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# Reaching home : a novel

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Reaching Home

by

Virginia Rorby Oesterle

Florida International University, 1991

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

This is the coming-of-age story of a twelve-year-old girl who lives in a Florida fishing village in 1968, and is thought to be retarded. On a birthday trip to see dolphins perform at a road side show she learns that they are captives simply because man believes he has the right of dominance over "dumb" animals. This emotionally conquered child develops a feeling of kinship to these dolphins and when, with outside help, she discovers that she is dyslexic, not retarded, it frees her to recognize that errors in thinking may exist at many levels. Her release from the trap of human ignorance allows her to devise a way to free the dolphins and guide them home to the sea.

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
Miami, Florida

Reaching Home

A novel submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing

by

Virginia Rorby Oesterle

1991

To Professors: Lynne Barrett  
John Ernest  
Les Standiford

This novel, having been approved in respect to form and mechanical execution, is referred to you for judgement upon its substantial merit.

-----  
Acting Dean Arthur Herriott  
College of Arts and Science

**The novel of Virginia Rorby Oesterle is approved.**

-----  
Lynne Barrett

-----  
John Ernest

-----  
Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Examination: May 21, 1991

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Dean Richard Campbell  
Division of Graduate Studies

**Florida International University, 1991**

to Doug, Daddy and a dead dog  
and to Oscar T. Owre

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I  
The Dolphin Show

September 29th 1968

It was Buddy Martin's twelfth birthday, and she woke up feeling this one would be different. For one thing, a dream was about to come true. Her father was taking her to see dolphins, this time close enough to touch.

The dolphins belonged to a friend of her father's who kept them at his airboat-ride place on highway 41, known as the Tamiami Trail.

Ten miles north of their island home of Chokoloskee, her father turned onto the Trail. A hundred yards after their turn, a semi roared around them, then cut back in so quickly, her father veered off onto the shoulder and swore at the driver under his breath.

The suction of its passing lifted Buddy's short blonde hair and popped her ears. Some papers on the split and cluttered seat lifted off and floated to the floor.

"Wow," she said. It was the biggest truck she'd ever seen. But then this was the farthest she could remember

ever have been from home. She grinned to herself.

A mile after the semi passed them, a large billboard came into view. It showed an airboat full of laughing people whizzing past an alligator that was sunning on a mudflat. "What's the third word on that sign say?" she asked.

"Which word?" her father asked. "Famous or Eden?"

"The one after Everglades."

"Eden, Buddy," he snapped. "Eden."

"Thank you," she said. She wasn't going to let him hurt her feelings today. "What does Eden mean?"

"Paradise; a perfect place."

"Stevens' Everglade Eden, 5 miles," she read aloud, slowly, pointing at each word. An arrow between Stevens' and Everglade directed the eye to the more recent addition of "World Famous".

"World Famous," she continued. "Airboat and Pam...Pa."

"Swamp," Kirk Martin said. "Where do you see anything that starts with a 'p'?"

She shrugged. "And Swamp Buggy Rides, 'Gator...um?" "Farm."

"Farm," she said loudly, quickly, as if she had gotten it a second before he said it, "and Dolphin Show," she finished, grinned, then glanced self-consciously at her father.

He was looking at her, his dark brows pulled down.



"Longer words is easier for me to read," she said.

"I..."

"Are easier," he corrected. "Sit back," he added.

"If I have to stop suddenly, you'll hit your head on the dash."

She pushed back in the seat and noticed, for the first time, the mess she'd made of her feet. In her rush this morning, she had polished her sandals after she put them on. Now she saw there were white stripes in the spaces between the straps. She hooked the back strap with her big toe, glanced again at her father, then slipped each sandal off, and tucked her feet back under the seat.

Gravel pelted the underside of the truck as they left the highway and turned into the parking lot. When they stopped a cloud of white dust curled up and washed over them. Buddy leapt out, fanning the dust away from her face, swung at her door but missed. She left it and ran toward the fence around the pool.

"Damn it, Buddy," her father shouted. She grimaced without turning and pressed one eye to a crack in the tall, cypress-board fence. She could only see the edge of some bleachers and a strip of brown water beyond them. She was watching the patch of water for a sign of the dolphins when a loud squeal came from an orange speaker which was wired to a piece of plywood and nailed high up on the lamppost beside her. She jumped and stuck her fingers in her ears.

At the end of the levee that separated Stevens'

Everglade Eden from Turner River and the Everglades beyond was a plywood booth where tickets were sold for airboat rides. A large man, dressed in white, sat on a stool in front of the booth and blew on the microphone he was holding. The speaker made a loud, damp whistling sound before the man's voice boomed across the parking lot.

"Folks," he drawled, "we got three different length airboat rides." He hesitated, coughed a gurgly cough, and spat. "The short one," he continued, "is a trip that goes to the edge of the swamp and around the mudflats. That'll give y 'all an idea of what airboats is built for and how they work. The medium ride is five miles and goes on through the first dense mangrove swamp. The grand tour is a seven-mile trip that takes thirty minutes and goes deep into the swamp to an old Indian village. There ain't no Indians living there today, but you can see how they built their village."

Kirk had come to stand behind Buddy.

"Who's that man?" she whispered.

"Stevens," he said. "In the flesh. In all his flesh."

The few people who bought tickets, trickled down the ramp to the dock, stepped into one of the airboats, and filed across to take seats on one of the three rows of benches.

This was the end of September and the start of the six-month tourist season. Buddy watched them and thought

of her grandfather, the Admiral, who hated these pale-skinned, camera-carrying people because their money brought so much change to Chokoloskee. He preferred summer when mosquitos swarmed over the island. Mosquitoes only take your blood, he told her once, a small price for running off all them tourists.

"We've had folks come from all over the world to take this ride," Stevens bellowed. He apparently hadn't recognized her father because he beckoned them toward the airboat, then suddenly smiled, sheepishly, waved his apologies, and held up a broad tobacco-stained finger to indicate the length of time he would continue to be busy. "While y'all is in the Everglades area, don't miss it. It will be the highlight of your Florida vacation." Stevens ended with his hand raised, cigar stub gripped like a short wand, then lowered it to point at Buddy and Kirk.

"Capt. Martin and his kid, whose birthday it is today, is here to see the dolphin show," Stevens announced, then put the microphone in the wet pocket of his armpit and clapped his thick hands together.

Buddy saw her father flinch when Stevens called him captain. No one in Chokoloskee called him captain, except the tourists. The other fisherman called each other and themselves Captain this or that, but they called her father the Admiral's boy, when they spoke of him, and Kirk, if they spoke to him. She reached to touch his arm, hesitated, then dropped her hand. She knew her touch would

be no comfort.

"It's nice and cool out in the airboats," Stevens added, encouragingly, put the mike down, patted the backs of a couple who had decided to take the grand tour, then rocked toward Kirk and Buddy.

O.B. Stevens had a long torso and narrow shoulders. His arms and legs were a matched set, short and heavy, and his rear end was broad and flat. He wore his trademark outfit: white pants, a white shirt, and a red belt.

"He looks like a bowling pin," Kirk muttered.

Buddy smiled, though she didn't know what a bowling pin was.

"Orange Blossom." Kirk stuck one hand out and smacked O.B.'s shoulder, hard, with the other. "Good to see you."

O.B. snorted, spat, and took Kirk's hand.

Buddy had stepped a little behind her father when Stevens' started toward them.

"You've never met my daughter," Kirk said, and pulled her around.

Orange Blossom had the biggest bottom lip Buddy had ever seen. And it glistened wetly. She tried not to stare at it. "Hello, Mr. Blossom," she said.

"Call me O.B., kid. How old are you today?" he asked.

"Twelve," she said, and smiled.

Twelve, huh? I thought you was in the sixth grade with my nephew, Alex Townsend."

"Yes, sir, I am," she said, and dropped her gaze from

a patch of damp belly, exposed by too much strain on his buttons, to her bare toes working themselves nervously back and forth into the oystershell path. She peeked up at her father. He was looking at her feet, too, scowling. Buddy quickly slapped one over the top of the other.

"She was out sick a year," Kirk said.

Buddy hadn't been sick since she was five. She glanced gratefully at her father.

Stevens was watching a couple at the ticket booth.

"Well, happy birthday," he said, without looking at her.

The couple handed the girl selling tickets some money. Stevens smiled, turned and squeezed Buddy's shoulder. "I'm going to make you a gift of the ticket." To Kirk, he said: "Just give the kid five bucks for yourself."

"Thank you, Mister O.B.," Buddy said.

"That's nice of you, Stevens," Kirk said, "but it wouldn't be my present then."

"Suit yourself, Captain. See you inside." O.B. rocked away.

"Why did you call him Orange Blossom?" Buddy asked.

"Because his initials are O. B. and someone who knows him real well once called him Orange Blossom as a joke."

"It's a funny name all right," Buddy said, and laughed out loud so her father would think she understood.

In the open-air gift shop, Kirk bought two tickets and two Cokes. When Stevens announced the start of the dolphin show, Kirk guided Buddy through a gate and handed their

tickets to a boy about fifteen who, from his shape and the size of his bottom lip, appeared to be O. B.'s son.

A dolphin surfaced in the pool and expelled air. Buddy darted around her father, ran to the waist-high chainlink fence, hooked her toes into its metal triangles and leaned out over the water.

The 'show pool' was a small, squarish, limestone pit, walled off by a tangle of Florida holly and willows and cattails. Rusting, saggy-benched bleachers were bolted to the back wall of the gift shop and sloped down to a gravel walkway. Just beneath where Buddy clung to the fence, a raft, with three boards missing, was anchored to the concrete-reinforced side of the pool.

At the far end of the path, Stevens, now wearing a baseball cap that read Stevens' World Famous Everglade Eden, was talking to a young woman.

"These critters ain't any business of yours, girly," he shouted, suddenly. His upper lip stretched, bloodless and shiny, across the uneven surface of his teeth.

Kirk had come up behind her. Buddy stepped off the fence and stood beside her father staring at Stevens and the woman, whose back was to them.

When Stevens looked up and saw them watching, his lip slid loose of his teeth and formed a smile. He waved them to seats in the once bright blue 'splash zone,' where now only the cracks, nicks and gouged-out initials still had blue paint.

The woman held a string at the end of which dangled a vial of soupy water. When Stevens waved at Kirk and Buddy, she looked around and Stevens snatched the vial. He jabbed her shoulder with a round finger. "You get on out of here," he snarled, but extended a closed fist, slowly uncurling his fingers, as if he were returning the glass tube. But when she reached for it, he flipped his hand over. The vial fell to the white path between them, then there was a crunching sound as Stevens put his foot on top of it and leaned forward. He grinned at the woman, spread his short arms in welcome to his customers, then brushed past, bumping her against the fence.

She spun around. "You won't get away..," she shouted, but caught herself mid-sentence when she saw that everyone had stopped to stare. At the ends of her rigid arms, she balled her hands into fists and glared at Stevens, then, quite suddenly, she turned away.

Somebody dropped a gate at one end of the pool. The fins of three dolphins appeared as they crowded through the opening. Buddy grinned to herself and watched them circle on the surface. When they arched over and disappeared, she glanced back at the woman.

The lady was the prettiest Buddy had ever seen. Her hair was bushy and dark, not blonde, short and limp. Buddy rolled a clump of her own hair between her fingers.

The woman was wearing sneakers, but Buddy could still tell that she had small, slim feet. She looked down with

shame at her own feet, long and flat, white-striped and dusty on the top, with soles as tough anchor rope.

Buddy crossed the path and sat beside her father.

"Why do you think Mr. Blossom smashed that tube?"

"I don't know. It looked like a water sample," he said.

"Is there something wrong with the water?" Buddy asked, just as one of the dolphins surfaced near the raft. The blast of air from its blowhole drew her attention away from his answer.

She had often seen dolphins feeding in the boat channel in front of Smallwood's, Chokoloskee's general store, and liked watching them, but birds had been her favorite animals because they could fly. Then, two years ago, on the last of the few times her father had taken her fishing, she discovered dolphins could fly, too, and that they liked to play. The order on her list of things she loved best changed from the Admiral and birds to the Admiral, dolphins, then birds.

She remembered that that had been the first day in the water with her father's new net. The haul of mullet was good and he, for the first time, let her help pull them in. She remembered how hard she worked to keep the cork line even with the sinker line he was pulling, and how her arms ached. When they were done, he had smiled and patted her shoulder as if he was pleased. And then, though he knew directions confused her, he asked her to take the wheel for



their ride home.

While her father cleaned some trout that they had hauled in with the mullet, she concentrated very hard on what she would do if she saw another boat approaching, or came upon someone's trap line. In her mind, she practiced right and left, starboard and port, turns.

Kirk was dipping a pail over the side to wash the deck with when she saw the first fin coming straight at him. She thought it was a shark and screamed a warning to him, but he was leaning over near the engine and didn't hear her.

He had warned her not to let go of the wheel for any reason. She hesitated a second before she thought to twist the wheel back and forth to rock the boat. He looked up instantly. She pointed to the two fins slicing through the water toward them.

"Dolphins," he shouted, smiled, made a trottle-pushing motion and yelled, "give it more gas."

She was disappointed. She didn't want to get away from them, but she did as she was told and pushed the trottle forward as hard as she could.

One of the dolphins shot beneath the speeding boat. "Daddy," she screamed, squeezing her eyes shut.

"It's all right," he shouted, and made his way to her. "Go up to the bow," he said, taking the wheel.

"Hurry."

Buddy stepped up on the starboard gunnel, held tight

to the roof of the trunk cabin, and inched forward against the wind. When she reached the bow, she flopped down on her stomach and wrapped her fingers around the anchor rope. One fin, then another, cut through the bow wake just a foot or two from her face, like two slick, gray, finned missiles streaking along beside them. They were racing at exactly the speed of the boat, as close and as fast as if they were attached. One whizzed ahead suddenly, then dropped back into the wake.

Buddy whooped and pulled herself farther out over the water.

The dolphin on the port side dropped back for a moment, then shot into the air. Buddy threw her head back laughing, and turned, still laughing, to see if her father had seen it. His eyes were on the dolphins, too, and he was smiling. But when he glanced at her, his eyes widened as if he were surprised to see her there, then, as that familiar pinched look came to his features, she realized she must have, at that moment, looked just like her mother. He pulled the trottle back and turned away from her. The boat dropped, then rocked and tossed in the backwash.

After that day, Buddy daydreamed that she was a dolphin with friends that were dolphins. They raced each other through clear, cool water, chasing boats and schools of fish and goosing sleeping pelicans.

The water in the dolphin pool at Stevens' was murky, warm and brown. Buddy could see them only when they

surfaced, but she watched for them, tense with the expectation of a child turning the handle of a Jack-in-the-box. She held her breath between the explosions of air that announced the surfacing of one of the three dolphins.

A dolphin's gray head popped up in front of the woman who had defied Stevens' order to leave and was still at the railing. Buddy watched her lean forward, smile, and speak softly to it. Then there was a sudden, sharp intake of breath. "Oh no," the woman cried, leaning over the fence so far, she was nearly nose to nose with the dolphin.

Buddy stood up to see if she could see what it was the woman saw. Several other people did too.

"I thought I told you to get the hell out of here," Stevens bellowed, then glanced up at his audience. A smile cracked open around his cigar stub. "The show is about to begin, ladies and gentlemen." He flipped a switch on a phonograph and dropped the needle onto the record. A badly worn version of the Lone Ranger's theme groaned to a start. He lowered the volume, and lumbered angrily down the path toward the woman.

As all eyes followed him, Buddy saw the lady, slowly, deliberately, take a small pad from the hip pocket of her khaki shorts. She patted her thick hair, and pulled a pencil from behind her ear. Buddy watched her make a little drawing, write something, then jam the pad back in her hip pocket. She squared her shoulders, turned, and smiled up at Stevens whose face was inches from her own.

"My name is Jane Conroy," she said to his bottom lip. "You'll remember that, won't you?" Her smile was gone. She put her hands on her hips and stared boldly up at him. "You're breaking the law here." She kept her voice even, but her eyes were narrow, angry slits. "And it's killing these animals."

"Get out," Stevens snarled. But his bulk blocked the gravel path.

Miss Conroy, pointedly, looked both ways around him, shrugged and stepped up on the first row of bleachers. She took a ticket stub out of her pocket, turned, held it up for him to see, then climbed to the very top row and sat down.

Stevens glared up at her and rolled his cigar in tight, angry circles until the record ended. The needle bumped on for a while before he stomped back, lifted the arm, and turned it off.

The boy who had taken their tickets came through the gate carrying a beachball, two hula hoops and a bucket of fish. He put them all by the fence, got a ladder from behind his ticket-taking stool and opened it so the front legs were on the raft and the back legs were on the gravel path.

The smell from the bucket spread up to the audience.

"Wow," Buddy said, and pinched her nose closed.

Stevens came forward to address his customers at the same moment the smell reached them. "Oh my," said a woman

five rows up from Kirk and Buddy. She fanned herself, then her husband, with a postcard. Another couple shifted along their row, first one way, then the other, trying to escape the stench.

"Looks like we got us a bad one in the bucket, boy," Stevens said. He put the bucket on the fence, and picked through the contents, chose one, and tossed it into the cattails on the opposite side of the pool. "Happens sometimes," he said, shrugged, then glanced up at Jane Conroy. "Don't you folks worry none," he said to everyone in general, "my dolphins don't get no bad fish."

Jane snorted. "Those dolphins have never seen a fresh fish."

Stevens waddled to a point at the foot of the bleachers directly beneath where she sat. He pointed his cigar at her. "I'm gonna ask you to be quiet little lady, or I'm gonna ask you to leave." He jabbed the air with his cigar, then spat on the path near the crushed vial.

Stevens looked at Kirk and Buddy, and smiled. He took Buddy by the chin, and rotated her head around toward Jane. "You're ruining this kid's birthday," he said, shaking his head, sadly. He thumped Buddy's shoulder. "Sorry kid. You get 'em like this sometimes."

Buddy, bounced under the thumping her shoulder was taking. Her father rolled his eyes skyward, then winked at her.

The boy blew a whistle. Three fins surfaced, came

across the pool and popped up, in a row, at the edge of the raft.

Stevens reached beneath the phonograph stand and brought out a microphone. "Testing," he bellowed. "Ladies and gentlemen." The microphone squealed. Stevens thumped it with his fingernail, then blew a fine mist over it. "Ladies..." The mike made a sizzling sound, and died. Stevens banged it on the top of the railing. The domed top fell in the water. A dolphin disappeared. "Damn," he muttered, then shouted: "Ladies and gentlemen, meet Annie Tiger, Lucie Cypress and Osceola. Take a bow kids."

The dolphin with a pink scar on its snout, popped up and tossed the top to the microphone onto the raft. The boy blew the whistle that rested on the shelf of his lip, then pointed skyward. The dolphin that had found the microphone top, brought itself out of the water and tail-walked backwards. The other two followed. The movement of their tails made their bodies bob in a quick succession of bows.

Buddy laughed and clapped until she realized there was no sound from above her. She put her hands on the bench under her thighs and peeked up at Miss Conroy, who was sitting on her hands.

Stevens' son took three fish from the bucket he'd hung on a hook on the side of the ladder, and gave one to each dolphin.

"That's it, give them their rotten little reward,"

Jane said, softly.

Both Kirk and Buddy turned to look at her.

"Why don't you cool it, lady?" Kirk said.

Jane lifted her head and stared down her nose at him. Her cheeks looked wet.

"For their next trick," Stevens shouted, "Annie and Osceola will jump through hoops. Lucie is excused from this trick because," he hesitated, grinned, and winked at the sweaty man in the third row, "because we think she might be pregnant."

The audience applauded.

Buddy glanced around at the woman.

Jane's elbow was propped on a raised knee and her chin was on the heel of her hand, knuckles pressed to her lips. She closed her eyes, and shook her head slowly.

The boy was on the ladder leaning out over the water, holding two hula hoops. He blew his whistle. For a moment the pool looked empty, then two dolphins exploded into the air.

A soft 'oh ' came from the audience.

One dolphin sailed through one of the hoops but the boy moved the other one just as the second dolphin started through. Its weight ripped the ring of plastic out of his hand. The dolphin, and the hoop, disappeared into the pool.

Stevens leaned over the railing and said: "Make 'em do it again." He turned and beamed at his audience.

"We'll have 'em try it again for you folks."

"It was your kid's fault," Jane called down from the top row, "Not the dolphin's. You don't feed them well enough to have them do your stupid tricks twice."

Steven pointed a broad finger at Jane. "You shut up," he snarled.

The boy blew his whistle, and pointed to the hoop that had floated back to the surface. The dolphin with the scarred snout brought and laid it on the raft.

"She's being awful mean to Mr. Blossom?" Buddy whispered to her father, who he was looking up at the woman, angrily. "I know she thought he was going to give the dolphins rotten fish," Buddy said to herself, "But he didn't. He threw it away." She sighed.

The pleasure had gone out of this for her. She watched Annie and Osceola bounce a yellow, red and blue striped beach ball back and forth, and was glad when a weak breeze caught it in the space between them, floated it up and across the pool into a stand of cattails. Buddy didn't want them to have do any more tricks.

"Ladies," Stevens hissed and made a sweeping bow in Jane's direction, "and gentlemen, Annie and Osceola have been taking dancing lessons from my boy here, Arthur Murray-Stevens, and they would like to show you folks a little of their fancy fluke work." Stevens slapped his hand over his exposed navel, and his belly bobbed, but his eyes were blue pinpoints.



The boy blew the whistle and Stevens put the Lone Ranger music on again. The dolphins faced each other, then hoisted themselves out of the water on pumping tails. Their flippers were held perpendicular to their bodies so that they appeared to be touching one another, like a couple dancing, before they spun and flopped into the pool.

The bleachers creaked behind Buddy and her father. She turned to watch Miss Conroy make her way along the top row, then down the far side of the stands. Near the exit gate, she stopped and leaned over the fence. The dolphin they called Lucie Cypress rolled on her side and floated past her.

"That's it folks," Stevens shouted, applauding loudly, before he leaned over, whispered something to his son, then crooked a finger for Buddy to come.

She looked at her father. He nodded.

"Really?" she said, when Stevens offer to help her up the ladder.

"No problem. Happy Birthday." He thumped her shoulder but was watching Miss Conroy.

Stevens' son blew his whistle and pointed to the raft. Annie, the dolphin with the scarred snout, swept around the pool until she was opposite them, then disappeared only to reappear a moment later on the raft next to Buddy's white-striped feet.

"You can pet her if you want to," Stevens' son said.

Buddy knelt beside the dolphin and ran her hand

lightly along her side. "You're very pretty," she said, softly,

"Here give her this." Stevens' son handed Buddy a fish.

It felt mushy. Buddy sniffed it, wrinkled her nose and turned her head. "I think this here's another bad one," she said, handed the fish back to Stevens' son, and wiped her hands on the seat of her shorts.

Over her shoulder, she saw the last of Stevens customers go through the gate, then watched him marched toward Miss Conroy. He leaned toward her so that his cigar was an inch from the end of her nose. "Out," he bellowed, poking her shoulder, twice, hard, with his finger. "Now."

Jane knocked his hand away. "Don't touch me."

Stevens grabbed her arm, spun her and shoved her toward the gate. "And stay out of what ain't your business."

Jane whirled around. "I'm making them my business," she shouted at him.

Buddy's father was still stretched out on the bleachers, his long legs over the bench in front of him, his elbows on the one behind. "Hey" he yelled, jumped up and ran past Buddy to land between them just as Stevens lunged at her.

"Get off my property," Stevens screamed. The veins in his forehead rose like buoy ropes. Spittle hit Kirk's face.

Miss Conroy's back was against the cypress gate. "I'll see this show," she hissed, "and you out of business if it's the last thing I do."

"Lady," Kirk struggled to hold Stevens, "get out of here."

"I'm leaving," she said, "but I won't be far enough away to suit the two of you." She jerked the gate open with the force of a gale wind, and let it bang shut behind her.

Stevens spat at the gate.

Buddy was frozen on the ladder, watching the argument, wide-eyed. When Jane let the gate slam, Buddy turned to see Stevens' son's reaction, but her attention was caught by the dolphins' return to other pool.

Buddy jumped off the ladder onto the path, darted out the gate, and raced along the oleander hedge to where it end at the edge of the levee. She jumped a chain with a 'no-trespassing' sign dangling from one hook and ran down the side of the long, rectangular, brown-water pond.

The levee ended at a trash heap that spilled into Turner River. But halfway down, Buddy saw a metal drainage pipe which ran under the levee. One end jutted out of the bank on the river side and the other poked through into the dolphins' pond, beneath the branches of a large seagrape tree. She swung herself down on a limb, and straddled the pipe.

On the far side of the pond, near the channel from the

show-pool, a dolphin surfaced, expelled air, then a moment later, slid past the end of the pipe where she sat.

Its snout was scraped and pink. "Hi, Annie. Remember me?"

The dolphin up-ended and its face cracked open in a grin.

"I came to say goodbye. I had a very nice time."

The dolphin made a whistling sound by squeezing air through its blowhole.

Buddy grinned, then pressed her lips together and blew air through them, making a sound that was not at all like Annie's whistle. She shrugged and slowly put her hand out.

The dolphin drew nearer.

Buddy's bare feet dangled in the water. When the dolphin nudged one with her snout, Buddy slowly leaned over and put her palm beside her right her foot. The dolphin came up under it so Buddy's hand was on Annie's forehead.

"Buddy?" Her father called.

The dolphin disappeared.

"I'm down here, Dad." She stuck her arm out through a gap in the branches and waved it back and forth.

He stepped over the chain and walked down the levee.

"What are you doing?"

"Talking to a dolphin. This is where they live." She looked up at him, her brow knotted with concern. "Do you think that lady is right? Do you think Mr. Blossom is killing them?"

"Did they act sick to you?"

"No, I guess not. But they look kind of old to be doing tricks. The boy dolphin, Osceola, has saggy skin like the Admiral's and a white, bumpy spot by his breathing hole."

"Look, don't worry, ole Orange Blossom isn't going to let his meal-tickets die." Kirk hunkered down on the levee above the drainage pipe. "I think she was just upset by the fish smell. She's probably a city gal that's never smelled dead fish without a white wine and lemon-butter sauce."

Buddy laughed. She thought about asking him what a meal-ticket was but decided not to chance it. She'd ask the Admiral what that meant.

"Too bad the Admiral couldn't come with us. He'd know if they was sick," she said, and was instantly sorry she had. She glanced quickly at her father. His jaws tightened, and he stood up.

"Were sick," Kirk corrected, "Let's go."

She knew it angered her father that she bypassed him to take every question, every problem, every discovery to her grandfather. But for as long as she could remember, not one thing she did was finished off right until she told him about it. And covering her love for the Admiral was as hard as keeping her stomach from growling when she was hungry. It just rolled up and out of her.

Buddy stepped up beside her father on the levee and

tried to think of something to ask him. When she couldn't, she cautiously took his hand.

A dolphin surfaced and swept the length of the pond. As it passed them, it turned on its side and slowed. "Do you think the dolphins would rather live in the ocean?"

"If they could think about it, I suppose they would."

"Should people keep things that would rather be free?"

"Animals can't want things. They aren't able to think like people do about the past or the future."

"How do you... How do people know that?"

"Scientists say their brains aren't big enough, or they are missing the parts that control those sort of thoughts."

"Oh. Well, do you think they miss their families?"

"They can't miss things either," he said. His voice was getting tense. "Stevens bought them; they belong to him, right or wrong."

"Where do you go to buy a dolphin?"

"Someone caught them and sold them to Stevens."

Buddy walked beside him watching for a break in the surface of the water. "Do you think it's okay to buy something that ain't selling itself?"

"Don't say ain't. It's isn't, and that question doesn't make sense. Animals are here for us to use. There's little difference between catching those dolphins to use in a show, and catching crabs and fish to sell for food. They're dumb animals."

Buddy stopped. "They're dumb?" She looked back over her shoulder. Just like me, she thought. They're dumb like me.

Her father stopped and turned. "Now what's the matter?"

"They're dumb?"

"Damn," Kirk muttered, knelt in front of her and took her by the shoulders. "It doesn't mean the same thing. It's an expression." He stood up. "Just a stupid expression."

Her father, with his head down and his hands jammed into his pockets, walked ahead to get the truck. But after Buddy stepped over the chain with the dangling sign, she turned to stare at the murky brown water. She knew everyone except her grandfather thought she was dumb; she was pretty sure they were right, and that he just loved her too much to believe it. But she was still able to miss her mother, dream she was a dolphin, pretend she had friends, make believe she could fly.

Her father pulled up beside her, leaned and opened her door.

If she could feel all those things, she thought as she step up into the truck, couldn't they?

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The instant her father stopped the truck under the strangler fig by the kitchen door, Buddy leapt out.

"Admiral," she shouted, and ran up his wheelchair ramp.

The Admiral was not really an admiral. He was born

Perry Martin, but in 1909, when Teddy Roosevelt came to Chokoloskee to tarpon fish, Perry's father was his guide and young Perry worked as mate. The President, probably because of his friendship with Admiral Peary, nicknamed 11-year-old Perry, the Admiral. The nickname stuck and now only a handful of old islanders remembered his real name.

"Admiral, where are you," Buddy called again. She came to the kitchen door and pressed her forehead to the screen. "Have you seen him?" she asked her father, who was wiping dust off the truck seats with a damp rag.

Kirk jerked his head toward the shed in the back yard. "Have you looked there? He said he was going to mend my traps."

When Buddy rounded the corner of the house, she could see his wheelchair pulled up under the workbench. She bent slightly at the waist as she neared and crept toward him on bare toes.

She had never actually caught him sleeping, but she felt sure she had him this time. His white-haired head drooped so that his chin rested on his chest. His grip on the hammer in his lap had loosened and several of the galvanized nails had slipped from his fingers and fallen between his legs. A stone crab trap and a stack of new lath slats were on the workbench in front of him. Two mended traps were on the ground. Fifty more, in need of repair, were stacked along the back of the shed. No sound disturbed the still air except his shallow, rhythmic



breathing and the hum of mosquitos.

When she was right beside his chair, he smiled without opening his eyes. A thin, wrinkled, brown arm shot out, wrapped around her waist and pulled her into the chair beside him. "Thought you'd caught me napping, didn't you?"

"I ain't never caught you yet, have I," she giggled, and threw her arms around his neck?

He hugged her, kissed her cheek, then untied her arms and held her away from him so he could see her face. "Was it wonderful?"

"Oh, Admiral," she jumped out of his chair, clapped her hands together, then stopped. Her smile faded. "It was at first. I mean there was three dolphins, you could see real close and they jumped through hoops and walked on their tails." She hopped backwards on her toes. "But, Admiral, there was this beautiful lady there. She was real upset with Mr. Blossom, and he was real mad at her. They had a fight. Yes, they did," she nodded, drawing her eyebrows down into a vee.

"Really? Did old Orange Blossom punch her?" he asked, poking her in the belly with a finger.

"Nope," she giggled. "But he might have if Dad hadn't stopped him. He was red in the face, and all his teeth was showing."

"What was they fighting about?"

"I missed the beginning, but later she was upset 'cause she thought he was giving the dolphins rotten fish

to eat. Mr. Blossom said just one fish was rotten, and he threw it away. But after the show was over, they let me pet one of the dolphins and gave me a fish for her and that fish was rotten, too. I told Dad but he still thought the lady was just some, um..." Buddy looked off toward the bay trying to remember what he had called the woman when they were driving home. "Ah ha," she said, and slapped the workbench, "an over-acting, good doer." She frowned. "Naw, that ain't it. I forgot what he called her, but you know what? I think Dad thought she was cute. He spent the whole ride home talking about how awful she was."

The Admiral smiled. "What did you think about her?" he asked, flattening a mosquito on her arm.

"I don't know. I think maybe she was right. Mr. Blossom's dolphins didn't look as pretty as the ones that played with Dad and me that day." Buddy snapped her fingers. "I forgot, the lady had some of the pool water in a glass tube and Mr. Blossom took it away from her and stomped on it."

"They really were fighting, weren't they?"

"Oh yeah, Admiral. He was gonna punch her."

"She kinda sounds like a nosy pain in the rear to me."

"Oh no, sir. I mean she said bad things about Mr. Blossom, and talked all through the show, but she wasn't a pain."

"She sounds awful."

Her father had come up behind them. "How's it going?"

he said.

"I was telling the Admiral about the pretty lady at the dolphin show." Buddy grinned at him.

"Her mouth was too big to tell if she was pretty or not." Kirk looked at the two mended traps. "Did you get a late start?" he asked his father, sarcastically.

Before her grandfather could answer a horn honked. "Yo, Martins." Carlisle Townsend waved to them from the stop sign at the top of the hill. He was driving his brand new, 1969, Ford truck that he'd gone all the way to Miami to buy. The bed was piled high with new traps.

"Doesn't that make you sick?" the Admiral muttered, but smiled and waved.

"Yeah. The cheating bastard," Kirk said, waved and walked away.

Buddy fiddled with the barnacle scraper and kept her head down because Mr. Townsend was Alex's father. She figured he might be in the truck, too, and she wouldn't wave at him if her like depended on it. But when the Admiral elbowed her, she politely raised her hand, but not her head.

Alex Townsend was always bragging about something, so it had surprised her to find out that the man who owned those wonderful dolphins was his uncle and that nobody at school had heard about it from Alex. She closed her eyes and wished the Steven's lip on him without much hope it would work. Nothing she had wished on him ever had.

"He don't like us," she said, "why does he wave?"

"He's just rubbing that new truck in."

"I'm sorry," she said, put her arms around the Admiral's neck and kissed his cheek. "I didn't mean he doesn't like you. Everybody likes you."

He leaned back, took her face between his calloused hands and studied her eyes. "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. Everybody loves you."

"Just you, I think, Admiral. Just you."

"Baloney," he said, "Townsend ain't waving 'cause he likes me, he's waving 'cause he wants the oldest stone crabber on the island to see how rich he's getting. Everybody else says hi to me because I'm the most historic character around here..." he ran a lath slat up her ribs, "...that ain't dead yet."

Buddy smiled because he was trying to make her feel better and she wanted him to think he had. She took up the barnacle scraper again and went to work scraping the slats that wouldn't need replacing, the ones the bore-worms hadn't eaten.

His joking about dying didn't really bother her. Nothing she could remember loving had ever died. Her grandmother had died, but Buddy only had a vague memory of her being sick. She had forgotten crying for her. Her mother was dead, but she didn't remember her alive. All the memories she had of her mother, she had made up --one for each picture in the shoe box on the shelf in her

father's closet. She frequently stole into his room to study one picture in particular. In it, her mother stood in the open door of an airplane, waving and smiling. It was a warm smile that made her dark eyes sparkle like the sunlight off the engine's prop. And Buddy felt sure she was waving hello, not goodbye. Her mother's long, curly blonde hair was in a bun, and she wore a stewardess cap and uniform. Buddy could hold that picture, close her eyes, and watch the breeze move wisps of her mother's hair, and see her mother's arm wave wildly with joy. And in that vision it was Buddy she was so happy to see.

"Admiral?" she said, brushing barnacle pieces off the workbench with a sweep of her hand. "If I'm dumb like Alex and everybody says I am, but I can still miss my mother even though I was too little to remember ever meeting her, can animals..."

"You ain't dumb," the Admiral said, smacking the workbench with his palm. "That sawed-off little squirt's the dumb one." He pulled her over and took the scraper from her hand. "You ain't dumb, honey. You're just like me, that's how I know you ain't dumb. You'll learn to read better. I never did 'cause of the swamp angels."

He grinned, so she did, too.

"Yep. Every time some teacher with pioneering blood drifted down all determined to start a proper school, the swamp angels would suck'm dry, and escort him back across the bay. I only know what I know because of the teachers

what got here in January. The ones that came in June had mosquitos for porters both ways. That's it by golly," he said, and patted her bottom. "You could say mosquitos was the main hitch in my education." He grinned and held her at arms length.

She smiled but she was staring over his shoulder at the bay. "Is pieces of our brains missing?" she asked without looking at him."

"Where'd you get an idea like that?"

"Dad said the dolphins is dumb animals, that the pieces of their brains for remembering the past and their families, or when they was free, is missing. He said scientists found that out. I figured maybe that's why I can't read too good, 'cause a chunk or two is missing."

Her grandfather grabbed her arm. "You listen to me," he roared, "you ain't got nothing missing up here." He jabbed his own forehead. "Your pa's the one with something missing, and it's here." He struck his chest with a fist. "He's the dumb one in this family." He grabbed a slat from the table and shook it at her. "And another thing. Those dolphins ain't dumb either. They know more about the sea and fishing than even I do. Humans is just too stupid to figure them out."

"I love you, Admiral," she whispered, then buried her face in the creased and wrinkled curve of his neck, closed her eyes and breathed deeply. His skin smelled of day-old sweat, and Old Spice, which he used daily though he only

shaved once a week. His shirt smelled of being worn often and seldom washed. She loved his smell.

He cleared his throat, gently pushed her away and tilted her head up by her chin until her eyes met his.

"You ever known me to be wrong about anything?"

She shook her head.

"So there," he said. "Come on, let's head in 'fore these swamp angels drain us. Does the birthday-girl want to race me or ride?"

"Ride," she laughed, took the chisel and hammer from him, and pulled his chair away from the table.. "Can we start from the top of the hill?"

"Sure. Where else?"

Buddy pushed him across the yard, onto the road, then turned his chair to point downhill. She wrapped her hands around the rubber grips, hooked one bare foot over a strut and pushed them off with the other. She slapped the ground twice to gain speed before folding that foot over the other strut. The Admiral gave hard turns to the wheels as they rolled down the road. "Faster, Admiral, faster," she whooped, swinging her arm in large circles like a calf-roper. As they neared where the pavement ended and turned to crushed shell, Buddy leapt off, ran along side, jumped in front of the chair and stopped it, just a couple of feet from the top of the boat ramp.

"Someday we ain't gonna make it," the Admiral panted, "and them catfish is gonna think they died and went to

heaven when two big skins with plenty of meat, heads and all, roll down that ramp and land in the middle of them."

"We ain't even been gutted." She grinned, arched her back and poked her stomach out.

A sadness came to her grandfather's eyes. "At least not so them catfish could tell," he said, patted her belly, then looked away at the sun sinking into the bay. "We'd look whole to them."



II  
SCHOOL DAYS

"I'm taking you to school this morning," Kirk said.

"How come?" she asked around the eggs in her mouth.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." He sat down with his plate, felt the top piece of toast with two fingers, then took the one off the bottom. "I have to go to the bank in Immokolee. I'm stopping in Everglades for a haircut on the way. You need one, too."

"I'll be late."

She didn't mind that he liked her hair short. She knew it kept her from looking so much like her mother, but if her first dread was school, her second was being late for it and having to sit near the front of the class, or anywhere in front of Alex Townsend.

"You won't be late," her father said. "We'll get yours done first, then you can walk over to school."

"I don't need a haircut." She lifted her chin and shook her head so her hair fell away from her face. "It's

short enough....," she stopped.

An expression full of anguish crossed her father's face before he looked away. "You'll need one by next week," he said, "and that will mean another trip for me. I'm getting everything done over there today so I can spend the rest of the week getting the traps ready."

"The Admiral's fixing the traps," she whispered, without looking up.

Kirk snorted a laugh. "I've got 300 traps to dip and...why am I explaining this to you? Why the hell are you arguing with me?"

"I hate being late for school," she answered, softly. "You hate school. You'd think the later you got there the better."

"I might have to sit near the front," she said.

"Maybe if you sat in the front, you'd learn something."

"Yes, sir." She poked her eggs. They were cold now.

Buddy put her books on the truck's front seat then climbed in beside them. Her father had the hood up, tinkering with something. "Please hurry," she whispered.

A weak cold front had pushed through during the night, dropping the humidity so that it felt cooler, and bringing just enough rain to pock the dust on the raised hood. A gusty wind blew out of the northwest.

"Look at that," her father said, jerking his thumb at

the bay as they came off the island.

Chokoloskee's shallow bay was a slick sheet of gray mud, emptied of water by the northwest wind and low tide.

"Fifteen years ago, you couldn't have gotten to school on a day like today," he said.

Before the bridge was built in 1955, the only way for the children of Chokoloskee to get to school was by boat.

"I wish we still had the schoolboat," she said.

"No you don't. We had to make up the days we missed, and we were always late."

When he was growing up, Kirk had told her, the island school only went to the eighth grade. High school was across the bay. So when he turned fourteen, he had to get up at 4:30 in time to hitch a ride over to Everglades City on a fishing boat.

In his senior year, the island hired Lester Simmons' tour boat to take the children to school. It was a leaky, creaky, complaining, broad, flat-bottomed, homemade wooden boat with rows of splintery benches and a worn-out looking motor whose starter cord dangled like a lolling tongue. But it didn't leave the docks until 7:45, which, her father said, felt like midday.

The boat's motor was Simmons' cross to bear. When he arrived at the docks each morning, he left it running and held on to a piling while the high school kids threw themselves into seat selection. But just as the last stepped aboard, the schoolboat's motor would quit. Like a

mule in its stall, it sank its stern in and rocked silently.

The first few times this happened, her father told her, Simmons pulled the motor's cord with increasing fury until, by luck or chance, it started. But as the year wore on, this seldom worked and Simmons fell to trying to trick it into starting. He would sit in the stern with his face in his hands as if he'd been defeated, only to leap up suddenly and jerk the cord.

When this ruse began to fail, Simmons resorted to threats, specifically, the seawall at Smallwood's store where there was a rusty pile of engines and assorted parts that Mr. Smallwood, a pacifist, had dumped there during the Second World War to keep the government from making bullets out of them.

Threatening the engine with Smallwood's nearly always worked, Kirk said. We could see its starter rope tightened. Simmons snatched the cord, the motor fired with an explosion of smoke and fumes, and before it had time to realize what had happened, Simmons had jammed it in gear and was smugly steering it away from the docks. The motor left a pissy little circle of fuel as a last defiant gesture, but it didn't quit again until it got to Everglades. It liked being at docks, in the company of other motors, and it only ran long enough to get itself from one dock to another.

They got a new schoolboat a year after her father

graduated. It had polished benches, a roof, windows and life jackets. After it went into service, Lester Simmons took the old motor to Smallwood's seawall and ceremoniously dropped it in with the other discarded, useless motors and engine parts. He told everyone it was an execution, a justifiable, fitting end to that deceitful, distorted little mind. But once the starter rope rotted away and the handle dropped off, the motor had a peaceful, mildly surprised look and it blew tiny bubbles when waves washed in.

"It tricked him, didn't it?" Buddy laughed. "Like Brer Rabbit tricked Brer Fox."

Homer Johnson, the barber, had a customer when Kirk and Buddy came in, and Homer liked to chat. It was after eight when Buddy got into the chair. She gave her father such pleading looks that he asked Homer to just give her a quick trim.

Buddy came out of the barber shop at a run, headed for the seawall along Barron River. The wall was a short cut to school, but once past the Rod and Gun Club, the backyards of every house on the river were full of traps, ropes and buoys. She darted through the first gap she came to, past four men dipping traps. In her rush to leave the house, she had forgotten her shoes. Her bare feet splashed through a puddle of diesel fuel and burnt oil, spotting her legs and shorts with the black, oily dip. She ran across the playground, climbed the railing, raced along the

breezeway until she stopped herself against the wall next to her classroom. She swallowed quickly, trying to control her breathing, opened the door, quietly, and slid in through the crack.

Two desks were empty: one in the middle of the first row, and the one in front of Alex Townsend, who was sitting in her favorite seat in the last row on the far side of the room. Buddy always angled that desk a little so her back was in the corner, windows on one side of her, wall on the other. Once she got positioned, she could see out without even turning her head. And she could smell Barron River and feel the slightest breeze. It was almost like not being there.

Alex looked up when she came in, grinned, took his foot off the seat of the empty desk, and patted the back of it.

Buddy ducked down, crossed in front of Miss Daniels' desk and slid into the one in the first row.

Miss Daniels looked at her and smiled. "I was just telling the class about this year's science project." She turned and pointed to the map she had pulled down from the roller over the blackboard. "Our end of Florida is unique and very important to the economy of the State. Particularly our mangroves and estuaries because that is where baby fish, shrimp and crabs are sheltered. In other words, this area protects the health of the fishing industry, which is how most of our parents make a living.

"There is a biologist here in town right now who is connected with the Florida Department of Natural Resources. Her name is Jane Conroy, and she's here doing her Ph.D work on stone crabs. A Ph.D is a doctorate degree, the kind scientists and college professors have.

"Will Miss Conroy be a stone crab doctor?" Alex asked. Jason and Timmy started laughing, but Alex kept a straight face.

Miss Daniels' eyes narrowed. "Why don't you three stay after school and I'll explain it to you more thoroughly." she said.

"Miss Conroy will be doing field work on stone crabs..."

"I ain't ever seen a stone crab in a field," Alex whispered to Jason, who giggled then slapped his hand over his mouth.

"...instead of in a laboratory where most scientists work." Miss Daniels continued, her eyes pinned on Alex.

"The project I have in mind will give you all an idea of how she goes about her study. In class, we will make a big poster, an overview of this whole area. Each of you will pick a plant or an animal you wish to study. I want you to write a report describing your subject's life cycle and where it fits in the food chain. In other words, what it eats and what eats it. You will also have to draw a picture of your subject's life cycle, and attach it to the poster. Are there any questions?"

Hands waved like cattails.

"Belinda?"

"Can I do turtles? I have a pet turtle."

"You can do turtles, but you have to explain where they are born, what they eat and what eats them. Alex?"

"Can I do stone crabs?" Alex's tone was sneering. "My father catches the most stone crabs of anybody."

Buddy saw Miss Daniels' jaws tighten. "Yes, you may do your report on stone crabs, but not on stone crab fishing, except to mention we eat them. I want the stone crab's life history." She sighed, then her voice softened. "Perhaps, if you see Miss Conroy around you could ask her what she is doing for her study."

With her elbow on her desk, Buddy unfolded her fingers.

"Yes, Buddy?"

"Could I do dolphins?" she whispered.

Miss Daniels came from behind her desk, and leaned over. "I couldn't hear you, honey."

"Could I do dolphins?"

"Well, sure. Do you know somebody who knows a lot about them, otherwise you would have to..." she hesitated, "you would have to read about them."

"Yes ma'am." Buddy knew what she meant. "O.B. Stevens is probably an expert. I could ask him."

"He's no expert," Miss Daniels said, harshly. "I'm sorry," she touched Buddy's shoulder. "He's not...his



dolphins aren't...never mind. He's just not a suitable source. To do dolphins, you will have to find someone else or go to the library."

At lunch time, Buddy stood in the cafeteria line with one bare, oily, black foot covering the other. She hated recess, lunch and fire drills, or any other time she was out of the direct sight of a teacher. She didn't need to turn around to know Alex had found her; she heard him coming.

"We need to get in here," Alex said to a little third-grader. He, Jason and Timmy stepped into the line behind Buddy. "I think Dumb Bunny, Buddy, I mean Buddy..." He slapped his forehead. Jason and Timmy and the the third-grader laughed. "I think she's changing color on us here." He pointed to her feet, and the spots on her legs. She's turning as black as a Semi-hole. Dumb Buddy is you a Semi-hole squaw?" He cocked his head like a dog. "She ain't answering me," Alex moaned and stuck his bottom lip out.

Almost, Buddy thought taking the next tray, a napkin and silverware.

"Any of you guys speak Semi-hole?" Alex asked, taking a tray and bumping Buddy's with it, nearly catching her fingers between them.

"I know a word or two," said the third-grader. He raised his hand in an Indian greeting. "How cow."

Alex slapped his back and laughed.

The third-grader grinned and blushed.

"Maybe just moo will do," said Jason, raising his hand in the greeting.

"You're a poet and don't know it," Timmy whooped. All three boys, and the third-grader, raised their hands. "Moo," they said together, and laughed until they were apparently quite weak.

Buddy pushed her tray along, and took what they handed her over the top of the steamy glass case.

"She don't want that," Alex said to the shower-capped server, who didn't hear him because she had never, as far as Buddy knew, ever listened to what the children said. "She wants stew; Semi-hole stew: water moccasin, 'gator tail, frog legs, and sawgrass stew." Jason clung to the railing for support. "And a pond apple for dessert." Alex elbowed Buddy. "Right squaw?"

"No, no," said Timmy. "Don't you remember, she wants dolphin?"

"You want one cut in steaks or filleted?" Alex asked her back, his eyes damp from laughing.

Buddy took her tray and stood looking at the messy tables and crowded benches. She didn't have anyone she always sat with, and if she took a table alone they would sit with her. Sometimes she sat with the Indians, who were always nice to her, but she decided not to give Alex the satisfaction. She weaved slowly across the room. Alex, Jason and Timmy (they had told the third-grader to get

lost) were right behind her, Alex bumping her back with his tray. At the empty table next to a group of teachers, Buddy put her tray down. This was a safe zone; this was the cast-offs' table. Alex, Jason and Timmy moved across the room to sit by the windows with some other boys, and soon they were all laughing and ducking their heads to see her feet.

Buddy smiled, but did not speak when Larry, then Naomi, sat down. Larry, whose mother was one of the servers, centered himself opposite her on the bench. His plate was piled high with potatoes, roast beef and three rolls. He hung over it and jammed huge forksfull into his mouth until his cheeks bulged like a squirrel's, then he began to chew.

Naomi, without looking at either Buddy or Larry, sat down on the bench as close to the end as she could and still have wood under her. One leg was under the table but the other one was free as though she was prepared to dart away. Buddy, without thinking, put her milk carton back on her tray and scooted down to give Naomi more room.

Naomi put her napkin over the knee of the leg under the table, and smoothed out a corner. She took up a string bean, sniffed it, and bit the end off. Her eyes, tremendous behind her thick lens, gave the appearance of being horrified by all she saw. She finished the bean and carefully choose another, sniffed it and bit the end off.

Larry ran the last half of his third roll around the

rim of his plate, and stuffed it in his mouth. He had dropped his knife early on, so he used the handle of his spoon and his fork to tear the last slice of roast beef in two, then fed both pieces through pursed lips.

Buddy looked at Naomi's thick lens and remembered when she was in the second grade, and her father had taken her to Doc Little to have her eyes checked.

"She still can't read," Kirk had told him.

"Do you know your alphabet?" Doc Little asked.

"Oh yes, sir." She grinned. Both her front teeth were missing.

"Good. See this chart? I want you to read the letters on each line as I point to them. Okay?"

Buddy looked down and flicked at his linoleum floor with her toes. "I can say the alphabet, but I don't know how to read all the letters yet."

"You know the alphabet, but you don't know the letters?" The doctor stroked his long nose then pulled down on his bottom lip.

"I just don't know which letters is the ones I know." She crossed her eyes, pulled her bottom lip out and tried to touch the end of her nose with it.

"Look," Doc Little said, finally, "the first letter is an E, do you see an E in this third line?"

A three, a three, she hummed and let her lip go. "No, sir."

"How about the fifth line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you see one in this line?" He pointed to the eighth row of letters.

"Two," she laughed. She'd caught him trying to trick her. "I see two in that line."

"Her eyesight is perfect," he told Kirk, patted his shoulder, and gave Buddy a lollipop. "I'm sorry, son. I don't know what it is, but it's not her eyes."

Buddy failed the third grade. Her one and only friend moved on and Alex Townsend caught up.

In the fourth grade, her father hired a high school student to tutor her. Buddy liked her and the girl came every Friday evening for three months until she eloped one weekend with shrimper from Marco Island.

Then in the fifth grade, Buddy got Lillian Wilson for a teacher. A woman, who after one look at Buddy's handsome father, insisted Buddy's problems were "all in her darling little head." The child is just nervous reading aloud because she is shy, Miss Wilson chirped when she called Kirk and Buddy in for a conference. I was like that myself, she told him, drawing her shoulders up and cocking her head. I'll give her such special attention this year, you won't recognize her when I'm through. She beamed at Kirk, patted his arm, then Buddy's head, while fanning her bodice with a report card.

And almost daily, she was true to her word.

"Buddy Martin, will you please stand up and read now,

dear?" Lillian Wilson requested, cocking her head and smiling at Buddy. "Practice makes perfect, dear," she purred. "Your father will be so proud."

"Practice makes perfect, dear," Alex Townsend mimicked, cocking his head to one side and smiling, sweetly at Timmy. "Your father will be so proud."

"Be quiet, Alex," Lillian Wilson snapped. "Stand up, dear. We are all on your side."

Buddy's shoulders sagged at the sound of her name. She wrapped her left arm around her waist and dug her fingernails deep into her side. If the open book on her desk could sink fangs into her hand, she would have stroked it.

Miss Wilson's tinny voice filled the still room again. "Stand up, dear."

"Stand up, dear," Alex mimicked.

Buddy closed her eyes and concentrated on the Admiral's face. Not until she could see him smiling did she move her legs, slowly, from beneath her desk and stand up.

Alex, Timmy and Jason turned in their seats, put their chins on balled fists on their desk-backs and stared up into Buddy's face. Timmy giggled.

"Shh." Alex put a finger to his lips. "Dumb Buddy's gonna read to us."

"Start right at the top of page seventeen, dear."

"Th, Then the..." Her voice quivered.

"That's 'when the', dear."

Alex patted his fingers to the yawning circle his lips formed, then began to drum the top of the desk behind his.

"When the ...children was..."

Alex snorted and elbowed Jason.

"Saw, dear. Saw," said Miss Wilson, with a sigh.

Buddy cleared her throat and gripped the edge of the book as if it was the railing of a swaying tuna tower.

"When the children...saw the little...g,go,god?"

Alex slapped his forehead. "Little g,g,g,god," he sneered. The children around him laughed.

"That's dog, dear. Alex turn around please. You're making the poor thing nervous."

Jason did as Alex was told and found he alone had minded. He whirled back around in his seat, and resumed drumming his fingers in time with the others.

Buddy tried not to, but she looked up quickly to see if Alex had obeyed. He grinned and stuck his tongue out at her.

In a straight line off the top of Alex's head, her teacher sat hunched low over her desk. Buddy thought she saw Miss Wilson stick her tongue out at her, too. Buddy blinked. Miss Wilson had put on lipstick and was leaning over her compact wetting her lips with quick little licks like a snake's tongue. She glanced up and smiled at Buddy. "You're doing just fine, dear. Go ahead."

Buddy felt sick to her stomach, but she found her place and started again. "When the children...saw the

little...dog and the cl,cl,clown, th, they began to..."

Buddy stared at the next word. The drumming fingers pounded in her temples.

"Laugh, dear. Laugh," Miss Wilson squeaked.

Buddy looked up and tried to laugh. It came out as cry, short and shrill.

The class erupted.

"Quiet," Miss Wilson shrieked. "That was very nice, dear. You may sit down. You be sure and tell your father how much better you are reading, won't you dear?"

Buddy sank into her desk and bowed her head.

"Admiral," she whispered.

Occasionally, when Buddy was called on to read, she did quite well. "Wonderful," Miss Wilson would gush, fanning her thin neck with her hankkerchief. "It's night and day, the difference. Night and day. Makes all the work worthwhile, doesn't it, dear?"

However, Miss Wilson's career rewards were based on Buddy's good memory. The times she read well were when the reading assignment was given in advance and Buddy asked their neighbor, Iris Smallwood, to read it to her the night before class.

In one of her teacher's frenzies of delight, she must have tried to call Kirk only to find that they had no phone. Buddy guessed this because she saw a perfumed, pink-flower-bordered note addressed to her father from Miss Wilson. She never knew if he answered it or not, but Miss



Wilson soon grew less and less interested in whether Buddy could read or not, and finally gave up. But, apparently, not before bragging of her progress to Miss Daniels, Buddy's sixth grade teacher, and suggesting that she should continue where Miss Wilson left off.

The first week of the sixth grade, Ruth Daniels called on Buddy to read. The reading was from an assignment she had given the day before. Buddy read slowly, her voice low enough that Miss Daniels twice asked her to speak up, but she read the two paragraphs with no mistakes.

The next time she was called on, it was not from an assignment. Buddy went white under her tan. Perspiration beaded on her forehead and upper lip. I can't, she thought, please don't make me. I can't. But she made it to her feet, steadying herself with one hand on the desk top. The textbook trembled, blurring the print.

Alex, Timmy and Jason turned in their seats and propped their chins on their fists.

"Turn around," Ruth Daniels hissed, her voice low and threatening. All three boys whipped around and folded their hands on top of their books. "Are you all right?" she asked Buddy. There was concern in her voice.

Buddy nodded, then slowly began to read.

Apparently what she heard sounded perfect because Miss Daniels relaxed and sat back.

"I just read that part," Belinda Bailey said.

Buddy stopped. The perspiration on her forehead ran

down the sides of her face. She let go of the desk, lifted her arm and wiped her cheek on her shoulder. The book slipped, hit the desk and landed at her feet. Buddy stared down at it blinking rapidly and swallowing over and over like someone trying not to gag.

Ruth Daniels stood up and came down the row of desks toward Buddy. At Alex's desk, she stopped. "I told you to turn around." She whacked the back of his head.

When she reached Buddy, she bent her face to her ear and whispered: "Are you all right?"

Buddy felt her knees buckle, but Miss Daniels caught her under her arms, and walked her toward the door. Outside, Buddy stumbled to the railing and threw up.

Miss Daniels leaned against the door, her head tilted back against the little oblong window and her eyes closed. "I'd like to tie Lillian Wilson's smelly little hanky in a knot, tight around her turkey neck," she said, through clenched teeth, then, fighting back tears, she said: "I'm so sorry, honey. Please forgive me."

Whispers and giggles came from the other side of the door. Buddy watched Ruth Daniels shift her weight, slightly, and kicked the door with the heel of her shoe as hard as she could. There was a cry Buddy hoped was Alex, a scurry of feet, then scraping desks.

Ruth Daniels walked to the railing and put her hand on Buddy's shoulder. "I didn't know. You read so well the first time."

"Miss Smallwood read it to me the night before."

"You memorized it?"

"I guess so."

Miss Daniels lifted her chin and leaned down so their faces were very close. "You'll never have to stand up and read aloud again. I promise."

Buddy suddenly began to cry. Ruth Daniels turned her away from the door, wrapped her arms around Buddy's shoulders and held her until she was quiet.

From that day on, Buddy stayed after school once a week to be tutored. And life got easier. Alex still nipped at her but not in class; not in front of Miss Daniels. Alex was mean; he wasn't brave. At the bus stop, he hummed 'Dumb Buddy is teacher's pet', knocked her books out of her hand, butted in front of her in lines, teased her on the playground, but Buddy didn't care so much about those times. She could relax in class, try to learn without worrying about being called on to read.

Recess, for Buddy, was a time set aside each day for children to ridicule one another. Coach Johnson always chose the team captains so that everyone got a chance at the job, but even he had never picked Buddy, Naomi, or Larry, for the boys' team.

Everyday it was the same, after the captains for the girls' softball teams were selected, the rest of them formed a line, and this day was no different. Buddy stood

a little apart from the others, her trap-dip-covered toes rooting into the sand of the diamond. Either she or Naomi would be the last chosen.

A Great Blue heron was fishing on the far bank of the river. When the teams were chosen, Buddy took the seat at the very end of the bench where she could watch him, and hoped he'd be there until she could go back to class. When someone punched her, she looked up to see that the girl who had been sitting next to her on the bench was standing at home base holding the bat out to her. Buddy rarely batted, and the few times she had, she had always struck out. She stood up, amid moans and groans, and walked slowly to the plate. When she reached to take the bat, the girl dropped it. "There's the bat dummy, try not to hit yourself in the head with it."

Buddy picked it up and held it out like everyone else did but she didn't swing at the pitches. The first pitch was a ball. Someone clapped, but was silenced by a teammate. Buddy looked across at the heron. The second pitch was a strike.

"You just gonna stand there?" someone yelled.

Buddy swung low at the next one.

"That was a ball, you idiot," cried the captain.

"Here comes out three," she muttered to the others.

Buddy wanted to sit down. She felt dizzy and swayed slightly. A ball whizzed past her head.

"Ball two," the umpire called.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the heron stab a fish and step up on the bank.

The pitcher wound up and threw again.

"Swing," someone screamed.

Buddy closed her eyes and swung as hard as she could. The crack of the bat stung her hands. She dropped it in the dirt.

"Run," the girls screamed. "Run, Dummy, it's a homer."

Buddy looked at them then whirled and ran toward the base. The rush of air against her damp skin was cool, and the hair on her arms prickled as it dried. She could hear the children shouting, screaming her name. She slapped past the first base and raced toward second. She was running faster than she had ever run. She grinned as she rounded second and swept toward third. Her eyes followed the heron as it flew up river. Buddy felt as if she too had taken flight, had lifted off, leaving the playground far below. The screams of the children faded until she could no longer hear them at all. No one could reach her. No one did. Home plate grew larger and larger. Chill bumps spread down her arms and legs. She slid into the flat little sandbag like she'd seen the boys do. Then she put her head back and laughed.

Sets of brown legs covered with fuzzy blonde hair gathered around her. She was grinning when she looked up into their quiet, sneering faces.

"You're so stupid," said one of the girls. They

turned, all the little girls, and scattered to their positions on the field.

Buddy watched their backs as the incoming team filed past her, snickering, thanking her. One of the girls was carrying the ball, retrieved from the yard of a nearby house. When she passed Buddy, she tapped her shoulder. "You're out," she said, and her teammates laughed.

"You ran like a deer," Coach Johnson said, bending over and straightening the plate beside her knees, "but you ran the wrong way." He patted her back. "Maybe next time." Then he, too, walked away.

Buddy sat by the sandbag and looked left, toward where the sunrises, the direction she had run. She looked to the right, toward the river where the heron had been.

"You gonna sit there all day?" the catcher asked, smacking the ball into her glove.

Buddy didn't look at her, or answer. She got up, walked straight out from home plate, past the pitcher, past second base, into the outfield, out of the school yard, down the road to the traffic circle. At the bridge on 29, she started to run and she ran until she was running as fast as she had run the bases, then she pushed harder, ran faster, her arms pumping at her sides, and the wind in her face, drying her cheeks. And she didn't stop running until she had crossed the bridge, until she was on the island, home and safe.

She heard hammering coming from the shed as she came

over the hill above their house. She caught her breath, then pulled the hem of her shirt out of her shorts and wiped her face, before crossing the yard. "Hi, Admiral."

"Hi, yourself. You're early, ain't you?"

"A little."

"How was school?" He looked up into her face.

"The same." She turned and took the scraper from a nail on the wall, kissed his cheek, and started working on the back side of the trap.

"I didn't hear the bus." He was watching her.

"I missed it." She didn't look at him.

He reached and took the scraper out of her hand.

"Come with me," he said.

"Oh, Admiral," she cried as they came around the side of the shed. "For me?"

"Got your name on it, don't it?"

Resting on two wheelchair-height sawhorses, in the shade of an avocado tree, was the old pitpan, a short wooden skiff. Its bottom glistened with wet red paint and he had painted BUDDY on the stern in tall black letters.

She threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you, thank you," she cried, then danced around it, twirled, and stopped in front of him. "It's beautiful."

"I've gotta patch an oarlock, otherwise, she's seem seaworthy. We'll test her," he said and grinned, "then I'll show you the way up to see them dolphins of yours again."

"Oh, Admiral," she clapped her hands together, then dropped her arms to her sides. "Are you teasing me?"

"'Course I'm not teasing you."

"How?"

"Up Turner River." He tested the paint with his finger.

"Dad'll never let us go."

"I'll handle him. You just follow my lead." He grinned. "What's all over your feet?"

"Trap dip."

"Well good. That's good." He laughed. "It'll keep the bore worms out of your toes."

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### III

#### The Pitpan

"Well," said the Admiral, that same night at dinner. "So you said them dolphins is in a pen up on Tamiami Trail, huh? Must be right near Turner River." He accepted the platter of broiled Yellowtail, scraped the largest fillet onto his plate, put the platter on the table, and slid it to Buddy. She took the smallest piece and passed the rest to her father.

Buddy grinned at her grandfather. "Yes, sir," she said. "The airboat rides is along the river."

The Admiral glanced at Kirk then winked at her. "You know," he said, "Turner River comes into the bay just north of us. The Calusas, and then the Seminoles, used it like a highway to get back and forth between their camps and here. I used it for years to get up into the 'glades to hunt. Sure was good fishing in that river," he said, speared a piece of fish and chewed it thoughtfully. "I 'spect the river's overgrown in places, but I betcha we could still make it."

Buddy felt she was about to laugh. She ducked her head low over her plate, but took her cue. "Up the river?"

"Sure."

"To see the dolphins again?"

"Yep."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kirk said, scraped away from the table and bumped the edge, slopping Buddy's milk into her plate as he passed. He got a beer from the refrigerator, searched noisily through a drawer for an opener, then took a long swallow.

Buddy used a corner of her napkin to sop up the milk in her plate and watched her grandfather.

He was staring at his son's back, his eyes narrowed. "Yep, it's been too long since I've been up that river." He looked at her and grinned. "I was thinking maybe you and me could clean up the old pitpan and give it a try."

"Oh, Admiral," she cried, caught up again in her original excitement. She glanced quickly at her father, who was standing at the sink looking out the window at the docks. "Could we?" she asked him.

"No, you couldn't," Kirk said, turning. "What the hell are you talking about you old fool?" He moved to the end of the table opposite his father, leaned on one fist, and shook his beer bottle at him. "You're going to patch the pitpan? I can't even get you to stay awake and patch crab traps."

"We'll do the traps before we go," Buddy whispered.

"We?" Kirk looked at her, and gave a short laugh. She sagged in her chair like an inner tube with air seeping out.

Kirk leaned forward toward his father. "On your little cruise, where are you going to put your wheelchair? On skis, maybe?"

The Admiral smacked the table with the palm of his hand. "The bench in the bow was rotten. I took it out," he hissed.

"You've removed the bench? You've already removed the bench?" Kirk slammed his beer down on the table and leaned toward Buddy. "You're not going," he shouted.

"Aye, aye captain," the Admiral snapped, and saluted his son.

Guilt swept over Buddy. It seemed every argument was because of her. She slid out of her chair, stopped at the door to the living room and looked back at her grandfather. He was watching Kirk who stomped to the refrigerator, grabbed another beer and went out the back door, letting it bang shut behind him.

"I liked you better as an airline pilot when you was gone four days a week," the Admiral said, loudly, jamming a chunk of cold fish into his mouth. "Or when you was gone all together."

Buddy crossed the living room and slipped out onto the porch. The crushed oystershell road was a dead-end extension of the paved road to the docks, the lights from

which illuminated the Martin's front porch. Her father was standing on the seawall with his back to the house. She tiptoed to the far side of the porch, ducked under the railing and padded away into the darkness.

Smallwood's store was a red, tin-roofed, rambling, hard pine building anchored atop eight-foot pilings. In the dark, it looked like a giant, black, rectangular spider, but Buddy still liked Smallwood's best at night. She liked to sit on the seawall under the store and watch the white foamy lip of the bay roll over the engines again and again, causing them to hiss, make little sucking sounds and, occasionally, sigh, as if life was being breathed back into that rusty pile of motors.

She loved the engines. They had faces, cracked and old like the Admiral's, with secret stories to tell. She put her toes in with them so she could watch and feel the water rise and fall as rhythmically as the Admiral's chest when he was sleeping.

Nowadays she found it hard to recall that she had once been afraid of the store. That when she was six, the Admiral had told her the story of "Bloody" Ed Watson, who had lived on Chatham River, down the coast from Chokoloskee. He grew sugar cane and made syrup to sell to moonshiners for what people called low-bush lightning, a blend of cane syrup and Red Devil lye for moonshine so strong it lathered like soap.

At cane-cutting time, the Admiral told her, Watson

would go to Naples and hire folks with no kin. When the crop was in, instead of paying them, he shot them and buried them around his farm.

For a couple of years Buddy had a recurring nightmare in which her father took her to Watson's farm and gave her to him. "She's worthless to me," he told Watson. "Maybe you can get some work out of her."

After the cane was cut and boiled and the syrup put in tins, Watson chased her with his shotgun shouting, "Come back, I want to pay you."

She always ran away from him down the bank of the Chatham River. And each time, at the same spot, she turned to see Watson taking aim and tripped over 300-lb, Hannah Smith's leg sticking out of the mud bank. She'd fall, hear the crack of the shotgun blast, and wake up.

It was after clam-diggers found Hannah Smith's body that the men of Chokoloskee killed Ed Watson. Killed him right there on Smallwood's dock, the Admiral said. "Right where them rusty engines is now." And after they killed him, they found fifty bodies buried on his farm, he told her. "'Course no telling if that was all of them."

Sometime, a few years later, her grandfather found out she was afraid of the store and he must have realized that he had frightened her with that story because one evening, just before his accident, he had walked there with her and they had sat on the seawall and watched dolphins fishing in the channel. He told her about Teddy Roosevelt and the

Calusa Indians and history of the shellmounds. After that the store became theirs and she went there often, though now she went alone.

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The Saturday following the day the Admiral mended the pitpan, Buddy tapped softly on his door before opening it a crack to peek in. He was in his chair, waiting, and smiled when he saw her, pressed a crooked finger to his lips and winked. One hand was behind his back. "I got something for you," he said, grinned, toothlessly, and pulled out a red plaid hunting cap. He held it out to her, snatched it back, smacked it against his knee, and waved away the eruption of dust.

"Oh, Admiral."

"It's old," he said, holding it out to her with both hands, "but it ain't never been wore. I bought it for your pa twenty-five years ago. He didn't want it. Said it was a redneck's cap." Her grandfather scratched at something on the brim then lifted it to her again. "It'll keep the spiders out of your hair when we go through where the mangroves is thick and low."

When she leaned over, he pushed her bangs off her forehead, and fitted the cap snugly on her head. She stood up, looked at herself in the mirror and smiled. "I've been wanting one of these." She turned sideways, pulled the bill a little lower over her eyes and grinned. "I love it.

Oh, yes sir," she said placing her palms flat on his dresser and lifting her chin to the mirror. "I really been needing one just like this." She leaned toward her image in the cloudy mirror. "Admiral, you know something? When I'm looking in a mirror is the only time everything's where it's suppose to be."

"Yeah, I know. It's that way for me, too."

She came back and squeezed into the chair beside him, pushed the cap back on her head and put her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad Daddy didn't want it."

"He was just young and full of beans when he slung that cap back at me. It hurt then, but I don't blame him now. He didn't want to spend his life hauling nets and traps like his pa."

Buddy grinned, suddenly. "His neck, and his whole head was red as cooked crab when he found out we was going up the river."

Her grandfather laughed. "It sure was."

Buddy turned the cap around so the bill was in the back. "Admiral," she said, tracing the path a blue vein in the top of his hand, "why did Daddy quit flying airplanes? If he hated fishing, why'd he come back here?"

"He didn't want to live in Miami anymore after your ma died, and he needed help taking care of you. You was such a little thing then."

Buddy took his hand and gathered his gnarled fingers into a pack, one at a time. She held them in her fist and

looked up at him. "Admiral." She let his fingers go. "Why has Daddy always called me Buddy instead of my name?"

Her grandfather stared up at the large stain on the ceiling where the roof had leaked during the hurricane of '48. "Elizabeth was such a big name for a little girl," he said.

"It was Momma's name, too, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But that's not why. I think your pa just didn't know much about being a father. He called you his little buddy from the day you came here. I 'spect he was planning on you two being pals."

"We ain't though."

"You will be, honey. I know that for sure. You believe the Admiral, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. But sometimes, he don't even like looking at me. It hurts him."

"You ain't hurting nobody, honey. Pain like your pa's in is something he can stop only when he's ready."

She took the cap off and rubbed the material between her fingers. "You think we should invite him to go with us up the river?"

"That's nice, sweetie, but he ain't even gonna like us going. I picked today 'cause he's busy getting the last of his traps weighted with concrete, too busy to fuss with us."

"Did you tell him we was going today?"

"I wasn't planning to, but I guess I need him to put



me and this damn thing," he smacked the armrest of his wheelchair, "in the boat." He grinned, suddenly. "This sure is gonna make him mad."

When Kirk called them for breakfast, Buddy went to get the Admiral and pushed him to the kitchen door. He put a finger to his lips. "Wait here a minute," he whispered, then butted the door open with his knees, and wheeled across the pitted linoleum to his spot at the table. "I'm taking Buddy up the river today," she heard him say. She pushed the door open enough to see through the crack.

Kirk had a loaf of bread in his hand when he turned. He put the end of the wrapper in his mouth, sucked the air out, spun and knotted it. "Which river, you crazy old coot, the Chattohochee?"

"Turner."

"Yeah? That's nice." He added a dash of tabasco to the eggs he was stirring. "In the pitpan, huh?"

"Yep."

"You gonna sit straddling the bow so you can dip your toes in the water?"

"I glued blocks where the bench was to keep my chair from rolling."

"You are nuts," Kirk said, not cruelly or crossly, but with a hint of admiration. He scraped the eggs onto three plates, felt the toast, muttered to himself, and put two slices on each plate. On his way to the table, he kicked open the swinging door. "Buddy. Breakfast."

Buddy plastered herself against the wall.

"Buddy, now," her father shouted. "Your eggs are getting cold."

"Like the toast," the Admiral called.

"Anytime you want to take over the cooking and give up riverboat-piloting, be my guest."

Buddy ran on tiptoes to her bedroom, grabbed her cap off the bedpost and dashed to the kitchen door. She took a deep breath, put her cap on and went in. "Hi, Daddy."

Kirk only nodded, his mouth full.

She grinned at her grandfather, and turned her head first one way then the other so he could see the fishing lures she had attached to her cap. Then she turned all the way around in her chair so he could see where she had carefully printed her name on the back with a laundry marker: \* U \* \* Y.

"That's a good looking cap you got there. Don't you think so?" he said to Kirk.

"Yeah." He scooped up a fork-full of eggs, brought it to his mouth, and stopped. "You really think you're going to do this, don't you, you old fool?"

"Watch who you're calling old, or a fool," the Admiral snapped. He smacked his fist on the table. "I've been up that river a thousand times in the last seventy years."

Kirk interrupted. "I'm not saying you don't know the way. I know you know the way," he shouted. "I'm saying

it's not safe to go, you in a wheelchair, with just her," he indicated Buddy with a jerk of his thumb.

"What you're saying," the Admiral growled, "is that I'm helpless, and she's stupid."

Buddy slumped in her chair and closed her eyes. It was a moment before she felt the Admiral's hand on her shoulder and let herself be pulled out of her chair.

Her grandfather wrapped his arm around her waist and lifted her chin. "He's wrong about both of us. We ain't, neither of us, either of those things."

"Don't listen to him," Kirk said. "That isn't what I meant at all." He leaned back in his chair, casually, as if the misunderstanding was settled, but his balance was off. The chair-back bumped a notch down the wall, startling him. He swung his arms in a large circle to regain his balance, and brought the chair down on its front legs with a jolt.

The Admiral's expression remained cold and angry. He put his arm around her narrow shoulders which were humped like she'd been hit in the belly. And when she turned to look at her father, guilt, as if that was exactly what he had meant, swept across Kirk's face. He scraped his chair back, and left the kitchen.

"Daddy." Buddy ran after him and caught up as he was shutting his bedroom door. "Daddy, it's all right." She stopped when he stopped, lowered her head, and stroked a pine knot with her big toe. "I know I ain't stupid," she

said, not looking at him, but at the floor. "I just get confused. The Admiral understands 'cause he used to get confused, too." Her father was so quiet, she glanced up to see if he was still there, then back at her toe flicking the pine knot. "My feelings ain't hurt."

Kirk stood with his long arms straight at his sides, his head down. He didn't say anything or look at her until the Admiral wheeled up, then he turned, went into his room, and closed his door. From within, Buddy thought she heard him crying --thought she heard him say "I'm sorry. Forgive me."

"Daddy?" she whispered at his door.

There was no sound. She pressed her ear to the wood.

"Come with me, honey," the Admiral said. He leaned over and took her hand.

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IV  
Up Turner River

Buddy sat in the stern of the pitpan on her grandmother's milkstool with her hand on the little 7hp Johnston's handle. She was practicing the Admiral's instructions by pretending the motor was running and she was steering.

The Admiral had told her the boat would turn the opposite direction from the way you pushed or pulled the handle. That had sounded just perfect to her.

"Okay," she said to the engine. "I want to go that way." She pointed right then leaned over the stern to watch which way the propeller pointed. She pulled the handle into her stomach then sat for a moment looking between the propeller and her chosen direction. Suddenly, she grinned and smacked the little motor on the back. "We did it," she said. "Let's do it again."

So as not to make it too easy, she straightened the motor, then chose to go left. She pushed the handle away and leaned over the stern to look. It was perfect. So

perfect she felt she'd cheated by just choosing to go the opposite direction, but she felt if she had chosen the same direction it would have been just as easy. She didn't know how to practice, once she'd gotten it right. Time, she decided. I'll do other things to try to forget what I learned.

Buddy took the gas hose out of the tool box, attached it to the fuel can then to the motor. She pumped the bulb exactly three times, pulled the choke out, then stood up and pulled the starter rope as hard as she could. The second time she tried, it started with a rattle and a puff of smoke. She eased off the gas and pushed the choke in.

The pitpan was nosed in beneath the bow of her father's boat and the seawall. Buddy was afraid to try reverse so she untied the bow and the stern lines then, hand over hand, pushed the herself down the side of Kirk's boat.

When the pitpan's bow pointed out into the channel, she held her father's stern line while she slowly twisted the handle from neutral into forward. Her heart pounded even in her fingertips. The pitpan didn't move. Buddy tried to give it just a little more gas, but went too far. The engine roared, and because she was still holding onto the line, the pitpan's bow swung around and smashed into the back of her father's boat. She twisted the handle back too far the other way, and the motor died.

Her hands were shaking and sweaty. Though she could

not find the dent she'd made among the scratches and dents a thousand stone crab traps had made, she still looked around to see if anyone who knew her father had seen her. A boat was coming up the channel, but the docks were empty, except for two men cleaning fish by the boat ramp. She couldn't see them, but she could hear the sounds of fish cleaning: catfish sucking at the surface, the flapping and jostling of pelicans, and the screams of seagulls overhead.

Holding on to a piling, Buddy waited for the incoming boat to pass. It was Miss Conroy, the woman from the dolphin show. Buddy waved then pushed the pitpan around to face the direction she wanted to go.

With the motor carefully notched into neutral, Buddy pushed off the piling and pulled the starter rope. The engine rattled to life. She twisted the handle into forward, then a little further, adding gas. The pitpan pattered down the channel toward the boat ramp. At the ramp, Buddy wanted to go left, but she had forgotten which way to turn the motor. She jerked the handle into her stomach and the boat swung right. She pushed it away too late to miss scraping the seawall on the other side of the canal.

Miss Conroy had backed into a slip two down from the boat ramp, and was tying her bowline. She glanced up when Buddy hit the wall. So did the fishermen. Then they all watched her use her hands to push off and line herself up with the ramp. When it was a straight shot, Buddy gave it

some gas.

"Cut your motor, little fella," a fisherman called to her.

"I'm not a boy," Buddy said, though not so they could hear her over the motor, then she twisted the handle the wrong way and roared up the ramp. The propeller gouged into the concrete and stopped.

"You need a mite more practice there, sonny," the second fisherman said, and they laughed.

Jane Conroy gave them a dirty look. "First try?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am." Buddy raised the pitpan's motor, and jumped out, nearly slipping on the moss. She pulled the boat up the ramp, tied the bowline to a cleat on the seawall and grinned at Miss Conroy. "My grandfather and me are going up Turner River to see..." She stopped and bit her lip. "To fish."

"That's nice."

"I'm Buddy Martin. We live there." She pointed to the house.

"Jane Conroy."

"Yes'm, I remember."

Miss Conroy looked at her, questioningly.

"My teacher, Miss Daniels, says your studying stone crabs."

"That's right, I am," Jane said, putting a cooler and a tool box on the dock.



"Well, see ya," she said, turned, and dashed across the road.

She burst into the kitchen. "Admiral, I did it," she shouted, before she saw her father standing at the window over the sink. The water was running and a mound of white foam showed over the rim.

"I'll do those, Daddy," she said, gathering the rest of the breakfast dishes off the table.

"I'll do the dishes, you fix a couple of sandwiches for yourself and Dad, and fill a jar with water." He scraped the crusts and cold bits of egg into the trash bag, then dropped the last plate into the hot water. Together, they watched it sway like a porch swing until it settled to the bottom. "I want you to know I'm against this, but I'm not going to stop you. Maybe it'll teach that old coot a lesson."

"Yes, sir. We'll be..."

Kirk didn't let her finish. "Seems everybody around here is trying to prove something to someone, whatever the cost." He left the room. The kitchen door made a whooshing sound as it flipped back and forth behind him.

She could catch him, she thought, catch him and tell him they wouldn't go, or that they wanted him to go, too. But he'd say good, or no. Buddy raised her arms and twirled around and around, like a coin flipping in the air. When she stopped, she was facing the sink so she did the dishes.

For their lunch, she made peanut butter and apple sandwiches --the Admiral's favorite. She wrapped them in wax paper, held in place with rubber bands, and stuffed them into one small paper bag. Her grandfather had put his tackle box by the kitchen door. Buddy put the sandwiches and a spool of bright pink plastic ribbon in with his fishing knife. She added a pair of scissors and the hammer then shut the lid and carried it down to the pitpan.

When the kitchen door slammed behind the Admiral and her father, she had just finishing spraying every crack and crevice, bolt and screw on the little Johnston with WD40. She gave the oarlocks a quick squirt and put the can away. Neatly laid out in the bottom of the boat were the Admiral's fishing rod, a machete, two oars, a long pole, and the small pile of stakes he had cut and painted white. She reached up, took the bucket of shrimp off the seawall and put it under the remaining bench with his tackle box.

The Admiral rolled his chair down the kitchen ramp and crunched along the road to the docks. Kirk hopped over the railing. Both their chins jutted forward and their jaws were tight.

At the top of the boat ramp, the Admiral stopped and sat grimly with his elbows on the armrests. Kirk lifted him out of the chair, swung around, and without great care, deposited him on the seawall. He snatched up the chair with one hand, stomped down the ramp and jammed its wheels between the wooden blocks.

Jane, who was washing down her boat, looked over her shoulder, folded the hose to stop the water, and watched.

Buddy smiled at her. "This is my grandfather," she said. "Admiral, this here's Miss Conroy. The lady from the dolphin show."

"Ah ha," Jane said, apparently realizing where Buddy remembered her from.

Kirk looked around in surprise, then put his hands on his hips. "Well, well. We have a new boat in the fleet. Are you for charter, Miss Conroy?"

She lifted her chin and glared at him.

Kirk gave a short laugh, turned, slipped on the wet moss, spun on his rear end and slid backwards into the canal.

Buddy and Jane laughed until he came up sputtering. Buddy took a deep breath and held it. Jane turned her back and released the hose.

Kirk came out of the water on his hands and knees. "I wish I'd been carrying you, you old goat," he snarled up at his father, who had fallen back on the path laughing.

"I know," the Admiral said, and laughed all the harder.

"Stop it," Buddy said to her father.

He did, and her grandfather sat up and Jane turned around again.

"It's not funny anymore," she said to her grandfather.

Two and a half years ago the Admiral had been standing at the water's edge at the bottom of the ramp holding a friend's bow line when the boat a tourist was hauling out broke its cable and slid off the trailer. A fisherman on the dock shouted a warning and the Admiral spun in time to see the boat lurch toward him. He tried to jump clear but, like Kirk, his feet skidded on the moss-covered concrete and he slid on his back across the ramp. If he had gone into the canal, he would have been all right, but he stopped himself by grabbing a trailer tire and tried to roll in tight against it. The vee of the bow caught him on his left side at his waist, crushing his spine.

"It's all right, honey," her grandfather said. "My accident was too long ago not to have a good laugh on your pa."

He was still grinning when Kirk got him around the waist and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of flour, then flipped him into his chair and pushed them off, leaving a wide scrape of fresh red paint on the ramp. The pitpan drifted to the side of the canal and bumped gently against the seawall.

Buddy twisted the handle into neutral, stood up and jerked the starter rope. The motor sputtered to life. She looked back toward the ramp just as the kitchen door slammed behind her father.

The Admiral twisted in his chair, glanced at the house then smiled at her. "Okay, Captain, dead ahead." He

turned and swung his arm like a general leading troops into battle.

Buddy waved goodbye to Miss Conroy, straightened the motor and eased the handle around to forward. Slowly they pattered beneath the faded NO WAKE sign toward the end of the canal. As they approached the channel, Buddy saw the Admiral tightened his grip on the armrests. She turned to check the prop then twisted the engine a little one way, then the other, before making a flawless left turn into the channel.

"What a seaman," her grandfather hooted.

The breeze off the Gulf was warm, but smelled fresh all the same. The Admiral put his head back, took a deep breath, then spread his arms wide. "Smell that," he said. "Just smell that air."

At the end of channel, Buddy swung them left past Smallwood's store, then on around the eastern edge of the island. From there less than a half-mile of choppy bay separated them from wide mouth of Turner River, but the Admiral pointed left.

"Go around and cross on the lee side of the causeway," he called back to her. "Out of the wind where the water's calm."

Once in the river, she eased off the gas, opened the tackle box, and took out the plastic ribbon and the scissors. Carefully, she stepped forward, straddled the bench, and handed them to her grandfather.

As she steered them up-river, he measured ten strips the length of his forearm, and cut them.

"Admiral, what's that coming in the water?" Buddy asked, pointing at a nub moving erratically toward them.

"Don't see nothing."

"Swimming toward us like a snake. There."

He grinned. "That's a baby shark, black-tipped probably. This river's a nursery for them cute little critters."

The two-foot shark zigzagged toward them through the pale brown water until it almost bumped into the pitpan. When it finally saw them, it flung itself in the other direction, splashing the Admiral.

"With some luck, maybe we scared the little tyke out of a year's growth." He laughed and wiped his arm on his pants leg.

The river narrowed and turned rust-colored as they moved north, and the flow of the tide became less noticeable. The black mangroves gave way to the red with their tangled, arching prop roots, like the legs of closely-packed spiders. And then, around a bend, the river looked as if it ended.

"There's a tunnel there somewhere," he said, scanning the wall of mangroves.

"There?" she said, pointing off to the left.

"No, that ain't it. That dead-ends. Look at the water. It's scummy and stagnant 'cause it ain't flowing

nowhere. That's how you tell. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." She grinned and saluted him.

"I see it." He pointed to the right. "Ease her into the opening so I can cut those branches back. It may be too overgrown to get through, but we don't know 'til we try."

After he cleared away the branches that blocked the entrance, he drove a white stake into the mud at the side of the opening to the tunnel, and tied a pink ribbon around at the notch he'd made in the top. "Your first marker," he said, and smiled at her over his shoulder.

They weren't all the way into the dark channel when the mosquitos discovered them.

"You want some spray?" she asked, taking a can of 6-12 from the tackle box.

"Naw, I don't feel them anymore. My hide's too tough."

Buddy wished her hide was tough because she hated the smell of mosquito spray. She took her cap off, held her breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and sprayed herself from head to toe, then aimed a cloud of spray at the Admiral before putting the can away.

The tunnel wound and twisted through the mangroves, but they were moving slow enough for the Admiral to cut away the low branches, so she only snagged the prop once on the roots.

Whenever they came to a false channel, he showed her how to watch the current to decide which way to go. "The

strongest flow is the main stream," he said then drove a stake and tied a ribbon to mark it, anyway.

If they had been coming from the other direction, the place where they broke out of tunnel and into sunlight was indistinguishable from any other dent in the wall of mangroves. The river, when she looked back, appeared to flow straight south between a bank of cattails on one side and the mangroves on the other.

Her grandfather carefully marked out the entrance with stakes on either side and a ribbon streaming from the branches above it. When he was finished, he turned and grinned at her. "It's downhill now. Fifty more yards and we turn off onto the main track across the prairie. It's a straight shot from there."

The prairie was scarred with airboat trails, and pocked with cattail stands which encircled holes scraped out by alligators during winter dry-downs.

They were about a quarter of a mile away from Stevens' when Buddy heard an airboat coming. Before she could think of where to go to get out of its way, it burst onto the trail just in front of them, made a sliding left turn and roared away toward Stevens' dock. The blast from its propeller blew the pitpan's bow around, nearly tipping the Admiral over backwards, and might have if he hadn't leaned into its wind.

"I hate them things," he muttered. "See those willows?" He pointed to the small stand of trees growing



up the levee on the river side. The pipe from the dolphins' pond jutted out of the embankment just behind them.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"If you pull in there, we'll be out of that jackass' way."

A few feet short of the levee, Buddy cut the motor and let them drift into the willows. After the Admiral tied them up with the bow line, she poled the stern around parallel to the levee, jammed the pole into the mud, and tied the stern line to it.

"Hand me that fishing rod and the shrimp bucket before you go visiting, will ya?"

"I wish you could see them," she said, handing him the bait.

"I've seen a thousand dolphins," he said. "You go on. I'll stand the watch for renegade Indians, while you pow-wow with your friends."

She giggled, bent low, sneaky-like, and crept up the side of the levee. At the top, she looked both ways, waved over her shoulder then, still crouched, darted across to the cover of the seagrape tree, stepped down and straddled the drain pipe.

The pond was smooth, empty-looking. She stood up amid the branches and peered over at the show-pool, but it was quiet there, too.

"Hello, dolphins? " she called softly.

A sucking sound came from the pipe as a swell moved the garbage caught against the metal bars. It was a moment or two before she realized the movement of the brown water was caused by a passing dolphin. By then the pond was still again.

A palmetto frond floated amid gum wrappers, plastic ice bags, beer and Coke bottles, and two dead fish. Buddy got on her stomach, reached into the trash and lifted the long frond out. The rotted leafy part dropped off leaving only the paddle-shaped end of the stalk. She used this to scoop the garbage away and shovel it up onto the bank beside the pipe.

She worked awhile, before she saw the circle of gray cheek and the eye watching her. She smiled at it. "Hi." she said, and kept cleaning.

More of the dolphin's head appeared until she could see the smile-shaped curve of its mouth.

"I figured if I cleaned this drain out, you'd get some nicer water in here."

She had stirred up a stink. Pinching her nose closed, she reached between the bars and pulled out a giant tangle of fishing line along with all the moss that had grown around it. The drain made a gurgling sound, then a loud sucking noise before water from the pond swept through belching the remaining trash into the water behind the pitpan.

"There," she said, sat up and wiped her hands on her

shorts. "I suppose you don't remember me. I was here two weeks ago on my birthday."

The smile and eye sank out of sight.

"No, I suppose you don't," Buddy said, and dipped her toes in the rush of water through the pipe. "I guess I oughta go say hi to Mr. Blossom," she said, after the pond had been still for a while.

Just as she was about to stand, a dolphin popped up in front of her.

"You scared me." She laughed, sat down again and put her toes back in the water. "My grandfather marked a trail for me, so I can come up to see you, anytime. He's just over there now, fishing." She jerked her thumb in his direction. "He would've come over, but he can't walk."

The slick gray face smiled at her.

"You're Annie, right? I'm Buddy. Buddy Martin. From Chokoloskee. Right down the river." She pointed out the direction for the dolphin. It bobbed its head and squeaked.

Buddy giggled. The dolphin bobbed again then let a whistling sound and a couple of pops from its blowhole.

One of the other dolphins surfaced nearby, expelled air and disappeared. As if they were connected to one another, her dolphin disappeared, too.

Buddy found O. B. Stevens leaning across the bottom half the door to the ticket booth, talking quietly to, and rubbing the shoulder of, a pretty girl.

"Mr. Blossom," Buddy said, softly, and touched his arm.

He jumped. "Yeah, what do you want?"

"I'm Buddy Martin. Remember?"

"Who?"

"Kirk Martin's daughter."

"Oh yeah. The birthday-girl. Where's your pa?" He glanced toward the parking lot.

"He ain't with me. My grandfather brought me."

"The Admiral? Where is that old codger?"

"In the boat."

"What boat?"

"The pitpan. In the river."

"You two came up the river?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ain't he still in a wheelchair?"

Buddy nodded.

Stevens sucked at his teeth making a sound like the catfish at the docks, then snorted a laugh. "If that don't beat all. What are you two doing here?"

"I came up to see the dolphins again."

Stevens stuck a short pinky into his mouth and scraped at a back tooth. "Well okay," he said, flicking whatever he'd gotten off his finger. "You want me to send some boys to get that crazy grandpa of yours out of the boat? We got another show in about twenty minutes. I'll only charge for the old man. You can go in free."

"No, sir. Thank you anyway. I've already been to see them. We gotta be heading back."

"You were in the last show?"

"No, sir. I went and sat by their pond and watched them."

Stevens jammed his cigar in his mouth and rolled it around. "That there's a no-trespassing area. Folks ain't allowed down there."

Buddy ducked her head. Her toes began working at the gravel. "I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to trespass."

"It's because of the snakes. Pygmy rattlers is around there. You stay away from there from now on."

"Yes, sir." Buddy turned to go, stopped and turned back.

Stevens was leaning in the door again.

"Mr. Blossom? I only saw two dolphins."

He looked over his shoulder. "Osceola's dead."

Buddy's eyes were on Stevens' lip. It glistened like a wound. "How come?" she whispered. "How come?" Her voice cracked.

Stevens patted her head. "He was old kid. That's all." He turned back to the girl in the booth. "I'll talk to you later about that gift shop job." He winked at her, then rocked away.

Buddy stepped over the chain with the no-trespassing sign still dangling by one hook. She looked back in time

to see Stevens go through the gate to the show-pool. Balling her hands into fists, she shouted: "Miss Conroy told you he was sick."

He didn't hear her, but the girl in the booth peered out.

Buddy picked up a chunk of limestone and threw it as hard as she could at the sign. It missed. She ran at it and kicked it. The sign broke loose and spun away across the gravel lot.

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V  
DOWN TURNER RIVER

"Admiral." Buddy stood on the levee above the pitpan, hiked her arm and wiped her eyes on her shoulder.

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

"Osceola's dead."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry." He held his arms out.

"Miss Conroy was right. She said he was killing them." Buddy came down the levee to let him hug her. "If that awful Mr. Blossom had been as nice to Osceola as he is to his ticket-taker girl, he wouldn't have gotten sick." She spied the stringer hanging over the stern. "Did you get some fish?"

"Yep. Three snook. Nice ones, too." He leaned over, and pulled them in.

"Can I have two of them?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so. One of them ain't all that big, and this one here you and me can share." He took off the biggest fish and handed her the stringer. "We'll give them dolphins your pa's share." He grinned.

Buddy crossed the levee, swung down onto the pipe and patted the surface of the water. A flat, slick paw-print appeared in front of her. "Annie? I brought you a fresh fish. The Admiral just caught it." She slipped the largest snook off the stringer, got a good grip on its tail, then held it out to the dolphin.

Annie up-ended and stood with her whole head out of the water, but made no move to take the fish.

"Please Annie. It's fresh." She wiggled it in the air. "See it's still alive."

Annie moved closer and brushed the fish lightly with her snout.

A whistle blew and the scratchy Lone Ranger's theme came over the loud speakers. The dolphin disappeared.

Buddy carefully put the snook back on the stringer. "Don't you die, Annie," she said, softly. "Please, don't you die."

"I don't see how he's allowed to keep them if he don't feed them right." Buddy handed the stringer back to the Admiral. She stepped into the pitpan, jerked the lines loose from the willows, and rocked the pole angrily until came loose, then she pushed them off and out into the river. The southward flow caught and floated them quickly downstream, stern first.

"Always start your motor first, honey," the Admiral said, "before you untie, in case it don't start. Now you got no control over where you're going." He spoke calmly,



and smiled over his shoulder at her, but he his grip was tight on the armrests.

Buddy yanked the starter rope over and over.

"Admiral?"

"It's okay, honey. Take it easy. We're going to lodge in them reeds there, see? "

They drifted sideways into a stand of sawgrass. The Admiral grabbed a handful of the sharp-sided grass, and held on. "Let the starter rope wind in all the way, then pull it."

The little motor fired with a roar, plunging them forward toward the mountain of trash rising out of the weeds at the end of the levee.

Buddy fell across the engine hood.

"Honey!" the Admiral shouted. "Turn!"

With one hand on either side of the cowling, she was pushing herself upright when he yelled his warning. She twisted the motor. The pitpan made a sweeping arc away from the embankment and back out into the river.

"Well, I'll be dipped," the Admiral said, and laughed. "You saved us. Guess you'll remember to make sure you're in neutral next time. Huh?"

"I'm sorry, Admiral. Maybe Daddy was right."

"Oh bull. I made plenty of mistakes when I was learning. I ran my pa's boat aground so many times, he gave me a hoe one Christmas. Said I spent so much time on dry land, I might as well plant something."

"Is that true?" She grinned.

"Word of honor," he raised his right hand.

"Admiral, you're hand's all bloody."

"Couple of little scratches. Ain't nothing. Shows my hide's getting soft." He wiped his hands on his pants and used his shirttail to clean the blood off the armrests of his chair.

"You want your sandwich yet?" Buddy asked when they were out of sight of Stevens.

"Pretty soon, now. There's a secret lagoon I want to show you."

"Where you used to go with the Indians?"

"An Indian showed it to me but I 'spect I'm the only man alive, white or red, still knows where it is. It ain't easy to find. Even back then, the way to it was only wide enough for a dugout," he said, then set his cap low against the sun.

Buddy added gas slowly until they were clipping along. At the pink-ribboned stake marking the airboat trail, she slowed and turned off the shallow track onto the river, spooking a Great Blue heron. He flew downstream ahead of them with great sweeping strokes, his passing shadow alarming schools of mullet which exploded into the air with each downward beat.

"Nice, huh?" the Admiral called over his shoulder.

"Go past our tunnel about a hundred yards, then slow up so I can watch for the opening to the lagoon. A couple

minutes later he pointed. "I think that's it on the right. See it?"

Where he pointed look like nothing more than a deep dent in the mangroves to her. "You sure that's it, Admiral?"

"Wouldn't be a secret lagoon if it could be found easy."

Her grandfather cut away the limbs blocking the entrance, then tied a ribbon just inside. "You'll have to look to see this one, but it'll keep anybody else from finding it."

The tunnel was short and narrow with a bend in the middle that made it look, once inside, as if it had closed behind them. At the end, it ballooned into a small lagoon with shellmounds rising up from its shores.

Chokoloskee was mostly shellmounds, but all the building since the bridge went in had obscured or flattened them. Here it was easy to see what they looked like without a gas station or a motel on top.

Everyone agreed that the Calusa Indians had made the shell-mounds, but some people believed that they built them for high ground in hurricanes.

"Bull," the Admiral said. "An archaeologist fella told me, and I'm telling you, it weren't hurricanes what bothered the Calusas. They had hurricane savvy. They built their houses on stilts, which took a lot less effort than piling up oystershells just for some place to sit out

a blow. Shows they had good sense.

The Seminoles weren't any smarter than we are now. They drove the Calusas off and burned their houses. Next hurricane that hit, they had to skedaddle up Turner River and ride it out in the mangroves."

That had ended the discussion until the day Buddy came from school and said her new teacher, Miss Wilson, had told them the Calusas did build the mounds for high ground. That launched her grandfather.

"You tell that hotshot, know-it-all, Yankee teacher of yours that she don't know her rear-end from a bait chute. They didn't build those mounds for no purpose, they just shucked a lot of oysters in 3000 years. Ask her what she thinks they was doing about hurricanes the first thousand years while they was waiting for the mounds to get some height?"

"Look at that," the Admiral whispered as they nosed out of the channel into the lagoon.

Six roseate spoonbills, plastic-ribbon pink, were feeding on the far side. They looked up, studied the intruders, then, as if they had decided the distance between was safe, went back to sweeping their bills through the muck for food.

Rather than start the motor and scare them away, Buddy poled the pitpan along the edge to a shady spot in the mangroves. She tied the stern line to a thick prop root, then climbed across them to the front and took the bowline

from the Admiral. She hunkered on the roots when she was done and took the sandwich he passed her.

"Admiral, you ever wished you was something different than you are?"

"Yep, bunches of times. Right now, I wish I was forty years younger and didn't have this chair attached to my butt." He reached and touched her knee. "Do you wish you was something else?"

"Uh huh." She looked at him, her brow furrowed. "I wish I was a bird or a dolphin or growed or something that didn't have to go to school Monday, or ever again."

"Would you feel different if Alex was a snook on that stringer?"

"Yep. That would help." She grinned. "You know what?" She was watching the spoonbills. "Mr. Blossom's got a bottom lip that's the same shape as a spoonbill's bill."

"I remember." He wiped peanut butter off her cheek.

The level of water in the long, narrow tunnel was lower on the way home. In a few of places, the receding tide left half moons of reddish mud, glistening wetly, and covered with web-like shadows cast by the light that seeped through the branches above. Buddy slowed for each one, and carefully nosed the pitpan into the flow around them.

"Tide's gone out," her grandfather said, yawned, then let his head droop onto his chest.

The tide had not gone out enough to expose the corner

of a rusted washing machine that had settled into the muck. They hit it with a dull klunk. The Admiral started awake and gripped the armrests as the pitpan's bow scraped over it, lifted and tipped his chair. He tried to lean the other way, but he was too late and up too high. The chair laid over, but stayed in the boat. The Admiral fell out, and disappeared beneath the surface.

"Admiral," Buddy shrieked, and swung the pitpan wildly to miss him. The stern swept around until the prop hit a mangrove root and stopped. She leapt over the side and waded, armpit-deep, upstream against the flow. Twice she tripped on submerged limbs, fell, and was washed back a few yards.

The Admiral floated on the surface, his useless legs pointed down stream. He had hooked his right arm around a prop root, the other arm swept back and forth freely in the current. His eyes were squeezed shut, and his lips were pulled back over his dentures in a grimace.

When she reached his side, she caught his left hand. He yelled in pain then moaned. "I think it's broke," he said, quietly.

She moved around behind him with the intention of trying to lift him higher onto the roots, but she was afraid to touch his arm again. She tried to pull him up by his belt which must have startled him into thinking he was loosing his grip on the root. "Don't," he yelled.

"Help me," she cried out. "Please, somebody help me."

"No good calling, honey," he moaned. "There ain't nobody around to hear you. I'm okay. I've got a good hold on this root. You go get the boat and bring it here."

"Admiral, please let me help you."

"Go get the boat, Buddy. That's how you can help me."

She tried to run but the water was too deep. The mud sucked at her feet. She started swimming, her arms beating the water. But every few strokes she looked back to make sure he was still there.

The pitpan had drifted around a bend and lodged among the mangroves fifty yards downstream. She climbed out into the trees and stepped down into the boat. Every root looked like the one he'd been clinging to, but she could not see him. Panic swept over her. She jerked on the cord and the engine started, lurched across into the mangroves on the other side of the river, and stalled. But she could see him then.

She put it in neutral and let the stern swing downstream before starting the engine again. His white hair, now reddening with tannic slit, was her beacon. When she was a yard or two away, she cut the motor, jumped overboard and tied the bowline to a branch just above his head. His legs moved back and forth like the breakfast plate sinking into the soap suds.

"You're gonna have to leave me here," he said.

"I can't leave you, Admiral."

"You have to. I can't get back in the boat with no

legs and only one arm."

"I'll help you."

"You can't lift me." His voice was harsh with pain.

"You do what I tell you."

"Yes, sir."

"Get my chair and put it here as near me as you can."

She got it and put it in the water. It up-ended and started downstream. She grabbed it and tried to jam it in among the roots. They were too dense and gnarled.

"Untie the stern line."

She laid the chair back in the bow, and waded along the side of the pitpan until she could reach and untie the rope.

When she waded back to him, his eyes were closed.

"Admiral?" She touched his cheek and held the rope up for him to see.

"That's my girl." He tried to smile. "Tie one end to a good strong root. That's it. Is it tight?"

She pulled on it as hard as she could.

"Good. Now get the chair and loop the rope once around the strut just beneath the back rest, then bring the rope around my waist."

She put the wheelchair in the mud, just behind and beneath the Admiral's head. The seat pointed downstream. She looped the rope through it and around his waist. With her other hand, she lifted and floated him into a sitting position in the chair.



"That's it, that's it," he said, moving his grip up the root he had been holding. "Loop it around the other strut. Now, pull me into the chair.

"Make the rope tighter," he yelled, when she let go and the current caught him, sliding him down in the chair.

She pulled it tight, waded behind him, and looped the rope through another root as he instructed. "Now pull me in tight. As hard as you can." He let go of the root to help her pull.

When they had it tight, the chair tilted backwards, then slid down until it rested at an angle in the mud. The Admiral grabbed a branch over his head, then cautiously, let it go. The chair shifted, but held. The water came to his armpits.

"Admiral, you're neck's bleeding."

His shoulder was dislocated, and the jagged tip of his clavicle stuck through a tear in his shirt. Blood spread down his chest and swirled away when it reached the water sweeping around him.

He surveyed himself. "I'm pretty banged up, ain't I?" He patted her arm. "Hand me them napkins out of the tackle box then get going. We ain't got a lot of time, honey, before the tide turns."

Buddy felt suddenly sick to her stomach. Bloody water swirled around his armpits. "How long?"

"Plenty of time for you to get help. Go slow and be careful. Okay?"

She nodded because she couldn't speak.

"Leave me my fishing knife. If the water gets too high, I'll cut myself loose, and hug a root 'til you get here." He grinned at her. "If your pa ain't in yet, and I kinda hope he ain't, get Raffield, or one of the Browns to come back with you."

"Admiral, can't I just wait here with you until somebody comes by?"

"Honey, nobody uses this river any more. Least ways not up this far, and it'll be dark in three hours. The trail's marked, and I promise to wait right here for you." He smiled, put his good arm around her neck and pulled her head to his cheek. "I'm a tough old coot, honey. There's nothing wrong here that you should worry about. You go on now."

"I'm sorry, Admiral."

He shook a finger in her face. "Don't you go trying to blame yourself for this." He lifted her chin. "It was my own fault. I was suppose to be watching and I dozed off." He kissed her. "Now git."

She climbed in the pitpan and started the motor. When she stepped forward to untie the bowline, he make an okay circle with his thumb and forefinger. "This here is some adventure we're having, ain't it, honey?"

"Yes, sir." Smiling for him then was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

She watched him waving until she turned the bend. A

half mile downstream, she slowed, leaned over and lifted his Mack truck cap out of where the mangrove roots had trapped it. She took hers off and put his on. Water poured down her neck and into her ears. She looked up through the overhanging branches. "Momma, please watch him."

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## VI

### Trap Line

For as long as Buddy could remember, her grandfather had sat at the end of the kitchen table with his back to the window. The evening he came home from the hospital, she wheeled him to his place.

"I want to sit at the other end," he said.

Kirk turned from the fish he was frying. "You've always sat at that end."

"Not any more," the Admiral snapped. "I want to see out."

Buddy backed him around and looked at her father.

Kirk took the frying pan off the stove, walked to the table and roughly shoved it up under the window. With the side of his arm, he dragged the salt, pepper and tabasco down to the other end, then rolled his father's knife and fork in his napkin, and delivered them to him like a diploma.

"There." Kirk stood back, his hands folded across his chest, surveying the new setup. "Does that suit you?"

The Admiral looked up at him, coldly. "That should do it, thank you." He unrolled his napkin, snapped it and jammed the tip of it into the edge of the bandage around his chest.

Kirk turned away and slapped the frying pan back on the burner. After a moment, he glanced around at her. "The season opens tomorrow. You two want to go with me in morning," he asked, sharply.

Buddy thought of school. "Yes, sir. I do. You want to Admiral?"

"Not me. I'd be in the way."

"You can run the boat," Kirk said, unenthusiastically.

They were being invited, but they weren't wanted.

Buddy ignored his tone. "Yeah, Admiral, you can run the boat. Daddy can pull 'em and I'll..." She couldn't think of anything left for her to do. "I could bait 'em," she said, finally.

"You go, honey," the Admiral said. "My fishing days is over."

Kirk's sigh was nearly a groan. Her grandfather apparently didn't hear it, but she did.

"Don't say that, Admiral. There ain't never been a stone crabber like you. Everybody says so. Please go."

He shook his head which made him flinch. "If I'm in the way here at my own damn table, I sure ain't going out on his boat."

"Oh bull," Kirk muttered, and jammed a spatula under

the fish he was frying. He scraped one out of the pan, slapped it on a plate and slammed the plated down in front of his father.

"I'm not hungry," the Admiral said.

"You haven't eaten since you got home. Eat, or I'll take you back to the hospital in Naples and let them feed you through a tube.

"I'm your father, don't tell me what to do."

"Eat."

The Admiral glared up at Kirk, grabbed the tabasco and doused the fish with it. He tore off a piece with his fork, and jammed it into this mouth.

Buddy was afraid the invitation was going to be forgotten while they were slamming plates and stabbing fish. "I'll miss school," she said, softly.

Kirk put her plate down and squeezed around his father. "I know. A lot of kids will miss tomorrow. They're needed on the boats."

Maybe he really does want us to go with him, she thought. She watched to see if his face would show her, but he was chewing, absently, and looking out the window. No, she decided, he doesn't. She thought again of school -  
-with Alex.

"Okay then," she said. "I'll be there."

The next morning, Buddy came down to the docks at 5:30, rubbing her eyes and yawning. The day was already

warm and humid though the sun was not yet up. The only light came from a bare bulb, the wire to which was stapled to the ceiling of the trunk cabin of her father's boat. He had the engine running and the cover off checking the bilge pump.

She waited until he slid the cover back across the opening. "Morning," she said, covering another yawn with the back of her hand.

"You all set?"

"Yes, sir." She hesitated. "It's still okay if I go, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, then looked up at her. "Sure it is." He reached up, and she stepped off into his hands.

Her father always pulled traps from the starboard side of the stern. He had already put all his equipment within reach. Leaning against the starboard gunnel was the broom handle with a large hook driven into one end that he used to snag the buoy lines. On his right were the buckets full of fish heads and scraps. It was called stinking bait, and it did. In line with the bait buckets were three large, green, plastic bins, stacked atop each other.

From the darkness beyond Kirk's light, came the crunch of tires stopping on gravel. A door slammed and another crabber stepped out of the blackness.

Chokoloskee's sky had a high, thin, gauzy layer of clouds, but far to the south, lightning flickered silently through spiraling thunderheads.

More men appeared. An engine started further down the dock, then another. Diesel fuel, cigarette smoke, and the smell of bait blended with, then edged out, the heavy smell of the sea.

Kirk switched off the light. "Cast off the bow line when I tell you, okay?"

"Yes, sir." She grinned and scampered the port gunnel to the bow.

Kirk untied the crossed stern lines. "Okay," he called.

The line was taut. Buddy struggled with it, then pulled the boat forward for slack, untied the line, looped it neatly, and laid it on the dock.

"No, no." Kirk came along the gunnel. "You untie it at the dock." He grabbed one of the pilings and pulled them back in. He untied the line from the cleat on the dock and retied it to the Samson post on the bow.

"I'm sorry," she said as he went past her. "I guess I forgot."

"It's okay."

Kirk eased the boat away from the docks and out into the channel. Buddy stayed forward. Before he turned it off, the light in the trunk cabin made the water look like old, cold coffee. When the blackness settled over them, she slid back against the cabin bulkhead and rolled the end of the bowline around her palm. Its rough, scratchy texture was like a calloused hand to hold in the thick



still darkness. Her hair and face were damp from the humidity. She ran her arm across her forehead, put her head back against the bulkhead, closed her eyes, and fell asleep to the subtle throb of the engine and the rush of water against their bow.

A half-hour later, they came out of Chokoloskee Pass into the dead calm waters of Florida Bay. The churning and splashing in water to her left woke her. She sat up and squinted into the gray dawn. "Daddy. Look." She stood and pointed toward the exposed mudbank of a mangrove island. "There's a beached dolphin. Do you see him?"

"He's not beached," Kirk said, slowing the engine and swinging the bow around toward the island, "he's fishing."

As they neared, the dolphin humped itself back into the water and disappeared. A moment later, a fin appeared, then a second one, and they began crossing back and forth off the beach until the shallow water boiled with fish. When they had driven a mass of them unto the bank, the two dolphins nosed onto the mud, rolled a little to one side, and picked off their catch, one by one.

"I can't believe they can do that?" Buddy said.

Kirk laughed. "Looks like they can to me."

It was still over an hour's run to Kirk's first line. The sun was up, its rays knifing through gaps in the storm clouds. Only their wake disturbed the calmness of the water, now a pale shade of rose.

At her father's first marker, he rapped on the port

wall of the cabin for Buddy's attention. When she looked around the edge, he crooked a finger for her to come.

"I'm going to let you run the boat," he said, when she hopped off the gunnel beside him.

"You are?"

He nodded.

He had a hundred and fifty traps in this line, seventy-five up, seventy-five down, each about two hundred and fifty feet apart. He patted her shoulder. "It's a straight line. Just watch the markers and do what I tell you."

"Yes, sir."

Stretching out before them was a row of styrofoam mannequin heads, their faces pink in the morning sun. Black nylon ropes ran from the end of the trap, up through their necks and out the top of their heads like double-strand ponytails. The first one in line had a barnacle on her chin and chunks missing from her face, pecked away by seagulls.

"When I hook the buoy, put it in neutral," Kirk instructed. "When the trap's on the stern, put it in forward. Don't touch the throttle. Okay?"

Buddy nodded and wiped her damp palms on the seat of her shorts. Her heart pounded in her chest as she took the wheel.

Kirk picked up the broom handle and leaned over the stern. He hooked the trap line just below the mannequin's

neck and brought it up until he could get hold of the rope. Hand over hand, he hauled the 65-pound trap up through the soupy water, and lifted it onto the stern. "Now. In forward."

She eased it into gear. They moved slowly ahead.

Kirk turned the catch and lifted the lid of the trap. "Four," he muttered. "One's a short and one's female. Gravid," he said, holding the female up for her to see. A mass of orange eggs covered the back of her abdomen. He dropped the under legal-sized short and the female over the side. The other two were big males, called boars. He tossed them into the green plastic, rectangular tub, scooped up a fist-full of red snapper remains, stuffed them in the bait chute, slammed and latched the lid, then checked the position of the next buoy before shoving the trap over the side.

Buddy was too far from the next marker. Her father reached around her, jerked the wheel hard right, then straightened it. He hooked the buoy rope. "Stop."

Buddy put it in neutral.

"Good," he said, pulling the trap line in hand over hand. "Got it. Go."

She moved the gear into forward and leaned over to watch for the next buoy.

"Seven," he said, "and a blue crab and a snapper." He pitched the blue crab and a female stone crab over, handed her the snapper. "Dinner. Put it in the fish box."

She held it by the tail with one hand and steered with the other. When it was time to put it neutral again, she darted forward, threw the fish in on the ice, and dashed back to the wheel.

The bottom of the first green box was covered with stone crabs by the seventh trap which came up with two of its sides torn away. "Damn loggerheads," Kirk muttered. He cut the buoy off, threw it forward and elbowed the trap off the stern.

She had been watching him and forgotten to put it in gear.

"Let's go," he snapped, jerking his shirt off over his head.

By ten-thirty, he had pulled the first seventy-five traps, half his line.

"The tide's due to change at noon," he said, taking the wheel. "I don't think we better try pulling down tide."

Buddy knew pulling down tide meant hooking the buoy line then backing up to the trap. She guessed he didn't think she could do it.

"We'll go back to the Indian Key end of the line, and wait for the tide. If you're hungry," he said, rubbing his shoulders, then rotating them in circles, "get a sandwich."

Buddy sat on the cooler, listening to the thunder and watching the crabs in the bin circle around challenging

each other. She had nibbled off the corner of a peanut butter and apple sandwich, decided it tasted sad, and put it back in the bag. Now, she leaned over the bin, close enough for a large boar to see her. He opened his claws, flung them wide, and backed across the rippling mass of crabs beneath him until he bumped into a corner. She smiled and wagged a finger at him, the movement of which he follow with his claws.

"We've got a lot of crabs, don't we?" she said, covering a yawn.

"Pretty good. About eighty pounds in claws. You tired?"

"No sir," she said and yawned again before she could stop herself. "It's gonna rain."

"We'll probably be finished before it gets here. Hand me another Coke, will you?"

She opened the lid, moved the snapper, and dug into the ice for his third Coke.

"Do you remember when you were real small, right after your grandmother died? Dad and I brought you out fishing with us, and we kept you in the fish box so we didn't have to worry about you falling overboard. You were only tall enough to see over the rim. You were too young to remember, I guess."

"I think I do remember." She didn't, but she wished she did.

"That seems so long ago now," he said to himself.

They drifted for a quarter hour near the head of his line waiting for the tide to change. Buddy tried to nap, but it was hot and the thunder rumbling kept her edgy. At least a breeze had kicked up. Kirk sat on the edge of the fish box eating his fourth sandwich and watching the tug of the tide around his first buoy. Minutes after noon, the flow hesitated, then resumed in the opposite direction.

They had pulled about ten traps when Buddy saw the boat about three-quarters of a mile down his line. When her father realized it had one of his traps on its stern, he pulled Buddy away from the wheel, held her arm to keep her from falling, and slapped the throttle and the gear full forward. The bow lifted out of the water, hesitated, then slammed back down and bounced full speed toward the Mako.

Kirk pulled the power and settled in beside Jane Conroy's boat. His trap was still on the stern. "What the hell do you think you're doing," he snarled.

Jane was sitting on the gunnel with her pad in her lap, a pencil behind her ear, one of Kirk's crabs in one hand and calipers in the other. She smiled at him. "Measuring a crab." She nodded to Buddy who smiled back, quickly. "From your language and the expression on your face, this must be your trapline."

"You're damn right, it is," Kirk snapped. "What right..."

"I have a permit from the state to pull your traps and everyone else's. I'm doing a survey."

"What for?"

"For the Department of Natural Resources and the Park Service." She smiled broadly at him. "They are thinking about making the Park off-limits to commercial fishing."

"Bullshit."

"Perhaps, if your haul is sufficient today, you could afford a dictionary. Your vocabulary seems a bit stunted."

"My language is all that's keeping me from coming over there and pitching you overboard."

"Life's little blessings."

"You're real clever lady, but you haven't proved to me you have any right to pull my traps."

Jane finished measuring the crab then, with an oddly shaped pair of pliers, attached a small metal tag to its carapace before putting the crab back in the trap. She pulled her backpack from the compartment under the wheel, rifled through it, came up with a piece of paper and handed it across to Kirk.

He read it, folded it and handed it back. "My father helped survey the park boundaries," he said, not looking at her, but at the storm, which was much nearer now. "He was at the dedication. They said it would always be open to commercial fishing."

Jane looked at him. Her face softened. "Things change."

Buddy saw that she meant it sympathetically, but her

father hadn't. His eyes narrowed.

Buddy watched Jane carefully reach in for another crab, take up the calipers and begin to measure first the claws, then the carapace.

"What exactly are you doing?" Kirk asked.

"I'm counting the number of trap lines set in Park waters, and spot checking individual traps in each line."

"What are you going to find out?" Buddy said, softly, then glanced up at her father.

"Hopefully, the impact of commercial crabbing on the Park population."

"That's more bull," Kirk said, calmly. "There are a zillion crabs in these waters."

"You people always think the supply is limitless." She tagged and replaced the active, angry male, then took out a soft, molting female. "There aren't nearly the number of crabs there were five years ago."

Kirk's eyes were on the female crab in Jane's hand.

She measured it, made a note on the pad and dropped it over the side.

"Don't," Kirk yelled, too late. "Ah, Jesus Christ, That was a young honey."

"Pardon?"

"A molting female."

"So?"

"You leave them in the trap, doctor," he sneered.

"They attract big boars."



"Clearly."

Buddy grinned and ducked her head.

"That was funny," Kirk said. "Now explain how we are reducing the numbers of stone crabs when we don't kill the crab, and we don't take females?"

"We suspect that females, at the least the claws of large ones are being taken."

Buddy knew Carlisle Townsend, Alex's father did. He bragged about it.

"If they close the park, that will change anyway. You'll be allowed to take them, a stupid trade-off, in my opinion, but I'm not the one making the decisions. The existing law is unenforceable anyway unless they go back to having the crabbers bring the whole crab to docks before declawing. That practice guaranteed they all died. Now just most of them die."

"They die?" Buddy asked.

"They don't die," Kirk said to Buddy.

"Laboratory studies indicate that taking the claws kills the crab."

"Laboratory studies indicate...why don't you people speak English?"

"Your level of English, Mr. Martin? No, I prefer not to." She held the female she was measuring over the side, smiled up at him. "May I?"

He made a be-my-guest motion.

"Thank you." She dropped it into the water, closed

the lid of his trap and pushed it overboard.

"Oh, and thank you." Kirk bowed as the heavy, crab-laden trap sank to the bottom.

Miss Conroy nodded to Buddy and turned to start her motor.

"Ma'am," Buddy called to her. "Why does taking the claws kill them?" She looked up at her father. "I have to do a science project for school," she said. "Maybe I'll do something on stone crabs."

Jane's Mako had a hoist. She leaned over and hooked his trap again, looped the rope over the part of the hoist called the snatch block, and started the gas-powered, cat-head wench. She let the hoist bring the trap up until it dangled above the stern, then she swung it in, opened the lid and, with a gloved hand, grabbed a crab. "Help yourself," she said to Kirk.

"In the lab," Jane said to Buddy, "we keep crabs in aerated tanks."

Buddy's brow wrinkled.

"Tanks with air hoses in them," she explained. "And they have plenty of food. We did a test where we took one claw off a hundred crabs, and both claws off another hundred. The breaking was done properly, cleanly, like this." She popped the crab's right claw off by snapping it down, sharply, at a right-angle to its body. She tossed the claw to Kirk. "There was another group of a hundred, none of whose claws were taken, and none of them died."

Buddy couldn't take her eyes off Jane's face. It was even more beautiful up close, and her voice was soft and deep, like she was sure her mother's had been.

"Of the crabs from which we took one claw, twenty-nine died within twenty-four hours. Of the ones that lost both claws, half died by the next day. Out here where they have to feed themselves, and defend against groupers, octopuses, conch, and other crabs with claws, we don't think any of them survive."

Buddy looked at the two bins of stone crabs, then at her father.

"That's not true," Kirk said. "I'm always finding crabs with small claws, or those nubs that grow under that sheath before they molt."

"Those have probably dropped their own claws. When a crab releases its own claw, the wound seals naturally. And it rarely loses both at the same time."

Kirk stared at her, stony faced.

"Not only that," Jane said, peering over into the bins. "They should be kept out of the sun and wetted down often."

"Would you like me to stop and dig clams for them too?" Kirk sneered. "And if you're so sure they are going to die, why bother?"

"To give them a fighting chance. I'd like to see the law read that you people could only take one claw, but that's unenforceable, too. Do you know how to properly

break off a claw?" she asked Kirk.

"No, I've only been doing this off and on for thirty years. Why don't you show me, doctor."

She ignored his tone and smiled at him. "I'm doing this study for my Ph.D., so I'm not a doctor yet.

"See how clean this break is," she said to Buddy. When the claw is twisted off it tears the meat and the crab bleeds to death." She twisted off the remaining claw.

"Don't," Buddy cried, too late.

"I'm sorry," Jane said. "I wanted to show you something. See this white, sticky stuff? That's the crab's blood. Put him in a bucket of water, take him home and see how long he lives." She handed the crab to Buddy and tossed the claw to Kirk.

"I'm sorry," Buddy whispered to the crab, stroking its carapace. She pushed the snag of meat back into the break, and put her thumb over the hole. "Miss Conroy," Buddy said. "Osceola died."

"Damn," Jane muttered.

Kirk turned to Buddy. "You didn't tell me that." His brow furrowed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I forgot." To Jane, she said. "My grandfather and me went up to visit them, and Mr. Blossom told me Osceola died." Buddy looked down at the crab, then back at Jane. "Do you know why he died?"

"He had dolphin pox. I saw it when I was there."

"Was that the white, cauliflower-looking bump near

his blowhole?"

Jane nodded.

"And that little thing killed him?"

"Well, it wouldn't have in the wild, but the conditions Stevens has got those dolphins in are so bad it probably weakened him and left him open to some other infection."

"Will the others get it?"

Jane's lip were compressed to a fine line. "I don't know," she said, finally.

Buddy bit at the corner of her lip.

Jane glanced at Kirk, then back at Buddy. "I don't think they will, honey. He's learned his lesson. He'll take better care of the other two."

Buddy studied Jane's face and saw kindness, maybe even pity, and she knew that Miss Conroy was only hoping, too. She nodded, sadly, and stroked the crab.

"Look," Jane said, reached and touched her hand. "Why don't you come by after school one day and I'll help you with your science project. I'm staying in cabin nine at the Rod and Gun Club."

Buddy glanced at her father, who nodded. "I'm not sure if I can really do stone crabs," she said to Jane. "Alex Townsend told Miss Daniels he wanted to do them."

"Ruth Daniels is a friend of mine," Jane said, "I'll ask her to let you do them, if you want me to."

Buddy's head bobbed. "Oh yes, please."

"How about Monday at three-thirty, okay?"

"Can you pick me up, later?" she asked her father.

He nodded. "I've got my Rabbit Key line to pull," he said to Jane, "so it wouldn't be until after five. Is that all right?"

"Sure." She smiled.

Buddy grinned from ear to ear when her father smiled back.

Nearer now, the thunder rumbled.

Buddy held the crab in one hand, with her thumb over the hole in its side, and steered with the other. When they idled for Kirk to pull a trap, she held the crab underwater so it wouldn't dry out. Its legs moved in search of freedom.

Kirk missed a trap because she had veered off course. "Damn it, Buddy, throw that thing overboard and pay attention to what you're doing."

"He'll die."

"Then put him in the bucket until we get through."

In her mind she saw the blood from the Admiral's shoulder swirling around them in the river. "Please, Daddy, he'll bleed to death."

The first raindrop stung her cheek. A black wall of clouds moved toward them from the south.

Kirk's eyes narrowed to points of darkness and his gloved hands balled into fists, rolled open then coiled

closed again. He reached over and jerked the wheel hard to the right, jammed it in reverse, and roared backward over his buoy. "You nurse the crab, I'll finish alone." He spun her by the shoulder, and pushed her toward the cabin.

The buoy line was wrapped around the prop.

"Damn it." He stripped to his underwear, ripped his gloves off, threw them down and dove overboard.

Buddy carried the bucket of saltwater into the trunk cabin, crawled up on a pile of nets, and sat with her knees pulled up to her chest. "He really hates me now," she told the crab, before putting him in the bucket.

Kirk came up, expelled air, sucked in another lung-full and went down again. Thunder boomed closer. Rain pelleted the choppy surface of the bay. The wind turned cold and frantic.

When he got back in the boat and pulled the trap, it was empty and its galvanized core was missing. "Damn conch," he hissed, swinging the trap aboard. It hit the deck at the exact moment thunder crashed over them. Buddy dropped the crab, plugged her ears and dug her kneecaps into her eye sockets.

When her father put the engine in gear, Buddy peeked up and took her fingers out of her ears. Rivulets of water ran from his matted, black curls down his face and back. He squinted against the sting of the wind driven rain, and watched for his next trap.

She was cold and trembled from it. An old, torn,

dried-hard towel was in the opposite corner of the cabin. She stretched a long, chill-bump-covered leg out, hooked a corner with her big toe and dragged it over. Two roaches fell out when she shook and smoothed it. One scurried into the net and the other ran up the leg of her shorts. She shuttered and squashed it, wiped her hip with the towel and threw it back in the corner. Buddy reached in the bucket, caught the scuttling crab, and put her thumb back over its wound.

There was a searing light, and the thunder was explosive. Kirk threw his arm over his head and ducked. "Daddy," she screamed, and started violently, knocking the bucket over. She curled into a ball and rolled on her side. Her forearms covered her ears, and she pressed her eyes hard against her kneecaps. "Daddy," she cried, "Daddy, please, I'm scared."

Kirk put the engine in reverse and backed slowly toward the buoy he had missed. "Be quiet, Buddy. It's gone now."

She stayed rolled in a tight ball with her arms wrapped around her head until a warmth touched her shoulder. It was the sun, but to her it was her mother's hand. She clutched her shirt where it was warm and listened as the distant rumble of the departing storm become the Admiral's deep soothing voice.

The stillness of the morning returned. Buddy found the crab lodged in the port scupper. She dipped the



bucket, put the crab in, crawled back up in the net, and silently watched her father.

"Is there still Coke in the cooler?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." She let go of the crab and jumped up to get him a drink.

"Three more and we're through. You want to take us in?"

She side-eyed the bucket, but said: "Yes, sir."

"That was quite a storm." He patted her shoulder, drained the Coke in one long swallow, and tossed the bottle overboard. It righted itself and bobbed away in water nearly the same color as the bottle.

"There should be a buoy here." Kirk said to himself. He looked ahead to the next trap then back at the last one. "Damn tourists." He gunned it and went on.

"Why damn tourists?" Buddy asked.

"They run over our lines, but instead of taking the time to get untangled they cut themselves loose, and we lose a trap."

"Are the crabs trapped in there forever then?"

"We are certainly into worrying about crabs all of a sudden, aren't we?"

Buddy lowered her eyes.

"The trap rots away, okay? But let me tell you something. Bleeding-hearts are always coming along wailing about killing crabs, shooting deer, feeding a bad fish to a dolphin, but they've got nothing at stake. They make their

livings in offices somewhere, and they don't have to kill what they order up in a restaurant, or buy packaged and bloodless in a grocery store. It's easy for them to care about things they don't have to care about. Do you understand?" His face was so close, she could smell the Coke on his breathe. "I do care about the crabs and the deer and the lobsters and the fish." He ticked them off on his fingers. "All of them, because they feed us. That's why I don't take the females even though, in a fish basket on the scales, the Feds can't tell female claws from male. I don't take them because they are protected and I believe they should be. So don't belly up to plate of crab claws tonight and give me this conservation crap now. Got it?"

She was leaning so far back, her stomach muscles quivered. She nodded.

Buddy tried to watch him declawing without looking as if she was watching. Done right, it made a snapping sound she soon became comfortable with. Snap, snap, she'd hear then imagine a splash. Snap, snap, splash. For an hour and a half, crab after crab somersaulted through the air and disappeared in the foam of their wake. Twice, when he muttered damn, she looked in time to see the claws disappear over the side and the crab land in the claw-bin.

At the dock, there was a line at the fish house waiting to have their catch weighed. Crabbers lolled on decks, drinking Budweisers, smoking, and complaining about how lousy their hauls were. Buddy had never heard a

fisherman admit to a good day. The Admiral said it was so other fishermen wouldn't move their lines near yours. He told her about the time he brought in so many claws that the next time he went to pull his line, he couldn't find it in the crowd.

Her father never joined in these discussions. He exchanged nods as he guided his boat in, but that was all. No one offered him a beer, or asked about his day, except Carlisle Townsend. He was the only one who always ignored Kirk's coolness. And it apparently didn't bother him that Kirk rarely responded. Like his son, Townsend was a braggart. To him, a quiet audience was engaged.

"Looks like you got a nice haul there, Martin," Townsend called from the dock. "Considering the number of traps you got out."

Kirk nodded and continued washing down the deck with the hose from the dock.

"I hauled nearly 700 pounds."

"How many of them were females?" Kirk muttered.

"About half." Carlisle laughed. "Not really. A third, maybe. From the barnacles, I'd say most of 'em were locals this time. We get a good norwester, and them suckers start walking, I bet I double my haul."

"I'll pray for you," Kirk said, under his breath.

Buddy put her bucket on the dock, and hoisted herself up beside it.

"What you got there, Buddy?" Alex's father asked.

"A stone crab."

"It's against the law to keep a crab." He grinned at Kirk, and winked.

"The lady gave him to me."

"What lady?"

"Miss Conroy."

"Who's she?" he asked Kirk.

"Just some broad out there counting crabs."

"What's she counting crabs for?"

Kirk shrugged, then his face got a friendly look. He gave Buddy a conspiratorial glance and folded the hose in half to stop the water. "She said she was checking on the ratio of females to males in the traps so the Park people can get an idea how many females are being taken illegally."

Buddy was standing on the dock a little behind Mr. Townsend. She grinned down at her father, then peeked around to see Carlisle's usual puffed-up, self-important expression deflate like someone had stuck a pin in his cheek. She smiled up at Alex's father. "She's real nice, Mr. Townsend. She gave me this crab for my science project."

"She was working my traps today," Kirk said. "I can't remember whether she said she had already checked yours or not." Kirk scratched his head, as if trying to remember, then shrugged, and let the water through the hose again.

Townsend spun and walked down the dock.

Kirk glanced up and winked at her. Buddy laughed, scooped up her bucket, and skipped down the road toward home. She stopped once to look back. Alex's father was with a knot of other crabbers. Smoke from their cigarettes rose out of their tight circle so they looked like a pile of leaves before the fire catches.

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## VII

### Osceola

When her father came into the kitchen, Buddy had just finished telling the Admiral about their meeting with Jane and the joke on Carlisle Townsend. They were sitting at the kitchen table, laughing, with the crab between them. Buddy was trying to get it to eat the small squares of bacon she had cut.

"It's not going to eat bacon, especially not sitting on the table." Kirk washed his hands then filled a pot with water. "Why don't you let it go down by Smallwood's."

"If he doesn't die, I can use him in my science project."

"Oh yeah. I forgot about the science project." He put the pot on a burner and dumped a bag of claws into the sink. "I got \$900 for three hundred pounds. At that measly price, we might as well eat them ourselves."

Buddy swiveled in her chair. "What do crabs eat,"

she whispered to the Admiral, scraping the bacon bits off into a napkin.

"Clams and oysters, mostly. You named him yet?"

She thought for a minute. "Maybe I could name him Osceola. Do you think that's bad luck, Admiral?"

"No. He's a lucky crab to have you take care of him and that dolphin would like having a tough little namesake to be remembered by."

"Good." She smacked her thigh. "His name is Osceola."

"You know we used to have a fish tank. I ain't seen it in years, but your grandma never gave nothing away so it must be here somewhere."

"It's under the front porch," Kirk said. "I saw it there a few months ago."

Buddy put Osceola in the bucket and darted out the door, letting it bang shut behind her. "Sorry," she shouted. Minutes later, she came in with the fish tank under her arm. She had washed it at the dock, but not the sand off her knees, or elbows, and she had a cobweb in her hair.

"Do you really think they going to close the Park?" the Admiral was asking.

"I don't know." Steam rose from the pot. "Buddy, look what you're doing," Kirk said, pointing to the puddle forming on the floor.

"Sorry," Buddy grabbed the dish towel off the refrigerator handle, wiped the fish tank then the floor.

"I bet they do close it," the Admiral said. "A promise made by the government is as useless as the politician that makes it. Remember old man Smallwood's 167 acres. He helped them survey it then they took it for his trouble. Yep, they'll close it," he said.

"Damn it, Buddy, that's a clean dish towel." Kirk snatched it out of her hand.

"I'm sorry."

"Quit saying I'm sorry. Just think about what the hell you're doing and you won't have to be sorry."

"Quit yelling at her," the Admiral shouted.

"Mind your own business," Kirk snapped.

Buddy took the bucket and the tank, and backed out the door.

"She takes enough of a beating without you yelling at her. And she's as much my business as she is yours."

Buddy sat down on the top step beneath the kitchen window.

"She needs to pay attention to what she's doing."

"It's a little water on the floor."

"Look, I've had a brutal day so get off my back," Kirk shouted. "As long as I'm supporting the two of you, you'd both better shut up. Unless, of course, you'd like to take over."

"Someday son, you'll realize what you've lost." The Admiral hesitated. "What you've killed in that child. I wish it on you," he shouted.



When Buddy heard her grandfather bash through the door to the living room, she got up. Osceola scuttled round and round his plastic prison. "I know how you feel," she whispered, "but as soon as you're well, I'll let you go. I promise." She hiked the tank up on her hip and headed down the road, through the pines, to Smallwood's store.

Years ago, Ted Smallwood had cleared away some red mangroves and seagrapes to expose a narrow strip of sand as a place for the Indians to land their canoes.

Buddy set the bucket on the seawall and waded out from this beach with the aquarium past where small waves rolled over on themselves. In cupped hands, she scooped sand into the tank until it was about two inches deep, suddenly listed and sank to the bottom. She emptied it and brought it to the seawall. "This ain't gonna work," she told the crab. "I'll be back, okay?" She started off at a run, stopped, came back, carried the tank and the bucket to the bushes by the old boat cradle, then ran off through the pines.

"Admiral?" she tapped on his door.

There was no answer.

"Admiral?" She rapped louder and opened the door a crack.

He opened his eyes. "Hi, honey."

"Admiral, Osceola's tank is gonna be too heavy for me to carry back."

"Where's your father?"

"I don't know. In the kitchen still, maybe. I don't want to ask him, Admiral. He's mad at me and don't like the crab none either."

He stroked her arm. "How about the wheelbarrow?"

"The wheel's off, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Admiral, can I borrow your wheelchair. I'll be careful and I wouldn't get it wet."

"I ain't worried about you getting it wet. Wet dries. Ain't you smart to think of it."

She kissed his stubbly cheek. "Thanks."

When she got the chair off the porch, she kicked up the footrests, got in, launched off with her bare feet and spun the wheels as hard as she could. The trail from her house through the pines was slightly downhill. When she was flying, she threw her legs out straight, flung her arms wide and tilted her head up into the wind.

Before she wheeled the tank back, she put Osceola in it and watched as he bashed himself into first one side then the other. She scooped up a half bucket of water, put it in the seat with the tank, then waded into the shallows and walked back and forth digging her toes into the sand for clams. When she had gotten half a dozen, she marched her collection home.

She unloaded the chair at the bottom of the porch steps then loaded it again at the top. The shower was running as she wheeled passed the bathroom into her

bedroom.

Buddy cleared a spot on her dresser then put the tank against the mirror so Osceola could keep himself company. His tracks poked the sand as he scurried back and forth, bumping the glass, north, south, east and west. "You need to hide, don't you? I'll get you something. Wait here."

She felt the need to sneak about, to keep attention away from herself and the crab, so she tiptoed past the bathroom where she could hear the shower dripping and the scrape of a razor across a cheek.

In the shed, she chose the oldest trap, broke the steel-core loose, then dragged the trap to the darkest corner, and stacked two other traps on top of it.

She stood on the front porch, listening, before she quietly opened the screen door and slid in through the crack. She had stuck the metal tube in the waistband of her shorts, behind her back, and pulled her t-shirt over the top of it. She crept across the living room, past her father's bedroom door. Her hand was on her doorknob when he touched her shoulder.

"You ready for dinner?"

She spun and pressed her back against her door.

"Are you still messing with that crab?"

"No, sir. Well, yes, sir."

"Well get done and clean up for dinner."

"Yes, sir." She backed into her room.

Osceola had partially buried himself in the sand. She

smiled at him over the rim. "I can see you."

Puffs of sand exploded into the shallow layer of water.

"That did it, you're gone now." Buddy put the tube in the tank, added most of the water, and dropped all the clams in except one which she left in the bucket. "I'll open that one for you later. Okay? Bye." She waved, and took the wheelchair with her.

Her grandfather was snoring, softly, when she parked his chair beside his bed. "Thanks, Admiral," she whispered.

At dinner Buddy pushed the claws to one side of her plate and ate her string beans and potatoes.

"Why aren't you eating the claws?"

"I will. I'm saving them."

When he wasn't looking, she turned each claw so she could see if the broken end was ragged. None were. She felt better.

After she did the dishes, Buddy got a sharp knife, turned the clam on its flattest side, worked the blade between the two shell halves and pushed down as hard as she could. The blade went through the clam and the bucket. Water seeped slowly out of the crack in the plastic. Buddy grabbed the bucket, put her hand under the puncture, and ran from her room toward the porch. She hit her father as he came out of the bathroom. Some water splashed up the

side and soaked the front of his shirt, the rest dripped out on his shoes.

"I can't believe this," Kirk said, calmly. "What are you doing? " His voice more strained.

"I was trying to open a clam for Osceola," she whispered.

He seemed to try, for a moment, not to yell. "You know better than play with a knife. Don't you?" His fists knotted and unknotted.

"I wasn't playing." The bucket was empty now. They were standing in the puddle.

"Screwing with that stone crab is playing." He was yelling now.

She hung her head.

"And you've ruined that bucket. They're expensive and I have to get them in Naples." He snatched it away from her, stomped across the living room, opened the screen door, and sailed it off the porch, clam and all. "Now clean up this mess."

A tear rolled down her cheek and splashed into the puddle at her feet.

"And don't cry." He shook finger at her. "It's about time you grew up," he shouted, stomped into his room and slammed the door. "And get rid of that crab," he yelled.

Buddy stood looking from closed door to closed door, then walked to the Admiral's and opened it quietly, all the way. The sun was setting. Its bright glow came through

the living room door and windows and now blazed into his room. He snored on, softly, fitfully. She closed the door.

Osceola was out of his tube when she came into the room and flung herself across her bed. He shot into it and clunked against the glass at the other end.

It was morning but still dark when Buddy heard her door open. She didn't turn or open her eyes, but she held her breath as the floor creaked under her father's weight.

He stopped at the end of her bed and just stood there for what seemed like a long time. She could hear him breathing.

Her right foot was out from under the sheet. She felt her father gently lifted it, pulled the sheet free, covered her and tuck in the corner, then she heard the boards creak as he walked away. "I'm sorry, honey," he whispered, just before he closed the door.

"I know that, Daddy," she whispered back.

When Buddy woke again, the sky was graying. She dug a clam out of the sand in the tank, crept out of her room and into the kitchen. She jumped up on locked arms and looked out the kitchen window. Her father's boat was gone.

She went outside and smashed the clam with a coconut, then took the flat blob to the kitchen sink to rinse the sand and shell bits off. Carefully, she sliced the clam into tiny pieces.

Back in her room, Buddy tapped on the glass and dropped a piece of clam into the water. It settled on top of the tube. The next one drifted down and came to rest just at the opening. She sat on the edge of her bed and waited.

The tip of a jointed leg appeared, then half a crab. A tiny pincer opened, reached slowly out, picked up the piece of clam, and carried it to his mouth. Two flat flaps opened up and the clam was sucked in.

Buddy dumped the rest of the chunks into the tank, took her cap from the bed post, peeked in on her sleeping grandfather then left the house.

Near the trash pile at the end of the Stevens' levee, Buddy cut the motor and let the pitpan drift into some cattails. It was early and there were no tourists yet, but it was still too open to walk from there to the pond so she poled along the bank and tied up tight into the willows.

On the far side of the pond, near the gate to the show pool, both dolphins surfaced, expelled air and disappeared. Buddy straddled the pipe and patted the surface of the water, her eyes locked on the spot where they had gone under. The warm scummy feel of the water on her palm, suddenly became cool and slick. She looked down to see that she was touching the face of a dolphin, right behind its eye. Surprise caused her to jerked her hand back. The dolphin zipped away.

"Annie? Lucie? I'm sorry, you scared me." Buddy said. "Please come back."

The dolphin with the pink scar on her snout cruised past on its side, apparently grinning.

"Hi, Annie." Buddy smiled and waved. "It's me. Buddy Martin."

The dolphin circled, drew up at the end of the culvert, stood on her tail, squeaked and tossed her head.

Buddy smiled, bent low over the pipe and extended her hand slowly, palm up, but she did not try to touch Annie. They looked at each other for a moment, then Annie lowered her head and laid her snout in Buddy's palm.

Buddy felt a rush of heat from the tip of her toes dangling in the water to the top of her head. Her heart pounded as she slowly, carefully, covered the dolphin's snout with her other hand, leaned over and kissed its scarred tip, then cautiously put her arms around the dolphin's thick neck. When the dolphin didn't move away, Buddy pressed her cheek to Annie's and closed her eyes.

It was the sudden, unexpected clatter of the metal folding doors on the gift shop opening that startled Annie. In an instant the dolphin was gone from the circle of Buddy's arms leaving her suspended for a moment over the water before she toppled in head first.

Nearly the instant she hit the water, she was lifted out again, draped like wet moss across Annie's snout and forehead. Buddy screamed, flung herself sideways, and went



under, sucked deep beneath the surface in the eddy of the dolphin's departure. With no air in her lungs, she fought her way up toward the murky light and burst out of the water gasping. She spun looking for the dolphin.

Annie was near the gate to the show pool.

"I'm sorry," Buddy choked. "I know you wouldn't hurt me." She put her hand out and Annie came slowly toward her, stopped and turned on her side to expose her smile before she sank away and swam a circle around her. Buddy felt her pass, felt the pressure the movement of her tail made in the water. She spun trying to keep track of where the dolphin was. Her stomach seemed to sway inside of her as if she were in a tuna-tower in high seas. Suddenly, Annie's dorsal fin arched up behind her and slid into her hand. Buddy caught it at the narrow tip, then quickly let go, afraid she was too heavy.

Annie dove, circled and came up again. Her fin slid against Buddy's palm which closed low over the broadest part. Annie gave a pump of her tail, dragging Buddy toward the cattails at the far end of the pond. In front of the cattails, she swirled to the right. Buddy rolled off laughing and bumped to a stop sitting shoulder-deep in the shallow water.

"Oh, Annie," she said, when the dolphin nosed in next to her and nudged her head onto Buddy's lap, "that was wonderful." Buddy put her arms across Annie's back, one on either side of her blow-hole and kissed her: "Smack, smack,

smack."

Annie jerked her head up and brought it down heavily, splashing Buddy and rocking her, then raised up again, flopped sideways and zipped across the pond. When she came back, a seagrape leaf was stuck to her forehead. Buddy plucked it off and flicked the tip of Annie's snout with it. Annie snatched it, twisted and skimmed away.

"Give me that leaf." Buddy leapt after her.

Annie released it and up-ended.

Buddy swam, slowly, sneaky-like, as if Annie couldn't tell she was moving. Inches from where the leaf bobbed between them, Buddy's hand shot out. Annie, in a blink, snatched it and dove, popping up a second later just behind her.

Buddy whirled and lunged at her.

Annie flopped sideways.

Buddy remembered Stevens' son saying Annie liked her tongue tickled. "If you give the leaf, I'll tickle your tongue," Buddy said, wiggling her fingers in the air.

Annie opened her mouth and let the leaf float out.

Buddy ran one finger along Annie's lower row of teeth then danced her fingers up and down the pink tongue. The leaf bobbed in the water beside them. Buddy grinned suddenly. "It's mine now," she cried, snatched it, splashed the dolphin and dove under.

She felt the suction as Annie passed beneath her.

Buddy let herself bob to the surface, took a breath, then

dangled face down, making a slow circle, trying to find the dolphin. From directly beneath her, Annie loomed up out of the murky water. That monstrous form moving slowly toward her flooded Buddy with the fear she'd felt the first time. It welled in her chest, flattening her lungs against her ribs until the breath left her in a gasp. But she did not scream nor did she lift her head, and in that moment she realized that her fear had exploded on the surface in that bubble of her air. The emptiness in her chest suddenly filled with love for this smile coming toward through the muddy water. Buddy reached down and touched the side of Annie's face.

The dolphin stopped and left her cheek against her palm until Buddy lifted her head for air, then Annie pumped herself high out of the water and spun in a circle, splashing Buddy with her flippers. Buddy twirled with her arms outstretched and splashed Annie.

"I'll race you," she challenged, diving away from the dolphin.

Annie flashed by her, covering Buddy with her wake then made a tight circle and gently brought her dorsal fin into Buddy's hand.

"Buddy Martin," Stevens bellowed, "get out of there."

Alex stood on the levee between his uncle and an Ochopee policeman. He grinned, tilted back on his heels, glanced quickly from one to the other then stuck his tongue out at her.

Buddy swam slowly back to the culvert, swinging one leaden arm after the other, barely kicking her feet. She wanted to sink into the cloudy water like Annie had done; quit lifting her heavy arms and disappear, drift to the bottom and wait for them to go away.

The policeman stepped down onto the culvert and reached his hand out to her. She treaded water and looked up at him before taking it, putting her foot on the edge of the pipe and letting herself be pulled out and up beside him.

"Hi, Dumb Buddy," Alex said, his grin nearly splitting his face.

"Go back to the booth," Stevens ordered, smacking the back of Alex's head.

"Aw, come on. I'm the one what..."

"Git." His uncle shoved him. When Alex moved only a few feet, Stevens stomped the ground and pointed down the levee.

Alex ran a few yards, stopped, turned, stuck his tongue out and his thumbs in his ears and waved his hands back and forth.

"Son," the policeman said, "you..."

"I ain't a boy," Buddy said, staring down the levee at Alex.

"Oh. They called you Buddy."

She turned to the policeman. "That's my name. Buddy Martin, but I ain't a boy. They call him Orange Blossom,"

she added, looking at Stevens, "but he ain't."

The cop grinned, covered his mouth and coughed.

"Watch your mouth, girly." Stevens growled. To the cop, he said: "I want you to take her to jail. This here's the second time she's been here teasing my dolphins."

Buddy's eyes widened. "I ain't teasing the dolphins," she said to the cop, touching his hand. "Annie and me are friends. We were playing."

Stevens snorted. "My taxes pay your salary," he poked the cop in the shoulder. "Arrest her." He ordered and stomped away.

In the water, an eye and a gray cheek broke the surface.

The cop, head shaking, lips tight, turned from watching Stevens departure and brushed his shoulder, absently.

"Are you going to arrest me?"

"No," he said, smiling down at her. "And I don't believe you're teasing the dolphins. I think you believe they are your friends, but," he put a hand on her shoulder and lifted her chin with the other, "they belong to Mr..., old Orange Blossom," he grinned. "You can't swim with them. Besides, it could be dangerous."

"It ain't," she said, softly, moving her face free of his hand and looking down at her toes curling and uncurling in the wet sand and shells. "Annie wouldn't hurt me."

In the water, beside the drain pipe, Annie squeaked

and shook her head from side to side.

"Well, I'll be dipped," he said, and grinned in surprise before he could help himself. He looked away, quickly, and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry," he said. "You still can't come here anymore. If you do, I'll have to call your parents."

"I 'spect my dad knows where I am and my ma's right here," she tapped her chest.

A confused look rippled across the policeman's face, then sadness filled it. He glanced away. "That's where my mother is too," he said, softly. He straightened his shoulders, took her hand, and patted it. "I'm sorry, honey, you're trespassing. It's against the law to trespass."

Annie made clicking sounds behind her. When Buddy turned, Annie lifted out of the water, head bobbing, then flopped backwards into the pond with a grand splash.

Buddy turned back to the policeman. "It don't seem right a person can keep you from seeing a friend because he thinks she belongs to him."

"They do belong to him," he said. "People can own animals, keep them as pets, raise them to eat, use them to plow fields..."

"Like they used to own colored people?"

"That was different," he said. "Somehow," he added, before he took her hand and started walking down the levee. Annie moved along in the water beside them. "Did you ride

you bike here?"

"No, sir. I came up the river."

"Where's your boat?"

"In the willows." Buddy pointed behind them.

"Oh." He turned, exchanged the hand he was holding, and retraced their steps. Annie turned and swam back beside them. Off the end of the culvert, she lifted up, squealed, then twirled, spraying an arc of water.

"I can't, Annie," Buddy said. "They won't let me."

The dolphin disappeared.

"I'm sorry," the policeman said. "Really sorry."

From the pond, came a series of whistles and clicks. Annie flopped over sideways, swam in a tight circle, then popped up in center of the eddy she'd made. She bounced her head, squeaked and let her jaw drop. On her tongue was the tattered, shredded seagrape leaf.

Buddy jerked her hand free of the policeman's, jumped down, waded into the pond and sat down in the water. Annie propelled herself up and put her head across Buddy's thighs.

"Young lady," the policeman said.

Buddy turned and looked up at him.

He put a finger to his lips. "When I was your age I'd have given anything to have a friend like Annie. If you come back to see her, don't get caught." He tipped his hat, turned and walked away whistling, softly.

## VIII

### Cabin Nine

The following Monday afternoon Buddy walked the seawall from school to the Rod and Gun Club, past cabin nine. She slipped quietly into the dark, pecky cypress-paneled lobby of the hotel, took a chair opposite the grandfather clock and watched the hand flick from minute to minute. At 3:30, she got up, walked down the steps, across the lawn and back along the seawall to Miss Conroy's cabin. She rapped shyly on the screen door.

"Come in, Buddy," Jane called.

It was dim in the cabin and very bright outside. Buddy closed the screen door softly behind her and stood still while her eyes adjusted.

"Hello." Jane stuck her head out of the little kitchen. "I'm fixing us a snack. Make yourself comfortable."

"Yes ma'am." Buddy looked around then took the stiff-backed chair near the door.

Miss Conroy came out of the kitchen carrying a plate



of Oreos. "I said make yourself comfortable," she said and smiled. "That chair belonged to the Marquis de Sade."

"Ma'am?"

"The first guy to make kids eat spinach."

Buddy laughed and leapt up.

Jane put the cookies on the coffee table in front of the sofa, went back to the kitchen and returned with two glasses and a bottle of milk hugged to her chest. "Help yourself."

Kirk never bought cookies. Buddy took three, thought perhaps that was too many, and put one back.

"I heard about your grandfather's accident. How's he feeling?"

"About the same. I'll be glad when his shoulder's better. I miss him. He's my best friend," Buddy said, then added without self-pity, "I ain't really got another friend, but if I did the Admiral would still be my best one."

"You know," Jane said, "I'm kind of in the same boat. I don't know anybody here, except Ruth Daniels, and she's busy with her family and work, so I don't really have a friend at all. Maybe we could be friends. Would that be okay with you?"

Buddy had only made one friend before and she didn't remember how the friendship started, only how it ended. She liked Jane's straightforward approach to the fact she didn't have a friend and needed one. "Sure, it would," she

said, got up, walked to where Jane sat with a cookie stalled at her lips, and stuck her hand out.

Jane put the cookie between her teeth, took Buddy's hand and shook it. "You really have three friends now," she said after Buddy sat back down.

Annie, Buddy thought? How could she know about Annie? "No, just two. You and the Admiral," she said.

"And your dad?"

"No ma'am. Friends is people that like each other."

"I'm sure your father loves you."

"Yes, ma'am, I guess he does, but he don't like me."

Jane looked at her, squinted her eyes in thought, but only said: "Good cookies."

"Yes, ma'am. Real good."

"Ma'am's a little formal for friends, don't you think? My name's Jane. Okay?"

"Yes ma'...sorry. Jane." She hesitated. "Jane's a nice name for a lady. Buddy don't sound like a girl's name, does it?"

"Buddy's a nice name, too. It sounds like you're a friend before anyone even knows you."

"I never thought of that."

"What's your real name?"

"Elizabeth."

"Would you rather be called Elizabeth?"

"I don't guess nobody would know who I was then."

"Would you like me to call you Elizabeth?"

"I don't know. Do you think it's too fancy a name for somebody like me?"

"I think people can grow into their names. Grow until they fit just right, and I think you're almost there."

Buddy smiled. "Elizabeth," she said, softly, then grinned. "The Admiral's name fits him real good." She nodded agreement with her own statement. "Yep, it's perfect for him." Her brow creased. "What do you think about my dad's name?"

"I think correctly spelled it would be a glove."

"Ma'am?"

"Nothing honey. It's a nice name. How's your crab?"

"He's fine. I named him Osceola after Mr. Blossom's dolphin."

Jane laughed. "Mr. Blossom?"

"Dad told me Mr. Stevens' friends call him Orange Blossom."

Jane whooped and slapped her thigh. "Now that's a perfect name for that blowhard."

Buddy laughed too, then waited for Jane to stop laughing before she asked: "What's a blowhard?"

"A braggart. Somebody that's always talking and never saying anything. You know what I mean?"

"Boy, do I. I got one of them baggarts in my class at school. He's Mr. Blossom's nephew."

Jane rocked back in her chair laughing but didn't correct Buddy. "That's another strike for nature over

nurture."

"Ma'am?"

"Scientists have been arguing for years about whether we humans are shaped, you know, our personalities, by what we inherit from our parents, nature, or by the way we are raised, nurture."

"Oh." Buddy nodded. "If you're interested," she said, leaning nearer. "Alex didn't get his uncle's lip."

Jane burst out laughing. "Life's not fair, is it?"

Buddy grinned. "No, it ain't. The Admiral told me there was a boy once whose nose grew every time he told a lie."

"Pinocchio."

"That's him. Well, when Alex teases me 'cause I can't read too good," Buddy glanced toward the door and lowered her voice. "I wish Mr. Blossom's lip on him. I shouldn't, I guess, but it ain't worked yet anyway." She sat back and shrugged. "Maybe teasing ain't considered as bad as lying."

"It should be. Keep wishing." Jane snapped her fingers. "I forgot to tell you, I talked to Miss Daniels yesterday about your report."

"Yes ma'am...sorry, Jane, she told me. Thank you."

"Well I thought maybe you'd like to go out with me one day and I'll show you how I do my research and what I'm learning.

Would you like that?"

"Oh yes ma'... , yes I would, but," she dropped her eyes for a second and bit her lip. "I ain't much help. You sure you want me to go?"

"Of course. I'm not asking you because I need help, I'm asking you because I'd like you to come. I'd like to show a friend what I'm doing. I get lonesome out there working by myself. And what makes you think you aren't much help?"

"I get things like directions confused. They seem right to me, and the Admiral, but to other people they ain't right. They're backwards-like."

"Is that why you have trouble reading?"

"And doing arithmetic and steering a boat..." She stood up and walked to the mirror mounted on the outside of the door to the bathroom. "For me, the only time things is the way they should be is in a mirror."

"What do you mean?" Jane's eyes narrowed. "Explain that to me." She walked over and stood beside Buddy.

"I don't make mistakes in the mirror." Buddy slung her arms out to the right then swung them left, raised them in an arc over her head, spun herself on tiptoe, caught Jane's eye, blushed, and put her arms down.

Jane stared at their reflections, turned, grabbed a magazine off the coffee table and held it up to the mirror. "It's not just backwards," she said, "it's reversed." A huge smile bloomed. "Reversed," she whooped and punched the air with her fist, spun and grabbed Buddy by the shoulders.

"How would you like to go to Miami?"

"To Miami?"

"To Miami."

"Oh, yes ma'am. I'd love to go to Miami."

"I want to ask Ruth Daniels something then I'll call and ask your father. Okay?"

Buddy's heart sank. "We ain't got a phone."

"That's okay. I'm in Chokoloskee two or three times a week.

I'll stop by and ask him next time I'm there."

Buddy waited for father on the front steps of the hotel. He was late, tired and smelled of dead fish when he picked her up. "How'd it go?" he asked.

"Fine," she said and grinned to herself. She was busting to tell him about Miami. "Was the haul good?"

"Awful."

She couldn't stop grinning, so she turned to face the glass window. "That's too bad," she said to her smiling reflection.

Her grandfather was propped up in bed with three pillows behind his head. His eyes were closed.

"Admiral, are you asleep?" Buddy whispered from the end of his bed.

"Nupe." He drew his lips tight across his gums in a grin. "Whatcha up to?"

"Nothing." She moved around to stand beside his bed.

"Don't I get a hug?" He put out his good arm.

She dropped to her knees beside his bed and put her head on his chest.

"How's my girl?"

"I'm fine." She grinned against his shoulder. "I made a friend today."

"You did? Who?"

"That biology-lady. Remember Miss Conroy. Her name is Jane."

"I remember. The one your father thinks he don't like."

"I'm beginning to think he really don't like her." Buddy propped herself up on her elbows.

"Oh, I think he does. He's spending too much time pretending he don't."

"Well, if he does, how come he just don't act like he does?"

"'Cause then she'd know he liked her."

Buddy smacked herself on the forehead. "Grown-ups is harder to figure out than subtraction."

He clicked her chin. "You'll understand it all soon enough."

"How come you're sitting here in bed with the blinds closed and light on?"

"I don't know. There wasn't nothing to do and I got tired of sitting on the porch."

She took his hand and worked the wrinkles down toward

the tips of his fingers. "You're okay ain't you?"

"Sure I'm okay, honey. I'm just lazy today."

She watched his face for a moment then nodded, gave his hand a quick kiss and pressed it to her cheek. "Can I tell you a secret? No wait." She held up two fingers. "Two secrets." She lowered her voice. "Jane asked me to go out in her boat, and even help maybe, and Admiral, we was talking and I told her about things being right for me --for us --in mirrors and she got all excited and said we was going to Miami." Buddy clapped her hands together.

"Well," he said, blinked and glanced away.

"Admiral?" She took his hand again.

"That's real nice, honey."

Buddy's brow creased. "You know what else?" She watched his face. "When we was talking, before she asked me out on her boat or to go to Miami, I told her you was my best friend, my only friend. That's when she said she needed one and asked me if I'd be it."

He nodded. "People need more than one friend."

"I like her Admiral, but I love you." She touched his face with her finger tips. It was as wrinkled and brown as dead leaf.

"I know honey. I ain't hurt. And I ain't afraid of losing you to a new friend." He leaned his head back on the pillows and closed his eyes.

She didn't like the color of his skin in the lamplight. "Do you want me to open the blinds and turn out



the light?"

"No, I want the light on in case I fall asleep before night comes." His eyes were still closed.

She sighed and stood up. "I guess I'll feed Osceola. Admiral," she said from the door. "Promise me you won't ever go away without taking me."

He opened his eyes. "I might have to one day, honey."

She felt the sting of tears. "Then promise me..." She looked up at stain on the ceiling. "...you'll never leave without saying goodbye."

"I promise you," he said, then he shielded his eyes against the afternoon sun behind her. "You looked all growed there in the light," he whispered.

She bit her lip. "I ain't though."

Kirk was in the shower when Buddy flinched a hammer from the shed and smashed a clam on the front porch step.

"Whatcha you doing?" he asked, his hair slicked back and wet.

At the sound of her father's voice, Buddy started. "I'll clean it up," she gasped, edging the hammer off the step into the bushes with the side of her hand.

"That's okay," Kirk said. "How's he doing?"

"Who?"

"Your crab."

"Osceola?" she asked, then answered. "He's fine."

"That's good. How was school today?"

"Fine, thank you."

"And your meeting with Miss Conroy?"

"Fine."

"That's nice." He smiled. "I thought I'd barbecue some lobster for dinner. Does that sound good?"

She loved lobster. "Yes, sir."

"I'll barbecue some corn on the cob, too. Would you like that?"

She loved corn on the cob. "Yes, sir."

"Well, good. That's settled." He jammed his hands in his pockets and looked past her toward the docks. "Well then," he said finally, "Guess I'll see you later." But he didn't move. He nodded toward the wad of smashed clam on the step. "He likes that, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

He squeezed his lips together. "I like clams, too. Guess we crabs have the same tastes." He patted her shoulder and walked away, leaving her to wonder if that was some kind of apology. And if it was, what he was apologizing for?

Three days later, through the dirty school bus window, Buddy watched Jane's Volkswagen pull away from stop sign at the top of the hill above her house, and turn right, headed back toward Everglade City.

She could also see that her father's truck was backed up to the shed. The instant the driver opened the door, Buddy leapt down and raced across the yard. Kirk was

unloading cans of paint. "Was Jane here?" she asked, grinning.

"Don't you think you should call her Miss Conroy?"

"She told me to call her Jane. We're friends."

"You are?" An odd look crossed her father's face.

"Did she ask you if I could go to Miami with her?"

"Yes."

"Can I go?"

"May I."

"May I?"

He looked at her, then smiled. "Yes."

Buddy grinned, broadly, ran to the truck, got two cans of paint, brought them to him, then ran to get two more. When he finished stacking all the cans, he unrolled a large piece of the plastic, cut it off and covered them.

"Whatcha gonna do with that paint?"

"Paint the house, when it's cooler."

"Can I ... May I help?"

"I don't think so," he said, bending over to tuck a corner of the plastic under a paint can.

"Did Jane tell you why she asked me to go to Miami?"

"There's a doctor there she wants you to see."

"A doctor?"

"She specializes in learning disabilities."

"Oh." Buddy worked her toes into the grass. That confused her a little. They said the Admiral was disabled, and it wasn't anything anybody could fix. It didn't

matter, she decided, it would be worth getting poked and prodded, even getting a shot, to go to Miami.

"Did she say when we're going?"

"The appointment's in two weeks."

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## IX

### The Substitute

The Admiral had eaten little, if anything, since coming home from the hospital and preferred to stay in bed.

Buddy remembered that when she was five and sick with the chicken pox, her grandfather had spent hours entertaining her, and she'd felt better. It took her a while but, jammed in the space between the refrigerator and the side of the cabinet, she finally found the game tray Iris Smallwood had given them seven years ago.

She pulled it out and dragged a yard stick through the space expecting to scrape out the dice and the cars that had come with it. She got two dried roaches, a rock-hard crust of bread and a matchbook from the Belmont Plaza in New York.

She put the roaches and the bread crust in the trash and the matches on the counter, then took the tray down to the docks to wash the dust and cobwebs off with the hose.

The rusty, metal tray had a map of the United States on it. Most of the states had little scenes depicting a

summary of its interest to anyone who had never been there. These were connected by two strings of dots, one red, one yellow. Florida had a trapeze artist painted near Sarasota, and a hurricane swirling in the waters off Miami. Arizona had an Indian by his tepee sending smoke signals. Georgia had colored people picking cotton. Iowa and Alabama didn't have anything.

When she was five, the Admiral had spent hours in her dim room, with the venetian blinds closed tight against the light, playing game after game on the tray. She'd shake the dice violently, splatter them across the tray, then roar her car along the dots to the whatever tourist attraction she wanted to hear about irregardless of the number she had rolled. Her grandfather, who had never been north of Lake Okeechobee, east of Miami or west of his trapline in the Gulf, would describe it to her without even glancing off the truth, except the hurricane. His hurricane story was true.

"That there is the 1926 hurricane," he said. "I remember because I was courting your grandma, and because of the eels."

"Eels. Ick." She'd shudder, then roll her fingers like they were a swarm of eels out to get him.

"Yep" he continued, tapping his temple and squinting as if in searching his memory for the details, he did not see her writhing little fingers coming nearer and nearer. "There was millions of them swarming over the island after

that blow. When the water receded, they was under every house and hanging off tree branches. Stunk up the island for weeks. "Yeow," he'd yell, and throw his arms in the air when she got him. "Eels. Get 'em away from me." She'd tickle him, and he'd wiggle like he was covered in them.

After the hurricane, Yellowstone was his favorite story. The tray pictured Old Faithful; the Admiral took it from there.

It was called Yellowstone by the Indians, he told her, because all the mountains, in fact every rock, had a yellow streak in it. There was so much yellow stuff in the rocks, he said, that on sunny days the Indians had to shade their eyes with eagle feathers.

"You know what that yellow stuff was?" he'd ask.

"Cornbread," she shouted. The time before, she had guessed key limes.

The Admiral acted amazed again. "Cornbread? Are you crazy? It weren't cornbread, it was gold, and it was holding the whole state together. After the White man came and dug it all up, the state sprung leaks. Now everywhere you go in Wyoming you gotta watch where your walking 'cause hot water squirts outta them holes where the the gold used to be. It'll goose you," he said, and popped off the edge of her bed like one had gotten him. "One as big as Old Faithful will pick you up, spin you around like you was in a washing machine, steam you like a carrot, and drop you..." He rolled his arms around each other, higher and

higher, then flung them to his sides.

"Splat," she shouted.

After washing the tray, Buddy dried it with her shirttail, rather than risk using a dish towel. She found two nearly whole seashells, and went to her room. On a piece of notebook paper, she carefully printed the numbers one through six, twice, in two rows, then cut them into twelve neat squares and put them in a cup. She used an old paint-by-number set to color the shells. She painted one blue, the Admiral's favorite color. She made hers yellow, the only other color that wasn't dried up. It didn't matter to her that it was yellow because blue was her favorite color, too.

She wanted to surprise her grandfather by taking his breakfast in on the tray. With the cup of numbers in one corner and the seashells in the other, she carried it to the kitchen.

Her father was standing at the counter staring at the matchbook in his hand. Bacon fried on the stove.

"Is the Admiral's breakfast ready?" she asked, getting a plate from the cupboard.

Her father looked at her, blankly for a moment, then, as if hers was a face he was glad to see, a smile came slowly.

She smiled back. "Are you glad I found the matches?"

His face darkened as his fist closed over the matchbook. He put his foot on the lever that raised the



garbage can lid and dropped the book in with the bread and the roaches.

Outside the Admiral's room, she balanced the tray on a raised knee, rapped once, then quietly opened his door. She thought she saw his eyes close so she tiptoed across the room, grinning, expecting him to wink at her and laugh. Instead, he made raspy little snoring sounds.

"Admiral?" she whispered.

He sighed heavily.

She put the tray on a chair next to his bed. "I've got a surprise for you, Admiral."

His breathing was even.

"I guess I'll come back later." She tiptoed backwards to the door, watching him. He turned on his side, his back to the tray, and moaned. She waited a moment, waved, stepped out and closed the door.

He was asleep when she came to take the untouched breakfast, She stood quietly, watching him breathe. His eyelids twitched.

"Admiral?"

He didn't answer.

She walked to the door and turned. "I'm so sorry you hurt yourself. I didn't see it."

Buddy went through the living room and out onto the porch. At the bottom of the steps, she started running. By the time she reached Smallwood's store, she was panting and

sweating. She stopped herself against a piling, wrapped her arms around it, put her cheek against the wood, and dug her toes into the cool sand. "Please forgive me," she cried. "I didn't see it."

Someone was walking around the store. Boards creaked above Buddy's head. She put her back against the piling, slid down till her bottom rested on the seawall, drew her legs to her chest and pressed her cheek to her knee.

She must have slept because she started violently when Miss Smallwood slammed the front door and snapped the padlock in place.

The sun was setting. Buddy sat quietly until Iris disappeared through the pines. She stood up and brushed the sand off her bottom, then leaned back against the piling and watched the orange ball sink into the sea. "Oh Momma, I'm scared," she cried, suddenly. "Please, make him better."

When she took dinner into him, he smiled at her.

"Hi, Admiral." She moved his untouched lunch and put the plate down. "I caught you sleeping a bunch of times today."

"You did?"

She nodded. "Look." She held out the cup full of numbers and the two shells. "I made these so we could play with the tray. The real dice and the cars are lost, I guess." She grinned. "Want to play?"

"Well, not right now. I ain't feeling all that

chipper. Maybe tomorrow. Okay?"

"Sure. Okay." She put the cup on the dresser. "You hungry? It's black grouper. Miss Smallwood brought it for you." She lowered her voice, and shielded her mouth with her hand. "She fixes it better than Dad does. Don't you think?"

He nodded. "But I ain't very hungry just now. Leave it there. Maybe I'll take a bite or two later."

"Want me to get you a beer or some milk?"

"No, nothing." He shifted on his pillow and screwed his face up in pain. "I'm going to rest a little." He patted her hip. "We'll talk later." He closed his eyes.

"Sure. Okay." She took the dried-up sandwich, pinched a little piece of grouper and popped it in her mouth. "See you later," she said from the door.

He waved without opening his eyes.

At school the next morning they had a substitute. Miss Daniels was out with the flu.

After lunch, using the rollbook, the substitute called on Elizabeth Martin to stand and continue reading, starting where they left off at lunch time.

A whoop went up in the back of the room. Alex clamped his hand to his mouth, then did a silent cheer in his desk. His bottom wiggled, his top swayed and his arms poked alternately in the air. He turned in his desk and grinned broadly at Buddy.

"Quiet please," said the substitute. "Elizabeth."

Buddy stood, slowly, and steadied herself against her desk top. Her heart pounded in her chest and her head throbbed.

"Elizabeth, start at the top of page 79."

"Af, Af, After the...ba, battle, Presi...dent Lincoln saw..."

"That's was, Dumb Buddy," Alex said, loudly. "A first grader knows was," he explained to Timmy.

"Oh my," cried the substitute. "You're Buddy? You're Buddy Marvin?" She ran her finger down the rollbook.

"It's Martin, not Marvin. Oh, I'm sorry, dear, you may sit down."

"Oh dear, you're the idiot," Alex cried, imitating the substitute's voice. "You may sit down, dear."

"Be quiet back there. Be quiet this instant."

The substitute, trying to move ahead, ran her finger down the roll and called out Alex's name. He grinned and stood up.

"Oh," she cried. "Never mind. Sit down, please."

Alex ignored her, picked up the history book, turned it upside down, and moved his finger heavily from word to word on the page. "Da," he said, letting his mouth hang open. "Da." He scratched his head. Timmy and Jeffery poked their books and scratched their heads.

"Sit down," the substitute cried.

The class giggled. A few let their lips loosen and

their jaws go slack, uttered 'das', poked at their textbooks, and scratched their heads.

"Stop it," screamed the substitute. She swooped toward Alex who dodged into his desk. She whirled on the class, her face red with fury. "You heartless little bastards," she screamed, then her eyes became round with horror, and she clamped her hand to her mouth.

The class broke into hoots and hollers. A few took up the imitation again. Alex made a spitball and shot it at Buddy. They all made them, targeting Buddy, each other, and the substitute as she swirled frantically around the room, screaming: "Sit down. Stop it. Sit down."

The teacher from the next classroom, swung the door open with such force that the papers on Miss Daniels' desk were sucked up, then fluttered to the floor. He struck the first desktop he came to with a pointer. It snapped in half. There was the scramble of feet, then silence. "Everyone of you will be punished for this." His voice was even and menacing. "Come with me." He took the substitute by the arm.

"I didn't know she was a girl," she whimpered up at him as he guided her out of the room.

A moment later, he reappeared. Whispers stopped, heads drooped, hands appeared and folded themselves on desktops.

Buddy sat in her desk, her hands gripping the far edge, her head down gasping for air. The deeper, more

quickly she breathed, the more air she needed, as if she was trying to breathe through mud.

"Come with me," the teacher said, lifting her under both arms.

Buddy legs would not hold her weight. He supported her as far as the outside hall, then he picked her up and carried her to the nurse's office, put her on a cot, and covered her with the sheet.

The nurse spoke to her softly and made her cup her hands over her nose. When her breathing quieted, the nurse wiped her face with a cool damp cloth until she fell asleep.

When school was over, the nurse woke her. "We tried to call your Dad to come get you, but the operator said you don't have a phone. If you will wait till five, I'll take you home."

Buddy didn't want her father to know what had happened, and she wanted to see the Admiral. "No ma'am, I'll take the bus home. I'm all right now."

"Are you sure, sweetheart?" The nurse stroked her hair.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure."

"Elizabeth," the nurse said, lifting her chin so their eyes met. "I heard what happened in there and I want you to know something."

"Yes 'am?"

"I'm 63 years old. I've got four grown kids, eleven

grandchildren, two great grandchildren, and been nursing kids for forty years. You aren't dumb. I don't know what your problem is, but I know dumb when I see it. Dumb is in the eyes. Your eyes are bright with the light of a good mind."

Tears slid down Buddy's cheeks. The nurse pulled her to her large, soft breasts. "I bet your smarter than any kid in that class."

Buddy began to sob.

"That's it, baby," the nurse whispered. "You cry now, here with me, but the next time that little poop-face pokes fun at you --punch him." The nurse's fist whizzed through the air.

Buddy laughed, then hiccupped. The nurse laughed, picked up a pillow and punched it, hard. "Hit him in the belly; hit him in the nose." She hugged Buddy. "Okay?"

"Yes ma'am," she said, with a nod.

The nurse held the pillow up, and Buddy punched it as hard as she could then threw her arms around the nurse and the pillow. "Thank you."

Thunder rumbled as Buddy walked slowly to the bus stop. Children ran, screamed and chased each other. No one noticed her. She stood in the narrow arched shadow of a palm tree and watched them with curiosity. The way the spoonbills in the lagoon had looked at her and the Admiral. Children pushed and shoved to get on one of the buses. She saw Linda-Ellen Brown push the boy in front of her, then

shriek and duck when he swung at her. Linda-Ellen had been Buddy's friend in the third grade. When Buddy failed that year, Linda-Ellen never spoke to her again. That seemed so long ago that Buddy couldn't remember what having a friend had felt like.

Her books shot out from between her arm and her hip and splayed out on the grass.

"You got us all in trouble, Dumb Buddy," Alex scolded. "We gotta write essays, and stay fifteen minutes after school every day for a week cleaning up the room. It's all your fault, 'cause you're so stupid and funny."

Buddy's hands squeezed into fists.

"You gonna hit me?" Alex hooted, and danced in front of her, shadow boxing.

She relaxed her hands and squatted down to pick up her books. Alex kicked them away.

She stood up and started walking. Alex skipped around her, and danced along side as she left the schoolyard, walked Copeland Avenue to the Broadway Circle and crossed it to the highway.

Alex dropped off at the circle because he wasn't allowed on the highway. But he called out, "Dumb Buddy is teacher's pet," until she was too far away to hear him.

Thunder rumbled nearer and it was raining by the time she got to the bridge.

Lightning flashed.

"One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-



thousand.."

Boom.

She flinched. "Three miles," she said, walking faster.

Boom.

Buddy ducked and covered her ears, then started to run, stopped, took her sandals off, stepped onto the highway, and ran toward home.

Her head was down so she didn't see the dog trotting toward her on the other side of the road. But she looked up when the horn sounded behind her and the car swerved to miss her, knocking the dog off the road, into the bushes at the edge of the canal.

Blood blended with the rain and ran in rivulets from the gash on his back leg. When Buddy squatted near him, he bared his teeth.

Lightning flashed so near that the dog and the trees and the blood, for an instant, had no color. The world went white, then sounded as if it had blown up.

Buddy threw her arms over her head and rolled into a tight ball.

Brakes squealed. The school bus driver flung the doors open, jumped down and raced across the highway. "Are you hurt?" she asked, touching Buddy's shoulder.

The dog growled, struggled to his feet, and hopped away on three legs.

Buddy reached out for him. "It's my fault," she told the driver.

The bus driver went to her stop first. When Buddy stepped off, the sun was out and steam rose from the pavement. She ran down the hill, up the ramp, across the kitchen and living room to the Admiral's door. She rapped softly and stuck her head in. He wasn't there.

"Admiral?" she called at the bathroom door, pushed it open slowly, then dashed back through the kitchen and down the ramp.

Her father was on his stomach on the deck of his boat leaning over the engine, the insides of which he had exposed. He looked up when she spook. "Why are you wet?"

"I waited for the bus in the rain." She looked down at her feet. "A dog was hit on the highway. Can we go help it?"

"It wasn't dead?"

"No, sir."

"We'll go after I finish here. A few more minutes."

"Thank you. Where's the Admiral?"

Kirk pointed the wrench he was holding. "I put him on the porch."

Buddy ran back toward the house.

Her grandfather's head was against the pillow her father had jammed down between his shoulders and the back of the chair. His mouth was open and he was snoring.

"Admiral?" she whispered.

There was a momentary pause in his ragged breathing,

then it started again.

"Admiral, it's me." She touched his shoulder.

His head snapped up. He blinked and squinted at the shadow she was against the afternoon sun.

"Hi," she said, pushing herself up to sit on the porch railing.

"How are you?" he asked, running his hand over his crusty eyes, then rubbing them vigorously.

"Okay. You were asleep."

"Do I get a hug anyway?"

She hopped down, knelt beside his chair, wrapped her arms around his waist and put her face against his well-shoulder.

"How was school?"

"Awful."

"Alex again?"

Her head nodded against his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, honey." He rubbed a circle on her back and kissed the top of her head. "You're wet."

"I walked most of the way home. Admiral, a dog got hit 'cause a car swerved to miss me."

He patted her back. "Is it dead?"

"No, sir. When the school bus came, it ran away, but it was bleeding."

"That's a shame." He put his cheek against her hair. Buddy nudged in closer, waiting, but he said no more.

His skin smelled moldy and stale, like damp clothes in

the hamper too long. His hair was matted and oily, and he hadn't shaved for a week or more. His shirt smelled like the decaying odor of river mud when the tide was out. A smell she used to like.

When Kirk came up the steps, Buddy jumped to her feet and hopped behind the Admiral's chair, unconsciously putting him between herself and her father.

Kirk stared at her for a moment, in some confusion then his expression change and she knew she had hurt him again. Her father looked at his father, angrily. "Dinner's going to be early tonight," he said. "I've got to be up at five so I want to get it over with and get to bed." He went into the house, letting the door bang shut behind him.

"The dog?" Buddy called after him.

"He's gone or dead by now."

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X

Miami

Buddy pulled her blue, Swiss-dot church dress off a hanger in the back of the closet. She held it out, snapped it in the air, fanned away the dust and sneezed. Its white laced-trimmed bib and the cuffs on the short sleeves were yellowing. She held it up even with her shoulders. The hem was still out of the back where she had caught it getting down from the truck. But even where it hung down, it did not touch her knees. She put it back on the hanger and closed the closet door.

Osceola was tucked into himself at the glass watching her.

"You hungry?" She lowered her hand through the water slowly and poked through the sand with a finger until she found a clam. She put her face near the crabs and grinned at him through the glass, "I'm getting ready to go to Miami."

The Admiral was in his chair in the shade on the front porch, snoring softly. She tiptoed over and kissed his

cheek.

He opened his eyes, grunted and rubbed the back of his neck. "You cooking for that crab of yours?"

"Yeah. He's getting little claws." She smashed the clam with the hammer, picked the shell fragments out of the meat and began to dice it. She looked up at him. "Admiral, did you know that when their claws grow back they is under a clear little cap-thing?"

"I've seen it a time or two."

"Neat, ain't it?"

"Yep. When he molts, that shield will drop off and he'll have himself a nice new set of claws."

"I'll let him go then. Soon as he can feed himself, or after my science report, if he molts first. I hope he don't, I want the kids to see his claws under them caps." She scooped the pieces of clam into her palm. "After I feed him, you want to play some cards or something?"

"I don't think so. Looking at cards makes my eyes hurt."

"Want to go for a walk? Smallwood's is closed. We could go sit under the store and watch for dolphins or something."

"Maybe later, okay?"

"Yes, sir." She nodded and watched his face. Everyday she grew more and more afraid to take her eyes off him. She looked in every time she passed his room, sometimes quickly through the key hole. She did her

homework sitting in his wheelchair. School was endless. The bus ride home took forever. Twice, as she stepped down off the bus, her skin had prickled and her heart began to pound. She'd taken off running and didn't stop until she was at the foot of his bed, watching his chest rise and fall. She started telling him where she was going and how long she would be gone, just to hurry back early or not go at all.

She stood up, folded her fingers over on the clam and put her arms around his neck, her cheek against his cheek. "I gotta go see Iris or Miss Nancy 'bout borrowing something to wear to Miami. I'll be back by lunch, okay?"

"I ain't seen you in a dress in years." He rubbed the bumps of her spine. "You sure was beautiful in a dress."

"Ah, Admiral, a dress ain't gonna make me beautiful. I ain't even sure it'll make me look like a girl."

He took her arms. "You're the prettiest girl in Collier County and getting prettier every day. You just wait, won't be long before I gotta sit out here with a shotgun across my knees to keep the boys away. Bang, bang." He fired his fingers at two trees.

Buddy blushed. "If boys is all like Alex and his friends, I ain't ever gonna want one. We can both sit out here and shoot at 'em." She scrunched into the chair with him and leaned her head against his shoulder. "If I ever do get married, will you come and live with me?"

"It will be mighty hard to find you a husband if he's

gonna get me in the bargain."

"Then I ain't getting married," she said holding her hand out so the juice from the clam trickled through her fingers and dripped on the porch. "Ever."

Short, round, Iris Smallwood couldn't find a dress to fit Buddy so she made her pick a skirt from her closet. Buddy chose a faded, pleated, plaid one because it looked like her fishing cap, though she didn't plan to wear them together. Iris took it in at the waist, let the hem out and pressed it while Buddy made sounds through her teeth for Iris' parakeet.

When Iris was finished they walked over to the Blue Heron Motel where Iris' aunt, Nancy Smallwood Hanson, added a white blouse with a long scarf attached to the edges of a stand-up collar. They tied and retied it until they got a bow that drooped evenly on both sides. When they finished, Buddy looked like a twelve-year-old, bare-footed schoolmarm. She stood inspection with her arms at her sides and her toes working back and forth through Nancy's new shag carpet. She looked from one to the other, her long bangs snagging her eyelashes.

"Well," Nancy and Iris said together and glanced at each other. "That will be fine for Miami," Nancy said. Iris nodded.

"Do you have some white sandals?" Iris asked.

"Yes ma'am. My school sandals is mostly white."

"Good. Then all we need it a barrette for your



bangs," Iris said pulling them to one side and turning Buddy's head this way and that by her chin. "A red one. I have one down at the store."

Buddy found her grandfather back in bed. She spun around on her toes. "How do I look?"

"Is that you?" he asked, shading his eyes and squinting.

"Sure it's me."

"It don't look like you."

"It don't?"

"No. It looks like some growed lady snuck into my room."

She grinned, bent her knees and crept toward him. Her skin prickled, suddenly, like the times coming off the school bus. She straightened and dropped her arms. Her heart began to pound. "I ain't growed yet. Don't go thinking I'm growed."

Early the next morning, Buddy heard Jane shift gears when she came off the stop sign at Mamie Street. She grabbed her sandals from the closet, the barrette off her dresser, shouted "bye crab", dashed out of her room and burst into the Admiral's. "She's here."

A sandal dangled from each pinky as she snapped the barrette into her hair. She grinned at her grandfather then did a little Indian jig on her toes, her arms poking the air, sandals bouncing. "Just think, Admiral, all the

way to Miami."

He smiled and held his arms out. "I found something I want you to have." He opened the drawer in the little table beside his bed and took out a small box. He handed it to her but held her hands to keep her from opening it. "When I was in school, the first of my growed teeth I lost was an eye tooth." He lowered his voice and winked. "Got it knocked out fighting. Back then I figured an eye tooth was worth saving, so I picked it out of the dirt and kept it." He let her hands go. "It's brought me good luck ever since. You take it now."

Buddy opened the little box, lifted the tissue and took out the tooth. She closed it in her fist and looked at him. "I wish you could keep an eye on me through this tooth?"

"Maybe I can. Ain't ever tried."

There were two short beeps from the road.

She stood up. "Admiral, try, okay?"

The pocket in the skirt had a small hole in the bottom. Buddy dashed to her room, dumped her bottom drawer out on her bed and sorted through it until she found the white patent leather purse that went with her church dress. She opened it, dropped the tooth in, snapped it closed and ran out. At the Admiral's door, she held up the purse. "It's in here. I love you." She waved the purse and was gone.

Buddy held her purse in her lap and focused on the arrow-straight, brown-water canal until it seemed to be the thing moving instead of them. She remembered there was a mangrove branch slung so low it had hooked a blue crab trap buoy. She watched for it.

When they reached the blinking light at the intersection of 29 and 41, she knew they would turn right, east into the sun. She knew Stevens' was five miles and that they would pass a sign: Miami 72. Buddy knew where she was.

Two cars, one with a New Jersey tag and one from Iowa, were already in Stevens' lot.

"Tourists," Jane hissed. "Their money keeps that old fart in business."

Buddy clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, thought of Annie and Lucie jumping through hoops and dropped her hand.

"I filed a report with the Marine Patrol. Hopefully, they'll jerk his license and take them away from him."

"Will they let them go?"

"No, they'll move them somewhere else where they will be properly taken care of."

"Why can't they just let them go?"

"It is assumed that once an animal has been tamed, it loses its ability to care for itself in the wild. That makes us responsible for what we tame, forever."

Buddy looked back at Stevens'. "Do you think that's

true? That they can't take care of themselves anymore?"

"It is for most animals, especially ones taken young, but I'm not so sure about animals as smart as dolphins."

"My crab eats out of my hand."

"That's all right. Once he's back in the ocean, he'll go right back to finding his own food. He's not tame, he's trusting, and that's easy to get over."

Sawgrass stretched away to their right, ending against a distant wall of mangroves. Buddy leaned back and watched the scenery sweep by. Near the highway, in open shallow pools, egrets and herons clustered, poised, eyes locked on the water, motionless as statues until, with a lightning-fast thrust of a head, one then another would catch a fish, like a Seminoles spear-fishing.

"Are you excited about seeing Miami?" Jane said after a long silence.

Buddy's head bobbed and her barrette fell out. She swept her bangs to one side and snapped the barrette closed on them.

Jane glanced at her watch. "We're a little late so we have to go straight to Dr. Wheeler's but we'll see the city right after that, okay?"

When Buddy nodded her barrette fell out again. "I hate my hair. I wish I had hair like yours."

"And I always wanted straight blonde hair like you have."

"Why?" She leaned forward and examined her bangs

cross-eyed.

"Because I can never do anything with mine. It's always a fuzzy mess, never smooth and silky looking like yours."

"I think your hair is beautiful. It's fluffy and soft. I wish I had curls."

"You can. Today if you want them. After the tests, I'll take you to a beauty parlor for a permanent."

"A permanent?" Buddy rolled a strand of hair around her finger, pressed it to the side of her head, leaned so she could see it in the sideview mirror and let it go. It flopped against her cheek. "I guess people is always wanting what they don't have, huh? I been wishing for curls for as long as I can remember but I ain't sure I want them forever. What if I get them then start wishing I didn't have them?" She looked at herself in the sideview mirror again. "Boy, it ain't easy deciding this."

Jane laughed. "It will grow out. A permanent isn't permanent."

"Oh brother." Buddy shook her head, then grinned. "Let's do it."

"Do you want me to check with your dad first?"

"We ain't got a phone, remember? But he won't care anyway."

They rode awhile longer in silence before Buddy turned to Jane. "Do you really think this doctor can fix me? Nobody could fix the Admiral."

"What does that have to do with you?"

"Dad said you said I had a learning disability. The Admiral's spine getting crushed was called a disability by the insurance company."

"I said I think you have a learning disability. But it's not the same thing. His is a physical disability. And if you do have an LD, as they call it, Dr. Wheeler can fix you."

Ellen Wheeler cleared two chairs, one of books and the other of more books, a stuffed raccoon and a musical bear. She put them all on top of her cluttered desk behind a sign that read: Dyslexics of the World Untie.

She was a large, tidy woman with a bubble of soft blonde hair and cheeks that inflated like shiny pink balloons when she smiled, which was nearly all the time. She leaned forward so her head appeared above the books as if it rested on them, and smiled at Buddy. "Miss Conroy tells me she thinks we have a problem in common, you and me."

Buddy looked at Jane then back at Dr. Wheeler. "We do?"

"Yes." Dr. Wheeler picked up the raccoon and touched the end of its nose. "She thinks you're dyslexic like me."

"What is that?"

Dr. Wheeler smiled. "Just a different way of seeing things." She put the raccoon against the stack of books

next to the bear who let out two slow notes like a sigh. "When I was your age, they thought I was retarded. I was teased by other children and left out of games."

Buddy ducked her head and scraped her toes back and forth inside her sandals.

Dr. Wheeler came around her desk, knelt in front of Buddy and lifted her chin. "They were wrong about me and they are wrong about you. We are very smart we are. I've got some tests here. If you are dyslexic, they will show it. And if you are, I'll show you how to get around it. Okay?"

Buddy nodded.

Dr. Wheeler squeezed Buddy's hand. "I promise, you will be able to read and write and do arithmetic." She stood up, her cheeks pink and glowing. "How many grades have you failed?"

"One. So far." Buddy scraped her sandals off, put her hands under her thighs and dug her toes into the carpet.

"I failed two," Dr. Wheeler said.

"You did?"

"Yes, ma'am. Now I have a Ph.D. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes 'am. Jane here's getting one on crabs."

The two women burst out laughing. Buddy smiled and waited until they were quiet. "I ain't too good at tests."

"Oh, these aren't like the tests you take in school. Some are even fun."

"You two go to work," Jane said, getting up. "I have errands to do and some curls to schedule." She walked to the door, turned and gave Buddy a thumb's up. "See you in a couple of hours."

"Now, the first test is a game that lets me intrepret what you see." Dr. Wheeler sorted through a drawer and came up with a plastic bag full of small square tiles with designs on them. She shook them out in the space she'd cleared on her desk then looked at Buddy. "Do you know that Albert Einstein, the smartest man who ever lived was dyslexic?" She selected tiles and placed them in a line, end to end. "So was Rodin, a brilliant artist, and Woodrow Wilson, one of our presidents and..."

Buddy interrupted. "Was Teddy Roosevelt?"

"I don't think so." She smiled. "But he was smart enough to have been."

"Well?" Jane poked her head into the office. Buddy and Dr. Wheeler were laughing. "How did it go?"

Buddy held hand up, to silence Ellen Wheeler, and grinned. "I've got it. I'm dyslexic."

Jane laughed and hugged her. "I guess that's wonderful."

"And watch this. I can subtract." Buddy placed a recipe card over the tens and the hundreds columns of the problem 279 from 543. "Nine from three will not go," Buddy whispered to herself. "Strike, change, make a teen. Nine from thirteen is four." She wrote four and moved the



card left a column. "Seven from three will not go, strike, change, make a teen. Seven from thirteen is six," she said, but wrote nine.

"Watch your sixes and nines," Dr. Wheeler said. "Oops." Buddy erased the nine and carefully made a six. "Nine from thirteen is four, seven from thirteen is six, and two from four is two. Two hundred and sixty-four." She slapped the pencil down and threw her arms up. "How 'bout that?"

Jane and Dr. Wheeler applauded.

"The secret is keeping the other columns covered so that the numbers can't be reversed. And remember," Dr. Wheeler said to Buddy, "be extra careful when you see a six or a nine and a five or a two. We tend to turn those numbers upside down."

Dr. Wheeler gave Buddy a folder of instructions to parents and instructions to teachers, a workbook called Solving Language Difficulties, and the seventy-five dollars in Monopoly money she'd won doing subtraction problems. "Take your pick," she indicated the priced toys in plastic bags thumbtacked to a corkboard on the wall behind the office door.

Buddy handed the money back. "No, thank you ma'am, I got this book." She ran her hand over the bright orange cover. "I won't have time to play with toys."

Jane had found a small beauty parlor on Dixie Highway,

just south of the new Dadeland Mall. Betty's Hair Boutique, "We Curl Up and Dye For You," read a sign in the window.

A train crossing Kendall made them a few minutes late. Buddy leaned out the window to watch it pass, ducking in to bring all the new sounds and smells to Jane's attention. "Listen to that," she yelled over the rumble, her hair blown by its passing. She ducked in. "Do you hear the bells?" Out she went. Her finger tapping off each car. She ducked in again. "Can you smell it? Doesn't it smell wonderful?" Out she popped. The conductor blew the whistle at the 80th Street crossing. "I hear the whistle, hear it?" The caboose rolled by. A man was leaning over the back railing smoking. Buddy waved. He smiled and tipped his blue and white striped cap.

"There was sixty-three pieces to that train." She shook her head and watched the arms go up. "This is the most wonderful day of my life." She kissed Jane's cheek quickly, blushed and scooted back on her seat.

"Do you like it?" Jane asked, with concern, as Buddy studied herself in the hand mirror while Betty slowly rotated the chair.

"I think so." She took a curl, stretched it out then let it go. "I look kinda like Jason, but that's okay," she added, quickly, "he ain't as mean as Alex."

"Oh brother," Jane moaned.

"It'll loosen up after a few washings," Betty said

and lit a cigarette.

Buddy smiled at Jane, slid out of the chair and took her hand. "It don't matter. Today I saw a train and found out I ain't retarded. I ought to look different."

Jane sat down on the edge of the swivel chair, pulled Buddy into her arms and hugged her. "I'm so glad you're my friend." She held her for a moment then let her go and took her hand. "Come on, I've got a surprise for you."

"You do? What?"

"Ah, ah." Jane wagged a finger. "First things first."

Jane pulled into the library lot and parked under a tree. Hand in hand, she and Buddy crossed Biscayne Boulevard at the First Street light to stand at the base of the Biscayne Building.

"How tall is it?"

"Thirty stories. Let's see. About 350 feet is my guess."

"Wow," Buddy whispered. "What keeps it from falling over?"

"Well, for one thing, it has a steel skeleton anchored in concrete. Kind of like tree roots. Beyond that..." Jane shrugged.

Buddy tilted her head far back to look straight up the front side. For a minute she watched the clouds passing over until it looked as if it was the building moving and

not the sky.

From there they walked Flagler where the stores posted their sale signs in spanish and men gathered at windows on the street to drink tiny cups of coffee.

"What's that building with the pointy top?"

"The courthouse."

"Why are all those turkey vultures sitting on it?"

"No one knows why, but for years they have come every October and spent the winter. The courthouse is where they have chosen to roost during the day."

"Maybe they remember what was there before, and have just ignored the change, like Mr. Smallwood's dog after Mr. Ted died. Every morning --'til he died too --ole Jake'd go down to the store, like always, stay all day and come home in the evening, just like he was still walking there and back with Mr. Ted."

Jane stopped. "You know," she said, lifting Buddy's face up by her chin, "in some ways, dyslexia, for all the trouble it has caused you, may also be a gift. You may see things differently than other people but I have noticed that often what you see is probably the truth."

"A whale?" Buddy smacked her hands together and whirled in her seat to face Jane. "A real whale?"

Jane nodded. "This is the Seaquarium and they've had this whale since May. His name is Hugo. He's an orca; a killer whale. A small whale, as whales go.

"He's a killer?"

"Most whales eat plankton, killer whales hunt in large groups called pods and eat fish and seals, so," she pressed her lips together and shook her head, "typical of our apparently unlimited misunderstanding of the creatures we share this planet with, we call them killers." Jane slapped the price of their admission down on the counter.

Buddy, watching Jane's face, saw the same blend of anger and sadness that she had seen that first day at Stevens. She took Jane's hand.

A voice came over a loud speaker. "Ladies and Gentlemen, the dolphin show will begin in the Seaquarium's center tank in ten minutes."

"Come on," Jane said, "I wanted you to see a real dolphin show, not spoil your trip."

Buddy stopped and faced her. "You ain't spoiled it," she said. "Nothing you say or do could spoil it. The Admiral told me that when people learn important things, get educated like you are, that they got an obligation to teach what they know to other people. You're just doing what you gotta do. And besides, it makes me feel good inside, because you're the first person, except the Admiral, that ever thought I was smart enough to educate."

When they entered the cool, dark entrance to the center tank. Buddy stopped. "Was that a real dolphin?" she asked, pointing at the white dolphin mounted high on

the wall over a machine that made plastic replicas of dolphins and whales.

"Yes," Jane said without looking up. "That's Carolina Snowball. She was captured off the coast of South Carolina."

"Did they kill her and put her up there?"

"They didn't kill her on purpose. She got sick and died, then they put her up there. People came to the Seaquarium just to see the world's only white dolphin. They still want to see her."

They climbed the circular, concrete stairway to the top of the main tank. Buddy hooked her arms over the railing and peered down into the deep, clear water. Dolphins swept by as if caught in an eddy of their own making. She turned to look at Jane. "Do you think it's right, that they caught that white dolphin and brought her here?"

"No. I don't."

Buddy straightened and turned to face Jane. "I don't remember my mother, but I think she was like you. Inside," Buddy tapped her chest with a finger. "In here, she was like you. She don't come into my head so much since I met you. I think she must be resting better knowing you're my friend."

Tears filled Jane's eyes. "She must have been very special to have had a daughter like you." She turned Buddy back facing the tank, wrapped her arms around her shoulders

and put her chin on top of Buddy's curly head.

A young woman in a bathing suit climbed a ladder to a platform above the tank. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to the Seaquarium's Top Deck dolphin show." She blew a whistle and raised her arms. Seven dolphins sailed into the air, turned somersaults and disappeared again.

Buddy smiled, but there was no 'wow' left in her heart.

The show ended with one of the dolphins jumping twenty-three feet in the air for a fish. Buddy clapped, politely, and turned to Jane. "That was neat. Twenty-three feet, that's really something. I'm just glad Mr. Blossom don't know about this. I wouldn't want Annie trying to jump that high."

In the next show, Salty, the sea lion, played catch with his trainer by catching the beach ball on the tip of his nose, balancing it, then launching it back with a flick of his head.

"It would be more fair, and a lot more interesting, if the trainer had to catch it and balance it on the end of his nose, too," Jane whispered.

Buddy giggled and bobbed her head.

The trainer rolled out a sheet of red plastic, wet it then signaled Salty who came out of the water on one side of the raft, slid across and dropped into the tank on the other side.

"That looks like fun," Buddy said and smiled at Jane.

On the way to see Hugo, they walked the rim of the donut-shaped shark tank.

"Dad said animals is missing the parts of their brains that let them miss their homes and families. He said scientists found that out. Is that true?"

"Some scientists believe that. I think animals are just missing the ability to tell us what they miss and how they feel, and we conveniently ignore what they try to show us."

Buddy returned to watching the sharks swimming in endless circles in their pool. "Do you think that after awhile they finally give up thinking about it?"

"What do you mean?" Jane asked, absently.

Buddy turned to look at her. "The Admiral has quit thinking about fishing."

Jane put her hand to Buddy's cheek. "He'll be all right, honey," she said, impotently. "His collarbone's nearly healed, isn't it?"

"Yes 'am. That ain't it. He's got no fight left. Like a tarpon that's been wore out trying to shake the hook. By the time they get him to the boat he don't think about being free of that hook no more. He's just thinking about resting. The Admiral only wants to rest." She spun and put her head on her arms on the railing. "It's all my fault."



"It's not your fault. It was an accident. The fault belongs with the people who saw that river as a place to dump their trash."

"I'm so scared he's gonna die," Buddy whispered.

"Honey, I can't promise you he won't die but I can promise he will always be with you." She stroked her hair. "Remember what you just told about your mother coming less often because we're friends? Well, your grandfather will always be there like that for you, too. Whenever you need him, he'll know it and come to you. In here," Jane touched Buddy's forehead, "he'll never die."

Hugo, the killer whale, had been at the Seaquarium for six months. He was being trained but, as yet, there was no show. The faces of the people who came in were full, first of curiosity, then awe, then pity as they stood and watched him slowly move around and around his tank.

And as much as Buddy had wanted to see him, she found she couldn't bear the sight of him there alone in a pool that was only two feet deeper than he was long. The price he was paying was too much for her. She asked Jane to leave.

They were nearly home when Buddy said: "Hugo seemed to be lonesome, didn't he? He kept coming by to look at us."

"I suppose he is."

"Annie does that, too. How long will it be before the

Marine people take them away."

"January, at the earliest. It will take that long to finish the bureaucratic b.s. necessary to take his license away and find another place willing to take them. And if Lucie's really pregnant, they may want to wait until after the baby comes."

"I wonder if Annie and Lucie can call the sea up in their heads like I can call up Momma and the Admiral? If they can, do you think the memory makes it easier or worse?"

"Worse, I would think."

"Me, too. And Hugo. He must hate being in that little pool instead of the ocean?"

"Yes, I'm sure he does. It is wrong of us to take away his freedom. But maybe, if we try, we can learn how wrong it is from Hugo."

Buddy thought about that for awhile. "Jane?" she said, after a few minutes. "Do you get paid for finding out if stone crabs is being used up?"

She nodded. "I work for the state of Florida but they pay me with money they get from the federal government, tax money."

Buddy put her head back against the seat. "Did the Seaquarium have to pay anybody for Hugo or Flipper or Snowball?"

"No, they caught them or paid someone to catch them."

"You know what? I think the government ought to make

places like the Seaquarium give some of all that money they make to people like you. It ain't fair they can take them from the ocean and not have to pay to find out if they're using 'em all up."

"Did anyone ever tell you you're brilliant?"

"Nope." Buddy grinned. "That's one thing nobody ever told me."

Kirk was sitting on the porch with his feet on the railing, drinking a beer. He dropped them and stood up when they parked. "How'd it go?" he called and came down the steps. "Damn, what did you do to your hair?"

"We had a permanent," Jane answered.

"We did, huh? How come she's the one that looks like a poodle?"

"It will loosen up after a couple washings," Jane said.

Buddy's father stared at her hair as if he wanted to, but couldn't, look away.

It made Buddy uncomfortable. "Is the Admiral still awake?" she asked.

Kirk shrugged then, and turned to close the car door.

Her grandfather was not awake. Buddy stood beside his bed and whispered his name. He snored on. At his door, she smiled back at him. "We're dyslexic, Admiral."

Buddy stopped at the kitchen door when she heard Jane say "...it's not a form of retardation. Einstein was

dyslexic."

"Where does it come from?" she heard her father ask.

"It's inherited."

"I don't see things backwards and neither did Elizabeth."

"Your father does," Jane said.

Buddy coughed, pushed the door open and went in. Her father and Jane were sitting across from each other at the table drinking beer. She grinned at them.

Kirk was smiling when he turned to look at her, but his expression changed swiftly. "You look so grown up," he said, then to himself, softly: "Too grown up."

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## XI

### The Hurricane

The stone crab season, so far, had not been good and Buddy's father was short tempered because of it. She kept out of his way when she could.

It was Saturday. From the kitchen window, she'd seen her father come in early from fishing. It must have really been a bad day, she thought, retreating to her room where she stayed to work on her science report until she heard him in the shed, sawing wood.

Buddy felt safe in moving to the front porch to start work on the poster she needed of the stone crabs' life cycle. She'd been at it for awhile when she heard her father hammering something at the back of the house. She crept down the east side, pressed her stomach to wall behind the croton hedge and peeked around the corner. He had nails pinched between his lips. A stack of short boards leaned against the wall under her bedroom window. He selected one, fitted it across the one he had just nailed, and pounded it into place.

She pulled her head in and moved quietly back to the front porch. When she opened the screen door to go into the house to ask the Admiral why her father was nailing up her window, she knocked over the jar of water she'd been using to clean her paint brush.

She passed the bathroom on her way to the kitchen for paper towels and heard water running in the bathroom sink. She knew her grandfather was bathing himself as best he could because he hated asking his son to do it.

"Damn it, Buddy," her father shouted, "come out here."

She dashed to the kitchen, grabbed a streamer of paper towels, circled back and burst out onto the porch.

He was standing on the step with his hands on his hips staring down at the papers, paints, the over-turned jar and the blue stain on the wood.

"I'm going to clean it up," she said, dropping to her knees to wipe the wet spot. The cracks in the wood snagged strips of toweling. She tried to dig those out with the end of her paint brush but it was too thick.

"You're only making it worse. Put all this damn stuff away. I need you to help..." He stopped and turned away when she stood up and ran her fingers through her curls. "I wish you hadn't done that to your hair," he said and walked away in a flurry of blown leaves.

Buddy stared after him. Her knees, where they had pressed into the cracks, were red with raised white cords of skin in the center. "I can't help looking like her,"

she said. "I can't help it."

Buddy stood at her door and looked at the dark X the two boards made against her sunlit window. She tiptoed to the side of her bed, crawled into it on her hands and knees, and rolled herself into a ball. She wound her t-shirt into a knot and held it hard against her stomach. The curtains on her window flared out suddenly, then were sucked back flat against the screen. The crab appeared at the entrance to his tube, raised himself up, then scuttled to the side of the tank and looked out at her.

She released her t-shirt, reached over her head, and felt along the headboard to the bedpost for her red plaid cap. She got up, put it on, and slipped out of the house.

Only two boats were at the docks, her father's and one other. She paddled the pitpan out the channel and around the point before starting the motor. Outside the harbor, a gusty breeze chopped the creamy, pistachio-green water. It lapped at the low sides of the pitpan, splashing in and down her bare legs to swirl and roll around her feet. She slapped one foot rhythmically in the puddle as if she were keeping time to music.

On the back side of the island, the waters calmed but the warm breeze pressed her shirt to her back and puffed it out in front like wind in a sail. The clouds were long and round like rolling surf and they passed quickly overhead in a wide arc.

It was ten, twisty miles to Stevens. In the open,

wide stretches of the river, she could push the pitpan up to twelve or fourteen miles per hour, but through the narrow mangrove tunnels, she pattered slowly looking for birds, but this day, though they should be busy building nests, there were none. The silence was creepy.

At Stevens' Buddy crept up the side of levee and looked both ways. She was about to dart across when an airboat's engine exploded to life twenty yards to her right. Buddy jerked her head in like a turtle.

There were no customers on the benches of the airboat as it headed down river past her hiding place. She hunkered low in the willow stand and watched it make the bend in the river. She was just ready to try to cross to the cover of the seagrape when the other two airboats' engines whined to a start and whizzed down river in the wake of the first. Stevens' son pattered after them in a little dory, the sound of its motor lost in the roar of airboat engines.

When there were no people and no more boats, Buddy dashed across the levee to the culvert. She slid into the water and patted the surface with her palm. "Annie," she whispered.

A dolphin's blowhole appeared, opened, and blasted misty, warm air over her. Annie rolled on her side to show her grin, then rolled back and slid her dorsal fin into Buddy's hand.

Buddy put a finger to her lips in warning, then



wrapped her hands around the fin. Annie whisked her to the shallow end of the pond, depositing her, giggling soundlessly, in the muddy water, waist-deep. Annie ran aground beside.

The sun winked through the clouds one last time and disappeared.

From the far end of the pond, Lucie surfaced and eased toward them until she was near enough to touch. When Buddy put her hand out, Lucie nudged it with her snout then backed away, but slowly enough for Buddy to see the small, dry, white lump at the side of her mouth. She felt as if her heart had stopped.

Annie's head was in the water bumping against her hip. "Oh, please," she whispered, running her hands over the dolphin's slick, cool, gray skin, "not Annie. Don't let it happen to Annie."

Buddy found nothing. Relief, warm, as if the sun had broken out again, spread over her. Her Annie was all right.

Annie seemed to think so, too. She lifted her head up, then dropped it with enough force to roll Buddy over with the wave.

Buddy righted herself and splashed her back. "You want to play, huh?" She splashed her again then bellied into deeper water like a gator.

Annie wiggled herself backwards out of the muddy, swallow water and came up beside Buddy, slipping her fin

into Buddy's cupped hand.

The first pumps of Annie's tail sucked Buddy's legs down, then lifted them again, suspending her above the dolphin's back. Annie took her gently along the show-pool side of the pond, then faster and faster, so when they made the sweeping turn at the parking-lot end of the pond and started down the levee-side, she was nearly full speed, her tail pumping furiously. Buddy held her head back to keep the water out of her mouth. Her chin threw off a rooster tail of water like a slalom skier. When they started around the second time, Lucie joined them, on the inside, making a tighter circle.

When the rush of water against her chest broke Buddy's hold, Annie stopped. Their backwash rolled over Buddy, dunking her. She sputtered to the surface across Annie's snout and was carried toward the shallows at the cattail-end of the pond. When her feet touched bottom, Annie sank out from under her. A moment later, she shot into the air from the center of the pond and did a somersault. When she came up again, she lifted up on her tail and spun like a water spout. Buddy stood on her tiptoes, knee-deep and dripping, threw her arms out wide and spun like the dolphin. When Annie flopped back in the water, Buddy did too.

From the river, she heard the dory's little motor and the sound of men laughing. Annie and Lucy sank beneath the surface. Buddy stood and stepped deeper into the cattails.

From there she could see the three airboat drivers and Stevens' son leave the dory tied to the dock and march, single file up the ramp and across the lot toward the gift shop. She held her breath until they disappeared and wondered what they had done with the airboats.

The wind had been coming, off and on, in gusts, calm one minute, agitated the next. Now, for the first time, a light sprinkle of rain began to pock the surface of the pond. Buddy sat in the water with Annie nosed in beside her, put her head back and caught raindrops on her tongue. When it began to rain harder, she put her forehead against the dolphin's. "I had a wonderful time, Annie, but it looks like it's gonna storm." She kissed her cheek. "I guess I'd better start for home."

Annie followed her as she swam back. At the culvert, Buddy turned and stroked Annie's face. "My friend Jane is trying to get you out of here 'cause this is such an awful place to live." It hurt to even think about that. Buddy closed her eyes for a second. "I wish you could just go with me. I wish you lived in the bay where the water feels good and the fish ain't dead, and you could come to Smallwood's to swim with me."

Annie's smile was too much for her. She hoisted herself up onto the drain pipe. "I'll go now, I guess." She stepped up on the levee and turned. Her pale hair, rusty with silt, produced rivulets of water which ran down her face and neck. Everywhere, crooked little streams made

their way down her body, down her arms and legs, dripping finally off her fingers and feet and chin. The warm wind gusted suddenly and chilled her.

The dolphin rolled on her side and moved her flipper up and down.

"Bye, Annie," she whispered, raising her hand like a person making a pledge. She held it there for a moment then folded her fingers and let her arm drop. She turned and crossed the few feet of dirt and crushed shells that separated the pond from the river to the sea.

The light rain from the first squall line stopped, but the gusts, when they came across the open prairie, were strong enough to blow the pitpan sideways across the water. One blew her stern first into the sawgrass, where she stalled. Buddy raised the motor and pulled strands of weeds off the prop. In the quiet, she could hear thunder rumble. She shook her finger at the swirling sky. "Just wait 'til I'm home."

When she came off the trail into the river, she saw all three of Stevens' airboats strung on a line and lashed at each end to the mangroves with ropes. She remembered the men laughing and decided maybe this was a joke they were playing on Mr. Blossom, though she didn't believe anybody would have the nerve.

When the second squall line hit it brought pouring rain and stronger winds. Buddy was near one of the dead

end channels. She swung the bow toward the entrance, cut her engine and guided the pitpan into the narrow opening. Once inside, she pulled her cap low, humped her shoulders, wrapped her arms around her drawn-up knees and put her chin in the crack between them. The low, steady whine of the wind whirling above her and the creaking of swaying limbs were the only sounds she heard until the sound of a boat's motor was carried back to her on the wind from down river.

Her head jerked up. "Admiral?" she cried. "Admiral, I'm here." She pulled the pitpan, hand over hand, backwards out of the channel. When the stern poked out into the river, the wind caught her cap and blew it up stream. It hit the water, whirled in an eddy until it was so water-logged the wind gave it up to the current, which floated it back toward her. There was no sign of a boat. She waited for her cap to drift into reach, wrung it out, and put it on then started her engine and pushed back out into the river.

She tried to keep going. Where the river was narrow and shielded by mangroves, it wasn't too bad, but where it fanned out, the wind got too strong for the pitpan's little motor and she was blown into the trees or jammed against sandbars. The howl of the wind frightened her, the rain strung her arms and legs and she was cold.

It was nearly dark when she saw a small opening in the mangroves. She jumped overboard, and pulled the pitpan, stern first into the tight black, dead-end tunnel, then she

crawled back in and curled into a knot on the bottom of the boat. The low-slung branches creaked above her head and small spiders, knocked loose from the leaves and branches of the mangrove trees, went to work webbing her to the deck. It was wet and warm in the tunnel, and the wind didn't touch her. After awhile, she grew used to the howl and the frantic frenzy of the branches high above her head. She watched them in the waning light.

When the sound of the wind became a roar like that of the semi sweeping past them on the highway, she covered her ears, closed her eyes and tried to see her mother's face smiling out of the pictures in the shoebox. But she couldn't call her up and the roar grew louder, nearer. "Momma?" she cried out.

She pulled her cap down as low as she could and tried to squeeze the knot she'd made of herself under the pitpan's remaining bench. Her ears popped. "I'm scared, Admiral," she said.

"Don't be afraid," she told herself in a deeper voice.

A moment later, the hair on her arms and legs stood straight up, pulled at by the wind, and in the next instant, it felt as if someone had covered her nose and mouth with cold, dead lips and sucked the air from her lungs. The branches above her head cracked, splintered off, and crashed somewhere else, exposing the sky. Eyes wide, she gasped for air and screamed in terror as the black funnel cloud swept up river.

Over it all, Buddy heard another scream like an echo of her own. She thought for a second was the wind before she realized it was someone else caught, as she was, in this storm, crying out. She crawled forward to the bow of the pitpan and leaned out. Twenty yards down stream, a pale arc of light from a dropped flashlight was shining up from the bottom of a boat, she could see the tops of white rubber boots and a man's knees. She took her cap off and waved it back and forth just under the branches, low over the water. "I'm here," she called. "I'm here, please." But the wind carried her voice upstream.

The boat drew nearer, until, when it was only yards away, she recognized it as the dory from Stevens' and the driver as her father. He was doubled over, rocking back and forth with his arms locked over his head.

"Daddy. Daddy," she cried, scrambled off the bow and dropped into the water.

Kirk's head jerked up when Buddy grabbed onto the side of the dory. In the glow from the flashlight, she could see that his eyes were red and swollen. Blood from a gash on his forehead washed down his left cheek and neck, staining his demin shirt. "Daddy, I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't know a storm was coming."

"Thank God," he cried, grabbing her wrist. "The tornado. Oh, thank God. I thought I'd lost you too."

He leaned toward her but before he could lift her into the dory which was still moving slowly upstream, it passed

over a tangle of branches snagging her legs as if the river itself was trying to claim her, tear her back from her father.

"Daddy," she cried out as the boat moved on. His grip on her wrist was painfully tight and her arm stretched so far it felt as if it would come loose from its socket. She tried to kick her feet free but only managed to stop the dory and swing it around in the instant before her wet hand slid out of her father's and she went under.

It was silent and black as death beneath the surface. Overcome with panic, she flailed blindly until her hands struck mud. She gasped in surprise, swallowing water and choking before she realized she was facing down and twisted the other direction to force her hand out into the wind.

Her father had jumped overboard. A second after her hand broke the surface, he caught her under each of her arms and lifted her and the tangle of tree branches into the air. He pulled her close and crushed her to his chest. "Forgive me, please," he whispered against her ear. Warm tears struck her shoulder.

After her father snapped away the branches that clung to her feet, he waded, carrying her, to the dory which had been blown aground on a sandbar. Kirk pulled it off and physically pointed it toward home. At the tunnel where Buddy had wedged the pitpan, her father went over the side again to lash it with a rope to the mangroves.

The river offered some protection from the high winds,



giving a false sense of the storm. Where the river met the bay, huge waves rolled in, foam and spray filled the air so much so they could not see Chokoloskee. Her father made a sweeping turn back into calmer water.

Buddy, shouting to make herself heard, pointed to the shellmound that rose up behind the old cistern near the first bend in the river. Together they carried the dory up through the white mangroves to the top, turned it on its side against a tree and crawled beneath it.

Her father wrapped his arms around her again, pressing her head to his chest. "Try to sleep," he said, against her ear.

It was more the silence than the light of dawn that woke her. She found herself tucked into the s-curve of her father's body, as if she'd been sitting in his lap and they had fallen over. His right arm was across her shoulders, his other arm was her pillow.

She carefully lifted his arm and crawled out from under the dory, stood and stretched.

The gronk-call of the Great Blue heron she scared woke him. "How's it look out there?" he asked, rubbing the print of her head on his arm.

"Bay's still a little choppy." She squatted down in front of him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, taking her hand and touching the bruise on her wrist.

She nodded.

"I thought I'd lost you last night," he said, softly, keeping his head down. "When I found your boat gone and knew I'd let you go off without knowing about the storm I...I was terrified." He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "Stevens' said he hadn't seen you, but the top of that pipe under the seagrape was still wet where you'd climbed out after swimming with your dolphin. I borrowed the dory thinking I could catch up."

"You almost did," she said. "I was in tunnel sitting out a squall when you passed the first time."

That familiar pained look crossed his face. "Please forgive me," he said, and it sounded as if he meant he was sorry for not finding her then. But she knew that wasn't what he meant at all. Buddy knew, and for the most part had known all along, what he had only realized last night in the storm. That he loved her and needed forgiveness for having lost her in the first place. But he didn't know he hadn't. He didn't know she'd been waiting.

"There's nothing to forgive," she said, and for her that was true, even if it were not so for him. She hesitated then said: "Daddy do you want to talk about Momma?"

He did not answer for such a long time, she thought he hadn't heard her. "Daddy?"

"I'm to blame. Her death was my fault," he said, quietly.

"It was an accident."

"That's what the FAA said, but I took a chance I shouldn't have taken." He unfolded himself, worked his way out from under the dory and sat up, then shifted so his back was against a tree trunk. He reached and took her hand. "I should have told you before." He looked down at her hand in his. "You're just like your mother," he said. "There wasn't an unkind bone in her body. I have punished you for reminding me of her instead of thanking God I still have her in you."

Tears filled Buddy eyes. Her father wiped the one that rolled down her cheek away with his thumb.

"It was October 1960," he said, finally, "our fifth wedding anniversary. You'd just turned four. We left you with Mom and Dad so we could go to Las Vegas for a second honeymoon.

"We'd been there three days when I read about the hurricane," he said, put his head back against the trunk of the tree and shut his eyes. "I can still see the headline. 'Donna kills 110 in Puerto Rico'." Kirk looked at her. "It was headed for the Gulf Coast of Florida," he said. "You know your grandfather wouldn't leave Chokoloskee for a hurricane, any hurricane."

Buddy knew that was true and nodded.

"But they were calling this the storm of the century. Your mother and I packed up and caught the all-nighter to Tampa where I had left my plane.

"By the time we got there, the eye of hurricane was south of Long Key but the winds were a hundred miles an hour. I decided it was still far enough away for us to at least make Ft. Myers or Naples. If it got too bad, we'd drop down in one or the other and rent a car. You see?" he said, looking at her, his brows knitted, hands lifted, palms up. "I was only thinking about the winds from the hurricane. I...I should have know..." His eyes pleaded for her to say something, but she didn't know what to say. She looked down at her own hands in her lap.

After long moments of silence, he went on. "The winds, when we go east of Ft. Myers were light, only strong enough to bounce and sway us a little. I thought we were home free," he said. "I thought we'd make it. I was teasing your mother because she was holding my arm so tight."

Kirk had covered his drawn-up knees with his hand, now his fingers began to knot and unknot. "I called her a coward," he said. "Told her if she was too chicken to go on we could land on the gravel strip at Immokolee and rent a tractor." He closed his eyes again. "She started laughing. Your laugh has always reminded me of her in those last moments," he whispered.

Buddy suddenly felt with all her heart that she did not want to hear the rest, but instead she reached and put her hand over his.

"I heard the roar," he said, softly, "but your mother

saw it before I did and screamed. It was a tornado, like last night, spawned by the hurricane. In an instant we were spinning upward in its center, then a second later, we were upside-down on the outside of it, with the engine dead, plummeting. The next thing I knew we were right-side-up in a cypress stand.

"We were alive when we hit. Your mother squeezed my hand." He lifted Buddy's hand and stared at it.

Buddy felt herself quivering inside, and where their shoulders touched, she could feel him tremble. His face became pinched like she'd seen it so many times when he had looked at her, then he began to weep. "I brought her hand up to my lips and turned to smile at her. She was crying," he said, "and her lips were moving." He put his head back. "Her eyes," he moaned, "her eyes. She was so scared."

Buddy, with an urge to run, had gotten up. She was on one knee, the other leg raised as if she could dart away in time. "What happened, Daddy?" she whispered, then held her breath.

Her father folded in half and sobbed. "A limb had broken out her window. A branch was through her throat."

Buddy threw her arm across her eyes. "Oh, Momma," she cried.

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## XII

### The Science Report

Kirk scrawled a note on a piece of Buddy's notebook paper and sent it with her when she went the final time to Jane's to finish her report.

Jane burst out laughing. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's an invitation to have Thanksgiving dinner with you. That's very nice. I'm not laughing at that. But it says at the bottom, 'If you have a special recipe for turkey, it would make a nice change.'"

"It sure would," Buddy laughed. "We ain't never had any turkey we could chew."

"Well, I still have all my own teeth, I'll be brave and accept the invitation. However, I don't know anything about cooking turkeys. But tell him thanks and, though I bet he already suspects this, I'm a great potato-masher."

Early Thanksgiving morning Buddy covered their red formica kitchen table with a white sheet. She set a place for Jane at the end opposite the Admiral, and she made sure all Jane's silverware had the same patterned handles. From

her grandmother's old recipe box, she took four blank but yellowed cards, folded them in half and carefully wrote each of their names on one to mark their places at the table. In the center, where the turkey would go, she cut and laid a circle of seagrape branches leaving a space just the right size for the platter.

She borrowed candle holders from Iris, then went back to see if she had any spare candles. She chose two used green ones because they would look nice with the seagrape leaves, and burned the longer one until they were the same height.

Kirk was at the stove when Jane arrived. Though she parked near the kitchen door, Buddy went out the front to greet her and brought her in through the living room then led her into the kitchen.

Jane smiled at Kirk and shook his hand, but when she saw the table, her place card, and the rose from Iris' garden on her plate, Jane's face went soft and tears welled in her eyes for a moment before she blinked them back. "Thank you," she whispered, and hugged Buddy. "I've never felt so welcome."

"You're the first friend I've ever had to dinner," Buddy said, softly, and hugged her back.

Kirk took the potato-masher from a drawer and handed it to Jane. "I was told this is your speciality," he said, smiled, and jerked his thumb toward the pot on the stove. "Do a good job, the potatoes may be the only part of this

meal we can chew."

"I'll get the Admiral," Buddy said, backing toward the door. She stopped when they turned to their jobs: Jane to the potatoes, Kirk to the cornbread which was struck to the pan. Buddy was still watching when Jane glanced at him in his struggle to bring even one chunk out whole. "Looks like it would be easier to cut the pan away," she said.

When her father laughed, Buddy released the fingers she had crossed behind her back, grinned, and left the kitchen.

"Well, will you look at this," the Admiral said, when Buddy wheeled him to his place.

She blushed.

"We ain't never eaten as fancy as this," he said, and winked at Jane.

"Now that we're all here," Jane said, "I have something for each of you." She went into the living room for the bag she'd left on a chair. From it she pulled a bottle of wine for Kirk, good wine, which she must have driven to Naples to buy, because there was no good wine any nearer. For the Admiral, she had framed the picture she'd taken of Buddy leaning over the railing at the Seaquarium, nose to nose with Hugo.

"And I brought this for you." She handed Buddy a soft, poorly wrapped package. "I thought it would match the skirt you wore to Miami."



Buddy opened it, carefully. The red, v-neck cardigan was folded so the monogram, EM, in curly letters just below the left shoulder was the first thing she saw.

Jane smiled at her. "It fits you now," she said, and Buddy knew she meant she'd grown into her name.

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A week later, early on the day of her science report, Buddy went to the Admiral's door and rapped softly. When there was no answer, she opened it a crack and slid in.

His room smelled of tinkle, closed-up and stale, like it had before her grandmother died. That was all Buddy remembered about Winona, the smell of her room while she was dying. Before she woke him with his breakfast, she emptied the urinal, opened the blinds and the windows and turned off the light on his dresser. When he said he wanted to hear her science report and would eat later, she collected every pillow in the house and packed them behind him so he was sitting up like a real audience.

When she was done she closed her notebook.

"That was wonderful," the Admiral said and applauded by slapping the top of his nightstand. "I didn't know none of those things about stone crabs," he shifted one of the pillows, "and I been catching and eating 'em for sixty years."

"I'm still awful nervous, Admiral."

"I know, honey, that's natural, but I'm telling you

that there will be the best report of any of 'em. You just wait. Now stand up and let me see how pretty you look." He made circles in the air with his finger.

She got out of his wheelchair and turned all the way around once. The skirt and blouse were the ones she had borrowed to wear to Miami. Over the blouse she wore her new red sweater.

Buddy faced the mirror on his dresser, straightened the long bow at her throat, traced the initials on her sweater with her index finger, then turned with her shoulders back and her chin high and grinned at her grandfather. The curl had loosened; her hair looked longer and formed a fuzzy pale circle around her tanned face and dark eyes.

The Admiral took the picture Jane had given him of Buddy and Hugo from his nightstand and held it out, comparing them. "You're even prettier than this picture." He pressed it to his chest and shaded his eyes. "The room's glowing, you're so pretty."

"Oh, Admiral." She blushed.

He held his arms out to her. "Knock'em dead, baby. Knock'em dead."

Kirk siphoned most of the water in Osceola's tank into a bucket, then put the aquarium on the floor of the truck. He put the bucket in back and a coil of plastic tubing on the seat between them. Before starting the engine, he reached over and squeezed Buddy's shoulder. "You look

beautiful," he said, and started the engine. When he turned to back out, he put his foot on the brake, reached and lifted her chin. "As beautiful as your mother."

Buddy leaned across the tubing to kiss his cheek.

Her father cleared his throat and took his foot off the brake. "Jane said she would like to sit in while you give your report. Would you mind?"

"I was hoping she could." Buddy smiled down at Osceola then turned to grin at her reflection in the window.

After introducing Jane to the class, Ruth Daniels did as she had promised and called on Buddy so she wouldn't have to sit and grow more nervous through other reports.

From her corner in the back, Buddy looked at Jane sitting in the desk she'd separated from the others and dragged up beside Miss Daniels'. Her face was expressionless, but Buddy felt her eyes lift her, hold her steady, then balance her as she came slowly to the front of the room.

When she passed Alex's desk, he leaned over and whispered something to Jason. Muffled giggles erupted.

Buddy saw Jane's jaws tighten and her eyes narrow, but they did not leave Buddy's face.

At the corner of Miss Daniels' desk, still holding Jane's eyes, Buddy stopped and put her hand on the rim of Osceola's tank. As if dropping the safety line, she closed

her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and turned to face the class. Sunlight poured in the high windows along the front wall, warming Buddy's head and shoulders.

The children squirmed, grinning and whispering to each other, expectantly, like an audience before a performance. Miss Daniels' chair scraped back. The room grew quiet, except for Alex's last words to Timmy. "Dumb Buddy looks like a dandelion."

The class snickered.

Buddy's shoulders sagged and she lowered her head.

Jane's fingernail tapped the desk top. Buddy glanced at her, and saw her straighten slowly in her desk and lift her head, chin held high. Buddy did the same.

"Elizabeth Martin on stone crabs," Miss Daniels announced, and sat down.

"My, my report is on stone crabs," Buddy whispered.

"A little louder," Miss Daniels said, gently.

"My report is on stone crabs," she repeated, her eyes cast down, her toes, bound in socks, working inside her sandals. "When stone crab eggs hatch, they don't look like baby crabs. They come out as little squiggly things that float in the water." She held up a drawing and pointed to the top figure. "These is --are called the lar..." Buddy looked at the ceiling, not at Jane. "Larvae," she said, suddenly. "These larvae keep changing shape." She drew her finger down the row of drawings. "Six times. These are called larvae stages. Larval stages," she corrected.

"The larvae float in on the tides and do their changing around the mangrove roots where they are food," she put the poster down, "for snook, trout," she ticked them off on her fingers, "redfish, mullet, jack and grouper. Stone crab larvae is at the bottom of the food chain Miss Daniels told us about.

"Nothing eats full grown crabs except octopuses and us. Conchs can get them when they are in a trap.

"To make sure stone crabs ain't extinct when we're grown, we need to protect the females with eggs, keep the males out of the sun and wet when they are in the fish boxes, and be careful how we break the claws off.

"Osceola here had one claw snapped off at what Miss Conroy calls the...I've forgotten," she told the class and looked at Jane.

Jane nodded and turned to the class. "It's called the fracture plane. It's where the claw releases naturally without causing a wound."

"That's right," Buddy said. "His other claw was twisted off and his meat showed. If I hadn't kept my thumb over it he'd have bled to death. Their blood ain't red," she added. "It's clear and sticky."

Buddy tapped the side of the tank. Osceola came to the end of the tube, looked up at her then disappeared again.

"He's scared of everybody but me," she explained, pushed her sleeve up, reached in, tipped Osceola out,

caught him as he scuttled across the tank, and held him up for them to see.

"The claw that got twisted off had to heal first." She tapped the left one. "So the little claws he's growing is different sizes. They're under this clear cover, so he can't pinch 'til he molts."

"Let me see," Belinda said.

Buddy, holding one hand under Osceola so he didn't drip on the floor, walked the aisles showing him to the ones who wanted to see. Alex looked away when she passed.

When she came around to Miss Daniels' desk, she carefully put him back in his tank. The class giggled when he scuttled across the sand, darted into the tube, crept back to the opening for a peek, then jerked himself out of sight.

Miss Daniels clapped her hands together. Jane joined in, as did all the children, except Alex, and Timmy after Alex hit him. "That was wonderful. Exactly what I wanted." She stood up. "Congratulations, honey," she said, softly.

When the bell rang for lunch, Belinda leaned toward Buddy, and said: "You want to eat lunch with me and Lisa?"

On the way out, Buddy stopped beside Jane. The girls went on to the door. Buddy stared at them as they stood huddled together, whispering. "Nobody ever wanted to sit with me before," she said, turning to Jane. "Now they're standing there waiting for me." She shook her head in disbelief.

"People like winners," Jane said and grinned.

Buddy stood on tiptoe and kissed Jane's cheek. "Thank you."

Jane nodded toward the girls. "Go on with your new friends."

"They ain't friends yet." Buddy said, glancing at them over her shoulder. "They never waited for me before, when I was wishing someone would."

"But they are waiting now, honey, and that's the beginning of friendship."

Lisa and Belinda followed her across the lunch room, but hesitated when Buddy put her tray down at the table with Naomi and Larry. Naomi smiled.

"Don't you want to sit by the window with Megan and Pam?" Belinda asked.

Buddy hadn't thought about it. "Sure," she said, stood up, then stopped. Naomi had lowered her head. Buddy sat back down. "You go ahead," she said to Belinda. "I think I'll stay here."

Belinda and Lisa looked at each other, shrugged, and put their trays down.

From the corner of her eye, Buddy saw Alex, Timmy and Jason, in a giggling knot, moving toward her. Alex stopped at the end of the table, grinned at her, then put his plate down and pushed it toward her.

For a moment Buddy couldn't face the truth of what

he'd done. She couldn't look down, couldn't take her eyes off Alex's face. He was laughing so hard, tears ran down his cheeks.

"No, please, no," she whispered before she let her eyes drop. The pain of the sight of Osceola dead was as sharp as a knife driven into her very soul. The noise of the children laughing and talking roared in her ears. She began to scream, and scream over and over, before finally lifting him to her cheek and rocking with him, gently.

She lifted her head only when Jane broke through the crowd. "Help me," she sobbed, lifting Osceola's steaming body up to her.

Jane shoved children aside, grabbed the crab out of Buddy's hand and poured someone's cold milk over the blisters on her palms, then pressed the cool, wet glass to the fiery print his shell had made on her cheek. "That son-of-a-bitch," she murmured, folding Buddy into her arms and rocking her. "That son-of-a-bitch."

Ruth Daniels dropped her hands away from her tear-streaked face and whirled on Alex, who tried to back away. No one behind him moved.

Buddy saw Coach Johnson snatch Alex out of Ruth Daniels' closing hands. Alex tried to squirm free of Mr. Johnson's grip. "If you don't hold still, I'll rip your arm off," Johnson snarled, jerking Alex so hard his neck snapped.

Teachers began moving the children away. But the ones



at the back, who hadn't seen what had happened, pushed in now to take a look. An eddy formed.

"There ain't nothing there but a stone crab," a little girl whispered to her friend. "Is she crying over that stone crab?"

"I think it was a pet."

"Got little claws, don't it?"

Alex had pried the shields off Osceola's new claws, broken them off and put them apart from the body, on the plate, with a catsup cap full of yellow mustard between them.

"You're hurting me," Alex whined, again trying to twist his arm free from Coach Johnson.

Buddy wiped her eyes, first on one shoulder then the other. She stood up, trembling like a muscle that's held a weight too long. "No more," she said to Alex. "No more." Her voice was soft and even. And like a pebble dropped in a pond, rings of silence swept across the cafeteria. "Don't ever call me dumb again. I'm not dumb. But if I was, there's nothing so dumb it ain't got feelings and can't be hurt." She put her hand over the shell of the crab.

"Osceola trusted me, knew I wouldn't hurt him. When you took him out of the tank and killed him, he was afraid. He died afraid..." Her voice cracked and tears ran down her cheeks, "...like my mother." She lifted her head higher. "You shouldn't have killed Osceola," she said, then spread a napkin, placed his body in the center, laid

his claws on top of his shell, folded the ends over, and put him in the pocket of her red plaid skirt.

She stepped over the bench, came around the table to face Alex. "I'm a better person than you, and I'm smarter."

Alex's eyes twinkled and a slight sneer twisted his lips.

"If nothing else, I'm bigger than you are." She squeezed her hand into a fist and swung at his face as hard as she could.

Alex's head snapped back and blood spurted from his nose. "She hit me," he wailed, covering his face. Blood dripped through his fingers. He lowered his hands, wiped them on his pants and started to cry.

Jane drove her home.

"Admiral?" Buddy whispered from the doorway.

He was on his side, snoring softly.

The room was exactly as she'd left it just this morning: the blinds open, light off, wheelchair pulled close to the bed, one footrest up, one down, the way she'd left it when she got up to hug him goodbye. The only difference was he had put her picture back on the bedside table, beside the glass with his teeth. And the room smelled of tinkle again.

She stepped in, closed the door and quietly slipped into his chair. "Admiral," she whispered. Tears slid down her cheeks. "Alex killed Osceola, Admiral." She reached above his head, took his Mack truck fishing cap off the

bedpost, and put it on then covered her face with her hands. "Oh Admiral, I feel so bad."

He sighed, turned on his back and opened his eyes. She straightened and pulled the cap lower.

"Is that you under there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you crying?"

"No, sir."

He leaned over trying to see under the brim.

She tilted her head up and smiled at him.

"Did the report go okay?"

"It was the best one."

"I told you, didn't I. How'd they like that crab?"

"I let him go, Admiral."

"Ah, that's what the sniffing's about." He patted her leg. "You think he was ready?"

"Yes, sir. He was ready."

"Don't feel bad honey. It's the bravest love that gives freedom."

"Yes, sir. I had promised him."

"And he didn't look back, did he?"

"No, sir. Not once." She looked at the stain on the ceiling. "I'll miss him."

"I know, honey, but when something is born free, like your crab and them dolphins, then caught and kept, even by someone who loves and takes care of them, they still is only thinking about being free again."

"I never meant to keep him." Tears streaked her cheeks.

"Don't cry, honey." He took her hand. "He knows that now."

Before Jane left to go home, she and Buddy walked the road to Smallwood's. Buddy sat on the seawall, drew a circle in the sand by her left hip, then got on her knees and began to dig a hole. When it was deep enough, she lined it with the napkin, laid his claws in first then his body.

When she finished mounding the sand over Osceola, Buddy took her shoes and socks off, sat down, put her feet in the water, her arm around the piling and her cheek against it. Jane came and sat beside her, the grave between them. "How awful," Jane said of the pile of rusty engines. "Such a pretty place to dump all that junk."

"Oh no, they ain't awful." Buddy smiled down at them. "I like them and know who most of them belonged to." She stretched her leg out until her big toe touched an exposed edge of one near the bottom of the pile. "This was my great-grandfather's engine. Took Teddy Roosevelt tarpon fishing. And that one there," she pointed, "that was the first school boat's motor. It used to drive Mr. Simmons crazy by quitting whenever it got around other engines. Putting it here was Mr. Simmons' revenge, but I think it looks happy, don't you?"

Jane studied it, then shrugged.

"I like it here best when the tide is out and they stick out of the water. Waves come in and fill them up then go out again, so it sounds like they're breathing. I want the pitpan's motor to end here." She stroked the top of the pile with her foot. "But I guess they ain't too pretty to someone who don't know them."

"They're nicer that they were," Jane said.

Buddy ran her hand over the small mound of sand between them. "We all see things different, don't we?"

Jane nodded. "My mother used to say, there are three hundred and sixty ways to see an elephant."

"She did? Why?"

"That was her way of saying what you just said. We all see things differently. There are three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle. If the elephant is in the center, everyone on the outside has a different view of him. See?"

"Yes 'am. I see." Buddy drew a circle around Osceola's grave, then looked at Jane. "It means as long as we is all looking at it from a different place, we ain't never gonna agree on what we see."

Jane put her arm around her and touched her forehead to Buddy's. "We can agree it's an elephant."

Buddy stood by the back door and waved as Jane pulled away. She had just turned to go in, when Jane honked, put the Volkswagen in reverse, backed back down the hill and stopped. She got out and walked to the railing. "This

probably isn't the time, but I think you should know," she said, gently, "Stevens lost his license; Marine Patrol will move the dolphins right after the holidays."

Buddy looked down and dug her toes into her sandals.

"I'm sorry, honey."

Buddy nodded.

"They will die if they are not moved. It's their only chance."

"I know."

A first quarter moon broke out of the clouds. Buddy looked up. Her cheeks glistened in its dim light.

"Lucie has dolphin pox."

Jane bit her bottom lip. "It may not be too late."

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### XIII

#### Promises

Buddy was crossing the living room when she heard her father swearing on the front porch. She tiptoed to the screen door.

He was on the first rung of a ladder, painting the porch ceiling. The plastic sheeting covering the porch was splattered with paint, as were his boots, pants, shoulders and hair.

"Hi," she said. "Can I help?"

"May I...," he stopped, looked down at her and smiled. "I look like I need help, don't I?"

She grinned up at him and opened the screen door just wide enough to squeeze out onto the porch.

"Don't slip," he said, jerking his head to indicate a large circle of paint between the door and the ladder. "I hit the bucket with my elbow."

The ceiling was nearly done. Only an arc above the screen door was still the color of sanded-down green paint.

He looked down at her. "Jane tells me they are moving

the dolphins."

Buddy nodded.

"I've been thinking and I don't want you going up to see them anymore."

She bit her lip.

Kirk stepped down and opened the screen door. He dragged the ladder over and let the door flop against it. "It's going to be the crab thing all over again." He dipped the brush in the bucket of paint. "You'll be crushed when they move them to north Florida. And Stevens doesn't want you there."

"Annie does," Buddy said, softly.

"The dolphin?" Kirk asked, scraping paint off the sides of the brush. He looked up smiling with amusement, but it disappeared when he saw her face. "Look," he said, laying the brush across the top of the can. "I just don't want you to be hurt again." He held his hand out to her. She came toward him and took it. "I want you to stop being hurt." His eyes narrowed and his voice became bitter. "By me, or anybody else."

"I already love Annie, so not seeing her again starting now would be as bad as not seeing her after they take her away."

Kirk sighed and nodded. "You win." Then he smiled. "Try not to get arrested, bail money is hard to come by."

"What's bail money?"

"When a dolphin-lover gets thrown in jail, it's the



money her father has to bring to get her out."

She grinned. "My piggy bank's on my dresser."

He laughed and stepped back up on the bottom rung of the ladder. "I'm almost done here," he said, "and I'm pulling traps tomorrow morning." He leaned down to check the lead-colored sky. "This front will stir the crabs up. So how about helping me do the railing tomorrow afternoon?"

"Sure."

"Good. I was looking for a sucker."

They smiled at each other, shyly, like new acquaintances.

Buddy came out on the porch after dinner, headed for Smallwood's, but it was raining. She crossed the wet sheeting to the top step and stared at the dark, silent docks. A little gust of wind rippled the water in the channel and the puddles on the plastic sheeting. She raised her chin, closed her eyes and let raindrops streak her face, then she turned, took a couple of quick hops, and slid the length of the porch, like the sea lion at the Seaquarium.

The rain the night before had preceded a cold-front which had left a crispness to the air, a biting, tingling coolness. Buddy sat huddled on the milkstool in the stern of the pitpan. She kept the bow into the wind until she reached the calm shoreline midway between the bridge and the mouth of Turner River, then she turned east. Out of

the wind, it was warmer and the sky was cloudless and a deep blue.

She came out of the mangroves onto the river, then made the turn onto the prairie and saw the levee in the distance, looking like a narrow ribbon of dirt, an inch or two wide, hardly strong enough to trap and hold so much as the spirit of a dolphin.

Buddy thought of the hopelessness of Hugo, the Seaquarium's killer whale, separated from his ocean by twenty-five hundred miles --and then of Annie, only ten miles from the sea. When the wind came from the south, Buddy bet that Annie and Lucie could smell their home, smell freedom. Only that skinny mound of dirt trapped them.

At the north end of the levee, an airboat engine roared away from the dock. Buddy swerved off the open water into a stand of cattails and cut her motor. A limpkin screamed and lifted into the air like a question mark, its long neck and bill arcing, its thin legs hanging down. The airboat swept past her, its benches lined with tourists.

From her hiding place, she could see the roof of the chickee where 'gator hides were hung to dry. She left the cover of the cattails and poled toward it, through yards of short sawgrass, but out of sight of ticket booth on the levee.

Willows lined the entire length of Stevens' property, except the trash dump. Behind the willows, on the high

ground, was a wall of Florida holly. It looked impenetrable, but the stench drew her to the narrow, cleared path that led to the back of the chickee. Cast up in some willows branches, at the mouth of the trail, was Osceola's body, the skin shriveled and dry and wrinkled over his nearly rotted insides.

"This is as much as he cared," Buddy said, sadly, before hatred filled her heart. She tied the pitpan in the willows on the opposite side of the path from his body and waded up the trail. She came out behind the chickee, just as a whistle blew, and Stevens' voice announced the first trick to scattered applause.

The chickee was separated from the dolphin pond and the show pool by an open stretch of mowed weeds that ended at a stand of cattails. There were two splashes from the pool, some applause, then Stevens' voice announcing the next trick. Buddy moved silently off the path and along the edge of the holly. When she was opposite the bleachers, she bent low and tiptoed across to the cattails. The stand was too thick for her to see the water but she could see the hoop held high by Stevens' son. The whistle blew. Annie sailed out of the water and through the hoop. Buddy grimaced as if a pain had shot through her and turned her face away. When the applause started, she clenched her hands into fists and covered her ears, pressing harder when Stevens called his son Arthur Murray and put on the Lone Ranger's theme.

When it was finally over and Annie and Lucie came through the gate between the pool and the pond, Buddy was waiting, standing knee-deep among the cattails. She squatted down and called softly to the dolphins. Annie saw her, veered and swept into the cattails next to Buddy's feet. When Buddy sat down and stretched her legs out straight, Annie lifted her head and laid it across Buddy's thighs. Buddy draped her arms across the dolphin's head and pressed her forehead against Annie's just above her eye. "They're gonna take you away." Her breath came in short gulps. She was trying not to cry. "It'll be a better place. The water's salt and there are other dolphins and...oh Annie."

The airboat was returning.

Buddy sat up and wiped her eyes on her shoulders. "People can see me when they get off that boat." Annie lifted her head and Buddy scooted backwards, deeper into the cattails. The dolphin lurched in beside her, flattening their cover. "Annie, they're gonna see us." She put her palm under Annie's snout, lifted it and pulled some of the cattails free. Her fingers brushed across a small, hard, dry-feeling bump. Buddy clutched her stomach, dug her nails into her skin and rubbed the bump, before tilting Annie's head to see. It was white and cauliflower-shaped. Buddy threw her head back. "No please, please not Annie," she cried.

The airboat engine whirred and died.

Crying softly, she laid back in the water, deep enough to cover her ears. Annie pressed her snout to Buddy's cheek where the scalded skin was peeling. Though the burn itself no longer hurt, it was a pressure --Annie's skin on hers -- that she could not stand. Buddy moved her face away, and thought of stone crabs, remembered that when their shells become too small, tighten around them, give them no more room, no peace, they empty themselves of water, shrivel down until they can escape. That's what she wanted to do, to empty out, shrink until she could escape her skin, now tight and cracked. She felt as if her shell had failed her, broken open and let the belief that nothing she loved could die, slip out.

Annie shifted so her snout again bumped Buddy's cheek. "If you could only understand me," Buddy cried, in frustration, "I could get you out here. A dolphin at Seaquarium jumped twenty-three feet. That levee's only ten or twelve feet across. You could make it," Buddy rolled over to face Annie, "if I could explain it to you."

Annie jerked her head, whistled softly, and nudged her.

"I don't want to play Annie. I feel too bad."

Stevens' was into his long-winded sales pitch again. It had been a numbing noise chopping up the stillness like white caps. When it ended, she raised her head and looked across the pond. The airboat's engine fired up. Stevens hung the microphone on a hook inside the ticket booth and waved as the airboat pulled away from the dock. The driver

tested the rudders, blasting Stevens and rocking him back a few steps. In Buddy's mind, it toppled him and drove him, on his butt, across the parking lot and out onto the highway where a semi rolled over him. She had a wistful look when she dipped her hands and scooped water onto Annie's drying skin. It became slick and slippery again. Buddy ran her hand along her side, glanced at Stevens, waddling toward the gift shop, then scooped more water over Annie. "I've got an idea," she said, suddenly, getting on her knees and splashing more and more water on the dolphin. "I've got an idea." She kissed Annie's forehead. "I'll be back the night of the full moon."

That night she sat beside his bed in his wheelchair. "I don't see it as stealing," her grandfather said. "The State's already decided he ain't doing right by them. All you're planning is to move them early and to a different location." He ducked his head to see into her eyes, smiled and squeezed her hands. "I never seen such a love of something like you got for that dolphin. If she's sick with what killed the male, you gotta try, honey." He put his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. "I always thought I'd die at sea --pull a trap full of crabs, or a net full fish, and just keel over. But here I am, like them dolphins, trapped, legless, yards from the sea and no way to get there." He turned and looked at her, tears ran down the gullies in his face. "Show her the way home for

me."

"Admiral. Oh Admiral." Buddy wrapped her arms around his neck.

"My little girl," he whispered. "I'll miss my little girl."

"I ain't ever leaving you, Admiral."

"I know that. I mean if you get your dolphins out, you will come back all growed up. A little girl can't do what you're doing. Only growed love can set what it loves free." His lips were dry against her forehead and his breath was warm.

"I'd still be your little girl."

"That ain't the way it's suppose to be. To keep you my little girl would be as wrong as penning them dolphins." He stroked her forehead and lifted her chin. "You'll understand when your dolphin swims out of the reach of your hand, you'll know how I feel. You want her to stay because you love her and you want her to go because you love her."

Buddy suddenly realized he wasn't talking about her leaving him. Her grip on him tightened, her fingers clutched the sleeve of his pajamas. "Please, don't leave me," she cried. "I ain't growed."

"Honey, I'll ain't leaving you. I told before, I'll always be there..."

"I have to see you. To touch you. Please."

"Honey, if you ever need me and I ain't right here, you go to Smallwood's. I'll wait for you there, on the

seawall by the engines. Look at me."

She raised her head.

"I'll be there, I promise."

She buried her face against his neck and stroked his cheek. "I love you so much," she whispered.

"And I love you," he said.

She felt his cheek grow warm and wet beneath her hand.

Buddy was afraid to leave him that night. She stayed in his wheelchair, watching his pale cheeks flutter in the pale light of the moon, and listening to his breath rattle in and out until she, too, fell asleep. He woke her about two. "Go to bed, honey. It's late."

It took all her will to stand and walk to the door. When she reached it, she turned and tried to smile.

"My little girl is all growed up. Goodbye, my little girl," He waved. "Good night, my growed up girl." He smiled, then yawned. "Honey," he said.

"Yes, Admiral?"

"Please turn out the lights."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

She flicked the switch by the door and closed it softly behind her.

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#### XIV

#### In the Eyes of the Moon

As she had somehow known he would, in the morning he was gone.

Three days later, the entire town of Chokoloskee and most everyone in Everglade City came to say goodbye to the Admiral. They buried him next to Winona, in the cemetery on the shellmound, beneath an ancient gumbo limbo tree.

After it was over, Kirk and Jane stayed at the gate waiting for Buddy.

She came away finally but when they started the walk home, she stopped. "Please," she said, tears coming again. "I can't leave him there. Not yet." She turned and went back up the hill.

"Honey, come...," Kirk called.

Jane squeeze his arm. "She'll come when she can face coming," she said.

A week later, Buddy lined her pillows up under her blanket and took her cap from the bedpost. She crossed the hall and at her grandfather's door. Moonlight glowed

through the venetian blinds, casting bars across his bed and the floor. His wheelchair was folded and leaned against the wall in a dark corner. "I'm going now," she whispered, and leaned her head against the door frame.

She spun, ran on tiptoes to her room, and opened the jewelry box that had been her mother's. It was empty, except for her stewardess wings pinned to the torn satin lining of the lid and a gold slot machine charm in the felt square next to the Admiral's eye tooth. She pinned the wings to her shirt, put the tooth in the pocket of her jeans, adjusted her blinds so no light fell on her bed, then tiptoed back to his room.

"I got Momma's wings and your tooth, Admiral."

That's my girl, she heard him whisper in the empty room. Go let your dolphins go, baby. Free them for the both of us.

She walked in and stood beside his bed. "I'm scared, Admiral.

Don't be, the breeze through the blinds said. I'm gonna watch you the whole time. Just look up if you need me, I'll be right there like I promised.

Buddy nodded, patted the tooth in her pocket, then took the picture of herself and Hugo, and put it on the Admiral's pillow.

Before leaving, she pressed her ear to her father's door. Through the thick wood, she heard him softly

snoring.

It was ten to eleven by the clock on the stove. She took a flashlight from the drawer next to the refrigerator, slipped out the kitchen door and around to shed. Without using the light, she felt around in the right corner until her hand hit what was left of the roll of plastic. She lifted it onto her shoulder.

The docks were lit by one bright light near the cleaning stand. Buddy crossed through Iris's backyard, staying in the shadows until she was opposite her father's slip then she darted across. She boarded his boat on the port side from the seawall, crossed to the pitpan and dropped the sheeting onto the deck. From the trunk cabin of her father's boat, she got a bucket and a tow rope.

Sitting on her knees in the bow, she paddled the pitpan away from the docks, out of the channel, and along the shore until she was opposite Smallwood's dark store. To her ears, in the silent, still night, the little motor, when she started it, sounded like a jet taking off.

Once away from the island, the bay was a flat calm, and as silvery as a new baking sheet. The pitpan's wake sliced it into two halves. Twice, schools of mullet exploded out of the water in front of the bow in a shower of phosphorescence. At the mouth of the river, her approach disturbed a roost of ibis. They rose into the air in a thunderous, squawking protest.

It was bright where the river was wide and open, but

where it narrowed and the mangroves on either side joined their limbs in a dense tangle above her head, it was very dark. Red eyes appeared, then amid a rustle of leaves and the creak and sway of branches, disappeared.

"Raccoons," she said aloud, hopefully. She did not use the flashlight, afraid that when and if she really needed it, the batteries would be dead.

Spider webs, easily ducked in the day, stretched unseen across the black tunnel and ripped away when her face went through them. As she came out of the tunnel, onto the river, she took down a web that left a large golden orb spider dangling off the bill of her cap. She lifted the cap by the button on the crown, lowered it until the spider got its footing on a gunnel, then she broke the strand that linked them and put the cap back on her head.

Stevens' levee looked like a narrow white scar on the pale, still face of the prairie. A hundred yards short of it, a distance she hoped was far from anyone's hearing, she cut the pitpan's motor. When the engine went silent so did the frogs, leaving absolute stillness. Buddy, who was nearly always alone, felt suddenly mired in loneliness. She looked at the moon, now very high, its face dim and far away. "I hope you're watching me, Admiral," she said, wadding her pocket and the tooth in her fist.

As if on some signal, a gator grunted far off to her right and the frogs, as one, began to croak again. Before she could feel grateful, the scream of a frog, like that of

a woman, silenced the others. She shuddered. "A gator got it," she said, just to hear a human voice.

She poled the rest of the way, tied the bow up in the willows and jammed the pole in the mud for the stern line. She threw the roll of sheeting up on the levee, got the bucket, stepped out and up the embankment.

Before calling Annie, she walked to the chain, where a new no trespassing sign dangled. Two lights burned. One above the gift shop door, another, bright like the one on the docks at home, was on the pole above the speaker and aimed so that it only lighted the parking lot and shone out onto the highway. The pond and levee were darker for it.

The levee, long and narrow, no wider than a single lane road, was made of the rock and dirt removed to make the pool and pond. The wash of airboat wakes gave the river-side of it a steeper drop off. The pond-side had a ten-inch lip that sloped off into deep water.

She choose what looked like the narrowest point that was still a safe distance from the parking lot and the lights of the occasional car and semi. She cleared the path to the river of any large rocks then unrolled the plastic.

Unfolded, it was a good four feet wide and long enough to reach the water on both sides. Buddy dipped the bucket in the river and splashed it across the sheeting. The moon came into focus on the plastic and shone up at her. She bit her lip, glanced skyward with her palms pressed together,

hopped and slid from the river to a point three feet from the lip of the levee, where her feet went out from under her. She spun a half turn and slid toward the edge on her fanny, then went over the lip backwards and sank into the pond. Annie pushed her head against Buddy's stomach and lifted her onto the shallow slope. She up-ended, whistled through her blowhole, spun in a circle, throwing water in an arc with her flippers then pushed up beside Buddy and opened her mouth. Buddy tickled her tongue, bent and kissed her forehead. "I'm gonna get you, and Lucie, too, if I can, out of here." She stood and stepped up on the levee. Annie squeaked, slid back in the water and bobbed her head.

"Shh." Buddy put a finger to her lips.

She filled the bucket again and again, wetting the plastic until it was a glistening, silver trail.

"Watch me, Annie." Buddy skipped, slid toward the river then ran back to the pond. "Come to me." She bent and patted her thighs, then knelt and ran her hand back and forth across the sheeting. "Come up here with me." She backed away, toward the river. "Come on girl."

Annie made two small circles then stood upright on her tail, clicked and squealed.

"Please, Annie, try."

The dolphin dove and came up in the center of the pond.

"Come on, girl." Buddy walked backwards, patting her

thighs.

The dolphin disappeared. A moment later, she was beside Buddy on the levee.

Buddy pressed her hands against Annie and put her weight into trying to push her farther before she realized Annie had gone as far as she was going.

Buddy covered eyes with her hands and sank to her knees on the sheeting beside the dolphin.

Annie had come to a stop with her head almost dead center on the levee. Her flukes hung out over the pond. She arched her back and swung her tail, trying to move. The effort skidded her sideways toward the edge of the sheeting.

"Don't Annie," Buddy cried, pushing against her. "Don't get on the gravel. I'll get you across."

Buddy straddled her head and tried to pull her forward by her dorsal fin. Annie pumped her tail in the air above the water. It was an attempt good only in inches. Buddy got the bucket and poured water over Annie and around her on the sheeting then got in front of her and tried again until she lost her footing and threw herself sideways to keep from landing on the dolphin's head. She did not feel the gravel tear her skin.

"Don't move Annie. I've got a rope. I'll pull you over with the pitpan."

Lucie was upright a few feet behind Annie's tail, clicking and whistling. When Buddy came back up the bank

It wasn't until she was there with the rope that Buddy realized there was no way to get it past the point where Annie's neck rested on the levee. She flung the rope to the ground, jumped off into the water and tried to pull her back into the pond by her tail.

Annie turned her head and rolled a little sideways to watch, but otherwise did not move.

Lucie squealed and ran herself up onto the shallow shelf a few yards down from where Buddy was trying to pull Annie back into the water.

Annie answered, as if she too was frightened.

Buddy scrambled up, grabbed the rope, looped it around Annie's tail and knotted it. "Lucie, come help us," she called. She waded in and swam out with the rope. "See, like this." She held it up for Lucie to see and pulled it tight. "Pull Annie back in." She swam slowly toward Lucie with the rope in her teeth. The dolphin clicked frantically, jerked her head, sharply, and was gone.

Buddy dropped the rope, swam to the shelf, crawled up beside Annie and laid beside her on the sheeting. The moon, high and small, was straight overhead. "I don't know what else to do, Admiral," she said, then rolled and put her arm across the dolphin's head and her cheek next to Annie's.

In the pond, Lucie stood on her tail, watching, clicking.

Buddy thought of Osceola's body out back in the weeds, his skin shriveled. She didn't know how long Annie could



be out of the water before she dried too dry. She sat up. A dim circle had formed around the moon, like it got sometimes before a rain, but the prairie was suddenly brighter, brighter than it had been coming, as if the circle was like a mirror reflecting a candle. And though she had never noticed it before, the river ran like a silver trail as far as she could see. "I see, Admiral," she whispered. "I see." "I'm going home for help, Annie."

She poured bucket after bucket of water over the dolphin. "I'm going home for help, Annie," she said, then stepped into the pitpan, untied the stern line, and loosen the bowline. She refilled the bucket. "Please don't move. Please understand me." She emptied the bucket over Annie then ran and jumped down into the pitpan, started the engine and jerked the last line loose from the willows. Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw Annie lift her head and heard her frightened whistle, even above the noise of the engine.

She approached the point where the airboat trail enters the river too fast. To make the turn, she swept sharply to right and skidded into the shallows. The prop caught in the mud and stopped. She tried over and over to start the motor, but it was too muddy and clogged with weeds. She grabbed the pole and frantically pushed the stern free, then stepped over to the bow and poled toward deeper water, jamming it in hard over and over. She hit something solid. Limestone, she thought, in the instant

before the bow of pitpan rose out of the water, tipped up on one side and threw her out. The moment she went over, she knew she'd hit a gator; a big gator. She came straight out of the water, she believed without ever touching bottom, and flung herself over the side into the boat. There was a wide swatch of flattened sawgrass where the startled gator had shot out from under the pitpan. His wake still rippled away, swaying the grass in the moonlight.

Shivering in the bow, Buddy got the flashlight and shone it in a circle around the pitpan for the pole. It was yards away in an open area among some lily pads. She got the paddle and pulled herself toward it. She was nearly there when a dark form broke the surface near it. She flicked the light on and aimed at the black, bumpy mass. The gator sank slowly. His eyes glowed red on the surface for a moment, then disappeared. She turned the pitpan and eased it between the pole and where she had last seen the gator, then hunkered in the bow and waited. When he did not come up, she slowly lifted the paddle and brought it down sharply against the bow. The gator spun away beneath the surface, rocking the boat. Buddy snatched the pole.

Buddy went up the wheelchair ramp at a dead run. She stopped herself against the back railing, jerked the kitchen door open, and bashed through the swinging door

into the living room. She hit her father's door with a thud and flung herself at him.

He bolted straight up. "Jesus, what is it?" He grabbed her shoulders. "What's wrong?"

"Annie's stuck on the levee."

"What?"

"Annie, my dolphin. She's stuck on the levee."

"Damn it." He leapt up, pulled on the jeans he'd thrown over the chair and ran with her through the house.

"How did this happen?" he asked, jerking open the truck's door.

Buddy had stopped behind the truck. "We need the pitpan."

"What for?" He came around and stood staring down at her.

Buddy hesitated. For the first time she felt how cold and wet she was. "If we get Annie across, I'm taking her out to the Gulf."

"Oh no you're not."

"Yes, sir. I am." She straightened her shoulders and looked up at him. "Daddy, she and Lucie both have the same thing that killed Osceola. I don't want Annie to die in a fish tank somewhere."

"It's stealing," he said, but he sounded as if he wasn't too sure.

"No, sir. It's not. Mr. Blossom's the one that done the stealing. He stole Annie and Lucie and Osceola, just

the same as colored people in Africa was stolen from their homes. I'm just trying to take 'em back."

Kirk stared down at her, biting the side of his lip. It was then he saw the wings. "What are you doing with those?"

"I've got the Admiral's tooth, too." She dug in her pocket, pulled it out, and rolled open her palm.

Kirk closed his eyes for a moment then took her hand. "I can't help you do that. They still belong to him for another two weeks."

Buddy pulled her hand free, turned and ran the road to the boat ramp. Jane was the only person left. As she untied the pitpan, she heard her father start the truck and the gravel crunch as he backed toward her.

He set the emergency brake, got out, walked to the back of the truck and dropped the tailgate. "I guess..." he hesitated. "I guess you deserve more for a father than you've got."

With the pitpan in the bed of the truck, Kirk and Buddy tore up the highway and skidded into the Everglade Eden parking lot. Buddy leapt out and ran to the levee. There, in the moonlight, right were she had left her, lay Annie. The dolphin lifted her head and whistled a greeting.

Buddy jumped the chain and ran to her. She filled the bucket and poured it over Annie, then dropped to her knees beside her. "That's my dad, but don't be afraid. He ain't

like he was in September." Buddy motioned for her father to come on, slowly. She spoke softly to the dolphin, reassuringly as her father came down the levee toward them. Annie watched his progress with her eyes rolled, but she stayed quiet.

"Put your hand out," Buddy whispered. "If she doesn't act scared, touch her."

Kirk did as he was told and slowly moved his hand toward the dolphin. Annie lifted her head and tail, as if in preparation to swim away.

"It's all right, Annie." Buddy stroked the dolphin's forehead then took her father's hand and held it for Annie to see. She placed it against Annie's side then slid her own out leaving his against the dolphin's skin.

Kirk smiled a smile of discovery. "She feels like a wet inner tube."

Annie lowered her tail and head. When Kirk's hand crossed her blowhole, she squeezed a little jet of air through causing him to jerk his hand away. He laughed. "An inner tube with a sense of humor."

"Yeah," Buddy smiled. "She likes to tease."

Buddy poured water over and around Annie, then took the rope off her tail. "I want to pull her back into the pond."

"Why not just across into the river?" Kirk asked.

"Because if she doesn't slide across on her own, she won't know what to tell Lucie."

When he shrugged, she could tell he didn't believe Annie could do that. Buddy wasn't sure of it herself.

Kirk got on one side of her tail and Buddy on the other. They each braced a foot against the edge of the levee. "On three," Buddy whispered. "Ready, Annie?"

The dolphin turned a little to look at her, then straightened and lay still.

"I think she understood you," Kirk said.

"I hope she did. Ready?" she asked. "One, two, three."

For a moment, as hard as they pulled, nothing happened, then slowly Annie began to move backwards across the sheeting. When her middle was off the edge, Buddy let go. "She'll do the rest," she told her father. When he was clear, Annie whipped her tail in circles, cocked herself sideways, teetered for a second, and fell into the water.

Lucie swept by and Annie shot off with her toward the end of the pond. A moment later, they came speeding back. Annie veered off and circled toward Buddy, who waded out to her.

"Will you try again, Annie?" Buddy asked, stroking her.

Annie up-ended and bobbed her head.

"I don't believe that," Kirk muttered and sat down on the side of the levee with his feet in the water.

Annie let out a series of clicks, flopped sideways,

and disappeared. A second later, she rose out of the water and did a somersault in the air.

"Bet Stevens didn't know she could do that," Kirk said.

"He ain't ever gonna know either," Buddy grinned.

Her father helped her straighten the sheeting, then passed up bucket after bucket of water until it was completely wet and glistening in the sinking moonlight. Before Buddy went to the edge of the levee to call Annie, Kirk moved down by the ticket booth.

Annie came across the pond, popped up at the end of the plastic carpet and squeezed a long, shrill whistle out of her blowhole.

Buddy crossed her fingers, lifted them skyward and looked at the moon. "Help us, Admiral," she whispered, then to Annie: "Come with me, girl." She pounded her thighs, then turned and ran the length of the sheeting to the river. "Come on, Annie," she called.

Annie flung herself sideways and dove.

For a second, the pond where she had been, flattened like a scar, then a breeze rippled it, removing any trace. A moment later, Buddy saw the water hump like a mole trail in a garden, then Annie was on the levee. Buddy leapt clear of the sheeting as she swept past and broke the silvered surface of Turner River's black water.

Kirk's fist shot into the air.

Buddy jumped straight in the river.

Annie made a sweeping circle of the deep channel, upended in front of Buddy, twirled and twirled, spraying water in an arc, then flopped sideways and disappeared.

Kirk laughed and pointed toward a trail of flattened sawgrass. "Your dolphin scared the devil out of that big sucker," he said, of the gator barreling away in the opposite direction.

Buddy, treading water, turned looking for Annie. In the reeds A fin came up behind her and slide into her hand. She took it and felt Annie buck beneath the surface to gain speed. Annie dragged her around the channel, faster and faster until the water churned and Stevens airboats scraped and crashed against each other.

Buddy dropped off when they were opposite the sheeting.

Her dad was sitting cross-legged on the levee -- smiling.

Annie circled and swam back to her. "No more, Annie, we have to go." To her father, she said: "Keep down so Lucie can't see you, okay?"

He got up, walked out on the dock and took a seat on the edge with his feet in the water.

Buddy put her arm across Annie's back. "Call Lucie," she said.

Lucie was frantic on the other side. She had been clicking and whistling. Now, for the first time, Annie answered.



Buddy swam and heaved herself over the side of the pitpan, pulled its bow into the willows, then parted them so she could see the pond. "Call her now, Annie. Make her come with us."

On one side of the levee, Annie circled, clicking, whistling, and squeaking. On the other, Lucie did the same. Annie's calls had an excited tone; Lucie's sounded distressed. Annie leapt into the air. Lucie did the same. The second time, they jumped it was at the same time. They saw each other for a moment. When Annie came up again, she stood on her tail at the end of the sheeting and began to click, slowly with a beat between each one. Lucie swam in slow circles on her side, then stood upright a little to the left of the sheeting. She seemed to listen, but made no sound before she sank away and came up where the plastic floated on the surface. She butted it with her snout, then propelled herself forward until her head rested on it.

"Keep calling, Annie," Buddy whispered.

Annie clicked, fell backwards, circled and leapt in the air. Lucie answered, pushed herself off the sheeting, made a sweeping circle of their pond and disappeared.

Buddy glanced at her father. He was sitting very tall with his neck stretched. She signaled him with her hand to get down.

Annie appeared to do as her father was told and sank from sight.

Buddy gnawed at her bottom lip and scanned the still

choppy surface of the river looking for a fin. "There isn't much time left, Annie," she whispered. "Where are you?"

Lucie pushed back up on the sheeting and lay quietly. A sudden stillness came. The frogs stopped croaking, the airboats had ceased bumping each other and the breeze had died. Miles away, from the intersection of the highways, Buddy heard the gears of a semi shifting as he gained speed after turning onto 41 from the road to Immokolee. She glanced at the road then back at the river. Annie was on the far side, shadowy against the sawgrass. She squeezed one long, shrill note out. Lucie gave one pump of her tail and splashed back into the water. Annie sank just below the surface and started clicking. It was a constant even series of sounds. Buddy's heart began to pound. "This is it," she whispered. Her father nodded and gave her a thumbs up.

The rumble of the approaching semi drown out Annie's signals. The arc of its headlights swept across her father. Buddy grimaced and squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. When she opened them, Lucie was on the levee, in a slow slide, out of sync with the sweeping roar of the semi. She came to rest on the edge, her head above the river, her flippers inches short of the lip of the levee. Annie came up and pressed her face to Lucie's.

Her father started to get up.

"Wait," Buddy said. "If she gets scared and rocks

herself off the plastic, we'll never get her in." She sat on the gunnel of the pitpan then dropped into the water.

Lucie watched her, the eye Buddy could see rolled sharply back in her head, her body stiff, tail lifted. Buddy spoke softly, swam slowly. Lucie did not move.

When Buddy reached her, she lifted her hand and touched Lucie's cheek, stroked it gently. Lucie arched her back slightly then lowered her tail.

"All right," Buddy said, to her father without looking at him. "Come slowly."

When he got up, Lucie's head jerked in his direction and she began to click, frantically. Her tail whipped in the air and her flippers slapped the sheeting.

"Lucie, stop," Buddy cried.

But the dolphin's eyes were round in panic. She made a noise that sounded like whop, whop, whop and beat her flukes against the sheeting, trying to swim away. The thrashing propelled her forward the few inches it took for her flippers hit the sides of the levee. It crumbled a little beneath her. She threw her head up, then down, whipped her tail in a circle, and pitched into the river.

"All right." Kirk whooped, and slapped his thigh.

Buddy grinned, scampered up the side of the levee and launched herself into her father's arms.

He picked her up and swung her around, hugged her, then held her out straight like a wet, dripping rag doll. The print of her thin body marked his shirt and pants.

Kirk put her down, but held one of her shoulders and lifted her face by her chin, then he, too, looked straight up.

"Did you see that? Did you see our wonderful daughter?"

The eastern sky was graying.

Her father bent and kissed her cheek. "Take your dolphins home, baby," he said, and started toward the truck.

"Do you want to come with us?"

Kirk stopped and turned. "Do you still need me?"

Buddy looked down at her feet. "I just think we should finish this together."

He came back and took her hand.

Buddy had not realized how shallow the airboat trail through the prairie was until Annie balked at the first stretch of low water. She started into it, churned the deep mud with her tail, stopped and backed off. Buddy tried to reassure her, stood and called her, but she lay still, clicking.

The alligator she had jabbed hours ago, flickered briefly in her mind before she went over the side and waded, armpit-deep, through the muck to Annie. She bent and stroked her snout, spoke softly, then waded with the dolphins the length of the trail to the river.

Her father followed at a distance in the pitpan and waited while Buddy swam with the dolphins to rinse the mud off. His eyes were sad when he lifted her back into the

boat, but "I've missed so much," was all he said.

The sky was just turning pink by the time they reached the mangrove tunnel. When they came out the other end, the pink glow had crept across the horizon. "It's a dolphin-sky," Buddy said, and smiled. "Pink on the bottom and gray on the top." She looked for the moon, but it was gone.

The river opened up and the tide tugged, pulling them gently downstream. When they reached the subtle stretch of the river where it shifts between brackish and fresh with the tides, the dolphins sped around the pitpan, taking the lead for a few yards, then dropping back, as if unsure. Annie made large, fast, sweeping circles, slowing at the bottom of each arc to slide close to the boat, turn on her side, part her jaws in a deep smile, then shoot away again.

As they rounded the last bend of the river, the first white caps of the bay were visible. "There's home, Annie," Buddy said.

Lucie had gone way ahead but Annie came back again and again to circle and nudge the pitpan, bumping it with her snout.

"I'm going as fast as I can," Buddy told her when she stood on her tail and waited for them to catch up.

"What's the other one doing?" her father asked, pointing to where Lucie floated with her back arched high out of the water.

Buddy steered toward her then slowed as the dolphin

moved away. She shaded her eyes with hands and squinted against the reflected light on the water.

Annie zipped past Lucie, then swam back and made slow circles around her. After a few moments, Lucie straightened and began to move again toward the open sea.

Buddy followed, keeping the pitpan against the eastern wall of mangroves away from Chokoloskee. The dolphins stayed out in front, but on the course she had set.

"How far are you taking them?" Kirk asked. He was sitting on the only bench with his long legs drawn up like a frog.

"To where there ain't a speck of mud in the water."

Beyond the mangrove islands, out of Rabbit Key Pass, the water turned from pale brown to pale green then to blue. A hundred yards in front of the pitpan, just where the water turned the deepest blue, Annie and Lucie soared into the air, side by side. Two dolphins with three tails.

Her father turned. "What was that?"

Buddy stared, blinked as if to clear her vision, then grinned suddenly and jumped up, punching the air with her fists. "Lucie's having her baby," she whooped, and threw her arms around her father's neck. "We stole three dolphins."

For less than an hour, Lucie floated quietly in the water, her back arched, tail down. Annie floated between the pitpan and Lucie. Buddy stroked her with one hand and held her father's with the other.

When Lucie raised her tail, their hands tightened. When the water turned brown beneath her, her father kissed her the side of her face.

Lucie dove. Annie followed.

A moment later, they surfaced again. The baby, draped across its mother's snout, opened its blowhole and filled its lungs with its first breath of air. The air was heavy with the smell of the sea, not garbage, rotting fish and the sound of traffic. Lucie rolled on her side and looked at Buddy. Her baby bumped her with its snout then swung around and rested at its mother's side. Lucie drifted toward the pitpan until the baby was an arm's length away. Buddy slowly reached out until her fingers touched the tip on the its dorsal fin. Lucie lifted her head, gave one long whistle then, with a pump of her tail took her baby toward the open sea.

Buddy bit her lip. "Balance me, please," she said her father.

Kirk leaned a little starboard while she swung her legs over the port side, kicked and dropped off into the water.

Annie glided up beside her and stood on her tail.

Buddy reached up and put her thumb over the dry white bump on the underside of Annie's snout. The thumb that had sealed Osceola's wound and saved his life, for a time. She wrapped her other arm around the dolphin and laid her head against the pink folds of her neck. Annie flippers were

under her arms.

"Don't let nobody trap you again, Annie. You stay free for me and the Admiral and for..." Buddy turned and looked at her father. His chin was propped up on his fists and tears rolled down his cheeks, "...for all of us."

Beneath her, Buddy could feel Annie's tail move gently, keeping them afloat. "When I miss you," she said, "I'll close my eyes and remember how much I love you and how you loved me." She pressed her face to the dolphin's neck and closed her eyes. "I can see you Annie," she whispered, then let her arms float open.

Annie lowered her head, touched her snout to Buddy's ear, then sank away without a sound.

Buddy groped behind her for the side of the pitpan, turned and pressed her forehead to the gunnel. That's my girl, she heard the Admiral whisper. We're free now, baby. We're all free now.

Her father put his hands under her arms, where Annie's had just held her, lifted her into the boat and wrapped his arms around her. "She'll come back," he said.

"I don't think so, Daddy." With her head against his shoulder, she turned to face the sea. "I don't think I'll ever know where she is, but I'll know where she ain't."

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Buddy Martin, three months and one week into her



twelfth year, sat on the seawall beneath Smallwood's store and watched the water move like a cold breath back and forth across her long, tanned feet. She hooked her right arm around a piling and with her left index finger, drew circles around the small mound of sand beside her. She divided the wait for him between watching the horizon and the circles she drew.

She stopped finally, wiped her sandy finger on her overalls, sighed, and closed her fist around the tooth in her pocket. She put her cheek against the wood and shut her eyes. In her mind she saw her grandfather laughing and a dolphin racing in the bow wake of his boat. On an island beach, Stevens stomped up and down,, shaking his fist at them like he'd done when he discovered his dolphins gone. I lost two week's revenue, he'd whined. At the police station, her father, holding her hand and grinning, had said: "Sue me" and taken her home.

For an hour she waited like that, eyes closed, cheek against the piling. There was no sound, no breeze, only her toes felt touched by life as the cold water seeped in, seeped out, until she became aware that the blackness behind her lids had lightened.

She opened her eyes. "Admiral?"

Just above a mangrove island, as if seated in its branches, rested the full moon. Its pale, ancient face smiled at her.

"Is that you there, Admiral? I've been waiting," she

whispered.

THE END