

Anicha

By Nico Earhart

She still lay mired at the high end of the beach where bronzed and sinuously-constructed men had dragged her above the tideline and wedged her to the side of a dilapidated shack, rusted, oxidizing rebar jutting from still unconstructed cinderblock walls where she lay baking in the solar glow. The Sun had begun to take its toll on the cadaverous scow and cracked particles of waterproof stain slipped from the gunwales and hull, collecting in her belly in as an amalgam of grime. Scabious flecks of paint. The engine, long ago stripped from the transom and cannibalized, left only the faintest trace of a blood-red iron smear that had dripped to the deck and caked to a metallic red and orange mire like thick, meandering veins. Even the accented bands of paint that ran below the flanges of her gunwale were beginning to fade and dull as the epochs of undeviating sunlight washed over her flanks. In time, even her name, which had been emblazoned upon a fascia near the bow in a soupy, lampblack ink – ANICHA – had begun to fade to a greasy, gray stain slowly losing its vitality as the launch too was beginning to fade into the landscape where it had been stranded.

Weeks and months of this daily misuse would come to pass. The rising and falling of the sun etching its daily toll on the wind-beaten deck, a salt crusted mist pilling up in brittle layers of corrosive silt, the discarded trash piled around the console, empty cans of *Toña* and cigarette butts collecting in her sun-swollen hull. Sitting idly roadside as passing jeeps overlaid threads of dust across the sad affair. Once, she had been a proud slip who motored the tempestuous boils of the eastern Pacific, unimpeded by the rolling caps and bow-driven salt mist. But in her current

state of disrepair she was as melancholy a sight as could be found on this sweeping and craggy shoreline of golden, granular sand and pockmarked rock formations.

There was still life in this ship worth celebrating and nurturing though. The smoothly polished floorboards, struck from individual steaks of teak had faded a touch but could be reanimated with care. The hull remained air and water tight. Only a few mends would be needed where amber bottles had shattered in the hull, compromising the layered sheets of fiberglass that held her to. And only one large depression sat in the low keel of the bow, below the freeboard, that would have to be repaired to maintain a pure draft as she lumbered into the thick oncoming waves. Given another chance, and the particular, finessed touch that would be required to chisel her back into shape, she could be out on the sea again dancing along the peaks as she sidled onto her running plane.

Eventually, as time wore on and the launch sank deeper into its highwayside morass, a journeyman crested the southern escarpment that marked the southern boundary of the bay. Clambering over the exposed boulders and desiccated scrublands leading over the saddle, he made his way towards the smattering of habitations that spangled the beach. He walked, barefooted with diligent steps placed on the hot, coarse sand, until he found a beachside bar slung below a copse of shade trees. The man drew up a rattan barstool and cozied to the unblemished rosewood bar as pure white sand spilled away to the water's edge behind him. He had built up a thirst in his effort, perspiration matting him in rings around his pits and diaphragm, and so ordered a cold bottled beer to be brought to him at an isolated table in a windless corner of the barroom.

Weary, he sat quietly and poured the drink into a glass cup that swelled with hives of moisture as the tropical air circled the curved edges of the chalice, yeasty smell faintly noticeable

as the shifting breeze flowed through the room and wafted the perfume around the table. He eased into the drink, polishing off the first tiny glass cup of the beer. Then, tilting the oversized bottle of coffee-colored glass to the rim, he filled the cup again and sank deeper into his chair, taking in the drafty room, sets of oversized flags fluttering from the rafters.

As he sat in the still coolness of the bar only the slight rattle of the wind, whipping through vaulted walls of bamboo, disturbed the morning tranquility. He took in the scene like a spectator; the sand and sea and the emerald-green forest of hardwoods running up the canyon behind the run-down little shack. When he noticed a faded white hem through an open field behind the bar. The object was obscured by a smattering of garbage. Plastic bags and ancient, discarded fishing equipment that had been heaved into the lot in some forgotten era. Through the swaths of waste, however, he knew that what he had seen should be a portion of a ship, most likely the uppermost section of the beam and gunwale on the vessel's flank. Up and down the beach similar shapes could be seen on brightly colored fishing boats at rest in the sand. Slugging through the remainder of his beer, gulping it down with a sudden urgency and emancipating a belch that pleased the Nicaraguan barman in the process, the gringo ambled through the rear entrance of the establishment leading away from the sea and into the insalubrious field.

Steps he took through the empty space were intended to avoid the rusted remnants of fish hooks and high-test wire there, until, reaching clear to the other side, he slid open a mangled gate that screeched hawk-like and slid to its final position. On the far side of the lot, in the same depression it had been cast into long before sat an idle craft, cream-colored and yellowing, but beautiful in its casing.

The size of the boat would be hard to decipher without proper measurement but from where he stood it looked to be near twenty feet long by half a dozen wide. His blood began to

pick up speed on its circulation, heartbeat hastening as he inspected the hull, bow-to-stern, and into the brackish pit at the center of the boat. He was looking for blemishes or signs of degradation but there were none so big as to raise a doubt of the boat's seaworthiness. There was no uncertainty that given the proper care, some passionate upkeep and basic repairs, this boat could once again venture out into the unknown beyond the placid bay. Returning now, he strode through the unhealthy wasteland, past the dusty lot marking the entrance to the bar and up to the counter where he placed both hands firmly on the polished crosspiece and spoke in his formative Spanish to the young man behind it.

‘¿Quién es el dueño de ese lancha?’

Negotiations went as smoothly as could have been expected. Two people struggling to deal with an abrupt language barrier, neither of the two parties well-versed in the tongue of the other but sufficient to complete the barter. Though the owner of the boat had seemed content with its final position above the tideline, the man was anxious to rid himself of the heap but would put up a good defense of its worth. They settled on an appropriate price and the gringo headed back over the saddle to the neighboring cove where he had a wad of hundreds stashed into an unassuming billfold. By the time he had passed over the rocks for the third time that day, his stash doubled square and hid under the liner of his decrepit hiking boot, he knew that the boat would soon be his.

After taking possession of the boat, he would have to find a withdrawn space where he could mend the ship in privacy. Away from the settlement near the outcropping on the opposite end of the beach where the people gathered and houses hung below the canopy. To the south of

town, heading in the direction of the footpath from where he had crossed, were a series of removed leas where the boat could be jostled out of the pendulous midday sun, exposed enough from the east that a crisp breeze filtered in, taming the azimuthal curve of the afternoon sunlight. A quick exploration of the area found a hollowed-out section of trees where saplings could be felled for space and the bushes tilled and cast aside so that his boat could fit snugly into the space. From here a keen watch could be deployed on those who wondered in from town. A defensive posturing that would secure the boat when he returned, nocturnally, over the hill-straddling gap each night. This, he decided in an inward deliberation accompanied by a lethargic sigh, would be where his boat would come to rest while he made his repairs.

The problem that remained now was how best to get the hulking, cumbersome launch the half mile down the beach to where he had made the clearing. Included in the purchase were two utensils, meter-long cylinders of wood like emaciated old telephone poles with half-spheres of rusty and dangerous looking rebar sticking out of one end. This was the utilitarian form of locomotion used by the Nicaraguan boatmen, who were masters of their domain. In theory, the two poles would be placed underneath bottom of the boat, perpendicular to its imagined course, rotating underneath the chine as she was heaved along the beach like a rudimentary conveyer belt. By replacing the poles each time they slung clear of the rear transom, stooping behind the boat to grab them and stuffing them back under the now-raised bow, the boat could crawl along the sand like an intoxicated beetle. Using this technique, fewer bodies would be needed to move the boat, some exerting the main push from behind and a single man intermittently pushing and then moving the wooden bolts to the front as she rumbled down the beach, off-kilter and sliding on the mossy cylinders. The procedure seemed foolproof in its simplicity and would eventually

take the boat to the secluded destination, but only after she could be pried from the unrelenting clutch of the gravely sand that held her like a barnacle's peduncle.

After picking out stale clumps of trash that had collected in the hollow shell of the boat, handfuls still malodorous and damp from rain that had drenched the boat and washing away the grime and cemented layers of salt-crust with buckets of seawater, the boat was ready to be shucked from its stationary resting place and hauled to the clearing the gringo had selected as its next station. But, when pushed by the greatest exertion of his own weight, his arms and legs shaking with the effort, the boat would not move. It lay still encased in the declivity by the side of the raggedy, garbage-strewn road.

Steeling away to his room overnight and returning the next day with a condensed bundle of currency, green and blue paper etched with the faces of Nicaragua's past, he attempted to ply some of the young men of the village to a task he would need more than a few souls to accomplish. With some careful solicitation and the promise of free bottles of sodas for the remainder of the afternoon, the man and his conscripted crew of lean-looking assistants drew to prying the boat from the roadside hull. For their fare, they would help him lift the boat from its current position and slide it out to the beach where he could take over the task of moving her, sliding the wooden poles under the chine and inching it along down the sand. Finally, after some exhaustive effort on his and his companions part, the vessel unlocked from its earthen grasp and began to wobble to-and-fro, first a collection of millimeters, a hare's breath of shake, and then like a dam whose sluice had been opened wide she stirred to life and was raised into the air by the strength of the young men's lithe arms and callused hands.

Getting the boat on its newly established trajectory, however, was a decidedly more precise operation requiring his total dedication. With the help of the young men, he had moved

the slip from the road to the beach. Now, engaging the front of the bow into a southern tilt towards the far end of the beach, he heaved the front of the boat into the air and slipped the first of the wooden dowels underneath her bow. He moved to the rear of the boat, taking a three-point stance connected to the aft like a football player, lurching forward with effort to slide the boat further down the beach while the wooden pole saddled under her keel as the bow rose into the air until he could push no more. With the bow up in the air, the circular wooden tool with its rusty and harsh looking handle sitting in front of the halfway point of the boat, he moved to the front again and slung the second cylinder under the exposed section of sand beneath the raised front end of the ship. After fitting the dowel back into place under the bow, he grabbed the gunwale near the front of the boat and dragged it back to level, resting the panga on two cylinders now. The ship finally shuddered and came to a stop on both of the termite-ridden hunks of wood that now angled downhill, towards the water's edge.

In theory, the rest of the short trip down to his corner of the beach should have been an effortless one, having beforehand seen the locals who would sidle their boats at sunset to the top end of the sand away from the rising tide. But he hadn't taken the slope of the sand into account and his problems began almost immediately as he eased off the flat, soft sand near the bar and onto the angled sheet where the Pacific had cast its waves and cemented the sand like a desert lakebed. The boat slipped from its wooden spools, sliding towards the sea and dipping the bow seaward as the front of the ship came off the block and onto the sand. Now, as he spun around the circumference of the boat, kneeling down to reposition blocks, shoving them back underneath the scull, he realized this trip would be painstakingly sluggish. He pressed on further down the beach in his solitary ballet of repositioning and shoving, placing and pulling down and pushing forward as he moved.

Before too long this display had caught the notice of some fishermen who sat idly on the beachside stoop of a shack and gestured to the struggling man down the beach. The scene appeared humorous at first to the golden-brown skinned men who gaped on from the tepid shade of an adolescent *Malinche* tree, the heat of the midday turning the whole valley into a sauna and washing its inhabitants over with a languid glaze. They watched from the shadows until they could do so no more then rose from their seats and hollowed out sand cavities and began to make their way down the beach in a nebulous and reluctant cluster, moving closer to the man who still struggled mightily with his cumbersome duty. When they finally came to him his effort had all but concealed their advance and he was taken by surprise when the first of the men spoke out over the dull rattle of the breakers.

“*Ok, Amigo...*” a rotund man cut in to break the drum of the sea and inform the gringo that the group had amassed, his attention still focused solely on the ship. He spun a full rotation, looking around the bay before he finally caught the visage of the man who had spoken out.

“*Ok, Amigo...*” He spoke again. “*¿Dónde quieres que pongamos este barco?*”

He asked the gringo with a wide smile, exposing gold crowns on either side of his incisors, his head tilted back with the friendly aspect of a consort.

“*Dónde no hay gente,*” the gringo, who had needed a minute to compose himself and to search for the words, spoke to the group of men.

The trip to the south end of the beach had been a more amiable one, aided by the unsolicited assistance of the boatmen. When they had reached his veiled nook, cut into the creeping verdant foliage and tendrils of spindly plant shoots that flowed from the steep embankment, they wedged the panga into the clearing, exchanged some pleasantries with the

gringo who was grateful for their help and made their way back up the beach to leave him to his newfangled work.

It started immediately and he took too it diligently, scribing out a list of supplies he would need for the repairs: wood varnish and waterproof sealant, a whole galaxy of different grains of sandpaper to polish the mends he would make, epoxy and silicon filler to patch thin portions of the hull and chine that had been damaged. He wandered through the streets of the village, passing hostels along the way to raid their barebones libraries in search of nautical literature. Instructive manuals were gathered along with any books he could find regarding the ocean in any way – anything that could assist him in his restoration of the boat. He even managed to find a Spanish edition of Hemmingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, which he could read by the light of his torch at the end of the bay and imagine the potential his boat could have once it came to its gleeful and well-earned fruition.

From his secluded corner of the beach he made to his work. Plucking wooden clapboards from the base of the boat, polishing them and painting them with a glistening wood-lacquer he had scavenged from a local shop. He left the slats to dry in the heavy offshore winds, one side of them mounted on a harsh-looking rock, the other spaced like teeth around a flattened sheet of navy tarpaulin to bake in the heat. The two gashes on the exterior of the boat needed first to be stripped of the rotted lattice of fiberglass that held them loosely together, chiseled out so that the new filler could be poured and cast and mold to the aerodynamic shape of the hull. Then the epoxy mends would be sanded again, notched out as he sanded through the outer wall of the repairs and refilled with a fresh, stout batch of the glutinous mixture of foul-smelling chemicals. The blemished sides of the inner rear transom were filled where the original outboard motor had

been drilled into the metallic baseplate and fastened to the rear crossbeam of the boat, making way for the clean attachment of a new engine.

Repairs came along and he spent nights nestled in the upturned side of the boat that kept him warm from the night breeze. He traveled by the boisterous chicken buses to Rivas on occasion where he kept an eye turned for a used outboard he could replace the old motor with. In time, he found a weathered two-stroke that had languished in a forgotten corner of a marine supply that he managed to acquire after prolonged negotiations with the store's cantankerous owner. There would be no room on the chicken bus for this elephantine mishmash of steel and aluminum that dripped viscous slicks of motor oil in a steady beat near a hinge in the cavitation plate. But he knew that before long somebody in the beachside village would have to make for Rivas to resupply and he could add his ancient motor to the list of items to be procured.

After some weeks spent in his culvert attending to the repairs he had set out to tackle that day when he wedged his scow into the cliffside slot, there were no more tasks to be dealt with and the ship was poised to sail. There in the dotted shade of shrubbery that spread from the side of the overhang, he put her right-sided and took a final inspection of the reborn craft from bow-to-stern: the damage to the front bulb below the waterline had been patched and filled and sanded to a smooth and unblemished curvature, the clapboards with their lustrous shine and polished varnish were fitted into place and fastened to the deck with stainless steel rivets, screwed in flush to the wood's surface until they came in snug and tight. A fresh coat of barnacle paint had been applied to the chine as she had sat belly up in the dunes. The outboard had been transported from Rivas on an old Soviet flatbed that had arrived on the slack tide and crept onto the beach. It hauled the apparatus to the southern end of the bay where it could be secured to the transom of the vessel that now stuck out of the lea like an overfull mailbox.

When the engine had been fit to the boat and new screws bored through the fresh repairs he was finally ready to christen his sloop. The men who came down the beach to help launch her that morning were giddy with their own excitement for the man's well-spent labor. He passed a chilled beer bottle over the bow of the ship, crashing and spilling it onto the beach in an eruption before handing the rest of the case to the men who would help push him out. As the short ceremony came to an end, the gringo guided the men towards the sea with the boat, jumping into the rear at the last moment and cranking the engine to life. It took three pulls, but finally caught and stirred to a wonky hum after some mechanical wheezing expelled a thick, blue smolder. She cut through the first batch of breakers, bounding through them, childlike, before the fresh breeze had fluttered down from the carboniferous volcanic mountains to the east. The gringo stood in the pilot's place, grasping the handle of the outboard as the bowsprit sluiced through the effusive rollers that lapped at the hull. She cast a faint shadow through leagues of crystalline and uncolored seawater to a seabed that drifted away and casually disappeared into ether as the sampan crested the constraints of the bay and spilled into the sea proper. From a shaded alcove above the tideline where detritus had collected in long strings spanning the beach, marking the crest of the high tide, a girl watched as the boat bounded over the surging crests and dipped around the southern edge of the bay beneath a lunar formation of inky and cracked boulders that hung above the spraying jets of turbulent foam.