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Brother Love

DOUGLAS TREVOR

Brother Love started work the second week in March, right before the Spring Break rush. Gwen introduced us. I had just started checking the mopeds when she called me into the shop. He was standing by the counter, with a pose struck—I thought—although I wasn't altogether right, since it turned out he usually had some pose struck. He liked attention, that I could tell just by the way he looked: bleached white hair that hung down past his shoulders, a heavy, thick beard—like the kind the old fishermen who sat in front of Peppe's had—no shirt, a pair of khaki shorts and new-looking Birkenstocks. He's the only person I've ever known who took pride in keeping his Birkenstocks in good shape, treating the leather with a bottle of sheepskin oil he kept in one of the packs on his bike.

"Jodi," Gwen said to me once I was inside, "this is the new wave-runner mechanic, Clyde."

He held out his hand. He had one of those rope bracelets that everyone wore in elementary school. "Brother Love," he said to me. "Brother Love!"

He squeezed my fingers tightly for several seconds. I didn't realize until the next day that he wanted us to call him Brother Love; at the time, I just thought it was his own, personal greeting—not an uncommon thing to have down in the Keys—and it sort of was, I guess, since he called all of us guys Brother Love too. Gwen he didn't really call anything, now that I think about it—didn't even use her name most of the time.

"You're going to have your work cut out for you today," she was saying to him. "We've got three machines down. Number four just needs its plugs checked, at least that's what Pete thinks, but two of the others aren't running worth a damn. You might want to flush out their carburetors...."

I nodded goodbye and he didn't wink in response as much as he shut both his eyes for a second—just a split second—and smiled. Again, I didn't think twice about him; if you had gone over to Sundown Water Sports... Hell, every one of those guys was a little loopy.

I went back to work on the mopeds, popping up the seats one at a time, filling up each gas tank and then checking the oil. Ryder was late

as usual. I'd have to wait for him to rig the Hobies since I couldn't drag them down to the beach myself, not like Collie, Mr. Navy Seal, or Navy Seal Wanna-Be I guess would be more accurate.

Clyde, that wasn't his real name, we found out later. Everyone's account of that first day would change so that it wasn't long before Gwen would recall Brother Love touching himself repeatedly and staring at her breasts (Gwen would have been hard-pressed to name one guy she worked with who didn't touch himself repeatedly and stare at her breasts). Soon Ryder swore that the first thing out of Brother Love's mouth when they finally did meet, at nearly ten-thirty that morning, had something to do with a minimum security prison up in Wisconsin. What's more, Gwen, who managed the shop, and Pete Franklin, the owner, started passing the buck back and forth before the end of that month, each one claiming that the other had hired Brother Love without consulting anyone else. How you got hired at Sea Breeze Water Sports was important because neither Pete nor Gwen could bring themselves to fire anyone. I had assumed that was because all of us were Conchs, but I've since decided it had more to do with the fact that each of us had some kind of personal reason for being brought aboard. With me it had to do with my dad, who had handled Pete's divorce, in the process making sure he didn't lose his fishing boat, a thirty-foot Hatteras. Toby's grandfather had hired Pete to clean fish when he was in his teens. Ryder, they hired him because he was the best sailor in the Keys, but Collie had some sort of "in" as well, something to do with a loan Gwen had gotten through his uncle at First Florida National.

Brother Love was different—hired only because he claimed intimate knowledge of all two-stroke engines. Gwen, she didn't trust him, she told all of us that from the start. Afterwards she tried to claim that it was because she knew what he was capable of but that was bullshit. She didn't trust him because he wasn't a Conch, pure and simple, because he came from far up the Keys and then way West—California, if you believed a word of what he said. Most of the time none of us beach guys did; we just liked him—liked him because he was funny and because he annoyed the hell out of Gwen. Yeah, he was a strange guy right from day one, but not strange in a bad way. He seemed harmless, he really did.

By the end of Brother Love's first week all nine of the wave-runners were working. That was unheard of; usually we'd have two or three down at the same time. It was Spring Break, the whole island filled with kids with money to burn. At five, Pete would practically skip into the

shop, mouth foaming over the prospects of tallying up another record day. Gwen couldn't complain too openly about Brother Love, not when Sea Breeze Water Sports was making more money than it ever had before. Besides, he was busting his ass—one minute flushing out an engine or spraying a plug, the next reglazing one of the hulls, or on his knees, scrubbing away at the dirt and grease coated on the floor of the back room, shooing the cockroaches out the door while he crooned an impersonation of Tom Petty (*Don't come around here no moore*).

Brother Love was off on Saturdays but when he rolled in the next day, on his blue Cannondale, he seemed jollier than ever. Toby and I worked Sundays together. We were in our chairs, just staring at the sea—laid out like a mirror, as I remember it—when he called out to us from behind the shop.

“Brothers!”

“Morning, Brother Love,” we answered in unison. It was the same script we followed every morning, only he added to it slightly that day.

“Good, good morning, Brother Loves. A sweet, mother morning for us brothers!”

He stepped out from behind the shop, giving us a little bow and a twirl of his hand. An elderly couple walking along the shore stopped to look up at him. Brother Love darted back behind the corner of the building, no doubt to finish locking up his bike. He used two Kryptonites and a chain to secure it to the fence in back. Nothing walked faster than a bike in Key West, the saying went, except a Conch out of 801 Duval, one of the gay bars in Old Town.

When he was finished with his bike, Brother Love trotted off the asphalt driveway where the mopeds were parked, through the sand, down to where our beach chairs were set up. He shook each of our hands, another part of his morning routine, then poured sand on his legs and arms like it was water.

“Don't mind me,” he said, “just bathing in the sweet mother sand. Tell me, how are my brothers doing today?”

“Fine,” I said.

“Couldn't be better.” Toby was the first to decide that Brother Love was funny instead of just weird. I followed his lead a lot of the time, I think because he had been through so much—seeing his dad drink himself to death, then getting in fights with his step-dad all of the time, right on the Navy base. They were vicious fights; some mornings he had come in with one eye swollen shut, his arm in a sling.

“Look at Brother Love laughing!” Brother Love pointed at Toby. “Look at all of that love!” He stepped back in the sand to regard him

more fully. "Reminds me, I got something special in store for you all today, got a minute?"

We walked up to the shop. Business didn't usually start up on Sundays until around eleven, except for the parents who sometimes brought their kids by to see if we'd give them a ride on a wave-runner (Pete said we couldn't, something about liabilities). Brother Love had us wait by the mopeds while he ran into the back room. I glanced in front to make sure that Gwen hadn't poked her head out of one of the windows. Then I happened to look at Toby, who was standing right next to me. A few years before he had gotten cut up by an outboard. Usually the scars weren't too noticeable but sometimes, when the sun hit his face like it did then, you could see the pink streaks of skin, pulled tight like bits of rope, running from just below his left ear all the way underneath his jaw.

Suddenly the music stopped. One of Toby's Reggae tapes had been playing, although I didn't even realize it until Brother Love switched it off. The tape player was in back, rigged to two speakers set up underneath the awning and pointed out towards us. It had taken us about a month to talk Gwen into letting us beach guys pick the music for the shop. It was only fair; our job was the most exhausting—hoisting overweight tourists onto wave-runners, then cruising a quarter mile offshore to help them get back on once they fell off. The least we deserved was being spared "I Wish I Had A Pencil-Neck Moustache," the song she'd play into the ground whenever she got the chance.

Brother Love reappeared. "You're going to love this," he said. He had turned the volume way up; I could hear the feedback of the poor recording.

Hot, August night... the words began.

"Dance with me, brothers." Brother Love shook his head so that his hair flew out around him. "This is my song."

I recognized the voice, someone from the seventies. Horns in the background grew louder, accompanied by female singers.

... And that gospel group, telling you and me...

"Come on now, feel it!" When the chorus hit Brother Love suddenly threw his arms out and started going crazy—spinning around, twirling his hair, thrusting his waist in and out and periodically falling onto the ground.

... It's love, Brother Love, say Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show...

"Got to feel the music, brothers. Come on now, dance with Brother Love. This is my song."

Toby and I joined in, awkwardly, trying to avoid his flailing arms more than anything else.

"I SAID TURN IT DOWN!" Gwen screamed from in front.

I ran inside and stopped the tape, lowering the volume and slapping in the Third World cassette I saw sitting on the shelf. When I made it back outside Brother Love had his hand on Toby's shoulder and was bobbing his head over and over again, whispering emphatically.

"That was my brother Neil Diamond," he said to me when I joined them, "and I was telling Brother Love here how we wrote my song. See," he waved at the sea, knocking me on the side of the head, "it was a hot August night, just like the song says, and I was at Laguna Beach with Brother Neil, and he said to me, he said, 'Brother Love,' he said, 'Brother Love, I want to write a song with you, a song about you. How about we write a song, Brother Love.' So we wrote 'Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show.' This was way back in the early seventies. We wrote it that night, the whole song. And one long night it was, out on Laguna Beach, just Brother Neil and me, drinking a bottle of Crown Royal—Brother Neil loves his Crown Royal—him playing his acoustic, the words just streaming out of my mouth, the lyrics, you see."

He clasped his arms around both of our necks and squeezed for a moment. There was real definition in his upper body, not like Collie's, busting out all over the place, but tight—his pecks swelling out a good bit when he let go of us and crossed his arms. Add that to his beard and long, white hair and it was hard to place Brother Love's age. I didn't know how old he was until afterwards, when I read it in the paper. Twenty-eight, if you trusted the *Key West Citizen*; ten years older than I was.

"Yeah, that's my song," he said.

"Rental!" Gwen stuck her head out of the side window as a young-looking couple—the woman well on her way to two-hundred pounds, the man closer to eighty—hopped towards us, the asphalt burning their feet.

Brother Love headed into the back room, humming the music from his song. Toby's eyes followed him, but morosely it seemed, no longer tearing from laughter as they had earlier.

"Something about him, man. . . ."

"What?" I asked.

"Forget it." He barked at the couple to follow him down to the water.

I walked over to the life-vest bin to try to dig out one of the extra-extra-large vests at the bottom. Toby, he had spotted something. Brother Love was an alcoholic.

* * *

He told us himself a few days later. Ryder and I were working the beach. Brother Love had brought in homemade chimi changas for lunch. He asked Gwen the day before if it would be okay and she just gave him this long cold stare that Toby swore he could gauge to determine whether or not she was menstruating.

"Yeah, I was drinking my life away," he was saying to Ryder and me, "pretty near drank my way clear across the country. Oh, brothers..." he chuckled softly.

My mouth was too stuffed with ground beef and flour tortillas to say anything in response. We ate outside, on the small porch of the shop, just the three of us. Gwen always ate behind the desk, the same thing every day: cottage cheese, a couple sticks of celery and some pita bread. Brother Love offered her a chimi changa. She declined.

"Yeah, it can just kick your ass, alcohol, if you don't watch it."

"When did you quit?" Ryder asked, licking his fingers then wiping them dry on his cheek so that he looked like he was applying war paint.

"Got my wake-up call three months ago. D.U.I."

"So you lost your license?" I finished up the last chimi changa on my paper plate.

"Sure did. Won't get it back for ten more months. So what I did was, I sold my car—had a nice little Alfa, real nice, leather seats, CD player, phone, fax, the works—but I sold it, see, I sold it and bought that blue Cannondale. Said to myself, 'Brother Love,' said, 'you're going to ride that bike to sobriety.'"

"Cool, dude." Ryder—who went through half a dime bag of pot every week—gave him the thumbs up.

"Yeah, that's great," I added.

"Got myself in AA," he ran his fingers through his beard, picking out the bits of food that had been caught in the hairs, "and haven't missed a meeting in five-and-a-half weeks."

"All right, dude." Ryder reclined on the hard cement porch. With his arms behind his head, his shirt had inched up some and I took note of the roll of flesh that jiggled above his swimsuit line. He claimed that the extra weight helped him windsurf; that it made it easier for him to tack.

"You got to make yourself put to death those vile lusts of the earth," Brother Love intoned. "I mean drinking, fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, all of it. You got to renounce it all, got to follow the example of Mother Garcia," he held up his half-devoured chimi changa, "the fine Mexican mother who taught me how to make this food. Know what she told me, Brother Love?" he asked me.

“Nope.”

“‘Brother Looove,’ she said to me, ‘Brother Looove, you got to looove your brooothers and siiisters, but first you got to looove yourself. You cannot looove an unclean boooody.’” He had assumed a thick, Mexican accent, drawing out the vowel sounds so that he spoke slower and slower as he went on. “‘No, Brother Looove, you cannoot looove an unclean boooody, which means you cannoot looove yourself, and you cannoot looove ooothers until you looove yourself, so you muust clean ouut your boooody.’ So that’s what I did.”

“Who said this?” Ryder’s head peeked up from behind his stomach.

“Mother Garcia. The woman in India gets all the press, but hear me out, Brother Loves, Mother Garcia is busting her ass too, and with half the help.”

He pointed his finger at me sternly before continuing. “A sweet, sweet, sister, Mother Garcia, a sweet Sister Love. Robe flowing off those shoulders, cascading down that mother lode of love. . . .” And he stood up, spreading his arms out to encompass the sea. “She was like a mother pig, giving suck to all the poor piggies who didn’t go to the market, giving suck to the little brothers and little sisters who were too hungry to love, too forlorn—”

“Go with it, brother.” Ryder got up off the ground, grinning at him.

“Don’t worry, brother, I ain’t going to quit. I ain’t ever going to quit.”

But then he stopped talking; he just stared out at the sea, arms still spread wide.

“Yeah, Sister Love,” he said after a time, practically to himself, “you are a sweet mother of love.”

That next Monday, Pete towed his dinghy in for Brother Love to have a look at it. It was a fourteen-footer, painted a real nice red and white, but Pete said the motor kept on cutting out. Collie was working that day so he lifted the outboard up off the boat and carried it into the back room for Brother Love. That was about nine-thirty in the morning.

We didn’t see him until a quarter to five; he didn’t even break for lunch. We had derigged everything, buzzed and flushed the runners, when he bounced out of the shop, covered with grease and oil.

“You fix it?” Collie asked.

“Did I fix it? Oh, brother, how long until you believe?” He held up his blackened fingers, wiggling them in front of our faces. “Magic wands,” he said, laughing. “I’m going to take it for a run, one of you guys want to come?”

"Got to lift," Collie said, tightening up his neck muscles, then raising and lowering his arms as if he were doing a pull up.

"I'll go, but not too far." I pictured us trying to swim back to the island with the tide going out, Brother Love telling one story after another while we floated into the Gulfstream.

"We'll be careful, little Brother Love," he said, "not to worry."

While Collie carried the motor back out to the dinghy, reclamping it onto the stern, I struggled with a six-gallon drum of gasoline and two life vests. Gwen insisted that Brother Love call Pete to make sure it was okay to take it out. Then we pushed off.

It started after the fifth or sixth pull on the rip cord. The outboard was a fifteen horsepower Johnson and loud; I moved up to the bow before we even cleared the pier. Brother Love kept us close to the shore at first; I could almost count the people drinking at Louie's Backyard. A group barbecuing over at the Fort Taylor Beach waved to us as we crawled by them. There was some good chop but the motor was steady and strong.

The docks at the naval base reared up on our right and Brother Love cut the motor.

"What do you think, brother?" he asked me.

"Sounds good," I said. Of course, I knew as little about engines as he did about sailing.

"Sounds real good, huh?"

"I guess so."

"Want to take it out a little further?"

"Sure. Where to?"

"Over behind Christmas Tree?"

"How far behind?"

"Lone Oak Rock?"

"All right."

He started up the motor again. While it was running we couldn't talk. The waves picked up out in the channel, the water splashing me real good in the bow. We rounded the southwestern tip of the Island. Mallory dock was beginning to fill up as the vendors rolled in their carts for the sunset festivities. The *Fury* passed right by us, headed out for its nightly booze cruise, and I waved to Billy, one of my friends who mated on the boat. He held up a couple of beers but I shook my head no. We headed northwest, behind Christmas Tree Island, where some developer wanted to build a hotel.

A couple hundred yards from Lone Oak Rock, just into the flats, Brother Love turned off the outboard and popped it up. It wasn't an oak tree on the island, just a giant palm, all by itself. We beached on

one of the sandbars that seemed to curl out from the base of its trunk, like the points of a starfish. Then I took my shirt off and he and I slipped into the water.

We swam a little ways out. I could feel the fish on my legs, headed up to the surface to start feeding on the mosquitos that were settling on the water. A few times I went under, waving my hands through the seaweed and watching the minnows fly, every one of their twitches in perfect synch with one another.

Brother Love saw him first. "Look at Brother Manatee!" he screamed over at me. I caught sight of him as he came up for air, his long whiskers and drooping snout, mouth bent in a permanent smile like some cheerful, overweight grandparent. Brother Love went down just as he did. I could see their shadows join as they swam together, through the flats. I had never seen anything like it before—the closest might have been a few of us snorkeling through a school of dolphins off the Dry Tortugas the summer before.

"Oh, brother!" Brother Love screamed, his head popping to the surface, "Oh Brother Manatee!"

And it was like the manatee heard him, I swear it was. He came up again for air, then turned around and began to swim back towards us. Brother Love waved at me and I swam out into the manatee's path so that, when he neared me, I could go under and swim with him myself. And I did, I swam with him, just a few yards, wrapping my arms around the slippery skin—it felt like a wet coconut—and kicking with him, jetting through the water until he wasn't pushing with me as much as against me and I let myself slide off.

He didn't turn around again. We watched him swim away, out towards the gulf.

"Beautiful brother," Brother Love flipped onto his back, kicking softly, "a beautiful, beautiful brother."

The sun was a fiery orange in the distance. We waited for it to slip under the horizon before swimming back to the dinghy.

"Oh that was nice, wasn't it?" Brother Love's hair was matted tight against his head, his beard floating on the surface of the water, rippling gently as his arms breast-stroked.

"Real nice." The water felt so good, and it was beautiful out, the last gasps of the sun fading behind Lone Oak Rock.

"Brother Love?" He interrupted my trance. "Brother Love, what would you say if I told you that I've done some bad things?"

"What do you mean?" I had reached the boat slightly before him but didn't feel like getting in and was sitting in the water. He joined me.

"Teaches you what love is, doesn't it?" he said, dipping his hair back into the water.

I waited to see what he'd talk about next.

"Brother Love, what would you feel in your heart if I told you that I've done some bad things, some things I'm not proud of?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess it'd depend."

"Cause I've done some bad things," he continued, the water lapping against his face, "some real bad things, brother."

I almost asked him. Right then, I almost said, "What have you done, Brother Love, tell me," but I didn't. I figured everyone over twenty-five who moved down to Key West was running from something—however small—and I imagined with him it might have been something a little bit bigger, but I didn't ask him to explain; I just put my hands up on the side of the dinghy and rolled in. We didn't have any running lights; we had to get back before it got too dark.

"I'm trying real hard, brother," he stayed there in the water, looking up at me, "and I'm going to keep on trying."

"I guess it's tough, if you've had a drinking problem—"

"Oh, I ain't the first drunk in the world." He grabbed the side of the boat and pushed it off the sandbar before rising out of the water and twisting his body around like a gymnast's so that he set himself down right next to the outboard. Then he grabbed hold of the rip cord. "No," he shook his head as his fist tightened around the cord, "being a human being, that's harder than being sober."

His arm flew out at me, the outboard roaring to life.

Two weeks later, Brother Love stopped working. Before, every morning, he'd flush out the wave-runners with fresh water, checking the plugs—sometimes even the intake hoses—before giving us the okay to launch them. The third Monday in April that stopped. Toby and I had waited almost a half hour for him to come out. Finally, I went over and popped my head inside the door of the back room. Brother Love had taken the chain off his bike and was dousing it with WD-40, scrubbing each link carefully with a rag.

"You gonna flush them, Brother Love?" I asked.

He looked up at me slowly. "Good morning, Brother Love," he said solemnly.

"Sorry. Morning." I nodded behind me. "Toby's waiting."

"I'm waiting too, brother." He went back to work on his chain.

I stood there for a few seconds but he didn't say anything else. Toby and I decided he just needed a morning to himself and launched the runners on our own. Two days later, though, when Collie and I were

on, some guy riding six got stranded offshore. I towed him in and while Collie was relaunching him on three—Old Faithful—I fiddled with the engine a little, trying to locate the problem. Then I headed up to the shop.

The back door was shut; it was a first. I knocked loudly. “Brother Love?”

“Yeah?” His voice sounded higher than usual. I opened the door and poked my head in. “Six is down.”

He had a stool pulled up to the big counter where all of the tools were kept and was just sitting there, staring at the wall, his hands in his lap. Since then I’ve thought that maybe he was touching himself before I came in, that I detected a rise in his khaki shorts, but who knows, that could just be me making up things, like everyone else has done.

“Check the ignition wires.” He didn’t even look up.

“I did that. Bone dry.”

“Carburetor?”

“Fine. The hull’s draining now.”

“Unscrew the H valve,” his hand plucked the socket wrench off the wall before passing it over his head, back towards me, “then do a battery check—”

“Brother Love?”

“... There’s a diagram in one of the books—”

“What’s going on, man?” I reached over and shook him by the shoulder, gently. “What’s up?”

He didn’t answer. His body just rocked under my hand, like a rag doll.

“Snap out of it. We need your help; we need those magic wands.”

He didn’t say anything. I headed back outside.

There was a norther moving in. Collie had a vest on and was getting ready to round up the runners we had offshore, including three Germans who were buzzing the hotel’s swimming area over and over again, acting like they didn’t understand us when we yelled at them. Collie, he liked sitting up on the wave-runners right offshore, his shirt off, scanning the beach for any takers. Having to work with him one day a week was like serving a penitence for skipping gym class through middle school.

“You tell the Love Man to get on six?” he hollered at me.

“I tried to.”

“What?”

“He’s acting funny.”

“That’s cause he’s a funny guy.” Collie revved up the engine with one hand, adjusting his sunglasses with the other.

He did fishtails all the way out towards the channel, leaning back on one knee, steering with the palm of his left hand. The swells looked to be gaining on four feet. I looked at the flagpole at the end of the pier. The Marriott flag—white with a red M in the middle of it—was starting to whip around.

The thunder sounded first, then came the lightning. The claps were big; I could see the sunbathers over at the hotel heading for the bar. I waited for Collie and together the two of us batted down the life-vest bin and pointed the Hobies into the wind. Then we sat back down in our chairs. We only went inside if we absolutely had to. Gwen always found crummy things for us to do during a storm, like disinfecting the snorkeling equipment and refolding the T-shirts.

The storm ended up veering east, the wind dying quickly. Collie got up after a few minutes to do push-ups. I counted for him. He did seventy-five, then rolled over on his back and spat into the air, catching it in his mouth.

“So what’s up with the Love Man?” he asked me.

“Just acting weird,” I said, “like he’s really depressed about something.”

“Maybe it’s just one of his jokes.”

“Except it isn’t funny.” No sense talking about it with Collie; you had to be bleeding out of your eyes for him to be concerned.

Neither one of us said anything for a while. The storm clouds were far offshore now and the pelicans had started feeding. I could see them out by the channel markers, taking clumsy nose-dives for fish. We watched them splash into the ocean, the fish jumping out to avoid being eaten, their thin, scaled bodies catching the light like bits of tin-foil.

I was looking right at number six—watching the seaweed well up around its frame as the tide started going out—when he snuck up behind me. His hand came down on my shoulder and I jumped. He cackled.

“I am like a pelican of the wilderness,” he said, pointing at the birds offshore. “I am like an owl of the desert.”

He eyed both of us suspiciously—lip curled up, hair disheveled, eyes like black beads. Then he cackled again, clapping his hands around his head, trying to squash the mosquitos that buzzed around his face before he turned and stomped away.

“What the fuck was that all about?” Collie watched him crouch back towards the shop.

Neither one of us knew. In three weeks, Brother Love would be dead.

* * *

That same week, while we were trying to get used to the new Brother Love, Hally started working at the shop. She came in that Wednesday with her father, Mr. Fetter of Fetter Construction, better known around the island as Grouper. Grouper was in his fifties and still a hell-raiser. He and his cronies—Pete among them—hung out mostly at the Full Moon Saloon, sometimes at the Green Parrot. They had all divorced their wives and were dating the best-looking women on the island—the hot cocktail waitresses and private charter mates and tour guides and real-estate agents and the drifters, always the drifters, looking for men to settle down with—guys with bucks, swimming pools, nice fishing boats. Fetter Construction built everything—bridges, condominiums, office buildings; Grouper was one of the richest guys in the Keys. Hally, his daughter, had a reputation for being quite a bitch, although, when I think about it, she was more like a young girl—only sixteen—trying to act like a bitch and not getting it quite right.

Toby and I had just launched a Japanese couple on a pair of wave-runners when we caught sight of Hally and Grouper walking into the shop. We both turned and looked at her. She glanced over at the flagpole—like she was checking the wind—but flipped her hair an extra little bit, I guess so that we'd take notice.

"I knew something was up," Toby smirked, nodding in the direction of the shop, "Pete's looked like he wanted to hide under a rock all day."

Grouper had put the squeeze on Pete to give Hally a job, that had to be it. Now there'd be one more person in the shop—this one younger than us—who thought her main duty was to boss us around.

Toby read my mind. "Gwen'll find a use for her; you can bet on it." He ran his finger down the big scar alongside his jaw, scooping off some of the vitamin E he always smeared on it at the beginning of each day. "Stay away from Gwen this week," he warned me. "She's menstruating, I'm sure of it."

The Japanese woman had decided to come back in and I was hooking her runner to the line when Pete hollered from the door that he wanted to see us for a second. Both of us did a little half-jog up to the shop just to remind him how hard we worked. When we got inside, Hally was hunched over the counter, looking at the price list while Gwen explained it to her. Pete was off to the side, talking to Grouper.

Grouper shook our hands and we both mumbled "hello, Mr. Fetter," which sounded real funny, since everyone on the island knew him as Grouper.

“Harbison’s boy,” Pete said, pointing at me, “and Sammy Barrett’s.”

“How’s your mom doing, son?” Grouper asked Toby. Everyone was always asking him how his mom was doing since her first husband—a Conch—was dead and she had gone and married a jarhead.

“Just fine,” Toby nodded slowly.

“Guys know Hally?” Pete pointed at her.

“Yep,” we both said.

“Hi!” She gave us a real bubbly smile, like we all conference-called each other every night.

“She’s starting today.” Pete looked at me first, then Toby, sort of daring us to smirk.

“Welcome aboard,” Toby said, lowering his shoulders slightly and extending his hand towards her. He was so full of shit; I wanted to push him right over.

“Thank you.” She grinned some more.

I did a little half-wave. She was flat-chested; it was the first thing I noticed, maybe because Gwen was hunched over the counter, hanging out all over the place.

“You want to bring Brother Love in?” Pete asked her.

“He’s got work to do.” For the last three days, Gwen hadn’t let any of us forget that number six still wasn’t fixed. She was riding Brother Love hard; she was using what little she could to needle him and he wasn’t fighting back. It was infuriating.

“Okay, so if you got any questions about the rental stuff,” Pete said to Hally, “you can ask these two.”

“Then if you want an answer,” Gwen added, “ask me.”

That just brought the house down; Pete, Grouper, they couldn’t stop laughing. Hally looked back and forth in between her old man and Pete, trying to track but failing. She was a thin, thin girl, long legs that seemed to go right up to her ears, caught in the middle of that gawky period that takes some girls and turns them into coat racks for a couple of years. Her eyes seemed a little too big for her head—enormous and brown, more like a mackerel’s than a grouper’s but definitely fish-like. Toby and I bid our goodbyes after the laughter had died down a little and I got another good look at her as we left the shop—a small, red pimple on the point of her chin, cheeks that were still rounded, still plump, ears that weren’t pierced, the clasps of her earrings squeezing the lobes so that they puckered out like rising dough.

He met us on the way down to the beach. I thought of a ferret when I saw him—something that belonged under a couch, not out in the sun.

“There some kind of party going on?” he asked, looking back over

his shoulder, his face twitching and jerking anxiously. “Sure, an invitation, that would have been nice. That would have been real nice.”

“Just a little meeting,” I said to him, “nothing big.”

His hair was tangled and unclean, his eyes red and glazed over, and he smelled, he really did, he smelled bad—something in addition to his normal body odor but I couldn’t place it.

“I don’t like parties anyway,” he mumbled, “don’t like them one bit. Never did. . . .” He shuffled back towards the shop, talking to himself.

“We got to do something,” I said to Toby. “We got to help him.”

I could hear him in the back, ranting on, saying, “No, Brother Love doesn’t want that, he doesn’t want that. . . .”

“Nothing we can do,” Toby mumbled.

“He smelled funny, real pungent,” I tried to describe it, “not even like sweat. . . .”

“He’s drunk.” Toby shrugged his shoulders.

We headed down to our chairs. I didn’t say anything else, figured he was thinking about his old man.

The day it all went down, all of it, it started out just like any other day—a slow morning, busy between one and four, pretty near ninety degrees the whole afternoon. Eight had gone down the day before; none of us had any explanations, it just cut out on a chum run and that was it. Six was still down. Four had started acting up too. Ryder and I didn’t bother launching it that morning, we just dragged it a ways up the beach so that Gwen wouldn’t be able to see it from the shop. We were trying to help Brother Love as much as we could but we couldn’t fix the wave-runners, that was up to him.

When he showed up for work, almost a half-hour late, there was no greeting, he just glided his bike to a stop, let it fall against the fence—without locking it—then stumbled into the shop. Ryder and I tried to ignore his entrance but it was hard, especially when he didn’t chain up his bike. I kept an eye on it that morning. Then, around noon, the sandwiches we ordered from Paradise Cafe arrived and I grabbed Brother Love’s tuna melt and took it around to the back room. The door was shut tight, but when I knocked he hollered “come in” right away.

He was sitting on a stool, a whole pile of nuts and bolts in front of him on the counter, just sort of moving his hands through them, like he was washing them in a bucket of water.

“Got your sandwich,” I said.

“Thanks, brother.”

I set it down next to him. He looked up at me and smiled faintly. His skin was all puffy around his eyes and he stank, but not of alcohol, I was sure of it; he just smelled dirty.

"You know, your bike's not locked up."

"It isn't?" His voice cracked hoarsely.

"Nope."

"Oh."

"Things going all right, Brother Love?"

"Not too bad."

"You know, you haven't been the same lately."

A handful of bolts sprinkled onto the floor. "Maybe I'm not the same."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He just shrugged his shoulders. "How's the new girl working out?" he asked.

"Hally? Just fine."

"What'd you say her name was?"

"Hally."

"Hally!" And he jumped off his stool. He jumped off his stool and he beamed at me. He smiled and his eyes came alive. "Oh, brother," he said, "oh, sweet Brother Love. Hally! Hally! Like my song, brother. Her name, it's in my song!"

"You mean 'Brother—'"

It's love, Brother Love, he sang, say Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show, Hally, Hally.

"It doesn't go like that," I said.

"Of course it does!"

"Got rentals, Jodi!" I heard Ryder screaming from down on the beach.

"I gotta go—"

"Thank you, brother," he said, "thank you so much. The love is back in my heart now, all sugary sweet. You tell me if there's anything—"

"Fix six," I said, "or Gwen's going to can you."

"Consider it done." He grabbed a socket wrench off the wall and followed me to the door.

"Brother," he added, "when you see Hally next have her come by. I want her to hear my song."

"Just fix six," I said. "Don't worry about your song."

I started down towards the beach to help out Ryder, who was launching three teenage boys—always a nightmare, but Pete said we could only turn them away if they didn't have driver's licenses. I was nearing the mopeds when I heard Gwen's voice behind me.

“Jodi, get in here!” she hollered.

I reversed my tracks and headed into the shop, surprised to find Hally standing next to Gwen behind the counter.

“Don’t you have school?” I asked.

“Parent-faculty meetings.” She was chomping on a big wad of gum, stretching it out with her fingers as she spoke. “Still got to get the hang of the register.”

“What’s going on with Clyde?” Gwen never called him Brother Love; she preferred that name I think all of us must have suspected of being bogus.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean! Jodi, the goddamn beach looks like a junk yard!”

“He promised me he’d fix six today.”

“And what about the others?”

“Soon.”

“Did you tell him I’m getting impatient?”

“Yes, Gwen.”

“What’d he say?” It was a game she played—never talk to Brother Love directly so that she could interrogate us instead, letting her imagination run wild.

“Not a lot. He mentioned something about Hally’s name being in his song. He wants you to hear it.” I looked over at her. She had opened a magazine and was flipping through the pages.

“His song?” she said sarcastically, bouncing her head slightly. “What is this guy, mental?”

“I’m calling Pete.” Gwen reached for the phone. “This is bullshit.”

“Don’t Gwen.” And I grabbed her hand. Yes, I restrained her physically; I kept her from firing Brother Love.

“Give him until the end of today,” I said. “If six isn’t fixed, then fire him.” And then I lied, a white lie, I thought at the time, although I’ve since decided that—in a general way—it must have been true. “These last few weeks,” I added, “he’s had some personal stuff going on, some problems. That’s why he’s been acting funny.”

“I don’t give a shit what he’s had going on.” But her hand slid out from under mine, away from the phone. She turned to Hally. “Let me show you how to punch in items that are on sale. First you hit the SKU button. . . .”

When I walked back outside I could hear him unscrewing some bolts on the engine block. From out on the beach he was just visible—his upper body swallowed by the machine, the battery recharger resting on the wave-runner’s red seat. I remember thinking that I was finished trying to save Brother Love’s ass, that the rest was up to him.

"Gwen's after him," I said to Ryder once I had sat back down.

He was slouched in his chair, picking bits of sand out of his belly button. "Of course she's after him. It isn't a secret."

"I know."

"Hey, Jodi," he flipped his hair out of his face, tucking it back behind his ear, "if he doesn't work, he doesn't work. This isn't welfare."

When the teenagers came in I rigged their runners to the line since Ryder had launched them. The next few hours went by routinely enough—the two of us alternating sending people out and bringing them in, filling up the runners with gas after every third rental. I gave a Hobie lesson around three because Ryder said he didn't feel like doing it and I sort of liked giving them.

By four things had died down like they usually did. The Hobie came back in and Ryder helped me pop the rudders up and run her onto the beach. I figured Pete wasn't going to come by and went ahead and derigged her.

I was rolling up the sails when I heard it. *Room gets suddenly still and...he walks in...* I hadn't seen Hally go around the shop but figured that she had gotten bored and wanted to hear "his song."

Ryder threw the life vests in the bin and locked it up. Then he came on over, singing along with the music.

And we danced. When the chorus started, we threw back our heads, and we did the best Brother Love imitations we could—writhing and spinning and howling at the sky. And laughing. God were we laughing. He was back. Brother Love!

... It's Love, Brother Love, say Brother Love's traveling salvation show...

And I thought I heard it, right after the word "show," the words "Hally, Hally" repeated quickly. I was knocking Ryder on the arm to ask him when I saw Gwen run out of the front of the shop. She tore down the side of the small building, whipping around the corner and disappearing.

I grabbed hold of Ryder's arm and he looked at me, face all red, panting.

... And when your brother is troubled you got to reach out your one hand for him...

That's when she screamed. I remember that the clearest, Gwen's scream. It died for a second, then her lungs took in more air and it started up again, in shorter bursts, like shrapnel fire.

We started to run, both of us. It was like the music was suddenly turned off, although it couldn't have been, I just don't remember hearing it after Gwen started screaming. And we were running hard,

hard as we could—Ryder and I—but the sand, it was like it was real thick, real deep, because we couldn't run fast enough. When we got to the mopeds we could see Gwen, standing in the doorway of the back room, her fists clenched, mouth open—it wasn't even like the sound was coming from her—and suddenly a fist came out of the doorway and she was on the ground.

Brother Love ran out, facing us for a second, and that's when I knew, when I saw his pants, the zipper undone, the dark patch of pubic hair exposed. I didn't even look at his face; I was hypnotized, there was blood—like dried clay—all up and down his zipper and he turned and flew towards his bike, the blue Cannondale that wasn't chained up for the first time that summer, and he jumped on and headed right towards us, Ryder and me, and we stood beside each other until we knew he wasn't going to stop and then we stepped apart and he rode in between us. And Ryder, he turned and ran after him, just ran as hard as he could, but me, I didn't. I went to the doorway. I don't know why I did, just sick curiosity, just unrelenting curiosity, I don't know, but I went to the doorway and I looked in and I saw Hally, I saw her on the floor, on her stomach, a leg of her shorts ripped off, that same kind of thick blood smeared on her leg, on the floor, like a scar, like Toby's scar—I remember thinking—and her arms were covering her head and she was shaking, not crying, just shaking really hard.

Gwen pushed me out of the doorway screaming, "Call the goddamn police! Call the goddamn police! Call Pete!" and when she pushed me I just fell right over and she ran into the back room, slamming the door behind her, and I just lay on the ground for a second, all out of breath, saying, "shit"—remember that clearly—saying "shit" over and over again. Then I stood up, saw all the sunbathers over at the Marriott looking right at me, and I ran towards the front of the shop.

Pete was the first person I called. When he picked up the phone is when it hit me. He said "hello?" and I just screamed, I screamed, "Oh Pete! Oh Pete!" and he was saying, "What? What is it? Jodi?" But I couldn't say anything, nothing except, "Oh Pete!" and he said he was on his way and hung up. Then I called the police, I called 911, and I said, very calmly all of a sudden, very together, I said, "Ma'am, a young girl has been raped at 804 Seminole Street...."

They killed him, Grouper and his crew, at least that's what I think. He washed up on Stock Island the next day. The paper called it an accident, said the injuries—a broken arm, smashed-in skull, fractured hip—seemed to indicate that he had gone over the guard rail on US 1, landing on the rocks that, along with four feet of water, make up

Cow Key Channel. There are other ways to get your face smashed in, though, other ways to have your arm broken. I cringe when I think of it.

Two months later and I was gone too. Oh I could have stayed at Sea Breeze Water Sports. After the police report went in Pete never mentioned the incident again. Even Gwen didn't talk about it, although she had other ways of making me remember it—a way of shaking her head, a way of running her hand through her hair.

My first stop was just a little ways up. A friend of mine said he could get me a job on a dive boat that ran out of Islamaroda and he did, only I didn't stay there too long. I told myself that I was quitting because the pay was shitty but the pay hadn't been any better at Sea Breeze and dad was sending me money almost every week, even though I wasn't asking him for any. No, I quit because of Brother Love—because of what had happened. It was still too fresh in my mind and I couldn't stand being in the Keys. They didn't feel like my home anymore.

It's been a couple of years now; I've made it all the way up to Tallahassee. Since I've started moving it's like I can't stop. I don't think I can blame Brother Love for that—maybe he was just some sort of catalyst—but either way, the whole thing cut my moorings loose. Who knows, I might just keep on moving north. I started ninety miles from Cuba and I might not stop until I'm ninety miles from Greenland. I might not stop until I've gone clear around the world, ending up where I started.

I might not ever stop.