

The Untattling of the Tale

*"Lightbeams cast into darkness' core
Hope illuminating an opening door*

*The rebirthing of a once sad soul
Yet dashed again in stone gray cold."*

- --Lords

My brother laid his left hand across the steel table that was anchored to the ship's deck, facing my stepmother. He folded his ring and index fingers backward, leaving the middle finger protruded like an arrow. He pointed it directly at her middle.

He asked, in ever so innocent tones, "does this look like a cannon?" She leaned forward, closing her copy of *Captain from Castile* and bookmarking it with a paperclip. She sighed, then studied his hand---turning it slightly, so that now it was at a right angle to her.

"I suppose," she said, "if you use that wild imagination of yours."

I tried to hide my snickering. Annie was oblivious to what was going on. She did not know this little part of American subculture---not yet, anyway. Jim had managed to get that right past her. But he took the risk. All I had to do was revel in the aftermath. I looked at her and she was studying my sudden giddiness. I hoped she thought I was only laughing at Jim's clumsy art form.

Annie was a stewardess on a Far East airline when she met my father. He had been divorced for ten years and was fumbling the raising of his two sons. His days as a Flying Tiger in World War II had run their course, and like so many of Chennault's boys who wouldn't let it end, he took his wings with him when it was over. With the reputation that was soldered onto those wings, he was quickly contracted to the fledgling Indonesian Air Force, as one of eight counterparts training new pilots. The perks and salaries were commensurate with the legend. He would make a American-standards fortune in a very short time. "Steaks for breakfast," he would say, five or six days a week.

They met in the tower bar at some Far East airport. She was Cantonese---and striking---in her turquoise mandarin-collared uniform, slit up the side to showcase a slim olive thigh. It was classic Humphrey Bogart---a floppy-cap soldier-of-fortune meets a slinky

dragon-lady over drinks in pineapple husks with paper umbrellas. Stir in the magic of a yellow moon--so big that it filled the dark bar with a glowing yellow wallpaper.

They were married in Manila under a sword-gauntlet of ex-Flying Tigers---all making muster as if on the flight line. It was more of a party than a wedding---complete with flaming rum drinks and pig-with-apple on a twelve-foot long table of fruits and exotic samplings of Filipino and Asian foods.

There is still that four-by-three- foot square oil portrait of the newlyweds---once the centerpiece in all the houses we lived in. Annie was in tight white lace, hair in honeycomb, with a jade tiara given up by the Minister of Aviation. My father was in white duck, sworded, and with not one, but two pilot's wings---one on each breast pocket. They were the gold *Tiger* wings with white-on-blue starburst, and the other---the *Chinese National Air Corporation* set---the ones he just called C-Nac's for short. He and Annie were a match made at 18,000 feet.

It was 1953. The news from the Far East found it's way slowly into Gulf Coast Military Academy in Biloxi by way of letter from Grandmother. In it she told my brother and me that my father had remarried, and made a point to tell us that our new stepmother was Chinese. I suppose at the time it wasn't much of a shocker---it seemed to fit with the awe and mystique that I had for my father.

Two days later a telegram arrived. It was from him---his cable address *Tailwind* was followed by "Calcutta,"---the only hint to our knowing where he was.

"Boys. STOP. Announcing new family member. STOP. Annie looks forward to new life together. STOP. Reuniting soon. STOP. Our love Ann and Dad. STOP."

The kids in Platoon 3 were fascinated with that cable. I kept it penned to my corkboard in the barracks and everybody read it at least once. Posted beside it was a picture of my father---in his grinning shark-toothed P-40.

Jim and I had mixed emotions about the events. We hadn't been part of a family environment during those early years after our parents divorced. I was the youngest, and only six months old when they parted, so I had no recollection of my mother whatsoever. That is, except for the picture my grandmother had given me of her sitting in an open-door Cadillac that belonged to Rains & Talley Funeral Home. My dad worked as an embalmer, as a way to fund his flying lessons at the little airstrip in Marshall, Texas.

The only other thing I knew about her was the information Jim and I had gleaned from reading an onionskin copy of the divorce decree giving "custody of said minor children to the father." I think we were both glad he won that---knowing of my father's exploits had been exciting---although he was largely a absentee celebrity. We had been shuffled around among caring relatives, my grandmother, an aunt, and now military school--

always waiting on his promise to bring us together when it was prudent and safe. We saw him at Christmas and two weeks in the summer. We never saw our mother. We were told that she had started another family, and that now we had a half-sister named Dottie, somewhere in Alaska.

The day that cable came I longingly studied the photo of my father. I had looked at him many other times---sitting in the open cockpit of that famous fighter plane, with a thumbs-up and flashing a grin as wide as the miles between us. "All my love, Dad" was the inscription. Now, that sentence was trying to come alive---as it never had before. I was anxious to start the new life that the cable promised. That night I prayed that there would not be another cable, putting it all off again. I whispered that little prayer over and over for an hour or more after lights out---pausing only momentarily as Cadet Sergeant Rivers passed by, making his head count at ten o'clock. I fell asleep to good dreams.

That dream began unfolding quickly. At military school graduation I said my good bye's to Sergeant Rivers for the last time. He had been kind to me. He was only a kid himself---probably sixteen or seventeen---but he had been my mentor through it all. I knew I would miss him---his barking commands when I fouled up, and the smiles of pride he tried to conceal when his quarter would bounce high off my tightly tucked blanket---the test of a properly made bunk.

My father had sent his friend Junie Elliott to pick us up. We were headed back to Marshall for a brief stay with my grandmother---then my father and Annie were coming to get us. On the long ride back to Texas, Junie explained that he had spoken with my father and that we were going off to Indonesia once all the preparations were finalized. There was a lot of paperwork, he explained---passports, visas, and inoculation records.

Inoculation? Ah, the first stumble in the plan, I thought.

"You will make it through that, everybody does. I will tell you now, rather than surprise you, that you have to take eleven shots---but they give them over a two week span, and you get peppermint candy after each one." It must have been the first and original "good news-bad news" joke ever invented. I didn't particularly care for peppermint, or Junie's sense of timing. He could have waited until maybe the day before. I rubbed my arm for no reason.

It was clumsy for all of us. We sat in a circle of chairs in my grandmother's living room and the introduction of Annie was made in almost formal dissertation---like the announcement of a banquet speaker. She was quiet---and her dark, almost black eyes were narrowed into tiny slits. I could not read her reaction to meeting the family. There was a faint smile that sometimes formed into a reluctant, tightly composed grin as my father told us about her.

She was born in Shanghai but attended a British school--somewhat of a clandestine affair. Her father had died young, and her mother wanted her to get out of the country and improve her lot in life as soon as she was able. Her first job was with the airline---at only age seventeen, and since that time, she never returned home---not even for a visit. There was some kind of risk---something that might bar her from leaving again, had she done so.

While my father talked about her life, how they met, and all about the famous wedding, I studied her carefully. I could understand my father's attraction. She was tall and slender---almost too slender, yet perfectly proportioned. Her face was pretty, her skin smooth as silk---not the slightest imperfection. She spoke good English, slightly broken, but with good mastery---somewhat like aristocratic British. That day she wore a pale yellow silk dress---with embroidered dragons and flowers. I especially noted the diamond wedding ring. The stone was as big as a butter bean, and it caught the rays of daylight and cast tiny shards of lights around the room as she moved her hand.

My grandmother brought in a large pitcher of iced tea, and a plate of Hi-Ho crackers and hoop cheese. Between nibbles, my father outlined the plan. He was flying back to Indonesia in two days, and Annie was staying behind to escort us by way of ship.

"I wanted to give the three of you a chance to really get to know one another," he said. "I have mapped out a real adventure---a chance of a lifetime for you boys."

Indeed it was. We were to travel to New York with Annie, board a freighter, and sail through the Panama Canal and on to the Far East. The trip would take eight months, and would include all the ports of call between the Canal and the destination port of Jakarta. School would be held on board, with a hired tutor.

His explanation had moved too fast---I had trouble absorbing all of it between his description of the ports we would see, and the loud gasps of "woo" and "my goodness" and "oh my stars and little fishes" that my grandmother injected into the dialogue. Jim was quiet the whole time---his eyes fixed on Annie. He was chewing his fingernails with his big buckteeth, splitting the nails down vertically into the quick. I had seen it many times when he was presented with too much, too quickly to sort out. He was in his "decipherin' mode."

The Isthmus Steamship Company operated a fleet of freighters, but would take on a dozen or so paying passengers on each voyage. We found the *SS Iron Rose*, rusting there in New York harbor, right where it was supposed to be. There were crewmembers on platforms suspended down the side, scraping at the bleeding rust with air-chisels. Just above them were more hanging scaffolds, with other crewmembers painting the freshly-scraped hull. Big booms were lifting huge netted bundles of cargo up into its holds as we traversed the gangway up to A-deck.

The three tiny staterooms were located together, and Jim's and mine were adjoining---like a suite. They were very meager, but clean, and there was a bowl of fruit on the small dresser with a hand-penned welcome-aboard note from "The Captain".

Ship's life was an easy transition to make. After the sea-breeze romance of the first three days passed, then two days of green-faced seasickness, there was only the sameness of the sea---broken briefly by the wonderment and engineering awe of passing through the Canal. Once in the vast Pacific, we settled into the routines of ship's life, framed by blue-gray boundaries to all the edges of the earth. It was easy to imagine early mariners believing it all to be flat. The recurring scenery of ship's life was interrupted only by the vibrant and boundless imagination of the ship's chef, and the occasional appearance of rows of dolphins that would be our volunteer escorts for the day.

Peter Rosilov was our tutor and a self-proclaimed Russian Prince. We studied using the Calvert System, a Maryland correspondence school that furnished lesson plans for the tutor, and designed the tests that would provide us with U.S. accreditation for our work. It was rigorous and disciplined---but fascinating---and the tutor was very good. Our studies were enhanced by field trips to museums and centers of arts in each of the ports we anchored in. He had a list of every important attraction, and he scheduled them precisely so that we could visit them all.

Annie would go on some of the trips---otherwise we saw little of her. Nonetheless, her true character and personality had begun to surface. She was aloof, a powerful disciplinarian, and she imposed considerable rigidity on our on-board life. Each evening after ship's meal, we were to return to our cabin and do the day's lessons, and we were required to read for an additional hour on our own. She provided the material from the ship's library, and they were mostly the Classics. The next morning at breakfast, she and Rosilov would listen to a required recital of what we read---somewhat souring the fresh sausage and the Eggs Benedict.

Jim got caught several times having not done his reading, and at first she only warned him. Then one evening when she found him reading an old tattered comic book, she produced a leather riding quirt and gave him a terrible beating. Alone together in my stateroom, I helped him apply Noxzema to the scalds on his skin. There was a dozen of them---five-inch long blisters---across his buttocks, lower back, and shoulders. It was a graphic warning I took to heart.

A month or so later it happened again, just like before---this time because Jim was caught dumping his goat's milk in a potted plant next to our table at breakfast.

As the voyage went on, Annie dropped off of the field trips altogether, and stayed in her cabin while we were out. She would be present again each evening, quirt in hand, to oversee our reading choices, and sometimes to quiz us about the trip ashore when we were in port. Rosilov had begun to take all his meals with us, and I noted his attraction to Annie had exceeded that of a simple employee. Sometimes he brought her a bottle of wine that he bought on shore. On two occasions I saw them on deck together from my

stateroom window---romping around and chasing after the flying fish that often skittered across the deck at night. Once I was pretty sure I heard his voice through the wall that would have been Annie's lavatory.

Jim and I talked often about what seemed to be going on.

"Just you wait until I see Dad," he would say. I'm gonna tell everything about her and that teacher. I'm going to show him where she beat me. You can back me up on all of it, too. Then you can tell about how he brings her liquor and how you heard him in her bathroom that time. If I knew how to send to Tailwind from the ship's radio, I would ask Sparks to do in now."

Sparks was the radioman that let us listen to ship traffic and taught us Morse code. I was sure he wouldn't do anything like that even if Jim asked him. Besides, I wanted no part of it. I remembered too well the wrath of the quirt.

But he would pen a message on our behalf soon enough.

We stopped dead in the water that Saturday morning and the Captain gathered the crew and passengers together in the ship's mess. We would be entering the Saigon River in about an hour, and he took time to explain that there was considerable action involving the French and the Indo-Chinese. The French had manned forts all along the river to protect merchant and naval traffic going into the port. There had been infrequent but bloody skirmishes, and they seemed to be increasing. The Captain's message was meant to put all of us on alert---and to confine the passengers to quarters until the ship had docked in port. Twice he emphasized that it could be very dangerous to be on deck.

It was a vast muddy river at its mouth, lined by unbelievably thick green jungle. Litter and trash squirmed in the ship's wake, and twice we brushed large floating drums that clunked all the way down the side of the ship. I had seen movies about mines. I thought about mines.

From my porthole I could see the forts we passed---small, log cabin-looking arrangements with narrow gun slits on all sides, and a French pennant waving stiffly in the breeze. Just then it had begun to rain quite heavily, and the porthole glass began to fog. I unlatched it and pulled it open, so as not to miss the excitement of seeing the forts and the faces of the French soldiers peering at the ship from the slits in the walls. I put my head through the window, and all along A-deck I could see that the portholes were open. To my left I could see Jim's face, and I stuck my tongue out at him and thumbed my nose. He gestured back with his now famous cannon.

To my right was Annie's stateroom, and I saw her ringed hand, pushing at the porthole which seemed to be trying to close by itself---as if it was spring loaded. But then I saw a

man's hand, trying to close it against her protest. I was sure that it was Rosilov. I made a loud *ssstt* sound, trying to get Jim's attention, so he could see for himself.

Just then the pattering of the rain on the steel deck was broken by loud cracks---short thunder bursts, I thought. Then more---no, not thunder---gunshots---and new sounds of bullets crashing against the steel hull. I dove for the floor, and could hear the dead thunks of metal against metal just above where I lay.

It went on for what seemed like minutes. Then it stopped. I heard Rosilov through the steel walls, screaming something in Russian. Annie's cabin door clanked against the bulkhead wall so hard that the bulb in my study light went out. Now there was more shouting, some English---and more of Rosilov's Russian. The words just spattered out and bounced around the walls of my cabin.

"...Been hit...quickly...help...keep away...God, blood..."---just mixed and mingled phrases, no sentences.

I opened my cabin door, and there was Jim, just walking past. Together we looked through the door of Annie's stateroom. I dropped to my knees so I could peer between the stacked legs of five or six people crowding around.

It was her face. That smooth olive face with not a blemish. In the middle of her forehead, like the mark at the center of a target, was a perfect circle of blue-black, with a rivulet of red emitting from it, running across the bridge of her nose and traversing down her cheek. Her eyes were open, and she was completely naked except for blue knee-length socks and tight-clinging lacy panties.

Rosilov was standing there, his burly, hairy chest spattered with crimson dots---clad only in shorts and unlaced shoes with no socks.

I felt what was the same green-seasickness returning to the pit of my stomach. Someone grabbed Jim and me and hurried us away. It was to a part of the ship I had never seen---down an endless white-painted hall, where the ship's engines were causing the walls to hum and vibrate. Through the last door was a small chapel. The ship's nurse was there with a tray---with two injections. *Twelfth inoculation* was all that came to mind before I slept without dreaming.

It was nearly noon on that bright Sunday. We stood on deck at port---Rosilov, Jim, and me, with all belongings packed. I could barely hear the voices of the two crewmen standing watch at the gate leading to the gangway. They were talking to three men in French uniforms.

Someone spoke in broken sentences I could only partly discern: "First American ship ever attacked...three dead on board...French forces quelled the uprising...*bastard Indo-Chinese goons.*"

Then I heard what I already knew. "Shot up the whole shittin' ship. "Killed a passenger, the ship's carpenter, and one of the firemen-mates"

We walked down the gangway with a legion of people behind us---first the Captain, the First Mate, and then Rosilov--then others of importance from the Isthmus Company. My father was waiting there, with two men in black suits. He rushed to us, and the three of us embraced in a death-hug for what seemed like hours. My father gripped us tightly---almost uncomfortably so. It was the first time I remember feeling the strength of his arms around me.

I looked down. In Jim's hand was the riding quirt. He released his grasp and it hit the gangway once, bouncing over the edge and into the littered brown water. It sank---closing one chapter among many---in a horrid tale we would no longer need to tell.

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The byline *Lords* in the short opening poem is a registered pen name of the author, Lad Moore.