

The Best Christmas Present Ever



Delphinia Longstreet



A "New Woman" Novel



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by Delphinia Longstreet

I

Lieutenant Colonel Royal Carson “R.C.” Lawton relaxed in his folding chair and gazed up at his tall Battalion Sergeant Major, Charles “Charlie” McGrath who was smiling broadly.

“OK, SarMajor,” he grinned, “What’s on your so-called mind this time?”

“Whom me, Sir?” The man tried to sound innocent but the laugh kept bubbling through.

“OK, whom did you pillar today, SarMajor?” R.C. grinned.

"Why, nobody, Sir!" the pained man replied with an insulted expression. "I'm the easiest going guy in the whole damned U. S. of A. Marine Corps!" he boasted. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"Yeah, and I'm Queen of the Goddamned May!" R.C. grinned. "Whassup?"

"Well Dawg, as you know, it's Jonze's birthday today, so I put him on KP to keep him outta Cookie's hair while he makes the cake and all."

"What hair?" R.C. laughed. "Cookie's balder'n a basketball!"

"Yeah, I know. And then Cookie put him in the grease pit!" he laughed.

"Ouch!" R.C. winced visibly.

"And then some! You should have heard Jonze bitch!" Charlie laughed.

"No thanks, I don't want to be within ten clicks of him when he gets his dandruff up!"

"No, Sir! Me neither. That's why I took a powder!"

"Chicken!"

"Braaawk! Braaawk!"

"Damn, I'm surrounded by out-of-work comedians!"

"Did I ever tell you about the time I dated Jane..."

R.C. held his hand up. "Only about a million times!"

"But Dawg, this here's a new one," Charlie managed with a pained look on his face.

"Coming from you it'll have a beard down to its ankles, it'll be so danged old!"

"Yuh gots a pernt, Sir," the SarMajor mused, stroking his chin. "Whadda we gonna do about

Thanksgiving?" he asked suddenly. "The turkeys 'n punkins ain't got cheer yet."

"What? No turkeys? We got plenty of them hanging around! Us'n's oughta get some use outta summa dem," R.C. laughed.

"Wrong kinda turkeys, Sir," the BSM grinned. "Naw, that ain't the prolem, Dawg. Cookie wants tuh have punkin pies with 'em and there ain't a punkin within a thousand miles of this damned sandbox!"

"Hmmm, that do present a prolem," R.C. admitted. "Lemme call Regimental."

The BSM grinned widely. "Now that's what a dawg colonel's good for, Sir!"

"That's why I get the big bucks, you turkey," R.C. grinned back at him.

"So you say, Sir, so you say. Just so's it gets done in our lifetime!"

"Damn, you're so impatient!" R.C. mused. "No wonder the guys want to boil you in oil!"

"But I would make such tender meat, Sir!" the BSM laughed.

R.C. picked up his field telephone, dialed a number, spoke briefly, then hung up. "There, Cookie'll have his damned turkeys and punkins on tomorrow's mercy flight."

"Allus said youse Dawg Colonels had more uses than just takin' up valuable space 'n' breathin' alla that free air," BSM McGrath laughed as he beat a hasty retreat.

"Oh, yeah? Up yours, SarMajor!" R.C. called belatedly, laughing in spite of himself.

* * *

II

“Awri’, what’s on your mind now, SarMajor?” R.C. asked, looking up from the report he was writing. “Din’ yuh gets enough outta me fer Thanksgiving?”

“Aw, Dawg, let’s fergit that, OK? Naw, we gots us another prolem now.”

“OK, lay it on me.” R.C. sat back in his folding chair and waited expectantly.

“Well, as you know, Christmas is coming up in a coupla weeks...”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, the guys’d like to have a tree and ornaments and presents and I sorta promised ‘em a huge turkey dinner with all the trimmings and all.”

R.C. groaned. “So now you want me to scrounge the damned turkeys again?”

“And the punkins and the ice cream and cream for whipping, er, Cookie made up a list of things he needs.” He passed a piece of paper across the desk. “Yuh oughta be able to find this stuff easy.”

“Damn!” R.C. groaned. “All I am to you Greenies is a damned button pushing supply clerk!”

“Yes, Sir,” BSM McGrath agreed, “but you know which buttons to push, being uh officer ‘n’ all.”

“I swear, you guys will be the death of me yet! Regimental hates to see my ugly puss comin’ through the front door because they know I’m allus on a foraging mission ‘n’ lookin’ tuh steal ‘em blind!”

“Yeah, but since yer a Dawg Colonel, no one says word one tuh yuh!” BSM McGrath pointed out needlessly. “Sides, it’s Christmas and I...er, the guys, are sorta plannin’ on it, yuh know, Sir?”

"All right! All right! I know when I'm licked!" R.C. growled. "Now get yer scrawny ass outta here so's I can finish this damned report fer regimental!"

BSM McGrath turned and started for the door, then hesitated. "Uh, Sir?"

R.C. looked up. "Yes, SarMajor? Something else on your so-called mind?"

BSM McGrath came back to stand in front of his colonel's desk. "Yes, Sir...sorta," he admitted.

"Well, out with it! I ain't got all day like some lazy-assed SarMajors I know," R.C. teased.

"Yes, Sir." BSM McGrath looked ill at ease. "Uh, Sir, I know you're not all that gung ho 'bout the Christmas and New Year's holidays and all..."

"That's my business!" R.C. snapped in irritation.

"Yes, Sir, meaning no disrespect, Sir, but every year my church congregation back home sends cards to alla the guys in this sandbox, and this year one came that has your name written all over it!"

R.C. sighed. "Now that's a crock of b. s. if I've ever heard one!"

"It's true, Sir." The SarMajor took a slender envelope out of his pocket and handed it to his commanding officer. "See?" His finger pointed to the addressee.

R.C. looked at it, then blushed and looked up at his SarMajor. "*To One of Our Brave Fighting Men Far From Home.* That isn't my name, SarMajor, and you damned well know it! Give it to one of the guys who go out on patrol every day and put their lives on the line! This ain't for no R.E.M.F. like me!"

BSM McGrath drew himself up to his full height, all six foot four inches and two hundred twenty pounds of hard muscle and replied, "Sir! I was given a direct order to give this card to you and no one else! And since that order came from the high command, I am duty bound to deliver it to you, Sir! 'Sides, is you

is or is you isn't a brave fighting Dawg far from home?"

"There are others more qualified," R.C. equivocated.

"No, Sir, there ain't!" the man retorted hotly. "N' you know it! Sir!"

R.C. laughed softly. "Charlie, yer as full of shit as every Green Gyrene I have ever known!"

"Yeah Dawg, now take the damned card afore I fergit yer a Dawg Colonel 'n shove it up yer scrawny ol' ass!" He saluted smartly, spun on his heel and strode purposefully from the tent.

"Well, I will be damned!" R.C. murmured, staring at the retreating back of his SarMajor.

Smiling, he read the salutation again. "*To One of Our Brave Fighting Men Far From Home.*"

"Oh well, in for a dime, in for a dollar!" he muttered as he slit the envelope open. Inside, he read:

"To One of Our Brave Fighting Men Far From Home

As we enter this most holy of seasons, our thoughts ever turn to those who are so far

away from their loved ones. It is with the utmost thanks of those of us who enjoy our freedom

due to the efforts of those of you who place yourselves in harm's way to protect us.

Our hopes and prayers go out to each one of you with the wish that this horrible war will

soon be ended and you are returned safely to those of us who love you so much.

God bless each and every one of you and keep you safe!

Rhonda Suellen

But the surname was blurred so badly that even under the microscope and x-ray machine in sick bay it could not be deciphered! Lord knows I tried!

But, eventually I gave up and cornered my BSM. He grinned and replied, "Gripe, gripe, gripe! That's all you damned lifers ever do! Can't you take the fuckin' card in the way it was meant to be without griping? For Crissakes Dawg, don't look a gift horse in the mouth! Besides, if you ever get to my neck of the Big Sky Country, you'll have a most pleasant surprise when you discover the truth of the matter!"

And he would say no more on the subject.

Well, I took that card out and read it so many times it became shop-worn with deep creases and little tears, but always the same inspiring message, "Come home safe!"

But who had sent it? I puzzled over it for weeks!

And never did find out anything useful.

Then New Year's came and with it a renewed effort by the Iraqi insurgents to throw us back into the Arabian Sea. Well, we weren't about to let that happen, so we fought back.

Which brings us to the real beginning...

It was late February and we had been dodging incoming shells for days, always looking over our shoulders and watching the locals disappear just before another barrage began. They always knew. Most of the locals were decent people wanting to be left alone to go about their business as usual. It was the radical militants who made trouble for everybody else!

I was helping unload a truck of supplies when we heard the whistle and a shout, "Incoming!" And we fell to the ground or huddled behind something or ran for a doorway or something. But this time three of

the locals were caught out in the open! It was a woman with two small children.

As one man, BSM McGrath and I dashed from cover and threw our bodies over the three civilians to protect them from the blast. I heard a loud noise in my ear, something like rain falling on me and this woman screaming for her children...and then nothing.

I woke up three days later on an airplane bound for the burn unit in Germany for treatment along with BSM McGrath who had borne the brunt of the burning oil the bomb had exploded.

The personnel at the burn unit about had a cow when I insisted on sharing the ward room with my SarMajor. "It's just not done, Sir!" a bright young female nugget told me. "He's *enlisted!*" she insisted as though he were carrying some sort of horrible disease!

"And if he's not in that bed next to me when he wakes up, you'll be a yardbird no fucking class!" I thundered. Fortunately, another light colonel, a surgeon, saw my records and my M.O.H. and informed the nurse that I could do as I wished because of it. She didn't like it, but she backed off.

Well, SarMajor McGrath woke up two days later, hungrier than a starved grizzly bear with a sore tooth and from the way he bellowed orders, he had the whole hospital upset and jumping! After more than twenty-some years in the Corps, he knew most of the high-ranking officers personally and anything he wanted, he got! Immediately, if not sooner!

"Hey, Dawg!" he greeted. "Where're us'n's at? It sure ain't the sandbox!"

"Somewhere in Germany, I think," I replied because I wasn't really sure.

"Hell, that's better'n duh Kuwaiti prairies!" he grinned.

We lay up in those hospital beds and watched Armed Services Television, mostly westerns and shoot-'em-up gangster flicks, arguing about anything and everything that came to mind until we were sick of the whole mess.

I discovered that he had a younger brother who was in law school and acing it royally! From the way he talked, I knew my SarMajor was proud of his brother in a way I had never felt for my own brother. His dad owned a lumber yard that had been started back after the Civil War to provide lumber for the building boom in Washington State and that several years previously, he and a partner had started a small furniture factory to provide furniture for the Government's myriad housing projects in the tri-state area (Washington, Idaho and Montana). The factory was being expanded even as we lay there in our beds discussing it!

He learned that I was a fraud by several years because of my enlistment when I was just fifteen years old and he got a charge out of the way I had carried that dumb nugget out of the brush. "Damn, Sir, I'd've prolly left his sorry ass to the Cong!"

"Couldn't do that, SarMajor," I demurred, "Uncle Sam had a bundle invested in the so and so."

"Hey, you got time in, why don't you retire and come to Montana with me? For damned sure the Corps won't let me stay in with these burned-up legs! I got my time in and I been thinking about it my own self. You could come to our town and work in the factory. You said you liked making furniture and Dad can use all the help he can get...er, *good* help, I mean!" he grinned wryly.

"Yeah, picture that, me calling *you* Sir!" I laughed.

"Ain't that a kick in the ass, Dawg?" he laughed.

And that same nugget heard him call me, "Dawg," and she about had conniption fits all over the damned ward...again! "That's insubordination!" she squeaked angrily. "He's enlisted!" And again she

made it sound like he had some sort of horrible disease.

“Ensign,” I cautioned, “he and I fought together for two tours in Nam and one in the sandbox and he’s earned the right to call me any damned thing he wants to! Now, I don’t want to hear one more word out of you or, as I promised you once before, you’ll be a yardbird no fucking class quicker’n you can say, ‘Dawg!’ your own self!” I threatened.

And that was the end of that.

Charlie and I practically lived in the physical therapy rooms, trying to get our strength and muscles back in shape so we could get out of that damned hospital burn ward. I got tired of using the machines, doing rep after rep and and running in place and seeming, at least to me, getting nowhere fast.

Then, one afternoon, SarMajor Charlie McGrath collapsed while on the tread mill and he died in my arms right there on the floor. His last words were, “Take care of Rhonda and my Marie!”

I tell you, I just sat there holding his body while the tears rolled unchecked down my cheeks to splash on his face.

I cried.

And cried.

I could not help myself.

Nor could I stop myself from crying.

It just wasn’t fair.

Charlie McGrath had a loving wife waiting back in the States.

Charlie McGrath had a son waiting for his return to the States.

Charlie McGrath had a daughter, who also waited for her father to come home.

Charlie McGrath had his whole life to live and enjoy!

Me?

I had nothing.

I was nothing.

And now, that's all that was left.

Nothing...

And for once, the ensign had nothing to say as I held his dead body and cried like a baby.

Anyway, I requested and was granted permission to accompany my SarMajor's body back to the Z.I. for a full military burial in his home town. As I was getting ready to leave, I was called into a general's office and presented with the Medal of Honor for Battalion Sergeant Major Charles McGrath, awarded (of course) posthumously, and a silver star for my own "heroics" during the explosion back in the sandbox.

It seemed that the woman and children we protected were the wife and children of a high muckey-muck Kuwaiti sheik who had barrels of pull.

(Get it? *Oil* barrels.)

Big deal...

Oil barrels or none,

Sheik or not,

M.O.H or no,

Battalion Sergeant Major Charles "Charlie" McGrath was still dead!

I sat in the back of that airplane that brought me and a flag-covered steel casket back to the States, and I cried the whole damned twenty-one hours it took!

Such a waste!

* * *

III

It was with a heavy heart that I accompanied that body from Germany to Spokane in Washington State, the closest place to the SarMajor's (a hoot and a holler, he used to say) hometown in the Big Sky Country, the Rocky Mountains of Western Montana, not too far from Idaho to the west and Canada to the north. It was a small town, not even shown on most maps, but it had a church, a general store, and a gas station/garage. For anything else you had to drive about sixty miles or so south southwest to Coeur d'Alene in Idaho, the nearest city. Oh, yeah, there was also the McGrath lumber and furniture factory that was owned by the SarMajor's father by way of marrying his mother back in the day.

The scenery and terrain reminded me a great deal of Down-Eastern Maine where I had grown up. Woods, solitude, wild animals, and very few people to spoil the quiet beauty of Mother Nature.

Well, I did have an older brother and sister who had run as fast as they could to escape the dull backwoods and live in civilization, Boston and NYC, as soon as they graduated high school. Me? I liked the woods and stayed on even after the house caught fire when I was twelve and burned to the ground. Dad and I spent two years rebuilding the house and making usable furniture, and I do believe that it was the happiest time of my life up to that time.

Then my parents died; both were in their late sixties and my greedy brother and sister "executed" their wills, except that I never got my share and they had no reasonable explanation as to why I didn't.

But, being just fourteen and big for my age, I figured I could look out for myself and I spent a year living off the land. Then, just days before I turned fifteen, I got talking with a Marine veteran and decided that I would join up. I "borrowed" my brother's birth certificate that said I was twenty, wandered on down

to Boston and enlisted. Nobody questioned me, just looked at my size and passed me without comment.

I took basic at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, then advanced infantry training, then went on to jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia. Now it never made much sense to me to jump out of a perfectly good airplane into God-knew-what, but question the Marine high command?

You kidding? Nevah hoppen, G.I.!

After jump school, I became a Marine Sniper. That was a prelude to The Nam where I served four tours before I got shot in the ass and spent a year on Okinawa. Then it was back to The Nam where I yanked a dumb-assed second looey out of the line of fire, then hauled his sorry ass two miles to an evac helio. It turned out that the s.o.b. was the only son of some governor of some damn state or another and I was sent back to the Z.I. to be awarded an M.O.H. by his nibs, Le Presidente des Etats Unis, Lyndon B. Johnson, by Texas and by Gawd!

At least the food in D. C. was better than in The Nam!

It was in Nam that I first met Master Sergeant Charles "Charlie" McGrath and we tied one on several times during two tours.

But, on the basis of the M.O.H, I was offered a chance at O.C.S. and ninety days later, I walked out of Camp Pendleton, California a brand new nugget (gold bar) second looie! By my birth certificate, I was twenty-six years old. Actually, I was just twenty! It's some sort of law somewhere that you have to be twenty-one to be a commissioned officer. But, there was this don't ask, don't tell policy, and I sure didn't want to upset the apple cart! So, I didn't tell.

Over the years after The Nam, I was stationed here and there, sometimes even with now-Senior Master Sergeant Charles "Charlie" McGrath until Saddam invaded Kuwait. I was just short of having twenty-one years in as an officer (twenty-seven, counting my enlisted time), freshly promoted to Lieu-

tenant Colonel, and at the ripe old age of forty-two, was thinking seriously about retiring when all this started.

The death of my best friend, Battalion Sergeant Major Charles “Charlie” McGrath, took the wind right out of my sails, so to speak. I had lost my will to be or do.

At the closest Legion Hall we held the funeral and it was one of the hardest things I have ever done, handing that folded American Flag to this six-year-old boy with the M.O.H. around his neck who was trying so hard not to cry, but who cried as I placed the flag in his shaking hands. I held him while he sobbed, patting his back gently and telling him that his father was a hero and never ever to let anyone tell him differently! And I meant, no one!

He nodded soberly. “I won’t, Colonel,” he promised through his tears.

Then I was holding his wife and four-year-old baby daughter while she cried and believe you me, I cried too. I had lost the best friend I had ever had and I felt the loss deeply.

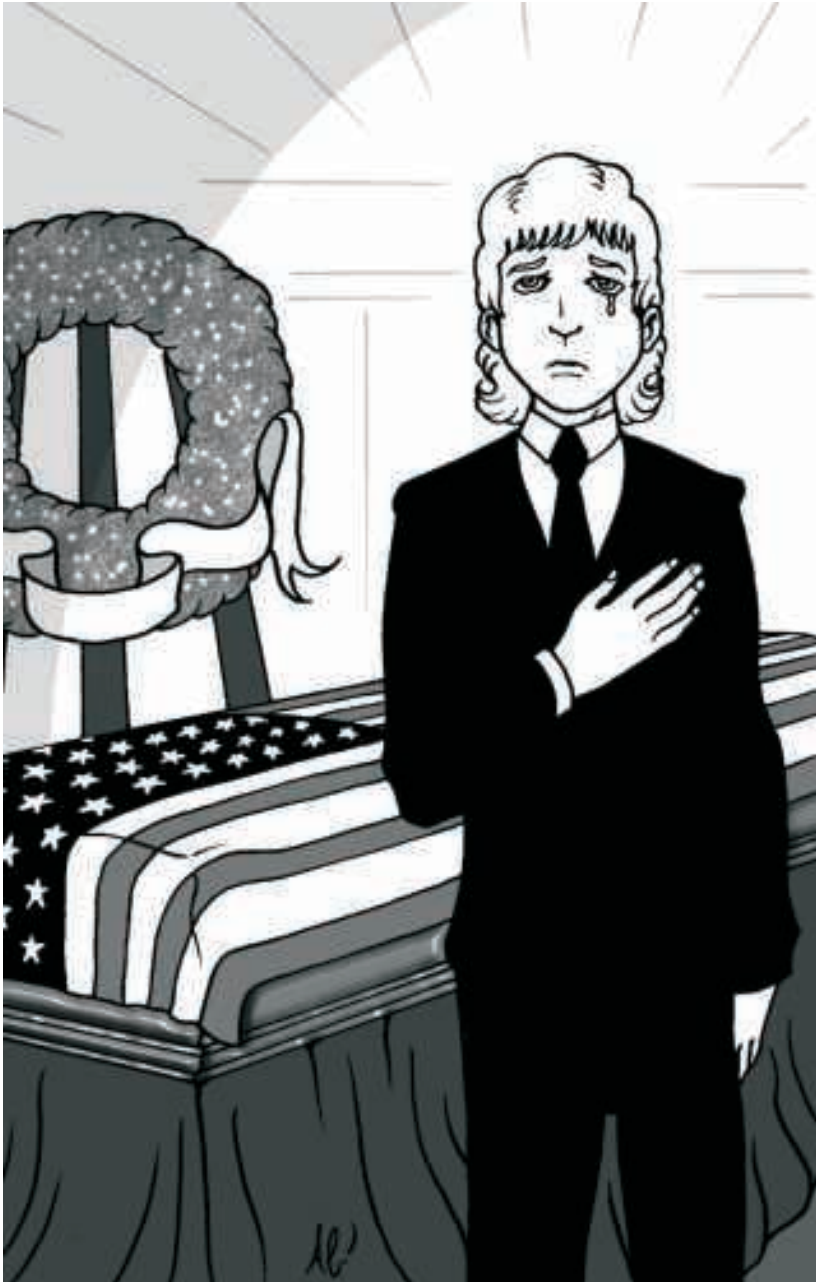
There, I met my SarMajor’s father and mother, Charles (“Chaz”) and Rhonda Suellen McGrath, and I had to tell them how their son had died saving others at the risk of losing his.

Yes, I cried while I told them.

I couldn’t help myself.

I briefly met his younger brother, Ronny, who disappeared shortly thereafter to return to Spokane and final exams. He seemed like a sort of wimp to me, limp-wristed, soft spoken, “soft” all around, kinda small at five-two or so, but direct with the longest blonde hair and prettiest blue eyes I had ever seen!

Now, I don’t think that I’m like *that* at all, but the truth of the matter was that I had always preferred the company and comradeship of men and to me it was a sad day when the Corps allowed women in!



Not that I had anything against women, per se, it just seemed to me that they were not combat material, something I soon learned was not always true! Some of those Lady Gyrenes were tougher than many men I had known in twenty plus years! And Lord help you if you called them Ladies!

I had known several cross-dressed persons in my years. I hadn't led a sheltered life, not by a long shot. But most of those I had known looked like men in a dress and that turned me off big time. No, I much preferred the softer, smaller, more believable ones, just never had had an opportunity to test my theory! Or, I didn't have the guts to try! Take your pick.

Anyway, the McGraths soon discovered that I had retired from the Corps and was not all that enthusiastic about returning to Maine, not that I had anything against Maine, I just had too many sad memories that I did not want resurrected!

So when Chaz asked me to stay around for a bit, I agreed readily and soon found myself living in my late SarMajor's old bedroom! I was reluctant as Hell about that, but his mother, Rhonda, assured me that the room was just going to waste otherwise, so I settled in, but only after telling them that I was duty-bound to contribute and that I would have to do some kind of work to pay them back.

"Good!" Chaz enthused. "You're good with your hands and you like to make things out of wood, so you can work in my furniture factory, by damn!"

And that was how I met Big George Washington Lincoln, the Bigga Boss of the furniture factory. Big George's grandfather had become partners with Rhonda's great grandfather and Big George just naturally worked for his grandfather, starting when he quit school at eight or nine years of age, some eighty or more years before, which made him in his late eighties or early nineties, but you would never have known it! Big George was as hale and hearty and strong as a man half his age and he ruled his little empire with an iron hand!

Big George was the grandson of slaves, six foot six, two hundred twenty pounds of muscle and sinew and brains! His son, Little George, his grandson, Baby George, and his great grandson, Tiny George, all worked at the factory, and he would just as likely chew them out for their mistakes as he would someone outside his immediate family! Big George always said, "If it ain't right, it ain't right!"

So, I went to work as a helper, which meant that if there was a dirty job to be done, it was my job to do it. Some come-down for a light colonel, eh? But you know, I didn't mind. I liked it. I didn't have to think about what I did, I just did it. I had no responsibilities except to please Big George.

Then, a younger man came to work and he became the helper. I was promoted to lathe man in the factory, putting blocks of wood on a lathe and turning out table legs, chair legs, dresser legs, you name it, I turned them out! It was boring, but I took satisfaction in seeing my efforts taking shape under the guidance of my own two hands.

Baby George stopped by one afternoon. "You know, R.C.," he commented, "the Bigga Boss must like you. I've seen guys like you pass through here like water in a sieve, but you just stand there like an old oak tree, keep yer cool and do your job. Da Bigga Boss likes that in a man."

I started with surprise. I had never noticed any such thing.

About then, Big George walked by. "If'n yuh hain't got enough work tuh do, Baby, I can damned sure fix you up!" he growled.

"Yas suh, Boss Man!" Baby yelped. "I'm gone!" And he was!

Big George turned to me, "Well, what you gawping at, white boy? Get to turning them laigs!"

"Yes, Sir!" I smiled and turned to my lathe.

"I got my eye on you, boy!" he warned, "so you better watch your candy ass close! Yuh hain't too big tuh get uh n'ass whompin'!"

"Yes, Sir!" I turned, snapped off a smart salute, then turned back to my lathe.

And he stalked off in high dungeon!

I laughed to myself, convinced that I had had the last word!

Next morning, Big George stopped me at the door to the break room. "You're working with Little George today." And with not another word, he stalked off.

That day, I did work with Little George. For a man in his seventies, Little George set a fast pace and by our first break, we had unloaded two trailers and re-loaded one of them.

Big George met us at the break room. "Took you turkeys long enough to load that last trailer," he commented sarcastically.

I was about to give him a sarcastic remark in return when Little George broke in. "We was slowed down by alla the nails in the floor and we had to pull alla them first so's we wouldn't damage the packaged load," he alibied.

Big George stared at him for one long moment.

"Honest, Boss, I ain't jerking yuh off!" Little George insisted.

"Humph, excuses, excuses," he snorted and muttering to himself, he stomped off.

"Well, I be damned!" I was shocked.

"Let me handle the Boss Man, R.C.," Little George told me. "He's got a hard on for something and the best way around it is to be quiet as a church mouse!"

I didn't like it, but I saw the wisdom of his remarks.

Anyway, when we got back to the loading docks, Big George was right there watching us and we busted our humps getting those trucks in and out. We worked so hard that we missed the lunch whistle and worked right straight through the whole afternoon.

When the quitting whistle blew, we looked up in some surprise. We had not only worked straight through lunch, we had missed our afternoon break too!

In the locker room, we were changing out of our work clothes when Big George stopped in to gaze at us. "You turkeys trying to set some sort of record er sumthin?" he growled.

Little George looked at him in surprise. "No, Suh, us'un's jus' lost track uh time, dat's all."

"Humph, excuses," Big George grunted and turned to me. "I still got my eye on you, white boy!"

And off he went, muttering to himself.

"What the Hell did you do to piss off the old man?" Little George asked.

"Beats the living dog shit outta me!" I replied. "But, while he's chewing on me, he's leaving some other poor bastard alone!"

Little George stared at me, then laughed heartily. "R.C., for a honky white boy, you're all right!"

Little George and I worked on the docks for two weeks under the watchful eye of Big George and it made me sort of uneasy. He never said anything, but we were aware of his presence nonetheless.

Then one day Big George stopped me at the locker room door when I punched in. "You're working with Baby today," he announced, turned on his heel and stalked off without another word.

I hunted up Baby George, a hulking giant of a man in his early fifties and found that I was working with

dowels and bezels. "The Boss Man said you'd be here," was his only comment.

He began making bezels of several different sorts, then stepped back. "You do it."

So, I did. He watched me for several minutes, turned and walked off, leaving me alone. So, I did bezels all day, alone. I had no idea whether I was doing it right or not because no one was around to correct me if I wasn't! Quitting time, Big George was there. He looked at the pile of bezels I had done, nodded his head once. "Not bad for a white boy," was his only comment.

Next day, Baby was waiting for me. "Watch." And he went to work making pieces to fit the bezels I had made yesterday. He stepped back. "You do it."

Now there was one thing I had noticed about Big George and Baby George; they didn't waste too many words! Unlike Little George who loved to talk!

I made several parts while Baby watched. He grunted and walked off. Not knowing what I was supposed to do, I kept turning out parts all day. Again, right at quitting time, Big George was there to look over what I had done. "Humph, yuh shows promise," he grunted and stalked off.

I worked with Baby for two weeks, every day learning something new, with never a word nor a comment one way or the other from either man.

Finally, at the end of the second week, Baby turned to me. "Not bad. I seen worsen. Monday see the Bigga Boss." And that was it. In two and a half weeks with the man, he had not spoken more than fifty words and yet, he got his message across clearly. I sensed that had I been unable to follow his lead, I would have been on the docks for the next year or two!

On Monday, I got out of Chaz's old army jeep and entered the locker room to punch in and found Big George waiting by the time clock. "Humph, shining up to the Boss Man, hunh?" he growled.

"No, Sir, I'm staying at his house and he offered me a ride in to work, that's all."

"I got my eye on you, white boy!" he snapped peevishly. "So you'd better toe the line!"

"Yes, Sir," I replied. "Er, Baby said to see you this morning before I started work."

"Yeah, you're with Tiny in assembly." He turned and stalked off.

Tiny grinned. "Boy! You musta really pissed him off, R.C. ! I ain't never seen him bounce a man around like you!"

"Aw, he's just pissed because I rode in the old man's jeep."

"No, it ain't that," Tiny disagreed. "He's got something else chewing at his craw. I know how my great-grandpap thinks!"

"If you say so," I agreed. "Now, we'd better hustle afore we get chewed for being late to work!"

"Yuh gots a pernt!" he grinned. Now, where had I heard that before?

And so I went to work in assembly putting furniture together, a lot like when our house burned down and I helped my dad build replacements. I fitted and glued and clamped and was whistling merrily when I became aware of Big George watching me. "Morning, Boss!" I greeted.

"Humph, damned kids!" he snorted and went in search of Tiny.

At noon, Tiny and I went down to Lois' Luncheonette. Tiny ordered his to go, so I did too and we went back to the factory. It was a pleasant day in early June and the scent of the surrounding trees was intoxicating. Tiny and I dawdled along, eating from our bags and walked through the plant door just as the whistle blew. Of course, Big George was right there with his big old railroad watch and he was glaring at

us like we had killed his pet rattlesnake or something worse!

“Working hours be from eight to noon with a fifteen-minute break at ten. Then it’s back at one with a fifteen-minute break at three, then work till five. Work means you’re where you’re supposed to be, ready to go to work at one o’clock, not five after nor five to, one sharp! You turkeys got that?” he demanded.

“Yes, Sir,” Tiny squeaked. “It won’t happen again!”

“See that it don’t!” Big George growled and stalked off muttering to himself.

“Damn, what crawled up inside him and is eating at his craw?” I growled.

“Aw, he don’t mean nothing by it,” Tiny alibied affectionately, “it’s just his way of reminding us that he’s the Bigga Boss around here, that’s all.”

“He sure has a funny way of showing it!” I commented angrily.

“Hey, R.C., long’s you do your job and keep screw-ups to a minimum, he may grumble and groan and mutter and all that, but if he’s really mad at you, you’ll know it right off, believe you me!”

“Yeah, I heard him chewing out Jensen the other day when he broke the band saw slamming that oak log into it instead of pushing easy.”

“Like I said, when he gets a mad on, he shows it. He can’t help it!”

Business picked up and Big George started a second shift, putting Little George in charge and moving me to foreman of the day shift.

It was easy work for me, just like being Battalion Commander back in the day. I let my SarMajor, Baby George, drive the crew and I took credit for what he did.

Sometime in mid-June, I called Maxine's Diner for take-out, my favorite, hot pastrami on toasted rye bread with curly fries, extra crispy and a cup of hot chocolate with those little marshmallows on top. When I walked into the diner, I saw my order sitting in my usual place at the counter. I yelled out to Maxine, the lady behind the counter, "Hey! I thought I ordered it for take-out!"

Hearing no answer, I sat down, poured ketchup all over the fries, took a big bite out of half a pastrami on toasted rye, munched some fries and took a long swallow of hot chocolate. "Aah! Now that hit the spot!" I murmured as Maxine came out.

"Hey, Hot Shot! Whadd'ya think you're doing?" she demanded in surprise.

"Having my lunch, that's what," I grinned, "but I would have sworn I ordered it to take-out."

"You did, big boy!" she exclaimed holding up the take-out bag with my meal.

"Then, who ordered this one?" I stammered, embarrassed.

"Him, standing right behind you," she dimpled.

I turned and what I saw caused me to leap to my feet immediately, almost knocking the little guy right through the plate glass window behind us!

I saw a short, slender, long-haired blonde, blue-eyed male person (well, he was dressed sorta male-like) standing there and for a moment, I was rooted to the spot.

I mean a runaway Mack truck couldn't have budged me!

"Oh, I am so sorry!" I gasped, grabbing his arm to keep him from falling flat on his keister. "I didn't know...I thought...you like hot pastrami on toasted rye bread with curly fries, extra crispy and hot chocolate with little marshmallows floating on top and...and...like that?"

He smiled. "Guilty as charged. Hello, my name is Ronny McGrath, and you are..."

"Oh, I'm Royal Lawton, only all my friends call me R.C.," I blurted inanely.

He cocked his head to one side. "R.C., eh? I think I'll just call you Royal."

"You can call me anything you wish!" I stammered, blushing profusely.

"So now that you two have met, what do you want me to do with this?" Maxine asked, waving an arm in the air with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

Ronny took pity on me and grinned at Maxine. "Bring everything to the booth, Max, OK?"

"Sure, Ronny, anything for you!" she agreed, smiling with all her white teeth!

"Thanks, Max," he replied with a wide grin of his own. "You're a real doll!"

She grinned too. "Yep, a real life Barbie Doll!" she quipped. "You know, something you undress, play with, dress again and put away until the next time you want to play!"

He blushed at her implication and turned toward a near-by booth.

I followed him to the booth and slid into the seat opposite him while Maxine slid our meals before us. "Bon appétit," he smiled, taking a tiny bite.

I ate.

I was too tongue-tied to talk!

Where had this person been all my life?

He was exactly what I had been looking for, and here he was, my SarMajor's brother!

Oh, cruel fate!