

Final Run

by Patrick W. Burke

Douglas Forrett looks over the flight instruments one last time before he's satisfied he can engage the aircraft's autopilot. As he flicks the toggle switch, Doug notices his co-pilot Enrique's heavy Latin features wrinkling into a frown, while he taps on one of the cockpit's gauges with his forefinger.

"What's up?" Doug asks through his microphone. Because the plane has to be light and fast, it's been stripped down to its frame of all non-essential equipment; passenger seats, insulation, heaters and air conditioners are gone, and the engines make communication without headsets and microphones impossible. Doug sometimes muses that Ricardo would strip off the wings and engines if that would make the plane faster.

Enrique turns to Doug and shrugs. "I'm not sure, but I think the horizon is screwed up." He's talking about the plane's artificial horizon, a necessary navigational tool when a pilot becomes disoriented, or during night flight. Doug leans over, the gauge shows a slight tilt to the left, suggesting the plane isn't true with the horizon. Doug taps at it himself, but nothing happens.

"Well, the hell with it. We'll get it fixed in Phoenix." Doug says as he turns to look out his side of the cockpit. He stares at the thick, carpet-like floor of white and gray clouds rolling underneath. Doug looks up, squinting into the bright sun blazing down from the otherwise blue sky. His stomach is tense, but he keeps his face impassive when he turns to the front again.

From the corner of his eye Doug watches Enrique, who is studying another gauge. It looks like Enrique accepted his flippant response about the gauge at face value, and that is good. Doug is too hung over to squabble about a gauge, because, surprise surprise, he drank way too much last night.

But he's also very nervous.

Last night's news was not good. He was going to have to do something. Something desperate.

Doug reaches down between his boots, and grabs the warm thermos. The cockpit fills with the smell of coffee when he twists off the lid. He lifts the thermos to Enrique. This part has to work, if it doesn't he's a dead man.

"Coffee?"

Enrique looks at the offered stainless steel tankard for a moment before grabbing it from Doug's gloved hand, pouring himself a capful of the thick, rich, dark aromatic fluid. Enrique wraps his blunt fingers around the cup and takes his time lighting a cigarette.

Doug studies Enrique for a moment. It's obvious that he has become an addict of his own father's product. Thoughts of nothing but his next fix dominate his already polluted mind. Enrique will forget the gauge problem when he really starts jonesing.

As if Doug's thoughts are a catalyst, Enrique starts to fidget in his seat, compulsively gnawing on his already thrashed nails, puffing nervously on his cigarette. To Doug, it looks like Enrique's need for another jolt of cocaine is closer than he had expected.

A little less nervous, now that Enrique's thoughts are elsewhere, Doug checks the instruments again. The plane is an old surplus DC-3, purchased at a U.S. Government auction several years ago. A steady, reliable beast with no frills, Ricardo bought it after more than twenty years of dedicated service by the DC-1.

The gauges- except for the horizon- are working, and the plane is OK.

"How many are in the back?" Doug asks Enrique.

Enrique, sweating despite the ice cold air at 30,000 feet is obviously focused on his next blast from the White Pony.

"The normal... three," he answers irritably. "Look, I gotta piss."

Doug watches Enrique yank off his headphones, unbuckle his safety straps, before lurching out of the cockpit through the cabin door. Alone, he rubs his hands over his flight jacket. His heart has been beating very hard since they departed from Bogota two hours ago.

Can he go through with it?

Does he have the balls?

Ricardo would. Oh yes, he would.

Doug absently lights up a cigarette, and tries to will up the courage. Cigarette smoke drifts up curling in on itself when it hits the cabin ceiling. Doug stares at the cigarette in his left hand. He's been smoking since he was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. Fourteen years he thinks, Jesus, that's quite a bit of smoking. Maybe he should quit.

Doug sucks in more smoke.

Fuck that.

The cabin door opens again, only this time it's Francisco, Ricardo's favorite Lieutenant. He stands in the doorway like a wild animal searching for the trap. Finally, satisfied nothing is amiss, Francisco dodges the levers, handles and instruments within the cockpit,

sitting in Enrique's seat. Francisco never learned to fly, and remains mesmerized by the strange, almost sacred cockpit, and the magic it holds.

Doug, a very old, and burnt-out cracker-jack pilot, cannot remember ever experiencing such an emotion. There's been too many miles, too many drinks, too many... everything.

Francisco comes up, taking Enrique's seat each flight to pass the time with Doug during these long runs. Both know Enrique will be gone for some time.

Francisco puts the headphones on. "Douglasssss...." He always hisses Doug's name, his Latin vocal cords struggle with the Anglo name.

"Frank." Doug acknowledges, and offers his pack of Camels. Francisco pulls one out, lights up, and exhales the smoke through his nostrils.

Francisco, like other novices to flight, admires the unique beauty of the blanket of gray and white clouds, and the rising sun. He looks up to the sun, squints, and puts on his designer sunglasses. Doug, like all veteran pilots, put his on before they took off.

"Coffee?" Doug offers.

"Ah... yes please." Francisco reaches over his right shoulder and pulls a Styrofoam cup from the stack resting over the radio. Doug opens the thermos and pours more of the thick brew into the cup. They both lean back. Doug's eyes record the small bulge in Francisco's jacket pocket; that must be his automatic pistol.

Doug's eyes automatically drift forward to check all the gauges on the control board. His mind, with twenty years of flight experience, automatically processes the plane's vital systems, correctly concluding they are still functioning properly.

"How much are we bringing up this time?" Doug asks.

"Two hundred poundsssss."

Doug nods his head. Francisco's answer confirms his fear.

Last night's news was correct after all.

Icy fear stabbed at Doug's guts.

Francisco has never answered that question before. Never. This was a trade with a strict need-to-know standard, and Francisco was the enforcer. If he was talking about information that Doug had no need to know, then it was for one reason only. They mean to kill him.

He had a hard time not taking this personally as Francisco, sips some coffee.

"How long have you and Ricardo been together?" Francisco asks.

"Since I left United... about ten years." Doug flashes on his unceremonious firing when he had been caught stumbling from the commercial liner, blind drunk. Then, his license was permanently suspended, so he was reduced to flying puddle jumpers for South America Airlines, and other companies that didn't necessarily need a licensed pilot. He flew from places like Xzoteca to places like Belmopan, and Rio. Then Ricardo had asked Doug to fly for him.

Doug, who couldn't think of anything else to do but drink and fly, took the offer, flying whatever Ricardo wanted, mostly cocaine, but sometimes weapons, into the U.S.. This lasted for over ten years, ten good years.

But Francisco must know all this, how could Ricardo's second-in-command not know?

"Ever been tempted to do anything else?" Francisco asks.

"Nah...all I have ever wanted to do is fly. Say...I have a question for you. How does Ricardo set it up so we fly the plane into the U.S. without a problem...ever." Doug's heart is beating so hard, he wonders if it can be heard through his microphone, over the steady ear-splitting drone of the plane's engines.

Francisco continues smoking, as if he never heard the question. Doug gives up, leans forward, and complying with FAA regulations, adjusts the radio to its new frequency as the plane crosses into Equador's control. The small radar shows no other air traffic, only them. Francisco finishes his coffee, and holds his cup out, eyebrows raised.

Doug pours him another cup.

"How is your daughter?" Francisco asks.

Doug looks at the worn photograph taped to the left side of the cabin, near his pilot's seat. A very skinny red headed girl with missing front teeth is smiling, holding hands with a tall thin adult blonde; daughter and mother. Both are wearing shorts and halters, and stand on the water- starved lawn in front of a mobile home.

"She's starting fourth grade this year."

Francisco nods. "My two boys are enjoying school. But, I understand they are a little reckless with the girls."

Both men smile at each other. Francisco taps his cigarette, the ash swirls in the air.

"Did you enjoy your stay at Ricardo's?" he asks.

Doug inhales more cigarette smoke before he answers. "Yes, as always. He's good host. I think we had dinner with the Minister of Defense."

He pauses for a moment, studying his cigarette.

"Those guys can drink a lot of booze," he says.

Francisco smiles and nods. "Oh yes. But you kept up with them, No?"

"Yes...yes I did." Doug agrees. He has reconciled himself to his alcoholism. But he has never drank while flying since he was canned by United. The rest of the time, his only true friend is bourbon.

"Your drinking leads you to trouble."

"Well, I think it's not as bad as Enrique's monkey."

"True," Francisco agrees. "Ricardo is concerned."

"He should be. Enrique is losing control."

"It is not our affair."

Coming from Francisco this is more a command than a statement.

"It is if he gets us in trouble." Doug is amazed at himself, he's not backing down to Francisco, and he's not even drunk yet.

Francisco looks at Doug with his bottomless black eyes, and then turns back to the clouds.

"He will never let that happen. Ricardo blames Enrique's mother."

A flash of silky brown thighs, the screams of passion, another flash of garter, and Doug feels his groin stir.

"Why her?" He asks, trying to keep any emotion from his voice. Stay cool he warns himself, as he feels his thirst wake up, firing signals to his brain.

Doug unconsciously licks his lips, he's thirsty.

"Ricardo believes she has been unfaithful to him, and this... indiscretion has affected Enrique in a bad way."

Doug is amazed at his control. They had been so careful, how could Ricardo know? It didn't matter anymore, Doug knew, that it was doomed before it started. He had wanted

her when he first saw her, and after he had her, his hunger for her not only remained, but grew. With the hunger, came carelessness.

Doug's mind flashed on her, standing in front of the guest bed. Her white evening dress contrasted with her chocolate, flawless skin, it slides to the hardwood floor, leaving nothing but her nude, hungry body exposed to the tropical, night air. Her black hair cascades over her slim shoulders. Her body, something that any model would freely exchange for, moves with a leonine grace as she climbs into Doug's bed and then into his arms. Her hungry lips smother his...

Doug blinks, and finds himself back in the DC-3's cabin, with its engines roaring, carrying two hundred pounds of pure cocaine to some airfield in the Arizona desert. He turns and sees Francisco staring at him again with that appraising look in his eyes, only now, they seem to mock him.

Stay cool.

"Does he know who it is?" Doug tries to look and sound innocent. It's funny how he forgets how to do that when he's guilty.

"Of course he does." Francisco smiles, showing his crooked teeth.

His heart is beating at a normal pace, but Doug is growing warm. His face feels like it's sunburned when he asks in a voice that sounds far away, "Who...who is it?"

Francisco looks at Doug, who returns his stare. Francisco blinks, and turns forward again before he answers.

He knows.

Francisco smokes quietly for a minute. "Did you know," he turns to Doug, "that Ricardo finds participating in sex disgusting?...No? Well he does. He prefers to watch." Francisco looks back out the window, he's talking in a matter of fact voice, like he's discussing soccer scores with Doug.

Doug feels sick, his stomach lurches inside him, and the acid from his drinking last night sloshes around.

He doesn't feel good at all.

Francisco smiles, and continues as he admires the view.

"He married Amanda for window dressing. She was thirteen when he found her in Rio. I guess you can say she was a very popular young woman. She had already starred in a couple of movies." He glances at Doug, and winks. "I hear there were a few with animals in them."

Doug, an expert at being sick, now knows he will throw up, it's not a matter of if, but when.

"Anyway," Francisco continues, "Ricardo saw she was going to be very beautiful. But if he didn't take her out of that life, she would die soon, or even worse, lose her beauty. He made her an offer: marry him and do what he tells her, and she will live very well. She accepted the offer... lawyers tell me that's a contract." He shrugs.

Doug feels a noxious burp rising, and lets it escape through his nose. Bile threatens the back of his throat. His mind flashes on an image of her spread before him, her powerful, well trained hips thrusting against him. Then his imagination puts an animal in the picture, a dog. Bile, and his heavy breakfast lurch upward, forcing him to close his eyes, and swallow it back down.

Francisco, clearly enjoying himself, goes on like he hasn't noticed Doug's physical pain.

"Things were alright for a while, but after some time, Ricardo noticed his beautiful bride was distracted. One thing about Ricardo, he knows human nature, he tried to keep her satisfied, but after a few times, he just couldn't do it anymore. He did get her pregnant... one of life's little ironies. Ricardo hoped that being a mother would settle her down. And it did... for a while."

Doug feels sweat running down his body, saturating his old flight suit. His stomach is surprisingly calm for now. The two men sit in silence for a few minutes, and Doug speaks only when he feels sure his voice will be steady.

"What happened?" Doug asks.

"Oh, she started having affairs. Short, one night stands at first, but she became braver... or sloppier. Her needs developed into larger demands, both in time and volume. To the point even Ricardo couldn't ignore what was happening anymore."

"Why didn't he do something?"

Francisco reaches into his inside jacket pocket, pulls out a gravity knife, slides the blade out, and starts flipping it in the air, catching it expertly by the handle each time. Doug's eyes are drawn to the blade flashing in the sunlight as it twirls in the air.

"Oh he did," Francisco nods, "yes he did. See, Ricardo is a complex man. He knew that he could tolerate infidelity for a while, as long as it was discrete. But, you have to understand, he cannot deny his Latin roots. While he knew on an intellectual level that he had lead her to impropriety by his... inaction, his emotions were on fire. What drove him nearly insane was that he had no idea who she was fucking... he went crazy thinking it could be the man seated on the other side of his dinner table, eating his food, laughing at his jokes... screwing his wife, or was it his gardeners... maybe his own guards... what about his business partners... anyone... his imagination drove him crazy with hatred."

Enrique smiled to himself. "So he installed hidden cameras in all of the bedrooms on the property. Then, to show you how paranoid he was, he hired a homosexual private investigator to follow her. He was afraid a straight one may start fucking her, and give misleading reports. Anyway, I was with Ricardo when the investigator gave a report. The list is extensive... we were all surprised. I was embarrassed and ashamed for Ricardo."

A video camera. This means Ricardo knew about Doug and her as well. He feels a sense of vertigo, while against his own self-interest speaks again.

"How long has this been going on... and why are you telling me this?"

"Oh, he's known about you and his wife for some time now, but he needed your skills as a pilot. I'm telling you this because he wants you to retire. He thought about killing you, but he feels that this is a disservice to your family. This is your last time we will need your services. Enrique will take over."

A small part of Doug wants to believe Francisco's story. But he knows it's not true. No one retires from this business, especially under these circumstances. But, after the conversation he had last night with Ricardo's wife, he cannot believe what's happening... unless, the cameras don't have microphones.

Silent movies of sex.

Silent.

Doug felt a small surge of hope. If there are no microphones in the rooms then they wouldn't know she told him the truth about their plans for his retirement. She had lay her head on his thigh, stroking the inside of his leg as she told him she had overheard them talk about the special something they had planned for him.

Francisco takes another sip from the coffee.

There were no microphones in the rooms. If there were, Francisco wouldn't be drinking the coffee.

Keep him talking.

"Enrique's a junkie... well, an addict. He won't be able to fly planes within a year, let alone walk."

"This may be, but Ricardo feels it is time for change anyway."

"I don't understand."

"I know." Francisco glances at his watch, and speaks again, almost to himself, "it's done."

"What's done?"

"Ricardo knows the damage his wife has done to his reputation is irreparable. This is, as we Catholics say, 'the unpardonable sin.' Ricardo must show he is in control, and he is not a man that is weak to a woman... he sold his wife to slave traders from Africa. The trade took place an hour ago. She's probably on her way to the highest bidder. My guess is she will go back into movies." Francisco smiles. The knife somersaults in the air, flashing the sunlight, and lands in his hand. It goes up again.

Doug is incredulous. "What? He sold her?"

"Sure, she broke their contract." Francisco shrugs, and catches the knife. He blinks rapidly a few times before tossing the knife again. This time he misses the handle, and the blades flashes against his open palm, slicing the brown skin. The knife clatters to the metal floor, and Francisco stares at his open, bleeding hand.

"I haven't done that in years..." He mumbles to himself, the microphone picks the words up, transmitting them.

Doug, his heart racing again, sweating freely, and reeking from last night's alcohol does a miserable job feigning interest in his gauges.

"Done what?" he asks.

Francisco frowning, looking for his knife, answers. "Missed a toss like that-" He sits upright, eyes wide, and then they lower, his body visibly sags. He forces them open, and sits upright.

"You drugged the coffee." He says with no affect, almost with a certain wonder. Doug watches Francisco move like he's underwater. He closes his eyes and his hand, going for his pistol, sags, before he starts awake again. Anger burns in Francisco's eyes as he slowly works his hand to his holstered pistol.

Doug unbuckles his harness, his hands shaking from fear, or a hangover, and then lurches out from his seat. Francisco glares at him as he tries to do the same, but the drug now has a firm grip on him; working on his body just like Ricardo's wife, Juanita, had promised.

Francisco is now unconscious, slumped in the co-pilot's chair. Doug watches the blood from Francisco's self-inflicted knife wound run from his hand like oil running from the oil pan, pooling on the cockpit's metal floor. He reaches into Francisco's jacket, his fingers wrap around the butt of the automatic before pulling it out. He checks the action, ejecting the magazine to make sure it's loaded. Satisfied, he rams the magazine back home, shoving it down the front of his jeans. Doug pulls off his headset and the noise from the huge engines pulling the plane through the sky hits him like hammers. He can barely think.

After one last look at the instruments, then at Francisco, Doug exits the cabin, stepping into the main body of the plane.

The seats in the aircraft's thin, metal framed body have been taken out to make room for the cargo, so it's like an empty, ribbed tunnel, with nowhere to hide. As if the noise wasn't loud enough in the cockpit, it's loud enough back here to make Doug's ears feel physical pain as he surveys the length of the plane for the two guards assigned to watch the product.

They must know about Ricardo's intentions to kill Doug, so they will not be friendly. Doug pulls out the pistol, pointing it out in front of him as he searches the cargo area for a target.

Doug knew they must have planned to kill him for some time, and using Juanita was just an excuse. Ricardo had been different towards Doug the last couple of trips. Doug suspected that his 'retirement' had more to do with the need to keep fresh blood in the enterprise, or maybe to shut it down entirely and re-open it somewhere else. Different faces, different M.O., keeping everyone else off balance. Ricardo had mentioned his desire to retire a few times in the past, and this type of business isn't the kind one sells off, or just disbands. To shut down such a large smuggling operation one has to make sure there are no loose ends.

Like ex-employees.

Doug, his hangover temporarily gone, looks over the clear, twelve-by-twelve bags of cocaine, stacked about five feet high. The stacks are taped, and secured to the floor with rope, leaving just enough room for Doug to squeeze through.

The two guards are kneeling over Enrique, who is lying on the floor by the door leading to the small bathroom. It looks like Enrique's drug habit disagrees with the tranquilizer in the coffee. Despite noise, Doug tries to quietly approach them from behind, watching them tear open Enrique's shirt. Before Doug can raise the automatic, one of the guards glances up.

Doug freezes.

The guard sees him, his Zapata mustache curls around his leer, as he hits his fellow guard on the shoulder. Before Doug can react, a machine pistol appears in the first guard's hands. The other looks up at mustache, and then follows his gaze to Doug. Both trained killers jump to opposite sides of the craft, leaving Doug with no target.

Doug jumps behind the packages of cocaine. Sweat pours freely from his face, and he looks first to one side, then the other.

Nothing.

Shit, one could be climbing over the top of the coke, pistol pointing right at the top of his head...

Doug risks a glance up.

Nothing.

He peers over the top, keeping his pistol ready.

Nothing. Nothing but the stripped back of the plane.

They must be below his line of sight, Doug surmises, approaching him from either side of the packages. He has to do something soon, they're better at this than he is.

"This is fucked-up," he says aloud, but the noise from the engine never gives it a chance to be heard.

He looks around his small, too temporary hiding spot, and spots the closed hatch on the floor. It's the mechanic's access to the plane's under carriage. Doug transfers his pistol to his left hand, and, with his right, starts loosening the wing nuts securing the access panel. The bolts are surprisingly loose, turning easily in his right hand while his eyes shift from one side of the huge pile of package coke, to the other.

Where are they?

There are three nuts holding the hatch in place, and he has two off. The final bolt is stuck.

"Fuck." He feels his mouth say the curse, but he only hears the roar from the engines. Doug glances to his left, right, and above.

Where are they?

He returns his attention back to the final bolt, twisting hard enough to tear some flesh from his finger. He shoves his bleeding finger into his dry mouth, and looks to his left, right...

There's one.

Doug raises the pistol and squeezes off two rounds at the quarter face peering from the coke pile's right side. The face jerks back and a large pile of white powder and dust explodes from the package, swirling in the cool, drafty plane. He experiences a moment of doubt as to whether or not his pistol even fired because the plane's engines are so loud, but the gun is warm. Doug spins, keeping his pistol up, firing another round to the left side of the pile. More dust explodes from the product.

Doug smiles, Ricardo's gonna be pissed.

Yeah, well fuck him.

Cordite swirls with the airborne coke, filling Doug's nostrils with its iron stink.

He reaches down with his bleeding hand, ignoring the needles of pain ripping through his fingers as he strains at the last bolt. He figures he has about another thirty seconds, at the most, before they come at him again.

Sweat makes his fingers slip, bringing more pain, but the bolt spins free.

Without looking up, Doug lifts the panel, giving him some cover from the guards, before jumping down into the under carriage, twisting his ankle when he hits. He feels more than hears something snap, and pain races up his right leg. He looks down the length of the shadowy, undercarriage, running below the main compartments of the plane. It looks safe, but Doug can't be sure.

Ignoring the pain in his ankle, Doug reaches up with his left hand to pull the panel back into place, but it flies into his face, popping his nose. Someone shot at it, or kicked it. Without thinking or looking, Doug sticks the pistol up through the hole and fires off three more shots.

How many is that? he wonders.

Blood from his face drops onto the gun and the floor. Turning away from the mechanic's access, he scrambles on his hands and knees to the front of the plane, leaving a trail of blood. Once he's under the cockpit, he can climb up into it through that floor's access panel. There, he can lock the bullet proof door from the passenger compartment.

Under the access panel to the cockpit, he turns around and watches the rear's open access panel the one between him and the two guards.

It's clear.

He turns forward again, ready to tear these bolts off with his teeth if he must.

And stops.

There, there in the darker area, near the front landing structure, lays a bundle wrapped in something brown.

He knows who is in there.

He duck walks over to it, and then slowly unwraps it, staring into the open, lifeless eyes of Ricardo's wife, Juanita. The bullet hole is small and neat, centered between her eyes, and above her nose. The gun was near her face when the shooter pulled the trigger

because powder burns score her once beautiful, sharp featured face. Doug re wraps the shroud around her.

Movement.

One of the gunmen jumps down through the access way from the cargo area.

Doug jerks the pistol up, firing twice. Flashes of return fire scar his vision. Something hits Doug's right shoulder, spinning him around. He hits part of the plane's landing structure with his arm. Disoriented, he clumsily turns around again, spotting the shooter, who lies in a heap where he fell.

The plane hitches and sways. The plane's autopilot has disengaged. This only happens under one of two conditions: either someone has switched it off and now pilots the plane, or the autopilot has confronted something necessitating a real pilot, and turned itself off. Judging from the sway of the plane, Doug knows it's the latter.

He crawls to the access panel leading to the cockpit, and looks at it for a moment.

Maybe someone's up there.

Francisco?

Doubtful, that narcotic in the coffee is supposed to last for some time.

Enrique?

Maybe. Does cocaine burn the narcotic off at a faster rate?

The other gunman?

Doug tries to remember if he locked the cabin door behind him, and cannot recall. He thinks he did, but he just isn't sure.

The plane descends, and this makes up Doug's mind. He has to risk it, otherwise the plane will crash, and the least he can do is make sure he doesn't crash the plane into a city, or town.

He reaches up with his battered hands, and starts working the bolts, wincing each time he touches the cold metal. It takes longer to open this one, and twice his fingers slip, tearing more of his skin, and ripping a fingernail to the quick. His left shoulder signals that a deep, debilitating pain is coming, his arm's movement is already restricted. Finally, the pain in his left hand forces him to finish turning the remaining bolt with his bleeding right hand.

He risks a glance over his shoulder. Where's the other guard?

After what feels like an eternity, the last bolt slips free. Doug pushes the panel up, and without giving himself the chance to chicken out, stands, lifting himself into the cockpit, scraping his already painful shoulder in the process. Pain shoots through him like a large bullet tearing through his flesh.

The cockpit, with the exception of unconscious Francisco, is still empty. Doug's shoulder is now on fire, he can feel the bullet inside him jamming his bones when he tries to move his arm. Something in his arm pops, making his vision dim, he sees stars. When his vision clears, there is a black edge that blocks out half of what he used to see.

He's losing too much blood.

As Doug slowly works his way back to his pilot seat, his mind is already processing what the gauges are telling him, and the status of the plane itself.

The first problem is the altitude, the altimeter tells him the plane is just below 5000 feet. Obviously fucking dangerous in such a mountainous area. Doug goes through the procedures to bring the altitude up without putting too much stress on the plane's frame. Too much force will tear the wings off the fuselage, and the plane will fly like a swimming pool. Doug's hands leave blood trails on the instruments and controls as he desperately tempers the need for height with a fear of putting too much stress on the plane.

The DC-3, normally a very forgiving plane, responds sluggishly, and Doug notices the fire warning light for engine number two flash.

"Shit."

He looks outside the front windshield, turning his head to the side to see engine two. Sure enough the engine is on fire and trailing black smoke as the fire consumes the fuel. Doug turns off the fuel pump to engine two, and the plane lurches, dips and rolls to the side as the thrust from that engine vanishes. Doug, using both wounded hands, tries to control the plane built to fly on two running engines, with only one. He gives engine one more power, and slowly the plane shudders level again, and almost reluctantly, resumes a steady position with a minor list.

Using the extinguisher on engine two may freeze up number two for good, but the engine can restart after the flames die out. Doug looks at his INS (navigational system) and quickly determines the plane is way off course, heading west, and is now flying over the Pacific ocean. Consulting the plane's map, but before computing how much range he has with the fuel he is suddenly afflicted with uncontrollable shuddering.

"Not now," he complains.

A memory sears across his fading consciousness. His first flight instructor, a grizzled warrant officer named Camarillo, a veteran of the Korean war and as mean as viper piss, once said about what to do in a crisis situation.

"Look, fuck-face, when you're in the shit and going to crash, don't panic. Try everything I teach you to get out of the shit. If you do crash, then you'll have plenty of time to panic."

Well, Doug thought, he's following that advice now. He looks at his shoulder, and sees the bullet hole for the first time. He must have been struck by a bullet from the man he killed underneath. As he brings his hand to his shoulder he notes his left hand is a mess as well. Then he remembers, when he was trying to close the access panel in the passenger area his hand flew back, hitting his face. A bullet must have gone through his hand, forcing it back and into his own face.

Doug starts laughing.

He broke his own nose.

Like any alcoholic worth his or her salt, Doug has a secret stash for emergencies such as this one. With his undamaged right hand, he reaches into his previously ignored flight bag. He finds a bottle of "Old Grandad," painfully opens it, and then drinks half of the bottle. Doug sighs, and leans back into his flight chair, as he feels the warmth flow from his throat, to his stomach, and outward. Ah yes, he thinks, this is much better. The bottle nestled comfortably in Doug's crotch, he lights a cigarette, and reflects on his situation: one engine down, bodies all over the plane, a shit-load of dope on board, and limited fuel, what the hell is he going to do? Then he remembers Juanita.

Ricardo had her killed, and put her on board, of that he is sure. But why have Francisco lie? Why did Francisco lie to him about that slavery bullshit? Doug smokes as he tries to puzzle through what was supposed to happen. The alcohol is a small respite from his body's pain; blood continues to seep from his shoulder and hand.

Ricardo is retiring, Doug thinks, everyone knows that. So retirement needs peace. Peace from competitors, and the Law. Ricardo holds the role of Patron over most of the other smugglers, so he doesn't have to worry about them. That leaves making peace with John Law. His thoughts want to race ahead, but the superficial clarity from the booze helps him stay focused and work his thoughts, step by step.

So, how would Ricardo get rid of his wife, who is into affairs and intrigue, and make sure that the U.S. doesn't swarm in on him in a year... or two, from now?

He makes a deal, that's what he does. Like selling out a plane full of dope, with a dead body or two. And for added insurance he scares the shit out his alcoholic pilot, so that he will go willingly to prison. Doug looks at Francisco, still unconscious.

And what about him?

Doug searches Francisco, and finds a folded piece of paper in his jacket's breast pocket. A frequency, and call signs, and a name scrawled in Ricardo's script, Agent Fitzgibbons. So, Francisco uses the pre-arranged call signs to agents waiting for the big bust. Dummy Doug lands the plane and is arrested for so many crimes that he never, ever, sees daylight. Francisco, and the rest, as arranged, walk away.

Doug looks at the temperature gauge for engine two, and satisfied the temperature is cool enough, restarts the engine. He watches it through the windshield as he pushes the ignition. It starts up quickly, but is much weaker than it should be. Doug suspects an errant bullet from the exchange caused the fire, and permanent damage. The engine may last, but it's running rough and a little hot.

Doug pulls out his map again, he has just enough fuel to do what he needs to do. He turns the plane, gradually so he won't disturb whatever god is protecting him and engine two, back in a southeastern direction. Now, he has to check the rest of the plane; there is another guard, and Enrique to deal with. After checking the gauges, and some final adjustments, Doug re-engages the plane's autopilot.

Doug reloads the pistol with the second magazine he found on Francisco, and after a fierce struggle with Francisco's inert body, binds his hands with old parachute cord from his flight bag. He opens the cabin door again.

The second gunman's fate is now clear: Doug sees him on the floor, dead. Apparently, one of Doug's wild shots through the passenger access way hit him in the chest. Doug notes bloody bubbles still coming out of Zapata mustache's open, sucking chest wound. If he's not dead, he will be in minutes.

Doug steps over the dead or dying man, works his way around the cocaine, and discovers Enrique is no longer where he last saw him.

Doug sways on his feet, as his body, despite the alcohol, feels the effects of the two bullet wounds and blood loss. He turns around, and his eyes settle on an open bag of cocaine, its contents spread across the metal floor.

Enrique's close.

Doug turns around in a full circle looking for a hiding place.

Nothing.

The hair on his neck is standing up, and his body is screaming for him to return to the cockpit and then lock the door behind him.

He turns.

Something kicks at his lower back, causing him to fly forward.

His face lands into the packaged cocaine, some of the crystalline powder invades his mouth and nose. Doug no longer feels any pain from last night's drinking in his stomach. He looks down, and sees a very large hole to the left side of his stomach, an exit wound from a bullet. He knows he should be greatly distressed by this latest turn of events, but with the dope, booze and loss of blood it doesn't really matter, anymore. Besides, he knows where Enrique is hiding. He's in the small bathroom. Probably doing another line.

Strangely detached from any emotion, Doug pushes himself up a little and inspects his blown out stomach. This is his death, he is dead. No body can withstand all this, and survive.

"Shit."

Doug is grateful for one thing: the damage has also short circuited his ability to feel any more pain.

A gun's hot metal barrel touches the side of his head.

"Get up, asshole!" Enrique yells into his ear.

Doug uses both hands to keep his destroyed guts inside, as he stands.

"Walk to the cockpit!" Enrique's lips brush against Doug's ear.

He lurches to the cabin. Enrique helps by shoving him forward whenever he wavers. Back inside the cabin, Doug collapses into to pilot seat, and Enrique manhandles Francisco from the co-pilot seat, dumping him onto the floor behind them.

Doug now feels pain everywhere. His guts push against his hands, wanting to leave the confines of his tortured body, but surprisingly, his intestines themselves are not in any pain. He looks down, at the sausage-like tubes weakly strain against his fingers. If he releases his hold, his guts will spring out like springs from a can. He doesn't want that.

"I'm dying, let me finish my bourbon...it's on the floor...let me die drunk."

"Yeah, sure...what the fuck." Enrique is wild, but even in his delirium he can see Doug is no longer a threat.

Doug reaches down for the bottle, he can't find it, but what he does find is Francisco's gravity knife. Without thinking, his fingers wrap around the handle as he brings the gleaming blade up into the light, and right into Enrique's throat.

The instrument panel, and windshield is suddenly coated with Enrique's blood as it sprays from his neck. Doug falls back into his seat, keeping his eyes closed. Waiting for the final shot, and peace. It doesn't come.

After a minute, and then two, Doug opens his eyes to find Enrique dead, his eyes open, and his throat still holding the knife. Where Enrique's blood first exploded from his neck, it now steadily flows, and, then like a river in summer, trickles as the pressure decreases. His side of the cabin is coated in his blood. The coppery smell of Enrique's blood fills the cabin.

Doug rights himself, causing half his intestines fall out of his body, onto the floor. Funny, he thinks, there is still no pain from his intestines. His vision is fading, and he squints at the panel instruments for a while before realizing the plane is now very near his target.

With almost numb fingers Doug finally finds his bourbon bottle. He lifts the heavy bottle to his lips, and swallows the rest of the amber fluid. He laughs as he wonders whether it will travel to his guts now splayed out on the cockpit floor. He continues to laugh as he remembers warnings from friends and family that he will die from his alcoholism. How fucking ironic, Doug thinks bitterly. His attention is distracted to the blinking yellow light telling him he is now close to the latitude and longitude of his destination.

Doug, using the last of his energy, dis-engages the autopilot, grabs the control stick with both hands, and triggers the radio.

Keeping his voice as calm as he can, he speaks into the microphone.

"Big Duke Six... this is Runner... come in... over."

Ricardo keeps a radio operator on duty on his compound.

"Runner... Big Duke Six is here... uh... he wants to know what's going on."

Doug, his vision failing, can just see the compound's main house, he can imagine Ricardo, in his smoking jacket looking at the operator, as he sips an after dinner drink.

Doug, flicks the switch to transmit, and points the wounded plane directly to the main house. He takes a long sober look at the small cheap photograph taped to the cockpit wall before transmitting his final words.

"Tell Ricardo his family is coming home."

The locals still remember the explosion that came from the plane smashing into the Patron's mansion. It took three days for the fires to go out.