

FOREWORD

Mac practically skidded the floatplane to a stop about 20 yards from my partner, who still drifted motionless, face down in the ocean. As I swung my door open and jumped onto the pontoon, Angie grabbed the pilot by the hair and thrust the broken bottle neck against his throat, drawing blood. “Don’t even think about touching that throttle,” she whispered with deadly vehemence.

I hadn’t hit the water when the officers in the Cuban gunboats realized what was happening and a cannon round struck the remainder of the boat Will had been piloting. The explosion threw a maelstrom of fiberglass and metal into the surrounding sea. A moment later the first of their 50-caliber machineguns came into range and bullets slapped the surface next to the aircraft. Angie tightened her grip on Mac. “Relax sweetheart, we’re not going anywhere.”

In seconds I was at Will’s side, flipping him over and looking for wounds. A bad gash on his forehead was leaching blood into the water, and his eyes were closed. He didn’t appear to be breathing but there was nothing I could do at the moment. I put him in a cross-chest carry and dragged him toward the floatplane.

The gunboats were closing on us – puffs of smoke from their 20 mm deck cannon heralded the whine of fresh rounds, the explosions ripping holes in the ocean around us, showering the Cessna with water and shrapnel.

I dragged Will aboard – pale, still unconscious. Angie pulled him into the back seat and began CPR as Mac hit the throttles. While the plane shuttered and bounced on take-off, a burst of machinegun fire stitched the starboard wing with the snapping sound of popcorn in a microwave. As frightening as it was, Angie never even missed a beat with Will. A cannon round exploded to our right and the aircraft shook from the shock wave, cantering up onto one float for a moment. Mac cursed under his breath as he fought with the rudder and ailerons for control. Finally, as the rhythmic slap of the water on the floats ceased and we became airborne (and I exhaled the breath I had been holding), three or four 50-caliber rounds slammed into the fuselage and shattered the rear window about a foot from my head. That time I cried out. There was another 60 seconds of dramatic tenseness as we rose into the darkening sky, but at that point it appeared we’d made it out.

I turned and looked back at Angie. She was still furiously working on Will, but I could see the fear in her eyes when she glanced at me. My stomach lurched at that look of desperation. I don't remember feeling more helpless in my entire life – I was watching my closest friend die. That sudden emptiness – the pain and the terrible reality – were overwhelming. Angie paused, tears streaming down her face. She began sobbing, hammering Will's chest frantically and crying out, "Don't do this Will! Oh God! Don't die, please... don't die..."

I reached back, I don't know why, and took my friend's hand. There were so many things I wanted to say, but my mouth was dry as sawdust.

I awoke with a start in the darkness of my room, a sheen of sweat bathing my face, heart thumping, breath coming in small, quick gasps. I had to still myself. It was a long time ago, a long, long time ago.

I lay there in the stillness for a moment or two, remembering, and being reminded of what a remarkable life we had lived – more luck than talent, that was for sure. Outside, the moon broke through a battery of powdery gray clouds and painted the room in soft chartreuse. I exhaled quietly and a smile began to edge out the tenseness around my mouth. Not only had we experienced extraordinary adventures, but we had been fortunate enough to share powerful friendships, dance in the rum-soaked moonlight in more exotic places than Elvis, and live through one of the most unique, absolutely spectacular eras of our times.

The late '60s, early '70s were a social anomaly – much like a two-week vacation in the history of America. We converted a symbol of war into a symbol of peace that would be remembered for generations; provided the first true blending of cultures in this country; and designated free love as a sign of the times – garnished with flowers and embraced by the newly braless. We nurtured rock music as it made its evolution into substance and power, and ardently participated in a garish, uninhibited, tambourine-accompanied symphony of communal living, drugs, and sex, all while undergoing a rebirth of faith that turned Jesus Christ into a superstar. It was a wondrous, brilliant, remarkably contradictory experience that provided a spiritual and cultural bonding like this country had never before seen.

There's no question that history is measured in eras, but within those same frames in time are geographic microcosms, creating their own unique flavor. During the '70s there was San Francisco, Denver, New Orleans, and dozens of other locales, each offering its own definition to

an extraordinary epoch. I don't know whether it was coincidence, karma, or just amazing good luck, but I ended up in the Florida Keys in August of 1971.

The Keys – haven of scoundrels, smugglers and pirates for over 300 years – a bastion for independent thinkers, benign crazies, adventurers, and visionaries. But the '70s brought a new sense of freedom and imagination, and The Florida Keys became magical, like Oz – rife with characters and experiences beyond ordinary vision. Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, or even Jimmy Buffett would have struggled to match the residents of that distant time.

CHAPTER ONE

Those Who Have Crabs and Those Who Don't (Metaphorically speaking)

My name is Kansas T. Stamps and I can say without reservation I have lived, loved, won, and lost with equal fervor in this lifetime, and there's nothing you could offer me that I would trade for the experience. I've been fortunate to have encountered a number of remarkable people with whom I have shared this journey. In my early days I made some interesting choices – not necessarily good, but interesting. I got married too early. She got to be in love – for a while, I got to have unabashed sex without entreaty – for a while. There were a couple of other notable relationships – first loves and first friends, but when I look back on the days of my youth, the person I count myself lucky for knowing was a guy named William Baltus Bell. He was my business partner and friend in what became a carnival of extraordinary experiences that lasted for almost a decade in the land of Oz.

Will and I met during our last semester at St. Petersburg Junior College, in English Literature – one of those electives you get when you're not paying attention to what the guidance counselor is saying. You're looking through the office window at the backside of the blonde in the hallway,

bent over her floor-level locker like a living, breathing, erectile dysfunction test. There are words coming out of the counselor's mouth and you're nodding, trying to keep the blonde in focus over his shoulder but the damned guy keeps moving his head. The next thing you know you're in English Literature.

The year was 1971, but I don't recall exactly how Will and I became friends – probably because guys are always a little awkward when it comes to establishing bonds. I think I remember us attending a couple of parties with mutual acquaintances and getting fairly snookered – that has a tendency to loosen up a soul and let personality show through. I had taught guitar for the last couple of years and was just recovering from a divorce. Will was living in a room at his parent's motel and working for his father. Both of us were looking for the beef in life.

We had a mutual penchant for the outdoors, particularly the ocean, and I recall we went fishing off the Sunshine Skyway Bridge one afternoon. As soon as the portable radio was turned on, the baits cast out, and the rods propped securely against the rail of the catwalk, Will lit a crooked cigarette with a sweet, green scent and drew deeply. Jimi Hendrix growled out *All Along The Watchtower* in the background. Will handed it to me. "Here, try this."

"There must be some kind of way out of here," said the joker to the thief.

I knew what it was, but somehow I'd never gotten around to trying it.

"There's so much confusion, I can't get no relief.

"Cool," I said, staring at it with sort of a first sex anticipation.

"No reason to get excited," the thief he kindly spoke.

(Hey, man, there aren't many bad reviews on this, just step up to the plate.)

"There are many of us here who feel that life is but a joke."

On one hand it was a lot less complicated than first sex. But this was sort of – illegal.

"But you and I, we've been through that, and this is not our fate. So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late."

Then I remembered that sex turned out to be way better than the best of reviews. "Gimme that sucker," I said.

"Outside in the distance a wildcat did growl. Two riders were approaching and the wind began to howl..."

We didn't catch much that evening, but it didn't matter. Everything took on a warm, decidedly amusing glow and I had more fun just trying to grab the baitfish in the bucket than I did at my senior prom. The sun bled into the ocean in a riotous chorus of Degas pastels that left me stunned and agape, and suddenly I could feel the pilings of the bridge come alive, vibrating through the soles of my feet as they fought the churning rush of the new tide. Twilight turned the green waters into frothing obsidian, and as James Taylor crooned about having a friend, we ate two entire buckets of "Mr. Chickie's Charcoal-Baked Chicken" under the glow of the yellow bridge lights.

Will looked at me with slightly glazed eyes and that infamous, crooked smile of his. "Don't get much better than this, dude." I agreed at the time, but it wasn't long until we'd both discovered that it did...

We were complete opposites in appearance. Will was tall and gangly with a curt, unruly shock of sandy hair and deep blue eyes. He had an easy nature and a clever, Steve Martin wit, which often led him to the nexus of any gathering (especially if alcohol or a little herb were added to the equation). I was short and stocky with long, almost shoulder-length dark hair, hazel eyes, and more of a type-A demeanor, but no less entertaining when plied with the proper personality-enhancing chemistry. We had this weird, cosmic connection almost from the beginning – playing off each other as if it were rehearsed, knowing what was coming before the other said it. We shared a passion for the mischievous, constantly looking for something to challenge our wit and whet our slightly twisted humor. We were benign rogues, Peter Pan pirates, searching for a sail on the horizon, a ship to board and burn, and as our two-year intellectual odyssey neared an end, we came to realize we simply viewed the world differently than those around us. They envisioned dental colleges, accounting offices, and brokerage businesses. We saw sails in the distance – and they carried us south/southwest.

A few weeks after graduation, Will and I, along with a friend of ours named Glen Fryer, decided to take a camping excursion to the Florida Keys. The trip was a hallmark for each of us, and it was somewhat of an adventure unto itself.

Will and I had taken a scuba diving course and received our certification in Saint Pete a couple of months before the trip. We both loved the ocean, but in the process we discovered that diving, for us, ran a close second to Mr. Chickie's Jamaican Chicken. We had purchased gear

and were looking forward to exploring the clear, aquamarine waters of The Keys. Our buddy wasn't certified, but had done some diving and managed to borrow some equipment for the junket. For Glen, a quiet, husky fellow of medium height with blond, curly hair, this was to be the last hurrah before starting veterinary school in the fall. He intended to make the most of it.

We left late one evening and drove all night, taking turns at the wheel. It was a long, eleven-hour trip down the twists and turns of old Highway 27, but a glorious, yellow sun rimmed the horizon and welcomed us as we entered Key Largo.

In each life there are a couple of absolutely indelible moments that unequivocally ordain a portion of your future – most guys will tell you those moments generally involve nice teeth and shapely figures. But as that weathered stretch of U.S. 1 arched across a limpid, blue-green bay bordered by mangroves, I watched a flock of egrets rise gracefully into the air – long, delicate, black and white wings showcased against the distant, gray and crimson morning clouds – and something inside me changed. As I savored the poignant, salty tang of the ocean and the mangroves, a fishing skiff turned out of a small cut and skipped lithely across the clean, clear water. Something clicked and whirred inside my psyche, and suddenly locked into place. It wasn't at all like experiencing wonderful and new – it was like coming home.

The first day was spent in an *Alice in Wonderland* montage of first-time sights, smells, and sounds. After breakfast at a little clapboard restaurant encased in red bougainvillea and yellow hibiscus we continued south, pausing here and there to cast a lure, or snorkel in the pristine waters, exclaiming to each other with muffled gurgles and urgent gestures as a kaleidoscope of sea life surrounded us. Rainbows of colorful tropical fish cascaded in and out of our reach, while grotesquely shaped and vividly embellished crabs scurried away from overturned rocks. Small, wary octopuses stared out from dark cubbyholes in the coral (an array of unlucky crustacean husks adorning the mouths of their lairs), and occasionally a bantam barracuda drifted in amongst the grunts and small snapper that gathered around to see if we might uncover a meal for them. It was heady stuff – a wonderland for real.

Toward afternoon we drifted into the Middle Keys. A boat rental was beyond our pocketbooks, but everyone said the diving off the bridges was magnificent, so we decided to take a shot at Spanish Harbor, just north of Big Pine Key. The waters of the reefs and the back country funneled into a shallow, crystalline channel that led to Spanish Harbor bridge (which was about a half-mile long), moving back and forth at the whim of the tides. We arrived as the

tide was coming in – the water was as clear as an aquarium. We sat on the seawall and watched huge green and red parrotfish picking a snack here and there from the underwater foliage while yellow-headed pork fish and blue angels floated effortlessly next to them against the current. All this was no more than a dozen feet below us.

A grizzled old conch was fishing next to us – no shirt, grimy, knee-length shorts, a faded Dodgers ball cap, leathered skin, and enough lines around his eyes to resemble a topographical map of Brazil. He heard us talking about diving. He checked the line tension on his rods, then turned to us with an appraising glance. “You boys ain’t seasoned at this, are ya?”

“Well, we have our diving certification cards,” I said a little defensively.

He spit into the slowing waters below us. “Well, that’s good. Take that with you so you have something to wipe your ass with when ya get in a dither down there and crap your pants.”

Will sighed, combing back his shock of blond hair with the fingers of one hand in a nervous concession. “Okay, we don’t know didly-squat about diving a bridge.”

Without preamble he began. “Bridges are great places to dive and tricky places to dive. The tide moves at a good clip most of the time, but when it’s ebbed at high or low, you got about a half-hour of still water before it begins to get a move again. When them waters pick up and near their peak – and it happens quick – they’ll wash you out to Hawks Channel quicker than the flick of a grunt’s tail. But the trick is to be gone before then and checkin’ your catch on shore.” He pointed. “Best place to get in is under the bridge, there, where all that cement and rocks meets the water.” Then he smiled – it was just a flicker. “Don’t mind Rufus. Now get going – tide’s gonna ebb in 15 minutes.”

We went back to the car and grabbed our gear, then worked our way down the abutment to the seawall that ran underneath the bridge. Shaded from the sun in the dim stillness of the grotto-like structure, we all stopped, staring. In the back of the man-made cavern was a structure of some sort – an old Maytag washing machine box embroidered with palm fronds and a variety of drift line flotsam. There were sheets of Styrofoam, ragged beach towels, driftwood, and No Trespassing signs – all woven into some kind of dwelling. Something rustled in the rear of the box. We all took a step back. The silence was punctuated with the reverberation of a car running over the bridge above. There was another rustle and a cough. A thin veil of smoke drifted from the nest and the distinct smell of marijuana pervaded the air. Suddenly, from out of the lair crawled a spindly-looking, light-skinned black guy clothed in a ragged, yellow Captain Tony’s

T-shirt and a baggy pair of khaki shorts. He had shoulder-length dreadlocks and weird gray eyes that looked as if he'd probably consumed sufficient pharmaceuticals to be listed in the "Who's Who of Experimental Laboratory Vermin."

"Hello mons! Hello mons!" he called with a warm, gap-toothed smile. "Welcome to you that you should meet me – gondolier of good tidings and grand messenger for the wisdom of ganja." He smiled disarmingly once more and bowed. "I am Rufus. May your life egg break cleanly and the great tortoise grant you a moonlit path to the sea."

Will, who was very quick and enjoyed psychobabble anyway, put his index finger and his thumb together, making the sign of the moon and drew his hand in a full arch across his chest. "When the eyes of beauty fall lightly on dawn's faint scent, the wind will smile."

Rufus' eyes lit up as if he'd just discovered a separated-at-birth sibling. Extending his arm, he made a peace sign, then reversed it and placed the two fingers against his forehead. "Only the clever blowfish treasures the darkness of the moon."

Will started to counter. "And the entrails of enlightenment are found only in the seagull's ass—"

"Okay, okay. Enough with the clever blowfish," Glen said. "Are we going diving?"

We sat on the rocks and donned our diving gear, while Rufus explained that he bully-netted lobster in the backcountry for a living, but he had lost his boat, which was sort of a temporary home as well, during a recent storm. He'd been living in his Maytag abode for about three weeks – a temporary setback in the life of a free spirit. Rufus wished us "great joy and infinite revelations" on our dive, assuring us that he would guard our clothes after Will struck a deal with him for two packages of Hostess Twinkies.

I'll always remember entering the sea and feeling that sense of weightlessness and wonderment. There was still just a little current. I gave my body a moment to adjust to the temperature, found Will and Glen to my right, then lifted an easy kick out into deeper green-blue water and drifted gently down into a world that would possess me for the rest of my life. There was, of course, the anxiousness of entering a domain in which you are no longer entirely in control, where life can be measured by the air you carry and the creatures you meet. But in moments I was immersed in the magic of it all – captivated by the silent rhythm of the tide, the

sway and cadence of all about us, and the movements of an insanely colorful, complex dance that I could only view with wonder, for I was a stranger in the strangest of lands.

We moved out a little further and found one of the grottos cut by the changing tides – a ragged hole perhaps 20 feet long, a dozen wide and six feet deep, with three-foot ledges worn back into the sand at the bottom. Fire coral flamed up in brittle fingers along the lip, and staghorn jutted out along the sides. All around there was a symphony of movement – snappers sailed in sleek schools with instant intuitive synchronization, and camouflaged grouper cruised confidently along the bottom or shared the deeper ledges with clusters of crayfish, scuttling for position in their hideaways. Indignant moray eels poked their heads out of dark, foreboding holes and bared their teeth like cats, and an array of florescent tropicals moved about or slipped away from us with practiced ease. Each turn around piling or pocket presented an extraordinary new experience, another vision from the underwater book of Alice. For the next thirty minutes I was mesmerized, immersed in a baptism by the sea, from which I would emerge changed forever.

When we felt the tide subtly switch and move toward the sea, we knew our time had passed. As I reached the shallow water of the shoreline, I removed my tank and crawled over the rocks, avoiding the sea urchins embedded in and around them, helping Will and Glen behind me to the dry, coral shore. Strangely enough, Rufus was nowhere to be found. We all sat there for a few moments, savoring the experience, watching the rising momentum of the tide as it coursed between the pilings, and eagerly trading the visions of our quest. The setting sun buried itself behind the bridge, only to reappear moments later as it descended beneath one of the arches, flickering gold and silver across the weathered concrete and the darkening waters. It was nothing short of magic. I looked over at Will and I saw that he was lost to the moment, raptured in paradise. I suspected that he was having one of his own indelibly ordaining junctures, without a shapely figure or nice teeth anywhere. It was pretty cool. He smiled strangely – as if a small revelation had just crawled up his leg and ever so lightly bit him on the ass. “You know, I like this place – I really like this place.”

I nodded, trying not to be too enthusiastic. “It’d be a far out place to live – if you could make a living.”

About that time Rufus showed up again, heralded by the rich, green smell of ganja. “Hey mons! You got Hostess Twinkies? It’s a very tired and hungry job guarding clothes!”

As Rufus bent down to help me with my dive tank, an amulet on a leather band slipped from the neck of his t-shirt. It was shaped like a pyramid, onyx colored, maybe an inch long. The last of the sun caught it and for just a moment I was certain I saw it glow – light up as if it had just been plugged in. “Where’d you get that?” I said pointing. Rufus wrapped his hand around it. “Family heirloom,” he said matter of factly, eyes subtly changing for a fraction of a second. He looked out at the graying horizon. “Even the one-eye toad has visions of truth when he squints at the moon.”

We packed up our gear and worked our way back along the coral pathway to the car. Evening was setting and the coconut palms leaned over the walk like old men, reflecting the last of the orange and red horizon. By the time we had gotten Rufus his Twinkies and loaded up, the trees were rustling silhouettes in the evening breeze. We said farewells to our Jamaican friend. With a half-eaten Twinkie in hand, he extended a final peace sign. “Cool driftings, mon. May you always nest peacefully amongst the soft down of life.”

Will and Glen looked at me, smiled, and we all returned the salute.

“Don’t take any wooden blowfish,” I said.

That night we stayed at a campsite on Holiday Isle, just north of Bahia Honda State Park – running water, showers, daughters of campers....

The following morning dawned clean and cool – the sweet, rich aroma of mangroves and sea blended with wood fires and sizzling bacon drawing us from our sleeping bags. For just a moment I lay there savoring it all – fluffy, cream-colored stratus clouds drifted indifferently across the soft blue sky, seagulls laced through the azure stillness calling to each other, and there was just enough breeze to caress the palm fronds above my head. It was like a Michener book (with the other fifty pages of the description torn out). I rose to a sitting position and glimpsed a pale, diaphanous moon still suspended in the other corner of the horizon, reluctant to surrender this glorious day to the sun. Softly, somewhere in the background I could hear a radio playing James Taylor’s *Fire and Rain*. I remember thinking if it got any better than this, I hadn’t experienced it.

Much refreshed, we set out for the Lower Keys for some more exploring, diving, and a visit to Key West – garrison of ganja, bastion of stunning beaches and bare breasts, and last but not

least, Duval Street; the dimly-lit cakewalk of music, liquor and liaison. It was heady stuff for young hormones.

After refilling our tanks at a local dive shop and getting a little insight to the area, we explored Big Pine Key for a while. We discovered it was one of the largest islands – almost five miles long. It had a beautiful high interior of pine trees and palms interspersed with other varieties like Banyan, Sapodilla, and Frangipani. There were a few businesses, and a couple of small subdivisions, but much of the island was still undeveloped.

We snorkeled the shoreline of Big Pine in a couple of places, then, moving towards Key West, we made a scuba dive off the southern end of the bridge at Kemp Channel. Once again we were astounded by the array of sea life, in particular all the incredibly colorful tropicals. Unable to refrain, we gestured frantically and gurgled incomprehensible words to each other at each new sighting. Sting rays soared by us like space ships, and we encountered our first loggerhead turtle, lying on the bottom, as if asleep (and maybe it was, before Will tried to ride him). When the tide began to turn and the dive was over, we exited the water by the overpass of the bridge, as we had at Spanish Harbor. Once again, we discovered company. As I peeled off my wet T-shirt (we didn't have wetsuits), I noticed another diver in a full wetsuit had just come out of the water about 30 yards from us and was bent over, working with a clear hand net of some sort over an Igloo cooler. I looked at Will and Glen, then walked over to him, the others in tow. The fellow, perhaps in his late thirties, early forties, face still pinched with a red circle from the mask, hair damp and matted, glanced up and nodded, then returned to his project. He had a three-foot-long, clear Visquene hand net with a square, eight-inch throat. The handle and the throat of the net were made of what looked like quarter-inch aluminum tubing. He was in the process of shaking out a variety of beautiful, small tropical fish into his ice chest, which was half-filled with water. The creatures darted back and forth, and huddled in the corners, displaying stunning combinations of shapes and designs.

“Dude! Those are wicked incredible,” said Glen. “What are you gonna do with them?”

The fellow spoke without looking up, getting the last of his fish in the cooler. “I sell them – for aquariums. A wholesaler out of Miami buys ‘em from me and ships them all over the country.

“Are there other people like you, doing this?” I said as casually as I could.

“A few.”

There was a heavy stillness in the air, a moment of incandescence.

“A cool place to live,” I whispered to Will, who stood next to me.

He cocked his head and smiled. “If you could find a way to make a living.”

And I thought I was going to have to drag him along.

As we headed for Key West, Will and I began to discuss the possibility of coming back down to The Keys to live – earning our livelihood diving for tropical fish. Hell, if that old guy could do it, surely we could! What a life! Diving for tropical fish in the Florida Keys! Sadly for Glen, the plan did not include him. He was committed to veterinary college in the fall. His course had been mapped long before, by him and his parents, both of whom were doctors.

We found a campground on Stock Island, where we could have running water and hot showers. No need for the camper’s daughters, it was Saturday night and we were headed into iniquity.

The sun burned a fiery hole in the layered gray and rose horizon, and by seven o’clock the evening breeze appeared like magic, washing away the heat from the island. As the shadows lengthened, we emerged from the campground, clean, frisky, and hopeful. Glen had dressed a little for the occasion, wearing tan bellbottom jeans and a long-sleeve maroon shirt he’d somehow managed to keep fairly wrinkle-free – blond hair combed straight back and blue eyes alight with anticipation. I had spent the last couple of years in a gym so my physique was one of my stronger points when courting barstool princesses. I went with a fairly tight T-shirt and blue jeans. After a quick comb, I let my hair succumb to gravity, the longest of it just reaching my shoulders. I looked over at Will, who had begun to slow-dance himself over to the car while fondling his own ass and singing “I Think I Love You.” I had to smile. The guy was a “Paint Your Wagon” Lee Marvin in a tropical shirt and khaki shorts – younger of course, and a little less aggressive, but he had that same sandy blonde hair and lanky, casual rhythm about him – the same irresponsible sense of self composure, reckless grin, and dry wit. If I could keep him in form, the night would undoubtedly be interesting.

We hopped into my old Ford Falcon and headed downtown, parking near the foot of Duval Street by the docks. I can still remember stepping from the car and pausing, captured by the essence that was Key West. The last of the crimson sky rose above distant squall clouds and silhouetted the outriggers of shrimp boats and the masts of sailboats at harbor. The pungent odor of drying nets and lobster traps mingled with the aroma of conch fritters, Cuban *Picadillo*, and

the tart, sweet, smell of Key Lime blossoms. It was that intoxicating contradiction of flavors that I would come to know as The Keys. Like the ocean, which could be so serene one day and so totally unforgiving the next, I would learn that The Keys were always the same and never the same.

As we strolled onto Duval, bathed by pale street lamps and humid evening air, the cross-section of humanity around us represented a vibrant blend of Bahamas sea-people, enterprising and excitable Cubans, and a cacophony of adventurers, misfits, and ogling tourists from across the country and around the world, all searching for their own slice of key lime paradise.

We spotted Sloppy Joe's (which was really sloppy, then) and worked our way toward the bar, passing little handmade jewelry stores where puka was still in, garish red and yellow conch fritter wagons with Cubans hawking their wares, and the Hippy Dreams Paraphernalia Shoppe (a hooka for every home) on the corner before Sloppy Joe's.

As we got closer, we could hear a guitar being beaten upon rhythmically and someone crooning about a great filling station hold up costing him two good years. As we went inside and found seats at the bar, the crooner had begun something about a piano player from Miami and a Cuban crime of passion – messy and old fashioned. I remember thinking the guy with the long, sun-bleached hair and the guitar certainly had some interesting themes.

We spent about an hour in Sloppy Joes, listening to the music, drinking, and trying to separate strays from the herd. We were having a great time, but none of us were finding the girl of our temporary dreams, and it was 50 cents for a Miller, so we decided to move on. We drifted across the street, to The Bull and Whistle, probably the epitome of a Key West bar in those days. Casablanca ceiling fans churned the thick, smoke-filled air above batteries of small, weathered tables loosely surrounding a huge center bar. High windows faced the street and provided a free stage show. Bartenders and waitresses, as high as they could afford to be and still function, scurried about in a frenzy of splashing liquid, sliding bottles, and clanging registers. From a small stage in the back, a three-piece group with a guitar, bass and a conga, pounded out sensuous, driving rhythms and the place virtually writhed to the tempos. But the Bull was fast and loud that night and the crowd was so thick it was a challenge just to get a beer, let alone a date, so we hit the street once more. Two bars down on the right there was a sign that read:

Hermit Crab Races Tonight (bring your best crawler)

Now that caught our attention – particularly Will’s, because he had somehow slipped ahead in the unannounced race for inebriety. “How in the hell are you gonna race a hermit crab?” he mumbled. “You’d have to have really itzy-bitsy little jockies, man.” Showing an inch of height with forefinger and thumb, he squinted through the window. “Itzy-bitsy jockies.”

The place wasn’t quite as packed as The Bull and Whistle but there was a good crowd gathering in the back, around a long, narrow table. It had a fluorescent light above it, with a notice that read:

**Touch a Crab During a Race, you get “The Hook” for 10 minutes
(and you buy all runners a drink).**

I noticed that in one corner of the bar and there was a huge gaff hook attached about six feet up the wall, and there, sure enough, was a guy dangling by his collar. I took another look around and realized the clientele was distinctly different from the last bar. There were a lot of burly-looking bikers, and biker chicks with that hard sensuousness that says *I can suck the chrome off a handle bar, but when I’m finished with you, I’ll sacrifice you to the god of Harleys*. I felt like I should instantly go get a tattoo and come back later. Actually I was on my way out when Will grabbed me. “Crab races, man! Let’s watch the crab races!” He was already stumbling in that direction.

A race was just about to begin and all the “runners” (guys and girls with crabs – wait, let me clarify that—all the guys and girls who had entered crabs in the race, regardless of their present hygienic afflictions) were gathered around the track. Will was almost to the table when he stepped on a piece of discarded lime and stumbled into a long-haired girl in saffron halter top and white bellbottoms. Her crab went flying, hit the ground and Will stepped squarely on it. There was a crackling, squishy sound, followed by a collective gasp and the room went totally quiet. The only sound was the jukebox in the back, playing a Creedence Clearwater Revival tune.

I see the bad moon rising.

I see trouble on the way...

Someone in the background whispered, “That was Little Mike’s crab.” I thought, *No, that was the cute little girl’s crab, and besides, if it’s Little Mike’s he’ll just have to accept an apology*. Suddenly, the men’s room door swung open and all eyes riveted on it. Silhouetted in the doorway was this little guy in Dockers and a T-shirt, curly hair, somewhat frightened eyes. *Ahhh, Little Mike. I’ll take care of this.*

I see earthquakes and lightin’

I see bad times today...

All of a sudden, a huge hand from behind the door swatted the little fellow in the back of the head, knocking him halfway across the bar. Then this “thing” stepped out – much like a shaved gorilla on steroids – hair pulled tight and braided in a long pigtail down his back, one really fierce-looking eye (the other gazing upward, glazed, and indifferent – very spooky), ice pick acne, dressed in blue jeans, chains, and tattoos, roughly six and a half feet tall. The crowd opened up, the little girl put her hands together. “I didn’t do it, Mike!” She swung around fiercely, and pointed at Will, who held the broken remnants of his future. “He did it! He knocked Little Charlie out of my hand and stepped on him!”

Don’t go around tonight

Well, it’s bound to take your life...

I thought, *Oh my God, the damned thing had a name! Sweet Lord, we’re in trouble (or Will’s in trouble)*, which made me feel guilty, but better. Will, being a sensible, intelligent person, did the only thing he could; he began pleading for his life, babbling about buying Little Mike a new crab, several new, larger crabs, or a new Harley, then lapsing into “Please don’t hurt me! I loved Little Charlie!” – then back to a new crab with a tattoo of his choice, or a dog – a dog would be good. Suddenly I found my feet moving toward them. I don’t know why. I was telling them to stop, but they’re just weren’t listening. Little Mike picked up a pool cue with no intention of playing billiards, and I’m suddenly facing him, standing in front of Will.

I fear rivers overflowing

I hear the voice of rage and ruin...

“Mike, sir. Ahhhhhh!” Mike tested the cue on the table next to me. It apparently wasn’t heavy enough because it shattered. He picked up another one.

“Whadda you want, you little weasel? You want a beatin’ too?”

“No! No sir,” I said in a squeaky voice that didn’t remotely resemble mine. “I want to replace your crab with the best, fastest crab around.” (*I don’t know where the words are coming from – someone has possessed me. Where am I gonna get a friggin’ hermit crab in the middle of the night, let alone a fast one—or one that isn’t scared shitless of Little Mike?*)

Don’t go out tonight

There's a bad moon on the rise...

Mike stopped, and gave me his Cyclops gaze. "I don't think so. I wanna beat him."

"But Mike, sir. Wouldn't you like to win more often?" I pointed at the wall. "The chart says Little Charlie was rated tenth in the top twenty. A guy like you can do better than that – you got a reputation. I'll make a deal with you. If I bring you a crab and he wins the race you enter him in, you let my buddy go. If the crab loses you can beat him to a pulp."

I heard a high-pitched whine from Will behind me, and felt his fingers biting into my side. "Are you frigging mad?" my partner hissed. "Whose side are you on?"

Hope you got your things together

Hope you're quite prepared to die...

Mike thought about it for a moment – we got the Cyclops gaze again. "If he loses, I beat you both to a pulp." He smiled, knowing the odds are way on his side and he'll probably get a two-for-one ass-whooping. Then he grabbed me by the front of the shirt (surprisingly fast for a big guy). "Okay, you got a half-hour to bring me the crab. You're not back by then, you can pick up the pieces of your friend in the back alley, and we'll be lookin' for you!"

Looks like we're in for nasty weather

One eye is taken for an eye...

A moment later Glen and I were out the door and into the street.

"Where in God's little green acres are you gonna get a hermit crab – a fast hermit crab?" Glen practically shouted. "This is a serious bummer! They're gonna beat you guys bald-headed, and I'm personally so very glad that I don't know you. Where? Where are you gonna get a frigging crab?"

I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, dude. Let's walk, I need to think."

We'd cruised along the street for about ten minutes, looking in bushes and checking out trees in people's yards – hell, I didn't know where hermit crabs hid. I didn't even know there were hermit crabs until a half-hour before. About that time, someone shot Glen with a BB gun while he was rummaging in a flower garden. He was getting pissed and scared. He glared at me. "Man, you better come up with something quick, 'cause the minutes are ticking away. This is a stone-cold bummer, dude. Where you gonna get a crab? And how are we gonna win –" I started to reply, when I looked over his shoulder and saw the sign in front of a distant bar:

Crab Races Every Saturday Night.

“C’mon,” I said. “I know where the crabs are.”

The racing setup in the Laughing Turtle was just about the same. The crab races were at one end and there was a big bar at the other. A handful of tables were dispersed in between. The place was pretty well packed. Two guitarists on a small stage in the corner were doing a fair version of The Doobie Brothers’ *Listen To The Music*, and about a dozen runners were getting ready for a race. The musicians finished their song and announced a short break. I turned to Glen. “Okay, we need a diversion. Order two double shots of 151 Rum and meet me at that table,” I said, pointing at the one closest to the races.

“So you’re going to get wasted? That’s your answer?”

“Just get me the shots, Okay?”

I looked around and saw a girl standing alone by the bar – not that pretty, but dressed hot – tube top, mini skirt, platforms, long dark hair. I walked over. “Hi.” She nodded and smiled. I cleared my throat. “Listen, how’d you like to make twenty bucks?”

Her expression turned to disdain. “Get real, little cowboy.”

“No, no. You just have to do one thing – ”

“Twenty bucks? Don’t insult me again.”

“No, no. I just want you to scream when I tell you to.”

“How about I moan while we’re doing it? I’ll say something like, ‘Oooh baby, oooh baby, you’re the one.’ But it’s still gonna cost more.”

“No, no. I don’t want to do it. It’s just –”

She straightened up, hands on her hips. “What? I’m not good enough for you? What are you – one of these weirdoes who just wants to ogle and play with your – ”

“No! For God’s sake! All I want you to do is to stand right here and scream when I nod to you. Can you do that – for twenty bucks?”

She shrugged indifferently. “It’s your money.”

“Loud,” I said handing her the twenty. “Loud.”

“Whatever turns you on.”

Glen showed up with the drinks and I told him what I wanted. He agreed on the condition that later, when we were arrested, I would admit that it was my idea. Then he drifted into the crowd.

I waited until the crab race started, then I took the first shot of 151 and belted it down. When I stopped gagging I grabbed the second shot, splashed it across the table, struck a match and tossed it. The tabletop went up like a faulty gas barbecue. I looked at the girl by the bar and nodded. She did much better than I expected. Right behind her commendable screeches I yelled, “Fire! Fire!”

Glen, from the other side of the room, did a remarkably good high-pitched scream and cried, “Save the women and children!” For a few moments, no one was paying attention to the crab race. People surged at the door as a waitress ran from the bar and sprayed the table with a fire extinguisher. I just strolled by the racing platform, snatched the crab closest to the finish line and kept going.

I thought I’d made a clean getaway, but by the time I reached the entrance, the panic had ebbed. Suddenly one of the bouncers stepped in front of me – six feet, muscle-shirt, no humor. “I saw what you did, dude, and now I’m gonna –”

“Meteorite!” I cried, pointing upward. He glanced reflectively at the ceiling. I kicked him in the nuggets and bolted through the door.

A few minutes later I found Glen hiding behind a dumpster and we headed back toward Little Mike and Will. We had six minutes. Setting out at a trot, Glen and I made three blocks before settling into a fast walk. The bar was only two blocks away. We were going to make it. Then, of course, we had to win a race, but I figured one thing at a time. We were walking by an alleyway when a voice hissed at us from the shadows. “Heh, man, help me! Help me!”

Glen and I stopped and turned, moving a little closer. We shouldn’t have. A guy with a gun leans out of the dimness – a Latin in his mid-twenties, dressed in a pair of worn khaki shorts and a tie-dyed T-shirt. He had hair that fell in dark curly ringlets around his forehead and ears, a swarthy, pockmarked face that reflected some African heritage, an Errol Flynn mustache, and anxious dark eyes. “Chu get chur ass in here, now, man!”

Hector Zarapata, the consequence of a liaison between a Haitian hooker and a Salvadorian fisherman who shipwrecked in Cuba, was a pickpocket, burglar, and former resident of Cuba’s *Quivicán* Prison. He was having a bad day, even for Hector. Actually he’d had another bad week – it was all kind of blending together in a collage of rotten luck. The “pluckin’ *touristas*” he tried to rob had lost or already spent their money. One lady spit on him, another kicked him in the

cojones. He got bit by a “pluckin’ dog” while breaking into a house, and for a week he thought he had rabies. *Son-a-bitch! When was it gonna end?*

Three months ago he thought his luck had changed. He managed to escape while on a work detail outside *Quivican* prison. A friend had told him about the raft – only room for five, a week in the right current and they hit Florida. It was all planned for Saturday night, when most of the guards who watch the docks were drunk anyway. Saint Nicolas, the patron saint of mariners, took them in his arms and eight days later, they’re burned to a crisp and each ten pounds lighter, but they’re drinking *cervezas* in Key West. He and Ramos got jobs cleaning traps on the docks. Ramos was fairly content, but Hector Zarapata “was no meant for clanin’ stinkin’ traps.” That was partly because Hector had a terrible lisp that was exacerbated when he spoke his thoroughly mauled version of English with Cuban and Haitian inflections. The boss had a tough time understanding the twisted dialect, and teased him some. Hector decided it would be easier to make a living robbing people. There was less conversation. At least that was the theory.

“Chu get chur pluckin’ ass in here or I’ne dwena choot chu.”

I looked at Glen. “Chu chu? Is he talking about a train?”

Hissing from the shadows. “*Dimme sus walletas* or I’ne dwena choot chu twice, man.”

“The Conch Train is on Simonton Street,” said Glen, trying to be helpful.

“*No! No! Idiota! Sus dinero! Dinero!*”

“The son-of-a-bitch is trying to rob us!” I muttered to no one in particular.

“No,” said Glen. “My Spanish is pretty good. I think he just wants us to buy him dinner.”

“Chit! Chit! Chit!” whispered a frustrated voice from the shadows.

Glen took two dollars out of his pocket and handed it to the outstretched hand. “Have a good *dinero* and a *bueno dias*, amigo,” he said with the same condescendingly earnest tone you use when the dog pees in the right spot.

As we slowly backed away and moved off, the voice in the shadows was still moaning, “*Cono! Cono! Cono!* Thas it! I’ne dwena buy bullettes. I’ne dwena buy real pluckin’ bullettes!”

We ran the final distance and entered the bar two minutes late. Still, our timing was good. Little Mike and two of his buddies were just marching across the barroom toward Will, who was dangling helplessly from the gaff hook on the wall. Mike had a new cue stick. We worked our way through the crowd and confronted them just as they reached Will. “We’ve got your crab,” I said, a little out of breath.

Mike paused and lowered the cue. “Yeah? Let’s see it.”

I pulled the little fellow from my pocket and held him up. He came wiggling out for a moment, then quickly ducked back into his black and yellow-striped shell (which is basically the first impulse anything would have when it saw Mike). He reached for the crab and I pulled back. “You get it when the race starts. I gotta protect my interests, man.”

Mike snorted. “You ‘gonna get it’ when the race ends – if he doesn’t win. Your friend stays where he is ‘til it’s over.” He reached over and picked up some guy’s tequila off the table next to him, shot it, dropped the glass and lumbered off to the bar. I breathed again for the first time in thirty or forty seconds, then Glen and I walked over to Will. I looked up. “What’s happenin’, man?”

Will looked down. “Nothin’, just hangin’ around.”

I noticed his Hawaiian shirt was partially ripped open in the front, and his pants were askew on his hips, zipper halfway down. I looked up.

“They made me dance on the tables for the biker bitches.” He sighed. “You can only be fondled so much before your dignity is lost.”

I looked at him.

“Okay, I liked it. But I still suffered the loss of my dignity.”

“You didn’t have any dignity to begin with,” Glen said.

Will grinned. “So you got a crab, huh?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s so fast I had to break one of his legs so the race wouldn’t look fixed.”

Will brightened. “Really?”

“No, you dumb shit. I wouldn’t know a fast crab from a tampon.”

“Well how in the hell is he gonna win the race?”

I paused and glanced over to a darkened corner of the bar where two shady-looking characters sat. “I got a plan.”

Will exhaled, exasperated. “Well it better be bitchin’ and quick because the race starts in seven minutes.”

“Try to keep your pants up for a little longer, dude. Glen will keep you company. I’ll be back.”

I had watched the two guys earlier, hard faces, expensive clothes, gold chains, leaning close, talking earnestly, drinking shots of tequila and following them with limes. But they were

following the limes with little white lines they were laying out on the table and snorting discreetly through a straw when they thought no one was watching. I may have been somewhat of a virgin when it came to drugs, but I wasn't stupid. I walked over causally, when they were between snorts. "It's none of my business, *amigos*. But I just heard the bartender say something about the DEA headed over this way. Just thought you might like to know. You dig?"

I blinked and the seats were empty. I reached down and with the edge of my little finger, gathered some of the cocaine residue on the table into a tiny pile. I put our crab down next to it, with the open part of his shell facing the pile, and blew.

I don't know exactly what I expected, but nothing happened, nothing at all. I peeked into the shell. The little guy was still tucked way into the back. I sighed. Maybe if I got Mike to hit me in the head right away, I wouldn't remember the rest of the beating. The bell rang for the next race and I heard Mike bellow, "Where's my friggin' crab?"

I was so certain that Will and I had about five minutes before being pounded into jelly, I just numbly handed Mike the crab. He smiled (or something similar to a smile). "This is a win-win situation for me," he growled. "Makes me feel so good, I'm gonna call him 'Lucky.'" Then he grabbed me by the shirt again. "Don't wander away." I stepped back. He turned and held Lucky at the starting line, as did the handful of other runners. The starting gun sounded, everyone released their crabs and stepped away.

Some contestants came out running, some set out a tentative leg or two, checking the turf before getting underway, some just wiggled a little and rolled over on their backs, then drew themselves upright and entered the contest like the seasoned racers they were. One just lay there.

I moaned. *Shit! I killed him! I killed him!*

As the fastest crabs neared the halfway mark of the track, the momentum of the crowd rose. People were yelling and screaming, money was changing hands as percentages altered, jostled drinks bathed onlookers and shelled participants, fights broke out. Two crabs reached the three-quarters mark with four more close behind – the crowd roared. I looked around and Glen was gone. I was about to make a dash for Will – *if I could get him off the hook we might make the door*, when suddenly I saw Lucky's shell tremble. I figured someone jarred the table. I stared. *C'mon Lucky!* There it was again. The damned thing was vibrating. The next thing I knew, Lucky was clawing his way out of his shell like he had a grease fire in the kitchen. The little dude popped out, completely forgot his house and ran two feet as fast as a rat before realizing he

was ass-crack naked. The crowd howled with excitement, but that spooked him and he swung around, starting to drag his ugly, curled little body back toward his shell. Suddenly Mike lumbered forward, slammed his hand on the table, put his face down in front of Lucky and screamed, “Run, you little son-of-a-bitch! Or I’ll eat you! I’ll friggin’ eat you!” With the blast of cocaine and one really good look at Little Mike, Lucky decided to book a flight to the other end of his known universe, which happened to be the finish line about twelve feet away. I’m pretty sure I heard him scream. He rose up on his back legs, balancing on his butt sack and shot off as if someone had spit him out of a blowpipe. He knocked out two contestants on the way, zigzagged into one side of the raceway, then crossed the track and careened off the other side, took out a fourth crab with a final body slam, and crossed the finish line three inches ahead of the contender. The crowd went wild. Mike picked up Lucky at the winner’s circle and I brought him his shell, which he scooted into gladly.

There was some argument that Lucky won without his shell – no one had ever seen that happen before. Someone in the back said there was nothing in the rulebook about it (*What friggin’ rulebook?*) Most importantly, there was Little Mike to contend with, so it was declared an official win. Mike was happy. Will and I were thrilled. Glen suddenly appeared saying he must have had to go to the bathroom when all the excitement started. Mike hoisted Will off the hook and bought us a round of drinks, then told us, “Don’t come ‘round here again ‘til you got tattoos.” We thanked him for the drinks and the advice, shot our rums, and quickly left.

It was one o’clock in the morning when we stepped back out on the street and began working our way toward the car. That old pirate moon, round and gold as a doubloon rose up over Duval, reminding us of the fortunes that had been won and lost for over 300 years right where we stood. And I realized then, even at this late date, there were still fortunes to be won or lost. The game was just a little different. But I could learn to play it. Yeah, we could learn to play it.