

The Explosions Sound Like Gunshots

by sean m. poole

The explosions sound like gunshots. Antonio Gattorno, absorbed in his work, flinches. He curses as he smears the brush across the canvas. He's been painting since mid-morning. It's a hot summer day. Tomorrow is the fourth of July. He'd forgotten for a moment. Firecrackers! He laughs at himself as he remembers then puts down the palette and stands up.

Looking out the bay window he sees the paperboy fling the afternoon edition onto the porch of the cottage adjoining the studio. The kid glances back waving as he pedals away. Gattorno salutes in return. He walks out of the studio crosses the yard and steps onto the porch. Picking up and unfolding the paper he immediately sees the banner headline. He freezes in shock.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY DEAD IN IDAHO

Gattorno feels as if he's been punched. Like he's had the wind knocked out of him. Ernesto. Ernesto. Ernesto. He cannot stop saying the name. His friend's name. His friend Ernesto. Ernesto whom he will never see again. His eyes fill with tears. They roll down his cheeks falling on the paper. He sobs softly without shame. Another round of firecrackers explodes in the yard next door. This time he makes no reaction to the sound as he steps inside the house reading the newspaper story of his dear friend's death.

He takes a bottle of rum from the bar he built for Isabel. He fills a glass, drains it, fills it again and drains it once more. He pours another glassful of rum sipping this one slowly. He sinks into his chair by the window staring blankly at the newspaper.

The firecrackers are like gunfire, Gattorno thinks. He drinks his rum. He doesn't know much about guns but he remembers what a big automatic pistol sounds like. It's been a very long time since

he's heard one. He empties the glass, settling back into the chair eyes closed, remembering.

Ernesto owned an automatic pistol, a .45 caliber Colt.

It was June 1935. They were fishing the Gulf Stream on the Pilar. Antonio and Lillian. Ernesto and Pauline. Lopez Mendez. Juan was the cook. Carlos served as pilot and deckhand. There was a young American writer on board, too. His name was Arnold Samuelson.

Ernesto called him the Maestro, Mice for short.

They pulled out of Havana Harbor before seven. They drank vermouth on the rocks for breakfast and most of the morning. Ernesto prepared lunch at about one o'clock. He made his specialty - a salad with plenty of garlic, onions and avocados. They drank several bottles of red wine as they feasted.

Lopez Mendez had brought a portable phonograph on board. Ernesto set it up on the shelf by the wheel. They all sang along with the records. They laughed and talked.

Pauline began asking each of them to share their goals, their hopes and dreams.

Lopez Mendez wanted to go to Hollywood and marry a beautiful American movie star. Lillian Gattorno wanted to go there and become one. The Maestro wanted to become a writer like his mentor. His mentor pointed out that it was nearly 4 o'clock in the afternoon. It was time to conclude the parlor talk and resume fishing. And drinking.

They did just that. Hooks were baited. Whiskey was poured. Antonio and Lillian perched on the fish box aft, their backs to the sea. Lopez Mendez sat with Ernesto and Pauline under the cockpit roof fishing with mackerel baits in the shade.

They were twenty-five miles off Havana when Ernesto hooked a big marlin.

A recent injury prevented him from fully extending his right arm without pain yet he labored tirelessly to reel in that fish. After a while the women went below to help Juan in the galley. Gattorno moved to sit in the shade with the fishermen. The Maestro poured them each a fresh glass of whiskey.

Ernesto had been working the marlin for nearly an hour when he saw the shark. He took his time bringing the marlin to the surface, guiding it to the stern. Carlos leaped onto the fish box with the gaff in hand hooking the shark in one powerful lunge.

Ernesto said, "Bring me the .45, Mice."

He handed the reel to Juan. Samuelson took the pistol from its holster in the rubber sack and gave it to Ernesto.

Hemingway stood up cursing at the shark. Samuelson and Carlos pulled together on the gaff handle raising the shark up out of the water. The big fish snapped its jaws its powerful tail churning up the water.

"You thieving bastard! That's my fish! You cowardly, carrion rogue!"

Ernesto fired his pistol, shooting his initials into the shark's head. The water foamed and boiled. Flesh and blood splattered the deck.

Gattorno lost his temper. He became furious. He shouted at Hemingway over the sound of the gunfire.

"It is you who are a bastard! Ernesto the murdering bastard! The shark is working for his supper. He is doing his job. You are fishing for sport! You have plenty of money to buy food or to pay a market fisherman for his catch. You are too eager to deal out death I think. You fish for marlin because you love the thrill of the hunt and yet you shoot the shark simply because he is feeding. I don't understand you sometimes!"

Ernesto stopped firing and holstered the gun. He squinted at Antonio. He grinned.

"Relax my boy! Take it easy! Mice, fetch Gattorno another drink! He's up on his soapbox again. Best not to lecture me on death, Mijo, not unless you know more about it than I think you do."

Arnold passed a bottle to Gattorno. Antonio drank deeply. He held onto the bottle as he spoke to Hemingway.

"I don't know as much about death as you do Ernesto. Perhaps that is what startles me when I see you kill with such ease. It saddens me to think my friend can be so hard and so cold."

Gattorno took another long drink then handed the bottle to Hemingway. Ernesto tipped the bottle back. He smacked his lips and laughed at his friend.

“Ah for Christ's sake man! Don't be such a maricon! Death is just like a knockout punch. It's like when you pass out. It's not much more than that. Here have another drink. You'll see what I mean!”

Antonio reaches for the bottle. It slips from Ernesto's fingers. Antonio looks down expecting to see it smash against the teakwood boards of the deck but there is only the sea. The bottle splashes into the water and sinks. He hears Ernesto laughing over the sound of gunfire. The sun follows the bottle into the murky depths. Night falls.

The sounds and the smells of firecrackers and summer revelry fill the warm evening air as Isabel walks home. Antonio's studio is dark. A single light burns in the window of their cottage. Antonio is passed out in his chair softly illuminated in the pool of light cast by his reading lamp. The newspaper is in his lap. The empty bottle of rum is on the floor beside him. Isabel is poised to deliver a poke and a rude awakening to her drunken husband when she sees the newspaper. The headline jumps into focus. She picks it up, reading, and begins to weep.

