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START



A bar in Saigon. September, 1963.

Stewart with a glass of beer. Halberstam, late 20s, approaches him. He carries a sheet of teletype paper.

HALBERSTAM. I heard you were in town.

STEWART. I just got in yesterday.

HALBERSTAM. Good of you to join us.

STEWART. Thanks. Have we met?

HALBERSTAM. Halberstam. The *Times*.

STEWART. I read your stuff. Good to meet you. Stew Alsop. *(Beat.)*

HALBERSTAM. I looked for you over at the Caravelle.

STEWART. This is more my kind of place.

HALBERSTAM. Mine too. Wouldn't drink the beer, though.

STEWART. Tastes okay to me.

HALBERSTAM. They don't wash the glasses. You need something stronger if you want to kill the hepatitis. *(Stewart smiles.)*

STEWART. Can I get us both something?

HALBERSTAM. No thanks. What are you working on?

STEWART. Piece for the *Post*.

HALBERSTAM. Fine paper.

STEWART. The *Saturday Evening Post*.

HALBERSTAM. Oh. Well. They publish some good things.

STEWART. We sneak it in, when we can. Between the recipes.

HALBERSTAM. State of the conflict, that kind of thing?
"Turning back the red tide ..."

STEWART. Depends on what I see, I suppose.

HALBERSTAM. Uh-huh. Who's showing you around?

STEWART. I'm finding my own way around.

HALBERSTAM. Good for you.

STEWART. Thanks.

HALBERSTAM. Not like your brother.

STEWART. Sorry?

HALBERSTAM. He was just in town last week.

STEWART. I wasn't aware.

HALBERSTAM. You guys don't travel together?

STEWART. No. Why would we?

HALBERSTAM. I thought —

STEWART. Why were you looking for me at the Caravelle, Mr. Halberstam?

HALBERSTAM. I was delegated.

STEWART. By whom?

HALBERSTAM. By my colleagues. After we read Joe's latest. We get it a little late over here, when *Stars and Stripes* picks it up, but some of the wire service guys made sure I saw this one right away. I dunno, maybe I should be flattered ...

STEWART. You'll have to help me out. I haven't read it.

HALBERSTAM. Don't you guys work together?

STEWART. Not formally, not for a long time.

HALBERSTAM. But informally?

STEWART. Mr. Halberstam, if my brother wrote something that's bothering you —

HALBERSTAM. He blames *us*.

STEWART. For what?

HALBERSTAM. For everything. The whole situation here. He blames us, his fellow reporters. And here I thought we were all in the same business.

STEWART. As I say, I haven't read it, but I'm sure he doesn't mean to —

HALBERSTAM. (*Reads.*) "The constant pressure of the reportorial *crusade*" — that's me and my colleagues, if I'm not mistaken — "against the Vietnamese government has helped mightily" — Mightily! — "to transform President Diem from a courageous, quite viable national leader into a man afflicted with galloping persecution mania, seeing plots around every corner."

STEWART. Joe wrote this? (*Halberstam hands him the paper. Beat.*) I see.

HALBERSTAM. *We* drove him crazy. The president of the country, the poor courageous, noble friend of the US has been driven round the bend by assholes like me and the nasty things we write in American newspapers.

STEWART. This is new?

HALBERSTAM. It just came out. He must have filed it before he left the country.

STEWART. Maybe you should take it up with him.

HALBERSTAM. I'd like to but he *left*. He's already gone.

STEWART. Well, I really don't see what you —

HALBERSTAM. He doesn't know the country, he breezes over here for a week, he stays with Lodge at the Embassy, he gets his Army car and driver, Harkins puts a helicopter at his disposal, he gets whatever he wants ... Meanwhile the rest of us are killing ourselves here, living in hovels, earning crap, and taking literally endless shit back home for trying to tell a sliver of a fraction of the truth about this fucked-up place, and he saunters in with his pressed suits and his cigarette holder and his phony fucking Andover WASP Harvard accent, and his *connections* ... and somehow manages to notice, during an exclusive two-day interview that the rest of us would give our eyeteeth for, that the fucking head of the country, the guy we're fighting and dying for, Our Man in Vietnam, who by the way you two have been cheerfully pimping from day one — he *notices* — that this man is not only a corrupt and incompetent and hopeless loser and dope, as the rest of us have been saying for months if not years, but also by the way actually *insane* — He *notices* this ... and then blames ... the press! *We did it! It's all our fault! (Beat.)*

STEWART. The accent's real.

HALBERSTAM. What?

STEWART. I don't think you can hold him responsible for that. It's how we were brought up.

HALBERSTAM. Is that all you have to say?

STEWART. Joe does know the country. He knows it very well.

HALBERSTAM. He was here for a week.

STEWART. He's been coming here since 1954. So have I. We covered Dien Bien Phu together. Joe's been coming to Asia since before the War. He was in a Japanese prison camp when you were in grade school.

HALBERSTAM. Well, things have changed here since 1954.

STEWART. Yes. They washed the glasses then. (*Halberstam turns to go.*)

HALBERSTAM. Jesus. I knew there was no point.

STEWART. Just a moment. The offer of a drink still stands if you'd like to discuss this calmly.

HALBERSTAM. Forget it. I'm sending a cable.

STEWART. To whom?

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