

Extract from *The Big Smoke*, by Jason Nahrung (Clan Destine Press, pending May 2015, pbk: 978-0-9942619-4-6)

Reece sat on his bunk while he ran through the files – print outs, easier to grasp, solid. But there was sweet FA about the Needle, his haunts, his known associates.

The air con was on the blink again, the barracks thick with body odour and stale socks. He tossed the papers back in their folder and took them with him to the rec room, where he ordered a beer before stepping out onto the balcony. The air was so still, the city sluggish, a cabbie below too tired to even honk at the car idling at a stale green light. He sat at a table, both it and the chair bolted to the floor. The only other people out – a couple, he behind her, pressing her to the rail as they took in the city view – soon left.

Below on the street, a tree itched with crickets, the racket reminding him of camping trips and the deafening scratch of cicadas, and at the family home too, trees thrumming with the noise of them, the sound of summer if ever there was one. Nights like this, he and his sister used to sleep on thin mattresses on the veranda, the unmoving, damp air thick with the reek of mosquito coils and the whine of the defiant bloodsuckers taking a chunk of foot and finger where the single sheet didn't cover. And his mother would be there, nightie wet and discoloured and clinging around her neck and chest as she rolled a cold stubby or tall glass across her forehead, depending on whether it was a beer or g&t time of day, and she'd tell them to get some sleep because the cool change was gonna come. They'd watch the storms charge down from the ranges like angry Apaches in a John Wayne film, all roiling and arrowful with lightning, hollering fit to make the house shake, and that cold, wet wind would charge ahead, chilling his puckered flesh like that of a chicken straight from the freezer. His mother would study the clouds with a knowing squint and pronounce it a bad one, "get the car under cover, there's hail in that one", the green rotten-meat glow announcing a front page tomorrow of gushing streets and suits huddled under uplifted newspapers and inside-out brollies and someone showing off a bucket of hail stones as big as golf balls or cricket balls, even.

Reece ran his stubby across his forehead, the cold shivering his skin and provoking a minor headache. There were clouds on the mountains and the air was thick with swamp heat and the city sweated, waiting for the cool change.

Gonna be a bad one, all right.

He flicked through the files again, careful to keep the papers away from the pool of condensation where the stubby had sat. They'd got sloppy, Newman and Petersen, more interested in stray fanny and big-noting themselves than doing their job; too reliant on the blood to reveal trouble in the making. But blood in Reece's world was after the fact; it was evidence. The Needle was a fucking phantom. The Needle was a master of disguise. The blood didn't lie, according to the vampires' mantra, but in his case it said nothing. Nothing at all. The biggest lie: the lie of omission.

Reece gathered up the papers and drained the stubby. Cast a last, resigned look over the railing at the waiting city.

Nothing for it but to hit the street and hope he got lucky.