

A Case For Pabst

The sky turned from light to grey to more grey as the plane sliced through the clouds. It was gently raining in Greensboro but nine thousand feet above the city, clouds bumped and hugged the aircraft, tossing it about, a butterfly in the wind. George was slouched down in his seat, eyes closed, leaning into the aisle as far as his seat belt allowed, asleep. Roger watched out the window searching for a shred of earth within the grey, tension slowly rising from his belly as only darker greys mixed below. He had done this a hundred times, but he never liked bouncing up and down in a big tin can with no idea where the ground was. He could feel his chest tighten as he stared out the window. An irrational fear perhaps, especially for someone like him but still - if you couldn't see the earth, then it might simply smash through the floor at any time as the plane jerked down.

A bored attendant's voice crackled in the speaker above his head, "We are making our final approach into Greensboro. Please place your seats in the upright position for the remainder of the flight."

George's seat wasn't moving anywhere. The plane banked to the right pushing George into a more upright position. His huge frame bent forward, his head now almost touching the back of the seat in front of him. A horse like snort came out of his mouth.

Roger watched in amazement. The window still showed nothing but grey; beads of rain began to streak across the outside glass. The plane cracked and swung up then dropped down again. George's head rolled back and forth, eyes still shut, his body half back into the aisle again.

Finally Roger saw the patchwork of fields, buildings and highways slowly coming into focus on the ground below. The plane was still at least three of thousand feet above the ground; Roger's belly relaxed – the logic levers in his brain flipped back on again.

George slowly woke up. He lifted his bushy head upright, gingerly opened one eye and then the other. Another snort – Roger could hear rivulets of phlegm move from the caverns behind George’s nose down to somewhere in the back of his throat and then with a gulp, into his belly.

It was George’s idea to fly into Greensboro. Their real destination was Raleigh, 70 miles east of the airport. But Marilyn could not find an aisle seat on any of American’s St. Louis to Raleigh flights that Sunday. There was a half empty plane going to Greensboro in the afternoon; it had plenty of aisle seats. So she booked them into Greensboro.

George was an immense man – 6’4” admitting to 300 pounds though Roger figured he was probably closer to 350. George flew a lot and knew that no one welcomed a big man on any sized plane. So partly for his comfort but more for the benefit of his fellow passengers, he insisted on aisle seats on any flights he travelled. Marilyn was used to booking him to destinations hours away from where he really wanted to be; she’d even fly him in a couple of days early just to land an aisle seat. Marilyn, a big woman herself, understood; she and George bonded the day she was assigned to work for him.

So they would land in Greensboro, rent a car and drive to Raleigh. The two were engineers for McDonnell Douglas in St. Louis, these days working on the wing flaps of the new MD80s coming out in three years. George was the manager of the wing design group; Roger his chief engineer. They were going to Raleigh to run computer simulations on the latest wing models. They carried a dozen alternatives in their briefcases. By the time they left Raleigh four days later, they’d take the model the computer liked the best back to St. Louis and fabricate it into a prototype.

Roger looked out the window again. The plane was approaching the runway 20 degrees left of center, the wind grabbing it back and forth. But for all the jerking up and down, the plane hit the runway with only a light bounce, then straightened out before the pilot reversed engines and shoved everyone forward against their seatbelts.

“Another donnybrook landing; I love these DC8s,” George turned towards Roger and smiled. “I helped design the wings on this plane. We took them over to a wind tunnel in Long Beach, riveted them onto a DC8 fuselage and poured on the wind. I tell you, we had those wings flapping like a bird’s. But they never cracked, never even loosened a rivet. Best wings in the business. I’d fly ‘em in anything.”

Well that’s good to know now, thought Roger. *Wish he’d been awake 15 minutes ago when the wings were shuddering through the clouds like they could snap off at any second.* But he said, “Yea, unbelievable what these planes can take.”

“Engines explode. Landing gear jams. I’ve seen a couple fuselages collapse when they lost pressure. But I never heard of a wing ever breaking off a DC8. Can’t be done.”

They picked up a Malibu from the Hertz lot. George sat behind the wheel. Though he never lived in North Carolina, he had driven all over it, sometimes going to the Raleigh Simulation Center but more often with his wife Murph travelling from St. Louis to Florida or Washington D.C. or Myrtle Beach. George and Murph had been married for 40 years, had no kids, and thought nothing about driving a couple hundred miles to someplace for the weekend.

Roger and George had reservations at the Ramada Inn in Research Triangle. Bennett Spangler from Superior Milling would meet them there after they arrived. Superior Milling was springing for the trip. They would make the prototype wings and sell the fabricating equipment to McDonnell once the designs were finalized. Superior figured to rake in a couple hundred million on the deal.

Spangler, part of Superior’s marketing team in St. Louis, had come down to Raleigh to make sure George and Roger got everything they needed at the Simulation Center.

“So, it’s going to take about an hour and half to get to Research Triangle. Let’s stop and get us some pop for the trip”, was George’s advice as he headed out of the Hertz lot. “There’s a gas station down by the Interstate.”

The pop was Pabst Blue Ribbon – a case of it. Roger figured out on his first trip down that, if in North Carolina, you drank PBR. Stores sold Bud but nobody bought it – “Yankee piss water,” the bartender called it the first time Roger tried to order one at the Ramada. “Nobody drinks that down here. We like our PBR.” PBR was fine with Roger too. About the only thing he really liked about Budweiser was their Clydesdales’ ads; otherwise, beer was beer.

George was thirsty. They had been on the interstate for maybe 15 minutes when George asked Roger to pop open his third PBR. But he nursed them after that and they still had a couple cans left by the time they drove into the Ramada.

Roger had learned long ago that George’s capacity for beer – any form of alcohol actually – had few bounds. But he liked beer the most and drank it the way Roger slugged back water after a morning run in July; he guzzled wine like most guys pounded beer. Neither drink, no matter the quantity, seemed to have much effect on him. Already a friendly boisterous man, a couple hours of steady drinking merely turned him into a big red faced hound dog that told stories you could listen to all night. His stories were exciting too – George had lost track the number of times he’d been around the world. He joined the Air Force for six years after high school and spent most of his time in Okinawa loading bombs onto B52s. After that, he did freelance mercenary working for whoever paid the most dollars to fight anywhere in Africa, the Middle East or southeast Europe. For eight years, his life bounced like a pin ball from country to country, sometimes getting into terrible blood baths, sometimes hustling out of town before the bad guys bombed the place. The good guys were

whoever was paying him. He didn't much tangle with the ethics of the thing until Murph came along. She awoke a moral conscious he never though he had.

He met Murph when he was thirty-three and she a U.S. Army nurse at a base in Istanbul. George had been brought in with a .233 Remington hole in his left leg courtesy of some Arab he was trying to strangle. Murph had the ER shift at the hospital that night. He fell in love with her as she sewed him up. They got married ten months later. By that time, George landed a job with McDonnell Douglas as an aircraft trouble shooter following plane crashes around the globe. At least he wasn't getting shot at. When Murph go out of the Army, George found a job at headquarters and they bought a house in St. Louis.

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George rarely drank straight whisky. He said it fucked him up; made him batty. So when Bennett Spangler met them in the Ramada bar and ordered shooters all around, George just pushed his shot glass next to Spangler's who downed them both.

Only in his fifties, the years had not been kind to Bennet Spangler. He wore his silver streaked hair brushed back with a little too much oil. His face, thin and angular, bore the rumpled craters of severe adolescent acne. A long blueish scar ran from this left temple down through his cheek carving a large C you tried not to stare at. The first time Roger met him, he figured it a souvenir from a knife fight. He learned later the more sober truth – ten years ago, Spangler was diagnosed with an aggressive form of skin cancer. The doctors cut deep swaths from his cheek to stop it, then did the best they could reconstructing his face. Roger wished it had been the knife fight story.

Spangler could tell some stories too. He had a salesman's knack for quickly putting a person at ease and a warm baritone voice that easily masked fact from fiction when he spoke. Today, Spangler

started off with his ‘this is my dream’ story, a story Roger heard a dozen times before, always when Spangler was revved up for some serious drinking. But since Spangler would pick up the bar tab, Roger was all ears.

“Did I tell you I bought land down here fifteen years ago? I’m gonna build me a nice little place when I get ready to retire. Raleigh is the best town in the world. It’s an absolute dream location – you got the mountains an hour to the west, white sand beaches 90 minutes east and it never snows in winter. Everybody’s friendly, stuff is cheap and it’s got the best pecan pie in American. It’s what I call heaven.” Spangler was sipping his PBR, relaxed and looking out the bar’s large terrace windows that framed the hotel’s pool and the large wooden deck surrounding it.

Spangler sighed, “Jeez, look at that doggy,” though it sounded like ‘dohgy’ to Roger’s Midwestern ears. The ‘doggy’ was a slim thirty something woman whose breasts and ass strained against a tight bubble gum pink two piece bathing suit as she got up from the recliner she’d been sunning on. The three men watched as she slowly headed up the stairs to the rooms above the pool, the dainty melons of her ass gently sashaying through the swimsuit’s bottom.

When she disappeared from view, George sucked in a deep breath and laughed, “Nice work Bennett – ring side seats next to the pool on a Sunday afternoon, drinking cold PBRs and eyeing the pretty southern scenery.”

It was 5pm. They were killing time until seven when they would meet another Superior Milling wrangler, Otis Taylor, at Bobby Ray’s Cow Palace for dinner. Taylor worked at the Simulation Center. Of the four, he was the guy that would actually be doing the work.

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Raleigh was a big beef town and Bobby Ray's Cow Palace, THE place a company took its customers for the South's best Angus beef as well as to show-off the size of their AmEx Platinum Card.

Though Roger had never spent much time imagining what a cow palace would look like, if he had, he figured it would look like Bobby Ray's. From the outside, the restaurant resembled a giant red barn; inside, dozens of white clothed tables sat on a dark walnut floor filling an enormous dining room. Pine paneling, shined by thick layers of varnish, covered the room's walls and quietly glowed in soft golden light twinkling from rows of tiny track lights hung from the ceiling's beams. Slim candelabra scattered along the walls provided just enough light to read the menu but tastefully hid any splats of steak suet or red wine generally left behind after a meal. Waiters in tails and cowboy boots pushed silver carts.

The long afternoon of drinking had made George, Roger and Spangler ready for big plates of beef. Otis had already gotten a table by the time they arrived and thoughtfully ordered three bottles of Bobby Ray's house Bordeaux, a 1971 Château Lusseau, which sat breathing on a side table. As they took their seats, a waiter emptied one of the bottles into giant goblets that, as Roger noted, seem to reflect Bobby Ray's signature approach to southern dining.

Spangler took a deep gulp from his goblet, raised it in the air and said, "I just want to thank America's greatest plane maker for the confidence they've shown in Superior. This isn't just about business; it's about doing something nobody has done before – make the best damn passenger plane in the world."

They took big swigs of wine. Spangler wasn't done. As their glasses were refilled, he continued, "To the two best engineers in aeronautics. It is a privilege to be able work with you!"

"Here, here," chimed Otis.

Spangler waited for them to take another swig, then started to raise his nearly empty glass. George had enough of the silly talk. He cut Spangler off, "Bennett, I wish everything you've said was half true. Good

flattery is hard to find.” Then raising his glass, he said, “To our wonderful hosts and their fat wallets.”

George let the sentence hang in the air for three seconds. Then he said, “Let’s eat. I’m hungry.”

Otis signaled the waiter for more Bordeaux as the four went on to order beef, spuds and asparagus.

Wine flowed and bread crusts crumbled across the white linen as dinnerware shuffled to make space for sizzling plates of Angus and sides. Bobby Ray’s did not disappoint. Filet Mignon soaked in garlic butter and topped with scoops of foie gras lay before Roger and Otis. George and Spangler both feasted on the Old Hickory rib-eye, a pound and a half of prime rib covered in pepper, capers and crumbled blue cheese. Mounds of salty asparagus browned in olive oil and oregano provided the evening’s healthy green. Roger wryly noted that its pungent scent would linger in all the urinals and toilet stalls that might cross their path that night.

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The meal ended with another Bobbie Ray’s Standard - pecan pie served on a dinner plate lathered with mounds of whip cream. The men lingered over their pies, heavy and sated, sipping wine from glasses filled from two bottles just opened.

“So there’s a place we should go to next. It’s downtown. And filled with lovely southern girls,” Spangler was looking at George and Roger. “We go down there, have a night cap and watch the ladies dance.” Then leering at Roger, “And maybe more.” Roger was the single guy here. George had his Murph and Spangler seemed involved with a girl named Coleen whom he talked about infrequently but when he did, so indifferently, you couldn’t tell if she was a wife or sister or some lady who cleaned his house every week.

Roger did not feel ready for anything except maybe to crawl in bed and flick on the porn channel. But then George bounced in. “Well, Murph said no touching the women down here, she said she said. But nothing wrong with a little eye candy.”

“And no reason they can’t touch you, eh?”

“Man, we got all this wine left. Maybe we just stay here and finish it up and do the girls tomorrow.”

Roger was looking for a way to get the evening ended.

“No problem Rog,” replied Otis. “They’ll put it all in ‘to go’ cups and we’ll bring them along.”

And they did. The waiter brought four large Styrofoam coffee cups and filled them up with the remaining wine. Each cup had one of those useful plastic lids with convenience holes you punched out for easy, dribbleless sipping.

They piled in Spangler’s rental; Spangler and Otis in the front, George and Roger in the back.

Roger, still impressed with wine in coffee cups said, “Those guys must know you can’t drink wine when you’re driving, but they gave it to us anyhow. Are they nuts? Are we nuts? I mean the cops, the cops must know they do this. How do we know they aren’t just sitting down the road waiting for us to drive by?”

“You worry too much,” said Otis. “The only people who go to Bobby Ray’s are guys taking their clients out for a nice dinner. The cops know where the money is. Ain’t no body gonna bother us over a little wine in the car.”

“No different than drinking pop on the way here from Greensboro,” said George. “As long as you don’t hit anything real bad, nobody gives a shit.”

Calming words no doubt and at least true that night. The ride from Bobby Ray's to the Angel's Nest took about fifteen minutes with nary the scent of a Raleigh police cruiser. The Angel's Nest, like the half dozen other strip bars in Raleigh, was pretty tame by St. Louis standards: nude dancing only - touching, playing, fucking, sucking, etc. got you a poke in the eye or a night in jail or both. Most of its customers were business men just like the McDonnell gang – far from home, testosterone kicked up after an evening of hearty drinking with nothing but soft porn on the pay-for-view back at the hotel. Naturally, a naked lady dancing in your nose sounded pretty attractive. Even with a belly full of Bobby Ray's Bordeaux, the place looked menacing to Roger when they pulled into its nearly empty parking lot at 10 pm. The building, low hung, clad with grey dirt-streaked clapboard siding sat at the end of the lot. A dull yellow light hung over its steel entrance door which opened into a dimly lit rectangular room; Roger could feel the damp haze of cigarette smoke and stale BO seep into his shirt as they walked in. A shifty looking bruiser eyed them from behind the bar.

The bar sat in the middle of the room. Near its center, a shiny floored runway connected it to a small stage along the wall. Four flickering track lights cast the stage in a murky red that both helped softened the features of its aging strippers and enhanced the bar's grim eroticism.

The show followed the same hackneyed script as every other club in Raleigh. A stripper strutted around the narrow stage swaying back and forth to 1970's pop songs transcribed for synthesizer and snare, all the time shaking her ass and tits towards the bar, scrounging to get any bit of interest from the guys sitting there. Then she'd slowly walk up and down the runway shedding clothing until nothing remained but a pair of pasties and a G-string. By that time, if she was lucky, some of bar guys would start flashing five dollar bills to get one of those pasties as a souvenir of a big night in Raleigh.

Spangler and crew sat down at the far end of the bar and ordered drinks. Further down the bar three guys sat drinking beer, talking to one another, hardly watching the dancer on the stage. Despite the large quantities of alcohol George and Roger had consumed, the two were holding up fairly well. They each ordered a six buck can of PBR, intent on making it last for the rest of the evening. Otis sat quietly – he didn't want to be here either but where his customers went, so went he. The wine in the car had made him sleepy. He had ordered a syrupy cherry colored cocktail and hardly glanced at the dancers. Spangler, however, was raring to go. He ordered a shooter, stuffed a bunch of five and one dollar bills in his shirt pocket and pawed on the bar for the dancer to come his way.

She did. Spangler pulled out some one dollar bills and held them up like a fan. "All of it girl. Take it all off," he shouted.

The dancer moved in front of him. Tall, taunt and on the other side of forty; her lips were painted a deep red; thick mascara hid smoker's eyes. Roger reckoned she'd been around a bit. Still, she had firm legs, small jiggling breasts and a nicely bubbled ass. Dressed now in only tight blue satin panties and a lace top, she fixed her eyes on the besotted Spangler, alternately licking and puckering those thick lips. Spangler eyes, glistening through the dreary stage lights, burned with lust.

She plucked a dollar from Spangler's fingers, tossed and turned then plopped off her top. Two bright red pasties wiggled from her breast. "Yea baby... that's it. Take 'em off." His eyes were glued to her tits. Another dollar snatched, a toss and turn, then bending down she shook both now pastieless breasts six inches from Spangler's face. He made a grab for one of them and she expertly slid away.

"No touch big guy," she growled but only moved back a foot or two. Spangler held up a five dollar bill. The dancer moved towards him, twisted to her side and grabbed the bill. Then turning her

back to him, slip the panties to the floor, swayed her little ass back and forth a few times then swirled around dangling the panties in Spangler's face as she slowly rocked to the dance song's bass.

Spangler jumped up and lunged towards her pussy, fingers out, ready to grab. But he was slow and off balanced. The dancer dodged and moved back.

"Fuck off buster. No touching." The bar was suddenly silent as she screeched in Spangler's face.

The guy that served their beers came from around the bar. "Alright, that's enough. You guys need to head out. Now."

George and Roger had gotten off their seats when Spangler tried his pussy grab, smelling the trouble to come. Otis quietly joined them as the bartender approached.

Spangler just sat there. "Listen, meant no harm. Just having a little fun. Besides, this place is dead. Just livened it up, right?" He was looking down at his shot glass.

"I don't give a shit buddy. You know the rules. You and your friends just get out of here."

Spangler swiveled from his seat, attempted to plant his legs, and hauled his right fist towards the bartender's head. But the bartender lunged away and Spangler lost his footing as his arm swished through the air. The bartender smacked him right below the ear and Spangler fell to the floor. He started squirming back up when the bartender's foot caught him full force in his stomach. He went back down and stayed there; the bartender kicked him twice more in the ribs in case Spangler had missed the point.

Then sirens approached. Somebody had called the cops as the bartender was rearranging Spangler's ribs. "It's amazing how fast the Raleigh cops respond, isn't it?" George drily observed to Roger.

"Unless you're driving around drinking wine outa' dixie cups," he replied.

They cuffed Spangler right where he lay on the floor. “You’re all coming over to the station. This one, we’re arresting.”

Roger was more tired than angry. “George – I am going to kill that bastard. It’s almost midnight; here we are sitting in the back of a cruiser heading to jail. And all I wanted to do was go back to the hotel. But no, let’s get a nightcap he said. And him with the car. Shit.” Roger and George were jammed into the back seat of the cruiser. A thick wire mesh separated them from the front seat.

“You piss or vomit back there, you’re going to clean it up with your own shirts,” came friendly advice from up front.

“I just hope Otis calls someone at Superior and gets us out of here. We don’t have a car. The police probably won’t let us drive anyhow.” Roger continued. George sighed and looked out the cruiser’s window as they left the Angle’s Nest parking lot. “Besides, you even got a clue how to find the hotel from here?”

The Raleigh downtown police lockup was a five-story grey building split down the middle by an alley the cops used to unload their take. Spangler was taken to the jail on the right side of the alley, the other three, into police station proper on the left. There were long wooden benches in a small waiting room. Otis found a phone; George and Roger sat at either end of one of the benches, slouched against the hard wooden arms attempting sleep.

Otis made some calls, talked with the desk sergeant who made some calls; then Otis made more calls. It was almost 2am when he came back to George.

“We can go now. Spangler is being booked for drunk and disorderly but we got our lawyer on the way and he’ll be out in a bit. I got a cab. Let’s go.”

It was fifteen minutes from downtown Raleigh back to the hotel in Research Triangle. “I wouldn’t want to be in Bennett’s shoes tomorrow,” George said to no one in particular. “Taking customers from their biggest account to a strip bar, then getting into a fight, THEN getting busted by the cops. They’ll fucking crush his nuts as they kick him out the door. Betcha he is gone before we leave Friday.”

Otis sat on the front seat. “I’m as screwed as he is. Everybody knows Spangler is trouble when he drinks. Should never left Bobby Ray’s with all that wine. I’m fucked.”

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Work is work; there were planes to build and an expensive computer simulator waiting for the McDonnell Douglas boys. It was Monday morning, four hours after they got dumped at the hotel. George was downstairs first, in the lobby nursing a cup of coffee. The clock behind the reception desk said 7:25. Roger shuffled in with his briefcase and sat next to George.

“The smell of your coffee is making me nauseous,” not looking a George or anything.

“Actually a good puke might fix you right up. Restroom’s right over there,” George motioned to a door next to the valet stand.

“Ugh. Don’t even say that.”

“You’ll be OK. We gotta a lot of ground to cover today. Just keep drinking water and eat something sugary. It’ll calm your stomach down.” George sipped his coffee. “I gotta a call from Marilyn at 6 this morning. Nothing’s going to happen to Spangler or Taylor – at least not while we’re down here. Spangler got out a couple of hours ago. He should be fairly sober by now. Taylor

is up in his room getting him cleaned up for a big day at the Simulation Center. I know Bennett. He will act like he slept like a baby for eight hours.”

“Oh, and by the way – Superior’s taking us all out to a place called Corkey’s after work. Have a few drinks and do some good ol’ southern barbeque. It’s Monday night. Happy Hour goes to 9pm. Pitchers of PBR for a dollar. You’re gonna love it.”

Roger started making loud swallowing noises and struggled to get on his feet.

“The door’s over there to the right. You’ll feel better. We’ll wait.”