

Breakfast with the Island Mystic

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CHAPTER ONE

THE EMERALD LAGOON

In the middle of my life I found myself lost in a fog of unknowing. When Dante was lost in the woods, Beatrice helped him find his true path. But Dante wasn't a sailor. Here on the Texas gulf coast you're more likely to be lost in fog than in forests. When that happened to me, a few dolphins showed me the rhumb line. Maybe one of them was Beatrice...?

I once thought I knew the course of my life. I thought I knew most of the answers. I knew how to find the ones I was missing. I was a spiritual director, a healer of souls and custodian of truth. But a time came when I no longer believed that being spiritual was about knowing answers. In fact, it seemed to have more to do with figuring out the right questions.

I was burned out.

It wasn't that I didn't believe in Jesus anymore. I trusted him more deeply than ever. But the old ways of being Christian held less and less meaning for me.

And it wasn't that I didn't love spiritual direction. I did. My directors have guided me through many dangerous storms. Spiritual direction is a sacred endeavor. The directee's insight and the director's advice are far less important than the loving Spirit that moves between them. But sometimes even that's not enough.

I discovered my lostness one foggy morning in late Fall. My heart was becalmed, empty of the Spirit's breezes. I had lost the will to listen as others talked about their lives' voyages while my own vessel was moored to her pier. I wanted to untie my life, sail away, and let the canvas carry me to new truths.

My sloop, *Moonghost*, was named after a missionary priest who surfed during the full moon while wearing a white cassock. The natives called him "the ghost who walks on water." I thought about Jesus when I named her. He went sailing with his friends when the crowds pressed against his soul. Sailing was a good escape for him. I always felt strangely close to him when I took the helm alone. While it's true that a boat is a hole in the water into which the owner throws money, I rationalized my boat payments by telling myself that I doing what Jesus did when he needed some solitude. My boat was my hermitage.

My heart grew lighter every time I stepped aboard *Moonghost* and felt her move beneath me. She was a soulful mistress awaiting my touch, and I loved her dearly. Boarding a sailboat is like approaching the altar for communion. The hull and rigging create a sacred sanctuary floating on a sea of Spirit. On this foggy day we were a congregation of two as I stroked her gunwales, rigged her main halyard, coiled her jib's furling line, and started the cranky diesel auxiliary that pounded like a beating heart in her depths. I cast a hopeful glance at the masthead fly, looking for signs of a breeze, only to see the mast disappear into a hovering cloud. Mist wrapped nearby boats in a foggy shroud. I might get lost between my slip and the harbor entrance, but it wouldn't matter. I was lost anyway. I cast off and backed away from the pier.

I have always sought perfect solitude. I have longed to merge with nature's sacredness and experience God's beauty uncontaminated by civilization. Ghosting through fog on a sailboat creates an illusion of such solitude shared only by Spirit. If there were other boats in the channel, I couldn't see or hear them. I was alone.

God is uncharted mystery. Our religions give us the illusion that we know our way around the divine. But when we think we have mapped God, we quickly find that our

charts don't represent reality. As I left the security of the channel for the expanse of the open bay, the familiar waterways I had sailed for years became a cloudy mystery. I recognized nothing. I saw no navigation aids. The silver cloud enveloped everything.

Mystery is wonderful but confusing. It calls us from mental apathy and sometimes scares us. I quickly realized that this voyage was foolish and dangerous as land disappeared into gray sameness off my stern. I laid my hand to the wheel to reverse course but something stopped me. My heart was under a relentless order to press on.

A mile or so farther east the foghorn on the sea-buoy comforted me like the voice of God bringing order to the brooding waters of primordial chaos. I knew my location for a brief moment. I quickly went to the chart table below and plotted a course for Redfish Island. I had navigated there often by eyeball but it was time to test my dead reckoning on this day of disorientation. If I did it right, I would raise the island in less than two hours. If I did it wrong, I would be completely lost. I turned *Moonghost* east-southeast on a blind course of 110 degrees.

Most of life is like that voyage. Not much happens. You just keep on keepin' on. There are anxious moments - "Am I on the right course with my life?" And there are

moments of terror - "Is there something or someone out there, something I can't see, waiting to sink me?" And there are other moments of gentle triumph yielding the simple yet often illusory satisfaction that we have arrived at the very place that we expected to find.

I slowed to a half-knot and stood in the bow pulpit to scan what should have been the horizon. A dark shape was a few degrees to port. I must be nearing the island's north hook where an oyster shell beach extends several hundred yards to the west. I floated quietly for a few moments, relieved, and remembered a sunny spring day when I was anchored in this very spot while a pod of dolphins danced around me.

Life's familiar landmarks mask a deeper mystery. We drift on reality's surface while currents of truth move in the depths... A misty puff from a dolphin's blowhole broke my reverie. I followed the sound to see four young dolphins leap across my bow, looking directly into my eyes before each dive. Their backs glowed a brilliant emerald color as they beckoned me to follow them.

My emerald guides slowly led me toward the shore. Amusement gave way to anxiety as the depth sounder warned of increasing shoaling: seven feet, then six, then five - soon I would have to stop or risk grounding. Just as I

slowed the balky diesel to 900 rpm and started to shift into reverse, the readings changed: first to six feet, then to twenty, then to one hundred! A pass appeared in the beach - a pass I knew was not there. I followed the emerald dolphins into a lagoon more beautiful than any I had explored in the tropics. The water glowed with the same color as my dolphin guides. In a tropical anchorage, emerald water is about thirty feet deep but this lagoon didn't follow the ordinary laws of nature. The depth sounder had a total breakdown. This pool had no bottom!

I looked astern. The fog that had embraced *Moonghost* was now a gray wall on the far side of a low island that nearly surrounded me. We floated in an emerald pool of unknown depth. Soft warm light flowed upward over me and my boat.

I have anchored beside this island hundreds of times. I know the reef, and I know the bottom. I searched for predictable behavior in this new universe where the familiar was a gateway to mystery. I could relax if I could set my hook in the bay's mud bottom, have a boat drink, and enjoy this illusion. Life would return to normal, and I would simply be resting after a foggy voyage to a favorite spot. I motored to within ten feet of the beach and went forward to prepare the ground tackle.

"Don't," the voice said gently.

There could be no voice. No one was there.

"Don't. You don't need to, and you can't anyway. There's no bottom. Just leave her be. She won't go anywhere."

I saw him over my right shoulder, sitting quietly beside a driftwood fire. His skin was dark, perhaps black, perhaps sunburned, or perhaps Middle Eastern. He wore faded denim, old leather sea boots, and a torn Greek fisherman's cap. His eyes were small slits, creased by years at sea, and they glowed with the same soft light that permeated the lagoon and shone on the dolphins' backs: a light that came from within as though he and the light were one.

The fire offered welcome warmth after the damp voyage. After a silent moment, he asked, "Are you hungry? I'm baking some shrimp on the coals. Come and have breakfast."

Something about this scene was familiar as though I had read it somewhere. Something about this strange sailor was safe as though I had always known him. I nudged *Moonghost's* bow near the shore, jumped off, and let her drift away. I liked the solid crunch of the shell beach

under my feet. I liked the heat of the driftwood fire.
And I liked my companion. "Who are you?"

"A sailor of truth," he answered, his eyes glowing a little brighter. "A voyager beyond the boundaries."

I felt a like a fish trying to resist the bait that floated in front of it. I had to ask, even though I knew that I would be hooked, "Where have you sailed? What ports have you visited?"

He began to spin stories. "I have sailed the deserts of Arabia, plied the Nile and the Tigris, crossed the Indian Ocean, and cruised the Sea of Japan..." He told of his travels and the people he had known. His adventures were like those of any seafarer but they seemed to mean more than the words he spoke, as though his words sounded more in my heart than in my ears. But of all his tales, those of the Middle East touched me most deeply. His last was of a mutiny: his crew deserted him and left him to die, tied high to the yardarms.

"How did you get out of that one?" I wondered.

"I didn't," he whispered in the solitude.

We sat in silence for weeks that day. The unspoken intimacy of an unexpected loving peace moved between our hearts while we watched the dolphins play in the lagoon's

soft light. Full of shrimp, warmed by the fire, comforted by my companion, I looked at the wall of fog that surrounded me and felt no desire to set sail for home. I was already at home.

Finally I broke the silence. "What do you want of me?"

"I need your ship."

I froze. Was this man I had trusted really a pirate? Would I be marooned on this island?

"No," he somehow knew my fears. "No. I don't want to take anything from you. I want you to carry a cargo for me. You will find that it belongs to you as well. You have traveled with an empty hold for too long. You have found nothing worthy of your life's voyage. That's why you have come here today. That's why I brought you to this place. I have much to give you - gifts that you will carry back to your world. You will become richer than you have ever dreamed as you share them with others."

I hesitated. I was almost comfortable with the emptiness of my life. It was familiar. At least I knew what I *didn't* believe, and I believed a lot in not believing those things. It had taken a long and painful time to unload the cargo that others had dumped into me. I wasn't sure I wanted to take on anything new. I liked traveling light.

"Relax. My burden *is* light. You can carry it with ease on *Moonghost*. Others dumped tablets of stone into your hold. You were right to throw them overboard. You can throw my cargo overboard, too, if it turns to stone."

I was quiet for a long time. I walked away from the fire. I wanted to be alone. I looked at the wall of fog that stood between me and my familiar but empty world. Seagulls swept down to steal the shrimp tails that we had left on the beach. Shells crunched under the weight of my steps. The emerald-eyed sailor hunkered patiently by the fire.

I walked back. "Let's talk. I have room on *Moonghost* for your cargo."