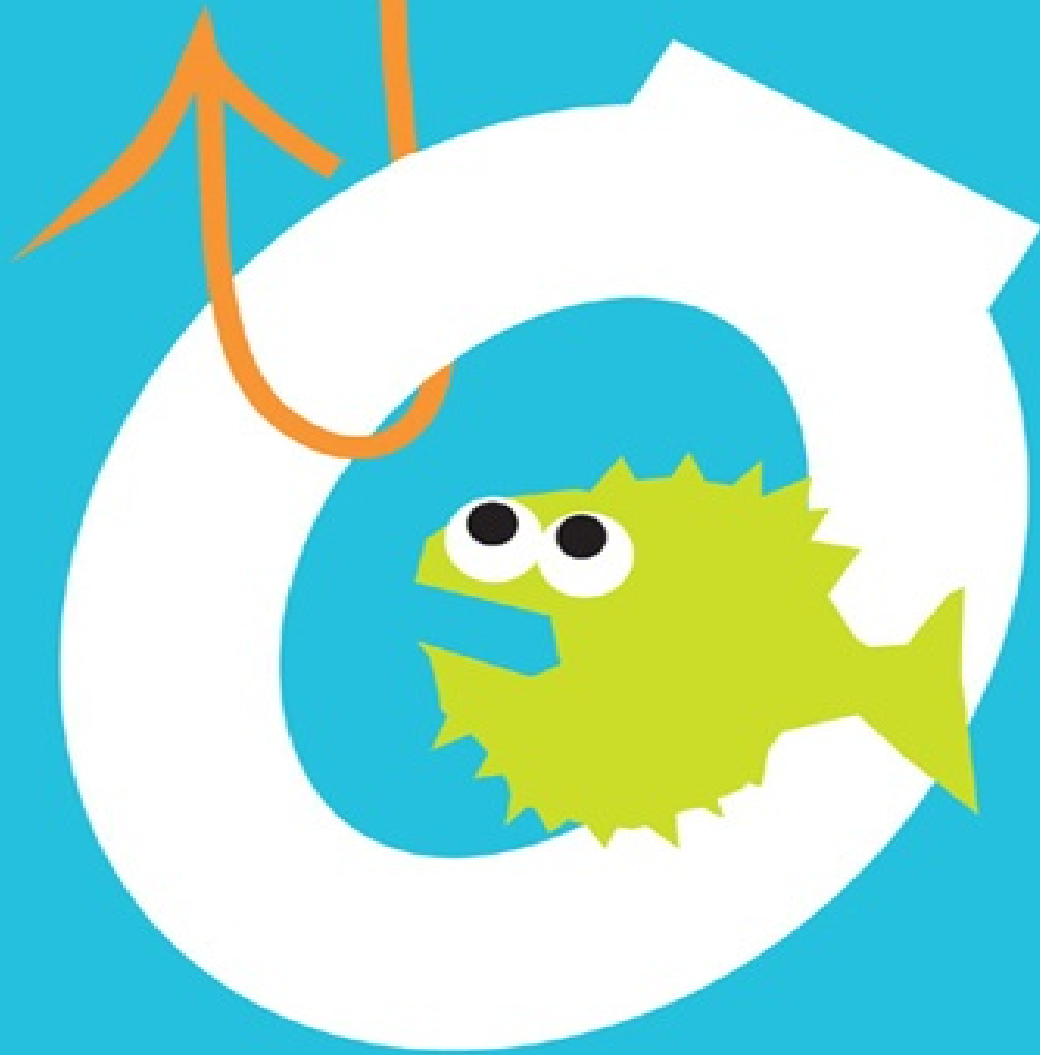


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FLUSH

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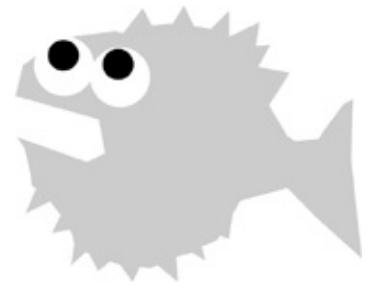
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F L U S H

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Originally published in hardcover as a Borzoi Book by Alfred A. Knopf in 2005.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hiaasen, Carl.

Flush / by Carl Hiaasen.

p. cm.

SUMMARY: With their father jailed for sinking a river boat, Noah Underwood and his younger sister, Abbey, must gather evidence that the owner of this floating casino is emptying his bilge tanks into the protected waters around their Florida Keys home.

eISBN: 978-0-375-83752-4

[1. Environmental protection—Fiction. 2. River boats—Fiction. 3. Fathers—Fiction. 4. Florida—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.H495Flu 2005

[Fic]—dc22 2005005259

v3.0_r2

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The deputy told me to empty my pockets: two quarters, a penny, a stick of bubble gum, and a roll of grip tape for my skateboard. It was pitiful.

“Go on inside. He’s waiting for you,” the deputy said.

My dad was sitting alone at a bare metal table. He looked pretty good, all things considered. He wasn’t even handcuffed.

“Happy Father’s Day,” I said.

He stood up and gave me a hug. “Thanks, Noah,” he said.

In the room there was another deputy—a broad, jowly bear standing next to the door that led to the jail cells. I guess his job was to make sure I wasn’t smuggling a hacksaw to my father so that he could break out.

“It’s good they let you keep your own clothes,” I said to Dad. “I figured they’d make you put on one of those dorky uniforms.”

“I’m sure they will, sooner or later.” He shrugged. “You doing okay?”

“How come you won’t let Mom bail you out?” I asked.

“Because it’s important for me to be here right now.”

“Important how? She says you’ll lose your job if you stay locked up.”

“She’s probably right,” my dad admitted.

He’d been driving a taxi for the past year and a half. Before that he was a fishing guide—good one, too, until the Coast Guard took away his captain’s license.

He said, “Noah, it’s not like I robbed a bank or something.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Did you go see what I did?”

“Not yet,” I said.

He gave me a wink. “It’s impressive.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

He was in a surprisingly good mood. I’d never been to a jail before, though honestly wasn’t much of a jail. Two holding cells, my dad told me. The main county lockup was miles away in Key West.

“Mom wants to know if she should call the lawyer,” I said.

“I suppose.”

“The same one from last time? She wasn’t sure.”

“Yeah, he’s all right,” my father said.

His clothes were rumpled and he looked tired, but he said the food was decent and the police were treating him fine.

“Dad, what if you just said you’re sorry and offered to pay for what you did?”

“But I’m *not* sorry for what I did, Noah. The only thing I’m sorry about is that you’ve got to see me locked up like an ax murderer.”

The other times my dad had gotten in trouble, they wouldn’t let me come to the jail because I was too young.

“I’m not a common criminal.” Dad reached across and put a hand on my arm. “I know right from wrong. Good from bad. Sometimes I just get carried away.”

“Nobody thinks you’re a criminal.”

“Dusty Muleman sure does.”

“That’s because you sunk his boat,” I pointed out. “If you just paid to get it fixed, maybe then—”

“That’s a seventy-three-footer,” my dad cut in. “You’ve got to know what you’re doing to sink one of those pigs. You ought to go have a look.”

“Maybe later,” I said.

The deputy standing by the door made a grunting noise and held up five chubby fingers which was the number of minutes left before he took my father back to the cell.

“Is your mom still ticked off at me?” Dad asked.

“What do you think?”

“I tried to explain it to her, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Then maybe you can explain it to me,” I said. “I’m old enough to understand.”

Dad smiled. “I believe you are, Noah.”

My father was born and raised here in Florida, so he grew up on the water. His dad—my Grandpa Bobby—ran a charter boat out of Haulover Marina on Miami Beach. Grandpa Bobby passed away when I was little, so I honestly didn’t remember him. We’d heard different stories about what happened—one was that his appendix burst; another was that he got hurt real bad in a bar fight. All we knew for sure is that he took his fishing boat down to South America on some sort of job, and he never came back.

One day a man from the U.S. State Department showed up at our house and told my parents that Grandpa Bobby was dead and buried near some little village in Colombia. For some weird reason they couldn’t bring his body home for a funeral—I knew this because I’d seen the paperwork. My dad kept a file, and at least four or five times a year he would write to Washington, D.C., asking someone to please help get his father’s coffin back to Florida. This is, like, ten years later. Mom worked with my dad on the letters—she’s a legal secretary, and she gets straight to the point.

My mom and dad first met while they were standing in line to pay speeding tickets at the Dade County Courthouse, and they got married six weeks later. I know this for a fact because Mom put the speeding tickets in a scrapbook, along with their wedding pictures and stuff like that. The ticket my mother got was for driving 44 miles an hour in a 35-mile-per-hour zone. My father’s ticket was much worse—he was doing 93 on the turnpike. In the album Dad’s ticket looks sort of lumpy and wrinkled because he’d crumpled it into a ball when the sta-

trooper handed it to him. My mother said she used a laundry iron to flatten it out before pasting it next to hers in the scrapbook.

About a year after they got married, my parents moved down to the Keys. I'm sure that was Dad's idea, because he'd been coming here ever since he was a kid and he hated the big city. I was actually born in a 1989 Chevrolet Caprice on U.S. Highway One, my dad racing up the eighteen-mile stretch from Key Largo to the mainland. He was trying to get my mother to the hospital in Homestead. She was lying in the backseat of the car, and that's where I was born. Mom did it all by herself—she didn't tell my dad to pull over and stop because she didn't want him interfering. They still argue about this. (She says he's got a tendency to get overexcited, which is the understatement of the century.) He didn't even realize I was born until they got to Florida City and I started bawling.

Abbey came along three years later. Dad talked my mom into naming her after one of his favorite writers, some weird old bird who's buried out west in the middle of a desert.

Most of my friends aren't crazy about their sisters, but Abbey's all right. Maybe it's not cool to say so, but the truth is the truth. She's funny and tough and not nearly as irritating as most of the girls at school. Over the years Abbey and I developed a pretty good system: She keeps an eye on Mom, and I keep an eye on Dad. Sometimes, though, I need extra help.

"So, what's the deal?" Abbey asked after I got back from the jail.

We were sitting at the kitchen table. For lunch Mom had fixed us the usual, ham-and-cheese sandwiches.

"He says he got carried away again," I said.

Abbey raised her eyebrows and snorted. "No duh."

Mom set two glasses of milk on the table. "Noah, why does he insist on staying in jail? It's Father's Day, for heaven's sake."

"I guess he's trying to make a point."

"All he's making," my sister said, "is a jackass of himself."

"Hush, Abbey," Mom told her.

"He said it's okay to call the lawyer," I added.

"He's not pleading guilty?" Abbey asked. "How can he *not* plead guilty? He did it, didn't he?"

"It's still smart to have an attorney," said my mother. She seemed much calmer now. When the police first called, she'd gotten real mad and said some pretty harsh things about Dad. Honestly, I couldn't blame her. Even for him this was a major screwup.

"Noah, how are you doing?" she asked.

I knew she was worried that the jailhouse visit had shaken me up, so I told her I was fine.

She said, "I'm sure it wasn't easy seeing your father behind bars."

"They brought him to a private room," I said. "He wasn't even wearing handcuffs."

My mother frowned slightly. "Still, it's not a happy picture."

Abbey said, "Maybe he ought to plead insanity."

Mom ignored her. “Your father has many good qualities,” she said to me, “but he’s not the most stable role model for a young man like yourself. He’d be the first to admit it, Noah.”

Whenever I get this speech, I listen patiently and don’t say a word. She won’t come right out and say so, but Mom worries that I’m too much like my dad.

“Drink your milk,” she said, and went to the den to call our lawyer, a man named Mr. Shine.

As soon as we were alone, Abbey reached over and twisted the hair on my arm. “Tell me everything,” she said.

“Not now.” I jerked my head toward the doorway. “Not with Mom around.”

Abbey said, “It’s all right. She’s on the phone.”

I shook my head firmly and took a bite of my sandwich.

“Noah, are you holding out on me?” my sister asked.

“Finish your lunch,” I said, “then we’ll go for a ride.”

The *Coral Queen* had gone down stern-first in twelve feet of water. Her hull had settled on the muddy bottom at a slight angle with the bow aiming upward.

She was a big one, too. Even at high tide the top two decks were above the waterline. It was like a big ugly apartment building had fallen out of the sky and landed in the basin.

Abbey hopped off my handlebars and walked to the water’s edge. She planted her hands on her hips and stared at the crime scene.

“Whoa,” she said. “He really did it this time.”

“It’s bad,” I agreed.

The *Coral Queen* was one of those gambling boats where passengers line up to play blackjack and electronic poker, and to stuff their faces at the all-you-can-eat buffet. It didn’t sound like a ton of fun to me, but the *Coral Queen* was packed to the rafters every night.

There was one major difference between Dusty Muleman’s operation and the gambling cruises up in Miami: The *Coral Queen* didn’t actually go anywhere. That’s one reason it was so popular.

By Florida law, gambling boats are supposed to travel at least three miles offshore—beyond the state boundaries—before anyone is allowed to start betting. Rough weather was real bad for business because lots of customers get seasick. As soon as they start throwing up, they quit spending money.

According to my father, Dusty Muleman’s dream was to open a gambling boat that never left the calm and safety of its harbor. That way the passengers would never get too queasy at the party.

Only Indian tribes are allowed to run casino operations in Florida, so Dusty somehow persuaded a couple of rich Miccosukees from Miami to buy the marina and make it part of their reservation. Dad said the government raised a stink but later backed off because the Indians had better lawyers.

Anyway, Dusty got his gambling boat—and he got rich.

My dad had waited until three in the morning, when the last of the crew was gone, to sneak aboard. He'd untied the ropes and started one of the engines and idled out to the mouth of the basin, where he'd opened the seacocks and cut the hoses and disconnected the bilge pumps and then dived overboard.

The *Coral Queen* had gone down crosswise in the channel, which meant that no other vessels could get in or out of the basin. In other words, Dusty Muleman wasn't the only captain in town who wanted to strangle my dad on Father's Day.

I locked my bike to a buttonwood tree and walked down to the charter docks, Abbey trailing behind. Two small skiffs and a Coast Guard inflatable were nosing around the *Coral Queen*. We could hear the men in the skiffs talking about what had to be done to float the boat. It was a major project.

"He's lost his marbles," Abbey muttered.

"Who—Dad? No way," I said.

"Then why did he do it?"

"Because Dusty Muleman has been dumping his holding tank into the water," I said.

Abbey grimaced. "Yuck. From the toilets?"

"Yep. In the middle of the night, when there's nobody around."

"That is so gross."

"And totally illegal," I said. "He only does it to save money."

According to my father, Dusty Muleman was such a pathetic cheapskate that he wouldn't pay to have the *Coral Queen's* sewage hauled away. Instead his crew had standing orders to flush the waste into the basin, which was already murky. The tide later carried most of the filth out to open water.

"But why didn't Dad just call the Coast Guard?" my sister asked. "Wouldn't that have been the grown-up thing to do?"

"He told me he tried. He said he called everybody he could think of, but they could never catch Dusty in the act," I said. "Dad thinks somebody's tipping him off."

"Oh, please," Abbey groaned.

Now she was starting to annoy me.

"When the wind and the current are right, the poop from the gambling boat floats out of the basin and down the shoreline," I said, "straight to Thunder Beach."

Abbey made a pukey face. "Ugh. So that's why they close the park sometimes."

"You know how many kids go swimming there? What Dusty's doing can make you real sick at both ends. Hospital-sick, Dad says. So it's not only disgusting, it's dangerous."

"Yeah, but—"

"I didn't say it was right, Abbey, what Dad did. I'm only telling you why."

My father hadn't even tried to get away. After swimming back to the dock, he'd sat down in a folding chair, opened a can of root beer, and watched the *Coral Queen* go down. He w

still there at dawn, sleeping, when the police arrived.

“So what now?” Abbey asked.

A dark bluish slick surrounded the boat, and the men in the Coast Guard inflatable were laying out yellow floating bumpers, to keep the oil and grease from spreading. By sinking the *Coral Queen*, my father himself had managed to make quite a mess.

I said, “Dad asked me to help him.”

Abbey made a face. “Help him what—break out of jail?”

“Get serious.”

“Then what, Noah? Tell me.”

I knew she wasn’t going to like it. “He wants me to help him nail Dusty Muleman,” I said.

A long silence followed, so I figured Abbey was thinking up something snarky to say. But it turned out that she wasn’t.

“I didn’t give Dad an answer yet,” I said.

“I already know your answer,” said my sister.

“His heart’s in the right place, Abbey. It really is.”

“It’s not his heart I’m worried about, it’s his brain,” she said. “You’d better be careful, Noah.”

“Are you going to tell Mom?”

“I haven’t decided.” She gave me a sideways look that told me she probably wouldn’t.

Like I said, my sister’s all right.

Lucky for us, it was summertime and school was out. That meant that Abbey and I didn't have to face all the other kids at once. It's a pretty small town and news gets around fast, so by now it was no secret that our father was in the slammer for sinking Dusty Muleman's casino boat. Everybody would be talking about it.

The kid I most didn't want to see was Jasper Muleman Jr., who was Dusty's son. He was a well-known jerk, which I partly blamed on the fact that his parents had named him Jasper. That would be enough to make anybody mean and mad at the world.

Unfortunately, he was at the marina the next morning when I stopped by to see the salvage crew float the *Coral Queen*. Scuba divers were feeding fat black hoses into the sunken half of the boat, though I couldn't tell if they were pumping water out or pumping air in. I spotted Jasper Jr. before he spotted me, but for some reason I didn't sneak away. I just stood around watching the divers wrestle with the hoses until Jasper Jr. came over and called me a name that wasn't very original.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your dad's boat," I said, trying my hardest to sound sincere.

When Jasper Jr. shoved me, I wasn't totally surprised. He isn't a big kid but he's wiry and strong, and he likes to fight. It's one of the only things he does well.

"Lay off," I said, and naturally he pushed me again.

"Your crazy father sunk our boat!" Jasper Jr. snarled.

"I said I was sorry."

"You're gonna pay for this, Underwood."

Normally I try to stick to the truth, but I wasn't in the mood to get punched in the face, which is what Jasper Jr. had in mind. So, to calm him down, I said, "I just came by to see if I could help."

"I'm so sure."

"Honest!"

Jasper Jr. sneered, which is another thing he's good at. I found myself studying the shape of his head, which reminded me of an extra-large walnut. He wore his hair in a buzz cut, and you could see shiny lumps and crinkles in the skin of his scalp. Maybe everybody's skull is knobby and weird underneath their hair, but on Jasper Jr. it made him look even meaner.

He said, "Underwood, I'm gonna kick your butt from here to Miami."

"I don't think so."

"Yeah? And why don't you think so, dorkface?"

"Because your dad's about to come over here and kick yours," I said, which was true.

Dusty Muleman had been hollering for his son from the other side of the basin. Jasper Jr. hadn't heard him because he was too busy messing with me, and now his father was serious and ticked off. I pointed across the water to where Dusty Muleman stood glaring, his arms folded.

Jasper Jr. spun around and saw for himself.

“Uh-oh,” he said, and took off running to join his father. “I’ll get you later!” he hollered and threw me over one shoulder.

A few minutes later Abbey showed up, and we hung around until the *Coral Queen* was on the bottom. We were surprised to see how easily they got her up, but of course there weren’t any holes in the hull or other damage that needed patching. My father had just pulled the plugs, basically.

“How does Dad know it’s the casino boat doing the dumping?” Abbey asked.

“Because they never had to close Thunder Beach before the *Coral Queen* got here. The boat never had a problem with poop in the water until now,” I said.

A small crowd had gathered to see the operation, but Abbey and I stayed off by ourselves on the far side of the basin. We didn’t want to make Dusty Muleman any madder than he already was.

“What a phony,” my sister said. “Just look at him.”

At one time Dusty Muleman had been an ordinary fishing guide, the same as my father. Their skiffs were berthed next to each other at a place called Ted’s Marina. In the summertime, when business slowed down, Dusty would head out to Colorado and work at a dude ranch, taking tourists into the mountains for brook trout. Then one September he came back to the Keys and put his skiff up for sale. He told Dad and the other guides that he had inherited some money from a rich uncle who’d died in an elephant stampede in Africa. I remember Mom’s eyes narrowing when Dad told us the story—it was the same look I get whenever I tell her I’m done with my homework and she knows better.

As for my father, he said anything was possible, even Dusty Muleman being related to a dead millionaire. Not long after he quit guiding, Dusty bought the *Coral Queen*, got her outfitted for gambling, and partnered up with the Miccosukees. That wasn’t even two years ago, and now he was one of the richest men in Monroe County, or so he said. He drove up and down Highway One in a black Cadillac SUV, and he wore bright flowered shirts and smoked real Cuban cigars, just to let the world know what a big shot he was. But according to Dad, Dusty still showed up every night at the casino boat, to count the money personally.

Abbey said, “Muleman’ll have that tub fixed up good as new in a week. What was Dad thinking? If he was serious, he would’ve burned the darn thing to the waterline.”

“Don’t give him any ideas,” I said.

Lice Peeking lived in a trailer park on the old road that runs parallel to the main highway. I got there at lunchtime but he was still asleep. When I offered to come back later, his girlfriend said no, she’d be happy to wake him. She was a large lady with bright blond hair and a barbed-wire tattoo around one of her biceps. My dad had told me about her. He’d said to make sure I was extra polite.

The girlfriend disappeared down the hallway and came back half a minute later, leading Lice Peeking by his belt. He didn’t look so good and he smelled even worse—a combination of beer and B.O. was my guess.

“Who’re you?” he demanded, then sagged down on an old sofa.

The girlfriend said, “I’m off to the store.”

“Don’t forget my cigarettes,” Lice Peeking told her.

“No way. You promised to quit.”

“Aw, gimme a break, Shelly.”

They argued for a while and seemed to forget they had company. I pretended to look at the aquarium, which had pea-green slime on the glass and exactly one live fish swimming in the water.

Finally, Lice Peeking’s girlfriend said he was hopeless and snatched the wallet out of his jeans and stomped out the door. When he got himself together, he asked once more who I was.

“Noah Underwood,” I said.

“Paine’s boy?”

“That’s right. He asked me to come see you.”

“About what?”

“Mr. Muleman,” I said.

From Lice Peeking’s throat came a sound that was either a chuckle or a cough. He fished under one of the sofa cushions until he found a half-smoked, mushed-up cigarette, which he balanced in a crusty corner of his mouth.

“I don’t s’pose you got a match,” he said.

“No, sir.”

He dragged himself to the kitchenette and knocked around until he came up with a lighter. He fired up the moldy butt and sucked on it for a solid minute without even glancing in my direction. The smoke was making me sick to my stomach, but I couldn’t leave until I got an answer. For two years, until last Christmas Eve, Lice Peeking had worked as a mate on Dusty Muleman’s casino boat.

“Mr. Peeking?” I said. His real name was Charles, but Dad said everyone had called him Lice, for obvious reasons, since elementary school. It didn’t look like his bathing habits had improved much since then.

“What do you want, boy?” he snapped.

“It’s about the *Coral Queen*. My dad says Mr. Muleman is dumping the holding tank into the marina basin.”

Lice Peeking propped himself against the wall of the trailer. “Really? Well, let’s just say that’s true. What’s it got to do with you or me or the price of potatoes?”

“My father’s in jail,” I said, “for sinking that boat.”

“Aw, go on.”

“I’m serious. I thought everybody’d heard by now.”

Lice Peeking started laughing so hard, I thought he might have an asthma attack and fall off the floor. Obviously the news about my father had brightened his day.

“Please,” I said, “will you help us?”

He stopped laughing and snuffed the nub of his cigarette on the countertop. “Now what would I do a dumb fool thing like that? Help you do *what?*”

I explained how the toilet scum from the gambling boat flowed down the shoreline to Thunder Beach. “Where the turtles lay their eggs,” I said, “and all the kids go swimming.”

Lice Peeking shrugged. “Say I was to help you—what’s in it for me?”

Dad had warned me that Lice Peeking wasn’t accustomed to doing something simple because it was decent and right. He’d predicted that Lice Peeking might demand something in return.

“We don’t have much,” I said.

“Aw, that’s too bad.” He made like he was playing a violin.

I knew money would be tight at our house as long as Dad was in jail—my mother only works part-time at the law firm, so the pay isn’t so hot.

“What about my dad’s truck?” I asked. “It’s a ’97 Dodge pickup.” Giving it up was my father’s idea.

“No, I already got wheels,” Lice Peeking said. “Anyway, I’m not s’posed to drive on account of they yanked my license. What else?”

I thought of offering him Dad’s fishing skiff, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. It was a cool little boat.

“Let me talk to my father,” I said.

“You do that.”

“Will you at least promise to think about it?”

“You listen here,” Lice Peeking said. “What do I care about baby sea turtles? I got my own daily survival to worry about.”

He pointed to the door and followed me out. I was halfway down the steps of the trailer before I got up the nerve to ask one more question.

“How come you don’t work for Mr. Muleman anymore?”

“Because he fired me,” Lice Peeking said. “Didn’t your old man tell you?”

“No, sir, he didn’t.”

To keep from wobbling, Lice Peeking braced himself with both arms in the doorway. His face was pasty in the sunlight, and his eyes were glassy and dim. He looked like a sick old iguana, yet according to my dad, he was only twenty-nine. It was hard to believe.

“Ain’t you gonna ask why I got canned?” he said. “It was for stealin’.”

“Did you do it?”

“Yep, I sure did.”

“How much?” I asked.

Lice Peeking grinned. “It wasn’t money I stole from Dusty,” he said. “It was Shelly.”

“Oh.”

“What can I say? I needed a lady with a big heart and a valid driver’s license.”

I said, “I’ll be back after I see my father.” “Whatever,” said Lice Peeking. “I’m gonna hup down a beer.”

My mother says that being married to my father is like having another child to watch after one who’s too big and unpredictable to put in time-out. Sometimes, when Mom and Dad are arguing, she threatens to pack up our stuff and take me and Abbey out of the Keys to “go start a normal life.” I think my mother loves my dad but she just can’t understand him. Abbey says Mom understands him perfectly fine, but she just can’t figure out how to fix him.

When I got back from the trailer park, my mother was in the kitchen chopping up onions. That’s how I knew she’d been crying. Nobody in our family likes onions, and the only time Mom ever fixes them is when she’s upset. That way she can tell Abbey and me that it’s only the onions making her eyes water.

I knew she’d been to the jail, so I asked, “How’s Dad?”

My mother didn’t look up. “Oh, he’s just dandy,” she said.

“Is there any news?”

“What do you mean, Noah?”

“About when he’s getting out.”

“Well, that’s entirely up to him,” Mom said. “I’ve offered to put up his bail, but apparently he’d rather sit alone in a cramped, roach-infested cell than be home with his family. Maybe the lawyer can talk some sense into him.”

Of course I couldn’t tell her what my father had asked me to do. She would’ve raced back to the jail, reached through the bars, and throttled him.

“Think they’ll let me visit him again?” I asked.

“I don’t see why not. It isn’t as if his social schedule is all booked up.”

From the tone of her voice I knew she was highly irritated with my father.

“I spoke to your Aunt Sandy and your Uncle Del,” she said. “They offered to call him in jail and try to talk some sense into him, but I told them not to bother.”

Aunt Sandy and Uncle Del are Dad’s older sister and brother. They live in Miami Beach—Sandy in a high-rise condominium with a gym on the top floor, and Del in a nice house with a tennis court in the backyard. This is a sensitive subject at our home.

Several years after my grandfather disappeared in South America, a large amount of money was discovered in a safe-deposit box that he’d kept at a bank up in Hallandale. Nobody even told Abbey or me exactly how much was there, but it must have been a lot. I remember Dad talking about it with my mother, who always wondered how a charter-boat captain could afford to put away so much cash. She had a point, too—nobody we knew ever got rich in the fishing business.

Anyway, Grandpa Bobby had left instructions that the money was to be split evenly among Sandy, Del, and my father, but Dad wouldn’t take a nickel. My mother didn’t argue about it either, which made me think there must have been a good reason for steering clear of the

cash. Aunt Sandy and Uncle Del were more than happy to take Dad's share, and they've been living the high life ever since.

"They wanted to send some hotshot Miami lawyer down to handle his case," Mom said "but I told them it wasn't necessary."

"You're right. It's not such a big deal."

"That's not what I said, Noah. It is a big deal." She scraped the chopped onion bits into a bowl, which she covered with plastic wrap and placed in the refrigerator. Later, when she was alone in the kitchen, she would empty the whole thing into the garbage.

"I'm at the end of my rope with your father," she said.

"Mom, everything's going to work out."

"You children need to have food on the table! The mortgage needs to be paid!" she went on angrily. "Meanwhile he's sitting in jail, talking about fighting for his principles. He wants to be a martyr, Noah, that's fine—but not at the expense of this family. I won't stand for it!"

"Mom, I know it's a rough time—" I said, but she cut me off with a wave of her hand.

"Go clean up your room," she said. "Please."

Abbey was waiting at the top of the stairs. She put a finger to her lips and led me down the hall to my parents' bedroom. She cracked open the door and pointed.

There, lying open on the bed, was my mother's suitcase. Not her vacation suitcase, either, but the big plaid one.

"Uh-oh," I said in a whisper.

Abbey nodded gravely. "She's serious this time, Noah. We've got to do something."

THREE

By the time they let me visit my father again, the *Coral Queen* had been pumped dry, mopped clean, and refitted with new gambling equipment. I was hoping Dad wouldn't ask about it but he did.

"No way!" he exclaimed when I told him that Dusty Muleman was back in action.

"They must've had twenty guys working on that boat," I said.

My father was crushed. "I should've taken it out and sunk it in Hawk's Channel," he muttered, "or the Gulf Stream."

Luckily we were alone in the interview room. I assumed that my father had convinced the big jowly deputy—and probably everyone else at the jail—that he was harmless and fairly normal. He was good at that.

"Mom heard you might get transferred to the stockade in Key West," I said.

"Not anymore," Dad reported in a confidential tone. "The lieutenant here likes me. I'm teaching him how to play chess."

"You play chess?"

"Shhhh," my father said. "He *thinks* I do. Hey, how's Abbey?"

"All right," I said.

"Tell her to hang in there, Noah."

"She says you need professional help."

Dad sat back and chortled. "That's our girl. Did you go see Lice Peeking?"

I described my visit to the trailer park. My father wasn't surprised that Lice turned down the old truck and wanted money in exchange for providing evidence against Dusty Muleman.

"Dad, how are we going to pay him when ..."

"When we're flat broke? Excellent question," my father said. "See if Lice will take me on a bonefish skiff. It's worth ten or twelve grand at least."

Secretly I'd been hoping that one day Dad would give me that boat. It was an original Hell's Bay with a sixty-horse Merc, a really sweet ride. Sometimes, late in the afternoon, my father would take me and Abbey out fishing. Even if the snappers weren't biting, we'd stay until sunset, hoping to see the green flash on the horizon. The flash was kind of a legend in the Keys—some people believed in it and some didn't. Dad claimed that he'd actually witnessed it once, on a cruise to Fort Jefferson. For our fishing expeditions either Abbey or I always brought a camera, just in case. We had a stack of pretty sunset pictures, but no green flash.

"You sure you want to give away the skiff?" I asked.

"What the heck, it's the best we can do," Dad said.

"I guess so." I tried not to sound too bummed.

"Hey, did you meet the famous Shelly?"

“Yeah. She’s kind of scary,” I said. “Lice said he stole her from Dusty—what did he mean exactly?”

I figured it was one of those I’ll-explain-it-when-you’re-older questions that my dad would brush off, but he didn’t.

“Shelly was Dusty’s second or third wife, after Jasper Jr.’s mother,” he said. Then he paused. “Actually, maybe they were only engaged to be married. Anyway, one day she got fed up with Dusty and moved in with Lice.”

I wondered how miserable life with the Mulemans must have been to make Lice Peeking look like a prize.

“Dad, when’re you coming home?” I asked.

“After the trial,” he replied.

The plan was to use his big day in court to expose Dusty Muleman’s illegal polluting.

“But Mom says you can bail out and come home and still have your trial later,” I said.

“No, I need to stay here and show I’m totally committed to the cause. You know how many jails around this world are full of people who spoke up for what they believed in and lost their freedom? Lost everything they had? Look at Nelson Mandela,” my father said. “He spent twenty-seven years in a South African prison. Twenty-seven years, Noah! A couple of weeks won’t hurt me.”

“But Mom misses you,” I said.

That seemed to catch him off guard and take the steam out of his big speech. Dad looked away.

“It’s a sacrifice, I know,” he said. “I wish it didn’t have to be like this.”

I didn’t say anything about Mom and the plaid suitcase because she’d put it away. The morning I’d peeked in their bedroom closet—her clothes were still hanging there. So were Dad’s.

When I stood up to leave, my father perked up slightly. He said, “Oh, I almost forgot. A reporter from the *Island Examiner* might drop by the house. It’s all right for you to speak with him.”

“About what?” I asked.

“My situation.”

“Oh. Sure, Dad.”

His “situation”? I thought. Sometimes it’s like my father lives on his own weird little planet.

In July the days get long and stream together. I try not to look at the calendar because I don’t want to think about time passing. August comes way too soon, and that’s when school starts in Florida.

Summer mornings are mostly sunny and still, though by midafternoon huge boiling thunderheads start to build over the Everglades, and the weather can get interesting in

hurry. I've always liked watching the sky drop down like a foamy purple curtain when a summer storm rumbles across Florida Bay. If you're on the ocean side of the islands, it can sneak up on you from behind, which happens a lot to tourists.

That's where we were going, to Thunder Beach, when a squall rolled through after lunch. Thom, Rado, and I hunkered in the mangroves and held our skateboards over our heads, to keep the raindrops out of our eyes. It took like half an hour for the leading edge of the storm to pass. Then the wind dropped out, and the only sound was a soft sleepy drizzle.

We crawled from the tree line and brushed the leaves off our arms. Not surprisingly, the lightning had spooked everyone away from the park except us.

Before heading to the water, we scanned the shoreline for pollution warnings. Whenever the biologists from the health department find too much bacteria, they post DANGER! signs up and down Thunder Beach—no swimming, no fishing, no anything. Only a certified moron would dive in when the beach was posted.

I was glad to see that the water was okay, especially when a big loggerhead turtle bobbed up to the surface. The three of us stayed real quiet because we thought the turtle might be coming ashore to lay her eggs, although usually they waited until dark. Loggerheads have lousy eyesight, so we were pretty sure she didn't notice us sitting there, but she didn't swim any closer.

We wouldn't have bothered her if she'd decided to crawl up and dig a nest. Most of the Keys are made of hard coral rock, and there aren't many soft beaches like you find up the coast at Pompano or Vero. The momma turtles down here don't have lots of options, so we leave them alone. It's the law, too.

After the loggerhead swam off, we jumped in and goofed around until Thom cut his ankle on a broken beer bottle that was buried in the sand. Rado and I helped him hop back to shore, where we tied his Dolphins jersey around his foot to keep the cut from getting dirty. Rado took him home while I skated alone down the old road, back toward Lice Peeking place.

Nobody answered the door, and I was already down the steps when Shelly appeared from behind the trailer and nearly scared the you-know-what out of me. She was barefoot and carried a long rusty shovel.

"What'd you want now?" she asked. She wore cutoff jeans and a sleeveless top that showed off her barbed-wire tattoo.

"I need to talk to Mr. Peeking again," I said.

"Well, he's not available at the moment."

"That's okay. I'll come back another time."

Shelly noticed me staring at the shovel. She laughed and said, "Don't worry, it wasn't Lice was puttin' in a hole. It was last night's dinner."

I nodded as if that was the most normal thing in the world, burying food in your backyard.

"Lobster shells," she explained. "I don't want 'em stinking up the garbage, 'cause they're out of season. Next thing you know, some nosy neighbor calls the grouper troopers and the Houston, we've got a problem."

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