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# Triggerfish Twist

**Tim Dorsey**

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# ***Dedication***

*For Henry and Linda Losey*

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## *Epigraph*

It takes a village.  
—*Hillary Clinton*

It takes a village idiot.  
—*Don Imus*

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Also by Tim Dorsey

Copyright

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## Prologue

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**M**Y NAME IS EDITH GRABOWSKI. I'm eighty-one years old, and I had sex last night. I wanted to tell you that up front and get it out of the way because that's what all the TV people want to know. They giggle and use cute nicknames for sex when they ask. I don't think they're getting any.

I'd never been on national TV in my life before last week, and now I've been on six times in five days. In a few minutes, it'll be seven.

I'd also never been to Los Angeles. We're in the greenroom right now, but my husband, Ambrose, says it's blue. He's wrong, but I don't say anything. That's how you make a marriage last.

We're newlyweds. But you knew that already unless you've been on another planet or just come out of a coma. We were married on the *Today* show by Al Roker, because he has a notary license. They say ratings went through the roof. We're rich now, too.

One of those network hospitality ladies in a blue blazer is asking me if I'm okay again. Do I want a pillow or some juice? I tell her I'm fine. She pats my hand and smiles that stupid false smile that stewardesses give you when you're getting off the plane. You just want to smack her.

They usually want to know about the sex right after they ask how on earth we stayed alive. They still can't believe we didn't all die. What's not to believe? We just...

Uh-oh, here comes another woman in a blazer. This one's blond. Am I all right? Of course I'm all right! I can take care of myself. That's how I got to be eighty-one. I'd like to see *you* make it. And don't touch me!

It's like this every time, every show. Just because I'm eighty-one, they treat me like some kind of magical little pet that can only understand four simple commands and will crap itself if they don't watch out. I'm the one who gets the most questions on camera because I say what's on my mind. Fifteen years ago I was just pushy, but now I'm a "character" or a "live wire."

The networks go nuts over any story where an old person shows spunk. That's why you hear so much about Florida these days. They might as well just move their studios down there. Seems every other month one of us from the bingo hall makes the rounds of the TV shows. Last time it was the seventy-six-year-old woman from Boca Raton who bit the pit bull.

That's true. She was walking her poodle, Mr. Peepers—TV made a big deal about the name—and some lovely neighbors raising pit bulls in their backyard car-chassis farm left the gate open. Anyway, the pit bull wouldn't let go of Mr. Peepers, so she bit its ear and it ran off yelping. The way the media reacted, you'd have thought she cured cancer or invented a car that ran on tap water.

So I guess it's my turn. I don't mind telling the story again, but they always bring up the sex, like at the mere mention of it I'm going to do a handspring for them.

Or maybe: "Yippeeeeeee!"

I shouldn't complain. I'm having the time of my life. I'm married to the man of my dreams. I've had a crush on Ambrose since I was seventy-eight.

They just told us to get ready here in the greenroom. They say we're about to go on. We have notecards about possible questions. About what kind of neighborhood it was.

They say it was such a quiet neighborhood. It's *always* a quiet neighborhood. Then the whole place goes berserk and everyone acts surprised. But they shouldn't. If you ask me, it's just people. Even the quietest streets are just two or three arguments away from a chain-reaction meltdown.

We can hear the audience applauding. They want the story. Can't say I blame 'em. So did we.

mean, me and my girlfriends—we were just trying to stay alive. We didn't see a tenth of what was going on. Same with everyone else. Things were happening all over the place. Everyone only saw a small part of the whole picture, but we were able to compare notes at the rehearsal dinner and pretty much piece it together. The entire wedding party was involved in some way. My bridesmaids were all with me, trapped as we were. Ambrose probably saw as much as anyone, riding up front in the black car chase after the shootout. His best man was Jim Davenport. Poor Jim Davenport. He was such a nice, gentle man. Still is, but I don't think he's ever going to be right again. It was just one thing after another; I don't know how he held up. The ushers, Ambrose's neighbors—they saw a good bit, too. Then there was Serge. Serge had actually been Ambrose's first choice for best man, but nobody knows where he disappeared to after the gunfire started, and the explosions and all the car wrecks and the electrical transformers blowing up and strippers running naked in traffic and nearly half the city burning down.

They just gave us the one-minute signal in the greenroom.

Well, story time again. Probably the best place to start is Jim Davenport, seeing as he was in the middle of almost everything that went wrong.

Yeah, we'll start there.

And I guess we should start with the one question everyone's asking these days. Not just the TV people, but folks everywhere. They all ask the exact same thing...I'll shut up now and let the narrator take over.



SO WHAT'S UP WITH FLORIDA?

Talk about a swing in reputation. Forty years ago the Sunshine State was an unthreatening View Master reel of orange groves, alligator wrestlers, tail-walking dolphins and shuffleboard.

Near the turn of the millennium, Florida had become either romantically lawless or dangerously stupid, and often both: Casablanca without common sense, Dodge City with more weapons, the state that gave you the Miami Relatives on the evening news every night for nine straight months and changed the presidential election with a handful of confetti. Consider that two of the most famous Floridians in recent years have been Janet Reno and the Anti-Reno, Secretary of State Katherine Harris. Is there no middle genetic ground?

And yet they keep coming to Florida. People who maintain such records report that every single day, a thousand new residents move into the state. The reasons are varied. Retirement, beaches, affordable housing, growing job base, tax relief, witness protection, fugitive warrants, forfeiture laws that shelter your house if you're a Heisman trophy winner who loses a civil suit in the stabbing death of your wife, and year-round golf.

On a typical spring morning in 1997, five of those thousand new people piled into a cobalt-blue Dodge Aerostar in Logansport, Indiana. The Davenports—Jim, Martha and their three children—watched the moving van pull out of their driveway and followed it south.

A merging driver on the interstate ramp gave Jim the bird. He would have given him two birds, but he was on the phone. Jim grinned and waved and let the man pass.

Jim Davenport was like many of the other thousand people heading to Florida this day, except for one crucial difference. Of all of them, Jim was hands-down the most nonconfrontational.

Jim avoided all disagreement and didn't have the heart to say no. He loved his family and fellow man, never raised his voice or fists, and was rewarded with a lifelong, routine digestion of small doses of humiliation. The belligerent, boorish and bombastic latched onto him like strangler figs.

He was utterly content.

Then Jim moved his family to Florida, and before summer was over a most unnatural thing happened. Jim went and killed a few people.

None of this was anywhere near the horizon as the Davenports began the second day of the southern interstate migration.

The road tar at the bottom of Georgia began to soften and smell in the afternoon sun. It was Saturday, the traffic on I-75 thick and anxious. Hondas, Mercurys, Subarus, Chevy Blazers. A blue Aerostar with Indiana tags passed the exit for the town of Tifton, SOD CAPITAL OF THE USA, and a billboard: JESUS IS LORD...AT BUDDY'S CATFISH EMPORIUM."

A sign marking the Florida state line stood in the distance, then the sudden appearance of palm trees growing in a precise grid. The official state welcome center rose like a mirage through the waves off the highway. Cars accelerated for the oasis with the runaway anticipation of traffic approaching a Kuwaiti checkpoint on the border with Iraq.

They pulled into the hospitality center's angled parking slots; doors opened and children jumped

out and ran around the grass in the aimless, energetic circles for which they are known. Parents stretched and rounded up staggering amounts of trash and headed for garbage cans. A large Wisconsin family in tank tops sat at a picnic table eating boloney sandwiches and generic pork rinds so they could afford a thousand-dollar day at Disney. A crack team of state workers arrived at the curb in an unmarked van and began pressure-washing some kind of human fluid off the sidewalk. A stray ribbon of police tape blew across the pavement.

The Aerostar parked near the vending machines, in front of the NO NIGHTTIME SECURITY sign.

“Who needs to go to the bathroom?” asked Jim.

Eight-year-old Melvin put down his mutant action figures and raised a hand.

Sitting next to him with folded arms and dour outlook was Debbie Davenport, a month shy of sweet sixteen, totally disgusted to be in a minivan. She was also disgusted with the name Debbie. Prior to the trip she had informed her parents that from now on she was to be called “Drusilla.”

“Debbie, you need to use the rest room?”

No reply.

Martha got out a bottle for one-year-old Nicole, cooing in her safety seat, and Jim and little Melvin headed for the building.

Outside the rest rooms, a restless crowd gathered in front of an eight-foot laminated map of Florida, unable to accept that they were still hundreds of miles from the nearest theme park. Their frustration would become even more bitter when they pulled away from the welcome center, and the artificial grove of palms gave way to hours of scrubland and billboards for topless doughnut shops.

Jim bought newspapers and coffee. Martha took over the driving and got back on I-75. Jim unfolded one of the papers. “Says here authorities have discovered a tourist from Finland who lost his luggage, passport, all his money and ID and was stranded for eight weeks at Miami International Airport.”

“Eight weeks?” said Martha. “How did he take baths?”

“Wet paper towels in the rest rooms.”

“Where did he sleep?”

“Chairs at different gates each night.”

“What did he eat?”

“Bagels from the American Airlines Admirals Club.”

“How did he get in the Admirals Club if he didn’t have ID?”

“Doesn’t say.”

“If he went to all that trouble, he probably could have gotten some kind of help from the airline. I can’t believe nobody noticed him.”

“I think that’s the point of the story.”

“What happened?”

“Kicked him out. He was last seen living at Fort Lauderdale International.”

The Aerostar passed a group of police officers on the side of the highway, slowly walking eight abreast looking for something in the weeds. Jim turned the page. “They’ve cleared the comedian Gallagher in the Tamiami Strangler case.”

“Is that a real newspaper?”

Jim turned back to the front page and pointed at the top. *Tampa Tribune*.

Martha rolled her eyes.

“Says they released an artist’s sketch. Bald with mustache and long hair on the sides. Police got hundreds of calls that it looked like Gallagher. But they checked his tour schedule—he was out of

state the nights of the murders.”

“They actually checked him out?”

“They also checked out Gallagher’s brother.”

Martha looked at Jim, then back at the road.

“After clearing Gallagher, they got a tip that he has a brother who looks just like him and smashes watermelons on a circuit of low-grade comedy clubs under the name Gallagher II. But he was out of town as well.”

“I hope I don’t regret this move,” said Martha.

Jim put his hand on hers. “You’re going to love Tampa.”

Jim Davenport had never planned on moving to Tampa, or even Florida for that matter. Everything he knew about the state came from the *Best Places to Live in America* magazine that now sat on the Aerostar’s dashboard. Right there on page 17, across from the feature on the joy of Vermont’s covered bridges, was the now famous annual ranking of the finest cities in the U.S. of A. to raise a family. Air coming in at number three with a bullet—just below Seattle and San Francisco—was the shocker of the list, rocketing up from last year’s 497th position: Tampa, Florida. When the magazine hit the stands, champagne corks flew in the chamber of commerce. The mayor called a press conference, and the city quickly threw together a band and fireworks at a river front park; the news was so big it even caused some people to get laid.

Nobody knew it was all a mistake. The magazine had recently been acquired by a German media conglomerate, which purchased the latest spelling and grammar-check software and dismissed its editors and writers, replacing them with distracted high school students in Walkman headsets. The tabular charts on the new software had baffled a student with green hair, who inadvertently moved a decimal point of Tampa’s crime statistics a decimal point to the left.

JIM AND MARTHA DAVENPORT were a perfect match. She had long, flowing red hair and the patience of a firecracker. He had selective hearing.

Martha was forty-two, a year older than Jim, five-six with large hips but the perfect weight. Her lips were full, and she unconsciously favored shades of lipstick that matched her hair and freckles. Jim was five-ten with a curious physique. His frame was narrow, except for the shoulders, which were spread and bony, and he required big suits that hung all over him like a Talking Heads video.

Martha drove past the Ocala exit and checked on the kids in the rearview. Debbie was working on her sulk. Melvin wore thick glasses and read a science book, how to make a compass with a glass of water and a sewing needle. Nicole leaned forward in her safety seat, discovering her toes.

Martha set cruise control on seventy in the right lane. They entered the gravitational field of Tampa Bay. An electric-lime bullet bike shot past on the left. Another ninja bike flew by on the right in the breakdown lane, followed by a speeding red convertible full of shirtless, tattooed rock scientists.

Martha watched them accelerate and disappear. “They endangered our family! If I had a gun—”

“That’s why you don’t have a gun.”

“Can we get a Suburban?”

“You know how much they cost.”

“They have more armor to protect the kids. Look how the people drive here.”

An Eagle Talon raced by on the right, cutting across the minivan with inches to spare. Martha hit the brakes.

“What kind of a place are we moving to?”

Jim grabbed the magazine off the dash. “Great weather, sandy beaches, beautiful state park historic Latin quarter, barely perceptible crime rate...”

They reached the city an hour before sunset. The moving van wasn't due until morning, so they had to put up. Martha drove slowly, hunched over the wheel, scanning roadside motel signs. Econo Budget, Value, Thrift-Rite, El Rancho.

They rolled through an intersection, the gas stations on all four corners boarded up with squat lawn chairs selling velvet paintings, country music lawn statuary, counterfeit Beanie Babies and slightly fresh seafood. Outside a pawnshop, a homeless man and a woman in a leopard miniskirt wrestled over a VCR.

“Doesn't look safe.”

Jim pointed. “There's a Motel 9.”

“I don't know.”

“It's a big chain,” he said. “They're not going to let anything happen to us.”

The Davenports checked in and unpacked. A half hour later, Jim and Martha strolled onto the second-floor motel balcony.

“See? It's beautiful!” said Jim, and they held hands as the sun set behind the Starvin' Marvin.

SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, a deep boom awakened the Davenports.

“What was that?” asked Martha, bolting up in bed.

“Thunder?” said Jim.

Martha walked to the window and peeked out the curtains. “There aren't any clouds.”

TEN MINUTES AFTER midnight at the Breakers Hotel. Not the one in Palm Beach. The one in Tampa near door to Motel 9 with three cars in the lot and a flickering neon sign advertising free local calls and in-room porn.

Room 112. Mr. Rogers on TV.

*“It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day in the neighbor—”*

Ka-boom.

A twelve-gauge blew out the picture tube of the twenty-inch Sony.

A tall blonde ran out of the bathroom with white powder across her face. “What happened?”

“I don't know. It just went off,” said the man holding a sawed-off shotgun in one hand and Schlitz in the other.

“It doesn't just go off!” yelled the blonde.

“This one did.”

Dogs started barking.

“Gimme that,” she said, reaching for the gun.

“No!”

“Yes!”

She jerked it out of his hands, and it went off again, blowing out the ceiling lamp. They ducked and glass fell.

More dogs barked.

“Okay, now that time it was *your* fault,” said the man.

“Don't be blaming me! You're the one who can't do a simple thing like guard this asshole.” She pointed at the bed and the drunk businessman who had been abducted outside a titty bar and driven

around for three hours, forced to make repeated ATM withdrawals and ride in the trunk during the interspersed drug buys.

But the businessman was too tanked to be afraid. In fact, he never stopped talking, and the kidnapers began to regret their hostage selection.

"I can fix you up with a nice, clean, low-mileage Camaro," said the hostage. "No credit? *No problemo!*"

"Shut up!" screamed the woman.

The male kidnapper walked over and looked closely at the man's face. "Hey! I know him! He's that guy on TV!"

The hostage smiled. He was "Honest Al," the lying sales manager at Tampa Bay Motors. Twenty times a day he could be seen on local TV, banging the hood of an odometer-tampered Hyundai. "No credit? *No problemo!*"

Al became cranky. "Can I go now? I gotta be back at the lot in a few hours."

"Shut up!" screamed the woman.

"I'll give you some more money," said Al. "I have to be there by nine. Got some people coming back to look at a flood-damaged Cadillac. Except they don't know it's flood-damaged. A couple of stupid Puerto Ricans."

"Hey!" snapped the male kidnapper. "That's not very nice."

"Screw *nice*," said Al.

"Shut up!" screamed the woman.

"You guys are losers!" said Al. "I'm leaving!"

Al got up from the bed, but the woman took two quick running steps, planted her feet and slammed Al in the face with the butt of the shotgun, sending him back on the mattress with a spurting nosebleed.

"You don't have to be mean to him," said her partner.

"We're *robbing* him, you stupid fuck!"

"He's just annoying. He hasn't given us any real trouble." The man tapped a bag of cocaine over the dresser. The coke had gotten moist and wasn't coming out of the baggie well, and he tapped hard and the whole thing fell out in a big chunk and disintegrated in the carpet.

"That was all we had!" yelled the woman. She got down on her hands and knees and snorted the rug.

"You getting any?"

She raised her head. "A little."

He joined her.

"You're such an oaf, Coleman."

"You used my name."

"Yeah, it's your name. Coleman. So what?"

"He heard you."

"So?"

"So now we have to kill him."

"We're not killing shit," she said.

"I didn't hear a thing," said Al.

The woman stood up and slapped Al.

"Do you have to do that?" said Coleman.

"You're the one who wants to kill him."

“He can testify against me.”

“Like I care.”

---

“All right, let’s see how you like it, *Sharon*.”

“Stop it!”

“*Sharon, Sharon, Sharon...*”

“Don’t push me!”

Coleman climbed on one of the beds and jumped up and down. “*Sharon, Sharon, Sharon...*”

The motel room door flew open. Standing against the dark parking lot: a tall, lanky man in a tropical shirt.

“What the fuck was all that shooting?”

Sharon and Coleman pointed at each other.

The man threw up his arms.

Coleman jumped down off the bed and ran up to him. “Serge! She used my name in front of the hostage!”

“You idiot!”

“Oh, I just used your name, didn’t I?”

Serge looked at Sharon, nose back in the rug.

“Can I ever leave you two unsupervised? And look at the coke all over the place! Don’t you know we’re in the middle of the War on Drugs?”

“The War on Drugs?” said Coleman. “I think I marched against that once.”

“Why don’t you get high on life instead?”

“And be like you?” said Sharon. “No thanks! Wandering around the parking lot like a lunatic...”

“I told you! The space shuttle was visible on the south-southwest horizon at seventeen degrees for four minutes and twenty-three seconds! I can’t believe you didn’t want to see it!”

“Can I go now?” asked Al. “If you take me by an ATM, I can give you guys and the hooker some more money.”

“Hooker?” said Sharon. “*Hooker!*”

“Mister,” said Serge, “for your information, that’s a coke slut.”

“*Hooker!*” Sharon screamed. She picked up the shotgun and bashed him in the forehead again with the butt. When she did, the gun discharged, blowing out the mirror over the sink.

“I give up,” said Serge. “Let’s save ammo and call the police ourselves.”

Dogs started barking again. This time there were sirens, too.

Serge sighed and went over to Al.

“Is he hurt?” asked Sharon.

“He’s dead,” said Serge.

“What?”

“Must have been the recoil from the blast. Broke his neck.”

“But I only meant to hurt him.”

“No good deed goes unpunished.”

The dogs were getting quieter but the sirens louder.

Serge canted his head toward the window. “That’s the two-minute warning. You know the drill.”

The three grabbed different parts of Al by his clothing, hoisted him to hip level and shuffled out the door. They threw him in the trunk and sped away without closing the room. Serge gunned the ‘68 Barracuda and raced without headlights down a service alley behind Motel 9, just as two squad cars pulled into the Breakers.

Serge avoided the expressway and zigzagged across town on darkened industrial roads through the hobo-land of the underpasses.

“I hope you two are happy,” said Serge. “Now I’m gonna miss the Marlins’ highlights on ESPN. I think they’re going all the way this year.”

“No chance,” said Coleman. “They’ll never get past Turner’s Braves.”

“Will so!”

“Will not!”

“Are we going by any place we can get coke?” asked Sharon.

Serge drove to the Port of Tampa and pulled into a vacant twenty-four-hour al fresco Laundromat where all the coin slots had been pried with screwdrivers. They heaved the body out of the trunk.

Serge dragged Al by the ankles across the concrete floor.

“What are you planning?” asked Sharon.

“He was drunk, right?” said Serge.

They nodded.

Serge pulled the body up to the vending machines. “So when they do the autopsy, he’ll have a high blood-alcohol content, right?”

They nodded again.

Serge laid Al on his back and spread Al’s arms wide in front of a soft-drink machine. He stepped back, doing rough trigonometry in his head. He leaned down again and slid Al a few inches closer to the machine. The machine had a warning sticker: a big rectangle tipping over on a stick man with lightning bolts coming out of his head. The sticker said not to tip the machine in the event a product did not dispense.

Serge tipped it.

The machine went over with a crash and the sound of hissing soda cans. A cocktail of Pepsi, Mountain Dew and blood began to pool, only the man’s fingertips sticking out from under the sides of the machine.

“There,” said Serge. “Not only will we not get caught, but he’ll always be remembered as a dumb ass.”

They jumped back in the car and grabbed the expressway.

“Where are we going?” asked Coleman.

“Back to the house.”

“But—” said Coleman.

“But what?”

“I want to party.”

“Yeah,” Sharon agreed. “We want to party.”

“Don’t you think you’ve already had a pretty big night?”

“It’s still early,” said Sharon.

“Yeah, it’s still early,” said Coleman.

“Early?” said Serge. “It’s getting light out.”

“That’s as early as it gets,” said Coleman.

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THE DAVENPORTS WERE up at first light. Jim pulleyed open the thick curtains before stepping onto the balcony. There was dew on the railing and diesel sounds from the interstate and a dozen police cars behind the motel next door. At the truck stop across the street, a line had already formed outside a Winnebago of ill repute.

The Davenports carried luggage across the parking lot.

Martha pulled up short at the Aerostar. "Someone keyed the van!"

Jim ran a finger along the scratch. "You're right."

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"You're right and I love you."

"Sometimes you make me so mad."

They climbed in the van; Jim hopped on the expressway. He threw a quarter in the automatic toll booth, but the red light didn't change. He drove through. A wino scurried from the underbrush and pulled a quarter out of the plastic basket, where he'd stuffed a rag in the coin hole.

The Davenports got off the expressway and headed into south Tampa. None of them had seen the new home yet, except in pictures. The deal was prearranged and underwritten by Jim's company, an expanding Indiana consulting firm that had asked for volunteers to move to new branch offices in Phoenix, San Antonio and Tampa. Long lines formed for Arizona and Texas. Jim wondered why he was all alone at the Florida desk.

Jim checked street signs as the van rolled down Dale Mabry Highway.

"I think we're getting close."

Drama built, everyone's face at the window. Antique malls, dry cleaners, Little League fields, 7-Elevens. Just like neighborhoods everywhere, but with lots of palm trees and azaleas.

Jim made a right. Almost there. Martha liked the sound of the street names. Barracuda Trail, Man O' War Terrace, Coral Circle. When they got to Triggerfish Lane, Jim made a left. Their mouths fell open.

Paradise.

The sun was high, the sky clear, and children played catch and rode bikes in the street. And the colors!...lush gardens and hedges, pastel paint schemes. Teal, turquoise, pink, peach. The houses started at the bayfront and unfolded chronologically as development had pushed inland. Clapboard bungalows from the twenties, Mediterranean stuccos from the thirties and forties, classic ranch houses of the fifties and sixties. It used to be a consistent architectural flow, but real estate in south Tampa had become so white hot that anything under two thousand square feet was bulldozed to make way for three-story trophy homes that now towered out both windows of the Aerostar. Half the places had decorative silk flags hanging over brass mailboxes. Florida Gators flags and FSU Seminoles flags. Flags with sunflowers and golf clubs and sailfish and horses. Jim pointed ahead at a light-ochre bungalow with white trim. A restoration-award flag hung from the wraparound porch.

"There she is."

Martha's eyes popped with elation, and she hugged Jim.



The moving truck was already unloading in the driveway when they pulled up in front of 88 Triggerfish. A grinning Realtor stepped down from the porch and walked to the van carrying a jumble of welcome basket of citrus jams, butters, marmalades and chewies, wrapped up in green cellophane.

“Welcome! Welcome!” The Realtor pumped Jim’s hand, then Martha’s. “Gonna love it here in Florida. Couldn’t live anywhere else!”

Jim went out on the lawn and triumphantly pulled up the FOR SALE / SOLD! sign.

A boy on a skateboard stopped at the end of the driveway. “You bought a house on *this* street?”

The Realtor grabbed Jim by the arm. “Let’s go inside.”

“What did that kid mean?”

“Guess what!” said the Realtor. “The cable’s already hooked up!”

Heart be still, Martha told herself as she walked between bougainvillea in terra-cotta pots atop pedestals flanking the porch steps. She stopped and turned slowly. A cedar porch swing. Three verdigris eights next to the door and a stained-glass window over it. Little fish swam in the painted glass. Triggerfish, Martha decided.

She walked inside, carrying Nicole in her car seat, and it just didn’t quit. Cherry hardwood floors and a yellow brick fireplace. Jim stood in the middle of the empty living room with hands on his hips. Melvin ran upstairs and claimed the cool bedroom overlooking the porch, and Debbie sulked up the stairs and kicked him out.

Martha stopped and gazed at Jim in the center of the room. There had always been something about him. People said he reminded them of Tom Hanks, although there was little resemblance except for the eyes and slightly curly dark hair. It was a certain sympathetic quality. The disarming smile. The vulnerability that made people want to take care of him.

There was yelling upstairs.

“No fair!” shouted Melvin.

“*Life’s* not fair!”

A door slammed.

Another voice from the porch: “Hellooooo, new neighbors!” Heavy panting.

Martha gave Jim a look—What can *this* be?—and opened the door.

“You must be the Davenports!”

A woman with a low center of gravity jogged in place on the welcome mat. Her sweatsuit was covered with Dalmatians. “Sorry, can’t stop running. Have to keep the heart up for at least thirty minutes...” She tapped the stopwatch hanging from her neck and kept panting. “Saw the moving van. Your car. Had to say hello. I’m Gladys. Gladys Plant. Of the original Tampa Plants.” She held out her bouncing hand for Martha to shake.

Gladys retrieved her hand and looked at the palm. “Sorry about the sweat. I’ll shower and come back.” She ran away.

Martha closed the door and braced it with her back. “Jee-zus!”

“Harmless,” said Jim. “Probably won’t be back.”

He was wrong. Gladys returned in an hour with a bottle of wine and an antique tin of homemade lemon cookies. Several excruciating hours later, the sun set over the tops of the palm trees at the end of the street. The movers in the driveway were down to just the big stuff stacked in the back of the truck, dressers, box springs. Gladys was still with them on the porch, a crowd of three on the cedar swing.

“...So then my great-great-grandfather built the Tampa Bay Hotel for the rich Yankees coming down on his railroad...Churchill stayed there. And Stephen Crane. And Remington. He was a painter

you know..."

Jim and Martha forced smiles and pinched themselves to stay awake.

"But you don't want to hear about that..." said Gladys.

Thank God.

"...You want to know about your neighbors." Gladys pointed across the street, two houses up, 907 Triggerfish. She checked her watch. "Keep your eye on the front door. Any second now..."

The door at 907 opened and an elegantly dressed couple emerged and got in a green LeSabre.

"The Belmonts," said Gladys. "Up close, they look like Angie Dickinson and Dean Martin, but with a lot more mileage. They like their gin. That's where they're going right now. They've got Tampa's happy-hour scene down to a science. Know every special at every bar in town, even the VFW hall and the Moose Lodge. It's actually quite remarkable."

The LeSabre drove by and Gladys waved, still talking. "See the place next door? Eight-nineteen seven?" They turned. A woman with cropped blond hair shepherded three small boys in designer tennis clothes into a sport-utility vehicle.

"Barbara Colby, soccer mom from hell. If you ask me, she's going to drive those kids up a tower with a rifle. She's compensating for a father who went insane when she was a child and forced her to start memorizing the Bible. She was up to Deuteronomy before calmer heads prevailed."

Gladys saw the looks on the Davenports' faces.

"Oh, nothing's a secret around here," she said. "Every summer the Bradfords tape newspaper up their windows for illegal renovations, every fall Mr. Donnolly blows all his leaves into the Peabody yard, and every winter the Fergusons put up so many Christmas lights it smashes the power grid. Mr. Schmidt has a yard the size of a postage stamp, but he has to have the best riding mower, and he's always drunk when he's on it. The Hubbards argue way too loud, which is how we found out about their swinging love harness. The Rutherfords can't park in their garage because it's full of Jet Skis and mopeds and unicycles and all this stuff they buy and use just once. The Baxters claim they're Xeriscaping, but everyone knows they just don't give a damn. And we all wish the Coopers *didn't* give a damn so they'd stop with the lawn jockeys and cement mermaids. Then there's Mr. Oppenheimer. I've never even seen Mr. Oppenheimer. They say he lives in his garage, where he's been building an experimental aircraft from a kit for twelve years..."

Gladys pointed directly across the street at 887 Triggerfish and the man kneeling on the manicured lawn with scissors.

"Jack Terrier. His middle name is actually Russell. Can you imagine parents doing that to a child? Takes all kinds. His thing is a lawn fetish."

They stopped and watched Jack hand-prune the St. Augustine.

"He does have nice grass," said Martha. She looked around at the other yards. "Everyone else's looks so...*brown*."

Gladys waved at the sky. "We're in the middle of a drought. The city's under Code Red lawn watering restrictions. Every night at four A.M., Jack comes out in a camouflaged hunting outfit to water his yard. I kid you not."

They stopped to sip wine. Triggerfish Lane took on idyllic amber and rose hues as the sun went down. The foot traffic came out: wholesome couples jogging and riding bikes and power-walking with heart monitors.

"It's so safe," Jim marveled.

"Like the fifties," said Martha.

"Ozzie and Harriet," said Gladys. "You're now living in the best part of Tampa, S.O.K."

“S.O.K.?”

~~“Local slang. South of Kennedy Boulevard. That’s like the demilitarized zone. The Thirty-eight Parallel...”~~

“So on the other side it’s like...?”

“North Korea.”

A dog began barking. They looked up. A fat pit bull ran out of Jack Terrier’s yard and chased jogger three houses down the street. Then the dog stopped and lumbered back to Terrier’s front yard. The jogger turned and shook a fist at Jack, but he was busy with his scissors.

“Is that his dog?” asked Martha.

Gladys nodded. “His name’s Rasputin.”

A Rollerblader came by, and the dog took off again. Then a couple with a twin baby stroller, who had to do a wheelie to get away.

“Isn’t there a leash law?” asked Jim.

“Of course,” said Gladys. “But enforcement is weak. We tried calling the police, but Jack always has the dog back in the house by the time they arrive. Cops say there’s nothing they can do until it actually bites someone.”

Martha noticed Jack walking across the street. “Shhhh! He’s coming over here.”

“Probably wants to welcome us,” said Jim.

Jack stopped at the bottom of the porch steps. “Got a second?”

“Me?” asked Jim.

Terrier nodded.

“I’ll be right back,” Jim told Martha and Gladys.

He came down off the porch with his right hand extended. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Jim Davenport. That’s my wife, Martha.”

Martha smiled and waved from the porch.

“Right,” said Terrier. He pointed back at the street. “Listen, is that your vehicle?”

Jim retracted his unshaken hand. “The Aerostar? Yeah, that’s ours.”

“Can you park it in your driveway?”

Jim looked at the driveway. The moving truck was still there.

“The driveway’s full,” said Jim.

“I know,” said Jack. He stared at Jim. Jim began to squirm; he looked up and down Triggerfish Lane. It was one of those old streets platted extra wide, and most of the neighbors had cars in the road.

“You having a party or something?” Jim asked. “Need extra parking?”

“No.”

“Am I breaking a rule?”

“No.”

Jim paused. “Please don’t take this the wrong way. Mind if I ask why you want me to move it?”

“I don’t like it there.”

“Oh.” Jim looked across the street at Terrier’s Audi parked at the curb. “Your car’s in the street.”

“I need it there.”

“I see.”

They stood for another awkward moment.

“So you don’t want me to park in the street?” asked Jim.

“Right.”

“All the time?”

“Right.”

“Except when we have company. That would be okay, wouldn’t it?”

“Not really.”

“What about an emergency?”

Jack patted Jim on the back. “Try to keep it in the driveway, sport.”

“Okay,” said Jim.

Jack began walking away. “It really bothers me.”

“Nice to meet you,” Jim called out.

“Right.” Jack looked both ways and crossed the street.

Jim went back to the porch swing.

“What did he want?” asked Martha.

“He wants us to park in the driveway.”

“When?”

“All the time.”

Yelling erupted across the street. Rasputin had finally gotten Jack Terrier’s attention.

“Whoaaaa, doggie!” Jack held out both arms in a halt signal as Rasputin went into the squatting position. The dog froze. Jack grabbed him by the collar and dragged him across the property line into his neighbor’s yard at 877.

“What about the people who live there?” Martha asked Gladys. “Doesn’t Jack worry they’ll see him?”

“That’s Old Man Ortega’s place,” said Gladys. “He’d never say anything even if it did bother him. Lives there alone. Comes out to get the paper and that’s about it. Pound for pound, the best neighbor on the block.”

Jim and Martha nodded.

“On the other hand...” said Gladys, pointing three houses away at 857 Triggerfish, where cars and Jeeps and pickups sat all over the dirt yard, and a plastic flamingo drank out of a toilet on the porch. Trash spilled over the curb.

“That’s the Rental House,” said Gladys. “A bunch of college kids from the University of South Florida. They’re majoring in dragging down our property values.”

“There’s a rental on the street?” Martha asked with concern.

“That’s actually the *Original* Rental,” said Gladys. “We now have a total of six on Triggerfish.”

“Six?” said Martha.

“The same guy owns them all. It’s like he has a thing for this street. And he has a knack for picking the worst tenants.”

“Which ones are rentals?” asked Martha.

“That one over there, where they think chain-link fence is landscaping. And the one next to it is rented by a Latin family who built that religious Madonna grotto with rocks and bathroom caulk. And that one over there, where a couple from Knoxville liked the grotto idea so much they made their own for Tammy Wynette.”

Jim stared at the students’ trash pile. “I’ve never seen so many pizza boxes.”

“It’s like clockwork,” said Gladys. “Every night, right after Jack comes out to water the lawn in his Delta Force outfit, the students order pizza. My guess is marijuana. That’s how it works, you know. The pizza companies are in brutal competition. Backgammon Pizza guarantees delivery in thirty minutes, and Pizza Shack sends its drivers out to follow the Backgammon drivers and lure away their customers by giving out free pies, which they claim taste better. Needless to say, they tear

around the neighborhood hell-bent for leather trying to make the thirty-minute deadline and catch each other.”

Martha pointed at the house between the college students and Old Man Ortega. “Who lives there?”

“Mr. Grønewaldenglitz. He’s an artist...and a renter. Half the times I’ve seen him, he’s been wearing a welding helmet. He converted his den into an acetylene shop, where he stockpiles scrap metal from the landfill and solders it together into those whimsical creations of modern art that you’re pointing at in his front yard.”

“So that’s what those are,” said Martha.

“What’s the big one supposed to be?” asked Jim.

“The cow made of fenders and umbrella skeletons?”

“No, the radar range, monkey wrenches and water faucets.”

“Lady Bird Johnson.”

“I think it’s ugly,” said Martha.

“So does everyone else,” said Gladys. “We went to the zoning board, but they say it’s First Amendment.”

A pickup truck full of real estate signs parked in front of 867 Triggerfish. A man in jeans got out and began pounding a FOR RENT sign into the front yard between Lady Bird and a chickenwire diorama of Gettysburg.

“Wow, Mr. Grønewaldenglitz moved out,” said Gladys. “So that’s what he was doing in the middle of the night.”

“What else should we know about this neighborhood?” asked Martha.

“Well, do you have any pets?” asked Gladys.

“No.”

“You do now. A family of opossums lives under your house. They come out at night and make three rounds of the neighborhood’s pet-food bowls.”

Something large and fast-moving caught the corner of Jim’s eye. He turned quickly, but it was gone.

“Was that one of them?” he asked.

“Where?” said Gladys.

“Over there. I saw something big.”

They looked and waited.

“There!” Jim yelled. He pointed at what seemed to be a small armored personnel carrier. “There it is again! What the hell is it?”

Gladys laughed. “That’s one of our roaches.”

“That’s a roach?” said Jim.

Gladys nodded. “If you belong to the chamber of commerce, you’re supposed to call ’em palmetto bugs.”

“Kill it!” Martha told Jim.

“Maybe we should observe it for a while,” he said. “Learn its defensive systems.”

“What’s are you waiting for?” said Martha. “Kill it, already!”

Jim grabbed a rake and walked across the porch.

There was sudden movement and Jim swung the rake, taking down a hanging planter.

“I forgot,” said Gladys. “And they can fly.”

A commercial van drove up the street. It passed the Davenport home and stopped three doors down. The van had a large magnetic sign on the side: INSULT-TO-INJURY PROCESS SERVERS. A man in

white makeup and a black-and-white-striped shirt got out.

“What’s that about?” asked Jim.

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“A malignant version of the singing telegram,” said Gladys. “For wealthy grudge-bearers subpoenas, summonses and suits delivered with attitude...We usually get them on this street about once a month.”

“What do they do?” asked Martha.

“Mrs. Van Fleet was served a defamation lawsuit by a barbershop quartet. Mr. Buckingham got a restraining order from a tap-dancing Shirley Temple look-alike. And Mr. Fishbine was subpoenaed by a clown who squirted him in the eye with a trick lapel flower.”

The three turned to the left and watched. The mime stood at the front door, but nobody was answering because he mimed knocking on the door instead of actually knocking. Finally, someone inside noticed him through a window and opened up. The mime handed him legal papers, then did a pantomime of someone crying silently and holding on to the bars of a jail cell.

The resident grabbed a bowling trophy and began chasing the mime around the front yard. The mime ran with silly, exaggerated strides and a goofy look of alarm on his face until he was knocked cold.

TWO A.M. The pedestrian traffic was down to a trickle at the south end of Tampa's Howard Avenue, the part of town overrun by bistros, martini bars and California cuisine. It made the young professionals feel cosmo, and they called the strip "SoHo"—South Howard—but it only increased the reek of small pond.

One of the last genuine places was a modest yellow building on a side street. Stark concrete and small windows with beer signs. The Tiny Tap tavern stood alone next to the railroad tracks and the vine-covered concrete supports of the Crosstown Expressway. There were two pool tables, some stock-car junk on the walls, lots of smoke and the loud, reassuring drone of malarkey. Tonight there was an added attraction. A leggy blonde poised with her back arched against the L-shaped bar and produced a cigarette with no intention of lighting it herself.

A young man with two beepers on his belt materialized with a flicked butane. The juke played "Indian Reservation" by Paul Revere and the Raiders. The blonde turned to the flame and lightly brushed the man's crotch with the back of her hand. His stomach fluttered. Did she do that on purpose?

Ten minutes later he was getting a hummer in the front seat of his Hummer, parked under the expressway. She came up for air. "You like to screw on coke?"

In an impressive display of prestidigitation, a wallet suddenly appeared in the man's hand. He was fishing out a hundred when she grabbed the billfold and dumped the contents in her lap. "If we get a eight-ball, we can really have some fun."

"But—" the man said, reaching for his money. She began playing the silent flute again, and his objections evaporated. "Start the car and head south on Howard," she said, then back to work. His gas pedal leg trembled, and the Hummer lurched herky-jerky up the street. She peeked over the dashboard. "Turn here!" He ran over the curb.

"Pull into those apartments. Cut the lights but keep the engine running. I'll be right back." Sharon jumped from the vehicle with three hundred dollars and ran for the breezeway.

"An eight-ball is only two-fifty," the man shouted after her. "Two-seventy-five tops."

"I'll get change," she yelled, and disappeared into the blackness of the apartment hallway.

The man stuck his head out the driver's window, trying to adjust his eyes. Where'd she go?

She kept running down the breezeway, right out the back of the apartments and into the next street. She spun around in the middle of the road, frantic. Headlights swung around the corner at the end of the street, and a dented Impala convertible raced up to her.

Sharon jumped in and punched Coleman in the shoulder. "You blockhead! You were supposed to be waiting!"

"Ow," said Coleman, rubbing his shoulder as he drove off. "How much we get?"

"I shouldn't give you any for being late! What if he followed me!" She bent down from the window to light a cigarette, took a deep drag and violently exhaled out her nostrils. "I should fuckin' kill you."

"Where'd you get that lighter?"

Sharon looked at the lighter. "What do you mean?"

"I think I recognize that lighter," said Coleman. It was an old banged-up Zippo. The paint had started to chip on some words. *Miami and Orange Bowl and 1969.*

"A lighter's a lighter," said Sharon, jamming it down the tight hip pocket of her jeans.

"If that's what I think it is, we're in big trouble," said Coleman. "That looks like Serge's Super Bowl Three lighter. You haven't been getting into his *secret box*, have you?"

"Secret box? What are you guys, playing fuckin' army in the woods? I was out of goddam matches. He's always got a ton of matches in there. This time I found the lighter."

"You've been taking his matches, too! Oh my God, we're dead for sure!"

"Give me a break!"

"Oh, man!" said Coleman. "If you don't understand the secret box, you don't understand *anything* about Serge."

"It's a box. So what!"

"A 1905 Ybor City master cigar-maker's box," said Coleman. "Those matches are from his favorite places in Florida. Half of them have been torn down. And you've just been going through them to light cigarettes? He's going to shoot us both!"

"He's not gonna know," said Sharon. "He's got so much shit in that box I couldn't believe it. I mean just crap! Swizzle sticks, lapel pins, ticket stubs, bar coasters, ashtrays, old hotel-room keys. He's never gonna miss it."

"Oh, he'll miss it all right," said Coleman. "I've seen his ritual, packing everything away in his special place and locking the box each night in the fireproof safe under his bed... We are so dead."

"Just drive, blockhead!"

Coleman drove. He wore a T-shirt with a rum ad, cutoff shorts and dirty sneakers with no laces. He was on the pudgy side with a circular head that was a little too big for his body, and he didn't like when Sharon called him blockhead or That Funny Round-Headed Kid. His driver's license was suspended for multiple DUIs. He opened another Schlitz.

"You're driving too slow! Step on it, you blockhead!"

"Sharon, please don't call me that."

"Fuck off, Charlie Brown!"

Sharon Rhodes, exotic, tall, high cheekbones and a full, moist mouth that caused men to let go of the controls and fly their lives into the sides of mountains. Easily the hottest stripper on Dale Mabry Highway when she got the incidental ambition to actually show up at work. She was on probation for Jet Skiing topless next to the Courtney Campbell causeway.

They pulled into a dark apartment complex behind Busch Gardens. A crescent moon peeked through the top of the Montu roller coaster. Sharon got out.

"Don't spend it all on crack this time," said Coleman. "Get some powder, too. Crack is bad for you."

"I'll get what I fuckin' want!" She put out her cigarette on the Impala's upholstery.

"Hey!"

As soon as she was out of sight, Coleman slammed the gear shift in reverse and lunged backward, spinning ninety degrees. He threw the car in drive and floored it, leaving rubber. He raced around the block and came up on the back side of the apartments just as Sharon ran into the street. She winced when she saw the Impala. "Damn."

Coleman parked at the curb and jumped out. "Nice try. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

They went back in the apartments and knocked lightly on a peeling second-floor door.

There were shuffling sounds inside, then a quiet "Who is it?"



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