

Note: This story is a rewrite of one of my favorite life episodes taken from my book, *Red Beans and Ripcords*.

Great Expectations

Everyone knows the feeling. You build a thing up in your mind, and your world comes crashing down when it turns out to be not at all what you expected.

In the early 1960's, when I arrived in Hammond, Louisiana, nearly penniless with pretty much just the clothes on my back and a very used skydiving rig slung over my shoulder, to begin my first job as a skydiving instructor, I had no money to find a place to live and barely enough money to keep myself fed.

So, feeling sorry for me and knowing cheap and desperate labor when they saw it, my new boss and his wife offered me as salary a small weekly allowance, \$15, as I recall, a couch to sleep on in a combination classroom and equipment shed adjacent to the skydiving center's office and hanger; that along with three meals a day, either at their caretaker's house on the airport or on a tab down at the M&M Drive-In where I survived day-in and day-out on hot roast beef sandwiches. Most of my weekly \$15 stipend went for beer.

Some time later, the decision was made at Southern Parachute Center that I had served enough time sleeping on the fold-out couch and the center owners starting paying me enough to find a place to live. After all, I had just gotten my pilot's license – a step up in the world of skydivers – and it didn't look good to the visiting jumpers who frequented the center to have your pilot and first jump instructor stumbling out of the equipment room, half-dressed, un-shaven, un-showered, bleary-eyed and yawning every morning. It just didn't inspire confidence, even if the days visiting jumpers showed up at the drop zone and stumbled out of their tents or cars or VW micro buses half-dressed, un-shaven, un-showered, bleary-eyed and yawning, not to mention half-drunk and hung-over.

Just prior to that, I had fractured my leg during a landing, not by landing but by stepping in a hole in the ground near the target *after* I had landed. It required a mid-calf cast and several weeks of light duty which consisted mainly of manning the telephone in the front office. To pass the time, I mostly read magazines and listened to the local F.M. rock-and-roll station.

Everyday, the station held a contest whereby listeners, if they recognized the first few bars of a song and were the first caller to identify it, he or she would win a prize. The prizes differed day-to-day, for example, free hamburgers at the local greasy spoon, free promotional 45 r.p.m records that the station

didn't want anyway, free manicures at Minnie's Klip and Kurl, buy three tires, get one free at Cooter's Gas Station and Fruit Stand, those sorts of things.

I got very good at dialing all but the last digit of the station's telephone number and holding my finger in the rotary phone's dial, then releasing the dial and the last digit when I recognized the song being played. In fact, I was the World's Champion at it winning the contest nearly everyday. I knew the world of rock-and-roll music pretty well back then.

Then the day came that I had healed sufficiently enough to jump in the center's courtesy car, a loose collection of parts and mismatched fenders that could nearly, legally, be called a 1962 Buick, and trailing a haze of bluish exhaust smoke, I roared and backfired my way to the radio station to collect my unwanted phonograph records and a handful of gift certificates for a lot of stuff that I really didn't want or need, except for the hamburgers, that is. It was at the station that I met Eddie, the station manager. Eddie was a Hammond native, a non-jumper, a non-pilot, about my age, but an all around great guy and we hit it off immediately and became friends, drinking and carousing buddies, actually. We had exactly the same macabre sense of humor, immensely enjoyed the local dating scene, and we were always on the look out for the next stupid thing to do. Eddie also played in a local rock band and bands are notorious chick magnets which supplied an ongoing supply of girls to date.

I found an apartment in town and to help defray the rent, Eddie became my roommate. There came the time after my leg had healed that everybody, my boss and his wife and all the regular jumpers had gone to compete in the National Parachuting Championships in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I was left behind to man the phones and to fly the occasional jumpers who drifted by.

One day, while everyone was having a ball in Oklahoma, a funeral home in New Orleans called and asked if I'd be willing to fly up to Memphis, Tennessee, and pick up a body and fly it back to New Orleans for burial. "You betcha!" I answered. We were all starving and nearly broke. The center coffers were dry and so were mine, and I would agree to fly anything but drugs to make extra money. I got the rest of the instructions from the funeral home and hung up.

A plan hatched!

Eddie was always bugging me to fly him somewhere for fun. He had made one jump but had never flown anywhere far away. I picked up the phone and called Eddie at the radio station. "Hey, man! I just got a call from a guy who wants me to fly up to Memphis and pick up his two daughters who are going to college up there and bring them back to Hammond. Wanna tag along?"

"Be there in fifteen minutes!" he responded excitedly, and he hung up with a loud click. In minutes, Eddie came barreling around the corner and jumped out of his car, shaving kit in hand, almost before the car had come to a stop.

Prior to Eddie's arrival, I had gone out to the airplane, a Cessna 170 which was one of our primary airplanes and installed the co-pilot's seat. Of course, there was no back seat as the 170 was a jump airplane. My plan was

that when we got to Memphis, I would take out Eddie's seat, the co-pilot's seat, and place it behind mine loose on the floor. Then I would remove the right door and load the funeral home stretcher over the wing struts and place it on the open space of the cabin alongside Eddie and myself.

I intended to load the stretcher and the body so that the body's head would be to the rear, adjacent to Eddie. I had been told that the deceased was an elderly woman who only weighed about 110 pounds. Prior to take-off, the weather was deteriorating quickly, and I told Eddie to jump in. Once in the airplane, Eddie wanted to know where the back seat was. "Oh!" I said, "The girls will have a lot of baggage, they can sit on top of it." That satisfied him and I shoved the throttle forward and we took off.

En route, the weather had really soured, so much so that at one point I had slid over the Mississippi River to get below the cloud deck and navigated northward following the river. At times, due to low ceilings, we were below tree top level. Eddie was nervous. Less than midway to Memphis, I had to land at Vicksburg due to low fuel and the bad weather. The weather was so rough, we decided to overnight in a local motel. I slipped away from Eddie and called Memphis and told them we'd be there in the morning. He was still none-the-wiser.

The next morning we landed at Memphis. While taxiing in, I asked Eddie if he would jump out at the small terminal and go get us an egg sandwich at the flight line grill; then I told him that I was going to taxi to the other side of the airport and load up the girls. I also told him that when "they" were loaded, I would taxi back around and pick him up.

Where I was going, Eddie couldn't see. As he got out, I also told him to bring me a carton of chocolate milk. I then taxied around the corner and found the waiting hearse. The funeral home folks helped me load the body in the airplane. The picture is, I'm left front seat, Eddie will sit behind me. The stretcher with the body covered with a purple funeral home blanket, will lie along the entire length of the right side of the cabin floor. I put the cabin door back on and taxied around to where Eddie was waiting with the egg sandwiches.

I almost couldn't contain myself as Eddie ran up to the cabin and opened the door. When he looked inside, his face turned two shades of ashen white and he jumped back a foot or so and dropped the bag containing the sandwiches. "Where the hell are the girls!?" he hollered over the sound of the engine. "Oh!" I said, "One of 'em ain't coming and this one's not feeling so good. So, we're just taking her home." He was now frozen in place. "Come on. Get in. She ain't gonna bother you, I promise." Little did he know.

He just stood there, head down, chin on his chest, shaking his head for a second or two, then he flipped me the bird, picked up the bag and crawled over her and sat down. "Where's my sandwich?" I asked. He silently handed me the sandwich which was wrapped in wax paper and the carton of chocolate milk. I put the sandwich in my lap. I would eat it en route. Then, I took the milk carton, reached over and repositioned the body's legs so that there was a small cavity in the blanket where I placed my milk so it wouldn't tip over during take-

off. This horrified Eddie. I heard him gasp over the sound of the engine. I had an ear-to-ear grin on my face that he couldn't see. This was going to be a hilarious show.

I then taxied toward the active runway stopping short of the runway to do my pre-takeoff run-up making sure everything was right with the engine. Assured that all was good, I released the brakes, peered all around looking for any traffic in the pattern, and seeing none, I taxied out on to the active runway before stopping momentarily.

"You ready?" I shouted to Eddy.

"You're an asshole!" was the response.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'" I said, giggling under my breath.

"FINE!" said Eddie, bluntly and loudly. You know, in the same matter-of-fact, resolute tone-of-voice that a woman might use to let you know automatically that you, pal, are in deep doo-doo over something. I laughed and eased the throttle forward and began rolling down the runway.

I knew Eddie had an unreasonable fear of death. He was now wide-eyed and silent huddled all the way up against the cabin wall with his face all but pressed against the plexiglass window. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that he was shooting quick glances down at the body's outline beneath the stretcher blanket. "Relax!" I hollered, "Sit back and enjoy the ride." He didn't. And wasn't going to. I was now climbing for as much altitude as I could get – there's a reason for that.

Here is what Eddie didn't know. When an airplane carrying a dead body climbs, if the corpse has not been embalmed, like the old woman under the blanket, the corpse may start to do funny things. As the altitude increases, it might belch, or pass wind or sometimes twitch - involuntarily, mind you, and not in any particular order. If a body is in a casket, you'll never know. But merely laid out on a stretcher with a funeral home blanket spread over it, some of the body's movements can be quite visible – and startling. The first time you experience this phenomena, it will raise the hair on the back of your neck. And I was climbing not only to see the show that would hopefully unfold, but for another reason as well. I was going to put the airplane on the "step."

By climbing to a higher altitude than your intended cruise altitude, you can then level-off and trim the bird to very slightly lose altitude over a very long distance thereby using less throttle than you would normally have to use to maintain cruise speed. That's called the 'step.' Your airspeed is also slightly higher making the trip somewhat faster. My reasons were two-fold: to keep from having to refuel again and to scare the crap out of Eddie.

As I passed through about 9,000 feet the old girl went off for the first time with her left arm involuntarily lifting a few inches underneath the blanket. Eddie saw that and screamed "It's alive!!" I pretended not to hear. "IT'S FUCKING MOVING!" he yelled. I looked back and Eddie was now in an upright fetal position with both legs drawn to his chest with his arms folded over them. There was a raised vein on his forehead. I could hold it no longer. I was nearly bent over in peals of laughter, which only pissed Eddie off because he knew then that I had gotten him.

“You ain’t seen nothing’ yet...” I said between high pitched giggles.

Just then she farted, loudly. Eddie screamed like a little girl. I turned as far as I could in my seat and reached back and put my hand on his arm. “Eddie! Take a breath and relax. You’re gonna faint.” He unfolded some. “She’s quite dead, I assure you. I’m messing with your head.”

“Son-of-a-bitch!” he retorted. “You son-of-a-bitch!”

“Bodies do that.” I laughed. “Enjoy the ride.”

“So there were never any girls in the first place?” he yelled. I said, “Nope.” and I started to laugh again. “Shut the hell up!” he hollered.

I had reached about 11,000 feet by then, and I leveled off and set the trim for a slight descent. I had forgotten that I was still climbing because I was laughing so hard. Now, anytime you fly over 10,000 feet without supplemental oxygen - which I didn’t have - the adverse effects of hypoxia can happen, like passing out. I was getting light-headed. Descending cured that.

Well, I wasn’t done with Eddie yet. After a time, he began to realize there was nothing about a dead body to be afraid of, and he calmed down a bit. The remainder of the flight was fairly uneventful until we got to within about 80 miles or so from Hammond where I would drop off Eddie, refuel, and proceed on to New Orleans. My radio had gone out and the weather had become so fierce that I was flat-hatting, down low on the deck, circling city water towers so I could read the names of towns painted on them to determine where I was.

This action returned Eddie to a state of panic. I had stopped laughing and feeling a little sorry for him, I apologized, even though I didn’t really mean it. I tried to reassure him that everything was going to be all right. But every time I buzzed a water tower, he would return to his fetal position saying things like “There’s already one god damned dead person here and I don’t want to join her!!” That would only cause me to begin laughing again, further pissing him off.

I made the decision to land at McComb, Mississippi, not too far from Hammond to wait out the weather. As I lined up for my final approach to land at McComb, Eddie thought we were crashing and started praying outloud which sent me into fits of high-pitched laughter.

He had had enough. Once on the ground, Eddie popped the door open, jumped over the body, hopping out even before the engine stopped. I was busy shutting things down, and when I looked up, Eddie was stomping across the tarmac at a fast clip. I hollered, “Eddie! Where are you going?!”

He spun around and walking backwards, quick-time, he yelled, “HOME!” I watched as he hailed a taxi at the small airport terminal. I would later learn he went to the bus station and hopped on a Greyhound back to Louisiana. I later reimbursed him for the ticket.

It took Eddie three months to really forgive me. For me, it was three agonizing months of watching over my shoulder for the inevitable payback. I checked my bed every night for snakes or short-sheeting. I cautiously put my pants on every morning not knowing what he might have put in them when I was asleep. I was distrustful of everyone, even friendly waitresses or bartenders

at our favorite haunts. Throughout it all, Eddie was cheerful and cordial, and acted as if nothing had ever happened; further making me suspicious that soon the hammer would drop. It never did. That was Eddie's way of paying me back. Three months of suspense and paranoia. I kept apologizing and he would just smile innocently and say, "It's okay. Don't worry about it." Finally, I had had enough and came out and asked him what he had planned? He just laughed and said, "Nothing. You've already done it to yourself."

"We even?" I asked.

"Yep." he said.

And that was the end of it.

When I caught up with Eddie many years later, I called his office and his secretary asked my name. I told her. She exclaimed, "Oh! You're the guy that took him flying to get the dead body." It was 30 years later and he was still telling the story. It's one of my favorite log book entries.