

1

Call it courage or the carefree ignorance of youth, but in early November, 1977, Razz McNeil emblazoned his name into the annals of surfing folklore by being the first and only surfer to surf under the entire length of the San Margarita Pier. He would remain the only surfer to do so, because with successively longer, more sturdily built piers, it had become impossible. But that was what they had thought back then, too, before Razz proved them wrong.

December 11, 2004

It was a blustery, cold December day, two weeks before Christmas. In San Margarita, that meant the thermostat inched all the way down to fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit. Short-sleeved shirt weather for people in the Northeast and Midwest, but this was Southern California, so leather jackets were the norm today. Named after Saint Marge, patron saint of tequila drinks, an ugly saint who magically got better looking around two a.m., San Margarita is a coastal town renowned for its warm weather, beautiful beaches and even more beautiful women, the province of real estate speculators, lawyers, the homeless, and enough psychiatrists and shamans to take care of them all. You had to be very rich or very poor to live in San Margarita and people of each ilk were moving in daily, bursting the town's social services and social fabric. Only twenty years earlier, it was a sleepy beach community of twenty-five thousand mostly white, middle-class working people. Now at eighty thousand residents, San Margarita had become a suburb of Los Angeles that just happened to have expensive ocean frontage. It was no longer a close-knit community at all, something its long-time residents bemoaned daily.

The beaches were practically empty on this day, except for a few hardy, snow-bunny tourists thrilled to be anywhere but in the snow. That meant the Pier was almost empty, too. The Pier. A monstrosity that extended over a quarter-mile into the Pacific Ocean, the Pier had been built and rebuilt five times in its relatively short existence. Originated in 1946 as a Works project

after the War, that first Pier collapsed in the Great Storm of 1952. After much political wrangling, it was rebuilt in 1955 only to be lost to a suspicious fire in 1960. The Pier's most recent incarnation, after its predecessor's partial collapse in the Northridge earthquake of 1994, was built to withstand Armageddon. Hundreds of huge, concrete pilings were anchored deep into the ocean floor.

Intended to be a tourist draw, this Pier included an amusement park with a Ferris wheel, roller coaster, and assorted other attractions that appealed primarily to small children and drunken teenagers. An array of tourist-trap shops selling expensive trinkets, restaurant-bars, and a carousel rounded out the Pier's attractions. Oh, and the police station. Because of an influx of gangbangers shortly after this latest pier was built, a police substation was opened to help create an illusion of safety for wealthy tourists.

Twelve people had died at the Pier in the last six years alone. Two had died in food poisoning incidents, which could have happened to anyone eating the PCB-poisoned fish caught in San Margarita Bay, three in rival gang battles, and one when an electric-powered bumper car inexplicably short-circuited sending thousands of volts through its innocent driver. Three people had died in separate fishing incidents when overly-excited fishermen reached too far out over the waist-high railing to haul in their catches and toppled over thirty feet into treacherous waters below. Those railings had since been raised a foot, damaging the Pier's aesthetic, but much improving its safety. The remaining three deaths were classified as suicides. Three years earlier, a young couple, high on life and crystal meth, had leapt from the top of the world's largest solar-powered Ferris wheel trying to make perfect swan dives into the Pacific. Unfortunately, they only made it as far as the heavy wooden planking of the Pier and their necks broke on impact. And, last year, a mentally deranged transient jumped onto the tracks of an oncoming roller coaster car splattering himself on three unsuspecting tourists whose subsequent treatments continue to enrich psychiatrists back in their home state of Indiana.

People said it was The Curse. But Razz McNeil didn't believe in The Curse, or any curse, for that matter. Born and bred in San Margarita, Razz was a stereotypical, strawberry-blond-haired surfer dude who, in his late thirties, finally realized he should settle down or, at least, try to make a living. People all around him were making tons of money in real estate, in the stock market, or in dealing drugs, but Razz had until then contented himself with the shapely surf off San Margarita's shore and the shapely blondes onshore.

Combining his love of the water and his love of women and fun, Razz went to work at the Surf's Up Saloon on the Pier. Starting as a busboy, he quickly worked his way up to doorman. He was, after all, a likable, intelligent, personable young man, just the sort a restaurant owner wanted greeting his patrons—especially the women. Razz liked being a doorman, because he got to meet every sexy thing, young and old, who walked in the Surf's Up door. He always remembered their names, partly because he slept with many of them. That was one of the perks of the job. Because of his positive effect on business, despite several catfights between jealous paramours during his doorman tenure, management promoted him to bartender, figuring he would be safer behind a large, deep wooden bar.

Bartending helped Razz first appreciate the psychologically calming influence of having money in the bank. Pulling down three to four hundred dollars on busy summer nights, he quickly built a nest egg of several thousand dollars. Unfortunately, following the ouster of his boss who was caught snorting cocaine from a restaurant salt shaker, Razz was elevated to manager. Now in his mid-forties, Razz made less money than when he was a bartender and got less pussy than when he was a busboy. It was the worst of all worlds. The responsibility of being

a manager seemed to crimp his sexual style. Perhaps, as manager, he was more threatening to the female clientele. Or, perhaps, it was because he was now married with two young children.

It was almost four in the afternoon when Razz found a parking spot for his 1967 Mustang convertible, a happy remnant from his youth. Like always, he parked on a meter-free side street instead of paying the eight-dollar parking fee on the Pier. He hated paying for parking and enjoyed walking along the lower boardwalk at beach level before having to face customers at the Surf's Up.

"Hey, mister, can you spare a dime?"

Razz looked to see the recognizable faces of two men sitting across from each other at a concrete chess table, one of many permanently affixed to the landscape near this part of the boardwalk. They were two of many homeless men and women in various stages of chess playing, eating and sleeping.

"I always do," said Razz, approaching. He fished in his wallet for a five-dollar bill and placed it on the table amongst chess pieces and stale leftovers that looked like they'd been retrieved from a local sub shop dumpster.

The two men, one white and one black, considered him noncommittally. Their clothes were clean, but well-worn. Each man had seen better days.

"And make sure you don't spend it on alcohol," Razz continued.

"So says the man who runs a bar," said the black man.

"Hey, it's a bar-restaurant," Razz said and the three men cracked up laughing. "What's up, James?" He greeted the black man first, and then tried helplessly to follow his elaborate handshake ritual until giving up and ending with a simple fist bump.

"Man, you so white. You're just like him," said James, pointing to his friend.

Smiling, Razz shook the friend's hand in the old, white businessman's style. "How you doing, Ryan?" In truth, Ryan looked pale and tired, but before he could respond, Razz said, "I haven't seen you guys in a while."

"Oh, you know, been busy. World cruise and what-not," said James.

"Yeah, me, too." Another laugh and then a pause that grew uncomfortably long. "Well, glad you're back. I've got to get to work." Razz tapped on their table, acknowledging them, and then continued down the boardwalk.

"Hey, thanks, man," James yelled after him.

Razz waved, but he didn't look back. As he thought about the two men, men he had seen hundreds of times in the past several years, his smile faded. Despite their friendly banter, he barely knew them. He had never seen either man without the other, but couldn't say if they were a couple or just good friends, partners in the full-time job of surviving the streets. His thought made him melancholy, but he cheered himself by vowing to invite them to the restaurant for a good meal the next time he saw them.

There were no bikini-clad beauties on this California-cold day, so there were no sight-seeing delays to Razz' stepping up the thirteen wooden steps onto the main pier. Most people got to the Pier, walking or driving, by way of a connecting street bridge from Ocean Boulevard, a street that, aptly, ran parallel to the Pacific Ocean along the elevated cliffs of San Margarita and offered a magnificent view of the Pier and amusement park below. Had Razz approached from Ocean Boulevard, he wouldn't have been surprised by the police tape which he now found blocking his path to the Surf's Up.

"What the hell?"

Looking up, he saw several police officers wearing heavy-duty gas masks shooing away a few remaining lily-white tourist-types. Police vehicles' lights flashed in warning. Razz saw a flurry of activity around the police substation halfway down the Pier, as officers outfitted in gas masks poured forth, moving out in all directions. The Ferris wheel in the distance was still, its usually insistent flashing lights ominously reposed. A siren blasted and Razz turned to see a HazMat truck screaming down the connecting bridge. Waved through the police barricade, the vehicle sped the length of the Pier, finally screeching to a stop in front of the Sol a Sol, a cheap, tacky Tex-Mex restaurant. *No wonder they need HazMat*, he thought, *people have been eating Sol a Sol food*. Though Razz had rubbed his belly in more than a few gutters in his day, he still had some standards. The Sol a Sol was the worst restaurant in town, but because of its cheap prices and its prime location at the end of the Pier, it did some of the best business. *Someone ate a bean burrito, and then burped. Better call HazMat.*

"Get the hell out of here, Razz."

He turned to see Police Sergeant Gerard "Sharky" Sampson and burst out laughing at the sight of his ridiculous-looking gas mask. Too big for his small head, Sharky struggled to keep it in place with his right hand.

"You've got to leave. Now."

"Hey, Sharky, didn't you hear? Halloween's over."

"It's Gerard."

Razz nodded. "So what's the fuss, Sharky?"

Sergeant Sampson fumed, but quickly recovered, for he had come to expect such insolence from Razz. "There's a scare. The Pier's closed until further notice."

"A scare? I'm not scared," Razz scoffed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Sharky looked like a man who desperately wanted to tell his secret. "You've just got to go."

Razz had known Sharky since they were kids. They'd been surfing buddies early on, and Sharky had watched from shore on the day of Razz' greatest triumph. He had never been sure that Sharky, in a losing bout with jealousy, had not secretly hoped he would fail and bite the dust, or, at least, take a large chunk out of a piling. He felt God sufficiently answered the question a few years after his feat when a confused, young five-foot tiger shark inexplicably attacked him and mangled his lower left leg. He knew it was mean to make fun of him, but Sharky had lost what little sense of humor he'd ever had the day of his attack, so Razz couldn't help himself sometimes.

"And take her with you," said Sharky, referring to a woman struggling to free herself from his grasp. She was Carlotta Gugliotta, the Surf's Up assistant manager. Razz had to hand it to him; Sharky was wiry strong, but he definitely had to work on his way with women.

Carlotta was a Mexican bombshell only somewhat past her prime who had once been married to an Italian Prince for three days before she sent him packing. She kept the name Gugliotta, because it was more rhythmical with Carlotta than her family name of Diaz. Because it was more fun and most apt, she was simply known as Lotta. And she was a lotta you-name-it—tits, ass, mouth. While Sharky hated his nickname and Razz lived comfortably with his, Lotta enjoyed hers to the fullest. Full-figured and dark-haired, she had enormous appetites. She might have been known as an enormous cock-tease, except that she did not tease. She and Razz had had their dalliances years back and were still tempted from time to time. But, in a concession to maturity and Razz' marriage, they realized that working together and sleeping together, even infrequently, could only come to a disastrous end.

“Get him the fuck off me, Razz. He wouldn’t even let me lock up.”

He wanted to laugh again, not used to Lotta asking anyone for anything. She usually just told people what she wanted and they happily obliged.

“Sharky, what the fuck, you’re hurting the lady.” Razz knew Lotta was no lady and that Sharky, even if he’d had a sledgehammer, couldn’t hurt her.

Lotta pursed her lips in anger directed now at Razz. “Ooh, you men, you all the same.” She ripped her arm violently from Sharky’s grasp, and then folded both arms across her chest as if to punish the impudent men by covering her ample cleavage.

“Sharky, let us, at least, close up the bar.”

“You can’t cross the tape, Razz. This is serious.”

“What’s serious? Another bomb scare? Christ, the things that get people’s rocks off these days.”

Lotta couldn’t help but flash Razz a desiring look when she heard the words “rocks off.” She loved dirty talk, but she quickly veiled any sexual desire with the indignity of having been held against her will. Tie her up, handcuff her, even slap her around a bit, but do it only when she says so.

“It’s anthrax.”

Razz’ mouth dropped open in shock. Lotta didn’t know what anthrax was, so was unfazed. Razz took Sharky aside.

“Anthrax? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“There was a call about half-hour ago. Someone left a suitcase containing anthrax outside the Sol a Sol. It’s hooked to a bomb set to go off in five minutes. So, will you please get the hell out of here?”

Anthrax. At least it couldn’t have happened to a worse restaurant. After his initial fear, Razz now considered this a hoax less serious than the Pier’s bi-monthly bomb scares. “So who do you think called it in, some terrorist in Pakistan?”

“What?”

“You think Osama’s been calling from his spider-hole?” Razz waited for at least a smile, but no recognition of humor was forthcoming. “This is just some jerk-off copycatting these other scares.”

Lotta perked up when she heard some magic words, but she still didn’t understand the true gist of the conversation.

“Fucking anthrax. Are you shitting me? You know better, Sharky.”

“Look, it doesn’t matter what I know or what you think you know. You have to get out of here—now.”

“You’re starting to piss me off, you know.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what friends are for.”

Razz couldn’t remember the last time he’d considered Sharky a friend, but he suspected Sharky would have the same trouble with him. He didn’t want to leave the restaurant open where hundreds of dollars were probably sitting amiably in the cash register available for a warm hand to wrap itself around them. Razz knew there were plenty of warm hands in the police department, but, before he could argue further, the HazMat siren gave off such an annoyingly loud, piercing sound that one would think Hell had found its way to the San Margarita Pier.

“Oh, fuck. They found something,” said Sharky.

At first, Razz couldn’t believe it, but when policemen scurried away from the Sol a Sol toward the connecting bridge, he decided that discretion would be better than stupidity. He

grabbed Lotta and pulled her down the steps toward his car.

“What the fuck? You men, you all alike.”

She fought against him, but appreciated his strength and good looks enough not to fight too hard. She even thought she might get lucky.

Lotta did get lucky that day. So did Razz, Sharky, and all of San Margarita, because there wasn't a bomb, only a timer that couldn't be defused before it triggered open the worn Samsonite to release its contents into the air. This time, its contents were harmless. The case contained twenty pounds of baby powder, not weaponized anthrax.

If it had been anthrax, killer spores would have wafted into onshore winds blowing across San Margarita toward the City of Angels itself, and that would have marked the end of this story and thousands or, perhaps, tens of thousands, of others.