

Part VI.
On The Dead Run

I bolted out of a dream by the light. Light that invaded the pitch blackness like the back side of a solar eclipse, and I was aware that something was not quite right. The sensation that I was not seated level in the driver's seat as my body strained against the shoulder harness may have been my first clue that something was amiss, but it may also have been the quiet, the lack of the taken-for-granted hum of my little car's engine and the singing of the tires across the night pavement. Whatever the hint, the fact became immediately apparent to me: There had been an accident.

The dream was interesting; I was sailing downhill on a bicycle in some sort of race and, at a sharp curve with a sheer dropoff, I had failed to negotiate it properly. I had fallen down on the bike and over the ledge but was hanging on to the gravel on the edge while some onlookers rushed to help me up. But still I slipped.

Now the lights behind and above me flickered as shadows loomed ahead of me, someone walking in front of them, first one, then the other, and the voice.

"Hey, down there. You alright?" What accent was that? Definitely southern, but different.

I looked out in the direction of the voice, up the embankment into the blinding light. "I think so." I

answered.

Then he was next to me. An aged man in overalls with, I could see as I shaded my eyes from the light, a couple days stubble and one enlarged cheek, probably stuffed full of chew.

His chest heaved from either the excitement or his trek down the steep roadside, and his breath was heavy with the odor of a days worth of alcohol.

"Must have fell asleep at the wheel," I added.

"Hmph," he made the sound as he turned and spit on the ground. "Can you git out?"

I loosened the seat belt and worked against the force of gravity to get my door opened and then hauled myself out. Surveying the situation, I realized that I had been rather fortunate. Yes, I was in the ditch, a considerable distance from the pavement, but I was not, I recorded in my mind, lodged deeply into the twelve-inch-diameter pine tree which stood ahead ten feet and directly in my path.

"Good thang you stopped when you didst," the old timer said.

"Yeah," I managed.

The car was at a decent angle, pitched maybe forty degrees from level, but, as I made my way around it, I felt pretty sure that there was no serious damage. It reminded me of the times when we used to drive our old

bombers on the ice in the middle of January right after a blizzard. There were always huge drifts patched over the frozen lakes, and we would do our best to drive right through them. Sometimes we would get hung up in them at impossible angles and would have to all get together and push, shovel, and grunt in order to free them

But out here, in the middle of---where?

"Say, where am I?"

"You sher you're alright sonny?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just don't know where I am."

The man, who I realized then wasn't as old as I originally thought, considered me for a moment. He removed a pint of bourbon from one of those lower pockets in his overalls, unscrewed the top and presented it to me. I swigged, probably more than he wanted me to, and handed it back to me.

"Well," he slowly began, "you are in a ditch along the side of interstate 81 in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Does that help?"

I nodded.

"You're a long way from home, aren't you sonny?"

Again, I nodded. I was still trying to remember the trip between New Hampshire and the embankment, and I wasn't at all sure of the day or the time, but didn't risk asking the already skeptical old man.

"It's early sunday morning, the twenty-second of

August."

"I know what day it is," 'you old coot' is what I wanted to add, but I was at a disadvantage already and he was, after all, just trying to help.

"Can you take me to a phone?"

"What fer?"

"So that I can call a wrecker, obviously." I felt my head, the scab now working all the way back from my forehead to my temple on the left side, and it was sore.

"Ain't no need for thet," and he smiled to expose a cavity between his teeth large enough to sail the "Aggressive" through. "I gots a winch on my Jimmy strong enough to tug that little rice burner outta there." Ras berner. And he spit again.

I followed him up the bank to his idling vehicle, and agreed that it would probably do the job.

And it was easy. The big truck effortlessly, methodically, pulled the tiny yellow 'ras berner' right up to the break-down lane, where I notice that she had a flat right front tire. Other than that, there was nothing else wrong. Not even a scratch on the paint.

The old man disengaged the winch and came out of the truck.

"Thanks, a lot," I said.

"That'll be twenty dollars, sonny."

I was shocked, then accepting, as I said, "Oh, sure,

sure," and I reached for my wallet.

He smiled. "Just kiddin', friend. It's on the house." What a cavern between his teeth. He spit.

I shook his hand, thanked him again.

"I'll stick around while you change that tire, if you like."

"You've been more than helpful, sir, but I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You sher you're alright, now?"

"Positive. Thanks again."

As he moved off into the night of the abandoned highway, the screaming of his knobby tires fading in the distance, it occurred to me that I hadn't even asked his name.

I decided to remain awake for the rest of the trip, and it was uneventful. I made my way into Johnson City early the next afternoon, and called my friend Leslie.

Leslie and I had attended the same church in our childhood, and, as we felt the pressure of adolescence and teenaged years, our relationship changed to a more boy-girl thing. Sometimes we would slip out of evening service and walk to the darkened schoolyard nearby and make out for a while.

We dated some in high school, but Leslie believed too strongly in virtue while other girls retained a more adventurous spirit, and my libido and I slowly gravitated

to the latter while Leslie, her easy-going temperament and her long, shapely legs faded into distant friendship. Even so, we remained on good terms, and I always knew that she would take me in if I needed a place to go. She had forgiven me, even though I didn't deserve it. By the time her parents had decided to move to Tennessee, her father's homeland, our relationship was still difficult to describe, but I knew that I would miss her.

"Hello?"

"It's Virgil."

"Hi. Where are you?"

"I'm in town, Johnson City."

"No! really?"

I wasn't sure at first whether I was welcome or not.

"Where are you?"

I gave her directions and she came to meet me in the parking lot of a Seven-Eleven store with hugs and kisses and a rather apparent new attitude.

She hadn't changed much physically though, her sand-blond hair was short cropped, her smile was still all cheshire-cat lips, her eyes still sleepy. But her level of enthusiasm was higher than I had ever noted before. She wore a tank top and very short shorts, and her legs were athletically trim and southern tanned.

"I'm on The Pill, Virgil. Did you ever think I would say that to you?"

"I must say it does surprise me. Is there somebody special who inspired you to do this?"

"There was, but he's a memory now. He lives next door, and Mom says that he's some sort of cousin to us, and we did have fun, but it's over now."

"I see."

"But what have you been doing? How's the Coast Guard? Tell me all about it." Her contagious excitement was something I hadn't remembered about Leslie, and I wasn't sure that it had ever existed at all, but I was consumed with her undivided attention. I told her the story, the truth, and I was pleasantly surprised to realize that she was perhaps the only person in the world with whom I could entrust it.

"So," she began after I finished, now more subdued, "what will you do now? Will you turn yourself in?" Shades of the old Leslie were coming back now. The conservative girl who I remembered was, at last, present with me, seated upon the concrete step in front of the store. The story of my recent escapades was too much for her. That or the fact that I was thinking of staying.

"Well, no, that's not what I had planned."

"I see."

"I'd like to go to college, to learn how to write."

"But what about the service?"

"Leslie, I've told you. I can't stay in there any

more. I--" I stopped at her expression of total disbelief and disappointment. I stood up.

"I'm sorry, Leslie. I guess coming here was a mistake--"

"No, no. I'm the one who's sorry. It's not up to me to judge you. You've been through a lot. Forget what I said." And she smiled. "I still love you."

I smiled.

"You bastard!" And we laughed.

"C'mon, follow me to the house. You can stay with us as long as you want."

She got into her Chevy Vega and I watched the legs fold under the steering wheel. What, I wondered, must it feel like to be between them?

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long to find out. Her mother sat at the kitchen table chain smoking as always, and didn't change expression as I entered the door of their modular home.

"Well hello stranger."

"Hi Peg, how's the south treating you.?"

"I hate it," she said in a cheery voice. "It's too hot." Peg was a native of Maine, and, like most others like her, held an almost cosmic devotion to the Pine Tree state. "What brings you here?"

"My car."

"Well I know that. But why?"

"I had some time off, thought I'd see my old friends and a little of the country to boot."

She took a long drag from her cigarette, its ashes extending over an inch from the unburnt paper, and studied me with probing eyes.

"You're not AWOL, are you?"

Leslie and I both laughed, nervously.

"No, Peg, I am not AWOL."

"Well, good. I'm going to the grocery store, how long are you staying?"

"Don't know."

"What do you like to eat?"

"Whatever, Peg," but I really wanted to say 'How about that fried chicken with that almost-black gibleet gravy that you used to make?'

"Maybe I'll make some fried chicken, how about that?"

"That'd be great. But don't go out of your way to accommodate me, Peg. Please." I felt guilty about being "over the hill," and also about lying to her, but she just would have lost her mind and started smoking even more.

When she left, Leslie and I were alone.

"I think I'll take a shower, if that's okay."

"Sure. How about if I join you?"

"Why Leslie, I am surprised."

We soaped each other up, kissed and touched each other, then rinsed and toweled before we flopped onto her queen -sized bed in hot embrace. She rolled over onto her belly and slid a pillow under her hips, said "C'mon," and I slipped into her from behind. Oh how I wanted it to last! But, of course, it didn't. In a matter of minutes we were both groaning and heaving and it was over. My whole body tingled and I was exhausted. And, as I drifted off to sleep Leslie kissed my face and spoke.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Virgil."

"For what?" I managed.

"I'm sorry for making you wait so long."

We lay facing each other as I laced my arm around her back.

"It was worth it, Leslie. It was worth it."

It wasn't until the next morning that I was awakened by Leslie, standing over me saying "C'mon sleepy head, wake up."

I shook my head and knew that the shadows coming in the window were morning shadows.

"You must have been really tired."

"Yeah," I spoke through a layer of tacky residue in my mouth.

"Are you hungry?"

I smiled.

"For breakfast?"

And I was.

Leslie took a few days off from her job at the Burger King and we drove around town, over to the university to check on classes.

"You know where I'd like to go? I said.

"To bed, if I know you."

"Who needs a bed?"

She smiled, the Cheshire cat.

"But, what I'd like to do after is go to North Carolina. Asheville; I know that's not far away."

"No, no it's not. But why Asheville?"

"Well, F. Scott Fitzgerald, you know, the writer? Well he spent some time there in 1935, and I'd like to see where he stayed and go to the library there. What do you think?"

"Sure. Why not?"

The next afternoon we packed a picnic lunch (leftover fried chicken and biscuits) and made our way across the mountains to Asheville.

It was a beautiful little town cradled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, with nothing but cool air and the open sky for miles around.

The Grove Park Inn, carved out of the stones of

Sunset Mountain where it stands, looks southwestward out over the entire city and beyond, into the Pisgah National Forest. Inside, the great hall and massive fireplaces at each end are not to be believed. Leslie and I sat at the Great hall bar and ordered a drink while I drifted back to the early part of the century, the Jazz age, the term itself coined by Fitzgerald.

The bartender was an athletic sort, short-cropped blonde hair, chisled features, and a rugged build. He immediately extended his hand, "Tom Smith," and he smiled.

"Virgil Peal. This is Leslie Dunham."

"What brings you folks to Asheville?"

"Well," I began, "actually I'm searching for someone."

"Oh, really?" he asked as he toweled off a rack of glasses fresh out of the dishwasher, one at a time to get the last drops off of them, to make them really shine. He was a pro.

"Yeah, F. Scott Fitzgerald, you ever hear of him?"

"You mean the writer? Yeah, he stayed here a long time ago, the thirties, I think. Don't think he's still here, though." He grinned.

"No." I looked at Leslie, then back at the friendly man behind the bar. "But I wonder if there might be somebody around here who was around here back then?"

"Well, only one man I can think of who might have been around then. He's been here most of his life, in one capacity or another. Name's Rodney. He works down at the courts now, but he was, at least I heard this, a bellboy when he was only nine years old. He's got to be at least sixty now."

"Is he here today?" asked Leslie.

"He's here everyday. Can't get him to take a day off, so they just let him have run of the place. Heck, he's been here longer than anyone on the whole staff."

I finished my drink and took Leslie's hand as we moved out onto the veranda and looked down at the three tennis courts. I shaded my eyes and looked for someone who might meet Rodney's description. But all I saw was two executive types hitting a ball back and forth, and an old black man sitting off to the side, almost in a position to keep score.

He sat with his elbows on his knees, cradling a weary head in his hands, in a dark blue pair of trousers with a button down uniform shirt of a lighter shade of blue. As we got closer, I could see the threads of silver amongst his jet black curls, cut close to his head.

"Rodney?"

He turned his head and smiled.

"Yes suh?"

"My name's Virgil," and he stood at almost attention, still smiling. I held out my hand, and he offered his, bony, strong, and soft, and timidly shook.

"We were talking to Tom, up at the bar, and he said you've been here a long time, at the hotel, and I was wondering, well, just how long?"

"Oh, well," he began, "I come here in '23, worked carryin' bags for folks." He shook his head. "Them bags back then was hevvy, let me tell you, and I was just a boy, but I lugged 'em jes the same."

"I was wondering, Rodney, do you remember the summer of 1935 at all?"

"Lessee, '35, '35, oh, lawd yas, hot dat yeah, very very hot."

"Do you remember the writer, F. Scott Fitzgerald? He stayed here that summer."

He looked at the two men playing tennis. They wore similar outfits, expensive outfits, held expensive rackets, but none of that was enough to make either a better player. Rodney smiled again.

"Sho' do 'member dat boy. Heh, heh. He was Kray-zee, let me tell you. Drank mo' beer dan you or me ever could in a lifetime. Once jumped off dat divin' bo'd, hed fust, and busted his arm all up. All to impress a lady."

I looked at Leslie. She was staring at Rodney, but

stopped long enough to glance at my eyes. We both knew that we were hearing the truth.

"He had a lady of his own, but she was sick." He pointed at his ear with a bony finger and made a circular motion. "Stayed out there at Highland, you know, th' sane 'sylum, 'cross town. I ges das why he was heah."

"He was real broke up when she died."

"How'd that happen?"

"Far. Dat hole place burnt t' th' groun'." She didn't have no chance."

Rodney asked if I was writing a book.

"Naw, I was just curious, wondering, you know..."

"Un-huh."

The sun was settling down over the Blue Ridge peaks in the distance when I shook Rodney's hand and Leslie and I walked up the steps and through the great hall to the Mazda for the hour-long trip back through the mountains to Johnson City.

It was a good day, a day in which I learned a lot about the size and beauty of the world, that people are people no matter what social status they acquire, and that no matter how big you get, the bottom is always ready to accept you when you come back down.

"Well, did you find what you wanted to find?" Leslie spoke as we headed back to Tennessee along with the setting sun. I thought a bit.

"I'm glad I came, if that's what you mean."

"Well, good." Then after a short wait, "You've changed."

"That's good to know. You, too, y'know."

"Yeah. I guess that's what we do, huh?"

"Huh," I mimicked her blossoming southern accent. She gave me the Cheshire cat again, and lay her head on my shoulder.

"There was a phone call for you while you were gone." Peg's searing eyes looked out over a long cigarette as her cheeks hollowed to inhale the smoke, and it was as if she was saying 'I knew you were lying to me the other day,' but she didn't say that.

"From who?"

"I think you know." Another long drag and she turned to her daughter. "Did you know this?"

Leslie nodded.

"I can't believe it." Her voice rose a degree or two. "My own daughter lies to me. Do you know what trouble this friend of yours is in?" Leslie looked at me.

"I told her everything, Peg. She knows the truth."

"Well," Peg continued, "I told them I hadn't seen you."

"So you lied to them?" That was Leslie.

"Yes, I know, I lied to them." She turned to me.

"You put me in an impossible position, Virgil. Of course, you'll have to leave immediately."

I nodded.

"Do you have any money to get back?"

I had twelve dollars in my pocket.

"Yeah, I've got some."

"Because I can loan you a little if you need it."

I had already caused them enough trouble, and, although I had little chance of getting back to New England on twelve dollars, I declined the offer.

"Are you sure?" again, those detective's eyes.

"I am."

Within five minutes, I was in my car, the few things I had removed from it now quickly heaved in the back seat. Leslie stood at the door of her house, feeling abandoned, I suppose, used maybe, and I waved, promised my return after I had sorted all this out, and then I was on the road again.

There were a few pieces of chicken left from earlier, and I pulled one out and ate. When I got to the expressway, I followed the signs not north or east, but south, on I-81, following the barely visible orange glow on the horizon. It would take, I reasoned, more than a phone call and limited funds to ever get me back to the Coast Guard again.

With half a tank of gas, I stomped the pedal and
wiped my mouth on my sleeve. California, here I come.

Shortly, I was in Knoxville, a pretty decent sized city, and it became apparent to me that the little fuel in my tank wasn't gong to take me very far. I spent five dollars and refueled, then, with the tank full and my spirits hence revived, I stopped at a convenience store and spent three more dollars on cigarettes, a couple of candy bars, and a Doctor Pepper. Thus supplied, I picked up interstate 40 away from the comfort of the lights of the city, away from the demons of eighteen years of failure, away from friends and family, away.

With nothing but time on my hands, the friendly drone of the country music station on the radio, I had plenty of time to think about my situation, to dwell on my plans, my future. But I did not think. I didn't plan. I didn't wonder.

I simply drove. And drove. As fast as the law allowed plus a few miles an hour. I got hungry again, early in the morning. And sleepy, too.

The truck stop just outside of Nashville was the opposite of the lonesome highway. Buzzing with life, truckers were eating, refueling, taking showers, resting, talking over construction tie-ups in far-away places like New Orleans and Tulsa as though they were just around the corner while their rigs idled obediently outside. The

smell of burning diesel fuel mixed with the exhaust fumes from the busy grill, and I took a seat at the counter reserved for "professional drivers only."

The breakfast special was eggs, bacon, hot cakes, grits and coffee for \$1.99, so I ordered it.

Grits are (is?) an amazing little dish. The white, wallpaper-paste consistencied concoction from coarsely ground hominy is almost tasteless, and, well, gritty feeling in your mouth, so I didn't finish them. But the rest I devoured.

Afterward, I crashed in the front seat of my car, until that became unbearably uncomfortable, so I moved to the tiny rear seat, but the lights from the truck stop kept me awake. I reached into my sea bag and pulled out the first article of clothing I got my hand on to, and wrapped it around my face.

I don't know how much later, it was still dark, but I awoke feeling like I had slept enough to continue my drive. Besides, I wasn't at all sure that the military investigators weren't on my tail, so I pulled the cloth from around my neck and chuckled when I realized that it was a thermal union suit that Mom said once belonged to my Great-grandfather.

Morning followed me through Nashville and it was nearly one P.M. by the time I got to Memphis and the

murky Mississippi. I crossed the great river into Arkansas and the land looked so desolate compared to the booming furor of Memphis that I got scared and turned around. In my pocket I had less than two dollars, and maybe it was that, or the effect that the long night's drive had upon me, that forced me to the pay telephone. Whatever the reason, I knew what I had to do.

As soon as the friendly voice answered "Coast Guard Recruiting office," I blurted out, "My name's Peal, I'm stationed on the Cutter "Aggressive" in New Hampshire, and I am AWOL and I want to turn myself in."

"Okay, Peal, where are you?"

Instinctively, I nearly hung up, but the man's voice reassured me to continue.

"I'm at the Thomas street exit off of forty."

"Okay, that's not far away--" and he gave me directions to the office, which I found without too much difficulty. I parked out front and went inside the Federal Building, half expecting to be accosted by SP's with handcuffs and leg irons.

Instead, I found the man alone in his office. He was grey-haired, but his tan made him appear younger than his probably forty-five years, and his summer blue uniform was tailor-made; most of the recruiters were particular about their appearance. I became aware, once inside the air conditioning, that it had been a while

since I had last bathed, and the day's growth of beard on my chin was interlaced with a glaze of oily residue because of it.

"Your Peal?" he asked as he extended his hand and smiled.

"Yes."

"I'm McMahon, Lee, if you like. People been lookin' for you?"

"I think so. The called where I was staying. Johnson City."

"And you drove all the way here?" His questions were not accusatory, only curious.

"It was the closest recruiting station, so I was told." I lied, and something about the man forced me, perhaps for the first time in my life, to tell him the difference.

"That's not true," I quickly began. "I was headed to California, or somewhere, I was never going back."

"So what stopped you here?"

"I don't know--"

"Run out of money?"

I looked directly at him. "Yes, I guess that's part of it." He watched me relax as the running inside my head came to a slow halt. "But something else, too--"

"Yes?"

"I guess I'm just tired of running. I feel like

I've been doing it all my life." Why was I telling this guy all of this?

"I understand how you feel, Peal. You're, what, eighteen? How the hell are you supposed to know what's in store for you. I see guys like you all the time." He sat down. "They come in here, wanting something to take the place of their mothers, to give them security, you know, three squares and a bed to sleep in, and I tell them what the Guard is all about, and they just drink it in. 'You mean I get paid, too?'" He waved a hand at the fly circling around his head.

"And they come from all these back ass country towns where there ain't nothin' for 'em. You probably met some of them in boot camp."

I looked around the office as he talked. There were pictures of small cutters slicing their way through choppy seas, the red beacon beaming. There was a photograph of a ship like mine, its crew at attention along the starboard side, the statue of Liberty in the background. On a nearby bookcase was a model of one of the forty-four foot search-and-rescue boats, the ones that would, if ever capsized, right themselves in a minute or two by manipulating ballast.

All around me were signs of a Coast Guard that I had only either heard about or had but a day's worth of experience with in boot camp, and I wondered how I had

become so isolated, so bitter, so angry in just a few short months.

The photo that grabbed me, though was one of Lee standing in front of the lighthouse at Cape Hatteras, the tallest one in the country, its "barber shop" black stripes embracing it from bottom to top. He was wearing a pair of cutoff shorts and smiling, his dog tags hanging from his neck.

"That's you?" I interrupted.

"Yep, last summer. You ever see that?"

I shook my head.

"It's really something. You're not supposed to be able to go up in it, but a couple of the guys over at the station there had a key and we went up in it. Man, what a view!"

"I bet." The feeling of family, the Coast Guard family, the one that takes you in no matter what your problems are, the one that talks to you like a person, the one that arranges for private tours of restricted places, overwhelmed me, and I realized that somewhere along the way I had missed a very important lesson about the length and breadth of humanity.

I remembered reading something that the late Jim Croce, the singer-songwriter, had said. "Your not the only oyster in the stew." Now, I thought, now it means something.

And it's funny, but, sitting there, listening to this warm, honest man, with all the stimulus of the good life on the walls and in the air, I was astonished to realize that, given the chance, I would have easily enlisted in the Coast Guard all over again.

Lee attempted to secure a hundred and fifty dollars for me to make my way back to New Hampshire.

"If I get you this money," he had said, only half serious "you're not going to take off to California, are you?"

"No," is what I answered, but I have to say that the thought did more than cross my mind.

But, after making several phone calls, one that ordered lunch from a local delicatessen for us both, Lee said that they turned me down, but that he was authorized to cut me a transportation chit on the next available flight to Boston, where a pair of SP's would meet me and take me to the brig.

"But, Peal, I have to tell you something else."

His tone was different than before, and I couldn't help but listen intently.

"There's going to be a court martial."

The words entered my ears as though they were being driven in with broom handles and the

expression into my eyes like shots from a pistol, and

together they were forced down into my throat pressuring my heart into the pit of my abdomen and I lost control. The sobs, buried down there for some time now, burst out of me while the tears, like a river of bullets, spilled onto the floor as I made some effort at controlling them.

"It's not that bad," Lee was saying, as he came around his desk and a hand on my shoulder, a fatherly hand, full of compassion and kindness, tried to console me. "Really, it's not as bad as all that."

I tried to stop the tears, wiping my face on my sleeve, but I just didn't want to.

I wondered how my father would take this news. It's amazing that I even cared about his reaction, but something in those words, "Court Martial," loomed over me like the ceiling of a camper trailer, protective yet invasive. I suddenly remembered something.

"My car? What about my car?"

"There's a station close by with a large enough parking lot. They won't notice one more automobile."

"But how will I get it back?"

"Virgil, while you were in the bathroom a few minutes ago, I called your parents, and they've agreed to come pick it up for you."

"Oh, noooooo."

"It's okay, they understand."

"But they don't have the money to go to Boston, let

alone Tennessee." I was whining like a child now, but I couldn't stop myself. "Oh God, what'll I do?"

Though I didn't expect an answer, Lee felt the need, I suppose.

"You'll go back to your ship and take what's coming to you. It won't be enjoyable, but it won't be as bad as you think, either."

"Virgil, you seem like a nice kid, uh, young man. I don't know exactly what you will do after all of this is over, but I believe that good things will come to you."

I believe he actually meant it. I thought about my writing, how awful it really was, how Miss Ammons said I would have to experience the world before it would be worth reading. I guessed that this is what she must have meant.

I arranged for Lee to send my guitar back to the ship for me, and decided that the clothes I couldn't take with me would be secure in the car until the parents got there to pick it up.

At the airport, Lee gave me an enthusiastic handshake and a pat on the shoulder, practically ordered me to keep in touch, which I promised I would, and sent me on my way. Once on the plane, I felt free again, like a parachutist in a free-fall. But, unlike all but the most unfortunate of parachutists, my landing would be unpleasant, to say the least.

I felt like a king, seated in first-class, the only available seat, eating lobster and drinking champagne, I understood a little the state of mind of one damned to the electric chair on the evening before execution.

"More champagne, sir?"

"Oh, why yes, thank you."

"How's the lobster, sir?"

"Oh, it's fine, thank you for asking."

"Any last requests?"

The engines cut back, quick trip, I thought, and the plane began its descent into Logan International Airport, as I began my own descent into, not hell, but the real world again. For a precious several days, I hadn't the worry of living within its tiresome bonds, and, though I had enjoyed it, there was an anxious emptiness to it,

perhaps because I always knew it would end something like this.

I just didn't want a scene. I had already pictured two thugs with handcuffs and pistols waiting to escort me through the airport while busy commuters and retired vacationers looked on, appalled.

What I got was nothing.

Nobody.

No how.

No where.

I exited the plane through that flexible arm/tunnel to find myself alone again. A little closer to home, which felt good, but there wasn't a single soul who looked as though I was his intended goal for the day.

I got my sea bag from the pick-up area and wandered about the terminal for a while until I finally saw them, entering from the parking tunnel. They were young, small, two of them, and they did something I hadn't expected; they walked right by me to the boarding counter. Apparently satisfied that the plane had already landed, the two of them began looking around while they stood still.

Then they walked in my direction and I gathered my things, looked right at one of them, prepared to say something, and then they did it again. They walked right past me.

Was there, I wondered, some disease particular to the northeastern United States that caused stupidity in the population?

"Hey," I called, a moment after reconsidering my freedom, the benefits and deficits, and my friend in Memphis, "you looking for me?"

The two geniuses looked at one another, and one said, "Yeah, I guess."

The second one dug through his breast pocket and pulled out a paper, a copy of some official looking document, studied it a moment, and said, "Peal?"

"That's me."

"Van's out here," and he motioned to the sliding doors.

Once on the road I asked where we were going.

"Station Boston, on the North side."

"Is there a brig there?"

"Nope. There gonna house you in the barracks until your ship gets back."

"When's that?"

"Ten days, I think," and he looked at the other one, the driver who shrugged his shoulders.

"What'd you do?" he finally asked.

"AWOL, went south."

"How come?"

"I don't know, really. The seasickness, I guess."

"You get seasick?" he was looking in his mirror at me.

"Yeah, pretty bad."

And then we were there. I checked in with the OD who didn't seem to care if I was there or not, so I didn't hang around very long. Libbo had been granted and I just left and walked around. I went over to the Hamilton where I knew one of my friends from boot camp was stationed, but he wasn't aboard, so I went back to the barracks and took a shower, long overdue, and tried to sleep.

"Hey, there, you!"

I spun around to see a tall, old man, dressed impeccably in a blue uniform that literally seemed to be dripping gold from its shoulders approaching me.

"What is your business here?"

"Well, sir, I'm here to see one of the lawyers."

"Dressed like that? Your out of uniform."

I was. I stood there in a pair of jeans, a tee-shirt, and my foul weather jacket, and I hadn't shaved for a day or so.

The headquarters in Boston was a place where military and civilian personnel controlled all Coast Guard activity for the entire New England area, and I had felt out of place on every occasion I was inside, which were many in the last several days. I hadn't much clothing, but I had somehow slipped under the watchful eyes of this particular man, until now, that is.

"Well, I'm not in the service, sir."

"Then where did you get that jacket?"

"Uh, well, my brother bought it at an Army-Navy store--"

"That's a lie." The big man loomed over me, breathing heavy. "You leave here at once, and don't come back until you are in uniform."

"But I have to see someone--"

"Who?"

"His name is Borman, he's an attorney."

"And you? Who are you?"

"My name's Peal, sir."

"Where is your uniform?"

"Well, sir, my parents' house burned down, and all of my clothes were there, since I was on leave at the time, and they all burned up in the fire." I was thinking fast, now.

"That's not true. Now get out of here before I have you thrown out." The large officer was obviously someone important, so I obeyed him. I left, went down to the lobby, and called my lawyer.

The line was busy. I was frustrated, I had to see him right away. My case was going to trial in two days, and I wanted to know where I stood.

I tried again. I slipped into the revolving door and chose the stairway this time. I actually hid behind some columns that abutted the hallway upstairs and past the door where the big officer had gone, and down the hall to my lawyer's office.

"Virgil, how's it going?"

I told him the story about the officer.

"You know who that is?"

I shook my head.

"That's Talmadge, the CO here. If he sees you again, he's going to have you up on more charges."

"God damn, Steve, I had to come here. I don't give a shit about more charges. I just want out of this carnival."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm sick and tired of this zoo, there isn't anyone who knows what the fuck he's doing, I'm treated like shit where ever I go, nobody seems to care about me."

"So you want out of the Coast Guard, is that it?"

"Yes, I want out."

"I see. Well, this matter of your court martial must be resolved, and it looks like there may be some time involved."

"Huh?"

"Confinement."

"You mean jail?"

"Probably sixty days."

I pondered the idea of prison for a few moments as he said how he would handle the proceedings. He would have some character witnesses there, he would do everything he could to show that it wasn't the military I was against, but that the seasickness, and the fact that nobody would help me was my reason for running away.

The trial was short, held aboard my ship, rather informally in the captain's quarters. Members of the crew, one old chief in particular, told the men how I had

helped his department, how I had taken it upon my own to build things that the crew needed, even though he had told me to not to worry about it. He told of Heflin's drowning, and how it had affected me more than any other member of the crew, something I hadn't noticed.

After I told my side of the story, a few minutes passed as I waited outside. I smoked a couple of cigarettes and looked out over the harbor. The sun beamed down, blinding me as the blue in the west was cloudless. I glanced up the pier and that's when I saw them. The captain walked between a man and a woman, perhaps fifty years old or so. The man, hands thrust into his pockets, had a brown button-down shirt and one of the tails of it hung down over his belt, and a baseball cap that was obviously dirty. The woman wore a thin white sweater over her shoulders and folded her arms across her chest, perhaps more for warmth than anything else. Their eyes looked mostly at the ground as the captain talked, but every now and then the woman lifted her chin to look over at the boats bobbing in the small boat station, the man nodding now and then.

I couldn't remember the last time I saw them. But now they looked tired, more fragile, old folks. I'm sure that the captain was telling my parents how they had tried everything they could to help me get over this supposed seasickness, but that I wouldn't try to help

myself. And he was so sorry it had come to this, but that Virgil will probably have to spend some time in jail.

I thought about calling out to them, but I was embarrassed. I half-hoped that Mom would notice me standing there on the forecastle and would smile and wave.

"Okay Peal," the call came from behind me, "they're ready."

Next to my lawyer, I stood at attention, still overcome by authority, still retaining some pride in the uniform, and one of the judges read.

"Virgil Isaac Peal, we find you guilty of being absent without official leave as per the charges against you. You are hereby sentenced to spend forty-five days confinement at hard labor at the US Navy brig in Newport, Rhode Island. After which time, you shall be honorably discharged and released from active and inactive service in the United States Coast Guard." And then he looked at me.

"Son," he began, less officially now, "we understand what you have been through. Perhaps there was no one who would listen to you, but we are skeptical about that. However, we will take this case into consideration, and perhaps even issue directives concerning chronic