

I was glad that Trish and Brendan left for St. Thomas the following week; I couldn't have gone into the bowling alley if she was going to be there. Steve and I kept up our regular schedule after the happy couple departed, the club, bowling, beer and pizza, scorched tissue in my mouth the next day. I tried to forget her, I tried to meet other women, but, let's face it, I was smitten with the Admiral's daughter and she had used me and my emotions and I just kept thinking Women, I hate 'em.

And I had a few fantasies about just quitting the band. The pain coupled with the fear and the embarrassment and left me in that state of I gotta get outta here, like when I ran away from camp, from football, from boy scouts.

As a young boy, I had looked forward to the day when I could join the a Boy Scouts. My best friend Wade and I used to camp out along the small creek that moved out of the mountains to the north, easterly to where it finally joined the North River snaking its way to the Atlantic ocean. We sat up all night and told ghost stories about Devil's cave and ate steamed mussels that flourished along the swift water's edge. Wade really knew his way in the woods. He had read a lot about the

indians, how they used to bury the top part of a small sapling to mark a path, and how they used snares and crude fishing devices to catch prey.

He knew wildlife too. Wade was one of those who always caught a fish when everyone else wasn't getting so much as a nibble.

I suppose he spent much of his time away from his house due to the fact that both his parents were alcoholics. Maybe he regretted staying away so much when we were thirteen years old and his father died. Then his mother died a month later. They sent him to live with his half-brother somewhere in New Hampshire, separating him from his two other brothers. Wade was never the same after that. He got into drugs and booze, often fought with his half-brother's wife, got into trouble with the law. The last I ever heard of Wade was that he had married a school teacher, but that they had had problems, and he then secluded himself in the Canadian Rockies to finish his days as a hermit, secure in the wilderness he loved so well, sheltered from the pain of people.

We decided to join scouts together, and went on many overnights and weekenders with the troop. Our troop even went to the camporee where we won for best overall troop. The honor almost slipped through our hands, though.

I don't even remember how it happened, but someone,

somewhere decided to start fucking with me, you know, messing with my head, and I guess I took it much too seriously because I started to get that feeling, that singled-out, lonely, sad feeling, and I figured that since I felt alone I might as well be alone, so I took off. I made it through the woods to the highway and just started walking the thirty miles or so back home. I always headed for home; any port in a storm.

Anyway, darkness fell and I got scared so I began to make my way back to the camporee sight. I got through the woods to the big field that adjoined the sight when I recognized a cleared area that our troopmaster had set aside for our daily meetings. There was a big log next to the now-cold fire sight that I could barely make out in the starlight of nightfall. Then I saw, off to the side, two guys who appeared to be wrestling, although the usual amount of yelling and horseplay associated with this activity was absent.

When they noticed me, they immediately jumped to their feet and, I couldn't believe what I saw. They were pulling up their pants! No. Yes, yes. The scout master and one of the scouts had been doing something, I didn't know what, that required one of them to be on top of the other with their pants off. I swear I had no idea at the time, although it did seem sexual, that two men could actually, would actually, have sex with each other.

"Where the hell have you been, Peal?" The scoutmaster, in a quick-minded attempt to defer attention away from him and his buddy, screamed at me.

"I haven't been anywhere."

"You get your ass back to camp right now, what the hell do you mean, running away like that? You had the whole troop, hell the whole camporee, worried as hell. We thought you had drowned in the lake."

By then, many of the others in the troop began to hear the scout master and came running over to the clearing. The scouts who were troop leaders gathered around and Carpenter, the scout leader who was older than me by about three years, started screaming at me as well.

"You're out! Do you hear me? OUT! I don't need any cry-babies who are going to run away whenever they feel like it. We're calling your parents in the morning to come get you. Fucking little twit--"

"Now Carpenter, scouts don't use language like that." The Scoutmaster was admonishing Carpenter. God, if he could only have been here five minutes ago, he would have seen that son-of-a-bitch having his way with Ralphie, his younger brother.

The wedding day arrived and I was heaving back the Jack at a pretty good clip as we set the band up---in the Admiral's fucking house. The first woman I ever gave a

damn about was at that very moment pledging her life to a man who, I was convinced, she did not love. I was making a trip in from the van with some of the PA equipment and had to stop in front of the door as one of the Phillipine caterers went through with an ice sculpture of a dolphin cresting the water, and I happened to look down at the floor in the foyer. I remembered the first time we made love, how uncontrolled it was, how real it felt, how I wanted it to last forever. I slowly shook my head as the tears swelled up behind my eyes.

"Well, are you going to go in or are you going to just stand there all day?" The voice belonged to Lenny who was balancing his bass amp on his thigh, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, his eyes squinting as he protected them from the smoke. I laughed at him, and at myself for feeling.

"Yeah, I'm going."

"Hey Virgil," he started as we made our way to the area where we were setting up the band, "tell me something. Was there ever any truth to the rumor about you and her?"

I turned around to see him staring at her portrait on the wall. She must have been about sixteen, and she was lovely. No hint of the ruthless killer inside. She had on a red velvet dress, and was seated on the piano bench in front of the piano, a bay window to her left

threw side light that made her look like a movie star.

"What, me? You think I'm that stupid?"

"Maybe not, but I'll tell you one thing: I am."

Thirty minutes later we broke into "The Girl From Impanema," a standard warm up tune. Whenever the music starts, I feel better. I don't care who the band is, or what the song is, there is some continuity in a room when a band begins to play. Marty finished up with an arpeggio on the sax, and I immediately hit the beginnings of "Horse With No Name," the big hit for America.

"They're here!" A fat woman who must have had a contract with Maybelline called to no one in particular. My heart raced. I glanced over at Lenny, who nodded, and we kept on playing. Chris Matthews, our egotistical drummer, began to sing the first strains of the song, and I had to laugh at the lyrics, they reminded me of my stay in New York. You know, "On the first part of the journey/I was lookin' at all the life." That's how I felt when I arrived in the Big Apple, when I saw all the fast-paced action, the sights I had heard about when I was a kid, when I saw Trish for the first time.

And then, she was there, in the room.

"You look like an angel," again, Miss Maybelline. And she was hugging Trish, and kissing Brendan on the cheek.

And she did look wonderful. Her gown was short, barely covering her shins, and cut very close to her legs, form-fitted, I guess you would say. Her hair was up, in a tight bun, and her veil was very long, so that she looked like a lion. But the real Trish was evident when she turned around. The entire back was cut out of her dress, all the way down to her spine, and it was just about all I could take.

Her father, the Admiral, came over to dance with her, and he motioned to Lenny which meant "We've Only Just Begun," and Chris started to sing it a capella, without any music.

The couple danced, and I kept thinking If he only knew what had gone on in his house when he wasn't there, he might not be smiling now. He was so fucking happy, I thought I would puke.

She did it. She looked over at me without smiling, no expression at all really. No, no, it was the same expression she had the first night we were together, the night we walked down the pier together and I told her about Hef, I need you tonight, Virgil, that's what she had said to me. I never realized until that moment in her living room, as she looked at me in her wedding dress, her father, the Admiral, beaming so that I thought he would burst, that the emphasis was on the word "tonight."

Then we played "Color My World," from Chicago, and Mr. and Mrs. Midgett danced with each other. The applauded politely, and Brendan walked towards me.

"Remember what we talked about?" He whispered in my ear.

I didn't until now. "Oh, yeah," I nodded.

"Play it real nice," and he handed me a twenty dollar bill.

"Sure." I purposely fucked it up.

He didn't seem to notice, but Lenny, Marty, and Chris did.

"Hey everybody," I began, "I'm real sorry for the quality of that last number, but I've worked up a special song that, If I was the groom, I know I would sing to this lovely lady. Trish," she was just standing there looking at me, trying to smile, I just know it, "this is for you."

I turned to Lenny. "I've got this one."

I started to play, my head hanging down in front of my guitar, letting the music blend with me, knowing that everything was just right, and, at the right moment I raised my head up and took a deep inhale, dropped my jaw and began to sing:

Longer than there've been fishes in the ocean,
Higher than any bird ever flew,

Longer than there've been stars up in the
heavens,
I've been in love with you.

As I played through the number, I knew that everyone in the place was listening to me, and that I could not hide the fact that the words came right from my own heart, but I did not care. No matter what she had done to me, or how she had treated me, I did love her, and in those few minutes, I hoped, she would somehow realize the mistake that she had made and, perhaps for the last time in her life, know what it feels like to drown as your ship slowly steams away.

And she did cry. As did many of the brides maids, her mother, her new mother in law (Maybelline), I think her father, and, I swear, Lenny and Marty. I knew it was a powerful rendition, and I wanted to cry myself, but reasoned that I would probably save that for later, when I was in the comfort of my room, alone.

Hugs were going around, some praise was floating over to me, and Brendan went to refill his punch glass when the beautiful, desireable woman I had known intimately for the past three months caught my eye from across the room and mouthed, "I'm sorry."

She looked harder at my lips to make out what it was that I was mouthing to her, shook her head, took a step

closer, I tried again, another step, another shake of the head, and then she was standing right next to me.

"Wait a few months," I said aloud, and tried to smile, but the grief overtook me and I sobbed like a baby. Just once. And then, she was giving me that not-put-on pouty look, and I just turned away.

The next day was Sunday, and the band was off for the day, so I took the opportunity to sleep late. When I did awake, around nine, the disc jockey was talking about how clear the day was, "the clearest day in New York in over five years," is what he called it. I looked out the window behind my bed to see the sun shining and the blue sky, bluer than I had seen all summer, and the twin towers hovering over it all, and decided that today was the day that I would make my way to the top.

When I was about eight years old, I began spending my summers at the airport in nearby Marshfield, Massachusetts. I loved being around the planes and the goings-on at the airport. I would sit and watch the pilots do "touch-and-go's," the given name to a series of take-offs and landings, and would evaluate each landing according to my vast experience. I once saw a guy come in at about seventy-five feet above the end of the runway in a Cessna 150 and almost stop there while the plane gently settled to the ground almost vertical. I read all the flying magazines and dreamed of the day when I would be one of the corporate big shots who owned a Beechcraft King Air or maybe even a Lear Jet, zipping from Boston to Chicago for a business meeting, and then back again in time to have dinner with my family. But my short-term hope was that one of the pilots would see me sitting there, by myself, and take pity on me. "Hey, young man," he would smile at me, "how'd you like to take a short trip with me to Portland?" Like it? Like it? I'd love it!

Imagine how I felt when, a few years later, after hanging around the airport for a couple of summers, the boss asked me if I could use a job cleaning up around the terminal.

"You really mean it?"

"Yep, I could use a hand with the garbage and mopping up and washing and waxing planes--"

"You mean I get to wash and wax airplanes?"

"That's right. What do you say?"

I didn't even ask what the job paid. But Tim went on.

"I'll tell you what. I'll give you a dollar twenty-five an hour in money, or I'll double it to two-fifty and hour toward flight time. How'd that be?"

"I don't understand."

"I mean that, if you want, I'll teach you to fly for working around here."

It was, without a doubt, the dream of my life come true. I could not speak, but nodded my head vigorously. He laughed.

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'"

In the next four months, I went flying with Tim exactly one time. I worked my butt off around the terminal, doing everything he asked. I even wore long-sleeve shirts with collars like he did. I had earned about a hundred and seventy dollars worth of flight time, which translated to about six hours in the air, and the only time I got a lesson was when Tim wanted to go to Plymouth to take a glider lesson and he let me have the controls for about twenty minutes. I became agitated,

and tried to talk to my parents about it, but they told me that I would have to solve my own problems.

As it happened, the girl who sat behind me in homeroom was Grace Schultz, and her father just happened to have a very nice Cessna 182 airplane tied up at the same airport. Grace and I got to know each other pretty well, and she told her dad that I liked to clean airplanes so one day she asked if the following Saturday would I like to meet him at the airport and help him wash and wax his bird and of course I said "yes" and I told Tim that I would need to have Saturday off and he said "okay" but that he definitely would need me next Saturday and I said "no problem," and I met Mr. Schultz and he was nice, handsome, one of those guys I dreamed of being with a briefcase and my own airplane, and we washed and waxed his plane in the hanger because it was raining outside and when we were through, he said something that I thought was strange.

"I'm not going to pay you today."

"Oh, that's okay." What?!

"I'm not going to pay you today because I'm going to pay you next Saturday."

I said that that was alright. He was smiling.

"You see, next Saturday I'm going to be taking a long trip around the state to see a couple of planes that I might want to buy, and I'd like you to go with me.

I've heard that you know a lot about planes."

A flight around the entire state was too good to believe.

"Whoa, I'd love that!"

"I thought you might."

I got on my bike for the ten-mile ride back to my house and pedalled with all my might; I couldn't wait to tell my father the flying nut whose enthusiasm got me hooked. I must have been five miles down the road when it hit me. Tim said he had to have me work the following saturday.

I was completely deflated by the time I made my way up the long, steep slope a mile before my house, and I didn't say a word to anybody about the next weekend.

When Saturday rolled around, I hopped my bike and rode to the airport, just like every weekend. In the brilliant sunshine of May I pedalled the distance in what seemed like minutes. The place was booming, all kinds of pilots and airplanes milling about, long lines at the rental counter. I walked through the door and Tim waved at me and said, "Boy, am I glad you're here. Fill the soda machine, will you?" I nodded and went out to the shed to get some cases of soda. From the shed I looked over the tarmac and saw Mr. and Mrs. Schultz and Grace readying their airplane. As I came out of the shed with a case of grape soda in my hands, Mr. Schultz was coming

towards me and waving.

"Virgil, hey Virgil. You ready?"

I looked at the soda in my hand, and took a glance toward the terminal, then up at the cloudless blue sky, and at Grace who was looking at me now and smiling, and thought about emptying garbage cans and mopping floors and there was no contest.

"I just gotta put these sodas inside, Mr. Schultz."

"Okay, make it snappy, we've got a big day ahead."

I know that it was the wrong decision, but I was only twelve years old and I dearly loved to fly. I dropped the case of soda on the floor in front of the machine and took off out the back door before anybody could say a word to me. I ran across the tarmac and hopped into the co-pilot's seat, shut the door, and we were gone.

And it was a wonderful day. We logged nearly a thousand miles on the plane, went to about six airports and looked at ten or so planes, and it looked like Mr. Schultz had decided upon a Beechcraft Bonanza. We ended the day making a sweep around Logan airport and came within a mile or so of a big jet airliner, then down the coast to Marshfield. It was almost seven P.M. when we landed, and I hoped that Tim was gone for the day. He was. But his girlfriend, who was the vice president of the airport, was still there.

"Well, what the hell happened to you, Mr. Peal?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tim said that you were supposed to work today, and you went flying, didn't you?"

"Well, Mr. Schultz--"

"I don't care about Mr. Schultz. Do you work for him? Does he pay your salary? Is he teaching you to fly? Huh? Is he?"

I couldn't look at her.

"Well, Tim said for me to tell you that you are fired."

I wanted to cry. I wanted to punch her, her and her panty-hose that always peeked out of the top of her slacks when she knelt down to pick up something. She was such a big shot around there, and she couldn't even fly.

As I pedalled home that evening, I thought Good, who cares? Mr. Schultz would take me flying anytime I wanted. He would give me some work around the airport, that bitch would see. I shook my head and the tears away and stood up on my pedals. As I came down hard on them I heard a pop and the bike slowed, became harder to pedal, and I realized that I had blown a tire. The rear one.

Night was beginning to fall and I still had about eight miles to ride when I came to a stop, got off, and confirmed that it was indeed flat.

The evening was quiet now. No cars coming by, no houses near this stretch of road so that I could call my parents. Not that they would come and get me, but just to let them know that I was alive. I pushed slowly. Then faster, faster along the flat, straight, quiet road. I stopped, realizing that I would soon be winded if I kept that pace up. Only my breathing was audible in the stillness, and my eyes began to adjust to the dim light. I pushed slowly.

A hint of light on the road ahead informed me that a car was coming up behind, and then I heard the whine of tires and engine in the distance. I turned around so that the driver would see me and hopefully avoid me, and I moved further away from the road.

As it approached, it slowed, and I became frightened, I don't remember why. It pulled along side and I moved further away, almost in the ditch. The window rolled down.

"Having some trouble?"

"Yeah, yes ma'am." I couldn't see the occupants inside, but they seemed harmful enough. The driver's door opened, and the inside light went on and I beamed at the sight of the Schultz's.

"Hey, hi, I didn't know that it was you." The trunk popped open and Mr. Schultz said "come on, lets put your bike on the trunk." And we did.

We drove along in silence for a while.

"What's wrong with your bike?" asked Grace.

"Flat tire."

"What was all the yelling back at the airport?" Mr. Schultz asked.

"Oh, it was nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing."

"She just likes to yell at me, that's all."

"Virgil, were you supposed to work today?"

"Oh, no, no, I don't have any scheduled hours. I work when I want to."

"Okay, I just don't want you to get into any trouble because of me."

"No, no trouble--"

"Because we could have gone flying another day, you and I."

Great, now you tell me. "No, today was fine. Okay. Great actually, I had a great time. Say, Mr. Schultz?"

"Yes?"

"Ah, do you think, that is, I wonder if you will need any more work done, you know, maybe waxing your plane or something, you know, anytime soon?"

"Well, not anytime soon, but if I need to, I'll have Grace tell you at school, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

My unemployment status didn't deter me from spending every weekend at the airport, waiting around for Mr. Schultz or anybody to take me flying, but no one did.

Until one day after school had let out. I was hanging around and watching the planes come in and go out, and this man I had seen around some came over to the couch and sat next to me.

"You're here all the time, huh?"

I nodded.

"Why you hang around so much?"

"'Cause I like it here."

"You want to be a pilot when you grow up?"

"Yes. A commercial pilot."

"Hey, that's what I am."

This caught my attention. "You are? For what airline?"

"Oh, I don't fly for an airline, I'm in business for myself."

I studied the thin, pale man with wavy silver hair and rounded nose. He didn't look like any of the pilots I had seen in magazines. He didn't look dashing or strong. He didn't look like Mr. Schultz.

"What do you do?"

"Well, I fly all kinds of airplanes for anybody who wants me to. Sometimes I ferry planes around here and down to Martha's Vineyard. Sometimes I run the mail.

Whatever I have to do to get by. I noticed you looking at that poster." On the wall was a huge poster of a photograph of the inside of an airliner's cockpit. "Do you know what kind of airplane that is?"

I looked again, carefully now, and noticed the four throttle controls, and the small sign above the airspeed indicator that said "V1=125 kts." "It's a 707," I answered.

"Hey, that's pretty good. A friend of mine flies one of those out of Logan for American, how would yo like to go with me sometime to see one for real?"

"Wow, could I?"

"Sure, why not. Hey you seem like a pretty good kid. Wanna come over to my house for lunch?"

And I thought Why not? so I did.

The man, whose name I never asked, drove me to his house which was not far away, we went inside and he made us each a tuna sandwich. He showed me his house, and, in his bedroom were two twin sized beds and, between them on the wall, was a picture of Jesus. I wondered about his wife. Why didn't they sleep together?

I ate my sandwich and he asked me about my girlfriend.

"Is she pretty?"

"Very, but she moved to California."

"Do you write her?"

"Yes, in fact I have a letter with me today that I'm going to send her."

"You ever have sex with her?"

Did he say "SEX?" I began to feel uncomfortable.

"Well, did you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know." Who was this guy?

"Well, sex is a beautiful thing, you know. If you love someone, or even like them a lot, you should have sex with them."

"I had my appendix out." I never had my appendix out, but my best friend, Raymond, just did and I don't know, it just popped out of my mouth.

"Really? Let me see the scar."

"Oh, you can't see the scar."

"Come on, let me see."

Obediently, I stood up and unzipped my jeans, lowered my underwear a little, and, of course there was no scar. "See, I told you that you couldn't see it."

"Hey, you're right," and he reached for my underwear. "How about your other thing there? Let me see that."

Instinctively, I pulled away.

"Hey, I thought we were friends. I thought you wanted to see that 707 with me."

And I did, I did want to see that airplane, and I didn't want to do anything that would make him change his mind, so I lowered my underwear some more to expose my genitals to the man. He reached for it, touched it, said "hey that's a good one," and I looked away towards the door as he fondled me, then I looked the other way, around the kitchen and dropped my eyes in time to see him move his head closer to me. I didn't know what to say. I wrenched my neck to the right as he put his mouth on it and I shut my eyes tightly. When I opened them, I was looking right into the bedroom and into the eyes of Jesus Christ, my lord and savior, and I turned and ran. I didn't even take time to zip my pants, I just headed out the door and down the street on the dead run. I was a bit astonished that he did not chase me when I heard the engine of his car start up and go into gear and on either side of the road were marshes and there was no other house on the dead end street so I just ran and ran and ran and then he was next to me, saying "hey, come on, I didn't mean nothing, come on, I'll drive you back to the airport," and I could see the airport in the distance and I shook my head as I ran, and he said, sternly now, "come on, I'll drive you back there, and he reached out the window for me, got my arm, slowed the car down, stopped, still tightly gripping my arm he said "now get in the car, okay, friend?" but he wasn't smiling and I was so

afraid that, in one motion almost automatically I just slapped my hand down on the door lock and brought my head down to his arm and bit him as hard as I could, and he let go and then I started running again, faster and faster, with the main road in sight, with cars passing by, and people and, and then, I was there. I turned around, but his car was no where in sight, and I caught my breath and walked back to the airport.

Later, I got on my bike and started to ride home. It was late afternoon and I was afraid as I passed the street where the man lived, but he wasn't there. I rode past as fast as I could and, even though he wasn't there, I was still afraid. I stopped and got off my bike, thought about the long ride home. I found a small stick and wedged it in between the stem on the air valve on my back tire and let all the air out of it. I pushed it back to the airport and called home.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

"Hi Virgil, everything alright?"

"I got another flat."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the airport. Could you come get me?"

"Your father's not home with the car. Is there any where you can get it fixed?"

"No, I don't have any more money either."

"Well, I guess you'll have to walk."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Start home and if your father comes home, I'll send him after you, okay?"

"Yep, bye."

"Hey, son, are you okay?"

"Yeah, Mom, I'm fine. See you."

And I walked the three miles to the nearest gas station and filled the tire back up and rode the rest of the way home. I never told them about the man at the airport, and, although I never lost my love of things that fly, I never went back.

All of this came back to me as I stood atop the World Trade Center and looked out at a small Cessna flying by, close by, close enough so that I could have touched it, and that feeling of high anxiety came back, as it does for me when I am in high open spaces. It is a strange feeling that almost makes you want to jump, knowing that you could, that there is nothing to stop you, knowing that it scares the hell out of you and that you would never jump, but you could and it lures you to the edge, of the building, of your sanity, of your life.

"Excuse me."

I wheeled around, yanked out of my daydream, and there was a young woman, maybe seventeen years old with

thick, curly blondeish hair, dark, Wayfarer sunglasses, and a big smile, and she was holding a camera.

"Would you take a picture of my parents and me, please?" The southern accent was not thick and lazy, as I had heard, but fluid. Determined. Vexing.

"Sure, why not?" SHE reminded me of someone, I didn't know who.

She meticulously posed them, making sure that the sunlight was in their eyes and that the Empire State Building was in the background, then said "Okay," but I couldn't figure out how to snap the picture. So she came over to me and showed me how to do it, and they went through the making sure procedure, but her perfume lingered in the air. I had never smelled it before, but it was sweet, not flowery or powdery like most of the perfumes I had smelled. In fact, everything about the young lady was different from any other woman I had ever known.

I snapped the picture as they smiled. Tourists. She walked over, thanked me, and took her camera back. As she was walking away, I called to her.

"Hey, what's that perfume you're wearing?"

"It's called 'Patchouli'."

"It's very nice."

"Thank you. Hey, what's your name?"

"I'm Virgil, Virgil Peal."

She shook my hand, "Hannah Wakeman, from Hickory, North Carolina." Hickree.

She looked at her parents. "We're on vacation."

"I see. I'm stationed over there," and I pointed at the now tiny island where the two long white ships with the distinctive racing stripes were parked.

"Wow, you live here?"

"Yeah, I play in the Coast Guard band."

"That's neat, what instrument do you play?" What a smile.

"Trombone. I'm originally from New England. Maine, actually.

"I've never been there. Well, gotta go. Nice talking to you, Virgil Peal." And she was gone. As I watched her get on the elevator, turn, wave and smile, I could not shake the feeling that I had met her someplace before.

As the days wore on and the fourth of July approached, I felt a growing sense of emptiness. Steve and I did less and less partying since both the marching/concert band and our little combo were seeing a lot of action. I developed a taste for champagne, a standard at many of the after-concert buffets that we were served. Someone, I suppose that it was old man Hospodar, decided that we should needed a live "big band"

sound for the big fourth of July gala ball, and many of us were called into extra duty to put this thing together.

The events planned for the fourth were unbelievable. Three concerts, a parade, the tall ships, the fireworks, and the huge gala ball. We were scheduled to play eleven times from ten A.M. until two o'clock the next morning. With all that was asked of us, I don't think anybody expected the stress, something that many were unfamiliar with back then, to be so all-encompassing. but tempers flared and a couple of arguments escalated into physical violence as we prepared for the big day. It was sheer luck that we had a parade out on Long Island on the first.

By then, we were a crack unit. The music was right on, and the marching and drill action was perfect. And, although there were only forty-four members of our unit, we sounded like a hundred. The crowds out on the island loved us, the Coast Guard, and they responded to our performance enthusiastically. With all five branches of the service represented at a battle of the bands, we walked away with the grand prize trophy. Pride was the only thing that kept me afloat after the wedding. Pride in myself, the band, the service, all sorts of intangible bullshit that helps the mind to shut down, and allows emotion to overrule it.

I took the weekend before the fourth to take a bus home and pick up my car. I didn't really need it in New York, but I wanted it. When I got to my parents house, they were gone, so I took a ride on Midnight, the Tennessee Walker that my parents boarded for the neighbors, took a shower, left a note so that they wouldn't think that the car was stolen, and headed back to New York. I stopped in New Hampshire to see Ricky, but the ship was out to sea. I got a tuna sub from the Greek place and a six-pack, went down to a favorite place on the beach and looked out over the ocean. I found it so mind-clearing to just sit there and watch the waves come and come and come, over and over, each one different as snowflakes, reaching ever closer to the rocks as the sandpipers tip-toed back and forth just out of reach of the wash. The tiny birds reminded me of Trish, fragile yet strong, teasing the water's edge as it summoned every ounce of energy it could to catch the fleeing feet, only to come up just short each time. Just out of reach.

And as the water retreated and regrouped for yet another of its infinite attempts, the long beaks probed the sand retrieving every bit, every scrap, every morsel of what the wave left in its wake. "Oh, Trish," I said aloud, startling myself in the screaming silence of high tide.

Back on the road south, I lit a smoke and wondered

if life was actually as unfair, as apathetic, as awful,
as it seemed.

The fourth came and went just like any other day.
We were tired, exhausted really, but other than that, it
was just another day. It was the first time I ever felt
that way about any major holiday.

On the sixth, the Hamilton set sail for four months
in Guantanamo bay, Cuba, for intense readiness training.
And Lt. Brendan Midgett went with it. I went bowling.

The cool, quiet of the bowling alley was always a welcome respite from the mid-summer heat of New York. Even though we were on an island in the middle of the harbor, the onshore breezes that made their way in from the ocean, passing through the spans on the Verrazano Narrows bridge, and across Staten Island, picked up a lot of heat because they were always hot, hot, hot.

But inside, the air conditioning and the darkened atmosphere was a certain heaven for me. And there were no people to speak of inside, so I guess that helped keep the temperature down. I walked up to the counter.

"Hi. How's the band doing?"

She hadn't changed, except for the darkening of her skin, the extra ring on her finger, and a new trim for her hair.

"I'd like to bowl."

"Ah, sure, sure." She looked around her, tried to chuckle a bit, turned back and said, "I think I've got an alley."

I looked at the empty lanes behind her, smiled at her sarcasm. "Number two, I guess." It was the farthest from the counter without being right up against the wall. It was also the way I had been treated by her, "number two."

"Two it is. Hey, you alright?"

"I find it difficult to believe that you actually give a shit."

"I do care, really Virgil. Can't we talk?"

"What the fuck do you want to talk about?"

She gave me that look, that neutral, not-sorry-not-happy-not-anything face that I adored, and I wanted to reach out and grab her, maybe in some way to still try to take her away from all of this, maybe to take her slender neck in my strong seaman's hands and choke the very life out of her.

"Don't give me that look, I hate you, I've always hated you, I hated you before I even met you--"

"Bullshit! Who do you think you're trying to kid? You love me, remember?"

"That was before. Before the lies, before the marriage, before the--" I cut myself short. I was going to say "the laughter," but just the thought of it left my knees weak, and I snatched the score sheet from her perfect hand and headed for the alley.

My favorite ball was nowhere to be found on the racks, and I settled for one that was bit heavier, but the holes were okay. I was fuming at Trish, her sharp tongue I had never really heard before, and it was all I could do to pay attention to the game.

I found my spot on the floor, brought the ball to my

very long time."

I remembered the docs at boot camp, how they seemed not to really care about any of us, but I thought that had something to do with the head game that they were trying to put us through. But no.

The red-headed, bushy-mustached fellow who was unhappy, to say the least, at being interrupted in the middle of his lunch to care for some kid who had hurt himself bowling came over to me after the corpsman had taken my vital signs.

"D-d-d-d-d-d--d----d-----do y-y-y-y--y---y-----you m-m-m-m--m---m-----mm--mmmmmean to say y-y-y-yy-y---y-y--y--yy-you hurt yourself b-b-b--b---b-----b----"

"Bowling, that's right, bowling." I wanted to burst out laughing. There is something about a stutterer that reaches down inside me and pulls the deepest, hardest laughter out from somewhere in my bilges; stifling it only makes it worse, but I had to.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha---h--hha---how'd that ha-ha--ha-----hap---n?"

This guy was a doctor? What if I was bleeding to death? What would he tell the nurse? How would she understand him?

He took out that thing that you test reflexes with and asked me if I could sit up. No, I couldn't sit up. Then he scraped the handle of it across the bottoms of my

feet and asked me if I could feel it. Right, yes. Left, no. No feeling. No feeling in my left leg, and in the hands of a man who could not speak. I have never been more sure that I was, indeed, fucked.

"I don't know, I was just bowling--"

"H-h--h----here? On b-b--b---b--bbbbbase?"

"Yes, on base."

"H-h--h-----how ab-bb--b--bbbout that Admiral's d-dd-d--ddddaughter?"

Why is it that everybody I talk to brings up Trish? I nodded my head and half-smiled, "Yeah, she's something."

"I've h-hh--heard some w-w--w-----w----"

"Yeah, me too. Uh, doc, what do you suppose has happened to me?"

"We-we--w-wee-well, you've done s-ss-s-----sss-sssss--omething to your b-b-bb---b--bb-ack. M-mm-mmmm---mmaybe s-ss-s-----sss-ssssss--lipped a disc. Any h-h--hh--h-history of it in your f--f--f-----fffamily?"

My father had hurt his back while building ships for the Navy years ago, and I told him so. He wanted to admit me into the base hospital, but they told him that I would be better off at the Public Health Service Hospital in Baltimore. Maryland. I was loaded into an ambulance, and two guys who were on staff that day, who were not, I must say, pleased at the prospect of

traveling to Baltimore, traded stories for three and a half hours while I just lay there, thinking What Next?

Part III.
Baltimore

If you have never been inside a Veterans hospital or any other military hospital, it's tough to describe. Suffice it to say that they treat you the way hospitals on the outside would treat you if you weren't paying them wads of money to care for you.

In the admissions department, the women were very nice; they were not, however, the most intelligent folks on the planet. I lay in the hall for another hour or so before they even got to me.

"Peal, Virgil I." The voice was booming from around the corner, and I opened my mouth to answer.

"He--" It was all I got out before the pain stabbed me again and I couldn't even scream.

"Peal? Virgil I. Peal?"

I pictured the large woman looking over the rows of desk-chairs, and the blank stares emitting from the faces of those waiting to be admitted, and their looking around, first this way and then that, wondering just where was this Virgil Peal character anyway?

"One more time, PEAL, VIRGIL PEAL, if you're here, sound off."

I managed to raise my hand in agony and pounded my fist against the wall as hard as I could. Click.

"Okay, Maronek, Richard T."

Idiots, was all I could think. Don't they even know

when someone's been brought in on a gurney? Don't they even know when they put someone in the hall, for Christ's sake?

About that time, a very attractive woman came around the corner. She had short brown hair parted in the middle and wore a long-sleeved red sweater over her white uniform.

But the eyes. They were green! I had never seen green eyes before, at least not that green. I guess she could tell that I was wincing in pain.

"Hey, fella, are you okay?"

"Mphh baaa mmmmm paaaaayyyyyynnnn."

"Hurts, huh?"

I think I nodded.

"What's your name?"

"MMMMMMMMpeal."

She inhaled fast, like she was startled out of a daydream while washing the dishes. "You're Peal?"

I think I nodded again.

"Hey Rita," she called around the corner. "Here's our Mr. Peal."

The big black woman came around the corner, threw her hand to her mouth to cover her smirk, snapped her head back and a muffled "Oh Shit," came from her mouth.

"What you doin' out here?"

If I could have talked, I would have said, "You put

me out here, don't you remember, you ignorant bitch?"

I was wheeled behind the counter and another genius doctor began the questions and the scraping of the bottom of my feet. At least he could see that I was in serious pain, and ordered some kind of pain-killer through an I.V.

"How'd this happen?"

"Bowling," I managed, after the drug began to take effect.

"What?" He had this incredulous look on his face, with a half-smile.

"I don't know how, I just know that I was bowling and,---" the drug really began to take effect now."

"Well, you've gotta take care of that back, you know."

I looked around the room, the curtains, green and well-pleated, started shifting back and forth, back and forth, and the doctor, who I was sure was quite young, now seemed to age before my eyes, then, he transformed into an Oriental, then, a woman. I felt like I was floating backwards.

"I feel like I'm flooooooooooooooooooating backwards," I giggled, humored by my own voice. I glanced down at my feet, which began to grow. Larger, larger, larger, until they were standing about three feet from the gurney.

"Peal! Put your legs down. Everyone can see your

business."

I don't know who said that, but I obeyed, even though it was hard to keep them from floating up again.

"I'm gonna strap you down, son," came the next warning.

"Aaaaammmmmmm nnnnnnnnooooooooooottt tt tt tt tt--"

I woke up sometime in the middle of the night, now in a bed in a creepy huge ward with snores coming from both directions around me. I shook my head as my eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Thirst.

Hunger.

Nurse. Where's the buzzer?

Ah, I see the guy's next to me, and it's hanging over the rail on his bed. I traced his cord back up to the wall and into the jack, right next to the empty jack on my side of the switch plate.

I had no buzzer.

I have needs here, I kept thinking. I'll just have to use my neighbor's buzzer. I'll just reach--.

The spike that was driven into my back must have been a foot long. And, I must have screamed, because in a few minutes, fifteen or so, a real, live, breathing, dressed-in-white nurse came bopping up, obviously thrilled at working the graveyard shift.

"Whatsa matter?"

Whatsa matter? Whatsa MATTER???

"I am in FUCKING PAIN. I am THIRSTY, I am HUNGRY, and now, just NOW, mind you, I realize that I have to PISS!!"

"I'll get you some water, but the cafeteria is closed now."

"Yeah?"

"I can give you a pain shot--"

"Just something easy, okay? Like some aspirin?"

She checked her clipboard, "Sez here that you allergic to aspirin."

"What? I've been taking aspirin all my life."

"I caint give you no aspirin, how 'bout Tylenol?"

"Fine, fine, anything to stop this back pain."

"Back pain? What about your Gall Bladder?"

"My What?"

She put her hand on my head. "Listen, Roger, you feel a little hot--"

"Roger? ROGER? Who the FUCK is ROGER?"

"Well, you are sweetie."

"My name is VIRGIL, Virgil PEAL, Goddammit."

"Keep your voice down, they's others that's tryin' to sleep, y'know."

She walked away, came back a few minutes later, chuckling, carrying a pitcher and a glass. She set it

down on my swinging table and placed it just out of my reach, then picked up my bed control and lifted my head up so that I could drink. I filled the glass with water and she handed me a small Dixie cup with two tylenol in it. I took the pills and she handed me another pitcher, this one was odd-shaped, and I realized that, if I didn't have anything else, at least I had a pot to piss in.

She came back. "That better, Roger?"

"I tell you my name is Virgil."

"Roger, Virgil, whatever," and she chuckled to herself as she went back down the dark walkway.

The antiseptic smell of the hospital filled my nostrils when morning came--at 6:30 AM. They woke us up just like we were in boot camp, turning on all the lights in the ward, shouting things like, "Up and at 'em," and "Hit the dirt," and "Move it or lose it."

"Move what?" I asked the orderly, a large black woman.

"Get your butt up, mister. You got to go to X-Ray in thirty minutes."

"Listen, I cannot move. Every time I try it hurts." Although I must say that the pain in my back was beginning to be more bearable, I didn't feel like moving.

She laughed. "I've heard that one a thousand times. Now get your butt out of that bed so we can make it up."

"No."

"Whatchoo say?"

"No."

She left, in a hurry, waddling down the hall and out of my sight, but quickly returned with another woman, this one dressed in a white outfit with a stethoscope draped around her neck.

She checked her clipboard. "Misterrrr ah, Greenkowski?" and she looked at me.

"Who?"

"Or however you pronounce it--"

"I pronounce it 'Peal.'"

"Well, what have we here, a comedian?"

"A comedy, maybe, but my name is Peal, Virgil Isaac Peal."

"We have you down as Roger--Greenwhatever."

I fished into my pajamas and displayed my dogtags.

"See?"

She frowned as she came to the realization that I was, indeed, who I said I was.

"Now, I want to see the Doctor assigned to me, right now."

"Hold it a minute." She moved away and she and

the orderly, or whoever she was, had a whispered conversation. "Be right back." And they were gone.

A few minutes later another woman came in, dressed like the big nurse, and her name tag said "Georgia Leaks," and I laughed as I played with the idea of the state of Georgia leaking somehow into the Atlantic, and then I remembered Hef. But I didn't have time to think much about him before she was speaking.

"Mistah Peal, we'll have your breakfast sent up to you. There was a misunderstanding with your chart: it was sent to the morgue."

"And my Doctor? When will he be here.?"

"There's none of 'em here before nine-thirty. You, ah, you ain't gonna tells him about this little mix-up are you?"

"Listen, I just want to get the hell out of here, that's all."

"I thought you couldn't move."

By now, I began to realize that there were others around me; men, young and old, dressed in the same grey striped pajamas, with matching robes hung over the ends of their beds. The guy to my immediate right spoke.

"F'get it, man, this fuckin' place is a zoo."

I studied him a moment. He had a pale round face and absolutely no hair, zipped in boot camp, I figured, and a pair of large lips. I recognized his accent.

"You're from Boston."

"Chahlstown, you know, where Bunkah Hill is."

Yep, Boston. "Yeah, I know, I grew up outside there. Hanover."

"Hanovah, Hanovah, Oh yeah, neah Brockton, right?"

"Yeah, that's the place."

"Mister Peal?"

I returned my attention to the nurse long enough to smile a bit and shake my head, and she left, her squeaking feet moving quickly down the shiny tile corridor.

"What ah you in heah faw?"

What a delightful accent. "My back, I threw it out bowling, I guess. They won't tell me what's wrong."

"That's probably 'cause they don't fuckin' know. I'll tell ya, I been in heah faw two fuckin' weeks f'what? I got asthma, that's all, asthma. I know it, they know it, but they got these fuckin' Chink doctors that they gotta train, so every day I see a different one."

"Sounds like a lot of bullshit to me."

"It is, it is. Hey, you play any cahds?"

"Not really, just for amusement really, to pass the time."

He was now sitting on the end of my bed with a

deck in his hands, shuffling, shuffling. "Wanna cut faw a kwahtah?"

"No, thanks. I didn't bring any money with me." The thought struck me, I was broke, a long way from base.

"Yaw, kiddin'. Not a cent?"

"Nope. I'm hoping that I don't have to stay here very long. Say, could you hand me that water pitcher?" He filled a glass for me, and unwrapped a straw. I leaned up to take a sip and the pain returned, although, as I have said, not quite as bad as the previous night. He extended his hand.

"Tom Kelly."

"Virgil Peal."

And he sat there on the end of my bed smiling.

"What?"

"Nothin', just knowin' that you gonna be heah a while."

"No fucking way, pal. A couple of days of R & R and I am outta here."

He laughed loudly and went back to his bed, "We'll see, we'll see."

In the next few days I began to recover rapidly. The Doctors all said that I had some type of "Disc Problem," but would not elaborate. Soon, I was able to get up and walk, which meant that I had to go to the cafeteria for my meals, although that may be somewhat of an overstatement.

"What's that?" I asked the man behind the serving line as I pointed at some type of caked-up-sort-of-meat product.

"Das scrapple. It's good. You want some?"

"Yeah, why not?" After all, I was young, and diet was never something that I gave much thought to. This was before alfalfa sprouts and mineral water.

He also scooped me some scrambled eggs and I popped a couple of slices of bread in the toaster and walked over to the beverage counter and drew some milk. Good All-American breakfast. At last, I took a seat at a long table with only one more occupant.

"You know what that shit is?"

"Excuse me?"

"Scrapple, you know what it is?" The old, kind of distinguished-looking man at the other end of the table who was dressed exactly like me called out.

"It seems like sausage, but square."

"It's all the shit that they don't put into regular

sausage. The stuff that they won't put in regular sausage."

I examined my plate and realized that there was some sinuous strands running through the scrapple, and that the texture resembled, well, shit really. I smelled. Sausage. I chanced a bite. Sausage, yet, not sausage. I lifted my head and the man was still watching me, now with a small smirk on his face.

"What'd I tell you? Shit!" And he stood, laughed, and walked off toward the dish galley.

I tried the eggs, but they were so watery that they made me want to puke. I picked up my two pieces of toast and went back to the toaster table and smeared a lot of peanut butter on them and that was my breakfast. I gotta get out of here.

Lunch and dinner weren't much better. Some sort of macaroni casserole with peas and some kind of fish (they said it was tuna, but I remained skeptical), and meat loaf for dinner, runny meat loaf. It was as if someone was consciously adding liquid to all the food, may be to stretch it, I don't know.

The next day, when the Doctor came in to check up on me, I mentioned the food to him.

"...I don't know Doc, I just don't seem to have an appetite for it."

His eyes met mine and he studied me with a knowing smile for a moment.

"How's your bowels?"

"Huh?"

"How's your bowels, any trouble?"

"I don't know, okay I guess?"

"Okay?"

"They're fine, what's this all about?"

"Any stomach pains?, any discomfort?, anyyyyyy---
heartburn?"

"Well, occasionally, but--"

"I see," and he began to write something down on his
knee-pad.

"What do you mean?"

"It may be nothing," he said as he raised his eyes
from his page, "but I'm going to have you checked out for
any gastrointestinal problems."

"You're what?"

"Just the routine, nothing to worry about."

"Doc, don't do this to me. I need to get back to
the band."

"Oh, I'm sure they can do just fine without you for
a few more days, don't you think?"

"Gimme a break, please. I'm fine, really. I just
need to get back to my unit. I'm tired of being cooped
up in here."