

# Principles of Navigation



*a novel by*

**Peter W. Fong**

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*For Sarah*



Barnaby Conrad III



# **Principles of Navigation**

# 1

The neurologist advised Rigger to avoid light, sound, and alcohol. Not directly, but with his white-coated back turned, one finger pointing at the gray images of a brain pinned to the wall. Instead of cause or cure, he talked of association and indication, like a lawyer sidestepping a judgment, or a loner dodging the word *love*.

Rigger, watching the doctor's finger, thought of a tern dipping and weaving above the waves. When a lull came, he told about standing on the deck of the boat with the twin diesels grumbling, their revolutions vibrating up the bones of his legs and into his spine. About trolling at eight knots through a heavy chop under a cloudless sky, knees locked under the gunwale, staring hard into the sun's double at the bubble trails of the baits. He even told about draining a pint of rum and a six-pack of beer in an afternoon, just to keep himself on an even keel.

The doctor turned away from the wall then, and Rigger could see by the earnest look in his eyes that he was puzzled. "Eight knots," said the doctor. "Isn't that a little fast?"

"Not for billfish," Rigger told him. "Most boats can't go fast enough to keep the damn bait out of their mouths. We've caught fish at twice that speed—too lazy to bring the lures in, just cruising to another spot on the weed line, when, *whango!* Fish on. Before you can get down from the bridge, they've got three hundred yards of line out."

The doctor switched off the light. "Amazing," he said, with a weary insincerity. "Let me know when you're back on your feet. I'd like to try it someday."

Rigger didn't mention that he planned to be back on the water tomorrow. Instead, he handed the doctor a business card—The Kentucky Clipper: Captains Bally Owings and Rigger Tavernier—and told him they'd waive the charter fee any time he could make it to Coral Key. What the hell, he thought. You tried to give as good as you got.

The neurologist's office was in a medical complex with its own multi-level parking garage. Bally's sister Jenna was waiting on the top floor of the lot, taking in the view of Biscayne Bay. She had the sunroof of her new Mercedes open and was blasting the stereo as if she owned the place, which in a way she did. When Rigger rapped on the roof she turned the music down, pulled her bare feet off the dash, and sat up more or less straight.

"What's the verdict?" she asked, smiling through the sunroof. "Nine months to live? A year, maybe?"

Rigger rested his chin on the warm metal. "Worse than that," he said. "Ten years, maybe twenty—with time off for good behavior."

Jenna's eyes were round; they seemed to gleam like blue beacons. To Rigger, she was a healthy girl of thirty-one, a couple years younger than Bally, and eighteen less faded than himself. She had married a numb nut of a man who Bally referred to as The Fencepost. They had a canal-front house in Pompano, but Jenna spent a lot of time in the Keys. Once in a while, when they were drunk as mullet, she'd threaten to leave her husband and move aboard the Clipper. "Wait a minute sister," Bally would say, "the Clipper only has one berth, and that's Rigger's." Jenna would laugh and nudge Rigger's foot under the table, as if she were asking him to laugh too.

Now Jenna looked serious. "Damn," she said. "I really thought you were sick."

Rigger opened the passenger door and sank into the leather seat. "I think I *am* sick," he said. Then he turned his head to look at the blue-and-white cooler behind them.

Jenna lifted the lid for him. "I should know better," she said, turning those blue beacons hard on his face.

He looked away just long enough to pop the beer, sip foam from the rim of the can, and rest the can between his knees. Jenna was still watching him. "Don't worry," he said. "I won't spill a drop."

Jenna leaned across the car, her fingers plucking the beer without touching the canvas of his shorts. She drank until her

cheeks were full, made a face like a fish, threatening to spray him, then swallowed. She leaned across a second time to return the can and, on her way back up, barely brushed his cheek with her lips. She started the engine and backed away from the view of the bay, stopping halfway through the turn to wipe her mouth with the smooth skin of her forearm.

“All right, Rigger,” she said. “Just don’t ask me for help with the good behavior.”

To return to street level, they had to navigate a corkscrew-shaped ramp. Jenna put the Mercedes in second gear and never touched the brake. Watching the red-and-white caution signs spin by made Rigger feel like he was stuck inside a barber pole. A fine sweat started from his forehead. When he closed his eyes the top of his scalp lifted off, and for a minute he thought he was going to lose it again.

The neurologist had mentioned something about dizziness, about an inflammation of the inner ear. He had prescribed two weeks of rest, then a follow-up exam. If there was anything there at all, it was very small, probably benign. He might never have another incident like yesterday’s—those were the doctor’s words, *an incident*—but you never knew. His profession was full of surprises. Some patients showed signs of vertigo, became easily disoriented, or lost their sense of direction. There was medication, of course, but in Rigger’s case they could afford to wait and see.

Jenna pulled into line to pay the parking attendant. “Another dollar for Daddy,” she said idly, tapping her foot on the gas pedal.

Rigger reached slowly for the beer, lifted the can to his lips, and drank. He thought he did a good job of keeping his hand from shaking. Yesterday, when the ambulance had met the Clipper at the dock, he’d refused treatment.

The paramedic had shrugged his shoulders. “It’s your funeral,” he’d said. “Sign here.”

Rigger’s fingers had rattled so badly that he could hardly form the letters of his own name. After the ambulance left, he and Bally went into the tiki bar for a drink. It was still happy hour, and

the buffet table was spread with freebies: batter-fried mushrooms, teriyaki chicken wings, sesame rolls stuffed with Swiss cheese and ham.

Bally picked up a plate and heaped it high with food. "You scared the shit out of me," he said, biting into a sesame roll with his straight, white teeth. "When I looked down off the bridge and saw you lying on the deck . . ."

Rigger was empty inside, but bar food didn't seem like the right thing. He was still out there, on his back. He could still feel the deck underneath him, while his mind spun like a penny on pavement. Before Bally had noticed what was going on, Rigger had had time to take a complete inventory of his forty-nine-year-old body. And nothing worked. He couldn't move his arms or legs, couldn't make a fist, couldn't even blink. Each time the hull rocked in the swells, trickles of ice water drained from the fish boxes and pooled under his neck. But he couldn't register wet or cold. He tried to think of something to say, to get Bally's attention, but he'd lost his tongue too. There were lights going on and off behind his eyes, and the sky gleamed like a sheet of aluminum foil.

They had been on the water since dawn, loaded with diesel fuel and ice, no paying customers to distract them. By noon they were well outside the reef, fishing the hundred-fathom curve, dragging four big plastic lures the thickness and length of a forearm. One minute Rigger had been admiring the spread of baits, the way they jumped and flashed in the wake exactly like a school of bonito, and the next he was down. Bally had run full throttle to the dock, pausing only to reel in the lines. By the way he was eating, Rigger could tell it had spooked him. "Make me a plate too," he told Bally. "I'll get us a drink."

Pammie, the bartender, had heard Bally call the marine dispatcher on the VHF radio. When Rigger leaned up against the bar, his hands flat on the teak, she grabbed them up and held them between her own two palms, wet from washing glasses.

"I'm OK," he told her. "But you better make Bally's a double."

She laughed, pulled him across the bar, kissed him once on each cheek, and then hard on the mouth. The touch of her lips had shocked him back into something like life. He had watched her kiss Bally before; they looked good together. Bally was taller, younger, nonchalantly tanned; Pammie was young too, but her skin was white from her day job, and she had to stand on her tiptoes to kiss Bally's chin.

As Jenna pulled out from the shade of the garage and into the sunlit traffic, it struck Rigger that he'd been kissed by both Bally's girl and Bally's sister in the space of twenty-four hours. And then he wondered why no one ever offered to kiss him when he was well.

He hazarded a glance in the rearview mirror. Was it as bad as that? True, he was paler than usual. There were purplish moons under his eyes, a chip in one front tooth, and some graying stubble on his chin. If anyone looked closer, he might mark a few regrets. But all in all, it was not an ugly face. It was the face of a man who'd spent some time on the water, a man who'd survived without the benefit of sunscreen or orthodontics.

He looked over at Jenna. They had passed Homestead and were on that treacherously straight stretch of Route 1 that crossed the Everglades before jumping Barnes Sound to Key Largo. She smiled carelessly, steering with just the tips of her fingers. A few strands of her blonde hair streamed out the sunroof. She and Bally were two of a kind. Not spoiled exactly; he liked them too much to call them spoiled. They just weren't like him.

Bally was short for Ballinger. What he knew about fishing when Rigger met him wouldn't have filled a bait box. He'd taught Bally everything: how to tie the Bimini twist, how to bill sailfish, how to lip-gaff tarpon. The family was from old Kentucky somewhere; Jenna claimed they had a county named after them. They were horse people who liked to get wet once in a while too. Bally's father had wanted his boy to become a veterinarian, had even forced him through two years of vet school in Gainesville, but finally gave up when Bally drove down to the Keys for spring

break and refused to go back. It was the old man's money that bankrolled the boat, so on the Christian holidays they polished the teak and stocked the bar with all the high-life liquors Rigger never bought for himself.

The Owings, Rigger thought, were smart money. They had the knack of knowing when to get in, when to get out. When the bank repossessed Rigger's old boat, Bally bought it at auction, then paid Rigger to spruce it up a bit. They had replaced some trim, cleaned out the bilge, and put in a new galley—mostly cosmetic stuff. Bally had changed the name from Reefhopper to Delusion, then sold it to a retired accountant from Pennsylvania at a hefty profit. He used that money for the down payment on the Clipper—a forty-six-foot Rybovich Sportfisherman. Classic boat: twin diesels, tuna tower, three fighting chairs, self-baling cockpit. Then he hired Rigger as captain and arranged a berth at The Palms Resort.

Five years later, Rigger was still appreciative, though perhaps not quite as impressed. When Bally had suggested the neurologist, Rigger reminded him that he'd studied horse anatomy, not human.

"Hey," Bally had said, "people don't just collapse for no reason. For all I know you might have had a stroke or something. What if we'd had a charter on board? What would I have done? Pulled a sheet over you?" Bally smiled his paying-customer smile and lowered his voice a notch. "Uh, don't worry folks," he droned, "Captain Tavernier is just having one of his little spells. He'll snap out of it shortly."

Rigger had been a bit woozy or he would've put up a better fight. What good were doctors, anyway? Broken bones or a case of pneumonia, maybe. But how could they tell what was going on inside your head? He had just wanted to outlive that afternoon—outlive it and forget about it.

But Bally had said, "Look, I'll call Jenna. She can pick you up in the morning and take you to Miami. My old man owns an office building there; we'll get someone to check you out—professional courtesy."

So now Rigger knew about CAT scans. A technician could take pictures of your brain as easily as the kid behind the deli counter could slice salami. Jenna laughed when he told her about the white metal and whirring machinery. They were driving across the bridge to Coral Key, the evening haze low on the water. The sun looked as if it might settle down on the double yellow line, like they could drive right into it and never see land again. Rigger opened the last beer from the cooler and passed it to her.

Jenna had her sunglasses on and was peering under the visor at the road. "So what did the doctor really say?" she asked, squinting.

He'd been working on his story since they left the mainland, the last fifty miles or so. He knew he would have to tell Bally something reasonable, but not too scary.

"Well," Rigger said, "his best guess was some type of migraine attack. I can't remember what he called it exactly—'migraine aura' or something like that."

Jenna looked skeptical. "I thought migraines were what depressed housewives got." She handed the beer back to him.

Rigger drained the can and stowed the empty under the seat. She was probably right. His ex had had migraines. She would draw the blinds and lie in bed curled tight as a crawfish. Her doctor said all she needed was a change of pace, a different routine. The next month she left him.

"This is different," he said. "It's more unpredictable."

When they arrived at the resort, the Clipper was dark. Two of yesterday's lures still dangled from the outriggers, and the sliding door to the cabin yawned open. A brown pelican squatted on the transom, eyeing the live well. They got out and sat on the warm hood of the car.

"Want to come up to the bar for a drink?" Jenna asked.

Rigger shook his head. He wasn't avoiding alcohol, but he didn't want to face the bar either. "We've got a charter tomorrow," he said. "I should clean up the boat some."

"Bally should've done that," said Jenna.



“Bally’s got a lot on his mind,” Rigger said, although he didn’t know that for a fact. “Why don’t you go up, tell him I’m fine, and tell him that we’ve got paying customers at eight tomorrow morning?”

With the sun’s passing, the air had gone soft as water. Jenna put her arm around his shoulder. “Are you really fine?” she asked.

“Finest kind,” he said. “Do you need a place to sleep tonight?”

Jenna laughed. “I thought I’d rent a villa, live it up a bit. Cable, hot tub, room service—all that stuff.”

She lifted her arm from his shoulder and bounced to her feet, facing him, blue eyes wide open. When she held out her hands, he grabbed them, and she yanked him up too.

Rigger had no idea she was so strong. His head drifted upward like a diver’s breath of air. He threw his arms around her to fight off the fall and felt his face pitch forward into the perfume of her hair. When the wave of dizziness passed, Jenna had him firmly by the waist, kissing him and pushing him away with what seemed like the same motion.

“You’re a sick, sick man,” she said, half-smiling, arms folded beneath her breasts.

Rigger planted his feet on the dock and waited for the blood to return to his head. “Thanks for the ride,” he said. It was all he could think of at the time. When his legs steadied, he turned and took a few steps toward the dock.

Jenna got back in the Mercedes, then waved a hand out the sunroof. “Get a good night’s sleep,” she said. “I’ll stop by in the morning.”

Rigger managed one foot on the gunwale and one hand on the gin pole, then swung himself into the cockpit. When he looked up, the sky was as blue-black as the bay. The pelican still squatted dimly on the transom, unruffled by the whole affair. Rigger switched on the cockpit lights: two bright, halogen bulbs mounted high on the tuna tower. A couple of mullet were floating belly up in the live well, so he fished them out and tossed them into the pelican’s beak. Poor bird had probably been waiting all day for a handout. It blinked, spread its wings, and tilted its head back to

swallow. Rigger watched the fish bump down its gullet, then prodded the bird into the water and mopped the transom where it had shit on the teak.

He was surprised that Bally had left their tackle out. The island wasn't what it used to be, and each outfit, with its gold-plated reel and custom-wrapped rod, was worth a couple thousand bucks. Rigger knew it was Bally's money, of course. That's why he did most of the mate's work on a boat with two captains. Still, it bothered him. Good tackle in good working order catches more fish; it was as simple as that. Even gold would rust if you didn't rinse off the salt every day.

He unclipped the two outside lines from the riggers and reeled in the slack, retrieved the flatlines from the stern rod-holders, then stuck all four outfits upright in the rocket launcher. He hosed down the rods and reels with fresh water, then began rinsing the marlin lures—molded plastic heads and plastic shimmy skirts, each hiding a pair of stainless steel hooks. The goggle eyes of the lures wobbled crazily in the spray.

After stowing the tackle in the cabin, he climbed onto the bridge with a beer. Bally had left all the instruments on too: VHF, LORAN, radar, depth sounder. Their dials and displays winked at him. He'd never been able to afford such gadgets when he'd had the Reefhopper. And he hadn't needed ten thousand dollars' worth of electronics to tell him where he was on the Gulf Stream. He just headed south every morning, then used the compass to make his way back to the dock. If the current was really ripping, he'd head a few degrees to the west on the way in, or follow a weed line along the reef until he picked up Dorado Light.

He had been careful, and he'd kept his eyes open too. Even if he had no idea how deep he was, or how far off the reef, he could find fish and bring them home. Most of it was anticipation. If you spotted a frigate bird circling, you got the baits under him and got ready, because the bird was probably following a fish—sailfish or marlin or big bull dolphin. If you found a board floating in a mess of sargasso weed—whether it was just a two-by-four or a full sheet of plywood—then you fished it hard, especially if it had

barnacles on it, because you knew there would be bait in the shade of that board, and you knew there would be fish waiting for that bait to make a wrong move.

To Rigger, there was no such thing as an empty sky or an empty sea. If you didn't anticipate action, then you wouldn't be paying attention, and you might miss out. He could do it on the water, but not on land. He hadn't expected the recession to hit Florida, then he hadn't guessed it would hurt the charter business, then he hadn't predicted it would last. He missed three payments and lost Reefhopper to the bank. For Bally, it had been easy pickings.

That's how Bally liked to fish too. He would choose a spot on the chart—miles offshore, a little bump in the sea bottom where the current wells up and draws bait—punch the coordinates into the LORAN, turn on the autopilot, and kick back until the alarm went off. The Clipper would steer itself toward the spot, a little electronic buzzer would sound, and the LORAN would flash “here.” Rigger always thought it should say, “Here, dummy.”

He finished the beer and opened the cabinet under the wheel. Bally kept a fifth of rum cradled in the fire extinguisher bracket, for safety's sake. Rigger had a taste and wondered what sort of sign he could've spotted to help him anticipate the end of his marriage, what bird flying or driftwood floating would have signaled that she was about to leave. He supposed that if he'd looked for trouble as hard as he'd looked for fish he would've seen it coming. But wouldn't it have come anyway?

With fishing, if you spotted a kink in the shock leader, any little nick or abrasion, you cut it off and retied. You checked the knots and swivels, sharpened the hooks, and set the drag a safe distance from the breaking point, because any weakness could cost you a fish—not a little fish, but a big one—the one you've waited your whole life to catch.

## 2

Although this wasn't strictly true, Jenna had always considered herself a poor hand at manipulation. There were times, of course, when it was trouble enough to talk her own self into motion, much less someone else. But it was nothing to convince Daddy that Post's company would be just the ticket for a weekend of claimers and allowances. There would be plenty of buyers in the grandstand: some Californians, some Japanese, a Saudi sheik or two. There was nobody like a licensed vet when you needed an expert opinion on horseflesh. She made one phone call, Daddy made another and, *presto*, her husband was happily packing for a trip to Kentucky. That meant four days of possibility.

It almost scared her for a moment, how everything had seemed to come together: a line on the chart, a horse race, an empty seat on a flight out of town. She would ferry Post to the airport, get her hair trimmed and textured, and then head south with a passion. But she had managed only that first step when Bally called.

"I'm worried," he'd said. That was her brother, in a nutshell. He was worried, but not enough to drive Rigger himself. So Jenna had cancelled one appointment to keep another, shifted from siren to nursemaid.

Which hadn't been easy. She was not one of those women who tried on a new personality with every change of season. She might not have known who, precisely, she was supposed to be, but that was not a new emotion. She'd always been that way. That's what she would have told her therapist: nothing new. Not inside. There was never anything new inside.

Since breakfast that morning, she'd made three trips between Coral Gables and Coral Key—two southbound, one northbound. She'd paid her tolls on the Homestead Extension, waited patiently to pass on the eighteen-mile stretch, and crossed bridge after bridge, burning none of them behind her. Then she'd turned tail

and done it again. Six hours on U.S. 1, the most dangerous stretch of road in America, and the scene of countless casualties in the undeclared war between the quick and the desperate, between the young guns striving to outrace indifference and the old fogies who thought scenery could only be appreciated through a windshield.

Of course, she'd had company for two out of three laps. And that hadn't been easy, either. Jenna had grown so used to joking with Rigger, to teasing him over drinks, that she didn't think they could have a serious conversation. Her plan relied mainly on body language, but she didn't know how far to go. On the surface, Rigger seemed fine. A little played out, maybe, but still as thirsty as a cut rose, still appealingly distant, still grateful. So few people were genuinely glad to see her anymore that she would've kissed him just for that. And she had done her level best to keep it friendly—a companionable kiss, not a confrontation or a challenge.

She couldn't say that he had fainted in her arms, but it was close. That, Jenna had to admit, had never happened with Post in all their mated years. Maybe she had swooned a time or two, but not him. Post could keep possession of his faculties like nobody she'd ever known. Drunk or stoned, beaten or triumphant, he always held a part of himself in reserve, a secret well of strength or sobriety.

Jenna supposed that she had that strength, too, but it had never been tested. Someone else had always been there to strike a match or take the wheel: Post, of course, for years now, and before that, Daddy, and even sometimes Bally. She had actually considered telling Bally, not because she needed her brother's help, but because he might have been just keen enough to rock her boat.

But after a quick soak in the hot tub, and some room-service oysters, and a toke or two, she decided against it. She took a long, soapy shower instead, shaved her legs and underarms, then paced back and forth before the big mirror. This had been a regular observance in college, something her roommates would

practice before every big night out. They told each other that their bodies were perfect, that they were too smooth, too splendid. And this was close to the truth, close enough to be treated as no small comfort when any one of them returned to the apartment alone.

Jenna herself had given it up after graduation, along with cigarettes, amphetamines, and petty shoplifting. After she married Post, there were fewer cheap thrills. Not because she didn't appreciate them anymore, but because there were so many others available. All her desires seemed so minor, so easy to gratify. Giving in to each one meant only that it would be replaced by another little want, so that she had only to finish the breakfast dishes before thinking "lunch."

Until the big one hit, the one true desire that had managed to dodge consummation, month after endless month. Another woman would've launched a career instead, hired herself out as a kindergarten teacher, bought a dog. But Jenna wanted nothing less than a life.

She went through all the stages: ravenous, exasperated, timid as a cat just kicked from its dish. Friends would grasp her above the elbow and look earnestly into her eyes. "I saw you in a dream," one of them said. "Have you put on weight?"

There were false positives that provoked manic highs. She would rise like a kite, then dive face-first into an empty pool. She had some air again now, but she didn't dare look down. This wasn't like walking from the college bookstore with a pilfered copy of *Sense and Sensibility* under her coat. Or even like breezing through customs with a half-pound of hashish hammered thin as flake pastry and rolled into her panty hose. Whether her plan worked or not, life would be at least slightly different. And if she was found out, then all hell might break loose.

In the grand scheme of things, Jenna didn't feel well prepared. She could guess the sort of questions her therapist would have asked, about her levels of transactional trust and the condition of her mother wound. But there was no time for these questions. She had to live first. To wake, eat, drink, sleep, and breathe. How

did people ever find time for therapy, to work on the self like a full-time job? If she'd reflected on the reasons for everything she had done—or was about to do—then she never could have begun.

After her session with the mirror, Jenna stepped into one of the hotel's monogrammed bathrobes: P for Palms, but of course she thought, "P for Post." Then she moved to the bed and climbed in on her side. Her side. Because Post always slept better with Jenna on his left. Maybe this happened to even the best of people, to even the best of marriages.

She felt sorry for herself then, full of half-baked delusions that sopped up her life like sponge cake.

But that didn't last long. After a few minutes, she sat up again and dialed room service, requesting a tray of seasonal fresh fruit, a fifth of rum, and a liter of tonic. She found it comforting beyond belief that her own paltry concerns were by no means everyone's. How could she go on if everybody knew how little it would take to make her happy?

She fixed herself a drink, then stowed the bottles in the minibar, where they would come in handy tomorrow. The fruit was artfully arranged: alternating slivers of cantaloupe, honeydew, and pineapple, rayed like the spokes of a wheel, then topped by a mound of strawberries. But the strawberries were watery and overlarge, the melon rubbery and tasteless, all of them picked too soon. She nibbled at the pineapple and drank the rum, trying to concentrate on what came next.

It had been easy with Post. There was a clambake on a Cape Cod beach, organized by his alumni association. Jenna had gone with a friend who was sleeping with one of Post's teammates. They had talked off and on during the afternoon, and every time she saw him, she put her hands in the pockets of her shorts. When sunset came, they were sitting together on a block of driftwood, thighs barely touching. She had eaten so much lobster and drunk so much beer that even the Atlantic seemed to relax between waves. Neither of them spoke, but it seemed inevitable that they would kiss.

A sort of cocoon formed around them, warm and hazy. Jenna leaned imperceptibly in Post's direction, each instant pausing like a drop of water on the lip of a leaky faucet. She could hear waves sifting through sand, liquid pouring into a paper cup, laughter, the beat of her heart, an occasional spark from the bonfire. He tasted of butter.

Jenna moved into the middle of the bed and buried her head under the covers. Her blood was running so hard and fast that she could feel her teeth vibrating in the current. She tried to breathe slowly, deliberately, to make her body dissolve beneath the comforter. She worked herself into a sort of trance, the years sliding from her, some full, some empty, until she was little more than a child in a sandbox: ordering, admiring, kicking aside. It was a deliciously disembodied feeling, vacant, guiltless.

Into this hollow swam an image from her childhood: nine plush bears, ranked in a row. She had resolved to prefer one above the others, and planted an exploratory kiss on each in turn. She had always liked to pick and choose.

Before losing interest in children, Jenna's mother had used to display two or three outfits on her daughter's bed in the morning. Sometimes Jenna would wear one of them. Sometimes she would reject them all and make her own selection from the closet. Sometimes she would feel overwhelmed and allow her mother to dress her as she saw fit. But even in that situation Jenna craved the choice. If her mother tried to pull a corduroy jumper over her head without consulting her first, there would be tears.

One of the few clear memories she has of them together takes place in Jenna's bedroom. It is evening. Her mother is unassailably beautiful in blue silk and pearls. Jenna has just fled the tub, scooted to her room, and rejected the nightgown chosen for her. Her mother looks down, one hand lifting the thick shank of golden hair from the nape of her neck. Jenna can see herself, too, naked and shivering, her arms folded over a damp belly. She is crying purposefully. Daddy is in the living room, joking with the babysitter and a childish version of Bally. Jenna can't tell whether her mother means to scold or console, but it's plain that she can't



pick up Jenna without ruining her dress. Her mother's elegant nose wrinkles, and for a moment she looks as if she might cry too. But instead, she laughs. She flings the nightgown on Jenna's bed and quits the room, without bothering to close the door on her way out.

Jenna considers this memory clear because she is in it. In most of the others, she is locked behind her own eyelashes, her vision clouded by awe or jealousy. All she can see is her incomparable mother.

Not the one she would have chosen, she realizes, with a sort of dreamy disloyalty. Given the choice, Jenna would have preferred a more substantial presence, the sort of woman that Daddy could have safely divorced, leaving him with a brace of well-tended toddlers and a cache of sure-fire recipes: crabmeat canapés, tombstone pudding, and fried apple pie.

The Owings were not known for their long lives. They passed on in youth or in folly. Daddy's parents went together, on a fog-bound stretch of Interstate 75, before Jenna was old enough to remember them as much more than a moustache and a whiff of lavender. If she wanted a glimpse of her own grandchildren, she would have to act, to arouse when desirable, and confuse when practical. This was no time for light heads or weak knees. She knew what she needed to do, and she slept on it.

### 3

The next day's charter turned out to be a couple. Rigger had fallen asleep on the bridge, slumped forward in the captain's chair with his cheek on the control panel. He heard a woman's voice calling "Good morning" and, for a moment, he thought it was Jenna. The sun was low and bright over the island, and a warm westerly breeze stirred the harbor. Although he couldn't remember stowing the rum bottle, it was locked tight in the bracket again, and only about half empty.

The woman stood on her tiptoes and waved. "Hello," she said. "We're a little early. Can we get in?"

"Sure," Rigger said, rubbing the soreness out of his cheek. "I was just listening to the weather report. We should have a fine day." He tucked in his shirt and climbed down into the cockpit. The man on the dock was very tall. Looking up at him from the deck of the boat, Rigger felt less like himself, diminished somehow. The woman was about Rigger's height—five-ten or so—and she seemed dwarfed too. Both of them were dressed in tennis whites. Rigger held out his hand and helped the woman down the step, then turned to help the man, but he had already jumped aboard.

"You ever play basketball?" Rigger asked.

The woman gave him a bored smile. "That's the first thing everyone asks," she said.

Rigger blinked. From the way that she slipped her hands into the pockets of her shorts, then shrugged, he could see that she had already lumped him in with everybody else in the world.

"You folks make yourselves comfortable," he said. "Captain Owings is in the café finishing his breakfast. I'll go tell him we're ready to cast off."

He jogged up the dock toward the restaurant, just to clear his head. He felt reasonably fine until he remembered the trip to the neurologist. Avoid light, sound, and alcohol? Hell, his life was sparse enough already. Except for Jenna and Pammie, he had no

women friends. He could still feel Jenna's hands on his waist, steadying him. She was married; she was Bally's sister. What had she meant by that kiss?

When he stepped into the café, Bally was at the register, paying his check.

"We have guests," Rigger said. "Go down and entertain them while I grab a cup of coffee."

Bally didn't look unhappy to see him. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Pammie and I really tied one on. Jenna gave us the report—only migraine, right? I wanted to haul your ass up to the bar, but she said you needed some sleep."

Rigger pushed open a door marked "kanes" and stopped halfway through. The doctor *had* mentioned migraine, but he'd also cited unusual swelling, a possible growth and, while shuffling through the film, murmured something about occasional nausea and recurring dizziness.

"Jenna was right," Rigger said over his shoulder. "I'm fine. Let's catch some fish today."

Bally nodded, looking relieved.

Rigger let the door swing shut behind him. It was cool and green inside the men's room. The whole resort had been decorated with a Hawaiian theme, right down to the palm fronds over the toilets. As he understood it, *kanes* meant men, and *wahines* meant women. He had no idea if the women got palm fronds, too, but they deserved them. He splashed a few handfuls of cold water on his face and neck, then wandered back into the café for some coffee-to-go and a couple of box lunches for the charter.

By the time he got back to the boat, Bally had warmed up the engines and rigged four outfits: two fifty-pound-class rods for tuna, and two thirty-pound-class for surface trolling.

"Kurt and Marie tell me they've never been big-game fishing before," Bally said, as Rigger loaded the lunches into the refrigerator. "So we'll use the heavier tackle today, make it a little easier on them."

“And tougher on the fish,” Rigger said, smiling, starting up the banter they would maintain for eight hours on the water.

Bally winked at Kurt first, then Marie. Unlike Rigger, he enjoyed this part of the charter business, the picking and the grinning. Even if they caught nothing but sunburn, he wanted their clients to have a good time.

As Bally climbed the ladder to the bridge, Rigger cast off the two stern lines, then went forward along the rail. He uncleated the bow lines, coiled them, and hung them on the pilings for their return. These familiar tasks, with their familiar movements, never failed to both rouse and settle him.

The Clipper nosed out of her slip and into the little bay that fronted the resort.

“Let’s run out to the Humps today,” Bally called. “Catch these folks some tuna.”

The Humps were about thirty miles offshore, two underwater mountains that shot to within a hundred feet of the surface and created a rip in the Gulf Stream. The shifting currents attracted baitfish and, at this time of year, the baitfish drew blackfin tuna and amberjack. The whole business could be that predictable, as consistent as a calendar, as reliable as rain.

“Sure,” Rigger said. “Take your time heading out. I’ll run two lines long while I set up the downriggers. Maybe we’ll pick up a few dolphin.”

Bally gave him a thumbs-up and pointed the Clipper into the channel. When Rigger returned to the cockpit, Kurt and Marie had both opened beers and were sitting in the fighting chairs.

“Have a beer, Captain,” said Marie. “We’re on vacation.”

Rigger wasn’t sure what his drinking habits and their vacation had to do with each other, but he liked these two better already. As they ran past Dorado Light, the Clipper up on plane and cutting smoothly through a light starboard sea, he tried to tell them about bluewater fishing. He showed them how to use the chair and their legs to fight a fish, how to pump up a big tuna that had sounded in six hundred feet of ocean. He let them watch as he clipped a line into each outrigger and set the baits skipping down

the face of the wake. When he mentioned dolphin, Rigger noticed Marie's lips press tight, so he explained that these were fish, not escapees from Flipper's Sea School, and that the restaurant at the resort called them by their Hawaiian name: *mahi-mahi*. Then he told her how big dolphin often run in pairs—a bull and a cow—and how a fish will often follow its hooked partner right to the boat.

"If you get another bait in the water," Rigger said, "you can usually catch both fish."

"That's sad," said Kurt.

"No sadder than killing one and leaving the other lonely."

Marie set her lips again, so Rigger changed the subject. They told him that Kurt was a basketball player after all, a second-string forward for Atlanta. Marie was a flight attendant, and adjusted her schedule to match Kurt's when the team was on the road. It sounded like a good life to Rigger, traveling together like that. He had just stood up to get them all another beer when the line snapped from the port outrigger.

"Fish on!" he yelled to Bally.

Then he picked up the rod, drove the hook home with two smooth pulls, and set the butt into the gimbal of Kurt's fighting chair. "OK," Rigger said. "She's all yours."

Bally backed off on the throttle while Rigger cranked in the other lines. When he checked on the chair again, Kurt was just holding the rod, watching his spool empty.

Rigger pointed in the direction of the fish. Bally put the Clipper in reverse and backed down hard while Kurt worked furiously at the reel handle. Marie got out a camera and started snapping pictures. The sea had picked up a bit, and they took a little spray over the transom. The warm water felt good on Rigger's skin. He watched Kurt regain most of the line he'd lost but, when the Clipper got close, the fish sounded. The line hissed straight down into the blue and Kurt's big right hand jumped away from the spool.

"Ease up," Rigger said, as Bally pulled the engines back to idle. He knelt by Kurt's side and carefully tightened the drag another

pound or so. He didn't think it was a big fish, and he was right. The fish stopped.

Kurt pumped and reeled until the double line appeared, which meant the fish was forty feet away. Bally eased the Clipper ahead. Rigger tugged a cotton glove onto his left hand and picked up a gaff with his right. When the double line was on the reel, he leaned out over the gunwale, grasped the leader to steady the fish, and buried the gaff hook into the thickest part of the body, right behind the head.

It was a small yellowfin tuna, about twenty-five pounds. Rigger swung it aboard. Marie whooped and clapped. Rigger turned the fish towards the sun, to show off the bright hues of its trailing fins and finlets, the hothouse yellow of its dorsal.

"It's like a canary," said Marie.

Kurt giggled, an elated little laugh that sounded odd coming from him. "The biggest fish of my life," he said, "and she calls it a canary."

"No," Marie said. "The *yellow* is like a canary." Her hair was wet with spray and dangled in loose clumps about her face. "Stand next to the fish, dummy. I'll take your picture."

Rigger gripped the gaff handle with both hands and hoisted the tuna high. Thick blood welled from the gaff wound, and more blood dripped red down the fish's silvery flank. A low wave slapped broadside against the hull, rocking the deck. Kurt lurched back on his heels just as Marie hit the shutter and, when one of his long, flailing arms struck Rigger in the chest, he went down too.

This time, Rigger was more in control. He pushed away the tuna and the gaff—with its six-inch stainless steel hook—then managed to get both hands down to break his fall. Kurt landed in a heap of limbs, looking surprised, but amused. Marie was doubled over, laughing. From a sitting position, Rigger watched Bally's reaction on the bridge, and saw the customary smile fade to concern. He thought of something to say, and said it.

"Hope you got a picture of that."

Marie straightened up and shook the wet hair from her eyes. “Sorry,” she said. “I should’ve, but it was too damn funny.”

Bally climbed down from the bridge. He helped Kurt up first, then Rigger. Kurt had contrived to get fish blood on his hands, face, and shirt. His nose wrinkled at the rank, rusty smell of tuna. He stood wobbling a little, holding his hands stiffly away from his clothes. Rigger picked up the fish by the hard wrist at the base of its tail, opened the fish box, and laid it on ice.

Marie took Kurt by the elbow and steered him toward the cockpit sink. “C’mon big boy,” she said. “Let’s get you cleaned up a bit.”

Bally looked at Rigger. “You all right?” he asked quietly.

Rigger nodded. “Everything seems to be in good working order, Captain.”

“That’s a fine tuna,” Bally said, loud enough for Kurt and Marie to hear, then added in the quiet voice, “Why don’t you take the wheel for the rest of the day—I can keep these folks busy.”

Because Rigger wasn’t feeling particularly sociable anymore, he agreed.

“We’re only about a mile off the Humps,” Bally said. “We’ll let Marie catch one, then head in.”

Rigger gave Bally a brief salute to let him know that he appreciated the offer. It could be a lot quieter at the helm than on deck.

As soon as he was on the bridge, Rigger unlatched the fire extinguisher bracket and had a drink. He brought the Clipper up to speed and checked the heading on the LORAN, but didn’t bother with the autopilot. He liked to feel the rudders himself.

When he looked back down into the cockpit, Bally was rummaging through the first-aid kit. Rigger watched as Bally handed two seasickness pills to Kurt, who smiled weakly before washing them down with beer.

The LORAN flashed “here,” so he throttled back and climbed into the tower for a better view. A flock of terns was working just to the south, diving and circling over a school of baitfish that some

predator had scared to the surface. He dragged the lures around the edge of the school without drawing a strike.

Kurt was bent over the gunwale, retching. Bally had him by the belt loops or he might have fallen overboard. After Kurt was finished, Bally and Marie helped him into a fighting chair. His head hung loosely over the backrest, eyes closed.

Rigger signaled Bally to set out the downriggers—two big cannonballs of lead which allow the baits to run deep without adding any actual weight to the line. The depth sounder was marking fish right over the Humps, suspended about forty feet below the surface. He held up four fingers, and Bally nodded. Rigger swung the Clipper in a big slow circle, then tightened the arc so the baits would cut through one edge of the school.

Both reels sung out at the same time. Two big fish. Marie fought the first one until the back of her shirt was soaked with sweat. Rigger could hear her swearing at it from the tower.

“Give up you fucker.” She glared down at the spot where her line entered the water, both hands gripping the cork handle. Bally crouched behind her chair and spoke directions into her ear.

Rigger kept the Clipper moving slowly ahead to keep the line tight on the second fish. When the double line came up on the first one, he went down and gaffed it. A nice amberjack, about eighty pounds. Then Bally gave Marie the second rod, and she fought that one too. It was smaller, about fifty or so. Bally reached around Marie’s waist with both hands to adjust the drag. Kurt slept.

After they boated the second fish, Marie jumped out of her chair and hugged Bally, then Rigger. She’d been working steadily for about an hour. Her face was flushed, and the muscles in her neck and arms were strung tight under her skin.

“Wow,” she beamed. “That was un-fucking-believable. Look at those fish. Are they good to eat?”

Rigger told her that amberjack can be very good when smoked, but most of the ones they had caught lately were shot through with parasites, little white worms which ruined the meat.



Bally whispered something to Marie; she laughed and hugged him again. Then she pulled her shirt over her head, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. She stepped out of her shorts too, and walked naked to the stern. She waved at them before diving in, a graceful half-turn. Bally glanced over at Kurt, but he was still sound asleep, rasping occasionally through his nose.

Rigger ducked into the cabin to get Marie a towel. He'd swum in the Gulf Stream before, clearing some rope that had fouled the prop on Reefhopper, and he'd been scared. Nothing but empty blue all around. He could see through that water as if it were air, and he knew that every big predator in the Gulf could see him too. He had kept his back to the hull, and when the work was finished, he got out fast. With his hands on the ladder, half his body clear of the water and half still in, he could feel them coming for his legs.

When he emerged from the cabin, Bally was helping Marie into the boat. They were both laughing, and Marie looked like she hadn't worried a bit. Rigger handed her the towel. She dried her face and hair first, then wrapped it around her waist and sat down in the fighting chair.

"What's next?" she asked.

Rigger looked at Bally before speaking. "We'll run in, maybe catch a few more fish along the reef, then call it a day."

Marie clapped her hands. "I'm ready," she said. "Which way's land?" She pointed a finger south, toward Cuba.

Bally nodded to the north. "That way's shorter."

Marie winked at him. "You're the captain."

Bally blushed. Rigger could see that he was trying not to stare at her. He asked Marie if they should wake up Kurt.

"No," she said. "Let him sleep. He still looks a little green around the gills."

Rigger climbed back onto the bridge. The terns had disappeared, and the ocean gleamed under the sun like the skin of a whale. He spun the Clipper, figuring on a heading of north-northwest. Just to check his bearings, he punched in the

coordinates on the LORAN. He was a little off. On a thirty-mile run, it would've meant a few extra minute's worth of fuel and time. No big deal. He was glad he wasn't like Marie, with no clue to north or south, but he supposed that's why someone had to invent the compass.

It seemed strange that a little swelling in your head could upset your balance or destroy your sense of direction. He wondered if he'd actually go back to Miami in two weeks for another CAT scan, then decided that he would if Jenna would take him. He hoped she'd be waiting for them at the dock. Sometimes she brought him a piña colada while he filleted the day's catch. Between sips, he would slice strips of belly meat for her to feed to the pelicans and to the great white heron that prowled the boards like a pet cat. The Palms served its piña coladas smoothly frozen, garnished with little paper umbrellas and swizzle sticks shaped like palm trees. If Pammie were tending bar, she'd add a splash of dark rum on top too, just for taste. He liked Pammie for that. She would have been hurt to see Bally flirting with Marie. Or was it Marie toying with Bally? It was funny how you could misread people. He wouldn't have predicted that Marie would drink beer in the morning or curse or sit topless in a fighting chair. But she did.

He went for the fire extinguisher again, then checked on the situation in the cockpit. Kurt was awake, and Marie was sitting in his lap, fully clothed, cradling the little tuna like a newborn. Bally had a beer in one hand and the camera in the other. He said something to Marie that drowned under the roar of the diesels. Marie pursed her lips as if to kiss the tuna, then bared her teeth, threatening to take a chunk out of its hide. Bally took more pictures.

They made it all the way to the reef without hooking another fish. At cruising speed, Rigger liked to run the baits at least five waves back. But Bally just tossed them out there, too close to the transom. Rigger really couldn't blame him for not paying attention; they'd caught enough to make the customers happy.

At the marina, Kurt shook Rigger's hand and apologized for falling asleep. Marie shook his hand too. They tipped fifty on top of the charter fee, and Bally offered to take a slab of the yellowfin up to the chef at The Palms so they could have it grilled for dinner. Marie said she would enjoy that.

While Bally was at the restaurant, Rigger finished gutting the catch, rinsed off the tackle, and swabbed the deck. He called the fish house on the radio, and asked them to send a kid over for the amberjack. They'd steak and smoke the fish, send half to Kurt in Atlanta, and keep the other half as payment. Rigger helped the kid slide the fish into the back of a pickup and gave him a five for his trouble. After that, he walked over to the tiki bar.

Bally and Jenna were already sitting behind rum drinks. The sliding doors were open to the bay, and two ceiling fans twirled sedately under the thatched roof. As Rigger pulled up a stool between them, a gust of air rustled in the palm fronds, lifting the edges of their cocktail napkins.

Pammie put a piña colada in front of him and he drank it. Before he could order another, Jenna pushed her glass into his hand.

"Drink mine," she said. "I've had enough already."

Rigger looked at her watch; it was only six o'clock. She didn't seem drunk, but when Bally stood up to visit the *kanes*, Jenna ran her index finger along Rigger's thigh, just below the hem of his shorts. Then she put her finger in her mouth.

Bally sat back down and ordered another round. Rigger tried to pretend that nothing had happened. He had always thought of Jenna as Bally's sister: too much trouble and too close to home. He didn't like The Fencepost, but he didn't wish him any hurt either. Did Jenna really want him? Or was she teasing in the same way that Marie and Bally teased each other, just for fun?

Pammie brought more drinks. Rigger counted his stack of paper umbrellas and plastic swizzle sticks. Bally waved his hands in the air, telling Jenna about Rigger and Kurt and the tuna all hitting the deck at the same time.

“In five years I’ve never seen Rigger make a wrong move on the boat,” Bally said, “and suddenly he’s on his back twice in three days.”

Jenna laughed and patted Rigger on top of the head. “I’m glad you didn’t break anything,” she said.

They had a few more while Pammie served out her shift. Then the four of them trolled over to Joe’s Steak House, not to eat, but to check out the new band. The music was reggae, very loose and loud. Rigger could feel each note vibrating under his rib cage. Between sets, Bally told about Marie taking a swim off the stern.

“As soon as she gets out,” Bally said, “Rigger throws a towel over her. He was more embarrassed than she was.”

Jenna laughed. “That’s because Rigger’s not a dog like you.”

Pammie didn’t laugh. “I’d have kicked her ass back over the side,” she said seriously. “For shark bait.”

Rigger wondered if Bally knew that Pammie’s kick was really for him. And then, for a few minutes, he wanted to go home, to listen to nothing more than the slow lullaby of the hull at rest. But Jenna wouldn’t let him. She wanted to dance. So they shuffled among the tourists with their elbows held in tight.

They closed Joe’s, then raided the refrigerator on the boat for Kurt and Marie’s unopened box lunches and a liter of rum. They sat on the transom with their feet dangling over the harbor, eating pickles and potato chips and swigging from the bottle. Jenna fed the stale sandwiches one at a time to the pelican. It seemed to enjoy them. And why not? It had a good thing going. Between the Clipper’s old bait, the scraps from fish cleaning, and the occasional ham and cheese on rye, that bird was living high. It never even had to get its feathers wet.

Rigger revived some just watching it—the confident tilt of its beak, the satisfying progression of sandwiches down its gullet. Rigger had a good thing going too: blue water to fish, a berth to sleep in, and three fine friends who knew how to pass the bottle. The doctor had said it was probably benign. If it wasn’t, he’d given it a pretty good workout—between the sun, the rum, and the reggae—with no ill effects.

When they finished the liter, Jenna asked them up to the villa for a civilized drink—one with ice and lime and tonic. It sounded good to Rigger. Bally took Pammie’s arm, and he took Jenna’s. They strolled away from the dock like timeshare owners on vacation from their ordinary lives. In the hazy lamplight, the villas looked like grass huts on stilts, except that the stilts were concrete pillars and the thatch was stapled on for show.

A lot of their charter customers rented the same villa for the same week, year after year. Rigger had knocked on doors before, waking late sleepers for their day of fishing, but he’d never been inside one. He had no idea how fancy they’d be: built-in televisions and glass end tables, coral-colored chairs and an emerald sofa. The hot tub was big enough to hold a cocktail party in; it even had its own ice machine.

Jenna turned the taps on full and emptied a bottle of bubble bath into the steaming water. When she turned on the jets, bubbles went everywhere. They were laughing, running around the tiles, scooping up handfuls of suds and tossing them at each other, and then Jenna stepped into the tub and sank up to her neck in bubbles. She pulled her clothes off underwater and threw them dripping onto the tiles.

Rigger thought about the graceful way Marie had slipped from her shorts and disappeared into the water. He could never have chased after that act, but he wanted to follow Jenna.

“I can’t get this blouse wet,” said Pammie. “It’ll run.”

“Take it off then,” said Bally, reaching for her belt.

Rigger turned his back to them, dropped his shorts and slid out of his shirt. Then he backed into the tub, like a crab. Jenna’s hand touched his ankle, guiding his foot toward the first step.

Although Rigger had never been in a hot tub before, he didn’t admit it then. He sat on a little underwater bench with his arms draped over the rim, keeping the bubbles out of his drink. Pammie and Bally reclined with their arms around each other, eyes closed. A warm jet of water massaged the small of Rigger’s back. Jenna leaned her head on his shoulder and hummed a tune they’d heard

at Joe's. Her voice and the warm water dissolved whatever resistance was left in him.

He didn't wake up until Bally splashed water on his face. "I want you folks to behave," Bally said, a towel wrapped around his waist. "Don't forget there's a Fencepost waiting at home in Pompano." His voice sounded indifferent to Rigger, almost bored. Pammie already had her clothes on. She waved from the door. "Bye," she said.

For the first time all night, Rigger knew what was coming. He didn't think Bally's parting shot was a warning to him. More like an acknowledgment to Jenna that her brother knew what she wanted. And if Bally had noticed, then it must be true. So Rigger let it happen. He left the lights on, said yes to everything.

The next day Jenna dressed like a college kid on spring break, in short shorts and a T-shirt so wide at the collar that it hung off one shoulder. She and Rigger bought a bucket of chicken and a suitcase of beer at the Winn-Dixie, opened the sunroof, and headed north for Orlando. They had been talking about things they'd never done before. Rigger went over the list of firsts he'd cracked in the past three days: CAT scan, villa, hot tub, among others. When Jenna found out that he'd never been to Disney World, she laughed at him. "Christ," she said, "you *have* been leading a sheltered life."

Rigger sat in the passenger seat for the first hundred miles, eating the chicken down to the bone and then tossing the scraps up and out the sunroof. That was a great feeling: chicken grease on his fingers and lips, the air thick with the salty swamp smell of the Everglades, Jenna with one hand on the wheel, bare shoulder and bare thighs and her belly warm to the touch. When he threw a drumstick it would fly straight up for a moment, then run slam into the slipstream and blow back behind them as if someone had yanked it on a string. Rigger would laugh and Jenna would laugh and maybe lean away from the wheel to kiss him.

At Homestead they stopped to stretch their legs. Rigger watched as Jenna reached toward the sky, both hands clasped

over her head like a fighter who has just been declared champion of the world. What there was of her shirt rode high on her breasts and the skin beneath them was smooth and white. She caught him staring at her and smiled. He looked down at the backs of his hands, wrinkled by salt and shellacked by sun—an old fisherman’s hands. He rubbed his face gently, just to test the feel of the old tanned hide, and it was all roughness: hand, cheek, the stubble on his chin.

Jenna didn’t want to drive anywhere near Pompano, so they passed up the Turnpike for the Okeechobee road. They practically floated through the swampy heart of the ‘Glades, more water than land. Rigger took the wheel while Jenna napped. The Mercedes was fun to drive: power steering, power brakes, power windows—another first. He’d wanted to ask Jenna if this was the first time she’d cheated on *The Fencepost*, but then *cheated* didn’t seem like the right word. And what did it matter, anyway?

She was still asleep when they got to Lake Okeechobee, thirty miles from the coast at its closest point, but only fourteen feet above sea level. Rigger thought about the weedy, tea-colored water falling fourteen feet to the deck of the Clipper, and it seemed like they hadn’t gone very far at all. He figured Orlando was three hours away. They would check into a motel tonight, Magic Kingdom tomorrow, and then what? Back to Coral Key?

Jenna opened her eyes for a moment and smiled absently at him. A hollow ache tunneled into his gut, the same ache that he got when the line went slack on a fish and he saw it jump far off, a big fish free in the air, his connection with it a thing of the past.

He considered calling Bally, to let him know what was going on. But what would he tell him? That he’d lost his bearings? That he didn’t know when he’d be back? That he was in love with the man’s sister and taking her to Disney World?

The sad part was that he didn’t want this ride to end. How many years had it been since he’d done something so heedless, so doubtful, so fun? Not that he thought he deserved it. No matter how you cut it, the knot in his head wasn’t terminal.

Still, when they were past the south shore of Okeechobee, he ignored the sign for Orlando and kept going west, through Goodno and La Belle. He realized that they should have been heading north toward Palmdale, Venus, and Lake Placid. But he didn't want to turn around and go back. He held his foot to the accelerator, opened his window and gulped the breeze. He was on the wrong road, and the faster he drove, the further they went astray.



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