

THE ANGEL OF THE TENDERLOIN

James D. Redwood

Mansfield forgot the most important rule only once: *never, ever, look into the eyes of the person you're about to kill*. But the 3-9X sniper scope mounted on his M14 was too powerful, too efficient, and so, many years later, the eyes of his last enemy still haunted him. Every day and every night. In all their innocent obliviousness....

“You’ll be working in eight-hour shifts.”

Alexander Vachin, the chief litigation partner of Coates, Vachin & Malberry, leveled his forefinger at the two associates as though he was pointing a weapon at them. It was a habit Mansfield did not like. He looked on coldly as a pair of maintenance men lugged twenty or so cardboard boxes labeled “Aldizel Documents 12/1/86—Privileged and Confidential” into the conference room and set them down on the floor next to the mahogany table at which he and Stanford Johnson were seated. Vachin watched the janitors carefully and waited for them to leave. Then he turned back to the junior lawyers.

“You take the first shift, Mansfield. Johnson, you’ll relieve him at five.”

“Yes, sir!” Stanford Johnson piped up. Mansfield said nothing. The eagerness in his young colleague’s voice reminded him of the chirping of the *vanh khuyen*, a type of Vietnamese bird Johnson would not have been familiar with. The boy had just graduated from Stanford Law School the previous May, and he liked to joke about how the university was “his namesake.” Mansfield wasn’t impressed. His job in the war, blowing people’s heads off, had called most of his previous faith in the value of self-enthrallment into serious question. But that, too, was something Stanford Johnson wouldn’t know about. Neither would Alexander Vachin, he felt.

“Good,” the partner said. He stared at Mansfield long enough to make Johnson squirm in his seat. The older associate merely stared back at him.

“Well, Mr. Mansfield?” Vachin said peevishly. Stanford Johnson fidgeted in his chair again.

“Whatever you say.” A furrow appeared in Vachin’s brow at the senior associate’s lack of deference. To alleviate his nervousness, or so Mansfield surmised, Stanford Johnson leaned down, picked up one of the boxes, set it on the table, lifted the lid, and fixed his eyes on the top page of a thick, Bates-stamped document. The smell of musty, long-neglected paper came from inside the box. As he settled into his work, Johnson edged his chair

away from Mansfield's as though he was afraid his older colleague's sullen attitude might be contagious. Apparently he'd forgotten he was not supposed to take the first shift.

"There's no reason to be *truculent*, you know," Vachin complained. But Mansfield felt no desire to placate him. CV & M badly needed the two associates to do the lowly document review work on the files of Aldizel Optics, one of the law firm's major clients, and it wasn't as though the partners were going to do it. Besides, Mansfield had lost all interest in his own prospects for partnership a long time ago. Vachin waited a few seconds, then drew himself up stiffly and tried again.

"Well, be sure you flag any documents that might be...awkward for the client. Mr. Mansfield, *you* have the experience to know what I mean."

Mansfield was as indifferent to the partner's lukewarm flattery as he was to his attempt to be intimidating. "Not having any idea what you're looking for," he said, "how am I supposed to know what you consider awkward?"

Vachin bristled as though the associate was deliberately baiting him. He pressed his lips together tightly, clearly finding it difficult to control himself.

"I can't go into the details right now," he snapped, "except to say that the client is in the process of negotiating a very important and very sensitive deal. That's all you need to know at present, Mr. Mansfield. But remember, I'm relying on you. You know that, don't you?"

Mansfield gave him a brief nod, which was all he was willing to concede to him. Alexander Vachin looked dissatisfied, but he wheeled and strode out the door without another word. When he was gone, Stanford Johnson glanced up worriedly. Mansfield smiled at him, reached over, and plucked the document he was reading out of his hands. Johnson blurted out a disconcerted cry.

"Relax," his companion said. "I'll take over now." He tried to sound reassuring, but Stanford Johnson appeared anxious still as he got to his feet. "Go on, get out of here," the older attorney ordered. "I'll see you at five."

It took him longer than he thought it would, but early that fall he found the right place at last. It was a dilapidated five-story warren of apartments on the corner of Olive and Larkin, directly across from a hole-in-the-wall *banh mi* shop from which the pleasing odors of fresh baguettes, *pho*, and French filtered coffee were like a finger pointing him in the right direction. The building was occupied by a number of extended Southeast Asian refugee families. At first they were reluctant to take him in, but Mansfield had expected that. He was too tall, too big-boned, and he didn't speak their language very well. The Vietnamese family that finally agreed to rent to him

found his request for a single small room and a shared bath rather strange. Particularly when they saw him leave almost every morning decked out in a three-piece Brooks Brothers suit with expensive Italian dress shoes to match. They charged him an exorbitant rent as a consequence, but Mansfield was prepared for that as well. Even though that meant that right before payday, he was obliged to take his dinners, a simple pate sandwich and a diet soda, at the Vietnamese bread shop across the way. Most of the rest of his salary, a good one by anyone's standards, went to Raphael House, the homeless shelter on Sutter. Two nights a week he volunteered his services at the law office of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic on Hyde Street. But it was not enough....

“What you doing?”

Mansfield flinched and turned his head. Cramped into the small bathroom with his back to the door, he'd thought he was immune from discovery, but somehow the young Vietnamese boy had managed to sneak in around his elbow and was staring at him, wide-eyed. The bathroom smelled of damp and mold, along with the faint scent of disinfectant. Mansfield casually dropped the pile of wet clothes he was working on into the green plastic washbasin inside the tub. *A child won't know the difference.*

“I'm doing my washing, *em oi.*”

The boy snickered scornfully. “That not *your* work,” he said. “That maid's work. Why you do it?”

Because it makes it easier to atone. But Mansfield knew there was no point in saying it. He was about to tell the kid to run along when he was spared the trouble.

“*Hai oi!*”

The lawyer hastily draped one of his dress shirts over the other clothes in the basin. The boy wouldn't understand, but his mother might. She appeared in the doorway, hands on her hips like an American. “*Em di ngu! Mau!*”

She slapped the boy on the rump and sent him off to bed. Then she turned and regarded Mansfield suspiciously. The attorney rocked uneasily on his haunches. Living with this family for three months had done little to allay their mistrust of him.

“You go bed too now, Mister?” the woman inquired, her voice sharp with disapproval. She glanced down at the clothes in the basin. “Why you no get Chi Lanh do that?”

Her lip curled at the Westerner's brazen disregard of face. Her husband had been a rich rice merchant before the fall of Saigon in April, 1975. Although they now lived at the mercy of the Department of Social Services,

they had finally managed to save enough money to be able to afford their own maid again.

“I call her.”

She twisted around to go, but Mansfield quickly grabbed her hand.

“No!” he said. “Don’t do that! I like to wash my own clothes.”

The woman glared at him in disbelief. She started to say something, but thought better of it and tramped away. Mansfield waited about a minute, his heart pounding rapidly. Then he sprang to his feet. With his hands shaking, he hung Chi Lanh’s wet pajamas over the clothesline which stretched between the ends of the tub and covered them with his shirt. He caught his breath and listened, then let his breath out again. He only hoped that in the morning they’d think he’d washed the maid’s clothes purely by accident.

“This is the last box,” Stanford Johnson said, as he set it down on the conference table. “Do you want to go through it, or shall I?”

Mansfield noticed the bags under his colleague’s eyes and knew that Johnson had stayed at the office all night again, imprisoned by the fear that the partners might catch him trying to leave at an indecently early hour for an associate. The man reeked of frightened sweat. Mansfield felt sorry for him.

“I’ll take it,” he said, sitting down. “Why don’t you go home and get some sleep?”

“Sleep!” Johnson looked horrified, as though Mansfield had suggested something lewd. “But what if Mr. Vachin—?”

“Finds out?” Mansfield interjected. “Then you’d be fired, of course.”

Johnson’s face turned the color of chalk, and a look of terror came into his eyes. Mansfield was initially amused at how easy it was to torment him, but then he became annoyed with himself for taking advantage of the man’s immoderate dread.

“I’m only kidding,” he said, as he took the cover off the box. The smell of mold filled the conference room and reminded him of his awkward encounter with the Vietnamese mother in the damp bathroom a week earlier. Aldizel Optics must have kept the last few boxes of documents in its basement, thinking they’d never be needed. Mansfield gazed at his companion. Johnson’s lip was trembling.

“Okay, then. If it makes you feel better, you can stick around and help me with these files.”

The younger associate’s lip stopped shaking, and he flashed his older colleague a grateful smile. Mansfield shrugged and reached for his copy of the checklist which in-house counsel at Aldizel had prepared for the lawyers

at CV & M, to make sure they reviewed every single document. His and Johnson's lists were identical, but each attorney had been instructed to check off only those documents which he personally examined. Once Mansfield and Johnson finished their work, both lists and all the documents were to go to Alexander Vachin for his assessment. Mansfield sighed, fished his first file out of the box, and started scanning the papers inside it. As he finished each one, he checked it off on his list. Stanford Johnson reached into the box, extracted another folder, and followed suit. The squeaking of the chairs as the lawyers shifted position to get comfortable and the droning of the law firm's antiquated heating system were the only sounds in the room for about an hour. But then Mansfield suddenly let out a muffled exclamation. Stanford Johnson peered at him.

"Something wrong?"

Mansfield flushed all over. It took both hands to keep steady the paper he was holding, they were twitching so. "No," he said shortly, when he could trust himself to speak. "Nothing's wrong."

Johnson seemed skeptical but didn't pursue the matter. He returned to his work. Mansfield took another peek at the document. It was the draft of a contract between Visioncraft Industries, Inc., a Southern California competitor of Aldizel, and the Iranian government. *What was it doing in the client's files?* As he read through it a third time, more carefully now, the blood drained from his face. He struggled to collect his wits and shot a sharp glance across at Johnson, but his comrade was buried in his paperwork, a look of weary concentration etched into his forehead. Several minutes later, while Mansfield was still deciding on a course of action, Johnson gazed up at him and stifled a yawn. The older attorney realized what he had to do. He reached behind him for his wallet and took out two dollars.

"You look bushed, my friend," he said, as nonchalantly as he could. He slid the bills across the table. "Why don't you go get us some coffee? My treat. It's going to be tough slogging through the rest of this damn box."

Stanford Johnson studied him with bleary eyes. Mansfield tried to sound encouraging.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll cover for you if Vachin comes by." Johnson stood up but lingered uncertainly.

"You'd better hurry, though," Mansfield prodded, "or you might have to deal with Coates and Malberry as well."

Johnson hastily pocketed the money. "Okay, thanks," he said. "I'll be back." He rushed off.

Mansfield waited until he disappeared down the hall, headed in the direction of the cafeteria, and then he folded the document he'd discovered

and shoved it in his pocket. After taking a rapid inventory of the remaining papers in the file he'd been reading to make sure there were no others he wanted, he closed the file and thrust it in among the ones that Johnson had already reviewed. Next he picked up his colleague's copy of the document list and checked off all the items that were contained in the folder he'd just switched. He paused and shot an apprehensive glance at the hallway. It was deserted. He knew he was taking a big risk, but he also counted on Johnson's exhaustion to work in his favor. Hopefully his colleague would be too tired to go back over his list or examine the pile of folders he'd already finished with, and would simply pick up where he left off with a brand new file. Mansfield bent forward, and when he was sure he could do so without spilling the contents all over the table, he took another folder from the document box and opened it. The blood pulsed in his temples but soon subsided. A few seconds later, Stanford Johnson stepped back into the room along with a couple of Styrofoam cups of steaming hot coffee. He must have detected something peculiar in his companion's face, however, for he quickly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Mansfield barked. Johnson appeared offended by his curt-ness, but Mansfield didn't need his meddling solicitude to make him feel any worse than he did already. As it was, he could hardly bring himself to look the younger man in the eyes.

"Well, Mr. Mansfield," Alexander Vachin said the following morning, "I hate to ask you to do this, but I need you to review all these documents again." His forefinger jutted out and indicated one of the cardboard boxes the two associates had labored over so tediously and which had now been returned to the conference room. His voice was a curious combination of ingratiation and resentment. Mansfield waited in tortured suspense for him to go on. *Did he suspect the truth?*

"And the worst part is you'll have to do it alone." The partner gazed at him meaningly. "Mr. Johnson won't be joining you."

Mansfield's tension began to ease at these words, but he remained on his guard. He had enough presence of mind to know he was supposed to act amazed, yet all he could come up with on the spur of the moment was a submissive "Sir?"

But it was the first time in months that he'd addressed Vachin with anything like respect, and the partner's normally stern expression melted in a pleased smile. He dropped into one of the brown leather chairs that girded the conference table.

"It won't be a secret after today," he went on, "so you might as well

learn about it from me. Mr. Johnson has been dismissed. For conduct unbecoming a lawyer.” His tone sounded regretful, but just below the surface Mansfield detected a note of injured betrayal.

“Sir?” he repeated. The partner took out a pipe and began to fill it with Balkan Sobranie. His smile grew warmer, as though he considered the associate and himself to be on an equal footing at last.

“Perhaps it’s best I explain everything so you can fully appreciate Mr. Johnson’s treachery to the firm.” Mansfield raised his brows inquiringly at the word “treachery,” feeling that this was what Vachin expected. “It’s time you knew what this case is all about, and then there won’t be any further *misunderstandings*.” His eyes glinted at Mansfield. “You get my meaning, I trust?”

“Yes, sir.” But Mansfield’s throat felt constricted, and he could hardly get the words out.

“Good. Take a seat.” The partner graciously extended his hand toward a chair opposite him. The associate sat down. “You know, even though you’ve had a . . . rocky career here, Mr. Mansfield, we still have great hopes for you. In fact, our need for you has never been so urgent. I take it you’re aware of that?”

Mansfield nodded but worked his face muscles hard to hide his emotion. He recalled what his immediate reaction had been when the Vietnamese boy Hai asked him why he did his own laundry, and he reflected that his own urgent needs now lay in a far different direction than anything that Alexander Vachin, who’d been cocooned from the war through various deferments and the timely intervention of several powerful family members, could ever imagine. The partner returned to the subject at hand.

“Keep in mind that everything I’m about to tell you is confidential and protected by the attorney-client privilege. Which is something Mr. Johnson forgot.”

Mansfield repeated the formulaic “Yes, sir,” to keep the man happy. Vachin fumbled in his coat pocket for his lighter and lit his pipe. He settled deeper in his chair, drew in some smoke, and slowly exhaled. The pungent aroma of Latakia floated out over the conference room.

“These files”—again he indicated the boxes on the floor—“are the subject of a DOJ Antitrust Division discovery request. You see, Aldizel is in the process of acquiring Visioncraft Industries.”

He stopped to inhale on the pipe a second time. The pending acquisition by the client was precisely what Mansfield had suspected after he unearthed the Visioncraft contract from among Aldizel’s files the day before. Still, he pretended to be surprised.

“Really, sir?”

Vachin now nodded in his turn.

“Yes. And the client has asked us to fight the Justice Department tooth and nail, and that is what we are going to do. We’re afraid that some of these documents might end up in the hands of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee instead. The Committee, as you know, has launched an investigation into this so-called ‘Iran-Contra’ affair. And if they get hold of these files, it would be highly embarrassing to the client, to say the least. And it might well be worse than that. Disclosure of these papers could potentially have a devastating impact on the merging companies’ earnings. Not to mention the harm to their reputations, of course.”

Mansfield smiled at the afterthought, but even more so at how correct his conjecture had been. Vachin returned the smile, clearly gratified by his associate’s compliant demeanor.

“I see you get the drift.” Vachin drew in loudly on the pipe again. The sucking noise grated on his companion’s nerves, and Mansfield had to force himself to remain unperturbed.

“But these documents would still be protected in the Senate, wouldn’t they, sir?” he asked, pitching his voice to sound as naïve as possible. Vachin guffawed and gave him a patronizing glance. He plunged his hand in his pocket and pulled it out again. With it came a folded piece of paper.

“We can’t rely on *that*, you know. A careless staffer or a Senator with an axe to grind against Aldizel or Visioncraft might well end up doing what Johnson tried to do. Here, look at *this*.”

Mansfield watched in alarm as the partner unfolded the paper and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. *No, it can’t be*. The color mounted to the associate’s face, and his temples began to throb as they had the day before.

“This one document alone would be crushing to the client. Absolutely *crushing*.”

Alexander Vachin extended the paper, but Mansfield was too appalled to touch it. *How did he get it?* Fortunately, his companion was too preoccupied to notice the associate’s distress.

“This document memorializes an agreement between Visioncraft and the Iranian government,” he continued. “To supply the Islamic Republic with ten thousand new, high tech night-vision rifle scopes for use in its war against Iraq. Visioncraft is to take a hefty cut of the proceeds, and then the rest of the money from the arms sale is slated to go to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. All pursuant to, ah, shall we say, a *secret* arrangement.” Vachin chuckled. “Secret from *Congress*, that is.”

Mansfield shivered and averted his gaze. The partner pursed his lips and went on. "And when *this* little item wandered from your document production"—he waved it about for emphasis—"well, let's just say that whatever the U.S. government did with it subsequently wouldn't have made much difference. Thank God we got it back."

He paused and cleared his throat. "And you're probably wondering how we *did* get it back."

Mansfield winced and peered back at him. "Yes, sir." This time his voice rose barely above a whisper.

"That was a bit of luck, let me tell you. Johnson dropped it off in an envelope at the *Chronicle's* front desk. They didn't know who he was, but he was dressed like a lawyer, they said, and who else could it have been?"

Mansfield broke out in a sweat at the partner's rhetorical question. The pounding in his temples became so painful now he thought his head would explode. He looked away again and tried to compose himself.

"The envelope was marked for the city room, but their new messenger boy delivered it by mistake to the G.C.'s office instead. Fisher realized the document's importance the moment he saw it, and since we're the newspaper's chief outside counsel, he phoned me up immediately to ask what he should do with it. I went over personally and picked it up late yesterday afternoon. After what had happened, I sure as hell wasn't going to trust anyone *else* with it." The partner's look turned smug, and he took a break and drew in another satisfying puff on his pipe. "Can you imagine what would have happened if they'd *printed* this?"

Mansfield's skin tingled as he thought of the enormous benefits which the Visioncraft contract was intended to confer on both parties. And the contemplated toll on Iraq.... *Yes, he knew what would have happened. The Iran-Contra affair was beginning to claim a lot of victims, both individual and corporate, and he had simply wanted it to take down one more....*

He snapped his head up but felt faint suddenly. Alexander Vachin gazed benignly at him while he emptied his pipe out in an ashtray beside him. He clambered to his feet and clapped Mansfield familiarly on the back, looking very pleased with himself and with the valuable service he'd performed on behalf of the client. He strutted to the door, then spun around to his disconcerted colleague and smiled at him one last time.

"Just make sure no other documents are missing, will you, Mr. Mansfield? We wouldn't want any more of them to go astray now, would we?"

Mansfield leaned away from the bathtub and mopped his forehead. It was a chilly night even for San Francisco, but he was sweating terribly,

and his stomach knotted up at the recognition of how utterly his plan had failed. He thought of Stanford Johnson, and guilt clawed relentlessly at his distracted mind. Once again an innocent person had been sacrificed for nothing. He clutched a bar of astringent Vietnamese soap and scrubbed hard at the three small pieces of clothing in his hand, in the desperate hope of relieving his anguish. He had no fear of being discovered; Chi Lanh had gone to the market, and the Vietnamese family was off visiting relatives in Sacramento. But as he continued to scrub away, his suffering only increased, and he shuddered in dismay.

“What you doing with my underwear?”

Mansfield jumped at the sound of her voice. His face burned with shame. He imagined her with her hands on her hips, scandalized, outraged, struggling to contain her anger. He could not bear to look at her.

“Well, Mister?” Chi Lanh exclaimed.

“I...I didn't realize...It was a mistake. I thought—”

Reluctantly he turned to her, tongue-tied, overwhelmed with remorse. And his jaw dropped.

Chi Lanh indeed had her left hand on her hip, but the right one was raised above her head, propping her against the doorframe. A bulging shopping bag lay at her feet. As her look met his, she thrust the hip on which her hand rested slightly forward, and then, smiling at him, she placed her thumb in the waistband of her pants and started to lower them.... Mansfield gasped in horror.

“No!” he shouted. “That's not what I want!”

The girl propelled herself off the doorframe and stepped forward, eyeing him provocatively and hooking her other hand inside her pajama bottoms as well.

“That what *all* men want,” she said. “I know.”

Mansfield felt sick all over. He was completely drenched in perspiration now.

“No!” he said again, scrambling to his feet and drawing back from her. The girl halted. She looked mystified and a bit chagrined. A frown clouded her face, and she began to pout.

“What the matter? You no like me?”

“I like you just fine,” he replied. “But please—”

Her brow cleared, and she started to giggle.

“What? You *dong tinh*, maybe?” Even though she sounded amused, her voice had just the slightest trace of disappointment in it. Now it was his turn to be confused, but then she added, “I know San Francisco have beaucoup *dong tinh*. You one?”

She giggled again, and Mansfield thanked her silently for giving him an out.

“Yes,” he said weakly. “You’re right. I like men.”

Her look turned doubtful for a second, but then she giggled for the third time. “You want maybe I find you man underwear to wash?” she said. Mansfield swiftly shook his head.

“No,” he said. “No. I’m sorry about your...things.” He suddenly realized that he was still holding her panties, and he hastily dropped them into the green washbasin.

Chi Lanh shrugged, strolled over to the bathtub, and gathered up her wet clothes. Mansfield opened his mouth, but he was so flustered to speak. He’d been told once about an American civilian who’d showed up one day at an orphanage in the Mekong Delta, and who, for two entire years, tried to expunge his guilt over the war by washing dirty diapers in the little stream behind the dormitory in which the war’s discarded children slept. And *he* had never held a rifle with a high-powered sniper scope in his hands, let alone use it. *But how could Mansfield explain all this to Chi Lanh or to anyone else?* She wheeled from him unceremoniously, picked up her shopping bag, and stalked off down the hall, leaving behind a long trail of water. Mansfield wanted to call her back, but he knew that she, too, would never understand.

He saw the other girl only briefly, one day in 1967, through the Visioncraft 3-9X magnifying scope mounted on his M-14. She was tossing rice into the air to let the wind carry away the chaff, before it fell back into the mesh screen she was holding in her hands. From her actions and her mannerisms Mansfield knew that she, like Chi Lanh many years later, was merely a maid. He had taken up his position on a faraway hilltop, and the girl was unaware of his presence, even when she glanced up to follow the path of the rice to make sure that not a single grain missed the screen upon its return. The distance was too great, some six hundred yards or so, where life or death could almost be said to depend on a coin toss. The day before, the Viet Cong had ambushed an American patrol in her village. Five GI’s were killed. By the time Mansfield showed up, the guerrillas were long gone, and indeed, except for the girl tossing rice and the sniper, there seemed to be no one left on the face of the earth.... Only later, when he was back in the states, did he fully realize the tremendous cost which doing his job well that day had exacted from him. For although *she* had not noticed *him*, his all-powerful rifle scope made it impossible for him to escape her eyes.

Water dripped slowly from the tap into the washtub. Mansfield plodded forward, flicked the bathroom light off, and trudged away, in darkness, to the shelter of his room.