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*An adventure of non-stop insanity...*

# *Hawaiian Escapade*



*Based on a true story*

*by*

*Gerald Lee Gibson*

*Two teenagers impersonate authorized personnel  
and manage to fly a naval plane to Hawaii,  
a feat that can wind them up in the brig or jail.*

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## *The Foolishness of Youth*

Often when I tell this story, I get that look. An eyebrow will cock, a snarl will play on a face, or someone will shake his or her head in disbelief. Few people are rude enough to call me a liar. Most folks are polite enough to marvel at my story, their expressions belying their words. Though this response is disingenuous, it's done with good intentions. On the other hand, there are family members and friends who take my story at face value and a small number accept it outright, as the God's honest truth. To these folks I should dedicate my novel. For those doubters, who can't believe two teenagers could get away with such an act, I have written this book.

So where do I begin? Surely, it must begin with the person who thought up this escapade: Bernie Suarez. I would never have dreamed of attempting such a foolish feat, myself. Truth be told, though, I was ready for such an adventure. I had always wanted to go to some exotic place I had read about in books. Why not Hawaii? There was, Bernie told me, a famous Naval base there—Pearl Harbor, a fantastic beach, and lots of Hawaiian girls—just my kind of outing. It was only a few months until graduation, and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. Of course, if I had been serious about my future as many other students, it would never have been tempted. In fact, I would never have been at my Naval air reserve meeting at Los Alamitos where the proposition was hatched. I was restless and on edge. Many of my high school friends were talking about college or joining the service. I was, at that time in my life, not college material, and the very thought of going off to fight a future war, such as the recent conflict in Korea, seemed terrifying. I had never gotten along well with my parents, so I couldn't stay at home, at least not for long, and yet the alternative unless I got a job, found my own place, and bought a car after graduating, was joining up with the navy, army, air force, or marines. That day I talked to a navy recruiter I was presented with a short term solution: join the naval air reserves, attend weekly meetings, until attaining the rank of airman apprentice or higher, and then, at a time of my choosing, serve two years of active duty on an aircraft carrier at sea. So, just as there was a precondition in my mental state for letting Bernie talk me into our trip to Hawaii—the desire for adventure, there had been a precondition in my mind for joining the naval air reserves: a short term solution for my sloth and lack of ambition.

The naval air reserves in 1960 included bases such as Los Alamitos, Alameda, and Barber's Point, all of whom Bernie and I would visit in a series of hops (flights on military aircraft), which in our case were fraudulent, unscheduled capers by two teenage recruits. Today, thanks to budget cuts, these bases no longer exist. For that matter, the aircraft carrier I would one day serve on, the USS Hornet, is now a floating museum. The navy, as a whole, has changed. Sailors are treated much better now. There is more equality; in fact there are women sailors, just as there are women soldiers, airmen, and marines. When I served on the Hornet, it was all men. The only women we had on board were visiting wives, relative, and friends, when the ship was berthed in Long Beach, California. Those lucky sailors in today's navy share their ships with women. I must say things have improved for servicemen as a whole. In most ways, however, the laws and ordinances in the navy haven't changed. If anything, because of Homeland Security and the threat of terror, the security on bases and regulations for travel are stricter... You certainly couldn't get away with what Bernie and I had done. We would be in Federal Prison if we tried that today.

But this conclusion is seen through the lens of time. At first, I only suspected that what we were doing might be illegal and wrong. Ironically, despite the dangers of such a harebrained plan, the meetings at Los Alamitos where the plan was first conceived were the safest place for a guy like me. I wasn't a risk-taker. I had no desire to break the law. There was little or no stress in this stage of my intentions to join the naval air reserve. As soon as I turned eighteen, I signed up and bragged to all my friends. Though I realized it was a serious move, it seemed like a logical step for a slacker like me, far better than going to basic training to become a GI or a Marine. One day I would have to go active on an aircraft carrier. Who knows, during my inactive duty, I might even get a job, go to a junior college, and get motivated. I would have plenty of time to decide. There was no telling, considering the communist countries and unrest in the world, what dangers lie ahead, but I was better off than my pal Tommy Walker, who was going to join the Army and Sammy Stewart, who was signing up for the Marines. Anyhow, considering my options, that was a long time away. All that would change one day, but that would require another book. Herein lies one story from my life, my Hawaiian Escapade, inspired by nothing more than the foolishness of youth.

~ Noel Bridger, Fort Worth Texas, January 6, 2015

## Chapter One

### Bernie's Plan

My trip to Hawaii would have been impossible today. In 1960 there was no Homeland Security and the rules of travel for naval personnel had been lax and ill defined. Even now, when I reflect upon my escapade, I'm amazed that we got away with it. Many people, who hear my tale, find it hard to believe. When I consider the facts, I do too. The most basic reason why I did such a foolish thing—the desire for adventure—was fueled by my naivety. One reason why it was successful had much to do with my wily travel companion: Bernie Suarez. Upon my eighteenth birthday with a few months left before graduation, I joined the naval air reserve in Los Alamitos, California. I had learned about this division of the navy when I was a sea scout. Already my appetite for the sea had been wetted by my voyages on the Sea Scout post's dinghy, 'The Barracuda.' Because I also found the notion of being on a flight crew in a Navy plane intriguing, the combination of air and sea travel offered by of the Naval Air Reserve convinced me that this was the branch of service for a slacker like myself, which brings me to the second reason why I decided to join up: I had nothing better to do.

Unlike my older brother, I wasn't college material. Don't get me wrong; I don't begrudge my brother Aaron for getting a scholarship and attending a big university. He worked hard to become a model citizen. He was athletic, got good grades, and a seldom rubbed my parents wrong. In a negative sense, I was everything he wasn't. My life was unfocused: a blur of undisciplined activity. Though I liked to play baseball for the church team, I wasn't particularly athletic. I didn't get good grades; in fact, I don't remember studying very much. I didn't get along with my parents and had no thought of higher education. Then one day, after talking to a recruiter, the blur suddenly cleared. The recruiter was quite a salesman. He extolled the benefits of the naval air reserve program: the education it provided (during and after discharge) and the life experience as a reservist at air bases and then active duty on an aircraft carrier at sea. That all sounded very promising to me, and, though I didn't know it at that point in my life, it gave me a purpose. It also gave me a status I could not obtain by going to college. I was going be a sailor and see the world. The very notion of continuing my education, after four years of high school, made me shudder. What better way to fritter away time than the life of a sailor on the sea or a member of an aircrew?

After joining up as a reservist, I thought I had done a fine thing. The future looked bright. I was going to get to ride in planes and, on active duty, be stationed on an aircraft carrier and see the world. Though I was impatient for the adventure, I was still a high school student and had to graduate and receive the rank of airman apprentice before active duty. There were no shortcuts at this point; the road ahead had been set when I took the oath and signed my name. First it was important, in fact one of the requirements for being in the navy, to get my high school diploma. So I settled down during my last days as a student and kept a clear head—the first time in my life that I had such a goal. Most everyone else I knew seemed set on going to college. What I was doing sounded like foolish to many of my friends. Yet we were all, in our own ways, impatient for the next chapter in our lives. For me it was not merely the thought of strutting around in my uniform, it was the adventure ahead: flying, sailing, and traveling the

world. Then I met Bernie Suarez. Bernie, a high school senior like myself, put us on the fast track to adventure, a course that almost landed us in jail.

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Unlike myself, who had nothing better to do, Bernie had a solid inspiration for joining the navy. His father and three of his uncles had joined up. Though he didn't seem like navy material to me, he looked upon it as a family tradition. He thought he might learn to be an aviation mechanic like them. I had no such ambition. It was all an adventure to me, nothing more. At our first meeting at Los Alamitos Naval Air Station, Chief Arnold Crump, our instructor, asked us to introduce ourselves. That began quickly enough. As we stood up and gave our names, he made a check on his roll sheet. When he asked us if we had any veterans in our families, however, there were a few groans, including my own. I imagine it was a sort of icebreaker for everyone, but I thought it was a meddling question. I dreaded the point when it was my turn. Because my dad had worked at the Rail Road in an occupation essential for the war effort, he had been given a deferment. When I explained this to my classmates I got blank stares and a few snickers. I avoided the instructor's probing stare. In the minds of many students, whose fathers had been in the army, navy, air force, and marines, my dad's circumstances made him a draft dodger. The chief told them that without men and women working in the war industry there would be no ships, trains, trucks, or planes to fight the war or transport men and materials. I appreciated his effort to help me save face, but I couldn't blame my classmates. A few of them had fathers that had been crippled in the war and one student's father had been killed in action. They, like myself, bristled at the prospect of dredging up such information. To prove that there was warrior blood among my relatives, I could have told them about my Uncles Roy and Sherman, who landed in Omaha Beach and Iwo Jima, respectively, my cousin Billy, who won a silver star in Korea, and my grandfather who served in World War I. Unlike Bernie, however, I wasn't a braggart. When the chief, who was calling names from the roll sheet, saw Bernie raising his hand and bouncing down up and down in his seat, he frowned with irritation but finally gave him a nod. The other recruits had given short and concise accounts, but Bernie had gone, in naval parlance, overboard. His story outshone everyone else's account and helped distract attention from my own. For that fact, I was grateful to him.

According to Bernie, Armand Suarez, his father, was not only a World War II veteran, he was a hero. His ship, the USS Hornet was attacked by Kamikazes in Guadalcanal (a name he could barely pronounce). During the attacks, Armand single-handedly saved a pilot from a burning plane and dived into the ocean to rescue crewmen who had fallen overboard. Leading the fire brigades, he also saved several aircraft from destruction and, during the raids, shot down several planes with an anti-aircraft gun. The instructor, who had been aboard the Enterprise during the same war, said he would like to shake his father's hand. There was a twinkle in his eye, though, as if he might have thought Bernie might have been exaggerating or stretching the truth. Bernie replied, with a straight face, he would be shaking hands with a ghost. Silence filled the room, as everyone expected a punch line. We thought he might claim that Armand was riddled with machine fire, burned up in a fire, or drowned. Instead he told us that his father was killed in an automobile crash after the war. It was the only part of his story that had the ring of truth. How could one man have done all those things Bernie claimed in one battle? Had Bernie been talking about more than one battle at sea? That he dived into the ocean to save his fellow shipmates also seemed hard to believe.

Nevertheless, I understood then why he joined the navy. The history he recounted about his father, which gave him so much inspiration, was a nobler reason than my own. Already, however, after hearing the story about of his father, I sensed deception in him. He was, from the beginning of our association, a pathological liar. I just didn't have a name for it then. From the beginning, though I was amused by his spirit, I didn't like him. Because of my candor at times, I don't think he liked me. He laughed a lot in class about silly things, and yet had no sense of humor. I realized, after listening to him carry on about Hawaii, that he needed a cohort for his trip. Perhaps, none of the other recruits, would have been interested. He was, in fact, very secretive about his plan. When the instructor dismissed us that night, Bernie took me aside and presented me with his idea: because we were in the navy now, we could visit Hawaii by using naval air transportation. At that time, I didn't know that you were supposed to have orders to use military planes. I would learn that from the instructor at our next meeting when he discussed navy protocol. Even then, the idea struck me as absurd. It was fortunate for us that the chief had left the room. He would probably have reported Bernie's scheme. Bernie spoke to me in a clandestine voice, looking this way and that, as if fearful that someone might overhear.

"Are you insane?" I looked at him in disbelief. "We haven't graduated yet. We're still in high school!"

"So," he said, giggling madly, "we're in the navy, right? We have uniforms and duffle bags. My mother will sew airman apprentice patches onto our uniforms, and no one will be the wiser!"

I continued to stare at him in amazement. "Our ID cards show we're recruits. I'm not good at deceit, Bernie. I could never fool my mom and dad. How can we justify our trip to Hawaii? Don't we need an official reason to climb on a naval plane?"

"Listen, it's so simple," he explained, fluttering his hands. "It's been done before. You don't need anything but proof you're in the service to travel within US territory. Hawaii's a state now, so that's even better. Plenty of people have done it. We'll say we're going to meet our squadron at Barber's Point Naval Air Station. Leave that up to me. I'm not afraid."

Though Hawaii had been made a state in 1959, it was, in my untutored mind, a remote and exotic place to visit. I was immediately intrigued but also frightened by the thought. Bernie had a baby face and had an effeminate voice. When he said that he wasn't afraid it prickled my masculinity. I was acting like a frightened lamb. To keep from losing face, I scratched my chin, as if I might be thinking it over, which I wasn't. The very idea was ridiculous. If I hadn't been caught off guard, I would be on a bus and heading home, instead of being cornered in the classroom. With less conviction, I tried to reason with him.

"I've never heard of anything so crazy." I shook my head. "You make it sound easy—too easy. That's what worries me, Bernie. Have you really thought this out?"

"Yes." He nodded excitedly. "It's all planned, to the last detail."

That was a lie, of course. Unfortunately, I didn't know it then. At that point, however, I listened impatiently, with my arms folded, tapping my foot, as he explained the details of his plan.

"Don't worry, Noel," he reassured, patting my arm. "I have it all mapped out. We start at Los Alamitos where we're at now, take a naval transport to Alameda Naval Air Base where my Uncle Dominick lives, then to Barber's Point in Hawaii where my Uncle Ralph is stationed." "It's so easy." He snapped his fingers. "At our next meeting, bring your duffle bag. My mom will sew or iron on the airman apprentice stripes. The Friday after next is Lincoln's birthday, but the navy still has flights. I heard that Monday is Parent Teacher's Conference day, too. That

gives us an two extra days. That Friday morning, we'll pick you up at your house at eight, so set your alarm clock. Tell your parents your going on a weekend naval cruise or something. Be vague, though. Bring civilian clothes in your duffle and your toothbrush and stuff. Don't worry about food. If we have time, we can eat breakfast on the base. My Uncle Dominic will feed us in Alameda. From that point on, we'll eat navy chow."

Bernie said nothing about bringing money. I had sixteen dollars left from my lawn mowing job, which didn't seem like enough money for a place like Hawaii, but I remembered the tour the navy instructor took us recruits on. The food was good at the base, much better than my Mom's. It seemed reasonable that it would be even better at Barber's Point.

"... You have it all figured out, don't you?" I drawled. After studying him a few seconds, more questions surfaced in my mind. "What about sleeping arrangements? Will they let us sleep on their base? How do we travel into town? I won't miss school, Bernie. We gotta be back on time!"

"Yes, of course," he reassured me, "it's all set. We'll sleep Friday night at my Uncle Dominick's house and Saturday night at Barber's Point in the enlisted men's barracks. That evening we'll go into town, like you wanted. We can also go Sunday, if you like. Monday my Uncle Ralph will arrange for our flight home. We'll be back by Tuesday morning. You have my word!"

"So I don't have to do anything," I muttered, "but place my life in your hands. I don't even know you, Bernie. Why should I trust you? You just met me. You appear to know some of these recruits. Why didn't you ask one of them?"

"... Because," he said after a moment of deliberation, "they're cowards. They're not my friends. I'm very picky about my friends, Noel. I heard you talking to the instructor. You're an adventurer like me. You joined the navy to see the world... Well, I don't want to wait until my active duty begins. I don't think you do either." "Trust me." His brown eyes locked onto mine. "I want you to be my friend."

The way he stared at me gave me the creeps. Though I was naïve back then and had listened with interest, I was suddenly suspicious. He had an ulterior motive: he wanted a cohort or traveling companion, not a friend. Looking away and shuddering, I felt trapped. If I walked away that moment, I would make an enemy. It was one reason why I decided to hear him out. I was stuck in his class, at least until we made airman apprentice. After that point, it would be just my luck when we went on active duty, that we would be given the same orders. I made a mental note then to make sure I signed up for active duty on a different date. I glanced at my watch, hoping I didn't miss my bus home. For the time being I found myself drawn into his plan like a bug into a spider's web—a characterization I make after the fact. At the time, I wasn't conscious of a trap, only irritated that I couldn't break away and tell him to bug off. Part of me felt sorry for Bernie. He must have been very desperate to ask a total stranger. At first, the plan was so outrageous, I couldn't take him seriously, and yet, in a strange and devious way, he was convincing. Now I was filled with uncertainty. As we walked to the parking lot, where he promised his mom would give me a ride home, he painted a mental picture for me: riding on personnel transports to our destinations at Alameda and Barber's Point, checking out Barber's Point and Pearl Harbor, and then exploring the tropical paradise waiting for us when we left the base. Playing on my adolescent hormones, he promised me that Hawaii had the most beautiful girls in the world—all of them oversexed, and that it was legal to drink alcohol in Hawaii, which meant that we could buy a six pack and get drunk on the beach. (Years later, in 1986, Hawaii

would raise the drinking age to 21.) Transcending the plane flights and experience on base, was the notion of carousing in town and searching for girls. Suddenly, I was trapped in Bernie's web.

As we waited for his mom to arrive, I asked him several more questions about Hawaii that he couldn't answer. It appeared, now that I think about it, that he knew just enough to bait me. He didn't know the name of the major city close to Barber's Point (Honolulu). Nor did he tell me about the history behind nearby Pearl Harbor or the fact that Japanese attacked it in 1941. I had been ignorant of Hawaii's geography, myself, but picked these facts up at our next meeting at the base. What should have raised a red flag in my mind as we stood in the parking lot was his attitude on sex. Despite his boast about Hawaiian girls, he didn't like me to talk nasty. To tell the truth, I was inexperienced about these matters myself, but Bernie's description of Hawaiian girls had excited me.

"Say Bernie." I nudged him. "Maybe your Uncle Ralph can set us up with a couple of Hawaiian chicks?"

"My Uncle's a married man," he replied indignantly. "He'll do no such thing!"

"All right." I nodded. "That's okay. We'll pick our chicks up in town."

"Are you serious?" He wrinkled his nose.

"Yes, Bernie. After we pick them up, we'll buy some beer and party on the beach."

"Ick!" He made a face. "I don't think so! Why're you talking like that? I'm a Christian, Noel. I don't like loose girls."

"Didn't you just brag about how beautiful Hawaiian girls are?" I frowned. "You said they're oversexed. You said we can drink at eighteen there. Now you're telling me you're a Christian and don't like loose girls. I don't understand!"

"Ha-ha, I was just kidding." He forced a laugh. "I like girls, just nice ones. Maybe we can find some *nice* Hawaiian girls too. I drank some of my Uncle Raul's tequila once. He was on an aircraft carrier too. We can buy beer if you want. Please, Noel, we're going to have a good time—I promise."

"Humph...I dunno." I studied him in the lamplight. "I can't hunt girls alone. I need a guide. You like girls, don't you Bernie? Being a Christian has nothing to do with it. I want to have a good time!"

"Sure-sure," he slapped my shoulder, "we're going to find us plenty of chicks. My Uncle Dominick has three teenage daughters—all beauties—"

"What?" My eyes popped wide. "You're uncle has daughters. You say they're beauties?"

Bernie almost choked on his words. As he clasped his mouth, I thought I heard him say, "Oops!" "...Yeah," he murmured regretfully, "wild things.... Me and my big mouth!"

That cinched it for me. Tipping the balance were thoughts of the Hawaiian girls and those 'wild things' at Uncle Dominick's house. Bernie's web of deception had trapped me. Had I an ounce of common sense I would have gone with my first impression of him. He was a schemer and, I already sensed, a liar to boot. Looking back with the working knowledge I have of psychology, I'm certain he was also bipolar. How else could I explain his sudden changes of attitude and different moods, traits he would exhibit again and again?

While I sat between him and his mother, I was surprised at the encouragement she gave him. He introduced me to her as soon as I climbed into the car and then immediately launched into his plan. I was surprised she didn't protest. My mom would have her Girl Scout troop camped out in our backyard Friday morning and my dad was going through a mid-life crisis and barely knew I was there. I was sure I would get a green light by my parents, but Bernie's mother had no such distraction. Almost instantly, she praised him for such a brilliant plan. Very

quickly, however, to avoid the details, Bernie steered her off the subject as he gave her directions to my house, and then explained what we had learned at our first meeting at Los Alamitos Naval Air Station. Unlike myself, who didn't have a clue about his future, Bernie said he wanted to be an aviation mechanic like his Uncle Ralph. I would never have taken this fragile youth for such a rating, but, according to his mother, he was always curious and displayed a scientific bent. According to her, Bernie got straight A's in high school. In the seventh grade, he made a life-like dinosaur, whose eyes blinked as it bobbed his head, and he once made a volcano that appeared to glow with lava as it spewed dry ice. How these projects related to what he wanted to do in the navy I couldn't imagine. She was so happy that he finally had a friend she chattered incessantly about his achievements. From Boy Scout merit badges to a senior project in which he was building a mobile of the solar system, Bernie had kept himself busy. A normal person would have been embarrassed by such flattery, but Bernie added details to her account. He enumerated all of his merit badges, which were just shy of the twenty-one necessary for Eagle Scout, bragged about the train layout he was building, and boasted about all sorts of things that had nothing to do with aviation mechanics. I didn't get one word in wise. Considering my C-average in high school and lack of achievements, I might have developed a complex listening to them talk. Instead I felt sorry for Bernie. In spite of my own checkered past, I had many friends and enjoyed the simple pastimes of youth. I had this feeling, as I listened to them carry on, that Bernie had been a lonely kid. All that stuff he did couldn't replace romping with friends, chasing girls, and those normal pursuits of youth.

## Chapter Two

### The First Hop

When they dropped me off, I was relieved I no longer had to sit in a crossfire of chatter. Doubts crept back into my mind as I entered my house. I had no word for it then; but Bernie wasn't a normal person. Was I doing something stupid? Despite my misgivings, I wasted no time in telling my mom one of the excuses Bernie suggested I give. That I would be on a cruise with my post would be too great a lie, so I told her I would be at the Los Alamitos Naval Air Station Friday through Monday as part of my training, which was a partial truth. During the period I would be gone, my mom would be occupied with her Girl Scout troop. My dad would moping most of the time in his study or in the garage. I was sure he didn't care.

During the following week, I continued to have misgivings. Bernie made it sound too simple. On the evening of our next meeting, I handed my duffle bag over to his mother when she picked me up. I didn't like committing fraud and had almost decided to forgo our adventure. Yet here I was turning my uniforms over to her for alterations that would have to be restored to their original state when our adventure ended.

Navy Chief Arnold Crump, our instructor, talked about naval history that night, from John Paul Jones up until modern times. This is when I learned about the history at Pearl Harbor and Barber's Point. He also began covering navy protocol. The lecture was interesting in parts and even quite funny. The chief was a typical foul-mouth navy man, who peppered his lecture with profanity and lurid stories about his escapades. When Bernie's mom picked us in front of the base, my duffle bag was returned to me. His mother had changed the patches during our two-hour meeting. I never asked Bernie how he got his hands on airman apprentice patches. It would remain one of the mysteries in our caper. All that concerned me was that she had promised to change them back before our next meeting, which was the following Wednesday after our trip.

Thursday, the following day, was filled with the routine drudgery of school, hanging out with my shiftless friends at lunchtime, and then mulling nervously around in my room. That night before Lincoln's birthday on Friday, which was a holiday, I was filled with excitement and doubt. Given the go ahead by my Mom's earlier response, I spent a few hours listening to Elvis and reading a book. Considering what lay ahead of me, the book should have been the Bible. Instead I was reading Moby Dick, required reading for my English literature class. After the first lines, after Ishmael introduced himself, I was momentarily captivated with his reason for the adventure that led him to Captain Ahab and the great white whale.

'...Some years ago,' he claims, 'never mind how long precisely, having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world...'

How more appropriate could a beginning be than that? It appeared as if Ishmael had no better reason than myself for crossing the ocean. I read on for a spell, and seeing what a slacker he was, too, was convinced I had found a kindred spirit. But then, after wading through the verbiage Herman Melville used to weave a tale, I began to lose interest. There were too many pages and too many big words. How would I ever be able to read it? I asked myself, thumbing through his novel. There were 1,916 pages and 135 Chapters in Moby Dick. Though considered

a masterpiece by my literature teacher, I would never have picked such a book. At that point in my life, my collection of reading material included Mad Magazines, pulp mysteries, and westerns.

Faced with two crises in my life—my pending trip and the prospect of flunking my English literature class, I sank momentarily in despair. I had one grim satisfaction: if our deception was found out, I needn't worry about my term paper or high school anymore. I would be in jail. One particular part of Chief Crump's lecture on navy protocol that covered aspects of the Uniform Code of Military Justice surfaced in my mind: it was a crime to impersonate an officer. I believe this included petty officers, but did it include impersonating airman apprentices?... Why did the instructor even mention this obscure fact? Did he suspect Bernie's intentions?

Suddenly, I took stock of myself. Bernie's sneaky behavior had made me suspicious. He had been too secretive about his trip. Why did he trust only me, a total stranger to travel with him? There were recruits from his own high school, students he must have known. The cloudy vision of his plan, in the telling, was also troubling. He had probably stretched the truth about his father and other facts; was he lying about his plan? On the other hand, what if it was as simple as he said? What if he was just peculiar youth—an odd duck, like many people I've known? If so, I was on my way to Hawaii—a tropical paradise filled with beautiful women made for a young man such as myself.

Perhaps Ishmael was as foolish as me. Unless I got my hands on an outline or summary of Moby Dick, I might never know. Before turning in, I packed my duffel with civilian clothes, toothpaste, shaver, and other odds and ends. I had decided to concentrate on the adventure rather than the risk. It didn't occur to me to borrow my Mom's camera so I could take snap shots of the picturesque landscape I would visit. My reasons for going to Hawaii had nothing to do with its cultural, historical, or geographical significance. I looked upon this caper as my first adventure in the navy and a chance to hunt for girls, which included Bernie's three cousins. In fact, I found it difficult to sleep that night. My head swam with conflicting images: girls in hula skirts and being arrested by MPs. Bernie and his mother would be picking me up early in the morning. I needed some shuteye. Pushups and jumping jacks didn't make me sleepy. Counting sheep or numbers didn't help. What finally did the trick was a shot of scotch from my dad's secret stash. He rarely touched the stuff. There was even dust on the cap. Nevertheless, I drank a jigger from his bottle of Canadian Club, placed it back in its hiding place, and walked light-headedly back to my bed.

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When my alarm clock sounded in the morning, I tried hitting the snooze button. Unfortunately, I hit the off button instead. It was an instinctive action, which I performed on school days. Today was a holiday, I recalled groggily. It was Lincoln's Birthday, which meant no school. So why was my alarm clock ringing? For a half hour or more, as dawn crept into my room, I floated in that twilight world between sleep and wakefulness, floating pleasantly around my room, out my window, and high above my house. One day, after reading up on this phenomenon, I would learn that it was called a lucid dream. As I looked down at my yard, I could see my mom and her Girl Scout troop below. At one point, she looked up and shouted, "Noel, wake up, your ride is here!"

When I opened my eyes finally, she was standing there with a disgusted look on her face. I could hear the Girl Scouts chattering in the backyard. My sister Julia stood there behind her in her uniform, also frowning. My dad looked in that moment but said nothing.

“Shame on you, Noel!” Mom scolded. “Didn’t you set your alarm clock. Your friend and his mother are in the driveway. *Get up!*”

“Throw cold water on him.” Julia sneered. “That’ll wake him up!”

“He’s a slacker!” my dad called from the hall.

“I’m getting up!” I muttered dazedly, rising like a zombie to my feet.

“Oh my god, Julia,” Mom cried, “hide your eyes!”

Forgetting I was in my underwear, I grabbed up my clothes, staggered around groggily, struggling into my trousers first, and, after pulling on a tee shirt, slipping into my jersey, and then plopping on my hat. I scarcely needed to shave yet, so I skipped this part of the routine, even failing to brush my teeth. Since my duffle bag was already packed, I was ready to go. Barely five minutes had passed and I was rushing out the door.

“Where the hell’s he going?” cried dad.

“Navy thing,” Mom muttered, as if that explained everything.

“Bye!” I called back.

“Be careful,” Mom called lightly. “When are you coming home?”

“I have to be back Tuesday morning for school,” I reminded her.

I was notified last week by the principle that I had perfect attendance. Though I wasn’t a model student, this feat, as accidental as it might have been, stuck out in my mind. For some reason it was important to me now. Added to my concern for Bernie’s planning of our trip and my term paper, therefore, was the danger of missing school Tuesday. Come hell or high water, I told myself, I’d make it back in time. Scampering to Misses Suarez’ station wagon, I tossed my duffle bag in the back, climbed into the back seat, and sat there a moment as Bernie scolded me for being late.

“Didn’t you set your alarm clock?” he barked testily.

“Yeah,” I replied with a yawn, “I accidentally turned it off.”

“We have to be on the airfield at nine o’clock,” he snapped, “and they’re not going to wait.”

“Sorry.” I shrugged. “We’ll just have to hurry.”

He glared at me in his visor mirror, as his mother backed out of our driveway. “You can’t do that in the navy, Noel,” he persisted. “Sorry won’t cut it. They’ll throw you in the brig!”

“Now-now, Bernie,” chided his mother, “be polite. He’s only a little late. He’s here, isn’t he? That’s what matters.” “Are you all right son?” She looked back with concern.

“Yes ma’am,” I grinned. “I just need a little coffee.”

“Coffee is unhealthy,” Bernie muttered tersely. “It’s corrosive to your colon and bad for your teeth!”

I had heard that line from my Mormon friends. Added to Bernie’s puritanical outlook on sex, which I detected in spite of his efforts to cover it up, this statement reinforced my earlier impression. Bernie was what we called in high school a ‘goodie two shoes.’ He said he drank some of his Uncle Raul’s tequila, but that statement seemed lame. I didn’t mind if Bernie didn’t drink coffee, but what if he didn’t even drink beer? More importantly, was his earlier slip, “Ick! I’m a Christian, Noel. I don’t like loose girls.” He tried to convince me that he was kidding after this slip, but he seemed insincere. The way his brown eyes darted this way and that and he couldn’t look me in the eyes had seemed devious. While his mother drove us to the naval air

station, I was conflicted. I liked his Mom. She was trying her best to be nice. Though she had an ulterior motive, herself, I didn't blame her. In fact, I admired her for acting on behalf of her son. She wanted him to have a friend. And yet, as she chattered away and Bernie sulked, my misgivings about this caper returned.

"Were those Girl Scouts in your back yard?" I heard her ask.

"Yeah." I stifled another yawn. "My mom has a Girl Scout troop. They're camping out in our backyard."

"Scouting's a great thing." She smiled into her rearview mirror. "Bernie was a Cub Scout and then a Boy Scout, but after his stepfather passed away, he dropped out."

This revelation seemed significant to me. Not only had Bernie lost his first father after the war, but he lost his stepfather too. Was that one of the reasons he was so strange?

"That's too bad." I gave him a sympathetic look. "I went all the way through scouting, too. When I was fourteen, I got into the Sea Scouts. I think that's why I joined the navy."

"My daughter Anna was in scouting." She commented thoughtfully. "She's only sixteen now. But when she's old enough, she plans on joining the naval reserves too."

Bernie frowned into his visor mirror again. On and on, she prattled about her first husband's service in the navy. Her account was different than Bernie's, mainly for what she left out. I remembered Bernie bragging about Armand Suarez's heroics. Bernie's father had, in fact, served on the USS Hornet (an aircraft carrier I would serve on when I was on active duty). Bernie had left out this detail and also details of Armand's job. At the time his duty station meant nothing to me. What seemed significant was the job he had on the Hornet. He was an aviation mechanic, like Uncle Ralph (Bernie's Barber's Point contact), who repaired the catapult engines, which launched aircraft from the flight deck of the ship. This sounded exciting to me. I had heard about this rating during our recruit indoctrination. Unfortunately, however, Mrs. Suarez talked fast without pausing. For much of the time, it became a blur in my head—a phenomenon that occurred often in my classrooms at school. All I could focus on those moments was her sixteen-year-old daughter. The thought intrigued me very much. Hopefully, she didn't look like Bernie. His mother was an attractive Mexican woman, who looked nothing like her son. Sixteen years old would make Anna a sophomore in High School. Who knows, I reasoned, Bernie's cousins in Alameda were wild. Why not her? If she joined up in two years on her eighteenth birthday, I would probably be on active duty. I would return to reservist duty for my remaining time, a savvy, seasoned sailor. Perhaps, I would meet her on the base. If I visited Bernie's house, it might even be sooner. As his mother explained that her husband's service during World War Two was one of the reasons her son chose the navy—a fact I already suspected, Bernie shook his head and glared once more into his mirror.

He knew I was thinking about his sister Anna. Almost as if he could read my mind that moment, I saw his lips move. Though I wasn't a lip reader, he conveyed to me that moment, "Don't even think about it!"

"Hey," I muttered defensively, "what's your problem?"

Misses Suarez stopped in mid-section, murmuring aloud, "What did you say, Bernie? Why are you frowning like that? You're being *very* rude!"

"Sorry," he replied quickly, "it's this headache I have. I got up on the wrong side of the bed!"

I thought that was pretty lame; I think he did too. Flashing a token grin in his visor mirror, he said nothing. The word I would have used for his smile, had I known it then, was 'disingenuous.' The second thoughts I felt earlier resurfaced, worsened by that expression. Did

I really want to do this? I asked myself. Bernie had verbally attacked me as soon as I entered the car. He assumed I would make a play for his sister. He obviously didn't trust me. Our trip to Hawaii—an island paradise—had been his idea, and yet he recoiled at my suggestions for having fun. Though he said was kidding, I was afraid he was, like my Mom, a teetotaler and prude. So why did he pick me as a travel companion? I asked myself again. Was it because he couldn't find anyone else? Perhaps, he hadn't asked anyone else. The recruits in his high school probably didn't like him. When I thought about it, the notion of recruits flying on naval air transports had seemed outrageous. It still seemed outrageous as we traveled to our destination. As I look back at this episode, I don't remember anyone even talking to him at our meetings. I must have come off as an easy mark for him in class. Bernie told me he would take care of everything. He said he would do all the talking when we arrived at the hanger deck at the base. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I found this hard to believe. I was his stooge or second fiddle on this enterprise, nothing more. The urge to call it off, triggered by Bernie's surly mood, rose steadily in my mind.

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Soon Los Alamitos Naval Air Station loomed into view. I decided that moment that I wouldn't continue with this caper until I got more details. Were we breaking the law? Just how could we proceed with nothing but our dog tags and our recruit IDs? Was he serious about having a good time? One moment he was normal, and the next moment he was acting strangely. All along, I had begun wondering if Bernie was right in the head. In naval terminology, what took the wind out of my sails was his sudden repentance, after his mom dropped us off at the gate. For a moment, I stood there deep in thought... Should I go or should I stay! I asked myself, as I sat motionless on my seat.

Seeing my hesitation, Bernie said contritely, "Please, forgive me for being rude!"

"... I dunno, Bernie." I shrugged my shoulders. "... Are you really sorry? You frowned when you said that. Why're you grinding your teeth?"

"All right" He forced a grin. "I'm sorry, I truly am. It's going to be fun, Noel. You have my promise!"

His mother looked worried when he gave him a hug, peck on the cheek, and he jumped out of the car. Grabbing my duffle bag, I slid out of the back seat, and bid his mother goodbye. She peered anxiously at me, as if to say 'take care of my boy,' and broke into a sweet smile, but Bernie didn't give her a second glance as he charged toward the gate. No sooner had we presented our IDs to the Marine guard, than he was racing down the road toward the airfield with his duffle bag, huffing, puffing, and muttering incoherently under his breath.

"Bernie, are you certain you want to do this?" her voice faded into the distance. "Be careful boys. Wear your parachutes on the plane!"

"I'll call you when we arrive," he shouted. "Hurry, Noel," he called back breathlessly. "There's no time to waste."

"Why are we running?" I screamed at him. "Are we late? What's the rush?"

"Don't worry. We should make it. It's hangar four." He pointed, almost tripping on his gear.

"Are we really going to be wearing parachutes?" I yelled. "I want more information Bernie. You've been acting weird!"

Bernie managed a laugh. "My mom has us mixed up with the Army Airborne. We're not paratroopers. We're going on a personnel transport, Noel. It leaves at nine o'clock."

“Jeez Bernie,” I cried, glancing at my watch. “We got ten minutes. We won’t have time for breakfast. You’re really cutting it close!”

Bernie admitted that he already had breakfast. I would be flying with an empty stomach. As we approached our destination with our duffle bags slung over our shoulders, we could see a plane that looked like a DC-4. I would learn later that it was called a C-54 in the navy. It sat in front of the hangar deck; its silver plates flashing with sunlight, as if ready to take off any moment. I was both frightened and excited at the same time. Before I could bawl him out for his erratic behavior and not getting breakfast, however, he once more tried defusing my anger.

“I know you’re upset.” He waved his hands. “I’m sorry for the way I’m acting. It has nothing to do with you, Noel. I’m just nervous about being on time. I have everything planned out. I just need to find my Uncle’s friend.” “Let’s see where is that fellow?” He muttered, shielding his eyes from the sun.

He scanned the hangar deck in back of the plane. There were several different kind of aircraft parked inside, including a second C-54. A handful of men in naval dungarees and shirts mulled around a wing engine, eying us with curiosity. One third-class sailor was inspecting the tail section of the C-54 and an airman appeared to be checking the wheel well of the plane. From an office in the rear of the hangar, I could see a third group—naval personnel in uniforms, their duffle bags on their shoulders, a few holding suitcases and other gear. Running toward the office, as I stood there contemplating our folly, Bernie called out to someone in this group, “Lou, it’s me, Ralph’s nephew—Bernie. We’re here for the hop to Alameda.”

The middle-aged man, who wore the stripes of a navy chief studied Bernie a moment, then jerked his thumb toward the office. “I remember. Go tell the flight officer you’re here Suarez.” “Not you.” He pointed to me, as Bernie charged ahead. “You look like a deer in headlights. His uncle told me about this kid, but he said nothing about you.”

“Really?” my voice creaked up a notch. “...I don’t understand. He said it’s all arranged.”

“Listen,” he spoke discreetly, “the navy’s pretty lax about these hops. I served with his uncle on the Hornet. I’m doing him a favor. All his nephew has to do is add your names to the flight manifest; it’s as simple as that. I want nothing more to do with this!”

I closed my eyes in disbelief. By the time Bernie returned, the chief had disappeared. Bernie was jumping up and down excitedly, muttering, “I thought I might get challenged and we’d have to show our ID’s, but I was wrong. The log was on the counter, unattended, so I added both our names. Those people really are stupid, Noel. This is going to be a cinch!”

“It’s too simple,” I mumbled, “much too simple. You forged my name on that log, Bernie. What if they find out?”

“You worry too much.” He giggled madly. “We’re home free!”

As the other passengers boarded the plane, we held back politely to let the officers and legitimate enlisted men enter. Until I entered the plane, my misgivings were at their highest level. Bernie had a mischievous expression on his face when he called them stupid. He rubbed his hands as if he just pulled one off, and even did a little jig. I was certain that Bernie had done something wholly fraudulent, and I was now incriminated in the deed. If the fake airman apprentice patches on the shoulders of our dress blues are matched with our airman recruit IDs, we would be in big trouble. I said a prayer (something I rarely do), took a deep breath, and, as the last passenger to enter, followed Bernie into the plane. All eyes seemed to turn our way. I had expected to be challenged at any moment, but then, as we sat down (Bernie by a window and me next to the aisle) I heard the roar of the engines, felt the rumble of the fuselage, and looked out to see the land slip away, and our plane rise quickly off the ground.

“Wow,” I cried, “this is awesome!”

“Your first hop?” An airman looked back and grinned.

“No,” I exclaimed, “my first flight period!”

He laughed. We exchanged names with a handshake. The third class sailor next to him appeared to be listening as we chatted a spell. In fact, several heads turned our way. To avoid controversy, I tried talking small talk with him. When he asked me where I was stationed, however, I was caught immediately off guard. I answered that we were heading to Barber’s Point. It was the simple truth, and yet I heard Bernie gasp. He had warned me about keeping my mouth shut. If the sailor asked me for details, I would have to lie like he did. I didn’t want to do that. I wasn’t good at lying. My parents realized that often enough. So quickly, I tried changing the subject.

“That was some take off,” I commented, gazing down at earth. “How high does this thing fly?”

“The word’s elevation,” the third classman snorted. “This thing is a C-54 passenger transport. Because this is not a pressurized compartment, we fly relatively low—not much more than ten thousand feet.”

As if to underline our discussion, a sudden up thrust of turbulence caused the compartment to rock sharply. According to the third classman, this was the problem of prop jobs like the C-54 that fly at low elevations. It tended to cause more airsickness than pressurized, high elevation craft. During our chat, Bernie was deathly silent. Though I had sounded like a greenhorn among these salts, I was thankful I had changed the subject. Belatedly, though, a gravelly voice now erupted a few rows back: “Barber’s Point? Did he say Barber’s Point? That’s in Hawaii. What the hell’s he doin’ at Los Alamitos?”

“Oh no,” Bernie groaned.

I expected an elbow in the ribs that moment. I didn’t realize what our discussion and the motion of the plane was doing to him, and when he uttered “Oh no” he was going to be sick.

“In the bag, you dumb shit!” the airman cried.

“Awe Christ almighty.” The third classman slapped his forehead. “We gotta barfer. Someone clean that up!”

Fortunately, Bernie had managed to vomit into the deck below and not on his lap. After missing breakfast, I felt nauseated, myself, until someone arrived, mop in hand, to clean the deck below. Raising my shoes up, I watched him slop the mop back and forth and, after dunking it a pale of water, repeat the process several times. With my eyes closed, pinching my nostrils, I cursed the day I ever met Bernie Suarez. For the remainder of the flight, with drooping eyes, slack jaws, and deathly pallor, he sat there moaning to himself. When the mess was cleaned up, there was still that telltale odor in the air. The only good thing to come out of his bout with airsickness was that it had diverted attention from our destination. All the way to Alameda, the smell pervaded the air. For the remainder of our journey, no one talked to us and hostile looks were cast in our direction, which was all right with me now that the subject had changed.

## Chapter Three

### Kissing Cousin

When we arrived at Alameda Naval Air Station, we quickly exited the C-54, following the other passengers down the stairway, across the tarmac, toward the flight office, and then detouring sharply to avoid a challenge. Bernie, who had suddenly regained his wits, was steering me this way and that way toward the main gate. I was fearful that we would be caught now. Stopping at a pay phone near the gate, he reached in his jersey pocket, pulled out a slip of paper, dropped in a quarter, and dialed a number. While listening to Bernie's call, I felt trapped in his scheme. My fate was in his hands.

"Uncle Dominick," he began in a trembling voice, "this is Bernie... Yes Bernard—Constance's kid. Remember me?... You don't? Well, I'm your brother Armand's son. You remember him, don't you?... You do? Good! How are you sir? I'm in the navy now... Yeah, like my dad. I know, you were on an aircraft carrier like him. How's my dad? Oh, he's been dead a long time sir." "Uncle Dominick," he said with bated breath, "I thought I might pay you a visit.... Yeah, I'm here at the base... Oh, Is this a bad time?".... You're daughters are having a slumber party with their friends? .... That's all right sir—we'll stay on the base. I'm sure they'll put us up.... Really, your wife says it's okay. That's very kind of her, Uncle Dominick.... Thank you so much... We'll be outside the main gate of Alameda Naval Air Station."

After he hung up, I followed him to the guard shack now, my heart hammering, in a cold sweat, my fear offset by what I just heard. My mind reeled with possibilities I dare not vocalize. Dominick's daughters were having a slumber party! Though inexperienced in such matters, naughty images flashed into my head.

"We meet our contact tomorrow morning," he said, as we approached the guard. "Smile. Raise your ID card. Keep your duffle bag on your other shoulder. He'll see our airman apprentice stripes and let us pass."

"What if he checks our badges," my voice quivered, "and compares them with our stripes. We'll be screwed Bernie. Tomorrow, we still have to go back in."

The same Bernie who had turned green in the plane acted fearless now. "Going in is a cinch," he promised. "In the morning when there's a lot of traffic, they'll barely notice with all the sailors returning to base. That Marine guard looks bored. Act natural, Noel. You have a guilty look on your face."

I whistled and looked straight ahead. Bernie mumbled, "Have a good evening!" to the guard as we walked passed. I was certain, he would shout, "Halt!" but he remained silent. I held my breath until we were at the bus stop in front of the main gate. Recalling his behavior earlier and then his conduct on the plane, I studied Bernie in the lamplight. I didn't know what to make of this guy. He appeared at first to be an overly sensitive youth. What happened on the C-54 indicated to me that he had a delicate nature. And yet just now, as we skirted the prospects of being arrested and court-martialed for impersonating an airman apprentice, he appeared to have ice water in his veins.

"All right Bernie," I admitted, looking back at the gate. "That was impressive. We were lucky this time. I hope we don't have to do that again!"

Bernie quoted something he must have read (“A hero dies but one death. A coward dies ten thousand times”). What rubbish! I thought, shaking my head. Bursting into laughter, I stifled an urge to argue this point. Was he brave or just plain nuts? I wondered as we waited for his uncle. I must admit that signing us up for an illegal flight and sneaking us out of a naval base took guts, but this sort of courage wouldn’t be admired by military authorities, certainly not that Marine guard.

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At this point, Bernie broke into nervous babble. I had noticed this trait in him at Los Alamitos. I hated small talk. I was tired, hungry, and out-of-sorts. Though we wore our woolen dress blues, there was a chill in the air. Because we were so close to San Francisco, a fog was rolling in. After waiting over an hour, I might have taken this as an evil omen. But then suddenly a rundown 1950 Chevrolet pickup pulled up to the curb. Hearing the blast of its horn, we ran toward the vehicle, tossed our duffle bags in back and climbed in. When Bernie motioned for me to get in first, I shook my head. He cursed me under his breath, growled something unintelligible and slid in. When we were inside the cab I asked him in a whisper why he had made such a fuss. He whispered back, “I wanted the window seat.” “A window seat didn’t help you on the plane!” I murmured. It struck me that moment that he might be susceptible to carsickness too. I introduced myself to his uncle that moment. In front of Bernie’s nose, he shook my hand vigorously, introducing himself as Dominick Enriquez and then broke into friendly chatter. Unlike Bernie and his mother, his accent was quite thick. I barely understood what he was saying, and yet pretended that I did. One thing I did understand after we pulled up to his house and Bernie clamored ahead of us, dragging his duffle bag and mumbling incoherently again under his breath, struck me as ominous

“Bernie is loco,” he muttered discreetly. “He get you in big trouble!”

“What?” I gasped. “Bernie’s loco? I know what that means. Are you serious, Dominick?”

“Silencio!” He nodded, holding a finger up to his lips.

“Oh-my-gawd!” I groaned.

I hoped that Uncle Dominick was trying to be funny. Otherwise, considering his warning and Bernie’s previous behavior, I was being guided by a lunatic. As we followed Bernie into the living room, I heard Spanish being spoken somewhere in the house. Dominick called something out in Spanish in response. It occurred to me that Mister and Misses Enriquez might not be happy about us barging in. Abruptly, to confuse matters, the small room was filled with giggling girls in pajamas. A corpulent, bespeckled Mexican woman appeared that moment, apparently scolding her husband for bringing these strange young men into her house. Bernie spoke to her in Spanish, she nodded reluctantly, and walked over to whisper into Dominick’s ear. In broken English again after she stormed away, Dominick explained that he would get the sleeping bags from the garage. His wife would make them sandwiches if they were hungry and they could sleep on the living room floor. I was embarrassed for such an imposition, but Bernie was perfectly calm after this cold reception.

When I asked him to introduce me to his cousins, he merely snarled. One dark haired girl with a becoming spatter of freckles on her cheeks, reached out her delicate hand and, in perfect English, introduced herself, her two sisters, and her three friends: “I’m Concepcion, this is Maria, Blanca, Rosemary, Monica, and Eileen.”

“My name’s Noel Bridger.” I bowed politely. “Pleased to meet you!”

All five girls were attractive, a mixture of brunettes and blonds, but I was immediately taken with Concepcion. She seemed to have a mischievous gleam in her brown eyes. For that matter so did the other girls. That moment, with grand delusions swimming in my head, I hoped that Bernie was a sound sleeper.

I tried to make small talk—something I wasn't good at. "So you're having a pajama party, eh. My little sister's a Girl Scout. She's having a sort of slumber party, too. My Mom's Girl Scout troop is camping in our backyard."

"Noel, get in here!" Bernie called from the hall.

"He's cute!" Concepcion exclaimed to the others.

As I followed Bernie into the kitchen, he growled, "You keep your hands off them girls!" Looking down at this baby-faced kid, I snickered. "Bernie," I whispered, "don't threaten me. I'm a guest; she was just being friendly."

"I don't care." He puckered his lips. "I know what's on your mind. She's highly impressionable. You're hoping she sneaks into your sack!"

"Hey, I doan got all night." His aunt grumbled.

Quickly, she slapped mayonnaise on four slices of bread, tossed in meat, greens, and yellow peppers, slammed them onto two saucers, hastily poured us two glasses of milk, and stood there a moment, until we sat down.

"Tienes un montón de nervios!" She wrung her finger at Bernie.

Bernie sighed but said nothing. Though she had scolded him, not me, I apologized for both of us. "I'm sorry we're such a bother. We should've stayed on the base."

Flashing Bernie a disgusted look, she exited the kitchen. Turning to Bernie as he began wolfing down his sandwich, I found his indifferent attitude unsettling.

"I'm curious," I said, as he made short order of his meal. "What did she say to you? Your aunt was pretty steamed."

"She said I had a lot of nerve." Bernie grinned, a milk moustache on his upper lip.

"That ain't no lie," I drawled. "You've got ice water in your veins!"

As if he took that as a compliment, Bernie nodded thoughtfully. After chugalugging the remainder of his milk, he waited impatiently for me to finish my sandwich and milk. Because I was a bit upset with him myself, I took my time. During our meal, Uncle Dominick had brought two sleeping bags into the living room, and promptly gone to bed. When we left the kitchen, he, his wife, and the girls were nowhere in sight. Despite my misgivings about our adventure and the cold reception we got from his aunt and uncle, I was warmed by thoughts of Concepcion, a freckle-faced Latin beauty, who titillated my adolescent mind.

Climbing into the sleeping bag in my skivvies (navy jargon for underwear), I tried my best to ignore Bernie. A night-light burned on the adjacent wall. I prayed that the day's ordeal had worn him out and he would soon be asleep. Listening to the giggling of the girls in a distant room, I imagined I heard the patter of bare feet in the hall. At first Bernie had moved his sleeping bag to the sofa, leaving me alone on the hardwood floor. Because this was typical of his mannerisms, I wasn't surprised or dismayed. I didn't want to lie next to him. I just wanted him to fall asleep. A snore from his corner of the room would have been a pleasing sound. Bernie then left the room momentarily; I assumed it was to use the restroom. Strangely enough, however, when he reentered the room, he had splashed an overpowering scent on himself, probably his uncle's cologne. Suddenly, the living room smelled like Old Spice, obliterating entirely the faint perfume I detected on Concepcion. Gone also was my hope for a late night encounter with her. My first thought when Bernie snapped on a lamp, was that he was afraid of

the dark, an action that further damaged the ambience of the room. Did he suspect my motives? I wondered, as he prepared his nest. Before I realized what he was doing, he removed the cushions, yanked on the mattress below, and out sprang a fold-a-way bed. Placing the sleeping bag on the mattress, he giggled with satisfaction, and then reached over to snap off the lamp. A faint, eerie light played on his features. Two points of light glowed in his shadowy face.

“That floor is hard, Noel,” he beckoned. “Come on, I won’t bite!”

I was wrong; Bernie wasn’t afraid of the dark. A terrible dread gripped me. Though I didn’t know the correct terminology for my feelings back then and I relate this in retrospect now, I wanted to jump up, pull on my clothes, and flee the house. In the darkness, as he lie there staring down at me, he reminded me of a predator. Though I was quite capable of defending myself against this puny fellow, I felt like his prey. Several moments passed, as I planned my next moves: getting dressed and, with my duffle bag slung over my shoulder, hitching a ride on the highway heading south. What stopped me cold, as I began fumbling around for my trousers, was a sound breaking the silence.

As I had prayed for, Bernie had fallen asleep and was snoring peacefully on his side of the room. I could still hear the girls giggling in the house, but I was happy just to get a good night’s sleep. Perhaps, I was wrong about Bernie. Nevertheless his actions, as innocent as they might have been, gave me the creeps. Like Bernie, I was worn out after today. The smell of his Old Spice and snoring and the hardwood floor couldn’t keep me awake that night as I tumbled into slumber. Later, however, as Bernie slept in comfort, I dreamed we were caught sneaking back onto the base, roughed up by a pair of burly Marines, and thrown into the brig. In our cell, Bernie blamed me for us getting caught. In fact, he blamed me for everything. I had a guilty look on my face, he claimed. From the beginning, I continued to question his judgment. Because of me, we would be drummed out of the service—all because of my lack of faith. Naturally, I flew into the rage in my nightmare, calling him all sorts of names—curse words I learned from my dad.

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I remember awakening from my nightmare, sweating and staring wildly around the room. For a terrifying moment, I didn’t know where I was. Everything came back slowly. My first impressions were the hardwood floor, pungent odor Old Spice, and pig-like snort of Bernie across the room. Before this interlude, I recalled the hectic day at Los Alamitos, ordeal on the plane, and my fear when we left the base. As I lay there in my sleeping bag trying to fall back asleep, a face loomed overhead: Concepcion. Bending down quickly, she kissed me on the mouth, and then scurried back into the hall. I heard giggling from her sisters and friends, who had probably dared her to kiss the young man on the floor. A faint smell of musk perfume lingered in the living room. In my immature, adolescent mind I felt great excitement. Under the circumstances, I couldn’t follow this up. What delighted me the most about her daring-do was that it happened under Bernie’s nose. Had he been awake he would have had a fit. I wouldn’t tell him about the encounter, but I planned on telling my friends back home. Of course, I would embellish it somewhat; that seemed understandable. I wondered, as I drifted back into slumber, what would have happened if Bernie hadn’t been in the room.

When I awakened a second time, I was staring this time up at Bernie’s face. “Oh my gawd!” I groaned. He was fully dressed, his hand resting on his duffle bag. I could hear giggling again somewhere in the house.

“Up and Adam!” He chimed. “Uncle Dominick’s driving us to the base. He’s in a bad mood. So hurry it up. There’s no time to waste!”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” I grumbled. “I need coffee. I gotta pee!”

Fearful that the girls might see me in my skivvies, I pulled my trousers on quickly, pulled on my jersey, and sat down at my leisure to put on my socks and shoes.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” I grumbled.

“Here,” he snickered, “you forgot your hat.”

Patting my sailor’s hat onto my head, he hefted his duffle bag as if we might go straight out the door.

Remembering more of my dad’s swear words, I growled, “You ass wipe! You self-centered bastard! You’ll wait till I take a leak. So help me, Bernie, I’ll walk out the door, hitch hike home, and report you to naval command!”

Bernie was taken back a moment. I didn’t know anything about naval command, but it sounded good. While he stood there with his duffle bag on his shoulder, I hurried down the hall, looking for a bathroom. Luckily no one occupied it at the moment. I did my business and stared in the mirror on the medicine chest. I needed a shower. There were rings under my eyes and bristles on my cheeks and chin. As I exited the bathroom, I met Concepcion still in her pajamas, grabbed her in my arms, and kissed her passionately on her lips. It was the boldest thing I had ever done. Her small, firm little breasts pressed against my chest. She was panting. Her eyes were wide with surprise. Shocked at what I had done, I immediately apologized. Just that moment, Bernie looked in on us, an accusing look on his face, but Concepcion smiled sweetly, gave me another kiss before prancing back down the hall.

“You-you, kissed my cousin,” he sputtered. “I caught you red-handed!”

“No, Bernie.” I thought quickly. “You saw her kiss *me*, and that’s not my fault. *Get over it!*”

“Bernie,” Uncle Dominick called from the kitchen, “let’s go!”

As we entered the kitchen, Dominick held open the door leading into the garage. His wife was fixing breakfast for her family and her daughters’ friends. A large table was set with many plates and glasses and, torturing my senses, the smell of bacon, eggs, and toast wafted in the air. Thanks to Bernie we weren’t going to be fed. After tossing our duffle bags into the back of the pickup, Bernie stood there waiting for me to climb in. I didn’t have the energy this time to argue with him, so I scooted in. As I sat next to his uncle, I watched Dominick wolf down a bacon and egg sandwich, as a steaming cup of coffee sat in the cup holder. Mentally, I compared Bernie’s sweet mother and friendly cousins to the rest of his family. They were best of the lot. I couldn’t imagine Misses Suarez being so rude. In spite of the rumbling of my stomach and ringing head, I had one thing now that Bernie didn’t have: a kiss from Concepcion’s lips.

## Chapter Four

### The Second Hop

Our trip from Oakland to Alameda Naval Air Station was conducted in cold silence. Bernie was angry with me for kissing his cousin. Uncle Dominick was angry with Bernie for barging into his life. Sitting between these two grumpy souls, I was comforted by the thought of Concepcion. And yet the adventure ahead filled with me misgivings when I considered the risks involved. We had been lucky so far, but how long would our luck last? When we arrived at the main gate again, Dominick pulled up to the curb waiting just long enough for us to retrieve our duffle bags before taking off. Once more, as we trudged into the base, I was stricken with fear. Flashing our IDs, we passed the guard on duty as quickly as possible. He was bigger and meaner looking than the night guard. Bernie looked back, worried that I would present a guilty face. I looked straight forward, a grin frozen on my face. He frowned at me and shook his head. When the guard station was safely behind us, however, his grumpiness vanished completely.

Slapping me on the back, he exclaimed, "Well, Noel, we pulled it off again. Now let's go get some breakfast!"

"Really?" I muttered in disbelief. "This time we have time to eat?"

"Sure." He nodded calmly. "Our plane doesn't leave for two hours. The mess hall's open. That's why we had to hurry. Wait till you taste navy chow!"

Before having breakfast, it was necessary to store our duffle bags in a safe place. Bernie entered the first row of barracks, found the man on duty, and asked him to watch our gear. Except for my shaving kit and a few articles of civilian dress, there wasn't much worth stealing in my bag. I hadn't brought my pee coat along and the only valuable items I had were the sixteen dollars in my wallet, but Bernie didn't trust the man on duty. Opening up his bag momentarily, he retrieved his electric razor and stuffed it into his pocket.

As we made our way to the mess hall, other sailors were heading that way too, many of them hung over like myself. The line into the hall moved slowly. The smell of bacon, sausage, eggs, and coffee revitalized my spirits. For those moments I didn't hate Bernie. When it was our turn to grab a tray, I was dazzled by the array of breakfast items. I had never seen so much food. I decided I would stuff myself like a pig. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, hash brown potatoes, and toast were heaped on my tray, to be washed down by coffee and orange juice. Fearful he would upchuck again on the plane, Bernie selected a more conservative selection, including oatmeal, fresh cut fruit, and toast. Making up for his lack of food were the glasses of milk he drank with his meal. He guzzled down one glass after another.

I gave him a concerned look that moment. "I wouldn't drink that much liquid, Bernie. We'll be airborne soon. It'll slosh around in you like a blender."

"You shouldn't talk," he said, eying my tray. "At least I'm not flying on a full stomach. Besides, there's a restroom on C-54s. I can go on the plane."

"I wasn't talking about pissing," I replied through a mouthful of food. "I was talking about puking, and I don't get airsick like you. I spent enough time on roller coasters to know that."

"Ick!" He made. "Don't remind me. You have no manners Noel? Don't talk with your mouth full!"

After breakfast, we retraced our steps back to the barracks where we left our gear. Right in front of the sailor on duty, Bernie checked his duffle bag, stuffed the electric razor and cord back in, and, mumbling thanks, slung it over his shoulder and headed for the door. I thought his suspicion was ill mannered and thanked the man before exiting the barracks. All seemed to be copasetic for us, as we began searching for the terminal. With a full tummy my spirits had risen considerably in spite of Bernie's moods. Already, he had lapsed into what I now categorize as his serious mood. I didn't know that he was bipolar then. In fact, I'm not sure they had a word for it in 1960. But when he wasn't giddy or grumpy, he was in a no-nonsense frame of mind with little to say. In the words of my dad, "he didn't suffer fools."

"Man, this place is huge," I commented, scanning left and right. "Look at all the planes!" "One, two, three, four, five, six hangars," I counted, "all filled with planes. Look at the ones lined up on the field!"

"I'm not 'looking for planes or hangars," he grumbled. "I'm looking for the terminal."

"You mean like LAX." I frowned. "I dunno, Bernie. That complicates things, doesn't it? You told me it was all arranged."

"Be quiet Noel," he snapped, stomping his foot. "I'm trying to concentrate."

"Well *excuse* me!" I frowned. "Why're you so nervous? Are you lost?"

"I'm not lost!" he screamed. "I just can't find it. Well you please shut up!"

"Damn it Bernie," I shot back. "You said you had a contact. Find a phone and call him up!"

In retrospect, I would label this as one of Bernie's grouchy moods. After pausing to pat his back pocket, a look of horror fell over his face and a fourth mood surfaced for him.

"Oh no," he shrieked, "I lost my wallet!"

"What!" I gasped. "You lost your wallet? Good grief, Bernie. Are you sure?"

"Yes," he gave a wounded cry. "It must have fallen out in the pickup."

"But you showed the guard your card?"

"I keep that in my jersey pocket." He gave me a stricken look. "You know what this means. I have to call that cranky man up again. There might not be enough time. What if it dropped out somewhere in his house? Maybe I dropped it after we entered the base: in the mess hall, in the barracks, near the guard shack, or by the main gate." "My driver's license was in there." He broke down in tears. "All my important information, including money my mom gave me. I gotta find a phone, Noel. Oh, I don't want to call that man again. Please don't make me do that."

I gave him a look of disgust. "Are you crying, Bernie? I lost my wallet at school. What's the big deal? All you need is your ID. Stop bawling. It's not the end of the world!"

"Yes it is," he wailed, "we have to find it. I'll find a phone. You can talk to him this time, Noel. He likes you. He really does!"

"No, he doesn't Bernie." I shook my head. "He thinks I'm dumb gringo, and he thinks you're crazy. Besides, it's too late to call him. He won't get here in time." "Come on." I motioned wearily. "Let's go back to the last place we were at: the mess hall. Maybe when you sat down, it dropped out."

"Well, all right." He sniffled, rubbing his eyes. "I hope we find it."

After searching the mess hall—a difficult task considering how many diners were still inside, we gave up. If it had fallen out there, I tried reasoning with him, someone might very well have stolen it. Our next best bet was to return the barracks where our duffle bags were left. Trudging back to the barracks, we talked to the sailor on duty. He shook his head and told us to

check the lost and found. When Bernie started blubbering again, the man looked at him in amazement.

“What’s wrong with you?” he scolded. “This ain’t the Girl Scouts. Where’s your backbone? You need your Mama’s tit?”

“Bernie,” I said through gritting teeth, as I led him out of the barracks, “get a grip on yourself!”

“Everything’s ruined now,” he lamented. “I need my wallet. Where could it be?”

In utter desperation now, he opened his duffle bag and began rifling through it. I didn’t bother asking him why he was tossing his pants, shirt, and skivvies out onto the pavement. At this point, I no longer cared. I was being led by a fool. He was self-destructing right in front of me. Several enlisted men passed by us on their way to the mess hall or to their duty stations.

One third classman paused to question Bernie’s behavior. “What’s that lad doing?” he asked with a snarl.

“He lost his wallet,” I murmured.

“Hah,” he exclaimed, “looks to me like he lost his mind!”

“Bernie, stop it,” I bent over to whisper, “you’re behaving badly. You’re uncle’s right. You need help. You really do!”

“What’s that at the bottom of the bag?” he mumbled deliriously, crawling inside.

As I watched Bernie’s small body enter the duffle bag, I broke into hysterical laughter. A group of enlisted men and one navy chief had stopped to watch the show. Bernie had almost disappeared into the bag except for his calves and shoes. All eight of the men were laughing loudly now at his antics.

“Ho-ho, is this an act?” the chief asked, doubling over. “Funniest thing I ever saw!”

The other men kicked at him playfully with the toes of their shoes. More seriously, a young airman asked if Bernie was having some kind of fit, and a Marine Corporal on his way to the guard shack stopped to investigate the scene.

“Now you’ve done it!” I groaned, as he inspected the bag.

“What’s he doing in there?” He looked squarely at me. “Is he drunk or on drugs?”

“No,” I explained nervously, “he lost his wallet.”

“I found it!” came a muffled voice. “It was here all the time!”

Scooting back out, his uniform covered with lint, hair mussed, and face puffy from crying, he looked up at the corporal and grinned.

The corporal wasn’t smiling. “Are you drunk or insane?” He gave Bernie a fierce look.

“He’s upset.” I said, helping Bernie to his feet. “He lost his wallet. We’re late for our plane.”

“What plane?” The corporal searched my face. “You guys here for a hop?”

“Yes sir,” I replied foolishly. “We’re going to Hawaii.”

“I’m not a sir,” he growled. “You see bars on my shoulders?”

“No sir, I mean corporal,” I straightened my shoulders. “You look really official.”

“Official?” He made a face. “What kind of talk’s that?” “Say,” he did a double take.

“You guys sound like recruits.”

I thought for sure that the jig was up. After this, I expected him to check our military ID and then compare them with our airman apprentice stripes. I was speechless, and for the first time during our caper Bernie was too. My mind was in turmoil. Silently, I prayed for deliverance. Suddenly, however, the corporal burst out laughing. I have no idea why anyone could find this amusing. In spite of my hysterical laughter, I didn’t find it funny at all. Bernie

had looked utterly ridiculous, and yet his antics had provided great entertainment for the enlisted men and chief. To camouflage my terror, I joined their merriment, giggling like a buffoon. Because the corporal didn't check our IDs proved to me once more there was a God. He swaggered away afterwards without a backward glance, chuckling under his breath. Regaining his composure, Bernie gathered up his clothes and stuffed them back into his duffle bag. Slinging the bag over his shoulder, he muttered, "Let's go. We've got to hurry!"

With the greatest misgivings, I followed Bernie. Here I was hundreds of miles from home, stranded on a military base with a lunatic. I couldn't trust him, especially now. He behaved horribly this hour and made us look guilty in front of that Marine. I wanted to go home. Despite my predicament, I decided to wait until we reached the terminal and Bernie found his contact. If it looked like he was going to incriminate us, as he almost did before, I would make a beeline for the gate. I didn't want to wind up being court-martialed and thrown in the brig. As we approached a building close to one of the hangars, I watched his reactions closely. He acted indecisive and disoriented for several moments, as if he wasn't sure where he was at or what he was doing. A sign over the building read in bold letters "Alameda Naval Air Terminal," and yet he paused in front, looking this way and that, an anxious look on his face.

When I asked him if he was lost, he snapped, "Lost. Of course, I'm not lost. At Ten-thirty I'm supposed to meet someone, right here in front of this building."

"Bernie," I said, as he paced back and forth. "Why are you doing this on the sly? Is this legal? I want to know once and for all: are we breaking the law?"

"No!" He stomped his foot. "Why can't you trust me? I got us this far, didn't I? Soon, thanks to me, we'll be on our way to Hawaii—paradise islands. You'll be chasing hula girls and lying drunk on the beach. No one's going to know, so stop worrying. Give me a chance!"

Certain of his duplicity that moment, I backed up a pace, did an about face, and advanced toward the main gate.

"What're you doing?" he shrieked. "You're leaving now, after all I've done? Come back here, you bastard! How dare you abandon me now! You asshole! You son-of-a-bitch!"

As enlisted men and officers walked in and out of the terminal, they glanced at Bernie. A few of them stopped to gawk, a small crowd gathered, until one a pilot, with lieutenant bars on his collar, walked over and shouted in his face, "What's wrong with you young man?"

"Huh?" Bernie stood slack-jawed, as if awakening from a dream.

As I explained before, I came to the conclusion many years later that he was bipolar, but it was 1960. Few people were aware of this disorder, and yet an excuse for his behavior popped into my mind. What triggered it was the whine of an ambulance in the distance. Obviously there was a medical emergency somewhere on the base. I remembered a term we learned in our first meeting at Los Alamitos, when the instructor introduced us to navy jargon, tradition, and rules: section eight—a label given to mentally incompetent or disturbed military personnel. Bernie clearly fit this description.

"He's being transferred, sir." I explained, pointing to my head. "It's complicated. He'll calm down in a while. Please don't put him on report."

A second officer appeared that moment, probably also a pilot, trotting hastily toward the terminal. "Jim," he called, "a technician checked it out. We got a broken hydraulic line. There's going to be a delay."

"Really?" Jim looked away from Bernie. "We've got sixteen passengers. I just checked the manifest."

“I should report him,” he muttered to me. “That was outrageous. That guy needs help. Is he on drugs? What’s wrong with him?”

“It’s a mental thing.” I answered quickly. “He won’t do it again.”

“You’re lucky I’m in a hurry.” He turned back to Bernie. “This is the navy man, not a mental ward. Stop that sniveling. Control your filthy mouth!”

When Jim followed his friend across the tarmac toward a row of parked C-54s the thought occurred to me that they were talking about our plane. I didn’t mention this to Bernie. He was already in a bad state. I was afraid that my departure might throw him into a psychotic rage, so I just stood there in a quandary.

“You’re crazy.” I murmured.

I wasn’t sure if he even heard me. As I studied him that moment, he withdrew from me, leaving his duffle bag on the sidewalk, plopping down dejectedly on one of the benches in front of the building.

“What time is it?” he asked, staring dully into space.

“Ten-forty-five.” I answered, after checking my watch. “He’s late, isn’t he? You said, ‘No one’s going to know.’ That answered my question. What we’re doing is illegal. You’re dragging me into your plot, Bernie. I don’t want to go to prison, and neither do you. Let’s go home, okay?”

“You’re such a coward!” he groaned. “You have no guts!”

I stared at him in disbelief. “You think *I’m* a coward?” I spat angrily. “You whining, little crybaby! Your performance back there almost got us into a heap of trouble. You have no self-control, Bernie. You’re the one who’s a coward. My little sister’s more grownup than you!”

Once more his personality changed. I thought of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde then. With his fists clinched he charged toward me. “This is all your fault!” he screamed. This time, to avoid trouble, I grabbed him by the collar and drug him away from the entrance.

“Shut up! Shut up!” I growled through gritting teeth. After shaking him soundly, I slammed him against a wall, and tried reasoning with him. “You moron; you heard that pilot. Next time, they’ll haul you away!”

“I’m sorry,” his mood shifted, “please don’t leave. I can’t go by myself. I won’t do it again. Please give me another chance!”

“Bernie,” I tried to explain, “I don’t think you can help it... I think you’re nuts!”

He shook his head vehemently. “No, no I’m not crazy. Really, Noel; I’m not. You think I’d be in the navy if I was nuts?”

“Yeah,” I replied, searching for words, “...You have many moods, Bernie. I’m sure you fooled them. Right now you’re in your ‘sorry’ mood. If I piss you off again, you’ll go bananas just like before!”

That instance, before he could respond, I heard a voice, “Bernie Suarez? Which one of you is Bernie Suarez?” Startled half of my wits, expecting an officer or the military police to challenge our presence on the base, I noted recognition in Bernie’s eyes. A smile broke his tear-stained face. When I reeled around, a swarthy, dark, squat little man in a flight suit and baseball cap, chewing on an unlit cigar, approached us. I couldn’t tell what his rank was. Except for his attire, which indicated that he was a member of a flight crew, he barely looked navy at all.

“I’m him,” Bernie hopped forward.

He bowed, shook the man’s grimy hand, and related our mission here at Alameda Naval Air Station. The man said very little, as he lit his cigar. I knew Bernie was a liar, but I was stunned by his claim. Though he appeared jittery this time, the man nodded and there wasn’t a

flicker of suspicion in his dark eyes. What came out of Bernie's jabbering mouth was the biggest whopper of them all.

"...So you see sir," he summed up his dilemma, "we have to reach our squadron on Barber's point before they join the carrier group off Midway Island. It was a last minute thing. I heard you were my father's friend in the navy. You were the only one I could turn to."

"That's enough!" he held up a hand. "You're dad helped me out of a jam once. I'll add you to the flight manifest. Go inside the terminal, and find C-54 525, fill in your name and serial numbers, and report to hangar three. We leave in fifteen minutes."

"Oh, thank you sir," Bernie bowed again. "You saved our lives!"

For a moment I thought he was going to kiss the man's hand. Looking passed Bernie, he gave me a sympathetic look. "Bernie didn't introduce me." He smiled faintly. "My name's Al Papas."

"Noel, Bridger, sir" I chirped, shaking his hand.

"Just Al." He frowned. "Take my advice." He looked back at Bernie. "Don't bow and click your heels. You're an airmen apprentice, not a SS officer. And don't grovel when you talk to someone. Give them a firm handshake and look them squarely in the eyes."

"Yes sir—I mean Al." He nodded vigorously.

This time Bernie reminded me of one of those bobbing head dolls on the dashboard of cars. Al Papas shook his head, laughed dryly, and trotted back to his plane. Before I could question Bernie's latest antic, I found myself following him into the terminal to sign in. I couldn't believe how lax the navy was. At the word of a crewman, and after simply entering our names and serial numbers on the flight manifest, we were flying to Hawaii. I should have been excited, but all I could think as I took my turn, was that I was committing fraud. Charging excitedly out the door, Bernie ignored my whispers, "What if they check us out? Meeting our squadron at Barber's point? Why did you have to add that stuff about the aircraft carrier and Midway Island? What if they ask us what aircraft we're assigned to? What if the pilot demands to see our IDs?"

These questions remained unanswered as he ran frantically to the hangar, so I repeated them, adding, as I grabbed his duffle bag strap, "Stop running Bernie. He said the plane's leaving in fifteen minutes. That gives us plenty of time. Were you listening to me? Why would you say such a stupid thing?"

"It's all I could think of." He shrugged.

"Really?" I searched his face. "You could've left it at 'We have to meet our squadron.' Why'd you add that other shit?"

"I dunno," he muttered sheepishly. "It sounded good. My dad was on a carrier. So were my uncles."

"I don't care, Bernie. You're using your father's name to break the law. What if they decide to check our orders?" "Hello!" I held my thumb and small finger up to my ear. "We don't have any orders. When you're sent to a new duty station, you're supposed to have *orders*. If someone says they're on an aircraft carrier, they might just check out the ship's manifest. Our instructor covered all this in class. It's covered the Uniform Code of Military Justice, too. Just because Los Alamitos and Alameda are careless doesn't mean our next pilot or the duty officer at Barber's Point are lax"

Bernie nodded curtly, but then broke away, and continued running toward the hangar.

"Where's 525?" he cried frantically. "Oh my gawd." He slipped further into his terror mood. "What if it's Jim's plane?"

“Wait a minute.” I grabbed his arm. “You mean that pilot who bawled you out?”

“Yes!” he slapped his forehead.

I had thought the same thing. Alarm returned to his eyes. Earlier in our caper he had scolded me for worrying too much. Now, with eyes wide and trembling lips, he looked as if he might start bawling again. Looking across the tarmac, I spotted C-54 525 and a trio of crewman looking on. I couldn't see the pilot Jim in their midst but in the middle stood Al Papas.

Heaving a sigh of relief, I shook him gently. “Bernie, don't you remember what Jim's friend told him? That plane is grounded for repair.” “Look over there.” I pointed to 525. “That's *our* crew. They're waiting for the passengers. That includes us.”

A courier rode up on a bicycle that very moment and handed the pilot a clipboard, which I assumed was the flight manifest. A group of enlisted men and a few officers trotted out of the hangar with their duffle bags, and lined up in front of the passenger-boarding stairs. Unlike the last time at Los Alamitos when everyone entered the plane pell-mell, this would be an orderly affair. Bernie's expression changed from abject fear to a milder form of alarm.

“Why're those crewman standing there?” he mumbled to himself. “Why aren't they in the plane?”

“They're checking off names,” I explained thoughtfully. “You know, like school when the teacher calls role.”

As we got in line behind the other passengers, Bernie grew hysterical. His eyes widened again with terror and he muttered, “Oh no, Oh no,” over and over again. I could understand his fear, but I tried maintaining my cool. The first enlisted man to approach one of the men, I assumed was the pilot, raised up his ID card. The pilot checked his name off and he clonked up the stairs. This continued for three more passengers, until a first classman pulled out his dog tags and let the pilot read them.

“Did you see that Bernie?” I gave him my elbow. “Answer me, you dumb shit. Stop talking to yourself.”

“Uh huh.” He jerked his head up and down.

“Get your dog tags ready.” I directed. “Like you told me, look straight ahead. Come on Bernie, I thought you had ice water in your veins.”

Almost instinctively, I began praying. This time it was more like a chant. I don't remember what I said, but once more it seemed to work. I moved ahead of Bernie to set an example. When I approached the pilot, I raised my dog tags up, gave Al a petrified look, as if to say, “Save me!” and waited for the pilot to check off my name.

“These are the two lads I told you about.” Al informed him. “They're catching a squadron at Barber's Point.”

“Is that right young man?” the pilot raised an eyebrow.

“Yes sir,” my voice creaked.

Seeing his nod, I saluted him belatedly, held tightly onto my duffle bag strap, and began trudging light-headedly up the stairs.

“You must be Bernie Suarez.” I heard the pilot say.

Bernie mumbled, “Uh huh” again.

“I heard about your dad, Armand Suarez. He was stationed on the Hornet. That's quite an aircraft carrier. Is that the name of your ship?”

“I'm not sure,” Bernie blurted, “our squadron's stationed at Barber's point. We're going on maneuvers with a task force. It might just be the Hornet. Wouldn't that be great?”

As I entered the plane, I was directed by a sailor to stow my duffle bag aft. He looked at me with suspicion that instant. Numb with fear, I followed his instructions, wondering if this was our moment of truth. When I heard footsteps clonking up the stairs, I looked back to see Bernie's grinning face. Only moments ago he had been stricken with terror. Now the old Bernie was back. I could scarcely believe he pulled it off. After stowing his duffle bag, he slid in ahead me in order to grab the window seat. Our seats were midway in the passenger compartment as they had been before. Deju vu filled me as we sat there waiting for the engines to rep up.

Bending to the side he whispered to me, "If you're going to tell a lie, lie big. I wasn't worried anyhow with Al standing there. I think he's the co-pilot or navigator. When we get to Barber's Point and it's time to go home, it'll be much easier. We'll just be going home for leave. Those kind've hops are a breeze."

"All right, Bernie," I exhaled. "We'll cross that bridge when it comes. But what about your airsickness. What're you going to do about that?"

"Maybe I won't get it airsick this time," he said, looking out the window. "It's like when I'm in a car. If I can look out and see the road ahead, I'm all right."

"That ain't no road out there," the man behind us informed him. "That's sky. You see any blacktop or road signs?" "Here," he snorted, his hand poking between our seats, "take this pill. It'll stop the nausea. I take them all the time."

"Is that drugs?" Bernie curled his lip.

"No," he snapped, "its called Dramamine. It's for motion sickness: air, car, ship, roller coaster—you name it."

"Not drugs, eh," he said studying the pill. "Where do you get these?"

"Any pharmacy," he explained, shaking out a few more from this bottle. "Here take these, I have plenty."

"You're a very nice man." Bernie grinned with appreciation.

Names were exchanged that moment and we shook his hand. It just so happened that First Class Mechanic Bud Workman was returning to Barber's Point. I was certain, by the crafty look on Bernie's face, this was good news. He had found one more contact to meet his ends. After taking one of the Dramamines and slipping the others into his jersey pocket, he sat back and waited for the pill to take effect. I would learn later that Bernie took two more just to be sure. As I listened to the engines rep up and felt the fuselage tremble, I saw him tense up and roll his eyes, and slowly, after a half hour of flight, relax, and fall finally sleep. A snore rattled out of his infantile face. I settled back myself, and, trying to keep my conversation to the level of small talk, chatted with Bud and the other passengers nearby. This time I managed to steer the subject to Bud's long career in the navy. Bud, like Bernie's father, was stationed on the USS Hornet CVS-12. He joined in 1951 during the Korean War and his carrier task force provided bombing runs against the Communists in North Korea. When I asked him if he knew Armand Suarez, who was also stationed on the Hornet, he scratched his chin, thought a moment, and then raising forward in his seat, studied Bernie a moment.

"That must be his son." He laughed wryly. "I remember that man's name. How many Armand Suarez's do you meet in one lifetime? He was once on my ship, the Hornet. It's a small world we live in, isn't it?"

"Yes, it surely is." I rolled my eyes in wonder. "A chief knew him at Los Alamitos. One of the crewmen at Alameda also knows him. I can't believe that you know him too!"

"Did that fellow at Los Alamitos or the crewman tell you anything about Armand?"

“No,” I shook my head. “Bernie told me a few things, though. The story’s always the same: he was a World War Two hero on the Hornet, and he was killed after the war.”

“Ho-ho,” Bud laughed softly, “told you that, did he? Maybe that’s what his mother told him. I don’t know about him being a hero; that was before I enlisted. When the Japanese started their Kamikaze raids there were a lot of heroes; that’s what I heard. Not all of them got medals. I was only an airman apprentice when I met Armand, but you couldn’t forget a guy like that. He was a real loud mouth. I remember catching sight of him in Honolulu. I was with my buddies in this bar listening to him telling about his exploits and narrow escapes—Japanese planes attacking, shooting down Kamikazes, and the fire brigades. Everyone on ship knew and liked Armand, even green horns like us. He got shore duty before we set sail, but I saw him again at Barber’s Point. He was a chief mechanic then, still friendly, still loud, always ready to tell a tale.... I don’t know what he’s doing now.... So why would your friend say he was killed?”

“What are you saying?” I gasped. “He’s not dead? Armand Suarez’s *alive*?”

“Oh yes.” He chortled. “He’s alive all right—at least the last time I saw him.”

“That’s incredible.” I exclaimed. “Do you work with him at Barber’s Point?”

“No,” he sighed, “I live in Oakland. I’m returning from leave. The Enterprise, my new ship, is in Pearl. We’re going into dry dock up in Washington.” “Say,” he commented, peeking over the seat, “it’s a good thing he’s a sound sleeper. That Dramamine did the trick!”

“Yeah.” I studied Bernie. “How long does it last?”

“Depends.” He shrugged his shoulders. “If you’re already tired, maybe a few hours. It’s better than being sick all the way.” “Hey,” his voice lowered, “why would he believe his father’s dead? Sounds like he’s really proud of his dad. There’s something strange about that!”

“I agree.” I raised an eyebrow. “The question is ‘Do I tell him?’... All this time he thought his father was dead, he was alive, still in the navy, and stationed at the very place we’re going to now. How coincidental is that?”

“I wouldn’t tell him,” Bud gave me conspiratorially look. What’s that old saying? Ah yes: ‘Let sleeping dogs lie.’”

For the remainder of the flight, I listened to the chatter of the passengers and Bernie’s snoring, wondering if I should take Bud’s advice. Remembering a name Bernie mentioned, I asked him if he had ever heard of a Ralph at Barber’s Point. Bud told me he knew several Ralphs but none in Hawaii. A notion grew in my mind as we approached our destination: In addition to his stepfather and his father, whom he never knew, Bernie had a lot of uncles. There were Uncle Dominick, Uncle Ralph, and Uncle Raul, who introduced Bernie to tequila. Where were other uncles too? At that point in my life, I didn’t understand what that might imply. It confused and troubled me, and yet like a dim bulb rising in intensity, I sensed the meaning. Had his mother been a woman of ill repute? I thought about this attractive woman and her pleasant disposition and found this difficult to believe. The implications, though they might be circumstantial, seemed branded in my skull. My most troubling thought, however, was that Armand Suarez was alive. Considering Bernie’s claim that his father was dead, this revelation was shocking. Had his mother, as Bud suggested, told him this? Why would she do such a wicked thing? If she hadn’t told Bernie his father was dead, where did he get such an idea?... Poor Bernie... Bud was right: let sleeping dogs lie.”

## Chapter Five

### Barber's Point

It took nearly five hours for our plane to land at Barber's Point. At noon, we had been given lunch k-rations and cans of coke. Bernie awakened during our meal in a groggy state and ate sparingly. The Dramamine was obviously still working. He didn't upchuck again, but acted drunk, saying silly and controversial things. Fortunately, his voice was slurred as he muttered his fears about what lie ahead. At point one, his mood changed from gloom to euphoria. He began rambling about our plan, giggling at how we got away with it. One enlisted man in front of us looked back with irritation, the other with amusement, but they said nothing. Fortunately for us, only I was able to interpret his thick speech. I clamped my hand over his mouth finally and whispered a threat into his ear, but he ignored my threat and, changing the subject again, began bragging about his father. Inexplicably then, his speech was more coherent. This time a first class electrician sitting beside Bud Workman took issue with his boasts, by reminding Bernie that there were a lot of heroes in the war.

"Everyone pitched in during those raids," he said thoughtfully. "I was on the Enterprise, myself, a seamen apprentice. I should know. It was do or die, sonny. Calling your dad a super hero is understandable, but I wonder if he would make that claim. My best friend got the Navy Cross, and he never made such a claim. Most heroes are just doing what needs to be done. I find it hard to believe your dad did all that stuff. You claim he led a fire brigade, saved pilots from burning planes, and jumped in the ocean to save drowning men. Seems to me if he did all that, he'd get the Medal of Honor, not the Cross."

"Well, he did!" Bernie stuck out his lip.

"Excuse me," someone called out. "I was on the Hornet. What was your father's name?"

Bud, who had advised me to let sleeping dogs lie, raised forward to pat Bernie's back. It seemed to me that Bernie was waking up the dog. Looking around for the source of the voice, I saw a navy chief rise up briefly and wave. Bernie had mumbled the name indistinctly before. Hesitantly now, he announced it loudly and clearly: "His name was Armand Suarez."

"I remember him," replied the chief, "a talkative fellow. He was a third class mechanic then. I just came aboard out of boot camp. That was at the end of the war. I missed most of the action. I don't remember hearing about any exploits, though. You said his name *was*, not *is*. Did your father pass away?"

"Yeah, a car wreck," Bernie said in a downcast voice.

"Sorry to hear that," replied the chief. "That must've been tough."

"I never knew him," Bernie shrugged. "My mom told me a lot about him. My Uncle Ralph served with him awhile. He was killed when I was just a baby."

Dead silence followed. Remembering Bud's advice and the response given to Bernie's claim, I was thankful that the subject was dropped. Bud patted his back again. I asked in a whisper, "What about your sister? Was that your stepfather's child?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess so," he murmured discreetly. "She came along after dad was killed. I don't remember much."

I had no intention of telling Bernie what Bud told me. Bernie might be grateful to know that his father was alive. On the other hand, there might have been a good reason his mother told

him he was dead. I was thankful that none of the other passengers were aware that Armand was alive.

When we touched down at Barber's Point, the fuselage jerked, the engines decelerated, and our plane glided to a jolting stop. Everyone filed out hastily, happy it had been a safe flight, eager to enjoy the remainder of the day. Evening light streamed through the hatch. The few officers aboard, who had remained silent during our journey, frowned with disapproval back at us. The enlisted men, including Bud and the friendly chief, smiled or nodded, but most of the passengers didn't know what to make of Bernie Suarez and gave him curious looks.

I hadn't the foggiest notion what Bernie had in mind now. Was his Uncle Ralph supposed to meet us somewhere? I wondered. Perhaps, I thought light-headedly, there was no Uncle Ralph at all and he had made that story up too. As we walked across the tarmac toward the terminal, I saw a row of men and women, both in uniform and in civilian dress, apparently waiting for the plane to arrive. Trotting over to their wives or friends, many of the passengers hugged and shook hands, while the others continued on their way to the barracks before reporting for duty Monday morning. I envied them all for their legitimacy. We were illegitimate with fake airman apprentice patches on our arms. Bernie scanned the faces of the welcoming line, looked over at me, and shook his head.

"What now, kemo sabe?" I asked dryly.

"Well," he said wearily, "let's find a pay phone. It's the weekend. I hope I can reach him. After I call, we can stow our gear in the barracks and gets some chow!"

"Now that's a great idea," I grinned, slapping his shoulder. "After that we can go into town."

"I dunno," Bernie groaned, "that medicine's strong. I only took three of them and they wiped me out."

I looked at him in disbelief. "You took *three*? You dumb shit! You're only supposed to take one." "Come on," I said, taking his arm, "you make that call right away. Then we're going to the mess hall. Whether you like it or not, Bernie, you're drinking coffee with your dinner. I didn't come to Hawaii to have you take a nap!"

Bernie whined and cursed, until we reached a pay phone near the terminal.

"Move it!" I gave him a shove. "Make your damn call!"

After inserting a quarter with a shaky hand and taking a deep breath, he waited a few moments as Ralph's landline rang. I had a sinking feeling as I studied his expression. When it became apparent that Ralph wasn't at his duty station or in the barracks, Bernie hung up the phone and stood there staring into space.

"Bernie, wake up," I snapped my fingers "Is your Uncle Ralph going to give you the same reception as your Uncle Dominick?"

"I dunno," he exhaled nervously. "I don't know Ralph very well. I found his number, introduced myself, and asked to meet him here. He knew my mom, not my dad—at least that's what she told me. My mom used to live here during the war."

"What?" my mouth popped open. "She was here in Hawaii. She must've been a teenager."

"Yeah," he bobbed his head. "My Mom's not Mexican, Noel. She's half French and half Polynesian.

"Wow—half French and half Polynesian!" I slapped my forehead. "Was she born here? Was her father stationed here like your dad?"

“I dunno.” he gave me a perplexed look. “I know nothing about that man. My Mom’s always been tight lipped about that part of her life, and most of my memory is about her, my sister, and stepfather. My sister Anna and I, of course, have different last names, hers is Johnson and mine is Suarez. From that point, it’s bits and pieces—nothing concrete.”

“Her last name’s Johnson?” I focused upon his disclosure. “What does Anna look like, Bernie? Describe her to me. Blond, brunette, redhead? Does she have big knockers?”

In a daze Bernie replied, “Well, she’s a dishwater blond, with blue eyes and freckles—”

“A blue-eyed blond? Hot damn!” I slapped my knee. “Your cousin Concepcion has freckles too!” “Holding back on me, eh?” I said, ruffling his hair. “You sly fellow!”

“Wait.” He did a double take. “We were talking about my Mom. My sister is off limits to you, Noel!”

“Sure-sure,” I elbowed him playfully. “So tell me Bernie, how did your mom meet your dad? Was it here at Barber’s Point?”

“I told you,” he replied testily, “Mom’s tight-lipped. There’s hardly any pictures of him. I have one in my wallet, but she must’ve thrown the others away.”

“How very strange,” I replied, scratching my chin. “There’s a lot of secrets in your family, Bernie. There’s nothing mysterious about my family; it’s an open book.”

“All right,” he huffed, spreading his hands, “I got a weird family. Let’s go dump our gear and eat!”

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Our first stop was the enlisted men’s barracks. The airman on duty smelled of liquor. I knew we wouldn’t have any trouble from him. Nevertheless, I took over now. It would remain this way for the rest of our caper. As Bernie sat dejectedly on a bench outside, I requested two sets pillows, sheets, and blankets and two sets of towels. We might get a late start, I told Bernie, but we’re going to shower and shave before hitting the beach. I dreaded passing by a gate guard in my uniform again. I took this opportunity to ask the airman if enlisted men could exit the main gate in their civvies. He gave me the same look the corporal at Alameda had given us.

“Are you fresh out of basic?” he sneered. “Of course you can!”

“Really?” I replied, compounding my ignorance, “what about coming back? Some of those Marine guards look pretty mean.”

“Listen sport.” He stuck out his chin. “This is Barber’s Point, not Los Alamitos or Alameda.”

I wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean. As we stood in line at the mess hall, I could smell roast beef and other aromatic dishes. Piled onto our trays along with the main course, were mashed potatoes, string beans, and biscuits. The aroma of coffee also wafted in the air. This time even Bernie appeared to have an appetite. He had eaten very little since this morning. Despite not eating most of the k-rations passed out to the other passengers, however, he still ate sparingly. I was astounded to discover that he didn’t eat meat, which left him with only vegetables and buttered biscuits. When we arrived at the desert portion of the chow line, he selected Jell-O instead of hot apple pie. He could guzzle all the milk he wanted, but one thing I absolutely insisted was that he drink at least one cup of coffee.

The evening diners were nosier than the morning crowd. I noted that many men eating breakfast at Alameda appeared to be hung over, half awake, or in grumpy moods, but the men eating supper at Barber’s Point seemed pumped up about the weekend ahead or a night on the beach. I was pumped up too, but Bernie, like the breakfast crowd at Alameda, was hung over on

Dramamine. Though he made the effort and drank most of his coffee, I was worried he was not up to the task.

“Listen kemo sabe.” I gave him a studied look. “We’re going back to the barracks and get ready for a night on the town. I want to see Honolulu. Tomorrow, if we have time, I want to tour Pearl Harbor and all those places in Hawaii our instructor told us about.”

“I need a nap,” he whined. “Can’t we do this first thing in the morning. I’ll be refreshed then.”

“No!” I snapped. “You shouldn’t have taken all those pills. The first thing you do tomorrow is contact your uncle. You promised me he would get us a flight. Monday we have to fly back to Alameda, and, according to your plan, catch a hop home. We’ve got school Tuesday, Bernie; as much as I love adventure, I’m not going to be stranded here at Barber’s Point.”

“Bernie, are you listening to me?” I shook him awake. “Damn it, you’re drinking another cup of coffee.” I jumped up and headed for the decanter. This whole thing was your idea, not mine. You’re going on the beach tonight. You’re not going to let me down!”

“Ick,” he whimpered, “I hate coffee. I’m going to be sick!”

Slamming the mug down, I ordered sternly, “Drink!”

The men around us were laughing at us, but I didn’t care. I was losing my patience with Bernie. His personality had been changing into various moods since we set out on this caper. Now he was demonstrating his ‘wimp’ mood. Those Dramamine pills had wiped him out. Unfortunately, the coffee was, in fact, making him sick. To wake him up, my best bet would be to make him take a cold shower. After placing both our trays in the rack, I led him in zombie-like increments back to the barracks, told him to get into the shower, and, on the other side of shower area, quickly rinsed myself off, as he struggled out of his clothes. Out of modesty or pure stupidity, Bernie entered the shower in his skivvies.

“It has to be cold!” I shouted at him.

“I can’t do it, it’s freezing.” He tested it a moment.

Placing a towel around my waste, I stomped over, shoved him in, turning it sharply to the left.

“Oooooooooooh!” he squealed like a girl.

It just so happened that there were enlisted men entering the barracks that moment. Embarrassed after hearing their exchange, I ordered Bernie to get dressed.

“Hey,” one of them snickered ghoulishly, “sounds like a chick in the shower. Maybe it’s a wave or wahine.”

“Yeah,” hooted the second man, “let’s check this out!”

When they appeared, the two sailors eyed us with suspicion, but said nothing as Bernie stood their drying himself off. I quickly began shaving to disassociate myself from him. As a squat, square-jawed sailor with spectacles, looked on, a short, wiry, pimply face youth moved forward to survey Bernie a moment.

“You two guys have fun?” he drawled.

“You filthy pig!” Bernie spat.

I wanted to say that I had never seen him before. In stead, I turned to the smaller man, dropped my shaver, and told him to mind his own business. The squat man charged forward with clinched fist, but then, as I stood my ground, just stood there glaring at me with smoldering dark eyes.

“I know about guys like you,” he growled.

At that point, I was tempted to punch him in the nose. "What are you talking about?" I frowned. "He was singing in the shower. Haven't you ever heard a falsetto voice? All the rock and roll singers used it now." "Ooooooh Oooooh," I tried imitating Frankie Valli.

"That's not what I heard," snarled the pimply face youth. "I heard a chick squeal." "This chick!" He pointed at Bernie. "You guys playing games?"

That's all it took for Bernie, "MPs! MPs!" he shouted running through the barracks.

"Hey, what's the fuss?" I heard the man on duty shout.

"Two men are threatening my friend with a knife," he cried. "Call the MPs."

"I know those men," replied the airman. "Are you sure you saw a knife?"

"Come and see, Come and see," he said in a tremulous voice.

"All right," he snorted, "but get a grip on yourself, man."

At that point, I was more worried about what Bernie was doing. I had no desire to have to answer to the MPs when they investigated the scene.

The first sailor flashed his friend fearful look. "We don't have any knives. That guy's crazy."

"Yes." I heaved a sigh. "nuttier than a fruit cake."

"What's going on in here?" The airman stormed in. "This fellow says you got knives."

"Heck no, Dewey," the first sailor laughed nervously. "We were just fooling with them."

"You're always fooling with someone." Dewey shook his head. "You two let these youngsters get ready so they can hit the beach."

The amiable words of the man on duty (now identified as Dewey) belied his sarcastic tone and the look on his face. When the two sailors slipped away like jackals, he stood there appraising us, a leer on his face. It was obvious what he was thinking. He said nothing, however, as he did an about face and swaggered out of the room. I was completely disgusted with Bernie now.

"Why did you make that noise?" I scolded him. "Haven't you ever had a cold shower before? Why didn't you just ignore them? And why did you call for the MPs? Are you insane?"

"I'm sorry." His lip quivered. "...I wanna go home."

"What?" I screamed. "You want to home? You son-of-a-bitch! So help me, Bernie, I'm going it alone!"

## Chapter Six

### Hitting the Beach

As Bernie slinked off into the sleeping area, I finished shaving, returned to the locker assigned to me, dressed in a pair of jeans and sporty shirt, and stuffing my wallet in my back pocket, grabbed my lightweight jacket, and, to show Bernie I meant business, trotted swiftly out of the barracks toward the main gate. I was upset and yet excited by what I was doing, but as I approached the guard, I slowed down to almost a crawl. There was a slight chill in the air, so I slipped on my jacket, dug my fists into my pockets, and, with my collar up, moved cautiously like a felon toward the gate. I looked around to see if Bernie was following, but he was nowhere in sight. Fortunately for me, there were several other servicemen in civvies scurrying out of the gate, so I joined them as if I was one of the group. I didn't even bother flashing my ID. Exhilarated by this feat, I pumped the air with my fist and stood with the other men at the bus stop in front of the base. I immediately introduced myself to the men, who responded indifferently, looking upon me as an outsider. I judged by their close-cropped haircuts they might be Marines. That might explain their attitudes. In general, however, it seemed that Barber's Point was an unfriendly place. Looking back, I have concluded that it was the fact that I broadcasted, by my demeanor, that I was greenhorn that rubbed some of the enlisted men wrong. For Bernie, who was also immature, it was even worse. I should have been happy to be rid of him as I waited for the bus, but I felt only guilt. I couldn't put into clinical terms back then, as to how unbalanced he seemed. I wasn't quite sure he was really nuts, but I was certain he shouldn't be in the navy.

When the bus to Honolulu arrived, I stood there by the bus stop, as the Marines climbed up the steps, tempted to join them on the bus. What stopped me cold was not merely the pity I felt for Bernie but the realization that he was my ticket home. He, not me, knew Uncle Ralph, who appeared to be our only hope.

"Get in mister," the bus driver snapped.

"I'm waiting for my friend," I replied morosely. "What time does the next bus arrive?"

"It runs every two hours," he answered, shutting the door.

Just as the bus took off, I heard Bernie shouting as he ran from the gate. He ran as fast as he could, but he was much too late. I was furious at him, and yet I kept my tongue. I was afraid now for his mental state. If he couldn't get a hold of his Uncle Ralph, we would be stranded. The possibility that he exaggerated the influence of his contact loomed large in my mind. I had to keep Bernie's head clear of fear and gloom. How he could be homesick so soon during our caper and why he kept losing control were a mystery to me. Things were not that bad yet. Given the assurance by him that we would have a flight Monday, it was merely a waiting game. Until we left the base, we were safe and sound at Barber's Point. Perhaps, the thought of this exploit was troubling to Bernie. Neither one of us had ever been away from home on our own, but that was exactly how it would be on active duty.

"We have to wait for the next bus," I informed him coldly. "That's at least two hour away. Have you ever hitched a ride?"

"Good grief no," he shivered.

"Bernie," I observed, "you're wearing your pee coat."

“I didn’t bring a jacket,” he replied sheepishly.

“Why not?” I placed my hands on my hips. “We’re supposed to look like civilians. What else did you forget?”

“...Money,” he said in a small voice.

“What?” I yelled. “You didn’t bring money? You dumb shit! I only have sixteen dollars. You said you had money in your wallet. That was another lie Bernie. How’re we going to have a good time on just my money? We still have Sunday and Monday to go. How many six packs do you think sixteen dollars is going to buy?”

“I don’t drink,” he said petulantly. “Why should I let you use *my* money?”

“The fact that you don’t drink,” I reasoned with him, “doesn’t mean *I* can’t drink. We could’ve pooled it together. That’s what friends are for.”

“Really?” He gave me a dull look. “Am I your friend?”

I started to answer him but bit my lip. I wasn’t sure Bernie was my friend. He certainly was a nuisance. The sun was just setting in the western sky. There was just enough daylight before reaching town. With sudden inspiration, I began walking ahead of him down the boulevard with my thumb outstretched.

“What’re you doing?” he shrieked. “I’m not hitch-hiking. We’re supposed to wait for the bus!”

“I’m not waiting two hours for that damn bus. I checked my watch after that bus came. By the hourly schedule that driver gave me it was a half hour late. Buses are always late! I calculate our wait to be more like two and half hours. Besides, I’m saving my money. You take the bus if you want, Bernie. I’m hitch-hiking to Honolulu.”

Bernie screamed obscenities I had only heard my dad utter. This was, of course, a test. If he didn’t follow me and called my bluff, I’d have to stay behind with him. As it turned out, however, as I stood by the road in the classic hitch-hiker position, a car pulled over ahead of me. For a moment I panicked. I looked back, as I trotted to the ramshackle vehicle, and saw Bernie still standing by the bus stop, fuming with rage.

The 1948 Chevrolet station wagon was filled with native Hawaiians, who were in high spirits. I know now, after reflection, that the natives were understandably annoyed with sailors and Americans in general, for corrupting their culture. They certainly didn’t appreciate servicemen getting their women pregnant. At that time in my life, though, I knew nothing of this danger. I didn’t even know yet that they were drunk. Placing pressure on me to make a decision (did I go or did I stay?), the driver got out and yelled at me: “Come on sailor boy, we ain’t got all day!”

“Can I bring my friend,” I shouted. “Please wait. I’ll go get him.”

“You be hurrying boy,” he warned me. “I not be waiting long!”

Running back to the bus stop, I pleaded with Bernie, “Bernie these nice men are going to take us to town. It’s our chance to see Honolulu.”

“No,” he said, folding his arms, “I’m waiting for a bus. You can go by yourself, and you can also find your own way home!”

Something momentarily snapped in my head. Bernie was sabotaging our trip. I did an about face, retracing my steps back to the station wagon.

“I’ll find my own way home!” I shouted back at him. “If I get caught, I’ll blame it all on you!”

Glancing back as I reached the car, I could see Bernie throwing a tantrum, screaming, “I hate you! I hate you!” at the top of his lungs. It seemed as if I would be going it alone, and then,

as I squeezed into the middle seat beside a huge Polynesian fellow holding an open bottle of spirits, a voice rang out that sounded possessed. After a flurry of obscenities I didn't know Bernie was capable of, he bellowed, "Wait! Wait! Please wait!" The station wagon had already pulled from the curb but stopped in the road, allowing Bernie to catch up.

"That haole crazy!" the driver exclaimed.

"Oh, he's harmless enough," I said light-headedly. "He's just weird."

"Oh thank you!" Bernie muttered deliriously, as he began climbing in.

The driver looked over the seat with a snarl on his chubby face. "You be sitting in back seat!"

Struggling to a place between two hefty Hawaiians, Bernie parked himself in uneasy silence. I kept my mouth shut, too, as the station wagon sped down the road. I didn't know that a rickety old 1950 station wagon could go so fast. I realized that moment that the five Hawaiians in the vehicle were all very drunk. I had, in my haste for adventure, placed Bernie and myself in great danger. All I could think of now was to abort the mission and talk the driver into letting us out of his car.

The driver looked back with a mischievous grin. "You afraid sailor boy?"

"Yes sir," I croaked nervously. "Please drop us off by the road."

"That bad idea boy." The man next to me slapped my knee. "It dark out there. We taking you to Ewa Beach."

"Is that near Honolulu?" I asked, looking back at Bernie.

"Ho-ho-ho!" the driver broke into merriment. "He want to go to Honolulu. He think that be Hawaii." "Listen sailor boy, you want to see real Hawaiians, you go to Ewa, not Honolulu. You want to see American Indians, you don't go to big city, you go to reservation. Ewa be like reservation."

The station wagon had slowed down a little, but not enough to make me feel comfortable.

"We wanted to have fun," I said glancing again at Bernie, who was too frightened to speak.

"Here, you want fun, you need some of this." The man next to me waved his bottle in front of my nose.

"No thanks." I shuddered.

I remember my father's scotch, which had a distinctive smell and passable flavor. I also recalled another alcoholic odor, which I smelled that moment: wine. My Uncle Roy was a wino. I hated wine.

"You being unfriendly sailor boy." The driver said glaring into his rearview mirror.

"No, I-I'm not unfriendly," I sputtered. "Really, I'm not. I eat pineapples, coconuts, and pork. Some of my best friends are Hawaiians. I saw From Here to Eternity four times!"

I still can't believe I said such a thing. I didn't know any better, of course, but they didn't know that. There was dead silence in the station wagon as the five men thought about what I blurted, and then, to my relief, they all burst into laughter. By now, Bernie had begun gibbering fearfully to himself, "I want out of this car, I want out of this car!" over and over, until it was almost a mantra. As I scanned the landscape on each side of us, I knew we weren't going to Honolulu. Judging by what one of the men said, we were going to Ewa, if we weren't already there. Now that Hawaii was a state I expected to see a few gas stations and restaurants. There were, however, dimly lit houses and storefronts, that were, as I reflect, typical of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American occupation.

The driver stopped laughing and in a serious tone said, "So that is what this haole thinks we Hawaiians are: pineapple, coconut, and pork eating natives doing hula and playing ukuleles."

"Well...no." I swallowed. "It's what they show on TV and the big screen."

"That one in back be crazy," he growled, "but you haoles all the same. You come here thinking we all a bunch of coconut chuckers, with no brains in our heads, standing below palm trees with big happy grins."

"That's not true!" I cried. "Where are you taking us? Let us out. We've never done you harm!"

That moment, as he playfully accelerated, Bernie's frozen terror thawed enough for him to shriek, "Let me-e-e out!" and then an ear-shattering scream: "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

"Okey-dokey," the driver piped, "we let you out!"

At that point, he brought the station wagon to a screeching halt. The doors flew open, and Bernie and I scrambled out of the car.

"What're we going to do here?" I asked looking out into the darkness.

"I dunno," he replied in a cavalier voice, "mebbe you go see a movin' pitcher show or find Hawaiian wahine. You be in our city now!"

No sooner had we exited the station wagon than it sped away, the driver calling out jubilantly, "we go to Honolulu now, find haole whores. You can walk back to base!"

"What did we ever do to them?" Bernie wept bitter tears.

"I don't know," I said, badly shaken, aware that Bernie was far worse.

They had, in fact, let us off on the beach. A sign ahead read Ewa Beach. Only a few dim street lamps highlighted the road ahead. The clouds covered the moon, its lunar sheen sparkling faintly on the sea. The silhouettes of trees lining the highway were penetrated by twinkling lights of Hawaiian homes. Except for the Pacific Ocean in front of us, the landscape was quite unfriendly. It was no place for a haole.

"Well," I said, slapping Bernie's shoulder, "we're on the beach!"

"What?" Bernie cried hoarsely. "You think this is funny. This is all your fault Noel. We could've taken the bus. So we arrive in Honolulu later; at least we wouldn't be lost in the middle of nowhere."

I expected another volley of profanity from Bernie, but he was beyond mere anger. I looked straight ahead, but I heard him weeping softly to himself.

"We're stranded." He simpered. "We'll never get back to base."

"Yes we well. It's not that far back to the main highway. If we can't get a ride, we'll walk back."

That remark caused Bernie to weep more loudly. After a short spell, he stopped blubbering. We walked on in silence then until reaching the beach. As I looked at the intersecting road, I saw a wondrous sight: a liquor store. In fact, it read simply Liquor. It was probably where the Hawaiians bought their wine. I decided I was going to get smashed.

"Come on Bernie," I beckoned, "the proprietor of that store might help us."

The help he would give us would be selling us a six-pack of beer, but I didn't tell Bernie that. Bernie's only concern was getting back to the base, but the issue now was getting drunk. After strolling up to the small liquor store, the best lit building in this dreary town, I walked in and struck up a conversation with the man behind the counter, coming straight to the point.

"Hello, my names Noel Bridger. This man's Bernie Suarez. We were unexpectedly abandoned here by five men. Is there a bus arriving in this town?"

“You in the wrong place,” the short balding Hawaiian replied grimly. “This ain’t no place for haoles, especially kids.”

“Do you have bus service?” I pressed.

“No busses in Ewa this time of night.” The man frowned.

“Oh no,” Bernie wailed, “we’re screwed!”

As he began sobbing again, the man shook his head with disgust. Once again, I was embarrassed by his behavior.

“How old he be?” The man snarled. “He wearing a navy pea coat, but act like crybaby!”

“Bernie,” I said through gritting teeth, “stop it!”

“Maybe you should call Taxi,” the man suggested sarcastically.

“Yes-yes.” Bernie nodded tearfully.

“Do they even run in this neck of the woods?” I looked at him hopefully.

Again, in my ignorance, I made a stereotypical statement. The man made a face, shook his head, and waved at us as if he was swatting at flies. I was conflicted now. My intent in entering the liquor store was to buy beer, but I was also concerned about getting back to the base.

“No taxi, no bus,” he made shooing motions. “You buy something or go way!”

“You heard the man.” I turned to Bernie. “Let’s buy us a six pack and hit the beach.”

Without further adieu, I walked over to the cooler, opened the door, and selected a beer I saw advertised on television. The price below the six-pack of Schlitz was 4.99, which left me, minus taxes, twelve dollars. After quickly calculating in my head, I realized that this would only leave three beers for each of us, so I added a quart of cheap beer, which costs 1.50. With tax added in this would still leave me nine dollars, enough for at least two six packs for tomorrow. When I presented it to the man, he held out his hand. For a moment, I thought he wanted a driver’s license, which I didn’t have, so I fished into my wallet to retrieve my military ID. I had no idea what was printed on this document. I rarely ever looked at it. Hopefully, it would indicate my birth date, which would show that I was eighteen years old. It would have been safer to have Bernie buy the beer, since he had a driver’s license. But Bernie stood back, frowning with disapproval at what I was doing.

“That will be six dollar and eight-nine cents,” the man snorted.

“Splendid!” I handed over a twenty-dollar bill.

Heaving a pent up sigh, I paid the man, placed the remainder of my money back in my wallet and pocket, and led Bernie hastily out of the store. Back home, this feat would have been impossible. I doubt if that man even cared about such details. Despite the dilemma we were in, I felt delighted about this accomplishment. To add to my euphoria was a path alongside of the seaside liquor store, leading to the ocean. Although there were no girls on the beach, we at least had our booze. The moon had broken through the clouds. The distant street lamps by the road and lunar radiance provided all the light we needed. The surf and wet sand glistened, as one gentle wave after another gently broke. Removing my shoes and socks, tying the laces together after stuffing my socks into my pockets, I hung my shoes around my neck, and walked barefoot in the sand. Bernie hung back dejectedly, muttering to himself. Because he was no longer cursing me under my breath, I saw this as a good sign, and yet I pretended to ignore him, as I stopped at a likely spot, plopped down, and began drinking my beer. As I quickly chugalugged the first beer, I felt a buzz in my head. A warm tingly feeling in my body followed after I finished it and started on my second can. I had never been intoxicated before. It was an exhilarating experience. By now Bernie had arrived at my spot, eying me disdainfully.

Because of what he had said to me earlier, I couldn't justify my drunken feeling to him. All I could think of saying was, "Yum, this is delicious!"

For a moment, as I worked on my second beer, he studied me closely, knelt down finally in the sand, and reached over to pull a can from the carton. I could scarcely believe he caved in that easily. Popping the can open, he sipped it, and then made a face.

"Ick!" he said, spitting it out, "this tastes like piss!"

"Bernie," I chided him, "you haven't even tried. You never tasted piss. That would make you a pervert!" "Here, give me that," I said, pulling it out of his hands and then handing him the quart. "This bottle is high quality booze, Bernie. I'll drink the Schlitz. You can have the good stuff—native brew."

"Really?" He wrinkled his nose. "Hawaiian Lightning? I never heard of it, Noel. What kind of name is that? You sure it's beer?"

"No," I answered truthfully, "maybe it's something better. Why don't you try it?"

Carefully unscrewing the lid, Bernie delicately raised the bottle to his lips in an experimental manner, took a sip, and nodded. More quickly this time, he raised the bottle up again. "This one's sweet," he exclaimed, after a longer swig. "It's much better!"

I was pleased that Bernie had given in. Though curious to try the cheap beer, I decided to make it Bernie's share. Snickering with mirth, I watched Bernie take big gulps from the bottle. Meanwhile, I finished up my second can, and popped open a third.

"You know something Bernie," I exclaimed, after a long swig, "we're gonna have fun. I promish you. What do you think of Hawaii now?"

"I shink ish wunnerful!" he replied, wiping his mouth.

I couldn't believe it. He was already drunk. He had drained over half of the bottle. Reaching out, I snapped my fingers. "Hey, lemme see that!" I said, grabbing the container.

In the moonlight, I read the label, but I couldn't read the fine print, so I tried it myself. Immediately, I realized my mistake. It must have been in the wrong place in the cooler; it certainly wasn't beer. I should have paid closer attention to the label. It had a sweet taste, but it wasn't wine—the only other liquor I was familiar with. When I was a child we lived next door to an Italian family, who left out a bottle of table wine on the kitchen table. I also tried it once at my Uncle Roy's house, where I had once again been introduced to its the nasty taste. This wasn't it. In fact, it wasn't half bad. Not wanting to upset Bernie, I returned the bottle to him and continued drinking my beer. We chatted, as drunken men do, about silly things that hour. At one point in a whiny voice (the proverbial drunk crying into his glass), Bernie lamented that we would probably be stranded, but then characteristic of my associate, his mood changed, and he exclaimed, "Shay thish is grade shtuff. Led's go ged some more!"

I was, including the can of beer Bernie had snubbed, on my fifth can, giggling at the absurdity of it all. Here was Bernie, normally prudish and uptight, asking for more booze. Undoubtedly, after finishing the stronger container of spirits, he was more drunk than I. He was saying all sorts of things, and, at one point, did a little jig in the sand. Giggling at the absurdity of it all, I handed him the last beer. Before he had a chance to try it again, however, he became sick. I was certain this might leave him in a miserable state and change his mood, but this time he wiped his mouth off, grinned, and reached for the unopened can.

"Gimme, gimme." He flexed his little fingers.

"You sure you wanna do this?" I watched him pop it open and guzzle it down.

"Thishnodsobad!" he said between gulps.

It took him about three minutes to empty the can. I could barely understand him now after he drained the can. “Yeowww!” he let out a war hoop. “Yrnodsobadnoel...Ithinglligeu... Thangsfirthebooze!

I was a little concerned now. After he collapsed on the sand, as I expected he would after drinking so much, I had the presence of mind to stagger across the beach close enough to the lamplight to scan the label. Even in my current state, I was stunned by what I read: Okolehao Liqueur...80 proof “Ohmagawd!” I groaned. It was a wonder he was even still alive. It was most fortunate that he had purged himself of this evil drink, but I was still fearful that he might never wake up. Running back to where Bernie lie unconscious, I fell on all fours, and shook him violently. To my great relief, he stirred, and his tongue rolled thickly in his mouth.

“Wayuwagmeup!” he muttered.

“Shorry,” I said, patting his head.

We weren’t going to make it back to the base tonight. I was just glad he was all right. Despite my drunken state of mind, I felt protective of Bernie. There was no telling what would happen to him if I abandoned him here. Considering his fragile nature and the way he behaved at Alameda and Barber’s Point, he was like a child who needed constant watching. It was, of course, just as well we stayed put. This would be a dangerous place to travel in at night. I looked at my watch, but once again, the moon had disappeared behind the clouds. Bernie was right about one thing, I thought lying down beside him. Until tomorrow when we had slept it off and had daylight to navigate our way back, we would be stranded in Ewa. In a short while, as I watched the moon part between the clouds, I was fast asleep myself. Two drunken sailors now lie on the beach in one of the darkest pockets of the island.

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We awakened the next morning with several native Hawaiians glaring down at us.

“What you haoles doing on dis beach?” A tall, wiry youth challenged, giving Bernie a kick.

“Wa-was wrong?” I stammered, my head ringing like a gong.

“What’s wrong sailor boy?” a second, corpulent fellow with tattoos all over his body sneered. “What’s wrong is you stinkin’ haoles!”

Jumping up upon shaky legs, I made an attempt at being friendly. I introduced myself and my sleeping friend and received blank stares that turned into frowns when I tried explaining why we were on their beach.

“We’re new in Hawaii. It was dark last night. We didn’t know it was a private beach.”

“You had you selves a party, eh haole?” A third youth, with a beard and shell necklace, stepped forward.

The remainder of the eight Hawaiians joined in the taunting. Encircled by them, I watched them playfully jostle Bernie with their bare feet. Awakening finally, Bernie reacted sluggishly, looking around as if he didn’t know where he was.

“Wha-a they want?” he asked me fearfully.

“We want you haoles off our beach!” the first native cried.

“Okay, okay, we’re leaving,” I held out my hands. “Come on Bernie,” I beckoned, “let’s hit the road!”

It was an unreasonable attempt, considering the condition we were in. Nevertheless, under the circumstance, we had to try. Helping the trembling Bernie to his feet, I grabbed his soiled pea coat, which he had used as a pillow, and escorted him slowly from the scene. I was

thankful the gang hadn't beaten us up, but we were not out of the woods yet. Behind us we left six beer cans and an empty liquor bottle. I might have been embarrassed about this if the area wasn't already strewn with cans and trash.

"Go haole pigs," the ringleader shouted, "or maybe we cut off your balls!"

Bernie was whimpering. I pleaded with him not to start bawling. That's all we needed to have them see that. The morning sun was blinding. By the time we reached the road, after pulling Bernie along, I felt as if I was going to drop. I could imagine how poor Bernie felt. My stomach ached, I thought my head might explode, and my legs felt like dead weights. As we staggered back down the side road toward the main boulevard leading through this town, I prayed again—this time for deliverance. I didn't care about anything except getting back to the safety of the base.

Suddenly, a car passed by us, and, slowing down directly ahead, pulled off to the side of the road. A man of medium height and build wearing a Marine uniform stepped out and began walking toward us. I thought surely this time that we were finished. Here was the symbol of authority in my mind—a tough no nonsense Marine guard. When he stood in front of us, I realized that he was a native Hawaiian. I wasn't sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing, but at least it was different. Then, when I focused upon the advancing Marine, I realized he wasn't another gate guard at all. I could see two bars on each shoulder, indicating that he was a full lieutenant. This discovery was so alarming, I could scarcely talk.

"You boys lost?" he asked, shielding his eyes from the sun.

"Bernie," I whispered shrilly, "let me do the talking!"

The only vestige of our military status had been Bernie's pea coat, which he carried under his arm. My first instinct was to pretend that we were simply haole youths, in the wrong place at the wrong time. We must have looked really young. He had called us boys, not sailors or, in navy parlance, lads. Unfortunately, Bernie failed to comply and immediately blurted out our dilemma.

"We need to get back to the base," he said hoarsely. "Can you give us a ride?"

I expected him to challenge us with something like, "Name, rank, serial number!" but a smile broke his stony face.

"You boys tied one on, eh?" He laughed softly. "Where you stationed?"

I drew a complete blank. Bernie, however, promptly replied, "We're supposed to meet our squadron on the USS Hornet." I wanted to strangle Bernie. I thought I might pass out. Surely, he would challenge that claim. Instead, he raised an eyebrow, scratched his jaw, and then led us to his car. I remembered Bernie telling me that if you're going to lie, lie big. That never worked for me, though. I left all the lying to him. After all that crybaby stuff, there were still times when he had ice water in the veins. As the Marine lieutenant drove us to Barber's Point, he gently scolded us.

"What're you boys doing in Ewa?" he asked, as we climbed into the car.

"We were exploring the island," Bernie explained. "I guess we drank too much."

"You picked a bad time to visit this town," he replied, frowning into his rearview mirror. "After the incident last month, haoles are persona non gratis here."

"What's persona non gratis?" Bernie wrinkled his nose.

"It's means you're not welcome here," he clarified. "It's a wonder those boys didn't beat you up!"

"Sir," I found my voice, "why do they hate us here?"

“It’s just Ewa,” he said thoughtfully, “not the rest of Hawaii. Last month, a native Hawaiian girl in Ewa claimed that sailors had raped her. It wasn’t the first incident. We’ve had trouble in the past. The men were never caught, which made the people of Ewa even angrier. You two were lucky you didn’t get roughed up.”

“Well that explains it,” I looked over at Bernie. “Do you live here sir?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I was visiting my parents. My Father’s ill. Your fortunate I was driving by.”

“I’m sorry your dad’s sick.” I chimed. “Are you stationed at Barber’s Point?”

“No,” he replied genially. “I command the Marine detachment on the Enterprise berthed at Pearl.”

“What?” Bernie tensed up. “You’re not going to Barber’s Point?”

“It’s on the way,” he reassured us. “I’ll drop you off at the gate.”

I was so delighted I could scarcely speak. Bernie was so relieved he sat there gibbering to himself. To prevent him from saying anything more foolish, I elbowed him in the ribs and whispered from the corner of my mouth, “Shut up!”

Because we would be dropped off by a Marine officer, I was certain we wouldn’t be challenged. Though we both had a hangover and wanted to crawl away somewhere and take a nap, we exited the officer’s car in relatively high spirits. I thanked our savior profusely as he pulled up to the passenger’s zone. Seeing that the guard had spotted our driver, Bernie charged ahead, without a backward glance.

“Bernie, slow down,” I called, trotting after him. “Let’s stop by the barracks and shower first.”

“Not me,” he called over his shoulder, as we approached the guard. “I’m famished. Let’s go eat.”

“You dumb shit!” I shouted. “We gotta be in uniform for that. Show the man your ID.”

Raising his card just in time, as he slowed down, Bernie flashed a mischievous grin at the guard. I greeted the stone-faced Marine with a cheery hello. When we were a safe distance from the guard shack, I scolded Bernie for his foolishness, but he seemed delirious. I decided that moment to let him run ahead. They would stop him cold when he tried to enter the mess hall in civvies. I stopped in at the barracks to shower, shave, and put on my uniform. Bernie, who had second thoughts when he regained his wits, entered the barracks as I was exiting the shower. Slowing down a pace, I let him catch up with me. While I dressed, he took a quick shower, threw on his civvies, and followed me to the mess hall. Though he complained of a headache and queasy stomach, he was calm and in an upbeat mood when we stood in the breakfast line waiting our turn. For breakfast I chose bacon, eggs, hash browns, toast, and stack of pancakes, and, from the decanter, poured myself a steaming cup of navy coffee. Bernie, despite his hunger, thought I was behaving like a pig, and decided upon oatmeal with raisins, cut fruit, toast, and his old standby milk.

As we ate breakfast, Bernie remained in a tranquil mood. His darting brown eyes, which always seemed sneaky, rolled this way and that as he munched. Much like children do at the table, he hummed faintly as he chewed, ignoring me completely as if I wasn’t there. I thought he might bring up our fiasco after leaving the base, but he said nothing, which was fine with me. I had my own thoughts to ponder. Overriding even my goal to visit Honolulu, was my concern that we might be stranded at Barber’s Point. As if he read my mind, Bernie’s first words at the table were, “I’ve got to call my uncle.”

“I agree,” I nodded vigorously. “First thing! We should have that settled before we hit the beach.”

“Hit the beach?” He wrinkled his nose. “You’ve said that before, Noel. What if you’re not going to the beach? I would say, ‘going into town.’ That makes more sense.”

“Bernie,” I chided him good-naturedly, “weren’t you paying attention in class. I heard our instructor say that. It’s what all sailors say, no matter where they go on liberty. Liberty—there’s another navy word. It’s when sailors are in town having fun, like we’re gonna do. You gotta talk the talk and walk the walk, Bernie. I’m going to learn *all* of the nautical words!”

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Nodding faintly, Bernie chewed lazily on a piece of toast. I hoped I had given him food for thought that moment, but I could never be certain he was listening. He continued humming absentmindedly to himself, gazing dully into space, as if he was in another world. Bernie was in for a rude awakening, I thought, shoveling in a mouthful of eggs. I was convinced more than ever of this. If he wasn’t mentally ill, as I had suspected, he was a delicate and fragile soul who needed protection against the world. At first, he appeared to have ice water in his veins, his ability to fool naval personnel convincing even me, but now, after observing him awhile, I was filled with doubts. Bernie’s true character was surfacing. When angry, he lost control. When stressed, he broke down into tears. After his meltdown at Alameda, he no longer inspired my confidence. My confidence had gone down hill ever since. Nevertheless, despite how much he irritated me, I felt sorry for him. Somehow, though I couldn’t find the proper words back then, I sensed that Bernie was broken. Of course, he wasn’t born broken. If he was fortunate, his emotional cracks might even heal, but not here. The navy was no place for him. His behavior at Los Alamitos, Alameda, and Barber’s Point had proven that. Because of the lies fed to him as a child, he lived in a make-believe bubble that might burst at anytime. Knowing what I do, I could burst his bubble. There were a few times, when I was irritated, I was tempted to tell him the truth. I was sick of hearing about his dad. But I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he was still alive. Mentally, Bernie had painted a rosy picture of his father. Until I talked to Bud Workman and some of the other passengers, I could envision Armand firing an anti-aircraft gun and saving his shipmates, as Bernie claimed, similar to those characters in World War Two movies who performed super-human feats. Even though it was hard to believe Armand performed all those acts, I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. Yet the picture Bud and the others left in my mind was of a loud-mouthed braggart who loved telling tall tales. My uncles, cousins, and grandfather had never talked about the war. My Uncle Roy, who was haunted by his experiences, had become a wino, and yet, even when he was drunk, never talked about the war. After the feedback I got from men who knew Armand Suarez and considering the tight-lipped responses I got from my uncles, cousin, and grandfather, I doubted his stories. I just hoped Bernie didn’t meet him on the base and, if he did bump into him, recognize who he was. He said he had a picture of his father in his wallet, but he could have made this up too. He might not even be able to recognize him on sight. I wished Bud had never told me about that man. After the doubt I heard in his voice and the vague recollections the other men had of him, I knew that he was right. I was left with the impression that Armand Suarez wouldn’t live up to his son’s expectations, which was a good reason to follow Bud’s advice and let sleeping dogs lie.

I’m not sure I ever really liked Bernie, but I felt responsible for him now. That day when his mother dropped us off at Los Alamitos Naval Air Station, I could read her expression. I

knew she wanted me to take care of him. Though I had been impressed with her friendliness and warmth—not to mention her good looks, I had mixed feelings about her now. She had been so pleased that he had found a friend and someone to accompany him to Hawaii. That's why she gave me that look. It made me feel protective of Bernie. Of course, it wasn't merely for his interests that I looked out for him; it was for my interests too. As a guardian of this unruly child, I had to watch him constantly now.... Though he was moody and unpredictable, I needed him to get home.

## Chapter Seven

### Uncle Ralph

Upon leaving the mess hall, we found a pay phone nearby. Handing him a quarter, I waited expectantly as he dialed Uncle Ralph's number. A man on duty answered the phone and explained that Ralph would be on liberty until Tuesday. With a quivering lip Bernie told me the news. Tears welled up in his eyes. This time I almost bawled myself.

"Oh, that's just great, Bernie," I shouted at him. "We have to be back in school *Tuesday!*" "I'm sorry," he blubbered. "I thought surely he'd be on base."

Several enlisted men leaving the mess hall glanced at Bernie. A few snickered or gave him a curious look. Many of them frowned with disapproval. At this point I didn't care. All I could think of was that I wouldn't get a perfect attendance award upon graduation. If only the principle hadn't told me about my attendance record, I wouldn't care. It seemed so illogical for a slacker like me, but I was furious at Bernie for robbing me of this. For those moments, as we stood there by the pay phone, I glared at him. My blue eyes had turned into smoldering coals, and yet I could think of nothing fitting to call him now. Slowly my rage cooled, as I listened to Bernie simpering and began feeling conspicuous where we stood. Even in my state of mind, I knew it wasn't his fault Ralph wasn't on the base, but I blamed him for not anticipating this possibility. Bernie had taken too much on faith. This entire episode had been dreamed up by a lunatic, and yet I had no one to blame but myself. I was, I realized, also mad at myself for letting him talk me into this caper. After listening to a few catcalls and hearing one seasoned first classman call Bernie a pussy (another word to add to my list), a notion, driven by desperation, filled me.

"Bernie!" I shook him. "Stop bawling. Give me that phone number. I have an idea."

Without protest he handed me a slip of paper. I took the phone, slipped in a quarter, and hastily dialed the number. When a nasally voiced man on duty answered the phone, I immediately barked, "This is the base Captain. It's an emergency. Is Ralph there?"

"No sir," his voice quivered, "he's on the beach."

"What's your name lad?" I shot back.

"Tom Watkins, sir," his tone changed to alarm.

"Well, Mister Watkins, that answer's not good enough. Once again, where's Ralph?"

"Well, it's kind've sensitive," Watkins replied hesitantly. "I don't want him to get into trouble."

"What kind've trouble?" I snapped. "You want me to put your on report?"

"No sir," Watkins sighed. "...He's at Mama Sally's. Please don't tell him I told you."

I had no idea what this meant, but my heart leaped in my chest. "I want a number lad." I shouted. "Stop stalling!"

After a delay, in which Tom Watkins fetched Mama's Sally's number, the man on duty read the number into the phone. I wrote it down carefully, and then to make sure I had it right, repeated it back to him to make sure it was correct. After that I thanked the man profusely, promising to put a commendation in his record. Back then there was no caller ID. I would never have dared to do such a thing today. When I told Bernie about my achievement, however, I got a mixed reaction. I had just impersonated the base Captain, whoever that was, another offense

added to our list of crimes. Bernie stopped sniveling, smiling yet speechless. A furrow twitched on his brow as he contemplated what I did.

After dialing the second number, a voice blared into the phone, "Hello, Mama Sally's. You play, you pay." I giggled with realization. I had heard about houses of ill repute. The last words from the woman answering the phone convinced me of this.

"This is an emergency!" I yelled into the phone. "I'm Ralph's commanding officer; I have to talk to him at once!"

"What Ralph you speak of," she responded, "we have many Ralphs."

"Please hold," I replied. "Let me check." "Psst! Bernie." I held my hand over the receiver. "What's his last name?"

"I dunno." He shrugged.

I looked at him in disbelief. "You don't know your uncle's last name?"

"Uh uh," He shook his head. "I just know the first."

"Bernie." I frowned with great irritation. "Have you even met this man?"

"No." He sighed. "My mother told me about him."

It was all I could keep from exploding at this point. "All right." I gathered my thoughts. "Was there any pictures of him at your house. What does he look like? What is his rank?"

"Oh, I know some things," Bernie hopped up and down. "Ralph is a chief. He has red hair." "Ma'am," I turned back to the phone, "Ralph is bald-headed—"

Before I could finish the description Bernie gave me, the woman, whom I suspected was Mama Sally, herself, exclaimed, "Only one bald-headed Ralph: a fellah with tattoo of mermaid on his chest."

"Great!" I exclaimed. "Do you know where he might be—a bar he frequents, perhaps?"

"I don't know," she replied thoughtfully. "Ralph mebbe go home to wife"

"Excellent!" I chimed. "Do you have that telephone number?"

"You silly boy." She tittered. "I have no such thing. Sailor boy, you hang up now. I busy woman. You come visit Mama Sally sometime."

"Maybe I'll do that," I said warmly. "Thank you; you've been a big help."

After hanging up, I placed another quarter into the slot, mumbling, "I should've done this in the first place!" That uncle of yours is a piece of work!" As the petty-officer barracks' phone rang, Bernie squirmed nervously outside the telephone booth, so I shut the door. The fact is I had gained nothing from Mama Sally, except the fact he visited her place. The fact that he had visited a whorehouse I would keep to myself. I was worried about calling the same duty officer back. This time I would disguise my voice and use a different tact. By now Bernie was beside himself with worry. Rapping on the glass door, he kept asking, "What's going on? What's going on?"

"Shut-the-hell-up Bernie!" I screamed. When the phone was picked up on the other end, I heard a different voice. "Non-commissioned Barracks, Chief Wharton speaking.

"Hello," I said in a deep, gravelly voice I once used in my Drama class. "I'm trying to locate my son Ralph. His mother is ill and he must return stateside immediately."

"We have two Ralph's here in the barracks," replied the chief, "Ralph Mercer and Ralph Kapinsky—which one do you want?"

"Ho-ho," I tried being casual, "the bald-headed chap, of course!"

"Kapinsky's not here," he answered, a suspicious edge to his voice.

"Oh dear me," I faked a groan. "Do you happen to have his phone number?"

“Humph, let me look in the directory.” He left the phone a moment.

To quieten Bernie, I told him of my progress. He clapped his hands with delight. It was at this point, however, after the chief returned, that I forgot my accent.

“Whom am I speaking to?” a second, deep-based voice returned to the phone.

“My name is Reginald Kapinsky,” I answered in my adolescent voice. “Whoops!” I muttered, shaking my head.

“This is Captain Vogel, the base commander!” he bellowed into the phone. “Are you that clown, whose been impersonating me? You know that’s a federal offense!”

Clunk! The receiver slammed into its cradle. I looked out of the booth at Bernie, a stunned look on my face.

“What’re you going to do now?” His bottom lip quivered.

I tried to sound upbeat. “Well, I have his last name, at least. How many Ralph Kapinsky’s can there be?”

“Yeah.” Bernie’s face brightened. “That should be a cinch!”

“Listen Bernie,” I said, as I thumbed through the directory, “he’s your uncle. I’m a total stranger to him. Here it is: Ralph B. Kapinsky—a Honolulu number and address. I think you better take the phone.”

“Uh uh,” he shook his head vigorously. “You’re good at this, Noel. I’ll freeze up.”

“What!” I shot back. “You want us to be stranded here? What happened to that ice-water-in-the-veins liar I once knew? You who got us into this mess, Bernie, not me? Now you’re letting me clean it up. Don’t argue with me. I’m dialing the number, but you’re taking the phone!”

After only a few rings, a woman answered, but when I handed the phone to Bernie, he backed away and turned his back, shouting, “I can’t do it! I can’t do it!”

“Is this a prank call?” she shrilled into the phone.

“No ma’am.” I tried gathering my wits. “... I need to talk to Ralph. Is he there?”

“Ralph!” she hollered, not bothering to shield the phone.

My ear was ringing now. In the background, her husband shouted, “Who is it? I’m not coming in again, Darla. I got fours off. They pulled this on me last time.”

“What’s your name?” she grumbled.

“Bernie Suarez,” I blurted. “I mean a friend of Bernie Suarez.” “...Oh shit,” I groaned as she hollered out my reply.

A stream of invectives echoed in the distance, growing louder as Ralph approached the phone.

“Bernie or friend of Bernie—which is it joker?” he roared into the receiver. “I got a call earlier from my barracks. You’re the one impersonating the base Captain, aren’t you? Are you the police? My ex-wife?” “Why did you call Mama Sally?” he whispered angrily into the phone.

With desperation in my voice, I pleaded. “Wait, let me explain. I’m sorry I bothered you, but you’re our last hope. My friend Bernie has gotten us stranded here in Hawaii. He said you could help us.” “Please,” my voice broke. “I thought he knew what he was doing, but he got us into a real pickle! Oh please sir, you’re our last hope!”

“Hold on sport,” his voice softened. “I hear what your saying. That last name sounds familiar, but I don’t know a Bernie Suarez.”

I remembered Bernie admitting as much about him, so I shouldn’t have been surprised. I had the presence of mind not to refer to Ralph as Bernie’s uncle, for that might be fiction too. Bernie was weeping again. A sinking feeling overwhelmed me. I was close to bawling myself.

“I was hoping...,” I said hesitantly, “that maybe you at least knew his name. He said you knew his father.”

After a pause he muttered aloud, “...I’ll be damned.... I know a fellow named Armand Suarez. I see the connection.”

“Yes,” I suddenly felt light-headed again. “...You knew him?”

“Yeah, we used to be friends.” There was a bitterness in his voice. “Say,” he spoke discreetly, “is he with you there, this Bernie?”

“Yes,” I nodded into the receiver, “you wanna talk to him?”

“No, I don’t,” his tone sharpened. “I have a wife and three grown children. Please don’t complicate my life. Let him think what he will. Just don’t introduce him to Armand Suarez. That man’s changed in the past few years. I scarcely recognized him.”

A revelation filled me beyond my years. It sounded like something that happened in a movie I once saw. Shutting the door of the booth again so Bernie wouldn’t hear, I murmured into the phone, “You’re his father, not Armand. You were married when you met his mother. Armand gave Bernie his name, but their marriage didn’t work.”

His silence was answer enough. I was thankful he didn’t hang up. Bernie gave me a strange look. I was convinced more than ever to keep him in the dark about all this. I remembered the questions I asked myself earlier. Bernie had a lot of uncles. The implications for his lovely, good-natured mother were staggering. What I heard Ralph say now was so faint I almost didn’t hear him.”

“I have all daughters....What’s he look like?”

“Well, he’s got dark hair and brown eyes—” I began.

“Ah, he looks like his mother,” he muttered wistfully, “she was some looker that woman!”

I started to protest. “Really.... You think they look alike? I don’t know.... I guess so.”

“Listen.” He exhaled deeply. “.... If you promise not to repeat any of this, I’ll help you. I didn’t want to come in Monday, but you and Bernie be in front of the terminal at 1 o’clock. I’ll introduce you to a crewman. You can standby for a hop. We should get you both on a plane by the evening, okay.”

“Yes sir,” I cried jubilantly, “eight sharp!”

“And don’t call me sir,” he barked into the phone. “I’m a chief; I work for a living. How old are you lad?”

“Eighteen,” I piped, “I’m in the naval air reserve program at Los Alamitos. So’s Bernie” He laughed softly. “You’re still in high school, aren’t you? That’s why you gotta go home. I’ll be damned!”

“Yes Ralph,” I replied, feeling giddy with relief. “I look forward to meeting you.”

When I heard his phone hang up, I staggered from the telephone booth, stunned by my revelations. To Bernie, however, I said simply, “It’s settled. He’ll get us a hop tomorrow.”

“Yippee!” Bernie squealed. “What time? Where?”

“At 1 pm we’ll meet him in front of the terminal for a standby flight.”

“This is great!” He grinned happily. “Wait a minute.” He did a double take. “Why so late? That’s cutting it kind’ve short, isn’t it, especially if we’re on standby.”

I looked at him with irritation. “He’s coming in off a four-day liberty, Bernie. I’m sure he knows what he’s doing. We’re lucky to get this.”

His grin had vanished completely. Rubbing his hands together nervously, he gave me a worried look. “You think we can get a hop when we land in Alameda too?”

“Excuse me?” I said, watching him squirm. “Did I hear you correctly? You’re asking me if we can get a hop?” “Listen hotshot.” I poked a finger into his chest. “You said you had this all planned. What do we do when we’re back in Alameda? It’s hundreds of miles from Orange County? That wasn’t part of your plan too?”

“I had it all planned.” His lip began quivering again. “Most of it,... just not that far.”

I shook my head and waved him off as if dispelling a bad dream. “I can’t deal with this right now. I’m going to be positive and try not worry about that right now. We’ll be landing at Alameda in the evening, if we’re lucky, which might be the worst time for a hop. If worse comes to worst, we’ll just have to hitch hike home.”

“I told you,” he replied petulantly, “I’m not a hitch hiker. I won’t do that!”

“Damn it to hell, Bernie,” I slapped my forehead. “You won’t hitch hike, you didn’t bring money from home, you’ve done nothing but whine and complain. So help me I’ll go it alone if I have to. You can have your mother wire you bus fare. I’m not missing school Tuesday.”

“That’s final!” I folded my arms and began walking back to the barracks.

Bernie was weeping again. This time I didn’t care. Over my shoulder, I called back wearily, “I’m going back and rest up until lunch. I’d like to explore Barber’s Point today. Maybe we can go to Pearl Harbor and look at the ships. After the evening meal, we can take the bus into Honolulu. You can do what you want, Bernie. I’m through babysitting you. I’m gonna have some fun!”

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After only a few moments, Bernie caught up with me and, in moody silence, followed me into the barracks, where I found the bunk assigned to me and, still in my uniform, lie down for a short nap.

“You’re going to get lent on you,” commented Bernie.

“Don’t worry,” I reassured him, “I have masking tape in my duffle bag. I don’t want to make my bed yet. I just need forty winks.”

My forty winks turned into a two-hour nap. I assumed Bernie napped during that interval. I awakened with him shaking me violently, hollering, “Wake up! Wake up!” I almost hit him this time. Once again he appeared bereft of his senses.

“What’s the matter with you?” I roared, rising shakily to my feet. “Is there an emergency? Why did you shake me like that?”

Out of breathe, he exclaimed, “The guy on duty said it’s lunch time. We have thirty minutes before the mess hall closes.”

“You dumb shit,” I scolded him. “You could’ve tapped my shoulder. Why do you panic like that?”

Hastily, I found my masking tape. After sharing the tape, we took turns removing lent from the back of our uniforms. Splashing water on my face, I led Bernie to the chow line. I was gratified to find that they had one of my favorites: cheese burgers and fries. In place of coffee, I had punch. Bernie, who always marched to a different drummer, had a hot dog, coleslaw, and his old standby milk. Rested up, our energies restored, we set out to explore Barber’s Point. It was a huge naval air base—much bigger than Los Alamitos or Alameda, but its only attraction was a large airfield filled with planes. We had seen the same kind of planes at Los Alamitos and Alameda. I had planned on going to Pearl Harbor to visit the naval shipyard, but, as we approached the gate to take the bus, Bernie grabbed my arm. There were several sailors and a few Marines leaving that moment, all of them being stopped one-by-one by the guards.

“Look at them.” He pointed fearfully. “There’s two guards today. I see them checking ID’s. Maybe Ralph informed on us. We better wait until the night.”

I nodded in agreement. “You’re right to be worried. Those guards are suspicious. But trust me, Bernie. Ralph wouldn’t do that. If we were in trouble, they’d have nabbed us by now. We’ll slip out this evening in our civvies when the watch changes.”

Until that time, we whiled away the hours at the base movie theatre watching Jailhouse Rock (an appropriate title for our predicament), preceded by and two Disney cartoons. Bernie fell asleep during the feature film and awakened in a bad mood. At the recreation hall, I tried plying him with a cup of coffee. One would have thought it was medicine by the way he acted. In almost every way he behaved like a spoiled child. As we got spruced up for our adventure in town, however, he was silent. It was obvious that he was afraid to go into town. We had both heard about Honolulu from our instructor, who painted it as a wild, carefree territorial town. It had been obvious to me that Chief Crump stretched the truth. It was 1960 and Hawaii was now a state. His tall tales were a deliberate effort to spice up our class. Half of me hoped Honolulu was as he painted it. The other half hoped he had made most of it up. If Mama Sally’s place was any indication, however, there might be some truth to Chief Crump’s tales. As we set forth that evening, we would soon find out.

## Chapter Eight

### The Honolulu Express

The evening finally came. Once again, after saying a hasty prayer, I led Bernie out of the gate without incident. This time I noticed the destination sign on front of the bus. Appropriately enough, next to the route number, the sign read ‘Honolulu Express.’ It was apparently a regular night service for military personnel. More importantly, considering my limited funds, I discovered that it was free. As usual, I chatted with the other sailors on the bus, while Bernie sat in glum silence, contemplating the adventure ahead. As I looked out the window, the sun was setting over palms and countless other species of native trees. The shadowy outlines of settlements leading up to the city of Honolulu, were reminiscent of Ewa, until city lights broke through the forest and a grand entrance greeted my eyes. Suddenly, we were traveling down the main street; a point I hoped would be the highlight of our trip. So far, we had flown in planes, eaten navy chow, and seen a movie at the base theatre—nothing to boast about yet. Now, I could also tell my friends that I had visited Honolulu—Hawaii’s exotic capital.

As we exited the bus terminal where the Honolulu express could pick us up every two hours until 2 am, we found ourselves in a group of like-minded sailors and a trio of Marines. The Marines appeared to be embarrassed in the presence of rowdy sailors. Bernie clung to me like a frightened child, as I gazed in wonder at the restaurants and nightclubs strewn down the strip. Unlike Hollywood, which my family visited when I was young, there was little order or symmetry to this town, and yet it didn’t fit the images I saw in movies. There were, I recall now, no call girls hanging out of windows or parading up and down the street as in other cities of the world. Though I had not personally seen such phenomena yet, Chief Crump had given us lurid accounts of his rowdy days, and I half-expected to see such sights. Up and down the strip on both sides of the street there was, I was certain, a constant stream of navy men from Barber’s Point and soldiers, but, because most of them wore civilian clothes, it was impossible to tell. Intermingled with military personnel, were probably civilian tourists—more obvious in their Hawaiian shirts and cameras, and something else, hidden in the shadows, popping out like jack-o-lanterns to avoid the new laws.... prostitutes.

In class Chief Crump had mentioned a crack down on the prostitution in Hawaii. “The good old days are vanishing now that it’s a state,” he had told us wistfully. I wondered those moments, as Bernie and I followed the other men down the boulevard, why I had expected so much. I had no intention of following the example of many service men. Out of good conscious, despite his lurid stories, the chief had warned us about venereal disease and the dangers of being mugged. An old trick of hookers, he explained, was to lure sailors or soldiers to alleys or other shadowy haunts so that their pimps can rob them after knocking them over the head. We continued following the group that had exited the Honolulu express. At one point, the leader of our group, a loud-mouthed named Buck, turned sharply right. I could scarcely believe where he had led us. “This is the place!” he crowed. “Hold onto your dicks!” As we entered the famous bar called ‘Mama Sally’s,’ I remembered our limited funds.

“We can’t afford this,” I explained to Bernie. “Let’s check it out, then leave. I’m not catching the clap or gonorrhoea.”

“Ick!” he made a face. “I’m not going in. It’s a bar. There’s bad people in there. I wanna go home!”

“Suit yourself,” I followed the last man in. “This is the place your Uncle Ralph told us about. Come on, you pussy, be a man!”

I was only teasing, of course, but the insult worked. Trailing behind me a moment, he seemed frightened out of his wits. Looking around I saw service men, a few in uniform, drinking and socializing with each other with several flashy brunettes and blonds that I assumed were Mama Sally’s girls. One of them, a black haired beauty with stunning green eyes, walked up to me and asked me to buy her a drink. I told her I was tapped out. She snarled and strutted away. I could see nothing in Mama Sally’s that was spectacular. I had been in restaurants in my hometown fancier than this. Obviously, the lure of this place were its ladies of the night. A second girl, this one a platinum blond with jet black eyes, brushed my crotch, as I led Bernie out of the crowded room, whispering something in my ear. She couldn’t be much more than a teenager. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe a girl would say such a thing, and yet, as we emerged on the street, there was a grin on my face.

“Well, that was fun,” Bernie said shakily. “Now what do we do?”

Remembering a place Chief Crump had praised in class, I exclaimed, “Waikiki!”

“Why-what?” Bernie gave me a stupid look.

“Waikiki,” I repeated, ruffling his hair. “Don’t you remember anything from our class?”

With the remainder of my money, I’ll buy us a couple of six packs. Maybe we can find a party at the beach.”

“Well, all right... I guess so.” He gave me a dubious look. “But I don’t like beer. Can you buy something that doesn’t taste like piss?”

In a light-hearted manner, as we waited for a bus, I chided him again. “You said that before Bernie. Where have you ever tasted piss? I’m beginning to think you tried it out once. Trust me kimo sabe, beer doesn’t taste like piss. It’s a man’s drink. If you want, I’ll buy you a bottle of wine. I hate wine, so you can have it all to yourself.”

“Well we have enough money?” he gave me a look of concern.

“Oh.” I snickered. “Got you hooked, did I? You really like the stuff. First we have to find a liquor store near the beach, like the one in Ewa. If we don’t have quite enough, I’ll buy a couple of quarts and you can drink cheap wine.”

“Cheap wine?” He wrinkled his nose.

“Wine is wine,” I shrugged. “In the words of my Uncle Roy, ‘After a few gulps, it all tastes the same!’”

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Night collapsed finally on the strip, but this time we had a full moon to guide our way. I was pumped up by my own imagination. When the bus to Waikiki arrived, even Bernie was excited about the prospects ahead. Unlike the Honolulu Express, which was filled with noisy sailors, the Waikiki Express was filled with a more subdued crowd. There were families with children on board. It appeared by their conversations that they were heading back to the hotels on the beach. I don’t know why but this struck me as a good sign for both our sakes. Because it was, because of its proximity to the hotels, more of a civilian haunt, it might seem safer to Bernie. I imagined that we might find a lot of those ‘nice girls’ Bernie said would be on the island. The police would certainly protect tourists against rowdy sailors and prostitutes, I reassured him. Surely we wouldn’t hassled by native Hawaiians like we were last night.

When the bus stopped at what I heard the tourists call Hotel Row, however, we hadn't arrived yet at Waikiki Beach. Almost all of the hotel guests disembarked with their souvenirs and cameras, leaving only a few other passengers on the bus. The glittering row of building, which included restaurants and nightclubs, slipped away, replaced by a panorama of palm trees and the moonlit beach. Because it was so reminiscent of Ewa, Bernie was alarmed. I knew what he was thinking. At the point where we were dropped off—the Waikiki Express' last stop, we were greeted by a din of noise greater than even Mama Sally's. Loud music—the sound of Little Richard's Tutti Frutti, raucous laughter, and squeals of pleasure echoed in the night. A bonfire glittered in the near distance, the silhouettes of merrymakers cavorting around the flames. There were, I could discern, dozens young men (most likely servicemen) everywhere, along with a smaller number of women, at what was obviously, in fact, a party, as I had hoped. Unfortunately, it was far too wild for Bernie's tastes. I knew he would balk at the notion of joining this bunch. The other passengers—very likely servicemen—joined the merrymakers, while Bernie and I stood there at the bus stop with different emotions about what we saw. Bernie wanted to flee. I was tempted to join in. I noticed, after scanning the horizon on each side of us, that there were no liquor stores in sight. If, judging by our original goal of buying some booze, we didn't join the party, coming to Waikiki was a foolish move. If, on the other hand, we became party-crashers, we could still get smashed and I wouldn't have to pay a red cent.

Bernie was overwhelmed by this event. Awakening out of his trance, he looked at me with wide unblinking eyes and gaping mouth then asked in a deadpan voice, "Where are we Noel? Who are these people? I thought we were going to buy beer and wine and get drunk, like before. Some of these people are half naked. Those must be prostitutes on the beach!"

Using the most logical tact, in fact the only one Bernie would understand, I explained to him that there might not be any more buses back to Barber's Point. In order to get back to the bus depot in Honolulu by 2 am where the Hawaiian Express dropped us off, we might need a ride. Though it was possible that we might get a ride from one of the merrymakers, it was also possible that if we returned to the bus stop and waited long enough we might catch another bus. We would arrive in plenty of time at the Honolulu depot to catch the last bus to Barber's Point. I knew very well that if we joined the party the 2 am deadline might, in fact, be impossible to meet. The impression I left in Bernie's mind, however, was that we might be stranded here unless we made friends with some of merrymakers. I had exaggerated the problem for him, and what we were doing was a calculated risk. If worse came to worse, I reasoned, we'd have to sleep on the beach again and catch a morning bus. But tonight we were going to have fun!

"You don't have to join in," I suggested. "Just grab a beer once in awhile, and watch the show."

"But I don't like beer," he whined. "You said you'd buy me wine."

"Listen, Bernie," I tried reasoning with him. "Sailors don't drink wine, they drink beer. You drank a beer last night, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I was already drunk," he said, making a face. "My taste buds were numb."

"All right," I was losing patience, "I learned something in science class. Smell dictates what you taste, so hold your nose while drinking."

"Well that really work?" He wrinkled his nose.

"It has to." I frowned irritably. "We're stuck here, Bernie! You wanna walk back to town?" That was, of course, a great exaggeration. More thoughtfully, I added, as he dragged his feet, "I remember something I heard on television: 'When in Rome do as the Romans do!'"

“What’s Rome got to do with it?” he muttered, as I prodded him on. “What if they consider us outsiders?”

“Remember what I said,” I gave him a shove, “Talk the talk and walk the walk... *Now move it!*”

As we moved through the bodies of sailors and women, I realized that most of these people were too far-gone to challenge us or even ask our names. Bernie saw this too, giggling hysterically when a dark haired woman, probably twice his age, grabbed his hand and tried forcing him to dance.

“Oh no-o-o-o-o!” he squealed.

“Whatsamattah?” she asked in a slurred voice. “You queer, boy?”

While he cowered behind me, I was swept with embarrassment. My only recourse was to set an example for him and get smashed as soon as possible. Immediately now, as he followed close behind, whimpering under his breath, I searched for a cooler containing beer. Several men tried engaging us in drunken conversation. I translated their slurred voices as “What ship you on, men?,” “You come from Pearl or Barber’s Point?,” and to Bernie, “What’s wrong with you boy, you afraid of girls?” I mumbled incoherently and nodded my head, but Bernie exclaimed foolishly, “We’re going to meet our squadron on the Hornet. I like nice girls!”

I had been worried that Bernie might spout controversies. At times he had no control over his vocal chords, blurting exactly what was on his mind. “Are you completely nuts?” I snapped, fishing into a cooler for a beer. “Here,” I said shoving him a can, “do as I told you.” “When you’re done with that one, drink this one.” I handed him another. “You dumb shit. Keep your mouth shut!”

With one can stuck in my pants and a second can stuck in Bernie’s, we snuck away with our beers to a spot several yards away from the group and glow of the fire. At this point, as Ritchie Valens’ La Bamba, blared from the radio, I saw a dozen or more couples swaying or staggering to the music. Many of them were so inebriated they could barely stand up. In various spots, lying where they fell, a few sailors appeared to be unconscious. I had spotted three attractive females near the cooler, as I grabbed our beer—a blond, redhead, and brunette, all drunk, but I was fearful of the kinds of women they might be. Flashing into my mind were two sources of information: my eighth grade sex education class, which showed the dangers of venereal disease, and Chief Crump, who echoed the same warning in his discussion of unprotected sex. Popping down awkwardly, with this thought in mind, I motioned for Bernie to do the same. Reluctantly he sat down Indian fashion, with a beer in each hand. All my visions of meeting girls in Hawaii were based upon a storybook understanding of dating. Here I was surrounded by girls—put to the test, and I was no braver than Bernie. The difference was that I wanted to plunge ahead, and Bernie didn’t. As I guzzled down my beer, I glanced at Bernie to check his progress. For a moment, he looked at the frosty can as if it was medicine, then, holding his nose, and tilting his head back, he upended his first can in an effort to take his first swallow. When it spilled down his chin and dribbled down his neck, I broke into laughter.

“Oh, that’s the funniest thing I ever saw,” I giggled, slapping my knee. “You dumb shit.” I shook my head. “I wasn’t serious. That only works for food—broccoli and spinach, not drinks.” “Come on Bernie,” I egged him on, “show some balls. Up and in—you’re a sailor now!”

Bravely, Bernie up ended the can again, took a long swig, made a face, and then, after more coaxing and second gulp, as it took effect, I witnessed a boyish grin spreading across his face. Once again, I had won! Chattering about different topics—the bonfire, the lovely beach,

and the music blaring at the party, Bernie managed to finish his first can and almost finish his second, before two hour-glass figure sashayed our way. Between the moonlight and firelight, I could discern the faces and adolescent figures of two native Hawaiian girls. They looked so much alike they could have been twins. Suddenly, the V.D. film and instructor's warnings were mentally discarded, as they approached. Even Bernie seemed taken at first, as they sat down—one on each side of us and, after quick introductions, the girl next to me came right to the point.

"My name Sophie, she be Lucy," she chimed softly. "You boys want good time?"

"Sure," I said, jumping up, "I'll get us some more beers."

Leaving Bernie alone with the two girls was a mistake. Hurriedly, I fished out several cans. Using my shirt as an apron, I carried my stash to our 'nest,' giggling madly. As I handed a can to each member of the group, I noticed a sheepish look on Bernie's face. Both girls were staring at him as if he was a vile thing.

"What's wrong?" I looked down at the girls. When they pointed silently at Bernie, I asked him bluntly, "What did you say to them? Did you insult our friends?"

"I told them that we only had nine dollars." He shrugged indifferently. "Surely they'll want to be paid?"

I was momentarily speechless. Sophie jumped up and cried, "You think all Hawaiian girls whores? You dumb haoles all the same!"

"Yes." Lucy was suddenly on her feet. "Sailors pigs. You think you get us drunk and get into our pants!"

Several merrymakers looked over at us. I was furious at Bernie's rudeness. Looking around self-consciously, I was also worried about the reaction I saw in many of the men and their dates. Whether or not they were prostitutes or not, Sophie and Lucy displayed indignation, storming back toward the bonfire to tattle on us and, I was afraid, get us ejected from the group. What actually happened, however, was muted by a commotion on the road.

"Shore patrol! Shore patrol!" a sailor bellowed.

"Get up Bernie!" I screamed. "We got more to lose than them. We'll go to jail if we're caught!"

As everyone ran in different directions—some up the beach, some down the beach, and several men running drunkenly into the arms of the SP's, I led Bernie in the direction of those running south toward Diamond Head. I saw one frightened youth point to this distant landmark, which I had heard about in class. I was surprised that the shore patrol didn't follow us. As one seasoned sailor explained, though, the SP paddy wagons had only so much room. Introducing himself simply as Harry, as we paused momentarily for a breather, he told us that it was against the law for servicemen to drink alcohol on Waikiki beach, and yet the rule was enforced only when complaints were made. There was no active patrol this far south. Except for Hotel Row further up the road, there were few houses on the peninsula, so it must have been hotel guests making the complaints. I was surprised that the music had been heard that far away, but Harry explained that there were no natural barriers to block sound, so the music was carried in the wind. "The party was certainly loud enough for that!" He laughed, slapping his knee. After drinking his share of beer, I was impressed with his wit. After a short while, when everyone was certain we weren't being followed, our group had slowed to a walk. I noticed at that point that there were no women in our group. Though prostitution was illegal in Hawaii as in any other state, Harry explained, the shore patrol didn't arrest civilians. While Bernie dropped his can on the spot, I managed, even in my haste to hold onto two of the beers, one of which I handed to him as we strolled down the beach.

“What’s that?” He pointed at the great looming rock.

“Diamond Head,” I announced, raising my can in salute.

With moonlight shining on its ragged surface, it reminded me of Point Dume at Zuma Beach, with the exception that it was much bigger. Quite by accident we had stumbled upon one of Hawaii’s most iconic landmarks. In my current state of mind, this realization faded in importance, as I contemplated getting Bernie and I back to the base. Now that it appeared that we were safe to return, Harry, the most sober of the group, called out in military style, “About face!” and, pivoting 180 degrees, the group began trotting back to the bonfire. Soon we could see its distant flames. The shore patrol had left the fire burning. As we came closer and closer, it was obvious that the females had vanished. The question on the sailors’ lips was, ‘had the beer vanished too?’

“I wonder when the next bus comes?” I muttered aloud.

“Ain’t no more this late.” Harry responded. “Most of us got wheels. The Waikiki bus had its last run. You can walk up to Hotel Row. That bus runs all night.”

I was glad this sailor was sober. I made a mental note for Bernie and I to hitch a ride with him, if we didn’t hike down to the hotel bus. I would soon discover that my observation was premature. When we reached the bonfire, we could see the coolers, one on each side of the ring, open, a disappointing sign as we approached.

“Those sons of bitches,” Harry swore, “I bet them SP’s took ’em. Damn hypocrites!” “Hold on,” he added looking down into one of the coolers, “there’s plenty left.”

“Looky here,” a drunken sailor exclaimed. “Thish one full too!”

“They must’ve grabbed only a few,” I observed, grabbing my share. “How much beer did you guys buy?”

“We didn’t buy any.” Bernie muttered stupidly.

“Hey, I got an idea,” Harry cried, “let’s go to my place. You men gotta keep it down, though. We’ll play poker and get shit-faced.”

Shit-faced, I realized, was the navy word for getting drunk. In a free-for-all motion, everyone took as many cans as they could carry. Each cooler was carried between a pair of sailors to automobiles parked by the road. Caught up in the excitement, I greedily carried my four cans away from the site, following Harry and his friends. With a can of beer in each hand Bernie trailed behind me, with wide unblinking eyes.

“Where we going?” he asked in a breathless voice.

“You heard the man,” I looked back happily. “We’re going to Harry’s place.” “Harry,” I called through cupped hands, “can we ride with you?”

“Sure,” he called back, “climb in back.”

“Oh no,” Bernie groaned, “it’s a pickup truck.”

After climbing into the bed, I reached down to him. “Here, gimme your hand, Bernie. You wanna to walk back to base?”

Several other sailors climbed in, until the bed was packed with bodies. In the front, beside Harry, three more men were crammed in. Now, in the twenty-first century, that would be considered a misdemeanor, but it was probably a common scene in 1960 Hawaii. A civilian patrol car passed us on our way back to Honolulu. Harry was driving quite fast too. Behind us was a caravan of automobiles carrying more drunken sailors. The back window of the pickup was evidently slid open, for I heard the men inside the cab planning the night ahead.

“We’ll call Lola and Esther—they two whores we picked up this evening,” he explained to his friends. “Maybe they can invite their friends. We don’t want no SP or police raids, so we’ll keep it business-like.”

“What about your old lady?” asked his friend. “What if she shows up?”

“Don’t worry,” Harry scoffed. “She ran off last week. Took the kid too. We got the house to ourselves.”

As I listened, I noted even in the dim light, Bernie’s reaction. Once again he was terrified. I was frightened myself, after hearing what Harry said. I had heard enough scuttlebutt (a navy word the instructor taught us meaning rumor or gossip) to know what they were talking about. Yet, despite my own fears, I couldn’t help being excited. The sound of cans popping open around us and excited murmurs heightened my excitement. Bernie was whispering something in my ear as I popped one open and drank heartily from the can.

Bursts of air tickled my ears. “You-you heard him,” he sputtered, “he’s taking us to another party. I bet those are prostitutes coming. What if the police arrive this time? That’s illegal, Noel. We’ll go to jail.”

Bernie had sobered up quickly. He was dead right, of course, but I wouldn’t tell him that. In stead, to dull his wits, I plied him with beer. I’m not proud of it, but it worked. In fact, as he guzzled down another can, he seemed to relax. It seemed that he was acquiring a taste for beer. I had gotten him to like it. Now if I could only get him to like girls. Not for one minute did I seriously entertain the notion of paying for sex. I had only nine dollars and I didn’t want V.D.. Bernie, I realized, had deeper reasons for shying away from girls. Even if the opportunity availed itself, I knew he would freeze up. As I continued guzzling down suds, these thoughts and all other intellectual insights became a blur of laughter and motion. At one point, while Harry was still speeding down the road, I heard more cans snap open in the cabin, and Harry demanding in a slurred voice, “Hey, gimme nuther. Thash good shit!” Normally, if I hadn’t been so inebriated, that would have been alarming. As we disembarked at Harry’s place, however, Bernie and I were already smashed. I almost broke my neck climbing out of the bed. The gate of the pickup had to be opened to fish him and the other men out.

From this point, my memory is filled with noise, movement, and bright lights. The few reflections I reconstruct now are possible because of the adrenaline pumping in my veins. Crowding into Harry’s house in Honolulu, the sailors waited for the girls to arrive. A few, sober enough to think straight, played poker at the kitchen table. I realized, in spite of my condition, that Bernie was right. This could lead to big trouble for two counterfeit sailors. We were, thanks to me, trapped. Even this shaky frame of mind waned, as someone handed me another beer. My resistance was weak. Bernie sat on a dirty sofa, staring dully into space. Someone had handed him a can too. I don’t remember when he got sick, but there were vomit stains on his pea coat and shirt. What pushed me over the edge was the sudden arrival of the girls Harry promised. I forgot what their names were, but I recognized the green-eyed brunette and platinum blond with jet black eyes from Mama Sally’s. An illogical temptation drove me those moments. I didn’t have enough money, and yet I followed the other sailors down a dingy hall to two rooms, where the two girls led a line of men through each door. The nasty words the blond had whispered in my ear at Sally’s flashed into my mind. I had been scandalized then, but now I pictured her lovely face and savored her words, as if they came from a long lost love.

Ironically, what snapped me out of my drunken trance was a natural reaction. Luckily, there was an unoccupied restroom on my right. Charging into the room, I bent over and purged. As I clasped the filthy bowel with unflushed urine in it, I felt a strange peace. In my sodden

mind, I knew I had been given a reprieve. Though I had but nine dollars for those lowlife women, it might have been enough.... “Thang you gawd!” I drawled.

After staggering back down the hall, bumping into clients on the way, my instincts gripped me now. I remember a woman entering the house, swearing aloud, and yelling, “Harry, you bastard. This time I’m calling the cops!” This caused my adrenaline to pump even faster. When I found Bernie slumped over on the sofa sound asleep, I shook him violently, until he was awake, dragged him to his feet, and pulled him like a zombie out of the door. That hour fortune smiled on us again. As I led Bernie toward a dark side facing the house, I had no idea where we were going. A voice rang out that moment, “Are one of you two men, Bernie Suarez?” Bernie was too far gone to respond, but I turned to the voice, recognizing the angry woman in the house. In the light, she was a slightly overweight woman, with a mixture of Asian and Hawaiian features, and yet, as I recall, she spoke in a crinkly, articulate voice, without the hint of an accent.

“He must’ve dropped this.” She held out his wallet.

“Oh thang you ma’am,” I bowed. “Pleeze led us eshcape before you call poleeze?”

“Don’t worry.” She laughed sourly. “Some of those men are our neighbors. I don’t want to get *them* busted. My daughter and I have moved on. He pays the rent now. It’s his house.”

I gave her a quizzical look, tilting my head in the manner of drunks. Bernie was almost asleep on his feet. Studying us intently, as I took the wallet and then tucked it into Bernie’s back pocket, her face broke into a smile.

“According to this license, he’s eighteen years old,” she observed dryly. “What’re you two kids doing with that bunch?”

“Uh, we made a mishtake.” I tried explaining, “We thod id wuz just a pardy. We didn’t know they’re wuz proshittutes there. Bernie doeshn’t know any bedder. Ids my fauld.”

I was referring to the event at the beach and at Ewa. She waved her hand impatiently, though, saying, “I don’t care what Harry does anymore. He’s a degenerate, haole pig” “The question is.” She looked at us with concern. “How’re you boys getting back to the base? You’ll get picked up by the shore patrol or police in that condition.”

I looked over at Bernie in his soiled pea coat, scratched my head, and nodded. “We’re in a piggie.”

“Ho ho,” she shook her head, “I should say so. They’ve been cracking down at Barber’s Point and Pearl lately. You can’t even take the bus. You try to get into the gate that way, and you’ll be on report!”

“We’ll be more than thad,” I muttered to myself.

Moved by our miserable plight, the woman, as the Marine Lieutenant last night, took pity on us. Motioning to the automobile parked in the driveway, she said wearily, “Come on, you two. I’m gotta bail you out of this. I work in the commissary, and I have a base sticker. You guys lie low in back, and I’ll sneak you in.”

I mumbled my thanks over and over again, “Oh thang you, thang you!” Bernie had to be guided into the back seat. I pulled his smelly pea coat off, rolling it up inside out, so he could lie on it instead of my lap. Had I not been so drunk I might have been worried about his zombie-like state. As it turned out, I fell asleep myself, as she drove us back to the base. When we arrived at the turn-around loop provided for drop offs, she stopped her car, reached back and shook me awake, and then, after I drug the drowsy Bernie from the car, disappeared from my life. I didn’t even ask her name, but like the Marine, whose name I also failed to ask, she stands out as an important person in my life. There were many such persons I can recall...but the Marine lieutenant and Harry’s wife, brief as the encounters were, were the first, holding special

place in my mind. Had they not arrived, I can't imagine what might have happened to us during this freewheeling madcap time. At least so far in our caper, Bernie and I had escaped detection, arrest, and incarceration in jail or a Marine brig. We had no idea just how much trouble awaited us ahead.

## Chapter Nine

### More Revelations

That night, through a drunken fog, I managed to find our barracks with Bernie in tow, moving like the walking dead. I don't remember greeting the man on duty or even climbing into my rack. I should have made my bed. The sheets, pillowcases, and blanket lie untouched on both our mattresses. We crashed heavily on our faces onto our unmade beds, remaining in that position until the morning. With sunlight streaming in from a window, my memory became solid. I heard the sound of floor-waxers and men chattering back and forth. Looking up to one of the men, who worked the waxer, I protested weakly—my tongue rolling thickly in my mouth. I don't remember what I said, but the two men laughed at my predicament. So, I swore at them for disturbing my peace. One of them gave me a kick and told me to get out of the barracks if I didn't like it. That really made me angry, but then, seeing the third class stripe on one of them, I simmered down quickly, lie back a moment to gain my bearings, and, with great effort, rose sluggishly from my rack.

"Tied one on did ya'?" the third classman taunted. "You're lucky you got through the gate. The base Captain's cracking down now. There's been too much hell raising in Honolulu. Is that where you boys were? SP's had a field day last night."

The third classman was a fount of information. I was hung over, but it wasn't as bad as the night before. The purge I had at Harry's place appeared to have helped. Nevertheless, I felt as if I had emerged from a blender. Even in my groggy, queasy state, I listened intently, realizing how very lucky Bernie and I were. I thanked him for his information and introduced myself. He didn't reciprocate, but I saw a nametag on him that read, "Louis Suarez." In my delicate state, upon seeing that name, I almost passed out. The coincidences Bernie and I had experienced continued to mount, this one topping them all.

"I don't believe it!" I said, slack-jawed, bracing myself against the bunk bed frame. "... Are you by any chance related to Armand Suarez?"

"Yeah." His eyebrows plunged downward. "Don't remind me."

Looking over at the unconscious Bernie, I lowered my voice. "Is he your father?"

"Hell no," Louis snarled. "My father was killed in Tarawa. Armand's my uncle. I haven't seen that bastard in years."

"Is he still alive?" I asked hesitantly.

"Why do you ask.... What's he to you?"

"Please." I said, looking over at my sleeping friend. "It's important to us."

"Us?" He followed my gaze. "You including him—that kid?"

His words had literally sobered me up. I nodded faintly, stunned by his revelation. With an intuitive gaze, he searched my face, and then, glancing back and forth between Bernie and me, nodded his head. Slowly, a smile of comprehension fell over his face, and yet there was no punch line yet. I studied Louis a moment. He looked nothing like Bernie or his mother.

"Armand Suarez," he exhaled the words, the great *Armand Suarez*. Since I arrived here, I've tried to avoid him, but I don't have to worry anymore. He's in the VA Hospital in Honolulu. He was working on a P2V, and he had a heart attack.... That's all I know."

"Why do you hate him?" I asked indelicately.

“You ever meet Armand?” he asked with great bitterness. “You either love him or hate him; there’s no in between. To most guys, he’s good ol’ Armand, a hard drinking, back slapping friend—a bull-shitting story-teller about the war. To his family—my mother and my poor Aunt Celia, he was Armando, a two-timing son-of-a-bitch. When they transferred me from the Enterprise for processing, I freaked out when I found out he was here. Luckily, while waiting for my discharge, I was assigned housekeeping to keep me busy. Since then, like Brer Rabbit, I laid low.”

“How long you been here?” I inclined my head.

“Not long,” he shrugged. “I’ll be discharged this month. I don’t have to worry about running into my uncle anymore. If he doesn’t croak first, they’ll give him a medical discharge.” “All right,” he said, stepping away from the waxer. “I told you my story. Now you give me yours” “...or his.” He pointed to Bernie.

“It’s complicated.... He’s a complicated person.” I said, watching him stir.

After motioning for me to move to the far side of the barracks, he listened to my account of our adventure so far, from the moment Bernie talked me into this madcap caper, through our two hops, trip to Honolulu and Waikiki, and the party at Harry’s, including the details that have led me to believe that Bernie is unbalanced and too delicate to serve Uncle Sam.

“So, he thought Armand was his father, eh?” Louis concluded, when I lapsed into silence. “You think your story is complicated, wait till you hear mine. My mother told me about him after Aunt Celia died. Celia got pregnant by that bastard. He never married her. Aunt Celia had a good heart, but like Mama she was plain. It almost killed her when he took up with that whore —”

“What was her name?” My heart leaped in my chest.

“Started with a C,” he began. “She was a looker, that one.”

“Constance!” I exclaimed.

“Uh huh,” he grinned. “...Oh shit, that must be her son.” He looked back at Bernie. “No wonder you want to keep that hush-hush.”

The words flew out of my mouth. “Yes, it’s true. He thinks he’s Armand’s son, but Bernie’s father was already married. It seems Armand married her to keep her good name.”

“Or to get in her pants.” Louis snickered. “She dumped him, and took her kid to the states. Crying in his beer, as drunks do, he told this story to my dad’s friends on the base. When Celia heard it, she blew her brains out with her father’s revolver.... How’s that for a storybook romance?”

“Holy shit.” I clasped my forehead. “Bernie must never hear about this. He’ll lose it. I swear, he’s not right in the head. This might push him over the edge!”

“Mums the word!” Louis reached out to shake my hand.

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I thanked Louis for telling his story. While he went back to work, I shook Bernie awake, coaxed him into the shower to clean himself up, and while rinsing myself off, tried sorting out everything I knew. It was, in deed, complicated. Though Louis now knew Bernie had been illegitimate, he didn’t mention Ralph, and yet Ralph was Bernie’s father. It had been a tangled web for Armand and Constance. Armand dumped his wife for her and she dumped Armand for Bernie’s stepfather. I wondered then if Ralph, who appeared to resent their relationship (in spite the fact he was married), knew the dark side of this man. If so, he hadn’t mentioned it to me. Of course, I reasoned, Ralph, who got Constance pregnant, already had a wife, so he was a villain

too. Nevertheless, from the vantage point of Constance, Armand galloped in like a knight in shining armor to save her good name (or just to get into her pants as Louis claimed). The only innocent party in this whole tangled web was Bernie...and he was nuts. I laughed hysterically. What am I doing here? I asked myself repeatedly, as I dried myself off, dressed in my blues, and coaxed Bernie to do the same. The beer and lack of sleep had taken their toll on us, especially Bernie, who followed me like a sleepwalker to the mess hall, muttering incoherently on the way.

Fortunately for us, the mess hall was still open. Sailors in both informal blues and formal dress blue uniforms as well as work clothes stood in line with us. Once again, I had a hangover, which grew worse in the bright morning sun. It was as if a drum was being beaten inside my skull. I could imagine how Bernie felt. I had to tell the servers what to put on his tray. To simplify matters, I told them to give him the same courses they gave me. More conservatively this time, I left out the pancakes and sausages. We had scrambled eggs, hash browns, toast, and oatmeal. I got us both cups of coffee and made sure Bernie had his ration of milk.

When we found a spot at a table amidst cheerful and talkative men, Bernie finally spoke.

"I will never forgive you for getting me into this," he uttered, chewing lazily on a piece of toast.

I was, as I had been many times before in his company, speechless. After talking me into this madcap enterprise and placing us in jeopardy with his lies, it was my fault for trying to make the best of it. It was my fault that I wanted us to have some fun. Though I wanted to knock him out and stomp on his face, I considered the source. This was Bernie; he was, through his uncle Ralph, my ticket home. I could at least verbally state what was reeling in my mind, but I was afraid I might explode. So, like a volcano, my anger smoldered for a while. Not wanting to make another scene, especially in the mess hall, I leaned over and in my most menacing voice and whispered, "Eat shit and die!"

"That was vile," Bernie jumped to his feet. "Right when I'm eating, you talk about shit!"

That had been the wrong thing to say to Bernie. Several diners reacted angrily to his outburst. I sat there mortified, as several of them reacted to his outburst. The man across the table, scolded him severely. I heard another sailor threaten to punch out his lights. Among the diners, however, the worst reaction came from a tall, muscular black mess steward, who came over grabbed the back of Bernie's collar and shook him violently, muttering, "I gotta good mind to toss your ass out!"

"Sorry," he whimpered, "please don't do that!"

"Oh dear God!" I covered my face with my hands.

Bernie sat down and began sniveling. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he looked around the room. Dropping my hands, I glanced light-headedly at his detractors. As if it was guilt by association, many of them were also glaring at me. A first classman next to me poked me in the ribs. When I didn't react quickly enough, he poked me again.

"Hey, what's wrong with that kid?" he asked discreetly. "I saw him carrying on like in front of the visitor's barracks. He's a real crybaby. That ain't no kind've behavior for a man."

I giggled hysterically. Regaining some of my composure, I briefly summarized Bernie's predicament. "He's not cut out for military life," I explained audibly. "He's too immature. His moods change constantly. If he stays in the navy, they'll eat him alive!"

Though the men within earshot listened in, Bernie's sobs prevented him from hearing my words. I was glad he didn't know my true feelings, at least until we were out of harm's way and I could give him a piece of my mind. For now, until Ralph got us a hop back to Alameda, I couldn't tongue lash him as I wanted. Judging by the last sailor's comment in the mess hall,

Bernie's antics had circulated on the base. I had eaten only a portion of my breakfast and drank half of my coffee, but I decided it was time for us to leave. Hopefully, there would be a different crowd here at lunch. Otherwise, it might be a good idea to forgo lunch and eat k-rations on the plane. My mind was in turmoil. I wasn't sure what to do with Bernie, as he walked behind me muttering under his breath. Our adventure had been too much for him. I could scarcely imagine what his mental state would be if I told him the truth about his father, which would incriminate his mother as a liar and onetime woman of ill repute.

The view I had in 1960, I realize now, was unfair. After all, Constance had raised Bernie and his sister the best way she could. Compared to current morals, her behavior might be seen as tame. At least she didn't have an abortion or turn him over to social services. Everyone, after all, deserved a second chance. But Constance should have told Bernie the truth about his father when he was a child. It was too late now. He would never hear the truth from my lips. Given his erratic behavior so far, I was certain it would drive him over the edge.

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After returning to the barracks to shed our uncomfortable blue uniforms and use the restroom, we sat at each end the table provided for letter writing, in verbal silence. The housekeeping team had already finished. Outside we could hear the sound of lawn mowers mowing the grass. In the foreground there were friendly shouts of sailors to each other, of all things a dog barking, and then the roar of a distant plane taking off from Barber's Point. I was lulled by these sounds. I had big plans to go to Pearl Harbor and see the ships, but that was out of the question now. After Bernie's last outburst, we were more vulnerable than ever. The word was out on him. If one man remembered Bernie, others had seen his antics too. I was afraid he would incriminate us. Sooner or later, I was certain, it would catch up with us. It was a miracle we hadn't been caught so far. Much later in my long, checkered life, I would visit the Pearl Harbor National Monument, Hickham Field, and all the other memorials and landmarks in Hawaii of the Second World War, but my main concern that day was getting us to Alameda and, after that, sneaking off that base, and hitch-hiking home. There would be no more hops after today, I decided. It would be foolhardy to try and get flight from Alameda to Los Alamitos. For that matter, if we got caught finally at Los Alamitos, our home base, it would go especially hard on us. That's where we signed up and attended our airman recruit classes. We were lucky that no one, who might recognize us after attending our meetings at Los Alamitos, was there the day we embarked on this ill-conceived trip.

I liked to think that God had been watching over us, but I remembered my minister quoting Jesus' rebuke to Satan, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord." We had, if nothing else, tempted fate. Sensing that Bernie was a liar, I had tossed caution to wind. I had no one to blame but myself. So, perhaps, all things considered, religion had no part in this. We had been guided by chance. Our good fortune was being driven by pure, blind luck.

With these grim thoughts in mind, I stood up, yawned, stretched in exaggerated motions, and, without a backward glance, sauntered out of the barracks into the late morning sun. "I'm going to take a stroll," I called back. "You can do want you want."

"Wait!" Bernie shouted frantically. "Maybe we better hide out until lunch."

"Keep a low profile perhaps," I shook my head, "not hide. All you have to do Bernie is control yourself—at least until we're hitch-hiking home."

"I'm not hitch-hiking home," came his refrain. "It's dangerous. We'll get another hop."

“No, Bernie,” I said with resolution, “we’ve been fortunate so far, but that’s pushing our luck. After our last hop, if we can sneak out of Alameda undetected, and we’re home free. That’s what we should do. If you don’t join me and get caught in Alameda or Los Alamitos, you’ll probably rat me out. We might both wind up in Leavenworth—all because you’re afraid to hitchhike and take a chance. At least *I’m* going to try.”

“Hitchhiking’s dangerous!” He repeated stubbornly

I stopped and looked at him in utter disbelief. “Bernie—you dumb shit!” I cried, clapping my forehead. “You call that dangerous. I’ll tell what’s dangerous. Pretending to be airman recruits and illegally using military transports *is dangerous*. Lying to naval officers *is dangerous*. Don’t tell me about *danger* Bernie. Everyone hitchhikes nowadays. Sailors do it all the time. What we’ve been doing on naval bases can get us arrested. We can go to federal prison!”

“Oh pooh!” Bernie made a face. “You’re exaggerating. I got us this far, didn’t I? Alameda was a cinch before. I’m sure we can do it again.”

I felt light-headed again, as if I was walking in a dream world. Barber’s Point wasn’t real. Bernie wasn’t real. This had to be a nightmare, I told myself giddily. No one human being could be so thick-headed; it defied reason.

“Where you even listening to me?” I asked him hoarsely. “Did you hear a word I said.... This is the last hop for me. You can do what you *damn well please!*”

Bernie started humming to himself. As we walked aimlessly through Barber’s Point, I saw one more personality shift for Bernie. He was, I thought with great irritation, in his ‘stupid mood.’ How else could I define that type of stubbornness? As he continued to hum off-key, though, I reeled around and said aloud, “No, that’s not right. I’ve been right along: you’re nuts Bernie. I’m dealing with a madman!”

“Oh!” He recoiled. “You scared me!”

Seeing my disdain, he burst into tears.

“You’re also a crybaby,” I added maliciously after seeing his response. “Look at you—tearing up, lips quivering, ready to bawl at the drop of a pin. Take my word for it, Bernie, you’re not cut out for the navy. You haven’t the spirit or courage for it. You’ll be keelhailed or tossed overboard if you assigned to an aircraft carrier! You won’t last a week!”

There I said it. It was for his own good, but that wasn’t why I said it. I was fed up with this nincompoop. Bernie was visibly shaken by what he heard. Instead of breaking down this time, however, he doubled up his little fists and came after me, his face dark with rage.

“Whoa,” I laughed in panic, “you wanna play, eh. Okay, you little turd. One more swing like that, and I’ll deck you!”

Through his teeth, bereft of his senses, he listed my sins. I interpreted his ramblings as, “You took me to wild parties, made me drunk, and introduced me to nasty girls.” He went on to blame me for everything that had gone wrong on our trip. He also cursed me, using my dad’s favorite swear words, and, at one point, let out an inhuman shriek: “Eeeeeeeowww!” Upon hearing that unearthly sound, I took to my heels. In spite of my anger, I didn’t want to hurt Bernie, at least not physically. He was much smaller than me, and it would look bad if someone saw me knock him out. Unfortunately, though I could easily outrun him, Bernie continued to scream at me, calling me a coward now and threatening to beat me to a pulp. Sailors walking up and down the main street on the base cast alarmed looks at us. One naval officer shouted, “Stop! Stop! I’m calling the MPs!”

Turning around that moment, I tried doing the least damage I could to him. I slapped him silly. My fist might have broken his jaw or nose. As it was, I left a handprint on his baby face. Staggering around in a daze, he gave me a surprised look and then broke into sobs. Meanwhile, as I stood there stunned by what happened, the officer began running toward us.

“Listen to me, you stupid son-of-a-bitch,” I shouted, “we can’t let that man catch up with us. Follow me!”

All I could think of doing was circle around somehow and head back to the barracks. I was thankful that Bernie had the presence of mind to take to his heels too. I don’t believe I ever ran that fast. I was impressed that Bernie could keep up with me. In the receding distance, the officer yelled, “You men stop skylarking on base. So help me I’ll call the MPs.” His original threat had been watered down considerably. We weren’t felons; we were skylarkers—a term I heard Chief Crump use. A great weight lifted from my mind that moment. I doubted that the man would pursue us further. Despite this impression, we continued our circuitous route around the row of enlisted and non-com barracks onto the nearby field and then back to the visitors barracks close to the gate.

“We’ll wait here awhile,” I informed Bernie, plopping on a chair to gain my breath. “At noon we’ll eat chow, and then meet Ralph in front of the terminal at one. Hopefully, we won’t run into that officer again. If we do, we’ll just admit we were skylarking. I think I heard the chief call it grab-assin’ too.” “The thing is Bernie,” I paused to scold him, “you caused that. You’re not right in the head. When we get back home, you’d better think about a section 8. Our instructor told us about this.”

For a few seconds, Bernie’s cheeks puffed up in anger again. I gave him a warning stare, doubling up my fist. “So help me, Bernie,” I wrung my fist. “This time no one’s around. I’ll knock you out!”

“Oh why do you make me lose my temper?” He shook his finger. “You make me so-o-o mad!”

“You’re too little to have a temper.” I frowned. “You better not act like this around a regular sailor. He’ll put you in the hospital!”

“Oh yeah.” He gave me a fierce look. “I have a gun. No one’s going to beat *me* up!”

“Is that another threat, Bernie?” My eyes narrowed to slits. “Do you really have a gun?”

“Well, I think my mom has a gun,” he equivocated. “She said she did. It belonged to my stepfather.”

I watched him squirm under my scrutiny. “Why would your mom need a gun? Have you seen it?”

“No, but my stepfather bought one.... I think.... He wasn’t a very nice man.” He looked up with dry, unblinking eyes.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked, as he sank into himself. “Did he hurt you?”

“Yes.” Bernie nodded. “He didn’t like me. My sister didn’t like me either.... Only my Mom.” “I don’t want to talk about this!” He blinked and looked self-consciously around the room. “My stepfather’s dead.... My father’ dead....”

“Let sleeping dogs lie,” I finished his train of thought.

I wanted to tell him the truth about his parents—his mother, Armand, and his real father, but it would have been too cruel. I was still convinced it would be the last straw, and yet he had a right to know. Perhaps, I thought, watching him rise up slowly, and begin pacing around the room, his mother might tell him someday.... I wasn’t going to be the straw. Bernie was already exhibiting what I didn’t understand back then: a bipolar disorder. During that hour, however, all

the fancy words I use to recount this episode in my life are written in retrospect. All I knew then was that Bernie wasn't normal: he wasn't right in the head and I had placed my fate in the hands of crazy person. What I didn't need to do that moment was to make him any crazier, so I let the subject drop. After laying low in the barracks for the next two hours, I nearly went nuts myself. When the dials on my watch stood straight up, I jumped up and announced cheerily, "It's noon—the lunch hour. Let's go the mess hall, Bernie. Afterwards, we'll come back, grab our gear, and meet Ralph in front of terminal at 1 o'clock."

For a few moment, as we proceeded to the mess hall, Bernie followed me, wrapped in this thoughts.

"Ralph won't like me either," he suddenly announced. "No one likes me...except my Mom."

"Ralph doesn't even know you." I sighed. "Why would you say such a thing?" "...Bernie," I looked back with concern, "do you have any friends?"

"No, not anymore," he replied faintly. "Not since that time," he said, biting his lip. "It all changed then."

"What?" I reeled around to face him. "What happened? Out with it Bernie? What made you such a dork?"

I immediately regretted saying such a thing, and yet it had no effect on him. He continued murmuring to himself inaudibly. I snapped my fingers in front of his face, as if to wake him up, fearful that he had slipped over the edge. I remembered seeing a movie about a man who disappeared into himself. Today, I know the word as catatonic, but that moment it was like watching someone go to sleep with their eyes open.

Clapping vigorously, I shouted, "Wake up, Bernie! Tell me what's wrong!"

"Leave me alone!" He placed his hands on his ears. "I don't want to talk about it!"

What I saw then was an improvement; he hadn't slipped over the edge. Heaving a sigh of relief, I patted his shoulder. "Okay, Bernie, keep your dark secrets to yourself. It's none of my business, but you need help. You really do!"

"You think so?" he asked in a small voice, "You think I'm nuts, and I should really take a section 8?"

"Yes, I do," I replied emphatically. "The military is no place for you!"

I thought he might start weeping once more, but he exhaled deeply this time, shrugged in resignation, and once more began humming an off-key tune. In navy parlance again, 'the wind had gone out of his sails.' As we stood in the noon chow line, the humming began to get on my nerves. I was worried that there might be another episode like the one this morning. When portions of baked beans and coleslaw were slopped onto my tray, I opted for a hamburger as before, as did Bernie, with the exception that, like Bernie, I dispensed with the coffee (I was already jittery enough) and drank punch. I wasn't very hungry this time; neither was Bernie, but it might be a long time before we ate again, so I shoveled it in and tried getting Bernie to eat. For a few moments, he pecked at his food, still humming and looking vacantly around the room.

"Damn it, Bernie," I whispered, "people are watching. Why are you making that noise?"

"... It's Beethoven's Fifth Symphony," he informed me finally. "It sort've stuck in my head."

"Yeah," I nodded, "I heard it. My dad plays that stuff, but we're in the mess hall, Bernie. It sounds weird. Stow it until we get outside."

"Stow it' is another navy word," he observed dully, "I heard the instructor use it.... You know a lot of navy words, Noel. I barely know any."

“Because you daydream in class,” I censured him. “If you paid more attention, you’d understand a lot more about how sailors act.” “You’ve got to talk the talk and walk the walk,” I reminded him. “I’m sorry, but you’re just not cut out for this kind of life!”

“You’re very cruel!” A shadow came over his face. “My mom used to say, ‘the truth shall set you free.’”

“Bernie,” I said wryly, “I go to church and attend Sunday school. I remember that saying. You’re mom was quoting Jesus. Jesus said that to Pilate. It’s from the New Testament. After that Jesus was nailed on the cross.”

Bernie looked over at me with a deadpan expression. “Whose Pilate?... Did he fly planes?”

Giggling at his play on words, Bernie grinned foolishly. I was certain he knew who Pilate was. He had lapsed into a silly mood. I stood up that moment and motioned for him to do the same. After dumping our trays in the receptacle, we quickly exited the mess hall. We had, I explained to Bernie, a half-hour to fetch our duffle bags from our lockers, do our business, and arrive at the terminal before 1 o’clock. We talked very little during this time. What more I could say to this troubled youth? I wasn’t a psychiatrist. I scarcely understood what was wrong. I really felt sorry for him. I had the nagging feeling that his mother was much to blame. I had thought that she was nice person. She certainly was a looker!... But that had been the problem, I realized, as we strolled to the terminal to meet Ralph. Louis Suarez had implied that Constance was just another Hawaiian whore. I wondered if Ralph had picked her up in a Honolulu bar, like Harry and his friends had done. Would he still give way and acknowledge his long lost son. Upon reflection, to use a term from Greek mythology, that would be like opening Pandora’s Box.

## Chapter Ten

### The Final Hop

My fear of disclosure returned as we waited in front of the terminal. It was difficult for me to follow Bernie's changing moods. That moment, as we waited for Ralph to appear, he seemed distracted. He began whistling, which was even more annoying than humming. Was he merely nervous, I wondered, or was he simply trying to block me out. With a tinge of irritation, I asked him what he was whistling. He explained that it was Tchaikowski's Swan Lake. I had heard that one in my house too. During his mid-life crisis, my father had switched from Jazz to classical music. Bernie however appeared to be tone deaf. What I heard from his puckered lips sounded like the same note over and over again, nothing like Swan Lake.

Glancing at my watch, I noted the time; it was 1:10. Where was Ralph? There were sailors in dungarees and tee shirts on the tarmac and in the closest hangar inspecting airfoils and working on airplane engines. A few crewmen in jump suits stood by a strange plane with a nose cone I had never seen before, and yet I saw no other passengers waiting for a flight. Abstractedly, as I tried not worry, my mind wandered to other matters. I would be glad to be home, no matter how my relationship with my parents had worsened. I worried about my perfect attendance again. Weighed against going to prison, this should have been insignificant. I was only eighteen. There were many girls I would miss if I went to jail. For some reason, I thought about Bernie's sister then. As I had before when I found out about her, I tried to picture what this blond and blue-eyed vixen looked might look like, but this time it wasn't the same. I had a hunch that she was a pampered and spoiled teen. After what he told me about her not liking him, I was reminded that my sister, who was also pampered and spoiled, didn't like me either. For Bernie, however, it appeared as if no one, except his mother, liked him; at least this is what he believed. Though he said he didn't want to talk about it, I knew he was a sad and lonely human being. Because of his personality, I could understand why he had no friends. Try as I may, I found it difficult to like him, myself.

Lulled by the ambience of my own thoughts, I stood there alongside of my colleague in crime, my mind locked on the past, almost forgetting the predicament we were in until a voice brought me crashing down to earth: "Noel Bridger! Are you Noel Bridger?" I looked around both ways—left and right, and then saw a bald-headed, overweight fellow in a sporty Hawaiian shirt and shorts, ambling toward me. When he removed his shades, I immediately saw a likeness.

"Ralph Zapinsky!" I cried. "I'm Noel." "This is your nephew Bernie." I slapped Bernie's back.

Except for Ralph's baldhead, it was like looking at Bernie twenty years in the future. Bernie muttered, "Hello," and nodded faintly. Ralph was visibly shaken as he studied his son. He kept swallowing and rubbing his stubbly chin.

"Thank you Ralph for helping us." I said, shaking his hand.

"Christ almighty," he muttered. Looking up at me, he shook his head, whispering, "No... Thank *you* Noel. I'm glad I can help." "We don't have much time," he added, looking at his watch, "I just talked to Happy, a crewman on a P2V. I served with him during the war. There's two spots on his plane. They take off within the hour. Standby in front of hangar one. They'll have you sign the manifest at that time."

“Where’s hangar one?” I asked, slinging my sea bag over my arm. “Do we have to show ID?”

“That’s hangar one.” He pointed. “It’s right next door. You’re all set; just show up and sign the manifest.”

In a belated reaction, Bernie embraced his father. “So you’re my Uncle Ralph,” he exclaimed. “Why did my mom wait so long to tell me?”

“Your mom told you about me?” his voice constricted. “Why did she do that?”

“When I told her about my plans, she suddenly remembered. She knew I was determined to go, so she told me to look you up. I’m sorry we don’t have more time to get to know each other. Maybe you can come and visit us some time.”

He looked over his son’s shoulder at me and smiled ruefully. “I don’t know Bernie... I just might. You turned into a fine young man!”

Bernie now had two people who liked him: his mother and his Uncle Ralph. Time was running out, however. Pulling away now, Ralph made scooting motions with his hands. “Off with you now. You don’t want to miss your hop.”

“Thanks again Ralph,” I called over my shoulder.

Bernie kept looking back at the receding figure of his father. It was a wonder to me that he hadn’t make the connection as Ralph had. In many ways Bernie was quite dense, which was fortunate. I’m still thankful he didn’t find out who Ralph was. When we arrived in front of hangar one, there were workers checking out our plane, with a flight crew looking on. I knew at once that the strange looking aircraft, I noticed before, was our ride back to the mainland. It was the only one being prepared for takeoff. Bernie took one look at it and began muttering excitedly to himself, “What is that? It looks like a World War Two plane? I thought we were riding in a transport? There must be some kind of mistake.”

“There’s no mistake, Bernie,” I snapped at him. “Get a hold of yourself. Ralph wouldn’t steer us wrong.”

“But it’s strange-looking,” he protested. “How do we board? Where do we sit?”

“Bernie!” I jerked his sleeve. “Do you have any Dramamines left?”

“A few.” He nodded.

“When we’re inside,” I instructed him, “take them all. You can sleep on the way back.”

When we were only a short distance from the crewman, one of them, a weather beaten man, with graying hair and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, motioned to us. In his hand was a clipboard, which I assumed was the flight manifest. With wide fearful eyes, Bernie stared at the aircraft, more afraid of boarding than signing the manifest. It was just the opposite for me. I was thrilled with the prospect of flying in this plane, and yet worried that we would finally be caught.

“I’m Noel Bridger,” I forced a grin and stuck out my hand.

“Dave Forrester,” he said, his cigarette dancing on his lip. “Call me Happy.” He shook my hand. “You must be Ralph’s nephew.” He looked past me at Bernie. “I can see the resemblance: brown eyes, dark hair, olive skin. Old Ralph claims his parents were Russian, but he looks like a Mexican to me. That right sonny?”

“My mother’s French.” Bernie bristled. “Ralph was my Aunt’s husband. She was French too.” What he said made no sense at all. It must have been what his mom told him to cover up the truth. I understood that he was insulted, but when it was his turn to sign the list, I was shocked when he didn’t follow it up by shaking Happy’s hand. Eager to get it over with, Bernie was guided by another crewmen up the ladder into the plane.

“I’m deeply sorry,” I whispered to him. “He’s not himself. You’re very kind to give us a hop!”

“I know more than you think I do,” he murmured cagily. “...I know that kid’s Ralph’s son. He told me today. I knew his mom too. Whoa, she was a wild thing! I was luckier than ol’ Ralph, though. Ho-ho, I could’ve he could’ve been *my* son!”

Guiding me up the ladder, he added with a snicker, “Mums the word!”

“Request permission to come aboard?” I beamed at him.

“There’s the spirit!” he saluted. “I’ll show you were to sit.”

Perhaps it was because of my spirit that Happy gave me the best seat on the plane: the nose cone—a window of latex used for observation. As I sat on a small, cushioned seat, the soles of my shoes rested on a bar, and I felt like I was suspended in space. Bernie, whose whereabouts on the plane I didn’t know, would have freaked if he were here. Hopefully, his Dramamine would take effect, and he would soon be asleep. I felt exhilarated in the nose cone and couldn’t wait to tell my friends at home about this experience. It was like a fantastic amusement ride. For hours, with but one restroom break, I sat in the seat of honor, as Happy called it. Though I never even had a chance to talk to the pilot and co-pilot or go on a tour of the rest of the plane, it was a singular event in my life.

When I exited the aircraft I was helped down the ladder by Happy. This time there wasn’t a trace of a smile on his chiseled face. His watery gray eyes locked on mine. His gravelly voice was stern. “Something ain’t right kid,” he said, guiding me by my elbow away from the plane. Already disembarked, standing forlornly between two men in suites wearing shades, was Bernie, weeping softly to himself. I knew that our moment of truth had come. I never saw Happy and the other crewmen again. From that point, after hearing one of the men grunt “Come with us!”, the nightmare Bernie and I dreaded began.

## Chapter Eleven

### Moment of Truth

Someone must have informed on us, I thought grimly, as the men led us away. All I could think of as a possible suspect was one of the men on duty in the visitor's barracks at Barber's Point. What I soon discovered, though, was a much simpler explanation.

I was taken into one room and Bernie into another by the two men, who introduced themselves as Agent Connors and Agent Phelps of the FBI. I was terrified when we were separated. I knew it would be much worse for Bernie. When Agent Connors sat me down across from him at a table, I felt like a criminal (which I was in the eyes of the law). I decided straightaway to tell the truth. This fellow would get the truth out of me one-way or the other. I was surprised there wasn't a lie detector in the room. Without delay, Connors asked me for my wallet. I passed it to him quickly. He rifled through it carefully, finally extracting my military identification.

"It's true," he muttered. "You're not on active duty. You're just a recruit!" "So tell me young man," he said, handing back my wallet, "how'd you pull this off?"

"Well sir," I began nervously, "it's a long story.... Bernie, a classmate at Los Alamitos, assured me it was a good plan."

"The plan being impersonating an airman apprentice on active duty and flying illegally on military transports," summarized the agent. "Was that your plan?"

"I sensed it was wrong," I tried to explain. "I almost didn't do it, but he made it sound so reasonable."

"He being Bernard Suarez," Agent Connors clarified. "In other words, he talked you into breaking the law. This wasn't your idea?"

"Right," I nodded. "I thought it was crazy at first."

At that moment, I gave the agent a rundown of our caper, from the first hop at Los Alamitos, including Bernie's airsickness, through our hop from Alamitos to Alameda, including Bernie's disgraceful behavior, to our experience at Barber's Point where Bernie's Uncle Ralph helped us get a hop back to Alameda, where we were arrested by the FBI.

"You're not under arrest," he stopped me there. "This is an inquiry."

"Are we in trouble?" I asked with bated breath.

"What do you think?" He cocked an eyebrow.

I hated it when I asked a question and was asked a question in return. My mom did that a lot. I screwed up my face, thinking deeply on this a moment. I couldn't squirm out of this. They caught us dead to rights.

"Yes." I nodded grimly.

"You're not the only one in trouble young man." He frowned severely. "You and your cohort incriminated more than a dozen men. If this becomes an issue, your friend's uncle, those crewmen involved, and anyone else knowing about your subterfuge might be court-marshaled, probably reduced in rank. When you began this insanity, did you even think about this?"

"No," I replied, my eyes tearing up.

"Are you sorry you broke the law?" he inquired sternly. "Would you consider doing this again?"

“Absolutely not!” I piped, wiping my eyes. “If I could go back in time, I wouldn’t do it at all!”

“Well,” he sighed with resolution, “I have no more questions. The base Captain wants to talk to you. So hold tight. Let’s hope your cohort gives us the same story.”

With a sinking feeling, I considered Bernie’s history. He was, what I would later define as a pathological liar. He had stretched the truth and told outright lies before. I was almost certain he had lied to Agent Phelps. Those moments that I sat in the interrogation room, I reminisced about my short life. All things considered, in spite of my parents and sister, I had a good life, I told myself, much better than poor Bernie, who had been lied to all his life. Looking through the open door at an officer with captain’s bars on his shoulder, I assumed he was the base Captain. I had half suspected to see Marine guards appear to escort me to the brig. Would they arrive later after he interrogated me? I wondered. He looked really upset. If Bernie stuck to his previous story, it would have only made matters worse. Walking slowly into the room, the captain shut the door behind him and sat across from me as had the agent, folding his arms in the manner of adults in serious discussion

“You know who I am?” he asked, pursing his lips.

“No sir,” I croaked.

“I’m captain William Hayden, Commander of Alameda Naval Air Station. Do you know why the FBI gave you the third degree?”

“Yes sir,” I answered solemnly, “Bernie and I pretended we were airman apprentices who had to meet our squadrons in Hawaii. It was a lie.”

“Tell me the truth young man,” he studied me. “The wasn’t your idea, was it?”

“No sir.” I shrank in my seat.

“It was his lie then,” he concluded. “He talked you into this foolishness, didn’t he?”

“Well yes—” I began.

“The story he gave his interrogator was quite fanciful. When the agent asked him where his ID card was, he was trapped in his lie. It turns out he dropped his card in the barracks. The man on duty reported it missing. He informed me that your friend Bernard Suarez is an airman recruit—a reservist currently on inactive duty.”

“Ohmygawd” I gasped. “How did he not know his card was missing? I keep mine in my wallet unless I’m challenged.”

“I don’t know. That’s not the point.” Captain Hayden’s voice rose angrily. “What amazes us—the United States Navy and Federal Bureau of Investigator—is that two wet-behind-the-ears airman recruits could pull this off without being challenged. Not one person at Los Alamitos, Alameda, and Barber’s Point caught on—not even the crew that brought you here. You are an embarrassment to the navy and federal government.

To my surprise, the captain laughed sourly. “Question is,” he muttered, “what do we do with you? You know how many heads would roll if we court-martialed you now.”

“Lots!” I perked up eagerly.

“You’re one lucky son-of-a-bitch!” He slammed the table with his fist. “Listen to me carefully. For the record you were never here. You were never at Barber’s Point or Los Alamitos either. You never fraudulently flew in naval aircraft—a federal as well as a military offense. You never impersonated a higher grade, also a federal and military offense. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Oh yes sir,” I tried shaking his hand.

Recoiling as if I was a foul thing, he stood up, and in an acid tone, said, "It's good that you have your civvies on. According to sources, your uniforms indicate that you airman apprentices. You must remedy that when you return home. Now grab your duffle bag and go! If someone asks you why your hitchhiking, tell them that you're a college student or something—I don't care. If this leaks back to your home base, Los Alamitos, they'll be hell to pay. We at Alameda don't know you!"

"What about Bernie Suarez?" I asked almost as a second thought.

"Don't worry about that young man," he said dismissively. "He's going home too. I heard his uncle is picking him up. His mother will arrange things from there. Take my advice, Mister Bridger, stay away from him. Bernard Suarez is not your friend. When they cornered him in his lie, he blamed you for everything. He even ratted on his uncle and the other men who facilitated your hops. You didn't incriminate anyone. You just told the truth. Now go home and finish high school."

"What's going to happen to Bernie?"

"After his breakdown in front of the agents and myself, he will be given a psychological examination. It's better than going to Leavenworth. That young man is a lit fuse. Because he's a reservist still in school, though, I'm recommending that he be released from the service with a general discharge. He's damn lucky that he doesn't go to prison or get a BCD."

"You were merciful to me kind sir," I said with a bow.

"No son," his voice softened, "I'm being logical. You haven't been logical, have you? You let an unbalanced, immature teenager talk you into breaking the law. Alas, though, you're a teenager too—same age as my daughter and a high school student to boot." "Go home," he repeated, pointing to the door. "You can play sailor in a couple of years. *Finish being a kid!*"

I thanked him profusely again. He waved me off as a trifling nuisance, brushed ahead of me and vanished forever from my life. I would never see Bernie again either. I was satisfied that we had escaped prosecution. Despite everything that happened, I could continue being a recruit until making airman apprentice. Apparently no record would be kept of my part of the crime. It was enough that Bernie, whom the authorities considered a worse felon, would be given a general release from the service rather than a bad conduct discharge. I'm still not certain whether his release was a section eight discharge or simply one of those 'swept under the rug' affairs. When I exited the room, under guard by two burly Marines, still in my civvies, with my duffle bag slung over my shoulder, I was led straight out to the main gate and unceremoniously deposited at the bus stop. Knowing that my twelve dollars wouldn't get my back to Whittier, California, I found it strange that they expected me to take a bus all the way home. I was aware of the fact, from the lectures at Los Alamitos that the navy officially frowned on hitchhiking because of the potential dangers, but I had seen sailors and soldiers, as well as civilians, hitchhiking many times. Servicemen, Chief Crump had admitted, were particularly susceptible to being mugged, but tonight, as I slinked passed the gate to a likely spot and stuck out my thumb, I would try hitchhiking as a civilian. Motorists might very well assume that I was a college student or rover too poor to ride public transportation.... Once again, however, I had guessed wrong.

## Chapter Twelve

### Homeward Bound

Not long after I began waiting for a ride, a car slowed down, stopping ahead of me on the side of the road. It seemed too good to believe. I had just left the base, and already I had a ride. At first, as I heard loud music and laughter from inside the vehicle, I filled with déjà vu. Bernie and my experience with the native Hawaiians in Ewa flashed into my mind. I paused just long enough for one young man to get out of the car and shout, “Are you coming or not?” Trotting toward a black late model Cadillac, I sized up my situation: these people weren’t angry Hawaiian men in a ramshackle car; they sounded like young people, like myself, out for the night in Daddy’s car, which, because it was a Monday, not the weekend, weren’t anymore serious about school than me. I had seen these types in my own high school. Many of them were spoiled rich kids with a devil-may-care attitude. Though they were my kindred spirits, I shied away from them at parties or when I saw them carousing in town, and yet I envied those carefree youths. The guys were wild and the girls were fast—too wild and fast for me. Sliding into the front seat, next to a drunken coed, I felt a thrill of excitement. Oddly enough, I also felt very stupid for getting into the car. As soon as the driver (also quite drunk) took off from the curb, my thrill quickly faded to fear.

“Here,” the girl said, handing me the bottle, “have a shwig!”

Against my better judgment I raised the bottle up and was startled by its familiar smell. It wasn’t Canadian Club Scotch, the liquor my dad drank. This was a brand called John Paul Jones, probably cheap stuff. As the night before I embarked upon my adventure, it had a nasty, burning flavor as it gushed down my throat. I made a face, shook my head, sticking out my tongue.

“Damn,” I lied, “that’s good scotch!”

The girl and her friends—the driver and two couples crammed in the back seat—giggled at my reaction. “Thas ride,” her voice slurred heavily, “bud I thod you shailors like beer!”

“How did you know I was a sailor?” I gave her a troubled look.

“Shimple,” explained the coed, “thad wuz Alameda bag there—a shailor base. You thing we’re stuid?”

I was, as in Ewa, in a car with drunken merrymakers. I also noted, as I had back in Oahu, a hostile tinge to her voice. The driver, as inebriated as the others, was speeding recklessly down the road, perhaps for my benefit. The Hawaiians had also tried to scare me. Unlike my experience with scotch before, the swig I took had hardly taken effect. The adrenaline was pumping too fast and furious in my system, I was scared out of my wits, and I had no intention of getting smashed. All I wanted to do was get home—in one piece. But already in my journey home I had made a dreadful mistake.

“You shouldn’t be driving?” I blurted as the car drifted over into the other lane.

“Yeah Carl, shtay on the road!” a voice from the back seat blared.

I remember him crossing a bridge, turning sharply right and speeding down a highway. As the occupants in the vehicle broke into two camps, I heard names shouted back and forth. Todd, Muriel, Rick, and Ellen, who sat crammed in the backseat, wanted Carl to slow down. In the front seat Anita (who sat next to me) and Carl, the maniac driver, didn’t. Most of us begged

him to slow down, but Carl, who sat behind the wheel, had the deciding vote. Soon, it felt as though we were going hundred miles per hour down the road, and, after a few moments, even his girlfriend Anita was alarmed at his speed. He wanted to terrorize me. It seemed like pure insanity, but I could think of no other motive. Perhaps he had experiences with sailors in his community as had the residents of Ewa. If this was the case, it was totally unfair. I wasn't even out of high school yet, and I was being blamed for sailors' behavior. The only satisfaction I had was that everyone else had turned against Carl, too. The boys pounded on his back and the girls yanked his hair, but to no avail. Carl, now on a path of destruction, wasn't listening. Turning sharply right again, the Cadillac careened around the corner. Everyone in the car screamed as he raced he car down a hill at breakneck speed.

"Let me out! Let me out!" I shrieked.

"Ohmagawd!" cried Muriel.

"We're gonna crash!" shouted Todd.

I pause to remind the reader that there were no seat belts in 1960. Of course that would make no difference if the vehicle rolled over and burst into flames. At this point, as we plunged into the night, everyone lost it, especially Carl's girl friend Anita, who appeared to have wet her pants. Slowing down to avoid hitting a dog crossing the road, Carl swerved around the beast and wound up plowing through a barbed wire fence. I looked ahead and, to my amazement, saw the faint sheen of waves ahead. Suddenly the Cadillac was crashing into the surf. If it had not been for the headlights, it would be almost pitch dark. Luckily it was low tide. Mired in the sand, the vehicle might be slammed with waves at any moment. Jumping out of the car with my duffle bag, which had sat on my lap for protection, I fled the vehicle, with only my shoes soaked with salt water.

"Now you did it!" Anita wailed, her slur almost gone. "You wrecked your dad's car. He'll kill you!"

The other youths, also sobered by the calamity, piled in on Carl, calling him all sorts of names. I could see a lonely street light up the hill on which we detoured, but it was down the road a ways. It wasn't going to be easy. Huffing and puffing, as I charged up the slope, I prayed for deliverance again. I wasn't even sure where I was now. How would I ever make it home in time if I had such delays? I almost ran into the barbed wire fence, and was saved by the merest glint of light. Lifting my leg gingerly over the wire, I emerged intact on the side of the fence where the Cadillac plowed through. The road ascending the hill was almost totally dark, except for two pinpoints of light at the top. The lights grew and grew and became headlights. A spotlight shot out from the driver's side of the vehicle. I froze momentarily where I was, wondering what other horror would befall me now. I could hear voices behind me, echoing from the beach, and then I broke into a trot, opting for the strangers ahead.

When the headlights were blindingly close, I shielded my eyes, and stood my ground. A gruff, baritone voice shouted, "Hey kid, come here!" Walking cautiously to the source of the voice, which was on the passenger's side, I looked in and discovered two men in uniform. This time, to my relief, they weren't military. On the door it read 'California Highway Patrol.' I don't remember ever being so happy to see the police.

"What're you doing here kid?" the officer grumbled. "Didn't you see the sign on the fence? That's private property. You're trespassing. Can I see some ID."

I handed him my wallet and jingled my dog tags just for good measure. The first patrolman mumbled something to the driver, the beam of a flashlight gave my wallet a brief inspection, and then my wallet was quickly returned.

“All right,” the first patrolman grunted, “you’re in the navy. What’re you doing here? Are you lost?”

“Officer,” I began, glancing back into the dark, “I was hitchhiking, and I was picked up by drunken teenagers, who drove their car into the surf. Please give me a ride to the main highway? I gotta get back home for school.”

“Tell you what sport,” replied the patrolman behind the wheel, “that’s navy property down there. It’s probably those navy brats on a drunken spree. Climb in the back. We’ll call the station at Alameda. Let them handle this.”

Tossing my duffle bag in first, I slid in, heaving a sigh of relief. The Marine Lieutenant in Ewa and Harry’s wife in Honolulu had rescued me. Now two more good Samaritans had crossed my path. The officer behind the wheel made a call over his radio to the shore patrol headquarters at Alameda. Without further delay, he did a u-turn on the road and drove back up the hill to the highway, turning right, which I hoped was heading south. On the way, the two patrolmen said very little. Before they drove a ways down the road and dropped me off, however, I tried engaging them in conversation. The first officer I had talked to looked back at me and shook his head.

“What are navy brats?” I broke the silence. “Are they servicemen’s kids from Alameda Naval Air Station?”

“They’re the children of *officers*,” he clarified curtly, “high-ranking men. Most enlisted men’s kids don’t act like that!”

“That was awful.” I shuddered. “I thought we were going to crash.”

“You *did* crash,” he replied. “You’re lucky the car didn’t roll over and catch fire!”

“Yeah,” I said, I reflecting upon my close calls. “I’ve been lucky so far.”

“You’re *damn* lucky, boy,” he scolded. “You shouldn’t be hitch-hiking. You’re fortunate we picked you up. Next time you might get mugged, maybe killed.”

“Yeah,” I mentally shrugged, “but I have to hitchhike. It’s the only way I can get home.”

“We understand that,” the driver nodded with understanding, “I did it myself in the army, but it’s still dangerous. Rule number one: look at the car and see whose inside. If the car’s filled with people, it’s probably joy riders or hell-raisers. Rule number two: look in at the driver, himself: does he or she look sober, and is the driver acting strange. You don’t want to get picked up by a psycho or queer. Rule number three: When you’re picked up by someone you thought you could trust and they start acting weird, tell them you need to make a restroom stop. Don’t piss them off. Make sure it’s at a gas station or at least a well-lit area. Rule number four: Avoid hot rods and low-riders. There’s two reasons to avoid such cars. Hot rods drive too fast; you might get some smart aleck showing off to this girlfriend. Often a low rider is filled with Mexicans. During the war in Oakland, I remember the Zoot Suit riots. Servicemen hitchhiking were killed by gangs. This happened all over the country. It’s starting up again in these parts, only they have names, like the Desperados and the Vigilantes. Some folks hate servicemen, especially sailors. If you see a hot rod or low rider turn, pull in your thumb, and get off the road!”

“All right officer.” I rolled my eyes.

When they finally dropped me in a well-lit portion of Alameda County, I was even more nervous than before. I thanked the patrolmen and promised to be careful. I never really considered such factors as the number of people in a car, what they looked like, how they acted, or whether the vehicle pulling over was a low rider or hot rod. As the highway patrol drove away, I looked with greater dread at the road ahead. I would try to remember everything I was

told, but what if someone picked me up that didn't send up a red flag, as the officer suggested, and all of sudden they went berserk. We servicemen were at the mercy of drivers when picked up. I didn't realize until my experiences at Ewa and then Alameda how much some people hated us. It dawned on me that the patrolmen could have added another rule: don't hitchhike alone. I remember seeing servicemen, two or more, trying to hitch a ride. This, of course, might discourage some motorists, but I would take advantage of this situation whenever I could.

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After the patrolman's lecture, I felt vulnerable. Bernie and I had been careless that first night on the beach when we climbed into a car full of drunken Hawaiians. Tonight, as if I hadn't learned a lesson, I climbed into a car of drunken teens. But as far as I was concerned, I was a civilian again. No one had to know I was in the navy. Unfortunately, I carried one item of navy issue that might give me away. If it hadn't been for my duffle bag, I could fool them. The letters USN were stenciled on the strap, a dead giveaway. Somehow I would try to hide this acronym.

Though I had been dropped off between a gas station and motel, there were only a few cars on the road and no other pedestrians about. It occurred to me, as I stood on this lonely stretch of road, that I might be waiting a long time for a ride. It was late at night. It was nearly four hundred miles from my hometown and I had to be in class at 8 am Monday morning. My perfect attendance award now seemed like a futile dream... And then once again, after a semi truck, Greyhound bus, and two automobiles passed by, a small sports car pulled suddenly off the road. It seemed to come out of nowhere. My mind had been dulled by lack of sleep and the long wait by the highway, so I was startled out of my wits. The last time I saw an MG was in my high school parking lot, a sports car owned by one of the rich kids at my school. It was so tiny no more than two average sized teens could fit inside. I pondered how I might fit into such a small vehicle with my duffle bag, hesitating as I bent down and looked into the car. After a moment of deliberation, I realized it was a woman driving. At a glance she was an attractive blond in flashy clothes. A pungent perfume filled my nostrils, the kind of scent worn by fast girls at school. Judging by the patrolman's rules, this seemed like a good sign. He hadn't mentioned a female driver. She was alone in the car, she wasn't driving a hot rod or low rider, and I didn't smell alcohol when I shoved my duffle bag behind the cramped seats, and squeezed into the car. What I failed to note yet, however, was the voice. That gave me a jolt.

"I'm Noel Bridger," I chimed, offering my hand.

"Steve Wade," he replied, giving me a firm handshake.

"Oh dear me," I muttered in shock. "... Masquerade party, right?" I was flabbergasted. Not knowing what else to say, I chattered nervously. "Halloween is my favorite holiday—I love to dress up. Last time I went as Zorro. Rusty, my best friend, went in drag."

"No-no!" He chortled in a masculine voice. "Like sailors and soldiers, I wear a uniform. These are my work clothes. I'm a female impersonator at Finocchio's in San Francisco."

"Really?" I replied stupidly. "I saw the cartoon. Is this one is a musical? Is Geppetto in it too?"

Chattering in embarrassment a moment about how much I loved Pinocchio, it gradually dawned on me that was behaving like an ass.

"You don't understand Noel," he said patiently. "It's *Finocchio*, not Pinocchio, and Finocchio isn't a cartoon. I'm not in a musical. This is what I do for a living. Along with several other players, I perform in drag. Some of us are comedians, some dance, and others sing.

I do magic and illusion. Instead of having a female assistant in a sexy dress, one of the players in a tuxedo assists me.”

This was utterly strange to me. I showed my ignorance again by giggling hysterically. The patrol had warned me of drivers exhibiting weird behavior. I wasn't sure if that included female impersonators, but I had been caught off guard. Each time I opened my mouth, that proverbial foot filled it. I wanted to say something clever, but I was embarrassed. So, instead, I said something even more stupid than before.

“Wow!” I exclaimed, scratching my head. “That’s fantastic. Really it is. I’ve never known a female impersonator. You have great courage, Steve. There’s a boy at school who’s queer. His name’s Harland Biggs. His parents are the richest people in town. He gets straight A’s, but is always getting teased. Those guys are really mean. Once, on campus, they gave him a wedgie, and I saw him get pantsed during gym—”

“Hold on, young man,” Steve interrupted. “I’m not a homosexual. It’s my work. I have a wife and daughter. I like women just like you.”

“Whoa, that’s incredible.” I sighed with relief. “Your wife doesn’t mind? She must really be cool. You must get a lot of money doing that. I bet you’re good. Someday, when I’m in San Francisco, I’ll visit Finnochio’s.”

“Humph! Are you twenty-one years old?” He looked over and smiled. “You have to be twenty-one to enter a nightclub in California.”

“No, I’m eighteen,” I shrugged. “In Hawaii I could buy liquor. Here in California I’m just a kid.”

“What were you doing in Hawaii?” he asked with surprise. “Is that where you’ve been?”

“It’s a long story,” I began, stifling a yawn.

I was tempted to tell him what happened, but then, remembering Captain Hayden’s warning, bit my lip and gave him an ambiguous summary of my trip. I admitted that I was on navy business, but failed to mention I was a reservist and recruit, who, in league with Bernie Suarez, broke military and federal laws. I left out the most interesting elements of the story, such as our close call in Ewa and being chased by the shore patrol at Waikiki Beach, also downplaying our flights to Alameda and Barber’s Point. I didn’t want Steve to think I was a fool. And though I mentioned our visit to Honolulu, playing up its bright lights and swarm of sailors and tourists, most of my recollections were when it was night on the beach and Bernie and I were thoroughly drunk. Rather than admit I was so stupid, I played up the spectacular silhouette of Diamond Head in the moonlight and the sheen of lunar light on the surf. My favorite part, the ride in the nose cone of a P2V, would have complicated my story too much, but I did tell him about our harrowing experience with six drunken teenagers and my rescue by the highway patrol.

Soon after relating my abbreviated account, Steve lapsed into moody silence. After he turned on the car radio, we listened to classical music. He had a long drive home, he explained. I had no idea how far that might take me on my own journey; I was just thankful I was making progress. Each mile got me closer to my destination. I was so drowsy now the music and quiet lulled me into slumber. I awakened suddenly after being shaken gently awake. Steve announced that we were in Santa Cruz, where his family lived. I glanced at my watch and realized it was only midnight. I was disappointed he hadn’t taken me further, but I had eight hours to reach my goal. I thanked this good Samaritan and promised to visit Finnochio’s when I turned twenty-one.

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Perhaps on purpose after seeing my sleepy face, Steve let me off beside a Denny's restaurant in his town, where I bought a cup of coffee. It was nice to sit down in a booth and be served, even for a short time. The waitress, a plump, sour-faced, middle-age lady with graying hair and a gap between her two front teeth, was just the sort of person I would expect to be waiting on me this late at night. There seemed to be no one else in the restaurant, except an old man eating a piece of pie nearby and, across the room, a huge fat man chowing down on a plateful of food. Inspired by the old man, I ordered a slice of apple pie, devouring it within moments when it was set down. Though she was in a bad mood, I was cheerful to the waitress, and placed a quarter on the table before I left. Today that would be considered insulting to a waitress, but for a twenty-five-cent cup of coffee and fifty cent piece of pie in 1960 that wasn't bad. I still had over eight dollars left from my original sum.

As I strolled down the highway, with my duffle bag slung over my shoulder, I felt rejuvenated. A simple cup of coffee and piece of pie had done the trick. I had been fortunate being picked up by a kindly female impersonator. After only a short while of strolling south and seeing vehicle after vehicle pass me by, I looked up from the sidewalk and saw another car pulling over. My luck seemed to have changed since Steve picked me up. Already, another good Samaritan had appeared.

Recalling the motorists the patrolman warned me to avoid, I looked into the Mercedes Benz and discovered an attractive woman behind the wheel. I wondered why someone like her would pick up a hitchhiker. She acted normal at first and didn't appear to be drunk, and yet almost immediately, with me trapped in the car, her personality began to change.

"My name's Noel Bridger," I offered my hand.

"Dotty Simms," she snorted, her hands still clutching the wheel.

"How far are you going?" I blurted, glancing again at my watch.

"A ways," she replied evasively. "Where you headed?"

"Whittier." I piped cheerily. "That's my hometown."

"Never heard of it." She snarled. "What's in your bag?"

"My uniform and gear." I gave it a pat. "I was in Hawaii over the weekend. I gotta get back to school."

"How old are you?" She frowned.

"...Eighteen." I answered hesitantly.

Considering her looks, I might have told her I was twenty-one, but she wouldn't have believed me. I couldn't fool a wily female like her. In fact, everyone I had met so far thought Bernie and I were a couple of wet-behind-the-ears kids. For a few more moments we lapsed into silence. My head dropped lower and lower as I began to doze. She hadn't answered my question on how far she was going. Until she began talking to herself, I had hoped it would be quite a ways.

"That no good son of a bitch!" Dotty muttered.

"Huh? Excuse me?" I jerked awake.

"Men are all the same!" she heaved a pent-up sigh

"Well," I thought quickly, "technically, I'm still a teenager, so I don't count."

"You got the hardware, don't ya?" she replied accusingly. "You eighteen year olds are in your prime. After that, it's down hill. I know sonny; I got a kid like you. He got his girlfriend pregnant. He ain't the only one either. My old man got his girlfriend pregnant *too*. Pow! I'm suddenly a grandma, aunt, and mother." "Can you beat that?" she slammed the steering wheel.

"Hey, calm down!" I bolted in my seat.

Feeling the vehicle accelerate and the back of my neck bang the seat, I realized she had floored it. As I had before in Alameda with those drunken kids, I panicked, begging her to let me out of the car, but she continued to rant and rave about her no good husband and shiftless son.

“He never loved me,” she wailed. “He married me for my money, my knockers, and my ass. He’s no good. None of them are.”

Money, knockers, and ass might sound like good qualifications to many guys, but this woman had seen better days. She was, upon closer inspection, hard-looking. Her face was plastered with too much makeup and her fragrance was a pungent perfume I had smelled on loose girls as school. Far more important than these idle observations was her behavior and the fact she was driving too fast. When it appeared that she was set on a suicidal course of action, I could scarcely understand her ramblings because my heart was beating so fast. Then suddenly, when her Mercedes had reached its limit of speed, a siren sounded in the distance. I looked back hopefully through the back window. Once more the arm of the law I had feared in Hawaii was coming to my rescue. I realized, of course, that this discovery would mean nothing if we crashed and burned.

“Please stop!” I screamed. “You can’t outrun the police. Pull over and let me out!”

“Oh, why do I keep making the same mistakes?” She groaned, gnashing her teeth. “My life is one big pile of shit!”

This is it, I told myself. I would pay for my folly. I thought about my misspent youth, regretting I ever met Bernie Suarez. Closing my eyes tightly, I prayed feverishly. I remember uttering the Lord’s Prayer and my childhood prayer (Now I lay me down to sleep...) and then bawling loudly as we flew down the road. I was certain she would careen off one of the cliffs south of Santa Cruz and I would die a horrible death, until in gradual increments the car decelerated, the siren was right behind us, and the woman pulled finally off the road. Jumping out the Mercedes with my duffle bag, I shouted angrily, “That woman’s crazy! She’s out of her mind!”

Two officers emerged from the vehicle. One highway patrolman, with his gun drawn, ordered her to get out of her Mercedes. The other patrolman told me to calm down and move away from the car. Soon a second patrol car arrived on the scene. Quickly, as I stood by the first car, Dotty was handcuffed, and shoved in back. I moved nervously over to the second car, wondering if I would be arrested too.

“I’m US Navy,” I called out anxiously. “I just want to get home.”

One of the officers from the second group nodded and pointed to his vehicle. “Get in kid. We’ll take you to the next town.”

I looked up at heaven dramatically. “Oh, thank you! Thank you!” I cried deliriously.

Without a backward glance, clutching my duffle bag, I scrambled into the backseat. As the two highway patrolman slid into the front seat, my gratitude exploded in a flood of words. Both men glanced back with mirth, as the patrol car took off, and shook their heads.

“Got yourself a live one, eh kid?” the driver snickered, looking into his rearview mirror.

“She was nuts!” I shuddered. “You men saved my life. You’re not the first. It seems like somebody’s always there to save me!”

“Well, think of us as your guardian angels!” the second patrol exclaimed.

Once again, I was rescued by the highway patrol. It does seem, as I look back, that there was someone there at every turn to pull me out of a jam. When we reached Watsonville, I was ready for another stretch of road. Considering all my rescuers, it seemed that the Good Lord was

watching over me, and yet my optimism began to wane as I waited by the road. There were even less vehicles on the highway at this late hour, most of them semi trucks with drivers who seemed to ignore hitchhikers. At first the area where I had been dropped off seemed to fit the criteria for a good place to hitch a ride. It was well lit with street lamps and hillside homes, and it was surrounded by trees I could run into in case I had to escape, but it was also quite dead. Though the street lamps provided ample light, the storefronts were dark. Not so much as a dog or cat was about. Glancing at my watch after a while, I discovered to my dismay that it was now 2 am, which meant I had six hours to get to school and save my perfect attendance. Fatigue, the long hours of travel, and apparent futility of it all swept over me suddenly.

“Why do I even care?” I shook my fist at the sky.

From the nearby hills echoes resounded: “*Why do I even care? Why do I even care?*”

“Because I’m stupid!” I shouted back angrily. “I’m an underachiever, a slacker. Why am I killing myself? I’m not going to make it. There’s not enough time!”

“*Because I’m stupid!*” came my echo “*I’m an underachiever, a slacker. Why am I killing myself? I’m no going to make it. There’s not enough time!*”

On and on the echoes boomed from hill to hill and through the sleeping town. In fitful distraction I began singing Little Richard’s Tutti Frutti at the top of my lungs. This time the echoes were louder as they bounced eerily through the landscape and town. Suddenly an old man appeared that moment in his pajamas and robe, shaking his cane and cursing fitfully under his breath.

“Young man! Are you drunk?” he exploded. “Do you know what time it is? It’s 2 am. Stop that racket at once or I’ll call the police!”

“I’m sorry,” I said glumly. “I lost it a moment. I just want to get home. Don’t call the police. I’m just so very tired.”

He squinted nearsightedly at me a moment, his rage softening to a scowl. Coming close enough to study the strap on my duffle bag, he shook his head. “A sailor, eh? You don’t look old enough to be in the navy. You’re just a kid. I was in the Great War, just a kid, myself—army though. I killed me a few Krauts!” “Well, I need my rest, sonny.” He smiled wearily, his voice fading in the night. “... I hope you get a ride soon, but it don’t look likely in this neck of the woods. The only ones coming through here this late are truckers. Because it’s downhill, they’re usually driving pretty fast...”

On that note, the old man disappeared into the shadows whence he had come, still muttering to himself. Standing there in this barren town those moments made me feel as if I was the last soul on earth. In spite of my pie, I was still hungry. I wanted to lie down in some nook and sleep until dawn. But I was on a mission. “I gotta get a ride!” I muttered deliriously. “I gotta be on time!”

After an indeterminate period of time in which I seemed to be sleeping on my feet, I was rudely shaken awake. Upon hearing the roar of an engine and loud hiss of hydraulic brakes, I looked out to see a semi-truck looming on the road.

“Hop in kid!” a voice bellowed. “Make it quick!”

With my duffle bag in my grip, I ran happily to the truck, handed the bag up to the driver, and then climbed up the ladder into the cab. Usually large trucks with trailers traveled great distances, so I expected to gain time to meet my goal. In fact, however, he drove only to King City where he had to unload his trailer. Though he was a friendly fellow, he smoked constantly and played contemporary jazz on his radio. In spite of his cheerful banter, this combination wore on me after awhile. I opened my window a crack and pretended to like his music, but the truth

was it was like a form of torture. I had experimented with smoking myself, but he smoked cigarillos, which were much stronger and smellier than cigarettes.

As a typical redneck, his subject was sex. He told me a few crude jokes and then related a series of one-night stands he had with women. I had never heard such nasty stories. His vocabulary was worse than the sailors I overheard at Alameda and Barber's Point. When we reached the middle of King City, he turned left on a side street, let me off on the corner, and swung his truck and its cargo onto a ramp where a crew waited to unload his goods. Before dropping me off he gave me an apple he had been saving for a snack and wished me luck. I would need it. It was, I noted on my watch, 3:00 am. I had only five hours to meet my goal. After watching the men unload his trailer a moment, feeling detached and numb with exhaustion, I ambled down the highway until reaching the crest of a hill. Looking down at this sleepy town, I admired its inhabitants as they snuggled safely in their beds. Now, as I scanned up and down the highway, the road seemed totally barren of traffic. Who on earth would be awake and driving at this hour?

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My pessimism was understandable. I had only five hours to reach my house and then run madly to class. There was no time to stop at an all night diner for a sandwich and cup of coffee. I had to keep moving even it meant I would walk some of the. When I was walking, I was doing all I could to make my deadline. I might not meet it, but at least I tried. That train of thought gave me bitter comfort, as I trekked south. For just a moment as I reached the outskirts of this community, I stopped at a bus stop, hoping one ran this late. I had eight dollars and some change left. That should get me pretty far, I reasoned, as I sat down. With my duffle bag on my lap as a pillow, I lay my head down and fell asleep. I don't know how long I had slept. A fleeting dream played in my head those moments. I was back at Alameda Naval Air Station, but this time I was being hauled off in chains. In the background Bernie was yelling, "It's all his fault. He did it!" I found myself suddenly in a dark unfriendly jail cell. Bristly chinned men leered like jackals at me as if they had just been tossed fresh meat. Someone shouted into my dream, "Hey, you want a ride." After hearing the other meaning of that expression at school, I screamed to my tormentors, "No, no, I want to go home!" I awakened on my duffle bag, hearing those same words, "Hey, you want a ride?" and looking up, saw a Ford Bel Air idling on the curb. I couldn't see the driver yet, but the voice, though high pitched and lilting, sounded like a man's. Instinctively now, I glanced at my watch. Relieved that I had only lost fifteen minutes, I tossed my gear in back and slid into the front seat.

"Where you going sailor?" he asked immediately. "I'm going as far as Santa Barbara. I could drop you off there."

"Super!" I exclaimed. "I might just make it now."

"Where you heading?" he became inquisitive. "Are you on leave?"

"I live in Whittier," I explained wearily. "I must get home on time."

"My-my," he giggled, "you *are* in a hurry."

A twinge of déjà vu fell over me suddenly as I studied the man. Was he on the patrolman's list? I wondered. He's certainly gave me the creeps. Though he was almost bald, his face reminded me of Bernie. Like Bernie, he grinned too much, and there was a girlish lilt to his voice. As there had been in Bernie's uncle's house, a red flag went up in my mind. I was certain I could defend myself if he turned out to be a predator, but I was still trapped if he went berserk like Carl, the teenage driver, or Dotty, the demented blond, who picked me up in Santa

Cruz. Because I was desperate now, I decided to be as polite as possible until reaching the dropping off point. What could he do to me, I reasoned, as long as he was driving the car? I introduced myself as simply Noel. His name was Chuck. His limp handshake raised another flag in my mind. He asked far too many questions for my state of mind: Where was I from? What did I do in the navy? Did I play football or baseball? Why was I in such a hurry to get home? I answered all his questions vaguely, especially the last one. Remembering Captain Hayden's warning again, I explained why I had traveled to Hawaii too. To satisfy his curiosity, I related Bernie's original version of us having to meet our squadron, leaving the impression that I was, in fact, on leave now. I bragged about my life on the USS Hornet, which, ironically, would be my ship one day. At the time, I knew nothing about aircraft carriers and relied on information my instructor gave me at Los Alamitos Naval Air Station. The answer to his question why I was in a hurry to get home, however, I couldn't explain very well. A sailor on leave wouldn't be worried about perfect attendance. "I just have to!" I shrugged. It was an outright lie—all of it, but what did it matter, I thought, staring vacantly out the window. I would never see this man again.

"My goodness." He clasped his hands. "You're a busy fellow!"

"Yeah," I murmured drowsily, "an old salt!"

"But you don't look old enough to have done all that," he eyed me slyly.

"Please," I groaned, "I'm so tired. Can I take a little nap?"

"Of course," he nodded amiably, "I'll awaken you when we reach our destination."

"Yes, yes," I nodded impatiently, "in Santa Barbara. Thanks for the ride Chuck."

I was relieved he hadn't tried anything funny. I slept for over an hour, awakening with a jolt as the car stopped at a light. When I glanced at my watch, it read four fifteen. I looked up to see a cityscape, similar to Santa Cruz. I had made another milestone in my journey: Santa Barbara. Abruptly, though, as I awakened fully and remembered where I was at, I realized we were turning onto a side street. One more red flag shot up in my head when Chuck stopped and, while I was still half asleep, popped the question.

"Oh my god!" I recoiled, reaching to grab my duffle bag and scrambling out his car. "Get away from you foul thing!"

I remembered that line from a horror movie. It had been leveled at vampire then, but in my mind Chuck was worse. As I was waking up, he had taken advantage of me. As in the case of Bernie, I had suspected Chuck was strange, but wasn't sure of his motives. I would never have made an issue of his peculiarities had he left me alone. Charging angrily toward the highway, I put distance between Chuck and myself. I was a short ways from the corner when I glanced back and saw the Chevrolet Bel Air racing toward me. Just in the nick of time, as he sped past, I dodged onto someone's yard. Shouting obscenities at me, as he drove over the lawn and knocked down a picket fence, I saw lights appear in the resident's windows and heard voices inside, but stood there trembling until the vehicle was out of sight. Quickly then, before they emerged from their house, I ran to the corner, looked both ways, and, so I would be facing traffic instead of being ambushed from behind, ran back across the street. Fearful that Chuck would come back to terrorize me, I stood there a moment, keeping a vigil of both the north and south directions of the highway. From this point on, until I felt safe, I would be jumpy each time I saw a car in the distance.

Finally, when it seemed prudent, I crossed the street to begin hitchhiking again. I must have walked over a mile that hour before another vehicle appeared on the horizon. Darting into an alley and peeking around the corner, I waited until I could discern the make and model of the

car. There were a lot of Bel Airs on the road, even white ones like Chuck's. When it was close enough, I was greatly relieved to see a blue Ford Fairlane. Had the driver seen me peeking around the corner? I wondered then, trotting out with duffle bag in tow. As I approached the Ford, three Marines in uniform emerged from the front and back seat. I remember thinking earlier how safe it would be to hitchhike with other sailors, but I hadn't considered the prospects of thumbing a ride with Marines. The motorist, who must have lived in Santa Barbara, drove on, leaving the three Marines on the curb, only a few yards from where I stood.

"Hello, my names Noel Bridger." I stuck out my hand.

There was no response.

"I live in Whittier, California." I announced cheerily. "Where do you guys live?"

Again there was no response.

The three men walked passed me as if I wasn't even there. They were in surly moods. I followed several feet behind them. After listening to them talk back and forth, I was able to attach the correct name to each Marine. The hefty fellow with dark piercing eyes was called Doug, the tall, buck-toothed, freckly-faced fellow was Dick, and the short guy with glasses was Bill. I gathered from their conversation, why I was so unwelcome. With me added to their group, there would now be four men for a motorist to pick up. It seemed logical to me to slow down and let them walk ahead of me for another mile, in order to grab the first good Samaritan. In fact, I reasoned, I had the advantage on the highway. I just hoped that Chuck wouldn't return and attempt once more to run me down. I was light-headed with fatigue. Upon seeing another bench on the sidewalk, I sat down to wait. I tried to be positive now. Surely, in this larger town, there must be early risers. It occurred to me that I might even catch a bus at this hour. After looking back at the bus schedule posted by the bench, I discovered that the first bus didn't arrive until 5:30 am. "What's wrong with your people?" I shouted out loud. "Even in Whittier, that Quaker town, the buses run around the clock!" As I sat cursing my fate, I saw a vehicle emerge from a cross street and head south.

"Oh shit!" I yelled, jumping up and dashing up the street. Fearful that Chuck was coming back for another try, I ran into the alley I had hidden in before. Watching with wide unblinking eyes, as the vehicle approached, I waited until I could see it clearly. A pink Buick Century four door now drove slowly down the highway. Heaving a huge sigh, I emerged with my duffle bag, not sure what the motorist had in mind. Why was the car driving so slowly? Was he or she drunk? I wondered. I had learned by experience to be on guard when an automobile pulled over. I recalled the patrolman's warning about suspicious behavior. Not everyone was a good Samaritan. During the wee hours, crazed, angry, or drunk motorists prowled the highway. This time, as I looked into the vehicle, I saw another woman—this one young, perhaps in her twenties. Wordlessly, with a mere smile, she beckoned me in. In the shadow of the vehicle the details were vague, but as I scooted in, I was greeted with an attractive girl with short, frosted hair, wearing casual slacks and blouse. Another red flag, that was perhaps of smaller size than the last, surfaced in my mind that moment. I was aware that servicemen were often picked up by loose women, and this is exactly what was happening now. I couldn't help being tempted by this lady. Like Chuck, she was going to pop the question. I remember introducing myself, shaking her hand, and learning that her name was Candy Cane (obviously a fictitious name). I was so excited I could scarcely talk. Working against my adolescent hormones were the V.D. films shown to eighth graders at East Whittier Junior High and the warnings I heard from Chief Crump in my recruit class.

"Do you want to go to my place?" she finally asked.

“Huh?” My eyes popped wide. “Really?”

“Yes,” she purred. “It’s just up the street a ways. Afterwards, I’ll take you to the next town.”

Upon closer inspection, she wore far too much makeup, her perfume was a stinky musk scent, and there was a haunted look in her gaze. Despite her exterior and smell, her voice belied her appearance. If my eyes were closed, she would have reminded me of my first crush: Maryanne Benson. Unfortunately, however, my eyes weren’t closed—this woman was very likely a prostitute or nymphomaniac. I had to make up my mind very soon, before she took me home.

What changed everything and saved me from doing something foolish, was the appearance down the road of the three Marines. I would have mixed feelings about this for years to come, but that moment I was glad to see those men. Immediately, as I suspected, her green eyes lit up as she spotted the men. In civilian dress with a duffle bag with USN stenciled on the strap I was no match for men in uniforms, especially Marines. Pulling over ahead of them, she waited with bated breath, panting like my pet dog. Though delivered from foolishness, I felt diminished as the Marines piled in with their duffle bags. To allow room for all our gear, I was forced next to her thigh. My hand fell on her knee, as she invited the Marines over to her place. I would remember this as one of those ‘what-could-have-been’ episodes. There was hardly any discussion now, as she raced down the boulevard. She meant business. The Marines meant business. I wanted out of the car. As she began turning wheel, I called out in a croaking voice, “This is my stop. Please let me out!”

As I reached back to grab my duffle bag, she shook her head in surprise. “Do you live in this neighborhood? I don’t remember a Noel Bridger. Did you just move in?”

“Yes-yes,” I stammered. “I live across the street. We—my wife and I—just moved in. Thanks for the ride, Candy. You folks have a good time.”

Dick, the Marine sitting beside me, climbed out to facilitate my escape, muttering, “You’re loss sailor boy. This is a hot one!”

“Wear protection,” I replied artlessly. “You don’t want Gonorrhoea!”

Frowning severely at me, he climbed back in the front seat and, without further delay, he and his friends were transported to Candy’s house down the street. Swiftly, I put distance between this temptation and myself. I should have felt relieved then, but I knew that time was running out. Even the short delay caused by Candy, had robbed me of valuable time. In order to arrive in time, I would need a good Samaritan to take me straight to my destination. Clutching my face and groaning, I moved sluggishly down the highway.

“Why Lord?” I shouted to the sky. “Am I a bad person? Why did I listen to that yo-yo? Look what it got me. Why do I care about perfect attendance? I’m an underachiever and slacker. My parents are always saying that. Why do I care about one stupid, insignificant award?”

But it was it wasn’t stupid and it wasn’t insignificant. It was the only thing I had to show for four years of high school. In spite of the blame I heaped on Bernie that hour, I knew much of it was my fault. In the first place, I didn’t have to go. No one twisted my arm. Bernie might have talked me into it, but I could have stopped in my tracks before ever climbing into a plane. It was me who got Bernie drunk at Ewa and Waikiki. In a way I corrupted him by plying him with booze. On the other hand, Bernie might have gotten us over there, but it was me who got us back. I told the truth to the FBI and Captain Hayden, and Bernie had lied, but these facts meant little in the end. We were an embarrassment to the government and navy. As I continued my

trek through Santa Barbara, I began giggling uncontrollably. I was on a fool's errand now. If my perfect attendance were really an issue, my escapade would prove costly. The absurdity and hopelessness of it swept over me like a large jolt of scotch. I couldn't stop laughing, swaying like a drunk until I arrived at another bus stop bench. Collapsing momentarily in uncontrolled mirth, the light-headedness gradually wore off. I just sat there for a while staring into space, stifling the urge to bawl. In the east, I saw that dreaded first light, which signaled the advance of dawn. Burying my face in the duffle bag on my lap, I uttered a muffled scream, rose up shakily, and trudged on. I didn't bother sticking out my thumb. I hadn't seen a car for a half hour.

I must have presented a forlorn and dejected picture to the motorist approaching me that moment. A late model dodge station wagon now pulled off the road. I could scarcely believe it. The driver didn't have to wait long for me to slide into the back seat. Greeting me with cheery smiles were a middle-aged man and woman, with a little Chihuahua yapping between them. "Hi, I'm Noel Bridger!" I piped happily. The man behind the wheel introduced himself as Horace Fairbanks. His wife Helen held her little dog tightly so he wouldn't jump on me, but soon it had broken free and began running wildly inside the car. As the station wagon took off, Horace asked me where I was headed. When I told him I lived in Whittier, he informed me that we were next-door neighbors. I whooped with joy when I learned that they lived in nearby La Habra.

Because I was so young, Horace and Helen cautioned me about the dangers of hitchhiking, a warning I heard earlier from the highway patrol. When I explained to them that I couldn't afford a bus ticket home, they found this unacceptable. I should never be hitchhiking in the first place, they both agreed. What would my parents say? Why would I travel without sufficient funds? What possible reason did a kid like me have for hitching rides, especially late at night? Didn't I know there were all sorts of predators and deviants on the road? Though their criticism was irksome, I agreed wearily with them, yet avoided telling them my story. I just didn't have the energy. What I did talk about was my high school. Perhaps it was because of my meeting with the principle, who told me I would get a perfect attendance award if I didn't miss any school. Perhaps it was the sheer effort I made in getting home in time that drove me on. But it seemed, with this goal in mind, my four years of high school suddenly meant something. I bragged to them about my drama class and the plays I performed in at school. I also boasted about our football team, which had been almost undefeated this year, my tennis letter, my membership in the Thespians club, and I reminisced about the many school dances and events throughout my high school years.

Suddenly, I was once more a kid. Today I would be a high school student again, not a naval recruit or felon nor a footsore traveler of the world, just Noel Bridger—nothing more. The difficulties I had with my family and making it through the last months of school no longer mattered. I would be home, safe from trouble and the dangers of the road.

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Horace Fairbanks turned out to be a pastor and his wife a professor of theology at Biola College. After chatting with me about his church in La Habra, he asked me if I was saved, and was pleased to hear I attended a Baptist church like himself. That was not completely true, of course; I had been attending, without success, Maryanne Benson's Methodist Church to score points with her. But I had been baptized in the Baptist church near my house; so, all things considered, I must be saved. When they returned to the original discussion, I listened contritely to their admonitions about the dangers of hitchhiking for a teenager like me. The conflict of my still being in high school and the fact I was doing such a dangerous thing made it even more

difficult for them to digest when I admitted finally that I was in the navy. My duffle bag had been a dead giveaway. When the subject of the stenciled letters on the strap was brought up I had as story ready. I simply told them that I was in a special program for high school seniors eighteen years old, and I had been on a weekend cruise with my squadron at Alameda. They nodded thoughtfully at my story. Though they still insisted that I take public transformation, they appeared to accept it at face valuable. I wondered, as we approached my house, whether they were just being polite. I wouldn't have believed my story.

I was hungry and exhausted from my odyssey. During our long talks, the Fairbanks' Chihuahua, Scooter, continued to frolic inside the car, becoming a great nuisance to me, but serving the important function of keeping me awake during our trip. He was constantly jumping on each of our laps and nipping playfully at our hands, and, at one point, as the pastor lectured me on the evils of drink and unprotected sex, peed on the floor. Reverend Fairbanks and his wife Helen seemed oblivious to his rowdy behavior. Though I was growing tired of the pastor and his wife's inquisitiveness and unasked for advice, and their unruly dog, I felt indebted to them for their kindness. What did it matter what they said or the fact I had to smell dog urine during my ride; I was safe and secure in their car, and I was going to arrive at my first class on time.

Thanking Horace and Helen profusely as they dropped me off in front of my house, I promised to visit their church when I had a chance (a chance, I confess, that never came.) Giving Scooter a pat, before I grabbed my duffle bag, I dashed toward my house without a backward glance. There was no time to waste. It was seven fifteen, as I walked through the backyard gate, found the key under the porch, and unlocked the door. I had tried being quiet after opening the gate. Unfortunately, Toby, our dog, had been awakened by the commotion. Letting out a sleepy bark, he charged up to me, jumped up and down excitedly, and then scampered into the house. Roused from slumber, my mom called sleepily from her room, "Noel is that you? How was your weekend? Did you have a good time?" "It was great Mom!" I piped, dropping my duffle bag onto the floor. For untold miles I had carried that baggage. I was now free of it at last. My dad had already left for work. The kitchen was a mess, but I made myself a hasty breakfast of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, grabbing a coke from the refrigerator to wash it down. After throwing on some clean clothes as I wolfed down my sandwich, I sprinkled on some of dad's cologne to camouflage the fact I hadn't taken a shower, and then charged out the front door.

I would have to walk, even run to school, but I knew I would make it now. Here I was, I thought, on the road to perfect attendance and I still had eight dollars in my pocket. I was totally exhausted now, and yet I felt a burst of energy after my coke and sandwich. I ran, then walked a ways when I was spent, and, during the final lap, when I had reached the campus, dashed frantically down the hall. When I found my locker, I pulled out a textbook and notebook, slammed the door shut, and continued running down the hall. My first class, which happened to be English Literature, had what most students thought was a cranky teacher. Her name, Misses Crabtree was fitting enough, but Misses Crabtree looked in every way like a mean, ornery crone. This morning, however, she became one of those special people in my life. With barely a minute left until the tardy bell rang I sailed into class, sweating profusely, breathing like a rail pounder, and plopping down in my designated seat just in time for the bell. I remembered that moment that my term paper on Moby Dick would be due Thursday, and I had a math exam the following day. After my insane weekend, however, and amazing trek home I was light-headed with relief. While calling role, Misses Crabtree, paused to ask me if I was drunk or high on drugs. When I answered no, she asked me if I might be ill and did I want to see the school nurse. I stifled

hysterical giggles that moment but insisted that I was merely tired, at which time she walked over, felt my forehead, and insisted I be excused from class. It was then, against my better judgment that I told the teacher and classes why I was sweating and acting strange: I ran all the way from home to be on time.

“You see Misses Crabtree,” I gathered my thoughts. “I found out from the principle I had a perfect attendance record—me of all people would be getting an award. The last award I got was the Order of the Arrow in Boy Scouts. I got home just in time to grab a sandwich, get dressed, and make it to my first class.”

“Got home from *where*?” She frowned. “You look like you’ve been partying all night.”

“No ma’am,” I shook my head, “that wasn’t it at all.”

At that point, it spelled out in a flow of words that mesmerized my teacher and the class. Doing exactly what the FBI and Captain Hayden had told me not to do, I told them the entire story, beginning with Bernie’s harebrained scheme, through the hops from Los Alamitos to Alameda and Alameda to Barber’s Point, to the point when we were arrested by the FBI and interrogated, and then, because we were an embarrassment to the navy and government, that moment when I was expelled from the base. I explained to them that there would be no record of my involvement but that Bernie, because he lied to the FBI, would be drummed out with a section 8. Adding the important episode when I was picked up several times while hitchhiking by drunken teens, a female impersonator, deranged women, and queer, until being driven home by a minister and his wife, I sat there out of breath, realizing I had taken up almost the entire hour.

“Now class,” Misses Crabtree announced, shifting to the podium, “that’s what I call a storyline. Like the authors of *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and *Adventures of a Young Man* by Ernest Hemingway this young man has a vivid imagination, but he did it all in one weekend instead of years or months.” “In fact Mister Bridges,” she looked down at me sternly, “this will be your theme for your semester story. I want all of you to write a story about an important event in your life.”

The class groaned. I felt a spit ball bounce off my head. What have I done? I asked myself, gazing around the room. I had, to use a trite phrase, let the cat out of the bag. Now I had a roomful of resentful students to contend with for the remainder of the semester. Despite my misgivings, however, I was deeply moved. It would be the only time I heard her compliment a student in her class. Out of all her students, she had singled me out. I felt honored by Miss Crabtree’s regard. For a moment my voice was caught in my throat.

“...So you believe me?” I grinned foolishly at her. “I scarcely believe it myself.”

“Mister Bridger, walk with me.” She crooked a finger and exited into the breezeway outside of her class.

As the class murmured angrily amongst themselves, she led me down a ways, turned to me slyly and looked me squarely in the eyes. “I don’t believe you young man, and it’s best that I and no one else believes you either. You’ve always struck me as an imaginative student. Would you prefer that I think you are a felon instead?”

“No ma’am!” I gasped.

“You may not know it Mister Bridger, but my husband is a navy man, himself. He’s a captain on an aircraft carrier—the USS *Kearsarge*. He’ll retire soon, but he’s very strict about regulations. You appeared to have broken them all.”

“Are you angry with me?” I asked in a stunned voice. “They let me go. It’s as if I had broken no laws.”

“But you did!” She smiled wryly. “The important matter is that they warned you not to tell. What would happen if they found out that you spelled the beans, eh? That J. Edgar Hoover is a sly fellow. You don’t want to upset *him!*”

“No, of course not,” I heaved a sigh. “Does this mean you don’t want me to write about my weekend?”

“Oh yes,” she nodded, “but skip over the controversial parts and use fake names. It must be condensed to twenty pages. In spite of your apparent exhaustion, you told your story well. Someday, after many years, when the principles in the story are dead and gone, this might make a fine novel, but as fiction.... You must use fictional characters in your story, of course. Your paper, which you might entitle, “My Weekend of Insanity,” will likewise be fiction. I will grade it, probably giving you an A if you do it properly, and return it after making a copy for myself. After that, keep this story to yourself. You and your crazy friend did something that most young men only dream of doing: you broke the law and got away with it, you went to an exotic island without paying a dime, and, most of all, you survived it no worse for wear. But you still broke the law!”

“I’m confused,” I wrinkled my nose. “You just said you don’t believe me. You sound like you believe me now.”

“No,” she corrected gently, “I meant *for the record* I don’t believe you. I don’t believe anyone, especially in your condition, can make up such a tale.” “Now go to the your second period class, try to stay awake, and don’t tell anyone that silly story again!”

“They probably won’t believe me anyhow.” I smiled sadly.

“Noel,” she patted my head, “you’re eighteen years old and a high school student. You flew on military transports and fooled the navy and all you got was a slap on the wrist. What is that old navy adage my husband might say? *Don’t rock the boat!*”

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Bud, that old salt Bernie and I met on our hop to Barber’s Point, had said, “Let sleeping dogs lie,” which means the same thing. I had taken his advice and kept my secret about Bernie’s parents from him. That was easy enough. What Misses Crabtree was asking me to do, however, was much more difficult. Though I should feel foolish for stumbling through our misadventures, I was still proud of our achievement. After all I had gone through, including coping with Bernie Suarez, I felt that I had bragging rights. Misses Crabtree cloaked it as fiction for the class’s benefit, and yet it had inspired the old gal. I saw it in her eyes and heard it in her voice. Thanks to me, the entire class had to write an essay on an important event in their life, and yet mine would be labeled fiction. That gleam in her eye told me she was pleased with my spirit. I was being encouraged to use my imagination, which my teacher praised, to write a story about our caper in Hawaii. I knew she was right. I had been warned by the navy and FBI not to talk about our adventure.... Until one day in the future when I felt comfortable enough to expand my story into a novel, I decided to take her advice. I at least had the satisfaction to know that she believed me. The question was, ‘would anyone else?’

I had no idea that many of the important places in Bernie and my journey would no longer exist one day. Los Alamitos Naval Air Station is now called the Joint Forces Training Base. Except for USS Hornet Museum located in Alameda, its base was closed during President Clinton’s administration, as was the naval air base at Barber’s Point. In a special place tucked in the back of mind I let my paper about my caper sit, and then one day, while cleaning up my study, I found the story I had written in my English Literature class. Misses Crabtree, who

would be in her hundreds today, was likely dead, as were Captain Hayden, the FBI agents who interrogated us, and anyone else who could point the finger at Bernie and me. We were safe now. The sailors and marines we encountered, including the kindly lieutenant, who rescued us in Ewa and the sailor's wife who drove us back to the base, had vanished forever from our lives. Sadly enough, I don't know what happened to Bernie either. Once, after my active duty from 1960 to 1962, I was at one of my weekly reserve meetings at Los Alamitos and learned from a high school classmate and neighbor of Bernie, who happened to be in our recruit class, that my onetime travel companion had moved away. From one other reservist, who was also a classmate, it was also rumored that he had a breakdown and was committed to an asylum. According to the first informant, who was a weekend warrior like myself, Bernie moved with Constance his mother back to Hawaii where she had spent her childhood. Reflecting upon my long ago adventure and the impact it must have had on Bernie's life, I would rather believe he moved than lost his mind, but I would never know. I wrote a lot of stuff that is still buried in my filing cabinet and stored in my computer, but the story I wrote for Misses Crabtree inspired me to make one more try.

Call me a late bloomer if you wish. I'm an old man now, and this is an old story. Considering the threat of terrorism at home and abroad and the many conflicts in our world, I doubt very much if the FBI, navy, or Homeland Security care very much about my book. Even now, when I tell the story of how two high school teenagers managed such a caper, I get skeptical looks. Today, because of the rules and restrictions in military air travel and the general climate of suspicion after 9/11 and the years following which have seen conflict and war, such a feat would be impossible and unbelievable. Yet we managed to pull it off, as Bernie mischievously put it. From the moment we stepped on our first naval plane until the night I left Alameda Naval Air Station on my own, it had been an insane adventure. Later, during active duty, I would travel around the Pacific Ocean in my aircraft carrier, the USS Hornet. I would experience stormy seas and freewheeling exploits on land, and almost wind up in the brig.... But nothing can compare with that first, madcap adventure—my Hawaiian escapade.