



THE BATTLE OF VENICE BEACH

The Beach Boys sang “Fun Fun Fun” on the phone’s ringtone. Kenny opened his eyes a little but closed them again when he saw gray. It was daytime. And raining. He heard water dripping outside the living room window.

The phone’s answering machine picked up after the boys sang that daddy took the T-bird away. Jamal’s voice said, “Aloha keiki. I guess I’m out catching a wave. Talk to me. A hui hou.”

After the beep a woman said, “I’m with the Venice chamber of commerce and I’m calling for Mr. Jamal Abudi.” She had a perky voice. “Your Funk o’ the Junk Deck Wax has come to our attention, Mr. Abudi. We’ve noticed you sell it at several local surf shops, and we’re hoping you’ll join the chamber so we can help you promote it. I’ll call back later so we can discuss the many benefits of chamber membership. Have a great day!”

The machine beeped off and Kenny shifted position on the couch. He would leave the message for Jamal. Big-time businessman. Funk o’ the Junk at the chamber of commerce. He chuckled as he drifted off again to the sound of the rain.

He half awoke later when he heard some crackling outside. It sounded like fireworks coming from the direction of the beach. Fireworks in the rain was strange. Was it the Fourth of July? Christmas? Maybe it was Marley’s birthday. They played a lot of his music at the beach the night before. He wondered if schools and stuff would be closed. The chamber of commerce was open. The wahine on the phone sounded hot. He fell asleep again picturing her as a blonde walking the nose of his board.

A loud slam jerked him to a sitting position, eyes wide, brain burning with light. He saw two homeless men outside the window. They were pushing their shopping carts away from the dumpster that was in the alley behind the apartment complex.

He sat blinking until his eyes adjusted to the light. It wasn't so bright outside really. The day was gray from the overcast, but the new mural on the side of the dumpster still popped with neon color. The painting filled the window with an electric blue ocean and a bright orange sunset. Somebody had graffitied their initials in the leaves of the palm tree, but the letters were small and you could barely see them. At least the taggers were respecting the chi of the new painting. Except for the one who'd sprayed a penis rising out of the waves. He wrote "Moby" just above it.

Kenny reached up to scratch his forehead and found a post-it note stuck there. It was a reminder from Jamal that the repair shop would be in touch when his boogie board was ready. Kenny had promised to pick it up as soon as the call came in. And he was waiting for a call from somebody else, too. Who was it? He fought through the brain fog and pictured a face, the dealer he met at the party on the beach. Bob something. Fuzzy Bob? Furzo Bob? No, Fresno Bob, that was it. He didn't know the dude but everybody said he was cool. He tried to sell Kenny some pot.

A sudden need to pee hit Kenny. The urge was strong but he pinched it off because there was more important business to take care of first. He dug through the ashtray on the floor and found a half-burned joint. It was some of Bob's orange stuff, from the beach party. Kenny wondered where his Grease Monkey went and hoped he hadn't smoked it at the beach. Maybe he dropped it between the cushions of the couch. He'd look later.

He fired up the joint, inhaled, and smacked his lips. Bob said his pot was as good as Banana Kush, but it wasn't. It didn't have anywhere near the THC content. BK was banana plant crossed with primo Kush, and Bob said his was crossed with orange trees. Kenny could definitely taste the orange. He took another hit and felt himself relax. The pot wasn't bad. It gave him a buzz, and the orange juice taste was perfect for breakfast. If the rain let up later he'd take care of the bacon and eggs taste at the taco cart.

There were more firecracker pops, closer, and Kenny hoped the party was coming his way. Some of the hardcores from the beach might still be going. He remembered a bunch of them shouting, "Til death do us partay!" while they played dodgeball with a dead stingray.

"Partay," he chuckled as he smoked, and then on a long exhale he noticed that two of Jamal's boards were gone from a corner of the room. Where did he say he was going? Oroville, that was it. He said he wanted to check out the dam there. People said it was going to break from all the rain. They had some stuff about it on TV the day before. Kenny and Jamal watched an emergency dude talk about it, and then the governor said the United Nations was coming to help out. "Humanitarian aid, invasion," Jamal said. "Tomayto, tomato. I'm going anyway." Kenny didn't know what the U.N. had to do with tomatoes, and he was about to ask when Jamal dropped to the floor to do some pushups. "I want to catch the first wave," he said while he pumped, then he jumped to his feet and went into his surfing crouch. He said, "The trick will be to stay ahead of the debris in the flood. Should be a wicked ride. You should come with me, K." Kenny said he'd pass because his hamstring was sore from that morning. He tried a 360 on a crest, but he only hit 180, and that was top to

bottom instead of front to back. So he told Jamal to go on without him. Jamal said to watch for him when the dam broke.

The blinking light on the phone's answering machine caught Kenny's attention. He checked the I.D. and saw that two messages were waiting. One was from the babe at the chamber of commerce, and the other was from somebody named Robert L. Maybe that was the call about Jamal's board. Kenny played the message.

Robert L. was Fresno Bob. Kenny recognized his voice. He said he hoped Kenny enjoyed the taste or orange he got for gratis, and he could knock ten bucks off the half ounce. "Coupon code H-I-G-H," he giggled, "so give me a shout when you lower the landing gear." The machine beeped off and Kenny wondered when Bob had called. He didn't remember hearing the Beach Boys during the night, but he remembered telling Bob he was twenty bucks too high on his asking price. Bob said, "It is what it is," but this morning it looked like it wasn't what it was. Kenny smiled. The dude was coming around. Make him sweat for a while. Some things are worth standing up for, and the price of weed was one. Kenny told himself he would have to be amadant with Bob. He was new to Venice Beach and needed to earn his place there. So Kenny would be amadant on the price. He might even use that word the next time he talked to Bob, because when somebody says that, you know there's no use arguing.

Kenny struggled up from the couch and limped through scattered clothes to the bathroom. He peed and then stayed for a monster crap. He closed the door afterwards so the smell wouldn't follow him, and he fought the chop back to the couch. His feet were wrapped in clothes by the time he sat down. He untangled them and massaged his hamstring. Then he reached up for the

joint he'd stuck behind an ear when he crouched on the can. The joint was gone, burned down to nothing. He poked at the blister where it had been. Bummer, he thought, but he felt good after the crap, so things could be worse. Just keep on moving. Like Marley said, keep on moving, keep on grooving.

He grooved to the song in his head until it faded and there was nothing but the sound of dripping rain outside the window. He studied the mural on the dumpster but soon got bored and searched for the TV's remote. He found it under the coffee table. One end was stuck in an open can of Funk o' the Junk. He wiped it off on the couch and turned on the TV.

It was tuned to the weather channel. The weatherman said the situation at Oroville was getting worse. A view from a helicopter showed water foaming over the top of the dam. Kenny didn't see Jamal, so he clicked around and landed on a show about soldiers fighting in a bunch of rubble. It was old black and white film, with sounds of explosions in the background. A narrator said the place was called Stalingrad. Kenny couldn't understand why anyone would fight over rubble, but the people on the screen were really into it. They were shooting and running around and popping up and down like a game of whack-a-mole.

Kenny knew what it was like to fight, not over rubble but over the right to smoke. He was a political activist during the final push to legalize marijuana in California. It was a tough fight, what he could remember of it, and it wasn't fair that he did all that frontline work and now he was low on weed. He should be treated like a veteran, like those retired navy dudes who jogged up and down the beach. Or used to. They all moved away. But they got free hospitals and stuff, and he should get free weed. It didn't have to be Grade A, just

good enough to stay buzzed.

He thought about his Grease Monkey again. No telling when he'd be able to do a repeat on smoke like that. Probably not until the government sent another stimulus check. He felt around under the couch cushions to his sides, hoping to find the little baggie the pot was in. No luck. He dug through the soda cans and takeout cartons on the coffee table and found a baggie, but it was just some old Mexican generic with a "Half Price" sticker on it. There was enough residue in the baggie to make it to the evening if he was careful. He thought about calling Bob for the half ounce of orange but fought the urge. He didn't want the dude to think he was desperate. Make Bob call him, and stick to his guns on the price. It was a war of wills.

He started to roll a joint but remembered the blister over his ear and decided to burn a bowl instead. The TV was still buzzing, so he muted it and focused on searching for his pipe. He found it in a shoe. He loaded it and fired it up.

Lungs full, he settled back on the couch and held his breath. He held it, held it, and the mural outside the window began to glow. Then it began to swim, and then he saw the top of a pale blue bubble floating across it.

He exhaled and watched the bubble bob slowly along the bottom of the window frame. He thought of the big glass fishing floats they used to find washed up on the beach. They were blue and rolled up and down in the lapping surf.

The bubble passed the Moby penis, then stopped and rose up. It was a blue helmet, on a short dude with dark skin. He turned toward the window and looked in at Kenny. The helmet said UN in big white letters on the front. Kenny smiled and waved with his pipe.

The dude yelled something and dropped down.

Kenny wondered where he went, then the front door flew open and people came barking into the living room. Kenny bent forward and curled his arms around the back of his head. He'd learned the position during his political activist days, and it had saved him more than once from getting head injuries. Not from cops beating on him but from falling down after smoking dusted pot.

Kenny held his position but glanced up a couple of times and saw that the dudes stomping around the apartment were soldiers. They wore green ponchos over green uniforms. It didn't take them long to search the place, since it was just the living room, kitchen area, bedroom and bath. The soldier who checked the bathroom came out gagging and slammed the door.

In all there were four soldiers. When they finished with their search they gathered in front of the couch and pointed their stubby rifles at Kenny. He sat up straight and raised his hands above his head.

"Cool your jets, dudes. You don't need to get all . . . Galinstad on me."

They didn't say anything, just stood dripping water and staring at him. All were dark-skinned and had shaved heads under their helmets. Their brown eyes were pinched like they'd been smoking mucho ganja. One looked kind of like the Godfather, Brando, with his jaw stuck out. Another looked like Curley from the Three Stooges.

They jabbered some but Kenny couldn't understand them. He wondered if they were Filipino. They looked a little like the Tresmanos a few doors down. Justino and his wife were from the Philippines and Kenny couldn't understand them either. She cooked pineapple into everything. It seemed that Brando was in charge, so Kenny asked him, "Habla Filipino, dude?"

He didn't habla, so maybe they were from

somewhere else. Maybe China.

“You boys from China?” Kenny asked, then felt bad for calling them boys. African-Americans didn’t like the word, so maybe these dudes didn’t either. He needed to be more politically correct.

“Are you Chinamen?”

They didn’t answer, but after a pause Curley leaned across the coffee table and took the pipe from Kenny’s lap.

“Hey, be careful,” Kenny said. “That cost eight bucks.”

The soldier examined it, then aimed it at the floor and tried to pull the trigger.

“No,” Kenny said, “it’s not a real gun. It just looks like one. It’s a pipe.”

Curley looked at him and shrugged.

Kenny made a gun shape out of his hand, put the end of his index finger to his lips and sucked on it. “You know, for smokee? Ganja?” He sucked again, held his breath, then exhaled and rolled his eyes up with a smile.

Curley sniffed the pipe and jabbered to the others. He held the end of the barrel to his lips, faked inhaling, and staggered around a little. His friends all laughed.

Another soldier took the pipe. He pretended to toke and then hunched down so his knuckles were scraping the floor like a monkey’s. They all laughed again, and Kenny joined in. The next guy took it and pretended to stick it up his ass. He hopped up and down squealing, and Kenny laughed again. But the others didn’t. He noticed they were all looking at Brando, who’d gone from smiling to serious. He barked something, then took the pipe and used it like it was a syringe to poke at his forearm. The others nodded. Next Brando put the pipe to his temple like he was going to shoot himself, and he jabbered at Kenny. Kenny didn’t know what he was saying, but he knew the

tone of a lecture when he heard it. Brando was definitely down on drugs.

“I can dig it,” Kenny said. “You’re not into self-medicating. But all I do is toke a little. I don’t spike. I tried it once. I stuck the needle between my toes, safe-like, but I hit a nerve. My toes went numb and it spazzed my walk for a week.”

To show what he meant, Kenny walked two fingers on the coffee table. He buckled one with every other step.

The soldiers stared at him, then Brando used the pipe to point around the apartment while he barked some more in his lecture tone. It was easy to see he didn’t like the mess. He got really loud when he pointed to the trash piled around the trashcan.

While he yipped, the soldier who’d checked the bathroom earlier went back to it and opened the door. He fanned it a couple of times, and the rush of smell into the living room made everybody gag and cough. Before the soldier closed the door he sent the monster crap tubing. Kenny had forgotten to flush.

Brando yelled when he got his breath back. He pointed to the sole of one of his boots and made a show of squatting like he was taking a dump. Kenny assumed he was complaining about stepping in one of the offloads from the homeless people outside. They stopped and pinched a loaf no matter where they were when nature called, and it called a lot from the sidewalks.

Brando must have asked a question because he went silent and stood looking at Kenny like he expected an answer.

“Uh, sorry dude. I don’t know what you’re saying. But you definitely have to watch where you step around here. It helps if you know un poco surf.”

He did a snaky little sway and cutback move,

and the soldiers all stared, then they all started jabbering and shaking their fingers at him. They repeated the word “dude” over and over, and Kenny knew he was being dissed, though not about what. He tried to figure it out but needed a toke to clear his head.

It was like Brando read his mind. He tossed the pipe so it landed in Kenny’s lap, then he barked at the others. They each gave Kenny a final jabber as they filed out the front door. Brando was the last to leave. He paused and checked the ground before he stepped out.

Kenny watched them walk across the dumpster sunset, one helmet after another, like fishing floats heading in the direction they’d been going when he first saw them. When they disappeared he fired up his pipe.

He blissed out for a while, and then he heard the pop of a firecracker. Just one at first, then a siren or scream, then more pops. The sound wasn’t from toward the beach like before; it came from the direction the Chinamen went. And it sounded like it was a ways down, maybe from the Tresmanos place. The beach party could have passed him by while he wasn’t paying attention and ended up there. Justino liked to party. He liked to get high and mess with people’s heads by waving his machete around.

Kenny was thinking about going to check on the party and maybe get a free toke, when the Beach Boys sang out from the phone. He saw from the ID that it was Fresno Bob again. Make him wait. Let the boys sing and then pick up just as daddy takes the T-bird away.

Kenny smiled and looked at the muted TV. The people in Strolingad were still fighting over their rubble. He respected them because they were all so amadant. That’s how he needed to be with Bob on the price of the pot. The two of them were

in a war of wills, and Kenny would win because some things were worth fighting for.