

The Wayward Wind

By F. David Bolton

Fresh from a shower, Randy Knight stood nude at the sink, eating Chef Boyardee beef ravioli from a can. After a hard session of lifting weights in the apartment cellar, he needed protein. He also needed peace of mind... hadn't been easy ending the affair, never was.

The place was mercifully silent of Lonnie's yapper dog Tinkle... what kinda dog has no fur?... gray, pasty skin, mean as cat shit. Had to resist stomping the critter. Wasn't Lonnie's fault for the breakup. Same old same old: first the flirt, then the wooing, leading to the climax and a stretch of infatuation. Too bad he couldn't stay in that state. The longer he was with a woman, the more he saw flaws... three times in '56 he dumped his chick, first the spring fling with Gilda (too hairy), then the sultry summer with Sandra (snoring that shook the rafters), and now the romantic fall with Lonnie (too much a girly girl... makeup thick as concrete). Randy didn't enjoy making them cry. Face it, Knight, you're a shallow man.

Maybe the next woman will be a match. Maybe she would be the one to love. As a Charles Atlas body-building plumber who had just turned 30, he had no lack of chances meeting the opposite sex, sometimes for the wrong reasons. How could he forget that Jane Meadows look-alike... approached him last week while he was fixing a toilet in the basement. Took her blouse right off. "Like what you see?" she asked.

"Very nice," he mumbled, turning back to the toilet.

"Does this mean I get this for free?... What do I have to do?"

No chance he'd touch this dame... trouble ahead, could be a spying husband or a rape charge down the road. It happens. "Sorry, lady," he said, putting away the caulking gun, "forgot I have a pressing job at Whispering Pines... sewer backup..." She trailed him up the stairs,

desperation in her voice as she asked him to stay awhile... how about a beer, or, better, “a shot of whiskey to brighten the day?”

“Be back for free,” Randy assured her, heading out the door. Sure, lady, he’d be back... in his next life.

That afternoon Lonnie and he had a date... supposed to catch a matinee at the Senator. He wanted to see John Wayne in *The Searchers*; she wished to see Charlton Heston in the *Ten Commandments*. Of course, he deferred. When he was with a woman, he was all in, true blue from the first day to the last. One at a time, that’s all he could handle. And now, like Gilda and Sandra, his latest has left the scene. Cue the curtain.

He added the can to the stack of dirty dishes... needed to clear his head, get some clarity on the situation. If he didn’t, his mind would relive Lonnie’s departure, word for word, leaving him gorged with regret over breaking his lover’s heart. Maybe he could make it work. Don’t do it... remember the last time, with Gilda?.. if he won his honey back, he might very well grow tired of her all over again. How screwy is that?

In the bedroom, he put on an LP of Navajo flute music, a gift from a grateful customer. Randy assumed the lotus position before the Buddha, a boy playing a flute, made in Japan. As a Marine, he picked up the philosophy during the occupation. Not bad for a barefoot boy with an eighth-grade education. Closing his eyes, he observed his thoughts, passing like clouds... chatter fading into stillness, all is nothing...

The phone jarred him back to the here and now. The manager of Whispering Pines was on the line. Bathroom leak in the East Building, Apartment 4D. Time to put on clothes. “I’ll be right on it, sir.”

Covering 16 apartments around the quadrangle was, for the most part, a breeze, earning him free rent, saving him 90 bucks monthly, half of which he put aside, in case he has a sudden urge to spend, say, a year in India or the south of France. He had no ties.

His combat boots crunched through mid-November snow, first of the season. Always appreciated how snow tidied things up... like those rusting hulks scattered in front of their tin-roof shack back home. He remembered being eight, how the snow transformed the vehicles into dragons. Paddy had good intentions for fixing those cars for a profit but never got around to it... Oh he'd talk about clearing the yard, planting roses, sprucing it up nice for Ma and Sis, but young Randy knew it was just the moonshine talking.

As the lungs deteriorated, Paddy dedicated himself to teaching his only son how to feed the family. They spent time in the woods and on Pigeon Creek, his father teaching him the ways of animals and fish. "Don't want to depend on charity," Paddy said. "that's not the Knight way, we take care of our own."

The end came quickly. On a hot afternoon in August, he took to the hammock. "Good a place to die as any," he wheezed. "You take care of Ma and Sis, hear me, son?"

"You're not dying yet."

"I'm like an old dog. Time to go... do life right..." Those words would become Randy's motto. When Paddy passed the next day to coal miner heaven, he left in peace because he knew his eldest had become a crack shot; the ice box had plenty of meat.

Randy brushed the flakes off his jacket and entered the East Building. Coming up the stairs, he heard the TV in Apartment 4D... had to knock twice. A roundish woman in a colorful, woven dress opened the door. Barefoot, with Caribbean-green toenails, she had to be less than five feet. As he passed near, his keen nostrils, at times an impediment for a plumber, picked up

her exotic aroma... couldn't place it. The apartment was warm, too close for comfort. In the living room, a little boy in shorts and a coonskin cap was jumping up and down on the sofa. Elvis was singing "Don't be cruel" on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.

"*Detener esa tonteria!*" yelled the mother. The child leaped off the sofa. The woman led Randy to the bathroom, telling him that the leak had occurred when her son took his bath. "He fills it up... to float."

He ran the water, opened the access panel and checked the pipes. Dry as a tomb. As he did some caulking along the tub and around the faucet, he became aware of two black eyes peering through the crack by the door. "Howdy," Randy said. "What's your name?" The boy in shorts stepped into the light. He was wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt and had a six gun on each hip. "Are you the marshal?" Randy asked.

"I am. I'm here to arrest you for robbing a bank in Tombstone."

"Aren't you Wyatt Earp?"

"My name's Sean."

"My name's Randy, pleased to make your acquaintance."

"What's that mean?"

"I'm happy to meet you." From his knees, Randy extended his hand.

The boy said he was not supposed to touch people, "*solo mi mama*." He removed his coonskin cap and exposed his bare head. "The boys on the quad call me baldy."

"How old are you, Sean?" he asked, running a bead of caulk along the tiles.

"*Siete*, seven and a half."

“Well, I’m thirty and bald too.” He removed his Baltimore Orioles cap and showed his dome, speckled from ear to ear. “Lost most of my hair before I was twenty-two.” That blow to his vanity drove him to become a bodybuilder.

“What’s that?” Sean said, pointing to the blue letters tattooed on the hairy forearm.

“United States Marine Corps,” he said proudly. “Served in the Big One.”

“Shoot any Nazis?”

“Not a chance... joined in ’44, the day I turned 17.” His Ma signed the papers. He wanted to be a sharpshooter, but they found he had plumbing experience... “saw every latrine from Parris Island to Guam.” He eased away from the tub and pulled a pack of Camels from his flannel shirt. He verged on lighting a mule but realized that may not be copasetic, with the boy and all. Sometimes, Randy admitted, he was blind to the needs of others.

As he moved on to the overflow, Sean peppered him with questions. Did he make a lot of money? Enough. Why’d he become a plumber? “Well, I was a Depression kid. We had no latrine.”

“What’s a latrine?”

“Toilet.”

“Did you have to go to the bathroom outside?”

“Until I put in a toilet and septic tank. Got tired of going to the rising half-moon, the outhouse, in the middle of the night. Might run into a bear.”

“A bear?”

“We had bears around.”

He replaced the gasket in the overflow. “That should do it, Sean. Careful not to splash too much when you’re taking a bath, okay? And don’t let the boys in the quad bother you.” Easy for him to say.

He scribbled out his phone number, tore the page off the notepad and handed it to Sean’s mother in the kitchen. If there’s a problem, call him... usually not in the habit of giving tenants phone numbers (rather they go through the manager). But lines on her face showed fatigue... no evidence of a man around.

“You want some tea?” she asked.

Like the boy, she had almond eyes and cocoa skin. Not bad to look at, but not his type. He was a fool for showy women, the Marilyn Monroe type, the buxom babe who looked good on his muscular arm when he turned up at a ballgame or the Dixie Ballroom. “Please,” he said, putting down his toolbox. Now he wished he had showered after lifting weights... felt grimy sitting at the kitchen table with this woman. She did have beautiful skin, so smooth. Randy glanced over his shoulder. The boy was playing chess against himself in front of the TV.

“What’s with your son?” Randy whispered. “Don’t mean to pry...”

“No, thank you for asking, do you know what a blast cell is, Mister—”

“Knight.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mister Knight. Call me Sacniete... means White Flower.”

“Aztec?”

“Maya. My late husband worked for the United Fruit Company. I met him at Guatemala University. I was his Spanish teacher.”

Inky black hair with a trace of gray tumbled to her shoulders. He guessed her around 35. “You don’t have much of an accent.”

“Spanish is my second language. Let me return to the question: My son has leukemia, cancer of the blood. Basically, the bone marrow is not functioning. The blood cells it produces don’t reach maturity. Instead of becoming white blood cells that fight infection, they turn into blast cells and feed off the red blood cells. Think of them as thugs in the bloodstream. I hate them.” A knock on the door. “That must be Miller, here to play chess with Sean. *Abre la puerta, Sean.*”

“Hi, Mrs. Clover,” Miller said.

“Hi, poopyhead,” Sean said to Miller.

“Sean, be nice,” said Sacniete.

“That’s okay, Mrs. Clover, he can call me anything.”

“Okay, poopyhead!”

“Sean! You want a time out? *Ve a jugar al ajedrez.*”

Randy watched the boys settle in front of the television. A juggler was now on stage, spinning plates on poles. Aside from an occasional glance, the boys kept their eyes on the board.

He could have gone for a second cup of tea, but that might be intrusive. He thanked White Flower for the hospitality.

“Are you depressed, Mister Knight?”

“Very perceptive, Mrs. Clover... I did break up with my girl today. It’ll pass. Remember, call me, if you need me.”

An inch of snow had fallen when he stepped from the apartment building... loved the stillness and clarity. That night he did not dream of Lonnie; instead, he dreamed of Sean, the child floating on water, speaking some ancient language... *Caw!*

He awoke to the newspaper slapping the doorstep... still dark outside... Might as well rise and shine. Quite a dream, magical... loved being a crow. Was that some sort of sign? What language was he speaking?

He smoked a Camel at the card table. The black and white photo on the front page of the Sun reminded him of the date; December 6, 1941: there it was, the U.S.S. West Virginia in flames. Randy lost Uncle Jack there; tough one. After Paddy's death he had leaned on his uncle for assistance, such as fixing a leaky roof or putting in the septic tank, the man was there for him. Hard to believe fifteen years had passed since Pearl Harbor. The world has moved on. Now humans can blow themselves off the planet.

He unlocked his metal case and pulled out the Colt .45 pistol, the M1911 he had worn on guard duty in Japan. The gun fit nicely in his palm, as if it belonged there. He pointed it at the window, then his temple. Click. No one would mourn his passing. Sis died in an automobile accident six months past; his Ma and Pa were gone, and he had lost contact with his cousins in West Virginia, scattered to the wind. What did he have to live for?

At 7:20, the phone rang. He put down the gun. Please let it not be the manager. Wasn't in the mood for work, not yet... needed a second cup of coffee to ease into the day. He wanted to peruse the sports section... see how this rookie quarterback for the Colts was doing. Unitas had potential.

With great reluctance, he picked up the black receiver. "Hope I didn't wake you, Mr. Knight," a woman said.

He didn't recognize the voice. "Who's this?"

"Sacniete."

“Oh, yes, White Flower... call me Randy, please. What can I do for you? Is it leaking again?”

“That’s not why I called. I decided to take you up on your offer to help. Be honest with me, Randy. I won’t think the worse of you if you were referring to plumbing. I would apologize for the misunderstanding.”

“No, I mean yes... yes, of course, Sacniete, I can help you. What do you need?”

“Would you go with me to Johns Hopkins this afternoon? My son is scheduled for a spinal tap. It would help if you could drive. These procedures can be nerve wracking.”

“Long as you don’t mind riding in my pickup. It’s a little dirty.”

“Sean would love riding in your pickup. He’s crazy about trucks.”

“He can help shift gears.”

“As long as you don’t let him steer. By the way, that was sweet of you when you showed your bald head.”

“My pleasure...” He locked the gun in the case. Not today.

The morning dawned clear; sunlight sparkled off snow. In an alley, he cleaned out the pickup, throwing into the dumpster cigarette butts, cans, bottles, spare parts, wood, newspapers, menus, and a small pile of chicken bones. Then he drove to a carwash, vacuumed out the cabin, and opted for the deluxe wash. Save for a few dents, the neon-blue Chevy shined like new when he parked in front of their building. Sacniete and Sean stepped from the foyer. The boy looked fragile coming down the icy steps, holding his mother’s hand. “Climb in,” said Randy. Sean scooted to the middle, and Randy wrapped him in a USMC blanket and turned up the heat.