



Alpine Dolphins



Blackberry tea with travelers by the sea

Teachers expect precision. All the time, with every written or spoken word, any practicing rhetorician demands accuracy in word choice and content.

Sometimes, I don't feel precise at all.

This is a short and precise story about imprecision.

The cold sea air falling dueled with the hot steam rising from my blackberry tea. The steam always lost. It rose from the depths of the saucepan strong and wild like a football-adrenaline monster and promptly was destroyed like a three-day-old kitten within six or eight inches. The steam could never win.

I sat beneath a near-petrified log lean-to and watched my tea steep, waiting for the sun to make its way toward my shelter from behind my back. It was morning on the West Coast, somewhere on the Klamath coastline in Northern California. This particular stretch of beach was deserted, prehistoric and beautiful. Monolithic boulders lay like the spines of dinosaurs once connected on a beach rolling on like the Sahara for a half-mile or so from where the ocean ended and the forest began. Or vice versa.

Either way, if you wandered in the middle of the dunes and couldn't hear the surf break, you'd have sworn you were in the middle of the Lost Wasteland Desert. But then, if you climbed to the top of the knoll on the last dune, you could see the ocean, open and mysterious, like a vast letter with no return address, no postage stamp, though dog-eared and tattered from traveling a blue billion miles. Fifteen- to 20-foot waves, post-marked from the mid-oceanic ridge, broke on the spines of dinosaurs sending the mail service every which way.

I just sat there with my blackberry tea.

Wandering the coast had been my habit and occupation, for three months now. I headed home in a week to start back to school. My sojourn was peaceful and productive. Thus far, I'd met many interesting travelers, and we'd exchanged many stories. This is one of them.

I poured a mug of tea. It was hot, so I let it steep in the mug. I looked toward the south and saw a thin man with a bright red moustache and hair to match. His olive pants had holes in the knees and he kept a very odd sort of stride -- he skip-

hopped on every fourth step. It was a kind of I-don't-care-about-anything-too-seriously-type of walk. He noticed me and walked towards the lean-to.

"Howdy."

"How-do," he said.

"Care for some tea?"

"Sure. Let me grab my tin."

He put down his pack and pulled a mug from one of the side pockets; I poured the tea.

"Name's Shamus," I said.

"Debel. Sal D. Debel."

"Where you coming up from Sal?"

"Why, the tip of South America, of course. That's where this body of land starts anyway. And I've

COWAN
Kevin

walked the whole way, except for when I had to swim the Panama Canal."

I looked at his boots, they were only slightly worn.

"Bull-puckey."

"No, really! I've walked the whole way. What, you think I did it on one pair of boots? I bought these new in San Fran."

"How long has it taken you?"

"Well, I've walked 20 miles a day for 620 days. You figure it out." I looked at him pensively, smiled, and did not answer.

"12,368," he said.

"Got a head for math, Eh?"

"What else have I got to think about all day?"

"Where you walking to then?"

"North Pole."

"That figures."

"Well, you know. You want to make it whole and linear -- it's the way of the Western world."

"Yes, except that same way of thinking separates things into parts, you know: ignore the whole and specialize."

"Let them have their way of thinking, and I'll have mine. I believe it's a free planet."

"Point well-taken."

"Where are you coming from?" he inquired.

"Toronto," I said off the top of my head.

I actually had not come from Toronto, but what the hell. Anything's fair in story-telling.

"Walk all the way, did you?"

"No. I took a couple rides."

"Wimp."

"Suit yourself."

"Why get in a car for Chrissakes? You miss the convection of the walk, the subtleties of the landscape, the smells and the sounds."

"I didn't -- I don't have 620 days. I had three months; I have one month left to go."

"Go back to where? Toronto?"

"No, Bonn, Germany."

"No. Really?"

"Ja, wirklich."

"Huh?"

"That's German for yes, really."

He sipped his tea; I stood and stretched in the sunshine.

"What are you going to do in Bonn?"

"I make boats. I've been learning to build boats and ships since I was a child, have studied ship building in Germany and in the U.S., in Portland."

"Where in Germany?"

"In Bonn, of course."

"Of course."

He sat and thought for a moment.

"I don't believe you," he said.

"Why not?"

"Bonn is inland. Ship building wouldn't be functional, I'd bet."

"Yep, you got me. But I got you, too."

"No you don't."

"You're right, I don't. Have you really walked all the way up from South America?"

"No. I was just messing with your head. I have, however, walked all the way up from San Diego, which feels like walking up from the Straits of Magellan some days. Actually, I've only been out a couple months. I'm taking some time off from school to travel."

"Me, too."

We both laughed.

"You need to work on that story telling, Shamus. Don't be so random. The simple key to good story telling is precision in description," Sal said. "Be precise."

"Yep. I agree with you totally, Sal, and I have one thing to add, or divide as it were."

"What's that?"

"12,368 divided by 20 rounds down to 618."

Cowan is a senior sociology and English major and a Diversions columnist.



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