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SPECIAL DEIVERANCE

It was a little before eight a.m., on a chilly autumn day in 1966, when I hurriedly boarded the American Airlines plane at the Greater Cincinnati Airport and located my assigned seat. I was traveling on government business, from the National Institutes of Health, and our office manager at NIH had, accordingly, booked me into economy class for my overnight roundtrip to Cincinnati. However, due to overbooking – and likely due, also, to the large stainless-steel cannister that I was hugging with both my hands when I approached the airline ticket counter – the agent had offered me an upgrade to business class. I accepted the offer gratefully, and I was assigned seat 2B, an aisle seat. My carry-on suitcase was checked, since the cannister would be more than enough baggage for me to handle during the boarding process. No airline employee inquired or seemed curious as to the contents of the cannister.

Entering the business class cabin, I observed a rather burly, middle-aged gentleman comfortably settled in 2A, the seat by the window. This man was wholly occupied with pouring the contents of a miniature bottle of J&B into an ice-filled glass on his tray table, and he did not look up immediately when I arrived with my cannister. There were already two empty J&B miniatures on the man's tray table. As I slid into my seat, I cautiously lowered the cannister to the floor, taking care to keep it vertical. Once I had secured the cannister between my knees, I glanced again at the gentleman in 2A, who had already finished off his third drink and was now studiously stirring the ice in his glass. His face looked vaguely familiar. Had we met somewhere recently?

I was pretty sure that there was an FAA rule that prohibited the serving of alcohol to passengers prior to take-off, but this passenger seemed to have established a close rapport with the young blond stewardess who was on duty in the business class cabin. The stewardess presently came by with another J&B miniature for 2A and asked – while flashing a warm blond smile -- whether there was anything else that she might be able to provide for him. "Not right now, sweetheart," he responded, "but don't y'all go too far away." He then pulled a wad from his pocket and peeled off several bills which he handed to the stewardess – together with his business card.

The plane took off on schedule, promptly at eight a.m., and, as soon as the plane reached cruising altitude, I reclined in my seat and closed my eyes. I had awaked at half-past four that morning, in order to catch a taxi from my hotel near the airport and make it to the VA Hospital in downtown Cincinnati by half-past six. My instruction was to be present in an operating room of the hospital, scrubbed and dressed in a surgical gown, when a brain biopsy would be performed on a patient who had been disabled by a progressive and undiagnosed central-nervous-system disease.

The neurologists who had been attending the patient suspected that his disease was due to some rare and undefined infection. The brain biopsy specimen would be placed on dry ice in a stainless-steel cannister, and my sole responsibility was to carry the cannister back to NIH. There, in the primate lab, some of the tissue from the biopsy specimen would be inocu-

lated into chimpanzees, in order to determine -- after a year or two! -- if the patient's disease was indeed infectious and transmissible. I believed that I had been chosen for this assignment by my chief at NIH because (a) at the time I wasn't doing anything the chief considered important, and (b) the chief had faith in my ability to keep a stainless-steel cannister in a vertical position at all times.

"What on earth might y'all be carryin' in that there milk can?" The question from the middle-aged gentleman in 2A interrupted my catnap. "Y'all ain't fixin' to blow up this here airo'plane, are ya?" The man's voice -- the drawl and the dialect – sounded familiar to me. And the man's face now looked definitely familiar. A few evenings earlier I had attended a poetry reading at the Library of Congress, delivered by the "Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress," James Dickey, and it dawned on me that the gentleman on my right spoke just like James Dickey and looked a lot like James Dickey. I turned my head toward him and said, with some hesitation, "Pardon me, sir, but if I'm not mistaken, you must be James Dickey." The man nodded his head up and down slowly, twice, and smiled gravely, as if to signal that he was pleased by this homage. I explained that I had attended his recent poetry reading at the Library of Congress and had enjoyed it greatly. He again nodded his head up and down and smiled gravely.

I then proceeded to tell Dickey the story of the cannister. "Nothing in there is going to blow up," I assured my seatmate. Dickey expressed his admiration for the work that was being done by the medical scientists at the NIH. He then inquired as to my age, and when I replied "twenty-nine," Dickey exclaimed, "Twenty-nine years old! Damn! Y'know, I'd rather be twenty-nine again than be the Poet Laureate Consultant and all of that." As the plane descended at Washington's National Airport, Dickey, who was by then more than a little inebriated, handed me his business card and suggested that we meet for lunch sometime soon.

A couple of weeks later, after I had made telephone contact with Dickey, we did meet for lunch, at Mr. Henry's on Capitol Hill. I arrived a couple of minutes late for the lunch date but had little trouble spotting James Dickey. The Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (more commonly referred to as the United States' Poet Laureate) was seated at a table in the rear of the restaurant, and seated close to him, in her conspicuous American Airlines uniform, was the young, blond stewardess. I was surprised but not at all disappointed to be part of this rather staid *menage a trois*. Dickey introduced me to the stewardess, whose name was Kimberly ("please don't call me Kim"), and then ordered drinks for everyone.

Kimberly of course had no recollection of having seen me on the flight from Cincinnati when I was seated next to Dickey with a big cannister between my knees. We enjoyed a convivial lunch, during which the conversation was predictably dominated by Dickey's rambling but artful monologues. No one talked about brain infections or chimpanzees or anything like that, which was fine with me. I allowed myself just one glass of wine, knowing that I would need to return to the office after lunch, but Kimberly didn't object when Dickey refilled her glass each time that he refilled his own. I was surprised that she was exercising so little restraint, considering

that she was one of the crew assigned to an AA flight to St. Louis later that afternoon. Maybe the rules for pilots apply only to pilots, not to the rest of the flight crew.

Dickey entertained us with a lot of amusing stories, most concerning the foibles of well-known figures in the literary world. I recognized the names of many of those literati, and couldn't help but wonder if those individuals weren't reciprocating with similar tales concerning Dickey's foibles. Kimberly spoke little but appeared to be fascinated by her companion and his stories. Her pale blue eyes were wide open and fixed on Dickey continually, and some of his juicier stories caused her mouth to drop open, too. Our lunch concluded soon after the three of us finished our Irish coffees, and then it was time for Kimberly to depart for the airport. Dickey paid the bill, left a tip on the table, and then escorted Kimberly out the door of the restaurant. At the curb, after a brief hug and a peck on Dickey's cheek, she managed to hail a taxi almost immediately. I waved goodbye to both of them as I headed up the street toward my parked car. My only regret, upon departing the restaurant, was that I hadn't slipped my own business card to the pretty blond stewardess named Kimberly. At least I wasn't twice her age. But it probably wouldn't have done me any good, as she appeared to be thoroughly enamored of Dickey.

I didn't receive any more invitations to lunch from James Dickey during the next year, which would be his last as the United States' Poet Laureate. That didn't surprise me in the least. After all, he had been pretty much in his cups when he extended an invitation to me aboard the airplane, and, truth be told, we had hardly anything in common. But I did happen to cross paths with Dickey a couple of times during the course of the year, in circumstances which really did surprise me. During that year, in which I celebrated my thirtieth birthday, I was in the last throes of bachelorhood. The epicenter of the singles scene in the D.C. metropolitan area at that time was Georgetown, a once-elegant neighborhood that had deteriorated somewhat during the prior few decades and was then going through the process of "renewal." House rentals in Georgetown in that era were within the reach of recent – and some not-so-recent – college grads, and quite a few Georgetown houses were rented to groups of single young women in their twenties or early thirties. Those were the houses which regularly hosted singles parties on weekends, and word of the parties always spread quickly.

It was at several of those Georgetown singles parties that I encountered James Dickey – who was, mind you, still the incumbent United States' Poet Laureate – as he uninhibitedly mingled with a bunch of young partygoers, taking frequent sips from a beer bottle held in his hand, swaying in time to the music. He was easy to spot in a crowd because he was six-foot-three with a large head and a receding hairline. On those occasions when we did make eye contact, Dickey would acknowledge me with a nod of his head, but he would not interrupt whatever pitch he was making to the comely young woman du jour who stood at his side. Dickey's reputation as a womanizer had by then become common knowledge in the Georgetown singles community, as it had already been known for many years among the literati. His wife remained at their home in Atlanta throughout the two years of his service at the Library of Congress. She died in 1976 from alcoholism.

After leaving Washington, Dickey returned to academia, becoming a professor at the University of South Carolina and a visiting lecturer at several other institutions. In 1970 he published *Deliverance*, his highly acclaimed first novel, which he subsequently adapted as a screenplay. The 1972 movie brought Dickey considerable fame and fortune. He published a few more novels and a little poetry during the next two decades, though his later works were greeted with less acclaim. He remained a habitual womanizer and drinker, even as he sank deeper and deeper into the slough of alcoholism. In 1976, two months after his wife's death, he married one of his former students, and that marriage, too, did not succeed. His health steadily deteriorated, and in 1997 James Dickey died from alcoholic cirrhosis.

I had been provided, by chance alone, a few first-hand glimpses into the life of James Dickey during a relatively early stage of his career, while he was the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1966-8. I did not encounter him again during the course of the next thirty years. Even after Dickey became something of a celebrity with the publication of *Deliverance* in 1970 and the release of the movie version two years later, I never took the trouble to read the book or see the movie. (The sort of macho escapade that is at the heart of *Deliverance* – four "civilized" men in the wilderness, in backwoods Georgia, transformed into primitive survivalists -- never appealed to me.) I gave James Dickey scarcely any thought until I chanced to see his obituary in the Washington Post, in January of 1997.

Dickey's obituary gave me pause for reflection (as obituaries generally do.) I learned that in 2010 his son Christopher had published a candid memoir of the Dickeys' troubled family life, to which he gave the title *Summer of Deliverance*. And one reviewer of that memoir had opened his review with this observation: "James Dickey was hugely gifted and hugely flawed." That succinct observation, I thought, might have served as a fitting epitaph for Dickey. Then it dawned on me that, while I had come to know something of Dickey's flaws, I really knew next to nothing of his gifts. Not only had I not read *Deliverance*, but I had not read a single one of his poems, either.

Ironically, my first acquaintance with Dickey had been that evening at the Library of Congress thirty years ago -- just a few days prior to our chance meeting aboard an airplane departing Cincinnati -- when he gave a public reading of his poetry. That evening I heard him read selections from *Buckdancer's Choice*, a poetry collection that had earned him a National Book Award a couple of years earlier, but I paid scarce attention to the words that he was enunciating. Dickey wrote poems in free verse, replete with freely associated thoughts and exotic imagery, which I found difficult to assimilate at first hearing. What's more, I had become distracted by a couple of strikingly attractive young women who were seated to my right, a couple of rows down from my row. They gazed intently at Dickey all the while that he spoke, beaming adoringly, never turning their eyes away from the lectern. Wow, I thought, who would have imagined…here are a couple of really hot-looking chicks who are really into poetry!

I soon tired of trying to absorb whatever it was that Dickey was trying to convey to us via his poems, and I began to think of the punch-and-

cookies reception that was to follow, where Dickey would be signing copies of his latest poetry collection. That wasn't because of an ardent desire on my part to greet the United States' Poet Laureate, but only because of the opportunity I thought it might afford me to catch up with the poetry-besotted chicks whom I had spotted in the audience. At long last, Dickey finished his recitation and we all filed out of the auditorium. At the reception, rather than joining the long line of poetry lovers and poetasters who were waiting to meet Dickey and have him sign their copies of his book, I headed straight to the punch-and-cookies table. That's where I thought I might have the best chance of bumping into one of the hot chicks. Lo and behold, both young women did approach the table, and the shorter one promptly began ladling punch into three of the glass cups that were arrayed around the punch bowl.

"Well," I said to the taller woman, a knock-out blonde, who had begun to nibble on a cookie, "don't you think James Dickey might have made sure that we had some liquid refreshment that was, ah, perhaps a little more spirited?" I actually impressed myself with that impromptu word play. More than did the chicks, unfortunately. "Maybe he's a teetotaler" was my feeble follow-up.

The women glanced at one another and then broke into giggles. "No," said the punch-ladling woman, a well-endowed redhead. "I can assure you that James is not a teetotaler. Not to worry about the drinks, he'll be breaking out the good stuff later."

That riposte caught me by surprise. James? The Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, was "James"? And there's going to be an after-party, to which the two young ladies were evidently invited, where there'd be a whole lotta drinkin' goin' on? What connection, I wondered, did these two dishy women have to James Dickey? Does a Poet Laureate ordinarily have groupies attending an event like this?

"Do you ladies write poetry yourselves?" I asked. "Is that why you've come to this event?"

More giggles. "Do we look like poets? Do you think we're, like, real bohemian types?" asked the redhead, hands on hips, feigning a small measure of petulance.

No, they obviously didn't fit the grungy-poet stereotype, for they were both smartly dressed and carefully coiffed. "So," I disingenuously countered, "are you just friends of Mr. Dickey?"

They glanced at one another and emitted a few more giggles, before the blonde chick responded, "Sure, we're friends…we've been friends with James for…like, almost two weeks." At that they both broke into laughter.

Her friend, the redhead, couldn't refrain from breaking into a smug smile. Now I was really curious, so I probed a little harder. "You must be really good friends," I said, "considering that you've come all the way to downtown D.C. just to hear Dickey recite a few poems."

"Oh," responded the redhead, "it's not far at all. We fly for Allegheny Airlines, and we're based in D.C. We live just across the river, in Arlington. And we thought this would be a kick."

"So, you're stewardesses?" That was a safe presumption on my part, since there were no female pilots employed by commercial airlines in those days. They nodded their heads affirmatively, and then, catching sight of the United States' Poet Laureate motioning to them from the book-signing table, they promptly excused themselves and headed in his direction, bringing with them a glass of punch and a brownie for his refreshment.

My evening proved to be unrewarding all-around. I hadn't connected with Dickey's poems, and I didn't connect with the two stewardesses, either. As for my chances with those stewardesses, how could I compete with the United States' Poet Laureate? Who would ever have guessed that a middle-aged poet could be such a chick magnet? And why did the stewardesses decide to attend his poetry reading? Mainly for the after-party, I surmised. Yes, they really were groupies, in thrall to the pied piper Poet Laureate of the United States.

So, it didn't surprise me in the least when, a few days later, I found myself seated next to James Dickey aboard an American Airlines flight out of Cincinnati as he was hitting on yet another stewardess. It just seemed to be his avocation, his way of passing the time when he was travelling by air. Were these stewardesses just all-too-available, easy prey for an accomplished womanizer like Dickey? Or did he in fact have some sort of a neurotic obsession with airline stewardesses?

The Washington Post obituary had provided me with a few clues as to Dickey's obsessions. Airplanes, for one. Dickey had enlisted in the Army Air Force soon after the outbreak of WW II, when he had completed but one semester of college (at Clemson, in South Carolina, where he was tailback on the football team.) He flew thirty-eight missions in the Pacific Theater as a radar operator aboard Black Widow fighters, and he was awarded five bronze stars. He was called back to duty in the Air Force during the Korean War. Between the wars, he matriculated at Vanderbilt where obtained B.A. and M.A. degrees, and he later held a number of jobs – teaching and writing advertising copy – before he finally committed himself to a literary career.

While Dickey published several collections of poems during his lifetime, his best- known poem, by far, was *Falling,* his visionary re-telling of an actual event that had received a lot of media attention in October of 1962: An Allegheny Airlines stewardess was swept to her death when her airplane's emergency door opened during flight. This poem of Dickey's has been included in numerous poetry anthologies, and it has been reviewed most favorably by all manner of critics. Joyce Carol Oates judged *Falling* to be an "astonishing poetic feat," and Laurence Lieberman wrote that it was "a fantastic affirmation of life." Stephen King, in an interview published in The Atlantic, was effusive in his praise for *Falling:* "When it comes to literature, the best luck I ever had with high school students was teaching James Dickey's long poem *Falling*…They see at once that it's an extended metaphor for life itself, from the cradle to the grave…"

Okay, I decided, I would finally read something that Dickey had written, so that I might be able, after all these years, to appreciate the man in full. I got hold of a poetry anthology, a fat volume, in which I located Dickey's *Falling*. Given all the accolades the poem had received, including

some from critics who were themselves eminent writers, I expected to be blown away when I read the poem. But I wasn't. Impressed, yes, by some very creative imagery -- but blown away, no. In *Falling,* the poet depicts a stewardess who, having been swept through the opened emergency exit of an airplane, is falling to her certain death…while her mind is pre-occupied with…stripping off all her clothes? And that's what she does. I'm sure that critics who are so inclined could read into this depiction of a woman disrobing while in extremis something existentially profound. But I wasn't buying into that.

Dickey himself offered this explanation of the stewardess's actions: "She undresses on the way down … [she would] rather be found naked than in an airline uniform. So, she takes off everything, is clean, purely desirable, purely woman, and she dies in this way." Really? Is this a credible re-imagining of the woman's final thoughts? Not thoughts of horror, not thoughts of loved ones…but thoughts of how can I shed this airline uniform and get naked? Is Dickey re-imagining the woman's thoughts or projecting his own thoughts? In one stanza of the poem, Dickey pauses to describe the erotic dreams of widowed farmers and priapic farm boys in the houses below, asleep in their beds, as the naked stewardess accelerates towards her demise in a freshly plowed field nearby. He seems intent on transforming an actual human tragedy into a fantastic celebration of female sexuality and male concupiscence.

So, while I was not altogether enamored of *Falling,* my reading of the poem did provide me with some appreciation of Dickey's literary talent. Someday I may get around to reading *Deliverance*, too. Overall, have I been able to draw any lessons from the life of James Dickey? Not really. While he was a genuine war hero and widely acknowledged to be a talented writer, he was also consumed by his appetites – forever craving alcohol, and danger, and sexual adventure – and he failed as a husband and father. Like all human beings, he had gifts and he had flaws. And the reviewer of his son's memoir was probably right: he just had greater gifts and greater flaws than most of us. Judging by what I witnessed and what I have read about James Dickey, it seems fair to conclude that he was a self-absorbed person who couldn't love anyone but himself. Yet his poems were loved by many. Just another one of life's many riddles.

Rest in peace, James Dickey, United States' Poet Laureate.