

Live long enough you'll think about things way back there and how one thing led to another. Things you couldn't figure out make sense thirty, forty years later. There is an old three story brick building on my high school campus, a place of endless academic agony, of tortuous Gregg touch typing class, the tap,tap, tapping of the Underwood keys and the unsynchronized thump of the carriages returning for more pain on the next line. A,s,d,f,j,k,l semicolon, the teacher patrolling the linoleum floors waiving her steel ruler ready to pounce on the unfortunate right guard who dared to drop his weary eyes for a quick peek at the keys.

During English Literature class, the row near the window, heating radiators clanged loudly emitting drowsy warmth that tugged at my eyelids. The old windows rattling from the damp biting southern winter wind awaiting us across the street as we grabbed a smoke or a chili dog in front of Charley's Pool Hall. Mrs. Turner, an elderly teacher with a sand paper voice, grafted to our sleepy brains, the awful abstract lessons of some passage from Samuel Peeps.

The Principal of the school had a twin brother who visited assembly from time to time wearing a sharp blue and khaki uniform with sparkling brass buttons and web belt, battle ribbons upon his chest. Sitting there to the right of the podium, a red stripe uniquely marked his blue trouser legs as he held his immaculate white military cap. I vaguely remember that he was a captain, a Marine Corps Captain. But the importance of that was completely lost on my youthful ignorance. A masterful marketer, he never said a thing. His presence telegraphed great subliminal volumes to us receptive disoriented lads.

Our window on the world beyond the little southern town was The World News Tonight, with Huntley and Brinkley or Dave Garaway and J. Fred Mugs, hosting a black and white Today Show as the people of New York City, wrapped in warm overcoats, walked past studio windows to work. Too, The Naked City, Stories from The New York Herald Tribune, with it's theme song from Ein Helden Leiben mixed with a steady diet of World At War, Ed Sullivan, Sergeant Bilko, Gun Smoke and the Nixon Kennedy Debate; piercing questions of Lawrence Spivak and Martha Roundtree on Meet The Press, it all began to form my reality of the world. Mom's and Dad's stories to us, my sister and I, about their war years, their lives in the Great Depression, were told again and again like rhymes from some Homeric epic. The year was 1962. Graduation was but a few months away. And the days of my boyhood dwindled to the depressing, crushing realization that I must do something, and soon.

THE FIRST LESSON

“L’Premier Lecon”

“When are the Americans coming?”

**Gen. C. de Castries by phone to
Superiors, just before the fall of
Dienbienphu. Quoted M. Higgins
New York Herald Tribune
May 25, 1954**

Experts

1961 Lydalia, Georgia: Someone had farted. Vance Poplar sat slumped over his desk in the rear of his American History class. Around him was his cadre of friends from their long marathon bicycle excursions to and from a canyon twenty five miles out of town. The bikes were not the feather light racing cycles of today with young men and women zipping about in colorful tights. They were heavy, fenderless ,rusty bikes of grease and steel. Machines that took them heart bursting distances into the Georgia countryside. To Poplar’s left sat Freddy, a rotund lad with an ebullient sense of humor. On a less than rare occasion, Freddy would let slide a nasty fart and wait for the explosive reaction from his fellow cadre positioned around him or even better some unsuspecting prom princess raising her studious head from study in awful discovery.

Seated on Poplar’s right Paul worked copiously on notes relating to some inane historical occurrence that would likely appear on an exam. Paul was also a pianist and, like the entire cadre, was quick witted and a keen observer. Amidst his intense academic concentration Paul would usually be the first to catch the fog, as they called it. He would not alarm the cadre of the impending attack. Rather, he would quietly endure and watch the others reaction as the reality overcame them. Then he would laugh uproariously.

Forward of Poplar sat Lawrence, a short freckle faced boy whose emerging talent, in addition to quail hunting, was relating the exacting comedy skits he’d seen on *Red Buttons* or *The Steve Allen* TV shows the night before. As the boys had advanced upward through their grades their regular meetings during school occurred at the bus stop where in the snappy southern winter they would inevitably find a beer can and strike up a spirited game of beer-can football before the bus arrived to deliver them to Lydalia Junior High. Lawrence could sail the best spiral pass, hurling an empty Black Label can clear across old man Carter’s front yard right on target for a touch down before the bus pulled up. “Mabel! Black Label”

At Poplar's rear, sat Bubba Green. Bubba, his father a World War two fighter pilot then working for the government was, they all came to accept, destined to the learning halls of MIT or Georgia Tech. He had already taken on the profile of the contemplating, worrying NASA engineer, walking down the hall to class working his prized yellow Keefle and Esser slide rule to solve physics equations with which they all struggled. They all had scrimped and saved to own the same precision yellow metallic slide rule which hung from their hips like Colt .45s.

The absolute truth be known, and I would not tell this story with any deception in mind, Vance Poplar was not as academically gifted as his fellow cadre members. If the others required two hours to prepare for a test, Vance required the entire evening. If the others had to read a book in preparation for a book report, they could read the requirement in less than a week. Poplar usually took twice as long or longer. Emotional pain gripped him as he glanced at his buddies graded tests. He noticed seemingly effortless "As" and "Bs". He had come to agonizingly ready himself for the first glimpse of his own returned paper which would inevitably be "Ds" or "Fs". A "C" would be a quiet victory for Vance Christian Poplar.

But along with this debilitating shortcoming, which all souls have in one form or other, *you just have to search long and hard for it but you will find it and don't let anyone kid you about this*, was a sparkle of salesmanship. He'd gotten it from his father, Thomas Mahan Poplar a policeman in town. Poplar compensated for poor academic achievement with eloquent explanations and expansions. With his provocative questions he would defuse his teacher's momentum. Troubling to his father, he also had an impulsive sense of independence. Troubling to his teachers Poplar seemed to have as a side car to his academic difficulties a keen sense of intuition. He knew with certainty when he was about to be called upon by the teacher. His name would ring out; the question would be asked then would come the long humiliating pause in a sea of silence. At that moment he would usually play his card.

In studied deliveries of Chet Huntly or David Brinkly, "Uh mam before I answer the question, I am not clear on something. This would be much more meaningful if I know exactly what was going on in the other parts of the world at that particular time." Then Vance would say nothing else. He had become skillful at the con. He knew when to shut his mouth.

It was the first week his senior year. As old Mrs. Harkins had put it, "Vance you'll make it, but by the skin of your teeth young man." But the new teacher at the school was not the understanding Mrs. Harkins who had taken a sabbatical for a tour of Europe. The new teacher of Senior World History was Miss Louise Ledbetter Ruby, whom Poplar had sized up as a doddering old biddy and whose class he'd expected to ease through achieving at least a D-plus with some relief in his academic struggles.

She looked easy going and kind enough but was unknown to any of the other students. Also unknown to them, she was descendent of ancient Cicero the Grammarian. And she seized upon the opportunity presented to her by this young upstart Poplar to soundly drill the class on the most agonizing amalgam of dates

and names. After his skillful pause following such a question, she sustained Vance's challenge of silence and walked casually toward the back of the room. Then Miss Ruby spoke.

"Ahhh, I see Mr. Poplar, you wish to have a clearer picture of global collateral events? Is that right? Do I understand you correctly?" she said rising on the balls of her aging feet.

"Yes mam." Poplar felt discomfort at this sudden shift of inquiry directed back at him alone. Harkins always took his bate enlarging on the subject and forgetting the question altogether. He was also well aware of the annoyed stares of his classmates including Lawrence, Freddy and Paul and the studious Bubba.

"Then each of you shall have the opportunity to know exactly what was taking place in....let me think....ahhh yes, I recall; the southeastern most peninsula of South East Asia, Annam. Take precise notes. I will watch each of you. If anyone of you so much as drifts from this lecture I will now give, we will begin again or if time is lacking, I will begin anew tomorrow or the next day and so on and so on," she snapped her fist in her open palm rhythmically to insure her point was well made, "for the rest of the year if necessary. In the great picture, what is a day or week or month more or less. Do you understand me Mr. Poplar?" asked the deceptively grandma like teacher grabbing his ear in a painful pinch.

"Yes, yes mam."replied. the shocked student.

The powerful old lady went to the black board which wrapped completely around the room, the only such room in the entire Lydalia school district. After all it was the World History room and Mrs. Harkins had taken pride in finally obtaining the installation of the wrap-around black board from Mr. Krist, the stern school Principal. But old lady Ledbetter-Ruby neither took notice of the achievement nor gave lip service to the unusual configuration. She simply went to work.

As she wrote her powerful cursive with the white chalk the loose wrinkled flesh under her arm swung and quivered from the force of her pedagogic performance. Perceiving her threat accurately the class scrambled to notate the ancient lesson. She wrote as fast as she spoke.

"We will begin before the death of Christ with ruling dynasties. Annam is situated on the China Sea at approximately the same latitude as Central America. Ruling dynasties: De Minh to Lac Long Quan. REVOLUTION! Hong Bang to Trien Da. REVOLUTION! Han Dynasty to Sisters Trac and Nhi. The year Twenty Four AD: The sisters fail in revolt committing suicide leaving the Han in Power. Again REVOLUTION! Trieu An, Ly Bon, Ly Xuan and Ly Phat all armies against the Chinese. The year Six Seventy Nine AD. In China, the Trang Dynasty seizes power. REVOLUTION! Ngo Quyen ousts the Chinese from Annam for good. Le Hoan in Nine Eighty AD defending Annam against a Chinese attempt to regain power. CONFLICT! How does power change hands class? REVOLUTION! In neighboring China the Great Wall is built in early Fourteen Hundred to keep Islam out! Collateral event. Are you with me Mr. Poplar? In all, twenty revolutions in one thousand years of history."

“Now I shall begin to detail the chronology of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in like manner.” The front black board was full so Miss Ledbetter-Ruby walked quickly over to the East wall and continued writing.

The class rumbled with desperate sounds of pen on paper. Flipping paper. Broken pencils. Desperate searches in book bags for replacement pencils. Faces down to desk tops. Fingers now beginning to ache. The old woman’s chalk broke on the black board. She found a fresh chalk. Her hand now white with chalk dust. Her discourse was expert. As she pronounced the foreign names her thick Southern accent magically transformed to the tonal dialects of Asia. The boys in the cadre, now vacant of their usual comedy, shifted in their seats for a clearer look at the board. Poplar the upstart wrote too with the fury of his classmates, his spectacled face close down to the paper, he was far behind and now copied what the teacher had already written no longer hearing her discourse. “Damn” he muttered to himself. The bell rang signifying the end of the period. There was a lurch for the door. The old woman suddenly slammed her pointer upon a table near the black board. “WHAMM!

“This class is not dismissed” she said sharply. Students sullenly returned to their desks. Then she turned to her black board and continued.

“For about one thousand seven hundred years of revolution and the rise and fall of these ruling dynasties, the land you now enjoy was wilderness except for the Cree, Mohawk, Seminole, Pawnee and other native American Indian tribes too numerous to detail here. At the time of Tay Son rebellion, an uprising of native peoples against exploitive Chinese merchants, the land of Annam sold away its customary turbulent transitions to the French. Nguyen Anh was in due time converted to Catholicism by French Jesuits. In time Nguyen Ahn succeeded to the throne and ruled as Gia Long. The year 1767. Mr. Poplar does that year have a familiar ring? Gia Long’s power transferred to Ming Minh in 1858, the time of the Lincoln and Douglas Debate on the issue of slavery. Fourteen French frigates and twenty five hundred men under admiral Genouilly entered a river in a place then called Touraine.”

A boy rose to leave the class. “YOU WILL BE SEATED UNTIL I DISMISS THIS CLASS!!! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?” thundered the old woman sternly. The boy sat sullenly down again. Other students in the hall peered through the small glass window of the door to see what was brewing.

“1884, Nam Nghi! 1886, Dong Kanh!. End of another turbulent thousand year period. The year is 1923, Khi Dinh to Bao Dai in 1954 to the present Ngo Diem. Ancient Annam is now” she paused and looked around, “ Indochina. ”

She dusted the chalk from her hands and opened her desk drawer. “Distribute these please, Miss Lindsey. Class, you will be expected to read this syllabus on Annam.” Groans came again from the classroom. “Each of you will be required to memorize three sections by Friday next and be ready to discuss.”

The old teacher finished at last. The eyes of the drained students now fixed on her. Leaning forward and placing the tips of her wrinkled fingers upon her desk, her voice was low, nearly a whisper, “You will be tested on this chronology of Annam.”she said over her bifocals. “Class dismissed.”

Vance, the last out of the room still copied the remainder of the teachers black board script then at last closed his notebook and rose to leave the room. Miss. Ruby was already in her office anti-room pouring a cup of coffee from her thermos. Vance walked to the office door. "I'll be working on this until finals Mrs. Ruby. Be lucky if I finish. I, um I don't get it. "

"The more important lesson here Mr. Poplar is that you do get it. What is a year or two more or less in your struggle? " She started toward her new class, now seated and ready for her next lecture.

Out in the hall a short freckled face girl spoke sharply at Vance Poplar as she hugged her note books and readied to run to her next class. Lockers banged.

"I didn' unastan' any uhh at stuff Vance Poplar! 'at Teacher's crazy as a fruitcake! You see what your smartness got us all into? I ain't studin' you Vance Poplar. I hope you satisfied." She slammed her locker door and fumed away.

Vance disappeared into the boy's room laughing, pulling a pack of Lucky Strikes out from under his tee shirt sleeve.

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"In the resistance the time unit was the month. You see, it took three months for a Southern Cadre like me to work his way from the maquis in the Mekong Delta to the Vietminh zone in the North. And after we had undergone four months of special training up here in Tonkin, we spent another three getting back to the South again- clandestinely, through enemy territory, and on foot. In such circumstances, what is punctuality? What can an hour or a day more or less mean? "

**Gaston Pham Ngoc Truan
Vietminh Cadre, 1954
Dennis Bloodworth
Eye for the Dragon- 1970**

By the late winter of 1961 the final prelude for the Class of '62, the seniors were buzzing in the hallways about the final paste ups for the school annual. There was equal chatter about just where each of them planned to attend college.

"Hey Poplar I got accepted at Georgia Tech!" yelled his buddy Paul in the strained gravel voice of emerging adulthood.

"Hell raising at its best." mumbled Poplar as he stuffed his jacket into his wall locker. The year had sped past them, football season transformed to Basketball season ending Poplar's last bouts with the B-Team blocking sled, the fat Coach Gray riding upon it barking, "Come on Poplar! Hit it Poplar! Get up Poplar! Hit it again Poplar! Get up off the ground Poplar! What are you doing on the ground Poplar!"

Paul watched Poplar loading up his books for class. "Do you know where your are going yet?" asked Paul

"I applied for a few junior colleges. Haven't heard anything yet." Poplar's voice was spoken in a tone of disappointment. *Nothing new for me*, he thought.

"Larry got accepted to Cal Poly. Perk is going into the Air Force. He got into electronics school I think." said the newsy Paul. Perk was a friend on the periphery of their cadre. He and Vance dabbled in short wave radios.

The hallway was a dirge of students between classes, locker noise and the usual adolescent misbehavior. Then the flow of students and teachers moved down the hallway for one of the last student assemblies before graduation.

“Come on, lets go, Ed’s gona meet us at the lab door. Opps, damn I almost forgot. I have to go to Miss Elliot’s room. We’re presenting a tribute on President Kennedy at assembly. I’m supposed to work the lights and Mr. Elliot wants it perfect. See ya later.” Paul peeled off down the small passage way to the speech teacher’s classroom.

Joined unceremoniously by Freddy, the three resumed the trek stepping into the flow of students streaming down the hall that flooded into the enormous auditorium. As did everyone Poplar noticed that Mr. Kristy had again invited his twin brother to sit beside him on the stage. The lights were on the members of the faculty as well as the Principal. Mr. Krist a tough disciplinarian sat leaning slightly to one side, his legs crossed his and head canted as if listening for something. His brother sat across the stage in perfectly excellent posture symmetrically mirroring his brother. He wore the Dress Blue uniform of the United States Marine Corps. The students didn’t know rank but all of them knew even if only by rumor that Mr. Krist’s twin brother was a Marine. On the many times he visited, he never spoke nor participated in the programs. He simply sat not moving a muscle, an icon of military presence.

Finally, Mr. Krist signaled a call to order limped to the podium and the student body quieted.

“This morning, Mrs. Elliot and her speech club will present the program. But first a word to our seniors. This is the last assembly before graduation. Let me just say briefly that, for most of you seniors,” he paused looking around over the student body as a swell of laughter arose, “ Most of you are prepared to step into your adult lives, to college, to a trade and some of you I know plan military service.” He glanced toward his brother. “Let me say for the benefit of you freshmen, sophomores and juniors that we have given our seniors the tools they will need to succeed in life. The rest will be up them as it will be up to you as you move up the academic ladder. It is up to you. I will now turn the program over to Mrs. Elliot.” There was a sputter of applause as he walked back and took his seat.

The lights dimmed as Paul worked the controls high up in the balcony. Then a tall young man walked out on to the stage, his sandy hair combed in a full sweep across his forehead. He was dressed in a black tuxedo, impeccable white shirt, an uncharacteristic handkerchief in his breast pocket and his hand was placed in an unmistakable imitation of the new President of the United States, John F. Kennedy.

Unlike Kennedy, nervousness snaked up from the boy’s adrenal glands and gripped his larynx causing his voice of quiver as he began to speak.

“My fellow Americans...” The boy brushed his hair aside in exacting imitation of his idol. He continued massaging, searching for the right the inflexion and tone, his imitation of the New England accent, the elevated gaze to the future. Feeling more confident as he moved into the flow of his rhetorical river that was the President’s Inaugural Address he suddenly seemed to say *I can do this.* .

“...and to those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for what-ever period is required- not because the Communist may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right.” The boy had become solid now in his delivery, speaking in a near perfect imitation of the President, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” When he had finished the student body stood and roared in applause. There were whistles and as the cheers died down, there were other vignettes about the sweet opium of optimism that floated omnipresent in the air and like most of the students, dare say all of the students, Vance Poplar did not know what had been said by this surrogate of the new President but he liked the sound of it, and the cadence of it, and the youth of it, and the panache of it.

Kennedy had gripped the South as he had gripped the nation and the young students of Lydalia High were no exception. Mrs. Elliot had done it again and in her usual stoicism acknowledged Mr. Krist’s approval of her speech club’s performance with an icy nod.

Not long after exams, Poplar approached Letha Rose, his mother, in their kitchen. Fried chicken sizzled in her frying pan.

Moma I would like to work with Mr. Connar out at Lydalia airfield over the summer.

“How much is he paying?”

“Well, you only get paid in flying time. Me and Eddie went to see Mr. Conner and he said we...”

“You mean he won’t pay you a nickel?” interrupted Letha Rose.

“Well, he’ll pay us but, it’s like he will give you your pay in flying time.”

“But you don’t fly Vance.”

“I know mom.” Poplar moved his feet around on the floor when he got uncomfortable or nervous. “Its, its for *learning* to fly.” He knew he couldn’t con his father or mother so he never embarked on his usual class room shenanigans at home.

Letha Rose took a deep breath. “What will your hours be Vance.”

“Me and Freddy would split the week. I would work Sunday.”

“You mean you won’t be going to church?”

“Sunday is his busiest day mom.” Vance wiped their chrome edged Formica table with a dish cloth.

“Well okay, but you will have to bag groceries at Pigly Wigly when you’re not out at that air field. I’ve saved some money for when you go off to college and you will add what you can to it. Even if it’s for a few cloths.”

“Go off to college? Have I been accepted?”

“Yes, Vance, you have been accepted!” she said producing the envelop marked Middle Southeastern Junior College. “You’re accepted at MSEJC just south of Macon!”

Letha Rose beamed at the news. Vance would be the first of all her family to go to college. She never told Vance but she had pulled strings for this acceptance, including a personal letter of reference from Mr. Krist himself. Vance

had worked so hard only to squeak by. Letha Rose Poplar had struggled to the bone to present this opportunity to her son.

The evening T.V. line up on their black and white mahogany Motorola console television included *Gun Smoke*, *Bonanza*, *Wagon Train* and *Have Gun Will Travel*, his father's favorite. But most of all Letha Rose liked *Perry Mason*. The Poplar's owned a pink and white stick shift Fifty Seven Chevy. On Letha's secretarial and Tom's police income they owned a mortgage on a two bedroom house they had built on a shady street outside of town. And Letha Rose, a keen manager of the dollar kept them budgeted to the last nickel.

A fellow patrolman had once asked Tom how he had come to afford a home in a ritzy neighborhood and a car while raising two children, Vance and his little sister Leslie. The patrolman was known as a bit of a party and gambling man, as much as one could party and gamble in the little Georgia town.

"Buck I'd tell you, but it'd bore you to death." Tom had replied, which they all laughed about. And yet to be strapped for a dollar, the days, at least for Vance had been full of B-team football, dreaming of girls, dismantling and reassembling his used English Royal maroon bicycle, building ham radios, and struggling with his school work. In fact his room was so full of ham radio equipment that the table holding it collapsed one early morning hour raising his sister Leslie, Letha Rose and Tom, to survey the disaster before returning to bed shaking their heads.

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The airfield was a small grass landing strip outside of Lydalia. Ernie Connor was a big hard of hearing mass of a man who stumbled about the place pulling old fabric aircraft around the hangars, topped off wing tanks of crop dusters that constantly taxied up to the pumps. He sat on the front stoop of the block house, referred to as "Operations", listening to country music with an ear for incoming planes on the VHF loud speaker. The crackle on the radio and the open sky surrounding the desolate field had a magical essence to Vance. There was a world outside Lydalia, a big world, with long summer days. And with good flying weather at hand Ernie welcomed some youthful relief for his tired old bones. Hiring the boys, he thought, was a good idea.

"Now, Doctor Hunt will be coming in here in a few minutes. You just go out there and top him off the way I showed you on the Piper in the hangar. They're all the same. Put the ladder up there, top him off. Don't forget to say "That'll be Nine Dollars and ten cents Doctor." His credit's good. And always check over the plane at the pump. You see anything wrong like I showed you, tell the pilot." yelled Ernie walking back to his block house.

"Oh one other thing." Ernie spun around at mid course. "Be on the look out for "The Bear". Do you know who The Bear is?" smiled Ernie his jeweled eyeglass retainer glinting in the sun.

"No." Eddie and Vance were eager to get started.

“The Bear comes down the coast every spring, from up North somewhere in an old Stearman biplane to crop dust in South Georgia and Florida. He pays cash BEFORE you pump! No credit cards.”

The Sundays came and went and Ernie went on about his business as Vance and Freddy took care of the gas pumps. A few of the old planes would need priming and cranking by hand and after a switch off prime or two, Vance could be heard yelling.

“Switch on. Contact!” commands echoed by the pilot and Vance would leap to jerk the wooden prop down and the engine would thunder and tick while Vance pulled the chocks and waived off the pilot to all points of the compass. Then he’d walk back to the block house and swat flies with Ernie’s *Georgia Cracker Fly Swatter*.

Pace McKenna flew an old yellow PA-18 fabric Piper for the Georgia Forestry Service. Pace would fly in, top off his wing tanks then fly out hours on end seven days a week. He was a harried, cussed grump of a man who always answered in monosyllabic grunts. Vance pestered his ears off for a ride up on one of his tours down the Flint River and around the county.

“God Damit. Don’t you ever take no for an answer, Poplar?” yelled Pace over the noise of the idling engine. “Okay get in.”

Vance glanced around quickly and saw Ernie nowhere in site and climbed in the back set of the Piper, reached up and pulled down the side hatch and the two of them bounced down the run way to windward.

Now Pace had heard Vance and Freddy talking back at the block house one morning about how they’d like to take a parachute jump. So as the little yellow plane climbed to a thousand feet, Pace looked back at Vance.

“You buckled in boy?” voice barely audible, his ears still popping he reached back and jerked at Vance’s seat belt to be sure Vance was indeed strapped to his seat. Then he threw open the door and rolled the aircraft to its side. The only way to look was straight down at patches of farmland, green hedge rows, little red roads and barns all the time his ears popping to the dull hum of the engine and the cool fresh ocean of air. He suddenly felt a pencil and Moon Pie slip from his shirt pocket and fall into space. He held his glasses to his face and felt the great exhilarating wash of air move over him.

Pace looked back at him and laughed uproariously at the Moon Pie falling out of the plane.

“You think you still want to do a parachute jump?” Vance’s grin was his only reply.

Pace gave another uproarious laugh. “You gona be one crazy son of a bitch Poplar.” Then he banked the little plane around following the meandering Murder Creek back toward Lydalia field. The plane landed an hour or so later and Vance walked on home to Sunday supper.

Around mid to late summer Vance’s flying career took a critical turn. Inside the tiny block house of an office, Ernie had a tin roaster set up on a table for the pilots. Next to it stood an old refrigerator choked with beef burgers. In addition to flipping through Ernie’s’ huge collection of Pups Parts magazines full of naked women, Vance and Freddy could put away three or four of these burgers

each day they worked. A few weeks after his flight with Pace, Ernie was doing an inventory of his frozen beef burgers.

“Hey Poplar you and your cohort come in here.”

“Yes sir?”

“There must be twenty five beef burgers in here I can’t account for.”

Ernie’s glasses magnified his eyes as he gazed directly at Poplar. “You boys are eating me out of business here!” Then he walked over to the slips of paper he’d taped to the door that marked off the flight time they had accumulated.

“Let’s see, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen beef burgers! You have eaten all of your flight instruction time. If you don’t control yourselves around the roaster, you just as soon forget about flying.” he said tearing up the slips of credits.

It wasn’t long before graduation so Vance jettisoned any fantasies of his heroes General Chennault, *Flying Tiger* played by John Wayne, Colonel Robert Scott or Chuck Yeager and his X-15. Besides he muttered to himself out on the deserted highway in a moment of truth, *I’m blind as a bat without these*. He cleared off his glasses with his tee shirt and took one final ride home on his bicycle.

“Mama, can I go to up to Dobbins Field with Lawrence. His brother was home on leave and is flying his jet back to Pensacola. His mother’s going to take us.”

“When are they going up there?”

“This Sunday.”

“Does that mean you won’t be going to Sunday school Vance?”

“Yeh, but I think they’re going up *after* Sunday school but not go to Church.”

“I guess so Vance. Isn’t Richard a Marine?”

“I guess so.”

That Sunday the weather was foul. Rain whipped across highway Forty One as the DeSoto eased northward toward Atlanta. Richard and their mother sat in the front seat talking quietly about the family as Poplar and Lawrence sat in the back seat peering out the window at the rain. Upon arriving at the gate at Dobbins Field, an Air Force guard stepped out of the guard shack, acknowledged the officer with a salute and waved them past.

Richard directed his mother, wearing her Sunday best including white driving gloves, to a row of dreary gray block houses on the very edge of the tarmac. Curtains of rain drifted across them as Vance and Lawrence got out and followed Richard who lugged his flight gear and helmet into the building.

They all stood at the urinals. Richard and Lawrence had zipped up and headed to the locker room. Richard turned to notice Vance still at the urinal.

“Lets go Vance.”he said. “Double time. Lets go.”

Vance quickly zipped up ran into the locker room. Richard was in full flight suit now holding his white helmet. The emblem of the United States Marine Corps and the officer’s name was painted on the helmet front. Quickly moving outside they saw a pickup truck marked “Follow Me” backing up to an F-104, the attendant waiting instructions from the pilot to start the engine. The boys climbed a ladder in the rain to view the cockpit interior then stepped aside while Richard

donned his helmet, slipped into his seat and begin his preflight check. The attendant motioned the boys to get into the truck, out of the rain. In seconds the jet engine came to life, the odor of fuel in the air, the heat of its emission swishing the standing rain from the tarmac. The attendant unplugged the umbilical and ran to the truck.

“The pilot asked me to take you boys up the runway a bit.” said the attendant in a deep southern drawl. He whipped the truck around and sped up the deserted runway.

“He ought’a be airborne about right hear.”he said whipping the truck around and off the tarmac. The windshield wipers thumped as the boys peered out the foggy window and the rain poured on the metal cab of the truck. “Here, get out. Y’all can’t see nothin’ in the truck. Stay next to the truck. He won’t be long.”

It was Sunday and except for the jet, the truck the attendant, Lawrence and Vance, the base was empty. Then they heard the faint whine of the jet engine. It grew louder and louder until they saw the silver F-104, MARINE CORPS lettered on the side, suddenly appear screaming through the mist before them. Richard, helmeted in the cockpit, now roared passed them through the rain, lifting the nose of the aircraft exactly where the attendant said he would lift into the air. Then they heard the after burner light up in explosive propulsion.

“I told ya. Racht here.” The attendant yelled. In a second the place was silent again except for the rain.

“I saw Richard wave. I saw him. Did you see him wave.” said Vance.

“Nah. You couldn’t see that Vance. He’s going two hundred miles and hour.”

“I saw him wave.”

The boys argued about the wave until the truck returned them to the Desoto. They climbed in the car and rode home in silence. For Vance it was a religious experience.

* * *

1961: “.....the troops will march in...then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It’s like taking a drink, the effect wares off and you have to take another.”

Kennedy to aid Arthur Schlesinger

Davidson, *Vietnam at War*

p. 87

* * *

Jazbos, in the language of modern marketing, was a variety store. Like the variety shows on T.V. in those days, Jazbow's contained any items or acts that promised the owner a reasonable return on investment. Such a business plan, when practiced over a few years would produce a store with an enormous inventory of, kites, razor blades, razors, paper weights with statues of naked hula dancers, lamps in the form of a naked hula dancers, record bins loaded with single 45s of the Kingston Trio "*Clickity Clack, Clickity Clack Freight Train's goin and Never Come Back*, Johnny Ray "*Do not forsake me oh my darlin'*, shaving cream *Boomer Shave*, hats, magazines, *Stag, Playboy, True Detective, Life, Saturday Evening Post, Time, News Week, US News and World Report, Newspapers, The Atlanta Constitution Covers Dixie Like the Dew, The Atlanta Journal Everything That's Fit To Print*. Toward the back of the store, school supplies, canned goods and sleeping cat. Jazbow's office was his pants pockets.

Along the front of the store, Jazbow in the summer months put out a colorful assortment of vegetables, corn and greens collards, snap peas and butter beans, okra and in season fruit, apples, strawberries, plums, local grapes and scuppernongs, brooms, shovels and garden tools. Across the street from Jazbows stood a theater that kept the town folk and the college students in touch with Hollywood USA. The Marquee at one time or other carried the legendary titles, *Thunder Road*, starring Robert Mitchem, *Guns of Navarone* starring Gregory Peck, David Niven and Anthony Quin, *Ben Hur* starring Charlton Heston, *Payton Place, God's Little Acre, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* and *High Noon* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. *God Created Woman* starring Bridget Bardot, to the agonizing disappointment of many young college men, never made it to town.

Between the theater and the storefront lay the main highway North and South, highway Forty One. A two lane pavement cutting through the town, highway 41 was the main artery into Florida in 1962. Cars from all over America streamed through the little town bound for the Georgia Islands, Tallahassee, Daytona, Tampa, Miami and all in between. It was the same road that went through Lydalia a hundred miles to the North. Vance's father often wondered what types of characters, crooks, tough guys and salesmen from up North had passed him undetected as he directed traffic

"Some times you don't want to know." He once uttered.

There were three stop lights in the college town. Folks there went about their business while travelers and truckers from Chicago, New York and Montréal gawked from their windows like interstellar visitors observing life on a strange planetary stopover.

Middle Southwestern College was south of town where the curb ran out and the sand washed over the roadside to blend, in summer months, with the hot sticky-black highway tar. It was a neighborhood of strict Baptists, fine white colonial homes, a community of shacks for the town's Black and the surrounding collegiate population of professors and those in intellectual pursuit which was a light percentage of the student body, the rest of which had not identified exactly the nature of their pursuit. It was a town also of business owners, bankers, feed and seed, paint, hardware and grocery merchants and at the far end of town a

liquor store and honky-tonk but among them all, and probably the richest, was Jazbow himself.

Jazbow was really Henley D. Candlar a huge truck of a man who spent his life working his store. A master business man Henley, everyone called him Jazbow, spoke in simple carefully thought out declarative sentences and could always be spotted peering out his store at the passing traffic of town citizens, the college students, and the farmers waving from their tractors, and their strong women who managed the large surrounding farms. If he'd wanted to run for office he could have won. Beyond the store, the town and the school rolled out the great tracts of whispering pines, cooing doves, snapping creosoted railroad tracks vanishing the distance, barking hounds and endless fields of produce, peanut, soy bean and tobacco crops and the old triangle trade lands of the revolutionary Piedmont.

One morning in February 1963 Jazbow climbed in his Chevy pick up.

"Junior!" he yelled into the store rolling down the window of the truck.

"Junior! where in the hell...Junior!. Jazbow yelled again. Then a tall African American youth came out of the store.

"Yes sir Mr. Jazbow."

"Junior, I got'a go up to Macon to pick up a load of cantaloupe. You think o'anything else we need."

"Lucky's. We just about out Luckys." Junior replied leaning on his broom stick.

"A'right. I'm gone then. Looks like its gona rain. Take'em tools in off the street. Yell to Ezelle if you got any troubles." Jazbow rolled up his window to the chilly air and pulled away. He'd trained Junior to run the store when his wife Ezelle's arthritis began to impair her mobility. Junior turned and went back into the store.

Jazbow drove his truck on through town waving here and there to his fellow merchants until he passed the Black district which most southerners at that time called simply "nigger town", then another wave and on to the out skirts of town. He turned up his radio to listen the farm news and George Jones whaling a sad song. The little drops of rain on his wind shield vanished when he flipped on the wipers and noticed a figure up ahead. As he drew closer he noticed it was a boy he'd seen around the store. He pulled the truck to a stop.

First he looked at the boy who, uninvited, reached for the door handle. Then the boy hesitated, looking in though the window. Waiting for an invitation to climb in. The boy opened the door slightly.

"Hi Mr. Jazbow." said the boy waiting for a response.

"You want'a stand out in the rain or climb in to the truck?"

At that the boy opened the door and seated himself into the seat of the big pickup. Jazbow noticed the boy's cracked leather jacket and soaked jeans. The boy had removed his glasses and was cleaning them with the tail of his flannel shirt. His shoes were well worn sneakers. Surveying him briefly while pulling back on the highway Jazbow turned the radio volume back up a bit and continued to drive on.

"Where you headed boy?"

“Goin up to Macon sir.”

“Well you picked a fine day to hitch hike to Macon young man.”

Jazbow had already established the boy was a student. Unlike the local youth who worked at various jobs around town, the students all seemed a part of the same carefree fraternity. They spent a lot of money, their mama’s and daddy’s money at his store. It was a clientele he had carefully analyzed for maximum return. This boy was no different.

“I seen you around the store. You come into my store quite a bit ain’t that right?”

“Yes sir.”

“You from the college ain’t ya?”

“Yes sir. I’m in Wiggs Hall. I’m Vance Poplar.” said the boy extending his hand across the cracked and torn seat of the truck.”

“Hendley Candler, but everybody calls me Jazbow, but you know that.”

“Yes sir.” the boy smiled.

“Oh yea. I know where Wiggs Hall is. I been here since nineteen thirty eight. I seen that college start up from nothing, like my store. You know that college used to be a barracks for them pilots at Warner Robins. English fellers. Talk funny.” Jazbow laughed as he took another sideways glance at the boy.

“Hey I think I saw you at the show Sunday?”

“Yes sir. You saw that movie?”

“Yea. Ezelle didn’t like it much but I thought it was a good story.” The two were referring to a movie, “*Adventures of a Young Man*” which was roughly based on Ernest Hemingway’s famous novel *Farewell to Arms*.

Jazbow then tuned his ear to the local news station announcer reading the commodity prices as he drove on and listened. The boy stared through the thumping wipers at the highway ahead. The rain was now heavy and the truck splashed on through standing water on the open roadway. The farm news ended and the voice of Farin Young chimed a country song as Jazbow turned the volume down again. “So you headed to Macon.”

“Yes sir.”

They continued on northward passing dense forests of pine and kudzu. The local AM radio station on the old truck crackled and faded as they moved farther from the little town. Soon the station faded completely. The cold rain continued.

“God damn thing.” Muttered Jazbow as he fiddled with the knob. Then in disgust he turned it off.

“Where you goin’ in Macon.”

“Uh Post Office sir”

“Uh huh, I see.” Now why is this boy going all the way to Macon to the post office, Jazbow thought.”

“What’s wrong with the post office in town? They got one out at the college ain’t they?”

“Yer sir.” the boy laughed. “Sir, I’m going to Macon to meet the Marine Corps Recruiter. He was at the college last week but I missed him.

“Marine Corps? Uh huh. I see.”

Jazbow endured a long moment of silence and clearing his throat, “So you going to Macon to join the Marine Corps son?”

“Yes sir.”

“Yo mama and daddy know about you doin this. I guess this is none of my business but I look at you kids as sort of my own if you know what I mean.”

“Yes sir. I’ll call them. I just want to meet the recruiter and talk about the Marine Corps. My dad was in the Army Air Corps.”

They had by now entered the outskirts of Macon and soon Jazbow’s Chevy pick up pulled up in front of the Macon post office. The boy opened the door and looked back at Jazbow.

“Thank you for the ride.”

“You quite welcome. Let me git them cantaloupes. You uhh going back to the college today?”

“Not sure. I’ll probably catch a Grayhound this afternoon”

“Well you take care ya hear?”

“Yes sir.” The boy closed the door and ascended the steps to the post office. Jazbow curiously watched him disappear into the building.

Sergeant John Clark sat at his desk in immaculate dress blue trouser with red stripe and khaki military blouse. His expert shooting badge glistened over his pocket. The sergeants white cover with spit polished bill and the golden globe and anchor emblem of the United States Marine Corps was placed on a shelf behind him. He had been completing his final reports for the month when a boy appeared before him.

The boy was about six foot in height. He had short dark hair and his facial skin was adolescent and void of whiskers or, he thought, of contact with a razor. The boy wore a red and blue flannel shirt jeans and a worn cracked leather jacket. They boy also wore glasses and a pair of much worn sneakers. The sergeant noticed that the boy looked him in the eye as he spoke his first words. The sergeant slowly put his report aside. “Good morning. I’m Sergeant Clark. What can I do for you?”

The recruiter was a Staff Sergeant. A model Marine he worked his South Georgia territory, college to college, high school to high school, from his headquarters at the Macon post office. He filled his quota every quarter always keeping an eye out for just the right candidate. He had heard their stories, listened to their ambitions, their southern accents and their fathers who had come with their sons to say they too had served. The fathers often seemed to offer their sons to the Marine Corps that would make them men.

When addressing young Poplar, “What can I do for you.” he already knew the deal was done. He could size up a recruit in a glance. Perhaps it was the look of determination as they spoke about communications, flight and transportation schools, a promise of vocation for a hot rod or Civil Air Patrol enthusiast.

“I tried to catch you at the college but you’d already gone.” said Poplar.

“Sorry I missed you. I’ve got a pretty rough schedule toward the end of the quarter.”

Poplar looked around glancing at a large poster of a model Marine in dress blues, the smartly airbrushed image of the Marine machine, the man of steel. "I've decided to join the Marines."

"Well that's a big decision. You've thought about it, I can tell."

"Yes sir."

The recruiter reached into his desk for a folio and a book. Poplar noticed the Sergeant did not look for the book and folio but reached for it knowing exactly where the articles were kept. He placed them on the desk in front of Poplar. "There are some photos of basic training and some of the things we do in the Marine Corps. I have to make a call and I'll be back in a minute."

Poplar flipped through the book. There were black and white photos of recruits throwing huge medicine balls, lifting huge logs, climbing a huge A-frame, and grasping an enormous rope engaging in a fierce tug of war all events observed by highly focused instructors. He looked at the photos but did not see them. His mind was racing wildly spinning in a weightless void with out traction. He desperately sought direction. He did not know the Marine Corps from the Army really but something, a thing omnipresent propelled him onward now, onward into this portal an entry or an exit. He did not know. It was all the same.

"So what did you think of the book." The recruiter had returned.

Poplar nodded approvingly without speaking.

The recruiter was suddenly cautious. He took the book and opened it again turning to a section that displayed pictures of technical schools, jet engines, diesel engine school, communications and aircraft maintenance. "How about this section. Did you notice these Marine Corps technical schools?"

"No sir."

"So what part of the Marine Corps do you like most."

"Infantry sir. Four years."

The recruiter noticed that the boy again looked him strait in the eye when he spoke these words. Why a young boy would utter that word was anyone's guess; the subliminal influence of a youthful exposure of movies, to *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Walk In The Sun*, the shadow of a father or uncle or guardian, the lust for something, anything different from the present. Perhaps it was that morning in the rain, watching the jet pilot lift and dissappear into the sky. But all of this was of little concern to the recruiter now. He snapped the book shut and opened the folio. He skillfully contained his glee that at the last day of the quota period, the absolute luck that he had made his quote! He placed four documents before the boy.

"I made a call to the college and spoke with the Dean of Students. You have a good record at the college. You haven't knocked up some gal have you?"

Poplar suddenly looked up and grinned. "No sir."

"Well my last concern is your parents. Have you consulted your parents about this decision?"

"No sir. But I will call my dad tonight."

"That's fine. You will see your life changing very fast in the Corps. I have served for eight years. The Marine Corps is my career. I love the Marine Corps. I think you will make a fine Marine Vance Poplar."

At that the recruiter spread out the forms that would be Vance Christian Poplar's first contract. The recruiter reviewed the details of the contract with the boy, much as a car salesman reviews the details of an agreement of sale. Final. But Poplar was in yes mode. Get it done. Get it on. Get it gone.

In the days the followed the shock wave if what he had done rippled through the small college campus, his friends and his family. Letha Rose wept his father became stoically lost in his memories of his war and a girl in Lydalia formed a word with her lovely glossy lips as Poplar sat in their old teenage hangout Dick's Snack Shack, Fats Domino's *Aint That A'shame* played on the juke box.

"Why?"

* * *

Atlanta Induction Center: February 4, 1963: The fluorescent lights came on at five in the morning. The variety of young men had completed their head to toe physicals. The NCO duty, an Air Force enlistee TAD to the center yelled out for them to roll up the vinyl ticking mattress on which they had slept, without sheets and to prepare for breakfast in the mess hall.

"Okay. You people will shit shower and shave and meet me here in room D-135 in one hour. You will take your personals with you wherever you go. Do not leave your personals on your bunk. You will take morning chow from zero six hundred to zero seven hundred hours. Then you will return to room D-128 to complete your forms and ready for dispatch to your branch assignments.

Room D-128: A short Army corporal sat on a gray desk watching the long side burns and duck tailed enlistees' parade through the door. He checked his watch and tersely directed the attendees to take a seat in the school desks.

"Auh 'ight listen up. Roll call. Get used to it." He laughed to him self.

"Smith, RD?"

"Here."

"Kershaw, David?"

"Here."

"Johnson, Rudolph

"Here."

"Rollins, W.D?"

"Yo."

"Whats that supposed to mean Rollins?"

"Here."

"Goldberg, J.R?"

"Present."

"Poplar, V.C?"

"Here."

"Butts, P.H.? "Right heh suh?"

"Whats the P stand for Howard?"

"Phillip uhh sir."

“Okay. Auh’right you people get used to answering with sir. I’m an NCO you don’t normally say sir to me, but during your basic training you will say sir before you brush your teeth. Got that?”

A barely audible mumble of sleepy responses. The corporal chuckled to himself again. “Guess you’ll learn when the time comes.” He yawned.

“Higgins, Harwood?”

“He’s still in the bathroom.” Replied a recruit.

“Okay, lets hold up a minute.” The corporal checked his watch again.

“I’m waiting for your jackets still down in Admin. Who’s going where?”

Butts, how about you?”

“Army, uh sir.”

“Rollins?”

“Air Force electronics school.”

“Anybody else Air Force?”

Smith and Kershaw raised their hands. Higgins walked in his complexion pale his hair ruffled.”

“You feel alright Higgins?” Higgins nodded without speaking. “Where you headed?”

“Navy.” replied Higgins.

“Not even aboard ship yet and your sea sick, I can tell.”

“Shit yeh!” sparked Smith laughing.

“Hey recruit, you will watch your language. Understand?”

“Goldberg, Johnson where are you headed?”

“Navy flight maintenance school.” Goldberg spoke for Johnson. They had joined as buddies.

“Well that’s everybody but Poplar. I guess you’re here just to visit? What branch is waiting for you.”

“Marine Corps.” Poplar relied sternly.”

“Holy fuckin’ shit. You poor fucking bastard.” Replied the corporal amidst roars of laughter as he passed an endless stream of forms to be read and signed.

On the noon Grayhound Charter, Vance Christian Poplar would be on his way to Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina.

I only vaguely remember those few days through the Atlanta Induction Center. I distinctly remember the vinyl ticking mattress, no sheets and one army blanket, issued and turned in the next morning. I do recall most of the recruits in Atlanta were heavy smokers when ever allowed. More vivid was my meeting with the Marine Corps Recruiter in Macon Post Office a week or so before, some three hours to the south of Atlanta. Like all Marines, I distinctly remember the date. February 3, 1963. In an odd irony, my parents delivered me back to Macon for the signing in that initiated my four year enlistment in the Marine Corps.

Years earlier they had met while my father was assigned to Army Air Corps motor pool at Warner Robins Field in 1941. My mother was a civilian clerk to an Army Air Corps officer, a Major Day, who had barnstormed with his wife in the wooly days of

aviation. They had told this story to me and my sister many times, the story always ending with sitting on a front porch in courtship as a jeep screeched up, the driver yelling for my father to get back to the base. The Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor." But where was Pearl Harbor?" they would always add signifying the end of the story. Or the beginning of another.

There was no wise old teacher who knew the history of Asia. But there were good teachers who drilled the fundamentals of learning, research and reading into us. The crusty old teacher who drilled me on typing would not believe my achievements on the keyboard. Once I observed my mother as an executive secretary for the Anglican Church Rector, typing a document a lightning speed leaving me wondering if I would ever match such expertise. The old teacher gave me a priceless lifetime gift for which I will always be grateful.

We really knew nothing about Annam, Southeast Asia, or Indochina for that matter. We were preoccupied with movies, stock Chevys, Rock and Roll, the issues of Civil Rights only just then appearing in the daily papers as a result of Dr. Martin Luther King great movement. But we would learn in time.

M.Malsbary July 2004

