

12SHORT.DOC 8-12-04

Tune in on this story at any stage. Makes no difference what page or what sequence. The cast is composed of Goat Whiskers the Younger, my brother Walter, and myself. All Noelkes, all striving for the lead part.

Let's just start at the San Francisco air terminal last month. Whiskers leads with his six-foot, four-inch height, taking strides beyond the goals of a Kentucky racing stable. I run a poor second. My brother tails along dragging his roll-on, trying to read a book review.

Last pole was the sixth landing elevator to pass over the new train station en route to car rentals. Whiskers knows the way and refuses to wait. Audio contact is impossible except at close range. Background noises from escalators and floor polishers isolate us into reading sign language in a melee of humanity too thick for contact.

Every time I look back to implore Walter to hurry, Whiskers intercepts the echo off his good right ear and speeds up. Other pedestrians fall to the outside of the turns, distressed by such epithets as: "GOSH-A-MIGHTY, WHISKERS, IF YOU DON'T SLOW DOWN WE ARE GOING TO LOSE WALTER!" or, "WALTER, FOR THE SAKE OF MY SANITY, PUT DOWN THAT LITERARY REVIEW AND CATCH UP BEFORE WHISKERS IS OUT OF SIGHT!"

At the finish line, we congregate by the rental desk in time to hear Whiskers announce he deserves a discount because of a relative working for the company. It was the first time Walter and myself were aware that a family member rents cars in Florida. Sensing fraud, I whisper to Walter, "Bro, the answer to any question is, 'I left it at home.'"

Had to repeat the directions until he understood that whatever deal Whiskers made renting the car, our drivers' licenses, credit cards, and proof of insurance were back home in a safety deposit box that even Houdini couldn't access. Reminded him if we had to make a run for it, we'd meet at the main post office in San Francisco. Also, to remember not to answer a page or pass through a gate photographing passengers. If necessary, to jettison his luggage (The plan developed in our formative years from being abandoned in strange towns while the Big Boss, our dad, played cards or followed the high life. Post offices were safe, dependable havens.)

Join us days later for breakfast at a comfortable outdoor dining place in Northern California. We sit at wide benches, Whiskers on the end, Walter directly across from me. Breakfast specials range from seared flank steak to a seafood broth in a bowl made of pastry. All other breakfast foods are on the menu, including such delicacies as eggs Benedict and fruits from nearby orchards and vineyards.

Now watch this: up comes a Vietnamese waitress with a red hibiscus tied in her hair by a green ribbon, dressed in green silk printed with brown patterns, as demure as a first-term Epworth League lady. The three diners (ourselves) become alert. The moment she asks for our order, Walter and Whiskers announce their diet is heart-healthy, opening with egg beaters, dry toast, alfalfa shoots, and dehydrated oats. But as a side, they ask for the flank steak, hash browns, blueberry pancakes and fried Polish sausage links.

Next, Whiskers says: "And he will have herb tea, dry cereal, skim milk, and a bowl of berries." I am so startled I freeze, staring the girl straight in the face. I suppose I nod as she writes down the instructions.

In shock, my mind roams all in italics: *I'm no sniveling mute unable to order my breakfast. I traveled alone in the Orient. Bowed low to buss the fingertips of dark-eyed Asian princesses. Rode a clipper ship in the Sumba Seas to islands of animistic worshipers primitive as the thatch in the roof of their huts. Floated down a wide, wide river in Borneo to the sounds of crocodiles flopping off the muddy banks, dodging sand bars and whirlpools in a hewn log canoe. And what's this stuff about not being able to order my breakfast?*

So you see what heart-healthy means. Order it for your companion. I ate the rice cereal topped with berries to the

sound of sausage casings forked open, releasing a rich odor of garlic and sage. I spooned red, black, and blue berries in fat-free milk, to be interrupted by "Please pass the maple syrup." The dry toast dried on my plate; the rice cereal became soggy. I sucked on a tea bag, hoping the paper might have been exposed to caffeine.

You understand now that there is no sequence to follow. You know also that we have a lost relative working for a car rental agency. Further, it should be easy to understand why our answers are the same and the post office is still emergency refuge.