

Set Sail For Stun

Have you ever taken off on an airplane? As the plane accelerates upward, you feel the floor press against your feet. Jet engines spin unusually fast. That is what gives airplanes their unique sound. Way up high in the audible spectrum is a subtle, distinctive whine.

For a week after we reached shore, I felt like I was taking off. I didn't experience any physical sensation. It was more of a general feeling.

I'm in Pohnpei. I've been staying in Kumiko's guestroom. God knows she has enough to do without me on her plate. I'm not sure why she is so kind.

I haven't been paying rent to Kumiko. I would consider this too generous, but she is wealthy and the cost of living is low. I actually do have a decent amount saved up. For my current lifestyle, money is about as useful as a decorative hat.

Every morning I write a page or two of this story. For some reason, it's important for me to find an ending. Mostly, I guess, I just like to finish the projects that I start. That's something Lowry taught me: real

men follow through on their intentions.

Storytelling is weird. I make sense of my life by thinking about it as a bunch of stories. *This is what happened. This is what I learned. As a result, this is who I am.* I sometimes think that stories are unrealistically hopeful. We are who we are. We don't change too much, and a bunch of stuff happens.

Those are the types of thoughts I have when I spend too long inside my head. Then I drink few beers, shoot some pool, and get over myself.

During the day I harvest coconuts. It's the best job I've ever had. Here is how you harvest a coconut:

1. *tie a piece of cloth between your feet.*
2. *shimmy up to the top of a coconut tree. Use the cloth to increase the surface area which holds you against the trunk.*
3. *cut down the coconuts with a machete.*

It is satisfying, physical work. The countryside here is beautiful.

I know that I can't stay in the Pohnpei. I should move on. But I've been dating a woman named Maria. She is 38. She has one child. Between Maria and the coconuts, it's going to be hard to leave.

They took us all to a clinic after we landed. Something about post-traumatic stress. Maria was my nurse. She asked me if I wanted psychological support. I was reminded of Lowry's experience at PlumpCo. I talked to her about that. She thought it was a pretty good story. She said that if I wrote a book, she'd like to read it.

We got coffee at the local shop. The shop has no name. It is simply called the shop. It is also a bar and a used book store.

We talked about relationships, and about the estranged father of her child.

"We all have the potential to hurt our loved ones," she said.

"Sure," I replied. "People do awful things all the time."

She nodded. "And once someone makes you feel that badly, you

can never let them get too close. You can't risk it."

We talked about writing. I told her some cheesy ideas that were on my mind.

"Don't you think," I said, "that each experience teaches us something about who we are?"

She replied, "Maybe. I think a lot of people never figure out who they are."

A man entered the shop, wielding a gun and a mask. Maria's eyes darted, but she didn't turn her head. She shrunk down into her seat. She made herself so inconspicuous that she disappeared.

If you've ever been robbed, you know that it makes your heart pound. You think differently. You course with adrenaline. I was handing my wallet over to the robber. I was even looking at him. But Maria held my attention.

After the man took my wallet, he walked right past her. There was something about the way she acted, and the small movements of her eyes. I felt like I was the only person in the whole world who could see her. In my whole life, I have never been more turned on. My Uncle was dead, my wallet was stolen, and every ounce of me wanted Maria.

My arm reached across the table. In my peripheral vision, the robber was emptying the cash register. I laid my hand on top of hers. I stroked her index finger. She barely flexed a knuckle but, from the way she responded, I knew that she was turned on too.

That was seven weeks ago. Maria and I are starting to see eye to eye. I feel like I understand how she sees the world. Maybe not perfectly, but pretty well. She says that she gets me.

I'm not sure what greatness is anymore. I used to think that changing the world made a man great. But maybe instead of improving lots of lives a little, a great man might improve a few lives a lot.

The idea of greatness doesn't even seem that important. For now, I'm just grateful that I feel the need to make something. I'm old enough to appreciate that urge. Many people lose it. Most older people don't have

as much desire. ‘Burned out’ isn’t the right phrase. They settle.

Last night Maria put her son Phillipe to bed. I stood in the doorway watching.

“I don’t wanna!” said Phillipe. Maria tucked him in.

“Good boys know their bedtimes. You know what happens if you’re not a good boy?” asked Maria.

“Krumplenurfners!” said Phillipe.

“Exactamente,” said Maria. As she continued, Phillipe pulled the blankets beneath his chin, listening, riveted. Phillipe expected a story.

“The krumplenurfners are the clingyest of clingers. They latch on and suck. They suck and suck and puff up like balloons. The more you give, the more they take. And they never say thank you. So, what does a big ol’ krumplenurfner like more than anything?”

“Stir up trouble!” said Phillipe.

“Exactamente,” said Maria. “They like to stir up trouble. And their favorite types of trouble are peapods and dice. On cold nights, the ‘nurfners float over town, looking for bad little boys. If you don’t do your homework, they’ll stuff you into a peapod! The nurfners throw dice at each other until the sun comes up. Then, the winner does what nurfners do best. He’ll suck up all the peapods until there’s nothing left. Not one little nose! Not one little ear! All gone.”

“All gone,” said Phillipe.

“And once the little boys have been eaten, they become krumplenurfners too. They’re all empty. I suspect they’d suck up just about anything. Because nobody wants to be empty, do they?”

“No..” said Phillipe as his eyes fell shut.

So, little munchkin, how do you avoid krumplenurfners?”

“Be good,” said Phillipe, “and let go of um!” Phillipe rolled onto his side. Maria looked down at her son.

“As you grow, so many ideas are going to pop into your head. And the moment that they do, they’ll get mixed up with other stuff. You’ll watch ideas drift into the sky. So remember, let the krumplenurfners float away. Be good! And hang on to your ideas as hard as you can.”

Maria closed her son's door.

I said, "I think you're adapting some of my mannerisms."

"Don't flatter yourself," she said. "There's lots of weirdos. I was a weirdo long before I met you."

Maria winked at me, and then we went to bed.

The end of Lowry's marriage was simple. There was something missing, and both of them knew it. Pepper accepted it more easily. She was a heart surgeon.

A heart surgeon is a particular type of person. To understand them, you must first understand the difference between heart surgeons and cardiologists.

It is the job of a cardiologist to monitor the heart's health. Cardiologists conduct the maintenance and basic repairs. These days, cardiologists even put stents inside of hearts, opening up damaged arteries.

Patients who require a heart surgeon are generally very sick. Many of them will die on the operating table. A heart surgeon has chosen the job of standing by a table for 8 to 10 hours, holding a frail life in their hands.

Emotional distance is the only way to cope. Aunt Pepper lived her life in cleanly measured cuts.

The last time Lowry talked to Pepper was two weeks after she had left him. She called. She asked him how he was. Her tone of voice and choice of words conveyed that she didn't want him. He told her to leave him alone. Later that night, he threw up. After Lowry barfed, he felt a strange sense of freedom.

A few days later, Lowry ate some Chinese food. His fortune cookie said this: 'you will be free of the heavy burden which you have been carrying.'

In that moment, he had a clear image of a beer, brewed along the Chinese-American oceanic trade route. In the next moment, he missed holding Pepper in his arms.

The night before the Bell Pepper left New York, Lowry took me out for drinks. I had to be onboard by midnight, but wasn't scheduled for active duty until the following evening. He slugged down three Manhattans in quick succession. I did my best to keep up.

I told Lowry that I would miss him, and would send postcards. I asked him if he knew when the ship was scheduled to embark. The time wasn't marked on my itinerary.

"9 a.m. tomorrow. There's gonna be a brass band. Cameras. Reporters. The whole board will be there. Security alone will cost a fortune. And they're all expecting me to give a big speech." Lowry's eyes gleamed as he pictured the scene. Then he changed topics, as he often did.

"True love," sighed Lowry. "True love is when working a crummy job for forty years sounds like a great idea, if it means you get to come home to that one person."

I don't think I'll ever understand Lowry.

We may not be capable of complete understanding. We may not be capable of loving without doubt. But experience has taught me that we are capable of most things we set our minds to. That might be a platitude, but it means a lot to me. I've seen some marvelous things accomplished through perseverance. And it is those closest to us who set our minds.

Some strange, primal emotion conceived of the great pyramids. Emotion is the driving force behind all the best and worst things that people do. Emotion can scoop out your insides and throw them on the ground. Sometimes emotion destroys people. And sometimes it takes some wrenching and tearing to set a man to action.

When 9 a.m. arrived, the Bell Pepper had already left harbor. Lowry never gave his speech. He was nowhere to be found. A marble plaque had been affixed to a rock, fifty feet from the empty moorings. A poem was inscribed on the plaque:

I hoped to be a lover
Then I hoped to be a king
I had hoped for so much more
Than the sailor's life might bring

But the Pepper she calls
And the sea shining bright
And there'll be some adventures
And wistful twilights

I've been making some plans
And then watching them thwarted
Now I'm sailing away
From the hopes I've discarded

Away! without fear
Away! at last
The merry Bell Pepper sails away!

Authors Note:

Thus ends the Bell Pepper. I'm surprised you read the whole thing.

Below are a couple of letters written by my grandfather. I wasn't extremely close with him. I do know that he memorized Shakespeare while working in a tinsel factory. He was a naval officer in WWII. He was a professor, a mayor, and a renown pension consultant while raising my mother's family.

Grandpa Bill taught me how to make a martini and light a cigar. I was in elementary school at the time.

He loved Krispy Kreme donuts.

November 5, 1985

Dear Kate,

I had hoped that you would enthusiastically encourage me to go to Las Vegas for the Thanksgiving week-end. Heretofore disapproval and your mild disapproval take much of the pleasure from planning the excursion.

I have enjoyed playing poker for money for almost fifty years. It has given me a good deal of pleasure at little or no expense. It surely hasn't deprived the family of anything. Hold 'em, a variation of poker, was an interesting diversion in Montana. After a few weeks I found that I could win moderately, even allowing for the house's "rake." In eight days I won 350 dollars playing hold 'em in Las Vegas last August. Although hold 'em in a casino involves somewhat greater stakes and greater risks than the friendly Gainesville games, I feel sure I can win in Las Vegas or not lose much. If I am wrong I will quit. What harm can there be?

I have often thought that it would be fun to play poker with some expectation of winning large sums. This can't be done in a friendly game. One doesn't want friends to lose large sums. I have the time, the money, the desire, reasonably good health, mental acuity that has not begun to decline precipitously. I will be 65 on April 9, an anniversary that I do not dread but one that I face realistically. Yet the time is no

I am puzzled and saddened by the lack of encouragement to pursue my pleasures. On arranging semi-retirement with an increased income for a few years, lightened financial responsibilities, and reasonable provision for the financial responsibilities that remain, I rather expect those I love to encourage a hedonistic old age. Why don't they? It must be lack of understanding. How could you understand the excitement of the draw; the interplay of minds, the juxtaposition of friendly competition and greed; the revelation of character; the pleasure of fleeting acquaintance with a variety of people? If you understood these things you would encourage me to go to Las Vegas. You might even join me for a day.

Doubt that the sun doth move.

P.S. Today I am wearing the mittens you gave me.

Similar letters to Sara, Nancy and Sandra.

March 8, 1995

Dear Uncle Roger,

I sometimes think it half a sin
To put in words the pain I feel;
For words, like music, half reveal
And half conceal the soul within.

Few sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law have had the affectionate and good humored relationship that Aunt Jet and I have had. I have loved you and Aunt Jet for more than forty years.

Love is a difficult word, isn't it? It has so many meanings. It may mean the affection of a husband for his wife; it may mean the affection of parents for their children, a different meaning. Saint Paul probably meant general good will in his letter to the Corinthians: "Faith, hope, and love endure, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Love may mean the affection of a brother-in-law for a sister-in-law. We are embarrassed to tell people, other than our spouses, our parents, and our children that we love them. We are so easily misunderstood. You will understand.

Just as she has for many years, as long as I live Aunt Jet will be frequently in my thoughts . . . and always in my heart.

* * *

As I reread this letter I realize that I am expressing my own sorrow rather than giving comfort to you. I would offer comfort if I could.

Uncle Bill