

“Okinawa Interlude” – *Jelly Bucket* (Number 5, 2014)

A tough American girl working in an Okinawa bar meets a Marine. Unlike most men she had known, he treats her with consideration and respect. During a two-day interlude with him she learns he has advanced stage cancer.

Okinawa Interlude
By
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Diedra Hoskins took the job at the Club Rose because she was bored; living in that crummy little off-base house was driving her up the wall. The air conditioner didn't work right, roaches defied her in the kitchen, the television set flickered, and, except for a standoffish couple one street over, she never saw another American face. She convinced herself the Okinawans gave her hard looks, and, in any case, she couldn't understand a word they said.

Worst of all, Ben flew away with his damned navy squadron for weeks at a time. She'd married him almost on a whim less than a year before. If she had known it would be like this she would never have done it, even when she thought she was pregnant--which it turned out she wasn't. And, she said to one of the other girls at the bar, “He never told me we didn't even qualify for on-base housing. If he had, I sure as hell wouldn't have come over here to this Godforsaken rock.”

She hadn't decided if she would tell him she'd taken the job. It was part-time, and she didn't have to go in when her husband was back, but it seemed as if he stayed gone more than he stayed home. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Besides, even if he did find out, he ought to understand. Money was just part of it. After all, she'd been an exotic dancer in a Long Beach club when he met her. He'd happily described the long-legged twenty-three-year-old as “really built” and “hot to trot.” Well, she hadn't stopped trotting just because Ben's stupid plane spent so much time in the Philippines. Quite the opposite. She wasn't just bored. On her second night

at the Club Rose she whispered to the young lance corporal buying her drinks, “I need a little action, if you know what I mean.” He knew, and she took him home when the club closed.

Most of the hostesses who trooped in to the place in the early evening and traded their jeans and tees for miniskirts and halter tops were Okinawans or Filipinas. But, the club owner, a nervous, little mongoose named Higa, had also hired eight or nine American women. Outfitted in a white jacket and dark blue shirt and boasting of having once lived in Portland, he claimed the American women provided the place with *a little international spice*. Diedra found out some of the girls’ G.I. husbands had lined the work up for them.

Laved in flickering neon light, the sandwich board sign at the entrance boasted the place offered the companionship of *high class ladies from around the world*. *High class* seemed a bit of a stretch. Word among the Marines at Camp Schwab and the sailors from the P-3 squadrons had it that if you couldn’t score with one of the girls from the Club Rose you had to be dead or dying.

It was Diedra’s kind of place. She basked in the attention that came her way, in the manner in which those sailors and Marines watched her move her body. And if their hands roamed a bit, she didn’t mind. Indeed, she delighted in their surprised and pleased expressions when she reciprocated. If they wanted to slip the manager a little money and take her to a nearby hotel, that was okay too. And if she liked them enough and could get away with a little free lancing, she’d put them in a cab and bring them to her house. Of course, her employment in the club--without a work permit--broke the law. So Higa told the American girls, “Cops come here, remember you just say you customer.” But the cops didn’t come.

Pushed ahead by an oncoming typhoon, oppressively hot and steamy weather smothered the island. The evening crowd had failed to materialize, and it seemed more likely the four or five customers, who sat like lost souls at shadowed tables, would leave rather than that any others would arrive. Diedra sidled up to a solitary Marine who perched at the bar staring straight ahead with an intensity that seemed likely to drill a hole in the bottle-lined mirror.

“Hey, Gunny, you got a smoke?” Like her military clientele, Diedra smoked Luckies.

“Sure.” He tossed a packet of cigarettes on the counter.

“Do you suppose I could trouble you for a light?” Her voice came laden with sarcasm that seemed to ask, *why are you ignoring me?*

“Uhuh.” He retrieved a plastic Bic from his shirt pocket and lighted her cigarette.

“You’re not exactly talkative,” Diedra said.

“I’m thinking.”

Damn. Outfitted in an aloha shirt, he was one fine looking man, late thirties, maybe forty; graying hair high and tight; dark blue eyes; and tough, not somebody you’d want to mess with--like one of those Marines you saw in the comics, or maybe on television in old movies. Sure as hell not like her skinny, pasty faced sailor husband. The Marine looked like he could be mean though. But, what the hell, half the men she’d been involved with turned out to be mean.

“Buy a girl a drink?”

“Sure. If you’ll fuck off and leave me alone.”

“Well, thanks, but no thanks.”

She flounced off to the corner where, like assembled birds of prey, a dozen girls waited for customers to come in. They preferred NCOs, but on a quiet night like this who could afford to be choosy? The girls assumed the place was dead because of the typhoon blowing up from the Philippines; most of the troops had been ordered to stay on base to button things up.

God. That was another thing that bugged Diedra--typhoons. This would be the third one since she arrived in Okinawa. During the first two, the howling wind blew and blew, and the deluge of constant rain flew sideways. Everything stopped, and all you could do was hunker down and wait for it to be over. Left alone and convinced the roof would fly off their little cinder block rental, Diedra had cursed her absent husband for bringing her to this wretched place. She didn’t want to be alone again.

A base civilian pumped some quarters into the juke box, but the soulful hurt of Percy Sledge’s *When a Man Loves a Woman* got swallowed up in the nearly empty room. A couple of

young Marines peered through the entrance door, shook their heads, and turned away. No action here.

Diedra made up her mind to give it another try. Why not? Nothing else on the radar. The Marine at the bar remained immersed in thought, in a different realm, one that shut out the here and now.

“Another whiskey,” he said to the bartender. She liked his voice, almost a hoarse whisper, but firm, authoritative, a voice accustomed to giving orders.

“You got a name?” she said.

“You back?” he said, barely turning his head.

“Just trying to be friendly. You looked kind of lonesome. I’m Diedra.”

“Name’s Cregan. Hank Cregan.”

Exploring the possibilities, she said, “They say there’s a big storm coming in. Don’t you have to get back to the base?”

“I’m on leave. I don’t have to be anywhere.” He gulped down his drink. “Gimme another one,” he said to the bartender. “Double.”

“You’re drinking pretty heavy.”

“What’s it to you?” He manipulated the glass between two hands, then turned to her and said, “Sorry. Guess I came off like a hard ass.”

“That’s okay. Probably got something on your mind.”

“Yeah, something on my mind.”

“Want to tell me?”

“No. Hey, bartender, give this little lady a drink. Me, too.” He slid off his stool. “Be right back,” he said. “Head call.”

More drinks followed. As the leading edge of the typhoon began to push across the Ryukyu Islands, the few remaining customers and bar girls beat feet. Sonny and Cher emoted on *I Got You Babe* for an audience of two, three if you counted the bartender.

By the time Diedra and Cregan went into the street, the wind had picked up, and the rain had transformed itself from a fine mist to a splashing downpour. Oblivious to the rain, Cregan staggered off a few steps headed for who knew where, then wandered back and, soaking wet, draped his arm around Diedra for support. When a cab finally stopped, Diedra steered Cregan into the back seat and crawled in beside him. "I'm Henry Cregan," he said. "Gunnery Sergeant, USMC. Oorah." He then slumped against her shoulder, asleep or passed out.

"Yeah. Hoorah, you big lunk," Diedra said.

When she woke, Diedra found herself at home, sprawled half dressed--or half undressed--in an arm chair. She lifted her head and looked around, momentarily confused. Her stomach rumbled, and her head throbbed. Barefooted, she padded into a bathroom not much bigger than a phone booth to search for some Alka Seltzer. She failed to find it, stopped to urinate, and then continued her quest in the cramped kitchenette.

Even with the wind moaning outside she could hear Cregan snoring in the bedroom. The previous night's events blurred. She recalled crawling into bed beside the passed-out man after she undressed him. But . . . the snoring, it had to be the snoring--and his thrashing about--that drove her to that damned chair. She wind-milled her arms and rotated her neck trying to exorcise the stiffness.

Then she leaned toward a humidity fogged window, rubbed open a spot, and squinted out at the storm. She should have closed the shutters. To hell with it; it was too late. Seven in the morning, and the typhoon, now spilled its wrath across the island and buried the entire archipelago beneath light-obscuring, dirty gray clouds. An errant wind-driven metal sheet from some roof banged in the street. The wind howled unrelentingly, and to step outside would be like passing under a cascading waterfall. Diedra clamped her eyes shut and covered her ears with her hands. When she opened her eyes and took away her hands, the storm still raged. Try as she might, she could not wish it away.

Her refrigerator provided few rewards, but at least it still ran. No power outage so far. She salvaged a couple of pieces of bread, opened a can and settled for a breakfast of toast and peaches. Later she peered into the bedroom. Cregan still slept, more peacefully she thought. The snoring had stopped. What was his problem anyway? Best to let him sleep. Nobody was going anywhere until the storm passed.

She tried the little black and white television set--nothing but "snow." What a laugh--snow in Okinawa. Then she tuned in a static laden Armed Forces Far East Network radio broadcast. The announcer kept talking about the storm and when it would be gone. Not always the latest, but, at least, they played tunes she liked. She perked up with Roy Orbison and *Oh, Pretty Woman* and remained as mystified as ever by the Animals' version of *House of the Rising Sun*. Maybe the song had something to do with Japan. She passed the next two hours on the couch, intermittently dozing and paging through dog-eared movie magazines.

Around ten o'clock Cregan got up and disappeared into the bathroom. She heard the shower running. Ten minutes later, his face appeared at the door. "Okay if I use this razor to shave?" He didn't ask whose razor it might be.

His rain-washed clothes had dried, and by the time he joined her at the little kitchen table, Cregan looked quite presentable. He scooped up the remaining peaches, happily munched a bowl of Rice Crispies, ate two pieces of toast, and downed two cups of coffee.

"I guess I really tied one on last night. Thanks for looking after me," he said. Unlike the night before, he smiled easily. To her surprise, he sounded genuinely appreciative, appreciation something she had never received much of.

"They say we're supposed to stay indoors until they give us an all clear," she said. She poured him another cup of coffee. "I suppose it's not my business, but something was bothering you last night, real bad."

His face turned serious. "Still is," he said.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I suppose you could say that. I'm sick."

“Come on. You’re putting me on. Husky guy like you. I bet you’re healthy as they come.”

“Wish it was true.”

Diedra pushed her chair back. “How are you sick?” Concern shadowed her face. “I mean is it . . . is it catching?”

No, little lady, it’s not catching. I’ve got a case of cancer, pretty advanced prostate cancer. They tell me it’s probably spread.”

She looked perplexed. “Why aren’t you in the hospital?”

“Guess I figured I was too tough for just about anything. Anyway, I’m headed there. It’s a long story.”

The long story was this. Because he had been deployed in the Vietnam bush, the forty-one-year-old Cregan had missed his annual physical. When he returned to Okinawa from Danang he immediately checked in with a Navy doctor at the Camp Hansen clinic. But, by then, he’d already been experiencing symptoms for months. The doctor told him it could be prostate cancer, or it could be something else. In any case, he immediately sent Cregan to see a specialist at the Army Hospital. The biopsy results confirmed it--an aggressive case of prostate cancer. The army doctor scheduled him for surgery in five days. Bearing this unhappy news, that evening, Cregan disregarded the typhoon warnings, and went out drinking, ending up in the Bar Rose.

“They tell me it could kill me. Hell, lots of *people* tried to kill me. Japs, North Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese. Worst of it happened right here in Okinawa--in 1945. I beat all the odds. But, I guess this stuff is different. Funny thing, I’m more afraid I’ll have to leave the Corps than that I might die.”

Diedra had always tried to avoid thinking about dying. “Gee. I never knew anybody that had cancer,” she said. It sounded as if she’d encountered a celebrity.

“Say hello to your first.”

Diedra rarely had a sober moment--in any sense of the word. Now she did. She experienced a strange sensation, an alien sensation; the name of it was sympathy. "I guess you really are sick."

"You got that right."

"Don't you have to be in the hospital?" she asked again.

"I'm going. Pre-op physical day after tomorrow, surgery on Thursday. But, I just wanted to have one last toot. I can't explain it very well, but . . ."

"Jesus, Gunny, I just thought we'd come back here and, you know . . . get it on."

"Afraid not. I'll bet it would be good though--real good, Diedra. Diedra. Never heard that name before."

It's Irish, I guess. Supposed to mean *sad*."

"Diedra, my sad friend, how'd you like to spend the next day or two with me? Just kind of enjoying the rest of my leave. Storm's likely over by tomorrow. How about it? Laugh a little. Have a good time. Make these days a lot easier. Just looking at you makes me feel better already." He accompanied the pitch with what seemed to her a movie star smile.

This tough Marine gunnery sergeant confused her. He seemed so, well, so respectful.

"Sure, Gunny. Sure. I'd like that." How could she refuse?

Since they could not venture out until the storm abated, they spent the day imprisoned in the little house. The television set provided some old sitcom relief from the boredom, but after a half hour or so, Cregan said, "You got any cards?"

"Yeah, I think so, Gunny." She foraged through a kitchen drawer and came up with an unopened pack of Bicycle Playing Cards.

"You play gin?" Cregan asked.

She shook her head.

"No? I'll teach you. There was a time I did pretty good playing gin. Made quite a bit of money."

They played several hands, but Diedra just couldn't get the hang of it. "I guess I'm not real smart," she said. "Can't we just get in bed?"

Cregan smiled and shook his head. "Sorry. Just not up to it." She missed his meaning.

Diedra had never learned how to cook, and her sole culinary skill seemed to lie in opening cans. That translated into chicken noodle soup for lunch and later corned beef hash for dinner. Both meals topped off by more canned peaches.

The wet warm air overwhelmed the house with stifling discomfort. Stripped to her underwear, Diedra lay on a sofa, fanning herself with a cheap souvenir fan. Shirtless, Cregan leaned back in the room's only easy chair. Each of them periodically wiped away perspiration. As the afternoon wore on, the sand-filled ash tray on the coffee table became the burial site for more and more butts. And Cregan made periodic trips to the bathroom.

"You got some pain?" she asked at one point, raising herself on an elbow.

"No. I just have to piss a lot. It's one of the symptoms."

She took his words on board but made no comment. She really didn't understand what was wrong with him.

"You want some weed?" she asked. "Maybe it'll make you feel better."

"No thanks. I don't touch the stuff."

Outside the shutters still rattled and the wind pushed against the block walls, but in both cases with decreasing frequency and loudness.

"You married?" she asked.

"I was. Long time ago. Funny thing, she ran off to Mexico or some other warm place with an insurance salesman while I was freezing my ass on the Chosen Reservoir."

"Where's that?"

"Korea."

She waited for him to ask about her husband, but he didn't. He'd figured that out long before.

"You got any family back in the States?" Diedra asked.

“Nope.”

“I guess that’s kind of sad, you being sick and all.”

“I get by. The Corps been good to me.”

Diedra calculated Cregan must be what Ben disparagingly referred to as a *lifer*, a career Marine. Whatever he was, she thought, he came across as a decent guy. She hadn’t known many decent men and didn’t quite know what to make of him. She felt strange around him--not a bad feeling, just strange.

Diedra sat up, tucked her legs beneath her, and lighted still another cigarette. “Did you ever kill anybody? I mean like in the war.”

He smiled and gave her a fraudulent look of deep seriousness. “Of course. I’m a trained killer, don’t you know?”

She waited for some elaboration, but he offered none. He closed his eyes and settled back in his chair. “Do you ever get down island? To the battlefields there?” he asked.

Why, she thought, would she ever want to do that? “No. I’ve been kinda stuck here. I shop at the base and go out to . . .”

“The Club Rose?”

“Yeah. But it’s not what you think.” Why did she feel it necessary to say that? It hadn’t been a concern with the others who’d passed through her door. She realized she wanted him to think well of her.

“You want a beer, Gunny? Couple cold ones in the fridge.”

“Probably go right through me. Ah, what the hell? Sure.”

So, with Cregan quaffing down his Budweiser and popping up from time to time to go to the bathroom, they spent the evening on the couch watching Armed Forces Television. He put his arm around her, and she snuggled against him; they were like a couple of high school kids. She allowed as how Opie was “cute,” and she wondered if Mayberry might be a real place. She said it sounded kind of nice, but probably was boring. They watched with simple amusement,

laughing at all the right places. Andy and his pals inhabited a clean, gentle world there on the screen, one alien to anything Diedra or Cregan had ever experienced.

Later, she cuddled against Cregan's sleeping body; it seemed to exude strength. How could such a person be under siege by a serious illness, one that might kill him? The thought of death frightened her; she wanted to pretend life would never end. She wished she could help him, make things somehow better. He'd turned out to be a good guy, not mean like she expected. She had never cared a rat's ass about how others felt, her only concern being for *numero uno*. Now, beset by thoughts about what this guy must be facing, she felt like a piece of trash. She faded into sleep.

She awoke later, still in the dark. The rain had stopped, and the wind had left them behind. She could make out a star through the window. She pressed her face against Cregan's shoulder and silently wept. She didn't know why.

When Diedra dragged herself back into the conscious world at nine in the morning, the storm was long gone, and so was Cregan. She made her way out of the bedroom, thirsty for a swallow of the filtered water she kept in the refrigerator. Disappointed, she wished Cregan had at least awakened her to say goodbye. Then she came across a penciled note on the table. *Dadra (Sp) - Gone back to transient quarters to change. Put your face on. I'll pick you up around 1000. Hank*

As ten o'clock approached she repeatedly scanned the Timex wristwatch Ben had given her for her birthday, given her on the same day he had later blackened her eye. Ben. His name had hardly crossed her mind in the last day or two. She smiled, wondering how petty officer third class Ben Hoskins would like it if he knew a Marine NCO had used his razor and, so far in an unlikely way, his wife. Hoskins--she despised the name.

Her meandering thoughts jerked back at the deep-throated rumble of a motorcycle in front of the house. The engine stopped, and Cregan knocked on the door. "Here I am. Let's

go,” he said. “Hope you like motorcycles. I just picked this baby up at Island Rentals--across from the main gate.” He swung onto the bike and beckoned to her.

“I’ve never been. I’m not sure I . . .” Her voice failed to mask her trepidation.

“You’ll love it. Hop on and put your arms around me,” Cregan said, patting the seat behind him. “Hang on. Here we go.”

She did, and away they went.

They flew south down Highway 58, the typhoon washed sky a crystalline dome, blue as the now gentle sea that lapped over the coral reefs. The air rippled across her face, fresh and cool. She clung to Cregan’s body, pressed herself against his back. Feelings of excitement--no, feelings of simple exhilaration--coursed through her as they shot past villages of tile-roofed houses, farmers in cane fields, US bases, fields brilliant with red and yellow flowers, convoys of Army trucks--on and on.

A half hour or so down the highway, Cregan turned off on a farm road that led them through fields planted with sweet potatoes. Then, on a small rise he pulled over and killed the motor.

“Let’s stretch our legs. I’ve got to go. It’s sure as hell annoying.” He walked away a few feet, turned his back, and relieved himself. “You okay?” he said over his shoulder.

“Yeah. I’ll let you know if I need to stop,” she said.

“Look over there,” Cregan said, pointing to a low ridge line a mile away. “Doesn’t look like anything now. In the spring of ‘45 it was hell. We must have tried to get up that hill a dozen times. All part of the Shuri Line. Machine guns cracking away, mortars, artillery. We’d go up, kill a bunch, and then get repulsed. Korea, Vietnam--never anything like this. This was the worst. They’d come up behind us. Mud, bodies and pieces of bodies--couldn’t tell theirs from ours, shell holes, and the stink, no way you could ever imagine the smell.”

She wondered if he even knew she was there. The same fixed look he’d had that night at the bar. He frightened her. He’d gone to some awful place.

“I was seventeen,” Cregan said, his tone more normal. “Seventeen.” He did not speak for a moment, lost in thought. Finally, he said, “There’s a Japanese cemetery on that hill now. Locals think the place is haunted, claim to see ghosts of Japanese and American soldiers--ones that never got found or put together--wanting to get buried.” He smiled grimly. “Maybe some of those ghosts are my buddies.” He gave a half wave toward the hill.

“I know there was a war here, but . . .,” Diedra said. The talk of bodies and ghosts disturbed her.

“Just something I had to do. Let’s go,” Cregan said. “Sorry. I promised we’d have a good time.” The weight of whatever it was that brought him to this spot seemed to have been lifted. Diedra felt relieved, once more light-hearted.

They rolled back up the island and, to Diedra’s great surprise, cruised into an A & W drive-in, orange, brown, and white, both incongruous and beckoning.

“Thought you might be hungry, could go for a burger and some fries,” Cregan said. He grinned at her.

No sampler of foreign food, Diedra grinned back. “You got that right. I didn’t even know this place was here.”

While the two Americans sat at a table consuming their burgers, a cluster of small Okinawan boys surrounded the motorcycle. “Twenty years ago, they’d have been looking at the burgers, not the bike,” Cregan said.

She changed the subject. “It’s nice being with you, Gunny.”

“Aw, come on. I’m just a fucking piece of USMC surplus.”

“No. I mean it. It was real thoughtful of you to bring me here.” Her bar girl brassiness failed her--gone. She looked embarrassed.

“Hey, we’re not done yet.”

Back on the motorcycle, they traveled north, toward Manza Cape on the East China Sea. Ben, the Club Rose, her despicable house, the boys she brought home, even Cregan’s cancer--all

disappeared from her mind. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin, her hair streaming behind her. If Gunnery Sergeant Cregan was, as he put it, having a toot, so was she.

They pulled into a parking area overlooking the sea, after the typhoon more emerald than blue. They walked to one side of the viewing area. The place was noted for a rock formation local people claimed looked like an elephant's trunk, hanging down from the face of a cliff.

"Sure doesn't look like a trunk to me," Diedra said.

"Me neither," Cregan said. "Looks more like me these days." She got it, and they both laughed. He took her hand and they strolled over to the other side of the view area.

Cregan gestured. "Out there on that point of land, that's the Manza Beach Hotel. Just opened," Cregan said. "I hear they're getting ready for the Japanese, after Okinawa goes back to them. I figure we can have dinner, maybe do a little dancing."

"It's probably a classy place. I might feel kind of funny there."

"It's for tourists. You look great. Nice slacks. Nice blouse. Nice person. Come on."

Fifteen minutes later Cregan delivered them to the hotel. Once inside, Diedra marveled at the soaring atrium, resplendent with tropical plants and flowers.

"They're supposed to have three different restaurants--Chinese, Japanese, and Okinawan. There is also a grill. What do you think, Diedra?"

She craned her neck, gazing up as late afternoon sun filtered through the glass sky above her.

"Maybe the grill."

"Tomorrow I have to fast. Last meal of the condemned man," Cregan said.

She gave him a dirty look. "That's not funny."

They feasted on pork chops, potatoes, and green vegetables, type unknown, but, she said, "sort of like spinach," downed glass after glass of wine, and gorged on chocolate cake. Diedra said it was just like being back in the States. She described the waiter as nice but a little stuck up.

After dinner they toured the hotel's shopping arcade.

Well within earshot, a middle-aged American woman, overwhelmed by her own pomposity, said to her female companion, “Apparently they are now allowing enlisted men in here.”

“He looks old enough to be her father,” the other added, her voice laced with affected disgust.

“Lady, you’re right. This place has no taste,” Cregan said. “They’re even letting ugly, old bitches in.”

Cregan took Diedra's arm and guided her into a jewelry shop. “Gotta have some little memento,” he said. “What do you like?”

“Oh, I don’t . . .”

“How about some earrings? Maybe one of these bracelets.” Then to the female Okinawan salesclerk, “Could you show us some of those necklaces, the plain ones.”

“Don’t they cost too . . .?”

“Hey, kiddo, I’m flush. Don’t worry.”

Diedra reveled in the selection process. By the time she finally settled on a silver bracelet, seemingly half the contents of the show case had been lifted out, displayed, and returned. She’d never been the recipient of such consideration. It was all new to her, and Diedra tightly clutched the cloth pouch holding her new treasure as they returned to the corridor outside the shop.

“Thanks, Gunny. I don’t know what to say.”

“Hey, just having you around is all the thanks I need. I’m having a great time. Sure as hell beats sitting around the NCO quarters waiting to head over to the hospital.”

As they wended their way back toward the lobby, music wafted out of the main dining room, an eight-piece Filipino dance band having a tryout.

“I’m not much of a dancer,” Cregan said. “But, how about it?”

“Me neither,” Diedra replied. Her only dancing had involved Long Beach solo appearances in minimal costumes or the body contact that passed for dancing with customers at the Club Rose.

“Let’s give it a try,” Cregan said. And so they did.

Four or five other couples occupied the floor. Diedra declared the music to be old-fashioned, but she soon became caught up in the moment. The music appeared to wrap Cregan in nostalgia. They sipped mixed drinks at a table and took the floor several times. *Moonlight Serenade*. Who cared if the clarinet squeaked? *I’ll Be Seeing You*. Who cared if the singer sang off key? *The Tennessee Waltz*. Cregan told the truth. He wasn’t much of a dancer. Neither was she. It didn’t matter. Around they went. Diedra found herself in a new place, a happy place.

Finally, Cregan said, “Time to go. You’re so full of life. Kinda tuckered me out.”

The ride back to her house along darkened roads proved to be as exhilarating as the earlier trips that day. They stopped once more at the Cape Manza overlook and gazed back at the glimmering hotel lights and the lights of small boats almost lost in the sea’s darkness. She clutched his hand. Neither of them spoke.

When he delivered her back to her house, she urged him to come in, “just for a cup of coffee.” He said he couldn’t. He had to check into the hospital early the next morning for the pre-op physical. “Anyhow,” he said, “I’m feeling kind of weary. I guess you did me in.”

“I wish you didn’t have to go, Gunny. Really. I had a real fine time today.”

“Me too. I liked being with you. But you know what they say, all good things got to end sometime. Thanks for being there for me. I have to go.” She hugged him--an innocent hug at the end of an innocent day, a hug loaded with genuine affection.

“So long. Maybe I’ll see you again sometime,” he said. He revved the engine, and then roared off into the night. She traced the faint glow of the motorcycle’s headlight until it vanished from sight. Seized by an olio of feelings she would never be able to explain, Diedra put her hand to her face to quell her trembling lip, then to wipe away the tears that clouded her vision.

“So long, Marine. Good luck, you big lunk.”

When she heard the knock on Friday, for a moment she thought it might be Cregan. Maybe they'd put off the operation. But when she rushed to open the door she encountered a grim-faced Navy chief petty officer and another sailor.

"Are you Mrs. Hoskins?" the chief said.

She nodded.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Can we step in for a minute?"

She nodded again, confused. Could it be about Cregan?

"Mrs. Hoskins, your husband's plane crashed into the South China Sea yesterday. Headed for Clark Field. I'm afraid there weren't any survivors."

Diedra felt nothing. It was an abstraction, like something she heard on the radio or read about in a newspaper.

"Maybe you want to sit down," the chief said, apparently assuming her reaction to be one of shock.

Dry-eyed, she said simply, "Then, I guess that means I'll be going back to the States."

The chief offered the Navy's condolences and spent a few minutes explaining the various administrative procedures. They would send a car and driver by a little later. Take her to see a chaplain, personnel officer, disbursing officer--whatever she needed to do. Would 1400 be okay? "We're mighty sorry," the Chief said. "Anything you need. Just let us know." Then he and the other sailor backed through the door and went out to their car.

Ben dead? She supposed she ought to feel something, but she could summon no grief. Married less than a year, she had hardly seen him since they arrived in Okinawa. In a sense he had already been gone from her life. She felt nothing--nothing.

When the car showed up, Diedra asked the Navy driver, a young woman her own age, to take her first to the Army Hospital. They stopped under the hospital portico and the driver opened the door for her. Dressed in a simple one-piece dress and wearing flats, Diedra walked straight to the reception desk.

“I’d like to visit one of your patients,” she said. “He had surgery here yesterday.”

A civilian volunteer, an Army wife, looked up from behind a placard reading *Information*. “Are you a family member?” she asked. “Visiting hours start at 1700.”

“A friend. He has no family.”

“What is his name?”

“Cregan. Henry Cregan. He’s a Marine. I’m sure he’ll want to see me. I’m Diedra. Diedra Hoskins.”

The receptionist scrutinized a sheet of paper, and then walked over to a sergeant typing at a nearby desk. They conferred briefly; then Diedra saw the sergeant talking on the phone. He put down the receiver and approached the desk.

“I think you might want to talk to the chaplain,” he said to Diedra. “Why don’t you have a seat? He’ll be right over. His office is just down the hall.”

The chaplain? Why the chaplain? Was it about her husband? She dabbed with her handkerchief at her perspiring hands. What was happening?

A middle-aged Army major approached her.

“Are you the lady who’s here to see Gunnery Sergeant Cregan?”

“Yes, I’m his . . . I’m his friend. I’m Diedra Hoskins. Is something wrong?”

The chaplain seated himself in an adjacent chair. Sober faced, he said, “I wish I had better news. Sergeant Cregan passed away Wednesday afternoon.”

“Oh, no. That can’t be true.” Diedra looked at him with disbelief. “There has to be a mistake. I know he was sick, but they were going to operate and . . . I mean I just saw him a couple of days ago. He was riding around on a motorcycle. He couldn’t die.”

The chaplain touched her hand in a consoling manner. “I’m terribly sorry. It’s true.”

“Was it . . . was it the cancer?”

“No. Your friend had a heart attack. While he was waiting for his pre-op physical. He was just sitting in a chair. Surprised everyone.”

“A heart attack? I can’t believe . . .”

“There’s something else. I don’t have the impression the gunnery sergeant was a religious man. But he stopped in my office Wednesday morning. He said he’d changed his government insurance beneficiary. Told me he wanted me to follow up with the personnel folks to make sure there weren’t any *foul ups* in case the surgery didn’t work out. He used another word, but you understand my meaning. He named you as the beneficiary.”

Diedra looked at the chaplain. “He was a nice guy, chaplain.” Tears welled up. She murmured. “A real nice guy.”

“Had you known him long?”

“Not long enough,” she said. “Not long enough.”

