

## ***'I HAVE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING'***

**By Michael Ventura**

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I was 13 and on my own. Strangers took me in. I wasn't grateful. I felt no loyalty. They were not my kind. But I'd been on the street, alone, and I didn't want to go back to that. I looked upon their home as a hideout.

So did they. The father was a pederast, the mother a lush. She'd chosen me for motives that were not wonderful. My role was to deflect the father's attentions from his son. There were two daughters; each, in her way, kept to the shadows. And there was the father's mother, a monster, but entertaining.

Even such swampy waters can foster affections. The mother was broken, but defied her fate with whiskey; her defiant surrender made me fond of her. The son, my age, became a friend.

As for the pederast, I was more than he could handle; his intentions were enough to upset and soil me, but he kept his hands to himself, more scared of me than I of him. (His was a cavernous, greedy, selfish loneliness, smug on the surface and rotten inside.)

And me? I was a charmer and a liar. I said whatever my rescuers wanted to hear and did what I pleased, deftly.

This troubled household lived in a small city in Maine. Compared to my Brooklyn slum, Maine was an amiable version of Mars where I learned that "normal" doesn't exist and that money protects no one from unhappiness.

That's the setting, not the story.

I turned 15 in the fall of 1960. (That's right: I'm old.) My heart burned with the questions of anyone that age: What am I to do? Who – what? – am I to be? Who might I be like?

I loved Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," but my temperament was not like theirs, and howling, even then, was not my style. Only one man in my family, my Uncle Hugo, possessed genuine dignity, but I was not like him. Only one adult, Johnny Ertha, seemed truly free, but his festive energies were not in me. My mother, very ill, had dignity, brilliance, and courage, but I couldn't be her. They were examples, not models.

Looking about me, I came to the alarming conclusion that I did not want to live the way I saw people living. Working class, middle class, educated, uneducated, it seemed to me that people picked their lies or their lies picked them and that's what they lived. I didn't want any part of any of that. I wanted adventure – I had only the crudest ideas of what "adventure" was, but, whatever it might turn out to be, I wanted it. Some said this was because I was a boy and very young. I didn't believe them. I still don't. I believed that my nature could be satisfied by nothing less than adventure. I still do.

True adventurers learn, eventually, that anything can be an adventure if you live with an adventurer's heart and your life is not a lie. But I was a greedy boy. I wanted my adventure to look like an adventure.

That fall of 1960, great discoveries presented themselves to me. Two came together: jazz and poetry. They swept me up, took me over. Suddenly I had an identity that was not imitative: I believed I could be a poet, a writer. Swiftly, writing became the prism

through which I saw everything and jazz became the template through which I began the slow task of understanding form – and behavior. (That’s a longer story.)

Another discovery: One night that November a TV show premiered: *Route 66*. An actor, George Maharis, in the role of Buz Murdock, spoke in a New York accent to a grizzled blacksmith in a Mississippi village. Maharis looked ethnic, like me. He spoke with my homeboy grammar and tones. He said to the blacksmith, “You live it the way you feel it. When it moves, you go with it. Tod says I got unrest. So what’s wrong with unrest? It’s as good as anything. Besides, we’re all stuck with it. ... I’ve been looking ever since I can remember. ... So I say, who needs New York [the city I’d been rescued from]? Only the buildings got roots there, and they don’t go too deep. Sure, we’re looking. Tod says if we keep moving we’ll find a place to plant roots and stick. With me, it’s fine just...” – he pauses – “moving.”

The episode was “Black November,” Stirling Silliphant’s first *Route 66* script. The guy on the screen seemed to be me – me, just as soon as I could get the fuck out of the trap called “normal life,” which was a trap because the word “normal” is itself a lie, a one-word cover for a phantasmagoria of lies. The guys on *Route 66* would travel the continent and not find “normal” anywhere. That, in itself, was subversive as hell.

I had been uprooted at age 13. By age 15, I sensed vaguely that I would never be, or feel, rooted again. *Route 66* – or rather, my enthusiasm for *Route 66* – taught me that I did not want to be rooted again. If the world is a shooting gallery – and it is – I wanted to be a moving target.

The *Route 66* guys adventured to learn, to understand.

“Trap at Cordova” (1961, written by Silliphant): “There is a passion for understanding, just as there are other appetites and passions.”

“Burning for Burning” (1961, written by Silliphant): “That’s what understanding is, taking away all the limits.”

Oh, that sounded inviting. What they did I could do. I wouldn’t need accessories – a gun, a knife, X-ray eyes. Wouldn’t even need a car. Nor much money. All it takes to journey is the willingness to journey. (Understanding, I would find, takes a great deal of work. But I was willing.)

A lifetime and many adventures later – many adventures, and many, many pages of writing – I taught literature for several years at a Waldorf school in California. I punctuated my lessons with stories of my fellow-adventurers. To the students, even some of their names sounded adventurous: Ginger Varney, James “Big Boy” Medlin, Spider Johnson, Dixie Howard, Naunie Batchelder (whom I’d reference as “my Georgia Baba Yaga”).

“What’s Ginger Varney doing now?” a student asked after a tale.

“She’s a private detective.” (Well – she is.)

Sometimes I quoted my favorite Medlin line: “Know thyself, and keep a damn close eye on the rascal.”

Teaching was one of my best adventures, so happy and so sad.

When I taught T.S. Elliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” I remembered reading it in high school, especially these lines:

*Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?*

*I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach.*

*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.*

*I do not think that they will sing to me.*

The high school boy I was said, fiercely and aloud, “They’ll sing to me. I’ll live so that they sing to me.”

If all I’m doing is revealing my own foolishness, so be it. That is inevitable in a writer’s life. You need to be a fool to do this at all. A fool to think you know anything, a fool to say stuff out loud, a fool to imagine your words will be any use to anyone. And the fool you really are is less attractive than the fool you think you are.

Now what I find wonderful about “Prufrock” is that the speaker, timid and tentative though he may be (“Do I dare to eat a peach?”), believes he’s heard mermaids sing. “I have seen them riding seaward on the waves.” Whether they sing to him or not, whether he is happy or not – that’s less important than this: His walk on the beach is something of an adventure because, for him, there are mermaids and they do sing.

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