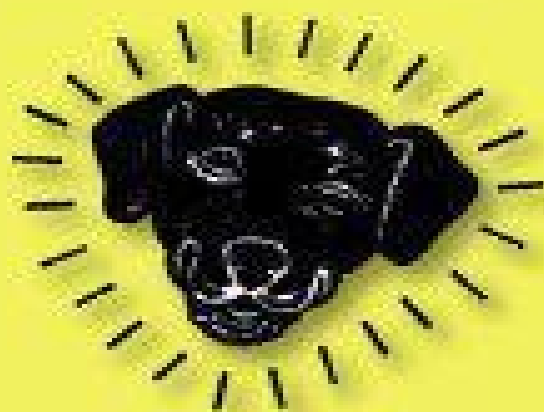


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Carl Hiaasen



SICK PUPPY

"FROM START TO FINISH, *SICK PUPPY* IS A HOWL."

—Barbara Hoffman, *New York Post*

Sick Puppy

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General, Fiction, Mystery Detective, Unknown, Humorous stories, Environmentalist

Tags: Politicians

SUMMARY:

Da den politisk indflydelsesrige Palmer Stoaat forurener Florida's natur bestemmer miljøidealister Twilly Spree sig til at give ham en lærestreg.

On the morning of April 24, an hour past dawn, a man named Palmer Stoa shot a rare African black rhinoceros. He fired from a distance of thirteen yards and used a Winchester .458, which knocked him flat on his back. The rhinoceros wheeled, as if to charge, before snorting twice and sagging to its knees. Its head came to rest under a spread of palmettos.

Palmer Stoa instructed his guide, a former feed salesman named Durgess, to unpack the camera.

"Let's first make sure she's dead," Durgess said.

"Are you kidding? You see that shot?"

Durgess took the Winchester from his client. He approached the lifeless mass and poked it in the rum with the rifle barrel.

Stoa grinned as he dusted off his mailorder khakis. "Hey, Bungalow Bill, look what I killed!"

While Durgess assembled the video equipment, Stoa inspected his newest trophy, which had cost him thirty thousand dollars, not including ammo and gratuities. When he moved the palmetto fronds away from the rhino's face, he noticed something wrong.

"You ready?" Durgess was wiping down the lens of the video camera.

"Hey, look here." Stoa pointed accusingly.

"I'm lookin'."

"Care to explain?"

"Explain what? That's a horn," said Durgess.

Stoa gave a yank. It broke off in his hands.

Durgess said, "Now see what you done."

"It's fake, Jethro." Angrily Stoa thrust the molded plastic cone at Durgess.

"The other one's real!" Durgess said defensively.

"The other one's a nub!"

"Look, it wasn't my idea."

"You glued a phony horn on my thirty-thousand-dollar rhinoceros. Is that about right?"

Nervously Durgess cracked his knuckles.

"What'd you guys do with the real one?" Stoa demanded.

"Sold it. We cut it off and sold it."

"Perfect."

"They's worth a fortune in Asia. Supposably some kinda magic dick medicine. They say it gives you a boner lasts two days." Durgess shrugged skeptically. "Anyhow, it's serious bucks, Mr. Stoa. That's the program for all our rhinos. Some Chinaman over Panama City buys up the horns."

"You bastards are gypping me."

"Nossir. A jenna-wine African rhinoceros is what the catalog says, and that's what you got."

For a closer look, Stoa knelt in the scrub. The rhino's cranial horn had been taken off cleanly with a saw, leaving an oval abrasion. There the plastic replacement had been attached with white gum industrial adhesive. A foot or so up the snout was the animal's secondary horn, the caudal, real enough but unimpressive; squat and wart-like in profile.

"The whole idea," Stoa said irritably to Durgess, "was a head mount for my den."

"And that's a helluva head, Mr. Stoa, you gotta admit."

"Except for one tiny detail."

Stoa tossed the fake horn at Durgess. Durgess let it drop to the ground, now sodden with rhino fluid. He said, "I got a taxidermy man does fiberglass on the side, he'll fix you up a new one. Nobody

know the difference, sir. It'll look just like the real deal."

"Fiberglass."

"Yessir," Durgess said.

"Hello, why not chrome – ever thought of that? Rip the hood ornament off a Cadillac or maybe a 45 SL. Glue it to the tip of that sucker's nose."

Durgess gave Stoa a sullen look. Stoa took the Winchester from the guide and slung it over his shoulder. "Anything else I should know about this animal?"

"Nossir." There was no point telling Stoa that his trophy rhinoceros also had suffered from cataracts on both eyes, which accounted for its lack of alarm at the approach of heavily armed humans. In addition, the animal had spent its entire life as tame as a hamster, the featured attraction of an Arizona roadside zoo.

Stoa said, "Put the camera away. I don't want anybody to see the damn thing like this. You'll get with that fiberglass man right away?"

"First thing tomorrow," Durgess promised.

Palmer Stoa was feeling better. He rubbed a hand across the rhino's bristly plated hide and said, "What a magnificent creature."

Durgess thought; If only I had ten bucks for every time I've heard that line.

Stoa produced two thick cigars and offered one to his faithful guide. "Cohibas," Stoa said, "the genuine article." Theatrically he fired up.

Durgess declined. He grimaced at the acrid comingling of fumes, stogie and rhino piss.

Stoa said, "Tell me something, little bwana."

Oh blow me, Durgess almost said.

"How old you figure this animal to be?"

"I ain't too sure."

Stoa said, "She looks to be in her prime."

"Yeah, she does," said Durgess, thinking: Blind, tame, fat and half-senile – a regular killing machine all right.

Palmer Stoa continued to admire the carcass, as he felt this was expected of a triumphant hunter. In truth, it was himself he was admiring, as both he and Durgess knew. Stoa patted the flank of the carcass and said to his guide: "Come on, man. I'll buy you a beer."

"Sounds good." Durgess took a portable two-way radio from a pocket of his safari jacket. "First lemme call Asa to bring the flatbed."

Palmer Stoa had more than enough money to go to Africa, but he didn't have the time. That's why he did his big-game hunting at local safari ranches, some legal and some not. This one, located near Ocala, Florida, was called the Wilderness Veldt Plantation. Officially it was a "private game preserve"; unofficially it was a place where rich people went to shoot exotic wild animals. Palmer Stoa had been there twice before, once for a water buffalo and once for a lion. From Fort Lauderdale it wasn't a bad drive, a shade over four hours. The hunts were staged early in the morning, so usually he was home in time for dinner.

As soon as he made the interstate, Stoa got on the phone. He had three cellular lines to his Range Rover, as his professional services were in high demand.

He called Desie and told her about the kill. "It was classic," he said, smacking on the cigar.

"How so?" his wife asked.

"Just being out there in the bush. The sunrise. The mist. The twigs crackling under your boots. I wish you'd come along sometime."

"What did she do?" his wife asked. "When you blasted her, I mean."

"Well – "

"Did she charge?"

"No, Des. Everything was over in a second. It was a clean shot."

Desirata was Palmer Stoa's third wife. She was thirty-two years old, an avid tennis player and an occasional liberal. Stoa's buddies once called her a bunny hugger because she wasn't a fan of blood sports. It all depends on whose blood you're talking about. Stoa had said with a taut laugh.

"I suppose you took video?" Desie said to her husband. "Your first endangered species and all."

"As a matter of fact, no. No video."

"Oh, Dick's office called."

Stoa rolled down the window and flicked the ash off his Cuban. "When?"

"Four times," Desie said. "Starting at seven-thirty."

"Next time let the machine pick up."

"I was awake anyway."

Stoa said, "Who in Dick's office?"

"Some woman."

That really narrows it down, Stoa thought. Dick Artemus was the governor of Florida, and he liked to hire women.

Desie said, "Should I make dinner?"

"No, let's you and I go out. To celebrate, OK?"

"Great. I'll wear something dead."

"You're a riot, Alice."

Palmer Stoa phoned Tallahassee and left a message on the voice mail of Lisa June Peterson, an aide to the governor. Many of Dick Artemus's staff members went by three names, a vestige of the college sorority days at FSU. So far, none of them had consented to have sex with Palmer Stoa, but he was still early in the new administration. Eventually they would come to see how clever, powerful and charismatic Stoa was, one of the two or three top lobbyists in the state. Only in politics would a job like that get you laid; no normal women were impressed by what Stoa did for a living, or even much interested in it.

In Wildwood he got on the turnpike and soon afterward stopped at the Okahumpka Service Plaza for a late lunch: Three hamburgers all the way, two bags of french fries and a jumbo vanilla shake. He drove one-handed, stuffing his cheeks. The digital Motorola started ringing, and Stoa checked the caller ID. Hastily he touched the off button. The man on the other end was a Miami commissioner, and Stoa had a firm rule against speaking directly with Miami commissioners – those who weren't already under indictment were under investigation, and all telephone lines into City Hall had long ago been tapped. The last thing Palmer Stoa needed was another trip to the grand jury. Who had time for such nonsense?

Somewhere north of Yeehaw Junction, a dirty black pickup truck appeared in the Rover's rear window. The truck came up fast and then settled in, three car lengths behind Stoa's bumper. Stoa was gnawing on fries and gabbing on the phone, so he didn't pay serious attention until an hour or so later, when he noticed the truck was still behind him. Weird, he thought. Southbound traffic was light – why didn't the idiot pass? Stoa punched the Rover up past ninety, but the truck stayed close. Gradually Stoa eased off the accelerator until he coasted down to forty-five; the black pickup remained right there, three lengths behind, as if connected by a tow bar.

Like most affluent white people who owned sport-utility vehicles, Palmer Stoa lived in constant fear of a carjacking. He had been led to understand that luxury 4x4s were the chariots of choice for ruthless black and Latin drug gangs; in such circles a Range Rover was said to be more desirable than a Ferrari. Glare on the truck's windshield made it impossible for Stoa to ascertain the ethnicity of the tailgater, but why take a chance? Stoa groped in the console for the Glock semiautomatic that he

been given as a Christmas gift by the president of the state Police Benevolent Association. Stoa placed the pistol on his lap. Ahead loomed a slow-moving Airstream travel trailer, as wide as Mississippi barge and just about as nimble. Stoa accelerated around it and cut back sharply, putting the camper rig between him and the pickup truck. He decided to get off the turnpike at the next exit, see what the tailgater would do.

The Airstream followed Stoa off the ramp; then came the dirty black pickup. Stoa stiffened at the wheel. The clerk at the tollbooth glanced at the gun between his legs but made no mention of it.

"I'm being followed.," Stoa informed her.

"That'll be eight dollars and seventy cents," said the clerk.

"Call the Highway Patrol."

"Yessir. Eight-seventy, please."

"Didn't you hear me?" Stoa asked. He handed the clerk a fifty-dollar bill.

"Have you got something a little smaller?"

"Yeah. Your brain stem," Stoa said. "Now, keep the change and call the goddamn Highway Patrol."

"There's some lunatic tailgater following me."

The clerk ignored the insult and looked toward the vehicles stacking up behind the Range Rover.

In a low voice, Stoa said: "It's the black pickup truck behind the travel trailer."

"What pickup truck?" asked the clerk.

Palmer Stoa placed the Glock on the dashboard and stepped out of the Rover so he could peek around the Airstream. The next car in line was a station wagon with a square-dance pennant attached to the antenna. The tailgater was gone. "Sonofabitch," Stoa muttered.

The driver of the camper honked. So did another motorist, farther down the line. Stoa got back in the Range Rover. The tollbooth clerk handed him change for the fifty. Dryly she said, "You still want me to call the Highway Patrol?"

"No, thanks."

"How about the CIA?"

Stoa smirked. The little smart-ass didn't know who she was dealing with. "Congratulations, your lady," he told her. "You're about to enter the cold cruel world of the unemployed," Tomorrow he would speak to a man in Tallahassee, and it would be done.

Palmer Stoa found an Exxon station, gassed up, took a leak and then headed back toward the turnpike. All the way to Lauderdale he kept checking his rearview – it was mind-boggling how many people owned black pickups. Had the whole damn world gone redneck? Stoa's nerves were whacked by the time he got home.

They had brought their idea for Shearwater Island to Governor Dick Artemus in glitzy bits and pieces and he'd liked what he'd heard so far.

A planned seaside community. Beach and boardwalks between the condominium towers. Public park, kayak tours and a nature trail. Two championship golf courses. A clay pigeon shooting range. A yacht harbor, airstrip and heliport.

But Dick Artemus could not locate Shearwater Island on the wall map of Florida in his office.

That's because it's not called Shearwater Island yet, explained Lisa June Peterson. It's called Toad Island, and it's right there on the Gulf, near the mouth of the Suwannee.

"Have I been there before?" Dick Artemus asked.

"Probably not."

"What does 'Shearwater' mean?"

"It's the name of a bird," Lisa June Peterson said.

"Do they live on the island?" asked the governor. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Lisa June Peterson, having already researched the question, reported that shearwaters were migratory.

seabirds that preferred the Atlantic coastline.

"But there are other kinds of birds on the island," she added.

"Like what?" Dick Artemus frowned. "Eagles? Don't tell me there's goddamn bald eagles on the island, because that means we got a federal scenario."

"They're doing the survey this week."

"Who!"

"A biological survey. Clapley's people," Lisa June Peterson said. Robert Clapley was the developer who wanted to rename Toad Island and subdivide it. He had contributed most generously to Dick Artemus's gubernatorial campaign.

"There's no votes in bulldozing eagle nests," the governor remarked gravely. "Can we all agree on that?"

"Mr. Clapley is taking every reasonable precaution."

"So what else, Lisa? In fifty words or less." Dick Artemus was famous for his insectine attention span.

His assistant said: "The transportation budget includes funding for a new bridge from the mainland."

It passed the Senate, but now Willie Vasquez-Washington is being a prick."

Willie Vasquez-Washington was vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. He and the governor had tangled before.

"What's he want this time?" Dick Artemus said.

"We're not sure."

"You reach out to Palmer?"

"We keep missing each other."

"And I suppose this thing won't fly, this Shearwater Island/" the governor said, "without a brand-new bridge."

"The one they've got is sixty years old and wooden," Lisa June Peterson said. "It won't hold a cement truck is what Roothaus says." Roger Roothaus was president of the engineering firm that wanted the contract for designing the new bridge to Toad Island. He, too, had contributed generously to Dick Artemus's gubernatorial campaign. In fact, almost everyone who stood to profit from the development of Shearwater Island had donated money to the governor's election. This, Dick Artemus took for granted.

"So get Palmer to fix the bridge problem," he said,

"Right."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing major. We're anticipating some local opposition," said Lisa June Peterson.

The governor groaned. "People live on this island? Christ, nobody told me that."

"Two hundred. Two fifty max."

"Shit," said Dick Artemus.

"They're circulating a petition."

"I guess that means they're not golfers."

"Evidently not," said Lisa June Peterson.

Dick Artemus rose and pulled on his coat. "I'm late, Lisa June. Would you relate all this to Mr. Stoat?"

"As soon as possible," she said.

Twilly had spent the day in Gainesville at the University of Florida veterinary college, reputedly one of the best in the country. Many famous nature parks and zoos, including the one at Walt Disney World, sent their dead animals there to be necropsied. Twilly had gone to deliver a red-shouldered hawk that appeared to have been shot. The bird had fallen on a remote patch of beach at a place called Madeira Bay, in Everglades National Park. Twilly had bubble-wrapped the broken body and placed it on dry ice in a cooler. He'd made the drive from Flamingo to Gainesville in less than seven hours. He

hoped the bullet had remained in the bird, because the bullet was a key to resolving the crime. Which wasn't exactly the same thing as solving it. Knowing the caliber of the weapon would have been useful: something to file away in case the shooter returned to the park and was foolish enough to let himself get stalked, captured and lashed naked for a month to a mangrove tree.

Twilly Spree wasn't a park ranger or a wildlife biologist or even an amateur birdwatcher. He was an unemployed twenty-six-year-old college dropout with a brief but spectacular history of psychological problems. Not incidentally, he also had inherited millions of dollars.

At the veterinary school, Twilly found a young doctor who agreed to do a postmortem on the hawk which had in fact succumbed to a single gunshot wound. Unfortunately the slug had passed cleanly through the bird's breast, leaving no fragments, no clues, only blood-crusting feathers. Twilly thanked the young doctor for trying. He filled out a form for the U.S. government stating where he had found the dead hawk, and under what circumstances. At the bottom of the paper he signed his name as "Thomas Stearns Eliot, Jr." Then Twilly got in his black pickup truck and drove south. He intended to return directly to the Everglades, where he had been living in a pup tent with a three-legged bobcat.

On the turnpike somewhere south of Kissimmee, Twilly came up behind a pearl-colored Range Rover. Normally he wouldn't have paid attention to the style of the vehicle, but this one had a vanity plate that said in green capital letters: *cojones*. As Twilly swung into the passing lane, a Burger King hamburger carton flew out the driver's window of the Rover. Next came an empty cup and then a wadded paper napkin, followed by another hamburger carton.

Twilly put a heel on the brake, steered his truck to the shoulder of the highway and waited for a gap in traffic. Then he sprinted into the road and picked up the litter, piece by piece, depositing it in the cab of his truck. Afterward it took him only a few miles to catch up with the pig in the Range Rover. Twilly got behind him and camped there, contemplating his options. He thought about what his therapists would recommend, what his former teachers would say, what his mother would suggest. They were indisputably mature and sensible people, but their advice often proved useless to Twilly Spree. He remained baffled by their outlook on the world, as they were baffled by his.

All Twilly could see of the litterbug was the man's shoulders and the top of his head. To Twilly, it seemed like an exceptionally large head, but possibly this was an illusion caused by the cowboy-style hat. Twilly doubted that an authentic cowboy would be caught dead in a pearl-colored, fifty-thousand-dollar, foreign-made SUV with vanity tags that celebrated the size of his testicles, in *español*. No, Twilly thought, would a true cowboy ever toss hamburger wrappers out the window. No, that would be the work of a garden-variety asshole ...

Suddenly the Range Rover cut ahead of a slow-moving travel camper, then vectored sharply off the highway at the Yeehaw Junction exit. Twilly followed toward the toll plaza before switching to the exact-change lane, and scooting past. Then he drove across State Road 60 to I-95 and headed at imprudent speeds toward Fort Pierce, where he again hooked up with the turnpike southbound. He parked in the shade of an overpass, raised the hood of the pickup and waited. Twenty minutes later the Rover sped by, and Twilly resumed the pursuit. This time he stayed farther back. He still had no plan, but at least he had a clearly defined mission. When the litterbug flicked a cigar butt out the window Twilly didn't bother to stop. Biodegradable., he thought. Onward and upward.

2

After three glasses of wine, Desie could no longer pretend to be following her husband's account of the canned rhinoceros hunt. Across the table she appraised Palmer Stoa as if he were a mime. His fingers danced and his mouth moved, but nothing he said reached her ears. She observed him in two dimensions, as if he were an image on a television screen: an animated middle-aged man with a slight paunch, thin blond hair, reddish eyebrows, pale skin, upcurled lips and vermilion-splotched cheeks (from too much sun or too much alcohol). Palmer had a soft neck but a strong chiseled chin, the

surgical scars invisible in the low light. His teeth were straight and polished, but his smile had a twinge of permanent skepticism. To Desie, her husband's nose had always appeared too small for his face; little girl's nose, really, although he insisted it was the one he'd been born with. His blue eyes also seemed tiny, though quick and bright with self-confidence. His face was, in the way of prosperous ex-jocks, roundish and pre-jowly and companionable. Desie wouldn't have called Stoaat a hunk but he was attractive in that gregarious southern frat-boy manner, and he had overwhelmed her with favors and flattery and constant attention. Later she realized that the inexhaustible energy with which Palmer had pursued their courtship was less a display of ardor than an ingrained relentlessness; it was how he went after anything he wanted. They dated for four weeks and then got married on the island of Tortola. Desie supposed she had been in a fog, and now the fog was beginning to lift. What in the world had she done? She pushed the awful question out of her mind, and when she did she was able to hear Palmer's voice again.

"Some creepo was tailing me," he was saying, "for like a hundred miles."

"Why?"

Her husband snorted. "To rob my lily-white ass, that's why."

"This was a black guy?" Desie asked.

"Or a Cuban. I couldn't see which," Stoaat said, "but I tell you what, sweets, I was ready for the sonofabitch. Senor Glock was in my lap, locked and loaded."

"On the turnpike. Palmer?"

"He would have been one stone-dead mother."

"Just like your rhino," Desie said. "By the way, are you getting her stuffed like the others?"

"Mounted," Stoaat corrected. "And just the head."

"Lovely. We can hang it over the bed."

"Speaking of which, guess what they're doing with rhinoceros horns."

"Who's they?" Desie asked.

"Asians and such."

Desie knew, but she let Palmer tell the story. He concluded with Durgess's fanciful rumor of two-day erections.

"Can you imagine!" Stoaat hooted.

Desie shook her head. "Who'd even want one of those?"

"Maybe you might, someday." He winked.

Desie glanced around for the waiter. Where was dinner? How could it take so long to boil pasta?

Stoaat poured himself another glass of wine. "Rhino horns, Holy Christ on a ten-speed. What next, huh?"

"That's why poachers are killing them off," his wife said.

"Yeah?"

"That's why they're almost extinct. God, Palmer, where have you been?"

"Working for a living. So you can sit home, paint your toenails and learn all about endangered species on the Discovery Channel."

Desie said, "Try the New York Times."

"Well, pardon me." Stoaat sniffed sarcastically. "I read the newspaper today, oh boy."

This was one of her husband's most annoying habits, dropping the lyrics of old rock songs into everyday conversation. Palmer thought it clever, and perhaps it wouldn't have bothered Desie so much if occasionally he got the words right, but he never did. Though Desie was much younger, she was familiar with the work of Dylan and the Beatles and the Stones, and so on. In college she had worked two summers at a Sam Goody outlet.

To change the subject, she said: "So what did Dick Artemus want?"

"A new bridge." Stoot took a sideways bite from a sourdough roll. "No big deal."

"A bridge to what?"

"Some nowhere bird island over on the Gulf. How about passing the butter?"

Desie said, "Why would the governor want a bridge to nowhere?"

Her husband chuckled, spraying crumbs. "Why does the governor want anything? It's not for me question, darling. I just take the calls and work my magic."

"A day in the life," said Desie.

"You got it."

Once, as a condition of a probation, Twilly Spree had been ordered to attend a course on "anger management." The class was made up of men and women who had been arrested for outbursts of violence, mostly in domestic situations. There were husbands who'd clobbered their wives, wives who'd clobbered their husbands, and even one grandmother who had clobbered her sixty-two-year-old son for blaspheming during Thanksgiving supper. Others of Twilly's classmates had been in bar fights, gambling frays and bleacher brawls at Miami Dolphins games. Three had shot guns at strangers during traffic altercations and, of those, two had been wounded by return fire. Then there was Twilly.

The instructor of the anger-management course presented himself as a trained psychotherapist. Dr. Boston was his name. On the first day he asked everyone in class to compose a short essay titled "What Makes Me Really, Really Mad." While the students wrote, Dr. Boston went through the stack of manila file folders that had been sent to him by the court. After reading the file of Twilly Spree, Dr. Boston set it aside on a corner of the desk. "Mr. Spree," he said in a level tone. "We're going to take turns sharing our stories. Would you mind going first?"

Twilly stood up and said: "I'm not done with my assignment."

"You may finish it later."

"It's a question of focus, sir. I'm in the middle of a sentence."

Dr. Boston paused. Inadvertently he flicked his eyes to Twilly's folder. "All right, let's compromise. You go ahead and finish the sentence, and then you can address the class."

Twilly sat down and ended the passage with the words ankle-deep in the blood of fools! After a moment's thought, he changed it to ankle-deep in the evanescent blood of fools!

He stuck the pencil behind one ear and rose.

Dr. Boston said: "Done? Good. Now please share your story with the rest of us."

"That'll take some time, the whole story will."

"Mr. Spree, just tell us why you're here."

"I blew up my uncle's bank."

Twilly's classmates straightened and turned in their seats.

"A branch," Twilly added, "not the main office."

Dr. Boston said, "Why do you think you did it?"

"Well, I'd found out some things."

"About your uncle."

"About a loan he'd made. A very large loan to some very rotten people."

"Did you try discussing it with your uncle?" asked Dr. Boston.

"About the loan? Several times. He wasn't particularly interested."

"And that made you angry?"

"No, discouraged." Twilly squinted his eyes and locked his hands around the back of his neck.

"Disappointed, frustrated, insulted, ashamed – "

"But isn't it fair to say you were angry, too? Wouldn't a person need to be pretty angry to blow up a bank building?"

"No. A person would need to be resolved. That I was."

Dr. Boston felt the amused gaze of the other students, who were awaiting his reaction. He said, "Believe what I'm hearing is some denial. What do the rest of you think?"

Twilly cut in: "I'm not denying anything. I purchased the dynamite. I cut the fuses. I take full responsibility."

Another student asked: "Did anybody get kilt?"

"Of course not," Twilly snapped. "I did it on a Sunday, when the bank was closed. That's my point – I was really pissed, I would've done it on a Monday morning, and I would've made damn sure my uncle was inside at the time."

Several other probationers nodded in agreement. Dr. Boston said: "Mr. Spree, a person can be very mad without pitching a fit or flying off the handle. Anger is one of those complicated emotions that can be close to the surface or buried deeply, so deeply we often don't recognize it for what it is. What I'm suggesting is that at some subconscious level you must've been extremely angry with your uncle and probably for reasons that had nothing to do with his banking practices."

Twilly frowned. "You're saying that's not enough?"

"I'm saying – "

"Loaning fourteen million dollars to a rock-mining company that's digging craters in the Amazon River basin. What more did I need?"

Dr. Boston said, "It sounds like you might've had a difficult relationship with your uncle."

"I barely know the man. He lives in Chicago. That's where the bank is."

"How about when you were a boy?"

"Once he took me to a football game."

"Ah. Did something happen that day?"

"Yeah," said Twilly. "One team scored more points than the other team, and then we went home."

Now the class was snickering and it was Dr. Boston's turn to manage his anger.

"Look, it's simple," Twilly said. "I blew up the building to help him grow a conscience, OK? To make him think about the greedy wrongheaded direction his life was heading. I put it all in a letter."

"Yes, the letter's in the file," said Dr. Boston. "But I noticed you didn't sign your name to it."

Twilly spread his hands. "Do I look like an idiot? It's against the law, blowing up financial institutions."

"And just about anything else."

"So I've been advised," Twilly muttered.

"But, still, at a subconscious level – "

"I don't have a subconscious, Doctor. That's what I'm trying to explain. Everything that happens in my brain happens right on the surface, like a stove, where I can see it and feel it and taste the heat." Twilly sat down and began massaging his temples with his fingertips.

Dr. Boston said, "That would make you biologically unique in the species, Mr. Spree, not having a subconscious. Don't you dream in your sleep?"

"Never."

"Seriously."

"Seriously," Twilly said.

"Never once?"

"Not ever in my whole life."

Another probationer waved a hand. "C'mon, man, you never had no nightmares?"

"Nope," Twilly said. "I can't dream. Maybe if I could I wouldn't be here now."

He licked the tip of his pencil and resumed work on the essay, which he submitted to Dr. Boston after class. Dr. Boston did not acknowledge reading Twilly's composition, but the next morning and every morning for the following four weeks, an armed campus security guard was posted in the rear of the

classroom. Dr. Boston never again called on Twilly Spree to speak. At the end of the term, Twilly received a notarized certificate saying he'd successfully completed anger-management counseling, and was sent back to his probation officer, who commended him on his progress.

If only they could see me now, Twilly thought. Preparing for a hijack.

First he'd followed the litterbug home, to one of those exclusive islands off Las Olas Boulevard, near the beach. Nice spread the guy had: old two-story Spanish stucco with barrel-tile shingles and vines crawling the walls. The house was on a cul-de-sac, leaving Twilly no safe cover for lurking in his dirty black pickup. So he found a nearby construction site – a mansion going up. The architecture was pure ScarfaceMedellin, all sharp angles and marble facings and smoked glass. Twilly's truck blended nicely among the backhoes and cement mixers. Through the twilight he strolled back toward the litterbug's home, where he melted into a hedge of thick ficus to wait. Parked in the driveway next to the Range Rover was a Beemer convertible, top down, which Twilly surmised would belong to the wife, girlfriend or boyfriend. Twilly had a notion that made him smile.

An hour later the litterbug came out the front door. He stood in the amber light under the stucco arch and fired up a cigar. Moments later a woman emerged from the house, slowly backing out and pulling the door shut behind her; bending forward at the waist, as if saying good-bye to a small child or perhaps a dog. As the litterbug and his female companion crossed the driveway, Twilly saw her fanning the air in an exaggerated way, indicating she didn't much care for cigar smoke. This brought another smile to Twilly's face as he slipped from the hedge and hustled back to his truck. They'll be taking the ragtop, he thought. So she can breathe.

Twilly followed the couple to an Italian restaurant on an unscenic stretch of Federal Highway, not far from the seaport. It was a magnificent choice for what Twilly had in mind. Litterbug parked the convertible in true dick-head style, diagonally across two spaces. The strategy was to protect one expensive luxury import from scratches and dings by preventing common folks from parking next to it. Twilly was elated to witness this selfish stunt. He waited ten minutes after the cigar-smoking man and cigar-hating woman had entered the restaurant, to make sure they'd been seated. Then he sped off on his quest.

Her stage name was Tia and she was already up on their table, already twirling her mailorder ponytail and peeling off her lacy top when the stink hit her like a blast furnace. Damn, she thought, did a sewer pipe break?

And the three guys all grins and high fives, wearing matching dark blue coveralls with filthy sleeves, laughing and smoking and sipping their six-dollar beers and going Tee-uh, izzat how you say it? Kinda name is Tee-uh? And all three of them waving fifties, for God's sake; stinking like buzzard puke and singing her name, her stage name, and slipping brand-new fifty-dollar bills into her G-string. So now Tia had a major decision to make, a choice between the unbelievable gutter-rot stench and the unbelievably easy money. And what she did was concentrate mightily on breathing through her mouth so that after a while the reek didn't seem so unbearable and the truth was, hey, they were nice-enough guys. Regular working stiffs. They even apologized for stinking up the joint. After a few table dances they asked Tia to sit and join them because they had the wildest story for her to hear. Tia said OK, just a minute, and hurried to the dressing room. In her locker she found a handkerchief, upon which she sprinkled expensive Paris perfume, another unwanted gift from another smitten customer. She returned to the table to find an open bottle of the club's priciest champagne, which was almost potable. The crew in the dirty blue coveralls was making a sloppy toast to somebody; clinking their glasses and imploring Tia to sit down, c'mon, sit. Have some bubbly. They couldn't wait to tell her what had happened, all three chattering simultaneously, raising their voices, trying to take charge of the storytelling. Tia, holding the scented hankie under her nose, found herself authentically entertained and of course not believing a word they said, except for the part about their occupations, which the

could hardly embellish, given the odor.

~~How come you don't believe we got our load hijacked! one of them exclaimed.~~

Because it's ridiculous, said Tia.

Really it was more of a trade, said one of his pals. The young man give us three grand cash and the use of his pickup and told us to meet back here in an hour.

Tia flared her eyebrows. This total stranger, he hands you three thousand bucks and drives off in a – All fifties, one of the men said, waving a handful of bills. A grand each!

Tia, giggling through the handkerchief: You guys are seriously fulla shit.

No, ma'am, we ain't. We might smell like we are, but we ain't.

The one waving the fattest wad was talking loudest. What we told you, he said, that's the honest-t God truth of how we come to be here tonight, watchin' you dance. And if you don't believe it, M Tee-uh, just come out back to the parkin' lot in about fifteen minutes when the boy gets back.

Maybe I will, said Tia.

But by then she was busy entertaining a table of cable-TV executives, so she missed seeing Twilly Spree drive up to the neon-lit strip club in a full-sized county garbage truck. When Twilly got out, one of the men in blue coveralls tossed him the keys to the black pickup.

"You guys go through all that dough I gave you?" Twilly asked amiably.

"No, but just about."

"And it was worth every dollar, I bet."

"Oh yeah."

Twilly shook hands with each of the men and said good-bye.

"Wait, son, come on inside and have just one beer. We got a lady wants to meet you."

"Rain check," said Twilly.

"No, but see, she don't believe us. She thinks we robbed the bingo hall or somethin'. That's how come you gotta come inside just for a minute, to tell her it's no bullshit, you paid us three grand to rent out the shitwagon."

Twilly smiled. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Hey, man, where's the load? The truck, it looks empty."

"That's right," Twilly said. "There's nothing to haul to the dump. You guys can go straight on home tonight."

"But what happened to it?"

"Best you don't know."

"Oh Lord," one of the garbagemen muttered to his pals. "This is a crazy-ass boy. He's gone done some crazy-ass thing."

"No," Twilly said, "I believe you'd approve. I really do." Then he drove off, thinking how wrong D Boston had been. Anger wasn't such a complicated emotion.

Palmer Stoa ordered an antipasto salad, garlic rolls, fettuccine Alfredo, a side of meatballs, and before long Desie had to look away, for fear of being sick. He was perspiring, that's how hard he worked at the food; droplets of sweat streaking both sides of his jawline. Desie was ashamed of herself for feeling so revulsed; this was her husband, after all. It wasn't as if his personality had transformed after they got married. He was the same man in all respects, two years later. Desie felt guilty about marrying him, guilty about having second thoughts, guilty about the rhinoceros he'd shot dead the morning.

"From here to the salad bar," Stoa was telling her. "That's how close she was."

"And for that you needed a scope?"

"Better safe than sorry. That's Durgess's motto."

Stoa ordered tortoni for dessert. He used a fork to probe the ice cream for fragments of almond

which he raked into a tidy pattern along the perimeter of the plate. Watching the fastidious ritual plunged Desie deeper into melancholy. Later, while Palmer reviewed the bill, she excused herself and went to the rest room, where she dampened a paper towel to wipe off her lipstick and makeup. She had no idea why, but it made her feel much better. By the time she finished, her husband was gone from the restaurant.

Desie walked outside and was nearly poleaxed by the smell. She cupped her hands to her mouth and looked around for Palmer. He was in the parking lot, beneath a streetlight. As Desie approached him the odor got worse, and soon she saw why: a sour mound of garbage ten feet high. Desie estimated it to weigh several tons. Palmer Stroat stood at the base of the fetid hill, his eyes fixed lugubriously on the peak.

"Where's the car?" Desie asked with a cough.

Palmer's arms flopped at his sides. He began squeaking like a lost kitten.

"Don't tell me." She struggled not to gag on the stink. "Dammit, Palmer. My Beemer!"

Haltingly he began to circle the rancid dune. He raised an arm, pointing in outraged stupefaction.

A cloud of flies buzzed about his face, but he made no effort to shoo them away.

"Goddammit," Desie cried. "Didn't I tell you to put the top up? Didn't I?"

3

Twilly made it back to the Italian restaurant in time for the show. Under the amused supervision of several police officers, a detachment of workers with rakes and shovels had begun the unsavory task of digging out the BMW. This Twilly watched through field glasses from high in a nearby pine tree. There was no sign of the press, which was a shame – here was a story made for TV. Over the rhythmic crunch of digging, Litterbug's voice could be heard admonishing the sanitation workers to be careful: "goddamn you, don't scratch the paint!" Twilly found it comical, considering the likely extent of the Beemer's contamination. He imagined virgin leather upholstery ripening under an ambrosial lode of orange rinds, cottage cheese, Heineken bottles, coffee grounds, eggshells, crumpled wads of Kleenee, potato skins, sanitary napkins, pizza crust, fish heads, spare ribs, leaky toothpaste tubes, bacon grease, coagulated gravy, cat litter and chicken necks. Twilly wished he could infiltrate the cleanup crew, to see the ghastly sight up close.

Litterbug's wife/girlfriend could be observed pacing, arms folded, beneath a flickering streetlight. Twilly couldn't make out her expression, but the clip in her step suggested impatience. He wondered if she truly cared about the BMW; in any event, the insurance company would buy her a new one. Twilly also thought about the sanitation workers, being called out so late on such a strange job. He had a feeling they might be enjoying themselves, exhuming a fancy red sports car from a heap of refuse, but still he hoped they were getting overtime.

It was quite an extensive operation, and Twilly wondered why he wasn't feeling a commensurate sense of satisfaction. The answer came with a sour jolt as he studied the litterbug through the binoculars. He watched the man unwrap a piece of candy – probably an after-dinner mint from the restaurant – then crumple the wrapper and drop it nonchalantly to the ground. The dumb fuckwad didn't get it! Didn't he make the link between his piggish misbehavior on the turnpike and the malicious defilement of his automobile. He probably figured it was the random mischief of vandals; a prank.

I should've left a message, Twilly thought glumly. I should've made it crystal clear. He muttered a curse and climbed cautiously through the darkness down the trunk of the tree. By the time he reached the parking lot, the excavation of the car was complete. Litterbug and his wife/girlfriend could be seen leaving in a taxi. The soiled BMW was being hooked to a tow truck, whose burly driver wore a bald blue hospital mask and joked with the sanitation crew, which was shoveling the last dregs into the Dumpster.

Twilly asked one of the cops what had happened to the red convertible.

"Somebody emptied a garbage truck on it," the officer reported with a harsh chuckle.

"Jesus," said Twilly. "Why?"

"Who the fuck knows. It's the sick society we live in."

Twilly said: "I saw all these police cars, I was afraid there was a murder."

"Naw, just some big shot left his ragtop down in the wrong neighborhood."

"He famous or something?"

"I never heard of him before tonight," said the cop, "but obviously he's got some juice. Otherwise wouldn't be here, I'd be home in my underwear watching basketball. Stand back now."

The tow truck driver was maneuvering out of the parking lot, the cop waving directions. Twilly knew better than to press for the litterbug's name; he didn't need it anyway. He approached one of the sanitation workers and asked if the Beemer was totaled.

"Yeah, and it ain't right. A sweet car like this."

Twilly said, "Completely ruined, huh?"

"You can't never get the interior clean, not after somethin' such as this. We're talkin' about a minimum – I'm guessin' now – four tons of raw garbage." The man stopped working and rested his weight on the stem of the shovel. "I mean, hell, an expensive car like that – why trash it when you can just steal the damn thing? Any fool leaves the convertible top down deserves to lose his wheels. But this? This is evil shit, you ask me. Taking this much trouble to destroy a perfectly splendid vehicle. Deeply evil shit."

"Sick world," Twilly Spree said, in his own defense.

He was born in Key West, where his father had gone to sell commercial waterfront. Little Phil Spree was a real estate specialist. If a property wasn't on the sea or the Gulf, Little Phil wasn't interested. He would buy and sell beach until there was no more beach to buy or sell, then pack up the family and move to another town where, Little Phil typically would exult, "the coast is clear!" Florida has thirteen hundred miles of shoreline, and young Twilly got to savor plenty of it. His mother, who kept out of direct sunlight, wasn't crazy about the tropics. But Little Phil was making excellent money, so Aunt Spree basically stayed indoors for eighteen years, tended to her complexion and endeavored to occupy herself with hobbies. She grew bonsai trees. She started writing a romance novel. She learned to play the clarinet. She took up yoga, modern dance and strong martinis. Meanwhile Twilly ran wild literally. Every free moment was spent outdoors. His parents couldn't imagine what he was up to.

When Twilly was four, Little Phil briefly moved the family to Marco Island, which was famous for its white dune-fringed beaches. The sand was spangled with ornate tropical seashells, which Twilly collected and organized in shoe boxes. Usually he was accompanied by a sitter, hired by his mother to make sure he didn't wander into the Gulf of Mexico and drown. Years later, at age fourteen, Twilly hot-wired a friend's station wagon and drove back to Marco, in order to prowl the shore for shells. He arrived late at night in a howling downpour, and fell asleep in the car. When he awoke at dawn, he comprehended for the first time what his old man did for a living. The island had sprouted skyline; a concrete picket of towering hotels and high-rise condominiums. Waterfront, of course. Twilly fixed his eyes downward and marched the beach, his shoe box under one arm. He hoped he was seeing a mirage, a trick of the fog and clouds, but when he glanced up, the hotels and condos were still there, looming larger than before. As the sun began to rise, the buildings cast tombstone shadows across the sand. Soon Twilly found himself standing in a vast block of shade – shade, on an open beach under a bright clear sky! He sunk to his knees and punched the hard-packed sand with both fists until his knuckles were skinned.

A woman tourist came up to Twilly and told him to stop carrying on, as he was upsetting her children. The woman wore a stretch two-piece swimsuit and spoke with a New England accent. Her toenails were colored magenta and her nose was buttered with zinc oxide and in one hand she brandished a

Arthur Hailey paperback. Twilly howled and resumed pummeling the beach. The woman glowered over the rims of her sunglasses. "Young man," she said, "where is your mother?"

Whereupon Twilly whirled and chomped down on her bare foot and didn't let go until a beefy hotel security man came and pried him off. Little Phil arrived later that day with lawyers and a checkbook. On the trip home Twilly had nothing to say to his father. At bedtime Amy Spree went to her son's room and found him mounting a gaily painted human toenail in his seashell display. The next morning she took him to a psychologist for the first time. Twilly was given a battery of tests, none of which pointed toward violent sociopathy. Though Amy Spree was relieved, her husband remained skeptical. "The boy's not right," he would say. Or: "The boy's not all there." Or sometimes: "The boy's playing the wrong team."

Eventually Twilly tried to talk to his father about Marco Island and other heartaches. He reminded him that Florida for eons had been underwater and was steadily sinking again, the sea and the Gulf rising each year to reclaim the precious shoreline that Little Phil and others were so avidly selling off. So what? Little Phil replied. That's why people got flood insurance. Twilly said, No, Dad, you don't understand. And Little Phil said, Yeah, well, maybe I don't understand geology so good but I understand sales and I understand commissions. And if this goddamn place starts sinking to where you can see it with my own eyes, then me, you and your mother are packin' up and moving to Southern California, where a man can still make a dandy living off oceanfront.

And Twilly said, Forget I even mentioned it.

On the eve of Twilly's eighteenth birthday, Little Phil drove him to a banker's office in Tampa, where it was explained to Twilly that he was about to inherit approximately \$5 million from a man he had met only once, Little Phil's father, the late Big Phil. Big Phil Spree made his fortune off copper mining in Montana, and had retired at age sixty to travel the world and play golf. Not long afterward he had dropped dead in a sand trap on the sixteenth hole at Spyglass. His will left a third of his money to Little Phil, a third in trust to his only grandchild, Twilly, and a third to the National Rifle Association. As they walked out of the bank, Little Phil threw an arm around his much taller son and said: "That's a shitload of dough for a young fellow to handle. But I believe I know what your grandfather would have wanted you to do with it."

"Let me guess. Oceanfront?"

"You're a smart one," said Little Phil, beaming.

Twilly shook free. "Mutual funds," he announced.

"What?" Little Phil was aghast.

"Yep."

"Where'd you hear about such nonsense?"

"I read."

"Look around, boy. Hasn't real estate done right by us?" Little Phil rattled off all the fine things they had done for their life, from the swimming pool to the ski boat to the summer time-share in Vermont.

Twilly said: "Blood money."

"Uh?"

"What Grandfather left me is mine, and I'll do what I please with it. That'll be no-load mutuals."

Little Phil grabbed his shoulder. "Lemme see if I understand. I'm offering you a half partnership in a two-hundred-and-twenty-room Ramada at Daytona, beachside, but you'd rather stick the cash on the insane roulette wheel otherwise known as the New York Stock Exchange?"

"Yep," said Twilly.

"Well, I always knew you were playing for the wrong team. This ices it," said his father. "Did you mention the motel comes with a liquor license?"

A few months later Little Phil ran off to Santa Monica with a secretary from a title-insurance

company. Despite her son's unease in structured settings, Twilly's mother beseeched him to enroll at ~~Florida State University, in the state capital of Tallahassee.~~ There Twilly majored in English for three semesters before dropping out and moving in with a poetry professor, who was finishing a doctorate on T. S. Eliot. She was a dynamic and intelligent woman who took a fervid interest in her new boyfriend, particularly his inheritance. She encouraged him to use the fortune to do good and noble deeds, beginning with the purchase of a snazzy new 280-Z for her garage. Eventually Twilly was spiffed up and presented to the dean of the English department, who proposed the funding of a resident Poet's Chair to be named in honor of Twilly's late grandfather, a man who wouldn't have known W. H. Auden from Dr. Seuss.

Twilly said sure, what the hell, but the gift was never made; not because Twilly welched but because in the interim he was arrested for assault and battery on a state legislator. The man, a Democrat from Sarasota County, had been written up in the news for blocking clean-water reforms while at the same time accepting illicit campaign donations from a cattle ranch that was flushing raw manure into an estuary. Twilly had spotted the legislator in a restaurant and followed him to the rest room. There Twilly shoved him into a stall and lectured him for forty minutes on the immorality of water pollution. In fear the legislator feigned contrition, but Twilly saw through the act. Calmly he unzipped his jeans, pissed prodigiously on the man's Bally loafers and said: "There, that's what your pals on the ranch are doing to Black Drum Bay. How do you like it?"

When a sanitized version of the incident hit the press, the dean of the English department decided it would set a poor precedent to accept grant money from a deranged felon, and broke off contact with Twilly Spree. That was fine with Twilly, for although he enjoyed a good poem, he felt subversion was a worthier cause. It was a view that only hardened as he grew older and met more people like his father.

"Dick says you're the man." Robert Clapley raised his bourbon and gave a nod.

"Dick exaggerates," said Palmer Stoa, well practiced at false modesty.

They were having a late lunch at a walnut-paneled country club in a suburb of Tampa. The government had set it up.

"Dick's not the only one," Clapley said, "to sing your praises."

"That's very flattering."

"He explained the situation?"

"In a general way," Stoa said. "You need a new bridge."

"Yes, sir. The funding's there, in the Senate bill."

"But you've got a problem in the House."

"I do," Clapley said. "A man named Willie Vasquez-Washington."

Palmer Stoa smiled.

"Have you got any earthly idea," said Clapley, "what he's after?"

"I can find out with a phone call."

"Which will cost me how much?" Clapley asked dryly.

"The call? Nothing. Getting your problem fixed, that'll be a hundred grand. Fifty up front."

"Really. And how much kicks back to your friend Willie?"

Stoa looked surprised. "Not a dime, Bob. May I call you Bob? Willie doesn't need your money, he's got other action – probably some goodies he wants hidden in the budget. We'll work things out, don't worry."

"That's what lobbyists do?"

"Right. That's what you're paying for."

"So the hundred grand ... "

"My fee," Stoa said, "and it's a bargain."

"You know, I gave a sweet shitload of money to Dick's campaign. I've never done anything like that before."

"Get used to it, Bob."

Robert Clapley was new to Florida, and new to the land-development business. Palmer Stoa gave him a short course on the politics; most of the cash flying around Tallahassee could be traced to men in Clapley's line of work.

He said, "I tried to reach out to Willie myself."

"Big mistake."

"Well, Mr. Stoa, that's why I'm here. Dick says you're the man." Clapley took out a checkbook and a fountain pen. "I'm curious – is Vasquez-Washington a shine or a spic or what exactly?"

"A little pinch of everything, according to Willie. Calls himself the Rainbow Brother."

"You two get along?" Clapley handed the \$50,000 check to Stoa.

"Bob, I get along with everybody. I'm the most likable motherfucker you'll ever meet. Hey, do you hunt?"

"Anything that moves."

"Then I know just the place for you," said Stoa. "They've got every critter known to man."

"How about big cats? I made space for a hide on the wall of my library," Clapley said. "Something spotted would go best with the upholstery. Like maybe a cheetah."

"Name your species, Bob. This place, it's like where Noah parked the ark. They got it all."

Robert Clapley ordered another round of drinks. The waitress brought their rib eyes, and the two men ate in agreeable silence. After a time Clapley said, "I notice you don't ask many questions."

Stoa glanced up from his plate. "I don't have many questions." He was chewing as he spoke.

"Don't you want to know what I did before I became a land developer?"

"Not really."

"I was in the import-export business. Electronics."

"Electronics," said Stoa, playing along. Clapley was thirty-five years old and had Yuppie ex-smuggler written all over him. The gold, the deepwater tan, the diamond ear stud, the two-hundred-dollar haircut.

"But everybody said real estate's the smart way to go," Clapley went on, "so a couple years ago I started buying up Toad Island and here we are."

Stoa said, "You're going to lose the 'Toad' part, I hope. Switch to some tropical moth or something."

"A bird. Shearwater. The Shearwater Island Company."

"I like it. Very classy-sounding. And the governor says it's going to be gorgeous. Another Hilton Head," he says.

"It can't lose," said Robert Clapley, "as long as I get my bridge."

"Consider it done, Bob."

"Oh, I will."

Palmer Stoa drained his bourbon and said, "Hey, I finally thought of a question."

Clapley seemed pleased. "Fire away, Mr. Stoa."

"Are you gonna finish that baked potato?"

That same afternoon, a man named Steven Brinkman was summoned to a cluttered double-wide trailer on Toad Island. Brinkman was a biologist, fresh out of Cornell graduate school, who had been hired as an "environmental specialist" at \$41,000 a year by the prestigious engineering firm of Roothaus and Son, designers of highways, bridges, golf communities, office towers, shopping malls, factories and residential subdivisions. Roothaus and Son had been recruited by Robert Clapley to the Shearwater Island project, for which a crucial step was the timely completion of a comprehensive biological survey. Without such a document, the development would be bogged down indefinitely in red tape,

great expense to Clapley.

Brinkman's task was to make a list of species that lived on the small barrier island: plants, insects, birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals. The job could not be sloppy or hurried, because the government would be doing its own survey, for comparison. Steven Brinkman, in fact, once had been offered a position of staff biologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, but had chosen the private sector for its higher salaries and broader opportunities for advancement. That was the upside. The downside was having to answer to soulless cretins such as Karl Krimmler, the project supervisor, who would have been rapturous to hear there was no wildlife whatsoever on Toad Island. In nature, Krimmler saw neither art nor mystery, only bureaucratic obstacles. A flight of swallowtail butterfly or the chirp of a squirrel could send him into a black funk that lasted for days.

Now Krimmler wedged a phone at one ear and fanned himself with Brinkman's list. Krimmler was an engineer, not a biologist, and he reported directly to Roger Roothaus. It was Roothaus to whom Krimmler was now speaking on the phone.

"Gators?" Krimmler relayed the query to Brinkman.

Brinkman shook his head.

"Bald eagles? Anykind of eagles?"

Brinkman said no. Into the phone Krimmler said: "He's sure. No eagles. You want me to read you what he's got? Yeah. No. OK, lemme ask."

To Brinkman then Krimmler explained: "All we're really worried about is endangeredes."

"I haven't found any yet."

"You're positive? We don't want any surprises – six months from now, some fucking red-bellied caterpillar turns out to be the last of its race. That we don't need."

Steven Brinkman said: "So far, I haven't found a single endangered species."

To Krimmler this was the happiest of news, and with a satisfied tone he repeated it into the phone. He chuckled at Roothaus's reply, saying, "I know, I know. It's too damn good to be true. But the young man tells me he's sure."

"So far," Brinkman interjected tentatively, "none so far." There was always a chance of the occasional burrowing owl or gopher tortoise.

Krimmler glanced up. "Mr. Roothaus wants to know if you've found anything weird. Anything we need to take care of before the eco-pinheads from Fish and Wildlife show up."

Brinkman took a deep breath. It didn't take much to set Krimmler off.

"Well, there's this." The biologist held out his right hand.

Krimmler peered. "The hell is it?" Then, into the phone: "Hold on, Rog."

"It's a toad," Brinkman said.

"Gee, and here I thought it was a baby unicorn. I know it's a toad, OK? I know what a goddamn toad looks like. The question is, what kind of goddamn toad, Mr. Brinkman?"

"It's doctor. Doctor Brinkman." Some things you couldn't let slide, even at forty-one grand a year.

Krimmler glared. He cupped a hand over the receiver and whispered, "I'm waiting."

"Bufo quercicus."

"Now in English."

"It's an oak toad."

"And?"

"The smallest toad native to North America."

"That I can believe," Krimmler said. "But it's not on the endangered list?"

"No, sir."

"The 'threatened' list?"

"No."

"Any other goddamn lists?"

"None that I'm aware of."

"Then what's the problem?" Into the phone he said, "Hey, Roger, young Dr. Brinkman brought me a adorable baby frog ... Well, that's what I'm trying to find out."

Brinkman said, "There's no problem, really, with the oak toads. It's just they're all over the place, by the hundreds. I've never seen so many."

"That would probably explain the name of the island."

"It would," Brinkman said, sheepishly.

The toad in his palm was smaller than a quarter. Its coloration was a mottled gray and brown, with a vertical orange stripe bisecting its back. The toad blinked its shiny eyes and began to squirm. Gently Brinkman closed his fingers around it.

Krimmler said, "Take your little pal outside before he pees on this fine linoleum. I'll be with you in a second."

Brinkman shut the door behind him. The sun was so bright it made his eyes water. He knelt and placed the diminutive toad on the ground. Immediately it hopped off, into the shade of the trailer.

Five minutes later, Krimmler came down the steps. "Mr. Roothaus says you're doing a super job. He's a little concerned about those toads, though."

"They're completely harmless," Brinkman said.

"Not necessarily. These days it wouldn't take much to stir up another snail-darter scenario. I mean, some tree-hugger type really wanted to throw a wrench in this project."

Brinkman said, "I told you, they're not endangered. They don't even take a cute picture."

Krimmler shrugged. "Still and all, we can't be too careful. Where exactly did you find these toads. Do you know Brinkman?"

"All over the island, like I said."

"Uplands or wetlands?"

"Uplands, mostly," said Brinkman.

"Excellent."

"In the flatwood and shrub. There's so many, you'll never catch them all."

"You're absolutely right," Krimmler said. "That's why we're going to bury 'em instead."

4

On the drive to the airport, the man tossed from the Range Rover a styrofoam coffee cup and the cellophane wrapper from a Little Debbie's cinnamon-raisin roll. This happened at eighty miles an hour in breakneck traffic on the interstate, so Twilly was unable to pull over and retrieve the trash. By now he had ditched his dirty black pickup and rented a generic maroon Chevrolet Corsica, of which there were no fewer than half a million on the highways of South Florida during tourist season. Twilly enjoyed feeling inconspicuous behind the wheel; for the sake of appearances, he even spread a road map upside down across his lap. He followed the litterbug all the way to the airport parking garage, and, by foot, into the terminal. Twilly shouldn't have been surprised to see the man greeted affectionately at the Delta gate by a top-heavy blond woman with a Gucci overnighter, but Twilly was surprised, and a bit pissed off. Why, he didn't know. He drove back to the litterbug's house and waited for the wife/girlfriend to make a move. She came out wearing a short tennis ensemble and carrying not one but three oversized rackets. Twilly watched her slide into a black BMW that his husband/boyfriend must have leased to replace – temporarily, Twilly felt certain – the ruined red one. After she was gone, Twilly slipped through the hedgerow into the backyard and scoped out the window jambs, which were wired for an alarm. He wasn't concerned. Based on his observations of Litterbug and wife/girlfriend, Twilly had a hunch the alarm wasn't set. And, sure enough, neither of them had remembered to lock the laundry room door, which Twilly nudged open. No sirens, beeps or whistles.

went off. Twilly stepped inside and listened for a maid or a cook or a nanny. Through a doorway he could see into the kitchen. While there was no sign of movement, Twilly thought he heard breathing. "Hello?" he called. He had a story ready – county code inspector, checking for hurricane shutters. Sa the door ajar, got worried, et cetera. For the occasion Twilly had worn a thin plain necktie and a white short-sleeved shirt.

"Hello!" he said again, louder.

An enormous jet-black dog trotted around the corner and clamped onto his right calf. It was a Labrador retriever, the largest Twilly had ever seen, with a face as broad as a bear's. Twilly was annoyed with himself for failing to anticipate an oversized house pet, because it fit Litterbug's profile. He remained motionless and unflinching in the dog's grip. "Bad dog," he said, vainly hoping the animal would be intimidated by his composure. "No!" was Twilly's next try. "Bad boy! Bad boy!" Never before had he been attacked by a dog that didn't growl or even snarl. He took the Labrador by its silky ears. "You made your point. Now let go!"

The dog glanced up with no discernible hostility. Twilly expected to feel more pain, but the Labrador actually wasn't biting down very hard; instead it held on with an impassive stubbornness, as if Twilly's hide were a favored old sock.

I haven't got time for games, Twilly thought. Bending over the dog, he locked both arms around its barrel-sized midsection and hoisted it clear off the tile. He suspended the dog in an upside-down hug with its ears slack, hind legs straight in the air – until it let go. When he put the dog down, it seemed more dizzy than enraged. Twilly stroked the crown of its head. Immediately the Lab thumped its tail and rolled over. In the refrigerator Twilly found some cold cuts, which he placed on a platter on the kitchen floor.

Then he went prowling through the house. From a stack of unopened mail in the front hall he determined that the litterbug's name was Palmer Stoa, and that the woman was his wife, Desira. Twilly moved to the master bedroom, to get a better sense of the relationship. The Stoas had a four-poster bed with a frilly gossamer canopy, which Twilly found excessive. On one nightstand were a novel by Anne Tyler and a stack of magazines: *Town & Country*, *Gourmet*, *Vanity Fair* and *Spin*. Twilly concluded that this was Mrs. Stoa's side of the bed. In the top drawer of the nightstand were a half-smoked joint, a tube of Vaseline, a pack of plastic hair clips, and a squeeze bottle of expensive skin moisturizer. On the other nightstand Twilly saw no reading material of any type, a fact that jibed with his impressions of the litterbug. Neatly arranged inside the drawer were a battery-operated nose-hair clipper, a loaded .38-caliber revolver, a Polaroid camera and a stack of snapshots that appeared to have been taken by Palmer Stoa while he was having sex with his wife. Twilly found it significant that in all the photographs Stoa had one-handedly aimed the lens at his own naked body and that the most to be seen of the wife was an upraised knee or the pale hemisphere of a buttock or a tangle of auburn hair.

From the bedroom Twilly went to the den, a tabernacle of dead wildlife. The longest wall had been set aside for stuffed animal heads: a Cape buffalo, a bighorn sheep, a mule deer, a bull elk, a timber wolf and a Canadian lynx. Another wall had been dedicated to mounted game fish: a tarpon, a striped marlin, a peacock bass, a cobia and a bonefish scarcely bigger than a banana. Centered on the oak floor was the maned hide of an African lion – utterly pathetic, to Twilly's eye, the whole white-hunter motif.

He placed himself at Stoa's desk, which was strikingly uncluttered. Two photographs stood in identical silver frames; one on the left side, the other on the right side. One picture was of Desira waving from the bow of a sailboat. She wore an electric pink swimsuit and her face looked sunburned. The water in the background was too bright and clear to be in Florida; Twilly guessed it was the Bahamas or someplace down in the Caribbean. The other picture on the desk was of the big Labrador

retriever in a droopy red Santa cap. The dog's forbearing expression made Twilly laugh out loud. He listened to Stoa's telephone messages on the answering machine, and jotted some notes. Then he got up to inspect a third wall of the den, a burnished floor-to-ceiling bookcase that was, predictably, devoid of books. Twilly found three thin volumes of golfing wisdom, and a glossy coffee-table opus commemorating the first and last World Series championship of the Florida Marlins baseball franchise. That was it – Palmer Stoa's whole library; not even the obligatory leather-bound set of Faulkner or Steinbeck for decoration.

Exquisite tropical mahogany had been used to craft the bookshelves, which Stoa had filled with, of all things, cigar boxes – empty cigar boxes, presumably displayed in a way that would impress other smokers. Montecristo #1, Cohiba, Empress of Cuba Robusto, Don Mateo, Partagas, Licenciados, L. Upmann, Bauza – Twilly knew nothing about the pedigree of tobacco products, but he realized that for Stoa the empty boxes were trophies, like the stuffed animal heads. Prominently displayed on its own shelf was more proof of the man's fixation: a framed mock cover of Cigar Aficionado magazine featuring a nine-by-twelve photograph of Stoa wearing a white tuxedo and puffing a large potent-looking stogie. The dummy caption said "Man of the Year."

Twilly heard a noise at the door and spun around – the Labrador, done with his snack. Twilly said, "Hey, bruiser, come here." The dog gazed around the den at the dead fish and dead mammals, then walked off. Twilly sympathized. A rolling library ladder provided convenient access to the taxidermy. Twilly glided from one mount to the next, using his pocketknife to pry out the glass eyeballs, which he arranged with pupils skyward in a perfect pentagram on Palmer Stoa's desk blotter.

"What is it you want, Willie?"

Palmer Stoa had waited until they reached the back nine before bracing the cagey vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

And Representative Willie Vasquez-Washington replied: "What kind of fool question is that?" He was looking at a four-footer for a double bogey. "Makes you think I want something?"

Stoa shrugged. "Take your time, Willie. I'm on the clock." But he was thinking how he had undercharged Robert Clapley for the job, because one hundred grand was seeming more and more like a dirt-cheap fee for spending a whole wretched day on the golf course with Willie Vasquez-Washington.

Who, after missing his putt, now asked Palmer Stoa: "Is this about that damn bridge?"

Stoa turned away and rolled his eyes.

"What's the name of that island again?"

"What's the fucking difference, Willie?"

"The governor told me but I forgot."

They rode the cart to the eleventh tee. Stoa hit first, slicing his drive deep into the pines. Willie Vasquez-Washington sculled his shot fifty yards down the right side of the fairway.

"What is it you want?"

Sometimes Stoa was too direct, Willie thought. The question had sounded so common and venal, the way it came out.

"It's not about wanting, Palmer, it's about needing. There's a neighborhood in my district that needs a community center. A nice auditorium, you know. Day-care facilities. A decent gym for midnight basketball."

"How much?" Stoa asked.

"Nine million, give or take. It was all there in the House version," said Willie Vasquez-Washington, "but for some reason the funding got nuked in the Senate. I think it was those Panhandle Crackers again."

Stoa said, "A community center is a fine idea. Something for the kids."

"Exactly. Something for the kids."

And also something for Willie's wife, who would be appointed executive director of the center at an annual salary of \$49,500, plus major-medical and the use of a station wagon. And another something for Willie's best friend, who owned the company that would get the \$200,000 drywalling contract for the new building. And another something for the husband of Willie's campaign manager, whose company would be supplying twenty-four-hour security guards for the center. And, last but not least, something for Willie's deadbeat younger brother, who happened to own a bankrupt grocery store on the southwest corner of the proposed site for the community center, a grocery store that would need to be condemned and purchased by the state, for at least five or six times what Willie's brother had paid for it.

None of this would be laid out explicitly for Palmer Stoa, because it wasn't necessary. He didn't need or want the sticky details. He assumed that somebody near and dear to Willie Vasquez-Washington stood to profit from the construction of a new \$9 million community center, and he would have been flabbergasted to learn otherwise. Pork was the essential nutrient of politics. Somebody always made money, even from the most noble-sounding of tax-supported endeavors. Willie Vasquez-Washington and his pals would get their new community center, and the governor and his pals would get their new bridge to Shearwater Island. A slam dunk, Palmer Stoa believed. He would arrange for Willie's project to be inserted into the next draft of the Senate budget, and from there it would easily pass out of conference committee and go to the governor's desk. And, his private concern for the Shearwater development notwithstanding, Governor Dick Artemus would never in a million years veto the funding for a community center in a poor minority neighborhood, particularly when the elected representative from that district could claim – as Willie Vasquez-Washington had at various times – to be part Afro-American, part Hispanic, part Haitian, part Chinese, and even part Miccosukee. Nobody ever pressed Willie for documentation of his richly textured heritage. Nobody wanted to be the one to ask.

"I'll fix everything tomorrow," Stoa assured Willie Vasquez-Washington. "Listen, I'm kind of late for a meeting at the capitol."

"What're you talkin' about, 'late'? We got eight holes to play." Willie was gesticulating with a three-iron. "You can't quit in the middle of a fairway. Specially when I'm down twenty-six bucks!"

"Keep the money, Willie, and the cart, too. I'll walk back." Stoa hung his golf bag over one shoulder and took a beer from the cooler. He gave a genial but firm wave to the vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, then began the trudge to the clubhouse.

"Hey, Palmer! One more thing!" Willie Vasquez-Washington called out.

Stoa turned and cupped a hand to his ear. Willie motioned him closer. Stoa cursed sharply under his breath and walked back.

"It's about the name," said Willie, dropping his voice.

"What about it?"

"Didn't you see the name? In the House budget item."

Palmer Stoa said, "I don't read the House budget word for word, Willie. I don't read the Miami phone book word for word, either. So help me out here, OK?"

"The name should be the same in the Senate version. That's all I'm saying."

Stoa had an urge to snatch Willie's three-iron and wrap it around his blotched sweaty neck. "What name," he said thinly, "would you like me to put in the Senate bill?"

"The Willie Vasquez-Washington Community Outreach Center."

"Done," said Stoa. Once again he turned for the clubhouse.

"Shouldn't you maybe write it down?"

"No, I'll remember." Stoa thinking: Community Outreach Center? Willie's not reaching out, he's ju

reaching.

"Hey, Palmer, what about your new bridge?"

"I'll fax you the draft language. And it's not my bridge." Stoa was moving away briskly now; long purposeful strides.

"What I meant, is it gonna be named after somebody in particular?" Willie called after him. "You want, I could name it after the governor. Or maybe even you!"

"No thanks!" Palmer Stoa shouted pleasantly, but he kept his back to the man and continued walking.

"Maggot," he grumbled. "Another greedy little maggot on the make."

The human population of Toad Island was 217 and in decline. Repeated efforts had been made to develop the place, and many of its remaining inhabitants were casualties of those doomed enterprises. The unofficial mayor was Nils Fishback, former landscape architect of an ambitious project that had promised three high-rise beachfront condominiums, a total of 660 units, called the Towers of Tarpon Island. (Everyone who sought to develop Toad Island renamed it as the first order of business. In addition to Tarpon Island, it had been incorporated fleetingly as Snook Island, Dolphin Island, Blue Heron Island, White Heron Island, Little Spoonbill Island, Big Spoonbill Island, Sandpiper Key, Sandpiper Cay, Sandpiper Isle and Sandpiper Shoals. The circumstances of failure varied from one busted scheme to the next, but a cheerlessly detailed history was available for scrutiny in the bankruptcy files of the federal courthouse at Gainesville.)

Resistance to the latest Toad Island makeover came from a small core of embittered landholders masquerading as environmentalists. In protest they had begun circulating an impassioned, Thoreau-style quoting petition, the true purpose of which was not to protect pristine shores from despoliation but to extort more money from the builders. Among the private-property owners it was strongly felt that Robert Clapley was being stingy about buying them out, and that he could easily afford to overpay for their property, just as previous developers had overpaid previous Toad Island inhabitants. The petitioning strategy had worked well before, stirring up legitimate conservation organizations and luring big-city editorial writers and columnists to Toad Island's cause. Lacerated by headlines, the developers usually caved in and doubled their offers. There was no reason to believe Clapley wouldn't do the same, so they expedite groundbreaking on his luxury resort community.

Fame and seniority handed Nils Fishback the lead role in the anti-Shearwater Island petition drive. He'd bought thirty-three lots there, having invested his life savings – unwisely, it had turned out – during the euphoric first gush of hype for what was then Tarpon Island. It had been Fishback's fantasy to escape Miami and retire to a placid Gulf Coast paradise, surrounded by water. He planned to keep four of the most scenic lots and, using his landscaping earnings from the high-rise project, build a grand plantation-style estate house for himself and his wife. Unfortunately for the Fishbacks, the Towers of Tarpon Island went belly-up shortly after the first slab was poured, due to the unexpected incarceration of its principal backers, two young gentlemen cousins from Barranquilla. At that point Fishback had decorated only the sixty-by-sixty-foot parcel upon which the Towers of Tarpon Island sales kiosk had been assembled – an admittedly modest landscaping chore, but one for which Nils Fishback nonetheless expected compensation. He was not paid, nor were any of the other subcontractors. Worse: After eight years and three more failed Toad Island ventures, Fishback remained stuck with seventeen barren lots of the original thirty-three. His dream home had never advanced beyond blueprints; Fishback lived alone in the abandoned Tarpon Island sales hut, one of the few company assets in which the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration showed no interest.

Fishback's wife long ago had given up hope and bolted for the mainland, leaving him with an unhealthy amount of solitude and free time. He went through a stretch of hard drinking, during which he regularly neglected to shave, bathe, floss or change clothes. He commonly passed out for days on the beach, and his skin became as brown and crinkled as a walnut. One morning, while drunken

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