



XVIII

THE SONOROUS ring of the telephone bell penetrated my singing skull like a platoon of pipefitters in a sheetmetal shop. Big, long moments crawled through tiny, short holes in my brain as I gathered the courage to open an eye, although I could not decide which one deserved that life-affirming blast of morning light. My mouth tasted like concentrated eau-de-cheap-dive-floor. I decided at last on my right eye and attempted to send motor nerve pulses in its direction; my left eye expressed its gratitude.

The telephone was on the desk, between my swollen feet and a nearly empty bottle of whiskey. My shoes felt as tight as a spinster's girdle on Easter Sunday. Nearby lay a plastic tumbler and downstream from that my last pack of smokes, which were as wet as diapers in a pail and just about as smokable. Good thing my bookie was one of the rare ones who actually sold them at his cigar stand—he'd give me some on credit.

I had to answer the phone: I knew that. It might be a new, paying client, which I needed a whole lot more than I didn't need another corny simile. I felt worse than a sailor on his first morning of leave and just getting my feet to the floor required an





flapping

eternity¹ of head-pounding effort. Several centuries passed before I rediscovered how to move my arm. I didn't know what time it was: I'd hocked my watch to back a filly—a sure thing in the third race—earlier in the week. It could have been a photo-finish, but they don't make cameras that slow. She was still running the course, the last I'd heard.

I grabbed the receiver. My breath was so bad I should have filed an environmental impact report before opening my mouth, but I didn't have the time, the consultants, or the forms.

“Nick Glossy, Private Investigations.”

“Nick, is that you?”

I didn't recognize the voice. I hesitated, briefly, like a schoolgirl on her first drive-in date.

“It's Ed, Nick!”

“Ed...?” I started to ask, but then the voice and the name clicked in my ruined memory cells and I exclaimed, “Wrigley!”

It wasn't a paying customer after all, but Ed and I went a long way back. We had been attached to the same unit during the Burmese campaigns in the big war. I hadn't heard from him in a couple years, easy, but for some reason I knew this wasn't a social call.

“Great to hear from you, Ed. What's up?”

“Remember Poonta Ng?”

I didn't like the way he said it.

Not a day went by that I didn't think of little Poonta Ng, the rotund holy man who had found us after we had been ambushed and left for dead in the last days of the war. He had cared for us,

[1] In certain subcultures, eternity is defined as the amount of time between your own sexual gratification and when your trick goes home.



nursed us back to health, and had helped us reach safety after the surrender.

During the weeks we spent with him, recuperating, in the lush, deadly rain forests of the foothills, he had, using an elaborate sign language, told us the most amazing stories, stories about secret organizations that spanned the globe, dedicated to the charting and maintaining of the higher planes of human existence, whose meditations helped keep the world at peace, the war notwithstanding, stories about Tibetan lamas, hundreds of years old, who could levitate, disappear into thin air, perform other incredible feats.

The story I had always liked the best, though, was The Prophecy of the Coming of the Man Who Flapped. Even now, I find it inexplicable how he could capitalize letters in sign language, but somehow Poonta Ng had managed it. He had told us the story several times during our recuperation, much to our delight. It wouldn't happen soon, Poonta Ng had warned us, but when the Flapping Man did indeed come, entire thought systems around the globe would rupture: implicit in his arrival would be the end of advertising as we know it. He had added, somewhat parenthetically, that this would force those in the industry into less profitable areas of crime.

One day, in the middle of another tale, Poonta Ng had paused and stood perfectly still for a moment. He had blinked once or twice and then had announced that the war was over and we had won. How he had known, I never will.

Ed and I had never discussed any of it, once we had made our way back to civilization and the States. Some things just can't be discussed.

So I was surprised he was asking me now, almost thirty years later.

