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DATELINE: KEY WEST

by Larry Freeman

The yellow runway lights at Key West airport were barely visible. They mingled for awhile with the blue taxiway lights before trailing off along the black runway into the evening mist. What remained of an arctic cold front was thrusting cold Canadian air into the tropical blanket that shrouds the Caribbean shorelines of the most southern Florida Keys.

The cold air above steadily squeezed moisture from the saturated air below, and scattered fine molecules of water in gray wisps across the island's shores. Sitting behind the steering wheel of my Palm Beach, I watched as tiny droplets formed, gathered strength, then straggled in rivulets down the gentle curves of the windshield.

Suddenly, the darkness roared. Life stirred, shattering murky vapors that enveloped the taxiway beyond. Alternating bursts of power cut the fog-drenched silence as the gray shape of an aged DC-3 surged forth. Twin props cleared a wispy path toward the welcome mat next to the passengers' unloading zone.

This was Bogart country, film land, Key Largo to Key West. An area just south of Miami where the Florida mainland loosens its grip, releasing a two-hundred-mile spurt of islands scattered in a line of splashes as if a giant hand had skipped a clutch of stones across the waters leaving puddles of land in their wake.

The Spanish called them cayos. Small bits of tierra scattered among the waves. They skidded west toward Cuba creating a screenwriter's romantic paradise, portraying an infamous setting for some of film land's finest fantasies and a haven of the arts. Even Casablanca's closing airport scenes seemed to have been transported into the fantasy setting before me.

I chuckled as a long-legged blond strode forcefully forward from the airline office located in one corner of a broad, dull-painted, double-door hangar. She carried two taxi wands, which were carefully directing the historic, tail-wheel aircraft toward its parking space. Long light strands lifted,

bouncing gently at first, then more forcefully, as gusting swirls of prop wash approached, then settled quietly in the descending silence as the pilot cut the magnetos.

The blond, I knew, was a guy. A pilot in drag. We had met in the lounge the night before. He hadn't spun a DC-3. Commercial pilots try not to do that. It upsets the passengers. But I had. It was a test pilot's curiosity. And that had brought an invitation for a free ride around the islands discussing various upgrades in the famous aircraft's systems since its first days of flight, plus a confidential insight into tonight's unusual, unfolding scene — an in-house joke to mark the incoming crew's first flight to this nostalgic, open-air theater.

"Welcome to Key West," I thought, as the passengers started to disembark. "There's a lot of Hollywood still here." Eva, my Dutch-Rhodesian spouse, was last down the steps of the plane.

We had come to explore the culture of this particular key, to bear our senses to the unique community of arts and performing arts, and to enjoy the picturesque tropical setting, stretched on a Caribbean canvas framed in palms and fringed in bits of coral, limestone and calcareous oolite.

Eva and I often do this, planning to rendezvous in unusual places. She, flying over the top of the nation's highways; me, catching a few weeks of bachelor seclusion, winding along the ribbons of roads below in my Palm Beach — a fortnight of contemplations. The rendezvous are always fun — rediscovery, or new discovery of unusual places, different cultures, interesting people, enjoying being gypsy.

The Palm Beach had been good to me on this trip. The learning curve was slow but rising. Finally, I'd taken the initiative to ward off predictable problems, and pave the way for the more enjoyable fantasies that excite the dreams of those who explore in motorhomes. When the Palm Beach first appeared in the budget, I didn't know what to

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