

Tem Montgomery

The Lieutenant: A Faulknerian Tale

As they tell it in the town—those still there and old enough to remember—the little “Lieutenant” came all the way from England seven years after the war with a converted Spitfire to crop dust in Fermata Bend, Alabama. There are versions of the story from years of people getting together to talk. The most common story is that he came not for need of money—it seems he had money from somewhere. It was not because he wanted to become an American, or to see America or the Deep South. He didn’t. The reason he came was that Fermata Bend had no aerial regulations and he wanted to keep flying dangerously. No one knew that at first. He was such an oddity, an unusual deliverance from the sky. Nor did they know what an isolated and childish stranger he would turn out to be. The name “Lieutenant” would become synonymous with the little man and the town’s impression of him. For the young, especially the boys, the name became legendary, associated with manhood, glory, and being a hero.

He came to Fermata Bend on a June day, literally appearing out of the blue, unannounced, unanticipated, like a traveling salesman or a bum would. Only in his case, from the *sky* with this dark, foreign, mean-looking aircraft. It was an olive green, oblong-winged plane with steel spray rods running under each wing. The warplane appeared from the direction of Legger Mound, the thick-wooded mound, no one owned, where Indians were buried and where there were worn, overgrown mounds of Civil War breastworks. The warplane circled low over a cluster of one and two story nineteenth century buildings, and descended on the long dirt road that cut through fields toward town. People stared as the plane taxied into the quiet town square. It blew up dust, as it circled the median of the Confederate statue and other war memorial plaques and World War I artillery pieces. The windstorming plane slowly gyrated and the engine cut right in front of Miller’s Hardware before the cars, trucks, and a couple of shied mules harnessed to wagons. The propeller blades whirled slowly to a stop. The people stared as the pilot slid open the cockpit. Somebody in the crowd said, he looked like a human bug with his uniform, tight cap and goggles. He climbed down off the plane, raised the goggles from his eyes, peeled off his gloves, bowed to introduce himself to the group of gawking men on the tin-covered porch of the hardware as “Lieutenant Barker”. He had a soft voice and a serious face for such a little man dressed in leather headpiece and goggles, khaki jump suit and a sheer

white scarf draped around his neck. He looked like a movie character or someone from a costume party.

"Boy, you're lost," came a simple, impetuous utter invading the silence of the porch.

The little man ignored it, gave a parsimonious smile. He pranced before them and spoke more at them, than to the gaping, rough men with plain, weathered faces dressed in drab work clothes. He spoke with a polite but laconic speech; it was a peculiar English they had never heard before.

"Like holding your breath 'til the end of a sentence and whining off the last word," someone said.

Gloves in one hand, fists on his hips, it seemed more like a little dressed-up man who dared the larger bullies to take him on, his imposing machine behind him in the dirt. The men couldn't follow what he said very well. In fact, no one remembered what he had already said. But they got the gist of it. He inquired about, no, insisted they give him work.

This oddity finished his peculiar elocution. He stood and faced them with hazy eyes that didn't tell, see, or seem to concern themselves with what anyone thought of him; his mouth was frozen with an expectant smile, following what he had just said, as if insistence in itself would bring his sole reward. The mules calmed down, the dust settled, and a still group of men stood in the shade of the porch, as this stranger stood his ground in the hot sun, arms akimbo. He waited, holding his courteous smile for no one in particular; he appeared patient, polite, but he expected to receive from them what he wanted. They watched as beads of sweat formed on his face.

"Who the hell does he think we are?" somebody said.

It seemed this bizarre and idiotic standoff would go on forever when stout Jupo Demus, who was like someone out of the nineteenth century in Fermata Bend, in his dusty white coat, plantation hat, and trimmed, salt and pepper Vandyke, stepped off the porch and went forward, looked from side to side, and stretched out his hand to greet the stranger. Only Jupo did it. He was really somebody in Fermata Bend. He was of old cotton and pecan family, and he knew it.

He drove a black Packard, had a family name, and a thousand acres outside of town. Jupo gave the stranger a perfunctory nod, a handshake, and never looked at him twice, stared and smiled toward the plane, glanced back to the men, and asked vague questions. It was like he had seen something he wanted to devour, or more likely, it was just the idea of the plane. In actuality, a dissimulation of his was that he had not served in the military like his father and his grandfathers had before him, being too young for World War I and too old for World

War II and now, the Korean Conflict. This was where the high school male graduates were all going to, three boys had already come home in caskets, each to a somber town procession with a military honor guard, a folded flag and taps played at an opened grave beside the old Confederate and Spanish-American War tombstones in the Fermata Bend Cemetery. Jupō had not lived up to Fermata Bend's family tradition, what the older veterans of proper families had done and how Jupō had always wanted to think of himself—as he was brought up to idolize and emulate his soldier father and grandfathers, their stern portraits lined up above the mantel of the fireplace at the old home place.

Jupō glanced at the plane and then back at the men on the porch with a slow smile and a wink; he offered the stranger work before he even got his name or price. Jupō nodded at the man, but he didn't seem to hear the stranger's response, as he took the warplane in with a grin and wonder.

Everyone knew that Jupō had hired the stranger because the plane was something to show; it was something no one else could have done. It was one of the things of land, an indifference in what the Demuses thought of themselves with the old family home place that Jupō's grandpa had swindled from a carpetbagger. The house stood on a rise outside of town that overlooked the fields in view of Legger Mound and the surrounding countryside. The two men shook hands there in the dirt of the square before the silent onlookers. The pilot grinned at his luck and Jupō smiled. The men watched as Jupō got back into his black Packard. The pilot climbed into his plane and started it. Men grabbed at their hats as the engine coughed and boomed, blades whirled and the plane turned and began to move. The Packard led the way around the square and out of town and the pilot taxied his plane after it. The simple farmers watched them as they circled the square and left. They just shook their heads and scoffed.

"The rich act rich," someone said.

At the Co-op, Jon Stephens and his boys stopped what they were doing as the little "Lieutenant" walked in.

"He pulled up in one of them Demus International trucks, Ol' Jupō driving," Jon told them. "They both came in, this little clown in his get up leading, his shoulders square 'cause he knew Jupō was behind him. I thought he was a circus character or a movie star; he was that pretty, with this damn scarf 'round his neck and a thin silver wristwatch flashing on his wrist. And he was sweating, ha, sweating like a laboring mule in that hot khaki get up and leather cap, goggles shining on top of his head and all that sweat running his uniform dark; there was sweat dripping off his fingers, face, nose, and he was trying to ignore it as if we wouldn't notice. He was numb to reality. I figured it out quick;

either they were the only clothes he had, or he HAD to wear them, know what I mean? Well, they marched up to the counter, this clown acting like he knew what he's about, and Ol' Jupo just behind him with this set, closed smile and a look that knew he got something we don't; the whole time Jupo looked at me and then him, like a kid impressed with his new puppy."

"The little clown bids me good day, smiling with sweat flipping off his nose, and I knew then and there he ain't from around here. He offers me a quick hand (the one without the watch) and it's limp, which is another bad sign. Jupo just stands behind him and keeps nodding to me. 'Afternoon, Jupo,' I say. The clown pipes up, says he wants a thousand gallons of liquid pesticide, may come back for more, he says, charming as you please, these hazel eyes, a quick smile, and he's raining water the whole time. I wasn't in the mood and I didn't like his. I seemed to forget my manners. 'You don't say now,' I said. 'Boy, I thought the war was over. Ain't you hot? Or shall I get you a glass of water?' My boys, loading the shelves, looking on and just a tittering.

He shoots me another short smile. 'I'm on business,' he pouts. And I want to hit him. 'Yessir,' I drawl it out as long as I can. 'But it gonna take a week or more to bring it up from Mobile. Can you wait that long, sir?'"

"He shoots a querulous look at Jupo, then nods at me, all detached and intent. 'All right,' he says. He says it funny-like, real crisp-*All right*. 'You do that. Order it,' he demands. 'I'll be back in a week.'

Jupo nods, too, which means it's on his account. 'You do that,' the little man echoes, like the cameras are still rolling, the war's going on, and somebody's watching. He gives me this gamely nod and grin, turns around and slowly marches or slushes, depending on how you want to look at it, back out with Big Jupo behind him in his dirty white suit, who hasn't removed his hat, and who hasn't said a word all this time, which is not like Jupo. Jupo only gives us a quick look over his shoulder, nodding, and hurries to keep up with his new boy wonder. They go past the sacks of feed and seed, my shiny stacked buckets and plows. The boy walking like he leading an invisible parade. Soaked with sweat, he leads it all the way out the door with Jupo to the truck. Me and the boys watch them go; at the door we see them climb in the truck and it's obvious—Jupo is driving." Jon said.

Jupo Demus drove all day long and the next. "Meet Lieutenant Jonathan Barker," he swaggered in and announced loudly to those at the hardware, the drug store, the barbershop and then at the post office. "Formerly of the RAF," he stressed, then added with emphasis, "the Royal Air Force," as though no one could know that and it was somehow a superior and unique privilege through Jupo, himself. The

stranger entered and stood beside Jupō in his war outfit; he acknowledged everyone with a tireless, zealous smile and a quick nod, flashing a silver wristwatch when his hand moved. People noticed how he smiled but seemed to avoid eyes, with a somewhat smooth indifference. The stranger appeared confident, with a quick, precise stride in his boots and an erect back, overly erect, like a ramrod. A veteran at the barber shop noticed his abnormally wide and high boot heels. But no one said anything, at least in public. They smiled and remembered their manners before Jupō, introduced themselves to the little stranger and spoke. The little stranger held a small smile. He said "ma'am" or "sir," to everyone and often glanced over at Jupō. The little man gave quick, laconic answers to questions about himself and his warplane, but offered no further conversation. Jupō just grinned and nodded along with him until silence ensued and then Jupō nodded for them to leave. The stranger and Jupō headed for the door; the little stranger in his uniform still held by the silent onlookers, made a quick bow with his head before he stepped out. In an instant imitation, Jupō did the same, and everyone nodded back as well.

One farmer swore he saw a glint of silver above the little man's ear as he turned to go, and if so, that proved he had a mental injury. "He ain't the real McCoy," someone agreed. The veterans scoffed. They said there wouldn't be an England left if the U.S. had not entered the war. But everyone kept their manners, and in typical Fermata Bend fashion, never said what they were really thinking. Then a day later, Jupō had to go and brag about the "Lieutenant" at the pecan farmer's meeting to anyone else who would listen. He had put the stranger in one of his abandoned sharecropper shacks below the Demus home place and the mean, green warplane was parked out front of Jupō's big barn in full view of the highway, for everyone to see. Jupō told everyone, with his thin and silent teenage son with the club foot named Michael, standing there bareheaded and looking on, how he liked the fact that the Lieutenant had been a fighter pilot in the war and still acted like a military man. Each time Jupō always reminded the veterans that he, himself, had been too young for World War I and too old for World War II. But he would have gone, yessir, he would have. He was a Demus. He paused, hesitated with Michael, quiet and watching, then added that Demuses had a long tradition of soldiers; his father had been in the Spanish-American War, both his grandfathers served in the Confederacy, a great-grandfather in the Mexican war, all of their names were carved at the base of the marble veteran's memorial on the town square, along with several of his other relatives and the names of other old families in Fermata Bend.

“Demuses are ALWAYS fighters,” Jupō added, with a quick glance to and then away from his son. Several men nodded out of politeness for respect to the memory of Jupō’s father.

“Besides, the Lieutenant’s a man,” Jupō said. “He can hold his own. Brave and smart. Best damn mechanic I ever saw. He broke down my tractor engine and put it back together in a jiffy.” Jupō paused for emphasis and looked around. Those listening to him smiled and wondered.

“He’s all right,” Jupō repeated to them. “Quiet and sure of himself—he’s all right.”

Someone said something to Michael to break his silence and change the subject. Though, Jupō inevitably brought the Lieutenant back up again.

“Well, I guess he’s all right,” someone said to Jupō.

“When is he leaving?” someone else asked.

And they all watched Jupō’s smile fall.

Jupō talked and the town rumored, and then in a week the Lieutenant went to work. However mysterious, odd in speech, dress and size he was, however quiet and aloof the stranger was and whatever the reason he came to America and Fermata Bend—the fact remained, the boy could fly. He put on an aerial performance no one in Fermata Bend could have imagined.

“The dark, green warplane did acrobatics,” someone said. “You never seen the likes of it.”

“Oh, yes,” someone might add and whistle. “It was a show, now, sure enough.”

People pulled their cars or trucks over onto the side of the road near the Demus Fields, got out and stood along the railroad tracks, shaded their eyes and watched. They gathered on the town square before the Confederate statue three miles away, and gazed up at the sky, some with binoculars, while the plane did loops and rolled. It circled high in the blue, disappeared into the blinding sun and then was back again in the heart-stopping dives. The plane was a dark form falling through the blue with its engine screaming; the plane grew suddenly larger as it swept low over the fields of cotton, with white trails streaming from the wings. The trails cut off, then the plane would pull up, scale the telephone wires, the treetops, or it would dip its wing and skirt the Demus’ water tower like a deft, metallic bird that swayed back and forth before the rise of the thick-wooded Legger Mound, then it would turn back up into the blue, climb up and disappear into the sun. It continued to dive again and again; it swept over the fields, and streamed more spray—like a mirage. One moment it was there, loud and roaring; next, it was gone with only a faded drone. Everyone had to look away

or cover his eyes when the plane led them into the sun.

"It's a wonder," someone said, whistling and shaking his head, "a wonder what's in that boy's head."

Farmers said that you shouldn't crop dust like that. Too fast. Too stupid. The veterans said he was using bomber attack tactics, like some serious game. The old people shook their heads.

"A young fool. A looney is what he is," someone declared.

For days, this lone, secular show of a foreigner appeared to be fighting an invisible foe. He bombed before the local spectators and the silent, still fields and trees, all beneath an infinitely blue sky and bright sun. The locals began to wonder why he traveled so far to fly like this, especially to this small, dull and telluric community of farmers. There was nothing there but bland sun and flat, fertile land. This foreign oddity and his crop dusting war machine could beat the excitements of the traveling circus or the country fair or even what the old timers remembered from barn storming days. The plane was just fun to watch. It looked like fierce play. It flew fast, did loops and rolls, ear-splitting dives, hard and sharp climbs that just missed the telephone wires and trees as it pulled up and hid in the sun before it bombed the fields again and again, day after day, to release a soft, settling mist. Stout Jupio drove into town with a broad grin.

"Quiet little fella," Jupio remarked as he winked at the farmers and veterans that listened. "Hard worker and got the cleanest table manners you ever saw." Jupio said it matter-of-fact, stroking his Vandyke.

The pilot had fought in the war, he was pretty sure: the Battle of Britain, Dunkirk and D-Day. Jupio talked about the plane. It was double walled construction. It had the biggest single engine he had ever seen. "Rolls Royce," Jupio announced with a nod. There were brackets and welded plugs where the machine guns had been. The glass cockpit was a foot thick and there were bullet holes in the body that had been patched, welded over. "He's the real thing," Jupio declared, nodding for effect, his eyes searching the others. He wouldn't say how much he paid the man.

Among themselves, the veterans observed that his plane had to be a stripped, surplus fighter. How did he get it? How did he bring it over here? But now, they had to admit, the boy sure could fly. Everything the plane did had precision, control, and daring speed. Their wives wanted to know what the English stranger looked like. Their girls wanted to know his name and whether he was good looking. Their boys imitated him on the playground at school. They would spread their arms out like wings and chase each other and issue machine gun sounds from their mouths, all inspired with the idea of such freedom.

Jupio Demus, in a clean, white coat and his Vandyke trimmed,

proudly brought the stranger with his teenage son and daughter to church. Everyone watched as Jupo took off his hat and noticed that his gray, balding head was not so dark or shiny as his Vandyke. They saw the Lieutenant was a little, wiry man with a smooth face, wavy platinum blonde hair, with soft, hazel eyes; and shy and uncomfortable in a borrowed coat, shirt, and slacks too large for him. The thin silver watch stood out on his wrist and he tried to avoid eyes as he sat or stood beside Jupo. After the service, he quickly shook hands, but said little. As everyone went outside into the churchyard to congregate, he went to Jupo's Packard, sat on the running board as if to guard his rear, and began nervously to pop lemon drops into his mouth out of a brown paper bag, he stopped only to smile and nod quickly to onlookers when he had to.

"Well," someone commented, "so much for his manners."

While the adults talked in the yard, the boys and girls got a look at him. The children would nudge one another, as they watched him. The boys were at one end of the church yard under the trees, while the girls were at the other end near the church steps. It didn't matter what the adults thought. The little stranger was different. He was new. His silent, nervous reserve seemed esoteric, unique. The girls thought he was cute. The boys took his behavior as a sign of toughness, and they admired him; they would shoot furtive glances in his direction from beneath the trees in their Sunday clothes. There he was...real. In the flesh. A real fighter pilot. A survivor of the war told to them, by their fathers, the men, and their talk—only this man flew the warplane with welded studs, where the machine guns had once been. They all had watched the war machine fly and dive in the sky. It had flown against the Germans. It still flew.

"Hey," a boy mustered the courage to go closer but somehow 'mister' didn't seem appropriate to use. "Were you really in the war?"

The other boys watched. The small, bareheaded stranger in his oversized clothes looked up, his cheek bulging with lemon drops, made a slight grin with lemon-stained teeth...

"Oh, yes," he replied.

"Ever get shot down?" another boy called from the trees.

"Many times." The smile broadened.

"You kill any Germans?"

"Many, many times," he replied.

A pause. "You ever wounded?"

"Many, many, many times."

A longer pause. "Well, say, why did you come here?"

"I can fly here."

In the pause that followed, he rose from the running board and

stuffed the paper bag of lemon drops into his coat pocket. The boys followed behind him from a distance; they whispered about him among themselves. They watched as he went over to the WPA rock wall that bordered the street, sat down, produced a cigarette from a small silver case and what looked like a lighter and lit it. His thin wristwatch flashed once or twice in the morning sun and they watched the quiet stranger's reserved face as he smoked. They also listened to thin Michael Demus, Jupo's son, as he dragged his club foot in the special shoe.

"He don't talk much, but my Pa says that only means he's seen a lot," Michael said as he neared the other children.

"I didn't see any scars," someone said.

"He let me sit in the plane," Michael continued, searching the other's faces.

They let Michael talk; his quiet monotone grew more and more matter-of-fact as he watched the small stranger who seemed somehow as stolid as the wall he sat near, calmly smoking. They watched as Jupo's daughter, Katrina, parted from the chattering girls on the church steps and made her way across the churchyard to the wall. She had the thin, forming body of a woman in a simple cotton print dress Jupo always kept her in. Katrina stopped a few feet from the Lieutenant, a smile on her face, her hands behind her back.

"Poppa told me I was to look after you," she said.

She grinned and began to gently rock on her heels and swing her long, simple black braids.

"He might even take me up with him. He might teach me to fly," Michael said.

A boy turned and looked at Michael. "You can't fly," he said.

Michael hushed at that and the boys watched the Lieutenant as he nodded to Katrina's constant, soft questions, her steady look on him. He smoked and tried to look away, but Katrina would not leave him alone. She held her smile with its blank, eager look, and offered conversation until the stranger had to look at her. Then he laughed. The relaxed and briefly vulnerable look on his face was not the way the boys wanted to see him, nor was it a violation of their impression of him; it was just that he, somehow, was supposed to stay constant and distant in the way he looked and acted. The silent and impervious manner on the wall was not supposed to waver. A boy sneered and scoffed.

"What does she think she's doing?" he said morosely.

One of them commented that he had heard the Lieutenant shot down seven German planes. Two shot from under him, another said. Who said? someone echoed. Michael, looked on, but he would not confirm or deny it. It did not matter. They wanted to hear it. Someone said that

he was lucky to be alive. They nodded and watched the pilot while he watched Katrina. He had not wavered. He was in control and independent. They watched him light another cigarette and cough slightly, though the steady gaze of his eyes, now, did not leave Katrina, and she had stopped rocking on her heels.

The air went quiet when there was no more crops to be dusted. The warplane remained parked before Jupō's barn for a day, and then it was gone. It came back two weeks later, circled the square from the direction of Legger Mound and landed in the long, even pasture behind the Demus home place. It left the next day. It began to return every week or two, sometimes it stayed a weekend or longer. By then, everyone knew it was because of Katrina. Or that he could fly here, unlike in Mobile. Or both. Katrina, who was a young, beautiful lady, just like her deceased mother, was beginning to realize it. In the absence of a wife and ignorant of women, Jupō had kept her in simple dresses and no make up. Though true to being an old-time gentleman from Fermata Bend, Jupō had made Katrina an idler as he had been reared to treat ladies, no less his deceased wife. Slender, with her mother's face and large, black, banal eyes, Katrina smiled a lot and often waited to be spoken to, she knew she was somebody's daughter. Jupō discouraged the approach of the local boys because as everyone knew, Jupō, who had married late in life after he found the right woman from another town, did not think anyone was good enough for his daughter. It did not seem to matter that Katrina was not bright, and was not expected to finish high school. She was obedient to Jupō and attractive. A black maid ran the kitchen and cleaned the home place while Jupō waited on Katrina, drove her to town or high school in the Packard, to piano lessons and even to visits, teas or birthday parties of other respectable families.

But now, there were new events. Everyone knew when Jupō took Katrina to buy new clothes at Sue's Clothing store. He took her to the drug store to buy lipstick, perfume and rouge. The ladies whispered about Katrina's "romance". The men joked and winked at the hardware store. Katrina no longer wore her hair in braids, but long, full, gathered behind her like Tarzan's Jane in the old movies shown down the road at Citronelle cinema, and she was suddenly taller and trimmer in new shoes. She was more eager and courteous in public.

"How are you? How are you?" she echoed, along with effusive 'Thanks-yous', offering little else but just the same smile to further discussion.

"And how's the Lieutenant?" people asked Katrina about town. Jupō stepped back and smiled. Neither Katrina's grin nor her eyes blinked.

"Oh, why, he's fine," she drawled.

As the months went by, Jupō was seen with Katrina and the little stranger in his Packard. The couple was also seen on horseback rides on mornings in frosted fields. They were seen on picnics at Fermata Bend Springs. Jupō drove them to high school football games on Friday afternoons, and the couple would sit together and hold hands on the bleachers, apart from everyone. Katrina's smile would beam in a new overcoat and heavy lipstick, while the little stranger would be in uniform and a leather flight jacket.

Jupō was pleased that the little man was courting his daughter. But soon the question "Who's courting who?" would be asked by someone. People knew it was Mobile now, where, as Jupō told them, he thought the Lieutenant did professional flying and mechanical work.

"It's a good match," Jupō declared to everyone.

He would smack his hands and grin. Jupō liked the little stranger because he was a gentleman. He had manners. English manners were just like Southern manners. A man knew how to act, how treat a lady, eat at the table, and how to treat a guest.

"It's a good match," Jupō would repeat and he swore the Lieutenant had good blood, like the Demuses had good blood—going back five generations on the same land in Fermata Bend.

"Hmm, that before or AFTER the carpetbaggers?" someone quipped when Jupō left.

"We've got some English in us, too, you know," Jupō would look about and nod.

"The fact that the stranger's English don't mean shit," someone muttered after Jupō was gone. "He's different is what matters."

In May, Michael Demus forced the little man in his skivvies out to the sharecropper shack at night, while he brandished one of his grandfather's service revolvers in each hand. He hobbled after the Lieutenant in his special shoe and his Sunday suit under the half moon and into the fields, ordered the Lieutenant to turn around and made a fervent declaration to the memory of his mother and how he was ready to kill or be killed for his family's honor. He finished and threw one of the revolvers at the Lieutenant's feet but the little man would not pick it up. Michael then challenged the stranger's name, his manhood, forgot his manners and insulted the stranger in every way he could think of; he even spit on him and called him things that were perverted. When that did not bring results, Michael, in a righteous rage, decided to shoot him anyway, but then could not pull the trigger. Michael wept and felt humiliated; he threw the other revolver and left. The next morning, out of spite, anger, or shame, he confessed to Jupō what he had done to the Lieutenant and why he had done so. Jupō heard him out and said

nothing; he waited until the next weekend and caught Katrina and the little man nude in one of the old slave quarters that was used for a shed. Jupo entered the shed just as Katrina had found a switch and had instructed the little man, like a stern schoolmarm to a dunce child, on how to sit so she could mount him. Jupo forced them to dress and get into his Packard at once by gunpoint; he did not threaten the Lieutenant, but instead he slapped Katrina before the little man's eyes. With shame, fear, and indignation and the memory of his dead wife, Jupo drove them over the state line into Mississippi to a Justice of the Peace. Jupo Demus could not tolerate disgrace.

The news hit town fast. It stunned them. All the ladies of proper families were shocked. A Demus? Married without a formal engagement? It was beyond belief. Jupo was quiet, he wouldn't talk, but he ran a full-page announcement in the *Fermata Bend Bugler* and then brought the couple before the entire church congregation to have the marriage blessed. On that Sunday, the little man with the warplane walked as if wooden, in stolid stupor and reticence, his face white as a sheet while he went through the motions in a coat and tie, with Jupo and Michael behind him. He went before the altar, kneeled with his happy wife in her Sunday dress before the minister and all the eyes of the packed church. Afterwards, the women gave a party with presents for Katrina at a neighbor's farmhouse. Katrina, in a new white dress with lace that Jupo had ordered from Birmingham, couldn't hide her smile or meet everyone's gaze while her three men looked on, the silent Lieutenant seated between Jupo and Michael.

The couple flew away to Mobile to live, but came back six days later because, as everyone knew, especially the women, Katrina was homesick. All she had ever known was Jupo and Fermata Bend, and some suspected, too, that the Lieutenant still wanted to fly without restraint. Rumor had it in Mobile the Lieutenant paced the floor of their apartment, smoked cigarettes, and said very little to his wife; while she cried herself to sleep each night, she suffered from a sweating fever with dreams of cruise ships that leave harbors to sink, mansions that crumble to the ground, and an old, white-bearded man that waves goodbye. Within three days, Katrina went into a violent fit; she refused to eat or sleep with her little husband until he agreed to take her home.

The Lieutenant and Katrina flew back to Fermata Bend. They settled in at the home place and lived there for over a year. The little man and Katrina went to church every Sunday with the Demuses and sat in the family pew. The Lieutenant crop dusted the Demus Fields and the surrounding farms. Sometimes he still made trips to Mobile, but soon those stopped too. He took on odd jobs and mechanical work at Morton's filling station and he flew alone every day, weather permit-

ting, whether there was work or not. The plane would be high in the sky, it screamed and droned, whirled and tumbled, it would fall and rise, over and over again, like a big metal bird in flight. It looked like ecstasy, it looked like practice, it went on and on and on—and yet, it went nowhere.

The boys at Fermata Bend Elementary School, when asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, all clamored that they wanted to be pilots. The girls said they wanted to be wives, mothers or nurses of pilots. The women in town thought the little man and Katrina made a cute couple. The men and veterans shook their heads over the thought that the weirdo was here to stay.

Jupo gave the new couple a dowry of fifty acres directly across the highway from the Demus Fields and the home place. He supervised the field hands in the construction of a new house, a small rock house with a shed and dirt runway. The couple moved in the house the following fall after their first anniversary. It was after crop dusting season and the harvest that Jupo invited all Fermata Bend to the house warming.

People of Fermata Bend came in their Sunday clothes to see the little man and his wife the closest they would ever see them. The lieutenant was dressed in a blazer and tie, yet he appeared still quiet and small. The guests observed that Katrina was in a new red dress, and she talked for the two of them and gave quick, apologetic smiles when she goaded the little man about how he served the punch, the sandwiches, or the cashews. She would also complain about how he stood around and did nothing.

Within a few months after the house warming, the flying noise above Fermata Bend stopped. The warplane was parked by the shed and the new rock house. The Lieutenant could sometimes be seen outside washing it or working on the plane. It was learned through the Demus' maid that within a few weeks after Katrina became pregnant she suffered from the fevers again. This time she saw black cats, spider webs, and crashing bats in her dreams. She became fearful for the Lieutenant to fly. Katrina would whine, beg, and nag the little man about it at first, then she went into violent fits for weeks until at last she extracted a promise from him not to fly until after the child was born. The Lieutenant then cried himself, groveled, and begged her to recant, but Katrina remained firm. The child demanded it, she told him. The town saw the Lieutenant drive Katrina around in their new Ford. He was by her side in town, out of uniform, in plain clothes and jacket while Katrina was larger in a flower-print maternity dresses. The little man was servile and attentive to his wife, but he would nod and speak quietly to others when he had to. At the grocery store, people watched Katrina goad him with plaintive whines, usually too impatient to wait

for his answers. She would give peremptory orders, or read the shopping list always quick to smile at others, her cheeks growing fatter and glowing.

"Nature's call done caught him," someone said later.

"Ha, yeah," someone agreed. "He's run right into the very thing he was running away from."

Three months before the baby was born, the warplane was gone. Katrina and the Demuses did not come to town. The first, polite response of people was that it was work, after all, perhaps in Mobile. Good manners required that no one ask outright. Had anyone heard the plane leave? After the plane was absent for a month, the talk began to fly. He had jumped the coop....there had been an argument about living in Fermata Bend.... the little foreigner had married thinking there would be money in it for him.... there was another wife in England, or Mobile. So it went. Katrina and the Demuses became reclusive while silent, hard-faced, and impervious. They kept to themselves, tried to avoid the others and not talk.

Then one evening, people heard the plane come in from the direction of Legger Mound. In the morning, it was back in the runway, parked by the shed at an off-angle, dirty and mud-splattered, the paint chipped, the glass on the cockpit flimsy. It sat like that all day and in the afternoon, Jupo drove across the Demus Fields and slowly crossed the highway in a ton truck full of field hands, got out of the truck with his pump shotgun and blasted the tires of the warplane flat. He ordered the field hands into the woods where they cut a large oak down, trimmed the limbs off and, with the truck, dragged it to the plane. Jupo produced a heavy chain from the back of the truck and directed the field hands to run it through the landing gear and spike the ends of the chain into the tree trunk.

"Barker!" Jupo bellowed at the rock house he had built for Katrina and the Lieutenant.

But no one came out. Jupo stood and glared. He ordered the hands onto the truck and drove off, the truck tires lifting dust. The warplane remained still, dirty and shackled. Jupo hired a biplane duster out of Waynesboro that summer whose flying was ordinary. The baby, a girl, came in the fall. The Lieutenant was now a father and Katrina, a mother. Katrina stayed at home and the Lieutenant worked odd mechanical jobs, while in town, people gossiped. They stared at him, nudged one another, then smiled when he appeared on the square behind the wheel of a Demus truck, or walked about the stores, or if he was in line at the post office dressed in drab overalls and work boots. He avoided people and spoke little. Whenever the subject of the Lieutenant was brought up to Jupo, he would press his lips together and look away.

"Why, I think I could whip him blindfolded, and with one hand," a farmer would declare at the hardware, in Jupō's absence.

Of course, the farmers and veterans would be gathered together, seated in the rockers or leaning on the counter, drinking soda pop or chewing tobacco, talking about the weather or planting, politics or history, or telling tales as men in Fermata Bend would do.

"For all them Demuses think, he ain't nothing much," someone would drawl and spit.

Slow snickers. A guffaw. "That little stranger—he's so good he's not one of us."

"Take those wings away and he ain't much now is he?" Soft laughter.

"Flyboy," someone would add and laugh low, "got caught with his fly open."

At the afternoon baptism, the child was christened Jimma Demus Barker. Jupō's pride swelled in his new beige suit and tears welled in his eyes while he held his hat in his hands and watched his grandchild. The Lieutenant and Michael stood beside him in new beige suits Jupō had ordered for them, too. It was not in fear, or even distance from what was before them in Katrina's arms at the baptismal font, but in a shifting and boyish awkwardness at what to do, which was nothing but to look on and be there while Katrina in her new, flowing, yellow dress, her cheeks still plump from pregnancy, smiled like her father, in a simple self-absorption and purpose, clutching the child in its gown and blanket, all aglow in the middle of her men. She handed the child forward to the preacher at the baptismal font and before everyone in the church, mostly women, who had come to watch. The preacher gave a benevolent smile, as did, almost spontaneously, all the women in the church, mothers and mothers to be, their men either deceased, at work, or not claimed yet. Then everyone smiled in polite awe as the preacher prayed, touched the child's forehead with water and repeated her name. A piercing cry uttered from the small and insistent creature in the blanket. Jupō and Katrina's smiles grew even larger. Michael's mouth closed, small and solemn. And the Lieutenant stared.

In April, people noticed as they drove by on the highway that the war plane was clean and the glass shone. The field hands that lived in the shacks beyond the runway began to line up on the fence in the evenings to smoke, talk, and hum to themselves with that ingrained placidity and defeated mentality of knowing one's place for so long that one did not even think or dare to question on the other side of the fence and watch Mister Jupō's son-in-law, the "white man's white man," they called him, for being from England. He was solitary, quiet, alone and looking even smaller in the runway beyond the fence, in the

slow, quotidian and arduous restitution of his Spitfire. In denim overalls now, and tee shirt, his long and unkempt hair falling in his face, they watched him evening after evening until it grew too dark, watched him wash the windows until the glass shone, scrub and hose off the dirt and grime. They watched him polish and mend: a lone man's slow, diligent labor, section by section of the warplane. The field hands began to lean on the fence, talk and smoke everyday before dark and supper, and watch him with feigned indifference, slyly, with repressed eagerness. They watched him with occasional exclamations under their breaths, guffaws or long, slow chuckles.

"He doing a whole lotta work for a man to go nowhere"

"Ain't gonna be no energy left for his woman tonight!"

"Hey, don't you know he ain't had none? Why you think he out there trying to fly?"

"Naw. That ain't it. He scared! He scared she wanting another one."

And they watched every evening, every dusk, acted nonchalant, casual, but with quiet curiosity and respect, not that they understood what he was doing or why with his machine, that they could not ever know, but wonder at the "white man's white man" lone, daily, and self-driven labor. Every evening after a hard day's work, they were there to watch, bemused, befuddled, a little awed, and with envy reborn from abnegation with whites, at this strange white and his strange machine, and stranger to them yet, his dogged, self-absorbed and assiduous devotion to it: a little white man, face set with determination, not of revenge or conspiracy, but with a look more like need, someone who could not leave the warplane alone, had to touch the machine, maintainance it, be with it and not like love, but more like helplessness or a desire for hope. The upstart was that he directed all this "affection," as the field hands called it, on a warplane that couldn't, didn't move, on flat tires that Jupio had shot out, alone in the overgrown dirt runway, like a dead, shackled steel bird that needed paint, chained and staked to the stripped tree trunk Jupio had made them do on his orders. Yet, they watched and wanted to watch, in a silent hope, that the little "caught" white man who married Boss' daughter, but didn't know "he done married Boss." They watched him work with contained and impervious faces, wondering among themselves how the Boss could not know, and how much he would allow, and what he would do. And like many things, what they knew did not get outside their circle because something was about to happen between white folks.

They watched him work on the flaps and the engine from a ladder, and gradually polish the propellers and pivot the plane by its tail so it faced the highway. They watched him clean out the cockpit and check the flaps again. Over the weeks, their casual, quiet lounging on the

fence grew into a hush, a rigid vigil of the evenings, their eyes riveted on the man transforming the tethered plane, interpolated with low exclamations when the little man brought new batteries and slowly, meticulously took the old ones out and installed the new ones. He changed the spark plugs, drained the oil and the radiator, added new oil and radiator fluid. He greased the engine. He jacked up the wheel legs, straining the plane against the chain, removed the tires one at a time, replaced the inner tubes, patched and inflated the tires, and put them back on the warplane.

"He fool, sure enough." someone said.

They watched him slowly fill the warplane's tanks with fuel, carrying two five gallon cans back and forth from the larger drums in the shed, and an evening in June, they watched him bring the war plane back to life after several moments in which the little man just sat in the cockpit in silence, staring ahead as if in seizure or prayer. The engine coughed black smoke out the side exhaust pipes; the blades slowly turned, stopped. The engine coughed two more times, the blades stopped. Then the engine coughed, caught a rhythm, the blades slowly turned and spun into a blur, sending wind and dust into the falling dark. The field hands caught their hats, bowed their heads, squinted their eyes; but in spite of themselves, grinned and laughed, danced and clapped. The little white man stood up in the opened cockpit and turned to them, the propeller wind blowing his hair to one side. He grinned and waved. The field hands' cheers were drowned in the wind and noise of the plane, but they waved back. The engine roared, the blades whirled a storm, the wings slightly rocked for fifteen or twenty full minutes...and the warplane went nowhere.

But Jupo knew. He was too conscious of being a gentleman, or too proud, too white, and too aware of his place in Fermata Bend to confront his son-in-law again in front of blacks, or in public, certainly not at church, or Sunday dinner at the home place before every member of the family, or to walk into a man's house, not so much because of his daughter, or even the respect of his daughter, he had that regardless, but some inherent principle that said a man did not demean another man in front of a woman, much less his wife, no matter whose daughter she was or what she may or may not have told her father in the first place.

Jupo drove in to Joe Morton's Rabbit Oil filling station in his big black Packard one morning, and smiling, told Joe Morton he had engine trouble and would like to see his son-in-law. In the dim and contiguous rear of the small, cinder-blocked garage, with the hood of the Packard raised, out of the light and sight of anyone and the street, but not completely out of the hearing of one Joe Morton, came the

sharp, metallic ring of a tool hitting the concrete floor and a thick “whump” of what Joe later realized was the tall stack of new tires beside the back wall hitting the wall together, like someone had been flung or shoved against them, and then with Jupō’s voice there was no question—coming hard, low and guttural, “Do you think I’m blind, boy? You think I’m blind?”

What came after was a long, effusive tirade or sermon, depending on how one heard it, after which, came a pause, undoubtedly for air, and a quiet, plaintive reply, “I’m just looking after my plane.”

“Sure now,” Jupō declared, his tone mocking, “looking after your PLANE. It got you here, didn’t it? Its the only damn thing you can do well—except for maybe falling for a girl and then shunning your obligations and this family when you do. Oh, I been watching. Sure now, look after your wings—until you go buy rubber inner tubes and batteries. Then maybe you better kill the idea. Them days is over, son. You ain’t leaving again. You should have thought everything out before you shackled up with a Demus. The only rubbers you’re goan need, boy, are the ones you’re collecting in the septic tank.”

Then, according to Joe Morton, came a long, bitter, bellowing laugh that echoed from the garage, that Joe Morton later realized contained all Jupō’s fear of shame and disgrace, and all the hard anger that checked it. Jupō could be heard, loudly now, talking and laughing at the same time. “You think I don’t know? Mike and me—we got us a telescope! We ordered it special through Sears Roebuck in Mobile two months ago. Ha. Set it up in the kitchen just to watch your house. What you do inside is your business, boy, but what you do outside is OURS. We might say,” Jupō taunted, “we Demuses got vested interest.”

Then as Joe Morton explained, the Packard’s hood slammed, you could hear the car door open and shut, the engine start.

“Old Widow Beck drove up for gas in her Henry J and I ran forward from the office to tend to her at the pumps as Jupō backed the Packard out of the garage and abruptly braked to doff his hat and smile out the Packard window to the Widow before he drove off. The Lieutenant... he come walking out, in his dirty maintenance overalls, wiping his hands fast on a rag, looking up the road after Jupō while I told the Widow good day and gassed up her Henry J, cleaned the windshield and checked her oil and tires—me acting like I don’t know nothing but what I’m doing. The Lieutenant just stands there, bareheaded, staring hard up the road, and wiping his hands over and over, though they didn’t need wiping to begin with; he hadn’t done anything to Jupō’s car.

“It was the plane, you see. Jupō knew that. It weren’t that he couldn’t leave, if he had a mind to. Any man can run away from a woman. But

it was the plane for a reason I don't think anybody ever knew; and therefore, maybe that's why we never understood him. Maybe it was power, you know, though I think he was powerless, was a stuck up fool, a stuck up dreamer—and the plane was his dream, the magic that gave him a way he wanted to see himself. That, and that suit and scarf he liked to wear and that ever glinting wristwatch that he had to have polished everyday. I've wondered. Here I am years later, the same, alive and pumping gas. There he was—wanting to fly . . . and ruined.

“But it weren't the woman, nossir, not alone. A man can leave a woman. He could have slipped out at night, drove, or hitch hiked. Or hell, he could have caught the train at the cross switch, taken the Blue Goose that ran every Tuesday night through Citronelle and Mobile. It was the plane. There was something about him and that plane that weren't normal. He was polite enough. Courteous, is the word. He knew his manners and knew how you're supposed to treat a stranger and a lady—though he weren't good much after. That, and the fact he was married to a Demus, is why we tolerated him. And he was a good worker for a spell—not for long, mind you—he couldn't do the same thing over and over. He couldn't work on cars for more than a week. If it hadn't been for the different jobs he picked up, he would have quit working for me out of mounting boredom. You could see it coming in his eyes and the way he slowed down in his work. He was only good for a little while—but never any job for long. He sure couldn't just sit here, chew the fat with people stopping by and pump their gas. No, he would get edgy, that man couldn't stay still.”

Jupo's telescope was set up on a tripod in the kitchen, new, shiny metal and glass, beside the old wood kitchen table, before the large window, and aimed across the fields, railroad tracks and highway toward Katrina's. What was learned about the telescope came through the maid who cooked for them or the teenage boys who delivered cords of firewood and came into the kitchen to wait for their money, among others. People in town talked and imagined the two men carefully watching the rock house and runway through the telescope in a contained but consistent and driven anxiety, participating in a private, coveted, even childish stealth; of course, assuming they were in the hidden cloister of their act, their thoughts, and in their family house, never admitting or telling anyone, but doing it out of fear for the image of themselves and the belief in a reputation of their family name in Fermata Bend. The stories grew. People imagined Jupo and Michael taking turns night and day, taking shifts from work, keeping diligent watch; another version was of them taking shifts at breakfast and dinner—sunup and sundown—one sounding an alarm when the little man was spotted. People could imagine, too, Jupo shoving thin Michael

aside to peer through the telescope, making loud declarations as he did so.

Months later, on a gray fall dawn, the field hands were awakened in their shacks by someone calling the Lieutenant's name. They looked out of their windows at the lone figure of Michael Demus doing a slow, circular dance, dragging his club foot in its shoe outside of one of the Demus trucks with its doors open, in the dew-covered runway by the wet, chain-tethered plane. Michael, the quiet, shy Demus, thin as a stick, who always worked in nervous silence in the shadow of his father, who couldn't brag or talk like Jupo—who never seemed to like girls, court one for long, or find one who was good enough for him—had a bottle of moonshine in one hand and a flame torch in the other. Despite the chill, his shirt was unbuttoned to his undershirt and a wide, diabolic laugh was frozen on his face as he whirled around, staggered, calling the Lieutenant again and again, hanging the name out like a long, primitive wail.

The chain lay parted from the wheels of the plane, the ends smothering on the ground. What the field hands saw was the little man come, first walking then running, out of the rock house in nothing but his Liberty overalls and untied work boots, his hair mussed from sleep, his face angry. He clambered over the fence, stopped and stood before Michael, blinking. Michael swayed, gave a leering grin, struggled for balance, and offered him the bottle, saying something inaudible, but like a pronouncement, like a declaration, maybe a boast. The little Lieutenant didn't seem to see him. He took the bottle and dropped it, staring at the plane, running to the chain and picking the ends up. Michael followed, holding out his arms, pointing, smiling with the flame torch, making a speech. "I'm letting you go," he said, "I'm letting you go." But the Lieutenant didn't seem to hear. He dropped the chain ends and walked past Michael, out into the dew-touched, dead ragweed-encroached runway; gazing at the still gray, foggy peace, toward the gray highway, the wet railroad tracks and the Demus Fields, heavy with cotton. Some of the field hands were outside and on the fence now, dressing, shivering and bleary eyed, and trying to affect indifference as they looked on, but not wanting to miss any of this.

Michael began yelling at the Lieutenant's back. He threw the flame torch down. The Lieutenant just stood there, gazing off. Then the field hands saw what apparently the Lieutenant was looking for, a plume of spurned dust rising in the distance of the dirt road across the Demus Fields, trailing a black spot: Jupo's black Packard coming pell mell from the home place. Katrina came running out of the house, her face covered in pale blue cream and pinched in a scold, unheedful of her

appearance in a white nightgown, the ends of her hair tied in tissue papers, and the child forgotten for the moment. She halted at the fence, gripped the top rail, and uttered a 'No' like a demand, but too loud, too sudden, to mask her fear. She shook her head, hair, tissue papers, and uttered it again. But the little Lieutenant, standing there and looking off, didn't hear her—or didn't choose to. He seemed deaf, oblivious to anything else. Katrina, Michael and the field hands stared, rooted and immobile, in that momentary hesitation of waiting for what someone else is going to do.

The little man turned for the plane and Katrina's mouth yelled 'No' again, only there wasn't any sound as he quickly climbed onto the wing and into the cockpit, the brown plume beyond the highway now a long cloud across the fields, Jupō's speeding Packard visible. Everyone stared as the plane coughed, died, coughed again, the propeller blades turned; the engine boomed to life, barking exhaust, making wind. The field hands on the fence bowed their heads, the tails of Michael's loose shirt rose behind him, and the hem of Katrina's nightgown slanted up to her white thighs. Katrina began mouthing "No" over and over again as if she expected to be heard. The field hands could see the little man's set face. But he didn't look at anyone, or wave, or even close the cockpit. He taxied the plane forward and leaving the trunk of the tree, the chains, gaining speed down the ragweed encroached runway towards the oncoming black car. The two vehicles were charging at each other with the highway between them. Jupō braked hard at the fence gate before the railroad tracks; the plane lifted, cleared the fence, swept over highway, railroad tracks and car in what seemed like a dreamlike suspension, its landing gear folding up under the wings as it turned up into the grey air, its thundering roar fading like a sigh.

Jupō jumped out of the Packard, bareheaded, gray and balding, in opened bathrobe and ragged long johns, and began firing away at the plane with his shotgun, unmindful of his appearance or who saw him, or that the plane was quite out of range and climbing with a distant drone. Katrina came running down the runway, the field hands behind her and Michael limping, no one considering, much less Katrina, how she was barefoot with a creamed face, only a thin nightgown on and tissue papers unraveling in her hair. Everyone stopped and stared up from the fence before the highway, across from the gate and the car and the fused, manic face of Jupō, who frantically reloaded and shot. They watched the warplane circle, dip a little and bank into a wide turn. "He rusty," a field hand said. The plane turned back, coming fast and low toward the car, its drone growing into a scream.

"He goan kill us!" someone said.

"Shit, man! Why don't he just fly off?" someone said.

TEM MONTGOMERY

Jupo stood his ground at the oncoming plane, firing until he and everyone dropped to the ground. The plane shot over them in a blasting scream, turned up over the pine trees beyond the runway and rock house, faded back into a drone and diminished into the sky. Everyone stood up, followed him with their eyes. The warplane banked, wings wavering then steadying, seeming to follow the line of the gray horizon above the serrated tops of the pines. They watched it dive, come in from the north, perpendicular to the cotton fields and the dirt road.

"C'mon, you useless imp!" Jupo yelled. He reloaded and began firing as the warplane came at him fast and low, as if delivering a bomb or a torpedo. Everyone dropped to the ground as it screamed over Jupo, the Packard and toward Legger Mound. Everyone rose and turned to see the warplane's wing slice the stilts out from under the water tower, the tower collapse, breaking and bursting water; and the plane recoil, bouncing hard into the heavy cotton field, sliding and spinning, its wings and violent propeller rutting up stalks, cotton and earth, and explode into a roaring, rising orb of flame that curled up into a thick, black line of smoke against the sky.

Jupo cursed and cursed the Lieutenant. He brandished his shotgun. Katrina began to scream and Michael laughed. The field hands climbed the fence, hollered and ran as they pointed and scattered across the highway and onto the railroad tracks. A pickup truck pulled off the highway and a man got out. A school bus braked and the children inside pressed their wide-eyed faces against the window panes to see. Everyone stared at the burning wreck, the long trail of smoke rising and thinning into the sky.

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