

Part I Dry Dock

A dry dock is a narrow basin or vessel that can be flooded to allow a load to be floated in, then drained to allow that load to come to rest on a dry platform. In my case, a dry dock could be Beaumont where I spent my childhood years waiting to make my escape. Or, maybe Dallas where I thought I was building something, something big, yet only led to my demise. Some might even suppose prison is the case. In all three instances, I'm there waiting like a ship being repaired for something yet to come. Beaumont was run by the ships.. The early morning fog horns woke you up for school. The noon whistle let you know it was time for lunch.

It had been time for me to go for a long time. To clear out of Beaumont, Texas. Like when you leave a marriage that's been bad for years. So bad that it's infected your whole system and getting out's the only cure for it. When things come up on you like a sort of revelation and the act of getting out takes hold like a lightning bolt. Everything falls into place like a sort of plan and it becomes almost easy. That's what finally happened.

I pulled over to look at it one last time, that old port. I parked by the Hotel Dieu, closed now. I'd been born there. Looked like somebody else had the same idea. A red Hornet had plowed off the road and had a tow sticker on it. I looked at the dawn breaking over the Neches River. Somehow, it looked so innocent with no tell of what the mean town held. I remembered all those times I'd sit here looking out, wondering what was beyond the Beaumont city limits.

I'd been hearing about Dallas all my life, but had never been there. I'd only gotten as far as Houston. I liked Houston. Liked the people there, but it was too close for comfort. I needed a place like Dallas where I could disappear. Where Gene had no power over me. So, Dallas it was.

I can't say when I first began to scheme. I knew what I'd do when I got there. Dance. I'd known of a few who'd moved to Houston and gotten work in the topless joints. I was a good dancer. I knew how to move and what my talents were. You could feel it. I'd read books about people when they did something they were cut out to do, like acting or singing. Everybody said about the same thing. That when they were doing what they were made to do, they felt a satisfaction, a sense of enchantment. That's what I felt when I was dancing. I felt like almost nothing could touch me. Like I was a super woman, dynamic and potent. So, by any cost, I was going to get myself to Dallas. I knew I would need a bankroll. Enough to get me there and hold me till I could find work. It had been tricky, because I had to keep it a secret from Gene and his crew. I also needed wheels.

It was going to take some doing, but I was ready. What's the saying about necessity being the mother of invention? More people than me had schemed to get out of Beaumont. One girl from my high school had run off with Black Oak Arkansas after they played in town. Stories about her surfaced for years afterward. Who knows if they were true or not.

Some said they all fucked her and when they were done, left her on the side of the road either in Arkansas or Arizona, depending on who was telling the story. An 'A' state always figured into it. One report had her gone crazy and committed to Rusk State Hospital for the criminally insane. Don't ask me, but two things. First, I wanted out of Beaumont bad, but not bad enough to enlist the ranks of Black Oak Arkansas. And, two, I didn't even like their music enough to go see them in concert. Even for a free ticket at the fairgrounds out on Gulf Street. That kind of music was for Gene and his crew. Always trying to appear younger than their years.

Gene and his crew, Skitz, Apache and Duck had been plotting for a real big job. I knew it was major, because they'd make me leave the room or send me to the store. They talked in low voice and would go on all night. There'd been small-time capers before. Like a liquor store or burglary. A drug store. They always had some kind of scam working, but, this one sounded serious. I tried to listen, but couldn't make out what they were talking about.

I started trying to listen in to their plans. It was tough, because they were very secretive. I got to where I'd slide in to do chores and cook when they were whispering over the kitchen table. I knew it had something to do with gambling due to the snippets I'd pick up. Gene would say, "They have a regular Friday night Stud game." He'd bite on the filter of his cigarette in that weird grin of his. "And, best thing, it's right down from the high school. Can't hear a damn thing." Everybody knew about the Romano family card games. Even though gambling was illegal, the right palms were greased downtown. Ever so often, you'd read about a bust, but it would be small time and never at the Romanos.

When he realized I was listening, he'd clam up and not let any of the others say anything until I finally left the room. I'd know I'd pushed it to the limit when Gene would hold up his hand. He always wore his South Park high school ring and would jut it out toward me with his thumb. He used to ask me if I wanted to taste the backside of his palm, but used this pantomime action as shorthand, so to speak. Either way, I knew it wise to skedaddle out of the room quickly and quietly. For my own good.

Teddy Romano was a grade ahead of me in school. There were whispers about his family just like people talked about Gene. The Romano house was right down the road from us and from Beaumont High School. They had a Friday night card game that was famous all over Beaumont. You'd see big Cadillacs and other Thomas Road cars parked up and down South Street. It was a blue collar neighborhood, so those big cars looked as out of place as a red dress at a funeral.

Their house was low key. It sure didn't look like the kind of place that housed a big gambling operation. It was wood frame like the other homes up and down South Street. Most of them lived in by families who drew a paycheck from Texaco or Mobil Oil. The Romanos place always looked like it could have used a coat of paint. One of the kids had talked about the inside. He'd gone over to Teddy's one afternoon and was floored by the interior. There was gold furniture everywhere and

plush coverings of pink and red velvet. It looked like a palace inside.

The Romano family had some pull at the Beaumont police department. The very next night, Saturday the Castle Mo-Tel was raided. It was retaliation for the Romano family poker game. All four of them, Apache, Duck, Skitz and Gene were hauled downtown. Gene called me and told me where he'd stashed his payload so I could come down and go his bail. I knew the jail backwards and forwards. This wasn't my first time to put up bond downtown. Plus, that old Beaumont city jailhouse played headquarters to what seemed the world's largest population of hornytoads. We'd go down and catch them in the hot summertime. The old wrought-iron bars filtered over the faces of male prisoners who'd yell catcalls at us kids. It was a strange old jail and like a movie. Everybody got out, but Skitz. He had an old warrant and the night judge wanted to make an example out of him. It was on a Sunday and you know what they say about how slow the wheels of justice grind. While Gene and the other two were scrambling around with lawyer business, I saw my opportunity and took it. Skitz had given me a set of car keys to the Vega. And, one more thing. By a sheer stroke of luck, he'd left his part of the Romano hit hidden at the apartment. And, Gene was unaware of it. Skitz had winked at me when he slipped the envelope into the cover of "In Through the Out Door." So, thank you, Led Zeppelin. I made a big mistake before I saw my chance and hit the road for Dallas. I should've done away with Gene for good. It was a mistake and it was a big one. It would have changed everything.