Shots With Steinbeck

At The Spaniard bar in Havana, I sat between John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway, the air thick with smoke and unspoken rivalry. Four ghosts of literature's greatest had gathered here—poking, prodding, and puffing on fat Cuban cigars—each claiming the soul of storytelling. Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe had parked me between the two writers because they didn't like one another and never would. I said, "I feel like a pendulum with a big axe is swinging above my chest, about to slice me in half."

Edgar Allan Poe scribbled something down.

"I don't want any trouble," I said, "I'm just an innocent abroad."

Mark Twain's eyes sharpened.

I did shots with Steinbeck and friends after sucking iodized salt from the back of my bruised and scarred hand mangled in heavy Caribbean seas from when I had helped an old man at sea fight a giant shark.

Hemingway loved my story.

The beeping of medical equipment hit my ears. "Dear, you must drink this quinine," my lovely nurse, Catherine Barkley, said with a British accent.

I swallowed the nasty tasting drink followed by a whiskey toast to the wonderful writers surrounding me.

Mark Twain stood up in my unwarranted defense, his eyes on Becky Thatcher who was painting the walls in my hospital room a bright white. Kinda hurt your eyes.

“Mark, I love your Presbyterian dog.” I shook my corrupted Hadleyburg head and took a deep breath. “I’ve sure been roughing it.”

My mentor’s eyes went wide. “Mind if I use those ideas?”

A joyful tear fell from my cheek and spattered on the table, joining the beer, cigar ashes, and slobber.

“Where is literature headed these days?” John Steinbeck asked, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

I imagined a head of literature getting picked from the garden. Wondered if it was ready to eat.

Hemingway lit another Cuban cigar and blew smoke *through* me at John. “Hell, you wouldn’t know good writing if it was shoved down your throat.”

Steinbeck shot back, “I don’t only know good writing, I describe *everything* so you can see, smell and feel it. You apparently missed that lesson.”

Sparks flew across my field of vision. A fight seemed imminent.

Ernie, now three-quarters shits to the wind, put his big knuckles to my nose, making blood trickle down my face along with a strange sweat that I couldn’t understand. He said with a wry grin, “Sorry, Kemosabe.”

“Have gun, will travel.” I presented my card.

Suddenly, I felt a needle hit my bare buns. “Phooey! That’s a big needle, my love.”

“I’m sorry, Honey, since you can’t get the quinine drink down, I must give you a shot.” A soft, compassionate smile. “I think you’re having strange dreams. It’s common with malaria.”

“Thanks Gertrude.” I gazed through the grey haze. “How is the Stein family doing these days?”

The look she gave me was over priced.

Back at the Spaniard, I shoved my left hand into my jeans and scratched the mice and men while I lay dying along with William Faulkner. “Mr. Steinbeck, why aren’t your lovable, lazy paisanos from Cannery Row here? They lost?

He said, “At the moment, they’re on the road crashing Cadillacs with James Dean.” John scratched his big ugly nose. “Wait, they’re with Jack Kerouac.”

“I see. I was worried they might be with them there oakies picking fruit – those California authorities take graft and are full of wrath.”

Steinbeck exclaimed, “That’s a great title for my novel. I’ll call it “The Wrath of Graft.”

I opened my mouth to suggest something more profound, but a cold cloth slapped my forehead.

“Dear, you’re flailing your arms and sweating furiously,” a pretty woman said. The Rose of Sharon offered to breastfeed me. Her hand touched my left arm and I exclaimed, “We must say a farewell to arms.”

Hemingway said, “Hey, I like that title, mind if I use it?”

“That’s like you – stealing from others,” Steinbeck said.

“Look who’s talking?” Ernie retorted, his fists curled and ready.

John stared right through me as if I was a ghost.

Maybe I was.

The night was warm with a soft sea breeze ruffling the Spanish-speaking patron's black hair, unintelligible patter of giggling Spanish senoritas pressed to men's sides, arms, and toes. The bullfight is tomorrow!

Twain remarked wittily with a grin on his white-whiskered face, a tasty stub of a Cuban cigar hanging from the corner of his lips. He spat on the table.

"Heaven forbid, your drool is running for my lap!" Lord Jim, with a heart of darkness, cried for the wild, trying to get Joe Conrad to change the outcome.

"I'll be damned, Doyle. How did you channel my favorite author?" Hemingway said as he stubbed his fat cigar nub into the ashtray that ran over and off the table along with a river of beer. The ashtray waved its hands like it was that famous jumping frog in Calaveras County. It stopped at the edge of the table and yelled at the top of its lungs, "You made me do this!"

It leaped…

And was soon fragmented on the floor to no one's dismay.

I rolled over and off the bed. Lenore came to my rescue. "Monsieur, you must be more careful or you will become even more unreliable. Now please, drink this quinine or I'll have to put a needle into your butt again."

Given her beauty, I bared both buns. "Be my guest." I grinned.

"OUCH! That hurt!"

Shoulda seen the look on Mr. Poe's face.

It was Hemingway's hundredth shot of whiskey and thousandth Cuban cigar this evening, not counting earlier during the day when he fought a four ton sailfish aboard the Pilar. He was letting a bait-less hook troll atop the warm Caribbean waves in the

Gulf Stream among the islands in the stream, hunting for Nazi submarines – sneaky suckers. Contract with the KGB, he claimed.

The new two ton test pole bent.

He manly grabbed it, brave to the bone. The pole snapped in half, dragging the man's man, wounded in a bone during the Spanish Civil war and ironically tried to home a British nurse. Shoulda left her to the bull fighters since she broke his little tell-tale heart. The red pony for whom the bell tolled was headed for Tortilla Flats. Before he made it, a monstrous noble marlin (symbolic of God) gnawed the boat to its rafters. "I fought 'er hard, got wet," Grandpa Hemingway remarked with a blend of sadness and pride.

Sweating like a mad man, I was suddenly aware that Clara's wet nurse was coming at me with a huge needle. Frightened because I was trapped in the House of Usher, I made the mistake of clenching my buns.

It struck its target.

"ALAS!" I cried out.

George said sternly, "Relax, Lenny, or you'll never pet another rabbit."

Doc feigned horror.

Suddenly, I was in another Edgar Allan Poe mystery. I surreptitiously whispered in Hemingway's ear, gnarly from a lion attack, "The Masque of The Red is here."

The crowded bar went silent as heads ducked and sombreros fell fortuitously on the filthy floor. Anticipating an unanticipated O'Henry twist, we all cheered.

I looked around the rancid place where gangrene in the leg had taken the protagonist's life, frightening us in this gloomy jungle below the snows of Kilimanjaro.

The adobe walls cracked wider.

I raised a wad of American dinero to attract Widow Douglas. “I’ll have five whiskey shots to share with my writing buddies.” I winked.

“You should *not* take advantage, Doyle.” The widow slapped her own face.

I hollered, “Leave me alone!”

She did.

Brett Ashley**,** my new nurse, took my hand. “Dear, you’re sopping wet.” She leaned over and promiscuously kissed my forehead.

Hemingway’s lividly drunk face loomed between us. “Listen Doyle, I need a new character and this Brett fits the bill. Can I use her?”

I offered a toast, “Of course, Ernie, what are friends for? You’ve taken all my ideas for interesting characters, why not Miss Ashley?”

The door opened into the dreary night, heads turned, and in walked Tita, selling spicy burritos. Magically, they sold out within seconds. One bite and her love entered our bodies, then seeped throughout the smoke-filled bar.

The mustard gas slowly came at our trench. I fumbled with my gas mask. It was not at all quiet on the western front, not since Schindler had reported that his factory was out of gas.

Poe’s raven dipped its tail and hit the center of our table with a pile of white runny stuff. The rancid chalk ran slowly into my lap. I stared down at it. “Why me?” Asked Alfred E. It was 1984, a Brave New World.

The Lord of the Flies made me Cracked up, I was Mad!

Shakespeare sat up with a start. “Are ye fine gentlemen negating the truth? Forsoothe, methinks the ghosts of days past haunt your weary heads.”

Don Quixote went on and on, padding the story with unknown, unpronounceable words as did Dostoevsky and Dickens since they were paid by the word.

I love diarrhea of the ears.

Hemingway let out a huge smoke ring and casually remarked, “Ah, a cool Caribbean breeze to make the evening into a moveable feast.”

Miss O’Hara placed a cold wet towel on my chest and I sat up and said, “Good to see you, you literary slut, I love you!” I ranted and raved. I was Kafka madly metamorphosing into a slimy vermin in the hospital room. “You’re all insane!”

Scarlett said flippantly, “I’ll think about it tomorrow.” And turned away.

I leafed page by incredible page, a legacy to admire here on earth where I resided, hidden within the majesty of the snow covered mountains of Alaska, called to the wild, a private, quiet, writer’s life, alone and very frightened as I desperately tried to start a fire.

In my heart and mind I feverishly failed to immolate them; I loved each and each – not only as great artists, but as souls who killed words and literary works without mercy – they thought little of me, despite being my idols. I was swept into the sea along with Edgar’s beautiful, frail, and anorectic, Annabelle Lee.

I was lost in literature

My buddies yelled, “Stop it!”

The next thing I saw was Hemingway’s fist speeding at my nose, breaking my malaria sweat.

A nurse named Aunt Polly hit me with another shot of quinine combined with Acetaminophen.

Crazy, I was.

At last, I slept.

But later, the radio came on, “Good Morning Vietnam!”

“No, please!” I yelled, “Not another wet dream…”