

## Singrad Advaard

The island was shaped like a comma. It was small, cold and rainy. The only village was situated at the pointed end of the peninsula about a mile from the airstrip. Wincross wasn't a scheduled stop. If everything went well you flew over it on your way to St. Lucies, where you could get a decent meal, a soft bed and spend a comfortable night before continuing on to the continent. But if there was engine trouble or bad weather ahead, you might be required to hunker down on this miserable outpost a thousand miles from Labrador, a thousand miles from St. Lucies and two thousand miles from the coast. It was engine trouble that had forced me down on this occasion.

Ivar, the island's only mechanic, had been kind enough to allow me to stay in his home. He was a nervous man who seemed overly concerned with my comfort. Was I warm enough, was the bed firm enough, did I need more tea or perhaps a beer? He watched me for any signs of discomfort and stood wringing his hands until I said good night. Unfortunately, shortly after I went to bed he suffered a heart attack. During the days that followed Ivar's death, a shaggy collection of people—who, most said, were Ivar's disreputable distant cousins from some far-off island—descended upon the house, seizing the opportunity they had apparently been waiting for, to move, along with their attendant chickens, goats and milk cow, into Ivar's house. Naturally I felt compelled, after offering my condolences, to leave the squatters to their new home.

I had enough money for two or three nights stay in a room above the tavern, during which time I made the acquaintance of a local by the name of Singrad, who claimed that he could fix my engine, without aid of schematics or original equipment parts. Furthermore, he would only take on the job, he told me, if it entailed what he called 'a challenge.' He had no interest in simply plugging the correct pegs into the correct holes. He intended to manufacture any necessary parts himself. They would, he assured me, be superior to the originals.

I had little choice but to trust him, although from the look of the non-ambulatory farm equipment and small household appliances scattered over his weed-infested property, he had not been all that successful in getting far less lethal devices up and running.

“When can you get started?” I asked.

“After a time,” he said, taking a leisurely bite from his sandwich. “You people from the *world*, you’re always in such a hurry. Here on Wincross we go by island time. But as you can see I have many other jobs ahead of me before I can tend to your flying machine.”

I took a look around. I could see nothing other than the pile of junk out in the yard. If I had to wait until all these objects began to move under their own power, I would be in for a long stay ... but I had no choice.

During the day I had little to do other than wander around the island on foot, so I followed the peninsula to the head of the comma where I made my way inland, away from squawking gulls, crashing waves and nesting puffins. On a treeless outcropping at the edge of a tidal pool, in the, rocky, rain-swept interior, I came across a disintegrating old cabin, well on its way to a merger with the landscape. My most pressing need at the moment was to find less expensive shelter than the room I was currently renting, as I was quickly running out of money. Even in the poor condition in which I found it, the shack presented an opportunity to put a free roof over my head for a few days. Inside, I was able to coax a smoky fire from the woodstove. In one corner, the rotting roof had collapsed, allowing the sky to pour in. I had spent three days on the island and in that time there had been about five rainless hours. This was not one of them. After warming myself sufficiently I zipped my waterproof windbreaker and made the long trudge back to the village.

In town, I used most of my remaining money to purchase groceries and a few items to hold me over until Singrad’s repair was complete. Passing the airstrip I retrieved the two books I had brought with me from the plane, before making my way back to my new home.

I was able to cook a simple meal on the stove, which also served as my source of heat. Afterward, I tried without success to read by the light of the fire from its open door, before bedding down for the night on the floor. I used some old burlap bags for a mattress and an Army blanket from the plane for cover. During the night, the rain stopped its kidding around and came down in torrents.

I was awakened by its seriousness creeping into my sleep. I reestablished my bed on the table, which listed to one side on a damaged leg. The table was not long enough, of course, to accommodate my body in anything other than a fetal position so I spent a most uncomfortable night of shifting here and there until the first faint hint of another dismal morning broke over the horizon. When the light was sufficient to illuminate the grim interior, I found the floor covered with about an inch of black water.

I shivered there over a cup of coffee for as long as I could stand it, bracing for the sodden walk back into town to see if I could prod Singrad into getting busy with my repair. As I gazed out through the fog and drizzle, I thought back to other mornings, before Kendra left, when we had been more than happy to silently share mugs of coffee at the edge of a fire ring, tent-camping in the Upper Peninsula ... or along the peaceful shore of some alpine lake. After those happier days came to an end, I had tried to convince myself that I could be content with my own company, flying from outpost to outpost, getting odd jobs here and there that allowed me to buy enough supplies and fuel to move on to the next location ... seeing the world from a perspective available to so few. Even before Kendra got sick of waiting for me to *'get some kind of life'* as she had so often put it, I had come to the conclusion that no matter what our situation, deep inside, we live out our lives alone. Now, here I am—alone, wet and cold. But even if she were here, would I be any less alone?

When I arrived at Singrad's place it was still only 7:30 and I could see no light inside. It was too early to go banging at his door so I huddled under the roof of his front porch until I heard stirring inside. When I felt that it would be appropriate to make my presence known, I knocked. The woman who answered the door seemed far too young and attractive for the grizzled old mechanic, nevertheless I tested the notion of who she might be.

"Mrs. Eh ... Mrs, Singrad?" I didn't know Singrad's last name.

"Oh no, sir. I'm his secretary."

"Oh. Oh ... yes ... I see. Well, is he available? I'm sorry, you see, about the early hour, but I need to talk to him, to find out if he could possibly push my repair to the top of his list."

"Did you have an appointment?"

“An appointment? Uh ...no...but I did talk to him about my airplane.”

“Oh, yes. I think he did mention that, sir. Which airplane was yours then, the blue one?”

“Um ... no in fact. It's red.”

“Oh, I see. Could you excuse me for a minute sir?”

As she turned to walk away, the rising sun passing through an interior window, penetrated her thin nightgown, revealing a shape that made me temporarily ache for the comfort of a woman.

She closed the door behind her. I could not help wondering why Singrad's secretary was dressed in such intimate attire in his home. What would she be doing there at such an early hour. Was there a Mrs. Singrad inside? Was this secretary available, or if I approached her with some of the thoughts I tried now to suppress, would Singrad object? She was after all, only his employee—his secretary—a title that implied less than appearances seemed to indicate.

As I waited, I tried to remember any other aircraft that I had seen on the island. I could recall none. Mine was the only plane parked at the airstrip, lashed down against the constant windblown rain. I stood for what seemed like twenty minutes until she returned with a clipboard.

Well I'm afraid sir, that Mr. Singrad will not be able to get to your problem until he has seen to the blue plane, the white plane and of course, the toaster-oven. Could you come back, say, next Wednesday? I'll put you down for 3:30.”

I craned for a glimpse behind her, of the busy Singrad, but she kept shifting her position in the doorway, intentionally blocking my view. I thanked her and resumed my walk back into town. I wandered about asking shopkeepers about Singrad's reputation for promptness and quality of work.

“Oh, sir,” I was told by one, “unfortunately, I would have suggested Ivar, but sadly he passed away only a few nights ago. He was a wonderful mechanic sir, but he was always such a loner, and we heard that some evenings ago he had a house-guest. Most unusual. His relatives, who are now staying in his home, concluded that the stress must have been too much for him. But Mr. Singrad Advaard, sir, is as fine a repairman as

you will find in these islands, now that Ivar is gone. In fact, I have entrusted him with the repair of my toaster-oven.”

I gave the man a puzzled look.

“These islands? I thought this was the only one until St Lucies.”

“Well, just to the west, about thirty miles from here, there is Port Waltrude. It’s much smaller of course but they also have a mechanic. But Singrad sir, is as I have said, the finest in these islands—now that Ivar has gone to his rest. Be assured sir, you could not have crash-landed in a more fortuitous place.”

Upon my return to the cabin, I found smoke rising from the chimney. Cautiously I pushed open the door and was greeted by the aroma of delicious cooking smells. A smiling man greeted me. He was bearded and dressed in some rustic outfit comprised of animal skins. He looked like some kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century French-Canadian trapper.

“Um ... hello,” I said. “I’m sorry to intrude. Is this your cabin?”

“My cabin? Oh no. I thought it was yours,” he said with a laugh, in the accent of a 19<sup>th</sup> century French-Canadian trapper. “I am Broussard. I am, as you, stranded on this godforsaken backwater of a hellish rain-soaked-shit-hole.”

“You ...you know who I am?”

“Everyone knows. You are the asshole owner of the red aeroplane who caused the death of the mechanic, Ivar. And you are the reason we wait in a long line behind white aeroplanes and toaster-ovens for a way out of this miserable tundra. I am the owner of the blue aircraft. But join me in some wine and *gigot en chevreuil* and we will become drunker and wetter together.”

Over the course of the long evening, we drank and shared stories of travel and misadventure as viscous raindrops battered the roof and windows of the leaky cabin. It seems that Broussard’s craft had suffered structural damage to the stabilizer when he got caught up in turbulence from a 747 that he thought was well out of range. When I yawned for the third or fourth time and glanced at my watch, it was 1:34 AM.

“I think I’m ready to hit the sack,” I said to Broussard who was obviously wide-awake.

“The sack?”

“Sorry. It’s an expression. Bed. I need to get some sleep.”

“Oh yes, of course. You must take the table. I will sleep on that shelf.”

Just then a knock at the door, startled both of us.

“I say,” said the intruder, poking his head in the door. “It’s a frightfully nasty night out and I was wondering if you chaps would mind if I joined you at the fire? I’m soaked through to the bone.” Cheerfully, the newcomer bounced into the room, removing his cap and extending a hand. “Perkins, Jerome Perkins. I’m the owner of the white aeroplane.”

I made an effort to stay up with Perkins and Broussard as long as I could hold out. Broussard and I had managed to plug enough of the leaks so that the floor no longer held standing water. Perkins, who had been staying in a cave in the interior hills had seen our light and smelled our fire. He told us that the sight was so downright cheerful that he had decided to see if he could join us, just for the evening. It seemed that he had been on the island for two or three months, waiting for his repair. Ivar had been too busy to take him on and had passed the work on to Singrad. Ivar, just prior to his untimely death, had been thinking of moving to Florida and was hoping that Singrad could gradually take over all of the island’s repair work. I remembered then, the posters of Disney World, plastered over the walls of Ivar’s house.

When I asked Broussard and Perkins where their airplanes were, they explained to me that before any repair could begin, they had been moved to the hangar. When I commented that I had seen no hangar, they told me they would show me on the following day. We managed to clear away a relatively dry area of floor near the stove, where Perkins slept. Broussard took to his shelf and I to my table.

The next morning after Broussard prepared a delicious breakfast of puffin eggs and fried cod strips, we hiked through the rain, fog and gloom to a rocky ledge near the landing strip. Built up against its opposite side was an immense wooden lean-to, covered by a leaky tin roof. Sheltered inside were Perkins white plane and Broussard’s blue plane, a crude sailing vessel and what appeared to be a missile that was being repaired in stages. A jet or rocket engine, sat next to the tube-like craft, having been unbolted from its housing near the tail assembly. Various tools were scattered about the disassembled engine and on a workbench adjacent to this craft, sat the toaster-oven—the troublesome device that seemed to be at the heart of the hold-up.

I picked up a set of drawings from the bench. They were rendered in the hand of an unskilled draftsman, probably Singrad himself, and appeared to be attempts to visualize the possible shortcomings of the appliance. I could see that he was going at it all wrong. The heating element in one of the drawings, was attached to some kind of clock. In another, a fan was shown, with arrows indicating wind direction, blowing out from its blades toward some kind of deflecting screen, apparently for the purpose of dissipating heat produced by the clock, from which wavy lines indicative of radiation emanated. I turned the toaster-oven in my hands. On the front of its case there was an on-off switch. Behind the switch, I discovered a broken wire. Using my pocketknife, I stripped the two ends of the wire, and spliced them together as Perkins and Broussard watched with inexplicable interest. I plugged the oven into the wall socket and flipped the switch. Heat immediately began to radiate from the now repaired appliance.

“This is ridiculous!” I said.

“Good show, old man,” Perkins said, “I say. You’ve made short work of that major obstacle.”

“A child could have fixed it!” I protested. “This genius, Singrad needs to draw up a set of plans for this?”

That night, over dinner, Perkins, Broussard and I discussed our options.

“We must go to him and demand immediate action,” I said.

Even as I made this suggestion I was second-guessing myself. I did not know enough on my own, to repair the engine, but at the same time—putting my life in the hands of this mechanic who had such difficulty in finding and repairing a simple broken wire—I did find somewhat troubling.

“Impossible,” Perkins said. “You’ll never get past that secretary of his.”

“Ooo la la,” said Broussard, with a shake of his hand and snapping of loose knuckles. “That one is a most tasty dish.”

Perkins raised his eyebrows twice in agreement.

“Why are you in such a hurry, old man?” Perkins asked. “It’s rather pleasant here. No pressures. Winter is coming on, but we could fix this place up.”

“I saw some cans of paint at Singrad’s hangar and there are brushes in the tool shed out back,” Broussard added.

“Here’s what we’ll do! We’ll start making repairs tomorrow. We must keep active and productive through the long nights. We mustn’t let ourselves go. I’ve seen what can happen to men, living in isolated conditions in these latitudes. When the dark settles in for months, it takes its toll on the soul. It starts simply enough—arguments over who’ll gather firewood, who’ll do the cooking, which one will go for water—and before you know it, you’re at each other’s throats. I’ll begin straight away, building a running track. We’ll jog three miles a day, and in the evenings we can do readings. You can start tonight, old man,” he said to me. “I took a look at the books you brought in. They look quite interesting. You read a chapter of yours and I’ll read one of mine.”

“I play the guitar,” Broussard offered. “We can sing songs of our homelands. We’ll get to know each other well by winter’s end.”

They seemed positively delighted at the prospect of spending the winter in this nightmare of ineptitude and squalor.

“You have a guitar here?” Perkins asked Broussard.

“No, but with some materials from Singrad’s shop and whatever I can find in this place, I will build one.”

“That’s jolly well, old man,” Perkins said, clapping Broussard on the back. And I always thought you French were a lazy lot.”

“French-Canadian,” Broussard corrected him.

I could see that I would get nowhere trying to reason with these two. The following morning after breakfast, I hiked alone to the hangar. Still no Singrad. I picked up the repaired toaster-oven and headed off to his house where I was once more met at the door by the night-gowned secretary.

“Did you have an appointment?”

“No, but I need to talk to him about my airplane.”

“And which craft was that, sir, the blue one?”

“No! I’m the red one. Look ...” I tried to calm myself. “I have to get out of here before winter closes in.”

“Oh yes sir. Winter in these islands can be very harsh. I hope you have set in a store of supplies and wood. Many of our previous customers have found that a running

track of some sort can be helpful, not only in relieving the monotony but also it is said to help the circulation in this damp.”

“I don’t give a damn about my circulation!”

I regretted my outburst, which had caused her to give me a rather shocked look. I made every effort to control myself.

“I want to get my plane repaired and get out of here. I promise you that I will get my exercise somewhere else. I’ll keep up proper circulation in some civilized place.”

I felt bad once again, having implied that the poor woman’s home island was something other than civilization.

“I’m sorry sir, but he has promised the owner of the toaster-oven that it will be repaired soon. As you can see, even now he is hard at work on drawings which will lead to its restoration.”

With that she opened the door a bit and stood aside so that I could see Singrad at a drafting table, busy with a drawing, occasionally looking up at the ceiling and scratching his head with the eraser end of his pencil. Clearly, he was devoting all his concentration to the problem.

I tucked the oven under my arm and walked into town to see the shopkeeper-owner of the appliance. The man was elated.

“Oh sir, thank you!”

He plugged the oven in and made toasted cheese sandwiches for each of us.

“I tell you sir, that Singrad ... what a genius! And only two months this time. With these dark winter nights coming on, it can be so difficult without a properly working toaster-oven. And it’s good that he has hired someone to make his deliveries for him. With that worry off his mind, I expect that he will become even more efficient. What do I owe him?”

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When I arrived back at the cabin I found Perkins and Broussard, busily cleaning and cooking. The windows were hung with curtains made of some flower-patterned material. The table was set for five. Candles and an arrangement of native lichens and mosses served as a centerpiece.

“We have invited Singrad and his secretary to join us for dinner,” Broussard explained.

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While the secretary and Broussard made eyes at one another, Perkins and I made small talk with old Singrad as a lead-in to my request for more timely repair work.

“The missile we found on your workbench, what’s the story on that?” I asked.

“Story? Oh, it’s nothing really. We found it washed up on shore and several of us thought that if we could get it to work, it would be a welcome addition to the island’s Department of Defense.”

The Department of Defense turned out to be Singrad, the shopkeeper I had met previously and Ivar before he had sadly passed. Prior to the missile, their arsenal consisted of a couple rifles and a harpoon gun.

“But the problem of the toaster-oven has been solved at last,” Singrad said. “It has mysteriously vanished. Therefore I am free to move on to the next task. And since you,” he waved his hand graciously to include Broussard, Perkins and me, “have been so kind to me and my dear secretary, Gertrude.” Here he paused to indicate Perkins. “Your name, sir, will advance up the list.”

“Oh that’s quite all right old chap,” Perkins said, as I fumed. “I’m perfectly content to spend the winter here. And I’m sure my colleague Broussard will be quite happy as well over the coming winter.”

Perkins winked at Singrad and me.

“Oh yes,” I said, first nodding my thanks to Perkins for his deference. “And I almost forgot. I have something for you, Mr. Advaard.”

“Please, by all means call me Singrad.”

“Singrad,” I said, smiling.

I produced the money the shopkeeper and I had agreed upon for the repair of the toaster-oven and handed it over to Singrad who seemed not in the least surprised that the repair had been made and delivered for him.

“Are you quite sure,” he asked me, “that you wish to leave? I could really use someone of your expertise in the repair of small appliances.”

The next day, Broussard, Perkins, Singrad and I towed my craft to the repair hangar. I must admit that I was surprised at the skill the old mechanic displayed in working on my engine. He began by looking the engine over and drafting some plans, which allowed him to disassemble it, locate the problem, a broken piston ring, and reassemble it once again. In a matter of two days, the motor was humming like new. There was a delay of a few days more for the weather to improve to conditions of lighter rain and lighter fog, before I felt that it was safe to resume my journey. I shook hands with my cabin mates, and hugged old Singrad. Broussard and the old man's secretary, Gertrude stood with arms encircling one another, waving goodbye, as I took to the air once more. As I gained altitude, I circled the comma shaped island once before heading east. I had not gone more than twenty miles before the engine began to sputter. Below me and to the west I could make out white rollers crashing against the rocks of a question-mark-shaped island, even smaller than Wincross. This must be Port Waltrude that the shopkeeper had told me about. I was afraid to turn back to Wincross and even more afraid to attempt going on to St Lucies which lay still so far ahead. I had no choice but to put down. The small airstrip was easy to pick out. The attendant, bowing into a stiff wind, came out to meet me holding his blowing rain-hood down with one hand and clasped his collar closed with the other. He helped me lash down my plane and guided me into the little hut where he poured me a fresh cup of coffee.

“Engine trouble?”

“Yes,” I said, defeated. “But I'm told you have a good mechanic here.”

“Oh yes sir. One of the best. Gringaard is his name—Gringaard Advaard.

He's the brother of the mechanic on the island just to the west. Perhaps you noticed it as you passed over. But I don't know when he'll be able to see you. He's extremely busy just now, with winter coming on. I'm afraid you'll have to make an appointment with his secretary.”

Light drops of rain changed into fat splatters. A few wet snowflakes joined into the mix as darkness descended over the little hut.