



# Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price  
Chapter 5

**The story continues: Following on from several dinner engagements at James McKinnon's French mansion in Saigon, further developments arise. Claude Bastein, the Inspector of the French secret police — the Sûreté — still attached to the Saigon secret police, and James's housekeeper and governess Charmaine Curtain, have wined and danced the night away at The Continental Hotel. At the same time the engagement of James to Phuong Duval is celebrated. Meanwhile, the Bishop of Saigon, Jean-Baptiste Lacroix, has had an interesting audience with his old friend Ngo Dinh Diem, the president of South Vietnam, and dinner with numerous others is about to commence at the Presidential Palace.**

There were ten at dinner, seated at the long table; at the head of which was the president, Ngo Dinh Diem, while at the opposite end was his brother-in-law Ngo Dinh Nhu, with Nhu's wife, Madame Nhu by his side. Next to her was General Dao Hu Loc and his wife Trinh. Opposite sat Air Marshal Vuong Kha and his wife Phung. Further up the table closer to Diem sat General Chu Lo Duc and his wife Huyen, then next to the president sat the Bishop of Saigon, Jean-Baptiste Laicrox.

As the first course was being served, it was the president's brother, who opened the conversation.

"It is most gracious, my Lord Bishop, to welcome you again this evening. My brother and I have a great affection for you and our church. So far, you have alluded to our government that you support the sanctions of the Geneva convention for free elections to come, when both North and South will join in deciding the ultimate future of our country. Even so, I feel there are some within our midst who would not be so kind or generous."

Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix acknowledged Nhu's opening remarks with a lift of his glass of white wine. Within the small gathering he felt secure, if not supreme. After all, his God was with him, which was little he could say of the president's brother and sister-in-law. He was aware of the tension that exuded around the table. Here were generals and an air marshal in competition with each other, all vying for the very important positions within Ngo Dinh Diem's cabinet. The knives were out. Being so close and yet so far from the intricacies of government, he could see what was going on. He smiled down the table, lifted his glass again . . . made sure that his chin was well forward . . . and said: "The Catholic congregation of Saigon is well aware of the good that this government is doing to unite all against the infiltration of the North, but at the same time, your Excellency, there is dissatisfaction among the Buddhist community, which your government, may I say, has not addressed."

The murmur that ran through the room startled Madame Nhu, whose eyes flamed and widened. "My Lord Bishop, we are doing what we can! Look at the hundreds of thousands of refugees pouring down from the North. Escaping from the heartless Communist regime! We are having trouble where to put them all, and the Buddhists do not seem to accept our position. With all respect, my Lord, why are you speaking out for them?"

Her husband, Ngo Dinh Nhu, interrupted. "My Lord Bishop, with great respect . . . great respect . . . the people you talk to may not be dedicated Buddhists, but part and parcel of the revolutionary movement hiding under the umbrella of the Buddhist movement."

"That is so," said General Chu. "There are many within the Buddhist movement who would be traitors to our cause."

Air Marshal Vuong spoke up. "All depends upon the sect. There is the average Buddhist community . . . and then there are the hard-liners . . . the ones who adhere to . . . well, you need to be careful about putting them all into the same basket. Though I would agree with my Lord Bishop in that the majority are somewhat concerned about the way this administration is moving."

"Stop this idiocy!" The dark brown eyes of Madame Nhu blazed out across the table. "You are all misled. I, myself with my family, have gone through the punishments of the North. Do you not remember my family's struggles against the Viet Minh? Do you forget that I was imprisoned? I suffered. And did the Buddhists care about that?"



General Dao turned his moon face toward the end of the table. “But you yourself practiced Buddhism before your marriage — before you converted to Catholicism. You, of all people, should know how the Buddhists care for people.”

The fire in her eyes grew bright. “Not all . . . not all dear General. There are many who profess to follow the Buddha, yet deep in their hearts they are Communists.”

General Dao tapped the table with his fork. “That is stretching things a little, I think.”

“Our police have evidence.” said Ngo Dinh Nhu.

“And what evidence might that be?” remarked General Dao, “which is not arranged, or concocted. The police raid the temples and what do they find? Nothing!”

“There are reams of evidence, piles of it.”

General Dao laughed. “Evidence! What evidence? Your police, if I may say so, are corrupt!”

Jean-Baptiste Lacroix, Bishop of Saigon, smiled to himself. He had got them talking, which was what he wished. That he might be in favour with his God for that, he knew not. He only knew that these people were so far off guidance as to be so close to hell. He watched their faces as they continued the discussion throughout the numerous dishes and wines both red and white until the final closure of the night came around 9.00 p.m. What had changed, if anything? Give it time, he considered as Duy, his chauffeur, ushered him into the stately black Packard. It had been an interesting evening, though he was unsure of its outcome. He had sown some seeds, so let’s see if they germinate.

The dawn of a new day, thought James McKinnon, as the sun savaged the brilliant white facade of his French colonial mansion. A hot one, indeed. He finished shaving, combed his shock of dark curly hair back, and went down for breakfast. The breakfast room was off the kitchen and abutted the parlour where he entertained visitors, preferring it for its small area compared to the drawing room. Both rooms looked out onto the rear lawn and lush garden beyond. Everyone’s still asleep, he mused, as Ngan, the elderly Vietnamese cook, laid out a Continental breakfast for him. She laughed when he said she was a very beautiful woman and disappeared to the kitchen cackling away in a voice that had spoken with 37 years of residents coming and going. So long had she attended to their needs and she had cared for them all, loved them all. The previous French owners had been kind to her when she was suddenly widowed, kept her on and gave her an increase in salary, but they had been of the military and the family had gone back to France after the massive defeat at Dien Bien Phu. In the interim before the McKinnons, there was a German family, an attache at the German embassy and his wife, but they had only stayed for a few years. She thought they were somewhat reserved. She couldn’t help pick sides, but she had come to love the McKinnons the best — the children were so lovely, and that governess and overseer, Charmaine, had such a kind heart, unlike some of the other French neighbours who had departed in recent years. She should find herself a good husband. Ngan cackled again as she thought of it, and she had seen the way that inspector of the secret police looked at Charmaine. Any fool could see there was something bursting out loud and clear there. Why, she wondered, was that man so gentle and easy to get on with? Surely, he could not be the same kind of person at his secret work, no doubt the continuous interrogating of prisoners? Wouldn’t that turn one into stone? Very strange, she thought. She shrugged her shoulders and turned to the combustion stove. Work to be done here before the children are awake. She smiled to herself. She couldn’t help it, but she loved Samantha best of all. Sweet child. She hoped they would all stay forever.

James opened the *Saigon Presse International* newspaper, looking to see how rubber shares were going. He nodded to himself as he scanned the financial section. Things were up. The Korean war had long seen to that, he thought, and shares were stable at the moment. Some downside in Malaya, which was to be expected due to the insurgency, but overall, quite okay. Malaya would recover now that they had the Chinese terrorists on the run. Malayanisation troubled him a little, if and when he returned. How to convince the Malayan Federation Government that he was needed? He wondered about his superior Justin with his Vietnamese wife, Nguyet. Though perhaps they would remain in Vietnam no matter what the politics were. He turned back to the front page, knowing that his French was only just adequate in translation. It amused him, somewhat. Most of the French were gone, yet here was a daily newspaper in French language still flourishing. But then, much of Saigon even though being Vietnamese could read and write in French — so long a colony under the influence of the French. His eyes alighted upon a slim column on the front page and he attempted to translate. It was disturbing, written by a correspondent who alleged that the Viet Minh from North Vietnam had infiltrated the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia in an attempt to bring their army down the border areas into



South Vietnam. James re-read the article, attempting to ensure that his woeful French had got it correct. Yes, it certainly seemed so. He drew a deep breath. Well, that makes a rather comical set-up with Geneva, doesn't it! Useless talks. So damned useless. The North won't keep their part of the bargain. Should have brought a United Nations force in long ago. Too damn late now, by the looks of it.

There was an official looking envelope beside his plate. He slit it open using his bread and butter knife. It was a short letter from Claude Bastein, proposing a trip up to the Marchand rubber plantation this coming week. Could he call tomorrow at James's office to discuss a plan? The last line was "I'm rather keen, James, to know who this fellow is and to bring him to justice, if necessary." Fine by me, thought James. Never liked the man anyway. If he is the collaborator then he surely needs to be extradited to France to stand trial.

"My, you're up early!" said a voice. It was Charmaine. "May I join you?"

"My pleasure. Late night?"

She blushed. "It was rather wonderful, James." She flourished her ring finger with the diamond ring glittering in the early morning light.

He chuckled. "As expected. I don't know why you two waited so long. Should have happened weeks ago, or even months for that matter. I'll call for champagne."

"A little early, is it not?"

"Never too early to celebrate love and passion, my dear."

Phuong Duval observed an unusual nervousness among her students at the Nguyen Académie. Some kind of 'bush telegraph' as they called it in Australia, was occurring. She was explaining hyphens by chalking on the blackboard 'a colour-blind man . . . the man is colour-blind,' when one of the students burst into tears and laid her head upon crossed arms upon her desk. The girl beside her also began to sob. Then, another at the back of the class began to cry. The whole class erupted in murmurs and whispers.

Oh, my Lord, thought Phuong. What is going on here? She cried out "Girls! Girls! This is nonsense, stop this!" And gradually the sobs and cries diminished.

"Oh dear ones, what is the problem? You don't have to keep it to yourselves. Please . . . please . . . communicate! I've taught you all this year about communication, be it the English language, and now you must . . . you must communicate with me as to what is concerning you, otherwise . . . otherwise . . . all that I have taught has been a waste."

One of the tallest girls who seemed to have been unaffected by the hysteria of the class, stood up. "Miss Duval, it is because of some parents."

"There is talk of the Communists coming down to invade Saigon, Miss. Some parents have read this in the daily newspaper. Vy's father and some others said that the soldiers would come and rape all the daughters of Saigon."

A great chill came over Phuong. She felt herself succumbing to the feelings of her students. Be strong, she thought . . . be strong . . . they depend upon you so much . . . be strong. She felt faint and reached for the desk beside her, allowing it to steady her. How could they possibly believe that? How on earth could a parent say that out loud in the presence of a daughter? How stupid! She regained some control and sought to break the nervous feeling that had swept into the classroom.

"You are soon to be women," she said. "You will take your place in society as adults in a few years, and you will need to know truth from fiction. What has been spread among you this morning is fiction, total fiction. Look at the blackboard! See what I have written! It is about colour-blindness, but colour-blindness doesn't mean only that incurred by sight, it also means that which is incurred by the mind, and how there are differences of opinion amongst all humanity. News often comes in black and white, without proper interpretation, and if I have taught you all these years about proper communication, I have taught you to be discerning, to pick right from wrong, to choose fact from hearsay. Is that not true, girls? *Is that not true?*"

The class of teenagers slowly rose as one and then began to clap; then they began to stamp their feet in unison. And their voices rang out: "Miss Duval, Miss Duval, Miss Duval! Cheers for Miss Duval! Cheers for Miss Duval!"

And the French headmistress in her office above, thought some kind of revolution was taking place and rang for the police.



Claude Bastein arrived at James Mckinnon's office on Tuesday morning; white flannel trousers, light fawn jacket, open necked red silk shirt, light tan Alberto Fasciani shoes. James's eyebrows lifted. Here was a different person again, another version of the inspector of police! He chuckled. Was Claude a Chameleon?

*"Magnifique, supreme inspector! You look so cool!"*

Claude laughed. "So, I'm unofficially off duty, but here to talk serious business about Monsieur Marchand. Are we likely to be interrupted?"

James shrugged. "My secretary is away sick, and the others are out on business."

"And your office would not be wire-tapped, I presume?"

James chuckled. "What! Surely, only you would know about that?"

Claude laughed and sat down on the leather upholstered seat in front of James's desk "Things change. It won't be long before I am back to France. What used to be the police is no longer the police. It has all become political and the police now follow the ruling government's policies, which are not amenable to my old style of policing. I'm afraid, my friend, that the country no longer has much to offer for people such as me. There is corruption everywhere."

James felt a tremor pass through him. "Are you saying that the government cannot be trusted?"

"The government is not the government one would wish to serve. I've had some very deep conversations with Charmaine, and sad as it may be for your family, James, we are out of here as soon as we can make proper arrangements."

"But we rely upon her so much . . . my children rely upon her . . . she is such a part of the family!"

Claude bowed his head slightly. "I understand that, but you should look again at what is occurring here. We have a country divided. It is a division that cannot, will not work. Look how long these negotiations have been taking place in Paris? It is years of very little being given on either side. I have come to love this country as my own, but I cannot bring up a family in this atmosphere. There is no longer any security. And you should also think about that before it is too late."

James sank back in his chair, the leather giving way to the blades of his shoulders. This was not what he wanted to hear. Claude had come for another reason, and here he was opening up to his real feelings — inviting James into a realisation of insecurity, when all had seemed so fair, so new and bright. Don't want to think about it. Change the subject. He shovelled it out of his mind and said to Claude: "Okay, but for the time being it's Marchand we are concerned about, is it not?"

The inspector breathed deeply, and realising that the subject had changed, ran his tongue across his lips and said: "The problem, of course, was how to go about it . . . how to get back up there without anyone knowing of our quest. I do not need that man to be forewarned. Paris has telexed me back with enough information beyond doubt that it is the same man, the same collaborator with the Japanese who caused the deaths of several French military prisoners." He slapped his right hand on his thigh. "I will have this man, James. I will have him!" He waved a piece of paper. "I can hold him for 48 hours for questioning, and then . . ."

"So, the plan is?"

"How are you at flying?"

"What?"

"Well, we don't wish to come into contact with any of those Cong friends of yours, do we? So driving is out of the question. I've secured, through an old friend of mine — Air Marshall Vuong — a helicopter courtesy of our French friends to the AVRN, to take us up from Saigon to the plantation."

"A military helicopter? Won't that put Marchand on the alert?"

"We'll put down a kilometre or so away and go the rest on foot. He'll be used to copters going overhead on their way back and forth to the demarcation zone. Be like bees buzzing around him almost all day long. Something he'd surely sleep through."

James winced. "Not so sure about that."

"It'll be fine, *mon amie*, we'll have two armed Saigon police with us, compliments of Major Do Dinh Thanh whom I can trust. They can remain well in the background while we talk to your friend Marchand."

"Damned if he's my friend! The last person I'd want for a friend. If he's as guilty as it seems, then yes, we do need to bring him to justice. How we do it, of course, can't be that easy — he has some back-up, you know."

Claude frowned. "Leave that to me. I only have to carry out a cough three times and my men, hiding in the background, will be on top of it."



“I suppose . . . if you really think so . . .”

To James, the Sikorsky H-19 helicopter looked like a bloated frog, its bulbous nose and tiny legs sitting on the roof of the Adventia building. Its rotor blades were idling around, swishing in the afternoon air, making enough noise to drown out normal conversation. The two armed Vietnamese police had already scrambled aboard and Claude Bastein was pushing James forward, giving him encouragement.

“You sure this thing is safe?” yelled James. “There’s a few dents in it.”

“No problem *mon amie*, safer than your Citroen.” said Claude, pushing James from behind. The pilot made a beckoning signal and the two men climbed aboard. “Time to shove off,” said Claude.”

The rotors gathered speed and the Sikorsky lifted off, whirling away into the heat of the afternoon sky. James felt sick. He put his head down between his legs and prayed for guidance. This was stupidity. Surely, what was to be gained by flying up the country in the blazing heat within a machine that could send you half way to deafness? He wished he had not agreed to the journey. What if Marchand was innocent, after all? What if it was another who was the culprit, and this Pierre Marchand was simply duplicated by Parisian police’s faulty investigation? After all, the name was not all that uncommon. He didn’t like the man, but to have been accused of the collaboration which caused the execution of a number of French soldiers, well . . . that was not something that was proven. And so many years past. Surely, if the man was guilty, he would have been caught up with long ago? It didn’t make sense.

They were above Tan Uyen and dropping in elevation, preparing to roll into the area where the Loy plantation was situated when there was fire from below, bullets and tracers were coming up at them from a patch of jungle close to a river.

“Shit!” said the Vietnamese pilot. “Communists!” He shoved the copter into a left bank, growled up more power, and hoped he’d done the right thing.

“Need to get out of here!” screamed his Eurasian co-pilot. “Take it up!”

The copter shuddered as several bullets hit the hull. The pilot fought with the controls and managed to bring the copter around and higher, up and away from the firing zone.

“Holy, holy Moses!” said Claude Bastein. “I never thought they were so damn close! How could they have got so far down South without us knowing?”

“Wooo,” said James. “What the hell have you got me into!”

The Sikorsky droned on. Then, within minutes. “All clear . . . all clear,” said the Vietnamese pilot. “Taking her down behind the plantation. Prepare for landing.”

They skidded out of the Sikorsky, keeping their heads low from the spinning rotors, Claude Bastein, James McKinnon and two South Vietnamese police armed with M1 Garand semi-automatic rifles. The copter shut down.

“I have a map here,” said Claude Bastein, “We are within one half a kilometre of the plantation. It’s no problem.”

James shook his head. “So glad someone knows what we are doing!”

“Now, now, you need to get some control of yourself, James. I know the chopper ride has probably shaken you up somewhat, but what the hell, that’s life out here in the country, eh? Look upon it as an amazing experience that otherwise you would never have had. You can tell your grandchildren about it”

James stretched himself. “You’re full of fun, Claude. Just hope we get out of this all in one piece.”

“Or pieces, ha ha,” laughed Claude. “If so, they can bury us all mixed up together.”

The co-pilot engineer was out, checking the helicopter for damage, removing inspection panels, feeling around, then closing them. Checking the rotor blades. “Lucky,” he said, turning to Claude with a wide grin on his face. “Very lucky.”

Claude laughed. “Must be the lucky rabbit’s foot I keep around my neck.”

James looked and shook his head. “You don’t have anything hanging about your neck!”

“You have no imagination, James; it’s there if you think hard enough. How do you think I got this far in life without believing in luck?”

“Interesting thought,” said James. “Well, shall we go?”

It was long after the rubber tappers had completed their morning work and most were resting in their shacks. The group of four newcomers padded up the winding driveway toward the home office of Pierre Marchand. Claude Bastein raised



his hand for all to stop. He looked around but could see no movement. Difficult to believe that this could be the same place as it would have been early morning when a hive of activity was presenting. Nothing stirred. There was not even a dog chained up. No birds in cages where some could give out a warning. The silence was incredible. He whispered to the constables to stay back, hide behind some palms that were lining the gravelled driveway, then motioned to James for the two of them to move forward. They were armed, Claude had belted on a Smith and Wesson .45 calibre pistol, and James wore a Webley revolver — a relic from his Malaya days.

Claude moved up the steps, followed by James. He opened the fly-wire door and walked inside — his eyes scanning the semi-darkened office for movement. There was none, but there was a man reclining on a tattered sofa in one corner of the room. He was asleep with his right hand hanging down, still managing to hold an almost empty whisky bottle around which some flies nestled. Easier than I thought it would be, considered Claude as he moved forward to shake the man who could only be Pierre Marchand. James stood back in the doorway, now and then casting a look over his shoulder for any signs of activity outside.

The blue eyes opened, closed, opened again, then the Frenchman made as if to rise.

“Just stay there for a moment, Monsieur Marchand. I am Inspector Bastein of the Saigon police.” He withdrew his identity card and poked it into the face of the man.

Marchand rested his head back on a Chinese embroidered cushion. “What? What do you want? My plantation is well run . . . all is in order.”

Claude rested his right hand on the butt of the Smith and Wesson. “It’s not about the plantation. It’s about things that occurred some years ago here in Vietnam. We wish you to come to Saigon for some talks. As a witness, you may very well be of much use to us.”

Marchand raised his head a little. “Witness! Witness to what?”

“Some details to do with the Japanese occupation.”

“What’s . . . what’s that to do with me?” He sat up, dropping the whisky bottle on the floor. Claude stepped back.

Marchand went on: “Who’s that over there by the door? I can’t see his face because of the shade.”

“James McKinnon, Mr. Marchand. You remember, I came with Asia Barr some weeks back to perhaps make you an offer for the plantation, since you wish to return to France.”

Marchand looked from one to the other. His lips tightened, his eyes stared hard and long. “I’ve withdrawn from sale. I’m not returning to France. I’ll spend out my days here in Vietnam with my Chinese and Vietnamese friends.”

“What seems to have changed your mind?” queried Claude.

“Well . . . er . . . it’s all been too much trouble . . . too much trouble, and I still have fits of malaria.”

Claude made a quick look to ensure that there were no weapons near the sofa, then pulled up a chair. He sat and crossed his legs. “Mind if I smoke, Pierre?”

“No problem, but what is this really all about? What could I possibly have been a witness to that would require you to come all this way?”

Claude took out his pipe, filled it with tobacco, and lit it. “We can talk about that in Saigon. Surely you need a rest from the plantation, Pierre? How long is it since you saw the city lights and enjoyed some of it’s pleasures? You could do us a favour and also indulge in some of life’s pleasures. An opportunity for you to kill two birds with the one stone, so to speak.”

“The plantation and my friends here give me all the pleasure I need. I’ve no wish to go to your stinking Saigon.”

“But you must have liked it once . . . perhaps when you were young?”

“If you’re alluding to young women, I’m not interested. Beside, I have the plantation to run.”

Claude took a deep puff on his pipe. “I understand you have a manager who is very capable of standing in for you for a few weeks.”

“What’d’you mean, weeks? Yes, I have Chun Li, he’s very capable, but I’m not leaving and that is all about it.”

Claude knocked out his pipe on the heel of his boot. “Well, I’m sorry it has to be this way. I was hoping that you would co-operate.” He pulled out a folded sheet of paper from his pocket, opened it up and poked it towards the man’s face.

“This is a warrant for your arrest, Pierre Marchand, on a charge of collaborating with Japanese soldiers, which led to the deaths of several French soldiers. I will now read you your rights.”



When the inspector had finished, James spoke. “There’s someone coming through the plantation, inspector. But it looks like more than one. Too far away at present — can’t quite see who it is. I think we have only minutes to get the hell out of here.”

Claude took the Frenchman by the elbow. “Come along *monsieur*. No need for handcuffs . . . you do seem rather frail.”

Suddenly there was no resistance. The man bit his lower lip and moved beside the inspector down the steps, with James following and watching to see who it was that might come through from the plantation. The group of three had negotiated a bend in the gravel driveway and had almost reached the palms, when a voice broke out savagely: “HALTE!”

“Who is that who speaks French?” hissed the inspector to Marchand.

“My manager, Chun Li. Thank goodness. You can leave now, inspector Bastein . . . otherwise!”

The large Chinese was standing at the entrance to the plantation with a carbine pointed at them. James felt a shiver run down his spine. Behind the Chinese was a smaller Vietnamese male, unarmed except for a heavy bamboo rod resting over his shoulder and a wicked looking knife tucked into his belt.

Claude held onto Marchand with his left hand, while his right strayed to the butt of his pistol. Time seemed to stand still. “You’re not leaving me, Marchand. Tell your idiot *garçon* to back off.”

Marchand laughed. “I’ll tell him nothing, inspector. Look’s as if you’re in a bit of a jam. May I go now?”

Claude’s grip on Marchand’s arm tightened. He squeezed a little harder, feeling the muscles in his own arm contract. The man gasped “Uuuh!”

The big Chinese stepped forward, followed by the Vietnamese. Both had faces that looked as if they could tear a tiger apart. Evil pair of bastards, thought James, as he recovered his senses. Then he heard the click and slap of the bolt as the Chinese primed the carbine. He was thinking, whatever you do, Claude, do not go for your pistol. But Claude had kept his hand clear of the pistol butt, as a signal to the Chinese that he wasn’t going to do anything stupid. He squeezed Marchand’s arm even more tightly. “Call your *garçon* off, Marchand, or I will break your arm. I can do it with one hand; you know very well that I can do it, you bloody imbecile!

It was probably only a few seconds, but James thought it was minutes — time packed discreetly into a waiting game, when Marchand laughed again. “Break it then, what use will I be to you even if I die! Take me to your cells and I will hang myself. You can’t win, inspector of the *Sûreté*. Yes, I know who you are, and I know your filthy methods to obtain confessions. You and your French inquisition chambers down in Saigon. I’m not the first and I won’t be the last, so go on then, do what you have to do. I hear your Vietnamese friends in Saigon have brought the *guillotine* into use again. So what? Use it. But you’ll never win.”

What are the chances, thought James? Looks as if Chun Li was preparing to put a bullet through Claude’s chest any second now. He had turned slightly so that the Chinese could not see his Webley revolver and wondered how fast he could manage two or three shots at that range? He’d had some practice in Malaya, but this was a different situation. If he missed, then both of them — Claude and himself — were dead cert goners.

Claude turned to look at Marchand. “I’ll break your bloody arm, all right. But not here *mon amie*.” And with that he covered his mouth with his free hand and coughed three times

The response was dramatic. The two Saigon police appeared from behind the palm trees, their M1 Garand semi-automatic rifles at their shoulders. Both flicked the safety catches off and one of them fired into the shoulder of the big Chinese. The man was blown backwards, his carbine hitting the ground and firing off a shot into the air. The Vietnamese raised his hands and shook his head violently. “No shoot. No shoot!”

The fracas had brought out numerous Vietnamese and Chinese rubber tappers and they stood around watching the events play out.

Claude called out: “Get that man to a *daktar*! Medic! Understand?”

Several in front nodded and made their way to the wounded Chinese, lying on the ground moaning and writhing in the dust. Claude turned to his small party, still holding Marchand firmly by the arm: “Let’s go, back to the chopper.”

Commissar Chu Lam Long, his men and two women, had heard the helicopter settle down north of Tan Uyen. They’d earlier heard rapid gunfire, probably coming from another cadre and thought that it may well have been directed at the flying bird. Had it been forced down? Was it on some mission? He was curious; it would pay to investigate and he had ordered his cadre to march in the direction of where the helicopter went down. Eventually, they



had come to a clearing where the bulbous metallic bird was sitting in silence. Long spotted the military markings — enemy! He signalled to his comrades to spread out in the undergrowth while he watched and waited. He observed the AVRN pilot and co-pilot sitting in the shade of the copter, eating from provisions. No weapons. Strange, he thought, most strange. Then it occurred to him that perhaps they had brought a party up to this area, but where was that party now? The more he considered it, the more he thought it was most likely. The pilots were waiting for someone to return. But why? Whatever, this helicopter would be a prize for the National Liberation Front. He could arrange for it to be flown to Hanoi. Good to have them shot down, but here was a live one. Seemed in good condition and the pilots were so relaxed, so there cannot have been any engine failure or other. No, they were waiting for someone to return. He was convinced of that. Now, should he capture them immediately, or should he wait to see what develops? If there was a party of soldiers or other, there cannot have been many. The helicopter was not designed for a large group. Six, eight, maybe? Hmm, that would be rather crammed. Four, perhaps five. We'll wait, then. See what the situation brings.

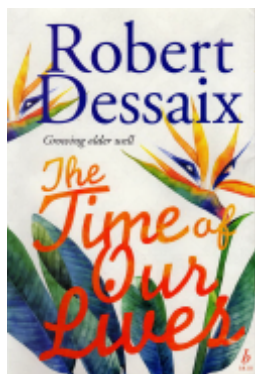
Cuc cradled the AK47 in her arms. She was lying spread out, watching the two pilots licking their lips from the food they had gorged. One of them belched loudly, his face partially shadowed by the hulk of the machine. She smiled. So, here she was at long last . . . a chance to vindicate the death of her loved one, Kim. She'd not seen a helicopter up close before and she marvelled at its shiny exterior and those massive blades that lifted it. How could that be? How could such fragile things like that lift a heavy body? Mystery. She looked across at Linh, not too far from her, and grinned. Linh grinned back. After their little fight, they had become firm friends; two women in search of the same goal, the freeing of Vietnam. Linh had a boy-friend, the Commissar's brother, Lung. Cuc felt happy for her, but considered that she would never fall in love again. It was too much of a heartbreak to lose those so close to you. The cause, the NLF, was her great love now. She would sacrifice herself to its fulfillment and leave men to their own devices. But the memory of Kim would stay with her forever and she knew that his dedication to her would last as long as life would, and one day — at a time of complete destiny — they would meet above the clouds, for it had been — and still was — an eternal love which neither torture nor death could destroy.

She heard voices. She looked to where her leader, Long, was. He was signalling for quiet. Her breathing became rapid and she could hear the thump of her heart as it began to race. This was her first real confrontation. It would go well, she thought . . . it would go very well, and her hands firmed along the cool steel of the AK47, safety off, with a finger curled around the trigger guard. •

*to be continued*

## Book review: **The Time of Our Lives.**

**Robert Dessaix has written a book for the 70 and 80-year-olds. It's all about growing older well.**



**There are a number of reviews of this book, which are of interest.** Ann Skea for *The Newtown Review of Books (Sydney)* writes “Robert Dessaix is 76 years old. Not quite spry enough to join the middle-aged hotel guests dancing to boom-box music by the lotus pool of his Indonesian hotel – ‘I know my limits’ – but alert enough to admire the 25-year-old wellness instructor in his clinging T-shirt and shorts. At the same time, he finds the scene disturbing. Much of this book reflects Dessaix’s musings on this as he discusses it with various ageing friends living in different countries around the world and sees how they live their lives.” Skea neither likes or dislikes the book. She leaves that up to the reader of her review, having depicted numerous scenes from various pages.

Kevin John Brophy writing in the Adelaide Independent News *InDaily*, states that it is not a book to churn through in one sitting. He writes: “Dessaix’s special skill is to be able to ask the deepest and most complex questions while appearing to be chatting amiably with you, all the while performing for you the literary equivalent of an enchanting dance. By the end you don’t really want such a book to end, which I guess is the sign of a thoroughly well-judged work . . . It can be enjoyed on several levels at once, and though it reads easily, it’s not a book to churn through in one sitting because in its pages you will come across Epicurus, Lucretius, Prokofiev, Hafiz, Sarah Day, Diana Athill, Giotto, the Indonesian language, Javanese anthropology, Bertrand Russell and many others you might want to Google as you go, testing Dessaix’s references and losing or finding yourself in the fun of these digressions.”

Personally, I would join with Helen Elliott of *The Monthly*, who writes: “Dessaix loves philosophy and is learned about Nietzsche, but unbidden emotions that cannot be intellectualised confound him. He is a significant and valued figure in the Australian cultural landscape, but this latest reiteration of his self-search called up impatience from me. The narrow road to high culture is unforgiving.” I also found that I was becoming impatient with his philosophising, and to be reading about death on almost every second page seems not a healthy thing to be doing. All praise for Robert’s previous writings, but . . . !

**The Time of Our Lives, Brio hardback  
Dymocks \$AUD32.99**