

About That Leg

by Randall Stickrod

He's a big guy with blond curly hair and an oddly stiff gait. Bigger than me, probably six-three or more. The mystery of the gait reveals itself soon enough when I happen to be hitting the showers the same time as him one day at our trendy gym near the San Francisco waterfront. He has one prosthetic leg from the knee down, but he's always working hard in the weight room and on the body bag. We made a nodding acquaintance as gym rats will do. One day he told me he also worked out in an old-time boxing gym in Oakland, a rough place where real boxers trained. He said I should join him there, that I looked like a guy who would do well at it. I'm impressed that he would do this, a guy with such an obvious handicap, but also a well off guy, a bond trader at a major firm.

One night my girlfriend and I walk down to Marina Joe's for a simple dinner, and as we are leaving, passing through the bar, I see John having a drink with a woman. He catches my eye, yells out my name, waves us over. John is practically frothy with *bonhomie*, introducing us to his wife, who seems a bit frumpish but pleasant and sociable. After our second round of drinks the women have discovered their common professional interest and are talking animatedly among themselves. John bends to me conspiratorially and tells me the story about his leg.

He had been surfing in Hawaii, he says, and a black-tipped reef shark attacked him. He fought it desperately, punching at it, trying to gouge its eyes, all while trying to swim over 100 yards back to land. By the time he got to shore there wasn't much left of his lower left leg. Holy shit! I am suitably awed and show it. We have another drink and I can hardly wait to leave so I can tell Catherine the story.

He also tells me about the sea kayaks he owns that he keeps down at Pier 39, and that I should go out on the Bay with him one day soon. I had always wanted to try sea kayaking, and urged him to call me any time.

As luck would have it, the day he calls, I am in the throes of some kind of flu, but I'm at the office anyway. He doesn't even ask me how I am, even though my voice sounds terrible. In fact he doesn't even say hello, just a simple growl, "Let's take the kayaks out. I've got an extra wet suit. Can you be here in fifteen minutes?"

I could have said no. I should have said no. Prudence, however, was not in the air. Fourteen minutes later I am at the door of his condo a few blocks from Pier 39. Twenty minutes later I have wriggled into his extra wetsuit and am following him on his wife's bike to the waterfront. It's late afternoon, an abnormally warm day, tourists swarming the area. We lock up the bikes on the top of a pier and then scramble down awkwardly in our wetsuits to the boat slips where he has his two kayaks berthed.

I expect a nominal instruction or a little coaching. I have never done this before. Instead, what I get is a view of John's back as he hops in one and begins paddling away out into the Bay without a backward glance or a word. I scramble to get in the kayak, situate myself, figure out how to grip the paddles and control the rudder. I dig in hard with the paddle, wondering what the hell is going on and why he is being so inconsiderate. Then I remember that I really don't know him at all.

Eventually I get the rhythm down and I'm keeping up with him, though not a word has passed between us. We're simply headed out into the Bay and there's a great deal of boat traffic. We are, of course, the smallest objects in sight. There are sailboats of every kind. Ferries chugging across to Marin and Angel Island. And most impressively, enormous cargo ships lumbering in toward the

Oakland waterfront stacked with containers the size of small houses. The surface is rough from all the boat traffic, but I've got a good stroke going and now I'm cruising through the chop feeling more or less at one with my little craft. I'm beginning to relax and enjoy this, a nice balance of outing, adventure and recklessness. The scenery is stupendous from the vantage point of the water's surface, the City skyline on one side and the Marin headlands on the other, and the adrenaline rush has completely subdued the flu symptoms that I'd been wrestling with. I am feeling good, and even though I am not feeling particularly comradely toward John at the moment, I am glad I've come and am having another notable adventure.

I follow close to John as he heads straight out toward the middle of the Bay, and now we are clearly in the middle of major shipping lanes. A Japanese cargo ship carrying Toyota pickups comes so close I can see the faces of crew hands standing at the deck rails and I can feel the vibrations of its engines. I could be surfing on the swells from its wake, a real thrill ride, but I am all the more aware of how fragile I am out here. We get to the midpoint of the Bay Bridge when finally, to my great relief, he slowly carves an arc back in the other direction.

Instead of the obvious vector back to Pier 39 and safe harbor, I realize we are making a beeline for a landing somewhere in between. John turns and yells over his shoulder, "I need a drink!" the only words he has spoken to me since we hit the water.

We ease up to a rickety dock off the kitchen of the Waterfront Restaurant and to a badly rusted ladder at one corner. We tie up the kayaks and I follow him up this shaky jumble of iron that looks like it's been abandoned for decades. But we come to a landing and go into an alcove between the bar and dining room. In our wet suits. The restaurant manager is wearing a tux and greeting the early arrivers with dignity and bearing. There is a small cluster of people

in the bar. I have never felt more conspicuous or ridiculously out of place in my life.

The manager gives John a slight nod and we shuffle up to two bar stools, dripping sour sea water that had sloshed into the kayaks. The bartender greets John as if nothing is out of place or the least bit unusual. John orders a double Dewars rocks. Well, okay, I'll have a margarita. Oddly, he has practically nothing to say to me. I don't even know how to start a conversation at this point.

John seems to be just sipping, but his drink vanishes in a minute or so. I have no idea how he does this. Then he unzips a side pocket and takes out his phone and punches up a call. It's brief, but he's smiling throughout and his voice takes on a syrupy-sweet tone that I find nauseating. I give him a questioning look, but he just flashes a knowing nod and a wink, and I leave it alone. I want to get out of here. I feel ridiculous and it's getting much later than I planned on being gone.

Quite suddenly there is a woman next to him. She's ebony black, curvaceous to a fault, bursting out of a too-tight dress. Her nails look like bloody talons. Her heels make her look like she's walking on stilts. They obviously know each other. They talk for a bit, a lot of teasing banter, flirtatious in an unsubtle way. Then he's off the stool with a casual "Have another drink. I won't be long." John limps off and she strides alongside him, holding on to a wet-suited arm with both hands, her heels clicking on the gleaming floor tiles. Now I'm sitting at the bar by myself, my wetsuit mostly dry by now, but I'm no less uncomfortable or self-conscious.

Ten minutes go by, painfully dragging out, and I am debating whether to simply make a break for it and paddle back on my own, though I'm certain I couldn't find the place we started from, much less where to leave the kayak. Much less get into John's condo and get my clothes, my wallet

At my wit's end, I begin to feel a wave of panic crash over me, and then suddenly he's back, with a stupid grin. I am visibly annoyed. He slaps a big hand clumsily on my shoulder. "Best fucking blow job in the City," he says, his hot breath in my ear. "You gotta try it. Seriously. My treat."

I glance over his shoulder. She catches my eye. She is voluptuous, all curves, a black dress glittering with sequins plastered to her body. She beams an enormous smile my way. Her teeth gleam at me. This is for real. Damn. I am utterly flustered. All I want to do is get the hell out of here and go home. Competing against that need is the desire to be cool, not to wuss out. But. I shake my head. "Can't. Not this time," I say, trying not to sound lame. "I've got to get back. I've got shit happening I really need to deal with. Next time, okay?"

He looks at me archly, as if my passing on a free blowjob on the loading dock out back of the Waterfront Restaurant is the most unbelievable thing he's ever heard of. He shakes his head, shrugs, waves her off, then tosses down the last of his drink.

To my immense relief, we finally get up and pad out of the bar and onto the rickety pier out back. We maneuver down the rusted ladder to the water and I somehow manage to get into my kayak without flipping into the Bay. As before, John simply takes off, paddling strongly into the setting sun. On San Francisco Bay, a setting sun is accompanied by a rising wind, directly into our faces, and it's tough going. Rather than stay in open water, John goes for the short cut and heads under the nearest pier and maneuvers between the pilings. There is a string of very long old piers on rotted wooden pilings between where we are and where we need to be, and we are on a beeline through them, though the light is fading quickly and the water under the piers is slapping back and forth and it is suddenly very easy to imagine going under the next one and not coming out. I have no business here. As I get banged up against one piling after

another in the darkness, I try to yell at him, but fear seizes me by the throat.

Somehow we make it through the labyrinth of pilings and inky polluted water, and I not only make it home safely, but the adrenaline pump that has been running at full throttle for hours seems to have burned out the last of my flu, an unexpected dividend.

Days later, I am at the gym. After a workout, soaking in the eucalyptus scented vapors of the steam room, having it all to myself. I sense the door opening and the shadows of two people coming in. The steam is so dense they can't see me at all. They are talking. I ignore them, lying in my bit of reverie in the heat. Suddenly a word pierces the fog. "The Bear." That would be Bear Stearns, the investment house. Where John works. Then "leg" pops out of the conversation. I am suddenly hyper aware and tuned in to every word the two of them are muttering. One of them is asking about John's missing leg. "Yeah, he told me the story," the other one says. "Amazing shit. He was motorcycling through Viet Nam by himself, off in the mountains somewhere on a dirt road. Hit an old land mine, left over from the war. Had to rip up his shirt to make a tourniquet, nearly bled to death before some villagers found him and took him in. Didn't see a doctor or a hospital for over a week. Guy's lucky to be alive." "Wow, the guy is fucking amazing!" the other one says breathlessly.

I fight back the urge to introduce myself and tell them the shark version of the story. I am both amused and disgusted at the implications. I decide that I will simply avoid contact with him from here out. A few days later, getting ready to leave the gym, I am standing in the reception area and I see him come up to the entry portico with his gym bag. He lives only two blocks away. But instead of coming in, he waits by the door, and then I see why. A minute later a Mercedes convertible pulls up in front, in the driver's seat a well put together woman of indeterminate age. John glances quickly

around and then dashes to the car and they speed off. Well, of course. He tells his wife he's going to the gym. He's not entirely lying because he actually makes it to the gym — sort of.

I successfully avoid him for a long time. Months later, Catherine and I and another couple are going out to dinner in North Beach. As we approach the restaurant door, I hear my name called out. John, and a couple of other guys, hanging out by the parking valet station in front. I go over to say hi politely, letting my group go on into the restaurant ahead of me. As I approach I can see that he is very drunk, propping himself up on a parking meter. I have no idea who the other two guys are. Suddenly he grabs me by the shirt, around my neck, and yanks me close to him, something barely intelligible but clearly venomous coming from his mouth. I can't tell what he's saying, but it doesn't matter, it's suddenly simply a bad situation. I grab his wrist and squeeze it hard. He glares at me fiercely and tightens his grip. Well, fuck. I don't say anything, just squeeze his wrist harder until I see pain in his eyes, and he lets go. But I don't. I peel his arm backward and then down, forcing him to his knees. I glance quickly at his two friends, but they're just watching us stupidly. I look down at him with disgust. I want to feel pity but it's just not there. I let him go, and he falls forward, grabbing his wrist. I turn and walk into the restaurant.

