

SHIP OF FOOLS

Our fame as distributors spread like a forest fire. This was neat as we were sought after by the brilliant, eclectic, and eccentric from a broad spectrum of island circles. The spellbound year of 1965 when psychedelics were still legal seemed unmarred by chemically related catastrophes...but then fine cracks in the mirror hinted our catalysts might not carry us the full distance after all. Mine was about to shatter...not send subtle messages!

My parents were curious what I was doing for a living while I began to wonder about the future, how we'd raise our young in communes, carry on with our untested worldview, and fit somewhere into society. Few others were hung up on this, so my communal farm remained a secret. Huxley's book, "Island," started our group planning to colonize Palmyra, a delicate atoll one of us owned, six-hundred miles to the south. There, like the Bounty's mutineers, we'd create a harmonious cooperative.

It was easy to see most of our talk was visionary flatulence. This lacksadaisical "wait and seeness" disturbed me greatly, for I'd set out from the start to make magic work and figured we should already be planning to implement our dreams. In that respect, it seems an anomaly I was the first one to "duck out." There wasn't much choice.

There wasn't much time allotted either, and all my plans went down the toilet with some of the stash. In fact, I barely escaped reality's crashing wave in a frantic and poorly figured exit from all I treasured. Our popularity backfired on us. All roads led to our place, and like kids caught shoplifting, we scrambled in panic and made a run for it. I might've picked a better hiding place than some grisly war, but in the final days, as my fear grew, the possibility of joining Black Jack again on the Nez Perce in a furthering chapter into manhood seemed the classic option. At the end, it was my only one.

Long before escape entered the picture, my father, disgruntled with the bizarre traffic at my house and Ralph's bewildering attitude, had mentioned the fleet of towboats from my Alaskan summer was on its way across the Pacific to a chartered mission in the warzone. As an eleventh-hour solution to my seeming path to nowhere, his suggestion that I make some big money, engage in true adventure, and get my finances and future in order seemed one bold stroke. When I look back on my dad's influence I'm awed by his urgings and sense of bizarre directions. He must've known what I needed through some genetic link...and his choices are mine to savor, not be sorry for.

It was like sending me to the Bering Sea the day after

High School graduation and Bourbon Street for my higher education. This was his wildest call yet. I asked Kela's father for her hand in marriage, and he, too, thought Vietnam a fine place for me to go...more to get good and lost in, I suspected. Giggling at our elders' first consensus on what to do with me, Kela and I disregarded it as some remote alternative to simply being in the now, which was about all we could manage anyway. We were still tripping most of the time...right up to the last minute, in fact.

Nonetheless, thoughts of such a daring move on the chessboard of life did arise, and a vague premonition pulled me to those dreary docks, as much my hopes of seeing Jack again. The reality of going to Vietnam as a mercenary hadn't risen to the surface yet. Interviewing the motley crews of these ragged boats as they straggled through, a few at a time, on what would be their final voyage, I found the Nez Perce had already left on the last leg to Indochina. Undaunted, like Ishmael flirting with his own prodding dares to sign aboard Ahab's portentous Pequod, I was drawn on dark mornings to witness their passing...a solitary conscript compelled to search the odd, little armada for signs of a private calling.

It came more like a startled cry of warning. The Feds were on to us! I knew those young girls babbling about magic and the secret of life at Kerry and Ralph's were gonna cause us grief, but this one had gone too far. Dancing naked with the statue by the family pool, she'd spilled the beans to her mom, who promptly contacted the FBI and gathered a coalition of enraged matrons in the name of urban integrity to run us out of town...or worse!

It had all the momentum of a lynching, leaving just enough time to grab my gear, a thousand hits of acid for the troops, and a brief phone call to my family. The cresting wave hurled at me, and paddling like a frantic surfer on the inside of a mega-set, I scrambled from destiny's churning wake into an anonymous ocean and myriad visions of a vague crusade into the darkest corner of our known world.

In the early morning light, a mingling of diesel fuel and cable dressing, harbor flotsam, and flowers reminded me of gleaming ships and earlier, happier times. There was no music or ticker tape here, just Kela's whimpering tears and the leis of aloha her girlfriends had brought along. They toured the wheelhouse like somnambulists through the murky film of a bad dream, nearly becoming ill in the forecabin tomb which would be my home.

Some of the crew woke to the sight of fair buttocks lowering into their dismal dungeon, but were too inebriated to focus. Their surly remarks drove us above, where we discovered my hallowed sanctuary on the wheelhouse roof. It was there I would ride the rolling waves, imprisoned by rollicking, mutinous mayhem on the long journey ahead. In hindsight, if I'd known it was gonna take ninety-six days

just to get there, I would've aborted and gone with Ralph to Colombia. I might've saved him from his obsession with power and become a millionaire, too.

It came to pass, though, with the sun rising through purple haze of verdant valleys, that I found myself exiled to that severed rooftop watching Kela, my first love, and the island of my youth fade like stones sinking in a pool. Never in my life had I felt such a longing to remain enshrined in time, cherish the way things were, and somehow hold back the onslaught of a callous and inimical future. My heart ached so! What fear or longing had induced this exodus and shipped me on such a heinous voyage of the damned and doomed?

Arguing, bickering, and belching rose above the shuddering din of ancient, pounding engines and creaking timbers, while I reeled in retrospect at what I'd committed myself to. The huge cable swished in foamy slices as our two barges, loaded with cranes and earth moving equipment, jackknifed far astern. Could I still swim back? A dark fin cut the surface and great jaws grinned as if in response.

Seasickness and a surging melancholy swept over me like the waves beneath our bobbing boat. My last thought, in colored patterns of fluttering gulls and flying fish, was what a serious error taking acid at a time like this had been. My indoctrination aboard the vehicle of my deliverance from the claws of justice was surely the bummiest trip of my life.

All that day the cook harassed me when the captain didn't, and I finally barfed on the potatoes I'd meticulously peeled. Utterly exhausted, I was put below to recover. Trying to vomit from the upper bunk in those drawer-like berths was ludicrous, so I spent the next twenty hours curled in the chain locker wrenching in a hollow agony I'd not known could be. I felt like a blob of ambergris regurgitated from leviathan beasts into a spinning coffin. My past withered like a mirage in fumes of bile, paint, and oil.

Saturated in LSD and slobber, I drooled in darkness trying desparately to come down, but it just kept raging on. The chemical plan to brighten my departure weighed now like an anchor around my neck. The philosophy books and guides to the afterlife lay like bricks in my footlocker. How could they help me in this man-made purgatory, lurching across swells in renewal of eternal damnation? I sweated in the wretch of sickness and despair, while ahead lay the steaming miasma of war. Behind me, even the slightest grace of memory seemed cut off by an executioner's blade. Hopelessness discolored my view, and consumed by a fate worse than death, I prayed, in exile with the rope, rats, and rotting canvas for an end to the misery.

After eternity passed, Macky, the second engineer, hauled me blinking to daylight. Lying awash near the rusty towline, I began to recuperate in the cool slurry gushing

through scuppers from the open ocean. I think it was the sailfish he caught that brought me back, for its colors pulsing and fading alongside me startled my mind. Passing goony birds screeched encouragingly to each other at my revival, while flying fish missing their marks flopped between my legs. The smell of diesel and puke cleared in the sea breeze, and I began a slow process of catharsis and acceptance of my assigned fate.

I would make some sense of this chaos. There was no other choice. I had trapped myself. I cleaned the sailfish and served the crew at the galley table, listening to their Neptunian prattle about my "meeting muster," marveling at what appeared a rerun of an earlier play with a different cast yet identical lines. So began my rite of passage on a ship of fools.

Finally accustomed to the surge, I became a regular salt, knife and braided lanyard around my shorts, scampering barefoot to odds and ends of the Captain's fancy. They couldn't get me to fall for the mail bouy this time, but many a charade was enacted between day's blazing sun and the chimerical stars of night. A month out, their humor suddenly waned, and in some mutinous schism I was not privy to, they turned on each other...the resulting shoot-out bringing a Coast Guard cutter to lift off casualties and escort us to Guam for an investigation.

There a brief phone call altered my life as perhaps no single instance. Kela had become lover to another in our circle of acidheads...something I couldn't grasp no matter how she cried for understanding and sympathy. I didn't attempt to decipher this traumatic event and simply decided to kill myself rather than ever come to grips with a lesser version of love than ours. I was a very sensitive guy on one side of my gemini nature. The other hasn't emerged thus far in my story, but will soon enough.

I spent the entire night on the boom of a towering gantry over Agana Harbor, planning to leap at sunrise. When morning came, I concluded my Russian roulette tour of Vietnam would suffice in penance. So with a dim perspective on my dismembered past, no clue to the future, and an altered value of women, I set sail with the rest of the fools, a little more like them now, wounded mortally and dying slowly, as much from the gash in my heart as the vacancy of all memory. I had turned it off...

Although sharing a newfound sympathy for these beaten creatures whom love's loss had exiled to ships at sea, I could not accept my shipmates' snide remarks, nor their vaguely concealed jokes about my states of mind. Macky found me crying and told them I was an initiate to their nautical fraternity, but it mattered not, their knowing I was mortal...I would never be one of these irreversible cynics, regardless of our forced sharing of time and space.

I retreated to the wheelhouse roof, where every sunset

of the ninety-six day crossing I took LSD to meditate on my existence--present, past, and future. I know why it happened now, how my dangerous split-nature was formed. I grew up on that impersonal ocean when true love drowned, in a war where both fear and hatred were born, and a time when everything I might have believed in perished around me. I'm a child of the sixties...born in its excess to die of its abandon.

A hundred days beyond the sight of land does strange things to men, bringing them in its unceasing continuum face to face with the mirror of life's endless passage. We crawled along, trudging a few knots an hour across a boundless realm, dragging those barges full of fuel and equipment to their appointment with the Devil himself. The crew drank and fought in steady shifts as sure as the sun rose and set upon that pelagic mirage we were painted upon.

Unable to comprehend their madness, I held forth in the breeze above their ribald ridicule and squabbling dementia in my few square feet of sanity, at one with a cosmos stretching away in every direction. All was in flux and motion. From this intangible place came a new perspective on the oneness and magnitude of life. Its opposites were no longer a riddle to be solved...more a mystery to behold. Therein lay hope for growth beyond my self-pity, loss, and confusion. Bouyed up by my chemical aids, I began to discover a gentle peace and serenity in the raw elements which held us.

To be alone on the infinite sea and feel beyond the ship beneath one's feet that nothing human floats on the horizon begets in a thoughtful mind a great solemnity. No land comes to bear tidings, no firmness to yield any stability, while all 'round stretches the pure image of eternity. Sky and sea recede from view like a circle above, around, and beneath, with no boundaries to shape one's thought. As the eye finds no resting point, the soul, knowing neither time nor space, can only mount Godward.

On the great ocean with no living thing beyond his tiny vessel, man begins to realize his own physical insignificance. The stars looking down on me, their light faint from the farthest reaches of space, displayed countless worlds of greater beauty and higher perfection to explore. They deepened my feeling of helplessness, 'til ultimately my soul recovered its dignity in the very magnitude spread before it. I recognized all this as a portion of our heritage...earth, air, and water but ministering spirits to guide us.

In this period of my intense overture with the cosmos, I placed my trust in nature to keep from brooding on the faith of a woman...a fickle and fleeting thing in comparison. I discovered total sunsets in mid-ocean, among other immutable truths, full-spectrum light shows in every degree of color. From purple skies astern speckled with the first star's twinkle, to incandescent fires raging in the west, the face of heaven became a giant clock marking time as we solemnly

surged onward in a wake of phosphorescent brilliance.

The living creatures therein bore us witness, but the mask of eternity paid little heed to our passing. Tremendous storms rose from its remoteness to drag us hither and yon, as if out of sheer boredom. Months slipped by unmarked as I meditated thus in solitude, a silent monk shrouded in stars and oecania.

One morning breaking clear and fair, a terrifying sonic boom shook the boat, shattering the serenity of predawn darkness, nearly bowling me off my rooftop monastery. A reconnaissance jet from 'Nam almost broke off our masthead. We were there...