



El Berdo

"The Bearded One"
A Vietnam Veteran in Belize

John K. Olson

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Dedication

To the People of Belize, the Jewel of the Caribbean. To my children, Molly Hannah and John Franklin. To Linda Anderson, their mother. To my brother, Cary Lancaster, and his wife, Julie, for their support. For my devoted sister, Karen Breckon and her husband David, my eternal gratitude. Karen's contributions, as always, are enormous and so necessary. Dedicated to my parents, Beebe and Ole. To Hannah and Rue Kimball. To Atella and Al, Kenny and Sharon Gardner. To Kurt Browning and Gary Moore. To Bourne High School: Mildred Anderson, Ruth Kiniry, Stewart E. Jones, Raymond Fitzgerald, Lou Bachand, Chuck Lindberg, Russ Burns, Fred Dunbury, Dick Hopwood, Bill Lavin. To John McDowell, Michael James and Michael Joseph Sweeney, Steve and Marty Roach, Jim Gable, Walter Rogers, Jim Hayes, Ronny Courtney, Walter Harding, Richard Eckstrom, Steve Poage, Jim Kelly, Billy O'Niel, Dan, Mike, Joe Butler, Mario Rigazio, Rob Schween, Chris Nerolich, Frank Thomas, Dan Jarvis, Herb van Dam, Russ Davis, Buddy Slowik (Cindy and Flash), Nancy Tassinari, Linda Hadley, Linda Jo and Mo Tibble, Tamara Petty, Becky Gray, Rosie and Pam Landis, Maren and Betty Meyers, Betty Lumbert Sullivan, Kathy Barnes, Mary Sweeney, Sarah Anne Douglass, Sandy Parker. For Brown University: Harold J. Mugford, Jr., Richard P. O'Toole, Kirk, Kathy, Holly and Brendan O'Donnell, John A. Bohn, David R. Cashman, Wayne I. Badan, and Patrick O'Hare, Robert Hargraves, Bobby Hall, Dave Jollin, John Adamiak, A. "Buzz" DiMartino, Ken Fitzsimmons, Dick Trull, C. Lodge McKee, II. For Amy Gordon Davenport, Bonnie and Peg. For Manny's. For Bill and Vera Sweeney. For Nancy and

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Suzanne, Billy, Kathy and Sandy Sweeney and Paul Riley. To Kris and Zach Veugen. For fishing: Tom Fuller, Mike Mahoney, Joe Bragdon, Gary Bostwick. For Marc Finneran and Robby Carroll. For Ted "Burn It" Wolf and Tom Adams' Cataumet Sawmill gang, Vinny, Danny, and Josh and so many more. Thanks all, for listening.

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American Cherokee

"All Along the Watchtower" – Jimi Hendrix

A statically crackling radio transmission interrupted their conversation. Danny stepped across the room and picked up the microphone from Frank's desk.

"Belize Muni – Cherokee four-nine-two-zero-kilo is two miles north, say landing."

"Roger, two-zero-kilo. Enter left downwind for runway three-zero. Winds are two-seven-zero at five, gusting to fifteen," Danny answered. "Be advised we have numerous people on the approach end. Exercise caution." Danny walked out the door stretching the microphone's long springy cord. He scanned the sky to the west. Otis pointed to the plane entering a right banking turn toward the aircraft traffic pattern's alignment with the runway, a downwind leg.

"I have a tally on you now." He could see the plane, about three miles from the office, as it turned parallel to the runway heading 180 degrees from the direction of its intended landing. After every glance up at the plane Danny grimaced at the seawall crowd.

"Roger, Muni, I have a visual on the runway now."

"Okay, two-zero-kilo, report turning base."

"Otis, run out there! Get those people off the seawall. I don't know this pilot or I'd command him to execute a low approach. I don't want to confuse him."

Otis got up and loped toward the crowd. They were obliviously milling around on the seawall or stretched out on towels. He wildly waved his arms while screaming for them to disperse and whistled loudly attempting to attract their attention. Most were blithely unaware of both him and the airplane making its shallow turn onto the base leg of its

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approach, a position ninety-degrees to the final approach and about three quarters of a mile from touchdown. As he ran over the rough ground next to the runway clumps of wild grasses and dagger-edged prickly weeds snagged Otis's corduroy Levis. When some of the bathers finally noticed him running toward them they only glared at him in mocking disbelief, amused by his ridiculous arm-waving antics and whistling.

“Get the fuck off the fucking runway!” he screamed, “Get out of the god damned way! Oh! My fucking heart!” He predicted, even saw, how it would play out. “Oh, you stupid fucks,” he whispered to himself while it happened.

The blue and white painted four-seat low winged Piper completed the turn for a short final approach course. As it rolled out pointed at the runway the plane seemed to wobble for a moment then instantly sank toward the water. The pilot had been mesmerized by the peril he finally recognized. He saw the people and had stopped flying for the moment it took him to assess the crowd's threat to his safety. The airplane sank low while he solely concentrated on calculating a way out. When he finally pushed in the throttle and his engine roared, the power arrived much too late. Formerly transfixed by the plane driving toward them, but now awakening in fear, the crowd panicked; not everyone knew why they were running around randomly. A few of the bathers recognized the threat and tried to get out of the airplane's way.

The Cherokee's pilot had frozen on the controls for too long an instant. He fell behind the unforgiving and divine power curve, a graphed arc prescribed by the physics of flight when the variables of a sink rate and the delay in time required for an engine to respond have been ignored. His late application of power insured that his now unavoidable impact

with the ground would be harder. The Cherokee accelerated toward an inexorable impact with the seawall.

Within the confused clutch of sun worshipers leaping over one another and colliding in their frantic choices of paths toward an escape, a lithe twelve-year old girl, tall for her age, ran toward her bicycle which was parked upright on its kickstand near the seawall twenty steps away. The newly repainted green previously used girl's Schwinn was the finest gift she had ever received. How would she explain to her father that an airplane hit it while she played jump rope with her friends nearby?

At the edge of the touchdown zone, recognizing that a catastrophe was imminent, Otis pulled up short. The event was immutably destined to transpire. Every unrelated variable, universe-wide, suddenly and fatally aligned in a clinical demonstration of inevitability. Fate is naked and revealed when the moment for a timely intervention expires between a tragedy's unfolding and its infinite number of links in the chain of its precursors. There, in the last millisecond before a disaster, the concerned observer meekly demands that the laws of physics should find compassion. It is the superstitious among those so tormented who invent gods.

With engine RPM still increasing, approaching max power, the stall warning horn loudly predicting disaster, all yoke controls and rudder mushing, the Cherokee's pilot, pulling back on the yoke as hard as he might, was unable to preclude the landing gear from clipping the top of the water. The violent surge of aerodynamic thrust from the now fully thrust-loaded propeller shot the airplane toward the seawall. The gear's glancing impact with the waves started to tumble the plane through a shallow arc. Had the plane bounced fifteen feet higher above the runway it would have resulted in an unsurvivable upside down crash with the bird pointing

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back toward the bay. The seawall stopped the nose from moving beyond a slightly nose-down attitude when it met the prop and then ripped off the nose wheel.

Almost simultaneously with the airplane's propeller's first touch of seawall concrete, the bicycle girl's torso, her head gyrating and arms flailing, flew skyward enveloped by a wispy curtain of spirally exploding dark red spray. Just after the propeller simultaneously struck the girl and runway asphalt, the left wing slammed her bike to the ground and it bounced, through the bloody cloud, twelve feet into the air. Next, the seawall neatly wiped the tricycle main landing gear out from beneath the plane's fuselage. The plane's three wildly flying shiny stainless steel hydraulic piston landing struts and now detached tires tore the air then unpredictably bounced and/or collided with one another chaotically; first inside then out of the touchdown zone. Airplane parts were landing in the water or the grass or rolling down the runway miraculously missing the clutch of howling, scrambling bathers, narrowly avoiding further human carnage.

At the seawall, the Cherokee's left wing had passed a foot above the girl's uprightly balanced lower body, and left it to stand in a hideously shocking momentary broken-statue-like pose. Her lower body, severed at her hips above shaking legs, almost imperceptively bent forward at the knees like an unstrung puppet, then uncoordinatedly collapsed, shins barking against the concrete's sharp edge, and fell in an ungainly crumpled bundle toward the water and tumbled in.

A deafening metallic screech enveloped the entire touchdown zone as aluminum airplane skin complained of being shredded by the asphalt runway's unyieldingly abrasive surface. Otis, from a spot about fifty-five feet from the impact, watched the skidding fuselage's deceleration and the startled faces of the airplane's occupants slowly slide by.

Their animated faces alternated between expressions of incredulous fear and then amazement at their survival. The Cherokee's occupants, seatbelt chest straps preventing their wildly bouncing skulls from smashing into the dashboard or the seatbacks in front of them, jerked past. They were safely strapped in but condemned to ride out the dead bird's terminally slow final slide. Behind the engine's cowling, along the fuselage under the cockpit's side windows and over the left wing ran a new swath of blood flowing in a tail-ward arc running rearward and downhill off the skin from the combined forces of momentum and gravity. The wreck spewed a fine mist of blood that instantly congealed forming tiny drop-sized scabs upon impacting the roughly irregular surface of the friction superheated and sun-baked asphalt in the plane's wake. When the mangled metal bird careened to the right through all the points of the compass and lurched into a jerky stop, Otis ran toward the crippled airplane thinking its new splattered decoration was like it had magically contracted a case of instant measles. The Cherokee's traumatized passengers sat in shock, unaware and inert, immobilized like strapped down inanimate cargo.

"Turn off the battery, shut down the gas, un-strap, get out," Otis shouted. He repeated his commands to the unresponsive passengers again and again. They only moved to cover their eyes with their hands or to pat themselves down inspecting themselves for damage or to turn their heads about slightly to observe one-another's condition. Otis yanked open the cabin door and individually pulled all three occupants clear of the plane's cockpit and passenger compartment. He then dived into the cockpit to retrieve the keys and to turn the battery and fuel switches off.

Danny arrived with a chemical fire extinguisher, which, as a successful and timely precaution, he emptied over the

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engine bay and wing tanks where fuel leaked from crash-damaged tanks and lines and rapidly flowed toward dangerously red-hot engine exhaust manifolds that had already melted the asphalt upon which they came to rest. Otis ushered the pilot and the two passengers far enough away from potential harm into the grass at the seaward side of the runway, putting the wreck between them and the town.

The bewildered crowd coalesced into two separate throngs. One group moved threateningly close to Otis and the traumatized former Cherokee occupants and the other gathered at the water's edge. Shrieking prayers in Spanish, the bifurcated girl's mother was standing in the water up to her knees tightly embracing her daughter's top half, crying in unrestrained grief oblivious to the intestines and the draining blood slick that gently floated and bounced in the rippling waves around her. The dead child's unseeing face was to the sky and her limp outstretched arms, palms up in a skyward supplication, spanned the horizon. Nearby, the father held onto one ankle of his child's two floating legs with his right hand. Each leg was draped in a shroud of now soaking wet and shiny blue pedal pushers. The girl's naked jagged oval cylinder of torn flesh and organs above her belt, once concealed under her plump and shirt-shrouded belly, now bare and saltwater-dappled, reflected vibrantly winking sunlight. With his vacant left hand the whimpering father groped for one of the seawall's half-dozen helpfully waving arms that offered to pull him and his daughter's bottom half out of the reddening water.

More cries and shouts, strangely harmonizing with the grieving parents' voices, broke out from all directions. Knots of curious people from town, attracted by all the bewildering crashing noises and the frantic calls families were making to

locate one another, flocked onto the airport running toward the accident.

Danny ran toward the office and the phone. Otis struggled to keep the curious and the angry away from the airplane and its prostrate passengers hoping *El Jeffe* could quickly return to exercise his influence over the seething crowd now ramping itself up toward an uncontrollably palpable rage. During a desperately long ten minutes Otis virtually sacrificed his body as he interposed himself between the locals and the dazed crash survivors. When Danny finally returned he was able to calm some of the tempers.

It seemed like another hour elapsed before the ambulance arrived. Thankfully, Otis mused, no one alive needed it.

The cops made their first appearance way too late. The disaster slowed the passage of time. The urgency of the need magnifies time by a factor based on unmet anticipation. What was in reality only fifteen minutes felt like thirty or forty hours. The cops showed up long after the ambulance arrived. The nation's most highly trained and regarded public service arm had been delayed while searching for a sign that read – “Keep Out” – and, upon their arrival, first consumed precious minutes of crowd control dutifully driving a metal post into the ground with none-too-precise flails with an awkwardly oversized seemingly unwieldy sledgehammer. They would later publicly claim their sign had been in the ground before the accident. The fumbling cops naturally put the signpost in the wrong location, right at the edge of the taxiway. Toward the end of the melee Danny made the cops pull it up and move it far enough away to allow for the safe passage of any conceivable length of wing overhanging the taxiway.

“You no listen me an’ see wah gone here?” Danny shrieked at the detectives and patrolmen. “You gets d blame,

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man! Shame I say! Dis here all you! We already gone bury poor girl. You lettin' d' peoples kill each other nawh?"

The growing crowd swarmed over the airport. The detectives who arrived in the Police Department's first jeep on scene fanned out to interview witnesses. But upon the arrival of reinforcements in a second jeep the detectives had to restrain the cops late to the melee. Instinctively, the recently arrived cops attempted to disperse the witnesses and onlookers with flailing Billy clubs unmindful of the need to gather testimony. The ones who had really seen anything were the ones close to the plane and, naturally, the ones set upon by the cops. Most of the real witnesses were then too angry or shaken to speak. Many of those at the back of the crowd, the late arrivals, were all too vociferously outspoken and volunteered wild claims about a massacre or described patently impossible events like wings falling from airplanes colliding overhead. Pushing and shoving matches proliferated among cops and the mourners. The crowd's anger and futile wailing only intensified after the cops' arrival. The continual shrieking rising above the touchdown zone was as much a blundering police riot and a demonstration of public buffoonery as it was a confusion caused by a morbidly inspired group of dimwitted cluster-fuckers.

Newspaper reporters, brandishing pencils and spiral notebooks, followed the cops from the downtown station to the tragic event seeking an explanation from anyone with an opinion. Rumormongers, only recently arrived, volunteered lurid testimony that the scribes dutifully noted then and later quoted in print. Some of the actual bathers claimed airplanes had besieged them all day by diving at their innocent gathering. Reporters followed witnesses into the tall grass searching for the many other imagined victims.

The police, at Danny's earnest insistence, finally set up an insulating cordon around the airplane and its occupants. Threatening Belizeans had begun to scream taunts and epithets at the dazed pilot and passengers. Some now accused all the "Yanquis" of murder. A broken into beehive is more orderly than those Belizeans that day. They bordered on becoming a bloodthirsty mob.

"Lynching is too good for the murderous 'Norte-Americanos,'" some growled.

"It was an accident. Can't you see? Get away! You people are only in the way," Danny implored. He bravely stared down hostile miscreants while walking a circle in the space between the crowd and the cops.

"Let those who know what to do to do it. Give the cops and paramedics room to work. Please get back! Get back! Please! *El Berdo*, move those people. They're standing in 100LL."

Otis moved closer to the crash site and gently encouraged the nitwits standing in the gas to step out of the pool of leaking aviation fuel.

"You don't want to even stand near that stuff. It could still catch fire!"

Those wading in fuel nervously complied. Their Danny had just publicly confirmed on Otis a new name.

Most in the previously roiled angry crowd willingly accepted *El Jeffe's* intrusion and respectfully obeyed. The cops, basking in Danny's implied praise of their ability to serve, instantly parroted Danny's orders.

"Give us room to work! Make room for the paramedics!" Though they quoted Danny's exhortations in their own requests for civility the cops continued to roughly maul people as they pushed the slow to respond away from the

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crash site and tried to clear the area adjacent to the wide-open back doors of the ambulance.

The level of the crowd noise suddenly diminished. A gap formed between a few people near the seawall then gradually widened to create a path through the throng all the way to the rear of the ambulance. The girl's two halves occupied separate stretchers. Her pieces moved through the crowd and soon arrived at the back of the old ambulance truck. Her four bearers stood patiently waiting for the boss paramedic to develop a loading plan. During the pause a mixture of pink seawater and blood collected on the ground under the stretchers at the ambulance's rear while the crew set themselves to properly stow their inanimate load. One white jacketed stocky man backed into the crypt-like truck in a crouch ready to accept the leading handles of the stretchers. Four other pallbearers each held a stretcher handle and fed each one with care and solemnity through the ambulance's narrow doorway.

Surrounded in the middle of a wide circle of mourners observing a temporary respectful silence, the parents emitted pitifully muted cries, each holding a muffling hand over an agonized grimace. They stood in a sobbing embrace unsuccessfully trying not to watch their child's two-part loading.

The attendants and two of the larger cops struggled to stack the dead girl's parts, top above bottom, setting the four handles gently onto the interior's stainless steel racks attached to the passenger side back wall of what had been a recycled rusty old British military panel truck.

From the far side of the Cherokee the crowd could now hear the pilot's whimpering. As he watched the loading operation for his victim he loudly swooned and fell into what appeared to be a state of shock. His two passengers offered

their comfort and tried to keep him conscious with gentle slaps and some heartfelt vocal urging. Someone from the bathing crowd gave him ice water from a thermos jug and one of his friends draped him in clothing retrieved from a suitcase and put a rolled up sweater between his head and the sun-broiled asphalt.

Thankfully, as the ambulance prepared to leave, the locally residing Americans the Cherokee group intended to visit in Belize motored onto the airport. They arrived unaware of the tragedy that had so recently transpired. They drove up in a spotlessly polished waxed and heavily chromed modern leather upholstered Buick station wagon. Danny sent a kid he knew to the car to ask they needed. When the kid reported back to Danny he urgently waved them over and went to the driver, a man he recognized. He quietly explained the relevant circumstances and motioned to Otis to help load the crash victims into the car and to get them all quickly away. After leaving a phone number with the cops, the driver and Otis gathered up the crashed plane's suitcases and other valuables before the man spirited the Cherokee's traumatized Americans off the field in the resplendent conveyance. They had all feared an impulsively rash member of the still somewhat agitated group of onlookers might seek to make good on the lingering threats still being muttered to exact a violent retribution.

In contrast, the ancient British military surplus ambulance, in a typical indictment of the country's apparent fifty-year time lag, slowly drove away shrouded in a cloud of bluish exhaust with the dead girl accompanied inside it by her uncomfortably hysterical parents. Otis could not help imagining the child's next and last ride in a similarly pathetic Belizean excuse for a hearse.

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Danny, with Otis trailing, abandoned the runway to the buzzing throng and cops and retreated to the office where he called the International Airport Tower to report the accident and to publish that the Municipal was closed until the Cherokee could be removed from the runway in the morning. Tikal's maintenance crew would be busy.

"Thanks for your help today, *El Berdo*, you handled things well," said Danny.

"You were great. In all fairness, unlike you, probably, I've had ample prior training. It wasn't the first time I saw huge fucking amounts of blood up close like that. It's still tough to see. I had to swallow hard for a few times to avoid puking."

"I lost my lunch here in the weeds right outside the building when I came back here for the extinguisher. I thought I was gonna' pass out." Danny made his admission with an expression of surprise on his face like he was just then remembering.

"You're doomed to recount the details of what happened here today forever, Danny. You might remember more things about the experience than you think you saw. Some things get bigger, or maybe just closer to you than they really were, like, magnified. That sometimes happens to me when I remember and have my eyes closed, like when I'm in bed before I fall asleep. Today will keep coming back in little echoes at the oddest times." He spoke in a voice that trailed off as he looked across the airport and rocked back and forth from his toes to his heels.

"I thought of my kids," *El Jeffe* revealed. "I was afraid for them. And I was afraid for me thinking of when I have to go home and explain this. The whole country will be talking about this soon and they'll mostly get it all wrong. My kids

will hear all kinds of stupid shit and believe most of it if I don't get to them first."

"That's good. Your first reaction was not just to puke your guts out. Amazing what you think of at one of these times, isn't it?" Otis punched the younger man's shoulder lightly.

"You're a good man. Man? Shit! You're still a kid yourself! You tried to protect everyone out there. You did good. Can you imagine the disaster it could have been if Frank were the only one here?"

"He would have gotten into his car at impact and driven away. The Americans in the Cherokee would have all been torn to pieces by now."

"I've always tried to give people a break when they don't quite measure up for me at first because so many of them have surprised me after I've completely written them off. When someone I've trashed turns out to be a stellar human being the embarrassment I experience is worse than the satisfaction I initially felt at kicking him aside. Frank, sadly, is in a special category all by himself. I traveled here. I believed his lies. He sucks, big time. When I see him I think of the Vietnamese barber who I allowed to shave my neck with a straight razor. I imagined him carrying rockets at night for the VC. I imagine Frank carries around some dark secrets here."

After enduring a couple more hours of frustration attempting to put the airport to bed, Otis and Danny were finally comfortable enough to consider leaving the strip. It took until the sun completely descended below the horizon line of the Cockscomb Mountains and the encroaching darkness wrapped up all the airplanes and the hangers, only after the wind died and the mosquitoes came out, did all the

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original bathers and their hanging-on rubber-neckers finally concede the field.

“How much do you get paid for a fucking day like today?” asked Otis trying to minimize his continued hazy agitation by trying to focus on something mundane like money while Danny padlocked Tikal’s front door.

“Had you wanted to, you could have flown my charters,” he suggested. “You were being generous to me. I won’t forget. But really, you didn’t need me to fly today, did you? You could have earned my share,” said the deprecating Otis expressing a lack of clarity about paycheck intricacies.

He had to remain content to wait for Friday’s first 7% paycheck but anxious his worst fears that his pay would be less than promised would be borne out. Then what?

“What would I have done today without you? Now, don’t you ever worry about me, Sundays aren’t nearly always this bad. Sometimes I get big fares from unscheduled charters.” answered Danny authoritatively. “I bein’ here for all the ‘special’ duties. I always gets paid. For as quick as you be, *hijo*,” he said while pointing to Otis’s pocket stuffed with tips, “I be even quicker from bein’ at it much longer. But I promise. I’ll take care of you. Don’t worry.”

He shook his curly black hair at Otis. A twisted smile lurked under his wispy mustache. He turned away to duck any further questions. It had been a horrific day and talking about it anymore was only going to be unsettling. They both needed to begin putting it behind them. But he couldn’t stop.

“What the fuck was it all about?” Danny asked. “Why did that little girl have to die? What good did that do?”

“Not any fucking good at all,” Otis admitted. “Everything that happens, anything that happens doesn’t need a reason. It just happens,” Otis declared.

“What kind of God...?”

“Fuck God,” Otis vehemently interjected. “This right here, this life we have, is heaven. Right here. Right now it’s all you get, forever. You only get to live here. The other heaven was invented to comfort old ladies.”

“You’re an apostate.”

“No shit. Let me tell you. One time we were in the Keys in my van, me the Gremlin, Peter Hennessey, and Elaine Ferreira headed toward Key West. We were doing bike rides and camping out. We were headed south, passing Lower Maticumbe Key, when Peter said ‘Turn around!’ That boat there is Allen and Eve’s Morgan! I said ‘sure,’ to myself, ‘what are the fucking chances? We’re going to be late for sunset at Mallory Dock and for cocktails at Sloppy Joe’s.’ but I turned around anyway and drove into the parking lot of the bar the boat was anchored by. Sure as shit, it was the boat but the owners were in Miami trying to collect the fees they had just earned for hiring themselves and the boat out to a film crew that had just completed a porno flick, using their boat as a prop. In the movie the boat was owned by a crew of sexually insatiable bare-breasted pirates, sea borne Amazon warriors, bent on sexually plundering the male crews aboard South Sea shipping. You get the drift. Anyway, the actual crew, my friend Peter really knew them, was in the bar carrying on and we joined in. They invited us to go aboard ship.

“Somehow they had lost their dingy. The only access was by shuttling across this inlet on a surfboard, one of us at a time riding behind a paddling crewmember. When we all got aboard we were invited to join in the ships major entertainment, which was sucking on a hose connected to a steel cylinder of dental office quality anhydrous nitrous oxide, ‘laughing gas.’ And boy, we laughed. It was a hilarious thirty-six hours before we could tear ourselves away.

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“The thing was, I would start sucking down the gas, the person next in line operated the valve, opening it when you inhaled, and the effect began. First, your hearing was affected. The noise from cars driving by on the Overseas Highway caught your attention because they interrupted each other’s sounds and echoed, like a Doppler effect. It went ...yeeeeooooooooow, yeeooow, yeeeuuuw, yeeeeeeo ow, ow, ow ow, ow. It was totally captivating, like great music. Then, as you continued to deeply inhale, you started examining yourself, your motives, all of them were suspect, you became paranoid-like, until you began trying to describe to yourself what your ultimate truth might be, what the secret of life might be. Every question you ever had came up in a spiral of questions on questions and onto further questions. You asked yourself everything you could ask and expected an answer. Is love real? Is there a god?

At the cataclysmic moment, just when your mind almost divined the fucking unknowable answer of all answers, you started to slobber and waver until you collapsed onto the deck and went through a few mild convulsions. You never got to it. You spontaneously recovered after you breathed just air again, got up, climbed to the main deck, ran to the stern, dove in, swam back to the boat, grabbed a beer and got back downstairs at the back of the line. Try as hard has you could, time after time at the hose and you never got to the fucking absolute and final secret answer. It eluded your reach. It always does and always will. Like there ain’t no escalator to awareness. There ain’t no stairway to heaven. In my continued rational quest I’ve decided that heaven is right here. It’s the now.

What’s interesting to me is hell. It is usually only a function of stupidity and greed. I imagine the worst manifestation of hell as breathing my last breath and realizing

I have more regrets than accomplishments; that I've been stupid, that I've never thrown my complete self into something beautiful.

That scene on the runway was like inhaling a whole tank of oxide. We were on the laughing gas hose here, today, *hijo*. We'll never know the answer. We're here to ask the cosmic questions. We need an occasional prodding. We refine the mystery of reality that way. We'll do better on the questionnaire next time. The only reward in life is finding someone to help you frame the next good, informed question; some other frustrated avenger, a disappointed lost soul—like you are for me, pal. Roger that?"

Peralta and Otis walked away from the airport past another tiny empty airline office; that of Tikal's closest competitor, *Caribe Air* at the airport's border. They were officially off the airport and formally off duty. A dusty breeze lifted road-grit up at them in hot gusts in the night wind cutting across the rutted bare roadway.

"Looks like the wind is backing down toward the south. Things will be fine in the morning. Tell me, Otis. I'm wondering. What the hell are you doing here? What the fuck can you gain here, *hijo*? Did you get some wild offer from the boss?"

"I just saw Tikal's ad in the Miami Herald," Otis said matter-of-factly. "I decided to get back into the cockpit. I wanted to pick up enough current hours for an airline transport pilot rating, I want an ATP."

"You're an American. You could have found something in the States. You could be somewhere with washing machines and stereo TV and white pussy but you land here, in our poor shit-hole fucking Belize. Why?"

"If I tell you, you'll really think I'm fucked up beyond all recognition."

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“Bullshit. Tell me.”

“Well, I finally believed what a mechanic in Iceland told me one morning. He said I was the luckiest man in the world.”

“Iceland? What the fuck does Iceland have to do with your coming down here?”

“Everything I was connected with in Florida was fucked. The financing for our ‘bi-i-i-ig’ apartment building project was evaporating and I was fucking absolutely broke. The German investor friend I was working with and whose airplane I was flying said he was closing up shop until the economy stopped hemorrhaging. In a panic I checked the classifieds. I felt my recent luck was pushing me back to flying. I had a feeling of bulletproof confidence again. It was what I thought I had been committed to all my life, *El Jefe*, flying. When I eventually saw the invitation to call Tikal, it spoke right at me. I knew, without any doubt, I would be extended an offer to join the airline.” Otis spread his arms wide turning his palms up and let his arms collapse in a clapping thud on his thighs.

“I grew up venerating my father, Danny. He was a career Air Force pilot, whom I followed into the Air Force after college. Unbelievably, I got assigned to the same combat squadron two years after his assignment to it. I eventually flew the same fucking birds in the same war he flew. Vietnam was a real mind-blowing trip. My father died of cancer after telling me he could depart happily, knowing an Otis was on the stick, flying for the Air Force.

I always get a good feeling in the air, like my true home is a cockpit. It’s somehow a natural part of me. My awareness is increased. Our truest underlying drive is always to obtain some sort of new sentience. With the tragedy that just occurred on the runway I’m getting the feeling this place like

a laboratory and I am both an experiment and a scientist, if you will. I believe I somehow belong here. My job is more than just my living.”

“Yo! How often does a son follow his father’s career like that?” asked Danny. He managed to ignore the larger point.

“Seems pretty rare, right? I imagine it almost never happens. Just like the rest of the shit I’m trying to tell you. It just feels like ever since what went on in the air over the North Atlantic I’ve been guided into everything that has happened. Like, there’s almost an audible identifying signal in my head, a voice saying ‘go do something, boy, you’ve been loafing for long enough.’ Since making the decision to call here about the job it feels like I’ve been stumbling into scene after scene I’m supposed to play. I’m thriving and alive. I’m beginning to expect both the best AND the worst. We got a real dose of both here today, didn’t we?”

An eighth of a mile away, a Subaru station wagon Peralta recognized and waved at turned off the paved road that, beyond a nearby curve, passed the country’s signature horse track. The car angled toward them and immediately began bouncing and meandering back and forth attempting to avoid the deeper tire swallowing chuckholes in the roadway.

“My wife and kids, Otis, get in. We’ll take you home,” said Danny when the car pulled up and stopped. They both got inside the car, Danny up front and Otis in back with two young boys. It was family time and Otis was included in the playful introductions and the gentle teasing and jostling while Delores drove the two miles into town to Otis’s two-story apartment building.

“I’ll meet you at ‘J-J’s’ (the “Jungle”) some night, soon, after dinner, and you can tell me about how you’re so very lucky. *Verdad?*”

“*Si Jeffe!*” Otis agreed.

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After a few quick good-byes to Delores, little Jorge and Pedro, they drove home to what Otis presumed was a rare evening meal together.

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Incoming

“Gimme Shelter” – The Rolling Stones

Another vehicle’s headlights suddenly illuminated the roadway where it met the far side of the ravine seventy-five yards to the left of the plane’s tail. Both of the formerly deft aircraft baggage handlers vaulted into the back of the truck and retrieved their automatic weapons. Chalo drove. Their clearing’s invasion instantly transformed the erstwhile lumping crew into lethal commandos. They scrambled to firing positions with their guns resting on top of the cab and pounded on its roof urging Chalo to move. The truck drove away from the plane but began a wide looping turn toward the right attempting to commandeer the exit from the jungle clearing on the same road the Islander needed for a runway. The strange attack prompted a desperate race for real estate between the heavily loaded Islander and the empty, except for driver and gunners, Cheyenne. Both vehicles jockeyed for exclusivity along the recently hacked-out one airplane wide trail.

Otis got the best first jump. He added full power while dropping the wing flap selector switch to the full down position and flipped the landing lights back on. It helped to see. The little bird shot forward and Otis yanked the yoke all the way to his chest. Though the Islander was leading the truck by only a few yards, Otis could still hear the sound of gunfire over his noisy engines. The commandos were shooting from prone positions in the Cheyenne pick-up’s open bed. The truck tucked in, like a “number two” bird in a formation take-off, behind his left wing. Appearing on the windscreen before him were the reflections from the strange truck’s headlights now lumbering out of the ravine at their

rear. Sharply brilliant circular reflections from the truck's high-beam headlights were vividly dancing projections reflected on the interior surface of the cockpit's plexi-glass windshield. Otis's quick glance in the cockpit's rearview mirror revealed brighter lights, muzzle flashes coming from locations above the pursuing vehicles reflected headlights. He ducked at hearing the descending whoosh of projectiles sizzling past beside the cockpit.

"Come on baby," he said encouraging the little Islander into the air. "I know you don't like all this fucking weight and the tail wind launch, but, dear heart, you gotta leap up, NOW!"

When the speed finally pitched the nose up Otis heard three distinctive metal-to-metal rips and a thrice repeated concomitant dull thudding impact noise, the same "thwhaack!" he had occasionally heard in combat; bullets slammed into the over-stuffed duffle bags behind him. Three new and distinctly different but harmonic whistling tones emanated from rushing jets of outside air entering through the new bullet holes drilled into the rear of the passenger compartment. The tires were tossing their organic debris again, but as the wings became increasingly effective at lifting the Islander the tires dug progressively less deeply into the dead vegetation and, gradually, the reduced amount of leaf litter reaching the fuselage created a diminishing, softer, less alarming metallic clatter he had tended to mistake for more hits.

The little plane suddenly vaulted ahead of the parallel running truck, as if it had been somehow kicked in the ass. The winged machine leaped into the air abandoning the roadway to the two sets of pick-up truck bound antagonists. The trucks' onboard guns continued to blaze away at one

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another, behind and below the Islander's precarious skyward fluttering.

The solid hedge of trees at the runway's end now loomed in Otis's windscreen. The rapidly approaching towering tangle of leaf-trimmed skinny branches fronted shrouded stout limbs that joined at the trees' interiors to a dense mass of formidable trunks. At breaking ground, the two wing-mounted landing lights illuminated two widely spaced cones in the air that brilliantly exposed the intricately interlocking mass of leaves and thatched branches in the mahogany trees. The closer the bird approached the trees and the higher it climbed, the closer together the two, now brighter, once diverging light-cones became and the more the windscreen was occupied by less solid round cordage and more by spindly offshoots and fragile newly opening leaves.

The stall warning horn had begun to shriek at lift-off and continued while the landing lights eventually overlapped off the plane's nose creating a sharp vertical double-lit ellipse shining brilliantly on flimsy twigs and gossamer shoots. The Islander, its yoke rattling like a snake in Otis's hands, warned him of an impending catastrophic stall. His mechanical coping instincts directed that he repeatedly pound forward the throttle levers against their unbending stops. With the nose pointed its steepest toward heaven, as Otis desperately willed the machine to climb, the heavy bird popped, like a cork out of a champagne bottle, above the trees with only the left tire barely clipping the highest leaf-tip. Once over the top, he abruptly reduced the backpressure on the wildly vibrating yoke and nosed the straining bird over to a slightly nose low flight attitude. She responded to the mostly drag-less full power flight condition by charging ahead, quickly picking up airspeed. She flew again; without trembling.

“Hey ‘And-hell,’ what do you think of our little rocket now? And who the hell are your friends? And why in the fuck are they shooting at us?” asked Otis as he leveled off, retracted the flaps and toggled off the landing lights. All in one seamless motion he reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette, put it in his mouth and lit it. He celebrated the successful escape.

“I think I heard a few new decorative holes being drilled into our passenger compartment. You hear that whistling back there?” he asked.

“That was either our competition or the *Federales*,” said Angel coming out of the defensive crouch he had assumed on the departure roll back on the runway. He had ducked down so far below the seatback at the first sound of gunfire he ended up sliding under his loose seatbelt until he landed on the floor.

“My boss might be having a little dispute with the Guatemalan cops,” he said apologetically, climbing back up into his seat. “Or he might not have paid them in time.”

“Oh, great, a ‘little dispute’! Thank god it isn’t a big one requiring us to dodge artillery fire or rocket propelled grenades, you know, something potentially dangerous. Guatemala you say? There’s another fucking sovereign nation I need to avoid. You know, I haven’t been a real fan of ground-fire since my initiation to combat back in Vietnam.” Despite his stammering Otis was able to inject some sarcasm into his complaints.

“I’ve been hit a few times before and I’m afraid of running out of my allotment of ‘close call survival coupons.’ You like getting shot at, ‘And-hell?’ Did you expect any of this and just forget to warn me? Do you know how fucking lucky we were? Happily, your bags of dope absorbed the punishment but were there another bag of that shit in the back

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making us a little heavier, unable to top those mahoganies, or say, maybe a lucky shot hit the back of my head we both would have become a buzzard's barbeque restaurant back in those tree-tops!"

"I'm a little surprised," Angel said. The whites of his eyes almost lit up the airplanes entire blacked out cockpit. "I hope my *compadres* in the truck made it. Chalo is my second cousin."

"Well, that's great! Let's hope for their safety. Me? A little surprised you say? Not on your life! I'm fucking goddamn flabbergasted! That sucked BIGTIME! Hell, now we only have to pray we have enough fuel to make it home. Was that praying you were doing there on the floor a minute ago?" When Otis glanced at Angel to see if his last crack had an effect his passenger's face was still frozen in terror. Otis, suddenly feeling sympathetic toward his passenger, handed him the cigarette pack and his precious Ronson lighter.

"Here. You need a cigarette," Otis said. "I'll have to risk being seen by some villagers and cut the dogleg by shooting straight southeast toward the water. Fuel's low." He aimed the bird at the southern corner of the black bay ahead. Angel nodded thanks and deeply inhaled. "We'll be hanging onto nothing but fumes all the way home!" Otis spoke the last words softly. Angel was visibly shaken. The last thing he need was for his passenger to go nuts or puke or go for his gun again.

Otis set about reducing fuel consumption by retarding the mixture controls. He severely leaned the engines' mixtures, robbing them of the inherent cooling effect of the proper amount of gas. He set about saving the excess cooling fuel for down the road. He had to hold his penlight flashlight in his mouth to scrutinize needles on the otherwise darkened RPM and cylinder head temperature gauges.

The little bird tooled along at barely a hundred feet above the citrus groves. “Stay low,” he said to himself. His biggest nightmare was for some eager beaver radar operator back at the International calibrating his scope to recognize the familiar radar return of an Islander tracking across his scope toward the Muni and calling out the gendarmes. The cargo was as heavy on his mind as it was on the airplane’s floor.

Otis automatically scanned the ground for a possible forced landing. He believed he needed to accept the climbing cylinder head temperatures in a trade for actually reaching the intended runway. The bird went “feet wet,” flew out over the water. Behind, now, were the fields of sugarcane and fetid salt marshes mixed into the citrus plantations where the trees or cane faced the poorer salty wet soil. The swallow-you-up terrain was too soft to support a survivable crash landing. Turning back was no longer an option. He was totally forced to press on.

While plotting the optimum navigation toward home, Otis calibrated in his head the inches away from the trees he had been, the angles the bullets’ trajectories were off from proving fatal, and all the other slim margins for safety he had somehow remained within. With the same weight he had aboard, he wondered whether or not another pilot would have summoned the appropriate flying techniques or have been as flat-out fucking lucky. He couldn’t help but wonder to what mythic force must he attribute this most recent miraculous escape?

“Stay on point,” he told himself. He would reflect on all that vanity shit later. There was too much more to come. Right then he just needed to think ahead of the airplane. It was unproductive to ponder mysteries or the shit that was in his wake. He tried to look beyond the three remaining

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landings. He looked toward the large ration of deliciously cold beers he'd consume upon finally arriving at home.

Otis shined his flashlight into the passenger compartment.

"Where did you get those fucking official US Army issue duffel bags?"

"Every *mercado* in Central America has a *tienda* selling them. The American Army gives them to the soldiers they train. The soldiers sell them to the vendors. It's an industry."

"I drove one of those bags full of cocaine out of the Everglades one night about two years ago."

"How did that happen? Did you fly it in?"

"Hell, no. I was paying back these two girls, customers of the bar in South Florida I ran, for saving my ass one night."

"Saved your ass?"

"Yeah. The joint I ran had a twenty-three hour a day liquor license and the bar had an all night low-life white trailer trash clientele. It was a package store and bar in a converted gas station. About four o'clock one morning I got a call at home to come down and save the clean up kid from being attacked by a bunch of bikers who claimed allegiance to 'Big Jim Nolan's Outlaw' gang. They were really pussy wannabe's. To get their attention, to get them away from my employee, I knocked down the whole row of their motorcycles that was parked in front of the building. I had no good next idea. It was just me against about a dozen pissed off dirt bags. One guy came at me with a couple feet of heavy chain. The rest followed him."

"I'd have shit my pants."

"Yeah, I was about to when I heard these two loud mechanical clicks from pistols cocking on either side of me. These two lesbians that spent a lot of late hours in my bar carried heavy heat. They both stepped in front of me and told

the assholes to hop on their bikes, to ‘beat feet.’ The guy with the chain backed off and the rest drove off with him.

I told the girls I was forever in their debt and if there were ever anything I could do... Well, they called me one night, the night I found out that they were serious dope peddlers. Who knew? Their car shit the bed near their drop in the Everglades so they asked me to pick them up. I watched a guy parachute to the ground with a full duffel bag, like the ones back there, dangling from his harness. They gave me a couple ounces for my trouble. The dope financed an extravagant ski vacation in Vail, Colorado, later that winter.”

“Cool.”

“Within six months my girlfriend was knocked up. I married her. She went on to develop a fairly large coke habit and had a spontaneous abortion, a miscarriage. Her addiction was a huge contributing factor to our splitting the sheets.”

“Did you know the baby’s sex?”

“She thought it was a boy.”

“Do you talk?”

“No idea where she is.”

“The divorce was troubled?”

“The marriage was never recorded. We were married at our house by a Notary. Florida law. On the way out of the restaurant after the ceremony we found out that the best man’s Porsche had been stolen. It turned up quickly and the only consequence was that the suit coat with the signed license in it was gone. The marriage license never got recorded.”

“*Equela*, what sad story!”

“Tell me about it. Sorry for getting on your case back there, Angel. I get a little ‘jiggy’ around blow.”

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“*De nada*. I’ve always forbidden my women to use. Is that Belize City up there?” Angel asked pointing at a line of blinking lights on the otherwise dark horizon ahead.

“It better be.”

Otis’s careful fuel management resulted in sufficient petrol for an abbreviated dark approach, a power off glide and landing into the municipal. Angel audibly yelped when a gust of tailwind on final stole their lift. They were dropped fifty feet before Otis wrested enough control ten feet above the runway to execute a flounder-like hard touchdown on the asphalt.

“Oops! That could have smarted,” Otis admitted.

They arrived just after 8:30PM to a deserted airport and managed to taxi off the runway before the right engine sputtered and died of fuel exhaustion. They made the cargo swap from Charlie Tango to Delta Victor and turned around in an efficiently accomplished fifteen minutes despite Angel’s needing to broom some leaked cocaine from two bullet-punctured bags into a plastic bag of the same kind of stuff he carried in his jacket’s inside pocket.

Before he locked up Charlie Tango Angel held out a short length of a soda fountain straw and offered him a hit of toot.

“No thanks. I’m driving,” Otis declined. “Besides, I’m still coming down from all the adrenaline from that last take off and our landing back here.

Otis went inside the terminal and raided Frank’s private refrigerator stock, confiscated a soda pop for each of them before locking up the building again and jumping into Delta Victor’s cockpit. He fired up the appropriate engine for quiet operations. Otis was relaxed again when, unmolested, the heavy bird quietly idled away from Tikal’s ramp.

The take-off profile, requiring more than normal power, the aircraft’s weight being at the top or beyond the allowable

envelope, was of the frightful variety but it, nonetheless, transpired uneventfully.

Their next stop was a familiar northern strip into which Otis had made quite a number of recent approaches. Because they had all the local authorities in their pocket, the guys who ran the Shipstern Lagoon joint rented it out to the various drug cartels with the same alacrity a well-connected pimp might operate a 'hot sheet' motel.

The "Lagoon's" runway operators had very adequate lighting facilities they surreptitiously installed prior to each pre-arranged-for operational night. They monitored a VHF radio on a discreet frequency. Otis knew how to call in and identify himself prior to his approach, like his voice and American accent over the radio wasn't already distinctive enough, right? The lights always came up when he was about a mile out. The Shipstern Lagoon operators were consummate pros. They managed and/or owned most of the remotest and safest of the northern clandestine smuggling runways.

"This ride's a piece o' cake," Otis told Angel as they settled into a low-level cruise up the coast in the half-moonlight, "unless your competition has been tipped off about our next destination." Otis lit his eighth cigarette in the last three hours. He needed to not be rattled anymore. "You get to personally explain to Rhodes how this airplane gets the next bullet holes. I'm going to have to do a tap dance explaining Charlie Tango's new AK-47 customizations."

Otis gradually ratcheted down his anxieties and was soon feeling fairly comfortable for the first time that night. Angel followed his lead. Ahead, Shipstern's runway was both long enough and wide enough to accommodate the Islander's landing even in a heavy tailwind. He could go straight in, turn around, offload the baggage, de-fuel at the far north end and take off into the wind going straight home to cold beers

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on the half line of fuel, on the eighth of a tank they normally 'saved' for him. All the good stuff happened after he 'sold' them the scheduled six hundred pounds, thereof.

The only remaining question was how much he would be paid? Who was on the hook?

"You paying me tonight, Angel?"

"Yes," Angel said.

"Why don't we settle up now? I want to launch out of the next joint ASAP."

"How does \$300 American sound?" asked Angel handing over three Ben Franklins. "I think you earned it back there at Blue Creek."

"That was my hairiest take-off since flying combat near Cambodia in Southeast Asian. I'll be happy with that figure, thanks," said Otis. Angel surprised him by kicking in another big bill.

"You're a real veteran," Angel admitted. "You deserve a tip for the excellent service. It's a pleasure to fly with you, *El Berdo*. You saved our *cajones* back there. Thanks for the cigarettes and for sharing Frank's soda with me."

"*De nada*." Otis said. He almost added, "You better hope I never tell your crew how brave you looked hunkered down on the floor. That would really make you some kind of grateful." Otis held his tongue. He didn't want to come off too harshly on the guy who just paid him extra. That last hundred had to have come from his share. The fucking guy wanted to be generous, Otis thought. Angel was a little gun happy, maybe, but overall, he seemed mostly like a good guy. Mostly fucked, you mean. Hell, the guy's boss almost got us both killed twice. Once by the fucked up runway and once by not paying off the Guatemalan Police or competition's hit squad. The night hadn't been at all smooth. He laughed aloud at himself for worrying that he sweated out blood back at

Blue Creek and for having actually examined his seat's backrest for tell tale stains.

About five miles out Otis dialed in the Shipstern freq on the number two VHF com. radio. All he had to say over the air was "Lights, please," and the runway lit up.

Otis executed a gentle straight in approach and landing. He taxied off the runway to the usual improvised ramp area and braked to a stop as the props ceased rotating. Otis opened his cockpit door and got out. Angel opened up his door after checking for an approval with Otis and began to supervise the cargo's unloading and transfer. They nodded and mumbled an "*adios*" toward each other.

Two de-fueling efforts, one for each wing tank's fuel cap, were soon underway. Battery driven electric pumps atop steel barrels located in the back of two appropriately fitted 'junker' Toyota pick-ups sucked up the Islander's contracted six hundred pounds of fuel, fifty gallons from each wing's tank. Another crew wearing lighted miner's helmets carefully unloaded the cargo. Before off loading any duffel bags Angel had the attendants put crosses of duct tape over their three puncture wounds.

The load of contraband was carefully piled lengthwise onto a small wooden cart with iron wheels, a type he'd seen around Belize City's sugar refineries. The cargo crew rolled the loaded cart over to a stripped down newly painted and clear-coated sleek Rockwell Aero-commander that was parked under camouflage netting twenty yards away. The Aero-commander's fuel tanks would soon have enough fuel for the trip to what *El Berdo* believed would be an early morning rendezvous in South Florida.

Otis liked the look of the bullet-bodied airplane parked across from him. It was and looked fast, had retractable gear, and turbocharged engines. The bird he piloted, the BN2-A,

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was a docile cumbersome bug-smashing kite by comparison. In the time it would take Otis to return to the municipal, the Aero-commander could be halfway across the Caribbean Sea almost jetting around the Eastern tip of Cuba and on toward the Bahamas. He looked around for, but did not identify anyone likely to fit a description of the plane's pilot. He thought it would have been interesting to compare a few smuggling stories.

Before the trucks could drive away, Otis climbed into the bed of both de-fueling pick-ups and measured how much fuel remained for his last leg home. Satisfied he had sufficient petrol and after he double-checked each fuel-cap's locking mechanism he returned to the cockpit and prepared to leave.

Prior to engines start up, a proud old man, the one the workers called "*Padre*," approached interrupting Otis's departure checklist. During previous trips the old man commanded such deference from the workers that Otis assumed he was the big boss, the head of the family. Otis and *Padre* briefly chatted on a couple prior meetings but their exchanges had never been as detailed or as frank as their conversation that evening. Times were changing. One checked the wind.

"Any boats, *El Berdo*?" *Padre* asked when he got to the pilot side cockpit window. It appeared as if *El Padre* feared a maritime assault on his field. Boats had been the first topic of all of their past conversations.

"Your lights were the first ones I saw since passing San Pedro, *Padre*," said Otis trying to assure the old one.

"We heard you had some trouble in the jungle," *El Padre* intimated.

"Word travels fast, *Padre*," Otis remarked trying not to let on how shocked he was at *Padre's* revelation. He did not initially understand how the information had traveled so fast.

Was it phones? That could be stupid. They probably talked over their radios, he assumed. Belize had to have a sophisticated information network for the smugglers to operate so effectively. They had survived in the area since the sixteen hundreds. Geographically distinct clandestine operators were able to quickly share important timely news. Though he assumed the different smuggling operators communicated regularly it was the first time Otis was convinced they had such a timely capability. On the other hand, for all Otis knew, *El Padre* could have known about the Rio Bravo shit because he had a hand in it. One just did not know. Otis was not about to ask.

“It is important to know, “*estas cosas*,” these things,” he said.

“These Columbians could be cutting some corners, *Patron*.” Otis averted his eyes not wanting to appear as if he were challenging the man for doing business with such irresponsible cowboys. “They might unnecessarily stir up *los Federales*.”

“They frighten me very much,” he continued respectfully understating the case as Danny had taught him. Tell only what you really know. Do not exaggerate. Don’t ask.

“*Con mucho cuidado, El Berdo*. You are correct. Some of these *hombres* are a threat to the peace.” Take much care, the old man warned.

“There was gunplay out there. I might have been hurt. I don’t want to be shot, *Patron*,” Otis said indirectly agreeing with the old man’s assessment and accepting his warning. Who knew? What Otis regarded as a warning could have really been a threat. An instantaneous new dose of adrenaline bombed his system. Clearly, it was time to go.

“*Vaya con dios, hijo mio*. Go with god, my son,” *El Padre* said. He showed he respected airplanes as he walked well

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away around the propeller arc when he turned away and approached the other airplane to make sure of the correctness of all the preparations being made there. It was incumbent that the enterprise moved forward like clockwork. Difficulties at one location virtually guaranteed more complications in the chain of transactions. It was appearing to Otis that the Columbians' penetration of the market was generating a new round of suspicion and frictions among the existing participants, and a consequentially elevated potential for more shooting. Everything was becoming more dangerous.

El Berdo started both engines, spun his bird around tightly on one solidly braked main gear and ran up and launched, all in one fluid motion. Getting back home, away from these airplanes and their dangers, and getting out of his sweat-drenched clothes as soon as possible became his primary concerns. It was, however, difficult for Otis not to celebrate having survived and even profited despite all the day's many hazards. Anticipating the end of his mission made him happy. He counted the hours flown that day, the number of the day's take-offs and landings. He had totaled ten hours of flight and eleven of each, landings and take-offs. His logbook would have a crowded new entry. He had had enough. He climbed to five hundred feet and set up a high-speed cruise with double 24's, one 24 for hundreds of RPM, and one 24 for inches of mercury for the engines' manifold pressures. He did a quick auto-mixture leaning and aimed the now light and zippier airplane straight at the Belize City lights. He was jetting home for more than a few well-deserved beers.

Cash-wise, it was his best day in Belize, and the day in which he had been in the most jeopardy ever. He flew back to the muni contemplating a vast new ill-gotten fortune and its unsavory sources. Despite the new roll of \$670 American bucks in his pocket he felt a new determination to resist. The

day's events combined to form in Otis a newly re-steeled resolve to agitate against the insanely pecuniary corrupted machine that so blithely sent him off defenseless, in the blind, without any chance for the simplest of preparations, into potentially terminal situations, on errands with decades of possible incarceration consequences. He resented being virtually whored out to and at the mercy of drug impaired homicidal or paranoid Columbian cocaine cowboy gunmen and vulnerable to their enemies.

"Fuck me harder, again!" he said out loud to himself.

It's real nice for management, he thought, when profits can support all the high insurance premiums. What are a few measly bullet holes when there's fuel to sell and a compromised pilot to charter out? For that matter, what's an airplane or two? We pay our insurance, don't we? How fine it must be to sit in the office armchair and still make the big money after paying out all those damned necessary "contributions" while underlings collect the remaining morsels and stick out their 'bloody fucking' necks.

He could almost hear Frank and Rhodes saying: "We bloody fucking promise! We'll find you a really nice bloody fucking grave."