

Down by the Bay

*"Down by the bay, where the watermelons grow,  
Down by the bay, I dare not go..."*

*--Old Song*

"What do you say, Lanni?" Sheri asked me, resting an elbow on the bar, "Wouldn't you like to go sailing with this lecher tonight?" With a nod, she indicated the occupant of the seat beside her. She stirred ice into a tumbler of pale wine, her other arm resting lightly on the back of our potential skipper. The delicate chiming of ice on glass was just audible where I stood behind her, like sirens sweetly calling us from the bay.

Grasping the dilemma, I took a long sip of my draft beer. We had a chance to go sailing--it was the dream ending of all our nights at the Sunrise Tavern, an unexpected bounty of life, like free concert tickets or windowpane acid. And I was free for a change, since I had an all-night sitter for the kids. I inhaled the prospect of sailing--the water rushing beneath us, the loft of wind bearing us moonward, cool and resurrected through that dense, sweaty, Florida evening.

The hang-up, of course, was the skipper, at present our only connection to a seafaring craft. I glanced at him, slouched over the bar, his head about level with Sheri's boobs, as if he was very slowly being sucked between them. I trusted her assessment; my housemate knew men like Audubon knew birds. She had them mapped and measured, mentally catalogued by their habitats and migratory patterns. I'd have to be his "date," and the

thought of being pecked on by this turkey was enough to take the wind out of my sails.

Sheri withdrew her ruddy bulbs a few inches and straightened up, causing the gobbler in question to turn just far enough to see me. "Lanni, this is Noel."

I saw he had about ten years on us, although that, in itself, was no big deal. Even with the generous tenor of sex in the seventies, though, he was not my type, in his dark, tailored shorts and knit-collar shirt with a squid embroidered over the left tit. He was probably one of the supper crowd, cruisers who disappeared early in the evening, before The Who and The Stones and The Dead started rocking the bar. By a quarter to eleven, he should have been home to roost.

"Hi," I mumbled, making an effort to meet his eyes, but when he turned to face me, the darkness that oozed out from under his captain's hat was full of contempt, and bore with it a stale reek of beer breath. The recoil from that blast hit me like a cue ball, and I retreated to the far end of the room. I looked around, regaining a sense of security in this more congenial corner of the bar.

The Sunrise Tavern faced east toward the bay, but it did not bow. It peered out at South Street from two small, square windows brightened by modest neons for Harp and Anheiser Busch. The painted sign over the door had once been yellow, but the name, as well as the semicircle of a sun with casually spaced rays, had faded to an ochre tone on the gray-green board.

Despite its subdued exterior, the tavern was a lively place on weekends. The owner was a laid-back Irishman who spent most of his evenings at the dog track, leaving the establishment in the quavering hands of Mac, the basset-

eyed bartender. Mac gave us no trouble and we told him no lies, or very few, anyhow.

Paradise was alone at the pool table. That was unusual, but the crowd was a bit slow for a Saturday. I caught his eye across the table. Paradise was going to take me biking when he got his Triumph out of the shop.

"Mind if I shoot?" I licked a bit of beer froth from my lip.

"Chalk up, Babe." He smiled.

I took his stick and sunk a little one, only it kissed the purple stripe on the way, so I handed back the cue.

"I'm gonna run them now," he told me.

"Do it," I told him, standing by the steel post that held up the tavern's ceiling while he gave me a lesson. His bridge hand was wide and steady, and he moved his stick from shot to shot with the studied rhythm of a blues drummer. Paradise was a "Coastie,"--an ensign at the Coast Guard station a couple blocks to the north--but occasionally he sat in with the better local bands.

Coming from the north and driving over Thrill Hill toward the tavern, a bike could go airborne as it came over the top. On a windy day, it might stay aloft as far down as The Sunrise. Paradise was wide but not fat, solid enough to land an Evel Kneivel from the hill, even with a passenger on back, I was pretty sure. I followed his moves as he circled the table, picking off a couple of big ones.

A momentary sober thought crested my consciousness--my sons were sleeping by now, I hoped. They had a way of modulating my urge for adventure. Sure, I thought about jumping the hill on the back of Paradise's Triumph, but I couldn't really take that kind of risk. They only had me to depend upon, and I wasn't about to make them orphans.

Sheri came over and stood on the other side of the post, arms crossed and fingertips pointing to her shoulders as if invoking the divine. Scrunching down to meet my eyes, she pleaded her cause. "Sailing, Lanni! How can you refuse?"

"Jeez--did you see the look on his face?"

"You just have to be a little friendly until we get underway..."

"Well..." I watched the solitary eight ball come back from the cushion and thump into the side pocket.

Paradise returned his cue to the rack and gave me a friendly pinch on the butt as he passed. "Coming out to the patio?"

"Maybe in a few minutes." I let him disappear out the side door. An unruly hedge surrounded the patio, and someone was usually out there at the picnic table with a doobie. Mac made it his business not to notice, as long as nothing was brought inside. Considering the number of Coasties who patronized the bar, it was a paradoxical situation; but as far as I know, no one was ever busted there.

"Well...?" Sheri swung around the post and stretched her five-and-three-quarter-foot height before me, fixing me with an imperative downward gaze. She was not about to give up. I knew her well enough to realize that.

We'd met three months earlier, a few weeks before she got busted for dealing weed, and I'd offered to let her move in with us. Of course, I'd explained she'd have to sleep on the living room couch; my bedroom was really small and the boys shared the Florida room behind the kitchen. Sheri didn't mind a bit. The old backpack that held her

clothes fit neatly behind the couch and the rest of her possessions were mustered in the big leather bag that she carried everywhere.

I hadn't had a girl friend since grade school, much less another woman living in my house. Not that I had anything against other women--they just seemed a needless distraction from the task of fishing out my working-class hero from the great sea of lounge lizards, losers and trolls.

However, with Sheri staying at the house, our lives took on an unfamiliar normalcy. She fixed snacks for the boys after school, although her cooking skills were pretty much limited to a great guacamole and anything out of a can. The boys loved her, regardless, and I often found them all playing hearts at the kitchen table when I got home from work.

Sheri did housework, too, and the little bit she paid for rent filled out my meager paycheck. The household flourished--even our socks began to match. Most of the time, we stayed home nights, doing chores and listening to music, but once in a while--a blue moon, really--there was enough cash to pay the neighbor to baby-sit overnight.

"Sure, I want to sail, but I don't have your talent for keeping those guys at arm's length." I brushed the world of lechers from my hair with one hand.

"Listen, just come back over and talk to him...okay?"

My eyes made a quick sweep of the tavern--one couple huddled in a booth by the door, and in the back a rowdy gang of foosball players had nearly shouted-out the jukebox. It was turning into a slow night. "You can't always get what you want..." Jagger's insinuating lyrics

mocked at me, through the din. I shrugged at Sheri and followed her to the bar.

"It's your call," she urged, "if you say okay, we'll go, if not..."

Crazy Jim came in from the patio. From the breeze that wafted in around him, I guessed he'd been getting high with Paradise; although with Jim, it was hard to tell. His blond afro gave him a look of cherubic grace that was nearly revoked by the angles of his teeth when he smiled. Still, he had charm, and was pleasant enough to talk to, as long as you wanted to talk about boats, or fishing, or the bale of dyn-o-mite weed that got away.

"What's happening?" he ventured, doing the Groucho Marx thing with his eyebrows and cigarette.

"Noel wants to take us sailing," said Sheri, commandeering the stool next to the huddled skipper. Jim slid onto the other seat beside her. "Farr'm out!" he nodded. As he bent his head toward Sheri's, his voice dropped. "Do we know this dude?"

She introduced Jim to the captain, smooth as a debutante, while I stood there making granny knots with my fingers and wondering whether to bolt to the patio. There was still time to party with Paradise, before the weed was gone.

"You want a great sail tonight, Man?" Jim was leaning over the bar to get the skipper's attention. "We can crew for you." Jim usually fished for a living, but sailing was his passion.

"Not unless I have a date," muttered Captain Sleeze.

I rolled my eyes at Sheri, but she just winked and spun him around to face me. He leered in my direction, and

I figured he had to be pretty wasted. Maybe the sea air would put him to sleep.

"I like your...name," I said. It was all I could think of.

I would not have gotten into this with anyone but Sheri. Tall and assertive, with the proficiency of an emergency room medic, she took command in every predicament. I trusted her to see us through, even though I hadn't forgotten the story of her friend Margaret.

We were peanut-buttering crackers for lunch one Saturday morning when I found myself sharing a guilty secret. I told her about snubbing the girl who had bullied me in junior high. Later, I found out she'd had a baby at sixteen. When I got pregnant and hastily married the boys' father, I realized how lonely she must have been, and how changed.

"You call that a confession?" Sheri had shrugged. "Listen, if you keep reliving every bump in the road, it will eat you up. Sometimes you have to tune out the past just to keep trucking."

"I'm not so sure about that," I'd replied. I wanted to remember my mistakes--maybe it would make me a better person, or at least a wiser one.

"I ever tell you about my best friend, Margaret?"

I shook my head no.

"We were broke, and these people I knew wanted smack smuggled in from Mexico. They would pay well on delivery, with a small advance for the trip, so I talked Margaret into hitching across the border with me. She didn't really want to--she was shy, like you. Neither of us was into hard drugs, but the deal was too good to pass up. It was

just one run, I told her, and then we could travel--see the world."

I had never considered smuggling, myself. I was too paranoid even to deal weed, although I could have used the money. As for smack, I had no interest--it would not be right around kids. Sheri went on, gathering cracker crumbs off the kitchen table into her hand as she spoke.

"We made our connection, and everything seemed to be going fine until they picked us up for vagrancy in Arizona. We only had a minute until they searched us, so I told Margaret to swallow one package and I swallowed the other. Then we let them stick us into the cell until morning.

"After a while, Margaret started to get sick, and they took her away. I guess the packet had started to come unwrapped inside her. Anyhow, she must have died without telling them what we'd done, because in the morning they just said she was dead and dumped me on the street."

"And you kept on going?"

"I didn't want to, but what choice did I have? She was dead. I wasn't a relative, so I couldn't even claim her body. I sat right down on the street corner and bawled until my eyes dried out in their sockets, but that didn't change a thing. After a while, I figured the best I could do was to live out our dream in her honor. And I was doing that, at least until I got caught with those dime bags and tossed in jail here."

I didn't know what I would have done. I knew the law might find Sheri responsible, but that was the same law that had sent my brother to 'Nam, and shot down schoolgirls at Kent State. I didn't have much use for it. And I certainly couldn't judge her; all the same, I was glad it



wasn't me. If I had to choose, I thought I'd sooner be Margaret than Sheri.

I returned me attention to the situation at hand. Only a month remained until her court date, so this might be our last chance to sail together before she had to skip town.

"Don't worry," Sheri told me, "I've got your back."

"Okay," I said, "let's go sailing."

As the four of us strolled out of The Sunrise, we linked arms, singing, "I Shot the Sheriff" and "Free Mexican Air Force," all the way to the marina. The skipper was wedged between Crazy Jim and me, and I think Jim was actually holding him up. He seemed to gain a bit of lucidity as we approached the dock, and pointed out a medium-sized white Irwin with "Cavalier" in script on the side. It looked to be about twenty-four feet. A classic, although the trim needed varnish.

"Thar she blows." Noel nodded in the direction of the Irwin. He stood, appearing to search his pockets, as Jim leaped on board and gave us a hand on deck. Jim and Sheri got busy with the ropes, and I helped cast off. The engine wouldn't turn over, so we had to tack out of the Little Salty. I shifted from side to side, trying to avoid the boom, as well as the skipper. When we finally cleared the bend of the creek, the wind filled our sails and we shot across the ripples like a flat rock spinning.

I watched Jim out on the prow, his white trousers flapping like an albatross over the deck. He was in his element here, as he seldom was on land. He trimmed it out on a starboard tack, then settled in the stern beside Sheri. The skipper was leaning against the bulkhead,

working the wheel with his foot, and I sat beside him, by default.

"We could take this baby to The Keys if you treat me right." I knew I wasn't going to The Keys, even before his hand slipped below my shoulder and cupped a boob. I stiffened, trying to change the subject. "How long have you had this boat?"

"It's not a boat, it's a yacht."

"Well, all right, the yacht..."

"I don't know, I don't remember," he said, slipping his other hand onto my thigh.

As a snow queen, I was a real wash out. Just when a coy phrase might have distracted him from this molestation, my brain had frozen. I couldn't even remember my name. I tried to talk, but nothing came out of my mouth. I squirmed, attempting to evade his grasp, but that just seemed to encourage him.

"What's 'a matter, honey, don't you like men?" He tightened his grip.

Sheri bounded toward us and whispered something in his ear. "Go sit by Jim," she told me, taking my place by the skipper. She was really amazing. In a few minutes, she had him laughing and sharing some jujubes she kept in her pocket for emergencies. I fell back to the stern, where Jim extended a brotherly arm around my shoulder. The evening took on a more agreeable aspect. I tried to find my voice again. Noticing that my throat was really dry, I tried to hum, but couldn't.

"Check out that moon," sighed Jim. The moon was enormous and riding high over the black mangroves. The reflections on the water, a million shattered bits of

mirror, gave the night the brilliance of a glitter band concert.

"M-mmh," I whispered, "nice," as I leaned on his shoulder. Jim's skinny frame offered more comfort than I had expected.

I heard the skipper tell Sheri, "You're friendly, not like that one over there."

"Now, now." She twirled a lock of hair on her finger. "Don't be rude.

Unabashed, he pulled out a pint of Courvoisier from beneath the seat and took a swig. "This is just for us," he said, passing the bottle to Sheri. "It's too good for those two."

Jim was evidently guilty by association. Not one to be told what to do, Sheri reached out to me with the bottle, and I grabbed it. "What did I just say?" she scolded.

I didn't figure on the bottle being passed again, so I whispered to Jim, "Take a big gulp, but keep it in your mouth--just let it slide slowly down your throat." We both gulped, and I was concentrating on the trickle of liquid burning its way down my chest when Jim exploded, spraying cognac everywhere.

"Carramba!" he avowed. I saw the fire leap up in his blue-gray eyes.

"I said, slowly." I laughed, choking and swallowing along with him. But the liquor did its thing, and I began floating off on a silver cloud, still riding on Jim's arm. Voices drifted into the distance, and the lap, lap of the waves became the chorus of some drama in a forgotten language, revealing the mysteries of the moon and stars.

I don't know how long I was out of it, but gradually the voices I was hearing became harsh and sharp, and I was cold and alone in the stern. As I blinked awake, Sheri was hollering to Jim, who was cursing in Spanish and leaning over the side of the boat.

Then I heard, "Lanni! Lanni! Get up."

"Huh?" I struggled to sit, all stiff and unwilling to surrender my cosmic state of mind. From the urgency of Sheri's command, though, I gathered that we were in danger. Glancing around the deck, I saw no sign of the skipper. "Lanni," shouted Sheri, "when I give you the signal, I want you to grab my purse and jump overboard."

Jump out in the middle of the bay? I didn't get it. My mood was now ruled by the onset of queasiness, and I attempted to reason past the barnacles cleaving to my brain. Her bag wasn't waterproof, and most of the stuff would surely be ruined. But what about me? We'd been well past the furthest buoy when I passed out. I could swim, but I didn't know how far, and a midnight drenching had not figured in my plans.

Besides, where was the skipper? I confess, I'd been ready to drown him earlier, but I wouldn't--not really. Sheri certainly wouldn't have pushed him over the side, but if he were drunk enough, he could have fallen... Were they trying to pull him out?

At once afraid and ashamed of my thinking, I called back, "No chance, Sheri; if I grab your purse and jump, I'll drown." I was sure she'd heard me, but there was no reply.

As my senses cleared, I saw that Jim was using a paddle to push us off some mangrove stumps that extended out into the water. Sheri was standing farther toward the

bow, doing something with the topsail. Once I found the strength to right myself in the seat, a look over the side convinced me that there was little chance of drowning. In fact, we were in serious danger of running aground. We'd drifted back toward shore, where the water couldn't have been more than three or four feet deep. I finally concluded that Sheri was planning to jump ship and wade to shore if they couldn't push the hull off of the sand bar.

I fumbled around and found the bag stashed under a seat. If anything could have pulled me under, it would have been that purse. Beside her wallet, she had provisions in there for any situation: bathing suit, T-shirt, a pantry of legal and illegal pharmaceuticals in small glass bottles, beef jerky, transistor radio, a plastic makeup bag full of brushes and powders, even a couple magazines in Spanish, in case she got stuck somewhere, and was bored. It must have weighed twenty pounds.

A rasping snore drew my attention below, where I could make out the lower half of the skipper, who'd evidently passed out on the bunk. I gave a deep sigh of relief and was ready to yell to Sheri that I'd found her bag when the boat came out of the mangroves and slipped safely into the channel. A simultaneous yelp of joy gushed from our throats and I leaped to my feet, steadying myself on the bulkhead. Sheri stood facing me from across the deck, the mast towering between us. There was nothing either of us could say. Although I held the purse, there was no longer a reason for jumping. In the crisis, I had denied her. Under such circumstances, she would not take my remarks lightly, and it was too late to change or explain my drowsy refusal. Without another look, we brought the boat safely

through the creek, tied her up and left her sorry skipper to sleep it off in the cabin.

We didn't mention that incident again, and our lives continued pretty much as before, but I could feel it between us. I hadn't died for her; I hadn't even got my feet wet. I knew, too, that I would do the same again. I would never be Margaret, although I had thought I might. It was like jumping the hill with Paradise--a risk I had no right to take.

I'm sure she understood, after all; just like I understood when she disappeared the day before the trial, along with my best leather cowboy belt and some magazines in Spanish, checked out on my library card. In return, she left me Crazy Jim, who got a job at the marina looking after the yacht of a weekend sailor. In our spare time, he taught me the fine points of crewing. We stayed together for nearly half a year, until I got really tired of talking about fishing.

Sheri wrote to me once, a year or two later, a long funny letter with an account of her adventures and squashed chocolate kisses for the boys. Although I did not respond, I kept the letter, without the return address. I was still afraid the authorities would come looking for her. I did not want to know where to find her, in case anyone asked.