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*The Saturday Evening Post*

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*Dear Fiction Writer,*

Thank you for your recent submission to *The Saturday Evening Post*. While your material doesn't meet our current needs, we hope you'll keep *The Post* in mind as you continue to write and submit your short stories for publication. Please know that all query letters and manuscripts are closely reviewed by our editorial staff before any judgment is made.

To help you better know *The Post* ....

Our readers enjoy upbeat fiction that stresses traditional relationships and family values. A light, humorous touch is always appreciated. We prefer typed manuscripts between 2,500 and 3,000 words in length, and we generally buy all rights. Payment of about \$.10 per word is made upon publication. Although space limits us to one or two short stories for each issue of *The Post*, we are proud of our magazine's tradition of publishing the works of promising writers, and we continue to search for new talent. Certainly the best way to become acquainted with the tone and flavor of our fiction is to review several recent issues.

We look forward to hearing from you again.

Sincerely,

Ted Kreiter  
*Executive editor*

## THE LOVE GIFT

G. R. Holloway

Day broke louder than usual at First Base. One of the resident peafowl had staked out John Everette's roof, now it sqawked at rivals and rummaged for insects in the thatch. Everette sat up on his cot watching the ceiling rock as he reached for his jeans.

Outside, Trexler, the mechanic bid him a cheery good morning. The Brit's chirping inflection could be annoying as a gnat before Everette had coffee. "Your plane's ready, Ev. Weather patches are moving in from the coast but it looks like you've got two, maybe three hours," Trexler said.

"I only need an hour. I'm just going to Burning Bush 2."

Everette stared fondly at the old gull-wing Stinson he had rebuilt himself. He never saw it without thinking how Ginny handed him tools, brought him lunch, helped him paint it. She even checked out in it, although he knew she didn't truly like flying.

"Well, I guess I need to be able to get it down if you were to get sick or something," she had conceded.

He laughed. "Honey, it's gonna come down. You just wanta



interfere a little with how and where."

The mangrove canopy was shiny with condensation and refracted light. The peninsula's granite spine humped in an early morning stretch. He could have made better time in the new Piper but this was mostly a private errand and he wouldn't use an institute plane for that. This bird was his in ways no other could ever be, even if someday he owned one of the twin-engine dream jobs a friend was designing.

The motor's burly bass induced a silent colloquy complete with behind-the-eyes video. Was it last Wednesday? Thursday? You couldn't tell one day, one season, from another here. All of 'em equalizing 12 hours of dark and light. And when your business was eternity it didn't much matter.

Whatever day it was, Ginny was wearing that dumb black dress and the kids were trailing behind her and if you hadn't known her long ago in Singapore and if the sun wasn't prying around in her hair and you didn't spot the casuarina colors in her eyes, you might not turn around so fast. That's when you knew she needed a vacation. Eleven months she'd done most of the cooking at Home Plate. What was she now, 41, 42? The tropics, New England winter, even a surplus of money for awhile hadn't changed her much. Put her in a sarong kabaya, take the hairpins out of that damn bun the

way you did the other night, and 20 years vanished. How do you tell such a woman you love her more than ever when you've said it so often-- starting way before that dual edition of jungle genes bringing up the rear ever said "Daddy?"

The undulating green below grew denser as Everette's winged shadow moved inland. "Telephone pole forest," pilots called it. More than one had gone down without ever reaching the bottom--disappearing through skyside verdure, impaling on unseen trunks just below. A party of Sakai reported finding an old wipeout when they climbed into the trees searching for honey. The plane, lost 8 years ago, was invisible to ground as well as air searchers.

The incident had opened the door for contact with the tribe. They had rejected the mission team earlier. Now, the New Testament had been translated into the Sakai language, reading courses begun and Burning Bush 5 firmly established, deepest outpost in the Malay interior.

Everette sighed. You wouldn't be back here if not for that pilot. Your door opened, too. It had to be planed off, hinges oiled, and then shoved. But it did open-- whining and complaining like the old ornate gate on Grandpa Stellar's high Back Bay porch.



You never really left here, you know. But there was a hole in the dedication. Being poor was no surprise. Missionaries get used to that. But there was an unexpected lack. Bad enough to discover it, hell not to be able to identify it. You faked it awhile. Like pulling your shirt tail out to cover a suspected split in the seat of your pants.

But Ginny knew. She also knew it wasn't anything she could solve for you. Once, she asked if the stateside, scholarly branch of the institute would suit you better than the jungle aviation arm. You laughed. "Can you see me hunkered in a monastic cubicle with a quill and candle? I don't have linguistic gifts, just wings. Maybe a few people-skills." For awhile it did make you wonder if constant, plodding exposure to the Word in different dialects would answer your own gnatting questions.

It didn't come about as some big epiphany. One of Trexler's letters--good ole Trex wrote you the whole time you were in New England forgetting about him-- it was his letter that told about the discovery of the old wreckage. The pilot wasn't one you ever knew but his bones wore a stainless steel cross inscribed with: "Send me." That same year a national magazine published a poll that claimed 92% of Americans believed in God. But a whopping lot of them

apparently dropped it right there. For most, "Send me" had a whole different meaning. And your big-mouthed, wing-folded alter ego informed you if you weren't gonna do anything about what you said you believed, you were just another so-what stat. When you announced you wanted to come back, all Ginny did was smile and ask when.

Everette lined up the Stinson with a small trough in the green. The thick vegetation on either side of the rift was already making incursions into the hand cut landing strip.

He saw the old weaver walking toward the plane before he got out. There were two bright rolls under his arm.

"Welcome, Mr. Everette," said the native. "We are hoping you had a fine flight."

"Great, Gelami. Thank you. The new hymn books and medicines are in the back." He clasped the burnt leather hand then indicated the beautiful cloth. "May I see?"

Gelami held out the bolts. Everette unrolled each one. Berry reds, indigo and pepper greens sparingly accented with brown repeated the leaf patterns vining wild around the mission perimeter. It was genuine batik, not the common sarong or printed kain chocking the shops and market stalls. Hair-fine tracery of pigment bled through wax gave a muted mossiness to the hand-painting on the hand-woven fabric. Everette stroked its softness. "I'll buy 'em both."



Airborne again, he could hear Ginny saying, "Ev, they're gorgeous! But you shouldn't have splurged so."

He chewed his lip. Yeah well, you could start practicing what you're gonna say to her. Something more than just that 20 years of putting up with a knothead deserves a special gift. One that tells her better than words that she's still beautiful, still what makes you hike 9 miles to Home Plate when nothing can fly and the road is gumbo. Something more than just "Happy anniversary, darling." Why not come right out with it? Just say: "I'm sending the twins to camp at Ipoh for a week and I've rented a private cottage on the beach at Penang. We'll skinny dip in the ocean, make love on moonlit sand and you'll dine on satay and pineapples and wear these sarongs with green orchids in your hair. You may as well accept it without protest, because that, my dear, is the missionary's position." He laughed out loud.

The weather worsened abruptly. Not unusual this time of year when the northeast monsoon was shifting. He climbed above a bulbous bag of rain and thunder sagging darkly between him and First Base. His radio blurted static to his questions.

The ceiling thickened rapidly. He couldn't get above it. He found a corridor of calm that lasted several minutes. Then his mezzanine of light dimmed. He headed for a bright

hole in the mist that closed before he reached it. The plane shuddered as lightning bounced around near his wing tips. The engine had an alien burr in the changed density. He could smell ozone seeping in the window chink. Now and then the draft was dripping wet on his arm.

Everette wiped his forehead on his sleeve as the buffeting got rough. Easy, John-boy, you've bulled through many a storm. Plenty of fuel. Relax.

The dark deepened. Above and below were meaningless. His instincts began to argue with the attitude indicator. He wanted to pull the nose up sharply. It was all he could do to believe the instrument. Through the prop he saw lightning arc across his path like a warning bow shot. For an instant the nacelle glowed eerily.

What if you buy the farm? Widow your wife on a trip you didn't have to make? Leave your boys when they need you most? Nothing urgent or even worth-while beyond personal interests. Just a few yards of cloth!

No, that's a sorry view. It was for a gift of love and that was not, that would never be an unworthy thing. He looked up. Not exactly a valley, Lord, but I see some bad shadows and I could sure use some of that goodness and mercy following my tail. Please help m-- Everette felt his skeleton plunge violently in its sack. The batik bolts



levitated beside him. He got the nose down and recovered from a near stall. He nailed his concentration on the artificial horizon, struggling with his impulse to doubt it. The altimeter indicated he'd dropped almost 100 feet.

You're the real instrument, Lord, the only true horizon. You-- The radio clapped a bolt of static in his ears then smoothed to a low rasp that turned to a human voice: "First Base to oh-niner-zulu. The deck is clear to 300 feet. We can hear your engine. Come on down, Ev, you're close to home."

John Everette smiled. Yes, he thought. Either way.