



The PATSY



short fiction by **P J Garland**.

He walked briskly through the streets fighting the urge to run with every step.

As planned, he cut up Elm Street to South Lamar and the Greyhound bus station was right there. He passed sobbing women in clutches hugging, men sitting on the curbs holding their heads as sirens wailed.

He walked by a TV store with a crowd in front staring at the window.
Someone yelled “Oh God!”

He pulled his hat down over his eyes and got to the bus station counter and bought a ticket from a pale man who kept looking over his shoulder at the television up on the wall.

As he sat waiting, on the television a newsman with a mustache made an announcement and a moan went up from everyone in the room.

A lady started to cry and men looked at each other wide-eyed and stricken and shook their heads.

He almost ran when three police cars pulled up in front but no one got out and they suddenly left sirens and red lights flashing.

They’ve found him, he thought.

Poor bastard.

At least he won’t live to suffer their electric chair.

Five days later back in the rainforest he settled in for the long wait until the boat returned.

For the first time he felt what he thought was sorrow.

The televisions in the bus stations during the layovers on the long bus ride north held him transfixed. The metal boxes of newspapers with the photographs.

He could not help himself.

He saw the beautiful widow and the little saluting boy who looked like his own Vlady.

He was surprised to find himself weeping one night as he sat in the old schoolhouse in the rain forest, trying to keep warm by the ancient wood stove as the endless rain dripped through the roof.

He should put this behind him, as before.

He was angry at his weakness.

He waited almost a month, mostly undiscovered.

One evening, he walked through the rain to the beach and flashed his light out over the dark ocean. As the inflatable pulled up on the cold beach he saw too late that it was unfamiliar. He only had time to shout, over the noise of the surf, “Who are you?”

Rick Sullivan and Tom Dobson drank some cold draft beer, nodded and smiled and stared across the table in the Queen’s Hotel at their grizzled skinny old air force buddy wearing a sweatshirt that could have walked here alone.

His eyes widened, showing a yellowish tinge.

“I got somethin’ to tell you guys. Just promise you won’t laugh, OK?”

“OK, Stem.” said Sully, waiting for it. It was a set-up for sure.

“Remember back in ’63 when I met that guy on the beach I told you he looked just like that freakin’ Oswald?”

“I remember that Stem,” laughed Sully. “I also remember that you were one of the great bull- shitters in the Royal Canadian Air Force.”

“Well, boys, now that you’re here, and I never thought I’d get up the guts to say this, because you get written off as a nut bar right? But that was the guy that did JFK. He freakin’ did,” said Stem nodding, anxious to be believed.

Sully and Dob were thinking the last forty years of booze and who knows what else have this guy completely screwed up.

They had driven down to Victoria BC for the day from an air force radar - bases reunion at Comox to find their old friend Stem. Stem had been AWOL for forty years.

They smiled at Stem.

He was on his fourth draft and no figuring how many beers before they’d arrived.

“Whacked JFK eh, Stem?”

“You bet your ass. The freakin’ President.”

“Yeah, right. Get a grip Stem.” Said Dob laughing. “Whoops. I promised, sorry, buddy.”

“Sure it wasn’t Elvis, Stem?” said Sully, laughing.

“And bears don’t crap in the woods,” said Dob. “Have another one, buddy.”

Stem got angry. “There was crap in the woods alright.”

Both Sullivan and Dobson, known as Sully and Dob in the military and hockey habit of never calling people by their actual names, had known Stem since they all met at basic training in 1958.

Back then the Soviets were coming any minute and with thousands of others they were shipped to Clinton, Ontario to be trained to operate the NORAD early warning lines, to watch and wait for the arrival of Russian bombers and ICBM’s.

From there they had gone to separate bases, but were luckily reunited at a radar base named Holberg on the northwestern tip of Vancouver Island in the early sixties.

RCAF Station Holberg in 1963 was a small air force village that sat on the edge of the Quatsino rain forest, the radar towers situated on top of Mount Brandes, one the highest mountains in the area and the town site huddled at the bottom in the ever-present mists and downpours.

It was a good base, populated by people isolated but happy, living in the midst of one of the world’s most beautiful areas, despite the rain.

And rain it did, ten feet a year, swelling the salmon-choked San Josef River that ran northwest into the ocean to a sandy beach seven miles from the base.

A sunny day was never taken for granted.

Two miles south, a loggers’ camp called Rayonier sat on the shore of a twenty –mile inlet that led to the Pacific. Plentiful salmon, red snapper and crab were sought by fishermen. Cougar and mule deer abounded, so hunting was popular.

Bald eagles soared above the misty mountains. Fishermen would slap a snapper baitfish hard on the water and throw it in, they'd fly down from their aerie on a four-foot wingspan and grasp it in those huge talons and fly it up to the nest, their screeches echoing off the mountains.

Deep and ancient forests surrounded the base, with most of the ugly clear-cut logging operations that scarred the area to the east and south.

A trail that roughly paralleled the river led northwest from the base to a pristine thirteen - mile beach on the Pacific at San Josef Bay. Port Hardy, a town of about 1200 souls lay east, thirty miles down a gravel logging road.

Forty-two years later, the 2005 Pine Tree Reunion on Vancouver Island was fun but after golf or touring around and a banquet, a few brews and endless recounting of the good old days most of the grey heads tottered off to hit the sack at ten, leaving a disc jockey spinning oldies for the bartender and a few stalwarts.

They were all ex - Fighter Control Operators, or as the trade was known, Fighter Cops.

Aging cold - war sentinels who manned the radar bases that strung across Canada during the cold war, white radomes gleaming like huge golf balls on the Pine Tree Line.

The plan back then was basically when the incoming invaders were picked up, you warned the population; you then intercepted the bombers by controlling fighter aircraft and shot them down.

As far as the ICBMs were concerned, you kissed your ass goodbye.

Because the radar stations were the primary targets.

Take out the eyes, the rest is easy.

So they'd put their immortal young butts on the line back then, but now, no one outside their aging circle seemed to care.

Too many actual disasters happening right now to commemorate a disaster that could have happened, and didn't.

No praise for the sentinels who never had to shout a warning.

It was raining in Comox and had been for three days so the reunion golf tournament was off.

That made Dob and Sully's decision easier.

They left their wives for the afternoon promising to return in time for the banquet and dance that night, to look up an old buddy who got lost way back when.

Corporal Chris “Stem” Stemkowski was basically stand-up guy with a penchant for getting minor scrapes with air force brass. For no apparent reason he went AWOL in December '63.

There was not a great deal of concern at the time because he'd been AWOL before. A lot. Coming back late from leave was a favourite stunt, booking off for seven days, returning after ten, Usually terminally hung over, and once from Mexico urgently needing penicillin.

This time he was not seen or heard from for forty years.

He was found by chance when a ex-air force type bumped into him in Victoria at a grubby tavern, somehow recognizing him, and spread the word at the last reunion in P.E.I.

The word at the reunion was Stem was now a complete hit - bottom alky, looked like death warmed over.

Drinks a lot and lives in a cheap hotel in downtown Victoria.

He was a loner back in the day, given to spending time in the surrounding dense rain forest and hiking down to the beach at San Josef Bay.

He came from Glace Bay, Nova Scotia and never talked about family.

Rumour had it he grew up in series of bad foster homes until he joined up at seventeen.

When in his short sober stretches, he was a good worker and a good friend to those who stuck by him, a much-loved screw-up in the air force with a charge sheet that listed nothing really serious, but a lot of beery run-ins with the military police and others on a regular basis.

He was also movie- star handsome, very popular with the airwomen and a legendary liar who'd tell outrageous stories just to get a reaction or try to extricate himself from some jam.

People at other radar sites were treated regularly to the latest Stem story all along the connected Pinetree line.

One of the best: He'd once been caught by a female sergeant in the airwomen's barracks washroom having a leak, explaining that he was there to actually chase some other airman out who he'd seen come into the barracks.

What gave him away was the fact that he was shoeless. He was also quite drunk.

He was told to find his shoes, which he happily did, along with his shorts, from under an embarrassed airwoman's bed down the hall.

At the time he was based in Mont Apica in northern Quebec, so he spent fourteen days in the army brig down the road in Valcartier under the sympathetic care of the Prevost Corps, a very nasty branch of military police.

He liked to tell the terminally gullible wild stories.

Once to a table of fascinated recent arrivals he recalled the time he'd met Elvis and stayed at Graceland while on leave, stringing an incredible tale of singing with the King, and driving his pink Cadillac and drinking beer in the jungle room.

This monologue lasted for an hour or more, told absolutely straight-faced and urging listeners to corroborate it if they wanted to, just ask so and so.

Who was never there, of course.

Sometimes these rookies would shake their heads and marvel at their good fortune at meeting Stem for weeks before someone wised them up.

Then, on one of last days of 1963, he vanished.

Sully and Dob remembered December 30, 1963.

The three had been tight, on the same ops crew, hung out and partied together and even shared a room in the airman's barracks.

They both had come back from a six-day Christmas leave and found Stems' civvy clothes were gone, his usually locked closets open, drawers emptied.

Like he'd left in a hurry.

Mysteriously, a machete and a search and rescue orange vest were found on his bunk.

There was every reason for them to suppose he had gone away for his New Year's leave, but they recalled him saying he was staying on base, he was broke.

But they waited and when New Years leave ended January 5 and it got to be January 8 they got anxious and went to their crew chief.

Sully called the MPs and they basically laughed and said Stem would return from New Years leave when he felt like it, that's Standard Operating Procedure for Stem.

The word got around and a sergeant who headed up the base volunteer Search and Rescue team called Sully and explained he'd asked Stem on December 29th if he was going down there, to clear the trail of overgrowth. That explained the vest and machete.

So Sully and Dob convinced him to send some guys from the team down the trail that wound through the rain forest to the beach to see if he maybe fell into some deadfall off the trail or got attacked by a cougar. They were working day shift and couldn't go, but the sarge sent a team down anyway.

The SAR team did not come back with any new of Stems' whereabouts.

Instead they'd found a body. It was on the beach just up from the high tide line and had been dead for days. It looked like a suicide as a handgun was found nearby. There was no ID.

The SAR team's focus had then quite understandably gone off looking for Stem to calling the RCMP and then calling in a chopper from RCAF Comox to get the stiff out of there.

Then the base military police, asking around in Rayonier about the body, found out by chance that a logger from the camp had driven Stem to Port Hardy on the night of December 29th, and he'd been seen getting on the ferry to Kelsey Bay.

So he was AWOL again, this time without the bother of putting in for some leave first.

Sully asked an MP if they'd heard anything about Stem and got the word.

They were mightily pissed-off that they'd wasted a lot of time and effort worried about their buddy Stem who's living it up south somewhere.

Sully also asked the MP if they ever found who the suicide on the beach was, and was told no, some drifter probably.

But now they remembered the funny, generous and outgoing Stem and all the good times they'd had together. They had to look him up. Where the hell did he go? And why?

Over beers at the reunion TGIF party they decided to hit the road to Victoria two hours south the next morning and see if they could find him, their old buddy, and catch up.

Get the story before it was maybe too late.

At the reunion, four hundred folks on the distant side of sixty enjoyed a weekend of reminiscing with old friends who reminded them of their own mortality, attempting unsuccessfully to both avoid mirrors and drink a lot of beer.

They were now cheap dates, all of them, alcohol-wise.

A lot of stories were re-told of a special time, a lot of pictures of children and grand-kids were shared.

Sully laughingly said as his arthritic knees ached from standing at the bar, “Who the hell are all these old people?”

Sullivan and Dobson had kept in touch over the years, occasionally visiting each other.

Sully had retired again recently from a job in London Ontario, and moved to Red Deer Alberta to be close to his aging in-laws.

Dob owned a successful lumber-yard chain in Nanaimo and area and worked part time, just for something to do. He was a millionaire. One February, Sully had parked his fifth-wheel motor home up the road from Dobs’ luxurious condo on North Hutchinson Island near Vero Beach Florida for a couple of weeks.

They partied and golfed, barbecued and fished, drove to the Keys in Sully’s motor home, got some booze in the blender at Margaritaville, complained about their achy bodies and enjoyed.

Their wives were also friends from air force days, being airwomen in the radar chain who’d met and married their guys the same year, at the same base.

Life was good.

They drove south on a drizzly Saturday morning from Canadian Forces Base Comox, passing Nanaimo, (driving by a huge billboard for Dobson Lumber –Three Locations - Helping You Build Your Life !) and grabbed a coffee and a sandwich at the Timmy’s outside Ladysmith.

They rolled into Victoria shortly after noon and headed downtown.

Gaunt and unshaven, Stem had resisted at first when his two old best buds took a good guess and found him living above that grimy Queen’s Hotel and tavern on the less-genteel side of Victoria where he’d been spotted.

Sully had asked the bartender for him and the guy just rolled his eyes, pointed up and said 203.

When the door opened they didn't recognize him. Gaunt, with wispy greasy white hair, and a matching scraggy beard, standing in the door, beer and smoke in hand. Dirty t-shirt, jeans, barefoot.

Sully was one second away from asking this rummy if Chris Stemkowski lived here when thankfully the rummy spoke first in a scratchy voice:

“Well holy crap! Look what the cat dragged in. Sully and Dob, you old bastards. How're you doin'?”

They stood there stunned as he looked them up and down.

“Don't recognize me”? He laughed and coughed into a skinny shoulder and shook hands.

“Good to see you lads. You're a little greyer than the last time I seen you. Little fatter too.”

Dob said, “Stem? Holy crap. Forty years. How're you doin'”? Thinking this guy is all bones.

Over his shoulder they saw a bleak room with an unmade bed, a hot plate, an over- flowing garbage bag, beer empties. A raggedy blanket covered the window.

It smelled like an ashtray, and so did he.

“Stem, good to see you man, holy God. We're up at the reunion at Comox,” said Sully,

“Thought maybe we'd drive down, say hello and catch up. How're you doing?”

Stem stared, eyes red - rimmed and shiny. He took a drag on a cigarette and coughed.

“Been better.” he said shrugging. “But I'm on the right side of the grass, for now.”

“You didn’t want to go to the reunion, Stem? Did you hear about it?” said Dob.

“Nope. Don’t matter. No money and no wheels to go to some geezer reunion... Times is tough, lads. You can see that, right?” he said gesturing behind him. “Life been good to you two I bet? Lookin’ good after all this time, boys.”

Dob said “We’re OK Stem. Good to see you man.”

“Thanks, thanks.” said Stem, looking at what might have been standing in his doorway.

“Been awhile eh, boys?”

“No kidding. Let’s go shoot the shit for awhile, Stem. Lots to catch up on.” Said Dob.

Stem looked down, shook his head and scratched his beard with a shaky hand.

“No thanks , I don’t think so right now. Appreciate you comin’ around, though. Not feelin’ so hot. I need to be alone. Good seein’ you guys, eh?”

He started to close the door. “Thanks for comin’ by.”

“Whoa, hey Stem, let’s grab a beer downstairs,” says Dob, putting a hand on the door. “Talk over old times. Come on man.”

“Old times,” say Stem. “Some of that crap is better left behind eh, like, forget it.”

“Forget what, Stem?” said Sully “We had some great times. Hey come on... we just drove all the way down from Comox to see you, buddy. We never had a chance to say goodbye. Half an hour, couple of beers, do some catchin’ up? We’re buyin’.”

Bingo. Stem lit up and took a swig out of his beer.

“I should know better. You’re buyin’? You bastards always could talk me into stuff.”

He stared at them for a moment.

“Yeah, well, maybe it’s time. Maybe it’s time.”

He ducked inside, coughing, and came out wearing torn running shoes and an old Maple Leaf sweatshirt with a memories of many beers and meals down the front.

“Roger- dodger, lets go. Life is short. Take my word on that boys.”

They went down the filthy stairs, out a side door.

The Queen’s Hotel featured cheap draft beer, hookers, dopers, and at least one good brawl a week.

They wove between a sad huddle of smokers outside in the drizzle, went in and sat down at a small rickety table.

It smelled like stale beer, Lysol, and urine.

Sully and Dob each threw a twenty on the table as a stone-faced waiter came over, and said “Stem, you flush tonight?” Stem nods at the twenties, and the waiter put down two draft beers in front of him and took Sully and Dobs’ order.

They talked over the beer, Stem putting down the first two fast and then slowing down and relaxing, got the waiter over again for more and sipped.

Old friends talked over old times and got back into the groove they’d enjoyed as friends long ago.

They rehashed the stuff that happened at Holberg, that infamous and legendary radar station with no highway in, just winding dirt logging roads.

The quirky little base boasted all the amenities of a small town, including an indoor pool in a recreation center, a library, movie theater, and housing for the married folks and bars for all the various ranks to get wet inside.

Also adding to the quiriness was the only official boat in the air force, the ex- WWII mine sweeper RCAF Vessel M.S. Nimpkish, that chugged up and down the inlet lugging airmen, dependants and their stuff from Coal Harbour, near Port Hardy.

It was an air force base with no planes, but a boat, all in the middle of a North American rain forest.

You could drive up at night, but the logging companies owned the roads in the daylight.

They talked of wild rides from Port Hardy in Sully's old beater drunkenly navigating the rough roads that hugged cliffs with no guardrails and meeting twenty-ton logging trucks as wide as the road.

They recalled the RCAF Dakota aircraft flight twice a week to Vancouver from Port Hardy for the terminally - bushed who just missed traffic and neon lights.

Stem had been on board once when both engines quit and it came within 300 feet of auguring in before they figured out the fuel was dirty and switched tanks.

“Somebody's wife comin' up had a Chihuahua on board and it crapped all over everyone on board when the aircraft took the dive”, laughed Stem. “I'd a crapped too if he hadn't pulled her out. I got off covered in stale sandwiches, coffee and dog poop,” laughed Stem, and that brought on a coughing spell.

“Good news was we didn't have any practice intercepts to control up the hill for two weeks while they cleaned the gas tanks at Comox.”

They laughed about the endless parties in the Corporals club, and the pick-up band that sounded better the more you drank, called Corporal Punishment.

They talked about who shagged who and the operations site “up the hill” at the radar tower with its dark ops room and glowing scopes and the Plexiglas plotting - board map to track flights.

The long midnight shifts, staring at a sleep - inducing radar screens under threat of severe punishment should you be caught nodding off.

“No problem getting caught, when the boss is tits- up snoring in the break room,” laughed Dob.

They recalled the little radio station that Stem worked at as a volunteer DJ, spinning country and western tunes once a week, when he showed up.

Once he did a memorable two hours very drunk and babbling incoherently until the Orderly Sergeant physically removed him from the studio, with the mike on.

All agreed his last show was his best.

There were no TV signals that reached Holberg, and the base radio station was the only AM signal during the daylight hours.

The Vancouver and Victoria newspapers came two days late in the mail on the Nimpkish.

They laughed over stories of their fishing trips in Dob's 14-foot aluminum boat, catching huge salmon and crab and drinking vast amounts of Lucky Lager.

"You mind the time we just about got swamped by those freakin' killer whales comin' up the chuck?" said Stem. "Could've reached out and touched the mothers."

They talked about the abandoned Danish settlement built in 1900, the original Holberg, just off the trail to the beach. It had five acres carved out of the rain forest, eight houses, a small graveyard and a schoolhouse full of relics, all left behind. Coal-oil lanterns, woodworking tools, huge cross-cut saws, wood stoves, and piles of moldy books.

A promise was broken by the government to build them a decent dock at the inlet so they simply packed up and left after 30 years and went back to Denmark.

All the memories, or at least most of them, were satisfying to recall.

It had been a special time, but where had all the time gone?

"So what have you guys been up to the last forty years?" asked Stem.

"After I got out in '83, I got a job at GM Defence in London Ontario making personnel carriers for the army, did that for twenty years then I bought a motor home and Glenda and I live in that. Red Deer in the summer, that's where Glenda's folks live, and we drive'er to Florida when it gets cold," said Sully. "I got three grandkids now."

"Jesus, that's sweet. What about you, Dob?"

Dob thoughtfully played it down.

“I’m up in Nanaimo. I got out of the air force and got a job at a wholesale lumber place in ’70 and worked my way up. I got a chance to buy it ’85 thanks to the bank. My oldest boy runs it now, hopefully not into the ground, eh? Still married to Rosy, met her after uh, we knew you, forty-two years together in November.”

He didn’t mention that he’d made his first million by 1995. Palatial house, Florida condo, the whole nine yards.

“Dob’s doing alright.” said Sully winking at Stem.

“Sounds like it.”

What you been up to, Stem?” said Dob, warily.

“Well, oh boy, it’s a different story than you lucky bastards. But the long story short is: After I split, I spent time in Tofino layin’ low and workin’ part time at a tourist lodge doin’ handy-man crap and we thought we’d try our hand at the big city and come down here. When I say we, I mean me and my lady Mary. I met her there, my beautiful hippy lady. She was into flowers, was a helluva gardener, she could grow a daisy on a sidewalk, so we had a florist shop. I fixed up this old place we got over on Fort Street. We did OK, I kept it fixed up and she grew the flowers. Thirty years together. Never was so happy.”

He hung his head. His voice got tighter.

“She, uh, died in ’94 – cancer. I tried to make it go for awhile and then just packed ‘er in and sold it. I miss her awful, still do. Sweet lady. I got down. Pissed it all away, story of my life.”

I got down.

He wiped his eyes and took a pull on his draft.

“Sorry, boys.”

Dob coughed once and said, “That’s hard, Stem, sorry...I, uh...excuse me.”

He got up and went to the men’s. Not good with tears.

Sully said, "I'm sorry to hear that, Stem. You got any kids?"

"Nope. No kids. That would have been a good thing, 'specially now. What I actually do now is I work over at the Goodwill, sortin' crap ...when I'm OK. Pretty good outfit for someone like me. Top up the welfare."

Sully, a shade too forced, then feeling stupid said, "Oh good. Good! The old lady loves Goodwill, me too. I get stuff for the motor home and it's uh...good. Real good."

Stem looked at him. "Yeah, we get some good stuff in. I get a discount if I see somethin' I need. I don't need much."

They both sipped at their beer and then Dob came back.

Then Stem came out with "I got somethin' to tell you guys. Just promise you won't laugh" and then leaned in, lowered his voice and came out with the Who Killed JFK line, bam, just like that.

"Yeah, right. Get a grip Stem." Said Dob laughing. "Whoops. I promised, sorry, buddy."

"And bears don't crap in the woods. Have another one, buddy."

"Sure it wasn't Elvis, Stem?" said Sully, laughing.

"There was crap in the woods alright," said Stem, suddenly really pissed-off, bleary eyes flashing, voice low.

"Y'know I'm fuckin' tempted to get the hell outta here right now."

Pushing his chair back, looking down his nose, glaring.

"OK Stem, settle down. I'm just yankin' your chain." said Dob.

"You used to spin the odd tale way back when, Stem."

"Piss off, Dob."

He sat and glanced around the room and finally calmed down.

Then a sad and frightened look came across his face and he hung his head.

“No spinnin’ lads, not to spoil your day and I’m sorry I lost it there, but here it is. I gotta tell you, I’m dyin’ is the long and the short of it, so I need to get this off my chest, what’s left of it.”

“I’ve got a tumour in here”, he said tapping his sweatshirt, “so I’m outa here pretty soon.”

“Oh God, Stem, what are y... have you had any treatment for it?” asked Dob.

“Yeah, radiation and chemo. Chemo damned near killed me anyway. Went away for about two years. It’s back.”

Sully said, “Can’t they operate?”

“Nope, not anymore. Doctor gave me crap ‘cause I didn’t quit the butts, eh? That’s the way she goes. I’m sixty-six. Shouldna made it this far.”

Dob said, “Sorry Stem”.

“Yeah”, said Sully, “Sorry. Jesus.”

Silence. Finally Stem says:

“OK. So that’s it. But I’m tellin’ you two bastards. You’ll be the first I’ve told this Oswald stuff to in 40 years, besides Mary, God rest her soul. She thought I’d get put away or shot or locked up for a freakin’ loony if I didn’t keep my mouth shut. So do anything but laugh or I’m outta here. A guy can take a lot, but ridicule is just pilin’ on at this stage. But you’ll hear a lot about this soon. ”

“Sorry I laughed”, said Sully.

“Well, the C.O. laughed first.”

“The C.O. at Holberg?” asks Dob.

“Yup, the old man. Thought I was nuts.”

Sully said, “Is that why you went AWOL Stem?”

“Because the CO thought I was nuts? Yeah right. Frankly I don’t give a crap anymore ‘bout the AWOL shit. Come and get me if you care anymore. At least I’ll die in clean sheets.”

He waved at the waiter.

“Incidentally, how was your Christmas leave boys? Never got the chance to ask ya.”

“Pretty good as I recall,” said Dob, smiling. “Missed the room- mate when we got back.”

Stem hacked a bit, then drained the dregs of a draft and played with a wet circle on the table while the waiter put two more down.

“You’re saying the guy that you said looked like Oswald is the guy that shot Kennedy?” Dob said, trying to fight a half grin on his face.

“Yup. Not only that, but the guy tried to kill *me* too. After it all happened I got to thinkin’ about it and I got very, very paranoid. If they can shoot JFK they sure as hell would shoot me.

“So I went down to the loggin’ camp and paid a guy to get me to Hardy, got on the ferry to Kelsey Bay and hitched down to Tofino.

“I basically stayed there for fifteen years with Mary and a bunch of hippie types before we come down here. Exact opposite of air force life and better haircuts and weed boys. Cops showed up once or twice asking about me, but they covered my ass, I was safe. Peace and love, bro.”

He laughed his raspy laugh holding up a nicotine- stained peace sign.

““Scuse me, boys, I gotta leak again.” He left for the can.

Sully and Dob looked at each other and shook their heads when he left.

“He’s lost it, man.” said Dob.

“Fifty years on a beer diet”, said Sully, “will do that.”

“And doobies,” said Dob. “Very screwed up.”

They waited, and then Dob said:

“Sully, I just remembered something. Remember that body they found at the beach right around the time Stem buggered off?”

“Oh yeah. The suicide. God, I’d almost forgotten .We should tell him. He’s probably never heard about that. Some drifter, right?”

After five minutes had gone by he shuffled back to the table, rain on his face.

“Sorry, ducked out for a butt.”

Drained a half a draft. He coughed deeply. It was all the boys could do to keep from wincing.

The waiter dropped another round on the table and scooped up some of Dobs’ money.

“OK Stem. Not sure you ever heard about this. We were just remembering that search and rescue found a body down on the beach after you left.” says Sully. “They were down there looking for you and they found a stiff.”

“It was those poor bastards with search and rescue finally found the body, eh? Musta been pretty hummy by then, I’d imagine. I got news about that, too.”

That got them sitting up straight. “You knew about the....”

Stem held up a finger, cutting Sully off.

“Don’t get ahead of me. Stand by one, I’ll get there. You guys remember, sure you do, the time we kept them Russians company from the trawler that came ashore for the beach party in summer of ’63?”

“How the hell could we forget that? Jesus, unbelievable,” said Sully.

For years, when international waters commenced just 12 miles out, Soviet “fishing” trawlers, actually electronic monitoring vessels, lingered just outside the limit listening to the UHF/VHF ground - to - air transmissions as the intercept controllers at the base practiced with fake targets and Starfighters out of Comox.

At least once, the USSR types thought it was time for a little shore leave to swim and drink on that deserted, pretty beach and they steered for shore.

They had been spotted by some airman with binoculars on the roof of the radar site looking for bald eagles who noticed a listing trawler very close to shore down by the beach at San Josef Bay.

Stem, Dob and Sully been part of a search and rescue team dispatched to quietly get the beach partiers back on their boat.

And then shut up about it.

No international incident, please, over a bunch of Soviet drunks desperate to set foot on dry land.

When the ten volunteers on the team arrived after hiking for four hours, all the Russians were drunk and swimming, and the trawler was stuck on a sand bar at low tide about 100 yards offshore.

After initially wondering what the hell to do about each other, the situation evolved into talking with hand signals and bad English. “Vee sorry, vee sail away, mebble liff hockey and Canada nize plass” were understandable phrases. They sat around a campfire and waited for the tide to come in.

It became a sort of a cold-war version of the famous WW I German / Allies get- together on Christmas Day.

All three had pulls on the Soviets’ vodka bottles that night, away from the eyes of the Sergeant in charge of the search party.

During the night both sides saw they had more in common than differences.

Families, laughter, young men sent by old men to war.

This is the enemy?

In the morning, the boat floated and the evil commies sailed away after shaking hands with their friendly capitalist guards and surreptitiously exchanging souvenirs.

Sully still had his Soviet sailors' hat somewhere...and some Russkie had his hat badge.

Have a nice Cold War.

Dob said, "The older I get the more it seems like a dream, like it never happened. I learned a lot that night."

"It happened alright," says Stem."Un-freakin-believable."

"So anyways, I met this guy I told you about on that beach. Let me refresh your old - fart memories. It was the morning of Halloween - October 31, '63, eh?

"I remember the date 'cause all the little PMQ kids were going to school in their trick or treat outfits when I left to go walkin' up the trail. I loved that walk through the rainforest, those giant Sitka spruces two hundred feet tall with the Spanish moss floatin' on them, in the deep dark forest. Beautiful, man."

"I never figured on meeting anyone, not at that time of year. We were on three days off, I got bored as usual so I hiked down there to see if I could find some more of them Japanese glass floats that wash up that I liked to collect."

Sully and Dob nodded, remembering the fishing net that hung over Stems' bunk full of multi- coloured fishing - net glass floats that came ashore at the beach, brought in by the warm Japanese current that keeps the west coast so temperate.

Sully said, "Yup. It was Halloween. We had a party at the club, remember? Dob went as woman and got hit on."

"Well, of course. I was better lookin' then your date, for God's sake."

They laugh and Stem leans forward, very serious, elbows on the table, holding his beer.

" So, maybe you also remember me tellin' you this: As I come outta the bush and over the dune on to the beach here's a guy sittin' on a log down by the water with something like a radio up to his ear. I yelled Hi and he jumped a foot. Then he just sits there watching me. He comes over to me after awhile and starts small talking, sounded sort of American. Kind of an odd accent, somethin' else in there. Not tall, five-ten, black hair, didn't smile much.

“Says he’s working at the loggin’ camp and he likes those glass balls he saw I had and all. He said he likes to listen to music so he brought his radio, just small talk. I walked the beach a bit and got my glass floats after a while and start down the trail back to base and he whistles and runs up and asks he can walk with me.”

Finishes a draft, wipes his mouth.

“Can you remember me tellin’ you all this crap, meetin’ this dude?”

“Sure do,” says Dob.

“I remember.” said Sully, also remembering immediately dismissing it as one of Stems’ fictions.

“OK. Any way no problem, says I, she’s quite a hike so I’d like the company. He ducks into the bush and comes out with a little blue knapsack thing and I wondered why he stashed it in there, but what the hell. So we walked the trail just shootin’ the crap a bit about family stuff, he said he hadn’t seen his wife for a while but hoped to next year, that sort of thing. Said he was from Georgia when I asked him. Smartass got that right, as it turns out.

“Quiet guy, but lookin’ back he seemed OK, y’know? Not a smile. Said his name was John, no last name. I told him mine. When we got to the gatehouse I thought what the hell, so I gave him the float, the red glass ball. He really was surprised by that, real grateful like I’d given him a huge gift. Couldn’t thank me enough.

Lots of those types at the lumber camp were runnin’ from somethin’ I thought then.”

Sully thought, not just them buddy.

Dob thought, holy crap he cooked up a beauty and he’s stuck by it. The glass ball bit. Every detail.

“Anyways we shook hands and he kept walkin’ down to the lumber camp at Rayonier and I went to the barracks. I recall telling you guys all this crap, meeting this guy on the beach. Like, it was weird at the time. Civvies never hiked down there, maybe in the summer.”

Dob says, “You loved to hike that trail all the time. I used to think you were nuts, going out in all that rain.”

“Maybe I was, but I loved it. I wish I hadn’t now for all the good it done me.”

He paused.

“Then JFK got killed, we’re up to Defcon one again for the second time in just over a freakin’ year. I can’t believe it.”

Shakes his head, takes a sip.

“One thing I can really remember is you going ape when I picked up the Vancouver paper at the snack bar and brought it back to barracks. You went nuts when you saw Oswald’s picture,” says Sully.

“Of course I went ape! The President was dead and I’d met the bastard who did it.”

He’s keeping a straight face; I’ll give him that thought Dob.

“Here’s this guy in the paper I’d met on the beach or his identical twin holdin’ up his handcuffed arms in the picture, underneath says ‘I’m a patsy!’

Stem stared at the both, eyes flicking back and forth.

“Headline says: ‘JFK Assassin Caught’. This was the same guy, I’d have sworn on a bible. I just knew. You guys were laughin’ but I just about died there and then. I never slept a wink and next day I went to the C.O. and him only cause, well, you know I’d told the odd tale before, right boys?”

He half - smiled and took a pull on the draft glass.

“I was sure as hell not goin’ to the MP’s.

The meathead MP’s are going to buy me tellin’ them I spotted an honest-to-God Lee Harvey Oswald dead ringer? Yeah, right. Truth is I was out of my mind scared. I was also, like feelin’ guilty or something. Nothin’ I could a done about it but still... imagine? So I went to the old man. I never told you guys I did that.”

Dob just shook his head. “What did he say, Stem?”

“I told the old man the story and that maybe the god dam Russians had put him ashore.

He laughed at me and said did I go down to Rayonier and see if the guy was still haulin' logs? That's where you'll find him, Corporal. They got the assassin. He's in jail in Dallas. Lots of people look alike. Thanks and see you later."

Stem coughs, takes a drink.

"Nice guy, the C.O. Now there's no way I'm gonna tell you jerks what I'm doin' as if you'd believe me, so I went down to see if I could spot this guy, ask around. No joy. Nobody had ever seen a guy workin' there who looked like Oswald and they told me to get my crazy pigeon ass back up to the base," says Stem.

"You're lucky they didn't punch you out. They hated us, except when they wanted beer," said Sully.

"Then of course Ruby shot the asshole," said Stem. "Then all the stuff comes out about him livin' down there and Marina the wife and I just figured, well holy God I'd happened to bump into someone who just was the jerk's double, like the ol' man said. Some bum passin' through. A hiker, whatever. A coincidence. Game over. Forget about it. That's that. I'm an idiot, right?" said Stem, tapping his head. "I felt like a freakin' fool."

Dob was leaning back in chair at this point, with a grin, watching Stem from under his Dobson Lumber ball hat, and says, "Well, that's still a hell of a story, Stem."

Dob thinking, that's not the ending I was expecting to that bullshit story.

"Yeah well, there's more, Dob. Listen up, here's some stuff you guys never heard because you were both south on Christmas leave and when you came back I'd split.

"Now it's Christmas Eve. I'm down the trail, had to get away from all the Christmas crap that brought me down bad back then. Anyway, I'd been into the Danish settlement looking around again, just killin' time really. I noticed it looked like someone had been stayin' in there, in the schoolhouse.

One of the old stoves had a fire in it recently. Empty KD boxes, bread wrappers and bean cans lying around, cigarette butts, stuff like that. I remember lookin' at a receipt from the Rayonier store."

He leans in, eyes wide again.

"And then I got shot at."

“Say what?” says Dob.

“Somebody took a shot at me comin’ out of the old schoolhouse. It took my god dam hat off.”

He whipped his hand up beside his head.

“Just about tore the peak offa my ball cap. I’m like yellin’ ‘Hey who’s shootin!’ and stuff like that. Never heard a thing except for the gun shot, never saw anyone. My heart’s going one hundred freakin’ miles and hour. I got the hell outta there.”

“I’ll bet you did.” says Sully.

“I ran like hell down the trail towards the base. After awhile I settled down and figured it was some crazy logger after mule deer or something, so I just put it down to that. Merry Christmas, Stem. Shit, gimme a minute, I gotta go.”

With that he left for the men’s room.

“It just gets better and better,” said Sully when he was gone.

“What next?” says Dob. “I feel so sorry for the guy. He’s lost it.”

Stem comes back, Sully says “So you were sayin’ someone took a potshot at you, Stem?”

“Yup, but like I said I figured it was some lumberjack out for his deer or somethin’. So, being stupid, I go down again six days later, December 30. Flight Sergeant McDonald, remember him, knew I went down a lot and he’d asked me to check out the trail next time I go down there for Search and Rescue, just cut away any of that overgrowth over the trail in case they had to go down there for some reason. Now I’d booked New Years leave starting December 30, but I ain’t goin’ nowhere so I get a machete out of Supply and head out real early, like at first light, and I remember I also signed out one of those orange SAR vests in case that freakin’ blind hunter was back.”

“We found that stuff on your bunk, Stem”, says Sully.

“Good thing I brought it back to supply or you’d be in shit,” smiled Dob.

“Yeah, well here comes the answer to your question awhile back .I wasn’t even gonna go to the beach, I’d whacked away at brush on the trail and I was tired so I thought I just sit down there and watch the waves roll in and have a smoke and kick back. So I come over that dune and I see about ten feet up from the high tide mark is what looks like a pile of clothes. Seagulls are standin’ on it, peckin’ away. I mean you never think about it being a body, right? I walk over and holy crap I just about honked. He’s been there awhile and he’s lyin’ on his back and there’s a hole in his head and a gun layin’ there. I freaked out. In the sand beside him was a flashlight and a small backpack. Blue.”

Stem paused and stared at them both, nodding, eyebrows raised.

“You lads startin’ to get it now? There’s your answer. You bet I knew about the body on the beach. ‘Cause *I* was the first one to find it. It was the guy. The guy I’d met. Oswald’s twin. He had a beard this time. But it was him.”

“Really,” said Sully, playing along. “Same guy, huh?”

“I’ve come up with some pretty good yarns Sully, but not this time.”

After awhile Dob says “Now look Stem, you gotta ask yourself, why they are going to put a guy ashore way the hell up here to go down and shoot the President in Texas.”

“Well, I thought about that too. But when you think about it Dob, why the hell not?” says Stem. “Here they already had a door into North America. They knew those bozos we met came ashore as easy as hell. The CO would have let headquarters know that happened. Probably an official quiet protest to the Russian embassy went out and the Russians say whoops sorry and then are thinkin’, whoa, OK how easy was that? Come in a back door to the States. Drop this dude off.”

“Can’t argue with that,” says Sully, looking at Dob.

“Yes you can,” says Dob. “The jerk’s got to get to Dallas.”

Stem then got into a major coughing fit and hacked away.

He brought out a dirty hanky and Sully thought he saw some blood on it before he tucked it away.

He swallowed some beer. His thin face was pale.

“Jesus.Scuse me.” Collects himself.

“Dob, how easy was it then to get south? I did it.

Hitchhike to Port Hardy, get on the ferry to Kelsey Bay, take a bus to the Nanaimo ferry to Vancouver and Greyhound it south. The US border guys asked you two questions then and you were in, simple as that. This guy had three freakin’ weeks to get on a bus to Dallas, do what he did and split unnoticed in all the commotion and get his ass back up here. He had to get a bit lucky, but before they looked in any bus station they’d nailed Oswald in that movie theater and the heat was off. They’d caught the guy. They weren’t lookin’ anymore.”

Dob is shaking his head. “Come on, Stem.” he said.

“Hey man, I’ve had forty years to work this out and I’m tellin’ ya. The Russians already have this freakin’ psycho Oswald in Dallas who’d spent time in the USSR, and I bet the KGB filled his soft head full of crap, set him up as one of those harmless sixties dissidents and sent him back to Texas to become a nutcase protester against the US government. Then find a look - alike. Big country.” says Stem.

“Who shoots the President of the USA? I don’t know. Lot’s of theories like you said, but all I know is, here’s a Russian guy who I saw in Holberg ,who looks exactly like Oswald, in Dallas at the same time. Do you know after Kennedy was shot, like ninety seconds after, a cop and Oswald’s boss actually met Oswald in the employee’s cafeteria and he was drinkin’ a coke? That’s official evidence. This is a guy who’s just shot the President? I don’t think so. But I think he’d met my guy and once he realized what had gone down, he panicked.”

Dob says, “OK Stem let me ask you something else. The JFK Dallas visit was, like, a last minute decision wasn’t it.? So your guy goes to Dallas on spec?”

“I don’t know. Dallas just lost the toss, that’s all. I guess it didn’t matter where Kennedy went, they were going to get this bonehead Oswald near him, wherever it was, I think. And then get the twin in. Oswald had been out on the streets handing out pamphlets and crap. Even took a potshot at some retired right-wing General. They probably got him to do that. He was a freakin’ nut bar, so he was the perfect patsy.”

Sully says, “This isn’t the first time the ‘two Oswald’s’ theory has been put out there, Stem. I saw something on TV during the 40th anniversary in 2003.”

“I saw that too. Little did they know how close they were,” says Stem, “But I’m the guy who can actually ID a second Oswald. Whoever shot the President, this asshole hides or whatever and then goes to the bus station. They got Oswald at 1:45 in the afternoon in a movie theatre. It’s all over the radio and TV. Cops are at the theatre, downtown, everywhere but the bus station. Maybe this guy got some second looks, but remember, Oswald’s been caught. Now he’s just a poor unfortunate look-alike on a bus. Two days later Ruby shoots Oswald while this dude’s headed north. Game over.”

Stem paused and drank some beer.

Sully and Dob glance at each other.

“What I’ve always wondered was how come he didn’t put me away when he had the chance at the Danish settlement. Maybe just to warn me, or he had a guilty conscience by then, wanted the story out, I dunno. Maybe that red glass ball saved my sorry ass.”

“Well Stem,” Dob says, rubbing his chin, “I got to say, of the seven hundred Kennedy assassination theories you got a beauty there, buddy. Come on, Stem.”

“Whoa lads” says Sully, holding up a hand, “Take it easy.”

“No Sully, that’s OK,” says Stem, resigned. “I shot a lot of crap in my time and I ain’t blamin’ Dob here.”

He looked at Dob.

“Dob, this ain’t no freakin’ theory. I been carryin’ this around for forty-two years and I finally decided it’s my ticket out of this greasy hotel. I look at these idiots who come up with a story and they make a shit load of money from some tabloid or TV show. Well, it’s Stems turn, if it ain’t too late, probably is. But I got a story to tell someone. Maybe I’ll get me my motor home or even a lumberyard.”

“Sorry Stem, I didn’t mean to...” says Dob, retreating. “You know, it’s a pretty wild story, buddy.”

“Yeah, you are right. It is crazy. But there it is.”

He leans in closer.

“But I ran. Why? A President was killed by a Russian Oswald look – alike in the middle of the cold war and I knew it. Look boys, JFK had pissed them off royally with the Cuban missile crisis thing. Remember the Defcon One we were on in October ’62? I kissed my ass goodbye that time.”

He held up his finger and thumb, a half-inch apart.

“We came that close. If Khrushchev hadn’t blinked it was entirely probable that Kennedy was going to push the freakin’ button. You guys know that. We were the poor jerks up the hill with all the fighters on high- alert standby, and the Chief Ops Officer at the briefing saying, ‘Lads, this is not an exercise.’ Christ, they even sandbagged the perimeter of the Ops site, remember? As if the Soviets were going to drop paratroops in for a ground assault. Lord have mercy. We’d have been dust by then.”

The waiter appeared, cleared glasses and dropped two full ones, scooped money.

“Then it happens all over again,” says Stem, “JFK gets it. November 22, 1963, for God’s sake. We were workin’ days remember? Up the hill at 10:30 when the Defcon shot up? The President’s dead! Holy God! And they knew the assassin spent time in the USSR before that? Man!

I remember getting’ updates over the land - line from the forward plotter at Penhold Alberta who’s getting’ news from a TV in the break - room there. She tells me they caught him, he was just a local nut bar who’d just spent some time in the USSR for God’s sake! Finally the Defcon went down and this was serious shit, boys, even to us indestructible twenty-year- old beer heads. I was ready to kiss the world goodbye that time too, weren’t you?”

He paused, looking blearily back and forth at Dob and Sully who both felt disturbed at how far Stem had taken this thing in his mind.

An encounter with a man 47 years ago who looked a bit like Lee Harvey Oswald had come to this.

“Serious shit for sure Stem,” said Sully.

“Any way, when I got back to base from the beach that day after findin’ him down there, I knew that I have the proof that could bring the world to freakin’ nuclear war”, said Stem.

“When it hit me, I literally stopped in my tracks and broke out in a sweat. Right there on the trail.

“Do I report it with the evidence I got and the shit hits the fan? Like the song goes ‘He’s Got the Whole World in his Hands.’ Me, goof - off Corporal Stemkowski. My first thought was to run. So I did. I was scared shitless. I got my paranoid butt out of there and took the story with me.”

“You say you got evidence?” said Dob, sarcastically. “Now that *would* be something”.

“Yup,” said Stem. His eyes were getting a little shiny now, his speech a bit mushy.

“As far as the Mounties were concerned it was just some bum on the beach who wrote himself off. Or maybe they figured it out and put the lid on it for the same reason I had. Too much to lose. Like the world.”

He paused, sipping from his beer, looking at Dob who was still shaking his head.

“If that had gotten out you wouldn’t be seeing your grandkids, Dob”, said Stem, “cause LBJ would have pushed the button and you and me and Sully here would have been ashes, glowing in the dark in Holberg.”

“Sorry to push, Stem, but where’s the proof?” said Dob.

“Love to show you boys, but sorry”, says Stem suddenly all business.

“All I can say is it absolutely backs up what I said. Period. Nobody will see it except the first TV or newspaper type who shows up with some major cash. Yeah, big time cash.”

A pull on the glass of draft.

“I don’t plan on gettin’ ripped off. I show them this stuff and it gets seized by the FBI or whatever and I’m screwed.”

He got into another coughing spasm, sweat beading on his forehead.

When he recovered, Sully says, “So, sorry, let me get this straight Stem. The guy on the beach killed himself?”

“Can we change the subject?” says Dob, fed up.

“Sure we can Dob, but to answer you, Sully, there’s no way he did himself. No way.

He came back up from Dallas on a bus, then he hitched his way up here and was waitin’ for a trawler to, like, pick him, pick him up off the beach”, says Stem, starting to show the beer. “I’m tellin’ ya.”

“The flashlight and the gun was layin’ there next to him in the dirt, uh...in the sand when I seen him... I figure it was all arranged, like y’know...you be there on this day, this time and he signalled a trawler for a pick up, flash, flash, flash. They come in, get a bead on him, took a shot, missed him so he pulls out his weapon, but the second one gets him and end of story. Never wanted to pick him up, just get the hell rid of him. I dunno...”

Stem pointed upstairs. “I still got the newspapers, ‘member them? ‘President Slain’ says one. ‘Assassin Captured’ says one. Then ‘Oswald Shot Dead’. Two out of three ain’t bad. Never captured the assassin.”

“That isn’t proof.” Said Dob, under his breath.

They left Stem drinking in the tavern, all promising to stay in touch, leaving phone numbers with him on one of Dob’s business cards.

Dob told Stem to call him if he needed anything, quietly offered him a hundred bucks when Sully was in the can and Stem gratefully accepted it, embarrassed.

Stem promised to keep them up to date on the Oswald story.

“But when this sucker comes out, you won’t have to hear it from me, boys.”

“OK Stem, whatever. We’ll stay in touch,” said Sully, shaking his hand. ”See you buddy.”

They left him sitting, lonely, delusional and lost

The ride back up to Comox seemed to take a long time through the drizzle, both men lost in their sad thoughts.

“This was like spending time with Elvis, new edition. He’s lost it.” said Dob, shaking his head.

Both were depressed by the decline of their old friend.

At the reunion dinner, they told mutual friends the sad story of their old buddy, sick and frail.

The reunion wrapped up with a breakfast the next morning, and farewells said until the next one in two years.

Sully, Glenda, Dob and Rosey made their Florida winter plans and hugged goodbye.

Two months later Stem was dead.

Dob got a call late one night in October from the Victoria Police Department asking if he was related. They could not find next of kin but Dobs' business card was there.

The body had been found upstairs in the Queens Hotel, natural causes.

The cops had his personal effects, could Dob come down for them and also and claim the remains? Otherwise he goes to the paupers' section at the graveyard.

Dob called Sully to tell him the sad news and Sully offered to fly over from Red Deer but Dob said he could handle it, he thought.

He drove down to Victoria the next day and went to Police headquarters.

Different story now: The body would be held until they were absolutely sure no next of kin could be found, and then he could make arrangements, if he wanted to. Otherwise the city would take care of burial.

“Shouldn't take long. Lots of poor old dudes like him,” said the sergeant. “Not a relative anywhere. At least he had you.”

‘I got down’ thought Dob. You sure did, old friend. God.

The sergeant called downstairs and someone brought up a cardboard bankers' box and some clothes in a garbage bag. Dob signed for them, put the box and the bag in the back of the Escalade and headed back up to Nanaimo.

He went into one of stores to talk to a manager about some upcoming inventory stuff and headed home.

Made small talk with his wife and retrieved the belongings from the car, brought them into the garage.

He dumped the garbage contents onto the floor and got what he expected: soiled and smelly clothing, sheets, towels and a pair of ratty running shoes.

He opened the banker's box. He found an old empty blue knapsack.

Inside that, an old clock, an old two-way Cantata radio, (Dob thought, don't remember that brand), toothpaste, a toothbrush, a comb, an old rusty flashlight, soap, a bottle of aspirin, a jar of instant coffee, two dirty plates and a cup, a Timex wristwatch, some ballpoints. A red glass float wrapped in saran wrap. He thought he remembered Stem saying something about something about a blue knapsack but that was two months ago, Lord he couldn't remember where he left his keys half the time.

The guy was so full of crap anyway.
Poor old Stem.

There was a large brown envelope in the box..

He opened the envelope to find photographs of Stem in happier days, sporting long hair and a mustache holding up the peace sign. One of him in his blues with corporal hooks. One with a pretty, dark-haired woman he assumed was his beloved Mary, working away in a shop. Some shots of a much younger couple by the ocean. A picture of a store front, "Mary's Flowers", with the proud owners posing in front, holding a bouquet. Another one of Stem in his uniform, grinning, holding a beer in one hand, arms around Sully and Dob back in Holberg, in the Corporals Club.

Dob felt his throat tighten and tears come.

He fumbled in his pocket and came up with a ratty Kleenex and wiped his eyes.

There was a business card from the reporter from the Victoria Times-Colonist.

Man he wasted that guys' time, thought Dob.

He found yellowed and fragile newspaper clippings from the Vancouver Sun. 'President Slain', 'Assassin Captured', 'Oswald Shot Dead' read the headlines above pictures of the bright young President with Jackie and the kids.

Oswald holding up his cuffed wrists. 'I'm a Patsy!' Says Suspect.'

Ruby in the police tunnel shooting Oswald.

Well, he said he had them, thought Dob.

He found an opened letter from the Bank of Montreal indicating that his balance wasn't sufficient to cover the yearly cost of the safety deposit box, and would he contact them as soon as possible please.

He sent an email to the Pine-Tree Line website to have Stems' name included in the "Last Post" section.

He called the cops in Victoria later and they had done a search, focusing on Nova Scotia, for any next-of-kin for Stem and had come up empty.

They said if he wanted to assume responsibility for the remains to come down and sign the necessary paperwork. If Dob was OK with having the remains cremated they could arrange that and he could claim the ashes from the cities' contracted funeral director.

He called Sully.

"Maybe sometime we could drive up to Holberg and scatter them somewhere."

Sully said, "Good idea. Like on the trail down to San Josef Bay. He loved that trail. Let me know when and I'll get over there. Sorry you're doing all this stuff by yourself, Dob."

"No sweat, talk to you later.""

Then Dob remembered the letter from the bank and called them.

"You'll need a letter from the police certifying you as the authorized person, because of the no next-of-kin situation for Mr. Stemkowski," said the manager. "We can then release the safety deposit box contents to you."

Jesus, what a hassle, thought Dob.

He drove down to Victoria on a beautiful October fall day and went to the police station. He signed all the forms and got the letter for the bank and arranged to have Stem cremated which would not take place until the next day at the earliest, said the funeral home.

“We can ship them up, the ashes, if you wish, sir. For a small fee in addition to the cremation charges. Would you like to stop by and pick out a suitable urn for the deceased?” said the funeral director, with a voice like Lurch from the Addam’s Family.

Goddamn ghouls, thought Dob.

“Yes, ship them up. No urn is necessary. Just the, uh....regular package will be OK.”

“Fine, sir. The regular package as you say is the blue vinyl box with the sealed pouch inside. It’s \$79.99 plus tax.”

“That is ridiculous,” said Dob and gave the guy his address and hung up.

He went to the bank, and showed the manager the letter of authorization and followed him into the safety-deposit box area.

The manager opened it up and handed him a large brown envelope, got him to sign something and charged him \$58.35 back rent.

Dob sighed, paid him, left and tossed it on the car seat and drove back up to Nanaimo.

He was going to check out the envelope during a pee break at a Timmy’s but got distracted by calls on his cell phone from two store managers and his son trying to figure out what to do about sixty doors they’d advertised on sale starting the next day that hadn’t arrived yet.

He got home, cracked a beer and finally opened the envelope while sitting at his kitchen table.

His wife, outside pulling weeds had heard him yell something and she’d run like hell into the kitchen thinking he’d had a heart attack.

She found him holding some papers that were shaking like a leaf.

She sat with him and held his hand as he cried.

They were both frightened of the storm they knew would come.

“Sully, you sittin’ down?” said Dob, on the phone later, his heart still beating fast, sweaty hands.

“What’s the matter, Dob? You’re voice is real high,” said Sully.

“No goddamn wonder. I got the stuff that was in the safety deposit box. It’s all there, just like he said. Holy God.”

“What’s all there, Dob?”

“OK, excuse me. I’m having trouble catching my breath. Lord, just a sec.”
Takes three deep breaths.

“What Stem told us he had - it’s all there, Sully, for God’s sake. It was in a zip-lock inside a brown envelope.”

“What’s there?”

“There’s an old black and white picture of the Oswald- lookin’ guy I guess it is, with a woman and a child, with Russian writing on the back.”

“There’s a ticket stub for the BC Ferries Vancouver/ Horseshoe Bay to Nanaimo Ferry 4pm departure. November 26, 1963. \$7.00, one passenger - no car.”

“My God.”

“There’s a BC Ferries ticket stub. Date is November 27, 1963. Kelsey Bay to Port Hardy 3 pm departure, \$5.50, one passenger - no car. And here’s the big one, Sully.”

“What’s that?”

“A cancelled ticket, says Greyhound Lines, 205 South Lamar Street, Dallas, Texas
‘SceniCruiser - Let Us Do The Driving.’”

Sully felt the hair on the back of his neck rising. Dear God, Stem.

“Dallas to Vancouver. Departure: Dallas, Texas. Friday 2:50pm, Arrival Vancouver, BC Canada, November 26, 5pm. Cost \$37.50 including state tax. The stamp says the ticket was sold on November 22, 1963 at 1:50 pm.”

Later that night Dob called the Victoria Times- Colonist reporter. His hands shook as he punched in the numbers.

Sully flew over to Nanaimo the next day. The reporter interviewed them both for about four hours, photographed the proof and left, practically burning rubber all the way to Victoria.

The reporter went to work.

Greyhound verified the authenticity of the ticket, as did BC Ferries.

The blue knapsack was analyzed and was a Russian Navy issue, made in China in 1955.

The people in the photo were identified from the Cyrillic writing on the back as Leon Brasov and his wife Titania and male child Vladimir.

They came from Tbilisi, Georgia, U.S.S.R.

Brasov's likeness to Oswald was astonishing.

Old RCMP records produced a photo of the body found on the beach. It was a bearded man, but photo analysis said it was Brasov.

The RCMP denied ever having any suspicions about the body, and still regarded it as a suicide.

The glass ball and the Saran wrap yielded many of Stem's fingerprints and many that were unidentifiable. The Russians said they couldn't identify them either.

The story broke in the Times-Colonist and was immediately front page news around the world.

Putin categorically denied that the old USSR would have had anything to do with the JFK assassination. Brasov was no assassin, they said, he was a sailor in the Navy, and they had no proof that he ever saw duty close to North America.

Dob and Sully realized they needed a lawyer and a media advisor and hired both.

They gave scores of interviews.

CNN, all the major US, Canadian and world TV networks and the major newspapers called.

Sixty Minutes, The Fifth Estate and Dateline NBC came to Red Deer and Nanaimo and went up to Holberg to shoot footage.

Both men travelled to Atlanta to appear on Larry Kings' show and the next day were guests on Oprah in Chicago.

The conservative talk show hosts had a field day, calling for an investigation and prosecution of any former U.S.S.R. government officials, and decrying the fact that even forty - odd years ago, terrorists and assassins were streaming into the U.S. from Canada.

A group of Russian immigrants in New York City received death threats.

Stems' original materials were confiscated by the FBI.

Sully had legal photocopies and both he and Dob agreed to sell the rights to their story and give the money to the Air Force Associations' RCAF Benevolent Fund.

That had yielded \$700,000 in the first two months from various news organizations with Time-Warner, owners of CNN and Time Magazine kicking in about \$500,000 of that.

Dob and Sully kept only enough to pay their legal bill and travelling expenses.

The President appointed Senator Clinton to head up a new Congressional Kennedy Assassination Committee to re-examine the evidence, and amend the Warren Commission findings if necessary.

Surviving members of the Warren Commission insisted they got it right, even if there was a look - alike Oswald on the scene.

Sully and Stem were both asked to provide testimony and traveled to Washington to do so.

Marina Oswald, now a grandmother, stated that she was sure now that her late husband would be vindicated at last.

Nothing was heard from the Kennedy family.

Much to the joy of the old Fighter Cops, Time Magazine ran a piece about the “forgotten sentinels of the Cold War” as a backgrounder to the Oswald story.

Recognition at last.

The BC Parks Service had to staff the entrances to Cape Scott Park due to the hordes of media and curious people from all over the world wanting see Holberg, San Josef Bay and the area.

Guards and guides were hired to protect the park, and keep people from injuring themselves in the rain forest. They limited the daily visitors to 100. Bookings were taken on-line and waiting time reached two months.

Camping was forbidden until further notice, and what was left of the Danish settlement was fenced off. The Scarlet Ibis, the small hotel and pub in Holberg, formerly the Corporals Club, was overrun and did booming business, as did the hotels in Port Hardy.

Sully and Dob and their wives were annoyed that their trip to Florida had to be cancelled. They planned to go somewhere else to avoid recognition.

Sully and Dob drove up Highway 19 to Port Hardy and then down the gravel road to Holberg through a driving rain.

The news firestorm that had changed their lives was ebbing, but only slightly.

They carried with them Stem’s ashes that had been sent up to Nanaimo, ironically, on a Greyhound bus from Victoria.

During the drive they talked of one thing: Stem.

They both wondered why he had never come forward with that proof to back up what he knew to be at least a partial answer to one of the twentieth centuries’ greatest mysteries.

Paranoia during his time with Mary certainly, he’d mentioned that, but also guilt and self - doubt perhaps? A sense of power, knowing something that few others did?

Years of procrastination in an alcoholic haze and then urgency once his prognosis was grim and he had met his trusted old friends from Holberg?

They drove by the misty mountains, thankful for the improved road and guardrails nowadays as they wound their way from Port Hardy to Holberg.

There were changes of course, but the little village sat where the town site once did, and the married quarters had been extensively renovated and were all occupied.

The radar site was still operational, controlled remotely now from Seattle. Most of the other air force buildings, except for the old corporals club were long gone.

They found that the trail was now part of Cape Scott Park and well - marked and maintained.

Miraculously the rain stopped shortly after they pulled up to the park gate.

The guard recognized them and insisted on having his picture taken with them.

They walked for an hour, heads down as they passed tourists, and then stopped on the misty trail and solemnly let Stems' ashes drift across the trail and into the tall Sitka pines, through the Spanish moss, into the places where Stem felt most at home back then.

“You're a part of history, Stem,” said Sully.

“Sorry we doubted you buddy, said Dob. “You deserved better. God bless.”

Both wiped their eyes as they walked down the trail.

After a few false starts, searching and clambering through the thick, wet growth they found what remained of the old Danish settlement, now surrounded by a new-looking chain-link fence and overgrown with vines and brush and hidden almost completely from prying eyes.

Yellow “Do not Trespass” tape had been draped around the wire.

Dob rolled an old stump over to stand on and they managed to clamber over, Sully tearing his jacket in the process.

The moss-covered houses had collapsed in on themselves, just a few chimneys stood, and tall trees grew in the former cleared acreage.

The stones in the tiny graveyard were green with moss, some toppled.

Two walls remained of the schoolhouse, leaning in, like the remnants of a house of cards.

A flock of ravens took off, cawing and flapping as they approached, startling them both.

Most of the relics in the old schoolhouse were gone. A broken old horse-drawn plow lay on its side, the blade rusting away. A table with two legs, a rusted old wood stove, chimney pipes. Plants and vines grew up through what was once a cedar floor.

This is where Stem said the guy lived.

This is where Stem said he almost got his head taken off.

They walked around inside the crumbling structure, careful not to put a foot through the rotting floor.

They sat and said nothing, each adrift in thought.

Sully stared at a moss-covered wall lost in the memories... back at Holberg... the mossy green reminding him of the lazy green sweep on the radar scope, 12 seconds at a time, five times a minute sweeping across everything for 300 miles... where did the time go... crew pictures of young men in blue... Stem laughing in the barracks... laughing around beers in the Corporals Club... telling lies... his dying days in the tavern... all alone, wasting away... a young President killed, the world mourning... ask not what your country... little John-John saluting..... Stems gaunt face smiling, .I ain't spinnin' ... I'm a patsy! The ... 3

3...?

He realized that he had been staring at a spot where thick moss had been partially pulled away by a leaning section of the rusty tin chimney revealing what looked like the number 3 carved into the cedar, like a frightened seagull in flight.

“Look at this, Dob.”

He found a stick and scraped the rest of the thick moss away, peeling the forty-year-old growth back and rubbing it with his hand to show what was underneath.

Slowly the unfamiliar letters were revealed under the moss and mold:

Помощь Бога ЦРУ Бразова 1963

“Not sure what the hell that says, Dob, but looks like Russian don’t it?”

“How could the cops miss that?” said Sully. “He must have carved that in there.”

“I think the old stove stood here, so it maybe was behind the stove at one time.”

Dob took a picture and they got back over the fence and walked back up the trail.

Once they left the gravel road in Port Hardy, Dob gunned it south.

When they got back to Nanaimo, Dob loaded the picture into his Mac and emailed it to the reporter who had it translated and called back within an hour practically screaming into the phone.

Stem had known only half the story.

The Russian had left it, perhaps hoping that this confession of the murder that caused his weeping would not be seen for many years. He got his wish.

A new, more violent storm approached.

The reporter breathlessly gave them the translation:

God Help Brasov CIA 1963

The End

