

Flight Path

by Steven Gowin

Those who love aluminum bellies and landing carriage and ailerons... that ilk... settled at the western edge of of LAX 24R 6L and called the encampment Flight Path.

Out there, between runway's end and the Pacific surf line, you could watch the Lockheeds and McDonnells lift away from it all... all of whatever was care or bother or bedevilment.

Wind off the Pacific blew steamy on warm days, but was cold and foggy at night. Atomized JP4 mixed with dust off the beach. The airborne goo dried into a brown toxic lacquer that coated our trailers and squat shacks and war remnant out buildings.

Flight Path smelled of lighter fluid and rotting kelp and skunky marijuana. Residents there spoke in stilted cadence... an idea, support, a summation... a long long pause while a departing airliner's scream and roar subsided.

No law west of 24R 6L, the neighborhood attracted aerophile n'er do wells, petty criminals, and grifters. A midget and part time clown, Little Jimmy Dubcek, drove out from Bayou Le Blanc every month to push voodoo hallucinogen.

I was putting together a show, trying to anyway, and the encampment suited me fine; I understood its inhabitants. I photographed them and developed the pictures in my darkroom, a leaky Airstream where I also slept.

Jacey Quinn and Howard Rasmussen kept an old double wide mobile classroom. The desks were thrown outside in a heap, but blackboards still hung on the walls. Jacey raised a garden in that wind and greasy air, and brought me tomato and mozzarella sandwiches with a glass of Abruzzo on Sunday afternoons.

She danced three nights a week somewhere in the Valley, the Lazy Leopard, maybe, and made enough to bankroll Howard's business. Tall and slim with large brown eyes, she wore her dark red hair in a kind of a pageboy... something she carried off well when few women do.

Devastatingly attractive, she could obsess over whatever interested her as long as it interested her... the coastal wetlands, card trick magic. But she could also lose that fascination in a flash.

You might begin a Jacey night in Manhattan Beach, truck across the border at dawn for a lobster breakfast at Puerto Nuevo, and end days later, watching her wave goodbye from the Las Mochas ferry. A word, even a glance from her, could break a heart forever or fill you with joy.

Howard's father, Ron Rasmussen, Rasmussen Cadillac, owned car dealerships from Ventura to Glendale, told racist jokes, believed in a firm hand clasp, and smoked Dutch Masters. Elizabeth Greene Rasmussen, Howie's mother, insisted on Swiss boarding school for her son.

The boy studied French, Danish, some German, and hashish. After Brown and Yale grad school, the Sorbonne expected him for a PhD on Poul Martin Møller, Kierkegaard's mentor. But Howard inevitably dropped out. In the end, dope trumped philosophy.

He loved ingesting drugs of nearly any sort and had an enormous tolerance for mescaline in particular. But the flakiness, the doper persona, the here and now and danger of drug culture... those were the true attractions. He cared about hop and Jacey and Flight Path in that order.

A visit chez Howard began with a jive handshake, Howie's poor imitation of his posse in Inglewood. The Brothers, however, never understood his strange wind up, slip sliding palm, and jerky grip.

The bong or a line, and a cold beer always followed, and at Jacey and Howard's, you could meet a pilot or a junior producer from the studios, someone from the mayor's office or a Sonoran campesino who'd smuggled a half kilo across la frontera north of Tecate.

Howard began by dealing only weed, a few pills, and a little blotter, but his inventory soon featured more and more cocaine. He'd cultivated some kind of good Peruvian connection up the street at LAX and managed to bypass the normal Hollywood middlemen.

Jacey spoke perfect Spanish and translated for Howie as needed, but when the LAX Peruano disappeared and a Russian from Palos

Verdes replaced him, Howard's best times were over. The middlemen were back.

Transactions became less sure and more complicated. Money changed hands less freely. Howie relied more often on his connections' credit, and his clientele relied more often on his. Vendor and customer alike began trading in jewelry, fine wines, even automobiles.

But barter economy led Howard into businesses he little understood. Once in a pinch for cash, he sent Jacey to the Slausen Swapmeet with a cigar box full of antique diamonds.

And, for 25 grams of Equatorian blow, he'd accepted that nickel plated Browning automatic. A 1911 model, Patton had used it in World War One. Howie prized it as a talisman of Pattontonian invincibility. He carried it in his waistband everywhere and kept it in high sheen although he never owned a round of ammo for it.

That was about the time I quit Flight Path. I'd had enough of late night fools banging at my door... always somebody looking for somebody else named Trevor, and the vomit and pee at my threshold in the morning, or the afternoon, or whenever.

Away from Flight Path, I realized that Howard never understood the gravity of his vocation. He behaved as if he were pushing bad Mexican shit to country club pals back in Thousand Oaks. He acted as if mistakes had no consequence.

Jacey understood too, said she sensed something, something off track, but said she still dug those jets and how they rattled the windows, and how everybody above was heading to Taipei or Amsterdam or Nairobi. She loved Howie and existential raps and the way he polished that beautiful silver pistol.

While she was working one night, Howie, packing the Browning as usual, answered someone at the door. When John Law spotted the handshake wind up and Howie's chrome gat, he leveled his LAPD .38, cocked the hammer, pulled the trigger, and shot Howie dead through the lung.

I never saw Jacey again. After the funeral, she quit Flight Path, and I lost track. I imagined her at some sad lap joint in Lancaster or

Barstow, somewhere in the desert, far past the edge of the City, far past her prime.

But a few weeks back, I ran into Jimmy Dubcek in Hollywood. He was pushing shrooms and crank, and crank-laced schrooms and working a circus in the clown car. He'd heard that Jacey'd married a rich video gamer and lived with him and a couple of kids in Los Feliz. He'd heard she's fine and content and as beautiful as ever.

I guess I'm fine too. I mean, I'm still knocking around the City of Light, taking a few pics, still trying to put it together. I go downtown to photograph the alkie and hobos, the addicts and talkers and hooks from time to time. We understand each other.

Flight Path ended as a cluster of meth labs. The narcs busted it, and County Health bulldozed it to the ground, hauled it away, decontaminated the sand, and made it into a public beach. The jets are cleaner and quieter than they used to be; little kids chase frisbees on the strand.

And from time to time I still drive out there, out there at night, out to the end of 24R 6L. I like the triple sevens and A 380s. I like to watch the big boys lift off and fly away... far far away.

