

# 10

After I squeezed the last bag into our station wagon - Bobbie Jean unfolded our map over the hood of her Bentley. She asked, "Do you want to lead or follow?" "I'll follow - I've got a load and a half." "Stop in Pecos for breakfast. If we lose each other we'll meet there." "After that we'll turn southeast at Sanderson." Bobbie Jean smiled, "and have lunch in Langtry, Texas." "Langtry?" "We have to stop at my namesake - don't we?" "Are you sure your family didn't move west?" "Maybe. We'll find out." "The rest of the way reads like towns out of a western movie - Del Rio - Uvalde - Hondo and then - San Antonio. What about the house keys?" "Almost forgot - after we lock up - they go under the door mat. Hoar said Bidwell might have a buyer." "He's not coming back?" "Would you?" "Knowing Bidwell he must have advance knowledge of something." "Is the Base going to close?" "Not as long as the head of the Senate Armed Services Committee is from New Mexico." "Chavez is his name - isn't it?" "Believe so. They just bricked all the buildings and spent a fortune on renovation." "Walker will never close."

I followed Bobbie Jean's Bentley east into a low winter morning sun - wondering if I would ever return this way again. I looked around at desolation and Eastern New Mexico. The terrain answered my question, "Never!" Bobbie Jean wasn't impressed with West Texas when she drove her Bentley this way three and a half years ago and I'm less impressed today. I caught up with her in the town center of Pecos - Texas, "Looks like breakfast in Pecos is not breakfast at Tiffany's." "I've had all I can do to stay awake. Next time we drive long distance - I'll bring along coffee." "Ready to eat eat breakfast at the diner? You can get a cup to go from

the waitress." "Easy choice soldier - it's the only place in town." The service was fast and friendly, but Bobbie Jean was still a bit testy, "Eggs aren't bad, but these grits are terrible." "Do you still want to stop for lunch in Langtry?" "Okay, but lets make it quick - Let's get this part of the trip over with. Can't stand the sight of one more tumble weed. Drive until we see green." When we stopped for lunch I asked, "What do you think of your namesake - Langtry - Texas?" "Not much."

We stopped for the night at Hallettsville - east of San Antonio. After breakfast - Bobbie Jean purchased two Thermos jugs, "We'll eat sandwiches and drink coffee until we reach civilization." "Biloxi or New Orleans?" "Either - I've had enough of the west for a lifetime." "Not a cowgirl?" "Or a westerner. The only thing romantic about the mountains - hills of dirt and dust is leaving it." We drove straight through to Biloxi - stopping only for refills of coffee and an occasional hot sandwich. As we drew nearer - both food and drink demonstrated a marked improvement. I followed Bobbie Jean's Bentley as she turned on East Beach Road - with a chill in the air and warmth in my heart. We had returned to our beginning.

Herbie opened up Bobbie Jean's home - with all of the lights on to welcome us. As I stepped out of my station wagon - a cold damp wind chilled me to the bone. A Blue Norther had dropped Mississippi temperatures below fifty degrees. Bobbie Jean checked the house while I unloaded both cars, "Herbie had the house cleaned and all the dust covers removed. If you'll carry and I'll unpack." As I hauled the last load into our bedroom - she asked, "Shrimp Scampi in garlic sauce with Italian bread and salad?" "You finally sound chipper again." "Don't like driving alone. No one to talk too." "You said a little Italian? Here or at the Broadwater?" "Dinner first - desert second. Call ahead and

order while I finish unpacking." "After I shower away this road grime. Does it feel good to be home?" "I'd feel better if you weren't going away for a year."

After dinner - Bobbie Jean curled up by my side on the couch in front of the Broadwater's fireplace and we warmed our hands over mugs of Herbie's special Irish coffee. Herbie pulled up a chair, "Slow night. Too early in the season for northern guests and too cold for southern ones. Had one of our maids open up your place and clear away the dust. Was everything all right?" Bobbie Jean placed her hand over his, "You're ready to go solo. Have you heard anything about Bonnie?" "The Body Beautiful? She's back on the circuit - a little older and wiser. Left her husband last year." "Did she give a reason?" "Oliver T became insanely jealous. He couldn't hold a job and wouldn't let her work. She's working in New Orleans. Oliver T moved to Palo Alto, California." I asked, "Any idea what he's doing?" "He's developing a new thing - computer or something foolish like that. Spends all day long working in a friends garage." Bobbie Jean wondered, "You said left him. Are they divorced?" "No - she doesn't believe in it. You know Bonnie - she thinks her absence may bring him to his senses."

Bobbie Jean took a sip of Herbie's Irish, "Do you want to open your own place? I'll back you." "I'd like to open up a large lounge with a grill. Nothing fancy. Only live entertainment would be a piano. Mostly taped light jazz - piano - you know." "Start looking tomorrow. I'll fund your start up for half. Do you want to make a career out of it?" "No - get it running and sell it at a profit. Did you speak with your Mother?" Bobbie Jean couldn't hide her surprise, "No - not since just before we left New Mexico. Why?" "She found out you two are married." "And she's still alive? That old fake. She never let on. So much for heart problems Will I ever give her a piece of my mind. Was she upset when

she found out?" "Not at all - I believe she may be hiding a little pride in your Yankee husband." "When did she know?" "Two - maybe three years ago." "And she never said a word." "When do you travel north?" Bobbie Jean looked at me and I answered, "I feel like a prize lamb at auction time. Class begins the 2nd of January. Should try to drive there before the 29th. Snow can pile up this time of year and I want to stop and visit my folks." Bobbie Jean added, "And I do too. Have to find out if you Yankee devils really do grow horns at night." "I do when I'm near you." Bobbie Jean face turned a light pink, "Herbie - start looking. I like your idea." "Do you have time to check out a location I found on the beach." "I knew you were ready. First thing tomorrow."

It was as if we had never left - a relationship always magic - blossomed on the water. The early winter cold snaps soon faded away and warm nights returned. In the evening - we stuffed ourselves at all of our old haunts. Under a misty Mississippi moon - we wore out the beach sand with long romantic walks. Bobbie Jean and Herbie completed the plans for their new lounge while I repaired and replaced appliances and fixtures in her apartments. I asked, "How did you get a liquor license on such a short notice?" Bobbie Jean laughed, "Mississippi is a dry State. The Sheriff handles it. Herbie and I are part of Biloxi's in crowd." "What if I tried to get a license - as an outsider?" "You would help our Sheriff demonstrate he is cleaning out a corrupt influence." "Are all outsiders corrupt?" "You're catching on. But - since we are a dry State - it's cheaper to do business here than in Alabama or Louisiana." "That doesn't make any sense." "It does when you consider that we have fewer politicians on our payroll."

Although we were reluctant to depart - it was time to leave the sunny Gulf Coast and travel north to the snowbelt. We drove north to Jackson the day before Christmas and left

the day after Christmas. This time her Mother allowed us to stay together. Though - I had to retrieve my personal items from a room at the far end of the visitors' wing. And one evening - after cocktail hour - her Mother linked her arm in mine as we entered the dining room for the evening meal. When we were alone on Christmas night - Bobbie Jean cuddled close - in front of a pecan log fire in the sitting room. "Mother is resigned to our marriage, but she has one last request." "We couldn't deny her one. What is it?" "You might want too. I'm an only child. My father wanted the Langtry name to continue. So - Mother wants one of our sons to carry on the family name." "Are you pregnant?" "No, but when you return it will be family time." "How many?" "At least two - then we'll talk." "I really don't have a problem with the name thing. Tell her I agree. Not because I don't care for my family, but I believe in family tradition. Not sure I want one of my sons to be a Reb - though. We have all the potential of producing another Cain and Abel." I flinched, but did not receive the expected dig to my ribs. Instead - we drew nearer - until we were one.

We arrived in Concord Township early in the afternoon - on a slate gray wet Ohio winter day. The time of year when twilight in central Ohio lasts from sunup to sunset. Bobbie Jean became an immediate favorite of my family - again. She asked to see all of my childhood secrets, "I know you Yankees must have caves and hidden places. The kind where you learn all types of wicked things." "We're short of caves along the Scioto, but wicked things - maybe." As we strolled along Mill Creek Road - I pointed, "The Old Mill was right over there." "I can't see a thing." "It's under water now. They raised the height of O'Shaughnessy Dam." "Is that what they call the dam by the Columbus Zoo?" "Yes - I had more than one run in with a moonshiner by the name of Ol' Ned Smith and his gang near that Old Mill." "You didn't drink whiskey when you were a boy - did you?" "My goodness - no. Not in my

family? A glass of wine was for medicinal purposes back then." "Where was his still?" "On a creek about a mile away from the Scioto River in a place called Dublin. He tried to kidnap me and the Preacher's boy - so I turned him in." "He wouldn't have done that in Mississippi and live." "You have a different set of laws down there. Ours were a carry over from Prohibition." "That explains it. You had gangsters - we have businessmen. Have you seen Mr. Smith since you had your troubles with him?" "No - not for - lets see - at least fifteen years. Why?" "I thought I saw an ugly scarecrow of a man watching us from behind that stand of Walnut trees." I turned around, but saw nothing. "We'll go see the dam I told you about. Had a wild ride over the top of it when I was a boy." "You must have been fearless." "No - stupid is more like it."

We parked in the Roadhouse lot - across from Zoo and walked across to look at the downstream side. Tons of water - two to three feet deep - cascaded over the top to the snow covered rocks of the rapids below. I talked above the water's roar, "Can't believe this is the huge dam I rode a rowboat over when I was younger. After Hoover Dam it looks small. Grandfather Mac's favorite fishing hole was on the other side. Caught lots of bass there." "Was it like this when you rode over the top?" "Didn't have the boards then - so it wasn't as high. Water flow was smoother and the channel below was between the rocks. Wouldn't want to do it today." "That's the Roadhouse across the street?" "Yes. Want to drop in for a drink?" "I've never been in a real Yankee bar. Do they have horns?" "And drums."

As we entered - Bobbie Jean wrinkled her nose, "Do all your bars have that musty smell of spilled beer." "It's a cold sharp smell here - much warmer and soft where you live." "You'll have to go to the bar for us to be served. I don't see a waitress." The bartender recognized me, "You're the

Ropp Boy from down the road. Ned Smith said you were drowned." "He tried too. Is Ol' Ned around." "Didn't you hear. He passed out the night the river rose - where the Old Mill was - a couple of days after they put boards on top the dam. Drowned in less than a foot of water. Emaciated - he looked worse than road kill. Floated down stream. Found his body near Dublin - wedged between some rocks below the dam. His last request was to be buried near the Old Mill and that's where they planted him. What would you like?"

I carried wine to Bobbie Jean and beer for me back to our booth. She shook her head, "You took your time. An old friend?" "No - this is the first time I've ever been in here. He told me about the passing of my nemesis - Ol' Ned Smith. Buried where you thought you saw him. You must have seen his ghost. Taste your wine. It may have turned. They don't sell much of it in here." "It's okay. Do we have plans for New Years Eve?" "No - do you want to go out?" "I want to hold you close and curl up in front of a warm fire. In another month you'll be a long way from my arms." "We'll stay at the farm. Did your Mother mention a formal wedding." "Only if we're assigned to Washington DC. And then she will reserve the Lee Mansion. That's where she wants us to renew our vows." "She doesn't give up - does she?" "No - she doesn't. I think she wrote the motto, 'Forget Hell!' Lets leave for Dayton early - so we can be alone.

Bobbie Jean didn't care for the hotel in downtown Dayton or most of the motels, "Too old and rundown. They'll go past break-even to bankrupt if they're not brought up-to-date." We found a clean motel near what was Wright Field. Bobbie Jean was not impressed, "You Yankees live Spartan lives - don't you? Most of your motels are equipped like Trapist Monasteries. Do you sell sack cloth at your department stores?" "We're plain folks up here. Where would you like to eat?" "Somewhere where the restaurant isn't rated by how

good its home fries are." "The Ratskeller at the O' Club has great hot roast beef and pastrami sandwiches." "Don't tell me. We're back in Kingman, Arizona." "You'll change your mind." "I'll go if I don't have to stand around outside in the cold. It feels like it's 20 below. Your northern winds are colder than San Francisco in summer."

Wasn't any school to report in too - or a Commandant - or even a pilot around to tell us where to go. I saw FTD on my orders and thought it meant Field Training Detachment. The civilian guard at the main gate to Patterson Field straightened me out, "You're assigned to Foreign Technology Division. It's located on Flight Line Road - on the golf course." After several wrong turns - I found the parking lot and a red brick building with very few windows. I entered through a bullet proof door - showed my ID to the guard - signed in and was escorted to my classroom.

As I was soon to find out - there were only ten of us. We were greeted by a government scientist and a contractor Physicist from Santa Monica, California. The government guy asked, "How many of you EWs have an engineering degree?" Four raised their hands. "How many of you have a science degree?" Five raised their hands. He looked at me, "Captain Ropp - isn't it. Can you explain what the cosine of theta means?" "I looked around - sensing I was being hung out to dry. I honored Tucker, "Don't you really mean - you play ball with me and I'll shove the bat up your ass?" When the laughter died down - he repeated the question and I answered, "I dated a Theta in college, but she didn't need anyone to cosign. Does that count?" "Damn those ass holes at SAC Headquarters Personnel. They promised that every single one of you would have at least a Bachelor of Science degree." He looked at my folder, "Tell me Ropp - how in the world does anyone get a BS degree in American Literature?" "I didn't. It should be a Bachelor of Arts - BA." "Someone in SAC got

even with you. It's too late to get a replacement. You'll have to do the best you can. At least you're an EW - aren't you?" "Yes Sir. What is it we're supposed to do?" He didn't answer.

Trying to explain the ins and outs of my friendship with Bidwell would take too much time - so I didn't. I hunkered down and hoped the tempest would blow over. The first two weeks of our course covered Optical Physics. Not anywhere close to any schooling or work in my experience - or for our engineers - either. I mean - why in the world would I know K - Kelvin is the equivalent of Absolute zero or - 273.15 ° centigrade and that Spectral Response over Wavelength Range - 300K background 2 Steridian Field of View formulated an optical background. None of which was covered by Mark Twain in Tom Sawyer. I had finally found a course that could not be overcome by rote - or sweat. With infrared - ultraviolet - reflection - refraction and angstrom floating around in my brain - I longed for the days when all I didn't understand was electronics.

Bobbie Jean drove me to class each morning and picked me up at night. By the end of the second week she could tell that my frustration level was over the top, "Can't you get out of the Optics?" "As of today I'm out. Four electronic engineers and me have been relegated to ELINT and Telemetry. It's refreshing to know that American Lit and Electrical Engineering are equal in status. They decided those with a physical science degree will be the only ones allowed to operate optical equipment." "Can you get out of this trip north?" "I can always go to Leavenworth." "Leavenworth?" "A military prison in Kansas." "How many more weeks of training do you have?" "Not enough. We're supposed to finish the first of February and no one has explained what it is we're supposed to do." Bobbie Jean laughed, "And it's sixty degrees below zero in Fairbanks."

As we turned in to our motel, Bobbie Jean asked, "You know what I like about Ohio?" "Can't be the cold slate gray winter days. What is it?" "We get to dine out every night." "Only because you turned down a room with a kitchen." "And you know what I don't like?" "Probably the twenty degree temperatures and twenty knot winds." "Brr - I really don't care for that, but that's not it. I can't stand a place that will judge its restaurants by the quality of the home fries." "You'll have to admit our home fries are pretty good here. Better than the slime you southerners call grits." "Watch your tongue. Where are we going to dine tonight?" "At a steak house that rates it's steaks by size." "Not quality? Ohio is a very strange place indeed." "You get to meet a childhood friend of mine." "What does he do for a living? Roast babies?" "Close - Slick's a lawyer." Bobbie Jean laughed, "Slick? And a lawyer. That's an apt name." "Slick and me played Tom and Huck when we were little tikes. We explored all the caves - quarries and rivers around here when my Father taught at the local High School." "What was its name?" "Bath - Osborn Bath." Bobbie Jean got the giggles and all discussion of my childhood ended until we sat down in the restaurant with Slick and his wife.

I discovered that it was easy to return home, but not as easy to return to a friendship separated by too many years. Slick and I were trapped in different worlds. The evening was pleasant but limited - with stories only of childhood. Soon - the end of January arrived and an end to our training with me none the wiser. Bobbie Jean dropped me off at Base Ops after she discovered today's Air Foce would not allow her to wave good-by on the tarmac. I embraced her as she needled me, "So much for June Alyson kissing Jimmy Stewart good-by before he climbed into his SAC airplane." "Only in the movies. I'll phone you at the farm after we touch down in Alaska." "Dress warm. It's still sixty degrees below zero in Fairbanks."

SAC - always frugal with the taxpayer's nickel - had diverted a KC-135 Tanker to fly our newly formed - all EW aircrew to Fairbanks. We left Dayton in twenty six degree weather - landed at Eielson Air force Base - greeted by sixty six below temperatures and cold soaked on the tarmac for twenty minutes until transport arrived. Our escort - a local reconnaissance Wing EW - apologized, "Welcome to Fairbanks. Sorry about the delay. Couldn't find where they parked you guys. We'll fly you to Elmendorf Air Patch in Anchorage - tomorrow. You'll draw Arctic gear and parkas there. Until then - don't wander to far away from the O' Club or your VOQ. Any further - without proper clothing and you might become a statistic. Travel in twos and bundle up the best you can. We'll have a crew bus pick you up in front of the Club at eight thirty tomorrow." Couldn't hold it back. Tucker had to be served, "Don't you really mean - you play ball with me and I'll shove the bat up your ass." He did not respond - so I added, "You left us out here on the tarmac without proper gear. We damned near turned into ice cubes." "I promise - we'll not cold soak you tomorrow." But they did.

We arrived at our VOQ in the dark. Mine room was warm enough, but it had nylon carpet. I learned not to touch metal after two electrical discharges from finger tips arced - in visible flashes - to electrical ground. From the our bus - Eielson looked just like Ellington - Keesler - Castle and Walker - all had barrack buildings left over from World War II. I dressed as warm as I could and walked to the O' Club with C Little. One of the optical guys - C Little was wiry and intelligent - almost too smart for his own good. We looked around. From appearances this O' Club was the same as any other Club - except its bar was packed with lonely men. I ordered popcorn while C Little opined, "A Clock Stopper would have a field day. Do you know what the ratio of men to women is here?" "No - I don't. And I don't see any married couples." "I don't either, but it must be six to one. And

there's an Army Post nearby. It would take a strong frontier style lady to live all winter - in the dark at sixty below." "Save me a seat at the bar and buy me a beer. Told Bobbie Jean I'd give her a call as soon as we landed. See what you can find out about our new home." "Here - or the one on Shemya?" "Both."

Bobbie Jean seemed happy enough about her stay at the farm, "I'm learning about all your escapades when you were a little boy. It's a wonder you're still alive. What time is it there?" "A little after ten." "It's five o'clock in the evening here, but dark enough to be midnight." "Tell me about Alaska. Have you seen any Polar Bears yet?" "Too dark outside to tell. Only have an hour or so of twilight each day. Like living inside an icebox. Its dark - cold and no wind. Like a refrigerator - only difference is the light doesn't come on when we open the door. How soon do you plan to leave for Biloxi?" "I'm waiting out a storm. Your Alaska sounds like Ohio - with a shorter twilight. Can you call tomorrow?" "We fly over to Anchorage to pick up gear. By the time we get back - it'll be past midnight your time. I'll phone the day after."

My beer was still cold when I sat down on a bar stool next to C Little. He had all the answers, "Bartender says that the only single women here are teachers and they're married before the end of the fall semester." "That fast? Being a bachelor up here must be the pits. Why does the Army have a base up here?" "Winter and Arctic training. Army camouflaged one of its tanks so good last winter they couldn't find it when the exercise was over." "Did it ever show up?" "Early summer. Sun melted the snow off and heated it up. Tank melted the tundra underneath it - until it sank forty feet down. Couldn't pull it out - so they left it." "Wonder what an archeologist will think a million years from now when he discovers a tank under the permafrost." "I know

what I'd say. My stomach clock says it's time for dinner."  
"After I finish the rest of my beer."

The King Crab legs were great, but the next time I'd order steak. Coffee was a bit watery, but didn't bite back. It was hot - which is a major criteria here. C Little ate his fill and part of mine. He asked, "Another beer in the bar?" "Might as well. I didn't see a TV set in my room and I didn't bring along a book. Did you find out anything about Fairbanks?" "If you own a car - you have to plug in a heater or the oil will get so thick the engine will never turn over. They heat the base with a central steam plant." "After I finish this beer - I'm going back to our VOQ and hit the sack. Been up five hours longer than the clock says. On our walk back - C Little chattered on - mostly about things we couldn't do. Like open the windows for fresh air and wander around outside on your own. We were members of a new flock - who didn't know the identity of their shepherd.

Next morning we flew to Anchorage in the back end of a two engine - prop driven - C-123 transport owned by Alaskan Air Command. And we were cold soaked again - at sixty below zero before takeoff. We landed at Elmendorf Field in balmy - twenty three degrees above temperatures - an eighty-three degree shift. Hot - we peeled off our topcoats and scarves to cool down. After lunch - we were driven directly to Base Supply and issued Arctic clothing. My issue parka had a smoky odor - it had been to the North Pole and back. The inside of the hood was lined with something that looked like domestic cat fur. Flight Crew Supply issued winter flying suits - brain buckets - oxygen masks - brief cases and nav equipment. Needed a wheelbarrow to carry our gear back to Little Shaky - our C-123 transport. So we wore our parkas. We all looked like Nanook of the North on our return flight. And I wondered, "Who's the idiot in supply who flies people to things instead of things to people?"

When I phoned Bobbie Jean - she commented, "From what you've described - don't slip and fall on your back - you'll be like Charlie Brown an oversized turtle - unable to get up." "Darn - I was beginning to think I looked like Trapper Dan." "Do you know when you're supposed to leave for your tight little island?" "Don't know for sure. We have another training course here. They had a rebellion on the island." "It must be caused by a lack of sunlight." "Could be - all the folks I've met here act a little paranoid." "Can I fly up and visit?" "Don't know if it's allowed. I'll ask around." "Check on a hotel room." "Are you sure? You'd be standing around in sixty below weather?" "Not as a steady diet, but we could start a family." "I was hoping we all ready accomplish that." "We just might have - if we're lucky. It will be a month before I know."

Evening meals at the O' Club were one lonely affair after another. Three nights of bachelor food was three too many for me. Most of the live-ons at Eielson stayed home - working on cabin fever. If it wasn't for my crew and a few bachelors - the Eielson Club would have to close during the week. One night of King Crab was all I cared for. After that I ate whatever the special was. And I couldn't get a straight answer as to how long we were going to be here. Eielson's senior EW tried to be our shepherd, but we wouldn't let him use his crook or take charge of us. He wasted our time with daily lectures about his airplane and his mission when we were being assigned to an island with our airplane and our mission. I warned Bobbie Jean, "We have no idea what we're doing or when we're going. I wouldn't bother flying up - not into all this indecision.

After a week of nonsense - we finally discovered why we were being held prisoner. The Eielson folks were attempting to establish control over us. Another mutiny had occurred in the current crew - on the island. This nonsense could have

been unbearable, but my literature training came to good use. Mr. Christian's mental state - why he cast Captain Bligh away from the HMS Bounty was alive and well here. Three thousand miles of ocean - without daily communication - an impossible span of control. No one would admit to the problem - what it was - or what caused it - so paranoia was rampant. We were drilled in the conviction that authority and control was to reside in Fairbanks. We were going to fly with a temporary flight crew - two pilots and a navigator rotating out to our island on a weekly basis. As a result - our senior crew EW was in charge of the mission. A situation ripe for mutiny - when temporary pilots attempt to regain control.

I did learn how to bail out of a KC-135. It consisted of falling out of the entrance hatch. But it didn't matter. Where we were flying no one could live longer than an fifteen minutes in Arctic waters - not in our flight gear. Bobbie Jean was worried, "Why would SAC have you fly over areas where you will die of exposure if you crash land - or bail out?" "Never thought of asking. Might be that our mission is more important than the safety of an individual. Might be the powers that be are convinced we have the necessary gear to insure our safety." "Even though it won't?" "That's called a Catch 22." "I read the book." "We're living it. If you're planning on flying up to surprise me - don't" "Why not?" "We leave for the Rock tomorrow." "Why so sudden?" "No one will say for sure, but my guess is there's been another mutiny. All, but three of the old crew have been shipped off island." "It must be an awful place. Do you have to go?" "Don't worry. They say that adversity brings out character." She finally saw the humor of it, "And mutineers. Can you phone from the island?" "Only if you have stock in the telephone company. It is costly." "I do - so please call. I'm anxious to know about the mutiny. It sounds so military - so exciting." "You will - I fly away at dawn - with the replacement front-end flight crew.

Shemya Air Force Station looked like a run down South Pacific island movie set - with a Moscow apartment building smack dab in the middle. We landed after dark - which isn't unusual in the Arctic - in a snow storm driven by forty mile-an-hour winds - which is normal for Shemya. Like prisoners in a transport - we taxied directly to a SAC hanger - our new office - home and recreation area. The three remaining crew members waited at the bottom of the ladder. I immediately gave them nicknames - See-Evil - Speak-Evil and Hear-Evil. C Little asked the first one he saw, "Where do we eat. I'm starved?" Speak-Evil responded, "I'm in charge here. I'm Major Cure to you - Lieutenant," facial tic a-twitter. "You can forget all those lies they told you about me at Eielson. There's nothing wrong with me - I'm fine. Starting tomorrow you go on alert twenty-four hours a day - as long as our airplane isn't broke and the wind is below fifty knots. I'm on my way to the O' Club on top the Composite Building. Does anyone want to join me?" Wouldn't pay to use Tucker's you play ball with me response - so I asked, "Do they serve dinner?" "Food - who eats food here? I wouldn't if I were you. Not when they're trying to poison us." He wandered off, "Food - food indeed."

C Little asked Hear-Evil, "We need to stow our gear." And I said, "I'm getting wet and cold standing outside in the snow. You can introduce yourself to us when we're inside - out of the wind." He had a crazy smile, but looked harmless enough. "I'm Captain Bat, but my friends call me Broke. You will pick your rooms by rank. Bring your gear inside. This is our airplane." He pointed to a clean - well maintained RC-135 - modified to carry reconnaissance gear. After we were escorted to the orderly room at the top of the stairs - Bat apologized, "Sorry you had to see Major Cure in his condition - after he has been sipping from the source of all knowledge. All but Ropp and Little will live here on the second floor. Little and Ropp - your rooms are across the

hanger. Stow away your gear and meet me back here in twenty minutes. I'll drive you to the NCO Club for dinner. Our mess hall in the Composite Building stopped serving dinner two hours ago. Ropp and Little - follow me. We live in the quiet zone." I knew, "Away from Speak-Evil."

On our way back downstairs, I asked, "What is the source of all knowledge." Bat laughed, "In Cure's case - Johnny Walker Black Label. When he starts sipping it - he can't stop. Wanders around the hanger hanging on to anyone who will listen. Damned difficult to get away from him when he ties one on. He teaches Optics. I teach Telemetry - ELINT and electronics." I dropped my gear on the floor of my new home and looked around. The room was long - narrow - with thirty foot ceilings - reminiscent of a Russian prison cell. Bat stuck his head in the door, "Are you ready to go?" "Yes - who was the other Major? The one with his right hand inside the front of his parka - like Napoleon." "Larry Plager. He's strange. Don't startle him."

I looked up - my gymnasium style ceiling lights were swinging back and forth, "What's going on?" Bat looked up, "Earthquake. We get them all of the time." The light's arc increased, "But this is a big one. Run for your lives!" The floor rolled in a visible wave. In the hanger - our airplane bounced up and down dancing with warped wings. Bat's eyes grew as large as two silver dollars. He ran outside to the tarmac and we followed. I had to wonder, "You say this happens all the time?" Bat was shaking, "Not like this one." The earthquake stopped as quickly as it began. C Little shook his head, "Not a bit of sound. Hardly felt it when we were standing up. I only noticed movement when I was sitting down. What a wild ride." We didn't have to wait for the rest of our crew. They were outside with us. I asked Bat, "Who owns this island - SAC or Alaskan Air Command?" "To your great misfortune - AAC does."

We rode past the Base Theater and Gymnasium to the NCO Club. So far Shemya looked a lot like every other Air Patch I'd seen except there were very few buildings and not a tree or bush in sight. Bat advised, "We only have two buses. One for the flight crew and one for our maintenance guys. They live on the second floor on the other side of the hanger. On the same side as Ropp and Little. We have five - six man pickup trucks. Front end crew has one - Commander - Chief Master Sergeant each have one and we share the other two with our maintenance guys. So you now know who's on the bottom of the food chain. Cure has ours tonight. NCO Club is around the corner - other side of this hill."

The NCO Club had seen better days. It was as windy inside as a mess tent on MASH and twice as cold. We left our Parkas on - inside. Snow inside reminded me of dust piled against the wall in Roswell. We were the only ones in the Club. Sat at a long table - left over from when it was a mess hall. I asked, "Does the wind always blow like this?" Bat laughed, "No - sometimes it blows harder. You'll get used to walking with your back to it. Sixty knots is normal for winter and summer. Slows down a bit in fall and spring. Low Pressure cells move across Shemya at record speed. Most days the wind swings 180° - from all points of the compass. We lean into the wind so much that when it stops we have to remember how to walk."

We ordered a round of beer at a quarter a pop. Bat loosened up after the second round, "Beer used to be a dime. Last July - Big Shaky was bringing in our yearly supply when it lost an engine. Pilot ordered the cargo master to dump all of our beer to lighten his load. So - they raised prices to cover the costs. Won't dent your pocketbooks. You'll be on alert most of the time and that means no alcohol twelve hours before a flight. Better order before they shut down the kitchen." The menu said gourmet, but the meals were

frozen - served in cooking containers - like TV dinners. I whispered to C Little, "Closing the kitchen must mean turning off the knob to the oven." C Little asked, "When do we start training?" "Tomorrow morning. I'll give you a walk around and begin Morris code training for the Ravens. Cure and Plager will work with you Optical guys." I mentioned, "We did all our emergency procedures work at Eielson - test and all." "Great - you can get right to work on the equipment. The quicker you check out - the sooner I get to go back to the world. Lets head back to the hanger."

On the ride back - I asked, "Is this all there is to do up here?" Bat answered, "We're thousands of miles away from civilization. We have a small BX convenience store inside the Composite Building. Take you two days to memorize all the items for sale. Movies are always six months old. Cable TV is all tape. Reruns of old shows. No live sports. No live anything. What we do get is in Black and White and out of synch. Gym has basketball and bowling, but you'll find it's too hard to go there. Staying within twenty minutes of takeoff - twenty-four hours a day is time constraining. When the klaxon sounds - we go. We're like firemen answering the bell - except we have no relief. Takeoffs and landings in high winds might subtract a few years off your lives. And fog - you won't believe the summers here. We get sixty mile an hour winds and zero visibility." C Little shook his head, "Textbook says that can't happen. Winds have to be light and variable to create fog." "The professor who wrote that book was never on Shemya. Fog here is like the cloud base - on top of the Bearing Sea. One word of caution. Some of our RC-135 pilots think they're fighter pilots. They sometimes push the envelope on takeoffs and landings."

C Little stopped in as I was stowing away my gear, "What do you think?" "My gunner described our weekly issue pilots." "How -so?" "Keen eyesight - coordinated and

possessing a death wish. Said if you're lucky you'll get one without the later." "And we're going to push the envelope. No wonder they carried off seven basket cases before their tour of duty was up." "Not true. You forgot the three we met today." "Right - that makes ten. Wake me up. I want to eat breakfast at the mess hall in the Composite building." "Better leave here no later than seven." I sat down on the edge of my bunk. World War II springs bent downward with my weight. It was going to be like sleeping in a metal hammock. I looked up at caged lights, "Damn! - I'm living in an Air Force version of a high school gymnasium." I grabbed my towel and toothbrush and headed for the latrine.

*"In that direction," the Cheshire Cat said,  
waving its right paw round, "lives a Hatter:  
and in that direction," waving the other paw,  
lives a March Hare. Visit either you like:  
they're both mad."*

# 11

Morning on Shemya is a carbon copy of morning on any other military outpost - where mandatory barracks form a basis of society. Stubble bearded men stagger out - bundled in robes - washing away sleep from lonely eyes. I woke at oh-dark-six o'clock - Arctic dawn four hours away. C Little didn't answer when I knocked on his door. He was up and shaving in our private latrine. It lacked the green stuff that grew in the corners of southern ones - green stuff spores couldn't live this far north. We dressed in cold rooms - in flight gear - ready to fly away when the klaxon called. Captain Broke Bat led us out in single file into blowing snow to the Detachment bus. The first of many trips to the Composite building mess hall for breakfast had begun. Bat was right about Shemya's wind whirling halfway around the clock. This morning's sixty knot breeze blew one-hundred eighty degrees opposite last night's gale. A full compliment of bright eyed - almost sane - new guys motored up the only hill on Shemya - in an Air Force blue school bus.

As we shuffled up the steps to the Composite building's front door each one of us detoured around Major Cure. His arm was around a big bear of a dog - Boozer - an Alaskan Husky - the island mascot. Boozer and Cure were singing - or howling in disharmony - a tune neither could understand. It was a toss-up as to which one was howling and which one was singing. But it really didn't matter. They were both covered with six inches of snow and seemed quite happy in their circumstance. Speak-Evil and dog had been sipping away at the source of all knowledge since the O' Club bar closed at midnight. Only Boozer's warmth kept Cure alive through another Arctic winter night. Cure's bowl of Scotch and milk

made for one happy Husky. C Little frowned as he sidestepped these two snow covered canines, "Brings new meaning to be kind to your web footed friends." "This one has paws."

We entered a Composite building - a Moscow apartment building constructed of prefabricated cement. If a Russian Trawler could sail close enough - our one and only building would remind them of home. Like our hanger - it provided offices and quarters for everyone on the island, but us. And we would live here too- if it wasn't for mission requirements to stand Alert. However - if there had not been a mission - we wouldn't be here and neither would the Composite building. This mess hall was much better than any I'd ever seen or ever will. We were on Arctic rations - more of everything and since our cooks had to eat their own food - it didn't take new ones long to learn how to season food. This morning's mess hall breakfast was like a beach hotel's Sunday buffet. Like all buffets - I took more than I could eat and then ate every bit of it. When we walked out the front door - Cure and Boozer were on the steps - passed out in each others paws. After the Medics sobered Cure up - our Detachment Commander confined him to his room. He was dispatched to the world on the next Alaskan Airlines flight. Boozer lost a drinking buddy and we lost an instructor - and the world gained another unstable outcast of Arctic isolation.

Captain Broke Bat accelerated our training. Now this wasn't difficult - since our equipment was simple enough to operate. The only complex items were the tape recorders used to process mission tapes - and we had a civilian Tech Rep to assist us. We were ready to fly the day after we arrived - so missions were flown in spite of the fact we were still in training. However - our training came to an abrupt end on the third live mission when See-Evil - Major Plager ran amok. While sitting in the instructor pilot seat during final approach See-Evil grabbed the throttles. Most pilots would

take exception to another pilot doing this. And they really took exception to a non-pilot. As usual - we were landing in high cross winds. Control of the airplane was critical. Plager left the island that night and Broke Bat followed a week later. Bat broke right after Plager left. Like 12 O'clock high - he refused to climb on board our airplane. When the klaxon blew - Bat assumed the prenatal position - naked in his room and would not come out. By default - in two short weeks - since we were the only sane ones left - we became - The Crew - certain that when we were replaced next year - we would be much saner than the crew we replaced. The truth is - the only one who could live here for a year and not go crazy was our island mascot - Boozer.

Boozer had been on the rock for more years than anyone could remember. He arrived as a pup under the coat of a civilian contractor - when they were building the new phased array Radar at the west end of the island. He became fond of Scotch and milk as a pup and addicted to it as a dog. By the time we arrived - it was estimated by some that Boozer was over ten years old in real time and one-hundred and ten in Shemya years. Boozer's addiction to Scotch had resulted in partial loss of control of several important body functions. However - he retained just enough control to complete his mission as Shemya's foremost movie critic. And he had a particular distaste for Romantic Comedies - showing his displeasure by lifting his leg on the lower right corner of the theater's movie screen. And if he really hated a film - Boozer would amble along - marking the entire screen. No mean feat when you're a large Husky with a malfunctioning bladder. Boozer developed an off and on attachment - after Cure's departure - to C Little and me, but mostly he remained independent - the leader of our pack. He had an uncontrolled dislike for authority figures - such as pilots and island Commanders - so our front end crews stayed their distance and island Commanders should have.

Winter temperatures out on the rock were one-hundred degrees above those in Fairbanks, but sixty knot Bearing Sea winds brought a wind chill that made it colder. After we had our feet on the ground and felt comfortable with our airplane and mission - we began to explore. If the wind was below twenty knots - it was beach time. No one stuck as much as a toe into Shemya's surf. The Bearing Sea water temperature hovered a degree above - or below freezing. We were warned to stay out. Hypothermia would occur in seconds and death was certain to follow. Walking the beach was good exercise, but that wasn't why C Little and I wandered there. Boozer came along for the ride and an ocean side romp while we searched for glass fishing floats. Isolation brings forth legends and Shemya has one - too. Ours was you would not return to the world unless you found a glass fishing float. If it still had net attached - you would leave sooner. All I ever found were World War II aluminum mess trays wedged in the rocks along the shore - still shining like silver plates. And Shemya jade - Coke bottle fragments worn smooth by wind - sand and wave action.

This particular trip was for whale watching - Shemya style. Boozer rode along again for a ride and a romp. Away from the beach - wedged in ocean volcanic rocks - an Arctic Sperm whale met an honest death. Sea gulls walked on top and occasionally - one would disappear into whale muck. A minute or so later - a head would pop up - followed by the rest of the gull - all goo and feathers. True - this was pretty sick entertainment, but for Shemya - standard fare. What else was there to do when this week's movies remained at Elmendorf Air Force Base because the sergeant in charge wanted to view them again. C Little whistled for Boozer, "Time to get back in the truck." Wind had switched and the dead whale's odor was overpowering. Didn't seem to bother Boozer. He sniffed the breeze like he was looking for his next meal. I helped boost him up in the back and we returned to his domain.

I searched for months, but failed to find a fishing ball. I didn't believe in Shemya's legend, but still. And I wasn't the only one. Our Medics had been harassed by the Air Police for over a month. More for something to do than any real offense. The APs made a game out of how many tickets they could give them. So our Medics plotted to get even. One sunny day in May - two of the largest glass fishing floats ever seen were found floating off our concrete pier. Two APs jumped off the pier into freezing water and attempted to swim after them. Medics had to treat them for hypothermia. I found out about it when two more APs appeared at our hanger and asked to borrow my rowboat.

Now about my rowboat - not long after we arrived - I was appointed Detachment Safety Officer by our new Commander. He decided we needed to augment Air Sea Rescue. This was an extremely difficult concept - as we had none to augment. The nearest was two thousand mile away. C Little believed our Commander was correct and the rowboat might save lives, "If we slide off the end of the runway into the ocean - how do we get to shore?" "Not in a rowboat built for two. This one isn't safe enough to float on one of our lakes. Most of the time we take off in a force six gale. If we crash off the cliff - the surf will drown anyone attempting a rescue in our boat. We'll have to take our chances with the life rafts we have on board. No use killing two more in a foolish rescue attempt." "Orders are orders." "Even though our Commander is gathering nuts with the squirrels?" "You have to bring the rowboat to the hanger." We carried it to our hanger in the crew's pickup and leaned it against the leeward side of the building. Later - I drilled holes in the bottom so the boat would sink before anyone would drown in it.

Without my knowledge - the APs hauled our rowboat to the end of the dock and jumped into it. And I had planned - it sank. APs soon discovered they had been. Our Medics filled

two green plastic garbage bags with air - tossed nets over them and tied sea anchors on the bottom. The whole affair ended with shots being fired at the garbage bags and my Air Sea Rescue craft at the bottom of Shemya's unsheltered harbor. Wasn't a complete waste of time. As Safety Officer - the sinking of my boat helped me maintain safety - making all of us safer. I haven't mentioned much about our new Detachment Commander. A Lieutenant Colonel pilot - he became immediately frustrated at commanding a group of EWs - whose mission he could not comprehend or control. Two weeks after his arrival - he began to seek solace in the source of all knowledge - so we didn't see much of him after that. All our guidance now came from the Ops Officer - another pilot - who was able to make a sane adjustment to his fate - being in charge of crazy technical guys wearing funny wings.

Now - I know I haven't said much about our mission because I signed an oath not to tell - so I won't. Some say it's to protect sources of intelligence and some say it's to protect the lack of it. But it really doesn't matter which - because ones word is ones bond - unless your a skirt chasin' President. Flying in a B-52 meant hours of boredom followed by a microsecond of ultimate chaos. Fortunately a real war never happened. Flying our reconnaissance missions from the rock was chaos - followed by more chaos - finishing in chaos. We flew at a moments notice - at all hours of the day and night to the sound of a klaxon. There is nothing in this world that vibrates your nerves as a klaxon horn - so loud it would wake up the dead Aluets who lived here long ago. We were so busy flying - four months flew by in an instance - and we were going back to the world.

I phoned Bobbie Jean and gave her the good news, "We're flying back to Wright-Pat in two days. Can you meet me there?" "I'm leaving as soon as I pack your station wagon. "Any reason for your early return." "Airplane is in for

mandatory repair and modifications." "How long can we spend together?" "I have seventy-five days of leave in the bank. That long - maybe longer. How are things at home?" "Looking up. Mother is all atwitter." "Is she finally resigned to a Yankee son-in-law?" Finally, but there's more to it than that. I'll fill you in when you return. Are the squirrels still gathering nuts in your land without trees?" "As we speak. Our Commander has become a complete recluse. Has to stay on island with our Ops Officer. And our Ops Officer is trying to convince him to fly over to Attu and do a little fishing while we're gone." "Why there?" "Closest island of any size. Navy has a loran station and a dozen men to keep it operating. Lots of mountains and streams full of trout and salmon. A fisherman's paradise. Maybe it will bring him back to life." "How do you get there?" "Reeves Aleutian Airlines. They fly resupply in a modified C-54 once a week along the entire island chain. Attu's runway was split in two by an earthquake. Their plane is the only one out here that can fly long distance and still land there. And the runway is built into a box canyon. There is only one way in and one way out." "Isn't that the place you told me about. Where the fog sets in and no one can get in or out for weeks at a time?" "You remembered. If that happens - they'll have to carry are Commander out in a basket. Where are you going to stay?" "Same motel. Since you and your airplane don't exist - I'll wait for news from you there. Oh - Oliver T has surfaced. He and his California computer friends are in the news." "Serial killers?" "No - silly - they've invented a new memory device for computers." "Bet it's for short term." "Don't laugh. While you're wasting your time up north he's become a multimillionaire." "You've got to be pulling my leg." "No - it's true." "Did Bonnie move back?" "What? and leave show business!"

Our return flight to the world began in cold Arctic fog and ended in fuzzy bureaucratic fog at Wright-Pat. As soon

as I could get to a phone - I called Bobbie Jean at her motel, "We finally made it in." "You're a day late." "They made us land at Eielson and change front end crews." "Where are you?" "I'm at Base Ops." "Don't move. I'll pick you up out front and we can have lunch at the Club." "Are you checking out or do you want to stay over?" "Our wagon is packed and ready to roll south." "I need a shower and a change of clothes. Don't have anything summer with me." "And I tossed out most of your old clothes." I waited for the punch line, "But - I bought new. Is there a place for you to change?" "At the gym next to the O Club. I'll shower and meet you there."

Bobbie Jean took one look and frowned, "You look so pale. Don't you ever get any sun up there?" "Darned little. You're brown as a berry and you've gained a little weight." "Not much else to do in Mississippi when your best friend is away. And I'm glad you noticed my weight. I'm almost five months pregnant." I held her in my arms, "So that's the surprise. Why didn't you tell me before this? No wonder your mother is excited. I am, too." "We're lucky. We got it right on our first try. I didn't tell you because you have enough problems on your plate without worrying about me." "Bobbie Jean - I know you can handle anything including pregnancy. But - me? I would worry. Might even go AWOL from the rock." "Hurry up and change. You did shower?" "That's why my hair is wet." Her little dig to my ribs told me I was home again.

We parked outside the O' Club and walked in - arm-in-arm. Bobbie Jean asked, "Did you find out how long we can be together in Mississippi?" "They're taking off some of the optical gear here and flying the bird to Dallas for new equipment. They say it will take three months, but if we follow past updates - it'll take much longer." "I'll try again. How long before you have to return to work?" "I have

forty-five days until I'm supposed to return to Wright-Pat." "Can we be together - then?" "As long as you can travel. Hot roast beef sandwiches in the Ratskeller?" "Just cheese and crackers for me and a whole lot of you. Now that we're away from phones you can tell me what you're really doing on the other side of the world." I returned to our table with food and drink. Soda water for Bobbie Jean and a beer for me, "You drive while I sleep this time. I'm still wound up from our flight out of Alaska." Hard to eat and hold hands like schoolchild lovers, but we did.

"You were going to tell me all of your island secrets." "I'm not allowed to tell you any of those, but I can tell you what it's like. Our being there combined with location is classified. It's a tight little island in more ways than one. Our runway begins at one end and ends at the other. Right after World War II - when it was a fuel stop for Northwest Orient - families were allowed. That didn't work out. Wind and isolation got to the women. You can still see the remnants of a one room school." "Are there any Aleuts left?" "No - they moved toward the mainland. Even they don't care for it. Too isolated - weather is rotten and it's hard to live on shell food - grass and fish as a steady diet." "You said there weren't any trees - or bushes and you call it the Rock. Is it bare rock?" "No - Shemya is covered by an Arctic grass we called tundra. Can't walk in it - too thick - like saw grass. Our island is perched on top the stem of an old volcano - like a giant mushroom. Are you ready to travel?" "After I powder my nose."

I woke up when we were halfway to Cincinnati. Bobbie Jean pulled my chain, "One beer and you turn into sleeping beauty." "Out of practice." "Can you see any of the other islands?" "Two - Aggatu and Attu. Aggatu is the closest." "Sounds like they're twins." "Not really - Aggatu is like a table top with cliffs all around. When it's halfway clear we

can see it most every day. No one on it - though. When we flew over it on a training mission - I could see buildings - telephone poles - wires - roads and buildings. Really spooky - like a ghost island. It has cliffs above the ocean all the way around. Probably why the Air Force decided on Shemya. Attu is the largest island of our little group. We can see its snow capped mountains on occasion - when we have a clear calm day - which isn't often." "Is it your Bali Hi enchanted island?" "Not really. Snow capped mountains in the Arctic have a cold remoteness to them - not found in the South Pacific." "Your island doesn't seem remote - with theaters Clubs and a gym." "Runway is our problem. Planes fly in and out at least three times a week. So the temptation to leave is there. Kind of like a prison without walls. And with high winds - freezing cold rain and fog - we spend most of our time indoors. Cabin fever sets in."

I read the map as we navigated our way through downtown Cincinnati and across the Ohio River. Bobbie Jean wasn't finished grilling me, "Shemya really sounds quite desolate. Has anyone run away - or as you say - gone AWOL?" "We had a really bad example this spring. The Protestant Minister disappeared after our Catholic Priest got stuck over on Attu. Priest meant well enough, but got weathered in over there for a month. Reeves couldn't get in to fly him out." "And the minister?" "No one knows where he is. They're still looking for him. He must have snapped after reading one too many Dear John letters from our troops." "That's terrible." "It's so bad up there even has God left our island." I moved away to miss the dig coming at my ribs. "You won't tell me what you do?" "Maybe when we're old and gray. Where do you want to stop tonight?" "Nashville. We'll get in late, but I want to get back home. Are you ready to take the wheel?" "Better keep a watch on me - I haven't driven since January." Bobbie Jean laughed as she pulled over at the first turnoff, "That's not all you haven't done."

Mississippi was unbelievably hot and humid after Alaska. The sea breeze off the Gulf helped, but it took awhile to adjust. And it took awhile to adjust to Bobbie Jean's Mother. With a Grandchild on the way - she popped in and out like a mother hen - checking to make sure its chick was safe. Sun - swimming and walking the beaches with Bobbie Jean made the days whistle by. Biloxi was in the middle of its normal lazy southern summer - moonshine stills sending columns of smoke to the skies - only to be trapped under a high pressure dome of haze. I spent mornings scraping and painting Bobbie Jean's apartments and home. Afternoons - we escaped the heat in air conditioned comfort or lounging at the Broadwater's pool. It was hard to pack up and leave for Ohio after this vacation. Bobbie Jean's Mother wasn't keen on her traveling north with me - being over six months pregnant. But - Bobbie Jean would have none of it, "Women traveled west on wagon trains under worse conditions." Her only concession was to travel light for a change, "When I reach seven and a half months - I'll move up to Jackson with Mother. You won't have to worry about me getting good care. My Nanny is preparing to spoil our child - just like she spoiled me."

As we drove into Nashville - to stay at our favorite motel - Bobbie Jean sat up straight, "I forgot to ask. What ever happened to Sergeant Bidwell? You haven't mentioned him once - not even in your letters." "Bidwell left the island before I got there." "He was there less than six months. What happened." "He almost bankrupted the island. It was a compassionate transfer." "For him or the island?" "For the island. He was assigned to Bergstrom Air Force Base near Austin, Texas." "Won't be long before he pops up in your life again. Does he keep in touch." "Phone call after I arrived, but that's about it." Our motel represented the demarcation line between Bobbie Jean's old south and my new north. At breakfast - I continued our friendly culinary battle over home fries and grits, "You know the only thing

I like about grits?" Bobbie Jean grimaced - knowing a barb was coming her way, but she was a good sport, "What?" "They don't serve them with dinner." "Watch your tongue. Our soon to be new family member is listening. And my child is going to grow up on grits just like his Granddaddy. You never mentioned where you'll be working in Dayton?" "Same place - Foreign Technology Division." "Aha! I know what you're doing." "No way." "Yes I do. You've been capturing little green men in Alaska. And now you're going to interrogate them." "Where did you get that idea?" "Our supermarket tabloid identified FTD as the place where the Air Force keeps all the little green men in a giant walk-in freezer." "Isn't that Roswell?" "They identified both places - you sneaky Yankee you." "Remember the supermarket in Dayton?" "Yes?" "Don't buy the green mint ice-cream out of the freezer. And don't scare our soon to be new family member with stories about aliens." "But - doesn't FTD dissect aliens?" "They do what the name says - investigate foreign technology." "Is that what you do?" "You're digging again and you know I can't tell. I'll dance around it. FTD processes our technical stuff and sends it to Washington. Sort of like a big brother. It's all very technical and dull. Now that's about as far as I can go. Want to stop in Cincinnati for dinner? There's this little Italian restaurant downtown called Caruso's." "Careful. I got this way after a little Italian." "So that was the night!"

We had reservations for our favorite motel outside of Dayton. But - this time Bobbie Jean reserved a suite with a kitchen. Almost seven months pregnant - she wasn't anxious to dine out. It was my turn to accept her barb, "You know what I don't like about your Yankee home fries?" "Go ahead - I deserve a shot across the bow." "They make me feel the same way I did when I had morning sickness." "Touché! my love." "We'll stay in and order Chinese out the tonight. I thought I would never see a place as hot as Jackson, but

Dayton qualifies. It's steamier than a sauna." "Remember last winter?" "When this sauna turns into an ice cube?" "What do you plan to do while I'm working." "What the doctor ordered. Take it easy - lounge around the pool and read." "Who's watching the store?" "Herbie."

By the time we completed our make-work projects at FTD - Bobbie Jean was seven and a half months pregnant and ready to go home. She was swelling up faster than the Goodyear Blimp, but still had her sense of humor, "We planned to be together until you returned. Looks like our new addition is going to change that. I think it's time to go home to Mother while you gallivant around. Oh - your island friend - C Little sent you a letter. I didn't know he had returned to your island." "Commander wanted one of us to keep him company and he drew the short straw." I opened the letter. C Little had solved the mystery of our missing minister -

*Johnny,*

*Living up here on the rock in summer is worse than winter. Wind is blowing sixty knots and visibility is zero/zero. You won't believe where they found our minister. He was holed up in the basement of his house in Washington State. Threatened to shoot anyone that tried to bring him back. Crazier than a March Hare. Oh, before I forget. You may want to send Boozer a dog biscuit with a file inside of it. He bit the Base Commander on the ass and is in the lockup. The Radar contract civilians are sneaking whiskey and milk to him.*

*Our Commander came back from his fishing vacation with enough fish for a fry. Vacation didn't help his mental state. Still gathering*

nuts where there are none. Wing at Fairbanks must have noticed. They ordered him to spend at least one week back there each month. Bad news for you. Ops Officer wants you up here in two weeks. SAC is sending up a replacement airplane until ours is fixed. You and I have to train the crew. You'll get word - soon. They're going to divert a KC-135 to pick you up. We'll come back to the world to train at the factory and pick up the airplane.

See you soon,

### *C Little*

I was reluctant, but I had to tell Bobbie Jean the bad news, "C Little says I have to return to the Rock. I'm supposed to receive orders in a day or two. Going to divert an airplane to pick me up. I'll drive you back to Jackson and make arrangements for a pick up." "Is this all necessary?" "It is if you're into playing games. I don't think it's all that important, but the powers that be must." "If this is the way the Air Force operates in peacetime - I'm not sure it's safe to be on our side if there's another war." "As C Little says, 'Orders are orders.'"

My orders arrived at FTD three days later. I had time to drive Bobbie Jean home to Jackson. From there - I drove on to Biloxi and stored my car. Herbie drove me to New Orleans and I flew to Dallas - stayed overnight and departed the next day with a KC-135 crew from Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth. We flew directly to Eielson Air Force Base. I returned to an Indian summer - August in Alaska and I was ill prepared for the tail end of Fairbank's summer. And not at all prepared to fight off tundra mosquitoes. They were as large as my salt water friend in Houston and ten times as

hungry. When the sun melted snow off the permafrost - a million miles of ice turned into instant swamp and clouds of these airborne piranhas filled the sky. Fairbanks - locked in ice in winter - is closed down by hungry mosquitoes in summer. I was lucky to arrive at the tail end of their season, but the few that nailed me were healthy enough. All Bobbie Jean could do was giggle at my predicament, "Now will you listen to me and think about leaving the Air Force." "What and leave snow business?" When she stopped laughing she had a surprise, "Know why I'm getting bigger than a house?" I took a deep breath, "You're going to have a baby?" "Can you say two?" "Twins?" "That's what the doctor said." "How soon?" "On schedule. Can you return in October?" "It shouldn't be a problem. We're supposed to go through more training in Texas and bring the airplane back up. Factory is having problems. Hit a few snags - so we won't fly up until after mid-November." "Twins solve one of our problems. We can carry on both family names." "I'll have to explain that to my parents. How is your Mother?" "Pure ecstasy. She is so proud of you - she wants to make you an honorary son of the Confederacy." "I'll bet you want to get out of the baby business after this." "You've got that right - soldier. I've never been so uncomfortable in my life."

A week later - I was still feeding mosquitoes in Fairbanks and wondering why I had to hurry up here and wait. C Little set me in motion again - when he phoned from the island, "Sorry they jerked you around." "What's up?" "You weren't needed out here until next week. Commander took one too many sips from the source of all knowledge and brought you back early." "How am I going to get out to the Rock - swim?" "You'll have to fly out commercial on the next Alaskan Air Line flight." "Isn't scheduled until next Wednesday and it leaves from Anchorage." "Take the Alaskan Railroad to Anchorage. You might even see a moose." "And it skirts by Mt. McKinley. Pat Boozer on the head for me."

While Fairbanks enjoyed early Indian summer - winter and snow arrives on top of the Alaskan Mountain Range in August. Green leaves were turning from red to gold along the Alaskan Express' slow - long climb to Summit. Now - Alaskans are a practical people. Towns are named by distance from - like Twenty Mile and tops of the railroad passes - Summit. I looked, but could not find one moose from the train windows. As a matter of fact - outside of streams and trees - with an assortment of rocks - I saw not one living thing. Found out later that moose were all in high summer pastures. When snow stacked up ten feet or better in the trees - they would use the railway tracks as an easy way to wander about. Lunch on the Alaskan Express - which barely exceeded forty miles an hour - was a feast of dry white bread - mustard and lunch meat. Which was almost, but not yet - turning green. Table tops of linoleum were covered with oil cloth - permeated with an odor of creosote. Ambiance and cuisine were as rugged as the country the train rolled through. As we approached Summit - clouds were clinging to McKinley's sides in ever increasing layers. I gave up my search for life and leaned back and awoke to the squeal of railroad brakes. The Alaskan Express was chugging slowly into The City of The Great White North - Alaska's Anchorage.

Got lucky - an Air Force Van was waiting to pick up a courier - so I hitched a ride to Elmendorf Air Force Base with him - since Elmendorf's runways did double duty as Anchorage's International Airport. As usual - I dined at the O' Club - the temporary bachelor's friend and afterwards phoned Bobbie Jean, "Remember when I said the sun never rises except for twilight last winter?" "Yes - is it just as dark now?" "No - just the opposite. Except for twilight - the sun barely sets in summer. How is your Mother handling the blessed event?" "I'm carrying the twins high - so she is certain they our boys. She's out buying two of everything. Your Mother is coming to help when my time gets near." "Oh

my God - dueling Grandmas!" "Of course not. Your Mother can charm the devil out of his den and she'll charm my Mother out of her distaste for anything north of the Mason-Dixon line. What time do you leave in the morning?" "Alaskan Airlines - seven o'clock takeoff."

I flew out to the rock on one of Alaskan Airlines few four engine - prop driven - Lockheed Constellations. I had always wanted to fly on one. After World War II - airline advertising convinced us all that Connies were the wave of the future. However - as I was now accustomed to jets - this flight seemed like an eternity. When we landed at the Navy Base on Adak - at least half the passengers departed. I looked around. Adak - shrouded in Arctic summer fog looked a lot like our Rock. Our pilot - not wanting to be delayed in the middle of nowhere with fog setting in - made a quick turnaround. Our flight droned on and on - from nowhere to emptiness - half loaded with happy new rock residents. Their response would be quite different on the return trip a year from now. It took six months for Rock residents to become withdrawn - another three to be hermits and the last three to become mad as hatters. We landed at the isle of the damned - twenty minutes before fog closed the runway.

I was greeted as if I were a long lost friend an island celebrity. C Little and Major Birdsill - our Ops Officer - met me with our pickup on the tarmac. Birdsill threw my duffel and suitcase into the back of the truck, "Welcome back - Johnny. Don't complain about your lot to the Commander if he happens to pop out of his room. And if he does - treat him with kid gloves. Any stress and he just might go off the deep end. Air Force shouldn't send someone up here lacking in a good sense of humor. How is the world?" "Still there - full of people were not familiar with - sane folks. Wife is going to have twins in October. I'd like to be back for that." "Depends on how long the RB-47 stays up here. As

long as they're here - you and C Little are the designated stuckees." "What are we supposed to do? Were not trained on their airplane or equipment." "You know that and I know it, but our Commander believes you two are the secret to his promotion." "How so?" "He's convinced you two know all there is to know about what you're supposed to know" "I think I feel the large end of a bat coming my way." "I know the RB-47 troops know their stuff and don't need training, but I couldn't convince the Boss. So - play along. Help them mission plan and process their take. Go through the training motions. We have to humor our CO."

We dropped Birdsill and my gear off at the hanger and drove to the mess hall. C Little broke his silence, "I didn't want to totally screw up your vacation - so I didn't tell you the rest of the story. Birdsill is right about our Commander. He's out of it most of the time and when he returns to the land of the sane - it's only for a short stay. He still wants to make decisions - plays the game at running things. Good news - we have a new Station Commander on board. Our pal Boozer is free at last. Medics are weaning him off Scotch and milk - loading him up with vitamins. Damn dog gets better treatment than we do. Talk about the devil. Birdsill is following us. Wonder what's going on."

Boozer greeted me like a long lost friend - from his throne on top the Composite building steps. I held his huge front paws as he jumped up with a wag and a bark, "Damn - you're getting frisky for an old pup, but you're looking good. Not as mangy as the last time I saw you. New diet must be doing you a world of good." I scratched him behind both ears as Birdsill ran up the steps to join us, "Boss came out of hibernation looking for me. Been on the source of all knowledge for two days. Had to get away. Mind if I join you two for dinner?" We both nodded, "Yes." I looked around - we were enveloped in fog - I had returned.

Birdsill sniffed the mess hall air, "Chicken smells good today." C Little filled his plate, "and it can't be road kill - too plump." As we removed the plates from our trays - I asked Birdsill, "What have you been doing up here while we were back in the world?" "Fixing myself new quarters in the other hanger and trying to stay as far away as I can from our Boss." "Hanger Two? Are we finally getting the new bird?" "Anytime now. They say her Radar will fry hamburger a mile away. Sorry to eat and run. Promised to give a tour of the island to one of the Alaskan Stews." C Little smiled, "A tour of what? For whom?" "Met her at Anchorage when I had a little R & R last month."

For a pilot - Birdsill knew his EWS. There wasn't much we could put in a training guide that would be useful for the RB-47 troops. They did the same thing we did, but in another part of the world. I thought a bit and came up with the solution, "C Little - listen to this. We developed a signal environment and sequence of events for the troops who replace us next winter. I recommend we copy it for the RB-47 crew." "And we can formalize our processing procedures - packing and mailing. Kill two birds with one stone." "Got a problem no ones thought of." "What's that?" "Our tape machines may not be compatible with their tapes." "Whoops - different contractors." "Right. Might have a problem checking results in real time."

Birdsill asked, "Can you think of anything else that may help them?" C Little answered, "Might as well make up a newcomer's guide while we're at it. Let the new guys know where they can go and what they can do." "Are you going to include whale watching?" "Need a new dead whale. Carcass of the last one disappeared in our last storm. Wind got up to one-hundred and sixty knots." "And no one knew?" "And no one knew." When the time came - Birdsill picked us up at the mess hall, "RB-47 is coming in." C Little asked, "How soon?"

"within the next thirty minutes. They just reported in over the high cone." He parked on a small knoll, overlooking the runway. The RB-47 flew around the landing pattern once - twice - three times before landing. I laughed, "Like a dog trying to get comfortable." Birdsill looked worried, "Don't know if that bird can handle our cross winds. Only thirty knots and he's all over the place." Birdsill drove our pickup to the Hanger and welcomed the new outlanders to the Rock. The RB-47 crew consisted of - two pilots - a navigator and two EWS - called - of course - Ravens. C Little and I took charge of the Ravens and Birdsill escorted the front end crew to the day room. Unlike our RC-135 - the Ravens had ejection seats. However - their seats ejected downward - from a bomb bay capsule.

Our training course for the Ravens took less than half-a-day. We spent the afternoon taking them on a Cook's tour of the island. When they both found a glass fishing float - where we had found none - C Little worried, "Legend has it that you can leave the island, but doesn't say how. Johnny and me haven't found ours." Raven One asked, "What do you guys do for excitement here?" C Little and I were laughing so hard - we couldn't answer, but didn't need too. Raven Two offered, "If there is nothing to do here, but eat and sleep - you might as well take a look at our bird before dinner. Mess hall is it?" I answered, "Unless you like frozen gourmet dinners at the NCO Club." "Isn't there an O Club?" "Top of the Composite Building if you care to dine on peanuts - popcorn and the source of all knowledge." "Source of all knowledge?" We explained our Detachment's disease on the drive back to the Hanger.

After crawling around their capsule and looking at the equipment - I was impressed, "Looks good to me. Do you see any problems?" Raven One answered, "Two great big ones. The good news is that our receivers are preset to intercept and

record when signals come up. The bad news is they're set on the wrong frequencies for this area." Raven Two added, "Our antenna pattern won't work. Not wide enough and cut for the wrong frequencies." I couldn't believe it, "Christ all Friday - didn't anyone at FTD think of this before sending you up here?" "We tried to explain it to our folks, but sometimes pilots don't listen." Raven One laughed, "And our Commanders are frustrated fighter pilots. Kick the tires - light the fires and go - mission mentality." C Little asked, "Anything we can do to help?" Raven One nodded, "We're going to fly a training sortie in the morning. Pilots want to get familiar with your Air Patch. Touch and goes - that sort of thing. We'll check over our gear and see if we can come up with some kind of fix. Your maintenance guys - can they help?" I offered, "We'll have our troops standing by after you land. Our guys are good. Your receivers frequency - maybe. Antenna patterns - I don't think we have that kind of capability."

After breakfast - we rode to the crest of the hill overlooking the runway and watched as the RB-47 attempted a takeoff in twenty-five knot cross winds. I asked Birdsill, "Can they handle it?" "RB-47 should be safer than our RC-135 - depends on how good the pilots are." We watched as the airplane began its takeoff roll. Halfway down the runway - something went wrong. It could have been a compressor stall or an unexpected gust of wind. The RB-47 veered to the right before its initial lift off point. Too late to throttle back - all four engines made popping sounds as its wheels touched lightly over the tundra. Straining to leave earth - without power to do so - the RB-47 dropped out of sight below our cliffs. Birdsill hopped into the pickup - drove down the hill and across the runway like a mental patient running away from a lobotomy. We expected to see parts of the RB-47 scattered across the ocean. We saw the RB-47 reappear in view - straining to regain altitude over the wave tops. It

flew with gear retracted - engines screaming in a full power whine - trying to climb. After a minute to us - and an eternity to the crew - it began to climb - slowly out over the ocean and disappeared into the bottom of low summer clouds. C Little whistled, "SAC almost lost an airplane and five good men. Where is your Air Sea Rescue rowboat?" "At the bottom of our harbor where it belongs. We'd only lose two more - me and you - taking it into that surf. Swells have to be seven feet high."

Birdsill returned - driving slower - almost sticking his pickup in the tundra. He was excited, "Made tracks right to the edge of the cliff and the jet exhaust cleaned out a wide swath of tundra grass. Johnny - you're Safety Officer. I'll get the manuals out for you when we're back at the hanger, but I don't think you'll need them." "Why? Aren't they coming back here to land?" "No - they're hightailing it to Fairbanks. Bet that pilot's ass is in-between his shoulder blades. Copilot requested clearance to fly direct." C Little asked, "Are you sure they won't return." Birdsill laughed, "Airplane might, but not that crew."

Birdsill was half right - neither crew or airplane were coming back. The drop off the cliff scared them witless. They made three passes at Eielson - attempting to land in a dead calm and couldn't. On the fourth try they hit the runway - so hard it caused structural damage to the RB-47. SAC sent another front end crew up to fly it back to Kansas. A week later we were visited by an airplane full of safety inspectors. Being pilots and me not being one - they didn't read my report. Birdsill kept them away from our Detachment Commander. He shrugged, "A report on one pilot gone crazy is enough. One look at our Commander and they'll try to put the blame on him." You two go pack your gear. I'm sending you back to the world on the KC-135 with the safety team. Just don't spill your guts." I asked, "Aren't they sending in

another RB-47?" "Don't have one to spare and someone must have told them it wouldn't work if they did." "Are you coming with us?" "I don't mind it up here. Stews coming in tonight and someone has to watch over the Boss."

*"Well!" thought Alice to herself.  
After such a fall as this, I shall  
think nothing of tumbling downstairs!  
How brave they'll all think me at home!"*

## 12

Birdsill shouldn't have worried about us spilling our guts. The SAC Safety team wasn't interested in talking to a lieutenant - or captain who are non-pilots - about an almost airplane accident. Left alone and glad to be so - I slept - or read most of the way on our flight back to the world - while C Little practiced his navigating. Our early morning landing in Omaha, Nebraska was uneventful. Leaving the Aleutians in summer is the same as traveling from England to America. The climate change is noticeable, but not drastic. I phoned Bobbie Jean from Base Ops at Offutt Air Force Base. Out the window - up a small hill - hovering over me was the mother hive of all of the defenders of the free world - SAC Headquarters - Strategic Air Command. When I told her of my vision - the terminal phase of pregnancy had not caused Bobbie Jean to lose her sense of humor, "You're as close to the source of all knowledge as you're going to get, soldier. What are you doing back so early? Thought you were stuck up on the Rock for at least another month." "Would have been if fate - two glass fishing balls and a near accident had not intervened. I'll fill you in when I get there. I'm going to get some rest at the VOQ - catch the next flight out to New Orleans - rent a car and drive to Jackson."

As I rode from Base Ops to the VOQ - I had to chuckle to myself when I noticed a pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible parked in Headquarters' east parking lot. The rocker panels were beginning to show a little rust, but it still looked in pretty good shape. And I wondered how my boy Bidwell was doing in Texas, but for only a second - knowing there are a lot of high rollers in the Lone Star State. As

we rolled up to the VOQ office - I admired the location. SAC folks are just as practical as Alaskans. The VOQ was across the street from the front entrance to SAC Headquarters. The O Club was next door and a little used nine hole golf course surrounded it all. If anyone stormed this citadel - there would be a clear field of fire.

There was no room at the Inn - so I phoned Base Ops to see if I could get a military hop out of here. Didn't have any flights going my way, but they did provide several airline telephone numbers. My luck was holding better than my ability to stay awake. I booked an afternoon flight to New Orleans - connecting out of Love Field in Dallas. And Base Taxi had a van leaving in thirty minutes to pick up VIPs arriving at Omaha's airport - north of town. The ride north through Omaha's suburbs is a journey through time - homes of waves of immigrants - who traveled west to work in the meat packing plants or at the stockyards. South Omaha is the home of the Polish Club - feeder lots and of course - stockyards. The Bohemian Cafe announced the home of Czech immigrants followed by an area dominated by Italian restaurants. Omaha was one of the last cities in the west to retain its ethnic neighborhoods. Central Omaha was boarded up. Business and hotels had moved to the west side. North Omaha reminded me of the outskirts of Fort Worth. Not farm or ranch, but not suburb or city. Several oxbow lakes explained the reason why. Missouri River must have meandered around here before Army Engineers dredged a pass through channel that stabilized its banks.

Whoever designed airport terminals must have gotten the contract for every one I'd been through. Omaha's was like all the rest - crescent shaped - like a continuous motel entrance. Convenient though - one room deep. Everyt! was located in one place - including the waiting rooms. I fell asleep in a chair and would have missed my flight if the

ticket lady hadn't noticed me after all the others had cleared out. I woke up in time to board as the engines were cranking on the airplane. Herbie was waiting for me in New Orleans. I couldn't believe his loyalty, "You shouldn't have gone out of your way. I'm causing you too much trouble." "When you made Bobbie Jean an honest woman - she gave me a jump start on the path to independence and wealth. Least I can do for the best friends I have in this world. Parked right outside the front door." "How did you do that?" "Don't ask." "Don't tell. How is your new lounge coming along?" "Incredible! Paid for itself in six months. We've all ready had several offers." "Are you going to take one?" "Not until I can find a new opportunity. Bobbie Jean said she'd help me look for an area - after your twins are settled in and stable." "You ought to include a Chef in your next mix." "It'll be outside Biloxi." "Why?" "Getting a little seedy. With jets - folks are finding new vacation spots. I thought it would come back - in spite of the lack of gaming, but it hasn't. We're not Miami Beach. Only good waves we get is when a hurricane passes through."

After three weeks in Jackson - I was in melt down, "Does it ever cool off here?" Bobbie Jean scolded me, "You've adjusted too well to Alaska - my Nanook of the North. August and September are Mississippi's hottest months." "I was spoiled by the afternoon sea breeze in Biloxi. And I arrived after Christmas and left before mid August." "Have you heard anything more about our friend - Bidwell." "I was thinking about him in Omaha. Swore I saw Bonnie's pink and white Packard Caribbean in the Headquarters' parking lot. Have you heard anything?" "Only that there was a Federal raid on a floating casino in Austin. Someone floated a river boat - loaded with casino equipment on the Air Force Officer's Club lake. And they found a race track nearby." "Bidwell!" "He went over the line." "Why?" "Gambling on horses is against the law in Texas."

Not much I can say about the birth of our twins - except that we were so proud we could pop. And Bobbie Jean was able to walk without waddling, "Can't believe how uncomfortable it was carrying our boys. It was worth it, but I'm not about to travel that path again. If I knew you Yankee boys were so fertile - I would have married a southerner." "I thought it was the woman who determined how many." My Mother raised her eyebrows when we named one of our boys - Randolph Livingston Langtry - after his deceased maternal Grandfather and the other boy - John Ropp - after his Great Great Grandfather. She was understanding if not fully convinced. We immediately began calling our sons JR and RL and that seemed to solve the dilemma - except I had to needle Bobbie Jean, "When our sons grow up and ask why they have two different names - you'll do the explaining." "You're right! I didn't think about them when we picked their names." "And our boys are identical." "You know what?" "I'll bite - what?" "I'm just not going to worry about that until the time comes. Just thank your lucky star that my Father wasn't named Calhoon or Beauregard. Can you stay a little longer?" "With two Grandmothers and a Nanny? I only get to hold my sons when we feed them at two in the morning. My Commander has ordered me back to the Rock." "Even without an airplane?" "Crazy isn't it?"

Birdsill phoned the next day, "I've scheduled a KC-135. It'll to pick you up in Columbus, Mississippi. Call the Command Post tomorrow and get your exact departure time." "Do we fly out to the Rock or stay in Fairbanks." "After all of your crew arrives. Congratulations!" "Why thank you. Bobbie Jean and our two sons are doing fine." "That - too. You've been promoted to Major." "I wasn't due for a couple of years." "They changed the rules." "Are you sure it's in our Air Force?" Bobbie Jean asked, "Who was on the phone?" "My Ops Officer from the Rock. He set up an airplane to fly me from Columbus, Mississippi to Alaska in the morning." "Do you know when you'll return." "In a month - for training in

Texas. Second honeymoon?" "In Greenville, Texas? Are you out of your mind? Are you sure you want to stay in?" "I've just been promoted." "To major?" "Yes, but I'm having second thoughts." "Why don't you wait until we know what your next assignment is going to be and then decide. The Air Force can't send you remote all of the time." "Only when there is a war on or a President feels macho." "Herbie is coming up later this morning. I'll have him drive you over to Columbus." "I hate to impose." "He loves it. Won't be long before you and I are full partners in business as well as marriage. He wants to size you up."

I don't know if Herbie got my correct size, but he sure grilled me about everything from philosophy to business practices on our drive from Jackson to Columbus. Columbus, Mississippi? One look at all the good old boys lounging around the gas stations and I knew the true meaning of RC and a Moon Pie. And it was a good thing that I stopped by Base Ops before checking into the VOQ. My flight had been moved up to this evening. I had just enough time to grab a snack and get to the airplane. I arrived in Alaska with the mother of all jet lag headaches. When I landed in Fairbanks - C Little met me at the airplane, "Get some sleep. We leave for the Rock tomorrow at eight." "In the morning?" "Roger that." "Who else is going?" "Just you and me. Everyone else extended their leave. How is the new father?" "Easiest pregnancy I could ever have gone through - since I wasn't there for most of it." "I made Captain!" "Will wonders ever cease? They'll have to break the mold."

We arrived on the Rock in time to hear the good news. Mona Lisa was approaching with the toys - promised by Alaskan Air Command - for all of us good island boys. If she did - the US Naval Service's Ocean going tug - pulling two barges - would have to be as large as the Queen Mary. Birdsill met us at the airplane, "Sorry guys. Commander insisted that you

return." I asked, "Is there work to do?" "I tried to talk him into letting you stay south, but he would have none of it." "Wake me up when this tour is over." Birdsill smiled, "Well - its not a total waste. We can watch the Mona Lisa barges unload." "Will it be better than watching sea gulls disappear on a dead whale's back?"

The thump - thump - thump on my door woke me up from the sleep of the dead. C Little couldn't contain himself, "Wake up - Johnny - it's your big day. Mona Lisa is sailing toward our dock." I rolled out of bed and staggered toward the latrine, "How soon?" "Not sure. Should be in this morning. Hurry up. We can stop at the headlands before breakfast and take a look." We parked at the top of Shemya's highest cliff and looked out through the lifting fog. "C Little - either our ocean is very big or Mona Lisa is very small. This must be where the island gets the bat again. Lets eat breakfast." "Birdsill wants us to pick him up on the way." "Why?" "We've got his truck." Boozer wasn't on his throne this morning. He had joined our island throng - waiting at the dock by the harbor.

Lingering over breakfast coffee - Birdsill gave us a rundown on what Alaskan Air Command promised to provide SAC. "We're supposed to get a real runway clearing snow blower to assist our current road grader and dump truck with a blade." I whistled, "It's about time. They have more of those than I can count at Elmendorf." "And we're supposed to receive eight new pickups - a bus and a fire engine." I asked, "Have you seen the barges?" "No." "Well - if all the stuff they promised is on board - remember the little car in the circus. The one that all the clowns came out of. Mona Lisa will have to duplicate that feat." "Oh - oh. We need that equipment for our second airplane and crew." We drove down to the dock and watched as the barges were tied down. Excitement rose to a fever pitch as Mona Lisa's barge crane lifted the

first vehicle out of its hold. A bright blue Air Force pickup was suspended in air over the dock. The barge rolled on a swell and the crane dropped our new pickup from five feet above down to the dock with a thump! When the "new" pickup finished bouncing - all of the new blue paint flaked off onto the dock. What was left said, "US Navy" through gray paint and rust. Another pickup followed and as if by magic all of its new blue paint also was scattered about the dock. And that was it. All that was left to unload were sundries and foodstuffs. And these items were loaded into our one dump truck and driven to the warehouse at the Composite Building. We were not shorted on food. Our dump truck nearly wore itself out on one too many round trips. As we walked back to the pickup, I asked Birdsill, "Who was the supply troop that promised gold and sent lead?" "Can't believe the hosing we got. They even spray painted over rust. And the supply guy? Haven't the foggiest."

I cornered our SAC Supply Sergeant and asked, "Who is your contact at Alaskan Air Command. The Sergeant replied, "You want to know who shoved the bat up our ass. Captain Tucker Tubbs is the troop that took our orders, but it wasn't him that did us in. He's long gone - out of the service. Left almost nine months back. My contact at Elmendorf says he's working as a reporter on a newspaper in Washington DC." "Hope he knew enough to ship his household goods." "That's how I found out about him. Tubbs must have been a real flake. He left all of his stuff stacked in his BOQ room. They had to ship it to Washington DC two months after he left Alaska." "Then who stuck the bat up our ass?" "Someone higher up in Alaskan Air Command diverted our vehicles to Elmendorf. Not much we can do out here. We're just a tenant. Alaskan Air Command owns the rock. And they do damn well what they please. Looks to me like we need an IG visit." "What good will that do?" "They'll write an official report on the screwing we've been getting and send

it on to Washington. Even self serving generals don't care for that kind of recognition." "Do you think it will happen." "He smiled, "You never know. If you don't tell - you can't ask." Mona Lisa stayed at the dock for another week before casting off to its home port in Seattle. This was a quiet visit. There weren't more than six fights at the NCO Club and none of them amounted to much. Most of the Merchant Mariners were too long in tooth to fight and our rock citizens to remote to care.

After two weeks of twiddling our thumbs, Birdsill had good news, "I'm sending you off island. Have a KC-135 circling the high cone as we speak. You'll fly to Eielson and return with them to their home Base in Fort Worth. Stay at the Carswell VOQ until you finish your training at the factory and return with our bird." "I feel like a yo-yo. Why are you moving us on? We haven't been here long enough to satisfy our Boss." "I don't know if you've noticed, but our Commander has taken to running around our empty hanger naked after midnight." "You're kidding?" "No - I'm not, but it's the pamphlets he's been reading on Theosophy that really concern me. I may need an oversized net to capture this cuckoo. Get packed and get moving before he notices you're gone."

Birdsill and the KC-135 arrived at the end of the Rock's runway together. The airplane turned around at the end - ready for takeoff. As soon as the airplane stopped - the hatch opened. We scrambled up the ladder and strapped in. I looked out the window at fog shrouded Shemya as the KC-135 rolled down the runway. C Little shouted over the engine noise, "That was fast. Feel like I'm on the wrong end of a shotgun wedding. What do you make of our travels?" "Motion is work. We've got to show movement." "Even if nothing is happening?" "The faster we move - the more important our motion becomes. Nothing will become something. Move fast

enough and all tracks will be covered. Our airplane won't be ready, but we will be. And in the land of motion - that's as good as make-work can get."

Fort Worth in October? It was darn near paradise. Warm sunny days on the Base Golf course followed by cool fall nights filled with barbecue and beer. Doesn't get any better than that. Bobbie Jean flew over and stayed for three weeks - until she couldn't stand being away any longer. Her Nanny wouldn't let the twins travel. Not yet. Said they were too young. I spent a few weekends in Jackson, but all that did was wet my appetite for a return to the world. She asked, "Will it always be like this? Living out of suitcases all over the world. Not knowing when you'll leave or return?" "It could be worse. Southeast Asia is beginning to heat up. They're talking about sending B-52s over. Doesn't look good. You know what's really crazy?" "No." "Majors up to colonels are worried about it being over before they get their chance to go. We've got a lot of crazy folks hungry for a wartime promotion. I don't think its being over is going to be a problem." "You think it will last over a year?" "Dien Bien Phu." "Isn't that the place where the French surrendered?" "And with their best Foreign Legion troops. Fighting on Vietnam's turf is like being a British Grenadier in our American Revolution - wearing red - marching down the center of a road - while the enemy is wearing green - shooting at them from behind trees. We'll get mired down in this one." Is there anything we can do?" "Talk to your Congressman." "Can't - his hearing aid is turned off."

As I helped her on the plane for the last time - Bobbie Jean gave me a kiss, "Keep me posted." "Should be Greenville - then back to the rock." "Greenville?" "Is it that bad?" "Remember Columbus - Mississippi?" "Right - RC and moon pies." "Ralph wanted to build a casino in Texas. Greenville is closed to liquor and overly religious."

C Little helped me stack my gear into our shared VOQ room, "Only have one night remaining in Fort Worth. The factory airplane is scheduled to pick us up tomorrow and fly us and our gear to Greenville." "And I almost got on the plane with Bobbie Jean. What's the schedule?" "A week of ground training on the new collection gear and one or two training flights - depending." "Depending on what?" "All of our gear isn't installed. Can't test what we don't have." "What if it doesn't work?" "They're sending engineers along with the plane." "Wonderful, frigin wonderful. The same people who stood by and watched two bicycle repair men design and fly an airplane. Said it couldn't be done and built a profession around it after they were proved wrong." "Tooth Fairy time?" "Not as bad as that. At least we'll know why it can't and won't work." "You're worrying about nothing - the factory engineers promised to stay with us until everything is working - installed - or repaired." "Or three weeks." "Whichever comes first."

We returned to the Rock with equipment that worked at the factory, but not on the airplane. And - with holes in our equipment racks where other equipment was promised, but not yet available for installation. The factory engineers watched our maintenance folks make the non-working equipment function and then drew diagrams to explain why. After three weeks of diagram drawing - interspersed with engineering incantations - they boarded an Alaskan Airline flight and flew away - never to be seen again.

Not much I can say about flying missions day after day with unsure equipment and teenage killers circling our airplane in Russian MiGs. Tempers grew short as our Arctic winter nights grew longer and longer. Like those who had gone before - we slowly withdrew into our own individual protective shells. Living out of a suitcase was taking its toll. Lack of mission success didn't help - either. But -

if it doesn't happen you can't see it. And we couldn't force it - either. Thanksgiving dinner was eaten in silence. I stared at C Little and he stared back. We had nothing left to say. And Thanksgiving dinner at the mess hall was wonderful, but hard to eat on bitter stomachs.

Bobbie Jean's telephone calls were a daisy a day and the one at Thanksgiving - a breath of spring, "We missed you at dinner. Mother and I had family and friends over. The twins were little angels. Cooed at everyone." "They must take after my side of the family." "How are you getting along? Are the squirrels still gathering nuts where there are no trees?" "Japanese fishing boat pulled up to our dock and off loaded a crew member with appendicitis. C Little tried to climb on board to surrender, but they took off. Their crew member is recovering in our infirmary. Don't know what we'll do with him. His boat has vanished and no one here speaks Japanese and he doesn't speak English. Looks like he beat C Little to it." "To what?" He surrendered before C Little could." "It looks to me like Captain Little has missed the boat again." "How are you holding up?" "Great - Mother is busy with her new Grandchildren. We're all fine. Get done what you must and hurry on home." "Are you going to stay in Jackson?" "Until you return."

C Little was becoming an irritant. To get work done without adequate resources or manpower - we had to cut through regulations. Not C Little - he warned, "When the IG comes - they're going to tear you guys a new ass hole." C Little would have been right under normal circumstances, but out on a Rock - at the end of a tenuous supply chain - he was wrong. As we passed the three quarter pole and turned on the home stretch - our back end crew was coming apart at the seams. The chief seam splitter was our Commander. The good news - he stopped his midnight run - naked around the hanger. The bad news - he was running naked in the snow around the

Composite Building flagpole. The only one who liked it was Boozer - he loved a good romp through the snow and being a dog didn't wear clothes. When the Air Police brought the Commander back to the hanger - Birdsill put him on a flight back to Fairbanks. I wondered, "What will they do with him. He's gone off the deep end." Birdsill smiled, "Don't worry - he's now qualified to become a flag officer or President." He never returned.

Tucker's letter arrived like a bolt out of the past. And - it was his first one that didn't ask a favor -

*Johnny*

*The Post is sending me to Vietnam on a short assignment to report on the war. Thought I'd write a short note to give you a heads up. My contact at the Pentagon says they're shipping you to SAC Headquarters in February. I have another project that includes SAC Headquarters. We'll see each other there. Did your new snow blower arrive on Mona Lisa? Keep 'em Flying,*

*Tuck*

Birdsill confirmed Tucker's letter the following week. I phoned Bobbie Jean, "Hope you like good steaks and friendly people." "We're going to Omaha." "You guessed right." "How is the hunting and fishing?" "Excellent." "Then you will still be in SAC." "Right." "I vote that you stay with it. Nebraska is a good place to raise our twins. When you get orders - let me know. I'll fly over and house hunt." "Our head squirrel has found his tree. He left the Rock for good." "I can understand that - It's Christmas - the time for nuts and candy. Where is he?" "They're keeping him in Fairbanks until his tour is up."

C Little wasn't entirely off base with his concern about an IG inspection. We had the administrative responsibilities of a large organization - like a squadron - or wing - without people - or equipment. We used our one and only typewriter for mission reporting. We didn't have a barber - so our Clerk spent most of his time cutting hair. We all doubled up with additional duties and filled the administrative squares. My extra duties were Safety Officer and Instructor/Evaluator. And others had similar chores. Preparing to fly - flying - processing our take and reporting took twelve hours a day - seven days a week. When we did have some time to spare - we were without forms - procedures - or adult guidance.

Like a thunderclap in a snow storm - days of tedium and nights of chaos on our mushroom shaped volcanic outhouse - exploded. The day was normal - Our mission was uneventful - another empty handed flight. Our landing was smooth as silk. It was the night of the full Beaver moon - without a whisper of wind. The runway was clear of snow as was the tarmac and taxi way. The centerline stuck out like a wide stripe on a skunk's back. In short - it was a perfect night - one lovers could only dream about, but wasted on an Arctic outpost like Shemya. I've heard of folks going sun-blind and snow-blind, but not moon-blind. Our temporary pilot forgot to watch where he was going and taxied thirty feet off the centerline climbing the tarmac to Hanger One. As a result - the left wing's leading edge was imbedded in a lonely telephone pole. Unlike the near miss of the RB-47 - as Safety Officer - I had an accident that must be reported and I was without forms or book to follow.

The Wing Safety Officer from Eielson solved my dilemma - "No report unless the airplane can't be repaired. A sheet metal and a wing spar expert is flying out tomorrow. Don't write about it - don't call about it - don't do anything about it until you hear from me." "You mean don't ask -

don't tell?" "What?" "Nothing important." C Little had a pot of black paint and a brush in his hand - before anyone could interfere. Before breakfast - on the left front nose - next to the entrance hatch - he painted a telephone pole with a gouge in it - like a fighter pilot paints the flags of his vanquished. We took a few happy snaps to save this moment for posterity. It was well that we did. As soon as the Wing flock arrived from Eielson - their first repair was to erase C Little's art work.

Took a few days, but the repair work turned out to be satisfactory. When weather turned so bad we couldn't land on the Rock - we flew to Eielson. X-rays were taken and no damage was found. C Little was a mite upset, "Damnit Johnny - you're the only one who made out on this affair. You didn't have to write a report which would have shown your ignorance. Since no one asked and you didn't tell - the Wing Commander thinks you're aces." "Remember what we talked about after the RB-47 dove off our cliff?" "No - what?" "It's not what you do, but the wake you leave that counts." "If we had taken some real damage - we'd all be home by Christmas." "No such luck. We represent an investment of an enormous amount of money and people. Jobs will be lost if we disappear. Our bird would be repaired - regardless. Are we going to stand down over Christmas?" "Always have. Did you hear about our Japanese fisherman?" "Is he still here?" "Not after tomorrow. His embassy is sending an airline ticket. He flies out tomorrow to Anchorage and then straight home to Hokkaido. They must live an austere life. He calls our island - Disneyland."

A week before Christmas the sky fell. C Little's prophecy came to pass. On a cold blustery winter's day - the tower called, "We have a SAC KC-135 inbound from Japan. Are you expecting visitors?" Birdsill was as hung over as the rest of us. Last night was our first chance to stand down in

over a month - so I purchased enough beer and liquor for a promotion party. Bodies were scattered around the day room this morning - like limp dolls after a birthday. Birdsill sprang into action, "What a hell of a way to wake up after a bender. That plane is carrying the SAC IG. We're getting a no-notice inspection. Johnny - get to cleaning the bottles and trash out of the day room. C Little - roust everybody out of bed. We have less than thirty minutes to clean up the mess and get ready." C Little thumped on all the doors - in Cassandra heaven, "The IG is coming - the IG is coming. To arms! To Arms! The IG is coming!" Birdsill entered the day room, "What are we going to do about our latrine? Three out of five toilets are still backed up by the last earthquake." Our Clerk reassured him, "Alaskan Air Command gets the write-up. We've had emergency work orders in for the last two months." I pulled Birdsill aside. I remembered our Supply Sergeant's comments about needing an IG visit to straighten things out, "Relax - the bat is heading elsewhere." "A setup?" "We need vehicles and beds for Hanger Two."

Birdsill is what they used to call a man's man. If a war was to be fought - he would rise to the top - take charge and win. But wars weren't being fought to win. And spit and polish soldiers of the barracks were in charge - ready to lose, but looking good. Smarter than your average pilot - he arranged to have the SAC IG's 135 parked at Base Ops. And then arranged an around the island tour in our crew bus while we finished cleaning our facility. When they arrived we were all lined up - decked out in clean flight suits and scarves - with shiny shoes and combed hair. Would have made Little Lord Fauntleroy proud. The Colonel in charge attempted to place us at ease, "We've been sent to help you. To make sure you're getting what you deserve." When we broke formation to show off our airplane - I whispered to Birdsill, "We're all in our places with sunshiny faces." He laughed, "Handling you funny wings is like being in charge of kindergarten."

We gave the IG team a Cook's tour of our airplane while administrators and safety types went looking for our records. After the first group was satisfied we knew what we were supposed to know - C Little came charging down the aisle, "Johnny - get your ass upstairs to the Commander's office. The Safety Colonel wants to talk to you." "What happened?" "He slipped and fell on the stairs climbing up to our day room." "Go back and tell him to watch his step." "No way. They're looking for the SAC shield. The one that's supposed to be on our airplane. Do you know where it is?" I knew, but had been sworn to secrecy, "Must have gone out the back door of Big Shaky the Crowd Killer with our booze." "Aren't you going to speak to the Safety Colonel." I had it up to my ears with this Mickey Mouse business, "Tell him to place his head where the sun doesn't shine. I'm needed here. Can't be in two places at the same time." "You're messing with the SAC IG. No one ever denies one of their requests." "Well - this is their lucky day. They're going to be denied three times before the cock crows." "Three times?" "The first was to park them out of the way. The second was to delay their visit and the third is they'll be out of here in less than an hour." "Can't be - won't be finished by then." "Watch our Ops officer and learn."

I knew better than to let C Little know where our SAC shield was. He'd blurt it out and our NCOs would be in deep trouble. They had glued all of them to their day room wall and painted over each one. They didn't want to rile up a teenage Russian fighter pilot by flaunting the SAC shield in his face. He just might shoot first and ask questions later. My second tour group was called out of the airplane before we could finish showing off the gear and explain our mission. By the time we climbed down out of the hatch door - the SAC IG team was on their way out of our hanger. Birdsill shook each hand as they walked out the door. He walked up the stairs to our day room - relieved, "It worked." I laughed

and asked, "Because you were shaking hands with them like a southern politician?" "Only courtesy - doesn't pay to rile them up. Had Base Ops call and tell them a storm was coming in and they might not make it out of here today." "We always have a storm coming in." "Right and sometimes twice a day, but they don't know that. One look at this place and they were ready to leave. That Safety Colonel would have been hopping mad - if he could hop after spraining his ankle on your stairs. You owe our Clerk a six-pack. He saved your ass. Had a work order in for non-slip stair covers for over a year." "Did they ask where the new trucks and buses were?" "Yes and they're going to tear Alaskan Air Command a new ass hole. Our Island Commander has his people coming down to fix our toilets and your stairs." "They're not mine." "They are now." "Did they ask where our Commander was?" "That was sticky. I told them he was back in Eielson working on a special project for the Wing Commander." "Did they buy it?" "Think so, but I didn't tell them that our Commander was the project. Did you know he's been promoted to Colonel?" "Are you serious?" "Yes." "How did that happen?" "It's our Air Force's reward doing such an outstanding job - here."

Christmas arrived with the usual dual stand down - for us and the Russians - who decided to drink their fuel instead of lighting it and the Wing at Eielson decided we needed to be home for the holidays. Not ours - theirs. C Little was not a happy camper, "Wonderful - Johnny - frigin' wonderful! What the hell are we going to do in Fairbanks over Christmas? The whole place will be shut down. Might as well put us in a lockup." "After we freeze our butts off at forty below we'll be farmed out for Christmas dinner - like poor relatives who are allowed to dine once a year, but not allowed to stay after the meal." Birdsill smiled, "Sorry fellows - I can't go - someone has to watch the store. Not to worry - you'll be back in time for our annual USO show." C Little bit, "I didn't know that. We get a USO show? Bob Hope?" "He flew

over once and talked over a radio hookup, but that's as close as the big names get. Shemya isn't a good photo-op for big time entertainers." I tried to see the up side, "At least we get a show. All those Navy guys on Attu get to see is an occasional botanist - our Priest once a year and their replacements." Birdsill added - with a knowing smile, "And two weeks of R&R on the sunny beaches of fun filled Shemya. Have a Merry Christmas - my funny wings."

We flew our bird to Eielson the day before Christmas - landing at forty-four below. Our bus ride was the last transport we saw until the day after Christmas. Eielson Air Force Base was locked down for the holiday. The O Club was closed for Christmas eve - the mess hall was seven miles away through blowing snow and the candy machines in the VOQ were empty. We were left to forage on our own - abandoned and starving. With temperatures hovering at fifty below - our morning trek to the mess hall turned into a survival hike. C Little was so cold he shook all over, "I'm so cold my feet are numb and I'm hungry enough to become a cannibal. Now I know what motivated the Donner Party. How far is it now to the mess hall?" "Must have four more miles to go. Our VOQ rooms are the last buildings on the north side of the base and the mess hall is on the other side." "Wonder who thought up this arrangement?" "Has to be the same folks who support us from Alaskan Air Command. I have come to the conclusion that the general in charge must have been a prison warden in civilian life." "And we've been shipped to his Siberian Gulag." "Do you notice we're the only ones out and about?" "God - this place has to be the second loneliest place on earth." "And the other?" "Our island at the end of this chain." We made it to the mess hall twenty minutes before it closed. Eggs were cold and pancakes half cooked, but it was gourmet food to our starving stomachs. First time I'd ever cleaned up a morning mess hall tray. The walk back to our VOQ was just as cold, but on full stomachs.

My Christmas dinner began at noon and ended at one. It was friendly enough, but to my host - I was an assigned duty - not a guest. I barely knew him and he didn't care for me. His wife held up well - considering a stranger was thrust in their midst on a family holiday. I'd just as soon have eaten at the mess hall - where I could bring back leftovers. I left as soon as dinner was out of the way. Christmas is a magic time for children and theirs had presents to open. Back at the VOQ - I kicked the candy machine, but I was out of luck. Wasn't any food stuck inside its sheet metal columns. Christmas night? Eielson was in absolute lock down. Without transport - foraging for food in Fairbanks was out of the question. I called Bobbie Jean, but all lines to the world were tied up. Nothing left to do, but nap.

Bobbie Jean was asleep by the time my call got through. "Johnny - it's one in the morning here. Have you been out partying?" "No such luck. A moose would die here if it had to forage for food. Even the candy machines are empty, but I can survive missing one meal. Lines back to the lower forty-eight have been tied up. Merry Christmas. Hope yours was better than mine." "Except for missing you - it was the happiest ever. Your sons spent the whole day watching the reflections off the Christmas decorations - tree lights and playing with the wrappings - quiet as little mice." "Did you get my package?" "Yes and I appreciate everything except the Moose Pooplets. Not the kind of ear rings I'd wear to a ball. How was dinner with the Major's family?" "Harder on them than on me. I miss you." "Do you know when you'll return?" "Mid-February was all they would say. Depends on when the new crew is checked out. Oh - the SAC IG took one look at our furniture. They're sending new stuff to replace it." "What type?" "Ranch Oak." "The alert barracks's furniture." "We buy in quantity. Don't ever furnish our home with it." "Why not? Too expensive?" "No. Ranch Oak reminds me of lonely nights away from you."

We left too early for breakfast - so an in-flight lunch box fed a starving crew. C Little was still mad, "Christmas here was like being caught in a restaurant after closing hours with the food lockers padlocked." I asked, "How was your Christmas dinner?" "Fastest meal I've ever eaten. When I placed my fork down after the pumpkin pie - they whisked me out the door." "Out the door?" "As soon as I stood up they had my parka out of the hall closet and door open." "Must be a well practiced ritual - another set of good intentions dashed on the rocks of every day reality. Even the damn candy machine was empty." "And mess hall closed. I'm starved to death." "You know what I find hard to believe?" "No - what?" "I'll be glad to be back on the Rock."

The Rock's USO show arrived via Alaskan Air Lines the next day and was scheduled to leave the morning after - one hour of live entertainment after three months anticipation. Even Birdsill couldn't hide his disappointment, "We waited all of this time for an accordion player - a burlesque comic and an overweight lady tap dancer. My heart is singing!" He said it all. In true hermit like fashion - C Little and I hunched our shoulders and followed him to his truck. The show was so bad it was funny. Boozer was the star for the tenth year in a row. It was as if he waited for the yearly USO show with baited breath. His first trick was to amble across the stage - lift his leg and piss on the accordion player's leg. That always brought the house down. The comic made a big mistake this year. He kicked at Boozer - trying to get him off the stage. Boozer took such a big bite out of his ass - it took down his pants and closed the show. I really enjoyed Boozer's show, "Got to admit - our Alaskan Husky has taste. Didn't he try to hump the lady singer's leg last year?" Birdsill laughed, "Either Boozer doesn't care for tap dancers or he's getting long in the tooth. Lets drive to the NCO Club for a beer. Russians are celebrating New Year. There'll be no mission tonight."

Birdsill set his can of beer down. His eyes lit up as the tap dancer entered the NCO Club with the USO players. He had that hungry dog look, "Think I'll invite her over for a drink." I wondered, "Isn't she a bit on the heavy side for you?" "Oh my no - pleasingly plump is the one to hump." "Are you buying?" "One round and I'll be tap dancing. Can you walk back?" "Not a problem. Isn't there a Stew staying over?" "My Stews on vacation." When I entered the hanger - I had a phone call waiting in the Commander's office. Bobbie Jean bubbled, "I just had to find out how your USO show went. Did you get Bob Hope?" "Even he won't come here. It was awful, but short." "Who were the players?" "A comic - an accordion player and a tap dancer." "Did your dog approve?" "I don't think so - he bit one on the ass - pissed on the other's leg and didn't try to hump the tap dancer. He was never one to enjoy human comedy." "What's new on your end?" "Your sons have learned to crawl. And Herbie paid off his loan. What should I invest in?" "The way we're running up phone bills - I'd recommend AT&T. Herbie would be at the top of my list. It's late and I'm bushed. Love you and see you soon." "I'm counting the days."

In the world - New Years eve arrived with merrymakers - toasting and blowing into cardboard horns. On Shemya - our eve arrived with the sound of a Klaxon vibrating from the walls of our cubby hole Station Exchange. C Little and I ran from the Composite Building to our truck and he floored it to Hanger One. He mumbled, "Taking time off here is like taking vacation in a prison." "Don't you wonder why we wander the aisles of the exchange? We've been here so long we must have every item memorized." "Like you said - it's something to do when there's nothing to do." The hanger doors were opening as we pulled up. One thing that's great about having a dedicated airplane - we could and did leave all of our gear on board. We scrambled up the entrance hatch as number one engine began to turn. By the time we strapped in - our Bird

was rolling toward the runway. And another thing about flying off the Rock - there wasn't any traffic to interfere with departure. We were airborne less than twelve minutes after hearing the **AOOGA** sound of our klaxon.

This weeks front end crew was captained by Red Baron. He was not one to wait around. His idea of a successful mission was a fast takeoff - a long flight and aerobatics. He was rumored to have shot a touch and go on an aircraft carrier in an RB-47. I wasn't sure about that until he shot a touch and go on Attu's earthquake shortened runway - at the end of one of our equipment test flights. Attu's only usable runway couldn't have been any longer than four thousand feet. And it ended in a box canyon. Climbing out of there with all four engines screaming was more of a pucker than thrill. I was left with the impression that the runway was the only flat spot on Attu.

I checked my equipment - turned on radios and listened to our radio for instructions. It was the only warning we received. In this area of the Arctic - radio signals arrived like visitors from another world - attracted by a warp in the earth's magnetic field. We were in an electronic sump - the black hole of radio waves. Attempting to tune in a frequency that was half way clear was like winning at roulette. Still waiting for a message from Garcia - I was startled as C Little shouted over intercom, "Incoming." Within ten seconds - thousands of dollars of expensive film and tape had wound their way through recording devices and cameras. C Little was celebrating - giving high five's to the rest of his optical mates - when over intercom came a voice of reason. The Red Baron - speaking in his best Right Stuff voice chided us, "Funny wings - listen up. Are we wasting our time and hard earned Federal dollars collecting against ourselves? Please look out your windows. The collection side of your airplane is pointed toward Alaska." Needing to reload film

and tapes and with fuel running low - the Red Baron turned toward the Rock - carrying a subdued - silent and chagrined back-end crew of embarrassed funny wings.

It was several days before I said anything to C Little about his error. I waited until he became feisty again, "You're leading a charmed life." "Nothing happened on the mission and it was time to empty out our old tapes and film - anyway. You know what pains me the most?" "Go ahead." "It was the best tracking I've done this year and it turns out to be a meteor." By mid-January activity picked up, but it was much too late - our crew was in hermitage. It happened to those who had gone before and it was happening to us. As our time on the rock dwindled down - tempers grew short - nerve endings snapped - doors closed and our conversation consisted of grunts and nods. Our anticipation of leaving had reached its peak - laughter became snarls - idiosyncrasies that were overlooked when we arrived - became unbearable. Two of our crew members could take it no longer and were whisked away. Another was given a hardship transfer because he had family problems at home. Leaving early saved him, but it didn't save his marriage. Isolation wasn't the cause of everyone going Rock happy, but it contributed. It was the runway with commercial flights coming and going. Airplanes flew in and out at will, but the inhabitants had to stay on. The last straw was one prisoners knew. As freedom nears - confinement becomes unbearable.

The end was in sight when Birdsill called me into his office during the first week of February, "Our new crew is arriving tomorrow. I can't leave until they're trained and checked out." "I just hope we don't scare the hell out of them." "You will. You funny wings look as bad as the crew you replaced." "Crazy as loons?" "Yes, but none of you were crazy enough to grab the throttles." "Wonder what ever happened to Plager?" "The great impostor? He's out of the

service. Lied on his academic records. Even falsified his combat experience. What a character. He disappeared after Air University called him on the carpet to explain how he received a Doctorate in Education - when he didn't finish college. And you know what is really funny? Plager was one of their best - most highly regarded instructors." "Looks like doers do and impostors teach. I wonder if he really attended EW school at Keesler." "That he did. He pulled off another whopper there. Claimed he was in charge of the Presidential Inaugural Committee for the military. Conned the Base Commander out of an airplane to fly to DC. Even had it stand by for him while he partied. He screwed up when he billed his stay to the Inaugural Committee. They never heard of him. That triggered an investigation into his records." "Took a long time." "He moved around from assignment to assignment before they could catch up with him. Wasn't one to let grass grow under his feet. If you need surgery or dental work - make sure Plager isn't doing it under a false name." "I need a cup of coffee." "Lets go to the day room and you can fill me in on your plans for the new crew of funny wings." "Greet 'em - train 'em - leave 'em."

Birdsill poured, "Do you have everything you need to train your new group?" "Yes and we better get it over quick or the Medics may run out of straight jackets." "I'll schedule an orientation flight the day after they arrive and you can have two training flights after that." "We'll need missions." "They can take the place of training flights. How much ground training will they require?" "Not much. They've all flown recon before. Equipment will be new - though. If everything goes right - two days max." "How about emergency procedures." "As long as they know the Lords Prayer - they'll be fine." "Is this something new?" "Not for this part of the world. If they have to bail out or ditch in the Bearing Sea - he'll be the first person they shake hands with." "I'm going to miss you - Johnny, but I've

been given a Squadron in a real airplane Wing." "That means you've been promoted." "Mistakes were made. Do me a favor?" "Your wish is my command." "You're going to SAC Headquarters - so don't ever recommend me for staff."

The new crew arrived at ten the next morning. Birdsill - me and C Little were at his side. He took charge of the ritual of greeting, "You're going to hit the ground running. C Little will teach optical stuff and Johnny - electronics. We only have eight empty rooms. Some of you will have to double up until the old crew leaves. Training begins this afternoon at one. Your orientation flight will be tomorrow morning and after that you'll train on live missions. Two should do it. When the klaxon clangs - you've got five minutes to climb on board. Spark chasers follow Johnny and you four eyed folks - follow C Little." I showed my five replacements to their rooms - let them unpack and took them on a tour of the island before lunch. Manicotti spoke for the new guys, "Don't take this wrong, but you guys really look weird." "Takes one year here to become certifiable. But - don't worry - it's your turn in the barrel."

Their orientation flight was well done, but not without problems. When I looked out at clear blue skies and calm winds - I knew we were in for it. The Red Baron flew our new crew out to the Rock. Manicotti noticed my concern after we completed our in-flight orientation. "What's wrong - Johnny? You look like you've seen a ghost." "Wait a few minutes. I'll give you five to one that the Red Baron tours Agatu and Attu after we reach the high cone. And tour we did. Flying around Agatu - below its cliff tops. As we flew to Attu - our bird came so close to the waves - its engines made four wakes. The Baron lined up on Attu's runway and dropped the landing gear. We saw the whites of the Island Commander's eyes as he tried to wave us off. He ran to the side of the runway as we touched down with barely a bounce. This time

the Baron turned - as soon as he had full power - on our climb out. We cleared the box canyon wall by at least two hundred feet instead of almost scraping bottom like the last time. He buzzed the Russian Fishing Trawler on the way back to the Rock - flying so low we snaped photos up while they were snapping theirs - down.

In less than two days of ground training - the new crew mastered what took us weeks. Their experience outweighed our training efforts. Late on the fourth day after their arrival - the klaxon's electronic **AOOGA** interrupted my afternoon practice nap. When we met the new crew at the airplane - Manicotti asked, "Is this the real thing?" "Won't know until we reach the mission area, but if you want to know if it's training - it isn't. This is not a planned flight." We had a live event and the new guys efforts were as good as could be expected. Except for a few glitches - they performed well. I pulled Manicotti aside after the flight, "Our Tech Rep will show you how we process the take. Pick out two guys to help him and get out of the way. Too many cooks spoil the broth." "Did we pass?" "With flying colors. You are now full fledged citizens of the Rock." "I thought Birdsill said we would fly two training missions." "Waste naught - want naught." "What does that mean?" "You've got it and we're out of here!"

It was the day of departure and here I was - sitting on the metal springs of a stripped down bed - waiting to board an Alaskan Airlines plane to return to the world. I looked at my wrist watch. The minute hand was frozen in place. I walked down the hall to the day room and paced the floor. Nothing worked - time was standing still. I walked gingerly down the newly rubber coated stairs. Instead of slipping - now our feet would stick and more that one of us had fallen. I strolled around the airplane and across the hanger to C Little's room. I pounded on his door, "Open up!" "Go away.

I gave all I'm going to give at the office." He opened the door, "Didn't sleep a wink last night and when I finally get a little - you wake me up. What is it?" "Time is passing slower than molasses flows in winter." "You - too?" "I can't concentrate on anything at all. Are you going to fly out of Anchorage to California in the morning?" "Can't. We have to turn in our Arctic gear." "Forgot all about that. Want to drive up to the Composite Building? I want to bid our friend Boozer a fond farewell." "Me too. How many hours before we board Alaskan?" "Three."

Boozer! It was almost as if he was trying to honor our departure. He stood at the top of the entrance stairs - with a wide canine grin and a patch of torn khaki between his teeth. I wondered who the offender was this time. He accepted my pat on his head and offered up the cloth clenched between his teeth. I turned it over in my hands, "Damn - he got the whole pocket - billfold and all." "Who does it belong too?" I opened it and looked at the ID, "Our boy Boozer has stepped in it - again. This belongs to the Island Commander." We dropped it off at his office. The clerk couldn't hide his delight, "Good for our Mutt - he deserved it." "Can someone hide him until this blows over?" "The Radar guys are on their way." "Why did Boozer bite?" "My Commander is a squirrel without a tree. Boozer was on his throne and he tried to kick him out of the way." "Take good care of our pooch." "We will."

We wandered through our cubby hole of a BX for the last time - looking, but not seeing. I bought a James Bond novel to read on our flight out of here. After experiencing the real world - fantasy spies had lost all their glitter, but it was something to do. The klaxon sounded. We were out the door and halfway to the hanger before realizing its **AOOGA** was for them and not for us. Birdsill joined us on the hill over the runway. He poured each of us a drink from our ex-

Commanders last bottle of The Source of all Knowledge. We raised our plastic glasses high and saluted the bird as it took wing. He poured the remains on the ground as a gift to the volcanic rock gods. He handed me the empty bottle. I threw it over the cliff, "From this day forward - let this no longer be The Source of all Knowledge!" Birdsill turned away - no tears in his eyes, "Lets pack up and get the flock out of here. I'm returning with you to the world."

We boarded our flight - lifting off our runway for the last time. We left our tight little island through blowing snow and fog - both visual and mental. Didn't read much of the novel I purchased. After a night without sleep - I made up for it on our flight to Adak. Our Alaskan Airline Connie didn't hang around long. The second time here was not a charm. Fog was closing in and seats were being occupied with sullen Navy wives and children. Our group of expatriates from the Rock were as effervescent as well aged apple cider. The Adak wives had long since passed the effervescent stage on their descent into cider vinegar silence. White knuckles clenched tight - well worn airplane armrests. One look and I knew why our schoolhouse on Shemya stood empty all these years. We flew on to Anchorage - our spirits dampened by a melancholy - penetrating through the cabin. When we touched down on the mainland - an involuntary cheer rose from our lips - only to be dampened by a sullen atmosphere surrounding the Adak wives. We waited until the ladies debarked before gathering our possessions from the overhead storage bins. Birdsill was all smiles, "Perk up funny wings. We're free at last!" He called for Base Taxi. By the time we retrieved our luggage from the carousel - a station wagon stood outside the terminal - waiting.

As we checked into the Elmendorf VOO - I spotted the first good news - outside of leaving the rock. Supply had a drop box for our Arctic gear. I placed my gear in it and

then placed a call to Alaskan Airlines. The next available flight south was to Seattle - early in the morning. I booked a seat and requested routing to New Orleans. My next call was to Bobbie Jean, "Free at last - thank God almighty I'm free at last!" "You made it out with half your wits. When will you be here." "Sometime tomorrow." "Rest, but if I know you - you'll be out celebrating with your Rock friends." "Steak - beer and bed. Did you decide on a house?" "Yes - but I want you to see it first." "Is it close to the base?" "Close, but far away. I think you'll like it." "Is Nanny coming along?" "Of course! I'm a southern lady."

Birdsill hustled us out the door, "We're going downtown and toast those we've left behind." C Little asked, "Where?" "Stew told me about a bar on top the tallest building in town - Anchorage's Top of the Mark. After that - we're going to sink our teeth into the biggest steak we can find." On our ride downtown Birdsill remarked, "Phoned my relief on the island to wish him well." "How's Boozer doing?" "Air Police are scouring the island for him. Turned both of our hangers upside down. Radar guys have him hidden in the abandoned school house. That dog must have nine lives." I laughed, "Like Tucker!" "Who?" "The Alaskan Air Command Supply Officer." C Little offered, "We've got to get together for a reunion after the dust settles." Birdsill laughed, "That's the funniest thing I've heard all this year. You funny wings might want to get together, but you'll never see me again. I'm going back to the land of throttles and rudders. I've had enough of you tech guys to last me a lifetime. Here's our building. Bar's on the top floor. I'll buy the first round and you the next two. It takes three drinks for a complete closure." I added, "And that completes the ring - my Wagnerian pilot friend."

From the bar - high atop Anchorage's premier building - we looked out on fog - more fog and a harbor half empty at

ebb tide - shrouded in obscurity - our view of the sea. After the third round and our third toast to our tight little island - Birdsill excused himself, "You'll have to eat my steak - I'm off on the town. Stew's waiting and as much as I like your company - I prefer hers." As Birdsill foresaw - only a portion of our crew remained in contact. Reunions are for happy times - long past - we never saw him again.

Lonely island nights slipped into a distant memory except for one - our island Lancelot. Boozer died in pursuit of his holy grail - liver and kidneys aged well beyond dog years - could function no more. Laid to final rest - with full island honors - he was given a posthumous promotion to five stars for his effort to bring chaos out of order. But - his greatest honor was that well chewed chunk of khaki cloth - placed gently between his canines.

*"This seemed to Alice a good opportunity  
for making her escape: so she set off  
at once, and ran till she was quite tired  
and out of breath, and till the puppy's  
bark sounded quite faint in the distance.  
'And yet what a dear little puppy it was!'  
said Alice."*

# 13

After hours and hours - climbing on and off airplanes - from Fairbanks to Seattle to Chicago - I finally arrived in New Orleans. I stepped down the rolling stairs into the cool humid night of southern Louisiana - feeling again - like I'd been rode hard and put away wet. Bobbie Jean - dressed in a light gray trench coat - open at the neck - revealing a white silk turtle neck and matching slacks - leaned against the arrival gate - right out of Casablanca, "Welcome home - my wandering soldier" Her embrace and lingering kiss brought closure to my island prison and long - long twenty-four hour trip across continental America, "I wasn't expecting you. How did you track me down?" "Through feminine skill and cunning. How do you like our winter weather?" She placed her arm through mine and we walked - our bodies touching with each step. I sensed her warmth - a soft presence against my thigh. Like Louisiana's mild weather - an unaccustomed, but pleasurable experience, "After the frozen north - you and your southern weather are a breath of spring to me." "I've heard that line before - from someone who looks a lot like you. How can our cold fifty degree weather get your Yankee blood excited?" "Fifty degrees warmer here than Anchorage and ninety-eight degrees warmer - with your body close to mine. Feels strange, but nice to be walking this close to a real live woman. Going to take awhile to adjust to living with someone I share a bed with."

I stood back and looked into her eyes and drew her close, "A real live woman. Will wonders ever cease?" "After I get breakfast inside my Nanook of the north - you're going to find out just how alive I am. Do you want to drive?" "I

haven't been to bed for twenty-four hours. You drive. Your perfume should keep me awake until we get home, but not enough to handle a car. Breakfast? Will my stomach have to adjust to Louisiana hot sauces." "I'm not concerned about your stomach." I held her close - not wanting to let go. She pushed me gently away, "If we hold each other any closer - we're going to give my Cajun cousins a thrill they won't normally see - outside the French Quarter. We'll pick up your luggage and leave right away." "Where did you park?" "Outside the front entrance." "Won't you get a ticket?" "A policeman is watching it for me." "I'll never learn."

Bobbie Jean pulled into a diner/bar on the outskirts of New Orleans. The type of place where night shift rednecks downed boilermakers with their omelets. She ordered thick steamy chicory coffee in lyrical Cajun French from a raven haired waitress - as steamy as the mugs and coffee thermos she left on our table. Bobbie Jean smiled, "I see you can still appreciate a beautiful woman." "Civilization is still a shock to my senses. A women not wearing a parka is like opening a centerfold." We held hands and stared into each other's eyes for what seemed an eternity. She finally broke the spell, "How does it feel to be back?" "Like someone lifted a five-hundred pound gorilla off my shoulders. Have you made arrangements for our move to Omaha?" "I covered up what were not shipping. Not sending antiques. They're so used to Gulf moisture - they'll shrivel up in the west. We can buy what we need at the Nebraska Furniture Mart." "How soon do you want to leave?" "Not until you have to report in. Nebraska is one great white sheet of ice and snow." "Talk about absentminded - how are the twins?" "Happiest little fellows you'll ever meet. They'll stay with Mother until we have our house set up." "Tell me about the one you picked out." "In a forest." "On the prairie?" Breakfast arrived and was it ever hot. I swallowed half a glass of water, "What's in this omelet?" "Everything from sausage to

peppers." "I can taste the peppers. Really good. Glad you ordered beer to wash it down with. How did you find this diner?" "An old haunt of Ralph's, but don't come in after nine at night. This is Cajun Country. If a fight is going to start - it will be then." "You were going to tell me about our house." "Located in a forest north of Bellevue and south of Omaha. A golf course home with a wonderful view." "If you like it - buy it." "Not until after you see it and approve. Do you know what your new job is?" "Haven't the foggiest. All I know is that I'm assigned to the Estimates Directorate in Intelligence at SAC Headquarters." "Sounds like it is very bureaucratic." "To me - too." "Ready to drive to Biloxi?" "Aren't the twins in Jackson?" "I moved them down several days ago - when I knew you were on your way home. Mother was fit to be tied."

Bobbie Jean kissed my forehead and said gently, "Wake up - soldier - we're home." I shook the cobwebs out of my head and looked out on a vast Gulf view, "Great to see salt water that won't kill you." "You haven't lived through one of our hurricanes." I carried my gear into the house, "Looks like an old movie set - with half the furniture covered up. Will Nanny be upset if I look in on our boys?" "Not if you're quiet." I whispered, "How do you tell them apart?" "A mother can tell by smell, but just to make sure - an ID bracelet." "What if we get the bracelets mixed up?" "Don't even think of it. You look beat." "You're right. With that Alaskan gorilla off my back - the wind has gone out of my sails. I'm going to undress - shower and sleep. Wake me if it looks like I'll miss dinner." "We're going to the Broadwater. Herbie is running the bar - again." "Why?" "To keep busy. When we sold his lounge he signed a clause that prevents him from opening a new one in this county for two years from the date of sale. The Broadwater jumped at the opportunity to have him manage their bar again. Don't even think of sleeping past five this afternoon."

I woke with the setting winter sun in my eyes and Bobbie Jean at my side, "When did you hop into bed?" "An hour ago. We southern ladies need beauty naps. And my body is still recovering from the birth of our two sons." As we moved closer together our body temperatures began to rise, "Do you remember - or has it been too long." Bobbie Jean propped her head in her hands and smiled, "I remember - life is short - eat desert first." Our lips met and then our hands and - dinner would be late tonight.

Herbie's grin was as wide as the Broadwater Hotel's front entrance, "Welcome back to the sunny south - stranger. You look as pale as Yankee of the Yukon." I embraced Herbie, "Clean living and a celibate life style my Cajun friend from Arcadia. Bobbie Jean says you're an instant rich guy." "And she is - too. We both did quite well." Bobbie Jean placed her finger to her lips, "Shush - Johnny has his secrets and I have mine. Do you know what we want?" "Before dinner? Two Irish coffee specials coming up." Herbie motioned for a waiter, "How soon will you be leaving for Omaha." "Not right away - Bobbie Jean says it's frozen over and we have a second honeymoon coming." She laughed, "That's not true. This will be our first one. Where are you taking me?" "Palm Beach." "The Breakers?" "Yes." "When?" "This weekend. Your Mother has volunteered to take care of the twins." "And she didn't say a word." "She couldn't. It's her gift to us. All is forgiven - except - " "A formal wedding at the Lee Mansion." "With all those dead Yankees."

Herbie stood up, "Time to leave you two alone. Do you want to dine in the bar?" Bobbie Jean answered, "Can we have a very private table in the dinning room? As much as we love you - we need to be alone. We have a lot of catching up to do. Is the new Chef working tonight?" "Yes and is he ever consistently excellent. It isn't on tonight's menu, but he'll fix you the best steak 'au poivre' you've ever had." I

asked, "Where did he come from?" "Out of the French Quarter. Wanted to breath fresh air. Enjoy your coffee. I'll have a private window overlooking the Gulf ready for you in the dining room. Stop back after dinner. I have a new business proposition."

After we were seated in the dining room - I pushed our chairs together and held Bobbie Jean close, "I can't believe I'm here with you. After a year of mess halls with nothing, but crazies for company - this is overwhelming. A romantic table on the Gulf - a beautiful woman - pinch me." "For me - too. I have not been out since I left Fort Worth last fall." "This is our winter of discontent." "My - we've brushed up on our Shakespeare - my fair son of York." "You didn't learn that at your Biloxi finishing school." "My Daddy read to me when I was a little girl." "This is exactly why your Mother pushed a honeymoon. We need some time alone. I'll have to reconsider my first impression of Mississippi's Grande Dame of Langtry Hall." "And more - she gave us this honeymoon as her peace offering. I'm going to order blackened Red Snapper and I know what you want." "Medium rare."

I pushed my chair back from the table, "My pepper steak was incredible. Best I've ever had - anywhere - anytime. And your fish?" "Lets stop in the bar and talk to Herbie. I believe our Cajun friend has uncovered the French Quarter's hidden treasure." Herbie sat down at our table, "Well - what do you think?" Bobbie Jean took his hand in hers, "Yes - we'll go in with you on your new restaurant." "He's great - isn't he?" "New Orleans's loss is our gain. Where do you want to build it?" "Omaha - there will be nothing like it there." I shook my head, "Not all true - you will have competition from the steak and potatoes people. There are several excellent steak houses and the Blackstone Hotel has a pretty fair French cuisine. Besides great food - you'll need a great location to make it a success." Bobbie Jean stood

up, "I can scout around for a location. We'll need a liquor license - zoning and I'll have to bone up on Nebraska law. Then there are politicians. We'll be newcomers. I almost forgot. What style of restaurant?" "Simple. Mixed grill with prepared French sauces. And a small amount of Cajun. Limit the menu and concentrate on quality. Dinner first and add lunch if it looks profitable." Bobbie Jean nodded, "Yes - I like the limited menu idea. Have you thought of the container?" "Container?" "Building - French Quarter style - Victorian - modern?" "We may have to take what's available." "Or build. How soon do you want to begin." "I'd like to begin operation by this time next year. I've taken up enough of your time. Another coffee?"

Our honeymoon began that night and continued until we arrived in Palm Beach. We strolled along Atlantic Ocean beaches in the late afternoon sun - dined under the stars and slept in until nine. Wearing formal attire for dinner is a bit stuffy, but then - so is the Breakers. All in all - it was a honeymoon worth waiting for. We returned with sand in our hair - sun baked skin and happy songs in our hearts. True to her word - Bobbie Jean didn't ship her antiques, but she almost filled a medium sized moving van with all the furniture she considered modern. "Where did you have all of this hidden?" "You've seen my storage over the garage." "How do you date an antique?" "First you see if he has money." "Touché!" "My antiques are anything built before the War of Northern Aggression." "A life of straight lines. Are you ready to travel west?" "I don't want to drive two cars. Why don't we ride together in my Bentley?" "We'll need two cars." "Buy one in Omaha." "What about my station wagon?" "Herbie said the Chef needs a better car."

It wasn't easy for either one of us to leave our twins, but we knew they were in the best of care. I survived - unscathed - a series of grillings by Bobbie Jean's Mother and

her Aunts. Neither of us wanted to say good-by - so we lingered - until late in the morning on the day of our departure. As we drove west toward Memphis - Bobbie Jean asked, "Do you want to stay at the Peabody Hotel?" "Do I have a choice?" "No." We arrived in Memphis long after the Peabody's famous ducks were asleep inside their roost on the rooftop. Bobbie Jean rushed us to our room and followed me into the shower, "Four star restaurant - Johnny. We must hurry before the kitchen closes. I don't want you to miss the experience. Careful - don't you dare get my hair wet." "I don't suppose it pays to discuss desert first." "Not this evening. We have less than two hours before the kitchen closes. Scrub my back?"

As we walked down the corridor - returning to our room from a late dinner - Bobbie Jean gave my hand a squeeze, "Why did you order pepper steak again?" "Business - to compare our soon to be Chef with his four star competition." "I don't believe you, but how was it?" "You can't go wrong. This was excellent, but there is no comparison." "I'll invest with Herbie - if the figures work out, but I'm not sure about his Chef. I'm having second thoughts. The jury is still out." "Is there a problem?" "Not with his cooking. New Orleans Chefs can't stay away from their city. It won't be long before he wants to return home." "Sell before he does. What do you think of Tennessee?" "Arkansas without red dirt." "I agree. Hard scrabble, but not as mean. What time do you want to leave in the morning?" "When we get up. Desert?" "Without whipped cream?"

We watched with amusement - the Peabody's ducks waddling from the elevator to their lobby fountain. Breakfast was well prepared - though I danced around the grits without comment. We were packed and on the road - heading west by nine. Bobbie Jean checked the weather and recommended we cross Arkansas and the Ozarks before ice formed on the roads

in the late afternoon. She drove the first leg through Marked Tree - Hoxie and Hardy, Arkansas - not stopping until we reached Thayer - over the Missouri border. She woke me, "Coffee and a stretch - soldier? I had the Peabody fill our thermos. I've driven this way before. I would have stopped earlier, but I didn't want to park off the road in Arkansas' red mud." "I'll take over and you can rest. Next stop Springfield - for a late Missouri lunch?" "Wake me," and she curled up by my side.

We drove into the eastern outskirts of Kansas City, Missouri before dark. I nudged Bobbie Jean. She awoke with her arms pressed outward - stretching, "Kansas City?" "Where everything is up to date. Where do you want to stay?" "Find an expensive motel and pull in." "We're almost to Omaha. Maybe we should keep on driving." "No, lets stop. There is an Art Museum here that I want to see. It is supposed to be very special. We can stop there in the morning and be in Omaha before dark." "I haven't seen a motel worth stopping at." "Drive through downtown and north on the Missouri side of the river." We found a place to her liking - north out of town - on the outskirts - but close to the museum. Bobbie Jean unpacked while I undressed and ran water for a shower. She asked, "What are you interested in?" "Do you mean dinner?" "I'm thumbing through the yellow pages." "A little Italian?" "Do you mean dinner?" and we both laughed.

As we drove north on a blustery February day, Bobbie Jean was all smiles, "Now wasn't the Art Museum worth staying over for?" "So were the home fries. We finally made it out of the land of grits." "Hush - the way you complain they must have served grits on your island." "Every morning. Do you know what I can't get used - too?" "Not me - is it?" "Never! I've been off alert for over a month and I'm still reluctant to be farther than twenty miles away from home." "We're a thousand miles away." "I know. Weird isn't it."

"You've become a fireman answering his bell when there is no bell." "It no longer tolls for me." "We are becoming literary. Where do you want to stop?" "Do you want to look at temporary quarters on base?" "No, but I'm willing to compromise. If we can find a suitable one - a motel near the base will do." "If not?" "The Blackstone."

We crossed over the toll bridge south of Omaha and north of Bellevue into our new home State - Nebraska. I turned south on I-75 and drove toward Bellevue. Bobbie Jean tapped my arm, "I haven't seen anything I like - yet." I knew when I was licked, "Blackstone?" "You'll have to backtrack and I know how much you hate doing that. It's still light out. We can drive by the area I want you to see." "Is it safe to go down to the woods today?" "Only if we go in disguise." Fontennelle Forest lived up to Bobbie Jean's sales pitch. Trees were scarce on this side of the Missouri and finding a home near one was like living on the beach in Biloxi. "I like it. A little hilly for winter driving, but worth it. Is it open or do we have to wait for the owners to leave?" "Brand new - built on spec". We have to get back to I-75 to go into town."

Bobbie Jean hovered over the porter like a mother hen - as he unpacked her Bentley. I asked, "Don't you want to leave everything we don't need right away in the car?" "We may be here for awhile." "But - you have our home picked out." "Moving van won't be here for a week and negotiations may take a little time." "I better leave the business end of moving up to you." "That's why I get paid the big bucks" and we laughed together while the Porter looked puzzled. The Blackstone was a little worn around the edges, but the service was still first rate and our suite very comfortable. I had to ask, "Hotel owner's courtesy?" "Not free, but we only pay the regular room rate. Shower and dress for dinner." "Coat and tie?" "Like the Breakers, but not formal

attire." "You do like the Grande life. Why did we get treated so well when we checked in." "Professional courtesy and we are driving a Bentley." "We look important - even though we aren't?" "You are catching on. When you own a big boat - sail it close to the shore."

I almost stumbled into a table when I saw him sitting at the bar. His hair was a little thinner and he had put on a little weight, but the Alfred E. Neuman grin hadn't changed a bit. I pulled Bobbie Jean along, "Tuck - Tucker Tubbs. What in the world are you doing in the Blackstone bar? I thought you were still in Vietnam." "That's why I'm a reporter and you're still marching to the beat of a different drummer. Got too cozy with the Vietcong and the military asked me to leave. Now I'm chasing another story. Who is this good looking young lady you're with?" "Meet my bride - Bobbie Jean Langtry - the belle of Biloxi Mississippi." "How long have you two been married?" Bobbie Jean gave Tuck a kiss on the cheek, "Not long enough. Johnny has mentioned you often. You do have the look of the devil about you." I laughed, "Believe it or not this young lady was my landlady when I was wandering through Electronic Warfare training in Biloxi." "You and I were threatened with extinction if we chose an assignment beginning with an E or R." "It's too long a tale - I'll fill you in - later. What story are you chasing down here?" "I'm doing an in-depth piece on SAC Headquarters. Have you reported in?" "We just drove into town today. Everyone on the Rock wanted to hang you for what wasn't on Mona Lisa." "The ocean going tug? Don't blame them. My general diverted your stuff for his own use. Couldn't believe he'd stiff his main reason for being. Taught me several lessons about organizations." "What were they?" "Stick around too long and all the feathers will go to your nest. His Detachments were on one year tours and his people were on three to four. By the time the Detachment folks figured out what was going down - they had moved on. Your

Island was lucky to get food. What were you doing on the Rock?" "Flying with the SAC Detachment." "Did you ever get your vehicles for the second airplane?" "Not until SAC IG pulled a no-notice inspection and tore Alaskan Air Command a new ass hole. Even after that - your boss told our Commander to shove it. When our four star pulled his head out of the ceiling - he flew right by Alaskan Air Command. A week later a flock of C-141s arrived with trucks - buses and ranch oak furniture for the Alert Hangers. SAC might work our butts off, but they know how to take care of their troops." "I feel better. Didn't set well - leaving the service and not doing my job. At least that explains why no one here will bad mouth the organization. I can't pry anything negative out of your troops." "Pays to have a mission."

Bobbie Jean tugged at my arm, "I'm starved. I hate to interrupt war stories from two long lost military waifs, but I'd like to eat dinner before the restaurant closes. Would you care to dine with us - Mr. Tubbs?" "Love too. Hard for me to figure out how someone as ugly as Johnny wound up with the belle of the ball." Bobbie Jean tugged on my arm again, "I have poor eyesight and bad hearing." We followed Tucker into the dining room. Instead of walking through the main entrance - he forced open two locked French doors and ambled through the string quartet. And continued to the Maitre D's desk as if entering this way was the right thing to do. The string quartet continued playing Mozart, but with open mouths. The Maitre d' greeted Bobbie Jean with a smile and Tucker with a scowl, "Mrs. Langtry?" She nodded, "Yes." "I was informed that you were staying with us. We are honored. Tonight you will be our guest. Our Chef is the brother of your Chef at the Broadwater Beach - follow me. I have a table reserved for you near our string quartet." He frowned at Tucker, "Have met all of our violin section." Tucker kept right on smiling - following the Maitre d' and waving to the violin section .

Bobbie Jean whispered, "He is everything you said he was and more." Our waiter asked, "Do you care for a before dinner drink?" Tucker ordered a beer and Bobbie Jean ordered a bottle of California Chablis. After he delivered our drinks he explained, "Our Chef would like to prepare his Nebraska version of steak 'au poivre' medium rare for you. If you would care for a different dish - he will prepare one, but he has an exceptional pepper sauce he would like you to taste." Bobbie Jean was pleased, "It's my husbands favorite meat dish. We are honored by the Chef's choice and delighted to be in his hands." Tucker rolled his eyes upward, "Do you guys always get this royal treatment?" "Bobbie Jean does. She owned the Broadwater Beach hotel in Biloxi. Sold it a few years back. Hotel owners have a union." She added, "We may start a business venture here with a friend of mine and the Chef's brother. I think the Chef is sending us a message - I'm not certain what it is. How do you like living in our nations capitol?" "Great! Bought a two bedroom condo in a new building on the Potomac River called the Watergate." I asked, "And how do you like being a civilian again?" "Never left it - as you well know. Love working for the Post. It's a muckraker's dream. My job is to look for the dark side of the Department of Defense." "What if it's all sweetness and light?" "Won't print it. If I did - I'm out on the street looking for work." "I thought newspapers were supposed to seek truth - set it in print and protect our freedom." "Not in today's world. We seek liberal causes - print what sells and pocket the money."

Conversation ceased as our salad plates were removed and the main course served. Bobbie Jean asked Tucker, "Does it bother you?" "The newspaper business? Not as long as I get a paycheck. With a little luck - I may work my way up to an inside the beltway guru." "What is a beltway?" "A road that circles Washington DC." "Tell me - Mr. Tubbs - are you married?" "No - I'm not. Haven't been where there are

enough eligible ladies. Not since Houston. Alaska was fun, but it's hard to get romantic when your girl is bundled up in a parka. Washington may change that. It's a bachelor's paradise." "Do you plan to settle down?" "If I find the right lady." I interrupted Bobbie Jean's interrogation, "This steak is wonderful. Even better than his brother's. Has to be the meat. The sauce is identical." Tucker asked, "Something I should know about?" Bobbie Jean set her fork down, "It's very good. My bar manager and his Chef asked us to look into building a New Orleans style restaurant here. The Blackstone will be stiff competition." "Just how many businesses are you involved in." I laughed, "Even I don't know, but I do know she owns a piece of the Sands in Las Vegas." "Now - don't bother Mr. Tubbs with our business affairs. I think reporting for the Post is much more interesting than working for a living." Tucker turned a new shade of bleached white - before joining in our laughter. "I should have warned you about Bobbie Jean. She feasts on straight lines."

Our waiter cleared the dishes and poured coffee, New Orleans style and was joined by the Chef, "Our Chef would like to introduce himself." He bowed and shook hands all around, "Mrs. Langtry - I've heard so much about you." "I hope it was all positive. My husband and I are honored by your generosity. Your sauces are Cordon Bleu. Did your brother tell you we were coming?" "Yes. He asked that I provide any assistance you might need in your new venture." I asked, "He must have briefed you. What do you think?" "Most of your competition will be on 72nd Street or tucked away in Omaha's ethnic neighborhoods. Not much down Bellevue way." "How about outside of 72nd Street?" He laughed, "Not much - Boys Town and farms." Bobbie Jean whispered to him, "I'll be in touch after we get settled in." He gave her his card - bowed and walked quickly away. Tucker pushed his chair back, "How about a drink on the Washington Post?" I

agreed, but Bobbie Jean hesitated, "After a meal like this one - all I want to do is curl up in the corner. Maybe - just one and then its off to bed."

Bobbie Jean and I ordered a glass of Port and Tucker asked for another beer. I opened, "I'm going to pry into your business - Tuck. SAC Headquarters is too big a whale to swallow. Which piece are you interested in?" "O Clubs." "What do you expect to find there?" "Remember our Cadet mess hall officer?" "Isn't he the one that followed you to Supply School." "Right. Washed out and was assigned back into food service. This time it was O Clubs. After two years he had enough funds to pay cash for his own restaurant." "I didn't think he was smart enough to steal." "If what I think, but can't prove is real - there's a whole lot of that going on. Don't know where my investigation will take me, but I'm enjoying the trip." "Have you found a source? One that will spill the beans?" "Yes, but only one. I'd like to have at least two or at a minimum - a wink and a nod."

Bobbie Jean gave my arm a second tug, "Say goodnight - Johnny. You and Tucker can finish your war stories over breakfast." "Meet you at seven-thirty for breakfast - Tuck? We can pick up where we left off." "First one down orders coffee." As we entered the elevator - Bobbie Jean poked me in my ribs, "I thought you would never leave the bar. I'm bushed. We have a house to purchase and furniture to buy in the morning." "Sorry - haven't seen Tuck since Nav School. He sure can land on his feet." "You always described Mr. Tubbs as a klutz, but he appears to possess a few cat like moves." "Tucker used all of his nine lives in Nav Training." "I mean - he seems to know what he's doing." "As long as it isn't technical. Maybe he's found a job that suites his talents." "Walking through string quartets?" "Had all I could do to keep from laughing." "He carried it off well." "That he did."

As she undressed - Bobbie Jean mentioned, "We may have several problems if we must live south of Omaha." "Don't tell me - stockyards and feeder lots?" "Yes. I don't believe it's the location where Omaha's movers and shakers live." "If Uncle Sam built an Air Base there - it must have been a swamp at one time. Although I believe it was an Army Post - Fort Crook." "Does that describe the inhabitants?" "No - it was named after the General who fought the Indian Wars out here. At least Omaha has more than one TV station." Bobbie Jean took my hand and led me to our bed, "I'm getting a second wind." "And we didn't have desert."

I tiptoed around our suite like a mouse in front of a sleeping cat, but wild elephants on a rampage wouldn't wake up Bobbie Jean. I was on my second cup of coffee before Tucker entered the Blackstone's restaurant for breakfast. He pulled up a chair, "Where is Bobbie Jean?" "Out like a light. Takes awhile to recover from birthing twins." "You have twins?" "Identical boys last fall." "And she kept her maiden name?" "It's an old southern family tradition she asked me to uphold. Her family has no sons." "Rich?" "She spills more than I make as a major." "Major? You're on a fast track." "Ignorance and superstition will always win out over science and fact," and we both laughed. "We were married in Reno. She promised her Father on his death bed that she would not change her name without her Mother's permission." "And her Mother wouldn't give it?" "Right - hates Yankees. The twins changed all that, but it has been many cold years. She wants us to have another wedding at the Lee Mansion." "Overlooking Arlington Cemetery?" "And all those dead Yankees. Will you stand up for me when the time comes?" "I will stand and deliver. You are a lucky man, Johnny. Rich - witty and beautiful. You couldn't find a better wife. I hope I'm as lucky." "And you're the Romeo that broke the hearts of an entire airline." Tucker looked surprised, "Which one? There's more than one?" "TTA."

"You've run into my covey of quail. Miss 'em - lets order breakfast." "You can tell me more about your investigation into our O Clubs."

Tucker didn't toy with his food - pancakes - potatoes - bacon and eggs disappeared while I was buttering my toast. He asked, ""You gonna' eat those potatoes?" "No - they're yours. Finish your story." "Let me see - I was talking about my source in Washington. He said that stealing from a club is like stealing from any business where you have control, but don't own it. Main revenue comes from kickbacks on the purchasing end and selling the kickbacks at the retail end." "How can you do that when each item is controlled." "Three ways that I know of and there may be more. One - have your own cash register - Two distribute your free food and liquor at private parties - Three - sell it back to the distributor. Some of it is halfway legal." "How so?" "Lets say a wholesale liquor dealer is passing on a distiller's promotion - where you get three bottles and pay only for two. The manager pours the free bottle at weddings and promotion parties. Where there isn't a cash register to control cash inflow - in a high traffic O' Club - it can add up to over two hundred thousand dollars a year." "Wouldn't anyone notice?" "Not if it's business as usual. If stealing is normal - it will look normal." "How about food?" "Parties and weddings - same as the booze. Be back in a minute. I have to see a man about a horse."

I finished my breakfast by the time Tucker returned from the John. He asked, "What work will you be doing in SAC Intelligence?" "Don't know, but it's probably connected with passive or active Electronic Warfare - since I'm not trained in Intelligence." "I shouldn't ask, but what the hell does passive and active mean?" "Passive means to collect what the enemy transmits and active means to deceive - blind - or destroy what he transmits." "I knew I shouldn't have asked.

I never did understand that electronic stuff. How soon do you have to report in?" "In a week. If all goes right - we'll move into our new house before then." "Take my card. Drop me a line after you settle in. We need to stay in touch. Won't be long before you'll wind up at the Pentagon." "Don't count on it. When are you heading back?" "At the end of the week. Bought a car here. A real collectors item. Finish your coffee and we'll step outside. I want to show it to you."

The rocker panels had been filled in and rust scraped away, but it was either Bonnie the Body Beautiful's bright pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible or its twin. "Leaving it at a body shop this morning. Should have a new paint job and new top on her by the time I'm ready to leave. Don't build them like this anymore. Even has its original leather seats and torsion bar suspension." "Who did you buy it from?" "Chief Master Sergeant in SAC Personnel. Drove a hard bargain." "Are you going to drive it back?" "Sure am. Wouldn't trust this beauty to anyone else." "Better have a mechanic check it over." "Do you know something about this car that I should know?" "Only two of its past owners. It was because of your Packard that I was sent to the Rock." "The Chief Master Sergeant?" "Yes." "I'll have it wrung out before I leave."

Bobbie Jean stepped out of the shower as I entered the bedroom with a pot of coffee, "Just what I needed. How is your friend - Mr. Tubbs." "Just bought Bonnie's pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible from a Sergeant at SAC Headquarters." "Bonnie's?" "Looks like it. Gave me a dump on how to cheat a restaurant and bar." "Second cash register?" "And several more." "We can look at the house this morning and close this afternoon." "That's impossible." "We're buying from the builder and we are paying cash." "What if we find something wrong after we move in?" "We hold

out ten thousand - until it's fixed." "Will he do that?" "Anxious to sell and get his money out. With a little luck we can have our furniture in place by the end of the week - fly back to Jackson and pick up our boys. Pour me a cup of coffee and find out when the Nebraska Furniture Mart opens. You can help me pick out furniture."

Our moving van arrived early Wednesday morning and the Nebraska Furniture Mart truck arrived Thursday afternoon. I helped unpack and assemble - until all our items were together - if not in their proper place. We flew to New Orleans Friday night - drove to Jackson and returned to New Orleans for our flight out - Sunday morning. Our twins were snugly tucked in bed in their new home by Sunday evening. Bobbie Jean and Nanny gave notice that I was to stay out of their way. They didn't need a male's help to decorate and arrange. Knowing when to leave - well enough alone - I reported in to SAC Headquarters early Monday morning.

Reporting into headquarters - any headquarters - is a one body operation. The system decreed that a body was needed for a particular slot and a body was requisitioned to fill it. If it was a Command position - politics came into play. If it was a technical position - papers were shuffled until a matching body was found. I walked my matching body through Incoming Personnel and received identification tags - not unlike ones Coroners attach to toes. When I arrived on the doorstep of my Directors office - he nodded knowingly and inspected the body he requisitioned to make sure it matched. He instructed his Sergeant to escort me to the office and desk it was to fill. In less than a day my body had received its stamp of approval - all except a bar code. Introduced to my immediate boss - a moody Lieutenant Colonel by the name of DD Dripper - I didn't have to ask what the DD stood for. After a ten minute lecture on 'do the right thing,' - I knew. I settled my body into a job it matched on paper not knowing

what the paper said. Knowing mind over matter might work - I dug into the matter at hand.

Bobbie Jean settled in quite nicely - becoming a first rate homemaker. After she selected a two story cross-home - between modern and Victorian - business ventures were placed on hold. We nestled in quite comfortably on a hillside drive at the edge of Fontinelle Forest. As spring drew near and the trees began to bloom - I admired her canny ability to choose the right location - be it house or business. There are damn few trees in Nebraska and she had planted us in the middle of a forest - on rolling hills - alongside the mighty Missouri. Our forest provided a sanctuary and our home an oasis from the searing competitive heat at SAC Headquarters. All was well until the ground thawed in mid-March and warm western breezes swept in.

Bobbie Jean opened the windows to let in the breeze and was greeted by an unfamiliar odor. She closed the window and asked, "What's that smell? It's awful." "You must not have had cattle on your plantation. That - my Dear - is the odor of manure thawing at the first sign of spring. We must have a feeder lot to the west of us." "Smells like a stockyard." "Can't be. We're ten miles to the south of it." "Three months of ice and snow - the first spring thaw and our place smells like an overturned outhouse. Find out how long it will last and call me." "When you pick a place to live in a primeval setting - you've got to expect primeval smells." "Spoken like a true farm boy."

I phoned after I arrived at work, "Troops say as soon as the ground dries out - or your odor will go away with the spring rains." "I certainly hope so. I'm going to look at property along the Missouri for Herbie's restaurant this morning. I'll stop at the Officer's Club for lunch - meet me?" "First one there reserves a table." She arrived in the

parking lot as I walked across the street from headquarters. "Did you find a spot up out of the flood plain?" "Located several nice parcels - this side of the river." "How far south did you drive?" "Quite a-ways. Turned around when I saw a chemical plant on the horizon." "Is it the location you've been looking for?" "Maybe - it's pretty far out of the way." "Not around here. Not much else to do, but dine out. If it's good enough - you'll have more customers than you can handle. Give folks someplace to go and they will come." "I still need to check north of here and across the river." "You'll run into zoning problems north and folks don't like to cross the river on a toll bridge."

We ordered lunch. Today was Friday and Clam Chowder was the special. Bobbie Jean said, "I think I'll try the Clam Chowder." "Depends." "Depends on what?" "If the clam has survived." "What do you mean?" "Last time I had Chowder here - the soup was so thin - the cook must have dragged it through the pot with a string." I ordered a Reuben sandwich. After Bobbie Jean tasted her soup she made a face, "Someone murdered your clam. How is your job coming along. Have you found out what it is you're supposed to do?" "Not really. All my boss keeps saying is, 'do the right thing.' I spend most of my time learning about what we used to do - not what needs to be done. And it's all classified beyond belief." "Classified? Classified what?" "Military speak - like classified Secret or Top Secret." "Jargon - Johnny. Can't you folks speak English" "It's like Latin to a lawyer - except we don't charge a fortune for the interpretation." "I'll have to get used to it. Something is on your mind." I hesitated - knowing Bobbie Jean did not care for surprises, "My Directorate is holding a steak fry out at the Base Lake tomorrow night." "Why such short notice?" "It's nothing sinister. My Colonel forgot we belonged to his Directorate." "How could that happen?" "His office is underground and we're on the top floor." "That sounds inverted - the boss is

supposed to be on top. That doesn't sound right - never mind." "Never asked. My offices always seem to be out of the way. In case of attack - they'll be safe." "Or the first ones out. I'm going to call around and find out what everyone is wearing to your steak fry. And when you get home - you can tell me about the people I'll meet tomorrow. And Johnny? Please - no more surprises. Do you want me to drive you back to work?" "It's just up the hill - past the statue in honor of government workers." "Isn't that a SAC missile?" "It is, but it doesn't have propellant - so it can't be fired and it doesn't work."

When I arrived home that evening - Bobbie Jean met me at the door with a glass of red wine and a smile, "And I thought I had a bad day. You look like someone who needs a hug." Our kiss would have become more than passionate if she had not wiggled out from under my embrace, "I have dinner in the oven and it's your turn to feed the boys. Nanny has the night off." "Where are they?" "Swinging and giggling with me in the kitchen. Keep me company while I cut up greens for our salad. You can tell me about the people I'll meet tomorrow night." I wound up both swings, "Tucker and Oliver T would both feel at home here. We have a major down the hall with a wall full of signed photos from dedicated to him from generals. Don't know who's the vainest - our major or the generals. Most of the guys I work with are elusive - won't give a straight answer to any of my questions. Guard their information like it is gold. Information is the key to advancement - so the folks I work with won't share what they know with anyone that can't help them. They all tend to be on the defensive - like I'm Brutus with a knife hidden in my toga. So don't be surprised if they're not friendly. Did you find out what the other ladies are going to wear?" "I made a few phone calls. We'll see." "I asked DD Dripper and he said casual." "That's a big help. What does that mean to you?" "No coat or tie." "For men, but for women that can

mean anything from shorts to formal dress. I can't believe your Colonel forgot that you worked for him." "I'm the new guy. I believe it's an honest mistake." "I hope you don't mind if I wait and judge later." I wound the swings again. Our boys smiled with the motion - staring out the kitchen windows at the trees , "Going to change out of this uniform. I'll feed the boys after I get into something comfortable." "And so they won't spit up food on your clean uniform." "You broke the code."

After I fed the boys - we placed them in their oversized playpen in the kitchen. Bobbie Jean finished preparing our meal while they played with balls - bells - stared at each other and out the window at the trees. My eyes wandered to the same view - my boys were on to something - buds were popping out. Winter had stayed on far beyond its welcome. It was mid-April before Omaha's earth finally warmed up after a long winter's freez. Temperatures soared - Mother Nature brought her climate back to balance. Spring arrives in Omaha like dawn in Mandalay - with thunder.

My work in Intelligence changed from chaotic to routine. Took me awhile to learn how to fly a big wooden desk, but I finally got the hang of it. Everyone I met seemed to know what their job was, but me. I was still filled with self doubt. All I could get out of DD Dripper was, "Do the right thing - don't ever go around me to the Colonel and we'll get along fine." As long as I had to wait on special security clearances - I decided I might as well read through the files and see what my predecessor did. I found out he compared our collection assets against intelligence requirements and recommended new systems. However - now that the war in Vietnam was heating up - there weren't any funds available for new systems. So - I decided to evaluate what we had against what was needed and recommend improvements. Finally - guidance floated down from above.

My Directorate Colonel requested a survey of all of our reconnaissance systems - other service systems and national systems to ascertain success rate per mission - versus cost - how long would they be of value - and if they flew in range of enemy defensive systems - when would they become vulnerable. This dovetailed with the work I had all ready begun. My data gathering was almost complete. Analysis would take another week or two and writing the report another month - if the creek didn't rise.

Bobbie Jean broke into my mental world, "You and our boys have been staring at the trees in our backyard for five minutes. Do you want to eat dinner in the kitchen or dining room?" "Sorry - my mind was on my work. I'm wrapping up a survey on our collection systems. Why don't we eat at the counter. The boys have fallen asleep in their playpen. We won't have to move them." "And I won't have to carry our dinner to the dining room. Wasn't a survey done before you arrived here?" "Can't find one. SAC recently purchased a fleet of new airplanes. Our four star wants to know how they are doing in comparison to other systems and the ones they replaced." "Sounds reasonable. Oh - I've narrowed down my search to two parcels south of here and one on the other side of the river." "Council Bluffs?" "To the south of town." "Which way are you leaning?" "One of the parcels south of here. You were right about the toll bridge. No one uses it. Might as well put up a fence." "Did you decide what you're going to wear tomorrow night?" "Blouse and slacks. If it's cool - I'll carry a sweater."

A cold spring wind whipped through the trees. Saturday afternoon's heat had changed to a damp chill. Early evening thunder storms bore down on Omaha from the northwest. The wind and approaching thunder sounded like garbage cans - full of boulders - rolling down a hillside. Bobbie Jean and I ran from her car to the Base Lake pavilion - dodging raindrops

the size of nickels - splattering in the dust. As I lowered our umbrella - she gave me a nudge, "I was right." "About what?" "All the ladies are wearing what I am." "Isn't that what you were told?" "No - I was told everyone would wear shorts. I was going to be put in my place." "Not nice." "Petty if you ask me. What is it you flyers say when you warn someone about watching their behind?" "Watch your six." "If this is any indication - watch yours at work. Now that the ladies know I have brains - they'll be more careful. Who is that waving?" "The major I told you about. The one with the I love me photos on his wall - Major Christy."

Christy walked quickly - to where we were standing and before I could introduce Bobbie Jean asked, "Do you know who added a photo of Christ to my wall?" "Haven't the foggiest. Was there a dedication?" "Someone wrote, *'To Major Michael Christy - Come Visit Soon, Love JC.'*" I turned away - so he wouldn't see my widening smile and attempted to choke in -uncontrollable laughter. Out of the corner of my eye - I noticed Charlie Big Hands - doubled over in a convulsion of giggles. I introduced Bobbie Jean, but Christy was all ready moving, "Pleased to meet you. If you'll excuse me - Captain Hands is talking to my date. I don't trust him. Do you think he is the one who nailed the photo to my wall?" Before I could answer - he was gone. Bobbie Jean had that look - one of incredulity - speaking volumes, "So that's who Oliver Tugwattle would be - if he had stayed in. Buy me a drink - soldier and one for yourself. We'll need one if there are any more Tugwattles around." "This group has premeditation instead of spontaneity and all of them - except Christy - have a sense of humor. Want to meet the gang of four?" "Not now - buy me a drink and keep me company."

I carried Bobbie Jean's drink to her as the skies opened and rain poured in sheets into the pavilion's northwest side

- driving everyone to shelter on the southeast side. As lightning danced across the sky - we found a seat in the middle of one of the semidry picnic benches - made small talk to folks we didn't know - or would care to remember. When we dug into our steaks - they were cooked cowboy tough and boot leather thin. Bobbie Jean whispered, "A dollar ninety-nine in Sacramento" and we both laughed. "Will I ever meet anyone from your office?" "There will be other parties. Look at my boss over there - DD Dripper. He's so busy licking the Colonel's boots - he doesn't have time for peasants. And my peers - the gang of four - have circled their wagons." "I think it's time to leave." "Charlie Big Hands has left the inner circle. At least you'll meet one." I introduced Bobbie Jean, but all Charlie did was nod in her direction and grab my arm, "You didn't squeal on me to Christy - did you?" "About what?" "The photo of Christ I added to his wall." "Didn't know it was there." "Neither did he. Had it up over a year and he just noticed." He turned away laughing quietly to himself. And we turned away from a sea of backs and said good-by to my boss - the Colonel and their wives - as military protocol demanded.

Bobbie Jean snuggled close to my side for protection as we strolled on wet blossoms - scattered about by the storm across the parking lot. She whispered, "We've just been ignored by the in crowd." "I'm the new guy that came from outside and took over a plum Branch. We won't have many friends. Smell the air?" "No more feeder lot odor. The rain must have washed it out of the air." "Wait till the sun comes out and begins to bake the manure dry. What do you think of the folks I work for?" "First group of military people I've met who are as political as our politicians in Biloxi. They must train SAC Headquarters' people at the County Courthouse." "That's the down side. The up side is - I'm not a briefcase staff type." "How about DD Dripper?" "There is always an exception made for incompetent pilots."

"Want to stop for an after dinner drink in Bellevue?" "After all the crow we've been offered - I'd rather stop for a sandwich and beer."

Springtime in Omaha flew by faster than a New Jersey minute. Nebraska's brisk westerly wind changed to summer slow - southwestern breezes. And my reconnaissance survey slowly ground down. I required more data as grist for our computers to calculate. And accurate cost and collection results from national systems were not available to me or to anyone outside of Washington DC. And my preliminary results were not ones my bosses expected - casting an unfavorable light on our new aircraft reconnaissance system. My two month project was in danger of stretching out to more than a year. While work was stagnating - our family wasn't. Summer trips to Jackson and Biloxi helped break the monotony of dust devils on the prairie. Spring and fall - Nebraska is a great place to be. Winter - those with money flew south to Arizona - or Acapulco - summer - they baked with the rest of Omaha's citizens. Bobbie Jean - accustomed to the steady warm temperatures of Biloxi's marine climate - could not adjust to the Nebraska's extreme summer temperatures. So she didn't. While I fought the paper crush - she and the twins summered in Biloxi.

Fall arrived with a early winter cold snap. Leaves on the trees didn't have time to turn to red and gold. Instead - they froze into dark browns and greens. Like the weather - my collection survey was frozen in time. No matter how I ran the figures through our computer - results remained the same. The Aircraft we replaced produced better collection data - with fewer flights - than our new one. And Bobbie Jean's restaurant search froze in Nebraska politics. She purchased the parcel she wanted, but wasn't able to get a liquor license. Nebraska had a set number and like New York City taxi medallions - didn't grow with need or population.

Spring arrived with our twins standing and stepping out. And my survey moved from dead center to fast forward. While DD Dripper was off on an orientation course in San Antonio - a call came from our Directorate Colonel for me to stand and deliver. When I finished briefing - he asked that I give the same one to his fellow Directors. This time I was to add why we had purchased a set number of airplanes and what was the criteria for selecting that number. That was easy. Our four star wanted the set number - so he doubled the request - knowing that Washington would cut his request in half. I now had two answers that were unacceptable. And to make matters worse - DD Dripper returned from his orientation course as disoriented as ever. I had violated his guidance - speaking to our Colonel without going through him. As a result - in his eyes - I had done the wrong thing. He would not accept the results of my survey, but could not refute them. All he could do was mumble, "Consider the source," which meant he didn't agree, but had no answer. He directed that my study show our collection had doubled and we had arrived at the number of airplanes through science and fact - neither of which was true. So - being a consummate briefcase Colonel - he sat on it - hoping it would go away.

His boss smelled a rat. So - he dispatched DD Dripper to another orientation course. While he was away - I was given an hours notice - to present my briefing to the other Directors. I explained the survey and results to a roomful of Colonels who remained silent. Not a single question was asked. When the lights came up my Colonel took me aside, "Good pitch Johnny. Tell me - when did you come to your conclusion we had a turkey on our hands?" "Last May." "And when did you have this briefing ready to go?" "Last summer." He had that look of Caesar - as Brutus pulled a knife out of his back, "Interesting - take a couple of weeks off. If you don't have leave - I'll give you a pass. When you return - see me first."

Bobbie Jean was ready to go, "Good - we can go to Biloxi before it gets hot in Omaha. Why were you asked to take two weeks off?" "Remember my collection survey? I briefed it to our decision makers." "How did they like it." "I was greeted with the sound of silence." "Not even one polite question?" "Not one." "Should I call a van line?" "Not yet. We'll see how it plays out." "Now that you are persona non grata - do we have to attend your office party tomorrow night? Draft beer and hot dogs are not my idea of a night out on the town." "It should be better than the last one." "Watered down beer and pizza on the kiddies side of the pizza parlor? My stomach churned for three days." "How is the liquor license coming along?" "Have preliminary approval. We'll get full status in ninety days." "Is this a good time to leave?" "Can't do anything more until I have our license in hand." "The twins?" I can have the twins ready to go in in the morning. Do we have to go to the party?" "Duty calls - I want to find out how far I've fallen from grace."

Wasn't much of a brewery - only one kettle. Bobbie Jean and I trailed along at the tail end. As we entered the breweries' party room - we were given a wide berth by my office mates. Bobbie Jean took one look at a sea of backs and said, "We're leaving. Will they lighten up on you when we return?" "Don't know, but I've been here long enough to know messengers carrying bad news don't stay around." "But - you're only halfway through your tour here." "Doesn't look good - does it?"

*"At any rate I'll never go there again!"  
said Alice, as she picked her way through  
the wood. 'It's the stupidest tea-party  
I ever was at in all my life!"*

# 14

June in Biloxi is my concept of what an ideal vacation should be. The sea breeze cools down a normally very hot afternoon and the four o'clock thunder storm finishes the job. Almost perfect - except Bobbie Jean's apartments badly needed tending too. I pounded and plumbed - scraped and painted, but still needed professional help to finish the job. Her apartments - plumbed and wired before 1940 - salt air had damaged both beyond the capability of a shade tree mechanic. Chlorine mixed with water and brushed on removed mildew covering my last paint job. And a mid-vacation stay at the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans renewed our courtship. Blueberry muffins - thick rich New Orleans coffee - romantic horse drawn carriage rides in the evening and Bobbie Jean's favorite restaurants added cement to our wedding vows.

On our last night in New Orleans - dining on pompano and white wine - Bobbie Jean turned wistful, "I wish we could carry all of this city back with us to Omaha." "Isn't that what you're attempting to do with your restaurant?" "I don't think it's possible to duplicate an attitude. Mississippi flows past New Orleans - a ribbon of rich brown molasses. The Missouri rushes past Omaha in a muddy frenzy - hurrying on its way." "You can't duplicate the scene, but if I know you - you'll find a way to replicate New Orleans's ambiance." "I see what you mean - maybe we can teach her laid back - friendly attitude to our wait staff. Can't we spend another week? I could use another trip to New Orleans before we return to your prairie." "If things don't work out at work - we may have all the time in the world. A lot of powerful people invested their careers in the billion dollar project I

called a turkey. And no one wants to hear their pet project didn't live up to expectations." "Can you tell me what caused it to fail?" "Can't give you a complete data dump." "Without going into classified information?" I waited until our waiter finished pouring coffee.

"You asked why it failed. Without going into details - the system failed because our electrical engineers tried to stretch computer technology beyond its current limits. By the time the collection systems were installed in the airplanes - technology had progressed from transistors to semiconductors. What once filled up an airplane could now be placed in a medium sized box. They also tried to defy several laws of Physics, but I can't go into what." "Won't they take that into consideration?" "The Colonel will. He's pretty sharp, but not DD Dripper and he's the one that writes my efficiency report. Dripper hung his chances of being promoted to full colonel on the success of these airplanes." "Ignorance and superstition will always win out over science and fact." "You're stealing my act. Do you want to drop by the Coffee Stand before we return to our hotel?" "Of course." "And when we return to our room I'm going to cover your body with powdered sugar." Bobbie Jean motioned for our waiter to come over and whispered in his ear." "He returned with a brown paper sack." "What did you ask for?" "Powdered sugar." "Life is short." "Eat desert first."

After completing the architectural plans for her restaurant - Bobbie Jean was reluctant, but ready to return to Omaha - bubbling over with energy for her new project. "Our license may come in any day. Herbie and I have decided to go ahead and break ground. See if you can stay on at SAC for another six months -so I'll have my part completed." "You're going to hang around during the summer heat?" "Have too - if we want to be up and operating before winter sets in. At least we should have the walls up."

I walked in the kitchen door after my first day back at work relaxed with a perplexed smile. Bobbie Jean looked up from the sink - wiped her hands on a towel and gave me a hug, "Our twins are getting more mobile every day. I've spent all day trying to corral them. I'll pour you a glass of wine. You don't even look like you had a saddle on your back today. I'm dying to find out what happened on your first day back at work." "I stopped by my office first thing this morning and it wasn't there." "Your office disappeared? Is this the twilight zone?" "The room was there, but folks from JSTPS had moved in." "Jargon time again." "Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff. They select targets for all three services. Believe it or not - they work for a three star admiral." Bobbie Jean broke out in laughter, "Nebraska really does have a Navy! What happened next?" "I asked where everyone had gone too. No one in my old office knew. Then I remembered - my Colonel requested I report to him after I returned from vacation. So I moseyed on down to his underground office and made an appointment with his secretary. I asked her if she knew where my office was and she said, "It isn't." "Stop right there. I have to tend to dinner on the stove. Change out of your uniform and keep me company while I cook. I'm dying to find out where your Lieutenant Colonel Dripper was transferred too and what you're going to do."

When I returned to the kitchen I asked, "Where are the boys?" "Nanny has them out for a stroll. Tell me where your boss wound up." "Dripper was transferred to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida." "Was it a promotion? Do you know what he will be doing?" "For a pilot - his new job is lower than a cat's hair ball. He's going to be a test pilot who doesn't test airplanes. He'll chase after experimental target drones after they're launched and shoot them down if they go out of control." "What's a drone? Are they connected with a queen bee?" "It's an Air Force version of a remote controlled model airplane. Not one of your more challenging jobs, but

Dripper won't have to carry a briefcase." "Why? Don't you?" "No - I'm not allowed to carry work out of the building." "So - Dripper has been put out to pasture. That's a shame. He worked hard at military politics. When he leaves the service - I bet he becomes a full fledged knife wielding politician." "If he does - he'll soon discover mastering technique and knowledge are - in his case - an oxymoron. His problem is - he's ninety percent absolutely right and ten percent absolutely wrong." "Is that bad?" "Only when you fail to recognize the difference." Nanny brought the boys in. I had my hands full. I placed them in their playpen and helped Bobbie Jean set the table.

As we sat down - she asked, "Why didn't you call and tell me what was going on?" "Don't have a phone - an office and when I found a phone I could use - your line was busy." "I was chasing down the status of our liquor license." "Is it on schedule?" "We have a slight problem, but fixable. Finish your story. What did the Colonel say to you?" "He saw me standing outside talking to his secretary and asked me to come in. He apologized for not having a desk for me. I asked where my workers were and he said they had returned to crew duty." "Why not you?" "Might be because I'm too new. Anyway - he thanked me for being straight up with him and implied it was the only reason I was still around." "They still shoot messengers - don't they?" "I'll be waiting for that shot to be fired as long as I remain at headquarters. If I read the tea leaves correctly - we better be prepared to move on within a year." "How are you going to keep busy?" "That's a hard one. Can't fly a big wooden desk when mine has crashed. Guess I'll set up office in the cafeteria and wait until something better comes along." "Would you do it again?" "I thought about it. The easy way out is to fudge the figures, but we owe it to the guys who fly in harms way to provide equipment that works." Nanny arrived - sat down at the table and our dinner began.

I helped Bobbie Jean clean up, "Coffee outside on the patio? Cool enough under the trees." "I have to powder my nose. Can you carry it out?" "Fetch and carry are the number one item in a navigator's job description." When Bobbie Jean joined me - she strolled aimlessly around our patio - warming her coffee mug in her hands. She turned, "Think I should go slow on our restaurant?" "No - press on. After it's up - it'll be Herbie's nickel. I may be reading the tea leaves wrong, but we should be here at least a year. Your restaurant should be up and running by then." "I'll sleep on it. Another glass of wine?" Bobbie Jean returned with two glasses of red, "What will SAC do with their airplanes?" "Modify them with new collection gear that does the same job and takes up one tenth the space. And add on gear for a new mission. SAC will kill two birds with one stone and everyone looks good." "Can you tell me what the new mission is?" "You know I can't give specifics." "Before I forget - we're dining out tomorrow night." "On a Tuesday?" "Business. I want to check a steak house on 72nd Street." "Does it have a name?" "Angelo's. Our Chef's brother at the Blackstone says they have a great pepper steak." "My God - a little Italian and a pepper steak?" "You'll be in heaven." "Come on over here and I will be."

Angelo's Italian pepper steak was incredible - better than Herbie's brother advertised. Covered with green and red peppers and marinated in a sauce we could not place. Bobbie Jean was impressed, "Now I know why Johnny Carson sends for a case of these each month." "Won't Angelo give you stiff competition?" "No - too far away to have an impact and the cooking style isn't the same. And he is adding a show room." "They do well in Las Vegas." "Only as a loss leader to attract gamblers. None of the New York clubs are doing well and the Blue Room at the Roosevelt is closing." "What happened?" "Television. Show rooms are going the same way as vaudeville." "What are you planning for yours?" "Trio -

piano - bass and drums." "What - no Dixieland?" "Not in Nebraska. But that's something we can do to establish our New Orleans style when we open. Have to restrict it to the bar. Dixieland is too loud and fast for fine dining. What would you like to hear?" "Same as you, but add a good sound system for when someone shoots the piano player. No piano bar." "Why not?" "You'll get singers who can't sing and drinkers who won't drink. Light classical background music is my cup of tea." "I'll put you down for elevator music. After dinner drink?" "In the lounge."

Bobbie Jean wrinkled her nose, "We won't have to worry about competition from this Irish coffee. What will you do at work without an office or job?" "I'm frozen in time and without friends. When Mike Christy gave me the cold shoulder - I knew I was in trouble." "You're not going to stay around for make-work are you." "If that happens - I'll resign my commission and help you with the restaurant." "I don't know if I want a known loser associated with my project." "Then I just might drive to Biloxi and wait for you there." "That's the best news I've heard tonight. I'll go with you and we'll let Herbie bring our restaurant in."

I wandered the halls for two more weeks - spending most of my time at a rear table in the cafeteria. On a late Friday afternoon - I was joined by a Colonel - new to me and to headquarters. He sat down beside me and introduced himself, "I'm Colonel Black Bird. I'd rather fly than be stuck in headquarters, but I'm here and we'll both have to make the best of it. As far as I'm concerned staff work sucks. You're the fellow they call Johnny Ropp?" "Yes Sir. Welcome to my office. Can I buy you a cup of coffee?" "I'll take black and hurry back. I have business to conduct and damn little time." I carried two mugs back to my table. He smiled a sly Irish smile, "I heard you had an unusual office. Makes more sense than most of the ones I've been too. I'm

setting up a new reconnaissance office. When I found out about how you tugged on superman's cape and stuck with it - I figured you're the one for my outfit. I've absorbed all the functions of your old branch. I want you to focus on intelligence requirements for our current aircraft systems. Work directly with the analysts. Find out what they need and go after it." "With our aircraft or by other means?" "Try us first. If we can't do it - use other means." "Shouldn't be a conflict. When do I start?" "Now. Make tracks to the rear basement. Your desk is waiting." "Anything else?" "Work hard - play hard and don't hang around when you have nothing to do."

My new office was located in the SAC Reconnaissance Center. Unlike Gaul the Center was divided in two parts - Operations and Intelligence. Intelligence provided the requirements and tasks and Operations planned the missions. With the Vietnam War in high G - the Reconnaissance Center was manned around the clock. I was in good spirits when I arrived home from work. I walked in the kitchen door and breathed a sigh of relief. Bobbie Jean had not begun dinner, but she had poured a glass of red wine. I picked it up and wandered into her office. She was busy - going over revised architectural drawings. The twins were playing with old blueprints on the floor. She looked up, "I know. You have a new job." "How did the information get here before me?" "Mrs. Bird called. She invited us to dine with them at the Officer's Club tonight. That is the first invitation I've ever received from one of your boss's wives. We'll meet them in the bar at six-thirty. What is your Colonel's name? Is he a nice guy?" "Colonel Black Bird. He is a refreshing change - a job doer not a job stopper." "Is he a pilot?" "Flew the Blackbird - the SR-71. "Is it a jet fighter or bomber?" "Neither - it's the highest and fastest." "Herbie phoned. He and the Chef are flying in the last of July. They want to look at our site and go over the revised

drawings." "Are they going to stay with us?" "No - the Chef's brother has reservations for them at the Blackstone." "Looks like you might be serving meals by Thanksgiving." "I have my fingers crossed."

The Officer's Club looked like it had been designed by Holiday Inn - complete with a drive through entrance and reception desk - lacking only a bellhop. The cocktail lounge - bar and dining room were side by side and open to each other. When the drapes were open - the nine hole golf course provided a view - which couldn't be seen after dark or when the sun set through the windows - which happened every evening. The previous SAC Commander's wife had new carpet installed. It was thick - luxurious and was wearing like iron - which was a great misfortune. It reminded Bobbie Jean of early carnival with its bright - fluorescent colors. We were paying for it with higher dues. Still - the O Club's rib eye steak was as good as any in town.

Colonel Black Bird and his wife were waiting as we entered the lounge. He introduced himself and his wife, "Johnny - you didn't tell me you had a beautiful wife. Bobbie Jean - you're gorgeous. Don't tell me she is rich - too?" I laughed, "And she is about to build a restaurant south of here." He helped Mrs. Bird to her feet, "Service here isn't worth a damn. Lets go to the dining room. We can order cocktails at the table. Me and the Mrs. are from Las Vegas Nevada." "Bobbie Jean is from Biloxi, Mississippi and I'm from Bellpoint, Ohio." "Hope it doesn't seem like I'm prying, but your last names aren't the same." I let Bobbie Jean explain. When she finished - Colonel Bird laughed, "My first name is Bart - but I use my middle name because it fits where I came from and where I want to return. Riding herd over a bunch of funny wings is not my idea of a good assignment. Mrs. and I are sticking with bourbon and branch." Bobbie Jean ordered a bottle of Medoc for us, "We

began our evening with a glass of red wine at home and we'll stay with it." As our ladies chatted away - Colonel Bird took me aside.

"One of the reasons I wanted to get together with you is because of my boss. When I told him I wanted you - he gave you a good report, but - " "SAC shoots messengers." "I wouldn't put your house up for sale, but I wouldn't add a recreation room either." "He appreciates your hard work and honesty, but you and I both know that sometimes two rights make a wrong. He's bringing in a silver tongue to defend our airplane's new configuration. And he is removing you from that portion of your work." "I can understand that. He lost a flock of birds the last time I worked on the project." "Don't be so hard on yourself. We haven't really lost a single one. They're just changing missions. It would have happened eventually - you sped it up." "System requirements are a no win situation. I'm glad to be rid of that task. Silver tongue can have it." Our waiter appeared, "Our special tonight is rib eye steak and lobster tails - or you may wish the broiled trout."

Black Bird's interest had been stimulated, "Systems requirements - a no win situation? I tend to agree. Why are you convinced?" "Technology drives Air Force procurement - not requirements. The engineers come up with bells and whistles and we have to come up with the need. It doesn't always work that way, but happens often in electronics." "Computers are supposed to be the wave of the future." "And most times they are adding machines with a cult formed around blinking lights. When we can't do it on the collection end - we try to make computers solve our problems on the processing end. You've heard of garbage in - garbage out?" "I see what you're driving at. Can you give me more on the problems with system requirements?" "It's really an artificial field. All began back in World War II by accountants - like that guy

from Ford - Robert MacNamara. Problem is - requirements are historical. And because we create new things that don't have a history - we spend all of our time working backwards to find requirements that will fit. As a result - paperwork winds up costing ten times more than the product." Black Bird stirred his drink, "Sad - but true. Kelly Johnson can create a system in his Skunk Works and have it flying while the normal procurement system is mired down in paper. The only thing that flies out of MacNamara's system is paper airplanes." Our dinner arrived. Bobbie Jean changed the subject to Las Vegas and how fast it was growing. Mrs. Bird knew some of the same people - Bobbie Jean did. As we adjourned for an after dinner drink in the lounge - Bird whispered - remember what I told you." "Don't add on a recreation room?" "Right."

After we arrived home - Bobbie Jean asked, "What did Colonel Bird say to you that made you so quiet after dinner? You hardly touched your steak." "I'm not on our General's A list. He wasn't happy with the message I carried - even though it was correct. Did you mention to Mrs. Bird that you owned a piece of the Sands?" "Not good for your career to have an independent wife. My Bentley raises enough eyebrows. And your boss may not care for my associates in Vegas. He knows where all the bodies are. Your Colonel grew up there when it was Biloxi's size. Are you sure we'll leave?" "Bird couldn't have been more direct. It's only a matter of time." "Our restaurant is on hold - unless Herbie agrees to take over when we leave." "Don't slow down for me. If your concept is a winner - you'll have a valuable property." "Do you think we should put our house up for sale?" "Bird said don't, but added - don't build a recreation room." "That certainly gives me a lot of confidence." As we undressed, Bobbie Jean gave me a hug, "Thought you needed one. How do you feel - inside?" "Like I've been hit in the stomach by a two-by-four."

I settled into my new job - satisfied - knowing for the first time in two years what it was I was supposed to do. As soon as he walked in the door Colonel Bird took control. Watching him in action is the equivalent of a postdoctoral degree in management. He guided without interfering - accepting what he didn't fully understand and pressing on. Black Bird wasn't afraid to delegate work and retain the responsibility. The same as proper handling of draft horses - firm control with light reins. With horses and people - trust works - both ways. He took me aside during my first week, "I don't expect you to be able to fly an airplane at Mach three point two - you shouldn't expect me to understand how your electrons dance around the way they do. However - if you can explain what you're doing so I can understand - our General will and we'll both be winners." He spent most his time studying what we did - how we did it and who was doing it. Black Bird was like a symphony conductor taking unlike instruments - making them work in harmony for the best overall performance.

Bobbie Jean bubbled over with excitement when she called Monday morning, "Herbie and the Chef are still flying in next week." "Did you tell Herbie about our eminent departure?" "Yes - they're planning to go ahead with or without us." "Are we going to stay in for a piece of the action?" "Of course. My only hang-up was - our Chef might leave before we could sell." "What changed your mind." "His brother will join us if our Chef decides to return to New Orleans." "It will be another absentee investment." "My intuition says it will be a money maker." "Follow it - you haven't been wrong yet. How much is it going to cost us." "Between two-hundred and three hundred thousand. Worst scenario - we'll lose no more than thirty thousand." "Average and best?" "A gain of three hundred to six-hundred thousand." "Did you settle on a design?" "Three story riverboat." "On the Missouri?" "No-silly - on dry land."

Herbie and the Chef flew in and out on a whirlwind tour. With their approval - Bobbie Jean had the foundation poured and walls up in record time. Her roof would be on before the first leaf turned gold. And her liquor license came through two weeks after Herbie flew back to Biloxi. While she spent part of each day on the construction site - making sure their specifications were met - Colonel Black Bird drew up a new set of specifications for us. He took his time - visiting each desk and listening - as each cubicle occupant explained what it was he did. On the first Monday of October - Bird called us into the briefing room we shared with Ops, "We have shift workers who are required to monitor missions from five o'clock in the evening to seven o'clock in the morning. And I still find most of you working from five in the morning to seven at night. I want this overtime to cease. We have more than enough manpower to accomplish our mission. I have only one rule - if you can't accomplish your work between seven and five you're either incompetent or stupid. Either way - I don't wan't you around here. Listen up funny wings - don't waste your time or mine. Are there any questions?" Captain Schweig - who sat next to me whistling Deutschland über alles under his breath - raised his hand, "What if we have to work up a special collection mission or finish up a rush project for the Pentagon?" "Use your head - rules are meant to be broken when they interfere with getting the job done. I'm eliminating make-work." I raised my hand and asked, "You play ball with me and I'll play ball with you?" He broke out in laughter, "And if you don't - I'll shove the bat up your ass." Tucker had been served.

I was greeted with a kiss and a glass of red wine when I walked through the kitchen door, "You're certainly chipper this evening." "Roof is up and the plumbing is in. Before I forget - don't forget to read your mail." "Anything of interest?" "You have a letter from your friend - Mr. Tubbs of the Washington Post." "Wonder what Tucker wants now. He

hasn't written in two years." I opened the letter and almost choked on my wine. Bobbie Jean pounded on my back and my throat cleared, "Christ all Friday!" "What does Mr. Tubbs have to say?" "We're going to Washington." "How would he know?" "He's the Post's military reporter." "I thought he was a foreign correspondent covering Vietnam." "He was, but he kept getting lost in Saigon and shot at by our troops in the Delta. Only thing that saved him was his Mad comic book cover grin. Even the Vietcong wouldn't waste a bullet on an innocent like him."

I sat down on a stool at our pass-through counter and read Tucker's letter -

*Johnny,*

*Don't ask me how I know, but you're being transferred to Washington DC. They want you to report in by the last of November. You'll be on the Air Staff. Got to go. I'll phone in a couple of weeks and fill you in.*

*Tuck*

"We report to DC the last of November." "I'll put our house up for sale in the morning." "You can stay here and see the construction through to completion." "Too many single women in Washington for me to let you go alone. Herbie is ready to move here." "Maybe you should ask him if he would like to buy our house." "I'll speak with him before I list it. It'll save us commission and a lower the price for him. How did Mr. Tubbs find out about our move before we were notified?" "I have no idea." "Your friend must be well connected."

Herbie jumped at the chance to buy our house. I had decided to resign if we weren't transferred - so Bobbie Jean rushed through the paperwork. And two weeks later - Tucker phoned as promised, "Congratulations Colonel. You're being assigned to Air Force Intelligence and you have just been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel." "And I thought SAC shoots messengers." "What does that mean?" "Nothing - just a local joke." "I have two Realtors sending information to you." "I hope you're right. We just sold our house. We'll be house hunting the last week in October. Can you make reservations at a central location for us?" "Call before you leave and I'll make all the arrangements. I'd have you stay with me, but I use the second bedroom as an office." "If I know you - it's more like a landfill for sporting goods." After more small talk - Tucker excused himself, "Gotta' go - have a deadline to meet." Bobbie Jean asked, "What did Smiley Face have to say for himself?" "He says I've been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and assigned to Air Force Intelligence at the Pentagon. And he's having two Realtors send along house and area information." "You're not due for promotion." "I know, but Tucker has been right so far." "Has anyone at work talked to you about promotion?" "Not a soul." "I wouldn't speak about this with anyone." "It's hard to keep it in, but I haven't said a word to anyone about our move." "Including your Colonel?" "Yes."

The following Monday - Colonel Black Bird called me into his office and closed the door. "Johnny - don't know how you did it, but you've been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and assigned to the Air Staff at the Pentagon. Only the General and I know about your promotion. It won't be announced until after you leave. He has requested that you not mention it to anyone except your wife. You can begin clearing out today. Turn all of your work over to Silver Tongue. Don't rat hole any of your information. And I want you to write an end of tour report for my eyes only. Tell it like it is. Don't

sugar coat anything." I tried to appear overwhelmed, but I knew I couldn't, "Any advice for the soon to be dearly departed?" "Outside of watch your six? Be careful up there. You're being assigned to an advanced course for military politicians. Remember - in peacetime it's the politicians who get promoted. But - when a war comes along they look for warriors. You can make it to Colonel on your brains and talent, but after that it's strictly politics. Neither Eisenhower or Patton would have made it past Colonel in peacetime. You'll have to make a choice one of these days. Do what's good for the country or for yourself. You've all ready come up against that decision here and you got lucky. You did what was right and it worked for you. No matter what you've experienced in SAC - Washington is not a society that rewards achievement." "For you pilots that may be true, but for funny wings - anything above major is a miracle." Bird laughed, "That's probably why you survived your first test. You'll do fine in DC as long as you keep that attitude." "Will you and your wife be our guests at the Blackstone Hotel tonight. As long as I have to keep my promotion close hold - I'd at least like to have a small promotion party." "Monday night shouldn't be a problem." "I'll have Bobbie Jean make reservations for seven. Pick you up at six-thirty?"

Bobbie Jean added the general and his wife to our small party, "A promotion party should include more than one couple. And the only one who influenced your promotion has to be your General. Black Bird hasn't written an efficiency report on you - has he?" "Your right. We'll have to use your Bentley if we're going to drive six people." "I phoned ahead to make sure the Chef's brother is working tonight. We set up a special menu." "I shouldn't ask, but did you ask the ladies if they preferred fish or steak." "I did and you shouldn't have. That's your last glass of wine." "I've only had one glass." "You're driving and we have to be on our best behavior." "Desert?" "Not first - later."

Bobbie Jean's Bentley raised a few eyebrows. When we stopped by the brick quarters to pick up the General and his wife - Mrs. Bird asked, "How can you afford this limo on a Major's salary?" "I can't. Now that we're on our way out of here - I'll let you in on one of Bobbie Jean's secrets. She owns a small piece of the Sands." "In Las Vegas?" Bobbie Jean nodded, "Yes. I didn't think it was wise to mention it before, but now that we're leaving it shouldn't matter." She changed the subject, "A friend of mine from Biloxi - a New Orleans Chef and I are opening the River Boat restaurant south of the base. The New Orleans Chef's brother is the Chef at the Blackstone. I asked him to prepare several of the items we'll have on our menu. If you don't mind - we'll have a Chinese style meal - so we can share the dishes. I'd like to have your opinion." Bobbie Jean's interest in what they thought and discussion about her new venture was another stroke of genius. It took the pressure off me and eliminated any need for competition between wives. She was genuinely interested in their opinions about the menu. They liked it. The General asked, "How much of the restaurant will you have. I have never had better blackened Snapper and the shrimp in garlic - well - I'll be back." Bobbie Jean was pleased, "My friends will each have thirty five percent and I have thirty. I plan to sell my piece back to them after the restaurant is established. My part was Planning - designing - construction and obtaining licenses. My work is almost complete. Oh - the Chef won't prepare this menu here again. He has his own specialties. These are his brother's. I'll make sure you are treated with first class accommodations when our River Boat opens."

I had to admire Silver Tongue. He not only was the spokesman for all SAC's fast pacers - his gift of oratory was also matched by a better than average intelligence. He was able to absorb my work and files in the week allotted. I sat down with him at the O Club bar after work - Friday evening.

I couldn't help, but put a little needle into his balloon, "Tell me - how do you sugar coat manure?" "Logic - Johnny - logic. No matter what I'm given - I try to always find the sunny side. And if you build a logical positive case - brick by brick - it will be accepted." "And if it can't be done on a computer?" "That's where the sugar comes in - when a computer can't handle a job - have a human do it and print out the results with the computer's printer." "You're dealing in smoke and mirrors." "Johnny - you and I are trained technical funny wings. Pilots and ground pounders are dreamers. They believe in Camelot and the Holy Grail." "And the Holy Grail is?" "Computers." "Computers?" "Now you've got it. The powers that be are looking for a Wizard to solve all of their problems. If it comes out of the computer's printer - they believe God has spoken and they are happy" "You've become the man behind the curtains. The one that pulls the levers and runs. "You ain't in Kansas anymore - Dorothy."

Bobbie Jean made her last inspection trips - Monday and Tuesday. She gave her general contractor a long list of items that had to be completed before she would release the third of five payments. I thought we were going to fly east, but she surprised me, "We'll drive your car and when we leave for good - we'll take mine." "And the boys." "Nanny and they will fly to Jackson in the morning. They'll stay with Mother until we're settled in Washington." "They're getting pretty rambunctious. Think she can handle them?" "You're Mother is visiting. She'll help. They both need Grandma time and it has been a year." "Who is going to watch the store." "No one is needed for two weeks and by then - we'll be back. Which way are we going to drive?" "Not much choice. We drive on Interstate all the way. With Mother going south do we scrub our stop at the farm?" "No. She won't fly to Jackson until after we leave. And I want to find out how she won Mother over. They're like old school

chums now." "The Lee Mansion will be receiving a call." "You're right. They must be in cahoots. You know - their planning our wedding!"

We ate breakfast in Des Moines - lunch outside of Champagne and a late dinner at my Concord Township farm. Bobbie Jean helped Mother clean up after dinner. She was direct, "How did you win Mother over. You two are like old friends." "I looked for common ground." "Almost impossible. My Mother is Past President of Daughters of the Confederacy." "Johnny's Father's family owned a plantation in Alabama before the war. But - it was Daughters of the American Revolution that established our common bond. Your Mother is quite a history buff." "Has she mentioned the Lee Mansion?" "We're going to plan the wedding as soon as I arrive." "Do I have to wear white?" "She said your Grandmother's dress is now more of a winter white. I can't wait to see the boys. When do you think it will be all right for the twins to stay with us on the farm?" "Not until Nanny decides they can manage on their own." "She's set in her ways?" "She was the same with me and her children. We were five before she turned us loose." "A Nanny - my goodness. Southern folks certainly live a different life style."

An early frost painted the southern Ohio hills in shades of red - green - brown and gold. The pleasant, but acrid aroma of decaying leaves was softened by autumn's cool dry air. As we crossed over the Ohio River into Wheeling, West Virginia - Bobbie Jean leaned forward and turned off the radio, "If I have to listen to John Denver singing Mountain Momma one more time - I'll pull the knobs off your radio. It must be the national anthem for West Virginia." "I kind of like the song. Where do we join the Pennsylvania Turnpike?" "Outside of Washington, Pennsylvania. Your Mother packed enough food for an army, but I still need to powder my nose. Find a clean gas station and pull in."

I turned the radio back on after we traveled into the mountains of Pennsylvania on the turnpike. After picking up static and evangelical radio preachers and being unable to tell the difference - I turned it off. As I dodged another pothole, "Remind me not to use this turnpike again. This road has so many potholes - it looks like the craters of the moon. The only cash Pennsylvania spends on this turnpike is for additional toll booths." Bobbie Jean didn't respond. I glanced over. She was sound asleep. Bobbie Jean woke as I slowed down to pay our last toll at the turnoff north of Breezewood, "How long was I asleep?" "You missed the entire turnpike and the mountains of southern Pennsylvania. About three hours." "Lovely country. Looks like mountains to a Mississippi girl." "Proves it's not how high the mountain is, but how steep the hill." "If you were on my side of the car - it's how steep the cliff." "I'd hate to go through Breezewood on a holiday weekend. Traffic must back up for miles. There's no way to bypass it." "And you thought Mississippi was the queen of political pandering. Someone has a legislator in his pocket when a bypass isn't built and it's obvious that there is a desperate need for one. You Yankees make us Southerners look like pikers when it comes to buying politicians. We can get one for a jug of moonshine." "At least ours are protecting local business." "Who said they are local?" "Touché!" "Stop at Maryland's welcome center down the road. I need to use a rest room and we both need to stretch our legs."

As we continued on - into the outskirts of Washington DC - Bobbie Jean asked, "Where is the motel Tucker booked for us?" "Outside the main gate of Fort Myers. He said the price is right and we'll be in the center of where you want to look for housing." "Washington DC is like a giant wheel with a lot of little hubs, but no central one. Don't miss the turn to the beltway." "Where is our next turn after that?" "After we cross the bridge into Virginia."

I passed by the Pentagon twice - going both directions before finding Route #50. I turned off at the Fort Myer's exit and into the motel parking lot. Bobbie Jean frowned, "Don't sign in. I'll use the pay phone and call the Watergate Hotel." "That's the same complex where Tucker lives. Why didn't he book us there?" "Probably because it is very expensive." I almost said - can we afford it, but didn't. She hung up the phone, "We have a suite overlooking the Potomac that is affordable." "Only to members of the hotel Mafia." That remark caused a sharper than normal dig to my ribs, "If I can find the Watergate in this evening traffic it will be a miracle." "Cross over the Memorial Bridge to Rock Creek Parkway and take the first exit past where the new Kennedy Center is being constructed."

After battling late evening traffic on the bridge and parkway - I drove by the Watergate complex three times before finding the hotel entrance. The bellhop unloaded our luggage and a valet whisked away my station wagon, "Parking here is almost as much as the Motel Tucker booked us into." "Not for me. As they say the cost will be a wash." "Same as the motel?" "A little less. I remember when you used to say - 'Live fast, die young and leave a beautiful corpse.' "That was before I had the responsibility of a beautiful wife and two sons." We followed the bellhop to our suite. As he opened the curtains for a view of the Potomac - Bobbie Jean sighed, "Now isn't that better than a view of Fort Myers and the odor of horse barns? We even have a sitting room and a desk." I tipped the bellhop as she opened an oversized case. Inside were twelve bottles of wine - six red and six white, "No wonder that damn thing was so heavy. I suppose you want ice?" "Of course. I think it's in the little room next to the elevator. The refrigerator has a tray, but I prefer the other. I'll open our wine while you fetch." When I returned - Bobbie Jean was entering the shower, "Phone your friend - Mr. Tubbs and let him know of our change of plans."

Tucker answered his private office phone, "You're staying where? The Watergate? Talk about rich friends. You want to meet me for dinner tonight?" "What time?" "I'll meet you in the bar of good old reliable Nathan's for dinner at seven. I have to get back to work no later than nine. We work nights to get out a morning newspaper." "Are you bringing a date?" "Not enough time." I opened the shower door. Bobbie Jean handed me her back brush, "And what did Mr. Tubbs say?" "He wants to meet us for dinner at seven." "Where?" "A little Italian restaurant in Georgetown." Her caress told me that we might not make it there by seven.

Bobbie Jean handed me a tie, "Hurry up or we'll be late." "With Tucker it won't matter. Who were you on the phone with?" "The hotel concierge. I gave him the type of place we're interested in and he is selecting areas and houses he thinks may be suitable. Saturday is open house day in Northern Virginia." "Where are we interested in looking?" "Arlington and McLean tomorrow and Mount Vernon on Sunday." "How about the Watergate? This isn't a hovel." "Twins - don't you remember. We need space for them to roam and grow up safely." "It would make Washington DC livable." "For us, but not for them. Is Nathan's a place I'd like to dine in or one of Mr. Tubb's surprises? After all he does own a pink Packard Caribbean convertible." "He says it's pretty good, but if you know Tucker - he'll eat sawdust if it has catsup on it. Read the brochure to me while I finish dressing." "You will find our Watergate complex is a city within itself. The Watergate consists of four buildings. We have private residences - hotel - offices - shops and restaurants." "Does it mention how it got its name?" "Watergate is a water regulating device located at the confluence of Rock Creek and the C&O Canal." "Makes sense."

The phone rang. Bobbie Jean answered, "It's the concierge. He recommends we take a taxi to Georgetown."

"I'd rather walk. It's less than a mile as the crow flies." "He doesn't recommend walking. Not safe after dark. He will have a taxi waiting for us at the entrance and has scheduled one to pick us up at nine from Nathan's." I picked up towels and turned off lights as she finished her conversation. I locked the door and walked toward the elevator, "He kept you on the phone for quite awhile." "The concierge is all ready working on real estate. He'll have several condos open for us here - tomorrow. Has a pretty good idea about values here, but he's not certain about Virginia. He found a small farm in McLean selling under distress. I'd like to look at it. Will you mind mowing grass?" "No problem - we'll buy a small flock of sheep." "Are you serious?" "From the looks of the hillsides around here a mower wouldn't do any good." "My own shepherd." "Life does go in a circle. Did he mention taxes?" "High."

It was a typical Georgetown Friday night. Nathan's was knee deep in singles hoping to find love - or true love - depending on which gender was looking. We found Tucker at the end of the bar - deep in a hot and heavy conversation with a stunning blonde. When Tuck finally noticed us - he stood and offered Bobbie Jean his stool, "Forgot about the Friday night crowd. This stool is all that I could get. Our table will be ready any minute." Bobbie Jean was proper to a fault, "Introduce us to your friend - Mr. Tubbs." "Oh - this is Ingrid. She's a stewardess with Scandinavian Air lines." I tried to hide my laughter, "You've gone international - Tuck." "Made editor last week - dinner tonight is on me." "Which department?" "Military. My exposé' on military clubs was the clincher. Have you decided which area of the city you're interested in?" "I like the Watergate, but Bobbie Jean wants room for the twins to roam." "Watergate is a great address, but three bedrooms start at sixty thousand and DC's taxes are out of sight. The maitre d' is waving. I think our table is ready. Good thing you remembered to wear

a tie." "I know my eastern establishment rules - khakis - regimental tie and a dark blue sport coat. Form over substance. Let me pay for the drinks." "No way - I owe you big time for your help. Tonight is on me." Tucker led the way into the dining room.

Bobbie Jean chided Tucker, "You have come up in the world. We have the A table." "Never underestimate the power of the press." "Isn't Ingrid joining us?" "Must be the crowd noise. I met her at the bar and didn't think to ask. I'll be right back." "Mr. Tubbs never ceases to amaze me. How did he ever make editor at the Post." "Eccentricity is highly valued in the east." "And in the south - too. And will you look at how these folks are dressed? We'll have to throw away your white shoes - white belts and leisure suits." "We're not in Kansas anymore - Dorothy?" "Ingrid is coming with him. It has to be Tucker's boyish charm that attracts women." "And his forever youthful sixteen year old mind." Tucker pulled out Ingrid's chair, "She stopped by with her pilot - but he became ill and had to turn in." I asked, "Airsickness?" "Once a Navigator always a Navigator." Ingrid added, "I'm staying with my sister. She is my twin." Bobbie Jean wondered, "Does your sister work in DC?" "Oh yes - Lisa is the Protocol Officer at our embassy."

Tucker opened his menu, "Pasta here is excellent and anything Italian." Bobbie Jean raised her eyebrows, "I've never seen prices this high for Italian food." "Wasn't always this way, but our restaurant editor gave Nathan's four stars and a great write-up. Within a month all the waiters were wearing tuxes and the prices doubled. It's still my favorite place to fish." Ingrid - not fully understanding Tucker's meaning said, "I'll have the poached salmon over linguine." Bobbie Jean didn't crack a smile, "I'll have the same." Before I could say pepper steak - Tucker advised, "Order a chicken or veal dish. Our waiter is growing roots."

Dinner and wine were excellent - if a bit overpriced. Tucker ate everything that didn't move - including half of Ingrid's and Bobbie Jean's poached salmon. Over an after dinner coffee he asked, "Are you sure you know where to look for housing? You ought to consider the Watergate. Although it's pricey it's an excellent buy. You won't lose any money if you have to sell." Bobbie Jean was very diplomatic, "We're looking at two units - tomorrow. Is this area a good place for our twins to grow up?" "Not if you let them roam. Arlington or McLean would be better." "We're going to look now - think it over and buy in November." "If you find something you like - better think about getting a contract on it. Property is moving reasonably fast here. Johnny - I need to talk business with you - off line." "Newspaper talk - not for attribution?" "Right. How about dinner in your suite tomorrow evening? I'll bring Chinese." Bobbie Jean cautioned, "We won't be back until after five." "Six it is. Don't forget to call if you need help."

As we rode the elevator to our floor - Bobbie Jean took my hand, "Glass of wine on the balcony?" I drew her close, "I'll take red." "Why didn't Mr. Tubbs invite us for dinner at his condo? He must live close - in one of the buildings." "Out of deference to you. I imagine his place looks like the aftermath of a Kansas cyclone. He's buying two meals in two days - so I'm impressed." "Does he want to talk military business with you?" "He mentioned that." "Make sure he doesn't put our names down on his expense account. I learned long ago that there is no such thing as a confidential source." "You must be talking from a Gulf Coast experience with a gambling investigation by a well known U.S. Senator." "Not mine, but Ralph's." "I'll be careful. Don't think Tucker would intentionally try to throw me in jail." "It's not the intentional I'm worried about." We walked down the corridor to our room - arm in arm like two lovers hurrying to a rendezvous.

I poured while Bobbie Jean opened up the drapes. We looked out over lights of autos winding their way up and down on Rock Creek Parkway - almost blocking out moonlight on the Potomac. She shivered and drew close, "What did you think of Ingrid?" "She's a drop dead blonde - almost as pretty as you." "While you and Mr. Tubbs were telling war stories - she asked a dozen questions about your friend. I'm certain she's interested." "One thing about moving to Washington - we'll know the outcome. No complaints about Tucker coming over tomorrow night." "None - but I'm not sure about Chinese food." "We can always go downstairs for desert." "I thought you'd never ask." I swept her into my arms and carried her into our suite. As I placed her on our bed - she gently pushed me toward the balcony, "Better close the doors and pull the drapes. Never know when someone may be watching." "Or listening."

We woke to the ringing of the suite telephone. It was our Realtor, "I have three condos for you to view. I'll meet you in the lobby in an hour." We showered together and almost missed dining on concierge coffee and breakfast rolls. Our tour took less than an hour. All three condos were open and vacant. Purchased as investments - none had been lived in. Their owner had fallen on lean times and had to sell. After the Realtor departed - Bobbie Jean asked, "What did you think of the last one?" "Terrific view of the river, but did you notice the traffic noise when we opened the doors to the balcony." "It's the only one that is suitable for us." "Should be with three bedrooms - an office and den. It will take me awhile to get over the sticker shock." "Mr. Tubbs was right about Watergate condos being moneymakers." "That doesn't make sense. Those three were new - never been lived in." "Timing and location. There isn't any land left near the seat of our government along the water to build a complex like this. I might buy the larger one and maybe one other and rent them out." "You're out of my league." "Silly - we

will buy it with borrowed money through my corporation." "That's why you make money and I serve. How about a late brunch in the hotel restaurant before we continue our house hunting expedition?"

Bobbie Jean waited quietly - until after the waiter took our order, "If we buy here - where can I shop?" "Fort Myer across the river - Georgetown and there are shops in the building. The Watergate has a convenience store for small items." "Can't walk to a grocery store?" "Not that I know of." "We would really have to stock up." Our waiter interrupted - handing Bobbie Jean a phone. Bobbie Jean placed her hand over the mouthpiece, "It's the concierge - McLean in an hour. Off Chain Bridge Road. And the two houses in Arlington?" She handed the phone back to the waiter, "Can you expedite our order? We have to be in McLean in an hour." He nodded yes and returned with our plates in less than five minutes. We nibbled half - signed the check and were on our way to the lobby. I asked, "Are you sure we won't get lost?" "The concierge provided a highlighted map and written instructions. If you work very hard at missing street signs - we can still get lost." "Touché!"

All three places were expensive - nothing under one hundred thousand and all much larger than I expected. As we drove back to Watergate on George Washington Parkway at four in the afternoon - Bobbie Jean spoke with the authority of one who knows value, "The farm in McLean is our best buy." "But - it was the most expensive and it needs a lot of work. The stables will have to be rebuilt from the inside out." "True, but it does have forty acres and if I know our government - the way it continues to grow by leaps and bounds - the land alone will be worth six times what we pay for it in less than ten years. Remember the Realtor that advertised on TV in Roswell?" "Yes - he said, 'There will always be more people, but there'll never be more land'?" "He might

not have been right about New Mexico, but he is dead on about here. McLean will be the next hot address." "It'll take a lot of upkeep." "It has its original stone exterior and hardwood floors. I love the ceiling to floor fireplaces. There is even one in the stable." "And ancient plumbing and wiring." "Don't worry - I'll have a contractor look at it it as soon as we sign a contract." "I thought we were only looking." "A woman has a right to change her mind." "Who's buying - us or your corporation?" "This one is on us." "And the two at the Watergate?" "I ran the numbers. The'll pay loan costs - upkeep and provide a small return. We'll buy all three. I'm glad you were transferred. Washington DC is certainly the land of opportunity." "You've convinced me." "And we'll have a stable for our boys' ponies."

While Bobbie Jean was on the phone with the real estate broker - I looked over the data sheet on the farm. It was still a working farm with a tractor for sale. When she hung up - I showed her the data, "We better buy the tractor. It comes with all the attachments. Can't buy an equivalent one for twice what they want. We'll have to plow the snow off the lane in winter and keep the weeds cut in summer." "Reasonable. Can you have your sheep?" "I don't see any zoning against them. The boys will go nuts over lambs." "We may not be able to build a subdivision, but it can be split into half acre lots when the time is right." "Do you want to see Mount Vernon tomorrow?" "Might pay too - before we sign on the dotted line."

The knock on our door was like a sledge hammer blow. Our friend Tucker had arrived - bearing Chinese food. I whistled under my breath, "How many do you have attending your banquet?" Tucker kept right on trucking to the bar, "Just the four of us. Ingrid had to fly out - so she fixed me up with her sister." "Lisa?" "Yes and they are identical twins in every way. They share a condo in my building."

"And you never met them?" "Morning newspaper. We have weird hours. Give me a hand with the boxes while I retrieve the beer. Where is Bobbie Jean?" "Downstairs getting her hair done." Tucker came back in with a case of beer, "Where do you want it?" "Won't all fit in the refrigerator at the bar. We have ice near the elevator." "I'll fetch some after we unpack the food." I whistled, "You brought enough for ten people." "Where did all of these boxes come from." I looked up - Bobbie Jean had returned and Tucker was gone. "Tucker delivered his Chinese banquet. You must have passed him in the hall. He went after ice for the beer. Wouldn't all fit in the fridge." "Chinese and beer. I'm glad I remembered to bring wine. Is Ingrid coming?" "She had to fly back to Europe. Tuck is bringing her sister - Lisa." "Oh - the protocol lady." Bobbie Jean unpacked the plates from under the bar, "And no chopsticks. No matter - we have silverware and bowls with the suite." Tucker returned with two buckets of ice and another stunning blonde on his arm, "Lisa - these are my friends - Johnny and his wife - Bobbie Jean." I took her hand, "Ingrid was right - you are a lovely carbon copy of your sister." Tucker interrupted, "I'm starved - lets get on with dinner. We can talk while we dine. Where do you want the food?" Bobbie Jean handed Tucker bowls and me silverware and plates, "We'll dine out on the balcony. It's a lovely Indian summer evening." Lisa opened the French doors, "DC has too many hot summer days for me, but it does have lovely fall days and nights and that makes it livable." Bobbie Jean and Lisa set the table. Tucker and I carried out ice - wine and beer.

Tucker looked out over the Potomac, "Great view. Can't see anything but lawn from my condo." I poured four glasses of wine and offered a toast, "To two of the most beautiful women in Washington and to our new home." As we sat down to dine - Tucker asked, "Where did you decide to buy - here or Virginia?" Bobbie Jean nodded, "Yes to both places. We're

negotiating for three condos here and a farm in McLean." We'll lease the condos and live on the farm." I scanned the dishes - Chicken Lo Mein - Curried Shrimp - Mu Shu Pork - Fried Wontons - with Spareribs as an appetizer and enough sticky rice to sink a small boat. Table talk was confined to real estate and Scandinavia. As Bobbie Jean and Lisa cleared away the dishes - Tucker pulled me aside. "I've paid the piper - now it's time to talk."

*"The time has come,' the Walrus said,  
'To talk of many things:  
Of shoes - and ships - and sealing wax -  
Of cabbages - and kings -  
And why the sea is boiling hot -  
And whether pigs have wings."*

# 15

I walked inside and whispered to Bobbie Jean, "Tucker wants to talk business. Do you want to sit in - or take Lisa aside?" "We'll sit in as long as you keep it clean. Port or Cognac?" "I'll stick with beer as long as Tucker does. Back on the Lanai - Tucker asked, "Do you know what your job is going to be on the Air Staff?" "No, but by your smile it looks like you do." "Intelligence systems, but I'm not sure what that really means." "What are you interested in" "I'm interested in our tar baby - Vietnam." "Tar baby?" "We are sinking up to our knees in tar and if we keep adding troops we'll be stuck in it - up to our neck." "You're saying we didn't learn from the French experience?" "Can't learn if you don't understand the past and we don't. When I was over there we had fifteen thousand troops called advisors." "How many do we have now?" "I don't really know, but the number is climbing. If Johnson keeps worrying about losing - we are going to lose big time. What do you think about our new hot spot?" Bobbie Jean interrupted, "Tucker needs a beer and do you want another?" "I'll have a beer - too."

I responded to Tucker's question, "You asked me what I think. My gut feeling is the same as yours. My field of expertise is Technical Intelligence. I look for threats to our airplanes and attempt to figure out how to counter them. From what I know about the Vietcong's Command and Control it isn't very modern. They're fighting the same guerrilla war against the South they fought against the Japanese and French - can't counter someone who uses notes and hand signals with anything, but a bullet. So my area of expertise is not the solution. Looks to me like an Army war. If the South wants

to win they'll have to control their own territory. And if we take it on - it'll take overwhelming force and most of our national budget." "We're in agreement. The way I see it - we have two more choices - pull out and back the South with weapons and a pat on the back - or continue our current involvement and fight a war by proxy. The South can't win if they don't control their own territory. Trouble is - the Vietcong controls the countryside and the South controls the cities. A no-win situation." "Looks like we can't win if we don't go all the way." "And there's no support for that course of action. And it gets stickier - Johnson's afraid to pull out because he doesn't want to be labeled a loser." "It's a tar baby." Tucker stood up, "I need to go inside and see a man about a horse."

When he returned - I reminded him, "You asked for my help. Looks to me like you don't need any. You have a pretty good handle on what's going on." "Intentions and actions are what I need. We have a Secretary of Defense who has tied our military's hands with a new concept called gradual escalation." "Interesting how one can rise to the top making one error in judgment after another. I'm on the losing end of his Systems Analysis concept." "And his tactical concept is to counter the Vietcong with slightly more force." "I'm aware of it, but since I'm not directly involved - I haven't paid much attention. His tactic may be flawed, but we're equally at fault for allowing him to let us commit military suicide." "No one in your Pentagon has the balls to stand up to Mr. book smart - life stupid." "Curtis E. Lemay." "Forgot about him. MacNamara is doing a number on Lemay. He's being painted into a corner as a hot headed killer. He's been politically isolated. From where I sit at the Post - it looks like our civilians are playing the tune and the military is doing the dancing. I need to know who's driving the ship. If McNamara is playing the pipes - what's going wrong with our military leadership? Are they speaking

out or are they kissing up - to keep their jobs?" "McNamara has the mentality of a bean counter. That may account for some of the stupidity, but it doesn't excuse our generals. It's my turn to see a man about a horse." Lisa asked, "Is he inside your bathroom?" I left Tucker smiling - wondering how to answer her Scandinavian question.

I opened two more beers and carried them out to the patio, "For an ex-navigator who couldn't find West Texas from an airplane - you sure have come a long way at the Post." "Simple logic. Navigation is abstract. Military thought is closer to classical literature - an art - not a science." "You've found the nut of the problem. McNamara tries to reduce military problems to mathematical solutions and wants his explanations in numbers." "Can you help me?" "Maybe - I won't give you any classified data and I'm not allowed to release official information. My hands are tied by my oath." "I don't need classified information. The power structure in this town leaks classified data to my newspaper like water out of a broken sieve. The powers that be will do almost anything to get the Post on their side. Your Pentagon does its fair share of leaking - too. So we have to work overtime - to protect our government from itself. I want your opinion on people and personalities. And I'd like to know what the real movers and shakers inside the Pentagon think." "At the top? I'm not connected." "Action officers - the troops in the Pentagon trenches." The hair went up on the back of my neck, "You believe that we're going to take over the fight?" "It's only a matter of time. Johnson doesn't want to lose and the South can't win. There is no other choice." "But we don't have the will to stick it out - or funds." "Congress gave Johnson carte blanche when they passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. That Texan is all pride and you know what hubris can do to common sense." "He bought off on McNamara's gradual escalation?" "Had too - to control costs." "Penny wise - dollar foolish." "If it was my nickel - I'd back the

South with weapons and a pat on the back. We could win a military victory with overwhelming force, but we'd be the new colonial power." "Not a pleasant pickle to be in - is it?" "You and I can't change the direction of the winds of war, but I'd like to know who's doing the puffing." "I won't violate my oath, but I'll let you know what the troops think. "I'd like your assessment of your leaders - too." "I'm impressed. You have found your niche in life."

After our guests departed - I helped Bobbie Jean clean up. She had remained silent - except for small talk with Lisa. As I stacked the last empty beer can in the waste basket - I asked, "Well - what do you think?" "About the war?" "And anything else we discussed." "I won't believe what I read in the papers anymore. I hope you don't have to go over there. I thought you worked hard at preventing loss of life on foolish missions?" "Would if I could, but this one is above my pay grade." "I'm not sure you're in the right profession. It seems to me every military job you get comes with its own briar patch and tar baby." "Keeps me from returning to tending sheep. We should have given Tucker the rest of his beer." "To go with the remains of the Chinese banquet he left." "I'll call him in the morning." "We fly out tomorrow afternoon. What about our car." "Leave it at the airport. We can pick it up when we return. Are we going to drive through Mount Vernon in the morning?" "We have two Realtors stopping by with contracts. After we sign we can drive down the Parkway - have lunch - look around and catch our flight out."

Cool - windless fall days create smooth air and smooth flying. We were on our way to New Orleans with an interim stop in Jackson. Bobbie Jean needed a twin's fix. It would be at least two weeks before our farmhouse was ready. When we stepped off the plane at the airport - Herbie was waiting at the exit gate. "Greetings my wandering friends. My spies

told me of your change in plans." Bobbie Jean asked, "How is our restaurant progressing?" "I landed an hour ahead of you. Chef is overseeing installation of his kitchen and storage. Those folks in Nebraska really know how to work. We are four weeks ahead of schedule. I'm back in town to pack up. How soon are you moving out of my house?" Bobbie Jean answered, "You can move in no later than two weeks from today. I'm having the walls painted and carpets cleaned as soon as we pack up and leave." "Do you want a ride to Biloxi?" "Not on this trip. We stopped to see our twins in Jackson. They're staying with Mother until we move. Keep me posted if we run into any glitches on construction. With the Chef supervising - we could wind up with one table and all kitchen."

Our drive north to Jackson - under a full moon - brought back memories of romantic late fall Mississippi nights. I nudged Bobbie Jean, "Wouldn't you rather be walking along the beach tonight." "Under a full moon? It would be tempting, but I miss my children. Strolling under a Mississippi moon is how I trapped you last time." "Fish always return to the same bait." "I may not have the same bait, but I can show you the same hook. How about a walk in the moonlight under our Magnolias when we reach my Jackson home." She snuggled up, "How long will it be before we arrive?" "Not soon enough." "I really miss our boys." When we arrived - the boys were in bed. Bobbie Jean peeked in - then tiptoed in and tucked them in - giving each a kiss on the cheek.

We gathered out in the solarium - sipping rich New Orleans' coffee. Bobbie Jean asked our Mothers, "What have you two been up too? From the way you're getting on - it looks like our Revolutionary War has won out over Johnny's War of Northern Aggression." Her Mother smiled, "Now Bobbie Jean - we don't have time to talk foolishness. Johnny's Mother and I have worked day and night on your wedding." "Lee Mansion?" "Overlooking Arlington Cemetery. It will be

lovely in June. I've all ready reserved it for the first weekend." "I didn't think they allowed private parties." "Don't you remember? You're a direct descendant from Light Horse Harry on your Father's side." "I hope you are holding it down to immediate family and a few friends." "Johnny's Mother and I are working on the list now. Your boys are certainly a handful. They have been everywhere - inside and outside." "My old playroom?" "They've had a few tiffs over your rocking horse, but have learned to share." I whispered to my Mother, "How many guest on the list?" "Not more than two hundred, but it keeps growing." "That's around four hundred. At least I won't have to hold a bachelor's party." Bobbie Jean added, "And a shower would be ridiculous." As she refilled her Mother's cup - she added, "I insist you print, *'Renewing Their Wedding Vows'* on our invitations. My God - we have two sons." Both Mother's blushed. Her Mother asked, "About your last name. Don't you think it is time to take Johnny's" I interrupted, "I'm quite comfortable with things staying the way they are. It adds a certain spice to our relationship."

We woke to a full press breakfast of waffles - eggs - thick country bacon - hot New Orleans' coffee and of course - grits. Bobbie Jean poured while I dug in, "I could get used to this life style." "Maybe when we're older, but not now. It's too close to my childhood. Would you want to live on your farm?" "Maybe when we get older, but not now." She squeezed my neck with her hand, "Now who is producing all of those straight lines." "We may not have to worry about taking over our parents' homes. We have two boys. They may wish to carry on the tradition. Wouldn't it be funny if JR stayed here and RL liked my Concord Township farm?" "I don't want to think about who's going where. We might all wind up in Florida. Our real estate lawyer phoned. Mother left a note." "We have a lawyer?" "All closings in Virginia are held in law offices." "Guess who writes the laws. What was

it all about?" "We have four signed contracts at the prices we offered." "You are amazing. You offered ten percent less." "The real price is always ten percent less. Mother is sending one of her cars around. We're going to drive her - your Mother and the boys to our place in Biloxi. Your Mother has never seen it."

Colonel Black Bird was waiting at the exit gate when we walked off the airplane in Omaha. I shook his hand, "Never had a full Colonel drive a taxi for me." "Don't count on it ever happening again. Are you carrying your luggage?" "Yes - Bobbie Jean has clothing scattered from Jackson Mississippi to Virginia." "Good - I have a staff car waiting out front." Colonel Bird took Bobbie Jean's hang-up bag, "Follow me. Guess what - I'm leaving - too. Taking an F-4 Squadron over to Saigon." "Is it heating up?" "Only war we've got. I jumped at the opportunity." "Why are you honoring us with a free ride to our house?" "Not my idea. I was directed too - by the General. He wants you to pack up and move out. I have all the necessary clearance papers ready for your signature." "Why am I being given the VIP treatment." "Air Force screwed up when they promoted you. You weren't in the zone or even eligible below the zone." "Will they take it away?" "Too late for that." "How did it happen?" "One of our personnel sergeants mistakenly sent your folder to the Lieutenant Colonel promotion board. The board promoted you on your record - so you made the cut below the zone." "You said it will stick?" "Like glue. A review board has all ready met and decided that you would make it next year - so they changed your line number." "I'm in the last group to pin it on?" "Right, but I'll let you in on a secret. The only reason you scated through is that no one at the top will ever admit to a mistake."

Nebraska's fall wind scattered leaves as Colonel Black Bird's staff car turned into our driveway. He opened the

door for Bobbie Jean, "Keep your good fortune to yourself at the Pentagon. Don't go bragging about how young you were when you made it." "If I don't go along?" "How would you like to be my Exec in Saigon - flying in the back seat of an F-4 with a teenage killer up front?" I laughed, "We have a contract on a farm in Virginia. I'll keep my mouth shut." "Wife and I drove out to look at your new restaurant. Very impressive. General took some friends out to see it. He liked what he saw - too. Do you still have a Chef?" Bobbie Jean perked up, "Part owner. He's from New Orleans. I'm sure you'll like it - four star food at reasonable prices." "Packers will arrive tomorrow and a van on Friday. Be out of here before Monday." "The word will be passed among my peers that I've been sacked?" "A time honored SAC tradition. It will keep those who stay behind on their toes." "Lets keep in touch." "Don't think I'll ever come your way. Pentagon? "I'll quit before they haul me in there."

Black Bird was on target about our movers. A double shift of packers arrived at eight in the morning, but the van arrived a day early. Our house was cleaned and empty by six Thursday evening. VIP quarters had been reserved for us next to the O' Club, but following the General's wishes - we made ourselves scarce - staying at the Blackstone and dining out downtown. Contract painters from her restaurant arrived at our house the following morning and carpet cleaners late Friday afternoon. We left the keys to Herbie's house with his Chef and drove eastward - early in the morning on a cold windy Nebraska day. As we crossed over the Missouri into Council Bluffs I asked, "Do you think we'll miss Omaha?" "I'll miss the people." "Yes - they're friendly." "I'm looking forward to fixing up our new home and of course - our wedding in June." "Are you kidding?" "Only about the wedding. Lets not stop at your farm. Drive on to Washington. I want to look around and see what I missed. We need our farmhouse wired and plumbed so your boys can move

in. I have a contractor dropping by the farm - early Monday morning." "Where do you want to stay? At the Watergate?" "Not this time. I want to stay close to the farmhouse. We'll look for a place in McLean or maybe Arlington. I want the house fixed in seven days." "That's a mighty tall order and almost impossible in Virginia - Pilgrim."

Six days later - Bobbie Jean and I stood at the bottom of the farmhouse lane with our arms around each other - looking up at our partially remodeled farm home. Bobbie Jean shook her head, "Even I didn't think it was possible." "Only because the plumbing and wiring had been replaced by the last owners." "I can live with it while we finish the interior." "I thought we were done." "All three bathrooms have to be brought up to my standards and I want a gourmet kitchen." "Two of everything?" "Yes - and I'd like to refinish the hardwood floors." "I don't want to move our furniture again." "First things first. I want to fix up the stables." "Are we going to have horses?" "Are you certain you really want sheep?" "Forty acres is a lot to mow and it's too hilly for anything else. At least the grass is dormant until spring. What about the stables?" "I want to bring them up to my standards. It will be a great place for our boys to play." "If I know you - we'll be able to eat off the floor. Ours must be one of the last working farms in McLean." "It's becoming suburbia." "You purchased it as an investment." "I know, but I'm growing attached to it." "Glad the fall weather is warm enough to leave the windows open and air out the paint smell." "Speaking of airing out - how about a night out. Buy me dinner at Harvey's in DC tonight?" "Great - and move out of our motel tomorrow. Paint smell should be bearable by then." "I hope so. Nanny is flying in with our boys tomorrow afternoon." "I'll call ahead. Reservations at six-thirty?" "Excellent - when do you plan on reporting in for your new job?" "We're ahead of schedule. I'll spend a couple of weeks getting our grounds up to snuff."

Two weeks of work around the farm wasn't enough time. There were more than enough honey-dos to keep me busy and out of Bobbie Jean's hair. I cleaned out the ditches on our side of the road and rented a bushwhacker to chop down small trees - bramble and underbrush. Least that's what the guy called it when I rented it. Sort of like a huge lawn mower - but with long thick blades. Hooked it to the power takeoff on the back of my tractor. Only took four days to wipe out five years of neglect on our forty acre farm. On Monday of the second week - Bobbie Jean's contractor built a small shelter - open on three sides - on the southeast side of our stables for my sheep. We took delivery of one ram and five ewes on Friday - near the end of my vacation. Our lawn mowers were now in place. Bobbie Jean's contractor remodeled our farmhouse in stages - starting with the kitchen and master bathroom. The stable was the last item on her list of priorities and by the plans - looked more like a giant rec room. I was more than ready to report into work. My body needed time to recuperate and Bobbie Jean wanted me out from under her feet - so she could redecorate in peace.

My orders were to report to Air Force incoming personnel on the fifth floor at the Pentagon. It was not an easy trip to get there. I parked in North Parking - at least a mile from the building and entered on the opposite side of where I should have - near the Pentagon Officer's Athletic Center. I soon discovered the Pentagon is a medieval maze of corridors and stairs - either blocked off or lead to nowhere. Figured it became so - as competing fiefdoms captured more territory. After failing to discover a shortcut to the other side of the building - I gave up and walked the long way - around E Ring. Thirty minutes later - after walking into more dead end stairwells than I could count - I found incoming personnel. There I discovered - too late - that a walk around A ring is the shortest route to circumnavigate in the Pentagon. Processing into the Pentagon was uncommonly quick for one

used to a military mind set. I reported to my new office - conveniently located - in a blocked off hall on the fourth floor - eighth corridor.

Discovered that my office was located inside a security vault. So I had to telephone my new boss - a Colonel Mac Muddle to get in. He opened the vault door with a frown, "Welcome aboard - Major Ropp. The funny wing you replaced cashiered out of here two months ago. Major Black has your job for the interim. He's in the middle of a close hold project for Southeast Asia - so the turnover may take awhile. While you're waiting I want you to inventory the safes." I looked toward the interior of this blocked off corridor - saw cubicles and safes stretched out before me - along both sides of the wall and two deep at the back. "Did you have any trouble finding us?" "Not after I found in-processing at personnel, but before that I must have been lost a dozen times. This building is made up of walled-off corridors - just like this one." "A funny wing getting lost? My-oh-my - what is this world coming too? Do you have any questions?" "What am I supposed to do?" "Why do the right thing - of course - do the right thing. My-oh-my - a funny wing getting lost. What is this world coming too?"

I walked along the row of cubicles until I found Major Black's desk and introduced myself. He looked up, "So you're the new guy who's replacing me at the agency. I'm Paddy Black. What did Muddle ask you to do?" "Inventory the safes." "You'll be at that for several months. Hasn't been done in years - long overdue. When it's appropriate - I'll have you follow along with me." "When do I go solo?" "We'll see - we'll see. Watch out for Muddle. He's a frustrated pilot trapped in a land of funny wings. Heed my warning - stay out of his way after lunch - he's a mean drunk." "When do I start my inventory?" "After I introduce you to the rest of the office. We walked along a double row - twelve

cubicles in all. Paddy introduced me to each occupant - all funny wings like myself. Somehow - I didn't envision myself winding up in this situation, but as long as I was here - it was to my advantage to learn all I could. And - as all the office files were in safes - an inventory was as good a place as any to start. So - I began with safe number one - after spending an hour looking for the combination. I ended the day barely half way through the top drawer of a four drawer safe. The first lesson I learned was - not to ask anyone to review a document. The delay would stretch my work into late winter or early spring.

When I drove up the lane to our farmhouse - Bobbie Jean strolled out on the front porch, "Welcome home my Pentagon warrior. Did you find your way around the building on your first day in the fray?" "Just barely. What a maze." "Did you discover what you were sent here to do?" "Not yet - in a couple of months - maybe. But - I will know what everyone in my office does." "Going through the files again?" "How did you guess?" "That's why I get the big bucks in our family. You must have discovered something." "Only that no one has thrown a thing away since the office opened. I'll destroy a lot of outdated classified information by the time I'm through." "Will you eliminate the need for safes?" "By the time I finish?" "At least a third of them. I am a little down though - feel like my wings have been clipped." "My poor soldier - knocked off his perch by his peers again." "Has to be our military's way of training staff officers." "Let me show you our new kitchen." "Is it finished?" "No - but the cabinets are in."

"Notice the fireplace?" "Looks new." "Won't have to re-brick it. All it needed was a good cleaning. Appliances are coming tomorrow and the floor will be tiled next week." "Why didn't you tile first." "Couldn't get anyone to tile until next week. Tell me about your boss." "Colonel Mac

Muddle is his name. Don't worry about inviting him over. He won't be around long. He spends his lunch hour tapping the source of all knowledge." "At work?" "Came back from lunch smelling like one of your Mississippi stills. Then there is Major Paddy Black." "Nick nack Paddy Black - give the frog a loan?" "Another straight line delivered." "And accepted." "Major Black is temporarily occupying my job." "Doesn't sound promising." "It isn't, but reading through all of the files should be. How is Nanny adjusting to her new home?" "We don't have to worry about monitoring contractors. She's making sure the job is done right. Mother may have a hard time getting her to come back." "How so?" "I've been bringing her up to speed on my corporation. She's all ready taken over bookkeeping and taxes and is doing a better job than my former accountant."

After a week of wandering the Pentagon corridors in silence - passing by one eyes to the floor denizen after another - I decided to smile and say hello to every person I passed. The first two folks I greeted almost jumped out of their shoes, "This was going to be a fun way to pass my time in hell. During the second week - I went looking for my Operations counterparts down below - in the land of a purple water fountain - in the bowels of the Pentagon. I wandered around the ground floor looking for a staircase that would lead down. Had to give up and use a non working narrow escalator - the only way I could find to go down two floors to the basement. After passing by the purple water fountain for the third time - I stopped and asked for directions to the Reconnaissance office. When I finally found it - no one was in. I did find an Army map storage area - by mistake - so far underground - its denizens were losing their eyesight. The brochure said that any location inside the Pentagon is within a twenty minutes walk from any other location. I soon discovered this was only true if you knew your location and knew where the hidden stairs were and which corridors were

blocked off - which I didn't. Most of its 26,000 inhabitants never left their area of influence - staying within their own fiefdom. Lunch with Bobbie Jean was out of the question. Walking to my car in North Parking took half-an-hour and a drive to a decent restaurant another thirty minutes.

Three weeks of shuffling papers and I had worked my way up to safe number ten - gaining a vast knowledge about my office, but not knowing anything about my new job. I soon discovered a number letters signed by generals who had long since retired. Almost half of the documents were over five years old and of no historical value. Still - I had great difficulty getting the current holder of a particular file to let go. Persistence finally won out - or it may have been - no one else wanted to join me in bottom feeding. Inventory of classified data was looked upon the same as an officer pulling latrine duty. Since I had gone through this drill in Nebraska - I looked upon it as an opportunity to excel. And - as in all staff work - knowledge is power. And - not to worry about not knowing the background of actions taken in the past as no one knew. Wasn't long before I was up to speed on Intelligence programs and systems - keeping what was necessary and throwing out the extraneous. I was anxious to complete my work. Southeast Asia was heating up and I wanted to be in on the decisions about which reconnaissance system would do the best job. And - I still had twenty-four safes - to be inventoried.

Monday morning - two weeks and fifteen safes later - my call to duty came through. Bobbie Jean rubbed her eyes as she entered the kitchen, "What are you doing here. You should be at work by now. It's almost eight o'clock." "Coffee? Right out of a shepherd's pot." "Yes - but why?" "Free at last - thank God almighty - I'm free at last." "Dr. King's birthday is in January." "I have an appointment at CIA in an hour. Finally get to do real work." "Is this a

permanent thing?" "Oh - no. I'm not being assigned to CIA. I'm still in the Air Force. I'm being assigned to a USIB committee." "USIB?" "United States Intelligence Board." "A committee? You'll go crazy. Pour me a cup of coffee and I'll fix you a Virginia breakfast." "The whole US government is run by committee. What kind of breakfast?" "Ham so salty you'll have drink water all day. Eggs that are round in the middle - like potholes. Grits that stick to your ribs like marine clay and whole wheat toast - which is what you'll be if you don't start coming home before seven at night." I had to learn to eat grits - if only to keep Bobbie Jean happy, but I still didn't care for them.

Still smiling from Bobbie Jean's punch lines - I drove north from Chain Bridge Road on the George Washington Parkway and turned off at the Fairbanks Highway Research Station exit sign. I located visitor parking near the geodesic dome and entered the visitor's reception area. After several photos were taken and my identification verified - I was escorted to my Committee office and introduced to the Secretary - the only permanent member. In less than an hour - I was back on the Parkway - driving south to the Pentagon. The Parkway between Chain Bridge Road and the 14th Street bridge was almost empty this time of day - except for empty headed Congressional Staffers - Senators and Congressmen. Just past the Memorial Bridge stood the five sided swamp - its sandstone stained brindle by the fumes from Shirley Highway and the Pentagon power plant. Inside - the floors shined from years of wax on top of wax. And the walls mirrored the exterior with yellowed white paint stained rust - brindle and brown - like a limestone cave in Kentucky. Knowing that my inventory had to be complete before I could take over my new job - I worked through lunch.

At half past one - I walked to the fourth floor snack bar - just in time to get a deli sandwich before the line

closed down. Paddy Black wandered in and sat down with a cup of Pentagon coffee. Now - the only thing remarkable about Pentagon coffee is it is too boiling hot to drink - takes five minutes to cool down and tastes like dishwater when it does. Paddy Black looked like the cat with a canary - me - in its mouth, "How's your inventory coming along?" "I'll be finished in another week - if I'm lucky. Have seventeen empty safes when It's completed." "That much trash?" "We've got pack rats." "Be careful - you never know when an old document can cover your backside." "The documents I'm throwing out aren't useful enough to replace corn cobs in an outhouse. I wouldn't be surprised if I ran into a message from President Wilson to General Pershing." I excused myself to get a refill.

When I returned - Paddy offered to do something to help me that was a two months late, "If you find something you're not sure about - run it through me. Did you clear in at the Fairbanks Highway Station?" "Cleared in - met the Secretary this morning." "Have you been called up to the General's office?" "No - why?" "Air Force is looking for volunteers." "Southeast Asia?" "Looks like we're going in. Must be anticipating a buildup." "If we had any sense - it would be to build down. Mucking around in that swamp was a lost cause for the French - we won't fare any better." "You need to go there if you want your ticket punched for promotion. It's the only war we've got." "Ticket punched or body punched into a plastic body bag. Not a very good choice. Do you think we'll go in with guns blazing?" "Not with McNamara's policy of gradual escalation. Shouldn't be too bad if we tiptoe around the edges." "Two steps forward and one step back? We're in for a long walk if we follow his policy. Did you see the General?" "Have a security problem. Know too much. Can't afford to be captured?" "Does that include me - too?" "As soon as you signed in at the agency." "If we really do get involved - this war is going to last a long

time and our clearances won't keep us out of it. Not if we continue to use one year rotations and back fill with TDY - temporary duty personnel." "We're too smart to fight wars with personnel on temporary assignment." "Hope your right." I checked my watch, "Need to get back to the vault if I'm going to complete my inventory."

As we walked down A corridor to the vault - I invited Major Black and his wife to our farmhouse for dinner Saturday evening. "Should be able to make it. Have to check with the wife." After I returned - I decided to take time out. If the Air Force was hot after volunteers - something important had to be going down. Several phone calls later - I had to admit, "Paddy was right - they are looking for volunteers. And our Chief of Staff - General LeMay is in hot water for not giving McNamara's policies his full support." I found what Tucker would call a reliable source - in the basement. Another expatriate from SAC reconnaissance with his ear tuned into Pentagon politics. Lieutenant Colonel Wilson Wrangle had flown high and fast in a photo-recon bird under my old boss - Colonel Black Bird. He was a kick the tires - light the fires type, "You worked for Black Bird - too. Hell of a boss. What do you want to know about my hero - LeMay?" "Need to know what's going down in Southeast Asia. Where does he stand?" "Rather not talk here. Lets go upstairs to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee."

We sat down in the front of the cafeteria - just up the ramp from the Concourse - where all the shops are. Wrangle asked, "Where is Black Bird these days?" "He was at SAC Headquarters, but he's leading a squadron of F-4s to Saigon sometime soon." "The recon office will let me know where he is. I volunteered when my Ops General called me in. Rather fight under someone who wants to do the job - not just fill squares. You asked about LeMay. Rumor has it that McNamara tried to get rid of him - not once, but twice. LeMay said we

should destroy the North's port of Haiphong. Also wanted to take out the dikes. Figured if they couldn't get supplies shipped in and their fields were flooded - they'd be too busy to support the Vietcong. He's right. That war would come to a screeching halt. Post misquoted him as saying he wanted to bomb them back to the stone age. I carry a copy of the full text in my billfold." He handed it to me -

*"My solution to the problem would be to tell them frankly that they've got to stop their aggression, or we're going to bomb them back into the Stone Age."*

I handed it back, "They did a number on our boss. Problem is - he's right, but it isn't politically popular." "And it goes against McNamara's policies. He didn't endure himself to McNamara when he didn't go along with the F-111 and fought cancellation of the B-70. If our bird is so bad - why are the English and French copying it for a commercial airliner?" "You don't think he's long for the Pentagon?" "Only a matter of time before LeMay retires." "Wouldn't blame him if he did. Can you imagine - we're going to fight a war wearing red coats and march down the middle of the road." Wrangle laughed, "And the Vietcong will wear brown - hide behind the trees and pick us off - one at a time."

As I spun the combination lock on the safe - securing it for the night. Paddy came over, "Did you find out who is pushing us into the Southeast Asia quagmire?" "According to the guys in Plans its the civilians at State - the National Security Council and Robert Strange McNamara. And our Army has discovered a new way to fight. They're going to scatter out in small cavalry units to counter the guerrillas in the countryside." "Isn't that how Custer got clobbered at Little Bighorn?" "Absolutely - and when the Cong mass enough troops - our units will be picked off one by one."

I polished off my last remaining safe inventory by five-thirty Friday evening and arrived home - late again. Bobbie Jean was waiting - standing out in the cold on the front porch - hands on hips, "You were supposed to leave early. You should have been home an hour ago. We have guests arriving in a few minutes." "Forget about Paddy Black and his wife. They won't be able to make it." "That leaves only Mr. Tubbs and Lisa." "And don't worry about Tucker arriving early. He won't find his way here without stopping and asking for directions." "You sent him a very detailed map." "Mark my words - thirty minutes after he's scheduled to arrive - Tuck will call from the corner gas station and ask for directions. What are you serving our guests tonight?" "Nothing special - an easy meal to prepare. Pasta with chicken breasts cooked in salsa. With the Blacks canceling - I'm glad I didn't hire a caterer." "You cook better than the last one we had." "Hurry and change out of your uniform. I want you to greet our guests and keep them entertained while I finish preparing dinner."

At exactly six-thirty Tucker phoned from the corner gas station and asked for directions , "I have the map you sent, but it's flat and I see nothing but rolling hills and forest along these roads." "Which way are you pointed?" "Don't know. We've been driving around in circles." "Drive north from the gas station - turn left - count three hills and turn right at the bottom of the next valley. I've marked the entrance to our drive with a wooden sign - **JRL Ranch**." "What does JRL stand for?" "First letters of my boy's names - JR and RL." "Which way is north?" "Can you see the afterglow of the setting sun?" "Yes." "Put it on your left shoulder and you'll be facing north. Watch out for my sheep when you turn in. They tend to wander." "You have sheep in the middle of McLean?" "Have to do something to keep the grass short. Bobbie Jean purchased forty acres of rolling hills." "Sheep in McLean? Which way is north?"

I watched Tucker's pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible weave up our lane - dodging a ewe and stopping when my ram decided to challenge his radiator. We met on my front porch, "See you just missed one of my sheep." "You weren't kidding about your woolly lawn mowers. Where's Bo Peep?" "In the kitchen fixing your dinner. How do you like our little home on the range?" Before Tucker could answer - Bobbie Jean opened the door and ushered us all into her kitchen, "We're going to dine in here tonight. What do you think of my farm?" Tucker grinned, "Picturesque, but you can't plow rocks and trees. Outside of Johnny's sheep - what are your plans for it?" Bobbie Jean couldn't resist, "Why we'll do what every red blooded Virginian does with his land." "Plant tobacco?" "Of course not. We'll subdivide it when we're ready - sell it to Yankees for ten times more than it's worth and move south. But for now - this farm will be a wonderful place for our twins to grow up." "Can we see the boys?" "Johnny - take our guests to the play room while I garnish our hors d'oeuvres."

When we returned - Bobbie Jean motioned for us to sit at the counter overlooking the cooking area - separating it from the fireplace and dining area. She served smoked salmon and a Chinese style barbecue ribs, "Johnny, pour Lisa a glass of white wine. I'll show her the rest of the house while you two armchair generals spin your war stories." I poured Tucker a mug of English Stout and Lisa a glass of white wine. Tucker took a sip, "This is good stuff." "Only the best for our muckraking friend." "What's the latest news from the Pentagon?" "The brass have asked for volunteers to go to Southeast Asia. Are we escalating?" "Gradual - gradual." "Stupid." "Any word on the status of LeMay?" "Rumor has it he isn't long for his job as Chief of Staff. Is McNamara going to can him?" "Can't - too much grass roots support - or he would have been gone by now. Know he's crosswise with the Secretary. Anyone else?" "Understand he has serious

problems with the JCS Chairman." "That figures. MACV - General Harkins in Saigon and Maxwell Taylor are both active supporters of McNamara's tit for tat gradual escalation policy. Your rumor is probably right. LeMay is too much of an iron ass to stick around when State - DOD and Johnson freeze him out of the decision making process." "From what I understand at the Pentagon - the thorn in LeMay's paw is civilian control of bombing policy. McNamara's band wants to pick a nonessential targets to get the North's attention. LeMay says that's how politicians lose wars. He wants to destroy the North's ability to support the Vietcong - not drop a few bombs on the jungle."

I refilled Tucker's mug and poured another glass of wine for myself. Tucker polished off the last of Bobbie Jean's Chinese spareribs. I never ceased to be amazed at his incredible appetite. Tucker wiped his hands on a napkin and asked, "What do you think the solution is?" "I haven't changed my mind. There isn't any. We can't win friends and influence the natives with bullets." "What do the troops think?" "Majors and below aren't keen about taking a years vacation in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Lieutenant Colonels up are blinded by an opportunity for promotion." "Do you have a feel for what the other Service Chiefs think?" "I believe Shoup and McDonald have the same feelings as LeMay, but they're all outvoted by McNamara. I'm not certain about the rest of our Air Force generals. Everyone below the Chief keeps their mouths closed. Who do you feed my thoughts too at the Post?" "Phil Graham." "You go to the top?" "Don't worry. Even if he doesn't agree with LeMay on this issue - Phil still believes he is our number one warrior. Did I here you right? Three of the Chiefs oppose McNamara's policy?" "Yes - however your boss supports McNamara." "Not everyone is perfect." "Can you change his mind?" "Not on this one. If this war keeps growing - we'll wind up with a lot of dead soldiers." "I know my history - the Vietnamese

won't fold under the pressure of gradual escalation. Don't we know those folks can read and understand?" "LeMay is right. If we threaten to eliminate their economy - they'll arrive at an accommodation - even if it is temporary." "To the Vietnamese - temporary means decades. They survived occupation by the Chinese - Japanese and French and they'll outlast us."

Bobbie Jean and Lisa returned from their walkabout, "I see my ribs were a hit. I'm glad you saved some smoked salmon for Lisa. Now - no more of your war talk until after dinner. Johnny - throw another log on the fire and Mr. Tubbs - you can help Lisa carry dinner to the table. On our farm we dine family style. We pass the serving plates." Dinner was superb - as usual. Bobbie Jean had supervised several of the countries best Chefs and her sauces showed the results. Tucker ate everything in sight and more. While our ladies cleaned up - I poured coffee and cognac and we sat around the kitchen table. I chided Tucker, "Now you know where the phrase Kitchen Cabinet came from." "Discussions around the table? But - we don't make things happen." "I don't, but you can influence them." "Even an editor gets edited. What do you think of the Vietnamese countryside?" "Not an expert. You know more about it than I do. I haven't been there. I've tasked reconnaissance missions. It's almost impossible to see into a jungle from the air. The books say never to get involved in a guerrilla war between religious factions, but we've gone over that time and again."

Bobbie Jean asked Tucker, "What about dominoes? Will all of Southeast Asia collapse if we pull out?" "That's a load of crap from State. I don't trust those guys. They see the world through Ivy League eyes. We should look at the Vietnamese world through their eyes - not ours. Hurt their economy - LeMay's way - may be the only way out, but it will never sell. So - we're back to square one. Supply the South

Vietnamese and get out of the way. Let them win or lose on their own. Bottom line - get our troops out of there. When I was over there covering the war - I traveled extensively outside of Saigon. It's a different story from the one we're being fed by State and the White House. Our officials in Saigon are feeding our folks bad data - distorting the information they send here." I added, "And once we've been given a mission and its constraints - we'll find a way to make it a success - even if it isn't." Bobbie Jean asked Tucker, "What do you think will happen?" "McNamara's ego won't let him admit there isn't a solution to winning - so he won't let go. And Johnson doesn't want to be labeled as a loser." I interrupted, "You and I are beating a dead horse. We're back to where square one. We began this discussion at the Watergate." "Speaking of dead horses - I have to see a man who owns one. Which way is it?"

When Tucker returned he changed the subject from Vietnam to systems policy, "You really raked McNamara's systems analysis concept over the coals. Congress thinks it's the greatest thing since sliced bread. If it's as bad as you say it is - why does it have so much support?" "Most of our lawmakers are lawyers - or accountants who believe filling out a sheet of paper is doing real work. At the peak of World War II the Air Corps had five people approving hundreds of thousands of airplanes. Mark my words - if we keep on piling up paper as we're doing today - we'll have hundreds of thousands of people approving five airplanes. It looks like Calvin Coolidge will finally get his wish." "And he wished for?" "Coolidge told his War Department to buy only one airplane and let the fliers take turns." "If I understand you - you're saying the Defense Department will spend all of its funds on studies and none will be left to buy airplanes." "Or damn little. We can build paper factories or we can build hardware. Looks like we've chosen paper." "I forgot to ask you what our troops are thinking about fighting in

Asian jungles." "I don't think they've decided one way or the other. Most of them are not involved and could care less." "Will they support a war over there?" "They'll fight if told too, but support? We'll do our duty, but might not care for the conditions." "One year rotations and temporary assignments?" "One way to prevent a mutiny. Our minds will be on getting home - not the futility of it. With gradual escalation - we'll be so busy fighting snakes and crocodiles we'll forget our mission was to drain the swamp. There will be no corporate memory of pitfalls and minefields. All our troops will care about is surviving and coming home. My turn to visit the man who owns a horse."

I returned as Bobbie Jean served dessert. Tucker gave me his best Mad Magazine smile, "That wasn't so bad - was it? All I'm interested in is scuttlebut - not classified." "And I'm the Tooth Fairy." "I play by the rules. If I need classified data I have official sources to go too." "If the Post was in a horse race - your editors would cut across the infield to win." "We won't sacrifice National Security on the altar of Journalism. I don't need too. Like I said - the Executive Branch plays I've got a secret with us daily." "Your boss hard over to support the administration." "Yes, but if their policies fail we'll be all over them like a blanket." "Right - if it works it's on page one." Tucker laughed, "And if it doesn't it's next to the Obits. Bobbie Jean - tell me about your Watergate condos. Do you have them leased?" "Long term to diplomats. Lisa gave me the idea." She whispered, "Are you and Lisa an item?" Tucker blushed, but didn't answer.

As Tucker got up to leave - he pulled me aside, "I report direct to Phil. He knows I'm opposed to our increased involvement. That's why my assignment to Saigon was cut short." "And I thought it was because you kept getting lost in the Delta." "MACV wouldn't let me out of town without an

escort and a driver." "Managed news?" "They tried." "You didn't answer Bobbie Jean's question." Tucker grinned as he whispered, "Double your pleasure - double your fun." Bobbie Jean asked, "What are you two doing for Christmas?" Tucker looked at Lisa and they both shrugged. "Why don't you spend Christmas eve with us? You can watch our boys tear wrappings off their packages in the morning." "Best offer we've had this year. After tonight's meal - I'm looking forward to another one at Christmas. Now - so I won't get lost - will you give me directions to Watergate?"

After we watched Tucker turn the wrong way onto the main road - Bobbie Jean closed the door and gave me a full body squeeze. After a lingering kiss - she led me to the kitchen. "I'll make you Herbie's Irish coffee - if you tell me what you know about Tucker and Lisa." "Not certain if Tucker is serious." "Lisa says Tucker proposed and she has accepted." "That rascal danced all around my question." "Mine - too. Do you think he has a tapeworm? I've never seen anyone as thin as he is eat so much." "Metabolism and nerves." The phone rang. Tucker was at a pay phone in Great Falls, "You can't give directions worth a damn. I'm at a closed gas station." "How did you get there?" "Followed a roundabout route." "Can you see a road sign?" "Georgetown Pike." "Follow it southeast. It runs into Chain Bridge Road and that runs into George Washington Parkway." "Where did I make my mistake?" "When you drove the wrong way out of our lane." Bobbie Jean laughed, "Lisa will have to learn navigation." "She all ready knows how. Tucker will have to learn how to listen." "What was Tucker interested in?" "The Pentagon gossip mill." "And they say women can't keep a secret."

Tucker gave Lisa a rock large enough to cut glass at our farmhouse on Christmas eve. Lisa and he were now more than an item, but had not set a wedding date. She was concerned that the Post might send him back to Saigon. The battle for

Ben Hoa Air Base - eighteen miles from Saigon - in November brought the war home to the Pentagon. We were seeing a sharp upward turn in the number of troops and an equivalent degree upward on McNamara's gradual escalation curve. Things didn't bode well for our Vietnamese venture. Right after New Years - I began a new career as Major Black's caddie. I carried his briefcase - riding shotgun on classified data - to our Committee meetings at the agency. Bobbie Jean was right - I was not cut out to sit and listen to drivel. Our meetings droned on - hour after hour - without much of anything being accomplished.

A long expected event occurred in mid-January. Paddy Black and I returned late on a Monday afternoon from the agency to an office in turmoil. Colonel Mac Muddle had been canned after returning to the office from a liquid lunch - dead drunk. Before anyone could coral him - he was on his way to the General's office - swearing and yelling. His voice carried all the way to the snack bar. The Air Police escorted him to Andrews Air Force Base. After he dried out - he was given an offer he couldn't refuse - retirement our else.. Everyone - except me - moved up a slot.

I was still carrying Major Black's bag. And because of the stellar work I had performed on the branch classified inventory - my reward was to inventory all of the classified documents in the General's office. Paddy Black was all heart, "Busy hands get all the good jobs." "Thanks for the vote of confidence. When do I go solo at the agency?" "Soon." "Will you sign off on my inventory sheets for the General's office?" "No - have someone from his office do it. I'll give you the combination to my safe so you can get up to speed on your new job, but don't destroy any documents." I was moving up. His was the only safe out of bounds on my last inventory. I dug into Paddy's safe and boned up. It was just as dull as our Committee meetings.

On a cold winters day - late in January - Tucker left a message for me to call him at the Post. I dialed his private number, "What's up?" "Need to talk to someone who isn't in my business." "You need a sounding board?" "Right. Can you get away for lunch?" "I'm on another make-work project. Where and when?" "You know where the Market Inn is?" "DC near the railroad track by the old market." "See you there at noon." "How's Lisa?" "Getting anxious about living together and not being married. Wants me to fly to her home and meet her folks." "It is serious."

I handed the parking lot attendant my keys. Tucker was inside at the bar. "Care for a drink?" "Make mine coffee. My office has a very low tolerance for drinking on the job." "Have you been here before?" I looked around at photos of naval ships adorning the walls and furniture that looked like early prohibition and said, "No - it's the first time I've seen a parking lot attendant with a shotgun. Must be a rough neighborhood." "Wouldn't walk around here at night without an armed escort. Clam chowder is to die for here." "What did you want to discuss?" "Remember Diem's overthrow and the chaos that followed?" "Four new governments in less than a year. Kennedy's folks really screwed the pup. That got us up to our ankles in the swamp. Are we having problems?" "No one will talk openly about it, but the war is going badly for the South. We have over twenty thousand advisors now." "Wow - the number is going up?" "Big time." "Sending in more advisors won't do us any good. We'll have more troops than our allies." "Lost cause time. The peasants will be so busy chasing after us with pitchforks - they won't have time to listen to our political message." The bartender interrupted, "Are you ready to order?"

Tucker continued, "The South Vietnamese Army is fighting a guerrilla army supported by peasants. We're joining a fight with both hands tied behind our back. The Joint Chiefs

are the key. If they oppose sending more troops - McNamara will have to throw in the towel." "If they don't?" "We will be in a war longer than any in memory. I want you to keep your ears tuned to the rumor mill. If LeMay retires - you know what I'm thinking." "Phil doesn't pay attention to you." "History. If this war goes into the toilet - we need to know who flushed us into the sewer." "The handle has been pulled. LeMay is on a tour - visiting Air Force units all over the world." "What does that mean?" "He's retiring soon. Our Chiefs visit when they take over and when they leave." Our lunch arrived. We dined in silence with an occasional, "Damn!"

As we walked to our cars I asked Tucker, "Set a date for the wedding?" "Middle of March. Are you and Bobbie Jean still going to stand up for us?" "Sure, but you should know the last time we did - the couple separated after a year." "Bonnie the Body Beautiful." "How did you know?" "I have her car. Lisa and Bobbie Jean tell their own war stories while we're spinning ours. Is Bonnie that good?" "The best there is - not one blemish." "I'll see you a week from Saturday. Bobbie Jean will fill you in." "Are you going out of town?" "Lisa and I are flying to Denmark to meet her family." "Ingrid - too?" "I hope so." "You are living on the edge." "Hands off time since Lisa captured me."

*"What do you know about this business?"  
the King said to Alice. 'Nothing,' said  
Alice. 'Nothing whatever?' persisted the  
King. 'Nothing whatever,' said Alice"*

# 16

Major Black's note was short and to the point -

*"Meet me at the POAC if you're back  
before two. I'll sign you up. I'm on  
racquetball court three."*

*Paddy*

I checked my watch - it was one-thirty. If I walked fast - I'd make it before two. I was going to join the Pentagon Officer's Athletic Center, but hadn't gotten around to it. Besides a gym - swimming pool - weight room - courts for all the ball games - lockers and showers - the POAC had three distinct advantages - check cashing for out of town banks - barbers that knew how to cut hair and a cafeteria that served beer. I stopped by the office to join up. While filling out the form - I felt a tap on my left shoulder and turned around, "Bidwell - Sergeant Bidup Bidwell - how long has it been and what the hell are you doing here?" "Same old Johnny. See that you made Major." "And Lieutenant Colonel." "When do you pin on your silver leaves?" "First of April. Your fingerprints are all over both my promotions." "That's why I'm an NCO and you're not. We're capable of anything." "And crafty enough to bear watching." "That's why we have officers. Finish filling out your application and stop by my office." "You run this place?" "Lucky me - I'm the Army's Manager." "An Air Force sergeant running an Army facility?" I handed in my application with the required twenty-five dollar deposit and looked for Bidwell's office.

I found it in the entrance corridor behind an unmarked door. It made my General's office look shabby. Bidwell motioned for me to sit down and wait - while he finished a phone call. He hung up, "Poker game at a hotel in Middleburg tomorrow night. Have you settled in yet?" "Why didn't you give me a call?" "You were getting settled and my schedule got backed up." "How did you get this assignment?" "Skill and cunning. Got crossways with a member of the Texas Legislature when I was stationed in Austin. Seems he got shot in the foot at one of my poker games." "That happens a lot when you open a deck of cards. Where did you have the game?" "On my houseboat in the middle of the Base lake. Couple of skin divers boarded my boat and tried to rob the game." "Why were you holding a poker game in the middle of a lake?" "Had too - they closed my racetrack down." "Horse racing is illegal in Texas." "So I found out. There's a lot of itch down there that needs scratching. Texans would just as soon race Quarter Horses as eat." "How did you wind up here." "Not just me - it's how we wound up here. I arranged the sale of that pink and white Packard Caribbean convertible for my NCO friend at SAC Personnel and he got lucky in a poker game. When I called he hauled." "And me?" "Lets just say we accelerated your career. You were heading this way - anyway." "That promotion raised a few eyebrows." "Don't ask." "Don't tell."

Paddy Black knocked on the door and walked in - his hair still wet from the shower. I introduced him to Bidwell, "Meet the second richest NCO in the Air Force." Bidwell laughed, "What do you mean, second?" "Did you move up a notch to first?" "My poker playing buddy from Roswell is out of the service." "The one that owned all those laundries in New York City? Why? He loved it." "Served in Southeast Asia during the Second World War. Voted with his feet when he discovered we were going to be more than advisors." "I've been chasing that rumor down. Are you sure?" "Our President

is a big risk taker. Played a few games of chance with him in Austin. Has an ego as big as Texas." "So - you think we're going to do more than advise?" "We all ready are. You need a full sized locker. I'll put you in next to the movers and shakers. Most of them don't come down anymore. You'll have an area all to yourself." "Will you be free a week from Saturday?" "Should be back by then. Have to set up a poker game at Homestead Air Force Base outside of Miami this weekend. Four stars are having their annual meeting next week. Where did you buy?" "We have a forty acre farm in McLean." "Almost next store neighbors. I live across the river in Potomac. How is Bobbie Jean Langtry?" "Getting domesticated. Out of the hotel business." "Still have a piece of the Sands?" "As far as I know she does and a restaurant in Omaha." "Heard about it from my friends at SAC. Getting rave reviews. Is she going to hang onto it?" "Bobbie Jean doesn't care for absentee ownership, but if she sells - it will be to the Manager and their Chef. Will you see LeMay next week?" "Should. What's up?" "See if he's going to retire." "That's easy - all the signs say he is, but I'll check." "Trust, but verify." "Roger that."

As we rode the escalator up to the fourth floor - Paddy whistled under his breath, "Took me two years to get a full length locker. Where did you meet Bidwell?" "Roswell - New Mexico. He was my Gunner. Great troop. Only one in town with his own federal gambling stamp." As we walked along corridor eight - a line drawing - of the Air Force Art Collection lining the wall - caught my eye. The inscription caught my eye. I stopped and read, *"Gus - a fighter pilot and Lieutenant General - former Vice Commander of Air Force Systems Command."* It was an artfully done line drawing of the first Chimpanzee to fly in space. Paddy said, "Someone is going to get into trouble." "Don't think so. Most pilots I know have bad near vision and are too proud to wear glasses. Whoever

changed the caption knew his pilots." "What do you mean?" "It doesn't say former fighter pilot. None of them will ever admit they're over the hill." "But this is a Chimp." "Not even an astronaut Chimpanzee."

Dull work had fogged my mind, but I remembered to talk about our get together when I arrived home. I asked Bobbie Jean, "Have you decided what to serve Tucker and Lisa next Saturday?" "Your friend - Mr. Tubbs never said one word to me about getting together. Lisa mentioned that we should talk, but didn't say when. I'll give her a call." "You better do it tonight. They're flying to Denmark to meet her parents. Tucker said the wedding will be in March. Wants us to stand up for them." "Where?" "Don't know - could be here or Denmark." "This is all news to me. Do you have any other surprises?" "I joined the Athletic Center today. "Guess who I ran into." "There can only be one person that can make you smile like that - Sergeant Bidwell. Did you invite them over next Saturday?" "Yes - and I apologize for not telling you about it earlier." "Your punishment will be to barbecue steaks out in our stable." "Almost finished?" "Good enough to hold a party there. Why don't you phone Tucker at work while I finish cooking dinner."

I changed out of my uniform and dialed Tucker's private Washington Post phone number. "Who is this?" "Johnny." "Make it quick - I'm on a deadline." "LeMay's retiring." "Is it official?" "No, but as you say - I found a reliable source. You'll meet him at my house next Saturday. Be there at six-thirty." "I am getting depressed. We are heading into hell in a hand basket Have Lisa phone Bobbie Jean before you fly away to Denmark." "OOPS - I forgot to tell Lisa to call - earlier." "Anything you can do about Vietnam?" "Keep score. I'll bring wine." "Screw cap or corks?" "They have corks?" After Tucker hung up - Bobbie Jean asked, "What's that about screw caps or corks?" "The good news is that

dinner is on for a week from Saturday. The bad news is - Tucker is bringing the wine." "While your up - I'll take white."

After dinner - as we huddled by the fire - Bobbie Jean wondered, "How can it feel so cold here when the temperature is above forty degrees?" "Somewhere in Virginia in the rain." "Is that why?" "Humidity and it's also a song title. Chill goes right through to your bones." "Aren't your sheep cold?" "Just their noses. They huddle up in the lean-to we built for them. Should be more than enough shelter for this climate." "Don't lambs arrive in the spring?" "Don't worry - if the weather turns bad - we have a large farm kitchen and two boys who would love to feed them." "Lambs in the kitchen!" "Only poor little lambs that have gone astray." "Baa! Yaa! Baa!" "I'll spend my life feeding you straight lines." "Father read me to sleep with Kipling."

Bidwell phoned from his POAC office Monday afternoon, "Back sooner than I expected." "What happened?" "Four stars cut their winter meeting short." "Any news about LeMay?" "He made a short speech and they all packed up and went home." "No poker game?" "Night before with the early birds. You were right. He is retiring. Hate to see a real leader go, but all things must pass." "The passing of an age of warriors. Wonder how long it will take the fighter pilots to eliminate strategic bombers and SAC?" "Can't be anyone around that crazy." "You're right. McNamara's system analysis will do it for them." "How so?" "Drive up the cost so we won't have more than a hundred or so bombers left." Speaking of fighter pilots - are you the one who promoted our astronaut Chimpanzee to three stars?" "You mean our new three star - Gus?" "I read the caption on the line drawing last week." "Is it still up on the wall?" "Sure is. I have a three star that's dogging me here. Figured he wouldn't carry his glasses with him." "Are you behind it?" "Don't

ask." "Don't tell." "Did they mention his replacement?" "Gus or LeMay?" "LeMay - you sly dog." "No one knows. They're all jockeying for position. How do you like your locker?" "Raised a few eyebrows of several generals and admirals when they saw a major amongst them." "I know. The complaints came straight to me. Had to inform them that there is supposed to be no rank on the playing fields." "Try getting a tee time at Andrews on Saturday morning." "I can take care of that." "You won another pro shop?" "Sold it back to the Pro at one third of retail. What time Saturday night?" "Six-thirty. Hope your wife is coming - too." "Of course. She can't wait to give you a hard time."

I completed my inventory of the General's classified files late Thursday evening. Outside - a slate gray Ohio type winter day had turned into a Nebraska pitch black night. I noticed the beginning of a winter storm - snow flakes falling outside - through the inner courtyard windows. I crunched through new fallen snow to my car in North Parking. It stood waiting - lonely as the Blue Ridge Mountain's fabled lonesome pine. Turning north onto George Washington Parkway - snow driven by a noreast wind stuck to my windshield - in soap suds clumps. My wipers moved the snow about like a stick through kindergarten paste. A twenty-five minute drive turned into an hour of stop and go - reminiscent of bumper cars at a carnival. I must have sidestepped a dozen wrecks and stopped a dozen times to clean my windshield.

Bobbie Jean met me on the front porch with a broom and a smile, "Where is your car?" I brushed off the snow. "Had to park at the bottom of the lane." "Change into your work clothes. Not all of your sheep are in the lean-to." "Our ram?" "Sacked out - chewing his cud." "On a night like this - we need a Border collie. Before I play Nanook of the North - how many are missing?" "Two. How many are pregnant?" "All five ewes." I changed - bundled up and began my search.

It didn't take long. Both ewes were huddled - sheltered from wind and snow in a grove of trees not far from the lane. "Come on ladies. We need to get you under the lean-to and out of this storm." Herding them uphill - into wind driven snow made up my mind, "I have to buy a Border collie." I bedded them down with their kin - inside the lean-to. Each received a salt tablet treat. I chucked the ram under his chin, "Old fellow - you might as well be on welfare. A Border collie will get you in shape." I peeked inside the stables to check on Bobbie Jean's project. The stalls were gone. Large yellow Mexican tiles covered the floor. Two bathrooms had been installed. Besides a floor to ceiling fireplace - two potbellied stoves decorated both ends. She could entertain a large group - if they didn't sit down. She had installed a barbecue on the side of the fireplace - using the chimney for ventilation. "So that's where I'm going to cook steaks - Saturday."

I entered the farmhouse through our mud room - attached to the kitchen - hung up my outer garments and removed my boots. Bobbie Jean handed me a mug of hot coffee, "Find your sheep?" "In the south pasture - near the lane. They're all bedded down in the lean-to - including the ram." "All he wants to do is eat - sleep and chase after our ewes." "It's my fault. He was so frisky and obedient when he arrived - I changed his name from Copilot to Pilot and now all he wants to do is sit on his ass and 'Baa! Yaa! Baa!'" "You stole my punch line. What took you so long?" "I would have been in earlier, but I stopped to see how the stables are coming along. Will those pot bellied stoves keep the pipes from freezing?" "Lisa gave me the idea. They're made in Denmark. One or two good sized pieces of wood will burn all night." "Just to make sure - I better add a piece before we go to bed. Did you hear the weather forecast?" "We're in for at least a foot of snow. When it clears - the temperature is supposed to drop into the teens." "See the barbecue is in.

What's left to do?" "We'll add a bar and refrigerator. I may stain the interior wood. What do you think?" "The interior walls look good the way they are. Gives it a rustic look. I've lived in worse looking places. Besides - smoke leaking from the fireplace and barbecue will stain the wood. I wouldn't do anything until spring." "You sure have learned how to dance around with your answers." "Pentagon training and the survival tools of a male in marriage." "Is everyone still coming?" "They're looking forward to it. Has Lisa phoned?" "This afternoon. Boys are bathed and ready for bed. Why don't you tuck them in while I serve dinner."

Bobbie Jean smiled, "Hope you like soup and salad. Cold weather makes me hungry for a big pot of beef vegetable with lots of noodles." "You didn't answer when I mentioned buying a Border collie. A good dog will offer protection when I'm not around." "You'll have to take care of him." "Me and the boys. A barking dog will keep intruders away." "And herd your sheep to shelter when it's snowing. Major Black phoned before you arrived home. He wants you to call him before ten tonight. I was so worried about your missing sheep and your driving through the storm - it slipped my mind." "Did he mention a subject?" "No, but he lives in Springfield and the snow is getting deeper." "Probably wants me to cover for him at the Committee meeting tomorrow." "As long as you don't have to work another Saturday." "Soup is delicious. Old family recipe?" "Whatever is left over and stock."

Paddy Black was worried, "Can you believe this snow?" "After three years in Nebraska - yes. What's up?" "Roads are blocked. I barely made it home. Can you take my place at the Committee meeting tomorrow? I'll never make it there through this snow." "What time?" "Nine o'clock. I'll phone ahead and let them know you're my replacement." "Any special instructions?" "Make like a recorder and ask for a time out if anyone attempts to pull a fast one on us." "Understand -

do the right thing." "What do you mean by that." "Nothing - just an old saying that popped into my mind." As I hung up - Bobbie Jean asked, "Are you going to check on your sheep?" "I'll wait awhile and throw another log into your pot bellied stove fires. Don't want our pipes to freeze." "What did Major Black say to you?" "Wants me to take his place at the agency tomorrow. He doesn't think he'll be able to make it there." "The way the snow is blowing - you'll need a four wheel drive to get out of our lane." "We should buy one." "We'll talk about it after you try another variation of my Irish coffee." "Not Herbie's?" "See if you like it?" "Creamy and very smooth." "What's the difference." "Lighter beans and our favorite moonshine. How about a four wheel drive Jeep station wagon?" "Have you gone eastern." "Of course not. We don't own horses. What do you want to cook for our friends Saturday night?" "Barbecue ribs and beans?" "To messy. I'll marinate steak and you can prepare beans." "Beans - beans what a wonderful fruit." "The more you eat - the more you toot." "The more you toot - the better you feel." "Why can't we have beans for every meal?"

Bobbie Jean nudged my arm with her elbow, "Wake up. We both fell asleep in front of the fire. It's late. You check on your sheep while I turn down our bed." "Forgot to ask. Does the vent work in the stable?" "Fan was wired Monday. It will take out the excess smoke from your barbecue or the fireplace. Look outside - it's really coming down. We may not have to worry about what to cook Saturday." "Don't know about Saturday - tomorrow is the problem." "You'll get to try out your snow blade on our tractor. Make sure you don't dig into the packed stone." I bundled up in outer garments - still damp from my last trip outside. Snow was now blowing horizontal as the noreaster cranked up. For a minute I felt like I was back in the Aleutians. It was difficult to tell if this was new snow or snow that had all ready fallen. I searched for the stables. Finally found them when I was less

than ten feet away. My sheep were huddled together - warm as toast under the lean-to. They were covered with only a light skiff of the white stuff. Our Scandinavian stoves were living up to their billing, but I added one more log to fire - anyway. All was secure.

Bobbie Jean called out, "Close the door to the mud room. The cold air is whistling up our chimney. How are the sheep?" "Huddled together under the lean-to and warm as toast." "Come to bed - my toes are cold." "I was afraid of that. Right after I bank our fire and secure the screen." I knew - when the fire went out we'd lose heat as interior air flowed up the chimney. I undressed and hung up my clothes to Bobbie Jean's laughter, "Dry your hair. It's covered with snow." "Now you know what I'll look like when I'm old and gray. Set the alarm for six. I have a lot of clearing to do if I want to get out of our lane." "Don't you remember - you left your car at the bottom of the hill" "I'll have to be careful not to cover it up."

After making coffee - checking on my sheep and stoking the pot bellied stoves - I started the tractor and attached the blade. While it was warming up - I ducked back into the stables and warmed my fingers around a mug of hot coffee - warming on top of one of the pot bellied stoves. "Damn it's cold. And I left the farm so I wouldn't have to work outside in this kind of weather." I hopped back up on the tractor - under stars blinking brightly on a cold - crystal clear - morning sky. The noreaster had roared through and now snow was blowing into frozen drifts. Now a razor sharp wind from the northwest cut through my jacket like frozen glass. Snow drifted back as soon as my blade pushed it away. I made three unsuccessful round trips before returning the tractor to the barn. I poured fresh water for our sheep - retrieved my coffee mug from the top of a pot bellied stove - shivering through the snow - entered the mud room.

Bobbie Jean took the coffee mug out of my frozen fingers and refilled it, "You look like Jack Frost." "I feel like Scott." "Who is that - Sir Walter?" "No - the Scott who froze to death on his way back from the South Pole in Antarctica." "How did our Scandinavian stoves do last night?" "Still hot this morning, but the room temperature was down to fifty degrees." "We can either be rustic or insulate. Are you going to try plowing snow again." "Not unless the wind slows down. Like plowing water out there. Looks like I'm going to miss the Committee meeting." "How about breakfast?" "Bacon and eggs?" "And I have pancakes on the way." "You are becoming a Yankee wife." "I draw the line at home fries. Peek in on the boys and see if they're awake." "Will do. Have they given the weather forecast." "Look outside. It's freezing."

Both boys were sound asleep. Nanny shooed me away - when I lingered - too long in the doorway watching them. Bobbie Jean asked, "Are you going to be underfoot all day?" "More snow on the way?" "No, but the town is shut down. All government offices are closed until Monday morning." "That takes care of my meeting. The boys are asleep, but Nanny is awake." "I'll set three plates on the table while you throw another log on the fire."

It was midday Saturday before most of Virginia's main roads were cleared. Heavy frozen snow and ice - tossed by snow plows - blocked the entrance to my lane. I almost flipped my tractor - pushing snow away from the entrance into the ditch. As the tractor rotated backward on its wheels - I pushed the clutch in. The front end dropped down and the tractor slid sideways into the ditch. I eased it out slowly - creeping upward in low gear. Once warned twice cautious - I pushed it to the sides and over the road into the opposite drainage ditch. After parking the tractor back in the barn - I freed my car from the snow.

Bobbie Jean helped me out of my coat, "I watched you try to make a sled out of your tractor. Be careful out there." "Almost flipped it over on top of me. Been awhile since I've handled those big back wheels under these conditions." Can our guests make it up the lane tonight?" "Not without four wheel drive. I'll phone and tell them to park at the bottom of the hill. The surface will freeze solid before the sun sets." "Are you going to build a fire in the fireplace to warm up the stables" "I restoked the stoves. I'll set a fire about thirty minutes before they arrive." "We're going to dine there. Better start it at five. Do you want to invite Major Black?" "Not with this group. I'd rather not talk office politics. Lets keep it friendly."

Tucker and Lisa were the first to arrive - almost. He failed to take my instructions and attempted to drive up the hill. As a result - he stuck the rear end of his Packard convertible into the snow bank I made clearing the lane. I slid down hill on shoe leather to help, but was too late. Tucker had stuck his convertible's rear end deeper into the snow bank - trying to break free. "Tucker - hold on while I get my tractor out. Lisa - take my arm and I'll help you up the hill." When I returned - Tucker had his car's rear end stuck even deeper into the bank - his Packard looking like a cork in a bottle. He leaned out the window, "Pull me to the top. I should be able to navigate my way down hill when we leave." "If you could navigate - you'd still be in the Air Force." I attached my log chain to his front axle, "Put it in low and don't gun it. My tractor will act as an anchor. Use idle speed and try not to brake. If you begin to slide - steer in the direction of your slide." His pink Packard convertible popped out of the snow bank like a champagne cork under pressure. Reminiscent of a Hal Roach silent movie comedy - Tucker gunned his engine instead of using idle. He alternated driving up the chain and sliding backwards - turning in the opposite direction of his slide. Tuckers trip

uphill on my icy lane was like a sidewinder slithering over hot desert sand - careening off the snow banks on both sides of my lane.

Bidwell and his wife drove into our lane as Tucker's stuttering stop and go climb up the hill was in progress. He waited until Tucker turned off his engine before engaging four wheel drive and climbing the hill. As Bidwell helped his wife out of his Jeep station wagon - he called over, "Has your friend ever thought of driving a cab. He'd do great driving in downtown DC." "Do you recognize the pink Packard convertible?" Bidwell stopped in his tracks, "Is that Bonnie's pink and white psychedelic cloud?" "Fully restored by an ardent lover of antique autos." Tucker retrieved two gallon bottles of wine from his trunk, "Just shorten that to lover. Is this the previous owner?" "No - Bidwell is more like a used car dealer." "No way - I won it fair and square in a poker game." "And like Ali Babba - thirty-nine more used cars - an entire lot in New Mexico. Mr. and Mrs. Bidwell meet Tucker Tubbs of the Washington Post. Come on inside and get warm. What kind of wine is that - Tuck?" "The type we serve at weddings and funerals. It has a cork in it." "In a gallon jug?" "On sale in DC."

As is always the case - we adjourned to the kitchen. I poured while introductions were made by Bobbie Jean. I handed the ladies a glass of white wine and mugs of English ale to Tucker and Bidwell, "We're going to have a cookout in our stable. Bobbie Jean wants to show it off. She just had it remodeled." Bidwell grinned, "Can't you afford dining room furniture?" "Wait until you see her stable." Tucker feigned shock, "My God we're cooking horse meat." I needled right back, "Tonight we're all going to eat a little crow." Tucker laughed, "Touché! Now I remember Bidwell. I met him in Omaha. He introduced me to the Sergeant in Personnel that sold me my pink Packard cloud - a real collector's item. Did

you know it's worth five time more than what I paid for it?" Bidwell breathed a sigh of relief - barely audible under his breath. "When you purchased it, Johnny's and my stock in the Air Force shot up five-hundred percent. It was a win-win deal for all three of us. Nice place you have here, Johnny. Are you going to show off your twins?" Bobbie Jean broke in, "Johnny - take the steaks out to the stable and start the fire. I'll show our guests to the boy's playroom."

After the flames were almost out - I adjusted the coals - tenting them so they would all catch on. Bobbie Jean opened the stable door - leading a pack train of guests - each carrying a portion of our evening meal. She whispered to me, "Do you know where I stored the wine out here?" I nodded, "No" and she pointed to a storage locker - which at one time held grooming equipment, "We'll use Mr. Tubbs' wine for cooking." Tucker accepted a refill, "You didn't tell me that Bidwell is the world's greatest card player. Winning an entire used car lot is quite a feat." "I wouldn't be one if I admitted it. I really like your spread, Johnny. Forty acres in McLean - Bobbie Jean hasn't lost her business touch. I purchased several farms over in Potomac. Do you know where the Gore Mansion is?" "Senator Gore's place? North of Congressional Country Club on Potomac Road?" "Right - in that area. Good place to raise kids and it should be a good investment." "How about your Roswell real estate?" "I sold everything except my ranch near Riudoso before Walker closed. Got lucky - even I didn't expect Senator Chavez would die. Losing the Armed Services Committee Chairman was Walker's death knell." "Coals are ready. I better start cooking steaks or we won't have solid food tonight."

After dinner - the ladies adjourned to the kitchen in the farmhouse while we pulled our chairs in a semicircle in front of the stable fireplace. I poured cognac and Bidwell offered us each a cigar. Tucker declined, but I didn't, "Not

often I have a chance to smoke a gourmet cigar. These look like they're from Cuba. Isn't that against the law?"

Bidwell leaned over, "Don't ask." "Don't tell." We lit up and stared at the fire for what seemed like an hour, but was more like five minutes. Tucker broke our silence, "Well - troops - how does it feel to know what the power structure is doing in Washington and not being able to do anything about it?" I nodded, "And we're middle managers. Imagine how LeMay and the Joint Chiefs feel. They have an accountant for a boss - who is attempting to reduce their job to numbers." Bidwell asked Tucker, "Where did you meet Johnny?" "On his first day at Nav Training - south of Houston. He made it through by the skin of his teeth while I was fortunate enough to depart early and avoid the rush." I added, "The bums rush." "Johnny mentioned that you're well connected with the brass - even played poker with our President." "Mostly when he was with Mr. Sam. Met Lyndon in Dallas a few times at Mr. Sam's game. Later in Austin when he came by himself. This cognac is top drawer." "Thank Bobbie Jean. She stocks our liquor locker. You'll have to try some of her moonshine." "I still remember the bottle she gave me in New Mexico."

Bidwell blew a smoke ring toward the embers, "Mr. Sam held his cards close to the chest. Lyndon - well he was a risk taker." Tucker asked, "Have you been paying attention to the war in Southeast Asia?" "Hard not too. All of the brass I play poker with are involved." "What do you think about it?" "It's like a boulder rolling downhill - gaining momentum and out of control. We'll be crushed big time if we don't get out of the way." "Are we going to stay out?" "Doesn't look like it. Most of the wheels I know spend all of their time trying to figure out how to find and fight an elusive force. Outside of LeMay - I don't think a one of them has looked into whether we should be there or not. They leave that up to the civilians." "What do you think?" "Only way we can win is with our troops. If we have to fight it

and use just a little more force each time the enemy attacks - we'll be in that jungle forever - a stupid way to fight. If it were me I'd either kick ass or get out." "Is LeMay going to retire?" "All the signs say Iron Ass will be gone in sixty days - maybe sooner." "Iron Ass?" "A nickname he picked up early in World War II. LeMay could sit in the left seat and fly an airplane for hours without getting up. That war has been over for twenty years. Looks to me like LeMay is the only one who hasn't forgotten how to win. Troops today call him one tough son of a bitch, but not to his face." "What do you think of him?" "I always thought he was ten feet tall - until I met him in person. He's barely over five feet, but when he enters a room the walls part. He has that much charisma. Have you met him?" "Interviewed him a few times and you're right about his charisma. How about you, Johnny?" "The only thing LeMay and I have in common is graduating from ROTC at Ohio State. How about a refill?" Tucker nodded, "No - have to navigate back to the Watergate." "Coffee - then?"

I pulled on an oven mitt and lifted my Grandmother's graniteware coffee pot off the charcoal grill. The coffee came out steaming hot, "Even bad coffee tastes good brewed over an open grill. Must be the residual smoke." Tucker took a sip, "You're right, but is it ever hot. What about CINCSAC?" I looked up, "General Powers? He retired in November. Didn't three fingered Jack take over? He's a warrior, but lacks LeMay's clout." Bidwell nodded in agreement, "Plays a pretty mean game of poker - too." Tucker was in his question mode, "Lots of turmoil in the Air Force - guys. Any reason for it?" I answered, "LeMay was given a new term as Chief. Powers didn't have anywhere to go except out." Bidwell added, "And when McNamara canceled SAC's supersonic bomber - the B-70 - Powers was miffed. Air Force is losing funding for new planes." I offered, "McNamara is doing his Coolidge imitation. More coffee?"

Tucker held out his cup, "What does LeMay think about Vietnam?" "You all ready know that." "From official documents - yes, but Bidwell may have some off the cuff remarks." He looked at me, "Can I speak freely?" "As long as it isn't classified or official data." "He believes we're going to hell in a hand basket. His thoughts mirror mine." "What about the rest of your fearless leaders?" Bidwell looked down at the embers, "I'm leaving the service after this hitch. I've seen too much and know too much. We're going to have a whole new generation of book smart - life stupid bosses. Maybe it's the aphrodisiac of power here in Washington. Did you two ever read The Devil and Daniel Webster? Well - this town is like that. Some folks would rather sell their souls than give up being near the center of power." Tucker nodded, "And it's especially true over at the White House. What about our Foreign Policy?" Bidwell shook his head, "I'm in serious disagreement over the way it is heading. We'll go broke trying to police the world. I don't mind dying in another country if we're helping defend it from barbarians - but a civil war? Not my cup of tea." "Can it be turned around?" "You're asking a Sergeant who manages an athletic center and plays a little poker with the brass some very tough questions. Look - if we continue to let whiz kids experiment with live soldiers we're going to wind up with a lot of dead ones. And I do mind dying if I'm being led by commanders who fail to learn from history. It's your turn in the barrel. How about the Post?" Tucker stood up, "Pour me another cup of coffee while I see a man about a horse. I'll answer your question when I return."

Tucker placed another log on the fire, "Coffee's great, but in cold weather - goes right through me. My newspaper supports the President and his policy. We're Democratic and so is he. I call it our head in the sand editorial policy, but I'm in the minority. If and when we run into trouble - we'll make like a weather vane and go in a new direction.

Johnny - are you going to hang it up?" "I've thought about it. I will when I can't do my job - tell the truth or keep the troops I support from being sent on fools missions. Even if we don't agree with our current policy - someone has to stand watch, but - I know sheep and I won't be one. If the guy at the top leads us to pasture - water and safety - I'll follow. If he leads us off a cliff - I'll watch. So far Vietnam isn't our war, but if we go in - someone will have to warn our folks where the enemy is. That's where I come in." "How about his plans?" "Intentions? If we could collect intentions there'd be no wars." "Only if we believe what we see. Our State Department has a tendency to see what they believe." "Time to adjourn before we all decide to fall on our swords."

As we stood up to leave - the door to the stable opened. Bobbie Jean entered - shivering, "Are you going to join us or stay here all night?" Like three lost sheep - we followed her back to the farmhouse. She asked Bidwell, "Do you still have a Federal Gambling Stamp?" "Never can tell when a game will get busted. That stamp has saved me more than a few times. When I hold a high stakes game and the local law drops by - my stamp and a few dollars usually will do the trick. But - you know more about local law than me - you own a casino." "We may make and sell whiskey in a dry state today, but after Estes Kefauver's Committee persecuted the Gulf Coast - our casinos were closed. I have desert waiting for you in the kitchen and real New Orleans coffee - not that dishwater Johnny has been serving you."

We entered the kitchen through the mud room - stomping snow off our feet. Tucker warmed his hands around a mug of Bobbie Jean's coffee, "This is smooth. What did you put in it?" "A little bit of this and a little bit of that." I handed him a bottle of her Mississippi moonshine, "This is a little bit of that." "Moonshine? With a black Mississippi

State liquor stamp on the bottle?" Bobbie Jean smiled, "Now - don't you pick on us poor Southerners. After your Yankee Reconstruction - we only had a limited number of ways to make money. Do you like the taste of our limited effort?" "This whiskey is better than any I've ever tasted." "I can give each of you several bottles, but that is all. It's a limited run." Bidwell asked, "How old is it?" "Over twelve years - I think. What does the stamp say?" "Fifteen." She took Bidwell's hand, "You look down. Did Mr. Tubbs pick on you?" "Tucker? He sure did, but that's not the reason. I have to give up poker games at the NCO Club on payday." I couldn't let that pass, "You can still belong after you retire." "I'll be an entrepreneur - no longer a Sergeant. It wouldn't be right." Bobbie Jean asked, "Can't you find another place to play?" "Congressional Country Club, but it won't be the same." "Do you have a membership?" "Family and a single membership at Burning Tree. It's restricted to men - only." Is it a complete Club?" "Strictly golf. The clubhouse looks like an old Civilian Conservation Corps mess hall. Your stable would make a great place for a game." "It would - wouldn't it, but I think not. You would be too close to home. You mentioned your farms in Potomac. Why not there?" "Same reason - too close to home. We better get on the road. It's getting late. I'll follow Tucker down the hill. After what I saw of his driving when we arrived - I don't want to be in front of his Packard.

I turned away - so I wouldn't have to see carnage - as Tucker's Packard slid sideways down the hill. By some miracle of Physics - he was able to do a two hundred and seventy degree sliding turn and exit our lane onto the road head first. Luckily there was no one coming. This time Tucker turned the right way and sped off with a wave - tires spinning on ice. Bidwell waved and followed after Tucker - creeping slowly down the hill. Bobbie Jean huddled close as we watched the last of our guests exit our lane. She was

still shivering as we entered the house, "I like Bidwell, but stay away from his gambling activity." "That's why we're good friends - neither one of us believes in gambling." "Does he manipulate the cards?" "Only to help a loser win, but never for himself. Doesn't have too. After the Black Jack lesson he gave me on our way up to Wichita - I'll never even think about playing a serious game of chance again." "With that much skill - he must be a mechanic." "Only to be able to spot those who are."

LeMay retired quietly - on a cold blustery winter day in late January. America's military was prepared to willingly accept civilian micro-management - of a war lost before it began. Longing to be near the center and overcome by the aphrodisiac of power - translucent generals were now in charge, but McNamara was in command.

*"How the creatures order one about, and  
make one repeat lessons!" thought Alice.  
"I might as well be at school at once."*

# 17

I wondered - "Am I the only one who noticed unusual activity at the gazebo - refreshment stand - in the Pentagon's center courtyard?" It closed in November and wouldn't open again until spring. I had to ask myself, "Then why all the apparent activity?" I tried one of their hamburgers last fall - soon after I arrived. Hockey puck is what comes to mind when I recall that unpleasant dining experience. As we walked to the POAC - I mentioned this activity to Paddy Black. His response was, "Haven't noticed anything unusual. Maybe they're doing repairs." "I hope it's to the cook. If DC ever gets a hockey team - I've found a source for inexpensive pucks." "Got to admit - it's in a great location." "In our gazebo's case - location isn't everything." "Do you think you're ready to take over at the agency?" "I'm going to fly solo?" "It's time. I'll brief you in when we get back to the office."

Bidwell looked up when I knocked on his door, "You're finally getting with it." "You were right. Exercise is the only way to stay sane around here. What do you know about the gazebo in the center courtyard?" "Great location - lousy food. Hear they're remodeling. How about our friend Gus - the Chimp astronaut - is he still hangin' in there?" "I check everyday - he's still hangin' on the eighth corridor wall. Are you admitting to being our mischievous Pentagon mad art bandit?" "Knowing you won't turn me in - yes - and knowing how vain pilots are - it won't come down until they paint the walls." "Speaking of coming down - Have you put in your papers?" "I retire in August. I am now officially a

lame duck." "I'll buy the lame part. What do you plan to do?" "Might go into the restaurant business. Tell Bobbie Jean to keep her eyes open for a suitable location." "What will your theme be?" "Can't decide if it'll be western or eastern. Have you tried to get a good steak around here?" "Only ones worth while are at the Jolly Ox." "Not enough of them around to compete." "You're on to something."

Paddy Black was waiting, "What kept you? I've been here for ten minutes." "Bidwell bent my ear. What did you want to talk about?" "Your guidance." "Fire away." "Do the right thing - carry a briefcase and walk fast." "I can handle that. So - I'm being thrown to the Committee wolves." "You'll do all right. You know our systems better than most. You won't need to haul along an engineer." "Knowledge is power." "That's only your entry. It'll keep you in the game, but politics is your trump card." "Then I'm a babe in the woods." "Remember - Chairman and Secretary are both agency." "And they have a member - too." "They're all honest brokers, but watch out for NSA - Navy and keep an eye on White House and State. They'll push their own agendas." "Which is?" "Navy is only interested in support of the fleet. Damn the torpedoes - full speed ahead mentality. NSA wants to take over our business and freeze everyone else out." "Is that bad?" "Damn right it is. Right now they control our collection resources. We do the work - they control the take." "But - don't we get the information?" "By the time we do it's history. If they take over - we'll be reading hot off the press documents about British marching on Concord." "And the White House member?" "He plays fair except when his people need something from NSA and then he's been known to make a deal." "Who's the enemy - the Soviets or NSA?" "Sometimes both. NSA wants to play I've got a secret." "How did we get in this fix?" "Consolidation of Intelligence resources in Washington under the banner of effective management." "What about Army?" "Not organized.

They tend to listen and support whomever they can cut a deal with." "State?" "They sold out to NSA when they cut back on their internal Intelligence staff." "What are you going to do now?" "General is sending me out - to take a look at our resources in Germany and Japan." "Southeast Asia?" "Can't go there because of our security clearances. Anything I can do for you - let me know."

With the weather warming up - I could take the shortcut across the center courtyard to get to North Parking. Tonight - I noticed smoke rising from the gazebo chimney. As I passed by I heard, "Place your bets" and the sound of a roulette wheel spinning. I thought to myself, "Bidwell! Is he trying to commit suicide?" I stopped and listened. I could hear muffled voices and the sound of cards shuffled, "Blackjack - too? In the middle of the Pentagon courtyard? Who would be playing here?" I hurried on. Luckily - no one else seemed to be paying attention.

I didn't wait to change out of my uniform. I found Bobbie Jean in the kitchen, "Roulette - Bobbie Jean and Blackjack in the courtyard gazebo! Our friend Bidwell is up to something big." "Did you say a casino in the middle of the Pentagon courtyard?" "Dead center. Looks like he's trying to hide his game out in the open." "Why doesn't he take up cliff diving in Acapulco. It's safer. Can't believe he would ask to be raided. How did your day go?" "I'm on my own at the agency." "What happened to Major Black?" "The general is sending him overseas on an inspection tour." "Are you nervous?" "Not anymore. Most of the Committee members don't have a clue about what's going on - I have a leg up." "How was your day?" "Boys are doing fine. Lisa phoned. She wants to use our stable for their wedding." "Did she say when it will be?" "Spring." "Is right around the corner. Oh - almost forgot - Bidwell is retiring in August - wants to talk to you about the restaurant business." "And I almost

forgot. Tucker wants you to phone him. He'll be at his work number until eleven tonight." "Did he say what he wants to talk about?" "Something about weather vanes."

Tucker answered his phone, "Johnny?" "What's up at the Post - Tuck?" "Our weather vane has switched one hundred and eighty degrees. The winds of war are changing our editorial board's opinion about Vietnam. They're sending me back to Saigon. Flying out in the morning. Tell Bobbie Jean the wedding will have to go on hold until I return." I figured now was not the time to tell Tucker that she had just found out we were holding it and didn't know when, "How long will you be gone?" "Two - three months at the most." "Why is the Post's military editor pulling up stakes and folding his tent?" "My Vietnamese and Vietcong connections. Our editorial board wants to know who we'll be up against if we take over the war." "You could tell them that today." "I've all ready got it written, but don't you remember?" "What?" "My third law. Motion is work." I had to laugh, "We're living proof of that." "Paddy Black may be in Japan if you stop by on your way over." "Black? Air Force Intelligence?" "Right - do you know him?" "I'll contact him through his Detachment Commander at Ben Hoa Air Base." "Don't you mean Fuchu Air Station in Japan?" "No - you really do have a lot to learn." "If you need help back here - you know who to call." "I have Bidwell's phone number. Got to go. Take care of Lisa." Tucker was right - I was learning more than I needed too.

Bobbie Jean shooed me out of the kitchen, "Change out of that dreadful uniform for dinner. Hurry back and tell me what Smiley Face wanted." "Not to be called Smiley Face." I returned in more comfortable attire, "As I was saying" and gave her a hug, "Tucker is being sent to Saigon by the Post. He'll be over there for two to three months. Said to tell you the wedding will be delayed." "So far - all I know is

where it will be held - not when - so it won't interfere with any of our plans." "What about your Mother's plans for our wedding at the Lee Mansion in June?" "You won't believe this - it slipped my mind. I've been married to a sweet Yankee boy long enough not to be enthused by Mother's foolishness." I held her in my arms, "Are we having fun - yet?" She gently pushed me away, "Not until after dinner. It will get cold." "I hope not." She scolded me, "I mean dinner." "I have tamed a Southern lady." "Lucky for you - you didn't say shrew. But - you're right about being a homebody. I've learned to appreciate caring for someone I love."

All through March the gazebo chimney stood silent - cold as the slate gray days. I looked in when I had time - which wasn't often. Day after day of mind numbing Committee meetings at the agency occupied most of my time. The last Friday in March - when dogwoods were in full bloom - I confided in Bobbie Jean, "Now I understand why Paddy gave this job away. By Friday afternoon - I'd rather jump off a building than sit through another Committee meeting." "Why don't you resign. We don't need the money." "What can I do? I've had on the job training to be a shepherd or what I'm doing now. And I've seen enough sheep to last a lifetime." "Why don't we open a restaurant here or in Biloxi?" "From what I've seen of that life - it's twelve hour days - seven days a week. While we're on the subject - you ought to sell our share of the River Boat to Herbie and the Chef." "You must have second sight. Herbie phoned this afternoon and made an offer hard for us to refuse." "Call him back and take him up on it. It was fair - wasn't it?" "More than fair, but we'll have to reinvest or be stuck with a large tax bill." "Remember what I said about Bidwell? He would like to open a steak house and asked for your help." "What does he need?" "He said location, but I imagine he could use your advice on every aspect. What is our profit from the Omaha venture?" "Two dollars on every dollar we invested." "Why

so high?" "Business has been gangbusters since they opened their doors. They began serving lunch last week and had to start taking reservations. The Omaha bank we use did an extensive financial survey on its prospects and is eager to lend money on the buyout." "As conservative as those folks are - it must be doing well. I'll check on the boys if you'll pour me another glass of red wine." "Your favorite!" "And with a cork!"

Bobbie Jean handed me a platter, "Speaking of steaks. The coals in our stable grill should be about right by now. I'll bring the salad and bread." I had the steaks on the grill when she lightly kicked the stable door with her foot and I opened it for her. She was carrying a basket, "It's heavy." I lifted it, "It is. Where do you want it?" "On the bar." "I was wondering when you would mention it. Must be antique. Where did you find it?" "Came out of an older hotel in Washington. Lisa found it on one of her antique rounds." "It's huge - must have room for thirty stools. Are you going to open a restaurant in our stable?" "Of course not. Not that I didn't think about it, but it's too close to home." "And too far away from the center of town." "It won't be in twenty years. Do you think we should go into business with Bidwell?" "We can do that. He needs more help than he thinks he does." "I think he'll be a good manager, but we must insist on a no gambling clause. If he isn't interested in a partnership - I can get backers from New Orleans." "Why not go it alone?" "You have a lot to learn about business - Johnny. It's prudent to spread the risk among at least two - maybe three owners." "Speaking of risk - our steaks need to be turned over."

I liked what I saw, "Steaks smell good." "I used lemon - soy - Worcestershire sauce - garlic and ground pepper in my marinade. What do you like in a steak house?" I didn't hesitate, "Remember the one on the way to Hondo, New Mexico?"

"The Silver Dollar bar?" "That's the one. All they served was steak or lobster on the grill. We should keep it simple - with reasonable prices." "You are ready to fly solo." "I was thinking of a little Italian." "Dinner first - desert second." "We are getting to be old married folks." "Better check on your steaks." "They're ready - are you?" "Bring them over here. We'll eat at the bar. Need a refill?" "Does a duck need wings?" "Have you heard from Major Black?" "He returned from Europe last week and left for Japan Monday. He almost went ballistic when I asked him what he knew about our Saigon Detachment." "The one at the Air Base?" "Yes. He refused to answer my question." "Did you tell him Tucker is on his way to Saigon?" "Didn't get a chance."

As we sat down to eat Bobbie Jean asked, "Have you given any more thought to resigning?" "Checked into it. Can't. Not until I serve the two year commitment they levied on me when we accepted this assignment and I might have another year after I pin on my promotion." "When will you know?" "Sometime next week." "The witching hour is nigh." "And our steaks are getting cold." "Will you see Bidwell?" "Monday noon when I go to the POAC." "If he brings it up - offer to go in on his restaurant."

Bidwell called before ten Monday morning, "If you're not busy - come on down." "Anything important?" "We need to talk." He met me at the POAC door, "They're going to have another cattle call." "Is this about Southeast Asia?" "Yes - can you get word to your friend Tucker?" "He's in Saigon, but before he left - he said you have his phone number. I'm in the dark. What's going on?" "My poker playing friends say we're going to take over the fight." "Tucker said the same thing before he left. That's why the Post sent him to Saigon." "Then he doesn't need me." "Tucker likes to have as many sources as possible. If it's heating up over there - he may need you're connections." "Maybe - planning is for

officers - execution is for Sergeants." "What about the cattle call?" "Everyone of our Commanders is going to poll his troops for volunteers to go to Vietnam." "Are you going to pull your retirement papers and volunteer?" "You still have a lot to learn - Johnny. Sergeants run this man's Air Force. I talk weekly with my counterparts at Ben Hoa." "And what do they say?" "It is not a healthy place to visit. The Vietcong is everywhere and everybody. They not only own the countryside - they're the real estate agents in the cities. Our State Department is propping up a piss-ant government. Let me get you a cup of coffee. I need one - badly."

When Bidwell returned I asked, "Fess up. What's going on at the gazebo in the center courtyard?" "Just a little going away present for a three star who's after me." "Is that why I heard a roulette wheel and card noise?" "I'll have to improve security. How did you find out?" "I must be the only one in the Pentagon that doesn't walk around with my head in the clouds and my eyes on my shoes. You have smoke coming out of the chimney - be careful. This is Federal property." "My prints are wiped clean. Don't worry - this one is a set up. Nothing illegal is going on. Did you ask Bobbie Jean about my restaurant idea?" "She'll go you one better. Would you like a partner?" "I was afraid to ask. With your twins - she has to be very busy. How much control does she want?" "Forty-nine percent and the right to sell out to you or your designee after one year. You can use her expertise in design - construction and set up. Can you get the liquor license and zoning waivers - if they're needed?" "Piece of cake. That's a load off my mind." "How soon do you want to start?" "Now - I'll take terminal leave the first of July and give it my full attention. Tell her it's a deal." "Where do you think you should build?" "Not in DC. Even I don't have any clout - there." "Maryland?" "Too many trees and almost as crooked as DC." "That leaves Virginia and the nations largest good old boy network."

When I returned to my cubicle - a note was on my desk -

*"Major Paddy Black is missing.  
While traveling with a Washington  
Post reporter from Ben Hoa Air Base  
to Saigon, his vehicle was attacked  
by unknown assailants. Bodies were  
not found. Search and rescue efforts  
are underway."*

"Bidwell - this is Johnny. Bad news - Paddy Black's vehicle was ambushed between Ben Hoa and Saigon. Tucker may have been riding with him." "Are they alive?" "Don't know. Paddy is listed as missing. Can you help?" "Tall order for someone in the basement of the Pentagon. I'll phone my contact at Ben Hoa and get the details, but search and rescue missions are too hard from here." "I apologize for asking a stupid question. I should know better. I'm out of pocket this afternoon. See what you can find out. I'll phone you at home - tonight." "What if I need to contact you?" "Can't - have a meeting up river." "You spooks talk in code." "At the agency north of here." "Understand. I'll get you the real skinny, but any action by me to retrieve them is out of the question. Your boys may be in over their ears. Vietcong has wild eyed ideologue spear carriers."

The drive north on the George Washington Parkway cleared my mind of worry about my friend. The dogwoods were in full bloom. Virginia was enjoying a spectacular spring. More so - along the Potomac River. Winter's cold lingered on - west of the Blue Ridge, but spring was in full bloom - here. I returned to the real world after turning off of the Parkway at the Fairbanks Highway Research Station sign and stepping off the elevator on the seventh floor - the last Committee

member to arrive. The Secretary nodded in my direction and placed a check mark next to my name. Our Chairman motioned for me to sit next to him. He whispered, "Major Black is missing in Vietnam. Our Director is very concerned. Paddy should not have gone there. Not with the sensitive data he has handled. Our Director has talked to your General. We are going to take extreme action to insure that Paddy is not interrogated or transferred North. Don't speak about this with anyone - not even our Committee." "Rescue?" "If possible." "If not?" "Don't ask." "Don't tell."

Bobbie Jean sat rocking - in one of our rocking chairs on the front porch - tapping her foot. As I walked up the steps - I knew I was married when she greeted me with, "Your late." "Sorry - had to haul my classified back to the Pentagon. Got held up by a wreck in the southbound lane on the Parkway. Bad news - Paddy Black's vehicle was ambushed outside of Saigon." "Is he alive?" "Missing along with a Washington Post reporter who was with him." "My God - not our Mr. Tubbs." "Tucker has friends among the Vietcong. If it was him - he'll have to spend a chip to get free. Bidwell is checking on their status with a contact at Ben Hoa." "He phoned an hour ago. Call him at home."

"Got your message. What did you find out?" "The Post reporter is Tucker. He's in the hospital at Ben Hoa." "Was he injured." "No - standard procedure to make sure he's okay." "And give the medics something to do." "Did you talk with him?" "Roger that. Is your friend more than a little off center?" "That's normal for Tucker. What did he have to say." "That he was lucky this was a high level job and not a random one by Vietcong peasants. They recognized him and let him go." "How about Paddy?" "He got nicked." "Nicked?" "Nack Paddy Black." "Bobbie Jean is training you. Where did he get nicked?" "Bullet creased the top of his head. Tucker said Paddy was alive when they hauled him away. The ambush

was a case of mistaken identity. They were after a South Vietnamese Colonel who was supposed to be on the road at about the same time." "How did they make that mistake?" "Tucker had the Colonel's driver. He got the Colonel drunk when he was pumping him for information at a bar near our embassy. Tucker used the Colonel's staff car to pick up Paddy at Ben Hoa." "Can you hold for a minute. I want to let Bobbie Jean know Tucker is okay."

"Thanks for waiting. She wants you to know - you can have any percentage you want - your deal is sealed. Is there anything else?" "Tucker made an arrangement with the Vietcong to get Paddy Black back." "Did he have to pay ransom?" "No - not even the Vietcong will screw around with the Post. They don't want bad press." "Is Paddy okay?" "The bullet probably saved him. You spooks are lucky. It scrambled his brain. Doesn't know who he is or where he is. So he's of no value to the Vietcong. Can you get in touch with anyone high up in the agency?" "My Committee Chairman is connected." "Tucker said the next twenty-four hours are critical. He doesn't want anyone to show any more interest in Paddy than normal. If they do - the deal will go south. Tucker will be in harms way and Paddy will be on a plane to the Soviet Union." "Did Tucker say when he's returning?" "No, but he wants Bobbie Jean to tell Lisa the wedding is on for mid-May." "Is he certain Paddy will be returned in good shape?" "Returned - yes. In good shape is a problem."

I phoned Ops at the agency and got a phone patch to the Committee Chairman at his home. I was carrying coals to Newcastle. He knew the details, but twenty-four hours was all the agency was willing to wait. "I'll phone my contact." "We would rather that you didn't. Our people will cooperate with your friend. Come in tomorrow." "I have a meeting at eight. I can be there by ten." "Stop at the front desk. They'll give you directions. Johnny?" "Yes Sir." "The

Director wants you to keep all of this close hold." That was easy to do. I didn't know any more than the extraneous data we discussed, "Will do. I have to let my boss know about Paddy's status." "Keep it to that."

My immediate boss wasn't happy about receiving a phone call at home. His only response was, "How did you get involved?" I couldn't say how - so I answered, "I'm not. I'm just the messenger." "Who did you get the message from?" "I'm not free to say." "Our General shoots messengers. Come directly to my office when you arrive tomorrow." "What about my eight o'clock?" "It's canceled." Bobbie Jean knocked on the doorway, "Are you finished? I'm starved. Change your clothes - we're going to try that steak house in Arlington." "Roger that - looks like I'm finished in more ways than one." "When you're given a hot potato - pass it on - before you get burnt." "This one came with handcuffs. Is it coat and tie or casual?" "Coat - tie is optional. Hurry."

Our morning Post arrived early - in the ditch by the side of our lane - as usual. I opened it to page one with one hand and poured coffee with the other. I almost dropped the pot. The story of Tucker's capture and release was on page one - with his byline. I scanned it. Tucker kept his word. He didn't mention - Paddy. Bobbie Jean wandered into the kitchen rubbing her eyes, "I thought you would be on the road by now. Is that a story about Mr. Tubbs on the front page?" "And written by him. Doesn't mention Paddy Black. I'm in no hurry. They canceled my eight o'clock meeting." "Can they force you out of the service?" "Not that lucky - I haven't done anything." "Except have two very eccentric friends. What did you think of the steak house last night?" "Not very good. You won't have much competition. You and Bidwell have found a niche." "Can you stay awhile? I'll cook your breakfast?" "The condemned man's last meal?" "More like my brave warriors send-off."

I made a mental note to leave for work earlier or later. At seven o'clock - the traffic south on the George Washington Parkway is close to gridlock. And the only parking space was at the far end of North Parking. Far enough away from the POAC entrance to qualify as an aerobic walk. I checked on Gus - our Chimpanzee astronaut on my way down corridor eight. He was still hanging in there - in his place of honor with the rest of the Air Force art collection. As I turned onto A ring - I ran into my boss on his way to the General's office, "Where have you been Ropp? The General's Exec called four times." Before I could say I was stuck in traffic or I could care less - he said, "Stuff your excuses. Come along with me." We were ushered in - to the front of the General's desk. He laid his copy of the Post aside, "So you're the one who arranged for Major Black's release in Vietnam - and from the Pentagon - no less. I don't have to remind you - that no good deed goes unpunished." While he took another sip of coffee I attempted to control my fight or flight response. "I'm in hot water with the CIA Director because of your meddling where you don't belong. You're in the military. We play by the rules and you didn't." I wasn't about to get run over without putting up a fight, "Excuse me Sir. What am I accused of?" "None of your damn business. Damned Washington Post would screw up a wet dream. You're confined to quarters until I find out who blew the whistle on my operation at Ben Hoa. If I find out it's you - you'll be out of uniform in a week. You're dismissed." I saluted and did a smart about face. My mind was racing. It was hard to control my fight or flight response and I wasn't doing a very good job at it. My face was as red as a beet. I knew it wouldn't do any good to mention my ten o'clock meeting at the agency to my boss - so I didn't, "Should I clean out my desk?" "Drive your car to the POAC entrance. You'll find my Sergeant waiting with your personal items - and Major Ropp?" "Yes Sir." I was saying a lot of that this morning. "Don't bother to return for a visit. We're changing the combination on the vault

door." This certainly was beginning to be a strange day. I was canned before I could reach my cubicle. I drove along the old railroad tracks to the POAC basement door. My personal items were outside in a box. The Sergeant - who was supposed to be guarding it - wasn't.

I drove north on the Parkway - enjoying a spectacular spring day - wondering what happened to Paddy Black and what this was all about. Driving off the Parkway to the agency is like going from a Technicolor to a Black and White movie. An escort waited for me at the reception desk, "Put your badge on and follow me." He led me to a special elevator and we descended into the bowels of CIA. I was led through a maze of corridors to a debriefing room. He motioned for me to sit down at a student desk and left me alone. A studious looking lady attached wires and leads to various pressure points on my body. She checked her equipment, "Relax and answer all of our questions to the best of your ability." Three hours later - she unhooked the wires, "Thank you Mr. Ropp. That will be all." "Did I pass?" She turned away. My escort opened the door, "Follow me." We retraced our steps through the maze and entered a different elevator - one that went from the basement to the seventh floor.

My escort knocked on the door of the Deputy Director, "Come on in - Colonel Ropp. I've been waiting for you. What do you know about the Paddock in Middleburg?" "I'm an old farm boy. Isn't that where racehorses are saddled?" "You have a lot to learn, but from your dossier you look like a quick study." "You said Colonel." "As of this moment you are now a Lieutenant Colonel and Commander of the Air Force Detachment at Paddock." "Any guidance?" "Continue as you have." "Do the right thing." He looked puzzled. "It's an old inside joke. When do I report?" "Monday. Follow your General's orders until then. The Director wants to thank you personally. Follow me." I was as puzzled as I had ever

been. I had been threatened with court martial - fired from my job - given a command - promoted and commended - all in the span of one morning and half an afternoon. Tucker's second law - *screw up and move up* had to be in play. The Director shook my hand, "Good job - son and I was out the door. I drove onto the Parkway - from the Black and White world of the agency into Technicolor spring.

Bobbie Jean looked up from her account books, "What are you doing home at this hour of the day?" I almost said don't ask, "I was fired by the General and hired by the agency." "Are you still in the Air Force?" "Must be - I was just promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and commended by the Director." "What did you do?" "I don't know." "Don't ask?" "Don't tell. That's what the Deputy Director said." "Did you hear anything about Major Black or Mr. Tubbs?" "Nothing and I'm not supposed to ask." "Where is your new job." "I'm Commander of a spook outfit called the Paddock in Middleburg, Virginia." "Out Route #50." "I guess so. I'm to stay home on vacation until told otherwise. What's really weird is that my General has me under house arrest and the agency has me on paid vacation." "You must have some idea about what's going on." "Paddy Black was sent by our General to an Air Force Detachment in Vietnam - that doesn't exist and without agency clearance. He was captured while riding along with a reporter from the Washington Post. I guess my General was caught with his hands in the cookie jar." "Looks like he has designated you as the stuckee and the agency - a hero. You need insurance." "In case my General wins out?" "You are learning." "I'll call Bidwell."

Bidwell answered, "Good afternoon - Colonel." "How did you know?" "You forget - Sergeants run this man's Air Force. Understand your General is giving you trouble." "How did you know?" "Don't ask." "Don't tell." "I called in another chip. Don't worry about me burning bridges. I have more

than I can spend before I retire. You'll be back to work in the Pentagon tomorrow morning and leaving for Middleburg with honors. Your General won't be around long enough to write your report." "Political influence?" "Is there any other kind? I need a favor in return." "Name it and you have it." "I want to borrow three of your sheep." "You've got them. When?" "Not certain. When you notice they're gone - report them as missing." "You're not going to use them as part of a Greek festival are you?" "Of course not and not a nativity scene - either. I want to keep you in the clear if this goes project goes south." "Just give me your word that no harm will come to them?" "Safe as babes in their mother's arms." "Don't ask?" "Don't tell."

The General's Exec called after dinner, "Your security clearances are restored. Report back to work in the morning. The General apologizes for any inconvenience he may have caused." "Any word on Paddy Black?" "He's safe, but has no memory. Flying out on Medivac. If you have more questions - call me in the morning. Its been a long day and I'm heading home. Let me give you a piece of advice. Keep checking your six." "Thanks for the warning." Bobbie Jean asked, "Who was that?" "The General's Exec. All is forgiven. My vacation is over before it began. I report to work in the morning." "Any word on Major Black?" "He's safe, but doesn't know who - or where he is." "He'll fit right in with the rest of your friends." "I'm going to check on our sheep." "The lambs are doing fine. Your flock has almost doubled."

"Sheep are watered and bedded down. Lambs sure are frisky. Is the ram still chasing our boys?" "And they chase after him. They're both getting a workout. Oh - Herbie phoned from Omaha. Our check is in the mail along with release forms for our signatures. We now have a hefty down payment." "Have you found a location?" "In town Arlington." "Any difficulty with licenses and zoning." "Bidwell said

he'd take care of that. I have to call about the location and see if he approves - anyway." "Is Virginia a good old boys network?" "Almost a closed shop. They haven't forgiven you Yankees for stealing West Virginia from them."

The next morning - my cubicle mates were cordial enough, but that was as far as they went. No one wanted to stand next to a condemned man or building - a stray brick may fall on them. I smiled and said hello to one wave and received barely a grunt of recognition on my way back to my cubicle. I sat down at an empty desk. Everything I didn't take home in the box - except the phone - was gone. Fortunately it worked. It was Bidwell, "Tucker is on his way back." "He's a month early." "Lucky to get out alive. The North jumped all over the Cong for giving away Paddy Black. They came after Tucker. Blew his apartment up at the same time he was making a run for Ben Hoa. Hitched a ride out on a transport to Guam." "Do you know where he is now?" "Somewhere between Guam and Saudi Arabia." "He never was one to navigate in a straight line. My sheep are still mowing away. When are you going to borrow them?" "Soon. Let Bobbie Jean know her Arlington location for our steak house is perfect. Zoning was easy. Licenses are tough to get, but we'll have them before we open." "How are you going to get them?" "Don't ask." "Don't tell."

I leaned back in my chair - looked over a clean - empty desk. I would have looked out a window - If I had one. My new job had not begun and my old one was over. My mates weren't interested in talking to a condemned man and I had nothing to do. I wandered up cubicle row. Most didn't look up and those that did looked away. My boss stormed out of his office, "Where are you going?" "Snack bar for a cup of coffee." "No! come along with me. The General wants to see you." A row of heads popped out of every single cubicle. All eyes were on me - now. Everyone likes to witness a crash

- as long as blood doesn't splatter on them. The General was all smiles when I entered his office, "You're out of uniform Lieutenant Colonel Ropp. He came around his desk and shook my hand. He pinned one silver leaf on my shoulder while my boss pinned on the other. He sat back down and shuffled through some papers on his desk before looking up, "Oh - don't bother returning to your office. I want you to report to your new job this morning." Even though I knew - I asked, "Where do I report?" "I have a staff car waiting for you at River Entrance." "What about my car?" "A staff car will bring you back here this afternoon. For now - you will simply disappear." "Can I let my cubicle mates know. I'd like to hold a promotion party." "I'm afraid not." "Don't ask. Don't tell." That's the spirit. Tell no one in your office about your promotion or your new job." "Who writes my report." He looked up - smiled, "I do."

I walked out of his office alone. The General's Exec handed me my hat, "Remember what I said?" "Watch my six?" "And seven and eight and nine." "I'm not long for the Air Force?" "Worse - he'll keep you with him." "And get even?" "Good luck on your new job at the Paddock." I walked down the River Entrance steps. A driver held the staff car door open. I asked "Where?" "West of Middleburg. Nice day for a drive." "Are you going to wait for me?" "I work for you Sir." "Then drive me to my car in North Parking. I'll follow you to the Detachment. We'll save you a trip back to the five sided swamp this afternoon."

Bobbie Jean noticed the silver leaves on my shoulders, "I didn't know you were that old" and gave me a kiss. "How was the Pentagon today?" "No longer there. Reported to my new job this morning." "Why didn't you phone?" "No personal phone calls over long distance lines." "Not even to the Washington Post." "I didn't think of that - there is method in their madness." "But we can call in."

"We'll establish a time." "Tell me about your office." "The General really did a number on me. I've been moved so far away from the center of power - you couldn't find me with a Boy Scout as a guide. I can't tell anyone what I do or where. Had to sign my life away. Having said that - it's going to be a great place to work. I can see the Blue Ridge and we're almost out of the smog." "Is this going to be one of those jobs where you can't tell me where you've been or where your going?" "Worse. Not even supposed to tell you where I am." "Lisa phoned. Tucker Tubbs will be in Friday morning. Wants you to pick him up at Dulles." "What time?" "Plane lands at six-thirty. We all ready made plans to have the Bidwells over Friday evening - so I invited Lisa and Tucker. Tell Mr. Tubbs we expect to see them at six when you pick him up." "So he'll be here at six-thirty."

One of the bennies of being a Commander - and having a boss that doesn't ever want to see you again - is the only person I had to notify where I'd be is my Secretary - and she wasn't all that interested. I waited for Tucker's people mover to slowly arrive at Dulles main terminal. The decision to use motorized ramps to move people from airplanes to the terminal was not an all time bright idea. Another decision that looked good on paper, but bad in practice. If I had worried about missing Tucker - I shouldn't have. He wandered off the vehicle into the terminal wearing a multi-pocketed khaki costume - reminiscent of Stanley in Africa searching for Livingston. He approached with his famous gapped tooth smile, "Hello - Johnny. What are you doing here? Where's Lisa?" "Had to work. I'm your taxi driver. You look like that famous African explorer." "Livingston?" "No - Groucho Marx's Dr. Spaulding. Where did you get the plantation hat." "Like it? In Egypt. How is Paddy Black?" "Paddy Black has cracked." "From his neck?" "Nack Paddy Black. Our foggy friend is undergoing treatment in San Antonio. Lucky guy - still can't remember a thing. Other than that - he is

healing good. You look pretty chipper for a guy who flew all night from London. Do you want to go home and change - or go to your office?" "This is my reporter outfit. Style over substance - don't you remember?" "Is this rule the one right after motion is work?" "You may make it in the spy business - after all. I'm wearing this to impress my boss." "Did you discover a war on your jungle vacation?" "It's briar patch time for Uncle Sam." "Did you know the Vietcong bombed your apartment?" "Yes - I made it out just in time." "You must have a whole new set of nine lives. Lets motor - Pravda on the Potomac is many miles away."

I waited - rocking on the front porch. Tucker was the first to arrive - followed almost immediately by Bidwell. I greeted my problematical friends, "We're having cocktails in the stables. Wait till you see the bar Lisa found for Bobbie Jean." Lisa added, "And we can see how many people we can invite to our wedding. We're holding it in Bobbie Jean's stable." Bidwell shook his head, "And your first born will arrive in Johnny's manger?" "My nativity scene is back. The sheep you borrowed returned this afternoon." "I'll take one of your English ales. My God you have it on tap." "Told you Bobbie Jean had one hell of a bar." "You must have thirty stools." "Thirty-three. Tell me what you did with my sheep." "After you pour Tucker another ale and he tells us about his visit to the jungle. I anxious to hear how he survived the ambush." Tucker drained his glass, "It's unreal to be back in the world. Vietnam has faded from my memory like a bad dream." I asked, "What does the war look like up close?" "It's a dirty little war. There are no fronts - or organized fighting - it's all around. We're going to wind up in the same mess the British were in when they fought farmers and merchants in Massachusetts." Bobbie Jean interrupted, "Can you open another bottle of wine - Johnny?" "White and three glasses coming up." "There are three types in your fridge. Wuch one?" "Chablis."

"Go ahead with your adventure - Tuck." "Same old story. Hasn't changed since we last talked. We look upon this fight as containment of Communism and the peasants look on it as a patriotic war of liberation. To the peasants - America is propping up another French puppet government. Remember Kipling's poem about fools who hustle the east?" "Roger - that. It went -

*And the end of the fight is a tombstone white  
with the name of the late deceased,  
And the epitaph drear: A Fool lies here who  
tried to hustle the East."*

We're going to be the fools he wrote about. We'll fight a war of attrition and lose." I asked, "No matter what we do - we lose?" "You broke the code. Short of using Vietnam as a nuclear test ground - there is no way we can win." Bobbie Jean interrupted, "Dinner will be buffet style. Serving plates are on the other end of the bar. Help yourselves when you're ready. Informal seating around our table." Serious conversation was replaced by dinner banter as we filled our plates. Southeast Asia took a back seat to Lisa and Tucker's wedding plans at the dinner table. Tucker eyes were still glazed over from his trip, but after dinner coffee perked him up. We adjourned to the bar.

Bidwell spoke with authority, "Enough about wedding plans. I'm still waiting for Tucker to tell us about the ambush." "Wasn't a big deal to the Vietcong until they found out that Paddy Black was a keeper. Our driver was Vietcong and not all that bright. When I used him to pick up Paddy Black at Ben Hoa - he forgot to tell his buddies. He stayed with the plan even though he wasn't transporting his Colonel. When he pulled off the road into the brush. The Vietcong Colonel recognized the fowl-up right away. Would have let us

both go, but Paddy lost it - bolted for the trees - running away in zig zag crouch. Colonel fired a warning shot over Paddy's head at the same time Paddy came out of his crouch and nicked Paddy's noggin with a single shot. Paddy fell like a giant redwood tree. If he hadn't run - I could have saved him on the spot. Vietcong realized he was a walking zombie - so they released him in the morning." My curiosity got the better of me, "How did you find out they changed their minds and decided to come after you?" Tucker didn't answer - not right away. He pointed at his cup and I got up to refill it with coffee.

"This information stays with the three of us. I haven't sworn an oath to protect data like you two, but there are times that it's prudent to do so. The CIA Station Chief made sure Paddy was on a Medivac airplane the same morning he was returned. When the North Vietnamese Colonel reported the incident - his folks checked with the Soviets and all hell broke loose." I shook my head, "Pieces of this puzzle are falling in place. We have a mole somewhere." Tucker wasn't certain, "A mole in Saigon? Don't think so. How about the Pentagon?" "It's possible, but not likely. Paddy's folder is held at the agency. Who is your CIA contact in Saigon?" "Colbie - Kolby - or something like that. A quiet studious type. Wears glasses and looks more like a State Department accountant than an agency cowboy." "That leaves the agency." They both looked at me. "I'm a new guy on the block. I can only hazard a guess. It would have to be someone in CI - Counter Intelligence. If it was someone on the substantive side - they wouldn't give a damn about Paddy. Who warned you?" "My Vietcong contact in Saigon. She gave me a heads up that I had lost my immunity - as a reporter. I didn't return to my apartment. Hitched a ride on the back of a motor scooter to Ben Hoa. If you have to go over - take a cab - you can get killed on one of their scooters. Didn't have time to return for my things. When their after you -

it's serious business. However - they did me a favor when they blew up my apartment. The Post won't reimburse me for abandoned property." I asked, "Has your Vietcong source been turned?" "Fat chance. Our agency boys are supporting the establishment. Really weird. When they were OSS back in 1944 - they supported the Vietcong."

I looked at Bidwell, "Your turn in the barrel. What did you do with my sheep?" "I'll come clean after Tucker tells us about his trip home. How in the world did you wind up in Egypt?" "Wasn't easy - I flew out of Guam to Calcutta. Now that's a place that I don't recommend for a vacation. One trip there and the Pope would endorse birth control. Hot and humid - the stench was unbelievable. I've never seen so many poor people. At night the streets are lined with sleeping peasants. The privileged ones were allowed to sleep under the overhangs. From Calcutta I flew to Saudi Arabia. Dust storms! Not where I'll go again. Egypt after that. I don't blame the Israelis for giving the Sinai back. Everywhere I stopped - wall to wall people." I added, "There'll always be more people, but there'll never be more land." Bidwell laughed, "The real estate guy on TV in Roswell! When did you finally reach civilization?" "London. Now it's your turn. What did you do with Johnny's sheep." "Not until he pours us a glass of cognac and after we step outside so I can smoke a cigar. No fireplace draft to evacuate my smoke."

Bidwell offered me a cigar, but I refused. He lit his and took several drags - blowing smoke rings into the cool night air, "Got crossways with a vindictive three star at the Pentagon. Seems he didn't like a Sergeant hobnobbing with the brass at poker and golf. So - he took after me - trying to nail me for anything illegal. You know me - I decided to give him a helping hand. I dropped a few hints that I'd set up a casino inside the center courtyard refreshment stand." Tucker grinned, "You mean the gazebo in the middle of the

Pentagon that sells hockey pucks for hamburgers?" "That's the one." "I rigged it so smoke was coming out the chimney and made it sound like a Las Vegas casino. General triggered my tape recorder when he walked by. Had it set to turn on by a motion detector. When the time was ripe and I was tipped off that a raid was on the way - I borrowed three of Johnny's sheep and herded them inside." I had to ask, "How did you get them inside the Pentagon?" "You forget - sergeants not only run the Air Force - we run the Pentagon. My three star thought he had me for sure. He was leader of the pack. Had his GSA marshals kick in the gazebo door. As he was going in - Johnny's ram came charging out - with two ewes following. The ram butted the three star in the midsection - doubled him over and the ewes knocked him backwards out the door. My three star went ass over teakettle and Johnny's sheep went to pasture." Bidwell reached inside his coat pocket, "Had the Air Force Photographer take happy snaps of the whole event." I looked at the photos and handed them to Tucker, "Don't ask." Tucker laughed, "Don't tell."

*"But I don't want to go  
among mad people," Alice  
remarked. "Oh, you can't  
help that," said the (Cheshire)  
Cat: "we're all mad here."*

## *Pentagon*

White sandstone turned dingy brown  
With soot - from Washington  
Five buildings - wrapped in one -

## *Pentagon*

Each building - five stories high  
A center courtyard - open to sky  
And - closed to the sun -

## *Pentagun*

Divided by four  
Army - Navy - Air Force  
And - Marine Corps -

## *Pentagore*

Could have stopped a war  
Planning McNamara's gore  
All you had to say  
Can't win it that way -

## *Pentasway*

Blue suits and khaki  
Politician's lackey  
Dancin' on a string  
To an Executive Wing -

## *Pentalacky*

What - no promotion?  
This side of the ocean  
Five sided square  
Why didn't you care -

## *Pentagrief*

Career and opportunities  
Open up - so take a stand  
Better sign up for Vietnam  
Now - ain't war grand -

*Pentaband*

Got a new way to fight  
Pockets of men separated  
But - connected by air  
All alone - out there -

*Pentaplan*

Damn you - five sided swamp  
We got mired on the ground  
Waiting for your air  
To come around -

*Pentabog*

Your plan's not new  
It's over a century old  
The British did the same  
In Afghanistan I'm told -

*Pentacopy*

Ten thousand marched  
Over the Khyber Pass  
Only one soul came out  
With his pack and ass -

*Pentadumb*

Afghans saw supplies  
Set apart from tents  
Like the Vietcong  
Came between  
Men and munitions  
And won -

*Pentadone*

Five sided enigma  
With parking lots full  
Sould-a used  
Your head  
Your heart  
Not your -

*Pentabull*