



### Gently Down the Stream

by Don Poss.

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*John Achecpohl submitted a photo of Phan Rang, common to Vietnam and Thailand, depicting a sight we all may remember: a stream meandering through a meadow, or paddies, with distant mountains... beautiful in daylight, threatening at night, and always burdened with untold mysteries of survival and sudden death. John's above photo is a composite rendered in to a threatening-night scene so common back then. It was easy for me to visualize drifting sampans ... and to feel the adrenalin rush as to whether those riding the gentle current were friends or foe....*

#### **Gently Down the Stream...**

**by Don Poss.**

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Papasan steered the small lead-sampan through the darkness over even darker waters, followed by family in two other small boats. The night was quiet and his mind drifted, fretting over family, as the war could be heard in the distance like the eternal hum of a fertile night.

He had hoped the family gathering would have gone better...a *gathering*, such as it was, considering *what the war had left* of his family. Three sons already lost to the war...and two surviving sons fighting on opposite sides. Still... *at least we were all together tonight, however briefly*, after a frightful night of paddling upstream.

There was no love lost between the brothers, and only duty toward their elder grandfather had compelled them to his side a final time. It pleased the father that both sons actually wanted to be there, and did so against their superior's wishes.

Grandfather had held both their hands as they knelt on either side of his deathbed. And at that moment,

his joy soared and he was happy once more...even as his spirit left him. The priest was not happy, having advised against bringing the two brothers together and disrupting the tranquility of the dying process...he had prophesied the fate of the spirit could be harmed during departure from the body. None of that concerned the old man...only his village, family, son and grandsons mattered.

When grandfather's spirit finally whirled into the night...he could only hope the priest was wrong in his divining of the spirit's fate. Yet, for the briefest moment, it seemed the brothers had forgotten their differences, caring and remembering their childhood and a happy playful grandfather. Then the magic of that moment smoked away, leaving him as the families' elder.

A cloudy moonless night had given hope to a successful trip to and from the neutral *meeting-village*, and the few miles of paddling and drifting that required. Earlier that morning, he had reluctantly boated his father, priest, and some family to that village, and returned for wife and daughters and a risky night journey. He feared he would lose his two sons as he had their older brothers. He knew there was real danger in even bringing them together, with their nearby hothead young warrior friends ready to pounce. He had arranged to send both sides ample quantities of food, hoping to distract them from *war-like* thoughts.

Again his mind replayed the earlier evening, when the black clad younger son had fled the hut without parting words. His chilled heart feared they would never meet as a family again, and it struck him that could even be possible should both survive the war. *Fear* played a daily role in his song of life.

The oldest boy had joined the army and hated his brother with an equaled deadly passion. But at least this night, neither had exchanged harsh words as during their last meeting more than a year ago. Father forced himself to set aside the family pain the night had brought in fulfilling his own father's last wishes. Now it remained for him to skirt the gauntlet between warring-sides a second time this night, where danger lurked for his family in every direction. His thoughts drifted with the current. At any moment, he knew, the younger boy's Viet Cong friends could ambush and slay them all in seconds...or his brother's army comrades could shoot at them with giant rifles requiring several men just to fire it. Or the *foreigners* could breathe fire from the sky like a dragon...and they *were* mightier than a dragon. *What did such mighty people want with his poor world?* They didn't even need the moon...they had chased away the darkness with fireballs, like Chinese fireworks, and were even now lighting the night sky with many suns, searching for whatever they searched for. *Curfew*, they had called it...his mind gave name to his transgression. The North had *their rules*. Saigon had *their rules*. The foreigners had *their rules*. No one ever asked him what rules he wanted.

*What do I want...really want?* he mused. His thoughts rambled a lifetime...*peace from their rules*, for his village...*to be left alone*...his village did not need the rules of foreigner's from Saigon, Hanoi, or the Chinese, Japanese, French, or Americans. In fact, his village needed nothing beyond the life-giving mountains on the horizon. Mostly, he yearned for the *Quiet-Times* of his father's youth...which few could now remember...and wondered if such times ever really existed.

For now he only wanted to lead his scared and hungry family safely home, and worried if their boats' flare-light reflections in the mirror like stream could be seen by the iron-bugs of the sky. He glanced back to the trailing sampans. The last boat was like a wisp of smoke as one of his daughters poled it forward. He could not quite make out which daughters steered or poled, but knew his wife would silence their prattling ...mostly about the bright lights of the city and the hovel of the village.

He glanced once more to the dark sky where danger often hovered. He feared those hovering-whirring monsters of the night more than anything, and knew they could easily slay his family, like a fire-tongue from a flying frog.

They drifted onward... *gently down the stream* ... as he thought of his father in happier times, and prayed his spirit would once more find the peace of the *Quiet-Times*.

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