

Ship Out on the Foam

An excerpt from *Tell It Like It Is*

April 1, 1969
Kansas, USA

Woefully attired in a lead-grey, synthetic wool suit, the value of which “not to exceed twenty dollars” (as delineated in official release papers now pocketed snug against his heart), said suit manufactured by marginally skilled inmates at Fort Leavenworth Penitentiary, Rand stood for a salient moment in his dress shoes—the only vestige of Government Issue retained—astride the freshly repainted center line of a two-lane, rural, highway extending across an infinity of cornfield Kansas flatland, and cracked a wide-as-sin grin of relief, release and bare-tooth joy.

His temporary hitchhike companion, a Canuck by way of New England, named Derosiers—Rand never knew his Christian name though they had been yoked together for the past six weeks on permanent kitchen duty from five a.m. to seven p.m. in the stainless steel yet fetid confines of the stockade mess hall—was poised in the opposite direction boldly flashing the middle fingers of both hands while cursing in English, Joul and recently acquired though not quite mastered Ebonics at the two retreating, enjeeped MPs who had upon their own initiative feloniously deposited the young ex-prisoners just outside the gates of the base all the while laughing and projectile spitting that *Ya'll can find your own fucking way to the airport, faggots!* No doubt still chortling derisively and crowing over their own cleverness and devotion to justice, the former unemployable hillbillies were speeding to the comforting embrace of the noncommissioned officers club where for the next three hours (the

time it should have taken them to drive to Topeka Airport and back) they could slake beer from tall, condensating cans, garble salted monkey nuts and enthusiastically bicker over whatever mindless sports event was being broadcast from the black-and-white television screen above the ever-busy bar.

When the jeep was finally out of sight, Derosiers heeled round and glared at Rand as if his companion had let him down by not abetting his indignant but futile attack at the tail end of the ignobly peopled jeep, but Rand was incapacitated with joy over the now very real fact that he was finally a free individual in sole control of his own day-to-day destiny. Not only was he free of prison (officially, a rehabilitation facility), but through the magnanimity of the usually cranky, unaccommodating gods he had been kicked clear of the armed forces altogether. Derosiers could rant and spume about the criminality and fundamental shit-heeledness of the army in general (and the two piss-ant MPs in particular) but Rand possessed among his papers in the aforementioned inside coat pocket a document of the rarest value and international cachet: a discharge from the United States Army, the same organization of mostly mindless robots and beefwits that at the moment was engaged in barely disguised genocide in Southeast Asia. But this was no commonplace discharge. This was an official declaration, albeit printed on the cheapest paper available in the western hemisphere, stating in standard military nounspeak that in addition to being judged no longer useful to the army, he had been deemed *Undesirable*, a word that if uttered by a potential love interest would cause mental discomfort if not gastrointestinal pain but when employed in this context was most welcome to read, hear or speak, a word in fact to slowly savor along the surface of the tongue: an *Undesirable Discharge!*

The 500 other so-called non-violent prisoners of that season's rehabilitation crop (loosely classified as 'political' and culled from otherwise violent army prison populations across the

country), having been successfully re-brainwashed into thinking they were to once again play a vital role in the US government's altruistic effort to make the world (whether it wanted it or not) safe for democracy—and in the present case, free of perceived domino-effect communism—were all of them, save the five like-minded souls who had with Rand comprehensively resisted, about to be spirited back into the indifferent arms of the regular army, no questions asked, and then, in most cases, quickly propelled into the enthusiastic if ever-expunging embrace of the Viet Cong.

Without another word the two poorly clad ex-incarcerates, one behind the other, confidently thrust well-scratched, lacerated, bruised and KP-dishwater-sulcated thumbs into the steady Midwest prairie wind in the direction of Topeka until soon enough a civically-minded, patriotic soul (figuring any hitch-hikers outside the base gates to be worthy soldiers on a three-day pass) slowed to pick them up and the two eventually arrived at the airport in time for the departure of their flights home: Desrosier to still snowbound New Hampshire, Rand to always sunny but at the moment brisk southern Virginia.

Three hours later and still in a happy daze, Rand emerged from the Newport News airport and tossed his small bag of books and sundries into the back seat of a taxi—he had accumulated some little money for all those months at hard labor—and rode without nostalgia to the neighborhood of Hilton and a mock colonial (with stylish camping trailer permanently parked in the drive) that was his family home, the unlocked front door of which he opened and into which he stepped inside—the *bildungsroman* journey of a former golden boy now black-sheep prodigal-son at last come to an end. At least for now.

Late afternoon, his father still at work, his mother out sewing something for the church, Rand in good cheer approached his six siblings (congering in the den under the glow of the television) but found all of them skittish and shy as if he were a just-released reform-school

stepbrother or rarely seen uncle of tainted reputation. What stories they had been told to allay their curiosity, mitigate the damage to family honor, he couldn't know, but there were no hugs or kisses from this after all transplanted non-demonstrative Yankee family, no emotional moments of sweet reunion, none of them knowing what to say to the stranger come into town. He was 19, they were all younger (in dispersements of devout Catholic, two-year family-planning); only his sister spoke: "Daddy says to look in the refrigerator" which he did and inside which he spied wedged between a long yellow box of Velveeta and a pasteboard carton of eggs a frosty litre of Liebraumilch— his favorite in those days of oenological naiveté—with a *Welcome Home!* note scotch-taped to the butt, and without looking further for any food his mother might have set aside (she hadn't) he snaked out the already corkscrewed well-chilled slim bottle and cradled it by the neck into the sacred first generation American living room, which was not covered in plastic but neither was it accessible to children for any reason other than to be quickly introduced to invited adult guests then redirected to the den or yard, but Rand, having graduated from the realm of childhood (although without acceptable petit bourgeois distinction), walked right in, thumbed through his brothers' record collections, yanked free the just-released first Led Zeppelin album (having been forcibly isolated and deprived of any music for the past six months, he had heard only whispered reverent talk of it), eased the vinyl under the needle of the console's turntable, snapped forward the on switch, dialed the volume to maximum, sat down on the floor with back against the verboten sofa, tilted the bottle against his lips and let the cool mineral-rich wine slather down his anxious gullet as the opening notes of *Good Times, Bad Times* parted the air and upon instantaneously reaching his body shook it *like his back ain't had no bone. . .*

Everything went black then white then black again as a sustained surprise assault of an ingeniously wrought musical dynamic consumed the whole of his being. It was unlike anything he had heard before. It was blues and it was rock, but no morpheomantic black or imitative long-haired white musicians had ever expressed it with such artistic and sensual ingenuity. And as in some LSD experiences wherein every word innocently said by a passing stranger can be pregnant with deep personal significance to the tripper, the words of the song spoke directly to Rand of his present situation: *In the days of my youth, I was told what it means to be a man. Now I've reached that age I try to do all those things the best I can. No matter how I try, I find my way to the same old jam . . .* the jam being that he was here in his parents' house where he didn't want to be, unsure of whether his girlfriend, Helena, was still waiting for him or was shackled up with someone else as he hadn't been allowed while incarcerated to write to anyone outside of his immediate family. The next words of the song directly addressed this: *Good times, bad times, you know I've had my share. When my woman left home for a brown-eyed man well I still don't seem to care . . .* But if his woman, his Helena, had left home, as it were, he *did* care, in fact, he cared very much and he was dreading the phone call that would provide that answer.

They all said they would wait, didn't they? When he first went into the army, his girlfriend of two years said of course she would wait, couldn't he feel the passion of her love for him? How could he possibly doubt her fidelity? But before he had finished eight weeks of basic training the infamous (and ubiquitous because so common) Dear John letter was in his hands *I still love you very much but I met someone and . . .* And as well he thought of Ezra Pound and the two-week limit—but the song continued *Seventeen, I fell in love with a girl as sweet as could be. It only took a couple of days till she was rid of me . . .* A couple of days? But that had never happened to him. Maybe there was hope after all. He had been 18 and

AWOL from the army when he met Helena and they were together much longer than two days, maybe six months . . .

The divinely wrought power of the blues-rich music took control of his nervous system re-regulating the direction and flow of the blood that was newly being pumped in happy sync with the vibrant bass and cleverly assertive drums though the unpredictable shift in time signature, in mood, in instrumentation, prompted frequent if irregular surges of adrenalin (or other like substances) from still young glands, which in turn enabled a euphoria that could rival any he had achieved as a medic with easy access to sterile needles and a pharmacopeia of untainted drugs . . . And as his body writhed and vibrated about the floor (his frightened brothers and sisters warily watching from the next room) in fits of aesthetic and visceral ecstasy, only slightly chemically enhanced by the Liebraumilch, each succeeding song spoke to him and guided him further into a kind of *artisticus spasticus* labyrinth of heightened sensations.

Babe I'm Gonna Leave You with its sweetly folkish guitar notes had a soothing effect that paralleled the peaceful easy influence of the chilled wine; the words of the song were not so apropos of his current situation but the musical changes, the intense ups and downs, the impressive power and range of the voice, were in themselves stimulating. Then came the flattening-all-in-its-path avalanche of lyrical beauty and teasing licentiousness of Willie Dixon and J. B. Lenoir's *You Shook Me*, rendered in a fashion so exalting and stimulating as to make its originators proud while it also incorporated a surprising and—to Rand, delightful—reference to Dylan's version of *Corina Corina* with the addended Robert Johnson "I got a bird that whistles" lyrics (from *Stones in My Passway*) sung in perfect sync and timbre with the notes of the lead guitar in an upwardly transcendent duo that through deft, organic manipulation descended at the end of each line like the disintegrating cry of a bomb

falling through the air; but instead of the single shock of explosion at the end, it moved in a side motion with a bass and tenor exaggerated three-chord blues riff, spreading the impact of the detonation along the ground in a wide swathe as that same bass line morphed into the opening soul-throbs of *Dazed and Confused* . . . And so on . . .

At some point—he later surmised that it was during *I Can't Quit You Baby* because when he listened to the album again he didn't remember hearing *How Many More Times*, the last song on the record—his head no longer propped against the couch but resting on an inner forearm, he drifted completely into a subconscious state, which is how his parents found him when they arrived together at six o'clock, his mother alarmed at first sight of him splayed across the carpet as if he had done himself harm (there had been lapses into depressive lassitude all through childhood), but in noting that the wine bottle on the floor next to him was empty and in hearing the somnambulant moans and disparate murmurings from his mouth her mind was comforted, even more so as her husband intoned, "He's all right. Let him sleep it off. He's had a long and, if I know the army, poorly organized, unnecessarily difficult journey."