

REUNION RAPPROCHEMENT by Anthony Branon

Tough decision. Do I risk life, limb, and composure to the vagaries of aircraft maintenance and TSA silliness? Set sail from Las Vegas and my recliner (with its accessory dog) in exchange for non-stop discomfort and a college dorm room with “accommodations” that would put a Spartan on Prozac? Suspend my wars with Vegas penny-slots just when I’ve moved into the black for the year by \$12?

Hello, 50th Reunion.

So long, air-conditioning.

Goodbye, TV.

Adios, refrigerator. Sayonara, computer.

Adieu, casino cocktail waitrae in dental-floss G-strings.

On the other hand, the 50th is hyped in Harvard’s nagging postal emissions as life’s final GREAT PERSONAL MILESTONE; conceding recognition, if you will, of Harvard as THE SEMINAL EVENT in the arc of one’s mortal-coil construct.

Yeah, right. Translation: Time for that big endowment bequest before the worms break out the soy sauce.

Harvard even sent me a snappy reminder in the form of a Reunion refrigerator magnet (magnet?) that never made it to the kitchen -- but did make it to the rear of a green SUV in the Rampart Casino parking garage where it was positioned with vodka-aided surgical precision over a Dartmouth decal.

In order to salvage enough dollars to add to my Class Gift donation (thereby approaching \$100 status and keeping the “class participation” percentage abreast of other carroted-on-a-stick Ivies), I opted to fly the one-stop Red-eye from Vegas to Boston -- departing at 12:35 AM. The crowded flight to Dallas/Fort Worth is uneventful after I clear TSA inspection at McCarran Airport where I lose my cigarette lighter, deodorant bar (over 3 ounces, sir), and re-shoe myself wrongly (right shoe on left foot) much to the amusement of a small Hispanic child who gleefully points out my error to all persons within twenty yards.

I wait three hours in Dallas to catch the connecting flight to Boston.

The Dallas to Boston leg proves not to be the routine fun-trip as advertised. It is, in reality, a Mexican Medivac mission between the southern border and the East Coast. During the flight, only half full, six persons from the four rows in front of and behind my seat, end up prostrate, two of them stretched out on the floor in the center aisle; the other four athwart seats, three seats to a customer with seat arms raised.

Midst the fallen bodies, you’ll be proud to know that my first thoughts are of Harvard and my classmates. And their assorted “partners.” The situation screams Swine Flu. My \$800 Reunion deposit hangs in the balance. But just before buckling up for a Logan tail-hook landing, a swarthy man of officious mien strolls among the stricken and declares that the semi-conscious ones do not have Swine flu. No way. A doctor? He could have been a plumber for all I knew. Or an American Airlines shareholder. (Hey, it’s been a tough year.) Nevertheless, I resolve to increase my prophylactic allocation of tobacco and alcohol, wash my hands real well, and not to schmooze indoors for the first 24 hours -- Quincy tent and suchlike ventilations

excepted.

I grab a cab for the hop from the airport to Harvard. The driver is a small dark man from Somalia. He drives well, but every five minutes or so he screams the word "FREEDOM" for no apparent reason. When asked where I want to go I say Quincy House at Har... "I do certainly know of that Quincy," he intones enthusiastically. Well, boys and girls, he does "know of" Quincy. The town. Ten miles in the opposite direction from Fair Harvard. After 20 minutes, I decode Boston's newly cobbled spaghetti-bowl Enigma, and we alter course for Cambridge. We arrive in Harvard Square -- where there ensues a marked unpleasantness about the appropriate tariff due. I refuse the sum. He knocks a few bucks off. I pay. He counts the money. "Hey mon, where my tip?" he asks. "You don't get a tip, pard," sez I, "... I already paid more than you should get." *Click!* The back door locks snap down. I'm locked in the cab. "You don't get out, mon," he growls. I lean into his sneer and growl back: "If I don't get out, you get your neck f*****g broke, ... MON!" But I extend a \$3.00 tip. *Un-Click!* Wry detente concluded, I exit. One last "FREEDOM!" -- a proper coda -- reverberates from the cab as it pulls away.

It occurs to me that "FREEDOM!" translates to "Hi yo, Silver!" in Somali.

I set course for Quincy House and registration.

In the space of forty steps, the plastic wheels on my suitcase, perhaps emboldened by the above cab gab, start an escalating spat (tick tick tiCK TICK TICK) with the grumpy legions of Cambridge sidewalk bricks. (Bricks most probably imported from Somalia.) -- "Escalating" because the wee axle on my suitcase is beginning to seize up for some reason. In minutes, wee wheels morph to wee skids. I de-Viagra the suitcase extension handle thingy. I heft the bag. A few more steps. The +90 point spread laid on Massachusetts humidity over that of Nevada by Ma Nature's bookie asserts its clammy advantage. Armpits weep. Crude crevices ooze offensive rills. Endothelials dilate. Privates crawl. Deodorant, stripped of reinforcement by TSA quislings, takes casualties, retreats, retreat to rout. My brand new Reunion sports jacket (Burlington Coat Factory -- "SPECIAL! LESS THAN \$100.00!"), now dark in widening spots, begins to squish.

This Reunion starteth not well.

Quincy acquired. I sign-in and get escorted by undergrad sherpa Portia through the Lowell House courtyard. The Sunday bells of Lowell explode directly overhead in all their tape-synced, stapes-cracking Gloria. I wonder if the damn things will do this every day I'm here. I consider leaving town at once; back to the peace and quiet of manic slot machine banks; back to the restful vistas of imagination-not-required dental floss G-strings; back to FREEDOM!

We reach my room door. Mr. Key, failing penetration, however slight, escapes Miss Lock's charges and is free to go. Noble Portia, the only person to lend me a smile and a helping hand since my trek began, now abandons me in quest of the proper key. I sit on my wheelie suitcase.

I sit for twenty minutes.

Portia returns. The door key fits. I enter my new home-away-from-home. I donate five bucks to Portia's sherpa benevolent fund. I'm alone.

For those who know, and in the interest of civility, it would be inappropriate for

me to shag Harvard's multi-billion-dollar image with a description of that room. But ... do the words Joad, Andersonville, and Hesperus (as in ship) work for you?

I disrobe. Completely. I look for clothes hangers on which to dry my damp raiment. No hangers. I utilize a standing floor lamp, the one rusty door hook, and the crude iron-pipe "headboard" of the bed as improvised substitute. (Bedding by Attila -- two sheets, one pillow, no blanket.)

I repair to the bathroom. I pee. (My prostate has been playing mumblety-peg with my urethra for the last two hours.) I innocently depress the flush handle. Again, as above, I won't describe the flushing evolution out of courtesy. But ... for those of you who have used the pee tube on an Air Force KC-135 at 500 knots over the Pacific, the voracious vacuum generated by that gender-altering 5-G flush may structure comparison.

I make a mental note to keep the bathroom window cracked open at least four inches to avoid the possibility of a sudden, perhaps fatal, decompressive commode-induced building implosion.

I step to the sink. Hit the hot water tap to rid my paws of trip debris. In dental school, I once dissected the lung of a coal miner who died of pneumonia. The tap exudes fetid ooze flecked with blizzards of tiny black granules. I've seen this before.

I sit on my bed. Ever the optimist. Seek the positive. Across the 12x12 room is a brick fireplace. Nostalgia stirs: of freshman nights in Matthews 18 with textbooks and overdue bills burning merrily on a similar hearth. Aha! A like conflagration would surely cheer these spare surroundings. -- But wait! Recall that the TSA appettes stole my lighter. Images rise: Huddled cacklers in bureaucrat-gray *Eye of newt and toe of frog* using my lighter to fire a dark pot *Wool of bat and tongue of dog* on the edge of the Nevada desert *Double, double toil and trouble* within broom distance of McCarran Airport. The flames rise 'round their foul concoct. Oh! The humanity!

Something else: there's nothing to burn in here but toilet paper and the wrapper from the single 1x2-inch "bar" of soap on the sink. (Likely purloined by Frau Faust from the Concord Holiday Inn in a fit of Endowment preservation, she being a Mother of Invention, etc.) Maybe if I rip some pages out of this Reunion booklet ... I look back at the fireplace. --Abort!

WARNING! THIS FIREPLACE IS INOPERATIVE. DO NOT START FIRE.

The sign next to the fireplace consigns this former nicety to tits-on-a-turnip status.

Sunday Night. Quincy tent. Early-bird, low-burner schmooze.

I approach from east of north. Backlit by random incandescence hulks a solid figure well away from the tented masses and their buzzings -- solitary -- silent. I am unsure. Might this be some faux-Remington composite? A retro mall-casting? A courtyard sentry of import stern and friend of squirting pigeons?

I hold position twenty meters off.

Unexpectedly now, its left arm drifts upward. "Unexpectedly" because my appraisal has committed to the inanimate. There it is! -- A hot red glow in a dark silhouette of head. The glow, blunt and big, too big to be mere cigarette. It's a man with a cigar! (Though "man" may be too rushed a diagnosis in these transforming environs according to a bit of Somali wisdom offered earlier this day.)

No matter. This is a fire source. I'm well past the 24 hour mark where lungs dare to dream; where floaters leave the eye; where coronary arteries start to hope.

This stolid being, this *ignis fatuus*, this ignitious Icarus, my first official '59er encounter. Classmate. Friend. Dealer.

"Who are you?" Gruff.

"Bill. Bill Branon." I take hold of the name tag on my lapel and tilt it at his face.

"Doesn't say Bill." A snarl.

"Yeah, well I'm ..."

"It says Anthony."

"I know. That's my first name. They ... My middle na ..."

Snort.

Me: "Can I get a light?" I feel the stirrings of both the werewolf and the addict in me, a problem I'm pretty good at controlling now that I've got seventy years in my back pocket. (But you never know.)

Stumpy reaches for matches inside his sports coat. He hands them over without saying anything.

I light up. My pack of smokes is five days old, but how sweet it is! I'm dizzy in fifteen seconds.

El Ropo reaches for the matches. Pockets same.

"Thanks," from me.

More silence while we two surreptitiously savor carcinogens. I expect jack-booted Minions of the Commonwealth to descend *ex machina* at any moment. A good friend of mine, Amy, a New England ex-pat, warned me of smoker status in Massachusetts, how Green Bullies hold the high ground. Amy, bunkie of my Libertarian writer pal Vin Suprynowitz, recently turned down a free Vegas to East Coast trip to see dear and dearly-missed family solely because of these hairy-legged Prohibitionistas. (I deem these rabid Nanny Staters had best take a long look at that butt-depilating Force 5 damned water-wasting ogre of a toilet in my assigned Reunion bathroom. Where I come from water is more precious a resource than lung tissue. Lungs, we got. They fly 'em in by the thousands every day.)

Suprynowicz, author of *Send in the Waco Killers* (get a copy), is a member of that most revered fraternity of mine: journalist. Vin's dad was a CPO radioman on the USS Raymond, one of the small boys in Sprague's tiny screening force that turned the mighty Yamato and her full cruiser escort in the Battle of Leyte Gulf, October 25, 1944. At least read the preface of *Send in the Waco Killers* for a one-paragraph definition of tactic and courage.

"Your name tag says you're Andrew. Can I call you Andy?" I feel human again.

"No, It's Andrew. ANDREW ... " Oops. No room for bonding with my savior just yet.

But then he says he's a journalist. In D.C. An editorial writer. ANDREW moves up from savior to minor god. Not only does he provide fire, he writes to deadline. My whole Harvard experience was defined by seven term papers over those four years, all started in the eleventh hour before date due. (One, a thirty-pager ... in German.) I still have nightmares. This smoke-breathing ink-stained Olympian does it for a living.

Bonded! In Epoxy.

“Hell, nothing to it, now. Just forty minutes of typing. Automatic.” The man dismisses his talent with a flick of paw. But those day after day deadlines. Again and again. I try to imagine. I can’t.

We talk of things big and small. A good talk. Smokes burn down. Then an odd thing happens. I walk over to a trash can and deposit my dead cigarette butt. I figure ANDREW is right behind me, about to do the same. No. He’s some distance off -- by a pile of construction planks. He’s crouched down. He’s secreting his dead cigar butt in a niche well out of sight. He takes great care doing this, determined to make sure it’s secure.

We part. He heads away from the tent and chatter, I toward the festivity. But I stop and look back. ANDREW has disappeared.

Mystery man. Mystery cigar butt hiding, The sweet swoon of nicotine fades. Did I imagine ANDREW? Was he a figment of withdrawal?

The Reunion begins to take on worth.

Maybe I’ll stick around, after all.

Yeah, I’ll give it a go.

The Sunday/Monday hours evolve to challenging tests of hunter and hunted. I stalk and confront familiar though time-smudged faces across crowded venues, only to be, in turn, shoulder-tapped by like stalkers who sneak up from behind and spring the 50th Reunion’s version of a pop quiz on me, an instant testing of rusty synaptic face-name welds. (I quickly learn to delay turning around at the first tap, opting instead for the person I’m talking with to look past me and say something like “*Hey, Bill, look! It’s Charlie.*”)

Speaking of welds ...

The editors of the 50th Class Report are two souls I did not know in college, Weld Henshaw and Louie Howland. We first trade correspondence after the 50th Report is published. What they accomplish in chairing the Report puts (most of) us in their debt. They properly deflect major credit to Deborah Smullyan and her warren of wordsmiths, but all concerned gave us gifts for the ages. I return to those books like an addict to crack. I’m not sure why. As I wrote to Weld, “You, Louie, and the book crew have done something most special for the rest of us. You have fashioned a literary rib-spreader -- and put it to use.”

Of course I would not be me if I didn’t forthwith screw things up. As a novelist, thus by definition a genetic enemy of editors, I write in a letter to Louie (with New York, not Harvard, in mind), that editors are “... nepotistic sperm fragments”

Louie, a gentleman to the core, replies: “... we editors were always pretty low in energy, vision, and courage [but] HarperCollins had the wit to publish *Let Us Prey*.” It doesn’t take an ESP major to infer “your piece of junk” after the word “publish” in the preceding line. Two -- shaaaay!

Truth be bold, editors repeatedly save my wrinkly butt. And I dearly appreciate what they do. My pre-college aptitude tests came back: *Do anything, but don’t write for a living. You can’t write worth a damn.* Probably the only time in history an aptitude tester used a profanity on an evaluation report.

Editors not only structure my re-writes and polish my gerund, they also refer me to proper defense lawyers, give me rides in big cars, and buy me drinks. They go far above and well beyond. As a result I always give them sixty or so easy typos to keep

them away from the deep stuff.

So, I'm crossing Plympton between Lowell and Quincy. My knees are really a mess -- too much church time as a kid -- and I trip over the curb. I'm caught by both arms before hitting the cement by four or five Harvard students getting ready to work the tents or drive vans or maybe just posted there to catch falling fogies. Who knows?

I'm really grateful and not the least embarrassed since I fall down a lot. Plus, there's all kinds of gravity around Harvard.

I thank my fellow gymnasts and make some half-ass remark like "This was just a test. Well done!" Something like that.

I gather myself, check tie, fly, and name tag, and start toward the Quincy gate. Coming at me, of impish eye and cocked head, is a craggy-faced elder wearing an off-scarlet sports coat that would lead one to believe this elder has managed to mug a restroom attendant at Fenway Park.

"Branon?" Finger pointing at me.

"Henshaw?" Me, pointing back. In this instance, the 50th Report mug shot mates reasonably well with reality, unlike some of the back-lit photo-shopped surgeries that pixilate the Report's pages.

Smiles, handshakes, and salutations accomplished, I insult his sports coat. He replies that it's not his, he had to borrow it.

I assess the odds. Word-people are quick on their verbal feet. Enough said.

Henshaw is a bit shorter than I imagined, editors being at all times granted Herculean stature in my imagination, the result of a simmering sense of inferiority as to my scribing inventories. However, I am made at once comfortable by the man's bony, properly weather-beaten face, a visage nonchalantly stepped on by time and brine -- and apparently, judging from his slightly bulbed nose, by the working end of a mainsail boom at the terminus of a vicious jibe. And the eye of Weld Henshaw! It is graced by a traitor twinkle, testament that, though crimped by circumstance, this man is one with whom an evening and a bottle could not better be sacrificed. Here be a gentle dragon. Draggin'? (Though that "twinkle" thing could be a calcified cataract in search of a laser.)

I envy facial histories since I am pure of skin and delicate of bone, my soft Celtic angles a cherubic melody evermore sweetly tuned by time. Alas, if moderation had not taken my days ...

Upon subsequently parsing Henshaw's partner in print, Louie Howland III, I choose caution as muse. H-III's 50th Report entry bubbles with pH1 discontent, bristle's with accusation, and concludes with the ominous intimation that he has an impending audit with Beelzebub's CPA. The only one not nailed to H-III's "Big" cross appears to be Big Bird. The growl pervading H-III's Class Report submission alerts me to the possibility of what psychologists term transference. I fear hosting the concentrate of III's ire. I have enough problems without inviting the red dot to dance on my vest as I fill four-of-a-kind at my favorite Las Vegas poker table.

But ... though I chance dire misinterpretation, I'm obliged to report an innocent observation: III and Henshaw, through some mystical juxtaposition of divine import, share identical DNA. (I'm talking Bible here, people, not Mendel.) Were it not for Henshaw eating a boom tip and H-III having intercepted a right cross in

some bar (his nose tacks to starboard of plumb), it would take stout apostasy to deny the match. Per collateral military assignment, I am schooled in breaking disguise. I'll admit to Reunion fatigue, visual degeneration, and to excess imbibing of Reunion-fired social medicaments, but it's there. Gait, bone structure, set of jaw, retreat of hairline, -- not to mention affinities of sail, pen, geography and education. I'll own up to an aging author's tendency to mental overlay, a protective urge that seeks to meld all editors into single threat, but I'll be dinged if this ain't pretty cool.

The above is compliment, not critique. These men share blessed sensitivity and decent perspective. Neither suffers pretence gladly. Both carry sorrow with class and meet obligation with resolve. They give their time. They value works of worth.

Chaos theory does pattern, after all; and these two mates of ours are, to say the least, appropriately non-linear. Hail fellows, well met!

(Though H-III does strafe icons, including Harvard, with non-reg hollow-points.)

(And Henshaw has really, really bad taste in sports coats.)

My first tent foray immediately results in a Tingle encounter.

Some years back, Mr. Donald Eric Tingle was gracious enough to write me a gratuitous atta-boy based on something I'd written. We began to correspond. At some point I grew concerned by his brilliant though plaintive Report entries, but that never intruded on our back-and-forth about books and writing. A few years later he tolerated my crude self-published first-book effort and, in a follow-on missive, with classic Tinglesque grace, described me as "*turbocharged calliope*" and promoted me to the level of "*dysthymic stove bolt*." I realized he was being kind.

Tingle is one of the few un-met '59ers I've resolved, under penalty of sobriety, to meet at the Reunion. Meet we do.

That first afternoon in the tonic tent I spy what looks like a Tingle engaged in conversation with one man and three women. "Yes, that's Tingle," from the wine-gargling personnel directory on my port side, a forgettable Dilbert positioned by a playful Satan's evil GPS.

Two of the women lean close to the Tingle. Lady fingers rest on his forearm. Inference of intimacy. Implication of indiscretion. The sugary musk of mischief fondles Quincy courtyard's leaves of grass.

Whoa, Nellie!

This is Tingle a-mingle. Not what I expect. Not the image he artfully projected through twenty years of depressive class reportage. The first clue: he's not wearing a straitjacket -- merely the regular kind. No shackles. No attendants. From his past Class Report encryptions I half-expected, if not a sagittal Bosch, at least a screaming Munch. *Why, you old fox!* I should have known. I mess with cams and pistons, too. Mostly tractors and Fords. But not at his level -- that of Master Lotician. One thing about us wrench-spinners: If something's broke, you fix it. If ol' Don's timing belt was off a notch a while back, he got hisself fixed. Now, as I watch this self-assured and suave Tingle work the Sabines, I realize I must re-set my assumptive carburetion.

I turn to face Dilbert to excuse myself. So I can go meet Tingle. *Hey, Dil, I think I'll mosey over and ...* There's a sudden sharp tap on my shoulder. "Branon." Not a question. Tingle has materialized from across the tent in milliseconds. I am undone.

First the Hulk (ANDREW) disappears into thin air. Now, Tingle appears next to me with similar disregard for space-time legislation.

I gaze into my drink, then across to the table of mixologists -- fresh-faced Harvard students, smiling, mixing, pulling tips from mobile cadavers -- no witch hats, no mystic wands, no tiny vial of hallucinogen sprinkled into the drinks of endowment non-donors. I begin to wonder what the early symptoms of Swine Flu might be.

I stare at Tingle in confused silence. It's not that I don't recognize him. I do. His Class Report pic is properly vintaged. And I'm not being cocktail-coy for effect. Nor is my lull purely a product of his abrupt cross-tent levitation. My discombob stems from the fact that Sir Tingle is the dead-on spittin' image of my best Navy buddy, Bob Howie. Right down to the short-timer beard. The eerie likeness wasn't evident to me in the Report's two-dimensions.

Howie is a chap who stuttered to the point of incoherence as a kid. He studied voice and physiology and worked like hell to overcome his problem. He ended up, among other attains, as Intelligence Briefer to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. (Yes, those Joint Chiefs of Staff.) In that capacity, a stutter, here and there, has the potential to fry more than patience.

I almost say *Howie*?

"Branon?" This time a question.

Don and I cross orbits many times during the Reunion. We talk motors. *Hell, fixing a Lotus is a snap. It's a real simple engine.* We talk of writing and books and how to bump Read Only to OCR to CD. Tingle, the most brilliant insight-tortured pen in the class, is trying to get his stuff published. It's a tough commercial market for Literature -- no big secret. I attempt to offer subtle consolation on acquisition editors. (Oops, there's those nepotistic sperm fragments, again.) I opine on shallow pop culture infatuations: *celebrity ... confessionals ... cookbooks ... tit biters* (my updating of the retro term "bodice rippers"). Easy, Billy boy. My try to bolster Don edges a bit too close to my own pop tit-biting style. How to palliate authors' cyclic angst? I could retreat to Melville's Mr. Dick or Sammy C's Xanadu, but that would empty my intellectual wallet. -- Beowulf and I never did Grendel and fries together.

Occasionally Don escorts a Branon reader forward who offers a nice word or two on one of my publications. After a quick guess at how much he paid these guys to do this, I come to appreciate Don's decency.

I never did that nicety for a fellow writer.

A thing unexpected begins to occur; an awareness that will evolve to revelation from Sunday on the way to Friday.

I came to Harvard as freshman determined not to let Harvard intimidate or color me. (Unfortunately, I suspect, even to educate me.) I arrived self-everything; not the best at anything, but damn good at survival. Irish-pig-headed independent, to boot. What begins to dawn on me is not just an appreciation of the brute intelligence of the men and women I'm meeting here.

Not their money.

Not their books.

Not their patients saved or cases won.

Not their summas.

But this:

Their kindness.

Their decency.

And Mr. Donald Eric Tingle is the one who turns on the light.

Despite my current dietary practice of eating only one meal every two days, I stoutly determine to attend all Reunion meals on the docket. Hunger is not my fear; missing subversive table talk is. Veritas is a sucker for vino et vittles.

Full Disclosure: I prepaid for all meals with my pre-registration. A faction of my genetic stew tends to tartan and tam. An Irish border violation? So “frugal” won’t gild my obit; “cheap” on the other hand ... No way I’ll waste my carbo ante.

A man may hae an honest heart ... yet hae nay cash to spare him.

(Robbie Burns, -- 1786)

The once-every-two-day regimen mentioned above accomplishes several things:

(1) No more weight control wars. (I’ve dropped 40 pounds in eighteen months.)

(2) When one does eat, it’s every man(icotti) for himself. No restrictions. Hoo Ha! Chomp, chomp. Prepare it and I will come.

(3) You get to stress-test Type II diabetes theory that advises frequent little meals. My sugar’s great. It’s always fun to knuckleball doctors.

(4) Your messmates will give you funny nicknames; mine (infrequent but large meals) is “Monty” -- as in Python.

So, about the meals. My handy-dandy Reunion booklet says there’s an informal lunch Monday noon at Annenberg Hall. I lurch my way north, my coral-laced knees protesting every uphill meter between Lowell and the Yard.

I discover a confluence of bewildered bipeds milling around Memorial Hall’s exterior. Nobody seems to know where Annenberg Hall is. Surely there can’t be one Hall inside another. Tiny maps are blinked at in the glare of a blinding mid-day sun. I don’t know where Annenberg is, either. No entry is evident. No signage in stone or helpful paper on post to guide that pilotless pooling of pilgrims.

Then -- a distant olfactory imprint starts to twitch. I close my eyes. Concentrate. Faint at first, then stronger. Now I have it. The scent of decades-old beer. Cached deep in stone, marinating wood, it lingers still. Puddles of beer. An ocean of beer. An obscenity of beer.

I guide the herd to gastric salvation. Me, the pie-eyed Piper. The Moses of noses.

To the left of the INSIDE entry to Annenberg Hall (INSIDE Memorial Hall) is another of those ubiquitous Reunion “Spirits” stations. Only beer and wine, this time. I take a brew to replace spent fluid and as homage to freshman smokers.

A minion of Miller nods suggestively at the tip jar. I grind my teeth. Skycap in Vegas. Waitress in Dallas. Cabbie in Boston. Gratuity envelope atop the Reunion sign-in package at Quincy, noble sherpa honorarium, bartenders, -- and Harvard’s ever-present, subliminal, white sound, gray light, skin temperature, endowment violin ensemble playing the Tin Cup Concerto.

I fork over a buck tip. Where does it stop?

I pass through Annenberg’s doors into a vast table-filled church gymnasium of sorts. At least everything’s paid for in here. Gratuity Free Zone. At last.

I turn to my left just inside the entry. I taste my beer. I'm six feet from a large statue of, I think, John Adams. The statue's right arm is extended. Palm out.

Reflex takes over.

I go to my pocket for a couple of bucks.

Later, post-Annenberg, my fear of passing Swine Flu to destitute functionaries dashes any hope I have of attending the scheduled "presentations" on Harvard's financial straits. Though the word "electrifying" does not adequately convey the degree of fascination I feel at the prospect of five-hours of lecture on this subject, my proximate seat-mates and fiscal leaders must come first. Asymptomatic though I be, the danger of close-quarters transmission is too great. The day pigs fly will be the day I'll venture such selfish risk. I repair to an ale house in despair.

At dusk, I wander home to Quincy tent, my canvas oasis in this desert of bricks.

Wherein occurs a Grand Reformation!

It is here that The Dachen Machens will assemble, their glasses raised on high. Atwood, Costa, Gorman, James, Branon and, later that evening, Snodgrass *de Los Angeles*, who has to work late, as usual. The above-mentioned men are apparently the only DMs in attendance, though I suspect others craft foul eschew and adopt low profile lest punitive warrant still pend. (Snowballing Dr. Pusey and Bombing the Bick come to mind as likely Statutes sans Limitation.)

A study club formed in the mid '50s, the Dachen Machens is more fully described in my 50th Report entry. The only line I here extract as relevant is: "... *A club of peculiar Banshee trill requiring immediate return regardless of circumstance ...*" On subsequent days of the Reunion, I suspect that I'll not be the only Dachen Machen uneasily weighing social priorities should a BREEEET resound during a random Latin Salutatory, Chapel chorale, or Senior screed. But I know these men. The call will be answered! -- Then again, Bob Snodgrass and I, The Count (my club handle), are the only two Dachen Machens at the Reunion without our wives. Hmmm. Will return BREEEETs of the others fail to materialize due to spousal intimidation?

We must now consider wives. As Snodgrass and Branon proceed through the week, the dorm room, bleak to start with, quickly and properly degrades to hovel status. Skivvies hang on lights. Beds sag unmade. Socks camp in corners.

In the Quincy House dining room, Tuesday breakfast sees an inspiring revival of the heretofore dormant Snodgrass vs. Branon eating contest. My opening gambit is a dinner plate buried in strips of fat-oozing bacon. Only bacon. Nothing else. No more room on the plate. Snodgrass counters by mustering a cohort of glazed rolls armored in butter, great gulps of orange juice walking point. During undergrad days Snod and The Count downed a minimum of one quart of O.J. per day -- each. (Procured from the Greeks across from Elsie's.) We competed on everything from pool tables to game boards to the floor. (Sit-ups -- in the 300 to 600 rep range.)

The revival continues. Islets of Langerhans tremble in the face of sugar tsunamis. Pensioned livers brace for phalanx on phalanx of fat.

Fellow '59ers stare. Then smile. Memories.

The wives of '59ers gag. Then get up and move. Revulsion.

So, that's the problem with wives. Apparently Snod and The Count are the only ones trusted by the Bitter Half. How sad. Would the others not savor the excite of

excess? The freedom of filth? The gasses of gluttony? They'd rather choose scold by sigh? Shackle by scowl? It makes no sense. The spine of Reunion is atmosphere. Our fellow travelers in those lost days were spiders and dust balls. That's Atmosphere!

The sight of wife exiting dorm entry at speed, followed by husband still loaded with suitcase and check-in package, was mine to witness twice. Thoroughbred mares obviously too "classy" for their assigned stalls. Pea-under-the-mattress types, no doubt.

Yet, I concede delight in meeting my mates' mates. I'm meeting all for the first time, except for Beverly James whose Palo Alto castle I invaded unannounced with a kayak paddle on my shoulder in November, '85. I'd been solo-ing down the stormy California coast, a grubby apparition needing a place to rack. On that visit, while roaming downstairs in search of a lost sock at 3 A.M., I triggered the James' robust security alarm system. George hit the upstairs floor with a mega-thud as he fell out of bed trying to get to the cop phone to abort an armed response. Oh, well.

John Atwood's Marti, (whom I prefer be named Nadia), has a Ukrainian sparkle to her. High zygomas and disarming freshness. I ask myself why would she wed a lawman -- perhaps she violated a copyright and this cad Atwood brought her to earth with threat and a BREEEET!

Keith Costa's Beverly. I try to make out stress lines on Bev's brow as remnant of her Kermit-gigging tussle a few years back. I detect nary a furrow. I try to imagine what it's like working the planet to rescue three young grandkids while time and distance howl. Bravo, g-ma! Who's got the movie rights?

Frank (*I'm not just a diver, damn it!*) Gorman's Pati: Bubbly. Energetic. Funny. A looker. Obviously very tolerant. Extremely well read, more so since the Reunion. Married far below her station, she fights on with a smile. Most empathetic to one whose hubby nicknamed me *The Big Red Organ* back in Matthews when I would roam the halls in my blood-red full-body Doctor Dentons.

George James' Beverly. San Francisco Royalty. Obviously a misguided jock-chaser, she fell for a gimpy Harvard basketball-cum-wannabe rock singer who probably doesn't have two dimes to rub together. Man, the times I had to keep him out of trouble. Once, down at Princeton, I had to drag George away from getting his face recycled by a Korean War vet. The things I do! Bev, you're my warrior hero!

Like my wife, Bob's wife Kay stayed home to watch the dogs. I suspect darker reasons. Kay, a creative, Colombian-connected beauty, knows how demanding it is to keep up with Bob, a thyroid in moccasins. He's all over the place, ever in motion and disgustingly fit. Liable to launch into lecture at the drop of a loose premise. Reunion for Kay, trying to keep up with Bob on these bumpy bricks, would be hell.

Even *in absentia* Reunion spouses can be trouble. Example: The only other reunion I ever attended was in New Haven in '05. (Prep/high school.) I made the trip to that 50th to kill a lot of birds with one stone -- book talks, Hopkins' 50th, inter my mother, stuff like that. I have to speak at the Yale Graduate Club. Loll says I should make a good impression, so she buys me a blue shirt and a new suit. She also rolls up my belt and sticks it in the toe of one of my dress shoes. Loll always packs my stuff. She says I don't have "clothes sense." (?)

The room's full. Alums. Spouses. The banquet table is in the shape of a big letter "U." The dinner: desert stage. I get up and wander to the center of the "U" to talk

with a Yalie I pitched against in a Harvard/Yale freshman baseball game way back. Two things: (1) The new suit Loll buys me is slippery like it's plastic, and the blue shirt (I'm convinced of this) is made of spun Teflon. (2) I wear my running shoes to the dinner, not my dress shoes (running shoes are way more comfortable). Since I don't wear my dress shoes, I never find my belt that Loll stuffs in the toe.

I'm in the "U." I raise both arms high to show how my first baseman spears a line drive a Yalie hits off me. *Woosh!* My pants drop to my ankles. Lucky me, I'm wearing my cherry-red Hanes briefs (two for \$3). A hush falls over the room. Red tighties. White retired-guy legs. Blue shirt. -- Memorial Day. -- Totally patriotic.

Just one more example why spouses and Reunions don't mix. Even from far off.

My Solution to Spouses: Spouses can only come to a Reunion for the last day where there's Dinner Dance stuff and wine drinking.

Advantages:

(1) Alums get a few days, spouse-free, to re-bond -- to rant and expound and dissemble just like in the old days. (Atmosphere)

(2) You get to switch accommodations just before your picky spouse arrives so you don't get run off to some expensive hotel for the whole week. (Saves money.)

(3) If important college-things like a return BREEEET needs to be done it can happen. (Avoids intimidation and scowls.)

(4) You can get drunk and give a lot more money to Prez Drew than you can afford. (Good for Harvard.)

(5) You only have to change your underwear once. (Hygiene.)

(6) You can cut way down on those after-Reunion social outings conjured up by spouses with too much time on their hands; you may have discovered during your spouse-free days earlier in the week that you really don't want to spend any more time playing ear to some preening fruit-ball. (Gets you back to your dog and your recliner where you belong.)

I offer this suggestion on the management of spouses for free. Stay alert. It's probable that I'll have more suggestions like this for Reunions.

The evening progresses. As the Quincy crowd swells and spirits flow, at some point I'm enfiladed by the '59er ROTC squad. I don't precisely recall the hour. I vaguely remember earlier passing a table of Rounders and Schemers on one of my bar recons. CPA: three meters. More silent that table than other tables. Squinty of eye they were, heads turning in concert to track passers-by. Now I pass them again. Do I imagine their scan? To what end?

Suddenly I'm staring down the barrel of a swizzle stick. It's owner squares my front. *Art Romaine* says his name tag. *Parris Island* says the set of his jib.

I take a step back.

The hand of another grips my shoulder from behind. Envelopment. I turn. The wisp of once-savored never-forgotten *Eau de Bunker Oil* googles up decades-old memories; the same dazzling olfactory genetic that parted seas of confusion and led the famished multitude to Annenberg's succor connects again.

Navy. Engine room. Snipe. And this one's old. Papa Snipe.

This name tag says *Hill* -- *Malcolm Hill*.

As the ROTC squad is introduced, some deeply imprinted Pavlovian reflex kicks

in: I pull out my rumpled pack of stale cigarettes. Up to and through bright college years, ever pure in thought and habit, I shunned sample of demon weed. But then, alas, I fell in with a bad crowd aboard ship. (Navy Chiefs.) As we drifted in the hot laze of a flat equatorial sea -- *As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean* -- a cabal of these crusty elders forced me into the dark clutch of week-old black coffee and foul tobacco. Whenever the comfortable fraternity of military fellowship recurs, as now, the urge to smoke rekindles.

There's only one problem (besides the fact that I'm standing in a state formerly the Mayflower of Tolerance) -- I have neither match nor lighter. Romaine watches me fumble for matches I don't have; I shrug: he wheels and hurries off. In seconds he returns, leading a fine gentleman who offers not just a book of matches, but a pouch of cut tobacco. *Sorry I don't have a cigarette, but if we can find some paper ...*

I smile and demur. I draw a bent and flattened smoke from its crushed container. Awe paints the faces of the assembled. *Is this guy cheap or what?* With the skill of the truly addicted, I massage my cigarette back to proper shape and light up. I go to hand the matchbook back. *Keep 'em. I'll get more.* -- I'm truly home.

Ten minutes pass, and aggressive discourse concerning the stunted status of ROTC programs at Harvard displaces small talk. Eyes narrow. Jaws tighten. Intimation of insurrection brews. Earlier I regarded Romaine as crisp but gentle in manner, a man whose name popped a double-deep phonetic wheelie with the title of my first book, *Let Us Prey*. (Think hard. Hoo Ha!) Now, on the subject of ROTC, Art's proud opine as ROTC grad and Captain of a Marine rifle company begins to show through. As does the boiler plate of Malcolm Hill, Chief Engineer, DD-629. Fletcher Class strong-boss still herding cadets and teaching midshipmen which end of the oar goes in the water.

Holding on to the rail of a ship five times their size, I've watched those gutsy Greyhounds take plus-forty degree rolls in WesPac typhoons. It's tough enough keeping turbines spinning in small seas, but in that kind of hell? Falling into a shaft alley can take the crease out of your khakis.

As The Week of Reunion shifts to The Week of Revelation, I meet others like these. Military men who have been where I've not been, men who have seen more than I have seen. And their ladies who lived alone with the icy fear that one day the doorbell could ring and dissolve the dream. We military know different verses, but the common chorus keeps us close.

A thing not of my asking seems to want me to choose sides. Harvard or military. Where -- in the end -- if I have to choose -- when it comes right down to it -- does my loyalty reside? It's a petty exercise. I imagine that this request originates from deep in the hindbrain where primitive decisions need be made; brontosaurus burger or T-rex T-bone? Club or spear? Yale or Princeton? Its puerile genesis stems from the Harvard vs. ROTC bicker, no doubt.

Hey, pal, answer my question. Who's side are you on? Sounds simple. Pick.

Harvard or military?

Well, it's not that damn simple, Mr. Hindbrain. Everyone, military and civilian, eventually gets beaned in this ballpark. Hard times seem to even out; enough bad

hops to go around. War is heck. But there's no shortage of missed pitches in the class of '59. Not at our age. Ol' Ned has a great fastball. We've carded our share of regret. Most of us know what it's like to nurse sanity through an iffy night.

One more thing: You'll find heroes in San Francisco and Greenwich Village as well as in Kirkuk and Kabul. Wars against rejection and prejudice hurt, too. AIDS and hate eat pretty much the same as Willie Pete. -- Listen up, "pal," love is hard enough to find in this life. Give it a god-damned rest.

Harvard or military? Pick one or the other? Can't do it. Might as well ask me which of my kids I love most.

So, Hindbrain's bicker sort of puts me down. But then, unanticipated, up pops Reunion's great gift: a peculiar and genuine pride in the accomplishments of '59er roommates and friends. A pride that blind-sides me on the steps of Lowell's "B" entry where, after years apart, I run into Bob Snodgrass. It happens again when George James sticks out his hand beneath a smile as big as his heart. I am at once proud of them. My freshman roomies. What they have done. What they have given. No envy. No qualifiers. Simple pride. What they have accomplished, I somehow share. The mish-mash of Matthews 18 kept it together, kept charging. My tenuous "I did it!" changes to a solid "We did it!" Ol' Ned may have slipped a few by me, but the ones I missed, George and Bob hit. Scoreboard, baby! Something more: We grandpas are still punching. George still gives. Dr. Bob still heals. I'm still alive.

That same sense of pride repeats as I meet other '59ers. This is the gold I will smuggle back to Las Vegas.

On Tuesday night I join the Ivy Blitzkrieg (with Wehrmacht escort) that rolls through the streets between Winthrop and Symphony Hall. The eyes of a stunned populace stare in glazed bewilderment from sidewalk and side street as our monster bus convoy rumbles past. Poland, 1939. The urge to apologize to someone is strong.

The Pops concert starts well enough, but we Harvards are packed in like olives. Five to a table-built-for-two. Twinkle-ass midget chairs made by Machiavelli on moonshine. Tables by Tonka. Legroom by Leonidas. Too crowded. Though flush with health, I'll not chance laying waste the third row center with Swine Flu. I bail first chance I get, which is pretty quick. Self-quarantined, I decide to explore.

Symphony Hall proves an interesting place. I discover hallways and stairwells, meeting rooms and restrooms. I go outside and smoke some stuff with a "connected" bus driver and a '59er classmate I meet for the first time -- another "Anthony," like me, and with some Navy history, a penchant for cigars, and an aversion to sardine-can seating (all like me, too). We three talk and smoke. Anthony and ANDREW (he of Quincy night # 1) would be my first choice as wingmen on the shore patrol gigs I pulled overseas where I learned that barrel-shaped Damon Runyonesque conscripts steely of eye and chewing erect cigars are gifted peacemakers.

Smokes finished, I leave my two compadres and go back inside which requires some work since these fromp doors all lock automatically when you go out. Before leaving my sidewalk pals, I ponder telling them about the room I discovered inside that has a big-screen TV and an open bar. (The bar is "open" because there's no one around.) But I decide against telling them. That Swine Flu thing, don'tcha know.

I slip back into the room. The bar is still “open.” The TV shows what’s going on in the concert hall. All in all, sort of a neat arrangement.

I settle in with my complimentary drink. It looks like they’re doing *Oklahoma!* or suchlike on the stage -- crazy folks in jeans and boots are yelling and jumping up and down. Ooooh. Too much like Nevada. I don’t want to get homesick like Palin for Prudhoe. I kill the sound on the TV and savor sweet solitude. -- You betcha!

Early Wednesday morning I rise with the sun and put on my townie clothes. I need to walk and loosen up the old knees, but mainly I want to check out the old streets, see what the alleys have to offer, see what’s left of the ’50s outback.

Down to the river, past the boathouse, and west under the bridge where I used to row my wherry despite picking up a used condom on the blade of my oar at every fourth stroke. (I always meant to trek up river to see where in hell they were all coming from.) Next, I climb the bank to Boylston Street -- it’s called something else, now -- then north toward the Square. I hoof it around Harvard’s periphery as far as the rickety two-room walkup my gal and I rented on Broadway for the duration of my senior year. (\$49.00 a month.) Lolly was an RN working at MGH to keep gas in my Vespa and hash on the table.

Four hours later, memories buffed and discoveries put by, I return via Plympton Street to Quincy. Things I saw on my hike seemed hemmed in, closer together. It’s funny how memory inflates geography. Encounters of note: Two squirrels, one on each side of a quadrant of pizza, wrestle their prize down Plympton’s sidewalk. The pair work like Atlas Van Lines pros, advancing the left side of the slice then the right with steady six-inch synchronicity. I follow for half a block. The pace never slackens. Hypnotic. They don’t even stop for a coffee break -- evidently non-union.

The other encounter is with a lean homeless man who emerges from a narrow trash niche next to a Seven Eleven. He smoothes wrinkles out of his wool shirt. He looks up. Our eyes meet. We sit on stone steps and will spend forty minutes talking the chill out of the morning. I offer a cigarette. He smiles, accepts. We light up. At one point, I offer him a twenty. He frowns. He refuses to take it. I insist. So does he. *I don’t take money, I work for it.* I stuff the twenty back in my pocket.

When it gets cold I go down to Pennsylvania. Or Virginia.

But I always come back here.

I come from New York.

I like being near Harvard. I just do. It makes me feel right.

I tell him about the time a friend and I hitch-hiked to Bethesda, Maryland, from Saybrook, Connecticut. We were both in the eighth grade. We went to visit a family that had three “easy” blonde daughters. He’d met them at the beach. We exhausted our ten-buck stake on the way down and, while the family was out to church, we cracked open a six-year-old’s piggy bank to get enough cash to buy something to eat on our hitch-hike back to Saybrook. We got \$5.75 from Ms. Piggy.

Couldn’t get away with that nowadays. Hitch-hiking, I mean. Eighth grade.

“Maybe not.”

Wouldn’t get past New York. You ever pay it back?

“We mailed ’em two fives.”

Good.

We talked about things besides hitch-hiking. Music. Politics. War. The rest of the

world. He stood. I did likewise. Time to move on. A last few words:

Were they?

“ ‘Were they’ what?”

Easy?

A white man of Harvard and a black man of Principle laugh. Part.

Before hiking back to the Yard to catch General Petraeus do his thing at the ROTC Commissioning Ceremony (11:30 a.m.), I go back to the room, hop into the Marble Maiden (my term for the shower from hell), scrub down with the last twenty molecules of Drew’s soap, and shift to the uniform of the day.

I make a quick trip to the Lowell House admin office to get twenty more repros of the 36-page handout I foist on college profs and book clubbies. I always carry a few of them with me when I travel. It gives folks who want me to talk to their people a range of subjects that I’m able to speak on -- from self-publishing to ship wrecks to brothel etiquette. I left Vegas with seven copies, figuring my fame hadn’t spread further than New Mexico. Wrong. Someone ratted me out. The word was spreading. Gone were the Vegas copies, as were all those from the first repro run of twenty-five more I got from Lowell admin previously.

I’d like to take a moment here to insert not just a note of gratitude for the help given me by the admin office guy, but for his forbearance. When I was stapling the first run of repro packets that first day, I inadvertently set them down on the table behind me sort of without looking. After stapling the last one I gathered up the pile and went back to my room. I left half the pile on my bed, stuck the top half under my arm, and zipped off to some dinner or suchlike. At the dinner I’m handing out copies to those demented souls who’d asked for one earlier. I look down near the end of the pile and guess what? There’s the title page to some kind of dissertation about Architectural Principles of Titicaca Pyramids, or something silly like that. There’s this black and white picture of a pyramid, too. I know at once something’s up. I’ve not been to Titicaca. I’ve been to some caca places, but never to that Titty one. -- So the next day when I return to the admin office to get my second run of copies, I hand over the dumb thesis. Turns out some panicky twit left it with Lowell admin to repro since it was the original and he’s scared he’s going to lose it. Seems nobody can find it. Some people are way too excitable. Anyways, the admin guy lets me do my second run, but he keeps looking my way.

So I’m off to The Yard to parse Petraeus. I don’t go to the ROTC breakfast at Eliot House or the ROTC group picture evolution in front of Harvard’s John, both earlier this morning, even though I’m invited. Two reasons: (1) I was never in the ROTC program at Harvard or Penn. Dental. (2) I had to do my Cambridge walk-about. When I travel somewhere, I’m compelled to burrow into the underbrush of a place. I don’t regard myself as being much of a writer, so I’ve got to parlay my forte, reconnaissance. A Pulitzer author once told me that my writing’s most valid characteristic was Sense of Place. As did Tingle. And two other pros. But I don’t “burrow” because they say I’m good at it, I do it because it’s in my DNA. Might as well do it right. Dance with da broad what brung ya.

Okay. So I missed the Tin-cup Tango on Monday. And I imposed on nary a symposium on Tuesday. Here it is Wednesday, and damned if this morning, pre-

Petraeus, I didn't "go missing" again. Fie on schedules! I did not take the walking tour of the Yard -- hell, I've *crawled* most if it. I've done the River Cruise before, with and without condoms hanging off my oars. Forest Hills residents were not forced to look up this pant leg, again. I did not wander Widener or chance somnambulant relapse touring Lamont. And post-Petraeus, the Great Matted Lauer will not suffer my Celtic lance.

Instead, I burrowed and will continue to burrow. Cop and cupola. Student and stairwell. Barkeep and belfry. Alley. Alcove. Squirrels with that pizza. Two cigarette butts out of place on the steps of Memorial Church.

People: The small boy, maybe four years old, balancing, then jumping small gaps from boulder to boulder in the shallow pool fronting the Science Center, his mother letting him conduct his traverse freely, though the tic at the corner of her forced New-Age smile betrays the barbed wire bowline working her stomach. / The blind man with his white cane at the corner in the Square and the three strangers who, from different points of the compass, simultaneously converge to help him cross the street. / The matriarch of a covey of tourists. She drops an expensive camera as she goes to take a picture of her cheese-ing flock; the camera hits the sidewalk in front of the Faculty Club. The lens and mount shatter.

More small stuff: The taut symmetry of the white-rope hitches that anchor the Quincy tent to the planet, and how the early-week torrent of rain drums on canvas stretched to singing by rigging professionals. -- I wonder if some were sailors.

People, again: A special one: A tall female Harvard student, Indian or Pakistani, passes where I stand on Plympton, stops after six more strides; stops and turns as though she remembers a thing quite important and wonderful; comes right at me with a smile as wide as it is genuine; eyes dark and sparkling.

How are you?

Are you having a good time?

Do you like seeing everybody again?

[Stammer. Mumble. Inhale. Gulp.]

It's good when you come back to us.

I do not remember, ever in my life, being struck dumb by spontaneous niceness. Ever. A vibrant six-foot-tall orchid unfolds just for me. Her words too simple not to be sacred, her manner not of my time. Orchid converts to lotus. I know that my jaw doesn't work anymore, but I don't care -- and neither does she.

I hope you come back again. She smiles one last sunrise. She turns and continues on her way.

There are times when hyperbole has no place or service. This was one of those.

Gen. Ed: General Petraeus blips brightly on my radar. On the far side of the Pacific, I once served on three General staffs at the same time. All three Bigs were tolerant, competent and friendly. Then I watched one of them stand on the hood of a jeep and deliver the identical Gung-Ho speech he always gave to incoming units deployed to WesPac. I had heard it before and would hear it many times more. Those Marines most likely believed that the General's spirited words were special and new and for them alone. That's how I learned what most Generals do. I felt surprised at first, then empty.

The “why” of the speech is clear, but not the “how.” A minor change here and there, something personal, maybe unique to those boys or that unit, would be easy to fashion and add so much.

Writers write because they can’t speak. The only authors who talk as well as they write are Maya Angelou and Frank McCourt. These are the exceptions. I can’t listen to any others and applaud except to endorse the fact that I’m glad they’ve finished yakking. Conclusion: Good writer/crummy speaker. Good speaker/crummy writer. Smooth talkers in any trade are suspect when it comes to production.

Enter General Petraeus. Might the same principle hold for these war guys? Some of history’s best military men were mummies -- Eisenhower, Bradley, Marshal -- but A-list professionals. Conversely, some of the military’s best speechifiers were brutal bastards. Mr. Patton killed 1000 of his tankers at the Desert Training Center in the Mojave Desert right here in California, U.S.A. Those troopers died because Georgie just knew, really knew, in his sweet little ol’ delusional heart of hearts, that he could train his men to fight in 120-degree heat on one quart of water per day. *Screw up against Rommel, boys, and you’re coming right back here.* He was a mule-headed, egotistical, people-eatin’ SOB. (In the best sense of the phrase, of course.)

Imagine my relief -- General Petraeus doesn’t draw two pearl-handled .45s and shoot the buttons off President Faust’s jumper. He delivers words of reason with muted garnish, tells a joke, then gently exhorts the newly commissioned to go forth and reap the wind. Providing, of course, they have proper mandate from that sty of bobble-headed swine formerly known as Congress. (That last line my words, not his.)

The General compliments the smarts of the new guys and gal. He does not, as might Patton, urge them to swing by Holyoke Center Medical and backhand some sniveling grad student suffering PTSD because he lost his silly thesis. He does not suggest that they prove their sway by marching their first platoon off a cliff, ala the Aztec Training Manual. Nor should they (in keeping with the South-of-the-border theme) attempt to show courage by putting on sparkly pants and sticking swords in cows.

No, Petraeus isn’t Patton. But don’t infer that Petraeus is the lesser warrior; that upchuck of color on his chest isn’t the result of a food fight at Del Taco.

Use your brain, take care of your people, be brave, work like hell. -- Dr. Dave’s Rx.

Not bad. Not bad, at all. Hmmm. You’d think “Veritas” could partner with that.

The commissioning gig puts a serious dent in my old-goat cynicism. Sipping HopeLite, I came to see this fellow Petraeus. What he did not do graced me with a tumbler of Cognac.

For the duration of Wednesday afternoon, I opt out of both closing Symposia. Four reasons: (1) A final self-quarantine due to concern for pal, pundit, and pig is still in effect. (2) I’ve endured as much “Market Capitalism” in the last year as I can comfortably afford without shooting myself. (3) I’m prone to unsocial reflex when “Understanding the World” is filtered through the ethical mesh of those lovable louts of Langley and the taciturn tricksters of NSA. (4) I have a mole of my own in the person of Bob Snodgrass who attends every Symposium and who, with minimal prompting, will gleefully relate everything I’ve missed. He’s valuable that way.

Instead, students trump Stentors. In the span of three hours some intelligent and honest college students will tell me who they are. On dorm steps, walking the Yard, sitting at the base of a tree. The contact can't hint of stalking. It has to be accidental. You might start by simply asking for directions.

Guarded at first, each talk starts gently. Polite. Casual. Tolerate the old guy. Spook-work utilizes what's called the I.D. Opener, a word or phrase that substitutes for credentials. This is like that.

I launch a few "openers" in the guise of questions. *I'm trying to be an author. If I could write anything, what can I write that you'd like to know about? How would you handle my scars? My screw-ups?* But don't whine about fate, and absolutely never lapse into nostalgia; these are cross-generational land mines. The young operate in real-time.

It works. I'm good at this.

What starts shallow goes steadily to crush depth. Be fascinated. Be curious. Be genuine. Slowly they'll begin to biopsy their dream and their doubt.

Like opening a new jar of olives that morphs to Jack-in-the-Box, suddenly it's not about prying out that first olive, it's about getting your heart under control.

I talk to four Harvards. What they say is private and I'll honor that, not because I'm a prince, but because this page would run to a hundred more.

In only one of the talks do we start by exchanging names. Names are hard to avoid, but it can be done. You might think that a minor detail, but it is not. A person will risk more if there's an escape hatch. Anonymity. Names come last, if offered.

Those faces will stay in my brain for a time, then fade. Their words, hurting and wise and grand all at once, will last as long as I last.

5:30 p.m. It's getting on to Dinner Dance time. Hoo Ha! The Zombie Hop. The absence of a spouse takes on serious advantage at this point. It will not be required that I join what surely will turn out to be a cruel replay of the Bataan Death March. My wife is a lean mean seventy-two-year-old ex-runner who still covers a brisk eight miles a day. My exaggerated limp would be *delenda est Cartilage* in the face of one of her power pouts at not being asked to the dance floor. Even if I succeeded in timing a slow two-step as concession, it would mean nothing. I know from experience that many of the musicians who play for these Elder Stomps are Stryker shareholders. They are honed in the art of ambush and bereft of CPR training. As sure as night follows Gladys, these toot-monsters will shift from Waltz to Watusi as soon as eyeballs begin to bulge and carotids pop collar buttons. For the disturbingly fit, this up-tempo switch triggers something resembling voluntary epilepsy; for the properly vintaged, the choice is either ignoble retreat or *morituri te salutamus*.

The bus ride to Soldier's Field is a masterpiece of convolution. Like the removal of all clocks from a casino, the route to the dance smudges synaptic patterns. Much as the dice thrower loses track of time, we '59ers are being subjected to directional addle. South is North. We're headed for Canada. Logic reels. Fearsome speculation grows. Are we being kidnapped to satisfy some Faustian plot involving endowment-bolstering ransom? Are the bus drivers foul MIT pranksters moving up from simply welding the Yard gates shut? Is the dinner tent besieged by more Saudi Atta-boys? Will the orange-faced playboys among us see their investment in pubis-bred

hair plugs and last week's I-Shall-Live-Forever dance class go bust?

But, no. South goes to south. The bridge spanning the Charles is crossed. Like Caesar past the Rubicon, we are committed. The die is cast. *Danseur noble*, draw up thy truss. Snake-eyed tootists await. Verily, the fatted calf will need Ben Gay on the morrow. Alas.

We debark to yet another tent. I think I smell camels. I place my foot with care.

The evening unwinds apace. Drink. Food. Kudos. Music. People I want to meet but didn't, take bows. (Too bad. Time's up.) Spousal insulation continues. (It would have been nice -- just one night. Stolie and stags.) Couples begin to dance. Waddaya know! They look pretty darn good. There may be something to these Stryker joints and Geritol suppositories, after all. Maybe Viagra, too. Loins and tigers and bears, oh, my!

Late in the evening I go outside to smoke my last cigarette. Someone stands nearby. Alone. John McDermott. We'd met two days earlier when he and his sweet lady Laurel and I attended a reception at Eliot House. Now, away from the blare of the party, we two share a mile-deep summer night. A strange melancholy had taken me an hour after the dinner, something to do with the way the crowd thinned, empty glasses, vacant tables. More than the Reunion was ending.

John and I talk of small things, then of young people. He taught for thirty-seven years at Gilman in Baltimore. I did twenty-three years active with the Navy and Marines. We talk of what those young people gave to us. We swap stories.

Then I tell John about the Boys in After Steering. I capitalize because capitals should be used. Our ship is on fire. Electrical, then fuel oil, then everything else. C to B to A to you swabbies. We're 140% over capacity with torpedoes, ASROC, and peroxide. The Medical Officer and I are heading deep into the ship, down to the keel where medical's bulk safe is located. All the upper deck morphine is used up. Dick is the only one with the safe's combination, but he can't remember it. You can't fault him. It's hot as Hades. Smoke. Steel plate groaning. Two minutes go by, then he gets it. We jam our pockets full of morphine vials and syrettes. Head back up.

Before we started down, the forward stack was cherry red, top to bottom. Things are worse, now. I tell Dick to lay topside. He takes off with the morphine. I run on steel decks that are melting my shoes, work my way to after steering. Un-dog the hatch. There they are, the three of them. Shirts off and tied around their hands for protection. They'll have to muscle the rudder hydraulics if the bridge loses the con. They're important people. Critical crewmen. They're also just kids. Two of them barely out of high school. A year ago they were probably bouncing spitballs off your gourd in the local theater. Royal pains in the ass.

It is difficult to describe what it's like in that 20' x 8' steel compartment. There's more involved than just heat, smoke, and steam.

The color red. I remember that most. How the self-powered emergency lighting paints gearing, bulkhead, and human face with hell's cosmetic How the red refracts through the haze and makes it look like the air is burning, too. Three small warning lights, yellow, blink urgently on consoles I can't see, their tiny alerts eerily impotent against the backdrop of shouts and thumps and bangs -- a loud confusion muted by steel, but close and closing in.

I see, draped over young bare shoulders, the goggle-eyed black OBAs with their

breathing cans and straps hanging down. Sailors know the capacity and stay-times. *Oxygen Breathing Apparatus (OBA) A-3 ... you can breathe until the capacity of the chemicals is used up. This normally takes from 20 to 40 minutes depending on how hard the wearer breathes.* In that compartment, when things deteriorate to the point those boys have to don the masks ... *depending on how hard the wearer breathes ...* forty minutes -- fear / isolation / claustrophobia / exhaustion / heat. -- won't be forty minutes, anymore And something else: I know these guys. That "forty minutes" will be used to stay on station longer, not to run.

What's going on, Doc? What's happening?

"Your sound powered phones are out?"

Nobody's answering. Must be pretty bad topside.

"The forward engine room's gone. Looks like the forward stack might come down."

You got here. So, we can still get out?

"Yeah. For now." I'm that close to ordering them out. They look so ...

After ten seconds of silence, ten seconds I'll never forget ... *Doc, you better go.*

I know I must not say another damn word. I turn and go back to the hatch. I step over the flood sill.

Mr. Branon?

I pause and look back.

Thanks.

I muscle the thick steel door closed. It's tough. The hull is deforming. I throw the six levers. I dog them in.

Standing outside the Soldiers Field tent, it seems like John McDermott and I are not just alone in the night, it seems like we're the only two people in the world.

I look at his face. Tears are there. He wipes them with a finger.

"John, those boys in after steering were no different than all the ones we talked about before, the ones you taught." Awkwardly, I run the back of my own hand under my eyes. "They're the same, John. All they need is a chance to prove it."

That fire happened at the sub pens in Key West, at the pier. That doesn't make it any less. It makes it more. I've been at sea on ships on fire. When the word spread through town that she was burning, every man on that crew came in to help. Every man on liberty. They knew what we had on board. If she blew, and she nearly did, one third of Key West would have disappeared. XO told me later that a delegation from City Hall tried to get us to put to sea when it looked like the fire couldn't be stopped. I can't blame them. That's why after steering had to stay manned.

But they all came in. Nobody ran when there was a choice. Unlike at sea. Nobody ran. Not one. Not the Boys in After Steering. No one.

But she never really recovered. She was finally put to sleep in the Atlantic Ocean off Charleston. MK-48 torpedoes fired by submarines Atlanta and Finback.

Submarine Tender, USS Bushnell (AS-15), put down by her own "kids."

She was a good old girl.

Late that evening, I sit with my pal Snodgrass and Bob Willman ('59) in the Quincy tent. Other people come and go. The empties reproduce and cluster center

table. Willman lives in Aurora, Nebraska. He takes in dogs nobody wants and gives them a home. In his casual, soft-spoken way, he tells us that he's got a dozen or more mutts. *At least that was the count when I left for the Reunion.* Ol' Snodgrass is a dog nut as am I, but neither of us are Twelve-dog Nuts.

Not long after, moved by something Willman says, Snodgrass gets up, walks over, shakes his hand and says "Thank You. Thank you for taking care of those dogs." What he does surprises me. I've never seen him do something like that, shake anybody's hand that hard. I know him. Or thought I did. That handshake is as sincere as sincere gets. Seeing him do that puts a warm fuzzy on a pleasant evening.

Thirty minutes later I'm alone at the table. I'm alone in the tent, also. Off to one side, empty bottles clink in the dark, probably some barkeep packing up, the loser in a Rock, Paper, Scissors throwdown to see who's last man out. I sit a few minutes more and think of the day sweetly spent. I think of John McDermott and his Gilman boys. And the boys in after steering. I think of the young people I talked to in the Yard, what they told me and how they told it.

I chew my last ice cube. I get ready to leave. I close my eyes for a few seconds as I stretch and rub the back of my neck. I open my eyes and look across the table.

There sits an Amazon princess, tall, as graceful as she is beautiful. I stare. Damn. This is the same old Quincy-tent *deus-ex-machina* bit. The third in three days. First the Hulk, then Tingle, now this. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. What are the odds this tent is made out of pressed LSD? Okay, tent, deal me in. I'll go one more hand. If this is some death-bed illusion, good on you! I'm all for it. Huzzah! And thanks!

She's young. She's athletic. She's not a peyote fragment. She's Lauren Mann. She's goalie on Harvard's championship soccer team. We discover that we shared the salt air of San Diego County -- I lived scant kilometers from her. Her parents are both Scots. I'm one quarter Scot(ch) myself.

Then suspicion takes hold. There's too much coincidence. Be this mean ruse? Has she been commissioned by varlets to pry this gnarled gnome from his perch? To tear the grizzled gargoyle from its moor and ship it to Somnus? Thy moon groweth hair, fair Alcibiades! The hour be late.

Well, Gentle Readers, apparently it's not a ruse. She's animated and curious. She leans forward with honest questions. (Hey, wait a minute, that's my tactic.)

One by one, angels drift out of the night. Tawny and taut. Athletes all. They call themselves *Rising Juniors* and smile at some obscurity. The next half hour sees my table full, not only with soccer sprites, but with eye-popping pucksters (also Ivy-Gal champs). I'm Lawrence Welk in Elysium.

I keep hoping someone I know walks by. If I'm lucky a Dachen Machen. Heck, anyone. Me with all these babes. Maybe there's a security camera that I can ...

At one point, with charming cupidity, they rake this opportune brain for tidbits on Vegas, where to shoot, what to pull, how to win. I attempt to relate how a Casino combats recession by titrating odds -- beware. They'll have none of it; I don't press my caution. I'm with young people again. I'm alive. It's what John McDermott and I talked about. I keep waiting for someone to let slip that they all belong to some Paleontology Club, that I'm some "Fossil-of-the-Week" project.

I'll stop this here. No way you believe about me and these girls. But it's true.

It's knee-walking late when I get back to the room. Bob is out like a log. George

is AWOL in the hinterland. Billy is back, not walking too well, half in the bag and with stories to tell. -- Some things never change.

Thursday morning: This won't be a day like yesterday. There'll never be a day like yesterday. Nothing's on for Thursday. Oh, yeah. Some dingbat thing called The Alumni Parade. (More like The Alzheimer Amble.) And Commencement. Yuck.

We form up and shuffle through a gauntlet of young folk. They're decked out in tassels and gowns. They applaud our winding file, a nice gesture honoring Darwin.

The high point of the ceremony is sitting next to Dr. Jim Hull, the nicest guy in the class. We go "sophomore" again, just like in the old days. Laughing when we shouldn't, not laughing when we should. Sarcastic. Eyes rolling at anything over two syllables. Head-shaking when the Almighty is run up the pole of presumption. We gaze at clouds during the Latin shtick. Hull and Branon, rowdy rounders once more. Juvenile. Uncouth. -- And it makes my day.

After one last tent lunch (the word "grub" would go nicely here for two reasons), I pack it in, check out, and hop the MTA for Logan. While eating at a lunch bar in the airport, my "Vintage" Harvard souvenir gym bag on the counter, a messmate on my port side leans over and sez, "That bag is f----d up." I'd be generous in assigning this wordsmith an I.Q. greater than his shoe size -- but I look. He's right! The logo is upside down, grapes and all. I think, *Holy Half-ass, Batman! Are they all this way?* The bag made it past maybe 15,000 Harvard I.Q. points against his what? -- 50?

Sure puts four "O's" in OOPS, don't it?

Conclusion: I got all I expected out of the Reunion, and one whole hell of a lot more. I won't cite new friends made and old friends revisited. It's not necessary, and I'd miss a few. Besides, that was a thing common to all of us. I just try to write what I feel might be different about my experience.

Wish I'd had the chance to sit 'n' spit seeds with old chums some more, but better hungry than full.

Out,

-- Branon

