

Heart and Soul

Ray Showalter drove across the causeway at forty-eight miles per hour, the optimum speed for gas mileage with his old camper. Most cars were headed east toward Tampa and the Interstate north, but Ray avoided the Interstates even in normal times. The camper, a cab over style, grew unwieldy in cross winds and he had to push that old engine too hard. Ray was sensitive to the limits of machinery.

Once across the causeway, he'd thread his way up through Safety Harbor and Dunedin on city streets. Not much danger when you got north of Weeki Wachee Springs, the radio said. He'd make the Panhandle tomorrow, Arkansas the next day, and be home in Missouri the day after that.

He was cutting it close. The storm had sucked all the water from the bay but several hours might pass before the surge back in. Maybe the surge wouldn't amount to much; maybe it would. The wind, hitting seventy in gusts, had dropped off, and the sun shone through sheets of rain as they danced across the bay. The effect was eerie, even ethereal, but Ray thought about all the fish flopping in the mud. He used to smoke mullet on the weekends with hickory pellets. Sometimes, he smoked so many fish he sold them at the Oldsmar Flea Market.

A lot of people weren't even leaving, but Ray had told his boss, Francisco Urias, that he'd stay two years, and the big storm would mark two years and a month. He couldn't ride out a hurricane in his camper, not so near the water where the job was. Time to pack up and say goodbye to Paradise.

Francisco gave him a box of cigars. His mother worked in Ybor City at a tiny cigar factory. “You’ll come back, my friend.”

Ray nodded. You never knew. He’d been a of jack-of-all-trades for Francisco, working with Venezuelans who came cheap, probably off the books but Ray didn’t ask. They rehabbed drug houses and sometimes built new ones if Francisco found an unclaimed piece of sand. Francisco allowed him to stay in his camper on the job sites, which meant Ray saved almost everything he earned.

With the shore in sight, Ray spotted a junky little Hyundai with the hood up. A woman looked toward his camper and Ray slowed to twenty-five. She wore shorts and a halter top, a pretty standard uniform for the Gulf Coast, but so much female skin always made Ray nervous. He knew it was rude to stare, but then he’d make a production of not staring. Other than his mother and sister, there had been no woman in his life for ten years and more. Still, if the woman was in trouble, and no better hero was available, he had to try.

Might be a dead battery, he thought, and did a quick U-turn, so that when he drove up the shoulder to the Hyundai, jumper cables would reach. He stepped out of the camper just as the wind began to roar again, crashing through the willows and bending the palms in the little inlets along the causeway. The woman motioned frantically and shouted something he couldn’t make out. Ray held onto his Cardinals cap and shouted back: “Battery? You think it’s the battery?”

“I gotta get outta here!”

Her eyes were brown but their true color was fear. “We’ll get you out, ma’am,” he shouted, as his cap flew away. “Gonna be all right!. You wanna crank her?”

The woman shook her head violently. “What?”

His language. Happened all the time in Florida. His father always spoke of cranking an engine, dating from his youth when he started old tractors with a hand crank. “Try to start her, ma’am.”

The woman said something he couldn’t understand through her snarl of wet hair. But her head bobbed, she slid under the wheel, and even in the roaring wind he could hear the starter engage and whirl. He raised a hand to stop the woman, who nodded, yanked back her hair, and got out by the fender. “It just stopped,” she shouted. “It just stopped!”

He dropped to the oyster shell shoulder and quickly saw what had happened. He stood again and pointed toward his camper. “Get your stuff. C’mon!”

She had two bags of groceries, which he grabbed and stuffed into the camper. She pulled something from the glove compartment, slung her purse strap over one shoulder, and tried to run, but the wind blew too strongly and she nearly fell. He couldn’t stand, either. They hung onto each other, bent low, and made their way up the leeward side of the camper. Ray crawled in over the gear shift and she followed. He threw her a shop rag from behind his seat and she dabbed at her face. She pulled back her wet hair into a red elastic tie and said, “I’m Abby Durant.”

“Ray Showalter, ma’am,” he shouted. “Pleased to meet ya.” He turned the ignition key and heard a clanging of metal on metal: he’d never shut off the engine. No one could have heard the engine over the storm noise but he cursed his mistake. Very hard on the starter.

The camper rocked violently in the wind as he turned onto the highway. Subtly, the driver’s side felt more buoyant, as if it could tip at any moment. The rain pounded harder and he flipped the wipers to their highest speed. The speedometer said he was driving at fifteen but the camper seemed motionless, and he could hardly see. When the tires slipped onto the shoulder, he pulled left. Abby leaned forward, wiping the windshield with the shop rag. It helped a little.

At last he sensed they'd reached the shore. Trees whipped back and forth, branches and palmetto fronds skittered across the highway, but the the wind seemed less formidable.

"What's wrong with my car, Ray?" Abby shouted.

"Big gash in the oil pan. How far you drive it that way?"

"From Tampa. I heard a thump and a bunch of lights came on but I thought, I can't get stranded out here on the causeway."

"I imagine you ruint your engine. "

She shook her head as if she didn't believe him. "I need that car!"

"Yeah." He was sorry for the woman. It wasn't much of a car but probably all she could afford. "Where ya live?"

"Largo. You'd turn south on Lincoln, but you don't have to—"

She stopped. It seemed to Ray that he did have to; he couldn't let her out in the middle of a hurricane. He was pleased with himself for picking her up but wished he didn't have her on his hands. He shouldn't have started home so late. He'd allowed no time for a diversion. "About ten miles?" he asked.

She nodded and settled back. She leaned forward again, crossed and uncrossed her legs. Ray reached twenty miles per hour briefly but the rain was pooling and the wind made it hard to hold the camper steady. In five miles, debris and high water blocked the highway. By a chain-link fence, he spied a van turned upside down

"Gotta get outta this," he shouted, and now Largo seemed an impossible goal. He turned north at a stoplight that no longer worked. It swung wildly and seemed likely to break loose. He'd have to find shelter for the woman somewhere—and for himself as well. He tried to think. He could park the camper next to some sturdy building, such as a church or a bank.

Perhaps three inches of water stood on the street, churning in mad, small whirlpools around drains. He drove forward at ten miles per hour, concentrating so hard he forgot about Abby. Then he felt a warm hand on his forearm.

“Thank you,” she said.

Somehow, taking streets he thought he could get through, then turning slowly around like a motor boat and trying another way, he drifted over to Cleveland Street in downtown Clearwater. Any farther west, he'd be in the Gulf.

He'd visited Clearwater once. It was too expensive for his budget and he hated to pay for parking. Today the storefronts were boarded up and there wasn't any traffic.

“Dammit!” he said. He'd been wading six inches of water, but ahead was a dip in the road he sensed would drown out the camper.

And the wind had grown even stronger. Everything that wasn't nailed down sailed out sideways. Plywood, shutters, barrels, even old tires blew from God only knew where. He spied a black Ford Ranger parked under a mammoth chinaberry tree. Nothing would bring that old tree down but water had reached the driver's door on the Ranger. “Why didn't he move that truck?” Ray asked. “Water gets up to the wiring harness, it never will run right.”

“It's only a truck!”

Did she say that? Her words were like a thought. He stared at her and didn't know who she was, but she tried to smile, and her smile seemed familiar. He might have known her way back in high school, a pretty girl named Rita, the only one with enough patience to wait out his shyness. Moments, it seemed, after graduation, Rita fled to St. Louis.

“We can't get through!” he shouted. “We gotta hole up somewhere.”

She twisted in her seat and pointed to a parking garage, nestled against a big hotel, that rose five stories. “There!”

Ray nodded and slowly backed up, then forded the dip at the entrance. The guard station had been abandoned. The camper would clear the opening by four inches but the boom barrier was down, and of course it was electronic.

“*Knock* it down,” Abby shouted, but Ray could never be so rash. He didn’t want to destroy private property. A piece of the boom might thrust through his radiator. He glanced over at this refugee he’d picked up and there was an awkward moment when he tried not to stare at her breasts. He said, “You cold?”

“I’m freezing!”

“Hold your horses.” He’d bought a new pair of shoes at the Oldsmar Flea Market, leather shoes to celebrate his return to Missouri, rather than the Walmart crap he usually wore. He didn’t want his shoes to get wet, so he took them off before wading back to the camper’s door. He found sweatpants and a flannel shirt—and two half-inch box end wrenches. He rapped on Abby’s window and handed in the clothing, then waded over to the boom barrier. It was old like the garage, or might not have been so easily dismantled, but he finished in minutes. He leaned the barrier against the guard station and waded back to the camper, weaving in the wind like a drunk, catching Abby’s eyes through the windshield the defroster had finally cleared. Something new had taken over those brown eyes, replacing fear. Ray couldn’t fathom it.

In his old clothing, Abby reminded Ray of his sister in Missouri. Then he remembered: the shirt *was* his sister’s.

“Let’s go,” Abby said. “Go!”

Each floor was supported by square concrete pillars, and there were half-walls all around, like parapets. Twisting up the ramps, the wind hit them on the east side—not with its full force but at a shear. The old camper crawled up the slopes in first until, on the last ramp, a clump of battered steel sheeting blocked their way. Ray's door, on the leeward side, opened easily.

The metal looked like a bent-up, galvanized hog feeder, which made no sense in Clearwater, Florida. It sat trembling, as if a new gust would grab it, but it was too heavy to lift. Ray dragged it to the parapet and slowly edged it up, tipping it, waiting for the wind to grab it. He could feel the trembling power of the storm and thought this might describe hell: an indifferent, brutal force you couldn't fight. At last, the wind tore away the hog feeder, but as he leaped back a shard of steel slashed from his elbow to his wrist. He heard Abby screaming. He hurried back to the cab and didn't look at her. She reached out with the shop rag but he shook her off.

The camper wouldn't move forward against the shear and he backed slowly down the ramp to the third floor for a new start. He shifted to first again and goosed the camper up the ramp, almost stalling at the last, curving slope. Free from the shear, they vaulted forward, and Ray drove toward the center, parking near a post. They were out of the storm. They were safe.

“You got any alcohol, Ray?”

“Under the tray in the tool box.”

He did not like to admit that he bought the occasional bottle of whiskey. Sometimes, his drinking was more than occasional, and he fought it, but he was a lonely man. He was skilled at filling loneliness with work, but could sink into depression if he wasn't careful.

The cut still bled. Abby didn't say anything as she dabbed at it with her shirt-tail soaked in whiskey. She wrapped the cut with a white tee shirt, tying her bandage with cotton strips, rolling painter's tape around for good measure. She was wonderfully tender. He thought of his mother when he was ten.

"They allus do that in Westerns," Ray said. Deep inside the garage, the storm's roar had muted somewhat, and he didn't shout so loudly. "Some guy gets shot, they pour whiskey on the wound."

"You could have been badly hurt, Ray."

"You did a real professional job on that bandage. You must be a nurse or somethin'."

She laughed. "I'm an accountant for a real estate office. Half-time for now. Just got my A.A. degree."

"Alcoholics Anonymous?"

She slapped his upper arm, startling him, but he'd made her smile. "No! Associate . . . Something; I don't know. Two-year degree, but I'll keep going."

Mostly, what Ray had packed in his camper were boxes of tools he'd bought at the Oldsmar Flea Market: Chinese hammers, screwdrivers, drill bits, circular saws, bolts in several sizes, plastic cartons of drywall screws. But he also had two collapsible chairs, a charcoal grill, and some food—canned soup and beans, a little coffee. Abby's sacks of groceries yielded sausages, bread, a head of lettuce, and mustard. It was cold on the fourth floor. Abby wrapped herself in an afghan Ray's mother made, and he unfolded a crinkly space blanket. They wolfed the sausages and beans and crowded near the grill like old friends, which maybe they were by now.

"We have water?" Abby asked.

“Four more bottles.”

“We could catch some rain.”

The radio brought in nothing but static and Abby’s phone didn’t work. She said, “Try yours.”

“Don’t have one.”

She looked incredulous. “You don’t have a *phone*?”

“Too expensive. I been savin’ evry dime. I even pick up aluminum cans.”

She frowned. “Is that even worth doing?”

“Naw,” he allowed. “It’s like pickin’ up pennies. I do it on Sundays, sometimes.”

Her frown changed to a dubious smile. “What about a social life?”

“Not so much,” he said.

He knew everyone was supposed to have a social life. Back in Red Buck, he sometimes thought his sister’s sole purpose in life was to set him up with her pals. His mom’s married friends were even more insistent, inviting him to dinner, to church socials, to softball games and old car shows. A single man was dangerous, in their view. Ray was thirty-three, an affront to the institution of marriage. He’d break up some unhappy home.

However, Red Buck’s pool of available women was vanishingly small. The best of the bunch were school teachers, but they were too smart and refined for rough old Ray. That’s what he thought. His sister said just having a steady job, and no criminal record, was qualification enough in the potential husband department. The pool of available men was also vanishingly small.

“Girlfriend? Lots of girlfriends!”

“Naw—”

She laughed. “They’re too expensive.”

He squirmed in the camp chair, then looked at her. Her eyes were full of mischief but also kindness. He could talk to her. “I’m on a mission,” he said.

“You’re a missionary?”

They both laughed. They sat in their camp chairs knee to knee, and held their faces a few inches apart so they could hear each other over the roaring wind. “I had this idea,” he said.

“I’ve got an idea, too. Let’s get drunk.”

She mixed the whiskey with bottled water in two paper cups, and dribbled in more whiskey as he talked. He told her about the big hardware chain that had stores all around the Ozarks. In the larger cities they had competition, but in little places such as Red Buck they could raise their prices. Everyone hated the chain, but farmers and carpenters and electricians bought from them rather than drive seventy-five miles to Springfield or Lebanon. The chain closed down anyhow. Red Buck was too small. It was the county seat but the town was dying.

Then the Dollar Store moved to a new location, and their old building went up for sale. “It’s like the onliest idea for makin’ money I ever had. I allus could fix things, see? So I know parts. I know all the procedures. I said to myself, there’s a cryin’ need for a hardware in this town, and that buildin’ is where it goes. I borrowed some money on the farm—”

She reached across the little space between them and gently touched his bandaged arm. “How’s that feel now? Does it hurt?”

“Naw,” he said.

“Good. You own a farm, Ray?”

Disconcerting, how she took him off the subject as if what he said was unimportant, then came right back. He was reminded again of his mother. “We don’t hardly farm it; it’s too hot and

dry no more. Anyhow, I bought the store but I didn't have enough money left to stock it. We stuck my sister in there—”

She leaned forward under the afghan and poured another splash of whiskey. “What's her name?”

“Barbara. Barb's just holdin' down the fort, sells potata chips and cigarettes and fish bait. I sent her five hunert to stock some paint and caulkin' and like that.”

“You know what you need?”

“What do I need, Abby?” It seemed bold to say her name.

“An accountant. You'll have employees, and taxes to pay, and what about inventory? There are a lot of good programs. Sell something, it pops right up, so you know what to replace.”

He nodded. “I guess I hadn't thought that far ahead.”

“Well, you need to. My God.” She seemed indignant, but then she said, “It's a *good* idea.”

“You think so?”

“Lots of hard work, but yes.”

He felt fine. Maybe it was the whiskey and maybe it was looking at Abby. She pulled aside the afghan and stuck her feet into Ray's old moccasins. She filled their drinks again and handed him his, leaving one more round. “It's almost dark. Let's walk around some.”

Rain blew in from the south side of the garage, so violently they couldn't stand near it. On the western side, the leeward side of the big hotel, the air felt supercharged. Shallow streams ran over the floor but they could look out onto Cleveland Street. Far on the horizon, they could see the setting sun, half of a streaked red ball. The big wind blew so steadily the bent-over palms

seemed motionless. Then the chinaberry tree fell, its massive trunk mashing down the Ford Ranger's cab.

“Lord Almighty,” Ray said, stepping back.

“Your pretty little truck,” Abby said, and turned up her shining face. Not stopping to think, he kissed her.

She didn't seem to mind and they staggered back to the camper, bumping into each other. She opened the door to the camper. “Don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. Can I lie down in your, what do you call it, your living room?”

“You'll be awright in there,” he said. “I'll sleep in the cab.”

She crawled up on the mattress. It lay atop boxes of tools, and boxes rose to either side of it. There were several pillows. She lay back, pulling in the afghan. “Good night, Ray,” she said, laughing.

He wanted to say something more, I'm glad you didn't get blown away or what's so funny, but he couldn't form a sentence. He bowed his head and walked to the cab. He took off his shoes and wet socks, placed them on the hood, and then tried to coil himself around the gear shift and tuck in the space blanket. Bucket seats were no good for stretching out and the gear shift made things still more uncomfortable, but he was worn-out and fell immediately asleep.

In the deep darkness of the garage, he dreamed he was driving through the storm again. He tried street after street and this time there was no way through. He woke in a sweat and didn't know where he was.

Abby rapped on the window. He opened the door and slowly extricated himself from the gear shift. He reached into the glove compartment for a flashlight.

“I'm cold,” Abby said. “Do you have any more blankets?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and finally struggled to his feet. “I shoulda thought a that.”

He crawled up on the mattress. He had several worn-out cotton blankets, one wool army blanket, in a box under a box. He pulled them out and turned slowly around. Abby had slid in behind him.

“You can’t sleep up there,” she said. “Giving up your bed? It’s too much. *I* should go up front.”

“Well,” he said.

“It’s just us in the hurricane. It’s an adventure. We’ll never be here again!”

He kissed her at an awkward angle and they bumped about on the little mattress, hitting each other with elbows and knees until they lay side by side, face to face. He nestled his head between her breasts and she pulled up the blankets. She shone the flashlight between them and giggled. He’d had one good idea in his life. Or was it two?

They were bashful in the morning, elaborately courteous. They’d eaten all the food except for half a loaf of bread and one sausage And the lettuce, which Abby munched on as if it were an apple. They made coffee, toasted the bread, and shared the sausage. Abby looked at his cut again. It felt sore but had clotted nicely.

Drinking coffee, holding hands, drifting apart and rushing together for a kiss, they drifted to the parapet overlooking Cleveland Street.

Ray was drunk with love. “Marry me.”

“Oh, my God!” she said, and pulled apart from him. “Don’t say *that*.”

She was right. Love never lasted, because it was illusory, a delusion, in the first place. Even if love were possible, he wasn't much of a lover. And he'd used up his courtship skills, if you could call them that, with "Marry me."

"I *was* married," she said, with a reproving glance. "No, thank you, Mister! Never again."

"Okay!" he said, almost angry, wholly confused. They'd made love and it meant nothing. People went crazy when they thought the world was ending, that was all. That old black cloak of depression rose up from the second floor or the third, seeking him out, but he wouldn't let it overtake him. Depression was righteous for an instant but became an evil Jesus. It was no fun.

She got on her phone like every modern person, and this time it worked. He walked along the parapet as if he had something to do. A city maintenance truck came down Cleveland, and men in wading boots picked up brush, plastic garbage cans, busted plywood. The wind was gusty again, much less strong, and the palms stood erect. Sunlight shone through the light rain with the same mellow, eerie light he'd seen over the bay.

In the apartment building across the street, a man tied a crudely-lettered, cardboard banner to the railing of his balcony, with arrows pointing three floors below to what had been, what again would be, a nightclub. The sign read, "Orquesta Luna. Tonite." On his saxophone, the man played, "Heart and Soul" over and over. He nodded to Abby and Ray and put everything he had into the song, dancing forward and back, lifting the instrument, bending out over the railing. He'd survived the hurricane. He wanted to tell the world that he had a heart, he had a soul, and life went on.

Abby took Ray's hand. They clung together and waltzed to the music. Ray wanted to make love to her again.

“*Madly*,” Abby sang, laying her head on his shoulder. Her moccasins made a shuffling sound on the concrete.

“Like a fool would do,” Ray said. “Listen to me, Abby. I’m not a fool.”

“No,” she said. “You’re a very nice man.”

By noon, the streets were passable again. Ray offered to drive back to the causeway but Abby found a junkyard in Tampa that would haul away the Hyundai, no cost. Assuming it was still there.

“It’s worth a coupla hunert for parts. Somebody’d have to tow it, a course.”

She nodded. “I’m glad to get rid of it.”

Ray drove her the ten miles south to her place in Largo. She seemed cheerful and he smiled and nodded but had little to say. He wished he’d met her when he first came to Florida, but figured he’d have messed things up. It took a hurricane for Ray Showalter to find a woman.

She lived in her Aunt Lena’s garage apartment, built onto a cement block house dating from the 1950s, painted blue. “It’s nice, it’s really nice, but I wish I owned a house.”

“Too expensive,” Ray said.

She nodded gloomily. “Half a degree, half a job. I’ll get there!”

“Of course, you will.”

In her driveway, he shifted to neutral, but kept the engine running. He met her bright eyes and looked away again. “Well,” he said.

She tapped him on the shoulder with her fist. She did that a lot. “Wait a minute, Ray, please. What is it you say, hold your horses? Keep your powder dry?”

She might have a going-away present. Could be they'd e-mail each other, even phone once in a while. He looked at her gratefully and cut the engine. No sense burning gas if you weren't going anywhere.

She leaped from the camper and ran toward her apartment, energetic as a grade school girl. It invigorated him to watch her but then there was nothing to do but sit. Two stubby pin oaks stood in her aunt's front yard and a bluejay hopped from limb to limb, scolding him. "Where'd you go in the storm?" Ray asked.

Ten minutes passed. He got out of the camper and pulled Spanish moss from the pin oaks, stuffing it into plastic bags.

"What you want with that stuff?" The woman might have been sixty. She had long, gray hair combed out straight. She stared suspiciously.

"Makes real good mulch. You don't care, do you, ma'am?"

"Good Lord, no. It's a parasite."

"Yeah." Ray nodded. "They say it just grows in the air, don't really hurt the tree."

The woman extended a hand. "I'm Lena."

"Ray Showalter. Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am."

Lena smiled. "I wanted to thank you for how you helped Abby."

"Well," Ray said. "Situation like that, anybody woulda stopped."

"Not so sure about that. Can I look at your arm?"

Abby appeared, pulling along two suitcases. "Aunt Lena's a nurse, Ray!"

Lena took off the bandage. The cut hurt a little but Lena had a gentle touch. She rubbed Vaseline along Ray's forearm, then dropped the tube into his shirt pocket. "It's fine. Doesn't need stitches, the way it's healing. Probably won't even leave a scar."

“Thank you kindly, ma’am,” Ray said, but all he could think about was those suitcases. Abby and Lena each appeared again, Abby with a closed box that seemed heavy, perhaps full of books, and Lena with an open box, shoes spilling out of it. Abby climbed into the camper and he stared at her, dumbfounded but happy. Ray had little experience with happiness and wondered how long it lasted.

“Well,” he said. “What about—?” But he didn’t finish. His mother’s ironic phrase, *will wonders never cease*, flashed in his brain like a neon sign.

“Here.” Abby handed him her phone. “Call your sister. Call your mom. You could do it tonight but why not now at 1:52 p.m.? Right here at Ridge and 82nd, in Largo, Florida?”

He laughed. It might not even last all the way to Missouri, but Abby was a great adventure. “What do I tell ’em?”

“You say, ‘Get ready, people. I found myself an accountant.’”