

The Perfect Daiquiri

I was with Boy Stanton the night he began his search for the perfect daiquiri. We were in the bar of the St. Regis Hotel, waiting for our drinks, when Boy mentioned that he hadn't had a decent daiquiri in months. After the glass was placed before him, he eyed it speculatively with cool blue eyes and then took a sip. He set it down and eyed it again. "Not bad," he said, in a way that meant "Not good." I sipped my perfectly acceptable gin and tonic. "Why don't you drink something else?" "Oh, I do," said Boy. "But a daiquiri . . . At a certain time in the evening, when there's still a lot of light in the sky, it's a daiquiri I want."

Boy wore a cream-colored linen suit with a blue silk shirt open wide at the neck; anywhere he was it seemed that he brought with him a bit of light from the sky.

Boy went on to an analysis of what made a good daiquiri so elusive. He had decided that the lime juice was what mattered, more even than the quality of the rum. He expounded on the nuances of freshly squeezed limes.

When he finished his drink he stood up. "Let's go someplace else. By God, there must be a really good daiquiri served somewhere in this city. I'll make that my life's goal: finding the perfect daiquiri."

So that evening provided the adventure that became my latest Boy Stanton story. For he was a person others told stories about.

There was the night Boy, with a dozen other graduating seniors, had tea and dessert at Dean Wascomb's house. It was a staid occasion, with the students cautious and polite and the Wascombs gracious and concerned. Boy, in full view of the other students but unobserved by the Wascombs, spent the hour slipping various items inside his clothing — including a four inch tall cigarette lighter in the form of an elephant and a framed photograph of the Wascomb's basset hound. All would be found by the Wascombs in the morning, arranged in an eerie tableau on their backyard sundial.

Boy (Boyd, actually, though the "d" made the name seem too serious to fit him) had been blessed by being born into a family of wealth, some of which filtered down to him in monthly installments. Good looks, intelligence, athletic ability, wit, charm — all were his. Even the term "charismatic" could rightly be applied to him. And despite these blessings he was not despised, but universally liked.

He used his advantages in life to do exactly what he wanted, and we long-time friends of his, who had buckled down to jobs and given up our carefree existence, possibly told stories about Boy because he was doing what we wished we could do.

Our perfect daiquiri hunt led us in a zigzag course around the island of Manhattan. The morning after, as I laboriously tried to get myself together for a day of being a rising young attorney, I found myself rehearsing the story I'd tell about our exploit: "So this Irish bartender looks up from the fight on the TV and says, 'You want a *what?*' "

But three days later, at a party, I found myself listening as someone else related what had happened the night before: "Then Boy said, 'Limes grow in the tropics, right?' So we took a cab up to Spanish Harlem . . ." And he continued to entertain his audience while my too-similar story went untold.

But I knew Boy's search had begun that night in the St. Regis bar.

As the weeks and months went by, the tales of Boy Stanton and his pursuit of the perfect daiquiri were added to and embellished.

He and I got together the night before he left New York. He looked a bit washed out — as if some of the blue had left the sky. He drank a gin and tonic, subdued. “Why are you headed for Jamaica?” I asked.

“Tropical climate. Palm trees. Endless beaches. Lime trees.”

We drank quietly that night and shook hands solemnly when we parted.

Now I must tell of years passing. Boy eventually wound up in Europe, becoming a modern-day expatriate. Stories would occasionally reach us, placing him in different locales — Bruges, Montreux, the island of Rhodes — so that he came to seem like a pinball careening about the continent. But he was absent from our lives, and in a way he became unreal. What was real for me was my job, the firm. I became something of a workaholic as I entered my thirties. I was tremendously ambitious to succeed.

I met Tracy and we were married. I told her some stories about Boy, but they sounded juvenile, even to me, and her laughter at our antics was forced and indulgent. I certainly have grown up, I thought.

I very much wanted Boy to be present at our wedding, but there was no way to locate him. It took place at Tracy's parent's home, with its beautiful gardens, and the day was dazzlingly bright. The kind of setting made for him.

The reports we got about Boy over the next years began to take on an ominous tone. It seemed as if reality were at last catching up with him. A friend who worked at the bank Boy's father dealt with told us how Old Man Stanton had shut down the account that had fed Boy's extravagant life style. No more allowance for Boyd, he said.

After that the people in Europe who had given us the occasional news about Boy reported that they no longer saw him or knew of anyone else who did. With the end of the money, he had suddenly dropped from the scene without a trace.

We heard nothing of him until three years later, when Tommy Briggs, who was dating a model who wanted to slum around in some low-life bars, saw Boy in a dive on West 54th Street. Boy was sitting at the far end of the bar, alone, gazing fixedly at his image in the mirror. Tommy was positive it was Boy, though he looked much older and somewhat seedy. Not knowing what to say under such circumstances, Tommy had made up an excuse to his date and, unnoticed by Boy, they had beaten a quick retreat from the place.

I heard this story over lunch with three other friends. We talked for an hour about Boy and our feelings for him. It was Tommy's opinion that he was our boyhood myth that had foundered on the shoals of reality and that we'd best keep him — in one of his brighter incarnations — in our memory of a more carefree time. Besides, Boy had returned to New York and had chosen not to contact any of us. That was obviously how he wanted things. So let him be. Life moves on.

My life moved on, and it was one in which I accumulated the standard fulfillments that make one a success. By the time I was forty I was the father of two daughters and a partner in the law firm. I owned a home with ten acres surrounding it.

One last word filtered down about Boy, again from our friend at the bank. Old Man Stanton died, leaving Boy \$300 out of an estate of many millions. In the will, the reading of

which Boy did not attend, his father explained his action by stating that money was not good for some people. A sister told our friend that Boy had been working for the past five years as a seaman on freighters.

Boy in his forties now . . . I thought about him in that dive on 54th Street, and I pictured those leathery-skinned, middle-aged men who walk the streets around cheap hotels when they're off the boat. Faces darkened by a couple day's growth of beard, clothes shabby; in and out of cheap bars; mournful country western songs saying that, yes, life is this sorrow and loneliness here tonight. Was it possible that Boy was one of them?

Life, I was to find, could hold such unpleasant twists.

In the passing years the things I valued turned out to be insubstantial. My marriage went bad. Tracy and I divorced; she and the girls moved to California. I sold the house and moved into an apartment in the city. I grew increasingly disillusioned with the ponderous maneuvers of corporate law. My partner in the firm said that I needed a vacation, to get away from it all for a good long while. But there was nowhere I wanted to go.

It was at this point that I started thinking about finding Boy. The idea both attracted and scared me. Scared me because I was afraid that I'd find a confirmation of all my worst fears about what life does to us. But, I'd think, maybe it doesn't have to be that way; maybe Boy had landed on his feet from the great fall he'd had.

I was most attracted by the mystery of it. It was something to be discovered: What had become of Boy Stanton? That, in a world which had turned stale, did still interest me.

So tentatively I began my detective work. I won't go into all the ins and outs — it was sometimes a month of dead ends. But finally I got the name and telephone number of a man in Yonkers who had captained a freighter Boy had sailed on. I called and he said, "Sure, I can tell you about Boyd. Come to my place."

When I was seated in Captain Fred Pedersen's backyard with a lemonade in my hand, he leaned forward in his chair and observed me with narrowed eyes. "So, I was thinking . . . I hope Boyd does not owe you money."

After I reassured him as to my honorable intentions for wanting to find Boy, Captain Pedersen nodded his head and said, "Well, I can't tell you where he is anyway."

Boyd (not Boy — I slipped a "d" onto his name after the first few times) had signed on Pedersen's ship, the MARY SUNSET, six years ago. The SUNSET sailed out of New York, took on more cargo in various ports in the Caribbean, and then passed through the Panama Canal. It made stops along Mexico's west coast before going to San Diego.

Boyd was, said Pedersen, a good man, a good worker. He had sailed on the MARY SUNSET for two years. Then one day he had disappeared.

They had unloaded some drilling pipe at Salina Cruz, in Mexico. They had an empty boat but were stuck in port awaiting completion of some paperwork.

It was Boyd's habit to travel about alone when in they were in port, said Pedersen, to travel far and wide. But he always made it back to the ship. As he did this time. Pedersen was in a waterfront bar when Boyd came in, sat down next to him, and announced that he would not be sailing on, that he was staying.

"He wouldn't say anything more. I figured he'd gotten involved with some woman, but I couldn't advise Boyd like I would a twenty-year-old. So we went back to the ship, he signed the papers releasing him, collected his pay and gear and shook my hand. I gave him the name of someone in town who could contact me, and I told him that I'd pick him up anytime he needed me to. Every time I stop in Salina Cruz I ask about him, but no one has heard from him or about him. So the last I saw of Boyd he was walking off down Morales Street."

In my apartment that night I looked at a map, studied the southwest coast of Mexico, its inlets and peninsulas, looked at the exotica of names, some in Spanish, many long, incomprehensible Indian words that stared out at me like the face of a Mayan statue, flat and imperious and strange.

I decided to go there and search for Boy. My plan of attack, worked out after another phone call to Captain Pedersen, was based on the fact that there had been four days between the time when Boy had left the MARY SUNSET and had returned to tell the Captain that he was signing off. Pedersen said he might have rented a car — there were four wheel drive Jeeps available — and he remembered that Boyd had left during the dry season, when the dirt roads leading from village to village were only bumpy and dusty, not impassable.

I was certain that Boy had gotten away from the port of Salina Cruz. If one drew a radius around that town, corresponding to how far he could get in two days, there was a possibility that somewhere in that radius was the place where Boy had decided to stay.

I had had four years of college Spanish, and I revived it with two weeks of Berlitz classes. I made all my arrangements. Much of what I did, as the day for my departure approached, I forced myself to do. Doubts and fears assailed me. Nights I would lie awake imagining all the dangers that might befall me in that far-off jungle. I would tell myself that my chances of finding Boy were minuscule; I even considered the possibility that I was pursuing someone who was dead. But each time I thought of these things, I would remember Captain Pedersen telling how he last saw Boy walking away down Morales Street. As I pictured it in my mind's eye — as I wanted it to be, I suppose — Boy was walking as if he knew where he was going.

I flew into Mexico City, the smog hanging thick over that cancerous old monster. After three hours at the airport I was on another plane for Oaxaca. That night I sat on a bench in the plaza there, listening to a band concert as the whole town seemed to move happily about me.

The next morning I boarded a two-engine prop plane filled with a mixture of prosperous-looking businessmen and poor Indians. The range in luggage went from initialed leather briefcases to cardboard suitcases held together by rope.

We bounced on wind currents over rolling hills and then mountains and reached Tehuantepec after three grueling hours. The heat of the coast was startling. Also, as I had been warned by Captain Pedersen, Tehuantepec had been made into an ugly, industrial center for the Pemex Oil Company. I rented a Jeep and headed down a fairly well-maintained two-lane highway toward Salina Cruz. Huge trucks blasted by me, passing on blind curves where, if another truck were coming the other way, we would all be killed. I remembered my fears of a deserted jungle road, and I realized that it was this twentieth century conveyer of oil and pipe that I needed to fear.

At Salina Cruz I looked up Captain Pedersen's friend. He was a dispatcher, very busy at the moment, but he got a chance to take me aside. His broad, fleshy Spanish face looked at me doubtfully as I explained what I wanted from him. Then he shrugged. "Si, senior." He took a sheet of paper and a pencil and drew a hub with Salina Cruz at its center. Then he traced two roads out of it, both winding along the coast. He'd mark a village on the map, sometimes add a short road twisting inland. He wrote names, those incomprehensible Indian ones. He'd stop and think, add something. Finally he pushed the paper over to me, shaking his head. "You know what you're doing, senior? Make sure you always top off the gas tank. I mark an X where you can get gas." He shook his head again. "Good luck."

I slept in a concrete block motel, spartan and ugly, with a window air conditioner that labored noisily all night.

The next morning I headed my Jeep west, which meant that I was traveling up the Mexican coastline. The road was bumpy and dusty, the tropical jungle gave off a claustrophobic power, and the Indians I met were silent and inexpressive ciphers. But it was not the fearsome world of my dreams; it was a world like any other, in which one managed.

In each village I came to I asked the owner of the cantina or the man who pumped gas into my Jeep — anyone in charge of something — whether they knew of a blue-eyed Norteamericano named Boyd Stanton.

I spent the first night sleeping on the beach in a hammock, under a mosquito net. I worked out this arrangement with the owner of a cantina where I had stopped for a beer. I also arranged for his wife to boil me a plate of shrimp, and she fried some plantains to go with it.

After washing off the dust and sweat of the day in the ocean, I dried out in the fading sun and then drew myself into the cocoon of the hammock. Images of the day flashed through my mind, all the undigested jumble of faces and jungle and road and words and dark interiors coming like ghosts, until fatigue brought sleep to me.

I awoke to the cries of a raucous flock of parrots that colored a treetop like a bright quilt.

By noon of the second day I sat in another dark beachfront cantina farther up the coast. Some men I took to be village fishermen sat at the bar down from me. I asked the proprietor how far away Puerto Angel was; I knew it to be a small fishing village that was lately being developed as a beach resort, replete with chain hotels and upscale restaurants. He told me that it was about a five hour drive. I realized that Puerto Angel would be the westerly limit of my two-day radius from Salina Cruz.

When he brought me my beer I asked him about the Norteamericano. He didn't reply, just nodded toward a man sitting two barstools away. This man turned toward me, his dark eyes meeting mine.

"Senor Stanton?" he said. "Si."

An hour later, as we bumped over the waves in his motorboat, he explained that the Playa de las Palmas was not an island, but you could get there only by water. It was at the end of a peninsula that hooked down parallel to the mainland. You could not travel by land from the mainland to the peninsula because dense jungle and mountains provided a barrier. He took a few turistas over every week on his boat, for on the Playa de las Palmas was a hotel ("Muy bonita, senior, muy luxuriosa.").

The peninsula came into sight, its huge palms appearing on the horizon. Behind it loomed the green mountains. The boat went to the inside of the peninsula, where the water was calm.

A circle of round, thatch-roofed structures took shape, surely the hotel muy bonita. Fishing boats were pulled up on the beach, a few men moving about them. Some sunbathers dotted the white sand. Two Indian girls carrying baskets walked up the beach. Gulls circled about, one suddenly diving straight into the blue water, hitting with a startling splash. Another single structure, larger, open, was set off from the hotel. And behind all was the jungle rising up gradually to the mountains far away.

The boat was driven up on the beach and I got out. The boatman took my arm. He pointed, said, "The hotel, senior." His finger moved to the single building. "The restaurante. Drinks."

"Gracias," I said, and went on to get a drink.

There was a stillness on this beach that seemed to make all the sounds stand out. The cawing of the gulls. The calls of a little brown boy running toward the boats. The hot sand crunching beneath my shoes.

There was an overhang of thatch, part of the steep roof, that I had to duck under to enter. The inside was a startling transition. It was dim and, out of the sun, almost cool. A breeze flowed through. High above was the peak of the roof, giving a feeling of spaciousness.

It was open on three sides, but I noticed slats of mosquito netting that would be lowered when evening came. The closed side was occupied by a long bar. Tables with colored cloths and vases of flowers were spread through the rest of the interior. Under my feet were wide planks, gleaming softly. I began to think that the rooms of the hotel might be much more bonita than I had thought at first.

I sat down at the bar. I looked at the rows of bottles across from me, surprised at how well stocked it was. There was an open door behind the bar, most likely leading to the kitchen. But there was no one about.

Then a man walked through the door. “Buenos dias, senior,” he said. A strong, handsome Indian face, like so many I had seen these last few days. Pure Indian. He was short, broad chested. He looked to be in his forties.

“Buenos dias. Una cerveza negra, por favor.” As he pulled a dark beer from the cooler he said, in only slightly-accented English, “May I ask where you are from, senior?”

“From New York. May I ask where you learned to speak English so well?”

“For eleven years I lived in the United States. In California. Mostly in San Francisco. I worked last at the St. Francis Hotel. For eight years. From kitchen help to bartender there.”

“This is a very different world from San Francisco.”

“Si. I was born here. I left as a young man, wanting to see the world. Then when I needed to see the familiar I came back. That was thirteen years ago. I stay here now.”

“I only just walked up the beach. . . . But it’s beautiful here. I hope it doesn’t change.”

The man looked carefully at me. “Strange for you to say that. Sometimes it is difficult for things to stay as they are.” He paused, tentatively. “Do you know the history of us here? It is a good story, not too long.”

“I’d like to hear it.”

He pulled a stool over a few feet and sat down. Before he began speaking he reached a calloused hand across the bar. “My name is Balina. My Spanish name. My Indian name I will spare you.”

“We are Zapotec here,” he said. “Have you seen the museum in Oaxaca? No? Well, it tells of our people. I will not brag on us. See what we did, read of us — if you wish. When the Spanish found silver in the mountains they came, as the Aztecs had before them. But, unlike the Axtecs, they defeated us. It was not easy, not easy at all. The bravery of the Zapotec is important in the story of this peninsula. Because a tribe fled into these mountains and jungles, and the Spanish thought it not worth the price they would have to pay to pursue us.

“The Spanish left in time, we returned. And so our tribe remained a free people, living apart from the world. But then modern times came, and the world outside discovered us and saw how beautiful it is here. Businessmen, developers among them. Offers came to us for purchase of the land, which we refused. But then we heard that our ownership of the land was being questioned, and that perhaps even the right to sell it was not ours.

“We are not knowing in the way of legal matters or high finance. Some, like me, had lived in the other world, but I had only served drinks to the type of men that now threatened us. One of us went to a lawyer in Oaxaca to get advice. Our council decided to do what he told us. We would sell a part of our land in order to set a — what is the word? Yes, that’s it, precedent. It would be a precedent to show our ownership of the land. This was hard for many here to understand — that you could show you own something by selling a part of it, by exchanging

money. But others said that it was the way of the world, and so we sold some land to a Zapotec friend, a businessman in Oaxaca. We sold him the land where the hotel and this restaurant are now. It was an investment for him, to make money, we understood that. But we had agreed with him as to what he would build and how it would be developed. It would bring him a profit, but it would not change our lives. We would control that.

“So the hotel, something like what you see now, was built. But soon we learned some news that worried us. A group of developers from Mexico City was offering our Oaxacan friend a very large sum of money to sell his hotel to them. And suddenly he would not talk to us anymore.

“One day these businessmen, wearing suits and ties, came and walked all about this peninsula, pointing and talking, never once speaking to any of us.

“We felt stupid, tricked. We saw a many-storied hotel rising in our midst. We knew we could not survive that. The invasion was occurring that had never, in the centuries before, succeeded.

“The young men said to burn the hotel to the ground, burn all that is built after. But others of us knew the power of the world. Some talked of retreating into the mountains as our forefathers had, giving up this stretch of beach so precious to us. Some were simply resigned to accept what came.”

Balina paused, looked closely at me.

“Seeing you here like this reminds me of it. I was in the bar, no one else was about, when the Norteamericano walked in. I fixed him a drink. We began to talk. As you know now, I love to talk. I told him the same story I am telling you, except I ended it with our anger and our fears. He asked a lot of questions. Good questions, you know? The kind that shows that the asker understands more than the answerer.

“This man left, but returned in a few days and asked me if he could see our council to offer us his help. He should not have impressed me. A seaman, that is all. But he did impress me. It seemed that he knew the ways of that world we were trying to fight.

“Our council meets in the mountains. Only members of the tribe go there. But some council members talked to this Norteamericano. He asked for nothing, but he had a plan. We were suspicious. We asked him why he wanted to help us. He said because the land is beautiful and should stay our land. We thought of all the lies we had heard. We let him wait alone in the sun for days. He slept on the beach, with the sand flies and the mosquitoes. What is this man without a home who is to win us our land? But, like me, the others were impressed by something about him. So we said to him, ‘Do what you can.’

“He left. It only took a week’s passing for us to give up hope in him. But then he returned to us. Coming over the waves, standing at the prow of a boat, I saw it. Dressed up — looking sharp, as you say.

“And the boat was crowded with others. It was the invasion we feared! Oh, reporters and cameramen roaming around, poking into everyone’s business. Always wanting everyone to talk into their tape recorders. To tell them how we dye our clothes, weave our baskets. To tell them of our ancestors, to tell them everything of our way of life. But the Norteamericano said, ‘The plan is working. Endure this.’

“In a few weeks they left, and the stories began to appear in the magazine. We were presented as the primitive culture living on the beautiful peninsula, struggling to survive in our old ways against the powers of business. High-ups were interviewed — politicians, professors — all now offering us the support they had never offered us before.

“So you know the end of this story. We won. We have legally been granted by the government complete control over this peninsula. The ballyhoo from the magazine died down after a time. Now we get a handful of tourists every so often. We allow no more than we want. We live our lives as we always have.”

The bar had become darker as the sun’s rays began to lengthen.

“And the Norteamericano?” I asked.

“Ah, him? He is still here. He is a part of us. I mean, he is a member of the tribe. He has been up the mountain. We have bought back the hotel and it is his to do with. He works on it, improving it all.

“He is married. To one of us. They have a daughter and a son. But you can talk to him. He comes here most evenings at this time.”

And so Balina finished telling the latest Boy Stanton story.

I moved to a table off to the side, in shadow, to be unobserved. As I waited a few people came in, sitting at other tables.

Finally I recognized a figure walking along the beach. Boy was dressed in a loose white shirt and pants that came down to his calves. The shirt had a line of blue stitching around the neck.

He was as dark as Balina. His hair was long. He was more muscled, broader of chest than he had been. His face was older, lined now; handsome now in a different way.

“Hola,” he said to Balina as he sat at the bar. They talked as the drink was mixed. Balina sliced the lime and squeezed it between his palms. He reached for the bottle of rum.

When the drink was set in front of Boy, he paused, then turned so that he looked out over the beach as the last light of day played, sparkling, on the surface of the water.

He took a sip.

“Ah, Balina,” he said. “Perfecto.”