

## **Gina's Thong and the Salvation of the World**

by

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### **Part I**

He came to, moaning in pain. It was as if his head were in a vise that someone was tightening. He opened his eyes. Bright light stabbed into them—a bare, high-wattage bulb hung down from the ceiling on a wire, inches from his face.

John couldn't turn his head away from the light or look around. It felt as if his body was strapped to a table with ropes from his neck down to his ankles. He heard some laughter and muffled talking. His ears were pinned in the vice with the rest of his head; he could not hear well. He thought he heard Arabic.

A chill of fear, like cold steel, penetrated his chest. 'Would they torture him?' was foremost in his mind. Two fiercely grinning, bearded men in robes and turbans moved into his view. One held a curved knife with gilded blade in his teeth. It cut the corners of his mouth, and, like an animal, he dripped both blood and saliva onto John's face. John couldn't turn his face away to avoid it.

The Arab took the knife out of his teeth and laughed. John's fear reached his throat. He felt impelled to scream but he held back; then the other Arab asked him a question. He couldn't understand it. The Arab asked again, this time with an unveiled threat and a curse. John couldn't respond. The Arab grabbed John's throat.

John tried to speak. The fingers of his interrogator squeezing his throat cut off any sound. The first Arab put the point of his knife on John's forehead between his eyes and began to press. The pain was unbearable, the scream that had been rising from his chest, passed through his constricted throat and reached his mouth with the onset of this new pain, but John could barely emit a sound. It was as if his mouth were frozen too. In place of a scream, only a low guttural moan emanated into the fetid air of the dank room.

Earlier, days earlier, back in Connecticut, before this nightmare took place, John went to dinner with his wife. John Pearsall, the greatest window cleaner the world had ever known walked confidently with a squeegee in his belt, and a bucket swinging from his arm, sporting a bright red bowling shirt with “Pearsall’s Window Cleaning” emblazoned on the back. He felt confident. There was no dirt, grease or bug spot that he and his faithful razor couldn’t remove. He approached the door of the restaurant, with Ann at his side. She, with her auburn hair, clad in sweater and jeans and emanating a beauty that would make a nervous man faint, was shorter than even he—her head barely reached his earlobes. Ann was the mother of his children and the one who put up with him even before he was famous and comfortable.

The Great One reached the window, a window that he agreed to wash as a favor to the restaurant owner who’d comp him his meals. He touched it with his hand, checked its integrity within the frame. He applied the water and with two smooth, purposeful strokes, guided the strip washer across its surface. . . .

About as full of himself as he could be, John cleaned both sides of the glass, as patrons, hoping to enter or exit, watched and waited.

All marveled at John's dexterity and skill and at the gleaming surface and the light that now shone through. Tears formed in the corners of many eyes, throats caught, a few

grumbled, "Oh, for God's sake." and the whole of them passed one way or the other through the door of Charlie's Red Tongue Bar and Grill.

The bucket and squeegees were left by the coat rack. The host led John and Ann to a table reserved for them, gave them menus and described the specials of the day. "We have cheese tortellini in a creamy pesto sauce with Julienne cut vegetables, New York strip steak with broiled scallions and Portobello mushrooms, and fillet of scrod basking in a red tomato base—lightly sprinkled with peppercorns with potatoes rouge frits. Ling will be your waitperson."

"Thanks," said John accepting the menu.

Ann looked at her husband, "Did you bring your glasses?"

"No I forgot them." John held the menu at arms length just barely able to discern the small print.

"Why do you even have them if you don't bring them with you?"

"Well, for one thing, they help me read."

Ann made a face, he was hopeless. She loved him dearly but felt she should get a medal for living with him day in day out.

John's arms were not long enough. He propped up the menu against glasses of water and a vase then stood back from the table.

"Now what are you doing?" his exasperated wife said.

"I still can't read it; the light is not strong enough." John spoke to the host who got him a trouble light. Ann hated when he drew attention like this. She didn't mind so much the fame and admiration, after all, people came to this restaurant to catch a glimpse of the famous John Pearsall. John was not your typical window cleaner. It was well known that

he'd worked on the Eiffel Tower, Washington monument, Seattle Space Needle, and cleaned Teddy Roosevelt's glasses on Mount Rushmore. He was also suspected of great covert feats of cleanliness such as the top floor of the Kremlin and Slobodan Milosevic's bathroom mirror, for surveillance by the CIA, but these were only unsubstantiated rumors.

"Oh, God," Ann hid her face in the menu.

"Okay," John had come to a decision after asking the host the ingredients and method of preparation of a half-dozen entrées, "I'll have the pesto thing on special with the tortellini and vegetables."

"Excellent choice, sir," responded the host who was anxious to leave the scene.

The waitress jotted down his selection; she had already recorded Ann's about ten minutes prior to this. "Anything to drink?"

"What beers do you have on tap?" As he said this his wife groaned.

"Well, we have Amstel Light, Guinness . . ." The waitress went through the list.

"What about bottled?"

"In bottles, we have . . ." Again the list.

"I'll have Sam Adams."

"Very good, sir." The waitress left.

"Why," asked his wife, "do you always have to get the whole list? You always order the same thing anyway?"

"I like to have a choice."

"But you never order anything different."

"Now that's not true. Remember last week at that new place, Dennehy's? I got a

Heineken."

"They didn't have Sam Adams there! You always do this. And also you get somebody to explain the whole menu to you, and, after that, you choose the first thing you looked at. And don't get me started with the lamp thing." She was beginning to speak in a low but intense hiss that emitted from between clenched teeth.

With a slight look of fear in his eyes, the Great One, lowered his voice, "I'm sorry, Sweetie."

"I'm going to start wearing a cape with a hood so I can hide when we go out."

Just then the drinks arrived; Ann had a Bailey's. John quickly lifted his beer, exhaled a sigh and toasted his wife, "To your beauty and grace and undying love." Then he took a long draft of the beer. She smiled with one side of her mouth and sipped her Bailey's. To her relief, the other patrons were now ignoring them.

She and John were quiet for a few minutes. Ann focused on her drink to let the frustration of the previous few minutes and its attendant thought, dissipate. John bided his time, hoping it would all blow over.

She was the first to speak, "Jack's got a drum lesson tomorrow afternoon; you got \$50?"

"I think so, upstairs in the drawer. When are you going to take up the violin again?"

"Maybe when I get a little more time," her violin career had been short lived. She had tried to learn almost 20 years previous, back when she was single and living alone, even before John had ever laid hand to squeegee.

"Ah, it'll be good to hear the squawks of the young violin again," he said,

remembering fondly.

"Since when have you ever heard the squawks of the young violin?" she said, a little perturbed as if thinking to herself, 'Easy for you to criticize, you never played the friggin violin.'

"In my youth, when my young cousin Lil' was learning, he went on to have a brilliant career on the stage."

"You don't have a cousin Lil'."

"Tony."

"Tony?"

"Yeah, we used to call him Lil'."

"Tony, the guy in and out of rehab who lives with your aunt?"

"Yeah, he played in the St. Evans Elementary School Christmas show two years in a row. He was very good. That was before his decline."

"You think?"

They continued this thread for a time and just when the conversation could not get more scintillating, the food arrived. But it was not Ling delivering the food, plates on one arm, napkin on the other.

"What happened to Ling?" John asked.

It was a sturdy, medium built, eager young man with dark hair in a cheap black suit and sunglasses. "I slipped her three bucks, she's having a cigarette." He laid the plates before the wrong person as he smiled out of the corner of his mouth.

The fact that the meals were placed wrong did not set off alarm bells; it was the cheapness of the bribe and the suit.

"Not the CIA again," moaned Ann, "Here, take my seat; I don't like pesto anyway." she rose to leave.

The erstwhile waiter put his hand up stopping her, "That won't be necessary," then he leaned his head toward John and whispered, "can she be trusted?"

"With what?"

"Top secret plans of the U.S. government."

"Sure," responded John offhandedly, "who's she gonna tell?"

"Spies, her girlfriends, the pediatrician, her hair stylist, you," said the waiter, annoyed.

"Well," said John, "I doubt she finds this stuff interesting enough to pass on."

"Okay, if you say so." He pulled up a chair and snapped his fingers for another waiter, to come over.

A tall, young fellow with curly hair, impeccably pressed white shirt, and black pants, came over. "What's up?"

"Get me Fettuccine Alfredo and a glass of Chablis."

"Get it yourself, you asshole," said the waiter with annoyance and then went back to his own customers.

"Service isn't very good here is it?"

Ann gave him a dark look and then traded plates with her husband, "It used to be."

The man in the suit made a knowing nod to Ann and then turned his attention to John, "We have a problem."

"I'm sure," responded John, "if you worked on your manners a little you'd get

better service." With that he started to stand and was about to wave to the waiter when the suited one stopped him.

"No," with his hand on John's arm, he got him to sit back down, "*We* have a problem," he said ominously.

"We do?" said John.

He looked around to make sure no one at the other tables was paying attention—they were, of course, but they were being discreet—John's doings were always followed with keen interest; this "Man in Black" could be a movie producer, for all they knew; they didn't want to miss anything.

"We," he quickly looked around again, "have information that AI is planning to destroy the U.S. and we need your help."

"AI who?"

"Koda."

"The guy who owns the deli on Madison? He makes the best canoli in town," said John, quizzically.

"No, the terrorist." The suited one looked straight into John's eyes with a grave intensity that made the Great One shudder secretly in his heart.

"Are you sure?"

"Would I be here if I weren't?"

John, hero of many dangerous cleaning campaigns, thought to himself how often CIA certainty led to bungled, unnecessary operations and lost lives, "Say that again."

"Would I be here if I weren't?"

"Of course not, how can I help?"

“Be outside in 15 minutes. Better kiss your wife goodbye; you won’t be home for breakfast.” He started to rise and with a deft move that reflected years of training and experience, produced a fork in his right hand, speared three cheese tortellini basking in thick pesto sauce, and ate them without a drop landing on his jacket.

In a moment he was gone.

Silence fell upon the couple and swelled outward filling the whole room as would a pebble tossed in the center, send ripples to the far reaches of a pond.

“You going to eat that,” John indicated a butter-soaked floweret of broccoli on his wife’s plate.

“Be my guest—you don’t have much time.”

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishin’ in.” smiled John.

“Don’t forget you have to call the tree guy for a load of wood.”

“I’ve got it written down in my day planner.” John rose, “I love you, Sweetheart.”

“I love you too, John. Could you pick up a quart of milk later?”

“Okay.” He leaned over the table, kissed her, the light of his life, on her upturned lips and turned and strode forth to meet his destiny but not before being handed something by Ling his former waitress.

“What’s this?” he said

“You forgot your fortune cookie.”

“Oh thanks,” this seemed natural enough to John.

A sleek black helicopter with deadly, enormous blades turning in unremitting deadliness, hovered two feet off the ground in the center of the restaurant's side parking lot. John, with red bucket in hand, walked towards the beckoning arms of men in cheap black suits in the open hatch of the chopper. He looked back at the window on the restaurant door, now plastered with paper and leaves from the wind created by the revolving blades, with dismay.

As he approached the helicopter, he dumped the water from his bucket. The water caught by the turbulence, splattered all over everything and everyone. He handed up his empty bucket, grabbed one of the outstretched arms, and with one foot on a strut, climbed aboard.

The helicopter rose swiftly above the rooftops, leaving behind plenty of business for the local car wash.

"Welcome aboard, Son," a smiling officer reached out his hand to John.

He took it and shook it warmly, "Ahoy, Captain G., how you been?"

"It's Colonel now, Son. I've been great."

"Hi, John," the other of the suits sitting further back in the chopper nodded to John. He was taller and a little thinner than the one he met in the restaurant and had blonde hair. John knew him vaguely from another mission, though he didn't remember

his name. What John did remember was how this stalwart, quiet, upright guy risked his life to save some kids.

“Hey, how you doing?” replied John. The man just made a hint of a smile and a brief nod.

“So, it’s been a while,” said the square jawed Colonel. In the fading light, John could see the Colonel had a nice tan and looked in the peak of health despite his pot gut and thinning hair. John had been on a number of missions with Captain Granby, now Colonel. They had all been extremely covert and dangerous. It had been long enough since the last one for John to have forgotten or forgiven Granby’s oversights, misjudgments, and egotism. The missions all started out very well and some of them had been successful in spite of all the blind arrogance, but it was like how the joy of childbirth washed away the pain to let a woman have another baby. Only with this it was in reverse, the excitement of going on a secret mission with cool, decorated officers and special ops to save one’s country made the eventual disaster and wasted life seem remote. “How’ve you been, John?”

“Fantastic, couldn't be better. What do you want me to do?”

“Save the world, Son, nothing less than save the world. Can you do it?”

“Well, I can make a few calls and free up my schedule. I have a couple jobs I've been putting off but I guess they can wait longer.”

“That's the spirit. Would you like to use my cell?”

“No, that's all right, I've got plenty of minutes left on mine, but it's too noisy, can we close the door?”

Wind had been whipping through the compartment creating a roar like a dragster.

They closed the hatch as they swiftly left behind Bridgeport and, shortly thereafter, Connecticut, heading in the direction of the North Star. John called his customers and let them know he'd be out of town for a few days.

"I'll call you when I get back."

"Have a nice time on your trip, John," one customer said.

"Where are we going, Colonel?"

"Flying Hog."

"Oh." John did not know what he was talking about.

The Colonel explained, "This operation is code-named Flying Hog. It's named after headquarters, among other things. We're going there now."

"Okay," said John, agreeably.

"We're going to have to blindfold you for the last leg in case you're tortured."

"Why should I be tortured?"

"That's top secret."

"Okay, but let me eat my fortune cookie first."

"You can do that after you're blindfolded."

"Yeah, but I won't be able to read the fortune."

At this the Colonel told the pilot to hover. John, read his fortune then allowed them to blindfold him while he munched on his cookie.

He ruminated for the next hour on the fortune it said, "When you realize your true nature, you are free."

The first thing he saw when they removed the blindfold was a blimp, actually a rigid airship, with S. S. Flying Hog on its tail. I guess we're there, thought John.

The helicopter hovered directly over the airship. The Colonel, John, and two black suits were lowered one at a time down to the top of it. A man in a jumpsuit helped them dismount and clip into the airship then they made their way individually on a rope ladder in a death defying descent to the gondola underneath.

Even the Colonel had lost his color by the time he was inside. They gathered around a table with a map of an island and schematic of some kind of facility.

"Is this Flying Hog Island?" Asked John

"No. Yuhkanpee." answered the Colonel.

"No thanks, I've already gone."

"No, that's the name of the island."

"Oh."

"Men, this island is Al Koda's base of operations. From what we can see, it is a missile base. We suspect Al has nuclear warheads, chemical and biological payloads and a number of intercontinental missiles purchased on the black market from somewhere in the former Soviet Union. We need to know how accurate this information is. We need to see inside the mountain and that is where you come in, John. What we need you to do is get inside the facility so we can get "eyes on" whatever is going on there."

"Why not just send a special ops guy in. What do you need the greatest window cleaner in the world for?" humbly queried John.

"Do you see this rectangle on the top of the mountain right here?" The Colonel indicated a small one cm square on the island.

"Well, not exactly. I don't have my glasses."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know I was going out to eat. It was a last minute thing. I usually bring them to read the menu."

"You were out to eat?"

"Yeah, but I left them at home. It was a mistake, all right? I made a mistake."

"There is no room for mistakes here, Son."

"Oh no? Isn't this the CIA?"

"Not this time. This mission is so secret, even the CIA doesn't know about it."

"Who does?"

The Colonel wasn't saying, but he did indicate that death might be the answer for those who knew too much, "Can you see how serious this is?"

John grew silent, almost contemplative, "Well, if I had my glasses . . ."

"Here, use these." The suit from the restaurant handed him a pair of glasses.

John put them on. Suddenly the world, as he knew it, changed. He rocked back on his heels and had to reach out to steady himself. The inside of the gondola began to move in and out of focus and started to roll. They were graduated trifocals.

"You'll get used to them."

John reached out and grabbed the shoulder of the Colonel and one of the suits. Looking down upon the map John spotted a small square, "I see it; I see it! I think I'm going to be sick."

The cheap suit next to him reached over with the arm that wasn't supporting him and took off the glasses.

"Whew," said John regaining his equilibrium, "that was close."

"Now, I guess, you can see what I'm talking about," said the Colonel.

"Clearly, but what do you need *me* for?"

"It's a skylight, a very dirty skylight, probably hasn't been cleaned in years. If it was clean, we could conduct surveillance. We thought of cleaning the outside ourselves."

But they decided against it. They knew that no one would be able to clean it like John and they said as much. This truth sank slowly into the inner recesses of John's self exalted brain, "I am the best, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are, that's why we've spared no expense in the planning. We've used the top minds, not the tiniest detail has been left to chance—"

"Even how I'll escape afterward?"

"Well, we haven't worked that out quite yet, but we have covered the essential part of the operation."

The USS Flying Hog was like a space station except it wasn't in outer space. It would more properly be considered an upper air station, since it was at 17,000 feet and the air was still easily breathable as long as you were in decent shape. The Colonel was not.

The Fellowship of the Pane (John, two black suits, and the Colonel) prepared to make their ascent up the rope ladder to rendezvous with the helicopter that had dropped them off earlier.

One suit proceeded first out the gondola hatch and up the rope ladder. The wind tore at him. His jacket and tie whipped and snapped like so many flags, his white shirt pulled away from his pants to join the other flapping fabric. He struggled up the rope, sometimes hanging only by a hand and an elbow crooked over a bending rung.

"Shit," he exclaimed between gasps.

The Colonel, seeing that, got on the phone and ordered a Harrier jet, one of those that could hover like a helicopter without the decapitating action of the blades.

"Go," he said to John.

"No, I'll wait for the jet too."

"No room, get on the rope."

John refused. If the Colonel wasn't going to climb the rope, he wasn't either.

“I’m taking the jet,” said John.

"Of course you are," responded the Colonel smugly.

As suit number two heroically reached the top of the airship and waited with number one for their next ordeal with the helicopter, the jet showed up. It hovered beneath the gondola with an occasional death tempting, dramatic shift in attitude and elevation, the cockpit drew back revealing a second seat behind the pilot.

The pilot radioed that he was ready when they were. The airship pilot told them to jump. The Colonel, weighing his options, hesitated. John jumped. He landed astride the fuselage and the open cockpit; fortunately his foot, on the gray leather upholstered seat, broke the force of his fall. He got a grip on the cowl as he landed and quickly took his place in the second seat.

John tapped the pilot on the shoulder and signaled with his thumb to go. Seeing this, the Colonel, throwing caution to the wind, dove toward the bobbing craft. He landed in a full-length sprawl across John and the pilot. The pilot was shaken off the controls. The plane went into a twisting, shrieking dive.

Most of the shrieks came from the Colonel, aaaaaaaaah, aaaaaaaah, aaah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaah."

The pilot, however, intuitively knowing that if he was going to do any freaking out it would have to wait till later, reflexively countered innumerable inaccuracies in the flight pattern miraculously righting the jet.

John dragged the no-longer tan, clutching, grappling, and screaming officer, pride of the Guantanamo Bay Officer Club’s 2004 Championship Dart Team, into a nearly sitting position next to him. It was chummy.

When he could breathe regularly enough to utter something comprehensible, the Colonel said, "I thought I was going to die."

"You were."

"I lost my boot, too," The Colonel said, then became quiet.

The cockpit closed. Then as John felt the warmth start to penetrate his frozen exterior he began to laugh, "All in a day's work, Colonel. Why, I remembered the time I had three tie fighters on my tail. I was flying beneath the surface in the metal canyons of the Death Star. I blocked fear from my mind and used The Force to drop the bomb that disintegrated it. That was a tense situation."

"Also, that was Luke Skywalker, not you, a character in the first Star Wars movie."

"And your point being?"

The Colonel became quiet again, meditative almost. Two can play at this game, he thought, "That's why we knew you were the man for the job, a man who laughs in the face of danger."

"May the Force be with you, Colonel."

"Ditto."

The jet gained altitude and shot through the sky like a flaming arrow of light with a vapor trail. Their trip to the South Pacific involved a few transfers into roomier modes of air travel; however, the last leg entailed another *cozy* ride in a Harrier trainer. The Colonel was in a hurry.

Day turned into night, a long night. Then the Harrier jet lost altitude and speed by pulling itself perpendicular to the direction of its momentum. Then it shifted its thrust to

beneath its wings and descended towards what looked like the lights of a city heaving on the open sea.

"Welcome to the *USS Impatience*." The crewmember helped the Colonel and John get down from the jet. "You're wanted on the bridge immediately, follow me."

Upon their arrival there was a flurry of salutes and introductions, "Colonel Peter Granby, counterinsurgency."

"I'm Captain Andy Johnson and this is my first officer, Lt. Commander Danny Christiansen and bosun's mate, Chief John Stubbs."

They shook hands. "We've heard from your helicopter. It should catch up to us in a few hours."

The Colonel had used his pull to finagle fancier flights for himself and John but was not so concerned about his suited compatriots.

"We received our instructions an hour ago. I'm steaming towards your rendezvous point in the North Fiji Basin off the New Hebrides where they just finished filming another Survivor. Do you watch Survivor, gentlemen?" asked Captain Andy reaching for a bon-bon.

"Never miss it," said the Colonel.

"Is that the show where young people run around half naked eating worms and wrestling alligators?" asked John.

"Something like that. It's entertainment. The men and I watch it together," said the captain offering John and some of the others a bon-bon. The captain had a penchant for bon-bons.

"Thanks, Captain," this was repeated by every man on the bridge as they accepted

the chocolates. The bowl being almost empty, the first officer handed a key to the chief. Using the commander's key and one he carried on a ring at his belt, the chief, with some ceremony, opened a double lock on a built-in cabinet and withdrew a large box with which he refilled the bowl. Then he placed it on its gimballed retainer on a silver pedestal near the captain.

There was a table bolted to the floor upon which was affixed a map of the South Seas.

"This is our current position," he touched the map with his index finger at a spot in a large blue area, "and this is where you catch your submarine." He dragged his finger across the blue and stopped in another blue space. His finger created two brown smudges linked by a chocolate line. The first officer quickly erased the smudge with a handy wipe and then took another and wiped the captain's extended hand.

"This mission's top secret.," said the captain referring to the handy wipes.

"Any questions?"

"Why don't you use snuggie wipes, they contain aloe?" offered John.

"Questions about the mission at hand."

"My wife and I used them on our babies' bottoms. They moisturize as they clean!" John saw that he was off topic but felt it needed to be said.

"I'll take it under consideration," said the annoyed captain and, then, in an aside to the Colonel, "Are you sure he can clean the window?"

"Skylight... it's not just a window, it's a skylight."

"All right, skylight."

"I know he's a little rough around the edges, Captain, but he's the only man in the

world that can be trusted to accomplish this feat."

"If you say so," Captain Andy eyed John with distrust and reached for another bon-bon. "Just don't try wiping any butts around here."

"I wouldn't think of it." John reached for a handy wipe and extended it to the captain, "Handy wipe?"

The captain took it grudgingly, recognizing it as a peace offering.

"We rendezvous with the sub in three hours. Crewman Fitz will take you to guest quarters where you can rest."

"Thank you, Captain," John smiled, clicked his heels with a nod, made an *about face*, and followed the crewman off the bridge.

They made their way down several ladders and gangways until they came to a hatchway that looked just like every other.

"You can go in and lay down on a bunk. I'll return for you when it's time," said the sailor.

"Thanks." John entered. He saw there were two bunks, one on either side. This must be the presidential suite, he thought. He turned around and went back out into the passageway. A couple sailors passed him, "Hey, guys."

"Hi"

"Ever do any fishing off this boat?"

"Never, it's forbidden," responded one sailor.

"Yeah, said the other, you'll get in a lot of trouble if you get caught. Why, you fish?"

"No," said John, "but I've listened to a lot of guys bragging about it, and it looks

like fun."

The sailor turned to his friend and said, "Chuck, you go on, I'll meet you in the mess."

When they were alone he said, "How long you got?"

"Three hours."

"Come with me, I'll hook you up."

They went down several passageways and walked for what seemed a half-mile. Engine sounds grew quite loud and the walls and floor vibrated and groaned with the stress of moving thousands of tons of steel through the water.

The sailor looked around, opened the hatch, and then closed it behind them. They mounted a steep ladder in a very narrow chimney-like passage. It rose to a small platform and another closed hatch. The sailor opened it and John found himself 60 feet above a white churning sea at the stern of the aircraft carrier.

"OK," said John, "how do I catch the fish?"

"That information's gonna cost you."

"How much?"

"A hundred bucks."

"A hundred bucks!"

"Look, I could get in trouble for taking you up here. Think about it," he paused, "if you chartered a boat it would cost you a lot more."

"Okay, I see your point." John, the Great One, took out his wallet and counted, "All I've got is \$48."

"I'll take it."

John handed him the cash. The sailor reached over into a dark corner of the passage and detached a large length of plastic, gray pipe about six inches in diameter, unscrewed one of the ends and pulled out a massive rod and reel in sections. He then stuck the plastic pipe to the bulkhead; it had large magnets on its side. He assembled the rod for John and inserted the shaft into a steel tube welded onto the bulkhead just below the center of the open hatch.

"What'll I use for bait?"

"I've got that covered too." The sailor reached into the corner and unhooked a five gallon plastic bucket with a lid. He pried off the lid

"Oh, my God," groaned John trying to move away from the smell of the putrid meat.

"You'll get used to it; the fish love it, just keep the lid on the bucket."

The sailor then unhooked the line, which was more like a cable in thickness, from an eye on the rod, pulled a little slack, and, trying not to get any blood on his hands, worked three hooks into a piece of meat. Raising the rod out of its holder, he carefully hoisted the meat out of the bucket, through the hatch so that it dangled out over the water, then let it drop and replaced the rod in its holder. It hit the water then submerged with the reel paying out line with a terrible scream.

Once it got over 100 yards astern, the sailor yelled, "Watch out!" and flipped a lever on the reel. The line caught with a jerk, and became taut causing the rod to bend at a 90 degree angle.

It held like that for a few seconds, John was sure it would snap, and considering his posture—leaning back away from the rod with his hands in front of his face—the

sailor thought it would too.

Gradually, the rod eased back, halfway to its original position.

"Okay, you're all set. You may not catch anything—"

"Why, aren't the fish biting?"

"Naw, fishing's pretty good around here, we're just going a tad fast. Use as much bait as you please, just put everything back where you found it when you're done and one more thing . . ."

"What's that?"

"You never met me."

John held out his hand, "John Pearsall."

"You're kidding," said the sailor, "*the* John Pearsall?"

"None other." John said this with the false modesty that comes so easily to the famous.

"John Pearsall, the renowned expert on the Islets of Langerhans?"

"No, the window cleaner, world's greatest," said John indignantly.

"Oh. Nice to meet you." The sailor's tone flattened out, "See ya," the sailor quickly slid down the ladder with his insteps and palms lightly touching the rails. He was gone through the hatch in a few seconds.

Where the hell are the Islets of Longhorns, thought John? He'd heard of the Isles of Guernsey and Jersey but not Longhorns, maybe they're in the Gulf of Mexico. But before he had time to ponder this weighty question, the fishing rod suddenly started bending and whipping side to side.

"I've got a bite!" shouted John excitedly.

John waged an epic battle with the fish. It reminded him of those deep sea fishing shows he'd seen on TV except that he was about 60 feet above the water. He finally landed the fish, got the hooks out then paraded the ugly, stunted shark through half of the aircraft carrier on his way to the galley--John hoped to offer his fish to the captain for dinner. He was very proud of himself for single-handedly catching this prize, and the fact that he'd made quite a stir in his transit only reinforced it. Though he had gotten accustomed to the smell, the combined odors of rotten meat and fish drove sailors he encountered, away, or to the point of vomiting. He took their frightened and sickened aspects, to be admiration and perhaps awe of his prowess.

John found a doorway with the word "Galley" worked into a full-color painting of a grinning Neptune with a pot roast skewered on his trident.

"This must be the place," said John entering.

The kitchen was 100 feet long with stainless steel counters, tables and sinks in rows, also a wall of large stoves, griddles, fryers, and steam tables. The room was full of men hard at work, mostly. They were chopping, mixing, frying and baking. No one noticed John at first due to the predominance of cooking smells, but all at once everyone looked up.

"Who farted? Maxwell, was that you?"

"No, you asshole."

"Smells like something died."

"Shit, I can't breathe."

That's when they noticed John, red shirt and all, smiling like he'd won the lottery.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I brought supper," said the nonplussed window cleaner.

"Somebody get Senior Chief, now!"

"Get the hell out of here with that thing." A large man with tattoos down both arms started walking towards John with a meat tenderizing mallet.

John instinctively reached back for his window razor, forgetting that he'd removed his belt in the helicopter. He thought he saw violent envy in the man's eyes. He's not going to get my catch away from me; let him catch his own. John agilely slipped the meat hook, that he had used to carry the fish, out of the its mouth and faced off against the threat to his rightful prize.

At this point a short burly man with a large face, curly gray hair and voice like a megaphone, appeared.

"Hold it, Thompson. Go back to work!"

Thompson met the chief's no-nonsense gaze then backed away.

"Where the hell did you come from, a masquerade at an insane asylum?"

"I'm here on a mission."

"Yeah, well, you stink and so does your fish," said the chief

John's appearance was not remarkably different than before his fishing expedition. His red shirt and dark pants masked the appearance of the gore he'd gotten all over himself--but not the smell, "I caught this fish so you guys could have it for supper. It must stink from the bait. It was bad meat."

"You think?" said the chief incredulously.

"I think we'd better cut it open and clean it before it goes bad."

"Too late for that."

"Let me get the captain. I'm sure he'd like—"

"No, we don't want to do that. We're all too young to die. Bring it over here."

The rest of the men were watching this interchange from the far side of the galley. They had a whole new respect for their very dangerous chief. They could not believe he could stand the smell. Much later they were to hear him say, "After you've handled rotting corpses for a while, nothing smells that bad." They knew he'd been on the river boats in Vietnam, but they didn't know about the corpses. The thought of it added new meaning to his, "Do you want to end up in the stew?" threat.

"Lay it down over here," the chief indicated a large drain table next to a slop sink.

"So, you say there is some bad meat in here?"

"Yeah, I used it for bait."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Some sailor."

"Oh?" The chief shot him a hard questioning look, "Do you see him here?"

John looked over at the staff jammed into the far corner of the kitchen. They were all shaking their heads *no* and waving him off. John thought he recognized his fishing guide towards the back.

"No." He said flatly.

The chief grabbed a long thin knife, held it between himself and John, then turned and slit the shark from right below its jaw clear to its tail.

There was a thumping sound as a man fainted from the new emanations from the fish. John held his nose.

"This stinks more than you do." The chief said to John. With that he held up,

away from himself on his upturned knife, a blob of festering meat that had been the bait.

"Maxwell, dispose of this."

Maxwell came over, hand covering his nose and quickly took the newfound treasure and put it down a disposer.

"And look what else is in here." At that, the chief held up a boot.

"That's the Colonel's boot!" exclaimed John, "he'll be glad to see that."

"What Colonel?"

"Colonel Granby."

"What are you doing with that jackass?"

"The mission."

"God help you, Son."

"You know him?"

"Vietnam. Tell him 'Chief Martin has a corpse missing some gold teeth' and see what he says."

"What about the fish?"

"We'll fix it for you."

"I'm not staying for supper."

"All right, we'll fix it for the captain. He loves fresh fish."

"Okay. Now I know my fish is in good hands. Thanks."

"Thank you. By the way, there was an announcement an hour ago. They're looking for a guy in a red bowling shirt. You're wanted topside. Here, don't forget the Colonel's boot. Tell him where he can put it."

The chief had one of his seamen lead John up on deck. After John left he had the fish disposed of and the drain board and sink cleaned with bleach.

John had trouble keeping up with the sailor. It must be urgent that I get on deck, thought John. He ran holding tightly to the boot. The sailor desperately kept his lead and, once on deck, ran in the direction of the bridge. Finally, as John approached, he motioned for him to go up, then the sailor, holding his nose, disappeared down a hatchway.

Boy, these sailors are dedicated, thought John. John walked onto the bridge. All hell broke loose. Soon there were only four men, three holding their noses, one of which was the Colonel, and then John.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"I was helping with dinner," John said reaching in and helping himself to a bon bon.

"I hope it wasn't mine," said the captain

John winked. The Colonel, gasping between words said, "We've got to go." With that he grabbed John, somewhat daintily, by the sleeve and led him out.

"Wait," called the captain, "a going away present." He shoved a silver bowl with bon bons at John who hugged them to himself with his right arm as the Colonel led him out with his left.

Back down on deck, the Colonel walked swiftly to the starboard side of the ship

tugging "the Great One" behind him.

"Wait," stopped John, "I've got something for you."

"I don't want any stinking bon bons."

"No, it's your boot. Chief Martin wants you to have it. He told me to tell you where to put it. Well, I think it goes on your left foot."

The Colonel turned around with a look of surprise and took the boot. John saw that he had a new pair on.

"I already threw the other one away. What's this?" He reached into the boot and pulled out a small bottle. "This from the chief too?" It was a soy sauce bottle.

"No, must be from the fish. If you don't want it I'll take it."

The Colonel put the bottle back in the boot and handed it to John then resumed hauling him across the deck. John thought about what he could use the boot for. Maybe a planter, no his wife would throw it out anyway. He dropped the boot, but stuck the bottle in his pocket; he liked soy sauce on his fish.

Upon reaching the starboard side, the Colonel led him down a hatch to an area that was open to the sea and close to the hull beneath the main deck. Below them they could see the sub riding parallel with the carrier, about 200 feet away. A platform had been lowered, but the sea was too rough to come alongside.

"We'll have to use a chopper." The Colonel got on his cell phone to the Captain. Soon the four were airborne again.

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," said John. The three stayed as far away from him as they could, holding their noses, blinking their tearing eyes. When they reached the sub, John was let down first on a cable with a belt around his waist.

By chance, the helicopter which was holding even over the steadily moving sub suddenly swerved and dipped, plunging John briefly into the sea. The error was quickly corrected but then it inexplicably happened again. Finally a cold, soaking wet window cleaner was gently lowered to the awaiting seamen who quickly unbuckled him from the harness. Another seaman lead him up into the conning tower and then down inside the sub itself.

The welcoming committee got him some dry clothes, a towel, and a cup of coffee.

"Is this decaf?" asked the shivering passenger.

"It's coffee."

"Yeah, but is it decaf?"

"Yeah . . . okay, sure. Why?" said the sailor.

"Coffee'll keep me up."

"Well, we wouldn't want that, Sir." said the sailor as he left through the hatchway.

The First Lieutenant who remained with him said, "Sorry about the dunking, Mr. Pearsall. We heard about the problem with the fish."

"That was no problem. Captain Andy is probably eating it right now. I'm just sorry I didn't get any pictures."

"That would have been something very special," said the lieutenant rolling his eyes, "here, let me get rid of these clothes for you."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"Send them out a torpedo tube."

"No. Especially not the shirt, it's the only one I have left. I spilled soup on my other one. Can't you wash them?"

"I'm under strict orders."

"All right." John saw it was inevitable but then he remembered he had something in a pocket, "Wait," he withdrew the bottle, "You having fish tonight?"

After the lieutenant withdrew with the wet, still pungent, double bagged clothes, the Colonel and the two suits arrived.

"Thank God." said the Colonel, then he and the two suits did high-fives.

"You warming up?"

"Starting to. Where can I get another bowling shirt?"

"That'll have to wait till after the mission."

"I can't clean glass without the shirt."

"Not even for your country? If I remember correctly, you used to clean in a bathrobe."

"Yeah, but my wife thought it lacked dignity."

"Well, we could probably get you a bathrobe with *USS Scheineekan* on it."

"What is a *USS Scheineekan*?"

"This sub."

"Okay. I'll wear it, but I'll tell you one thing, Elvis wouldn't have given up his *cape* for a bathrobe."

"Better get some rest. We go into action in four hours."

"Sure has been a lot of build up," said John.

The sub cruised submerged for the remainder of their route under the Pacific. The insurgent enemy, if they were trying to follow the dubious logic of this transit, would have been completely flummoxed by the four's last transport. Underwater there was no way to follow them, no way to track their next move. The game is in our hands now, thought Colonel Granby as he dozed off in his bunk.

The four men rested in separate compartments, but their fates were tied together by a common pane, the skylight on Yuhkanpee.

They were all wakened at four bells by a gentle nudge on their shoulders, "Dinner in 15."

Somewhat groggy after their naps, they stumbled their way to the Captain's table. Mahi Mahi was on the menu. This was a favorite of John's. His compunction about eating fish was put on hold till after the mission was over. After all, he didn't want to seem like a prima donna—asking for a special meal. If he was going to do that he should've booked ahead. As it is, the accommodations aren't that great, thought John. At least it wasn't his fault this time as his wife had indicated about their last vacation. On their trip to Cancun they had to fly redeye and in different planes. Their hotel had cockroaches and the bar boy on the beach kept forgetting to put umbrellas in their drinks. No, this time it wasn't his fault. The Colonel had booked this one.

They were led to a small room, the officer's mess, with a table in the center affixed to the deck. They sat on benches attached to the walls. It was a cozy affair. Usually it was a tight squeeze for all the officers but tonight they had four guests. Once seated, a seaman entered and filled all their wine glasses with champagne. He had to lean between men and finally, to reach the head of the table where the Captain sat, stand on a bench, hold on to the gimbaled light in the ceiling for balance, and pour. He did this with as much artistry and grace as he could muster, which wasn't much, all truth be told. However, he did not spill a drop. No doubt his care was due to the fact that he intended to drain the remainder of the bottle himself, once out of sight.

The Captain lifted his glass for the toast, "Gentlemen, this is a great moment, we are embarking on a covert mission. No more are we the newbie sub sent around for dog and pony shows or for exercising the sonar of the fleet. Today, for the first time, we get to do something dangerous. Well, it's the first time if you don't count the fact that we could be instantly crushed to death by the immense pressure of the surrounding sea, drowned, asphyxiated, or killed by radiation poisoning like so many submariners of the past. So, cheers." Everyone lifted their glasses and touched everyone else's then it was down the hatch.

"We have with us today four special guests," the Captain continued, "three of whom I can't name, for security purposes, since they are military personnel. The one I can name, who is a civilian, is a person you have all heard of, the great John Pearsall, a man who needs no introduction, but since this is my boat I'm going to introduce him anyway. John is a man whose reputation precedes him. He is a world-famous oceanographer. Some of the legendary work he has done include the mapping of the

Mariana trench with Jacques Cousteau, consultation on the Chunnel under the English Channel, the mapping of Loch Ness, development of the Top Secret submarine base on the Berants Sea, discovery of ancient Atlantis on the Isle of Santorini, and discovery of the Cardiff iceberg shaped like a giant potato. So without further ado I give you John Pearsall." At that the room burst into applause then started to chant, "Speech, speech, speech, speech . . ."

John, rather sheepishly, rose to his feet. He hemmed and hawed a bit—after that build up it was going to be hard to tell the truth. "Gentlemen, this grand reception warms my heart. It is great to be recognized for one's accomplishments, however, I am not able to take credit for any of those things your Captain praised me for, at least not total credit. Just let me say this, I am especially excited about the discovery of the iceberg that looks like a potato and just want to say I caught a big fish today. Thank you." Then John gave a little nod and sat back down to more applause, which was less enthusiastic than it was before—the officers looking a little confused.

After things had quieted down the Captain raised his voice again and proclaimed: "Bring on the fish."

A great fish was placed in their midst. Its skin browned, its white flesh steaming—sweet and succulent. A plate of sliced lemons, small bowls of melted butter and tartar sauce, a platter of fried potatoes, corn on the cob, and a large basket of buttermilk biscuits were laid on the table between them.

There was no room for plates. "Have at it," said the Captain. The officers and guests after some polite hesitation, dug in. It was the best meal they'd seen in many a month. A sailor stood at the door with a basket to catch the cobs as they were stripped of

their corn. There was an initial attempt at etiquette—some extended pinkies, delicate small bites, elegant munching, napkin usage, and gently spoken excuse me's, but it gradually devolved into an, "every man for himself" elbow jabbing, food flying free-for-all.

However, not for the great John Pearsall, even without his bowling shirt, he managed to evoke in himself the self-mastery necessary to maintain proper decorum. So, when he speared his fork into the fish to obtain a morsel of its juicy flesh, he did not then try to catapult it upwards in an arc to catch in his mouth. No, he gently guided it to its objective with the calm assurance of someone who knows he'll eventually get fed and does not care how soon.

Before obtaining his second morsel, John remembered the soy sauce. This he now brought forth, removed its top in preparation, imagined how fine it would taste, secured a piece of fish and tipped the bottle . . . nothing came out; he tipped it further, still nothing—was he now to be cheated by the deep, after all he had done to bring this moment of culinary triumph to fruition? He set the fork holding the bit of fish on the table then violently beat the upended bottle with his palm, and then, something did come out, but not the lifeblood of the soybean. A small thin slip of white paper fell out and floated to the table. It was a fortune.

John picked it up. Suddenly, for him, the elbow and food flying mayhem receded into the distance; inside him an extraordinary silence welled up. He read the fortune "When you realize your true nature, you are free." He was stunned. They must make duplicates of these things, thought John; he knew he'd gotten that fortune before.

His disappointment was great, not so great as he himself, yet great all the same. Why go on with this charade any longer, he felt? What meaning can any of this have now? It was for him a moment of capitulation to the inevitable; he threw caution to the wind, jumped on the fish, and bit into its flank with the ferocity of a caged animal now free to attack its tormentor.

The riotous meal, though seeming long and eventful to the participants, lasted only five minutes. The Captain marked its end with, "Boy, that was good!" Then rose and prepared to take his leave.

"Captain, what about your dessert?" hastily inquired the seaman waiter.

"There's dessert too?"

"Of course, we have apple crisp."

"It doesn't get any better than this," said the Captain, sitting back down.

After dinner, when all the officers had changed, dressed their wounds, and returned to their stations and the officer's mess had been hosed down, the four guests met

with the Captain in private.

"In one hour we will be dropping you off, until then we will be running silently. You will exit underwater at a depth of eight fathoms. You will have three different underwater propulsion units to throw off the terrorist's sonar. Use a serpentine approach path...."

John imagined the passage they were soon to make. Jack would love doing this, he thought, the escape trunk under water, secrecy, the propulsion units and scuba gear, and then he thought of Sarah and Ari too.

He smiled. He always smiled when he thought of his kids, especially when he wasn't with them. They would have loved that meal we had, particularly the fight over the last helping of apple crisp.

". . . so remember not to touch the red button," finished the Captain. John, whose mind had wandered, had missed something, but he wasn't worried—he was sure it wasn't important.