

Pulp Fiction from the East

ORIENTAL **S**ALT *3*

Byron Bales

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Pittsburgh Go A Novella
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Smith A Novella
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Oriental Salt 4

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Byron Bales is from St. Louis. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps with the Fleet Marine Force (FMF) in Asia during the pre-Vietnam period and later with the 5th MEB in the Caribbean during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He is a novelist and screenwriter, as well as an lifelong private investigator, and lives in Southeast Asia.

Oriental Salt 3

Prologue	3-4
Smith · East St. Louis; France 1917	5-120
The District ▪ News Orleans 1886	121-129
Killing them Softly · New Zealand, South Island	136-139
RDKS · New Caledonia 1944	140-147
The Cardinal is Six · Southwest Pacific 1945	148-155
Guy Gabaldon; A brief word on a great American Hero.	158-160
The Thomasites – The Philippines	162-

Prologue

It's the Old Salt talking here. When I returned to Thailand after my trip around the States—very likely my last given my old bones—I started this and another volume of remembrances. I had previously told you about Private Turner and his Woman in **Oriental Salt**, and about Pittsburgh Go in **More Oriental Salt**.

Anyhow, I've decided that with many of my old cronies kicking off, there was little reason for those damn endless flights across the Pacific. Folks visit me now, because aside from those who've served in the armed forces, not that many have really spent much time over here. Those who are married or otherwise entangled rarely bring their wives, and I suspect many of those old babes slip down to Jamaica for their own place in the sun. Yeah, guys with any snap know that their old ladies gallivant down in the West

Indies and they don't much care if the dark boys fall all over their gals with attention—lots of that—plus supply some beef when they have to. For a price, of course. Old gals, like old guys, flatter themselves with the notion that handsome, health young companions keep them company merely because they appreciate their seniors. These folks also believe pigs fly. As they say; there's no fool like an old fool.

I promised to tell you about Smith. He was an Asian institution, you could say. Seemed like he owned Asia. He was called Mister Smith back then. Like he had no first name. But he had a first name, alright, and it was John. Straight scoop; John. The name that appears in a million hot-sheet hotel ledgers around the world. But not many people used his first name even if they knew it. Most didn't, because he just signed his name 'Smith' and that was that. He was friendly, if standoffish, didn't cotton to easy banter with strangers or fall into casual acquaintances. He read people like a book and inside of a minute listening to what someone said, knew more about that person might even know about themselves. If they were honest with themselves, that is. Yep, from what was said and what wasn't said, when something should have been said. If that's confusing, well too bad. Some folks know what I mean.

It wouldn't be entirely accurate to say that his name was rightly John Smith. It was, but in German it was Johann Schmidt. It was changed out of necessity. Firstly, because Germans weren't very popular at around the time he changed his name, particularly with him for reasons you'll see. And not to be overlooked: he was ducking the law.

SMITH

Smith is a novella excerpted from the **Some Called It Paradise** **Trilogy** which is in development.

1

East St. Louis, Illinois

January, 1917

It had taken Johann Schmidt all day walking and hitching rides from Union, Missouri to St. Louis. The distance hadn't been so great, about forty miles, but the weather that December across the windswept plains of Missouri was bitter, snow storms paralyzing road traffic all the way. People tended to stay close to home in such weather, and during one ride in a new, open Carter that had no top, he sat freezing in the twenty miles-per-hour speed. He was thankful to get out when the driver had to turn off the road; being afoot was at least warmer. He shook snowfall off of himself and his grip, mashed his fedora down tight against the wind, and trudged on.

Just outside St. Louis city limits, he stayed the night in a farmer's barn. He'd looked for German names on the route delivery boxes, knowing they were usually more friendly with others of their ilk. Especially these days: Germany had become unpopular with Americans these past few years, especially after the Lusitania in May, 1915.

The following day, the snowstorm passed and he did chores around the farm until mid-afternoon in payment for the straw mattress and breakfast of ham and eggs. The farmer, more than pleased with his work, bid he stay longer under the same unspoken terms. But Johann politely refused; it was important that he get over to East St. Louis where he had a job waiting.

He'd gotten through St. Louis by late afternoon, and there crossed Mississippi River over the Eads Bridge into Illinois. But East St. Louis' town proper was yet a few miles beyond the river and being Sunday, road traffic was light even though the snow stopped falling. Exhausted, he reached Tenth Street by nightfall, and inquired from a local on his way home from work where he might rent a room. He was directed to a home on Old Missouri Avenue.

It was dark as he mistakenly approached a home across a wide road from where he should have inquired. A sign in the parlor window read:

Rooms Available for Short Stays

He earned a curious look from the pretty, young mulatto girl who answered the door. She looked him up and down as he stood there with his grip, pointing to the sign and asking the price of a room for the night.

"Suga" she started, holding back a laugh. "We don't rent no rooms for sleepin.' Why are you here?"

"Some man said I could rent a room here."

"He did, huh? Here?" she asked emphatically, looked across the wide road separating this part of town from the commercial section where Mrs. Brimley's Room & Board stood. Brimley's was a stately three story home where rooms were rented with meals.

"Who is it, Becky?" An older woman called from within. Becky laughed, sort of. "'Is a boy wantin' a place to sleep."

"Sleep?"

"'As right, Missus Murphy. Ta sleep."

Mrs. Murphy, a heavy-set woman holding a Chihuahua to her ample bosom, came up behind Becky, and studied Johann at length. "How much can you spend, boy? Be mindful that your handsome looks ain't negotiable around here."

Johann asked what the going rate was.

Mrs. Murphy was a white woman around fifty. She was well dressed, wore heavily applied rouge and acted with a floozy manner it seemed to Johann. She gave a loud, bawdy laugh and Becky giggled, covering her mouth. “Well, son,” Mrs. Murphy replied, “we ain’t got no house menu, exactly. Again, how much ya lookin’ to spend?”

So it was back to Johann. “I guess fifty cents.”

A man came up the steps behind Johann, tipped his hat to Mrs. Murphy and winked at Becky. They welcomed him in with an “Evenin, Mister Doe!” and Mrs. Murphy gave him a pat on his bottom as he passed into the warmth of the home.

Mrs. Murphy withdrew a large pocket watch that hung from a chain around her neck, and glanced at it as Mister Doe entered, as if timing his visit. Her eyes scanned over the quiet street in the gathering dark, and she shrugged, bobbed her head this way to help her reach a decision. “Try guessin’ one dollar and for that you also get a dinner snack tonight and breakfast in the morning.”

A dollar seemed a bit much, but Johann was too tired to quibble. He also needed to look presentable in the morning when he met Mr. Heinz Wulfe who’d offered him a job if he traveled here to claim it. Wulfe was a cabinet maker, and had admired Johann’s work with wood, particularly since he’d single-handedly constructing and put into operation a light ferry across a creek in Franklin County. Too bad, he’d said, that Johann hadn’t thought to claim the actual operation of the ferry for himself instead of just building the launch.

Mrs. Murphy passed her Chihuahua, named Pancho after the Mexican desperado, to Becky and instructed the girl to feed it and settle Johann in the Magnolia Room. She returned to the front parlor where, with three gaily dressed girls, one a Chinese, she was entertaining some men. “Call me when Judge Perkins arrives,” she added to Becky.

“Yes’m.” Becky took Johann’s bag and he followed her up a staircase to the second floor. They passed a large black woman coming down with an

armful of soiled linen who Johann judged to be in her late thirties. “This here is Agnus, boy,” Becky said.

‘My name’s Johann, not boy,’ he returned, and then nodded to the older woman. Agnes stopped him with her fist on his chest, turned to Becky. “Who’s this hunky thing you got here, suga’.”

Becky shrugged. “Jus’ said his name’s Jo-hann.”

“Watcha doin’ here, honey?” she asked Johann. “Customer?”

“Jus’ a sleepin’ customer,” Becky answered, continuing up the stairs.

Agnus watched Johann trail after Becky. “Lookit de haunch on dat boy,” she appraised, and went on down the stairs laughing.

“Youse a lucky feller, John,” Becky advised as they reached the second floor. “A dollar for the Magnolia Room, an’ you gonna be gettin’ meals cooked by Agnus. She da bes’ cook in St. Claire County. Yessuh, she is.”

“I said my name is Johann. And I’d like to take a bath,” he announced, more like asking. “I’ve been on the road for two days.”

“An’ you smells it, John,” Becky agreed with a smile.

Pretty smile, Johann thought. Pretty face. No. Beautiful face. He studied her slender body as she dipped around him to a door, couldn’t recollect ever thinking a black girl was beautiful.

The room was sumptuous, available Becky advised only because it was Sunday night when business was usually slow. There was a massive, four-poster bed without a top, a settee, table and chairs and an ornate chifforobe whose workmanship Johann admired. The room smelled of magnolias, too sweet actually, and a large, ornate chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling.

Johann sat on the bed. He looked around, looked up. Over the bed, a huge mirror greeted his inspection. Now, why on earth would anybody want a mirror over their bed? It came to him a second later. Oh!

Becky started preparing a hot bath for him, and shortly, she left. Johann opened his grip and took out the special suit he’d be wearing in the morning when he met Mr. Wulfe. It was crumbled, but if he hung it inside the

bathroom door the steam rising from the hot bath would straighten the material some. He stripped down and tossed his soiled clothes in a corner of the room, and ventured into the tub. But the water was nearly scalding.

Becky returned with a heavy blanket, and peeked into the bathroom. Johann stood naked by the tub, thought to gingerly ease himself down into the steaming water. Becky came into the bathroom and stood watching. Johann, embarrassed, started to get into the water to hide his nakedness but once committed found it absolutely scalding. He yelped, and hung over the tub, his hands and feet on the bathtub rim supporting his body. Becky moved closer to inspect him.

Johann smiled stupidly and hung there suspended. His nakedness didn't cause Becky to turn away. Instead, she admired him openly with a big grin and wide eyes, even came around the bathtub for a better look right at his business. "My lord, honey," she exclaimed. "Y'all is handsome all over. Not jus' you face. You could make some money with that ding-dong. Yessuh, there's ladies what pay fo dis service, too."

From the mirror canopied bed and her remarks, any doubt he might have held about what sort of 'house' this was vanished. "Could I have some privacy," he asked timidly.

Becky paced around slowly, taking him in. "Sure 'nuff, honey. You look funny, makin' like a spider hangin' over de water. Why you doin' that?"

"'Cause the water is damn near boiling."

Becky moved closer, stooped and dipped her hand in the water, keeping her eyes on his dangling manhood.

"Yessir, it sure is hot. 'Cause of the new water heater Mrs. Murphy put in las' month. It works like a miracle, it does."

"Will you leave?"

"I'm goin,' suga."

"Not very fast," Johann said.

Becky made a face and sauntered out of the room, a light melody in her voice, and then a giggle. "I'll jus' make up yo bed an' be gone sure 'nuff."

From the bathroom, Johann heard her humming in the bedroom for what seemed like a long time. Slowly, he eased his body weight into the bath, an inch at a time.

Afterwards, peeking into the bedroom, he saw that Becky had left, and he hurriedly locked the door to the hallway. He was tired and didn't feel like eating although he hadn't had anything since the morning at the farmhouse and an apple he bought in St. Louis. Instead, he opened his grip and took out one of the books he'd carried with him. He tried to read, but shortly, fatigue overtook him and he nodded off.

Middle of the night. Someone banged on Johann's door. He bolted up, his head foggy from fatigue. "W-who is it."

"Is' me, suga.' Agnus. Let me in."

"Agnus. What? No. I'm sleeping."

"Can't be sleepin ifn' you be talkin' to me." Agnus laughed. "C'mon child, open dis door."

"What do you want?"

"Whatcha you think ole Agnus be wantin?" Come on now, boy. Open this door an' spend a dollar on 'ol Agnus."

"I don't have a dollar."

"Yo credit is good." She rapped on the door harder, laughing.

'No, go away. I'm tired.'" "Youse from ove' in M'souri, ain't cha?"

"Yeah, but we don't need to talk about that, now."

"I'm wonderin' what you boys eat over yonder; young man like you'self not likin' a woman."

"I like women. I'm just tired."

Agnus laughed. "Youse a cherry boy, ain't cha? You kin tell Agnus."

"No. I'm not a cherry," he lied. He heard her feet shuffling away from the door.

“Yes, you is,” she called back. “But I’ll be pickin’ yo’ cherry soon. An’ you kin tell folks old Agnus done the pickin.’ Yassir, straighten you’ head an’ that thing ‘tween your legs right out.” He heard her high pitched laughter wandering off down the hall.

Breakfast for Johann was at six o’clock a.m. He ate in the dining room with an older fellow of around thirty who’d apparently also stayed the night. But there were no women in sight. The man, dressed for business as Johann was this morning, studied him across a plate of ham, eggs, home fried potatoes, fried tomatoes, and toasted bread with a spread of preserves like he’d never seen before. Every kind of fruit imaginable was in preserve jars, even more than at home. A large picture of cold milk sat in the middle of the table, but went untouched. Another girl, this one also a small Negress barely twelve served their meal.

“How old are you, young feller?” the man asked.

Johann, normally polite to older folks, returned “Who’s asking, and why, sir?”

The man shrugged. “You seem a bit young to be stayin’ here, is all.”

“Reckon I’m old enough.”

“Reckon you are. Say, if you ain’t had that little yeller one yet, I highly recommend her.”

“An’ that little chocolate gal, Becky,” the man went on.”She’s a winner, too. Cripple you, she will. Damn near kilt me last week.”

Johann nodded again, and they finished eating in silence after the man begged his pardon for breaking into Johann’s thoughts over the most important meal of the day.

Becky was right about one thing; Angus’s breakfast was better than anything he’d ever had, even his mother’s, and he’d always thought her cooking was aces. Agnus did something different with the food, but he wasn’t sure what. Some spices, perhaps. Maybe mixed ingredients.

Johann finished his breakfast and went up to his room. He took the man’s meaning to be the Chinese girl.

He packed his kit that he'd leave here in the house and return later to claim it. There was talking at the back of the second floor, now; the house was coming to life.

As he was leaving, two of the girls were coming downstairs. They peeked at John, giggled, and watched his every move as he readied to leave the house. It was just after seven o'clock, and the man, leaving with Johann, whispered that he'd never seen a girl downstairs for breakfast before ten o'clock. One of the girls was a Mexican whom the other called Juanita. The man elbowed Johann. "Ain't had that one, yet. I'm told she's a saucy l'il pepper."

Stepping out onto the front porch, they saw that had been lightly snowing since midnight and the roads were covered with a thin veil of silver. They walked down the steps and with directions from the man, Johann went off on foot towards State Street.