

LOST!

By Barry Block, DPM, JD

College reunions are often bitter-sweet; an opportunity to remember the past and come face to face with the ravages of time. Twenty-five years after my graduation, I planned to reunite with another college student who didn't even attend my school. He wasn't a friend; in fact I hardly knew him, yet his impact on my life has been so profound that I felt compelled to search him out of my past and confront him again.

It had been fifteen years since I'd seen him last. A letter to his old alma mater, Brooklyn College was unproductive. I called a fellow Hunter College Alumni and friend Jeffrey Odell, now a prominent ophthalmologist, but to no avail. Jeff recently moved from Forest Hills to Manhattan and had discarded much old memorabilia. I called my former girlfriend Arlene Finn, but she too had only pictures without addresses. Even a search of the Internet revealed nothing, and unfortunately his last name, Brenner was all too common. Finding him was going to be like finding a needle in a haystack..or more appropriately a tiny raft in a vast ocean.

On Friday, February 28th , 1970 we were lost at sea, sixty five miles off the coast of Aruba. Looking back a generation later, the lessons derived from this harrowing adventure have assumed a new meaning and perspective. The emotional turmoil of that awakening at sea became a catharsis that shaped the rest of my life.

Spring of 1970 was a time of unrest at college campuses, with anti-war fervor reaching new dimensions, climaxing with the killing of four students by national guardsman at Kent State. Final exams were canceled nationwide and the future of an entire generation looked bleak. Not so for a few dozen lucky students from Hunter and Brooklyn College, urban branches of the City University of New York to which all students commuted from the safety of their homes. We had elected to spend that semester in the idyllic environs of Aruba. Along with several faculty members , we were studying marine biology, sociology, anthropology.. but primarily just having fun. It was the year after Woodstock, and we were still basking in the sun of rebellion, feeling our oats and searching for new experiences.

Friday morning the 28th was a typical school day. I awoke in a the cottage which had once served as the home of Exxon employees. Our contingent occupied several of these structures in the Exxon compound which was located on the eastern end of the island just up the big hill from San Nicholas. Perhaps a hundred of these pastel cottages, reminiscent of Long Island's Fire Island were scattered among several hundred acres of sandy soil. Each of these single-story bungalows housed eight or nine students in bunk beds among three bedrooms and a common kitchen and bathroom. It was Spartan and commune-like.

The overall atmosphere was one of tranquillity, save for an occasional visit by one or more of San Nicholas's native macho men on motorcycles. Imitating Hell's Angels these dark skinned mulatto natives in their early twenties were intrigued by

the presence of Americans and eagerly adopted anything cultural from us from the latest musical cassettes to Levi jeans.

We stood in stark contrast to the tourist's version of Aruba situated on the casino laden western end of the island, some seven miles away. That part of the island was dominated by the many restaurants and modern hotels of the port city of Oranjestad with its main emphasis on shopping and nightlife. In the Esso (now Exxon) Compound, not far from the Lago oil refinery, one of the largest in the world, a relaxed atmosphere prevailed. There were no fancy cruise ships, only an occasional behemoth sized oil tanker waiting to export its refined oil and perhaps return full of Hudson River drinking water touted as the best available. (Exxon was later to have gotten into legal trouble for having brought this water back without paying for it.)

Most of us did not take the morning classes seriously. In art class, we all went out to a dried up tar flat with gallon cans of house paint. My project consisted of merely tracing the dried cracks with paint. Others drew intricate patterns. Later we went up in a small plane and viewed our "masterpieces." Although we had some "serious" classes such as the genetics class taught by the noted professor Irwin Herskowitz, our minds were usually more focused on the afternoons, which could be spent on Rogers Beach. Here we played all the games that young people are drawn to, from flirting and showing off firm bodies to an actual game of volleyball. We rocked to the Beatles, the Stones, and the Beach Boys.

The whitish-tan beach was often littered with the remains of unfortunate sea creatures washed up onto an environment hostile and deadly, and unable to get back to the thriving marine habitat. Occasionally a horseshoe crab could be found, barely alive or struggling for breath in a fight for survival which it would eventually lose.

In the early afternoon, Barry Brenner, a Brooklyn College student and myself decided to take a 4-man rubber raft out for some snorkling in a quiet, shallow area known as Baby Lagoon. Brenner was a tall lanky and hip guy. With his long curly hair, he bore a great resemblance to Radio's shock jock, Howard Stern and usually looked like he just arrived with the Woodstock Festival. We were totally mismatched, both in attitude and appearance. He was definitely "cool." The Beatles were more my speed, Jimi Hendrix his.

Despite these differences, he had somehow agreed to join me in this adventure. Perhaps he had had enough of the beach scene or perhaps he wanted to exercise his athletic body. Anyway, we borrowed a raft from an aged biology professor interestingly named Dr. Salmon, whose wrinkled appearance reminded us of Granny from the BEVERLY HILLBILLIES. The bright canary colored rubber raft was the type designed for fishing on a small lake or mild river. The fact that it had rowboat oars seemed irrelevant at the time. Brenner grabbed an army surplus canteen filled with drinking water and off we went for an afternoon of fun.

The weather was typically near perfect, about eighty degrees with a slight breeze. The water was comfortably warm and amazingly clear. I had previously been scuba diving and experienced the aquarium like nature of the Caribbean waters. A large reef separates baby Lagoon and Rogers Beach an area noted for its

varied marine life including lobsters, Moray eels and an occasional barracuda, and of course there was talk about hungry sharks

We were having such a good time, shirtless and drinking in the euphoria of being away from home, that we opted to row out of the lagoon around the reef and around to Rogers beach. That turned out to be a very bad decision.

It took very little effort to exit the lagoon because we were aided by an outbound current of 4-5 knots and the increasing effects of the southwest blowing Divi Divi winds.

These winds are so prevalent that there is a type of tree known as the Divi Divi which is characterized by its peculiar angled shape, a result of the near constant wind direction. Within a few short minutes we were in open water, perhaps three-eighths of a mile from the shore. We first waved to the people on the beach and they waved back sensing that we were in no trouble. It took at least ten more minutes until we realized our predicament. Then we frantically tried to get their attention but by this point we were too far out for them to see our plight or hear our panic.

We desperately tried to row back exhausting ourselves in the futility of challenging the sea's will and we continued to drift further and further out. The physics were such that the long slender wooden oars did not provide the proper leverage to overcome the combined effects of the wind and the current. We were two boys in a craft designed for four men and like a balloon riding high on the water were literally being blown out to sea.

Should we abandon the boat and swim to shore or should we stay with the boat? We were both better than average swimmers, but what if we didn't make it? What if we were attacked by sharks. The athletic Brenner initially argued to abandon the raft and swim for shore. Boy scout experience told me stay with the boat..and every minute that argument became more persuasive to both of us as the distance increased and the seas roughened. After all, surely our classmates on the beach would realize we were in trouble. They would summon help to save us. Besides we wouldn't have to explain to Professor Salmon what happened to her raft.

The raft continued its relentless southwest journey along the shore of Aruba. A half hour or so later we found ourselves drifting past the actual Exxon refinery. A large oil tanker was anchored just offshore. On our present course we would slide by it on the outside. Would the people on the tanker see us? Or would we be sucked into the ship's powerful propellers? We waved furiously at the boat and yelled as loudly as we could. The noise from the tanker's engines drowned out any hope that we might be heard. And there was no reason for anyone on the tanker to look down. No one could be expected to venture so close to this giant. It seemed like an eternity until we finally passed this enormous vessel measuring many football fields long.

The sun was beginning to set and the realization that the fun was over set in. Land-sight began to fade and soon all we could see was the distant string of casino lights on the western end of the island. Those lights were soon replaced by the those of the constellations. The sky at night unobstructed by artificial light is striking. Brenner located the North star and having established our bearing started to row

back towards Aruba. I first thought of this as an exercise in futility. I later realized that it was a positive expression of his will to live.

Seasickness set in; I wretched, I buckled up in pain. In the open sea the raft was continually rocked. The sheer size and power of the ocean intimidates. Imagine looking in every direction and seeing nothing but water. Up and down, up and down, up and down...with no rest to steady one's stomach. The incessant swaying, the chanting litanies of the oscillating waves, our bobbing bodies in contrast to the unmoving sky; I closed my eyes and prayed to God "please give me a wooden piling to tie on to..and in recompense take my right arm."

Within a few hours I had vomited whatever contents remained in my stomach. After that all there was to expel was a bitter, foul tasting bile. Unemotionally, Brenner commanded that I vomit in the boat, so as not to "chum" for sharks. The fact that this putrid smelling expellent was soon diluted by waves that overran the raft and was baled into the sea defeated that notion anyway, but eventually all reason becomes replaced by the immediacy of survival. For example, during the night a small fish jumped into the raft. What to do? Brenner grabbed it and held it under the water until it "drowned." Imagine...drowning a fish in water. That fish might be our only food. We did have a canteen of water which we instinctively knew to hoard. With all this sea water around, we felt like we were in a desert.

Our next challenge was heat conservation. The bright sun that baked us in the day eventually was replaced by a chilling wind. Shivering, we huddled together to conserve body heat. It must not have been pleasant to get close to me at that point.. Occasionally Brenner would sit up and row ferociously until he would collapse in exhaustion. The hours passed slowly. We didn't dare allow ourselves to sleep. Besides, we would often take on water from a large wave. When this happened, we would have to bail it out, using only our cupped hands..

Still Brenner's indomitable spirit prevailed. Once while rowing early in the morning, his glasses fell off and into the deep ocean. This seemed yet another cruel act of the hand of fate as Brenner squinted into the horizon. Then Brenner, knowing I was of no use as a navigator, acquisitioned my pair and continued to row.

My depression continued to worsen. First I hallucinated that my parents would come by in a yacht and merely pull us in. Oh, if only my parents owned a boat. They had no idea what was happening to me. How would they take my death? Would our remains ever be found or would they sink to the bottom of the sea. We wondered what was below us. How deep was it; what creatures called this home?

God was very much on my mind. In my altered state of consciousness, I argued why I should be allowed to live. " I am after all only twenty-one years old. I haven't accomplished very much and gotten to do the things I had imagined I would do..like falling in love, getting married, having children and supporting myself. The odd jobs I had had like delivering newspapers or driving a Taxi cab on Long Island were small opportunities, but what experiences would I be denied. What would my life have been like if I had not taken this raft.

I thought about the time I had brought a crib sheet into a high school test and about the time I had lied to my parents about a bogus sleepover and had driven to South Carolina to buy some illegal fireworks. There was the time I sucker-

punched my sister, Ellen in the nose. I could have been a better friend to my brother, after all he was only 15 months older than me. Was I being punished for my misdeeds?

What memories would I leave behind? Artists leave paintings, musicians songs, and authors books. I thought of John F Kennedy and the pictures shrouded in black placed in store windows after his death. What if anything had I accomplished that would be worth remembering me for? When I was twelve, I went to the movie theater and found a wallet below the seat which I returned to its owner. He sent me a three dollar reward and a nice letter which now stuck in my mind. I balanced all my good deeds with my faults and feared that I did not deserve to live. That fear turned into belief and I laid down in a fetal position as the raft continued to rock.

Brenner's face was stoic with that gritty determination of a John Wayne. He wasn't talkative but always responsive. There was no feeling of blame because we knew we were cohorts in this. His presence was more important than any words he could have spoken. I knew he too had a family and much to live for. He was my only connection to humanity. We searched the skies and seas for any life, for any movement other than the rolling of the ocean. The cloudless skies had a blank look from horizon to horizon. Occasionally we would think we saw something moving in the distance, a glimmer of hope which would fade into the sameness of the ocean.

Suddenly Brenner got excited. He was sure he had seen a boat and as I squinted into the distance I saw something too, but then it was gone. Was this another cruelty?

In a few seconds we saw it again between wave rises, or did we? As the wave lifted us up a boat came into sight only to disappear as we came down. We started to wave our arms and yell for help though they were much too far to have possibly heard us. Over an interminable period of time they seemed to get closer and we continued our desperate efforts. Our yelling turned into screams of joy as the realization set in that they saw us too and were heading our way.

As they approached us we began to see the swarthy faces of fisherman looking at us in amazement. They threw us a line and pulled us towards them. Then we felt the strong arms of working men pluck us out of the ocean. They spoke rapidly in Spanish. Brenner knew some Spanish, mostly curses and he struggled to explain our predicament. As the raft was pulled aboard we stood in reverence to the vehicle that had both gotten us into trouble and sustained us at the same time. A man came running with a bowl of something to offer us. When I looked in and saw raw fish, I fainted.

We arrived in Las Piedras Venezuela late at night. After not having dry land below us we were still not allowed to get off the boat. We were aliens without identification. There were no Customs authorities to contact until morning when both Aruban and American diplomats would cut through a slew of red tape to arrange our return to Oranjestad.

I did get to eat my first food in two days, an ice cream sandwich, the taste of which has never been equaled.

The next morning a private boat from the Aruba Yacht Club. We were greeted as celebrities. Everyone had a million questions. We were featured in

newspaper articles and appeared on local television emanating from The Talk of The Town, famous restaurant.

We walked around like heroes until Prof. Herskowitz sat us down and explained to us what fools we had been. Reality set in. We were indeed lucky to be alive.

That realization made all the difference in my future. I found a new appreciation for many of the things I had always taken for granted; the subtle aroma of a simple flower, the taste and texture of a hamburger, the sound of a bird chirping. My life turned around.

From a mediocre non-caring student I became a motivated learner. I was determined not to waste the rest of my life by drifting aimlessly.

A generation later I am satisfied that with the path my life has taken. I am happily married with three children. Three separate careers have been successful and still more challenges lay ahead. But what ever happened to Barry Brenner? Despite this ultimate bonding experience we had endured, I had lost contact with him. How had this experience, so seminal to me affected him? We had last met at a tenth anniversary reunion by many former Aruba students but only briefly mentioned the raft incident. Maybe he was still mad at me for getting him into that mess or was it that the confrontation with our own mortality was too fresh in our minds and too painful to recollect.

I never did locate Brenner, but maybe someday I will. And what of the others from my generation. Perhaps the Dr. Spock philosophy under which we were raised gave us the freedom to experiment and express ourselves. We all seemed so self-confident and knew where we were going, but we wouldn't be able to get back by ourselves if we got into trouble. The cries for help in our generation could not be heard. No one was there to pluck us from our foolish wanderings and give us a good spanking. Perhaps too many of our heroes came from such self-destructive adventures. Perhaps some of us are still lost and waiting to be rescued. Perhaps the experience of being lost in of itself has given special meaning to our lives.