

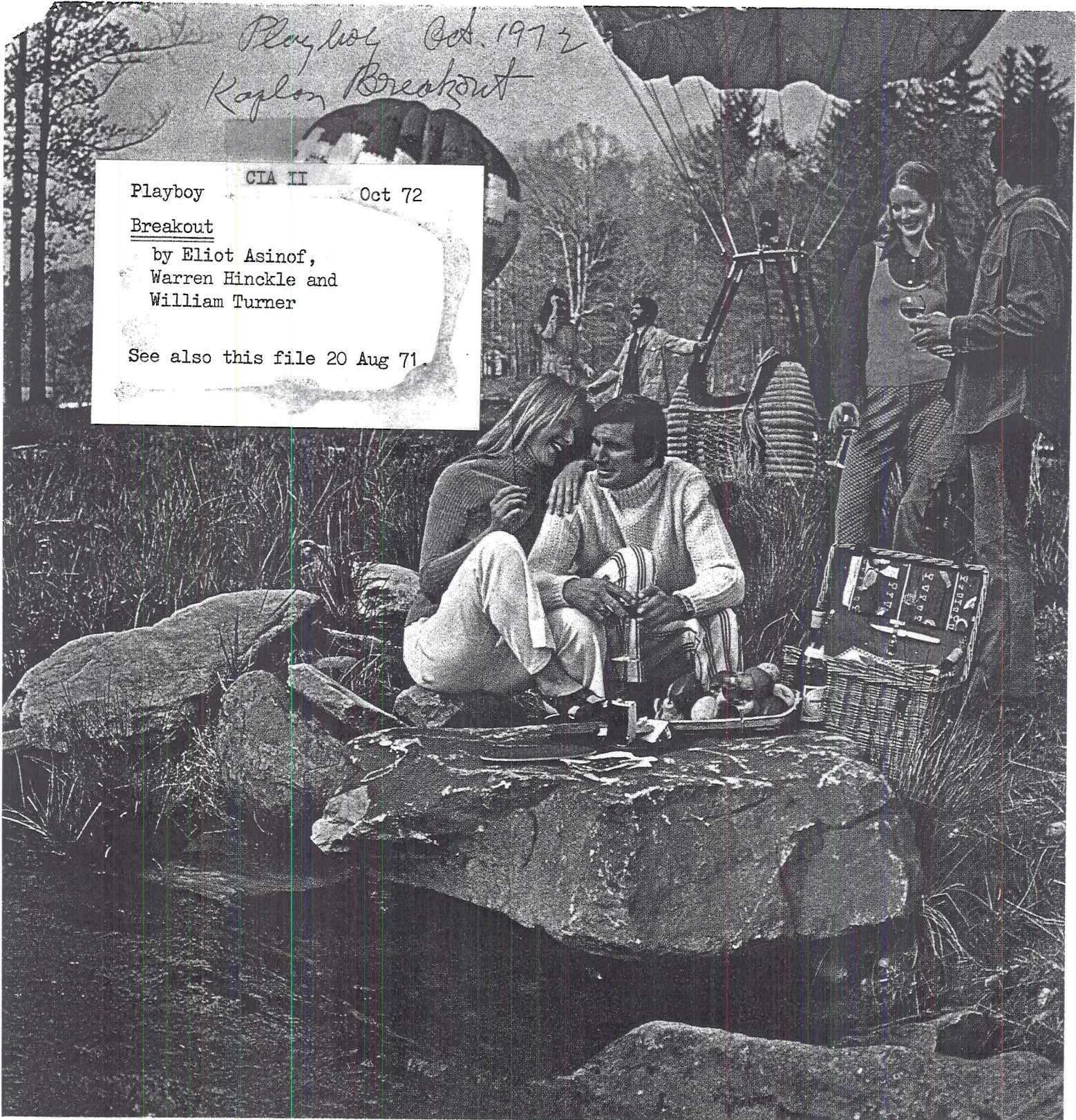
Playboy Oct. 1972  
Kaplan Breakout

Playboy **CIA II** Oct 72

Breakout

by Eliot Asinof,  
Warren Hinckle and  
William Turner

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# BREAKOUT

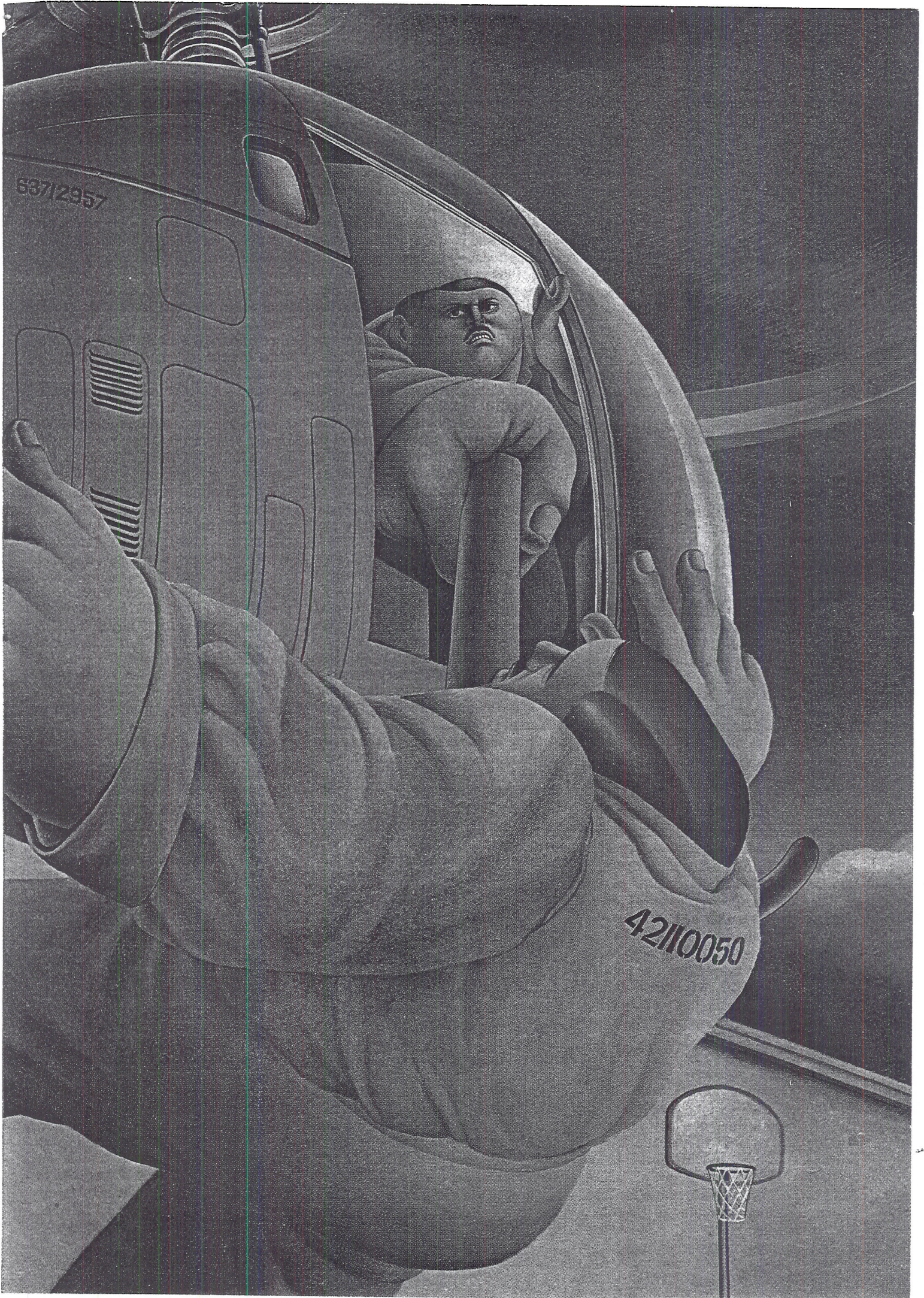
article By **ELIOT ASINOF,**  
**WARREN HINCKLE** and **WILLIAM TURNER**

*american millionaire joel kaplan spent  
nine years trying to escape from a  
mexican prison—but it took smilin' jack and  
his blue chopper to turn the trick*

WHEN VIC STADTER DECIDED to take the job, he didn't really know what he was getting into. The circumstances were strange, even for the tangled world of Latin-American intrigue: Joel Kaplan was a wealthy American whose family had put together a fortune in the Caribbean—sugar and molasses, mainly—and he now sat in a Mexican prison, convicted of having murdered his partner in 1961. Only the judges who had tried Kaplan seemed certain that the corpse in question was actually one Luis M. Vidal, Jr., and the evidence that had convicted him consisted chiefly of inspired imaginative leaps between apparently unrelated events. But that was not so odd, not in Mexico, anyway. What was strange was that Kaplan had not been able to buy his way out. Stadter knew a lot of people who had done so, including a heroin dealer who had paid his way free despite considerable pressure from the United States to keep him locked up. If you had the money, which Kaplan and his family did, you could always make the right payoffs and walk away. But Kaplan had been trying *very* hard to get out for eight years, and nearly \$1,000,000 had been spent in the effort, without

ILLUSTRATION BY ROY CARRUTHERS







success. Someone, evidently, wanted him to stay there.

Stadter was being paid handsomely to get Kaplan out of prison and into the United States. By profession, Stadter was a smuggler, so this wasn't entirely out of the line of duty, just a little more chancy than his usual enterprises. He had drifted into the business after the war, hauling bootleg whiskey in Oklahoma. A few years later, he was airfreighting cargoes of capuchin and spider monkeys into the U. S. from Nicaragua, without the irritation of Customs. Hundreds of such laissez-faire import jaunts have turned him into an underground Smilin' Jack—a pilot who can run the Mexican border with the very best of them; and he has become a specialist in Latin America, handling diverse contraband from lobsters to linen, using all manner of ruses and all varieties of transportation and refining the respected art of the bribe to a precise science. Stadter knows his business.

In 1971, when Stadter was to pull off the most astonishing caper of his career, he was 51. A tall, well-built Californian, he has the style of a Texan: flaring rust-colored mustache, curly hair, cowboy boots. He can be as tough as he needs to be, but he is generally friendly, candid and a believer in old-fashioned chivalry. If there are any such creatures as rugged individualists left, Stadter is one of them. There are no written contracts in his business; he mistrusts the world of brokers and agents and lawyers. With some reason: In his only serious encounter with the law, a conspiracy case involving the possession of marijuana (he claims it was a frame-up), he ended up spending five years in the Federal penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. In those five years, he managed to build up a hefty grudge against governments, bureaucrats and all their issue. When the chance came to spring Kaplan, whom he viewed as another victim of justice miscarried, Stadter saw it as a matter of freedom going up against authority—as well as an opportunity to turn a tidy profit. But as he got deeper and deeper into the Kaplan case, with its twists and shadows fading back several decades, the profit motive became decidedly secondary. "Hell," he said later, "I would've taken him out for nothing."

The Kaplans have been making money in the Caribbean for a long time, and they've been fighting over how to divide it for just as long. In the late Twenties, Joel's father and his uncle, J. M. ("Jack") Kaplan, had a savage falling out over their molasses business in Cuba—an altercation, according to Joel, that left his father broke and made Uncle

Jack rich. The brothers didn't speak for 25 years. Joel's own battle with Jack commenced 15 years ago, when the uncle managed to wrest effective control of the family molasses business from his nephew in a deathbed conversation with Joel's father. Young Joel remained as titular vice-president, while Uncle Jack held all the money—quite tightly.

The financial fight that followed—and continues today—was intensified by the fact that the two men saw the world and the role of their companies in it through very different glasses. During the late Fifties, for instance, Jack's politics and financial interests were such that the CIA and the State Department found him a useful advisor on the troublesome matter of Cuba. He participated in and agreed with the U. S. decision to end all dealing with the "untrustworthy" Castro, even though it meant the loss of his Cuban operations. There was, of course, the hope of Castro's removal—via natural economic and political developments on the island or his overthrow through the covert actions of the CIA. In any case, Jack Kaplan, fully appraised and conforming to this historic shift in U. S. sugar politics, in the early Sixties moved his business operations to the Dominican Republic. Incidentally or not, the Dominican Republic at approximately the same time began to receive the lion's share of the funds the CIA secretly ran through the J. M. Kaplan Fund, money earmarked to build "safe" social-democratic alternatives to Communist or rudely anti-American socialist regimes.

During the same period, Joel's political sympathies were drifting, somewhat erratically, to the left. He had joined the company after the Second World War, hedgehopping around Central and South America, overseeing the family interests. He became something of an entrepreneur himself, starting an independent molasses business in Peru and a trucking line in Oklahoma and Texas. Somewhere along the way, he met Luis Vidal, Jr., a half-Cuban, half-Puerto Rican who happened to be Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo's godson. As Trujillo's personal "unofficial representative"—or business agent—for the Dominican Republic in the United States, Vidal's father moved in the upper echelons of official Washington. In spite of this high-level heritage, Vidal, Jr., preferred moving in lower and darker circles—and into these circles he took Joel Kaplan.

To this day, Kaplan is uncomfortable discussing his relationship with the unsavory Vidal. "I met him off and on for many years during the Fifties," he said. "We drank a few beers." The relationship in fact was considerably chummier than that. Vidal, Jr., was president of a mysterious entity called the Paint Com-

pany of America, which, despite its formidable name, was never listed in any of the standard business directories. It appears to have served as a front for any number of Vidal's legal and extralegal activities in the late Fifties. The illegal activities included gunrunning, bootlegging, high-class prostitution and a black-market exchange in the Cuban peso. Of these, Kaplan admits to having been involved only in the gunrunning. "I was bored handling so much molasses," he said, "so I had no qualms about seeing what could be done when some people from Guatemala asked me about getting some guns." The ubiquitous Vidal provided the raw material and Kaplan discovered he had a vital facility for moving hot cargo into Central America—access to the now-abandoned old San Juan Sugar Company storage yards and grass airstrip at Veracruz. "The guns came in by air, I stashed them there for a few days, moving them on by air," Kaplan said. This arrangement proved so convenient that he and Vidal set up a "small operation" for importing arms into Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras. With a faint smile, Kaplan says that most of these guns went to "sportsmen." These sportsmen opposed the governments in power in Guatemala and Nicaragua—one of which had been set up by the CIA when it overthrew the Arbenz regime in Guatemala in 1954, and the other of which was the Somoza family dictatorship in Nicaragua, a prime collaborator with the CIA in staging the 1961 invasion of Cuba.

Kaplan indicates that he was principally involved in what might be described as the "left" side of Vidal's extensive arms operation. A much larger "right" side of the business was carried out, rather unscrupulously, Kaplan thought, by Vidal. Through his own sources, Vidal was busy selling arms to the right-wing, anti-Castro Cubans who starred in the Bay of Pigs. He was also known to be making heavy arms shipments from the south of Florida into the Dominican Republic to his godfather, whose thugs in turn supplied them to forces sworn to overthrow the generalissimo's friends and enemies in Haiti and Venezuela. Kaplan and Vidal prospered in their little arrangement for several years—until late 1961, when the Mexican authorities accused Kaplan of terminating the business relationship by murdering his partner.

Kaplan claimed then and now that he was innocent—and there is good reason to believe him. Vidal had been in serious financial and political trouble for some time—he had been selling guns to Castro forces and to anti-Castro forces, shorting both sides—and he told Kaplan

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## BREAKOUT

*(continued from page 82)*

several weeks before his supposed demise that he intended to disappear for a while. Kaplan thinks he did just that and doubts that there ever was a murder. That doubt was shared by some Mexican officials, who refused to issue a death certificate for Vidal because supposed identification of the body was too vague. The "widow," for instance, later told an interviewer that, although she was sure the corpse she had viewed in the Mexico City morgue was that of her husband, "they had replaced his black eyes with blue ones."

Whatever happened to Vidal, someone was determined to nail Kaplan for the crime—even though, as far as can be ascertained, his only encounter with Vidal in Mexico City on the day he disappeared had been to drive him from the airport to his hotel. It was a short while later in Lima, Peru, on a business trip that Kaplan heard of Vidal's "death." When he returned to New York a few days later, the Spanish-language press was speculating that the Mexican authorities wished to talk to Kaplan as a possible suspect. On the advice of his lawyer, he decided to take a trip to Europe. But it was an unsuccessful dodge: One bright Sunday morning in the early spring of 1962, Kaplan walked out the front door of his Madrid hotel and was pinioned between two police officers. He soon found himself sitting across a desk from Luis Pozo, the Spanish chief of Interpol, the international police agency, who informed the millionaire all in one breath that he was wanted for murder in Mexico but not to worry because Spain and Mexico hadn't been officially talking for decades and no extradition treaty existed between the two nations. Pozo said that Kaplan "might" be deported to France and allowed him the Spanish equivalent of one phone call, which in this case was a telegram crying for help to the American embassy. Kaplan never heard from the embassy. After he spent a week in the Madrid jail, Pozo showed up, looking a bit flustered, and told him that "orders had come down from the highest sphere of the Spanish government" to reverse long-standing policy and to cooperate with Mexico—in his case, anyway. Two hours later, Kaplan was in a jet on his way to face trial in Mexico.

At the earliest stage in the long proceedings against Kaplan, a Mexican judge, citing lack of evidence, reduced the charge against him to being an accessory after the fact. But before Kaplan could write out a check for 75,000 pesos' bail, the federal district attorney stepped in, removed the judge for "incompetence" and revoked bail. Mexican legal

experts have said that the irregular proceedings against Kaplan violated Mexico's double-jeopardy law, since he was in essence tried twice for the same crime. His Mexican attorney was one of the nation's leading constitutional experts, Victor Velasquez. But the Kaplan case turned out to be beyond the realm of mere lawyers. "Obviously, something other than the law is keeping Mr. Kaplan in jail, because there are no legal grounds for him being there at all," Velasquez once said. He also points out that at least six prominent Mexican judges refused to try him because of the dubious legal grounds for the charges. Finally, a seventh judge, one whom Velasquez describes as "politically compromised," took the case. To no one's surprise, he found Kaplan guilty and sentenced him to 28 years. When the Mexican Supreme Court turned down Velasquez' appeal in 1968, the distinguished, gray-haired attorney threw up his hands. "This has become an issue of politics, not law," he said.

. . .

To Judy Kaplan Dowis, who hired him, Stadter came well recommended; he had a reputation for completing any job he undertook, and doing it on schedule. She needed someone like that. For the past eight years, she had been exploring every channel, legal and extralegal, to get her brother out of prison. She had, at various times, enlisted the help of an unlikely cast of adventurers that had included a defrocked priest, a one-armed Canadian, an erstwhile Green Beret demolitions expert, a former CIA contract pilot and a New Left radical from Big Sur who was aided by a crew of Sausalito wharf rats and abalone poachers. Each had his own escape scheme. Some, involving straight bribes, were the essence of simplicity; but the officials, lamentably, refused to stay bribed. Other plots were more ingenious. In one, the ex-priest performed a putative marriage ceremony between "Luis Vidal" and one fictional Lucia Magana. The vows were duly registered and certified, and it was Kaplan's hope that this proof of Vidal's continued existence, hence nonmurder, would be enough to free him. It wasn't. Another scheme involved the purchase of a van, which was then painted to duplicate the laundry trucks that served the prison. Two guards were bribed to look the other way and Kaplan was to be spirited out with the dirty sheets and dropped in the hills. There a seasoned operator would meet him, fill him with vitamins and pep pills and walk him across the mountains overnight to a waiting escape plane. That one fell through when the guards backed out; it's doubt-

ful, anyway, whether he would have been able to manage the hike.

There was another plot in which two airplanes were gassed up and ready near the border and a former Air Force colonel was signed up to fly Kaplan out of Mexico. There was even a back-up escape vehicle, in the form of a 1962 Pontiac that had been converted into a sort of armored car by salting flak jackets in the doors and rear end. A crew of renegades went into Mexico, equipped with a .38 stolen from the California Highway Patrol, special armor-piercing bullets, two machine guns, selected side arms and a sack full of cash. They spent four frustrating months hanging around Mexico City, waiting for a bribe connection to deliver. An assistant warden agreed to drive Kaplan out in the trunk of his car but changed his mind—keeping the \$1000 down payment.

When Stadter got into the Kaplan-rescue act, yet another escape attempt was in the process of going awry. Kaplan had approached an inmate who ran a private trailer-manufacturing enterprise—using convict labor—within the prison. This inmate was paid to build a secret compartment into the bulkhead of one of the trailers. Kaplan was to wiggle into the compartment, and when the trailer was driven out for a test run—a normal procedure—the newly employed Stadter, as wheelman, would be waiting for him outside. A \$10,000 advance was wired to the inmate's bank in Mexico City, but he seemed to be stalling. Smelling a rat, Stadter wired Judy to stop payment on the check. Too late. The Mexico City bank manager had cleared payment, and later claimed that he hadn't received the stop notice in time. Perhaps it had been delayed in transit, he said regretfully, or misplaced in his bank offices.

Stadter did not discover until weeks later that the bank manager was the uncle of the inmate's wife.

. . .

Although he was nominally in charge of the next prison-break effort, Stadter was never too happy about it. An assignment, that was all it was—he had no part in organizing it. But it was going to be tricky, so he imported one of his best and most trusted operatives, a man known, unfathomably, as Pussy. "Pussy is one of those men with what seem like unlimited abilities," Stadter says of him. "His father was Portuguese, his mother French, and nobody knows what combinations preceded them. He's light enough to be white, dark enough to be black. He can handle himself in different languages, in proper dialects, but he knows when to talk and when not to. He can fit in anywhere. I could not function in Mexico without Pussy." Before the year

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## BREAKOUT

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was out, Pussy would make more than 20 trips to Mexico City. Even Kaplan, by then suspicious of nearly everyone, came to trust him.

The newest plan, on which Kaplan had been working for months, involved a transfer to the minimum-security prison at Cuernavaca. He needed the cleaner air of the Cuernavaca mountains, Kaplan alleged in a series of petitions, to recover from his frequent bouts of hepatitis and the over-all debilitation that had resulted. Once there, he reasoned, escape should be easy; at Cuernavaca, prisoners were permitted to go into town, enjoying freedom comparable to what might be allowed a student in a strict American prep school.

But Stadter was aware—as was Kaplan—that the very transfer that was designed to save his life might as easily be redesigned to kill him. On the road to Cuernavaca, there is a turnoff into a gravel pit. There's more than gravel in this pit; it's also liberally strewn with human bones. Here a prisoner could be pulled out of a car at gunpoint, told to run for his life—and shot "in the act of escape." What better way for a well-bribed official to protect himself from the accusation that he'd been a well-bribed official?

So Stadter set up a protection system. Pussy would be at the wheel of one car waiting outside the prison gate, ready to follow the car containing Kaplan—an obvious tail. A second car, mounted with a high-power spotlight, would be stationed less than a mile down the road, in case of complications; this car would be loaded with heavy artillery—and Stadter. A third car would be waiting at Cuernavaca. Word came through that the transfer would be made the night of January 16, 1971. Stadter and his three cars waited all night, in vain; no vehicle entered or left the prison. That didn't stop the bureaucrats who were allegedly engineering the move from calling Kaplan's Mexican wife, Irma, whom he'd married while in prison, and demanding \$80,000 in payment for a successful transfer.

Conditioned by then to failure, Irma temporized; she would drive to Santa Marta prison and see for herself. Her husband was there. No one had contacted him. He had passed another of the semi-sleepless nights that had been troubling him for weeks.

Stadter was not surprised to learn, some time later, that the "officials" who had been arranging the transfer, and screaming for their money, had been

ousted from office months before. They were no longer officially anything.

This time, Stadter told himself, it would be different. This time the project was solidly in his hands. The way he read it, the simplest thing to do was to buy Kaplan out with straight cash. Hit the *right* officials this time—with his contacts, he was sure he could do it—and make a deal. This was Mexico, and he'd never heard of a prisoner who couldn't be sprung with a sufficient sum of money. He began talking to people he knew, important people, letting it be known he had lots of money to offer. Judy had promised to back him to the limit of whatever resources she had remaining.

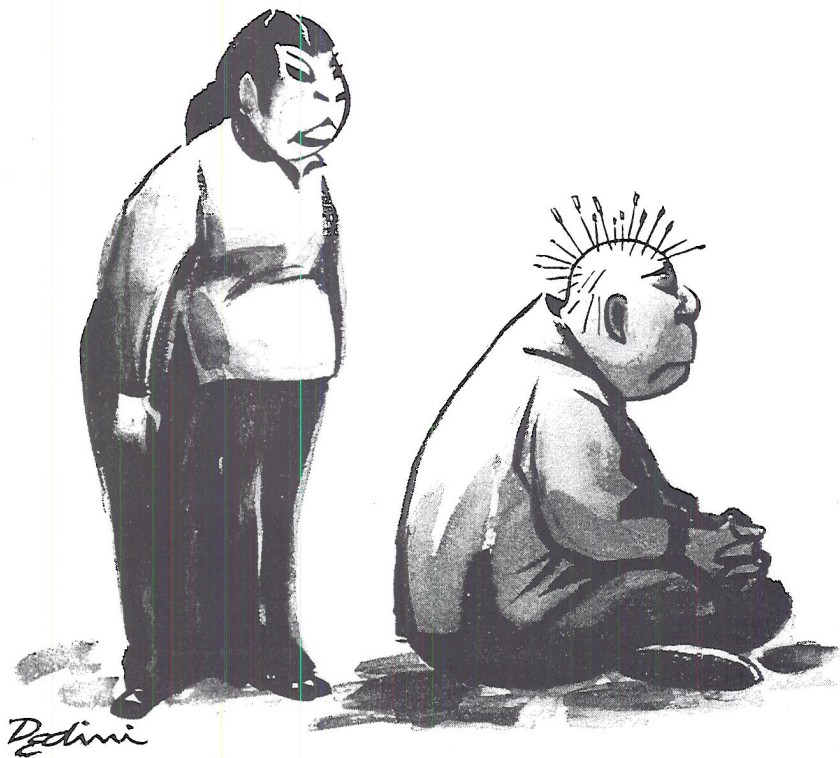
The bad news came back from contact after contact: "This Kaplan business. If I were you, I'd forget it." Stadter was stunned; with Kaplan, the door was mysteriously shut.

Matters took another odd turn with the arrival at Stadter's hotel of a stocky man in sunglasses, a figure straight out of John Le Carré, who proposed to Stadter that, in the unlikely event that he did spring Kaplan, his associates—unidentified, of course—would be happy to pay him \$50,000 to toss the prisoner back into Mexico. Stadter speculated on who the backers might be. Were they from the CIA? The Mafia? Cuban exiles who opposed Kaplan's known sympathy for the Castro left? Kaplan's Uncle Jack, who also opposed that sympathy, and had a financial bonanza at stake to boot? He never found out.

Early in the afternoon of June 10, 1971, a slight, dark, inconspicuous man we'll call Alfred Court arrived at Mexico City International Airport from New York, carrying a flight bag containing a few personal effects. He told customs officials that he'd come to Mexico City to visit friends and that he intended to stay only a few days. He was passed without question.

If the officials had searched him, they might have discovered a provocative curiosity. Court was wearing a neatly trimmed black wig—not in itself startling, but underneath the wig Court's own hairdo was identical. Why would a man wear a wig exactly like his own hair?

Court was wearing it because he was, by profession, a make-up artist and occasional operative of one Victor E. Stadter, who had decided that since he couldn't buy Kaplan out of prison, he would walk him out. The ailing Kaplan was currently in the prison hospital, and Pussy had already placed two hospital guards and one female receptionist on Stadter's payroll. The plan was uncomplicated, as all good plans ought to be. Court would enter the Santa Marta



"Really, Chang, why don't you just take an aspirin?"



prison with a friend—Pussy—ostensibly to visit the prisoner Kaplan. Inside the hospital room, Court would remove the wig, place it on Kaplan's head, perform a rapid make-up job with cosmetics he was carrying and switch clothes with him. When he was finished, Kaplan would look exactly like him. Then Pussy would drug and bind Court, making him appear the victim rather than the perpetrator, and, with Kaplan, would stroll nonchalantly out the gate. There was, of course, a slight chance that Court would be found out, but to him that was a reasonable gamble. He'd worked for Stadter enough to trust his judgment. He'd be paid \$2500, plus expenses, for a few days' work; what's more, he could always tell the story to his grandchildren. Everything was ready to go when, suddenly and inexplicably, Kaplan was pronounced medically fit and transferred out of the hospital back to his dormitory cell, making the scheme impossible to execute.

Only momentarily nonplused, Stadter caught the next flight to Los Angeles, where he made contact with another old associate, Dr. X. Inside of a few hours, the medico had put together the ingredients of a pill that would give Kaplan an attack of shakes and fever strikingly similar to the symptoms of malaria. Pussy, on a prison visit, would administer the pill; but since its effects would last only 24 hours, they would have to make their move on the following day. With a few recuperative aspirin tablets, Kaplan should be as good as new.

But when Pussy went to the prison to reconnoiter, he found a shocker: A special guard was posted at the front gate to tug at all suspicious hairdos. In fact, every visitor who wasn't totally bald was to be challenged.

Stadter never found out where the leak had come from.

Kaplan was drunk. With every frustrated hope he was, he realized, becoming more paranoid, convinced that as he plotted to get out, someone, somewhere, was plotting to keep him in. His cellmate, an irrepressible Venezuelan forger named Carlos Antonio Contreras Castro, tried to cheer him by spiriting in quarts of light Bacardi. For that, Kaplan was grateful, but there were times when Castro's garrulosity got him down. This was one of those times.

"I was drunk, but I didn't want to listen to Castro anymore," Kaplan recalls. "So I got up from my bed and said I was going to take a walk in the yard. He thought I was crazy. It was the wrong time of day for that, the middle of the afternoon; I'd get my head blown off by that sun, he said. I didn't care.

"As I walked around the patio, the



Our marriage will cause quite a stir.



sun made my head spin. The more I walked, the less important anything seemed. And then, while I was standing there like a drunken boob in the middle of the yard, it hit me—the weirdest idea of all, yet unmistakably the simplest: “I could fly out of here in a helicopter.”

The minute Stadter heard of Kaplan’s suggestion, he sensed it would work. All the fundamentals appeared to be in order: There was an inner courtyard without supervision of any kind, accessible to Kaplan at specific hours and, above all, not visible from any watchtower above the prison walls. All Stadter had to do was get a helicopter in there and take him out. There were, as he put it, “only 30 or 40 things that might go wrong.”

The first problem, as he saw it, was that the project would take time to organize, and time would breed leaks. As a result, he would keep himself—and as much information as possible—away from Mexico City in general and from Kaplan in particular. Kaplan would have to sweat out his progress on blind faith.

There was also the question of cost. Just for openers, they’d need a helicopter that could operate at Santa Marta’s altitude (7600 feet), with its thin air. Judy wasn’t sure if she had enough money, but she’d find a way of getting it.

Then, too, Stadter needed a helicopter pilot. Old airplane pilots were a dime a dozen, but helicopters were a young man’s ball game. Old-time pilots don’t even consider helicopters aircraft, just big dumb toys, floppy and unpredictable. “And,” as Stadter pointed out later, “you just don’t go around to any helicopter pilot you might run into and say, ‘Mister, I got this guy I want to spring from a Mexican pen, and I need your help.’ You’ve got to know the man first; he’s got to be someone you can trust.” In desperation, Stadter himself tried to learn to fly a chopper, signing up for double lessons, at two schools simultaneously. It went badly.

Finally, he called on an old pilot friend, Harvey Orville (“Cotton”) Dail. “Cotton had never flown choppers either,” says Stadter, “but the way I figured him, he could learn to fly anything as long as he had a rubber band to wind up the propeller.”

Cotton, a big, tough Irish-Cherokee Texas farm boy in his early 40s, was less sanguine. “It won’t work,” he told Stadter when Stadter flew down to see him at his home in Eagle Lake, Texas. “They’ll blow the damn chopper right out of the air.” It took five days to persuade him.

To teach Cotton how to fly a helicopter, Stadter hired a 29-year-old bearded Vietnam-war veteran named Roger Guy Hershner from the Brackett Field Air-

craft Service in La Verne outside Los Angeles. Hershner had been brought up in the solid, conservative tradition of Mansfield, Ohio, where he had learned to play a pretty fair piano and a not-so-fair trombone. His romance with helicopters had begun when he was assigned to a ground crew in Vietnam; when he got out of the Army, he used his GI Bill benefits to study flying. When one of his students at Brackett, Vic Stadter, offered him a new job for more money—and plenty of chances to fly—he took it. If its secrecy was strange, Hershner was discreet enough not to ask questions.

The plotters needed an idea of the dimensions of the prison courtyard and the height of the wall over which the copter would have to fly. Stadter had Pussy smuggle a Minox camera to Kaplan, so that he could photograph the patio from all angles. The pictures were clear enough, but the dimensions were too obscure for an accurate estimate. What was needed was for somebody to go in and pace off the area—and Pussy was unreachable, off in the hills somewhere between Mexico City and Brownsville, Texas, stashing five-gallon fuel cans in preparation for the helicopter’s getaway.

Stadter put in a call to his brother-in-law, Eugene Wilmoth. Well-dressed, well-spoken, the 6’2” Wilmoth—a salesman for a soap-manufacturing company—was imposing enough to impress any Mexican bureaucrat. Stadter sent him to Mexico City, with instructions to friends to get him into Santa Marta as a visiting official of some kind. The problem was that Wilmoth couldn’t speak a word of Spanish.

Sometimes the most audacious plan succeeds best. Big Gene was brought into Santa Marta as a Venezuelan specialist in penology. The warden himself escorted the VIP on an hourlong tour, inundating him with descriptions in staccato Spanish, to which the towering dignitary nodded in solemn agreement, occasionally even extending a smile. Nothing was withheld from the visitor, and when he came to the patio that serviced the prisoners of dormitory number one, no one noticed that he stopped a moment to take note of certain landmarks—the basketball court, the height of the dormitory wall—nor that he paced the entire length and width of the area with one of the prisoners, that annoying little American who had murdered his partner.

The way Stadter saw it, when Wilmoth reported the dimensions, a \$30,000 Bell Model 47 chopper would do the job handily. That machine is a small four-seater popular with oil-exploration companies operating in the back country;

it has enough power to lift pilot and a passenger, even at Santa Marta’s altitude—especially if they were to strip the craft of all unnecessary weight, extra seats, doors, trimming, and so on. “I may even have to shave,” said Cotton.

In Mexico, the law regarding jail breaks is unusually civilized. It recognizes a prison escape as legal if no law is broken in the process: in other words, if there is no violence to person or property, no bribery of officials. The helicopter scheme, if it succeeded, would meet those criteria. But Stadter had to get his equipment to Mexico City legally, as well—and passing through customs without incident, especially with a helicopter and given his reputation with border guards, was likely to be sticky. He needed a cover to justify the entire operation. And so was born the Milandra Mining Company—named after Stadter’s wife, Mary Milandra—with supposed interests in Honduras. The helicopter was duly registered in the mining company’s name.

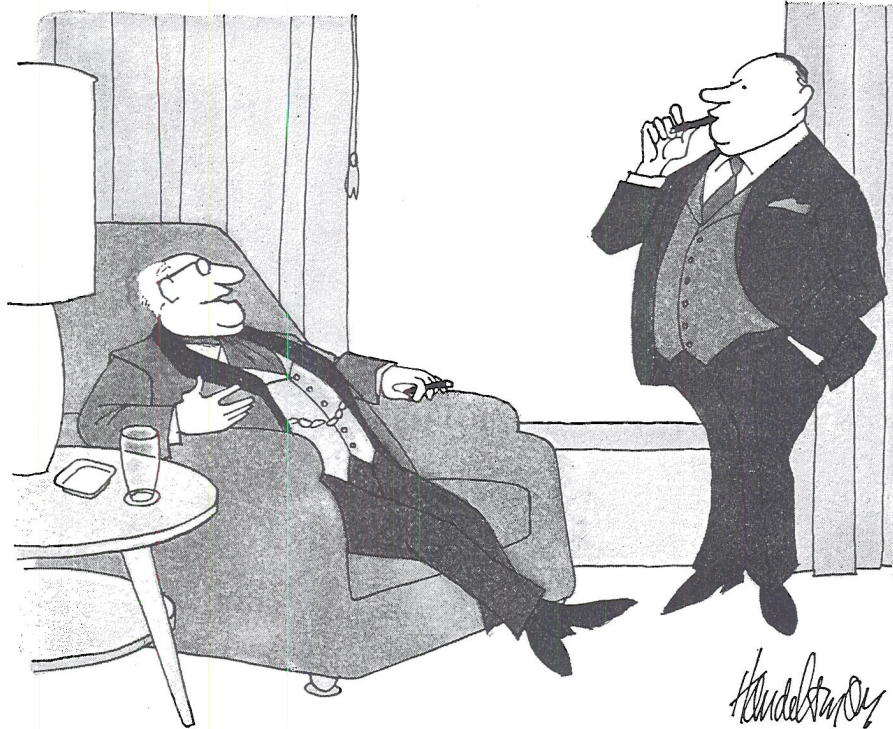
Stadter was now operating in the way he liked best, treading a delicate line between the legitimate and the fraudulent, covering himself so artfully that those idiot bureaucrats would see nothing. He was feeling great when the telephone rang. It was Irma, calling from Mexico City. Kaplan had decided that his cellmate of these past three years, Castro, was to be flown out with him.

Stadter exploded: “Goddamn it, no, no, *no!* The chopper will never be able to lift another passenger. It’ll hardly lift two at that altitude. Doesn’t he know about thin air? Tell him it’s no deal.”

Kaplan was adamant. Stadter threatened to pull out. Kaplan insisted. Stalemate. At last Stadter relented; after all, it was Kaplan’s game. But they’d have to buy another helicopter. It had to have a turbosupercharger, giving its engine the same power at 10,000 feet as it had at sea level; nor could it be much larger than the little Bell 47 they’d planned to use. The courtyard was too small. As Cotton put it: “You can’t park a Caddie in a VW garage.”

Cotton and Stadter spent precious weeks scouring the broad spaces of the Far West, calling or visiting dealers, tracking down all possibilities, until finally, there it was, at Natrona Services in Casper, Wyoming. The ad in the aviation journal had said: “Bell 47, reconditioned, rebuilt, reupholstered, with new supercharger designed for use in high altitudes, used to fly over 8000 feet.” The chopper, a magnificent plaything with over \$100,000 worth of work on it, had been rebuilt by a millionaire for use





*"The secret of my success, Henry, lies in the very sound advice my father once gave me. 'Son,' he said, 'here's a million dollars. Don't lose it.'"*

in taking friends to a private lake resort high in the Wyoming Rockies. Now it would perform for another millionaire, who was momentarily at the other end of the social spectrum.

Stadter had planned to buy the craft on credit, making a normal down payment and paying the balance in installments. "Then the guy checked around and found out who I was," he reported later. "He said, 'Stadter, they say you got a poor life expectancy.' That meant cash on the barrelhead. Hell, he wouldn't even sell me gas on credit."

He had to shell out \$65,000 for it.

Now Stadter had his basic ingredients. He began to assemble his cast of men and machines at Houston, where he'd decided to make his headquarters for the final stage of the assault. First he traded in his cumbersome two-engine Cessna 310 on a fast single-engine Cessna 210, which conceivably would attract less attention at the smaller Mexican airports he intended to use. The Cessna, like the helicopter, was registered in the name of M. Milandra. Cotton was continuing his flying lessons with Hershner and everything appeared to be going smoothly—when word came of another setback. Pussy, Stadter's trusted operative who was the liaison between Kaplan and his rescuers, had been stricken with severe

headaches and sporadic seizures of blindness. The medical diagnosis was possible brain tumor, with immediate surgery advised. Pussy would have none of that; he took himself off to an Indian reservation in New Mexico, where he knew a witch doctor. Stadter saw him off with misgiving. At any rate, Pussy was scratched for the duration of the assignment.

Kaplan, meanwhile, was growing more and more edgy. He conjured up a plan of old-fashioned ferocity: There would be a special car parked outside the main gate, to be smoke-bombed by the Cessna 210 as a decoy. The chopper would slide in a few minutes later from the opposite side of the prison, machine guns blazing at the tower guards, flak suits and rifles ready for the getaway.

Stadter preferred to work quietly. "You don't shoot at the guards, you wave at them. Any pro knows that." Trying to soothe Kaplan, he sent his new son-in-law down to Santa Marta for a visit. The emissary returned, reporting that Kaplan looked "sicker than the last dead man I saw." All in all, Stadter wasn't really surprised when Irma showed up, having flown all the way from Mexico City to Houston with a Polaroid camera in her handbag. Kaplan wanted her to get a picture of the copter, with her standing alongside, so he could be sure it really existed—that

he wasn't being taken for a ride more financial than physical.

"I've always wanted to ride in a helicopter," Irma remarked as she put the Polaroid back into her bag. "I've seen the attorney general's copter in Mexico City several times."

"How do you know it's the attorney general's?" asked Stadter.

"It's all blue," she replied.

Stadter ordered a blue paint job for the Bell 47.

Now Stadter sought a woman, a special kind of woman. Someone who looked like a high-class whore. From his experience, a man didn't drive into Mexico alone if he wished to avoid the suspicions of the dozen or so officials he'd confront in the course of his trip. A loner must surely be up to some illicit operation, they'd reason. But a well-dressed man in a big, flashy car, with a handsome whore wearing an inch and a half of make-up and blonde hair tossed up to the roof? Well, that was easy to understand. He had gotten away with the ploy many times before—often using a girl who was now unavailable; her bridegroom had put his foot down regarding such irregular behavior.

The way Stadter saw it, it was just as hard to find the right woman as to find the right chopper pilot. "You need a woman who can keep her mouth shut, and there ain't too many of them!" But he recalled a big blonde he'd seen a number of times at a truck-stop diner near his home in Glendora, California, a big Italian woman who painted herself up to make less of her 35 years. He made her an offer and she accepted.

He needed the proper car to complete the image. Preferably something like a Cadillac Coupe de Ville in Baroque Bronze, a touristy showboat built for weekend pleasure, a reliable car that could move when it had to. A car exactly like the Caddie owned by Cotton.

"OK," said Cotton, "but how much?"

"Well, you can have the blonde."

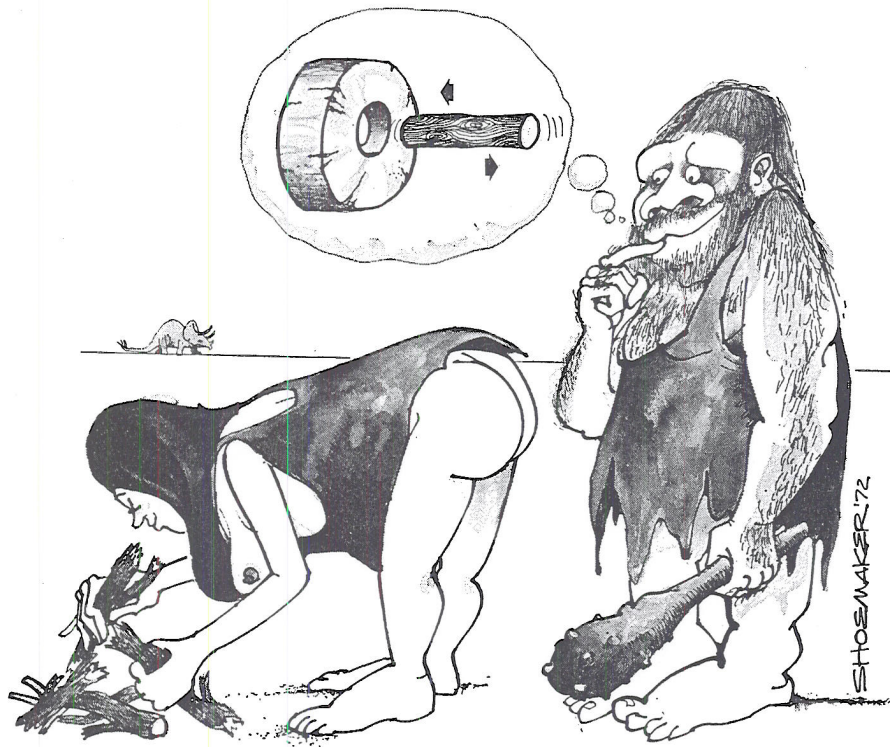
"Shee-it, Vic, I ought to charge you for servicing her."

But they struck a bargain. At last, Stadter was ready to proceed south; helicopter, fast airplane, pilot, Cadillac and blonde set to go.

Then came another telephone call from Irma. Kaplan had just undergone an emergency appendectomy in the prison hospital. He couldn't be moved for at least a week, probably longer.

In the coffee shop at the Houston airport, Cotton sat down next to Stadter. It had been ten days since Kaplan's operation, and the patient was fully recovered. But Cotton looked rocky. He





had a toothpick in his mouth and he hadn't eaten a bite yet. It was a bad sign.

"Vic," he said, "I ain't ready to fly that thing."

"What?"

"I need more time. Give me another week."

It was unbelievable, Stadter thought. By God, maybe that poor son of a bitch Kaplan really *was* jinxed right up to his ass. It just might be that there was no way anyone could get him out.

Of one thing Stadter was sure: He didn't want to hang around Houston another week, not with that bright-blue helicopter, the green-and-white Cessna, the big blonde whore, the Baroque Bronze Cadillac. Too conspicuous.

He sought out Hershner, the bearded young helicopter instructor. "Siddown, Roger, I've got a proposition for you."

"Oh?"

"The way I see it, you don't know what this whole thing is all about. Right?"

"None of my business, I guess."

"Right. Well, we're involved in something—it's not entirely on the square. It's legal in the U. S. A. but not in Mexico. You see, we're gonna be stealing some test ore down there, at a mine in Honduras. We're gonna go in with the chopper and take it out."

"Oh."

"It's a dangerous business, Roger. I gotta admit there are Indians down there, and maybe they'll shoot at you,

but they don't shoot too good, I guarantee you. . . ."

"What?"

"Look, I'll pay you some real good money."

"You mean you want me to fly the chopper all the way down to Honduras and take out that ore?"

"Well, yeah."

"Well, sure, Vic. Why not?"

Three machines, four bodies. Together, then separately, they began the trek south to the border, flying the pennants of the Milandra Mining Company. Stadter, dressed up in shiny Texas boots and striped bell-bottom trousers, sat tall behind the wheel of Cotton's shimmering bronze Caddie with his fair lady at his side. Cotton, relieved of chopper duty by mutual consent, returned to flying what he considered legitimate aircraft, the Cessna 210—which he was to take to the border city of Brownsville, where he would check into Mexico with appropriate papers and then go on toward the firm's holdings in Honduras. All strictly legitimate. There was but one final bit of tampering to be done. The Cessna's registration, clearly marked on its fuselage, read N9462X before Cotton went to work on it with a wad of tape. With a few artfully placed strips, it soon read N8482X. When Cotton took off for the border, he radioed his correct registration. But when he landed at the Mexican border town of Matamoros, the number was changed.

Cotton flew on to Tampico, where he checked into the Hotel Impala to await word from his boss. Meanwhile, Hershner climbed aboard the Bell 47 and flew to McAllen Field, near the Mexican border. There he was joined by Stadter, the Caddie and the blonde—and by 12 empty five-gallon fuel cans, to be filled, stashed and used for the chopper on the return trip. All of Pussy's earlier caches had been discovered, presumably by Indians.

Stadter and the blonde crossed the border without a hitch. "I told the Mexican immigration people that I was just an old tourist going down for a few days of fun. Sure, I was married, but this was not my wife. Just a friend. Jesus, I even winked at them. They took one good look at the blonde—I don't know why, but they love blondes—and I knew they weren't going to remember me, just her. I slipped them a ten-spot and they gave us tourist cards. Off we went, to the Mexican customs. I gave them another ten-spot and they smiled like true gentlemen, put stickers on the suitcases—without opening them—and we became bona fide tourists. It's all very predictable if you play your cards right."

It wasn't so simple for Hershner and the helicopter. A helicopter on business, however clean, is suspect—while a married Texan with a hooker friend is fine. Stadter could see Hershner trapped inside the office, being interrogated by a batch of customs officers jabbering away in Spanish—of which Hershner understood nothing. Helpless to intercede, Stadter could only watch.

Finally, they let Hershner go. He came out smiling.

"Welcome to Mexico, kid," said Stadter.

"Is it any easier going back?"

"Only on Christmas Eve."

"Wow. If they lock me up, Vic, can you get me out?"

Stadter had to laugh. "Why, sure, Roger. Easy as pie."

The helicopter flight plan called for Hershner to proceed south to La Pesca, a small fishing village on the Gulf of Mexico, about 200 miles from Reynosa. At the airfield there, he could fill up on gas; and there was no radio—a plus in Stadter's plan to avoid all possible contact with authorities. At Reynosa, they filled the 12 fuel cans, loaded them into the chopper and went their ways—Stadter in the Cadillac, Hershner in the Bell. To Stadter's delight, he could barrel down the open road fast enough to pace the helicopter. To a regular aircraft, that would be the ultimate insult. Stadter conjured up a thousand future barroom arguments as he fancied himself waiting for the helicopter at the scheduled meeting spot of Tamuin. He



was laughing so hard that he didn't immediately hear the right front tire blow. The car swerved violently, coming treacherously close to a deep ditch, skittering and screeching until he was finally able to wrestle it to a stop.

"Very funny," said the blonde.

Stadter changed tires. It was small satisfaction that he was able to catch up with the chopper less than 30 minutes later.

• • •

Hershner was having his own troubles. When he got to the airfield at La Pesca, he discovered not only that there was no radio—there was no fuel. It was just as Stadter had told him: Expect only the unexpected. Hershner flew due west to Ciudad Victoria to gas up.

Next, to stash those fuel cans. He had wondered about them. A helicopter averaging 65 miles an hour runs through 15 gallons an hour. The 12 cans would total 60 gallons, enough for four hours' flying time, or a little more than 250 miles. The shortest route to Honduras was a lot longer than that. But then, he wasn't getting paid to think. It was like the Army, maybe even including the shooting. The big difference this time around was the money; he would be making more in one week than he could save in a year. And Stadter had told him a man could have a good time in Mexico.

South from Victoria, a few miles west of the tiny village of Ajascador, Hershner found a clearing in the jungle. He hovered over it, marked the location on his map, then dropped softly to the ground and unloaded the fuel cans.

On arriving in Tamuín, Stadter called Cotton in Tampico. All was well, the pilot reported. They exchanged the usual pleasantries of two men involved in a routine business matter and hung up.

Tamuín is a quiet town, a few miles off Route 85 to Mexico City, not listed in most tourist guides. The hotel, outside the town itself, is an old inn surrounded by heavy foliage, with Spanish decor, arched ceilings and tile floors. Here Stadter took Hershner and the blonde, to keep them out of view. It was the kind of place he loved, where every courtesy was returned with courtesy, where the place was real, ageless and free of all garish nonsense designed to impress people. They spent the evening sitting over a simple but excellent Mexican dinner. No radio. No TV. They had moved back into another century.

It was a perfect place to spend the night before the hit at Santa Marta.

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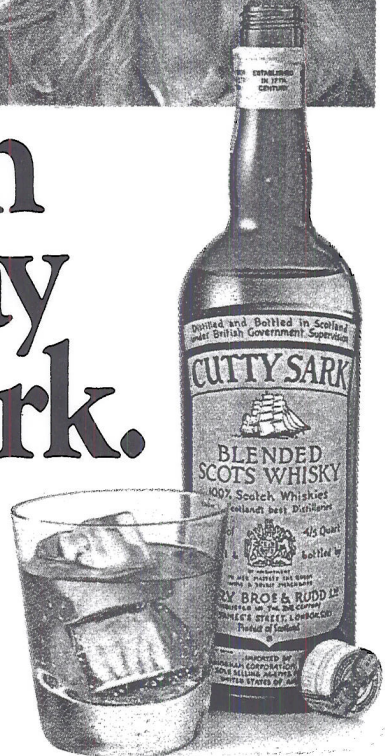
In Tampico, on the morning of Wednesday, August 18, Cotton rose early, had a quick cup of coffee and caught a taxi to the airport. The Cessna was there, safely parked. He left it there and hopped a commercial-airline flight to Mexico City; the fewer take-offs and



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landings the Cessna made, the less it would be noticed.

Irma picked him up outside the Airport Holiday Inn in Mexico City a few minutes before ten. They drove out to Santa Marta for what appeared to be a routine visit to the prisoner, Joel Kaplan.

"Cotton didn't stay long," Kaplan recalls, "just long enough to give me the instructions. He said they were ready to come for us, but he wasn't sure exactly when. Castro and I were to start walking the patio that evening at exactly 6:30 and stay out there until seven. If they didn't come for us that night, we were to go back the next evening, and again the next. Always from 6:30 to seven. For identification, we were each to carry a newspaper. The helicopter would touch ground and remain there for no more than ten seconds. We had ten seconds to get aboard. That was all there was to it. There would be no further communications.

"I saw Castro back in the cell and I

gave him the instructions, and he said, 'Sure, sure, sure.' Neither one of us really believed that anything was going to happen."

By 12:30, Cotton was back at the airport to catch his return flight to Tampico.

Stadter and the blonde drove to the Pachuca airport, 50 miles north of Mexico City, where Hershner was waiting with the helicopter, right on schedule. Mexican officials were hammering away at him. What was he *really* doing in Pachuca with a helicopter? It was the presence of an important Mexican air official, that was compounding the problem. The underlings would look good if they could kick up a fuss.

Says Stadter: "I could actually see this VIP thinking that here was a chance to make some sort of big investigation. They didn't like the look of the helicopter. Oh, they're hot shit with the investigations—they can investigate the balls off

a brass monkey. And that was all I needed, a day in some crummy Mexican office while the calls went out to every government agency they could think of. God knows what they'd come up with when my name got into it."

Hershner was amazed at Stadter's sudden pale intensity, his tremulous tone of voice. He had never suspected Stadter could be so vulnerable. What he didn't recognize at first was the creation of a whole new character: a big, dumb Texas American who was too stupid to offer a bribe.

"I knew that if I tried to bribe him, he'd know something was really wrong," Stadter recalled later. "So I told him all I wanted to do was get my equipment through to the south and have a little fun in Mexico City along the way." Again, the wink and the nod in the direction of the blonde.

"The captain took one last look at the blonde, a long look, and bless her soul if she didn't give him a smile and pucker her lips just enough to straighten him up. 'OK,' he said and gave us the go-ahead."

After the captain and his aides left the airfield, Stadter walked over to the little man who remained and gave him 20 pesos, asking him to watch the helicopter while they went to town for a little food.

In the café, Stadter sent the blonde to powder her nose and sat down with Hershner in a quiet booth.

"Roger, there's a little matter we got to talk over."

"That mine?"

"Well, yeah."

"It's not in Honduras, is it?"

"Well, no, it ain't."

"I figured."

"Roger, as a matter of fact, it ain't even a mine."

"Oh?"

"It's a prison."

"A what?"

"Now, listen carefully, Roger. We're down here on a rescue operation. I know it sounds pretty heavy, but I do it all the time. There is danger to it, and I want you to think it over before you say anything. You have the right to back out and you'll be paid no matter what. But it's all set up, so we don't anticipate any trouble. It should be safe enough."

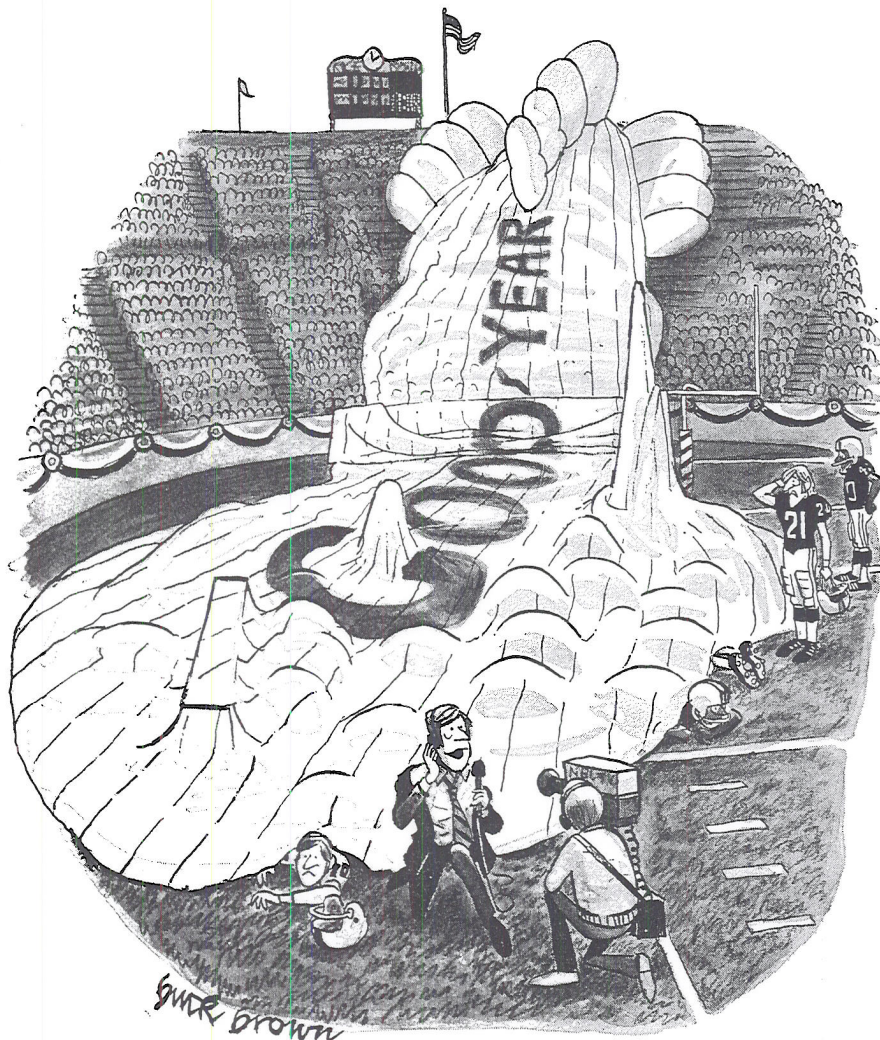
"I'm supposed to fly the chopper into a prison?"

"Yeah. There'll be two guys waiting for you. Our guy and his friend."

"Two guys?"

"Think it over. There'll be a nice bonus for you when it's done."

They finished their coffee, paid the check and left the restaurant in silence. It wasn't until Stadter had registered the flight plan, and they were back in sight



"And right now, folks, while there's time out on the field——"





of the chopper, that Hershner answered.

"OK, Vic. I'll do it."

"Fine, Roger."

"Just one question."

"Sure."

"What's your guy in for?"

Stadter thought he might as well give it to Hershner straight.

"Murder," he said.

Hershner shook his head and half smiled. "Just like Vietnam," he mumbled.

What would Stadter have done if Hershner had refused? "I don't rightly know," he says now. Perhaps he would have talked Cotton into flying the helicopter. Perhaps he would have flown it in himself. Perhaps he would have trained the blonde. . . .

They left the chopper at Pachuca and drove the 15 miles to the village of Actopan, where they were to meet Cotton with the Cessna. Actopan is a small, friendly village of 8500 souls, mostly Indians of Otomí heritage, spread out over a hilly area more than a mile high. Wednesday was market day and the town was bustling with activity. After sending Cotton and Hershner up in the Cessna for a reconnaissance flight to Santa Marta, Stadter took the blonde to the market place and bought pants, shirt and jacket for Kaplan, sandwiches and

fruit juices for Hershner and a minimal survival kit for the escapees: a blanket and a fifth of Bacardi.

The landing strip at Actopan is nothing more than a pasture, an emergency area for planes in trouble. Stadter had used it before; if it lacked facilities, it had more than enough privacy—which was exactly why he was there. He'd never seen anybody in the neighborhood, except an occasional cow. Here he and the blonde returned, about five P.M.; a few minutes later, Cotton and Hershner touched down from their prison-inspection flight. Like an athlete before a big game, Hershner was primed to go.

"Man, it'll be a breeze!" he boasted.

Sure, thought Stadter.

"OK," he said. "We go!"

An absolute minimum of waiting: That's the way Stadter wanted it to be. He was going to send that chopper into the prison courtyard at 6:35, exactly five minutes after Kaplan and Castro were to begin their walk. He wasn't going to give anyone much of a chance to start guessing about what those two guys were doing out there, walking around with newspapers in their hands.

As he drove Hershner back to the helicopter in the Caddie, Stadter sensed the

younger man's tension; in an effort to relieve it, he filled the entire 20 minutes with nonstop repartee—spinning a long-winded yarn about the time he and Pussy were smuggling monkeys and one of the crates broke open. "There were four of the things leaping all over the damn airplane."

They arrived at Pachuca with 15 minutes to spare and sat in the car going over the whole business as meticulously as any military operation. Stadter figured on a 42-minute chopper run from Pachuca to the prison, then 56 minutes back to Actopan. Since he wanted the pickup to be made at 6:35, that meant Hershner was to take off at 5:53.

"Ready?" he asked.

In all his 29 years, Roger Hershner had never been so keyed up. As the cool, damp twilight air gushed through the open cabin, he could see himself back in Glendora, recounting the entire saga to his buddies. He was over the dry bed of Lake Texcoco now, heading directly for Santa Marta. As Cotton had shown him, there was no way he could get lost from here. In less than 12 minutes, he would be at the prison. He checked his watch: 6:24. He was on schedule. Cautiously, he reviewed his assignment yet again. He



would approach the prison from the corner farthest from the guard tower above the main gate, then cross to the first courtyard of the four dormitories. Then he would drop right into its center, being careful to stay clear of the basketball court on the far end. Once he touched down, he would begin counting—thousand and one, thousand and two—to make sure he was neither too fast nor too slow, and he'd wait exactly ten seconds for two men carrying newspapers. If by some chance they did not appear, he'd take off at the count of ten without them.

One of them, he reminded himself, was a murderer.

Kaplan awoke from his nap slightly later than usual, about five. He washed up and changed his clothes, as he generally did before dinner. "It was quiet along the cell block," he recalled later. "No radios or TVs going. For a moment, that bothered me; then I remembered they were showing a movie in the prison theater across the quadrangle. Suddenly that seemed like a big plus for us: if everyone was in there watching a film, our departure would surely be simpler—assuming that the helicopter really would come tonight, which we both doubted.

"Castro and I boiled some water for tea and, while it was brewing, glanced at the newspapers Irma had brought. We had both *El Dia* and *Excelsior*. *Excelsior* is a good paper, but more on the conservative side and doesn't have as much foreign coverage, which is my favorite. Since it was beginning to rain, I decided to take *Excelsior* outside with me. I didn't want to soak my favorite paper, so I'd have something to read that evening if the helicopter didn't show."

About 6:20, the two prisoners silently picked up their papers and strolled out onto the patio. Castro took a big stick with him, pretending it was a cane. He wanted some kind of weapon to use in case someone tried to clamber into the helicopter with them.

They walked out toward the courtyard. The rain was coming down in a fine drizzle. Another prisoner noticed them and stood in the doorway a moment, watching. Then he walked out into the yard and accosted Kaplan: "Say, aren't you two coming in to dinner?"

"No." It was Castro who replied.

"Come on, you're invited to a free meal," said the prisoner, in a forced attempt at levity.

"Not tonight, thank you."

The other prisoner moved back inside, but not without noticing that Kaplan had turned up his collar against the inclement weather, and wondering why anyone should want to walk in the courtyard in the rain.

Kaplan and Castro, alone once more, stood under the backboard and pretended to discuss shooting baskets. Then Castro said, "I hear something."

"Nonsense," said Kaplan. But Castro pointed with his stick, and there it was, coming down directly over the dormitory, the rotors flapping loudly now. The two prisoners ran across the yard, waving their newspapers; within a second or two after the helicopter touched down, they were aboard.

"The craziest thing," recalled Kaplan afterward, "was that the pilot looked at us and smiled through his beard, his lips moving as if he were talking to himself. He extended his hand and said, 'How do you do? My name is Roger Hershner.'

"I guess we were a bit stunned, wondering why he didn't just get off the ground in a hurry, but we shook hands and introduced ourselves. He nodded and turned back to the controls. The engine was roaring; you could feel the pent-up power of it, just waiting to be unleashed. Then suddenly, with a tremendous thrust, up we went."

The prisoner they had spoken to minutes earlier later estimated he'd been back in the building only a minute when he heard muffled sounds from outside. He hurried out of his cell, down the corridor and onto the patio. Then he saw it, a huge blue helicopter sitting on the pavement, its rotors spinning like a giant fan. And there was Kaplan climbing through the door; Castro was already inside. He raced toward them, with no other thought than to join them. Somehow, it seemed, he had that right. Indeed, the helicopter appeared to remain there for an added second or two, as though it were actually waiting for him. He lunged for the door, only to have a large stick thrust at him; before he could grab hold, the machine suddenly leaped into the air like a frightened horse, throwing him to the ground.

When he looked up, he saw Kaplan waving.

Both witnesses to and participants in the jailbird airlift were later to comment on the chopper's mysterious lingering on the ground after both passengers were aboard. The explanation was simple: Hershner, following his instructions to the letter, kept right on counting up to "thousand and ten." Then he took off.

As the helicopter soared over the prison wall, two guards stood staring in a watchtower. Neither made a move. As the newspapers put it later, they didn't know whether to shoot or salute.

Hershner was proud of the chopper. It had handled the drop and the climb perfectly. Following Stadter's instruc-

tions, he moved away from the prison keeping as low as he could—once so close that he felt the landing gear brush against the upper limbs of some trees. The plan was to keep out of radar range for as long as possible. It was getting dark, which would help conceal him. It would also make the route back to Actopan a lot harder to follow.

There was a gate at the landing field at Actopan, the only entrance to the huge area that, because it also served as a pasture, was surrounded by a rickety but serviceable fence. Stadter had backed the Cadillac into that gate to block any intruders. A few yards away, at the beginning of what might laughingly be called a runway, waited the Cessna—its original registration numbers once again on display.

Stadter, Cotton and the blonde waited in the Cadillac, trapped by the drizzle that had begun to fall. They could do nothing now, only sweat out what seemed to be much more than an hour.

Suddenly, there was the honk of an automobile horn. Stadter wheeled in his seat like a lover caught *flagrante delicto*. A pickup truck was flashing its headlights outside the gate, obviously wanting to enter the field. Stadter quickly glanced at his watch: 7:16. The chopper was due in 15 minutes.

There were two men in the pickup, on the door of which was the seal of a Mexican federal official having something to do with aeronautics. What did he want here? Now?

The *comandante*, as he called himself, explained to Stadter that he was checking the field to make sure there were no cows on the runway. Smiling casually, Stadter pulled the Caddie away from the gate. The pickup drove slowly by, its occupants taking a long look at the Caddie, the blonde and the 210. Along the fence line the truck crept, doing maybe five miles an hour; then it drew up at the far end of the runway, turned toward them with headlights ablaze and waited.

It was clear they weren't looking for cows.

"I don't like it," said Stadter. "And they don't like the Caddie and the 210 too much. Wait until they see the chopper." Something ominous was stirring, and Stadter conjured up images to suit: a dozen cars moving onto the field, each sporting some damn Mexican insignia, and, when the chopper landed, all those emblazoned car doors opening and a hundred men with carbines surrounding it. He'd had that nightmare more than a few times.

Stadter stared at the sky, peering



through the night mist for a light, straining his ears for that special sound. It was 7:35 and there was nothing. Hershner was late. And what were those officials doing there? Maybe there'd been a police report from Santa Marta about the escape in a chopper and maybe all the airfields were alerted.

"Then I thought, no, it was too soon for that. This guy was just a Mexican official who'd stumbled onto something. He would sit and wait, the way Mexican cops always do. Like a bull, trying to decide whether to attack or retreat. It all depends on how he sizes up the situation. The thing to do is wait him out."

Then Stadter heard it. Flop-flop-flop. Hershner was coming, all right, about four minutes late. But he was heading for the wrong end of the field, flying straight toward the *comandante's* headlights. If he landed there, he'd be handing Kaplan right back to the Mexican government.

Stadter raced to the Cessna and flashed its landing lights, on and off, on and off, then switched on the rotating blinker on top. Hershner spotted it and reversed direction. Suddenly, Stadter had an unreasoning fear that Hershner was coming back alone. He stared, trying to see into the cabin, but it was too dark.

"Then," Stadter recalls, "like an answer to a prayer, there was a brilliant streak of lightning and the chopper lit up as if a spotlight had hit it—and there they were, two passengers, sitting behind Roger like a couple of jerks on a joy ride."

The helicopter alighted, a few yards from the Cessna. Kaplan jumped out and climbed straight into the airplane; Castro tried to do the same, but Cotton grabbed him, stuffed him into the Cadillac and sped off. The prisoners would be harder to track if they went their separate ways from now on; Castro was to hide in Mexico for a fortnight before being flown out by another Stadter pilot friend, first to Guatemala and then to Venezuela.

Stadter gunned the Cessna, moving straight toward the *comandante's* headlights to line up the take-off. "For a moment, I had one of those god-awful flashes that the son of a bitch was going to put that pickup in gear and come charging at me. I'd had that happen a few times before. But the *comandante* just sat there, and up we went, right over his truck.

"We hadn't gone 200 feet before we hit a goddamn storm that rocked us halfway back to mother earth. Lightning to the right of us, lightning to the left of us. But we were heading north, by God.

"I handed Joel the bottle of Bacardi

and he took a good swig. Then he turned to me and said it all in five words: 'Excellent. The timing was excellent.'"

They were about 30 miles west of Tampico when they broke out of the storm. From there it was an easy matter to head toward Brownsville and the U. S. border. Stadter immediately established radio contact to let them know he was coming, wanting to secure the legality of their entrance by having it recorded from miles away. He didn't want to give anybody the chance to say he'd sneaked across the border, so he kept talking back and forth with Brownsville, forcing a meaning'ess conversation at the risk of irritating the controllers.

It would be a legal arrival for Stadter. But what about his passenger? Nothing that had preceded Kaplan's arrival at Brownsville mattered now. All the little battles of his escape would be worthless if the immigration officer decided to send him back across the border.

It could happen. It was almost nine o'clock in the evening, barely two and a half hours since they'd plucked the prisoners from the Santa Marta courtyard. Had the prison officials announced the escape? Had the news reached this office?

Landing at Brownsville, Stadter led Kaplan into the Customs and Immigration office and stared into the face of the last opponent, a wormy little man in his late 50s, tired and bored and harassed after 25 years of pushing troubled people around. "He looked like he hadn't been laid in the last ten," Stadter said later. Stadter could easily have arranged an unofficial border crossing, but the terms of Kaplan's multimillion-dollar-estate trust dictated that his inheritance would be forthcoming only when and if he were in the United States in good standing—legally admitted and legally in residence. This, then, was a million-dollar gamble.

"Well, well, if it isn't the great Mr. Stadter."

There it was, for openers: the snide challenge.

"And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?" the inspector inquired.

"We're a couple of tired fellas, mister," Stadter offered. "We'd like to get cleared so we can get on our way."

"Who's he?" the official asked, barely looking at Kaplan.

Here we go, thought Stadter. One look at Kaplan's name and the old jackal will jump sky-high.

Kaplan offered the man his frayed and crumpled Navy discharge. The official glanced at the paper, then handed it back. When he looked up at Stadter, it was the same old angry face, totally without joy. Stadter could have hugged him.

"What's he doing with you, Stadter?" the inspector asked.

"He's a cotton grower. We met in Mexico City—"

But the inspector broke in, obviously indifferent to Kaplan's presence. "Suppose we take a look at your plane."

"Be my guest," said Stadter.

They looked. They stripped it down, found nothing, then went back and stripped it down again. It went on interminably, and every time the phone rang—and it did, repeatedly—Stadter could feel the sweat form on his neck. This time it would be some official calling to advise that an escaped prisoner named Joel David Kaplan, wanted by the Mexican government, was probably heading for the border.

But the Customs official kept looking for illegal merchandise. He even had Stadter and Kaplan stripped for bodily inspection. Finally frustrated in his search efforts, the Brownsville border inspector turned to interrogation. "Name . . . date of birth . . . place of birth . . . schooling . . . marital status . . . children . . . occupation . . . organizations . . . previous arrests and convictions—"

"You can't ask that," snapped Kaplan, who up to now had been slumped on a bench, looking more mouse than man.

"What do you mean? Why not?" The official was stunned at the challenge.

"The law does not permit that question," Kaplan retorted. "If a man has served time for a crime, he has paid for it. He is not required to put it on record."

Whatever the validity of Kaplan's claim, the bureaucrat was intimidated. That was all Stadter needed.

"All right, damn it," he snapped, "you've had your little fun. We've been here an hour and a half. You've found nothing outside or inside my asshole, so you got no reason to hold us. Now, clear these papers and let us get out of here."

The official knew it was all over. He could come up with nothing to justify holding the two any longer. He stamped the papers.

Stadter and Kaplan walked back to the Cessna without another word. Stadter needed gas, but he didn't want to hang around Brownsville another minute.

As soon as the Cessna was airborne, heading west across Texas, Stadter let out a whoop—a cry of relief, joy and triumph. They had done it, by Christ.

"You're free, you crazy bastard, you're free!"

And he began to laugh, tremendous laughter that made his eyes tear and his chest heave, laughter that left him spluttering like the village idiot.

Kaplan reached down for the Bacardi and unscrewed the cap.

"Here," he said. "I think you need a drink."