



BASKET CASE

CARL HIAASEN

A K N O P F  B O O K

Basket Case



Carl Hiaasen



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For my sisters,
Judy and Barb

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This is a work of fiction. All names and characters are either invented or used fictitiously.

However, the frozen-lizard episode is based loosely on the tragic true-life demise of a voracious Savannah monitor named Claw, who now sleeps with the Dove bars.

1

Regarding the death of James Bradley Stomarti: what first catches my attention is his age.

Thirty-nine. That's seven years younger than I am.

I'm drawn to the young and old, but who isn't? The most avidly read obituaries are of those who died too soon and those who lasted beyond expectations.

What everybody wants to know is: Why them? What was their secret? Or their fatal mistake? Could the same happen to me?

I like to know, myself.

Something else about James Bradley Stomarti: that name. I'm sure I've heard it before.

But there's no clue in the fax from the funeral home. Private service is Tuesday. Ashes to be scattered in the Atlantic. In lieu of flowers the family requests donations be made to the Cousteau Society. That's classy.

I scan the list of "survived-bys" and note a wife, sister, uncle, mother; no kids, which is somewhat unusual for a 39-year-old straight guy, which I assume (from his marital status) James Bradley Stomarti to be.

Tapping a key on my desktop, I am instantly wired into our morgue, although I'm the only one in the newsroom who still calls it that. "Resource Retrieval Center" is what the memos say, but morgue is more fitting. It's here they keep all dead stories dating back to 1975, which in a newspaper's memory is about as fresh as dinosaur dung.

I type in the name of the deceased. Bingo!

I am careful not to chuckle or even smile, as I don't wish to alert my ever-watchful editor. Our newspaper publishes only one feature obituary each day; other deaths are capsulized in brief paragraphs or ignored altogether. For years the paper ran two daily full-length obits, but recently the Death page lost space to the Weather page, which had lost space to the Celebrity Eye page, which had lost space to Horoscopes. The shrunken news hole leaves room for only a single story, so I am not cagey about committing to a subject. My editor is not the flexible sort. Once I tell her whom I'm writing about, there's no turning back, even if someone far more interesting expires later in the news cycle.

Another good reason for not appearing too excited is that I don't want anyone to suspect that the death of James Bradley Stomarti might be an actual *news* story; otherwise my editor will snatch it away and give it to one of our star feature writers, the way a cat presents a freshly killed rat on the doorstep. This piracy of newsworthy assignments is the paper's way of reminding me that I'm still at the top of the shit list, that I will be there until pigs can fly, and that my byline will never again sulch the front page.

So I say nothing. I sit at my desk and scroll through the computer files that inform me in colorful bits and pieces about the life of James Bradley Stomarti, better known to the world as Jimmy Stoma.

That's right. *The Jimmy Stoma.*

As in Jimmy and the Slut Puppies.

Stashed somewhere in my apartment is one of their early albums, *Reptiles and Amphibians North America*. Jimmy sang lead and sometimes played rhythm guitar. He also fooled around with the harmonica. I remember really liking one of the band's singles, "Basket Case," off an album called *Floating Hospice*. That one I lost to a departing girlfriend. Jimmy was no Don Henley, but the ladies found him very easy on the eyes. The guy could carry a tune, too.

Stoma also got arrested on a regular basis, and was unfailingly booked under his given name. That's how I got the computer to hit on "James Bradley Stomarti."

From the morgue:

December 13, 1984: With Steven Tyler, John Entwistle and Joan Jett in attendance, Jimmy Stoma marries a chorine turned professional wrestler in Las Vegas. He is arrested later that evening for urinating on Engelbert Humperdinck's stretch limousine.

February 14, 1986: Mrs. Stoma files for divorce, alleging her husband is addicted to alcohol, cocaine and aberrant sex. The Slut Puppies open a three-night stint at Madison Square Garden, and from the stage Jimmy introduces his new girlfriend, a performance artist who goes by the name Mademoiselle Squirt.

May 14, 1986: Stoma is arrested for indecent exposure during a Charlotte, North Carolina, concert in which he takes an encore wearing nothing but a Day-Glo condom and a rubber Halloween mask in the likeness of the Rev. Pat Robertson.

January 19, 1987: With the Slut Puppies' fourth album, *A Painful Burning Sensation*, poised to go triple platinum, Jimmy Stoma announces he is canceling the band's long-awaited tour. Insiders say the singer is self-conscious about his weight, which has inflated to 247 pounds since he gave up cocaine. Stoma insists he's simply taking a break from live performing to work on "serious studio projects."

November 5, 1987: Jimmy Stoma is arrested in Scottsdale, Arizona, after punching a *People* magazine photographer who had tailed him to the gates of the Gila Springs Ranch, an exclusive spa specializing in holistic crash-dietary programs.

November 11, 1987: For the second time in a week, Stoma is busted, this time for shoplifting a bundt cake and two chocolate eclairs from a downtown Phoenix bakery.

February 25, 1989: Stoma and an unidentified woman are injured when his waterbike crashes into the SS *Norway* in the Port of Miami. The collision causes no damage to the cruise ship, but surgeons say it might be months before Stoma can play the guitar again.

September 25, 1991: Stoma's first solo album, *Stomatose*, is panned by both *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*. After debuting at number 22 on the *Billboard* pop charts, it plummets within two weeks to number 97 before—

"Jack?"

This would be my editor, the impossible Emma.

"What'd you do to your hair?" I say.

"Nothing."

"You most certainly did."

"Jack, I need a story line for the budget."

"It looks good shorter," I say. Emma hates it when I pretend to flirt. "Your hair, I mean."

Emma reddens but manages a dismissive scowl. "I trimmed the bangs. What've you got for me?"

"Nothing yet," I lie.

Emma is edging closer, trying to sneak a glance at the screen of my desktop. She suspects I am dialing up porn off the Internet, which would be a fireable offense. Emma has never fired anyone before.

would dearly love to break her cherry on me. She is not the first junior editor to feel that way.

Emma is young and owns a grinding ambition to ascend the newspaper's management ladder. She hopes for an office with a window, a position of genuine authority and stock options.

Poor kid. I've tried to steer her to a profession more geared toward her talents—retail footwear for example—but she will not listen.

Craning her pale neck, Emma says, "Rabbi Levine died last night at East County."

"Rabbi Klein died Monday," I remind her. "Only one dead clergyman per week, Emma. It's in my contract."

"Then get me something better, Jack."

"I'm working on it."

"Who is James Stomarti?" she asks, peeking at my computer screen. With her intense jade-green eyes, Emma has the bearing of an exotic falcon.

I say, "You don't know? He was a musician."

"Local guy?"

"He had a place on Silver Beach," I say, "and one in the Bahamas."

"Never heard of him," Emma says.

"You're too young."

Emma looks skeptical, not flattered. "I think more people will care about Rabbi Levine."

"Then bump him to Metro," I suggest brightly.

Emma, of course, isn't keen on that idea. She and the Metropolitan editor don't get along.

"It's Sunday," I remind her. "Nothing else is happening in the free world. Metro can give the rabbi a fine send-off."

Emma says, "This musician—how old was he?"

"Thirty-nine."

"Yeah?"

Now I've got her chummed up.

Emma says coolly, "So, how'd he die?"

"I don't know."

"Probably drugs," she muses, "or suicide. And you know the rule on suicides, Jack."

Newspapers customarily do not report a private death as a suicide, on the theory it might plant the idea in the minds of other depressed people, who would immediately rush out and do themselves in. These days no paper can afford to lose subscribers.

There is, however, a long-standing journalistic exception to the no-suicide rule.

"He's famous, Emma. The rule goes out the window."

"He's not famous. I never heard of him."

Again she is forcing me to insult her. "Ever heard of Sylvia Plath?" I ask.

"Of course."

"Do you know *why* you've heard of her, Emma? Because she stuck her head in an oven. That's what she's famous for."

"Jack, you're not funny."

"Otherwise she's just another brilliant, obscure, unappreciated poet," I say. "Fame enhances death but death also enhances fame. That's a fact."

Emma's fine-boned lower jaw is working back and forth. She's itching to tell me to go screw myself but that would constitute a serious violation of management policy, a dark entry in an otherwise promising personnel file. I feel for her, I really do.

“Emma, let me do some checking on Stomarti.”

“In the meantime,” she says sharply, “I’ll be holding twelve inches for Rabbi Levine.”

A death notice isn’t the same as an obituary. A death notice is a classified advertisement written and paid for by the family of the deceased, and sent to newspapers by the funeral home as part of its full service package. Death notices usually are printed in a small type known as agate, but they can be long-winded and florid as the family desires. Newspapers are always happy to sell the space.

The death notice of Jimmy Stoma was remarkable for its brevity, and for what was omitted:

STOMARTI, James Bradley, 39, passed away Thursday in the Berry Islands. A resident of Silver Beach since 1993, Jim was a successful businessman who was active in his church and neighborhood civic groups. He loved golf, sailing and diving, and raised thousands of dollars to help restore damaged coral reefs in the Florida Keys and the Bahamas. A cherished friend, devoted brother and beloved husband, he will be deeply missed by his wife, Cynthia Jane, and his sister Janet Stomarti Thrush of Beckerville. A private family mass will be held Tuesday morning at St. Stephen’s Church, followed by a brief shipboard ceremony near the Ripley Lighthouse, where Jim wished to have his mortal remains committed. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that contributions be made to the Cousteau Society, in Jim’s memory.

Odd. No trace of his life as a Slut Puppy, the six million records sold, the MTV video awards, the Grammy. Music wasn’t even listed among his hobbies.

Maybe Jimmy Stoma had wanted it that way; maybe he had worked so hard to put the wild years behind him that he’d wanted nothing, not even his own death, to revive the past.

Sorry, pal, I’ll try to be gentle.

There is no James or J. Stomarti in the county phone book, but a Janet Thrush is listed in Beckerville. A woman picks up on the third ring. I tell her who I am and what I’m writing.

“Sorry,” she says, “it’s a bad time.”

“You’re Jimmy’s sister?”

“That’s right. Look, can you call back in a couple days?”

Here comes the dicey part when I’ve got to explain—very delicately—that when it comes to obituaries, it’s now or never. Wait forty-eight hours and nobody at the paper will give a rat’s ass about your dead brother.

Nothing personal. It’s the nature of news.

“The story’s running tomorrow,” I tell his sister. “I really hate to bother you. And you’re right, there’s lots of stuff I could use from our clippings. . . .”

I let this ghastly prospect sink in. Nobody deserves an obituary constructed exclusively from newspaper stories.

“I’d prefer chatting with those who knew him best,” I say. “His death is going to be a shock for lots of people all over the country. Your brother had so many fans. . . .”

“Fans?” Janet Thrush is testing me.

“Yeah. I was one of them.”

On the other end: an unreadable silence.

“Jimmy Stoma,” I press on. “Of Jimmy and the Slut Puppies. It is the same James Stomarti, right?”

His sister says, quietly, “That was a long time ago.”

“People will remember. Trust me.”

“Well, that’s good. I guess.” She sounds unsure.

I say, “There wasn’t much information in the death notice.”

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t see it.”

“About his music, I mean.”

“You talk to Cleo?”

“Who’s that?” I ask.

“His wife.”

“Oh. The funeral home gave the name as Cynthia.”

“She goes by Cleo,” says Jimmy’s sister. “Cleo Rio. The one and only.”

When I say I’ve never heard of her, Jimmy’s sister chuckles. A television murmurs in the background. *Meet the Press*, it sounds like.

“Well, pretend you know who Cleo is,” she advises, “and I guarantee she’ll give you an interview. Obviously Sis and the widow have some issues. “What about you?” I ask.

“Lord, don’t mention my name.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I say. “I was hoping you would talk to me. Just a few quick questions. I’m sorry, but I’m on a tight deadline—”

“After you get hold of Cleo,” Jimmy’s sister says, “call me back.”

“Do you have her phone number?”

“Sure.” She gives it to me, then says: “I’ve got an address, too. You ought to go out to the condo.”

“Good idea,” I say, but I hadn’t planned to leave the newsroom. I can do five phoners in the time it takes to drive to Silver Beach and back.

Jimmy’s sister says, “You want to get this story right, you gotta go meet Cleo.” She pauses. “Hey, I’m not tryin’ to tell you how to do your job.”

“I appreciate the help, but just tell me one thing. How’d your brother die? Was he sick?”

She knows exactly what I mean. “Jimmy’s been straight for nine years,” she says.

“Then what happened?”

“It was an accident, I guess.”

“What kind of accident?”

“Go ask Cleo,” says Jimmy’s sister, and hangs up.

I’m on my way out the door when Emma cuts me off. She’s almost a whole foot shorter than I am, sneaky, too. I seldom see her coming.

She says, “Did you know Rabbi Levine took up hang gliding at age seventy? That’s good stuff, Jack.”

“Did he die in his hang glider, Emma? Crash into the synagogue, by chance?”

“No,” she concedes. “Stroke.”

I shrug. “Nice try, but I’m off to visit the widow Stomarti.”

Emma doesn’t budge. “I like the rabbi better.”

Hell. Now she’s forcing me to show my cards. I glance quickly around the newsroom and notice, with some relief, that none of the young superstars are working today. That’s one good thing about the Sunday shift, the newsroom is like a tomb. Emma wants to take away my story, she’ll have to write the damn thing herself.

And Emma, bless her sorority-sister soul, has never been a reporter. Judging by the strenuous

syntax of her memos, she likely would have difficulty composing a thank-you note.

So, here goes.

“James Stomarti was Jimmy Stoma,” I say.

Emma’s brow crinkles. She senses that she ought to know the name. Rather than admitting she doesn’t, she waits me out.

“Of Jimmy and the Slut Puppies,” I prompt.

“No kidding.”

“Remember that song, ‘Basket Case’?”

“Sure.” Emma turns slightly, her raptor eyes scanning the rows of cubicles. The plan, I know, is to hand off Stoma to another reporter and dispatch me to do the dead rabbi.

But Emma’s coming up empty. The only warm body on the city desk is Griffin, the weekend copy guy. Griffin is sixty years old, nasty and untouchable. Emma has no authority over the police reporters. Griffin looks up from his desktop and stares right through her, as if she were smoke.

With a trace of a frown, Emma turns back to me. “Suicide, right?”

“Nope. Accident.”

Grudgingly, Emma moves out of my way. “Twelve inches,” she says curtly. “That’s all we’ve got, Jack.”

“For a dead rock star,” I say drily, “a Grammy Award-winning musician who dies tragically at age thirty-nine? Honey, I promise you the *New York Times* will give it more than twelve inches.”

Emma says, “Not on the Death page, they won’t.”

I smile. “That’s right. Not there.”

Emma’s expression darkens. “Ungh-ugh, Jack. I’m not pushing this for Page One. No way!”

Jesus, what a hoot. The *Times* won’t put Jimmy Stoma out front—he’ll be lucky to end up as the lead obit. But Emma’s in a sweat, rattled at the possibility of me breaking out of the dungeon. No doubt she perceives that as a career-threatening crisis, for part of her mission as a junior editor is to see that I remain crushed, without hope of redemption. The next best thing to canning me would be to make me quit in disgust, which of course I’ll never do.

This is too much fun.

I say to Emma: “You might mention Stoma in the budget meeting, just in case.”

“Twelve inches, Jack,” she reiterates sternly.

“Because my guess is, there’s at least one Slut Puppies fan on the masthead.” I’m referring to Abkazion, the new managing editor, who is my age and works weekends.

“Fifteen inches, max,” amends Emma.

I wave goodbye with my spiral notebook, and stride toward the elevator. “We’ll talk when I get back from visiting Mrs. Stomarti.”

“What kind of accident?” Emma calls after me. “How did he die? Jack?”

2

My all-time favorite obituary headline is:

**Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam
Of Mauritius Dies at Age 85.**

This did not appear in a Dr. Seuss book, but in the *New York Times*. Maybe three dozen readers all Manhattan had ever heard of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, but that's what made the matter-of-fact tone of the headline so splendid—the dry implication that even non-Mauritians *ought* to have known who he was.

Obituary headlines often contain helpful (though sometimes unnecessary) identifiers—**Joe DiMaggio, Former Baseball Star, Dead at 84**—yet no clue was provided as to the occupation or achievements of the departed Ramgoolam patriarch. Perhaps the headline writer was hamstrung by lack of space, due to the phenomenal length of the deceased's name, though I prefer to believe the succinctness was intentional.

Sir Seewoosagur is gone. Enough said.

I won't be writing the headline on Jimmy Stoma's obituary because, contrary to what readers think, reporters don't come up with the headlines for their stories. Copy editors do.

One time the copy editor on the Death page called in sick, and Emma herself was left with the duty. It was September 11, 1998, and here's what she put above one of my obituaries:

**Keith Murtagh, Inventor of French Toast,
Dies at 96 After Brief Illness**

The man's name was Kenneth Murtaugh, he had invented a toaster oven, and he was sixty-nine when he crashed his Coupe de Ville into a palm tree along Perdido Boulevard. That he died was the only fact Emma managed to get right.

The one who got the angry letters from the dead man's family was me, because it was my name on the story beneath the fucked-up headline. Weeks later, Emma sent me a memo of apology, in which she again misspelled Murtaugh's name. God, if only it had been out of spite and not incompetence.

Driving across Pelican Causeway, I'm imagining the headline possibilities for Jimmy Stoma.

**James Stomarti, Former Pop Star,
Dies in Accident at 39**

Or, slightly better:

**Rock Musician Known as Jimmy Stoma
Dies in the Bahamas**

That's if the story remains on the obit page, where headlines are customarily subdued and colorless. All bets are off if the duty editor bumps Stoma to Metro or Page One, in which case I would

give my right testicle to see a “Slut Puppy” reference in 40-point type, such as:

**Rocker Jimmy Stoma, Ex-Slut Puppy,
Perishes at Age 39 in Bahamas Accident**

Now there’s a headline to sell papers. You’ve got the irresistible ingredients of glamour (rock music), notoriety (the famously naughty Slut Puppies), youth (age thirty-nine), tragedy (“perish,” an exquisite verb, implying a rich life cut short), all set against an exotic tropical backdrop. . . .

Ugly but true: Death is what pays my bills.

At one time I was a serious reporter doing what passed for serious journalism. Now I write exclusively about the unliving—I go to bed each night thinking about the ones I’ve laid to rest in tomorrow’s paper, and I wake up every morning wondering who will be next. My curiosity is strictly and professionally morbid. Shamelessly I plot to resurrect my newspaper career by yoking my byline to some famous stiff. My days are spent dodging dead Rabbi Levines in the hope that someone more widely known will pass away before the first-edition deadline.

Certainly this is no life to be esteemed. Yet I like to think I bring uncommon style and perspective to the obituary page, which is traditionally a training ground for interns and fresh-out-of-college rookies. Emma, of course, would prefer that her modest stable feature an obit writer who was younger and less experienced than herself; someone she could guide, counsel and occasionally intimidate.

But she’s stuck with me, and I make her as jittery as a gerbil in a cobra pit. Emma keeps a stash of Valiums in her top drawer—the pills are disguised in a Bayer aspirin bottle, to avoid discovery by any of her ambitious rival editors. They would unhesitatingly use the information to cast doubt on Emma’s fitness for newspaper management.

Poor girl. She has a decent soul, I’m certain, and an untested heart that doesn’t deserve to be wrung like an old dishrag. Yet that’s what is bound to happen if Emma stays in this miserable profession. I’m determined to save her; she is one of two pressing personal projects.

The first being, to save myself.

Before heading to Silver Beach, I make two quick stops. The first is a record store, where I purchase the only unremaindered copy of *Floating Hospice*. Next, with Jimmy Stoma belting from the dashboard of my Mustang—“My baby is a basket case, a bipolar mama in leather and lace!”—I drive to a drugstore that employs a worldly young woman named Carla Candilla.

Carla is the daughter of my favorite ex-girlfriend. She works the drugstore’s photo counter. She waves when she spots me standing in line—we are on closer terms than her mother and I.

Carla smiles. “Black Jack!” Her nickname for me, inspired by my occupation.

I lean across the counter for a fatherly hug. “Once again I’m in need of instruction,” I say.

“Fire away, old-timer.”

“Cleo Rio. There wasn’t much in the morgue.”

“She’s new on the scene,” Carla concedes. “Is this research, or personal?”

“That’s right, darling, we’re a hot item, me and Cleo. Tonight we’re going to a rave and later we’re getting a suite at Morgan’s. Tell *that* to your mom. Please, Carla, I’ll pay you.”

When Carla laughs she looks just like Anne, her mother. And Anne laughing is one of my all-time happiest recollections.

Carla asks if Cleo Rio is dead.

“No, it’s her husband,” I say.

“Oh, that’s right. She got married,” Carla nods. “It was in *Ocean Drive*.”

Carla keeps track of all local and visiting celebs. At seventeen she is a wily veteran of the club scene and a regular pilgrim to South Beach, where she keeps current on music, movies, dietary trends, and fashion. Carla is a key source; my only reliable link to modern youth culture.

“So what has Cleo done to make herself semi-famous? What exactly is she?” I ask.

“More specific please. You mean her sexuality? Nationality? Personality?”

“Carla,” I say, “in about twenty minutes I’ve gotta sit down with this woman and drag three decades’ worth of quotes out of her. This will require first-class bullshitting.”

“She’s a singer.”

“That helps. What kind of singer?”

“Angry,” Carla says, “wounded but not hardened.”

“Alanis clone?”

Carla shakes her head. “Cleo’s definitely going for a more precious effect. You know the type—the suddenly fuckable former fashion model.”

Carla is not trying to shock me. She’s talked this way since she was twelve.

“Tell me some of her hits,” I say.

“Hit singular, Jack.”

“So everything you’re giving me is based on one song?”

“Plus the video,” Carla says.

“Certainly.”

“Directed by Oliver Stone.”

“Who else.”

“Supposedly she flashes some pubes. That’s how she got her name in *Spin*,” Carla reports. “Personally, I don’t think it was even Cleo on the video. I think they used a double.”

“For pubic hair?”

“Show business, Jack. Hul-lo?” Carla, who has come under the suspicious gaze of the store manager, now pretends to arrange some color slides on the light table for my inspection.

“What was the name of Cleo Rio’s one and only song?” I ask.

“‘Me.’” says Carla. “That’s all. Just ‘Me.’”

“And it charted?”

“Only because of the pube hype.”

“Gotcha. Thanks, darling.”

“Where’s the big interview?”

“Her place.”

“I expect a complete debriefing.”

“Of course. Hey, you ever hear of Jimmy and the Slut Puppies?”

Carla arches an auburn eyebrow. “They new?” She’s afraid she’s missed something.

“Nope. Old as the hills.”

“Sorry, Jack.”

Before leaving the drugstore, I can’t stop myself from asking: “So how’s your mom?”

“Good,” says Carla.

“Really?”

“Really good.”

“Shit,” I say.

Carla laughs fondly. The fact that I still miss Anne buoys her opinion of me.

“Tell her I said hi.”

“You’re quite the dreamer, Jack.”

Jimmy Stoma’s condo is on the nineteenth floor of an eyesore skyscraper at the southernmost tip of Silver Beach. Twenty minutes she keeps me waiting in the lobby, Jimmy’s widow, but truthfully I’m surprised she agreed to see me at all. From the briefness of the death notice, it would seem that the family doesn’t want much attention.

The door of 19-G is opened by a squat, bald, neckless man with two small platinum hoops in each earlobe. Straight from Bouncers-R-Us, this guy, down to the bomber jacket and the understated armpit bulge. Wordlessly he leads me through the hazily lit condo to the living room, where Mrs. Stomarti is standing before a wraparound bay window.

I have indeed seen her face before, on the cover of a couple tabloid-style celebrity magazines which I subscribe for professional reasons. (I clip and file some of the juicier profile pieces in case the celebrity subject someday expires within our circulation area.)

“I’m Cleo,” says Mrs. Stomarti. “Jimmy’s wife.”

She is maybe twenty-two years old; twenty-three, tops. Medium tall, thin but not skinny, and alarmingly tan. The hair is bleached snow white and cut in a mock pageboy. The lips are done cherry red and the cheekbones are heavily shadowed, like a pair of matching bruises. She’s wearing a beige sleeveless shell and tight white slacks. Her toenails, also white, remind me of paint chips.

No wonder she quit calling herself Cynthia.

“I’m Jack Tagger,” I say. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I only wish the circumstances were different.” Implying I am aware of her blossoming fame, and would otherwise be delighted to interview her for the Arts & Music page.

We sit down; the widow on the end of a long cream-colored sofa, and me on a deacon’s bench. Wasting no time, I tell Cleo Rio how much I liked her hit single, “Me.”

She brightens. “You catch the video?”

“Who didn’t!”

“What’d you think—too much?”

“Did Jimmy like it?”

“Loved it,” Cleo says.

“I vote with Jimmy.” I uncap a felt-tip pen and open the notebook on my lap.

“You’re the first one to call,” Mrs. Stomarti says.

“I was a fan.”

A faint smile. “Next’ll be the trades, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I know you’re trying to keep it low-key.”

“That’s what Jimmy wanted.”

“I promise not to take much of your time.”

The bald guy brings Cleo what looks like a screwdriver in a tall frosty glass. He doesn’t so much as glance in my direction, which is fine with me.

“Want somethin’?” Cleo asks.

I should mention her eyes, which are rimmed pink from either crying or lack of sleep. She’s wearing ice-blue contact lenses.

“A Coke? Beer?” asks Jimmy’s wife.

“No, thanks.”

To get the ball rolling, I start with the easy ones. How did you two first meet? *A VH1 party. How long were you married? Not quite a year. Where was the ceremony? Sag Harbor. On a friend's boat. Oh? Who was that? I forget the name. Some sax player Jimmy knew. A session guy.*

Here I pause longer than necessary to write down her answer. The interval is meant to give Mrs. Stomarti a moment to prepare. I still dread this part of the job, intruding so bluntly upon the grieving. Yet I've found that many people don't mind talking to a total stranger about their lost loved one. Maybe it's easier than commiserating with family members, who know all there is to know about the deceased, good and bad. A visit from an obituary writer, however, presents a golden opportunity to start from scratch and remake a person as you wish to have them remembered. An obituary is the ultimate last word.

I drop my voice from casual to somber. "Mrs. Stomarti, tell me about the Bahamas trip."

She sets her drink on a teak coffee table. "Jimmy loved it over there. We had a place down in Exuma."

Glancing down, I notice the toes on both her feet are curling and uncurling. Either it's some type of yoga routine, or Cleo Rio is nervous. I ask if they were on vacation when it happened.

She chuckles. "Jimmy was *always* on vacation when we went to the islands. He loved to dive—I was, like, obsessed. He used to say that being underwater was better than any dope he'd ever tried. 'The deeper I go, the higher I get,' is what he said."

Writing down every word, I'm thinking about how easily Mrs. Stomarti has settled into the past tense when speaking of Jimmy. Often a new widow will talk about her deceased husband as though he were still alive.

For example: *He's always on vacation when we go to the islands. Or: He loves to dive.* And so on. But Cleo hasn't slipped once. No subconscious denial here; Jimmy Stoma's dead.

"Can you tell me what happened," I ask, "the day he died?"

She purses her lips and reaches for the drink. I wait. She slurps an ice cube out of the glass and says, "It was an accident."

I say nothing.

"He was diving on an airplane wreck. Fifty, sixty feet deep." Mrs. Stomarti is sucking the ice from cheek to cheek.

"Where?" I ask.

"Near Chub Cay. There's plane wrecks all over the islands," she adds, "from the bad old days."

"What kind of a plane?"

Cleo shrugs. "A DC-something. I don't remember," she says. "Anyway, I was up on the boat when it happened." Now she's crunching the ice in her teeth.

"You don't dive?"

"Not that day. I was working on my tan."

I nod and glance down meaningfully at my notebook. Scribble a couple words. Look up and nod again. The worst thing a reporter can do in a delicate interview is seem impatient. Cleo takes another slug of her drink. Then she rolls her shoulders and stiffens, like she's working out a kink in her spine.

"Jimmy went down same as always," she says, "but he didn't come up."

"Was he alone?" I ask.

"No, he never dove alone."

I'm thinking: Again with the past tense.

"Jay was down there, too," Jimmy's wife says, "only he was diving the tail section. Jimmy was up in the nose of the plane. See, it's in two pieces on the bottom."

“Jay Burns? From the Slut Puppies?”

She nods. “He and Jimmy were, like, best friends. He swam up off the wreck and starts climbing into the boat when all of a sudden he’s like, ‘Isn’t Jimmy up yet?’ And I’m like, ‘No, he’s still down there.’ See, I was reading a magazine. I wasn’t watching the time.”

Cleo lifts the empty glass and turns her head toward the kitchen doorway. In a flash, the neckless bouncer guy hustles forward with a fresh screwdriver. A bodyguard who knows how to mix a drink—every pop star should have at least one.

The widow takes a sip and continues:

“So Jay grabs a fresh tank and jumps back in the water and . . . no Jimmy. He wasn’t anywhere near the wreck.” Cleo rocks back on the sofa cushion. She’s no longer looking at me; she’s staring out the bay window that faces the Atlantic. Her eyes are locked on something far away and invisible to mine.

She says, “Jimmy was everything to me, you know? My husband, my best friend, my lover, my manager—”

I’m writing like crazy. Trying to slow Cleo down, I say, “Have you got a phone number for Jay?”

“He’s still in the islands. He’s bringing Jimmy’s boat across tomorrow.”

“It’s nice they stayed so close after the band broke up.”

“Jay was the only one,” Cleo says, “the only one in the music business Jimmy would even talk to. Until he met me.”

She pauses while I catch up on my notes. Obviously she’s done interviews before.

“Anyway,” she goes on, “we called for help. They found him about three hours later, like, half a mile away. He was already gone. His tank was empty.”

I ask Mrs. Stomarti if an autopsy was performed in the Bahamas.

“Yeah, they said he drowned. I guess he just got wore out trying to find the boat. The currents got pretty strong out there, and all those years of smoking weed, Jimmy didn’t exactly have the lungs of a teenager.”

“But he’d been straight for some time, right?” I make the question sound casual.

Cleo says, “Totally.”

I don’t write that down because I don’t want her to think I’m too interested in Jimmy’s wild days.

“So what do you think happened,” I ask, “on that last dive?”

“I think . . .” Jimmy’s wife pauses to snatch a pack of Marlboros off the teak table. “I think my darling husband swam off and got lost—”

Now I’m jotting again.

“—simple as that,” says Cleo Rio, lighting up. “Knowing Jimmy, he saw something way down there and went swimming off after it—a hammerhead or a big moray eel, who knows what—anyway, he got all turned around. It’s easy to do.” She gives a rueful smile. “When he went diving, he was like a little kid. Totally preoccupied.”

“How were the seas?”

“Flat when we got there. But we’d had some wind the night before and Jay said visibility on the bottom was shitty.”

“And this happened when?”

“Thursday afternoon. A police boat took Jimmy’s body to Nassau and we didn’t get him back until yesterday.”

The way she’s dragging on the cigarette, I can tell she’s tired of talking.

“You’ve been very generous with your time,” I say. “I’m almost finished.”

“It’s okay.”

“You said Jimmy liked to keep a low profile. Is that why the death notice didn’t mention the Sl
Puppies, or even his Grammy?”

“Right.”

“But he wrote some good songs. People will remember.”

“Tell me about it. I was his *numero uno* fan.” Cleo stubs out the butt. “But Jimmy always said
was another lifetime, and he was lucky to get out alive. He didn’t want any reminders.”

“Not even the music?”

“*Especially* the music,” she says. “One of his songs came on the car radio, he’d turn it off rig
away. Didn’t get mad or nothin’, just changed the channel.” Cleo sweeps a hand through the air. “Di
in this whole place there’s not one of his records. Not one! That’s how he wanted it.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see the neckless man, leaning against a wall; waiting, I assume,
escort me out.

I say to Jimmy’s wife: “He was good.”

“No, he was awesome.”

Shamelessly I jot this down, too, knowing it’s a word that Cleo uses probably fifty times a day
describe everything from bubble bath to frozen yogurt.

She says, “That’s why I was so stoked about him producing my CD.”

“Jimmy was producing? That must’ve been a blast, working together in the studio.”

“For sure. We’re almost finished,” she says.

Finally, the present tense. Unless the “we” doesn’t include her husband.

“You have a title? I’d like to mention it in the story.”

Cleo Rio perks up, scooting to the edge of the sofa. “*Shipwrecked Heart*. But we’ve still got som
mixing left, so it won’t be out for a while.”

I write it down: *Shipwrecked Heart*. Slightly mawkish, but it gives me a semi-ironic kicker for th
story. Even Emma might get it.

Standing up, I flip the notebook shut and cap my pen. “Thank you,” I tell Jimmy’s widow. “I kno
this was difficult.”

We shake hands. Hers is damp, the knuckles showing pink and raw.

“When will this be in the paper?” she asks me.

“Tomorrow.”

“Will there be a picture of Jimmy?”

“Most likely,” I say.

The bald guy has materialized at my side.

“Well, I hope they pick a good one,” says Mrs. Stomarti.

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk to the photo editor.” Like he’d give me the time of day.

No sooner has the door to 19-G closed behind me than I think of a dozen other questions I shou
have asked. But that’s what always happens, and the truth is, I’ve got more than enough material f
the obit. Plus I still need to talk with Jimmy’s sister, Janet, and make some calls to the Bahamas.

I scan my notes as I’m waiting for the elevator, which is taking forever. Finally there’s a doub
beep and the door opens, and I nearly walk smack into some tall guy who’s on his way out. I don’t s
his face because he’s carrying an armful of grocery bags from a gourmet deli. We both grun
apologetically and manage to sidestep each other. As he turns the corner, leaving me alone in th
elevator to gag on his cologne, I see quite a lush mane of copper-red hair shimmering down past h
shoulder blades.

The elevator door doesn’t close immediately, which annoys me because I’m on deadline. Ever

pissant delay will annoy me until the Jimmy Stoma obit is finished.

~~Repeatedly I punch the elevator button. Nothing happens. From down the hall, I hear the guy knocking on a door to one of the apartments. I hear the door open. I hear the voice of Cleo Rio, and though I can't make out her words, the tone is clearly friendly and familiar.~~

Leading me to the brilliant conclusion that the shimmery-haired man who got out of the elevator was not a grocery-delivery guy, but an acquaintance of the bereaved.

And, as the elevator door finally closes in my face, I wonder: Why would anyone wear so much cologne to visit a widow?

Where is Janet Thrush?

I keep calling; no answer. I leave two messages on her machine.

Meanwhile, Emma hovers. She thinks I ought to be writing Jimmy Stoma's obituary by now, but she knows better than to nag. Emma dislikes being reminded that I haven't missed a deadline since she was in Huggies.

Come on, Janet, answer the damn phone.

From Jimmy's sister I need two things. One is a nice warm quote about her brother—I hate to have the entire obit on Cleo Rio. Second, I want to bounce Cleo's version of Jimmy's life off of Janet to make sure I'm not being steered off course. Wives have been known to lie extravagantly about dead husbands.

Janet Thrush could tell me if her brother had been producing *Shipwrecked Heart* for Cleo, and if the CD was nearly finished. Even if Jimmy's widow is exaggerating for self-promotional purposes, at least the title ought to hold up. That's all I need for my last sentence, which we call the kicker.

While waiting for Janet, I try the Bahamian police. Talk about a long shot. Headquarters in Nassau refers me to Freeport. Freeport refers me to Chub Cay, which refers me back to Freeport. Sunday, it seems, isn't the best day to track down a coroner in the islands.

Finally I hook up with a person who identifies herself as Corporal Smith. She's aware that an American has "very unfortunately" passed away while on a diving trip to the Berry Islands, but she has no further information at hand. She politely instructs me to call Nassau tomorrow and ask for Sergeant Weems.

It's futile to plead my case but I give it a try. And, as expected, Corporal Smith wants to know why I can't wait one more day to write the obit. It's a logical question. Jimmy Stoma certainly isn't going anywhere.

"It's news," I explain valiantly to the corporal. "I'm in a competitive situation."

"No one else from the press has called."

"But they will."

"Then they'll be advised to phone back tomorrow," she says, "just like you."

I hang up. Emma is behind me, her presence a clammy vapor.

"How's it going?"

"Peachy," I say.

"When can I see something?"

"When it's done."

She slides away like a fog.

Desperate for a second quote, I look up the home phone number of our music critic. His name is Tim Buckminster, although he recently began using the initials T.O. in his byline, because he liked the rhythm of it: T. O. Buckminster! He even sent an all-points e-mail instructing everyone at the

newspaper to refer to him henceforth as “T.O.,” please, and never Tim.

~~I cannot bring myself to do this. Tim Buckminster is only twenty-five years old, which is too young to be reinventing oneself. So I call him Timmy, as does his mother. Unfortunately, he turns out to be utterly unfamiliar with the music of the Slut Puppies, or of Jimmy Stoma as a solo artist.~~

“But you’ve heard of him, right?” I ask.

“Sure. Didn’t he marry Cleo Rio?”

Next I try a rock-writer pal in San Francisco. He is kind enough to cobble together an instant quote about the *Reptiles and Amphibians of North America* CD, which (he speculates) had an influence on current bands such as the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Foo Fighters.

Good enough.

I glance at the clock on the wall. Maybe Janet Thrush will call before deadline, which is ninety-four minutes away. On my desk I spread my meager notes and the morgue clippings, and begin to write:

James Stomarti, the hard-living singer-songwriter who founded the popular rock group Jimmy and the Slut Puppies, has died in an apparent skin-diving accident in the Bahamas. He was 39.

Known to millions of youthful fans as Jimmy Stoma, Stomarti disappeared on the afternoon of August 6 while exploring the sunken wreckage of a smuggler’s airplane near Chub Cay, according to his wife, the singer Cleo Rio.

Ms. Rio said her husband went diving in 50 to 60 feet of water with a former bandmate, keyboardist Jay Burns, while she waited aboard the boat. Burns came up after an hour, she said, but there was no sign of Stomarti.

His body was found later by Bahamian police, in calm seas a half mile away, Ms. Rio said.

“I think my darling husband swam off and got lost,” she said Sunday, still dazed by the tragedy. “When he went diving he was like a little kid. Totally preoccupied.”

Ms. Rio said it appeared Stomarti had gotten lost underwater, and succumbed to fatigue. She said an autopsy determined that her husband had drowned.

Bahamian Police Cpl. Cilla Smith acknowledged that an American died last Thursday on a dive in the Berry Islands, but declined to confirm that it was Stomarti or provide details of the coroner’s findings.

Stomarti’s body was returned to the United States on Saturday. A private service will be held Tuesday afternoon at St. Stephen’s Church in Silver Beach. Afterwards the singer’s ashes will be scattered in the Atlantic Ocean, according to his wishes, Ms. Rio said.

It is a quiet final chapter to a life that had, until recent years, been tumultuous and troubled.

Jimmy and the Slut Puppies barged onto the rock scene in 1983 with the raunchy hit single, “Mouthful of Muscle.” Over the next seven years the band sold more than six million albums, according to *Billboard* magazine.

As front man Jimmy Stoma, Stomarti played rhythm guitar, harmonica and sang lead vocals. He also wrote the group’s best-known singles, including “Basket Case” and “Trouser Troll,” the latter of which appeared on the Slut Puppies’ last album, the Grammy Award-winning *A Painful Burning Sensation*.

“Jimmy and the Slut Puppies was a high-octane act,” rock biographer Gavin Cisco said, “and the spark came from Jimmy Stoma. He was a screamer, for sure, but he was also a sly and solid songwriter.”

Cisco cited the “obvious” influence of one Slut Puppies album, *Reptiles and Amphibians of North America*, on the Red Hot Chili Peppers and other current rock bands.

Born in Chicago, James Bradley Stomarti grew up listening to hard-driving, mainstream rock-and-roll. He had a fondness for zippy, double-edged lyrics, and among his early idols were Todd Rundgren and Jackson Browne.

Stomarti was sixteen when he put together his first basement band, Jungle Rot. Several years later he and his best friend, Jay Burns, formed the Slut Puppies and went on the road.

“Mainly to get girls,” Stomarti joked in a 1986 *Rolling Stone* interview, “and it worked like a charm.”

Stomarti always performed bare-chested in trademark black overalls and combat boots. He was known for his elaborate tattoos, lewd comic asides and indefatigable stage energy.

Offstage, he exuberantly sustained the Jimmy Stoma persona, sometimes with embarrassing results. Stomarti had numerous brushes with the law, including one memorable arrest for indecent exposure during a concert in North Carolina. In that incident, Stomarti strode onstage wearing only a prophylactic, and a mask likeness of the Rev. Pat Robertson, the Christian broadcast personality.

Another time, the singer and an unidentified woman companion were injured when he crashed his high-powered waterbike into the stern of the luxury liner SS *Norway* while it was berthed in the Port of Miami. Later Stomarti admitted he’d gotten “seriously lit” before the accident, in which he fractured nine out of ten knuckles.

Indeed, his years of greatest fame and success were marred by heavy substance abuse, leading to the breakup of numerous romances and one marriage.

Stomarti eventually dissolved the Slut Puppies, and in 1991 released his first and only solo album, *Stomatose*, to mixed

reviews and disappointing sales. He soon dropped out of the Los Angeles music scene and moved to Florida.

His wife said Stomarti gave up drugs and alcohol, and became an avid outdoorsman, fitness enthusiast and environmentalist. He bought a second home in the Bahamas, where he indulged his passions for boating and scuba diving.

Last year, while attending a VH1 party for guitarist Eddie Van Halen, Stomarti met Ms. Rio, the former Cynthia Jane Zigler. Three weeks later they were married in Reno, Nevada.

“Jimmy was everything to me, you know?” Ms. Rio said. “My husband, my best friend, my lover, my manager.”

At the time of his death, Stomarti was producing an album for his new wife. The title: *Shipwrecked Heart*.

I re-read the piece and decide it's not terrible, for a forty-five-minute writing job. Maudlin as it is, the kicker works.

Jimmy Stoma's obit is 810 words, or about twenty-four column inches of type. The fastidious Emma will be plenty steamed. She told me fifteen inches, max. Anything longer won't fit into the layout of the Death page, meaning the story must be trimmed or moved to another section of the paper.

Emma would rather French-kiss an iguana than try to cut nine inches from one of my obits because she knows I'll be breathing down her collar, giving her hell about every measly comma she has the gall to delete.

Even when allowed to toil unmolested, Emma's editing cannot be described as seamless. In the fever pitch of battle, she tends to quaver; even her punctuation (normally a strong suit) becomes shaky. Trimming an inch or two from one of my stories is merely excruciating. Cutting nine inches would be indescribable torture, and Emma knows it.

Which leaves the other option: Move the Jimmy Stoma obit to a section front. That would shift the editing duty into the hands of one of Emma's competitors. More unpalatably, it might result in a prominent display of my byline—an event as rare and mystical as a solar eclipse.

Poor kid. What choices!

Before pressing the Send button to ship her the Jimmy Stoma obit, I go through it once more, tidying up.

I delete the “likeness” after “mask.”

I wince at the Chili Peppers reference, suspecting that the Slut Puppies had no influence whatsoever on that particular band.

I cringe at the “marred by heavy substance abuse” line, but I can't come up with anything that isn't equally clichéd.

I insert the phrase “highly publicized” in front of “romances.” . . .

Tinkering is a way of stalling, and I'm stalling in the hope that Janet Thrush might still phone with a quote or two about her brother. Except for a few paragraphs of background from old clippings, the obituary is pretty much all Cleo Rio. Single-sourcing always makes me uneasy, and I'm stuck with Cleo's word on lots of material facts, including the cause of Jimmy Stoma's death.

I keep thinking of the shimmery-haired guy with the deli bags who got out of the elevator. He could be a dozen innocent explanations. Maybe he was Cleo's big brother, or some diving buddy of Jimmy's. That bull-semen cologne, though, was definitely too heavy for the occasion.

My eyes fall skeptically on the phrase “still dazed by the tragedy,” which I've used to describe Jimmy's widow. I should probably take it out, but I won't. It paints a gentler scene than if I'd written she was “knocking back screwdrivers and staring blankly out a window,” which was the sad truth.

One more detail jumps out of the obituary to give me a twinge of acid reflux: the bit about how Jimmy and Cleo Rio first met at a VH1 party. That's what Cleo told me.

Yet she also told me her husband had broken completely from his past, and wanted nothing more to do with the music world until he'd met her. So why was he attending a Van Halen bash?

One of many things I'll probably never know.

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