Oceana

The city of Oceana was a tight-knit community. It wasn’t so much a city as a hippie commune built on a series of artificial islands in the Gulf of Mexico. They grew their own food, made their own clothes, and since it was in international waters, grew their own hemp for plastics, paper, and medicine.

There was trouble brewing on the horizon, though. A court decision made in the United States, where many of the inhabitants of the city hailed from, was challenging their sovereignty. The council of Oceana had received word that The United States had laid claim to Oceana, and were in a legal fight to declare eminent domain rights over the city.

The US Government had tired of trying to grab land. People fought for it too hard, sometimes with courts, sometimes with guns. Besides, any land that was worth a damn to the government had already been strip-mined and raped until it was useless. “The ocean, “they thought. “That’s where the future is at.”

They had just about fished out or polluted the entire thing, until it was nearly devoid of edible fish, so what better place to throw away the homeless populations that plagued each city because they had been priced out of the market for housing and medical care.

Wally “Stardust” Baker was a third generation hippie, and the unofficial head of the commune’s voting council. He was the most “officially” educated, so he was elected to speak for them at the hearing in Washington, but it was NOT something he was looking forward to.

First of all, he would have to leave behind his beloved Aussie “Max”. Secondly, he would have to face a room full of snarling Senators, who were just chomping at the bit to tear him down. He’d had severe agoraphobia since he was a teen, anyway. He did not look forward to this trip.

The day finally came for his trip. First thing he would have to do was say goodbye to Max, then board a sailboat bound for New Orleans, where he would fly to his connection in Atlanta, and then on to D.C. Once he’d gathered his bathroom things, he threw them into the shaving bag, then into the suitcase that blocked off his doorway to the outside world.

Max came next. Stardust turned one of his kitchen chairs around and sat in it. He patted his thighs for Max to jump up on him, and held his dog like a baby when he did. He explained his trip in detail, as if his dog could understand every word. He told Max that one of the neighbors was going to take care of him for a few days while he was gone.

As the boat captain was making the final preparations to cast off, Wally grabbed his suitcase and sauntered down to the marina. So far, so good. When the Captain welcome Wally aboard, he did so with a flourish that said he was definitely NOT a permanent resident of the commune, but an outsider who visited the island from time to time.

The sail to New Orleans would take about 3 hours. Good thing Wally had 6 hours before his flight was due to take off. It was a most uneventful trip to New Orleans. The Captain had his own problems on his mind, so he pretty much kept to himself, and kept the chit-chat to a minimum. That was just fine with Wally. He was still getting used to strangers again. He’d never been comfortable around them, but was going to have to get over that before his deposition on Monday.

Once Wally had reached terra firma, he borrowed a cell phone and called a cab to take him to the airport in Metarie. The cab arrived within 15 minutes. Since it was a light traffic day, and rush hour was a distant memory, the drive was smooth and comfortable, with Wally’s suitcase in the trunk.

The driver was a Cajun black man. 200 years ago, his ancestors had been slaves, but they had escaped to the swamps of southwest Louisiana, so he was almost as full Creole as those that had landed there before him. He was in a talkative mood, but somewhat hard to understand because of his thick Cajun accent. Obviously, he spoke more Creole at home than English.

Along the way, they chatted about the weather, and what a fine city New Orleans was. Turns out that he would have made a hell of a tour guide for the city he loved so much. His driver said that Wally should come back and visit when he had more time to stay and play in the city. Wally had no plans to do such a thing, but said that he would, just so the cab driver would drop the subject.

They got to the airport with two hours and fifteen minutes until Wally’s flight. He walked through the airport and up to the Delta counter, where he checked in for his flight and had his bag weighed and sent on that magical, mysterious belt to nowhere. Now, all Wally had with him was his hemp duffle bag that contained his essentials, just in case the suitcase got lost. He would carry that onto the plane.

The hours passed quickly, as some hours do, and before Wally knew it, he was being called to board. There were storms between New Orleans and Atlanta. That made for a bumpy ride, which bothered Wally more than some of the other passengers. Maybe they were used to this kind of thing, but it was only the 3rd time he’d ever been on a plane, so he wasn’t. Each dip and shudder felt enormous, and much more serious than others seemed to be taking it.

A layover of only 45 minutes seemed like it would be enough time, once Wally got to Atlanta, but he was unprepared for the enormity of Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, and practically had to run to catch his connecting flight, which was all the way in Concourse E. He’d landed in Concourse B.

Wally finally made it to Washington, DC, and caught a cab right outside the terminal to his hotel. The ride was short – only 15 minutes – and he was at his temporary home. Once checked in, Wally went straight to his room. Ah, how he’d missed the conveniences of life , like room service. Nothing like that was available in Oceana. They didn’t even have telephones in the commune.

He ordered red beans and rice and a salad… a nice, filling, vegetarian mean. Wally hadn’t INTENTIONALLY become a vegetarian, it just sort of happened little by little. First, he lost his taste for red meat, then for chickens when he moved to Oceana.

Overnight, he tossed and turned as he thought about Max and about his impending deposition before Congressional Committee. When the sun finally rose, Wally felt like he hadn’t slept a wink. First he got up and did his morning routine of yoga, and then went downstairs for the continental breakfast.

Thankfully, hotels that offered continental breakfasts were warming to the idea of providing vegetarian/vegan meals to their guests. Wally dressed in his ratty, tie-dyed t-shirt and lounge pants and sandals and hiked downstairs to the morning meal, where he got a bowl of mixed fruit and a bagel. God, how he missed fresh (ish) bagels. They were almost unheard of on the island. And they even had real butter and cream cheese.

After a filling breakfast, he beat it back to his room and changed, so he could get to his deposition. A shower also fit in there, which he desperately needed after his trip. Wally pulled his long, sandy brown hair back into a ponytail and combed his scraggly beard, and was out the door. The hotel always had a taxi on standby at the front, so Wally hopped in for the ride to Capitol Hill.

Once there, Wally passed through the metal detectors and found the chambers where he would speak. He was about 15 minutes early, but was told to have a seat on the bench outside, and the bailiff would call him in due time.

Fifteen minutes came a went, and Wally was called in. First, he was sworn in, then directed to take a seat at a long table, covered with microphones.

“Mr. Baker, we’re here to discuss the matter of your colony of Oceana, and its….disposition. Do you understand the ramifications?” Senator Hatch asked.

“Yes, Mr. Senator, I do.”

Senator Crawford chimed in, “First, let us state our position that your artificial island of Oceana falls within the territorial waters of the United States, therefore is subject to the laws and regulations of the United States. What say you?”

“I disagree with that statement, Senator. As I’m sure you’re well aware, the internationally recognized territorial waters consist of any bordering waters that add up to 3 miles from the shore of said lands. My colony of Oceana lies 14 miles offshore and therefore falls within international waters. We have been recognized by the country of Switzerland as our own Micro-nation.”

As Senator Crawford silently fumed in his chair, an older woman with a blue dress and a string of pearls spoke up. “Senator Crawford, I realize that I may be the least-experienced Senator on this panel, but I have to agree with the defendant about the internationally recognized territorial waters.”

We’ll have to have that measured by the US Navy, “ screeched Senator Hatch, in his harpy-like voice.

Senator Crawford had regained his composure, and started in again. “Being our position that the colony lies within US territorial waters, there is a laundry list of complaints about this experiment. Members of your colony have paid not taxes, have not had your children educated by an accredited source, have a great deal of illegal immigration to contend with, and have not cast a single vote for anything. As I’m sure YOU are well aware, Mr. Baker, the compulsory voting act of 2019 has required that every US citizen must vote in, at the very least, the Presidential election, and preferably all of them.”

The members of the Senate committee grilled Wally for perhaps another half hour before he began sweating profusely in the 68 degree room. His throat went dry, despite the copious amounts of water he was drinking, and, perhaps imperceptibly, he shook almost uncontrollably. His panic attack had begun. Wally’s heart felt as if it would escape, it was pumping so hard.

It took all his strength to calm himself with the breathing exercises recommended by his ‘doctor’. A glorified Native American medicine man, really, with no formal medical training or degree.

Once Wally got himself calmed down, he resumed testimony, and felt pretty good about his chances. When he was done speaking, and dismissed by the committee, he resumed his place on the bench in the hall to await a decision.

An hour later, the committee had come to a decision, and the bailiff came back to get him. He’d won them over with his articulate, yet impassioned pleas. Oceana was not a recognized nation by the US government, but was one step closer to that process.

A day of touring Washington DC followed. Wally saw the monuments, the White House, and the Smithsonian. It almost felt good to be back in civilization again. When he was done, he returned to the hotel and packed his things before bed.

Wally’s flight left at 6am, so he was going to have to get up very early, so a 7pm bedtime it was. He didn’t have much trouble falling asleep after the day he’d had. During the night, Wally dreamed of a nice, juicy steak for the first time in years. His craving took hold, and wouldn’t let go, even when he got up at 3. Wally resolved to satisfy himself with a cheesesteak sandwich at the airport. After all, who would know?

After he had gone through all the airport crap that came with catching a flight, Wally found a sandwich shop inside the secured area, and bought himself that cheesesteak. Wow, it was better than he imagined.

An uneventful flight followed, followed by a connection in Atlanta, and another flight to New Orleans, where he arranged for a boat captain to shuttle him out to the island. This time, instead of a sailboat, he found a fisherman with a bass boat that ran him out to the island in 45 minutes, instead of 2 hours.

When he got back, Stardust Wally called the council together and relayed his good news. Each of the territorial chieftans would pass along the news, and by tomorrow, the whole colony would know that they were one step closer to being a recognized micro-nation, and that they would have no more trouble from the US government.