

Blue Ice

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Milazzo, Sicily

The light of the gas fire on the point across the bay danced atop the crests of wavelets that dotted the surface of the sea like freckles on the face of a child. On that gnarled, rocky headland a large refinery lorded over all, a huge, ceaseless pump from which life in Milazzo ushered forth in a steady ooze of distillate. Looking across the bay from that point, one could see to the main street, laid bare before the soft womb of the harbor. From the headland the constant orange glow of the butane burn off fire, mixed with the sodium lights at the British Petroleum installation, extended its rays over the water to bathe the heavy gray granite quay, the dark buildings behind it and the boats tethered to it in a crimson light, as though they stood at the base of some great volcano spewing forth its wrath in torrents of brimstone and fire. This light though, was born not in the violent rapture of destruction, but in the more subtle, gentle forge of creation. Here the unrefined and appropriately named crude from throughout the Mediterranean was processed in the steel digestive tract of the BP beast, rendered down from its natural state to its more useful components, leaving only the waste that seeped from the tanks into the ground and the butane that was burned from the top of the towers relentlessly as though it was this fire that drove the beast, this spark that propelled the works.

This striking paradox of beauty, between ocean and refinery, would be all but lost most mornings at this time, the majority of the townspeople having been asleep for hours. The few who were drowsily going about their chores in preparation for the morning could not be bothered to waste their time gazing at a harbor they had seen every day for so many years. The rats that ran about the quay, scuttling from sewer opening to sewer opening, feeding, fornicating,

seemed not to notice the beauty of this ballet of light either; their only concerns this morning or any morning, were utterly utilitarian. Along the road that ran parallel to the granite quay, the bistros and restaurants had long ago stacked their tables and closed their doors. The lights at each of the two hotels, the seedy flop house by the aliscafo (hydrofoil) dock called the Sonora and the not quite so seedy tourist place by the ferry dock known as the Pomero, were all extinguished, the guests having retired in preparation for the coming day. At least, that is, most of the guests.

On that night, if you were to look long and hard, between the two tattered curtains in the fourth window on the right of the third floor of the Hotel Pomero you might have noticed a slight hint of light, alternating from a flickering white, at times grayish to an almost phosphorescent green. There a young man in a sweat soaked tee shirt sat at a dirty table huddled over a night vision scope which poked through the curtains, staring intently at two rust streaked freighters docked on either side of the town's dilapidated commercial pier. On the tabletop, a small laptop computer sat open, the white screen pulsing almost imperceptibly.

From his vantage point, the scope's illuminating light added a strange green tint to the two ships, but in return brought into view a variety of features which remained invisible to the naked eye. To the side of the table an old television flickered with scenes of Moby Dick, in English with Italian subtitles. At this particular moment there was relatively little to see out the window. There was no movement on either of the ships, short of the barely discernable movement of a few rats scurrying about. For two days it had been this way. Few people had come or gone, none of the sailors had been given shore leave and there had been no loading or unloading of cargo. Thurrow murmured another in what had become a string of obscenities and turned to the television.

Milazzo, just a short distance up the north coast of Sicily from Messina and its ferry service to the toe of the boot that is Italy, is a fairly large town, with aspirations towards becoming a city. The primary source of the town's marginal prosperity is the oil refinery

that lords over it from across the large, deep water harbor which shares its name. Typically, one can expect to see four or five tankers anchored in the harbor's refuge, with the small fleet of pilot boats, lighters and repair vessels busily hovering about like flies around a horse. The majority of the residents of the town are either employed by the refinery or in one of the many businesses related to it, either directly, such as a local marine survey company or indirectly, as is the case of the many restaurants and cafes that existed mostly on oil money. Sure, the town had a tourist trade; it was the port of departure for the Aeolian Islands, where Homer tells us Odysseus's crew opened the box of the swirling winds. The islands are now a favorite destination for thousands of European, primarily Scandinavians, drawn to Lipari, with its charming old world village, Volcano, with its warm volcanic springs and Stromboli, which is world renowned for its soft, black sand beaches.

Still, the town's feel is almost third world. On a warm day, which is everyday between March and October, the scent of the rotting garbage and sewage that float in the harbor paints the town in a sweet, disgusting odor so thick that it surpasses the mere qualities of scent, manifesting itself in a distinctly bitter flavor that settles on the tongue and defies all attempts to remove it. The tan buildings are mostly three story stucco facades streaked with rust that is the endemic to the salty air. Its streets, or at least those that are wide enough to be called that, are for the most part cobblestone. The major exception is the macadam main road by the heavy granite quay on the waterfront that runs from the marine repair yard at the base of the Milazzo highway, several miles west to the town pier, a rotted wharf that for all appearances could tumble into the ocean at any moment.

The Pomero is an elderly hotel which tries to cater towards the tourists, but in fact subsists primarily on a rogue's gallery of transient refinery technicians, sailors and anyone else capable of paying the 7,000 lira required for a nights stay. There are few who can't afford the \$8.00 rent for a room. Outside, the stucco is dark, stained heavily by the oily residue the refinery emitted. At night, the rooms

at the front of the hotel were bathed in the orange light of the butane fire, a fact that allows the owner to place a one dollar per night premium on the rooms at the back of the hotel, facing the alley.

Inside the hotel, Robert Thurrow looked up from the television sighed. For a moment he looked about the room, staring obliquely at the faded floral wallpaper, then to the dark, deeply worn and horribly stained carpet at his feet. It was deeply rutted, as though it had been etched by the acidic bile of the wretched waste of human existence, making the mere thought of touching it without shoes, or better yet boots, unthinkable. Why is it cheap hotels universally believe that low wattage light bulbs take the place of cleaning? He reflected for a moment then returned to the movie. Abruptly, in apparent hope that action on his part might somehow trigger action on their part, he took up the night vision scope again and turned to the window. He stared out at the ship forlornly, and then allowed the scope to pan across the harbor, from wave to wave, then from mooring to mooring. He wished only for the briefest of moments that he might be on board one of the larger sailboats; that this nightmare trip might end, that for just one day he could be one of the lucky ones relaxing in the cockpit of that blue Pearson, a margarita in one hand and a woman at the other. In the background, the television droned on in English. "Jonah thinks that a ship made by men will carry him into countries where God does not reign. He prowls among the shipping like a burglar." Thurrow laughed slightly and turned back to the television, only to be distracted as the sweaty form of his partner under the sheets on the far bed turned first to one side, then the other. Thurrow looked at the computer screen, and then pressed the page down button, scrolling the page slowly.

He shook his head and reached down to the cooler and pulled out another Orangina soda from the bottom. There were only two left and it was hard to find them among the brown bottles of Biera Messina. Thurrow's brow pulled together slightly for a second, annoyed, and stared maliciously at the lump under the bed sheets. Maybe you don't give a shit about what's left of your career, old man, but I worked too hard getting here to let you, or anyone screw it up.

He looked out at the ocean again. The waves shimmered with the odd light of the fire and for a second he thought of the aurora borealis. The oceans enveloping warmth seemed like a blanket wrapped tightly around your legs on a cold winters evening. He thought that he might slip out for a short while. If only he could get out and go for a swim he might remove the odious stain of the Pomero. He glanced back at the computer, and then looked at the water again. He smiled, and then read aloud softly from the glowing text on the computer. "Consider the subtleness of the sea; how it's most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure." He again gazed out the window, then picked a Power Bar off the table, ripped the wrapper off with his teeth and took a large bite, followed by a heavy slug of the orange soda.

The form under the sheets on the bed began to turn more frequently, seeming to build in rhythm with the movement of the Casablanca fan that limped along in a wide arc above. The body started moving faster, then the arms flayed out at the sheets as though they held him too tightly in their embrace. The smile that had appeared on Thurrow's face as he had thought of that long cool swim vanished instantly, as he leapt to his feet and rushed to the bed, and started to shake the figure.

"No, no, get away from me." The lump of sheets hoarsely rasped.

Thurrow shook him hard. "Duke, wake up, for Christ sakes, you're dreaming again!" Finally the form stopped moving, and the sheets came down over Duke Whitmarsh's head to reveal his matted brown hair and a pair of wide brown eyes. Thurrow let him go and stood up, brushing his clothes as though that act might somehow remove a nights worth of wrinkles.

Whitmarsh sat up in the rumpled bed and looked around the room slowly, then reached for a pack of Benson & Hedges from a dusty night stand with an overloaded ashtray on it. He tapped the pack against the side of his hand, ejecting one into his waiting hand with the schooled precision of a magician palming a coin. He

took it up in his thick lips and threw the pack casually back onto the table. “Same goddamn dream again. I’m getting sick of this.” He grabbed Zippo lighter, polished to a bright shine from its years of residence within his pocket. He regarded the worn engraving on the front for a second, and then lit the cigarette in a single fluid motion, then but it, along with the pack of smokes into his pants pocket.

Thurrow threw himself back down into the chair. “How the hell can you do that? It’s bad enough you’ve got to smoke those things at all, but Christ, you wake up and light one first thing.”

“So, it’s not like I’m forcing you to smoke.” He exhaled a large plume of smoke.

“It’s exactly like you’re forcing me to smoke. As long as I’m in the room with you, I might as well be smoking. D’ya ever hear of second hand smoke?”

Whitmarsh clenched the cigarette tightly between his thumb and index finger and raised it slowly to his mouth, taking an extended draw for the cigarette, then blowing it into the room. “If it’ll make you feel any better, I could smoke a pack of menthols next.” Whitmarsh looked at the computer. “What are you doing?”

“I caught Moby Dick on television, so I decided to get the text to follow along. I downloaded it from Keele University.”

Whitmarsh shook his head. “You are a freakin’ party animal. The girls must go nuts for you.”

Thurrow shook his head and turned to the television. Gregory Peck’s stern profile filled the screen. “Ay, it was Moby Dick that tore my soul and body until they bled into each other. Ay, I’ll follow him around the Horn and around the Norway Maelstrom and around Perdition’s flame before I give him up.”

Whitmarsh stood up. “Still nothing?” He walked over to the cooler and took out a beer. He rested the edge of the bottle cap on the window ledge and pounded down on the top with the heel of his coarse hand, popping the cap off, then took a long, deep gulp. He

walked over and turned the television off. Then he fixed his eyes on Thurrow and reveled in his cigarette, or more appropriately, in Thurrow's disapproval.

"Yeah, still nothing; same as yesterday, same as the day before that... Five hours and no one has come on or gone off." Thurrow sighed. "Near as I can tell we're in for a long wait. It doesn't make sense, but they haven't made a move. Maybe this is just a ruse. Could be they're just checking their back trail. In a small town, it's easy to notice anyone payin' particular attention to something. If they weren't worried they would have made the switch by now."

Whitmarsh limped slightly as he walked over to the table, his joints still stiff from his slumber. He took up the night vision scope and looked out the window. One hand came up to rub the side of his head. "You could be right. Wouldn't take them more than an hour to move that laser... The ships are only 50 yards apart. They could have at least moved around some of the other cargo to keep up appearances. Maybe we should let the department know we've been made. Then they can call in the locals and pull the plug on the whole operation. It doesn't feel right." The cigarette, which was hanging out of his mouth at a precarious angle, dropped its ash on the floor.

The sight of the ash dropping enraged Thurrow. "Either that or we grow old and gray in this room."

Whitmarsh turned from the window, set the cigarette in the ashtray and smiled in acknowledgment of Thurrow's anger. "Hell, you're even starting to look good. Much longer and I'm not gonna be able to control myself." Whitmarsh chortled and licked his lips.

"You probably would, you vulture." Thurrow walked slowly to the window and looked out through the greasy, gray curtains. "You've got bug bites all over your back." "Damn bedbugs. I was lucky to sleep at all; real first class accommodations. I'm going to have to burn all of my clothes when we get back to the States." His left lip turned up slightly in a snarl. "This is getting old."

"We'll be out of here soon enough."

“Yeah, then it’s off to the next shit hole.”

Thurrow stared at him for a second, trying to decide if it was even worth discussing the Department with Whitmarsh again. “So retire. You’re close enough to be able to get out. Do it.”

“I’ve got twenty eight years. I could live off the pension in another two years. If I worked on the side, I’d get by just fine. Look at me. I’m still the same, but everything else has changed. The government doesn’t really give a rat’s ass about enforcement. Hell, we’ve got a bunch of pot smokers in the White House. The courts are more concerned with the rights of the damned Larceno-Americans than the victims. We’re losing. No matter how many con-artists and counterfeiters we catch, most of them just slip right by. We’re trying to stand against the tide and we are starting to drown. We’re eroded away until there’s nothing left.” He sighed, then noticed the cigarette burning away in the ashtray, picked it up and took a long hard drag.

“If you can’t hack it get out. There are plenty of us who can get the job done.”

“Yeah, you guys with your MBA’s and computers figure we never got anything done until you showed us how.” He again set the cigarette in the ash tray, and paced slowly towards the door, then turned.

Thurrow’s face flashed red for a second. “That’s it, blame it on us. You’re a dinosaur who didn’t have the good sense to lie down and die with the rest of them. Treasury Department Investigations are computer investigations now. World Wide Web, electronic banking, does any of this sound familiar to you? You’ve still got a beat cop’s mentality. This job is changing and you aren’t making the grade.”

“So we get a ratty little paycheck, a shit ass pension and all in the name of protecting the currency supply of the United States government. There’s no end to it. It just keeps going on. We can’t win. It’s like Vietnam all over again, no chance to win, the best we can hope for is a stalemate and that hope is dimming fast.”

Thurrow coughed then pulled his bathrobe over his tee shirt. “That’s not the department’s view and it isn’t mine either.”

“Listen you candy ass, I’m forty six years old, I’ve got almost nothin’ in the bank, I rent the house I live in, when I’m around that is, I’ve got no kids, no family and no life aside from work. What I do have is an ex wife who takes most of what I earn and wouldn’t piss on me if I ran through the room on fire. On top of that, I’ve managed to tick off enough people in the Department that I can count on gettin’ assigned every shit ass detail that comes up, even though I’ve got more time in than just about anyone in investigations. I’ll tell you, it ain’t easy bein’ me.” He took another drag on the cigarette and set it back in the ashtray.

“Okay, Rodney, feel bad for yourself if you need to. If you’re going to eat your revolver, at least give me a couple minutes so I can take a shower, okay?” Thurrow said, reaching to pick up his Brown- ing 9 mm, which he carefully slid into his holster and covered with a tattered blue bathrobe.

Whitmarsh shrugged as he pulled out his Zippo lighter from the pocket of his tee shirt, preparing to light another cigarette. “Yeah, no problem, I waited this long.” He looked at the table, noticing the previous butt smoldering away. “Jesus, I’m chain smoking. This is getting bad.” He put the lighter back into his pocket and took up the butt from the ashtray between his index and middle finger, then raised it to his lips.

Thurrow turned, quietly opened the door and stepped into the hallway pulling the door shut. He checked that it had locked, and then walked down the dark, dirty hall. As he came around the corner a thick scent that for a second made him think of shiitake mushrooms assaulted him. He gritted his teeth and walked into the bathroom. The chipped, stained ceramic tile held water in three separate pools of stagnation, with bits of jellied paper. In the first a wadded up band aid floated. Thurrow almost gagged for a second, and then tip toed around the puddles to the one mirror which was not too badly cracked to shave himself. Even in the middle of the

night the place doesn't dry out. Lucky I brought my shower sandals. You could probably get a killer case of the creeping crud off the floor in here.

He took the time for a basic shower and to relieve the necessary bodily functions, about ten minutes at the most, before starting back towards the room. He walked lethargically down the hall, robe billowing as he turned the corner towards the room and suddenly froze. The door to the room was open. He pulled his Browning from its holster in a fast, fluid movement that came from extensive practice and approached the room in a low combat stance, slowly creeping along the wall closest to the door. Thurrow stopped by the door for a second and quietly counted to himself. One, two, three and in, quickly panning the room down the cold, blue steel sight. Nothing. Whitmarsh was gone. The mattress was on the floor and the dresser had been turned over. He ran to the window, jumping over the bureau, and looked out. Nothing. He turned back towards the door, knocking over the remains of his orange soda on the table top. An acrid smell in the room caused his eyes to water. Mace! Out to the hall, again pausing by the door, his training driving him like a primal urge, unthinking, unknowing. He crouched at the wall for a second, his mind catching up to his actions, and for the first time, questioning the wisdom of them.

Concentrate, he thought. It could only have been a couple minutes, ten at the very most. He made his way down the hall, door by door. He thought of kicking in the doors. No, in a place like this that would create more problems than it would solve. Half of these swine must be armed anyway, probably on the run. His eyes scanned the area as he made his way down what seemed like an eternal hallway. Concentrate, he thought. Forget what happened. All that matters is what is happening, what will happen. He passed the elevator. It hadn't worked since they had been there. Or had it? No, go for the stairs. He stopped just before the door and felt the steely dryness of his mouth. He looked down at the Browning for a second and realized that it was quivering slightly. He switched the safety off and pulled the hammer back, noticing that for some rea-

son the hammer seemed heavier now than it did at the pistol range. His mind raced as the surging waves of adrenaline coursed through his body. He swallowed, his parched throat rebelling against the action, and then slowly turned the handle. It moved smoothly. He pushed the door open, his right hand shifting slightly on the handle of the pistol. Thurrow drew a deep breath, preparing himself to leap through the door, when he hear a sickening metallic click, one that hadn't been there the last time he used the stairway. Oh shit! The doorway erupted in a tremendous blast that threw Thurrow down the hallway several yards, leaving him flat on his back and covered with debris. Through the haze he could hear people screaming and a sour, sulfurous taste clung to his lips as though he had been sucking on match heads. He tried to move his hand and the hallway began to swim in an inky blackness. He drifted away into a sea of unconsciousness.