

CARL HIAASEN



NATURE GIRL

1934

Nature Girl

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Honey Santana—impassioned, willful, possibly bipolar, self-proclaimed “queen of lost causes”—has a scheme to help rid the world of irresponsibility, indifference, and dinnertime sales calls. She’s taking rude, gullible Relentless, Inc., telemarketer Boy Shreave and his less-than-enthusiastic mistress, Eugenie—the fifteen-minute-famous girlfriend of a tabloid murderer—into the wilderness of Florida’s Ten Thousand Islands for a gentle lesson in civility. What she doesn’t know is that she’s being followed by her Honey-obsessed former employer, Piejack (whose mismatched fingers are proof that sexual harassment in the workplace is a bad idea). And he doesn’t know he’s being followed by Honey’s still-smitten former drug-running ex-husband, Perry, and their wise-and-protective-way-beyond-his-years twelve-year-old-son, Fry. And when they all pull up on Dismal Key, they don’t know they’re intruding on Sammy Tigertail, a half white - half Seminole failed alligator wrestler, trying like hell to be a hermit despite the Florida State coed who’s dying to be his hostage . . .

Will Honey be able to make a mensch of a “greedhead”? Will Fry be able to protect her from Piejack—and herself? Will Sammy achieve his true Seminole self? Will Eugenie ever get to the beach? Will the Everglades survive the wild humans? All the answers are revealed in the delectably outrageous mayhem that propels this novel to its Hiaasen-of-the-highest-order climax.

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On the second day of January, windswept and bright, a half-blood Seminole named Sammy Tigertail dumped a dead body in the Lostmans River. The water temperature was fifty-nine degrees, too nippy for sharks or alligators.

But maybe not for crabs, thought Sammy Tigertail.

Watching the corpse sink, he pondered the foolishness of white men. This one had called himself Wilson when he arrived on the Big Cypress reservation, reeking of alcohol and demanding an airboat ride. He spoke of ringing in the New Year at the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino, which was owned by the Seminole tribe on eighty-six acres between Miami and Fort Lauderdale. Wilson told Sammy Tigertail that he'd been sorely disappointed not to find a single Indian at the casino, and that after a full night of drinking, hot babes and seven-card stud he'd driven all the way out to Big Cypress just to get himself photographed with a genuine Seminole.

"Some dumbass bet me a hundred bucks I couldn't find one," Wilson said, slinging a flabby arm around Sammy Tigertail, "but here you are, brother. Hey, where can I buy one of them cardboard cameras?"

Sammy Tigertail directed Wilson toward a convenience store. The man returned with a throwaway Kodak, a bag of beef jerky and a six-pack. Mercifully, the airboat engine was so loud that it drowned out most of Wilson's life story. Sammy Tigertail heard enough to learn that the man was from the greater Milwaukee area, and that for a living he sold trolling motors to walleye fishermen.

Ten minutes into the ride, Wilson's cheeks turned pink from the chill and his bloodshot eyes started leaking and his shoulders hunched with the shakes. Sammy Tigertail stopped the airboat and offered him hot coffee from a thermos.

"How 'b-b-bout that picture you promised?" Wilson asked.

Sammy Tigertail patiently stood beside him as the man extended one arm, aiming the camera back at them. Sammy Tigertail was wearing a fleece zip-up from Patagonia, a woolen navy watch cap from L.L. Bean and heavy khakis from Eddie Bauer, none of which would be considered traditional Seminole garb. Wilson asked Sammy Tigertail if he had one of those brightly beaded jackets and maybe a pair of deerskin moccasins. The Indian said no.

Wilson instructed him not to smile and snapped a couple of pictures. Afterward, Sammy Tigertail cranked up the airboat and set out to finish the swamp tour at the highest-possible speed. Because of the cold weather there was practically no wildlife to be observed, but Wilson didn't seem to mind. He'd gotten what he came for. Squinting against the wind, he gnawed a stick of dried beef and sipped on a warm Heineken.

Sammy Tigertail took a shortcut through a prairie of tall saw grass, which flattened under the airboat's bow as neatly as wheat beneath a combine. Without warning, Wilson arose from his seat and dropped the beer bottle, spraying the deck. As Sammy Tigertail backed off the throttle, he saw Wilson begin to wobble and snatch at his own throat. Sammy Tigertail thought the man was gagging on a chunk of jerky, but in fact he was trying to remove from his doughy neck a small banded water snake that had sailed out of the parting reeds.

The creature was harmless, but evidently Wilson was in no condition to be surprised by a flying reptile. He dropped stone-dead of a heart attack before his Seminole guide could get the boat stopped.

The first thing that Sammy Tigertail did was lift the little snake off the lifeless tourist and release it into the marsh. Then he took Wilson's left wrist and groped for a pulse. Sammy Tigertail felt obliged to unbutton the man's shirt and pound on his marbled chest for several minutes. The Indian elected to forgo mouth-to-mouth contact, as there obviously was no point; Wilson was as cold to the

touch as a bullfrog's belly.

~~In his pockets the Seminole found the disposable camera, \$645 cash, a wallet, keys to a rental Chrysler, a cellular phone, two marijuana joints, three condoms and a business card from the Blue Dolphin Escort Service. Sammy Tigertail put back everything, including the cash. Then he took out his own cell phone and called his uncle Tommy, who advised him to remove the dead white man from the reservation as soon as possible.~~

In the absence of more specific instructions, Sammy Tigertail wrongly assumed that his uncle meant for him to dispose permanently of Wilson, not merely transport him to a neutral location. Sammy Tigertail feared that he would be held responsible for the tourist's death, and that the tribal authorities wouldn't be able to protect him from the zeal of Collier County prosecutors, not one of whom was a Native American.

So Sammy Tigertail ran the airboat back to the dock and carried Wilson's body to the rental car. No one was there to witness the transfer, but any casual observer-especially one downwind of Wilson's boozy stink-would have concluded that he was a large sloppy drunk who'd passed out on the swamp tour.

Having positioned the corpse upright in the backseat, Sammy Tigertail drove directly to Everglades City, in the heart of the Ten Thousand Islands. There he purchased four anchors and borrowed a crab boat and headed for a snook hole he knew on the Lostmans River.

Now a single coppery bubble marked the spot where the dead man had sunk. Sammy Tigertail stared into the turbid brown water feeling gloomy and disgusted. It had been his first day working the airboat concession, and Wilson had been his first customer.

His last, too.

After returning the crab boat, he called his uncle Tommy to say he was going away for a while. He said he wasn't spiritually equipped to deal with tourists.

"Boy, you can't hide from the white world," his uncle told him. "I know because I tried."

"Do we own the Blue Dolphin Escort Service?" asked Sammy Tigertail.

"Nothing would surprise me," said his uncle.

At about the same time, in a trailer not far from the fishing docks, a boy named Fry looked up from his dinner plate and asked, "What is this crap?"

It was not an unreasonable question.

"Salisbury steak," Honey Santana said. "It tastes better than it looks."

"Did you get fired again?"

"No, I quit," Honey said. "Now hush up and eat."

As her son well knew, she resorted to frozen dinners only when she was out of work.

"What happened this time?" he asked.

"You remember Aunt Rachel's Chihuahua? Yum-Yum Boy?"

"The one that got killed, right? Trying to hump a raccoon."

"Yeah, well, that's what Mr. Piejack is like," Honey said, "only bigger."

She took a small bite of the tough gray meat. It was gruesome but she managed a smile.

Fry shrugged. "So, did he make a move or what?"

"You could say that."

Mr. Piejack was the owner of the fish market, and he'd been sniffing after Honey for months. He was married and had numerous other unsavory qualities.

"You know those little wooden mallets we sell at the register?" Honey said.

Fry nodded. "For cracking stone-crab claws."

"Right. That's what I whacked him with."

“Where?”

~~“Where do you think?”~~

As Fry pushed away from the table, Honey hurried to explain.

“He grabbed my breast. That’s why I did it.”

Her son looked up. “For real? You’re not making this up?”

“My right breast, I swear to God.” Honey solemnly entwined her hands over the object of M Piejack’s lust.

“What an a-hole,” Fry said.

“Totally. After I hit him, he started rolling on the floor, moaning and whining, so I grabbed a slab of tuna out of the cooler and shoved it down his pants. You know, to keep the swelling down.”

“What kind of tuna?”

“Yellowfin,” Honey said. “Sushi-grade.”

Fry grinned. “He’ll throw it back on the ice and sell it to some snowbird.”

“That’s gross,” Honey said.

“How much you wanna bet?”

“Hey, I could fix us some soup.” She got up and scraped the Salisbury steaks into the garbage can. “Minestrone or cream of tomato?”

“Whatever.” Fry scooted his chair back to the table. Sometimes he believed that his mother was on the verge of losing her mind, and sometimes he believed that she was the sanest person he’d ever met.

“Now what, Mom?”

“You know my friend Bonnie? She’s doing these ecotours where she takes tourists kayaking out to Cormorant Key,” Honey said. “She says it’s a ton of fun and the money’s pretty good, too. Anyway, driving home from Marco this afternoon I noticed a string of bright yellow kayaks crossing the bay and I thought: What a heavenly way to spend the day, paddling in the sunshine through the mangroves!”

“Kayaks,” Fry said skeptically. “Is this the same Bonnie with the solar-powered sewing machine?”

“You sound like your ex-father.”

“He’s not my ex-father, he’s your ex-husband. Anyway, what’d I say wrong?”

“Oh, just the look on your face.” Honey took the soup pot off the stove. “What was I supposed to do, Fry? The man squeezed my boob. Did he deserve to be clobbered with a crab hammer in the testicles, or did he not?”

“How much does a kayak cost?”

Honey set two bowls on the table. “I’m not sure, but we’ll need at least two or three, for starters.”

“And where would you take these goobers on your ‘ecotour’?” Fry asked. “I mean, since Bonnie already locked up Cormorant Key.”

Honey laughed. “Have you looked out our window lately? Have you noticed all those gorgeous green islands?”

The phone began to ring. Honey frowned.

“Every night,” she said, “like clockwork.”

“Then don’t answer it,” her son said.

“No, I’ve had it with these clowns. Enough is enough.”

More than a thousand miles away, a man named Boyd Shreave stirred a latte and listened on his wireless headset to a phone ringing somewhere distant, in the 239 area code. A photocopied script lay on the desktop in front of him, but Boyd Shreave no longer needed it. After three days he knew the

pitch cold.

Shreave was employed by Relentless, Inc., a telemarketing company that specialized in outbound sales calls to middle-income residential addresses in the United States. The firm's call center was converted B-52 hangar in Fort Worth, Texas, where Boyd Shreave and fifty-three other solicitors toiled in individual cubicles that were padded to dampen ambient noise.

In the cubicle to the right of Boyd Shreave was a woman named Eugenie Fonda, who claimed a murky connection to the famous acting family and in any case had recently become Boyd Shreave's mistress. To the left of Boyd Shreave sat a man named Sacco, who was cavern-eyed and unfriendly and rumored to be a dot-com burnout. During work hours, Boyd Shreave rarely spoke to any of his coworkers, including Eugenie, due to the onerous calling quotas imposed by Relentless, Inc. They were on the phones from 5:00 p.m. to midnight, strafing east to west through the time zones.

It was a dreary and soulless job, though not the worst that Shreave had ever held. Still, at age thirty-five he realized that the feeble arc of his career had more or less flatlined during his six months in telemarketing. He probably would have quit were it not for six-foot-tall Eugenie, the ash-blond woman with a crest of whose head he could gaze upon at will in the adjoining carrel.

Boyd Shreave had been in sales since the age of twenty-six: corrective footwear, farm equipment, automobiles (new and used), fertilizer, herbal baldness remedies, high-definition televisions and exotic pet supplies. That he had failed to succeed, much less prosper, surprised no one who knew him. In person, Boyd Shreave was distinctly ill-suited for the craft of persuasion. Regardless of his mood there was an air of sour arrogance about him—a slant to one thin reddish eyebrow that hinted at impatience, if not outright disdain; a slump of the shoulders that suggested the weight of excruciating boredom; a wormish curl of the upper lip that was often perceived as a sneer of condescension or, worse, a parody of Elvis.

Almost nobody wanted to buy anything from Boyd Shreave. They just wanted him to go away.

He'd all but abandoned his ambitions in sales when, upon the occasion of his most recent firing, his future ex-boss had suggested that he consider telephone work. "You got the pipes for it," the manager had said. "Unfortunately, that's about all you got."

It was true that strangers were often unnerved when Shreave opened his mouth, so mismatched was his voice-smooth, reassuring and affable—with his appearance. "You're a natural," Eugenie Fonda had told him on his first day at the call center. "You could sell dope to the Pope."

Shreave didn't set the world afire at Relentless, but for the first time in his life he could honestly claim to be semi-competent at his job. He was also restless and resentful. He disliked the late shift, the confined atmosphere and the mynah-bird repetition of the sales script.

The pay blew, too: minimum wage, plus four bucks for every lead he generated. Whenever Shreave got a hot one on the line—somebody who actually agreed to a callback or a mailout—he was required by company policy to punt the sucker's name to a floor supervisor. Shreave would have gladly forgone the shitty four-dollar commission for a chance to close the deal, but no such responsibility was ever dealt to rookie callers.

A woman picked up on the fifth ring.

"Hello, is this Mrs. Santana?" Boyd Shreave asked.

"It's Ms."

"So sorry, Ms. Santana, this is Boyd Eisenhower calling—"

Eugenie Fonda had told Shreave not to use his real last name with customers, and coached him on selecting a telephone alias. She said research had proven that people were more likely to trust callers with the last names of U.S. presidents, which is why she'd chosen "Eugenie Roosevelt" for herself. Initially Shreave had selected the name "Boyd Nixon" and in four days failed to churn a single lead. Eugenie had gently advised him to try a different president, preferably one who had not bolted from

the White House with prosecutors camping on the doorstep.

“Eisenhower, like Dwight?” asked the woman on the end of the line.

“Exactly,” Shreave said.

“And your first name again?”

“B-o-y-d,” said Shreave. “Now, Ms. Santana, the reason I’m calling this afternoon-”

“It’s not the afternoon, Mr. Eisenhower, that’s the problem. It’s the evening, and I’m sitting down to eat with my family.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Santana, this won’t take long. Or perhaps you’d like me to try back later.”

It was a line designed to keep the customer on the phone. Most people didn’t want a callback they wanted to get it over with.

The woman’s voice began to rise. “Do you know how many telephone solicitations I get on this number? Do you know how aggravating it is to have your dinner interrupted by strangers every night?”

Boyd Shreave, unruffled, was already fingering down the call list. “Is Mr. Santana available?” he asked perfunctorily.

To his surprise, the woman replied, “As a matter of fact, he is. Hold on.”

Moments later, a new voice said, “Hullo?”

“Mr. Santana?” Shreave thought the person sounded too young, although there was always the possibility of a sinus infection.

“What’re you selling, mister?” the voice demanded.

Shreave let it fly.

“Mr. Santana, I’m calling about a unique real-estate opportunity that we’re presenting to specially selected candidates. For a limited time only, Suwannee Bend Properties is offering ten pristine wooded acres in north-central Florida for only \$3,999 down-”

“But we already live in Florida,” the voice said squeakily.

“Yes, Mr. Santana, this valuable offering is being made exclusively to residents of the southwest coast.” Boyd Shreave glanced at his pitch sheet. “You live in the fastest-growing part of the United States, Mr. Santana, and in recent years many of your neighbors have gotten fed up with the traffic, high taxes, crime and big-city stress. A lucky few of them have relocated to beautiful Gilchrist County, the heart of traditional old Florida—a safe, peaceful and affordable place to raise a family. Instead of being packed like rats into a gridlocked suburb, you can relax on a lush, secluded ten-acre ranchette, not far from the historic Suwannee River. May I send you some printed information, or perhaps arrange for a qualified sales associate to call back at your convenience?”

The voice said, “A ranchette? Is that like a dinette?”

“No. It’s a real-estate term, Mr. Santana.”

“But we don’t live in a crowded suburb. We live in the Everglades,” the voice said. “There’s only five hundred and thirteen people in the whole town.”

By now, Shreave had figured out that he was speaking to a kid, and that his time was being wasted. He was itching to say something really snide, but he had to be cautious because Relentless randomly monitored outgoing floor calls for “quality control.”

“Mr. Santana,” he said with exaggerated politeness, “would you mind putting Mrs. Santana back on the line?”

“I’m right here,” the woman piped in, catching Shreave off guard. Obviously the bitch had been listening on another phone.

“Then I guess I don’t need to repeat our offer,” Shreave said thinly.

“No, you do not,” Mrs. Santana said. “We categorically have no interest in buying a ‘ranchette’ in Gilchrist County, wherever that might be.”

“Well, you have heard of the Suwannee River, right?”

~~“I’ve heard the song, Mr. Eisenhower. There’s no reason to be sarcastic.”~~

“That wasn’t my intention.” Shreave’s eyes drifted to the top of Eugenie’s head. He wondered the fool listening on the end of her line would have ever imagined that she had a real pearl stud in her tongue.

Mrs. Santana went on: “The song’s actually called ‘Old Folks at Home’ and it was written by Stephen Foster, and you know what? He never floated way down upon the Suwannee, because he never set foot in ‘beautiful Gilchrist County’ or anywhere else in Florida. The man lived in Pennsylvania and he got the name Suwannee River off a map and took out the u to make the syllables fit the music. By the way, Mr. Eisenhower, what is your supervisor’s name?”

“Miguel Truman,” Shreave said dully.

“And his supervisor’s name?”

“Shantilla Lincoln.”

“Because I intend to speak with them,” Mrs. Santana said. “You sound like such a nice, decent fellow—does your mother know what you do for a living, Mr. Eisenhower? Harassing strangers over the phone? Trying to talk folks on a fixed income into buying things they don’t need? Is this what she raised you to be, your mother? A professional pest?”

At that moment, Boyd Shreave should have calmly apologized for inconveniencing the Santanas and then disconnected. That was the drill at Relentless: Never argue with people, never abuse them, never lose your cool. Do not under any circumstances give them a reason to complain to the feds.

Those on the receiving end of Boyd Shreave’s grating sales calls had at various times called him a deadbeat, a maggot, a polyp, a vulture, a douchebag, a cocksucker, a shitbird, a pussbucket and even a rectal ulcer. Never once had Shreave replied in kind.

And most likely he would have held his composure on this particular evening had Mrs. Santana not touched a sore spot by referring to his mother, who had in fact expressed bilious objections to his move to telemarketing; who herself had pelted him with unflattering names, each preceded by the word lazy.

So, instead of hanging up and moving down the list to the next call, Shreave said to Mrs. Santana what he had longed to say to his mother, which was: “Go screw yourself, you dried-up old skank.”

This was articulated not in Shreave’s friendly-neighbor telephone voice but in a corrosive snarl emitted so loudly that both Sacco and Eugenie Fonda sprang up in their cubicles and stared at Shreave over the padded partitions as if he’d wiggled out.

On the other end, Mrs. Santana sounded more wounded than angry. “What an awful thing to say, Mr. Eisenhower,” she said quietly. “Please connect me with Mr. Truman or Miss Lincoln right this minute.”

Boyd Shreave chuckled acidly and plucked off his headset, thinking: No wonder they’re moving all the call centers to India—the poor saps there don’t know enough English to insult the customers.

Eugenie passed him a note that said “Are you fucking crazy?”

“Only for you,” Shreave scribbled back.

But as he sat there sipping his latte, he reflected upon the exchange with Mrs. Santana and conceded he had been harsh, considering that she hadn’t called him anything worse than a pest.

Maybe I am losing it, Shreave thought. Jesus, I need a vacation.

Honey Santana stared at the phone in her hand.

“What’d he say?” Fry asked.

Honey shook her head. “Never mind.”

“You know, there’s a do-not-call list. Why don’t you put our number on it? Then we won’t have

to deal with these turds anymore.”

“Could you please not use that word?”

Honey already paid extra for a service that rejected calls from blocked phone numbers. To get around it, many telemarketing firms used rotating 800 exchanges, which is what Honey found when she pressed the caller ID button. She jotted the number down next to the name Boyd Eisenhower.

Fry said, “Thanks for the soup. It was good.”

“Welcome.”

“What are you doing now?”

“I’m calling the company to complain.”

“Like they care,” Fry said. “Mom, please, not tonight.”

The line was busy. Honey put down the phone and popped a Tic Tac. “I wouldn’t mind speaking to that guy again. He called me a truly awful name.”

“So, let’s hear it.”

“You’re only twelve and a half, Fry.”

“Hey, you let me watch *The Sopranos*.”

“Once,” Honey said ruefully. “I thought it was about opera, honest to God.”

“Was it b-i-t-c-h? That’s what he called you, right?”

Honey said no and dialed again. Still busy.

“You shouldn’t have brought up his mom,” Fry remarked.

“Why not?” Honey said. “You think she bled and suffered to bring him into this world, nursed him at her breast, bathed him when he was soiled, held him when he was sick-all so he could grow up and nag people in the middle of their suppers!” Honey shook a finger at her son. “You ever take a lame-ass job like that, I’m writing you out of my will.”

Fry glanced around the double-wide as if taking inventory. “There goes the trust fund,” he said.

Honey ignored him and dialed again. Another busy signal.

“Maybe his mom’s a pest, too. Ever thought of that?” Fry said. “Maybe he was raised by pests and he just can’t help the way he is.”

Honey slammed the phone on the kitchen table. “For your information, he called me a shriveled up old skank.”

“Ha!” Fry said.

“That’s funny to you?”

“Sort of.” Fry had never mentioned that his friends considered her the hottest mom in town. Fry said, “Come on-you’re not old, and definitely not skank material.”

Honey Santana got up and started banging dishes around the sink. Fry wondered when she was going to wind down-sometimes it took hours.

“What is it with men?” she said. “First Mr. Piejack wants to jump my bones and now this person I don’t even know tells me to go screw myself. My day starts with dumb animal lust and ends with rabid hostility-and you wonder why I don’t date.”

Fry said, “Hey, did Aunt Rachel ever get another dog?”

“Don’t you dare change the subject.” Again, Honey snatched up the phone and started punching the buttons.

“Mom, you’re wasting your time. You’ll never get through to that creep.”

She winked at him. “I’m not calling the 800 number. I’m calling my brother to have him trace the 800 number.”

“Oh wonderful,” said Fry.

“And don’t roll your eyes at me, young man, because-oh, hello. Could you ring Richard Santana please?” Honey covered the mouthpiece. “I will most definitely find this person,” she whispered.

emphatically to her son, “one way or another.”

~~Fry asked, “And then what, Mom?”~~

She smiled. “And then I’ll sell him something he can’t afford. That’s what.”

After nightfall Sammy Tigertail ditched the rented Chrysler in a canal along the Tamiami Trail. Then he hitchhiked to Naples and met his half brother Lee in the parking lot of an outlet mall.

“Come home. You’ll be safer on the reservation,” Lee said.

“No, this way is better for everyone. You bring the gear and the rifle?”

“Yep.”

“What about the guitar?”

Sammy Tigertail had only once set foot inside the tribe’s Hard Rock operation. The whole scene was gruesome, except for the rock-and-roll artifacts on display. Sammy Tigertail had zeroed in on a blond Gibson Super 400 that had once belonged to Mark Knopfler of Dire Straits, his late father’s favorite band.

“It’s in the truck,” Lee said, “and you owe me big-time, brother. They didn’t want to give it up.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

“But I got the big boss to make a call.”

“No shit?” Sammy Tigertail hadn’t known that Lee held any sway with the tribal chairman. “Let’s go,” he said.

His brother drove him to the Turner River, where together they dragged a small canoe from the bed of the pickup; not a native cypress dugout but a shiny blue aluminum model, manufactured at some factory in northern Michigan.

After they loaded in the gear, Lee said, “You see the Man coming, first thing to go overboard is the gun.”

“All depends,” said Sammy Tigertail.

They stood in a thickening darkness, silent but for the oscillating hum of insects.

Lee asked, “You didn’t kill that white man on purpose, did you?”

Sammy Tigertail took a heavy breath. “No, it wasn’t me.”

He told the story of the banded water snake, and Lee agreed that it was clearly a spirit at work. “What do you want me to do with your checks?” he asked.

Every month the tribe sent three thousand dollars to each Seminole, remittance from the gambling profits.

“Give it to Cindy.”

“Sammy, don’t be a fool-”

“Hey, it’s my goddamn money.”

“Okay,” Lee said. Cindy was Sammy Tigertail’s ex-girlfriend, and she had issues.

Lee put a hand on his brother’s shoulder and said good-bye. Sammy Tigertail got into the canoe and pushed it away from the bank.

“Hey, boy, since when do you play guitar?” Lee called out.

“I don’t.” Sammy Tigertail dipped the paddle and turned the bow downriver. “But I got all the time in the world to learn.”

“Sammy, wait. What do I tell Ma?”

“Tell her I’ll be back someday to play her a song.”

Eugenie Fonda had been briefly famous as a mistress in another relationship. In the summer of 1999 she had dallied with a man named Van Bonneville, a self-employed tree trimmer in Fernandina Beach. Soon after the affair had begun, a hurricane pushing thirteen feet of tidal surge struck the coast and smashed Van Bonneville’s house into toothpicks. He survived, but his wife was lost and presumed

drowned.

~~Hurricanes being to tree cutters what Amway conventions are to hookers, Van Bonneville was an exceptionally busy fellow in the days following the tragedy. While neighbors were impressed by his stoicism, his in-laws were disturbed by what they considered an inadequate display of grief by the young widower.~~

Certain grisly suspicions were floated before the local police, but no one paid much attention until Mrs. Bonneville's body was found in her Pontiac at the bottom of the St. Johns River. It was her husband's contention that Mrs. Bonneville had been swept away by the onrushing flood as she wheeled out of the driveway in a frantic quest for Marlboros. Doubt fell upon this story as soon as police divers revealed that Mrs. Bonneville had been snugly strapped into the driver's seat. Well known among her friends was the fact that on principle Mrs. Bonneville never buckled her seat belt, even though it was required by state law; an ardent libertarian, she opposed government meddling in all matters of personal choice.

Another clue was her knockoff Seiko titanium, which, unlike the genuine item, was not even slightly water-resistant. The face of the wristwatch was frozen on a time and date that preceded by a full nine hours the hurricane's landfall, suggesting that the Pontiac had gone into the river well in advance of the fierce weather, and that Mrs. Bonneville's corpse had been strapped inside to keep her from surfacing prematurely.

In the end, her husband's fate was sealed by the Duval County medical examiner, who retrieved from a blunt indentation on Mrs. Bonneville's scalp several sticky ligneous flakes that were later identified as bark particles from a sawed-off mahogany branch. The branch segment measured three feet long and seven inches in circumference on the day it was confiscated from the bed of Van Bonneville's obsidian-flecked Ford F-150 pickup.

The "Hurricane Homicide" trial was broadcast live on Court TV and later featured during prime time on Dateline. Prosecutors depicted Van Bonneville as a philandering shitweasel who had conspired to do away with his loving wife and blame it on the storm. The motives were laid out as greed (a \$75,000 life-insurance policy) and lust, Van Bonneville having acquired a new girlfriend who then went by the name of Jean Leigh Hill. Tall and smoky-eyed, her long languorous walk to the witness stand was the undisputed highlight of the trial.

Eugenie testified that she'd taken up with Van Bonneville believing he was a widower, having fallen for his claim that his wife had perished in a freak tanning booth mishap. It wasn't until three days after the hurricane that Eugenie had spotted a newspaper story about the missing Mrs. Bonneville. The enlightening article included several quotes from her "tearful and apprehensive husband." Immediately Eugenie located the one and only love letter that Van Bonneville had scrawled to her, and marched to the police station.

Scandalous headlines were followed by the obligatory book deal. Soon a ghostwriter arrived from New York to help Ms. Hill organize her recollections of the romance, although there wasn't much to recollect. Eugenie had known Van Bonneville all of eleven days before the crime. They'd gone on one lousy date, to play putt-putt golf, and afterward they'd had putt-putt sex in the cab of his pickup. That it was enough to leave Van Bonneville smitten and dreamy-eyed had been mildly depressing to Eugenie.

Initially she'd been drawn to his rugged looks, particularly his knuckles, which were intriguingly striped with scars. Eugenie had occasionally been a sucker for marred, rough men, but on that first and only night with Van Bonneville she would discover that his wounds were the results of frequent tree-trimming miscues, and that he was as clumsy at foreplay as he was with a pruning saw.

Fortunately for her publisher, Eugenie had a fertile imagination. The manuscript that she and the ghostwriter produced was thin but sufficiently tawdry in content to become an instant bestseller. For

seven weeks Storm Ghoul ran neck and neck on the New York Times non-fiction list with a collection of Ann Coulter's most venomous Al Gore columns. So torrid was Eugenie's account of Van Bonneville's sexual talents that he got swamped with marriage proposals from complete strangers. From Death Row he sent Eugenie a thank-you note and a Polaroid photograph of his hands.

Her share of the book advance was half a million dollars, a cheering sum. Eugenie's new boyfriend, a stockbroker who'd seen her on Oprah and contacted her Web site, advised her to invest the windfall in a red-hot Texas outfit called Enron, the shares of which he was pleased to acquire for her at a discount fee. Within twenty-four months Eugenie was dead broke, alone again and working the phone bank at Relentless. By that time a barrage of anti-bimbo invectives had caused her to shut down the Web site and adopt the name of Fonda, a demented aunt having declared herself a third cousin to Peter and Jane.

Eugenie was still not entirely sure why she'd seduced Boyd Shreave, a charmless and dyspeptic presence in the adjacent cubicle. Perhaps it was because he had shown so little interest that she felt the tug of a sexual challenge. Or perhaps she'd sensed something in his glazed indifference that hinted at a secret wild side, a raw and reckless private life.

Yet, so far, Boyd Shreave had failed to deliver a single surprise. He was a man without mystery and, except for an odd stippling on his pubic region, also without scars. On the upside, he was decent looking enough and fairly dependable in the sack. He kept assuring her that he was angling for divorce, a blatant lie with which Eugenie gamely played along. Boyd's wife had inherited a small chain of pizza joints, the profits from which provided the Shreaves with a comfortable existence in spite of Boyd's serial failures as a salesman. It would have been idiotic for him to run out on his wife, much less snuff her in the manner of Van Bonneville, a fact in which Eugenie Fonda took comfort. She had no desire to reprise her role as the paramour of a murderer.

To Eugenie, Boyd Shreave was not a love interest so much as a timely distraction. The relationship was the natural backwash of being stuck together in the most boring, brain-numbing job on the planet.

On the night Shreave had so loudly berated the customer on the phone, he arrived at Eugenie's apartment carrying a six-pack of Corona, to which he clung even as he hugged her. "I got canned," he announced.

"Oh no." Eugenie, who in her heels stood four inches taller than Boyd, kissed his forehead. "Don't tell me they were taping you!"

Shreave nodded bitterly. "Miguel and Shantilla called me in and played back the whole goddamned call. Then they sent some Mexican ape from Security to clean out my desk and hustle me out of the building."

"What happened to probation?" Eugenie asked. "I thought they aren't supposed to fire you the first time you lose it."

"They will if they catch you tellin' somebody to go screw themselves."

"Jesus, Boyd, screw isn't so bad. You hear it on TV all the time. If it was fuck, I could understand you gettin' axed, but not screw."

Shreave uncapped a beer and settled in on the couch. "Apparently skank is a no-no, too."

Eugenie seated herself beside him. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"Oh well. It sure felt good to say it at the time."

"Have you told Lily?"

"Not yet," Shreave muttered. Lily was his wife. "She'll be pissed, but what else is new. It was a shit job, anyway," he said. "No offense."

Eugenie was wondering how best to inform Boyd that she wasn't devoted to the idea of continuing their affair now that he was no longer employed at Relentless and they couldn't pass horns.

notes to each other. It exhausted her to think about carrying on with him by telephone.

“The only good thing about that goddamn place,” he was saying, “was meeting you.”

Swell, thought Eugenie. “Boyd, that’s so sweet.”

Shreave began unbuttoning her blouse. “You wanna take a shower?” he asked. “I’ll be the Handsome Drifter and you can be the Hula-Hula Queen.”

“Sure, baby.” She didn’t have the heart to give him the bad news. Maybe tomorrow, she thought.

Honey Santana’s brother was busy on a story, but he promised to try to help. While waiting, Honey robotically kept dialing the 800 number. She was well aware that telemarketing companies deliberately rigged their outgoing phone banks to thwart incoming calls, yet she continued to punch the buttons. She felt more powerless than usual against this latest compulsion.

“It’s driving me up the wall, this guy was so awful,” she said to her brother when he finally got through. “And, the thing is, he had such a nice voice.”

“Yeah, so did Ted Bundy,” said Richard Santana. “Sis, what are you going to do with the name? I give it to you? Be honest.”

Richard Santana was a reporter in upstate New York. Among the many Internet databases available to his newspaper was a nifty reverse telephone directory. It had taken about six seconds to trace the 800 line for his sister.

“All I want to do is file a complaint,” she lied.

“With whom? The FTC?”

“Right, the FTC. So, you got the name?”

Richard Santana was aware that Honey sometimes reacted to ordinary situations in extreme ways. Having been burned before, he was now wary of all her inquiries. This time, however, he felt confident that the information he was providing could result in nothing worse than an angry letter, since the offending company was in Texas and his sister was far away in Florida.

“I’ll E-mail you what I’ve got,” he told her.

“You’re a champ, Richard.”

Honey Santana didn’t inform her brother that she could no longer retrieve her E-mails without her son’s permission. Fry had locked her off the computer the day after she’d fired off ninety-seven messages to the White House complaining about the president’s support for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. The E-mails had been sent within a four-hour span, and the increasingly hostile tone had attracted the notice of the U.S. Secret Service. Two young agents had been driven over from Miami to interview Honey at the trailer park, and they’d departed believing, quite mistakenly, that she was too flighty to present a credible threat to anyone.

She hurried into Fry’s bedroom, flipped on the light and began to shake him gently. “You asleep, sweetie?”

“Not anymore.”

“I need to get on the computer. Richard’s E-mailing the goods.”

“Mom, look at the clock.”

“It’s only eleven-fifteen-what’s the matter with you? When I was your age, I used to stay up until midnight writing love letters to Peter Frampton.” Honey felt Fry’s forehead. “Maybe you’re coming down with a bug.”

“Yeah, it’s called the Psycho Mom flu.”

Fry untangled himself from the sheets and stumbled over to his desk. He shielded the computer keyboard from his mother’s view as he tapped in the password. The screen illuminated with a beep, and Honey sat down intently. Fry aimed himself back toward the bed, but she snagged him by one ear and said, “Not so fast, buster.”

“Lemme go, Mom.”

“Just a minute. Lookie here.” Honey tapped the mouse to scroll down her brother’s message. “It’s RTR Limited, Fort Worth. That’s the name of this outfit.”

“So?”

“I need you to Google it for me.”

“Google yourself,” Fry said.

“No, kiddo, you got the touch.” Honey rose and motioned him into the chair. “I’m too wired for this type, honest to God.”

Fry sat down and searched for RTR Limited, which came up as Relentless Telemarketing Resources, Relentless Wireless Outreach and Relentless, Inc. He surfed through the entries until he found a self-promotional Web site that listed an office-park address and a direct toll number.

“Bookmark that sucker!” Honey cried triumphantly.

“Okay, but that’s it.” Fry signed off and darkened the screen. “We’re done, Mom.”

“Come out and watch Letterman with me. Please?”

Fry said he was beat, and dived into bed. When Honey sat beside him, he rolled over and faced the wall.

“Talk to me,” she whispered.

“’Bout what?”

“School? Sports? Anything you want.”

Fry grunted wearily.

“Hey,” Honey said. “Did you see on the news about the wolves out West? They’re trying to take ’em off the endangered list so that we can wipe ’em out all over again. Does that make any sense?”

Her son didn’t answer. Honey turned out the light.

“Thanks,” Fry said.

“I didn’t forget my medicine, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Which was true in a way—she had thrown the pills in the trash weeks earlier. “Certain things still set me off, no matter what,” she said.

“But I’m getting better, you’ve gotta admit.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely gettin’ better.”

“Fry?”

“I’m serious,” he said.

“Other things I just can’t let slide. You understand? Starting with matters of basic civility.” Honey closed her eyes and listened to her son’s breathing. Tomorrow she would go find another job and then after she came home she’d get on the phone and track down Mr. Boyd Eisenhower.

“He had such a nice voice, didn’t you think?”

“Who?” Fry asked.

“That man who tried to sell us a place on the Suwannee River,” Honey said. “I thought he had an exceptionally agreeable voice.”

“I thought he sounded like a total dick.”

“What are you saying, kiddo? That I’ve lost my marbles?”

“No, Mom, I’m saying good night.”

The private investigator’s name was Dealey, and his office was downtown near Sundance Square. Lily Shreave was fifteen minutes early, but Dealey’s assistant waved her in.

Dealey, who was on the phone, signaled that he’d be finished in a minute. Pinned under his left elbow was a large brown envelope on which “Subject Shreave” had been printed with a black Sharpie.

After the private investigator hung up, he asked Lily Shreave if she wanted coffee or a soda. She said, “No, I want to see the pictures.”

"It's not necessary, you know. Take my word, we got him cold."

~~"Is she in them?" Lily Shreave pointed at the envelope.~~

"The pictures? Yes, ma'am."

"She pretty?"

Dealey eased back in his chair.

"You're right, it shouldn't matter," Lily Shreave said. "What's her name?"

"The one she's using now is Eugenie Fonda. She works at Relentless with your husband," Dealey said, "and she has an interesting back-story. You remember the 'Hurricane Homicide' case a few years ago? The guy who whacked his wife and tried to make it look like she drowned in a storm?"

"Down in Florida," Lily Shreave said. "Sure, I remember."

"She was the husband's girlfriend," Dealey said, "the one who wrote that book."

"Really? I read the first chapter in Cosmo." Lily Shreave was puzzled. The woman had made the tree cutter out to be a stallion in the bedroom. So why on earth would she want Boyd?

"Let me see those pictures," she said.

Dealey shrugged and handed her the envelope. "It's the typical routine. Drinks after work, then back to her place. Or sometimes a late lunch before they punch in. Did I mention she was single?"

Lily Shreave held up the first photo. "Where was this one taken?" she asked.

"At a T.G.I. Friday's off the 820. He ordered ribs and she got a salad."

"And this one?"

"The doorway of Miss Fonda's apartment," Dealey said.

"She's a real amazon, huh?"

"Six feet even, according to her driver's license."

"Age?"

"Thirty-three."

"Same as me," Lily Shreave remarked. "Weight?"

"I don't recall."

"Are those flowers in his hand?" Lily Shreave studied the grainy color print.

"Yes, ma'am," Dealey said. "Daisies and baby's breath."

"God, he's so lame." Lily Shreave couldn't remember the last time her husband had brought her a bouquet. They had been married five years and hadn't slept together in five months.

"This is the first time he's cheated on me," she volunteered.

Dealey nodded. "You got your proof. My advice is take him to the cleaners."

Lily Shreave laughed caustically. "What cleaners? The man can't hardly pay for his own laundry. I want a speedy divorce, that's all, and no trouble from him."

"Then just show him the pictures," Dealey said. "And save number six for last."

Boyd Shreave's wife thumbed through the stack until she found it. "Good grief," she said, and she felt her face redden.

"Deli over on Summit. Broad daylight," said Dealey, who'd taken the photograph from a parked car. The camera was a digital Nikon with motor drive and a 400-mm telephoto.

"Is she actually blowing him?" Lily Shreave asked.

"That would be my expert opinion."

"And what in the hell is he eating?"

"Turkey and salami on a French roll with pickles, shredded onions, no lettuce," Dealey said.

"You can remember all that, but not her weight?" Lily Shreave smiled and fitted the stack of pictures back into the envelope. "I know what you're up to, Mr. Dealey. You're trying to spare my feelings. When I get stressed, I tend to put on a few pounds, sure, and lately I've been stressed. But don't worry, I'll get down to a size six again once I dump this jerk. So tell me-how much does she

weigh?"

"A buck forty," Dealey said.

"Oh, get real."

"Exactly. People always lie on their driver's license."

"I mean, she's six feet tall, so come on."

"Like you said, Mrs. Shreave, it doesn't really matter. Adultery is adultery."

Boyd Shreave's wife took out her checkbook. "Let me ask you something else about Miss Fond. Do you think she put him up to it? I'm talking about the tree trimmer who murdered his wife. Is it possible this slut had something to do with it?"

Dealey said, "The cops tell me no. I already called down to Florida because I was wondering the same thing. They said she passed the polygraph with flying colors."

Lily Shreave was somewhat relieved. Still, she made up her mind to move swiftly with the divorce, in case her husband got any nutball ideas.

"Copies of the pictures are locked in my safe box. They're yours if you want 'em," Dealey said. He'd already made a dozen prints of the sub shop blow job, which he considered to be a classic.

"I'm sorry things turned out this way," he added.

"No, you're not," Lily Shreave said, "and, frankly, neither am I."

She wrote out a check for fifteen hundred dollars. The private investigator put it in the top drawer and said, "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Shreave."

"Whoa, you're not done yet."

Dealey was surprised. "You want me to keep tailing your husband? What for?"

"The oral stuff is okay, but I'd prefer to see documentation of actual intercourse."

"They usually don't give out receipts, Mrs. Shreave."

She said, "You know what I mean. Pictures or video will do."

Dealey tapped two fingers on the desk. "I don't get it. You've got more than enough to bury him already."

"The deeper the better," said Lily Shreave, snapping shut her purse.

Three

Fry's father was the only man that Honey Santana had ever married, and they astonished themselves by staying together seventeen years. The sea change took place after Fry was born. Fry spent two weeks in the hospital, fighting to breathe, and it was during that wrenching time that Honey began hearing musical static in her head; battling uncontrollable spells of apprehension and dread; overreacting, sometimes radically, to the bad behavior of total strangers.

From the day she brought Fry home, Honey was gripped with a fear of losing him to a random act of nature, an incurable illness, or the criminal recklessness of some genetically deficient numskull. The fright sometimes manifested itself in unacceptable ways. Once, when Honey had seen a car speeding down her street, she'd dashed out and hurled a forty-gallon garbage can in its path. Brandishing the demolished receptacle, she'd then accosted the stunned driver. "This could've been my kid you flattened!" she'd screamed. "You could've killed my little boy!" Another time, when Fry was in the fourth grade, she'd watched a motorcycle blow through the school zone and nearly strike one of his classmates. Honey had hopped into her husband's truck and trailed the biker to a tourist bar on Chokoloskee. When the man emerged two hours later, his motorcycle was missing. The next day, a purple plume of smoke led park rangers to a high-end Kawasaki crotch rocket, burned to scrap on a gravel road near the Shark River Slough.

Honey understood that every dickhead she encountered was not necessarily a menace to her son, yet still she struggled with a rabid intolerance of callousness and folly, both of which abounded in South Florida. It exasperated Fry and his father, who couldn't understand how she'd turned out the way she was.

Honey had tried many doctors and many prescriptions, with imperceptible results. Eventually she came to believe that her condition was one that couldn't be treated medically; she was doomed to demand more decency and consideration from her fellow humans than they demanded of themselves. What her husband wrote off as loony obsessiveness, Honey Santana defended as spells of intense and controlled focus. While denying she was mentally unsteady, she never claimed to be normal, either. She was alert to the uncommon impulses that took hold of her like a bewitchment.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm trying to reach a Mr. Boyd Eisenhower." Honey held the receiver in her left hand. In her right was a ballpoint pen, poised over a paper napkin.

"What was the last name?"

"Eisenhower," Honey said, "spelled just like the president."

"I'm sorry, there's no employee here with that name."

"This is RTR, correct? In Fort Worth, Texas?"

"That's right. I show an Elizabeth Eisenberg in Accounting, but no Boyd Eisenhower."

"He's in the telephone solicitations department," Honey said.

"That would be our call center at Relentless, but there's still no Eisenhower listed. Sorry."

Honey hung up. The guy who'd tried to sell her a ranchette on the Suwannee River had apparently given a fake name, or at least a fake surname. It occurred to Honey that Boyd wasn't something that man would make up for himself.

So she waited ten minutes and tried again. As she'd hoped, a different switchboard operator answered. Honey identified herself as an investigator with the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles. There'd been a bad rollover in Denton, she said, involving a man who claimed to work for RTR.

"Unfortunately, his driver's license melted in the fire," Honey said. "We're just trying to confirm an ID."

"What name do you have?" the operator asked.

“Well, that’s the problem. Right now the poor guy can’t remember anything except his first name-Boyd,” Honey said. “He was doin’ about eighty on the interstate when he swerved to miss a rabbit and flipped his car like seven times. Goned his melon pretty bad, but he finally came out of the coma.”

“Did you say ‘Boyd’?”

“That’s correct.” Honey spelled it for the operator. “Is it possible to do an employee search by first name only? If not, we can send an officer over to look through your payroll records.”

“Hold on, I’m scanning the directory,” the operator said.

“I sure appreciate this.” Honey laid on a touch of what she imagined to be a mild Laura Bunker accent. “I tell ya, the guy must have a real soft spot for bunnies-”

“I found only one Boyd,” the operator said. “Last name is Shreave. S-h-r-e-a-v-e.”

Honey Santana scribbled it on the napkin.

“But the thing is, he doesn’t seem to work here anymore,” the operator added. “Says here on my screen that he left the company as of today.”

“What a weird coincidence. Did he resign, or get fired?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any additional information. You say he’s gonna be all right?”

“The doctors are hopeful.” Honey tried to sound encouraging.

“Well, I’ll say a little prayer for him.”

“That’s probably not a bad idea.”

Honey hung up and did a dance through the trailer.

Boyd Shreave saw no reason to inform his wife that he’d been canned. His plan was to persuade Eugenie Fonda to quit the call center and find a day job. That way they could hook up after work and cavort at the apartment until midnight, Lily assuming that he was still pounding the phones. Relentless. He figured it would take weeks for her to notice that he was no longer depositing his paycheck, so paltry was his contribution to the family finances.

At breakfast Lily surprised him by asking, “So, what’s on the schedule today?”

Boyd Shreave had no schedule, as his wife well knew; no hobbies, interests or intellectual appetites. To ingratiate himself with certain bosses and large-account customers, he had over the years taken up (and soon abandoned) tennis, rollerblading, skeet shooting, dry-fly tying, backgammon, contract bridge and even bonsai cultivation. In truth, nothing filled his spare hours more pleasing than daytime television, which never failed to make him feel superior. In particular he was enthralled by the many talk shows that featured dysfunctional cretins debating the paternity of unplanned offspring. To Shreave, their raucous misery was more than idle entertainment; it reaffirmed his own higher place in the natural order. Comfortably stationed with a snack tray in front of the plasma screen, he drew hope from the cavalcade of cursing, frothing idiots-these were the prey, and one day Boyd Shreave would find his niche among the predators. He was sure of it.

“I haven’t got much planned,” he told his wife. “Just hang out and watch TV, I guess.”

“You want to meet for lunch?”

Shreave was rattled by the offer. “Um, I’m supposed to get the oil changed in the car. I just remembered.”

“What time?”

“Noon sharp,” he said.

Lily smiled a smile that Boyd Shreave hadn’t seen in a long time. She said, “Excellent. That leaves us the whole morning.”

“For what?” Shreave croaked.

“Guess.” Lily reached under the table and squeezed him. “You know how long it’s been?”

Shreave plucked her hand from his crotch and edged out of reach.

~~Gravely his wife said, "One hundred and fifty-six days."~~

"Really?" Shreave was confused. In all that time Lily hadn't once complained about his lack of attention, so he'd assumed that the disinterest was mutual.

"That's more than five months," she added.

"Wow," Shreave said.

"Too long, Boyd. Way too long."

"Yeah." Already the back of his neck was moist and clammy.

"What's the matter, honey?" Lily leaned forward, letting her robe fall open. Shreave couldn't help but observe that her breasts seemed larger than Eugenie Fonda's. He wondered if he'd somehow forgotten what they looked like, or if his wife had secretly been to a plastic surgeon.

She touched his arm softly, then lobbed a question that lay there like a ticking grenade: "Boyd, is there something you want to talk to me about?"

Oh Christ, does she know? he wondered anxiously. Or is she fishing?

Working from slickly worded scripts had dulled Shreave's talent for the improvisational lie. He knew he needed something better than an oil change to handle Lily's current line of interrogation.

"It's not you, it's me," he began.

Slowly she pulled her robe closed and crossed her arms.

"It's a flashback from the accident in Arlington," he said, aware that he was raising a touchy subject.

"Three years ago?" Lily raised her eyebrows, but Shreave soldiered on.

"I'm what they call 'clinically depressed.' The doctor says it's affected my...you know..."

"Libido."

"Yeah," he said. "Anyhow, I got some of those pills, but they haven't helped at all."

"What brand? The kind Bob Dole uses?" Lily was very active in the local Republican leadership committee, and a longtime admirer of the former senator from Kansas.

Shreave said, "The exact same stuff, but it doesn't work on me. I still haven't got the slightest interest in...you know..."

"Fucking?"

"Right. Off the agenda completely." He shrugged in resignation.

His wife said, "Well, what do you suppose you're so depressed about?"

"Hell if I know. But the doctor says that's pretty common."

Lily nodded sympathetically. "And who's your doctor?"

"Kennedy," Shreave said, following Eugenie Fonda's presidential advice on made-up names. "Some hotshot shrink over in Irving. Don't worry, he's on the company HMO."

Lily got up to refill his coffee cup, which Shreave interpreted positively. "Is something wrong with your work?" she asked.

"Are you kidding? They love me. I'm up for a promotion."

"That's great news." Lily bit her lip. "This is my fault, too, Boyd. I've been so tied up with the restaurants that I didn't notice what was happening between us."

In fact she'd been very busy-quietly closing a deal to sell her six pizza joints to the Papa John's corporation for a boggling sum of cash and common stock, none of which she intended to share with Boyd Shreave in the upcoming divorce. Lily felt sure that her husband's unfaithfulness would make him an unlikely candidate for alimony in the eyes of most Texas judges, especially the Republican ones. In the meantime, Lily was finding it strangely enjoyable-almost exciting-to toy with him.

She said, "Hey, I've got an idea. Let's get dressed."

Shreave frowned. "Where are we going?"

“It’s a surprise.”

~~“But Judge Joe Brown is on in fifteen minutes.”~~

“Great. Now I’m married to Rain Man.” Lily steered Boyd out of the kitchen, saying, “When was the last time Judge Joe gave you a hard-on?”

Later, in the car, Shreave sat solemn and petrified. He feared that Lily was taking him on a shopping adventure to the adult-video store a few blocks from their house—the same place he’d been renting DVDs for his clandestine visits to Eugenie Fonda’s apartment. Shreave had no faith that the video-store clerk would be merciful enough to pretend not to recognize him, or to not mention the \$37.50 in late fees he’d piled up.

But Lily went speeding past the porn parlor, and Shreave sagged in relief. She wheeled into a busy strip mall and led him into a bagel shop, which he vaguely recalled from a long-ago date, before they were married.

“We came here the morning after our first night together,” Lily reminded him.

“Oh, I remember,” Shreave said.

“The night, or the bagels?”

“Both.” Shreave forced a laugh. He was sweating like a hog with typhoid.

Lily clearly was planning something dramatic, and Shreave waited in a state of pale dread. He couldn’t possibly resume sexual relations with his wife and still carry on with Eugenie; it would be way too much work. While some men were able and even eager to juggle the needs of many women, Shreave withered at the thought. Whether on the job or in the sack, he’d never been burdened with an abundance of ambition.

“We’ll have two raisin cinnamons,” Lily told the waiter, “with cream cheese.”

“And ice water for me,” Shreave added urgently.

For some reason his wife had not removed her sunglasses. She appeared to be smiling to herself as she pulled her frosted hair back into a ponytail. From her handbag she took the car keys, which she let fall with a jingle to the linoleum floor.

“Oops,” she said, and disappeared beneath the tabletop.

Shreave gripped the arms of his chair as if plummeting on a crippled jetliner.

“What are you doing!” he whispered bleakly.

The question was answered by the sound of a zipper, his own. “Sshhh,” came the muffled counsel from his wife. “Just relax, sweetheart.”

Never before had Boyd Shreave felt a need to fake impotence, and he was not up (or rather down) to the task. As Lily rapidly got the better of him, he floundered in a state between panic and marvel—not once in thirty-five years had he been publicly fellated, and now it had happened twice in many weeks, with different women! Most men would have found the coincidence thrilling, but Shreave worried about the heavy implications. He understood that yielding to his wife would officially reinitiate his marital obligations, and compromise his secret life.

He ignored the gazes of other diners and pretended to study the menu listings printed on the paper place mat, all the while endeavoring to compress his knees together. However, Lily would not be dislodged.

Just as surrender seemed imminent, the raisin cinnamon bagels arrived. Shreave seized the moment to stage a mishap, overturning a tumbler of cold water on his lap. Lily came out sputtering from beneath the table, Shreave loudly chastising the innocent waiter for his clumsiness.

The restaurant manager picked up their tab for breakfast, but the couple rode home in a slack and deflated silence.

The circumstances of Sammy Tigertail’s conception had not been concealed from him. His father

drove a Budweiser truck three times a week between Naples and Fort Lauderdale, and was a regular customer at the Miccosukee service plaza where Sammy Tigertail's mother worked in the gift shop. Because she had serious doubts about trying to raise a half-white son on the reservation, Sammy Tigertail's mother reluctantly agreed to let his father keep the boy.

So, for his first fourteen and a half years, Sammy Tigertail was Chad McQueen. He lived in a middle-class subdivision in Broward County with his father and, beginning at age four, a stepmother who aggressively attempted to acculturate him. Growing up, the boy showed no interest in soccer leagues or video games or skateboarding. His passion was roaming the outdoors, and learning the rock music that his father played on the car radio. By the time he was in first grade, the kid was singing along to Creedence and the Stones and the Allman Brothers. Everybody said he was going to turn out fine, despite his Indian genes.

Then one day his father died suddenly. After the funeral, the boy's stepmother drove him back to the Everglades and dropped him at the truck stop. He had sensed it coming, and he was privately looking forward to the move. Every other Sunday his father had taken him to visit his real mother on the Big Cypress, and the boy liked it out there.

"I should've never let go of you," his mom said when he arrived with his suitcase and fishing rod. "This is where you ought to be."

"I believe so," the boy said.

"Remember the time you caught that cottonmouth with your bare hands? You were only seven."

"I didn't know it was poisonous," the boy reminded her. It had been an embarrassing episode. "I thought it was a water snake," he added.

"But you weren't afraid!" his mother said supportively. "That's when I knew you belonged here and not in that other world. First thing we do now is fix your name-starting today you're a Tigertail, same as me."

"Chad Tigertail," the boy said proudly.

His mother winced and shook her head. The boy agreed: Chad was definitely too white for the reservation.

"What about Sammy?" he suggested.

"Perfect. That was your great-grandfather's name."

"Was he a fighter?"

"No, a trapper. But your great-great-great-grandfather was a chief."

"Tiger Tail?" the boy cried excitedly. "The Tiger Tail?"

It was true. Sammy was descended from one of the last great Seminole warriors, Thlocklo Tustenuggee, a cunning leader whose fate Sammy chose to regard as a mystery. Most accounts said the U.S. Army had shipped the chief off to New Orleans, where he'd died of tuberculosis in a stinking military dungeon. But at least one teller of the Tiger Tail legend claimed he'd committed suicide by swallowing ground glass on the ship to Louisiana. Another said he'd escaped to Mexico and ultimately made his way back to Florida, where he'd lived to be a very old man.

Sammy felt honored to be half of a true Tigertail and, except for his Irish blue eyes, he looked full-blooded. To make up for the time lost during his white childhood, he spent hours listening to the stories of the elders. He envied them for having grown up in a time when the tribe lived in relative isolation, buffered by swamp from the other world.

Now things were different. Now there were casinos and hotels and truck stops, and the stampede of outsiders meant big money for the Seminole corporations. A few of the tribal bosses even flew around Florida in private jets and helicopters, which impressed some people but not Sammy Tigertail. He remained on the reservation and worked hard, although his frequent bad luck caused others to whisper that he was cursed by the paleness in his past. It was a thought that also had occurred

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