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FEATURE STORY
JAMES DEAN IN SAIGON
The True Story of the Clods

Paper Edition

James Dean In Saigon

(or The True Story of the Clods)

By Richard Turner

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For

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WARNING

**This story contains graphic language, which some people may find offensive.
If graphic language offends you STOP here. Do not read this story.**

James Dean in Saigon

(or *The True Story of the Clods*)

by Richard Turner

“Philosophers search the heavens and stand amazed at how the stars are still there moving through their ancient rhythms. The familiar constellations that illuminate our night seem as they have always seemed, eternal, unchanged, and little moved by the shortness of time between our planet’s birth and its demise...they will still exist long after we have gone. And while the flash of our beginning has not yet traveled the light years into distance, has not yet been seen by planets deep within the other galaxies, we will disappear deep into the blackness of the space from which we came, destroyed as we began in a burst of gas and fire... The heavens are still and cold once more. In all the immensity of our universe and the galaxies beyond the earth will not be missed. Through the infinite reaches of space the problems of man seem trivial and naïve indeed, and man, existing alone, seems himself an episode of little consequence.”

Astronomer’s soliloquy, planetarium scene,
Rebel Without A Cause

“This is the time I like Saigon best,” Larry says to no one in particular as he gestures with his beer bottle, toasting the passing parade and the setting sun.

“Twilight in the Paris of the Orient – the boulevard, the women, the cyclos, the scooters and our favorite dirty pic vendor, what more could we want. The evening awaits us. What will it be, homework, shantytown, the Olympic, another movie?”

“How can you even suggest another movie when we’ve just seen the film of the decade, the definitive portrayal of everything we aspire to be.”

“Alright, alright, maybe we do need time for reverential reflection. But we could continue this later at the Olympic. Deaner wouldn’t object to us downing a few cold ones in his memory.”

We’re sitting on the terrace of the Continental Palace across the boulevard from the Passage Eden where we had been watching *Rebel*. Larry, Joe, Dick, Roy, Paul and myself, the sleeves flat rolled on our white t-shirts, faded jeans, black loafers or motorcycle boots, combing our hair and lighting cigarettes.

“It’s not as good in French as it is in English, is it?”

“No, but what’s it matter when you’ve seen it as often as we have?”

Stateside I’d spent years of afternoons in my Michigan bedroom studying stills from the film in fan magazines – *The Real James Dean Story*, *James Dean Speaks from Beyond*, *The Star They Will Never Forget*, *Elvis and Jimmy* – while listening to the soundtrack album from the film – *Opening Theme*, *The Planetarium*, *Plato’s Theme*, *Chicken Run*, *End Theme*. Seeing *Rebel* here again was like watching a series of still pictures brought to life. A sequence of poses that

the cast settles into and moves out of one after another, Dean leading with a grace of measured violence from scene to scene, still to still. Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo, Dennis Hopper and the rest following his lead. The moments preserved in the fan magazine photographs are the iconography of the myth. They are with me like bible verses memorized in Sunday school and theorems from math class, but potent and charged, not empty.

“Still, it’s distracting to hear Jimmy speaking French...and those Vietnamese subtitles jiggling across the bottom of the screen don’t help anything.”

Sunk into the green enameled wicker chairs grouped around the wrought iron and glass tables on the Continental terrace, we order beers, iced coffee and a citron presse. Still under the spell of the film, our gestures are studied. Larry’s toast to the lovely women passing in the street, some of them momentarily backlit by the setting sun so that their legs show through their silk trousers, is a slight tip of his uplifted bottle toward the flow of traffic accompanied by raised eyebrows, a nod and a brief smile. Joe signals for the waiter with a similar nod of his head and orders for us in idiomatic French, perfectly accented. Paul lights his cigarette cupping his hand around the match and lowering his head to the flame as he has seen Dean do. I re-roll the sleeves of my white t-shirt and run my fingers through my hair before taking a sip from my iced coffee.

“I wonder who dubbed Jimmy’s voice? What is he like?”

“Do you suppose there’s a French James Dean? That would be cool, to meet the French James Dean. Do you think he would look like Jimmy?”

How Dean-like would he be? Would he move like Jimmy? Would he run his hands along the edge of the desk like he was sighting a gun? Would he flop, sprawl and slide over a couch, feet kicked up on the back, head lolling over the seat cushions. What about his lips on the overlarge cigarette as he stares through the window of the ’49 Mercury? In the chicken run, what about his tucked roll from the car door onto the dusty earth? Dean was comfortable with objects, not with people. Would the French James Dean be like that? People touch him, he doesn’t touch them except tentatively, reluctantly. When women hold him he responds to their embrace with a diffident anguish as if he had a body fever and wanted to be comforted but couldn’t bear to be touched. When he’s held he submits. He doesn’t kiss he lets himself be kissed. When he gives his jacket to Sal Mineo it’s his hands and fingers and the fabric and drape of the jacket, not Sal Mineo that he touches. It’s only when Mineo’s character, Plato, is killed in the last scene and is lying dead on the asphalt in front of the planetarium, the searchlights of the cop cars raking his body that Dean can love him, when he’s a corpse, an object. Dean drags his grieving body around Plato’s still form as if the force of his own sorrow had broken his legs. Is that what the French James Dean would be like?

“Was he sitting in a dubbing studio in Paris dressed in a red windbreaker, white t-shirt and blue jeans, boots, slip-on sunglasses, smoking a Camel or Pall Mall?”

“Maybe he was just some hack who happened to have the right voice for the part.”

“Impossible. Only a true believer could have done the part.”

After the show we stood in a tight knot studying the lobby cards in the display case as we had studied our fan magazines. The film reverted once again to a series of stills and we changed from audience to actors, combing our hair, lighting cigarettes, watching the dreaming flow of the crowd leaving the theater lobby. Vietnamese girls who had probably skipped their last classes at the lycee to come to the matinee, holding hands, twittering to each other, touching their foreheads and cheeks with wisps of linen handkerchiefs. French guys on their way to a bar or café or a swim before dinner at the Circle Sportif, kakhi shorts and white sport shirts open at the

neck. Tai baos, Vietnamese “cowboys” with slicked back Elvis hair heading towards their Lambrettas and Vespas to cruise the twilight boulevards.

“What about the Vietnamese James Dean. Do you think that the guy who did the subtitles is the Vietnamese James Dean?”

“Now there’s someone we could actually meet, the guy who did the subs. Tran or Pham could probably find out about him for us. I’ll bet they’d be interested in that. I know they’ve both seen *Rebel*. We’ve talked about it before. In fact Tran is probably the closest thing to James Dean of anyone I’ve met here.”

But we are the only true custodians of Dean’s legend. Our dress, our mannered gestures, our hesitant speech, our loneliness is his. He is our Jimmy Dean, not theirs. His broken body, his crumpled Porsche, the blood soaked t-shirt, the impact of the crash, the dusty roadside and rolling hills, the setting sun, his grave in Fairmount, his walks through Times Square winter twilight, his eccentricities, his boorish behavior, even in a way, his ambiguous sexuality. It’s ours. Bernard and Jean Claude may possess Rimbaud and hold Camus to their hearts, but Dean is ours. Pham and Tran may be lighting candles before framed photos of Dean for all we know, but their altars are at the back of the chapel. We are in the front pews, at the graveside, the immediate family.

“I’ll bet that the guy who did the subs for *Rebel* is some famous Vietnamese poet or novelist. That would be fitting.”

“He would have to know English pretty well to do a good job on the translation. Maybe he’s been to the States.”

“Or maybe he teaches English at one of the lycees or works for U.S.I.S. in the library or showing films.”

“I wonder what Dean is saying in Vietnamese? Like in that scene where he fights with his dad, Jim Backus. No Vietnamese kid would dare trash his father like that. I’ll bet he says something a lot more polite than what Jimmy is screaming, like ‘Honorable father I humbly request that you regard my plea for love with understanding.’”

“Sure, sure, that’s real likely.”

“Maybe the guy can get away with a more exact translation because it’s an American who’s showing the disrespect for his father, not a Vietnamese. This might never happen in a Vietnamese movie but it’s OK if a decadent Westerner is doing it.”

“How would you know? You’ve never seen a Vietnamese film in your life.”

“Well, have you, has anyone? Are there such things as Vietnamese movies?”

“Of course there are, I asked Tran about them but he said he just goes to French and American films.”

“Maybe we could go see one just for the hell of it sometime. It’s not like we don’t have the time here.”

“Not unless we get extra credit for it.”

“Extra credit from a correspondence school? Are you kidding? Can you imagine the University of Maryland Extension Program giving us extra credit for a report about a Vietnamese film? They barely acknowledge what little work we do as it is. Grades come back six weeks after we’ve taken our tests. A few cursory scribbles in red ink on our essays. Those assholes could care less. Talk about hacks. I wonder if they’re even real teachers.”

“Maybe our work is being corrected by poets and authors who are doing it just to get by, like Faulkner, worked as a night shift guard in some factory while he wrote *The Sound and the Fury*.”

“Yeah, maybe Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are going over our essays. That’s why it takes so long for them to come back. The American Community School mails them to the University of Maryland, the University of Maryland sends them to New York or San Francisco or Tangiers or Paris, some famous beat author corrects them while drinking red wine or smoking pot and sends them back. The government supports the arts and we are unknowingly enrolled in the equivalent of the Famous Writers School. Everybody’s happy.”

“Kerouac or Ginsberg would give us extra credit for a review of a Vietnamese film if that were the case. Let’s try it. We can get Pham to take us sometime.”

“*Rebel*, we’re talking about *Rebel* here. You know, I think that the scene in the planetarium where the astronomer talks about the vast and indifferent universe would translate pretty well into Vietnamese. Remember the Vietnamese poetry Mrs. Duthie read us in lit class that day. It was sort of cosmic – that line about ‘Sooner or later we all must die’ and the poem about the moon over the ruined city.”

“That’s so, but it was Camus who wrote about the ‘vast and indifferent universe’ not the astronomer in *Rebel*.”

“Alright, so it was *The Stranger* and not the astronomer. What’s the difference? James Dean was a teenaged existentialist if there ever was one. If they made a movie of *The Stranger*, Dean would be the guy to play the lead role.”

“Maybe if it were set in Corpus Christi, instead of Algeria.”

“You know, if you look at the romance in *Rebel*, Dean and Natalie Wood, it’s sort of Vietnamese too.”

“Pretty tame stuff, hardly any kissing, some meaningful looks, talk about raising a family. I imagine that would all translate into Vietnamese culture. The Vietnamese James Dean wouldn’t have any trouble with that.”

“But the very idea of a rebel without a cause wouldn’t make any sense to a Vietnamese. All the rebels in Vietnam had causes, so in a sense they weren’t rebels. They were dissidents, critics, nationalists, but not rebels. James Dean would have no place in traditional Vietnam.”

“So what. He’s got no place in traditional America.”

“Yes he does, we’re a land of rebels.”

“*Land of the Rebels* starring James Dean, Elvis Presley and Jack Kerouac, coming soon to a screen near you!”

“Pham and Tran would dig that. Their entire lives are without a cause. They seem to have nothing to do but go to parties, cut classes, chase around on their scooters and go to bars.”

“Like us?”

“Mmm.”

“They’re prime material for a Dean cult. No wonder they were in the audience today. We should have asked them to come along with us for a drink.”

“Nah, their English isn’t good enough.”

“Nah, your Vietnamese isn’t good enough.”

“They speak French. Joe could translate.”

“Some other time, like when we get the French James Dean and the Vietnamese James Dean and the American James Dean together for a party here in Saigon.”

I lean forward to sip my iced coffee. Paul lights another cigarette and, exhaling the smoke, sinks back into the deep wicker chair. We look out over the tamarind shaded boulevard: Deux Chevaux taxis, the tin-can cars, sputter in the mellow din, sleek black Citroens looking like gangers’ getaway cars move in stately procession through the eddies of bicycles, scooters, and

cyclos. Drab military vehicles punctuate the otherwise colorful flow of traffic. Women perched delicately on the back seats of Vespas and Mopeds glide by dressed in peach, rose and azure tunics that float over white rayon trousers. They wave to schoolmates, sisters and friends strolling the tiled sidewalks. The heels of the women's lacquered shoes click in occasional syncopation with the rhythms of the slow tangos and cha-chas floating out of the cafes, milk bars and boutiques that line Rue Catinat. Groups of cowboys congregating at intersections, slouch over their cycles and survey the crowd. ARVN soldiers in immaculately tailored and pressed camouflage uniforms move with self-important authority past the sidewalk vendors selling black market cigarettes, toothpaste, condoms, sunglasses, perfume, dolls and buffalo horn carvings. A few clean-shaven American military advisors are laughing at the rear of the café across the street. We never go near them. They're M.A.A.G. Farts, Pear Shapes. A sound truck blaring a message in harsh Vietnamese and accented French goes by. It carries a crude painting of James Dean and Natalie Wood.

"Hey, look at that, he's everywhere!"

"Dean would like it here."

"Yeah, what would he do? He's just a country boy from the Midwest," Dick jokes.

"So what. We're from the Midwest and we like it here. He could do just what we do. We'd pick him up after school, go to the Sportif, swim, hang out, and drink beer. Come down here to the Continental some evenings, get laid out in shantytown, a few parties, the Olympic on Saturdays, the usual. What we do all the time."

"That sounds pretty boring for a guy who's lived in New York and Hollywood. He hung out with some pretty weird people there, Vampiria Queen of the Undead for example."

"Well, we could introduce him to some Saigon weirdoes. He could go along with Roger Teidt the German attaché's son and roll drunken sailors. He could cycle with Mr. Bodybuilder himself Dominoe Nguyen, Mr. Vietnam of 1959. We could take him out to Cho-Lon to meet that Chinese magician who suspended the guy in mid-air right in front of our faces at Hollie Choi's rooftop party."

"Or take him to the bookstore down the street where Hanh and her friends read poetry and play guitars."

"Kerouac would like that place too, it's the closest thing to a coffeehouse we have in Saigon."

"If we knew where they were, we could take him to one of the opium dens out in Cho-Lon. I read that he smoked pot. He'd probably go for some of the big O."

"So would Kerouac. Maybe we could take both of them at the same time."

"I'm sure they'd both like it here in Saigon, but the guy who would really be at home would be Elvis."

"Elvis! Come on! He really is too much of a country boy to like it here."

"Unless he brought his hick friends along that he always travels with."

"No, I think that even if he were here by himself he'd have a good time."

"OK, what would Elvis do in Saigon? You plan an itinerary and a schedule for Elvis when he comes to perform at the Circle Sportif."

Paul and I had first developed the fantasy of inviting Elvis to sing at the Circle Sportif, one drunken evening after having seen Jailhouse Rock at the American theater. We were on one of our long walks around nighttime Saigon, drinking red wine and smoking Salem's, when I started feeling pukey. We were across the street from the Circle, so I cut over into the shadows of the club and threw up against the wall of the judo pavilion. Since I knew the guards there, I

thought it would be OK if they saw us. But no one did. Feeling better, at least I did, I don't know about Paul, although he said that he liked watching me throw up, we wandered over to the swimming pool, a grand structure of yellow stucco, dressing rooms with heavy slotted windows on the ground level, above, an Olympic size pool with a high diving platform surrounded by a colonnade topped by a trellis of untrimmed vines. The cirque, particularly the pool area, was the locus of our days in Saigon just as the Olympic Bar was our home in the evenings. Fancy dress balls were held there a couple of times a year. M. Vatin, the swimming instructor would produce a water ballet for the entertainment of the elegantly dressed French, Vietnamese, Chinese and American diplomatic crowd. Afterwards the pool would be covered over with a dance floor and a long evening of drinking, dancing, and dining would commence.

None of that was going on now though as I stood beneath a jacaranda tree looking up at the arcing strings of party lights hung between the capitals of the columns and the shredded remnants of paper lanterns forlorn beneath the unkempt tangle of vines in the trellis. There was just Paul and I standing there breathing heavily, me lighting up another Salem, inhaling the filtered smoke in the hope of changing the chemistry of my vomit etched mouth.

We had been to some great parties at the Sportif, the French balls, Sunday afternoon tea dances, a farewell party in the lounge above the billiard room, but the party that we now wanted to see was the one at which Elvis would perform. Elvis at the Sportif! It was an idea that ranked right up there with Kerouac on Catinat. True, it didn't have the same alliteration but it was a much more exiting event than a book signing. Actually it was the barhopping and the whoring in shantytown and the drive to Cambodia with Kerouac afterwards rather than the book signing itself that received the most detailed treatment in our continually evolving versions of the tale.

We were as possessive about Elvis as we were about Jimmy Dean, although not in such a morbid way. Elvis after all, was alive. We all thought the tai baos were jerks for imitating Elvis. Elvis like Jimmy Dean was our property. American citizenship was a prerequisite for legitimate Elvis emulation. Our only concession to the cowboys, one of whom dated my sister, was that at parties when Elvis' records were played there was the tacit acknowledgement that the Vietnamese guys knew that we were cool because we were from the land of Elvis. Which meant to us that they wanted to be like us. Which was crazy. I think they mostly hated our guts for even being in their country. But they did like Elvis and if we had had any sense we would have acknowledged this international brotherhood of Elvis fans.

The French guys at these parties were not a part of the brotherhood. Some of them, like Jean Claude and Bernard, who openly disdained Elvis, would walk off the dance floor at parties when Elvis' records were played. They liked The Platters and some of the other black groups, but they were more into the cha cha cha, jazz and Billie Holiday, Yves Montand and musical styles we identified with our parents' generation. Jean Claude, who was literally tall, dark and handsome, danced the cha cha cha with beautiful nonchalance and was known to have slept with all of the best looking girls in the French community, including Marie Claire who Joe was trying to make. Watching him on the dance floor, we had reason to suspect that *le jazz cool* was something we ought to know about and that *le cha cha cha* was a dance we should be learning. After all James Dean was supposed to have listened to jazz a lot and Elvis does some pretty fancy dancing in *Jailhouse Rock*. But our images, for the moment, were too firmly fixed. Kerouac would lead us from rock to jazz, later, not now.

Now it was Elvis singing at the Sportif, and Jean Claude - for all his disdain for *les choses Americaines* - he probably also hated our guts for being in the country that generations of French had considered their possession - would be in the crowd with Michelle on his arm.

Dominoe, Pham, Tran and the other cowboys would be down in the front dancing with their sisters. Paul and I, Larry, Roy, Joe and Dick, would all be leaning up against the rail around the pool back by the bar, impassive in the knowledge that in a matter of hours Elvis would be drinking with us at the Olympic. Judy, Jeannie, Little Mike, Mouthless, Big Bad Bob, the Wenie brothers, S'Ellen, the Skanky twins, Cowlegs, Garage Mouth, they could all get as excited as they want. We are the ones who brought Elvis here. We're the ones who will be partying with him all night.

Over our Biere 33's and roasted peanuts – one of the reasons we liked the Olympic was that it had a good peanut vendor who crisp roasted and salted the nuts instead of soft roasting them like the Vietnamese preferred – we superimposed the image from *Jailhouse Rock* of Elvis singing *Baby You're so Square*, snaking around in front of a cabana at the end of a swimming pool onto the colonnaded expanses of the Sportif. The hoods with heavy rings and drinks in their black and white celluloid hands became trim French rubber planters and diplomats wearing loose blue slacks and open necked white shirts with the sleeves rolled up. The women in modest swimsuits or cocktail dresses were transformed into Marie Claire, Michelle, Annie and the rest in flower print sundresses fluffed out in airy poofs by layers of crinolines or skimpy bikinis that held their breasts high and dove between their legs. Da da da do da da, da da da do da da, I could hear that amplified bass line throbbing through the crowd of kids from the American school, M.A.A.G. farts, agency spooks in seersucker suits just there to keep an eye on things and Holly Choi and his Chinese girl friends in gold cheongsams. All heads turn expectantly toward the bandstand at the end of the pool. Dum da da da do dum, dum da da do do dum. Then the drums crash in, Elvis starts to sing and the crowd explodes.

“OK, so what would Elvis do here, Joe, you're the Elvis expert.”

“That's easy. He would do the same things I like to do, except he would do them more and better. First we'd pick him up out at the airport. Have a cycle waiting for him, a Harley if we could get one. We'd haul ass directly downtown to a tailor shop where he'd have some wild new clothes made, some charcoal pants flecked with pink, a white silk shirt, some snakeskin shoes.”

“Throw in one of those embroidered satin jackets that have a map of Vietnam on the back just for good measure.”

“Don't interrupt, I've got this all planned out. We would take him to the Pyramid Bar, the one with the soccer game that all the French guys play and the pinball machine that tilts real easily, *Buttons and Bows*. Elvis digs games. We would shoot pool, he does that. One day we'd take him waterskiing on the Saigon River. He could eat at the military clubs, the B.O.Q. or the Dai Nam or Five Oceans. He wouldn't even have to eat Vietnamese food once. Steak, baked potatoes, beer, ice cream. I'd get him peanut butter at the commissary so he could have his favorite sandwiches. If he wanted to he could perform at one of the military clubs for the M.A.A.G. farts and their girlfriends. He's probably doing that over in Germany right now.”

“Well, I guess you're right. Elvis would have a lot to do in Saigon, but it sounds like a lot of entertaining to me. All I care about is the women Elvis would buy for us, the classy ones we can never afford. Forget Elvis at the Sportif, let's get him to sing at the Tu Do Lounge, the best nightclub in Saigon. Then we'd have all the women we want.”

“All life is not pussy, Larry.”

“Says who?”

“I know, we could get him to go along on the trip to Angkor Wat, on cycles instead of in a car. Dean and Kerouac would go for that.”

“I don’t know, I never read about Jack on a motorcycle. He’s always in a car that someone else is driving.”

“OK you drive Kerouac and we’ll cycle with Jimmy and Elvis.”

“After the book signing!”

“Elvis at a book signing?”

“Elvis could meet us afterwards. He could be in the sack with some bar girl from the Tu Do while we’re at the book signing.”

“We could get Jimmy to read something from *The Little Prince*, his favorite book. He could read it in English and Marie Claire could do it in French. Or maybe he could read from a translation of *The Stranger*.”

“And Jack could do a reading from *On the Road*”.

“Onna load?”

“Yeah, ‘onna load, Paul.”

The same night that we first fantasized about Elvis performing at the Circle Sportif I had gone over to Paul’s house on Cong Ly. His parents had gone out to dinner at the officer’s club leaving us fillet mignon, French fries and a six pack of San Mig. A meal fit for Elvis himself. Chi Ba the maid prepared this for us while we smoked Salem’s and drank on the verandah. Stale Salem’s had a hollow taste to them that went well with the move from an air-conditioned room to the street. The menthol was like air conditioning your mouth. Winston’s had a more substantial taste. None of us smoked Salem’s regularly. Sometimes we’d bum one from Peter Rabbit or the Moonlight Gambler at a party. Only jerks smoked Salem’s regularly. Future businessmen and military brats smoked Winston’s, thinking they had some class. Dick smoked Camels, which I also smoked, as well as Bastos and Gaouloises, which were definitely cool but too strong. It’s hard to be cool when you’re coughing. Camels were strong but not as harsh as Bastos or the other cigarettes the French guys smoked.

My father smoked Pall Malls. I could never figure that out. When I would buy them at the black market stands they were always staler than Camels, I guess because they were not very popular. They were always loosely packed so that they burned hotter than Camels. They were also too long, I felt old and uncertain smoking Pall Malls rather than confident like when I smoked Camels or empty like when I smoked Salem’s or world-weary when I smoked a Bastos. We would rarely buy whole packs of cigarettes, except sometimes when we’d go to parties with the other American kids. Usually we’d just buy a couple from a street vendor. The Rabbit and the Moonlight Gambler, Daddy Del, Mouthless and Bad Bob would pride themselves in having whole packs of fresh cigarettes in the pockets of their short sleeved floppy print shirts, or sometimes bulging out of the roll of their t-shirt sleeve. Fresh cigarettes bought at the commissary. Big fucking deal. I don’t know exactly why, but we all preferred stale ones bought off the street. Sometimes at a party we might offer one of our Bastos to Chuckles or Batman and they would make some smart-ass comment about it not being fresh. What limp dicks! Who wants fresh commissary cigarettes anyway?

In one of our *joy of smoking* conversations in Dick’s air-conditioned bedroom, Paul, Dick and I decided that our choice of cigarettes reflected our taste in literature. Kerouac, Ginsberg, Faulkner, Hemingway, none of them would be smoking Winston’s, unless of course they were bumming them at the end of a long night. That Faulkner smoked a pipe and Hemingway a pipe and cigars didn’t matter. If they were here they wouldn’t be smoking Winston’s with the Wenie brothers, Flaxie and their loser friends.

But tonight we were smoking Salem's. After dinner we went to the Indian store and bought a bottle of red wine to drink as we walked around town talking about literature. The more we drank the louder we talked and the faster we walked and the more Salem's we smoked. Hemingway, Faulkner, Kerouac, Ginsberg. Down Hai Ba Trung to Le Van Duyet, right at the corner, past the Sportif, through the park to the Hippique, up Mach Dinh Chi, around the circle with the Trung sisters statue, into a warren of alleys off of Pasteur, coming out near where my father worked at the A.I.D. mission, then over to the commissary and from there back to Cong Ly and Paul's house. Two or three hours of walking and talking.

We ended up drunk and exhausted sprawled on Paul's front lawn vowing to either take the places of Hemingway and Faulkner when they died or to join the swelling ranks of the Beats. Paul, who was from Falls Church, Virginia – Falls Balls, Vagina, as he called it – anticipated a solitary sojourn in the Deep South as his training period. I imagined myself going directly to San Francisco. Saigon, Vietnam to the City Lights bookstore non-stop.

Lying on our backs beside each other looking up at the stars we swore eternal friendship as we nursed our bloody hands. At some point in the evening one of us had spontaneously smashed his fist into the yellow wall beside the sidewalk to emphasize a point about Beats and Zen and enlightenment and drinking. (Some Japanese poet we had read about had reached enlightenment in the midst of a sake binge.) Then the other one of us, I really don't remember who, smacked the wall with greater ferocity. We stood looking at each other and laughing at our competition to out-Zen each other. I poured some wine over our bloody knuckles, imagining it to be an antiseptic of sorts, just as I had poured beer over my cock after my first few visits to shantytown. I took a last swallow and handed the bottle to Paul who upended it and got a mouthful of the crap from the bottom of the bottle which he spat out as he threw the empty bottle into the street. Still laughing we slumped down against the wall. Had we reached enlightenment and didn't know it? Were we drunk and didn't know it? Is seeking nirvana a competitive sport? Which brought us around to our current favorite literary hero, Kerouac, and reminded me to tell Paul something I would not have thought of mentioning had I not been drunk, because it wasn't cool. In fact the incident I was about to relate showed me to be a callow asshole instead of the cool Beat that I aspired to be. What the hell, I thought, confession is cool. Confession is part of the Beat ritual. I can redeem myself in Paul's eyes by the very act of telling him something stupid in this drunken moment. It wasn't all that stupid, I guess. What happened was that when I arrived in Saigon in April of '59 we were met at Ton Son Nut airport by the people my father was going to be working with. While they were shaking hands and helping my parents through customs, I wandered over into the gift shop area where there were some English and French books and magazines for sale along with shelves of lacquer paintings, dolls dressed in conical hats and Vietnamese slit-up-the-side dresses, python skins, crossbows and so on. After scanning the bookrack I went up to the guy behind the counter.

"Do you have a copy of *On the Road*?"

"Onna Load?" he replied.

"*On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac."

"Kerlak?"

"*On the Road*, book, travel, road, highway, route, map!"

"Oh, road map!"

The guy gives me a map of Vietnam. What a jerk! Not him, I meant me. How could I have thought that there would be a copy of *On the Road* in an airport souvenir shop in Saigon? I told Paul and he laughed some more.

Paul had been in a boarding school in the Philippines before coming to Saigon, in fact he'd been kicked out of the place. Before that he'd been with his family in Beirut where his father had been working for the C.I.A. I think. Saigon was my first time out of the states. I considered Paul more sophisticated because of his travels, even though I was certain that somewhere in his overseas past he must have done something as dopey as my asking for *On the Road* in the Saigon airport gift shop. Maybe he had done something like it back in Beirut, showing his ass in some situation where he assumed wrongly that American stuff could be picked up anywhere. But I couldn't think of any such instance. His stories of Beirut were all cool: the whorehouses in the center of town, the men jerking off in the cinemas when Bridget Bardot movies were shown, saying, "I come, I come" in Arabic. The Corniche, that promenade along the sea, the bookstore that sold Kahlil Gibran books in English. Everything was cool, nothing was out of place in his stories.

But even cool people get sick. Paul threw up on the coarse grass. His older brother Joe used to say that he didn't care when or where Paul vomited just as long as it wasn't on his Moto Guzzi, the Guch, and his motorcycle. The acid in the puke would ruin the paint job. After Paul finished vomiting we decided to make one more pass by the Sportif, which was lucky because that's when Elvis showed up.

"OK, we'll go get Kerouac from the fleabag hotel he's staying at. He's up there lying on the bed sweating, smoking a Gitane or a Bastos, or a Gauloise, smoking and sweating and thinking about writing. He would have been out with us the night before and is still hung over. That's it, coming out of a hangover, smoking a cigarette, an ashtray like the heavy glass one Jacques threw at Larry that day of the fight at the Sportif, balanced on his stomach going up and down with the rise and fall of his breath. He's unshaven, smelly, smoking and sweating and writing about it."

"No, he'd already be down at the bar across the street drinking Pernod or whatever he could con someone into buying for him. He's a cheap shit. A cheap shit and a complainer and he's tied to his mother's apron strings."

"So is Elvis. He's tied to mama Gladys's apron strings. And he's too damn polite. Don't quibble."

"Whatever his character flaws, I doubt that Jack would want to hang around with us anyway. He must be thirty-five or forty right now. He wouldn't give a shit about us. He'd already be tired of us telling him how many times we'd read *On the Road*. Hell, he wrote that ten years ago."

"He did? I thought it just came out two years ago."

"It did, but he wrote it in the forties. All that stuff was about America in the forties, not the fifties."

"I don't give a damn when he wrote it. It's the America I'm going home to when I leave this place. Drugs, driving, women, music, talk, friends, craziness that's going to be my America come July 4, 1961."

"Why leave, Dick, you've got that all here."

"Yeah, but Vietnam isn't my country."

"The French think it's going to be."

"What do they know."

"Anyway, to get on with it, let's drag Kerouac out of bed or out of the bar across the street and take him out to one of those opium dens we talked about. We could introduce him to James Dean out there in Cho-Lon. Remember all that stuff he wrote about Mexico City when he

was staying with William Burroughs. He was high all the time, pot, hashish, pills, whatever he could get his hands on.”

“William Burroughs, now there’s someone else we could invite.”

“Who’s he? I’ve never heard of him.”

“A friend of my dad’s came back from Paris in May with a copy of a book Burroughs wrote called *Naked Lunch*. I read part of it. It’s filled with queers fucking and sucking and murdering each other. Everyone’s a junkie. It’s gross shit. On second thought, let’s leave Burroughs out of this. He’s too weird. Withdraw the invitation.”

“Let’s stick with your basic Beats, rock and rollers and rebels.”

“So we introduce Kerouac to Dean in the opium den. Do you think they would get along?”

“A corpse and an alcoholic? Sure.”

“James Dean is a worm eaten mass of flesh and bones, a corpse rotting in the frozen ground of Fairmont, Indiana. He’s been dead since 1955, five years already. Jack Kerouac is probably passed out in his own puke on a doorstep in North Beach. Yeah, I think they’d hit it off real well.”

“As long as we’re getting realistic here, the only authors we know of who have actually been to Saigon are Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene.”

“And Audie Murphy is the only movie star who’s been here.”

“Audie (*To Hell and Back*) Murphy! What was he doing here?”

“He was the star of *The Quiet American* the film made from Greene’s book about Americans in Vietnam. Haven’t you seen that? My dad took the whole family to see it before we came to Saigon. Some of his friends are extras in the film. It’s not that bad considering that Murphy is in it.”

“What does he do, kill commies the way he killed Nazis in *To Hell and Back*?”

“That’s what he thinks he’s doing, but he fucks up and gets killed himself. The book is a lot better than the movie. You ought to read it. It’s got some great descriptions of Saigon. In fact it opens with a scene that’s a lot like what we’re looking at now, crowds on Rue Catinat. It’s a good story but Greene is awfully critical of what Americans are doing here.”

“What are we doing here?”

“I don’t know, I’m drinking a beer. Ask your dad, ask the ambassador, ask M.A.A.G. farts.”

“So Graham Greene probably wouldn’t want to come to the party. Cross him off the list. What about Maugham?”

“He was here two months ago when you were in Bangkok with your parents. There was a party on one of the French ships tied up in the Saigon River. Mrs. Duthie told us about it so we went down and had a few beers with Mr. Maugham.”

“What was he like?”

“I don’t know, we never got near him.”

“But we did get extra credit for it.”

“Well, he’s an old fart anyway. He wouldn’t have much to say to any of the other invitees. Drop him.”

“So, who have we got? Dean, Kerouac, Elvis, ourselves, anyone else?”

“How about Ginsberg? He and Kerouac are good friends.”

“Yeah and you could have him over to your English class to do a reading. That is if you were still teaching English.”

“You’re not teaching anymore? What happened?”

“I got shit-canned last week while you were at the beach up in Nah Trang.”

“What brought that about? I thought you got along real well with those guys.”

I had been teaching English to Vietnamese army officers at the Hemingway School of English behind the central market three evenings a week. I started doing it when I dropped out of school. It was fun. I made good money for it. The guys were OK too. It was a big deal for them to get time off to learn English. It meant that their chances of being sent to the States for training were good. That meant promotions and pay raises for them so they worked hard. Most of them were quite a bit older than I was but they addressed me by my family name instead of by my first name although I tried to get them to call me Rick. They said that they never called teachers by their first names. I guess I didn’t either. But then I never had a teacher who was younger than I was. So, I’d teach them conversational English from this stupid book called *Life with the Taylors*, and after the lesson they’d ask me all sorts of questions about the States. Was it like the movies they’d seen? How much money do Americans make? Are the women easy? Have you ever seen the Grand Canyon? The usual shit. When that got boring I would ask them questions about Vietnam just to get them to use their English. I learned about places to go and things to eat, mostly pretty innocuous things. There was one guy in each class, must have been a colonel or something, he rarely said anything, just observed. I think he was some sort of a spy. So we never talked about women or politics or Elvis. Which was OK. I was getting paid for it and the guys were learning something. The one time that the spy was absent a couple of the more articulate guys let on that everything in Vietnam wasn’t “hunky dory” as my dad would say. They said something about there being a lot more communists out in the countryside than the government newspapers reported. But I didn’t press it. What the hell did I know? There had been a few bombs thrown around Saigon and I’d overheard my father talking about terrorism in the villages, assassinations and so on. There were bars on the windows of our house, metal grates on the windows of the school bus. There were parts of Saigon that were considered dangerous. We couldn’t travel in the countryside at night. But so what. That’s Vietnam. It didn’t mean all that much to me. There weren’t any commies at the Sportif or the Olympic. No one was lobbing grenades into the Continental Café. It’s a stupid attitude I guess, but how was I to know any different. American aid was god’s gift to Vietnam. According to Time magazine, President Diem was the Churchill or the De Gaulle or the Patton or the MacArthur of Indochina, whatever that meant. The French were leaving of their own accord and we, as gracious allies were lending a hand in the fight against international communism, keeping those dominoes from falling. Everything was hunky dory.

These guys would get to go to the States where *Life with the Taylors* would come alive for them. That’s what pissed me off and what got me fired. *Life with the Taylors* presented the most bland, unexciting, middle-class, bourgeoisie view of America you could ever imagine. The Taylor family stood for everything that Elvis, Jimmy, Jack and Allen stood against: conformity, control, security, dependability, and tradition. Not bad values in themselves, but you can get too much of a good thing.

After going through three training cycles of six weeks each I began to hate presenting such a picture of life in the States. The mayhem of rock and roll, the rebellion of youth on fire, the Beats’ mad rushes back and forth across the country had no place in the Taylor’s world. But they were everything to the world I was coming to know through *On the Road*, *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Jailhouse Rock*. So, at what turned out to be my last graduation dinner – they had a big celebration at a Chinese restaurant each time one of the classes finished their cycle – I

decided I was going to tell my students about another America. After the usual thirteen-course meal interrupted by the compulsory toasts to the teacher – iced beer or Mekong whiskey – I stood up at my table to give what was supposed to be the congratulatory farewell speech. I was pretty drunk by this time, though not by choice, all sixteen of the guys in the class insisted on toasting me individually and I had to return their toasts. Whiskey, beer, whiskey, whiskey, beer, beer, whiskey. I wouldn't have had the guts to do it if I hadn't been that far gone. Anyway, I propped myself up behind my chair and said that I was going to salute the graduating class with a reading of a poem by one of America's foremost new poets, Allen Ginsberg. I think that if I had introduced Ginsberg as the American Tran van Do or whatever the name of some famous Vietnamese poet is, things might have gone better...but I doubt it. I began with the opening lines of *Howl*, "I saw the best minds of my generation..."

My students, who only understood a few words of my slurred but spirited rendition, applauded the opening stanza boisterously, but when I got to the first mention of cocks and balls the spy shot up out of his chair enraged. He grabbed my copy of *Howl* and sat me down abruptly, announcing in curt English, "Your young professor has had too much to drink." Eyebrows raised, heads turned, I passed out on the table.

A couple of my students took me home in a taxi and carried me up to my room. Nice guys in spite of the fact that I must have embarrassed the hell out of them. I was a complete asshole. No doubt about it. I went by the school and apologized profusely the next day, but they said that they no longer needed me. I couldn't blame them. I would have fired myself too. I saw a couple of the guys from the class on the street later. I apologized to them too, but they didn't seem to mind. I think it went over their heads. They laughed. They were going to the States. I wished them luck. The funny thing is that I never got my copy of *Howl* back. Maybe the spy and his friends are reading it somewhere right now. Maybe there will be a Vietnamese translation of it sometime and a Vietnamese Allen Ginsberg. Maybe the whole thing was worth it. The Taylors got what they deserved.

"Yeah, fuck the Taylors, long live the Beats!"

"We weren't going to invite the Taylors anyway."

"No, this event is big enough. We've got Elvis and his itinerary all taken care of. We've introduced Jack Kerouac to James Dean and they're getting along fine out in the Cho-Lon opium den. Ginsberg may come later if Jack can get a hold of him. We've got a trip to Cambodia by motorcycle and car after the book signing. When we get back from that we can have a farewell party for everyone at the club where Phuong plays sax. Elvis can play piano and guitar and sing, Jimmy and Jack can play congas and bongos – all Beats can play bongos – it says so in *Life* magazine. Phuong plays rock and jazz, he'll be the bridge between the rockers and the beboppers. We'll get Bach Yen, The Nightingale of Saigon, to do a duet on *It's Now or Never* with Elvis and that will be it."

"What about Hemingway?"

"Who said anything about Hemingway? He isn't invited."

"No, he isn't invited but he is the subject of the essay we have to hand in tomorrow."

"OK, how about this, Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises* in a bar, in fact in several bars. I'll bet our essays on it come out better if we compose them in a bar. What do you think?"

"Good idea. Let's do it over in the Café Frigate, the one down by the river with the concrete bar and the blue walls. It's a Hemingwayesque place to write."

"And tonight I'm sure it will be a *clean well lighted place*."

"Aren't you the wit? You can write my essay for me."

“No deal, but let’s meet there at eight. I’ll get something to eat and see you then.”

“That will be good. The Frigate is definitely the place to do Hemingway homework. Where do you suppose the most atmospheric place in Saigon would be to write essays on *Howl* or *On the Road*?”

“Oh, the airport gift shop or the Officers English Language school.”

“Forget it. It’s old Ernesto tonight, not Allen or Jack. Count your blessings. At least it’s not *Silas Marner* or *David Copperfield*. I can’t think of any place in Saigon that would make writing about them enjoyable.”

“Me either. See you later.”

Recommended Reading

[Biography – James Dean \(A & E DVD Archives](#)

[The Complete James Dean Collection \(East of Eden / Giant / Rebel Without a Cause Special Edition\) \(1955\)](#)

[William Faulkner: Novels 1926-1929: Soldiers' Pay / Mosquitoes / Flags in the Dust / The Sound and the Fury \(Library of America\) \(Hardcover\)](#)

[William Faulkner: Novels 1930-1935: As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary, Light in August, Pylon \(Library of America\) \(Hardcover\)](#)

[William Faulkner: Novels 1936-1940: Absalom, Absalom! / The Unvanquished / If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem / The Hamlet \(Library of America\) \(Hardcover\)](#)

[William Faulkner: Novels 1942-1954: Go Down, Moses / Intruder in the Dust / Requiem for a Nun / A Fable \(Library of America\) \(Hardcover\)](#)

[William Faulkner: Novels, 1957-1962: The Town / The Mansion / The Reivers \(Library of America\) \(Hardcover\)](#)

[Jack Kerouac: Road Novels 1957-1960: On the Road / The Dharma Bums / The Subterraneans / Tristessa / Lonesome Traveler / Journal Selections \(Library of America\) \(Hardcover\)](#)

[The Beats: From Kerouac to Kesey, an Illustrated Journey through the Beat Generation \(Hardcover\)](#)

[Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript, and Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public ... Pres \(Harper Perennial Modern Classics\)](#)

[Allen Ginsberg: Collected Poems 1947-1997](#)

[Albert Camus: The Stranger](#)

[The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway](#)

[For Whom the Bell Tolls – Ernest Hemingway](#)

[The Sun Also Rises – Ernest Hemingway](#)

[Kahlil Gibran: The Collected Works](#)

[The Quiet American – Graham Greene](#)

[Naked Lunch: The Restored Text – William Burroughs](#)