

THE SECRET MUSEUM OF MAN

College was a vague notion surfacing after a summer so full of adventure, but New Orleans conjured up its own spell, and I was eager to explore further frontiers. My dad thought it'd be the perfect place to be introduced to life's varied facets, so I pointed my virgin thumb south and headed across the continent for Tulane University in that colorful city, the "Belle of the South."

Memories of Jack, Rusty, and the Nez Perce kept me occupied through ride after ride toward San Francisco. I hoped something would be left in Monterey from John Steinbeck's time. Perhaps characters from Cannery Row still roamed there, like in the towboat drama I'd just left, but the world slipping by outside held few prompts for my imagination, and I felt terribly alone for the first time.

It wasn't the utter abandon I've since experienced in jails and asylums, but more that nebulous period when, without formed personalities, we're blown about by callous winds to experience life's impersonal remoteness. Holden Caulfield seemed to understand and kept me company as I hitchhiked with my battered copy of Catcher in the Rye close at hand, peering at the passing dreamscape like a timid child into a circus cage.

Then, transposed in time, I was standing barefoot on the banks of the Mississippi atop the very levees Tom Sawyer'd stood during the glory days of this wondrous waystop. Visions swept by of great paddlewheelers with cargos of shrimp, cotton, and bananas accompanied by gamblers and ladies, gypsies and slaves, fur trappers and plantation gentlemen.

Stripping like Huck Finn, I swam in 'ol man river, wondering why it was brown instead of blue, and thought of Huck's raft, catching catfish, and drifting to the mighty ocean beyond. Refreshed and gaining some slight foothold, I wandered into the city amid Cajun lingo and Negro jive, pinching myself to be sure it was all real.

I stood reflecting on the jolts destiny prepared for me, from my innocent youth and that crazy tugboat, to Bourbon Street at midnight. Bathed in the neon blur of its nightlife and gaping at humanity run amok, I remember taking a deep breath, guessing I could handle it, and stepping further into its fullness. I ranged from abandoned buildings in the French Quarter, where old black men hummed spirituals around tiny fires, to Pat O'Brien's famous bar for a rum "hurricane."

In the glow of flickering gas streetlamps, policemen on horseback with dogs straining at leash ends contrasted with shiny carriages and fancy ladies, while vagrants lay in dank

alleys as spirits hovered over them. I ate raw oysters, drank Jax beer, and smoked my first cigarette watching strip shows while soul music wafted through the night. It was a glorious sideshow that catalyzed my imagination. I became so engrossed in this waterfront world that I nearly forgot to register for classes.

It didn't really matter. College didn't register on me. I scarcely remember it. I did manage to eke out my own education from the Medical School attic. In my intrepid scouring of the campus, I discovered a hatch in the faculty restroom, and crawling through years of cobwebs, stumbled upon a vast cornucopia of learning beyond my wildest dreams.

It was incredible in array, from stuffed bison and prehistoric animals to jars of bulging eyes in Mongolian foreheads. I could've done a graduate thesis on its contents. There were medical books, art from other civilizations, and planets set up to turn around a light that cast galaxies on its vaulted ceiling. The oddest thing about my private collection was just that--I never found anyone to share it with--the South being noted for its sedentary mentality. It was like being the only one in the Smithsonian. I created a school of my own by covering the windows and turning on the lights.

I settled into dormitory life and went through the rites of fraternity rush, getting involved with "Grande 'ol Sigma Alpha Epsilon," mostly because some of the brothers reminded me of Haggard. They had fancy cars and money, and one was a Fountainbleu, so they hustled rather than rushed me, taking me to whorehouses and shows featuring the most bizarre sex acts imaginable. I got the crabs.

The football players in the dorm razzed me so much that I cultivated my colony, picking them one by one from the pubic forest they huddled in. Each day I harvested a faint shadow into a dixie cup, then wandered through the jocks' quadrangle sprinkling vermin, barely able to contain my mirth. Shades of the Black Plague produced epidemic laughter on my part and profound consternation in official circles. I'd struck a blow for the snipe hunters among us!

Only adventures stand out, like our Easter trip to the Bahamas in Dan's red convertible, during which he hustled southern belles like Sherman marching to the sea. I got robbed by a prostitute in Nassau, but recall pieces of imagery...being a pirate in old cannon ports above the ocean with "William Kidd, 1770" and other inscriptions carved in stone. What was time, anyway? It seemed only when I was aware of actual marks that its passage became apparent, flooding my mind with an anxious curiosity.

In pageantry and dimension, Mardi Gras is more than I can ever forget or describe, for in depth of excess it knows no comparison. A menagerie released from restraint knows no bounds, a moving event beyond words. I turned a profit renting a Bourbon Street apartment and charging everyone ten

dollars and a bottle to get in. The party raged nine days and ended in a skirmish that took the railing and a row of bodies with it. No one seemed to stop carousing except the injured and unconscious, and they were neatly piled under benches, safe from trampling masses.

I was relieved of liability by using a false ID and promptly decided against trying to get my deposit back. Only splinters, blood, and broken bottles were proof we'd ever been there. In the thick of revelry, not a sole witness came forward, quite like a tree falling in a forest with no one to hear.

Typical of my offbeat memories from the cultural extravaganza was drifting in early morning hours through an endless sea of empty beer cans. At times they were up to my knees, and clinking against surreal currents, I waded through quixotic channels, a solitary prince of tides, dreaming of pirates and fair damsels.

I was expelled from Tulane--a purist response to shallow thinking far behind advanced states of pranksterism in the West. I'd already elected not to return to this bastion of mediocrity, even for Mardi Gras, long before they decided on extricating me from their hallowed halls. As if the crab epidemic wasn't enough, I was exposed as primal instigator of the spring intra-dorm water balloon war, wrecking all manner of southern traditions and leaving scars of ratfuckery on the school's genteel reputation.

The best shot in that skirmish was definitely mine from the sixth floor of Irby Dorm. It landed directly on the pudgy nerd who'd turned me in for "lousing" up their football team--initial *raison d'être* for my touchy relationship with the scholastic hierarchy. The weather balloon was immense and weighed in excess of a hundred pounds, requiring a plywood chute, dedicated assistants, and extreme coordination of wind vectors, wobble propensity, and gravitational rotation.

A giant squirming amoeba, it floated quiescently down like some bioplastic alien blob to the very point on his fat bobbing head, the amazing elasticity of my vehicle stretching cartoon-like around his torso completely to his toes before exploding. You could even make out his laundry basket just before shock waves carried him off his feet in a vacuum of silence, followed by a thunderclap and wave of water.

Word of these endeavors, and rumors I'd masterminded the disappearance of the statue from the Sigma Chi's front yard, doomed my future in the South. Although involved in that "frat rat" caper, it wasn't me who actually looped the chain over the bumper of the city bus. I couldn't believe it! The whole retaining wall went with their lion down Xavier Street, exposing geological strata back to Tom Sawyer's time.

I sensed "history" pretty well described my current status, and withdrew, spending my last weeks alone

reminiscing in my museum, pondering the marvels of man, and preparing my speech on "southern humor" for my distraught parents. They were already implementing alternatives for my education at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, having heard from Tulane's faculty about my difficult adjustment to Dixieland.

Our reunion went fairly well. My failure to fit into the sociological fabric of the South was broached discreetly and I was welcomed home, the prodigal son, without a major scene with Pop. Somehow he either understood or restrained himself, for a change. There was by now some unspoken link between us, and I assume he had an inkling I was not gonna fit in anywhere.

I immersed myself into summer as if nothing had happened. One might think me ungrateful and a "spoiled brat" for tossing aside such exceptional opportunities, but I prefer to remember myself as reactionary and oversensitive to the stimuli of existence in those formative years. I simply couldn't "tow the line," as it were. The sole imprints I could retrieve from my entire memory bank were only of Black Jack, my museum, some bits of Mardi Gras, and the stunning effect of a pirate's carving hundreds of years ago.

Hawaii had never meant so much to me before. I'd not known seasons until that initial exposure, but now the incessant beauty of the tropics embraced me, cleansing my wounds, and revitalizing my spirit. I became part of the reef again, talking with my inky pals in octo tongue, dealing with the eels and sharks, and absorbing once more the sheer drama of the cliffs rising from the sea beyond.

My trusty sailboat took me back to a clearer period looking for whales, and I camped alone on Coconut Island, retracing my marvelous youth. Was I still the same after venturing into those other worlds? My flat "luau" feet grasped the sand and my footprints still followed me as before. What had changed? Not much that I could spot on the surface. I was still intact, but surely saw and appreciated more now, even as some growing enigma began to eat at my core.

By working construction, I figured to earn enough to buy a "woodie" station wagon and make the surf scene at U.S.C. The Ilikai Hotel found me a quality control inspector, but on every floor I'd run into a group of workers with binoculars engrossed in the activities of newly-wed tourists in the honeycombed concrete variety show surrounding us. I took to carrying my father's big Navy set, alerting various factions to appropriate locations via a code devised of numbers for floor level and alphabets for room.

At this stage, life held little meaning and I wandered through its endless corridors like some civil servant, checking to see that commonness and banality were the order of the day. It was an awkward period. I point it out because it makes part of my life seem "normal," a parade of

dull, repetitive tasks in endless patterns, signifying nothing.

There was surfing after work, cruising Waikiki in search of co-eds and tourist girls, and other adolescent behavior, but I never fully participated anymore. I was some kind of observer now. Evenings on the beach with the Kingston Trio, drinking beer and getting silly, and bungling every attempt at bedding fair maidens, filled summer nights but left me empty, groping for purpose and direction. I sensed way back then I was gonna be very different from the rest.

We pulled some "dirty tricks," water ballooning servicemen and back-firing the car to scare pedestrians, but it had lost its punch. We got the gang out for a night of "guava" throwing, and ran down the beach giggling like kids to camp in the pine trees once more and share our plans for the future. I quietly mulled over new values pals had succored from college, but couldn't put my sense of being a misfit into words, remaining mute on most subjects while my pals prattled away in a newfound worldliness.

Nonetheless it was a peculiar period of transition from boyhood into something else--I wouldn't call it manhood. We were all a bit slow for some reason. Maybe it was being raised in paradise in that tiny beach town over the towering mountain range that separated us from city life and civilization's corrosive effects. Perhaps it was simply the timelessness of Hawaiian youth itself. I don't know. We just didn't seem to grow up...or maybe it was me.

Our parents saw to it that we were exposed to culture. We were dragged to symphonies, tutored in Latin, Greek, and the classics, and shipped off to the finest schools. At heart, we remained barefoot rascals trying in vain to make time stand still. Something had been altered though. I could sense it, as if a clock had been set ticking in portent moments. Youth was maturing or maybe just slipping away. Even the magic of summer was fading before me, and I was helpless to stop it.