Set in Japan during the 1960s, Insomnia Mimatsu is a haunting story of young love, old regrets, simple patriotism and military espionage, which speaks as much to the secrets of the heart as to those of a nation.

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A Story of Love and Espionage in Misawa

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Front Cover: AP Alley at Night (1966); Photo by Dan Riss; Used by Permission.

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INSOMNIA MIMATSU

A Story of Love and Espionage in Misawa

George Welch

Table of Contents

Chapter Eight
An Elephant Cage to Die For

Our military transport plane was in a holding pattern over Misawa Air Base, Japan. The aircraft scheduled to land before us ran into some problems with its landing gear so the maintenance crew down on the ground had foamed the whole runway. Ambulances and fire trucks were spread out all across the flight line. After a couple of dozen tries, the pilot had finally gotten the gear locked in place and was able to land safely. We were just circling until the mess was cleaned up and some of the emergency vehicles moved out of the way.

The captain of our little ship, having some time on his hands, switched over into his role as tour guide. The best ones do that, I have noticed. I cannot begin to count the bus drivers and airplane pilots who have made me curl up into a gasping wheezing belly laugh with their shenanigans, their preposterous hyperbole which is intended to calm the nerves of their passengers—put them at ease—whenever the situation aboard moves from normal to abnormal or even scary. Every one of us riding that U.S. Air Force transport knew that another plane had just barely avoided disaster minutes before. Gulp! Is it going to happen to us, too? Not if your jolly tour guide can help it. We might go down, if it was the *Lord's will* for us to die that day, but we'd go down laughing.

The best of these tour guides I've ever encountered was a chipper old Southwest Airlines pilot who brought us safely through a terrible thunderstorm over Las Vegas. This was years after Misawa, of course. "Alright, everybody," our hot rodding SWA pilot informed us that day, "we're going to have to make a drop of about two thousand feet to get out of this storm and we're going to have to do it REAL QUICK, if you get me. So, I want ya'll to suck up your stomachs just as tight as you can. That'll be tougher on some of us than others, but we're just going to have to suck all together now on the count of three. Ready, now? And a One! And a Two! And a Three! SUCK IT UP! SUCK IT UP! SUCK IT UP!"

After that third "Suck it up!" old good-time Charlie of Southwest Airlines, formerly known in Texas and surroundings as *Tree Top Airlines* gave out a battle cry that sounded exactly like this: WHEE-EEE! WHEE-EEE! WHEE-OOOSH! And we plummeted down and out of the storm and continued our trip. One of the stewardesses confided to me later that we had actually dropped closer to three thousand feet—more than half a mile—but

that the pilot thought we would feel better if he told us it was only going to be two thousand feet. The maneuver was necessary because the thunderstorm had suddenly intensified and had the potential to knock us out of the sky without warning. That would have entailed a considerably longer free fall of about seven miles followed by a very sudden stop.

The Air Force pilot who brought seven ditty bops fresh out of Tech School safely onto the tarmac of Misawa Air Base in August 1965 was a Captain named Blaine Knowles. I remember his name because, incredibly, I had the pleasure of flying with him three more times. Once, up to Wakkanai, Japan, on the very northern tip of the island of Hokkaido, and then a return trip to Misawa some six months later. Two months after that, it was Captain Blaine Knowles who had delivered me from Misawa to Tachikawa Air Base in the south near Tokyo where I would connect once again with Northwest Orient Airlines for my journey back to the United States. I began to wonder if the good Captain was the *only* transport pilot the Air Force was employing on the islands of Honshu and Hokkaido but I guess the reason for all our flights together was that our tours of duty more or less coincided. There weren't that many passenger shuttles, so I guess he would have been piloting a large percentage of them. I even ran into Captain Knowles once down in AP Alley, a tiny street of wall-to-wall bars right outside the Main Gate at Misawa Air Base, which was a favorite watering hole for the airman on base, especially those who worked up on Security Hill. He had a two day layover and was tossing down a few whiskeys at a little place called Tony's Bar, normally an exclusive hangout for members of USAFSS. Since most of the Security Service guys knew the old shuttle pilot, they welcomed him in like a brother, even made him the Semi-Official You-Saw-Fits Pilot of the Month. The partying Captain told me on that occasion that prior to Tony's, he had been to the Bar Jimmy, the Flamingo, the Metro, the Prince, the Rhythm, the Black Pearl, the Top Hat and Toy's which was a favorite among the DF crowd.

"How many is that?" he asked me in a voice that made me believe he had had *more than one* in each of the places he named.

"Oh, you've barely gotten started," I answered. "There's about twenty more bars here in AP Alley you haven't made it to yet."

"Naw," said Captain Knowles. "This is my last bar. Not my last drink, though. You really should buy your old Captain a whiskey, you know. All the times I've driven you around this country and never charged you a dime. Set 'em up again, here, Cowboy! This young airman is buying."

And so I did. You paid a hundred yen for a glass of whiskey in Misawa, Japan, back in 1965. At the exchange rate of three hundred and sixty yen for

one U.S. dollar, I bought a whiskey for the Captain and one for myself and paid the bartender Cowboy what amounted to a little over four bits. Economical times, I tell you. Very economical times.

And money well spent. You wanted to stay on good terms with any officer in the United States Air Force. You never knew when you might need a character witness or a letter of recommendation. Or is it a character recommendation and a letter of witness? Something along those lines.

At any rate Captain Knowles was in fine form that Saturday morning as we circled Misawa. Gene and I and the other ditty bops were eager to land and get our "Machi Boots" on the ground. That was what old Tech Sergeant Bob Sharkey had said would be our first purchase once we arrived in Misawa. Machi boots were just high top rubber boots worn to protect your pants legs from the muddy or snowy conditions that always seemed to prevail in Misawa. The boots were also deeply serrated on the bottom which helped your traction in the ice and snow and usually but not always kept you from falling down if you had forked over too many one hundred yen notes down in the Alley that night.

Knowles was on his intercom pointing out to everyone the Buddhist shrines, the train station, Main Gate, Lake Ogawara and the North Mountains. Then he began his spiel about the Elephant Cage, that massive structure of concentric circles and silos that covered approximately forty acres of ground on the shores of Ogawara-Ko, which we called Lake Ogawara.

That was when Gene Thibodeaux and I began rolling our eyes at one another. We couldn't go up there and take the microphone away from the man and announce to the others on the plane, "Shit, people. You know that ain't no elephant cage. That's the most sophisticated antenna in the world and it's pointed directly at the Soviet Union over there. As soon as I get down from out of the air here and get assigned a position in the compound off to the left of that so-called cage which is really an AN/FLR-9 directional antenna, I'm gonna plug my headsets into the appropriate hole and start copying every dit and dah those communist bastards are transmitting."

No, you couldn't do that, of course. You could close your eyes and think, though: *I know something you don't know. Nyah! Nyah! Nyah!*

Our man from the NSA, the National Security Agency, back at Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi had been Yuri Orrel. He was the only instructor we had for the Top Secret Codeword portion of our training as Morse Intercept Operators. He spent the better part of a week explaining to us how the AN/FLR-9 was the keystone to our national defense and part of the World Wide High Frequency Direction Finding System.

"Construction on the FLR-9 system at Misawa Air Base began in November 1963," said Mr. Orrel. "That was not the only momentous event of that month, as you may recall, but, in the long run, the completion of the network of FLR-9 antennas at selected sites around the world may prove to be more significant in the history of our nation than the life or death of a single man. Just look at this thing, gentlemen!"

Everyone in the classroom looked at the color slide which Mr. Orrel had projected onto the screen covering the blackboard.

"Isn't it magnificent? Isn't it a dream? Isn't it the damnest thing you ever saw?"

It certainly was. Half a century later, I still have about a hundred snapshots of that FLR-9. You definitely didn't intend to photograph it on most of those occasions. It was just so damn big it was impossible to keep it out of the frame. There's a picture of the Dawgs from Trick Four playing softball. The FLR-9 looms in the background like a Martian concert hall or something eerily similar. You're having a picnic, playing golf, going down the little ski run on Security Hill, looking out the window of your room, walking to the Electron Theater or the Chow Hall and there it is…dominating your world. The FLR-9 at Misawa still exists today. You can google it up if you want. The damn thing is huge even when viewed from outer space. The mother of all antennas.

One of my favorite singers in the days I spent at Misawa was Dave Dudley. This probably confirms that I am indeed the hillbilly that Carson Little, my roomie back at Keesler, thought I was. But I don't mind. Dave's my man. In the Sixties he was singing *Six Days on the Road (And I'm Gonna Make It Home Tonight)* and other ditties like *Phantom 309* and *Truck Drivin' Son of a Gun*. One tearjerker among Dave Dudley's ballads was a little item called *Sugarland USA*. Dave would sing in his old raspy voice that he was going back, going back to Sugarland USA. We had a Sugar Land down where I grew up. It was just a few miles south of Houston on U.S. Highway 59. They did for a fact make sugar in Sugar Land, Texas: Imperial Sugar. They don't make it there anymore, of course, if you can imagine that: a town named after sugar that doesn't have a sugar refining operation. Sugar Land is a fast-growing suburb of Houston now with high rises of its own and a smooth-talking Chamber of Commerce. Dave Dudley died of a heart attack a few years back and that's probably just as well. I don't think he'd want to go back to Sugarland anymore. I know I don't.

But when I heard Dave Dudley sing about *Sugarland USA* back in 1965, I was no longer thinking about Sugar Land, Texas, but about a green-eyed girl

named Annie Carver way across the Pacific Ocean over in Biloxi, Mississippi. Wherever Annie was, that was my Sugarland. One day, I knew, I would be going back to her, back to Sugarland.

Dave also sang a very funny song titled *Give Me Forty Acres and I'll Turn This Rig Around!* Expert drivers can turn on a dime and back their trucks into places you never thought they'd fit, but Dave's frustrated trucker needed a whole forty acres to turn his eighteen wheeler around. As I was looking out the window at the Elephant Cage, the FLR-9 which occupied exactly that much space, I thought, "Here it is, Dave! Here's your forty acres. If you can't turn that sucker around in there, you better give it up and get into another line of work!"

"In November of 1963, many more ships than usual began to arrive at the Japanese port city of Hachinoe," Mr. Orrel had continued. "What was required to complete the FLR-9, in addition to tons of copper wiring and cables, were hundreds of monopoles and dipoles to support the concentric cages or fences which were to make up the structure. The inner ring of the FLR-9 at Misawa was to be a mere 210 yards across. The outer ring or screen was to be 366 yards in diameter. Trucks began to run day and night, back and forth, from Hachinoe to Misawa, throughout 1963 and 1964. There were giant silo-shaped tubes which were over 100 feet high that had to been transported and erected at Misawa. Many people still believe today that these tubes are missile silos, part of a nuclear strike force directed against the Soviet Union. They are not, of course. But rumors began to run rampant about just what this monstrosity was, this beautiful monstrosity, that is, that was employing thousands of Japanese locals as truck drivers and high rise construction workers. Several Japanese men would die building the FLR-9. One was thrown up in the air like a softball when an earthquake rumbled through the area. He landed a couple of hundred feet away. That's when the myth of the Elephant Cage began to be used as a cover story. Too many people were asking questions. Too many people were devising their own answers. The funny thing about it all, fellows, is that everyone knew it was an antenna all along. That's the way it was described in the American and Japanese newspaper articles of the time, a giant communications antenna. Of course, they reported the double-speak word for word as they got it from government people: *Joint U.S.—Japanese project which will facilitate communications on the islands*. Nothing in the articles about *surveillance.* Nothing about *espionage*. So, to be consistent, everyone began to explain it as an elephant cage. No one believed it of course but they suspected Security Hill people were a little off anyway and that just confirmed their suspicions. The FLR-9 is

completed now, Mr. Duncan, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Thibodeaux. You others that are going to be stationed at Misawa. I envy you. I wish I was a young man again just to take part in this great experiment, this great adventure."

"How much did it cost, sir?" asked Gene Thibodeaux. "I mean to build the whole thing? It looks very expensive."

"The FLR-9 at Misawa cost right at one point two billion—that's *billion*—yen to construct. At the current conversion rate, that's a little over three point three million dollars. Quite a price tag, eh?"

I used to think about Mr. Orrel's figure a lot. With whiskey at 100 yen a shot, how many drinks could I buy with *a billion yen*? What else could I buy in AP Alley with that kind of folding money? The answer was obvious: *Anything you want, son. Anything at all.*

Once our fearless pilot, Captain Knowles, put us safely on the ground, we were directed to a Blue Goose, an Air Force bus which would take the seven of us up the winding road to Security Hill which was separated by a lot of miles and a lot of other things from the Main Base at Misawa. Ahead of us, at the foot of the mountains, we could see beautiful Lake Ogawara and the dominating visage of the Elephant Cage.

Airman Second Class Cedric Burke was manning the orderly room on that last Saturday of August 1965.

"Welcome to Security Hill, gents," said airman Burke. "I think you're going to like it. The food is fantastic, the fishing is good, they've just put a brand new felt on the pool table over at the Rec Center, there's a Annette Funicello movie starting at the Electron Theater tonight. I think it's a different movie than her last one but sometimes I wonder if they don't just change the sequence of the scenes, give it a new title, and send it back over here. If all this doesn't excite you, well, there's always our own little Ginza, Misawa-style—AP Alley and the Main Drag."

"What's AP Alley?" asked Enrique Nunez, one of our in-coming classmates from Keesler. He was a pretty good bantamweight boxer. Everybody called him *Flaco.* "No one told us about that."

"Well, the *AP* part stands for the Air Police, of course," answered Burke. "The Alley is just that: not one but two—actually—little elbow-shaped alleys which contain I don't know how many bars. No one's ever been able to count them or run them all. By the time you think you have them all identified, one of the bars will disappear and another one will take its place. Favorite hangout for people from Security Hill and also for our AP brethren whose mission in life is to stop you from having a good time. Totally humorless men, those

APs. All brawn, little brains and no funny bone whatsoever. Your name, I take it, must be Nunez."

"Why?" asked Nunez. "Because I'm the only Hispanic ditty bop here?"

"No," said Cedric, "because I'm not blind. I can see your name tag plainly from here and it says *Nunez*."

"Okay, I give up. I'm Nunez."

"Airman Nunez, you're going to be assigned to Able Flight. That's Trick One, which is on its days off right now, so you're out of work for the time being. I'm going to write your flight assignment, room number, everything you need to get around until you can be properly processed in next week. Hang onto this paper, it'll get you into the Chow Hall temporarily and serve as identification if anyone questions your presence up here on the Hill."

Flaco walked up and took the paper from airman Burke's hand.

"Here's how it works, guys. The work never stops in the Compound, or *Gig*, as they call it. Twenty-four hours a day. Seven days a week. There are four tricks or flights which work in the Gig: Trick One, Able Flight; Trick Two, Baker Flight; Trick Three, Charlie Flight; and Trick Four, which should be Delta Flight but is called *Dawg Flight*. That's what the people on Trick Four want to call it, we just let it go. We're not real sticklers for detail or protocol up here on the Hill. You'll learn to appreciate that if, God forbid, you ever get reassigned to the real Air Force. You will work a rotating shift during your tour of duty here. They have experimented with the shift schedule off and on but the current madness involves working three evening shifts, three midnight shifts and three day shifts followed by three days off. It's a bitch, just like it sounds, but you'll get used to it. Now, Dawson and Young, where are you?"

"Yo!" said Eric Dawson. He was a tough, stocky guy who was known as "Big Red" to everybody.

"Here!" said Kevin Young, a quiet kid from Nebraska who had done fairly good in Tech School.

"You'll be on Trick Three, Charlie Flight. They start mids on Sunday night. So, get settled into your rooms and report with your papers to the Gig at 2300 hours tomorrow night. They'll process you there. Nunez, I forgot. Since you're on days off, report back over here at 0800 hours Monday morning. They'll start your processing so everything thing will be in order by the time Trick One gets back from its three day party."

"What are we supposed to do until 2300 hours tomorrow night?" asked Kevin Young.

Dumbass! I thought. *Never ask that question.*

But A2C Cedric Burke had an answer for him.

"Any damn thing you want to," said the orderly. "You're You-Saw-Fits now. What do you think this is, the damn Air Force?"

We all laughed at that. I looked around the room and thought this must really be some kind of a freaky situation here. Seven out of twenty-five guys in our class back at Tech School had been assigned to Misawa. Out the window of the orderly room, however, I could see the AN/FLR-9 antenna. It wasn't any coincidence that we were here, that the two airman who had accompanied Billy, Annie, Gene and myself to New Orleans back in April were also sitting here receiving their flight assignments. Misawa was big-time intelligence now. With its brand-new antenna and ideal location it was both perfectly equipped and perfectly situated to get some prime data back to the folks in Washington who would figure out what it meant and what to do about it.

Work had never really been a big thing with me. Of course I hadn't had that many jobs at that point in my life. I was excited about this, however. I was ready to get into the Compound or the Gig or whatever the hell they called it and start chasing some dits and dahs. Let's get this show on the road, folks!

Airman Burke addressed me.

"I saw you looking out the window, there, Thomas," he said. "That thing is an Elephant Cage. Remember that. That's our story and we're sticking with it. You're going to be asked about it a thousand times off base and every time they ask you, you'll give them the old Elephant Cage rigmarole. They'll think you're an idiot when you tell it but they think that already about us, so it doesn't matter. That's not my directive, by the way. I'm just an orderly room clerk, granted, an orderly room clerk with a very high security clearance, so I don't do directives. That comes straight down from Major Harry Prigget, the Commander of the 6921st Security Wing. Major Prigget is alright if you meet him under pleasant circumstances. Don't screw up, though. You don't want him on your ass, let me advise you right now."

We were all saying a silent prayer that our time would pass at Misawa without our even being *noticed* by Major Prigget.

"Okay, Thomas, that leaves you and who else?" asked Airman Burke. "Schmidt, Duncan and Thibodeaux. You're all Dawgs, every damn one of you. Trick Four. The Dawgs, bless their little perverted hearts, are working their last midnight shift tonight. They'll have their Roll Call in the morning and then go back on the day shift Monday. No point in you going in tonight. Report to the Gig at 0700 hours Monday morning for your first day on the

job. Gentlemen, I welcome you all to the 6921st Security Wing, best damn USAFSS site in the world. You're going to work hard and play hard here. Remember to keep the two separate. Any questions?"

"What's a Roll Call?" I asked.

"Oh, you'll find out," said Cedric, smiling. "The guys in your barracks will be sure you're present and accounted for. This will be your first Roll Call. You don't want to miss it."

I still didn't know what a damn Roll Call was supposed to be. Can't be much to it. Calling your name, I guess. Something like that.

Walking over to the Dawg Flight barracks, I snuck a peek at Gene's paperwork.

"Damn, son, you and me are going to me roomies!"

"Well, my Daddy was a pistol," said Gene, "and I'm a son-of-a-gun. What do you think about those biscuits, Bryan?"

"I think you're not nearly as pretty as Carson Little, my last roomie, but you'll do. Maybe we can develop some kind of meaningful relationship."

"Go to hell, boy," said Gene. "This is going to be strictly one of those *plu-tonic* situations of which I hear now and then. No way will I have your child. My mother wouldn't stand for an ugly grandbaby like that."

We threw our duffel bags in the room before making a mad dash to the Chow Hall. It was scheduled to close in a few minutes and we were both hungry as hell. The food wasn't too bad. Maybe Sergeant McBride had been onto something. I don't know if it was world-class cuisine or not, not having any basis for an opinion of that sort. Gene and I cleaned our plates, however, and then went back to the room and watched in amazement as mamasan made up our beds in sharp military style.

"We got maid service here," said Gene. "I could get to like this."

We stopped at the Post Office on our way to the Rec Center. We didn't have mail boxes yet but Gene asked at the window and the clerk handed him a couple of envelopes.

"Well, looky here," said Gene. "One from Momma and one from Linda. Can you beat that? And the boy has just arrived in town. You better check your mail, Bryan."

I checked. I didn't have anything. Shit!

We shot a few games of pool on the re-felted table Cedric Burke had recommended and then walked outside.

"Aren't you going to read your letters, smartass?" I asked. I might have been a little pissed.

"Naw, I'm gonna save 'em," said Gene. "I'll probably read 'em aloud in the room later. You know. Share 'em with my new roomie."

"Share *this*, sucker!" I said and then started laughing. I was over it. Hell, I would probably get plenty of mail in the next few days. And I did. In the thirty months I wound up spending in Japan I would accumulate enough letters to fill a good sized trunk. Hundreds of letters. I kept them all for many years and then, on one of the saddest nights of my life, I would feed them, one by one, into a bonfire I had built down on the beach at High Island, Texas.

"So what do we do now, seeing as how we have the night off?" Gene asked. "Shall we go to the Electron and watch Miss Annette play beach blanket bingo or beach blanket canasta or whatever she's playing this time?"

So, I sang to my old bud: "M—I—C—K—E—Y!"

"M—O—U—S—E!" Gene sang back. "Bad idea, huh?"

"Very," I said. "We'll save Annette for a slow night. I'm going to check out this Static Club, drink one cold beer, and go back to the room for a while."

"I'm with you, brother," said Gene. "I'm just a one-beer man myself. You think they take this monopoly money in there."

"I bet they do."

Down at Tachikawa Air Base, when we had first arrived in the country, we had been advised to exchange our American greenbacks for military MPC and Japanese yen. The military currency—MPC—consisted of funny looking bills of the usual denominations but of some wild and fanciful colors. We immediately began calling it monopoly money. We were still on the gold standard in those days and an American buck was an American buck and it was never supposed to get into the hands of a foreigner. Unlike the border towns back in Texas where you could spend either dollars or pesos, the division was very strict in Japan. You spent MPC on base and Japanese yen off base. As long as it'll spend, brother, I thought, you can call it whatever you want to.

The Static Club was more along the lines of dinky rather than plush. It was functional. It had to serve the needs of the four tricks, three of which were always working while the other one was off, not to mention the unofficial fifth trick, the so-called "day ladies" who worked straight days in the Compound and the few administrative types required to fill out the necessary paperwork on Security Hill. To serve all those needs, the Static Club stayed open twenty-four hours a day. It never closed. If you were coming off a swing or evening shift at 2300 hours at night and felt like a beer or a sandwich, no problem. It was usually more on the ratio of four beers to one sandwich, however. *Now we are talking about a problem.*

Gene and I picked up on this particular peculiarity about USAFSS people in Misawa early on in our tour. Our *official* motto, of course, in USAFSS was the well-known *Freedom Through Vigilance.* Our *unofficial* motto, one which was not as apparent to military historians or to our loved ones back home, was *If You're Not Working, You're Drinking.*

If you're not working and you're not drinking, what the hell are you doing, anyway? Spending time in the base library was not considered acceptable behavior. Ditto with going to church, watching flowers grow, or anything else which didn't cause cirrhosis of the liver or lung cancer. Filtered cigarettes cost ten cents a pack at the Static Club. Unfiltered ones, like the Chesterfields I favored at that time, were nine cents. Most people smoked three packs a day, minimum. Some four or five.

If you could bribe a maintenance man in the Compound to supply you with a hundred foot extension for you headset cord, here is how your shift normally went. You came to work legally drunk. That was not *out of the ordinary*. That was the status quo. To sober up, so the dits and dahs pouring nonstop out of your headsets wouldn't *hurt your brain* so much, you drank one cup of coffee after another and smoked continually. When your "Man" was quiet, when nothing was coming out of your headsets, you got up from your position, headsets still in place, and trailing your hundred foot cord, you walked the aisles and made rude obscene conversation with the other ditty bops who were dutifully copying their dits and dahs.

"Did I see you sneaking out the Top Hat with that bleeping bleeping Mari-ko the other night, brother? Don't you know that bleeping bitch has got it bad, man? She gave it to half of the bleeping bleepers on Trick Three, those worthless sons-of-bleepers, and now they say she's got her sights on the Dawgs, man. She wants to infect the Dawgs with that bleeping bullshit. You better go get yourself checked, boy. I don't want you dripping that bleeping stuff in my aisle. Get away from me! Get away!"

Half the airmen in the aisle in the aisle were roaring with laughter. The other half were chasing those dits, man, six-ply paper streaming out of the big processors I came to call *Popcorn Machines.* When you had your headsets on, you didn't hear anything else. They blocked out one world and opened the magic door on another more mysterious world. The Popcorn Machine had a light inside that kept it very warm. Nights got cold in Misawa, and there was nothing more comfortable, when traffic was slow, than to lay your tired old head on that Popcorn Machine and soak up a little warmth and much-needed rest.

My generation, which earned its stripes in the Sixties, was undoubtedly the very last *Un-correct Generation.* There was absolutely no room in our lives for the politico-social correctness of later decades. We were a bunch of bad bleeping bleepers, let me tell you. You could drink all you wanted to as long you quit in time to change into your uniform and make the dash over to the Compound. The big ashtray beside your Popcorn Machine was always overflowing with cigarette butts, half of them still smoldering. When the ashtray got too full, you dumped it into the big trash can between the consoles which was already full of the carbon sheets needed for the six-ply copy paper. It's a wonder we didn't burn the Compound down. Then the fabulous AN/FLR-9 antenna would have been standing out there all alone on the shores of Lake Ogawara picking up signals without anyone left to copy them.

Some guys escaped the madness. They went to church. They sat in their rooms and wrote letters. They played music on very nice equipment which they had purchased at the base exchange. Their tape decks and record players never wound up in the local pawnshops. These guys seldom went to town. Some of them *never* went to town. After a while, the other Dawgs gave up on them and let them live their nice quiet little lives.

I always wondered about these nice guys. How in the world did they do it? I didn't really want to be like the wildest of the wild men we worked with but I never had any desire to be as isolated, as set apart as these guys either. I guess the situation existed because there wasn't much of a middle ground, no in-between place where you could safely serve out your tour. You either ran with the crowd or you walked alone.

What happened to the nice ones after Misawa? I have no idea. You never got to know them, they never became your friends, never part of your group, so you didn't follow-up on their lives at all. Did they all become chiropractors? Bank presidents? What? I don't know but I guess they stayed healthier than the vast majority of us. There's no guarantee on that either. Life doesn't have any of those. Guarantees, I mean. Maybe they did all this niceness and went on to get hit by the proverbial truck. Nice guys still get heart attacks; they still get cancer. Years later, in the new millennium, when practically everyone in the world had quit smoking, lung cancer was still doing its number on the general population. Christopher Reeves, who did the best movie portrayals ever of Superman, died after years of paralysis caused by a fall from a horse. His wife Dana, *a really nice person*, had taken care of him throughout those years. She loved him. It was all very sincere and so un-Hollywood, that we began to think she might actually be some kind of

modern-day saint. Shortly after Chris died, Dana passed away. Lung cancer. She had never smoked a day in her life.

I got tired of trying to figure out this kind of stuff long, long ago. If you think you have the answer, *please*, please don't attempt to explain your theory to me. I've closed that account. It ran out of funds somewhere back in the early Seventies and the bank eventually wrote it off as inactive.

After our single beer at the Static Club, Gene and I were just laying on our bunks recapping everything that had happened over the last few days. He had read his mother's letter aloud to me and parts of Linda's letter. Not all of it, I noticed. Hmmm. What was he leaving out? The best parts, probably. The door to our room was open and people kept walking by saying something that sounded like, "JEEP JEEP JEEP."

"What the hell is all this jeep shit about?" Gene asked.

"I don't know," I sighed. "There's a lot of things we don't understand about this place yet, I guess."

We talked about the flight over the Pacific on that great Northwest Orient airliner with the Japanese stewardesses. Gene had taken a different flight to California but from San Francisco onward we were together, flying seven miles high over the Aleutians—there were ditty bops down there, we knew, and thanked God we weren't among them—and finally descending into the City of Dreams. Tokyo. Paris is a nice city but nothing on earth compares to Tokyo. It should have been a little bit before midnight on Monday when we arrived but something was wrong. The sun was shining like it was late mid-afternoon. It was. Mid-afternoon of Tuesday. We had crossed the International Date Line and lost a whole day out of our lives. What happened to that lost time, we wondered. Would we ever get it back?

At a snack bar on Tachikawa Air Base we discovered the best damned tuna fish sandwich in the world. Made with fresh tuna and absolutely delicious. I must have eaten two dozen of them before we departed for Misawa later in the week.

Outside Gate One at Tachikawa, we checked out the Bar Cherry and heard for the first time the cry of the Japanese barmaid: "Buy me drink, G.I.?" Our drinks cost two bits. The hundred yen price seemed standard everywhere I went in Japan. The drinks for the josans were, well, a little more expensive. Gene and I compared notes and decided we had just bought our last josan drink. We were only drawing Airman Second Class pay, after all. Not rich Americans like the josans kept insinuating.

We pumped the girls for information: what to do, what to see in the few days we would be in the vicinity of Tokyo.

"What should we do?" Gene asked his josan. "We only have three days and we want to have a good time."

"You want good time?" Gene's girl asked.

"No, no, not like that!" Gene said laughing. "I mean, if we go to Tokyo, what should we see? What's the best part of the city?"

"You go Ginza."

"Ginza?" Gene asked.

"Yes. You go Ginza."

So, we went Ginza. The Ginza in Tokyo is all lights, all shopping, all party, all the time. The biggest box of Crayolas in the world. A combination Fifth Avenue and Las Vegas. We took a train from Tachikawa to the city and then commandeered a taxi. Making various signs with our hands, like we were taking a drink and then holding up one finger, we thought we had conveyed to our Japanese cab driver our desire to be taken to the best club in Tokyo.

He drove like a madman for twenty minutes and then pulled up in front of a very large, very expensive looking hotel.

No, not a hotel, we wanted to explain but had no idea how to start. It wasn't necessary. The driver was pointing up in the air. We looked up and saw a bunch of people standing by a railing on the roof of the hotel. They were holding drinks. They looked very, very happy.

We paid the driver with some of our recently acquired yen and took the elevator up to the roof of the hotel. Yes, indeed, there was a party going on. The orchestra was on break, so we heard a taped rendition of Kyu Sakamoto singing *Sukiyaki*. It was the number one hit in Japan even though it had been out already for a couple of years. It was the Japanese equivalent of the big song back in the states: *Unchained Melody.* Kyu Sakamoto and the Righteous Brothers were becoming *legends in their own time.*

Gene and I sat at a very large table with about fifteen Japanese men and women. We were the only Americans there that night. There were no small tables. Everyone was sitting together, enjoying the company of friends and strangers alike.

A young Japanese man who had some English spoke to us.

"You know what song mean? You understand?"

"No, we don't speak Japanese," I said. "It's a very pretty song but we don't understand the words."

"Yes. Very pretty. Whole world now like to hear Kyu Sakamoto. Number one song. Number one."

"What is he saying?" asked Gene.

"He says he once happy but now very sad. Very alone. He walks with head back, how you say, tilt back, so tears not fall. Sadness hides in all things, the stars, the moon. But he remembers the happy days."

"Very nice," I replied. "It means more to me now that I understand what he's singing about. Thank you for translating it for us."

"Don't touch the moustache," the young man said in perfect Oxford English.

"Excuse me?" I asked, thinking I had misunderstood him.

"Joke. American joke," our new friend said. "In Japanese, to say *you're welcome* is *do itashima'shite*. Americans make a joke. They say, *don't touch the moustache!* You must learn some Japanese tonight. To say *thank you* is *domo arigato.* To say you're welcome is *do itashima'shite.* Try it now."

"Domo arigato," said Gene. "Thank you for explaining the song."

"Domo arigato," I said. "We are new in your country and you have welcomed us like friends."

"Don't touch the moustache," he said laughing.

We never asked his name, this young man on the rooftop. He would have been about our age, eighteen or nineteen, no older. A Japanese Baby Boomer, just as Gene and I were American Baby Boomers. When the war is over, everyone makes babies. It is one way of walking. Head tilted back. So the tears won't fall.

"You guys must be some of the new Jeeps," said a figure in the doorway. "We found two more down the hallway. One of them had the biggest set of ears I've ever seen in my life."

Gene and I laughed. We knew he was talking about our old classmate Carl Duncan, the blushing man from Brockton, Massachusetts.

"What's this Jeep shit, anyway?" Gene asked. "And who are you, by the way? I'm Gene Thibodeaux and my ugly roomie here is Bryan Thomas."

"Jeeps are new guys. You'll be Jeeps until you find your way around and start to act like real people. I'm Solomon Deleon," he said. "Folks on the Hon call me *The Wizard.*"

He was wearing a starched set of fatigues but some kind of non-regulation cap that was black in color with patches on it. Lots of patches. Solomon turned the hat around on his head, beak facing to the back. Sure enough. Stitched into the back of the hat were these words: "The Wizard.

Tampa, Florida. 1964-66." Three lines that told a lot about Solomon Deleon: who he was, where he was from, and the dates of his tour in Misawa.

"So, are you Jeeps working tonight?" asked The Wizard.

"Naw, we just flew in," I said. "We start Monday."

"Well, you still got to make Roll Call in the morning. You don't want to miss your first Roll Call, *believe me!*"

Roll Call, The Wizard explained to us, was held at 0800 hours sharp on the morning following the last midnight shift in the shift rotation. Out of the Trick's slush fund, a band was hired along with a couple of the better-stacked strippers. One of the larger bars in AP Alley, usually a *cabaret*, was made headquarters for the Roll Call which primarily consisted of a bunch of young airman and a few NCOs getting drunk on their butts and generally having one hell of time for a few hours to celebrate the 24 hour break between midnights and days. Somewhere in there, preferably while everybody was still able to stand up, we would troop out into the Alley and have a group picture taken.

The Roll Call pictures were usually taken by one of the best photographers on the Flight. There was a darkroom on Security Hill where you could develop your own pictures if you were that talented. Kind of an informal photography club. Each Trick had it's official photographers, those who could be trusted to capture that unforgettable moment—the beer softball game, the ferry trip to Hokkaido, the Annual Flight Picnic, the Roll Call—in a shot that would somehow define the moment, preserve it in all its essence, so that years later you could look back and say, "Oh, man. I remember that Roll Call. Had to be June of '66 because *Benjo Man* was still there. *Benjo* left in July, remember?" "No, *bakata'ri!—dumbass!—*that one's not *Benjo*! Benjo is right here standing with one arm around Sergeant Cortez and the other around *Soupy* Brumley, that ditty chaser from Super Four. What a guy Benjo Man was! What a bleeping guy!"

They were good quality prints and most of the Roll Call attendees would cough up the necessary change to buy a copy for themselves. Thousands of the Roll Call pictures survive into the new millennium, pressed behind plastic sheets in the albums or boxed up in the attics of old men who can't raise one half the hell they used to raise in Misawa.

Old farts in their sixties and seventies—USAFSS vets who have found each other on the internet—attach the Roll Call pictures when they email each other.

"Here's one from December '65," will read the caption. "Last Roll Call before the big fire. We lost a lot of good bars in that fire, man. A lot of good bars!"

The pictures, although they are group shots, seem to emphasize the individual. The faces in the photographs keep changing, being, as they are, a chronological record of the men who performed the mission at that particular Air Force site. I'm not in the Roll Call picture from July 1965, for instance. I hadn't arrived yet. I'm not there in March of '68, either. Back in the states, brother!

Whatever else the pictures are, they are revealing. They tell a story. Like empires, men rise and fall, you know. We did a lot of rising in those days. A lot of falling. We lived by the swinging of the pendulum, by the ticking of the clock, time always seemed to be running out on us—g*ot to be to work in four hours, Jack! Time enough to hit one more bar—s*o we ran as fast as we could.

You can't outrun old Father Time, of course. Can't catch him. He's one fast bleeping bleeper.

Here's exactly how I made my first Roll Call in August of 1965 just outside the Main Gate of Misawa Air Base down in AP Alley, great beating heart of Misawa-shi, Aomori Prefecture, on the island of Honshu, Japan.

The Wizard and the rest of Dawg Flight came screaming back into the barracks after their midnight shift. Showers were taken, uniforms and towels scattered everywhere. No problem. Mamasan and the houseboys would pick them up.

"IKI' MA SHIYO' YOU DAWGIES! LET'S GO! MOVE IT OUT! THE ALLEY WAITS FOR NO MAN, SON. THAT OLD BLUE GOOSE WILL BE LEAVING IN TEN MINUTES AND EVERY DAWG WORTH HIS BEER BETTER BE ON IT. THE DAWGS ARE GONNA HOWL TODAY. WOLF! WOLF! WOLF!"

So we went and we saw and we ate, as we said in those days. Whatever that meant. The band was great, playing all the great songs we loved in the Sixties, the ones which made us so homesick even while we were performing random acts of stupidity so atrocious they would have gotten us arrested in a minute if we had tried to pull them off back in Beaumont, Texas, or whatever place you called home.

The highlight of the morning came when some guy from Super Three decided that the backside of our voluptuous stripper was just too delicious to pass up. He came to the conclusion that he had to—absolutely had to!—sink his teeth into those cheeks. Too drunk to stand up, totally obsessed with the gyrating derriere of the completely naked josan, the hapless ditty bop began to crawl across the floor on his hands and knees. Target: *i'chi ban oshi'ri*, baby. Number one booty. Watch this Dawg bite! It wasn't going to happen today. A

couple of the NCOs caught the ditty bop just before he was about to make a meal of the stripper and took him back to his table.

"Aw, let a Dawg eat, Sarge," said the ditty bop from Super Three. "This Dawg is HONGRY! He didn't get no breakfast, I tell you. He's one HONGRY DAWG. WOLF! WOLF! WOLF!"

What we called it on the *Hon*—short for Honshu, the largest Japanese island, the one on which Misawa was located—was *getting fired*. Getting drunk. If you were just a little bit drunk, you were said to be *partially fired.* The stage beyond that was *fully fired.* If you were one wasted bleeper, then you were *truly kilt.* No doubt about it. I got *truly kilt* the day of my first Roll Call. So did Gene Thibodeaux. So did most of the people there. It was to become a way of life.

Gene and I were still young enough that August to count lifetime hangovers. On the fingers of one hand, if you can believe that. I awoke Monday morning with one bleeding, suffering, pounding hangover. It was only my second and far, far worse than the first one which had occurred in high school. *Am I dying?* I wondered that morning. *What the hell is happening to me?* Gene wasn't in much better shape.

Then we remembered: we had to be at the Compound at 0700 hours! First day of work at the 6921st Security Wing.

We shouldn't have done that! I remember thinking. Too late. We had already done it and our bodies were telling us about it!

"Lord," I said, "just help me get into and out of the coldest shower they have around here. Just let me sober up enough to make it over to the Compound and I'll be your obedient servant for the rest of my life."

The promises we break.

Quite a few of them to God, of course. Some to ourselves. Most of those broken promises, however, afflict the people who really love us, who *used to love us*, who wanted to *continue to love us* but found that task such an utterly thankless and infuriating one that they eventually had to give it up and so, they *stopped loving us* altogether.

Gene and I managed to get dressed in our baggy fatigues with our green regulation caps which told the whole world we were Jeeps. *I'm going to get my fatigues tailored like the ones The Wizard wears,* I thought. *Get me one of those cool black Trick caps, too! Gonna be a ditty bop, you gotta dress like a ditty bop!*

We had French toast, eggs over easy, bacon and hash browns at the Chow Hall and then made our way with the rest of the guys over the well-worn trail to the Gig, the vast Compound which sat right beside our very own

forty-acre antenna. All we have to do now, as Mr. Orrel had told us back in Tech School, is find a hole which we can plug these bleeping headsets into, and we can start catching those dits and dahs.

The Compound, as we learned that first day on the job, is about a hell of a lot more than dits and dahs. Some of the smartest people I have every met worked in that Compound and I'm not talking about the little group of Keesler classmates who had just arrived on the Hill.

The inside of the Compound was like the set of a James Bond movie that was never made. They wouldn't know how to make it, wouldn't understand the plot of this story if you explained it to them, which, of course, you could not.

On the wall, at the entrance to the Main Floor of the Compound was a sign with letters a yard high that read:

WHAT YOU SEE HERE
WHAT YOU DO HERE
LEAVE HERE WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE!

We were different people inside the Compound than we were on the outside. Everything was serious on the inside. We joked and laughed but we all knew that the work we performed could signify life or death; bring us victory or defeat in Vietnam or elsewhere. Outside we partied. Inside we worked.

And the things we saw…and the things we did…in the Compound? Well, they stayed right there, brother! Except for the memories.

Set in Japan during the 1960s, Insomnia Mimatsu is a haunting story of young love, old regrets, simple patriotism and military espionage, which speaks as much to the secrets of the heart as to those of a nation.

Insomnia Mimatsu