch his plane.

"Preferably in Saigon. It's dangerous up north."

A moment later the gentleman tossed the piece of paper in the trash.