

1985

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Recommended Citation

Vargo, Michael (1985) "Moving Right Along," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1985: Iss. 1, Article 27.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1985/iss1/27>

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Moving Right Along

by Michael Vargo

All I ever wanted out of life was a good cheese sandwich. I mean, cheese is pretty cheap and easy to come by; and what's more, I really like cheese sandwiches. The only problem with them is that people tend to think you're giving them a bad time when you order one. There's something about a cheese sandwich that makes people nervous. Regardless, I had decided to spend the summer wandering down the East Coast in search of the perfect cheese sandwich.

I had rationalized the whole thing by convincing myself that I would use the experience in the future to put together a "cheese lover's guide to the eastern seaboard." (something I knew everybody wanted, but didn't have the guts to ask for.) The cheese sandwich would make me my first million.

I clung to that idea—my first million, but still had a tough time understanding how my quest had landed me in the Atlantic on a forty-foot sloop, with a sadistic old pervert at the helm. His name was Captain Richard Wheeler. I soon learned to call him Dick.

It all began while I was sitting in a bar (the Beach-Bird or something) on a wharf in Boston, eating a mediocre cheese sandwich, drinking a bottle of warm beer, and starting to wonder what I was going to do during the fast approaching winter months. That's when this drunken old sea-slug oozed down on the stool next to me.

"Hey, Buddy, buy you a beer?" he asked.

"Thanks anyway, I've got a full one." He nodded and curiously eyed my plate.

"What's that you're eating?"

"Cheese sandwich. Want some?" I asked, knowing full well that he wouldn't. Like I said, cheese makes people nervous.

"Cheese sandwich! Hell no I don't want any. Cheese gives me gas. Ask anyone."

The bartender rolled his eyes and pinched his nose.

"Dick's cleared this place plenty of times. Don't you dare give him any of that stuff. Business is bad enough."

"Thanks for the warning," I said.

I finished my beer and Dick bought me another one. I felt obliged to return the gesture, and then so did he, and so did I, etc. It turned into one of those vicious circles that rarely leave anyone standing. Before either

of us was totally incoherent, I learned that he was getting ready to deliver a forty-foot Morgan sloop to its owner who was wintering down in the Florida Keys. He learned that I had just graduated from college and was on the bum for a year before I returned to start graduate school the following fall.

"So, whatdaya' have planned for the winner?" My brows knit. Winner?

"Winter. Winter," Dick said, pursing his lips. I wasn't as affluent in speaking "drunk" as he was, but I understood now.

"I was just wondering that myself."

"Know anything about boats?"

"The good ones float," I said.

"You're a sarcastic azzhole. I admire that in a perzon."

I told him I knew a little about boats then showed him the bow of my shoe and told him I was port handed. He laughed and asked me if I had ever done any sailing. I told him I had with my Dad when I was younger, but only on the Great Lakes, never on the ocean.

"Got any plans for the next month or so?"

"Not really. I figure I'll head for some place warm."

"Warm huh? My regular partner cancelled. . . wife had a baby. So if you're interested, and aren't queer, or hooked on dope, I could offer you a pretty good piece of change to make the trip with me."

"How pretty?"

"About two grand. Enough to buy a plane ticket home and still leave you with something in your pocket."

I told him I was interested, but that I would have to think about it. He gave me his phone number and told me to get in touch.

I checked his story out with the bartender the next day. The bartender had known him for years. He said the owner of the yacht paid him a ransom to sail his boat to his summer home in the Keys. Then I walked down to where the Morgan was docked to take a look at her, and to check out Dick's story with the Harbor Master. He gave me the same story, and the Morgan was a mint. Everything seemed kosher so I dialed up the Captain that afternoon and told him we had a deal.

"Great. We leave in a week. Be there at nine sharp."

A week later I'd sold my car and mailed most of the money to my bank in Milwaukee. I was standing on the dock beside the

Morgan with my duffle bag over my shoulder by 8:45. Dick was already aboard.

"Good to see you," he called out.

"Ahoy," I mumbled, climbing aboard. My duffle bag slipped from the shoulder and slid down my arm. Dick saw I was having trouble.

"Gimme your bag," he said. I heaved it to him, thinking he was going to catch it, but he made no such effort. He watched it thud and roll across the floor.

"Nice catch, Dick." He didn't hear me as he bent to pick up the bag. I was welcomed aboard, then we went below and stowed my bag in the cabin.

We were out of the harbor by noon, heading south by southeast at about 8 knots. The sun was shining and the seas were light. This, I thought, was the best move I had made in a long time. By afternoon the waves picked up, and by six o'clock we were bouncing around in 9 foot rollers. By 6:10 I was clinging to the portside railing, getting rid of the last of a cheese sandwich I had eaten for lunch. Dick was standing behind me.

"Hope you get over that real fast. Else this'll be a long trip."

Around 10 o'clock I learned the revolting extent of my decision to sail. It was my turn to eat dinner, and Dick's turn to take the helm, so I locked the wheel in and went below. As I opened the main cabin door I was assaulted by an incredibly vile stench. I quickly stepped back and shut the door, certain that something had died in there. I took a deep breath and warily opened the door again.

"Dick?"

"C'mon in. Have a sandwich," he cheerily called from the galley.

"How can you breathe in that stink?"

"Better get used to it real fast, or this'll be a long trip for you." As Dick said this I stepped into the galley and stared in panic. Dick was sitting at the table, surrounded by the crusts of five cheese sandwiches.

"I thought you hated cheese," I said, bringing my hand up to cover my nose and mouth.

"Noooo. I love the stuff. I just said it gives me gas. It's about the only thing I eat out here." Dick laughed, pleased with himself.

"You might say, I'm a cheese miser," he said proudly. Then, opening the pantry door, he revealed cases of cheese. Cheddar, Swiss, Colby, and even some Velveeta.

"But the smell. That's you?"

"I don't smell a thing. Neither will you in a week or so."

I was woozy, my mind whirled back, that smell, that gagging smell. I remembered Carol Herdus, a girl I went to elementary school with, and how she used to eat pieces of her frog when we did dissecting. I hadn't been this woozy since then.

"A week or so? I'll be dead then."

Dick laughed at me for a long time, then teased me with his sandwich.

"Wanna bite? Wanna bite? C'mon take a taste." I backed off and he howled with laughter. I suddenly felt my stomach in the back of my throat and stumbled back up to the portside railing. This was going to be a long trip for me, a long trip indeed.