

THE LIZARD-MEN

"Leaderless, the lizard-men stampede off the cliff."

An amazing line. Terrific! Not so much because of the words but because I -- the writer -- am 6 months old (36 lbs., a little over 2' long). Think what I'll be doing at 20. Anything I write now takes on importance beyond any meaning or literary value it may have. Placed in the right hands, it also takes on -- if I may speak frankly -- considerable commercial value.

No, I'm joking. I'm really 35, age of the average hack, age when most men realize that nothing they can do will change that pair of 3's they've stared at so long into a winning hand, and there's nowhere to go but down. Not me. I was born down -- without arms or legs, with no bone or cartilage in my body except for one chalk-like claw which protrudes from my lower half, and which I use to grip my pen. I'm an eyeless, earless, mouthless lump of flesh. It's astounding that I can -- or care to -- write a word. Obviously, my line is more than you thought.

No, I'm an energetic, sexually active human male, 317 years old today. I'm a mutant -- progenitor of a race of perfect men. The previous stories were part of a test which my wisdom -- acquired through so many years -- dictated that I should make before going on. My line is great because of the years of living which inspired it, and stand behind it. You would be foolish -- are not qualified -- to discount a single comma. My sayings should be disseminated through mass media until they become a religion.

No, I'm a 26-year-old American of English descent. Average build, respectable brain (no genius), reasonable looks (no movie star). I sell cars at my dad's used car lot. Why do you listen to a word I say?

PORTUGESE MAN-OF-WAR

i

The Portugese Man-of-War is a large warm-water jellyfish which floats on the ocean surface by means of a translucent, gas-filled sac streaked with iridescence like oily water in the sun. Below this "balloon" hangs a mass of multicolored "guts" and a number of blue, red, and purple tentacles of varied length, for stinging prey.

Seen floating at a distance, the balloon does resemble a sailing ship, though its shape is more nearly like the top half of a Roman helmet, or the head of a nearly submerged, crested dinosaur.

ii

Around the first of March, Teddy and I always made it to Galveston. In cutoffs, we'd ramble over miles of beach, seeing what winter had tossed up. There'd be bottles, light bulbs, net-floats, shells, crates with foreign writing, driftwood (sometimes whole trees), an occasional dead shark, sea turtle, grouper, or nameless rotting monster 2 inches deep in flies. Plus a beachful of Man-of-Wars. March was the month for them.

We'd grab long sticks and gallop up and down the shore like knights, lancing balloons to hear them pop, watch them deflate. They were made of a thin plastic stuff, like super tough jello, and got brittle as they dried in the sun.

We were careful where we stepped, since dead Man-of-Wars can still sting, and stray tentacles could be anywhere. We'd wade out beside a balloon floating in, poke our sticks behind it, and lift up ten feet of tentacle. Being heavier the tentacles always trailed the floats, so to the sides was fairly safe. On shore or off, never walk behind a Man-of-War. Even the popping balloons spit out a mist which makes bare legs redden and itch to beat hell.

iii

I was looking up "Prussic Acid" in the encyclopedia one day, ran across "Portugese Man-of-War," and learned these facts:

1) The Man-of-War is not a true jellyfish, but a complex colony of polyps, each polyp adapted to one of four functions: food capture, protection; food digestion; flotation; reproduction.

2) The Man-of-War was named by English sailors who encountered flotillas of them in the seas off Portugal. North of there, they are rarely found in massed formations.

3) Man-of-War tentacles may be over 15 feet long. Their sting can kill a man. The best antidote is vinegar.

4) The Man-of-War Fish lives among the tentacles, protected from enemies, sharing food killed by the Man-of-War, and sometimes eating its tentacles. As long as it is healthy, the fish is immune to the Man-of-War's venom. Becoming sick or injured, it falls prey at once.

5) The Man-of-War's float may be a foot long. It is filled with a gas secreted by the animal -- 90% nitrogen, a trace of argon, the rest oxygen. A valve allows gas to escape and the float to sink as much as necessary, when necessary.

6) The Man-of-War moves solely by current or wind, its float doubling as a sail. Its shape causes it to tack 45° into the wind. It slows its speed by letting out gas and sinking. In the northern hemisphere, it tacks to the left of the wind; in the southern, to the right.

7) Sea turtles are one of the few animals which eat Man-of-Wars. Their shells and scales keep them from being stung, but they must feed with their eyes closed.

iv

There are always Man-of-Wars around Galveston, but they're usually rare, and you can usually see them coming. Even so, half-blind as I am without my glasses, I never swim or surf without a friend to scan the waves. I remember too well my father's white face getting whiter against the sand, my mother in a panic, me crying, thinking he was dead.

The rows of fiery welts on his legs and back lasted into next spring.

v

I just heard a lecture called "Confusion in Sexual Identity: The Search for a Model." Some guys have it bad. If I was ever confused that way, it stopped that day, age five. I was sitting on Dad's shoulders surf-fishing and wave-jumping, both of us in swim-trunks. I saw a rainbow balloon float by and started to show Dad just as he flinched once and, without even scaring me, waded the 50 yards to shore and gently set me down.

A FAT MAN AND A POOL CUE

were arguing in a bar. The fat man had lost 30 bucks plus considerable face in a grudge match, and blamed his warped cue. The cue felt it had been incompetently used, made to look bad, then raked over the coals for a handicap which was minor compared to many, and which the fat man had caused anyway by storing it improperly.

"I'll use you for a rug beater," hissed the fat man.

"I'll flatten your pig's-nose," snarled the cue.

"I'll break you into toothpicks."

"I'll pop your kidneys like water-balloons."

"I'll make you into a cane and give you to a blind leper."

"I'll crush your balls into putty."

"I'll nail you to a wall, and people will think you're an S."