

The Blue Village

November 1978

My story starts, as it usually does for a lot of us, with our fathers. My father, John, was a fighter pilot once and became a smuggler for all sides as the Cold War raged on. One day he was dropping spies into Poland, the next he was gun-running for the Viet Cong. You've never seen pictures of him so I'll make it easy for you: he was tall, smooth and quick with his hands. He used the money he earned to take care of me and Renira, his reliable and outfitted Beechcraft. His co-pilot at the time, an old mechanic named Sam, was an ace with the guns; the Chewbacca to his Han Solo.

I remember I was about 6 or 7 when I started flying with them. A little kid on board a plane flying everywhere might have seemed weird. But it made checks with Customs and Immigration shorter and more innocent, I suppose. There were many stories I could tell about my father and my travels with him, but there is only one I can think to tell at the moment.

It was winter and we were flying a small group of mercenaries to a village that didn't appear on any map. The location was high enough in altitude that I recall my father arguing with Sam about how crazy the job was. It was an odd job, and a dangerous one too. My father was not a stranger to odd jobs. Yet I must say, it was a job that struck one accustomed to unusual vocations (such as smuggling) as truly odd.

I'm 35 now, and I don't recall why we were flying there, but I'll never forget the man who hired us: A sore-headed old American by the name of Hugh McElroy. Every word out of his mouth was a barking command or war story from the Normandy front. Yet, he was rich enough to bring 10 mercenaries with him right into Chinese controlled Tibet. About that man, I could recall my father eyeing him like a hawk and vice-versa, only erring on the side of decency and the spirit of making money at Sam's request.

Despite the danger, it seemed that any worry of running into the Reds was dashed when we arrived. The Blue Village, as it was called, was rural and remote enough that it felt like we flew back in time to the 1800s. There was no runway so my father landed Renira on a flat stretch of land next to the main square. The village consisted of blue frost-covered houses and huts. Nearby, small shrines with fragile yellow tongues of flame flickered in the snow.

The plane came to a full stop at the mouth of the village. The inhabitants emerged from their whitened blue houses and huts to meet us. Each of us needed full sets of winter clothing. The cold stung like needles anywhere our skin was not adequately covered. The villagers that approached were cautious and in awe of us. We were strangers in their harsh homeland. On our side, our gloved fingers were never far from a trigger until the village elder posed no hostility. He welcomed McElroy, a Tibetan speaking mercenary, and my father into his hut. The hut in question was at the mouth of a cave deeper in the village.

I noticed the elder peer over to me when Sam called out my name. I remember thinking that it must be rare for them to witness a foreign child arriving in their village, much less accompanying a group

of armed men. Nevertheless, to occupy the time, Sam and I decided to walk through the quaint little village.

As we walked through the village, we were eyed by strangers who had rarely seen foreigners walk their winding snow-covered dirt paths.

For a small village, there were dozens of empty dwellings, many marked with a dark red symbol on the doors. What little sunlight there was, it did not penetrate the shadows in the empty houses we passed. Mounds of old clothes and animal pelts adorned candle-lit shrines of unfamiliar deities. We were later told that these villagers were a superstitious lot. They believed the deceased inhabited the empty houses and that their dwellings were left alone for their spirits.

Despite this, much of the village seemed harmless. We set up a camp and stayed for two weeks. We hoped to dodge the oncoming snowstorm on the Chinese Radio weather forecast soon. To what end McElroy had employed my father and Sam to find this place was a mystery to me. But the thought of it left my mind soon after when I became acquainted with the few village children. Playing with them in the daytime became a regular occurrence.

It wasn't until the last day of our stay when things took a turn for the odd and dangerous. It was near midday and I played hide and seek with some of the children until I was sought out by Sam. He wanted me to get my things while my father prepared for take-off. The storm was coming soon. I reluctantly left them to their game and packed my things.

"Get that box for me, please." Sam stacked his duffel bag onto the pile in the hold.

"What is it?" I leaned down to reach around the handholds of the wooden box.

My father's voice joined in, "Souvenirs." He stepped out, slinging his brown winter coat over his shoulders and zipping it up. His aviators were a constant feature resting upon his sharp nose. "These people gave us a few of their crafts as a gift. Looks like we'll be selling these to Rosa in Anthropology when we get back. Can't wait to get out of the cold," He sighed.

"You're going to have to wait a while longer." A low gruff voice I soon came to recognize as McElroy's.

My father turned to face him. "No, we're not. We're going. We stay any longer and we'll be waiting for Spring. Get your men and pack up, we need to go before that blizzard hits."

The mercenaries were a constant presence around the old man, orbiting him like planets around a harsh, dwindling sun. This time, they were carrying wooden crates none of us had seen before out from the village. "You listen good, pilot. There's been a change of plans. You cover that plane up and we hunker down for a bit. We need more time to finish up here before we head back to civilization."

"I don't know if you can or can't speak Mandarin, Mac. But the few radio transmissions have been chattering non-stop about a huge snowstorm headed our way. We leave now, we can all sleep on real beds in India."

“We aren’t done here,” growled McElroy.

“The deal was two weeks in the Plateau and we’re out for the other 3.5 mil. No more, no less.”

The old man pursed his lips and stared at the ground for a moment. Then he took a step forward and met my father’s eyes. “I knew someone like you once. Insubordinate. Was caught and court-martialled for forging signatures -MY SIGNATURES, and I had him discharged. You see, I knew him. But most importantly, I knew what money meant to him. So, here’s what it’s going to be: We’re staying another week. If you want the rest of your money, you’re staying too.”

“We’re going, Mac. You want to stay, be my guest. You can tell the villagers over there about how you killed Hitler with your own two hands. But 7 million ain’t enough to risk my partner’s or my son’s life for another week of collecting weird rocks.”

Sam grabbed me by the shoulder, “Get inside, kid.”

With an unsure glance at my father, who gave me a nod to follow Sam’s order, I climbed into the cabin and sat near the window. Outside, the conversation escalated into shouts. The mercenaries’ attention turned from moving crates to slowly reaching for their guns.

Sam stepped in, “Look, let’s talk about this for a minute,” he placed himself between the two figures. “We can’t afford to stay here any longer, Mr McElroy. If we do, we’ll be grounded until—.”

BANG!

I fell to the floor of the cabin and covered my ears. Muffled shots rang out in a deafening crescendo of bangs, clicks, and yells. Catching my breath, I started to crawl towards the cockpit. I nudged myself past the seats as bullets banged against the wall of the plane and keeping as low as possible.

The noise of the gunshots slowed, replaced by the clamouring of villagers approaching us. I began to stand when I felt a firm hand grab me by the shoulder.

“You’re coming with me.”

It was that same low and gruff voice, barking nothing but orders. My eyes widened as his bear-like hands wrapped around my neck. I felt the heat and smelled the gunpowder off of the barrel of the pistol he pushed against my temple.

“Dad!” I called out with my loudest voice.

“Quiet!” He forced the pistol closer, I winced at the heat of the barrel stinging my skin. Despite my protests, he easily dragged me out of the plane.

Two mercenaries were still engaging my father, trading shots from behind cover. I tried to dig my fingernails into his arm, hoping to scratch myself out of his grip. But it was for nought when my eyes caught sight of Sam’s motionless body on the ground where he stood moments before. His red blood pooled around him, staining the pure whiteness of the snow.

“Trainor! Get out here before I put a bullet in this boy!” McElroy barked. The two mercenaries stopped firing at the wall behind which my father hid. From here, dozens of wide eyes watched from the windows of the houses, horrified at the scene that played out.

“God-damn. First my partner, now you want to put a bullet in my kid?” He retorted, “I knew you were a sorry case from the start. Why I ever let Sam talk me into even listening to you, I’ll never know!”

He motioned for his mercenaries to move with him as they slowly moved in an attempt to flank him. “Well, your partner is about done with talking. And if you don’t get out here, so will your kid.” They began moving closer and towards the side, with one other soldier moving the other way to catch him.

While the two traded insults and threats, McElroy began to move his gun away from my head. I noticed his exposed left wrist as he dragged me towards the row of houses. I gathered my courage and strength and opened my jaw wide before finally biting down as hard as I could. I bit him so hard that I tore a bit of his flesh and tasted his salty blood against my tongue. I ran as he screamed, retreating his hand and drawing the attention of the mercenaries in front of him.

The gunfight continued as my father killed one mercenary and forced the other into cover. I scrambled into cover by the houses with villagers watching in shock and horror. Before I knew it, I saw McElroy bearing down on me. I turned and ran further into the village, past people coming out to see the commotion.

Before long, I found myself back in that dizzying network of empty dwellings and shrines. Hearing McElroy’s grunts and my father’s yells, I opened a random door of an empty hut and hid among the assortment of old objects inside. Staying as still as I could, I realized my coat was ripped in some parts. I was freezing. I also realized my footprints in the snow may lead the old man to me. As I attempted to shift my position, maybe run to a different hut, I heard more footsteps outside and froze in place.

Please, dad. Hurry. I whispered like a silent prayer; my mind raced with panicked thoughts of how I could perhaps run past him. I heard the footsteps creep closer and closer. I dared not even breathe as his low voice made my heart sink deeper in place, his hand reaching around the door. “Come out here, ki-.”

Then, something interrupted his slow, confident entrance. “What on Earth? Oh God, get away from me! Go away! NO!” I watched as the shadow of his feet under the wooden door receded into whiteness.

I could not find the courage to step out. The chilly air began to wrap around me as a creeping breeze blew into the hut like an apparition. For that moment, I felt like I was not alone in the hut. I felt as though someone or something was staring at me, but I could not turn to look. I could swear I heard my father somewhere calling out: *James!*

I must have zoned out, the taste of blood lingered in my mouth. I could not think, I struggled to move. Then, I felt a pair of warm hands shaking me. I saw my father’s worried eyes staring into mine. After what felt like an eternity in there, he took me back to Renira. We took Sam’s body and left, arriving in India soon afterwards. We never went back there, and I never knew of what happened to McElroy or if

any of his mercenaries survived. I never knew what they meant by the rock-collecting or why McElroy wanted to go in the first place. These questions raced through my mind since we left.

My father and I continued to fly around for the next few years. But we never talked about what happened; he hated talking about what happened to Sam. My father died two years after my son was born. He left behind almost all he had: all the money he saved over the years, his house in South-East Asia, his souvenirs. The only thing he didn't leave for me were answers for that one fateful flight to the Blue Village.

Three weeks ago, I found his journal and his old maps; there was nothing new except for a set of coordinates. The same coordinates to that same, mysterious village in the Tibetan Plateau.

It's winter, and I'm there now.

December 2006

The outside of the plane was desolate and haunted by the harsh, chilling howls of the wind. Flakes of thick snow brushed past the cockpit windows. Because of this, I had to descend onto the snow-covered field. The only guide to my safe landing was the faint outline of the main square. The houses, huts, and shrines were old and decrepit now. No tongues of light flames, nor any sign of life and warmth. No one came out to see the plane this time.

I waited for the snowfall to slow; hours passed and soon it was late evening. What sunlight there was outside had diminished. I was tempted to leave this place but the answers that may lay within the village called to me like a siren song. As the snowing stopped, I took with me a set of flares, a torch and a pistol with the hope I would not need it and stepped out into the cold.

It was as I had seen from my seat: deserted houses and the huts which lined the worn dirt road along the square. Wooden windows and doors banged against their frames at the whisper of a breeze. Where there was once life, there are now those dark-red symbols that, even now, I never learned the meaning of. The shrines that dotted the corners of the unkempt street were now victims to ruin. The wax of their candles reached the ground like thick strands of cream-coloured hair. The once-polished figures were caked in rust and frost. Walking in, I became surrounded by these abandoned dwellings. It felt as though the marked and abandoned houses had spread to the entire village like an epidemic.

I found no living soul, human or otherwise, anywhere in the town. Soon, night fell. I felt compelled to leave flares and light the few remaining candles at the shrines to find my way to the main square.

I stumbled upon the opening of the cave where the village elder resided and a black outline of some frozen object by the cave. I couldn't tell you why, maybe it was my morbid curiosity or sheer stupidity, but I dug at the snow that covered the object. As I dug more and more, I fell backwards clutching my weapon when I finally made out its features.

It was the frozen blue corpse of McElroy. His features were shrivelled and his eyeholes hollowed over time. But there was no mistaking it, it was him. I felt repulsed at what I saw. It was as though the sight of him summoned that unpleasant taste of blood in my mouth once more. I could not think of any reason why the rest of his body was not subject to more decay. I reasoned that the climate and the location he remained at the time of his demise must have preserved him in this state. And then, the question of how he met his demise arose, to which I could provide no answer as well.

Not wanting to stay any longer, my gaze turned to the derelict residence of the village elder nearby. It was an old and battered hut of cracked brick that stood resolute in the dark and guarding the entrance to the cave beyond. Curiously, I felt that my eyes were deceiving me when I saw a muted blue glow through the open window. Eager to find more answers and to leave McElroy to his rest, I did not hesitate to open the rotted and marked door.

Old tattered tomes were scattered on the table across the room. Next to that was the source of that ethereal, cold blue glow -a piece of diamond or quartz-like mineral. Sensing no danger, I approached and reached out to pick up the mineral. It was cold to the touch, even while I wore my gloves.

Was this the object of McElroy's search? I wondered, staring into the peculiar reflections of the jagged stone. I could recognize many precious stones and minerals, but I could place no name to the one I held in my fingers.

Replacing the curious mineral, I turned my attention to the books. Many appeared to be records of hunting expeditions and catalogues of remaining supplies. As far as I could tell, the final dates written in the log were in 1987. When they provided no further insight, I turned my attention to a different text. This time, it appeared to be a hand-written prayer. From what little I could read; the prayer invokes the spirits of the deceased for wisdom and guidance.

Reading it, I noticed the faint outline of a wooden box between two small stacks of books I did not see before. Pulling it out and opening it, I found that it contained a small carved stone with old glyphs I did not recognize. It also contained a small blue leather-bound journal. I paid the stone no mind as it was the journal that had caught my attention as I flipped through its yellowed pages. Inside, it contained words upon words of hastily compiled entries. And between each one, there accompanied diagrams of odd proportions, start charts, an image of a large black rectangle, and sections labelled "Visions".

It soon became clear; the journal belonged to the Elder. As my finger traced across the page, my eyes widened at what I could understand of the contents.

On a log dated 1970, the elder describes a vision of a man and a group of soldiers one day arriving at their village. Asking the spirits for guidance, the elder wrote that the spirits advised appeasement. But he also wrote that they would act if the strangers remained greedy. On another page, this one dated 1971, the elder shockingly details hearing a name whispered in one of the houses he was passing by: James Trainor.

I stumbled back at this revelation. *How? How could this be?* I scrambled through more pages looking for any semblance of an explanation but there was none. The final entry was about a particularly

strong winter that the village folk could not withstand. Many had died while the others fled. The elder painted the symbols on the doors of the emptied houses and followed.

I spent more time reading the entries but the howling wind outside sent a chill down my spine. Soon, I decided that I could find no more answers here. Not unless I ventured into the caves. But even then, I was weary and I could spend no more time in this place. I took the glowing mineral in my pocket and left, hurrying back to my plane.

I was somewhat disappointed and mystified at what little I found. I could only assure myself that to venture further on was a fool's errand. I made my way back to my seat on my plane and started the engines as the skies cleared. The bright moon shone in the sky and I prepared for take-off.

Imagine my shock then, when I looked out to my left onto the field and saw a procession of withered corpses, including McElroy standing in the square watching me leave.