

WHEN JAMES DEAN WAS GOD

I laughed to remember awkward times, reminding myself that all youngsters progress through rebellion, testing their limits. It just seemed to take me longer than everyone else. I'd been slow maturing, in more ways than one. During adolescence, several matters of heart occurred, each of them such inviolate travesties that I emerged shaken and forewarned to the danger in dealing with these delicate reflections of our innermost needs.

Raised in a small beach town far from civilization, our gang flourished in unfettered innocence. Footloose in a Garden of Eden, we were barefoot souls as close to nature as the original natives, in a jungle where alluring creatures with soft, pink parts lingered.

Life was an adventure, spiced with natural inclinations, and our courtship with mischief may've been some latent reaction to reality. We endured authority, proper upbringing, and school as unpleasant duties, offset reasonably with respect for our parents, those upstanding creators of the Hawaii we loved. How could they possibly keep up with our highjinks or teach us "how to be" when we were cavorting in pristine waterfalls or exploring vast oceans beyond their calling? How could anyone have warned us then of subtle dangers that hidden reefs and unpredictable storms held for young voyagers on such a boundless sea?

I participated in some social activities bordering on youth's civic duties--raising the flag every morning while Jimmy blew his trumpet and the rest of the school stood at attention. It was my first attempt to play a part in the game and it felt good to fit in. Beyond the exposure, there was an honor guards' aura in being noticed.

Well, I remember the morning I first saw her like it was a minute ago. Barefoot in the grass, walking past the seniors' hotrods, we suddenly looked at each other. It seemed in that moment we were the only two people on earth, even though she was in a crowd. I was shaken, riveted with an initial sense of that animal power females hold over us. I suppose Jimmy saw her too, but it didn't affect him--probably no other person noticed--but this girl and I did. I was sure of that much.

Her name was Genevieve Faulkner, and even though she was surrounded by the studs of the senior class, I could feel her flirting with my very soul. I was in shock...what was this? It felt like the big shark hitting my handline one day on the pier. My heart fluttered. I sensed unknown danger. Glancing away, I fiddled with the trumpet 'til it felt safe to look up again. As we passed the line of hotrods, I looked for her, and our eyes met once more. She was smiling at me.

"Wow, did you see that?" I whispered to Jimmy, shuffling the trumpet into better view and marching along with as much dignity as I could muster. "You mean the new girl that Ernie Pacheco's cruising with?" he answered. "She came in with him and his pack of nerds in the '56 Nomad wagon yesterday morning, too. How come all the cute girls hang out with total zeros?"

I shrugged a questioning look in response, thinking what mysterious beings they really were, and padded off toward the band building. I stole one more glance at her. She was glowing like a goddess. Whatever happened when our eyes met turned me upside down. I floated in a haze, dreaming of her all week and wondering what this new feeling meant or could become, for my dimensions of love were cloudy to say the least. I was a fisherman, sailor, and surfer. This was beyond my realm of experience.

Oh, I'd had dreams all right--some of them so real I'd awakened with a start and some gooey stuff in my bed. But none of them held a real person. They all focused on an incredible melding of two souls in a surreal landscape, mirrored by pastel colors with birds arcing above. There were rainbows of stars whenever it came, and it was so real I still visualize it when I think how love will be.

My illusion was of such a cameo innocence that it didn't break my heart when Pacheco grabbed the heart-shaped box of chocolate on Valentine's Day, and, passing it around his trolls, laughed at my helplessness. Like a true novice, I'd followed its first taste to see my hopes twisted and warped by a pack of fools. I claimed it didn't matter when I saw her laughing, but that hurt the worst. I don't think I could've handled it without the lasting promise love's first view held in my mind's eye, and disregarding their mockery, I weighed the pain of my brief dip into its wondrous depths against what it might become.

Between drag races, fishing, and hanging out with Bob Haggard and the older guys with their fancy cars, I thought about girls. Was it worth the potential embarrassment and agony of dealing with their whims and wiles? Could they be trusted like the guys? I rolled this stuff around, cautiously trying to calculate the unknowns they presented. Cruising with Haggard was a lot easier than being in love! He was a self-proclaimed "post-graduate student" at Kailua High, and had been my idol since I could remember. Actually first in a long line of mentors, each became more deadly than the one before, until I was finally operating under the devil himself.

Artist, ladies' man, and master rat fucker, he was everything of value to me in those days, and I worked my ass off to be with him and his tight-knit crew, sanding cars and cleaning spray guns while he put the final touches of pin striping on the fanciest roadsters of the era. His "Gold Brick" had twenty coats of gold flake, with flashing black

and silver stripes. Riding in the back seat of that '32 Chevy with the top down exemplified my courtship with power, as we'd pass the Malt Shop to burn out on some mission. I mean, these guys were for real--they even drank in the car--and I was thirteen...all eyes, ears, and enthusiasm. I even nationalized two bottles of whiskey from my dad's liquor closet.

That summer, we finished the blue and silver-flamed scallop job on Doug Johnson's radical '55 Chevy, and were halfway through the "Orange Crate," a '33 Model A truck done in orange and black, when I met Charity Waterby. Though she stood a full six inches taller than me, it was only that miraculous glow I felt. There was the pastel vision and the floating feeling again. I confided in Haggard....

"Heyho, little buddy," he cried, "at least ya got good taste! I'll tell her what a whiz little mutha you are, we'll throw her in the back of the "Brick," snap a few brews, and take a slow cruise over the Pali. She'll be hangin' all over you after that!"

"Outasight!" I beamed, trying to hide a rising gulp in my throat. All my mind could focus on was what I'd say to her, but I managed a fairly confident grin, exclaiming, "I owe ya, Haggmo. Anything you want, I'm at your service."

At our next rendezvous, Hesh was with him, dressed in his standard black leather, hair all slicked back in the "duck's ass" style of the day, and staring at the tip of his Camel as usual. I never trusted him. His beady eyes darted, snake-like from dark sockets, at everything around him. No one could tell what he was thinking, except maybe Haggard, but it didn't matter, as there was some bond of mutual respect, affection, or protection between them, unfathomable to the common mind.

"Com'on, little buddy, it's time for you to perform," Bob said as we squirreled out of the parking lot, chicks oohing and aahing at the flash of gold and swirl of blue smoke. We started drinking after a quick stop at Rocky's Liquors and then were cruising along the beach road, wind in our hair, lords of the realm.

I never asked where we were going anymore, after being unloaded once for such impertinence, so just leaned back and dreamed of having Charity next to me in our upcoming ride. I even practiced looking over at her and saying cool stuff, 'til Hesh started to snicker. Then we were near the Marine Base gate, parked in preparation for the speech I knew was due.

"Ya know," Hagg began, "I been thinkin' of some good floorboard material for the Brick and the Crate, and it jest come ta me the other day, what with you owing me a favor and all, ta git the car ready fer yer wedding and make some bucks at the same time!"

I swallowed, sensing certain sacrificial duty--a Purple Heart for sure--and waited, thinking how cunning his methods

were. Hesh glared at me, "Whatsamatta? Chicken?"

"Hey, fuck you, Hesh!" I spit with my best grimace. "What's yer plan, Haggmo?"

He blinked through his coke bottle lenses, slurped at his beer, and laying the front window down, flopped his legs over the dash to grin back at me. "It's super simple, kiddo, a true pushover. There's this unreal rubber matting running the full length of the emergency entrance at the Base Hospital. It's the best shit I've ever seen, really soft but strong, and its got thousands of star-shaped holes! Can you dig this, man? Stars under your feet! We'll paint the floorboards silver, the rubber blue, and you'll be riding in Heaven, I promise!"

I couldn't help but agree...we really did need that stuff. Putting on my best conspiratorial grin, I listened eagerly as Bob laid out our moves. The black Marines guarding the main gate were only interested in the car. "Sheet, man, mutha fuggah! I nevah did see tha likes!" and all that jive. Bob just grinned, his magic glasses twinkling, as he carried on with the cool cats, speaking their lingo and allowing them to invite us on their base.

Hesh stared at the end of his cigarette as I gazed nervously down the fence to the sand dunes of an earlier caper. It seemed authority always held the bounty we sought, but there wasn't much time to reminisce. We were backing into a parking space clearly marked "Ambulance" outside the hospital, as I tried vainly to calm the butterflies in my stomach. Haggard always did things in such a manner, rankly and outrightly, as if he owned the world...and it worked!

My job was to nonchalantly measure my way up the rubbered hallway about twenty paces, cut across it with an Exacto knife, and roll the mat tightly back to the swinging doors and freedom...the unknown factor being, of course, how big it might get. I felt like I was in a morgue. Cadaverous eyes peered at me from cold cells, while Hesh's parting comment, "Fuck anybody looks at ya. Jes' keep rollin'!" echoed through my jerky moves. Really, that's how Bob kept his cool, owned the universe, and merely took what was his. Obviously it was the proper method. There he was, legs out, slurping another beer, and grinning at life as if it'd all simply been placed at his feet for the taking.

Bravado built in me, and I continued pacing, the steel blade in my clammy hand and an unfamiliar smirk on my face. After a nurse whooshed by with her gurney wheels clacking, I felt I'd gone far enough, and pounced on the floor, assassinating my target clean through with one stroke. Then I was humping and bumping the wobbling roll toward the exit as it grew bigger and bigger. My heart was pounding, the pressure was on, but in those moments I was growing too. Like the monstrous rubber tit that crashed through the swinging doors with a shuddering "whompf" into the parking lot, I was on a roll!

We grunted and farted in a furious struggle to get its unwieldy bulk into the back seat. Then we slipped effortlessly through the main gate, with the two coons guffawing in praise again while Haggmo grinned, his genuflected charisma carrying the day once more. I was caught up in a wonderful vision of my own, my arm around what appeared to be a big roll of rubber, but which would soon be my girl, basking in Haggmo's congratulatory glances and trusting his prophecies for the future.

Well, it all came true, at least for a while. After our glorious ride together on the magic rubber carpet, Charity became my first girlfriend, taking me into the shallows to feel puppy love. She was from the deep South, and such a fine lady it's hard to follow what happened. I was so happy in the beginning that even mischief became secondary to being with her, walking her home, or learning to "make out" to songs like "Love Me Tender." The idea seemed to be how long you could hold your breath. Of course, it was silly stuff, but to us it was a big deal. I got some white bucks and red socks, purple drapes, a pink shirt with a black bow tie, and began cultivating a D.A. haircut with a pointed wave in the front.

These were pretty special times for Charity and me. I would've taken her around Haggard more, but felt lurking in Hesh some groping, priapic desire whenever we came near. I'd see him and Bob parked in the glow of beach bonfires. In the aura of macho manhood emanating from the "Goldbrick," girls flocked about them like they were James Dean or someone. I'd feel a subtle urging come over Charity akin to an innocent starling under the hypnotic gaze of a cobra. I almost mumbled a warning, but that seemed worse than pretending not to notice, so I blurted out, "Watch, they're waiting to pull a train with Rene. Pretty soon they'll drive down the beach and the rest of the guys'll disappear."

That also made me look very loyal to her, but she didn't know what a "train" was, and the more I tried to tell her about girls who "gangbanged" a bunch of guys--intimating how evil the concept was in the process--the further my foot went into my mouth. Maybe my voice gave me away, that inwardly I'd like to be standing there bravely in line like an alley cat in some ancient puberty rite, that my fear of actually participating in such bravado showed, or what I do not know, but I did not feel my full princely self that night, holding her dear hand by the fire.

At the end of the school year the big dance came, and with it a succinct finale to my innocent affair with sweet Charity. I'd scurried off to the punchbowl where, hung up in line, I spotted Hesh dancing off with her. By the time I got back, I couldn't find them and was overwhelmed by a sudden, inexorable sensation of loss. Four other times in my life, I've known for certain that something was gone like that. I even had it once in Vietnam just before a buddy got hit.

It's probably what we'll feel when our soul leaves our body--a final emotionless void without amends, excuses, or second chances.

I ran through the spotlights with "Earth Angel" ringing in my ears to the parking lot as the "Gold Brick" screeched into the darkness. Still carrying the punch glasses, I zombied back, replete in taunting strains of faraway music, "and the little congregation prayed for guidance from above, lead us not into temptation, bless this hour of our salvation, guide us with eternal love."

I couldn't recall ever feeling so lost or vanquished; my hopes caved in and I felt I was suffocating, while the rest of the world danced around me unfeeling and untouched. Then, blinking like rescue beacons in the blue haze, Haggard's lenses twinkled and his reassuring grin moved toward me. Before I could cry or accuse him of complicity, he held me by my shoulders and simply smiled. Growing up, becoming a man, and daring to love were gonna be full of these moments of silence.

He and I seemed to grow closer after that, and Hesh kinda drifted out of his life. It was unreal, the power of women between friends. I guessed they'd even caused wars. Charity got pregnant, moved away with her parents to an Air Force base in Texas, and had twin girls. I never heard from her again. Hesh slithered over the mountain into Honolulu, where he was arrested for robbery and disappeared into the vacuous prison system. But the ache in my heart throbbed, unabated by these events, though I took some solace in their meted justice.

It was the purity of my vision that was important, that was tarnished, that could not fathom this gross error in judgment...could God have made the mistake and she'd only been a victim? I gathered my wits and courage, made deductions on a tenuous scale, and set out cautiously again. Love was some arcane gamble you had to expose yourself "all the way" to feel, and then you were open, completely vulnerable, to be hurt in dimensions not known before. It scared me so deeply I decided to steer a wide course for a while.

Bob had other ways to deal with women, and I watched with intensity as they swarmed around the car trying to get his attention, vying among themselves for his favors. It was uncanny--he simply played it cool, took what he wanted, and kept on going--extraordinary! Sometimes we'd pick up one of his regulars, and I'd have to take a walk down the beach while he diddled away in the back seat. It turned me on to see the girls' legs spread and the "Brick" bouncing on its old springs to the beat of their moans. I'd sneak back to watch but felt guilty, and shuffled off to wait like a puppy for his master. Then one night he winked at me, "Rene's hot again, and I bet she'll be into a train tonight. I kin git ya up front so's ya kin dip yer dick and check it out!"

"Sure, Bob. Whatever," I rallied nervously, thinking I should just get it over with. Then, like a vaguely familiar dream unfolding, we were standing in line, joking and guffawing in mock bravery, while the older guys poked fun at me. Jeez, I couldn't control my fear. This was not the way I wanted my first experience to be, and knew I was gonna run.

Closer we edged...leering animal sounds, the panting woman spread on damp sand, lowing to the desires of her lords, and lustful eyes flickering in the moonlight. It built in me like some Judeo-Christian painting of devil-like creatures holding dripping hard-ons. I was gone...Bob chasing me along the water's edge, laughing and pounding me on the back. "That's my boy! Someday it'll be right, li'l Buddy!"

From then on, I tested females at arm's length, cultivating them cautiously as equals, prying coyly into their thought processes, and steering clear of exposure to their feline wiles. I actually closed my mind consciously to love--it was just too dangerous! I took to leading a gang of girls on unusual adventures, once getting them into a stealing contest in a drugstore, and finding at this level they were manageable.

Haggmo approved of my methods, and began chauffeuring them about like a bevy of queens, going so far as to include them in some "boys only" functions like our secret demolition derby at a car wrecker's yard near the rock quarry. There, dressed in helmets, leather jackets, and football pads we'd ram old cars into each other until only one was left running.

The only constant was change, and with it came the end of Bob's paternal presence in my life. He was the living personification of the ultimate cool--all I ever hoped to be. With him gone I was going to have to start being somebody on my own. His send-off was spectacular, Statehood Day, 1959. While he delivered some ribald eulogy from the stage like Marc Antony to the Romans, orchids from a friend's plane showered down upon him. We lit trash cans on fire, threw toilet paper rolls into the air, and celebrated an event we hardly understood. With its coming we'd have to wear shoes to school but it didn't matter by then. Little to my knowing, my parents already had plans for me in higher society, part of their strategy to spirit me away from his very influence.

So it was without my idol and cherished mentor, that I ventured over the mountain into Honolulu and private school to finish my education, meet the leaders of our island world, and mingle with the cracked and dessicated upper crust of Hawaii's missionary families. Oh, I mingled all right, and Punahou School, try as it might to correct my ways or extricate me from its bowels, graduated me like sputum vomited from its gorge into the summer of 1961.