

*"Vulgar, violent... Dorsey's roadshow is some fun."
New York Times Book Review*

TIM DORSEY

author of *The Stingray Shuffle*

FLORIDA



ROADKILL

A NOVEL

Florida
ROAD-
Kill

Tim Dorsey



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Dedication

For Janine, Erin and Kelly



Epigraph

The Sun will not rise, or set,
without my notice and thanks.

—WINSLOW HOMER

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Prologue



Florida even looks good collapsing.

From Loggerhead Key to Amelia Island to the Flora-Bama Lounge, the Land of Flowers has natives caught in seductive headlights.

Millions of residents stayed up past midnight one evening in October of 1997 to watch the southern Florida baseball team win the seventh game of the World Series in extra innings.

The next day:

A full-figured maid from Rio ran in a circle in the parking lot, crying and screaming in Portuguese. The motel manager leaned against the office doorway, weary, a thin, bald Honduran, four foot eleven, sixty years. Brown slacks and ocher guayabera with a pink button on the pocket: "Play the Florida Lottery." He had coppery, folded skin, and he rolled his eyes at the paroxysmal woman in the white cleaning uniform who he decided was being overcome either by religion or insects.

The 1960s-era Orbit Motel was a two-story box around a swimming pool. Its east side faced Cocoa Beach and the Atlantic Ocean, and its sign on Highway A1A was an illuminated globe circled by a mechanical space capsule. The Launch Pad Lounge next to the motel office was retrofitted into the Launch Pad Food Mart, which the manager tended without humor.

The maid's hysterics were unbroachable for fifteen minutes, so the manager ate boiled peanuts. Through sobs, the maid eventually communicated her alarm.

Two police officers in a single squad car arrived four minutes after the manager's phone call. Cocoa Beach has a genie and a bottle on the doors of its police cars. The manager led the officers around the ocean side of the motel and up the unpainted concrete stairs to the balcony. The day was hot and sticky, but the second floor brought wind and snatches of conversation from a tiki bar at the end of the Cocoa Beach Pier. As the manager sorted keys, the officers looked through mirror sunglasses at the lone surfer in a black wet suit. A cruise ship sailed for Nassau and Freeport in the Bahamas. Both cops were thinking: We shouldn't have gone out drinking after the World Series last night.

The manager turned the knob of room 214 and pushed the door open. He made a gesture into the room that said, "And you've won a brand-new car!"

Inside was an evidence theme park. A six-foot Rorschach pattern of blood and bone across the wall near the bathroom. Bound securely with braided rope and sitting upright in an uncomfortable motel chair was the late, luckless John Doe, his mouth covered with duct tape and eyes wide. The end of a shotgun was tied to his throat and the exit wound in the back of his neck could hold a croquet ball. His chin rested on the shotgun barrel, the only thing keeping his head propped up, and he wore a baseball cap with the *Apollo 13* emblem.

The other end of the twelve-gauge Benelli automatic shotgun was wrapped to a sawhorse with more tape. A string attached the trigger to the shaft of an electric motor. From the side of the deceased chair hung a bare copper wire with a small model space shuttle dangling on the end. Circling the wire was a metal collar cut from a beer can. A wire ran from the collar to a car battery. Another wire ran from the shuttle to a solenoid switch and the motor.

The television was on the NASA channel. Live video of two astronauts spacewalking during the

third day in orbit. The cops looked over the room, gave each other a high five, and burst out laughing. One radioed for the detectives and lab guys. The other grabbed the remote control, looking for something good on TV.

Clinton Ellrod painted white block letters in an arc across the front window of the Rapid Response convenience store. Back behind the cash register, he admired his handiwork through the glass, reading in reverse: "Congratulations, Marlins!"

With the efficiency of a casino worker, Ellrod pulled down two packs of Doral menthols, tore loose five scratch-off lottery tickets (the sand dollars game), rang up a twelve-pack of ice-brewed beer and set pump seven for eighteen dollars. A crew outside was taking down the Rapid Response sign and replacing it with one that read "Addiction World"; they left early for lunch.

During lulls, Ellrod studied notes from classes at Florida International University. When fried from an all-nighter, he daydreamed out the tinted windows and watched traffic on US 1 run through the asphalt badlands between Coconut Grove and Coral Gables. Fast food, anemic strip malls, check-cashing parlors with steel-reinforced pylons out front. There was a desperateness to the commerce like a Mexican border town or a remote gold-mining settlement in Brazil. Except for weeds in the cracks, the pavement sealed everything up like an icecap. But Ellrod loved sunsets, even here. So warm light glinting off the cars, and the concrete orange at the end. The day people, rushing through checklists of responsibility, giving way to this other group, hustling around after dark to accomplish everything they shouldn't be doing at all.

Rapid Response stood a few blocks in from Biscayne Bay. Through the front door came construction workers filling forty-four-ounce Thirst Mutilators, schoolkids in baggy clothes shoplifting, registered nurses grabbing Evian from the glassed-in cooler, businessmen on cell phones unfolding maps they'd never buy. Nicaraguans, Germans, Tamil rebels, Sikh separatists, scag mule prom-queens-turned-drug-trollops, armored car guards, escaped convicts, getaway drivers, sideline salesmen, rabbis and assorted nonbathers. Ten times a day he gave directions to Monkey Jungle.

Ellrod, like all Florida convenience store clerks, had the Serengeti alertness of the tastiest gazelle in the herd. He studied customers for danger. He ruled out the pair at the chips rack, the tall, athletic guy and the shorter, bookish man exchanging playful punches, debating Chee-tos, puffy or crunchy.

Ellrod made change for a bookie on Rollerblades. A black Mercedes S420 limousine pulled up. Three Latin men slammed three doors. They wore identical white linen suits, shirts open at the collar, no chest hair or gold chains. Thick, trimmed mustaches. They entered the store in descending order of height and in the same order filled three Styrofoam cups at the soda spigot.

The athletic guy used a twenty to pay for two bags of Chee-tos and a tank of regular unleaded; the other drove to the edge of the convenience store lot in a white Chrysler and waited for the stoplight at the corner to hold up traffic, then rejoined US 1 southbound.

The tallest Latin asked Ellrod for the *servicio*, and Ellrod pointed to the rear of the store. All three went inside the one-toilet restroom and closed the door. Ellrod turned to the beeping gas control panel. He pressed a button and leaned toward a grape-size microphone on a gooseneck. "Pump number four is on."

"About fucking time," said the speaker on the control panel. The pickup truck at pump four sat on tractor tires. It was red, spangled metallic, with a bank of eight amber fog lights over the cab. The sticker on the left side of the bumper read, "English only in the U.S.A.!" The one on the right had a drawing of the Stars and Stripes. It said, "Will the last American out of Miami please bring the flag?"

The driver walked into the store, and Ellrod saw he came to five-nine on the robber height guide, running up the doorjamb. He had a crew cut midway between Sid Vicious and H. R. Haldeman, a Vandyke beard and a sunburnt face rounded out into a moon by the people at Pabst Blue Ribbon. He

wore the official NFL jersey of the Dallas Cowboys.

“What took you so long, stupid!” said the driver.

“That’ll be nineteen dollars,” Ellrod said without interest. The man pulled bills from his wallet; his face had a dense patina of perspiration. Ellrod smelled whiskey, onions and BO.

“I asked you a question!” said the driver. He looked up from his wallet and saw Ellrod’s T-shirt. “FIU? What the fuck’s that? Some new shitty rap band?”

Ellrod, African American, picked up the drift of the conversation.

“Florida International University,” he said evenly.

“Oh, you and the homeboys now stealing college laundry.”

“I go to school there.”

“Don’t bullshit me, boy. You’re so smart, how come you workin’ *here*?” The man pointed to the employee parking space and Ellrod’s two-hundred-thousand-mile Datsun with a trash bag for a back window. “That’s your car, isn’t it? Shit, don’t go telling me you’re a college boy. I didn’t even graduate high school and look at my truck!”

Ellrod glanced out at pump number four and the rolling monument to pinheads everywhere. The store audio system piped in “Right Place, Wrong Time” and it was to the part about “refrigerator confusion.”

“Now give me my fucking change, you stupid fucking...”

And he said it. The word. It hung in the air between them, an electrical cumulonimbus over the cash register.

The driver realized what he’d spoken and paused to flash back. He’d used the word once to criticize a bad parking job at a Wendy’s, and this little four-foot guy went Tasmanian devil on him. He’d received bruised ribs, a jaw wired shut and eight fog lights snapped off his truck.

He panicked. He jumped back from the counter and pulled a switchblade on Ellrod. “Don’t touch anything! You know you guys call each other that all the time! Don’t go getting on me about slavery!”

The tallest Latin was next in line, fiddling with a point-of-purchase display, keychain flashlights the shape of AK-47 bullets.

“Hey!” the Latin said to the pickup driver. “Apologize!”

The driver turned the blade toward him. “Fuck off, Julio! You don’t even have a dog in this fight! Go back to your guacamole farm and those tropical monkeys you call the mothers of your children!”

The driver never saw it. A second Latin came from behind, holding a bottle of honey-mustard barbecue sauce the size of a bowling pin. He had it by the neck and swung it around into the driver’s nose, which exploded. Blood squirted everywhere like someone had stomped the heel of a boot down on a packet of ketchup.

Ellrod witnessed an entirely new league of violence. Everything in his experience up to now, even murder, was amateur softball. The driver was swarmed as he fell, and the Latins came up with makeshift convenience store weapons. Dry cell battery, meat tenderizer, Parrot Gardens candle deodorizer. In ten seconds, they had pulverized both elbows, both kneecaps and both testicles.

The tallest Latin walked to the rotisserie next to the soda machine. A dozen hot dogs had turned on a circle of spits for six hours, and they were leathery and resistant to conventional forks and knives. He grabbed two of the spits and held one in each fist, pointing down, like daggers. The others saw him and cleared away from the pickup driver, now on his back. The tall one pounced and drove the spit into the driver’s chest, a bullfight *banderillero* setting the decorative spears. One spit pierced the right lung, and the other blew a ventricle. The driver torqued and shimmied on the floor and then fell in the death rattle, two shriveled-up hot dogs quivering on rabbit-ear antennas sticking out of his chest.

The tall Latin stepped over the driver and up to the cash register. He pulled a ten from an eelskin wallet and handed it to Ellrod. “Three Cokes and two Jumbo Meaty Dogs.”

Ellrod's legs vibrated under the counter, but he managed to make change. After a half minute, he ran to the window and watched the limousine merge into southbound traffic on US 1. The windows were down and he could see three men sucking soda straws.

Sean Breen ran his finger down the triple-A map on his lap, a steady flow of crunchy Chee-tos going to his mouth with the free hand. In the driver's seat, David Klein had a thing going with a bag of the puffies.

Fifteen miles south of Miami. Sean said, "Cutler Ridge." He looked up from the map and out the window. "Can hardly tell Hurricane Andrew came through. You should have been here five years ago. That business tower there. You could see in all the offices. The east face was gone."

Twelve more miles they hit Florida City. The turnpike came in from the northeast and dumped onto US 1. The end of civilization on the mainland. The peninsula had twenty more miles until the bridge to the Florida Keys, but the only thing left was a two-lane road south through the mangroves. The final building before the wilderness, the Last Chance Saloon, had a "Go Marlins!" banner over the door between the wagon wheels.

Sean and David thought professional wrestling in Florida wasn't what it used to be.

"Jack Brisco was my favorite," said Sean. "His trademark was the Figure-Four Leg-Lock."

"Those were the days, when the fundamentals meant something."

"Like the sleeper hold."

"Remember you had to apply an antidote hold after the sleeper knocked the guy unconscious?"

"Yeah, and one time this masked wrestler wouldn't let anyone in the ring to apply the antidote to his opponent, and Gordon Solie was going crazy in the announcer's booth, yelling, 'Brain damage setting in!' The guy went into a coma and came out of it the following week to win the battle royal."

David's face turned serious. Ahead, a dark lump sat in the lane. David winced as it passed under the car, and relaxed when it cleared the undercarriage.

He looked in the rearview. "Gopher tortoise," he said. "Ain't gonna make it."

David pulled over and walked back toward the tortoise, which had reached the center line. He stood on the shoulder, waiting for opportunity. Heavy traffic blowing by, but a break coming up. One more car to go and he could run out and carry the tortoise to the other side.

Serge leaned forward in the passenger seat and tuned the radio in the canary-yellow '72 Corvette. His yellow beach shirt matched the car and was covered with palm trees; his two-dollar sunglasses had ruby frames and alligators at the corners. The first four radio stations were Spanish, then blues from Miami, then Serge found the frequency he wanted as they passed the Last Chance Saloon.

"I just want to celebrate...another day of living!..."

Serge talked over the radio. "And what was the deal with Coral Key State Park? The place was a deathtrap. If it wasn't for Flipper, someone would have died there every week. Can't believe nobody sued."

"Dolphins like to wear hats," said Coleman, a joint dangling from his lips as he drove. On his head was one of those afro wigs painted in a rainbow. He was wearing novelty sunglasses with slinky eyeballs, and they swung and clacked together when he turned to face Serge.

"...I just want to celebrate...yeah! yeah!..."

"What's that in the road?" asked Serge.

"Don't know," said Coleman. "Looks like something fell out of a car and that guy's trying to retrieve it. Some kind of case.... Well, not today, fella!"

Coleman swerved over the center line, like Jerry Lewis running over Spencer Tracy's hat in *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*.

“...I just want to celebrate another day of living!...”

And Coleman popped the turtle.

The pair turned around and saw a guy jumping up and down in the road, shaking his fists in the air.

“You sick fuck! Why’d you do that?!” Serge shouted. “You killed a living thing!”

“I thought it was a helmet,” Coleman said.

“A helmet? We’re in the Keys! This ain’t fuckin’ *Rat Patrol!*”

Serge plucked the joint from Coleman’s lips—“Gimme that!”—and flicked it out the window. He

ripped the slinky-eyeball glasses off Coleman’s face and tossed them in the open gym bag at his feet.

The glasses landed on the packs of hundred-dollar bills and next to the Smith & Wesson.³⁸

“Pull over,” said Serge. “I’m driving.”

Twenty miles west of Key West, mangrove islets scattered across jade shallows. Toward the Gulf Stream, the green gave way at once to a cold, ultramarine blue that ran to the horizon. It was noon, soundless, cloudless day, and the sun broiled.

At the far end of the silence began a buzz, like a mosquito. It stayed low for a long time and then suddenly swelled into a high-precision, motorized thunder that prevented any train of thought, and a forty-foot cigarette boat slapped and crashed across the swells far closer to the flats than was smart.

Orange and aqua stripes ran the length of the speedboat, which had the logo of the Miami Dolphins on one side and a big number 13 on the other.

Behind the wheel was twenty-two-year-old Johnny Vegas, bronzed, built and smelling like a whorehouse. Because he was wearing Whorehouse Cologne, one hundred dollars an ounce on South Beach. Long black hair straight back in the wind, herringbone gold chain around his neck. His work T-shirt had the sleeves cut off and a cartoon on the front that made a joke about his shlong being big. On the back was a drawing of a woman in a bikini with a bull’s-eye on her crotch. He wore the curved sunglasses of a downhill skier.

Johnny’s mouth alternated between a thousand-candlepower shit-eating grin and running his tongue over his gums with cocaine jitters. He kept the coke in a twenty-four-karat gold shark amulet he bought in a head shop on Key West, Southernmost Bong and Hookah. It now hung from the gold chain. He threw two toggles near the ignition and “Smoke on the Water” shook from sixteen waterproof speakers.

Johnny lived off a trust fund generated by a life-insurance-for-the-elderly program targeting anyone who had ever been, known, seen or heard about a military veteran. He exercised daily in his Biscayne Harbor condo, and it showed—not muscle-bound but defined at six feet, one-ninety. On weekends he cruised for chicks in the boat, and he had the tan of a professional beach volleyball player.

Other people bought jerseys with the numbers of their favorite Miami Dolphins players. Johnny customized the cigarette boat for his favorite, future Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino. He soon found that people assumed it actually was Marino’s boat, and that Johnny was a tight friend. Johnny often said, yes, it was Marino’s boat. Would you like to come aboard, little girl?

In romance, Johnny was a selective man. He wouldn’t just go for anyone. He was attracted to a very specific type: horny, young, binge-drinking women in T-backs. Any event with a hint of spring-break attitude, Johnny’s boat was there.

He ranged from Fort Lauderdale to Islamorada in the Keys, where fast boats held effective parties on an offshore sandbar. That was as far as Vegas would take the cigarette. The cocaine he bought for the World Series the night before had taken him the rest of the way down the Keys.

No sooner had he arrived, he was on the business side of Key West, heading out to sea. As the propeller cavitated, Johnny unconsciously fingered the coke talisman hanging at his sternum. At sixty miles an hour, he strained to see as the air pressure flattened his eyeballs, but he had to keep u

appearances for the woman clinging to her white leather seat. She didn't really mind, with a tight belt full of Captain Morgan.

She was maybe twenty, a student at Key West Community College, majoring in flirting her way onto expensive boats with powder parties. She was thin, with a deep tan, sun-lightened brown hair, and a cute Georgia face. And she'd learned nothing in life is free when she'd gotten thrown overboard by an Argentinean tycoon on whose yacht she had been partying and whose knee she'd been grabbing before she said, "Sorry, I have a boyfriend back at school."

That morning Johnny had been idling the boat past Mallory Square when he spotted her sitting in a bikini with legs hanging over the seawall, having shown up ten hours early for the sunset celebration.

He tapped his left nostril; she nodded eagerly and boarded. They did two lines at the docks and slugged rumrunners as they passed Sand Key lighthouse.

Johnny's plan was to head south from Key West, pick up deeper water, and chart west. The uninhabited Marquesas Atoll sat twenty-five miles father with a sandy beach, perfect for scoring.

Which would be a first. Because, despite the boat and the exercising and the cocaine and cologne and money, he never got a babe in the sack. Not once. It was always something. Boat fire, waterspout, sand crabs, Coast Guard search, language barrier, drug overdose and, with rampant frequency, the sudden and complete change of heart. There was even the can't-miss time a statuesque brunette model came right up to him on the dock and said, "I fuck guys with fast boats." They were three miles offshore and she's topless, taking off her bottom, when she hears something. A hydroplane pulls up, a man opens the cockpit, and she gets in and leaves.

This time would be different. This time with—what was her name? One of those double, singsong deals. Something Sue. Betty Sue? Peggy Sue? Ah, to hell with it: more cocaine for everyone!

Indications to the contrary, Johnny wasn't obnoxious, just immature, and the older residents of his condominium regarded him as a lovable, goofy pet. They also had no faith in his seamanship. They worried that someday he'd hit an awash coral head and there would go Johnny, cartwheeling across the Gulf Stream at eighty miles an hour until he was embedded headfirst in the sand like a javelin. So they broke it down for him. Stay in the blue water and out of the green water. Over and over: blue water good, green water bad.

Johnny and 'Sue raced due south of the Marquesas in solid-green water and skirting closer to yellow and white. The water was clear as a swimming pool, and patches of sand and coral ran starboard. Between two islands was a channel that cut across the flats as if someone had poured a river of liquid Jell-O. He looked down and saw the shadow of his boat racing next to him on the seafloor, and he pretended he was the Flying Dutchman.

The bottom was soft, and Johnny's boat plowed a hundred-yard trench that bled off the violence of the grounding. The stop catapulted 'Sue onto the deck on her hands and knees.

"Are we stuck?" she asked, the boat's deck as solid and unmoving as Nebraska.

"Oh, no no no!" said Johnny. He tossed a mushroom anchor over the bow with forty feet of line, which was thirty-nine too many, and the excess coils of rope floated by where 'Sue was sitting.

"How 'bout some more cocaine!" said Johnny, creating a diversion. He tapped the amulet on the fiberglass console. 'Sue poured another rumrunner out of Johnny's titanium tactical party Thermos, having spilled the last one down the left side of her bikini top. Johnny took off his shirt.

The stereo blared "Funky Cold Medina." They climbed up on the bow. Dancing sloppy, not holding each other, rubbing chests. Johnny thought of his buzz and 'Sue and the music and how he was gonna finally get laid. He closed his eyes and saw an infomercial for Veterans' Health and Life on the inside of his eyelids, and he smiled.

There was a splash in the water off port, and Johnny and 'Sue tumbled back together on the bow.

"Jesus, Harry and Joseph!" he yelled.

They looked overboard, out in the blue water, where their boat should have been. They expected to see a bale of dope or an airplane wing, but instead saw a large blob covered with seaweed and algae and gunk, a long-dead manatee or Kemp's ridley turtle.

They stared a half minute, and their crunched-up faces released at the same time with recognition. Out in the water was a man, bloated and distended, chain around his neck. 'Sue gave a prolonged blood-clotting scream, which Johnny took to mean she was no longer in the mood.

It took a few minutes but 'Sue had started to calm down, just sniffing and her chest heaving a little. Johnny thought, Yeah, there's a blown-up old dead guy all putrid and shit a few feet away, but I got the smooth moves! He put his arm around her shoulder, to console her, and began sliding his hand toward her breast.

A procession of sports cars and RVs was making the grunion run down from Florida City to the drawbridge onto Key Largo. Because of speeding, reckless driving and head-on crashes, the Florida Department of Transportation had erected a bunch of warning signs and built special passing lanes.

One of the signs read "Be patient. Passing lane one mile." Next to it, an Isuzu Rodeo towing a Carolina Skiff jackknifed trying to pass a Ranchero. The Rodeo slid upright to a stop on the left shoulder, but the skiff rolled, sending four cases of Bud and Bud Lite clattering across the road. The rigid column of high-speed traffic became disorganized, like a line of ants hit with bug spray. A Mustang swerved left, flipped and landed half submerged in the water next to the causeway; a Mercury spun out to the right and slid down the embankment sideways, taking out thirty feet of endangered plants. Motorists ran to check on the people in the Isuzu but retreated when the Mercury driver pulled a nickel.45 out of the glove compartment. He opened fire on the Rodeo, across the street, which returned fire with an SKS Chinese military rifle. The Rodeo's bumper sticker said, "Hang up and drive!"

Behind the firefight, people got out of cars and crouched behind bumpers or ran for cover in the mangroves. Some jumped in Barnes and Blackwater Sounds and swam away.

Twenty cars back from the accident, Sean Breen and David Klein opened their doors for shields and prepared to run. Ten cars back, three Latin men sat in a bulletproof Mercedes limousine playing their Nintendo GameBoys.

One car back was a yellow Corvette. Coleman and Serge stared at the boat in the middle of the road and the foam shooting into the air from the Budweisers.

As they approached Key Largo, breaks in the roadside brush had given first glimpses of the Key. Hundreds of yards of tangled branches blurring by, and then a two-foot opening, a subliminal view across the sounds. Unnamed mangrove islands in that unmistakable profile, long and low. Serge thought it was the same profile that in 1513 prompted Ponce de Leon's sailors to name them Las Martires, the martyrs, because they looked like dead guys lying down. No they don't, thought Serge, but he was naturally high anyway as he sat in the parked Corvette. The sniper fire was making a racket and it snapped Serge out of it.

"Beer me," he said, looking straight ahead.

"Right," said Coleman. He waited a few seconds for a break in the gunfire and ran out in the road in front of the car, grabbing one of the few cans that wasn't blowing suds from the seams. He jumped back in the car and handed it to Serge.

Serge stared at him. "I meant from the cooler."

The Coast Guard petty officer, a serious young man with a galvanized clipboard, recent haircut and pressed uniform, stood on the back deck of Johnny Vegas's boat and said no unnecessary words as he took down Johnny's version.

Johnny eyed the man's wedding ring, which he noted was quite small and without diamonds. The petty officer hadn't mentioned Dan Marino. Johnny had been noticing for some time that people in authority weren't giving him enough respect. It wasn't that they were rude or patronizing. Worse, his image was irrelevant. Maybe I need to work on my image, he thought, and planned to buy a fighter pilot jacket.

Coast Guard and Florida Marine Patrol boats had arrived. A four-man dive team was in the water. The body had been pulled from the Gulf and lay on a stainless-steel table at the stern of the Coast Guard boat. A man with surgical gloves probed the remains; another took photos with a Nikon.

Johnny sat forlorn with elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands and a rotting buzz in his head, thinking about all the drugs he'd dumped in the ocean after radioing the authorities on the VHF. 'Su hunched over in fetal position on the port side with a towel wrapped around her, shivering and occasionally lunging for the gunwales to toss up more of her breakfast of cold pizza. She turned to look at Johnny with a sad, pleading look, not feeling so attractive anymore. He shook his head with impatience and opened a watertight compartment. "Here," he said, holding something out to her. "Have a mint."

Johnny put his chin back in his hands and stared at the flotilla of partially digested pizza being ravaged by tropical fish.

Another boat approached from the east, a forty-foot trihull catamaran. A reporter from Florida Cable News stood on the tip of the middle bow holding a microphone, facing back toward the cabin and his cameraman. Behind him, hidden under his suit, he had a brace and safety harness, like a barnstorming wing-walker. He raced at top speed toward news.

The upstart Florida Cable News network had to compensate for lack of money, experience, and reputation with raw daring. The coin of the realm was the scoop, and they regularly beat all major Florida affiliates by going on the air immediately with a ground-breaking series of premature, unconfirmed, flat-wrong stories.

But the worse FCN's accuracy got, the higher the ratings. A cult developed and tuned in to see how factually mangled the coverage had become. The closest thing FCN had to a recognizable personality was correspondent Blaine Crease, a former stuntman who was becoming recognized for exclusive reporting incorrect stories while suspended in a harness. Bouncing on a boat in a harness. Standing atop a fire engine in a harness. Bungee-jumping into precedent-setting slander.

On the Coast Guard boat the early bets favored a gangland hit, like the mobsters who occasionally popped up in fifty-five-gallon drums in the Miami River and off the Rickenbacker Causeway. Other bets leaned toward lunacy, remembering the psychopath who'd dumped three women in Tampa Bay in '83.

They wondered about the single cement block attached to the chain around the victim's neck. After the oil drums, you'd think every professional button man would know what it takes to keep a body down when it bloats during decomposition.

A diver broke the surface behind the boat and spit out his regulator. "We got another one!"

Sean and David were stiff, sweaty and tense from sitting in the car so long. When they arrived in Key West, they skipped checking in at a hotel and drove to a bar on Duval Street.

They arrived in the purple interlude between sunset and night and parked on a side street by the Expatriate Café. The bar nurtured a sinister, desperado atmosphere that could be purchased on the wall for out in a variety of T-shirts and knickknacks. The tables nestled among fishtail palms, and mature traveler's trees fanned out at each end of the patio. The tables had tiny, dim lamps with white shades. Over the bar was a world map from the 1930s, an antique sign for Pan Am, and a row of black-and-white celebrity photographs: Ernest Hemingway in Spain, Gertrude Stein in Paris, Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca, Roman Polanski in Switzerland, Howard Hughes in the Bahamas, Eldridge Cleaver

making Tim Leary wash the dishes in Algeria.

Sean and David grabbed stools at the bar and ordered drafts. A hit-and-run afternoon cloudburst left puddles in the street that reflected pink and green neon. The opening guitar chords of “Whole Lot of Love” pounded out the open door of the bar across the street.

The two sat with their beers watching the pedestrians and mopeds and cars cruising Duval. They looked up at the TV, hanging on the wall between Bogart and Polanski.

“Good evening, this is Florida Cable News. Our top story tonight...”

Serge pointed up at the TV over the espresso machine.

“...Our top story tonight is tragedy in the waters off Key West, where two bodies were recovered...”

Serge and Coleman sat in a cramped Cuban lunch counter on two stools next to the window. The restaurant was a block off Duval Street on Fleming. A blue awning hung over the door, flanked by U.S. and Cuban flags.

They ordered cheese toast. Coleman had café con leche and beer; Serge ice water. They watched TV and chewed.

“...We take you to correspondent Blaine Crease with this exclusive report. Blaine?...”

Blaine Crease bobbed against the horizon as his catamaran sailed toward the Marquesas.

“Thank you, Natalie. A grisly discovery about twenty miles from Key West today as divers recovered two unrecognizable bodies involved in some kind of incident with Miami quarterback Dan Marino’s speedboat...”

A large photograph of Marino’s smiling face filled the screen.

“It is not known whether Marino himself was aboard. But we have been unable to reach him by phone, and his boat captain refused to be interviewed...”

The TV showed a depressed Johnny Vegas staring at tufts of pizza in the water, then looking up at the camera and angrily waving it away.

Blaine Crease’s voice narrated over the video: *“...Heaven only knows what that poor young man was thinking...”*

Johnny was thinking, If she would only stop upchucking, I can still score.

“...Back to you, Natalie...”

“Thank you, Blaine. And in other tragic news...” said the smiling anchorwoman, who swung another camera and switched to frown. *“We take you to the Space Coast...”*

A skinny, baby-faced reporter walked backward on the beach with a microphone. *“As the space shuttle orbits overhead, police face a down-to-earth murder mystery in the space capital of the United States. I’m here in Cocoa Beach, where police have discovered a crime scene almost as puzzling as it is macabre. Officially, authorities are saying nothing except the deceased is male, but sources tell me he was the victim of the world’s most dangerous Rube Goldberg device....”*

Coleman gave Serge a worried glance but didn’t speak. Serge threw three fives on the counter individually, dealing cards, and they walked into the Key West night.



Eleven months before the World Series, in November, the start of the tourist season, the beaches of St. Petersburg were jammed with pasty people.

As always, Sharon Rhodes knew every eye was on her as she walked coyly along the edge of the surf, twirling a bit of hair with a finger. A volleyball game stopped. Footballs and Frisbees fell in the water. Guys lost track of conversations with their wives and got soaked.

She was the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition in person. Six feet tall, gently curling blonde hair cascading over her shoulders and onto the top of her black bikini. She had a Carnation Milk face with high cheekbones and a light dusting of freckles. Her lips were full, pouty and cruel in the way that makes men drive into buildings.

She stopped as if to think, stuck an index finger in her lips and sucked. Men became woozy. She turned and splashed out into three feet of water and dunked herself. When she came up, she shook her head side to side, flinging wet blonde hair, and thrust out her nipples.

There was nothing in Sharon a man wanted to love, caress or defend. This was tie-me-up-and-hurt-me stuff, everything about her shouting at a man, "I will destroy all that is dear to you," and the man says, "Yes, please."

Wilbur Putzenfus was losing hair on top and working the comb-over. No tan. No tone. A warrior of the business cubicle, with women he was socially retarded. Spiro Agnew without the power. A hundred and fifty pounds of unrepentant geek-on-wheels.

Sharon threw her David Lee Roth beach towel down next to his, lay on her stomach and untied her top.

Wilbur studied Sharon with a series of stolen glimpses that wouldn't have been so obvious if there hadn't been made through the viewfinder of a camcorder.

When Wilbur ran out of videotape, Sharon raised up on her elbows, tits hanging, and said to him in a low, husky voice, "I like to do it in public."

Wilbur was apoplectic.

Sharon replaced her top and stood up. She reached down, took Wilbur by the hand and tried to guide him to his feet, but his legs didn't work right, Bambi's first steps.

She walked him over to the snack bar and showers. Against a thicket of hibiscus was one of those plywood cutouts, the kind with a hole that tourists stick their faces through for snapshots.

This one had a large cartoon shark swallowing a tourist feet first. The tourist wore a straw hat, had a camera hanging from a strap around his neck, and was banging on the shark's snout.

The bushes shielded the backside of the plywood from public view, but the front faced heavy foot traffic on the boardwalk.

Sharon told Wilbur to put his face in the hole, and he complied. She told him not to take his head out of the hole or she would permanently stop what she was doing. She pulled his plaid bathing trunks to his ankles, kneeled down and applied her expertise.

Some of the guys from the volleyball game had been following Sharon like puppy dogs, and they peeked behind the plywood. Then they walked around the front of the cutout and stood on the sidewalk, pointing and laughing at Wilbur. Word spread.

The crowd was over a hundred by the time Wilbur's saliva started to meringue around his mouth. His eyes came unplugged and rolled around in their sockets, and he made sounds like Charlie Callas.

Finally, nearing crescendo, Wilbur stared bug-eyed at the crowd and yelled between shallow breaths, "WILL...YOU...MAR-RY...ME?"

"Yeth," came the answer from behind the plywood, a female voice with a mouth full, and the crowd cheered.

Wilbur Putzenfus, a claims executive with a major Tampa Bay HMO, was not an ideal catch. But he could provide a comfortable life. Wilbur's job was to deny insurance claims filed with the Family First Health Maintenance Organization ("We're here because we care"). As Family First's top claims denial supervisor, Wilbur handled the really difficult patients, the ones who demanded the company fulfill its policies.

Wilbur was promoted to this position after a selfless display of ethical turpitude that had revolutionized the company. On his own he'd launched a secret study that showed wrongful-death suits were cheaper than paying for organ transplants covered by their policies.

"So we should stop covering transplants?" asked a director during the watershed board meeting.

"No," said Wilbur, "we'd lose business and profit. We should just stop paying the claims."

"We can do that?" asked the director.

"Gentlemen," said Wilbur, grabbing the edge of the conference table with both hands. "These people are terribly ill and in serious need of immediate medical treatment. They're in no shape to argue with us."

"Brilliant," went the murmur around the table.

As the senior claims denier, Wilbur handled only the most tenacious and meritorious claims that bubbled up through lower levels of impediment.

While a simple coward in person, Wilbur became a vicious coward behind the relative safety of a long-distance phone call. Wilbur answered each appeal with the predisposition that no claim would get by, regardless of legitimacy, company rules, reason and especially fairness. When cornered by an airtight argument, Wilbur responded with a tireless flurry of Byzantine logic. If all else failed and it looked like a claim had to be approved, there was the secret weapon. It became legend around the industry as the Putzenfus Gambit.

"It's an obvious typographical mistake on the bill. Why can't you fix it?" the policyholder would ask.

"I don't have that authority."

"Who does?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?!"

"I'm not allowed to give out that information."

"What's the phone number of your main office?"

"I'm not authorized to disclose that number."

"Fine! I'll get it myself. What city is your main office in?"

Silence.

"Are you still there?"

"I'm not allowed to talk to you anymore."

Click.

Sharon's engagement ring was from denied dialysis. The wedding floral arrangement from rejected prescriptions and the open bar from obstructed physical therapy. The buffet was subsidized by untaken CAT scans that would have found a tiny bone fragment that later paralyzed a fourth grader. The

medical evidence in that case was so overwhelming, Putzenfus considered his denial of the claim a moral victory.

The white stretch limo slung a cloud of dirt for three hundred yards. Doing at least sixty, too fast for the thin causeway inches above water.

The coastal area north of Tampa Bay was too spongy and harsh for condos. The limo was way out on the sticks, and the view over the marsh opened up for miles. The incongruous sight of swamp and a speeding limo suggested an overthrown Central American president or bingeing rock star.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” Sharon asked from the back of the limo, her nose smudged against the side glass. She slid the electric window down. Sharon pressed her right hand on the top of her head to secure the wedding veil and stuck her face out into the wind to get a better view ahead.

Wilbur had proposed only two months before, and that night he’d laid out the plans for their dream wedding. Sharon listened and pictured nuptials on a fancy barrier island. She expected to drive over the Intracoastal Waterway on one of those new gleaming arches of a bridge and into a five-star resort.

Not a swamp.

Sharon fell back into her seat in the limo, lit a cigarette and said, “This blows.”

She scratched her crotch through the wedding gown as the limo crossed onto Pine Island. When the limo pulled into McKethan Park, she could hear the music Wilbur had selected, “Endless Love” by Diana Ross and Lionel Richie. Sharon stuck a finger in her mouth, making the international puke sign.

I need some more coke to handle this, she thought, and stuck a doctored spansule up her nose, snorting like a feral hog.

A cool, light breeze whipped small whitecaps near the shore. Wilbur, in a white tux, waited at the southern point of the island. The watery backdrop was ringed with distant saw grass and sabal palm. A laughing gull flew over Wilbur, catching the last light of day. It dove in the water and came up with a needlefish.

A windblown Sharon stepped out of the limo and walked toward Wilbur with the gait of someone making a trip to the mailbox. An enraptured Wilbur gazed upon the love of his life. Sharon, chewing a wad of Bazooka bubble gum, watched the seagull fly off with its fish and said to herself: I thought they just ate Fritos.

Sharon decided the honeymoon at Disney World stunk and told Wilbur every sixty seconds the details were there. She snorted cocaine the whole time, in the Country Bear Jamboree and all over Tomorrowland. She smoked a joint in the Haunted Mansion, and fucked another tourist at Twentieth Thousand Leagues, out behind the plastic boulders.

Wilbur thought the honeymoon was nothing less than perfect, due, in no small part, to the steady diet of blow jobs Sharon dispensed to keep him tolerable.

Driving back to Tampa on Interstate 4, Sharon said she felt unwell and climbed into the backseat to lie down. Traffic slowed to stop-and-go at the perpetual road construction outside Plant City. Sharon asked him to roll down the windows so she could get more air.

“Ouch!” Wilbur yelled a few minutes later and slapped the left side of his neck. “Damn mosquitoes.”

Police suspected they had another sniper on the Interstate 4 corridor between Orlando and Tampa, another maniac randomly plinking at cars from the cover of palmettos. The autopsy on Wilbur Putzenfus said the bullet was extremely small caliber and had missed all arteries and anything else important. Under other circumstances, it would barely be classified above a flesh wound.

Unfortunately for Wilbur, he received his medical care through Family First HMO. Unbeknownst to him, his physician, Dr. Sal “the Butcher” Scalone, fell under a Florida loophole that waived domestic

medical certification for doctors trained in certain overseas venues. This included Scalone, who was fully board-certified in the island nation of Costa Rica.

Wilbur also had the unremitting bad luck of being shot on the thirtieth day of the month. Under Family First's incentive plan, Scalone was still in the running for Buccaneers skybox seats for keeping the month's lab tests and referrals below a safe level.

But it was close. So close that Scalone instructed his secretary to keep a running total. By noon on the thirtieth, Scalone had come within two dollars of blowing the football seats. A whole half day to go. He did the only thing any self-respecting HMO physician could do when faced with such a medical emergency. He ordered his secretaries to close the office and planned to hide out on the back nine with his pager and cell phone turned off.

As the doors were locked, Scalone was told of the last patient he had forgotten about in admitting room seventeen. Scalone found Wilbur sitting with skinny white legs swinging impatiently off the side of the examining table. He wore a paper smock that tied in the back, and his left hand clasped his neck.

Scalone examined the wound and came to an obvious conclusion. Unless he just slapped on a Band-Aid, this injury would cost more than \$1.99.

Wilbur Putzenfus walked in the front door of his Palma Ceia bungalow and fell asleep in the den watching ESPN. On his neck was a smiley-face Band-Aid that said, "We're here because we care."

Over the next fourteen hours, blood poisoning and other bacterial complications had their way with Wilbur. Sharon drove him to the emergency room at Tampa Memorial, where he appeared in mild to bad shape. Still time left.

The agent at Family First who answered the phone told the hospital admitting clerk that he was sorry, Wilbur was not approved for emergency room treatment unless it was okayed by his doctor, who was not answering his pager or cell phone. When the hospital clerk raised her voice that the man urgently needed care, the agent said he would have to transfer her to somebody higher up. The admitting clerk then listened to a recorded personal greeting from Claim Denials Supervisor Wilbur Putzenfus before being dumped in voice mail.

"We can't get authorization from the HMO," the hospital clerk told Sharon Putzenfus. "Do you want to pay for this yourself?"

And that was the end of Wilbur Putzenfus.

Family First's HMO saved \$143 on medical tests and another \$2,624 on treatment for the bullet wound. Its life insurance division, which also covered Wilbur, paid out \$500,000 to a slightly bereaved Mrs. Putzenfus, who, for unexplained reasons, held Mr. Putzenfus's sparsely attended funeral in Tahiti.



The weekend Wilbur Putzenfus died was the last in January, eight months before the World Series and it was an eventful one for Tampa detectives. The morning after Wilbur's body was pried out of the recliner in his den, the city's 911 center received a call from the exclusive south Tampa suburb of Manatee Isles. The particular address of the emergency caused a series of off-the-record telephonic calls to spiderweb out from the 911 center to the most important homes in Tampa. Seven times the usual number of personnel were dispatched to the residence.

Celeste Hamptons lay peacefully on the living room carpet in a mauve bathrobe, looking more asleep than dead. As many people filled the living room as had attended most of Hamptonses' charity fund-raisers for the hospital, museum and political campaigns. Nineteen uniformed cops and eleven detectives; two teams of paramedics had just given up and were in the kitchen, going through the refrigerator.

There was a representative from the mayor's office and another from the county commission, both in charcoal-gray suits, white shirts, maroon ties with diagonal stripes. The deputy secretary of agriculture, in denim, had driven over from the State Fairgrounds east of town. All were being scolded by a man with no official title who didn't introduce himself. He wore bright white shorts and a teal tennis shirt decorated with navel oranges. Hundred-dollar sunglasses hung from his neck by a pink rubber lanyard. A graphite tennis racket was still in his hand and he shook it at the deputy secretary of agriculture. None of the cops or detectives recognized him, but they followed the lead of the guy from city hall, full of "yes, sir" and "no, sir."

"I don't care if it looks like *cyanide* poisoning, stonewall the bastard! Get rid of these cops—kill the criminal investigation!"

The agriculture man assured him there was absolutely no way the malathion pesticide had come from his Huey helicopters or DC-3 airplanes that were spraying the area for medflies. He was personally supervising the makeshift airfield at the fairgrounds himself. Believe it or not, it appeared to have happened exactly as it had been phoned in to police.

The helicopters and planes had been flying for three months after they had found the insects. A handful of Mediterranean fruit flies had turned up in Tampa backyards, and their tastes leaned toward Florida's citrus crop.

The next thing anyone in Tampa knew, the state capital hit the city over the head with a billion dollars of agricultural clout. Tampa was placed under a citrus version of martial law, and the helicopters were sent in. Saigon. The Hueys skimmed over neighborhoods spraying a mist of what looked and adhered to cars like Smucker's strawberry preserves.

State officials told Tampa they didn't need local approval and to just sit down and shut up. They repeated in lockstep mantra, "Malathion is so safe you can drink it."

Local officials and ad hoc citizens groups turned in water tests that showed a hundred times the federal pesticide limits in rivers and kiddie pools. Residents took on a Bolshevik swagger. Tallahassee decided to change tactics and commissioned a warm-fuzzy advertising campaign to make up with the residents of Tampa Bay. They hired "Malley" the Dancing Malathion Bear.

They were not remotely prepared for what was to come.

A desk phone rang out at the fairgrounds; simultaneously, fifteen miles away, a cell phone made muffled pulses inside a tennis bag at the Palma Ceia Country Club. When the deputy secretary of agriculture heard precisely what had happened at Manatee Isles that morning, he grabbed his head. The man on the tennis court bounced his graphite racket twenty feet in the air. "Un-fucking-believable!" He slammed the cell phone shut and stomped out of the country club.

In Celeste Hamptons's living room, the tennis player tore into the deputy secretary. "Who the hell had that bright idea was it to say it was safe enough to drink?!"

"But we never thought anybody would actually do it!" said the agriculture official. "She wanted to prove it was safe, support her friends in the citrus lobby. She was planning to make a public service commercial. Drank a whole ice tea tumbler of the stuff." He pointed at an empty glass on the counter with a lemon slice on the rim.

"Of all people! She knows we're liars!" said the tennis player.

The monogram on the tennis bag was "CS," for Charles Saffron, president and CEO of New England Life and Casualty, whose power outstripped his no-table wealth. He was the whisper-in-the-ear between business and politics, the behind-the-scenes, connect-the-dots guy who knew everyone, knew nothing on paper and couldn't be scathed. He was the crack in the system into which fear fed accountability and from which sprouted plausible deniability.

Saffron looked around. "Where's Sid?"—referring to Sid Hamptons, her husband, former city councilman, accused of bribery, never charged, resigned, then named chairman of the mayor's task force on task forces.

"You didn't hear? Died five months ago. Freak escalator accident at the aquarium. Got his shoelace caught."

"Shoelace in an escalator? I thought that was a load of crap you tell kids to settle 'em down."

"So did everyone. First case on record."

"Damn."

"She remarried a week ago. Young British guy." The agriculture official pointed to a gentleman in a double-breasted navy blazer and taupe ascot sitting at the dining room table. "His name is...here, I got it written down.... Nigel Mount Batten."

Saffron walked to the table and slapped the young man hard on the side of the head.

"Owwwww!" The man grabbed his right ear. The cops turned toward them for a second, then back to the basketball game on TV.

"Listen, you fucking limey poofter!" Saffron growled, then changed tone. "Is that correct? Is that the proper saying?"

Mount Batten nodded yes nervously.

"Good," said Saffron. "I wouldn't want to get my international protocol wrong, trigger some kind of diplomatic incident, you little colonializing son of a bitch!"

He grabbed Mount Batten by the hair and jerked his head back. "Everything is all wrong here," said Saffron. "Celeste was dumber than a dust bunny, but she never struck me as the kind of person who would drink a glass of insecticide." He stuck a thumb hard into one of Mount Batten's eyes.

The terrible screaming forced the cops to turn up the TV.

"I know you killed her, you Tory twat!" He bore in on Mount Batten with champagne-bruncheon breath. "Now listen good! We've got *bugs* in Florida that can kick your royal butt; imagine what my friends will do. I want you the hell out of my state!"

The agriculture official interrupted and grabbed Saffron's arm. "Hey, if it's true he killed her, we're in the clear," he said. "Let homicide take it. Charge this guy. The program will still have a clear record."

Saffron knocked three times on the agriculture official's skull with his knuckles. "Hello? Shit f

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