

Cape Calamity

It was evening on Route 28. It was also 1963, and fore and aft of us, low-slung Fords and Buicks were steaming by under the influence of hot drivers with close-cropped hair and high-rolled T-shirts, some with cigarette packs tucked in the sleeves. My older brother and I had been making a boat delivery, and we had been offshore for three days straight. My brother, who had wrung more saltwater out of his socks than most people have sailed over, was getting upset. The exhaust and the roadside hamburger stands were getting to him. His car had lost a number of critical parts and was unable to maintain a proper speed, and the drivers of the big Buicks were getting angry. One after another they would charge up behind us, tailgate for an improper period, and then pass. All we were doing was attempting to get to Boston alive.

In exasperation we pulled over. My brother stood sadly by the side of the road, shaking his head.

“What’s up?” I asked him.

“Just look,” he said. He was staring at one of the roadside stands that were a common element of the landscape in those unfortunate years. It was an ice cream stand that advertised itself with an immense, towering model of a milk bottle, one of the definitive landmarks on that section of Route 28 in those spicy bygone days.

We looked up and down the highway. As far as the eye could see, there were similar, though less ambitious, stands lining the road. Little crowds of dusty Bucks had gathered around them, like cows at a trough.

“What’s the matter?” I asked again.

“This has got to be the ugliest spot in all America,” he said.

Indeed.

But Cape Cod was a sad land from the beginning, the soil poor, the trees half-stunted, storms forever sweeping landward, tearing up the coast and spraying saltwater across the whole peninsula. It was a hard land. Even the Wampanoags

had a hard time there, and to make things worse, after Europeans arrived in their winged ships, the plagues came with them and laid waste to the meager villages.

Perhaps it was prelude. Even William Bradford found the place grim. The world stood before his pilgrims with a weather-beaten face, the whole country full of woods and thickets with a wild and savage hue, a hideous desolate wilderness filled with wild beasts and wild men, and only the ocean behind them, "...a main bar and gulf to separate them from all the civil parts of the world," as Bradford wrote.

"Better than it used to be." I said to my brother. "At least we can eat in winter."

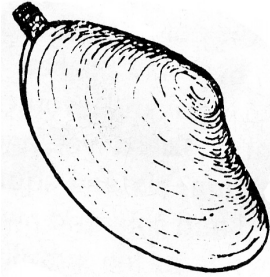
He looked at me as if I were crazy. He is eight years older than I am, and he sometimes reminds me of Captain Ahab. I stared back, as I sometimes would with him, and he quoted *Moby Dick*, as he sometimes would. "Unfix thine eye," he spit, echoing Ahab. "More intolerable than fiend's glarings is a doltish stare."

We drove on. It was indeed ugly. And as it was a Sunday evening in the summer, it was indeed crowded. We got stuck near Buttermilk Bay.

He began to rant again. Three days at sea never did my brother much good. It only made him worse.

On the other hand, maybe he was right. Two hundred years after William Bradford arrived, the Cape had not fared much better. The scrawny forest of oak and pitch pine and beech had been stripped, the fauna had been extirpated,





and the houses were small and roughly built. Henry Thoreau, passing through on a walking tour in 1850, claimed that the residents of Chatham had to use fog for shade instead of trees. He said the farmers were so unfamiliar with trees that they would refer to them by the personal pronoun, “I got him out of the woods,” one old farmer told Thoreau. “He doesn’t bear well,” he said of another.

The people were poor and had bad teeth. They built fences from ships’ ribs, scavenged from the wrecks, of which there were many. It used to be said that if all the wrecks that piled up on the back side of the Cape were laid bow to stern, they would make a solid wall from Chatham to Provincetown.

“Things are getting better,” I told my brother in 1963.

“Just wait,” he said.

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