

CHAPTER 9

Having no reason to stay in the bar, Frank decided to continue his search for a Thanksgiving dinner. As he left the Gemini Club alone, he noticed that the bench in front of the club was now empty, that the evening's moment of self-appointed oversight must have come to an end. As he walked into the heart of town he found himself looking over his shoulder and into alleyways to see if the gray lady had followed him or had somehow anticipated his movements.

The sun was flirting with the horizon as Frank walked along the waterfront of Perth Harbor. The sidewalks were still damp from the earlier downpour, and there were few people walking about. It felt like a Sunday evening. A party boat, a 45-foot catamaran called the Wild Cat, was sitting empty at anchor about 20 yards from the bulkhead. The owner was a friend of Gaston's, and he was taking the day off. The sound of the boat's automatic bilge pump coming on caught Frank's attention. Fetid water from the bottom of the hull was dumped mechanically into the clear, warm harbor. Frank could just make out the home ports – they both hailed from San Diego - of two large sloops tied up at the same mooring a bit beyond the Wild Cat. He heard their halyards slapping against their masts as they swayed in the lightly chopped water. Lights were on in the sloops and he could hear the faint outlines of a conversation. Frank tried to imagine having come so far in such a small boat.

He continued to wander past the closed bars and shops of the waterfront, past the silent fruit and vegetable stands, past a stand of empty magazine racks, by an empty bus stop whose corrugated tin walls were plastered with fading advertisements and an old poster offering a reward for a lost dog. Off to Frank's left a young man finished loading boxes of souvenirs he had been trying to sell into an old pickup, slammed shut the tailgate, got into the truck's cab, and slowly drove off. Frank could hear the old car struggle through first and second gears before it disappeared around a corner. A stray dog stopped briefly to examine Frank from a distance and then continued its head down search for tidbits in the street. A brown pelican lazily fled its post on a timber piling as Frank approached. A group of three swallows darted about in pursuit of an evening meal.

Frank ended his momentary journey when he found a park bench right down by the water; he sat to catch the last of the evening light on the eastern Caribbean. The water slapped harmlessly against the bulkhead of the wharf. There was no breeze, but the surface of the water

was still slightly chopped from the earlier storm. It sparkled unpredictably as it reflected the quickly fading sunlight and the streetlamps along the quay that were now coming on. Occasionally a quiet soul walking the length of the waterfront would pass behind him, but other than that, he had the deep sensation of being alone on the island. He had sought both escape and adventure, and found neither. Instead, he was simply alone, except for the gray specter of his past who too sat at the water's edge on this night. After another ten minutes of looking out at the water, when the only light on the water was that reflected from the lights onshore, Frank noticed her. He quickly got up from the bench, and, hoping that she would not follow him inside, headed away from her towards The Abbey, George Gordon's former place of employ. He could not have noticed her satisfied grin in the dark as she fed a handful of hungry, white-ringed crows.

The Abbey was ensconced in a nondescript, one-story, white stucco, square building with a red tile roof. It had a front door and a rear door, and a small, shoulder high rectangular window about two foot high and four feet long on each of its four walls. Its interior, chilled by a blasting air conditioner, was marked by too much dark wood and an overdone nautical theme. There were fishing nets hanging from the ceiling, and in those nets were collections of painted shells and starfish. The oak-paneled walls were covered with photographs of sailboats, oil seascapes, laminated advertisements for luxury cruises, replica photographs of a sperm whale's fate on a 19th century whaler, covers from a collection of Melville, Hemingway, and Conrad novels, brass clocks, a mounted marlin, a ship's bell with a small hammer tied to it by a lanyard, a couple of harpoons, the obligatory signs pointing in the direction of, and noting the distance to, the world's renowned seaports, a life preserver from the S.S. Abbey, and a pair of crossed oars over the bar. The bartenders and wait staff were forced to wear blue and white striped shirts that would have been worn by the ordinary seamen of some long-since-perished imperial navy. Irish roots music issued forth from speakers shaped like the funnels on the Titanic that were suspended from the ceiling in each of the bar's four corners.

The bar seemed out of place on Santa Clara. It seemed more like a theme park designed to assure anyone upon entering that they had left behind, for the moment, the endless woe of Santa Clara, and had stepped into a carefully sculpted world that offered temporary refuge to anyone who cared to submit to its fantasy. Although it was a favorite of American expatriates, Frank was surprised, on this American family holiday, to find the bar packed to the gills. He navigated his way through the throng until he found about a foot of open bar space.

A look around at the crowd revealed that most of the congregated were, once again, Americans. However, most of them were a generation older than Frank, and he did not immediately recognize any of the faces, also unusual for a visit to the Abbey. They were, for the most part, tan, fit, and prosperous looking, and their mass Thanksgiving appearance at the Abbey, a place that usually catered to the Frank Walkers of the world, was inexplicable to him. They lent the bar an air of opulence it seldom had.

As Frank was paying for a schooner of draught beer, a blue-blazered and deeply-tanned woman in her mid-forties pushed into the narrow spot of the bar just to Frank's left. She shouted her order above the general noise of the crowd and above the din from the jukebox which was starting to belch a monotonous string of old Jimmy Buffet tunes.

"Two more vodka tonics," she shouted gaily, as she waved a twenty dollar bill, something Frank hadn't seen for a while. The music was not loud enough to prevent a close conversation.

Frank leaned into Mrs. Vodka Tonics. "They take American money here? That's a first."

"That's all I've got. I guess if they want to make some money, they'll have to take it, right? Besides, what is the currency here?" She laughed at her own question.

"Francs." He pulled a fifty-franc note out of his pocket. "See? Some sort of holdover from the colonial era, I think. I'll buy."

"Thank you, darling, but you needn't, really."

Frank was quite sure that she could afford the drinks, but he wanted to appear gallant to this well-heeled crowd. He also wanted to solve the mystery of this homogeneous gathering. As he set the fifty franc note on the bar, he asked blonde Mrs. Vodka Tonics, "Are you guys all together?"

The woman smiled and put a well-manicured hand on Frank's shoulder. "Of course, dear," she said with a motherly tone. "Why don't you join us?" She was tall and self-assured, and she had an engaging athletic look about her, a look that spoke of tennis at the club, and Christmas in the Caymans.

"Join you doing what?" Frank's curiosity was aroused.

"We head out tomorrow for Trinidad. It's our winter race. We do it every year." She smiled as she dribbled out a few details to Frank. She was clearly enjoying herself.

"Race? What kind of race? Where are you guys from?" Frank's ignorance allowed him to hold up his end of the conversation.

“Palm Beach. You’ve never heard about this race?” She asked Frank the question as if she could not believe she was talking to someone who had never heard of the Palm Beach to Trinidad jaunt taken by upwards of fifty large sailboats on a yearly basis. Indeed, while their appearance on the island was a rarity, it was a well-known and regularized rarity to the locals. The vodka tonics arrived and the bartender took the franc note as payment.

As Frank sipped his beer, and as he hoped he hadn’t set a financial precedent for the evening, he nodded, “No.”

“We’re through here twice a year: once in the fall and once in the spring. That way we miss the hurricane season. We’re all from the same club, of course.” She took a sip from one of her recently arrived vodka tonics.

“For a race, it doesn’t look like you’re in much of a hurry,” Frank observed.

She laughed at his accurate assessment of the festivities. “Hah! Of course not. Well, it’s only a race to about a dozen of us, dear. The rest of the boats are along for the party. And it’s a great party!”

Frank had to admit that it looked like a great party. Just as his new companion was taking another sip from her vodka tonic, a man in a caricature of a yachtsman’s outfit – white ducks, no socks, deck shoes, a double-breasted blazer with some sort of crest on the breast pocket, a starched white shirt, an ascot, and a silly looking captain’s hat - stood up on the far end of the bar and demanded the attention of all in the Abbey. Someone tapped on the ship’s bell with the hammer to quiet the crowd. The music was mercifully turned off. Vodka Tonics leaned over, put her right hand on Frank’s left forearm, and said softly, directly into his ear, “It’s Archie, Archie Bishop, actually. He’s really the father of this race. Got the whole thing started about 30 years ago.” She pulled back from him, and gave him a smile as she put her glass down. Frank relaxed, leaned against his forearm that was resting on top of the bar, and turned his attention to Archie.

As Archie raised his glass above the crowd, he stated with much feigned seriousness, “Let this, the 31st annual fall meeting of the Easter Beach Yacht Club, officially commence.”

The official commencement was met with loud cheers, a number of quick toasts, and a general hoisting of glasses. Frank, who felt himself comfortably caught up in the proceedings, raised his beer to his companion who, apparently, had ordered the two vodka tonics for herself.

“Order, order,” shouted Archie, over the continued hoots of his fellow celebrants. “We have an important item of business to transact before we eat.” He paused as the general din once again

died down. The harassed bartenders and wait staff worked hurriedly to fill outstanding orders in spite of the apparent lull in the party.

“As you know, every year we have a few new club members who come along with us on this race. This year we have six, and I am pleased to say that is a new one-year club record!” Much applause, more general noise, toasts, etc.

“As you also know, new members have a small initiation to undergo during their first race and tonight’s the night!” Cheers again erupted from the crowd. “So, let’s get our new members up here.”

Frank turned to Vodka Tonics. “What’s the deal? What do they have to do?”

“Oh it’s nothing, really. Just a couple of shots of some awful rum that Archie always carries with him. It’s absolutely horrendous stuff! You know, I think he makes it himself. Anyway, he only breaks it out for these ceremonies. I had to do it three years ago on our first race. Ghastly stuff, but they’ll survive.”

By now all six of the recently converted had climbed onto the bar to join Archie, three on either side of him. They were all men, and they ranged in age from 25 to 50, all cut from the same upscale cloth. More cheers erupted when Archie pulled out a hip flask and held it in the air. Frank guessed correctly that the flask contained the noxious rum of which his new neighbor had just spoken. The flask was passed down the line of the six inductees, and each of them poured a shot from the flask into an empty highball glass they were holding. A few were razzed by the crowd for not pouring enough. It was all good-natured fun, and Frank felt right at home. Indeed, the evening was turning out to be reminiscent of “The Follies,” an annual party at his parents’ club on the last summer evening of each season. It was at these parties that, as a teenager, he had first indulged his genetic propensity to drink.

After the six had finished pouring their individual shots, Archie, to much fanfare, emptied the flask in a few quick gulps.

“I don’t know how he does it, but he actually likes the stuff,” remarked Vodka Tonics with a smile.

Having wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, Archie once again raised his hands asking that the crowd pay attention.

“Not bad,” Archie offered, to the howls and laughs of others in the crowd. “Quiet, please! This is a solemn ceremony,” he said with a momentarily solemn face. “Or at least it should be.”

Archie couldn't help laughing at his own pretentious seriousness. "Bottoms up, gents!" The crowd roared as the noxious liquid was quickly quaffed, with not a few grimaces, by the willing novitiates.

Archie signaled for quiet and was more or less obeyed. He was clearly enjoying his master of ceremonies role. "At this point . . . Ah, what the hell, you guys are in. Let the party begin!"

The crowd again erupted as Archie and the recently inducted jumped down from the bar to the cheers and pats on the back of their nautical comrades. The music started up again.

"It looked pretty rough," Frank offered when the induction was over.

"Really?"

"I mean the booze."

"Oh, I suppose, but it's a small price to pay. You can't get into this club with a crowbar. These races are great fun, and frankly there are about two hundred people lined up trying to get into the club so they can sail with us. A shot of Archie's nasty rum isn't so steep a price, is it?"

Again, Frank had to admit that it all looked like great fun.

"Are you down here on vacation? You look a little young for that, I don't mind saying."

"I live here," Frank overstated.

"Really?" Vodka Tonics seemed surprised and impressed. "You didn't grow up in this ghastly place, did you?"

Frank was disappointed by, but could not disagree with, her description. "Why ghastly? This is supposed to be paradise, right?"

"Not Santa Clara, dear one. I hope you didn't think you'd find paradise here." Another sip from the now sweating drink number two.

"It's tough to say what I thought, I suppose. Anyway, it sounded interesting, so I thought I'd check it out."

"How long are you staying?"

"I haven't given that much thought. I guess until it's time to go someplace else, if that makes sense."

"Not much, but no bother. Here, let me buy this round. By the way, I'm Gwen. I'm here with my husband. He's around here somewhere. I was about to say that he's the one in the blazer, but that wouldn't be much help, would it?" She smiled and they shook hands with a bit of overstated formality.

“I’m Frank. Frank Walker.”

“Well, Frank Walker, where are you from? Don’t tell me from Santa Clara.”

“No. I grew up in Connecticut, mostly. That’s where my family is anyway.”

“Did they move down here, too?”

“No. Honestly, I’m pretty sure they think I’m still in Key West.” Frank took a sip from his beer. “We don’t talk all that often.”

“Why is that, if I may ask?”

“I’m not sure. It’s just always been that way. Ever since I started going away to school we don’t communicate all that much, even with cell phones and everything making it pretty easy. Guess there isn’t much to say.”

“Oh, nonsense!” replied Gwen.

“Really. I was supposed to go to boarding school. I did that. What’s to say? I was supposed to go to college. I did that for a couple of years at least. Again, what’s to say? No one thought I’d actually make it through college. I didn’t. What, other than that, is there to say? I’m pretty sure I know what my parents are doing, so what’s to say there?” In fact, this was the first time that Frank had thought about the last eight years of his life in such a coherent way. He was trying to decide if the summation bothered him when Gwen spoke up.

“But what about just keeping up? What about brothers and sisters? There has to be some news at some point that you’d be interested in, or that they’d be interested in from you. You can’t just walk away, just like that, can you?”

“Well, I’m an only child, so there are no brothers and sisters to sweat, and I don’t think they’d be too thrilled to hear about the details of my life. I mean, would you be all geared up to hear that your son is pretty much of a drifter?” As Frank surprised himself with his assessment of his condition, he looked away from her and surveyed the prosperous crowd.

“I’d want to hear from him, no matter what. And I don’t believe that your family doesn’t feel the same way.” She was annoyed by his nonchalance. Indeed, Frank’s attitude was a veneer, false bravado masking a sudden feeling of deep isolation. He had made several attempts at letter writing - an anachronistic urge in this age - but each time he found what he wrote to be so divorced from anything approaching the truth that he could not continue. One attempt was deliberately chatty - a few lighthearted lines to let his family know where he was more than anything else. He did not recognize himself in the letter so he discarded it before finishing it.

Another was his attempt to sound like a fully-developed, successful adult, something along the lines of the ridiculously self-absorbed annual Christmas letters from more than enough of his relatives. He threw that one away after a rare thoughtful and sober look at his penurious surroundings. His most recent effort was aloof and preachy – an unhealthy dose of printed finger wagging and remonstrance. He actually finished the letter. Fortunately he reread it before sending it. Its highhanded tone perfectly imitated the most nauseating traits of his extended family. In horror, he burned it while forswearing any more such attempts. Besides, any letters would only invite return correspondence, a prospect he wished to avoid.

“Maybe you’re right, but I’d rather call when I have something to say, something besides, ‘I’m living in a shack with a bunch of outcasts and drinking my way through my days off. How are you guys?’ Know what I mean?” Frank finished his beer and motioned to the bartender for another. The last thing he had expected when he entered the Abbey was to get what amounted to a sermon on his lack of filial piety. And he was equally certain that he did not want to spend part of this evening, or any other evening, wondering about the life he had left behind, about the crowd of people within his former orbit, a crowd that easily could have been the one now invading the Abbey, festooned with badges of opulence for all to see, a dominant organism that sets the rules for so many others.

“Well, suit yourself, Frank Walker. If I run into your folks, I’ll let them know how you’re doing.” She picked up the remains of her vodka tonic and departed, heading for more familiar territory.

“Fuck you,” Frank thought to himself as he stayed put.

Another beer arrived at the same time that waiters were setting out platters with various happy hour offerings on them. Frank had the good fortune to have a platter of buffalo wings within easy reach, and so he finally began his holiday feast.

“Keep the wings coming,” Frank told the bartender.

The bartender nodded, lit a cigarette and grabbed one of the wings for himself. “Break time. Mind if I join ya?”

“Not at all. I’m buying as long as their free.”

“Your first race?”

“What?”

“You’re part of this crew, right?”

“No. No, I live on the island. I just sort of stumbled in here tonight.”

“Where you live?” The bartender ate as he smoked. He had a great deal of experience taking care of his vices in a hurry.

“Casa Jose. You know it?”

“Sure. George Gordon lives there. He used to work here ‘til he lost his shit. You know him?”

“Yeah. You can have him back if you want.”

“I’ll take a pass.”

“How long you been working here?”

“Too long. Maybe five years now. Since the day after I landed on Santa Clara.”

“Five years. Wow! I’ve been down here for about two months and I don’t know how much more I’ll be able to take.” The bartender shrugged as he cleaned the meat off another chicken wing.

“What brought you down here?” Frank was in need of nonjudgmental conversation.

“A friend of mine told me we could drink for next to nothing and catch our meals right out of the water every day. Like a dope, I believed him. He left after a couple of months, but it seems like I’m stuck here for good.”

The bartender was a huge man who looked like he should have been pouring drinks in some Chicago neighborhood bar. His meaty hands – “five pickles and a patty,” his sister once remarked - dwarfed the cigarette he was smoking. Instead of the nautical outfit of the rest of the staff, he wore a long-sleeve white shirt with a black vest that had no hope of ever being buttoned again. Seniority has its perks.

“How come they don’t make you wear the sailor suit?” Frank figured the bartender was a good guy who didn’t take himself too seriously. He was right.

“Horizontal stripes. It’s in my contract. I haven’t had to wear them since I hit 250. Besides I like to save that outfit for my other job.”

“What’s that?”

“I am an aerobics instructor. What’d you think?”

They both laughed.

“How ‘bout you? Got a job?” The bartender put his cigarette out and began to concentrate entirely on the plate of wings.

“I work for Out-Island Shipping out of Crown Bay.”

“Sounds like a good job for down here.”

“It’s not bad. I haven’t fucked anything up yet, so that puts it ahead of most jobs I’ve had.”

Frank paused as they both worked through a couple of wings.

“This crowd come through every year?”

“Oh yeah. Twice a year like clockwork. Actually the timing’s perfect. If it weren’t for them, this place would be a morgue tonight. Bunch of big shots, I guess. The tips are good, and it’s not like I’ve got a whole lot else to do tonight. Time to get back to work. I’ll get you another platter.”

The bartender lit another cigarette, took a quick drag off it and set it in an ashtray before grabbing a platter of wings from behind the bar and setting them in front of Frank.

“Thanks.” Frank gave the bartender a wave before turning his attention again to the rest of the crowd.

Not surprisingly, the throng got louder as it drank more. Frank guessed that they enjoyed themselves no matter where they were, and he smugly concluded they did so by arranging their lives so that they could be spent in collective isolation. Like many critics, he was attracted to that which he most often criticized.

Meanwhile he did not manage to move away from the platters of free food. Indeed, he remained in the Abbey for as long as it was open, moving from one spot to the next, depending on what free offering of holiday fare was placed where, occasionally even managing a free drink here and there from the well-meaning crowd.

An occasional friendly nod, a curious, searching look now and then, and the sight of Gwen (Was that her name?) from time to time, his comfort in this milieu, and the lack of any viable alternative kept him loosely connected to them all until closing time. As it turned out, he was the last patron to leave that night, his search for a genuine Santa Clara moment having unaccountably led him as far away from that goal, were he honest about the moment, as he could imagine.