

## Thistle

My name is Bill Gorman. I'm the great, great, grandson of Lt. Col. George Gorman, a decorated union officer in the American Civil War.... but more about him later.

Right now I'm flying some cargo and beneath me at 18,000 feet are the lights of Kansas City. (I often think flying over cities at night that I should have invested in light bulbs. Damn, what a sight....even after nearly 40 years of doing this. Those sparkling, points of light still seem magical.)

This is a Fed X flight and I'm flying one of their Cessna Caravan's. At this altitude those lights are recognizable; a power plant, a gas station, the highway, a mall, etc. The Caravan cruises at mid-altitudes – more like real flyin ; not like those jets at 32,000. In the cockpit (now there's a word for ya! Is it where chicken's fight or just a place where arrogant sons-a-bitch, know-it-all's congregate?), the instrumental panel, handling and feel are very much the same as a 172. We're averaging about 250 knots with a light 12-knot tailwind. These are solo flights and I almost always get the night flights; probably because of seniority and because they are the ones I most often request. The kids call me the Vamp. Our course is zero nine zero, that's due east for those of you who haven't looked at a compass for a while. We're being pulled by a very reliable 677 HP Pratt & Whitney turbo and our

estimated time of arrival is 7 a.m. eastern standard time, so I'll start seeing signs of sunrise in about half an hour. Whatever you say about beautiful sunsets, to me, sunrises are definitely more hopeful. I've been saying "we're" and "our" not because I'm a queen, but because of my somewhat unique cargo. My cargo's a coffin, boxed up, of course. I sometimes think that, up here is as close as any of those bugger's will ever get to heaven. This Flight started in Albuquerque where I picked up this guy (probably some distant relative). Sometimes, my people end up settling out west and when they pass, sometimes, if they've got the means, and planned ahead, they come home for the big sleep.

Many nights, through the years, I've made similar trips; usually with the same silent cargo to the same destination...good old sunken Lunken. Good old Cincy. This job, as romantic, exciting and fulfilling as some of you may be thinking, wasn't where I thought I'd end up. At a very early age, I began to realize that the track of my life was different than most. You see, I was born into a Traveling family. Some of you may know what I mean by that. It's all about the family, the history and traditions; being constantly on the move....or make....or whatever.

From what I've been told, the Travelers have been around since the beginning. You know, pre-Stonehenge, if you catch my drift. The Eastern European branch of the family are called Gypsies or Roma. Through the millennia, governments, tribes and agencies have tried to get rid of us, often for completely unjustified grievances.

Hitler comes to mind in recent history. But when anyone is ever looking for good music, a good party, or just a good time, we often come to mind.

We travelers who trace our Celtic roots back to Northern Europe and the British Isles recognize that we made our great split with our Gypsy cousins about a thousand years ago in the vicinity of what is now called Hungary. We were, have been, and always will be, in our hearts at least, hunter gatherers, though some families have bought into the prevailing culture or society, and established themselves – some becoming great business leaders and even politicians. Some, today actually manage and own Fortune 500 companies.

That being said, my family unit, our little caravan of two station wagons, with me, Becky my sis, mom, dad, Aunt Alma, Aunt Sibyl, and Uncle Robert, were as far from a Fortune 500 company as a lion was from a lamb. And, like they say, “the lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb’s not going to get much sleep”. Like that, we were your basic black sheep: the ones who give the other gypsy’s a bad name. We were the people who show up in your neighborhood once a year or so and play a fool’s game , and ...this is really what the shit is all about ... move on , keep moving, keep traveling and don’t let the grass grow under your feet. You know who we are; we’re the folks who come to your door offering a deal you can’t refuse for the price, usually some home improvement like replacement windows, garage doors, or black top for your driveway. “Here, we’ve got the samples – just need a

little up-front to get started - 25% sound good?" If we get the dough you never see us again.

It should be noted that the grift, the scam and/or flim/flam, or con or whatever you call it, is a two way deal. The mark always thinks they're pulling one over on you. This requires mutual cooperation. So, more of a game than a crime, I always thought.

Very early on, I learned (though we thought of it as a game), the fine art of diversion, and misdirection. Like a choreographed, blocked and staged piece of theatre, Becky and I, at five and six, would cause a distraction in a tiny jewelry store in some small town. We were great for turning what would be a normal day to utter confusion and even mayhem for the unlucky and often hapless jewelers assistant. In the confusion we'd cause, mom would cop a jewel and pop it in our mouths. I'd say, between our 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> birthdays, Becky and I swallowed our share of ruby's, opals and even a diamond or two. Even if we were caught, the local constabulary could do nothing except send us packing, which was truly a briar patch moment for us rabbits and anyway, you could say it all worked out in the end. Our little family unit could be our own mini-crime spree....never in any small town more than a day and never re-visiting said town for a couple of years, if ever. Thus, I learned the lesson that the law was as porous as it was plastic or elastic, and our family played with a different set of rules. Such was the matriculation of my early childhood.

Traveling in those two old station wagons, we'd look the part of a normal family on vacation. Normal, or more like what Hunter Thompson said "when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro" and we were certainly pros at being weird (if you define weird as being not normal). Our yearly trek, our own Bermuda Triangle, took us up and down the East coast with winters in Florida working our way in the spring to be in Cincy for Memorial Day, then going on up to Chi-town and East along the lakes in the summer, leaving the Northeast coast cities when the adults felt a nip in the air; then back down to Florida for the winter. This was our path and it often intersected with other Travelers and if we weren't "in a hurry" we'd stop and make great camp fires with much exchange, and music and lively conversation. I liked the music the best.

One of the things I really loved about all the Traveling was that Dad would try his best to find an airport. We'd all spend hours watching planes land and take-off. Dad had a fear of flying, but a fascination for aircraft; he passed that fascination on to me and it became a great education. He always said, "Some families waste their time and money watching TV and going to the movies when we've got the greatest show on earth for free right here." From what I could tell, Mom was indifferent. She would read to pass the time. Mom was a voracious reader, she taught us how to read and passed on her love of books ...there was always a dictionary in the car and

she taught us the value of a good vocabulary, it's was among her greatest gifts to us. She always said, "There's nothing more pathetic than a stupid gypsy".

Sometime around my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday (not that we celebrated birthdays-though I'm sure I was born in the spring), we came upon this gigantic yard sale. It was the nascent beginnings of the world's longest yard sale that today stretches along the I-27 corridor from Michigan to Alabama. Yard sales were important to us as our camping equipment was in constant use and often left behind if we were "in a hurry". So we set about to do some shopping and haggling. The yard sale is a wonderful thing – all that undocumented and untaxed commerce; true capitalism if you ask me. This yard sale was a life change for me, as Dad (a great dancer who loved music but had no real talent for it) bought for my birthday a beat-up, dented and scratched old cornet. He had been a fan of the old school jazz trumpeters, like, Buddy Bolton, Bik Spiderbeck and Louie. The seller had wanted \$25.00 for it and Dad, with his innate guile and power of persuasion bargained it down to \$10.00 by sweetening the deal with a "gold" tooth that we all knew was a fake. Whatever. When Mom saw what dad had done, she was livid. I remember her words like it was yesterday, "Why didn't you buy him a god-damn banjo or some bagpipes? Christ, George, we live in a fucking car!!! ". Mom had a way with words. She also had a point. A guitar or mandolin would have been preferable, especially around the

campfire. But she also knew I had a penchant for music as I'd bang on anything and could never stop tapping out rhythms which was annoying in its own way.

To me, that cornet was a god send. I had my own, very special thing and I took to it like a fly on shit. With a mute fashioned from old cloth rags and paper cups, I would practice for hours at a time, often on the road in the very back seat of the station wagon with our gear. As you know, there weren't child seats or even seatbelts in those days.

That yard sale purchase got me a beginner book that was mastered in one week. In two, I was playing little songs and within a year I was playing right along with songs on the radio. There was also a book of scales and a big fat book known the world-wide over as the trumpeters "Bible" called the Arban Book. Playing that horn was fun and the little cornet was just the right size. When mom made me stop blowin' I'd cry. Thankfully I got good fast so she didn't have to hear clunkers for long.

Music came to me naturally and I would escape into its realm whenever I could. Such an escape took me to a land of sound, a world of pitches, rhythm, of scales and intervals, mordents, trills, turns, arpeggios and more. The diminished 7<sup>th</sup> exercise #55 in the Arban book was my favorite and I could play it stupidly fast. On occasion, and always at the yearly gatherings in Cincy, guitarists and violinists

would take me under their wings and show me their tricks and licks; especially if I'd go fetch 'em a beer. It was the late 50's and they still played in an old jazzy folksy, improvisational style that, looking back, was definitely encoded on their DNA.

By the time I was 9, I was, in many ways, a freak of nature with an almost photographic, or maybe you could say phonographic memory for songs, scales and anything musical. I was eventually so proficient by my 11<sup>th</sup> year or so that I could play literally anything I could hear. From the old musicians (looking back they probably weren't even 40 yet) I learned the gypsy scale which sounded a lot like the harmonic minor from the Arban book with its whole step, half step, minor third, half step, half step, minor third, half step pattern. They also taught me standards and patterns and intervals distinct to the gypsy style – all without anything written down, kind of a three year Suzuki gypsy jazz course.

So began my years as a prodigy, a gypsy Mozart on the cornet and, like Leopold, my dad would cart me out and show me off and, of course, work the angles.

Dad's favorite trick was to put me into "play offs" or duels with other adult musicians. "Here's \$20.00 that says my little boy can play anything you play at him". The pot would grow and in the end we'd have steaks for dinner at the next campfire. So for a few years I became a bread winner, a strange little cash cow and I

was grateful to have the opportunity and contribute as such, but after four years of being a willing accomplice in my own exploitation I began to feel some resentment . Maybe it was just the onset of puberty but I began to be a handful and a general petulant pain in the ass in what were our close quarters. Even so, I never stopped practicing. I devoured sheet music like a demon and had the Fake Book practically memorized. I'd even become something of a celebrity among the families.

In the summer of my 15<sup>th</sup> year, a new chapter in my short life began. We were near downtown Chicago and dad took me to a bar music venue to hear the great gypsy violinist Stephen Grapelli. His counterpart Django Reinhardt had passed ten years prior tragically for the music world, far too soon at the age of 43. Stephen was 57 and was again touring. He was hiring pick –up bands from cities on his tour to back him up. With him that night were three local musicians all of whom were absolute monsters on their axes. I remember there was a slight cover charge, maybe \$10.00 and I got in for free.

As I said there were only three guys in support of who had to be the greatest jazz violinist of our time. Zoltan whose nickname was “Smegs” was an incredible guitarist and took most of the leads; playing mostly rhythm was Sahsha who was gifted on any stringed instrument and playing bass was “Toot’s”, an odd sobriquet for a string player I thought. Later I learned to, much hilarity that his nickname came from being able to fart tunes in perfect pitch. I was in heaven; I'd never heard music

played LIVE at that level. Such was their virtuosity that I felt as one in rarified air breathing in through the cigarette smoke the ambience, the cool vibe, and the electricity of that gypsy jazz sound.

At the bands first break, my very persuasive father, bless his heart, talked my way onto the stage. It was around 11 o'clock when they called me up at that intimate venue on the lower east side of Chicago .It was their last set and Stephen would be off the next day to Detroit. Oddly, I was not at all intimidated. I had listened intently to their previous sets and although virtuosic and cool, I hadn't heard anything I couldn't blow...such was my teenage sense of nonchalance and naiveté...sprezzatura is what I think it's called. Over the past 6 years I'd played, heard, and jammed on the gypsy tunes and standards like "J'Attendrai", "Swing Gitan" and "Minor Swing" as well as the common standards in the "Fake Book". So after what was a somewhat patronizing welcome to a kid, Stephan with his cool French accent said, "We got a kid out there tonight whose dad says he can play anything on the cornet. Let's welcome Bill Gorman to the stage...ok Billy boy, show us your shit!" Then and there my musical life expanded beyond my wildest dreams. The "freak of nature" traded solos with Stephan, Sahsha and Smegs and more than just kept up. The guys ended up keeping me on through the entire set and the place went wild.

Afterwards Stephan, the guys and my dad talked and there was a lot of finagling'... I think Stephan liked me if only for the fact that I was so proficient at

such a young age ...personally I think dad pissed off Stephen... something lost in translation? A clash of Style? Two gypsies wheelin' and dealin'.... someone's gonna get screwed. With me dad thought he held a great hand, but Stephan, a legend with worldwide touring dates 'till he croaked had all the cards. There was talk of future collaboration but as in life, things change when the music stops. I'd never play with Stephan again.

Ever the deal maker dad made a separate arrangement with Sahsha and Smegs who agreed to take me under their wings and tutor me knowing from the reaction of the crowd that night and their own ears that I could be an asset to their own musical enterprise. So just like that I became the charge of three musicians I'd never met until that night. The petulant, brooding teenager had a new life and dad would be wired a percentage. Thus began my new life of traveling, touring, living out of a suitcase, on the road again.

Toots, Smegs and Sahsha ended up being great teachers and were wonderful to me. No Dickensonian hardship case. For almost 10 years we traveled the orbit 500 miles or so to towns north , south, east, and west of Chi- town; from bigger venues in Milwaukee, Detroit, Toronto, Indy, Cincy, Cleveland , Minneapolis and as far west as St. Louis and Kansas city. We played college towns like Ann Arbor, Columbus and Grand Rapids. Once, at a crazy gig in the 70's we opened to a wonderful culture

clash in Madison when we fronted for Paul Butterfield with the Grateful Dead as the headliner. All those acid dropping coeds loved us and we all got laid that night.

The band was called “The Sultanz of Swing”, that’s Sultanz with a “Z”, long before Knophler coined it in that stupid song. To this day I think he’d heard us somewhere especially since that song had a line in it that went: “we don’t give a damn about no trumpet playin’ band”. For the first few years the guys would lie about my age to get me in the clubs and after that they lied in the other direction to keep the young phenom freak of nature angle going. What an education; the stories, the music, the cities, the crazy and interesting people and other musicians who could be arrogant but not always jerks. Once in St. Louis we warmed up for Brubeck; another time in Montreal we opened for Woody and his thundering herd. But, as heady as this all was I really missed my family: the campfires, dad’s crazy schemes and mom’s book reviews...generally the mundane aspects of blood family. That being said my ersatz uncles did make sure that at least once a year I’d catch up with the family in Cincy for the big party on Memorial Day weekend.

The guys respected my playing and Shasha was always trying to get me to be more original and not so technical. He played me records of Dizzy, Chet and Freddy and tried to get me to be more natural or idiomatic in my approach to soloing. They were kind and fair and gave me a little spending money that I’d save. Even though I was more than half their age they treated me as an equal. I thought they were

hilarious and funny each in their own way. You learn a lot about people on the road and after a year I felt more like a little brother. They were glib and said stupid, silly shit that always cracked me up. Sometime, somewhere, on the road, the word “douche bag” became a term of endearment or praise, as in “You da douche bag man”. If they saw a hotty in the crowd you could bet your ass that on the break I’d hear: “that one could suck the moon outa the sky, or she could suck a basketball through a garden hose “and my favorite, “I bet she could suck start a Harley” ...such was their witty banter, my education.

Two years into this new journey the guys thought it was time for me to lose my cherry. They didn’t know that a few years prior at one of the gatherings a hillbilly gypsy traveler woman had her way with me behind a headstone while everyone else was in full party mode. It had been a quickie and I had been a willing participant. So, I thought I had some knowledge regarding sex and women. But, I knew something was up as the guys had been smiling sideways at me all day and making comments on how I was “just 17" and you know what I mean”. They had a surprise, I could tell.

That night we opened for Taj Mahal and we stayed at the Sheraton in downtown Chi-town. I remember it was a warm early summer evening and even in the city with a light drizzle, the air smelled clean with a slight breeze off the lake.

I was backstage when Sahsha introduced me. Was she a fan? I was such a moron. She had auburn hair, angel tits, full lips and a perky butt. Her eyes were green and she had freckles that weren't out of character with her fair complexion and porcelain skin. . She was wearing a flouncy sundress with polka dots that moved with her as she walked. God what an ass! I thought it odd to be wearing a sundress at night, but that thought was in and out like my raging hormones hoped I soon would be. She had a slight Scottish accent and her smile lit up the backstage. She looked to be in her early 20's and she said that she'd heard the band before and loved the way I played...she shared in an easy way that she'd played woodwinds in high school and loved music. Who was this beautiful woman? Was she a friend of the guys, a high dollar hooker, had they pooled their resources? Whatever, they never told me and she was demure and silent about it. All I know is that after the gig this gorgeous woman went back with me to my room and in ten minutes her facile tongue was down my throat, her silky dress on the floor and she spent the next four hours fucking and sucking my brains out. One of the things that went through my mind was; this is a Dr. Sussian fuck. High, Low, Fast, slow, I can fuck you in a chair; I can fuck you everywhere. Whatever cherry I had was long gone and when I awoke she too was gone like a dream. If my gypsy brothers were responsible they didn't let on although that morning they were all smiles. My response, "You guys are the douche bag man!!!" The next day, like almost every other, we were back on the

road travelling all around the upper mid west being featured and opening for national acts and wannabees. I just hoped that the next time we hit Chi-town I'd see her again and here's the kicker and I shit you not my friends, my hand to God, her name was Polly Spurin...what are the odds on that ...you can't make this shit up!

For the next 6 years we played 4-6 nights a week playing everything from festivals to sketchy clubs in iffy parts of towns occasionally adding a sideman on sax or guitar or percussion. It was and is just a blur and the time flew by. We made decent dough and I was happy to have a bed to sleep in and sandwiches to eat. I knew that money was being wired periodically to the family and as my cut grew I saved all I could with the hopes of someday taking flying lessons. Eventually whenever we'd have a couple of days lay over between gigs, I'd go to that cities airport and began taking lesson flying tail dragger Taylor craft's , cub's and little 150's. In a matter of months, I did my first solo and had my ticket in less than 20 hours. I knew this would become more than a hobby and Smegs was especially worried about the future of the band.

At some point in my early 20's the idea of spending the rest of my life bouncing from smoky clubs to opening for "somebodies" incrementally lost its luster. Of course it coincided with my new love of flying. After nearly 10 years touring, the BIG BREAK never came although the promises and dreams were always there like a carrot and stick. No Johnny Carson, let alone Mike Douglas, or anything like that.

With me in my 20's the child prodigy angle was long gone and anyway it was the 70's and Rock and fucking Roll was the tits. No one big seemed to be digging our traditional style. An agent had recently told us truthfully (highly unusual) right to our faces "You guys are great but nobody's buying your kinda jazz shit now".

It was 1972 and I'd already spent half my life being a professional musician. I knew I'd always have music, hell; a melodic code was imprinted on my genes. I'd accumulated a lifetime of memories with the Sultanz but I was longing for a change. For once in my life I wanted to stop moving, plan a future, settle down at least for a while and maybe get a wife, a house, kids; you know, the whole catastrophe. So I said goodbye to the guys who thought I was nuts, and went and enlisted in the Air force at the end of what was one of the more controversial wars in American history. Having a pilot's certificate gave me an edge and somehow without any birth record or social security number I was processed and in a few months I was in theatre flying birddogs in recon missions accumulating hours and avoiding getting shot. When I got back I flipped my expertise into a commercial rating, but my first job back was flying brand new Cessna's low and slow without instruments from the headquarters in Wichita to Ft Worth where the instrument panels were added. Once again I'd turned the page and what was there was a new road to travel.

Yearly, I'd catch up with the family and often the Sultanz would be there too. We'd meet in Cincy on the exact same weekend. Memorial Day in Cincy is a sacred

holiday and not to be missed. My family tradition goes back to the beginning and in fact there's a good story there that's as true as true north that involves two union soldiers weary from the war: one an enlisted man benevolent and trusting and the other a tired officer traveling south. As fortune would have it, their lives would be forever connected. The sun's coming up now and we'll be landing in about 40 minutes so I think I've got time to tell you. It goes like this , as I've heard it told many times before.

Just past the end of the great Civil War, my great, great, grandfather, Lt. Col. George Gorman, a decorated veteran of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Ohio Calvary division was driving a wagon full of the possessions of the family. With him were his wife and 3 sons. It was in the early fall of 1867 and the family was traveling south seeking warmth and the beaches where the fish were jumpin' and rubes were aplenty. He had spent three long winters in Virginia and Pennsylvania and had somehow come out alive; forever changed; fully aware of the dark side of mankind wearing a heavy yoke of cynicism and mistrust. They were in a caravan of three other traveling families whose roots could be traced back to the Travelers in Ireland. Thus transience was genetically encoded. They had no other choice except to keep moving. Now they were headed south to Florida, a perilous, journey through Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia with the reward of sun and fish for Christmas.

It was in Cincinnati, on the northwest side of town close to Spring Grove Cemetery where a great tragedy struck the family.

The Civil War had taken over 600,000 men from South & North; an unprecedented toll of death. Never before in American history had so many from the upper classes passed in warfare. This was especially true in the South. In the North & South, taking care of the dead was a family affair. The dead would be prepared for burial by family members and “laid out” in the living room or parlor for visitation (hence the term “funeral parlor”).

That horrific war had taken boys from well-to-do families and those who died far from home (at least their remains) were sent home by rail to those families who had the means. This was the precedent for what would become a booming new business in America: the Funeral Arts. The dead soldiers had to be embalmed for the long trek and were often so decomposed that families, once they were home, opted for someone else to prepare the bodies for burial. It was a time when cemeteries grew by 100-fold all around America.

Coincidentally the American cemetery movement had begun in the 1830's with Mt Auburn in Cambridge. Great park-like municipal grounds with beautiful vistas, arboretums and lakes had begun to be built a ways from the big cities usually up on a hill. Here, in beautiful landscaped settings people would go hunting, have

picnics and carriage races. This was mostly as a response in need to the inadequate, dangerous (from disease like Yellow Fever) and expensive to maintain burial grounds in already overcrowded town commons and church yards that often had as many as six coffins on top of the other often just inches underground. During floods coffins and decomposed bodies would spill out into the streets in macabre scenes. So, with the war, the funeral business, and the job of undertaking, always a steady gig, grew by leaps and bounds.

One such young entrepreneur was Charles Miller. Born in Jamestown, NY in 1842, his family moved to Cincinnati in 1847. As a boy he worked in a feed & livery stable and apprenticed for 10 years with an undertaker in Chillicothe. There he learned to make caskets. At 18, he enlisted in the Army serving the 5<sup>th</sup> Ohio Cavalry. Early on, while in service, the discovery of his talents and knowledge were deemed to be invaluable to his superiors. Lord knows he got lots of practice. After the war he went back to the Northside of Cincinnati and opened up a feed and livery business with no intention of continuing in the grim business of undertaking. But as things often do, fate has its own idea for his future.

As I said earlier, it was the fall of 1867. The war had ended nearly a year before when the family of Lt. Col. George Gorman faced yet another tragedy. Driving his Conestoga type wagon south on the road just north of the Queen City, his wagon hit a rut and his youngest son Brian, only 4 years old, was thrown ,and

having his neck broken, died instantly. There was no time to grieve. The cold would be coming and there were mountains ahead. Col. Gorman made arrangements with a young man whose reputation as a maker of coffins was known and there he met a young man older than his years and made a bargain.

“I have no means except my horses to pay you – and those are needed for the journey – but if you will bury my son and mark the location...I’ll be back in the spring near the end of May and at that time I’ll pay you in full.” The two men shook hands and became inextricably linked. That spring, the Gorman family made their way back to Cincinnati on their way up to the big lakes and in the place called Spring Grove they grieved, in the way of their traditions, at the site of the burial of their son. Charles Miller had done the family right with a hand chiseled marker bearing the symbol of a thistle, the talisman of the tribe.

The word of this kind, gallant, generous and trusting act spread quickly and then and there, the relationship between the gypsies, travelers, or whatever you want to call us was linked and sealed to a location – Cincinnati, Spring Grove Cemetery and a man, Charles Miller and his business in the Northside of Cincinnati.

Well I’m about a hundred miles out and it’s time to check in with A.T.C..  
Flying cargo solo through the night isn’t everyone’s cup of tea but it fits my personality and I guess I just got used to being up late. Sometimes though in the long

lonely flights, my mind wanders back to those nights around the campfire and the fingers of my right hand unconsciously play the Gypsy scales and old standards.

It takes a strong will to overcome the boredom. It's easy up here with my silent cargo to wax with melancholy over the things I've missed – the “would-haves”, the “should-haves”, and the “could-haves”. Still the hum of my Pratt and Whitney is music to my ears and literally uplifting. Speaking of music, although rusty, I still hit the clubs in Kansas City – the Rose Room by the sideways fountain is good for Jazz. And I try to get to Dee Felice or the Wisp when I'm in Cincy.

Thirty – three years ago I settled in Kansas City so I'd be closer to my job with Cessna in Wichita. I followed my dreams, got the whole catastrophe, got divorced (it's a long stupid story – I'll just say we got along until we didn't.). I pay support for my brilliant piano-playing daughter, Melody, who is 15 now. So, Kansas City's my home but at the Gatherings I'm a B.F.D. and so I'll always have my connection with Cincinnati. In fact I own some real estate in Spring Grove. That reminds me of a joke: A guy goes to the doctor for some test. The doc comes out shaking his head and says, “I sorry Bob but you've only got a few weeks to live.” Bob says, “What are you talking about?! I feel fine.... Is there anything I can do?!” The doctor says, “Well down in West Virginia at the Greenbrier they've got these therapeutic mud baths” “Well”, says Bob, “will that cure me?”... “No... but it'll get ya used to the dirt.”

I don't think I've missed a Memorial Day in 60 years. At those times, or when I'm flying my special cargo into Lunken, I think back to those who have passed – of Mom and Dad, who are both buried at Spring Grove. I think about the Sultanz; I always kept up with Toots, and Sahsha and Smegs.

Toots is in a nursing home in Pewaukee. He had some family there. Twenty years ago Sahsha, at 60, was shot dead by a jealous husband. Smegs is still at it, playing as somewhat of a celebrity around the kids today who are just discovering Django. When he comes to the Gatherings he usually brings an entourage with him. He has to have help to get around; his vision's shot from too many sunrises and 12 o'clock tails. I used to see Becky but it's been a few years. She made me an uncle twice and one of her kids, Kathy, turned out to be a good musician and teaches and gigs and has an 8-year old of her own- makes me a great uncle; although, in reality, I'm less than mediocre.

Well I've just been cleared and now I've got to go set up the plane for landing. Funny coincidence that the plane I'm flying is called a Caravan. Ironic and full circlesque that I'm just a flying hearse and in that, kinda working for Charlie Miller, who by the way, will have one of his directors with a van to take my cargo and put it in the cooler 'til Memorial Day weekend.

It's been great being able to pass the time with ya'll in what was clearly a boring but luckily uneventful flight. The sun is up now in the Southeast and I'm on a long final for sunken Lunken on Runway 25. On the ground, I'll do some business, some paper work and make the transaction with one of the great, great, great grandson's of Charlie Miller.

This morning, I'll go visit friends & family in Spring Grove. It's just late April, so I'll be back in a few weeks. Even so, I feel drawn to that beautiful sanctuary, when I'm in town with a day. Before I go anywhere else, I visit the stone of young Brian, my distant relative who started this connection so long ago. Right now, it's early and the birds are all a'twitter and in the distance I hear a mourning dove. The mist is heavy. The cherry and crabapple trees are blooming, so the fragrance in the air is delicate and mixed with the smell of beer brewing reminds me of a Lambic. Finding the headstone is not so easy with this fog, lying so close to the ground. I'm in awe of the beauty; of the history; of the journey – how can I possibly pay homage? Well, there's the stone. I reach down and place a piney sprig in bloom and think... “This'll dew”.

By Chris Miller, to the Cincinnati Literary Club, February 18<sup>th</sup> 2013

