

A sixty-something couple of empty-nesters decide to split up to pursue their 3rd age by exploring in different directions. All aspects, funny, sad and unexpected, of living fully in this undiscovered country of the post-sixty are tackled willingly by both, head-on.

IN HOT PURSUIT

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IN HOT PURSUIT

Terry Oliver

CHAPTER 1

Barney Roper was in a good mood – hell, he was euphoric. He felt the wave of delight sweep over him like an orgasm. As he sat staring out the window watching the airline ground-crew loading baggage and meals aboard the Airbus 310, he caught sight of his reflection in the little rectangle of glass.

“Sixty-eight years old and grinning like a schoolboy,” he grinned. He pored over the details as people roved in and out of view purposefully carrying out all the endless checklist of last minute preparations. He had seen them go through this routine many times before but today everything took on a heightened significance. “This must be what an ex-con feels like – let out after serving a twenty year life sentence – seeing everything again like new,” he thought. Only he had done thirty years with no parole and now he was staging a breakout – at sixty-eight! He grinned again - “Barney the Kid.”

Terry Oliver

A pair of workers standing in one place under the wing caught his eye as they stood motionless staring upwards while everyone swirled around them. A moment or two later another man had joined them – Barney scrunched down in his seat to try to see under the wing but he could only make out the lower half of their bodies. One of those strange-shaped airport vehicles with no top half pulled up and two more men clustered around the others under the wing. A woman brushed past his seat and he looked up with a start.

“Alice?” She turned and glanced at him - one of the cabin crew members, an older woman, checking luggage and seatbelts – she must be the chief flight attendant, Barney reckoned, judging from her age.

“Get a grip,” he told himself. From the back, she had reminded him of Alice, his wife, and he felt a sudden pang for that soft curving back he loved to mold himself to in bed – each night telling himself he could never give that up – never prise himself loose from that comforting embrace as he fought off drowsiness to prolong his delight.

And now here he was, deliberately distancing himself from her – not that he had enjoyed that warm curling back for a while – it was only a pale memory, since they hadn’t slept together for – how long? – It seemed to him an age since he had been exiled to the narrow bed in the spare room while Alice luxuriated in their king-size bed across the hall.

“Excuse me, but I think this is my seat.”

Barney turned to see a woman standing in the aisle looking pointedly at him.

“Sorry.” He hurriedly gathered up his jacket, cabin bag and Guardian newspaper, which he had dumped on the seat

IN HOT PURSUIT

beside him and pulled them all on to his lap. The woman continued to stand there.

“Actually, mine is the window seat.”

“Oh, sorry.” He struggled to stand with all his belongings but fell back down into the seat in the cramped space. “Sorry,” he said again.

The woman smiled briefly. “Never mind, I’ll sit here.”

“No, please –” Barney attempted to stand again but she was already sliding into the aisle seat.

“Actually, I prefer an aisle seat. I can stretch my legs out and walk up and down whenever I like – I don’t know why I always ask for a window seat – habit, I guess.”

“Me, too,” he nodded. “All that clambering over other people every time you need to go to the loo – and now that we’re supposed to march up and down every hour so we don’t get DVT – Are you sure you wouldn’t like to sit here?”

The woman laughed and shook her head. “No chance.” Her dark auburn hair was streaked with grey at the temples and looked an inch or two longer than most women her age would have worn it, Barney reckoned, but it somehow suited her. She was wearing a longish skirt and a tailored jacket and looked faintly over-dressed amongst all the casual jeans and comfortable tops favoured by most long-haul passengers nowadays.

He remembered when a flight abroad was an occasion to wear brand new smart clothes and matching luggage – it had all seemed quite important in the fifties and sixties – must have been damned uncomfortable, too, judging by the rumpled state of most people by the end of those marathon flights in the old turbo-prop Super Constellations – ‘Superconnies’, as they used to call them. His first flight from Toronto to Prestwick

Terry Oliver

Scotland on Icelandic Airways had taken over twelve hours with a refueling stop at the RCAF airbase in Gander, Newfoundland. He grinned at the thought of it.

"What's so funny?"

"Pardon? – Oh, I just had a déjà vu about my very first flight."

"Was that to Canada, too?"

"No, the other direction. I come from Canada originally," Barney said.

"You don't sound very Canadian – more English."

"Ah, well. Thirty years is a long time."

"And now, you're going home." It was a statement more than a question.

"I suppose I am, in a way."

"Actually, so am I," said the woman. "I haven't been away thirty years though– only two but it seems a lot longer."

"Here in England?" asked Barney.

"No, China."

"China – wow! Whereabouts?"

"Guangzhou– in the south, - near Hong Kong but on the mainland."

"And you were traveling in China for two years – on your own?"

"No, no. I was studying. Chinese medicine – at the university."

"Oh, a doctor."

"A nurse, actually- you can't become a doctor in two years – not even in China."

"Sounds fascinating," said Barney.

"Exhausting is a better description," said the woman. "I'm glad it's over and I'm going home."

IN HOT PURSUIT

"You didn't like it?"

"I didn't say that – just that it was very tiring. You never seem to get any time to yourself. You're either studying or continually socializing with the Chinese – they never leave you alone – always wanting to practise their English – sometimes I just used to go to my bedroom and lock the door."

"Wasn't it difficult, being on your own? Did you get harassed by men much?"

"Mostly businessmen. They wanted to take me along on their business trips –"

"To translate?" asked Barney.

"I don't think translating was primarily what they had in mind," she said. "But I don't know – I never took them up on their offers. - More of an acquisition, I would guess, to impress their business colleagues." The woman looked around. "I wonder why they're taking so long to get going? I'm gasping for a drink. – Miss!" She hailed a passing attendant. "Has the flight been delayed or something?"

"No, not really," said the girl. "The captain should be making an announcement shortly."

Barney glanced out the window. The cluster of men under the wing was dispersing and the baggage handlers had gone. A few moments later the pilot made his usual bluff speech of welcome and apologized for the delay – technical hitch with the hydraulics – ready to go – forecast was for sunny weather in Vancouver.

"Ha!" said the woman, "that'll be likely."

The plane lumbered out to the end of the runway. Barney said nothing; he was staring out the window at the wing. He clenched his hands in his lap as the plane surged forward, recited his favourite Buddhist chant under his breath

Terry Oliver

and concentrated his whole body into helping the pilot lift the plane into the air. When he had succeeded in getting the huge ungainly structure level and no longer tipping either forward or to either side he slowly exhaled and un-hunching his shoulders, slumped back into his seat.

"Do you always do that?"

Barney turned to see the woman smiling at him. "Huh? – Oh, yeah, I guess I do. Little ritual I've got into over the years – back seat driver."

"Good trick," she said, "– you got us up here."

"Yep, never fails – at least, not yet."

"But can you get us back down?"

"Piece of cake," said Barney. "Getting down is easy – you don't need engines for that. We can just glide down if we have to- but getting up is another story."

"So do you think it's safe enough to take off my shoes, yet?"

"Absolutely." He grinned as he watched her bend down to ease her shoes off and push them under her seat. Her hair fell forward, partly hiding her face and giving her briefly the appearance of a young woman although Barney reckoned she was probably in her late fifties. She sat back, wiggling her stockinged toes and sighed.

"Now, if I could just have a drink."

The plane's passengers were settling themselves, sorting and shifting and re-storing coats and duty-free purchases as the flight attendants were threading their way through them passing out headsets for the film. Barney could see that it would be awhile before they got around to passing out the drinks.

IN HOT PURSUIT

“It just so happens,” he said, fishing out his shoulder pack from under the seat where he had stuffed it earlier, “-I have a drink here in my bag.” He produced a pack of six miniatures of Scotch and a can of ginger ale. “Emergency supplies,” he said. “Never fly without them. Only one snag – no glasses. I usually just open the can, drink a bit and discreetly pour one of these in.”

The woman leaned over conspiratorially. “How about if I go get a couple of paper cups from the washroom?”

She slid out of her seat and Barney watched her as she stood waiting to get into the aisle past a large Indian woman in a sari who was stuffing packages into the overhead luggage bins. She seemed tiny compared to the Indian woman and her tailored jacket accented her trim waist. Barney revised his estimate downwards – early fifties, he decided as she squeezed past the other woman and disappeared down the aisle.

He opened the Guardian and tried to read but his attention drifted off and he gazed idly round the cabin. The flight attendant he had earlier mistaken for his wife came down the aisle and handed a baby bottle to the large Indian woman holding a child on her lap. As she turned to go, she smiled briefly at Barney. She was not remotely like Alice, he realised.

His mind returned unbidden to his recent separation, picking at the scab, refusing to let it heal over. It was as though they had been moving in slow motion like those TV documentaries he had watched of plants gradually unfolding and then flowering, fading and wilting and sinking back into the ground. Was that what had happened to them, he wondered? How often had she turned away from his urgent longing on some pretext or other until finally pride had stopped him pressing her and he turned away too, so that then

Terry Oliver

they slept back to back, badly. Alice tossing, turning, and poking him with her elbow to stop snoring.

In the end, it had seemed easier to give in and go to the other room in order to get some sleep. After that, it was as though the irritability with each other in bed had seeped into their waking hours and they had picked and prodded at each other over the smallest thing. Soon, a word, a look, a gesture could cause a flare-up which only subsided into a smouldering ember of annoyance, ready to break out again at any hint of a possible slight.

They had made half-hearted attempts to talk about it, but this invariably degenerated into point scoring – a habit they had foresworn years ago. They drifted along in limbo – tip-toeing around each other in elaborate rituals of politeness or sitting staring miserably at the television.

“This is ridiculous,” Alice said and Barney agreed.

They thrashed out a plan, born of desperation, to take a page from their children’s book and have a gap year apart. Barney would go on his own to Canada. Alice would stay and resume her career. They would keep in touch and in a year’s time review the situation to see if there was anything to salvage or to go their separate ways.

It was the best they could come up with and they had parted stiffly - the awkwardness and the painful feelings would catch Barney in unguarded moments so that he had to stop and look about to get his bearings – he hoped Alice was making a better fist of it than him – did everyone their age go through this pain of adjustment when their kids were gone for good?

He knew there was even a term for it now – ‘empty nesters’ – a flimsy sort of expression for what they had been

IN HOT PURSUIT

going through, Barney thought. He tried to recapture his euphoric mood and looked out the window at the bright sunlight bouncing off the wing – he looked further down but there was nothing except a solid bank of cloud spread out like some endless white duvet covering the land.

“At last. You wouldn’t believe that one airplane could hold so many weak bladders – I nearly gave up.” The woman handed Barney two paper cups and he pried one of the miniatures free from the six-pack.

“Whole or half?” he asked her.

“Half is plenty,” she said. “And fill it up with dry ginger please – I need a long drink after that wait.” She took the proffered cup and raised it to him. “Cheers.” She took a big swallow. “My name’s Trish – Patricia, actually.”

“Cheers. My name’s Barney – Bernard actually.” He smiled and they leaned back sipping their drinks. Trish took another long swallow and Barney asked, “Okay? – Not too weak?”

“Oh, this one won’t even touch the sides,” she said. “You know, I hardly drank at all before I went to China – but all the young doctors and nurses at the hospital drank whiskey like water – Chinese scotch, too – real paint remover – I’ve probably done more irreparable damage to my liver in two years than I did in the past thirty.”

Barney fished in his bag for another miniature. “– No problem, there’s more where that came from.”

“I think I’d better start pacing myself now that I’m going back home or people will start getting the wrong idea.” She took a small sip from her cup. “– Not that anyone’s expecting me.”

“You didn’t tell anyone you were coming home?”

Terry Oliver

“Oh yes, I just didn’t say when exactly. I told them I’d be dropping off in England to visit my sisters for a few days. They live in Birmingham.”

“Ah. Well, somebody has to live there, I guess,” said Barney.

“Yes, I know what you mean. Still, it’s nice to go back home, even to Birmingham.”

“Is that where you’re from, then? You don’t sound very Brummie.”

“Actually, I’ve lived in Vancouver since I was a teenager – went to Kitsilano High School for my last two years. I soon learned to drop my Brummie accent.”

“-But your sisters?”

“They were older. They stayed for a year and then came back to live with Dad. My parents split up and my mother had moved us all out to Canada because her brother was there and he offered to help her get set up in Vancouver.”

“I thought Kitsilano was a posh part of town,” said Barney. “With the beaches and UBC and all.”

“Depends where you are,” Trish said. “– We were a long way back from the beach and the university, in a basement apartment. Not a patch on our house in Birmingham – we had lots of Chinese neighbours.”

“In Birmingham?”

“No, Kits. That’s where I first learned to speak Chinese.”

“You speak Chinese? I’m impressed –”

“It’s not that hard, actually. It’s the writing and reading that’s the difficult bit. I never really mastered that – only Pinyin.”

“Pinyin? What’s that?”

IN HOT PURSUIT

"It's a kind of westernized phonetic version of Chinese – uses our alphabet."

"Say something in Chinese for me," said Barney.

"*Hao. Wo yao hu shi White. Qing he ye yao putaojiu ma? Ni ne?*"

"Sounded like you said 'white something'."

"I did. I said, 'Okay, my name is Nurse White. Please may I have another drink – what about you?'"

"Is that what they called you – Nurse White?"

"In polite conversation or at work, yes. That's the convention – title plus last name." She held out her empty paper cup. Barney unscrewed the top off the miniature and poured her another.

"In two years you must have got pretty good at it."

"Not really. – The lectures were all in English- for the foreigners - and everyone always wanted to practise their English on me – also I used to go to Hong Kong a lot and there's a big expat English community there – it was a kind of haven from the unrelenting demands to practise English in Guangzhou. - Cheers," she raised her cup.

"Cheers," said Barney, topping up his cup. "I've always wanted to go to China – ever since I finished school."

"Why didn't you?"

"I toyed with the idea – but the language seemed so impenetrable, somehow –"

"Like I said, it's only the reading and writing – the speaking is easy."

"Hardly easy," said Barney.

"Relatively easy, then. Once you've mastered the tones – and there's only four of those in Mandarin – and hardly any

Terry Oliver

grammar. You should try it – there's lots of classes in Vancouver – you'll be speaking like a native in no time."

"Mmm," said Barney, doubtfully. "– Tempting, though."

"Only please don't ask to practise on me. I need a break for awhile," Trish smiled.

He laughed, "I think you're probably safe for the time being. I'll be too busy getting my act together to think about studying Chinese any time soon. – Unngghh!"

His drink flew across Trish's knees as the plane lurched suddenly sideways. A moment later, the ping of the 'Fasten Seatbelts' sign came on above their heads. Trish clutched her drink firmly as the plane shuddered and bucked again.

"Better get this down my neck – feels like rough weather ahead." She gulped the last of her scotch as a flight attendant hurried past towards the rear and people all around quickly sat down and fumbled with their seat belts.

More shuddering followed a sickening lurch to the right. The plane levelled out again only to make another lunge right – Barney glanced out as the wing rose up to block his view – he sat bolt upright, his empty cup crushed in his hand gripping the arm rest – Oh god, he mouthed softly as the wing dipped back level. The plane cabin had gone silent and the normal background murmur of conversation stilled – all heads facing forward as if waiting for a signal.

The shuddering continued as if they were driving over some bumpy road, each time followed by the rightward lurch before the plane slowly levelled out. Trish gripped Barney's arm tighter with each tilt of the cabin, saying nothing. He remained rigidly still throughout every gyration, mouthing 'no, - no', over and over.

IN HOT PURSUIT

A sudden sinking forward and a sharp steep veer to the right brought an involuntary moan from the passengers. Trish looked at Barney whose face had drained of colour.

“Are you alright?” she asked but he said nothing and stared straight ahead, his hands clamped on the seat rest, the spilled whiskey making a widening dark stain on his pale blue shirt.

No announcement had come from the pilot – obviously, they had their hands full and the flight attendants had vanished from sight – presumably buckled into their little jump seats at the back of the cabin. The stomach-churning lunges, always to the right, increased in intensity, the passengers whimpering quietly in anticipation of each turn and groaning more loudly with every lurch.

“Oh god,” breathed Barney.

The plane’s shuddering and bucking and rightward lurches stopped almost as suddenly as they had begun and it seemed to settle into its bumpy road mode. The intercom pinged and the pilot’s voice came on, slightly terser and less bluff.

“This is Captain Wilson. Sorry about not speaking to you earlier, folks, but we’ve been kind of busy up here. It seems our little technical hitch didn’t get ironed out after all. When we ran into that turbulence, it re-occurred and – well, you saw the result. We’ve been advised to divert to Reykjavik, Iceland and barring any more turbulence, should be there in about twenty minutes. Meantime, please remain seated and keep your seatbelts fastened. Thank you.”

A buzz of excited voices spread through the cabin as the passengers digested this bit of information. Trish released

Terry Oliver

her iron grip on Barney's arm and straightened up slightly from her crouching position in her seat.

"Oh thank God, we're going to be okay, Barney."

He remained rigidly upright, still gripping the armrests.

"Barney – Barney? – You alright?" He seemed not to hear her and Trish prized his hand from the armrest and began stroking it. – "It's okay," she soothed, "it's okay – you heard the captain – we'll be landing soon."

Slowly he slumped down from his erect position until his head and arm rested on his lap like some deflatable doll. He began to shake and long juddering sighs rolled down his body. Trish continued stroking his hand, obviously glad of the chance to let her training occupy her mind. She made no attempt to stop him shaking, only making soothing noises. Slowly his shaking subsided and he fumbled for a handkerchief. She quickly pressed some tissues into his hand and he blew his nose.

"Oh god," he sighed, breathing deeply – oh god – He looked up slowly and saw the large Indian woman across the aisle. She smiled warmly at him and he managed a weak smile.

"Sorry," he said to Trish. "Sorry. I –" But she only shushed him and patted his arm.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I think so," said Trish. "I'll tell you for sure when we're on the ground."

Fifteen minutes later the plane began its descent into Reykjavik airport and landed – rather shakily, but without further incident and the passengers erupted out of their seats, cheering and congratulating each other and hugging the cabin staff who abandoned any attempt to maintain their professional demeanour and hugged them back.

IN HOT PURSUIT

"It's my turn to buy you a drink," announced Trish and she took Barney's arm and steered him towards the long bar in the huge glass cavern of Reykjavik terminal where extra staff were being rapidly pressed into service to deal with the revellers as they poured off the wounded aeroplane. A large cheer went up as the uniformed flight crew passed through on their way to debriefing and they grinned and waved in acknowledgement.

"Two Johnnie Walkers, please," said Trish. "- Doubles." She turned to Barney. "You want anything else - a snack?" He shook his head. They took their drinks and headed for an empty table facing out onto the featureless moonscape of Reykjavik airport.

"God, I love this place," said Barney fiercely. "I don't ever want to leave."

"Here's to Reykjavik," said Trish. "- Cheers." They both drank deeply and gazed blankly out at the dusk settling rapidly beyond the wall of glass. Finally Barney spoke.

"Look, about that - thing. I mean the way I behaved - I just want to apologise -"

"There's no need," Trish interrupted. "I understand, really-"

"No," Barney said, "I don't think you do - I'd like to explain -"

"It's not necessary, honestly -"

"It's just that I felt about seven years old and I got completely swamped by a wave of fear - it sort of paralyzed me, the same as when I was a kid in the dark - afraid to make the slightest movement - even to breathe - it's completely irrational." He took another big mouthful of whiskey and

Terry Oliver

shuddered slightly. "Phew! – That's strong – I'm not used to doubles."

"Do you good," said Trish, working on her own glass. "– Look, we were all afraid. Everyone. It's normal – natural. That was very scary. I'm still trembling – in fact –" she rose, "Excuse me a minute –." Claspng her handbag, she walked unsteadily in the direction of the washrooms.

Barney resumed staring out at his own reflection in the plate glass. He wondered idly if he could make her understand what had happened to him or even if he should try. He hadn't told his wife about it until a couple of years ago – how do you explain to someone that you're still afraid of the dark when you're sixty-six years old?

He had never told her before because he was afraid she would no longer respect him. But after the kids had all left, he thought he should risk it. So he told Alice in a light-hearted manner, she had taken his cue and they had treated it in a joking kind of way. She would ask him, if she was going to be away for the weekend in London, if he was sure he was going to be okay on his own. And Barney would say yeah, he'd be fine as long as he had the dog with him.

And they had left it at that – he never told her about how that fear had come to govern his life – how it had sort of linked up with his physical fear of fights with other boys; of how he avoided any situation which might become threatening, until he became so convinced of his own cowardice that he decided he could never get married and have a family – how would he ever protect them? – And even when he did finally start in his late thirties, he hid his fear with elaborate ploys and when it cropped up as it eventually did, he relived his shame alone and silently.

IN HOT PURSUIT

When he was going through the breakup with Glenys, his first partner, he had gone to a therapist and told him how he had pissed his pants once when another boy threatened to punch him at a club – he could still burn with shame at the thought of other people seeing him so afraid – what had the therapist said? – he must have made some comment but Barney couldn't remember – probably he was too wrapped up in his own embarrassment in telling the incident – he had never told Alice about that – he was sure it would erode her feelings for him – there were some things you couldn't tell even to those you loved and Barney hadn't risked it.

There was no sign of Trish so he wandered around the few duty-free shops idly fingering cigar lighters and ludicrously expensive decanters of perfume. Seated apart from the other passengers was the large Indian woman and her family, quietly eating from an assortment of plastic containers, which she kept extracting from her multi-coloured hold-all. She seemed very serene, calmly feeding her husband and children as if nothing untoward had happened at all. Barney continued his tour of the enormous terminal.

Theirs was obviously the only flight in and they were nearly swallowed up in the acres of glass and open space. He drifted back to his seat by the window and took another sip from his drink. Trish's glass was missing and he saw her standing over at the bar chatting to the bartender. She turned round, saw him and waved her hands to ask if he wanted another drink but Barney shook his head and she came back and sat down.

"The barman says they're sending out another plane for us from Manchester."

"How does he know? I didn't hear anything."

Terry Oliver

“He took a tray of drinks to the crew lounge and they told him. Looks like we’ll be here for awhile,” said Trish, swirling the ice in her glass.

He leaned back in the leather armchair. “I feel exhausted. Think I’ll try to snooze for an hour – do you mind?”

“You go ahead, I’m going to read my book – I can’t sleep in these places – it’s like being on a park bench.”

Barney closed his eyes and began silently chanting his favourite Tibetan mantra. “*Om mani padma sidi hum, om mani padma sidi hum*” – up and down it went in his brain, smoothing and soothing and ironing away the creases and jagged edges of his mind – it was more like humming, really, he mused. “-*Om mani padma sidi hum,*” he hummed to himself, smiling behind his closed eyelids. He would say nothing to Trish about his fear – after all, he barely knew her. She might think he was some kind of weirdo. And she seemed to like him – despite what had happened.

He felt quite fond of her already – maybe we could go out together in Vancouver – nothing heavy, just meet up for a walk on the seawall and a coffee, or perhaps a concert at the Orpheum and a meal. Or a film maybe and then I could drive her home afterwards “- *Om mani padme sidi hum,*” he hummed – the odd trip over to Salt Spring, stay at some off-season bed and breakfast – we could alternate – one weekend at her place and the next at his – but no living together, he admonished himself. It’s taken me too long to get my freedom – don’t surrender it immediately.

A line from Martin Luther King’s famous speech swam into his head – ‘Free at last, free at last, thank God in Heaven we are free at last’ - he could hear the soaring cadence of that powerful voice, charged with emotion – “free at last,” he

IN HOT PURSUIT

hummed silently, “*-om mani padma sidi hum.*” He drifted off, his arm curled protectively around Trish’s warm naked body and his hand cupping her breast – a smile spread over his face and his breathing deepened into a gentle snore.

A muffled voice saying something he couldn’t make out brought Barney swimming back up to consciousness. The voice seemed to be in English but he couldn’t understand what it said. He opened his eyes and looked at his watch –the dial showed seven-thirty – in the morning or evening? The muffled voice echoed again in incoherent English – ‘gate five’ was all he could make out. He looked about for Trish and saw her sitting at the bar again, still swirling her drink and reading her book. He rose stiffly and crossed to the bar. She looked up, smiling.

“– Good sleep? You looked like you were out for the count.”

“Yes, I feel better.”

“Mmm, you were looking a bit unravelled – want a drink?”

Barney made a face, “Coffee, maybe – my mouth tastes foul.”

“You were snoring – with your mouth open, that’s why.”

“Charming. Why didn’t you wake me?”

“What for? We weren’t going anywhere.”

“I’m starving,” Barney said. “– Let’s get something to eat.”

“No time,” Trish said. “Didn’t you hear the announcement?”

“I heard it –but I don’t know what they said.”

“We’re boarding at Gate Five in ten minutes. You’ve got time for a coffee, though.”

Terry Oliver

“Okay,” said Barney. He beckoned the barman. “– You want one, Trish?” She shook her head and indicated her glass. “I’ll just finish this.” Barney went back to their chairs and collected their hand luggage. He returned to the bar with it and drank his coffee. “– Should have had orange juice – it cuts the fur,” he said.

“Not as well as this,” Trish said, draining her glass. “– We’d better go–” She stood up, unsteadily and picked up her things. Barney noticed she had a new duty-free bag.

“Doing some shopping?”

“Insurance.” She held up the bag obviously holding a bottle. “–Don’t want to be caught out again. Look – the barman even gave me some paper cups – no more queues this time. Let’s go,” she leaned heavily on his arm and they made their way to the boarding gates.

As the replacement aeroplane made its way across the Atlantic, Barney watched the TV screen where the little plane symbol inched across the map, following its Great Circle route. There was something comforting about seeing their progress every half hour or so – he much preferred it to watching the in-flight movies, which were usually inane comedies aimed at ten-year olds.

Trish had been making headway, too, working steadily through her bottle of duty-free scotch, stopping only to switch to wine with their meal when it arrived. She’d had a second glass of wine but declined the tea and coffee, reverting instead to another cup of scotch. Barney had long since ceased to keep pace with her and now as he sipped his tea, he watched Trish out of the corner of his eye.

She was in the middle of telling him about some lavish Chinese banquet she had been invited to in Guangzhou at

IN HOT PURSUIT

which they had apparently served all sorts of delicacies like snakes and locusts and monkey brains and puppies – none of which she could bring herself to even taste, let alone eat. So she just drank instead – round after round of toasts and counter-toasts until she nearly passed out and they had politely put her in a taxi and paid the driver to take her back to her hotel.

“I was so embarrassed - I mean I was sort of the honoured guest –the only westerner - and a woman, and I had messed up big-style. Not only had I refused every delicacy I was offered, I had got helplessly drunk as well – and they were so polite! God, I still blush when I think of it –” she took another big swallow of her scotch “– talk about losing face – I reckon I single-handedly set the West and womankind back ten years in one evening.”

“You’re exaggerating,” said Barney. “It couldn’t have been that bad.”

“It was. It was awful – terrible – one of the worst evenings in my life – and believe me I’ve had some disastrous ones.”

“How long ago did it happen?”

“Last week. The night before I left China – it was my leaving party – all my colleagues from the teaching hospital where I studied.” Trish shook her head mournfully. “– Some of the senior professors had been invited, too....”

“Ah well, you survived,” Barney said. “Probably a few months from now you’ll be dining out on that story –”

“Never,” said Trish, vehemently shaking her head “– What a way to end things - they had planned to see me off at the airport but I couldn’t face them – I sneaked off early in a taxi – bloody hell.” She finished off her drink. “– Story of my

Terry Oliver

life – one big cock-up.” She began to pour more scotch into her cup.

“I’m sorry,” said Barney. “It does sound god-awful.” Trish turned to him and smiled ruefully and he grinned back. They both started to giggle.

“Oh don’t,” she said. “It’s not funny.” She took a sip of her scotch and snorted in the middle of it, the whiskey spraying out her nose. Barney hand her a paper napkin and sniggered, setting her off again and the two of them giggled convulsively. Trish wiped her nose and her eyes.

“You see?” he said, “I told you you’d be dining off this in no time.”

“Who with?” said Trish. “– The way I’m going I soon won’t have any friends left.”

“Oh come on,” said Barney, “– It can’t be that bad.” He began mopping up the spilled whiskey with a paper napkin.

“You don’t know the half of it, brother,” Trish said. “That’s just so typical of me.”

“You mean there’s worse?” asked Barney, smiling.

“Much worse.”

“Tell me.”

“You don’t want to hear, believe me-”

“Try me” – but she shook her head. They sat silently staring at their hands, Trish working away at her drink. Several minutes elapsed.

“My husband left me because of that –” she announced suddenly. “– Said he couldn’t take one more scene like that –”

“–You’ve done this before, then?” Barney said.

“God, yes – dozens of times. My husband said every time we went to a party I’d make a scene. That’s not true of course – it wasn’t every time.... A lot, though,” Trish conceded.

IN HOT PURSUIT

“– I didn’t mean to – never intended to – I always started out vowing this time it would be different – but somehow –” her voice trailed off.

“What happened? I mean each time –” asked Barney, curious now.

“Oh nothing much,” said Trish. “– I didn’t dance on the tables or do a strip or anything. It’s just I would start out in a good mood, having a few drinks and then I’d start to feel bad so I’d have more drinks and then more, until finally I’d pass out and my husband would have to take me home. Only now he doesn’t have to anymore because he left-”

“Is that why you started drinking – because he was leaving you?”

“No – long before that – when I knew we weren’t going to have any children.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Do you have any children, Barney?”

“Yes, - three,” he said apologetically.

“Well I never had any,” said Trish, looking down into her empty glass. “None. My husband didn’t want any. Anthony said there were already too many children in this world without us making things worse. Only he didn’t tell me this until after we were married – after he told me he was having a vasectomy so we didn’t need to worry. I guess it was around then I started to drink whenever I wanted to forget about all my babies that never had a chance to be born. That’s when I really got to know Johnnie Walker – I just poured him into that big empty hole inside me – let him fill me right up – only he never could quite succeed because I always let him down – couldn’t last the course.” She stood up abruptly. “– Excuse me, must go to the loo.” She drifted into the aisle and

Terry Oliver

headed towards the rear of the cabin, still clutching the bottle of Johnnie Walker.

Barney decided he'd better go to the washroom as well. He could freshen up at the same time, wash and brush his teeth before the main rush – they must be getting near – the little aeroplane symbol on the map was edging its way down over northern British Columbia. The passengers lay about in crumpled heaps on their seats in a vain attempt to find a comfortable position.

He locked himself into the toilet and consulted his image in the mirror. For the thousandth time he asked himself who was that old guy staring back at him. He stuck out his tongue and examined it, then began methodically brushing his teeth.

By the time he was finished his ablutions a small queue had formed outside the door and the passengers were beginning to bestir themselves. A young mother in the seat ahead with twin girls was combing their hair into ponytails. The large Indian woman was packing and repacking her plastic containers while her husband sat passively with his hands folded and one leg tucked under him.

Trish was still in the loo so Barney used the space to sort out his things and reshuffle all his belongings into his carry-on backpack. He prided himself on travelling light and one day vowed he would have no luggage to check in – only his carry-on bag. But that day had not yet arrived and he told himself that he had an excuse because this time he was moving and not simply travelling. He resumed his seat and gazed out at the snow-topped crests of the mountains below, stretching into the distance in the bright sunshine.

IN HOT PURSUIT

"Excuse me sir." A flight attendant leaned over the empty seat. "Is your wife feeling unwell? She's been in the lavatory a long time and the other passengers –"

"Oh, she's not my wife," said Barney. "What's wrong?"

"Is she a relative, sir?"

"No, we've only just met – do you want me to go with you?" – He started to rise from his seat. The flight attendant seemed uncertain.

"You say she's not travelling with you?"

"That's right," Barney nodded, "But I talked to her quite a lot – I could come and speak to her –"

"Do you know her name, sir?"

"Trish – Patricia. – Sorry I can't remember her last name – I know she mentioned it, but"

The flight attendant turned to go, checking the seat number above Barney's head. "We'll find it on the passenger list."

Barney rose and followed her down the aisle to the rear cabin where a small knot of people stood by the toilets. She squeezed past and Barney followed in her wake. She rapped on the door.

"Patricia – are you alright?" She looked at Barney and nodded towards the door.

"Trish – Trish, it's Barney - can you hear me?" He knocked tentatively at first, then more firmly. "– Trish? Trish! Please open the door." – He pressed his ear to the door – "Trish?" – Nothing. He leaned over to the flight attendant and whispered, "She's had an awful lot to drink. – I think maybe she may have fallen asleep." – He banged on the door again. "Trish! – Trish?" Still nothing.

Terry Oliver

The flight attendant nodded to another one hovering nearby. The woman approached and inserted a hexagonal metal handle into a small hole at the top of the door and turned it. She pushed the middle of the folding door, which opened inwards a few inches. Trish sat slumped on the closed toilet seat her head leaning against the wall. The attendant tried to push the door open but it appeared stuck. The other woman squatted down and reached in behind the door feeling for the obstruction. She pulled out the empty bottle of Johnnie Walker and gave the first attendant a meaningful look.

“-Trish,” said Barney, over her shoulder “– Are you okay?” But already the two women were taking over, obviously familiar with this situation.

“We’ll look after her sir. Thank you for your assistance. Could you please return to your seat?”

“Don’t you want me to help you get her back to her seat?” asked Barney, but the attendant only shook her head.

“She’ll be better back here with us – there’s a spare seat right here she can have.” She turned back to the toilet and squeezed in beside her colleague who was leaning over Trish and shaking her shoulder. Trish’s head lolled forward. A strong whiff of whiskey caught Barney’s nose as they lifted her awkwardly between them and hauled her out of the toilet.

“Please sir – just return to your seat – we’ll look after her now.”

Barney nodded and backed away as they half-carried, half-dragged Trish into the crew kitchen space and propped her on a jump seat. The curtain swished closed behind them and the small group of onlookers shook their heads as they resumed queuing for the toilet and Barney walked back to his seat.

IN HOT PURSUIT

He sat staring at the little plane on the TV map and saw that it seemed to be hovering over the word Vancouver. As if to confirm it, the intercom pinged and the pilot announced they would be beginning their descent and should be on the ground in approximately fifteen minutes. Barney looked out the oval window at the sun starting to set over the mountains. In the top corner of the window, he could just see the sunlight glinting on a strip of water.

"The Pacific Ocean," thought Barney, "- I made it."

As soon as the plane had bumped down on the runway, Barney pressed his light button to summon a flight attendant but no one came. He craned his neck around to see if he could catch someone's eye but there was no sign of anyone. Not until the plane came to a standstill and the jets sighed in relief as they shut down, did the attendant approach him.

"How is she?" he asked. The young woman shook her head.

"We're not sure – we still haven't managed to rouse her – we've called ahead for a doctor and he'll be coming on board as soon as they open the cabin doors."

"I'd like to wait for her," said Barney. "See that she's okay." The attendant was checking under the seat. She held up a handbag.

"Is this hers, do you know?"

"Yes," said Barney, "I'm pretty sure. And that other one is too. The coloured material one." The attendant fished it out and rose.

"You could let all the other passengers leave first and then wait to see what the doctor says, I guess. You say she was just a fellow passenger?"

Terry Oliver

“But I feel I know her quite well,” said Barney. “We talked a lot. I couldn’t just leave.”

The attendant nodded. She began threading her way back through the milling throng of passengers filling the aisle. Barney gathered his coat and bag on to his lap and waited. After an age, the crowd thinned out and he was able to look back over the seats to the rear but the curtain was still closed. He watched the baggage handlers piling up the chain of wagons and snaking their way into the terminal. Still he waited. Two uniformed cleaners worked their way down the aisles stuffing rubbish into black plastic bin liners. Finally, the young flight attendant approached.

“Hasn’t the doctor arrived yet?” asked Barney.

She nodded. “Oh yes. He’s gone. They’ve taken her to the airport infirmary. He thinks she’s only passed out but they want to keep her in overnight to make sure. It’s Mr. Roper, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Barney Roper. – Look, couldn’t I go and see her?” The attendant shook her head.

“Sorry, sir – but you’re not a relative.”

“But I don’t even have her address or phone number – how will I find out how she is?” A thought struck him. “Did you look in her handbag? – she must have her phone number there.”

“Yes, we found it – but we’re not allowed to give out that sort of personal information.” She looked at him for a minute. “You could phone the infirmary in the morning – I can give you that number, if you like.”

“Yes, please,” said Barney, and he stood waiting in the aisle as she went back to the crew area. A moment later, she

IN HOT PURSUIT

handed him a slip of paper. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks very much, miss –" He tried to read her lapel tag.

"Becky," she said.

He nodded, "Becky. Thanks Becky." She smiled at him, then turned back down the aisle and Barney hefted his shoulder bag and headed for the exit.

In the bendy-bus driving into the city, he watched the other people all sitting silently with that condemned expression common to bus passengers everywhere. He got off at the Burrard Street station and consulted his notebook with the directions to his address. He knew the city fairly well from previous holiday trips but the darkened streets with their splashes of bright neon lighting disoriented him at first and he headed off in the wrong direction. He had walked two blocks before he decided he must be going the wrong way and asked someone, which was the way to Bayshore. The man pointed back in the direction he had come from and Barney turned and trudged back past Burrard and on down Georgia.

Eventually he found the building – a tall high rise, all glass, balconies and bright lights. He opened an envelope, took out the set of keys to let himself in. It took him awhile to work out the security fob that operated the front door and the elevators but he finally arrived on the twelfth floor and walked down to number 1203.

He knocked first, just in case, then opened the door and dropped his bags in the hallway, found the light switch and began exploring the apartment, turning all the lights on as he went. He slid open the balcony door and stepped outside. He still had his coat on and the September night felt cool on his face.

Terry Oliver

He watched the lights of the harbour reflecting off the forest of sailboat masts for a few minutes then stepped back inside and went into the gleaming kitchen and opened the fridge. He took out a carton of orange juice and started looking for a glass in the cupboards. His foot kicked something and he looked down at a plastic bowl half full of water that had splashed out onto his shoe.

Taking the glass of orange juice, he wandered into the bedroom and eased himself down onto the bed, still wearing his coat. He kicked off his shoes and stretched out full length, sipping cautiously at the juice, before setting it down. He stared up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. As he drifted off, he realized his euphoric mood had completely evaporated.

CHAPTER 2

When Barney left for Canada, Alice Roper smiled secretly to herself. She had been working towards this day for a long time and she intended to savour it to the full. Crossing to her old roll top desk, she unlocked a small drawer and took out an official-looking envelope – it had arrived three days before Barney had left but she hadn't allowed herself to open it. She knew exactly what it contained but still she had waited – just to be sure. She carried the letter into the living room, sat in her favourite wingback armchair and picked up a glass of whiskey that she had just prepared. The old longcase wall clock only stood at eleven a.m. but she raised her glass, took a good deep swallow and gently eased open the envelope.

She began to read –“...pleased to inform ...officially accepted ...master's degree program...archaeology department ...St

Terry Oliver

Swithens College, Oxford ... thesis topic... Roman household rituals... tutor Professor Hector Bradley...." Her eyes scanned the letter absorbing the comforting phrases and the slightly formal language. They stopped on the last paragraph and reread it. It was an invitation to attend a graduate students' informal get-together with department teaching staff for drinks at six-thirty pm on October the first – exactly one month from today.

Alice folded the letter carefully and put it back in the envelope. She leaned back in her armchair smiling contentedly. God knows she needed a break, she thought. Her caseload at work had become more and more impossible and when the new girl they brought in to share the work left after only five months to have a baby, all her cases defaulted to Alice.

She struggled on, feeling frustrated and unhappy knowing she was not doing justice to all the families entrusted to her care. Her sixtieth birthday was looming and she agonized over her decision to leave and pursue a totally different career at this age. Not that she wasn't familiar with it. After all, archaeology had been her first choice and she had never really given it up, even after her parents had persuaded her to switch to social work so she could at least earn a living when she graduated and support her baby daughter Netta.

Alice was still living at home with them in the big old mansion flat in North London on the edge of Hampstead Heath. She was determined not to live off them any longer than she had to and that had clinched her decision to switch careers. Her father had pointed out that she could continue her interest in archaeology as a hobby and this she had done ever since – going on digs for a day here or a weekend there and keeping up with developments in the academic journals.

IN HOT PURSUIT

They were right, of course. There were no jobs in archaeology when she graduated but social workers were in huge demand. She had never stopped working throughout her married life, except to have her second daughter, Cassie, and then only for six months. So when Barney had first mooted the idea that he might return to Canada to pursue what he called his Third Age Explorations now that the kids had all flown the nest, Alice too had begun hatching her own backup plan.

She drained the last of her whiskey and went to sit at her desk. Choosing a clean sheet of her letterhead paper and her favourite fountain pen with the wide gold nib, she started to compose her letter of resignation, effective exactly one month from today. She handed it in the next morning before she began working out her notice.

All through the turmoil that followed, Alice remained serenely unperturbed and happy, dealing with all the crises in a calm, efficient manner, smiling and nodding and listening to the stream of problems that flowed over her desk and in and out of her office. Her boss had gone from incredulity, to anger, to despair and then finally resignation when he realised that Alice was not to be dissuaded. Her colleagues and friends too, had come to accept her decision and secretly envied her new-found confidence, wishing that they had the nerve to pack it all in and go off – where? – To do what? They reluctantly went back to their overflowing desks and insistently ringing telephones thinking some people have all the luck. Alice just smiled at them and the piles of case-notes on her desk grew daily smaller while the clamour for attention from her clients diminished as she quietly but firmly transferred them to her bewildered replacement – another new graduate whom Alice was relieved to find had no current boyfriend likely to derail

Terry Oliver

her with an unexpected pregnancy. Alice was one of those people who believed that you made your own luck and she was enjoying making hers.

At her leaving party on the last day of the month, her women colleagues and friends had first taken her for a raucous meal at their regular Friday night bistro and then for a last night of ten-pin bowling. It was something they had started doing rather sheepishly at first after they were all sent on a stress-management course by a department head worried about increasing absenteeism.

There was a bar at the bowling alley and a team of regulars from a machine tool factory on a nearby industrial estate – young men bored with the routine of their work who came to let off steam. The women flirted with them, emboldened by drink and numbers and soon what had started out as a duty became a social engagement they looked forward to as each hectic week took its toll on their stress levels.

Tonight was no exception and they had started with a round of drinks at the bar and a surprise gift from the machinists. Tony, their spokesman, usually so vocal in his teasing of the women was almost tongue-tied as he made the presentation. “To Alice, from all the lads – hope this helps you find your buried treasure.” The barman passed over a long awkwardly shaped bundle from behind the bar. Alice unwrapped a stainless steel spade, which the men had retooled so that the blade was much smaller and narrower – she hefted it experimentally.

“It’s beautiful,” she said “– and so light. Thank you.” And she hugged each of them in turn.

IN HOT PURSUIT

Al, one of the older men, shook his head. "If I gave my wife a present like that she'd probably hit me over the head with it."

"Come on," said Alice, picking up her glass and carrying her spade. "I feel lucky tonight," and she headed for the bowling lanes.

They started with a mixed team of the men and women and Alice was allowed to go first. She had never been much good but enjoyed the chance to unwind with all her women friends. Tonight her first ball wobbled a bit, then smoothed out and gaining momentum, took out all ten pins cleanly – a strike. A loud cheer went up from both teams and Alice bowed and took her seat. She had never mastered the scoring and left it to the others to do the complicated calculations, which they did with increasing arguments as the game progressed. On her next two turns, she bowled spares and then another strike.

"Go for it, Alice," the women called encouragingly. "You're on a roll!" She finished the game with the second highest score, beaten only by Tony, the men's best player. More drinks followed and the teasing, flirting and innuendo grew in volume.

After an hour or more, Alice bowed out for a game and she and her oldest friend, Stevie retreated to the bar to cool off. They ordered mineral water and Stevie pressed the chilled bottle against her forehead. She was a big-boned woman, used to physical work in her large garden but she was still perspiring freely.

"You know, it's not too late to change your mind, Alice."

"Don't be absurd, Stevie – it's way too late for regrets now – anyway I've burned all my bridges - and boats –"

Terry Oliver

“But what about me, Alice – what’s going to happen to me?”

“You’ll be fine – you’ve got your house and your beautiful walled garden – and Charles.”

Stevie snorted. “Charles! – What good is Charles? – Who am I going to talk to, that’s what I want to know –”

“Stevie, you know everyone in the whole county, practically.”

“Yes, but I can’t talk to them, Alice – not like you.”

“You’ll just have to come and visit me, then. It’s only Oxford, Stevie – I’m not going to China.”

“It won’t be the same, though – you’ll be meeting all these clever new people – sophisticated –witty – charming –”

“Are you trying to frighten me, Stevie? – ‘coz it’s no use – I don’t care how clever or charming they are, I’m going – they can charm the pants off me –” Alice grinned, “I hope they do.” She set her bottle of mineral water down on the bar and headed for the loo.

Their final game over, amid much good-natured joking, the rest of the team came out to join them at the bar and ordered coffee. On her return from the washroom, Alice noticed Stevie was missing. She was about to enquire, when she spotted her talking near the exit door with the barman. He nodded and left and Stevie walked back over to join the group.

“Just before you all leave,” she announced, “I have been asked to say an official goodbye to Alice from all her friends and workmates. She will be sorely missed and so we decided to have the usual whip-round and get her a leaving present. We had thought of buying her a new Mini – but there wasn’t quite enough money. And anyway everyone knows the parking in

IN HOT PURSUIT

Oxford is hopeless – so, as more befitting her new role as a poor student, we settled for this instead....”

Stevie gestured towards the exit door and on cue, the barman opened it and wheeled in a gleaming new bicycle, complete with wicker front basket and ‘sit up and beg’ handlebars. Everyone applauded and cheered as Alice hugged Stevie and took the bike from the barman.

“No excuse to be late for school now, Alice,” said Al.

“It’s perfect,” exclaimed Alice. “My favourite colour – British Racing Green – now I feel like a proper student at last.” She wheeled it up and down between the tables holding it with one hand and hugging everyone in turn with her free arm.

“Let’s see you ride it, Alice,” called Tony, holding the door open. They all grabbed their coats and followed him outside.

“Someone hold my spade,” she said, brandishing it like a sword. Stevie took it from her and she pushed the bike out between the two lines of friends forming a guard of honour. In the car park, everyone cheered as Alice gamely mounted the bike and wobbled off between the cars. She circled round and headed back towards them.

“I don’t know how to stop it,” she shouted, as they all scattered from her path. “Squeeze the handles,” called Tony, running beside her. “Here,” he pointed. The bike halted abruptly and two of the other men who had joined the chase, caught Alice.

“I think you’d better practice in the morning, Alice,” said Stevie. “We can put it in the back of my car.”

“No, I want to ride it home,” insisted Alice. “Does it have a light?”

“Right here,” said Al, switching it on.

Terry Oliver

They all gathered round, calling their goodbyes and shouting encouragement as Alice rode off again, looping through the car park and then sailing past them, all cheering and waving as she headed off down the street, her red tail-light winking in the dark

A sixty-something couple of empty-nesters decide to split up to pursue their 3rd age by exploring in different directions. All aspects, funny, sad and unexpected, of living fully in this undiscovered country of the post-sixty are tackled willingly by both, head-on.

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