Baker

Albert Talbott*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1958 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Baker

WHEN I GOT BACK to the barracks from the mess hall, Baker had finally gotten up. He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, yawning and rubbing his bleary eyes. He winced a couple of times as I sat down on the bunk opposite him. I didn’t have to ask him what was wrong; I knew.

“What’sa matter, Baker? Don’t know when to quit?” prodded one of the guys across the barracks.

“Go to hell!” Baker shouted without looking up.

“What’sa matter, Baker? Sandy run off and leave you?” Baker stopped rubbing his eyes and dropped his arms limply to the bed. “For Christ’s sake, will you shut up?” he barked back.

Fester came running into the barracks and headed straight toward us. He had a deep frown on his face.

“What’s eating you?” I asked him.

“Hey you guys, there’s two MP’s and a major from criminal investigation in the orderly room right now. They’re asking about you, Baker.”

“God, I might have known.” Baker said it with a tone of inevitability in his voice.

“Are you sure that it was Baker they’re looking for?” I offered.

“Yeah, I was in the Orderly Room BSin’ with Fernandez when they got here.”

“Baker, you got any idea what they want?” I asked.

“I think so; it’s probably something to do with Sandy.”

“I kind of figured that.”

“We better do something quick,” Fester said anxiously.

“You’re supposed to be on pass, aren’t you?” I said, trying hard to think of something. I could tell Baker was about ready to give up.
"Yeah."
"Did you sign back in?"
"Nope."
"Why don't you go hide in my car? It's over in the parking lot. Fester and I'll find out for sure what these guys want."
"You guys are liable to get in trouble."
"Don't sweat that. We just haven't seen you, that's all."
"Okay."
"I don't see any sense in spoiling a Saturday afternoon by having to answer a lot of questions, do you?" I added.
"I guess not," Baker said. He turned to leave.
"Hey, Bake," I called to him. "I almost forgot something."
"What's that?"
"Where we gonna meet you?"
"You name it."
"Let's see... The beer garden behind the PX."
"When?"
"About a half hour."
"Okay, so long." Baker turned to leave a second time. This time he got all the way to the door. He looked back and gave us a sheepish grin, then disappeared through the door.

I had to smile back. I knew this wasn't the first time he had gotten in trouble over a woman. We'd been shipped out of Fort Riley in December, just in time. That was a close shave. I don't know how many times I'd told him then not to mess with married women. I knew he would get out of this scrape; he always had before. But Baker sure had his ideas about women. He was always asking somebody if they knew what a 'doll' was. To him, a 'doll' was something to play with. Old Bake, a real confirmed bachelor.

"TENCH-HUT!"

"At ease, men," boomed the major.
"This is Baker's bunk, sir," the CQ said as he pointed to the bunk that was next to mine.
"Soldier," the major looked directly at me. I tried hard
to keep from swallowing the lump in my throat, but couldn't.

"Where's your bunk?"

"Right here."

"Right here, what?"

"Right here, SIR."

"Then your bunk is right next to Baker's?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen Baker?"

"Not lately, sir."

"Oh, is that right. You sleep right next to him, huh. How do you explain the fact that his bed isn't made?"

"Well...you see, sir. I did see him earlier this morning. I believe he was going to church, sir."

"Is that right? If you see your friend, you tell him he had better get over to the MP's as soon as he can make it. We got some sweet little girl's old man over there, and he's just raising all kinds of hell."

I guess the major was through with me; he walked away. He said something to the CQ and started toward the door. The CQ called us to attention. Just before the major left, he turned back.

"You guys sure could save me a lot of trouble," he said, "if you would learn to keep your fly buttoned."

When Fester and I got to the beer garden, Baker was already there. He was sitting at one of the tables with two empty glasses and was starting on the third. We went over and sat down at his table.

"Sorry we're late, Baker," I apologized.

"That's all right. What did you guys find out?"

"All we found out is that Sandy's old man is down here raising hell with the MP's and the criminal investigation boys, and they're all looking for you," Fester said.

Baker laughed a little and scratched his head. "That's a hell of a note, isn't it?"

"Have you got any ideas on what's happening?" I asked.

"Some."

"It sure sounds like something's been going on that I haven't heard about," I said.
“Oh, I don’t know,” was Baker’s reply.
“You used to tell us all about your broads,” Fester added. “I haven’t heard you say one word about Sandy lately.”
“Yeah, come to think of it, that’s right,” I agreed. “All you ever say is that you been out with her. You’ve been kind of glossing over the details lately.”
“Oh hell, you guys don’t think I’m getting soft, do you?”
“I’ve known you a long time, and this is the longest you ever stuck to one broad,” I reminded him.
“You call four or five months a long time?”
“It is for you.”
“As long as they’re willing, I’m willing. You know me.”
“I’m not so sure,” I said.
“Do you know what that silly broad tried to do about three months ago?”
Fester and I were both puzzled. We just stared at each other. It was beginning to sound like Baker had been holding out on us.
“She tried to tell me she was pregnant. Said we’re gonna have to get married. I just laughed in her face, ’cause I didn’t believe her.”
“What did you do then?” asked Fester.
“Well, I made her go to a doctor and found out she was lying.”
“And so, you still went back for more,” I said.
“Why not?” Baker shrugged his shoulders.
“I almost forgot, Fester had a good idea,” I remembered.
“What was that?”
“To go see the First Sergeant.”
“Yeah.”
“So we called him.”
“What did he have to say?”
“He said to come over right away.”
We all jumped in Fester’s car and drove over to the NCO’s housing area. Sergeant Gradillos was sitting in a lawn chair in the front yard. He sure looked fat and sassy with that big bottle of cold beer in his hand. Gradillos started laughing when he saw Baker get out of the car.
“Well, if it isn’t Casanova!” he yelled.

The Sergeant took a long swig off his beer. We pulled up some other lawn chairs and sat down. None of us had said a word. Gradillos just looked at us with a broad grin on his face.

“This is really rich,” he said. “You guys’ll never learn, will you?”

We just sat there, half smiling.

“I called over to find out what the score was. This’ll kill you, Baker.” He laughed again and Fester and I couldn’t hold it back any longer. We grinned, but Baker still kept his half smile.

“Did you guys ever hear of statutory rape?”

“Statutory rape...?” Fester and I yelled.

“You heard me right the first time.”

“Wait a minute. That’s just for minors,” I said. “Sandy’s twenty-one and Baker’s twenty-four.”

“What about it, Baker? Isn’t that right?” Fester asked.

“Not quite,” Baker replied.

“What do you mean?”

“You said you saw her age on her driver’s license.”

“I did. But I was looking at it a couple of weeks ago, and I noticed something that I hadn’t seen before.”

“What was that?”

“Well, the date on the license was 1933, but when I looked closer, that last 3 used to be an 8. She’d scratched off half of it. She just turned 17 last month.”

Gradillos laughed louder than ever. Fester and I were speechless.

“The plot thickens,” the Sergeant said with a fiendish grin. “Baker, you don’t look like a man that’s just had his last meal.”

“What’ll we do now, Sarge?” I asked.

“Just hide him out till tomorrow morning. There’s no sense in Baker staying in the stockade tonight.”

“Where could we take him?” asked Fester.

“I know,” I said. “We could take him over to Iden’s. He lives off post. Then tonight he can sleep in someone else’s bunk. There ought to be somebody still on pass.”
“How we gonna get through the gate?” Fester wondered. “What if the MP’s stop us?”

“Oh, hell,” laughed Gradillos. “I’ll take you guys in my car. I’ve gotta go put on a shirt, but I’ll be right back.”

Next morning, Baker was called out of formation, and I saw a couple of MP’s by the orderly room. They escorted him to a staff car and drove off. Fester and I could hardly contain our curiosity. The morning, we thought, would never end, but finally it was time for noon chow. When we got back to the barracks, we found Baker sitting on his bunk. He started laughing when he saw us.

“What happened, for Christ’s sake?”

“We been dying of curiosity all morning.”

“Well, it looks like I won’t be single much longer.”

“You?...Get married!” I exclaimed. “Don’t make me laugh.”

Sergeant Foster, the barracks sergeant, walked over to where the three of us were.

“Baker,” he said. “Gradillos tells me you got yourself in a bit of a jam.”

“You might say that, I guess,” Baker replied.

“He said he’s going to have to marry her,” I added. I watched Baker for his reaction, but there wasn’t any.

“Is that right?”

“They’ll drop the charges if I do. If I don’t, minimum sentence under a court martial is six years in the stockade.”

“Good God.”

“Ain’t there anything you can do?”

“Don’t know what.”

“You’re not going to give up that easy, are you?” Fester said.

I looked at Fester, and Fester looked at me. We both knew what the other was thinking. This doesn’t sound like the Baker we know.

“For Christ’s sake, the legal officer couldn’t even think of a thing.”

“What about this?” I said desperately. “Couldn’t a whole bunch of us say we’d laid her?”
"Hell, that won't work. She's not pregnant. Under these state laws I ain't got a snowball's chance in hell."

"Why?" I asked defiantly.

"She was a minor under the law. She don't have to prove anything. I gotta do all the proving. In fact, it doesn't make any difference whether I ever laid her or not. All I have to do is prove I was never with her alone at anytime before her seventeenth birthday. See what I mean?"

"What kind of laws have they got around here?"

"The legal officer said on these kind of things, a man's guilty till proven innocent."

"When you supposed to get married?" I asked.

"This coming Saturday."

"What then?"

"I don't know for sure. Her old man says she's going home for awhile afterwards."

"You gonna stay with her?" asked Fester.

"What do you think?"

Fester and I looked at each other dumbfounded. We didn't know how we were supposed to take that last remark.

"Baker," said Sergeant Foster, "aren't you from my home state?"

"Yeah, I'm from Kansas."

"There's a state law there that says a wife's gotta live with her husband right after they're married. If she don't, you can get an annulment."

"That'll be too much trouble."

"Too much trouble!"

"Baker, are you out of your mind?"

Baker wouldn't look at us. He sat on the edge of his bunk and stared at the floor. Fester and I frowned at each other.

Finally, I had to break the silence. "Just what are you trying to say, Baker?" I was getting a little angry.

Baker still didn't want to look at us. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. Then he started rubbing his hands together. After a long moment of silence, he looked up and forced a smile in our direction.

"A guy's gotta get married sometime," he said.

Albert Talbott, Sci. Sr.