

The Snare

©2002 Jess Butcher
All rights reserved.

"Tell me a bit about the tiger cages, Colonel Merrick," the magazine reporter said with an unmistakable Australian accent. "Can you describe their dimensions, the means by which they were assembled and the like?"

"Each cage was approximately the size of a coffin," Merrick responded. He chose his words carefully, wondering why he'd begun yet another interview with the reporter.

"A coffin, you say?" Barry Serra repeated as he scribbled in his notepad.

The colonel nodded. "Stacked four high," he said.

"And each cage housed a prisoner?"

"Most of the cages contained prisoners," Merrick said.

The reporter nodded, visibly distracted for a moment by the wooden latticework that separated him from the subject of his interview. Colonel Merrick was shrouded in near darkness and had explained the unusual arrangement as 'necessary' due to his physical condition.

"As I mentioned when I rang you last week," Serra continued, "Oceania Magazine is doing a series of articles examining the lives of former American POWs residing here in Australia; a thirty-year retrospective chronicling their memories, their life-journeys after surviving internment in North Vietnam.

"Only the snapshots remain for me, I'm afraid," the colonel whispered, his pale countenance slashed by the floating shadows of the latticework.

The man in the wheelchair watched the reporter's eyes move about rapidly, noting his impatience. A westerly breeze pounded at the striped awning above the visitor. Behind him, the thundering blue-gray of the vast Indian Ocean stretched west from Perth, arcing gently over the broad horizon toward the unseen tip of Southern Africa.

The reporter muttered the single word, 'Snapshots,' as he fumbled through the odd assortment of enclosures on his well-starched safari vest. Merrick watched silently as the search yielded an American cigarette. In spite of the trellis-barrier that separated them, Serra gestured toward the colonel, offering him a Marlboro; the shrunken man declined with a slight shake of his head.

"Snapshots, you say?" Serra finally repeated as he re-situated himself, one leg hiked on the railing overlooking the rocky beach. He struck a professorial pose as he inhaled deeply and sat pondering Merrick's meaning.

At that moment, the silent house-servant who'd earlier directed the reporter to the verandah returned, offering the visitor a cool drink. Serra declined but watched the dark man as he bowed and disappeared

through the nearby doorway. The door clicked shut and, through the latticework, the reporter's eyes followed the white-jacketed native as he glided frame-by-frame behind Colonel Merrick and disappeared into an adjoining room.

Serra paused for a long moment, silently considering the unusual, yet hauntingly familiar circumstances of the interview. Motionless, Merrick sat in his wheelchair, a dark wool comforter tucked chest-high around him. Colonel Merrick finally broke the silence.

"In any event, yes, snapshots, much like the rectangles formed by this latticework," the colonel said. As he spoke, Merrick formed a frame, shrunken index finger to pale thumb, shrunken index finger to pale thumb. As Serra watched through the trellis separating them, the colonel aimed his skeletal viewfinder toward the glimmer of bright sunshine still visible at the apex of the distant horizon.

"The bamboo bars of my cage formed frames, snapshots, as I came to think of them," Colonel Merrick said. "My coffin had 173 such portals. Once I discovered the freedom afforded by these vistas, cataloguing and studying each frame became my singular passion."

"Did your captors ever ... question what you were doing?"

"No, my journeys remained a secret for the duration of my imprisonment. Had they realized how sustaining these plunges outside the physical realm of the cage had become, I suppose ... in any event, they probably attributed my frequent dream-state to creeping insanity. In a strange way, I suppose my solitary pastime gave me the opportunity to ... visit with you today."

For an instant, the colonel's gaze was oddly distant and, though Serra didn't realize it, he had glimpsed the same gauzy countenance the North Vietnamese jailers had so often witnessed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Serra. You'll have to forgive the musings of a weary traveler."

Serra balanced the stub of his cigarette on the railing and scribbled in his notebook again. A thin trail of smoke signaled noiselessly as the failing ember tumbled from sight, falling to the beach below.

"And how large were these tiger cages?" Serra asked, his forced expression studious, anchor-man curious as he considered having another cigarette. Merrick could see that the reporter thought him quite insane.

"About the size of a coffin." The colonel repeated the description he'd used earlier, but the words didn't seem to register with Serra. The reporter shifted his weight from one buttock to the other as he rested on the railing. He closed his notepad.

"Your cage is much larger." Merrick pressed the point, spreading his bony arms while moving his eyes around the perimeter of the lattice-covered window that separated him from the reporter. The translucent white curtains at the edges of the window moved in the breeze as Serra dully considered the colonel's remark.

As he had done so many times before, Barry Serra failed to grasp the colonel's meaning. He fished in a ballooning vest pocket for a cigarette package, removed another Marlboro, and lit it, shielding the flame against the wind with his cupped-hands. Placing the pack and the matches on the railing beside him, the reporter glanced out to sea, silently regretting the time he'd wasted conducting an interview with a madman.

"Well," Serra said, "I suppose I've taken enough of your time." The reporter's tone was a fraction of an octave higher, perhaps mocking. He stood to leave, struggling to hide his impatience.

Both men knew the interview had, once again, been a failure, and as usual, the good-byes were awkward. As the two exchanged pleasantries, the house-servant reappeared and drew the sheer drapes across the latticework. The wisp of white fabric transformed Serra from man to gray shadow before he disappeared altogether from Merrick's view.

Clements cried out.

He's dying, Merrick thought. A prisoner for a scant three weeks, the injured pilot was housed in the tiger cage resting on the muddy ground; Merrick was two cages above him. He'd never seen the young man's face.

Merrick understood enough Vietnamese to gather that Clements, already suffering from a broken leg, had been bitten two nights earlier by a Banded Krait. The young pilot's rapid, shallow breathing signaled that

his time in the cage was drawing to a close.

Merrick rolled to his side and counted the squares formed by the crisscrossed bamboo bars; nine over, four down. Peering through the opening, he gazed at a familiar face.

"Tell me about the tiger cages, Colonel Merrick." The magazine reporter peering in at him spoke with an unmistakable Australian accent. "Can you describe their dimensions, the means by which they were assembled and the like?"

"Each cage was approximately the size of a coffin," Merrick whispered, as the cries of the man dying in the cage below merged with the blue-gray of the thundering Indian Ocean, stretching west toward the unseen tip of Southern Africa.

The stories, poems and artwork published by The Harrow are protected by the various trademarks and copyrights of the writers and artists who created them. It is illegal to copy, redistribute, and/or republish any of these works, including mirroring The Harrow's site and modifying or reusing any text or graphics on the site, without the express prior written consent of the owners and holders of the copyrights. Readers may, however, print copies of the information for their own personal use; store the files on their own computers for their personal use only; and reference hypertext documents on this site from their own documents.

Questions and comments about this site or the contents thereof should be emailed to Dru Pagliassotti (editor@theharrow.com), unless they pertain to the reproduction of any fiction, poetry or artwork within the contents or gallery of The Harrow, in which case queries should be sent to the respective authors, poets or authors who own copyright to those works.

