

Nobody knows, from sea to shining sea, *why we are having all this trouble with our republic*!

*Riding home from Gainesville with four people, Thomas Skelton was in a globe of his own hallucinatory despair, a little blown away it is true; but nothing quite as serious as that sense of internal collapse and loss almost of armature that made it increasingly difficult to so much as sit up straight.*

*Skelton, two men, two women, wound up in a white clapboard hotel near Homestead frequented by citrus pickers; and a long night began of streaks, halos, and comas. Toward its end, Skelton found himself sitting on an enormous expanse of gleaming wood floor. He could see no furniture and the walls were yielding. He seemed to be alone; and he came to wonder what was becoming of him. There was a liquid window filling with silver light; and just over the sill he could see the crown of a palm tree moistly easing itself into his view. Thus he knew he was on the second floor. He turned over on his side and heard the change in his pocket ring out on the hardwood floor. There were voices in fatigue cadences, movement below, and vague, humming vibrations in the joists.*

He got to his feet and moved upon the region of the window. There was an empty intersection and a traffic light that changed colors in mid-air at lazy, musical intervals. The red was rather penetrating and Skelton closed his eyes when he saw it coming.

The voices were flying from the bathroom. Skelton left the window and traversed the vague space of the empty room to the voice-filled doorway. In the bathroom a terrible fluorescence curved over the surfaces of the plumbing. The four people were standing naked in the tub with the lurid fluorescence all over them. One of the men was bending over and squeezing his hands between his knees. The other man leaned up against the wall behind the tub as though waiting to board a bus or to light a blonde's cigarette in a 1947 movie. The two women were heating something in a screw-on bottle cap over a Zippo. The tub rested on iron frog's feet.

Skelton studied himself until he was sure that he was dressed and slipped out of the hotel. He walked to Homestead, then right on through town, tripping his brains out in the emptiness of 5 a.m. His feet were making an awful clatter on the pavement. When he got to the far side of town, he felt a small pain in his stomach. He touched himself and discovered a short heavy gun in his waistband, a .38 Colt Cobra. What in the hell was that doing there. He took it out and threw it into a mosquito ditch and walked on. Then he couldn't believe that there had ever been a gun; so he walked back to the mosquito ditch and saw it lying on the bottom, hard and brilliant in the stagnant slime.

The trees along the road were full of catbirds. Skelton kept on. It was getting warm and he could begin to smell the blacktop. Then the intersection of A1A and the sign to Key West. He stuck out his thumb and thought, They won't see I'm insane until I'm already in the car. It is hot and when I get to Key West I'll borrow some money and order a beverage. I'll get a six-pack and take my skiff out on the reef. If they say in the car that I am insane, I will take over the wheel.

No one said he was insane; neither the hardware salesman, the United Parcel driver nor the crawfisherman who drove the last leg into Key West suggested such a thing. When Skelton told the hardware salesman that the paint had just lifted off the whole car in a single piece, the hardware salesman agreed with him about how Detroit put things together. This was the epoch of uneasy alliances.

The sun penetrated the blue-green sea over the reef in shafts like church light clear to the reef. Schools of bait were on the reef like some vast gleaming silver pointillism shifting suddenly when predators passed through, then re-forming around the invisible trajectory of the vanished assailant. Skelton drifted over the millionfold expanse of the bait school calming down and finishing his six beers at some speed. More pelagic fish were finding the bait, and as they drove up under it, sheets of silver erupted from the sea scattering with the noise of heavy rain. The gulls came then by the tens and twenties and dropped everywhere among the bait, heavy and singular.

When the bait was gone and Skelton was drifting once more in the wooden skiff over the stony, illuminated reef, he saw that he would have to find a way of going on.

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Carter had a skiff like Nichol Dance's but where Carter's would high-center on a shallow bank Nichol's would pole in dew and let him drop in those little basins where the fish held faced up tide on the incoming water.

Now it was Dance's system to fish by the tide like a sniper and time his stops so the fish would come to him or to his chum slick; where Faron Carter fished the flats in the old style poling the skiff from the bow on the edge of the flats in the early flood then dropping back to the mangroves on the high water and looking for the waking fish.

But Dance knew the intersections and only touched the pole to set the skiff up and slip the anchor; or to chase a hooked fish in water too shallow to run the engine in. He made twice as many stops in a day as Carter and fished more by his brain as it was his method to be on the money when the fish came in on the moving water. So, Dance not only saw the flat from the top, but he saw it in cross section; because where the troughs were, the little sand streaks in the turtle grass, that is where the earliest fish came.

But on those days on the young moon or when a tide forced him to fish falling water, he was less skillful in poling out a bad situation to find what fish there were.

So, when Tom Skelton decided to guide, he knew it was these two men that he would study; because theirs were the styles that there were. The other men at the dock were averages of Carter and Dance without either edge.

Now Carter was a level person who presented certain civic virtues that could not be ascribed to Dance. Carter could spend the day in the boat with well-known golfers charming them with articulate fishing stories. While Dance would brood about the tide or lose his temper; or, much the worst, begin drinking. The two men were similarly successful as guides over the long haul. Day after day, Carter put a sound amount of fish on the dock. While Dance, the incessant addict of long shots, would sometimes blank out entirely, coming home in an empty skiff black in the face; but on his best days he would produce fish in quantities incomprehensible to Carter. Skelton favored Dance.

Nichol Dance was in one or two ways an interchangeable creature, born in Center, Indiana, in 1930.

Twelve years ago he inherited the hardware store in Center and a woodlot six miles away full of buckeyes that stank in the spring. It took him six months to piss away half of what had been left him; hunting coons and drinking with his and his father's friends, he was picking up everybody's tabs. His sister who had married a Croatian foundryman from Gary tried to sue him out of the rest; but he hung on to what was about now the price of a new Ford, made a trip to Kentucky to buy a redbone bitch and bought a tavern instead.

One year later, in hazy circumstances, he shot and killed an exercise boy of forty from Lexington; and was run out of town.

For many years he carried that handgun, a rather esoteric Colt's "Bisley" model, with Mexican ivory grips showing eagles killing snakes, chambered for the army issue .45. The exercise boy had acted up, true enough; but the Colt made what is called short work of him, about what a two-iron would do to a deliquescent toadstool.

He traded the deed to the bar for a two-door Fairlane convertible and drove to the sea thinking that would be the spot to start over. He hit the beach at Hampton Roads, a brake drum binding the wheel in a sleet storm; picked up Route 1 and turned south till it ran out in Key West.

He'd driven those many miles without any terminal mechanical trouble, but on Southard Street in Key West the brake drum had had enough and caught fire. Burning rubber and oil from the brake line slowly worked into the Fairlane proper which was loaded down with belongings including a Motorola TV, the pistol in hand, and a case of government ammunition. Nothing to do but stand back and watch her go. When the flame reached eight feet over the sputtering convertible top, the ammunition began to fire; and then the television let go. Dance had the Bisley Colt in the top of his pants underneath a palm-leafed sport shirt he bought in St. Augustine and great alligator tears swam down his cheeks. The truth was he felt free as a bird.

A burning Ford full of things that blow up does draw a crowd. And the conchs—as the old-time white people of Key West are called—the conchs who saw Dance for the next month drove him crazy, toothlessly following him around and saying, "There he is! That's the one whose car caught afire!"

A couple of weeks of this and Dance began to wheel on them. He thought, "I've got to scatter these bastards. They look like they'd eat you up some dark night."

Then odd jobs, hanging out at the dock, doing things for guides like Faron Carter, sandblasting flamingos on glass shower doors, substituting and finally guiding. And all along thinking about that exercise boy, once every year or so nearly getting to the point about that exercise boy that he nearly gave himself the same as he gave him, as a matter of restitution, as a matter of symmetry and as the one response to that fatal perfidy that put him and the exercise boy on the opposite sides of that empty bar, the deed to which was the final trace of a family business and a woodlot—"integers of a winding-down life."

Then, a fifty-seven-day bad marriage to a Catholic from Chokoloskee that ended in the court reconciling everything he had acquired but a skiff and it all went off in a Bekins moving van with the wife up front by the driver, headed for the Everglades. And drinking of the kind that is a throwing of yourself against the threshold of suicide though lacking that final will to your own ceasing, without which all the hemlock and Colt's patented revolvers are of no more avail than ringside tickets, photostats of lost deeds, or snapshots of Granddad's five-bottom plow.

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Nichol Dance's guide boat, "Bushmaster," was nosed up the tidal creek that bisected Grassy Key, not anchored but rammed into the red mangrove roots in a canopy of mosquitoes and sand flies. Nichol Dance's whole end of the creek smelled of whiskey. The ship-to-shore radio was turned on to the broadcast band; and out of its crackling loudspeaker, someone advised the prostrate Hoosier to "think young." Dance lay there, vaguely alive, his brain curing like a ham.

Carter shut the engine down and the two looked at Dance's person and found neither bullet holes nor seepage and knew as they had known in advance that he had polluted himself once more with one of the fifths that he always stored in the live wells. But, Tom Skelton thought, the intention to kill himself, however garbled or interfered with, was quite enough.

"Get in and see can you start the mother," said Carter.

Tom Skelton climbed aboard the *Bushmaster* and lowered the engine with the power tilt control up forward. With the electrical hum of its motor, Nichol Dance began to stir. Tom Skelton forgot himself for the moment, forgot the rather lurid momentary circumstance and felt only his own fine tremble to be that of the boat when, choked and started, the powerful engine passed its life through the craft and sent fine lapping tremors out around itself into the tidal creek.

Nichol Dance sat up and announced that he wanted a career in show business, with an air of having had one in an earlier life. Chemical impact thickened the flesh around his eyes. On the floor of the skiff was the Colt's patent revolver with Mexican ivory grips; and on his chest, his flowered shirt bore the print of the pistol.

Dance's uncanny presence produced a momentary silence in which the dry velocities of birds could be heard in the brushy creek. Even the bubbling of crustaceans on the red mangrove roots around him and the slow tidal seepage seemed to rise a measure or so while Nichol Dance looked them over with the same remote gaze you would understandably associate with the recently raised dead.

"A person can scarcely be deliberate any more," he said.

"What seems so exclusive to you about that," Carter inquired.

"Does it need to be exclusive for me to bring it up?"

"Not unless you're offering a franchise."

"You're the Skelton kid that's always on the goddamn flat in front of me."

"That's right," Skelton said positively to this basilisk drunk.

"I wonder how come."

"I enjoy water sports would be just about exactly how come."

"Very good. But child, I can't recommend it."

"I wasn't applying for a recommendation," Tom Skelton said.

"I was explaining," Dance said, "about how unattractive a day on the water can come to be."

"But I'd of known," Tom Skelton said, "that a person would spoil a boat trip if he only went out to shoot himself."

â€œNow look here, fucker, I didnâ€™t come here to be sassedâ€

â€œNeither did I.

Nichol Dance picked up the Coltâ€™s patent revolver and discharged it into the mangroves all around Tom Skelton with a collective noise that was close to that of war.

â€œFucker,â€ he said, â€œI donâ€™t seem to have your attention!

Carter said, â€œYou have rattled the boy. Now letâ€™s just all of our selves unwind and go home. And Nichol, that pistol has gotten to be a liability.

And Dance said to Carter, â€œBut weâ€™ve kept so many from crowding our trade, it discourages me to come across a hard case.â€ Then he smiled radiantly.

â€œIâ€™m not a hard case, whatever that is. I am going to guide is all.

Nichol Dance stared a moment at Tom Skelton with only mildly drunken appreciation. He said, â€œThen why donâ€™t you do the little thing?

â€œI think he means to,â€ said Carter. â€œNow letâ€™s run before the sun sets.

Nichol Dance said to Carter, â€œLet him lead us, Cart.

Well, all right. Skelton reversed the engine, eased backward in the narrow marshy quarters past Carter who followed backing after him, the sandy turbulence on the creek bottom lifting and carrying down tide. Dance sat at ease in one of the fighting chairs, his face still blurred, but the impression of durability remained in the compression ridges of flesh under his eyes. Otherwise, Nichol Dance was just a displaced bumpkin run out of his own unmortgaged bar for shooting a man in the horse business through the wishbone in not quite disputable self-defense; part of the world of American bad actors who, when the chips are down, go to Florida with all the gothics and grotesqueries of chrome and poured-to-form concrete that that implies.

When Tom Skelton had running room, a nicety of judgment based on a precise guess of distance between propeller and ocean bottom, he put the skiff up on a plane and ran the shallow bank on a dead course for the Harbor Keys, then swung abruptly southwest on the crawfishermenâ€™s wheel trackâ€”a wandering trough perhaps two feet wideâ€”which at this tide was absolutely the only way to cross the bank that separated them from Key West. Nichol Dance turned his head on a dark and sun-wrinkled neck to look at Carter and raise his eyebrows. Skelton centered the bow on the stacks of Key West Electric and started home.

Winter ducks and cormorants got up in front of the approaching skiffs and made off at angles to the boatsâ€™ running course. Sea fans, coral heads, yellow cap rock, stone-crab and crawfish pots were inordinate and clear in the shallow water. The trap markers were affixed to Clorox-bottle floats that hung down tide on yellow lines; but Skelton by painful and slow process knew very well how to run the country having slept out in mosquito bogs for his misjudgments. He had poled the better parts of full days upwind and up tide with bent drive shafts and wiped-out propellers for having had on the map of his brain previously unlocated coral heads or discarded ice cans from commercial boats; or for having lost surge channels in the glare crossing shallow reefs.

Well astern now, on Mente Chica Key, the outline of a bat tower could be seen against the smeared and windless sky.

â€œLeave it at the fuel dock,â€ said Dance now blearier than ever but still letting a thin devilish gas from slightly pursed lips evidence some dire bowel chemistry.

Roy Soleil, the dockmaster, stood beside the two pumps with a mild visual suggestion that he was the third. He made no move to throw them a line as Tom eased in and reversed the engines for an eggshell landing that lifted Danceâ€™s eyebrows once more. Behind them, Carter was just now mooring; and Tom Skeltonâ€™s brain was tumid with uncommitted navigational errors.

â€œWhy my God,â€ said Roy, â€œthe original survivor.

Nichol Dance did not look up but kept his reddening neck bent while he refueled the skiff.

â€œI mean, what makes folks keep signing up on these rescue missions?â€ Roy inquired. â€œOr is a rescue something every boy should have?

When Nichol raised himself up to fix Roy with a baleful stare, Roy flushed very slightly but did not, you could see, deviate from his curious course.

â€œWhat ails you?â€ said Nichol Dance.

â€œAils me?

Roy, the dockmaster, twice Nichol Danceâ€™s size, with the fame of maddened rages on his side, said: â€œNichol, that is what I have been trying to touch upon.

Carter by this time saw even from his distance what was afoot exactly; but the interval, even from Skeltonâ€™s proximate view, between releasing the gas pump and arriving on the dock with the ash-handled kill-gaff in hand was imperceptible. Skelton supposed there had been some prelude, even some subsequent move by the immense dockmaster; but Nichol Dance was sure with the gaff and the dockmaster was quickly down, neatly skewered between hip and short ribs; while Nichol Dance, standing over as he thrashed, gripped the hardwood handle with both hands and bore down as though to kill a snake. Nichol Dance said to Carter, â€œCall a doctor for this New Jersey arc-welder polack.â€ Carter ran to the pay phone and Dance disempaled the dockmaster, who lay bleeding, glaring and holding himself in with laced fingers. Then to Skelton he said, â€œBetter get some law in here too before I think to wind this bug fuckerâ€™s clock.

He looked at Roy.

â€œRoy, Iâ€™d go to Raiford Prison over you, if I needed.

â€œI see that.

When Tom Skelton came back, they sat to wait. First the ambulance came and took off the dockmaster. Then Nichol Dance handed Skelton a ledger of his bookings and told him to use the skiff. â€œI will call you from the joint as to what cut from your proceeds would be usual.

â€œHow did you pick me?

â€œIf I gave the bookings to Cart, Iâ€™d lose them. Anybody youâ€™d guide Iâ€™m going to get back.

It was a messy beginning. Still, he could regard his start with no sense of incursion by the events that surrounded it. He had enormous hopes for the future. He considered: mucus egg congestions are related to radiant sea creatures via indecipherable

links of change.

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“œl can remember,” said Skelton’s Mother, “œthat autumn so clearly because I was expecting you. A man from Sugarloaf had been stung to death by bees on one of the Indian mounds and they brought him into Key West. They took him right over to the newspaper and laid out the corpse on the steps of the old city hall to get some pictures, but a colored man’s dog wouldn’t stop howling and leave them be. So they threw the corpse into a Ford sedan and drove it to the funeral parlor. The face was as big as *that* with bee stings and the colored man’s dog chased the car and wouldn’t stop howling until his owner ran him off to the shrimp dock. The dog got down under the pilings and kept on howling. That night when the boats went out you could hear the howling over all those shrimpers’s engines and your father went down and brought the dog home and put him in the cistern with five pounds of sirloin until the howling stopped.”

Skelton, still and listening, felt himself to be moving through the house, the full vacancy of its rooms, thinking, So much has been lost. In this heat, every garbage pail is full of fish skeletons and this town smells of the special lizard stench of churches or catacombs; narcosis dying as slowly as the life that would replace it.

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Miranda’s hallway: A spindly mahogany end table to which the termites have had access for a hundred years sustains a green Mason jar with its lost patent numerals in heavy glass; and holding in its opaque vegetable water from the Keys Aqueduct, ribbed orange squash-blossoms in their delicately emblematic subdivision of light.

It was cool in there, a house holding a beloved woman, the aural penetrations of a Cuban side street and the Gulf of Mexico in an upper window.

Skelton perplexed himself as to how many dead had been transported through this hallway. If you had a specific answer to that, you would possess innumerable anecdotes about mortality with which to regale your friends; or if you had no friends, then to address to that not so finite darkness in which we are all corporate shareholders. The trick, finally, Skelton knew, was to keep them rolling in the aisles, saving the best one for last, about how we die and die and die.

What a thought. I am going to fuck my way out of this one. Miranda used to do reds, crossed her sevens, and had a Leo rising. She was Skelton’s girl, a pretty thing whose long black hair carried behind her as she walked.

The wooden fan made no sound in the front room. The door to the bedroom was ajar. Skelton paused midway across the room and felt a rising cold pass up through him as he began to hear through the doorway the bed’s rachitic sprung utterance. Skelton tried without amusing himself to think of this as an unspeakable pubic disaster. Pain. He stepped sideways very slightly and saw against that band of further space the writhing within; and could not keep himself from saying, “œ| Miranda” so that the front-room quiet fell across everything like an eclipse.

“œTom?”

“œYes”

“œl’m making love. Wait out there till l’m through.”

Skelton walked to the window as though riding a thermal. Not able to stand in one place, he returned to the table, rifled through the sewing box, removed a small silver snuffbox, a pocket mirror, and a razor blade. He opened the snuffbox with trembling fingers and tapped out a little heap of cocaine on the mirror. He divided the pile and drew it out in two long thin white lines; blocked first one nostril, then the other, and drew the cocaine into each.

He leaned back into the chair and tuned his ears once again to the bed’s noise, which seemed to open and close in the room, tenebrous as a bird’s claw. But by the time his nose numbed and his throat seemed to not quite close any longer, it had come to seem that the bed was not unmusical. And once its noise had stopped, he shared the exhausted breathing and relief from within. Across the room, the tall window suspended a pure convexity of luminous air toward Skelton; and in the door he had entered was a bar of fluorescing sun. He began to imagine that he could feel Key West urge itself against the Atlantic like a ship of terrible slow movement. The chrysalis he sometimes felt inside was beginning to shed and stream quite lambently.

“œTom?”

“œAh, Miranda.”

“œAre you blown away?”

“œA little.”

“œBecause you were upset?”

“œYes.”

“œThis is Michael.”

“œl’m sorry,” said Michael.

“œThat’s all right. Did you have a nice time?”

“œYes, very.”

“œWell, that’s fine.”

Michael said, “œl’ve got a plane to make.”

“œWell, good to see you and it’s fine with me that you had a nice time” and uh that there is a plane for you to make

“œThanks.” A perfunctory kiss to Miranda and away with him. When he was gone, Miranda said, “œYou didn’t fire anything?”

“œUh-uh. Couple blows of your coke. What’s that noise?”

“œMichael going out.”

“œSounded like the house falling down.”

“œTom, I had this incredible orgasm.”

“œDo I have to hear about your organism too?”

“Just this one. It was like a whole dream of sweet things to eat. I mean, it all came to mind. Spun sugar, meringue, whipped egg whites, and all these clear German cake icings”

“How about when your chum shot off? Was it a blintz or an omelet?”

“Ask him.” She held Skelton’s head standing beside him. He ran his hand up to her openness. That one hurt too; fragments of a life presumed dead. When would the light come. He would have to watch that pale cocaine edge pale like acetylene flame. And how could you dream of The Garden when what you would have had her have would have been a kind of beer fart: or, at best, the relief of a scarcely visible blackhead yielding to opposed thumbnails. Here it had been everything short of glazed almonds and it made Skelton mean. When the shining city is at hand, a special slum will be built for me and my meanness. I will be the person, if that’s what I am, in the slum; there will be one of everything; one rat, one tin can. The shining city will beckon in the distance. The shadow of the Bakunin monument will not quite stretch to my door. In the evening, the sound of happy syndicalist badminton finals will be borne to me on a sweet wind that sours as it enters my slum. I will behave poorly.

“Tom, what’s the matter?”

“Jealousy.”

“Well, that’s wrong. And you weren’t going to have any drugs any more.”

“I wasn’t going to have any jealousy any more either. You ought to see some of the things I wasn’t going to have any more. I’d like to cold-shake about a teacupful of reds and fire them right now. I’m just sick with hurt and jealousy and going back on myself. I want some more of that coke. And then to have to hear a description of that Viennese organism. God.”

Neither spoke for a time. Then Miranda said, “I’m twenty-four and I’ve been with a bunch of men”

“I know.”

“For whom there was always at least affection.”

“I understand.”

“And I won’t have it made an ugliness. You’ll have to think of another kind of innocence. I’ve been trying to get through too, you know.”

“I know, darling. I’m sorry. I want that of course too. But another thing comes in uh there, you see”

They took the car and went to Rest Beach on the other side of the key. They could hear a fire engine down in the quarter off Simonton. It was hot and Skelton could smell fish in the garbage truck that went by bristling with palm leaves; a sign between the two men hanging off the back: WE CATER WEDDINGS. The wind was beginning to pull eastward into a weather change and the smell of City Electric was in the avenues.

They parked at Rest Beach and walked across between the sunbathers. There was not much wind and the sea was very plain under the empty sky. A long way off, a remote vessel, maybe a freighter, seemed absolutely still under its smoke which declined only slightly from the vertical before bluing away.

They walked out on the jetty, the sea trembling among the stones like gelatin. At the end, Miranda sat down, her brown thighs disappearing in her shorts. Her green, stony eyes did not seem to be seeing anything; and Skelton was not having a very good time.

“Haven’t you ever walked in on a woman before?” Miranda asked, pushing her hair back over her ears with her thumbs.

“Yes.”

“Once?”

“No, three times.”

“And what were the women like?”

“They were types.”

“They were all three types?”

“Two were types and one was a junkie.”

“And what was I?”

“You were my girl.”

Three striped sergeant-major fish, inches long, rested in the swell at their feet, surging in on each small roller, trusting the wave not to carry them clear to the rocks and riding out in it again, only to repeat in a loop, in and out again. The water was as green as the jar of squash blossoms.

“You look strange,” said Miranda, “are you crashing from that cocaine?” Skelton said nothing. “Well, it’s still Michael.”

“I guess.”

“Michael used to be my lover.”

“Why do I have to be so stupid about this?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know better than to be this way.”

“I know but you just are.”

“I’ll ride it out.”

Though he knew he could still maintain, Skelton felt that voluminous hollow rush inside, that slippage of control systems, the cocaine express. Mild enough on the face of it, he had known it in other days to be the first step on the ride to the O.D. Corral. It was a family tradition to go the distance. This time it had to be in another quadrant because he had recently seen that tremulous threshold where another breath is a matter for decision.

“I was the victim of timing. I’ve been thinking about death all day. Don’t ask me why. My mother told me this ungodly story” Skelton at last could lose himself in something that would hold the jealousy away, stories of the dead, beginning with the man killed on the Indian mounds by bees; the usual powdered visages of cousins or acquaintances laid out next to an air conditioner or beneath a ceiling fan, more deeply foreign under their makeup than the maddest vices could have made them in life. Or when, in junior high, he had found with a friend, a drowned Cuban nun in the cistern. No more than four and

a half feet long floated face down in the stagnant water, her habit flowing like wings amid clouds of immature frogs and mosquito larvae. When his friend's father, a pastry cook, came home, he looked into the cistern and said that he had known that she would do it sometime. Quite without passion, they carried the little body to the lawn; then all three at the same time dropped it on the grass, a black and white pile in draining cistern water and stranded tadpoles, a thing.

"That's dreadful."

"I know."

"Why did you tell me that?"

"There uh was some connection"

"Between all this dead stuff and you walking in on me?"

"Yes!"

"Well, what was it," Miranda demanded.

"It's just that when you realize that everyone dies you become a terrible kind of purist. There just doesn't seem to be time for this other business."

"But darling that's all there is time for."

In the clear water at the jetty's end, the tide carried a few large jellyfish past. Ribbed as delicately as the squash blossoms, they swelled like a globe at the end of a glassblower's pipe; then pulsed suddenly in the direction of the tide.

"Let's get out of here."

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Thomas Skelton thought that Key West was a town he could only take so much of. Without the ocean, he knew he couldn't take it at all. It was one thing to be blanking out on a forty-hour week; and another to be unemployed and in Duval Street at a wrong hour; or in front of the Red Doors on Caroline Street when they came out with the stretcher and the shrimpers wandered into the night to smoke under the stars and look through the ambulance windows. The character with the knife was never cut off at the bar. He just strolled to the Wurlitzer and tried to remember exactly who he was. He played *The Orange Blossom Special* to someone down there looking at herself in the Formica who sat and never looked up. In the dreamboat evening of half-time wages the song was finished. The ambulance attendant held a hand mirror to the victim's mouth; and tried to remember if he mailed in the guarantee on his air conditioner. The shrimper's eyes filled to *The Orange Blossom Special*, which was his anthem. He recalled a childhood in Pascagoula when he'd never stabbed a soul, perforated a hymen, or put the boot to a man who was down.

Then too you could remember when you had been below Key West to the Marquesas on a cool winter day when the horsetails were on a rising barometer sky and the radiant drop curtain of fuchsia light stood on edge from the Gulf Stream. And when he ran back across the Boca Grande channel into the lakes and then toward Cottrell to miss the finger banks he knew how he would raise Key West on the soft-pencil edge of sea and sky. Then the city would seem like a white folding ruler, in sections; and the frame houses always lifted slowly, painted and wooden, from the sullen contours of the submarine base.

On the days when he was roughed up in the channel crossings and stopped for a drink to dry off, the upcountry girl in a wash dress would offer him Seven Crown and Seven-up; so that the two of them could soar down Duval in a flood of artificial light, stars, and bugs.

Key West was a town where you had to pick and choose. It was always a favorite of pirates.

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Skelton would not have picked a fuselage in a vacant lot next door to a rummy hotel if he had had a choice; but when the money ran out and half a dozen career daydreams collapsed like a telescope, those who might have helped failed to dart to his side. Impecunious as could be, his neighbors found his side trip into education rather fancy to begin with. House painting, culling shrimp, and the half-assed dream of being a guide had a homely recognizability. His popularity returned.

The fuselage, a remnant of a crash-landed navy reconnaissance plane, rested logically on a concrete form and had by now in the quick tropical growing seasons become impressively laced with strangler fig (a plant whose power was now slowly buckling the riveted aluminum panels), bougainvillea, Confederate star jasmine, and a delicate form of trumpeter vine whose blue translucent blossoms cascaded around the compression-sealed aerodynamic doorway.

Within the last month, an alcoholic drill sergeant had taken a room in the hotel; and every morning at seven o'clock, he drilled the winos in the back yard, the winos lurching across the packed earth under the early Key West sun, feet dragging in the dust and heads swinging under incomplete control on helpless and attenuated necks, hair slicked down, whitish blurred beards on some, veinous noses, broken teeth and bruises from falls. From his window in the morning, Skelton could only see the tops of their heads gliding and abruptly changing positions beyond the fence, the commands ringing out from the drill sergeant, the slow inexorable rise of absurd dust.

But today, coming home and closing the door, and opening his mind to the familiarity of his fuselage, Skelton felt a certain relief to be away from Carter and Dance, among whom he felt himself entirely to be the rube. Here in the fuselage, among Bohlke's *Fishes of the Bahamas*, *Field Notes on the Physiology of Marine Invertebrates*, and the entire Modern Library, from which, how many years ago, he had meant to assault the world on the most primal terms. Amid such familiarities, with all his ambitions flowing at once on parallel courses, it seemed to matter quite a lot less. He was a function of those continuities.

He dialed his mother's house.

"Mother, Tom. I can't make it for dinner; but I'll stop in sometime this evening. How's Dad?"

"He's resting nicely; if your grandpa would leave him be"

"Is he over there?"

"He came on the bike."

"How's Dad taking it?"

"Not so well, to tell the truth."

â€œOkay. Iâ€™ll get by.â€

Skelton warmed some food from the Frigidaire: picadillo, fried plantains, yellow rice, black beans; making notes to himself on a pad. He ate and ruminated, the sound of commands coming through the fuselage window, the plaint of catbirds and the gentle flutter of vine and leaf touching the yielding air-stream contours of the fuselage. Skelton liked this place with its black anarchist flag, utilitarian bunk, desk, card table, propane stove, and Frigidaire. He could sit on top of the bunk by way of a Pullman ladder he had installed and look out among the tin roofs, the beautiful old shipwright houses, and the poinciana trees that grew with vivid mystery along his street. The cemetery was close enough that he could see from the foot of his street the bronze Victorian sailor, holding his oar, of the monument to the sailors of the *Maine*; and save for one house he could have seen across to the tennis courts and the statue of JosÃ© MartÃ­ whose bust appeared that of a schoolboy in a false moustache, thumbing marble pages with a languorous hand; a memorial with some private character not lost in the inscription:

THE CUBAN LIBERTY APOSTLE  
WISHED TO OFFER  
TO THE PEOPLE OF KEY WEST  
WHAT WAS LEFT OF HIS HEART

Nor in the graven homage of â€œLos Caballeros de la Luz,â€ the horsemen of the light. Skelton could not see these things without some irrational desire to be a liberty apostle and horseman of the light, a shy delivery boy of eternityâ€™s loops.

A seabird-crowded sky made it quite impossible for Skelton to stay very long on land; and on the days when exaggerated tide fell below the mean low, exposing the flats around Key West and filling downwind side streets with the smell of ocean at its most fecund, he could grow quite frantic about it.

Todayâ€™s revelations, the skiff and the bookings, he paid into his system slowly, having what he wanted.

He walked to his familyâ€™s house on Peacon Lane; pulling the bell on the gate and waiting for his mother. She came without a word and let him through to the patio of old red street bricks. The deep bay porch swept out upon the patio in a watery-green cascade of vegetation and light, deep red pots of ferns hanging from the porch roof. At the far end of the patio, a small sprinkler turned and flung chains of glittering water up into the foliage-broken light; and high on the center of the green-floored porch was his father in his bed, covered by a gauzy mosquito canopy, his grandfather in a Cuban wicker chair beside.

â€œHow are things?â€ he asked his mother.

â€œFine.â€

â€œMother, how are they?â€

â€œGo over and talk to them.â€

â€œEvening, Grandpa.â€

â€œTom.â€

â€œHowâ€™re you feeling, Dad?â€

â€œHe feels perfectly well,â€ volunteered the grandfather.

â€œIf no one will get that asshole out of here,â€ said the muted figure inside the gauze, â€œI will shit my pants and die on purpose.â€

â€œDo it!â€ said the grandfather. â€œYou malingering well enough.â€

â€œGrandpa.â€

â€œEvery doctor in Key West says it is in his head.â€

Mrs. Skelton was silent in the kitchen, an absentee ballot.

Skeltonâ€™s father began to eat his pillow. Skelton reached gently under the canopy and pulled it from his tearing jaws; fluffs of eiderdown drifted on the porch.

â€œSomeone run shit pig into the Gulf Stream,â€ said Skeltonâ€™s father. The grandfather stood and lashed into the gauze before Skelton forcibly seated him again.

â€œGo ahead,â€ said the grandfather, drawing his glass of rum from under the chair. â€œGang up.â€

â€œCome on now, Grandpa.â€

â€œGot a job yet, bright boy?â€

â€œIâ€™m starting.â€

â€œAt what?â€

â€œGuiding.â€

â€œTerrific. Iâ€™ll see you at the Red Doors with the rest of the drunken charter-boat captains.â€

â€œI wonâ€™t be at the Red Doors. And Iâ€™m skiff-guiding anyway. Also, when did you join the lecture tour?â€

â€œThrow the old fartâ€™s ass over the wall,â€ said Skeltonâ€™s father.

â€œIâ€™m hungry!â€ the old man bellowed toward the kitchen. Then in a hushed voice, â€œLook! Look! Heâ€™s playing dead.â€

Skelton stood by the canopy. His father seemed to have passed. â€œDad?â€

â€œLet me go.â€ A stertorous sigh issued from the youthful-looking man. He sat up suddenly and looked all about his familiar surroundings. â€œPiss.â€

â€œNot so easy there, is it now?â€ chuckled the grandfather.

Mrs. Skelton came to the door of the porch: â€œSoupâ€™s on!â€

â€œWhat are we having?â€ the grandfather inquired.

â€œYouâ€™ll like it.â€

â€œWhat are we having?â€

â€œJewish chowder.â€

â€œIâ€™m leaving. I canâ€™t eat that. I canâ€™t eat nigger food.â€

The grandfather went into the pantry and came out with a glass of water which he hurled through the canopy into the face of

Skelton's father. Life is beautiful! he roared. Can't you understand one thing? *Get out of bed!*

Probably, seven months in bed had atrophied his muscles; so the grandfather's call for a Lazarus was a little fanciful. In any case, the often unpleasant old man hurried across the patio and out of the gate without another word. A whole section of the gauze was wet and clear. Inside, Skelton's father muttered with hatred a pastiche of maladroitness quotations from Marlowe and local vulgarities.

Skelton was tasting the chowder, looking at chunks of jewfish and disks of carrots, parsnips, pieces of potato, onions, streaks of tomato turning and disappearing in the fragrant bisque with the turbulence of the wooden spoon he passed through the big pot. "I shouldn't have eaten," he said.

"The hell with that," said his mother. "You sit with him and talk."

Skelton deliberately sat next to the wet part of the canopy so that his father's features were as perceived in fog.

"Well, Dad."

"I like it this way, all right?"

"It seems like such a lot of trouble."

"All right, it seems like a lot of trouble."

"Grandpa out of sorts?"

"Your grandfather's Huey Long complex has finally put him beyond communication. I'm not sure the old bastard ever did have good sense." Skelton could see his father gesticulating emptily inside the canopy. "Aw, I take that back. But God he's wearing me out. If only he'd get old. But year after year, he wears us all out! It's inhuman!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake Roberts was on the desk. "Hello, Bubba," he said to Skelton. He called everyone Bubba. He sat next to the telephone and the teletype machine with which he had informationally ensnared various and sundry. He was always working on his spread, by which he meant the variance between the cause of arrest and the eventual conviction based on teletype information. His best to date was an armed-robbery conviction arising from a loitering arrest. If he could get a murder conviction out of an unpaid parking ticket, jacking up the crime with teletype info, Jake would die happy. "Old boy has crossed his self up," said the cyberneticist.

Skelton followed Roberts behind the desk to the holding room, whose cell held three tired shrimpers. "Let's make this official," said Roberts and scrawled a note on the pad on the fingerprinting desk. He put Skelton up to the height chart and photographed him with the Polaroid camera; then he unlocked the elevator with the key and on the way up handed Skelton his mug shot, with his height behind him, five feet eleven. They got out of the elevator on the second floor where you could look into the Greyhound station parking lot. Roberts left him at the first cell. Dance was there, all by himself.

"What do you want?" Dance asked, putting on the good cheer; he was not happy.

"Thought I'd check in and see if you needed anything."

"Nope."

"How you gettin on otherwise?"

"Real lousy. All my pigeons come home to roost."

"Well, it's not so bad," Skelton said. "Sure worked out for me. I haven't been able to get up cash money for a skiff."

"Well, now you have got you a skiff."

"Yes, sir!"

"And all them good bookings it took me ten years to cull out of all them bad bookings I didn't ask back."

"I do appreciate it."

"Well, we'll work something out."

"I understand that."

"There's only a hundred twenty hours on that engine. You should get a couple of years or more out of it." Dance grinned a little.

"Don't you think that's a little pessimistic about how long you're going to be in stir?"

"No, I don't," said Nichol Dance. "The dockmaster died. That was not so much a thing for Tom Skelton to think about as to receive like news of induction or perhaps curable carcinoma."

"It hardly seems you could have killed him."

"I didn't. I just popped that little hole in him and he leaked out and quit. I feel like I been framed."

"I can't think what to say."

"Oh for God's sake! Go on now. Visit me another time."

Skelton started away. Nichol Dance called to him.

"About that other," he called, "we'll work something out."

"Mutual aid," said Skelton, in honor of his father.

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking from the foot of William to the foot of Margaret, among all the shrimp boats driven in by heavy weather, some with the net spilled in one place on the deck and others with the net streaming gauzily from the boom, various sea animals stranded in the web, Tom Skelton thinks: Of all my idiocies this one of guiding is the silliest; no it is not.

You could, he decided, erode everything always with these inquiries as to higher meaning. Now let us think of something amusing. From a single mustard seed grew a gargling violin. Why did the moron tiptoe past the medicine cabinet. Hm. Around the bases of the piers the green water was racing and whitening, racing back under his feet and colliding resonantly in the under-pier darkness.

James Davis, a slender gaunt gesticulatory fellow with walnut-shaped eyes and a face the color of birch stain, was skipper of



the shrimp *Marquesa*. In years past he was the boon companion and, in some spiritual sense, the underling cohort of Skelton's father.

James Davis and Tom Skelton sat together in the wheelhouse of the *Marquesa*, James with his feet on the chart desk, looking up out of one window in recollection, himself partly obscured to Skelton's view in the shadows of navigational and depth-finding electronics.

When your old man came of draft age, he would talk about shooting away his big toe or going to Cuba for a dose. Then Uncle called him up and he went to Fort Benning for basic but returned in real short order. Returned, Skelton knew, discharged as insane after a corps of officers met to determine just what would hamstring him longer in civilian life than a dishonorable discharge. In healthy quarters even then, a dishonorable discharge was no more than a certificate of some racy proclivity. But insane made folks jumpy.

Racy proclivities he had had even in the years Skelton's grandfather was in the state senate fabricating remunerative franchises around the state and establishing a gerrymandered kingdom for himself that in the face of subsequent investigations at the federal level proved to have nine lives; in countless Gulf Coast communities Skelton's grandfather was revered unseen and unmet as only a crook of limitless cynicism can be revered. Ultimately, various congeries of Miami Jews and legal swindlers out of the District of Columbia, later replaced by simple Castro sympathizers, nibbled old man Skelton's duchy to that small country below Big Pine. Here he retrenched, bilking everything and everyone when money changed hands, being downright fatherly about it, right up to the point he suggested a divvy on the city-wide bolita games; at which time a cadre of Castro types arranged to have half his ass blown away with the time-honored, sawed-off shotgun. Murder was intended, and before anyone could try again, the old man let up on the bolita. The true residue of this incident was another myth of old man Skelton hightailing it behind the Fourth of July restaurant, flat out as a sprinter, the shotgun barking in the humid night and driving his own self to Monroe General with half his backside still in the street.

Your dad meantime was trying to go straight listening to his classical music on the victrola. But with that father of his, he couldn't help himself: he run some guns to Cuba; he horsewhipped the navy-base commander for calling up his girlfriend; he fished with me; he studied all the time for no good reason and went out to drink himself crazy five nights a week

Was this girlfriend my mother?

Yes, it was.

Tell me what she was like.

Always telling you that. I tell you another time

They sat in the wheelhouse, neither of them fishing because of the blow that made the rigging clatter overhead.

What have you got for power in this thing? Skelton asked. To him, shop talk was always lyric.

Detroit Diesels with Capitol reverse and reduction gears and a Lister auxiliary.

That's a Lantana.

No sir, a Desco, out of St. Augustine. I bought it off of David Rawlin's widow the year he died. It needed work.

Do you know this flats guide, Nichol Dance?

Heard of him.

He killed a man yesterday.

James looked out at the scudding clouds. No doubt, he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Skelton, hiking to the dock, thought about Nichol Dance. In Skelton's mind, Nichol Dance was saying again, About that other, we'll work something out. The imprecision of the remark troubled Skelton.

It was that like so many of us Skelton had tried quite hard not to be crazy. Largely lucid and more than normally unaddled by abstract ambitions, Skelton had from time to time lapsed curiously into not terribly human actions. Perhaps it was his sense of humor; but, well, anyway he seems to have done some barking.

At first, it was inadvertent; or, as a joke. Then, once, he had driven back the urge to bark as though it were the embodiment of terror: to wit, that he was not human at all and that one day he would find himself beside a half-filled garbage pail, baying at the moon.

You are baying at the moon now, said a face once from the speeding Lagonda. Right now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Well sir, said Carter, stacking the frozen balao in one end of the bait freezer, it sorely grieves me to think of the mess he is in. But I would say that in view of his record, Nichol is all through. But then, Carter was smiling.

It doesn't seem fair, said Skelton.

Oh sure it's fair. I mean, Nichol is a good friend. But honestly, you don't jump up and gaff folks.

I suppose

You suppose?

I mean, I suppose you don't.

A few minutes later, Carter said, What was that?

What?

I heard barking.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake Roberts gave Skelton the elevator key and said, They got him for the whole thing, hook, line, and sinker. Jake was grinning too.

Nichol Dance was asleep. Nichol?

Why, the keed, said Dance, getting up readily and coming to the front of the cell. Have you heard the news.

â€œI believe so.â€

â€œIâ€™m going to use my connections to get on a road gang.â€

Skelton didnâ€™t know whether he was to laugh or not.

â€œAre youâ€¦ worried?â€ Nichol Dance didnâ€™t look worried.

â€œHell yes Iâ€™m worried. About a lot of things. Not the least of which is my next piece of tail is in twenty years. That actually hurts my feelings. Iâ€™m the kind of person would fuck a brush pile if I thought they was a snake in it.â€â€What are you laughing at?â€

â€œNothing.â€

â€œDid you ever hear of Charlie Starkweather?â€

â€œYes.â€

â€œCharlie Starkweather is what happens when you push someone around once too often. They laughed at him when he stuttered. They called him a redheaded bowlegged woodpecker. Starkweather used to wear Tony Lama boots. He used to hang out in used-clothing stores. He wanted to marry a cocktail hostess and settleâ€“you knowâ€“down. He killed eleven people outside of Lincoln, Nebraska, and owned a â€™49 Merc chopped and channeled with a bullnosed hood and frenched headlights.â€

â€œWhat does the â€™49 Merc have to do with the eleven people?â€ Skelton said, confused.

â€œThatâ€™s just part of the whole story, is all. Charlie Starkweather was sort of an artist. He used to draw pictures of himself committing the killings. It appeared like he was spraying them people with a garden hose and they was just all folded up around the bullets.â€

â€œThatâ€™s kind ofâ€¦ different.â€

â€œWell, it was extreme of him. But his life was real colorful. I have one thing against him though: he had no sense of humor. You should never kill somebody if it isnâ€™t funny.â€

â€œI donâ€™t like that idea.â€

â€œThatâ€™s because you donâ€™t understand it.â€

â€œI suppose. But anyway Nichol, I wanted to get by before you headed for Raiford and uh well at least thank you for letting me take the boat while youâ€™re away.â€

â€œOh, glad to do it, glad to do it.â€ He had one hand in his pocket and hung by the other from one of the vertical bars. â€œWeâ€™ll work something out. And tell Jake, would you, I want a salad tonight.â€

\* \* \* \* \*

The weather broke, streamed away in mackerel clouds, cleared and got hot. He would guide in the morning. He was on Duval Street now. The Conch Train drifted past Sloppy Joeâ€™s and a thousand screaming ninnies cheered the clanging bell the barmaid rang at them as they passed. In the window of Gomez Plumbing the Christmas display rested on a field of palm leaves: Mary, Joseph, and Christ in His manger, entirely fabricated from plumbing parts; the head of Holy Mary Mother of God was a squat chromium faucet; the Christ Child was a lovingly assembled congestion of pipe fittings in a cardboard manger. A simple faith, thought Skelton unkindly, but it is mine.

He had a bowl of *fabada asturiana* at the Cacique and then a double Jim Beam across the street at the Anchor. There were foreign sailors leapfrogging down Duval Street, squealing and blocking traffic, until a huge black police lieutenant scattered them among the side streets. The sun went down and the light came up on the side of the La Concha Hotel.

Skelton wandered over to Eaton and sat on one of the benches donated by Mayor Papy, smoked a Canary Island cigar, waved to people he knew, and worried about guiding. He thumbed open Nichol Danceâ€™s date-book: â€œMr. and Mrs. Robert Rudleigh, Rumson, Connecticut.â€ Well.

Skelton tried quite earnestly to think about Mr. and Mrs. Robert Rudleigh of Rumson, Connecticut. He imagined a brick house where Revolutionary War soldiers had fired at the British, a house with grapeshot in the lintels, covered with vines, and into whose front door Mr. Robert Rudleigh went each winterâ€™s dusk, carrying an enormous newspaper and wearing a gray coat. â€œDarling,â€ he would have said to Mrs. Rudleigh, â€œit is time we had sport.â€ Then the Rudleighs go to the city of New York. They go to a great brown store where pictures of Theodore Roosevelt and stuffed heads of tigers adorn the walls. A well-mannered lesbian shows them â€œtropical outfitsâ€ which include mosquito netting, a bonefish rod, a pith helmet, and a prophylactic; all stapled to a large piece of cardboard upon which has been printed a â€œtropical scene,â€ the entire outfit protected by cellophane and displayed under a disinfecting ultraviolet light. Rudleighâ€™s motto is, â€œI pay, I take.â€ The city of New York and the town of Rumson know him for what he is: a marvel in a gray coat who sometimes walks chest deep through snowdrifts to get that enormous newspaper; and who only occasionally breaks a savage work pattern for sport in the tropics.

He pulled the bell on the gate, now locked, as it was not in his childhood; now barbed wire was stapled along the top of the wooden wall. As a child, he sat in the uncultivated end of the enclosed lot and listened to the chameleons rattling in the deep grass, crawled low in that grass and watched the lizards leap out green and tremulous into the streaked sunlight.

Lying on his back he had watched a spider let itself down forty feet from the Alexandria palm inch by inch over a period of hours; so that after watching until it had magnified to subsume the world, the sky itself seemed to radiate from its back. The spider, noxiously banana-shaped, landed on his face, walked away and thus vanished.

â€œCome in and leave that cigar in the driveway.â€

â€œCanâ€™t stop but a minute. I just wanted to say hi.â€

He walked over to the gauze canopy.

â€œEvening, Dad.â€

â€œTom.â€

â€œWhat are you doing?â€

â€œReading Shakespeare.â€

Skelton had come to associate the higher arts with his fatherâ€™s holing up in bed.

â€œI also have my violin in here,â€ he added.

Skelton could barely see inside; but after an instantâ€™s rustling about, a phrase from Sibelius flowed out through the gauze; then, imperceptibly blurred into Hank Williamsâ€™ *Lovesick Blues*. Skelton listened to those abject hillbilly strains a long moment, remembering his father on the porch in his Cuban chair so many years ago now, playing for his pals, fishermen, idlers, and crazies. The music stopped.

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â€œMaâ€™am, you want to hand me that lunch so I can stow it?â€ Skelton took the wicker basket from Mrs. Rudleigh; and then the thermos she handed him. â€œIâ€™ve got plenty of water,â€ he said.

â€œThatâ€™s not water.â€

â€œWhat is it?â€

â€œGibsons.â€

â€œLet me put them in the cooler for you thenâ€”â€

â€œWe put them in the thermos,â€ said Rudleigh, â€œso we donâ€™t have to put them in the cooler. We like them where we can get at them. In case we need them, you know, real snappy.â€

Tom Skelton looked up at him. Most people when they smile expose a section of their upper teeth; when Rudleigh smiled, he exposed his lower teeth.

â€œHold the thermos in your lap,â€ Skelton said. â€œIf that starts rolling around the skiff while Iâ€™m running these banks, Iâ€™ll throw it overboard.â€

â€œAn ecologist,â€ said Mrs. Rudleigh.

â€œAre you sure Nichol cannot appeal his sentence, Captain?â€ asked Rudleigh.

â€œIâ€™m sure,â€ said Skelton.

Mrs. Rudleigh reached out one hand and bent it backward so her fingernails were all in display; she was thinking of a killer line but it wouldnâ€™t come; so she didnâ€™t speak.

Skelton knew from other guides he could not let the clients run the boat for him; but he had never expected this; now all three of them were glancing past one another with metallic eyes.

Mrs. Rudleigh came and Skelton put her in the forward chair. Rudleigh followed in squeaking bright deck shoes and sat aft, swiveling about in the chair with an executiveâ€™s preoccupation.

â€œCaptain,â€ Rudleigh began. Men like Rudleigh believed in giving credit to the qualified. If an eight-year-old were running the skiff, Rudleigh would call him â€œCaptainâ€ without irony; it was a credit to his class. â€œCaptain, are we going to bonefish?â€ Mrs. Rudleigh was putting zinc oxide on her thin nose and on the actual edges of her precise cheekbones. She was a thin pretty woman of forty who you could see had a proclivity for hysterics, slow burns, and slapping.

â€œWe have a good tide for bonefish.â€

â€œWell, Missus Rudleigh and I have had a good deal of bonefishing in YucatÃ¡n and we were wondering if it mightnâ€™t be an awfully long shot to fish for permit.â€

Skelton knew it was being put to him; finding permitâ€™s big pompanoâ€™s was a guideâ€™s hallmark and he didnâ€™t particularly have a permit tide. â€œI can find permit,â€ he said though, finishing a sentence Rudleigh started with the word â€œCaptain.â€

Carter strolled up. He knew the Rudleighs and they greeted each other. â€œYouâ€™re in good hands,â€ he said to them, tilting his head toward Skelton. â€œBoyâ€™s a regular fish hawk.â€ He returned his head to the perpendicular.

â€œWhere are your people, Cart?â€ Skelton asked to change the subject.

â€œThey been partying, I guess. Man said heâ€™d be late. Shortens my day.â€

Skelton choked the engine and started it. He let it idle for a few minutes and then freed up his lines. The canal leading away from the dock wandered around lazily, a lead-green gloss like pavement.

â€œOught to find some bonefish in the Snipes on this incoming water,â€ Carter said. Skelton looked at him a moment.

â€œWeâ€™re permit fishing, Cart.â€

â€œOh, really. Why, permit huh.â€

â€œWhat do you think? Boca Chica beach?â€

â€œYour guess is as good as mine. But yeah okay, Boca Chica.â€

Skelton idled on the green tidal gloss of the canal until he cleared the entrance, then ran it up to 5,000 rpm and slacked off to an easy plane in the light chop. He leaned back over his shoulder to talk to Rudleigh. â€œWeâ€™re going to Boca Chica beach. I think itâ€™s our best bet for permit on this tide.â€

â€œFine, fine.â€

â€œI hate to take you there, a little bit, because itâ€™s in the landing pattern.â€

â€œI donâ€™t mind if the fish donâ€™t mind.â€

Skelton swung in around by Cow Key channel, past the navy hospital, under the bridge where boys were getting in some snapper fishing before it would be time for the military hospitals; then out the channel along the mangroves with the great white wing of the drive-in theater to their left, with an unattended meadow of loudspeaker stanchions; and abruptly around the corner to an expanse of blue Atlantic. Skelton ran tight to the beach, inside the boat-wrecking niggerheads; he watched for sunken ice cans and made the run to Boca Chica, stopping short.

The day was clear and bright except for one squall to the west, black with etched rain lines connecting it to sea; the great reciprocating engine of earth, thought Skelton, looks like a jellyfish.

â€œGo ahead and get ready, Mr. Rudleigh, Iâ€™m going to pole us along the rocky edge and see what we can see.â€ Skelton pulled the pushpole out of its chocks and got up in the bow; Rudleigh was ready in the stern behind the tilted engine. It took two or three leaning thrusts to get the skiff underway; and then they were gliding over the sand, coral, sea fans, staghorn, and lawns of turtle grass. Small cowfish, sprats, and fry of one description or another scattered before them and vanished in the glare.

Stone crabs backed away in bellicose, Pentagonian idiocy in the face of the boat's progress. Skelton held the boat into the tide at the breaking edge of the flat and looked for moving fish.

A few small sharks came early on the flood and passed down light, yellow-eyed and sweeping back and forth schematically for something in trouble. The first military aircraft came in overhead, terrifyingly low; a great delta-winged machine with howling, vulvate exhausts and nervous quick-moving control flaps; so close were they that the bright hydraulic shafts behind the flaps glittered; small rockets were laid up thickly under the wings like insect eggs. The plane approached, banked subtly, and the pilot glanced out at the skiff; his head looking no larger than a cocktail onion. A moment after the plane passed, its shock wave swept toward them and the crystal, perfect world of the flat paled and vanished; not reappearing until some minutes later and slowly. The draconic roar of the engines diminished and twin blossoms of flame shrank away toward the airfield.

"It must take a smart cookie," said Mrs. Rudleigh, "to make one of those do what it is supposed to."

"It takes balls for brains," said Rudleigh.

"That's even better," she smiled.

"Only that's what any mule has," Rudleigh added.

Mrs. Rudleigh threw something at her husband, who remained in the stern, rigid as a gun carriage.

Skelton was so determined that this first day of his professional guiding be a success that he felt with some agony the ugliness of the aircraft that came in now at shorter and shorter intervals, thundering with their volatile mists drifting over the sea meadow.

The Rudleighs had opened the thermos and were consuming its contents exactly as the heat of the day began to spread. Skelton was now poling down light, flushing small fish; then two schools of bonefish, not tailing but pushing wakes in their hurry; Rudleigh saw them late and bungled the cast, looking significantly at Mrs. Rudleigh after each failure.

"You've got to bear down," she said.

"I'm bearing down."

"Bear down harder, honey."

"I said: I'm bearing down."

Now the wading birds that were on the flat in the early tide were flooded out and flew northwest to catch the Gulf of Mexico tide. Skelton knew they had about lost their water.

"It's kind of slow, Captain," said Rudleigh.

"I've been thinking the same thing," Skelton said, his heart chilling within him. "I'm going to pole this out and make a move."

A minute later, he was running to Saddlebunch and got there in time to catch the incoming water across the big sand spot; he hardly had a moment to stake the skiff when the bonefish started crossing the sand. Now Mrs. Rudleigh was casting, driving the fish away. Rudleigh snatched the rod from her after her second failure.

"Sit down!"

Rudleigh was rigidly prepared for the next fish. Skelton would have helped him but knew in advance it would make things worse. He felt all of his efforts pitted against the contents of the thermos.

"You hawse's oss," said Mrs. Rudleigh to her husband. He seemed not to have heard. He was in the vague crouch of lumbar distress.

"I can fish circles around you, queen bee," he said after a bit. "Always could."

"What about Peru? What about Cabo Blanco?"

"You're always throwing Cabo Blanco in my face without ever, repeat, ever a word about Tierra del Fuego."

"What about Piñás Bay, Panama?"

"Shut up."

"Seems to me," she said, "that Raquel commented that the señor had a way of making the señor look real bum."

A small single bonefish passed the skiff. Rudleigh flushed it by casting right into its face. "Cocksucker."

"That's just the way you handled striped marlin. Right there is about what you did with those stripes at Rancho Buena Vista."

Rudleigh whirled around and held the point of his rod under Mrs. Rudleigh's throat. "I'm warning you."

"He had a tantrum at the Pez Maya Club in Yucatán," Mrs. Rudleigh told Skelton.

"Yes, ma'am. I see."

"Uh, Captain?"

"I'm right here, Mr. Rudleigh."

"I thought this was a permit deal."

"I'm looking for permit on this tide. I told you they were a long shot."

"Captain, I know about permit. I have seen permit in the Bahamas, Yucatán, Costa Rica, and at the great Belize camps in British Honduras. I know they are a long shot."

Skelton said, "Maybe your terrific familiarity with places to fish will tell us where we ought to be right now."

"Captain, I wouldn't presume."

A skiff was running just off the reef, making sheets of bright water against the sun.

"Do you know what today's tides are?" Skelton asked.

"No."

"Which way is the Gulf of Mexico?"

Rudleigh pointed all wrong. Skelton wanted to be home reading Proudhon, studying the winos, or copulating.

"Is that a permit?" Mrs. Rudleigh asked. The black fork of a large permit surfaced just out of casting range: beyond belief.

Rudleigh stampeded back into position. Skelton slipped the pole out of the sand and began to ghost quietly toward the fish and stopped. Nothing visible. A long moment passed. Again, the black fork appeared.

"Cast."

Rudleigh threw forty feet beyond the permit. There was no hope of retrieving and casting again. Then out of totally undeserved

luck, the fish began to change course toward Rudleigh's bait. Rudleigh and Mrs. Rudleigh exchanged glances.

"Please keep your eye on the fish." Skelton was overwhelmed by the entirely undeserved nature of what was transpiring. In a moment, the big fish was tailing again.

"Strike him."

Rudleigh lifted the rod and the fish was on. Skelton poled hard, following the fish, now streaking against the drag for deep water. The same skiff that passed earlier appeared, running the other direction; and Skelton wondered who it could be.

"God, Captain, will I be able to cope with this at all? I mean, I knew the fish was strong! But honest to God, this is a nigger with a hotfoot!"

"I'm still admiring your cast, darling."

Skelton followed watching the drawn bow the rod had become, the line shearing water with precision.

"What a marvelously smooth drag this reel has! A hundred smackers seemed steep at the time; but when you're in the breach, as I am now, a drag like this is the last nickel bargain in America!"

Skelton was poling after the fish with precisely everything he had. And it was difficult on the packed bottom with the pole inclining to slip out from under him.

His feeling of hope for a successful first-day guiding was considerably modified by Rudleigh's largely undeserved hooking of the fish. And now the nobility of the fish's fight was further eroding Skelton's pleasure.

When they crossed the edge of the flat, the permit raced down the reef line in sharp powerful curves, dragging the line across the coral. "Gawd, gawd, gawd," Rudleigh said. "This cookie is stronger than I am!" Skelton poled harder and at one point overtook the fish as it desperately rubbed the hook on the coral bottom; seeing the boat, it flushed once more in terror, making a single long howl pour from the reel. A fish that was exactly noble, thought Skelton, who began to imagine the permit coming out of a deep-water wreck by the pull of moon and tide, riding the invisible crest of the incoming water, feeding and moving by force of blood; only to run afoul of an asshole from Connecticut.

The fight continued without much change for another hour, mainly outside the reef line in the green water over a sand bottom: a safe place to fight the fish. Rudleigh had soaked through his khaki safari clothes; and from time to time Mrs. Rudleigh advised him to "bear down." When Mrs. Rudleigh told him this, he would turn to look at her, his neck muscles standing out like cords and his eyes acquiring broad white perimeters. Skelton ached from pursuing the fish with the pole; he might have started the engine outside the reef line, but he feared Rudleigh getting his line in the propeller and he had found that a large fish was held away from the boat by the sound of a running engine.

As soon as the fish began to show signs of tiring, Skelton asked Mrs. Rudleigh to take a seat; then he brought the big net up on the deck beside him. He hoped he would be able to get Rudleigh to release this hugely undeserved fish, not only because it was undeserved but because the fish had fought so very bravely. No, he admitted to himself, Rudleigh would never let the fish go.

By now the fish should have been on its side. It began another long and accelerating run, the pale sheet of water traveling higher up the line, the fish swerving somewhat inshore again; and to his terror, Skelton found himself poling after the fish through the shallows, now and then leaning over to free the line from a sea fan. They glided among the little hammocks and mangrove keys of Saddlebunch in increasing vegetated congestion, in a narrowing tidal creek that closed around and over them with guano-covered mangroves and finally prevented the boat from following another foot. Nevertheless, line continued to pour off the reel.

"Captain, consider it absolutely necessary that I kill the fish. This one doubles the Honduran average."

Skelton did not reply, he watched the line slow its passage from the reel, winding out into the shadowy creek; then stop. He knew there was a good chance the desperate animal had reached a dead end.

"Stay here."

Skelton climbed out of the boat and, running the line through his fingers lightly, began to wade the tidal creek. The mosquitoes found him quickly and held in a pale globe around his head. He waded steadily, flushing herons out of the mangroves over his head. At one point, he passed a tiny side channel, blocking the exit of a heron that raised its stiff wings very slightly away from its body and glared at him. In the green shadows, the heron was a radiant, perfect white.

He stopped a moment to look at the bird. All he could hear was the slow musical passage of tide in the mangrove roots and the low pattern of bird sounds more liquid than the sea itself in these shallows. He moved away from the side channel, still following the line. Occasionally, he felt some small movement of life in it; but he was certain now the permit could go no farther. He had another thirty yards to go, if he had guessed right looking at Rudleigh's partially emptied spool.

Wading along, he felt he was descending into the permit's world; in knee-deep water, the small mangrove snappers, angelfish, and baby barracudas scattered before him, precise, contained creatures of perfect mobility. The brilliant blue sky was reduced to a narrow ragged band quite high overhead now and the light wavered more with the color of the sea and of estuarine shadow than that of vulgar sky. Skelton stopped and his eye followed the line back in the direction he had come. The Rudleighs were at its other end, infinitely far away.

Skelton was trying to keep his mind on the job he had set out to do. The problem was, he told himself, to go from Point A to Point B; but every breath of humid air, half sea, and the steady tidal drain through root and elliptical shadow in his ears and eyes diffused his attention. Each heron that leaped like an arrow out of his narrow slot, spiraling invisibly into the sky, separated him from the job. Shafts of light in the side channels illuminated columns of pristine, dancing insects.

Very close now. He released the line so that if his appearance at the dead end terrified the permit there would not be sufficient tension for the line to break. The sides of the mangrove slot began to yield. Skelton stopped.

An embowered, crystalline tidal pool: the fish lay exhausted in its still water, lolling slightly and unable to right itself. It cast a delicate circular shadow on the sand bottom. Skelton moved in and the permit made no effort to rescue itself; instead, it lay nearly on its side and watched Skelton approach with a steady, following eye that was, for Skelton, the last straw. Over its broad, virginal sides a lambent, moony light shimmered. The fish seemed like an oval section of sky—yet sentient and alert, intelligent as tide.

He took the permit firmly by the base of its tail and turned it gently upright in the water. He reached into its mouth and removed the hook from the cartilaginous operculum. He noticed that the suddenly loosened line was not retrieved: Rudleigh hadn't even the sense to keep tension on the line.

By holding one hand on the permit's pectoral fins and the base of its tail, Skelton was able to move the fish back and forth in the water to revive it. When he first tentatively released it, it teetered over on its side, its wandering eye still fixed upon him. He righted the fish again and continued to move it gently back and forth in the water; and this time when he released the permit, it stayed upright, steadying itself in equipoise, mirror sides once again purely reflecting the bottom. Skelton watched a long while until some regularity returned to the movement of its gills.

Then he cautiously "for fear of startling the fish" backed once more into the green tidal slot and turned to head for the skiff. Rudleigh had lost his permit.

The line was lying limp on the bottom. Why didn't the fool at least retrieve it? With this irritation, Skelton began to return to normal. He trudged along the creek, this time against the tide; and returned to the skiff.

The skiff was empty.

\* Â Â Â \* Â Â Â \*

The search for the Rudleighs was long and exhausting. The only thing Tom Skelton could imagine was that they had gone wading for shells and been caught by the tide among the mangroves, unable to return to the skiff. Because of the variation in depths, he could not use the engine and had instead to continue poling among the little keys. His search was very thorough; and when he had finished with it, he was no longer able to imagine that the tide had caught them shelling. His mind began to cling to a sequence of horrific conjectures—water-swollen bodies tangled in the stems of brain corals, for instance; Ma and Pa Rudleigh goggling in Davey Jones's locker.

The sun was starting down; and to the west he could see the navy aircraft landing lights in the dusk. He simply could not think of another thing to do. He decided to return to the dock and contact the Coast Guard. He started the engine and ran toward Key West. The military aircraft were coming in with regularity, their lights streaming.

His hands were blistered, and hurt against the steering wheel. He quartered, down sea, running wide open, and the boat twisted sharply when the forefoot dug, twisting the wheel against his blistered hands.

Skelton landed the boat and tied it quickly; it was the end of his first day of professional guiding. He had no trophies to send to the taxidermist in Miami; he had lost both the fish and his clients.

He ran inside the bait shack. Myron Moorhen, the accountant, was sitting at the desk poring over long yellow sheets under a gooseneck lamp. "Cart said you was to come across the street soon as you came in. He's in the lounge."

"I've got a problem."

"That's what it's about."

Skelton looked at him for a long moment, then headed for Roosevelt Boulevard. It was a warm night, ready for rain, and the headlights on the street streamed a wet, lactic yellow while he waited to cross. He ran between cars, hearing sudden brakes, and ran into the entryway of the Sandpiper Lounge, stopping in the air-conditioned near-darkness to get his bearings.

The bar was in front of him, five rows of bottles against a mirror with a fluorescent light over them; and perhaps a dozen people at the bar. Beyond the bar were the rest rooms, marked with the profile of a ballerina on one, a top hat and cane on the other. Johnny Mathis sang from the jukebox, sounding as if he'd swallowed an intra-uterine coil.

Out of the men's room stepped Nichol Dance. He walked not very steadily to the bar and joined Cart, the Rudleighs, and Roy the dockmaster, whose bandages bulged his already enormous midriff.

Tom Skelton began to track back through his mind. He remembered the skiff passing in two directions off the reef line that afternoon. It would have been Cart and Nichol; he remembered back in the mangroves, on Nichol's fortieth suicide attempt, that talk about their overcrowded profession, only now, he realized, directed at him. Roy the dockmaster never died and Nichol never went to Raiford; and Tom Skelton was evidently no longer a guide.

Rudleigh spotted him standing in the doorway and saluted him with a cocktail.

Skelton turned quickly out of sight into the entryway, leaned against the cigarette machine a moment looking out onto the boulevard. It was dark and the rain had thrown a huge corolla around the moon. Skelton's mind had just locked and was letting the finest thin stream of information in, a little at a time. Over the low crown of hill in the gleaming road, the smeared yellow lights mounted and dropped toward him out of a canyon of useless small businesses and franchised outrages. When you were down and out in Hotcakesland, there were always monuments of smut upon which to rest the mind. He looked at his hands.

The heat burned up his neck and into his brain. A cocktail hostess late for work ran past in a wet raincoat, the wet heat of the night darting in against processed air. Then from the kitchen a figure passed, blurred underneath a tray of bright trembling jellies. Suddenly, Skelton's brain began to fill with violence. He calmed himself, leaned over and touched fingers to the buttons of the cigarette machine, Kools, Luckies, Silva thins, Marlboros; and considered.

This time, crossing, he had all the patience in the world for a clearing in the traffic. The rain came light and warm and vertical in windless air equally upon Skelton and upon the ocean and upon the boats along the Bight brightening under its fall. The corrugated roofs of the equipment sheds looked shining and combed; and the sky was translucent enough for the broad, watery moon to show through.

Myron Moorhen the accountant could still be seen through the window of the bait shack, scratching at a yellow sheet and running his fingers deep into his hair. "I've got a problem," Skelton had said. "That's what it's about," he said, bored but part of the joke.

To be a fool. A fool in one of Skelton's children's books had had a red, V-shaped mouth.

Skelton eased himself over the side of the dock next to the skiff into the warm water. Some phosphor glowed at his movement. He untied the skiff's lines.

When Skelton's father took to his bed, Skelton's grandfather raged through the house looking for something bad enough to say; all he could come up with was the accusation that Skelton's father was no fool. From afar, his father could be heard in healthy laughter; then, accompanying himself on the violin:

*"I'm an old cow hand,*

*Not an old cow foot!*"

And the grandfather raging in to smash the violin and Skelton's father holding him by the throat, shutting off his wind and asking with utmost loathing and mania, "Wouldn't someone drop Mister Pig Shit in the Gulf Stream for me?"

Now easing the skiff away from its mooring and listening for movement on the dock, Skelton could sometimes touch bottom, sometimes only tread water. He had a thirty-yard stretch of canal flooded by the security light next to the bait shack and when he cleared that he would be safe. A door opened and closed in the shack: Moorhen wandering out still staring at his yellow sheets. He headed across the street to the lounge. Skelton began to rush, to push with all he had, and to rush.

Darkness: a basin in the canal, the gentle pull of running tide, the moon overhead trying to drag him to sea. Merle Haggard says every fool has a rainbow. I am safe here. Skelton climbed aboard and looked back out of his bay of darkness. The boulevard was a lighted stage, cars entering and exiting in opposite directions. The lounge was upstage center; on its roof an enormous profile of a sandpiper, outlined in neon and ungodly in the mercury-vapor light from the street. Hotcakesland. It is all for sale, thought Skelton.

He pulled the fuel line out from under the gunwale, and cut it; then rocked the boat so the surge in the tank would force fuel onto the deck. Gasoline was quickly everywhere.

Skelton sat down to rest and wait for all the gas to flow. He opened the small dunnage box by the controls and took out a book of matches that read, he strangely noticed, *Hands tied because you lack a high school diploma?*; then the rag with which he had wiped down the deck when he refueled the skiff.

Out of the lounge, pausing momentarily beneath the neon beak of the sandpiper while traffic cleared, came the Rudleights, Carter, Nichol Dance, Roy the dockmaster, and Myron Moorhen the accountant. Skelton looked at them. A moment earlier they had streamed out of the land of frozen daiquiris, past a buffet table covered with molded fruit medleys, past the fifteen chromium selector levers of the cigarette machine, and into the cloacal American night. Skelton on his lunar, fetid inshore tide did not for the moment belong to the nation; except in the sense that the two principal questions of citizenship, *Will-I-be-caught?* and *Can-I-get-away?*, dominated his mind entirely, only slightly modified by the prime New World lunacy of getting from Point A to Point B.

They were moving toward the dock, all facing forward rather than toward each other, which was strange: the Rudleights were customers, and when you are around customers, you point your face at them. You are selling and they are buying.

Skelton was out of the skiff once more, matches in his mouth, oily rag in hand. He treaded water away from the skiff, keeping the rag high in the air; then he held himself in position, lit the balled-up rag, tossed it into the boat.

Flame zigzagged up and down the boat's interior with a sucking noise until the entire thing was afire. Low in the water and swimming through darkness toward the far side of the basin, Skelton could no longer see the five people crossing the street. Then suddenly they popped up on the dock. Carter and Dance boarded Carter's skiff and the engine started with a roar. They jumped the skiff up to planing speed, then shut down abruptly as Nichol Dance's skiff coughed into explosion, a ball of flame blowing flat out sideways through the hull, then up like liquid into the sky, pieces of the hull soaring up in the fountain, one piece sailing like a comet over the joyous face of Skelton, trailing flame and fire. Then the boat sank so abruptly that Carter and Dance vanished in the darkness like Skelton.

Skelton listened to the engine. The skiff rose up against the light of the boulevard, Carter at the wheel, Dance in the bow with a gun. Skelton didn't move.

The skiff traveled in a slow curve and vanished in the darkness between Skelton and the shore. The dim moon overhead and Skelton's lowness in the water kept him from seeing.

The skiff appeared once more against the light, very slowly; then modified its course in the narrow quarters so that Skelton could see they would find him if he did not think of something.

The skiff was coming toward him. He would submerge; but the boat was moving so very slowly that he would have to stay down for a good while; he had to judge the last minute. The skiff kept coming and at a range of fifty feet, the skiff against the light, Skelton submerged and gripped deeply into the bottom thinking giddily that if he grabbed an eel or sting ray he would have to hang on to it. He could hear the engine very well down here; and in a moment the skiff was overhead. Skelton looked up and saw the pearly trail from the engine, the skiff soaring against the moon, the shadow of Nichol Dance wavering past. Skelton's blood lagged in his brain.

The engine sang by. Skelton stayed on the bottom until he could bear to no longer and then surfaced. The skiff was transom toward him, heading for the dock, the water mercurial and brilliant in the security light.

The Rudleights "no one knew why" were slapping each other on the dock. The surprise of that helped guarantee Skelton's life. The two guides jumped ashore and separated them. Mrs. Rudleigh spat; her husband's hat was askew.

Meanwhile, Skelton was suffering spiritually what is known on commercial aircraft as "a sudden loss of cabin pressure"; and his discovery of the Rudleights' combat was like the dropping of the emergency oxygen mask into his lap. So he convinced himself that he was safe, forever really.

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Thomas Skelton, whose aim had been to be a practicing Christian, was now a little gone in the faith. But, he thought, no matter; and took some comfort to remember the Gospel according to St. Matthew: *Whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire.* Upon occasion, a man had to manufacture his own hell-fire, either for himself or others: as one kind of home brew for the spirit's extremer voyages.

When Skelton's grandfather most kindly bailed him out and Skelton had returned Jakey Roberts's copy of *Swank* to him and turned down his grandfather's doubtlessly well-meant suggestion that they talk, and gone home to his fuselage, his private stock of hell-fire began to rise as volatile as rubbing spirits from the surfaces of his life.

Thou fool.

The odds and ends that lay around the interior of the fuselage, formerly in a skein of intimate connections that did not exclude himself, all began to separate amid cool segments of space. He felt the precise bevel at which his teeth rested against each other; and his hands lay in his lap within an invisible display case.

Hold on now, he told himself, no barking. For two hours he managed the control he needed, sitting as quietly at his breakfast

table as a gyroscope. And then slowly the tramp of drilling winos passed through his leafy window; and he wept with gratitude. When he had finished that, the salt and pepper shakers rejoined themselves to the table; the skein of connections returned and his hands sweated in one another's grasp.

He stepped outside, out to his garden fence, into the heart of the uproar. Standing by the hedge of uncleared vegetation, oleander cresting up out of it around one scrawny but wildly productive lime tree, he was pointblank to the marchers lurching mustily from left to right, while the drill sergeant marched backward ahead of them, surveying their primitive efforts with apoplectic eyes. Directly in front of Skelton, a younger, livelier wino passed; and each time the command changed, this wino found himself separated a few more feet from the others. Partly it was that he threw a good deal of florid body English into his marching; after each command, he would hunch his shoulders suddenly and stylishly like Fred Astaire, and slope further out of line. Finally, the drill sergeant stopped everything and realigned the preoccupied marcher, addressing him as "Fuckah!" in a lyrical tenor.

This kind of punctuating sight welded Skelton to reality as succinctly as an accident; but it drifted gauzily from his mind and he was isolated once more behind the hedge, irritably blinded by the glare of light off the fuselage. As usual, he looked at the lines in his palms.

Now this too: if his grandfather had not been in such a goddamn hurry, he could have got a bondsman to make his bail and been done with the thing until his trial. Instead, there would have to be a conference with the old dizzard in which the shit was perfectly certain to hit the fan.

Finally, the younger wino was expelled from the march. He was out of breath.

"You're the one lives in the bomb," he said, pointing to the fuselage. Skelton nodded.

"Yes, that's me."

The young man said, raising his fingers to a seemingly deliquescent cheek: "My grandfather was decorated in the First World War."

"Oh yes?"

"Ask me why he was decorated."

"Why was he decorated?"

"I don't know."

Skelton thought: I want to live on the bottom of the sea. Nincompoops assault me in squads. The younger wino went off, taking the sergeant aside, and was pointing at Skelton; probably telling him: Commie, or meter smasher.

The sergeant came over. He had a peaceful, phlegmatic face, the face of a herbivore. "What's your game?" he asked.

"I'm a moonshiner."

"Well, more power to you. We're running a works of our own up in the joint there. I made the coil myself. Last batch I run off kicked the hydrometer out on the floor. It was like rocket fuel."

"I'd like to try it."

"I'd offer you a drop; but these useless mothers over here have went through it quick as snot on a bottle. A man went blind here before I took over the still. But I run a tight, clean ship."

Skelton looked over at the useless mothers. They were milling among fallen palm leaves, quite as lost as babies in the shadow of a half-boarded-up house with a moonshine works in its attic.

Well, thought Skelton, life looked straight in the eye was insupportable, as everyone knew by instinct. The great trick, contrary to the consensus of philosophy, is to avoid looking it straight in the eye. Everything askance and it all shines on.

But in general he felt recovered; or in any event, at rest in a reasonably cool aftermath. He went inside to take out the trash, adding everything conceivably trash to the contents of the galvanized barrel, including a painting Spacey Tracy, the Day-Glo Dago, had given him on Simonton Street, depicting a tall thermos bottle standing in a field of breath mints. This same artist had done a series of "contemporary" portraits of historical figures. Kafka as remittance man. Van Gogh clipping coupons by the sea. Dostoevsky with a four-foot string of credit cards. San Juan de la Cruz peering out of a condominium as though room service had used cheap Triple Sec in his margarita. Into the shitcan with everything ironic for the fun of it.

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Carter and Dance are in the bait shack and have told Myron Moorhen, the lickspittle accountant, to haul ass and give them the desk. They take one of his yellow legal sheets out and try to figure some way of salvaging Dance's winter guiding schedule even though he is no longer the owner of a guide boat. First they determine how long it will take to have a new skiff built up, how long the insurance will take to settle on the old one; as against the number of days that Carter is not booked and Dance is "so that Dance can use his skiff. "There will have to be a small usage charge," says Carter.

"Naturally, man."

"Lemme tote this here up now." He ran his fingernail up and down the columns of numbers.

"What do you come up with?"

"You look."

"Hm."

"Don't look good."

"Sure don't. It looks sorta rank."

"How're you fixed now, Nichol?"

Dance looked at him. "How'm I fixed?"

"That's what I ast."

"Cart, if turkeys was goin for one cent a pound I couldn't buy a raffle ticket on a jaybird's ass."

"Haw haw hawmmm."

"If ten cent'd buy a tuxedo for a elerfunt, I couldn't buy a T-shirt for a flea."

"Heeheehee. Okay now. Let's, seriously now!"

Anyone else could have seen that Carter didn't care about these jokes; and in his strenuous laughter for the benefit of a



man who had learned or stolen everything he knew and the very faintest yet palpable hint of the craven.

“Are you going to get around to doing something about that boy?” Carter asked; he liked Skelton well enough, but now by Christ things were getting to be an inconvenience.

“I’m in the hands of the law,” said Dance. “I mean not that I didn’t give some thought to shooting him. But since I failed to shoot myself that day, I’ve kinda had a loss of innerest in shooting anything else.”

“Heeheeheemmmm.”

“I might could take a notion though. If this brand of irritation runs on I mean. He wasn’t a bad kind of a kid.”

“He wanted to guide.”

“I know, I know.”

Suddenly Carter saw how to ingratiate himself. “We was just sendin him to the school of hard knocks, Nichol!”

Now it was Dance’s turn to laugh. The little joke was such a success that it pushed Carter clear through to the other side of his mild instinct for ingratiation. He thought again of Skelton and the schooling they had given him; and did not feel particularly good about it. Nevertheless, as a major-league brown-nose, he was unprepared to investigate the emotion.

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The phone rang and he ran back into the fuselage. It was his mother. “Your grandfather would like you to come over here after dinner tonight.”

“I’d just love to!”

“All right now.”

“I’ll be there, Ma, with bells on.”

“But be here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“The French have a word for it,” remarked his grandfather, his back toward the woman as he mixed a drink; presently he turned and proffered the grog. “I call it pussy.” His hands closed before him in a prayerful shape.

“I know you do, Goldsboro.”

They were in old man Skelton’s exercise room, whose variety of health machines seemed compromised by the presence of a well-stocked bar.

“I call it that because it is candid to call it that and I am a candid man because I have nothing to hide.”

“You won’t get a whole lot of agreement about that in Key West, Goldsboro,” said the lady. She was fifty and heavy. Her name was Bella Knowles. Her husband, an insurance broker who dabbled in gunrunning, now made his home on the Isle of Pines.

He said, “I was trying out that tone before I talk to my grandson. I have got to set that little smartbutt on the straight and narrow or he will end up in a bassinet like his old man.”

“You should have let him go to jail rather than hang out with charter-boat fishermen.”

“Hurry up with your drink. I’m fixing to carry on.” He sat on the edge of the trampoline that dominated the room. Light from high, milky windows flooded into the little gym.

“I’ll sip as long as I please.”

“Long as you sip fast!”

“You’re talking to a lady and the only one you’ll ever get.” Goldsboro Skelton rolled the medicine ball off the tremulous surface of the trampoline; it slumped to the floor.

“Well!”

The strange couple—the etiolated, successful crook and the rounded helpmeet of an imprisoned gunrunner—undressed without ceremony, the rickety and the ample in curious counterpart as they bent to slide off socks.

Playfully, Goldsboro Skelton, Cuban bullet holes still dimpling his hind end, mounted the trampoline and began to hop around, veinous fists clenched next to his ears in simple heroics. Now he was making some fairly impressive leaps, not ignored by Bella Knowles. She joined him.

At first they bounced in an irregular pattern, Skelton going up at the moment Bella touched down. They stopped for a moment toe to toe and fiddled with one another, and then began to bound again, this time in the same rhythm. As they each looked at the leaping and speeding against the far wall, Goldsboro Skelton was an arrow of capability to Bella Knowles, a pinksurge of desire.

Beneath them, the black iron perimeter of the trampoline enlarged and contracted with their bounds. The thousands of springs that held its canvas surface squeaked like lemmings, unlubed harquebus locks or tholepins.

Then they collided, recoiled apart, bounced each unequally through high air to a delirium of limbs, glanced off the trampoline, and crashed to the floor.

They lay without motion. Reassured gym flies began to whirl in the light of the high windows once more. At that moment, Goldsboro Skelton’s grandson was reading the part in Pliny’s *Natural History* where the swell of tide at moon’s rising among the stars is described. And in other respects, life went on, though it seemed largely unassured here in the gym.

Presently Goldsboro Skelton began to crawl immediately behind his own nosebleed toward Bella Knowles. When he got to her he looked at her open eyes above the terribly fattened lip. Skelton staggered to his feet for a glass of water, which he held tenderly to her mouth. “The French have a word for this,” he remarked with some preoccupation.

“What is it, you cheesy piece of bung fodder?” Bella Knowles inquired.

\* \* \* \* \*

At dusk, the light can’t get much past Carlos’s market on Elizabeth Street; so when you walk down Eaton to go to Skelton’s mother’s house, and look down William Street or Elizabeth Street, the shrimp boats are crowded hugely in the

shadow of those streets while the clouds of gulls above them soar in sunlight; and on the corners, palm leaves that are piled for pickup and that rattle all day with lizards in the warmth now are cool and quiet.

When you pass the corner of Simonton, the mail trucks are backed up to bays that are closed with corrugated doors, and at least one boy is doing a figure eight in the quiet parking lot on his bicycle; and the glass and iron pineapples on the gate at the Carriage Trade look like scarabs held in old silver.

Duval Street, crowded and Latin all day, now seems filled with space and breeze, serenely modified by a taxicab spinning along in golden light; and the ticket seller at the dirty-movie house graciously promises the drill sergeant "no less than twenty fuck scenes." From a boat, Key West would seem to have shrunk once more unto the sea. And the few boats that have gone out to night drift for tarpon in the channels carry their red and green running lights through the blackness sweetly.

Dinner would still be transpiring at his parents' house, borne upon crazy accusations by his grandfather and Dada rebuttals by his father; his mother taking a view not less than Olympian of this particular, by now ancient, squabble.

So Skelton slipped into their garage and got his fishing rod, walked half a block to the corner of Front Street to the Dos Amigos bar, had a single bourbon and water, shot one maladroito game of eight-ball with a counterrevolutionary Cuban shrimper who claimed to be able to navigate from here to the north coast of Haiti without chart or sounding because "I am a Key West captain"; then took up his rod and crossed Front Street at last light and walked down to the pocket beach that lay between the fabric factory and Tony's restaurant.

It was dark and warm as summer, and tarpon were assailing bait under the restaurant lights; there were maybe a couple of dozen fish striking the lit-up water and shrimp were clearing the water completely and kicking out into the darkness.

Directly above the fish, on the corner of a balustrade, a man in a white dinner jacket was pressing at a girl in a gown, hauling her against the iron balcony, mashing into her with his face and holding his cocktail perfectly balanced out over the ocean without looking at it.

"Natalie."

"Gordon."

Skelton climbed out onto the transom of a half-beached skiff and chopped a cast right into the working bait from his lair in the darkness. He made one strip and came up tight on a tarpon. The heavy fish just held its own a moment, trying to think what had happened; then it vaulted high and terrific into the light, right up clear to where its gills rattled alongside the balustrade.

Gordon spun; and Natalie dropped her jaw. Gordon glanced ornery into his empty glass, looked at Skelton's line trailing into the darkness, and led Natalie to an empty table inside, his moment quite gone.

Skelton cupped the reel handles, broke the fish off, reeled up; and headed back to the house feeling an exquisite synthesis of spirit and place. His grandfather would possibly be there with his secretary, Bella Knowles, rotating her wry, discerning face and the spit curls that had adorned her temples for nearly forty years. Skelton wondered how many gallons of saliva that must have required.

He walked in through the gate without knocking. At the end of the porch, he could see his grandfather without his secretary eating in the lighted breakfast room. His father was on the porch, beneath his netting; with the television shoved under one end. He pulled up an iron chair and sat next to his father, who in a moment glanced at Skelton and said, "Green Bay missed the extra point." A few minutes later, he leaned forward and turned down the sound. "Green Bay has got great flankers," he told his son. "But Jesus, Macarthur Lane is some running-back. He's got these lateral moves right at the line of scrimmage that don't seem physically possible. Watch now: this close to the end zone, the linebackers will be keying off the running-backs. Touchdown. The linebackers keyed off the running-backs; but the quarterback threw the ball.

"I'll be a sonofabitch," said his father. He looked at his son. "Do me a favor."

"Name it."

"Get off the violence. You're too romantic to be any good at it. This bird Dance will eat you alive. He knows how to do violence and you're a dilettante at it."

Skelton thought with some admiration that Dance's trick had been a well-organized bit of cruelty. The touch of authenticity had been the story of Charlie Starkweather, who Skelton remembered as a kind of anachronistic dry-gulch artist running through the West; who got wired to a Nebraska utility outlet in a metal chair by officials of the republic. Restaurants darkened and Starkweather went off like a flashbulb at Tricia's wedding. It reduced his bulk through vaporization. He no longer fitted the electrical collar. They found him in the goodbye room like a wind-torn 1890 umbrella. A year later he might have grown Virginia creeper like a grape stake. After each electrocution, the officials of the republic get together for a real down-home Christian burial out of that indomitable American conviction that even God likes fried food.

"I didn't know you had this affection for violence," said his father as humor, studying his eyes gone vague beneath his Starkweather revery.

"I don't."

"Had you been emotionally forced into it?"

"More or less."

"Are you going to admit it?"

"No. I'm not going to pay for it either."

"I can't imagine this happening among scientists."

"I'm not a scientist and I'm not going to be one. It takes all the brains I've got to figure out where game fish keep themselves."

"And you never got into these cross fires until you started reading French poets. Furthermore, when your grandfather offered to bail you out, you didn't make yourself plausible to him by asking him to bring your Apollinaire instead."

"Well, he didn't know what I was talking about. Jakey Roberts gave me his copy of *Swank* and I read a short history of Spanish fly instead of *L'Amour et la Mort*."

"Those frog lunatics have produced a generation of destructive adlepatas to which I fear you are appending yourself. Though I'd prefer it to your fiddling with dope, it's a narrow choice."

Little does he know, thought Skelton.

The two men laughed; possibly close to tears. Skelton peeled up one end of the netting and twisted it over the corner of the frame. "That's not true." He could look at his father.

"What's not?" his father asked.

"About Apollinaire and the others."

"Don't you think?"

"I'd say Nietzsche produced more addlepates."

"What about Gurdjieff and Ouspensky?"

"What about Kahlil Gibran?"

"What about Tex Ritter?" And so on through Father Coughlin, Darius Milhaud, Stockhausen, Donald Duck, Baba Ram Dass, Lenin, a certain B&W 1/4rgermeister in a Milwaukee beer ad, guitar fops from the hideous 1960s, Thomas Edison and more laughter. Then, mock serious, his father took up his violin and played the opening of *Corrinne Corrina* hillbilly style and beautiful. Skelton lit a powdery Dutch cigar and listened in a swoon of those sad clodhopper strains, dying day, newspaper boys yelling faintly as they filled their baskets; a swoon that was as much as anything a part of his more than trifling instinct for some kind of topographical perspective upon his own life, as against a vision of cycling chemicals in a closed system that somehow never explained the attrition of the things that ail you.

He could hear the quarterback now calling signals in the new style: "Blue! Right! Get back! Eighty! Red!" *Snap*. The play was underway. The quarterback rolled out in a fake draw.

\* \* \* \* \*

Skelton's grandfather stepped onto the porch in a fog of cooking smells and looked across at the two of them talking with an air of reconnaissance. He made a minute adjustment of his shoulders before coming over.

"What happened to your nose, Gramp?" Skelton asked. His grandfather raised fingers to the swollen bridge.

"Damn trunk lid on my Coupe de Ville popped up and got my beezer."

A hand reached out of the bed, tugged the mosquito netting free, and drew it down over the opening. A moment later, they heard the television; Green Bay had the ball on their own forty-nine.

"Guess who I just had a drink with," said the grandfather to Skelton.

"Can't."

"Nichol Dance."

"Ah, then."

"Now I had had a look into that boy's insurance situation and learned he wasn't going to be out a dime. So, I told him if he wanted you in court I would see him in hell first but I would at least run him clean out of Monroe County on a rail. I asked him, I said, 'Mr. Dance, are you a gambler?' And he said no he was not and so I told him, 'Mr. Dance, let the insurance company handle your woes.' I had backed myself up with a transcript of his criminal record. I suppose you know he is vicious."

"I guess I did."

"Anyway, he is a lively boy with a mean streak in him. But he listens to reason. He's part of the community and so he'll have to do like I told him."

"Do you want a chair?"

"No." "Now what were you doing with his boat?"

"Guiding."

"You haven't dropped that yet?"

"Not going to."

"How much would it cost to have your own boat?"

"About four grand if you have it built and powered right."

"You want me to stake you?"

"Sure. Ha. Ha."

"How would you pay me back? And don't laugh so fast."

"Out of my guiding fees."

"I'd doubt that except Dance told me you'd make a great skiff guide. I guess you're on."

When Skelton's grandfather meant every word he was saying, he talked to you belly to belly, eyes looking through yours; if he had a drink, he crimped it high and close and emphasized his sentences by the gentle knuckle bumps against your sternum. He was a winning man, so far from schizophrenia that a thousand pitiful losers knew no more than to give him their money. Skelton's father, listening, said, "Generation after generation, the blind leading the blind. It gives them something to do."

\* \* \* \* \*

In his back yard and under a tortuous, unleafed poinciana, Nichol Dance was removing slabs of amberjack from a tray of brine and laying them across rough wire racks inside a gutted refrigerator that he used as a smoker. He was feeling stupid, real dumb in fact.

He had a good little fire of buttonwood coals going and the rich dark amberjack would smoke down to just the right moisture. But he was making work for himself, filleting and brining all that fish meat; and, in general, not feeling very bright, maybe even, you know, *dumb*.

What I need, he thought, is some credence; because damned if I'm not getting pushed out of shape around here. Skiff all burnt to shit and that old crud telling me to wait on the insurance. *Damn*.

And now work to do. Bad but necessary work to do based on his and Carter's dismal, yes he saw that now, dismal and stupid joke that he as well as anybody knew was so steeped in locker-room fatuity that when it backfired and his boat went up in flames, he and Cart, unable to escape the joke, had instead to hunt all over that canal, pistol in hand tumid with their own shared

rage, vacant as any emotion based in property.

But Dance was convinced that there was a necessity independent of what was right. Sometimes you did a wrong thing but then it was done and there you were. Damned if you weren't so best thing was, just rest your ass. The time to take your lumps would soon enough be at hand. Dance wished he hadn't set Skelton up like he had; but it was done and now he had to follow through. He thought he was a nice enough boy. Nichol Dance *truly* hoped he wouldn't have to waste him.

So the pistol was slipped into the front of his pants, butt to the right, and a short-sleeved shirt (blue porpoises on a white background) outside his trousers concealed it all. Naturally, the pistol was uncomfortable; but it was credence and collateral in the most liquid form he knew. It answered the problem of what came in handy when you had to follow through.

He stopped on the way out and looked at himself in the oval hall window. What's happening to this boy? he wondered.

Sometimes, he thought, you just wander around not feeling very smart and your clothes aren't sharp and your car is a loser and you know you haven't done a thing you will be remembered for and you haven't got no more sense than a curbstone nor brains enough to come in out of the rain or quit playing the dumb gags that only lead from one atrocity to the next. And you *just feel dumb*.

In the drive, he stopped and felt the south wind lifting the trees, warm as Cuba, and knew the fish were rolling in the channels, young moon and easy tides. It's a boy without a future, he thought with a smile. I bought a Ford when I should've bought a Chevrolet.

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Skelton and Miranda met at Mallory pier for sunset. A red sun was palpably completing its arc to the left of Man and Woman keys; in another couple of months, it would drop off by Mule and Archer keys. It would be hours after dinner and scratch-baseball games would be audible all through the city. Now a crowd of freaks waited for this thing to happen.

Are you still upset?

About your old boyfriend? No. Not too much. Will I always have to be used to that?

Not if it's important.

There was an old converted liberty ship, now of Grand Cayman registry. A cucumber boat, someone said. It was moored at the fuel dock. Three muscular men in T-shirts hung over the fantail looking at the sunset hippie girls loose-titted in their ersatz Oshkosh By Gosh work rags. The conch-salad man glided by yelling When you're hot you're hot! When you're not, you're not! to strengthen his claims for the aphrodisiacal qualities of the conch salad he sold from the front basket of his bike.

Self he's right about that conch salad, Skelton said, it's the last thing these crazy fuckers need.

The hot red sun began to penetrate the pale curve of sea, flaring optically at the thin line of division; the line gradually rose until only the smallest flame rested on the horizon; and snuffed. Applause rose.

Come to my place tonight, said Skelton.

Self you'd like.

They walked up Caroline and cut across Margaret to Skelton's block. There was a south wind and Skelton was saying that with these new-moon tides there ought to be some fish moving. Miranda told him that she thought she said it pleasantly that he ought to be able to enjoy a south wind, the new moon, and swimming fish without having to go out and catch something.

Pretty esoteric.

What kind of music are you going to woo me with?

Pachanga from Radio Free Habana.

Miranda had a springy step. Let us compare her mouth, thought Skelton, to a delicate section of tangerine. Who said that kissing was sucking on a thirty-foot tube the last five feet of which were full of shit? It was not to the point who said it. Right frame of mind, he thought, surreptitiously looking at the lovely young girl, bite on either end.

Pausing sternly across from Key West Oxygen and Ambulance, Skelton swept Miranda into his arms and sucked at the tangerine-like end of the thirty-foot tube, never heeding what might have been at its other end, doubtless rising slowly toward his mouth.

They turned into Skelton's lane; where a car was parked at the lane's junction with Margaret Street. Skelton walked another twenty feet before he stopped and looked back at the car. Its frenched headlights, bubble skirts, dummy baby spotlights, tinted glass, bull-nosed hood, and rust declared it to be Nichol Dance's.

Miranda, you're gonna have to go.

How come? I just walked ten blocks.

Can't take the chance, said Skelton half to himself.

Shall I have my tubes tied?

That isn't what I mean, he said, staring past and around the car. The truth is, Miranda, there's a man around here belongs to that car who doesn't like me.

You're worried.

I really am. Maybe he was.

Wouldn't you like me to wait.

I don't think so.

Okay, be careful.

It's not that serious, Miranda. It certainly may not be, in any case.

Okay.

I hate to miss out, I mean.

You'll get another shot, she said, adding though, Possibly not. She started down the lane for Margaret Street. Now Skelton just put his hands in his pockets and thought, Where is that sly mother hiding himself.

The shadows lay this way and that, the way a tide will carry on a particularly shaped bottom, bulging and deepening and only