

## LOVE GIFT

Day broke louder than usual at First Base. One of the resident peafowl had staked out John Everette's roof, now it squawked at rivals while rummaging for insects in the thatch. Everette yawned and sat up on his cot watching the ceiling shake as he reached for his jeans. Ginny was already up and gone to the kitchen hut. Connecticut was a world away.

Outside, gnats welcomed him. Trexler, the compound honcho, bid him a cheery good morning. Bugs and the Brit's chirpy inflection could be annoying before Everette had coffee.

"Your plane's ready, Ev," said Trexler, who was also the top mechanic. "Monsoon weather patches are moving in from the coast but it looks like you've got two, maybe three hours."

"That's more than enough. I'm only going to Burning Bush 1. But make sure you don't tell Ginny."

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-- because he wanted her to, not because she had any real love of flying.

"Well, I guess I do need to be able to get it down if you

LOVE GIFT

Glenna Holloway

Day broke louder than usual at First Base. One of the resident peafowl had staked out John Everette's roof, now it squawked at rivals while rummaging for insects in the thatch. Everette yawned and sat up on his cot watching the ceiling shake as he reached for his jeans. Ginny was already up and gone to the kitchen hut. Connecticut was a world away.

Outside, gnats welcomed him. Trexler, the compound honcho, bid him a cheery good morning. Bugs and the Brit's chirpy inflection could be annoying before Everette had coffee.

"Your plane's ready, Ev," said Trexler, who was also the top mechanic. "Monsoon weather patches are moving in from the coast but it looks like you've got over two, maybe three hours."

"That's more than enough. I'm only going to Burning Bush 1. Remember--don't tell Ginny."

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-- because he wanted her to, not because she had any real love of flying.

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

He teased her. "Honey, it'll always come down. You just wanta interfere a little with how and where."

A month later his wife had her pilot's certificate and instrument rating-- which was typical of anything Ginny set out to do. She did everything so well it was easy to just expect it as par and forget the praise. Ev winced. He'd forgotten to say a lot of things. Lately he was getting worse. Maybe you just don't know how, he almost muttered aloud. Hate stumbling around with words. Clumsy-- inadequate-- ambiguous-- words probably cause more misunderstanding in the world than fences.

John Everette flooded the cockpit with fresh air as he ate his breakfast of durian fruit and looked down at the riverine wilds where it grew. As always, he wondered how anything so vile-smelling could taste so good. From 6,000 feet, the mangrove canopy shimmered with condensation and refracted light. The Malay 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.

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 you're in the eternity business, what's the difference?

Whatever day it was, Ginny was wearing that dumb gray dress and if you hadn't known her long before that dual edition of jungle genes bringing up the rear ever said "Daddy," and the sun weren't prying in her sorrel hair, and you hadn't spotted the casuarina colors in her eyes, you might not've turned around so fast. That's when it hit you that she needs a vacation. Eleven months she's done most of the cooking at Home Plate. What is she now, 41, 42? Time, New England winter, the tropics, even a brief surplus of money never changed her. Put her in a sarong kabaya, take the pins out of her hair the way you did the other night, and 20 years vanish. How do you tell such a woman how you feel? Don't just wing it, say it. All of it. Tell her she means more to you than ever.

The undulating verdure below grew denser as Everette's shadow skimmed inland. "Telephone pole arcade," pilots call it. More than one's gone down without reaching the bottom--disappearing through the greenery, impaling on unseen trunks. In 1992 a party of Sakai reported finding an old wipeout when they climbed into the trees after wild honey. The plane, lost 8 years earlier, was invisible to ground as



well as air searchers.

The incident opened the door for contact with the tribe. They had rejected the mission team in the past. 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 crash, that pilot. Your door opened, too. It had to be planed off, hinges oiled, and then shoved. But it did open--squeaking and protesting like the old ornate iron gate on Grandpa Stellar's river view 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. It was bad enough to discover it, hell not to be able to identify it. You faked it awhile. Not a satisfactory solution to anything.

And Ginny knew. She also knew you had to resolve it yourself. Once, she asked if the stateside 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." For awhile it did make you wonder if constant, plodding exposure to translating the Word in different dialects would answer your own gnawing 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 back in Hartford forgetting about him-- told about the discovery of the 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 the things you said you believed, you were just another so-what stat. When you announced you wanted to return, 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 had to be chopped back weekly to keep it from making incursions into the landing strip.

As he got out of the plane he saw the old artist walking toward him with two rolls of his work under his arm.

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

"Yes, thanks, Gelami. I brought a few books for the library. The medicine stocks should arrive next week." He clasped the burnt leather hand and indicated the cloth. "May

I?"

Gelami held out the bolts. Everette unrolled each one. Berry reds, indigo and pepper greens defined exotic leaf patterns like the ones growing 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 dyes bled through wax gave a muted mossiness to the designs on the fine fabric. Everette stroked the soft weave. "I'll buy 'em both."

Gelami exposed a crescent of white teeth. "She will wear them like a queen. She will know they are a gift of love."

"You think so?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Everette. These colors will tell her. Your voice will whisper in these leaves."

Airborne again, he wished he had the native flair for romantic expression. He could hear Ginny saying, "Ev, they're gorgeous! But you shouldn't have splurged so."

He ran his hand through his thick brown hair. Yeah well, better start practicing what you're gonna say, he told himself sternly. Something more than just that 20 years of putting up with a knothed deserves a special gift. One that tells her she's still beautiful, still what makes you break out the parang to hack 'n' hike 6 miles to Home Plate when nothing can fly and the road is gumbo. Something more than just "Happy anniversary, darling." Why are words so damn

difficult? Maybe it is a cultural thing. Why can't you come right out with it? Just say: "I love you more than anything on earth." Just say: "I'm sending the twins to camp at Ipoh a week and I've rented us a cottage with a private beach at Penang. We'll skinny dip, make love on moonlit sand, and you'll dine on pineapples and satay and wear these sarongs with green orchids in your hair. Forget the cost. It's something I want you to have, so no 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 sagging blackly between him and First Base. His radio blurted static to his questions.

The ceiling thickened. He couldn't get above it. He found a corridor of bright calm that lasted several minutes. Then his mezzanine of light dimmed. He headed for a hole in the mist that closed before he reached it. The plane shuddered as lightning bounced 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 soaked his arm.

Everette wiped his forehead on his sleeve as the buffeting got rough and thunder got louder. 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, just 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. The altimeter indicated he'd dropped over a 100 feet.

As the shock passed, he was amazed that his life had indeed reeled by like a fast rewind while retaining total clarity. But more astonishing than the cliché-- it was his life with Ginny only-- scenes, conversations, intimacies. Separate from the man at the controls, he savored each bit. It took great effort to integrate all his faculties again.

He nailed his concentration on the artificial horizon,

struggling with his impulse to doubt it. You're the real instrument, Lord, the only true horizon. I know you're with me--your rod and staff-- You-- and she-- I know you better because of her--

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. You'll be able to see the tree tops. We can hear your engine. Come on down, Ev, you're close to home."

John Everette smiled. Yes, he thought. Yes. Either way. But thank you, Lord. This homeside can still use me. And I have so many things to say to my wife...