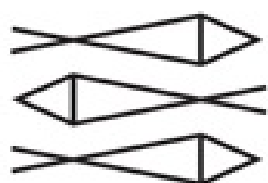


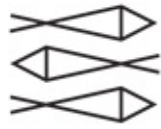
NINETY-TWO
IN THE SHADE

THOMAS McGUANE



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for Beck for Beck for Beck

“Man is excellently made and eagerly lives the kind of life that is being lived.”

MIKHAIL ZOSHCHENKO

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 of 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 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 to 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 sandwiches 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 stone illuminated reef, he saw that he would have to find a way of going on.

* * *

Carter had a skiff like Nichol Dance's but where Carter's would high-center on a shallow bar, 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 Fair-lane 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'n's the one whas 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 the 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 emp

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.

* * *

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 "thin 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 hole 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 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 shoot himself.”

“Now look here, fucker, I didn’t come here to be sassed—”

“Neither did I.”

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

“*Fucker,*” he said, “*I don’t seem to have your attention!*”

Carter said, “You have rattled the boy. Now let’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, “But we’ve kept so many from crowding our trade, it discourages me come across a hard case.” Then he smiled radiantly.

“I’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, “Then why don’t you do the little thing?”

“I think he means to,” said Carter. “Now let’s run before the sun sets.”

Nichol Dance said to Carter, “Let 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 crawfishermen’s wheel track—wandering trough perhaps two feet wide—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 boats' 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 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.

"Leave it at the fuel dock," said Dance now blearier than ever but still letting a thin devilish grin 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 Dance's eyebrows once more. Behind them, Carter was just now mooring and Tom Skelton's brain was tumid with uncommitted navigational errors.

"Why my God," said Roy, "the original survivor."

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

"I mean, what makes folks keep signing up on these rescue missions?" Roy inquired. "Or is it to 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.

"What ails you?" said Nichol Dance.

"Ails me?"

Roy, the dockmaster, twice Nichol Dance's size, with the fame of maddened rages on his side, said: "Nichol, 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 Skelton'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, "Call a doctor for this New Jersey arc-welder polack." 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, "Better get some law in here too before I think to wind this bug fucker's clock."

He looked at Roy.

"Roy, I'd go to Raiford Prison over you, if I needed."

“I 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 ski “I will call you from the joint as to what cut from your proceeds would be usual.”

“How did you pick me?”

“If I gave the bookings to Cart, I’d lose them. Anybody you’d guide I’m going to get back.”

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

* * *

“I can remember,” said Skelton’s Mother, “that 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 *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’ 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.

* * *

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 delicate emblematic subdivision of light.

It was cool in there, a house holding a beloved woman, the aural penetrations of a Cuban sidewalk 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 aisle, 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 the
as an unspeakable public 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, "... Miranda..." so that the
front-room quiet fell across everything like an eclipse.

"Tom?"

"Yes..."

"I'm making love. Wait out there till I'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
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
open and close in the room, tenebrous as a bird's claw. But by the time his nose numbed and his thro
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 itse
against the Atlantic like a ship of terrible slow movement. The chrysalis he sometimes felt inside wa
beginning to shed and stream quite lambently.

"Tom?"

"Ah, Miranda."

"Are you blown away?"

"A little."

"Because you were upset?"

"Yes."

"This is Michael."

"I'm sorry," said Michael.

"That's all right. Did you have a nice time?"

"Yes, very."

"Well, that's fine."

Michael said, "I've got a plane to make."

"Well, good to see you and it's fine with me that you had a nice time ... and uh that there is

plane for you to make...”

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

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

“Michael going out.”

“Sounded like the house falling down.”

“Tom, I had this incredible orgasm.”

“Do 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. The one hurt too; fragments of a life presumed dead. When would the light come. He would have to wait for that pale cocaine edge pale like acetylene flame. And how could you dream of The Garden when when 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 glacé 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 I 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 Circuit 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 blowing 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, the slippage of control systems, the cocaine express. Mild enough on the face of it, he had known it other days to be the first step on the ride to the O.D. Corral. It was a family tradition to go to

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. 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 she 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. Quietly, 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.”

* * *

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 wall. He 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

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 hymens, 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.

* * *

Skelton would not have picked a fuselage in a vacant lot next door to a rummy hotel if he had had his 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."

"Okay. I'll get by."

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 José Martí 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 "Los Caballeros de la Luz," 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 skiff delivery boy of eternity'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 the downwind side streets with the smell of ocean at its most fecund, he could grow quite frantic about it.

Today's revelations, the skiff and the bookings, he paid into his system slowly, having what he wanted.

He walked to his family'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 and 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-floor

porch was his father in his bed, covered by a gauzy mosquito canopy, his grandfather in a Cuban wicker chair beside.

“How are things?” he asked his mother.

“Fine.”

“Mother, how are they?”

“Go over and talk to them.”

“Evening, Grandpa.”

“Tom.”

“How’re you feeling, Dad?”

“He feels perfectly well,” volunteered the grandfather.

“If no one will get that asshole out of here,” said the muted figure inside the gauze, “I will shit my pants and die on purpose.”

“Do it!” said the grandfather. “You malingering well enough.”

“Grandpa.”

“Every doctor in Key West says it is in his head—”

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

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

“Someone run shit pig into the Gulf Stream,” said Skelton’s father. The grandfather stood and dashed into the gauze before Skelton forcibly seated him again.

“Go ahead,” said the grandfather, drawing his glass of rum from under the chair. “Gang up.”

“Come on now, Grandpa.”

“Got a job yet, bright boy?”

“I’m starting.”

“At what?”

“Guiding.”

“Terrific. I’ll see you at the Red Doors with the rest of the drunken charter-boat captains.”

“I won’t be at the Red Doors. And I’m skiff-guiding anyway. Also, when did you join the lecture tour?”

“Throw the old fart’s ass over the wall,” said Skelton’s father.

“I’m hungry!” the old man bellowed toward the kitchen. Then in a hushed voice, “Look! Look! He’s playing dead.”

Skelton stood by the canopy. His father seemed to have passed. “Dad?”

“Let me go.” A stertorous sigh issued from the youthful-looking man. He sat up suddenly and looked all about his familiar surroundings. “Piss.”

“Not so easy there, is it now?” chuckled the grandfather.

Mrs. Skelton came to the door of the porch: “Soup’s on!”

“What are we having?” the grandfather inquired.

“You’ll like it.”

“What are we having?”

“Jewfish chowder.”

“I’m leaving. I can’t eat that. I can’t eat nigger food.”

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 anything? *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 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,” Nichol Dance said. “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 shrimper *Marquesa*. In years past he was the boon companion and, 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 a 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 racial 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; 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 legions of 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 everybody 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."

"I'm always telling you that. I'll tell you another time..." Skelton never got an answer to the question.

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.”

“It’s a Lantana.”

“No sir, a Desco, out of St. Augustine. I bought it off of David Rawlin’s widow the year he died. 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,

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