

From [Route 66 to Vietnam: A Draftee's Story](#)
By Michael Lund
sixth in the Route 66 Novel Series

Prologue: Love at the Coral Court Motel

At the time I opened the closet (literally) of my Vietnam experience, I was living no more than a mile from the Coral Court Motel, famous St. Louis landmark on legendary Route 66. A night of lovemaking at that establishment coupled (if that's the right word) a war now considered disastrous for our nation with a symbol of American achievement, "The Mother Road." Strange bedfellows!

Since 1942 the Coral Court had been a comfortable stopping point for country crossing-travelers who entered the Show Me State from the east via the Chain of Rocks Bridge and then skirted the city's western edge. (This was more than twenty years before the Gateway Arch became the city's most celebrated structure.)

To unmarried or adulterous local couples, the Coral Court's attached garages had offered discrete entrances. And the unusual architecture (glass block windows, glazed beige tile, rounded corners) provided in the conservative Midwest an exotic structure appropriate for unconventional activities.

I proposed something like illicit behavior at the Coral Court to my wife Bella one fall in the mid 1980s, unaware that, at about the same time, my Southeast Asia past was stirring in the deepest recesses of my memory.

"You can wear something racy," I told her as we sat after dinner in our dining room. While not herself a Missourian, Bella knew of the motel's sleazy--and therefore oddly enticing--reputation. When I said "something racy," by the way, I meant garter belt and stockings, to me an erotic outfit. To her this was an uncomfortable combination she had discarded for panty hose at the earliest opportunity.

"And you?" she asked.

Me? I thought I was desirable enough in my usual boxers and T-shirt. But this got me thinking: how would I look, say, in samurai dress or as lord of the manor seducing the farmer's daughter? Perhaps I should also suggest elaborate role playing, always with me the stern disciplinarian.

The idea, of course, was that the Coral Court was the place to put the zing back in lovemaking at a time when our life ran so smoothly it threatened us with boredom. Our children were moving steadily toward high school graduation, our jobs were secure, our place in the community solid. When Bella herself made a Friday reservation at the Coral Court (both kids had planned overnights with friends), I decided she must have an idea of her own. And I was excited, despite not knowing precisely what she had in mind.

Even in a successful marriage, of course, there is never complete understanding on most matters. I've frequently entertained the illusion that my life followed a straight course once I, a college graduate, won Bella's hand, was hired by the Missouri Department of Transportation, and fathered my first child. And I thought I drove us all down that road. Arabella Landon née Wilfer, however, not only had a hand on the wheel but often decided the route I thought I was selecting.

And, there's more, I now know, that determines our path in life. Immovable objects are always out there in front and to the side of us, blocking our way and sometimes knocking us off course. At some times these barriers are of such massive size they allow us only one route into the future. Vietnam was that kind of unavoidable obstacle for me, as well as for other young men of Fairfield like Billy Rhodes, Larry Thornton, and Howie Bend.

The Coral Court Motel a decade and a half later, however, represented a happy straying from the straight and narrow, a detour from steady advance toward what I'd begun to fear, some sort of mid-life crisis.

Ironically, it turned out that my Vietnam experience did more to carry me through this difficult passage than would new ventures in eroticism.

There had been talk that the Coral Court might be torn down, another price paid to the American theme of growth and development. Still, more and more citizens from Chicago to Los Angeles were beginning to call for the restoration and preservation of "America's Main Street."

Personally, I was of two minds about this. I believed in growth and prosperity on the one hand, but I also didn't want to lose contact with central values in our tradition. When the Coral Court Motel got mixed up with the Vietnam War in my mind, I didn't know which, if either, I should leave behind.

Ninety-five percent of my experience in Vietnam, I believed, was, at least on the surface, either banal or comic. Unfortunately, the remaining five percent was especially tragic. For fifteen years all I could see was the tragic part. So I buried it deep from public view and private contemplation.

Then a series of chance occurrences brought my overseas experience to the surface. Reluctantly, I came to the conclusion that this return to the past was probably unavoidable, and perhaps necessary. I'll begin that journey proper in the next chapter when two Phyllises come to my front door.

However, I wouldn't have expected a trip through such memories to be pleasant, as I had originally hoped a return to the Coral Court would be. I had taken Bella there once before, when I was on orders for Vietnam and she was starting graduate work in psychology at St. Louis University. I thought she'd give herself to me in the same spirit I believed World War II brides-to-be had treated their soldiers going off to war. If they might never return, shouldn't they get what they wanted on the eve of battle?

I assumed I would take her gift, having turned a bit cynical as the draft pursued me and my friends at Southwest Missouri State College down in Springfield. Although not a virgin, I'd still had only a limited number of sexual encounters and thought the world that was going to send me to war owed me something more. But things didn't turn out the way I anticipated with Bella.

In part that was good. It seems we refrained because in the end I knew that this was the woman I wanted to bear my children. And that's not what I would have been about in my first time at the Coral Court. But it was bad in that, despite the generous offer she made, I failed physically to respond.

"We could be young again," Bella said somewhat wistfully in contemplating a second try at the Coral Court. Neither of us alluded to the details of that earlier time in the motel or the context of my going overseas. I was being offered a rewrite of that difficult night nearly twenty years later, not a reenactment. Surely I would succeed this time. Whatever spice Bella contemplated adding to our regular lovemaking would only guarantee the necessary excitement.

She began with the customary, "I guess I should slip into something more comfortable." We'd had dinner at a nearby restaurant and contemplated only briefly finding somewhere we might dance. The week had been hectic enough even before the hurry of today, and we were tired. I'd had a late meeting about property acquisition on my current project. And she had to ferry Nelson to choir practice and Jenny to soccer before they ate, packed, and were dropped off at respective friends' houses.

So I lay on the bed watching an old movie on the TV--wasn't this the Warner Brothers' 1953 Kiss Me Kate with Kathryn Grayson? And I reminded myself of one sweet advantage to being married to a psychologist: Bella knew what I liked. Images of the Sheik of Araby throwing a veiled woman over the shoulders of his horse and riding off into the desert floated through my mind.

Of course, sometimes Bella also decided what I should like rather than what I wanted and marched straight ahead on the basis of her own recognizance. I heard rustling behind the bathroom door, the unzipping of the overnight bag she'd taken with her.

The room we were in was not exactly the same as the one we'd stayed in years ago. It had an extra

rounded bay in the front with a Murphy bed, which, of course, we didn't need. And the main room had a pyramid shaped, glass block window on its rounded corner, one more unusual and intriguing feature.

I had been unable to think of a good outfit to hide in my overnight bag, so I went with the old standard: the birthday suit. "No secrets here!" I'd imagined myself saying when she unveiled whatever surprise she had for me. I was, of course, keeping more of me hidden than I realized at the time

I'd always insisted I was another Midwestern "open book," the surface matching the depths, outside same as inside. But when Bella stepped out of the Coral Court's bathroom, the shock reminded me that my life had actually been a bit more complicated.

She was wearing, as I had hoped, a garter belt (provocatively black) and sheer stockings. But above that she had on my old Army field jacket, the Vietnam service medal pinned above the pocket. What initial confusion stemmed from her appearance is to be told in the pages that follow. But I have since come to believe that the healing of the deepest psychological scars in my adult life began with this single dramatic moment.

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. . . to be continued.