

THE SKIES BELONG TO US

LOVE AND TERROR IN THE
GOLDEN AGE OF HIJACKING

BRENDAN I. KOERNER

ALSO BY BRENDAN I. KOERNER

NOW THE HELL WILL START
*One Soldier's Flight from the
Greatest Manhunt of World War II*

LOVE and
TERROR
in the
GOLDEN AGE
of
HIJACKING

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BELONG
TO US**

BRENDAN I. KOERNER



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For Maceo and Ciel

Figures can't calculate...

My son, from whence this madness, this neglect
Of my commands, and those whom I protect?
Why this unmanly rage? Recall to mind
Whom you forsake, what pledges leave behind.

—VIRGIL, *The Aeneid*

I shoulda stayed in Job Corps,
but now I'm an outlaw...

—GHOSTFACE KILLAH

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PRELUDE

The man in the black sunglasses tells the waitress he's fine with just coffee. One of his two lunchmates, a dapper Mexican gentleman he knows only as Dave, implores him to eat something—shrimp cocktail, perhaps, or a half-dozen oysters. But the man insists he has no interest in food.

It is a typically gorgeous afternoon along the San Diego Bay. Sunlight filters through palm fronds into the Brigantine Seafood Restaurant's brick-walled dining room. The sunglassed man and his two companions sit in a semicircular black-leather booth, beneath yellowing nautical charts and kitschy photographs of old yachts. They have come here to discuss a delicate matter.

It is Dave who breaks the ice. He says that he has reviewed a diagram of the man's proposed project, which he praises for its sophistication. He is confident that his associates in Tijuana will have no problem supplying the materials necessary to transform the man's vision into a reality. The only issue to discuss now is money.

The sunglassed man is wary of getting fleeced. "I want to look around," he says as he fiddles with the handle of his coffee mug. "See what else is on the market."

But Dave is keen to strike a deal. He says that he would be happy to accept a small deposit now and then wait for the balance until after the project is complete. He swears that none of his competitors would ever dream of offering such a generous payment plan.

The sunglassed man concurs. He asks Dave if a deposit of \$100 will be enough to get things moving.

Dave seems pleased. He is curious about just one thing.

"Now, tell me—what is it that you want to blow up?"

“KEEP SMILING”

MAJESTIC MOUNT RAINIER slowly sharpened into view alongside Western Airlines Flight 701, its cratered peak coated with snow and ice that glistened in the strong June sun. Curious passengers craned their necks left to catch a glimpse of the dormant volcano, while the flight's more nonchalant travelers kept their noses buried in newspapers, reading up on President Richard Nixon's trip to Moscow and the carpet-bombing of Huế'. Stewardesses clad in peach-hued minidresses roamed the narrow aisle, clearing empty plates and champagne flutes in preparation for landing. They would be on the ground in Seattle in twenty-five minutes.

Once they finished cleaning up, the three stewardesses assigned to coach class packed into the aft galley, where a few leftover meals awaited. The women had been working nonstop since seven a.m., flying down to Los Angeles before returning to Seattle, so they were plentifully famished as Flight 701 neared its end. To preserve the illusion that its stewardesses were paragons of female daintiness, Western forbade its shapely “girls” to let passengers see them eat. The women made sure to shut the galley's red curtain before tearing into their lunches. Safe from prying eyes, they shoveled forkfuls of sirloin steak and steamed broccoli into their brightly lipsticked mouths, taking care to avoid dripping gravy onto their polka-dot scarves.

Gina Cutcher stood closest to the galley's curtain, her back to the cabin as she ate and gabbed with her two colleagues, Carole Clymer and Marla Smith. Midway through the hurried meal, Cutcher was startled to hear the *tchk-tchk-tchk* of sliding curtain rings. She turned and found herself toe to toe with the passenger from seat 18D, the handsome black man in the crisply pressed Army dress uniform bedecked with ribbons. He peered down at her through wire-rimmed glasses fitted with amber lenses.

Oh no, she thought. The voucher. I forgot about his voucher.

Earlier in the flight, as Cutcher had been serving this man a drink, a bump of turbulence had caused her to spill some bourbon on the lapels of his olive-green jacket. He had been in real sport about the accident, just laughing it off—“Don't worry about it at all,” he had told her. “No damage done.” But in keeping with Western's customer service policy, Cutcher had insisted on bringing him a dry cleaning voucher. Now she realized that she had never made good on that promise.

An apology was on the tip of her tongue when the man spoke up. “I need to show you something,” he said politely, placing two sheets of three-by-five notepaper on the galley countertop. “Read these.”

The puzzled Cutcher began to read as Smith and Clymer peered over her shoulder. The first sheet contained a neatly handwritten message, marred by numerous capitalization and spelling quirks. But there was no mistaking its meaning:

Success through Death

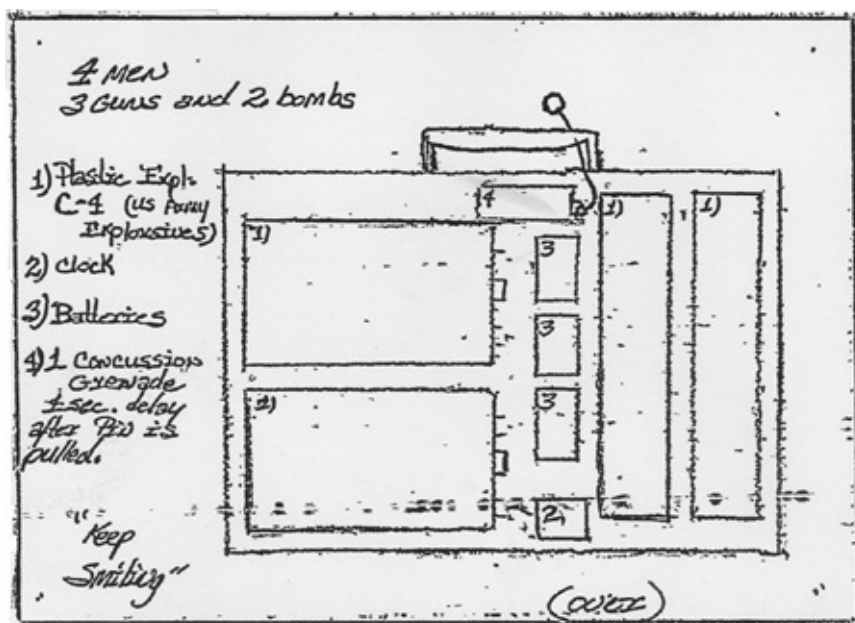
Everyone, Except the Captain will leave the Cabin.

There are four of us and two bombs. Do as you're told and No Shooting will take place.

- 1) Your Co-pilot and Navigator are to leave the Cabin (four paces apart.) Take seats to the rear of the Aircraft.
- 2) Place Aircraft on Audio-pilot, Place your hands on top of your Head. leave the Cabin door open.

Weatherman
S.D.S. of California
You have 2 mins, Sir.

The other sheet was filled with a diagram of what appeared to be a briefcase. Several rectangles of varying size, each labeled with a number from one to four, were sketched inside the drawing. A column of text to the left of the diagram explained the briefcase's contents:



FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

4 Men

3 Guns and 2 bombs

- 1) Plastic Explo C-4 (US Army Explosives)
- 2) Clock
- 3) Batteries
- 4) 1 Concussion Grenade 1 sec. delays after Pin is pulled.

"Keep Smiling"

(over)

Cutcher turned the note over. There was just one more sentence:

The man raised his left hand so the stewardesses could see that he was holding a black Samsonite briefcase. A thin piece of copper wire snaked from its top, right by the handle. It was connected to a metal ring draped around the man's left index finger. He made a show of rhythmically tapping the briefcase with his right hand, as if to say, *In here*.

The man elbowed his way past Cutcher and stepped into the galley. He leaned against the countertop, pushed his glasses up to the bridge of his nose, and locked eyes with Cutcher. Every trace of kindness was now gone from his gaze.

"You have two minutes," he said.

Cutcher did not hesitate to obey the notes' final instruction: she headed for the cockpit.

Smith and Clymer stood there, frozen in place, as the man stared at his immaculate, shined shoes. The only sound in the galley was the dull buzz of the Boeing 727's three engines. Smith furtively glanced over at Clymer, who was still holding the bowl of red Jell-O that she had been eating for dessert. Clymer's mouth was slightly agape, her hands shaking so much that her Jell-O cubes wobbled.

After an eternal thirty seconds, the man broke the silence. "Should've blown it up," he mumbled without looking up from his shoes. "On takeoff, blown it up. We're all gonna die anyway."

Clymer's red Jell-O wobbled even more.

Cutcher, meanwhile, was racing toward the front of the plane, the two notes flapping from her hand. When she reached the first-class section, she spotted the flight's lead stewardess, Donna Jones, stowing glasses into a cabinet. "It's happening to us!" Cutcher exclaimed. "Open the door, open the door! We have two minutes!"

Jones led Cutcher to the cockpit and rang the entrance bell twice—the signal for an urgent matter. The door opened, and the two women entered the cramped compartment. Jerome Juergens, Flight 701's captain, sensed right away that Cutcher was on the verge of panic.

Cutcher thrust the notes forward. "Captain," she said, "before you go on descending, please, you—you need to read these!"

Juergens zipped through the poorly spelled list of instructions, but he lingered over the diagram for several moments, looking for some flaw in the bomb's design. Juergens was a decorated ex-Marine, a man who had learned a thing or two about explosives while flying Alaskan Sky-raiders in Korea. He hoped the drawing might betray its artist as a bluffer, someone unfamiliar with the intricacies of detonating C-4. But the diagram was obviously the handiwork of a man who knew what he was doing.

Juergens passed the notes to his co-pilot, Edward Richardson, and calmly gave Cutcher his orders: "Go back and tell this man we'll comply with anything he wants us to do."

As Cutcher left to fetch the man from the aft galley, Richardson could only marvel at his dreadful luck: this was the second time he had been hijacked in less than a month.

ONLY THE MOST seasoned travelers can recall the days when flying was an ethereal pleasure rather than a grind. Decades have passed since coach-class passengers enjoyed luxuries that have since become inconceivable: lumps of Alaskan crabmeat served atop monogrammed china, generous pours of free liquor, leggy stewardesses who performed their duties with

geisha-like courtesy. Even on short-haul flights between minor cities, the customer was truly king.

Yet what seems most archaic about that bygone age is not the pampering that passengers received while aloft, but how easily they moved while on the ground. It was once possible to pass through an entire airport, from curbside to gate, without encountering a single inconvenience—no X-ray machines, no metal detectors, no uniformed security personnel with grabby hands and bitter dispositions. Anyone could stroll onto a tarmac and queue for boarding without holding a ticket or presenting identification. Some flights even permitted passengers to pay their fares after takeoff, as if jets were merely commuter trains with wings.

A generation of skyjackers exploited this naïveté. Between 1961, when the first plane was seized in American airspace, and 1972, the year Flight 701 was waylaid en route to Seattle, 159 commercial flights were hijacked in the United States. All but a fraction of those hijackings took place during the last five years of that frenetic era, often at a clip of one or more per week. There were, in fact, many days when two planes were hijacked simultaneously, strictly by coincidence.* Few other crime waves in American history have stoked such widespread paranoia: every time a plane's public address system crackled to life, passengers could not help but think that a stranger's voice was about to intone, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am now in charge ..."

In struggling to make sense of this madness, pundits and politicians often invoked the term *epidemic* to describe the skyjacking crisis. They spoke more truly than they knew, for one of the best ways to understand the Golden Age of Hijacking is through the lens of public health. The phenomenon spread in strict accordance with the laws of epidemiology: skyjacking always occurred in clusters that traced back to a single incident that had turned contagious. These outbreaks grew more and more devastating over time, as the impulse to hijack jumped from host to host like any organic pathogen. This "virus" traveled via mass media, especially television newscasts; the networks' stately anchormen were forever narrating clips of hijacked planes and the tearful families of hostages. Rather than empathize with the victims, some viewers were titillated by the skyjackers' ability to create spectacles that held the whole country in thrall.

Those viewers were susceptible to the skyjacking virus because they had lost all faith in America's promise. It is no accident that the epidemic began to crest as the last vestiges of 1960s idealism were being extinguished. Large segments of the population were aggrieved that words and placards had failed to end the war in Vietnam, or cement the gains of a civil rights movement that was decimated by assassinations. That disappointment quickly mutated into a more pervasive sense of hopelessness, a feeling that no amount of civic engagement could ever salvage a system that had been rigged to serve a selfish elite. Some of the frustrated drifted into hedonism, papering over their disillusionment with sexual excess or cheap brown heroin. But others sought increasingly radical ways in which to articulate their vague yet all-consuming rage.

Airplanes were ideal targets for these troubled souls. On a practical level, skyjackers could use planes to flee to distant lands, where they presumed they would be celebrated for their audacity. But there was also a strong psychological component to skyjacking's allure, one that stemmed from America's love affair with flight. Even as commercial air travel became accessible to the masses during the 1960s, it retained an aura of wonder and privilege—pilot

were debonair heroes, the planes themselves marvels of technological might. By seizing a jet as it hurtled across the nation's most exotic frontier, a lone skyjacker could instantly command an audience of millions. There was no more spectacular way for the marginalized to feel the rush of power.

Though all skyjackers shared a common hunger for respect, their individual narratives were bewilderingly varied. When I first became fascinated by the Golden Age of Hijacking, after reading about a Puerto Rican nationalist who spent forty-one years in exile after diverting a Boeing 707 to Cuba,[†] I was awed by the sheer range of characters who had commandeered the era's planes. Their ranks included frazzled veterans, chronic fabulists, compulsive gamblers, bankrupt businessmen, thwarted academics, career felons, and even lovesick teenagers. Each had an intensely personal, if sadly deluded, rationale for believing they could skyjack their way to better lives.

The more I immersed myself in the annals of American skyjacking, the more I fixated on the epidemic's final, most frenzied phase: the great outbreak of 1972. The skyjackers that year were bold and foolish beyond measure, prone to taking risks that smacked of lunacy. Middle-aged men parachuted from jets while clutching six-figure ransoms to their chests; manic extremists demanded passage to war zones a hemisphere away; young mothers brandished pistols while feeding formula to their infants. The FBI's burgeoning zeal for violent intervention did little to dissuade these adventurers, who were far beyond caring whether they died in pursuit of their grandiose goals. By the end of 1972, the skyjackers had become so reckless, so dismissive of human life, that the airlines and the federal government had no choice but to turn every airport into a miniature police state.

There is an absorbing tale to tell about each of the forty American skyjackers who made 1972 such a perilous year to fly. But none is as captivating as that of Willie Roger Holder and Catherine Marie Kerkow, the young couple who took control of Western Airlines Flight 701 as it soared past Mount Rainier.

Holder and Kerkow were ordinary skyjackers in many ways. He was a traumatized ex-soldier motivated by a hazy mix of outrage and despair; she was a mischievous party girl who longed for a more meaningful future. Neither was a master criminal, as evidenced by the utter zaniness of their hijacking plan.

Yet through a combination of savvy and dumb luck, Holder and Kerkow pulled off the longest-distance skyjacking in American history, a feat that made them notorious around the globe. Their success set them apart from their peers: by the end of 1972, virtually all of that year's other skyjackers were either dead or in jail. In its annual "The Year in Pictures" issue that December, *Life* ran a rogues' gallery of a dozen skyjackers who had already been convicted of air piracy, along with captions detailing their stiff sentences: twenty years, thirty years, forty years, forty-five years, life without parole. Holder and Kerkow were notably absent from that catalog of failures.

But Holder and Kerkow's story was far from over once they managed their escape. In the months and years that followed, they would take up with revolutionaries, melt into an international underground, and mingle with aristocrats and movie stars who lauded them as icons. But when their fame inevitably began to fade and their love dissolved, Holder and Kerkow were forced to learn that reinventing oneself, that most American of aspirations, never without its sorrows.

*In 1970, a University of Chicago statistician devised a procedure for assessing the probability of these so-called double hijackings. He was inspired to tackle the project after noticing that three double hijackings had taken place in a four-month span, beginning in November 1968.

†That skyjacker, Luis Armando Peña Soltren, voluntarily returned to the United States in October 2009, so that he could reunite with his family. He was arrested upon leaving his plane in New York and eventually pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit air piracy. In January 2011 he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

COOS BAY

THE KNOCK ON the door came at an inopportune moment for Cathy Kerkow, right as she was working a gob of shampoo through her long brown hair. Though she wasn't expecting any visitors that January afternoon in 1972, she was far too genial a soul to ignore the caller. She wrapped a kimono-style bathrobe around her slender body and hurried from the shower, leaving a trail of soapy water in her wake.

Kerkow opened the door to discover an exceptionally tall, rail-thin black man with closely cropped hair and manicured sideburns. A pair of tortoiseshell sunglasses shielded his sleepy eyes from San Diego's midday glare. He grinned at the lovely sight before him, a scantily clad twenty-year-old girl with rivulets of water sluicing down her cleavage. Kerkow flashed back a coy smile, pleased to know that her abundant charms were working their standard magic.

The man asked if he had the right apartment for an acquaintance of his, a young lady by the name of Beth Newhouse. Kerkow replied that Beth was her roommate, and that he could probably find her shopping at the local drugstore. The man promptly left without saying goodbye; Kerkow stood in the doorway and watched him speed off in a yellow Pontiac Firebird. As the car vanished around the Murray Street bend, she thought, *I know him from somewhere.*

Twenty minutes later the man and Newhouse returned to the apartment together. Apologizing for his prior rudeness, the man now introduced himself to Kerkow as Roger Holder. He explained that he had once been Newhouse's downstairs neighbor, back when she lived near Ocean Beach. They had recently bumped into each other on Broadway near 4th Avenue, down among the saloons of San Diego's red-light district, and Newhouse had passed along her current address in suburban El Cajon. With time to kill that afternoon, Holder had decided to pop by for a visit.

Newhouse was less than thrilled to see Holder again. She had always considered him something of a creep—not least of all because he had used a different name, Linton Charles White, when they had first met the year before. She had given him her address only after much cajoling, and now she was eager to get rid of her unwelcome guest without causing a scene. So Newhouse remarked that her boyfriend would be arriving soon, and that he was terribly insanely jealous type; if Holder didn't split, there could be trouble.

But Kerkow didn't want Holder to leave just yet—not while she was still trying to piece together why he looked so darn familiar. To delay his departure, she suggested they all share a quick joint; the girls were small-time marijuana dealers who never lacked for pungent grass. Holder readily accepted the offer.

As the joint circulated around the trio, Kerkow and Holder kept making eyes at each other, lobbing signals back and forth. They both pined to take a roll on Kerkow's queen-size waterbed—the only piece of furniture she owned—but the circumstances weren't right. Before he left, though, Holder asked the two women if he could repay their kindness by

treating them to breakfast that coming Saturday. Newhouse declined, but Kerkow said yes to the morning date.

Two days later Holder picked her up in his Firebird and took her to a diner on University Avenue. As they spooned sugar into their coffees, Holder made a confession: he had been driving himself crazy trying to figure out where he and Kerkow had met before. He had the strangest sense this wasn't the first time their paths had crossed. But try as he might, the memory of their previous encounter was eluding him.

Kerkow admitted that she, too, had felt a powerful twinge of recognition upon seeing Holder at her apartment door. But how could that be? She had been in San Diego for only five months, scarcely enough time to forget such a memorable face. Prior to that she had spent virtually her whole life in Coos Bay, a logging town on Oregon's southern coast. Surely there was no way Holder had ever passed through such an isolated place.

Holder set down his coffee and leaned back in the booth. He rubbed his chin and mouth in thought, then filled his lungs with soothing Pall Mall smoke.

Coos Bay. Yes, he said, he knew Coos Bay. He knew it very well.

WHEN CATHERINE MARIE Kerkow was born in October 1951, Coos Bay was in the midst of a splendid postwar boom. Located on a thickly forested peninsula dotted with scenic lakes, the town was blessed with a harbor deep enough to accommodate the world's largest timber ships, which hauled off Oregon's precious firs and cedars by the millions. A never-ending stream of logging trucks jammed the coastal roads, rumbling past the enormous waterfront sawmill that draped the town in the scent of fresh-cut wood.

The timber trade produced vast fortunes for Coos Bay's leading families, who resided in chandeliered homes overlooking the harbor and the verdant hills beyond. Yet the town's middle class thrived, too, as the logging money trickled down to saw operators, shopkeepers, and civil servants. Families grateful for their prosperity packed the church pews every Sunday to hear sermons about the virtues of hard work and the perils of sin. Their children were Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls who spent their allowances on double features at the Egyptian Theater, the town's Art Deco centerpiece.

Newlyweds Bruce and Patricia Kerkow seemed to be on track for just such a pleasant future when Cathy became their firstborn child. The couple wasted little time rounding out their family: by the time she was six, Cathy had been joined by three younger brothers. Though he loved his children dearly, Bruce was also frustrated by fatherhood's demands. A driver for a dredging company by trade, he yearned to make his living as a jazz organist instead. But there was no way to carve out such an offbeat career while stuck in Coos Bay with a sizable family. As Bruce's dream became more remote with the birth of each child, he turned morose: at the Kiwanis Club meetings and church potlucks that were the linchpins of Coos Bay's social life, rumors swirled that the Kerkows' marriage might be on the rocks.

In the summer of 1959, however, the town's gossipmongers began to chatter about news far more salacious than the Kerkows' marital woes. A year earlier the Navy had opened a sonar station on Coos Head, a bluff overlooking the bay, in order to track Soviet submarine activity in the Pacific Ocean. Now the installation had taken on a new chief cook, a fifteen-year Navy veteran who had recently returned from duty in the Taiwan Strait. To the horror of Coos Bay's more provincial inhabitants, this cook was also black. His name was Seaven

Holder.

A North Carolina native whose hobby was penning gospel lyrics,* Seavenes had joined the Navy shortly before D-day. He served aboard the USS *Beale* during the invasion of Okinawa, then sailed into Nagasaki right after the city had been flattened by the “Fat Man” atomic bomb. These historic adventures convinced Seavenes to become a Navy lifer. He was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, when his second son, Willie Roger Holder, was born on June 14, 1949—Flag Day, as proud and patriotic Seavenes was fond of pointing out.

In the mid-1950s the growing Holder family relocated from Virginia to Alameda, California, home to one of the nation’s foremost naval bases. Seavenes was gone for months at a time on the USS *Rogers*, a destroyer that prowled the waters of the western Pacific. With four young children now taxing the patience of his wife, Marie, he longed for an assignment that would let him come home each night. When the job at Coos Head opened up, the opportunity seemed like a blessing from above.

In August 1959 the Holders piled into the family’s Ford Crown Victoria and headed north up Highway 101, thrilled to be starting life anew in southwestern Oregon. Seavenes was in a jolly mood during the ride, talking up all the hunting and fishing trips he had planned for the kids. Ten-year-old Roger was most excited about the fact that his father had rented a four-bedroom house, a major upgrade over their cramped Alameda bungalow. He would finally have a room all to himself.

But when Seavenes showed up at the real estate office to collect the house keys, he was told that the property was no longer available and that his mailed deposit would be refunded. Seavenes knew exactly what that meant: the agent with whom he had arranged the lease over the phone hadn’t realized that the Holders were black.

The family camped out in a hotel room while Seavenes scrambled to find more permanent accommodations. He was rejected by several landlords who made little effort to conceal their bias: Coos Bay had just a single black family at the time, headed by the proprietor of a downtown shoeshine stand, and many residents were dead set against darkening the town’s collective pigmentation any further.

The Holders eventually settled into a house in the blue-collar Empire neighborhood, on the peninsula’s western side. The landlord, an eccentric older woman who drove a tractor and smoked cigars, provided Seavenes with a shotgun, advising him that he might need it to fend off intruders. Her warning quickly proved correct: two nights after the Holders moved in, a pickup truck full of rowdy men pulled into the family’s driveway at two a.m. “Niggers get home!” the trespassers yelled as they waved flashlights through the Holders’ windows and pelted the door with rocks. From that point on, such menacing late-night visits became routine.

The family’s tormentors operated in the daytime, too. When Marie went shopping for groceries on Newmark Avenue, housewives would spit in her face as she walked the aisles, or hiss that she’d better not touch the vegetables with her unclean hands. The children were taunted whenever they dared play in the local park; the oldest child, eleven-year-old Seavenes Jr., started carrying a small hatchet in order to protect himself.

The elder Seavenes pleaded with his family to turn the other cheek, assuring them that the bigots would soon tire of their bullying. And so on September 9, Roger and his younger brother, Danny, were packed off to Madison Elementary School to begin the fall semester.

The very next day several older boys cornered seven-year-old Danny on the school playground. The leader of the pack knocked him to the ground, then kicked his prone body at least a dozen times. The beating was severe enough to land Danny in the hospital, where doctors briefly feared that the boy might lose a testicle.

The petrified Danny initially refused to identify his attacker. The police eventually coaxed him into fingering the culprit, but the boy was never arrested. When news of the assault started to make the rounds, Coos Bay's progressive residents declared themselves aghast at their racist neighbors' campaign of terror. An emergency meeting of the Madison Parent Teacher Association was called to discuss the matter, and a local weekly paper chimed in with a soul-searching editorial on its front page:

Why and how could such a thing happen, and what can be done, is the question everyone is asking.

Although it could have been just a schoolyard fight, many who have tried to analyze the situation do not believe it to be only that. The viciousness of the attack indicates strong feelings, such as those instilled by an adult or by an older person the boy looked up to. Children can be little tyrants when meting out punishment for others their own age. This was not the case.

A majority of the school's parents banded together to beg the Holders to send Danny back to Madison, promising Seavenes and Marie that no more harm would come to their youngest son. And the embarrassed police vowed to protect the family against further racial harassment.

But the spirit of reconciliation did not last. Embittered by Danny's beating, Seavenes filed suit against the State of Oregon for failing to protect his family's civil rights. When his superiors caught wind of the case, they ordered him to drop the matter and report back to Alameda at once. The Navy did not want to risk antagonizing Coos Bay any further.

As their distraught parents packed up the house, Seavenes Jr. and Roger spent an unseasonably warm October day exploring the woods around Empire Lakes, a popular recreation area. They came to a secluded stretch of shoreline, where they spotted a boy and girl dipping jars into the water. Fuming over his family's humiliation, Seavenes Jr. whispered to Roger that they should avenge poor Danny by beating up the two kids. But Roger nixed that plan—he just wanted to see what the kids were doing with their jars.

The Holder boys approached the water's edge. Roger saw that the girl was around eight years old; the boy appeared to be her little brother. She was pale and slight, with prominent ears and oversize glasses. Roger asked what she and her brother were doing.

"Catching salamanders," the girl replied.

Roger peered at the muddy water inside the girl's jar and laughed. "Those ain't salamanders," he said. "Those are tadpoles, see? Tadpoles—baby frogs."

The girl reached into her jar and pulled out one of the minuscule creatures by its tail. She dangled it right in front of Roger's face, so he could inspect its frilly gills and nascent limbs. "I know a baby salamander when I see one," she snapped. When Roger could say nothing in reply, the girl broke into a wide grin; she was obviously pleased to have won the argument.

The girl's brother tugged at her sleeve—he wanted to head back to the picnic area, where Mom and Dad were waiting. "Well, next time I see you, I hope you've learned more about

salamanders,” the grinning girl said to Roger while screwing a brass lid onto her jar. “Bye-bye.”

“Good luck with them salamanders!” Roger Holder shouted after Cathy Kerkow as she and her brother disappeared into the woods. He was certain that she heard him, though she never did look back.

Four days later the Holders’ Crown Victoria headed south down Highway 101. The family had been run out of Oregon after less than three months.

AS CATHY KERKOW entered junior high, her parents’ shaky marriage finally fell apart. Bruce moved north to Seattle to pursue his music, leaving Patricia to care for their four children and herself by herself. The split was a minor scandal in conservative Coos Bay, where *divorce* was still a dirty word; the consensus was that only the lowest of scoundrels would abandon their kids to chase bohemian dreams. The town rallied behind the much-loved Patricia, who took a full-time secretarial job at Southwestern Oregon Community College (SWOCC) to make ends meet.

Because of her demanding work schedule, Patricia relied on Cathy to help run the household. Though barely more than a child herself, Cathy was expected to mend clothes, prepare roasts, and make sure her three younger brothers were dressed for school or church on time. While her friends from the neighborhood were outside on South 10th Street, running footraces between the lampposts or playing games of Truth or Dare, Cathy was often studying inside her family’s second-floor flat, tending to chores. The sweet and quiet girl never complained about her responsibilities as assistant mom, nor voiced any sadness over her father’s departure. But there was pain beneath her placid surface.

When she entered Marshfield High School in 1965, Kerkow was going through an awkward phase. The shy and gangly girl threw herself into the sorts of extracurriculars that proper young Coos Bay ladies were supposed to enjoy: chorus, the Latin club, and a Christian group that provided meals to elderly shut-ins. She made straight B’s and became close friends with one of her fellow sopranos, Beth Newhouse, the daughter of the town’s leading attorney.

As Kerkow progressed through Marshfield, though, she shed her gawkiness and blossomed into a talented athlete. She took up running, which had long been the biggest sport in Coos Bay—the town’s temperate climate allowed for year-round training, and the surrounding hills were ideal for strengthening young legs. The Marshfield track team was a powerhouse in the late 1960s, led by the best schoolboy miler in the United States, a scrappy carpenter’s son named Steve Prefontaine. Kerkow made the varsity squad as a junior and set a school record in the eighty-yard hurdles, an achievement that earned her special mention in Marshfield’s yearbook alongside her friend and classmate Prefontaine.

Junior year was also when Kerkow began to take full advantage of her newfound ability to set male hearts aflutter. Endowed with a cherubic smile and lithe curves, the sixteen-year-old Kerkow had matured into the sort of intimidating beauty whom boys often lack the courage to approach. She started going steady with a handsome jock named Dennis Krummel, a baseball star who had grown up in her neighborhood. They made the rounds at Coos Bay teenage hotspots, cruising past the Egyptian Theater and feasting on hamburgers at Dairy Queen.

Intoxicated by her first taste of adolescent freedom, Kerkow began to display a rebellious

streak that she had long suppressed, one rooted in the trauma of her family's dissolution several years before. The once-dutiful daughter now quarreled with her mother and retreated from the more wholesome aspects of high school life. She quit the track team, broke up with Krummel, and started to date a surfer who was in his early twenties. Kerkow would watch him ride the chilly waves off Bastendorff Beach, where scruffy types smoked grass and drank Rainier beer at all-night crab boils. The couple tooted around Coos Bay in his wood-paneled station wagon, with Kerkow's well-toned legs dangling from the passenger-side window. The Marshfield boys would sigh whenever the woodie passed, chagrined to realize that fair Cathy was now well outside their league.



Cathy Kerkow in the Marshfield High School yearbook, 1969.

COOS HISTORICAL & MARITIME MUSEUM

Kerkow was so busy enjoying the perks of her feminine wiles that she never paused to contemplate her future. And so when she received her Marshfield diploma in June 1969, she had only the vaguest notion of what to do next. Much like her absent father, she harbored pie-in-the-sky dreams of becoming a professional singer. But her main ambition at the age of seventeen was more mundane: she wanted to hang out with cool boys who would take her to the coolest parties.

The next two years of Kerkow's life were a blur of fleeting romances and halfhearted attempts at adulthood. After spending the summer of 1969 working at a sawmill in Prineville, she returned to Coos Bay and enrolled at SWOCC to study oceanography. But she was a lackadaisical student, accumulating just a bare minimum of credits. She also worked a succession of menial jobs, all of which she lost in short order. She was fired from a Rexa drugstore, for example, amid accusations that she had stolen amphetamines for her surfing friends; she lasted less than three weeks at a Payless drugstore after her boss deemed her too lazy to operate the cash register. Kerkow was eventually reduced to taking seasonal positions to fund her leisure: stocking shelves at a housewares store during the holidays, picking up shrimp in the spring. She supplemented her meager income by shoplifting; she loved to give the salesclerks a cordial nod as she walked out the door, lipstick and stockings stuffed in her

purse.

As she floundered in Coos Bay, Kerkow tried on a range of different identities, looking for ways to define herself as something more than just another aimless college kid. In October 1970 she traveled two hours northeast to Eugene, a city that many in Coos Bay considered latter-day Gomorrah, to attend a symposium featuring high-ranking members of the Black Panther Party. Kerkow cared nothing for the Panthers' radical politics, but she swooned over their style and attitude: the black leather jackets, the berets perched atop Afros, the fiery speeches about the system's rot. Above all, she knew the Panthers were feared and reviled in Coos Bay; to embrace them, however superficially, would make her dangerously hip.

A few months later she bumped into her ex-boyfriend Dennis Krummel on the campus of SWOCC, where he was also a student. Krummel was wearing an Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps uniform; he said that he had just joined up, in the hopes of becoming a pilot after earning his degree.

"Well, I'm with the Black Panthers now," Kerkow blurted out in response, greatly exaggerating her involvement in order to maximize the shock factor. "I know they have some different ideas, but I've come to agree with them." Krummel was every bit as floored as she had hoped.

In the late summer of 1971, Kerkow received a phone call from Beth Newhouse, her closest friend from the Marshfield chorus. A rebel in her own right, Newhouse had married a surfer ten years her senior shortly after graduating from high school. But that relationship had quickly disintegrated due to her husband's alcoholism, and Newhouse had fled to San Diego to convalesce with an older sister. Instantly smitten by the city's perfect weather and raucous party scene, she decided to stay and reap the benefits of being a young divorcée in the era of free love. She first moved into an apartment near Ocean Beach, a hippie enclave full of health shops and health food stores, where rock bands often played impromptu shows on the sand. When the rent there became unaffordable, Newhouse found a cheaper place in El Cajon, on the city's eastern edge, and took on a roommate.

When that roommate left without warning, Newhouse became desperate to find a replacement before the next month's rent was due. She offered the bedroom to Kerkow, who seized the chance to escape her dead-end life in Coos Bay. She dropped out of SWOCC, packed up her Volkswagen Beetle, and struck out for southern California.

San Diego was a revelation for Kerkow, a wonderland of sunny days and easy sex. She dated a galaxy of men who seemed fantastically exotic to a cloistered Coos Bay girl: Mexican bikers, greasy rockers, the bronzed and preppy scions of La Jolla's yachting elite. As she sampled San Diego's menu of bachelors, she discovered that she was especially drawn to black men; she confessed to Newhouse that, for reasons she couldn't fathom, she found such men "unusually attractive." Though Kerkow loved to press her mother's buttons, she never dared tell her about this romantic predilection during their occasional phone chats; she worried that Patricia would be appalled.

Kerkow also concealed the seedy means by which she earned her keep in San Diego: she worked at the International Massage Parlor on 4th Avenue, in the run-down Hillcrest neighborhood. Though she had fancied herself too worldly for Coos Bay, she was hopelessly naïve by San Diego standards; when she started at the parlor, she genuinely believed the job would entail nothing more than kneading kinks out of muscles. Kerkow was horrified when

the first naked client flipped onto his back and insinuated that he would like a sexual favor. When other similarly smutty requests soon followed, it dawned on her why the manager hadn't cared about her total lack of experience. Against her better judgment, she satisfied her customers' urges in exchange for tips, letting her mind wander to more pleasant thoughts as she rubbed and tugged.

Kerkow told her mother that she worked as a receptionist at a doctor's office.

Right after Christmas 1971, a sleazy gangster who owned adult businesses throughout San Diego convinced Kerkow to come work for him. He offered her a job at a downtown strip club, where customers were barred from touching the topless dancers. But she opted to remain a masseuse, moving to one of the man's upscale parlors in suburban Spring Valley. She and Newhouse also ran a sideline business in marijuana, peddling ounces purchased from a small-time hoodlum they knew only as Fast Eddie.

Kerkow was adrift in this sordid world when Roger Holder came knocking in January 1972. He, too, had gone astray since their fleeting encounter at Empire Lakes some thirteen years earlier. But his troubles ran much deeper than Cathy's, inflamed by experiences far more brutal than she could imagine.

THE ROGER HOLDER who returned to Alameda with his family in the fall of 1959 was not the same boy who had left for Oregon that August. The expulsion from Coos Bay had scarred him; once a devout Christian like his father, Holder now questioned what sort of God would see fit to crush his family's modest dreams. He channeled his melancholy into a solitary pursuit: building intricate models of trains, planes, and helicopters. The geeky hobby reminded him of the happy moments he had spent with his dad in Virginia, watching naval shipbuilders weld together the beams of aircraft carriers.

On the rare occasions he ventured outside, Holder faced relentless teasing by his peers. While waiting for the Navy to complete a new housing complex in Alameda, his family lived in a predominantly black section of neighboring Oakland. The boys there ridiculed Roger for a cruelly ironic reason: they considered his behavior too white. They mocked him for his models, his elocution, his skateboard—anything that smacked of habits favored by residents of the Bay Area's paler precincts. Confused and stung by this rejection, Holder retreated even deeper into a world of his own.

But when he entered Encinal High School in 1964, Holder discovered that girls of all races were actually charmed by his quirks. Adept at exuding a pensive cool, the long-limbed teenager attracted the sorts of female admirers who were just beginning to hang Beatles posters on their bedroom walls. Holder capitalized on their curiosity by mastering the art of the pickup. He started riding his skateboard to the coffeehouses frequented by students from Mills College, an all-girls school in Oakland's foothills. He convinced more than a few pretentious English majors to accompany him to Leona Heights Park, where he would pretend to dig the sappy poetry before moving on to lewder diversions.

Holder was a careless lover, a foible that led to predictable results: in the summer of 1965 he learned that one of his girlfriends, a sixteen-year-old Encinal sophomore named Betty Bullock, was pregnant by him—with twins, no less. That November, to earn money for his children's care, he dropped out of the eleventh grade and joined the family business by enlisting in the U.S. Army; he had to lie to the recruiter about his age, since he was still ju

seventeen. Holder was at basic training the following February when Bullock gave birth to his daughters, Teresa and Torrita.

Though he lacked a high school diploma, Holder was extremely intelligent and scored well on his Armed Forces Qualification Test, the exam the Army used to determine its recruit assignments. In March 1967 Holder was sent to Bad Hersfeld, West Germany, home of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, to take a course in tank warfare. That October he received the inevitable order to join the 11th ACR's contingent in Vietnam. On his way to Southeast Asia, Holder made a quick stop in California to marry Bullock and bid farewell to his infant daughters.

When Holder arrived in Vietnam, the 11th ACR was in the midst of an extended operation to pacify Long Khanh, a province northwest of Saigon that teemed with Vietcong fighters. The guerrillas launched daily ambushes on vehicles traveling the region's muddy roads, battering their prey with rockets before melting back into the jungle. The primary mission of the 11th ACR, better known as the Blackhorse Regiment, was to plow its armored vehicles through Long Khanh's dense wilderness in search of the elusive enemy.

The Blackhorse Regiment's mainstay was the M113 armored personnel carrier, a trapezoidal twelve-ton beast with the power to obliterate all foliage in its path. Holder manned one such vehicle's M60 machine gun, shielded by a steel plate stenciled with the regiment's unofficial motto: FIND THE BASTARDS THEN PILE ON. In the thick of the jungle, Holder and his crewmates would try to detect signs of Vietcong activity—the camouflaged hatches of underground lairs, the suspiciously neat piles of leaves that concealed grenades. But with visibility often limited to ten feet or less, their first inkling of the enemy's presence was typically a hail of AK-47 fire.

Holder grew enamored of this perilous search-and-destroy work. He relished the adrenaline of combat, the glee of blindly pumping hundreds of .308-caliber rounds into the jungle after surviving yet another Vietcong onslaught. And he loved tinkering with the M113's mechanical systems, much as he had once loved building model trains in the dim light of his bedroom. While his comrades counted down their days to freedom on homemade calendars shaped like *Playboy* models, Holder intended to stay in Vietnam for as long as possible.

But Holder's passion for combat did not make him immune to the war's psychological toll. The Vietcong were masters at fomenting paranoia, littering the jungle with clever booby traps that made the Americans question their every footstep. Ordinary objects like soda cans and rice bowls were rigged with explosives powerful enough to kill; 11 percent of American deaths in Vietnam were due to such improvised devices. And nightly Vietcong mortar attacks deprived the troops of much-needed sleep, jangling their frayed nerves even further. So as the Blackhorse Regiment pushed toward the Cambodian border in the waning days of 1967, Holder began to suffer from spells of overwhelming anxiety. He self-medicated with copious amounts of marijuana, purchased from peasants for ten cents a joint. The drug numbed him to the fear that his next foray into the bush could be his last.

On January 14, 1968, Holder awoke at dawn with a scorching fever—he had contracted a bad case of malaria. There was no time for medical treatment, though: the Vietcong's Tet Offensive was in full swing, and Holder's unit had orders to root out enemy fighters in the rubber groves by Loc Ninh. Holder chain-smoked a few joints, a ritual he referred to as “the breakfast of champions,” then hopped aboard his M113.

Holder and his crew ventured down a dirt trail that dead-ended at a crumbling Buddhist tomb. Worried that the bushes around the gravesite might conceal booby traps, the M113 driver reversed into a patch of tall grass. The stoned and malarial Holder turned his head to check for incoming fire as the vehicle backed up.

Then Holder's eardrums shattered, and his world went white. The next thing he knew, he was lying in the middle of the road, his shirt and helmet gone. He instinctively stumbled back to the M113, which a land mine had turned into a heap of twisted steel. One of his crewmates had been torn clean in half by the blast; another had clumps of brain leaking out from behind his right ear.

Holder heard the whirr of a helicopter and looked up at the sky. As he did so, he collapsed onto his back and fell unconscious; his spine had nearly been severed. He would spend the next six weeks recuperating at a hospital near Saigon, where his back healed but his mind did not: Holder could not stop envisioning the explosion's aftermath, nor shake his survivor's guilt.

There was more tragedy to come for Holder once he returned to action. On May 19 he lost his closest friend in the Blackhorse Regiment, a private from Los Angeles named Stanley Schroeder who shared Holder's love of model trains. The eighteen-year-old Schroeder was killed by a booby trap that sheared off both his arms, leaving him to bleed to death in a thicket of bomb-scorched trees. The death weighed heavily on Holder, who felt that Schroeder was the Blackhorse soldier who best understood his idiosyncrasies. But he dared not mourn, for fear that open tears would be regarded as a sign of weakness. He instead hid his emotions behind a warrior's countenance: decked out in black Ray-Ban sunglasses and a radio-equipped crash helmet, his worn khaki shirt unbuttoned to reveal his sinewy torso. Holder cut an imposing figure atop his M113 perch.

When his yearlong tour was finished in October 1968, Holder did not hesitate to sign up for another six months in Vietnam. The Army rewarded him with a trip back to California to visit his wife and their twin daughters. On his second night in Alameda, a drunken Holder stumbled into Bullock's apartment, expecting to find her waiting for him. Instead, he surprised her in bed with one of his high school classmates, whom he stomped into a pulp. Holder soon learned that Bullock had been sleeping with numerous men, allegedly for pay. Heartbroken by this revelation, he cut short his leave and returned to war, though only after his parents promised to take charge of raising his daughters. Holder knew his marriage was over, yet he continued to wear his gold wedding band; he didn't want his Army comrades to have any inkling of Bullock's betrayal.

Back in Vietnam, Holder was promoted to the rank of Specialist Fourth Class and allowed to choose his next assignment. He decided to ditch the Blackhorse Regiment in favor of one of the Army's most glamorous and demanding gigs: flying with the 68th Assault Helicopter Company, stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base just east of Saigon.

Nicknamed the Top Tigers, the 68th AHC was charged with airlifting South Vietnamese troops into the war's hairiest combat zones. The unit's single-engine Huey helicopters would alight in clearings to disgorge a dozen soldiers each, then dodge Vietcong rockets as they whooshed away with guns blazing. In his role as a crew chief, Holder was responsible for maintaining the Hueys in flight as well as firing the mounted M60s that hung from the doors. Unlike his experience in the jungles of Long Khanh, Holder could now see his targets

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