

BLACK JACK AND THE MIDNIGHT SUN

Far greater adventure was in store. I could vividly recall some years back when my father and his loud friend drank whiskey all night by the pool, telling tall tales of the Yukon Territories--the land of the midnight sun with its bear hunts, man hunts, and wild, wild women. John Bullock was a veritable legend in that challenging world, and would figure mightily in shaping my life.

So it came to pass, and the day after graduation I headed north to Alaska, where that same burly man gripped my hand and laughed, "Well, boy, yer dad told me ta make a man of ya quick, an' by golly, that's what we'll do! Y'ore gonna spend time with the craziest scrapheap of scalawags on this fair earth! Black Jack'll break ya in ta the ways 'a this life, I assure ya, son, he will! A few months on that man's towboat and yu'll be more'n ready fer college!"

I was impressed by his enthusiasm and trusted him even when he tried to scare me with far-fetched stories. But as he explained the DEW Line and his fleet of tugs, barges, and savage men that supplied America's "Distant Early Warning System," I began to grasp that getting in and out through this imaginary line before the freeze was a very dangerous reality, in which "Murphy's Law" ruled utmost, and a man survived on his wits alone. Stretching between Russia and some of the most desolate wasteland on earth, this mission proved the prospect "If it might go wrong, it will"...as many times in that precarious environment, it did, along with "Morton's Law" that "when it rains, it pours." Actually, there were no laws at all where I was going.

The next morning, skimming across a small lake in a tiny plane so overloaded I couldn't turn my head, I pissed in my pants at the furious vibration and certain prospect of enjoining the flashing landscape, as the rattletrap barely got the mail and us into the air. Jeez, if I was to be comfortable with this crazed bush pilot through another fifty of these ball-bursting, gravity-defying circus stunts, I'd best become consigned to life and death at every moment, and with that choiceless resignation got used to being in Alaska.

How can I relate what it meant, this unbelievable drama surging from all angles? There's no justice in any description of the beauty which befell me everywhere in a continually expanding panorama of animals, birds, volcanoes, lakes, and forests. All I'd known was Hawaii...I was benumbed now by the diversity and immensity of creation. Giant polar bears balanced, snarling at the insect-like plane from thousand-foot cliffs of ice above fjords teeming with fish. Herds of reindeer and caribou swarmed like ants darkening the landscape, and clouds of geese colored the

skies...everywhere life opening more unto itself. You wouldn't believe killer whales chasing seals, or how a bull walrus appears up close, or what the Northern Lights are like, but know how quickly I fell in love with that wild country as we skittered like a mosquito through the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes, deeper each day into a throbbing world so full of new sights and smells I could barely absorb it all.

The contrast that ugly, little tugboat with its motley crew of ragamuffins made on the backdrop of nature I'd been absorbed in, as she clanked out her rusty anchor chain off Unalakleet's pebbled beach, was sobering, to say the least. I'd waited for them in that remote Eskimo fish camp for a week, playing with huskies, catching salmon, messing with my first snow, and observing native lifestyles. Although ready for action, I was dumbfounded by the outlandish cast of characters that poured from her decks into that once peaceful village.

The crew of the good tug Nez Perce just plain raided the place, getting the local men totally wasted on Everclear grain alcohol, then sleeping with all their women. The first few nights, I actually hid from them when they'd start up the old drunken sally about "getting the kid laid!" It was destiny though, and I knew it. There was no running down the beach with Haggmo this time.

It was like that all summer...non-stop drama utterly without comparison to anything I'd ever heard or seen. The only semi-sane moments were in the wheelhouse at night when Jack and Rusty would terrify me with stories I'm still unsure are true. Black Jack was a wiry salt with a great handlebar mustache and wrinkles that spread from his eyes like cracks across a dry lake bed. He resembled someone from a recurrent dream. I sensed I'd known this man forever, and felt I'd follow him all over the world in adventures beyond description. Little could either of us have guessed how accurate these prescient feelings would be...for the prospect this same colorful towboat and its crazy captain would be anchored up a dark and twisting Asian river in a nightmarish war later in life was beyond us then.

Rusty was another classic reared in the Northwest's towboat world--mad eyes twinkling from flaming red hair and beard--a true merry prankster. In later years, he wore white robes and carried a seventy-pound boulder from bar to bar, sitting it on stools having people buy drinks which it would obediently soak up. I never did find out why Rusty blew his brains out--something to do with a woman--but I know he lived more than most while he was with us.

When they weren't terrorizing me with their ghastly arctic tales, they put me on the big, brass spotlight searching for the "mail bouy." This is similar to your Boy Scout "snipe hunt," and works especially well with kids of fertile imagination like me who'll swallow a fabrication

about a bouy floating around loose in the North Sea with our mail in it. The next night, as we supposedly neared its location, the crew got their letters out, and, passing a bottle of 170 proof whiskey around, made a great to-do what missing it would be. As I pointed out all sorts of more practical ways to get our mail, they poured more Everclear into my orange juice, having a heyday with my gullible nature.

Then I was on the foredeck in rain gear, working the probing beam of light into the shrouded mist of the Bering Straits. After a shivering passage at this droning task, my mind began to wander, imagining things out there and a distinct sensation of being observed. Suddenly in the shadows of the winch, splashing and groveling with long, green fingers and great webbed feet, a grotesque and slimy blob challenged me!

I slipped, crashing down the gangway to rave through the galley, causing pandemonium, and bolted up to the wheelhouse, cracking my head on a handrail just as the ship's clock chimed and stars circled in my mind. I almost fainted from the concussion, crying out, "There's something..." when its green arm reached through the porthole and grabbed Jack by the neck! I went for the rifle over the chart rack as laughing broke out on all sides.

They were everywhere, on the wheelhouse roof, the poopdeck, in the Captain's stateroom, and as the hatch opened, Rusty lay curled in hysterics while air rushed out of his rubber form, now deflating in a puddle of water. The bastards had set me up! They'd dressed him in the thermal dry suit and pumped him up for my initiation into "the rites of the northern nights."

Remarks about the mail bouy came and went as we settled into shipboard routine and four-hour watches. We'd go in with a shallow barge to some isolated beach. There, out of sheer nothingness, tractors and strangely dressed men would appear from "Ice Station Zebra." They lived underground, beyond the eyes and ears of the world, tending their tools of destruction. Seeing their unreal theaters, recreation rooms, and bars carved deep below the blue ice, I fancied James Bond in their midst.

As we partied with these sentries at our farthest frontiers, listening to Russian symphonies in the wheelhouse or rock and roll in their subterranean grottos, that solvent of the wits, alcohol, brought forth a phantasmal surge unfolding before me, rushing like a wave over my unsullied sensitivities and sweeping bits of my youth away in the process. It seemed a very good thing...

We could never leave the boat for long, as the terrifying coastal "williwaws," hundred-mile-an-hour bursts of wind out of nowhere, kept us on constant alert. Work shifts stretched to forty and fifty hours as we lay exposed during rushed unloading periods. Ferocious storms wracked us

at sea. Once, lost for three days near the coast of Russia, we were chased by destroyers as giant waves broke over the wheelhouse, tossing us about like a cork.

During the storm, our radio crackled with distress all night, and Jack returned venomous threats to some terrified captain who was cutting loose his "tow" with a fire axe. We sailed toward St. Lawrence Island, searching for this giant mother barge, alongside which we'd be some ugly duckling. I sensed Jack wanted to find that captain more, and as all five engines screamed, the venerable "Nez" trudged on with a vengeance through seas of whales and walrus feeding around us in teeming swirls.

Luckily, the company got to that poor soul before Jack did, and we found the lost beast impaled on a stoic ten-foot pinnacle of rock piercing her center hold. I went down into the inky blackness with Jack to inspect her innards, but the shriek of metal and rock struggling with the restless surge was too much for us to bear. She was the biggest barge in the world, and her three giant Manitowoc Cranes leaned perilously from tilting decks as the ocean gained--the entire year's supply for our country's northern defense perimeter hanging in the balance.

Jack flashed into action to keep abreast of the flow, while Rusty and Henry, the old engineer, created air pumps by taking the blowers off our 671 GMC engines and bolting them to holes burned in her hatch covers. These were no ordinary men, and we blew life into that mortally wounded hulk like it was some gigantic dirigible, crippling the Nez to only two engines. We worked furiously, manning pumps, inspecting air leaks, and monitoring the behemoth's slow rising in a menacing sea, while Jack calculated tide and weather changes, waiting for a miracle.

The Nez bobbed alongside like a rowboat tied to the Queen Mary, our thin tether her sole hope for survival. For sixty sleepless hours I stuck with Jack, running all conceivable errands. Finally, in a grotesque screeching of metal and rock the pinnacle's top fractured and the monster slipped off to wallow in bubbles and fuel oil like a broached whale.

The Fourth of July found us company heroes, on leave in Nome with all expenses paid, Jack congratulating us and exclaiming it was actually the way he'd planned the outcome all along. The boat became a floating bar where total chaos ensued. Nome's fabled history for this celebration being renowned, prospectors, trappers, Eskimos, vagabonds, and whores merged from far and wide to relive the Wild West that still flourishes there. They tossed each other in the air on stretched animal skins, held reindeer round-ups, ate their balls called mountain oysters, and caroused through town in drunken waves, like an ocean in a storm.

I was grooving on moosemilk malts until the crew decided to further my initiation, bringing two Eskimo girls aboard to

seduce me in another Everclear reality. I remember big red circles that wouldn't stop going around, and the girls giggling and undressing in Jack's stateroom, but it wasn't until the next day that I really discovered what ladies can do. Although that's how I lost my virginity, I've appreciated being with two women since that incident--they are so sensual together. The three of us had the run of the boat, as everyone was ashore, and we even practiced some more with Everclear. When Jack and Rusty returned they found me a little cocksure and almost worldly.

We sailed into the Bering Sea, past the Diomed Islands, in search of excitement, which day by day seemed to find us regardless. I was overwhelmed by the Northern Lights, curtains of shimmering fire, and meteor-like balls of colored light called St. Elmo's Fire, along with the oddest movements of the sun. I couldn't figure it out...sunsets were mirages. The yellow orb played hide and seek with us, dipping here on the horizon and reappearing shortly not far from there.

On one of those short nights, as I was leaning against the starboard bollard taking a leak and watching the the sea slide by, up with a great whoosh came a fearsome head with bristling whiskers and gleaming eyes. Through huge tusks it "woofed" at me! Slammed against the bulkhead, overwhelmed by fear, and nearly nauseated by its briny breath, I groped for a hatchway to escape, peeing on my feet while it glared at me and slobbered. When it slurped back into the inky swells, I scrambled to the wheelhouse.

"Bull walrus," Jack grinned matter of factly, looking a lot like Haggard to me. "Get up to a ton. Nasty fellows and very territorial, too. You were probably pissin' in his bed." All that night he told me of the animals and intrigue he'd seen in this land of eternal daylight and total darkness--a vast frontier at the edge of oblivion. As he read poems of Robert Service through the wee hours of our enchanted voyage, I thought of staying with him. The education I was headed for in college would never equal a part of his teachings. I grew to love the world of life and death we sailed through, noting in the terrible tragedies and triumphs an essence of continuum in its passage.

After a particularly long and tedious stretch, we put into Port Clarence where Jack and Rusty jumped a bush plane for a week with their wives in Anchorage. Jake Stalker, our Eskimo crewman, took me in the aluminum skiff up the American River, while Clyde, the cook, settled down with a case of Everclear to "watch" the boat. We stayed in abandoned prospectors' cabins, firing up pot-bellied stoves, reliving history, and even panning for gold with rusted tools. We trapped a fox and skinned it, shot a goose in mid-flight, roasted it on a spit, and caught salmon and trout with ease. Everywhere life was full with itself, and I was a part of it, witness to its majesty like a young Walt Whitman. The raw beauty and remote violence of Alaska let me grow...who

could you rat fuck out here and why?

I think some basic foundation was formed in its vast expanse, amidst those untamed men and wild animals, but my path held other callings. One day a seaplane dropped out of a midnight sunrise and snatched me from Jack's influence. Somehow imbued in our parting was a surety we'd be together again. It seemed the Nez sensed this too, for she rocked in farewell as the plane circled, her little cluster of barges bobbing like ducklings behind her. With tears in my eyes, I was swept on to my future.