

OLD  
MANUSCRIPT  
before  
Chicago style

# 1

Sometimes I'm called JR - that's short for Johnny Ropp. Been called Johnny ever since my Great Grandfather was alive. Back when I was learning to put one foot in front of the other - Grandmother called me JR - so my Great Grandfather wouldn't get confused. Couldn't see why he would - what with me being only three and short. It was Mother who named me after Great Grandfather. He was a surgeon in Sherman's Army on its march through Georgia - from Atlanta to the sea. Great Grandfather killed more Yankees with his surgeons knife than the rebels did with bullets. Maybe that's why he had more Confederate medals than Yankee ones. 'Course he said a Reb lieutenant gave them to him because he didn't saw off Johnny Reb's leg. Got called JR again in college - at The Ohio State University - because we had one too many Johns in our dorm.

Now I'm not too tall - or short - or fat - or thin. I'm about right-sized for a sod bustin' Ohio farm boy - with wide shoulders and little feet. Stand about five foot eight and hair? Kind-a sandy brown - sometimes blonde - depending on what time of year it is. Age? Well - when I left college I was barely twenty-one. Now turning twenty-one is important when you live in a State that can't make up its mind if its wet - or dry. Turn twenty-one in Ohio - you can buy six percent beer instead of three-two. And hard liquor - too if you have a taste for it - which I didn't. Not that I'd drink it anyway. Two whiskey sours and I'd upchuck supper.

Now - I'm not what you'd call your run-of-the-mill farm boy. Read one too many books in a dim lit attic. Gettin' smart kept me from being a pilot - not having twenty-twenty

vision. Didn't have a choice - bein' a Navigator or a pilot. And most pilots are so worried about their distant vision they won't read anything deeper than Black Beauty. As you can tell - I'm not short on conversation. When you spend half your life looking at the back end of sheep and the only one around to talk too is a Border collie - well - you catch my drift. Dogs listen all right, but like pilots they do have a short attention span and I wasn't cut out be a farmer. John Wayne was talking about farmers - not actors when he opined, "Talk low - talk slow and don't say too much." My bein' able to read made me a candidate for a BA degree in American Literature at The Ohio State University.

Spent most of my growin' up at our Scioto River farm in Concord Township - across from Bellpoint. A village so small - we didn't have enough boys in school to field a baseball team. Didn't take long for me to realize I didn't want to be a farmer. Ever spread manure on a meadow? On a hot - humid summer afternoon? And I didn't want to spend another spring near a barnyard when the ground thawed - ripe with a full load of hog manure. Whew-ee! That smell is strong enough to drop a turkey vulture out of the sky. And as much as I liked my Border collie - Ralph - I couldn't stand the smell of one more sheep. I could run away - join the circus or go to the university - all things being equal, but for me there was no other choice. The Ohio State University was my ticket out. Don't know why they insist on putting a The before Ohio. Not like we'd ever be mixed up with those cave dwellers way up north - just below the glaciers - in Ann Arbor.

Columbus - Ohio is an academic light year away from my farm and half-a world away from lonely night vigils along Korea's thirty-eighth parallel. My introduction to The Ohio State University life sure began on the wrong foot. I came in bright eyed and bushy tailed. Didn't take long for those who thought they were my betters to take me down a peg or

two. Might have been the bright red and white checkered sport coat I wore to Fraternity Rushing parties. Looked like a slick table cloth from a pizza parlor, but I thought it was hot stuff. Or - it could have been my stories about chasin' after sheep - or my tendency to voice an opinion when I should have kept my mouth shut. I was invited to come in by more than a few fraternities, but was never asked to join. Kind of enjoyed my new celebrity until I learned my pizza parlor sport coat and loose lips were the entertainment. So - I suffered through some loneliness - as an after effect of my instant celebrity and the finality of mistaken first impressions. However - like rain draining off the wool on my sheep's backs - snubs didn't get under my skin.

Got lucky - I was saved from becoming a total outsider by Air Force ROTC - those folks who wear a Post Office blue uniform. ROTC was called by those not keen on a North Korean vacation - The Registered Order Of Terrified Civilians. It stands for - Reserve Officers Training Corps. ROTC was more than just a haven for those of us with mediocre academics - huddlin' in fear of bein' called up for the Draft. For a sod bustin' sheepherder like me - ROTC meant: a job - friends and an occasional pay check. The Ohio State University had three - Army - Navy - or Air Force. I could walk - float or fly - a no brainer. I had enough walkin' behind my sheep and bein' on the skinny side - couldn't float worth a damn. I still had to march around in circles on The Ohio State University's parade grounds. Wasn't long before I traded my sheep for a sheepskin - graduated in the middle of my class and was on my way to flight training at Ellington Field - Texas - halfway between Houston and Galveston. My eyes were myopic and nearsighted - still not good enough to be a pilot. But - it didn't matter - pay was the same. Pilots move sticks around in circles and tap dance on rudders. Navigators? We get to ride free - sleep a lot and look studious - because most Navigators have read more'n one book.

God it was a cold and windy Midwestern winter day when I packed my gear into the back of my undertaker black Buick sedan. My four door 1949 Buick had portholes - four on each side of the hood and a well preserved paint job - shiny as a copper penny. I bade farewell to my family and sheep dog Ralph. He was at sixes and sevens since our sheep weren't around anymore. Soon as I trundled off to college - Father sold the whole lot. I gave one last wave at the end of the driveway and drove across the Scioto River to Bellpoint. Wasn't just crossin' over a river today - I was crossin' over from a life familiar to one unknown. I turned southwest on US 42 - driving through Amish country to Plain City. Stayed on 42 to the National Road - US 40. Spent most of the first day on US 40 to St. Louis. Scenery wasn't much to talk about - so I won't. St. Louis to Joplin was more of the same - dead grass and trees. I turned south at McAlester - Oklahoma and drove through Indian Territory toward Dallas. Saw more dead grass and damn few trees. When I entered Dallas the temperature had climbed up to comfortable, but the grass was still dead. And the thermometer kept on climbing to warm and humid all the way to Houston. Weather turned hot - humid - no wind at all drivin' south from Houston to the main gate of Ellington Air Field. I was in shirtsleeves while most Texans were wearin' jackets. Southeastern Texas humidity felt like early swamp to my skin, but seventy degree weather was a Blue Norther to Texicans.

I stopped at the main gate and asked for directions to Base Housing. It wasn't more than a block away. Looked like all the other buildings - another run-down temporary World War II barrack. A fat short tempered sergeant circled my new home in red on a base map. Not knowing what I was getting in too I asked, "Do you have a key?" "Key? Lieu-ten-nant you're going to live in temporary barracks. Key? Your room doesn't have locks." "Does it have air conditioning?" "Your air-conditioning consists of windows - open - or closed." He

was still laughing as I walked out the door. Chagrined - I paused by my car to get a better attitude. I looked around - grass was still dead - palm trees branches were green and I was in the Air Force. Couldn't figure out which was the most unusual. Wasn't grass. It was of the Bermuda variety. Goes dormant when nighttime temperatures drop below sixty. Had to be the Air Force - it took some getting used too. I followed my map to the barracks number circled in red. It wasn't better than a run-down shack, "Sergeant was right. My new home is better suited to sheep than people."

Inside my new home was a cubicle open at top and bottom with a desk - metal storage cabinet - dresser and very small bed - a cross between a cot and a crib. And as advertised - no door and air-conditioning? Open windows. No door was a good idea as one would block air flow. I began to stow away what little gear I had when my first visitor arrived through a large hole in the middle of my window screen. A female mosquito large enough to carry passengers. She buzzed to a three point landing on the middle of my desk and began to eye me like I was dinner - so I left her alone.

As I closed the dresser drawer on the last item from my suitcase - another visitor stuck his head through my cubicle opening. I looked up at a gapped tooth smile in the middle of a round head - sorta' like Charlie Brown. A life sized version of that oversized cherub who graces the cover of Mad magazine. I sat there with my mouth open - staring at him and he leaned against the cubicle opening - smiling. His smile grew and kept on growing until it disappeared around the corners of his cheeks. He stuck out his hand - breaking the spell, "I'm Tucker Tubbs from upstate New York. I live in the next cubicle - if you can call this living. Call me Tuck. Where are you from?" "I'm Johnny Ropp from a place you've never heard of - a small village named Bellpoint - on the Scioto River north of Columbus - Ohio." Tucker stood

there smilin' - leanin' on a stick with a small net on the end. I asked, "What is it?" He held it out so I could see, "You mean this? It's a lacrosse stick. I was Captain of my team at Syracuse." "Thought only Indians played it." "They do and we do. Lacrosse is big time back east." "I'll take your word for it." "Interested in dinner?" "Sure am." "Best place is the Cadet mess hall. Food's about the same as dorm food. We can eat as much as we can hold and it's a whole lot cheaper than the Officer's Club." "Wait until I finish here - find the head and wash up." "Are you building a model airplane or is that a mosquito?" "She's a big one isn't she? Thought I'd keep her as a pet. Might call her Moe." Tucker brought his lacrosse stick down on top of her with a flick of his wrist, "There ain't no Moe." He walked out, "Stop by when you're ready."

I finished hanging the few uniforms I had inside my metal cabinet - placed my empty suitcase on the bottom and walked to the latrine to wash up. I noticed a healthy growth of green around the base of the appliances, but it was better than an outhouse back home. When I returned - Tucker was sitting amid a stack of clothes - desperately in need of laundering - scattered around his room. His clothing was on top of the dresser - desk - arm chair and cabinet. I shook my head, "Damn - Tuck - looks like a cyclone whistled through your room. How long have you been here?" "This is my third day. Notice - I cleaned my cubicle today. Missin' a sock and baseball cap. Let me know if you find them." "Where did you get your arm chair?" "Out of your cubicle. Pays to arrive early. Ready to head over to the Cadet mess hall? My stomach clock went off an hour ago." "Lead the way - I'll follow." "Do you know when we have to report in?" "Base theater tomorrow morning at eight a.m. for greetings and orientation." "Know what it's about?" "Not certain. Should be what we can expect from them and what they will expect from us." "Johnny - before I forget - I'm having one of

those newfangled things called a hi-fi delivered tomorrow evening. Hope you like to listen to bag pipes - penny whistles and drums." "As long as you keep the volume down. We'll have to burn the midnight oil if we're goin' to earn Navigator wings." "You may burn away, but not me. Nothing to flying if you follow the book and know what you're doing - which I do." "What did you major in?" "Journalism - going to be a high paid editor one of these days. The first prerequisite for an editor is - don't do more than needs to be done. Cadet mess hall is dead ahead."

This Cadet mess hall gave new meaning to bland. The chicken - the cook plopped down on my tray - was flat as road kill and nowhere near as tender. The mashed potatoes were slick with butter and rancid with cooking oil grease. The green beans were overcooked - tasted like silage fermentin' over wintertime in the bottom of our farm silo. Topping this gourmet feast was a cherry on top chocolate cake - so burnt on the bottom - charcoal overpowered the chocolate icing. I ate a little off the top of my chicken - stayin' away from the tire tracks and loaded up with ice cream. Knew the mess hall cooks couldn't burn vanilla - though they might have tried. There were oven directions on the outside of the ice cream barrel. Tucker? He ate everything that didn't move and went back for more. I knew one thing for sure - wasn't a gourmet restaurant anywhere near upstate New York. Tucker pointed his fork at my cake, "You gonna' eat that?" "You can have it." I handed it to him and watched as the crumbs disappeared. I noticed that the cadets were separated from us by a wooden planter full of artificial flowers. I waited for Tucker to wipe away the crumbs before asking, "Why aren't we sitting with the cadets?" "Commandant doesn't want us anywhere near them. We're the first all officer class in his Nav school. He's afraid one will contaminate the other, but he's not sure which. I'm stuffed. Want to see a movie this evening?" "Not tonight - I'm in the middle of another

Michener novel and I'm tired. Think I'll read awhile and hit the sack early. Been on the road to Houston for three days - it's catchin' up with me." "I'm rested. There's a Luigi cowboy flick at the Base Theater. Gonna' take it in. If you're asleep when I come back - wake me up in the morning - so I don't miss breakfast." "Six thirty early enough for you?" Tucker didn't answer - just grimaced.

Next morning - I tried to wake Tucker up before going to the latrine to brush my teeth, but his only response was a moan. When I returned - he wouldn't budge. I gave one more try, but Tucker wasn't about to get up and I wasn't about to waste time, "I'll save you a seat at the mess hall." Outside - this early winter morning was - sunny - pleasant. Today's cool humid air was a whole lot better than yesterday's heat. I was beginning to adjust. The mess hall breakfast wasn't bad - not bad at all. Cooking eggs over easy - with pancakes - fit the skill levels of the morning chef. Syrup was hot, but not maple. Couldn't figure out what it was. Didn't run off like our syrup at home - soaked right through to the pancakes core. Bacon can be overcooked or undercooked. My strips were neither. Tucker arrived late - knocking chairs out of his way to get to the breakfast line. Filled his tray to the brim with everything in sight - including grits. Between bites he gave me a running review of last night's movie, "You should have gone. It was great - a real cowboy classic. Lips moved in Italian - words came out - out of synch - in English with no emotion and the translation made no sense at all. All-in-all a memory worth sharing. What do you think they'll do to us at orientation?" I glanced at my watch, "They'll try to scare us into toeing the party line." Tucker looked puzzled - so I added, "That's the Air Force way of making us work and obey orders." "Fine with me - since they sign my paycheck." "Every day in the Air Force is like Sunday on the farm." "How so?" "No heavy lifting and there's the aroma of bullshit in the air."

With Tucker demolishing mess hall food - we arrived late and had to sit down front - four rows back from the podium. Our class filled all, but a few seats in the front. After we were seated - doors closed - lights dimmed and a spot shined on stage left. A tall - thickset - graying at the temples - lieutenant colonel strode to the center of the stage - with the spot trailing behind. When he spat out, "Attention" - we all snapped too. He looked left - then right - then center, "I'm The Base Commander." Words came out like The Ohio State University - making no sense at all - as if there were two more Base Commanders around. He let us absorb that pearl of wisdom before saying, "I'm a py-lut and none of you myopic bastards will ever - ever be one of us - God's chosen few. You got problems - take it to your instructor. If he can't handle it - the Commandant, but never and I mean never - visit me. I don't ever want to see one of you four eyed bastards outside my door." Tucker gave me dig and whispered with a grin, "He likes us." The Base Commander scratched his ass - then his nose with the same finger and frowned at us, "I won't take any questions. I pray to God that I never see one of you weak eyed bastards again."

Our Base Commander left as he came in - walking fast - exiting stage left with the spot trailing behind. We were still standing at Attention two minutes later - when another lieutenant colonel walked in from stage right. The house lights came up. He was younger - closer to my height and didn't seem as uptight. He motioned for us to sit down, "At ease - gentlemen. I'm your Commandant. I want everyone of you to know that even though I'm a Command Fighter Pilot and consider you potential funny wings nothin' more than excess baggage - I'll give you a fair shake. Follow the chain of command - keep your noses clean - stay out of jail - work hard and graduate. You're our first class of officers and to be honest - we haven't changed our curriculum from the one we use for Aviation cadets. So - you'll march to retreat and

attend orientation lectures just like our Cadets. Stay away from them. We have several classes yet to graduate and I'll stand for no interference with their training and discipline. Welcome aboard - gentlemen. If you want to earn funny wings - you play ball with me and I'll play ball with you. Does anyone have a question?"

I sensed that Tucker was about to move. I looked over at my cherub friend with a gapped tooth grin and whispered, "Don't do it." But - his eyes were glazed over. Tucker was on his feet before I could pull him back down, "Sir!" The Commandant looked down into the middle of a mass of sweating gold bars - searchin' for the wise-ass who called out. No one had ever spoken up before, "We have a question from a brown bar in the fourth row. Go ahead lieutenant." Tucker began to grin - a smile almost as large as when I first met him. He spoke up for all to hear, "Sir - don't you mean - you play ball with me and I'll shove the bat up your ass?" The Base Theater grew silent - silent as a vacuum bottle when its air is sucked out. The Commandant frowned and then began to smile. A rustle of anticipation stirred in each theater seat - waiting for the wrath of the Air Force to descend on Tucker. The Commandant spoke softly, "That will be all gentlemen - except for you - yes - you lieutenant with the silly looking grin on your face. See me after formation. The rest of you are dismissed." A voice from down front shouted, "Ten-Hut!" We all stood up at once - our theater seats banging against the backs. Tucker - with his ever present what me worry grin - strolled to the podium. It's not in my nature to watch as another human being is tortured or humiliated - so it was not a difficult decision for me not to go forward with a condemned man. Believing our Commandant would tear a new opening in Tucker's posterior - I walked outside and waited at the front entrance - certain that Tucker was going to get his for being such a smart ass. I was so nervous - I bummed a cigarette and a light.

I puffed and waited - and puffed and waited - before Tucker strolled out through the exit with a wink and a nod - frowning at my cigarette smoke, "Didn't know you were a smoker." "Only when I'm nervous. How did it go?" "Guess who is a hi-fi nut?" "The Commandant?" "You betchum Red Rider. You know - for an illiterate pilot - he's not all that bad." "You sure like to live on the edge." "I'm a cat with nine lives." "Tucker - that's a nautical phrase - a reference to the cat-O-nine tails." "You mean the one bos'n's flailed sailors' backs with?" "Yes, but if we use your meaning - you'll only have eight lives remaining at Nav School. You just used your first one with the Commandant this morning. And his first impression of you couldn't have been a good one. I'd use your remaining lives sparingly." Tucker took the cigarette out of my fingers and stomped it out, "Eight lives are enough to get me through this school. Commandant said the Base Commander doesn't hate us - he's just upset at being turned down to return to fly single engine jets. He's taking it out on us." "Now that shows a lot of maturity on his part. With us as an outlet for his hostility - he won't have to kick his dog."

We whiled away the rest of the morning standing in line - waiting for our navigation equipment and flying gear. Our flight suits looked like farm bib overalls - with zippers instead of a row of buttons. My wool lined leather flying jacket smelled of sheep - a bit too close to a sheep farm for my liking. After lunch - we reported to our first class. We were taught in small groups called Flights of twelve or so men each. Besides Tucker and me - there was Roger the lodger - Mart the smart - Red the temperamental - Oscar D and others who were just as crazy. We began Navigation Training at the beginning - studying how to fly from point A to point B - without getting lost. Right off - Tucker proceeded to follow a path ~~into~~ that would lead him into a land of the hopelessly lost. Tucker spent most of his time staring off into space -

at the ceiling - or out the window. His mind was either in neutral - out of gear - or in another world. With Tucker it was hard to tell which.

When we returned to our barrack - Tucker had two large crates waiting inside his cubicle. He let out a whoop, "My new hi-fi has arrived." He tried to open it, "Damn - it's sealed with metal bands and I don't have a single tool. Do you have a hammer and screwdriver?" "In the trunk of my car. I'm hungry. Let's go to the Cadet mess." "Nah - I want to put my hi-fi system together. I'll walk with you out to your car." I loaned Tucker a hammer and screwdriver from my tool kit and walked to the Cadet mess hall. Tonight's meal was a carbon copy of last night. Another gourmet feast of road kill and burnt cake. I returned to find Tucker sitting on his bed watching The Commandant hook up his hi-fi system. He looked up with a more than usual wide eyed smile, "Come on in. Almost have it ready to go." "No thanks. My weakest subject is math and we have a test scheduled at the end of the week. With an analog mind in a digital world - I'll need all the help I can get."

Thirty minutes later the screeching of bagpipes and thumping of drums from Tuck's cubicle jolted me out of my chair. Either the British had invaded - or Tucker and The Commandant had connected all of the right wires. Tuck stuck his head inside my cubicle, "The Commandant and I are going to the O' Club for dinner to celebrate. Want to join us?" "No thank you. Mess hall fried chicken is swelling up inside my stomach like a chunk of marinated mutton. Need to get a leg up on my studies or I'll fall behind. Didn't expect this much math." I looked over my notes from our afternoon class. Before I would be allowed to fly our first training mission - I had a ton of technical stuff to learn. Basic Navigation covered Dead Reckoning - which is a Nav's way of saying, "I compute therefore I am." We had to learn to compute and know

the difference between airspeed - ground speed - drift - true heading and true course. All of which were used to discover where an airplane was - where it's going - the direction it should take and how soon it will arrive. Basic Navigation isn't all that complicated - except there are no highways to follow or road signs in the sky. I was getting the hang of it when my thoughts were interrupted by Burl Ives singin' folk music from Tucker's room. I called over, "What did you do with The Commandant?" "His wife tracked him to the O' Club bar and hauled him home." "Are you ready for the math they're throwing at us?" "Math? No one told me I'd be studying math." "Navigation is all math. Keep your music down. I'm going to burn midnight oil." "Roger that - math? I'm in big trouble."

Tucker may not know an algebraic sign, but he did know his limitations - and he was in trouble. Navigation math wasn't easy for a literal literary mind and the school made it more complicated than it should be. At the beginning of each morning class - our instructor rolled in a blackboard on which was painted a version of a basic navigation log. At the top of each vertical column he would chalk in titles - like TRUE HEADING - DRIFT - TRUE COURSE - AIRSPEED - WIND AND VELOCITY - GROUND SPEED - LOCATION - etc. and each morning he would move these columns about. Plus became minus and minus became plus. By the end of the second week we were all confused and Tucker? He was confused beyond redemption. He sat there - staring at the columns without comprehension - his eyes glazed over. Before our first examination - I asked, "Are you still having trouble with math?" "Sure am - didn't know it would be this confusing. Just when I think I've got it our instructor moves another column." "You just lost another one of your lives." "How many do I have left?" "Seven - Tucker - seven." "Can you help?" "No - I'm hanging on by my fingernails. But - I know who can." "Who?" "Mart the smart. If you'll listen to him and you'll pass."

When the test scores were posted for Basic Navigation - I couldn't believe my eyes. Not only did Tucker pass - he was right below Mart the smart - near the top of our Flight. I thought I saw his eyes wandering toward every answer sheet within his field of view, but I couldn't be sure. Before the first training flight - we all took turns drilling Tucker on how to use his equipment. This turned into an exercise in futility. Although he tried very hard - Tucker was unable to comprehend abstract concepts of time - distance and motion. Now Tucker isn't what you would call a dunce. He possessed a well honed literary mind - with a firm grip on synonyms - semantics and the Pentateuch. Unfortunately - none of this knowledge was useful for navigation. In spite of Tucker's shortcomings - we were ready for our first training flight - in the twin engine T-29.

Now - the T-29 is a training aircraft. Took two days for Tucker to understand what the T stood for. United still had a few of these Convair birds flying short haul passenger routes. It was safe - durable and slow. So slow that geese would fly by - wondering why it wasn't catching up and flying formation. You won't find the T-29 listed in aviation books - because it was used to train Navigators - not pilots. It had two propellers - a round stubby body and enough desks to train a flock of students. Our T-29s were configured for beginning - or advanced training. The beginning ones had a limited amount of equipment. Not more than twenty student positions. Each position had a table - intercom - compass and airspeed indicator. Toward the aft were five drift meters. Tucker had no problem using his table. He laid his head down on it and slept. However - drift meters were beyond his comprehension. Our drift meters had a periscopic scope looking down - not up - magnifying an object on the ground. When we viewed a stationary object - like a building - and measured the amount of time it took to pass across the drift meter's grid - we derived ground speed. To do this -

we had to turn a knob on the side of the drift meter to synchronize the grid with aircraft heading. The reading on this knob provided drift. With heading - drift and ground speed - we could determine airspeed - true course and all that stuff we used to navigate. This was straightforward. Tucker's problem was there were two switches on the side of the drift meter - one labeled Gyro and the other Heat. One was used to stabilize the gyro - the other was for heat in cold weather. We didn't need the second switch in Houston. If you turned it on and left it on - sure as Texas moonshine - heat would burn out the gyro. And along came Tucker - who was unable to differentiate between the switches.

At the end of our first training flight - Tucker left a trail of burnt out drift meters. And he would have destroyed the last remaining one if Roger the lodger hadn't tripped him. Roger was pissed, "Tuck - I've been elected by our Flight to tell you that we're going to give you your own personal drift meter. That's the good news. The bad news is - if you touch one of the others - we're gonna toss you overboard." Tucker brushed himself off, "That's not fair." I spoke up, "Okay - if you burn out yours - I'll give you have access to mine, but I control the switches. So you won't get screwed up - your drift meter is the one farthest aft." "Is that to the back?" I had to laugh, "You don't know what aft means?" "Is it the pointy end or the blunt one?" "The blunt end. You just lost another life." "No problem - I have plenty - six more to go."

As sure as spring follows winter - Tucker burned out his personal drift meter on each training flight. And if that wasn't enough - he didn't have the foggiest where we were - where our airplane was going or when it would arrive. He did have one small chunk of luck. He was never selected as Lead Navigator. As Lead provides directions to the pilot - no telling where we would have wound up. Tucker was at sixes

and sevens. The more he failed to understand the basic tenants of navigation - the more hyperactive he became. He overcame his lack of comprehension with a flurry of activity - runnin' the aircraft aisle - scatterin' maps - papers and pencils in his wake. I tried to calm him down, "Tuck - slow down - don't confuse motion for work. If you do - you just lost another one of your cat lives." "Not a problem - four down - with five more to go."

It was a warm - almost a spring-like day when we boarded our T-29 before daylight for our Basic Navigation air exam. The odds against Tucker passing had risen so high - even Las Vegas wouldn't post them. None of this bothered Tucker. He sat aft in his private - blunt end section seat - a paper back novel in hand. As the sun rose over the left wing of our T-29 - we climbed upward in a slow turn to the north - toward Dallas. After level off - I finished my first drift meter reading and looked aft - to check on Tucker. His head was in his arms on the table - fast asleep. I returned to my seat - filled out my log and forgot all about Tucker. As the sun rose - our March day turned hot and clear - typical in Texas. Even at eight thousand feet - sweat rolled down our backs and into our eyes. We slaved away - working at warp speed - attempting to keep up with a slow moving airplane. I forgot all about Sleeping Beauty. When we were halfway to Dallas - I glanced back. Tucker was leaning back in his chair - feet up on the table - a novel in his hand - dust cover still on his personal drift meter. After we turned - heading back to Houston from Dallas - I took time to walk aft and talk to Tucker. I spoke over the noise of our two prop engines, "Tuck - how are you doing?" "Great - I'm halfway through." "Our flight exam?" "No - my novel." "Think you'll pass?" "No problem. This flight is a piece of cake." "You haven't taken the dust cover off of your drift meter." "Don't need too - navigation is a piece of cake." I left Tucker with his novel - shaking my head, "No way Tucker is

going to pass." I had barely enough time to finish a set of computations before it was time to begin another and Tucker - was reading a novel. As we turned on final approach to land at Ellington Field - I finished my last computation - checked over my log for errors - walked forward and turned my log and map in to our instructor. Tucker shuffled down the aisle - nonchalant like - carryin' his like it was a manuscript. I glanced over at his log - wondering what he had accomplished. His log was completed in ink - a flawless masterpiece with flourishes and scrolls - enough to make a Benedictine Monk jealous. I questioned Tucker as we walked down the steps, "Did your drift meter work?" "Don't know. Didn't take the dust cover off." "How in the world were you able to complete your log? Everytime I looked back you were asleep or reading a novel." "It's easy with cunning - patience and a quill pen. Beginning Navigation is a piece of cake."

The next morning before class began - we checked the bulletin board outside the administration building to see if we had passed. I scored ninety points out of a hundred and stood just above the middle of our flight. And Tucker? His score was posted at the top of the page - separated from the rest of us - a perfect one hundred - three points higher than the next grade. I turned to Tucker in disbelief, "How in the world did you pass with a perfect score?" "Beginning Nav is a piece of cake - if you follow the textbook. Discovered we were flying to Dallas just like the sample log in our text. So - I copied it the night before - all but the times. I filled them in as we flew. As luck would have it - our winds were identical. Nice piece of work if I do say so myself. Most times - it's better to look good at what you're doing than to be good at it. Notice how perfect my log was and in ink - too." I had to laugh, "Looked like a monastic scribe copied it. Sorry - I'm going to take away another one of cat lives. According to my calculations - you only have four left." "More than enough to graduate."

As we entered the classroom everyone in our Flight stood up and we all gave Tucker three cheers. His face turned red as a beet as he walked toward his desk. He whispered over to Roger the lodger, "Will Map Reading be this easy?" "Should be - that's what pilots use when they lose their electronic aids. If a pilot can do it - anyone can." Tucker nudged me with his elbow and whispered, "Sure hope the roads are marked." "What do you mean?" "How can we tell them apart without signs?" I didn't have the heart to tell him signs would be impossible to read from several miles away and ten thousand feet up, "Don't worry about road signs. You won't need 'em. Map reading isn't that hard. We're not talking rocket science. Use the dead reckoning techniques we learned in Beginning Navigation to find approximate aircraft location and compare that position with what you see on the ground. Place a triangular fix on your map when you make a match. With two fixes you can compute distance - ground speed - and true course. We derive drift and true heading using that information." Tucker looked puzzled, "Fix? What's a fix?" "You're airplane has arrived at a fixed point - or location." "Sure there aren't any needles involved?" "Different kind of fix." Tucker had that blank look on his face, "Okay, but where are the road signs?" "There are no highways in the sky. You won't find road signs up there either. Do you remember what an ETA is?" "No." "We used it in the course you just aced. It means estimated time of arrival to the next navigation position or destination. Tucker - if you can't understand simple terminology - you're not long for Nav school." Tucker moaned, "I know - I know. I've only got three cat lives left."

Our electronics class almost washed both of us out. Not much call for this type of training in college - when our majors were American Literature and Journalism. We both passed by the skin of our teeth - after retaking the tests. After squeaking by the final exam - our instructor took us

aside, "Lieutenant Ropp and you too - Lieutenant Tubbs - listen up. I want both of you to promise me that you will never apply for an advanced course that begins with an E or an R." Tucker wouldn't let a straight line like that pass without a smart-ass remark. With a wide cherubic grin he asked, "Do you mean euthenics and religion?" Our instructor wasn't buying his humor, "No you dingbat. I mean electronic countermeasures or radar. Ropp - what did you do for a living before you graced our Air Force with your presence?" "I was a farm boy before I went off to college." "Not the kind of background we expect flyin' the line. But - you've probably spread more than one load of manure. If you don't buy the farm - you'll probably wind up at the Pentagon." He was laughing at his own sense of humor when he turned toward Tucker, "Don't say a word. I know what you were - the male model for the muppet on the cover of Mad Magazine. Remember what I told you both of you." He walked away chuckling to himself, "E and R."

As we walked to the Cadet mess hall - Tucker was jumping up and down - barely able to contain himself, "A sod buster - Johnny your a sod buster and probably a sheepherder - too." Having learned my lesson at Ohio State - I had not discussed my sheep with any of my classmates. Tucker must have sensed the truth - so I attempted a diversion, "That's why I round up strays like you." "Roger that - you're more like a sheep dog than a farm boy." Knowing I couldn't win - I changed the subject, "We both escaped electronics by the skin of our teeth. How many lives do you have left?" Tucker looked skyward, "I used up another one. Looks like I have only two cat live left in my pocket. Doesn't look good."

Tucker had a mental black out every time he looked at a map. He couldn't relate what he saw on the ground to towns on his map. He had a blank look when our instructor asked, "Lieutenant Tubbs. Please tell the rest of your Flight what

color the Red River is on your map?" Now - this is fairly standard stuff. Even on a road map - terrain is shaded brown to green depending on elevation. Small towns are black dots and larger cities - yellow. Highways are black for local and red for interstate. Rivers - lakes - lagoons and oceans are blue. Tucker - as proud as a peacock - thought he was asked a question he knew - answered, "Why that would be red - Sir." Laughter bubbled up from our Flight and grew until even our instructor joined in. Tucker didn't have to give up another life for this elementary error, but his reprieve was short lived. Map reading was to be his Waterloo - though it was a snap course for the rest of our Flight. And it would have been a breeze for Tucker if it hadn't been for the Lieutenant in charge of mess halls.

Tucker lacked basic navigation skills. To compound his problems - almost all log entries were made directly on the map. His textbook sample was now useless. After a brief ground school and three weeks of flight training - we were ready for our flight exam. As usual - Tucker - with the wandering eyes - was near the top of the Flight on our ground exam. And with a lot of help - it looked like he might pass our flight check. And he would have if one of our training flights had not been scrubbed due to maintenance problems. To make up this flight - two missions were scheduled on the same day - a training flight to Dayton and our flight exam on the way back to Houston. Our morning flight to Ohio was error free for everyone - including Tucker. Towns stuck out like zits on a teenagers forehead. On our flight back to Houston - everyone was on the same sheet of music except our evaluator. As luck would have it we drew one who had passed Nav training, but failed the instructor course. Deemed too incompetent to fly the line - he was placed in charge of mess halls where he again demonstrated his incompetence. To prevent a revolt among our enlisted troops - he became the manager of the Cadet mess hall.

We walked to the admin porch after breakfast and checked the bulletin board for our grades, but they were not posted. When we gathered inside the classroom - our Flight was still buzzing - wonderin' why our grades weren't up. Shortly after eight o'clock - The Commandant walked in. As we stood up and snapped to attention - he raised his hand, "At ease. You're probably wondering why I'm here and why your grades weren't posted this morning. According to your evaluator - all of you failed. Our Wing Navigator checked the pilot's map and log. Looks like our Cadet mess hall manager was in error. We know you were in the right, but we have an unwritten rule here. Right or wrong - your instructor is always right. There is no remedy for an incompetent evaluator." Tucker stood up, "Is this where the bat comes in?" The Commandant couldn't help himself - he doubled up in laughter. With tears forming in his eyes he asked, "Is there a second question? Look guys - I know this doesn't sit right with you. When it comes to navigation - our Wing Navigator has the final say and he won't allow a pilot's map to be used to grade your mission. It's a matter of pride. The best I can do for you is let you retake your Map Reading check ride without prejudice."

When we stepped outside for coffee during the morning break - Tucker was livid, "Damnit Johnny - I had it made. No tellin' where they'll send us tomorrow." "You're right. Bet the powers that be send us west to desolation. At least we won't draw the same evaluator." "What happened?" "He's been removed from flight status. I guess this mistake was the last straw. And they ran a preliminary inspection of his accounts at the Cadet mess hall. Looks like he screwed those up - too." Mart the smart walked over, "Guess where we're flying?" I answered, "West to nowhere." "Right you are - San Angelo - Texas and back." Tucker looked down at his shoe tops, "There's nothing out there 'cept mesquite trees - water tanks and rattlesnakes." Mart the smart laughed, "What do

you expect. The powers that be are going to extract their pound of flesh." Tucker's eyes opened wide, "Even though they were wrong?" Mart nodded, "Especially since they were wrong. No institution likes to admit they made a mistake." "Who's our evaluator?" "The Wing Navigator." Tucker looked crestfallen, "I'm a dead man!"

Except for a glimpse of Austin on the horizon - towns along the way were as scarce as hens teeth. Identifying terrain features was not easy. A seven year drought had left dry creek beds and brown vegetation. Hoping that motion would save him - Tucker ran the aisle - scattering a paper storm in his wake. Without a sound Basic Navigation background - Tucker was in way over his head. He was fifty miles off course when we turned over nowhere West Texas and headed back to Houston. The Wing Navigator kept a close eye on all of us. Wandering eyes were not going to help Tucker today. After we landed - Tucker questioned all of us to see if we had all seen the same landmarks from the air. With a sigh - Tucker seemed resigned to his fate. The good news was - we all ate a hearty meal at the Cadet mess hall. With new management dinner was better than ever. Even brought Tucker's spirits up.

When we checked our grades in the morning - Tucker was the only failure - with a grade so low it was on a separate page. He was pulled out of our class - to mission plan for his recheck. I looked for Tucker after class let out for lunch and found him in the next classroom - all by himself. I tried to cheer him up, "Look Tuck - we'll all pitch in and help you get ready for your check ride." "Won't do any good. The Wing Navigator is my evaluator and I have to fly it by myself." "You'll be Lead?" "Roger that. I'll have to give directions to the pilots. Johnny - I'm a dead man. If I fail will they give me another chance?" "As you said to the Commandant - bend over - here comes the bat. You remember

the sign over Purgatory in Dante's Inferno?" "Give up all hope - ye who enter here?" "Tucker - you only have one life to give to your Country."

We did all we could do to help Tucker that evening. He flew his recheck early the next day. His flight plan called for a trip to Laredo - Texas and back. Another flight over desolation - to nowhere - a disaster from start to finish - which occurred near the halfway point. The Wing Navigator took control when Tucker tried to steer their T-29 over parts of Mexico that had never seen an airplane. I waited for Tucker at Base Operations. He hopped off the back end of the crew truck all smiles. I was surprised. Tucker was up - not down in the dumps, "Did you pass?" "Not likely - but even our pilots said they had never been to Del Rio, Texas before. When we almost flew over Acuna, Mexico - the Wing Navigator took control. Sure is a nervous fellow. He jumped up and down and yelled a lot at me for being lost. I calmed him down when I told him I wasn't. Hell - I knew where we were. We were over the Southwestern half of the United States. Any fool would've known that." "Looks like you've used up cat life number nine." "Yeah, but it was fun while it lasted. I'm just not cut out to be a Navigator. Better to wash out before I kill someone. Where do you think they'll send me?" "Your background is Journalism. Should be something that involves writing or editing." "Commandant was one of our pilots. Offered to buy me a beer at Happy Hour. Want to come along?" "Roger that." "I need a shower and we should change into civvies. Doesn't want his pilot buddies to know he has Navigator friends."

The Commandant was waiting in the bar when we walked in. He greeted Tucker like a long lost friend. "You know - Tuck - I'm going to miss you. Won't be the same here without your wit and wisdom." I left Tucker and the Commandant in their cups at the O' Club bar. One beer was my limit and it isn't

much fun watching two grown men get wobbly legged. With a new Mess Officer - Cadet mess hall food was looking up. The Mess Sergeant found a surplus of funds after his boss was fired and rewarded us by cooking steak. Tucker didn't show up in our barracks that night - or the next - or the next. We looked everywhere, but couldn't find a sign of him. His clothes were still scattered about his cubicle as well as his sports equipment. And his new hi-fi was gathering dust in the corner. I checked with administration and all they would say was, "Lieutenant Tucker has been reassigned. Nav School policy was to remove failures immediately. Three weeks went by before we received a letter postmarked Cheyenne - Wyoming. It was from Tucker. Our mystery was solved -

*Johnny, how the hell are you? I'm fine. At supply school in Cheyenne. My household goods should have been here by now. Check with Base Transportation and see if you can find out where they're at. I'm at the top of my class in this school. Forms are so complicated - no one understands them. Remember the Cadet mess hall troop? He's in my class and am I ever getting even. Don't forget to check on my gear. Don't want to lose my new hi-fi. Keep in touch,*

*Tucker*

I couldn't believe Tucker. He certainly marched to the beat of a different drummer. I could follow his thinking and that worried me a bit. U S Air Force sent him to Wyoming - so they must have enough sense to send his gear. An idea that might look right to anyone unfamiliar with the military. And there was no one alive more unfamiliar than Tucker. I checked with Base Transportation and discovered it would take

a ton of paperwork and months to ship Tucker's gear north. I would have to jump through more hoops than I cared to - or had time for. It took a bit of doing, but I was able to convince our Flight to chip in and send Tucker's gear the quick way - by civilian air freight. I Scotch taped a note inside the top of Tucker's hi-fi -

*Tucker,*

*You - like your allegorical cat - may have lost all nine of your lives, but now - you're the cat that's out of the bag. Remember what the Cheshire-Cat told Alice when she said, "But I don't want to go out among mad people," Alice remarked. "Oh you can't help that," said the Cat: we're all mad here." We'll meet again and when we do, you owe us all a beer for bailing you out - again. Keep on - keepin' on,*

*Johnny*

Tucker's place was taken by Charles M. Line - liked to be called - Main Line. A dyed-in-the-wool rebel from South Carolina - a proud graduate of The Citadel and crazy as a March Hare. And as the Cheshire-Cat reminded Alice when she wanted to know -

*"How do you know I'm mad?"  
"You must be," said the Cat,  
"or you wouldn't have come here."*

## 2

Main Line is  $180^{\circ}$  - a direct opposite of Tucker Tubbs. Military life and Tuck were like oil and water. A proud graduate of the premier military school of the south - Main Line was a conivin' student of the military mind. He came from a spit and polish bastion - The Citadel and was drilled in military thought by some of the best - ramrod up the ass military minds ever to wear uniforms. Main Line was able to develop a certain familiarity - that lets one slide around sharp - uniformed military corners without scrapping a knee. Now - he wasn't a stuffy stiff neck tin soldier. Main Line suffered through his share of disciplinary hell. Marching the Quad alone - he was the proud holder of a Citadel record for punishment tours. Main Line had one glaring fault. He was always looking for short cuts where there weren't any. And that's why he washed back into our Flight. Too late - Main Line discovered there were no short cuts in Daylight Celestial Navigation.

Our Celestial Navigation training class was mostly about my dreaded nemesis - mathematics - necessary to track the movements of our closest star - the sun. We were taught to use a hand held aeronautical sextant that measured elevation - or altitude of stars and planets. We aimed our sextant at the sun - turned a black collimation knob to center a small bubble and captured the sun inside. This procedure measured altitude. Converting this observation with dreaded math - we derived a sun line to draw on our maps. When we combined sun line with Basic Navigation data - we arrived at our aircraft position. Transferring a sun line to the map was technically called drawing a line of position - or LOP. I wasn't able to understand the mathematical mechanics of Celestial - so I

learned how to do it by rote. And it worked - as long as there were no glitches. Main Line understood the mechanics - but didn't care for the rote - which is why he washed back to our class. If he paid as much attention to math as he did to his quest - we would never have met. He and Oscar D were on a quest - to follow Telephone Road from Ellington Field to the last Texas roadhouse - north of Houston - seeking two or more beers in each stop along the way. They began their quest in late winter - moving along at a two roadhouses a night clip - when Oscar D convinced Main Line to return to their first stop - a roadhouse called Trails End.

Any Texas city worth its salt - considerin' itself civilized - has either a Telephone or Telegraph Road. Roads dug out of Texas dust and mud at the turn of the century - were used as paths to assist in stringing wires. As a result - many a roadhouse cowboy bar popped up along these byways -like mushrooms in a swamp. And on occasion - maybe one or two real cowboys, but mostly a pack of wannabes. Trouble began one late holiday afternoon. Main Line and Oscar D returned to their favorite waterin' hole - Trails End. It was the first - or last - dependin' on your direction - bar on Telephone Road and first among equals in barroom brawls. Oscar D - a west Texas graduate of Texas A&M - that premier military college of the Southwest - was a smooth talking long drink of water, but mostly he chose to remain quiet. One of the few real cowboys in these parts - Oscar D had underlying mean - kept in check - never knowin' when he might go out of control. Mostly he'd agitate Main Line into poppin' off for sport - or something to do when he was tired of reading - or bored - lookin' for action.

Oscar D - well over six feet tall - had sandy blonde hair with bushy eyebrows of the same hue. Now - Main Line wasn't a tall one. He was two inches taller than me - wiry - like a terrier dog in a fight. His hair was always slicked

back - sort of reddish - muddled brown. Bushy eyebrows were mostly the same. What Main Line lacked in speed - he made up in quickness. Never could figure out how direct opposites were such fast friends. And Main Line would need a friend today - April 21st - that most sacred of all Texas holidays - San Jacinto Day!

San Jacinto Day commemorates Sam Houston' Texican army's victory over Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna Mejican Army. The victory was not won because of Santa Anna's dalliance with Yellow Rose - as some lead us believe in song and tale. It was - as Main Line insisted - because this battle was fought alongside the San Jacinto River. After a few too many beers in Trails End - Main Line asked the nearest Texan, "Do you know why all the stores closed today?" As luck would have it - Main Line had discovered one of the few real cowboys in Trails End. He glanced over at Main Line and frowned, "You don't know what day it is? Damn - you must be a Damn-Yankee. Son - it's Texas Independence day - San Jacinto Day. And it's time for a Yankee jackass like you to stand up and toast the great state of Texas." Main Line just sat there with a silly grin on his face. The cowboy's voice got real low and mean, "Get on your feet or I'll knock that silly smile off your face." Not bein' too smart - Main Line stood up with his own stupid smile - displaying that he was not afraid of anyone or anything - after two beers. He climbed up on his bar stool and raised his long neck bottle of Lone Star beer - turned toward the cowboy - pointed his beer bottle - raising his voice - so all could hear, "Here's to the great state of Texas and to the dirtiest bunch of scoundrels ever fought a river battle. And here's to our great Yankee friend and Union sympathizer - Sam Houston. And here's to Houston's victorious army. Santa Anna had Sam Houston's boys backed up against the San Jacinto River. Our brave Texans had only one choice - fight or take a bath - and we all know Texans would rather fight than take a bath." Main Line downed his beer

and sat back down. Oscar D - sensing trouble - began to rise. Dumbfounded by Main Line's sacrilege - the cowboy rose slowly from his stool and turned toward Main Line, "Friend - no one and no Damn-Yankee will ever say nasty things about Sam Houston and Texans and live."

Main Line slipped the first punch and ducked under the table. Trails End erupted with a whole lot of arm waving - shoving and threatening words. Before things got too far out of hand and a real melee began - Oscar D stepped in and saved the day. Using his best west Texas drawl - he spoke softly, "First - Main Line here is no Damn-Yankee. Second - he's a proud South Carolina Johnny Reb and a might hot tempered. Third - Main Line's not familiar with Texas' manners and the reverence we hold for Sam Houston and his victory at San Jacinto. If you'll accept his apology - Main Line will buy you all a beer." As Texas bar fights go - this one was over before it began - piddling. Didn't last long and no real damage was done. Now - Oscar D wouldn't normally stop such a promising fight, but he felt obligated too - since he was the one who insisted on going to Trails End. Besides - he was familiar with the rough and tumble ways of Texas' roadhouses. It was still early in the afternoon and no one was really drunk enough to brawl. However - in an hour - or two - after a few more beers - no one could've stopped this one.

On their way out - Oscar D whispered to Main Line, "You better not rile up any more Texas natives if you want to complete your quest. We have thirty miles of bars to go and damned little time. If you're not careful - we'll be out of Nav School before we can finish." "Damn - didn't know it was that far. We're only half way. I promise to keep my warped sense of humor under control. Anyway - at twenty-five cents a beer - I'll be broke if I have to buy a round af beer at each roadhouse. If we increase to three roadhouses a night - we just might make it."

One hot muggy Friday night in late April - Oscar D and Main Line talked me into coming along. Oscar D sat there with a sly smile as Main Line worked on me, "Come along with us - Johnny. You've never been inside a Texas roadhouse. Got to be a national treasure. All they sell is beer and wine. If you want hard stuff - you'll have to bring your own bottle. Not worth it. They charge an arm and a leg for water and ice. Why do that? When we can buy Lone Star beer for a quarter - no one in their right mind would pay fifty cents for water? Put your books away and come along." I wasn't all that eager. I was trying to save money to buy a new car and after listening to Oscar D spin tales about their nightly trips - didn't look like a good idea. I finally gave in, "It's against my better judgment, but if you two promise to bring me back and not abandon me - I'll go along." I knew I wasn't much of a drinker. Couldn't afford to be one at Ohio State - so I didn't have much opportunity to practice. I soon discovered my brush with a beer or two wasn't enough to prepare me for a Friday night out with two unpredictable friends.

Our first stop was at Sam's Shack for barbecue and beer. From the outside it looked like our smokehouse on the farm - just before it fell down. Now the inside was a different story. Only thing wasn't solid mahogany was sawdust on the floor. At the top of Sam's menu was a proclamation -

*Best Damn Barbecue in Texas  
and  
Texas Barbecue is the Best in the World.*

Main Line - weaned on South Carolina barbecue - in a state with borders represented by barbecue sauce instead of counties - begged to differ. He climbed all over Oscar D,

"Beef barbecue? Best in the world? Bull shit! And mesquite wood for smoke and flavor? You've got to be kiddin' me - mesquite? Some kind of west Texas weed? Only real barbecue is South Carolina pork - smoked over a hickory and oak fire - pulled apart by hand. Any fool off the street can cook beef over a mesquite weed." I could see smoke comin' out of Oscar D's ears. Main Line had stepped way over the line. Bad mouthin' San Jacinto was bad enough, but Texas barbecue? There are three taboos in Texas. One - you don't steal another man's horse. Two - you don't mess around with a woman who's been spoken for. And Three - you don't bad mouth Texas barbecue - and live.

Oscar D was up on his feet with as mean a-lookin' scowl I'd ever seen. He got right in Main Line's face - eyes narrowin', "Line - one more word out of your mouth and you won't have any teeth left to enjoy the best damn barbecue in the world. You better keep your opinions about Texas and our barbecue to yourself. Folks down here don't take kindly to an eastern poppycock puttin' down the world's best damn beef barbecue. Criticize Texas barbecue? Why - you might as well kick my dog and make nasty comments about my Mother." Main Line didn't say a word - just sat there with a silly grin on his face. He'd done his damage - now it was time for him to stay quiet.

I chewed at a beef barbecue sandwich so hot and spicy - smoke came out of my nose and water from my eyes. Downed half-a schooner of beer just to put the fire out. I started to say I liked it, but before one word came out - Oscar D's eyes began to get narrow again. He set his schooner of beer down, "Better not say anything bad. Can't abide with a poisonous nut bad mouthin' Texas barbecue." I knew when to back off, "Never had South Carolina barbecue, but if Main Line's is half as good as this - I'll be more than happy to give it a try." "Main Line - listen to Johnny. He knows.

You came close to needin' a Plastic Surgeon. You owe Johhny and me a beer." No sooner said than three twenty-two ounce schooners of beer slid the length of the bar. Mine stopped in front of two bulging eyes. Oscar D got the bartender's attention, "Another barbecue sandwich for my Buckeye friend and don't spare the hot sauce." So - I needed one more beer to quench a Texas barbecue stomach fire.

Sixty-six ounces of beer and I was feeling no pain. By the time Oscar D pulled into the Tiger Cat Bar's parking lot I was sound asleep in his back seat. Later - I'm sure Main Line asked, "Should we wake him up?" A West Texas drawl replied, "Let him sleep. Better lock the doors so no one can roll him." My eyes were half open as a Saturday morning sun crawled inch by inch on a slow journey across the back seat of Oscar D's car. I had met my match - sixty-six ounces of beer and two barbecue sandwiches. I checked my watch. The big hand was on thirty and the little hand was on six. I lifted my head and looked out the back window. I was alone - in an empty parking lot - in back of the Tiger Cat Bar. As I sat up - the pounding at my temples began. I reached over the front seat - unlocked the drivers side door and located Oscar D's car keys under the floor mat, "At least I won't have to walk back to the Air Base. No use waiting - my friends must have found Texas true love last night." Oscar D's car made more than a few trips south on Telephone Road to Ellington Field - so I aimed it down the highway and prayed - desperately in need of aspirin. When I walked into our barracks - didn't bother looking for two lost sheep - knew they wouldn't be there. Found two aspirin and headed toward the latrine for a shower - shave and relief. Stood in the shower for a good twenty minutes - water cascading on my head. Wasn't long before the pounding diminished. I dressed and walked to the Cadet mess. Aspirin needed company. Took one look at scrambled eggs and almost upchucked the aspirin. Good news - I discovered what grits were good for.

Walked out our barracks's front door - on my way to Monday morning breakfast at the Cadet mess hall and a red convertible braked to a halt. Main Line and Oscar D hopped out the right side rear door like Lazarus from his grave. I took a second look - Lazarus would've looked a lot younger than these two. As the convertible sped away - Oscar D asked, "Still have my car keys?" "Of course. They're on top your dresser. Where did you spend the last three nights?" "Got lucky." "I almost phoned the sheriff." Main Line came back from the dead, "Guess who we ran into?" "I'm a stranger in these parts. I haven't the foggiest, but let me guess - Tucker?" "Close - we met up two of his ladies at Tiger's. A couple of his old girl friends." Oscar D spoke up, "With an extra emphasis on - old. Had to be in their late thirties, but we didn't know that until the sun came up in Galveston. They're both past winners of the Miss Congeniality award." "What do they do for a living - bar girls?" "Nah - TTA stewardesses." "TTA?" "Trans Texas Airlines. The way they worshipped old Tucker - he must have been a wonder horse. No wonder he washed out. He not only burnt the candle at both ends - he lit the middle." My stomach clock went off, "I'm starved. Meet you at the Cadet mess hall. I have one more question to ask."

Oscar D and Main Line brought their trays over to my table thirty minutes later. I checked to see what they were carrying, "Only grits - toast and tomato juice? And four glasses each?" Oscar D grunted as he sat down, "If you could see the inside of my stomach - you'd understand." "The way you look on the outside - well - I'll pass. Why didn't you wake me. Talk about waking up in a strange country." "Only had two dates and they had their own car. A herd of wild elephants could have stampeded through the back seat and you'd still be asleep. Looked like Rip Van Winkle without the beard." "Were you in Galveston?" "Roger that. Tucker's ladies stopped by the barracks so we could pick up our

bathing suits for a midnight swim in the Gulf." "You two had quite a California style weekend." Main Line wiped his chin after his second glass, "More like a lost weekend." "And you lost a day of your quest." Oscar D laughed, "Line has decided to call it quits." "How come?" "When we woke up late Saturday morning - his lady friend circled three times before she got back in bed." Main Line propped his head up with his left hand, "You should talk. I had to cover my watch every time your lady walked by." They suffered through the rest of their breakfast in silence - except for one or two barely audible groans.

Turned out that Oscar D was correct in his assessment of Main Line. He was certainly a reformed bar hopper, but as a team they still ran fast and loose. On one of their forays they discovered the swimming pool at Houston's Shamrock Hilton hotel. Even for Texas it was giant sized. So large - when the Shamrock's private bottle club - The Cork Club - held their yearly bash on the first of May - they celebrated by floating a good sized yacht on the deep end. Main Line had a deal we couldn't refuse. Officers from Ellington Field were allowed the use of the pool at a deep discount. I asked, "What's the catch?" "None that I know of." Oscar D cleared his throat, "Houston's elite wants their daughters to meet up with Officers and gentlemen. But it's a win-win situation. Can't be a better place in town to meet wealthy young ladies and Houston has more than its fair share." Main Line was ready to go, "We can hoist a few beers - enjoy the sun - cool off in a world class pool and enjoy the view. Grab your suits and lets go."

I was more than game. I'd hit the books so hard my eyes were crossed. And the Shamrock ladies had to be a cut above the ones we'd met in Texas roadhouses. The size of the pool took my breath away. It was Olympic, but the diving boards and platforms were something else. Hadn't seen anything like

this set of boards since I tried the ones in Ohio State's natatorium - two high boards - two low ones and a high and middle platform. On my first trip up the ladder to the high platform I chickened out. Came down the ladder backwards to the middle platform and looked out over the edge. It was still too high for my liking, but I was committed. Couldn't back out twice. I backed off and took a short run - sailed through the air for what seemed to me to be an eternity. Got lucky when I parted the water with my hands - a clean entry, but it almost knocked me out. Getting turned around - well that took a lot more time than I expected. When I reached bottom - I crouched down near the center drain and pushed off - clawing my way back to the surface. Swam over to the far side of the pool - away from the hotel and sputtered to Main Line, "Worst part is comin' back up. Want to give it a try?" "Not now. I've got my eye on that young lovely sunnin' over there on the grass." Oscar D shook his head, "No - I've broke horses to saddle - ridden bulls and done a lot of crazy things, but jumping off a tower isn't one of them. You go ahead and kill yourself. I'll pull you out after you knock yourself silly. My objective is to dunk myself in this pool once or twice - drink a few beers and meet a nice young Texas lady - not jump around like a monkey on a string."

Main Line jumped in and swam under water until he was even with the target of his attention. Conversation didn't last long. He dove back in and surfaced next to us. Oscar D was impatient, "Not many ladies at the pool today - Line. How did you do with yours?" He shook the water out of his hair, "Almost a waste of time. She attends the University of Texas Nursing school in Galveston. Bad news is I spent all that time hustlin' her only to find out she's engaged. The good news is she gave me her phone number at school. She'll introduce us to a few of her friends this evening. What do you think?" I said "It's a long drive. Should we give it a go?" Oscar D perked up, "I'll go, but not Johnny. If we get

lucky - six in a car is a crowd." "We'll drive down after dinner. She'll have everything arranged by seven." "Line - one word of caution. Most of those little ladies have big - mean Texas brothers who'd just as soon kick your teeth in as look at you. So - we better not get caught messin' around. Need to be on our best behavior. Johnny - you don't mind not comin' along - do you?" I wasn't about to say so if I did and after spending one night in a parking lot - I wasn't about to be a two-time loser. Didn't take much to convince me. Main Line's idea of a good time was to rile up bar flies and cowboys and Oscar D went along for entertainment. I promised Roger the lodger I'd go with him to a Church social in Houston. You two go on ahead. If you find a lady that doesn't circle three times before she sits down - fix me up. Roger the lodger and I can double date next time if need be." Oscar D smiled, "So - you're going to that Church social Roger. Be careful - besides the Shamrock - our Texas churches and Universities are where our classy young ladies hang out."

When I walked in the barracks a little after midnight, Oscar D and Main Line were still up, "How was the Texas School of Nursing? You two look mighty sober for a Sunday morning." Main Line answered, "Not exactly what I expected. Didn't even go out on a date." Oscar D added, "Turned out to be a real proper Texas parlor introduction visit." "Yeah - we got introduced and that was all there was to it. I played the piano and they served tea. Talk about Victorian. They wouldn't walk out the door with us - not until we finished our social obligation." "Line means they won't go out the front door until after formal introductions. We're all set for next Saturday night. We fixed you and Roger up - too, but we have to telephone first. School is running a check on all of us." "What does my date look like? Is she like Tucker's TTA girl friends?" Oscar D took me aside, "Take a look at Line's watch. It's still ticking. Rest assured - we

met four good looking Texas ladies - nice and proper. They're all winners. How did your Church social go?" "Not bad. We met quite a few nice Texas girls, but there wasn't any spark. Most of them were a bit young for us. What's the age of consent in Texas?" Oscar D raised his eyebrows, "If you have to ask - they're too young."

Our days at Nav School were flying by like a T-29 at full throttle. Unlike west Texas landmarks - the sun was easy to find - though Main Line made a few false sightings. The sun's reflection in our sextant mirrors would at times produce a false image. When we took a false reading - our Line Of Position would be two counties over on the map. Dead reckoning - using Basic Navigation techniques - would resolve the problem - if you had confidence in your work - which Main Line didn't. Like Tucker - Main Line believed motion was work. He ran the Aircraft's aisle - leaving a trail of papers in his wake. Must have worked. We all passed with better than average grades. Oscar D let the air out of our balloons, "If you can't find the sun - you're looking in the sextant from the wrong end. We all have dates in Galveston Saturday. I called and we passed the Nursing School's security check. We can kill two birds with one stone. An afternoon picnic on Galveston Beach will make a great first date and we'll hold our Flight picnic at the same time. We need some diversion before we tackle Night Celestial. I nominate Line to take charge of our picnic." Main Line demonstrated he had the right stuff to be a flag officer, "Great idea. Since I'm in charge I'm going to delegate all the work. Sam's Shack will prepare the main course. Oscar D will pick up a keg - Johnny will get the ice - Roger the lodger chips and pretzels and those that have wives can make potato salad - coleslaw and dessert."

Roger the lodger rode with me as we trailed behind Oscar D's car on our way to the Nursing School. As usual we were

running late. Main Line and Oscar D had hung a doozy on at Sam's when they stopped by to pick up the barbecue beef Friday night. If Sam hadn't packed it in dry ice - most of the bacteria in Texas would have been feasting on the world's best barbecue. Roger was fidgeting in my front passenger seat. "What's the matter - is my driving making you nervous? You're as jumpy as my sheep were when they follow a Judas goat into the meat packing house." "Sorry - didn't think it would show. I'm not at all keen about going out on a blind date." "Oscar D gave his word. These Texas ladies are winners." I thought a bit and then a light came on, "Don't tell me. Tucker fixed you up - too." "How did you guess?" "I've been down the same path." "We had a small picnic with two TTA stewardesses at Galveston Beach before he left." "Were they older - around thirty-five or so?" "No - they were in their early twenties. Everything went well - at first - though they did seem a bit standoffish. We built a fire - cooked steaks - poured a little wine. A pleasant time - watching the evening sun go down. Tucker and I went behind a dune to take a whiz and when we returned our dates were walking away - hand in hand into the evening twilight. We waited for over an hour, but they never came back." "Did Tucker explain why?" "No - just gave me one of his Mad Comic Book smiles and asked if I wanted to meet a girl over at the Houston Country Club." "So that's how I got roped into my blind date. You turned him down." "Once is enough. Just out of curiosity - how did it go?" "Unbelievable! Begged me to go along since he didn't have a car. His was in the shop getting an engine overhaul. Seems he drove it with the oil a mite too low and you know Tucker." "Probably didn't know where the dip stick was." "You got it. I drove north of the Shamrock on streets lined with the biggest houses I'd ever seen. Turned on a tree lined road that looked like it was right out of Gone With the Wind. Must have been half-a-mile long. Pulled up in front of a huge mansion. Must have had forty rooms and pillars - larger than the ones at Monticello.

I was awestruck. A doorman opened our car doors and a butler greeted us at the top of the steps. He ushered us into the foyer. Tucker's date descended a circular staircase to a polished marble floor. That lady was gorgeous - a knockout. Couldn't help thinking - this was going to be a great night. She gave me a million dollar smile and said, How 'wah woo - right out of Elmer Fudd in Loony Tunes. Took all my control to hold back my laughter - it was so out of place. Good thing I didn't. She is the nicest most considerate lady I've ever met." "You'd go for her?" "In a New York minute and not for the money, but she wasn't interested." "Tucker would do well to stay in touch." "Our free spirit?" "I forgot. Go on. That can't be all of it." "Wish it was. We left her place and drove east to pick up my date." "Big house?" "A long - long way from that. We turned on a dirt road behind a drive-in movie into a trailer park. Couldn't see the movie from behind the screen." "How was she?" "Good looking - smart and articulate - with raging hormones." "Sounds like a winner to me." "The first words out of her mouth were, 'I shouldn't be going out with you.' I asked her what the problem was. She said, 'I was married yesterday.' I asked, 'Where is your husband?' She said, 'Up in Texarkana bringing back furniture for our new house.'" "Did you take her out?" "I was stuck - had no choice. That damn Tucker was rollin' around on my back seat floor - laughin' so hard he almost wet his pants. We took in a Luigi flick and stopped by the Shamrock afterwards for a drink. She was all over me, but all I could think of was Oscar D's warning." "What was that?" "It's legal to shoot anyone in Texas caught messin' around with your wife or girl. I dropped her off when she asked me to sleep over. Tucker's date stayed with her. She gave him a proper peck on the cheek and sent us on our way." "In spite of what Tucker did to you and me - we're going to miss that rascal." "He sure kept things stirred up. I never did hear from that trailer lady again." "Give her your phone number?" "Are you kiddin'?"

I pulled up to the front of the entrance of the Texas School of Nursing, but couldn't find a parking place. While I drove around - looking on a side street - Roger went inside the dorm with Oscar D and Main Line. When I sauntered into the lobby - Main Line was entertaining a crowd of pretty young ladies with a short Beethoven classical selection. Damn - he was good - played a flawless rendition of Fur Elise. The room was so quiet I could hear water running from the toilets above. I was impressed, "Main Line you have a hidden talent." Always hard for him to take a compliment - he whispered, "Great way to pick up ladies. I prefer Scott Joplin, but these ladies like the classics. Ragtime can really get down after a few beers in the bar." "Impressed me and the ladies coming down the stairs. Are those our dates?" "Roger that. Not bad - eh?" Roger the lodger whistled under his breath, "Things are looking up." After introductions - I asked my date, "Did you bring along a swim suit?" "Wearing it under my dress." I breathed a sigh of relief. Back home in Ohio - we had to wait until summer to find out what our girls really looked like. Texas had its good points.

Oscar D had purchased a keg of what San Antonio called ladies beer - Pearl Light. Supposed to be less fattening, but it tasted like Ohio three-two beer to me - watered down. We built a fire on the beach before splashing in the Gulf. No one stayed in long. Gulf water was still too cold from winter. We drank and ate and drank some more. We talked of college days and flying. Our dates talked of nursing - medicine and doctors. They were great fun to be with, but we had nothing in common. I didn't feel a spark - nor did Roger. With nothing in common - I knew how an alien must feel after being stranded on a strange planet. I didn't even talk Texan. We all promised to see each other soon, but none of us did. The nurses were looking for commitment and we were just looking around. On our way back to Ellington - Roger asked, "Going out with her again?" I shrugged, "Had

fun, but I didn't get that jolt of electricity. You know, the one that makes you tingle all over and sparks fly. I don't want to waste her time or mine. How about you?" "I don't know. At least they didn't walk off into the sunset holdin' hands." "And they weren't married the night before." We were still laughing next morning at breakfast.

Thoughts about ladies took a back seat to Nav School. Night Celestial arrived on our classroom scene like heavy - hazy Houston shipping channel fog in early spring. In Day Celestial we had to contend with one star - our Sun. Now - we had to locate three stars - sight them separately through our sextant - determine their average altitudes over two minutes of sighting - resolve the time difference of our sightings and compute three Lines Of Position. When we drew these LOPs on our maps the intersection would - hopefully - show our aircraft position inside a small triangle. That is - if everything goes right - which seldom ever happens. Our T-29 bounced through the night sky like a pickup truck on a dirt road and the bubble in our sextants danced around performing a nighttime version of Saint Vitus' dance. As a result - our LOP triangles were large enough to place a fist inside them. Night Celestial was the harbinger of tough times ahead - but life does have its ups - too. Sometimes the fox eats the chicken. Sometimes all he gets is feathers. We finally got a taste of chicken - our Air Base Orientation classes were canceled.

The demise began when Roger the lodger embarrassed the folks at the Base Legal Office. A pre-law student - he discovered the forms they were using were either out of date or in error. And last week - Mart the smart mortified the entire Base Engineering office. On a smelly field trip to the new sewage plant - he noticed the rocks they installed - as filters - were the wrong size. When the Base Commander decided that we didn't know enough about how an Air Field

operates - he failed to take into account our wide variety of civilian career backgrounds. We had electrical engineers - civil engineers - a chef - law students - bar tender and one sod buster - me - among others. Visiting the sewage plant had to be the last straw. I was still kicking stones about it being a waste of time when Mart the smart took exception, "For the rest of you it's a waste of time, but for me it's a labor of love." Oscar D got that sly west Texas grin on his face, "You got to be kiddin' me. A sewage plant? Come on - Mart. Why in the world would you want to visit one?" "Might seem strange to you, but this is right up my alley. It's a brand new plant. State of the art. I can't wait to take a look at it."

The sewage engineer in charge was proud as a peacock as he walked us around his brand spanking new plant, "This is the latest in sewage systems and we have it right here at Ellington Field. We are way ahead of any other community in Texas." I was able to see the humor of it, but I couldn't see its relevance to Nav Training, "By the smell of it - looks like the Base Commander wanted us to visit here - so we could better understand where he's coming from." Main Line jumped right in, "From the crap he's been giving us - he sure knows how to spread this stuff around." Mart the smart's eyes grew large as saucers when we toured the sludge storage area and filter system. I could tell he was getting pretty excited. He pulled the Base Engineer aside, "Excuse me - Sir. Did you know that the rocks in your filter system are the wrong size?" "How the hell would you know?" "I have a degree in sanitary engineering from Manhattan College." It was the Engineers turn to get wide eyed, "Are you sure?" "Sorry - I have to inform you - they're too large." "What should we do?" "How long have you been operating?" "Lets see - about three months." "Are you at full capacity?" "About sixty percent." "Divert your flow to Houston and replace them as soon as possible or you'll have a real mess

on your hands." The Engineer took Mart aside and dismissed the rest of us. Mart stayed on until late in the evening. He was a no show at the Cadet mess hall.

The next morning - posted on the administration bulletin board -

## *Air Base Orientation Is Canceled*

### *By Order Of The Base Commander*

Replacing the sewage plant rocks cost the Air Force over one hundred thousand dollars. This wasn't pocket change when funds weren't wasted on personnel - quarters or comfort. Not when it took every nickel to buy gas - weapons and airplanes. The notice stood alone. No explanation was given or offered. Oscar D was upset. Our next scheduled visit was to the Base Contracts Office - which was his specialty. Our Chef wanted to go over the mess hall books and Main line was looking forward to checking liquor purchases at the Officer's Club. Seems he had a wholesale liquor license. The Base Commander had ruined their fun. I wasn't a bit sorry. There wasn't one damn sheep on this base. I Chided Main Line, "It looks like your chance to be an auditor is not in the stars, but Deneb - Dubhe and Dallas are."

These two stars and a Texas city are a student Nav's mantra. I knew what Tucker would have said when he heard this alliteration, "Dubhe? Isn't that a Sinatra refrain - Dooby Dooby Do?" Dallas is the city that almost did Main Line in on his check-ride. Main Line had a habit of looking out our T-29's windows for a map reading fix on whatever town was handy. He worked his Celestial computations backwards from that fix. Oscar D got all over his case, "Line. You're the one stupidest Johnny Reb I've ever known. It's twice as difficult to back a three star fix in as to do it the right

way." "I know, but I can find Dallas - that's easy, but when I look through my sextant and try to find a star - I can't. They all look alike in that small field of view." I offered to help, "Star identification is easy once you learn a crutch or two." "For a night loving sheep herder like you - maybe, but not for me. I've tried everything I know and nothing works. I'll have the star pattern identified when I look out the dome. When I return to sight the star in my sextant - I lose it." "There might be a way. Let me think about it."

I was at home under the stars. When you're out all night tending sheep there's not much else to do. I'd lean back in the meadow - making sure I didn't lay on any sheep stuff and map the stars in the sky. Weren't any city lights to block out the sky - so I was able to memorize most of the northern constellations. My weakness was math. Learning how to do it by the book saved me, but any deviation from my routine would grind my mental gears to a halt. Deviation always came in distraction. And distraction was Main Line's middle name. He would run the aisle - scattering papers in his wake - screaming, "Where the hell is Dubhe?" And Oscar D would always answer, "Up in the sky - you dingbat!" To make sure we would all pass - without Main Line dragging us down I taught him how to identify Orion's Belt - the North Star [Polaris] and how to shoot the moon. He found Deneb - Dubhe and Dallas all by himself. We all sneaked through by the skin of our teeth after Oscar D convinced us to give Main Line - like Tucker - his very own astrodome and stay out of his way. It worked - too, but staying out of the Harris County Sheriff's Posse's line of fire wasn't as easy as staying away from a wild bull - Main Line.

Our T-29 had just taxied into its parking spot after we completed our Night Celestial flight exam. Most of our flight was gathered out front of the aircraft - so those who chose to smoke could - without igniting the fuel vapors. We

were waiting on Main Line to finish backing in his last fix with one eye open for the canvas backed six-by to transport us to Base Ops. Out of nowhere - a beat up 1953 Caddie whistled by on four flat tires with a juke box sticking out of its trunk. A minute later - a flock of new Cadillacs flew by with deputies hanging out the windows firing whatever weapon they had in the general direction of the '53 Caddie. It screeched to a halt and two scared men jumped out with their hands in the air. The Posse Cadillacs stopped in a semicircle - facing the two felons. Car doors opened and we heard, "Stop or I'll shoot!" in unison by a dozen or so Deputies - followed by gunfire. Both felons hit the ground as bullets whistled over where they were standing.

Oscar D lit a cigarette and took a drag, "Johnny - you have just witnessed justice - Texas style." I was so nervous I bummed a cigarette from him, "Who are those guys and where did they come from?" "Texas citizen volunteers. That's the Harris County's Sheriff's Posse. They're all deputized and have police radios in their cars. The two they were chasing must have stolen that juke box. Shouldn't have. Not much entertainment around here. Has to be right up there with stealing another man's wife or kickin' his dog." "That's a bit of overkill isn't it? A dozen or so Cadillacs chasin' after one car with a stolen jukebox." "Not much to do around here after football and huntin' season. Keeps our good old boys from pointing their guns at each other. Those two picked the wrong place and the wrong time to do their thieving. They did have a little luck - though. This Posse shot high and we got lucky - too. Weren't none of our T-29s in their line of fire."

About that time - Main Line climbed down out of the airplane, "What the hell is going on out here. Whatever it was it sure helped me. Diverted our evaluator's attention. I was able to finish backing in my last fix." Oscar D

laughed, "Line - why don't you just flunk and get it over with." "What and give up flight pay? What happened out here? Sounded like a war going on." "Nothing more than a bit of justice - Texas style." A canvas backed six-by pulled up to take us to Base Ops and drowned out all conversation. On our way to Base Ops - I asked Main Line, "How did it go?" "Until the gunfire erupted - our evaluator kept grabbing at my map and logs - trying to get them away from me. He said I was cheatin' and he'll probably be up all night trying to prove it."

We had two things to buzz about after breakfast - our grades weren't posted and last night's shoot-out. Oscar D asked, "Guess where they stole the jukebox from?" "I don't know. Trails End?" "Not even close. The Base roller-skating rink. Couldn't pry the coin box open - so they loaded it into their trunk. If they had driven out the Main Gate at normal speed the Air Police wouldn't have noticed. APs estimated their Caddie was doing a hundred when it flew by their shack. They called the Sheriff and his Posse caught up with them before they were out of the county. Pretty hard to hide with a jukebox sticking out of your trunk. Thieves hightailed it back to Ellington with the Posse in pursuit - a real western shoot-out. Came back the way they left - except for the four flat tires. They were motivated. Didn't want to wind up in the Sheriff's lockup." "What happens to them now?" "They're both in the Air Force and the crime occurred on Federal property. Probably wind up in a military prison." "Leavenworth - that's pretty stiff." "True, but doin' time there is a whole lot easier than being black and doin' time in a Texas jail."

Our Grades were posted after lunch. Oscar D read them to us as we were walking up. He turned, "Line - yours is on the bottom - incomplete with a note. You're supposed to go over to admin and visit the Commandant." Main Line turned

white as a sheet and disappeared through the administration building's front door - like a cat caught with a canary in its mouth. He walked into our afternoon class with a droopy hound dog look on his face. Oscar D whispered, "Line - tell us what happened." Our instructor looked up, "Welcome back - Lieutenant Line. What did the Commandant have to say?" "I have to fly another check-ride." During break - Oscar D said, "Fess up - Line. What really happened?" "My three star fixes were too perfect. Couldn't prove I cheated - so they couldn't fail me, but they wouldn't pass me - either." "You're caught right between the rock and the hard place, but you're better at math than any of us. It's time for Johnny to give you a refresher course on star identification. We'll get you through." "You better - they're sending me out to Tuckerville - west by God Texas. Not a town in sight and you can't find water tanks after dark." "When do you fly it?" "Tonight." "Better learn to pray."

I helped Main Line pick out the stars he was going to use and he pre-comped as much as he was able to do. But he was still a negative and reluctant student. Like Tucker he was going to fly alone and in the dark. When Main Line returned from his flight - he crashed through our barracks like a wounded deer - trying to wake us up, but we would have none of his chatter tonight. He was the last one in the sack and the first one up. He banged on my cubicle an hour before I normally rise, "Wake up sod buster. It's my big day." "It's yours - not mine. Go on ahead. I'll catch up." "Wake up Oscar D on your way. I couldn't get anything, but moans." I didn't have any more luck with Oscar D than Main Line. He wouldn't move - just pulled a pillow over his head. Main Line was on his fourth cup of coffee when I pulled a chair up to his table. "Damnit Johnny - I'm too nervous to eat a thing, but grits and butter. I stopped by the administration building and my grades weren't posted." "It's dark out. Maybe by noon. How did your flight go?" "I found every last

one of those stars you coached me on. Flying lead cut into my time, but you know - by not backing my fixes in - I had time on my hands. Only problem was - when I resolved the fixes on my map - both my hands fit in one - my fist in the other and the smallest one was still bigger than a silver dollar." "Did the evaluator take control of your airplane?" "No." "You did all right." "I'm going to the administration building to see if my grade is posted." "The sun's just now on the horizon. Relax - eat some solid food." "Nah - can't sit still until I find out how I did. See you in class." Oscar D came in as Main Line went out the door, "Line looks nervous as an alley cat in a room full of rocking chairs. How do you think he did?" "He passed."

As we walked into our classroom - Oscar D called to Main Line, "How did you do?" "Don't know - wasn't posted." About that time our instructor walked in, "Lieutenant Line - our Commandant wants to see you on the double." Main Line broke into a visible nervous sweat as he hurried out the door. He came back an hour later grinning from ear to ear. At the break - everyone crowded around. Oscar D asked, "You look like a Cheshire-Cat. Did you pass?" "Commandant asked me how I could max the course on my first flight test and come up average on the second one. I told him I avoided being perfect because I didn't want to be accused of cheating again. He let the first grade stand. I've danced around the flag pole and I'm not washed out. There's free shrimp at the O Club Happy Hour this evening. The first round of beer is on me." I shook my head, "If that happened to one of us - we'd be on our way to Supply School. I hope you know that beer is half price at the O Club this evening." "That's why I offered." "Is that all the Commandant had to say?" "No. He told me, "Lieutenant - anyone who can back a fix in as good as you can is going to make one hell of a navigator. Next time around - use the periscopic sextant. It has a limited field of view - fewer stars to confuse you."

Main Line bought the first round as we made short work of several good sized bowls of peel and eat shrimp. Oscar D looked around the bar, "Not a single - eligible woman in the whole damn place. Pool doesn't close at the Shamrock until ten. We've got four hours. Lets grab our suits and make tracks." I looked over at Roger the lodger, "Better take two cars. I'll drive." "I'm game." "Don't want to be stuck out in the country when the wild bunch decides to take off." "Line - I'll follow Oscar D's car. You buying at the Shamrock?" "The O Club was my one time good deal and that offer is over." I thought a bit before saying -

*"The rule is - jam tomorrow and jam yesterday  
- but never jam today."*

Roger the lodger smiled, "Quoting Alice again - aren't you. The way Line does his computations - remember what the Queen told Alice -

*"It's a poor memory that only works backwards."*

# 3

Couldn't be a better place in Houston for an early evening swim than the Shamrock Hotel pool, but not tonight. Except for the four of us - it was empty. Oscar D picked up his towel and pointed toward the men's locker, "Don't mind us being the only swimmers, but beer's fifty cents. A little steep for my pocket book. Now don't get me wrong. I enjoy the company of friends, but I was hopin' to meet a pretty young lady here. And seein' there are none - my vote is for the Tiger Cat." Main Line picked up his towel, "Most Friday nights this place is packed with lovelies. Wonder what's happening?" I took a calculated guess, "We had to park over by the apartments. Cork Club must be having one of their seasonal parties." Oscar D snapped his fingers, "Damn - you're right. If Houston's elite is inside - their daughters will be somewhere else. Should have thought of that when we parked two blocks away."

We walked past an eight foot high stucco wall listenin' to the sound of water splashing and laughter floatin' over the top. Oscar D agitated Main Line, "Hop up to the top of the wall and take a peek." Main Line wasn't one to back away from a challenge. He clawed his way up and dropped back down - his shirt white with traces of stucco. "You should have warned me. That stuff scratches." Oscar D was about to give him a full ration - when two large men in bathing suits came around the wall through the pool side door. The older one asked, "You make a habit out of peeking over fences?" Oscar D wasn't about to back away and I could see the hair rising on Main Line's neck. I tried to establish peace, "Nothing sinister - just nosy. We're on our way back from a swim at the Shamrock and heard the splashing. Party going on at the

Cork Club. Couldn't park over there." The older one asked, "Where are you from?" Roger answered, "Ellington Field. I'm Roger and this is Johnny. We're Nav students." "Cadets?" "No. Schools changing to all officers." While we were talking - I noticed Oscar D and Main Line slipping away. Our interrogator grinned, "I'm the senior OSI agent here. Not a good idea for you to be looking over walls in Houston. Too many folks with nervous fingers around here own guns. I'm Captain Attaboy and this is Lieutenant Gaylord. I'm from Detroit and Gaylord is from Fire Island - New York. Tell you what I'm going to do. You two buy a couple of six-packs and we'll introduce you to a few of our neighbor ladies. Bring your suits. Where did your friends go?" I answered, "The Tiger Cat." "Their loss - our ladies are lookers. Make sure it's cans. Don't want any broken glass near the pool."

As we got into my car - I asked Roger, "What's an OSI?" "Air Force Office of Special Investigations. Sort of like our own FBI." "How do you know about them?" "When I get out - I'm going to finish Law School and apply to be a member of Hoover's gang." "Are we in trouble?" "No. If we had really stepped in it - the Sheriff would be pulling up." "Where's the closest carryout?" "Around the corner."

We entered the pool side door with our bathing suits and two six-packs of beer. Attaboy and Gaylord were sitting by the pool with four really good looking young ladies. Attaboy looked up, "That was quick. Thought you might take off. Introduce yourselves and then go change. First apartment behind the diving board." Turned out to be a great evening of fun. They were all stewardesses and not affiliated with TTA. When it was time to leave - I left alone. Roger and a stew were into it hot and heavy and she offered to bring him home. I thanked Attaboy and Gaylord, "Turned out to be a great evening. Don't know when I've ever been so clean - dunkin' in two pools on the same day."

When I returned to the barracks - our two turncoats were busy tossing empty beer cans at the waste basket, "Where did you go? Roger and I met four of Texas' finest. You missed a great pool party." Oscar D apologized, "When I heard the older one say OSI - we slipped away in the night. Did they bring you up on charges?" "Never happen. We got along fine. All we had to do was bring along our suits and a few six-packs. They have more feminine company than they can handle. Roger broke the code. He said they came outside looking for help." Main Line handed me a can of Lone Star, "Johnny - you've been training. You're way past your two beer limit. Tell us more about the pool party." "Roger and me had a ball. Best party I've been too in Texas. Those OSI guys know how to live. Even have air-conditioning in their apartments - a swimming pool and a flock of single ladies. Look at us - we have windows - each other and a latrine with green stuff growing in it. Looks like we chose the wrong profession. Roger told me OSI is the Air Force's FBI. Any idea what that means?" Oscar D spoke softly, "Undercover work. Chase after deserters and stuff like that. Tell us about the ladies." "Like to do a bit of undercover work with them. You two really blew it. Roger is still with his girl. He's going out again tomorrow. She's bringing him home."

As if on cue - Roger walked in with a hop in his step and a smile from ear to ear. He opened a can of Lone Star and sighed, "I think I'm in love - head over heels. Johnny - you talk about sparks - I've been struck by lightning. I set up Main Line and Oscar D with dates tomorrow morning." Main Line stood up, "Whoa there big fella'. Where are we going?" "Church. You get a chance to meet some honest Texas ladies for a change. I'll let you in on a secret - both of your ladies are knockouts. Hope you two don't mind attending a Methodist Church." Main Line smiled, "I'm Christian. That's close enough." I asked, "Hey - what about me?" "Sorry - you weren't up to their standards. They thought you were cute,

but a bit too young." "Hell, I'm older than any of them." "You might know sheep, but you've a lot to learn about the fair sex." Roger's offer was all it took to get a coat and tie on Main Line. Oscar D was reluctant, "Only because it's something to do until the Shamrock pool opens." Roger asked, "Johnny - tag along. I'll need a ride to Church. Nancy will bring me home." I nodded, "Yes. Wish it was Presbyterian." "Why?" "I feel predestined to meet someone." "You will. Square becomes round with a little aging."

Nancy waved to get Roger's attention as we walked up the steps outside Houston's Methodist Church. Oscar D and Main Line weren't more than two minutes behind. Nancy's friends were even better looking than advertised. Oscar D and Main Line? It was love at first sight. I was elbowed politely out of the way as they escorted their new found loves into Church. Not easy being odd man out, but when the spark isn't there - on either part - it's best to not make a fuss. Using my best farm boy instinct which - if you know sod busters - isn't all that complex - I begged off when they asked me to join them for lunch. I drove over to the Shamrock and spent the afternoon in the shade - by the pool reading about our next class - loran.

Loran is an acronym for long range navigation. Using a special map and a simple radio wave receiver - it can provide rough - electronic location for airplanes and ships. After an hour of reading about it and being unable to concentrate - I looked up into the eyes of the prettiest stew I'd ever seen. I'd met Sally at Attaboy's pool party last night, but at the time she seemed preoccupied. She sat down beside me on the grass, "Hope I'm not bothering your studies - Johnny When you didn't come along with your friends after Church - I decided to come after you." "Glad you did. I've had my fill of technical jargon. Missed you in Church." "I was at mine - Presbyterian - near our apartments. Are you a Methodist."

"We used to kid around back home - a Methodist is a Baptist who can read, but no - I'm United Brethren." "Be careful about your religious humor down here in Texas. Texans take religion very - very seriously." "I'll try to remember that. Where were our lost ones when you left the apartment." "They were going for a swim in our pool when I decided to hunt you down. Looks like they all hit it off." "Roger acts like he was struck between the eyes with a two-by-four. Are the wild ones tamed?" "Oscar D and Main Line are as serious as I've ever seen them. Want to take a dip?" Sally grabbed my hand and pulled me up - ran toward the pool and dove in. Didn't expect to get a kiss underwater.

As Sally towel dried her hair - I wondered, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" "As long as it isn't personal." "It isn't. Attaboy is an enigma to me. He seemed friendly enough, but distant. Could you tell me anything about his background?" "Said he was a fighter pilot during World War II. When the war was over - the only job he could get was inspecting beer bottles in Detroit." "What does a beer bottle inspector do?" "Sit on a high stool watching bottles go by - checking for impurities." "Not a very challenging job, but I bet it has its rewards." "All the beer he could drink. Said he was looped by the time he arrived home almost every evening. When the Korean War popped up - he was called back in. He decided to stay. You should know - we were an item a few months back, but that's over. Since we're away flying most of the time - Attaboy and Gaylord keep an eye on our place and protect us from over amorous admirers." "Who do you fly for?" "I fly for TWA on their domestic routes. Tell me a little about you." "Not a very exciting life. Grew up on a farm in Ohio and graduated from Ohio State. Entered the Air Force through ROTC. Eyes weren't good enough to be a pilot - so I'm here at Nav School. Ready for another swim. I've grown to admire your underwater talents." Sally pulled me up off the grass and led me to the edge of the pool

- pushed me in and dove in after - again demonstrating her under water talents. When we came up for air I asked, "Do you want to try a little Italian this evening?" She laughed, "I know of a restaurant close by where the waiter is very short." "But is he Italian?" Sally pushed me under and our lips met again. Back on the surface I admitted my ignorance, "You never told me your last name." "After." "After what?" She pushed me under again. When I came back up she said, "No silly - my last name is After - Sally After."

Sally was off on a series of flights - which was just as well. Our loran class had begun. Since loran didn't begin with an E or R - I thought I was safe and I was. I didn't have to design or build a loran set. All I had to do was learn how to use one. Our problems began with the arrival of our new instructor - Lieutenant Stonehands - who knew as little about loran as we did, but wouldn't admit it. Mart the smart stepped in to fill that gap, "Loran isn't all that difficult. Pretty simple stuff - even for a sewage engineer. Loran uses long wave radio signals sent from a transmitter to a slave and retransmitted back. The time difference between the two radio waves gives us location." I asked, "How?" "Like I almost said - our set measures the time difference between both signals." "Is that all? Sounds fairly simple." "It is except for one thing. Our Nav School sets are worn out. Part of our training is to learn how to adjust the set with a screwdriver. And that's where the problem comes in. Instructors and students have adjusted our sets to where most no longer work and can no longer be repaired." "Isn't there a better system?" "Oh, yes - the new loran C system fixes all of those problems and more, but we don't have it at Ellington. We might see it when we fly the line."

The single most important lesson I learned from this phase of Nav Training was never to use our loran sets unless all else failed. Mart the smart was right. Even our

classroom sets were broken. Knobs had been twisted off and screw threads worn to the point - even a screwdriver wouldn't turn them. After one more equipment failure than we needed - Oscar D hit the nail on the head when he opined, "A navigator turning a screwdriver is the equivalent of a serial killer with an ax!" As he walked out of the classroom mumbling to himself - Main Line knew, "I don't know what else we should expect. These systems were built under government contract by the lowest bidder." The sets were worthless. That was a given, but my problem was how to differentiate a true signal from a false one. Mart attempted to explain the ether layer to us non engineer types - without much success. "Okay - one more time. Ether is a layer of particles above the earth's atmosphere. Long wave radio signals - like loran - bounce off it and return to earth. A one hop E is the first harmonic of the loran radio wave. If we try to synchronize it with a true signal - we'll get a false reading. Pretty simple stuff - isn't it?" I looked over at Roger and smiled a Tucker like smile and we both said, "Right."

I was having second thoughts about waiting for lightning to strike. The embers were getting hotter between Sally and me. The flame wasn't there yet, but I could feel it coming on. I was beginning to see why an arranged courtship lasted longer than ones where you had to find love on your own. She was on a Friday through Monday flight schedule - so we were together only two days a week. My three buddies were in over their heads. Wedding bells were going ring-a-ling-ling for them, but not for me. Our flights grew as frequent as our loran equipment failures. Most of the ones we used were not even suitable for artificial reefs. And competition replaced cooperation in our classroom. Until loran - we worked on a level playing field. With our equipment being unequal and none of us trusting each other when we approached a set with a screwdriver - our training was rapidly becoming every man for himself. To pass - we had to demonstrate a screwdriver

adjust in the classroom and on our check-ride. Trouble was - the damn things wouldn't adjust. And worse - Stonehands was the reincarnation of Tucker. He could walk by a loran set and it would wilt. If I found a working loran set the only way to keep it operating was not to adjust it. So we were caught in a real Catch Twenty-Two. We adjust and we won't pass. If we don't adjust we won't pass. A perfect no win - no win conundrum. And Main Line used his screwdriver like a sledge hammer - leaving a broken trail of loran sets in his wake. Stonehands stood in awe as Main Line adjusted every single loran set past the stops. Of course - Main Line received top marks on our ground examination.

Mart the smart was the bearer of bad tidings, "You talk about a hosing. We have to fly three training flights and a check-ride on the same T-29. No way that sucker's loran sets are going to hold up." I asked, "Where too and how long?" "West Palm Beach - Bermuda - West Palm Beach and back to Ellington - four days with our check-ride on the last leg." "What's wrong with Florida and Bermuda? I've never been to either one. Sounds more like a vacation than training flights to me." "Not if we don't get any down time between flights. And you know what happens when our loran equipment performs like it usually does." "You're right - we'll be lucky to have two sets operating by the time we fly our check-ride." "Better hope for a miracle. Our equipment is so old - no base outside of Ellington has mechanics that can repair them." "Or spare parts. Whose the lucky one that's going to be our evaluator?" "Stonehands."

Our training flight from Ellington Field to West Palm Beach Air Station confirmed Mart the smart's worst fears. When we took off - we had ten working loran sets - which was a miracle in itself. We landed at West Palm with only four working sets. Didn't have anytime for sightseeing. We landed two hours before sunset. By the time we checked into

the BOQ - showered and dressed for dinner - it was well past seven. The O Club wasn't bad. Ground steak was tasty and the price was right. After one beer - Roger and me walked back to the BOQ - ready to hit the sack. Oscar D and Main Line followed one beer later. I asked Main line, "You lived on the Atlantic. What does Palm Beach look like?" "From New Jersey south it all looks the same - 'cept it gets warmer down here. It's a lot like South Carolina without a decent barbecue - hot - flat and sandy. Inland there's swamp - swamp and more swamp. What time is takeoff?" Oscar D answered, "Oh seven thirty. Better hit the rack." Oscar D stood up and stretched - sure hope we have more than four loran sets working." Main Line wasn't worried, "Don't see what the problem is. I'll use your set or Johnny's. Mine went out when I touched it with my screwdriver." Oscar D and I both said, "Over my dead body!" "How can I pass if I don't have a set?" Oscar D thought a bit, "Tell you what - Line - I'll set mine up and you can take readings. Johnny will do the same, but if we see a screwdriver in your hand - I'm gonna' put it where the sun don't shine." I added, "And I'll pound it up. My set's a beauty. I turned it on and it works perfectly - haven't made one adjustment. Anyone that comes near it with a screwdriver is going away with more than a sore behind." Main Line wasn't buying our terms, "That's why Stonehands read the riot act to you two. You've got to demonstrate that you know how to adjust a loran set or he won't pass you." I didn't care, "No way - not with my set. It isn't broke and he isn't messin' with it."

Two more loran sets bit the dust on the over water training flight to Bermuda. Would have had four good ones - but Stonehands insisted that Main Line adjust one of them with his screwdriver. And when that didn't work - Stonehands tried to demonstrate adjustment on the other set. Oscar D's and my set were the only two working sets left. As we unloaded the airplane - Stonehands informed us, "Won't be

taking off on our scheduled time in the morning. Our T-29 has some kind of engine problem that needs fixing." I noticed both pilots off loading golf clubs and guessed the real reason for our layover. Told Roger, "We may be here for a day or two - depending on how much money the pilots have. Golf here can be expensive." Mart the smart wasn't happy, "Just as I figured. They can repair loran C, but not our sets. One of the maintenance types is going to see if he can cannibalize a couple of our sets and get another two up, but he doesn't hold out much hope." I asked, "What can we do to kill time?" Oscar D shook his head, "You really are a sod buster. This is Bermuda - with beaches - hotels and those will attract a bevy of young ladies - like a bee to clover." I looked at my watch, "Almost five. After we get to the BOQ - I'm going to shower and go to the O Club for dinner. Too late to go exploring and I didn't plan on being gone longer than three nights. Don't want to run out of cash and I only brought one check." Main Line laughed, "That should be enough." "Not when they have a \$25 limit."

Our two pilots - dressed in golfing attire met us at the O' Club for breakfast. The senior one gave us a crocodile smile, "Sorry guys. Not going anyplace today. We'll be here another night. Have an engine part being flown in today. Can't do anything for your loran sets. The electronic folks say they're beyond redemption. No one has parts for museum pieces and they all failed the same way. I'll leave notice this evening at the BOQ if we can fly out of here tomorrow. If any of you potential funny wings brought your golf clubs - we have room for two in our foursome. They have some great courses here in Bermuda." None of us answered - so he smiled again and walked out the door - followed by his copilot. Stonehands stopped us, "Since we only have two sets left - Johnny and Oscar D will share theirs. Check with me before you go out to dinner this evening. I should have our flight status by then."

Main Line waited until Stonehands left, "I vacationed here with my family a few years back." Oscar D laughed, "Line - how can you remember what's worthwhile. You were only nine years old." "Nine is too young to remember what you're interested in. Taxis cost an arm and a leg, but we can walk to St. George - rent motor bikes and ride around the island." Roger the lodger asked, "How about the four of us splitting costs of a rental car?" "Won't let you rent one. Pretty heavy restriction on autos. They limit them to one per household. We can walk - ride a motor bike or stay put." I asked, "How far is it to St. George?" "Not more than two miles and the view is great. Right along the ocean."

It was a bit longer than two miles - the view was spectacular and motor bikes were economical. That was the good news. The bad - they looked like World War II British paratrooper cycles with a motor attached as an afterthought. They were sturdy enough to carry a trooper with a full pack, but so under powered I had to peddle mine uphill. Oscar D took one look and decided against renting, "Line and I are going to sight see around St. George. We'll meet you at the O' Club for Happy Hour." I led and Roger followed out of Saint George - riding our motor bikes on the right side of the road which was the wrong side for Bermuda. A lorry met us on a roundabout - its horn blowing like a wounded banshee and almost did us both in. Roger drove on ahead shouting, "I'll lead. You're not fit for anything this technical - like a wedge - wheelbarrow or left hand traffic." He almost met his maker on another British style traffic circle - going around the right side.

The Bermuda countryside is beautiful, but I couldn't prove it. I couldn't see over the flowering hedge rows that lined both sides of the road. Halfway to Hamilton my engine gave out. Darn thing only worked goin' downhill. Wasn't much fun peddling a sixty pound bike uphill. I got Roger's

attention and pointed to the nearest seaside hotel. He stopped and I caught up, "Damn things not running right. Only works when we're pointed downhill or on the flat. Lets stop here and rest. I need a beer." Roger scanned the hotel and its surroundings, "Looks a bit snooty to me." "Nothing else near by and I'm starved. Sign mentions a world famous black sand beach." We stacked our bikes on the rack outside of the lobby and walked in. The maitre d took one look at us and took us outdoors to a table overlooking the beach. He smiled, "Coat and tie only in the dining room - gentlemen." We ordered fish and chips and an imported Dutch beer. It was really good. However when the bill came - we both groaned. It was six dollars - each beer was a dollar. Roger shook his head, "That very same beer was twenty-five cents last night at the O Club. I'm ready to leave. Can't stand a steady diet - not at these prices. And we're separated by at least ten tables from the other guests. Must be worried that folks who ride motor bikes will contaminate their guests."

I looked over the side, "Want to walk down to the world famous black sand beach?" "Looks like a postage stamp to me and stairs look like they'll break if we go down together. This place has a nose up in the air as high as their prices. Did you take a look at tonight's menu?" "Yes - black tie formal and nothin' less than ten dollars." "Don't you wonder how troops stationed here can afford to go out?" "Probably don't. Better head back to St. George. Don't want to push my bike uphill after dark."

Wild flowers and trimmed hedges dotted the landscape on the wandering road to St. George. It was as if the road builders had followed a herd of dairy cows on their way back to the barn. Roger was getting ahead of me - 'cause pushin' my bike uphill was easier than peddlin' it. I shouted, "Slow down! I'd enjoy this view if I wasn't pushing this damn bike uphill. Want to trade for a spell?" Roger either didn't

hear or didn't care, "Try to keep up or we won't make it back in time for Happy Hour." I wasn't getting any sympathy from him. Three miles out of St. George my engine quit for good. Roger motored back as I tried one restart after another with what appeared to be a makeshift lawnmower cord. His only encouragement was, "Keep pushing. I'll motor on ahead and send the owner back to pick you up." "Roger that, but hurry. At least walking this contraption is faster than peddling." When I looked up - I noticed I was talking to myself.

Roger disappeared over the crest of the hill and I followed - pushing my bike up the incline. After an hour of walking and pushing I finally arrived at the motor bike shop. The owner took the bike off my hands and placed it back on the rental rack. He wiped his hands, "You brought it in two minutes after five. Looks like you owe me for another day." "Not likely. You owe me a refund for a bike that won't run. You're lucky I pushed this piece of junk back and didn't leave it on the road." "We'll call it even. Couldn't come out to pick you up. Didn't have anyone to watch the shop." "Where's my friend - Roger?" "He walked back to the Air Force Base with two of your friends." "Don't know if any of them are my friends. Friends don't leave friends stranded - alone out on the road."

The colors of Bermuda's forever spring like flowers - a spectacular ocean view and the setting sun turned my lonely walk back to the Air Base into a pleasant stroll. I was soon over my irritation with former friends - anger had evaporated by the time I reached the BOQ. Roger posted a note on my door -

*"Meet me at the O'Club. Airplane is fixed.  
We take off at six a.m."*

*Roger*

My salt water shower was mercifully short and equally unpleasant. Fresh water was in short supply. Bermuda received most of it's water by catching rainfall and storing it in cisterns. It was used sparingly. I towed off the salt water and checked my suitcase to see if any clothes remained suitable to wear. After three days on the road - I was running short. I wandered outside into an evening sky - turning from burnt orange to deep purple. I wondered what mischief Oscar D and Main Line were into.

Roger the lodger waved for me to come on over and join him at the bar, "What kept you? I sent the owner out to find you." "Never left his shop. Said you walked back with our two wild ones." "Promised to phone Nancy at five - Bermuda time - or I would have made sure he picked you up. Did he give you a refund?" "Refund? He wanted to charge me for an extra day because I didn't bring his bike back on time." "Did you pay?" "No - but he sure has a weird sense of humor. We agreed - I paid half his rental fee." "Did he bring you back to Base?" "No and he didn't offer. I walked. That's why I'm late." "How are your finances holding out?" "With half-a rental fee back - I won't need to cash a check." "You're better off than Oscar D and Main Line. They were in here earlier looking for a loan." "What for?" They met two ladies from the hotel we stopped at in St. George. They have dinner dates." "Didn't you tell them about black tie and the price?" Roger had a canary-cat smile on his face, "Didn't ask and I didn't offer. And you know Main Line. He's been here before and knows it all." "I'd like to see his face when he sees the prices on the menu." "And when they find out dinner is black tie and tux." "I'm hungry enough to eat British food. Lets go to dinner. I want to hit the sack early. Have to get up at four to eat breakfast." On our way to the dining room, Roger stopped. "Almost forgot. Nancy says Sally wants to go out when we return. Said she'd like a little Italian." I laughed, "Private joke."

When Main Line and Oscar D dragged their bodies into Base Ops the next morning they looked like they had been rode hard and put away wet. I asked, "Where did you two run off too yesterday evening." Oscar D gave Main Line a dirty look, "Line here talked me into taking a couple of ladies to dinner. Of course he didn't check to see how much it would cost or that we'd have to wear formal dress." Main Line shook his head, "Worked out - though. Had room service deliver dinner to their room and they put it on their bill. Only cost us the tip. Ever try to get a taxi to bring you back here after midnight? Bermuda closes up at ten. We had to walk back." Oscar D added, "If it wasn't for Roger's note - I'd still be in the sack. What do we have planned for today." Stonehands came over and our conversation stopped, "You will take your loran check-ride on our flight back to West Palm." Oscar D's face turned beet red, "What the hell for!" "Relax Lieutenant - we have two working loran sets. If we lose either one - your check-ride from West Palm to Ellington will have to be scrubbed - If we have to add on a flight - it will cost Uncle Sugar gas and money."

The sun was barely on the horizon when we met our pilots at the airplane. As the senior pilot was loaded his golf clubs on board - Roger asked, "Why are we flying back so early." "Bermuda is way too expensive for our pocketbooks. We're broke. We'll gas up at West Palm and keep on chugging to Houston." Right there and then I knew we wouldn't see much of Florida on this trip. After we loaded our gear - I came back outside and sat down on the coral outcrop. My mind was working overtime - trying to figure out a way to keep our loran sets running and still pass the flight exam.

After we finished preflighting our equipment - I waited for Stonehands to go outside for a smoke before motioning to our Flight to put their headsets on. I had each one check in over intercom. After I was certain they were all on and

listening - I offered my solution to our dilemma, "If we want to complete our check-ride with working loran sets - we need to establish a few ground rules. Oscar D and me have the only two working sets. Mine will give pure loran fixes. It is sacrosanct. No one - not even me is going to approach it with a screwdriver or even twist a knob after I set it up. Get your reading and get out of the way for the next guy. If Stonehands insists that we demonstrate how-to adjust a set - we'll use Oscar D's. And Main Line will go last. Don't do any adjusts until we're at least three quarters of the way to West Palm. Any questions?" Main Line called, "Johnny - did you check this out with Stonehands?" "No and I don't intend too. Do we have an agreement?" A chorus of "Roger that," resounded over intercom. I added, "After we level off we can evaluate our situation again. If we need to do something else - we'll discuss it then and take another vote."

My plan worked like a charm for everyone, but me. We were able to keep Stonehands occupied until we were an hour out of West Palm. Oscar D held Main Line back until everyone, but me had demonstrated a loran adjust. Main Line approached Oscar D's loran set like a gandy dancer carrying a crowbar. Using his screwdriver like a sledge hammer - with Stonehands twisting synchronization knobs so tightly the knobs snapped off - they demolished Oscar D's set. Loran signals were left to dance wildly across the scope like green worms on a dead body. Oscar D got up in disgust - came over to my position and obtained a reading from my set. He shook his head and whispered, "Whatever you do - don't let those two near this set until we're getting ready to land." As Oscar D walked away - Stonehands came charging down the aisle - screwdriver held aloft - waving it around like a Pirate's sword - shouting, "Get out of my way. I want to use your set to evaluate Lieutenant Line's adjustment techniques." I stood my ground and blocked his path, "You lay one hand on my set and I'll break both your arms. This is our last working

loran set. If we lose it - we're out over this ocean with nothing more than a wet finger to navigate with. It isn't broke and it won't be if you stay away from it with that sledgehammer you call a screwdriver." Stonehands stopped in his tracks - dumbfounded. No student had ever talked back to him before. Slowly - the realization that we were out over open ocean and he was about to throw our last remaining oar overboard came home. I could see wooden spoked wheels in his mind crank slowly in ever increasing circles. His eyes grew narrow. I could feel the wrath of a Nav School instructor comin' down on me. I was beginning to wonder what Supply School would be like in early summer when Stonehands backed off. He put his screwdriver away, "Lieutenant Ropp - would you mind if I use your set for a reading?" "Only if you don't turn a knob or attempt to adjust it."

Oscar D came by after Stonehands walked back to his instructor station, "He hasn't given up. You and Main Line are going to demonstrate adjustment when we're within sight of West Palm. Only reason he backed off was he would face a severe ass chewing if we made landfall somewhere near South Carolina." "You're right. I've embarrassed our instructor." I had that sinking feeling - the one I used to get when I discovered one of my sheep was missing, "I've broken the unwritten rule." Oscar D laughed, "The instructor is always right." "And even if he is wrong - he's still right. What do you recommend?" "Simple - place your head between your legs." "Is that all?" "And kiss your ass good-by."

When the pilots announced they had intercepted West Palm TACAN and were taking control of the airplane - we closed out our logs. Stonehands his screwdriver out of his pocket - quicker than a gunfighter at the OK Corral - stormed down the aisle toward my loran set, "Out of the way Lieutenant. I'm going to throw your loran set out of adjustment and you're going to demonstrate how to bring it back on line. I watched

Stonehand's screwdriver move like a bludgeon toward the top adjustment screw on the right side of my loran set. Too late for Stonehands to back off - an electric discharge - wide as a jagged bolt of lightning flew out of my loran set to his screwdriver. Stonehands fell to his knees and rolled over on the floor. He tried to get up - fell over again and laid there unconscious. Smoke bellowed out of my set's cooling vents. I turned it off and popped the circuit breaker to prevent an electrical fire. We carried Stonehands back to his seat - with charred screwdriver - hair sticking straight out - frazzled. He looked like a convict after a bout with an electric chair.

Oscar D opined, "Damnedest thing I've ever saw. If I didn't know better - I'd say your loran set sacrificed it's electronic life to get even with the guy who destroyed all of his brothers." "Great show wasn't it, but I'm a dead man - I'm never going to pass this course." I walked over to see how Stonehands was doing. He was trying to write. His pencil was making circles, but the lead wasn't touching the paper. When the senior pilot called back over intercom - Stonehands came out of it. "Is that an electrical fire I smell back there? What's going on? Do you need help?" Stonehands clicked on his intercom mike, "No problem I have everything under control. What are your plans at West Palm?" "After we land - your students can grab a bite to eat at the Base Ops snack bar while the airplane is gassed up. We're going to have a fast turnaround and continue on to Ellington. Are you sure there isn't anything wrong? Smells pretty bad up here." Stonehands didn't answer. His pencil was still making circles above the grade sheets.

The senior pilot walked back to Stonehands position, "Damnit - when I call you I want a response. Is everything all right back here?" Stonehands was on his feet, "Yes Sir - just a small electrical fire. It's out and everything is

under control. One of our loran sets smoked a bit, but I pulled the circuit breaker. Everything is all right now." "You're a mess. Looks like you were hit by lightning. Have your students button up their equipment. We're going to land in less than ten minutes and make sure this doesn't happen again." "Won't - all of our equipment is out. We'll have to use your TACAN on our next flight." As the pilot walked forward - Stonehands slumped over - passed out again and our airplane flew through puffy white cumulus clouds with another instructor in la-la land.

Stonehands avoided our Flight at the snack bar. Mart the smart carried his tray to the table, "Don't worry Johnny - that asshole will have to pass you. He's telling the pilots he saved their airplane when it was him who started the fire. You're home free. A liar has to cover his tracks so he won't get caught. Bet Stonehands tries to buy you off." I had to laugh, "That thought makes me feel better all ready. The electrical shock knocked Stonehands senseless." Oscar D said, "Well - he didn't have far to go. Mart - tell us all about this thing pilots navigate with - called TACAN - isn't it?" "Piece of cake. TACAN is the acronym for ultra high frequency tactical air navigation. It's a line of sight navigation system - more accurate than any system we're allowed to use. Unfortunately it's for pilots - not for us funny wings." Oscar D said, "Stonehands told the pilots we were going to use it on our way back to Houston."

After level off - we took turns using the pilots TACAN. Roger the lodger was ecstatic, "It's almost like cheating - it's so easy to use. If the evaluator on our first Map Reading check-ride used it - Tucker would still be with our Flight." I gave Roger one of those you've got to be kiddin' me looks and added, "You forgot about celestial." Oscar D spoke up, "Ain't no TACAN over the Arctic or ocean. That's why we're here in school and their ain't no Tuckers wearing

funny wings." Mart the smart stepped up, "Not true. If Tucker had twenty-twenty eyesight he'd make a damn fine fighter pilot." I added, "He's crazy enough."

Stonehands stayed away from us. He hobnobbed with the pilots - moving out of our way when we were using TACAN. He sat by himself on our ride to Base Ops and turned away from me when I attempted to talk with him in the parking lot. Roger called for me to come back inside, "Nancy says they're waiting for us. We need to get a move on. They're cooking. We bring the steaks - wine and beer." "You and me?" "All of us - Oscar D and Main Line - too. They both want to know what we brought back from Bermuda for them." "Tell Sally I'm bringing a little Italian."

We had a wing-ding of a return party. My head was still hurting when we checked the bulletin board for our grades after breakfast. They weren't posted. Main Line pulled us aside at midmorning break, "Words out that the Commandant is having a heart-to-heart talk with Stonehands. After we landed - Oscar D pulled the pilots aside and told them what really happened coming into West Palm. When they confronted Stonehands he stonewalled them. Not smart. Pilots have a union - they stick together and Stonehands lied. You can lead your men into a trap and get them all killed, but you never ever lie." "You think I failed?" "You shouldn't have passed. Incomplete is the best you can hope for. You didn't adjust." "You better be glad I didn't. We'd all be flying another check-ride." Oscar D walked over, "Hell isn't it?" I asked, "What?" "Bein' right when it pays to be wrong."

Our marks were posted late in the afternoon. As usual - Main Line had top marks - even though he didn't adjust and I was buried in the middle. When I offered to buy us all a beer - Main Line shook his head, "No. Don't you remember - we're supposed to take our girlfriends to the Shamrock for a

swim after dinner." "Got wrapped up in our grades. How soon are you going to ask for their hands in marriage." All three turned red and I had my answer. The wedding bells were gonna' ring-a-ling-ling for them, but not for me. And our instructor - Stonehands - should have never gotten crossways with the pilot's union. He was on his way to Supply School in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

*"How are you getting on," said the Cheshire-Cat?"*

*"I don't think they play at all fairly," Alice began, "and they all quarrel so dreadfully one can't hear one's self speak - and they don't seem to have any rules in particular: at least - if there are - nobody attends to them -"*

# 4

Fall and an R class - Radar - arrived at the same time - on the twenty-first of September. A glorious season - fall is heralded by the dying leaves - falling from tree after tree. Radar training was heralded by Radar sets failing in airplane after airplane. I set forth into the dreaded world of E and R - knowing that I would soon be up to my eyeballs in sheep dip. Main Line didn't help me when he reminded, "Same government contractor that built our loran sets." "I know - from the lowest bidder. We don't have to design one - so I should be okay." "You'll have to adjust it." "You would have to remind me." "Did you call Sally about our get together this weekend?" "She's out of town until Thursday." "Are you getting serious?" "We could, but we've decided to stay friends. Never can tell - though. Gets pretty hot and heavy at times. How about you and Oscar D?" "Nervous time. We both are learning how gazelle feels when he sees a lioness circling him." "Understand the prey goes numb just before the kill." "And that's how we both feel."

Unmatched components hooked together in an electronics device are called a kludge. That aptly described what I saw when I looked at my first radar scope. Our sets were not only old and worn out - they were designed to operate above fifteen thousand feet. Our T-29s were lucky to get up to twelve. Now this wasn't all bad - since our airplanes were not pressurized. Cities the size of Houston and Dallas looked like blurs on our scopes. We were told to use ground and water contrast. That was fine along the coast, but the rest of Texas was in a deep drought. Oscar D opined, "Our equipment is older than dirt." Trouble was - I couldn't tell dirt from brick when I looked into my Radar scope. I battled

it out for two weeks to no avail. When I was in scientific trouble - I knew who to go too - Mart the smart, "James Thurber saw a blur when he looked into his microscope in Botany class at Ohio State. I see the same blur when I look into my radar scope." Mart looked at me as if I was a dufus, "What you really see is a Rorschach test. A Thurber blur? You've must use scientific terms if you want help. A Thurber blur indeed." "Okay - I know we live in parallel universes, but I need a boost. Radar reminds me of the Wizard's smoke and mirrors." "You're right about smoke and mirrors."

Mart proceeded to give me the whole shovel full, "Radar is an acronym for - Radio Detection and Ranging when it should be called Midar - Microwave Detection and Ranging." "You lost me on Midar. What's the difference?" "Radio is in the medium to high frequency spectrum and Radar is in the microwave spectrum." "And a spectrum?" "Like a scale from one to one hundred with long waves at one end and short waves at the other. Don't confuse short wave radio signals with my scale. They would be down at the low end and ultra violet at the high." "You lost me again with your scale. Explain the nuts and bolts of Radar range and resolution." Mart's eyes lit up, "That's the fun part! The Radar range equation is - *Distance equals the speed of light times the time to travel that distance divided by two for the round trip.*"

"Say What? Round trip? To where and why?" "Simple - the transmitted Radar pulse is sent out to an object - bounces off and returns." What about unambiguous range?" "A little more complicated. It is -

*Distance between Radar pulses or R equals the speed of light times the pulse interval, divided by two.*

Do you understand the concept?" "I hope they have multiple choice. It's my only hope." "You have a fine literary mind, but one not suited for modern science." "Hate to say it, but

our electronics instructor was right. I'll have to stay away from anything that begins with E or R." "Tell you what I'll do. I know how they construct our multiple guess tests. Did some mathematical computations on the probability of certain questions. I'll coach you." "I'll need it."

I resorted to the same technique I used in Celestial - do it by rote. Master how to operate a system using the data without comprehending the concept - design - or mechanics of it. I called it my I and S equation -

### *Ignorance and Superstition will always win out over Science and Fact!*

I wasn't the only one with problems. Main Line was desperate for help - too. I gave him my insight on how to pass by the rote system. He tried, "And it works!" We all passed the ground examination with Mart the smart's help. His insight into the construction of Multiple Test questions helped everyone, but him. As usual - Main Line came out at the top and Mart - the only one of us who understood Radar theory - came out just below - which really wasn't very far from the top. Knowing how questions are made up and using the data - well - lets just say he didn't. Mart got wrapped up in the individual trees and missed the forest. With our ground phase out of the way and flying training underway - we now had time to celebrate passing Radar. And we had only two more classes to go - Grid and Combined Navigation.

Oscar D came up with a way to celebrate agreed too by all. He called a meetin' on the morning we were planning our first Radar training flight, "Listen up troops. I can get half priced tickets for the Texas A & M - University of Houston football game next Saturday night. It's gonna' be at Rice Stadium. We can celebrate our passage and give you Yankees - and Main Line - an opportunity to see what real football is like - Texas style. A& M has a brand new coach - Bear Bryant and a better than even chance of beating Texas

University this year." Roger the lodger asked, "How are your Aggies doing?" "Won our first two games and we've been selected by the press to win the national championship. I'd say we're doing pretty well. Have an All American candidate at fullback by the name of John David Crow." Main Line opined, "How come all of you Teaxans have two first names?" Oscar D stared him down, "Line - how can you be so stupid? Everyone should have two first names. Gives you a choice if you get tired of the first one. Besides having two first names gives us a poetic ring." Main Line jumped right back in, "A cowboy poet? That's like a marching symphony band. Is John David Crow an Indian?" "Could be, but I think he's mostly Cajun from Louisiana Bayou Country."

Oscar D returned to his topic, "Bring your wives and girl friends. A & M will impress them all. Tickets are five dollars each - a real bargain." Main Line needled, "We'll all go - even if it is a bunch of marching farmers." I asked, "Is Houston any good? Didn't know they had a school." Oscar D got serious, "I didn't - either. Someone up at the State College Athletic Department screwed up. They violated the number one rule of scheduling. Never schedule a team named after a city. Bound to be full of mercenaries instead of students. I bet most of Houston's football players major in Travel Agent, Communication or Gym." Roger the lodger didn't agree, "How can you be sure. Do you have any proof?" "Yes - remember Tucker. He went to Syracuse - was Captain of his lacrosse team and could barely count past two." I had to stick up for Tucker, "But he majored in Journalism." Oscar D smiled, "Proves my point. Another name for a Communication major. Everybody going?" We all nodded, "Yes." "We'll meet at the apartment where my girl friend lives - out near the Shamrock Hotel. We'll car pool from there. Johnny - you can cook burgers on the barbecue grill by the pool. The rest of us will bring hot dogs - chips and beer. Game is at eight. We'll meet at the apartment at five."

Turned out to be a great feast and a wonderful game. Sally prepared the burgers and I did the cooking. She laced them with ground pepper and soy sauce - something she had learned in San Francisco. After Oscar D devoured three dogs two burgers and several beers - he called for all of us to gather around, "Now about my school - Texas A & M. It is an all male university and those that can walk are in uniform - and proud of it. Hubris is part our motto. So you'll be in the middle of a lot of Sam Brown uniforms." Sally asked, "Sam Brown?" "Uniform our Army wore before World War II. Brown and tan with a belt and strap on the outside of the coat. Our tickets are in the middle of the A & M student section. You'll have to stand the entire game." Main Line asked, "What for?" "The twelfth man - you idiot. Years back one of our coaches asked for a player to come out of the stands. He did - we won and now we all stand ready. If you are in the A&M section, you stand or else." I asked, "Do you have alumni support?" Oscar D's eyes narrowed, "You must be from another planet, Johnny. Do we have alumni support? Let me tell you a story. Happened right here in Houston. One of our old alumnus was visiting with a friend that had to attend a funeral - so he tagged along to be sociable. When they were planting the deceased - the minister asked everyone to say a few kind words about the deceased. When it came time for our alumnus - he obliged, 'I do not know anything about your dear departed. I am here with an old friend, but while we are all here together - let me say a few words about Texas A & M.' And you ask if we have alumni support. We have the best alumni - greatest band in the world - all military and precision drill and the best school anywhere. You'll all have a great time." Main Line asked, "Is that an order?" And we all laughed.

Roger and Nancy rode with us to the stadium - oblivious to our presence in the front seat. Sally sat closer than usual - stroking the inside of my right thigh. I whispered,

"Looks like they're heading to the alter." Sally nodded, "Yes." I placed my right arm around her shoulders, "Are we still friends?" She drew closer and whispered, "More than that, but ..." "No commitment?" "Right" and she moved closer. "I get mixed signals." "Matches your personality. You're my kind of mixed up guy." "Is there someone else?" "I'm still reluctant - after my break-up with Attaboy. I hope you understand. Follow my directions." She placed a special car pass on the dash that allowed us into the faculty section. "Another old flame?" "How did you guess?" There is something about a college football game that gets the hormones buzzing. After I turned the engine off - Sally came into my arms and I really wasn't interested in leaving the car. Roger broke the spell, "Are those Texas Rangers?" Sally separated from my arms, "They're A & M seniors - silly." "But they're wearing knee high boots." "Tradition - only the seniors are allowed to wear them." Sally gave me a gentle dig to the ribs and whispered, "We better go outside, or we'll embarrass our friends." I nodded, "Yes."

Oscar D had good seats - right in the middle of the A & M student section. There is something about the odor of wool uniforms that sticks in the back of my senses - like manure to a shoe. Neither comes off - or can be forgotten. The band was even better than advertised - even though they carried a bunch of sissy reed instruments - like the Michigan band. I knew better than to make a comparison with the Best Damn Band In The Land - The Ohio State Band. The A & M Band was the best military band I'd ever seen or heard and I let it go at that. Besides - Aggies weren't too happy. Houston played them to a tie with a fourth quarter touchdown.

I wanted to ask Sally why the A & M students kept singing, "Good-by to Texas University" when they weren't even here, but thought better of it. I enjoyed myself and Sally seemed like she did - too. We hadn't been close for quite

awhile and the warmth of her body next to mine felt good. I was beginning to hear a faint ring-a-ling-ling in my ears. I wondered if she heard bells - too. Sally knew her football and asked all the right questions. She was even interested in the outcome. This was a woman worth waiting for. We were separated from the others when a phalanx of A & M students rushed by - streaming through the stadium portals. Sally drew closer as we walked, "Doesn't it make you want to go back to school?" "Sort of, but when my memory kicks in - I remember how anxious I was to get out - to the challenge of real life." "Don't you like academics?" "College is like priming a pump. Once you learn how to draw water it's time to get pumping on your own. One of my Literature Professors said, 'We teach you how to use the Library. Once you've learned that - it's time for you to leave school and go to the Library.'" "I still miss it. Maybe it's because I left after two years."

My three compadres were leaning up against the portholes of my Buick - while their dates chatted away. Oscar D insisted, "Let's take our young ladies to Trails End for some good old cowboy music." I looked over at Sally. She said, "No" with her lips - not making a sound. I replied, "Sorry - Sally and I haven't had much time alone. We'll take a rain check." Roger and Nancy decided to go. "We'll ride with Oscar D to Ellington and pick up my car. Sure you don't want to go?" Sally said, "No" and they understood. We drove back to her apartment in silence. Inside - she turned off the light and came to my side.

When Sally was off on a flight - I was on the ground and when I was in the air - she wasn't. We didn't see much of each other during October, but I saw my fair share of busted Radar sets. Our radar training flights should have been a piece of cake, but ours weren't. Radar was supposed to be very accurate. Our systems were far from that, but that

wasn't the school solution. Tolerances on our fixes became stringent - decreasing from twenty miles to five. However - when I looked at my scope - everything toward the center - the most accurate area - looked like a fluorescent blob. No matter how many adjustments I made to my Radar picture - I couldn't get rid of ground clutter. Mart the smart couldn't help. He'd look at his own scope and moan, "Just like our loran sets - knobs are too loose. They've been adjusted too many times." I agreed, "The clutter at the center of my scope looks like the aftermath of a nuclear explosion." Mart got a Cheshire-Cat grin on his face, "Don't try to identify anything near the center." "I'll lose accuracy." "But you'll pass."

On our first training flight - over half the radar sets were busted before wheels were in the well. By the time we touched down - all, but one set bit the dust. Main Line was a whirling dervish - a cyclone of motion. Scattering papers everywhere. He charged aft toward me and kneeled down beside my desk, "You got us through loran. Get us outa' this mess." "Simple - find a set that works - share it and don't adjust it out of focus. Don't forget to cross-check aircraft location with a look out the window - use map reading." "I get it - we demonstrate adjustment on one of the sets that's fogged." "Right and we listen to Mart the smart - don't use an object too close to the center of the sweep."

Radar - which began as scientific enigma - resurrected as an art form. Oscar D found words to describe our Jackson Pollock abstract scopes, "With Map Reading - the law is -

*I see therefore I believe.*

With Radar - the law is -

*I believe therefore I see.*

All we had to do was believe the blobs that blossomed on our Radar scopes." Oscar D was right - as always. "A positive

frame of mind - not the scientific method is the key to our success." We sailed through training - ready and waiting for our flight examination - on election day.

It was Main Line's turn to sponsor our Flight outing and he had a doozy, "Listen up. I have tickets for all of us - to a political rally tomorrow night. If it's like the ones we have in South Carolina - there'll be a pile of barbecue and plenty of free beer." Oscar D stood up, "Line - what kind of political shindig are you getting us into. We're supposed to be neutral." "Couldn't be more neutral than a Democrats for Eisenhower gathering at Herman Park - eight o'clock Friday night." Oscar D smiled, "Line looks like you may have a winner. Might get a chance to see if Republicans have horns - like my Daddy told me. I've never seen a live Republican - not from my part of Texas anyway. Least ways - none that would admit to it. Don't count on any food or beer - though. This isn't a local election. Now if it was for Sheriff or some important office like that - there'd be more than we could eat or drink. A Politician won't make much money running for President."

Called Sally and she was game, but she wanted to talk to me - alone, "We have things to discuss - Johnny. You're getting way to serious." "I was under the impression you were - too." "Pick me up at six thirty at the TWA gate at the airport. I land on my flight back from Atlanta an hour earlier. I'll shower and change there." "Wear something comfortable. Main Line says it's an outdoor rally - not a tea party. Are you flying out this evening?" "Yes - I won't be able to see you until I return."

It was twilight when I picked Sally up at the airport. Sally bubbled over - teasing me unmercifully on our drive to Herman Park. I couldn't remember seeing her so up - so happy. And she was driving me crazy - stroking my inner

right thigh - cuddling closer than the law allows. It took a Herculean effort on my part to get out of my car and walk to the rally. When we joined our friends, my face was flushed, but Sally was as cool as a cucumber. Oscar D took one look at me and laughed, "You sure look hot and bothered - Johnny. Not much of a crowd here. Can't be more than fifty or so." Roger quipped, "They look like Republicans to me." Oscar D was puzzled, "Don't see no horns - so I'm not sure, but it doesn't matter. Eisenhower is a hero around these parts. If he's a Republican - then they must be okay." Main Line said, "Pay attention. You're going to get a lesson in politics - TV style. They're going to make fifty of us look like a throng of thousands".

One of the managers placed us in a section of a very small bleacher. Sally linked her arm in mine, "They must have expected a small crowd. This won't seat more than fifty." We were Galveston - or at least our sign said so. Roger and Nancy were Houston - Oscar D and his lady - Pasadena and Main Line and Mart the smart were given torches. When the TV lights came on - we waved our signs and cheered while Main Line and Mart came out from behind the bushes carryin' two torches. The MC identified them as the tail end of a mile long parade of supporters and us as an enthusiastic group numbering in the thousands. The Texas governor - a Democrat - spoke of his support for the General while the cameras took tight crowd shots. We cheered and waved our signs on cue - like monkeys on a string.

After it was all over - we shook hands with the governor and wandered off to our cars. Main Line was sufferin' much disappointment, "Oscar D was right - no beer or barbecue. Sorry I drug you out for this." "Not a problem - Line. I enjoyed every minute of it. Won't believe all that I see on TV the next time - so it wasn't a waste of time. Let's head on out to Sam's Shack for a late dinner." Oscar D's fiancé

gave him a dig to the ribs, "Now Oscar - we're closer to the Shamrock Hotel. Lets take all of your friends there. We'll use my Daddy's membership card. He won't mind. He just struck oil again out near San Angelo. They have the nicest jumbo shrimp and the sauce is to die for." First time I'd ever seen Oscar D blush. Knew he was a gonner. No one disagreed - so we walked to our cars. Sally linked her arm in mine, "Can't stay long." "Do you have to fly out again tomorrow?" "No - I was thinking of - you know."

I didn't get back to my room at the barracks until late Sunday night and even then I had to pry myself out of Sally's bed. For someone who didn't want commitment - well it sure felt like she did. Main Line's comments about me having a lot to learn about women popped into my head. He was right, but I had a suspicion we all had a lot to learn. At mission planning the next morning - I discovered we voted absentee and canceled each other out. Oscar D liked Eisenhower, but was afraid lightning would strike him dead if he ever pulled the lever for a Republican. Don't know how Sally voted. She was on another flight to San Francisco. I felt the same way as Oscar D. Don't remember anyone in my family ever voting Republican. But - unlike Oscar D's part of the country - my county was all Republican - except for my relatives.

Next day - we flew north to Dallas and south to Houston. A combination of a few good sets and good luck carried us through our flight exam with passing marks. As usual - Main Line stood alone at the top of our class. Oscar D surmised, "Either the rules of engagement have been changed or the Air Force needs warm bodies to fill vacant slots. Can't believe all of our motley crew would pass. Mart? How about the next phase - Grid?" "No flight test. All we have to do is demonstrate proficiency. Maps are weird though - Grid lines on them. We use a gyro instead of a compass. Navigator use it in the Arctic where the Magnetic Pole is unreliable.

Should be an interesting couple of weeks. After that we fly two training flights using all we've learned and then a final end of course check-ride. Pass that and they pass out our funny wings." Roger the lodger smiled, "And we're out of here!" Oscar D waved for quiet, "Time to celebrate. Why don't we all go to that little Italian place Johnny and Sally are always talking about." I telephoned Sally. She had not returned - or if she had - wasn't home. I drove alone to our Little Italian restaurant and left the party early.

Our days at Nav School were dwindling down to a precious few. We had only three or four more weeks before we received our funny wings and moved on to advanced training - or flying the line. My three friends were attempting the Texas side step - without training and without success. They didn't know this dance and if they did - wouldn't have helped. Their fiancés were on a full court press to get commitment before we packed our bags and left Texas. Main Line was as skittish as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs, "Don't know if I want to make a commitment. Not sure if I want to settle down, but I'm certain I don't want to spend another lonely year in barracks." Oscar D was more philosophical, "Don't fret - Line. You can't control your life. If someone is gonna' tell you what to do - might as well be the one you sleep with. Johnny how about you and Sally? Sure looked like you were hot and heavy there for awhile." "Acts like I'm the only one for her, but won't commit. If she doesn't - I'll sure miss her. She's a good sport. Wouldn't be all bad going through life with her. Besides - what's love got to do with commitment?" Roger looked up, "Doesn't sound romantic to me. Love is everything." "According to my Grandfather, 'What's love got to do with it.' What he really meant was - friendship and caring are more important than a brief episode of red hot romantic love." Oscar D nodded, "Your Grandfather is right. With today's high divorce rate - friendship seems to last longer than love. Say - I thought you said Sally was

out of town. When I came back to the apartment from your Italian restaurant I saw her dangling her feet in the pool - talking to Attaboy." I gulped, but said nothing. I had one of those deep down sinking feelings and a knot in the pit of my stomach. Like - when you open the barn door and all the sheep and your sheep dog are gone.

It was hard for me to concentrate. My thoughts weren't on navigating. When we flew our last two practice flights - combining all of our skills - I barely passed. I was still seeing Sally, but I knew something was wrong. Usually I'm an optimist, but having been down the bumpy road of love before - I was reluctant to let it all hang out. Experience taught me that a small hurt to my psyche was a lot better than a broken heart. Maybe that was our problem. Neither of us wanted to be wounded - so we didn't give our relationship a chance. So - it looked like we were both going to wind up losers - at least I was.

After our next training flight - we were scheduled to choose our new assignment - a ritual of passage that we had trained for all year long. I sensed it would be one of those few remaining times we would be able to choose the path to determine our own futures. We were approaching a time where one had to shoulder personal responsibility or wind up in a home. It took Oscar D to snap me out of my funk, "Don't worry Johnny - you'll find the right girl for you much sooner than you expect. I've watched and you're learnin' what it's all about. Get your mind on our mission. When we're done - and choose where we'll go - then you can mope. When we get to choose - remember what your electronics instructor said, "Don't choose anything that begins with an E or an R. Said he'd shoot you and Tucker on sight if you did." "Me maybe, but Tucker escaped from this asylum to Supply School. You're right - there's nothing I can do about a love affair gone sour. It's probably all for the best."

Turned out our last training flight was a piece of cake. And it didn't seem to me that they were trying to get rid of us. But - Oscar D knew what he was talking about. Air Force had to be short of Navigators. We flew leisurely - from Houston to Dallas and back combining map reading with Night Celestial and Radar for a flawless flight. This simplicity came to a screeching halt when we flew our check-ride. Instead of flying overland - we flew south from Galveston over open ocean - the Gulf of Mexico. There were no towns - water tanks or rivers. Radar and map reading were out of the question.

After departing Galveston - my Flight members performed like trained circus elephants - except this time the Big Top was on fire. Main Line topped us all - running amok. Shear terror gave him the solution to our dilemma, "Listen up - we're saved - TACAN - we can use TACAN! And it's legal! Mix it in with one night celestial fix - a radar fix at the end and we qualify!" Oscar D was laconic, "Line - we'll have too. You just destroyed our only working loran set." TACAN worked, but I could smell the odor of flight suits - loaded down with nervous sweat - as we battled each other to use the few astrodomes available. After it was all over - we drove directly to Trails End without changing out of our flight suits - closed the bar at midnight.

Our grades were posted after breakfast - early in the morning. Main Line was on top - Mart the smart next and we all passed. As I headed for our class room - I bumped into our Electronics Class instructor and he pulled me aside, "Didn't think you'd make it this far. How about Tucker?" "Tucker washed out - banished to Supply School." "Remember your promise?" "Yes Sir." "Keep it. Don't choose an assignment with an E or R. Where do you stand in your class?" "Top quarter." "Shouldn't be a problem." "If there's a choice - I'll keep my promise."

I was happy and mad - almost mid-December and no more Nav training, but we still had to attend class - gym class. And we didn't receive our funny wings. Classes were over, but the time allotted wasn't. Not knowing what to do with us - the Commandant decided we needed to exercise. And we did - four hours in the morning and four hours in the afternoon. We played touch football - swam laps - volleyball - capture the flag - basketball - baseball and every other team sport known to man - except field hockey. And we were getting in shape - as if lean mean second lieutenants needed it. We were so thin - couldn't see us if we turned sideways. Even with this athletic diversion - choosing our assignment was still an all encompassing obsession. Rumors and fact flew in tandem and separately.

We knew that Strategic Air Command was a tough place to work - long hours and more testing than most schools. B-36 and B-47 bombers were the backbone of SAC and the B-52 was just entering the inventory. SAC needed fresh blood and we were prime candidates. The main drawback was location. SAC Bases were isolated from modern civilization. If the town didn't have a TV station or department store - Air Force built a SAC base near it. North and South Dakota might have the friendliest folks on earth, but San Francisco had ocean and ladies. Roger the lodger didn't want any part of SAC, "Too many planes fallin' out of the sky and most of the Bases are a hundred miles from a good cup of coffee." Air Defense Command had its share of problems - too. Navigators were in the back seat of fighters - with a teen-age killer up front. As a GIB - Guy in Back - we operated radar - guiding the airplane on an intercept toward enemy bombers. Rumors had filtered back to Nav school and were spreading like a wild prairie fire. Up in Alaska - when a teen-age killer bailed out - his GIB was left behind - pinned in by his equipment - 'cause radar had to be stowed before a GIB could eject. Mart the smart wasn't worried, "Better than flying a twelve hour

round trip mission from the middle of nowhere and back in a BUF [Big Ugly F.....]." Oscar D got that sly smile he gets when he's been given the mother of all straight lines. "You mean SAC crew members have to fly around naked? Gives new meaning to moon shot." We broke up - but engineers don't have much of a sense of humor. Mart was serious, "BUF is what they call a B-52." We couldn't help it - we were rolling around on the ground - holding our sides.

A week before Christmas - when we reported in for another round of physical training we received the news we had been waiting for. Nav school was finished. We received our wings this morning and would choose our assignments at one o'clock. I decided that I wanted to fly the line in Big Shaky The Crowd Killer - an under powered propeller driven C-124 transport. It was a no brainer - considering SAC Air Fields were in clean air places like - Minot, North Dakota - upper peninsula Michigan and Roswell, New Mexico. Military Air Transport Command's bases were on the coast. Big Shaky flew to every exotic location in the world - from hardship bases - like San Francisco or New York. Someone had to take the tough assignments and it might as well be me. With top quarter standing in my Flight - I had as good a chance as any of my contemporaries. Main Line and Oscar D decided to stay in Texas. They had been caught in mid-step by their ladies. Roger the lodger wanted to stay on at Ellington - as an instructor. The wedding bells went ring-a-ling-ling for them, but not for me.

In the morning - we marched up as our names were called and received our funny wings. Piped in music over the sound system of the Base Movie theater seemed appropriate for the occasion. The notice was so short - wives and girl friends were not in attendance. We had as much ceremony as a tree falling in a forest when no one was around - sound and fury over nothing. That afternoon - assignment selection began on

schedule. I was nervous - enough to smoke another one of Oscar D's cigarettes. We were back where it all began - minus - Tucker. After we were seated - our Commandant strode in from stage left to, "Attention!" "At ease - gentlemen. Don't we all look fine in our shiny new funny wings." He stood silent - waiting for us to settle in.

He cleared his throat, "I believe we all have a clear memory of our first meeting. Our Base Commander is no longer with us. He transferred to Alaska and took command of a squadron of our newest radar interceptors. While flying a familiarization ride in the back seat - his plane lost its engine. He was pinned under the equipment and did not make it out. I'm certain we all feel a great sense of loss. Now where was I? Oh - Student Officers were new to us then. We flew uncharted skies with your class - so to speak. We've had a few air bumps along the way, but all-in-all its been a good learning experience for students and staff alike. I'm certain you remember the question I was asked by Lieutenant Tucker - who by the way - has just graduated at the top of his class at Supply School and he still doesn't know how to ship his own household goods. When I said, 'You play ball with me and I'll play ball with you' - Tucker said, 'Don't you really mean you play ball with me and I'll shove the bat up your ass.' To your great misfortune - gentlemen - Tucker was right. Bend over - here comes the bat."

"In the past we allowed you to select your assignments by academic standing - alone. Not any longer. Air Training Command has decreed that those with the longest service commitments will select first. Those of you scheduled to return to civilian life will select last. Therefore - Regular Officers will pick first - Reserve Officers with an indefinite term of service will pick second and Reserve Officers with a date of separation will pick last. Within those categories you will choose by academic rank. In case

there is another wise-ass like Tucker lurking among you funny wings - I won't take any questions. I want you to always remember this. You may be pure of heart - with the strength of ten. You may be smarter - with the wisdom of Solomon. You may be a charismatic - like Patton. But gentlemen - in this man's Air Force you can rest assured - as far as Navigators are concerned - there will always be a pilot in charge."

My stomach went looking for its pit. I couldn't believe it. My date of separation was less than four years away. I had dropped from the top quarter of my Class to lower than whale shit. I was devastated - while Oscar D and Main Line were jumping up and down with joy. Oscar D tapped me on my shoulder, "Line and me are regulars. If you want a better assignment you can change your DOS status to indefinite. Personnel has a guy ready to sign you up in the back of the room." Roger the lodger signed up. Mart the smart and I didn't. Mart shook his head, "Not much call for a sanitary engineer in the Air Force. I'll do my hitch and return to designing sewage plants. Why aren't you signing up." "Not much call for someone with an American Lit BA degree. Air Force is moving toward the electronic age and I've been warned to stay away. Might change my mind later, but for now three more years seems enough. Don't want to lock myself in to sixteen more."

I looked up at the movie screen - where our Commandant was last seen standing. Assignments were projected and names were called - Regulars first. Assignments to Big Shaky were the first to go - instructor assignments next - overseas assignments to Japan and Germany followed. When my turn came - all that was left were assignments beginning with E or R. I certainly wasn't excited about being a GIB. That left Electronic Warfare Training in Biloxi, Mississippi. Although it began with a dreaded E and way out of my knowledge banks -

EW Training along the Gulf met my criteria of coastal living. I marched to the podium and chose Biloxi. I walked outside and asked around, but no one knew what an EW was. Main Line speculated, "Not sure, but it might be a ground job - runnin' a Radar Site along the coast." Oscar D shrugged, "Doesn't matter what it is as long as you don't have to fly behind some teenage killer - who'd just as soon die as live." Oscar D and Main Line chose to become instructors and Roger the lodger chose to be a GIB. He discovered that the school was in College Station and he'd be near his intended. Mart the smart didn't get to choose. Pentagon needed a Sanitary Engineer and he was the only one around. Didn't make sense to me - they all ready had experts - who knew how to turn manure into regulations. Posted outside the administration building was a notice.

*Orders Will Be Picked Up Tomorrow!  
All New Navigators Will Clear Off  
Base By December 20. Merry Christmas!*

*By Order Of  
The Commandant*

It was a fitting ending to our sojourn at Nav School. Before we scattered - there was one more farewell party at the apartment pool. This time I didn't cook and was without a lady friend. Sally and Attaboy had again become an item. I was odd man out. Wasn't much of a party. It began as a celebration and ended as a wake. Sally treated me like a merry widow treats her dearly departed - after he is planted under the sod. With a single tear - she kissed me on the cheek and said she'd miss me. Might have been true, but

Attaboy made sure we didn't get too close. I smiled through the whole ordeal and told her I'd write, but knew I wouldn't. I left early - stopping at the O' Club for one more farewell drink. With not much to pack and carrying it all in my car - I was almost ready to leave.

I slept in spurts, but by morning I was ready to pack my car and move out. Sally's treatment aside - I was beginning to enjoy military life. It was a lot more entertaining than herding sheep - though I was beginning to feel more like a sheep than a shepherd. However - Air Force sheep could talk and outside of the pilots' union - there didn't seem to be a herd mentality. Most of the crazies I had been associated with might have been regimented on the outside, but inside they were still unique. I would miss the friendship, but it was time to move on. I packed my car - drove to the Base Gas Station and immediately ran into my electronics instructor. I tried to gas and run, but couldn't get away, "Johnny - hold up." "Tried to sneak out. They changed the rules. All that was left was E & R." "Understand. What did you choose?" "E - Electronic Warfare. Leaving for Biloxi as soon as I crank her up." "When you find out what an EW is - write me - so I can warn the others." "It's on the coast - so it can't be all bad." "So is Nome - Alaska. All I know is it's a spook operation and knowledge of it is hard to come by. Don't forget - write." "I will if I survive." I paid for my gas and hopped in behind the wheel - wonderin' if I'd ever see my Nav School friends again and stopped, "Haven't seen one soul from High School or Ohio State."

*"In another moment down went Alice  
after it, never once considering how  
in the world she was to get out again."*

# 5

Outside - it was pitch black - cold - damp - rain comin' down like a cow pissin' on a flat rock - as I drove northeast away from Houston - out of the familiar - into the unknown. With nothing to do except fight the hypnotism of synchronized windshield wipers and out of range of any, but country music radio stations - my mind wandered, "Just what is a spook operation? Is it an operation connected with graveyards - ghosts and haunted houses? No - couldn't be that. Had to be something Top Secret - or rumor of it would have reached Nav school. When the Air Force wants to hide something - the whole world finds out about it - except the troops. We're always the last to know. Better not to worry. EW couldn't require good hand and eye coordination. If it did - Air Force would have pilots doin' it." I smiled to myself, "Hope I'm not on the graveyard shift."

Sally kept creeping back into the recesses of my mind. We were close friends and sometime lovers, but neither of us allowed the spark to ignite into flame. Still - I really did miss her. Attaboy was getting quite a woman. Wondered - if I had made a full court press - would she would be beside me now - traveling to Biloxi? Then again - probably not. I caught Sally on the rebound - from Attaboy and when I wasn't paying attention - she bounced back. It was lonely driving off to a new adventure alone. I asked myself, "Are we having fun - yet?" And the answer came back, "No."

I stopped in a small east Texas town called Texarkana for gas - before crossing over the border into Arkansas. The gas station attendant warned me about going on, "Better stay

overnight here. Next town of any size is in the middle of Arkansas. Sidewalks don't roll up early or late in Little Rock." "When do they?" I had just provided another mother of all straight lines. "'Cause they don't have any sidewalks in Arkansas." I drove east with his laughter still ringing in my ears. In spite of this warning - I drove on through the night in a steady downpour. Couldn't see any of Arkansas in the dark and there were darn few lights visible through a heavy rain. When I reached Little Rock - I pulled into the driveway of a brand new motel - near downtown. The desk clerk was quite proud, "Only motel in town and it took quite a bit of political maneuvering just to get it built." I was too tired to ask why - so I nodded - trying to stay friendly. "Do you want a wake-up call?" "Not in any hurry." I fell asleep as soon as I turned down my bed.

I never thought of Arkansas as part of the deep south. As a matter of fact - I never thought of Arkansas at all. It was hard to spell - hard to pronounce and out of sight of anyone growing up in the midwest. Grits - a foul tastin' inedible concoction made from corn - proved me wrong. Grits can only be eaten when smothered in butter and covered with syrup. Grits filled half my breakfast plate. I tasted it - plowed around it like a farmer trying to avoid rocks, "Only good for a whiskey stomach." I wondered if folks down here knew they were making Yankee farmers rich - buying corn for grits. I finished eggs and bacon and sipped away on several cups of excellent motel restaurant coffee. I couldn't help, but overhear the conversation at the next table. Two suits with open neck white shirts were discussing local politics. The large red-faced one was upset, "We got trouble in our new State Legislature." The short - thick set man across from him answered, "Should never have let them outsiders build a motel here. Now they want to sell whiskey by the glass. Gonna' cut into our moonshine operation if we ever let 'em sell it over the counter." "I'm against it." "We can get

the religious folks to oppose it." "Might cost us an arm and a leg. How about cornering the distribution?" "Now your talking sense. We'll have to cross a lot of palms at the State house." "So - what else is new." "We're changin' an institution when we make mixed drinks legal." "Want me to explore?" "Might as well. Won't be long before our roads are paved and our folks will find out what's across the border." "We'll have a revolution on our hands."

I paid my bill at the cash register and returned to leave a tip. My waitress was cleaning up, "Don't mind those two. They fought this place going in tooth and nail and now they spend all there time here. Best grits in town. You stayin' on?" "On my way home for Christmas." "Stay on the main road - only one paved road between here and St. Louis. That red mud on our side roads sticks to a car like glue. We have too many folks - like those two - lining their pockets and not enough money going into pavement. We're not change friendly in this state." The way she frowned when she picked up the change - didn't take a CPA to figure out those two weren't big tippers.

I topped off my gas tank before leaving Little Rock. After listening to her warning - I didn't want to get stuck in the mud trying to buy gas along the way. Drove northwest toward the border of Missouri on what seemed to be the only paved highway in the state. Last night's heavy rain had turned the side roads into seas of bright red mud. I shook my head. Little Rock was a paved island surrounded by rural poverty and red dirt. I looked for and couldn't find a single paved side road or paved road leading to a service station. Autos traveling my way were the color of red dust. Those folks in Little Rock had really done a number on their rural cousins. My car was almost out of gas by the time I found a service station with pavement. I had traveled into southeast Missouri - just before crossing the river into

Illinois - where I discovered grits were still a favorite morning food. Passed through St. Louis and drove fifty miles across southern Illinois before finding a suitable motel. I might be back in Lincoln's home state, but the flavor was definitely deeply southern - grits and all the pork trimmings' for the evening meal.

The morning weather forecast was ominous. A fast moving cold front had moved out of the Rockies - into the plains of Kansas and was bearing down on the upper midwest. Folks in Houston called these storms blue northerns. I decided to try to make it to Cincinnati on US 50 east before the snows came. Passing through Illinois farmland was like being back home again. I traveled out of southern poverty into the rich rolling - black bottom farm land of Illinois. Prosperous farms stretched out before me as far as the eye could see. All the way towards a slate gray horizon - barns and silos dotted the countryside like pimples on a teenager with overactive oil glands. I stopped only for coffee - candy and gas in middle Illinois - attempting to stay ahead of the fast moving cold front. By early evening - I crossed southern Indiana into Ohio Territory. I had traveled away from the unreconstructed south into the known civilized world - a city like Rome - Cincinnati, Ohio.

Southern ways and southern women - all come loaded with charismatic charm. One can be lulled into a deep sense of euphoria when the scent of Magnolias drift on a warm summer night's breeze. Southern folks had to be who Kipling had in mind when he wrote - *"Many religious people are deeply suspicious. They seem, for purely religious purposes, of course, to know more about iniquity than the unregenerate."* The south is a land full of ambiguities - where one can be run down by a car full of God fearing Christians - speeding away from Bible study on a weekday night. But - there is only one civilized city in

America - Cincinnati. Like Rome - it has seven hills and a Coliseum [ called Crosley Field ] - with thick stone walls protecting a diamond of green grass. Like Munich - it was dotted with world class breweries and like the Rhine - had more than one outstanding winery on its river banks.

I stopped at the first Beer Garden I saw and bought a case of pure ambrosia - Golden Hudapole's Royal Amber beer - before driving through downtown and northeast to the tree lined suburb of Norwood. Passing by twenty or so Beer Gardens along the way - I found a motel to my liking and checked in. The storm had reached southern Indiana and would be here soon. I had one more pilgrimage to make before returning to our family farm. Like the gateway to Rome's Coliseum - Caruso's Italian restaurant is chiseled out of stone, but unlike the Coliseum it is in Cincinnati.

My pilgrimage was rewarded. Caruso's cuisine provided great pleasure to every single one of my senses. I lingered over the last drop of Chianti before venturing outside. The wind had switched from mild southwest to numbing northeast. Large flaky lumps of snow flew sideways past the tip of my nose. I had been in the south - too long. I turned up my jacket collar and walked backwards into the wind - turning my head every dozen steps or so - looking for my car. The chill wind of this early Christmas storm blew up my pant legs and whistled through my shorts on its way out through my jacket into a snowy Cincinnati night.

While I slept - this whirling cyclone weather system spilled more than a foot of snow on top of Cincinnati's seven hills. If my father still had sheep and they were outside roaming the Scioto River hills - he'd lose more than a few to last night's storm. I stayed on for another day - unable to travel on snow blocked highways. The outdoor Beer Garden's were closed, but not the inside. The debate over who was a

better hitter - Cincinnati's Ted Kluzuski or Chicago Cub's Ernie Banks would go on for many a cold winter night. After a night's rest - I was ready to move on. The forecast was for clearing skies and ice covered roads. Sally was in the past - slipping slowly out of my mind as I drove northeast toward Columbus on Route 3.

I turned north along River Road - driving past the Columbus Zoo - toward Concord Township and Father's farm. My heart quickened as I passed by Uncle John's great white barn - a mile up the road. As I drove uphill on a private lane across Grandfathers old stone creek bridge - a small flock of sheep sheltered in our farmyard came into view. Their thick wool coats protected them from all, but the worst of this early winter storm. The trip north from Cincinnati had taken forever - two slides forward - one slide back until I was anxious to be done with it. I could see a Christmas tree through the front window of our farmhouse. The lights were on - it was Christmas Eve on the farm.

I carried the case of Royal Amber into the kitchen and gave Mother a kiss. Father shook my hand and gave me a hug, "Figured you'd be flying home every weekend now that your in the Air Force. Been almost a year." "Don't own a plane and they frown on that these days. Noticed the sheep." "Just to keep my hand in. Not more than twenty - though we do have an ambitious ram." Mother poured coffee, "What happened to that young lady you wrote to us about - Sally - airline stewardess - wasn't she?" "We parted friends." I didn't feel obliged to unload all my troubles on my folks - so I didn't, "Don't worry. As Parson says, 'It's marryin' time.' Won't be long before I take that step." "Make sure we get to meet her early on." She refilled my cup and Father added a touch of brandy, "Doctor says it's good for my heart." "And he has had two fingers every night since. Dad - tell Johnny about the new houses going up." "Some foolish city folks want to

build down by the river." "In the hundred year flood zone? Where the water can rise twenty feet during a severe spring flood?" "Said they were foolish. We sold fifty - two acre lots to those folks." "Are you going to continue to farm?" "Land can stand a rest. I'll put it in the soil bank and let it return to good healthy sod." "Are you moving to Florida?" "No. I've been asked to coach football full time and teach a little on the side at the new consolidated high school." "How much land will remain?" "'Bout two square miles or so - not really sure. Been in the family since your ancestors received it in lieu of soldiers pay from Washington's Army. When you want to return - land is yours to farm." "Not sure I want to farm." "I said the same thing when I was your age. When I'm gone - I want you to promise you won't sell the main farm. Your Grandparents are resting on the hilltop. Mother loved that view of the river. Be a shame to move them to town and a cemetery full of strangers." "I'll pass this farm on to your Grandchildren." "Where is the Air Force sending you this time?" "Biloxi - Mississippi - Electronic Warfare Training." "What the dickens is that?" "Don't know, but I'll soon find out. You still smoking those sugar cured hams?" "Mom has some sliced in the pantry - waiting for you. Thanks for remembering the Royal Amber beer. Don't have any for sale around here. Cincinnati's the only place anyone can find good beer."

As anxious as I was to leave the farm - go on to college and enter the Air Force - I was reluctant this time to leave hearth and home and drive south. But - as shepherds say - it was time to get the flock out of there. I drove south to Kentucky. The road from Kentucky to Tennessee ran clear and dry. Grits on Nashville's breakfast menu reminded me - I was in the south. Drove south to Tupelo - Mississippi after breakfast. From there - through Meridian - Latural and Hattiesburg. Mississippi looked almost as poor as Arkansas, but roads were paved and farms had rich black bottom land.

While Arkansas is hard scrabble and mean - Mississippi looked fat and sassy - like it was waiting for the good times to roll in. Arkansas roads were flattened red mud. The road south from Hattiesburg to Gulfport was a paved modern miracle - with limited access through forests and wetlands. Wetlands is nothing more than an environmental euphemism for swamp. Driving through southern Mississippi - most of her folks were sittin' on the front porch - rocking - watching me. When the good times finally begin to roll in - Mississippi's minions were as ready as her highways.

Gulfport is a sleepy resort town - five miles wide and two miles deep - the lynch pin of Mississippi Gulf villages. To the west - Bay St. Louis - Pass Christian and Long Beach. To the east - Mississippi City - Biloxi - Edgewater - Ocean Springs and Pascagoula. All sounding like a refrain from the train station announcer on Jack Benny's radio show. Strung like an open necklace of pearls - offshore are a string of barrier islands. Beginning with Lake Borgne in Louisiana and ending at Dauphin Island south of Mobile, Alabama are - Cat - Horn and Petit Islands - marking the southern boundary of Mississippi Sound and the beginning of the Gulf of Mexico.

I continued driving south until I almost ran into the Gulf and then turned east on East Beach Road. As I drove by the Friendship House my eyes focused on the loveliest lady I had ever seen - walking the beach in the evening breeze. In an instance - all thoughts of Sally vanished. I thought about stopping and chasing after her, but knew that wouldn't be a good idea. I sighed - deeply and drove on to Keesler Air Force Base. The Air Policeman at the main gate was polite and helpful - giving me directions to Base Housing that I could follow. I parked my car outside another World War II administration building - got out and stretched. This Air Patch looked a lot like Ellington Field - condemned barracks and all. I slapped my arm. Mosquitoes were small,

but feisty. I waited for the desk Sergeant to hang up the phone. He reminded me of Bilko when he smiled and said, "Sorry Lieutenant. There's no room at the Inn. You'll have to stay downtown. Keesler is the new electronics training center for the Air Force and we're packed with students. You wouldn't want to stay here anyway. Our buildings aren't fit for hogs. Plenty of room at the local hotels. Try the Broadwater Beach. They'll give you military rates. A friend of mine runs the bar there - Herbie. Tell him Welko says hello. He'll treat you right. Oh - you can't afford to stay there full time." He handed me a list of apartments and underlined one of them in red, "Right behind Gus Steven's place. They rent to salesmen - strippers and military there." I smiled, "At last - I'm out of the ordinary and into the exotic. Thanks for the help. I'll look at the Broadwater and I'll give Herbie your regards."

I wasn't the only one distracted when I drove along East Beach Road. The object of my distraction had also noticed me, but I didn't know it. The lovely lady was Bobbie Jean Langtry - the one who was about to change my style of living. She strolled on sand packed firm from last night's rain. The warm winter Gulf breeze blew sand across her toes and straw blonde hair into her eyes. She brushed it away from the tip of her nose and turned toward home - across the road from the beach and next door to a southern shrine - Jefferson Davis' winter home. For some reason she noticed my old four door black Buick as I drove by. She returned my wave - wondering who I was and probably answered it with, "Must be another young lieutenant reporting into Keesler - by the looks of the boxes stacked in the back seat." It had been a year to the day since Bobbie Jean's husband - Ralph passed away from a massive heart attack. He was a fond memory, but she knew it was time to move on. When she crossed East Beach Road to her house - I was nothing more than an electron lingering in the recesses of her thoughts, but a bolt of lightning in mine.

I drove into the Broadwater's driveway - forced to chuckle to myself. The Broadwater Beach Hotel was big enough - white and well kept, but it looked like a giant dumpy white elephant - sitting on a mound across the road from the beach. One glance at the rates - even reduced for me and I knew I'd have to begin an apartment search. Welko was right, "Maybe Welko's friend Herbie can give me a leg up." I stowed my luggage in the room and wandered downstairs to the bar. Two days on the road had taken their toll. My body still felt like it was in a moving car.

The Broadwater's bar adjoined the dining room. There were several patrons on stools and a dozen or so at the tables. Pretty standard - except it was a reminder of an ornate turn of the century bar - decorated in early Queen Victorian. I introduced myself to the bartender, "You must be the famous Herbie - Welko mentioned. He said to give you his best." Herbie leaned over the bar and stuck out his hand, "Glad to meet you, Johnny did you say? Are you new to the Gulf Coast?" "Newly assigned to Keesler and looking for an apartment." "Might be able to help you. Did Welko give you a base list?" I handed it to him. Herbie scanned it, "Hm - the one underlined in red isn't for you. Unless you want strippers and their boy friends keeping you up all night. What would you like to drink? The first ones on me." "Might as well have a Jax. Better get familiar with the local brew. New Orleans?" "On the river. What school are you attending at Keesler?" "EW - Electronic Warfare. Do you know anything about it?" "Not the school, but you must be a lieutenant." "You guessed right. Tell me something. I'm sitting in an ornate bar - drinking beer - looking at liquor bottles with black state tax stamps on them - in a dry state." "Hope you noticed we have several carry outs - too. Our State Legislature got tired of losing taxes on bootleg whiskey and decided to issue a black market stamp. Now we have a ton of money at the Capitol we can't spend because

it's illegal - because the state is dry." "Is it all right to ask why?" "Too many well connected citizens here in Harrison County - our Gulf Coast is a cash cow for the state treasury. Money is in the bank drawing interest - waiting for Mississippi to go wet. Where are you from?" "Ohio - don't think I want another Jax." "How about a Bud." "One more and after that - think I'll eat dinner. How's your dining room?" "Not bad. Pepper steak is wonderful and our fish is - too."

Herbie refilled a room full of drinks and returned - turning Welko's apartment list over in his hands. He scanned it again, "None of these are for you. I have a friend who owns the best vacation apartments on the Gulf. She converted her mansion's bedroom house into four one bedroom furnished apartments and refurbished the apartment over what used to be the stables. They're usually spoken for a year in advance, but she might have one open. How long will you be staying at Keesler?" "Less than a year - probably seven months." "When I have some free time - I'll give her a call." Herbie wrote down her name and address on a cocktail napkin, "Lady's name is Mrs. Langtry. Her husband owned this hotel. Passed away last year. She didn't need the money and the kids did - so she sold it. Watch your manners around her. She's quite a lady and a good friend." "Langtry? That's the name of a famous singer. If she has room - I'll stop by tomorrow morning. Think I'll give that famous pepper steak you recommended a try."

The maitre di handed me Herbie's note at breakfast. I opened it - Mrs. Langtry had an apartment open, but wanted to talk to me before making a commitment. Herbie added, "Stuck my neck out for you. Mind your manners." Knew I was in the deep south and thought - "Mrs. Langtry must be a grand southern dame - celebrating her sunset years." I ordered bacon - eggs and toast. Filling half the Broadwater's ornate

plate were grits and more grits - whipped high - like a pile of mashed potatoes. Looked good - tasted neutral - which means they were the best I've ever had. I didn't check out of the hotel, but at thirty dollars a day - I could only spend another night on lieutenant's pay.

When I stopped at Keesler's Main gate to ask directions - the Air Policeman manning the gate was as good as the one who helped yesterday. I found the EW school admin building on my first try. The only one around was the clerk typist, "Your training isn't scheduled to begin until January 9th, but don't worry. You won't be idle. Our Commandant has farmed you out to the Technical Training Wing. Report over there at eight in the morning - day after New Years Day." "What are they going to do with us?" "You'll assist them with their military training." "Can you tell me what an EW is?" "Not supposed too, but you train on the ground and in the air. Everything around here is Secret." "Are there any officers running the school?" "Yes, but you won't find them here." "Where are they?" "Not allowed to tell you where or what they're doing, but they're not working for Uncle Sam." I walked out the door - hoping that someone at Technical Training Wing could tell me what EWs do.

So far so good - didn't know what an EW was, but no one seemed concerned. I returned the Air Policeman's salute as I drove out through the Main Gate, "Everyone seems friendly here. Shouldn't be too bad an assignment even if I don't know what I'm doing." I drove west on East Beach Road with one eye out for the apartments Herbie touted. I passed two carryout liquor stores - several bars and Gus Steven's - a strip joint. The marquee advertised -

## *Bonnie The Body Beautiful*

This strip joint looked clean. As a matter of fact the

entire Gulf Coast was well groomed, "Sheriff must keep tight control here. Can't believe the prices. Have to be twenty-five percent lower than Texas. There's Gus Steven's - that's the place Welko mentioned and Herbie said not to rent an apartment. I slowed down when I saw the Friendship House restaurant and turned right - into the driveway of Mrs. Langtry's apartments. I scanned the area, "This is close to where I saw that good looking lady yesterday. Wonder if she rents here?" Mrs. Langtry's home was in front of the apartments. Wasn't a mansion with pillars. Looked like a brand new modern ranch style home.

I rang the bell and the vision I saw on the beach opened the door, "Herbie didn't tell me that you were so young." Bobbie Jean laughed, "You were expecting a mature southern lady." Our eyes locked and that spark I had been waiting for all of these years flew into my brain and short circuited my thought process. I was speechless, but Bobbie Jean motioned for me to come inside and my tongue untied - halfway, "Herbie didn't tell me you were so beautiful. And young - why you're younger than I am. I'm sorry. I don't think that came out right." Bobbie Jean laughed and her eyes lit up, "You must be the Lieutenant Herbie called about." "I'm Johnny Ropp and I'm standing here like a fool with my mouth open when I came to buy your apartment. There I go again - I mean rent." She stared deep - deep into my eyes and smiled, "I'm sorry - what did you say your first name is?" "Johnny - Johnny Ropp." "Well - Johnny - I don't normally rent to strangers or military, but I rented to a military couple. Newlyweds live in the bedroom house - turned out quite well. Most of my winter guest are from up north and the summer ones are from New Orleans. However - you are in luck. One of my winter tenants was in an auto accident in Iowa during the Christmas storm. Theywon't be able to come this year. I have a large one bedroom apartment over the garage that you might find be suitable. Are you interested?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. I had passed the first test, "Yes ma'am." "Follow me." Bobbie Jean led me around a large ante-bellum building at the rear of her home, "This bedroom house was built at least twenty years before the war of northern aggression. It originally had eight bedrooms. My Mother converted it into four apartments after the hurricane took down the mansion out front. She lost interest after Daddy died. I added a fifth apartment over the livery stable. It's now a five car garage with storage and laundry room." "Did you build the house out front." "Yes. I lived in it when I met Ralph. Rather proud of it. Designed it when I was sixteen. I had to have a place to get away from Mother. Our family home is outside of Jackson. My Great Great Grandfather built this place to winter in before the war of northern aggression." I didn't rise to her bait. I didn't want to lose a beginning friendship and an apartment at the same time. I asked, "How much land do you have?" "I really don't know. My family has several large plantations and I have my own holdings." She blushed, "You meant around here. Six hundred or so acres out back, but it's mostly swamp and trees. Don't go tramping around back there. We do have snakes."

We climbed the outside stairs of the livery stable and Bobbie Jean unlocked the door, "Completely furnished with dishes - silverware and cooking utensils. There is a sitting room - one bedroom - dining area and kitchen. You won't need linen. I'll have my maid stock the place." I looked around. It was better than most of the homes I'd visited. Herbie was right. This was the best place to live on the Gulf Coast. I turned and bumped into Bobbie Jean, "Sorry - I should watch where I'm going. Do the ceiling fans work?" "Best ones ever made. They were in the Broadwater before I installed the air-conditioning there." "I'll take it. Do you mind if I move in today?" "Rent is eighty dollars a month and that includes electricity - water and gas." "Who do I make the

check out - too?" "Langtry Enterprises. Remember - this is a quiet place. When you have guests - make sure they mind their manners." "Yes ma'am. I've said more yes ma'ams than I've said since Grade School. I want to apologize up front. You can't help it if you're drop dead gorgeous. I shouldn't be standing around with my tongue tied in knots. It's impolite." Bobbie Jean had that southern flair. She just smiled at my awkwardness, "I've had enough ma'ams - too. I'm not a grand dame - why I'm barely twenty-one years old. You may call me Bobbie Jean and is Johnny all right for you?" All right? She could have called me a dirt bag - anything and I could have cared less. With foot in mouth I said, "Yes ma'am. There I go again." "Do you have a household shipment on the way?" "Everything I own is in the back of my Buick or at your hotel. Do you mind if I move in this morning?" I handed her the check - careful not to hold her hand - which was foremost on my mind. Bobbie Jean smiled, "An Ohio bank. My Great grandfather had his leg saved by a Yankee surgeon from your state - outside of Atlanta - when that butcher Sherman burned his way to the sea. I wonder? Move in when you want. Stop by for the key when you return." I smiled, "My Great Grandfather was a surgeon with Sherman on his march through Georgia. Claimed the confederate medal he had was given to him by a Reb Officer for saving his leg. Didn't saw it off. We may have more in common than you think." Bobbie Jean gave me a hug, "Why I believe there may be such a thing as a good Yankee. Wait till I tell Mother." She kissed me on the cheek and walked quickly back toward her house. I stood there - like your average sod buster - with my mouth open.

I looked around my new home and then out the window. Pine forest to the rear - crushed stone driveway to the front. Hurricane must have taken all the big trees down in the front yard - along with the mansion. There were only two left between my place and the bedroom house. I sighed as

Bobbie Jean disappeared around the corner of her apartment building. Then laughed at myself. I hadn't been this tongue tied since my first date in Jr. High. I wanted to ask her if every lady in the south had two names and remembered Oscar D's response to the same question and thought better of it. Bobbie Jean had raised much more than a few questions for me to ponder over. When our eyes met - an electrical spark was created that almost dropped me to my knees.

I sat down in the easy chair and placed my feet up on the ottoman. Sally was different. Four inches shorter than me and more than ample on top. I'll have to flat out say it - Sally was well stacked. Not that I was all that concerned with ladies breasts. When you grow up on a farm - if a cow's udder is overly large - you have to worry about them stepping on their teats. Bobbie Jean was my height. Maybe that was the reason our eyes met and locked. What knocked me out was a lady with the complete package - well proportioned - thin enough, but not so her bones stuck out. And that describes Bobbie Jean. Face and eyes made the difference - if the body was well toned - a smile - and those eyes. That had to be it. Sally and Bobbie Jean both had it. And Bobbie Jean had an aura about her. Twenty-one and all ready a widow? Rich - so she couldn't have time to attend college. Intelligent - good looking - a sense of humor and the sparks flew. My brain had turned to mush. All my defenses were down. I wondered, "Does this happen to everybody. Am I the only romantic in the world? But more important - does Bobbie Jean feel the same way I do? Can't find out sittin' here. Better get a move on to the Broadwater and pick up my stuff. The keys? Bobbie Jean could have handed them to me earlier. I wonder?"

I shouldn't have worried. Found out later that Bobbie Jean's heart was pounding - too. Back in her kitchen - she made a pot of tea and scolded herself, "Bobbie Jean! Under

normal circumstances you'd never rent to a bachelor - or military - and a Damn-Yankee? I didn't check his credit. I will, but not for money. I want to know more about him. Many a married man runs around pretending he's single. Now I remember - his car - he's the young man I waved too yesterday as I returned from my walk. But - why am I renting to an unmarried man and one so close to my age? Is it because most of the young men around here are in love with themselves - or all ready married? I wonder - did he feel the electricity I felt when our eyes met? Bobbie Jean stop that. You are acting like a school girl. You haven't had one date since Ralph passed away and the passes started at his funeral. Men! Bobbie Jean - you are a mess. Johnny will have to stop by for the keys. I should have given them to him. I better change out of these jeans. He'll be back soon. Oh fuss and feathers - I'll invite him to dinner. Come on girl - get back in the swim. Don't let this one get away."

I pulled up to the outside stairway and opened the trunk of my car. As I reached over to pull out the first box - a presence of a warm fragrant breeze enveloped me. I turned around and saw a pair of well shaped feet in summer sandals. Then up - into Bobbie Jean's eyes and it happened again. She looked flustered, "You forgot to stop by for your key." "Not really. I wanted to clean up first. I left the door open - unlocked." "We were so busy talking about ancestors - I forgot to tell you about the deposit. A months rent in advance." "I'll write the check out as soon as I carry this box upstairs." "Oh - you won't need - too. Why don't you bring it over this evening. We'll have dinner together - if you don't have plans." "If I did - I'd cancel them. I was about to ask you out, but my brain is tied up in knots. What time?" "We'll have cocktails on the verandah at five. Don't bring a thing." I felt color rise in my cheeks and noticed that it was happening to her - too, "Seems very warm outside today." She gave me her best southern smile.

An ethereal vision in winter white opened Bobbie Jean's front door - escorted me in and linked her arm in mine. I brought forward a bouquet of flowers I had hidden behind my back with a bow and flourish. Bobbie Jean giggled, "Your Mother trained you well." "Mother's a midwestern school teacher and doesn't have much time for romantic foolishness. You may credit it to - too many lonely nights at Saturday movies." "Rhett would be proud. While I put these in a vase," and she pointed at the verandah, "You can pour us a glass of wine." "White?" "My favorite." "I'll have red. It's not Chianti. What is it?" "French - an exquisite little Medoc." I knew when I was overmatched. I opened both bottles and filled two glasses as Bobbie Jean set my flowers on her table, "Do you mind if we dine out on the verandah. Most of the year it's so warm here. Tonight it is perfect." "And it's not just the weather." "Why Rhett dear - you do carry on so. Makes my little heart flutter?" "I hope so. It would be a perfect match for mine. Did I use the wrong wine glasses?" "Yes - dear. You need training. I'll take care of that."

Bobbie Jean looked me over - up and down - a lioness licking its lips at prey - ascertaining if she had selected the right antelope for dinner. I hoped so - I had on my best midwestern serious dating clothes - Khaki pants - dark blue sport coat and regimental tie. I raised my glass, "To the prettiest lady on the Gulf Coast." She blushed and changed the subject, "Before you ask. I really am twenty-one and a widow. Ralph - my late husband died in a boating accident last year. It was unexpected and tragic, but life must go on. You're the first boy I've been out with in over a year." "I wouldn't count a quiet dinner at home as going out on a date." "You really don't know anything about the south - do you. This is more serious than going out. Dinner at home is the final step in courtship." It took all of my strength not to mention eating desert first, but it wasn't proper.

Bobbie Jean gave me a dig to the ribs and smiled. We were on the same wavelength. She asked softly, "Would you care for another glass of wine?" I nodded, "Yes." She motioned for me to sit in the swing. As I toasted her beauty with my eyes - Bobbie Jean sat down beside me and linked her arm in mine. We both shivered and laughed - as we looked out on a glorious winter Gulf sunset. I couldn't remember ever being this excited - happy. She leaned her head on my shoulder - I could resist no longer. I turned and kissed her lightly on the lips. She pulled my head closer and our kiss turned into passion. Bobbie Jean slowly moved her lips away - reached down and held my hands, "Johnny - if I don't put dinner in the oven - we'll never eat tonight." "What did you prepare?" "A little Italian ..." She stopped, "Johnny - why are you smiling like a Cheshire-Cat?" "Nothing important - I was thinking of an old flame when you mentioned a little Italian." "Are you engaged?" "Don't worry - it's over - we parted friends. One look at you and her memory has been erased from my thoughts." "I just knew you would have a lady friend." "No longer - it's in the past. What is our main course?" "Veal Marsala."

She stood up and I followed - at her side. I took her hands in mine. We kissed lightly and I felt her body relax - passion began. She looked deep into my eyes, "I know - it's too soon, but ..." She put her finger to my lips, "I feel the same way, but it is too soon." She turned away and walked to the kitchen. I stood in front of the verandah window - looking out over surf lit by sunset's afterglow - beads of sweat dripping down from my temples. Bobbie Jean called out, "Bring our wine glasses to the kitchen. You can keep me company while I cook. I want to know all about your family." "Don't you want to know about me?" "If I know your family - I'll know you." "We have a family farm - several thousand acres along the Scioto River north of Columbus, Ohio. Been in our family since the Revolutionary War.

Mother and father are teachers. We're United Brethren by faith and liberal by practice. I graduated with a degree in American Literature from Ohio State. All in all - we're pretty ordinary. You've packed a lot of living into twenty-one years." "I was married at twenty. Two years at our local finishing school in Gulfport. I have been running either my family's business or my husband's hotel since I was fourteen. My college of hard knocks leaves very little time for books." "A real live Miss Scarlet." She nudged me with her elbow, "Help me carry dinner to the verandah."

After dinner - we lingered outdoors - sipping coffee and wine at the table. Bobbie Jean asked, "Do you know that damn senator from Tennessee?" "Gore?" "No - Kefauver. Don't ever try to say a kind word about Estes on the Gulf Coast. Most of our hotels are still recovering - after he closed gambling down on the Gulf Coast. Took a few years, but the Broadwater was finally showing a nice profit when I sold it last summer. Ralph had children from his first marriage, but they weren't interested in the hotel business and I certainly wasn't. Let's take our coffee to the swing. I'm sorry - I get upset just thinking about that damn Tennessee senator."

We spent the rest of the evening searching for a common ground - to cement a budding relationship, but a search wasn't necessary. The electric spark had all ready ignited a flame - far beyond our control. When the clock struck ten I knew it was time to go - or I might never. It was as if we had been matched by fate. We embraced and agreed to be together to celebrate New Years. Bobbie Jean took control, "You'll be my guest at the Broadwater. Will you join me for breakfast. Is nine to early?" "Do I have to leave?" "An old southern custom and good manners says yes."

I walked back to my apartment on air. My feet were barely touching the ground. I turned to see if Bobbie Jean

was watching. She was - from her back porch. I waved and she smiled. I hoped her inner self knew that I was her future. Mine did. I was tempted to call when I climbed the stairs. And I would have, but my phone was not installed. She pulled strings and had my phone installed after our first breakfast and she made sure that my apartment met with her approval. After I was settled in - Bobbie Jean took me on a Cook's Tour of all of the geographical highlights along the Gulf Coast. From the shrimp fleet at Biloxi to her fishing cottage along the river - inland. An octagon one room affair - it was built on a boardwalk out over the water with windows that hinged upward for fishing. Though only one room, her little cottage could hold as many people as a good sized parlor. After the first of the year - when I must return to Air Force life - I didn't want too. Talk about finding true love in strange places. The Broadwater bartender - Herbie - was going to be my friend for life.

I was a reluctant soldier when the 2nd of January came around. I made my own breakfast at my apartment and was away before dawn. I met my new partner in military discipline and training - a fellow EW classmate. Oliver T - an unreformed surfer from southern California - unlike his web footed friends - loved to march and wallowed in military life. After our first meeting - I knew why. One too many wipeouts over a rocky shore under erratic surf had left an imprint on his skull. A newly minted gold bar lieutenant from Aviation Cadets - Oliver T reported in early. Unlike me - he followed Welko's advice and rented an apartment behind Gus Steven's. T was chomping at the bit to give his new found authority a baptism. However Oliver T was in the rear of our marching formation. I was out front - leading one of the many massed electronic squadrons on parade. I was not a happy camper, "Marching at Electronics School is like diving into an empty pool- unnecessary and downright foolish." Being off center helped T, "We got two types of folks in charge here - pilots

and ground pounders. Neither of which knows an electron from a goat. Pilots think electronics is for fools and our ground pounders think with their feet. Neither group can compete on a technical playing field - so in order to take control - they resort to a military mind set. Therefore - *we march because we are!*" "Wish they would figure out a different way to dominate us. When training begins - that'll be the end of this nonsense - for us, but not for the enlisted trainees. There ought to be a better way."

*"Would you tell me, please,  
which way I ought to go from  
here?" said Alice. "That depends  
a good deal on where you want  
to get to," said the Cheshire-Cat.*

# 6

Oliver T's enthusiasm for marching didn't carry over to inspecting barracks. He wasn't alone - I considered these inspections beyond the pale. Bein' clean I could understand, but Keesler's training folks took it one step beyond - with Saturday night scrubbing parties. As a result - barracks floors were reduced to splinters - with the middle of the floors two inches lower than at the walls. "T - I have never seen a more destructive - make work punishment." "Looks like they'll have to install new floors." "Right - we better call the inspection off and talk to the Commandant." Oliver T stopped at the door, "Wouldn't do that if I were you." "T - they better install new floors or someone will stick a leg right through one of these upper floors." "Its been goin' on since 1941." "The officers in charge of this school can't be too bright. No one in their right mind would scrub a floor to splinters. Can't put me on report for telling the truth." After I had my say - I was immediately relieved of military duties with the Tech Training Wing. Oliver T stayed on. We met again outside of EW school admin - two days before class began. T pulled me aside, "Where have you been' hiding? Did you see the new flooring stacked by the barracks?" "Haven't been around. While you were marching - I helped Bobbie Jean paint her apartments." "After you left - Commandant fell right through the second floor of the barracks we inspected and broke both his legs."

Electronic Warfare School began without the fanfare we enjoyed at Nav training. We were ready, but no one gave us the opportunity to acquaint the powers that be on the proper use of a baseball bat. Split into two Flights - morning and

afternoon - Oliver T and me drew the morning class. Other than the clerk - the administration building was still empty. Someone had to ask the remaining sergeant and this time it was Oliver T's turn, "We have civilian instructors and you. Isn't anyone in charge here?" The school sergeant replied, "I am." "Where is the Commander?" "Don't ask." "I just did." "I just answered." The mystery remained, but our mystery about what an EW is - was answered.

"T - we're being trained to operate electronic equipment in the bomb bay of a B-47 or upper deck of a B-52. I thought we were going to be in charge of Radar sites." Oliver T was not happy, "And a waste of time if you ask me. Have to go through another beginning electronics class and we're stuck in classes that begin at six in the morning. God is getting even with me for living in an apartment in paradise. Parties don't end until two in the morning. We can't switch classes - there's no one around to talk too - except the school sergeant and he won't give us the time of day. I bet you a beer you can't find a single officer in our admin section and if there are any - you can't find out where they're hidin'." I couldn't duck a challenge. Bobbie Jean was visiting her Mother in Jackson - so I had time for a beer.

I collared Oliver T before class the next morning, "That was a sucker bet. I still couldn't find anyone, but our school sergeant in admin. However - I did find out where the officers are - so you owe me a beer." "Not until you tell me where they're hidin'." "See that smoke - in the trees out past the end of the runway?" "Don't tell me. Our bosses are running a moonshine still on Federal property?" "Don't order anything stiffer than wine downtown. If you do - there is a good chance you might go blind." "How about Gus Steven's and the resort hotels?" "Bobbie Jean is coming back from Jackson this afternoon. She knows who's buying what on the strip. I'll ask her."

It was a better dream than usual in my early afternoon nap - after class. Getting up at five had taken a toll. Then - I felt the warm breath of someone near and dear. And then I felt two soft lips kiss me on my cheek. This was too good to be a dream - my eyes opened - Bobbie Jean was leaning over the edge of my bed, "Are you playing Rip Van Winkle?" "I've been trying to get you in bed for over a month and you decide to come on your own." "Just got back. When you didn't answer your phone - I decided to check on you. I was worried you were either dead or someone had taken my place." "Never happen. How is your Mother?" "Feisty as ever. Still attempting to run my life." "Did you tell her about me?" "Yes." "What did she say?" "After she recovered - something like - 'A Yankee! A damn Yankee! Bobbie Jean - how could you? A Yankee? Over my dead body!'" "I take it she's not keen on me coming up for a visit." "Not now, but she'll come around - sooner or later." "Sounds like later." "Anything happen while I was away?" "As far as I'm concerned - nothing will ever happens when you're away. Say - what do you know about a moonshine still operating at the end of Keesler's runaway?" "Nothing. Is it on Federal property?" "Certain it is - looks like it's in swamp and trees. Our school commanders are running it." "Don't think our local cartel will appreciate that. First bad batch and they're history." I reached over and took Bobbie Jean's hands, "I like the appetizer. Lets skip the main course and go right to desert." "You may be a Yankee, but you do have southern ways." "There's an old saying, 'Life is short. Eat desert first.' "Not now my Yankee soldier - you're still in the deep south and we have rules about courting."

My worst fears came to pass during the third week of basic electronics. I passed the electronics theory test and was faced with hands on training in a lab. "T - this doesn't bode well for me." "Not to worry - I'm your lab partner - I'll pull you through. We'll do just fine." "Like I said -

I'm in trouble." Now I had two worries - electronics lab and Oliver T. Drawing Oliver T out of a hat meant never being able to train on our lab equipment. Oliver T wasn't a complete flake. As a matter of fact he was on the borderline of electronic genius. However - this expertise turned out to be our downfall. He dismantled our lab equipment and began to build an FM radio. He did his best to reassure me, "Any fool can do a simple experiment. If you really want to learn electronics - watch while I build another modern electronic miracle." "I'd feel better if we had an FM station."

And watch was all I could do as T reduced our equipment further - to wires and tubes - scattered around our work bench. While the rest of the Flight adjusted vacuum tube plates and grids - I watched as Oliver T assembled his FM radio from the parts he dismantled. Turned out to be a better show than a three ring circus. Wires were wrapped around magnets - crossing over and under a sheet metal base. Tubes were catty-wampus - tying resistors - capacitors - switches - in parallel and in-line. Two days before we were to take our laboratory exam - Oliver T asked our Flight to gather around his experiment. As he pulled the cover off of his electronic miracle - T began, "Listen up my fellow funny wings. What we have here is the latest miracle in hi-fi FM radio. You'll hear sounds you've never heard before. Watch and learn as I dazzle you with the finest receiver ever found in this part of the great State of Mississippi." We watched as Oliver T turned knobs - threw switches and fluttered about like a wounded butterfly. But all we heard was the sound of silence. T's smile turned to a frown. He kicked the corner of the work bench and then it began - first as a low moan - he tweaked his knobs and a low moan became a loud whistle. It grew in volume - until its squeal sounded like a thousand pigs being run over by a semi trailer truck. Oliver T's FM radio's output became unbearable. We covered our ears, but should have covered our eyes from the blinding white flash -

followed by a cloud of black acrid smoke. Oliver T - covered with soot from head to foot - stood dazed - next to his experiment - a pile of smoldering melted metal - while we bolted for the door. In the distance the sound of sirens drew closer and closer.

T came outside - brushing soot out of his eyes and hair, "How about that? Something else wasn't it?" I had to laugh, "You were right about one thing." "What?" "I've never heard a sound like that before in my life." As we waited for the fire engines to leave - the school sergeant walked up. "You guys stepped in it. Commandant wants to see both of you in his office - pronto." As he walked away Oscar T smiled, "Hey - there's always a bright side. We'll finally meet a live officer in the admin building." Oliver T had delivered the mother of straight lines with his comic pratfall, "That's another fine mess you've gotten me into - Ollie." T looked at me with a laconic smile, "Funny - damned funny. We better get it over with. What do you think he'll do to us." "At worst - we're on our way to Supply School. Which may be a blessing - seeing were facing an assignment in the belly of a B-47. And at best - a tongue lashing."

The desk sergeant motioned with his head for us to go in. The Commandant stood behind his desk - a mousy major wearing radiator wings. Our Nav School Commandant was right - pilots were in charge of everything in the Air Force. We saluted and stood before him - at Attention. He looked us up and down - obviously bothered by being here and not at his business, "I don't know which one of you two is at fault - so I'm going to assume it's both of you." He looked closely at Oliver T, "Lieutenant Tugwattle - haven't I met you on the strip. Outside of Gus Steven's wasn't it?" "Yes Sir. You had a load of clear liquid jugs on the back of your truck." The major turned bleach white and his left eye began to twitch. He collapsed into his chair and rummaged in his desk

drawer for a pencil. After placing it on the front edge - to separate us from him - the color returned, but the twitch was worse, "You are washed back to the following afternoon class. You'll DIA your lab and Tugwattle?" "Yes Sir." "Stay out of trouble downtown."

I had to hand it to Oliver T, "You saved us with that moonshine bit. Is it true?" "Don't know. Just guessed and got lucky. Some kind of punishment." "We get afternoon class from noon to six and another three weeks of living on the beach. What the hell is DIA?" I thought it might be Defense Inertia Agency, "Think it's pilot talk for do it again. Time to break our team up if we want to pass. Why don't you work on your radios at home?" "Don't have time - what with my engagement and all." "Engagement? Who too?" "Bonnie The Body Beautiful. You and Bobbie Jean have got to meet her. She's quite a lady."

I confided to Bobbie Jean - telling her of my new circumstance, "I'm really embarrassed. We're the first two to ever wash back before taking an exam. Won't happen again. Oliver T won't have time. He's engaged." "Who too?" "A stripper - Bonnie The Body Beautiful. T spends all of his free time warding off her suitors." "I have to meet this Oliver T - he sounds interesting. He must be a real flake." "Not sure I want you to meet the friends I attract. Remember - he is a surfer from LA." "I know Bonnie. She has a good head on her shoulders. Everyone needs a flake or two in their life or this world would be very dull indeed." I let it drop, but wondered how Bobbie Jean knew Bonnie.

Met up with Oliver T at our new lab class the following afternoon. He had forgotten about our falling out over not being lab partners. T was not one to look back, "You and Bobbie Jean have got to meet Bonnie. She is wonderful. We can surprise her tonight at Gus Steven's." "Is Bonnie still

the headliner at Gus's?" "She is and does she ever live up to her billing! I won't take no for an answer. The table will be in my name." "Bobbie Jean wants to meet you and she she knows Bonnie. What time?" "How about seven?" "Unless Bobbie Jean has a commitment - we'll be there." When we entered our afternoon class - our new Flight treated us like heroes that had returning from a distant war. I phoned Bobbie Jean at first break and told her of T's invitation. Again - I was surprised by her response, "I'm delighted - Johnny. Seven will be fine. Gus is an old friend. I haven't seen him in a long time." I decided it was better to ask my twenty-four dollar question over the phone, "Where did you meet Bonnie?" "I was wondering when you would ask. She performed at our hotel when Gus managed the showroom. This is a very small town. I'm an investor in Gus's Club." "You are full of surprises. We'll meet at the dock after my last class. I'll be there by five thirty." "Thought your class wasn't out until six." "Our instructor cuts the afternoon class short." "We'll go to the dock for shrimp, but pick me up at home." "Southern manners?" "Why - of course."

Shrimp was out of this world - cooked right off the boat. Two dollars bought three pounds. Bobbie Jean made our own shrimp sauce at the stand. I whispered, "Does the owner mind?" She whispered back, "No - he's been trying to steal it from me for three years. I bring my own premixed spices. He'll never be able to duplicate it." Later - when Bobbie Jean entered Gus Steven's it was like Moses parting the Red Sea. Oliver T's table was not good enough. Gus escorted us to a ringside seat, "Bobbie Jean! Its been a long time. You haven't been here since Ralph passed away." "No need too. You run an honest place and give an honest count." "You remember Bonnie from the Broadwater Showroom. She is packing customers in." Bobbie Jean took my arm, "Gus - meet my new beau - Lieutenant Johnny Ropp." Gus's eyes popped wide open. He stood there speechless and then offered his hand, "Never

thought I'd see the day when Bobbie Jean would be out with a new beau. How long has it been?" "Over a year?" "It's time - a year is long enough. Son - you should feel honored." Gus rushed away - beet red. Bobbie Jean squeezed my arm, "Gus and Ralph were very close. He still blames himself for Ralph's death. Gus believes if he had been driving the boat - Ralph would still be here. Gus had an emergency at home. It will take my friends quite awhile to adjust to us as a pair." "Longer than your Mother?" "Hush now. What is - is." "Depends on your definition of is - is." Is that your friend Oliver T coming this way?" "That's him." Oliver T pulled up a chair, "Hey Johnny - this must be Bobbie Jean. You're just in time. Bonnie will be on in five minutes. How do you like my table? Right up front." Bobbie Jean was a sea of tranquility in the midst of T's turbulent storm, "I'm so pleased to meet you - Lieutenant Tugwattle. Do you mind if I call you by your first name?" "Please do. There's the drum roll - Bonnie's on."

Bobbie Jean squeezed my hand, "Your mouth is hanging open - soldier." "I haven't seen anything like this since I went to a Burlesque Theater in Kansas City. And none of those ladies looked anywhere near as good as Bonnie. She does have a beautiful body." Oliver T was all smiles, "Isn't she somethin'. We're getting married a week from Saturday at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans. We want you to stand up for us." I looked over at Bobbie Jean and back to Oliver T, "Isn't this too soon. You're barely a brown bar lieutenant - fresh out of Aviation Cadets." "You're right - I have a lost year to make up." Bobbie Jean smiled, "If you will excuse me for a moment - I need to powder my nose. When I return we'll give you our answer." I watched Bobbie Jean out of the corner of my eye. She stopped on her way to the ladies room and spoke with Gus. When she returned - Bonnie had arrived at our table. Bobbie Jean hugged Bonnie, "Your beau - Oliver asked us to stand up for you at your wedding in New Orleans.

Johnny and I will be honored too be there." On the dance floor she whispered into my ear, "Gus speaks highly of Bonnie. She doesn't mess around and she's never been married before. But and this is a big but - Gus is not sure about your friend - Lieutenant Tugwattle. He thinks Oliver is a flake. I've seen matches made in heaven that wind up on the rocks and ones made on the spur of the moment that last a life time. One never knows." I nodded, "Yes, but three weeks of dating is shorter than most State's waiting periods. Are you ready to leave?" "Let's stop by the Broadwater and visit with Herbie. He makes a great cup of Irish coffee." "And he's a great matchmaker."

On our drive to the Broadwater - Bobbie Jean sat quietly - withdrawn. I knew enough about ladies to keep my mouth shut. As we entered the hotel - she broke her silence, "My first night out on the town since Ralph passed away and I agree to go to Gus Steven's." "Can't be a problem - you own a piece of it." "My minister was sitting at the table behind us. He doesn't know I'm a part owner. You and I are going to Church this Sunday." "I wouldn't worry if I were you. He'll have more to explain than you - why he was there." She looked into my eyes and smiled, "I didn't think of that - his being at a strip bar - I was only thinking of myself." We strolled into the Broadwater bar - arm in arm - back on track. We stood at the bar, "Herbie - remember Lieutenant Johnny Ropp?" Herbie's grin grew wider, "Of course and it looks like you two are beginning to know each other. Two Irish coffees on the house?" Bobbie Jean blushed, "Cajun style?" "Of course. Gus called. He wants you to give him a ring." She squeezed my hand, "I'll be right back."

Herbie carried our drinks to a window table overlooking the moonlit Gulf, "Be a full moon next week. You certainly are a fast worker. After Ralph died - Bobbie Jean would have nothing to do with our local boys. You're a lucky man."

Bobbie Jean returned with a wider than normal smile, "Gus rarely calls. He forgot to mention - Lieutenant Tugwattle is carrying." "Carrying what?" "A standard police 38. Better hope Tugwattle isn't the jealous type. Bonnie has more than a few admirers. Gus is afraid there'll be fireworks." "With Oliver T that's not a probability - it's a guarantee. You do love to call Oliver T - Lieutenant Tugwattle - don't you?" Bobbie Jean laughed, "I do - it has a certain ring to it. Doesn't Herbie make the best Irish coffee in the world?" "What's the unusual taste?" "Herbie's own secret blend of chicory. Let's take a walk on the beach before we turn in. Mustn't waste this southern moon."

An almost full - Wolf moon - cast our elongated shadows across white Gulf Coast sands as we walked hand in hand - arm in arm and then closer than the law should allow. The warmth of our bodies - pressed together almost as one - spoke more than words would ever do. Neither of us would break apart - alone, but together we did. As we turned to walk across the sand to Bobbie Jean's house - our lips met gently - lingered - then our bodies touched briefly and parted. Bobbie Jean took my hand in hers and held it tightly until we were at her front door. Bobbie Jean looked into my eyes and drew my head toward hers. Our lips again met with rising passion. She pushed me away gently, "I feel like a school girl. Touch my cheek." "You're burning up. Do you feel all right?" "Yes - I feel wonderful - wonderful. But - I must have time - time to think. We'll talk tomorrow. Wake me - it's your turn to cook breakfast for me." "Here?" "No - silly. I'll come over to your place. Now give your best girl a kiss and hurry on home."

The phone was ringing, "It must be Bobbie Jean." I ran up the stairs, but I was too late. It stopped as I opened the door. I wondered, "Should I call" and thought better of it. I must respect her wishes if I was to play at her game.

Bobbie Jean controlled the playing field, but I still wanted to call. I sat by my window - watching the moon rise over her giant Magnolia. My cheeks were warm - too and thoughts only of Bobbie Jean - with her soft caresses and winning smile, "If I want win at her game - I better play by the rules." I turned down my bed, but sleep did not come. I tossed and turned - and tried to remember Sally, but she was only a lingering vision in my memory. I wondered what she looked like, but could not remember the details of her face. Like all things past - my memory of her was gone. Bobbie Jean had erased all my lingering thoughts of her.

I woke with a winter sun in my eyes - still remembering Bobbie Jean's last embrace. Mississippi's early February sky - swept clear of clouds - glittered brightly as crystal prism. I tried to shut off the alarm, but the ringing continued. I picked up the phone and was disappointed. It was Oliver T not Bobbie Jean, "Where were you last night when I needed you?" "I was climbing the stairs when the phone stopped ringing." "Get your butt out of bed and put the coffee on - I'm comin' over. Need your advice about something personal." "Give me time to take a shower. I just woke up." I filled a deep pan half way with water - brought it to a boil and dumped in course coffee grounds - turned the temperature down to a slow boil and headed to the shower. When I returned - my shepherd's coffee was done. I poured it through a strainer into my large thresher pot - the one my Grandmother willed to me with a note, "You always sneaked coffee from this pot at threshing. Remember to always use fresh grounds." And I thought she hadn't noticed. I phoned Bobbie Jean. Her line was busy. I checked the clock. I had time to start a load of wash before Oliver T arrived.

T drove up as I was closing the lid and turning on the water. I took one look at his car and covered my eyes, "What the hell is that?" "Like it? Not many Packard Caribbean

convertibles left." "And darn few painted bright psychedelic pink with a matching top. I can see why there aren't any around. Had to cover my eyes so I wouldn't go blind. When did you purchase your rolling representation of abstract art." "Didn't. Belongs to Bonnie. Can only stay for a few minutes. Bonnie wants to drive to New Orleans and make arrangements for our wedding." "I made coffee like you asked. Come on upstairs and we'll talk." "Just one cup - Bonnie is dressing." Oliver T followed me up the stairs -pissing an moaning with each step, "One of Bonnie's admirers followed Bonnie home. Got overly excited when I told him to leave. Tried to grab her - so I pulled my gun. One shot at a drunks feet sure sobers 'im up. Law took me in for firing a weapon. I had one phone call - you're the only one I could trust. Turned out okay - though." "What happened? Who saved you?" "Dead luck and a forgiving Sheriff. He took one look at the guy who pressed charges - locked him up and set me free." "What do you need from me this morning?" "Coffee first - need something to mix with all the beer I drank last night. Do you have any aspirin?"

Oliver T gulped two aspirin down with his first swallow of coffee, "Not bad. Mighty fine cup of coffee. Anything special?" "Learned to make it over an open fire tending sheep. Boil it in an open pan and filter out the grounds." "Bonnie wants to know if you and Bobbie Jean both meant it when you said you'd stand up for us at our wedding." "I haven't known Bobbie Jean for very long, but when she says she'll do something - she does. Of course we'll stand up for you. How did you meet Bonnie?" "She lives in the next apartment." "A lot of that going around lately." "Thanks for your help and that really is a good cup of coffee. Got to get going. Our appointment is at noon - sharp."

As I watched Oliver T drive off - all I could think of was Uncle Remus - his fable about a tar baby. Seemed like

everything Oliver T touched turned sticky. I phoned Bobbie Jean, "You up?" Which of course she was. "Coffee's ready." "Give me ten more minutes and I'll be over." I carried a second load of laundry down the steps and almost dropped the whole load. Bobbie Jean came around the corner of her apartment building in short - short denim cut offs. She kissed me on the cheek, "I don't wash clothes or windows but I'll watch you. Have you learned to separate whites from colors?" "By trial and error." I loaded the first batch into the dryer and turned on water for the second load, "Did you see the psychedelic cloud in your driveway?" "Wasn't that a brightest pink? Was Lieutenant Tugwattle driving or floating?" "Bonnie wanted to make sure you meant it when you said we'll stand up for them. I said yes." "How about your coffee?" "I'll follow you up the stairs. You sure put new meaning to short shorts." "Do you think they're too short? I'll change." "I'm admiring the view."

I poured coffee and Bobbie Jean took a sip, "Not bad for a Yankee. Could use just a touch of Chicory." "That's an art form I'm not familiar with." "I'll be your teacher." "I certainly hope so." "Where is Lieutenant Tugwattle off too?" "Roosevelt Hotel to set up the wedding." "I might be able to help out. Hotel owners have a union that lasts - even when we're out of the business. Now - what's for breakfast?" "You?" "Not yet - though I'm weakening." Bobbie Jean looked inside my refrigerator, "It looks like beer and baloney sandwiches if we stay here." She took my hands and pulled me up, "Carry our coffee. We're going to my kitchen."

Oliver T was all smiles as he walked into our Monday afternoon class, "Your lady has quite a bit of influence. When Bonnie mentioned that Bobbie Jean is her maid of honor - all of the Roosevelt doors opened. Wedding is set for their courtyard. Want me to switch and be your lab partner? I owe you." "No way. Exam is this Friday and I'm beginning to

like Biloxi. And I certainly don't want to wind up in Supply School." "Stop by my car after class. I've got something special to show you." "As long as it isn't a live snake or a dead skunk." "No - it's much better." "Long as it doesn't bite." "It will do that."

Oliver T was grinnin' like a proud papa as he opened the trunk of his car, "What do you think?" He lifted up the biggest pistol I'd ever seen. "T - you've gone off the deep end. The love bug must have sucked all the blood from your brains." "Okay, but what do you think?" "Is it a cannon or a howitzer?" "Traded my 38' in for a Magnum." "How do you hold it?" "With both hands. One shot will bring down a Buffalo." "Not many Buffaloes this side of the Rockies. Why did you really buy it?" "Scare off the crazies Bonnie seems to attract." "Has she ever thought of a new line of work?" Oscar T grinned as he should. It was my turn. I gave him an atomic bomb straight line. "What? And leave show business?" He was still giggling at his effort when I asked, "What's the dress for the wedding." "White dinner jacket. Bonnie will let Bobbie Jean know."

New Orleans is a special place when you get away from the French Quarter and not too bad when you're there. Known as the Big Easy to shady folks - it was sixty miles west of Biloxi. As we drove toward the city - Bobbie Jean bubbled over - like a freshly popped bottle of uncorked champagne, "You've never been to the French Quarter?" "Never been in the city." "We'll go there after the wedding and when we call it an evening - we'll stop at the Coffee Stand for real coffee - New Orleans style." "I can hardly wait." "For coffee?" "No - afterwards." "Hush and pay attention to your driving. It's too early in the day for foolishness. We must look proper at Bonnie's wedding. Did Lieutenant Tugwattle behave this week?" "Has a new pistol. Big enough to bring down an elephant." "He's too hot headed to carry." "Agree -

he thinks everyone is after Bonnie. Can we park close to the Roosevelt Hotel?" "Shouldn't be a problem. Shrove Tuesday is several weeks away." "Never heard of it." "Oh - you Yankees call it Fat Tuesday. It's the end of Mardi Gras - the day before Lent." "Lent? My Grandfather always said, 'Ne'r a borrower or a lender be.'" I felt Bobbie Jean's elbow gently nudge my side, "Very funny. Over there. See - I've found you a parking spot next to the hotel." ✓

As Bobbie Jean took my hand to exit the passenger side of my old Buick - I swept her into my arms, but she escaped. "Johnny - no. Don't rumple me or smear my make-up. Not until we give the couple away. For ladies - weddings are serious business." Oliver T had done another number on me. I show up in summer white dinner jacket and he's wearing a blue blazer - khaki trousers - sandals and a white French silk shirt - open at the neck. Bonnie - and her body is certainly beautiful - was clothed in white wedding lace. She waved for Bobbie Jean to come to her side. I had to smile, "Looks like they're in a hurry." Oliver T led me to the beer keg, "They have Jax on tap. This is going to be a first class wedding." "T - you said wear a white dinner jacket and your dressed in a blazer." "Why in the world should we dress alike? Besides - you look good in white." Bobbie Jean took me aside, "I refuse to drink beer at a wedding. There is only one beverage suitable." She whispered a few words to the Roosevelt wedding coordinator and buckets of champagne appeared a few minutes later - followed by half the hotel staff - to bear witness. The preacher was as surprised as Oliver T - when he arrived. He had expected an intimate - little wedding.

Oliver T smiled, "I didn't know Bonnie and I were this popular. Lets get on with it." Ten minutes later - Bonnie and Oliver T exchanged vows in front of over two hundred waiters - maids - busboys - bellhops - managers and assorted

Roosevelt Hotel employees. I whispered to Bobbie Jean, "Is that it? I've stood in line at the market longer." "Me too. Better toast our newlyweds before they run off to their room." I raised my champagne flute, "To Bonnie - who is certainly beautiful and to Lieutenant Oliver T Tugwattle - who is certainly lucky - may you live long and happy lives and we hope - together." Bonnie and Oliver T drained their glasses. She handed her corsage to Bobbie Jean and our two newlyweds walked away - arm in arm - toward the hotel and their room - all to the applause of the hotel staff.

It was Bobbie Jean's turn to be amused, "Not only is this the fastest outdoor wedding I've ever been too - they should have the fastest consummation on record." Bobbie Jean made sure the staff had another glass of champagne and offered the keg to whomever would carry it. We toasted each other with another flute of champagne and our eyes. As we lounged in the hotel courtyard's early afternoon sun - Bobbie Jean noticed, "The preacher is still here. Our groom forgot to pay. Make sure he's taken care of while I wrap things up with the wedding coordinator." When I returned - a hundred dollars lighter - my best girl was her cheerful self and ready to go, "Let's walk the French Quarter. We have a complimentary room here and the manager reserved seats for us in the show room tonight. And pray tell me - why are you smiling like the cat who caught the canary?" "Not a canary, but you my love. I'm the lucky one."

The French Quarter is Coney Island with bars - the Left Bank of Paris in Cajun - with barely a lingering memory of why it was named. Artists sold prints instead of originals - quaint antique shops sold copies instead of antiques and carnival barkers stood in front of every bar and strip joint. All of this noise and commotion were a great strain on a once gracious lady. I enjoyed the walk and I enjoyed the company more. Bobbie Jean brought New Orleans to life with intimate

details - only a partisan would know. We walked and talked and walked and talked like lovers do when they cannot get enough of each other. When we could walk no more - she whispered in my ear, "Only a carriage ride to the Roosevelt will do - a perfect end to a marvelous afternoon." As I helped Bobbie Jean up into our open carriage - I asked, "Is this all there is?" She squeezed my hand, "No silly. We're going to have New Orleans style coffee and blueberry muffins in the Roosevelt's courtyard."

I followed a bite of muffin with a sip of rich creamy coffee, "How can chicory coffee taste this wonderful? It should be bitter." "Good roast and lots of rich cream. Your friend - Lieutenant Tugwattle and Bonnie are the talk of the hotel. Our waiter whispered to me that he knew Bonnie from somewhere, but wasn't sure." "Whoops - how so?" "She was wearing clothes." "Talk about the mother of all straight lines. I fell in love with a comedienne. What does the manager have planned for us this evening?" "I know of only one thing that can top today's wedding - our walk and coffee under the Magnolias in the Roosevelt's courtyard." "We're guests of the hotel for dinner and a show in the Blue Room." "That wasn't it. Any idea who is headlining?" "The Glen Miller Orchestra and a comedy team. The Concierge says they are quite good - Rowan and Martin." "If they're as good as Martin and Lewis - it ought to be a night to remember." "We can rest and freshen up in our suite before dinner." "Right out of Gone With The Wind." "Afternoon naps are a southern custom. That's why we live longer than you Yankees." "I see you dropped the damn." "Only because I'm in love with one. We can't stay overnight." "Damn - I was looking forward ..." "New Orleans is a small town. Too many citizens know me here. Tongues will wag all the way to Jackson." "Your wish is my command." "I certainly hope so." "I can't remember a better afternoon - anywhere." "This time of year - but never in summer. The Concierge has our key."

I laid on my stomach - head propped up in my hands - watching Bobbie Jean dress for dinner. I pinched myself. She knew, "I can see you in the mirror - why did you pinch yourself?" "Trying to find out if this is a dream - or if I'm alive." "If you want to know - I'm the expert - you're very much alive - and lively. If anyone needs further proof - I'll vouch for you." "What made you decide ..." "That's my secret. Never ask a lady why. Her answer is too complex - a lady might read about it, but never ever will a lady explain why. Get dressed. I don't want to miss the show - I'm famished." "Will a white dinner jacket be out of place?" "The Concierge had our clothes cleaned and pressed while we ..." "This is First Class. I don't know about you, but I didn't get very much sleep." "An hour nap is proper and more than enough. Now hush and hurry."

When we entered the Blue Room - I noticed Bonnie and Oliver T, "Look over to your left. Our newlyweds are trying to eat dinner and cuddle at the same time." "Cute - aren't they. We don't dare interrupt." Bobbie Jean whispered to the maitre d. He seated us on the other side of the room. She whispered to me, "True love?" "Us or them." "I won't ever question ours. Will you?" "Only if you leave me for someone else." "The staff is taking care of our newlyweds." "Oliver T thinks it's because of his influence. I hope he doesn't suffer a letdown when you're not around to grease the skids." "Oh - I didn't think of that. Do you think he will?" "I'll be surprised if he doesn't."

Bobbie Jean stood up, "Order while I powder my nose." "What do you want." "The fish here are excellent. You choose." "Wine or champagne." "White - my favorite." She squeezed my hand, "After you - of course" and smiled - "I'll be right back." She spoke to the maitre d' on her way back to our table. "Did you order?" "Pompano. Caught under torch light at night and baked inside a paper bag." "My

favorite and Rhine wine - you have paid attention." "You talked with the maitre d'?" "He is very upset over some of the demands made on his staff by Lieutenant Tugwattle. Your friend is not staff friendly." "He marches to his own tune." "And it's off-key." "I can't be dishonest about the wine. I chose Rhine because I couldn't decipher your French names. I didn't pay attention to your preference. When we're alone together - my eyes are only for you." "Now that has the ring of a song to it - soldier. What did you order - as if I had to ask. Pepper steak?" "You didn't have to ask. I hope you like Blue Cheese." "You didn't pay attention did you? I'll have the waiter change it. They serve the salad dressing separate here." "What do you prefer?" "Anything, but Blue Cheese and I'll give you a wine lesson the next time we dine out. What in the world were you thinking?" "The blood rushes out of my brain when I'm with you."

Bobbie Jean seemed satisfied with our dinners and the hotel service. I asked - gingerly, "Was everything to your liking?" "Pedestrian, but excellent for a showroom. The wine was average. I prefer one from Chile." "Rhine wine from Chile?" "Of course - they purchased cuttings. The climate there must be perfect. How was your steak?" "A steak is either wonderful or it is not. Mine was wonderful." And the pepper sauce?" "You're asking someone who doesn't know wine about sauce?" "Touché - order coffee. Do you want an after dinner drink?" "Not if I have to drive back to Biloxi after the show." "I'd like to stay on, but ..." "Coffee it is. We'll keep your reputation intact." Bobbie Jean moved her chair close to mine and took my hand in hers. I wondered - was I going to wake up and all of this would be gone? She nudged me, "You've left me again and with such a silly smile." "The band is wonderful and so are you. Do I have to tell you - I love you?" "Yes and often." I kissed her neck. The show was about to begin - lights dimmed - the spotlight appeared at stage left.

Dan Rowan walked briskly to our applause and stopped at the microphone - adjusting it. Dick Martin stumbled into the showroom through the band - bumping into the drum set - to a series of rim shots. Dan Rowan looked skyward -

"Do you always enter a room like that?"

"No - sometimes the drummer drops his sticks."

"Why don't you come in like a normal person."

"And miss the music?"

"That's about all you missed. I understand we have a newlywed couple in our midst tonight."

"Did the bed break?"

"Of course not. Why would you say a thing like that?"

"I couldn't find my midst. Their bed is on the floor above mine. With all that bouncing it was bound to happen."

"Now cut that out. Shine the spot on our newlyweds. Bonnie is an old friend of ours. She just married Lieutenant Tugwattle this afternoon."

"She doesn't look old to me."

"She isn't old. That was just a figure of speech. Don't you remember her? We're in the same business."

"She doesn't look like a bar fly to me. And with a figure like that - she doesn't have to speak."

"Now cut that out. Can't you say anything nice?"

"She has a beautiful bippy."

"Don't you mean that Bonnie has a beautiful body?"

"You look at your part and I'll look at mine."

"All right, Dick. That's enough. Your Mother didn't wash your mouth out often enough - did she?"

"My other Mother?"

"Whatever."

"She washed part of me last night and it's my best part."

"How can you go from description to debauchery so quickly?"

"It's easy when you have a fast car."

"Say goodnight - Dick."

"Goodnight - Dick."

"I give up."

"That's what she said."

"Now cut that out."

"That's what she said, too."

"Say goodnight - Dick."

"Goodnight Mrs. Tugwattle - whoever you are."

"That's Callabash and it belongs to Jimmy Durante."

"He can get his own girl."

"Goodnight - Dick."

"Goodnight Dan and you too - Bonnie. You can tug my wattle anytime you want too."

"Now cut that out."

"That's what her husband tried to do."

The laughter lingered long after they left the stage. I was impressed, "They were really funny. I hope Oliver T and Bonnie took it like good sports." "I know Bonnie did, but Oliver T dragged her out as soon as the lights came up." "That will be the story-line for the second show." Bobbie Jean frowned, "It's my fault. I gave the showroom manager the information. I didn't realize Lieutenant Tugwattle was so sensitive." "Don't blame yourself for other's faults."

"Your right - what is - is. Lets dance." We waltzed across the floor to each and every set until the band played Moonlight Serenade - announcing the break for the second show. Overcome by the Glen Miller melody - I held Bobbie Jean in a warm embrace. A romantic glow enveloped us like the heat from a thousand fireflies. I had to ask again, "Are you sure you don't want to stay over?" "She looked into my eyes and I melted, "We don't need - too. You know what they say about home cooking? Well - the southern version is even better." "Say no more. Follow me. We're leaving."

The moon over Mississippi City made a magical pathway from my car to Bobbie Jean's front door. Her arm linked tightly in mine - we were like sheets blowing in the breeze - brushing lightly together. I could sense our passion in the balmy salt air. She opened the front door and drew me to her bosom. I lifted her from the floor and kicked the door shut with my foot. Her spell was as magic as the Mississippi moonlight - until I heard that soft giggle and, "Just like Rhett." I carried my laughing lady into the bedroom knowing laughter and passion were emotional twins.

I reached over to touch Bobbie Jean's hair, but she wasn't there. I opened my eyes and looked at the clock. It was after ten. We were in bed by one, but I had no idea when we fell asleep from sweet exhaustion. I sat up - then stood up and walked to the bathroom. Bobbie Jean handed me a towel and pointed to her shower, "Hurry. Breakfast will be ready when you're finished. Are you awake or sleepwalking?" "Ask me if I'm in love. Did I ask you to marry me?" "Yes to both questions. We'll see about marriage. My Mother is a very formidable obstacle." "I forgot - I'm dealing with southern women. They must teach teasing in your Home Economics classes." "And we're taught how to fire a man up - then keep him at bay. Now hurry or I'll pop in and scrub you myself." "Is that a promise?" She pushed me into the shower and

turned on the cold water. I grabbed for her hand, but missed, "Foiled again by a fair maiden." "Your toothbrush is the blue one and your razor is on the sink. Use it. Your cheeks feel like wire brushes." "Say face - quick."

I needed cold water to cool my passion. I toweled off and entered the kitchen. I stopped in my tracks - mouth open. I was speechless. Bobbie Jean was dressed in the skimpiest shorts and top I'd ever seen. I turned into a yo-yo - springing back into her arms. She pushed me away, "I have steak and eggs ready for the condemned man." "Is that a yes to my proposal?" "Of course it is. After yesterday and last night - all my doubts have taken wing. Now you'll have to make an honest woman out of me." "So this is how courting is done in the deep south." Bobbie Jean sat on my lap and held me tight, "Only if a woman has brains - it is." "You know - somehow I pictured this as more formal - with me down on my knees." "Isn't it better this way?" "My God - yes. I feel like I've been rode hard and put away wet." "We do have one formality - our announcement. After breakfast we'll visit the Broadwater and tell Herbie." "Is that formal?" "One word to Herbie and everyone, but my Mother will know. It doesn't get more formal than that."

"You left one problem unsolved, your Mother." "She's not well, but is getting along." "What's the problem?" "Heart trouble. She's had it for ten years - ever since Daddy died. If she knows we're getting married it might finish her off. But - that's only minor. Daddy knew how independent and strong willed I would grow up to be. He made me promise on his death bed that I would only marry someone Mother approved of." "We've got trouble." "How about your family?" "Not a problem. Mother wants to meet you before we tie the knot. Wants to see if you're good breeding stock and if you have horns. You'll do just fine." "You're Mother isn't like that." "She's more like your Mother than you'd

expect. She's as sweet as can be, but she wasn't born yesterday." "That describes Mother to a T. Speaking of T - I wonder how the newlyweds are doing?" "I haven't had one thought of them." "For some strange reason - I thought this was our wedding night." "It is for now."

Oliver T failed to show up in class Monday afternoon. When he failed to show on Tuesday - I checked at the admin office. The school sergeant was aware of his absence, "Lieutenant Tugwattle is in a heap of trouble. Absent without leave for two days. I sent the OSI looking for him this morning." "Holy Cow! He was just married Saturday in New Orleans. They honeymooned at the Roosevelt Hotel. Didn't he have enough sense to ask for leave or a three day pass?" "Wouldn't get a pass or leave. Against school regs. He could have called in sick or just called and there'd be no problem, but he's nowhere to be found." "Hell of a way to begin married life."

*"Oh you foolish Alice!" she answered herself. 'How can you learn lessons in here. Why, there's hardly room for you, and no room at all for any lesson-books!"*

## 7

We found out later that Oliver T spent the second night after his wedding in jail and the next night - too. Seemed he waved his pistol in the face of one of Bonnie's fans. Had it been anyone else, but the Sheriff's son. When he returned to Keesler, Oliver T was given two options - court-martial or immediate release. The charge was conduct unbecoming of an officer. He took the later and was gone. Even Gus didn't know where they were and Bonnie was his dear friend. I told Bobbie Jean, "I'm worried - Oliver T and Bonnie have pulled up stakes and disappeared from the face of the earth. Admin won't tell me and Gus doesn't know. Can't believe they took off without giving us a call." "When hormones go wild - you men lose all control of your senses." "Maybe sheep have the better of it. They only go crazy when they're in season." Bobbie Jean shrugged her shoulders, "Don't worry - I can find Bonnie through the night club circuit. Why did they kick Lieutenant Tugwattle out of the service without a hearing?" "Air Force is a bit old fashioned about wives. Don't think they took kindly to T marrying a stripper and used the charge as an excuse." "You moved in with me and we're not married." "Neither are you - so they don't look upon it as adultery." "Will I cause you any trouble with our arrangement?" "Only if we go public or stick our rear ends in the powers-that-be faces." "I'll work on Mother, but it doesn't look good. I know it will take time before she will mellow." "Maybe if she becomes a Grandmother." "Do you want to put Mother in an early grave?"

Time really does fly when you're happy. The second half of training arrived and it was time for us to learn how to

become Electronic Warfare Operators - EWOs - sometimes called Electronic Countermeasure Crew Members or ECM. Pilots - not thrilled with haulin' us around - redefined ECM to Extra Crew Member. Bobbie Jean asked, "What do they make you do in flying training?" "We get to put into practice all the theory we've absorbed. Outside of that - it's a mystery to me." "Is all your work Top Secret?" "That's what I've been led to believe." "What will you be called?" "Blackbirds - Ravens or Crows." I had just delivered another straight line to Bobbie Jean, "Edgar Allen Poe is alive and well."

A Raven is an EWO who does sneaky things - such as electronic eavesdropping. He intercepts and records radar - telemetry and such. A Crow is an EWO who uses electronic emissions to confuse - deceive - or jam - radios - radars and things like that. It was as if their names came from above - my two flight instructors were - Captain Raven and Lieutenant Crow. Raven was obsessed with the terrible condition of our planes. We flew in four prop - converted cargo aircraft - C-54s. They had never been able to get all the coal dust out of them. These were the famous planes that flew the Berlin Airlift. Dirty as they were - we were proud to fly in planes with such an honorable past. Like the T-29 our C-54s flew slower than the fastest duck. Lieutenant Crow wasn't worried about dirt - he was concerned about the equipment we used for training. His concern, "Air Corps sold all of our equipment to salvage folks after World War II. When the Korean War came along - we had to buy it back for more than it cost new. You're going to train on equipment older than dirt and not as useful. All the new stuff is going to SAC B-52s. Captain Raven and me will be unable to fully train you. You will leave here ill prepared to do your job." I was impressed with his honesty, but as an optimist - I knew we'd handle whatever came along. Hi-fi equipment was in its infancy. Air Force equipment was hooked together with Cannon Plugs - so called because of its shape. Quick disconnect plugs were

in the experimental stage and transistors had not replaced vacuum tubes. Semiconductors? The minds that were to develop them were in the future. Silicon Valley was a stuffy school in California called a farm.

After a dozen flights - staring at empty equipment racks - I complained to Bobbie Jean, "If it wasn't for the flight pay - I'd just as soon not fly. Racks are mostly empty and when we do have equipment - it's broken. If we do find a working receiver - there aren't that any radio stations or radars in this part of the country to listen - or record." "Why don't you fly where there are such things." "Our pilots would rather fly around our air patch and practice takeoffs and landings." "At least you can check on the still at the end of the runway." "It's still cooking."

Although EW Flight Training was a waste of time - my new life with Bobbie Jean was fulfilling, "We need to celebrate our engagement." "I've celebrated it every single night since we've been together. I can't ever remember being this celebrated." "How about New Orleans?" "Look what it did for Oliver T and Bonnie. You don't own a pistol and I'll never take my clothes off in public." "You'd put Bonnie to shame." "And me - too. I'll make arrangements at the Broadwater." "I'm so happy I could burst - we must celebrate." "How did your parents take our good news?" "They still want to meet you, but when they saw your photos and listened to my rave reviews - they both said, "Go for it! Don't let this one get away. They thought I would procrastinate my life away until you came along to jump-start my heart." "Jump-start - what foolishness." I whispered into her ear, "And what about your Mother?" "Not talking to me. She had to take an extra heart pill when she found out I was engaged to a Yankee. We'll go up to Jackson this weekend - if you don't mind. Maybe - just maybe - if she meets you in person and will listen - we'll get her blessing." "What if she doesn't?" "You fell into my

trap - so you're mine. I've measured you up and down and you're a keeper. If we have too - we'll live together and tell everyone we're married. I won't go back on my promise to Daddy and I won't break my promise to you." "Wow - talk about being caught between the rock and the hard place. Look - do your best to convince your Mother. I prefer marriage, but I'll happily take the alternative if it's the only way we can be together. Have you found Bonnie?" "Not a word. And it's a tight little world she lives in. When she starts working again - I'll know where she is." "Bonnie may wish to drop the nightclub scene - put her career behind." "Behind?" "Now cut that out" and we both laughed.

Friday night and we opted to stay at home - preparing for our trip to Jackson. Life in our world did not come with a warranty. I knew we might not get the life we expected. We all die, but when - that's the mystery. All we could hope was for more pleasure than pain - along the way. Would my introduction to Bobbie Jean's Mother be pleasure or pain? Bobbie Jean nudged me out of my thoughts, "What are you thinking about?" "Will our trip to Jackson be pleasure or pain." "What is - is." "Definition time again." "Don't worry yourself into a self fulfilling prophecy." "Dress?" "For you - blue sport coat - regimental tie and khaki pants. For me - southern and flowery." "I'm as nervous as a suitor in a room full of maiden aunts." "You will be and you should be. Let's go out for a late dinner." "Shrimp - or steak?" "Or fish." "Decisions - decisions." "I know." "What?" "A little Italian."

Bobbie Jean's Mother would not meet us at the door, but her Butler did. I whispered, "You didn't tell me your family owned a mansion. Your entry hall is so large it echoes." "And Mother can hear every word. Pretend you've been here all your life." "Not easy to do. Your Butler checked my suitcase to see if it was made out of carpet." "Mother will

be in the sun room. It's your turn to follow." Her Mother turned as we entered the room, "Why - Bobbie Jean. You didn't tell me your Yankee boy friend was so nice looking. I'm Mrs. Langtry and you must be Lieutenant Johnny Ropp. Sit down and tell me all about your family. Where they live and where they come from." "Mother - Johnny will need a little whiskey and branch water before you give him the third degree." "I apologize - it has been such a long time since I was a hostess to my only child's new male friend. Johnny - help yourself to the decanter of whiskey on the table by the wall. We distill it right here on our plantation. Water is in the pitcher. Ice is in the silver bucket. Would you pour a glass of white wine for me and put one cube of ice in it. Bobbie Jean - your room is ready. I have Johnny staying in our guest wing." "You do want to keep us apart - don't you." "Of course - we don't bundle in our family."

Sitting next to Bobbie Jean's Mother - I felt like a schoolboy at a tea dance. When she smiled I knew she was an older version of Bobbie Jean, "I expected someone much ..." "Older and infirm - if you listen to Bobbie Jean. Now tell me all about your family." "Not much to say. Family moved to Ohio out of Virginia after the Revolutionary War on one of Washington's land grants. My Father's family moved north from Alabama before the Civil War on a Territorial land grant and we've been there every since." "What does your Father do?" "My Father and Mother were teachers. Most of the family were teachers - as far back as I can remember. We have a two-thousand acre farm along the Scioto River north of Columbus. Father has it in the land bank to help restore the soil." Bobbie Jean strolled into the room and saved me from further questioning. Her Mother fired one more shot, "Bobbie Jean tells me that your Great Grandfather may have saved my Grandfather's leg outside of Atlanta." "Yes ma'am. I think we have several of your Grandfather's medals at home. And as I mentioned to Bobbie Jean - he probably killed more Yankees

with his surgeon's knife than Johnny Reb did on Sherman's March to the sea." Her Mother frowned at my humor. I realized I had stepped in it.

The rest of the visit was cordial, but I did not win her Mother's unconditional approval. On our return trip - even Bobbie Jean could see the humor of the trap I fell into, "You would have to mention Sherman. You pushed Mother's *Forget Hell* button." "Is she opposed to our marriage?" "You scratched out half a victory. She has accepted our engagement, but has not signaled her approval of marriage. She asked that I wait a year. She is hoping you'll go away." "Damn - I stepped in it. It's my fault." "If you had been dishonest - it would have been much worse. We got all we could really expect from Mother. Now it's a waiting game - to see who can wear the other one down." "Southern women! You are a strange, but wonderful lot." "And I love you." "Enough to love - honor and obey?" "Common Law - yes." "I won't press. You made a promise and our word is our bond."

Our life together made time fly by like a fast rabbit, but my EW training crawled along like a slow turtle. I was ready to move on, but couldn't until training was finished. The only item that peaked my interest was the still at the end of the runway. When I mentioned our unusual landing aids - Bobbie Jean gave a knowing smile - one up on me and the rest of this world, "You still have a lot to learn about Southern ways and Mississippi politics. Two of our stills have operated for so long we joke about them being historical landmarks. Wasn't honest work for our boys returning home from the war of northern aggression - so they took up whiskey making." "Your Mother's is smoother than any I've ever tasted." "As long as they pay our Sheriff's tax - he warns them when the Feds are on the way. Besides - it's a family operation with all the tradition of Mr. Daniels. Whiskey - good whiskey is an art form. Let amateurs get into the

business and a lot of people will be poisoned or go blind. Most of our folks have chemistry degrees from our State University."

Bobbie Jean took my hand, "Time to show you the rest of my cellar." She pressed a button on the wall and the wine rack swung open. I looked inside, "You must have fifty cases of whiskey stored down here. Why so many?" "Several years back - Ralph discovered a particularly good batch. It was so fine he aged it in barrels. When we were married - he had it bottled and labeled with my name on it." I poured two fingers into a Mason Jar and took a sip - before passing it to Bobbie Jean. She took a sip and smiled, "I forgot how good this really is." "It is pure ambrosia." "And bottled like a fine wine. I'll never part with these. It's one of the few things Ralph did right." "He had problems?" "Most southern men do. He would rather hunt - fish and gamble. "You ran the hotel?" "After we were married. Took a year to get it solvent again and then he died." "What about our Air Force amateurs?" "We'll shut them down - soon." "I'm the luckiest man alive." "How so?" "We have an old saying. If you must marry - marry a rich Madam with a liquor store. Two out of three isn't bad!" Her elbow dug into my ribs - a bit sharper than normal.

I noticed the change on downwind. Where there used to be smoke there was none. Our pilots turned late when they realizing they had lost a marker. After a few passes they adjusted and our practice landings returned to normal. Our school Commandant and his deputy departed in the middle of the night. Though it was hard to tell they were gone - since they were never here. I asked the school sergeant if he knew where they had been transferred - too. He responded, "Supply School. Air Force figured since they knew how to make and transport whiskey - they'd be good at that." The Gulf Coast moonshine trade had returned to normalcy.

It was bound to happen - sooner or later. One of our students interfered with the radars at Pensacola Naval Air Station. Air training was disrupted and several students almost ran out of gas. Naval aviators were forever making mock attacks against our C-54s - which wasn't much of a challenge unless you consider the skill level of your average Navy pilot. Somehow - one of us funny wings got even. Now that wasn't all bad. He didn't disrupt anything but Federal activity and it was fun listening to the Navy guys panic as they chatted away like a bunch of magpies on emergency guard - UHF radio - known by the entire civilized world as Navy Common. But - we really got in hot water when one of our boys snapped and took the Jackson TV station off the air. Most of the time - it was the only TV station we received in Biloxi. And about the only thing it carried were faith healers and self appointed preachers.

Now - Bobbie Jean has a sense of humor equal to anyone I know, but she didn't smile when I told her about the TV episode, "Johnny - shame on you boys. Half the Mississippi television audience believed God had struck their preacher dead." "For that - I'm sorry. But - you have to admit it's a little weird to encourage a TV congregation to lift its backsides up to a TV screen to cure hemorrhoids." "Now - Johnny - you must remember - our favorite Oklahoma evangelist is the only entertainment we get on TV." "Even if we have to cover our ears when he shouts, 'Heal!'" "We're not all that technical down here in the deep south - Love. Has the Air Force decided where it wants to send you or do you get to choose?" "Not yet. Rumor has it we'll be told next week." "Where do you want to go?" "I was thinking about Japan or Germany, but ..." "I know. I wouldn't be allowed to tag along - unless we are married." "It won't happen. If we select by class rank and time remaining in service - I'll be the last to choose. All that will be left will be good hunting and fishing assignments." "And where would that be?"

"Far - far away from civilization." "As long as it isn't in the middle of a desert - I'll be happy. There really isn't an Air Force Base in the middle of nowhere - is there?" "Of course - more than just a few. I was hoping for something on the beach - near the sea." "You have your wish. You're here with me on the Gulf Coast." "And Houston is a port. It may be time for me to pay the piper."

My premonition of impending doom was a self fulfilling prophecy. Our Flight instructor called us together for the choosing - on a late August day. "Gentlemen - you select by your academic rank and date of service. Before we begin - are there any questions." In Tucker's memory - I had to raise my hand, "Is this where the Air Force shoves the bat up our ass?" "Only if you don't like good hunting and fishing." "As I said - we'll select in the prescribed order." I asked, "What are our choices?" "B-52s at Walker Air Force Base - Roswell, New Mexico." So we all stood up and chose - in order - the same unit at the same location in the middle of a New Mexico desert.

Bobbie Jean asked, "Did you pick your assignment?" "Yes and we all picked the same place." "Is it all they offered?" "Yes, but we were allowed to choose and rest assured there will be plenty of good hunting and fishing in Roswell, New Mexico." "Did you say Roswell, New Mexico? Don't you really mean Roswell, Georgia?" "No - New Mexico. We'll live on the beach in Roswell - by the sea - New Mexico." "Isn't it in the middle of a desert - a thousand miles from any ocean?" "Horizontally - yes, but a mile below is an old sea bed." "Funny - very funny. I'll go, but I'll scream and kick all the way." "I hope it's in bed" and I received another dig to my ribs, "Tell me about this desert oasis." "High - hot and dry. A place folks see mirages." "Mirages?" "Something you believe you see, but really doesn't exist." "That happens here all the time." "It does?" "When the good old boys go

fishing with too much moonshine in their bait bucket - we get reports on Flying saucers." "Well - the Pecos river is there and I know you've read tall tales about Pecos Bill." "Can't say I have, but there was a judge out there who worshipped Lilly Langtry." "Not as much as I do you." "I'm going with you in spite of your sweet talk. What type of Blackbird will you be - a Raven or a Crow." "I drew SAC's new bomber - the B-52." Bobbie Jean smiled, "I know which one - you'll be an Old Crow." "And wiser."

Our last month in Biloxi flew by so fast we lived in two-step time in a three-quarter world. And our living arrangement had more than one bonus for me. I saved enough cash to trade in my undertaker black - four porthole - inline eight Buick for a more substantial auto. And it was fortuitous. My Buick had developed a mysterious clank emanating from its rear end that I was unable to diagnose. A new Ford station wagon was a much better choice for a trip across country. With Bobbie Jean along - I needed all the extra space the luggage rack on top provided.

Bobbie Jean worked all week boxing the things she knew we may need. When she finished - I was escorted into her den, "What do you think?" "I'll need two more wagons and a truck." "We will mail them to Roswell?" "No - to Merced - California." "We're moving to California?" "I was just informed today - I have report there first - to attend B-52 Crew Training." "How long?" "Two to three months and then we return to New Mexico." "I want to drive up to Jackson on the way." "If your Mother sees you driving west with me - she'll have a heart attack." "Or it might move her in our direction. And I want to meet your folks." "And they want to meet you. I almost forgot - we need to prepare your cars for storage." "Not going to store them." "You're selling your Jaguar and Bentley?" "Of course not. Herbie promised to take them out for a spin at least twice a month and I have

our family mechanic. He's the only person - outside of New Orleans that understands English motor cars. I've asked Herbie to manage my investments including these apartments. I want to see how he does." "You must all ready have faith in him." "I do, but it is prudent to make sure."

Last minute packing filled the rear of our station wagon to where I had to use side mirrors to see out back. As we drove north to Jackson - I had a feeling that the good times were rolling north with me. When we drove up the Magnolia lined drive to Mrs. Langtry's mansion - I had that feeling - Bobbie Jean had returned home with a share cropper traveling to their new farm. We stayed for only an hour or so. Her Mother avoided any and all conversation with me. She tried, but her tears didn't work on Bobbie Jean. She did have her Butler place a case of plantation whiskey under our luggage in back and admonished Bobbie Jean, "That's for your Yankee boyfriend's Father. Make sure he knows where it comes from and the history behind it."

After we were on the road to Nashville - Bobbie Jean gave me the bad news, "Mother would not give her approval. I don't know what has gotten into her. If you will put up with me - I'm ready to live like this forever." "I have an idea. Why don't we get married in Reno on our way to California." "I made Daddy a death bed promise." "What was it?" "That I would not take a on new name - without Mother's approval." "You followed that with Ralph?" "And I took my name back when he passed on." "We'll get married and you can keep your maiden name." "Is that legal?" "Of course it is." "I can't let Mother know. She would die on the spot." "Do we have an agreement?" "When she changes her mind - will you promise that we'll have a second - formal garden wedding." "Of course. I'll have to explain it to my folks, but we've had mixed marriages before in our family - with similar problems." "North and south?" "Catholic and Protestant."

That comment got another gentle poke in the ribs, "We need to make a legal commitment - too." "Are you worried about my properties going bankrupt?" "No - what you bring into our marriage should remain yours." "And you?" "This car and the family farm when my folks pass away." "Agreed - we must not lose our heritage to lawyers. Mother despises them more than you Damn-Yankees." "Now that we've committed - lets stop in Nashville." "Early in the afternoon? Shouldn't we wait until we're married." It was my turn for a gentle dig and we laughed - together.

Nashville had grown a bit - one or two more new motels since my last visit. We ate an early dinner and hopped into bed - exhausted and relieved. I knew we were in the deep south when grits appeared on our breakfast plates. Bobbie Jean smiled, "I know how you love them - so." "Can't replace good home fries for breakfast with a white cloud of grease. Are you nervous. You woke me up a dozen times - tossing and turning." "I'm meeting your folks for the first time - we've decided to marry without Mother's blessing and you ask me why I couldn't sleep. I'm as excited as a teenage bride marrying a southern music star." "I'm country music?" "Well - no, but you're as close as I want to get to one. Did you remember to phone your parents?" "I didn't call. I think it's better to surprise them. We can only stay a day or two at the most. I want to have several extra days on our trip across country - in case we have a breakdown."

Since the marriage question had been resolved - Bobbie Jean covered a multitude of living arrangement what ifs on our drive through Kentucky. By the time we drove into Cincinnati - she was exhausted. And by the time I filled the tank with gas and purchased a case of Royal Amber - she was fast asleep. It was well after dark when I turned on River Road - driving north from Columbus along the Scioto. As we pulled into our farm lane - Bobbie Jean woke up, "Are we

there?" "Yes - the farm house is up ahead. The lights are on so my folks are awake." "Are you certain they will approve of me?" "Yes, but even if they don't - I do and that's all that counts." "I love your qualifier, but I'm more nervous than ever."

She shouldn't have been. Bobbie Jean got more of a hug from Father than I ever did and Mother bubbled over - visions of Grandchildren dancing in her eyes. Bobbie Jean won their rousing approval. We stayed an extra day. Mother insisted. She had to show all of her friends and all of our relatives my prize catch. The evening before we departed - I unveiled our marriage plans and explained why. Mother made us promise to have a formal wedding when Bobbie Jean's Mother finally approved, "The wheel turns - yet everything remains the same. Your Father and I ran away to get married. Your Grandfather Mac didn't approve, but he came around." "How long did it take?" "Quite awhile." "What happened?" "Grandchildren - your older sisters came along."

We followed the national road west to Saint Louis - Oklahoma City and jogged south of Denver to Colorado Springs. Bobbie Jean picked a hotel high up on Pike's Peak. Now that was a mistake. We turned in early and slept long. Not being used to the altitude. Romance took a back seat to getting well. We had to stay overnight in Denver - still groggy. By then we had acclimated to the altitude and were ready to cross over the Rockies. On the drive over the mountains to Steamboat Springs - Bobbie Jean sat dead center in the middle of our station wagon, "You're on the inside of these curves. My part of the car is hanging out over the edge of a thousand foot drop. Who built these roads?" "Don't know, but this time of year the southern route is too hot." "And that's where we're going to live?" "Roswell is up on a high plain - so it'll be cooler than Arizona." "I hope so - I've been to Phoenix and it cooks this time of the year."

Steamboat Springs wasn't more than two wide streets - crossing in the middle of nowhere - on the bottom of a mountain valley. We stopped at a diner for lunch. Mountain oysters were the special. Bobbie Jean was about to order the special when a diner cowboy - two stool down - whispered, "I wouldn't if I were you - Ma'am. They come from the wrong end of a bull." She thanked him and we both ordered hamburgers and fries. She whispered in my ear, "Always order something fully cooked on the road. Don't want to end up with cramps or worse." Our lunch was hot and quick. And we survived another meal - heading west.

Salt Lake City is an oasis surrounded on three sides by salt flats and one side by the Wasatch Mountain Range. I couldn't believe what I saw, "There are more bars here than in Biloxi. What's going on. I was lead to believe Mormons don't drink." "They don't, but Jack Mormons do." "Have you been to Salt Lake?" "Ralph took me on a honeymoon trip across the west. He stopped here to trace his ancestors. They have the worlds best archives up in the mountains." "A Jack Mormon must be someone overly familiar with Mr. Daniels. Want to visit the sights tomorrow?" "I thought we were in a hurry to get to California?" "Car is running good. We won't need those extra days. And we're a day ahead of schedule." "Remember our wedding in Reno?" "Right - we'll move on. Our honeymoon will be short enough as it is."

Our drive west to Elko, Nevada was hot - dusty and dull. Bobbie Jean kept me company in the morning, but the bright white salt flats wore her down. She fell asleep halfway to Nevada waking up only to comment, "How much more desolation do we have to drive through?" "Looks like it goes all the way to Reno. Didn't you spend your honeymoon out here?" "We flew over the desert part. Funny thing about driving out west. It looks like it's all the same - from the Rockies to the Sierras - a brindle desert kaleidoscope.

Bobbie Jean took off her sunglasses and looked around, "I'm tired of desert brown and tans - I want to see green." "We'll have to climb a mountain. According to the map - this desert stretches from the jungles of Mexico to the Arctic Ocean." "And the only difference is the temperature. Now I know why our government encourages air travel. The next time we decide to go across country - lets take a plane."

Bobbie Jean spotted it first, "Look to your left. I see green." "That's Elko, Nevada and it's time for lunch." Elko is your average western town. One main drag with curbs so high you can rip out the bottom of your car doors when opening them - gutters doubled as storm sewers. We parked two feet away, but Bobbie Jean still had to get out on my side of the car. I took her hand - helping her up from the street to the sidewalk, "Looks like they're expecting a flood of Biblical proportions." "Is that what they call a gully washer?" "Yes - town looks clean. They must care here." Wasn't a bad restaurant. Looked a lot like all the others we had eaten in along the way. The only difference was the rack of slot machines up near the cash register. Meal was the same as Salt Lake, but tastier - hot and quick. Bobbie Jean tried the dime machine while I paid our check. She was all smiles, "You know - I could live in a place like this. Clean air - why we can see a hundred miles." "And lots of good hunting and fishing. Maybe you're being influenced because you hit the Jackpot on the dime machine on your first pull." "Well - I'm glad we stopped for lunch. The emptiness of the west must have driven the early settlers' wives mad."

Back on the national road - Bobbie Jean settled in for the long drive across Nevada to Reno, "Are you excited?" "About the trip or flying in a jet bomber? Our life will never be dull." "No - silly - getting married in Reno." "I am nervous. I can see how some folks bolt at the church door. It's a big step when two people to make a lifetime

commitment to stay together. Makes me wonder why arranged marriages work as well as they do." "That was off the wall. Your mind does wander. The west's wide open spaces must be getting to you. We haven't seen much civilization between Salt Lake and here - except Elko." "The big winner always gloats. Lots out here for a geologist to love. Mountain gullies are full of alluvial fans. Really shows up when there isn't much vegetation." "Only a fellow with a jackass and a pick could love it." Bobbie Jean curled up, "Wake me when you see the lights of Reno. I want to make sure the condemned man eats a hearty last meal."

The western Nevada landscape changed from light sand to brindle-brown hard pan. And then to dry moss - with patches of green - as we approached Long Valley Creek outside of Sparks. I jiggled Bobbie Jean's shoulder, "Time to wake up. We're almost there. The open country between Sparks and Reno looks like wild grass over hardpan - a pretty good place to raise sheep." Bobbie Jean was wide awake and feisty as ever, "Or a good place to shear a reluctant bachelor." The lights of Reno looked like Times Square to two desert rats rolling in - out of the Nevada waste lands. Bobbie Jean was full of surprises, "Ralph and I stopped here and in Las Vegas on our honeymoon. It's a fun town with a block full of casinos that decree, 'Come as you are and bring money.' "That eliminates the unwashed Californians." "Don't worry. Mountains are too high for them to walk over. The Beat Generation stays on the coast - Monterey to San Francisco. Reno is cowboy country." "You mean the Frederick Remington working kind?" "You'll see. Boots and jeans are formal here."

We selected a new motel a block from downtown - without a pool - dining room or bar. Reno was Spartan, but clean. I showered and Bobbie Jean unpacked. As I toweled off - she warned me, "Don't gamble at any game except blackjack. We have a line of credit at Harold's and Harrah's under my

maiden name." "You've got casino connections in Nevada?" "I was in the business." "Hurry up - I'm eager to lose my hard earned cash." "With that kind of an attitude - the Reno casinos will oblige. Go on ahead. I want to shower - change and make a few calls." "Your Mother?" "Yes and we need to line up a chapel." "I should be doing that." "Your job is to show up and bring the ring." "Ring - you didn't mention ring." "Very funny - I helped you pick them out. I'll meet you at Harold's." "Any last minute advice?" "Don't put money in any machine." "You did in Elko." "One thin dime and I know when to quit. Don't bet one nickel over two dollars - don't double up and never bet on anything that talks - walks or runs. Set your limit and stick with it. The Dealers are honest here and the owners are like family. But remember - no matter how lucky you are - eventually the house will always win." "I'm off." "Be careful."

"If I had only listened to you I would have walked away winners." Bobbie Jean sat down beside me in Harold's bar, "Never - if you do it's only temporary. The house has the odds - money and patience. Tell me the bad news." "A hot streak at blackjack was my undoing." "Don't tell me - you doubled up." "And redoubled. Went from five hundred ahead to one hundred behind." "Your limit?" "Yes." "She kissed me. I'm the lucky one - Ralph never knew when to quit. I have a chapel reserved for tonight at nine." "So soon?" "We're not going to live in one more night in sin." "My lady is proper - too." "You do have a lot to learn about women. Though my nesting urge is ferocious - my moral fiber is tough." "Do I need to dress proper?" "Reception is at the best restaurant in town. I made reservations for nine thirty." "Talk about Oliver T's wedding being quick." "Does my condemned bachelor have a last request?" I was beginning to get those before wedding - nervous sort of clanks, "Coat and tie?" "Coat, but no tie - this is Reno. Your last request?" "You - you're my last request."

I wouldn't recommend a Nevada wedding to anyone who wants a formal one. Our preacher was ordained and the papers were legal, but it didn't seem proper. And he was surprised when we insisted Bobbie Jean keep her maiden name. It was a first for him. Now it might have been quick and more than a little plastic, but to tell the truth - my knees buckled as we took our vows. And I couldn't have been happier - when we walked out of that chapel as man and wife. I really did look like the cat that caught his canary. Bobbie Jean was more than a little misty eyed - too, "Are those tears of joy?" "No - I'm crying for Mother and Daddy. I do wish they could have been with us. I have no tears for us. We're the lucky ones. I'm loved and love you in return. I don't remember ever having so much fun." I was going to say something about Ralph, but knew better. "And now for the reception. Lead the way." There was no limo and no need for one. We were within walking distance - less than a block away."

Bobbie Jean was wide eyed, "You didn't order pepper steak? My - my - we are full of surprises." "Never had scallops before. Do you mind that I ordered the same dinner as you?" "No, but seafood?" "Man does not live by steak alone." I was too far away for her to dig my ribs. Dinner was delicious, but we played with most of our food - except the scallops. They were bigger than silver dollars and about as good as any food I've ever had. We ordered after dinner drinks - brandy for me and Irish coffee for Bobbie Jean. She moved close, "You've been awfully quiet this evening." "Not often one gets married. And it was almost too quick. It took fifteen minutes to seal our fate for sixty years. My mind hasn't caught up with my body. I chased you - caught you and we're now one. My thoughts have turned to providing a warm cave and protection from animals that are about. I'll cherish this moment and maybe look back." "Must be a male thing. All I want to do is curl up on a bear skin next to my cave man." "Now you have my attention." "Do you want to try

luck?" "At the tables." Bobbie Jean gave me one of those looks. One given to immigrants just stepping off the boat. She smiled and linked her arm in mine, "Do you mind if we wake up early and leave for California?" "Nesting urge?" "Yes - it's overwhelming."

And curl up we did - until the wee hours. I was up at the crack of dawn - tiptoeing around our motel room like a bull elephant in heat. I turned on the shower - to wash the cobwebs away. When I stepped in - two soft hands caressed my back and shoulders. "Mind if I join you - soldier?" We fell together - in a tight embrace - catching ourselves with one hand free - stopping the slide - squeezing together at the same time. We both laughed - stepped back locked in an embrace. Our laughter soon turned into passion. All thoughts of leaving early vanished in the morning mist.

An accident had traffic on the National Road slowed to a crawl from Truckee to the Donner Summit. Forewarned - we sped south toward Carson City. I looked over at Bobbie Jean - she had that glow - a blush new brides always have on the morning after. Always romantic - she said it was, "Whisker burn," but I didn't believe it. She cuddled near and stroked my leg, "You're a quiet one for such a talker - this morning. What's on your mind?" "You're my gambling expert. I really had a high at the blackjack table. Winning wasn't it and losing wasn't either. And afterwards I felt like a well spent buck." "On a Spring made sheet. It's the thrill one has in looking for the unknown - every time you turn over a card - matching your hand with the dealer's - not knowing whether you'll win or lose until the dealer turns over his hole card. It's a rush that can bring ruin - if you lose control." "It could take me down - hard. Difficult to back away." "Knowing about it is the cure." "Reno was a friendly town. Everyone treated us like long lost friends." "We were. We are their industry. Without us - it's back to

digging in a mine. And when the money runs out - we'll be strangers again." "I not only get a bride - I get a watcher - philosopher and a psychologist all in one pretty package. We'll skirt Lake Tahoe. Good place to take a few wedding pictures." "And I have my wish." "What's that?" "We've driven out of the desert and into tall trees."

Our drive west - downhill from South Lake Tahoe to Placerville was twist - turn and turn some more. Bobbie Jean motioned for me to stop, "Whoa - Big Felluh." I stopped at a pullout, "I've trained you well." "But - not my stomach. If we hadn't stopped - you'd have my breakfast in your lap." "Stretch - take in some oxygen and get your land legs again. I'll snap a few more pictures. When your ready to go - I'll drive a bit slower." The cool mountain air did its trick. She held my hands and pulled me towards her. We kissed and she said, "California or bust." I smiled and she gave me a little dig, "California first - bust later."

*"Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.  
Alice replied, rather shyly, "I-I  
hardly know, Sir, just at present-  
at least I know who I was when I got  
up this morning, but I think I must  
have changed several times since then."*

# 8

"It's all so - so brown. Golden California must be a Press Agent's release." I looked out from the center line of the winding mountain road, "Yup - miles and miles of dead grass," and focused again on a very narrow roadway. Bobbie Jean was disappointed, "I expected a land of milk and honey and the valley below - well there must be a million miles of dry parched grass land." "If you were trying to sell this place - what slogan would you use?" "Touché - you got me again - soldier. If California isn't gold - I'll bet the Golden Gate Bridge isn't either." "Never seen it, but we will." Bobbie Jean sat up and pointed at a town below, "Sacramento?" "Maybe - but probably a mining town. Hungry?" "Famished. I'm ready for red meat. Are we going to drive through town?" "Let's skirt the southern edge and turn south to Merced. It's not too far. Keep your eyes open." "There. See the sign."

## STEAK DINNER \$1.99

I whistled, "we've got to try that. It may give our stomachs something to talk about." And it certainly did. We were served a baked potato - tossed salad and a good sized steak. That was the good news. The bad? Salad greens were bitter. Bobbie Jean thought it might be endive, but wasn't sure. The baked potato? Was it ever overcooked. I tried to bounce it off the floor, but Bobbie Jean grabbed my hand. Our steaks were wonders. Couldn't cut them with a knife and we'd still be chewing our first bite if we hadn't taken it out of our mouths. We didn't leave a tip.

Bobbie Jean was still giggling as we continued our trip south, "We'll remember that meal for the rest of our lives. Have you ever had a piece of meat that tough?" "We raised our own and aged it proper. No - I never have - not even at YMCA camp." "I'm still hungry, but not enough to eat shoe leather." "We'll stop in Modesto." "Is that a town or an attitude?" "Probably both. Keep an eye out for a restaurant sign. I'll give you a second chance." "You watch - I'm going to take a nap" and she curled up by my side.

I nudged Bobbie Jean, "Wake up. You've got to read this sign." She sat up and looked out, "My goodness! Haven't our California Press Agents been busy little beavers. I like it. Has a certain rhythm to it." "Read it to me."

## "Modesto, California - Water Wealth Contentment Health"

"It is catchy. Sort of like a Burma Shave jingle. What valley are we driving through?" "Almost goes the whole length of the state - from Fresno to Sacramento - the San Joaquin Valley. Sierra Nevada Mountains on the east side and the Coastal Range to the west. Have you seen a restaurant sign?" "Minnies." "Mouse?" "No Minnies of Modesto" and we both laughed, "We follow the road to Dodge Ridge." "What's that?" "Must be a ski area. There it is - Minnies is on the left." "Chinese - should be good."

Not knowing Chinese food - I mentioned, "Chow Mein?" "Time to give my farm boy a lesson in oriental food. Do you mind? I'll order." "Go ahead. All my experience comes out of a can." She ordered Lemon Chicken - Kung Po Shrimp and Wonton Soup. It was more than just a culinary delight - to someone who grew up on steak and potatoes. I asked, "Why is the rice sticky?" "So you can pick it up in your chopsticks. And eat your food over the rice bowl - if anything drops - it catches it. The Chinese are very practical." Minnie's meal

wiped out our memory of the Sacramento steak. Back in the wagon - I asked, "You've been reading our tour book. Tell me about Merced."

Bobbie Jean opened it to the M's, "It's called the Gateway to Yosemite. If it is - the road up to the mountains from the valley to the gate has to be over fifty miles. It is renowned for figs - tomatoes - grapes - almonds - cotton and potatoes. The San Joaquin was a desert until irrigation came along. They trap snow runoff in the mountains. Other than Castle Air Force Base and agriculture - there is no other industry. Summers are hot and dry. Winters are cool with lots of valley fog. Kind of like Elko with humidity and wine grapes. Can't see more than ten miles. We could see forever in Elko." "Not many grapes growing in Elko. I'm stuffed. Ready to look for a new home - Mrs. Langtry." "That doesn't sound right. I looked around to see if Mother is here." "Best we can do until she comes around." "Call me Mrs. Ropp." I smiled, "We are married. Have to stop at Base Housing." "I'd rather live in town." "Have to see if they have quarters for us. Might have a list of apartments. Like the one Oliver T found behind Gus Steven's." "Oh no you don't. I'll not have you anywhere near strippers." "Can't have strippers without a strip." "Near an Air Base? If there aren't any around we are in the wilderness."

We followed the signs to Castle Air Force Base. Castle - Like all the others I'd been on - wasn't any new buildings since World War II. We saw barracks type buildings as far as our eyes could see. However - the hangers were new, but only because jet bombers were many times larger than B-17s and B-29s. We followed the signs to Base Housing. Inside I was greeted by a desk sergeant - an identical triplet to the ones I had met at Ellington and Keesler. He was - at the least - friendly, "You're going to have to find your own place in Atwater or Merced." "Which one do you recommend?" "Merced -

Atwater isn't much more than a vineyard with a couple of stores and some new tract houses." "Do you have a list of apartments?" Took awhile before he stopped laughing and composed himself, "Castle is our only B-52 and KC-135 training Base. We're packed with students. You may have to live in a motel." "Do you have a list," and he began to laugh again. "Ours is so out of date it's useless."

I opened the door to our wagon, "No room at the Inn and Atwater isn't. Merced wins by default. We'll have to look for a place to live on our own." "Good - drive south until we see green." The first motel we stopped at had a swimming pool so small - if we attempted a dive we'd hit the opposite wall and water so brown - no one would find you. First time I ever heard Bobbie Jean swear - other than at Yankees. "I'm not staying in a damn dump. It's barely one step away from a migrant worker's camp. We're right across the street from a giant Orange Julius stand. Lets move on. I just stepped on a bug larger than a Mississippi mouse." "Sheets look clean enough." "Only on one side."

We stopped next to a series of bungalows nestled in a grove of Sugar Pines with an appropriate title - *Pine Cone Inn*. Bobbie Jean tugged at my arm and giggled at the next sign, *The Branding Iron*, "Do you think they serve seafood?" "Only if you can rope it from a horse. We'll find out after we check in. Put a dime in the slot and get a copy of the local newspaper." "There's one left. I'll look for apartments at dinner." Our motel room was Yosemite rustic, but clean. You have to like ranch oak to really get the flavor. Dinner was at - where else - the restaurant next door. And they did have seafood and it was branded by the top of the grill. I finished a superb sirloin - thick and juicy while Bobbie Jean had trout - all delicious. She scanned the classifieds while we sipped two mugs of excellent coffee. She folded the

newspaper, "Do you want desert? Our waitress said they have their own bakery downtown." "Cherry pie?" "Can she bake a cherry pie - charming Johnny." "Why did I answer. Of course I want cherry pie for desert. And your the young one that cannot leave her Mother, but I know my duty. I'll be your permanent straight man. Did you find a lead?" "Yes and I'll find a place for us tomorrow - even if I have to buy a house. We've spent too much time in motels on this trip. I want to begin nesting." "Are you serious about buying?" "Yes - it's obviously a good rental market. We can turn a profit in three months if we rent to people like us."

After I turned off the light and climbed into bed - Bobbie Jean curled up like a spoon to my backside and pulled my pillow down to share, "Did you here what the waitress said about the entertainment here?" "No - must have been when I was using the little boy's room." "The main entertainment is watching bears eat garbage at the dump in Yosemite." "Not my cup off tea." "Their second favorite is squashing Tarantulas under their car tires on the way back." "Are you sure she wasn't kidding?" "Yes and the TV reception is so bad here we only get two channels - intermittently." "I can do nothing for three months - with you at my side. Learned how to do that tending sheep." "Well - if you expect nothing - that's what you'll get. Not us - we're going to see the Golden Gate - Yosemite - Cannery Row - the Pacific Ocean and tramp through the Redwoods. I'm going to make my Yankee farm boy into a man of the world." "That will take some doing. We still have a lot to learn about each other and now we have time." "Hate to admit it, but you're right." "Lets make this our extended honeymoon."

After breakfast - Bobbie Jean dragged me all over town looking at resale's - new homes and apartments. We found what she wanted - late in the afternoon. She asked, "What do you think?" "It's walled in and the only place to park is on

the street. Cool enough. We may not have to use the swamp cooler." "I noticed the vents. How does it work?" "Water flows over felt pads and a blower vents air through. Works in a dry climate - not Biloxi." "I like it. Hardwood floors and its furnished right out of 1930 - almost Art Deco. Clean and comfortable." "I thought you wanted to buy?" "I did until I saw the construction. The new places are being finished with packing crate wood. We'll rent." "We'll have to convince the owner." "No problem. When I retrieved the keys we hit it off quite well." "But it said no short term rentals." "I remember a young lieutenant in Biloxi who solved that problem. You'll convince her." "And we'll offer a large deposit and pay three months up front."

Bobbie Jean did all the talking. When she finished the apartment was ours at the long term rate. I asked, "How did you convince her?" "Remember - hotel owners have a union and apartment owners have the same bond. And she thought you looked cute." "Right - did you tell her we were newlyweds?" "Of course. She looked as straight laced as any lady I know in the south. You and I both have incomes - so I'll pay my share and we'll split all costs." "I can afford ..." "Not the way I like to live - not on lieutenant's wages." "Where were you when I was scratching my way through Ohio State?" "Cursing you Yankee carpetbaggers." "In your Biloxi finishing school?" "No - silly - in high school Confederate history class." "Did I transport a minor across a state line?" "Almost - my lucky one."

We spent the next three days picking up packages from the Post Office and buying household items to make our new - to us - two bedroom apartment livable. She had picked well. Although the furnishings had age - they were well preserved and sparkling clean. After watching Bobbie Jean in action - I gained a large share of respect for homemakers. Our waitress was right about poor TV reception. And we drove up

to Yosemite to look at the bears. Talk about big browns. We didn't stay long at the dump. Wasn't appetizing. And the Tarantulas were swarming all over the road on our way back. I avoided what I could and squashed the rest. Must have been a fall mating procession or something like that. We found two excellent restaurants - the Lodge at Yosemite and a little Italian place - on the road back.

All good things had to come to an end and so did our short honeymoon. I reported into B-52 Ground School early on a Monday morning. Our instructor's welcome was short and to the point, "Welcome to B-52 Combat Crew training. You'll have a month and a half of book training before you get to fly. Your crew consists of two pilots - a radar operator - a navigator - a gunner and you - an EW. All of the crews you'll join up with were together in B-36s - so they'll treat you as odd man out. The B-36 used gunners to protect the airplane. In the B-52 we use electronics and that's you. You have an important job to do, but your crew may not recognize it as such. From the feedback we're getting - most look at EWs as dead weight. The B-52 counts on high altitude - speed and deception to survive. You provide the deception. Can't see it - feel it or hear it - so EW will be a hard sell. Ground School begins tomorrow morning at eight sharp. In the back of the classroom you'll find your B-52 Tech Order books under your name. They cover the airplane from nose to tail - inside and out. And there is an emergency procedures book - also. I want you to spend the rest of the morning memorizing the applicable parts for your position. This afternoon - I want you to draw your brain buckets and flight gear from supply. We won't be flying above fifty-thousand feet - so you won't need pressure suits. Walker's Wing Operations Officer wants to see you at the Base Theater at noon. Any questions?" It was time for Tucker to be served, "Is it - you play ball with me and I'll play ball with you - or you play ball with me and I'll shove the bat up your ass?"

"No - Lieutenant - Ropp isn't it? Rest assured - the Tooth Ferry won't leave a quarter under your pillow - and SAC will play fair, but if that's your attitude I just might leave it where the sun don't shine. That's all I have to say. Now get to work." I not only learned emergency procedures - I discovered the B-52 pecking order - before I wandered over to the Base Theater. First came the senior pilot - or aircraft commander - followed by radar operator - navigator - copilot and I fell in behind the gunner. It was the same as joining a fraternity at Ohio State. The new guys were always on the bottom.

The Bomb Wing Director of Operations was a full eagle Colonel. The first of that rare bird that I had ever seen. And he didn't waste any time. He strode to the podium with the authority of a Texas Ranger at a riot. As a result - our packed Base Theater grew suddenly silent. He tapped the microphone, "Gentlemen - and I say that loosely. I'm for having a good time - as much as anyone, but World War II is over. Getting drunk - driving down a California railroad track at midnight with your headlights on high and playing chicken with an oncoming freight train is not my idea of good clean fun. If you have too much to drink - pick a sober guy to drive home. I don't want any more early morning phone calls from California's Highway Patrol. Lets do our job - learn what we need to know about our new airplane and return to Roswell without any more trouble. The next officer who winds up in a drunk tank will be dismissed from the service. For you new guys - we work hard and play hard. And remember - keep your play reasonable."

When I returned to our apartment in the evening - I told Bobbie Jean about our lecture, "This assignment is looking up. Looks like I'm joining a group that really knows how to party." "I'm party enough for you - soldier." "I'll watch my step. Most of them are here without their wives." "Like

sailors on leave. Lets go to San Francisco while we can." "Drive over Friday night?" "I'll make reservations at that downtown hotel with the rooftop bar - Top of the Mark." "We'll have to return Sunday evening." "It'll be fun. We can see if the Golden Gate Bridge is really painted Gold." "And if there are any forty-niners left."

By the time Friday morning arrived - I was certain B-52 ground school was going to be a piece of cake. SAC trained like it flew - with realism. No trick questions and the airplane exams were called - Practical - straight and to the point. Our trip to San Francisco turned out to be great fun. We visited the Fleishecker Zoo out near the Cliff House and rode an enclosed carousel shrouded in coastal fog - right out of a California movie scene. Did all the tourist things - rode a cable car - had drinks at the Top of the Mark and dinner at Trader Vic's. Wasn't as good as Minnies in Modesto - very few Chinese Restaurants were. The Golden Gate Bridge wasn't gold - not at all. It was a disappointment - painted in bright international orange. Cold - with fog and wind off the Pacific - I've never been as cold anywhere else in my life. We were dressed for San Joaquin Valley warm - not California coastal cold. If I had one thing I'd do again it was ridin' that carousel at the zoo. In the dense fog - with it's barrel organ playin' Paddlin' Madelin Home - had to be a land of enchantment. Bobbie Jean was starry-eyed as we strolled through Golden Gate park - arm in arm. Like most things in life - the best memories are free.

The next weekend we drove to Monterey. Cannery Row was a ramshackle pile of wharf and warehouses with seals and sea lions all over the docks. John Steinbeck would still feel at home there. We were dressed for the cold breeze of Seventeen Mile Drive, but not well enough. It was two in the afternoon before the sun poked through. We stopped at Pebble Beach and several pullouts to take photos, but didn't stay outside the

wagon very long. The wind was winter sharp. And we stopped at several Tea Houses in Carmel, but gave up trying to get in without reservations. All in all we came away with a memory that said - pack a lunch next time you come this way and wear another layer of clothes. I had to needle Bobbie Jean on our return trip via San Luis Obispo, "You weren't able to crack that cutesy quaintsy town without reservations." "And I thought Old Mississippi was a closed society. I like this mission town better. If California is the land of fruits and nuts - Carmel has the fruits and San Luis Obispo really does have nuts." "Say English Walnut - quick. That's a harsh judgment - Bobbie Jean." "What do they say about a woman scorned. I don't take turndowns lightly."

B-52 Ground training - like Gaul - was split into three parts. First - emergency procedures. Second - EW equipment knowledge and third - equipment operation. I aced the course - which was a first for me. But of course - most everyone else did - too. Flight training was a horse of another color - with more than a few airplanes falling out of the sky. Took the pilots awhile to learn the B-52 flew better with its tip tanks attached than without. And then - an instructor toggled off a tip tank by mistake. Landed point down in an orchard. The newspaper photo of the smiling farmer standing next to it - looked like a fisherman who'd caught a prize salmon. Wasn't long before the same instructor backed over the fire hydrant in front of our ground training building - where he had just been reassigned. He was on his way to Supply School in Cheyenne before water was restored to the west side of base.

I wasn't scared - just cautious. You see - my ejection seat centered on the tail - or as smart ass fliers call it - the vertical stabilizer. And that B-52 tail section stood almost two stories high. I was certain if I had to punch out - I wouldn't clear it. I kept thinking, "This is where the

bat comes in." Our instructor tried to assure us in a strange way, "At least you won't have to use a can opener to get out like EWs riding the capsule in the bomb bay do." I asked, "Can opener? What do you mean?" "When you activate that ejection seat - knives come out of the bottom. And when the seat rocket fires - the knives cut a path for your seat to follow." Tucker would have an answer, but all I could say was, "Right." "Works fine - we think - at high altitude, but it isn't worth a hill of beans down low. Doesn't pay to have a rocket tied to your ass when your seat is pointing down and you're flying close to the ground. But - don't worry - we lost the first B-52 carrying a capsule on takeoff - so it looks like SAC is going to cancel the project. Besides - EWs are in short supply - after the accident."

I needed reassurance, "Has an EW ejected from a B-52 and survived?" "Roger that. Even cleared the tail. Really funny - that one - now that you asked. Entire crew bailed out over the base. All except the instructor EW. After the crew left - the plane corrected whatever problem it had and circled the high cone. The instructor wandered around - then called the Command Post on UHF radio for instructions. Told him to bail out. Couldn't steer the thing without a seat. Just be happy your not in Royal Air Force Bomber Command. They only give ejection seats to the pilots - everyone else has to fend for themselves."

Even Bobbie Jean had to laugh when I told her the story about the lone EW, "Isn't that just like the Air Force - Dear. One of you is in position to fly the airplane and they tell him to jump. At least you know you'll clear that tail thing." "Only if they let me know when it's time to go." "Have you met your crew?" "No - they're not due in for another month. I'm flying with an experienced crew - though. This pilot is right up front about what he wants from me." "How so?" "He said that not failing is the only reward I can

expect. SAC expects and gets professional results." "Is he safe?" "Yes - he refuses to push the envelope." "Envelope?" "Take it past the stops." "Speak English." "When you were in Kindergarten - didn't they teach you to draw within the lines with your crayon?" "Yes." "That's what I mean. Know your limits and stay within them." I watched her smile grow and I knew another zinger was coming, "You've been around one too many pilots when you speak of crayons. How many more weeks do you have to train before we journey on to Roswell by the sea?" "Depends. If the weather remains good - I'd say at least five more weeks."

Our last five weeks flew by - pun like. Flying in a B-52 raised my heart rate more than a little bit. To some it might be uneventful, but not to me. Like EW school in Biloxi - we were short of equipment - so I was able to look through an empty equipment rack and watch two pilots practice bounce - bounce - bounce and go landings. Bringing a B-52 down was akin to landing a glider. It preferred to stay in the air once it got there. We had an equal number of takeoffs and landings - so I received SAC's highest mark - not failing. My reward was - being allowed to work eighty hour weeks - like every other crew member in SAC.

Bobbie Jean began packing a week before we were scheduled to leave. She still didn't trust the Air Force and we had too many things to mail. So - she scheduled a moving van. Leaving Merced was much easier than coming. All we had to do was point our car south towards Fresno and step on the gas pedal. Our trip was uneventful until we drove through a late fall cold front outside of Fresno. One that extended all the way into old Mexico. Bobbie Jean had a word for it, "West has two climates - too hot or too cold." "And miles and miles of emptiness. Did you make reservations for any particular hotel in Las Vegas?" "A new resort on the way into town called the Desert Inn." "From what I've seen so

far - it's aptly named. This desert is too firm to plow and too dry to pasture sheep." "And too far away from a radio station for music."

We could see the lights of town through the evening twilight - way out on the distant horizon. The sign announcing the entrance to the Desert Inn glowed clearly a half a mile away, "This is out on the edge of nowhere. Why did they build this far out?" Bobbie Jean knew, "To be the first major stop on the road from LA. You can find a bellhop while I check in. We're supposed to have the first ground floor room on the right front of the casino." Bobbie Jean's name worked its usual magic. I expected a hotel - not a two story motel, but the accommodations were first class. Our room was directly across from the west entrance to the casino and showroom. Bobbie Jean led the bellhop to our car, "I'll go ahead with the luggage. You can park the car next to the walk - outside our room." She was arranging our clothes when I entered the room, "With a location like this - it must cost a pretty penny." "For us it's free - we're comped - wouldn't accept our money." "Takes more than us walking in from the street for that." "I wired ahead for a line of credit - casino owner's courtesy." "You've been here before?" "Yes - before it opened. I have a very small piece of this resort. Start up money." "You never cease to amaze me. Is there a show tonight?" "Someone by the name of Ernie Kovacs - a very funny guy." "Do you want to go?" "We have reservations for the dinner show. It's the only place serving this evening. Not enough customers to keep the regular dining room open. So - if we want to eat dinner here - we don't have a choice." "I'm going to shower and dress. Coat and tie?" "Sport coat - shirt open at the neck. Las Vegas is still a cowboy town. don't lose more than your limit."

When my Bobbie Jean entered the casino in her drop dead evening gown - the gamblers turned their heads away from the

tables. I whistled, "I thought you said this was a cowboy town?" "Cowboy not cowgirl. How did you do at the tables while I was making myself beautiful." "Glass of white wine?" "Yes - your sitting at a table in the casino bar. Like Reno - did you lose your limit?" "No, but I screwed up. Sat down to play a couple of hands of blackjack and guess who relieved my dealer?" "I wouldn't know." "Dean Martin. I sat there betting and not paying attention - star struck. When he left the table I was seven hundred dollars ahead." "That's the one rule I didn't tell you about. Blind luck will always win out over knowledge and skill." "Think I've heard that another way. Ready for dinner? Show begins in thirty minutes."

The maitre d recognized Bobbie Jean as we walked into the show room. He opened the ropes and provided his own personal escort to a front row owner's table. Dinner was served almost as soon as he placed napkins on our laps. As the lights dimmed, I whispered, "You have more influence than even I expected. How did they know I liked pepper steak and you - grilled salmon?" "While you were playing blackjack - the maitre d called our room and asked. If it wasn't for this lamp on our table - I couldn't see my plate." "Is it polite to dine while the show is on?" "Yes - delicious isn't it?" "You are and the food is - too." Kovacs put on quite a show with his classic Nairobi Trio pantomime. As the house lights came up - Bobbie Jean whispered, "Did you notice the group behind us - to the left?" "Between the show and the way you look in your gown - no." "It's the Marks Brothers." I glanced back, "I wouldn't have picked them out. How did you?" "Maitre d asked if we'd like to be introduced and I declined. It's Harpo's birthday. They're having a private party." "Looks just like average grandfathers with trophy wives." Bobbie Jean took my arm, "If you want to gamble - count me out. Packing all week and the drive have caught up with my body." "Mine - too. Lets call it a night."

It was a miracle - Bobbie Jean was up before daylight. She tapped me on my shoulder, "Rise and shine, soldier. You wanted to be on the road by eight. Breakfast is on the way - so hop to it and make yourself presentable." "Do you want to stop at the Grand Canyon on the way?" "El Tovar hotel? Why not. Do we have time?" "Our airplanes haven't arrived at Walker - no one is pressuring me." "I want to stop in Prescott to look at property. Is it out of our way?" "Out of the way, but doable. Should we call ahead to the Grand Canyon?" "I will while you're dressing."

Breakfast arrived while I was shaving. Bobbie Jean called out, "Hurry - your eggs will get cold." "Not if you leave them covered. What else did you order?" "Bacon and toast." "I'm dining with the loveliest lady on the Las Vegas Strip. She smiled, "At least I've trained you to wear a robe at breakfast." "It's cold, but I remember. Did you make reservations at the El Tovar?" "Tried, but they're full up. One of the few places where my union card doesn't work." "Prescott it is. Should we call ahead?" "Not more than a wide spot in the road and late fall shouldn't be a problem." "Is it a resort town?" "No - but that's why I want to take a look - it may become one."

We stopped at Boulder Dam so this farm boy could look down - which I did. I said something quotable like, "Damn - it's a long way down." Bobbie Jean held on tight to my arm, "It won't bother you if you look straight ahead." "If I do that - it looks like the rest of Nevada. That's enough of looking down for me. Strange - I don't get a queasy feeling looking out of an airplane. Poured a lot of concrete here." "And ruined a good canyon. In an airplane you're surrounded by metal." We did the tourist photo bit and got back into our wagon, "Better gas up. It's a long haul to Kingman, Arizona. Bobbie Jean solved the problem of desert driving. She curled up at my side and fell fast asleep.

We traveled through high desert and big sky - on the drive south of Lake Meade. Dull - I had to talk to myself to stay awake, "It's so dry here - there aren't any bones laying about. Don't see any road kill - a vulture would have to pack a lunch if it was flying over this desolation." Bobbie Jean lifted her head, "Did you say lunch?" "Talking to myself to stay awake." "We'll eat lunch in Kingman" and went back to sleep. She woke up as we slowed to a crawl behind an ancient truck on the outskirts of Kingman, "You're awake - so you have the restaurant finding detail." "That's easy. There's only one decent place in town. Bobbie checked out the bathroom and peeked into the kitchen, "The bathroom is clean - kitchen looks okay. Play it safe - we'll stick with cooked food." The hot roast beef sandwiches were tasty - 'cause the gravy had some age to it. Coffee had a burnt acid taste - strong - almost borderline terrible.

As we drove outside of Kingman - scrub trees announced - this part of the desert had seen some rain, but not much. When we turned southeast toward Prescott - red canyons and pine began to fill the landscape. Bobbie Jean sat up and took it all in. I had to ask, "Well? What do you think of Arizona?" "I like this area - coming into Prescott. Still high and dry, but it has trees and some water in the bottom of the canyons. Don't think this area will ever become a resort." "Didn't they say the same thing about Las Vegas." "But Las Vegas has gambling. All this place has is red dirt that blows when it's dry and sticks when it's wet. No - I don't think this will ever be a big real estate market. I'm going to pass." "They have a good press agent. Arizona deserts are described as painted and rocks are petrified. "Must have hired the same press agent that coined the phrase, 'Golden California.' "I take it you want to drive straight through to Roswell in the morning." "You've got that right - soldier." "I've seen enough of desert desolation to last me a lifetime. Let's stop at the first decent motel."

Wasn't much of a choice - only one motel in Prescott. The owners made ends meet by selling Indian Jewelry from their office. Good quality - too. Our Mexican dinner at the motel was excellent and breakfast was even better. Bobbie Jean purchased a map of the area and inquired about an honest Real Estate Broker. Surprise! There was one and only one. She made contact and promised to call after we arrived in Roswell. I asked, "What changed your mind?" "The motel owners. They're very happy here. Cooler than Phoenix in the summer and winters are mild. And they're sinking their profits back into land. I'm ready to travel - are you?" "I packed the car while you were on the phone."

Phoenix? A series of ranch houses growing into a city. Bobbie Jean took mental note, "Notice the high gutters? Lots of adobe and it's above one-hundred degrees in November. Not my cup of tea." She held her nose, "What is that smell?" I had to laugh, "Horse country. Beef cattle - too." "Phoenix smells like a feeder lot." "Lets drive on. I'd rather stop in Tucson for lunch." Giant cactus dotted the hillsides along the highway. Farms appeared - looked like folks were barely scratching out a living on rock hard soil. Water had to be pumped out of the ground for irrigation. The rivers had run dry. Tucson had its own rough style of beauty - forests of giant cactus and mountains provide great scenery. Lunch was almost civilized and coffee? An improvement over the acid taste found in Kingman. East of Tucson we entered more of the same desert desolation we found south of Lake Meade. Bobbie Jean checked the map, "Next stop is the middle of nowhere - New Mexico. Looks like more hot sandwiches and acid coffee." "I take it you don't care for the desert." "I thought I might grow to like it, but I don't ever think I will. The air is so dry here - I'll wrinkle up. No - give me the salt air ocean breeze along the Gulf - anytime. I've slept so long on this trip - I'm wide awake and there is nothing to see. I would hate to have traveled across this

desert in a wagon train. Where do you want to stop for a snack?" "If you see something decent - let me know. We could starve out here." "Now that's a confidence builder." "Find a place with hot sandwiches." "I hope you like Mexican food. That's all I've seen along this road." "That's what we had for dinner in Prescott."

We crossed over the Rio Grande River at Las Cruces, New Mexico and turned north toward Almagordo - the mother of the Atomic age. "Rio Pequeno," Bobbie Jean said." "What's that mean in English?" "Little River." "Right - not much more than a wide drainage ditch. We'll have to drive through the Sacramento Mountains after dark. Any towns where we can gas up?" "Mescalaro - Ruidoso and Hondo." "Sounds like titles for a John Wayne Western." "Or a Jack Benny radio program train announcer. Stop for a snack in Almagordo." With a sunset on our left and moonrise on our right - driving past White Sands made me feel like we were in the middle of an ocean on a honeymoon cruise. Bobbie Jean wasn't impressed. She curled up at my side and drifted off. I smiled - she was a world champion napper.

She woke as we entered Almagordo, "What was that?" "The crunching sound?" "Yes - are we driving over gravel?" "No - locusts." "Locusts!" and she sat straight up. "My God - they're a foot deep in the road. I've lost my appetite. I won't step out of the car onto those." "All they are - are big grasshoppers. Must be attracted by the lights." "Now I know what a locust plague is. I didn't know they swarmed in the United States." "Remember the stories about Salt Lake? We need gas." "Not here. Don't stop. They may attack." "Only if it's plant food. Might get into your clothes and hair." "Drive on."

Mescalaro was another without town. Without a gas pump - or sidewalk - or general store. Ruidoso was a with town.

With one gas pump - one sidewalk and one general store. But, the gas pump was closed - as was the store behind it and its sidewalks rolled up when the sun went down. Hondo? It's gas pump closed down during World War II and never reopened. Our last hope was Tini. Tini turned out to be a ghost town. I smiled, but Bobbie Jean looked worried, "Looks like we should have crunched a few more locusts. What are we going to do now?" "Coast down hill - save gas and pray." She leaned closer, "We're coming into our new home town - coasting on a wing and a prayer."

We coasted downhill into the outskirts of Roswell on fumes. Bobbie Jean perked up, "Reminds me of entering the outskirts of Las Vegas. The lights of town have been visible for the last twenty miles." She breathed a sigh of relief when I pulled up to an open - working gas pump. The gas station attendant filled our tank with gas and our minds with information, "Roswell has two main roads - east and west - north and south. Your on the east-west one. Best bet for a motel is north of town. Out past the New Mexico Military Institute. You've come a long way traveling east with Mississippi license plates. Are you bein' assigned to Walker Air Force Base?" "I answered, "Yes. How do I get there?" "Drive to the center of town and turn south. Can't miss it. Road dead ends at the main gate." "You said the best motel is north?" "Yup - out near the Institute."

Bobbie Jean checked out the only two motels north of town and decided on the one across the street from the New Mexico Military Institute Golf Course. She frowned, "Lesser of two evils." The night clerk advised, "Plenty of rooms. Take your pick. Restaurant closed at nine. If your hungry - bar down the road serves a great hot sandwich. Breakfast is six to nine. Oh - don't wander around in the grass." Bobbie Jean asked, "Why?" "Rattlesnakes. Sometimes they get onery when you step on 'em." I asked, "Is the Pecos River nearby?"

"More like a stream. It's a mile to the east. Not much good to us since we sold the water rights to Texas. When we do get a gully washer - it can spread out. No one around here is foolish enough to build near it. Better hurry if you want to get a bite to eat. Bar closes at eleven."

I unloaded while Bobbie Jean unpacked, "Why don't you get two hot sandwiches while I shower away my road grime." "Any particular choice?" "Cheeseburger with everything on it and a beer." "Beer? You never drink beer." "Can't carryout a glass of wine and it's too late for coffee." I returned with two giant cheeseburgers - French fries and a cold six-pack, "Wasn't expensive and cooking looked good." "Burger is wonderful!" "They must have a meat packer in town who knows how to age a side of beef. Finish your burger and shower - soldier. I'll wait up for you." Bobbie Jean opened a second beer for me as I towled off. Before I could pick it up - she opened my towel and pressed her tender body close, "It's time." "Didn't we do that in Reno." "Doesn't count until we're home and this might be as close as we'll be." I picked her up in my arms, "Almost stepped on a rattler when I was outside." It worked - she held on for dear life.

I rolled over - woken by a dawn sunbeam - crawling slowly across my pillow - through a crack in the drapes. Bobbie Jean stirred and propped her head in her hands, "I'm awake. How long have you been up?" "Just woke up. I'm happy - just being here with you." "One beer and a rattler and we turn to lust." "I'll fill our refrigerator if that's what it takes. What do you think of New Mexico?" "Not a place I'd choose to honeymoon. It's different. Looks like we've discovered the real west. She draped the sheet over her shoulders and cracked open the drapes, "Wow! Look east - the air is so clear I can see forever. And the sun is so bright it hurts my eyes. Roswell looks a little worn around the edges. I'm not happy about rattlers, but we'll make the

best of it. How long do we have to stay?" "I get out of the Air Force in three years." "That long? After we're settled in - I have to fly to Mississippi." "Business or Mother?" "Both." "Do we look for a place for one or two?" For two - silly. I won't stay long. Did you check the menu?" "Tex-Mex all day long." "Join me in a shower?" "We may miss breakfast." "Who cares."

Breakfast was New Mexico - Tex-Mex - a Mexican omelet - tortilla wrapped around cheese - shredded beef - salsa and grits instead of potatoes. The coffee tasted as if it was brought to a boil over a campfire. Bobbie Jean ate around the edges, "Salsa's too hot, but the grits are wonderful. Can we look for a place to live before you report in for work?" "Yes, but I have to stop by Base Housing - first. They may want us to move on base." "I hope not. I found a new home with a pool - for sale or lease in the want ads." "Expensive?" "For here - yes, but I don't like second best." "Better eat your omelet. You'll need sustenance if your nesting urge is taking over." She pulled apart her omelet - brushed away the salsa and ate the egg - cheese and shredded beef, "I don't need salsa when I'm around you."

*"Alice was just beginning to think to herself, 'Now what am I to do with this creature, when I get it home?"'*

# 9

"Are you sure you want to go out to the base with me? I might get hung up on administrative matters." Bobbie Jean moved closer, "I'm still on our honeymoon. Point this car toward your Air Force Base. If you get hung up - I'll go to the Officers Club and make a few phone calls. We have furniture arriving and I want to check on the house I found in the paper." I followed the directions given to us by the gas station attendant last night. He was right. The road dead ended at the main gate. The Air Policeman wore a pearl handle revolver - I knew I was in SAC, "Which way to the 666th Bomb Squadron orderly room - Sergeant?" "Turn right at Base Headquarters - left at the first intersection and drive toward the flight line. It's a temporary building left over from World War II - out in an open field all by itself. Can't miss it. Can I give you a word of warning - be careful around Sergeant Bidup Bidwell." "Why?" "He'll hustle you out of your socks. Welcome to Walker Air Force Base." He punctuated his welcome with a snappy salute.

Bobbie Jean got the giggles, "I think I know Bidwell." "Really?" "If he's handy with a deck of cards - Ralph lost a few poker hands to him. I'll stay in the car. He might remember me." I opened the orderly room door and a stocky - yet handsome Technical Sergeant greeted me, "Fill out our sign-in sheet Lieutenant. You might as well save leave time. You have plenty of time to get settled in. It'll be a month before we get organized. Oh - I'm Sergeant Bidup Bidwell. My friends call me - Bidwell." "I'm Johnny Ropp. What do I do next?" "Nothing until Monday. Report at eight to roll call and our Ops Officer will tell you what to do." "More

school?" "Some, but our airplanes aren't here. They're still building them up in Wichita, Kansas. You'll have plenty of free time to get settled in. Is that your wife out in the car?" "Yes - why?" "You look like you can use a second car. I'll make you a deal you can't refuse. Got forty of them parked outside the gate." "Forty cars?" "Won a used car lot in a poker game last night. Have a beautiful pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible. Your wife would love it and I'll sell it to you for half of list - if you'll pay cash." "Maybe later - after we get settled in. Where is Base Housing?" "Back the way you came in. Right next to the Officer's Club. You'll have to live off base. No room at the Inn - here." "Good - my wife was looking at a new place with a pool for sale or lease." "Just put it in the paper. Here are the keys. Address is on the holder." "Poker game?" "No - the builder had a run of bad luck with dice. I'll be here all day. Give me a call if you want it. If not - leave the keys under the door mat."

"You know the house you saw in the paper this morning? Here are the keys. It's brand new. Never been lived in." "Bidwell?" "How did you guess? And he has forty used cars outside the gate for us to look at." "We'll need a second car. I don't want to drive one of mine back. That's one of the things I want to do when I go back for a visit." "Sell your cars?" "Only the Jaguar. We'll keep the Bentley as an investment."

The Sergeant at Base Housing was blunt, "You don't want to live in our temporary quarters. Sand stacks up a foot deep on the inside wall when the wind blows. Dust storms are New Mexico's middle name. Stay downtown." "How about if I move in on a temporary basis?" "Wouldn't recommend it. Once you're in - it'll take an act of Congress to move out." I hopped back in the car, "We can live off base." "I want to make a few phone calls at the Officer's Club."

Looked in the bar - bomber base - it was open early. Sat down next to two silver bar lieutenants and introduced myself, "I'm Johnny Ropp - just arrived in town." The heavy set one stuck out his hand, "I'm Joe Carry and this is Dick Hoar. Where are you going to be assigned?" "666th." "We're in the 333rd. Are you a pilot?" "No - EW." "Roger that - we are too. Do you need a place to stay? We have a room open in a four bedroom - downtown. Dick rented it and is subletting rooms. You can have a room for a hundred a month - includes maid service." "Wife's on the phone in the lobby. We'll need a place of our own, but thanks for the offer. Who's your third?" "Copilot in our squadron by the name of Chris Cherry. Don't see much of him. Sticks to himself. Have a beer. Cheap here." "What's that red stuff in your beer?" "Called a Red Dog - beer and tomato juice. Settles a stomach after a late night binge." I ordered one. Dick Hoar wrote down their address, "Don't have a phone yet. Supposed to hook one up tomorrow. When you call information - ask for Hoar's house" and they both laughed.

I took a sip of red beer. Wasn't bad - a nice change of pace. I asked Joe, "Anyplace good to eat in town?" "You're sitting in it." "What do we do until our airplanes arrive?" "Go to morning roll call and training - when they have some. That's about it. The roll call is to make sure we don't take off for civilization. We're inside the O' Club playing poker most every afternoon." "When do we pick up our Crew." "When they get here. When did you leave Keesler?" "Late August. Sent me straight to Castle." "That's new. We came here first. Have you gone to Survival Training?" "No - what's that?" "Send us to Reno, Nevada and throw us out into the snow. Teach us how to live off the land - so we can survive if we get shot down. Rumor has it we go there in January." "How long?" "Think it's thirty days. Did you run into Bidwell in the 666th Orderly Room." "Yes - he signed me in and tried to sell me a car. Seems nice enough." "You'll see

a lot of Bidwell. We do. He owns our house. Won it in a poker game." "I'm looking at another one of his this afternoon - won with his magic dice." "That's our Bidwell. Has his own Federal Gambling Stamp. Pays his taxes." "Is he honest?" "Squeaky clean. He doesn't need to cheat. As he always says, 'Odds over emotion.'"

I asked Dick, "Anything I should know about Walker Air Force Base." "Almost like that sign over Purgatory, 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.' Walker is in the midst of major changes. The B-47s are moving north to New Hampshire and the only thing left of the B-36s is the giant hanger on the west end of the Flight Line." "Why did the B-47s move?" "This time it's practical - not political. They'll save a refueling or two if we have to go to war. Rumor has it that Walker will get an Atlas Missile Squadron one of these days. Talk about foolishness - New Mexico is eighty percent desert hardpan and the Army Air Corps built this place on its only swamp. The runway keeps cracking - so they're repairing it now - before our airplanes come in." Joe added, "Someone in Base Engineering said they only know how to build runways on top of underground springs. Have another beer." "May take you up on it. Let me see if Bobbie Jean is finished making her phone calls - first."

I sat back down and ordered another beer, "On the phone with her Mother in Jackson, Mississippi. I'll have time. Tell me what you know about the B-52. All I got was the school solution at Castle." Dick deferred to Joe, "Boeing engineers designed it out of a cigar box and strings in a hotel room in Dayton - after Wright-Pat turned down their first design. It's designed for high altitude and speed. Like the B-47 - the wings flex upwards in flight. Problem is - Russians aren't stupid. They're building high altitude - high speed fighters to counter the B-52." "Sounds like a billion dollar chess game." "You got it. That's where we

come in. We were an add-on - to counter their fighters by blinding radars directing them to our airplane. If they can't find us - they can't shoot us down." "And we don't have any equipment." "Designed - just isn't manufactured." "Do we have any fighters protecting Walker?" Joe laughed, "What for? We only have one TV station and it shuts down at six p.m." Dick added, "And the only movie theater in town is chilled by a swamp cooler." Joe quipped, "But we do have good hunting and fishing."

Bobbie Jean asked, "What did you learn about our new home and your job." "Both are going to be like flying in a B-52 during a nuclear exchange. Many hours of boredom followed by a microsecond of chaos. Did you finish your phone calls?" "Yes - did you finish your beer?" "Only had two." "Before lunch?" "Touché! Show me the way to Bidwell's pool home." "I want to look at his used cars - first." Bonnie's Packard Caribbean looked in good shape, but Bobbie Jean would have none of it. "It reminds me of your crazy friend. I wonder why they sold it." "And where they are." "There is nothing here I care for. I'll drive the Bentley back." "What changed your mind?" "You won't believe the airline connections from here to New Orleans." "Show me the way to our new home."

Bidwell's house was more than either one of us expected. It had all of the modern conveniences and built-ins. Bobbie Jean smiled, "We'll lease." "Looks like a great place. Why not buy?" "We're north of the Institute and Country Club - all by ourselves out in the country. It's a lot more than double the price of the median home here. You'll have a very long commute to the Base. Resale may be a problem and if the Base closes down - a disaster. I called around - they have a salt water intrusion problem here. I want to freshen up. Lets head back to our motel." "Lunch at that little bar with the hamburgers we had last night?" "You're on."

Now - like I said - preparing to fly a B-52 and living where civilization ends - isn't all that exciting. Bobbie Jean and I settled down in Bidwell's pool home. His lease terms were more than fair. He offered Bobbie Jean an escape clause in case she changed her mind and wanted to move. Her being an ex-owner of a casino didn't hurt. She decided to stay on until I went to Survival Training - though her Mother applied all the pressure she could get away with - without totally alienating her. Bobbie Jean wouldn't budge. She was having too much fun - satisfying her nesting urge. I played a bit of poker at the O' Club and attended every type of training possible - from judo to altitude chamber. New Mexico's hunting season was almost over and that gave us something to talk about.

Texas hunters travel west to New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains to hunt turkey - deer and bear. Do a lot of drinking - which might explain two accidents that happened up in the mountains. One of 'em came around a mountain trail, near Carlsbad and met up with a bear comin' the other way. Scared the hell out of both of 'em. So much so - both the bear and hunter tumbled down the mountain. Bear came out all right, but the hunter lost his rifle and broke both his legs and collarbone. Said the last thing he saw before he passed out was the bear running away with his rifle. But - our Mayor's son took the cake. One of those silly Texans climbed a tree and gobbled - tryin' to attract a turkey. Our boy from Roswell heard all that gobbling and shot the Texan right out of that tree. Claimed he thought the Texan was a big turkey - which come to think of it - he had to be if he was sittin' in a tree. Now - the local folks weren't sure about his tale - very few turkeys are six feet tall and dress in international orange. But - nothing was done because it was the Mayor's son. Most of our big game hunters got their ammunition and fortification from the same store. Didn't pay to go on a hike in the mountains during hunting season. Too

drunk to walk - most hunters parked their trucks on the side of the road and fired away at any movement or sound - up - down and across canyons. After the snow melts - New Mexico rangers would find a dozen or so - if the coyotes left anything, but bones. And you know how canines love to chew on bones.

As dull as it was for Bobbie Jean and me - Roswell was worse for bachelors like Joe Carry and Dick Hoar. Though a couple of telephone operators did stop by their place to see what Hoar's house was all about. Joe and Dick had tickets for the local Junior College football team - New Mexico Military Institute. West Point and Annapolis hid more than a few players here - working on bringing their grades up so they'd pass admission tests. Roger Staubach was this years prize catch. And there were four golf courses, but the one at the Base was overrun by jackrabbits. Had to brush turds out of the way to putt and golf balls didn't smell all that good. Joe said the lady population was so depleted - he was getting desperate enough to wait outside the high school at recess. So - they had decided to make home brew to help kill time and cut down on their drinking costs. I was warned never to stand in front of their garage refrigerator door. One of their friends opened it when the temperature was 105° and an entire row of home brew bottles exploded. He was still at the military hospital in San Antonio - recovering.

Christmas came and passed - still without airplanes. When I received orders to attend Survival Training at Stead Air Force Base - Bobbie Jean made airline reservations for New Orleans. She flew out on TTA to Amarillo - Dallas - Little Rock - Memphis and New Orleans. She was not a happy camper, "Call me at my place in Biloxi. I have at least a month's work to catch up on while you play mountain man in the Sierra Nevadas." And I wasn't anxious to discover how the Donner Party wintered over in the mountains.

Took us three days to drive to Reno. Caught in a snow storm outside of Albuquerque - we had to make an unscheduled stop. Joe Carry wasn't as sure about the length of survival training as he was the last time we talked, "They're going to keep us guessing. That's part of the game. But - I do know we'll be hiking in the mountains above Donner Pass - up to our noses in snow." "Dick asked, "How deep?" "Been skiing around Tahoe. We'll be tree top deep." Can't say what the first part of survival training is. Not allowed too - so I won't. But - I'll never forget those mountains.

After our first day in the mountains - I figured the only survival training we'd get was how to starve - freeze - or get worn out trying to walk on snow shoes. Other than that - this training was about as exciting as watching sheep forage in winter. In this case - we were the sheep. Our rations consisted of what we could catch - or pemmican. Problem was - we couldn't catch anything that wasn't there. And we had to dig through thirty feet of snow for something green to eat. So we were stuck with what Air Force tried to pass off as pemmican. Our American Indians invented this treat. I understand the way they prepared it - pemmican was quite tasty, but not our Air Force version. Indians pounded lean deer meat flat - smoked it and mixed it with stuff to make trail food. Air Force paid the lowest bidder to mix fat - flour - molasses and suet to produce their bar of pemmican. Ours smelled rancid and tasted god awful. Now that's an item you could prescribe for fat folks. Easy to lose five pounds a week on a diet of pemmican - when the only way to eat it is to gag it down. We received lectures on how to catch rabbits - eat roots and other neat to know stuff. Would have worked - too, but over the years - previous trainees had scoured the country clean - like the cloud of locusts in Almagordo.

We hiked three days - straight up a series of Billy goat hills - climbin' high up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. On

the afternoon of the third day - as we reached the top - the clouds parted. The view was spectacular. Mountain peaks as far as we could see - to the four points of the compass. Joe whistled, "Look down - over there - to our north." It looked like any other mountain pass - tree deep in snow. "That's Donner pass. We're lookin' down at where people ate people with nothin' to eat, but pemmican." I was so busy putting one snowshoe in front of the other - I hadn't paid attention to why I was running out of breath. We were in reasonable shape, but above nine-thousand feet. That solved another mystery, but didn't help with our walking in mountains on snow shoes. Dick Hoar took his snow shoes off, "I can go a lot faster without ..." Didn't hear the rest of what he said because of the scream. Had to throw a rope down in the hole he made - to pull him back up. Had to be at least thirty foot deep. He made the mistake of thinking these were little Christmas trees - when we were walking through tree tops of forty foot pines.

On the fourth day - we hiked down the western side of the mountain in bright sunlight - cheerful as children in the Alps. Didn't last long. Instead of building a teepee with a warm fire inside - we split into pairs. Our instructor guide informed us, "Gentlemen - I've provided each one of you with a map. You are to rendezvous at the pickup point marked with an X at nine sharp tomorrow morning. I'll send each team out at ten minute intervals. You are going to attempt to escape and evade. We have patrols in snow track vehicles. They will attempt to intercept and incarcerate you. Are there any questions?" Tucker had to be honored, "Is this where the bat comes in?" "Lieutenant - you've been out on this mountain too long. Stay low and keep hidden."

My partner - who will remain nameless - waited behind a tree - half as wide as he was. I looked out over a wide open mountain valley meadow - ten miles wide and two miles across

to the opposite tree line. I looked up at a full moon and down at our green Air Force flight suits and parkas. We were going to stick out on the snow like a whore in church. There was no way we could evade anyone. I decided it had to be a game. When the instructor tapped my shoulder and pointed - we struck out on snow shoes - alternating the lead to break a path through the snow. My partner was into the game, "Lets get as far as we can up the other side of that mountain before we catch a few winks. We can wake up at dawn and walk into the checkpoint at nine."

Turned out that meadow was closer to four miles across than two. And walking on snow shoes takes twice as long as hikin' in summer. When my partner took the lead - three quarters of the way across - we hit a particular shallow and smooth patch of snow. He was chugging along. I almost had to break into a trot to keep up. All of a sudden - partner disappeared from view. I looked down, "Anything broken?" "You son of a bitch. You should have been lead." I figured we were wearing one too many layers to duke it out - so I said, "Looks like you've found the Truckee River. Any water down there to put in our canteens?" "Come on down and find out for yourself." Had to cross it anyway so I slid down the bank and began to chop through the ice. When I reached gravel - I gave up. Partner - still pissed off - was plowing through the snow a hundred yards ahead. I packed my survival shovel away and followed. If it hadn't been for the full moon and deep snow - I would have lost his trail as I climbed up the mountain through the trees. And maybe I should have. When I finally caught up with him it was two in the morning. He was all ready sound asleep in a double sleeping bag on top of the snow. Remembering the Donner Party - I moved a safe distance away and pulled the sleeping bags out of my pack. I climbed in - boots - parka and all. My feet still felt like icicles. By the time the sleeping bag's outer zipper hit my chin - I was fast asleep.

I woke up with the sun in my eyes and partner gone. Now I understood why no one else wanted to work with him. I made a mental note. If I ever had to work with partner again - I would never trust him with sharp objects or money. I checked the map. My destination was over the top of the mountain - another mile down hill to a road and then - two miles north. After I crossed over the crest and walked downhill for thirty minutes - I found the road and began walking north. I met two trekkers walking south. They tried to convince me to come along - but I continued walking north. Partner passed by me without saying a word. He too was walkin' south. Joe Carry and Dick Hoar arrived at our check point early - leaning against a canvas back six-by - our transportation. Dick Hoar asked, "Where's partner?" "Heading north - following two other lost souls." "You mean pilot and copilot?" "Guess so. Looks like I drew a winner with partner." "We chuckled all the way here - over that. Partner brings new meaning to loner." "Think he'll fail?" "No one fails unless he's dead - or lost forever." Joe laughed, "Sending out a search party for two pilots in need of a navigator." "Is the water in okay to drink?" "Better be - we filled our canteens from the stream." We hopped into the back of the six-by and bounced downhill on a mountain road to Stead Air Force Base - tossin' pemmican bars out the back. Crows seemed to like them - at first, but soon returned to peckin' at road kill.

I rode out of the high Sierras fifteen pounds lighter than when I went up. Most of it water loss. Melting snow to drink didn't hack it. I showered - shaved and put on a clean uniform. The mess hall had a special steak dinner for us. I tried to eat it, but a shrunk stomach will only hold so much. I was lucky to down less than half. After two cups of coffee - had to run to the bathroom. It's not what you think. Lack of water had dehydrated my system. Intestines felt like a compactor. I think I now know a little about what a woman goes through when she has a baby.

Bobbie Jean listened to my reason for not calling last week and my lack of water problem and began to giggle - and then laugh. After she composed herself - I received her standard warning, "Stay away from the tables. If you must gamble - remember the rules. I didn't set up a line of credit for you, but we have an account at Harold's. You can cash a check there. I'll have to stay on a little while longer than I expected. Do you mind?" "Yes, but if you must. Business?" "No - it's Mother. She is either not well or doesn't want me with you." "Did you tell her we are married?" "That would kill her for sure. I'm sending some furniture out next week. The moving people will contact you." "Are you going to drive back?" "Yes - flying TTA is a mistake I'll not make again. I'll call before I leave. When will you be back in Roswell?" "If we don't run into snow - in two days." After I put the phone down - Joe called for me to stop by his room, "They found partner. He was curled up next to a tree - ten miles from the pickup point." "And the pilots?" "They returned an hour late." "Will they have to take survival training over." "No - We all passed."

Bidup Bidwell met me at the orderly room door, "Welcome back Lieutenant. You look like you could use a good home cooked meal." "Don't tell me. You've won a restaurant." "Come to think of it - I have - a little bar with great hamburgers north of the Institute. How did Survival Training go?" "The only thing I learned was how to starve. You're living in this orderly room. Who did you piss off?" "My fault. Got carried away and cleaned out the Top Sergeant in a poker game. But - this won't last long. You've returned just in time." "What's happening." "We crew up tomorrow." "No big deal. I all ready have one." "Not anymore. You've been moved up - to the Egyptian's crew and I'm your gunner." "The Egyptian?" "Captain Scarcopha." "Is he good?" "We're the lucky ones. He's one of the best there is. Stays within the envelope!" "If I'm so lucky - how did I get you?" "I'm

crafty and bear watching." "When are you going to be out of the Top's dog house." "Payday at the NCO Club. He will have an amazing streak of luck. Understand Bobbie Jean is back in Biloxi." "She is. How did you know that?" "I travel in a small - elite world. Knew her husband." "Ever been to the Broadwater?" "I own a piece of it - now. Didn't win it from Ralph. Bought in with some friends. We're betting that Mississippi will allow gambling in again. Bobbie Jean turned a handsome profit for his kids. How do you like your new home?" "Great. Can't wait for it to warm up so I can use the pool."

Captain Scarcopha's greeting was friendly enough, but all business, "You met Sergeant Bidwell. He's given you his stamp of approval. Captain Godsend is our copilot - Major Duckshoot is our Radar Operator and Captain Fix is our Nav. We have the makings of an award winning crew. Except for you and Sergeant Bidwell - we all served together on B-36s. We will address each other by position or rank. No first names. I want us to be professional at all times. Welcome aboard. When can we meet your wife?" "As soon as she returns from Mississippi." I saluted and walked to the rear of the crew briefing room and motioned to Bidwell, "Pretty formal isn't he - Gunner?" "Call me Bidwell. The Egyptian's rules only apply to officers. Underneath all that formal stiffness is a pretty nice guy who cares about his people, but he's still a pilot. And most pilots don't relate to people - except fast women. They only relate to things - like flying machines - fast cars and boats. Air Force tests them to see if they have twenty-twenty eyesight - coordination and a death wish. They're afraid if they read anything deeper than Dr. Seuss they'll ruin their distant vision. We got lucky. Our Egyptian has all the pilot attributes except a death wish. That's why I steered you and me onto his crew." "Knowing you won't bet on anything that's not a lead pipe cinch - we must have drawn a prize out of the pilot's Cracker Jack box."

"It'll take awhile to get used to the Egyptian's formalities. After awhile he'll loosen up." "If he's safe - I don't care how formal we are."

I spent the rest of the day moving the furniture Bobbie Jean sent from Biloxi. She was due in three days and I knew we'd move it again, but it was something to do - for now. After roll call the next morning - Captain Scarcopha motioned for Bidwell and me to join him and the rest of the crew at the front of the room. "EW and you too - Gunner. We're flying to Wichita this afternoon. We'll ferry a B-52 back here. Bring your flight gear and earplugs. We're flying up in a 123 and they can be noisy." "Will we stay overnight - Sir?" "No, but be prepared to. Do you have a brain bucket and oxygen mask?" "Yes - Sir. Got fitted for it before I went to Stead. Not very comfortable. Tight around my ears." "That's the way they're supposed to be. We leave from Base Ops at ten. I want to be back at Walker tonight."

On the flight to Wichita - Bidwell took me aside and began to teach me how to spot someone dealing from the bottom of the deck. I learned one important lesson - I was a sheep ready to be shorn. His final lesson was blackjack. He let me shuffle and triple cut a deck of cards right out of the box. And then proceeded to deal to five players and himself. He won twenty straight hands before he put the cards back in the box. I had to know, "How did you do that." "Magic cards." "But - you broke the cellophane." "Lesson number two. I sealed the cellophane after marking the cards." "Do you cheat when you're playing for high stakes?" "Don't have too with a photographic memory. I know the odds and most important - the players. Most players gamble for the rush it gives them - so they take chances. I don't. Remember - it's only important to know how to cheat so you can spot the ones who do." "How do you tell if a deck is marked?" "Take too long to show you - have to keep some secrets." "What do you

do if you catch a person using marked cards?" "Wait - change the marks and burn the cheater." "Why do you stay in the Air Force? You can buy or sell almost anyone in town." "Simple - my rush is poker at the NCO Club on payday night." The pilot signaled for us to buckle up. Our little Shaky was coming in for landing.

Our 123 taxied to the Air Force side of Boeing's Wichita factory. The Air Force rep - a Colonel - met us at the Ops building, "Sorry - gentlemen. The airplane you're scheduled to ferry won't be ready until tomorrow morning. I've made motel reservations for you downtown. Everything's up to date in Wichita - except our liquor laws. If you want a mixed drink - you'll have join a private bottle club." We were driven downtown in an Air Force ten passenger van. I tried to phone Bobbie Jean in Biloxi after I unpacked my gear. She didn't answer - so I knew she was at her Mother's and I didn't want to push my luck calling her there. Bidwell stuck his head in the door, "Found a poker game. Care to join in? You can practice what I taught you." "Out of my league. I'm going to buy a steak and turn in early. Call me if you need any help." "Won't need too. The Sheriff is an old friend and he's sitting in."

Bidwell met us at breakfast, "I'm buying. Sheriff and me did better than expected last night. He had to draw his pistol on a West Texas rancher and one of the players got a little surly, but other than that it was pretty tame. Got in bed before midnight. Is our airplane ready?" Captain Scarcopha wasn't happy, "Thank you anyway - Gunner, but we'll pay for our own breakfasts. We're due at the factory in an hour. We'll meet out front in twenty minutes. Gunner - I want to talk to you in private." They adjourned to an empty table. Later - I asked Bidwell, "What happened?" "Nothing. Egyptian discovered it was the factory Colonel's game and we had a visiting general sitting in."

I climbed up the short flight of the steps that led from the Radar/Nav compartment to the top deck of our new B-52E and looked back at my position. Two UHF receivers - an HF radio - an ejection seat and an empty electronic equipment rack. My area was directly in front of the center fuel tank. This - of course - gave me a lot of confidence in my ability to survive if the fuel tank was ever penetrated by shrapnel from flack - or an exploding hydraulic pack. My position was the only one absent of most of its gear. I sighed, "Looks like ECM really does stand for extra crew member." I took the periscopic sextant out of its box - spun the dials and checked it out, "At least this is working." I strapped in for taxi and watched the pilots get ready for takeoff through the empty spaces in my equipment rack.

After takeoff - Nav called me over intercom, "EW - this is Nav. I want to check our compass and then shoot a day celestial leg on our way home. I'm getting rusty." "Roger - Nav. I'll give you a call when I'm in position and ready to go." I moved forward to the stool used for operating the sextant and set up my equipment. It didn't take long for both of us to work out our kinks. We finished the celestial leg over the high cone at Walker. The Egyptian banked right and began his approach, "Crew - this is pilot. We're going to shoot a couple of touch and goes before we call it a day." I could hear the moans and groans rising up from the seats on the lower deck. After eighteen touch and go landings - I understood why. Bidwell crawled forward from the Gunner's compartment when we were at a safe altitude. This was to become a common experience. I was going to learn how to manipulate a deck of cards.

When Bobbie Jean drove into town in her Bentley - she created quite a stir. She did her duty - meeting the other wives, but mostly we stayed to ourselves. With our airplanes arriving and training ratcheting up - ten hour weeks were in

the past. We were now working twelve hour days and eighty hour weeks. SAC Headquarters sent in an Operational Readiness Inspection - ORI team to test us on everything from flying to nuclear safety. We didn't fail - accomplishing that with flying colors. We were declared operationally ready and joined with others in SAC's mission of nuclear deterrence. With missiles still in the future - we were allowed to stay at home. It would take enemy bombers at least twenty hours to reach targets in the interior of America. We had plenty of time to drive to the air patch - load up and go.

The age of the intercontinental ballistic missiles changed our lives. Twenty hours warning had become twenty minutes. An Alert facility was built and our bombers were parked near the end of the runway - ready to go. We lived on the flight line - three days on and four off over weekends - four days on - three days off during the week. And the morning we came off alert we flew hours and hours of training to maintain SAC's required high standards of proficiency. Eighty hour weeks had turned into one hundred hours.

After two years in the New Mexican desert - I was offered a Regular commission. I wasn't certain if I wanted to continue a life that separated me from Bobbie Jean for at least a third of the year. But - she surprised me, "When you're in business for yourself the hours are just as bad. And you might be around, but you're away. We won't stay here forever and moving on will be exciting. We might be assigned near Washington DC. Mother wants to visit the Lee Mansion. Her Daughter's of the Confederacy maintain it." "And all those dead Yankees in Arlington Cemetery." "Johnny! It's up to you. I have properties to manage and my investments keep me busy." I signed up knowing if push came to shove I could resign and return to Reserve status. The clincher came when I was given a spot promotion to captain. Hubris swayed me.

I won't cover all the things that went on at Walker Air Force Base because - outside of mind grinding work - not a whole lot happened. Bobbie Jean's Mother still wouldn't give us her blessing and if it wasn't for Bidwell - life in Roswell - New Mexico would have been very dull indeed. One late fall Tuesday evening - after I arrived home from a flight - after pulling a weekend on Alert - I discovered a living room and entry way stacked high with boxes - of golf clothes - clubs - bags - shoes - balls and other assorted golf equipment. Bobbie Jean met me at the door with a smile, "Guess what Bidwell did this time?" "It looks like our boy won one of the Pro Shops." "Half - he won half the Country Club Pro Shop in a dice game with the Golf Professional. The Golf Pro delivered the equipment here." "What in the world is he going to do with it?" "I'm going to buy clubs - bags - clothes - everything for us. His half price cash offer is too good to pass up." "We'll go from part time golfers to full time hackers?" "Of course. We can play the Institute course whenever you have free time during the week." "Where did you learn the game?" "Great Southern - next to my home in Biloxi. I used to play twice a week. Where did you learn?" "In the pasture while tending sheep. I'd hit ball after ball. Got pretty good except for sand - didn't have any. Sort of dropped it after I went on to college and never bothered to take it up again." "Pick out shoes that fit - clubs and bag. We're going to try it tomorrow morning. You do get two days off - don't you?" We played with Bidwell's equipment whenever we had free time, but not more than two days a week. New Mexico's good hunting and fishing were not our cup of tea.

About six months after Bidwell finally sold off all of his golf merchandise - Bobbie Jean pointed out the lead story on the front page of our local newspaper, "Did you know about this? *Gambling equipment discovered in an abandoned house.*" "No, but I know only one person who has the wherewithal to set up

an operation like that." "It says here the Sheriff found a roulette wheel - blackjack tables - dice - the works. He impounded all of the equipment and is searching for the owner." "Did our boy do something wrong?" "Election is coming. It may be a set up - to help back the local Sheriff. Isn't Bidwell coming off your crew?" "Yes - they made him NCO in charge of the Officer's Club." "Bet the equipment winds up there." "Why is he leaving your crew?" "Something about running football pools on Base. They couldn't touch him because he has a Federal Gambling Stamp and he is on Federal Property." "Bet they close that loophole."

Two months after Bidwell set up shop in the O' Club - the Club decided to purchase gambling equipment from the Sheriff and began to sponsor monthly Monte Carlo nights. Bidwell's fingerprints were all over this operation and he had a pretty good run with his new casino. Lasted almost a year before orders came through shipping him north. He was transferred to Alaska - on an Aleutian Island so far out in the Bearing Sea - the International Date Line was bent around it. We enjoyed the turmoil and chaos Bidwell brought into what might have been a very dull world for the better part of four years. With Bidwell gone - the only excitement left in Roswell was an occasional dust storm and sighting of Aliens by the deranged or drunk.

Six months after Bidwell departed I received a phone call from Officer Assignments. Orders had just come in from SAC Headquarters sending me to Alaska. I was asked to stop by in the morning for a briefing. Bobbie Jean was excited, "We can buy a four wheel drive station wagon and drive up the Alcan Highway - or sail up the Inland Passage. It ought to be great fun!" "Don't get too excited. We're being sent on another good hunting and fishing assignment." "How were you picked for Alaska?" "Bidwell - his fingerprints are all over it." "We have a phone number for his unit. Why don't you

give him a call?" As usual - Bidwell answered the phone at the unit orderly room, "Stick with me - Johnny. We're going places." "Don't know about that. Every time I turn around - you're doing a punishment tour in the orderly room." "You must have gotten your assignment." "Do you know where my Air Patch is located?" "My friend at SAC Headquarters said it was classified, but don't worry." "Why not?" "Not a place up here that doesn't have good hunting and fishing."

The Sergeant in charge of Officer's Assignments laughed, "You're going to buy a four wheel drive station wagon and drive up the Alcan Highway to Alaska?" "Wife is out looking for one as we speak." "Better call and tell her not to sign a contract. Captain Ropp" and he rolled the R like a German umlaut, "You'll need a boat or an airplane to get to where SAC is sending you." "SAC has a unit in Alaska?" "Roger that - you'll be so far out in the Aleutians - it'll take Santa Clause to find your ass. And forget about your wife tagging along. Women aren't allowed where you're going. Who did you piss off?" "No one. I thought Bidwell was doing me a favor with his connections at SAC Headquarters." "Bidwell? Bidwell did you a favor?" "I thought he did." "Captain Ropp - you're being sent to Shemya - the Air Force Alcatraz of the north. I warned Bidwell about screwing over folks at SAC Headquarters. It's the Chief Master Sergeant in charge of Officer's Assignments - Bidwell cleaned him out in one of his poker games. That's how he wound up where you're going. He could have forgiven Bidwell, but I think it's the pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible Bidwell sold him that did you in. SAC folks hold a grudge and do they ever know how to get even. He didn't do you a favor when you're assignment is to Shemya Air Force Station." "Sounds more like it should be in Japan - north of Hokkaido" "You're half right. It's north of Hokkaido and west of Siberia." "How do I get from here to there." "You report to Wright-Pat for training after the New Year. SAC arranges transportation north from there.

Your new unit is detached out of Fairbanks. It'll be sixty below by the time you get there." "Where do I send my gear?" "You'll have to mail what you can't carry." "What's the duration?" "It's a remote assignments - one year."

Bobbie Jean took the bad news like a real trooper, "At least we'll spend Christmas on the Gulf. And I can go north to Ohio with you. We'll have to caravan to Biloxi." "Do you have room to store our furniture at our Biloxi home?" "No - but I have room to store it in Jackson. We're leaving here just in time." "I'll bite - why?" "The supermarket tabloid says Air Force is hiding Aliens at Walker." "Was it next to a man having a baby?" "How did you know?" "When Bidwell left - the only Alien we know around here went with him. How soon will you be ready to go?" "As soon as we pack up. What do we do about Bidwell's house?" "Joe Carry is handling Bidwell's local enterprises. Did you know that Bidwell owns a ranch south of the Base?" "No, but nothing he does would surprise me."

*"That was a narrow escape!" said Alice,  
a good deal frightened by the sudden  
change, but very glad to find herself  
still in existence."*