

OF SPECIMEN JARS AND ROCKETS TO THE STARS

I slowed after a few miles, as the grass, blowing in silken waves, beckoned me down a familiar valley to the bay. Despite my laundry bag and CISU shirt, I felt like the fisherboy who'd traversed these shores so many years ago. For the first time I wasn't in a frenzy to get somewhere, score something, or manipulate someone. Dazed perhaps by my forty-four day internship as a lunatic, I let new forces lead me, following an unfolding path through fanning leaves to a small stream, where I sat by its trickling edge lost in thought.

In retrospect, those first moments alone in acceptance for my fate initiated a process of recovery that all the jail time, shrinks, and substance therapy since haven't touched. It registered like other flashbacks, but held some freshening taste of that long-sought peace missed by so wide a mark. Even now I can hear a banana leaf flapping steadily above the slurry, and remember distinctly choosing to be the fisherboy once more. He's the only one who truly loved this life...and might be able to meet the beast head-on and survive.

Reviewing my extraordinary journey for clues to failure, I imagined salvation possible, with him to fall back on. After all, the recent clean-and-sober bit had paled previous ones. It started near the bay of my beginnings and spanned court scenes, prisons, and the agonies of renewal. From some old film reel, my shadowlike visage flickered in and out of focus. In a haunting monochrome crossing the likes of Dennis the Menace with "Mad Magazine's" Alfred E. Neumann, a reasonable facsimile appeared...freckle-faced, buck-toothed, and smiling a "What, me worry?" grin. Unwelcome in every mothers' home, it bore the impish features of a malevolent miscreant whose trail of nefarious deeds led from the cradle to the grave.

Blinking in awe and mischief, it reflected those dichotomous origins that led me progressively from neighborhood pranksterism to drug smuggling and mercenary missions on a global scale. Subtle tremors and a quixotic smile revealed an obsessive urge to be different from others. That deviate quality drove a wedge between humanity and what I eventually became, preparing a loneliness finally turned upon itself to madness. It would also save my life...

Chuckling with a morbid humor aged like fine wine, I savored youthful shenanigans--like my self-strangling hand choking me in class, and a goading to yell "Fuck!" in church. I watched my footsteps in the sand as if someone followed, and flirted from infancy, it seems, with defiance of power. The sensitive side of my Gemini nature precluded me from regular childhood games, while I played in Hawaii's fantasy

world of mud villages peopled by insects and creatures from tidepools.

School was a breeze as long as there was mischief brewing somewhere, but a few times I became attracted by exceptional teachers or interesting subjects, such as pickling fish and making rockets. I got so involved in collecting specimens I won the State Science Fair for the display put together with the help of my gang. We'd sneak around the fence by the Marine Base when the waves would lull. There, in virgin pools, we'd capture rare eels, crustaceans, and slippery gollums.

Our greatest trove by far was the bomb shelter we discovered in a huge dune past the firing range. In its rat-pissed ammonia and sticky cobwebs lay grooved fins of rockets and cases of explosives. Bazooka shells and assorted ballistics replaced jars of wriggling creatures in our bags, and danger changed us to wary insurgents, leery of patrols on one side and giant waves on the other.

As that summer in the late fifties drifted by, we camped near our foreboding treasure, and sometimes in somber rituals dug up a bazooka shell and set it on a mock launch pad, thinking of ways to ignite it without being wiped out. We couldn't come up with any safe solutions though. Like with the fish project, a physics teacher impressed me, and I became absorbed in outer space. Busying myself in rocket texts, I almost found my calling...but discouraged by its complexity, veered off and set up my own laboratory for simpler needs.

Behind our beach house lay a hundred piles of red brick, remains of the old Primo Brewery hauled from Honolulu and dumped there for my father's great swimming pool project. Amidst this heaped rubble, our blockhouse and launch pad came into being. It was from this "ground zero" that summer's stillness was shattered with great whooshes and excited cheers as we tried to reach orbit. Neighborhood sentiment rose rapidly against our heavenly intrusions, as aborted flights landed on shingled roofs, and various malfunctions blew out windows and started fires a mile away.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing, and turned me into a charred and hairless ex-explorer in that field. I remember thinking an acetylene torch was probably hotter than a Bunsen burner, as the sulphurous mass began to hiss and bubble in an old metal pot. I recovered from the explosion that nearly tore our garage off the main house, but my parents foreclosed on the lab and paid me a pittance for what was left. Where genius had soared to undreamed of heights, sending three-foot aluminum shafts far into the atmosphere, they saw only danger. So my mom carted off a load of salt, flour, charcoal and mustard powder, pulling the curtain on the saga of "rocket man."

While I pouted with ice packs on my pink skull, contemplating a hairless reentry to school, a grin crossed my

face, reflecting an internal calm that all had not been lost in the ersatz pile she'd bought...for the real chemicals lay buried in the sand, secure with the stash of my carnal youth.

Summer waned as we plotted ending our episode in the explosives business with a bang. We camped near its hidden power, smirking in succinct knowledge the beach would never be the same. Detonation day was zero minus twenty hours when we leaked into the coconut wireless that "the end of the world was near." Most of the kids were stationed near Flat Island when I lit it. All the Jetex fuse from all the model shops on Oahu led through a garden hose into our sandy Armageddon, and the astounding "ker whampf!" heard over the Pali became a mystery unsolved to this day.

Demolition teams and police prowled the beach, while rumors of submarines and other such Pearl Harbor mentality set in. I visited the gaping crater alone in the moonlight, scratching my peeling scalp, savoring victory's smell like "napalm in the morning" many years later on the Mekong, and closing a noble chapter of my inquisitive youth with a proper finale. I sat in self-investiture as "Doctor Destructo," grinning the ageless maverick incarnate, knowing full well my portfolio would hold more such sweet fait accomplii before I was old and grey.

Girls were still only for teasing, and our idea of excitement was sneaking out to Sandy Beach to watch the older kids drink and hold drag races on Saturday nights. I guess we just grew up slower than our peers on the mainland. Being in paradise must've kept us naive. There were so many of us "war babies" that Hawaii's system couldn't handle us all at once, so we went to school in shifts: half from 7:30 A.M. to 11:30 and the rest from 12:30 to 4:30, which was perfect for our lifestyle.

School had just begun when Billy Weaver got eaten by a shark while surfing. The state placed a bounty on them, and the rest of the year became a monstrous hunt...nights spent with my father welding hooks, barrels, and chains together, and days rapt in the fervor only killing demons can instill. We caught forty-six big ones and innumerable three to four-foot hammerheads, hardly noticing how it kept us out of trouble.

Growing up was almost all-American, few clues to my later dementia apparent. This goes for all of us war babies...latebloomers that seemed like those before us but who marched to a different drummer, one certainly unheard by our parents. They were too busy with air-raid sirens and bomb shelters. I started on the same foot as the rest. Anyone could end up like I did. Well, some perhaps...