

Summer On Puget Sound

"Arrggh! You be quite a scurvy scalawag, says I. I have a notion to cut you through the gizzard, matey."

"Aye, but if you kill me, you'll never find the dubloons. Dead men tell no tales."

"You be a yellow livered coward. Take that."

I swung my cutless around aiming for his broadside, which happened to be his head. He was quick and ducked the power of my stroke. I swung again; our silhouettes clashed against the blood red sky of sunset.

A mean looking scar cut across his face from ear to ear. His teeth were rotted and yellow like burnt carmel. The scent of his sweat was hot and steamy; it mixed with the cool breeze that swept across the water.

The rotted, splintered boards of the deck creaked beneath our feet. Metal sliced through the air. Wet warmth crept down my arm, leaving the sleeve a darker shade of liquid crimson. My sword rang on the deck as the pain shot up my arm. With my other hand I clenched tightly to the rigging. The bristled rope dug sharply into my calloused hands as I reeled around and swung through the air.

My feet plugged him hard in the chest. He doubled over like a sack of fine flour. I swung back and knocked him again. The power of my legs covered in Spanish leather thigh boots easily picked him off. He fell over the side and I heard a satisfactory splash.

"God-damn it, Giz!"

I peered over the side of the Hispanola and stared at my brother. I roared with laughter when I saw his butt was good and squelched down in the muck near the shore. His face got all red and the veins started to protrude in his temples, just below that horrible blonde crew-cut.

"You're a booger!"

“Oh, don’t pee your pants, Whoopie.”

I walked around the old hollowed out tree we call the Hispanola and picked up my spoils of the battle. I planted myself good and solid on shore and peeled away the gold foil from my chocolate dubloon. I lingered over it, my tongue ran up the sides, the chocolate oozed and ran down my throat. Good chocolate is the best possible orgasm.

Whoopie slogged his way through the waist-deep goo. His wooden cutless we’d made from some old plywood dragged behind him. I lifted the patch on my eye to get a better look at the damage to him, thus getting a better laugh. Poor guy. He was soaked and covered in moss and river slime. Personally I thought it was an improvement, but he didn’t seem to think so.

“You’re a turd.”

“Yeah, I happen to be the turd with all the chocolate.”

I stood up and wiped the sand and burrs off the butt of the old red bathrobe. I put the remaining booty in my pocket and tred towards the winding forest path. My little brother slopped along behind; the squish, squish of water-logged Keds.

This was our second summer on Bainbridge Island, smack dab in the middle of Puget Sound. We lived in a huge Victorian house on the south side of the island; the white paint peeling in the hot sticky air. I guess out of all the places we ever lived I like this one best, even with all that happened there.

I was twelve at the time, I’d be thirteen in December. Kinda a drag to have your birthday so close to Christmas, huh? Anyway, my younger brother, Whoopie, we called him, was ten. Our real names were Harry and Richard Hamilton, but we just went by Giz and Whoopie; there were just the two of us boys. I guess our mother was

relieved that it was only two, and not more. We were holy terrors.

I think mother dreaded us most on the days when it rained, or snowed, or it was just too damn cold to go out. Whoop and I would turn our house into a war zone. We had a shitload of army soldiers and cannons and the like. They were made of iron and were hand painted; each one must've weighed a couple of ounces, and boy, could they do some damage. There were quite a few dings in the wall were an infantry man or captain had been flung. I still have a nice bump on my head from when Whoop catapulted one of his cavalry in anger. We were arguing over who was going to be "General Nuisance." "General Nuisance" was a joke my dad played on us; told us he was the greatest general ever, so naturally both of us wanted to be him. We were pretty stupid.

Some people said it was real creepy to see me and my brother together. We had exactly the same face, only his was a little fatter. We both had long straight noses and high cheekbones, kinda like the Barrymore's. Steel blue eyes ran in our family, very cold and austere, except we were always laughing and hooting around. What made people stare at us was that Whoopie had soft golden hair; the total Nordic-Prussian-Aryan look, and my hair was black as the ace of spades. I got it from my dad who was a second generation Scot.

You could really tell my dad was Scottish even if he didn't have the thick brogue that Grandpa did. He sure drank whisky like a Scot and he sure used the language of one. When mother wasn't around he'd sit us down and tell us the best dirty jokes. God, were they salty. But one time she overheard him telling us two little sprouts about Greta, 'the girl with golden gazangas', Damn, if Whoopie and I didn't think she was gonna pack up and leave...

"Who do you think is the strongest guy in the world?"

"Why?"

"Come on, just tell me! Who do you think is the strongest guy?"

"Where do you come up with these questions, Whoopie? O.K., O.K.! Strongest guy? Gotta be Sir Lancelot."

"I think it's Flash Gordon."

Whoopie always did this, asked stupid questions and then made like your answer was completely wrong. You know, like his answer was so superior to anything you could dream up. It always irritated me.

"Whoopie."

"What?"

"Do you know what I would do if I was the strongest man in the world?"

"What?"

"I'd beat the shit out of you."

We walked through the thick forest, down the small dirt trail. The air was fresh with the fine scent of wet pine and redwood. We hacked away at low branches with our cutlasses and poked at the nettles and poison oak that tainted parts of the walkway. The emerald of the forest was a fire with the amber and red of the sun's last rays. That sun set with such a brilliance; somehow I knew I would never see a sunset that beautiful again . . .

"Hey! Hey, come on you knuckleheads!"

It was Boo waiting for us to go swimming out at Zachery cove.

My brother and I peeled out of the kitchen; it was already a scorcher of a morning. We nabbed our kits; everything a kid could need for an outing. We each had a yucky worn out towel mom had given us (way too gross for anybody but us kids to use), two bottles of grape pop (the kind that coats your tongue with electric purple goo,

like you're the kid of alien beings), a liverwurst sandwich, a bit of money, and a bunch of miscellaneous junk, like a pocket knife, string, rubber bands, junk like that. All this stuff was rolled up regulation army style; Dad had showed us how. We picked up our rifles, which were not much more than pea shooters in my opinion. You could barely make a dent in a slab of butter with one of these.

I slapped my chalk-white cowboy hat on; God, I loved that hat. It had a shiny snakeskin band 'round the brim and curved up just above my temple. The best moment in my life was when my dad plunked that thing on my head. I looked real terrific; the starch whiteness against my inky hair. Whoopie said I looked like a skunk, but that creep was just jealous. All he had was an old brown one with a simple cloth band. Boy, did it put a burr up his butt everytime I put on my hat.

Boo stood impatiently next to my dad's ol' rust heap of a car, shotgun (a real nice one, not like the tinker toys we had) and gear in hand. Boo's real name was Harvey Kingsman. Stupid name, Harvey; so we nicknamed him Boo. It stood for 'butthead, one and only,' but he never knew. His parents owned the only grocery store on the island, real convenient. Every once and a while Mr. Kingsman let us run wild in the candy section. Three Musketeers, Unos, Baby Ruths; we'd be sick for days, but what a way to go, huh? O.D. on chocolate.

"You guys will never believe this. This sucks, totally sucks."

"What's up?"

"My mom said we have to take Fishface with us."

"Ah, Jeez, Boo! You're kidding, right?"

"Shit, I wish I was."

"What a pisser," Whoopie added for emphasis.

Fishface was the only other kid on our side of the island.

He was three and didn't have anyone his age to play with, so his mother made deals with the Kingsmans and our folks to have us play with him. Talk about ruining the day. The kid wasn't so bad; he was real quiet and just sat there and ate dirt or squashed bugs or watched the snot drip down his face. What really got us guys was the simple fact we were responsible for the condition he returned in. We got such hell if that precious little kid returned with a hangnail.

Once I thought Mrs. Corothers was going to have me and Whoop arrested. My brother had just gotten this real nifty paint set for his birthday: twenty-five colors. Well anyway, we were out playing Picasso in the woods, and of course we got stuck with Fishface. We gave him a couple colors and a brush and let him paint rocks. The stupid kid ended up painting his private parts. Mrs. Corothers must have shit her pants when she saw her "adorable" three year old kid with green genitalia.

"Couldn't you get out of it?"

"No way."

To this day I wish to God we had gotten out of it.

Three sets of footsteps made their way across the dry shadeless road. We cut through a field of chest-high weeds. The golden stalks dry and brittle from the heat crunched as they collapsed under our sneakers. Sweat was already collecting around my neck and under my arm pits. You could just tell we were going to be lunch for every mosquito in Washington state.

We go to the Crother's house; Fishface sat silently on the porch, all bug-eyed as usual. Boo looked at me - the look of sheer distress, almost as if he was going to be crucified. He took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on some imaginary vortex in the sky. I looked over at Whoopie. His face was all scrunched up like a dried up ol' raisin. I myself

looked very stern, and we waited for it.

Squeek. The rusty screen door yawned open. The petite foot stepped delicately onto the loose wooden boards. Every muscle tightened. And then came that horrible sound. That excruciating mush, that sappy goo. Worse than nails on a chalkboard.

"Loook, precious! Your little friends are here. Now you take care of my swee-eet whittle pumpkin, Clarence. He's such a cutey-pie; look at those precious dimples. Kiss, kiss. Wave bye-bye to Mommy, honey."

It was enough to make you want to puke your guts out.

Boo and I grabbed up the precious little twirp, as we waved "bye-bye to Mommy". We probably broke Olympic records everytime we left that place. Of course we did make our usual stop at the blackberry bushes on the edge of the Crothers' property. This was our concession. I guess it was a fair trade. Those blackberries were my one weakness. Firm, dark, deep purple, they just melt in your mouth. They left your hands, mouth and half your body covered with those sticky sweet clots of escaped juice.

We reached Zachary Cove around noon. Booran down the bank, kicked off his sneakers, and peeled off the sweat soaked shirt with a snap. The three of us big kids stripped down to our underpants and left Fishface on a rock to eat snails or whatever was unfortunate enough to crawl his way. That kid would eat anything, old rotten shoelaces, weeds, marbles. God, you'd think his mother never fed the kid. We made special sure that our guns and cowboy hats were well out of reach from the gnawing teeth and slobber.

"YAAAAAAWHOOOOOOO!!

That was my feeble attempt at a Tarzan yell as I swung myself over glass-still water and dropped myself in; cold

as dry ice. You got used to it after a while. Boo cannon-balled in next to me scattering spray in a fifteen foot radius.

"Come on, you pussy!" Boo cried out to a shivering Whoopie who was in the process of inching his way in. Took him a good friggin' ten minutes.

Water, for me is the greatest sensation next to chocolate, the cool silky feeling of floating in liquid space. I sank down and let my ears plug up with water I could hear the muted thuds of Boo and Whoopie trashing about. I was pretty sure Boo was giving Whoop a good dunking, and naturally that brought a smile to my face.

After 'bout an hour we started getting tired of running 'round like a bunch of nutwads. I stood up close to shore, my shoulders just peering out of the water. I glanced over to see that Fishface was still alive. I don't know how he fuckin' did it. My blood turned twenty degrees colder than a cherry popsicle as I saw his slime coated fingers inches away from my frost-white cowboy hat.

I thrashed as hard as I could towards shore, yelling and screaming and thinking of terrible ways to kill him.

His fingers clenched onto the chinstring.

I must have scared the living shit out of that poor kid as I came barreling up, red and angry. He let out a bloody shriek and dropped my hat into the green below. I dove in after it. It was unscathed. I let out a sigh of relief and stood up. I looked over at Fishface; his eyes were even more bugged, like two champagne corks just ready to fly and spray foam. I shook my head and looked down. I WAS FUCKING STANDING IN A BUNCH OF POISON IVY! THE SHITTY LITTLE BASTARD DROPPED MY HAT IN FUCKING POISON IVY!

I didn't lose my temper. I gingerly placed my hat higher on a branch, and ran for the water. I hoped to God I could

get some of the thin toxic layer off before I ended up looking like one of the Corothers's blackberries. Boo and Whoop for once in my life were sympathetic. I made the best of it; it wasn't too bad. I could feel the itch festering at my ankles and on a small patch of my abdomen, but that was about it. Lucky me.

Around three o'clock the three of us gunslingers shouldered our rifles and headed off into the wilds of Bainbridge. Fishface was left behind; Boo chained him to a tree with a chewed up dogleash. The clasp was rusty and corroded. We thought it was pretty Fishface proof.

I feel really bad about leaving that kid there now. Even if I did hate his guts, I would never really wish death on someone. Boo took it the worst out of all of us. He felt responsible since he's the one who leashed him up. Whoopie was just stunned.

I had only dealt with death once before. It was when my cat, Skippy, died. Skippy was a stray peach-colored fuzzball that followed me home one day. He was my cat. And even though I was allergic, he slept with me every night curled around my face.

When I was nine I caught the chicken pox. I must have had a hundred and two temperature; Skippy was right there licking the sweat from my forehead with his pink sandpaper tongue, purring away the chills. Another time Whoopie had me pinned in a head-lock against the bed-frame. Skippy jumped down from the bookshelf, where he liked to sleep, and dug his claws deep into Whoopie's back, drawing two or three droplets of blood. Damn good cat. My best friend.

I kick myself to this day for the suffering Skippy must have gone through. I came down to breakfast, cold. Thick puffs of hot moisture misted out my mouth and nostrils. The sizzling hickory smell of bacon coaxed me to the

table. Skippy didn't come down with me and I figured he'd just gone down early to keep warm.

I heard his meows. His cat screams. I didn't realize. No one knew. The screams got louder. More painful. Heat. My heart. MEOW! Skippee! meow. Gone.

We found Skippy caught under the stove. His fur was singed and parts were charred black. Burnt blood was cooked on his forehead. When my dad pulled him out he was still alive. Barely. His head lolled in my dad's calloused hands. The green eyes, like two almond shaped emeralds looked at me. I swear what little moisture was left in Skippy's body collected and formed a tear as he stared his last look at this world.

I cried.

It was the only time I ever cried at death . . .

We looked for Fishface for an hour after we came back. We had only been gone maybe forty minutes, but he was gone. The leash chewed away at.

We found him face down in the water a couple hundred yards away. He was white and bloated like a wet marshmallow, with just a touch of blue. We pulled him out, his skin was cold and leathery. That poor little bastard. He just lay there with that same vacant pop-eyed expression he always had, but now he was dead.

I guess out of all the places we ever lived, I liked this one the best.

Even with all that happened here.

That was my last summer on the Puget Sound.