

The Plain of Jars

A Novel

N. Lombardi Jr.



Winchester, UK
Washington, USA

First published by Roundfire Books, 2013
Roundfire Books is an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd., Laurel House, Station Approach,
Alresford, Hants, SO24 9JH, UK
office1@jhpbooks.net
www.johnhuntpublishing.com
www.roundfire-books.com

For distributor details and how to order please visit the 'Ordering' section on our website.

Text copyright: N. Lombardi Jr. 2012

ISBN: 978 1 78099 670 7

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publishers.

The rights of N. Lombardi Jr. as author have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design: Stuart Davies

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

We operate a distinctive and ethical publishing philosophy in all areas of our business, from our global network of authors to production and worldwide distribution.

Dedicated to the people of Laos

PROLOGUE Laos 1969

"It takes twenty years or more of peace to make a man; it takes only twenty seconds of war to destroy him."

Baudouin I, King of Belgium, Address to joint session of U.S. Congress, 12 May 1959

Nothing that extraordinary really. Those things were known to happen. After all, there was a war going on.

Nevertheless, when he heard that firsthand account of what it was like to get blown out of the sky, it managed to unsettle him. It must have been just two or three days after he had shifted over to Eighth Tactical. He had walked into the Rec Room, where a serious card game was supposedly going on, though all the players had already put their cards face down on the table, absorbed in the narration of a highly animated second lieutenant in a leather bomber jacket who was standing over them.

"With death staring you in the face, you're suddenly stunned at your own mortality," the pilot was saying, "like, for the first time, you really grasp that it could all end here and now. And everything that's in your life, I mean everything, changes in a fucking flash of a moment...But the funny thing, and I know you're gonna say I'm full of shit, was...well, I could feel it, feel it coming, even before I got into the cockpit..."

The story ran on, but he had forgotten the rest of the details the young officer had so vigorously depicted. In fact, First Lieutenant Andrew Kozeny had intended to forget the whole damn thing, deeming it best not to even consider the possibility, to give no thought at all to such a disagreeable scenario, as this was the best way to rid himself of doubt and fear, emotions that tended to get in the way of what a pilot had to do.

Wanting to forget is one thing, but actually forgetting is another, for the mission briefing at 0400, only a few weeks later, reminded him of that episode in the Rec Room, and did indeed present the

prospect that something dicey might happen on the next scheduled sortie. To begin with, the reconnaissance photos were practically useless. It wasn't merely the cloud cover that perpetually veiled the mountains of northern Laos, since that was something all the pilots had long been resigned to, but the images were made even more hopeless by a frantic blur, caused by the erratic maneuvering of the RF-101 Pathfinder that had taken the snaps, and which was desperately evading a hell of a lot of unexpected flak at the time. The recon mission had to be aborted, and the location of the anti-aircraft artillery couldn't be adequately resolved solely from the recollections of the pilot. Therefore, the only logical recourse they had to protect the bombers, as outlined by the flight commander, was to use bait to make the enemy show themselves. The F-105 Wild Weasel, the plane that Kozeny was assigned to fly, had electronic sensors to detect the radar that the AA guns used for tracking hostile aircraft, and thus it was the typical lure to expose the enemy's defenses, although a heavily armed one: the bomb racks under the wings held twelve 750-lb. bombs, as well as a couple of 2.75-inch rockets, and two CBU-2A cluster bombs. Kozeny's part of this mission, along with his Electronics Warfare Officer and three other F-105 crews, was to get the bearing and range of the enemy radar, and knock out the gun emplacements so that the next six flights of bombers could come in without risk.

This wasn't the first time Kozeny had flown flak suppression in a Wild Weasel, although the missions he had flown over North Vietnam were tempered by better intelligence and more discernible targets; not such a blind run as this one. But that wasn't the only thing stirring his doubt.

Actually, the thing that was gnawing inside him was a facet of the mission that had little to do with his own tactical responsibilities: the bombing targets, if there were really any to speak of, were poorly defined.

The exercise was part of 'Operation Rain Dance' with the objective of retaking the Plain of Jars, this particular mission being a

retaliatory strike near Ban Ban. The 7/13 Air Force at Udon was busier than hell, especially the Tactical Fighter Squadrons with over three hundred sorties a day. The Intelligence and Operations briefing had told of a general concentration of troops in the target area, and the bombers would be flying a free-strike zone, loosely guided by the Airborne Command and Control plane circling high above them at 35,000 feet. At other times, release would be at the discretion of each individual Weapons Officer. In plain and simple terms, the idea was to pulverize the area, so that the Special Guerilla Units of General Vang Pao could come in and clear it on the ground.

The only features that Kozeny could clearly make out on the recon photos were the huts of a couple of small villages, and a structure he guessed to be a makeshift temple. But he knew that even if nothing of worth was visible, the bombers had to drop their munitions somewhere, and it bothered him that there was no predetermined fixed target for unused ordnance at the end of a sweep. There was no way that a plane would risk landing with armed weapons—they had to dump them. “What about civilians?” someone had asked. “No problem,” was the response, which could be interpreted to mean that they were the same as the enemy.

This aspect of the mission disturbed him, prodding him uncomfortably with a reminder of the letter he had just received from Cynthia, a letter that couldn’t have come at a worse moment. Then again, if only he had never decided upon this second tour, maybe he wouldn’t have lost her.

If only...

If only he knew what would be happening on the ground in the little village that lay in the middle of the target area, just as the planes would be nearing their specified coordinates. Old Man Souvanna would be at the market shopping around for high quality areca nuts, spending endless amounts of time inspecting them before committing to purchase. Young Keo, with a bamboo switch in his hand, would be taking the buffaloes to pasture alongside his father. Boon-mee would be heading home after fetching water, the

large earthen pot on her head threatening to topple her frail, diminutive body. And 19-year-old Jita would be skipping through the fields with thoughts of romance in her head, ecstatic over the hibiscus flower that her beau had just given her.

If only...

But it was too late—he was airborne, gazing at the gray, cloud-filled horizon ahead of him. He looked down below at a hazy patchwork of forested mountains and bare vertical cliffs that flaunted an unspoken menace. Kozeny then put his mind on the mission, alternately glancing out of the cockpit to key on his flight leader, ahead and to his left, and then at his Heads Up Display, the HUD, a hologram beamed into the air to his right reflecting his most salient meters and gauges. With this projected image, the pilot averted the need to look down at the actual dials—looking inside the cockpit could induce vertigo and cause a fatal collision.

Airspeed 650 knots, altitude 14,000 ft...looking out, sighting the leader, then glimpsing right at the HUD; leader, HUD, leader, HUD, all the while intuitively perceiving and adjusting the proper motions of his aircraft.

There was an orange haze, eerily beautiful, as the sun came up in a mist, shooting its rays to the heavens...

"Whoa! Oyster 2, got a beep!" called out his backseater, Lt. David Lewis, the Electronic Weapons Officer. "Triple A frequency, bearing zero-one-zero, range 7000!" His voice betrayed a buoyant excitement. Kozeny as well experienced a giddy rush of adrenaline, since the both of them had expected the typical North Vietnamese maneuver of turning on the artillery radar at the last minute, too late for the electronic countermeasures of the Weasels to be effective, and which would have left their asses wide open.

"Jamming pod formation," cackled the radio. The leader of Oyster Flight was ordering them to switch on their jamming pods, and to fly abreast with a staggered separation, to confuse the enemy radar into reading one huge blip, rather than four individual targets.

"Oyster-1, going in, engaging afterburners, on the nose twelve

miles, fifteen high...maintain position on Oyster-1..."

Although the flight leader shoulders a greater responsibility, it was actually harder to fly wing because one had to maintain position. To Andrew, this part of flying summoned in him an indescribable sense of balance and timing, and the high-tech choreography that ensued gave him an unequalled thrill.

At supersonic speed with the afterburner thrust, the hillsides melted into a greenish blur. Kozeny released the radar chaff, strips of aluminum that fluttered to the ground, to further confound the enemy radar. He flipped on the switches arming his ordnance, and checked his angle-of-attack indicator. "Reversing right and level, ready to pickle..."

"HOLY FUCK!" Dave screamed.

All around them, the colorful lines of tracer crisscrossed the sky, dotted by the puffs from exploding shells. The bursts of smoke were blue in color, telling them they were 57mm, and they were coming from somewhere other than their original target. The baiters had been baited, drawn in by one AA battery, while the other with its radar off silently waited for the kill.

"CHECK YOUR SIX! CHECK YOUR SIX!" Andrew yelled into the radio, alerting the others to watch their behind. He followed his lead down the chute, released the Shrike missile which would at least home in on the radar of the first AA unit, then banked left and pulled up, but not before his right wing was hit. "OYSTER 2 WE'RE HIT!"

Andrew rolled right now, banking and yawing, his pressurized suit nearly suffocating him as it inflated in response to the high-G maneuvers. If not for the suit, the acceleration would force blood out of his brain and into his extremities, causing him to black out....

He was losing altitude, getting too low. Then, machine guns, Kalashnikovs in automatic mode, unleashed a barrage of fire that penetrated the aircraft. Kozeny was scared, even more so when he realized that Dave's body had just been riddled apart. Covered with spatters of blood and flesh from his ex-backseater, Andrew

struggled to control the aircraft, the jet now screaming and whining as if in great pain, and violently hurtling itself at 1000 miles per hour, one and an half times the speed of sound, but despite all his efforts he could not bring her up. He dropped his entire payload to gain altitude but it was not enough to pull clear of the mountains ahead of him. His frantic hands manipulated the controls to ascend, while his mind raced through emergency procedures. The plane initially shot up into the sky, giving him some hope of regaining her, but then lurched and rocked, lost airspeed, and started to nose down.

For Lt. Andrew Kozeny, the journey leading to that flash of a moment was about to begin.

BOOK 1

DOROTHY'S SEARCH

Chapter I

Ohio 1989

"...Defense Department Policy for response on U.S. operations in Laos still applies and is quoted as follows: Quote. The preferable response to questions about air operations in Laos is 'no comment'."

Instructions from the Commander of the Pacific Air Forces sent to U.S. Air Force commanders in Thailand, February 1969

Dorothy Kozeny was merely going through the motions; trying to stick to the same routines she had followed each day for more years than she cared to remember. She had made her bed, replacing her paisley bedcover. She had washed the clothes, hung them to dry, ironed and folded them, all with an automaton-like indifference. But no matter how hard she tried to believe otherwise, today, what seemed a boringly ordinary autumn day, threatened to be different. Without any warning, her chores lost that familiar character of regularity she had been carefully cultivating over the years. She brewed herself coffee, fed the cat, and washed the dishes, not out of years of habit, but with a strained and willful tenacity, refusing to admit the possibility that things were indeed different than they were before this morning. Even watering her garden, her lovely crocuses and bougainvillea, was devoid of the usual pleasure.

It was hard to find a word for what some person who didn't even have the courage to leave a name had done to her, just as she started her day. Despicable maybe, contemptuous perhaps, cruel certainly, considering the painstaking effort she had made to build all those protective layers around her heart, a mother's heart, just to have them shattered, to be taunted twenty years later with the loss of her only child.

Whose ashes did you get?

Weary after a whole day of fighting off her distress, she plopped

herself down at the dining room table and cradled her head in her hands.

It was nearly the end of October, so it was already dark at five-thirty. Now that they had set the clocks back the days seemed to end prematurely. She sat in the gathering gloom, oblivious to the passing of time, the progress of which was nonetheless marked by the emphatic tick-tock of the grandfather clock on the opposite side of the room, its persistent stroke piercing the funereal silence.

The year was 1989. The twentieth anniversary of that horrible day had only just passed.

She was alone, and had been so ever since her husband Bill had died of a stroke seven years before. Was it only seven years ago, or did her husband die before that, the day the news came from the Air Force Casualty Office? To be given a lump of ashes and charred bone fragments, and to be told that this was all that remained of your son, your future hopes, was something that could make you resign from living. And so, understandably, William Kozeny began to shrivel up inside. For Dorothy, however, tending to her husband's grief, in some ways, had made it easier to deal with her own. Together, the both of them had gone through all the stages, from horrific shock to searing pain, to the endless chronic ache of sorrow. Until the rent in their souls could at least heal to a malformed scar. And now, to go through all that again, alone...*Whose ashes did you get?*

No longer able to contain her emotions, she sobbed aloud, her doleful moaning filling the darkness and echoing off the oak-paneled walls. It took a few minutes before she managed to restrain herself, sniffing her way back to self-control.

It had come that morning, in the mail, inside a plain white envelope with no return address, but with a faint postmark she made out to be Rockland, Maine. Was it a hoax, a malicious prank, or was there some substance behind it? On an A4 sheet of paper, in what appeared to be a demonic, handwritten scrawl, only the words: '*Whose ashes did you get?*'

The clanging of her baking timer startled her. Good, she thought.

Movement. Get up and move; movement will keep the brooding at bay. So, in an over-affected manner, she forced herself out of her chair and walked into the kitchen, which, in contrast to the darkened dining room, was blazingly lit by a circular tube of fluorescent light set in the ceiling. She opened the oven door to check on the rhubarb pie that she was baking for the bridge party. If she kept herself busy, maybe she could forget about this asinine letter. Inserting her hands into the oven, she noticed they were shaking...she would go to the Jack La Lane's Spa first, she told herself in her head, and go to Elizabeth's house directly from there...rhubarb pie, bridge party, Jack La Lane's....

Not paying attention to what she was doing, she burned her hand on the hot insides of the oven, causing her to drop the pie on the floor, the pie dish making an awful clatter as it rolled around, the filling splattered onto the tiles like blood from a wounded creature. She covered her face and burst into tears again.

Whose ashes did you get?

Feeling faint, Dorothy quickly sought a kitchen chair to sit down in. Her pulse started to race, her heart thumping heavily. It had been so long since she'd had a panic attack; she wondered if the Xanax in the medicine cabinet was still good. She jumped up to go into the bathroom, turned on the light, flung open the mirrored door of the medicine cabinet, and retrieved the orange plastic vial. Two tablets later, sitting on her bed and taking slow, deep breaths, she waited for their calming effect. Once her anxiety was under control, she stood up and challenged herself to open that drawer of her dresser, the one that had been safely closed for years, the one with the photo album and the framed pictures that had once hung on the wall and kept her company on the night table.

By the dull glow of an ornamental lamp with a shade made of clamshells, a souvenir from their trip to Bermuda, she went through the photographs one by one, trying to picture her son's face before her, evoking memories. There was the one with a little boy, a towel tied around his neck to serve as his Superman cape, on top of a chair,

ready to jump off. Even then, he was fascinated with flying, incessantly jumping off things until she and Bill had to put a stop to it when the stove came crashing down one morning while they were still snoozing in bed. She smiled wistfully at this recollection. In another photo, he wore a mixing bowl on his head, and using a ruler for a microphone, sang *Pennies from Heaven* to a Tony Bennett record. This snapshot broke her short-lived composure and elicited a further bout of weeping, but she managed to carry on to the next photograph, a little Andrew sitting amidst a pile of toys under the Christmas tree...there he was again, wearing a cake-icing mustache at his sixth birthday party... posing in a kid-sized blue suit for his Communion at eight years old...and in a red robe for his Confirmation four years later...

He was a good boy, who went to church every Sunday, without any pressure from her or Bill, who were only intermittent churchgoers. Only after Andrew had died did she go weekly to light a candle for him.

Flipping through the photo album, the pictures traced his life to young adulthood—at the wheel of his first car, a '58 Rambler; posing with his medal for the state cross-country championship; then, some time after, standing by the Piper Cub he flew for his flying lessons...

He was such a handsome boy: tawny blond hair, long-lashed, sky-blue eyes, and a charming smile; she could only find fault with the slightly pug nose. Probably got that from his grandfather—her father—she mused to herself.

She touched the photos imploringly as she gazed at them, as if they were privy to the knowledge concerning her son's fate, hoping to extract answers from an unlikely inspirational connection.

...Whose ashes did you get?

"Oh Dear God, why?" she cried out to an empty house. "Why, Lord, did you make me bring him into this world...then take him away so violently...without the dignity of a normal burial? WHY!" she screamed.

Her bitterness vented, she continued looking through the album,

her eyes brimming. In the last batch of pictures, Cynthia, Andrew's ex-steady, now appeared together with her son.

Outside of his parents, Andrew had two great loves in his youth. One was flying. He had worked his whole adolescence saving up money for his flying lessons. Both she and Bill were so proud of him when he finally got his license. Dorothy, now on an emotional seesaw, grinned widely, recalling the time Andy took his father up in the rented Piper. Poor Bill, who felt uncomfortable in a mere elevator, had been paralyzed with terror, but, as he confessed later, there was something wonderfully intimate in putting his life in his son's hands. The next autumn, Andrew was on cloud nine after he was accepted at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs—for him it was a dream come true. That was back in 1963, when the Vietnam War was only a faint rumbling in the distance.

Her son's other great love was Cynthia. Golden-haired and athletic, she had the poise and self-assurance of a beauty queen, though she was, paradoxically, more of an unaffected nature girl ...what was it that Bill called her? Earth Child, wasn't it? She was always dragging Andrew off hiking and fishing, and she seemed to be forever wearing those cutoff shorts. When Andrew attended the Air Force Academy, she followed him a year later, enrolling as a student at the University of Colorado in Boulder. For eight years, from high school sophomore, to his assignment in Southeast Asia, Cynthia was Andrew's devoted sweetheart. Perhaps what made their intimacy more intense was that they both lacked any siblings, each an only child.

Yet Dorothy knew all too well that, even in the most favorable of times, young love is tested by the changes that usher kids into adolescence. Goodness, on how many occasions did she and Bill split up? The 1960s were exceptionally volatile, a period when values were being questioned, old standards were being discarded, and new fads were being adopted with each and every Beatles album. In 1969, America's eminent triumph in landing men on the moon was tainted by the protests and demonstrations of her youth that

disclaimed her. To be patriotic was no longer fashionable, and war was seen as murderous, not glorious.

1969 was a bad year. In 1969, the Kozeny's lost their son. A son Dorothy had fed with her breasts, carried in her arms, and consoled when he was hurt.

Why, she found herself wondering, couldn't they have had other children? It would have made his loss so much easier to bear. She immediately felt guilty at that last thought, which led her to cry again, a soft, whimpering cadence of self-pity. She removed her reading glasses and rubbed her eyes before resuming her despondent journey down memory lane.

Cynthia. It had been so long ago.

Andrew's decision to go back to a second tour had angered Cynthia, and aggravated an ever-widening rift between the couple. It was unfortunate, for Dorothy had quite naturally assumed that they would soon get married. But Cynthia had joined the peace movement and became an active antiwar protestor, a transformation that was discordant with Andrew's military career. When he went back to the war a second time, she told him she didn't want to have anything to do with him. Or so Dorothy had heard, for neither one of them got the chance to explain to her just what the problem was. Regrettably, the breach in Cynthia's relationship with Andrew had also estranged her from the rest of the Kozenys, and contact between them soon ended.

Could it be her...after all these years...would she...no, not in such a grisly way...she would never do a thing like that. Still, she might have an idea; she was an investigative reporter now or something similar. Dorothy of course, had heard about the tragic highway accident in which both her parents had been killed. She had also heard through the grapevine that afterwards Cynthia had refused to sell the family house, and didn't even rent it out, preferring to use it herself for periodic retreats from her hectic life in LA or New York or wherever. Though Cynthia resided in Camden for only a few months of the year, lessening the likelihood that she

was in, Dorothy's urge to call her was irrepressible.

She went into the living room, flipping on the lights along the way, and sought out the telephone notebook that she kept in the drawer under where the telephone sat. Paging through it, she belatedly realized that the number wasn't in there; it's in the old notebook, the one in the shoebox in the closet.

She dived into the closet and dug her way through until she found the shoebox, then carried it to the living room to the end table with the telephone. She threw open the lid, recovered the faded green notebook, and with trembling fingers paged to S for Soronson.

With her fingers still quaking, she dialed the number. She put the receiver to her ear, then quickly pressed the button on the cradle to disconnect. She slowly put down the receiver and took a deep breath. She picked up the receiver again, then put it down again, but keeping her hand on it. Summoning her resolution, she picked up the receiver for the third time, dialed once more and braced herself.

The distant ring on the other end heightened her anticipation.

"Uh, hello?" came a voice from the past.

"Cynthia?" she blurted, suddenly petrified. What should she say? "Is that you? This is Dorothy, Dorothy Kozeny."

"Dot?"

Being called Dot, the affectionate name that Bill had always used, nearly broke her voice.

"Yes, Cindy, it's me."

"Well, hello, how are you?"

"I'm fine, just fine...it's just that it's been so long and I thought...well, really, I was fine, but now, I'm not so sure, I...I just thought...Well, I have to...I need to... talk to you..."

"Yes, of course, I'm..." There was a slight pause on the line. "I'm sorry that I've been out of touch. I didn't mean anything by it, it's just...you know..."

"Yes."

Another pause.

"Dot?"

"Yes?"

"Is everything okay?"

"No!" she whined, and the floodgates damming her emotions opened.

Camden, Ohio had grown larger over the past twenty years, so by now it was a mini-city replete with office blocks and mega-malls, but there were a few persistent landmarks that still imbued a small town atmosphere. Rosie's C'mon Inn, where all the kids a generation ago used to hang out, attracted by its wide, discreetly shaded parking area, not to mention those famous Chili Burgers, was one such place.

After Dorothy had related to Cynthia the story about the puzzling anonymous message, a lengthy discussion had ensued on the telephone, including the exchange of apologies, and promises not to let such a long lull happen again. There followed a quick review of what had taken place in their lives since their last contact. When Cynthia told her that she hadn't married anyone yet, Dorothy had noted it with some significance. Their conversation finally culminated in a plan to meet face-to-face. Rosie's C'mon Inn was the first place that had popped into Dorothy's head, unconsciously associating it with the bygone courtship between Cynthia and her son.

Before leaving the house, Dorothy had studied herself in the mirror, wondering how Cynthia would perceive the changes in her. She debated whether her beige pants suit was appropriate or whether it was too formal and cold. Beyond the immediate issue of her attire, she pondered the years that had passed. Her streaky, silver-gray hair was now worn in a pageboy with bangs, and crow's feet had sprouted from the corners of her pale blue eyes. Her skin was peppered with orange age-spots, and a pair of faint lines on each side of her face demarcated her cheeks. Around her midsection, a girth had developed, but despite her sixty-four years of age, her body was still surprisingly athletic-looking (Jack La Lane's Fitness

Center had been a worthwhile endeavor, she concluded to herself).

When she arrived at the diner, it was fairly quiet, the only other customer being a rotund, bald-headed man sitting at the counter busy shoveling his eggs onto a piece of toast. Waiting in the corner booth, Dorothy nervously rummaged through the contents of her pocketbook: removing the old orphaned sheets of Kleenex, rearranging her vial of Tylenol, putting the lipstick back in her cosmetic case, taking out the money from her purse and sorting it ...and then she saw her, walking through the swing door. It had to be her, but yet it wasn't. Dressed in a denim shirt and a pair of tight jeans that advertised her shapely hips, her hair in a wild, honey-brown mane, she strode in with a brashness that Dorothy couldn't recall Cynthia ever having previously possessed. God, she looked older, but of course she was older, must be nearly forty by now. Her hair was darker, her body heavier, and the soft curves of her face had hardened into angular edges. Despite a slight puffiness around her eyes, she was still quite good-looking, and her beautiful smile was much the same as ever, one forming now as she recognized Dorothy immediately and approached.

Dorothy stood up to hug her and couldn't stop her eyes from watering. She had underestimated just how emotional it would be to see her. "Cynthia!"

"Oh Dot, I'm so sorry," she consoled, squeezing her affectionately.

The two of them ended their embrace and, linking their hands, stood back to take stock of each other.

"Dot, you look great!" Cynthia said, the sparkle in her eyes showing the sincerity behind the cliché. "You really do. You haven't aged a day!"

Dorothy forced an abashed smile. "Thank you. And you, you still look like the 'Earth Child'."

Cynthia simpered self-consciously. "No, I doubt it. Maybe more of a 'Globetrotting Mama' ...let's sit down for God's sake!" Slipping into the booth, she resumed with her consolations. "Dot, I'm sorry

about Bill. I wanted to come to the funeral, but I was in Chile at the time."

Dorothy released a pensive sigh. "Oh, that's all right. I understand. I try to convince myself it was for the best, you know, he was never the same after...well, you know...I think that's what really killed him."

"Well, none of us are the same, are we? I'm sorry about everything else too."

"No, please Cynthia, don't feel bad. What's past is past."

Dorothy wanted to steer the conversation off this melancholic track. She remembered that Cynthia had told her that she was a freelance journalist, writing for various publications ranging from *National Geographic* to *Ramparts*. "How is your work going, I mean, I hope I'm not keeping you..."

"Don't be silly. I'm glad we're finally getting together. We should have never lost contact." Cynthia raised her arm, signaling a waitress. "Are you hungry?" she asked Dorothy.

"No, I really don't want anything."

"Coffee?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

"Two coffee's and one plate of quiche, please," she told the waitress. Then, to Dorothy, "I can imagine how upset you must be over that note you got. I don't know what to say, it's really bizarre. I've been digging up some background stuff since you called, and, strange as it seems, there might be something to it."

"Something to it?"

"Yes, well, I mean, it might be more than just a nasty joke. But who the hell would send a message like that in such a cryptic manner is beyond me."

At this point, she stopped her dialogue to dig into her buckskin pocketbook, coming out with a pack of cigarettes.

Cynthia smoked now?

She lit her cigarette with a Zippo, clicking it shut with an aggressive mannerism that seemed masculine, followed by franti-

cally waving the smoke away with her arm. This image of Cynthia conflicted with Dorothy's vision of the sweet, polite girl she had kept in her memories.

After exhaling a puff of smoke, Cynthia continued her explanation. "You know, a few years ago, they excavated the crash site of a C-130, that's a type of cargo plane..." She paused to take in another drag, "...at Pakse, a small town in Laos. It was carrying munitions and thirteen men."

"Where?"

"In Laos. It went down..."

"I'm sorry, but just where is 'Louse'?"

"It's the country next door to Vietnam," Cynthia answered with her eyebrows faintly raised, surprised that Dorothy didn't know. "The plane was on its way back to Thailand when it went down in a fireball. The remains of those on board ended up as thousands of burned bone shards, but they claimed they had positively identified which pieces belonged to all thirteen men. The wife of one of the men, Anne Hart, refused to accept her husband's remains without an independent expert to examine them. But the Navy was having none of her bullshit..."

Dorothy winced. She couldn't picture the other, younger Cynthia using such words.

"... and they tried to force her to accept what they were offering. She refused, and sued them, got a court order to allow a private forensic expert to make an examination, and guess what? —it wasn't her husband. The dog tag they gave her burned at a different time and temperature than the bone shards. In fact, the expert said that with the discredited methods they were using, it was tantamount to fraud to claim that any of the ashes and bone fragments could be identified as anyone. Well this just about opened up Pandora's Box. The relatives of the other C-130 crewmembers, as well as families of all the other pilots that were incinerated before that, began exhuming the remains of their loved ones and having them tested, and it was much the same. It blew up into a big scandal. It seems the

military just wanted to provide anything to shut people up, to prevent any widening of the MIA issue, especially since what they were doing in Laos was supposed to be a secret."

"Are you saying that...?"

"Maybe, Dot, I don't know," Cindy said cautiously, "maybe..."

Dorothy suddenly felt as if she were in an elevator dropping twenty stories. She felt her stomach trying to come out of her mouth, and knowing she would never make it to the ladies room, instinctively grabbed the linen napkin that was set on the table and heaved up into it. Luckily she hadn't yet eaten anything that morning and it was only mucous. Cynthia jumped over to her side of the booth and gave her a quick hug. "I'm sorry, Dot."

"I'll be okay," she stated in a cracked voice.

Now that the suspicion had suddenly become a tangible possibility that Andrew had never come home in any form, not even in ashes, a whole plethora of scenarios crossed her mind, dominated by the flimsy hope that he could still be alive. However improbable, it was nevertheless a mother's natural faith, which could only be quelled by seeing the body, even one that was, as much as it hurt to see it, seared to cinders.

An embarrassing moment as the waitress came over with the coffees and quiche. "There you go," she smiled, and began to tactfully walk away.

"Can you take this please?" Cindy requested, handing the waitress the soiled napkin. The waitress made a face as she picked it up and deposited it on her serving tray, then curtly withdrew. Once she was out of earshot, Cynthia turned to Dorothy and said, "Listen, Dot, this is what we're going to do. Step by step. First, if you want, I can help you get a court order to exhume, and arrange a forensic specialist to do the examination. If you want."

"Yes."

"If it's not Andrew's remains that you got, we'll have to get his status changed from Killed In Action to Killed In Action Body Not Recovered. That's not just semantics. Without a body, it makes Andy

automatically Missing In Action, according to a court ruling in 1979."

Cindy hoped that by mentioning all this technical detail, Dorothy would be too preoccupied trying to concentrate, thus forestalling any slide back into an emotional muddle.

"All this has to be done in the POW section of the Defense Intelligence Agency, but rather than do that directly, we'll try to get a special volunteer group to do that on our behalf. There is an organization called the 'National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia'. They have some pull with the DIA, and that gives them a better position. It's going to be tough, the whole MIA thing has become very politicized, and even the League may not help us. But if we succeed, the DIA will be forced to open a file on Andy and investigate what happened to him. You understand what I've said so far?"

"Some of it... I think."

"Well, don't worry about all the details for now. Just realize that there is a way to go about this. I'll run it by you again when the time comes. Now don't get any false hopes, Andy's...well...let's be realistic, none of this is any proof that he's still alive."

Dorothy sniffled acquiescently. "I know."

"The other thing we have to do is to find out who sent you that message. Leave that to me. I'm a professional snoop. I already have a plan to bait this mysterious messenger. You have the letter?"

Dorothy retrieved it from her pocketbook and handed it over.

Cynthia pulled out the sheet of paper and examined it briefly with a pondering frown. "Don't worry, Dot. I'll be with you all the way through this." She put the letter back in the envelope, which she put it in her bag, before pulling the plate of quiche closer to her.

Dorothy sat quietly for a few seconds before contemplating what she would say next. "Cynthia?"

She was now in the middle of devouring her quiche. "Yes?" she said after swallowing hastily.

"I don't mean to pry, but I just have to ask. How come you never got married?"

"Ah." Cynthia put down her fork, swallowed again, this time a bit too hard, and thought awhile before she spoke. "Well, I have love affairs, but in the end I always seem to be disappointed. Nothing is quite like the first time. And then again, my work keeps me busy, always hopping around here and there."

"I'm sorry."

"About what? About me and Andy? Don't get mushy, Dot. It wouldn't have worked out between us. It was bound to end anyway."

Dorothy sat back in her chair and looked away pensively. Fitting, she thought, that there should be such doubt. Genuine or not, ashes aren't a person. He never came home, that was the point. And their lives had never continued, their plans had never culminated, and their past would never be sealed.

"What are you thinking about?" Cynthia asked, looking up from her plate.

"Nothing," Dorothy said with a waxen smile.

Cynthia Soronson hadn't been entirely open nor forthcoming in her encounter with Dorothy Kozeny. She hadn't mentioned anything about the correspondences she had had with Andrew while he was overseas—those letters of condemnation she had sent to him. She hadn't mentioned the harassment by the FBI and the IRS that had started soon after Andy had died: her arrest, the wiretapping, the financial audits...nor had she said anything about Mitch, her lover at Berkeley. She had her own ghosts of the past to grapple with. It was too soon, too soon to tell all. She was proud of herself though, feeling her performance in Dot's presence was laudable, her staged self-composure worthy of an Oscar. She had to be strong for Dot, for the both of them. But now, alone in her apartment, she could afford to release the reins that had been cramping her insides with emotion.

In her bedroom, she flung her buckskin pocketbook on the bed. One arm went up to cradle her bowed head; her elbow supported

with her other hand. She shifted her weight left and right, rocking her body back and forth, left and right, back and forth. "Shit!" she swore to herself. She had thought that that particular segment of her life was over with, filed away somewhere safe. Why the hell did she agree to meet at Rosie's of all places?

She stopped her rocking. Stifled sobs welled up in spurts. One, and then another, and then another. It felt good after such a long time, like vomiting after a prolonged night with a stomachache.

"I'm sorry, Andy," she cried. "Sorry for being such a bitch." Talking aloud like that made her feel stupid enough to stop weeping. She lay down on the bed, while her thoughts roamed back.

Their teenage romance began at Rosie's. She was sitting in a booth with Carol and Ann-Marie, two of her friends that, because of the way she attracted boys, probably thought it was to their benefit to hang out with her. But Cindy had little interest in any of the boys, except for Andy. He had walked in that day, and all three girls thought he was so cute, with his shy, sweet smile. Ann-Marie, just moments before, waving her arms to tell a story in her usual colorful way, had spilt her soda pop, creating a mess on the floor. When Andy walked by, he slipped on the wet spot and went down headfirst, flinging his milkshake in Cynthia's face and banging his head on their table in the process. What a riot, everyone screaming in laughter. But Cynthia got down to rescue him, taking the ice cubes from her soda pop and putting them in a linen napkin, which she pressed to the bump on his head. For a 14-year-old girl in a small Midwestern town, it's hard to imagine anything more romantic.

Two years later. Again, they were sitting in a booth at Rosie's. She was sixteen, a junior in high school.

"Hey, maybe we could fly there," he proposed.

She knew he was trying his best to lighten the pain of their discussion, a discussion that concerned their inevitable separation.

"I could rent a Cessna, and we'll see the country from a bird's-eye

view. How's that sound?"

Cindy responded merely with a pout.

"Then after my orientation we could fly up to Boulder, and you can check out the University there. Whaddaya say?" He playfully shook her shoulder in a futile attempt to lift her spirits.

"Andy, I still have a year to go," she complained in a nasally whine, emphasizing her resentment of the situation.

"I guess, that's why they say, 'this is when life begins'," he said wistfully. "The choices, decisions..."

She looked deep into his sea-blue eyes. "I love you, Andrew Kozeny. That's where my life begins... and ends."

40-year-old Cynthia, lying on her bed, nearly cringed at the recollection of such a hackneyed line, but it hadn't sounded so corny at the time. Her teenage mind had considered it poetic. In any case, what was really important was that it expressed her genuine feelings.

What happened after that? Oh, yes...with bittersweet timing, their song began to play on the jukebox, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

"I love you too, Cindy," he had said.

They were sitting silently, listening to the music.

"So we really shouldn't worry, not if our love is true," he had teasingly assured, mimicking the lyrics of the song. There was just a hint of faltering in his false bravado.

Their song soon finished.

On the night of Andy's high school prom, they had lost their virginity to each other. That only made the next year apart even worse. Now, reminiscing in her bed, she could almost taste that aching, that longing of first love.

When she finally made it to Boulder, life was great. He would fly in on a rented plane every weekend. She loved flying with him, how he did it so effortlessly, so naturally, like a bird in flight. They cycled the Rocky Mountains in the summer, and skied them in the winter. Those three years were the happiest of her life.

Later on he was assigned to McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas. He had already asked her to marry him, but she wanted to go to graduate school first. Another two years, she told him, and she'd be ready to have lots of babies with him. She enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley. After that, they saw each other less.

That was in 1967. In 1967, 50,000 demonstrators, including some celebrities, marched in protest outside the Pentagon. In November of that year, peace activists, led by Bertrand Russell, held a mock tribunal of International War Crimes against the US. In the same month, a state of the art navigational beacon was installed on Pu Pa Ti Mountain in Laos to allow all-weather, twenty-four-hour bombing of North Vietnam.

When he was transferred to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, she wasn't allowed to visit him. He was learning secret electronic warfare stuff, he had told her, and access to the base was limited. And when he underwent a three-month language-training course at a Defense Department Institute, to learn Thai and Lao, she asked him why, fearing the worst—a posting in Indochina. Somehow, things were deviating from their plans, and Cindy was finding it more and more difficult to justify his Air Force activities to the new set of friends she had made at Berkeley.

A year later, again at Rosie's C'mon Inn. They had both come home, she, for summer vacation, he, on a short furlough. She remembered the anger that had been grasping at her while she listened to him.

"Look," he said, "they told me I wouldn't be seeing much action this time around. And if I do it now, it's over with. If I don't, they might call me to do another tour again next year."

"Next year the war might be over."

"All the better. But maybe it'll get bigger. Let's be realistic, they own my ass for four years. And I'm getting a lot of pressure."

"Fuck them. Quit."

"I can't just quit. I have to do the four years. I don't think you know what it means to be in the Air Force."

"It's you who doesn't know what that means. It means you'll do as they say whether it's wrong or right. And the war is wrong, Andrew."

"But it's not like I'm killing anyone. I'm just hitting bridges..."

"And planes, with a pilot inside..." She was referring to the MIG he shot down over Haiphong, the one that had earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

"Well hell, he wouldn't have thought twice to have shot me down."

"That's just it, you stupid ass!" she cried. Men were so thick, she thought. "Do you know what you're fighting for? I bet he did."

"Look, he bailed out, I saw him."

"That's not the point. The war is wrong. You just enjoy playing the hero. Do you think that impresses me, do you, that medal you got, huh, do you?"

His voice became louder, betraying his frustration. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe I don't. But it's easier to take back what I say than to undo what I've done."

"Cindy, I..." he paused to search for words. He couldn't confess to her that flying a jet fighter gave him a rush better than sex. No, that would surely finish it between them. But she knew anyway, knew that her rival mistress took the form of an airplane. Changing tack, he asked, "You don't want me to be a pilot?"

"You don't need the Air Force to be a civilian pilot."

"You know what I mean, an airline pilot."

"It wouldn't matter to me if you were a crop duster, or a janitor for that matter. Better than a killer."

Andrew turned silent. This was his way of signaling the end of the discussion. It was annoying to her, the way he always let her have the last word. What made it more annoying was that it worked. His silence eventually made her give in. Despite everything—her new friends, her new politics, her new lover—she couldn't just flick a switch and stop loving Andrew Kozeny. It just wasn't that simple.

Ah, regrets! No matter how carefully one tries to tread through life, one just keeps stumbling right into them. Each time, you think you know better, until later, the cold judgment of hindsight condemns you as a fool.

But if only she hadn't been so harsh in her last letter, if only she had known she would never see him again. If only....