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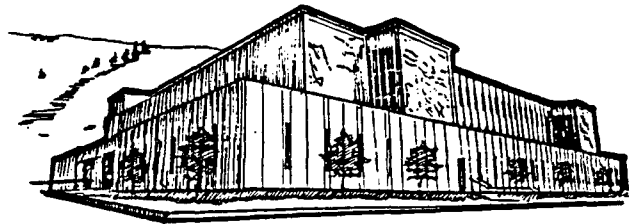
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University of  
**Montana**



# Principles of Navigation

STORIES BY

Peter Warren Fong

A.B., Harvard College, 1982

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

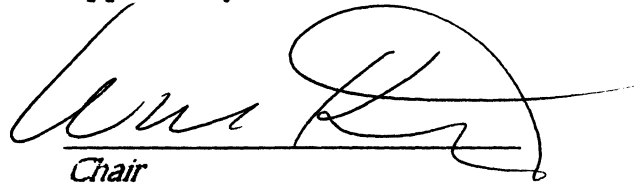
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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*Approved by*

  
*Chair*

  
*Graduate Dean*

*May 26, 1992*  
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for Sarah and David

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## Principles of Navigation

The neurologist in Miami advised me to avoid light, sound, and alcohol. He had his back to me, studying the pictures of my brain clipped to the wall. I told him about standing on the deck of the boat with the twin diesels roaring, their revolutions vibrating up the bones of my legs and into my spine. About trolling at fourteen knots through a heavy chop under a cloudless sky, knees locked under the gunwale, staring hard into the sun's double at the bubble trails of the baits. I even told him about draining a gallon of spring water and a six-pack of beer in an afternoon. And not having to piss.

He turned away from the wall then, and I could see by the earnest look in his eyes that he was puzzled. "Fourteen knots," he said. "Isn't that a little fast for sailfish, Captain?"

"Hell," I told him. "Most boats can't go fast enough to keep the bait out of their damn mouths—if they really want it. We've caught fish at full throttle—too lazy to bring the lures in and just cruising to another spot on the weedline—when, whango! Fish on. Before you can get down from the bridge they've got three hundred yards of line out."



“Amazing,” said the doctor, shaking his head slowly from side to side.  
“When you’re back on your feet I might come down for a day.”

I didn’t tell him that I planned on being back on the water tomorrow. I just handed him our card—The Kentucky Clipper. Captains Bally Owings and Rigger Tavernier—and told him we’d waive the charter fee any time he could make it to Coral Key

“Keep a tight line, Doc,” I said, opening the door to the empty waiting room “And if anyone I know ever needs a cat scan, I’ll give him your name first ”

The neurologist’s office was in a big medical complex with its own multi-level parking garage. Bally’s sister Jenna was waiting for me on the top floor of the lot, taking in the view of Biscayne Bay. She had the sunroof of her new Mercedes open and was blasting the stereo as if she owned the place—which in a way I suppose she did. When I rapped on the roof she turned the music down, pulled her bare feet off the dash, and sat up more or less straight. She smiled at me through the sunroof.

“What’s the verdict?” she asked. “Nine months to live? A year, maybe?”

I rested my chin on the cool metal of the roof. “Worse than that,” I said.  
“Ten years, maybe twenty—with time off for good behavior.”

Jenna’s eyes were round; they gleamed at me like blue beacons. She was a healthy girl, two years younger than Bally and eighteen younger than me. She’d married a numb nut of a man Bally referred to as The Fencepost. They had a beach house in Pompano, but Jenna spent a lot of time with us in the Keys. Once in a while when we were drunk as mullet she’d threaten to leave him and move aboard the Clipper. “Wait a minute sister,” Bally would say, “the Clipper only has one berth, and that’s Rigger’s.” Jenna would laugh, nudge my foot under the table, ask me to laugh too.

Now she looked serious. "Damn," she said. "I really thought you were sick"

I opened the passenger door and sank into the leather seat. "I *am* sick," I said. "Sick of waiting for you to offer me a drink"

Jenna pointed over her shoulder to the cooler on the back seat. "It's your funeral," she said, turning those blue beacons hard on my face.

I popped a beer, sipped the foam from the rim of the can, and rested it between my thighs. She was still watching me. "Don't worry," I said. "I won't spill on your new leather."

Jenna leaned across the car for the can, drank until her cheeks were full. She made a face like a fish, threatening to spray me with beer, then swallowed. She leaned across a second time to return the can, and on her way back up barely brushed my cheek with her lips. She started the engine and backed away from the view of the bay, stopping halfway through the turn to wipe her mouth with the smooth skin of her forearm.

"All right, Rigger," she said. "Just don't ask me for help with the good behavior"

To get down to street level we had to navigate one of those corkscrew-shaped ramps. Jenna put the Mercedes in third gear and never touched the brake. Watching the red-and-white CAUTION signs spin by was like being stuck inside a barber pole. When I closed my eyes the top of my scalp lifted off, and for a minute I thought I was going to lose it again.

A fine sweat started from my forehead. The neurologist had mentioned something about dizziness, about the tumor putting pressure on my inner ear. He had wanted me to take two weeks off, then come back to Miami for another brain scan. It was very small, probably benign. I might never have another incident like yesterday's—those were his words: "an incident"—but you never

knew. He'd been surprised before. Some patients showed signs of vertigo, became easily disoriented, or lost their sense of direction. There was medication, of course, but in my case we could afford to wait and see.

Jenna pulled into line to pay the parking attendant. "Another dollar for Daddy," she said, idling impatiently. She tapped her foot on the gas pedal.

I reached slowly for the beer, lifted the can to my lips and drank. I thought I did a good job of keeping my hand from shaking. Yesterday, when the ambulance met the Clipper at the dock, I'd refused treatment. The medic was from the island; he knew me. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "OK Rigger. Sign here." My fingers were rattling so bad I couldn't form the letters of my own name. After the ambulance left, Bally and I went into the tiki bar for a drink. It was still happy hour, and one end of the bar was spread with freebies: batter-fried mushrooms, sesame rolls stuffed with swiss cheese and ham, teriyaki chicken wings. Bally picked up a plate and heaped it high with food. "You scared the shit out of me," he said, biting into a sesame roll with his perfect, white teeth. "When I looked down off the bridge and saw you lying on the deck . . ." I was empty inside but bar food didn't seem like the right thing. I was still out there, on my back. I could still feel the deck rolling beneath me while my mind spun like a penny on pavement. Before Bally had noticed what was going on, I'd had time to take a complete inventory of my forty-eight-year-old body. And nothing worked. I couldn't move my arms or legs, couldn't make a fist, couldn't even blink. I thought of some things to say to get Bally's attention, but I'd lost my tongue too. There were lights going on and off behind my eyes and the sky gleamed like a sheet of aluminum foil.

We'd been out for marlin: well outside the reef, fishing the hundred-fathom curve, dragging four big plastic lures the thickness and length of my forearm. One minute I was admiring the spread of baits I'd rigged, the way they

jumped and flashed in the wake exactly like a school of bonito, and the next I was down. Bally had really humped it for the dock. He hadn't even bothered to reel the lines in. By the way he was eating I could tell it had spooked him.

"Make me a plate, too," I told him. "I'll get us a drink."

Pammie, our bartender, had heard Bally call the marine dispatcher on the VHF—she always monitored our channel. When I leaned up against the bar, my hands flat on the teak, she grabbed them up and held them between her own two palms, wet from washing glasses. "I'm OK," I told her. "But you better make Bally's a double." She had laughed, pulled me across the bar, kissed me once on each cheek, and then hard on the mouth. The touch of her lips shocked me back into something like life. I'd watched her kiss Bally before—they looked good together. He was tall, young and tanned; she was young too, but her skin was white from her day job and she had to stand on her tiptoes to kiss Bally's chin.

As Jenna pulled out from the shade of the garage and into the sun and traffic, it struck me that I'd been kissed by Bally's girl and Bally's sister both in the space of twenty-four hours. And then I wondered why no one ever offered to kiss me when I was well.

I pulled the rearview mirror over and squinted into it. Did I look that bad? True, I was paler than usual—between the Florida sun and Guatemalan rum my cheeks were generally ruddy. And there were pale purplish moons under my eyes, and a couple gaps in my front teeth, and some graying stubble on my chin, but all in all it was a face with character. Not an ugly face. The face of a man who had spent some time on the water, who'd used up a few years before sunscreen and orthodontics.

I looked over at Jenna. We'd passed Homestead and were on that long straight stretch of Route 1 which crosses the Everglades before jumping Barnes

Sound to Key Largo. She smiled carelessly, steering with just the tips of her fingers. A few strands of her blonde hair streamed out the sunroof. She and Bally were two of a kind. Not spoiled exactly; I liked them too much to call them spoiled. They just weren't like me.

Bally was short for Ballinger. What he knew about fishing when I met him wouldn't have filled a baitbox. I taught him everything: how to tie the Bimini twist, how to bill sailfish, how to lip-gaff tarpon. His family was from old Kentucky somewhere—Jenna claimed they'd had a county named after them. The Owings were horse people who liked to get wet once in a while too. Bally's father came down twice a year to fish with us—Christmas and Easter. He'd wanted his boy to become a veterinarian, had even forced Bally through two years of vet school in Lexington, but finally gave up when Bally came down to the Keys for spring break and refused to go back. It was the old man's money that bankrolled the boat, so on the Christian holidays we polished the teak and stocked the bar with all the high-life liquors we never bought for ourselves.

The Owings were smart money. They had the knack of knowing when to get in, when to get out. When the bank repossessed my old boat, Bally bought it for a song at auction, then paid me to spruce it up a bit. We replaced some boards, cleaned out the bilge and put in a new galley—mostly cosmetic stuff. He changed the name from Reefhopper to Delusion, and sold it to a retired accountant from Pennsylvania at a hefty profit. Bally used that money for the downpayment on the Clipper—a 46' Rybovich Sportfisherman. Classic boat: twin diesels, tuna tower, three fighting chairs, self-baling cockpit. Then he hired me as captain and got us a berth at The Palms marina. See what I mean?

Still, when Bally suggested the neurologist, I reminded him that he'd studied horse anatomy not human. He was convinced that I needed to see a doctor. "Rigger," he said, "people don't just collapse for no reason. For all I

know you might have had a stroke or something. What if we'd had a charter on board? What would I have done? Pulled a sheet over you?" Bally smiled his paying-customer smile and lowered his voice a notch. "Uh, don't worry folks," he droned, "Captain Tavernier is just having one of his little spells. He'll snap out of it shortly."

I was still a little woozy or I would have put up a better fight. What good were doctors anyway? Broken bones or a case of pneumonia I could see. But how could they tell what was going on inside your head? I just wanted to outlive that afternoon—and forget about it. But Bally said, "Look, I'll call Jenna. She can pick you up in the morning and take you to Miami. My old man owns an office building there; we'll get someone to check you out—free."

So now I know about cat scans. A nurse can take pictures of the brain as easily as the kid behind the deli counter can slice up a salami. Jenna laughed when I told her about the white metal and whirring machinery. We were driving across the bridge to Coral Key. An evening haze hung low on the water. The sun looked like it was settling down on the double yellow line, like we could drive right into it and never see land again. I opened the last beer from the cooler and passed it to her. Jenna had her sunglasses on and was peering under the visor at the road.

"So what did the doctor really say?" she asked, squinting, between sips.

I'd been working on my story since we left the mainland, the last fifty miles or so. I knew I had to tell Bally something reasonable, but not too scary.

"Well," I said, "his best guess was some type of migraine attack. I can't remember what he called it exactly—'visceral migraine aura' or something like that."

Jenna looked skeptical. "I thought migraines were what depressed housewives got." She handed the beer back to me.

I drained the can and stowed the empty under the seat. She was probably right. My ex had migraines. She would draw the blinds and lie in bed curled tight as a crawfish. Our doctor told me then that all she needed was a change of pace, a different routine. The next month she left me.

"This is different," I said. "It's more unpredictable."

When we drove down to the dock, the Clipper was dark. Yesterday's baits still dangled from the outriggers, and the sliding door to the cabin yawned open. A brown pelican squatted on the transom, eyeing the live well. We got out and sat on the warm hood of the car.

"Want to come up to the bar for a drink?" Jenna asked.

I shook my head. I wasn't avoiding alcohol, but I didn't want to face the bar either. "We've got a charter tomorrow," I said. "I should clean up the boat some."

"Bally should've done that," said Jenna.

"Bally's got a lot on his mind," I said, although I didn't know that for a fact. "Why don't you go up, tell him I'm fine, and tell him that we've got paying customers at eight tomorrow morning?"

With the sun's passing, the air had gone soft as water. Jenna put her arm around my shoulder. "Are you really fine?" she asked.

"Finest kind," I said. "Do you need a place to sleep tonight?"

Jenna laughed. "I thought I'd rent a villa at the resort, live it up a bit. Cable, hot tub, room service—all that stuff."

She took her arm from my shoulder and bounced to her feet, facing me, blue eyes open wide. When she held out her hands I grabbed them, and she pulled me up too.

I had no idea she was so strong. My head drifted upward like a diver's breath of air. I threw my arms around her shoulders to fight off the fear of

falling. Her hair was all wind and perfume. When the wave of dizziness passed, Jenna had me firmly by the waist, kissing me and pushing me away with what seemed like the same motion.

“You’re a sick, sick man,” she said, half-smiling, arms folded beneath her breasts.

I planted my feet on the dock and waited for the blood to return to my head. “Thanks for the ride,” I said. It was all I could think of at the time. After my legs came back I turned and took a few steps toward the Clipper. Jenna got back in the Mercedes, then stuck her head out the sunroof and waved.

“Get a good night’s sleep,” she said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I got one foot on the gunwale and one hand on the gin pole and swung myself into the cockpit. The sky was as blue-black as the bay. The pelican still squatted dimly on the transom, unruffled by the whole affair. I switched on the cockpit lights—two bright, halogen bulbs mounted high on the tuna tower. A couple of mullet were floating belly up in the live well, so I fished them out and tossed them into the pelican’s beak. Stupid bird had probably been waiting all day for a handout. He blinked, spread his wings and tilted his head back to swallow. I watched the fish bump down his gullet, then prodded the pelican into the water with the boat hook. I mopped the transom where he had shit on the teak.

I was surprised that Bally had left our tackle out. The island wasn’t what it used to be, and each outfit, with its gold-plated reel and custom-wrapped rod, was worth a couple thousand bucks of his money. I knew it was his money of course—that’s why I did most of the mate’s work on a boat with two captains. Still, it bothered me. Good tackle in good working order catches more fish; it’s as simple as that. Even gold will rust if you don’t rinse the salt off it every day.



I unclipped the two outside lines from the riggers and reeled them up tight. Then I retrieved the stern rods from their holders, and stuck all four upright in the rocket launcher. I hung the marlin lures from the back of one of the fighting chairs. All the outfits were sticky with salt. I hosed them down with fresh water, then rinsed off the lures—molded plastic heads and plastic shimmy skirts hiding a pair of 8/0 hooks. The goggle eyes of the lures wobbled crazily in the spray.

After stowing the tackle in the cabin, I climbed up onto the bridge with a beer. Bally had left all the instruments on too: VHF, loran, radar, depth sounder. Their dials and displays winked at me. I could never afford all the gadgets when I had the Reefhopper. And I didn't use to need ten thousand dollars worth of electronics to tell me where I was on the Gulfstream. I just headed south every morning, then used the compass to make my way back to the dock. If the current was really ripping, I'd head her a few degrees to the west on the way in, or follow a weedline along the reef until I picked up Dorado Light.

I was careful, and I kept my eyes open too. Even if I had no idea how deep I was, or how far off the reef, I could find fish and bring them home. Most of it is anticipation. If you spot a frigate bird circling you get the baits under him and get ready, because he's probably following a fish—sailfish or martin or big bull dolphin. If you find a board floating in a mess of sargasso weed—whether it's just a two-by-four or a full sheet of plywood—then you fish it hard, especially if it's got barnacles on it. Because you know there'll be bait in the shade of that board, and you know there'll be fish waiting for that bait to make a wrong move.

Bluewater fishing can be long periods of boredom—empty sky, empty sea—punctuated by incredible bursts of action. If you can't anticipate the action, you

won't be paying attention, and you might miss out. I can do it on the water, but not on land. I wasn't expecting the recession to hit Florida, then I didn't think it would hurt the charter business, then I didn't know it would last so long. I missed three payments and lost Reefhopper to the bank. For Bally, it was easy pickings. That's how he likes to fish too. He'll choose a spot on the chart—miles offshore, a little bump in the sea bottom where the current wells up and draws bait—punch the coordinates into the loran, turn on the autopilot, and kick back until the alarm goes off. The Clipper steers itself toward a spot in the Gulf, a little electronic buzzer sounds, and the loran flashes **HERE**. I always think it should say **HERE, DUMMY**. You still have the hours of boredom, you just spend them running for a spot instead of looking for one.

I finished my beer and opened the cabinet under the wheel. Bally kept a fifth of rum cradled in the fire extinguisher bracket, for safety's sake. I had a taste and wondered what sort of sign I could've spotted to help me anticipate the end of my marriage, what bird flying or driftwood floating would have signalled that she was about to leave. I suppose that if I'd looked for trouble as hard as I'd looked for fish I would've seen it coming. But wouldn't it have come anyway? With fishing, if you spot a kink in the shock leader, any little nick or abrasion, you cut it off and retie. You check the knots and swivels, sharpen the hooks, set the drag a safe distance from the breaking point. Because any weakness can cost you a fish. Not a little fish, but a big one—the one you've waited a whole life to catch.

The next day's charter turned out to be a couple. I'd fallen asleep on the bridge, slumped forward in the captain's chair with my cheek on the control panel. I heard a woman's voice calling "Good morning" and for a minute I thought it was Jenna. The sun was low and bright over the island, and a warm westerly

breeze stirred the harbor. Although I couldn't remember stowing the bottle, it was locked tight in the bracket again, and only about half empty.

The woman stood on her tiptoes and waved. "Hello," she said. "We're a bit early. Can we get in?"

"Sure," I said, rubbing the soreness out of my cheek. "I was just listening to the weather report on the VHF. We should have a fine day." I tucked in my shirt and climbed down into the cockpit. The man was tall. Looking up at him from the deck, I felt less like myself, diminished somehow. The woman with him was about my height—5' 9" or so—and she seemed dwarfed too. Both of them were dressed in tennis whites. I held out my hand and helped her down the step, then I turned to help the man, but he had already climbed aboard.

"You ever play basketball?" I asked him.

The woman gave me a bored smile. "That's the first thing everyone asks," she said.

I felt stupid right away. I mean, it was like asking a fat person if they ever ate dessert, right? The way she slipped her hands into the pockets of her shorts and shrugged her shoulders under her shirt, I could see she was already lumping me in with everybody else in the world.

"You folks make yourselves comfortable," I said. "Captain Owings is in the café finishing his breakfast. I'll go tell him we're ready to cast off."

I jogged up the dock toward the restaurant, just to clear my head. I actually felt fine until I remembered the trip to the neurologist. Avoid light, sound, and alcohol? I'd have to quit fishing and live like a monk. Hell, my life was sparse enough already. Except for Jenna and Pammie, I had no women friends. I could still feel Jenna's hands on my waist, steadying me. She was married; she was Bally's sister. What had she meant by that kiss? When I walked into the café, Bally was at the register, paying his check.

"We have guests on the Clipper," I said. "Go down and entertain them while I grab a cup of coffee."

Bally looked at me apologetically. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Pammie and I really tied one on last night. Jenna told me what the doctor said—only migraine, right?—I wanted to haul your ass up to the bar to celebrate, but she said you needed some sleep."

I pushed open a door marked **KANES** and stopped halfway in. "She was right," I said. "I'm fine. Let's catch some fish today."

Bally nodded, looked relieved. He counted on me. I stepped into the head and let the door swing shut behind. It was cool and green inside. The whole resort had been decorated with a Hawaiian theme, right down to the palm fronds over the toilets. As I understood it **KANES** meant men and **WAHINES** meant women. I had no idea if the women got palm fronds too, but they deserved them. I splashed a few handfuls of cold water on my face and neck, then wandered back into the café for some coffee to go and a couple of box lunches for the charter.

By the time I got back to the boat, Bally had warmed up the engines and rigged four outfits: two fifty-pound-class rods for tuna, and two thirty-pound-class for surface trolling.

"Kurt and Marie tell me they've never been big-game fishing before," he said, as I loaded the lunches into the refrigerator. "So we'll use the heavier tackle today, make it a little easier on them."

"And tougher on the fish," I said, smiling, starting up the banter we'd maintain for eight hours on the water.

Bally winked at me first, then at Kurt and Marie. He was better at this part of the charter business than me. He knew how to show people a good time

even when the fishing was lousy. While I cast off the two stern lines, he climbed up the ladder and onto the bridge.

I went forward along the rail, uncleaned the bow lines, coiled them, and hung them on the pilings for our return. The Clipper nosed out of her slip and into the little bay that fronted the resort.

Bally called down from the bridge. "Let's run out to the Humps today. Catch these folks some tuna."

The Humps were about thirty miles offshore, two underwater mountains that shot to within a hundred feet of the surface and created a little rip in the stream. You could pretty much guarantee getting into a school of blackfins or some big amberjack out there.

"Sure," I said. "Take your time heading out. I'll run two lines long while I set up the downriggers. Maybe we'll pick up a few dolphin."

Bally gave me a thumbs-up and steered the Clipper out into the channel. I went aft. Kurt and Marie had both opened beers and were sitting in the fighting chairs.

"Have a beer, Captain," said Marie. "We're on vacation."

I wasn't sure what my drinking habits and their vacation had to do with each other, but I liked these two better already. As we ran past Dorado Light, the Clipper up on plane, cutting smoothly through a light starboard sea, I tried to tell them about bluewater fishing. I showed them how to use the chair and their legs to fight a fish, how to pump up a big tuna who'd sounded in six hundred feet of ocean. I let them watch as I clipped a line into each outrigger and set the baits skipping down the face of the wake. When I mentioned dolphin, I noticed Marie's lips press tight, so I explained that these were fish, not escapees from Flipper's Sea School, that the restaurant at the resort called them by their Hawaiian name—mahi-mahi—but to me they were dolphin.

Then I told her how big dolphin often run in pairs—a bull and a cow—and how a fish will often follow its hooked partner right to the boat.

“If you get another bait in the water,” I said, “you can usually catch both fish.”

“That’s sad,” Kurt said.

“No sadder than killing one and leaving the other lonely.”

Marie set her lips again, so I changed the subject. They told me that Kurt was a basketball player after all, a second-string forward for Atlanta. Marie was a stewardess, and adjusted her flight schedule to match Kurt’s when the team was on the road. It sounded like a good life to me, traveling together like that. I had just stood up to get us all another beer when the line snapped out of the port rigger.

“Fish on!” I yelled to Bally. Then I picked up the rod, drove the hook home with two smooth pulls, and set the butt into the gimbal of Kurt’s fighting chair.

“OK,” I said, “he’s all yours.”

Bally backed off on the throttle while I cranked in the other line. When I checked on Kurt again, he was just holding the rod, watching his spool empty.

I pointed in the direction of the fish. Bally put the Clipper in reverse and backed down hard while Kurt worked furiously at the reel handle. Marie got out a camera and started snapping pictures. The sea had picked up a bit, and we took a little spray over the transom. The warm water felt good on my skin. I watched as Kurt regained most of the line he had lost. When we got close, the fish sounded. The line hissed straight down into the blue. Bally let the engines idle. I knelt by Kurt’s chair and carefully tightened his drag another pound or so. I didn’t think it was a big fish, and I was right. The fish stopped.

Kurt pumped and reeled until the double line appeared. That meant the fish was forty feet away. Bally eased the Clipper ahead. I put a cotton glove on

my left hand and picked up the gaff with my right. When the double line was on the reel, I leaned out over the gunwale, grasping the leader to steady the fish, and stuck him in the thickest part of the body, right behind the head.

It was a small yellowfin tuna, about twenty-five pounds. I swung him aboard. Marie whooped and clapped. I turned the fish towards the sun, to show off the bright hues of his trailing fins and finlets, the hothouse yellow of his dorsal.

"He's like a canary," said Marie.

Kurt giggled, an elated little laugh which sounded odd coming from him. "The biggest fish of my life," he said, "and she calls it a canary."

"No," Marie said. "The *yellow* is like a canary." Her hair was wet with spray and dangled in loose clumps about her face. "Stand next to the fish, dummy. I'll take your picture."

I gripped the gaff handle with both hands and hoisted the tuna over my head. Thick blood welled from the wound where the gaff hook bit, and more blood dripped red down the fish's silvery flank. A small wave slapped against the hull, rocking the Clipper unevenly on her shallow keel. Kurt lurched back on his heels just as Marie hit the shutter. When one of his long, flailing arms struck me in the chest, I went down too.

This time I was more in control. I pushed the tuna and the gaff—with its six-inch stainless steel hook—away from me, then managed to get both hands down to break my fall. Kurt landed in a heap of limbs, looking surprised but amused. Marie was doubled over, laughing. I watched Bally's reaction up on the bridge, saw his smile fade to concern. I thought of something to say, and said it.

"I hope you got a picture of that, Marie."

She straightened up, shook the wet hair from her eyes. "Sorry," she said. "I might have got one, but it was just too goddamn funny."

Bally came down from the bridge. He helped Kurt up first, then me. Kurt had managed to get blood on his hands, face, and shirt. His nose wrinkled at the tuna smell. He stood wobbling, his hands held stiffly away from his clothes. I picked the fish up by the hard wrist at the base of his tail, opened the fish box, laid him on ice.

Marie took Kurt by the elbow and steered him toward the cockpit sink. "C'mon big boy," she said. "Let's get you cleaned up a bit."

Bally looked at me. "You all right?" he asked quietly.

I nodded. "Everything seems to be in good working order, Captain."

"That's a nice tuna," he said, loud enough for Kurt and Marie to hear, then added in the quiet voice, "Why don't you take the wheel for the rest of the day—I can keep these folks busy."

I wasn't feeling particularly sociable anymore, so I agreed.

"We're only about a mile off the Humps," Bally said. "We'll let Marie catch one, then head in."

I saluted and smiled, to let Bally know that I appreciated what he was doing. It could be a lot quieter at the helm than on deck. As soon as I was on the bridge, I unlatched the fire extinguisher bracket and had a drink. I brought the Clipper up to speed and checked our heading on the loran, but didn't bother with the autopilot. I like to feel the rudders myself.

When I looked back down into the cockpit, Bally was rummaging through the first aid kit. He handed two seasickness pills to Kurt, who smiled weakly before washing them down with beer. The loran flashed **HERE**, so I throttled back a little and climbed up into the tower to get a better view. Some terns were working just to the south, diving and circling over a school of baitfish that



something had scared to the surface. I ran the lures around the edge of the school without getting a strike. Kurt was bent over the gunwale, retching. Bally had him by the belt loops or he would've fallen overboard. After Kurt finished, Bally and Marie helped him into a fighting chair. His head hung loosely over the backrest, eyes closed.

I signalled to Bally to set out the downriggers—two big cannonballs of lead which let you troll deep without adding any weight to the actual line. The depth sounder was marking fish right over the Humps, suspended about forty feet below the surface. I held up four fingers, and Bally nodded. I swung the Clipper in a big slow circle while he rigged two swimming mullet, then tightened the arc so the baits would cut through one edge of the school.

Both reels sung out at the same time. Two big fish. Marie fought the first one until the back of her shirt was soaked with sweat. I could hear her swearing at it from the tower: "Give up you fucker." Bally crouched behind her chair and spoke into her ear. I kept the Clipper moving ahead slow, to keep the line tight on the second fish. When the double line came up on the first one, I went down and gaffed it. A nice amberjack, about eighty pounds. Then Bally gave Marie the second rod, and she fought that one too. It was smaller, about fifty or so. Bally reached around Marie's waist with both hands to adjust the drag. Kurt slept.

After we boated the second one, Marie jumped out of the chair and hugged Bally, then me. She'd been working steadily for about an hour. Her face was flushed, and the muscles in her neck and arms were strung tight under her skin.

"Wow," she beamed. "That was un-fucking-believable. Look at those fish. Are they good to eat?"

I told her that amberjack can be very good smoked, but most of the ones we catch are shot through with parasites, little white worms which ruin the meat.

Bally whispered something to Marie; she laughed and hugged him again. Then she pulled her shirt over her head, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. She stepped out of her shorts too, and walked naked to the stern. She waved at us before diving in, a graceful half-turn. Bally glanced over at Kurt, but he was still sound asleep, rasping occasionally through his nose.

I went into the cabin to get Marie a towel. I've been swimming in the Gulfstream before, clearing some nylon rope that had fouled the prop on Reefhopper, and I was scared. Nothing but empty blue all around. You can see through that water as if it were air, but every big predator in the gulf can see you too. I had kept my back to the hull, and when I was done, I got out fast. With my hands on the ladder, half of me out of the water and half of me still in, I could feel them coming for my legs.

When I came out again, Bally was helping Marie into the boat. They were both laughing, and Marie looked like she hadn't worried a bit. I handed her the towel. She dried her face and hair first, then wrapped it around her waist and sat down in the fighting chair.

"What's next?" she asked.

I looked at Bally before I spoke. "We'll run in, maybe catch a few more fish along the reef, then call it a day."

Marie clapped her hands. "I'm ready," she said. "Which way's land?" She pointed a finger south, towards Cuba.

Bally nodded to the north. "That way's shorter."

Marie winked at him. "You're the captain."

Bally blushed. I could see he was trying not to stare at her. He asked Marie if we should wake up Kurt.

“No,” she said. “Let him sleep. He still looks a little green around the gills.”

I climbed back onto the bridge. The terns had disappeared, and the ocean gleamed under the sun like the skin of a whale. I spun the Clipper toward the dock, figuring on a heading of north-northwest. Just to check myself, I punched in the coordinates on the loran. I was a little off—over thirty miles it would’ve meant an extra half-hour’s worth of fuel and running time. Not too bad. I was glad not to be like Marie, no clue to north or south, but I suppose that’s why they invented the compass.

It seemed strange that a pea-sized lump of cells in your head could upset your balance, destroy your sense of direction. I wondered if I’d actually go back to Miami in two weeks for another brain scan, then decided I would if Jenna would take me. I hoped she’d be waiting for us at the dock. Sometimes she brought me a piña colada while I fileted the charter’s fish. I’d slice off strips of belly meat for her to feed to the pelicans and to the great white heron who prowled our dock like a pet cat. The Palms made their piña coladas in a frozen yogurt machine so that they were incredibly cold and smooth, and served them with little paper umbrellas and swizzle sticks shaped like palm trees. If Pammie was tending bar, she’d add a splash of dark rum on top too, just for taste. I liked Pammie for that. She would have been hurt to see Bally flirting with Marie. Or was it Marie toying with Bally? But even Bally’s conscience had to kick in sometime. I mean, Kurt was right there in the chair the whole time. It was funny how you could misread people. I wouldn’t have predicted that Marie would drink beer or curse or sit topless in a fighting chair. But she did.

I went for the fire extinguisher again, then checked on the situation in the cockpit. Kurt was awake, and Marie was sitting in his lap, fully clothed, cradling the little tuna like a newborn. Bally had a beer in one hand and the camera in the other. He said something to Marie which I didn’t catch over the roar of the

diesels Marie pursed her lips as if to kiss him, then bared her teeth, threatening to take a chunk out of his hide. Bally took more pictures.

We made it all the way in to the reef without hooking another fish. At cruising speed, I like to run the baits at least five waves back. But Bally just tossed them out there, too close to the transom. I really couldn't blame him for not paying attention; we'd caught enough to make the customers happy. After we docked at the marina, Kurt shook my hand and apologized for falling asleep. Marie shook my hand too. They tipped us both fifty on top of the charter fee, and Bally offered to take a slab of the yellowfin up to the chef at The Palms, so they could have it grilled for dinner. Marie said she would enjoy that.

While Bally was at the restaurant, I finished gutting the catch, rinsed off the tackle, then mopped the deck. I called the fish house on the radio, and asked them to send a kid over for the amberjack. They'd steak and smoke the fish, send half to Kurt in Atlanta and keep the other half as payment. I helped the kid slide the fish into the back of a pickup and gave him a five for his trouble. After that, I walked over to the tiki bar.

Bally and Jenna were already sitting behind rum drinks. The sliding doors were open to the bay, and two ceiling fans twirled sedately under the thatched roof. As I pulled up a stool between them, a gust of air rustled in the palm fronds, lifting the edges of their cocktail napkins.

Pammie put a piña colada in front of me and I drank it. Before I could order another one, Jenna passed me hers.

"Drink mine," she said. "I've had enough already."

I looked at her watch—it was only six o'clock. She didn't seem drunk, but when Bally stood up to visit the KANES, she ran her index finger along my thigh, just below the hem of my shorts. Then she put her finger in her mouth.

"Salty," she said. "You could use a bath."

Bally sat back down and ordered another round. I tried to pretend that nothing had happened. I mean, I had always thought of Jenna as Bally's sister: too much trouble and too close to home. I knew The Fencepost was dumb, but I still didn't wish him any hurt. I was confused. Did she really want me? Or was she teasing me in the same way that Marie and Bally teased each other, just for fun?

Pammie brought more drinks. I counted my stack of paper umbrellas and plastic swizzle sticks. Bally waved his hands in the air, telling Jenna about me and Kurt and the tuna all hitting the deck at the same time.

"In five years I've never seen Rigger make a wrong move on the boat," he said, "and suddenly he's on his back twice in two days."

Jenna laughed and patted me on top of the head. "I'm glad you didn't break anything," she said.

We had a few more while Pammie served out her shift. Then we trolled over to Joe's Steak House, not to eat, but because they had a reggae band in the lounge. My head was about under. I mean, I don't usually drink like that. I drink to keep things the same—no major repairs, just maintenance.

The band was relaxed, loose and loud. I could feel each note the bass player sounded vibrate under my rib cage. Between sets, Bally told about Marie taking a swim off the stern.

"As soon as she gets out," Bally said, "Rigger throws a towel over her. He was more embarrassed than she was."

Jenna laughed. "That's because Rigger's not a dog like you."

Pammie didn't laugh. "I'd have kicked her ass back over the side," she said seriously. "For shark bait."

She knew Bally, I could see that. I wondered if Bally knew that Pammie's kick was really for him. I wanted to go home right then, back to my bunk on the Clipper, the slow lullabye of the hull at rest. But Jenna wouldn't let me. She wanted to dance. So we shuffled among the tourists with our elbows held in tight.

The four of us closed Joe's, then raided the refrigerator on the boat for Kurt and Marie's unopened box lunches and a liter of rum. We sat on the transom with our feet dangling over the harbor, eating pickles and potato chips and swigging from the bottle. We fed the stale sandwiches one at a time to the pelican. He seemed to enjoy them. And why shouldn't he? He had a good thing going. Between our old bait and the scraps from fish cleaning and the occasional ham and cheese on rye, that bird was living high. He never even had to get his feathers wet.

I revived some just watching him—the confident tilt of his beak, the satisfying progression of sandwiches down his gullet. I had a good thing going too: bluewater to fish, a berth to sleep in, three fine friends who knew how to pass the bottle. The doc had said it was probably benign. If it wasn't, I'd given it a pretty good workout—between the sun, the rum, and the reggae—with no ill effects.

When we finished the liter, Jenna asked us up to the villa for a "civilized drink"—one with ice and lime and tonic. It sounded good. Bally took Pammie's arm and I took Jenna's. We strolled away from the dock like timeshare owners on vacation from their ordinary lives in Ohio and Michigan. The villas looked like grass huts on stilts. Except that the stilts were really concrete pillars and the thatch was just stapled on for show. A lot of our charter customers rented the same one for the same week, year after year. I'd knocked on doors before, waking late sleepers for their day of fishing, but I'd never been

inside one. I had no idea how fancy they'd be: built-in televisions and glass end tables, coral-colored chairs and an emerald sofa. The hot tub was big enough to hold a cocktail party in; it even had its own ice machine.

Jenna turned the taps on full and emptied a bottle of bubble bath into the steaming water. When she turned on the jets, bubbles went everywhere. We were laughing, running around the tiles, scooping up handfuls of suds and tossing them at each other, and then Jenna stepped into the tub and sank up to her neck in bubbles. She pulled her clothes off underwater and threw them dripping into the sink.

The rest of us just stared at each other. I thought about the graceful way Marie had slipped from her shorts and disappeared into the water. I could never have chased after that act, but I wanted to follow Jenna.

Pammie said, "I can't get this blouse wet. It'll run."

"Take it off then," said Bally, reaching for her belt.

I turned my back to them, dropped my shorts and slid out of my shirt. Then I backed into the tub, like a crab. Jenna's hand touched my ankle, guiding my foot towards the first step.

It may seem funny, but I had never been in a hot tub before. I was sitting on a little underwater bench with my arms draped over the rim, keeping the bubbles out of my drink. Pammie and Bally sat with their arms around each other, eyes closed. A warm jet of water massaged the small of my back. Jenna leaned her head on my shoulder and hummed a tune we'd heard at Joe's. Her voice and the warm water dissolved whatever hardness there was left in me.

I didn't wake up until Bally splashed water on my face. He had stumbled out of the tub and wrapped a towel around his waist. "I want you folks to behave," he said. "Don't forget there's a Fencepost waiting home in Pompano."

His voice sounded sleepy to me, cynical, almost bored. Pammie already had her clothes on. She waved from the door. "Bye Rigger," she said.

For the first time all night I knew what was coming. I didn't think Bally's parting shot was a warning to me. More like an acknowledgement to Jenna that he knew what she wanted. And if he had noticed, then it must be true. So I let it happen. I left the lights on, said yes to everything.

The next day Jenna dressed like a college kid on spring break—short shorts and a t-shirt so wide at the collar that it hung off one shoulder. We bought a bucket of chicken and a suitcase of beer at the Winn-Dixie, opened the sunroof, and headed north for Orlando. For some reason we'd been talking about the things we'd never done before. I went over the list of firsts that I'd cracked the past three days: cat scan, villa, hot tub, among others. When Jenna found out that I'd never been to Disneyworld, she laughed at me. "Christ," she said, "you *have* been leading a sheltered life."

I sat in the passenger seat for the first hundred miles, eating the chicken down to the bone and then tossing the scraps up and out the sunroof. That was a great feeling: chicken grease on my fingers and lips, the air thick with the salty swamp smell of the Everglades, Jenna with one hand on the wheel, bare shoulder and bare thighs and her belly warm to the touch. When I threw a drumstick up it would fly straight for a moment, then run slam into the slipstream and blow back behind us as if someone had yanked it on a string. I would laugh and Jenna would laugh and maybe lean away from the wheel to kiss me. She'd run the tip of her tongue along my lower lip and say "Mmm-mm—love that spicy chicken."

At Homestead we stopped to stretch our legs. I watched as Jenna reached toward the sky, both hands clasped over her head like a fighter who'd just been



declared champion of the world. What there was of her shirt rode high on her breasts and the skin beneath them was smooth and white. She caught me staring at her and smiled. I looked down at the backs of my hands, wrinkled by salt and shellacked by the sun—an old fisherman’s hands. I rubbed my face gently, just to test the feel of the old tanned hide, and it was all roughness: my hand, my cheek, the stubble on my chin.

Jenna didn’t want to drive anywhere near Pompano, so we passed up the Turnpike for the Okeechobee road. We floated through the swampy heart of the Glades, more water than land. I took the wheel while she napped. The Mercedes was fun to drive: power steering, power brakes, power windows—another first. I’d wanted to ask Jenna if this was the first time she’d ever cheated on The Fencepost, but then *cheated* didn’t seem like the right word, and what did it matter anyway?

She was still asleep when we got to Lake Okeechobee, thirty miles from the coast at its closest point but only fourteen feet above sea level. I thought about the weedy, tea-colored water falling fourteen feet to the deck of the Clipper, and it seemed like we hadn’t gone very far at all. I figured Orlando was three hours away. We’d check into a motel tonight, Magic Kingdom tomorrow, and then what? Back to Coral Key? Jenna opened her eyes for a moment and smiled absently at me. A hollow ache tunnelled into my gut, the same ache I get when the line goes slack on a fish and I see him jump far off, a big fish free in the air, my connection with him a thing of the past.

I considered calling Bally, letting him know what was going on. But what would I tell him? That I’d lost my bearings? That I didn’t know when I’d be back? That I was in love with his sister and taking her to Disneyworld?

The bad part was that I didn’t want this ride to end. I don’t mean that I thought I deserved it. I didn’t. The knot in my head wasn’t terminal.

Still, when we were past the south shore of Okeechobee I ignored the sign for Orlando and kept going west, through Goodno and La Belle. I knew I should've been headed north, toward Palmdale, Venus, Lake Placid. But I didn't want to turn around and go back. I held my foot to the accelerator, opened my window and gulped the breeze. I was on the wrong road, and the faster I drove the further we went astray.

## Big Tujunga Canyon

Maridee was at the Palace with Burt, courtesy of the record company. They were up close, pressed almost to the stage. Maridee was dancing, but slowly, hardly moving her feet at all. She had her eyes open, watching the lead singer. Her limbs felt heavier than usual—as if her wrists and ankles were roped with soft coils of lead. The song was about mothers and war, and the singer made circular motions over her long, flat belly. Maridee clapped her hands together, counting. She thought of Timmy at the sitter's and the new baby coming.

A waitress edged along the crowd, a tray of glasses held high above her head. That was one thing Burt liked about the Palace—it was civilized enough to serve out of glass instead of paper. Maridee had laughed when he said it, not only at the word “civilized,” but also at the slightly nasal drone he'd picked up since passing the California bar exam. She could remember when they'd chosen clubs for entirely different reasons—like smoke and mirrors, lights and action. The waitress brought Maridee a beer with a wedge of lime balanced on the lip of the bottle, and Burt held it for her until the song was over, only his head nodding with the beat.

The singer closed her eyes, turned her back to the buzz of the crowd. Maridee pushed the lime into the bottle with the point of her finger. Normally she would've had four or five beers by now but the baby had ruined drinking for her. Yesterday afternoon, at the women's clinic, the lab tech had pointed out the heart beating; a small white flicker on the screen. Maridee had swallowed two quarts of water in an hour and could barely focus. When the technician moved the probe, she concentrated on holding her bladder. All she could see were shapes and shadows. It was like lying on her back and looking at clouds. Maridee saw sand dunes, mare's tails, a gingerbread man—everything but the baby. Besides, it was still only an inch long, a little tadpole really—but hard, not fragile at all. She was sure of that. It would bounce if you dropped it, like a gumball.

The singer had been wrapped in a black wool coat but now she threw it off. She wrung her hands, leaned tiptoe toward the mike. Her bare shoulders glistened with the moisture that had been trapped under the wool. The spotlight was on her, and she was crying. Maridee leaned closer, to watch the progress of tears down the singer's cheeks. It was fascinating, mesmerizing almost, the way the water trapped light, the drops sneaking along the skin, from freckle to freckle. The person behind Maridee leaned forward too—the whole room seemed to yearn towards the stage. Maridee turned her head to look at Burt. His eyes were fixed on a point somewhere between the singer's breasts, just above the low line of her black dress, a soft depression where droplets of sweat slowed on their way down.

As always, Maridee wanted to swap places with the singer, to pinch the mike between her fingers like a chalice, to feel the lights burn on her bare shoulders, to watch the crowd surge towards her like a wave. But instead she brought the bottle to her lips, and the smell of beer turned her stomach.

Nausea spread through an empty cavity inside her chest and pooled beneath her collarbones, then rose up and spilled into her head. She wobbled like a woman with her back to the surf, leaned hard against Burt. He took her by the hand and led her through the crowd. They slipped between the tables of record company executives, then past a couple crushed into a leather couch, the woman like a cat in the man's lap, and finally out the glass doors and into the street.

Maridee pressed her back against the club's tiled facade. She locked her knees tight, like buttresses. Burt's fingers on her forehead were cool and dry. "No," she said, shaking her head, wanting to throw up, and then, "sorry." She could feel the wall pulsing faintly with the beat of the band; she timed her breaths to it.

The night air was still warm, and heavy with the exhaust of Friday's traffic. Maridee watched Burt rock back and forth on the heels of his loafers. He'd worked late, come straight from the office. At least he'd pocketed his tie, she thought. She could remember how they used to dress for a night out—how Burt would lace his combat boots and spike his hair, and she'd wear torn white t-shirts and a black leather jacket with the words "Straight to Hell" painted in red across the back. Now Burt was losing his hair—or his forehead was swelling—whatever, his widow's peak was positively Victorian, like the sharp-edged gables of one of the old homes in their neighborhood.

The doors to the Palace opened and a roar of applause washed into the street. The youngest members of the crowd stormed out first, leaping from the curb and rattling their fists on the roofs of cars. Maridee straightened up to let them pass—everyone was smiling or laughing. One woman was almost doubled over with the giggles: "Jiminy Christmas," she said, "I almost died in there." "Tell me about it," replied her companion, a hugely muscled man in a

white caftan. "That's the first time I've ever seen *him* in pants and flat shoes." Mardee felt better now. There was something comical in the man's high-pitched, reedy voice—and something even funnier in the fact that she was leaning against a wall, pregnant, eavesdropping, dead on her feet after one beer.

"You should go in," she said to Burt, knowing that he was expected to show up backstage. After all, the bandmembers were clients of the firm where Burt was a new associate. And that was funny too—her husband making a living by hanging around the edges of record deals, dropping names and picking up tabs. She really couldn't stomach another minute of it. "I'm going home," she said, "—you can catch a cab later."

Burt rubbed his forehead with the heel of his palm, leaned one elbow on the wall above her. "Are you sure you want to drive?" he asked.

Maridee kissed him on the chin. "I'm fine," she said. "I'll pick up Timmy, then go right to bed."

Jillian, the babysitter, lived in West Hollywood. She had her own apartment, even though she was only seventeen. Burt and Maridee had met her at the daycare center, where she was Timmy's favorite person. Most of the other daycare workers were elderly matrons or disaffected college girls from UCLA and Cal State. But Jillian wore a delicate silver ring in one nostril, and a stiff short haircut which drew attention to her pale skin and wan face. She moved among the children like a priestess.

Maridee liked Jillian too—her strange aura of maturity, her taste in music, the way Timmy shyly held her hand. She admired her seriousness and envied her freedom. As Maridee drove along the boulevard—past store signs alive with odd Asian characters, not like brush strokes at all but fat worms wriggling—she wondered how her life would change if she were alone and

seventeen. Would she be sober and responsible like Jillian? Or would she just let loose, like that teenaged vocalist who played the Palace last week, who was so small that they never saw her feet over the heads of the crowd, even when she jumped? The girl had sung a long version of Lou Reed's "Sweet Jane" that brought them to the verge of tears. Then, after the show, she'd drunk a pint of peach liqueur and serenaded the record company folks with old gospel tunes. Even the accountant had to admit the kid was something. At seventeen, Maridee thought, no mother would've trusted me with her child, and no exec would've offered me a contract. And at twenty-seven, things weren't much different. It was worse than depressing—it was unfair. She'd been backstage enough times, done enough studio and record company parties to know that most rock stars were nothing special, really. They could be tongue-tied, dumb, drunk or peevish—just like anybody else. Sure, some seemed like nice people, honestly nice, but they could afford to be that way. They were rich and famous. Burt would make her rich eventually, she knew that. But Maridee wanted the famous part, that rush. She wanted an audience to push forward at her feet, to clap when she bowed, scream when she pumped her fist in the air. She could have her own band, play guitar because she couldn't sing—and because too many women already played bass. Why always bass? Why the anchor, the backbone, the background always? It wasn't natural.

Maridee braked for a red light, rapped her fingernails on the dashboard. In the hills above the city, she could see the HOLLYWOOD sign shining like a giant reminder to itself. She cranked the volume on the car stereo, loud enough to rattle the door panels—a wail of chords and feedback, lyrics about rage and pain and desolation, or something equally as satisfying. An old woman shuffled stiffly through the crosswalk, steering an empty shopping cart. She turned her

head towards the car, seemed to glare right through the windshield. But when Maridee waved, the old woman didn't wave back.

Timmy was still up. He and Jillian had been watching a video, something she had let him pick out—something animated. Jillian believed in choice. All of her own possessions were so devoutly chosen that to Maridee, each visit to Jillian's apartment threatened to resolve itself into a still life. Looking around the girl's living room, Maridee could already imagine the scene: the two of them sitting cross-legged on the carpet, behind two empty bowls of ice cream, two long-handled spoons, the porcelain bowls fired with an intricately cracked green glaze.

Now Jillian stood on one bent leg, like a wading bird. "Bowls belong in the sink," she said. And Timmy picked them up, politely, confidently, more sure-handed than Maridee thought her two-year-old could be.

"Careful," said Maridee, bending over him. "Let Mommy have them." She took the bowls and walked into the kitchen. Jillian amazed her. How did she think the boy would reach the sink? Maridee felt something flutter near her stomach, outside her almost, like a beetle walking on her skin. She opened the taps and filled the sink with water.

She was tired again; it happened all the time now. She hadn't remembered feeling like that with Timmy. Then she could still go through all the motions: law school dinners and gallery openings, movie premieres and club dates. Maridee left the dishes and went back into the living room. Jillian was standing near the doorway this time, with Timmy clinging to one knee.

"Good night, Timmy," Jillian said. "Are you going to have fun tomorrow?"

Timmy looked at Maridee.

"We're going on a picnic," Maridee said, "in the mountains."



Timmy held tight to Jillian.

"With Daddy," added Maridee.

Jillian gently pried his fingers loose. "Oh," she said, "you won't want to miss that."

By the time they got home, it was after midnight. Maridee put Timmy down in his crib and went into the bedroom to change. It was good to get home, really; she liked their house, felt comfortable in it. Of course, they'd done a lot of remodeling, or at least Burt had. It had taken him three years to get it right—the wallpaper, the track lighting, the bathroom tile—but now he was done. He had changed with the house, grown more dependable, more habitable. Maridee had the feeling that she could come and go as she pleased, enjoying the fact that when she returned, everything would still be the same. That was completely different from the frustration she'd felt at the Palace, just an hour or two ago, but it seemed true nevertheless. She walked leisurely from room to room, closing drapes.

When she went back to Timmy's crib, he was lying quietly on his side, eyes only half shut. Maridee kissed his forehead, then switched off the light. "Good night," she said. She left the door cracked open.

The next morning they drove out to the San Gabriel Mountains with a cooler of beer and a picnic basket. In Big Tujunga Canyon a group of automatic weapons enthusiasts had chipped in and bought an old Chevy van, had it towed out to a gravel bar in the middle of a dry wash. They were going to shred it with bullets, carry the wreckage back to Los Angeles in the back of a pickup. They wouldn't stop until all the pieces were small enough to fit through a tire. One of the lawyers from Burt's office had invited them along. "It's something

to see," he said. "Those little numbers can perforate metal like nobody's business."

At first, Maridee wasn't too keen on the idea. The whole thing seemed a little violent for Timmy. But what the hell, it *would* be something to see, and Burt needed to socialize more with the firm. What impressed Maridee most in the end was the noise. The sound of guns seemed to shudder through her skin. Timmy opened his mouth wide and put his hands over his ears and she did too. He laughed and jumped up and down, flat-footed. Forgetting about the baby, Maridee jumped with him, until Burt slipped a finger through her back belt loop.

Burt's friend from the firm offered her his gun. "Try it," he yelled. "There's almost no kick."

Maridee dipped her shoulder into the sling, pointed the gun at the van and squeezed the trigger. There were so many bullets in the air that it was hard to tell which were hers, but she thought she hit the mark at least once. When the clip was empty, she handed the gun back to the lawyer, letting it swing by the strap, like an electric guitar.

After fifteen minutes, the van was reduced to bits, small shards of glass and metal with scalloped edges. There was no chunk so big that an average person couldn't lift it with one hand. Someone had hung a tire from a tree with a rope, but nobody bothered to test the pieces. A child was swinging on it instead. In the sudden quiet, Maridee felt the canyon walls close in. She could actually see smoke in the air, and the stench of gunpowder was overwhelming. When she blinked, an image of the van, still whole, wavered above the sand like a mirage.

"Let's go," she said.

Burt had been talking to the lawyer with the gun, but now he turned towards her. He grabbed Timmy under the arms and swung the boy up and over his head. "Sure," he said. "We'll go anywhere Mommy goes—won't we Timmy?"

They got into the car and drove further into the canyon. The road climbed steeply along an open face dotted here and there with mesquite and sage, scrub oak and spindly pines. They passed a half-empty reservoir, its banks bleached white by the sun, and parked at the recreation area. A sign read: **SCENIC TRAIL / 0.8 MILES.**

Maridee carried Timmy on her hip while Burt carried the cooler and the picnic basket, stacked one on top of the other. The heated air shimmered over the rocks, and lizards scabbled crazily across the trail and down the slope. When Maridee looked up, all she could see was haze and hills. The scent of sage was stifling. She could feel the new baby growing inside her, putting on layers like a seed pearl in her gut. She put Timmy down on a stump. He wobbled and smiled.

"Daddy," he said, hands grasping empty air.

"Watch him now," said Maridee.

Burt set the cooler downhill of the stump and lifted off the lid. "Don't worry," he grinned. "This way, even if he falls, he won't get far."

Maridee imagined Timmy tumbling off the stump and down the slippery slope, his doughy hands flailing among the dry twigs. She sat in the dust and the leaves and closed her eyes. The fetus fluttered inside her, an insect's tickling. In another month it would be able to really kick, the way Timmy had in the last weeks before his birth, hurting her sometimes with a knee or an elbow. She'd been volunteering at the museum then—two afternoons a week at the Temporary Contemporary, just to take her mind off things—and the

curator had been fascinated by the movement inside her skin. “The potential,” he’d said, watching her belly for signs of life. “I mean, when you can see it right through the fabric.”

“Potentially painful,” she’d replied. When Timmy kicked, the front of Maridee’s dress rippled and bulged like a wineskin. In those days, Burt liked to lie behind her with his palm over her navel. All that attention seemed to calm the baby—instead of jabbing he’d beat a gentle tattoo against Burt’s flattened hand.

Maridee opened her eyes. Burt had carried Timmy a little farther up the trail. He held the boy in the crook of one arm and pointed at some distant spot with the other. The two heads leaned together familiarly, like two old soldiers planning their next campaign. Maridee looked out over the shimmering hills beyond the canyon. She pulled her knees up until they touched her stomach. In another minute, she would stand and join them.

## Islamorada

Three days after Anna's brother was killed in a crash on the Coral Key bridge, the state police arrived at their trailer in Islamorada with a warrant and a flatbed truck. They spent an hour opening cabinets and emptying drawers before confiscating Donnie's fishing gear: three hundred lobster traps, several boxes of styrofoam floats painted yellow and green, a few thick shanks of black nylon rope. Anna and Donnie had spent ten years in the accumulation of this livelihood, the decade since their parents died, and since Donnie's wife drank herself into divorce.

"I'm sorry ma'am," said one officer, his face red from the heat and heavy lifting, "but the law authorizes us to confiscate any and all possessions which have been utilized in the purchase or sale of controlled substances."

"Donnie didn't buy it and we didn't smoke it," said Anna. "You should know that. We found it."

"I believe you," said the man, scratching his elbow and looking up at the empty sky. "If you don't mind, we'll come back tomorrow for the boat."

Anna's brother had salvaged the occasional bale—that was true—but running sodden marijuana up to Miami was like claiming a lottery ticket, not a

regular deal. The wreck wasn't even his fault. Some snowbirds from Michigan were admiring the view of Florida Bay when a local boy tried to pass them on the bridge. Donnie was on his way to meet the colonel, in the northbound lane, with two bait coolers full of reefer. His car ended up in eight feet of water. He didn't have much of a chance.

The Miami paper ran three columns about the collision. A reporter interviewed several of their neighbors, and not one offered a word of support. "They were quiet folk," said another fisherman whose name Anna didn't recognize. "Kept to themselves. Could've been dealing coke for ought I know." When she called the motel to ask for a day off to arrange the funeral, the manager told her to take the rest of her life off. "I don't need drug addicts for maids," he said. "I got problems enough as it is."

The coroner listed drowning as the cause of death. Donnie's body was cremated on the day the police came, and a few friends carried his ashes out to the gulf in their trawler and scattered them from the afterdeck. The next morning Anna led Donnie's skiff out of its slip by a stern line, until it floated free of the mangroves and into the outgoing tide. She waited on the dock until the line pulled tight in the current, then cast it into the channel like a spent match.

Anna walked back to the trailer, took a shower and washed her hair. She put on an old pair of dungarees and a white cotton shirt with ruffles at the wrist. She was thirty-eight years old and felt like every day of it showed in her face. There were purplish half-moons under her eyes, and wrinkles on the backs of her hands. The police had dumped a drawerful of paperclips and old fishing receipts onto the couch, and a pair of Donnie's pants with the pockets turned inside-out lay draped over the coffee table. A week ago Anna would have

picked up those pants and washed them if they were dirty, hung them in the closet if they were clean. She had been married once—just after high school—an untimely match which ended with a childish threat. The last time he had tried to see her, Donnie chased him from the steps with the butt of a trolling rod. Water under the bridge, Anna thought, under and gone. She brushed her hair before the long mirror on the bathroom door, pulled a few strands of gray from the bristles, and dropped them on the carpet.

She packed a small suitcase with six pairs of underwear and her maid's uniform and copied the colonel's phone number onto the title page of a supermarket novel. The bus to Miami was near empty. She took a window seat on the side facing the ocean. As they crossed the Coral Key bridge, Anna looked down into the shallow water where her brother's car had settled after clearing the guard rail and tearing twenty feet off the wooden catwalk. When she raised her eyes the grassy flats swam under a wash of tears.

The view reminded her of a day spent relaxing on the water, drinking beer gone warm in the sun, hunting conchs on the shallow banks, watching pelicans dive on unsuspecting schools of bait. Donnie had slipped over the side wearing a mask and fins, and hung with both hands to a line cleated to the transom while she nudged the outboard motor in and out of gear—ahead, neutral, ahead again. When Donnie spotted a pink-lipped shell, he dropped the line, kicked to the bottom and grabbed it. Once he found four conchs within a boat's length. He came up gasping, arms full, grinning like a sweepstakes winner. Anna packed the conchs in the fishbox with crushed ice. She had heard of some island men who knew exactly where to punch a blunt knife into a conch and sever the strong hasp of muscle which held the animal inside, but she preferred to ice them overnight, until their grip on the shell loosened with the chill and they could be pulled naked into the air. The next day Anna diced

the conch meat into a punchbowl along with two onions, two green peppers, and a quart of cherry tomatoes. She seasoned the mix with cilantro and chiles and covered it with fresh lime juice. That afternoon they sat on the dock with two forks, dunking their feet in the canal, eating like royalty. "You know, sister," Donnie had said, lying back on his elbows, "things might be worse."

On the day he found the bale floating in a patch of sargasso weed, Donnie called an old Army buddy in Miami—his former commanding officer—who had found him a buyer a couple of times before. "It's a wet one," he said. "We'll have to do a little wash'n'dry." The colonel had his basement fitted with floor drains and kerosene heaters. He would spread the grass out with a rake then rinse it with fresh water to cut the salty smell it had picked up in the bay. "Kids these days," said Donnie, "they don't like smoking this barnacle weed anymore." She and Donnie hadn't smoked much themselves lately either, not since the price had gone sky-high. "It's getting so I'd rather have the extra fifty dollars myself," she said.

At the Miami bus station, Anna wished that she had gone by the motel to pick up the pay she had coming. While waiting in line at a phone booth, she wondered if anyone had reported the skiff drifting, or if it had made it outside the reef and into the gulfstream. She hoped it had been caught by the big current and was floating over bluewater, on its way to Iceland.

The first time she dialed the colonel's number the line was busy. She had rehearsed an introduction, and went over it one more time before dialing again.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Donnie's sister. Anna."

"I've heard," said the colonel. "I read about it in the paper. Your brother was a fine fighting man."



“Look,” said Anna, leaning towards the phone until her forehead rested against the coin return, “I need a job. I’m at the bus station in Miami.”

“All right,” said the colonel, without missing a beat. “Take a taxi to my place. There’s a spare bedroom off the verandah. You can stay with me and read the want ads until you find one.”

Of course, she thought, he wasn’t really a colonel anymore. He had a very fine, expensive car which he never washed and a ten-room house with two rooms of furniture. He went fishing every weekend but seldom caught a fish worth telling about. He paid taxes. His face was soft and prone to sunburn. He smoked hashish in a tall glass water-pipe which bubbled like a snorkel.

She knew his habits now, as he knew hers. After a week of scanning the classifieds, she admitted that she didn’t really want to go back to scrubbing toilets and changing sheets, to the smell and mess of strangers. She didn’t mind doing a few things around the colonel’s house during the day. She didn’t mind him. “You know,” he had said, one night after a dinner of fritters and beer, “you don’t need a job. I can pay you to clean house—to do just what you’re doing now.” He seemed genuinely happy to take her in, and on the night that she forgot to lock the bathroom door, he wore a foolish, triumphant smile.

They slept in his bed. Although she had changed the sheets only a few days before, his pillows reeked with salt, sweat, and the starch she used to press his collars. After he fell asleep, she lay still, listening to the rasp of his breath. It wasn’t the sight of his naked body that had overwhelmed her that night in the bath. He had shown himself to her on several previous occasions, without rousing her interest at all. His thighs were thin and hairless, his chest narrow, and his stomach etched with the imprint of an elastic waistband. But it had seemed like the thing to do, like something that had to happen sooner or later.

The next morning, she fixed breakfast as usual—coffee with cream for them both, one poached egg on dry toast for the colonel, cereal and milk for herself. The colonel ate quickly, finishing his egg before she could offer to refill his coffee.

“Best breakfast I ever had,” he said on his way out. “I should double your pay” Then he kissed her forehead. Anna stood in the doorway with her hands wrapped in a dishtowel. As the colonel backed down the driveway, he tapped twice on the horn. She dried one hand and waved without lifting her arm.

The colonel still took in an occasional bale, and Anna sometimes helped in the basement, salvaging the dry buds, spreading out the wet clumps to be rinsed. On warm afternoons she sat in the shade with a cold beer and a dime novel. A year passed. She still kept her old room opposite the verandah and tried to sleep there as often as she could. Not out of actual dislike for the colonel or his lovemaking—he was as easy and generous a man as she had met—but to satisfy an old sense of decorum and a fierce love of privacy. He paid her to clean house, buy groceries, and fix meals. The rest she gave him on her own time.

One Friday afternoon the colonel called from a bar in Coral Gables to say that she wouldn't have to cook that night, that he would be home early. Anna hung up the phone as if his words were party to some natural event, like birth or dying. Over the past few weeks an old dream had surfaced like a porpoise in the night sea, sharp-finned, sleek, sucking in a wet breath of air. In the dream her brother Donnie stood knee-deep on the flats off Islamorada, alive and in middle age. He groped in the sand while she lay back in the skiff, her bare feet trailing over the gunwale into the warm green water. After a time he drew his hands from the water and held two conchs over his head. “This is it,” he called

to her. "This is it." The clarity of that image always woke her like an alarm. But instead of sitting up in the skiff, Anna sat up in bed, her brother's voice already fading into an echo of the colonel's.

The colonel came in around six o'clock with a bucket of barbecue and a bottle of champagne under his arm. He turned the television on and fell back into the sofa.

"You don't have to get a thing," he said. "I got plates; I got sauce. I got cole slaw, and I got paper towels."

Anna had put on a sleeveless summer dress which reminded her of the loose cotton jumpers she had worn as a girl in the Keys. The colonel picked it out himself some months ago, the pale colors of moonflowers and wisteria, and brought it home wrapped in waxed paper like a cut of meat, to surprise her. He pressed against her bare arm now as they ate, jaunty and casual, laughing when the show folk laughed, sitting quietly through the laxative and laundry soap commercials. He had a head for trivia and was a whiz at gameshows. They were tuned to "Double Jeopardy" when the phone rang. The colonel wiped his right hand on the cuff of his khaki pants before picking up the receiver.

"What is it?" he said.

Anna dropped a cleaned bone into the bucket and picked up a paper towel. The colonel had propped the receiver between his cheek and collar bone and now held his hands out, palms up, for her to wipe. He rolled his eyes at her to signify an idiocy which had to be suffered, like the television contestants who did not know the face on a five-dollar bill. "Sorry my friend," he said, "I'm not buying." The colonel hung up the phone.

He turned toward Anna, reached for the barbecue sauce. "I don't like to do business on holidays," he said.

"What's the occasion?" she asked.

"An anniversary of sorts," said the colonel, smiling. He balanced the jar of sauce on his knee and grabbed the champagne bottle. "To a year of clean sheets and good living."

Anna thought of Donnie's ashes drifting for an entire year, falling through the hundred fathoms of blue water where nothing breathes or swims. She wondered how far the skiff had made it in that time, how far it was possible to float without foundering. She felt like she had been drifting herself, watching the days pass through a shimmer of ocean. The colonel brought the bottle to his lips and tipped it back until champagne frothed down his chin. His knee twitched and the barbecue sauce spilled into his lap.

"Hell below," he swore.

Anna mopped his pants with a paper towel. "You'll have to take those off," she said, "if you want me to get the stain out."

"I was just thinking the same thing myself," said the colonel.

While he went to the bedroom to change his pants, Anna collected the plates and bones and turned off the television. The colonel reappeared with only a towel wrapped around his middle.

"I believe I'll have a bath," he grinned. "Will you join me?"

Anna nodded. "You get started," she said. "The tub's clean." She dropped the remains of their dinner into the trash and ran a damp sponge over the counters. She missed the Keys, and the days with Donnie in the skiff, pulling spiny lobsters from their traps. She missed the crash of pelicans diving on schools of ballyhoo, and the wet sharp smell of conch salad. She listened to the bathtub filling, to the taps turning dry, to the splash of the colonel and his happy groan as he settled into the steaming water, to the flare of a kitchen match and the gurgle of his hash pipe. She heard him stand up again in the

tub, and the creak of the medicine cabinet opening. Then she heard a heavier splash, and the chime of breaking glass, followed closely by a crack like the sound of a lobster thrown onto the deck.

By the time she got to the bathroom, a small pool of blood circled the colonel's skull like a halo. He lay on his back with his head pointing toward the door, his knees hanging over the edge of the tub, his feet still under water. The glass pipe lay shattered on the tile. He was still breathing, rasping through a slack jaw as if he'd fallen asleep in the middle of a sentence. The blood seemed to surge from his scalp with every breath. Anna lifted his legs out of the tub and placed a folded beachtowel under his head. She went into the living room to call an ambulance, then returned to pick up the glass. She dropped the larger shards into a paper bag and swept the rest into a dustpan. She flushed the colonel's store of hash down the toilet and sat down to wait.

Donnie had ridden alone to the hospital, dead on arrival. Anna wished that she could have been there, felt the lurch and sway of the ambulance as it rounded corners and ran stop signs. She marveled at the colonel's quiet and persistent life, his calm inhale and exhale while the sirens cleared his way to the emergency room. The doctor closed the wound with a dozen stitches and sent him to intensive care for observation. He kept referring to the colonel as "your husband" and told Anna to go home and get a good night's rest. "He'll come to eventually," said the doctor. "I wouldn't worry." But Anna wasn't worried about the colonel, not really. She thought of Donnie mostly, wondered whether his head had hit the windshield, whether he had been knocked out and so couldn't swim away from the car, whether he had thought about death or conch salad, Anna or his ex-wife.

The next morning she returned to the hospital with a change of clothes—the paramedics had bundled the colonel naked into the back of the ambulance and covered him with only a sheet—and was surprised to find another woman sitting in a chair inside his room. The woman wore a sensible peach-colored pantsuit and tucked her chin to look at Anna over the rims of her spectacles. “My brother is asleep,” she said in a reedy whisper. “What business do you have with him?”

“No business,” said Anna. “I brought him some clothes. I’m his housekeeper.”

“I didn’t know that my brother required a housekeeper,” said the woman, elbows flared like wings on a hen.

“I didn’t know that he required a sister,” said Anna.

An hour passed before the colonel opened his eyes. His sister referred to him by his first name, Lyman. She was a married woman named June living in Boca Raton, whom he only called in times of trouble. “It’s on account of my husband,” she confided. “He’s a county judge and Lyman can’t abide him.”

When the colonel woke up he smiled apologetically at Anna. The doctor had filled him in on the details of his concussion and praised her presence of mind. If she hadn’t raised his head with the towel, he might have lost more blood than he could spare. He was basically fine, but they wanted to keep him in the hospital for a few days just in case. Head injuries were always tricky.

“Why don’t you take a vacation?” the colonel said. “You can have the car if you like. June here will fetch me anything I need from the house.”

With a year’s wages in her purse and the keys to the big car swinging from the ignition, Anna drove south on the Homestead Extension, headed for Islamorada. The colonel’s quick recovery had surprised her. In the ambulance

she had thought him as good as dead and now was ashamed to admit it. What was worse, she wouldn't have been sorry to find him dead, not like she had been sorry for Donnie, numb and weary and sad all at once. If the colonel had died she would've been cut loose from her moorings again, but not lost. She wouldn't have done anything desperate.

When the Coral Key bridge swung into view over the mangroves, she pulled onto the shoulder and parked. The highway department had repaired the catwalk where Donnie's car had opened a gap, and several fisherman leaned out over the rail, their lines dangling in the tide. Anna walked out among them to test the new wood. The afternoon sun shimmered on the ocean. She peered through the glare, half expecting to spot the car still resting beneath the surface.

She drove on into Islamorada and stopped at a tourist motel, one she had heard another maid recommend when their place had been booked solid. After checking in she filled an ice bucket at the tiki bar and retreated to her room. There was a color television and a digital clock roped to the dresser with a length of chain and a combination lock. The walls were hung with seascapes, and the lone window looked out at the back of a seafood café. Anna closed the drapes and turned on the air conditioner. She grabbed a handful of ice and held it against her cheek. She wondered how to tell the colonel that she was sorry about his head, and that she was sorry about leaving him, but not sorry enough to stay.

That night Anna sat up with a paperback novel. She did not want to think at all and this book was just right for it. She narrowed her thoughts until they held only the page. She wanted the night to evaporate like sweat from a glass of cold water. While turning the pages, she held her breath—it gave the plot a

dizzying consistency. Only one time did her head snap up from the book. In the mirror on the opposite wall she watched as a small hand with red-skinned fingers combed through a thin shank of hair, fading to gray in some places, and in others merely gray. Anna stroked and patted absently, without vanity, smoothing her way back to the story. The air conditioner whispered on as she read, droning its cool, continual din, without interruption.

As predicted on the back cover of the book, the heroine cast aside her contemptible lover, suffered a miscarriage, then revived beneath the light of a rainbow. When Anna, exhausted, arrived at this end, she turned her head to the pillow and fell asleep.

By mid-morning the room was uncomfortably warm. The air conditioner had stopped its humming, and a molten, humid light seeped through the drapes. Anna sat up, blinking. The television was still chained to the dresser, the digital clock gone dark. On the far wall, pelicans dove for fish—shadowy, falsely complacent fish finning in a blue-green sea. She sniffed the pillowcase. It smelled of her own damp hair, of starch and air freshener. She picked up the phone and dialed room service.

The last place she could remember paying for a room was the Deep Creek Inn, a row of cottages off the Dixie Highway. "To commemorate the Fourth of July," the colonel had said, "we are sleeping out." He had stripped the coverlet off the bed and replaced it with an American flag. At that time, she would have agreed to almost anything he could suggest. Her conscience came clean on that account. When the motel clerk answered she ordered coffee with cream, cereal and milk.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," said the clerk, "but the coffee will be a few minutes. The power's out in the café."



"That's alright," Anna said. "Just bring the cereal. I'm awake now. I suppose I can live without the coffee."

After breakfast she walked along a row of palms to the edge of the bay, past the marina with its rows of pleasure boats, to the market where Donnie used to sell his catch. The sun shone on the water like a warm memory. She thought she might pack a lunch, drive down to Big Pine Key later in the day, have a picnic. The fish house looked cleaner than she had ever seen it before. The walls were newly painted and the display cases gleamed with clear-eyed fish, crab claws laid on beds of ice, lobsters boiled red. The man behind the counter smiled at her, a stranger.

## Homesick

The last time I left Edgecliffe for a few days, I heard that Mina—our landlord—had danced naked on the lawn until the squad cars came. Rebel calls her the whale. It took six men to get her decently covered. I was sorry I'd missed it.

I'd handed Rebel my key and taken the bus to Las Vegas for a week, to avoid the family phone calls and holiday invitations. Christmas at the casinos is just another business day: colored lights, free drinks, money changing hands with no thanks and no regrets. That's what I like about it. I'm not the daughter my parents would have chosen of their own free will.

They wouldn't like to imagine me at the Flamingo, running my fingers along red felt, wearing the outfit my mother sent for an interview at Universal: a tweed skirt cut above the knee, a white cotton blouse with bone buttons, an open tweed vest. Rebel calls them my gal Friday duds—I wear them to blend in, like camouflage.

I didn't get that job, but the producer did offer me some freelance work, reading scripts for fifty dollars apiece. I mope through six or seven a week, and keep my overhead low. When I'm on vacation I don't gamble. I eat midnight

breakfasts, take in the free lounge acts, sit placidly at the slots until a waitress brings me a drink.

I'd told Rebel that, for me, Las Vegas is a relief from everything unexplainable in Los Angeles, an oasis of convention. We were sitting on the steps outside Edgecliffe, and he was talking about Christmas dinner at his aunt's in Gardena, about smoked ham and candied sweet potatoes. The streetlamps wept a soft light which glistened on our bare knees. I imagined from the way his tongue moistened his lower lip that Rebel wanted either to kiss me or invite me to Gardena. That's when I thought of leaving town.

"Would you do me a favor," I asked him, "and feed Sam while I'm gone?"

"Feed the cat," Rebel said. "That's it?" He leaned back on his elbows and stared into the street.

"I'm taking the bus first thing in the morning," I said. "Do you want the keys now?"

"Sure," he said, holding out his palm. "I may sleep in tomorrow."

Rebel says Las Vegas is a bore, and that I must be easily entertained. Ordinarily, everyone in the casino looks the same to me, and I try to look like them. I appreciate that. But on this last trip, a Chinese security guard counting quarters reminded me of my father, and a fat woman at the poolside keno looked like Mina, and a grey tabby crunching chicken bones by the dumpster could've been my cat Sam—except that Sam doesn't have a tail.

The guard had rolled his sleeves over his forearms. His veins ran blue as he hefted four sacks of quarters onto the pay counter. The woman who'd hit the jackpot smeared his cheeks and forehead with the print of her lips.

"I did it," she sang, drumming her fists on his broad shoulders, which were not at all like my father's thin-skinned bones.

Moving closer, I saw that his face seemed more Tahitian than Chinese. He looked as unrelated to my father as I do.

My father was a librarian in Hong Kong; my mother a Calvinist missionary. The way they tell it, the story of their meeting has all the romance of a penny poker game. My mother was haggling over fish—she can't remember now whether it was bluefish or butterfish—when a stranger intervened. He had to duck his head to enter the shop, and his eyes held my mother's on a level she had grown unaccustomed to in China. At this point in the story they both smile. "Sparks flew," says my mother confidentially, while my father shakes his head: "No," he says, his eyes half-closed, remembering, "it was more like electricity."

After some debate, my father convinced the fishmonger to knock a couple cents off the price. He offered my mother his recipe for fish-head soup, and she accepted it.

My parents are the same height; they can wear each other's clothes. Although my mother is Scottish and my father Chinese, they look like a couple, like two children grown old together. I resemble neither of them. I am even taller, too tall to disappear comfortably in a crowd. My face lacks the clear imprint of race, and draws stares from men who like to categorize beauty. There is nothing wrong with my vision, but I wear glasses.

Rebel—that's his given name—says I should try contact lenses instead. "If you want to be discovered," he says, "you have to expose your cheekbones."

"I don't want exposure," I told him, pushing the frames high on the bridge of my nose. "All I want are the comforts of home."

Rebel moved to Los Angeles from somewhere in Tennessee and passed the California real estate exam on his first try. He works for an outfit in Santa

Monica called Backyard Reality. They don't just sell homes, they make them happen—or at least that's what they claim in the yellow pages. Rebel specializes in run-down bungalows. He calls them tin-bins, pest-nests, love-hovels.

Rebel's coffee-colored skin blackens in the sun. He wears Bermuda shorts and starched white shirts to work, rubs his calves and forearms with baby oil until they glisten. He says he'll do almost anything to sell a house: paint, plaster, or pose. He doesn't understand my desire to keep a low profile. I asked him once what he did with his commissions. He looked at me like I had just asked for a twenty-dollar bill.

"She-it," he said, in his best imitation cracker. "Don't we all have to pay the rent?"

We call it Edgecliffe, but the building doesn't really have a name. It's the sort of nondescript stucco four-plex with a red tile roof that clutters half the town. Rebel and the landlord live in the first-floor apartments. I have the second floor on the right—and the best view, since the windows on Prissa's side are obscured by a poinsettia tree. I had always known poinsettias as houseplants, but here they grow to the size of dogwoods or crabapples. The four of us live on the edge of something—Rebel says its either insanity or indiscretion. "Instead of Edgecliffe," he says, "we should call our building 'Tottering-on-the-Brink' "

Our street runs up a hill overlooking Sunset Boulevard and the HOLLYWOOD sign. A couple of weeks before Christmas, all the private homeowners festooned their eaves and porches with lights. Mina never decorates our place, and it's become a sore point in the neighborhood.

"I'm not the type," Mina says, and I don't doubt it. She watches television most of the day from the comfort of her king-sized waterbed. She doesn't mow

the lawn, trim the hedges, or raise a flag on the Fourth. "What I do on my property is nobody's business," she says.

Rebel and I take turns tending the grass, keeping up appearances, while our neighbor across the street—Mrs. Valdes—watches her grandchildren run up and down the hill to the grade school on Sunset. Her house boasts a wide front porch and a pair of driveways. Both she and her son-in-law drive white German station wagons. At night the two cars guard the house like polished idols. Just before I left for Las Vegas, I pruned the poinsettia and raked up the palm fronds which had withered and fallen by the curb. Although an hour of hazy daylight remained, Mrs. Valdes had switched on her Christmas display. She sat nodding in a wicker chair, the bulbs winking dimly around her.

I couldn't tell if she was nodding with approval or with disdain. Even at the Flamingo, I could still feel her eyes on me. I spent the days between Christmas and New Year's napping by the indoor pool, wrapped in a towel. The woman who reminded me of Mina wore a swimsuit stitched from some flimsy material that clung translucent to her skin. Her flesh overlapped in folds that held water long after she'd pulled herself from the pool. She dragged a lounge chair over to the keno table and reclined alongside the other players, a pencil stub behind her ear. She seemed completely unaware of the figure she cut, like a walrus in a damp housedress, and I wanted to be like her. I wanted her to win the big one, so she could go home and crow over her neighbors.

When I checked in on Christmas Eve, the hotel had only two rooms left, both of them honeymoon suites. The manager gave me the one on the ground floor, with a view of the alley, for the same price as a double. After I closed the curtains, it wasn't half bad. At Edgecliffe, I only have two rooms big enough to lie down in: the living room, with its picture window of Hollywood, and the

bedroom. The kitchen is just wide enough for the refrigerator door to swing open, and the bathroom fixtures fit like pieces of a puzzle. Luckily, I don't have much in the way of furniture—a walnut speaker cabinet with a fishbowl where the woofer used to be, a wooden chair I painted with forget-me-nots, a geranium that spreads floor to ceiling.

So the suite at the Flamingo seemed a palace. Everything was big and gaudy and new. The faucets gleamed like my mother's refrigerator. The mini-bar looked like a medicine cabinet. There were two upholstered loveseats, a queen-sized bed, a whirlpool bath, and a ceiling so high I couldn't touch it without a running start.

Sam would have liked it. At home he drinks from the tap and sleeps in the tub. His name is short for Sam-I-am, as in 'I do not like green eggs and ham, I do not like them Sam-I-am.' His tail had been run over by a tricycle and later amputated. The vet at the humane society told me that I could exchange him for another kitten at no charge—if he died within three weeks. That was months ago.

I wanted him to eat mice. Their gnawing and scabbling used to keep me up at night, and I went through a phase of killing. I lined the bottom of a deep cardboard box with spring-loaded traps and sifted granola over them. The mice would sit for a while on the rim and just stare down into the rolled oats, the sunflowers seeds and raisins, the wheat germ and date pieces. Then they jumped.

But Sam doesn't have the taste for mice. He eats whatever I eat, and I mostly serve take-out: chicken and waffles, okie dogs, the siam special. Since I don't have a table we sit on the floor. If I happen to drip sauce on the script I'm reading, Sam takes care of it. He likes the spicy stuff, even though it gives him trouble the next day.

At least one night a week Rebel and I take a long walk through the neighborhood. We invent a sales pitch for every house on the block, trade jokes about movie producers and real estate agents. When we find our way back to Edgecliffe, Sam is usually waiting under the poinsettia. One night, an animal the size of a cat with a long, hairless tail waded up the path in a pool of moonlight. "Here Sam," I said, forgetting that Sam doesn't have a tail, and then stopping cold with revulsion at the thought of petting a rat, a giant rat, big as a tabby

I remembered that when I peeked into the alley outside the honeymoon suite and saw the grey cat crunching bones. Light from the room next door glinted off the open dumpster. I heard a woman laugh, and then the scrape of a windowsash. A man's hand emerged, gripping an empty gin bottle by the neck. The bottle swung back and forth a few times, measuring the distance to the dumpster. When it smashed against the pavement, a yard short, the cat had already disappeared.

"Damn," said the man. "Missed again."

At Edgecliffe, I share my bedroom wall with Prissa. She matches Mina in width, if not height, and Rebel has dubbed her Shamu, the baby whale. She reddens her lips and paints her dimples with blush. When I first heard her at work, I thought that I had moved into a brothel. A woman's voice signalled a loud orgasm every ten or fifteen minutes, moaning first names, gasping endearments. Finally I got up and looked out the window, to see if a line was forming at the door, but the front yard was empty.

I went back to the bedroom, pressed my ear against a water glass, and the glass against the wall. I heard the phone ring, then her voice asking questions,



inviting confidences. She described herself as blonde, petite, insatiable. Her words quavered like prayers, mourning satisfaction.

"Are you there?" she asked finally, almost cooing. Then she hung up the phone. "Asshole," she said.

Eventually I asked myself why I could sleep through Prissa's fireworks and sirens but not the pitter-patter of little feet. I pulled the traps from the granola pit, and put the box in the bathtub. A mouse caught in the smooth hell of a clawfoot tub is a sad thing to see. Their legs spin so fast on the enamel. They pant with frustration. When they tire, you can pick them up, stroke the soft fur of their bellies, paint them blue.

I daub rings around their tails with a camel's hair brush, one for each time in the tub. Sam lets me know when two or three have bloated themselves with cereal and want out. He rests his paws on the script, looks me in the eye as if to say, "Hey, it's your responsibility." I've caught some a dozen times, and have begun painting their ears the color of baby bonnets, their forelegs the delicate shade of bachelors' buttons.

Once Rebel and I bumped into Prissa on our way home with a bag of taquitos. I invited her upstairs for a beer. She was wearing a silk kimono, tied with a sash. We sat on the floor in the living room and spread paper bags in front of us to catch the salsa. While we were eating, Sam jumped in her lap and began kneading her breasts with his paws. She stroked his head with her short fingers.

"Poor kitty," she said. "You were weaned too soon." She slid one hand inside the silk and exposed a nipple.

Rebel put down his taquito and wiped his hand on his pants. Sam sniffed carefully, then jumped down and trotted into the bathroom. Prissa struggled to her feet—she had to push herself onto her knees first—and followed the cat.

She wanted to know why I kept that big box of cereal in the bathtub.

On New Year's Eve, the casino overflowed with champagne. I had started the evening in sunglasses and fishnet stockings. Smiling faces with party hats surged among the gaming tables, and I let myself be swept along like a wooden boat. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't lose myself in the crowd. The same people kept shifting too familiarly into view: a cocktail waitress with a patch over one eye, the Tahitian security guard, an elderly Japanese couple who held hands as they placed their bets. I watched the walrus woman order steak and champagne for dinner, salmon and champagne at midnight, champagne and corn flakes for breakfast. She was really living it up. Around sunrise I pulled a stool into an eddy by the slot machines and sat down.

Not a soul went by who didn't remind me of somebody else, as if the whole neighborhood had been transported to Las Vegas wearing some subtle disguise. Even the Flamingo's stunted palms, cornered in pots, began to remind me of Edgecliffe. I wondered how Sam was treating the mice, and whether Rebel had visited him twice today, or just once. I hoped that Rebel had remembered to feed the fish and water the geranium. The thought of him inside my apartment made me want to check out right then, board the next bus for home.

I was so happy to be back, to cradle Sam and watch the fish and sniff the geranium, that I kissed Rebel hard on the lips.

"Your folks called last night," he said. "I told them I was your live-in housekeeper."

He scratched Sam under the chin and looked pleased with himself, half-smiling in a way that reminded me, oddly enough, of my father. I kissed him again, on the cheek this time.

"Why were you up here?" I asked him. "Didn't you have any place better to be on New Year's Eve?"

"She-it," he said. "There was no better place. You missed it. Mina was out on the front lawn shaking it for the neighbors. Prissa and I started out underneath the streetlamp, but we came up here to get a better view."

I looked out the window and tried to imagine it. The grass did look a little bit worse for wear. Across the street, Mrs. Valdes steadied the ladder while her son-in-law plucked the lights from their porch like grapes. A yellow cab docked at the curb and Prissa got out.

She ascended the path like a sultana, trailing veils of jasmine perfume. Rebel and I watched her fit the key in the lock, admired her plump knuckles and crescent fingernails. She looked up, winked hugely, then went inside, leaving the door ajar.

"How many times did you sleep with her?" I asked.

Rebel sank cross-legged on the floor, folded his hands over his navel. "Just once," he said. "She called me on the phone first. You know how she is."

I sat down next to him.

"What do you think we're here for?" I asked him. He leaned close, until our lips were almost touching. I felt the breath seeping from his mouth into mine. I leaned back and took off my glasses.

Rebel's eyes were closed.

"We're here," he said, "to keep each other entertained."

Without opening his eyes, he ran one hand down the length of my calf. His fingers circled the bone of my bare ankle. He untied my shoe.

I felt sorry because I had missed remembering it myself, the sheer spectacle, and also guilty for not participating in some way. I could have sweet-talked the policemen, or joked with Rebel under the streetlamp. I might have danced with Mina myself, and thumbed my nose at Mrs. Valdes. Either way, I had been excluded from something momentous that had happened right in my front yard, involving people I knew something about.

A half-dozen police officers stood on the sidewalk. Two of them had their hands on their holsters, staring; the others just stared. Mina was out on the front lawn drunk, and so naked that it was hard for them to focus. Rebel said it was like looking at the moon through a telescope. It was two minutes after midnight—New Year's Day—and she had wiped her slate clean.

One of the policemen stepped out of line and took her by the wrist. She shook herself loose—just slung one hip out and away, setting up a ripple of flesh which traveled up her body until it became a wave. He let go and she wobbled off, cursing. The cops retreated to the poinsettia tree to discuss strategy.

Mina posed, a fist in the air. She invited the officers to get naked and wrestle like men. A big sergeant advanced on her, bearish, growling, arms spread. Mina backed away. A second cop moved in behind her. He had stripped the comforter from her king-sized waterbed, and now spread it on the lawn like a picnic cloth. When the second cop got down on his hands and knees, the sergeant bared his teeth and charged.

Rebel said that he almost cried when Mina went over, falling backwards atop the officer who had crept on all fours behind her, hitting the comforter

with the heavy sound that air makes when it leaves your lungs. They rolled her up like a carpet and loaded her into an ambulance.

When the ambulance pulled away, the neighbors clapped like paying customers.

## An Angel in the Juvenile Phase

I'd come 1800 miles north since Thanksgiving. From the Sunshine State to the Bay State, driving my father's rusted station wagon, burning oil and memories. I had no idea what I was going back to. It wasn't Elizabeth exactly—although she was part of it. And it wasn't the family home in Concord, or even my unfinished Harvard dissertation. That past lay under six feet of warm water, buried—I thought—by a year on Coral Key. I fingered the wheel with a leisurely and empty-headed ease, slipped by the sleeping suburbs of New York just after midnight, then ran slam into Monday rush hour on Route 128 outside Boston.

A sea of angry traffic in both directions. All those commuters alone in their cars, the frustration rising in their faces like fever. I pulled into the breakdown lane and tried to think. Another mile to the Turnpike exit. Then nine to Elizabeth's apartment in Harvard Square. Figure fifteen minutes to find a place to park—and what did my life add up to?

The station wagon was loaded with dive gear: masks, fins, regulators, tanks, enough lead to sink a small skiff. I don't know why I brought it all with me. The Charles flows like a river of sludge between its grassy banks. I couldn't

imagine submerging myself in that murk. I knew some guys who dove off Nahant and Gloucester, but who in their right mind wants to freeze their ass off looking at cod?

Just a week ago I'd been working in eighty-degree water, netting tropicals to sell in Miami. My porcupine fish were on display at Epcot Center, my queen angels at the National Aquarium. I told my father that I felt a real sense of accomplishment when I visited one of my fish in its new habitat. In a way, it was a job that he groomed me for. He used to take me to Walden Pond, just a five-minute drive from the house. We'd wear hip boots and carry long-handled nets, come home with a bucket of newts and tadpoles, bullheads and bluegills. We had a 100-gallon fish tank in the living room and my job was to recreate a balanced ecosystem—whatever that was. My idea of balance at that age was to keep replacing the dead fish with newer, livelier ones. I put an eight-inch pickerel in there once and he cleaned out the entire tank in a week. Ate everything that moved. I tried to keep him happy with schools of minnows, but he tore through them like a shark. Though we tried, my Dad and I couldn't catch another pickerel for company. Maybe he ate to stave off loneliness. Eventually we let that one go, back into the pond, with others of his kind. I know enough about fish behavior now to be thankful that we hadn't managed to find him a mate. If she'd been just a fraction under eight inches, he'd have eaten her too.

I pulled back into traffic, back amongst the hordes hobbling to their desk jobs. I'd written to Elizabeth, told her that I was quitting the Keys, that I wanted to spend a week or so with her, trying to patch things up. She'd told me to "stop by when I got to town." Stop by? What did that mean?

My name is Adam Eve. No it's not. It's Adams Everett. Adams was my mother's maiden name, my grandfather's name on my mother's side, however you want to say it. But at mixers and cocktail parties I'll introduce myself as Adam Eve. It stirs up conversation for five or ten minutes anyway, enough for most folks to feel that they've discharged their social obligation to me.

That's how I met Elizabeth, at a Career Day reception at Vassar. My best friend Andie and I were hunting for grad schools, she in social work, and me in marine biology. We saw this girl in a white silk dress moving among the tweedy power suits like a butterflyfish in a school of alewives. She had round and heavy-lidded eyes, a lower lip which swelled forward to a kiss. We both fell for her; I introduced myself. It turned out that her parents lived just down the road from mine in a mock Tudor mansion. Her mother was a dean at Emerson College, her father an executive with Prudential. We'd gone to competing boarding schools, had probably seen each other at soccer games. Before the semester was out, we'd moved off-campus to a two-bedroom apartment—Andie in one bedroom, Elizabeth and myself in the other.

Who knows what I was doing at Vassar in the first place. The trustees had only decided to admit men a few years before. I thought it might be a nice twist on the Ivy League legacy—Dad graduates from Harvard; Mom from Vassar; only son follows in mother's footsteps. I could imagine my father joking with his pathologist colleagues: "The boy went to Vassar—that's right, the girl's school—the kid's not stupid." And he'd be right—I wanted to live with women. I used to go to the pharmacy in Concord and stare at the covers of women's magazines: *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*. Every month there was a new girl, more or less beautiful but always attractive. She drew your eye and held it. I guess that's what she got paid for. Sometimes I'd feel like some sort of suburban wolf—the Coyote of Concord, or something like that.



Even at Vassar there was a time when I couldn't pass a woman—student, professor, or dining hall staff—without wondering if she'd sleep with me. I'd feel guilty about objectifying women, and try to rationalize my way out of it. I figured that if I considered each one as an individual, then it wasn't really objectification, right? "Relax," Andie said. "It's a common affliction: DSB—'Dangerous Sperm Build-up'. You'll grow out of it." I was always coming up with these wild crushes on women. But I really only made two friends in those four years: Elizabeth and Andie.

When we all moved to Cambridge after graduation—Elizabeth for law school, Andie for a master's in social work, and me for a doctorate in comparative zoology—we split up into two apartments, with Andie going it alone. I don't think Elizabeth ever appreciated her, though they spent a lot of time together. "All we have in common is you," she used to say, as if that explained it.

Andie was something else entirely. She slept with women and men but never with me. I visited her in Los Angeles after what turned out to be my last semester at Harvard. She'd gone home to see her parents for a month and needed a break. We went to a club in Silver Lake called Fuck. It was a wild place, in the basement of a laundromat. A long, narrow room with a short hook at the doorway. After a suitable wait outside, we walked past the bouncer and down three or four steps, where a girl in a peach-colored push-up bra took our money, and a guy in a tight black t-shirt stamped the backs of our hands with the word FUCK! Like it needed the exclamation point.

The walls, ceilings, and floors were spraypainted black. But the room glowed with strobes and white skin. The lights pulsed very fast, so that the intervals of darkness were almost too short to recognize. There were pedestals

scattered around the room, and bare-chested men danced on top of them. Most of the patrons were either fantastically dressed or near naked. Lots of guys in black leather briefs, with chains around their necks, pierced noses, pierced nipples. One guy even had a ring through his belly button.

There were a few college kids like us, and some financial market types staring open-mouthed from the sidelines, but most of the crowd seemed serious about their fetishes. One of the dancers chained himself to a handy pair of manacles mounted on the wall. Then another guy swabbed the manacled one's bare back with a sponge soaked in alcohol and lit him with a cigarette lighter—like a human Baked Alaska. A cold blue glow flickered from the base of his spine to the nape of his shaven neck. It reminded me of one of Dante's infernos, except that everyone seemed to be having a good time. I kept telling myself: these are people, and I am a person.

Andie grabbed my wrist and yanked me onto the dance floor. The music was post-industrial: fast, repetitive, noisy and electronic. The human voices sounded altered and mechanical: "Bow down / before / the one / you serve / you're going / to get / what you / deserve." That refrain reminded me of one of my humanities professors, whose favorite warning was "sado-masochism is the necessary consequence of romanticism." I'd never known what she meant until then.

I found myself dancing alongside a girl whose breasts looked like they were resting on plates. She would've made one hell of a cocktail waitress. I was leaning over to tell Andie this when a guy with a handlebar moustache and a nose ring big enough to put your fist through shouldered past the dance floor. Andie touched her lips to my ear and whispered—"Poor guy must have fallen on his retainer." I started laughing, then Andie fell over backwards. Four bondage-types politely helped her up. We jumped and sweated like everyone

else for a couple hours, then headed over to a late-night sushi place Andie knew.

“What did you think?” she asked, while the chef was preparing our order.

“It didn’t shock me,” I said. And it didn’t really. I was doing some research on reproductive strategies in fish, and was completely taken in by the idea of natural variation. Most kinds of fish have only the two, familiarly distinct sexes, but the wrasses, for example—green wraiths with sleek pectorals that flap like bird’s wings—change sex the way lobsters shed their shells. They start out small, drab, and female; end up as bigger, brightly-colored males. They have names like bluehead, slippery dick and puddingwife.

Sometimes when I was working underwater I’d replay that evening in my head. I’d cache a string of tanks along the bottom so I wouldn’t have to surface for hours, then stake a barrier net around a clump of coral and start picking up fish. It’s strange the way most fish never think of swimming up and over the barrier. They’ll just keep bumping their noses into the mesh. I often caught entire schools that way: yellow tangs, porkfish, triggerfish, parrotfish. After nabbing all the easy ones, I’d break open a sea urchin and scatter the orange roe to attract angels. There are several kinds, and they all have distinct juvenile and adult phases. A young french angel is blue-black with yellow bars; the adults are mostly black, with gold-rimmed scales.

That night at the sushi bar with Andie, the urchin roe was called *uni* and cost two bucks a serving. We let it linger on our tongues, savoring the soft explosion of horseradish and the taste of the sea. I doubt that Elizabeth would’ve tried it, or that she would’ve enjoyed Club Fuck. When I got back from Los Angeles, we didn’t seem to be on speaking terms, so I never told her about it.

I'd only lasted two years in graduate school. My fellowship at Harvard was with a famous taxonomist, although I'd never cared much for naming things. Too much false precision, too many invented categories. I had started work on an air-breathing fish. Lots of fish can do it, but this one was easy to buy in pet stores. We would dope up a specimen and implant electrodes in his head, take x-ray movies of him breathing with a 150-frame-per-second camera designed by the space program for the lunar landing. Occasionally we'd give a fish a little too much anesthetic, its gill plates would slow until they were barely moving, and we'd have to scramble to save him. The famous taxonomist would throw up his hands and shout "Mayday, mayday"; I'd grab the turkey baster and wash oxygenated water over the poor sucker's gills until he revived.

After we got the film developed, I'd analyze the air bubble formation down in the stockroom—lights out, projector on, bottles of fish floating in formalin lining the walls from floor to ceiling: puffers and goatfish, fetal sharks, lesser rays, shortnose batfish, scamps and gags and speckled hind. I was completely surrounded by fish, but they were all dead. That got old fast. I started reading papers on reproductive behavior again, and kept switching topics until my advisor finally lost patience.

Elizabeth was losing it too. I figured it was just the pressures of law school. She'd entered her second year and I'd become mildly infatuated with the cashier at the White Hen Pantry. I always fall for the girl behind the cash register. She's there to make change. She takes your money then smiles. This one was a big girl, taller and heavier than me. She wore thin cotton t-shirts that drew my eyes right to her nipples and had a bluish of brown hairs on her upper lip. I started buying all our groceries there, on her shift, even though their prices were way out of line. I argued that I was paying for convenience, but Elizabeth didn't see it that way.

I came home one night with a shopping bag full of chips and ice cream bars.

"This isn't dinner," Elizabeth said.

"We're celebrating," I told her. "I saved a patient today at the lab."

"Don't talk to me," she said, rolling her eyes upwards, underneath those heavy lids. "I can't talk to you."

"I'm listening" I said.

"No," she said. "You're not. You're not thinking about me at all."

I had numerous opportunities to reconsider all this on the Turnpike. As the crush of cars crept on toward downtown Boston, my faults became clear. I was a typical twenty-three-year-old male, basically good-hearted but aggravatingly immature—an angel in the juvenile phase. I'd run off to Coral Key to escape from my problems, and now it was time to confront them. The fact that I'd managed to leave warm water for winter in New England proved I was ready. But by the time I made it through the tolls and onto Memorial Drive, the gas gauge was nudging empty. There was an old Thunderbird parked at the Shell station, with a hand-painted sign in big fading letters: ROSES, ROSES. On the hood: three five-gallon buckets of carnations—white, red and blue. The domes of Harvard gleamed in the cold. I pulled up to the pumps and rolled down my window.

The men at the station—one man really, the other was just a kid like me—were talking back and forth. Stubble shadowed their cheeks and chins; their hair was black, shiny. I could see they were related. The older man was saying—"You, you think you know it all. Tell me: what is preposition? You tell me what is conjunctive, what is adverbial." The kid was sullen, silent. The father turned his eyes on me, as if he expected me to answer him, and I wanted to. But what do I know about grammar? I didn't suppose he'd ask me about

something I did know, like functional morphology, so I asked him to fill it up, please.

The old guy just nodded and walked away. The kid looked at the rust on my fenders and said, "Leaded or unleaded?"

"Unleaded," I said. "The beast just looks old."

While he was filling the tank, the kid stared at my scuba gear through the side window. "You're a diver," he said. "Like Jacques Cousteau?"

"Not anymore," I told him.

"Did you have to go to college for that?" he asked.

"I didn't have to," I said. "But I went anyway."

The kid shook his head sadly. I paid him for the gas, and gave him another couple bucks for a bunch of flowers. What could I say? It was true—I didn't have to get a degree in order to chase fish around with a net. But if I hadn't gone to school, I wouldn't know half the things I know now. For instance, I wouldn't know that one species of goby engulfs the head of its mate during courtship, or that like humans some fish are monogamous, some polygamous, and most promiscuous. What's really interesting is that behavior like this isn't confined to the tropics. Look at the bluegill—the fish of my innocent youth. The older, more mature males build nests to attract females, then hang out, guard the eggs and protect their offspring. But some fish mature early, hide out on the edge of the nests, in the weeds, behind rocks. Those males dart in just as somebody else's female is about to lay her eggs and let fly with some sperm. Scientists call them sneakers or cuckolders. Mature males also have to watch out for another variety of cuckolder called satellite males, who actually mimic the behavior of females. Satellites will pair with both nesting fish at the same time, releasing sperm all the while.

That kind of stuff is worth knowing. And if I hadn't gone to grad school, I also wouldn't know that the best place to park in the Square is the top floor of the Broadway Garage, behind the art museum. There are closed-circuit cameras in the elevators and security guards on duty twenty-four hours a day. That's where visiting dignitaries leave their Mercedes limos, and where my parents and Elizabeth's folks used to park on their occasional visits. All four would converge on Cambridge and take us to dinner at Voyageurs or the Korean place next to the Kennedy school. Our parents liked each other, liked to recognize their own kind across the table. Underneath the current of polite conversation was a real sense of satisfaction—as a couple, Elizabeth and I seemed to ensure that life as they knew it would go on.

Elizabeth still lived in our old building on Massachusetts Avenue, across from the Yard and down the block from the Hong Kong, a Chinese restaurant. I left the station wagon at the garage, packed with the accumulated flotsam of my year in the Keys, and walked to the apartment, flowers in hand. I had my key but didn't use it. I knocked. She unlocked the door and opened it a crack.

"Oh," she said. "It's you."

"I brought you some roses," I said.

Elizabeth opened the door a little wider, enough for me to slip in sideways. Once I'd made it into the kitchen, she took the carnations from my hand and walked around to the other side of the breakfast table. "Roses?" she asked. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

I looked past her into the living room. I could tell she'd rearranged the furniture, but the place still looked familiar. The couch we'd bought at Goodwill, the wicker chairs were from our first place in Poughkeepsie. A rare shell I'd sent was lying upturned on the telephone table. A trumpet triton. I'd

found it clinging to a bridge abutment, removed the meat without scratching the shell, polished it with baby oil. Elizabeth had filled it up with paperclips.

"I have a class in ten minutes," she said, nibbling on a piece of toast. She had a spot of strawberry jam on her cheek, and I thought that I was still in love. I loved her in the way that you still love a dog that bites you for good reason. But when I bent to kiss her, she turned her cheek. I stood up straight again, and dabbed away the jam with my finger. I didn't ask if I could stay the night, and she didn't offer. We walked out of the apartment together.

"Call me later," she said. "I should be back by two." She crossed the busy street and disappeared into a crowd of students funneling towards the Yard.

I took a couple steps after her, off the curb and into the street, but that was it. When someone honked, I moved back between the safety of two parked cars. I was very tired. After all, I hadn't slept since Philadelphia. I stepped back onto the sidewalk and tried to remember if the bedroom door had been open or closed. Closed I thought, but I wasn't sure. Could someone have been sleeping in my bed? I suppose I should've asked. But the timing was probably wrong. And what could I have done about it anyways?

I walked into the Hong Kong and slumped down into an empty booth. When the waitress arrived, I ordered a pot of jasmine tea, a plate of chicken wings, and a scorpion bowl. I stole a look at her watch while she was scribbling: a couple of hours until two. I figured I could wait here until Elizabeth returned from class, especially with a scorpion bowl for entertainment: triple sec, grenadine, three kinds of rum, and a little flaming can of sterno in the center. The whole experience was like sticking a straw into a volcano. I revived after the first few sips, and remembered a woman in Coral Key—the dockmaster's wife. I kept my skiff at their marina, and used to see her piloting the rental boats from the wharf to the gas dock, standing up at the wheel, kicking the



motor wide open and then throttling back, bumping into reverse, sidling up to the pumps in the slow wash of her own wake. I had a crush on her of course; she seemed so self-sufficient. Her husband used to watch her from the lighthouse with binoculars. If he thought she was getting too friendly with any of the guides or sailors, he'd raise their slip rent until they were forced to leave. I was absolutely tongue-tied with lust for her, so me and the dockmaster got along fine. Besides, I was too young to be a real threat.

Now I was the one who felt threatened, and by some unseen male who might or might not have been monopolizing Elizabeth's affections. I dipped my straw into the bowl again, and realized that it's females who have all the options. Take the red-banded parrotfish: typically three or four women will set up housekeeping with one male, but at any time one of the gals can leave home, change into a guy, and wander around until she finds a new family to settle down with. This seems like a conscious decision on her part. Solitary fish are unlikely to trade in their gender—only the ones forced to be sociable will switch. A female bluehead by herself is content to be female, but if you put two female blueheads in a tank together, the bigger one will turn male. That makes sense to me: if you're alone, it doesn't matter what sex you are, does it? As far as your plans to reproduce go, anyway.

At two o'clock, I went to the payphone at the Hong Kong and surprised myself by remembering the number. True, it was mine for two years, but how often do you pick up the phone to dial your own number?

"Hi," I said. "It's me."

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to stay here," she said. "Why don't you call Andie?"

I think I hung up first.

I can't say I was shocked, but I definitely wasn't happy. When I finally recovered enough wit to call Andie, all I got was her answering machine.

"Hey," I said to the empty receiver. "This is Adam Eve. I'm homeless and confused. Send help."

I left the Hong Kong and walked four blocks to the Harvard Square Theatre without meeting anyone's eyes. The afternoon feature was "Stop Making Sense," a concert film by a band called Talking Heads. As soon as the house lights went down, I started to relax again. The theatre was warm, dark, empty as a cave. And the band seemed to be genuinely enjoying each other's company on screen. I liked the movie so much that I stayed for the evening show too. When it was over, I shuffled blinking into the street. Andie was waiting outside the box office.

"I knew it," she said. "I knew you were in there."

"It's over," I said.

"And about time too. I've been waiting forever."

Andie thought I meant the movie; I guess Elizabeth hadn't called her.

"Let's get your car and go home," she said. "I need my sleep."

On the way to her place I found out that Andie had finished her degree and found a counseling job across the river at the New England Home for Little Wanderers. She worked the early shift, from six in the morning until two in the afternoon. She seemed happy to see me. After we parked outside her apartment—the first floor of an old frame house near Fresh Pond—Andie asked me if I wanted to unload the station wagon. I looked at all my gear—the impossible weight of tanks and lead—and shook my head no.

"Tomorrow, maybe."

"I don't know Adams," she said. "If I were a thief, I'd be tempted."

"I haven't slept in two days," I said. "If anyone wants that stuff they can have it."

I followed her inside and laid down on the sofa, without even taking my shoes off. The upholstery felt familiar on my cheek—I'd slept on it a few times last winter too, when things had just started to go wrong. Andie punched up the pillows and brought me a couple of blankets for the night. Her hair was cut like a Marine's—much shorter than the last time I'd seen her—and she wore a pale flannel nightgown that covered her knees. There were blue flowers on the flannel, forget-me-nots maybe, I couldn't be sure.

I closed my eyes and Andie kissed me on the cheek. Then she moved off in bare feet to her bedroom. I heard the sheets rustle, and opened one eye. She was sitting up in bed, looking through the doorway at me.

"I think you'd sleep a hell of a lot better in here," she said.

I stood at the foot of the bed. Her sheets were white with blue pinstripes. Just like my parents'. It was an odd coincidence, and for the first time I thought of them in love, two young medical students, both with an interest in pathology, tangling under the covers. Andie's bedspread was thick down and the pillowcases matched the sheets. I felt like a bather standing at the shore of an ocean of comfort. She turned off the light and I took my pants off quickly and waded in. We lay on our backs while Andie told me the news of the old Vassar crowd. Then I told her about the fish called grunts who reassure each other by grinding the teeth in the backs of their red-orange throats. And about cowfish—silly creatures with the face of a cow and a bony carapace like a turtle. I used to entertain the kids at the marina with them, hold one up in the air like a stuffed animal and say, "How does a cowfish go? Moo, moo." Andie laughed and ran her fingers through my hair.

## His Dream Trip

My pregnant wife pointed to a spot on the globe with an unsharpened pencil. "Don't you have any other friends in Borneo?" she asked.

Deb was only eight weeks gone, but she held her left hand before her belly like a shield. We were standing on opposite sides of the coffee table, with the world between us. The globe was brand new, right out of the box. I'd picked it up at the Nature Company on the way home from the office. It spun slowly on its stand, lit from within by a sixty-watt bulb.

We'd been talking about my dream trip: the South Pacific—Papeéte, Rarotonga, Espíritu Santo. We'd wanted it for our honeymoon last year, but I couldn't swing the month off in June. That's the busiest time for travel agents, and the office couldn't spare me. Now it was February—the lull between the holiday season and spring break—and anything was possible. I'd mentioned my old college roommate, the anthropologist. I'd said that he'd be happy to put us up for a week or so, take us around to the native camps where he worked.

"You don't know that," Deb said. "People change."

I said that he probably wasn't a cannibal, if that's what she meant.

“Oh yeah?” She poked New Guinea with the eraser. “What did he have for breakfast?”

Her voice rose half an octave, and she wielded the pencil like a foil. I retreated to the couch.

He and I had lived together for two years, I told her. We slept in the same room, drank from the same bottle, passed the same tests. We brushed our teeth in front of the same long mirror, showered together in a tiled room with four shower heads poking from the musty walls.

“You didn’t tell me you were *that* close,” she smirked.

“Not funny,” I said. After all, I’d known Philip long before I met Deb. Our room at San Diego State was about the size of her walk-in closet. If Philip caught a cold so did I, and we took the same cure: a long soak in the dormitory shower, with all four heads pouring hot water onto the tiles until the steam flooded our nostrils. We would stand slack-jawed and sickly under the spray, breathing big gulps of steam, coughing and blowing until our heads cleared.

“That’s disgusting” said my wife.

“That’s friendship for you,” I said. So what if he’d moved to Los Angeles and become a college professor? So what if a few years had slipped by? Deb was mad because Philip’s last Christmas card had been addressed only to me. *Hi Ronald*, it began—no one calls me Ronald anymore, not since my mother died—*I’m on sabbatical this year, living in a longhouse up the Rejang River in Borneo. The tribe used to hunt heads, now they want Walkmans. Drop by if you’re in the neighborhood. Love, Philip.* But that wasn’t what fired Deb up. It was the postscript: *P.S.—I hope your wife realizes how lucky she was to land a stud like you.*

It was rude, but I had to laugh. I’m forty years old. If I was the kind of guy who kept track—and I’m not—I’d have more fingers on one hand than

notches in my belt. The Summer of Love passed me by, and all the summers after that too. I'm competent enough I suppose, but there are still times when the possibilities overwhelm me. In my youth, lust meant paralysis. Philip knows this. Deb took it personally.

"Who does he think I am?" she fumed. "Some bimbo whose clock went off?" Deb's thirty-eight, and very sensitive to conversation about biological urges. We decided before we were married that if it happened, it happened. But at our ages, we wouldn't count on it. We looked forward to living and traveling together, to being a couple, not a threesome. When the stick turned blue, at least one of us was surprised.

Deb works at a drug store. She brought home one of those test kits last month. We followed the step-by-step instructions, opening vials, mixing chemicals. In the presence of chorionic gonadotropin, the label said, the indicator stick turns blue. A little Binky on the way. I watched her face during the whole procedure, but it didn't change much. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and she was smiling—as if she'd known it all along, and the test was only a formality.

Deb wasn't smiling now, not happily anyway. She pushed at the globe with her pencil, and the world spun faster. "It's not that I don't *want* to go," she said. "But why the South Pacific?"

That one really rattled my cage. Usually I can separate people into two types. Those who go, and those who don't. Some sit down in the office with minute-by-minute itineraries of their trips to Paris: bistro breakfast, Eiffel Tower, lunch at Le Dôme, Musée Marmottan, dinner at Procope. One woman even asked me to reserve her a parking space near the Louvre. "I hear it's difficult to park," she said. That type doesn't go. But I'd always thought of Deb as the type who went. We'd met just three years ago, on the beach at Cabo San Lucas. There's a little

restaurant on the water with folding chairs and red umbrellas. You can knead the sand with your bare feet, order *ceviche* and broiled lobster, drink Pacificos as the sun sinks. I'd noticed her two rows ahead of me on the flight from San Diego. Nothing in particular, just the fact of her aloneness. You don't see that many solitary people on junkets to Baja. I was by myself too, on a "fam" trip—"familiarization" in travel lingo, a free ride so that you can return home and sell with conviction. When I spotted her again, walking under the awning and into the restaurant, I looked a little more carefully: short brown hair cut close to the neck, dangling wooden earrings—little zebras, I remember—and round, freckled shoulders. She sat down at the table next to mine and took a pill bottle from her purse.

"Headache?" I asked.

"No," she said, swallowing. "Do you want one?"

"Why not," I said, startling myself with the confident and worldly tone of my voice. I picked up my beer and slid into the chair across from her. I'd already finished my lobster. After Deb ate her dinner—snapper baked in foil with cilantro and red peppers—we went for a stroll along the *playa*. At some point I remember us both on our knees in the sand, laughing hysterically.

"So," I asked, almost choking, "what do you do in real life?"

Deb pressed her palms to her forehead. Her shoulders shook. "I'm a pharmacist," she said.

Those were some good times: seasoned with salt air and salsa, a sliver of moon balanced on a rim of sky. We moved into the same bed, the same intoxicating routine. We got married within the month, told ourselves that we'd both waited exactly long enough. Lately, however, Deb forgot the wine glasses when she set the table. I had to get my own if I wanted a taste. She was drinking milk, almost a quart a day. In the mornings, she brewed chamomile

tea instead of our usual jolts of coffee. And when I talked about a trip, she asked "Why?" Why does anyone go where they go? I half expected her to grill me about the food, about the availability of emergency medical services, about travel insurance for Christ's sake.

"Because I've always wanted to," I said. "Because we've never been there." I was angry—I admit it—and some frustration crept into my voice, but it didn't sound like anger, it sounded like whining.

Deb walked away from the globe and into the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator door open, and the slug and gurgle of milk pouring from a gallon jug. She wasn't using a glass.

"I'll bet you a case of champagne you give Binky hell for that."

"I didn't spill," she called back. "As long as he doesn't spill, he's fine." Deb reappeared, wiping her lips with the dishtowel. "Why don't you go?" she said. "You and Philip can relive your college days with the cannibals."

I stood up and gave the globe a good spin. "No," I said, "it's not the same. You have to come too."

Deb tossed the towel onto the couch. "I just can't imagine sitting on a plane for twelve hours," she said. "Besides, what about all the shots? All those vaccinations can't be safe for the baby."

She had me there. Diphtheria, tetanus, typhoid, cholera. Not to mention hepatitis and malaria. I sighed. I'd booked us on Thai Airways, with a stopover in Bangkok, and knew we could get an agent upgrade to first class. The flight would've been golden—a good Bordeaux with every meal, endless bottles of my favorite Thai beer, the Pacific unrolling like a blue dream 30,000 feet below. We could've stayed at the Oriental and dined on wild boar with pepper sauce, steamed tilapia with tamarind.



“You win,” I said. I put my palm on the North Pole to stop the world. Then I turned off the light inside.

We got a letter from Philip a few days later. The envelope had been postmarked January 14, so the mail was running about a month behind. I read it to Deb after dinner—chicken breasts with white wine and tarragon, a specialty from my bachelor days. *I'm sincere about the invitation,* Philip wrote. *You'd love these folks—they're wonderful with tourists. The rafters are strung with heads. When a boatload of Japanese makes it to the longhouse, the natives point upward—“Englishmen,” they say, and it always gets a laugh. When the Brits show, the elders smile when they say, “Japanese.” It's a regular hoot.*

*But seriously,* he went on, *this can't last long. If you're a real traveler, you'd better get here soon. Give my love to the little woman. Your man in Borneo, Philip.*

Deb wasn't thrilled about the letter. “The little woman' my ass,” she said. She'd seen her doctor that afternoon—Valentine's Day—and they'd both agreed that a trip at this point in the pregnancy would not be wise. I'd left our reservations open: San Diego—Bangkok—Kualalumpur—Kuching. From Kuching we'd have to catch a ferry to Sibiu then rent a dugout for the trip upriver. “Cancel my seat,” she said, “and just *go*. You won't be happy unless you do.”

I stared glumly at the half-empty bottle of champagne. Deb was right again. Somehow the idea of this trip had gotten out of hand. I'd made a few phone calls to Thailand and Borneo, almost booked a couple of charters even—which I never do. I believe in just going—getting your baggage to another country then winging it, living off your wits and your American Express card. Clients

who let me make all the decisions for them are missing out on half the fun. Look, I tell them, if you were destined to sleep between sheets you'll find a hotel room—even in Rio, even during Mardi Gras, even on Tuesday night. It pays to be flexible. But this time I figured if the details were more arranged, more predictable, then Deb would give in and go too. I thought the pregnancy was simply making her more cautious, more mindful of unforeseen complications. She pushed her seat back from the table and carried her plate to the kitchen.

"But who'll feed you while I'm gone?" I asked, head down, staring into the half-congealed pool of cream sauce on my plate.

"I *can* cook, you know," she said from the sink. "Don't forget that I survived thirty-five years without any help from you."

"No," I said. "I won't forget."

I heard Deb's footsteps behind my chair. She leaned down and put her hands on my chest. There were soap bubbles still clinging to the back of one knuckle. I let my head fall back between her breasts and closed my eyes.

"Sorry," she said. One of her tears dripped onto my upturned forehead, ran down between my eyebrows and along the side of my nose. I wished right then that we could change places, that Deb could sit in the chair and let me rest my palms on the curve of her stomach, that my tears could dampen her face. What kind of husband abandons his wife in the first months of pregnancy and allows her to comfort him? I should have been busy pricing cribs and car seats, or converting the den to a nursery. Not making myself scarce on the other side of the world. It wasn't like this was my last chance to get away—we'd agreed that we'd keep traveling, even with the Binky. And while it would be fun to see Philip, he'd be back at UCLA in September; I could hear all about it then.

"I should stay," I said.

Deb stood up straight, rested her hands on my shoulders with a surprising firmness. "I want you to go," she said. "I'm taking some time off too. I'm going to Ensenada."

Ensenada was an hour's drive south into Mexico. Deb's parents had retired to a beach house there. Her father practically lived on tequila and pineapple juice, and I had always enjoyed our visits. I reminded myself of all this before responding. "That's nice," I said finally, like some idiot in a situation comedy, then repeated it—"that's nice"—as if my stupidity hadn't already been demonstrated beyond a reasonable doubt, as if saying it could make it so.

Philip had been married three times—one former colleague in the anthropology department and two former graduate students. His most recent divorce had been finalized just before I met Deb. Sharon had been my favorite of the three, very practical and self-assured, an expert in Sumatran fertility rituals. She and Philip were still friends. After the papers were signed, they'd thrown a big party in which every guest had to take some item, some gift from Sharon to Philip or from Philip to Sharon—an earthenware vase or a llama-hair sweater or a jade figurine—and then smash it, burn it, send it to a relative in Hoboken, whatever—just remove it from their sight and make sure it stayed removed. All of the guests enjoyed themselves, prowling through the line-up of artifacts in Philip and Sharon's old apartment, choosing their objects of destruction.

Philip gave me a little fertility god, with an erect penis carved from some rosy tropical hardwood, and whispered to me not to burn it. It was genuine, he said. Sharon had brought it back after some fieldwork in the hills north of Muarabungo. It belonged in a museum. He couldn't bear to see it destroyed. I thought he might break down then, but he laughed instead, shoved his fingers

into his beard and grinned like a goat. “Don’t keep it in the bedroom,” he warned me. “I’m not liable for any damages.”

I buried it in the trunk where I keep the souvenirs of my travels: two toy seals from Norway, an ashtray from the Ritz, a dried lizard from an apothecary in Beijing. I don’t think Deb has ever noticed the little guy—she would’ve commented on it otherwise, made some crack about the primitive male. When we said goodbye outside the international terminal, she told me to tell Philip that if he ever referred to her as “the little woman” again, she’d arrange for all of his ex-wives to become lawyers. She was holding my hand when she said this; her car was double-parked and we were standing on the curb.

We kissed once, briefly, and I could feel the swell of her stomach against mine even after the car pulled away. I watched her go, thought of her driving back into those thirty-five years when she’d managed just fine without me. I’d never asked about those years, though I listened whenever she let something slip. Deb was an only child; she’d had two abortions. Her father had worked for a defense contractor and been involved in some procurement scandal. When she was fifteen she wanted to be a figure skater. I’ve seen photos of her on the ice, looking graceful, and I’ve seen other pictures too—posing with relatives, with co-workers, and with other men, smiling the way couples do when they’re trying too hard to be happy.

I picked up my bag—one of those backpacks that can transform itself into a suitcase—and stepped through the automatic doors. The terminal was alive with travelers and their families—some glad to be back and some glad to be going. There was no one in line at the Thai counter; I put my bag on the scale, gave the agent my business card, and asked for an upgrade. She was new, a trainee. She had a little trouble checking availability in first class but I talked her through it. I felt better as soon as I got my boarding pass. Here was proof: I

was on my way to the Orient—to Bangkok, to Borneo. Where I knew no one and nobody knew me, except Philip—and Philip had no idea I was actually coming. My heart began beating again with that familiar rush of promise and escape, that buzz I get sometimes even at work, when I've just booked a client the trip of her life. Anything could happen, and that didn't bother me one bit. You have to be willing to accept some uncertainties in the travel business.

I spent the hour before departure strolling up and down the concourse, watching the airline personnel at work: posting schedules and routing baggage, checking passports and making seat assignments. They all looked so young to me—like somebody else's children. Ten years ago—back when Eastern and Pan Am were still going concerns—back when I'd just turned thirty and hadn't been kissed in eighteen months, I won a week in the Virgin Islands for selling more package tours than any agent in San Diego. I sat under a coconut palm and smoked for six nights and seven days. After the flight back to the mainland, I left my wallet on the plane—a little turboprop islandhopper—and didn't realize it until I tried to buy a Miami paper. I went charging back to the gate and fell in love with the customer service rep. Really fell in love, the way it had been with Deb, and with only a couple of other women before. It was the accent that got me—its vaguely Slavic tilt, the odd roll of her vowels—and her smooth forehead with a lock of hair that settled across it like a smile. I found myself leaning towards her over the counter. She was a perfect professional: so calm, so personable, at once friendly and noncommittal, but helpful, so helpful. She let me back on the plane.

My wallet was gone of course—not on the seat or in the overhead compartment or in the seat pocket in front of me; I'd actually sat down in my row again and tried to think while Anja—that was her name—smiled benignly from the head of the aisle. But I couldn't think. I ran off the plane again,

shaking my head, bumbling thanks, not even daring to look her in the eye. I did notice there were no rings on her left hand.

My itinerary included an overnight layover at the Airport Hilton. I had an emergency traveler's cheque in my carry-on bag and desperately wanted to take Anja to dinner, to rest my chin in my hands and drink in her voice, to hear her laugh at my tales of the islands. I should've been worrying about replacing my credit cards, driver's license, scuba certification—all those wallet-sized records of accomplishment. But as I laid on the bed that night, all I could imagine was Anja's face drifting toward mine. Or Anja and I walking arm in arm along the boardwalk at Key West. Or Anja wearing a white sundress, pushing a stroller. I had actually imagined fatherhood; I was in that deep. When I got back to San Diego I sent a bouquet of hothouse flowers—birds of paradise and tiny ornamental pineapples—told the florist to deliver them to Gate 11, along with my phone number. For the next few weeks I toyed with the idea of catching a plane back to Miami, but the dollar surged in Europe, and bookings climbed through the roof. It was a lucky break. If I'd settled down at thirty, I would've missed Norway, Kenya, the Sarajevo Olympics. Anja's dreams probably had nothing to do with mine.

I waited until all the coach passengers had filed on board, then walked down the gangway. Before I could fasten my seatbelt the Thai stewardess came by with a cold Singha beer.

"We'll be delayed just a few minutes before take-off," she smiled.

"Thank you," I told her. What did minutes mean to me? I sipped my beer, pushed the seat back, let my head loll on the leather rest. In a little while we'd be heading out to sea, turning high over California, gazing down at the whole southern coast, from Malibu to Baja. I was looking forward to this flight.