

## Sea Tales in the Great American Divide

I had just finished a four year stretch in a tropical prison. I had been put through the meat grinder. There was little left to recognize my soul. My weary eyes persistently ran bloodshot and jaundiced. During the last year of my stay, much of the world developed consumption, now known as tuberculosis. For the time being, the plague had seemed to dwindle. This was the start of my short-lived new beginning.

We departed from a town about halfway between the Hamptons and New York City on the south shore of Long Island. This ancient oyster farming town, named Patchogue, had grown into something of a red-haired stepchild. Main Street was decorated with themed cellophane nightclubs. As the streets crept away from the main strip, the town grew ever more deprived economically. It was truly a nauseating place. Harboring the alienation of a suburb and the pollution headaches of a major city. There were simply no magnificent pearls left in this towns' oysters. Just another one of those American towns where you could spend a fleeting hour or a drawn-out lifetime and be left with the same feeling- "Not worth the price of admission, I've been cheated."

Our planned destination was a shoreline hamlet on the North Fork of Long Island called Peconic. A mid-century ranch house awaited us just beyond a dock. A boat was the only way to get there, no roads led to that sanctuary. That land used to be the Native Americans' territory. We seemingly bought into the lie - That in some sort of biblical or grandiose way, it was ours for the taking. Yet, the days of conquest were long gone... Long before us.

I hired my dear friend, John Patrick, as our ever-loyal captain. He had a more than suitable vessel and a kind but weathered soul that would fit perfectly in any Hemmingway novel. Paulie was the type of man you would want in your foxhole when the next great worldwide

conflict sparks. We alone would be ready to fight 'em all off. Liam was a stoic man; one could confide in him without hesitation. Lastly, Markus could have saved the world if he was told what the joke was supposed to involve. It seemed, at the time at least, that all my comrades were of a dying breed. Wise beyond their years. Hearts of gold. Yet, truly in a bittersweet way, lost in time.

We embarked from a bustling harbor. Song and drink were shared by all except Captain John. His convictions were unwavering. The journey was intended to take a total of four hours.

The awful stench; damp salt and rotting fish. The Great South Bay was far more poisoned than I recalled in my childhood memories. The water was ink black at midafternoon on a clear sky day. My debilitating nicotine addiction saved me that evening. Cigarettes seemed to temporarily mask the putrid smell. I quickly burned through an enormously tariffed pack.

About an hour in, we passed under a bridge into a stretch of shallow water. The industrial structure shuffled as automobiles drove only feet above us. Captain John, struggled despite his heroic efforts, to keep us drunkards in line and off of the sand bars. Eventually, after gaining some momentum, the ever-changing tides had pushed just enough sand to ground us in our path with some strong percussive grinding. I rolled up my pant legs and muscled the fiberglass hull back to chest high water. We continued onward, while I contemplated the possibility of developing a flesh-eating bacterial infection from the rancid water.

We reached the Hamptons. Surrounded by multimillion dollar mansions and corporate bankers dressed in seersucker. We loudly sang metropolitan rhymes in hopes to disrupt their facade of prestige. We were desert roses in the sands of azure. Rare as an innocent man in these burdening times. This canal took an eternity to navigate. A steady crawl in the depths of night. A thick fog began to roll over the waterway like clouds of cigar smoke. I remember the hair on my neck stood tall. Waiting, patiently, for one of those fat cats, in one of those gaudy mansions to

launch his ambush. I was armed to the teeth with a folding pocket-knife. Ready to put that bastard down like the feral hog that he was.

Once our vessel made it to the end of the canal, the gates closed around us. We rose with the sea, lifted three stories. From there Captain John let the throttle loose. The engines screamed and expelled a million gallons of water past the propellers every second. The wind was ferocious. The fog was as dense as concrete.

Just as we reached terminal velocity a cannon exploded. The impact was that of a trainwreck. We were launched six feet forward. Some landing on their faces. Others, nearly thrown overboard. The boat came to an uneasy halt.

I glanced and noticed bubbles rising ten yards behind the vessel. What followed is something I cannot explain to this day. An unmarked, oxidized buoy flashed to the surface. We struck the thing head on!

Captain John snapped into action. Giving each one of us commands. My duty was to enter the galley and check for cracks in the hull. By the grace of God, the hull remained watertight. If it had not we would have surely met a watery grave. There was simply no avoiding that hunk of steel that night.

Liam and I were handed a pair of lanterns. Our job was to dangle off the edges of the boat and spot any further obstacles. Like a match in a windstorm. Useless.

The vessel sputtered back to life and once again we pushed onward. This time with a greater amount of adrenaline pumping through our veins. It was simply too dark and too far along to turn around.

Paulie nonchalantly pointed to his tattoo that read, “Stay alert / Stay alive”.

I asked, “Is that a bad omen or a timely reminder?”

We began to sing old war time songs, in an off harmony, to even out our nerves.

“Gory gory what a helluva way to die. He aint gonna’ jump no more!”

We spotted the dock under draped moonlight and dying lanterns; after nearly seven hours. We drank Kentucky whiskey till the early hours of the morning. We needed to shake those harsh nerves. In those hours, the rest of the world and all its apathy seemed to disappear. What I would give to relive those precious moments.

The next morning Captain John proceeded to patch a football sized hunk of the bow with viscous epoxy that gave off quite a fume.

I wandered around the property wondering how a place could be so astonishingly tranquil. The sailboat in the harbor danced with the gentle wind. The local birds strut around the air with such ease. The rolling tide matched the rhythm of my breathing.

This world had become a hard place to find a break in. Yet, there was absolutely no doubt about it, in those fleeting moments I had made it. A wiser man than I once declared - We are born to lose and we live to win.

Too soon after, we were on our way yet again.

I had just one last pack of cigarettes and a lifetime to burn.

The voyage back went far smoother, as with most things in these strange lands and even stranger times.