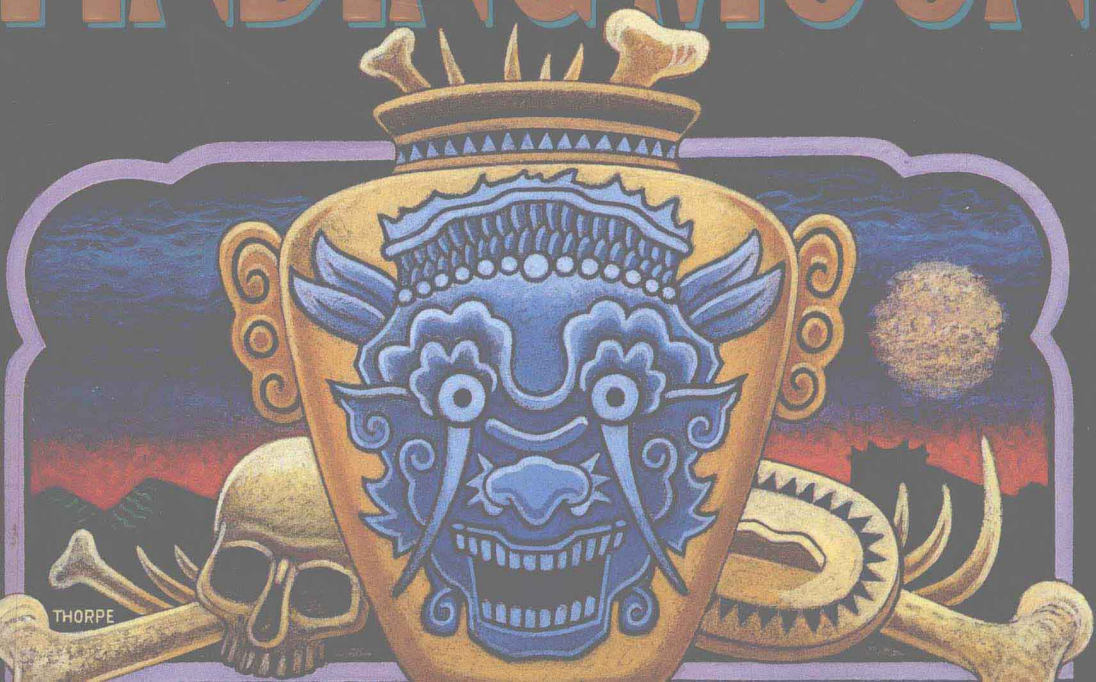


TONY HILLERMAN

AUTHOR OF THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER SACRED CLOWNS

FINDING MOON



**TONY
HILLERMAN**



FINDING MOON



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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FIRST EDITION

Designed by Alma Hochhauser Orenstein

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hillerman, Tony.

Finding moon / Tony Hillerman. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-06-017772-1

I. Title.

PS3558.I45F47 1995

813'.54—dc20

95-31309

95 96 97 98 99 ♡/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FINDING MOON

CAMBODIA

PHNOM PENH

*Elephant
Mountains*

Siem Reap
Sampot

Mekong River

Can Tho

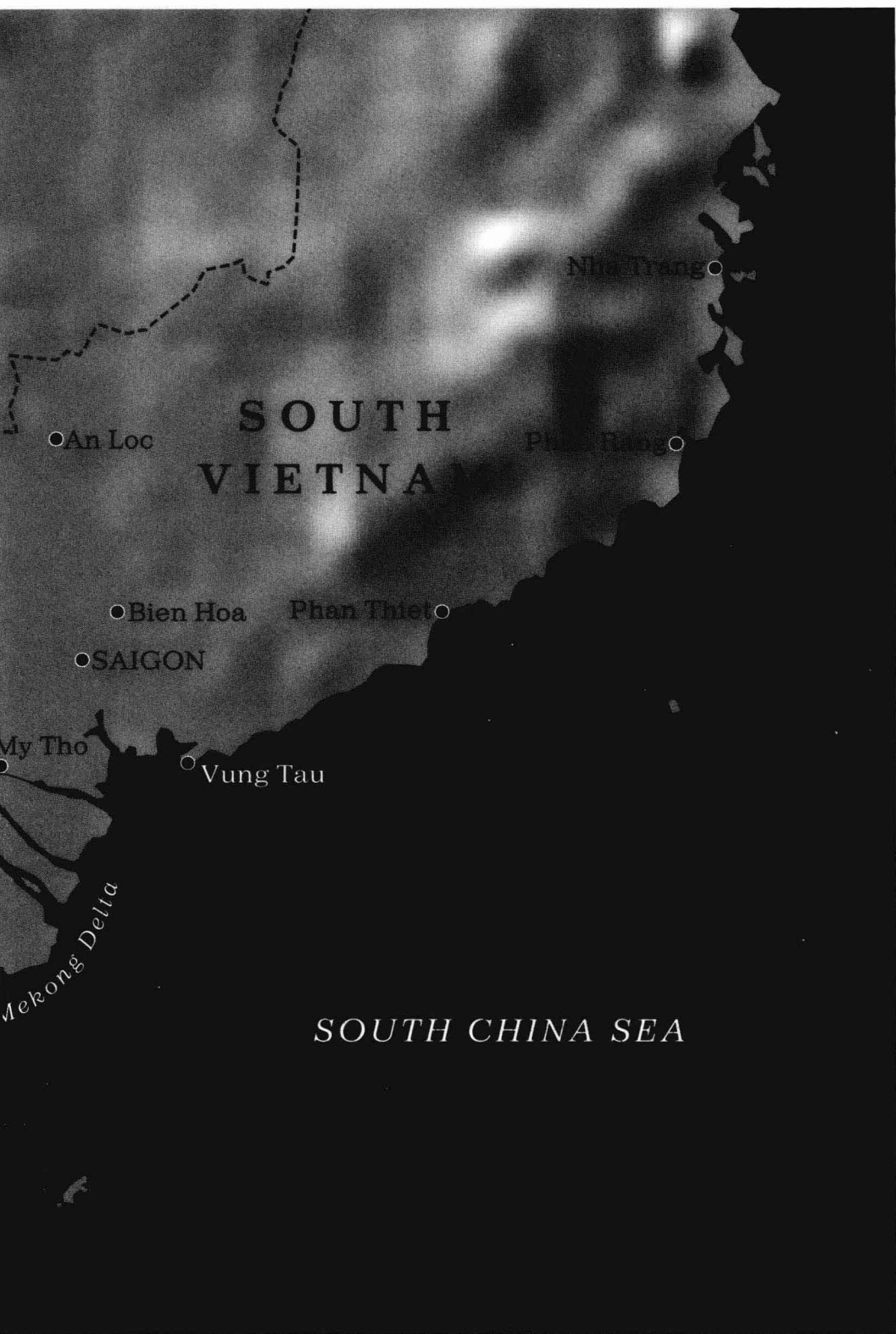
Phung Hiep

Long P

GULF OF SIAM

Nam Can

0 50 miles



SOUTH VIETNAM

○ An Loc

○ Nha Trang

○ Phan Rang

○ Bien Hoa

○ Phan Thiet

○ SAIGON

○ My Tho

○ Vung Tau

Mekong Delta

SOUTH CHINA SEA

Also by **TONY HILLERMAN**

❖ ❖ ❖ *FICTION* ❖ ❖ ❖

Sacred Clowns

Coyote Waits

Talking God

A Thief of Time

Skinwalkers

The Dark Wind

People of Darkness

Listening Woman

Dance Hall of the Dead

The Fly on the Wall

The Blessing Way

The Boy Who Made Dragonfly (*for children*)

❖ ❖ ❖ *NONFICTION* ❖ ❖ ❖

Hillerman Country

The Great Taos Bank Robbery

Rio Grande

New Mexico

The Spell of New Mexico

Indian Country



AN APOLOGY, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, DENIAL, AND DEDICATION

TO MY FELLOW DESERT RATS, my apologies for wandering away from our beloved Navajo canyon country. The next book will bring Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn of the Tribal Police back into action.

I acknowledge the help of Professor Jack M. Potter, University of California anthropologist and author of *Wind, Water, Bones and Souls: The Religious World of the Cantonese Peasant*, and of Bernard St. Germain and Rick Ambrose, who patrolled the Mekong in the Brown Water Navy. Thanks, too, to Sgt. Chris Hidalgo of the New Mexico National Guard for familiarizing me with a vintage armored personnel carrier. Finally, thanks to my friend and cardiologist, Neal Shadoff, for helping my fictional physicians sound genuine.

The denial: While former members of C Company, 410 Infantry, will recognize some of the names herein as those of our fellow grunts, I have borrowed only the names of these old friends and not their personalities. All characters herein are fictional.

This work is dedicated to the men of C Company and to all those who earned the right to wear the Combat Infantry Badge.

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PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, April 12 (Agence France-Presse)—The United States abandoned its embassy here this morning, with six helicopters sweeping into the embassy grounds to evacuate the ambassador and his remaining staff.

The action came as the last resistance of the Cambodian Army collapsed and Khmer Rouge troops poured into the capital, many of them riding on captured tanks and trucks.

The First Day

April 12, 1975

SHIRLEY WAS GIVING MOON the caller-on-hold signal when he came through the newsroom door. He acknowledged Shirley with the I'll-call-'em-back signal, threw his hat on the copy desk, sat down, and looked at D. W. Hubble.

"Nothing much," Hubble said. "AP has an early tornado in Arkansas. Pretty mediocre, but it could get better. Things are still going to hell in Nam, and Ford has a press conference scheduled for eleven Washington time, and Kissinger issued a statement, and General Motors—"

"What did Henry say?"

Hubble did not bother to look up from his duties,

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which at the moment involved chopping copy from the teletype machine into individual stories and sorting them into trays. The trays were variously labeled PAGE ONE, SPORTS, FEATURES, FUNNY, SOB STUFF, and PIG IRON—the pig iron being what Hubble considered “seriously dull stuff that the League of Women Voters reads.”

Hubble said, “What did Henry say? Let’s see.” He glanced at the top item in the PIG IRON file. “Henry said that Dick Nixon was correct in declaring we had won the war in Southeast Asia. He said the North Viets were just too stubborn to understand that, and the press was playing up the current setbacks to make it look like a disaster, and it was going to be the fault of the Congress for not sending more money, and anyway don’t blame Kissinger. Words to that effect.”

“What looks good for the play story?” Moon asked, and sorted quickly through the FRONT PAGE tray. The United States seemed to be evacuating the embassy at Phnom Penh. Moon saved that one. The new president of South Vietnam, something-or-other Thieu, was picking a fight-to-the-death bunch for his cabinet. Moon discarded it. A bill to put a price ceiling on domestic oil production was up for a vote in a Senate committee. That was weak but a possibility. The South Viets were claiming a resounding victory at Xuan Loc, wherever that was. He tossed that one too. Senator Humphrey declared that we should establish a separate U.S. Department of Education. There’d be some interest in that. The Durance County Commissioners had moved the road to the ski basin up a notch on the priority list. Most of the 28,000 subscribers the paper claimed would be interested in that one. And then there was a colorful, gruesome feature on the plight of refugees pouring into Saigon from points north.

It was good human interest stuff, but even as he read it

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Moon was conscious of how quickly these accounts of tragedy from Vietnam had become merely filler—like the comics and Ann Landers and the crossword puzzle. A few years ago they had been personal. Then he'd searched through the news for references to Ricky's Air Mobile brigade, for actions using helicopters, for anything involving the Da Nang sector where Ricky's maintenance company was stationed. But since Ricky resigned his commission in 1968, Ricky had been out of it. And since 1973 the United States of America was also out of it. What was left of the war was a distant abstraction. As Hubble had described it once, "Just another case of our gooks killing their gooks." In the press across America, and in the *Morning Press-Register* of Durango, Colorado, the war was no longer page one.

But it was still page one sometimes at the *Press-Register*—until last month. Ricky was still in Nam, a player on the sidelines. That made Moon interested and made him think the *Press-Register's* readers would also be. Now Ricky was dead, no longer running R. M. Air and fixing helicopters for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam just as he had fixed them for the U.S. Army. Probably the same copters, in fact. But as Ricky had said in one of his rare letters, he was "getting a hell of a lot more money and a hell of a lot less aggravation from division headquarters." There was a kickback to ARVN brass, but Ricky considered that "the equivalent of an income tax."

Ricky had said more. He had said, Come and join me, big brother. Come and join the team. Join the fun. It would be like old times. He'd said, South Nam is going under, and fast. Soon there'll be no more fat contracts from ARVN, but there will still be plenty of need for what R. M. Air can offer. Help me get this outfit ready for the change. And he'd said (Moon remembered the exact words), "R. M. Air is no good

for slogans. We'll rename it M. R. Air, for Moon and Rick, and call it Mister Air. I'll do the business, you keep the engines running. Come on. With all that money she's married to now, Mom doesn't need you anymore. But I do."

Which was just Ricky buttering him up. Their mother had never needed him. Victoria Mathias wasn't a woman who needed people. And neither did Ricky. But bullshit or not, Moon had enjoyed thinking about making the move, even while he was wondering why Ricky had invited him. But he had never answered the letter. There hadn't been time.

"That Arkansas twister is looking better," Hubble said, inspecting the copy now emerging from the teletype. "The new lead says they got thirteen dead now." He waved the paper at Moon, looking mildly pleased with himself.

"It's still a long ways to Arkansas," Moon said. "Doesn't the city desk have anything better than the ski basin road yarn?"

Hubble described the local news menu without enthusiasm. A one-fatality car-truck collision, vandalism at an elementary school, a roundup on candidates in an upcoming city council election. Hubble yawned and waved away the rest of it.

Moon picked up his stack of Please Call slips. The top one was from Debbie: *Call me right away. It's an emergency.* Debbie's emergencies tended to such matters as being out of fingernail polish. This one probably had something to do with reminding him of her birthday, which was tomorrow. But he dialed her office number. Her answering machine kicked in, her sweet voice inviting him to leave a message.

"Debbie, how about—" he began. But Shirley was bearing down on him, and Shirley did not approve of Debbie. "I'm at the paper," he said. "I'll call later."

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Shirley handed him another Please Call note.

"I think it's your mother,"

"I'll bet it isn't," Moon said. Victoria Mathias did not make telephone calls. She communicated by letter, written in a neat, precise hand on socially correct stationery. Shirley's expression said she felt the kindness she'd shown by walking over with this message had been poorly received. "I mean it's *about* your mother," she said.

Shirley oversaw the telephone system and, unofficially, the office. She was old and tired and would have retired years ago if she didn't need the money. He felt a faint twinge of guilt at his mild rudeness. "Sorry," he said. "I'll call right away."

But the call-back number on the slip was not the number for Victoria Mathias. The area code was not Miami Beach. And the note read, *Pls. call Robt. Toland immediately in regards to your mother.*

Moon frowned. What the hell was this? He punched the button for an outside line and dialed.

"Thank you for calling Philippine Airlines. How may I direct your call?" It was the voice of a young woman pronouncing each word precisely.

"Philippine Airlines?" Moon asked.

"Yes, sir. This is Philippine Airlines." The tone had changed slightly to the one used for drunks, weirdos, and those who dial wrong numbers.

Moon swallowed his surprise. "Do you have a Mr. Robert Toland? My name is Malcolm Mathias. He left a call for me."

"Just a moment."

Moon listened to a telephone ringing.

"Security office," a man's voice said.

"Robert Toland, please," Moon said. Why would the security office—

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“Just a minute.”

Moon waited. No use thinking about this. No use speculating.

“Toland. What can I do for you?”

“I’m Malcolm Mathias,” Moon said. “I had a note to call you.”

There was the sound of paper shuffling.

“Mr. Mathias, your mother became ill this morning in the waiting room here. An ambulance was called, and she was taken to West Memorial Hospital.” Mr. Toland, having exhausted what was written on his paper, stopped talking.

“Ill?” Moon said. “How ill?”

“I don’t have that information,” Toland said.

“What was she doing in your waiting room?” Mathias asked. “Do you know who she was meeting?”

“She was preparing to board the flight. At least she had luggage checked onto the aircraft. Would you like to have the hospital number?”

Moon considered what he had been hearing. Victoria Mathias would not become ill in an airport waiting room. Nor would she be boarding an airplane. He laughed. “There’s been some sort of screwup,” he said. “I think you have the wrong person.”

“We take the next of kin from the passport,” Toland said. “Am I speaking to”—a pause—“are you Malcolm Thomas Mathias, *Morning Press-Register*, Durance, Colorado?”

“Yes,” Moon said. “I am.”

And he was, of course, Malcolm Thomas Mathias, managing editor for the past two years of the *Press-Register*. And that meant his mother had gotten her passport out of wherever she kept it, and found somebody to look after Morick in their Miami Beach apartment, and had gone out to the Miami International Airport and bought a ticket to

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fly somewhere on Philippines Airlines. Another thought occurred to Moon.

“Where are you?” he asked. “Where is this?”

“What do you mean?” Toland said. “It’s the airline security office.”

“At Miami International? I didn’t know Philippine Airlines . . .”

“LAX,” Toland said, sounding irritated. “Los Angeles International Airport.”

For some reason that made it all suddenly real to Moon. “She’s alive? Was it something serious?”

“All I know is what I already told you,” Toland said.

“What flight was it?” Moon said. “Where the hell was she going?”

“The flight goes to Honolulu, Manila, and Hong Kong,” Toland said. “I could go get her ticket and take a look.”

“Never mind,” Moon said. He knew where his mother would be going. Somewhere toward Southeast Asia. Somewhere toward where her bright and shining younger son had been burned to ashes in a broken helicopter.



SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 13 (UPI)—President Nguyen Van Thieu announced today that government control of the provisional capital of Xuan Loc had been reestablished in what he called a “resounding defeat of Communist forces.”

Yesterday Radio Hanoi had announced that Vietcong troops had captured the city, just 35 miles north of Saigon. Refugees pouring into the capital brought stories of bitter fighting between Communist tanks and ARVN paratroopers.

The Second Day

April 13, 1975

HIS MOTHER was asleep. No, she was unconscious. Comatose. Or perhaps sedated. She lay in a position which no sleeping person would naturally choose: flat on her back, legs extended straight and parallel under the sheet, arms extended tight to the torso.

A transparent tube emerged from plugs in her nostrils. Feeding her oxygen, Moon assumed. Four insulated wires from monitoring machines disappeared under Victoria Mathias’s white hospital gown. One terminated under a patch of tape high on his mother’s rib cage. Another tube