

FULL CIRCLE

The summer crowds were a distant memory as I wiped down the bottles from the top shelf in early November of 2003. With only locals stopping by, the expensive stuff just gathered dust, and the boredom finally became an urge to clean, so you know I had to be pretty bored.

I felt the cold gust sweeping off the Atlantic before I heard the creak of the door, and turned to see an old-timer I didn't recognize in a tattered wool coat, slip in and force the oak door closed against the strong wind.

He shook his well-worn Padres cap, his full head of grey matted and sweaty despite the cold. "Hello, are you open?"

The long wooden bar was empty, so his asking was understandable.

I joked that he had his choice of seats.

"Well, fine then, I'll sit by the taps, so you don't have too far to refill me," he smiled.

His name was Harry, Harry Grimm, and it was his first time back to Long Beach, New York, in sixty-three years. "After the war, I settled in San Diego, just cause that's where they discharged me. I got married, settled down. We had a good life, until she took sick last winter. She passed in July..."

I said I was sorry to hear that.

He held up his hand. "Thanks, anyway... We never had any kids, a little problem with shrapnel from a Jap torpedo. So, being alone now, I decided to do some traveling."

I asked if he was originally from Long Beach.

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“Nah, even forty-seven years ago, it didn’t seem that anyone was really from here. Mostly summer bungalows and cottages even then. I was born in Kentucky, but always had that wanderlust, bouncing from place to place, until I got here.”

He asked how long I had lived here, and I told him a year. He looked around the place.

“Not too much changed here, except the modern stuff, television, that flashing jukebox.”

I wondered if he got drafted. Was that why he left?

“Yes and no. The same old story, a woman. She was the reason I stayed at all.”
He began to take me back with him to 1940.

Harry was 20 years old, and his latest employment, delivering furniture from Cincinnati, had brought him to New York City, when he had a falling-out with the foreman. The big city didn’t impress him, so he took the train out to see the Atlantic Ocean in the Summer of 1940. The beach was nice, the surf refreshing, and he came into this same bar to wash away a powerful thirst, as he called it.

“They served meals then, and the upstairs was rooms for rent. Everything I owned was in my canvas side-bag. Since it was summer and I liked to travel light, that being of one change of clothes, and my old Mud Hens cap.”

After a few beers, he spoke to the manager, and got a room for the night. He wound up staying until December, all because of Elizabeth.

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“She worked the kitchen, a Jill-Of-All-Trades. Chief cook and Bottle-Washer, waitress. And boy, was she a beauty. Long red hair, like Maureen O’Hara, as good-looking, only sweeter, if you can imagine. Little bit of a thing. Barely five foot. I was hooked the second she smiled.”

I smiled as I watched his eyes. They sparkled with excitement.

“Then, I met Floyd, her boyfriend.” Harry’s eyes grew dark at the recollection. “He had those Movie Star good looks, with that pencil mustache and slicked hair parted in the middle, looked like David Niven and I looked like Mickey Rooney.”

“But it wasn’t just jealousy. The fella just seemed shifty, you know? That smile was more of a smirk, like he was just putting up with you.”

“Days turned to weeks, and the manager, a guy named Chuck, says to me, ‘I got a bartender shift open, if you’re interested.’ I jumped at it. Being able to spend the day in Lizzie’s company, I woulda paid *him*. Summer ended and I picked up some more shifts, and before you know it, we were like the Three Musketeers, me, Lizzie, and Floyd. If he knew of my feelings for Lizzie, he never showed it. I guess he didn’t consider me any competition.”

Harry took a gulp and smiled. “Nothing like a fresh keg and a clean tap.”

I acknowledged his acuity, telling him the taps were cleaned today.

“You can always taste freshness, whether it’s just-picked blueberries, fresh corn, or clean taps.”

So, why was he suspicious of Floyd?

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“I couldn’t put my finger on it. Liz was from New York and you could hear it clear as a bell in her speech. Bronx-Irish, she said, but she had that Cagney edge, you know? I loved to hear her sing while she worked. The one time I mentioned it, she got so self-conscious and stopped for a week. I hated myself.”

“But, Floyd didn’t have an accent like any I’d heard, and I’d been from Oregon to Louisiana, and prided myself on recognizing someone’s origins. But, it wasn’t like foreign either, like English-English, or French, or even Canadian-English.”

“I asked about it, and he got indignant, claiming he was from San Fran, saying he spoke like most other people, unlike me, who mumbled. I let it go. Lizzie told me later that he grew up an orphan, and the shuffling from Orphanage to Foster Home accounted for his touchiness about his growing up.”

That sounded reasonable, right?

“There were other things. He’d only gotten to town a month before me. Just appeared out of nowhere...”

Sort of like you did, I asked?

“Touche’, I hadn’t thought of that,” Harry chuckled, sliding his empty mug across for a refill. “But in this story, I’m the good guy. Trust me.”

“So, just like this,” sweeping his hand around the empty bar, “After Labor Day, the town basically shut down. Every night, right after sunset, Floyd would go for a walk along the surf. I asked Lizzie where he’d go. ‘Oh, he likes to go pray every night, like Vespers. He’s very full of the Spirit.’ I could think of something else he was full of, if you get my drift,” he winked again.

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“It’s not that I’m anti-religion. It just troubles me when a man parades it out at his convenience. The idea of appreciating Nature’s power and magnificence roll wave after wave actually makes more sense to me than kneeling in some dingy old building. But Floyd falling to his knees was something I wasn’t falling for.”

So, why didn’t you follow him some night when you were off?

“Unless that beach has changed an awful lot since 1940, it’s a Lo-o-o-ng beach, hence its name. He would’ve spotted me in a second. Besides, I liked the time alone with Lizzie.”

Harry sipped as the years rewound for him. Then he was on his feet.

“Well, lookie there. It’s still there.” He moved past the jukebox, to the dart board. “No, that’s not it, but it’s hanging in the same place.”

It wasn’t the dart board he’d seen, it was an old Seaman’s map of Long Island, like so many that hang in Long Island bars and restaurants.

He grinned at me. “It was a Wednesday, early December, warm for that time of year. Whatever crowd we had was gone, so it was the three of us, listening to big bands on the radio, when the door opens.”

“In walks two men, long slickers. They both smelled of diesel oil. They stayed up front there, and I served them a couple of beers, tried to make small-talk, but they weren’t interested.”

“They spot the map. Not this one, the original. They’re both over here, pointing, speaking animated-like. Not arguing, but clearly upset.”

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“So Floyd, who’s the least sociable of the three of us, decides to see if he can help. He walks over, they seem defensive, but he starts talking in whispers and they seem to relax.”

“After a few minutes, during which he does all the talking, and they just nod, the two strangers give us a wave and are heading out the door.”

“‘Wait,’ I call, cause they ain’t paid for their beers.”

“Floyd says, ‘Don’t worry, just take them out of me,’ and he’s got that phony grin on his face, like he’s the smartest man in the world.” Harry shook his head in disgust. “I hated that look.”

He sat back on his stool, just as Floyd had done. “He says the men were fishermen. The unusually warm weather had brought the fog and they were trying to get back to Freeport, about ten miles east. ‘It sure looked like they were pointing farther out than that,’ I said, ‘like Montauk,’ which is a hundred miles away.”

“Floyd says I must be mistaken. He smiles, kisses Lizzie’s cheek, and announces it’s time for Vespers. Out of nowhere, he decides its praying time.”

“Liz just smiles, like this is normal, and I’m thinking ‘This is more than strange. It’s down-right weird. A fishing boat might run aground on that beach, but there’s no place to moor up, so they’d have to take a skiff in, and from the sound of the surf, you’d still be risking your boat could get hung up. I’m not a man of the sea, but it didn’t make sense.”

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“If they moored up on the Reynold’s Channel side, they had a half-mile walk to get here, and this bar wasn’t visible from that side, even without the fog. So how’d they find us? They had to come from the beach.”

Harry left me to ponder this while he visited the men’s room, smiling when he returned. “Still got the old trough in there, huh? Don’t see that anymore.”

So what about Floyd?

“I got your interest, huh? Good. So, when Floyd goes out, I say to Lizzie, ‘Oh, he didn’t close the door tight,’ and I rush over to see Floyd going on the beach with the two new guys.”

“Fifteen, twenty minutes pass, and even Lizzie’s beginning to think there’s more to this than meets the eye. Remember, Europe’s at war now, and Germany rules the North Atlantic, at least on the east side. Coast Guard and Merchant Marine are patrolling the entire east coast. Why the Krauts would come to Long Beach, or even Freeport, made no sense. Unless they were lost.”

“Then, we hear a grumble, a growl, low, threatening; Diesel engines coming to life. Lizzie’s eyes are wide and moist. ‘Where’s Floyd?’ she asks.”

“Now, I’m only still in this town because of her, and what Lizzie wants, Lizzie gets. We grab our coats and we’re out the door, me locking the place behind us. The moonlight only makes the fog seem thicker, and we move to the shore as the rumble seems to be fading.”

“We reach the surf and as we dodge the waves, we see where footprints surround a place where something was dragged into the water. I hold Lizzie’s arm, I don’t know

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why, and a breeze sweeps across, creating a brief glimpse, and there it was: a ship. No, not a ship, a submarine. As quick as it appeared the fog erased it from sight, and the growl became a gurgle, then silence.”

“Lizzie was beside herself, calling for Floyd, each way along the shore, but he was gone. After a half-hour of futility, I got her to come back to the bar and put a pot of coffee on.”

Harry let that sink in, and asked, “Is the Coast Guard station still in Atlantic Beach?”

I said I’d never heard of it.

“Back then, it was the closest thing to an Army base, so I told Liz that we had to contact them. If that was a sub, it wasn’t American, or they would’ve had uniforms. It had to be German.”

“Lizzy says, ‘I haven’t been completely honest with you, Harry.’ She said Floyd told her he was born in Germany. That he and his family came down here from Canada when he was a child. He lied about his heritage because he was ashamed of the Nazis. He thought Americans would hold his ancestry against him. They came in illegally. Floyd had no passport, so if we went to the authorities with a story of an illegal alien who happened to be from Germany being kidnapped by a Nazi U-boat, we would have all been locked up.”

“I didn’t bother to point out that she only had his word about his ancestry, and that he might very well be some kind of spy. It would have sounded like a Bogart movie or something.”

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Based on their pointing at Montauk on the map, Harry was sure the tip of Long Island was their true destination. Or maybe this was the contact Floyd had been waiting for.

“I tried but failed to convince Lizzie that Floyd was a guest on the U-boat and not a prisoner, but she was blinded by love. She made up her mind: She was going to Montauk to save Floyd.”

Harry tried to sway her. “Even if we’re right, where in Montauk? How would you find him?”

She stood and went to that map, and looked down. “What’s this?” she asked. A folded piece of paper lay on the floor. “

We brought it to the light. It was a crude map, probably drawn free-hand, rather than bringing a larger map, we could read, ‘Montauk’ with ‘Nordosten 3.2k.’ Not being bilingual by any stretch, Liz and I were sure it meant three kilometers north-east. We had no clue what a kilometer was, but based on the squiggles that looked like rail-road tracks, we knew that whatever the Krauts were looking for was 3.2 of them, east by northeast of the Montauk train station.”

I was about to point out how coincidental it was that they drop the map, but Harry raised his hand.

“I know, I know. But, we were both young and in love, her with Floyd, and me with her. I wasn’t going to let her go alone, and if I reported it, she could be implicated. I could be, too. In for an inch, in for a mile, as they say. Or a hundred miles.”

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Harry had been stashing anything he could save, secretly hoping Lizzie would notice him as more than a friend. “I threw a few things in my bag and we stopped at Lizzie’s place, where she had a coffee can for a rainy day.”

Train travel being what it was, it would have taken a day to backtrack to Jamaica, then catch the local out to Montauk, since it was a winter schedule, anyway. Then, Lizzie revealed another secret. She had a car.

“It was a 1933 Ford Cabriolet,” Harry said. “Remember The Andy Griffith show? Otis, the drunk’s car. And just as beat-up. The canvas top was all torn up, so the wind howled if you went over thirty. But it started, and we were on our way.”

“We started out east on Route 27. It was two lanes, with traffic lights in each town, but it was faster than the train. I’m not much of a fighter, but I knew if we were going up against Nazis, we needed weapons. “

“By the time we reached Oakdale, Route 27 was down to one lane. There was a bait and tackle shop in Patchogue that opened at dawn to service fishermen that caught our eye. The sign included ‘Fishing & Hunting.’ Although limited, they had small caliber rifles, mostly for chasing off pests and vermin. The Remington 511 Scoremaster caught my eye because it was advertised as ‘Jimmie’s First Gun.’ Not knowing anything about guns, I figured if a kid could use it, how hard could it be? It was single-action, with a bolt, but better than nothing.”

“Unfortunately, he only had one in stock, so I grabbed a small harpoon pistol, and a couple of fishing knives. Not much, but better than nothing.”

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“They had sandwiches to go for seamen. I grabbed a couple, and we were on the road again.”

Harry drained his beer and offered to buy me one. I accepted. Then he went on. “They hadn’t started gas rationing yet so we had no trouble fueling up and the guy was good enough to tell us a kilometer measured about 6/10ths of a mile.”

“Just past Shirley, we headed south about a mile into a wooded area and took turns with the Remington. I missed the tree from ten paces 5 times but Lizzie was right on center, so we decided that she’d be Annie Oakley and I’d be Robin Hood.”

“We reached the Montauk train station near sunset. With Lizzie’s superior arithmetic abilities, we came up with a distance of 1.92 miles, so we drove about a mile and a half, then walked east until we came on the ocean.”

Harry wasn’t smiling anymore. It was plain to see that things were serious now.

“We decided to separate. It was Lizzie’s idea, and like a fool, I listened. Her rationale was sound: since we weren’t sure where, when, or if they were coming ashore, we couldn’t sit there and pray they picked the same spot we were at.”

“I made her agree that if she saw anything, she’d come back for me, but I could tell she was just yessing me. We agreed to walk ten minutes in opposite directions, then return to our spot. Ten minutes, no further.”

“Well, I got back on time, but no Liz, so I went east, in her direction, toward the point. There was no fog this night, so visibility was better under the bright moon. I was almost ten minutes out, approximately where Lizzie should have turned around. I skirted the brush, figuring a person would stand out against the white sand.”

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“Then I saw the inflatable. A good-sized raft was up from the surf. I listened, I heard voices.”

“The next fifty yards were slow, being afraid of making a sound. The voices grew louder. Whatever they were saying, it wasn’t English for sure. I drifted deeper into the brush as I neared the next dune, then crept closer to see.”

Harry was sweating now, wiping his brow. “They had Lizzie,” his voice cracked, and he swallowed hard without touching his beer.

“There was Floyd, arguing with the men from the bar and two others. I couldn’t understand it, but from the gesturing, he was pleading his case.”

“Lizzie’s hands were bound behind her and she was gagged. They were around a pit filled with wooden crates which looked like weapons and supplies, and two men were filling the hole.”

“At that point, the Germans had enough, and they aimed their pistols at Floyd, who switched to English, addressing Liz. ‘Why did you follow me? Why? I could have had them leave me here, but now, they can’t leave you behind and they think I’m a traitor to the Fatherland. If you’d only brought some help, but no.’ I realized Floyd was speaking loudly, knowing I’d never let her come alone. He was telling me to do something.”

“I had idea what they planned, but when they filled in the first hole and began digging a second to the right, I just knew it was for Liz, and maybe Floyd, based on the fear in his eyes.”

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“The one in charge was barking orders to the diggers while his cohort held the gun on Floyd. I had no time to circle for a better shot, released the safety from my speargun, and aimed at the cohort.”

“The six-inch dart barely made a sound and caught the guard in his back. He let out a cry and I quickly ducked and re-loaded. When I looked up, Floyd had wrested the Luger from the wounded man as the leader hit the sand.”

Harry was on a roll now, back in Montauk. “My second shot caught the first man out of the hole in the neck, and I saw Floyd rolling in the sand with the leader. Another quick load and I was on my feet, moving toward the second digger as he scrambled for his rifle.”

“I let fly on the run and missed badly, but I kept charging. No time to reload. Two shots rang out and I heard a groan as I launched myself at the digger. We both went down, but it was clear that I would be no match for him. He was thick-chested, and he had me in a headlock, face down in the sand.”

“At that point, I remembered the fishing knife. I jerked it off my belt, but the sheath was still on. I forced it under me and yanked. It came free and I plunged it into his side.”

“He let out a howl, from pain and surprise, I bet. He released my neck as I twisted the blade, withdrew it and rammed it again. More shots rang out, and there were shouts in German. I pushed away from the digger, knife in hand, but froze at the sight of Floyd, crouched, aiming his Luger at me.”

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Harry took a deep breath. “He had me dead to rights. In the sudden quiet, we could hear voices and scrambling from the deck of the U-boat. We had two dead Germans, another dying from my knife, and the last wounded. And still, Floyd pointed the gun at me.”

Harry could see Floyd was thinking it through, deciding. As if an after-thought, he noticed Liz. “Untie her, will you?” he told Harry, which he did, using his bloody knife.

“Lizzie’s eyes stared right through me, watching Floyd. ‘Now, what?’ she asked. And Floyd said, ‘Their calling from the ship. I’m sure they’re afraid it was all a trap on my part, expecting the Coast Guard at any minute. They won’t send anyone else ashore.’”

“Liz rubbed her wrists. ‘Why, Floyd? Why did you do this?’ she asked.”

“He gave her a half-smile. ‘Lovely Elizabeth. Everything is not black and white. There is so much grey. That’s the world I live in. Had your Great President Roosevelt minded his own business, we wouldn’t be in this mess. His meddling in European affairs forced the Fuhrer’s hand. We could have been allies, not enemies. Instead he backs a King who would just as soon reclaim his colonies.’”

Harry smiled. “I can still hear the smugness in his voice. But Lizzie wasn’t having it. ‘You’re a spy, Floyd, living a lie. And I hate myself for believing you.’ She said, almost spitting.”

“Floyd stood above us on the dune. ‘At any rate, I must decide what to do with you. I’m sure my countrymen will not return to use the supplies they buried, fearing another trap. And I cannot leave with them with four dead crew members.’ Whatever he

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decided to do, we never heard. The first guard, with the dart in his back, fired three shots from his pistol into Floyd's side, and he went down."

"I was moving again, knife in my hand as the guard wheeled to fire at me. I heard myself scream, as I dove, slashing and stabbing and the gun fired again, then a single crack, a different sound from the Lugers. There was quiet, except for the diesel engines firing as the sub prepared to leave."

He gasped for air, much as he had that night. "I rolled over, and there was Lizzie, holding her Remington, now aimed at Floyd, who lay bleeding into the sand. He held up a bloody hand. 'Oh, Sweet Liz, what now?' he asked."

"I didn't shoot you. Yet,' she told him."

"I went about making sure everyone was dead. No more surprises. Besides, I felt like I was intruding on their conversation."

"Floyd coughed up blood, not a good sign. 'We could have been happy,' I heard her tell him, and he laughed at her. 'My dear, you are so naïve,' were his last words to her."

The diesels were fading when we finally looked at each other, suddenly exhausted. 'What now?' I asked."

"After a moment, she spoke, coldly and distantly. 'If we go to the authorities, they'll be suspicious, asking why we didn't report this originally. That was my fault for believing the bastard. We'll be sent to Washington, questioned, interrogated. I don't know about you, but I'd like to forget this ever happened,' she concluded."

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“It was time for me to make the call. ‘There has to be some kind of civilian patrol out here, no matter how little.’ I came up with a plan. We dragged some dried brush to the second pit, where the wind wouldn’t extinguish it.”

“As soon as the fire was going well, we headed into the brush, moving quickly west, back to Lizzie’s car. Someone would surely see the fire-pit and investigate. The authorities would find Floyd, four dead Germans and their stash of weapons and supplies before anyone could use them. With no witnesses, and the multiple wounds, they would hopefully assume all parties killed each other. The spears from my gun? Not likely they’d be able to track down the fishing store, never mind me.”

“We drove back, mostly in silence. At dawn, I used a pay phone to call the bar owner, telling him that Liz and Floyd eloped and, heartbroken, I was moving on. I would mail the key but he said not to bother. He had changed the lock. He thanked me for not being a thief.”

Harry drained his beer and went to the men’s room. When he returned, I was busting with questions. Like, what happened to Lizzie, and what became of the supplies? Did it make the papers?

I refilled Harry, and he continued. “I watched the papers as much as I could. Nothing. Could be the government didn’t want it known that this happened.”

Why?

“Well, we weren’t at war yet. I figure they didn’t go along with Floyd’s reasoning that the cache be abandoned, and they kept the area under surveillance, waiting for the Krauts to return.”

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So, we'll never know?

“Not for sure, but did you ever hear about the saboteurs they *did* capture?”

I shook my head.

“Spring of Nineteen forty-two. We joined the war the previous December. Four Germans were dropped off in Montauk, with weapons, explosives, and primers. Four days later, four more were dropped off in Florida. The plan was to blow up power plants, aluminum factories, and stations like Grand Central and Penn Station. It made all the papers.”

You think it was part of the same plan?

Harry shrugged. “Could be, or a re-invention. Rather than take a chance that the stash had been discovered, they brought their own gear.”

And, this really happened?

“You can look it up. All the papers covered it. The only reason they were caught is two of the Germans were born in America, and must have had guilty consciences. They turned themselves into the FBI and their cohorts were rounded up before any attacks.”

What about Lizzie, I asked, and Harry smiled, wistfully.

“We drove to her family’s home in the Bronx. She was hurt, by Floyd, I mean, and when I told her of my feelings, she just smiled, patted my cheek, and said, ‘I know, Harry. I’ve known it all along.’ I felt her sadness, knowing that she didn’t feel the same about me.”

“She sent me on my way, promising to stay in touch. I drifted around from job to job, and seeing the handwriting on the wall, I joined the Navy was sent to Pearl Harbor in

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October, 1941. I wrote Lizzie once a week for the entire war, never heard a response. I kept sending letters to keep up appearances that I had a sweetheart waiting for me, even though I rarely got mail.”

I muttered that I was sorry.

He raised his hand and went on. “They shipped me State-side to San Diego, doing office work: The shrapnel. I’m there for a week and they say, ‘Hey, Grimm, you got a guest.’”

Tears were running down his cheeks and his face was red with a grin that wouldn’t die. “It was Lizzie. She took the train clear across the country because she couldn’t put into words what she felt.”

He wiped his eyes and blew his nose into a handful of napkins. “She kept every letter, telling all her friends how brave and handsome I was. We both cried. She felt so bad but I was so happy. She told me she loved me, and asked if I still felt the same. We married a month after my discharge. When she passed, after 58 years of marriage, I was lost.”

He held up his beer, looking around. “She never wanted to come back here. Too many bad memories. But, for me, they were wonderful. I came back to remember. Thanks for helping me.”

I thanked him, too. So, what now, Harry?

“I’ve got a Winnebago outside. I’ll sleep these beers off, then take a slow ride out Montauk Highway to a spot 1.92 miles past the Montauk train station, and take a walk on the beach.”

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He finished his beer, and slid a Twenty across with a wink.

“If you’re still here in a few days, I’ll stop on my way back,” he said.

The blurb in The News a week later read: “Harry Grimm, aged 83, found dead on beach in Montauk. No criminality was suspected.”