

Orphans 'n Annie

*"Walking in the rubber haze--
Red rimmed eye and concrete gaze.*

*Hearing now a distant bell--
Clanging voice to fate foretell.*

*Freed from bonds of ribbon wire
To kindle sheaves of funeral pyre.*

*Then fly with wings in fleecy sky
And reclaim soul too strong to die."*

---Lords

Bright yellow stain flowed out of the third and final canister and mixed with the blue water to create a lime shade of green. Annie had decided to spend the contents while she was still able to open the valve with her fingers, which had become bloated and cracked from nine days of seawater and sun. Odd, she thought, that her hands were raw and almost bleeding from being constantly wet. And to think---she had used buckets of creams and potions to actually *moisturize* her hands over the years, only now to find herself praying for desert dryness.

Across from her in the raft was Clay McCoy, the big shot aviator for *Chinese National Airways Corporation*, or *C-NAC's* as they liked to call themselves. He was looking a little lifeless---except for the slight rise and fall of his life-jacketed chest. *Breathing more shallow now*---she thought, *and isn't it funny*---*how male strength is the first to wane in a*

real crisis. She lifted his arm back into the rubber raft for the hundredth time it seemed---no point in setting up a troll for the perpetually keen appetites below.

Their recent cockpit-romance interludes had lost all meaning. If she had begun to love him as she thought, the situation before her had distanced the flame, if not extinguished it altogether. Cocky American pilot, she thought---now helpless baggage. He had been almost useless when the plane had started to tilt and dive. His ego and confidence was riddled with sweat beads as soon as it was tested. Actually, Annie had been the one to level the C-47 out so it would plane out on impact---hell; it will almost fly itself, the old rock. Anyway, Clay was too busy covering up the face he thought so much of, with his kangaroo-leather gloved hands.

If we make it out of here, she thought, Clay McCoy can focus his Ray-Banned eyes and his cleft chin with the jagged scar on somebody else. I'm going back to Shanghai and fly with the real airline again. The fools that fly for CNAC are all alike---*putty in a tight*.

Four months later, they rang in the New Year together---it was 1951. It seemed like ten years ago that the South China Sea gave up its claim on the little two-person raft. She hadn't gone back to her native Shanghai, but instead crawled right back into McCoy's lap when they both started breathing salt-free air again.

They were married in the little chapel at the base in Manila, with only the Chaplain and four other *ex-Flying Tiger* and "*Hump*" pilots there to witness her caving-in. It was both a wedding reception and farewell luau, as she and McCoy were heading off to work for *Angkatan Udara*, the fledgling Indonesian Air Force, that was so desperate for flight trainers.

To McCoy's rowdy friends, Luau was a code word for booze, as the food was sparse and meager even for Annie's poor appetite. The only highlight was the *sate* with peanut sauce that Andrew, the flight line mechanic, had learned so well to mimic---and the stale counterfeit *Fritos* weren't so bad if you ate them like a canapé with a dried banana chaser.

As she would have bet, Mr. Ray-Ban McCoy let her down that night. He was too drunk to perform the marriage consummation. Hell, it would only have been a formality anyway; they had consummated themselves more than once at a sweaty ten thousand feet. You can never recapture that first time, she thought, as she watched him in REM sleep at two in the morning on their honeymoon night. She turned off the light that had collected ten or more moths and curled up beside his slightly twitching frame. Only *dreaming* about doing it, she decided. CNAC flyboys. *Putty in a tight.*

It seems as though McCoy was never really free of surprises. On the last leg of the hop from Djakarta to Bandung, he told Annie about his two sons "*from a previous weekend.*"

"Sons? *Two sons?*" she stuttered.

"I've got two boys in military school in the states, in Mississippi. I promised them that I would bring them to me when I got settled someplace long enough. I think Bandung is just that place from the looks of things."

Annie turned her eyes away from him, stunned. It was just his damn way, leaching out snippets of his life, as if adding chapters after a book was already at the publisher. It was also clear that he couldn't distinguish between incidental announcements---like his sometimes-painful testicles---to that of having two, yet-unrevealed, pre-teen children.

"Clay, I dunno..." she started, heading down the road of a sentence that she absolutely knew she would later have to retract.

"No *dunno* about it," he mockingly sliced in between her words, "Ted and Jimmy are already packing, and Artie Elliott is going to meet them when they change planes in Honolulu, and bring them with him on his way back out."

Then he put one finger to her forehead and said, "Done deal." Ah, his famous cliché to fit every situation that he sensed might possibly require a little explanation, or---God

forbid---a respectful dialogue or discussion. Express a difference of opinion with Clay McCoy? *Grow horns.*

Her eyes turned to meet his stoic look, his jaw jutted out like the Dick Tracy character. Her face reflected back at her in the mirrors that were his sunglasses. Annie thought. *I hate it when I see my own eyes coming back at me, its like he is rejecting my very presence.*

The house in Bandung was easily big enough for four---at least *that* was a pleasant surprise, and it would work out nicely in that the master bedroom was in a separate wing away from where she would put the two boys. She was already thinking in arms-length terms.

Annie despised the idea of raising children--any children--and especially *these* children, who had not only come out of nowhere, but were going to be handfuls, she judged. It was her stereotype, drawing on her notion that military school attendance is most often a form of sentencing---a place to park the incorrigible.

Artie checked in from the airport in Hawaii, and gave a fairly detailed rundown of things over the phone, so she and Clay would be better prepared. *God, she thought, in less than twelve hours, two little freckled bastards will be soiling these new rugs.*

Clay sometimes lovingly referred to Artie as "The Slug," because he was always late for flight-line checkout and usually late for everything else---except for the after-debriefing opening of the bar. But as Annie's bad luck would have it on that day, he arrived precisely on schedule. He was a tall and slender man of forty, with a plentiful head of yellow-gray hair that swayed out from under his cap looking like hay, as if displaced by a setting hen.

It was dejavu. If just once, Annie could see a friend of Clay's that didn't have on one of those oil-stained Chinese National Airways caps, she would celebrate Christmas early. Jesus, she thought, at least once a year somebody ought to order new ones and give everybody a break. And change the damn military-olive color. A CNAC-hot pink would be good---ego compatible, and a complimentary color to the red and blue sunburst.

There they were, looking at the ground and sweeping their tennis shoes in a semi-circle in the gravel, as Artie fumbled the introduction, calling Jimmy, Ted.

Jimmy was the oldest, and probably the catalyst that had funneled them into military school. He had been nearly unmanageable while living with Clay's mother, and constantly was into no good. He was frightfully skinny, making his two front teeth look like snow shovels against his facial profile. His ears resembled mini-radars, accentuated by his bur haircut.

Ted, at eleven, was two years younger, and reclusive and quiet. Artie had said that he was unusually bright, but took constant delight in talking about his imaginary friend like the two of them were together at all times.

Just from the phone call, Annie had already formed impressions that were indelible. Seeing them now, her inclinations seemed to have been confirmed. *Whacko and Wacko*, she thought.

Clay jumped in front of Annie's outstretched arms and swept them up, like pulling back a plate of food. At that moment, Annie's eyes squinted into two scalpel blades that had always been there and only needed birthing. She had just solidified what until then she had only been mulling---alright, the rude and inconsiderate son-of-a-bitch could raise them by himself—*He* could tend to the little dribbles of snot. The lot had been cast, demarcation lines drawn.

Life in Bandung was rich. On Clay's substantial income, they could easily afford a bevy of house servants, including a security guard at night to watch the perimeter. The growing Communist influence had begun to be a little more than just nuisance, as their strength increased after Sukarno came to power. The Dutch control of the islands had spoiled the people. It was as if their struggle for independence was a victory they just had to have, but then didn't want, once it had been achieved. Clay said it was a classic "be careful what you wish for." Now the populace believed that Communism could return them to the caretaker-benefactor culture.

The boys had a tutor. First there was Ignac, "The Russian Prince" as he liked to call himself, who came to the house each day and taught a correspondence-school curriculum filled with Liberal Arts and Hard Science. He took the boys once every two weeks on a daylong bus trip to the important shrines and art and cultural museums---anything that was of value for enriching the studies.

He was a big man, and rode a bicycle to the house each morning, arriving all red-faced and panting, expecting his large jar of limeade. This went on until he began to have recurring flat tires---almost daily. He resigned in a fury when it was discovered that Jimmy had been helping the situation develop with the aid of an icepick.

Annie couldn't contain herself. She unloosed all her wrath in a severe beating that Jimmy would never forget. Ted hid under the bed---frightened that he might somehow be implicated.

Beatings, almost always favoring Jimmy, were the default method of instruction and reinforcement. It might be just little things that tipped her over---things that rightfully deserved a scolding, or maybe an early-to-bed. There were things like the episode of the giant flowering cannas. Ted and Jimmy got their daily dose of goat's milk for breakfast, and it was not their favorite drink. Jimmy would open the crank-out window next to his chair, and dispose of the milk in the flowerbed. The flowers in that one spot grew to

enormous size because of the fertilization--enough so, to cause a curious investigation. The resulting punishment far exceeded the offense, and it lasted over three days.

But no one ever told Clay, and so Annie's control just continued to tighten, unchecked.

The Indonesian contracts were soon over, and the three, now-aging *Flying Tigers* were looking for the next great adventure. They had somehow stumbled like blind hogs into an emerging opportunity in safflower oil. Clay, Artie, and a flyer named J.H. Maupin would gladly leave *Angkatan Udara* for the promise of wealth that the safflower industry could deliver. After all, the much-publicized discovery of heart and health benefits of safflower had been published in *JAMA*, and the Surgeon General had just put his big signature on it.

So it was that everyone would return to the States and settle together in Sidney, Nebraska, chosen site of the start-up company. They recruited a fourth partner, a Phillip Robinson, who came up in a related business, processing cottonseed and sunflowers.

Clay and family rented a small farmhouse on Kugler Lake, where the owners ran a small fishing and family-retreat hideaway. There was a large cooking and entertainment pavilion on the grounds that groups could rent for gatherings, weddings, and parties. Over the years, it had also become regular home to a once-a-month bunch of rowdies called *The Pie-Eyed Pipers*, twelve or fifteen outdoorsmen that simply celebrated anything--

from "Duck-Eve," the night before duck-hunting season, to "Cheat Mountain Surf-Fishing Derby Week," a name that meant absolutely nothing in the Nebraska plains.

Annie caught on quick. This revelation explained the availability of the big farmhouse for such meager rent. It turned out that the all-too-often drunks, looking for midnight places to urinate and fornicate, had exorcised the previous renters and their three wide-eyed children.

The boys took to the place right away, and Clay bought them a Doberman to keep them company and to dissuade the night-crawlers from over at the party center.

With the sixteen-hour days of the safflower mill startup occupying Clay's head and heart, Annie was left with the chore of babysitting Jimmy and Ted---the job she had promised herself she would not take. Quickly enough, she was able to cope by re-asserting her Bandung success and her own set of new rules---harsh, chore-ridden schedules---to keep the boys under constant pressure. The regulations were punctuated by an ever-present riding quirt, her training-tool of choice.

Annie Liang was Cantonese, and as is the custom, had been raised under very rigid discipline as a child. Her parents were rice farmers, settling near Shanghai, and raised her much like an unrewarded servant. She and her two sisters were each the classic Cinderella---sans glass slippers and prince.

When she was eighteen, she dashed for freedom one night during a monsoon, and eventually became a stewardess for China Airways. It was in this relatively tight circle of aviation people that she met Clay one night over a gin and tonic. He lured her over to CNAC, where he taught her volumes one and two of *Cockpit Adventures with the Tiger*, his personal unpublished bestseller. *Finally*, she believed, she had met her soldier-of-fortune Prince. *Prince indeed---* when the light of day shone upon him, he would only be a warty toad, in aviator cap and goggles.

But she would never forgive nor forget her punishment-ratcheted upbringing, and she learned and remembered the tactics well.

For the boys, it was misery---dealt-with by a gradual building up of hatred---yet never revealed to their father, for fear of a too-graphic reprisal that would surely await them.

Home from school by four in the afternoon, a daily list of chores awaited both boys, posted on the refrigerator door. The tasks were scheduled with almost-precision timing, each with calculated completion times. At 6 p.m., it was dinner at the kitchen table, then quickly upstairs for one-hour of reading, followed by school lessons until nine. The reading assignments were either taken from the Classics, or were mini research projects to be found within the volumes of *Collier's Encyclopedia*.

There was no faking it. The quilt stood watch over the oral reports that would certify that the assignments were done.

The next day and the next would be precise replicas. On and on with no relief. Summer only meant the chore list was longer, and the readings extended.

Clay was not particularly aware of matters on the home front. He always showed up late for his evening meal, a perfectly rare T-bone and giant potato being the usual course. He sat all alone at the excessively long mahogany dining table, looking like a bowling pin at the end of an alley. From the ledge on the balcony above it all, two faces would peer down below; listening to stretches of the truth that Annie would feed Clay with his T-bone.

Clay would usually ask the same questions, as if all hooked together. "Are the boys doing okay? What do you have them doing after school? Do you think they go to bed too early?" Then he would excuse it all..."I wish I could get home in time to spend some time with them, but we're at a crucial point. Three new bean presses coming on the line."

Annie would say, "You know kids Clay, they come home wanting something sweet to eat, then they go out and hassle the ducks and run the Doberman around the lake. They love the outdoors I think, and Jimmy in particular likes to skip rocks across the lake---sometimes for hours."

"How are they coming along in school?" Clay would always ask next.

"Ted is always okay, if he could just shake his imaginary friend Sandy," she would reply, "He's a little damn old for that---he's going on thirteen."

"Harmless." Said Clay. "Stimulates his creativity."

"Stimulates my worn-out patience, said Annie, "and by the way---creativity is only worthwhile if you actually create something. He creates nothing but smears in his underwear. Rarely even talks."

"And Jimmy?"

"I told you that his last report had a note with it, asking that his father come for a conference about his behavior. Every conduct box was checked in the unsatisfactory column," she answered.

"No wait," she hesitated, "one had a *Needs-Improvement*---but anyway, you didn't show---you've never even been on the same street as the school."

Annie had reminded him of this before, and his pleading ignorance infuriated her.

"Loan meeting that day, as I recall, I can't be everywhere," said Clay, his usual response to explain his one-dimensional focus on his crummy, little oily beans.

He pressed. "But what else about Jimmy?"

"Well, if you mean his grades, they are always border-line failing. I think they just try to pass him to get him the hell out of their sight."

Clay took on that smirk he favored when he wanted to put her down. "That's not so bad, he'll probably make a friggin' prize fighter---and a heavyweight, at that---judging from the size of those damn shoes," he said, pointing to the spit-shined boots by the hearth.

"Those are *your* boots, asshole, Jimmy just shines them."

Like he did when Nebraska weather spun off its tornadoes and everyone headed for the basement, Clay woke Ted first, because he was always the one that would fall back into a coma in the bed. Then he banged on Jimmy's door until he heard "Huh?" It was 10:30 p.m.

"Downstairs---*now!*" Said Clay, a flavor of alarm springing from his words.

Annie was gone. He had come home that day to a waiting deputy with a satchel full of writs. There were divorce papers, and a cease-and-desist order preventing the removal of any personal assets of the marriage, etc., etc. There was another one in the stack---

freezing the partnership status of Prairie Oil Mills, Inc. It was a well-prepared bundle of handcuffs, from a very good lawyer named Jeremy Bell---a man with a reputation of tenacity in messy and contested divorces.

Clay told the boys that they were all going immediately to their grandmother's place in Texas, to stay until he could resolve his affairs. Jimmy would have to be "the big man of the family" and drive the '55 Chevy---yet with no driver's license. Clay would lead the way in the Buick, and they would be in Texas in a little more than a day and a half.

It was all too much for Ted, who began to mumble long, but broken sentences---or payer-like chanting, to *Sandy*.

Clay really meant leave--- *now*. They jumped in the two cars after a brief refresher lesson to Jimmy, who was roughly familiar with the car, having driven it around the grounds on occasions when Annie had been in town shopping. No clothes were packed, the Doberman was left to fend for himself, and the only thing Clay grabbed was the metal cash box with the household money, and the paperwork necessary to get the two boys into school in Texas.

There were times on the trip that Jimmy complained that he was too tired. He would flash his headlamps and Clay would pull over, long enough to reassure him and coax him on to the next hundred miles. Ted sat in the passenger seat counting Volkswagens, and

reporting to Clay out loud on changes in the count. It was pretty much all he uttered the whole trip, except for the "okay" when Clay would tell him not to pick his nose.

Clay began to wonder why Annie had not made a bigger deal out of Ted's strange behavior. It was more than just creativity-building---it was much, much deeper. As evening wore into darkness, Clay thought he saw Ted sucking his thumb, as the car would briefly illuminate him when it passed under city streetlights.

Gotta have Ted examined, he resolved. How could things have been this bad and Annie not make a production over it? Hell---she had made a bigger deal over the Doberman killing some of the neighbor's chickens. No---he was certain---he had never heard her mention anything about Ted except his good grades.

"Bitch," he said, breaking the long silence. Ted looked at him quizzically.

"Sorry---I was thinking about something else," said Clay.

The little caravan arrived at Granny Liz's house with its exhausted crew ready for bed.

After a pimento sandwich and apple pie, the three of them crashed.

By eight the next morning, Clay had outlined the arrangements that needed to be made for the kids' school enrollment, and was ready to leave to return to Nebraska. He knelt in

front of the boys for a long time, just gazing, and twirling a wayward piece of Ted's hair. He didn't have the words---had never practiced a good-bye---and it was coming hard for him. Christ---Artie had always handled this kind of thing for him.

"You boys mind Granny Liz now, and Jimmy, I don't want to hear that you have made problems for her. And get yourselves together for the new school. You have a chance for a new start now." He leaned over to Jimmy and tapped him lightly on the shoulder with his fist. "Nobody knows you here---*fresh meat, Champ.*"

"Ted, I want to take Sandy on the trip with me, okay? I don't want to drive that far by myself, okay?" Clay was almost swallowing the words as he spoke them. *This kid is thirteen---*but we're having a five-year olds' conversation.

Ted didn't answer, but nodded his head in both directions, as if saying yes, no, and maybe.

With a last big hug, Clay was gone. The Buick squealed a little on the slick brick driveway with one of the wheels smashing down a row of jonquils. Like spectators at a silent movie, two young faces watched through parted kitchen curtains.

It was five in the morning. The phone rang for what seemed like an eternity before Granny Liz picked it up.

"Accident?" She said, the phone receiver falling and jerking wildly at the end of its cord, like the body at the knot of a hangman's noose.

The funeral home was filled, so that Ben Hoffman had to get his ushers to unstack and set up folding chairs in the rear. That wasn't enough---they had to open the draw curtains into the adjoining parlor, and fill it with chairs. It was a celebrity-sized crowd; not matched since the death of Senator Othel Couch, the legislator who single handedly brought banking reform to Texas.

It was a combination of Granny Liz's friends from the Presbyterian Church, and a host of Flying Tiger expatriates that still liked to hang around Jones Field in Bonham. Present also, were most of the people from Prairie Oil Mills---probably the only time in the last year anybody had a day off.

The conversation was all about Clay and his exploits. Old Pap Womack, from the Harrison County Flight School where Clay learned to fly, told about Clay's early days of practicing touch-and-go landings at the Marshall field, and how one day he just made a big, sweeping turn and disappeared.

"The bastard took my Cessna over to Bossier City and looped it upside down under the Red River Bridge, so no one could read the wing numbers from above. But they figured out some way it was my plane, and the Fed-Aviation boys were over there the next morning looking for 'one crazy-ass pilot'," he said. "I told them that some sucker took that Cessna without authorization, then just left it over in Oney Taylor's cotton field," said Pap. "If you catch the sombitch, I want first crack at him."

Artie told how Clay had to bring in the C-47 one time in Burma with all his fuel gone, and insurgents had placed burning drums of oil across the runway at its mid-point. "Clay brought that thing down, hit the runway once about fifty yards ahead of the barrels, hopped them, and sat it down on the other side. He had to shut it down fast---running out of runway and taking out a row of banana trees at the end. But he flew that same plane again that afternoon, after the boys in the jeeps roused the bad guys back into the jungles."

Maupin recalled that time that Clay and Annie ditched in the sea, and had floundered there for days before being located. He suddenly dropped in volume and leaned over to his friends to whisper, finishing up with, "If you think that bitch was naturally yellow, you should have seen her after slopping around in that rescue dye for all that time. Hell, she looked like the *rising sun* itself," he quipped, bringing out a row of chuckles from the group who couldn't recall, or didn't care that she was Cantonese, not Japanese.

Ted and Jimmy sat quietly, just listening to the stories of their father---stories neither had ever heard before.

At the graveside, Brother Benchoff from the Presbyterian church added some more details about Clay's life, the harangue of *good father to the boys, Christian, kind and gentle, a model that people looked up to, man of integrity, generous to widows and the needy...*

Refrain: Ted and Jimmy sat quietly, just listening to the stories of their father---stories neither had ever heard before.

The black Lincoln pulled up to the graveside gathering and a gray-suited chauffeur stepped out to open the back door. There, in a black silk, mandarin-collared dress was Annie---face almost obscured with sunglasses almost as big as the hat the chauffeur now clutched closely to his breast. The earlier popular criticism of her absence at the funeral had just been upstaged----a grand entrance that put a hush over the big crowd, standing so erect on the fake grass carpeting under the maroon tent.

She walked briskly to the casket in long flowing strides, the slit down the side of her dress looking strained from the length of her steps. Her eyes never turned toward the cluster of family chairs as she placed a small, tissue-covered bundle across the white coffin with its oak handles. Maupin told Granny Liz that they were safflower stems, in early bloom.

Then she was gone---the limousine tires crackling in the pea-gravel road between the gray rows of marble.

Maupin knelt beside Ted who had begun to show his first signs of emotion as tears rolled down his face and spotted his green shirt. "Hey guy, I know this is tough. Is there anything I can do for you?"

A contorted face looked up at him through wet and hollow eyes. There was urgency in his voice---almost desperation. "Take me to where Dad's car is. Sandy was riding with him, you know."

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(The Byline "Lords" in the opening poem is a registered pen name of the author, Lad Moore)

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