



**Larry Cashman, the Unmitigated
Coward**

Chapter 2

The Road to Indonesia

When the letter arrived, it seemed so formal. The envelope was embossed with the seal of the American Embassy in Jakarta. The letterhead was engraved with the symbol of the U.S. State Department — the bald eagle clutching the sheaf of arrows in one talon and a fig leaf in the other. The letter was signed by the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia. It began “Dear Dr. Cashman, I am pleased to inform you.....” I’ll have to put an end to that ‘Dr. Cashman’ nonsense real fast, I thought. That can only get me into trouble.

It was the official letter appointing me as the American Embassy’s Education and Training Advisor to the Indonesian Family Planning Federation. It started by emphasizing the great honor being bestowed upon me with this appointment, followed by a bureaucratese description of the position; two items I could care less about. The only thing I wanted to know was how much I would be paid, all the comfortable benefits I would be receiving, and how Sabrina, Carmencita, and I would get ourselves out of Thailand and into Indonesia.

Unfortunately this missive mentioned nothing about that. What it did explicitly say was that, “The American Embassy’s Senior Officer for Contract Management will contact you to negotiate your compensation and benefit package.” I didn’t like the sound of that at all — “Senior Officer for Contract Management!” This person would be the first representative of the American Embassy I had to deal with, and his official title intimidated me. The next part, stating that the Senior Officer for Contract Management and myself would “Negotiate your compensation and benefit package,” also unsettled me as I knew absolutely nothing about negotiating. I simply thought they would give me a huge salary and an assortment of generous benefits because I was such a superstar. Now it appeared that I would have to negotiate with this senior government official with the lofty title! In typical Cashman fashion, I was scared shitless and ready to cut and run.

Sabrina tried to steel my nerves for the coming negotiation. She looked me in the eye and said, “Don’t be such a sissy-pants, Cashman.” Once again I reminded her that I took umbrage at this characterization, so she relented by adding, “OK, don’t be such a candy-ass,” she continued. “I’m sure this Senior Embassy Official will be a kindly, patrician gentleman who will invite you to a swanky Bangkok hotel for a civil and proper discussion over high tea. U.S. Embassy officials are refined, high class people. Plus, with that soothing palaver and mellifluous bullshit you dish out so effortlessly, he’ll think you’re a Boy Scout.”

Sabrina’s rationalization made sense. I could bullshit with the best of them, as well as talk my way out of most jams. My apprehensions were temporarily allayed.

But this wasn’t one of the typical jams that I found myself getting into. This was a negotiation with a high ranking U.S. Embassy official who held all the cards. What if my line of bullshit wasn’t convincing? This guy had probably heard it all before. My insecurity got the best of me. My anxiety returned in spades. Larry Cashman was scared shitless again.

I heard not a word about our future tete-a-tete for two weeks. Then, on a weekday night at 11 PM, I received a phone call. In a gruff, raspy drawl, the voice on the phone said, “Is this Larry Cashman? My name is Bob Durham. I am the Senior Officer for Contract Management from the American Embassy in Jakarta. I just arrived in Bangkok but will leave for Nepal tomorrow. Come to the Rajah Hotel right now to negotiate your contract. This is the only time I have available.”

My apprehension dramatically increased when I heard he was staying at the Rajah Hotel. This wasn’t an invitation to a swanky hotel for high tea. The Rajah Hotel was a dump frequented by derelicts, grifters, and vagabonds. This wasn’t a refined gentleman with a Boston Brahmin accent. This was a brusque, mean-sounding ruffian ordering me to get my ass to a seedy part of Bangkok at midnight to negotiate my contract. I was trembling when I got off the phone. Sabrina had to smack me upside the head to stop me from shivering in fear. Nonetheless, I put on the sports jacket, tie, and slacks that Sabrina had purchased for me to make a good impression, and headed off to the Rajah Hotel.



Rajah Hotel in Bangkok

During my less than stellar career I’ve been in some sleazy hovels, but the Rajah Hotel was in a category of its own near the bottom of the shit heap. The lobby was dimly lit and sinister looking; the cheap, Chinese-made furniture smelled musty; paint was peeling off the walls; and a half dozen prostitutes loitered in the coffee shop. I had to walk up four flights of stairs to reach the designated room. When the door opened, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Standing in front of me was Bob Durham, unshaven with greasy hair, sporting a sleeveless “Guinea Tee” undershirt¹ that barely concealed his enormous gut. He was wearing baggy boxer shorts that fell below his knees, and had a bottle of Jack Daniels in his hand. In my sports

¹ A white, ribbed, sleeveless tee shirt generally worn as a regular shirt, on any given day, by males of Italian-American heritage.

jacket, tie and slacks, I was clearly overdressed for the occasion. He motioned for me to sit down and with a flurry (for my benefit, no doubt), he slammed the bottle of Jack Daniels on the table directly in front of me.

“Are you a drinking man, Mr. Cashman? Because I am, and I will be drinking some Jack Daniels.” Already intimidated by everything I had just seen and smelled, while trying to make the best impression on the beast, I answered, “First of all, just call me Cashman. Everyone does. Second of all, if you’re drinking, so am I.” And thus we proceeded to knock down glass after glass of Jack Daniels.

I had engaged in many drinking bouts in my day. In college I nearly drank myself into the grave. I spent many nights in Thailand drinking Mekong whiskey with the Task Force 80 rangers, and always was able to hold my own. But I learned a very important lesson drinking Jack Daniels with Bob Durham that night. Simply stated, there are absolutely no odds in trying to out-drink an alcoholic. And that’s what Bob Durham was. I learned later that US Embassy Contract Officers tended to be lower humanoid life forms who subsisted on alcohol and Big Macs, communicated in grunts and growls, and belched and farted at their leisure. Most were holdovers from the Vietnam War, losers who had been hired when personnel needs were ramped up by the war, then discarded as contract officers because they had no other perceivable skills. Durham was hardly the refined patrician gentleman that Sabrina had earlier envisioned.

After an hour, the bottle of Jack Daniels was empty. Then another one appeared. An hour later I was three sheets to the wind. Then, abruptly, the brute announced in a very loud voice, “OK, now let’s negotiate your contract.”

Being acutely inebriated and knowing nothing about the art of negotiating is not the ideal time to negotiate a contract. But Durham was leaving in the morning, so I had no choice. Needless to say, I got fleeced. Compared to my initial expectations, my salary was a pittance and the benefit package was niggardly. There would be no plush Embassy housing and no International School for Carmencita. Pleased with his handiwork, Durham said with a smirk, “That just about does it, Cashman. I’ll write this up and prepare the final contract. I’ll be back in Bangkok in one week and you can sign it then.”

When I awoke the next morning, in addition to the massive hangover threatening to explode my cranium, I was devastated. And I was furious at being hustled by Bob Durham. Normally, Larry Cashman is the one who scams other people. But the oaf apparently gave me a taste of my own medicine. I had been snookered, swindled, and conned by a genuine flimflam man.

At work the next day, when I told Somchai the outcome of my negotiation, he laughed heartily while saying, “You went to the Rajah Hotel at midnight to negotiate your contract? Are you an imbecile?” Sabrina had expressed the same sentiment. “Always negotiate on your turf or on some neutral turf. And you don’t drink whiskey with an alcoholic before you commence the negotiation. Haven’t you learned anything in your four years in Thailand?”

Apparently not, but being a coward above all, I allowed Bob Durham to intimidate me. Now I would have to live with the low salary and miserly benefit package. I informed Somchai that Durham was planning to meet me in Bangkok in one week’s time to sign the contract. Somchai pondered my predicament for a while, then smiled. “I think I have a plan to salvage this fiasco. When he calls next time, insist that he comes to the API office to sign your contract. You can use my office. I’ll take care of the

rest." I had no idea what Somchai had in mind, but felt relieved that perhaps there still was a way to salvage the disaster I had created.

On the appointed day, Bob Durham called me to say that he was in Bangkok and wanted to meet so I could sign my contract. He agreed to meet at the API office. It was 3 PM, insufferably hot and humid even for Bangkok, and from the look of things Durham had already been drinking for a few hours. By the time we reached Somchai's 3rd floor office, he was huffing, puffing and sweating. When we entered the office, a blast of hot air enveloped us as the air-conditioning had been turned off for some time. Somchai's secretary directed Durham to a seat that faced an open window with the blinding afternoon sun blazing right into his eyes. She then inquired if he wanted something to drink. Durham looked like he needed another bottle of Jack Daniels. She offered him iced tea. He was sweating profusely, squinting into the sun, and clearly uncomfortable.

When the refreshments arrived, they were delivered by a woman I had never seen before. She was tall, attractive, and wore a low cut blouse that accentuated her fulsome breasts. When she leaned over to serve Durham his drink and he got a peek at those two voluptuous melons, he gasped for air and almost fell out of his seat. He was as flustered as I was when he slammed that bottle of Jack Daniels on the table the week before. Then as she served some snacks on a side table, she stumbled and fell into Durham's lap, brushing her breasts against his elbow on the way down. I thought Durham would have a heart attack on the spot. She apologized profusely for her clumsiness, and when her dainty hand lingered on his lap to brush off the peanuts, it looked as if Durham had come in his pants.

"Let's get this contract signed," Durham exclaimed as she left the room. "I need a drink."

I viewed the contract's terms and conditions slowly and pensively to prolong Durham's agony. The contract outlined in black and white the same miserly salary and benefit package that we had negotiated the previous week. Then I was startled by a loud siren followed by a great deal of commotion outside. Shortly thereafter two Thai police officers burst through the door and confronted Durham. "We have been informed that you have opium in your possession.² Please stand up so we can search you." If the young lady almost caused Durham to have a heart attack, the police officers nearly brought on a stroke.

I was enjoying this enfolding episode immensely. All of a sudden it dawned on me. This was Somchai's gambit. As I subsequently learned, that buxom young lady was not one of Somchai's employees but rather one of the women that worked at the nearby Darling Massage Parlor who was recruited to flummox Durham. She was the one who planted the opium on our unsuspecting contract officer when she stumbled into his lap. The police officers were two off duty cops who had recently been vasectomized at one of API's clinics and owed Somchai a favor. I had been kept in the dark about this subterfuge so that

² The reader may notice the frequent appearance of opium in this narrative. Tim O'Riordan had opium in his possession when we were captured by Khmer Serei guerrillas. In the early 1980s Thailand was awash in opium originating from the Golden Triangle in northern Thailand where Laos, Burma, and Thailand shared a border. The Golden Triangle was a no-man's land where farmers grew opium openly and drugs lords converted it into heroin for shipment around the world. The Hill Tribe people of Northern Thailand, Laos, and Burma used opium as a traditional medicine and smoked it in opium dens that operated unrestrained by the authorities. However, it remained an illegal substance and possession of opium by foreigners was a serious offense under Thai law.

my surprise would be genuine. After getting bilked by Durham, it was satisfying to see him on the other side of the scam.

When the police found the opium in Durham's pants pocket, I joined the charade, expressing my exasperation at Durham's behavior. "What are you doing with opium? I thought you were a distinguished U.S. Embassy official. I am truly appalled at your behavior!"

The Thai police joined in. "Do you realize that possession of opium is a serious offense in Thailand? You will have to come with us to the police station."

Right on cue, Somchai walked in. "What's going on here?" After the police explained, Durham started babbling. "This is all a mistake. I didn't have any opium when I arrived here. I am an official from the American Embassy in Jakarta. I can't go with them to the police station. This will ruin my reputation. I will lose my job. I want to speak with someone from the American Embassy."

Somchai conferred with the police again and explained, "Since you are a U.S. Embassy official in Indonesia, they will have to book you at the police station. You will be detained in police custody until this incident can be reported to the US Government through diplomatic channels. You'll have to go with the police officers."

Durham started babbling again. "This can't be happening. This will ruin me. Isn't there some way to work things out?" When he heard this, Somchai stopped abruptly, pivoted toward Durham, and said, "Perhaps there is. Can someone tell me why this gentleman is in my office?"

Having realized the con, I stepped forward and played my role. "He is a Contract Officer from the American Embassy in Jakarta and is here to see me. I am supposed to sign an employment contract with him. It was negotiated under very adverse conditions resulting in disadvantageous provisions for me. In light of these events, and this gentleman's unsavory behavior, I am not ready to sign the contract."

Somchai pulled the two police officers and me aside and spoke to us in Thai. Then he addressed Durham. "The police realize that these events are unfortunate, and that the consequences for you will be catastrophic. In view of the unfavorable circumstances surrounding your previous negotiation with Mr. Cashman, they have agreed that, if you and Mr. Cashman can negotiate more favorable terms right now, that include terms that are acceptable to Mr. Cashman, they will release you and this whole matter will be forgotten."

Then a light bulb went off in Durham's head. He realized that now he was the one being hoodwinked. But Durham didn't object. He didn't complain. After all, when a scammer gets scammed, he acknowledges defeat graciously in hopes of repeating the scam on another unsuspecting mark. Bob Durham was not only one of the biggest con men I ever met, he was also a wimp. If this incident was ever disclosed, his tenure at the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta was history, and he knew it.



Durham was not happy when he realized he had been scammed

Under the watchful eyes of the two policemen, Durham and I renegotiated every provision in the contract. Not surprisingly I managed to receive a nice fat salary, while all of our belongings would be shipped to Jakarta free of charge, and my family would be living in posh U.S. Embassy housing.

Carmencita, who was in the 2nd grade, would be enrolled at the Jakarta International School, and I would have a car and driver to take me back and forth to work. I even got Durham to throw in a stopover in Singapore on the way to Jakarta for some rest and relaxation. As we completed the negotiation and I signed the contract, Durham pulled me aside. “Listen Cashman, you little shithead, I know exactly what went on here. You got the best of me this time. Let us both forget what occurred and never mention it again. And by the way, never speak to me as long as you live. You’re nothing but trouble.” And with that Larry Cashman and Bob Durham parted ways.

Three months later, I bumped into Durham at the American Embassy cafeteria in Jakarta. He avoided my gaze, refusing to even acknowledge my presence. But I saw a chance to twist the knife in the wound. I sidled up next to him and whispered in his ear, “Have you been smoking any good opium lately.” With a menacing scowl, he walked away.

My image of Singapore was hatched when I watched the original “King Kong” movie as a kid. The boat departing to Kong Island to capture the great ape set forth from Singapore. In the movie, Singapore was a sleazy, steamy port town whose inhabitants were an assortment of pirates, half-breeds, touts, and criminals who worked on the countless trading ships plying its harbor. As Sabrina, Carmencita, and I prepared for our first trip to Singapore on the way to Jakarta compliments of Bob Durham, I expected to find a multi-cultural third world melting pot brimming with intrigue and sedition.



Raffles Hotel in Singapore

A lot had changed since that movie was filmed because the Singapore we visited in 1982 was an ultra-modern, financially prosperous megalopolis with tall, architecturally unique buildings, spotless streets, disciplined traffic, and a predominantly Chinese population under the firm grip of Lee Kuan Yew.³ We stayed at Singapore’s world renowned Raffles Hotel⁴ for three nights, another benefit extracted from my negotiation with the famously scammed Bob

Durham. We had a suite with a drawing room, a separate bedroom for Carmencita, and drank Singapore Slings at the Raffles’ famous Long Bar. Larry Cashman and family were moving up in the world.

³ Lee Kuan Yew was the Prime Minister of Singapore from 1959 until 1990. During his tenure Singapore became the most prosperous country in Southeast Asia. Its efficient public administration and spectacular prosperity came at the cost of a mildly authoritarian style of government that sometimes infringed on civil liberties. By the time Cashman arrived in Singapore in the 1982, Singapore had a per capita income second in East Asia only to Japan’s, and the country had become the chief financial center of Southeast Asia.

⁴ The Raffles Hotel is a colonial-style luxury hotel in Singapore, named after British statesman Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of Singapore. It was frequented by such notables as Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, and Somerset Maugham, who sipped Singapore Slings at the Raffles’ Long Bar. Now Larry Cashman would be added to that list.

Jakarta, on the other hand, was a sprawling megacity containing nine million inhabitants, with 25 million people living in the Greater Jakarta Metropolitan area. Jakarta has been called the world's largest village. The view from the plane (in business class thanks to Durham) was nothing but a sea of red clay roofs on modest, one-story homes as far as the eye could see. The few high rise buildings were clustered around the Merdeka (Independence) Monument constructed by Sukarno, the country's independence leader and first president, to commemorate Indonesia's independence from the Dutch. Not far from the Merdeka Monument was the U.S. Embassy where I would work (a term used loosely to describe my efforts) for the next 10 years.



Jakarta 1982

As we disembarked from the plane, two Indonesian employees from the Embassy were waiting to whisk us to a VIP counter where immigration formalities were completed in a few seconds and our bags were waiting for us in the U.S. Embassy limousine parked at the terminal entrance. Sabrina commented on how considerate the Embassy was. I liked the service, but wasn't that to be expected for an important dignitary like me! Hubris again. As usual, my comeuppance was forthcoming. For now, I was brought to meet one Chas Janssen, the Director of the US Embassy's Office of Population and Health, who would be my boss.

Chas Janssen was the antithesis of Larry Cashman. He was tall with dirty blond hair and slim as a rail, an American of Swedish descent who grew up in the wheat fields of Minnesota. Conversely, I was a sturdy, swarthy, Italian American from New York City. Chas was quiet and soft spoken. He winced at the sound of foul language and didn't know the meaning of the words chicanery and mendacity. As the reader knows by now, I am a bombastic cur who peppers every sentence with well-placed expletives, and for whom lying and scamming are survival skills. Chas was a religious, church-going Episcopalian whose family life centered around church and community. I was a card carrying atheist who viewed religion as the purposeful suspension of reason as well as a source for endless jokes.

For some inexplicable reason, however, Chas Janssen and Larry Cashman hit it off immediately. We had two things in common – we both liked to toss back a few cool ones, and we both enjoyed a good laugh. Chas even tolerated my expletive-laden jokes as long as they engendered a good chuckle. Despite our myriad differences, Chas and I developed a harmonious working relationship and became fast friends, as we remain to this day.

My initial time at the American Embassy was ephemeral, as everyone was anxious to ship me off to Bandung⁵ for Indonesian language training. I did meet the U.S. Ambassador, the Deputy Chief of Mission (second in command to the Ambassador), the senior Embassy staff, and my Indonesian counterparts. The Embassy lot were church-going, god-fearing rubes who came from states such as

⁵ Bandung is the capital of West Java Province, located in the mountains about 100 miles southeast of Jakarta. It is the fourth largest city in Indonesia and was the site for the first Asian-African Conference convened by Indonesia's President Sukarno in 1955, where the Non-Aligned Movement was created as a neutral diplomatic space between the Western alliance and the Soviet Bloc.

Idaho, Nebraska, Arkansas, Wyoming, and South Dakota; exotic places where the deer and the antelope reigned, but locales that I would be hard pressed to find on any map. Most of them were white, Anglo-Saxon, xenophobes who defended US interests from the Asian hordes with religious fervor. I had never been around people like this before; conversely most of them looked askance at a swarthy, New York City bouncer like me. This was obviously not a marriage made in heaven.

My Indonesian counterparts at the Indonesian Family Planning Federation (IPFP), on the other hand, were the most wonderful, friendly, and supportive group of people. Evie Sumarsono greeted me when I arrived and introduced me to all of the important people in the organization. Every meeting was accompanied by sweet Indonesian tea and much laughter and joking. The Indonesians love to joke around. They welcomed me into their family as Pak Cashman.⁶ They provided me with a comfortable office and support staff; and only spoke to me in the Indonesian language in preparation for my future responsibilities. I couldn't understand much, but I loved their lightheartedness and sense of humor.

During the week I spent in Jakarta, I had one essential task — to track down our household effects shipment. Another benefit I had extorted — I mean secured — in my negotiation with Bob Durham was a generous allowance to ship household effects from Bangkok to Jakarta free of charge. Sabrina purchased an assortment of unique Thai artifacts, antiques, handicrafts, and objet d'art that would become part of her Southeast Asian collection; as well as some hardwood furniture that cost pennies on the dollar compared to U.S. prices. Being unfamiliar with international shipping procedures, I wanted to locate the shipment and determine when it would arrive in Jakarta. However, regardless of whomever I asked, no one seemed to know anything about our shipment.

After one week in Jakarta, Sabrina, Carmencita and I headed to Bandung for Indonesian language training. This special course employed three teachers responsible for providing one-on-one training to Larry Cashman for six hours each day for a period of six weeks. For homework I would write essays in Indonesian, translate documents, and read technical reports. It was intensive. I even had to take exams to test my verbal and writing proficiency. Unfortunately there were no “see through” answer sheets like the ones I encountered in the Pathology class at Columbia.⁷ I had to study and apply myself now.

Some nights we ventured into the Bandung City Center, where we sampled the local cuisine and I engaged in light banter and repartee with the locals. Although Bandung was a big city, it was even more of a village than Jakarta. Most buildings were remnants from the Dutch era; a run-down, low rise, colonial style architecture that I would see throughout Indonesia. The streets were pure chaos. In addition to the endless throng of buses, bicycles, motorcycles, and cars, there were street vendors with push carts, three-wheeled bemos spewing black smoke from their single stroke engines, and an assortment of donkeys, goats, horses and dogs wandering about at their leisure.

⁶ The honorific “Pak” was the title given to any adult male in Indonesia. It is equivalent to “Mr.” in English, but less formal.

⁷ See Chapter 3 in Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles for Cashman's exploits with the “see through” Pathology exams.

Most of all one was constantly surrounded by a horde of people. Indonesia was the 5th most populous country in the world in 1982⁸, with 156 million people. Nearly two thirds of the population lived on the island of Java, where both Jakarta and Bandung are located. Java, geographically the size of Florida, had ten times the number of people. There were people everywhere. City limits did not exist and urban and rural areas merged into one endless mass of humanity. On the island of Java, it was impossible to escape overpopulation.



Cashman learned a lot of Indonesian on the streets of Bandung

Indonesians are amiable, warm-hearted people. When a “bule’ ” (pronounced **boo-lay**) like me⁹ tried to speak to them in Indonesian, the universal response was “You speak Indonesian so well,” regardless of how much I mangled the language. As the reader already knows, Larry Cashman loves to bullshit and he truly hates to allow a language to impede the mellifluous

sound of his voice. Every night I would engage the locals in Indonesian conversation — fishmongers and vegetable vendors, rickshaw and Padi cab drivers, teashop patrons and students, vagrants and beggars; literally anyone who would listen to me —until Sabrina dragged me away. I learned a lot of Indonesian on the streets of Bandung.

Compared to the Thai language Indonesian is relatively easy to speak a little, but it is hard to speak well. Thai has 44 vowels and 28 consonants written in a Sanskrit script. Indonesian uses the Roman alphabet and Arabic numbers. Thai is tonal. In Indonesian words are pronounced as they are spelled. Thai generally does not contain any set grammar while Indonesian has a complex grammar consisting of prefixes and suffixes appended to a root word to form verbs, adjectives, adverbs and tenses. To perform my job I had to learn the most formal and grammatically correct form of Indonesian.

While in Bandung I called the American Embassy every few days to inquire about our household effects shipment. And every time I would get the same answer — “Sorry Mr. Cashman. We unfortunately have no idea where your shipment is at the moment. It seems that it is being held up in Thai Customs.” This sounded ominous to me. Sabrina and I had invested a tidy sum in that shipment. What could be holding it up in Thai Customs?

⁸ The largest countries by population size in 1982 were China, India, Soviet Union, United States and Indonesia. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Indonesia is now the 4th largest country in the world by population size.

⁹ Another pejorative for people of European ancestry I could add to the lexicon. On the Navajo Indian Reservation, I was called an “Anglo.” In Hawaii, I was called a “Haole.” In Thailand, I was called a “Farang.” In Indonesia, I was called a “Bule”. And in New York City, I was just a honky.

After six weeks of hearing the same response, I received a call from the US Embassy. It was Dr. P. He was in Jakarta on a mid-semester consultancy working with Chas Janssen. He was in a good mood.

“How are you doing, Cashman? You sure you don’t want to change your mind and take that wonderful job you told me about in Sri Lanka?” He would never let me forget my arrogance.

I told him about my shipment. “It’s stuck in Thai Customs. Could you call Somchai Wongsawat in Bangkok to see if he can find out what the problem is?” Somchai was well-connected in Bangkok. If anyone could solve this mystery, it would be him.

A week later I received another call from Dr. P. He was pissed this time. “I spoke with Somchai. Your shipment was confiscated by Thai Customs because they found Thai Sticks in the shipment.¹⁰ What were you thinking? Can you explain what was percolating in that miniscule part of your cranial cavity that contains your brain when you decided to put marijuana in your shipment? Do you realize that this could jeopardize your position with the Embassy? And on top of that, you could go to jail; a nice cozy Thai or Indonesian jail! Cashman, your stupidity never ceases to amaze me! I’ve asked Somchai to find out what happened and what can be done to mitigate the damage. You need to speak with Somchai pronto.”

I was horrified and dumbfounded. I’m no saint, and there had been plenty of marijuana around our Bangkok apartment, the remnants from the many visitors for whom our apartment was a way station between the U.S., Europe, and Southeast Asia. But Sabrina and I had scoured our apartment before the movers arrived to make sure the place was forensically sterilized of marijuana. My biggest concern was the consequences if and when the marijuana-tainted shipment arrived in Jakarta. I definitely needed to speak with Somchai as soon as possible.

When I called Somchai in Bangkok, the first words out of his mouth were “Do you know someone named Gerhard Beckenbauer? If you don’t, you better find out who he is because Mr. Beckenbauer apparently has a very serious grudge against you. He bribed the moving company to plant the Thai Sticks in your shipment, and they tipped off Thai Customs. He’s out to get you. I have an informant in Thai Customs who told me everything.”

I was paralyzed with fear now. Someone named Gerhard Beckenbauer was out to get me, and he was making my life miserable. As I repeated the name to myself, it started to sound vaguely familiar but for the moment I couldn’t place it. Then it struck me like a bolt of lightning. While working in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, there was an incident where the heads of several voluntary agencies (Volags) were thrown out of Thailand because of an altercation with me.¹¹ I recalled that one of them was a German. I asked Somchai to check.

A few days later Somchai confirmed my suspicion. Gerhard Beckenbauer was thrown out of Thailand while he was the director of the International Committee for Refugee Relief in Khao-I-Dang as a result of the confrontation with me. Now he was back in Thailand in an unofficial capacity seeking revenge

¹⁰ Thai Sticks are a potent blend of marijuana unique to Thailand. The marijuana buds are wrapped around a thin bamboo stick and affixed with bamboo twine. Thai Sticks were ubiquitous in Thailand in the 1980s and a highly desirable commodity for foreign tourists.

¹¹ See Chapter 12 of Volume 1 of the Cashman Chronicles. The heads of several voluntary agencies refused to provide family planning services in their clinics in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp, directed their ire at Cashman, complained vociferously at a meeting of international agencies, and were summarily ejected from Thailand.

against Larry Cashman. I've never had someone with a vendetta against me. My stomach churned and my legs buckled as I contemplated Beckenbauer's motives. The first order of business, however, was to get my shipment out of Thai Customs. I asked Somchai if he had any ideas.

"I discussed this issue with my informant in Thai Customs. It seems that Beckenbauer has bribed Thai Customs to leave the contraband in the shipment, and subsequently inform Indonesian Customs that they believe the shipment contains narcotic drugs. When Indonesian Customs discover the Thai sticks, you will be in big trouble, probably lose your job, and perhaps wind up in some squalid Indonesian prison. Beckenbauer is definitely out to get you." This was a devious plan. Beckenbauer was a formidable opponent.

"There is a way out, however. My informant will arrange for the owners of the shipment to enter Thai Customs surreptitiously," Somchai continued. "You can search for the Thai Sticks and remove them from the shipment. This all must be done furtively. Thai Customs must not know that the contraband has been removed. If you are caught searching the shipment by Thai Customs, you will be in serious trouble, so you must be very careful. Thai Customs is planning to release the shipment any day so we will have to move quickly." Somchai's plan was cunning. It was also incredibly dangerous. And I would be right in the middle of it — a predicament that Larry Cashman does not like to find himself in.

Now I was convulsed with fear. Somchai was insinuating that I must fly to Bangkok, secretly enter the Thai Customs compound, break into my shipment illegally in the dark of night without anyone knowing, find the Thai Sticks, and then skedaddle. Beads of sweat began to appear on my forehead and trickle down my face. There was no way I could survive that ordeal.

"Can't we hire someone to get the Thai Sticks for me?" I asked. Somchai had already explored that possibility. "My informant said that he would only make these arrangements for the owners. That way, if you are caught, he has the excuse that it was the owners who were looking for something in the shipment. It might be a way out."

Then I reached for the coward's last straw. "It might be best if Sabrina goes to Thailand and searches the shipment instead of me. She is also one of the owners, and she is smaller than me so it will be easier to sneak into Thai Customs. Plus she knows where everything is in the shipment, and she handles stressful situations much better than me. Besides, I just incurred an excruciatingly painful ankle sprain playing basketball in Bandung, and I need a cane to walk. I would only be a hindrance in this caper." I added the bogus personal disability as a clincher.

There was silence on the other end of the phone line. Somchai was familiar with my cowardice and with my tenuous relationship to the truth. When he was able to speak, Somchai said with disbelief "You would have Sabrina take this risk for you? Have you no conscience? What if she gets caught? We'll tape your ankle and it will be fine. I'm sorry, Cashman. It will have to be you."

This decision was like a dagger plunged deep into my heart. I had tried every trick, every deceit, to get out of this fix. I couldn't run because, again, there was no place to go. I dislike danger, I hate intrigue, and I abhor subterfuge. I detest words like "surreptitious" and "furtive." Now I would have to engage in a scheme that had all these features in spades with me right in the middle. The only choice I had now was to bite the bullet and buy a plane ticket to Bangkok, and get done with it.

I felt like a fugitive when I arrived in Bangkok. I imagined every Immigration and Customs official in the airport was looking for me. In fact the only one looking for me was Somchai, who sent a car to fetch me at Don Meuang Airport. It was close to midnight when I arrived, and Somchai decided that we would pull the heist tonight, allowing me to hop on another airplane bound for Jakarta the following day. Somchai had arranged for an accomplice to escort me to the Thai Customs compound. His name was Nopadon, but everyone called him by his nickname, Moo. In Thai “Moo” means pig, which pretty much describes Moo’s portly appearance. While snacking on some “gai yang” (Thai barbecued chicken), Moo explained exactly how the caper would unfold.

Ever since speaking to Somchai, I was consumed with a sense of foreboding and sick to my stomach with fear about the whole escapade. From being a perceived “important dignitary,” I was now looking at potentially long jail time in a dingy Thai or Indonesian prison cell. My comeuppance was at hand. How quickly fortunes change.



Thai Customs Office in Bangkok

As we motored to an empty lot across from the pier where Thai Customs held my shipment, my bowels were rumbling and I already had brown stains on my underwear. First off, we had to scale a six foot high chain link fence to enter the Customs area, before meeting Somchai’s informant, who would let us into the Customs warehouse. I bounded over the fence. So much for my sprained ankle alibi. Unfortunately my accomplice in crime, Moo, couldn’t make it over the fence. That huge dinner of Thai fried noodles followed by a heaping plateful of sticky rice and mangoes did not enhance Moo’s agility. Somchai’s driver, observing our dilemma, suddenly rushed forward, literally placed Moo on his shoulders, and pushed

Moo’s fat ass, inch by inch, over the fence. Not exactly the furtive entry Somchai had recommended. Our fool-proof plan was not starting auspiciously.

When we reached the warehouse, Somchai’s informant was there with the door opened. He led us to the shipment. It was a mass of boxes piled one on top of the other. I had no idea where to start looking. My fear quickly morphed into despair. There was no way to find the Thai Sticks. That’s when Moo stepped up to the plate. It turned out that he worked for the moving company, and knew exactly where the contraband had been planted. He found a box that had been opened and resealed. He opened it carefully and Voila — the Thai Sticks were right there. I removed them and Moo resealed the box. As far as Thai Customs was concerned, the Thai Sticks were still in the box. What we knew was that the shipment was now clean.

Although I am a staunch atheist, it seemed that divine intervention had delivered me from this dilemma. I even wondered if all those prayers from my Aunt Sophie when I was a kid in Queens to save me from eternal damnation had finally paid off. Good old Aunt Sophie.

According to plan, we skedaddled. This time I gladly volunteered to push Moo's fat ass over the chain link fence. We were in the car and back at Somchai's office in time for me to catch the first flight to Jakarta the next day.

I was feeling more relaxed when I reached Jakarta. The crisis was resolved. Thai Customs could claim that there were drugs in my shipment, but I knew that the shipment was clean. I would plead innocence and let the chips fall where they may. But I still had to deal with possible fallout in the American Embassy in Jakarta.

About two weeks later I received a call from Chas Janssen. "The Ambassador wants to see you. Your shipment has arrived and there seems to be some sort of problem. Come to my office and we'll go to meet the Ambassador together." Dr. P had told Chas about the shipment issue, but he didn't know about my escapade in Bangkok. When I got to his office, Chas looked worried. "Dr. P said that marijuana was found in your shipment. This could be a big problem for you. How do you want to handle it?"

"Do you think I would do something like that?" I responded innocently. "Follow my lead and we can resolve this quickly." Chas was a great guy. He nodded his acquiescence as we departed for the Ambassador's office.

The atmosphere was tense as we entered the Ambassador's office. He was accompanied by the Embassy Management Officer, Linus Carey, the person responsible for clearing Embassy shipments through Customs. Carey was an asshole. He had a congenitally constricted anal sphincter that made him the most celebrated tight-ass in the Embassy. He liked to make life difficult for Embassy personnel. That's how he wielded power. He was one of those Midwestern, Anglo-Saxon, religious fanatics who had nothing but scorn for a swarthy East Coast rascal like me. Now he had me over a barrel, or at least he thought he did. Carey looked like he relished what was about to happen. The Ambassador was the first one to speak.

"Cashman, the Embassy has received a very serious allegation from Indonesian Customs. Linus Carey will explain the gravity of the situation to you."

Carey approached me menacingly. "Thai Customs has informed Indonesian Customs that marijuana has been found in your household effects shipment. It is the reason your shipment was detained in Bangkok. The shipment has arrived in Jakarta and Indonesian Customs has impounded it."

From his facial expression and body language, it was obvious that Carey was enjoying my discomfort immensely as he continued his reprimand. "Indonesian Customs will open the shipment and search it next Monday. I have been invited to witness the search. If the contraband is found, this will be a major diplomatic incident for the Embassy. We may have to turn you over to the Indonesian authorities. You are an embarrassment for this Embassy. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Now I was holding all the cards. I knew the shipment was clean and they wouldn't find anything. It was time for Larry Cashman to play the righteous indignation card and turn the tables on Linus Carey.

"Are you insinuating that I have placed marijuana in my shipment, Linus?" Carey hated to be called Linus. He insisted everyone call him Mr. Carey. But I was in the catbird seat now. "I take umbrage at your insinuation. I would never do such a despicable thing. I avoid substances that have an inebriating

effect, marijuana chief among them.” I loved the irony. “I can assure you that this must be some mistake. There is no marijuana in my shipment.” I almost blurted out that I should know, since I removed it myself. I was on a roll now and kept my big mouth running. “Mr. Ambassador, Linus has insulted me with this allegation. It seems that he has already decided my guilt. I demand an apology. And I demand that Linus be removed from any involvement in this case as he is clearly biased against me. I insist that Chas Janssen be present when my shipment is searched instead of Linus.”

Carey’s jaw dropped. He wasn’t expecting that response from me. I winked toward Chas Janssen and he jumped right in. “I totally agree with Cashman. Linus has jumped to a contemptible conclusion without giving Cashman the benefit of the doubt.” As one of the Embassy’s most senior officers, Chas’ opinion mattered. He hated Linus Carey too, and saw an opportunity to take him down a notch. Now Chas was on a roll. “Larry Cashman is an upstanding young professional and Linus has impugned his character and sullied his reputation. In light of his obvious prejudice against Cashman, Linus cannot be trusted to attend the search of Cashman’s shipment and report the findings honestly. I will attend in his stead. If nothing is found and the allegation is false, I strongly recommend that Linus Carey be penalized administratively.”

I may have sunk the knife in Carey’s back, but Chas poured salt on the wound. Linus Carey was reeling as Chas completed his peroration. He thought he would torture me; now he was the one left dangling in the wind. I love to see a bully taken down a notch.

The Ambassador also had no great love for Linus Carey. He knew that Carey was an arrogant blowhard who tortured embassy staff. He sided with Chas and me. “Chas, I agree with you and Cashman. Linus cannot be trusted to be impartial when it comes to this matter. You will be present when Indonesian Customs searches Cashman’s shipment and report the findings to me.”

Then the Ambassador turned to Linus Carey. “I am very disappointed by your behavior. You have accused and disparaged this fine young man without any evidence. If there is no marijuana in the shipment, as Cashman contends, I will take strong administrative action against you. Your career in the Foreign Service will be in serious jeopardy. Your aspiration to ascend to senior Embassy staff positions will be over.”

Carey didn’t know what had just happened. Like the twerp that he was, he began babbling in his defense while apologizing profusely to me. Had I dropped my drawers, he would have kissed my ass. If I had my way, I would have walked over and kicked him in the balls. It wouldn’t have much effect. Bullies have no balls.

As the reader may have surmised, nothing was found in my household effects shipment. Linus Carey had to send a formal letter of apology to me. He was also demoted one full rank to an Administrative Officer and was no longer able to terrorize Embassy staff.

When Chas Janssen returned from Indonesian Customs he was visibly relieved. “It was tense watching them search your shipment, Cashman old boy, but I never doubted you. Unfortunately, most of the boxes had already been opened. It looks like the shipment has been pilfered.” When Sabrina and I received the shipment, it had been pilfered all right. Most of the best pieces Sabrina purchased were

gone. I guess that was just the “tax” extracted by Indonesian Customs, but this was a small price to pay for escaping this mess unscathed.

In retrospect I came out of this entire affair smelling like roses. Sabrina used what remained from our shipment to decorate our comfortable new home provided by the Embassy. I was now the virtuous Golden Boy whose integrity, though falsely maligned, was beyond reproach and who had suffered the further indignity of having his shipment vandalized. And I was the wunderkind who had taken down Linus Carey. I had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. It is unusual for me to be viewed in such a principled light. I would use this moral high ground for some of my best scams in Indonesia.

This incident also demonstrated how seamlessly Chas Janssen and I worked together and how our skills complemented each other. We would use this working relationship to make some mischief at the Embassy.

But there was one loose end that needed attention. Gerhard Beckenbauer had done me a bad turn and almost brought me down. I needed to find a suitable way to exact my revenge on him. But that will have to wait for another chapter.