

Part V.
New Hampshire, Part 2

When I arrived in Portsmouth, I remembered to take it easy along the two-mile road to the ship. Across the two bridges, one metal, one wooden, I drink in the salt air as the August sun stands alone in the bluest of skies.

The "Aggressive" stands alone at the dock, and I drive right up to her.

"Peal?" I hear a voice that sounds familiar and look up on the deck to see Ricky waving and smiling. "What the heck are you doing here?"

I exit my little car, sorry almost to be off the highway, but glad to be standing at the edge of the Atlantic again. "I'm back," I holler up at him.

In the quarterdeck shack, a new face waves, young like me, and I hand him my orders. His name tag says 'Hurley,' but I see 'Heflin,' and I realize that I quickly lose my smile.

"Matt Hurley," says the blue-eyed man with curly brown hair, "you're Peal?"

I nod. He doesn't know where I have just gone to.

"Rick Graff told me about you. You're the one with the bad case of seasickness, right?"

I'm back. "Yeah, I guess that's me. I guess everybody's famous for something." I hand him my orders.

"Hey, you're not due here until Saturday."

"I know, I've got no place to go."

"Why'd you leave New York? Man, I would give my right arm to be there right now." I smile.

"There are people there who will be glad to take it. Not to mention your left one, your legs, your eyes, your wallet, your testicles." We laugh. Ricky was standing there then, and we shook hands.

"Good to see you, man. How was New York?"

I glanced at Matt, who grinned, then back at Ricky.

"It was okay, Rick. How's things on the ship?"

"The same. Work your ass off, bust your nuts, and they treat you like some piece of shit."

"Well, I'm sorry I wasn't here. Hey, let's go for a beer."

"No can do, man, I'm on duty." He looked at Matt.

"Yeah--yeah, I can go. I'm off in ten minutes."

"Okay, why not? I'll put my stuff aboard and then catch up with you in a few."

In less than an hour we were at the Brat Cellar, a sandwich and beer place downtown that specialized in imported beer and stacked sandwiches. I ordered a Ham and Swiss on Rye and a Guinness Stout. I never had one before, but it was Hef's favorite, so I got one. Hurley got a Rueben and a Budweiser.

"You like that shit?" he asked after the waitress

left.

"I don't know. Never had one."

"Man, I can't stand that dark beer. I hear it gets you shitfaced, though."

"We'll see." I looked around the place. The imitation beam ceiling and the rustic plank tables were stained a dark mahogany, and the walls were made to look like they were made of stone. At the bar, a few guys were pounding back some kind of draft. Dressed in blue jeans and knee-high rubber boots, I guessed them for fishermen. Lobstermen, maybe. Their life was worse than mine, but they got paid much more. I listened in on their conversation for a few moments.

"Yaw drunker'n a faht if you believe that," said one long-haired fellow with a beard.

"I'm tellin' ya," said another, "the gawd dam Patriots is gonna be tough ta beat this yeeeaahh."

"Those fuckahs cahnt even keep healthy lawng enough ta get the bawl in play. Watch yaw Steelahs."

Musical accents, really.

"They say you knew Heflin pretty well."

"Huh?" I was yanked back to the table by the name.

"Heflin, he was a friend of yours?"

"He was my best friend. And I was his." Who was this asshole who thought he had a right to even mention his name.

"We went to high school together."

I hadn't thought of Heflin having a life before I knew him, and I studied the face of this new man.

"Well, my brother and he did. But," he added quickly, "he came over to the house a lot, to see Ted. My brother."

"Good friends, were they?"

"Probably more than that."

What did he mean? "What do you mean?"

"Well, Ted's gay and--"

"Pete Heflin is--was--not gay! You asshole!" I shouted and the eyes turned on me, for just a moment as I composed myself, then the conversations continued, now with a hint snickering and an occasional backwards glance.

"Hey, take it easy, it's nothing to be ashamed about."

"You don't understand, Matt, I knew Pete, we fished together, we drove the coastal routes on our motorcycles together we--"

"--Did you ever double-date together?"

I stopped mid-sentence. It was true, we hadn't dated women together. In fact, I don't remember Hef ever talking about a girl, except his sister, whose picture alone adorned the wall of his cubicle. Was it true? Was Peter a homosexual? I looked again at Matt.

"So, I suppose you think I'm a queer, too."

"No, no--" He really didn't, I could tell.

"--are you? Are you gay, too?"

"No, I'm not. It's not like it's something in the water, you know."

Our food arrived, and I took one swig of the Guinness, set it down, called to the waitress and ordered a Michelob draft. It was awful. Like burned cocoa. What kind of person would put that into his body?

Only a faggot, I reasoned, would subject himself to such self-abuse.

But wait a minute. I liked Pete Heflin. He was like a brother to me. I munched a bit of sandwich.

Matt was laughing. "I told you, that stuff is shit."

"How," I asked Matt, "could Peter be gay and me not know it?"

"Well, you know, they don't all wear silk shirts and gold chains and talk with a lisp." Here he imitated what had come to be known as the typical gay man, while the fishermen at the bar watched and drank.

"No," I told him, "I didn't know it." This point disturbed me. Me, who had spent the last eight months in New York City and I didn't even know that gays didn't all dress in colorful clothes and sound like Rex Reed. What else, I thought, had I missed?

My draft came and I guzzled half of it.

We finished in silence. I left a tip and paid my check, Matt paid his, and we headed for the door.

"Have fun, fellas." I turned to see the one fisherman standing next to the bar with one hand on his hip and the other raised from the elbow, his limp wrist allowing his hand to gently float in our direction. I thought about starting something, but there were too many of them and besides, his friends weren't paying him any attention. Behind him, I heard one say "...and Grogan's fuckin' knees ain't wurth shit..." so I followed Matt out the door.

In my car, I turned on the radio to one of the local pop stations in time to hear the end of "Riders on the Storm," and the disc jockey saying "...and that's what's in store for the crew of the U.S Coast Guard Cutter "Aggressive." In case you haven't heard, all crew members of that ship have been ordered to return to it for an emergency call. Again, this is an emergency, all hands of the Cutter "Aggressive" are ordered to return to the ship immediately. Apparently there is a vessel in distress out there in the cold, bleak Atlantic that only our finest sailors would dare to venture out in..."

Instinctively, I hit the emergency flashers and stepped on the pedal.

"Fuck," said Matt, "I wonder what's up now."

Inside, I began to churn again. Out to sea. I couldn't go. But I had to. Maybe one last time, just to see if it was a fluke. Maybe.

I sped down the pier and dropped Matt off next to the ship. "I'm going to park the car," I told him, and I turned around.

Alone in the car, with just the radio to keep me company, I moved up the pier to the parking lot. But I didn't shut the engine off. I thought about the sick feeling that I was sure I would someday forget. The weight loss, the puking, the ridicule.

I saw Pete, vomit covering his uniform, and the others, sick, worried about dying, and, when I brought myself back to real time, I found myself on the winding road headed toward Wentworth, going through the gears as I stomped the pedal out of each tight corner until I got to my special place on the beach, where I parked, got out and walked down to the ocean. It was nearly dark, with just the fingers of the setting sun reaching from behind me to calm the ocean.

I lit a cigarette, sat in the warm sand, and listened to the easy waves trickle to shore. I thought some of the fate of my friend and twin brother, Steve Summey, out there on the deserted post in Alaska, and whether or not I would someday have to join him there. Although I wasn't due back until Saturday, the

Quartermaster had checked me in, and I was now duty bound to being an active member of the crew. And yet I harbored only a little guilt as I watched the red and green running lights of the white cutter as she made her sluggish way out to sea.

I wasn't sure where to go, so I headed back to the pier, and then over to the small rescue boat station where, perhaps, thirty men sat vigilantly waiting for the siren to sound, the call to action. They were, I decided, more like firefighters than sailors. I parked in the small lot adjacent to the building, and was about to present myself to the officer of the day when I heard a familiar voice over my shoulder.

"Hey, I thought you were in New York."

I turned. In her tight blue uniform, the skirt way above regulation to reveal two beckoning thighs, was Linda Carruthers, the wife of a fellow crew-member and a part-time Coasty herself. She was tiny, barely five feet tall, and her hair, which was shoulder-length and sandy blonde, was now piled atop her head and pinned under her cap. Her body was compact, her breasts small, and she reminded me of a French girl who was a foreign exchange student during my junior year of high school. She and Darren, her husband and the ship's yeoman, had two children but the usual effects of marriage and childbirth were not evident in Linda's figure or, I had heard, her social conduct.

"I was, but now I'm back."

"How nice. But, young Virgil, if you are back, why aren't you out to sea with the rest of the crew?"