

**The Dune Runner**

**by**

**Ram Bullings**

## THE FOOL ON THE HILL

The Wave was not finished with me. Not by a long shot. It returned with a vengeance just as I was beginning to feel like I could let my guard down and actually get some much needed sleep. This aquatic avalanche, malevolent and masticating, allows me no time for a final, deep breath as it thunders over me. I am tossed around by this watery puppet-master, that swallows branches, bodies and beach umbrellas and regurgitates the dead. Horror-torn faces, briefly spat out on the fanged crest of the Wave, uselessly grasp for the Siamese sky before being sucked down once again to murky depths. Sand, wet and abrasive, tears at my skin and plants itself in my hair and orifices. I give one last look for Jasmine. She has succumbed to the appetite of the Wave. Sweet, angelic Jasmine is but a drenched rag now, lifeless but with a look of disbelief on her face. Then I force myself to claw to the surface, lungs screaming for relief as I throw my blanket off and gasp for air. Is this sea water I am covered in or perspiration? Unreal, it is so real. The Wave has crashed my somnolence once again and turned it into flotsam.

Dali's Crusaders have fought the Wave and returned to their ships. My imaginary companion, J. Alfred Prufrock has left me to search for mushrooms in the rain forest. Having quit smoking many years ago, I have room in my lungs now for a new guest called Covid 19. My unconscious, liberated from nicotine, has opened its' doors to hallucinations and nightmares, surreal and horrific memories I have may or may not have witnessed.

This recurring nightmare, the Wave, is virulent in it's own right. I'm not sure what will kill me first. A month ago I returned here to Sanchuria, that turbulent tiny country on the Pacific, and yesterday I made camp high above the ocean in the dunes. I don't have a tent but have a shelter in the woods for the four o'clock tropical downpours. I monitor the Paco's swells during the day. Her heaving breasts assure me that the real tsunami can not reach me at this altitude while I am asleep. Maybe it should be the feminine, Paca, but I never learned enough Sanchurian to be correct. I had plenty of opportunity to learn the language but Sanchurians always spoke a type of pidgin, figuring that i was too dense to learn their tongue.

Mayan was spoken in the mountains, at least I think that is what those beautiful indigents spoke. A radio station came over the cordillera at night from Belize with some very strong English accents. My best source of news of this new plague came from a faint, San Diego station on Sunday nights. It had killed over a million people now but unbelievably, my President was still making light of it.

My mind has returned here many times since my escape years ago, and now my body has finally traveled with it. Now I fear that self-isolation is

a necessity, not because of the fear of the military that wanted to kill me, that has long passed, but to keep my contagion from the good people of Sanchuria.

I had purchased what I thought were essential provisions while I was in Puerto del Sol . The pandemic had spared that village up to that point, but news had come of an epidemic in neighbouring San Beuna de la Madre Teresa. Those poor people who had sheltered me years ago from the violence perpetrated by my home country, had paid dearly for a war they knew nothing about. Now an invisible enemy was decimating their populace.

My days will generally start the same as when I camped in Yosemite: build a fire and boil some water for coffee. Sanchuria grows some of the finest coffee in the world, but the best is saved for export. Indeed, coffee became an integral weapon in the conflict that ended a decade ago. Fortunately, I have not been a victim of any xenophobic hatred due to the intervention of the country of my birth. And just as fortunate, there is plenty of firewood in the forest behind the dunes.

My campsite is protected on three sides by enormous sand dunes and can only be seen from the sea. There is perpetual sunshine that lights the frigate birds' sails as they swoop over the waters. I am running short of supplies except for rice and beans. It is less than forty minutes walk to town if I want to make a painful hike to the Mercado. I am more of a dune limper than dune runner these days. I just hope I have enough time to explain.

Along with my malady there is a new danger afoot. Sanchuria lies in a volcanic belt that stretches down to Nicaragua and there have been frequent eruptions and earthquakes in the region during the past decade. I can only hope that the tremor I am feeling now will not toss me into the sea.

## IN MY LIFE

I was christened Ramses Bullings, and raised in Hermosa Beach, California. one of the beach towns just south of L.A. My folks never settled on a middle name for me although Steinbeck and Salvadore were both juggled around. It was embarrassing enough at school to be named after some dead Egyptian king and thus Ram became the norm.

Life was good growing up in Hermosa Beach especially if you were white and Anglo-Saxon. We had the Dodgers and Disney and the New Frontier. Who cared about the mass evictions in Chavez Ravine. For the fans and players alike, California was the great escape from the grisly winters in Brooklyn.

In the summers, it was the beach and bicycles. The kids I hung with never really worried about sharks until Johnny Miller disappeared off-shore in sixty-one. We heard that the surfers in La Jolla had put up a secret bounty for shark kills. I actually never saw a shark the whole time I lived there.

A couple summers, Dad took me camping in Yosemite and up to Crater Lake in Oregon. Mom did not like to 'rough it' so excused herself from these trips. These were times I enjoyed but I was more of a beach bum than a woodsman. Nevertheless, I learned some valuable skills that would later serve me in Sanchuria.

My father was a writer, both a journalist and novelist. He taught me a lot about his craft. However, I could never write like Dad. He had been published many times before he went to England as a war correspondent. After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, he sharpened his pen in an effort to thwart the Asian menace but instead was shipped to England. During his stay in Britain, he met my mother who was a nurse from Canada. She was also an artist in her own right.

After the war they went to live in Hermosa Beach California, where my father had grown up. He said he needed to return to the place where he was most inspired to write, and that was the house on Glendale Avenue, the same house that his mother owned before he went away to college. His mother was a musician and a composer in her own right, and when she died, the house sat empty as did her manuscripts for some time while my father was away in England.

My mother worked days at the clinic in Redondo Beach. She also painted and taught me a lot about the 'great masters', chiaroscuro and perspective, all that were equally boring. I was more into the surrealists, and Disney.

Dad toiled on his old Remington for a while in a futile effort to recapture

some literary magic. After I was born he abandoned this quest and found what he called legitimate work as a high school English teacher. On Saturdays, we enjoyed watching baseball on our old black and white.

When I was fourteen, we vacationed in Hawaii with my mother's parents, my Canadian grandparents. I mention this because that was the only time I saw my grandparents and later on in life when they were gone, I had many things I wanted to ask them. I have a lot I would like to ask mom and dad as well. But I had discovered the Beatles at that time and their music seemed to navigate me through my teenage difficulties.

After that Hawaiian trip, things seemed to come apart. My parents didn't really have artistic differences, but when it came to politics the rhetoric began heating up. I didn't get involved because I wasn't interested in foreign policy until much later when in Sanchuria, it hit me in the face.

Things crested in the spring of sixty-seven, and Mom moved back to Canada. Her parents were deceased and she went to live with her sister. She urged me to come with her before I got caught up in the Vietnam War. I had a major decision to make.

## DAY TRIPPER

I was still too young to appreciate the offer and besides, I couldn't think of leaving all my groovy friends behind. In retrospect, I haven't heard from these inseparables for over forty years. But what really iced the cake was the necessity of attending two more years of high school in Canada, versus one more in Hermosa Beach.

But finally, when I was sixteen, with a drivers' license and a Beatles' haircut, I took up the offer to visit mother in the frigid north land. It was under the pretense of going to the World's Fair in Montreal. Man and His World, or Expo 67, would become a huge influence on my life. But more on that later.

Everyone I met during my fabulous summer in Canada thought that was cool and assumed that I had surfed with Gidget and was part of the Summer of Love. Although I lived four blocks from the beach, I had never surfed and was definitely not cool.

I first met Ryan Townsend that summer and he was so, so cool. At sixteen he had his own car. His beat-up Triumph convertible screamed Arctic. He had even met the Beatles in the Bahamas. Any layers of arrogance he might have worn were shed long ago, and he was almost avuncular toward the girls. What impressed me most of all about him was that he didn't swear. My father, the constant gardener of the English language, had instilled in me the fact that swearing was a manifestation of inadequacy in self-expression. Fuckin' A.

Mother was spending her summers living in a place called Ipperwash Beach, on the shores of Lake Huron. Her works at that time were based on the littoral and on the sunsets that were described by National Geographic as some of the best in the world. The sunset pieces later came to haunt me as I seemed to feel my own presence on the canvasses. It was more than a cliché that they represented land's end, days' end and perhaps life itself plunging into the abyss. They became so etched in my memory, that I got so that I could make comparisons with them and some of the most incredible sunsets I got to experience around the world.

Huron gurgled ashore with waves rather than the powerful swells I was accustomed to in Hermosa Beach. One was able to wade out a hundred feet or more before the lake was deep enough for swimming. The summer was actually hotter here than in California. Vehicles roamed the beach on the weekends in search of the perfect place for a blanket toss with the sounds of the Sixties blaring from their radios...the Stones, Beatles, Beach Boys.

The cottage mom purchased was a one-room affair with a screened-in porch facing the lake. That became my headquarters for most of the

summer. Mornings began with an operatic offering from seagulls that came from all over Canada just to wake me.

We were not due to head to Montreal until the end of the summer, so mother suggested I would enjoy finding something that would occupy my time with monetary rewards. Jobs were scarce for teenagers in Hermosa Beach. I had been employed delivering newspapers for friends who were on vacation. I would take over a route or two each summer and invest the rewards in my record collection. Who saves for college when they're fourteen? I also cut lawns and babysat pets when the owners were away. I once watched a Saint Bernard for a couple of weeks. Man could he produce the fertilizer. But there were no lawns to cut in Ipperwash and most folks with pets brought them with themselves.

Hitchhiking was common in those days, so I stuck my thumb out and ventured north to the village of Grand Bend. In the summertime, the main drag hosts endless vehicles and the sidewalks are bursting with beach-goers. The lake is really that beautiful except during summer storms when it dares all to enter. On the way to the beach, one is treated to the arcades, souvenir shops and take-out stands very similar to those of my hometown. The smells from the deep fryers may be familiar but there is no hint of salt from the sea.

Disappointment was the key word in my endeavours of employment, as it was immediately pointed out to me that I needed a card or papers to work in this country. Maybe relief was a better word. But my trip far from wasted. A life-changing incident occurred that afternoon.

## THERE'S A PLACE

Ariel was her name and she would haunt me in a good way for the rest of my life. Whether her parents were fans of Hans Christian Anderson or William Shakespeare, is something I never thought to ask. I had spent a day in Grand Bend getting rejected for employment and was about to hitchhike back to my mother's place in Ipperwash. Ariel was in my spot. Anyone who has used their thumb as a mode of transportation knows that the best spot to get a ride is at an intersection or an on-ramp. Courtesy requires the second hitchhiker to move a hundred feet down the road in a sort of queue.

I remember there were times on the Pacific Highway around Big Sur, when there would be twenty or more people in line in both directions. Today I had the feeling that she was waiting for me, otherwise she would have got a ride by then.

And yes, her name was Ariel and she looked like a poster child for the Sixties with a tie-dye blouse and bell bottoms. Her strawberry blond hair was held back by some sort of kerchief and she smelled of patchouli, a scent I was never fond of. She introduced herself and told me she had seen me at the dance in Ipperwash on the weekend. That is where and when I had met Ryan Townsend who would become an integral part of my life. I confessed to Ariel that I had not seen her there.

"I really don't hang with that crowd" she said. "A bit fratty for me I'm afraid. But I do like listening to the bands, especially the ones that play Beatles' songs"

"That's cool," I replied with my sixteen year old's mastery of adjectives.

I went on, "I'm new here and just getting to meet people. Ryan seemed like a cool guy...a lot like my friends in California."

It was always imperative to let people know that I was from California. It was more impressive than say, Pittsburgh or Paraguay.

"Well cool dude, are you ready to be impressed with something other than California?" she asked.

Just then a car stopped for her and she told me to jump in the back seat. We drove for a few miles and then she told the driver to pull over. The driver looked as surprised as me. There was nothing but a field there.

"This is the place" she told me and I had to laugh. California had fields too. What was so special about this place?

It was a grand day in the first week of July so I went along with her charade. A couple of hundred yards or so and we entered the tree line. It was then that I realized, we had just crossed what was probably the only field between Grand Bend and Ipperwash. For twenty miles or so, solid forest abutted the highway. Maple, birch and pine had formed an almost impenetrable barrier beside the road. Now we were entering a forest of



evergreens; juniper, cedar and spruce coexisted in this part of the forest along with fiddleheads and trilliums.

"Pretty nice," I confessed, "but I come from a land of giant Redwoods and Sequoias. I've camped in Yosemite."

She winced and replied good naturedly, "It's not about the size you moron. You say your name is Ram...not Smoky the Bear? Were you named after a mountain goat or a push bar or something?"

"It is short for Ramses" I replied.

"Is that the name of a dead Egyptian or a condom?" she teased.

The truth was that I never knew how or why my parents named me Ramses. I took the ribbing like everyone else who was not named Bob or Don.

I was also intrigued as to where she was taking me and why. The woods were like a Grimm Brothers' enchantment, full of bird songs, ferns and wild berries. In time we came to a slow-moving stream that fortuitously had some rocks and detritus laid out to enable us to cross. Then we travelled through sweet-smelling pines until after another half-mile we came to the dunes. We struggled to the top and then caught our collective breath.

The lake was still resplendent in the afternoon. Sailboats traversed the cerulean with their sails splashed with little white crosses on the horizon. But it was the panorama that added to my breathlessness. For miles the sandy dunes stretched out a hundred feet high in places. Pine trees lined the top of these sand sculptures with lone strands of cedar, twisted and gnarled, somehow surviving on the slopes. Inspired by seagulls, I took a leap down twenty feet or so and began a mad dash toward the next dune. Ariel had shown me my new playground.

The dune runner was born.

Enveloped in the afternoon's rays I plummeted down dune after dune. Sometimes I would fly thirty, forty feet, soaring like Icarus or some daffy seagull with placid Lake Huron as my backdrop. I had never felt this exhilaration before. It was ski jumping without the snow and hindrances, or rappelling without the rope. I was never more than a few feet off the ground and would often touch down and leap forward again. After an hour and breathless, I realized that Ariel was not there anymore.

## GET BACK

Now, as I looked down from my Sancherian perch, I must admit that while dune running may have been irresponsible in an ecological sense, I would do it again in a heartbeat if I wasn't fifty something years older with a gimpy leg.

What prompted me to return to the tropics was not just a simple matter of temperature. I had been here twice with Ryan in 1990 and 2001. I still had friends here and memories...mostly tragic. Also, thousands of ex-pats have chose to live in countries where their meagre pensions provide a more comfortable lifestyle. I had accumulated a wealth of experiences but little hard currency to live on. I thought I would check it out. For the time being and maybe for the rest of my time here on earth, I am living for free in this tent.

I take plenty of naps now. As a result, I have had plenty of time to analyze my subconscious. It has probably been time wasted but I can now discern between my dreams and daydreams. My daydreams act like thoughts in a pinball machine. They are scattered all over the place. The deceased are welcomed back in my real dreams, especially during nap time. I am always saying to them, "I thought you were dead", and they always seem to brush this off without comment. Dreams often transport me back to the summer of sixty-seven, lying in the dunes and smoking a joint while stroked by the mid-summer sun, beside a lake so refreshing, you could drink from it.

There is still no vaccine for this virus, but I have taken a few malaria pills left over from my last trip to Thailand. They are probably outdated but they give me some psychological comfort. In today's matinee, I dreamt that Ariel was a waitress in a bar where Ryan was playing the piano. When I am able to remember these events when I awake, I like to write them down. I intend to self-publish as 'The Ravings and Hallucinations of a Sick Mind.'

In this instance, I am not aware of Ariel having a job or Ryan being musical, but at least the only waves that were in this dream were serenading me from seventy five feet below.

If Ryan Townsend was a piano player, I never knew about it. It was the middle of June when we met at the dance hall in Ipperwash. He seemed to be constantly surrounded by girls so I figured he would be a valuable acquaintance. He told me that he lived in Sarnia, Ontario, a place I had passed through when I came to Canada.

Ryan was a hockey player. His favourite pro team, the Maple Leafs, not Leaves, had won the championship that year. He loved hockey like I loved dune running. I never did get to watch him play, even though our lives would be intertwined for the next thirty years. My father who was a real

writer, would probably have described Ryan as a seed of enthusiasm, ready to burst and shower those around him in some sort of sparkly energy. I thought what we had in common was our love of hyperbole, but Ryan also revelled in taking it to the preposterous. He loved outrageous lies, like how I played hockey with the Beach Boys for the Hermosa Beach Leaves, not leafs. When I regaled him with stories of surfing with Walt Disney at Swamis', Ryan would nod respectfully.

"Are you putting me on?"

"Why would I want to wear you?" It became a common joke.

Ryan was the only person who ever addressed me as Ramses. He admitted to some jealousy in regards to my being from California because he and his friends grew up watching so many shows that were based there, and they also wanted to go to Disneyland. This sun-drenched land of fun was a fantasy for so many like Ryan and I purposely fed his fantasies.

"Yeh I just go to beach parties everyday with Frankie and Annette. None of my crowd goes to school or has a job and it never rains."

I spent the rest of that summer blissfully unemployed, dune running and spending the weekends bombing around with Ryan. We checked out all the dances in Ipperwash and at the Grand Bend Casino. One weekend Ryan took me on a tour of London, Canada, a place I would later write about in one of my short stories. That night we went to the Wonderland Gardens. It was an incredible place with a huge dance floor with a mirror ball on the ceiling, and with two stages so bands could play continuously. There was a swimming pool and lots of ponds and bridges beside the river. It was truly magical.

Someone that Ryan knew was arrested that night for possession of marijuana. It seemed harmless enough so I had to wonder why time and resources were squandered on this when there were some serious criminals out there. The reason and logic of why a lot of things were the way they were, came into question that summer. When I returned to Canada fifty years later, pot was legal and being sold in cannabis stores. Ryan's friend would probably still have a criminal record.

Getting high was constantly in the conversation that summer. We were still analyzing the Beatles' Revolver album when Sergeant Pepper was released. What was with all these strange sounding instruments and what were some of these lyrics about? It became a bit of a joke with us as to whether we were floating upstream or downstream, depending on what song was playing. Music was the number one thing in our lives except for girls.

Looking back at that time, I can't remember a rainy day or an unhappy face. I made many trips to the dunes and I even made some money as a painter. Painting cottages that is, and not exactly following in my mother's

footsteps. It seemed like more than a coincidence that mom had taken on Ariel as a student and so I saw her regularly that summer.

Ryan seemed to know everybody and everybody was beautiful. Unfortunately, he had to return to Sarnia during the week to work for his father. This had something to do with the ownership of his sports car. Sixteen and a road trip in a sportscar. Life was pretty sweet and we headed out on the last week of August. My mother was happy with this arrangement. I think she was feeling a little cramped with my presence and the substitution of Ryan saved her from a long bus ride to Montreal.

## MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR

Montreal felt like a foreign country inside a foreign country. Ryan knew a smattering of high school French so we managed to procure lodgings for the week at a type of hostel downtown. I never studied languages in high school, a fact I would later regret in my travels.

On the way to Montreal we stopped at a place called the Sand Hills. This massive hill tumbled down into Lake Erie but were the wrong kind for dune running. Then we went to Niagara Falls, a gigantic tsunami that fortunately stood still. I thought about its tremendous power and how nothing would stop it if it came ashore in Hermosa Beach. Next we stopped at a place called Sandbanks and I got my fix of dune running there on Lake Ontario. It was an exhilarating ride with the radio playing only the songs we wanted to hear. Whenever a lemon came on we were quick with 'off the plank skank' and the station got flipped.

Downtown in Montreal, the Expo Express stopped right beside our building and woke us up most mornings with its' subterranean rumblings. Expo had been constructed on a site beside the St. Lawrence River and that seemed to add to the humidity that August. It had a monorail like Disney's' that gave a fabulous overlook of the grounds, and stopped right at the American pavilion, a geodesic dome designed by Buckmaster Fuller.

For six days we revelled in the cosmopolitan exploring Man and his World, the theme of Expo. At the French pavilion we heard electronic music and avant-garde for the first time. In the Indian pavilion we sampled tandoori and watched a concert by musicians playing the sitar, tamboura and tabla, just like on Sgt. Pepper, the Beatles' new album. Ryan was particularly taken by the architecture he found at a Buddhist shrine used for the Siamese pavilion. They had shipped the whole thing overseas from Thailand.

We had our passports stamped daily at the Brewers Pavilion. Nobody seemed to care that we were only sixteen. Mexico was represented but none of the other Central American countries, including Sanchuria, had a presence here from my recollection. We immersed ourselves in a panorama of music, food and drink, and feasted on a cornucopia of cultures.

Nightly we haunted the Place de Nations, where we danced with girls from all over the world. We could buy beer there as well. Expo was a kaleidoscopic shower of concepts and ideas that impressed and would forever inspire. In the jargon of the Sixties, Expo blew our minds. We came away ready to face this brave new world but not sure how to start.

On the ride back to London, Ryan decided he should pass on the annual family trip to the Bahamas that Christmas, and come to California instead. Later in life, I would question the choices we made when it came

to family. I had spent an entire summer with my mother but had really not come to know her. A few nights we played cards together, but mostly she was content to read or sit out and look at the stars while the sound of the waves soothed whatever pain she might have been feeling. I never returned to Ipperwash while she was alive and have not learned to live with that regret. She did however, come to visit in California that same Christmas that Ryan descended on us.

The year 1967, was the best year of my life.

Century Boulevard never fails to make an impression on those arriving at LAX. The Royal Palms seem to touch the sky where one has just spent the better part of the day. One feels rejuvenated being the beneficiary of the three hours in time difference. I became quite proficient as an airport shuffle service since my mother's and Ryan's arrivals and departures were on different days.

That December we had a grand time celebrating the Christmas spirit in Hermosa Beach. Our house was built in the Thirties so it had some character without being mouldy. We decorated the veranda with garlands and bows, and even bought a real Christmas tree.

Dad was writing again. That year he had met John Steinbeck who was probably his favourite writer and that seemed to give Dad the proverbial kick in the pants as Dad joked, "He told me to get the lead out."

The reason we had moved back to this house in the first place, was that it was believed to provide some fodder for literary inspiration. It had been over twenty years since his last articles had been published.

Rather than feel like our guests had interrupted his output, Dad became the paragon of hospitality. The recordings of Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole were dusted off, and the house was constantly filled with music. He surprised us with culinary delights; fish tacos and smoked oysters from Cannery Row, and of course a turkey the size of a small llama that he cooked Christmas day.

The pier was lit up and bands played there nightly up until Christmas Eve. Ryan was surprised at how brisk the nights were and was disappointed that the ocean was too cold for a swim.

The day after Christmas, I drove Ryan to Anaheim and we jumped the fence at Disneyland. We spent the better part of the day there but didn't go on any rides. The only other theme park he had been to at that time was a place called Bob-lo Island, across the river from Detroit. Ryan admitted that Disneyland had been a fantasy of his and all his friends ever since they were kids.

"Better than meeting the Beatles," he said.

We managed to talk my father into letting us have the car for a few days and drove the Pacific Highway up to San Francisco. It drizzled most of the

time we were there but we still managed to take in the sights, especially Height-Ashbury, the scene of the summer of love. Back then we were used to 'crashing' at friends' places but we didn't have any luck in Frisco so we slept in the car for a couple of nights. One night we went to the Fillmore and heard the Grateful Dead. We both agreed that we preferred the bands that played Ipperwash that summer.

All in all it was a memorable trip that I am having a hard time remembering. Ryan had to return to school but mother stayed on for a couple more weeks and went to Pasadena for the Rose Bowl Parade. I could never understand some of the things she was in to. She had an extensive knowledge of plants but never had a garden at the cottage. She would also surprise me with the variety of music that she seemed to enjoy. Sergeant Pepper was queued up with Mozart and Rogers and Hammerstein. I am just now beginning to appreciate the merits of my parents as I slide into my seventieth year.

But as I mentioned before, 1967 was the best year of my life.

## TICKET TO RIDE

This is the third day of my quarantine. Last night I witnessed the clearest skies with the most stars, since my childhood. I had heard that the planes were not flying during this lock down and this contributed to the improved air quality. I don't know that it is helping me though. I still have this little bronchial cough that keeps me awake so I sip rum for medicinal purposes...right! I don't recall seeing any boats out on the ocean either, and this takes me back to my baptism by sail.

So right now I am trying to figure out what happened to Ryan between 1968 and 1989. I have nothing better to do these days so my main activity is writing my blog. Okay, first of all what was I doing during these years? I guess it all started in the Bahamas in Sixty-Eight.

Ryan was finishing Grade 13 and invited me to stay and sail with him and his grandfather in the Bahamas during Christmas break. I had never heard of this thirteenth grade before and thought he was putting me on. To my way of thinking, it was like missing the starting gun as I was already attending classes at U.S.C. I have since heard that wiser administrators have since abolished this grade in a way of evening the playing field between graduates.

It was the sailing that got me hooked and put my life on a six-knot per hour course. Ryan's grandfather owned a forty foot sloop and lived on it for most of the year. For years Ryan would visit his grandfather in Nassau and then sail down the chain of islands to George Town in the Exumas.

I missed Christmas in Hermosa Beach for the first time because I was still feeling the sense of wanderlust that Expo had instilled in me. Ryan met me at Nassau's airport on a beat-up Honda 50 that was communal property of the sailors who were friends of Ryan's granddad. Mr. Townsend had been a naval advisor in England during the war, and had read some of my father's columns when he was stationed there...small world.

On the way to the docks, Ryan showed me where he had met the Beatles some years ago when they were filming a movie here.

"Just think," I said, "two new countries in just two years."

"You should be just over three hundred years old by the time you see them all," Ryan countered.

At the docks I sampled conch, the Bahamian national dish, for the first time. There was cracked conch, conch fritters, conch salad and conch stew all served with hot island peppers that I grew to relish. Everyone seemed to know Ryan's grandfather so we really felt at home here. One of the salty dogs bought us a beer even though I wasn't quite sure what the legal age was there.

We were up the next morning at six and I remember witnessing my first sunrise over the ocean. Living in California, and even visiting mother on



Lake Huron, I had enjoyed hundreds of sunsets. Mother had painted dozens of them. They were her best sellers and afterwards, every sunset I would see would remind me of her. What I remember most from that first morning just outside of Nassau was the colour of the water. I had not thought it possible that there existed so many shades of blue.

We took our time sailing southward, anchoring at Allen's Key, with its' amazing iguanas, and then Warderick Wells with fantastic hiking trails. Our favourite was a little island where they had filmed 'Thunderball', a James Bond film. We were able to snorkel through a cave swarming with tropical fish, and come up inside the island.

The wind became much more than fast moving air, or a propellant for our sails. It was what I felt when I was leaping off dunes by Lake Huron, or what I smelt as an invitation to dinner off the coast of Jamaica, or what I grew to fear when it threatened to blow a boat onto the rocks. When the engine was off, I knew what the ancient mariners felt like with the gentle hum of the hull through the water, and the gentle flapping of canvas searching for points of sail. I would sometimes flashback to these feelings when I returned to classes that winter.

The Bahamian chain of islands appeared relatively flat compared to my Pacific coast. Once we anchored across from George Town, our sailing days were finished for that trip. But there were no shortage of sandy beaches with mini dunes that I was able to explore and scamper around. It was disappointing for the dune runner but still really amazing.

Ryan taught me how to snorkel and that sport became another obsession with me. So at some point I realized that in the past year and a half I had learned dune-running, sailing, snorkelling and beer drinking, all the tools I needed in life. Nevertheless, after a glorious week in the sun-drenched Bahamas, I still had to fly back home and finish school.

The next couple of years were spent in college. I managed to stay out of the draft and get my captain's licence for sailing. Some of my friends went to Vietnam and some of them did not come back. I intended to head east to sail and not west to what ever fate might awaited me.

I often wondered why I had to travel to discover my passion for dune running and of course, all things nautical. California has all those things too. But for two decades I was destined to frolic in and around the Caribbean, returning home on rare occasions, and strangely enough lost all contact with Ryan until Sanchuria was on my compass.

My travels as captain and crewman through the Caribbean would take up more than a volume of verse, so I will save these adventures for another blog if I am still among the living. As a graduation gift, my father purchased a ticket to Bimini on Chalk's Airlines on their seaplane. It was

pretty amazing landing in the harbour and then taxiing onshore. Dad insisted I stay at Hemingway's old haunt, the Compleat Angler, where I ended up staying for several days because a hurricane struck the island and it was impossible to leave. Walls of water continually poured down on us while the winds screamed as trees were uprooted and boats were overturned. In retrospect, this was more terrifying than the Wave, the latter being more surreal. But the hotel shook and the power went out causing us to drink our rum 'neat'. When the winds finally abated, I climbed up the hill to watch the sunset over the Gulfstream and see the glow of Miami on the horizon. Mom would have loved these colours.

When I finally got to Nassau, I found that Ryan's grandfather had sailed to Trinidad for the hurricane season, where it was safe. Nevertheless it was easy to find work for those whose boats had survived the hurricane, and wanted them moved to a safer location.

I often worked for some truly spoiled rich folks who in their entitlement, abused the islanders at every port. When I returned for a brief stint in the nineties, one crazy baldhead on a million dollar catamaran insisted on sailing to Montserrat to watch the volcano erupting. Before we were chased away by the Antiguan Coastguard, ash covered his sails and the deck was covered in mud...not my job mister.

But sailing was my ticket to ride and it was paid travel. I was able to visit almost all the islands in the Antilles and Spanish Main and see whales breach and dolphins play off the bow....some truly magical days. Oh, and the food...from jerk chicken in Jamaica to doubles in Tobago, the chain of islands were a gastronomic gourmet.

## A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

When the bus reached the intersection, I signalled the driver that we wanted the salida. Ryan looked at me with amazement.

"But there is absolutely nothing here," he said as we stood by the dusty road..

I went through the motions of a demented soothsayer, pointing to the sky and then mumbling incoherently toward the west. The bus had turned in a southerly direction and was too far gone for the driver to see Ryan waving his arms frantically. The sign at the junction was bullet-ridden but still told us of some place four kilometers away in the direction that the bus was headed.

I adjusted my backpack and started across the road to a field that led towards the tree line.

"This way," I shouted encouragingly.

What we were doing in Sanchuria was no mystery to anyone who had grown up in the Sixties. Expo 67 had bestowed wanderlust upon us. Ryan had spent the better part of two decades working for his father up in Canada and felt he was due for a vacation and adventure. I had been working on several pleasure craft that plied the Caribbean and the Florida Keys. Although neither of us were qualified, we both taught English as a second language. Sanchuria was an uncharted area for both of us.

By some serendipitous fate, we had reunited by chance in a place called Todos Santos in Baja California. It was 1992 and I had just finished crewing on a yacht that moored in Cabo San Lucas and was in the process of hitchhiking back home. The coast here was wild and the land was arid and full of all kinds of cacti. It reminded me of a scene from a Castaneda book. Also, Todos Santos was reputed to be the home of the real Hotel California from the Eagles' song. I was dropped off at a bar by the highway and there was Ryan working his way through a pitcher of margaritas.

"Man are you a sight for sore eyes," I yelled.

"What are the chances?" Ryan replied. "I stopped by your place in Hermosa Beach but your dad said you were out plying the Spanish Main."

"You look so much like a gringo with your pale face and flowered shirt. Doesn't the sun shine in Canada anymore?"

"And you Ramses, dreadlocks? You look like the big Kahuna. Still smoking I see"

Ryan told me that my dad was more than hospitable and said Ryan could stay as long as he liked. He said he borrowed my old bicycle and rode up and down the Strand, the new trail that ran along the beach almost to Malibu.

After getting caught up over a couple more pitchers, we decided to

head south to Costa Rica. We were a country or two away when we got off the bus in Sanchuria.

I recognized that this field was a portal, almost identical to the one Ariel had guided me twenty years ago. After a twenty minute hike we entered a magical woods full of ceiba and cabbage palms.

"The Mayans and other cultures believe that the roots of the ceiba tree are an entrance to the underworld or something like that," I told Ryan in my most informative voice.

"I hope you aren't expecting a tip Mr. Tour guide, 'cause I think we are lost," Ryan countered.

Amazing birds plummaged in rainbows ate from the wild fruit trees that grew in abundance. Then, to Ryan's astonishment, the stream that I had predicted was there, and appeared just beyond the bush.

"Hey Rye, remember I told you about that chick Ariel from the 'Bend?"

"The mystical one that you never saw again after she taught you about portals?" Ryan asked.

"It was the real deal," I replied, "but more mysterious than mystical. Where do some people disappear I wonder? "

We crossed the brook easily with the water only rising to our chests. I had hesitated to tell him about caimans but none seemed to be present. Quite sodden, we sloshed about on the opposite bank until we were dry enough to continue, and then headed into a copse of cauarinas that I was certain to lead us to the ocean.

As we exited the trees, we stood on a dune and took in the vista of the Pacific. Always breathtaking, it was at its' pinnacle of magnificence in the mornings. The white sand dunes and beach crescented itself southward to a fishing village. Beyond the village, gigantic dunes and cliffs curved around to protect the bay.

Ryan stood admiring it for quite some time. The ocean here had a more exotic look than the same one in Hermosa Beach. Having been raised by this ocean, I dune jumped and headed out for a plunge in the big blue.

The dune runner had found a new playground and pretty soon Ryan was joining in on the fun. I was quick to find out what terrible shape I was in. The Florida Keys are not known for their beaches let alone sand dunes. I soon found out that my time as a Conch had done some serious damage to my lungs.

A medicinal swim and an hour's walk brought us to a pier and the smells associated with the morning's catch. Puerto del Sol was the name of this village.

A mile or so south of here and past the mangroves, we could see a much larger port that was called San Buena de Teresa la Madre, but most simply called it 'Buena'. We could just make out some shipping containers awaiting shipping onto a cargo ship. Puerto del Sol reminded me more of

the docks in the Caribbean.

We stood on an ancient dock that looked as though it had been constructed by conquistadors. Rotting planks were barely fastened to oblique pilings. However, tied up between two fishing boats was a Morgan Out Islander, a shallow draft sloop made of fibreglass. It had the name 'Barnacle' printed on the stern. Aptly named, it would have looked more at home in the Bahamian Out Islands than in its' present location.

As we stood staring at the boat, a young woman emerged from the companionway holding a bottle of Presidente. She wore cutoffs and a greasy T-shirt with a shock of red hair stuffed up inside a LA Dodgers baseball cap.

"Help you boys?" She took a long swig and waited for an answer. I was first to get over the surprise and stammered some explanation of how we had come to be here. Ryan, on the other hand, with his cool and shy countenance just stood there and smiled until he was offered a beer.

"This boat goes through more impellers. They have to come from the States and the San Chefe puts double duty on all sailboat parts. Have to smuggle them in and destroy the evidence. You guys aren't working for the Chefe are you?"

"Who the hell is the Chefe?" I asked.

"You know...el Presidente, Dick Tator" she replied with a cocky grin.

As introductions were made and cervezas toasted, Azzy explained how she had sailed from California with her boyfriend and were gunkholing as much as they could on their way to Puntarenas in Costa Rica. At some juncture, the boyfriend caught the Dengue and had died suddenly through some complications that did not translate well from Spanish to English. Azzy was stuck with the boat and not confident enough to continue the voyage on her own.

It was at this point that we volunteered to help her with her problem. I was disappointed that we were not pushing on to Costa Rica, but knew enough to let things ride. After all, we were all metaphorical ships passing in the night and Sanchuria seemed to be more adventurous..

We stayed for about a month trying to get the boat shipshape and to enjoy the surroundings. Puerto del Sol was actually on the quiet side of the delta. The main course of the river passed through Buena.

We took her dingy upstream on several occasions to explore the mangrove tunnels that pirates had used a century ago. Quetzals and toucans abounded in the tropical canopy oblivious to that fecal smell that mangroves exude. The river I was told, had its' source in a lake up in the cordillera.

Sanchuria had been divided long ago between warring factions. On the eastern side of the mountains, Anchuria ran to the Caribbean Sea. It had its' own problems in the past but was relatively stable nowadays. It was the

richer of the two countries having teak plantations in addition to its' agricultural base.

We had some fine days at sea, taking the trial runs and landing some mahi-mahi at the same time. I made lots of friends with the villagers in spite of my weak language skills. They took it with great humour that I was constantly insulting their grandmothers with my poor vocabulary.

The market teemed with fresh seafood and the langosta ceviche became my favourite. The shrimp, or camarones as they were called, were huge and were caught upriver where the water was fresh and cold. They had a sweeter taste than their salt water cousins. And the weekend fiestas were magnificent with the costumes and dancing and the fabulous mariachi bands.

In all, it was disappointed to have to go but I was getting low on funds but was certain that I would come back some day.

I just didn't know the dark circumstances that would hasten my return.

## YOUR MOTHER SHOULD KNOW

The village had shrunk and the sky was grey. There remained only a thin strip of beach with a few lazy Australian Pines guarding the town. As usual I went searching for Ariel to guide me back through time and the portal to my dunes. Few businesses remained and everyone seemed tense and unfriendly. I recognized a few faces but no one seemed to remember me.

Perhaps I had wandered into the future by mistake. The Wave seemed smaller now as it stopped to discharge its' cargo of mutilated bodies and sea creatures on the shore. It splashes a leering look right at me.

As I awake easily from this nightmare I am surprised that it is still a crisp morning in Sanchuria as I begin my fourth day in the dunes. The air seems to have a fragrance of a memory from my childhood. I still have my sense of smell and that is a good thing considering my state of health.

I decided on taking my afternoon nap in the morning for a change since the weather was unusually chilly. My latest dream was already becoming a blur as I begin to relate the foggy events of 2001.

After our original trip to Sanchuria, I lost track of Ryan again. Back then I continued my travels through Central and South America and found a new career as a travel writer. Ryan, to my knowledge, had taken over his father's business and became independently wealthy. With my extraordinary skill at cooking beans and rice, I was often able to scratch out a means of employment to supplement my meagre writing. Even my wretched skills as a sailor proved somewhat lucrative at times, and teaching English as a second language provided much-needed dinero for cervezas.

One story that was published in the LA Times Leisure Section had to do with teaching the cadets from the Bolivian navy how to sail. Bolivia is a landlocked country but actually had a launch on Lake Titicaca. I chartered a sloop from the village nearby and showed a bunch of naval recruits the different points of sail. I discovered that Bolivians do not hold their liquor well when the boat was down to the gunnels. My father was very pleased with my use of hyperbole in this humorous account and always forwarded my stories to Canada. Mother in turn, would turn them over to Ariel, who always seemed to be lurking in the background. I think mother always had some design that I would return to Canada, settle down with a flower child and forgo my itinerance.

Unfortunately my dad died in September of that year and I returned to Hermosa Beach for his. Mom flew down from Canada to help me but missed the funeral because she was held up at the border and had to reschedule her flight.. After the September 11 catastrophe, the border guards became extra-vigilant in detaining a seventy-four year old woman

with dual citizenship...a real threat. I had not seen her for a decade and now she seemed more like an old friend than a mother. The last time we had got together was at the Dali museum in St. Petersburg. I had been in Tarpon Springs feasting on Greek food and awaiting the arrival of the boat owner from Greece. Mother was vacationing in Madiera Beach so I bussed down and slept on her couch for a few days. She was never judgmental about my career, or rather lack of career but I always had a feeling....

I was surprised to find the house was freshly painted and the grounds were immaculate with new palm plantings as well as some patches of bougainvillea. Then to my utter amazement I discovered a family of Sanchurians living in the carriage house. During my last trip to Sanchuria I had told some locals that if they made it to the States, be sure and look up my father. Evidently he was sheltering these illegals and in return they were taking care of the house and the grounds. They even found my late grandmother's sheet music and had compiled an album of her compositions. I left the matter of their situation in my mother's hands because as you will see, I had a new quest on my plate.

After the funeral I found a simple request inside a letter that had been left unopened on my father's desk for a month or so. Ryan had been in Thailand, and was asking my help in procuring the Barnacle from Sanchuria and sailing it to a safer home. The safer home was to be in Phuket, Thailand where he was now living and married. That was a surprise because Ryan never took relationships with girls seriously as long as I knew him.

I must have replied to Ryan because he showed up at Dad's place a month later while mother and I were still trying to sort out my father's estate.

"Married are you? There must be some desperate women in Thailand."

"Settling down might do you some good boat boy. We're pushing fifty now and unlike me, you aren't getting any better looking" he replied.

It was great to see him again and his presence and that of my mother's, helped to ease the pain of loss.

I continued to prod him good naturedly, " So this woman is obviously blind, has no taste and probably has a dozen other defects."

"Not at all, Ramses. Her name is Jasmine and she is a jewel. She works at the university and speaks four languages. You will meet her soon enough."

Then Ryan told me that this trip back to Sanchuria was to have a grimmer purpose. Not content to merely retrieve his sailboat, Ryan also wanted to find out the details of Aggy's murder. The authorities had told Ryan that she was a casualty of war, but that was not what the locals said. Aggy had become beloved by the villagers of Puerto del Sol and many knew of her disappearance, but had kept it to themselves.



It was a dirty, civil war fuelled by foreign capitalists, but Aggy was never a victim of reproach. Simple farmers that had never heard of Marx or Mao were being targeted as the next red threat. Aggy had voluntarily went up into the hills to help as a nurse to one of the relatives of the villagers. Ryan told me he had written to Aggy begging her to motor out of there while she was still able. He had argued that it was not her fight. Finally, she never returned but managed to get a letter off to Ryan stating that the Barnacle was now his and where it was hidden in the mangroves.

After our first adventure in Sanchuria, Ryan had returned to his father's business in Canada, and developed some software for the company that made him rich. At the age of 48 he retired and went to Thailand searching for the meaning of life. Expo had surely instilled him with a curiosity for the Orient. There he thought he found meaning in a Buddhist monastery where for two years he sought spiritual enlightenment .

Before taking his vows he met a lady named Jasmine and the world was good again. They got married just before his visa ran out. This left Ryan in a curious limbo. By coincidence, the letter from Sanchuria arrived stating his ownership of a Morgan Out Islander. He proposed to sail the Barnacle to Thailand and pick up his wife. Afterwards he had only a faint clue as to where he and Jasmine would go.

"Ryan", I suggested, " the Barnacle is not an ocean-going craft. It will not cut through the big pacific swells."

" But with some modifications to her keel and a few other expensive additions, including yourself as captain, the boat would be more than ready to attempt the voyage" he asserted.

. There was no point in arguing with a man in love.

So the Fall of 2001 found us returning to Sanchuria by sneaking over the border and returning to Puerto del Sol the same way we had done almost a decade before. The world was on full alert after the World Trade bombings so we travelled with due diligence. The Barnacle was still safely hidden where Aggy had left her but her tanks were dry. This risked a trip to the village for petrol and water. Fortunately, Ryan's reputation was still in good standing with the locals, and preparations our departure went smoothly...until word came that Aggy was actually still alive.

## HELTER SKELTER

This is the fifth day of my self-imposed quarantine. There are no rules yet in Sanchuria about masking and social distancing. I should have bought more water. For campers it is a bulky necessity and not easy to transport. I will head to the village later in the day when the sun won't suck out as much liquid from my fragile body. It will be good to get the news on the events of this pandemic.

Maybe they have a cure now.

Maybe people are going mad as a result of the isolation and quarantine. Are things really going to end in a whimper?

Not so with Ryan.

I can still hear the sounds.

I have to change channels in my daydreams. But back to Sanchuria in 2001.

Again we were on a bus heading southward and again I asked the driver to let us out at a most unpromising spot for a hike. Ryan did not question me this time as to my portal finding talent. Again I thought of Ariel as we crossed the field to the tree line.

Ariel? Aggy? Was any of this real or was I floating upstream. As we traversed the forest, it was eerily quiet. Not a single bird song serenaded us. And then we heard the shouting, and then the screams of women and children. We brashly entered a clearing, where, sure enough, there was a small collection of huts that could hardly be called a village. The jungle surrounded the village on three sides while the fourth overlooked the ocean from the top of a lofty cliff. There did not seem to be a road or path in or out of the village.

The captain smiled as he greeted us. We had evidently been expected.

"So Mister Townsend, where is the boat?" the captain asked while he toyed with a pearl-handled knife.

And so it dawned on us that this had been a trap. Ryan's boat was worth something and so was his life. Americans were seldom targeted in Sanchuria for ransom, but all other nationalities were fair game. The captain knew better than to bite the proverbial hand.

When Ryan refused to answer the captain, the soldiers began to burn the buildings. This had the opposite of the intended effect on Ryan. This gentle, fun-loving person that I thought I knew, began to curse the captain in words I had never heard him use before. Then the massacre began and the rage Ryan subdued so many years ago, manifested itself in a mad dash toward the captain.

The captain was shocked at Ryan's sudden attack but still managed to plunge his knife into Ryan. Not content with that, the captain pulled out

his revolver and shot Ryan in his face. I was as shocked as the captain but as he turned to look at me I realized that I was next.

One would think that I would have nightmares about Ryan's murder but I don't. Nobody gets to write the plot of one's dreams. I suppose I am a sunshine dreamer when it comes to Ryan, as I just seem to dream of the good times. But when I am writing about him, it is difficult not to visualize the ground covered in bloody chunks of his flesh.

My escape from Sanchuria was not heroic. I had jumped over the cliff when I realized that I was the captain's next target. It would not do to have an American witness to these crimes. I did not time my fall correctly and seemed to jam my left knee up into my thigh. Though not painful, I did not have the fluidity of my former dune runner days.

Nevertheless I fared better than the dozen or so soldiers that were ordered to leap over the precipice and chase me. From my hiding place I could see the carnage of broken bodies on the side of the cliff and on the rocky beach below.

I limped back to Bueno and swam across the river. Puerto del Sol was still another mile north and I to get there before the captain. Once there, I waited until nightfall and then cautiously made my way back to the Barnacle.

I scoped out the village until I was sure that all were asleep and slowly drifted out past the pier and into the Pacific Ocean. I raised the sails recklessly without reefing for the night, but my luck held and I was far out of sight of land by morning. Vowing never to return to Sanchuria, I headed north to California to relay the tragic news to Ryan's wife and family and to expose the crimes I had witnessed.

YESTERDAY

It was sweltering yesterday as I visited the Mercado in the morning to treat myself to a smoothie and to buy some fresh fruits and vegetables. Sanchuria was still a banana republic in spite of the efforts of the new democratic government to diversify economy. The country was still doing penance for straying from Uncle Sam while the occasional volcano and cyclone were also impediments to prosperity.

All of the vendors were wearing bandanas or some kind of protection from the virus. When I first wore one a month ago, they thought I was a bandito.

I was grateful to be able to smell the fish tacos and pupesas con carne in the stalls, but I had no appetite. Was it 'feed a fever starve a cold'? Over the years I had come to enjoy seafood properly prepared, but the today I was hoping for something cool and fruity.

In spite of the heat I was shivering. This was the second time this year I had experienced that feeling of rigid numbness that begged for warmth. This past Christmas I flew north again, this time to bury my mother who had lasted until she was ninety-three. After the funeral I drove my rental car up the lake house. Someone had put an addition onto it and some tasteless vinyl siding was hanging on tenuously to the porch. What was most disappointing was that the beach was gone. It was as if the gods of the aqua had feasted on the shoreline until there was little left.

The dance hall we called the Casino was gone. Long ago an inferno left only echoes from the bands that played there. The Provincial Park was gone as well. A bloody conflict in the Nineties had returned these and other lands to their rightful owners, the Chippewas. The Army road ran right into the lake now.

The perennial cold and grey plus the circumstances of the day were bringing on depression. I assumed that this foolish trip through the snow and back in time might add some closure to my somnolent wanderings. Was it possible that Ariel was still around as the mistress of the portal? It had been over fifty years but I still thought of her and the summer of sixty-seven with a feeling of loss. Thomas Wolfe's professies had foretold the eradication of the playgrounds of my youth. As my memories became foggy, it has only been my nocturnal videos that kept my adventures alive.

As darkness swooped in over the cloudy lake, I stood on the shoreline and pictured Ryan's blue sport car parked on the beach on the sunniest day the world had ever known. We had so many friends but I can't see their faces now. I imagine a transistor radio playing all the songs from that summer. The lake was calm then and a storybook blue.

Then the Wave came and my daydream was cross-checked another the nightmare... Boxing Day, 2004.

**FLYING**

Outrage often dissolves into quotidian necessity. Not many among us have the tenacity to continue the good fight when there are so many distractions that lead one to be sidetracked.

Although I wrote many damning articles about the war in Sanchuria, readership eventually ground to a trickle. Some readers thought my stories were fiction and suggested I add more sex and violence to make the prose more palatable.

In the following years, I received numerous invitations to return to Ipperwash but I always refused, knowing that ghosts awaited me there. I sold Barnacle to one of my enthusiastic readers who relished the idea of having an iconic sloop as a live-a-board. I managed to track down Ryan's wife, Jasmine, and sent her the proceeds from the sale of the yacht.

Surprises sometimes come in bunches, and I was the recipient of a serendipitous bunch in the Spring of 2004. I received an email from Jasmine with an attached photo of Ryan's daughter, who he never met. Also, I had just received a rather large royalty check for a trio of short stories that were going to be narrated with musical accompaniment. Although mother was disappointed that I was not coming to visit in Ipperwash, she encouraged me venture to Asia.

Arriving in Bangkok in late October, it looked like the Thailand pavilion from Expo on steroids. The temples and the architecture were phenomenal and the food was incredible. I only had a day to explore the city before catching my onward flight to Phuket. Once there, the only rental available at the airport was a pickup truck but they offered me a great deal on a three month rental. So there I was driving around Thailand without knowing a single word of that language.

Jasmine was taking a course at Phuket Rajabhat University so I drove there and somehow found her on campus. She was delighted that I came such a long way and insisted that I meet the child that Ryan tragically never knew existed.

Kat was almost four years old and staying with her grandma at Jasmine's house in Karon on the coast. Jasmine had purchased the house with the proceeds from the Barnacle that I had sent to her. She knew the story of Ryan's death and seemed to be moving on with her life.

I think now, that Ryan would have been the surprised one had he made it back to Phuket. Kat was learning to speak English and thought it was great that I was her daddy's friend from across the ocean. Jasmine had some time off at Christmas so I proposed a vacation at the nearby and very luxurious Garuda Resort. Kat was excited to go to a hotel with three swimming pools and a beach.

For the next month I busied myself exploring the Phuket and the nearby islands. I camped by the beach at Sinirat National Park right on the

Andaman Sea. I also had a kayaking adventure to James Bond Island. Now it felt like I was travelling in the footsteps of 007. Another island was where 'The Beach' was filmed. Every food stall was a gastronomic delight and the month passed quickly.

I spent that Christmas at the resort with Jasmine and Kat. Never having children myself, it was a riot to hear what Kat came up with especially with her broken English. The hotel had a thirty foot tree that was decorated with a Siamese theme. There was a bonfire on the beach on Christmas Eve and many culinary delights were provided by the hotel staff.

We exchanged presents on Christmas morning and Kat couldn't wait to use her new inflatable Mickey Mouse in the pool. Her happiness was contagious. To witness unadulterated joy in the eyes of a child, is like witnessing the Creation itself. I wished that she could stay four forever. That afternoon and the following morning Kat and Mickey were inseparable.

Horror manifests itself in many ways. Late this afternoon I ventured to Puerto del Sol to replenish my water supply. Body bags were being unloaded from a truck while a group of the townsfolk gathered and wept. I could only hope that I wouldn't need one. It had been many years since I quit smoking but my lungs were still on fire with the Covid.

Horror usually takes you by surprise. The sight of Ryan's face exploding can never be expunged from my mind. It doesn't matter that the captain, now a colonel, had justice bestowed upon him in the form of a fatal knife wound, ironically from his own knife. He had escaped from Sanchuria, but some Englishman bent on revenge, had tracked him down in exile..

Horror took me by surprise on that Boxing Day morning sixteen years ago and has never relinquished its' grip on me. The Wave that caused millions of dollars in damage and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, has haunted my dreams like a bad video on a loop. It sucked in someone I loved very much and swallowed dozens of others who weren't even there that day but somehow show up in the nightmares.

And it was a beautiful day.

At around 9 in the morning, I was having my third coffee and as many cigarettes as I enjoyed the view from my third floor balcony. Kat was already in the family pool with her Mickey Mouse floaty. Through the palms, I could see the ocean lapping the shore like a well-fed mongrel. It was hiding it's appetite well. Christmas music was still playing through the resort's sound system adding to the surreal quality of the morning. I decided to pass on a morning dip in the sea as I was becoming quite engrossed in 'The DaVinci Code'. I would later be grateful to that

author for keeping my spellbound for the next hour in the safety of my hotel.

And it was about one hour later the screaming started. I looked up from my book to see people running madly away from what looked like a river flowing into the resort. It wasn't a wave like the kinds you would see in surfer movies, but more like a relentless bulldozer that kept on coming.

Then it seemed like a steamroller grinding to a halt and going into reverse. The water stopped and began to retreat toward the sea, dragging with it all sorts of detritus, lawn chairs and beach umbrellas.

As I was trying to grasp what was happening, Kat came into my room and asked what was going on. My reply was drowned out by a low, rumbling, like white noise being filtered through powerful speakers. The palms on the beach were bending and breaking as the ocean crashed through with tremendous fury.

Then the Wave roared its introduction, shattering everything in its path. Small buildings were crushed into kindling. The hotel pools disappeared under its' turbidity. To this day I still feel like the Wave was taunting me as it rushed underneath my balcony. It was more than twenty five feet high. Its' massive jaw was set to feast on anything or anyone that stood in its' way. That is when I spotted Jasmine.

She was standing by the family pool holding Mickey and looking up to where I stood, making desperate signals as to where Kat was. I lifted Kat up but shielded her face from the mayhem below.

That is when the Wave pounced on Jasmine.

## TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS

Now more than ever, I have thought about the meaning of loss. The more we love someone, the harder it is to carry on without them. Well this concept is nothing new. What I am beginning to understand though, is that there is a link between places and the people associated with them, so when the person passes, so does he memory of these places. I cannot pass our home in Hermosa Beach without seeing my father clicking away on his typewriter in the lanai.

The ensuing days in Phuket were full of chaos and tragedy. Jasmine's house in Karon still stood but was badly damaged. It would be a month until I could return to the States.

The Wave would follow me there but did not manifest itself for over a decade, seemingly at the same time that I quit smoking. A few months later I dodged a bullet call Katrina.

I was on my way to New Orleans but decided to spend a few more days camping at Big Bend. Then I missed Wilma that blew down the Everglades and thoroughly soaked the Keys, but these are stories for another time. I had experienced many a hurricane in the Caribbean, but had only been introduced to one Wave.

I spent every Christmas except this past one, with Kat exploring her native Thailand and neighbouring vicinity. She has visited me as well and loved to see the spot where Ryan and I jumped the fence at Disneyland fifty years ago. She was attending the same university that her mother attended but now the pandemic has postponed her plans.

So now the dune runner is more of a dune sitter as I await what will be. I tossed my last anchor overboard after the death of my mother. The house in Hermosa Beach has gone and I, like a modern day Ulysses, am floating downstream to where ghosts frolic. The borders are closed now so I can't go anywhere. I think of Ariel but realize she is not sixteen anymore and of course, neither am I who have been single so long with a perpetual need to shake my trotters. Numbness is beginning to overtake me and I have a tremendous humming in my ears as I look westward from my sandy perch. I've been told that the air smells fresher now, but I can't tell. The sky is full of my neighbours, seagulls launching themselves off the cliffs...a glorious thing.

And this might be the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen.