John and Duke

This fiction is 1631 words.

Sunlight entered John Steinbeck's bedroom on a clear summer Sunday morning, waking him. He was alone and had neglected to close the blinds the night before. *Oh, what a head I've got*, he thought. He rolled off the bed, found his clothes, put on his shoes, drifted into the living room, and began picking up empty wine bottles. *I was beginning to think those people would never leave!*

John was living in his father's cottage in Pacific Grove. His wife and editor, Carol, had gone to stay with her mother in LA. Friends had come over to help him celebrate the publication of his book of stories set in Corral de Tierra, *Pastures of Heaven*.

He made some coffee and toast and was feeling better. Having no car, he often walked up the road to Doc Ricketts' lab in Cannery Row, about a twenty minute walk to the west, but he knew that Doc had gone into Salinas for the weekend. Perhaps he would go for a swim at Lover's Point Beach. It was a warm enough day, and only a fourteen minute walk in the other direction.

Then John remembered he had heard that the Olympic swimming champion from Hawai'i would be in Carmel that day for a surfing exhibition. Duke Kahanamoku was his name. He had been in LA for the 1932 Summer Olympics as an alternate for the United States' water polo team and was traveling up the coast with his younger brother, Sam, giving surfing demonstrations.

Well, I guess I will just have to hitchhike, he thought. *I can find out what this Hawaiian royalty looks like*.

Nobody locked their doors in Pacific Grove. John got his wallet and set out, walking down 11th Avenue to Ocean View Boulevard. He crossed the road and began walking to a likely intersection to hitchhike down the Seventeen Mile Drive. He passed the tide pools where he and Doc had spent

many hours collecting marine specimens. At the next intersection he stood just past the corner and stuck out his thumb as the infrequent vehicles went by. Two passenger cars with drivers only went by, ignoring him. Then a box truck loaded with fresh crab and fish from Fisherman's Wharf, heading for the markets and restaurants of Carmel, came by and stopped. Water from melting ice dripped onto the pavement. Gratefully, John reached up and opened the door and got in.

"Thanks," he said to the Italian driver with a bushy black mustache.

"You're welcome," said the driver. "I can use some company on this drive."

"I'm going to Carmel Beach. I heard there's this Hawaiian guy who's going to give a surfing demonstration."

"We'll be there soon. I won't be able to stop and watch. I have this fresh seafood to deliver."

They rode along in silence, admiring the scenery, passing through forest, watching the blue sea. As they neared the western tip of the Monterey Peninsula, the waves started getting bigger and were soon crashing on the rocks. There was a slight offshore breeze so the salt spray didn't foul the windshield.

John said, "I heard there was a hurricane down in Baja, so this must be the hurricane surf."

"Yep. Must be."

"Looks like the duke will have some waves to work with."

"Looks like."

When the truck came upon Carmel Beach at the bottom of Ocean Avenue in Carmel-by-the-Sea, the driver said, "This is where you get off. I have to go up Ocean for my deliveries."

"Thanks, again," said John as he got out. He shut the door and the truck drove off. John looked at the beach: sand, cypress trees, and big surf. A crowd was gathered down by the water. John headed down there. He got some sand in his shoes as he walked.

Duke Kahanamoku was the tall brown man holding a twelve foot redwood surfboard upright on the sand. His brother Sam was beside him. He was waiting for a lull in the waves between sets. He picked up the surfboard, hoisted it over his head, and walked into the water. He dropped the board into the water, jumped on, and began paddling vigorously out to sea.

John stood and watched, fascinated, a short distance from the cluster that had surrounded Duke. The set coming in looked like mountains on the horizon. Duke arrived at his chosen spot, sat back on the board to lift its nose out of the water, and circled his feet to turn the board around so it faced the shore. Then he looked back to watch the coming waves.

He let the first two swells pass under him and then he began paddling, slowly at first, and then faster as a wave rose up like a hooded cobra behind him. He was paddling top speed and the slope of the oncoming wave added to that speed. The next thing John saw was Duke standing on the board, ahead of the curl, master of the wave. He rode that wave a distance, and then, before it closed out and broke over him, turned the board toward shore and rode the whitewater all the way to the sand and stepped off. The crowd cheered and congratulated him.

A young woman in swimming garb came to Duke and, before he knew it, John saw Duke paddling the board back out with the woman prone on the board ahead of him. She was helping to paddle. They went even further out this time because, with two on the board, it would take longer to turn it around. Paddling together, they caught a big wave. Duke stood up and helped the woman to stand. Then he grabbed her with both hands and hoisted her over his head so that she sat on his shoulders. They rode like that all the way to the sand.

Spellbound, John stood and watched until the exhibition was over. Duke’s younger brother, Sam, took the board away to his parked truck up on the road. Duke was talking to the last few

spectators on the sand. John approached and introduced himself. Duke said, “I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Steinbeck. I liked your book, *The Red Pony*.”

“Thank you, your highness. Call me John. That was quite an exhibition.”

“Please just call me Duke, John. We are lucky to have big waves today.”

“Yes, amazing, Duke. Want to get out of the sun? There’s a bar up there just across the road.”

“Thanks, John. I would like that. I *am* thirsty after that surfing.”

“What about your friend?”

“Oh, that’s alright. Sam’s taking the board back to the hotel. He’ll come back for me later.”

Duke pulled on his pants and shirt but remained barefoot. The two walked up to the bar and went in. John peered into the gloom and saw someone he recognized at a table by himself. “Ernest Hemingway! By golly, I would recognize that beard anywhere.”

Looking up, then standing, Ernest said, “I don’t think we’ve met.”

“We haven’t. I’ve seen your photograph. I’m John Steinbeck, and this is Duke Kahanamoku, Olympic champion swimmer from Hawai‘i.”

Ernest shook hands with both men. “Well, sit down. Have a drink.”

They all sat down. John said, “Thanks, Ernest. I’ll have a beer.”

Duke said, “Thanks, Mr. Hemingway, sir, but if it’s alright with you, I’ll just have a ginger ale.”

“Sure, I know about athletes in training. Call me Ernest, duke.”

“Thanks Ernest.”

Ernest called to the bartender, “Two more beers, Bill, and a ginger ale for the duke.”

“My first name is ‘Duke.’ I’m not royalty.”

The bartender set the drinks on the table. Ernest hoisted his mug, “Here’s to you, Duke, and John, too.”

They clinked glasses with “cheers” all around. Ernest said, “You know, John, I liked your *Cup of Gold*, but I didn’t care much for your *Red Pony*.”

“Thanks, I think. I haven’t read much of your stuff. I don’t want to be affected by your style. What I have read, I’ve liked.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“What brings you out to California, Ernest?”

“I came down from Wyoming to see the California Rodeo in Salinas. I wanted to see the bull riding. But that’s all over now. Pauline’s back at the hotel here in Carmel with the kids. It’s lovely here. I like the way the wind whispers in the pines.”

“Any plans for the future?” asked Duke.

“I’d like to go to Africa next year, maybe I’ll take Pauline with me.”

John said to Duke, “Where are *you* going next?”

“Tomorrow, Sam and I are going up to Santa Cruz. A young surfer named Claude Horan gave the surf break there the name ‘Steamer Lane.’ I heard that his surf buddies gave him the nickname Horanamoku, an honor to him and to me. I’d like to meet him and surf that break. If the waves stay big, I’m sure he’ll be there in the water. Then Sam and I will go to San Francisco to catch a steamer back to Hawai‘i.”

They had another round of drinks. Hemingway, having more money, graciously paid. Sam came in looking for Duke, and the party broke up. John hitchhiked back to the house in Pacific Grove. The unfinished manuscript of *Tortilla Flat*, which would eventually make him famous, was still on the desk where he had left it.

Ernest Hemingway sat alone in the bar for a while, had another beer, then walked to his hotel where Pauline was waiting for him. Duke went surfing with Horan at Steamer Lane in Santa Cruz the next day. He and Horan had a lot to talk about and the waves were still big. With a light offshore breeze that morning, the break was really “steaming.”