

Bob Munroe woke up on his face. His jaw hurt and morning birds were yelling and there was real discomfort in his underpants. He'd come in late, his spine throbbing from the bus ride down, and he had stretched out on the floor with a late dinner of two bricks of saltines. Now cracker bits were all over him—under his bare chest, stuck in the sweaty creases of his elbows and his neck, and the biggest and worst of them he could feel lodged deep into his buttock crack, like a flint arrowhead somebody had shot in there. Yet Bob found that he could not fetch out the crumb. He had slept wrong on his arms, and they'd gone numb. He tried to move them, and it was like trying to push a coin with your mind. Waking up for the first time in this empty house, Bob felt the day beginning to settle on him. He shuddered at the cool linoleum against his cheek, and he sensed that not far below, not too far down in the sandy soil, death was reaching up for him.

But the little gears inside him did finally turn and haul him to his feet. He leaned against the wall to let a head rush pass, scratched the crumb from his behind, and then he went to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator, which was empty and breathed out a sour-thermos smell. Shrunken ice cubes lay in trays in the freezer, and Bob popped one out and stuck it in his



mouth. It tasted like old laundry. He spat it into the dusty cranny between the fridge and the stove.

Outside the kitchen door was the patio Bob was supposed to be down here tearing up. Thistle and rumpus weed stuck through the holes in the bricks. A table and chairs of mildewed white plastic sat canted over on high swells where tree roots were heaving up. It made him a little sick to look at that mess and think of what it would take to get it in order.

This house had once been the joint property of his father and his uncle Randall, who was wasting no time putting it on the market now that Bob's father was dead. It was an investment his father had been railroaded into six years ago, sight unseen, and Bob couldn't recall his father coming down here more than once or twice. The way the deed worked out, the place went straight to Randall, and Bob wondered whether his uncle, sixteen years Bob's father's junior, hadn't been banking on this turn of events all along.

Randall lived where Bob lived, several hours north. When Bob's father was dying, Randall had made a promise that he'd do what he could to make sure things turned out all right for his nephew. In the weeks after the funeral, Randall had made a point of stopping by frequently to condole with him, though his sympathies usually took the form of showing up around dinner-time and staying long enough to finish off whatever beers Bob had in the icebox. There was something disquieting about Randall, how his oiled hair always showed the furrows of a recent combing and how he wore braces on his teeth, though he was pushing fifty.

Bob had not been close with his father, so it was puzzling for him and also for his wife, Vicky, when his father's death touched off in him an angry lassitude that curdled his enthusiasm for work and married life. He had fallen into a bad condition and, in

addition to several minor miscalculations, he'd perpetrated three major fuckups that would be a long time in smoothing over. He'd reported to work with a blind hangover, committed a calamitous oversight on a house he'd been helping to build, and soon after lost his job. A few weeks later, he'd rear-ended a local attorney, who, as a result of the collision, developed a clicking in his jaw and convinced a jury that the injury was worth \$38,000, which was \$2,000 more than what Bob's father had left him. Worst of all, he had tried to find relief from the unpleasantness by trysting with a lonely woman he'd met in traffic school. There'd been no joy in it, just a two-week spate of drab skirmishes in a basement apartment that smelled heavily of cat musk.

Not long after the affair had run its course, Bob and his wife were driving into town when Vicky looked up and saw the phantom outline of a woman's footprint on the windshield over the glove box. She slipped her sandal off, saw that the print did not match her own, and told Bob that he was no longer welcome in their home.

Bob spent a month on Randall's couch before Randall got the idea to send him south. "Hole up at the beach house for a while," Randall had said. "This damn thing's just a bump in the road. You need a little time to recombobulate is all."

Bob did not want to go. Vicky was already beginning to soften on her demands for a divorce, and he was sure that with time she'd open her door to him again. But Vicky encouraged him to leave, and things being how they were, he thought it best to oblige her. Anyway, it was a generous offer on Randall's part, though Bob was not surprised that when Randall dropped him off at the bus station, he'd handed him a list of jobs already written out.



Randall's house was not a delightful place—a cinder-block cottage with flaking pink paint. The sallow linoleum that covered the living room floor had been improperly glued and was coming loose, curling back on itself at a long seam running the length of the room. The wood paneling in the living room had shrugged up over many moist summers, and now the walls looked like a relief map of unfriendly, mountainous land. “Lvn rm/Sheet-Rock!” it said in the note.

In the windowless hall, Randall had hung the taxidermied bodies of some things he'd killed. An armadillo. An alligator's head with a deer's face sticking out of its mouth, his uncle's idea of wit. A square of plywood showcasing a row of withered turkey beards. Above the kitchen sink was a painting of a beer can with Randall's signature in the bottom right corner. Randall had done a good job with the Budweiser script, but he'd had to stretch out the can's midsection to accommodate all the letters, so it bulged in the middle, like a snake swallowing a rat.

In a dark corner of the living room, an old aquarium burbled away. It was huge—as long as a casket and three feet deep—and empty except for a bottle of hair tonic, a waterlogged bat corpse, and some other things floating on the surface. The water was thick and murky, the color of moss, but still the aerator breathed a steady green sigh of bubbles through the tank. Bob clicked it off. Then he stepped into his flip-flops and went outside.

He crossed the cockeyed patio. Tiny lizards scattered from his path. He followed the sound of waves to the end of the yard, through a stand of pine trees, limbless and spectral. He stepped from the pines onto a road paved with oyster shells whose brightness in the morning light made his eyes clench up.

The house was at the northern tip of a small island, and it had given Bob a little jolt of hope and excitement when Randall had described the place to him. He liked beaches, how each day



the tide scoured the sand and left it clean, how people generally came to the coast because they wanted to have a good time. But when Bob reached the access path up by the bridge, he was crestfallen to see that this island did not seem to have any beach at all. The land here met the water in a steeply sloping apron of mud that sang with mosquitoes and smelled terribly of fart gas. The nearest decent beach, a man on the bus had warned him, was on another island three miles out to sea and cost twelve dollars to get to on a boat. Still, he thought it might be nice to get in that water, but in this particular spot, he'd have to climb back over the muck and walk home covered in filth. He turned around and headed back down the lane.

A pair of white-haired women in a yellow golf cart rolled past. "Hidy," one of them said to Bob.

"All right, now," he said.

Right then the sound of metal on metal rose in the lane, along with a man's voice raised in rage. "Son of a bitch!" The voice belonged to a man bent down half-vanished under the hood of a Pontiac. "Aw, God fuck a milk cow!" The white-haired women turned pursed faces at the angry man. The golf cart whined and moved faster but not much.

The jazz of oaths kept coming loud, and the birds fell silent at the din. The man's anger, Bob found, was getting him angry, too. It occurred to him to go and yank the sawed-off broom handle that was holding up the Pontiac's hood, but he did not. He walked over and stood beside the man.

"Hey, come on, man," Bob said. "There's people out here besides you."

The man pulled his head out of the hood and stared at Bob. His face was nearly all cheek, with small, crooked features that looked like they'd been stuck on in a hurry. He held a little pry bar in his hand.



“Who the fuck are you?” the man asked in a tone more mystified than hostile.

“Bob,” Bob said. “I’m staying over there.”

“At Randall Munroe’s? I know Randall. I did a couple of things to his cat.”

Bob squinted. “Do what?”

“Derrick Treat. I’m a veterinarian.”

“I didn’t mistake you for a car mechanic,” Bob said.

“Took me three hours to get this alternator in here. Now I find out it won’t take the goddamn belt.”

Bob knew a couple of things about cars, and he had a look at the problem, which was easy enough to remedy. Derrick hadn’t positioned the tensioner correctly before torquing down the pivot bolt. Bob made the adjustment, and the belt slipped snugly into the pulley groove. But the car still wouldn’t crank because the battery was dead, so Bob had to kick off his flip-flops and jog down the lane, hunching and straining at the Pontiac’s bumper to work up the speed for a roll-start. Finally, the engine caught and the car spurted off, leaving Bob gasping in the road with a mouthful of exhaust.

Derrick turned the car around. He pulled alongside Bob. He revved the engine into the high red, working his lips to mimic the shriek of the motor.

He held some money out the window. “Here, goddammit. Here’s five dollars. Wait, I got seven.”

“I won’t take that money.”

“Go on,” said Derrick. “You saved my entire day.”

“Turned one bolt is all I did.”

“More than my dumb ass knew to do. Now come in the house and have something to cool off with at least.”

Bob told him thanks, but he meant to try and find some way down to the water.



“Uh-huh, because the ocean’ll dry up by the time you have one drink,” Derrick said.

“Little early for me, anyhow,” said Bob.

“Brother, it is one o’clock in the afternoon, and it is Saturday. Go on inside.”

Turning the man down, Bob understood, was going to be a job in itself. He followed Derrick out of the sun.

The same cheap and careless people who’d built Randall’s cottage had built Derrick’s home, only they’d paved it in blue linoleum instead of white. The place felt lived in, at least. It smelled of fresh coffee, and it had been furnished to capacity. The small living room was jammed with a lot of false antique furniture bought as a set, all of it broken out in pediments and lathework grenades and ornamental buboes that filled every line of sight.

By the window, a woman was sitting in a recliner reading a magazine and sucking on a cigarette. She was pretty, but she’d spent too much time in the sun. She was pruned over and nearly maroon, like a turkey beard.

“Bob, this is Claire,” Derrick said. “Claire, this gentleman worked some magic on our vehicle. Just went *ernb-ernb* with that ratchet, and now it’ll run out from under you.”

Claire smiled at Bob. “Well, that’s something,” she said, shaking Bob’s hand and not minding the grease. “New out here?”

Bob said he was, and she told him welcome. She said he should come by anytime and that the door was always open and that she meant that.

Bob followed Derrick to the kitchen. Derrick pulled two jelly jars from the freezer along with vodka in a plastic bottle. He called to the living room. “You need a drink, baby doll?” Claire said she did, and Derrick pulled out a third jar. He poured champagne into each one and quashed the rising bubbles with



the vodka, which was chilled to syrup. “Claire calls it a Polack holiday,” Derrick said, handing a drink to Bob. “Her people are from over there, and they don’t fool around. Drink two of them, and I’ve got a hangover for life, but she can knock these back all day and be fine in the morning.”

They went back to the living room, and Bob sat on the sofa. Derrick sat on the arm of the recliner with his arm around Claire.

“What do you do, Bob?” Claire asked him.

“Just kind of on sabbatical, I guess,” Bob said. He knocked back his drink and a sour heat bloomed in his stomach. “Probably go back to carpentering before long, what I was doing for a while.”

“But what?” Claire asked.

“I built some stairs wrong and got let go. After that, I thought I’d take a little while to get a few things straightened out.”

“That doesn’t sound right—stairs,” Claire said. “That doesn’t sound like anything to get canned about.”

Bob explained what it took to build a staircase, how you’ve got to cut each rise on the stringers exactly the same height, even a sixteenth-inch difference and people will stumble. “I don’t know why, but I cut a stair in the middle to six inches instead of eight, just my brain went on the fritz. Then the old man whose house it was came by to see the job. He was going down those stairs, and wham, he fell and landed at the bottom with a broken leg. After that, a lawyer went over with a tape measure and that was it, pretty much.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” said Claire. “Only in America does somebody get rich off of being too dumb to walk stairs.”

“I didn’t feel real hot about it,” said Bob. “That bone was sticking out pretty good.”

Claire shrugged with her face. “Even so.”

He drained the jar and set it on the table. “Well, thanks for this,” he said. “Guess I better push on.”

“Look, now you just got here,” Derrick said, but the phone rang in the kitchen and Derrick went after it. Claire dipped a finger in her drink and then stuck the finger in her mouth. A saw-edged scar ran down the back of her hand, standing out pink and tender on the skin there, which was the color of a pot roast.

“You should stick around and have some brunch,” she said. “I’m making eggs and salmon cakes.”

Derrick came back from the kitchen, talking into a cordless phone, his voice loud with expertise. “Say what? Did you take a look? Can you see the head? Uh-huh. Red or whitish? Yeah, that’s natural. Sounds like she’s getting ready to domino. I’ll be over.”

Derrick came back into the living room. “Gotta take a ride over the bridge,” he said. “Need to go pull something out of a horse’s pussy.”

“What kind of a thing?” Bob asked.

“A baby horse, I hope.”

Before he left, Derrick showed Bob where to cut across the yard to get down to the sea. It was much hotter now, and the sun glared down through the gray sky like a flashlight behind a sheet. Bob walked across a dead garden and through a salt-burned hedge that rattled as he passed. He slapped along in his flip-flops, woozy from that drink and with a heat headache coming on. At the top of a steep bank of dunes, he stopped and saw the sea. The water lay in bands of blue and green, patterned over with little wind divots like a giant plate of hammered copper. At



the foot of the slope, a long tongue of smooth rock stretched a couple of hundred feet into the waves.

Bob started going down the dune, but it was steep here, too, and the simplest thing was to ride down it on your ass. When he got to the bottom he had grit in his shorts and skeins of shore weeds looped between his toes.

He scrambled along the spit of rock. The wind cut the stagnant dampness of the day and dried the sweat on his face and chest. He took the salt into his lungs and savored the pure itch in his chest. He touched the long grasses waving in the water like women's hair. He crouched to observe the barnacles, their tiny feathery hands combing blindly for invisible prey.

Not far from the water's edge, Bob nearly put his foot into a deep tide pool in the rock. It was big as a bathtub and deeper than he could see. A pair of crimson starfish clung to the edge. He fished them out. They were hard and spiny in his hands, but they were nice to look at, and he thought he might nail them up somewhere for an ornament, so he dropped them into the stretched-out belly of his T-shirt. He was about to move on, when he saw something moving in the blue deeps of the hole—a fish, four pounds at least, and gorgeous, nearly the same dark blue as the water, just sitting there, gently working its bright yellow fins. It was a fish for looking at, not eating, a kind of fish that would cost you good money at a pet store. Bob dropped the starfish on the rock. He crouched beside the hole and put his hands in the water. The fish didn't move, even when he reached his fingers down beside it, but when he snatched for it, the fish darted to the far side of the hole but then just sat there, idly finning.

He crept after the fish, taking an easterly circuit around the hole so he wouldn't cast a shadow on the pool. Again he put a

hand in the water, but he didn't do a big grab right off. With his left arm, he braced himself against the edge of the hole and, leaning over, let a string of spit unwind off his lip. The white bead hit the water; the pretty fish perked up. After a moment's contemplation, it floated over and ate the spit. Bob supposed the fish was starving in that hole, which explained its listlessness and the expectant way it now hovered just below the surface, waiting for another bit of lunch to fall out of the sky. Bob spat again, and the greedy fish lipped it up. Then he hocked up a lush wad from the back of his throat and lowered it toward the water on a slow strand. The fish sat rapt and waiting. As the gob neared the surface, Bob slipped a hand beneath the placid fish, lunged, and, to his own astonishment, flipped it out of the hole. It jerked and bounced across the rock, and Bob felt a panic shoot through him. He tore his T-shirt off, dipped it in the water, and draped it on the flopping fish in a shroud. Then he sprinted up the dune with the swaddled fish buckling and writhing against his chest. It was a violent and vital sensation, and Bob wondered for a moment if it was anything like this when a woman had a baby inside her.

Bob ran across Derrick's yard. Claire was in a bikini on the concrete porch. She waved to him and he yelled hey but didn't stop. He ran with his flip-flops in his fingers and cursed the oyster shells under his feet.

He made it back to the house, busted open the screen door, and dumped the fish into the aquarium. It sank and then slowly floated to the surface, fixing Bob with a vacant eye.

"Uh-uh. No way, buddy," Bob told the fish with stern pity.

He placed his palm beneath it and swept the foul water through its gills, and soon it stirred again. He pulled out the bottle of hair tonic and the bat and dropped them on the floor. The



fish, which had lost part of its delicate tailfin on the rocks, drifted indifferently to one end of the tank and nibbled at a pencil that was standing in the corner.

Using a tin saucepan as a ladle, Bob bailed out most of the old green water, leaving just enough to keep the fish covered. He cleaned out the rest of the junk: bottle caps, a doll's head, and almost three dollars in change. Then he got a soup pot from the kitchen and ferried up clean water from the sea. It took him forty-five minutes, toting the sloshing pot uphill and going back for more, but when the aquarium was full Bob stood back and beheld it, gratified.

The fish swam in contented circles and did not seem to mind the tiny white crabs that had come in with the seawater. The seams were sweating a little, and Bob patched them as best he could with caulk he found under the sink. Then he hiked over to the grocery store and bought two kinds of fish food. He carried it back, and sprinkled a little pinch of each into the tank to see which one the fish preferred.

That night he borrowed a folding cot from Derrick and Claire and set it up in the living room. He put a lamp behind the aquarium and turned it on. He did not like it in this house, its odors of old meals, how the place hummed with the shrill tunes of insects that breezed in through the unscreened windows. Lying there waiting for sleep to come, Bob found some calm in the sight of his fish, so large and placid, hanging there in the glowing water. For a while, it slowly patrolled the glass and peered out at Bob with a large, gold-rimmed eye. Then all of a sudden it stopped in the middle of the tank, shivered, and began blowing from its mouth a translucent, milky sac. Bob sat up in the cot and watched the fish with awe. The sac trembled in the water but held its form. When it had grown to the size of a basketball, the fish glided inside and seemed to fall asleep.

In the morning Bob went out to the patio. It was beyond hope. Even to weed it wasn't half worth the little money Randall had vaguely promised, and he'd be damned if he'd rip up those bricks and fix the grade as the note instructed. Still, he guessed he could pull a weed or two, if only to justify a long afternoon down on the shore watching the waves come in.

The work made him angry, first at Randall, who it was obvious hadn't so much as dragged a broom across this patio in the six years he'd owned it, and then at himself, for letting his life drift back to a place where he'd had to take the kind of ape work he had not done in years. Bob had helped build five whole homes, from the mudsills to the shingles. He'd put up a house for himself and Vicky, and when she first saw it finished, she couldn't stop laughing because it looked so good. What a gentle, decent kind of life he'd had with her. What a perfect pageant of disgrace he'd cast himself in now: down on all fours, clawing like an animal at thorns and marsh cherries whose yellow fruit left his hands smelling like bad breath, the red weight of the sun on him, and nobody around to pity his cracked hands or bring him something cool to drink.

With all the weeds gone, the patio did not look good. It was tidy, but now the big swells where the tree roots lay were easier and more unpleasant to see. The sight seemed an insult to the work he'd already done. Despite himself, he started on the bricks. When he'd pulled and stacked them, he set upon the roots below, snatching at the young pale ones with his bare hands and chopping at the stout pine roots with Randall's rusty ax. It took the rest of the day, and by the time Bob knocked off in the afternoon he was aching and had a raw sunburn on his face and arms. He went inside and mixed up some old Kool-Aid,



which hardly masked the sulfurous bite of the water that ran from the tap. Then he walked down toward the shore, and he brought the soup pot with him.

Derrick was out in his yard, and Bob wished he'd cut through the bushes on the other side of Derrick's house. But Derrick got out of his chair and waved Bob over. He had on a green plastic visor and a pair of the tiniest jean shorts that Bob had ever seen on a man. "Hey, man," Derrick said. "What're you doing?"

"I thought I'd go get my feet wet," Bob said. "I've been working like a slave all day."

"Doing what?"

"Picking shit up and putting shit down."

"Sounds nice," said Derrick. "I was up at five this morning throwing a purse-string suture on a hog with a prolapsed butt hole. What's that boil pot for?"

"I dunno," Bob said. "I was maybe going to put some sea life in it."

"Huh. Hold up a second." Derrick went into the house and came back out carrying a faded green dip net with an aluminum handle. "Here you go. I'll come down with you, if you don't mind."

Bob shrugged.

They skitched down the dune and got out on the spit. The sun looked orange and slick, like a canned peach. Bob dipped a foot in the mild water.

"I'm getting in," Bob said, unbuckling his belt.

Derrick was brushing off a spot on the rock and was slowly getting down on it. "In the water? To swim?" Derrick asked.

"Yes," Bob said. He shucked his shorts and waded in.

"What, nude?"

Bob didn't answer. He pushed out into the water, which was

thick and warm as baby oil. Even when he stopped moving, the water buoyed him up and wouldn't let him sink.

"All right," Derrick said. "But don't laugh at my small pecker."

He took his pants down. Bob glimpsed the melancholy little change purse he had between his legs, and looked away. Derrick's problem. Bob didn't want to know about it. He stroked into the tide.

The sea floor dropped away fast, and just a few feet out, his feet couldn't reach the bottom. He dived down through the green water and floated for a moment in the mantle of coolness where the sun's heat didn't reach. That would be an all right place to stay, if you could only find a way to linger there. But his lungs were full of air, and he soon felt the surface break across his back.

Claire was picking her way down through the grass. She wore a terry-cloth skirt and a leopard print bikini top. She waved to Bob.

"Back up, Claire," Derrick called out. "Bob is a nudist, and he's got me involved in it."

"I see," said Claire. Bold as an athlete, she shrugged off her top and pushed her skirt down. Across her breasts and oval hips, her skin looked soft and new and pale as paraffin. Bob floated off the tip of the spit, looking at her and smoothing the water with his sore hands. He watched her ease into the green curl.

He considered for a moment the many miles that lay between him and his own wife, and what it would take to cinch that distance up again. A lot of talking, a lot of work was what it would take, more than a hundred patios. It was a discouraging thought, and Bob slipped beneath the water with the weight of it.

With the sun beginning to sag, Bob crawled out and got his shorts back on. Derrick and Claire were still far out in the



waves, their heads blinking in and out of sight as the swells fell and rose.

He went to the hole in the rock and saw that the last tide had filled it with amazing things. A quivering halo of vermilion minnows hung near the surface. Hugging the side of the rock was a little blue octopus no bigger than a child's hand, advancing on a yellow snail. Bob got the net. The minnows slipped through the mesh easily, but when Bob went for the octopus, it panicked and pushed off straight into the netting. He dropped it into the pot, and then plucked the snail with his fingers.

Derrick climbed out of the water and came and had a look. "Caribbean reef octopus," he said. "They mostly live south of here, but when the water starts going through its cooling, like it is right now, the current goes a little haywire and draws these funny drifts up here."

A smoky curtain of squalls was moving in from the west. Claire crawled out of the water, catching her balance in a long-legged sprinter's crouch so as not to scrape a knee. Then she stooped and braceleted a dark thigh with her fingers, easing her hand down the length of her leg, stripping the water off in silver peels. Bob watched her dry the second leg this way, and the beauty of it made his throat itch. While Derrick went on about wildlife and currents, Bob coughed into his fist.

"Also, there's Harlan's Ridge, a little underwater mountain range about a mile out that way. It splits some of the Gulf Stream off and shoots a little splinter of it at our cove, and a lot of wild things come in with that, year round. Eagle rays, turtles, scorpion fish, just strays and accidentals, stuff that don't belong here."

Claire put a hand on Derrick's shoulder. She licked away the beads of seawater caught in the bleached down on her upper lip.

"Remember last year, that dorado?" Claire said.

“Dolphin,” said Derrick. “Now, that’s a deep-sea fish, but there it was, about yay long. We boiled it in coconut milk. Buddy, I’ve probably ate a thousand dollars’ worth of shit out of this hole over the years, no joke. What you got down there is a deep cave. A while back I dropped a forty-foot— Now look—”

He broke off and took the net from Bob. A khaki eel about eighteen inches long had appeared on the far side of the pool. On tiptoes, Derrick crept to where the eel lay and hauled it out with a quick jab of the net.

“*Anguilla rostrata*,” said Derrick. “American eel. It’s a little puny, but we could put him on the grill.”

“No, uh-uh,” Bob said. “Give it here. I want to keep it.”

“You know the thing about these?” Derrick said, still holding up the netted eel. “These and European eels, they both start out as babies in the Sargasso Sea. Some ride the Gulf Stream up this way and some cruise all the way to Europe. Same eel, it’s just where you catch it.”

While Derrick was talking, the eel struggled over the hoop and started wriggling fast for the water. Derrick scrambled after it. He ushered the creature back into the net with his hand, and in the process, the eel bit him hard on the thumb. Cursing, Derrick slung it into the pot.

“You just lost the rights on that motherfucker, Bob,” Derrick said, sucking his nail. “He’s got an appointment with some hot coals.”

But Bob picked up the pot and carried it up the slope.

The week wore on and Bob fell into a good rhythm, working in the days, jawing with the neighbors on evenings when he felt like it, spending time down by the water when he did not. He brought back many things for the aquarium: a hermit crab, sea



horses, a small dogfish. One day he and Derrick rode the Pontiac to a pier down the coast and caught hardhead catfish on pork rind bottom rigs. They took the fish back to Randall's house, and Claire came over. When she saw Bob's aquarium she put her hand to her mouth and said she couldn't believe he'd hauled all of that stuff out of the sea. Then she gathered the catfish to clean them. As a child, she said, her father always made her dress the catch. She'd hated the chore back then, but she found satisfaction in it now.

Out in the yard, Bob watched her nail the fishes' heads to a piece of plywood and then douse them in boiling water from the kettle. She made a couple of slits with a box knife, and with a special pair of pliers, she peeled the skin down, neat as a whistle, revealing the snowy flesh beneath. She cut the fish into bite-size cubes, dipped them in store-bought breader, and dropped them into a pan of boiling oil.

They sat on the patio and ate off paper plates.

"Look at you, Bob, this is pretty work you did out here," Claire said, surveying how he'd done the bricks. She was on her fourth beer and there wasn't much warmth in her voice. "I'd like to get you over and handyman up a few things for me. I'd like to get a front door with a window in it, and maybe a couple of cheap skylights. Though if we were smart people, we'd probably just light that piece of shit on fire and start from scratch."

"Why say that, Claire?" said Derrick. "We're having a good time, and then you have to say something like that."

"Well, it's the truth," said Claire.

Bob didn't care to hear any of this. He pulled a tiny bone from his lips and flicked it into the dark yard. "I'll probably split in a couple of days," he said. "Maybe you'll look after those fish in there when I'm gone."

The next night he walked to the store in the island's little village and called home on the pay phone. A big halide bulb buzzed at the top of the telephone pole, and a confetti of moths bumped and tumbled in the yellow glare. He plunked a handful of quarters into the slot. For a moment he waited. A man picked up.

"Hey, Randall," Bob said.

"Buddy," Randall said. "What's the word?"

"I don't know," Bob said. "I fixed your patio. Slapped some paint on those cabinets, too."

"Thank you, my man. That's a lifesaver. Would've done it myself, but you know . . . Anyhow, that's great." There was a pause, and then Randall sneezed into the phone. "How's that paneling looking?"

"It's looking pretty fucked-up, which is how it's gonna stay," Bob said. "I don't intend to hump a bunch of Sheetrock back from the store in a wheelbarrow."

"You can't get hold of a truck or something? Rent one?" Randall said. "Or maybe they deliver. Hell, I don't know, Bob, figure it out."

"What are you up to in my house?" Bob said.

Bob heard Randall saying something that he couldn't make out. Vicky got on and said hello.

"Hey, Vick," he said.

"Well, how is it?"

"Oh, real great," Bob said. "I struck oil in the yard. It's all champagne and gold toilets down here. I got people on call to put grapes in my mouth. But, anyway, I've enjoyed it about all I can. I'm getting ready to get ready to come on back."

"Huh," she said. "We have to talk about some things."



Bob asked what things, and Vicky didn't say at first. She told him that she loved him and that she spent a lot of time worrying over him. She said she pitied him for the unwise things he'd done. She said she did not like being without him, but that, though she tried hard to, she could not think of a reason to take him back right now. In a calm, lawyerly style, she detailed a long catalog of Bob's shortcomings. From the sound of it, she had everything written down with dates and witnesses and the worst parts underlined. Bob listened to all of this and he felt himself get cold.

He watched a mouse walk out from behind the soda machine. It was eating a coupon.

"Why don't you tell me about what Randall's doing on my property," he said. "Why don't we talk about something like that?"

"How about let's talk about nothing," she said. "I'm a happier person when I forget who you are."

Bob sighed and went into a fumbling half-hearted apology, but Vicky wouldn't answer, and he suspected she was holding the phone away from her face, as he'd seen her do when her mother called. Then he retreated to the subject of his uncle, which felt like solid ground, and began to deliver some big claims about what he planned to do to him if he didn't mind his business.

"Why don't you put it in a postcard, Bob?" she said. "Hey, look, I'm about to burn some noodles here. Enjoy yourself, all right? Keep in touch."

"Now, look, goddammit," Bob said, and Vicky hung up before he could tell her any of the things he'd really called to say.

Bob walked home with the sunset nearly dead. He went past the town's one bar and heard men and women laughing. He turned at the chamber of commerce, which was just an old converted garage where they'd hung out a wooden shingle with some

crooked letters burned into it instead of a sign. Past the post office, he picked up the road home and followed it into the dusk.

Bob was getting into bed when Derrick came over. He opened the door without knocking. “Oh, no,” Bob said out loud.

Derrick staggered into the house on splayed legs. He squinted around the room for a long second or two before he spotted Bob sitting on the cot.

“Get up,” Derrick said. “You’n me’s going into town.”

Bob sighed. “Man, go home,” he said. “Where’s Claire?”

“Fuck Claire,” Derrick said. “I’m telling you, she cursed at me. She disrespected me, and she spoke to me in a manner that was atrocious. Hell with her. Now, let’s ride down to Cocoa Beach and find some people to fuck and kiss.”

“Sit down,” said Bob. “I’ll fix you a drink.”

“Good idea,” said Derrick.

Bob went into the kitchen and mixed up a jug of Kool-Aid and poured some into a cup. When he got back to the living room, Derrick was asleep on the floor, quietly honking in his slumber. Bob couldn’t wake him, so he turned Derrick on his side, covered him with a blanket, and lay down on the cot.

Sleep had just dragged Bob down when Claire knocked, then opened the door and angled her head into the room.

“He’s down there, out pretty hard,” said Bob. “I shoved on him a while and couldn’t get anything out of him.”

She stepped in. “We can let him stay like that,” she said. “I brought this thing for you.”

She clicked on a lamp. She was holding a glass salad bowl filled with water. A brown speckled thing lay on the bottom. Its spongy body was studded with thorny reddish nodes; to Bob, it looked like the turd of someone who’d been eating rubies.



“What is it?” Bob asked.

“Not sure. Sea slug, I guess. Found it today,” she said. “It’s ugly as death, isn’t it? Maybe it’d at least make the other fish feel good about theirself. You want it?”

“All right,” said Bob.

She pushed back the cover on the aquarium and dumped the thing in. Then she padded over to Bob’s cot. “You down for the count, or do you want to hang out some?”

He slid his hand into the hollow place behind her knee and then drew it back. She knelt beside him. He reached under her hair and cupped the back of her skull, and she made a soft un-hitching noise in the back of her throat.

“You want me to get in there with you?” she said.

“Yeah, but don’t,” Bob said.

“Why not?”

He didn’t answer. She frowned and waited for a minute. Then she turned off the lamp and lay down beside her husband on the floor.

Bob woke up early. Claire was snoring hard. The air was close and boozy with her and Derrick’s breath. She was curled in the bay of Derrick’s arms, holding one of his big thumbs in her fist. When Bob stirred, her eyes opened for an instant and closed again.

The sun was still low in the sky. It slanted in through the windows and washed the room in brittle light. Bob glanced at the far end of the room and saw that things were not all right with his aquarium. He couldn’t see the eel or the fantastic fish with the long yellow fins. He walked over and saw that they were all floating together, making an unsteady, fleshy terrain on the surface of the tank. In the middle of the empty water was the slug-

like thing Claire had brought. It stretched and flexed, floating in happy solitude behind the glass.

Bob thought he might throw up. He made a fist and drove it hard into the center of the glass. That didn't satisfy him, so he hit it twice more, putting his full weight into it. The tank rocked back and then pitched forward off the stand, hitting the floor with a wet cymbal clap. Glass flew, and dead and dying creatures washed through the room.

Claire jumped up when the wave hit her. Derrick, whose cheek had been flush against the floor, sat up and spat out a mouthful of aquarium water even before he had his eyes open all the way. Then he looked down at the crab that had fetched up on his lap, then at Bob and Claire with a question on his face that seemed to have no feasible answer. He said, "What in the hell is going on in this living room?"

Bob tried to speak but his throat was painfully dry. A periwinkle was caught beneath his toes. He reached down and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger until he heard its shell give way. The slug was lying by the baseboard, caught up in a wad of hair and lint.

"Claire, I guess your slug killed all my fish," Bob finally said, breathing hard. He went over and tipped the creature into a coffee cup.

"Fuckin' sea cucumber is what that is," said Derrick. "These things are poisonous as hell. You can't put these sonsabitches in with other fish. Wait, now, *you* brought it over here, honey?"

"Yeah, last night, but I—"

"Now dammit, Claire, why didn't you show me that fucker first? I'd've sure as shit told you—"

"It's all right," said Bob.

"No, man," said Derrick, looking at ruined creatures at his feet. "That's a crusher, just a straight crusher."



“Oh, Bob, I’m so, so sorry,” Claire said. “Oh, Bob, I feel so bad.”

“No big deal,” Bob mumbled.

“What a wicked thing. Oh, Bob,” said Claire. “Put it down the toilet.”

“Pack its ass in salt. Make it pay,” Derrick said.

But Bob felt a kind of kinship with the slug. Had he been born a sea creature, he doubted God would have robed him in blue and yellow fins like the splendid dead fish at his feet, or put him in the body of a shark or barracuda or any of those exquisite destroyers. No, he’d probably have been family to this sea cucumber, built in the image of sewage and cursed with a chemical belch that ruined every lovely thing that drifted near.

“Nah, I’m going to chuck it back in the sea.” Holding the cup before him like a sentry with his candle, Bob went out the back door. Claire and Derrick followed him, talking about the used aquariums they had down at the St. Vincent DePaul, and how on Monday they would go down there and hook Bob up with a fifty-gallon outfit on Derrick’s dime.

“Yes, we will,” said Claire. “And we’ll go down to Dubey’s Pet World and get you all kinds of real great things, way better stuff than even what you had.”

“I guess we’ll see,” said Bob, sounding far away.

As they reached the end of the stone jetty, they were surprised to see a catamaran sailboat swinging in from the sound side of the island, sliding through the sea oats and marsh bracken into clean, open water. A young man squatted at the rudder, a pleased and capable captain, his elbow cocked, a pink fist on his broad thigh. On the drum of black webbing stretched between the hulls, the young man’s girl sat cross-legged, sipping orange juice from a short-stemmed flute. The girl wore a man’s button-down shirt, yellow and knotted loosely at the sternum to show a white bikini top, brilliant in the late dawn light. The

two beamed at each other in wholesome conspiracy, the look of young people having successfully escaped a dreary family holiday. When they rounded the spit, they waved ceremoniously at the trio standing there, as though Bob, Derrick, and Claire had gathered there expressly to wish the handsome couple well.

Claire and Derrick returned the smile and wagged their hands. And Bob Munroe was smiling, too, even as he dropped back his arm and, with a loose-limbed underhand stroke, lofted the slug into the blue-gold morning air. It was a good, soaring toss, and it might have dropped the creature into the pretty young woman's lap had not a surge of warm wind rolled off the land and pushed the sailboat from the shore.