

THE INTERVIEWS  
Copyright ©2013 Edwin W. Biederman, Jr.  
Smashwords Edition

To my late wife, Peggy-Jane

ONE

Lt. Kenneth Milton James sat nervously in the outer office wondering what the general wanted to talk to him about. What had he done or not done that brought his name to the attention of this man? Ken noted that he was perspiring all over. In short, the upcoming meeting did not seem to have a positive feel about it.

His thoughts were interrupted. The secretary calmly said, "The general will see you now."

Ken drew a deep breath, rose, and walked briskly through the door. He saluted and waited as the general pointed to a chair beside his large desk.

"So you are Lieutenant Kenneth James."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't usually call young lieutenants into my office for a conference, but this time the subject requires some discussion. Is this your memo to me?" The general handed a brief memo to Ken, and he recognized it immediately.

"Yes, sir." He wished he had not even thought of writing that memo.

The general continued, "Normally, when I receive a note like this stating that you cannot carry out one of my orders, I go to the file to check out the person's record. In your case, I thought that I remembered the name. You were the petroleum officer at Pitugfik Air Base in Greenland. I recall that I wanted to send two flights of B-36 Bombers in for a quick turnaround."

Ken remembered the occasion of the midnight discussion very well.

The brief discussion with the general took place in the small highly secure communications building. The night was clear and the temperature was 30 below zero. Ken recalled the general's voice as it crackled over the radio. "Petroleum Officer, can you read me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you handle two flights of Baker 36s? The mission is designed to check turnaround refueling time."

Ken picked up the microphone and said, "The petroleum section has half of its authorized personnel. At this rate, the speed of any turnaround will be relatively slow, and I cannot guarantee the safety of the operation."

The general's voice again came through the static, "We're coming anyway!"

Ken handed the microphone to the base commander who did his best to discourage the general, but the die was cast.

"Looking at this file, I am reminded that we lost a plane at one of the refueling locations. That was a significant loss and you were in charge of refueling."

Ken noted the extra emphasis on the "you."

The general continued, "There is a note here from Colonel Blunda which states that the cause of the accident was still under investigation. However, the refueling personnel were not at fault."

The general looked over his glasses at Ken and grumbled, "You got off the hook on that one."

Ken wondered about the completeness of the file.

The general interrupted his thoughts. "It says here that additional investigation revealed that a foreign agent posing as an Air Force officer started the fire that caused the loss of the B-36. This is interesting stuff, but back to the current situation. As you probably know, we recently lost a B-47 to a refueling accident. Your memo suggested that you needed an additional officer in refueling in order to carry out my order which is that the Petroleum Officer should be on duty for every aircraft refueling."

"Yes, sir."

"I understand your point, and I have assigned another officer to be on hand for the night shift."

"Thank you, sir."

"Since you are not afraid of communicating with the higher echelons of the SAC staff, I am requesting that you put together a lecture for my staff concerning the hazards of refueling. I have reserved the meeting room in the Officer's Club for 3:30 PM, Friday afternoon, three weeks from now. Is that enough time to prepare?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I am suggesting that your talk be no longer than an hour. Can you handle that?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Now at this point, I want to give you a few words of wisdom. Sending me a memo is not the best way to go when you have an urgent matter dealing with refueling. What I suggest you do in the future is leave a message with my secretary. She will get your message to me as fast as possible. Memos to me from first lieutenants don't usually make it to me. Somebody down the line usually shortstops such communications. In this case, I needed to know the problem. When we are dealing with a refueling problem, I want to be informed."

"Yes, sir."

"You know, Lieutenant, I respect people who have guts—and you have guts. Let's keep in touch when you believe it's necessary. That all, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Ken saluted briskly and turned to leave the office.

"Oh, by the way, Lieutenant, I should inform you that the Annual Air Force Association Meeting is scheduled to take place here two months from now. I want you to be ready to refuel all those folks who will fly in for the meeting. This includes people such as Charles Lindbergh and Jimmy Stewart, etc."

"Yes, sir!"

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

The door closed, and Ken turned to the secretary and thanked her for her help.

As he left the headquarters building, he almost tripped over the curb. His thoughts were racing through his head concerning what his talk to the general staff should include.

## TWO

Lt. Ken James returned to the Bachelors Officer's Quarters very tired after his meeting with the general, and the rest of the day was devoted to digging up information for his talk on refueling safety. A day that had started with foreboding and worry had almost ended on a positive note. As he entered the hall where his room was located, the airman on night duty handed him a letter. He recognized Jane's handwriting immediately.

He entered his room, which was still overheated from the afternoon sun that shone directly through the sliding glass door. Even with curtains, this room retained the heat. Ken opened the glass door so some of the cooler air might come in, and he then sat down in the lone chair. He noted that Jane's letter seemed heavier than usual. Her previous letter had mentioned that after she had come home from having won her battle with tuberculosis, her parents had given her a trip to Europe as a coming home present. She had mentioned her first stop in Paris and her anticipation of visiting Germany and then Switzerland.

Ken opened the letter and, as he thought she would do, she described her long walks along the Rhine River and ruins of castles that overlooked the river. Long walks, he thought, were good for her legs that had become weak from her hospital stay.

Her next stop involved Switzerland. This time the walks were up in the high meadows close to the steep mountains. The Brown Swiss cows came over to socialize and get their noses and ears scratched.

The next sentence riveted his attention. A young Navy Ensign named John, whom she met in Paris, accompanied her on these walks. He was able to make things safer on long walks. Yes, he had proposed to her and she had accepted. They were to be married in late June in a small church in the little village near the walking trail where they had frequently stopped to have a dish of ice cream.

Ken sat absolutely still, in a state of shock. He had never considered that in all of their letter writing, there was no commitment. His mind had always assumed that they would get together when he was back in the United States. Doc Wakerson was right. Girlfriends who were back in the States had opportunities to date attractive men who could promise more than the "blood, sweat, and tears" of military life, which could be terribly lonely for the un-deployed person left behind.

Ken's mind swirled with regret. Would it have made a difference if he had known how to write better letters? But he wondered how he should have written love letters. He had to concede that he did not do it well and really did not know how.

He was reminded of Shakespeare's words. "Then you must speak of one that loved not wisely, but too well; of one whose hand threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes, albeit unused to the melting mood, drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees, their medicinal gum."

Ken looked down at the page in front of him and it was, indeed, wet with his tears.

How could he write a letter back to her that contained the saintly grace of a truly dispirited soul that must concede defeat? Yet he must honestly wish her well. After all, she had saved his life and he appreciated that.

He undressed for bed, figuring that his overwrought mind might be clearer in the light of morning, but he could not sleep. It was two hours before he achieved a fitful sleep.

When the alarm rang, he knew that his mind was still focused on that letter which was on the table next to his bed. The question that disturbed his mind was what should he have done differently? Perhaps it was prayer or the lack thereof that could have made the difference. He sat back on the bed and asked that the Almighty provide him with inspiration to write a loving and compassionate letter.

Ken walked to his office just off the runway and, after a cup of coffee, he buried his attention on the numerous recurring reports that were required. The storage tanks for 100/130, 115/145, and Jp-4 fuels were all measured each morning, and additional supplies had to be ordered from the refineries.

On his way to the usual staff meeting, he passed by a number of small planes being overhauled in the long hangar. Aircraft Maintenance was always busy.

As usual, the staff meeting was remarkably boring. Each section had to report on the week's activity, which usually involved discussion of various other numbered reports. Ken's mind could not retain focus on this type of information.

"Lt. James, do you have anything to say? I understand that you talked to the general. Do you have anything to tell us?"

Ken was startled by this sudden attention. All eyes were focused on him. He took a deep breath and said, "We discussed refueling safety, and we will have another officer on duty to cover refueling operations during the night. I have also been asked to give a one-hour talk to the SAC general staff concerning refueling safety."

Ken looked around the table, and asked, "Any questions?"

The major at the head of the table started at Ken. "How in the hell did you get involved with this sort of problem?"

"There was a refueling accident that burned up a B-47."

"Okay, Lieutenant, before you go off getting us in trouble, you had better include me in the loop."

"Yes, sir."

The meeting ended, but somehow Ken had the feeling that those in attendance did not appreciate what he was called upon to do.

Ken reasoned that at home in the States, the fact that he supplied fuel to the aircraft did not affect their survival. In the far north of Greenland, fuel was key to everyone's survival—the fresh water had to come from the distillation plant, and heat for all the buildings was the petroleum officer's responsibility. In short, under those conditions, everyone was eager to help when things did not work well.

At this point, his mind reverted back to the letter he must write to Jane.

That evening after dinner, Ken returned to his room to begin working on the letter that he had thought, only a short time ago, he would never have to write.

### THREE

The evening air was hot and moist. To the west, Ken could see the storm clouds beginning to boil up over the setting sun. This was ominous weather for, from these clouds, tornadoes frequently dropped down to destroy almost everything in their path.

He was not concerned with the potential weather; his task was to compose a letter that was both sincere and inspiring to Jane and her husband-to-be. What Biblical quote could provide both comfort and a clear wish for uncompromising love? Ken left his Bible open near the open glass door, and the wind began to turn pages. He went over to shut the door before the heavy rain began. The pages had stopped turning on Psalm 13:

“How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord; forever? How long shall I seek counsel in my soul and be so vexed in my heart?” Then he turned the page to Psalm 17 and with a trembling hand began to write.

Dearest Jane,

Yesterday I received your letter containing the news that you plan to get married in late June.

I pray that the Lord’s marvelous loving-kindness may be with you in your future lives together. And that the Lord will hide you both under the shadow of his wings when troubles come.

Amen!

Love, Ken

He closed his Bible and decided to try to sleep. This time a truly restful sleep came over him—the words he had written felt right.

Refueling aircraft was a very active time at the base during the summer months. When the weather was calm, the pilots tried to get their flying time taken care of.

Special events like the Bendix Trophy Race required unusual planning. This time two, high-speed fighter jets were scheduled to arrive minutes apart. Ken arranged for two F-6 refueling trucks to be ready. The day for the race was clear and hot, and the base was the midpoint refueling stop for the planes that were on their way across the continent from California to New York. The jets were supposed to take on 1200 gallons in about a minute while the engines were still running.

If things did not go precisely as planned, the likelihood of an accident was high. Ken and his sergeants watched carefully as the first plane landed and taxied up to the refueling spot on the runway.

After one minute, the pilot gave the signal for takeoff, the ground crew withdrew to the side, and the plane took off with full power. Even with hands over his ears, the roar was almost painful. Five minutes passed and the second plane arrived. This time some fuel was spilled as the pilot started to take off before the minute was up.

There was no fire, but Ken called out the OIIA Fire Truck to take care of the spill.

The air show with the Blue Angels was the next event on the list. This time all the equipment had to be ready for emergencies. Crowd control was not Ken’s responsibility.

Another part of the problem was bringing a B-36 in on a relatively short runway. The pilot had to use all of the runway, and he came close to Ken’s barracks.

Ken’s mind was always sharply focused on the next hazard, and he heard the sergeant say, “Major Kelstrom called and wants you to come to his office as soon as you can.”

“Thank you, sergeant.”

Now what?

Ken didn’t need additional problems.

He walked briskly through the Aircraft Maintenance section and greeted the Major's secretary. "I understand that the Major wants to see me."

The secretary looked at him coyly and then let the major know Ken was there.

"Come in." The major's voice was somewhat friendlier than when they had talked at the staff meeting. "I don't know how you do it, Lieutenant, but this time you lucked out."

"Sir, what have I done now?"

"It turns out you have been selected to attend the Air Force Association Meeting."

"In what capacity, sir?"

"Let me tell it. You have been selected to escort Miss Airpower. That's quite an honor, you know. Tomorrow you are supposed to go over to room 17 at the headquarters building at 9:00 AM, and I assume that you will meet the young lady at that time."

"How come I was selected?"

"I'm not sure. I guess you are good-looking enough. You graduated from an Ivy League school and you spent time overseas." The major looked at Ken quizzically, asking, "What's the matter?"

"Oh, I just thought that one of the flyboys might be the one chosen to be Mr. Airpower."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, son. Humility won't get you far in this outfit. Go over and enjoy the trip."

"Yes, sir."

Ken saluted, turned, and left the office.

The major's secretary looked up from her typing and commented, "I hear you are going to have a girlfriend for the Air Force Association Meeting."

"That's my assignment," Ken said in a matter-of-fact way.

"Be careful. You are in dangerous territory."

"Enlighten me. I am not sure I understand."

"Do you recall when you stopped that unmarked car because it was dangerously close to where that B-25 was refueled?"

"Yes, I do. There was a man in civilian clothes driving and two ladies in the back seat. I informed the driver about the hazard and had him turn away from the refueling and leave."

"The sergeant who was on the wing refueling the aircraft says you checked him out but good."

"I didn't feel that I was that aggressive."

"Well, guess who that man was?"

"You tell me."

"That was Major General Speitz, and it is his daughter that you are supposed to take to the Association Meeting."

"I wondered why the ladies in the back seat were smiling and trying to keep their laughter under control."

"You get the picture?"

"Yes, your intelligence briefing is very much appreciated."

"I just wanted to give you a heads up. I don't like to see people get into trouble for doing their job right."

"Thanks a lot!"

As he left the office area, he was wondering how he was going to stay out of trouble on this upcoming delicate assignment.

FOUR

As instructed, Ken arrived at room 17 in the headquarters building at 9:00 AM sharp. He opened the door and noticed that there was no secretary at the desk. He sat down on one of the three chairs and assumed that he was to wait until someone arrived. He could hear what sounded like an argument in the next room, but he could not figure out what it was about.

Suddenly, the door to the next office opened and a tall beautiful brunette entered the room.

"I presume you are Lieutenant James."

"That is correct."

"I am Beth Speitz. I guess we had better talk a little before my Mom comes in."

They glanced at each other and sat down to talk.

"I see that I am taller than you, even in my flats."

"I gather that this would not be a good thing for the escort of a beautiful lady such as yourself."

"You are very perceptive, my friend. Unfortunately, this will probably be a problem."

Just then the door to the inner office opened and a very determined but muffled female voice said, "Let me handle this, and you stay out of it."

A rather gruff male voice from the inner office said, "You had better do it right!"

"Mom, this is Lieutenant James."

After the usual hand shaking, Mrs. Speitz suggested they sit down and talk things over.

"Mom, we have already agreed that we wouldn't look right together with me in high heels. He's about 5'10" tall and I am six feet."

"You two have really gotten to the essence of things in a hurry. I am terribly sorry, Lieutenant. I am afraid you two are right."

Ken spoke up, "I have the name of a friend of mine who is six three. He's a graduate of Kansas University and I think he would qualify."

As Ken wrote down a name and phone number on a piece of paper, Mrs. Speitz lowered her voice. "Just so you know, both Beth and I respect you more than you can imagine. Do you recall that time when you stopped that car that was too close to the plane being refueled?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That was the first time anybody on this base has told Major General Speitz what to do and where to go. Ever since he was promoted last year, he has terrified everyone around him. That goes for us, too."

"I am sorry to hear that," Ken said softly.

She continued, "You did what he deserved when you told him off. It was one of the best times Beth and I have had in a long time. I'm very sorry that you can't be her escort for the big event, but it may be the best way to keep the peace."

"You two have been most kind," said Ken. "Yes, I think that finding someone else is best, since I must take care of all the refueling for the important people who are flying in. It's been a pleasure to meet and talk to you folks."

Ken stood up and shook hands once more. Beth took hold of his hand and pressed it warmly.

"I wish you could have been the one," she whispered.

"May the Lord be with us both," he said gently.

"What's going on out there?" The gruff male voice was impatient.

"We are just finishing our discussion," Mrs. Speitz's voice was pleasant but firm.

"Good luck, Lieutenant."

"Thank you."

Ken turned and left. He walked back to his office, which was already becoming warm from the summer sun and sat down at his desk.

"How did things go?" Sergeant Butcher appeared to be very well informed.

"I did not qualify for the job of Mr. Airpower. I am too short."

"Sorry to hear that, sir."

"It is probably just as well since I would be involved in a very delicate situation."

"Yes, sir. The whole section was worried about you. By the way, we have a new person to help with the reports."

"Send her in. I hope she has her file with her."

"She does."

A small, well-groomed, young blond walked in and saluted sharply. Ken returned the salute and indicated that she sit down in one of the steel chairs not far from his desk. She handed him her file.

She spoke up rather nervously, "You will note that I have been recently court-marshaled."

"And what was this for?" Ken asked softly.

"Captain Snupp swore at me and told me to find a report that was not available. I told him I could not find the report, and I did not appreciate his treatment of me. He turned me in for insubordination, and I was court-marshaled."

Her tears began to flow across her cheeks.

"I see you lost your rank for this."

Yes, sir."

"And they assigned you to my section."

"Yes, sir. I was told that you are somebody who knows how to deal with black sheep."

Ken had never heard this before, but he thought back to some of the stories about Pappy Boyington, a World War II leader. According to reports, Pappy was put in charge of the pilots of questionable ability. In short, these were the people who other commanders did not want. The planes in his squadron were Corsairs, which were not easy to fly but had considerable speed and firepower. The story, as told by other pilots in the South Pacific theater, was that Pappy trained the so-called black sheep until they became famous as one of the best squadrons in the area. Eventually, Pappy himself was suddenly surprised by four Zeros and was shot down.

He flipped his Corsair over and parachuted into the water close to an island. From there, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese. As they were flying him back to

a prison camp, he tried to take over the plane and failed. Eventually, he did make it back to the U.S. at the end of the war.

Ken felt as though it was a challenge to be assigned the black sheep, but he also sensed that someone at the base felt that he and his section could transform the black sheep and lead them to a recovery in their performance.

Ken looked at the young lady before him as she wiped her tears away.

"I think you will be just fine with us. Sergeant Butcher will show you some of the filing of reports and related tasks. Don't worry. I won't swear at you."

Ken made a quick silent prayer request, "Help me keep this promise."

She looked at him and asked, "Is that all?"

"Yes, it is. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask either Sergeant Butcher or me."

Ken called the sergeant and indicated that she was ready to begin work on filing.

She stood up, saluted, and after wiping the tears away, she turned and was ready to start work.

As Ken entered that barracks, which was still hot from the heat of the day, he was handed another letter. This one he had been waiting for. He opened it hurriedly and read it quickly. He had been accepted to graduate school at the state university that was famous for its graduate faculty dealing with geology.

His two-year tour with the Air Force was up in September, and his start as a graduate student was scheduled to begin at about the same time.

## FIVE

The talk on refueling safety went well. The Lieutenant General, who was the Base Commander, had given Ken the assignment and had made sure that most of the important people were present.

Ken had obtained pictures of the B-47 accident, and he explained what went wrong and why. He also drew upon his experience in Greenland when a B-36 was destroyed by fire because of a jeep that was driven into the area where a large fuel spill had occurred.

The Air Force Association Meeting went off without any big problems. Now September was fast approaching, and he prepared to clean out his desk and show the new petroleum officer what he needed to know concerning the daily operation of the refueling section.

As he was removing some of the pencils and small items that had accumulated, he suddenly looked up, and the small blond airman was standing at attention in front of his desk.

"Sir, this is your black sheep that wishes to thank you for your kind help in restoring my self-respect."

"I am glad that I could help," he said softly.

"You showed me fairness and grace which only a black sheep can appreciate. That's called leadership, sir. May God help you in your new career."

She saluted briskly, and as she turned to leave, Ken could see tears on her face.

"Thank you, black sheep. Your kind words will be remembered."

She turned briskly, smiled, and then left the room.

The note from Sergeant Butcher on the desk indicated that the Base Commander wanted to see him at 9:00 AM the next day. Ken assumed that this was some sort of exit interview.

When he returned to his very warm barracks room, he began to wonder if he should take any notebooks or other items with him for the conversation, but he had no clue concerning what was going to be discussed.

After breakfast, he walked up to the general's office. The general's secretary smiled at him in a friendly manner and finally said, "The General will see you now."

As he had done previously, the general returned Ken's salute and motioned him toward the chair near the desk.

"I had a visitor yesterday who indicated that he was unhappy with you. As you might guess, this was Major General Speitz. Would you mind briefing me on how you two got into it?"

"I was out next to a B-25 that was being refueled, and a car comes down the road that passes close to the plane. I stopped the car and told the driver to turn around and leave as soon as possible. I indicated that he was driving into a dangerous situation. He was in civilian clothes, so I had no idea who he was. The car also had no identifying markings."

"As you can guess, Lieutenant, he was not very happy."

Ken began to worry concerning what the consequences might be.

The general continued, "I asked about why he was driving on that road, and he said that he was showing his wife and daughter around the base. I told him that this was not a mission that required his driving along that road. I further indicated that you were correct in making him turn around and leave. He apparently is not accustomed to being told to leave and to do it in a hurry. The airmen on top of the wing heard all the conversation, and it spread all over the base that you had told General Speitz where and when to go in, shall we say, no uncertain terms. I should tell you that General Speitz enjoys throwing his weight around, and many folks on the base enjoyed the fact that somebody at last had told him what to do and where to go. In short, your brief discussion had the effect of raising the morale for almost everyone on the base. There was the overall feeling that justice had been served. You did your duty correctly, and the results I believe were helpful to the whole organization. I even have a note from Mrs. Speitz that says your efforts made her day. She figured he would come to me and try to make trouble."

Ken breathed a deep sign of relief.

"Lieutenant, I see that you are leaving the Air Force for graduate school. I wish we could keep you here. You have a reputation for being honest and fair."

The General paused and looked out the window for a few moments.

"That kind of reputation should get you a long way, but universities are not always fair, so be careful. Setting professors straight when they perceive themselves as little gods can be dangerous. I sincerely hope that you can obtain all the degrees you are seeking and that you will be able to live up to your capabilities."

The General stood up and extended his hand, "God's speed, Lieutenant."

Ken said, "Thank you, sir," and saluted and turned to leave.

"Remember, Lieutenant, there are people just like General Speitz in the academic world."

“Yes, sir.”

The general's last words proved to be prophetic.

SIX

Graduate school was a whole new cultural experience for Ken. The transformation from the life and death world of military thinking to the sometimes brutal verbal battles between professors and so-called colleagues tends to spill over onto the graduate students assigned to their charge. Subtle digs and snide remarks tend to flow rather freely among faculty, and this denigrating behavior bothered Ken. Was this example supposed to carry over into the real world when they graduated?

One of Ken's girlfriends, a professor's daughter, expressed the route to success secretly. “Give them what they want you to say. Don't argue. This free exchange of ideas is not what they really want. Their elevated egos can't take too much originality and aptness of thought. Most of the faculty has never been out in the world where they have had to deal with the public on a continuing basis.”

She continued, “Go look at the theses for Ph.D. degrees. They are supposed to represent new ideas, but most of them are simply rehashes of their professor's particular specialty. Lots of statistics and occasional mathematical foggery are frequently designed to show how gloriously smart they are.” The girlfriend seemed to know what she was talking about.

During his first two months, Ken marveled at the seminars where graduate students presented some subjects and were then picked on by both faculty and fellow students. Ken asked his fellow students why they felt that this was the best approach to student learning. The answer was clear

“You are going to get picked on by the faculties from other universities when you give papers at national conferences. Your ability to shoot down questioners must be taught or your technical reputation will be shot down. Not unlike politicians, ‘if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen.’” Ken remembered that it was former president Harry Truman who made that remark.

His turn to come up with a seminar was scheduled arbitrarily.

What was he to talk about? All he knew about that might be of interest was about the rock formations in Greenland. He had taken some slides while there, but they had to be tailored to the critical audience. Meanwhile, he waited for payments from the GI Bill to start. His savings from his military tour were running out. He cut his eating habits down to two meals a day. Room and laundry were rapidly consuming what he had left. If the GI Bill did not start payments, he would have to reduce his diet to one meal a day.

One evening while he was studying for his seminar performance, he noticed that he did not feel well. He found his thermometer and soon discovered that he had a fever of 105°F.

Ken moved to the phone and called one of his fellow students who had a car. Could he get him to the infirmary? The student was happy to do so. The low winter temperature and snowy conditions made the walk to the infirmary appear almost life-threatening.

The nurse at the front desk checked his temperature and admitted him quickly. Two days and nights in the infirmary and it was confirmed that he was ready to

return to the classroom. But the preparation for the dog-eat-dog seminar was incomplete and no delays were tolerated.

As the day approached, there was not much technical meat in what he had to say, but he had to go with what he had, which amounted to a few rock specimens, a map, and a number of colored slides.

Still weak from his stay in the infirmary, Ken taped up the map he had drawn to the blackboard and loaded up the slide cassette.

The professor in charge of the seminars introduced Ken as a new student “who will tell us about the geology and whatever else we should know about Greenland.”

Ken’s knees were weak but his nervousness kept him up and on the subject. He knew that the presentation was too short, but he was stuck with whatever he was able to do. His talk on refueling for about a dozen or so colonels and generals was nowhere near as intimidating as this one.

The first question came as he thought it might, as a professor in his best snide voice asked, “And what are we supposed to take away from this travel log?”

Ken’s answer was short, “Don’t go there in the winter.”

The audience snickered and laughed.

“Why?” came the next question.

“If I were a wise guy, I would say that you wouldn’t be able to see much because there is no sunlight. On the other hand, you learn about the high-speed winds that carry snow and glacial dust down to the ice-covered bay. The very cold air builds up on the icecap and reaches wind speeds over 100 miles per hour coming down to the shore. If you are taking cores of sediments in the bay during the summer, you will see the results of the storms. If you take ice cores in the icecap and melt them down, you will find small spherules that are black in color and composed mostly of iron. Since most of this was formed prior to the industrial revolution, we must consider that these spherules came from outer space.”

Ken continued, “Next question.”

The audience was strangely silent.

“Are you going to work on this as a thesis topic?”

“No, thank you! I prefer a much warmer climate, and right now, the people who took the ice cores are doing the research on this topic.”

The seminar was finished and Ken could relax for a few moments before he enjoyed his one meal for the day and returned to the classroom for his nighttime lab work.

He sensed that things were going to become more stressful in a hurry. Ken’s feeling about the seminars and the objective of picking students apart so as to prepare them for the time when they were to present papers at conferences were somehow not positive.

Ken did not know it, but the spherules from space would become a topic of interest at a much later date.

SEVEN

The laboratories in the evening tended to be relatively quiet places. Peering down a petrographic microscope, drawing what you see, and identifying the minerals in thin sections can be a boring process. But to Ken this was fascinating.

While in prep school, he had thought of becoming an artist. His drawing skills were somewhat above average, and he enjoyed his sketching time. As a profession, the remuneration possibilities did not appear to be worth the effort.

Looking down the microscope with cross nicols (polarized light), the beauty of igneous and metamorphic rocks, such as basalts and schists, was striking to Ken. These colorful scenes from thin sections could be painted and have meaning.

His whole life course was changed by one incident while he was thinking about a future profession years ago at prep school.

One morning in spring while he was finishing up cleaning his paintbrushes in the classroom studio, a young freshman came up to Ken and asked him to explain what Modern Art was all about. As a senior he felt that the question could not be brushed off; so picking up a piece of artist charcoal, he went over to an easel where a large blank paper pad was ready for work. He might as well have fun, he thought.

"First remember that the force with which you draw the line shows the power and speed involved."

Ken drew a rapid comma-shaped black line. He then blanked in with charcoal black a curled spot at the top and drew some other crossing lines at great speed.

"You will note how this actually tells you it was done swiftly."

Ken continued, "The other thing we should mention is the need to achieve plasticity. This means that we also should try to achieve a feeling for the third dimension. When painting with oils, this becomes clearer."

After a few more wipes with the charcoal, Ken felt he had adequately confused the neophyte, and so with a smile he put down the charcoal and said, "Now that you see how it's done, you are on your own."

Ken left the room laughing to himself. He thought of this as a joke on an underclassman. The art instructor could bring him into the real art world later.

The next day, he was back in the studio working on his own representational art, a picture of a girlfriend, when the instructor asked him to come over and look at something.

It was the "joke" he had drawn the day before.

"Who drew this?"

"I did," Ken replied.

"Well, I want to tell you what happened."

Ken began to regret what he had done.

"You know that the famous modern artist, Hans Hofmann, is visiting us."

"No, I didn't know."

"Well, he saw this charcoal drawing and said to me, 'Patrick, you are improving.'"

"Thank you for letting me know," Ken said in a low voice.

"From now on, you can do anything you want in this course."

This had been a shock to Ken. If this was how modern art was done and judged by the experts, then he felt that to continue this profession would be somehow cheating the public.

Right at that point, he changed his mind about what career he should follow.

Bemused by the memory, Ken continued to draw the beautiful scene of the thin section that appeared in the microscope. He had to concede that his artistic appreciation made this mineralogy course more enjoyable.

The first set of oral exams went well, so Ken could continue toward a higher degree. Life from this point on would not be easy with all the tough courses that still remained.

The faculty, as in common with many universities, was from all over the world, and this led to many cultural differences and arguments. Ken's advisors were classic examples of this tendency. One was a Russian who escaped from Communist rule, and the other was a Welshman who also maintained very strong opinions on almost every subject. In today's world, this would be called diversity. To the student who worked with both of them on the same subject such as a thesis, things could be rough. Ken's fellow students suggested that he had somehow ended up in no-man's-land.

With the broadened perspective provided by the numerous debates, Ken felt free to come to the selection of a thesis topic that covered the interests of both advisors. This latter objective was not easy to achieve. From Ken's point of view, he wanted to work on research, the results of which could be useful. He concluded that oil companies could be interested in work on recent sediments following the idea that the present is a key to the past. Ken decided that work on the barrier islands off New Jersey was appropriate, since several oil fields in Kansas had very similar outlines that suggested barrier islands in ancient seas.

Once this selection was made and approved, a number of field trips were made, and numerous samples were collected in beaches, lagoons, dunes, and marshes. All of these had to be obtained following appropriate statistical designs. This latter sample collection approach satisfied one advisor. The other advisor allowed the student to make whatever measurements he cared to make.

For Ken, this was the kind of approach he enjoyed. A considerable amount of analytical equipment had been collected by the Geology and Mineralogy departments. Ken was allowed to use all of them by simply asking the professor in charge. This approach had the great advantage of allowing the student to immediately test a creative idea while it was still fresh in his mind.

Later, as Ken approached the end of his thesis work, he discovered that the accountants at the University had decided that the users of such analytical equipment had to have a budget required for the usage of each instrument. This slowed down the thrill and action when a new idea was fresh. The accounting was so slow in allowing approvals that the desire to do the research almost vanished by the time the budget approval was granted.

Ken was so tired at the end of his years of research on his thesis topic that he realized that those students who rehashed the professor's favorite topics were probably in a more favorable condition.

The final problem that must be faced is that of getting the student's committee to actually read the thesis. In a moment of frustration, Ken made an appointment with the dean of the graduate school. He explained that his funds could run out prior to the committee's actually reading what they were supposed to evaluate.

The dean looked at Ken and said, "You have considerable nerve to come in here and tell me that the faculty takes their own sweet time getting around to helping graduate students get their degrees."

Ken thought of the General's farewell remarks involving university professors and concluded that he was right.

The dean continued, "Your concerns are most likely correct."

There was a long pause.

"But, if I tell them to get on the stick," the dean added, "you will probably suffer the consequences in your thesis defense."

He quietly pointed to an 8-ball on his desk and said, "That's what you are behind."

Ken did not want to argue, but he felt that he had to make one more point.

"I think you should know that I am supposed to report for work at an oil company research lab in a little over a month. They expect me to have obtained my degree by then."

The dean looked out the window and thought quietly for about a minute, then said, "I think I know what I'll do. I will issue a general memo to all departments under my jurisdiction, which will strongly suggest that more attention to graduate student advising—including the prompt reading of theses—is required. This way, your name will not be mentioned. How's that?"

"Thank you so much, sir."

As the interview was ending, Ken thought of the Biblical quote, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord. I will repay."

As Ken went out the door, the dean opened a drawer and pulled out what appeared to be a number of typed pages stapled together.

The dean offered, "I can see that you are very uptight. Here's something for you to read to reduce stress. It may make you relax a bit."

Ken took the papers and thanked the dean again. When he returned to his desk next to the chemical lab, he started reading what appeared to be a very long poem entitled, "The Cat Who Went to College." A smile began to form as he read the opening page as follows:

Christopher Cat, aflame for knowledges,

Enrolled at one of the better colleges,

Attracted by its reputation

As moulder of many a generation

Of leading cats throughout the nation.

Eager, he met with his advisor.

He asked, "What courses shall I take?

I know that there is much at stake.

What shall I read to make me wiser?"

The advisor explained with a tolerant smile

(Tamping his catnip pipe the while),

"Reading would be mere bookishness

Till we have heard from the ETS.

Check off with this special pencil

(F) or (T), (a), (b), or (c); Correlation with their master stencil Will indicate As sure as fate

Your introversion, Extroversion, And tendencies Towards perversion. Your manual dexterity They'll measure with celerity, By methods psychometric, Infallible, electric!"

Ken fell asleep in his chair with a smile on his face.

EIGHT

Standing in line to be seated in the proper order for the graduation ceremony seemed to be just another ordinary occasion for those Ph.D.'s standing around him, but Ken was reviewing in his thoughts all the struggles he had endured while striving for credentials that would ultimately provide an unknown future.

The epic poem that the Dean of the Graduate School had given him provided a somewhat humorous memory, but the last page contained a definite warning about how unfair University rules and regulations can be, particularly at the last minute. Ken hoped that he would not suffer the fate experienced by Christopher Cat.

He had almost memorized the last page, and as he stood in the heat of a June sun, he mumbled the lines as follows: And now we see Chris Cat advance In tune to Pomp and Circumstance Happily For his degree.

"Christopher Cat – Ah, there you are. Report at once to the Registrar!"

The Registrar said with a cheerful smile: "We'll have to postpone that degree for a while. I find, in going through your file, That in Freshman year, when you transferred, A slight curriculum slip occurred. True, it was only an accident, But you haven't fulfilled one requirement."

"But," Chris cried in consternation, "Surely I've had an education? I've learned to exercise my mind, I've learned respect for feline kind –

What a piece of work is Cat! His conscious tail his state declares..."

In horror, the Registrar pulled off his glasses. "This proves my point. You are out of joint. You are not vocationally attuned to the masses. Without that course, whatever books he's sounded, No modern cat can possibly be well rounded. Term by term we're progressively weeding Out obsolete skills like writing and reading. Though scholars retrograde, Foes to audio-visual aid – Though reactionary pedants – try to cramp us, We're not anachronist! We absolutely insist Upon that course you missed – It's 'Orientation to the College Campus!'"

"Perhaps," mewed Chris, "I can acquire this tool At summer school? Please sir, if I could! My grades are pretty good."

"Your solid A record has no force Without that basic keystone course....."

So Christopher Cat, still yearning for knowledges, Enrolled again at this best of colleges.

Ken located his proper seat and could not keep his mind from wondering about his next most important event. His future wife-to-be in a month sat with her family back quite a few rows.

Gail had been a wonderful help in getting him through the various hurdles that were placed in front of the graduate school student. He recalled vividly how they had met in the local church choir. A friend of Ken's had invited him to join the choir since basses were needed. Ken had sung in the college choir in his undergraduate days and had enjoyed the experience. The anthem that the choir was preparing for Sunday's service was Beethoven's Hallelujah Chorus, Jesus Christ on the Mount of Olives.

This was a piece that Ken had sung a number of times before, so he sang with enthusiasm.

When the organ hit the last chord, the pretty alto sitting directly in front of him turned around and said, "Wow! That was powerful. My name is Gail."

She put her hand forward, and Ken shook hands and identified himself. So began a long relationship.

The memory of how he had proposed to her was still very fresh in his mind. He had just finished taking a number of photomicrographs with the electron microscope and was anxious to see if the pictures he had taken would have the details he was hoping to show. The darkroom was available, and he rushed over to start the developing process.

Gail came walking down the hall.

"It's getting late," she said. "I thought we might go to dinner."

"I was just getting ready to develop these plates. Want to go into the darkroom?"

He had said this in jest, but she said, "Sure, I won prizes in photography in high school."

Ken moved the sign to show that the darkroom was in use and that the safelight was on.

"It's pretty close quarters in here," he said matter-of-factly.

"I am not worried," she said.

The images began to slowly appear and they both leaned over to see. Ken explained the structures that were showing up when the safelight unexpectedly went out.

"Did you arrange this?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. We were supposed to meet downstairs. Better stand up straight so we don't knock things over."

As they both stood up straight, his hand brushed her side.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bump you."

She put her arms around him and said, "It's dark. We should make the most of it while we wait for the power to go on."

Ken had kissed her when he was at her door saying goodnight, but somehow this time things were different. He put his arms around her slender body and kissed her gently. At this point, Ken remembered the lines from the play *Cyrano De Bergerac*, and he whispered:

"A kiss! When all is said, what is a kiss? An oath of allegiance taken in closer proximity, a promise more precise, a seal on a confession, a rose-red dot upon the letter i in loving which elevates the mouth for ear; an instant of eternity, a fashion of inhaling each other's heart, and of tasting, on the brink of the lips each other's soul!"

Ken hugged her more tightly and kissed her passionately.

"Will you marry me?"

"Oh, yes. Yes!"

After a few more wonderful minutes, the safelight came on.

He was smiling as he climbed up to the platform for his hood and his degree. He thanked God for not having suffered the fate of Chris Cat.

NINE

Shortly after the graduation ceremony, Ken had to leave the University and report to the oil company research laboratory. Before he left he had a long goodbye with Gail, and they both promised to write frequently so that plans for the wedding

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

