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“Where do you think he’s from, Marie?”

Busy handling hot meal trays, Marie tried to ignore her friend. Charlene kept looking back down the aisle to the end of the plane. They were hardly more than girls when they’d started with Air Canada on the same day and had been friends since flight school. They listened to the details of each others’ every romance. Both of them had ex-husbands and no kids. They ignored Henri, the male attendant, because he was, they agreed, a lazy sonofabitch. They kept looking at the passenger who sat quietly in the last seat, looking out the window.

The girls were still laughing about the short layover they’d had in Chicago. They’d gone shopping for clothes instead of men. They frequently voiced their concern that at twenty-five they were over the hill. They looked forward to a three-day layover in Ottawa, but before that there was a stop at Toronto. Even though the flight was only half-full, the short trip to Toronto had the stews hustling.

The quiet man refused the meal Marie offered, but said he’d like another drink. Charlene parked the drink cart at the end of the aisle and placed four small bottles on the passenger’s fold-down table.

“Oh, no ma’am. I just ordered one is all.”

Charlene glanced down the aisle. All of the passengers were eating or waiting for their trays, paying no attention to her, so she sat next to him. “We, my friend and I...” and she pointed up the passageway to where Marie was serving

meals "...are bribing you."

"Ahh, ma'am, what for?"

"Well, we would like to know where you're from."

"Oh, hell, I'm from Canada."

"Good. That's the first drink. How old are you?"

He grinned. "I'll be twenty-one in a couple of weeks."

"Are you married?"

"Uh, err, I'm not old enough."

"Very good. Have another drink. If you're Canadian, how come you're wearing an American Army uniform?"

"Well, I went over and volunteered, and I'm coming home on leave."

"The manifest says your name is McDonald. Mac for short?"

"Yes'm."

"Are those all medals you won?"

"Ahh, no ma'am. I know it looks funny, but I ripped my uniform. That's just the lining showing through."

"Last question before I get back to work. Were you in Vietnam? And what did you do there?"

"Oh, hell, that's easy. Yes, I was and I was a cook."

"I'll see you later. I gotta get back to work."

Charlene smiled at him as she stood and started up the aisle. The soldier whispered to her retreating back, "You forgot your drink cart."

Charlene nodded toward the cart and said, "Keep it."

She leaned over a meal cart and quietly said, "Marie, you're not going to believe it. That guy back there is Canadian."

Marie looked down the aisle. "He's damn sure drinking like one."

"He's just back from Vietnam. He said he'll be twenty-one in a couple of weeks." As she stuffed used plastic glasses in the trash, Charlene added, "Says he was a cook. He's

not married, either.”

“Charlene, that guy was no cook. Don’t let the smile fool you. Remember when I dated that chopper pilot who was over there? He had a look like that. Just like a beautiful campfire; burn the shit out of you if you get too close.”

“I don’t care. I’d go out with him.”

“Charlene, you’re better off dating a guy like the one in 2C. The plastic man.” The laughing stewardesses in the small galley drew the attention of several passengers. “Just make sure his credit cards aren’t made of rubber.”

Man, Mac thought, that stew is pretty. From the jungle to the world. Almost home. He was terrified. Two weeks since his last mission. Now everything seemed brand new. Half-drunk, he felt like he should be tiptoeing instead of dashing back into civilization. In his last letter to his buddy Mac, Staff Sergeant “Flash” Gordon had told him that coming home was like riding a rocket ship: “The only thing you’ll feel when you got off is old.”

I can’t go home like this. I need to hide out for a day or so. Shoulda wore jeans and a T-shirt so I’d blend in. No, better off in uniform. Easier to bring my brother through customs.

“Can I have that bag there?” the dark-haired stewardess asked.

“Beg pardon, ma’am?”

“The bag, please. Off the floor.”

He could read her name tag: “Marie.” *Damn she has a nice smile!*

“Ahh, miss,” Mac said, “that’s mine.”

She slid her perfectly proportioned body between the seat and the drink cart, sat next to him and unzipped his black AWOL bag. “Soldier,” she said, “you’re gonna need a lot of ammunition.” The tanned and smiling stewardess proceeded to stuff his bag full of small liquor bottles.

“Ahh, ma’am, that’s a lotta booze.”

With difficulty, she lifted the bag, turned toward him and plopped the clinking carrier in his lap. Giggling, she said, "Compliments of Air Canada and..." nodding toward her associate, "...Charlene and Moi. Welcome home. After our layover in Ottawa, we'll be back in Toronto. We stay at the Royal York." She took his fist, opened his fingers and placed a piece of paper in it. "Here's the phone number. We always get the same room, so ask for that extension." She closed his fingers around the paper. "That is, if you're not too busy."

Stunned, he just stared at her. His mouth seemed full of cotton.

"My name is Marie Maisonneuf, and that, as you know, is Charlene. Mac, have you ever had a trip around the world?"

"No, I haven't. Just as far as Vietnam."

Marie laughed softly and left, telling him to keep his seat belt fastened.

He saw that the top shelf of the drink cart was full of little empty bottles Marie had taken from his table. He felt proud of himself.

He knew he was going to be unsteady on his feet when he got up so he waited until everyone else had deplaned. As he collected his bag and started down the aisle, he heard Marie's voice on the PA. He looked around. There were no other passengers on board.

"We hope you've enjoyed your flight with us..."

He looked toward the front and saw the two women watching him. Marie, with the microphone, was staring directly at him, smiling.

"...and we hope you'll come ride with us, real soon."

He felt like he was walking on stilts as he left the plane and entered the terminal. People were pushing and shoving, shouting greetings. He tried to avoid contact with individuals as they brushed against him, but it was impossible. The

line for customs crawled along and each time it stopped he was bumped by the person in back of him or by a suitcase. Could anyone see his concealed “brother” snugly hidden in its shoulder holster? He couldn’t remember feeling so closed in, so crowded. The terminal was immense and noisy and the whole thing scared the shit out of him.

When he finally stood at the counter, the customs agent called for his buddy to come over. “You been drinking, Sergeant?”

Mac looked at the uniformed man and his eyes told him there was a whole platoon in front of him. “Yes, sir, sure have.” “Where are you going, Sergeant?”

“Just come home to visit my mom, eh.”

“You’re a Canadian, eh, Sergeant?” The several faces of the platoon smiled. “What d’you make of this, Ed?” he asked his coworker. “A Canuck American sergeant.”

Ed stared in semi-disbelief as the first agent stamped his paperwork.

“Vietnam, eh? Kill any gooks, Sergeant?”

“Ahh, just enough to eat, sir.”

The platoon thought that was hilarious. “Welcome home. Go have a good time.” The platoon never asked about his brother.

He felt better when he left customs and started moving again. His legs had stiffened from leaning against the counter. Like standing in his granddad’s fishing boat, but the swaying sea turned into the floor of the terminal. The Labatt sign caught his eye. *Just a little more ammo*, he thought as he stepped to a concourse bar. He was about to pick up the beer when he heard singsong voices, too close. Feeling confined, confused, he turned to see that a family of Asians seemed to be everywhere. The beer bottle sat untouched. He moved quickly and didn’t feel safe until he was outside the building, standing on the curb.

“Sahib, you want taxi?”

Shit, he thought, *an Indian Indian. Almost a friendly face.*