

Bangkok, Thailand
February 27, 1969

This is the way it happened. Trey was chief photographer for the school paper. He often had shooting assignments in the afternoon, and if he thought he'd be later than usual, he would call. He had already said he would be busy every afternoon that week, mentioning the various events he'd be working on. That afternoon, Tuesday, January 21, when I was coming home in a taxi from the beauty shop, I saw him walking along Soi 71, our street but farther out. I waved, but he didn't see me. This was no place he should have been, but he did have his camera over his shoulder, and we would find out later. Still, I felt uneasy, and I tried to call Gus at the office. I dialed every one of the numbers twice, and couldn't get through. Trey had called when I was gone and told the cook that he'd be home at five o'clock. He got in about two minutes of five and went right to his room, after a couple of words with Chuck.

Gus had come home about ten of five, and we were having drinks on the balcony. I told him where I'd seen Trey, and his reply was that we should find out right then. He found him standing at the bathroom mirror and told him to come out, that his mother and he wanted to talk to him. When he was seated, Gus asked him where he had been that afternoon. He said we knew he'd had to take pictures at school. Yes, we knew. But he'd found the shutter of his camera broken, so there was no sense in staying at school. Then, where did he go? To a friend's house on Soi 53 (we don't remember the name) to ride his bike with him. Where else? We don't remember if he said nowhere else or didn't answer. Gus said, "Trey, your mother saw you walking along Soi 71 this afternoon. Where were you going?" "I won't tell you." "What do you mean, you won't tell me? Of course you'll tell me. I'm your father, and I must know where you are at all times. Your mother and I tell each other where we are, you know that's how we operate in this family. Where were you?" "What will you do if I don't tell you?" "I'll spank you. I'll beat you, if necessary, so that it will hurt more not to tell me than to tell me."

All the while, the two of them had been looking each other in the eye. Then a look of defiance and determination came over his face, actually over his entire body, it seemed to me. He glanced at me, looked back at Gus, jumped up, bolted through the door, and ran through the apartment to the hall. Gus went after him, saw the elevator at a lower floor, thought he'd run downstairs. He hadn't, he'd run upstairs, where Gus found him in a few minutes. The roof is the eighth floor, where there are some small apartments. Trey had gone up the ladder to the top of the water tanks. He was sitting with his feet dangling at the ladder. When he saw Gus, he got up and walked away a few steps. Gus told him to come down. He refused. "Come down and let's talk, Trey." "No, I can't talk about it." "Trey, we can always talk." "No, we can't. There is nothing to talk about. I have nothing to lose."

We didn't, and don't, know what he meant by this last remark. His behavior was completely aberrant, beginning with, "I won't tell you," on the balcony. He was being defiant and giving Gus threats. Certainly these threats couldn't stand. Gus told him if he didn't come down, he'd come up and get him, at which Trey moved nearer the outside edge. "If you come up here, I'll jump." At that, Gus backed off, thinking that if he could get nets put around the building he could then go up and get Trey. Never have we threatened our children with someone else; we do our own punishing. Gus would go up and get him, not send anyone else. Gus left the roof, went to ask the apartment manager if the police would bring nets. The answer was yes, but that they would have to go to the station, a telephone call would not be accepted. Gus returned to the roof, where Trey was again sitting with his legs hanging over the ladder. He stood up and walked away when he saw Gus, who again asked him to come down. When Trey again refused, Gus told him that he'd get police nets if he did not come down. "If you go after the police, I'll jump before they get here." Gus' reply: "I'm going after the police, and if you want to jump, you jump." He left, came here to tell me Trey was on the roof, that he was going after the police to get nets. All the while, I'd stayed in the apartment (we're on the sixth floor) with Chuck.

Chuck was on and off the back balcony, watching Trey on the roof at the other end of the building. I didn't really want him out there, but there was no real reason to forbid him, and I didn't want to alarm him. He told me later that Trey had put his finger to his mouth in the hush sign. I was sitting in the living room area. In ten or fifteen minutes, Chuck came over to me and said, "Mother, I saw Trey. He's down there. He said no, when I asked if he's seen him jump, or fall. I don't remember which word I used. I told Tawee to watch Chuck, to stay right with him.

I started down the stairs. Grace met me coming up and stayed with me. At the bottom of the stairs, I stopped and stood at the railing. Mary, a nurse, was bending over him, holding his wrist. He was face up, with his hands loosely clenched. Another tenant, whose window he fell past, called the U. S. Provost Marshal. Gus told me later that when he came back from the police station, a sheet was already over him, but I'd not remembered that it was done so soon. He died instantaneously, the death certificate says multiple fractures and contusions. At the autopsy, the following Friday, samples of body fluids were taken and have been sent to a laboratory. But we've been told it will be many weeks before there are any results.

Persons kept asking me to sit down, to take this or that, but I refused. I did drink some whiskey that someone put in my hand. Death was set at 5:50 on the police record. It was 8:30, Grace said, when his body was lifted up and out in the ambulance. All this time we waited for the MP's, the Thai police, the ambulance, the police reporter, Thai doctor, U. S. military doctor, Thai police reporter, the CID men, photographers.

Gus told me he had asked for the CID (Counter Intelligence Division) men to be called, and when I asked why he told me that Trey had been smoking marijuana. It seems that he had discovered this when I was in the States in November. They had a very long talk one evening, Trey brought everything to Gus (Gus had previously found it all without Trey's knowledge and had not disturbed it), they destroyed it all, and Trey asked him not to tell me. Gus did not, until after he was dead. When the CID man came, he searched Trey's room and found some white pills in his night stand; these were in an envelope with Thai writing on it. The doctor at the U. S. hospital, where we went after Trey's body was taken there, visually identified the pills as belonging to the amphetamine family. They have also been sent away for analysis.

We had no idea he was taking drugs. Two days before, on Sunday down at the beach, Gus told me Trey had taken his hand confidentially and in a brief moment told him he was so glad he'd stopped smoking marijuana, said he felt so much better. All of it absolute trickery, evidently. The CID man was not very thorough. We have found more drugs and more marijuana in going through his things. Just last Friday, Gus found his 1968 diary. It is sketchy, but he was on drugs this time last year! On Monday, Gus gave to the OSI the names of drugs and the names of persons (students) mentioned in it. The OSI (Office of Special Investigation - Air Force) took over from the CID, which is Army. An investigation has been held at school. I don't know if it's still going on or not, but it started the week after Trey's death. Many students are involved in drug usage. Gus talks to the OSI men from time to time, and to his questions they say that Trey's name has never come up. To this moment we have no idea how Trey got started, how much or with whom he was involved, or why he did it at all. The frightening aspect is that he could hide it so successfully.

The Monday after the funeral, Gus went to school to close out Trey's account, telling the superintendent and the high school principal that he was expecting the OSI to contact him. It was then 9:30. They told Gus that two OSI men had been at school since eight that morning. A new lock had been put on Trey's locker by the school the day after his death. They all opened it together, and Gus and the two OSI men looked through his things. They found an unfinished letter, being written to a girl in the States whom we do not know. He told of school life, sports, dramatics, classes, teachers, and drug usage. He was boasting how he and many others used drugs so cleverly that no others knew it. They were all A and B students, he went on, and held in disdain the "hardheads" who were so careless

as to use it indiscriminately and to let it show. He said there was one thing that worried him: he was afraid of having his parents or his teachers find out. If he were caught, especially over here, it would ruin his dad's career.

The OSI has this letter, for which Gus has a receipt. He also has a receipt for Trey's clothes. He had on light colored jeans, on which he had printed with a ball point pen when he was on the roof. The right leg: Trey Akerland, B (encircled) 5 Aug 1952, D (encircled) 21 Jan 1969. The left leg: I am lost. I am not angry.

On Saturday, January 25, the funeral service was held at the International Church at eleven o'clock. Although we made the arrangements through the minister of the church, the service was conducted by an Air Force chaplain at Gus' request. The music was on the piano by a classmate of Trey, who had called and asked if he might play for the service. We had never met him before, and we couldn't see him behind the piano. We ourselves didn't hear the prelude and postlude selections, but we had named Beyond the Sunset, Eternal Father Strong to Save, In the Garden, Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, Still Still with Thee, The Old Rugged Cross.

We wanted the service to be directed as much as possible to the teenagers, Trey's peers. Gus told Paul (pianist) and Dr. Ruklic (minister) what selections we wanted and in what order. The first was "Yesterday." Chaplain Saathoff spoke of Trey and read various selections from the Bible. Then Paul played "Love Is Blue," which is the first piece Trey learned to play on his guitar. After the comforting sermon, hardly a word of which I could quote now, "Somewhere My Love" left few dry eyes in the congregation. We three and our three friends who sat with us followed Chaplain Saathoff down the aisle. We were told that after we had left, the young people surrounded his casket three deep. During the entire service his guitar was on top of his casket.

The cremation service at Wat Mongkut was at half past one. This is a military wat (temple), but some of Gus' Thai officer friends arranged it. We could have had the wat, and crematory, at Don Muang, where the U. S. Air Force contingent is, with no special permission, but that would have been inconvenients to get to. There weren't a great many teenagers at the wat, however.

The crematory itself is at the rear of a platform about 20 by 20 feet. Seats are in pavillions along each side of the courtyard. A Thai orchestra was playing when we came in, and I think played during the ceremony, but I really don't remember. It had stopped by the time we left. Chaplain Saathoff had never attended a Thai funeral service and, I understand, had never been to a crematory. He said only a few words, which he began two or three minutes before one thirty.

First was the ceremonial burning, in which everyone who is present takes part. Before he walks up the three steps to the platform, each one is given a joss stick and a token. This latter is like a small wand about twelve inches long, which may be of sandalwood or bamboo, decorated with tissue paper, rice paper, or ribbon. These are placed on the bier, under the casket. When all have made this obeisance, the curtains are drawn, and the casket is moved into the crematory itself. There is a gap in the curtain; it doesn't actually touch the crematory wall. We were sitting right in front of that opening and saw the casket put in and his guitar on top of it. The ranking Thai officer present is the one who first lights the pyre. Gus and Chuck and I went up with him. There was a torch about three feet high to the right of the opening, at which the joss stick and wand are lighted. Gus, Chuck, and I followed General Prasart. One other Thai officer (Gus' counterpart) was after us. Only we five had been given another set of tokens and participated in the actual burning. Then the door was closed, and our last farewell to Trey was over.

After greeting our friends, which we'd not been able to do at the church, we left the compound. As we went through the gate, I turned and saw the smoke rising and thought of Kahil Gibran's words: For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun? And as of today, we still don't know why Trey wanted to leave us.