



Little Shark River

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I intend this story to be fiction but, these days, who knows? Think about it if you go to Little Shark River.

Chapter I

Ninety-six cents! That's what they want for a can of limeade concentrate. And it's not even Minutemaide but some brand I've never heard of. At home, in Tampa, I can get three cans for \$1.99; that's like sixty-six cents apiece. But the wages of sin are such that had I not forgotten to bring the limeade concentrate when we left Tampa I wouldn't be here, happy to pay almost a dollar a can. So we can have marguerites. The next item was more disconcerting. Sanitary napkins. I forgot the limeade concentrate; my wife forgot her sanitary napkins. That is also why I am here at the store alone. She started her period today and only had her emergency pad in her purse. She is waiting on board First Novel for me to return. I stare at what seems like shelf after shelf of sanitary napkins. It's not that I am embarrassed to buy them, it's just I'm never sure that I'm getting the right kind. There are maxi pads. There are mini pads. There are heavy day pads, light day pads, pads with wings, pads without wings. Who thinks up these things I choose what I think my wife said she wanted and I proceed to the checkout.

I leave the store and go to the left. This is a small grocery on Ft. Myers Beach. My wife and I had left Tampa two days ago and sailed down to Ft. Myers, nonstop, on our way to Key West. We had planned this stop for a rest but the need for sanitary napkins and marguerites caused this shore trip to the grocery. We anchored off the channel that runs behind the beach, past the bridge and most of the boats.

There are about fifty or so boats anchored; most are locals on permanent moorings. A few are transients like ourselves. I had taken our dinghy, Residual, and motored past the last house on the west side of the channel and turned into the little canal. I tied up the dink in the mangroves at the end of the canal, amidst several other dinks. Some of these little boats look as if they had been tied up here by some of Columbus' crew. One had a mangrove root coming up through it. I walked to the grocery.

Returning to the dinghy, I watched a scruffy looking man walk away from where I had tied up. I keep the dink locked up even when I'm towing her behind First Novel. A nice little Boston Whaler like this would go missing in a heartbeat if left unprotected. The same is true for my little five-horse power Nissan. I know the guy was eyeing my launch, and not just to admire it. He stood near one of the older boats and took a leak. I climbed into Residual and untied; pushed out into the canal and pulled the starter rope on the Nissan, heading back to First Novel.

Sky, that's my wife, was in the cockpit reading. Her real name is Dianne but when she was born her parents thought "Di" would be easier for her older sister, Mary Lou, to pronounce. But Mary Lou couldn't, or wouldn't, say "Di." It came out "Sky," for some reason. Sky's parents thought it was cute and Sky has been Sky ever since. I handed up the bag from the grocery, and before I was able to climb aboard Sky had disappeared into the cabin. When I made it to the cabin, the only things left in the grocery bag were the cans of limeade concentrate and Sky was locked in the head. I proceeded to make the marguerites. As I was putting salt on the rim of the glasses, Sky emerged with a blank face: a warning to watch out what I say. I poured the marguerites and handed her a glass. I proceeded to start the barbecue grille and was bit by a

mosquito. Our first real meal in almost forty -eight hours consisted of steak, salad, baked yucca and sour cream, and a bottle of Bordeaux. We talked and listened to the radio. Afterwards, I washed the dishes and then cleaned up myself as much as possible in the confines of the anchorage. Usually we go overboard and bathe in salt water but the water here was ugly looking so we made do with French baths. The weather report for tomorrow looked good so we went to bed with plans to continue the second leg of our voyage. The next morning was clear and beautiful. I set the kettle to boil and visited the head. When I emerged from the toilet my wife was still in bed with the sheets pulled up over her head. She tends to not be pleasant in the morning. I poured myself a cup of orange juice and climbed on deck to check things out. Residual was still there and we had not been boarded by pirates during the night. Most of the boats still remained in the anchorage, although I did notice that a couple had hauled anchor and were gone. I went back down into the cabin and selected tea for breakfast - American Breakfast for my wife and Lapsong Sushong for me. I poured the water. My wife stirred. I pulled out PopTarts, our usual breakfast aboard, grabbed my cup and some PopTarts and returned to the cockpit to sip my tea and eat. Soon my wife poked her head up the companionway and muttered a desultory "Good morning," and disappeared again. By the time she joined me in the cockpit, I had finished my breakfast and was ready to go but family protocol required that I sit and stay with my wife until she finished her breakfast.

At last the engine was running and I was hauling the anchor. Sky held the bow into the current. As the anchor cleared the water, I gave her a signal and she spun First Novel around and headed her down the channel toward the high-rise bridge. We crossed under the bridge and wound our way around the end of the island that is Ft.. Myers Beach. It took us about fifteen minutes and we were in the main channel leading out into the Gulf of Mexico. As the channel widened I picked up our heading of 180 degrees for Key West. Leaving Ft.. Myers one has to choose between the direct route of approximately thirty-six hours of open water or the more circuitous route toward Naples, through Gordon Pass or Capri Pass. This way, while longer, offers the luxury of overnight anchorages. At Naples and Cape Romano, one has three options. But we were not heading that way. Sky does well standing watch by herself. If I need to sleep, she can take the helm and keep us on course. If she needs help, she has the good sense to call me right away, rather than get into trouble. As we got farther from the entrance of the main channel the wind from the east picked up. I set the main and the jib and cut the engine. The weather was fine. The forecast was favorable. What a wonderful place to be. With the engine off, sailing is one of the exquisite experiences of life.

Being able to make way with only the wind pushing you is somehow primeval. To do so with someone you love is a very sensual experience for me. By ten o'clock we were well away from the Ft.. Myers channel and in open water. Off to our port side was the thin strip on the horizon that is the Florida mainland. Was about ready for Sky to take over the helm. Her mood had improved greatly and she was now smiling a lot. I asked her if she was ready to do a turn at the helm. "Just a minute," she said and dashed below. She returned in a few minutes with her hat and sunglasses, wearing only a pair of cut-off shorts. When we are away from land, Sky and I usually sail naked. With her present condition I understood that she was wearing shorts. One of the things I like about Sky is that she is ready to get naked whenever the opportunity presents itself. I love seeing her body and never have to ask, suggest, or cajole. Seeing her come up from the cabin gave me intense pleasure. I turned over the helm to her and reluctantly went below to tend to navigational chores. I always plot a dead reckoning course and then check it against the GPS. I believe in keeping my skills up. We have had the GPS go out on us and the dead reckoning plot is good backup. I located our position at 26 degrees 21 minutes North by 81 degrees 59 minutes West and calculated the distance made good. Not great but not bad considering that we were under sail alone. Close to shore like this we were subject to the local winds that the land causes. Later in the day the wind will pick up, as will our speed. I stowed the navigational gear, removed my clothes and returned to the cockpit. It was a great sight to see Sky, attired as she was, at the helm. I got a stiffie.

"Is that a gun or are you just glad to see me?" Sky joked, quoting Mae West.

"I'm always glad to see you dressed like that," I reassured her. "Besides, what is there to shoot at out here?"

"How about me?" She smiled. "I'll wait a few days, when you're able," I countered.

I surveyed the horizon for traffic. I know Sky keeps a good watch but it's an old habit. I sweated up the sails and sat back to enjoy the remainder of Sky's watch.

I relieved Sky just before lunch. Our position was now 26 degrees 15 minutes North by 81 degrees 59 minutes West.

Good for this wind. I expected the wind to drop so that we would have a lull until the sea breeze started to build. Before she could come up with lunch the wind died and we were dead in the water. The pleasant morning turned into a torrid, sweating bake. I saw Sky pull at the seam in her cut-offs. I knew she regretted having to keep them on.

I downed a Harp with lunch; Sky, to my amazement, downed two. "The cramps," she said with a tweak of her eyebrows.

By the time Sky took the helm again at 1400, we had covered an additional two knots but the wind was freshening from the west southwest. There were also cumulus clouds starting to form over the mainland, small now but sure to grow with the sea breeze. I checked the marine weather. It was the same broadcast that had been playing since noon: "Possible thunder showers along the coast line and moving inland as the day progresses," the computer voice said. I saw the horizon ahead and disagreed. Something was brewing to the south.

I relieved Sky at 1600. I checked the weather channel before taking the helm. The forecast had changed. Thunder showers and high winds were building in the Keys. We were off Gordon Pass. We had options here that we would not have in a few hours if we proceeded on our rhumb line. There were showers inland, to our left. I was not too concerned with these. Even if they did hit us, First Novel were well founded. If we kept our wits about us, we could weather these. It was the weather to the south that I was concerned about.

Big Marco Pass, just south of Gordon Pass, offered three options: sail on past Cape Romano to Key West, round Cape Romano into Florida Bay or, if your draft is shallow enough, take the channel that separates Marco Island from the mainland into Florida Bay. Heading on to Key West with a building weather front was foolish. I'm a conservative sailor and don't like being caught out in bad seas. First Novel's draft was too great for the channel. That left us with the second option: rounding Cape Romano and heading east into Florida Bay.

"Looks like we'll be anchoring down tonight," I told Sky.

"I thought we might," she said. "I won't mind. We can get another night's good sleep."

"Yeah, and we can have a decent meal."

"Good thing you got the extra lime concentrate," she grinned at me. "How long?"

"Well, if we make for Coon Key, four hours thereabout. We've got to go a long way south to miss the Romano Shoals."

"It'll be close to dark."

"Yeah, but whatever you thaw for dinner will be ready for the grille.

Besides, we can get a proper bath." By a proper bath I meant that we could go overboard and bath in the saltwater. We rinsed with freshwater when back aboard. Coon Key was secluded enough that we didn't worry about bathing suits.

"I won't be in the water long," Sky said, "not in my condition." I didn't really know if she was right about sharks being attracted by a woman's menstrual fluids but I agreed that she shouldn't press the issue.

I went below to plot a course around Cape Romano and returned to the cockpit with the waypoints written on a pad. For the next four hours I would keep the helm. For safety's sake I started the engine. The romance of the sea is great but not with the weather going downhill on us. I didn't have to prove anything to anybody. The sooner we were anchored down the better. The sky looked beautiful and placid; you'd never know that a blow was on the way.

When we reached the waypoint of 25 degrees 45.5 minutes North by 81 degrees 46.3 minutes West, I turned First Novel into Florida Bay. A thunderstorm over Marco Island sucked wind from the South, and First Novel heeled over under the force. I kept the engine in gear. In fair weather I would anchor behind Marco Island. But that would leave us exposed from the south and east. Coon Key would provide shelter from all quarters. I didn't expect the weather system from the Keys to

actually come close to us, but thunderstorms could develop at any time of day at this time of year and I'd prefer to have a sheltered anchor. I remember one time in Key West when we had a beautiful day. About one o'clock in the morning one hell of a thunderstorm came up. Lightening popped all around us and I was prepared to receive a strike. But it passed after about three hours and the next day dawned clear and beautiful. If that happened tonight, I wanted to have as much shelter as possible. We dropped anchor inside the channel at Coon Key around 2030. We both took a very quick dip. The clouds were still backlit by lightening from the afternoon's storm, and the air was cool and still fresh with the odor of ozone. Sky had tried to get a local television broadcast as we worked our way up the backside of Marco Island. The closest station was Ft. Myers, and the thunderstorms made the signal so poor that all she could get was snow. I listened to the marine weather station while I started the charcoal grille. The forecast was essentially no informative about what was happening to the south. I opened a bottle of white Bordeaux to go with our chicken breast and decided that we would try the TV in the morning.

After dinner, being less tired than the night before, I settled down in the cockpit with a bottle of rum, a cigar and, my laptop. With a backdrop of a mosquito choir, assailing the mosquito netting, I started work on a new story. I had been intrigued with the archaeological find of the Iceman, in the Italian Alps. I had played around with some story lines during the last couple of years and finally came up with one that I wanted to try for a novel. My Iceman was a fugitive trying to escape to freedom across the Alps to the north. I had devoured everything I could about the Iceman and his period of pre-history. One nice thing about long cruises is that there is a lot of time for thinking. My Iceman had been in the back of my mind since we had left Tampa. Now I felt the need to write, to start something. See where it went. Before I knew it, Sky was calling from down in the cabin. "I've got a radar picture." I joined her in the salon. She had tried finding something on the TV and had picked up a picture from Miami. No sound. But I didn't need sound. There, in the Straits of Florida, between the Keys and Cuba were yellows and reds of the weather radar. Underneath the radar display was a caption that said "35 mi. Winds." The low pressure trough was over Cuba and the winds in the Straits were coming out of the North-East. A thirty-five mile an hour wind doesn't seem like much to people on land. But on the water, it's scary as hell, at least to me. And with the wind going against the current of the Gulf Stream, the Straights of Florida would be churning up something fierce. God help any small craft that might have gotten caught in the jaws of this one. Even large ocean-going ships would be feeling the punch. Any time there is a low pressure trough in the tropics, it's something to keep an eye on. While it was still early in the season for a real full-blown hurricane, they can develop at any time of year. I didn't expect this one would develop. But it did mean that for the next few days we could not head directly towards Key West. We could stay where we were (OK for me. I could write, but Sky would go crazy) or we could spend the next couple of days going down the east side of Florida Bay. If the weather was clear in the morning, I decided, we would head for Little Shark River, the first leg down the East side of Florida Bay. Now that I had a better grip on the weather and a plan, I returned to the cockpit to write for a couple more hours.

Chapter II:

Ee-ee-ee-e! I awoke to the tutti forte of mosquitoes as they assailed every screened port and the netting covering the cockpit. The mangroves on the shore line echoed with a somewhat Doppler version of the same sound. No doubt an encouragement to the mosquitoes bombarding us, as we swung on our anchor. As the sun hit First Novel the mosquitoes disappeared, all but those in shadow, who persisted in their optimism. But, we had been here before and were prepared for them. The first thing we did last night when we anchored was to deploy the netting.

A few clouds to the east and all clear to the west. I could not see the southern horizon for the mangroves on the little island next to us. I quietly moved about the boat. We had plenty of time and I wanted to let Sky sleep. Rather than use the head, with all its accompanying noise, I slipped under the netting in a sunny place and took a leak over the bow. As I stood there relieving myself, a couple of fishermen, well, actually a man and a woman, slid by in their motor boat. Both smiled and waved. What else could I do? I just waved back.

I read about the Iceman for about an hour until Sky started moving. I slipped down into the cockpit, kissed her and started the kettle. By 0900 Sky was awake and we had finished our breakfast. Tea and PopTarts again. We went through our routine of Sky handling the helm while I hauled the anchor. She swung the bow down channel as I secured the anchor. We steered out the channel into Florida Bay. Florida Bay is a great expanse of water that is bound by the Florida Mainland to the North and East and the hooking arm of the Florida Keys to the South. But also to the East and North of Florida Bay are literally thousands of mangrove islands, some tiny, others larger. Many of these little islets are under

water at high tide. Between the islets are shoals.

The area is called Ten Thousand Islands (original, right?) The whole area is almost devoid of life. Human life that is. In years past it was a favorite place for smugglers to sneak in their wares. Today one must still be wary of any boats: rum and whiskey has been replaced by cocaine. In the seventies marijuana was brought in down here but, now, it is too bulky of a product for the modern smugglers. I think the best course of action, while in these waters, is to stay as far away from other boats as you can. And, in spite of what all the cruising guides say, I do carry a shot gun and a pistol aboard, just in case!

As we emerged into Florida Bay the entire seascape was free of any other human life. The tall condos on Marco Island were the only sign that mankind was here. With the exception of First Novel, that is. We steered to the South-East on a heading of 147 degrees toward Little Shark River. The wind was just a little ahead of our beam and First Novel points up well so, I made sail and killed the engine. Slowly the condos sank behind us. We were alone.

Hour after hour we pinched ahead in the glorious isolation. From time to time we would see a speck on the horizon that was another boat, but none come towards us. To the south, I could see clouds on the horizon. They all were moving towards the west. Ahead of us was clear. Radio transmissions, on channel 16, ceased. We lost the FM station from Ft. Meyers. Sky found a Miami station that put out some kind of Cuban music. We listened to that as First Novel cut through the water.

Sky came on deck. "Wunna try for shrimp tonight?" I asked her. Sky and I had been to Little Shark River once before. Dr. Linfesty says, in his Gunkholers' Cruising Guide to West Florida, that Little Shark River is noted for its tall luscious mangrove growths and the abundance of shrimp. The guide also says not to stay at little Shark river without adequate insect screens. What an understatement. On our first stay we had mosquito netting but never had a chance to put it up; the mosquitoes came out to sea to greet us and were all over us before we could secure the netting. By the time we had the netting in place, millions of the little bastards had filled the interior of the ship. We spent a miserable night swatting and killing mosquitoes. We discussed, if we ever had to return to Little Shark River, we would anchor well out and not go near the place.

"You're not going into the river?" Sky asks with real concern.

"I've gotta plan," I retorted.

"Fresh shrimp would be nice. But I'm not going in there!" I understood, completely. The truth was I dreaded the idea of going into all those mosquitoes but the idea of a meal of fresh shrimp tempted me.

We anchored down about 1730, two miles out from the entrance to Little Shark River. At this distance the channel marker was not yet visible but the GPS co-ordinates are reliable. I made sure all the screens were in place and checked for little holes that might need repairing. Sky had already draped the mosquito net over the Bimini top and made sure it was sealed well. I lowered the Nissan out-board motor on to Residual and loaded the gear I would need on board: a shrimp net and a five gallon bucket. I went below and returned in a few minutes dressed from head to toe in clothing and carrying a spray can of DEET. Nowhere on my body was any skin exposed. I had fashioned a netting to go over my hat and it was tucked into the top of my shirt. I had Sky spray me all over with the DEET. I am generally opposed to insecticides. This is not because of any concern, on my part, for the insects but, rather, the thought that if can kill insects what will it do to me. I figured that the DEET on my clothing was far better than on my skin. After Sky had finished spraying me I kissed her good by, sprayed my hat net hood, climbed down into Residual and, with the can of DEET beside me, started the kicker and was off.

As I motored towards the entrance to the channel to Little Shark River I made sure that my clothing was secure with no place where insects could get at me. Little Shark River is not a river at all. It is a bayou or sloughs that runs behind a series of small islands that have mangrove growths down to and into the water. Approaching it in a boat, it looks like a river. Following it through the mangroves, it looks like a river. But, it is all salt water and if you follow it long enough, the "river" will put you right back into Florida Bay, if you don't turn up any one of the hundreds of "streams" that intersect

the larger flow, that is.

When I could see the channel marker I prepared for the onslaught of mosquitoes . But, I didn't see any. The DEET was really working. I made it to the mouth of the river. No mosquitoes . I turned the little bend in the channel and started up the "river". I saw a very nice ketch anchored in the wide channel. Everything appeared Bristol on the red hulled vessel. No sign of anyone aboard. Huddled down below, I figured, trying to keep the mosquitoes away. I admired the beauty of Dansk Mar, for that was her name, as I passed. Still no mosquitoes . I motored on up the river for my quest was shrimp.

On a falling tide, shrimp become "active". You catch them by dragging your shrimp net through the grass and stir the shrimp up. You then scoop them with the net and fill up your five gallon bucket with them. Sounds simple. If you're at the right place at the right time, it is almost that simple. I made a few experimental scoops and produced nothing. Then I netted a few shrimp. Promising. After about a half hour of scooping I hit an area that was abundant with shrimp. In the next fifteen minutes I really did fill my bucket. In the frenzy of the hunt I had forgotten everything. I sat in the dink looking at the filled bucket of writhing shrimps. "Now where am I going to put the rest?" I foolishly asked myself and then realized that I had enough shrimp to feed ten people. My first thought was to cull the smallest out and throw them back but then I remembered Dansk Mar. I could share my catch with those poor people hunkered in their cabin. The DEET was doing a great job. I had not seen a mosquito since leaving First Novel. Surely I would keep the Mosquitoes away long enough to transfer the shrimp. I motored down river towards the mouth of the channel. This place really did have beauty of its own. The mangroves were tall and striking. The water swirled with feeding fish. I expected to see osprey and spoonbills but did not. What a wonderful place, if it wasn't for the insect life.

Dansk Mar hove into view. She lay motionless in the sluggish water of the neap tide. As I came closer to her, I called out. It is considered bad manners to approach a vessel without announcing yourself. I expected a head to pop up from the companion way but, I didn't see one. I was approaching bow on so it would be hard to see any one, anyway. Or, they could be looking out a port; I wouldn't see them, if that were the case. I yelled again. Dansk Mar had a rounded stern and the boarding ladder would be at the side, just like First Novel. I maneuvered Residual to the side of Dansk Mar and hollered again. Still no response.

Careful not to bump the hull, I motored up to Dansk Mar's side. I grabbed the toe-rail and with one hand holding the painter, I stood up. The white fiberglass of the cockpit was smeared with hundreds of little gray streaks, some punctuated in red dots. These folks had been swatting mosquitoes like crazy. No wonder they didn't want to expose even their faces to the bugs.

But my DEET had apparently drove the pests away; there was not a mosquito in sight.

"The mosquitoes have gone for a while," I called. " It's safe to come out, now. I've got too many shrimp. Would you like some?" No response. "Maybe they think I'm a pirate," I tell myself. But then I see the companionway has no hatch boards, no netting, nothing. It dawns on me that there is stuff strewn around the cockpit, as if someone left it in a hurry. I take a risk. I tie Residual to a stanchion and climb aboard, shouting all the time; like me, these people may keep firearms aboard and are ready to blow me away. "Is anyone aboard?" I shout. "Is everyone alright?" Its a foreign name on the boat; maybe they don't speak English. "Hello," I shout, everyone understands that. I get no response. I stand still. I don't want to appear too aggressive. Things don't look right. That is why I can't go away. If they had left the boat they would have closed it up. If they are below they are either extremely frightened or, perhaps, ill. I stick my head in the companionway, expecting a flash and a last thought before I die. I pull my head back quickly. In the fading light the cabin was dark and I didn't get a look at anything. I would have to look again and this time expose my head for a longer period. I remembered my hat and netting. If someone was peering down my companionway in the dusk with this over their head I'd be alarmed too. I risk the mosquitoes and remove my head gear. With my insides quivering I peer into the companionway. "Hello. Is anyone aboard?" The name Dansk Mar leads me to think they may be Danish. I don't know any Danish but I do know a few words of German. If they are from Denmark they will understand German. "Gooten Abent," I try, "Ist zie hier? Kapitan?"

Still no response! I look into the darkness. For a few seconds I seen nothing then, I do. It looks like a roll of carpet on the cabin sole. "Strange," I think. I can now make out the couches along the sides of the hull and part of a galley counter to the left. But that's all. There's nothing left for me but to go down. Still talking, declaring I mean no harm, as I violate their

private space, I step on the first step of the companionway ladder. Then the next. Still looking into the dark interior. I make out another roll of carpet on one of the couches. As I reach the sole I stand at the end of the first roll of carpet. I am sweating now and can hear nothing except the pounding of my heart. I realize that there is no one on board now. But I am afraid. I am afraid of these two rolls of carpet.

I bend over and touch the end of the large roll on the cabin floor. It is not carpet but a blanket. The blanket is rolled around something. I start to unroll the cloth and a foot appears. It is still and the skin has the appearance of tanned leather, just like that shoe covering it. I quickly move to the other end and frantically start to unroll the blanket. It is a man, almost as large as I am but as I roll him over he seems too light. I look around and find the light switch. The light does not come on. Either the breaker is not turned on or the batteries are drained. I look in the nav station. There I find a flash light and turn back and examine the man. His flesh is a brownish- gray and is riddled with tiny little brown spots.

I try to think of what diseases this could mean. Too small for measles, but people don't die from measles any more, at least not in the first world. Besides measles are red. I pull the blanket down farther and see that on his chest is the same color and tiny spots. I touch his flesh; it is dry and leathery.

I turn to the bundle on the couch. It is smaller and I'm afraid of what I'll find there. She is close to the same color as the man and also has the same little spots. I can't tell how old she is: could have been sixteen or eighty. The condition of the bodies prevented even a guess as to how old these people were. Her face is stretched: eyes tightly closed and mouth wide open. I can see her tongue and the inside of her mouth. They are mostly gray with darker little gray spots. Thousands of them. Just like the little brown spot on her skin. Just like the spots on the man. I am overcome by the thought that this disease has killed these two people and all I want to do is get away. I scamper up the companionway ladder and almost jump over the side into Residual. I do not remember starting the motor but as I calm down I am speeding towards the small light atop First Novel's mast. Safety and solace.

Suddenly I cut the engine speed and sit motionless in the water. If this disease, whatever it is, killed those two people, it could kill me. Not only that, I could contaminate Sky! There is no way I can return to First Novel!

I think. I consider the options of dyeing here in a fourteen-foot Boston Whaler in Florida Bay and no one would ever know. Just like that poor couple back there aboard the ketch. How long would it take? How much suffering would there be? I am sure the woman's face told of the excruciating pain she had gone through. Somehow I could not remember the man's face. As I felt my own face I realize that I had left my hat and net hood aboard Dansk Mar. I would have to return for it. It may take days for me to die and I didn't need the added discomfort. of the mosquitoes when they returned, as surely they would.

It was full dark by the time I returned to Dansk Mar. I knew that there would be no change but I somehow hoped that the two people would be hale and healthy. Just a joke. I bet we really scared you. Ha ha,ha. They were still as dead when I returned as when I had found them. I recovered the flashlight and looked around the cabin. I found the panel box next to the nav station. All the breakers were off except the one marked "Pumpe". I assumed that was for the bilge pump and hoped that the batteries were in good shape. I flipped the switch marked "Rundfunk" (radio) and "Huttelicht" (cabin lights). I tried the lights again. This time the nav station light came on. I found another light and turned it on. I did not want to light the interior so much that I had to see the two bodies. Nor did I wish to run the batteries down using unnecessary light.

I turned the radio on and found it was on channel 16. I keyed the mike. "First Novel, First Novel, First Novel!" Sky should have the radio on, a standing rule when one of us is off the boat. I waited. In the silence I thought, "Maybe she has already come down with this stuff! Maybe she died in agony while I was shrimping. Maybe..."

"This is First Novel! Come back." Sky's voice sounded wonderful but I could tell that she was tense.

"Try our channel." I told her. VHF Radios are not private; anyone can listen in. Channel 16 is a hailing frequency only. Usually you would say what working channel you wanted to switch to. If anyone wanted to hear your conversation they could switch to the announced channel and listen in to their conversation. Sky and I had a "secret" channel. With out naming a channel we had agreed years ago that we could change to this channel without announcing it. It did not give us

a private channel but would reduce the number of listeners, if anyone was listening.

"First Novel!" Sky's voice was tenser than ever now.

"Sky, there's a problem. I want you to stay by the radio and listen. I'm going back to 16 to call the Coast Guard. If I need to talk to you again we'll return to the last channel we talked plus one. Do you understand? Over."

"I understand. I'll come back on seven-oh. But, Aaron, what's wrong?" She sounds about to panic.

"I'm on a boat called Dansk Mar. And, there's a problem. I'm all right for now but want to go carefully on this thing. You'll have to trust me for now. You'll put the pieces together if I get the Coast Guard."

"Aaron, I'm scared!"

"I can't tell you any more for now." I paused. "Sky, I love you."

There was a pause on Sky's end. I imagined her with tears in her eyes and fear on her face. "I love you, Aaron."

"Dansk Mar out!"

"First Novel out and returning to channel sixteen." Silence.

My chest felt tight and I wanted to cry. I wondered if I would ever see my wife again; would I ever get out of this one. If Sky did catch this thing I would return to First Novel and we would die together. I know this sounds melodramatic and corny but the isolation in this place is unbelievable until you experience it.

I pushed my sentimentality down. I switched the radio to channel 16, made sure it was on high power and started to broadcast. "U. S. Coast Guard, any station! U.S. Coast Guard, any station! This is the sailing vessel Dansk Mar. Do you copy?" I notice that my voice was controlled and steady. I listened.

After a few minutes of silence I tried again. "U.S. Coast Guard, any station! U.S. Coast Guard, any Station! This is the sailing vessel Dansk Mar. Do you copy?"

The lack of radio traffic since leaving Coon Key this morning is due to the lack of boats in this area and the distances involved. VHF radio is line-of-sight. This means that the radio waves do not bend over the earth's surface but travel in a straight line. The limit of your broadcast is a circle extending from the tip of your antenna to the horizon. The higher the antenna is above the water the greater distance you can broadcast. Maybe twenty miles in the case of First Novel; not much more than that for Dansk Mar.

I doubted that I would get a direct response from the Coast Guard, the distance was just too far. But, any other vessel who hears my broadcast, even an airplane, would relay the message on. That's what I had to hope on. But in the dark, very few boats or planes would be out in this area. The one's that would be out would be most likely engaged in fishing or the types of people we wouldn't want to know about. Either way, neither of these would relay a message: the first would be too busy working, the others did not want anyone to know where they were. But I kept broadcasting. I didn't know how long I had to live and my concern was now for Sky. I wished her to have the greatest margin of protection. If I got no response by morning I would instruct her to either return to Marco Island for help, or, if the weather permitted, to head on to Marathon.

I remembered the open companionway. I could find no netting for the opening so I dug up the hatch boards and closed myself in. Each of the ports were open and the screens seemed to be in tact. It was going to be a hot night.

"U.S. Coast Guard! U.S. Coast Guard," I returned to the radio between checking ports. Still there was no response from

anyone. I did not wish to use "MAYDAY!" I didn't want to sensationalize the situation. Besides, no one was in danger of losing their life, not any more, and the vessel was not in danger of going down. Also, I did not wish to attract anyone who might be bent on pirating.

Chapter III:

By 2030 I had had no answer to my calls. "Sky?" I called on channel. She immediately answered with, "Switching up!" A quite, efficient response. I switch up to seventy. "Sky?"

"Yes?"

"Use the cell-phone and see if you can reach the Coast Guard. Advise them of my location. Tell them you intercepted an emergence call. Get back to me on sixteen if you make any contact. Keep trying."

"Aaron? What's happening?"

"Something bad. I don't know. I'm not sure it's safe to talk about it on the radio."

"Are you alright? You must really be suffering with the mosquitoes ."

"I'm OK for now, I think. The weird thing, Sky, there are no mosquitoes !"

"No mosquitoes ?"

"None. I haven't seen one since I left First Novel."

"Well, thank heavens for that! I'll try the phone."

"I'll keep hailing on sixteen." I switched back to channel sixteen and sent out another hail.

"Any ship, Any ship, Any ship! This is the sailing vessel Dansk Mar. Any ship who copies, please respond." I was getting tired. I was also hungry. I went into the galley and found a light. I searched and found some bread. The food in the icebox was still cold. I discovered some ham and made a quick sandwich. A can of Pepsi helped to wash it down. I refrained from looking at the two bodies for fear that my stomach would rebel and I would vomit. I sat at the nav station and thought. Nothing made sense. There was no appreciable odor about the cabin from the two dead people. They were almost mummified. That would indicate that they had died a long time ago. And yet, the batteries were charged up, the cooler had cold food in it, and someone would have noticed this ship a long time ago. How could these bodies become desiccated without someone discovering them? I realized that I was not thinking of these people as having identities, personalities. They were bodies, mummies, and things I no longer felt emotions for.

"Aaron?" Sky on channel sixteen.

"Switching." I answered and switched up to channel seventy-one.

"Sky?"

"Aaron, the phone shows no service but I've been trying anyway. So far nothing."

"I thought as much. Sky, you try hailing on sixteen. Maybe you've got a clearer shot without these mangroves around you."

"OK."

Back on sixteen I heard Sky's plaintive voice calling out, first for the Coast Guard then for any ship. While I waited I went to the ice box. I thought I had seen some beer in there and sure enough I pulled out a bottle of Beck's dark. I found a bottle opener and the beer felt good in my mouth. I drank half the bottle in almost one gulp. I was thirsty.

"Aaron?!" Sky was upset. I could tell by the tone of her voice, even over the VHF.

"Switching," I answered and went up to channel seventy-two.

"Aaron! I've been calling and calling and no one has answered. I'm tired and I'm scared! Tell me what's going on! If you don't I'm going to start the engine and come in after you! Do you hear?!" I couldn't stall her any longer. I couldn't risk having her come in here and catch whatever the hell this is. I had to risk telling her over the radio. So, I did. I told her everything. I told her about the shrimp, coming aboard Dansk Mar, finding the couple and described their appearance. When I'd finished there was silence on her end.

She finally said in a quiet voice, "Oh my God! Aaron, I'm sorry I lost my temper. But you didn't tell me anything!" This last sentence was in a raised voice.

"Other than wait for morning, I don't know what else to do," I confessed to her.

"I know. Get some rest, Baby. But if you get sick, call me. I'll come right in."

"Sky, promise me you won't do that, what ever happens!"

"Aaron!"

"Sky! Promise me!"

"Aaron, I can't!"

"Think of Laura!" Laura was our daughter. "What will happen to her if we both catch this thing and die!" The radio was silent but I guessed that Sky was sobbing on the other end.

"OK," came back in a small, almost childlike voice. "What do you want me to do?"

I told Sky that I couldn't think of any thing else but to wait until morning. If I had not raised anyone by then on the radio, I wanted her to head for Marathon or, if the weather was still bad in the keys, back to Marco Island. Or at least close enough to establish a secure contact on the cell phone. "Get some sleep and at sun up go," I told her. "That's our best chance. We can't stay out here forever." I could not help but think that I may be staying here forever, just as my hosts, rolled in there blankets.

"I'll do it, Aaron. I love you."

"I love you, too. Get some sleep if you can; you'll need it for tomorrow."

I went back to hailing the Coast Guard. While waiting for a response I looked for and found the log. But I could not read it. It was in either German or Danish. The hand writing was neat and uniform, however, with no sign that any of the later entries were made under stress. If this thing came on them gradually, whoever kept the log was very cool about it.

I found myself dozing off. I awoke for the third or fourth time about 0330. Unlike the other times of waking up, this time I was wide awake at once. Something was different. Was I getting ill? I sat there monitoring my body and my feelings. I

could tell no difference in myself. But I had the certainty of knowledge that something was happening. Then I heard it. Ever since I had entered Little Shark River, the surrounding area had been silent. But, no more. The noise was faint but there nonetheless. It was high pitched and kind of throbbed. It was an "Ee-ee-ee" sound, only continuous. As I sat at the nav station the noise grew outside the boat. My memory of last night at Coon Key and of our first visit to Little Shark River came to mind. The mosquitoes had returned.

I took the flashlight and shined it out the port above the nav station. The screen was covered with mosquitoes so thickly that the flash light beam could not escape the port. I felt a level of satisfaction that these bastards could not get at me. I flashed the flashlight around the cabin. Somehow there were about twelve or so mosquitoes inside. I don't know how they got there. I found a magazine and rolled it up, ready to do battle. "I must check all the screens," I thought. I roused myself and made the circuit around the interior of the boat. In the head I found where mosquitoes were crawling through a weep hole beneath the screen. I closed the port. I felt a sharp prick on my skin and swatted myself. I killed it, the tiny gray little mosquito. It amazed me how something so small could create such a painful bite. I found the first-aid kit and put something on the bite that I thought might have benzocaine in it. When I returned to the main cabin I swatted wherever I saw anything that resembled a mosquito.

I noticed that between two of the hatch boards was a crack large enough that mosquitoes were crawling in. I swatted what I could and found some tissue paper that I forced into the crack. When I got back to the nav station I saw by the clock that it was already 0400. I looked at the screen at the port above the nav station. To my horror the screen was being pushed in by the weight and force of the mosquitoes. I quickly closed the port and went around the boat again. At each opening port the same was true: the screens were being pushed in by the mosquitoes. I dogged down all the ports. The temperature in the cabin became stifling. I swatted my way to the icebox for water and wondered what I had done with the can of DEET. I had left it in the dink! I searched for insecticide. Any insecticide. I could find nothing. My skin itched where I had been bitten a half hour earlier. The place, where the mosquito had bitten me, reminded me of the inside of the woman's mouth. I took the flash light and looked at the skin on the man's face. Except for the color, the bite looked just like the spots on his skin. I stared at him in disbelief.

I went to the woman. It was the same. Suddenly I knew what these two had died of! I grabbed the mike. "Sky!!"

"Yes?" I knew she would not be sleeping.

"Switch!" I grabbed the knob and turned to channel seventy-three and waited for Sky to come back on the air.

"Aaron?"

"Sky, Are there any mosquitoes there?"

"Yes, a few. I started noticing them about an hour ago."

"Listen, Sky! These people didn't die from a disease! The mosquitoes killed them!"

"How, Aaron?"

"I don't know how. I just know that they did. Close your hatch boards and your ports. Seal up the boat!"

"But, Aaron. That doesn't make any sense!"

"I don't care! Remember how bad the mosquitoes were the one time we anchored here? Well its much worse! Hundreds of times worse. The mosquitoes are trying to push in the screens on the ports. They are trying to crawl into any crack they can! Close yourself up! Now!"

"Aaron, that sounds crazy!" I knew she was assessing if I was going crazy, a symptom of disease.

"Listen, Sky, whatever the explanation, I don't know. But, it makes sense to protect yourself. Do it now before they get worse and get inside the boat!" Would she listen? I hoped so. Sky can be obstinate at times. I hoped this was not one of them. I waited, the radio silent. Was she closing up? The heat inside Dansk Mar was getting unbearable. Sweat was making my clothing wet. Big drops of sweat fell to the cabin sole. I found a bottle of water and drank the whole thing in almost one gulp. Still the radio was silent. Finally...

"Aaron?"

"Yes?"

"I'm closed up."

"Thank God! I was thinking you might be thinking that I'm going crazy."

No reply to this. "The plan remains the same. As soon as you can safely leave the cabin, haul ass for Marathon or Marco. OK?"

"OK."

"Sky, I'll leave the radio on sixteen, if you need me."

"OK."

"Sky? I love you."

"Oh Aaron, I'm so scared!"

"Yes I know. Baby. We get the Coast Guard and all this will be over."

"I sure hope so."

I was suddenly attacked by several mosquitoes . I swatter around the cabin but their numbers were increasing. They were coming in through the Dorado vent in the ceiling. I twisted the vent shut, closed the second. I searched through the yacht looking for other Dorado vents or any other place the bugs might get through. All the while I slapped mosquitoes until, covered with tiny red spots, I was at least able to hold them at bay. The itching and burning was intense. I looked in the medicine box for alcohol. The salve I had used earlier had offered almost no relief from the one bite; I doubted it would do anything with the hundreds I had just sustained.

Finding no rubbing alcohol I located the liquor cabinet and opened a bottle of vodka. Using that I rubbed some over the places I had been bitten. It helped some. The interior started to resemble the smears I had noticed earlier in the cockpit. I imagined the horror that these two unsuspecting people must have experienced when they were unprepared for the sudden onslaught of insects. Back on channel sixteen I broadcast my plea, "Any vessel! Any vessel!"

Acknowledge, please." The time was 0545. Dawn would come soon. Would the sunlight drive these bugs away?

Chapter IV:

"Aaron?"

"Switching!" I turned to channel seventy-five.

"Aaron, how are you?"

"I'm still alive. Some mosquitoes got in and I've got a lot of bites. They itch and there is a lot of swelling. How about you?"

"There are still not many mosquitoes here. The sun is almost up. I'm going to get underway for Marathon."

"Sky, Wait! If you go out before they are gone you may attract more. I don't want that to happen. I want you to wait until the sun is up full."

"Aaron! There are only a few of them. I want to get this over with. We need help!"

"Yes we do but, if you get attacked, what good will that do us?"

"Aaron." Her voice was subdued with resignation. She didn't agree with me.

I looked out the port, or tried to. All I could see was the bodies of mosquitoes . The ones next to the screen had been crushed by the others trying to push in. The hatches in the ceiling were the same. I could not see out of the cabin! I tried the radio again. Each time I transmitted the "Ee-ee-ee" of the mosquitoes increased in volume. Some how my transmissions were effecting the insects but, I didn't know how.

"U.S. Coast Guard or any vessel! This is the sailing vessel Dansk Mar requesting assistance." Over and over again.

At 0830 Sky Informed me she was raising the anchor. She did not acknowledge my reply. I knew this meant that she was leaving, mosquitoes or no mosquitoes . She was going if I approved or objected. I hoped she would be alright.

Around 0900 I started hearing Sky's transmissions. She got away OK. "U.S. Coast Guard! U.S. Coast Guard! This is the sailing vessel First Novel reporting a vessel in distress!" She repeated the transmission at about five-minute intervals.

On Dansk Mar, I was still finding mosquitoes that were somehow finding there way into the interior of the yacht. The rolled up magazine that I had been using to swat them was in shreds. I looked for another, or something else, to continue my battle. The interior of the boat was as dark as it had been all night even though the sun must be high. I still could not see out of any hatch or port because of the dead mosquito carcasses crushed against the plastic. I took time from fighting mosquitoes to use the radio again.

"Aaron?"

"Yes?"

"I've made contact with the Coast Guard!"

"Thank God!"

"They want me to relay your vessel's condition."

"Switch up!" We continued on channel seventy-eight. "Did you tell them about the mosquitoes ?" Standard procedure for the Coast Guard was to find out if the boat could come to them. I wanted to know how much Sky had told them.

"I thought they would think I was crazy or hysterical. No. I only told them you were in distress."

"Did you tell them about the bodies?" "Not yet!"

"OK! Tell them that I found two bodies board. Tell them I can't get the engine started. That's true with all these mosquitoes but, don't tell them that. They won't believe you about the mosquitoes . I need help. Some body has to come here. If I'm wrong about the mosquitoes killing these people then this is a crime scene and the boat should stay here."

Back on twenty-two, the Coast Guards working channel, I heard Sky, "U.S. Coast Guard. This is First Novel again. Dansk Mar is unable to get engine started. They advise that there are two bodies aboard and request assistance."

Dead air.

Then Sky's voice, "Just inside the mouth of Little Shark River. Do you copy?"

Dead air.

"Aaron? Are you on twenty-two?"

"Yes!"

"The Coast Guard says they are contacting the Monroe County Sheriff's Department. We are to stand by."

"Where are you, Sky?"

"Just past Cape Sable."

"Can you find a place to anchor? I don't want you to get out of radio contact with me."

"Yes. I will anchor. Stay on twenty-two."

"Roger that!"

"First Novel out!"

"This is Dansk Mar, standing by on channel twenty-two" It was just a matter of time now before some kind of help arrived. I swatted more mosquitoes. I was tired and starting to fade. The Adrenalin from finding the bodies and then the attack of mosquitoes was starting to let me down. I decided to find some food and make myself a real breakfast. The involvement in a task would help keep me up and make the time pass.

Around 1015 I got the word. "Dansk Mar! This is the Monroe County Sheriff's patrol. Do you copy?"

"Yes! This is Dansk Mar awaiting your assistance."

"Dansk Mar, we have a report that you have two bodies aboard. Can you fill us in on how these fatalities occurred?"

Oh Boy! What do I answer to that? "I found the sloop unattended. Upon boarding I found the two bodies." I hoped that would satisfy them, at least until they got here. They asked the usual questions about boat size, color, registry, etc. I answered what I could but felt that I dared not tell them about how I thought these people were killed by mosquitoes. They would never believe me.

"Why did you board?" Uh-huh!

"I wanted to share my catch of shrimp. There was no response but the sloop was open and not secured. It looked

strange. I came aboard."

"Why didn't you contact us upon finding the bodies?" What a cretin!

"I've been trying to radio the Coast Guard or anybody else ever since yesterday afternoon. If you had been monitoring channel sixteen in this area you would have known that!" I was losing it.

"Dansk Mar, stand by." What the hell do they think I've been doing since yesterday!

"Dansk Mar.' This was Sky's voice. "The Coast Guard is dispatching a boat as well as the Sheriff's department." In other words, calm down. Help was on the way. Don't piss them off.

"Roger that, First Novel." She was right. I needed to calm down. I returned to preparing my breakfast. There was some very nice coffee in the cupboard. I found some bottled water and started the kettle. I dug out some ham and found some eggs. I may be here for a while so I might as well look to my strength. While I was searching for a fry pan I heard the noise of an engine. Since I could not see out of any of the windows I could only hope that it was a boat. After a few minutes the noise grew into the distinct sound of a helicopter.

"Dansk Mar," the voice came over channel twenty-two, "We think we have you in sight. Can you give us a visual signal?"

Yeah! I'm in the boat covered with mosquitoes ! "This is Dansk Mar. I am unable to leave the cabin. I can hear your engines, however."

"Dansk Mar, why can't you leave the cabin?"

Because of the fucking mosquitoes ! "Because I am beset by more mosquitoes than I have ever seen in my life. They are disabling! I am unable to leave the cabin. Be advised that I may have contracted whatever has killed these people and I may be a bio-hazard." They are going to think I am c-r-a-z-y!

"What disease do you think you have contracted?" I guess I got there attention with that one!

"I don't know! I suggest that you proceed with caution. But, I would really like to be rescued, if at all possible."

Silence.

"Dansk Mar," this is the Coast Guard helicopter again, "please stand by."

And just where the hell do they think I'm going?

"Roger, Coast Guard. Dansk Mar standing by."

Chapter V:

I decided to put the ham and eggs back in the icebox. I'll make due with the coffee. About 1130 I heard the sound of a boat motor. It was faint at first but as it grew louder my hopes rose. In a few moments help would be here. The motor sound grew louder. Then louder. Then louder. Then it passed very close to the hull of Dansk Mar and receded into the mangroves where I heard the boat crash into the mangroves and shore of the small island to the north.

Silence.

"Dansk Mar?" The voice of the Cost Guard radioman. "We have lost contact with the Sheriff's patrol boat. Can you

advise?"

Yeah! The son-of-a-bitch almost ran into me! "Negative, Coast Guard. I heard his engine but had no contact."

"Stand by, Dansk Mar." Yeah, I'm really going to run away!

Silence! Well not really. All the time the "Ee-ee-ee" of the mosquito population served as a background chorus for this farce. I'll say one thing: as quiet as the radio had been since yesterday, it really got busy now! The air waves came alive with transmissions. Channel twenty-two, sixteen, and probably others. Whatever had happened to the boat, I assumed was the Sheriff's launch, people were getting excited. I kinda felt left out.

"Sky?" I squeezed in between transmissions on channel twenty-two.

"Switching!" She came back loud and clear.

I couldn't remember the last channel we had talked on. Was it seventy-eight or seventy-nine? I tried channel seventy-nine. "Sky?" She was there!

"Aaron?"

"Sky, do you know what's happening?"

"No. But something happened to the Sheriff's boat!"

"Yeah! It almost hit me and it sounded like it crashed into the mangroves!"

"What happened?"

"I don't know but I think it might have been the mosquitoes."

"How are you feeling, Aaron?" She thinks I'm crazy.

"Listen, Baby, I'm fine! But something happened to the Sheriff's patrol and I think it's the mosquitoes !"

"Aaron, I'm switching back to twenty-two." She really thinks I'm crazy.

"OK. But get the hand-held and listen on sixteen also. If I want to talk to you I'll hail you on sixteen."

I wrote down the last channel we were just on so I'd know which would be our "private channel" next time. I tried to follow what was going on channel twenty-two, but the real information was on a channel shared by the Coast Guard and the Sheriff's department and not on VHF equipment. My attention was also waning due to my fatigue. I was fighting to keep from nodding off. I snapped wide awake at the mention of my name. Sky was hailing me. I switched to our next "private" channel. The clock on the nav station showed 1420.

"Aaron, someone here wants to speak with you."

"Mr. Bowe?" This was a male voice. "I am lieutenant Flannagan of the Coast Guard. I'd like to talk with you but due to the circumstances I don't want to do so over a public frequency. Do you have a cell phone?"

I told him that I didn't. There was another radio here. I thought it might be a single-side band. The labels were in German

but I could tell the frequency selection dial. I told Flannigan about it.

"OK, Mr. Bowe. The need for security is extremely important. Choose a frequency starting with your age and followed by your wife's age. Don't tell me what it is. Your wife will tell me and we can talk on that frequency."

He was very secretive. That told me he had an idea what I was going through and something drastic had happened to the Sheriff's boat.

"I don't see that frequency on the dial," I told Flannigan.

"How about if you divide that number in half?" This guy was clever.

I looked at the dial. There was no such number but, there was one if you added three. I told him so and turned on the SSB.

After some twisting of what I thought was the squelch control, I heard my name on the SSB. I adjusted the volume and something labeled "Orientierungssindfinden" (radio direction finder)

"Yes, this is Aaron Bowe."

"Stand by, Mr. Bowe" the voice told me.

"Mr. Bowe?" This sounded as if it could be the lieutenant. The voice quality was different on the SSB "I've been talking to your wife. She has filled me in on your situation. At first we thought you were a crank but considering what happened to the Sheriff's Patrol and the team we sent in, I think we'd better pay attention to what you have to say." They had sent a team in? I didn't know about that. "What did happen to the Sheriff?"

"The Sheriff patrol went in to investigate. One deputy in the boat. He reported citing your boat. Said it was covered in a gray pulsing mass. He started screaming and we never heard from him again. Our helicopter thought they saw where the patrol boat had run into the mangroves but mangroves are so thick where you are they could not confirm that."

I told Flannigan that I had heard the boat run past me and crash into the bank. I ask about the Coast Guard team. "Did you say you also sent a team in?"

"Yes. We lost radio contact with them. The last thing they told us was they were being attacked by more mosquitoes than they had ever seen before.

I heard screams in the background when the transition ended. Mr. Bowe, do you really think these mosquitoes could kill a human being?"

Boy, did I! I told Flannigan about the condition of the bodies I had found. I told him about the attack on Dansk Mar; how the mosquitoes were trying to push through the screens, how the bite was more painful than any mosquito bite I could remember. How I compared the bites on me to the bites on the skin and in the mouth of the dead people. I told him another thing: there was still no odor from the bodies. They were mummified as if all the fluids had been removed from them.

Flannigan thanked me. Wanted me to stand by on the SSB. I asked him how Sky was. He assured me that, other than her concern, she was fine. The Coast Guard had a boat anchored beside First Novel and would keep someone with Sky until this was over with. He did not need to tell me that that end may not include my wife and I reuniting; he didn't need to. I listened to the silence for a while. Sixteen was silent and the SSB was silent. Something else was silent too. There was no "Ee-ee-ee" sound from outside Dansk Mar. The mosquitoes may be in a inactive mode, just as when I first entered Little

Shark River yesterday. Was it only yesterday?

"Get me Flannigan!" I was on the SSB. When he came on I told him that it was silent now. For some reason the mosquitoes had a "quiet period". If this was true, could, no, would, he send someone to get me out?

"What do you suggest?" I sensed caution in his voice.

"Maybe there is something that triggers the quiet period. I don't know what it is nor how long it is. It was, oh, maybe two hours from the time I entered the River and boarded Dansk Mar. We've spent maybe ten or fifteen minutes talking. If the mosquitoes were as bad as the Coast Guard patrol says they could see that from the helicopter. Right? Have the copter do a fly over. If the boat looks clear, the copter could haul me up. What do you think?"

"It'll take a good half-hour. That's if the copter is fueled and ready to go." They were in the area two hours ago looking for the Coast Guard patrol. OK. He'll try it. Stand by.

Chapter VI:

Rescue was on the way. I told myself not to get my hopes up. Something would go wrong. But, I could not help it. My spirits started to rise. I wanted a bath. I wanted a good meal and, most of all, I wanted to see Sky. I waited. A half-hour passed. I waited. Forty-five minutes passed. I stopped waiting.

"Flannigan?! What's going on?"

"We're waiting for a word on the copter. It seems that some Cubans in a sinking wooden boat have washed up on a reef off of Indian Key. I'm sorry. They have women and children aboard. As soon as the copter is free and refueled we'll try to get back with you. It's priorities."

Damn! Like I said: something would happen. I paced the cabin. Sky came on the VHF radio. We talked. She was in tears the whole time. I got madder all the time I talked to her. Finally, I reached a point where I was really pissed-off.

"Sky? Can I get back to you? I gotta do something."

"OK. I'll be waiting on sixteen."

Time was slipping by. I figured that I had at least a two hour window. Over an hour of that had gone. I was getting out of here. The worst that could happen is that I'd have a quick death; the best was that I'd get out. Right now I figured the odds were in my favor. I covered myself as best I could. Maybe on the way out I could pick up the net hood I had dropped in the cockpit yesterday. I stood by the companionway with my heart pounding. I waited. Could I do it? I stepped into the galley, found the bottle of vodka and took a big drink. Without pausing I slid back the hatch. What seemed like millions of mosquitoes fell on me. I froze in horror, expecting death to come in excruciating pain. It did not. The mosquitoes were all dead! I didn't waste time removing the hatch boards. I climbed out into the cockpit. There were pockets of dead mosquito bodies here and there. Nowhere could I see my net hood but, I wasn't going to waste time looking for it. I was over the side and into Residual and had the engine cranked in a heart beat. I untied and headed for sea as fast as I could go. So far I had not seen any live mosquitoes. The tank on my dink holds two gallons. The little five-horse Nissan was very fuel efficient and I knew I had over half a tank of gas. I could go at least an hour, maybe more at full throttle. I told myself that I would throttle back when I got farther from land. How far that would be, I didn't think about. I headed south-west in the late afternoon light. The five-gallon bucket of shrimp was still in the dink but it no longer contained the squirming delicious shrimp I had left last night. The little shrimp were desiccated and dry inside their shells. The mosquitoes has sucked every bit of fluid from them. What should be a mass of stinking rotting shrimp was a bucket of

shells and dried flesh. There was little odor, if any at all.

I regretted not thinking to bring water with me. I was very thirsty. The air seemed cool after the heat of the cabin on Dansk Mar. But I had sweat out a lot of fluid and I felt weak and the thirst was almost disabling. The mangroves were just a line on the horizon now. I decided to risk throttling back some, but not too much. My survival instincts started up again. I should have told them I was going to make a break. No one knew I was out here. What happens when I run out of fuel? Will I be pushed right back into the mangroves and into the mosquitoes by the tide and winds?

Should I turn back? Get on the radio. Let them know what I'm doing and run again, this time into the path of a rescue party? No! That would be stupid. Keep what I've gained. Use it. Go with it. First, thing of importance is put distance between me and the land. Second, survive the night. I won't starve, even though I haven't eaten since last night. Thirst would be more of a problem. Don't run out of fuel. Make a decision about what might be a safe distance, conserve fuel for when you might need it later. I even throttled back more as I thought my plan through. Too bad I didn't think to bring the flashlight. It would help for signaling during the night. I would have to rely on the Coast Guard to search for me. God, I hope I haven't made my situation worse! Take an inventory. What do you have on the dink that can be of use?

I had oars. I would have to rely on them when the fuel ran out. I had a small anchor and line. If I was sure I was a safe distance from shore I could use that to hold my position so I wouldn't be washed back towards land, or away from it, as a matter of fact. I had my knife in my pocket. I had the bucket of shrimp. I can't imagine eating them but, who knows? As long as they don't stink I'll keep them aboard. I have the five-gallon bucket. If it rains I can catch water. I have a set of running lights that I keep on First Novel for operating the dink at night. Unfortunately, they are still on First Novel. Don't waste time on what you don't have. What else do I have? I have my pants, shirt, hat, shoes, and sox, even underwear. I have the fuel tank, the engine and that's it. No that's not it. I also have the shrimp net. What's the depth? What's the bottom? Can I fish for live shrimp out here? That would give me a source of moisture. I suddenly throttle all the way back and kill the engine. I must test the air for mosquitoes. I can also try the depth of the water. I have fifty feet of line on the little anchor. I sit motionless for a long time. I wait for the pain of a mosquito bite. It doesn't come. Either I am far enough out or the mosquito swarm is still inactive. I drop the anchor over the side. The anchor stops falling. I have about twenty feet still in my hands. Water depth is about thirty feet here. Too deep for shrimping and diving. But I can make the anchor hold. As long as the sun is up I can tell which direction is which. After it becomes dark I'll have to see if I can spot a star or something to keep my direction. Otherwise, I'll have to anchor for the night. Unfortunately, I don't know a lot about the heavens. I can spot the North Star at home. But, here there are so many stars that can be seen. The north star, which is not very bright, in comparison, may not stand out enough for me to find it. One time, on a sailing trip to the Bahamas, I tried to spot the north star at night. I couldn't do it. It was lost among all the millions of stars that are visible there but not in Central Florida.

I checked my fuel supply. About a third of a tank left. I was starting to feel hot again. Should I take some of these clothes off? I decided to strip down to my undies and start rowing to the south. I could make some progress while I could tell the direction. All I had to do was keep the line of land to my right. As I rowed I would stop whenever I got tired and check the depth of the water. The sun slowly went down and the darkness surrounded me. Venus popped up over the mangroves. But, Venus is a planet and moves as the night progresses: not a good point to follow. I couldn't remember if there was a moon. If there was it could make it harder to see the North Star. On the other hand, I might be able to see the glow of lights from Marathon or, hell, even Miami. They would be a non-moving reference point I could use. If the moon was up and full, I might not be able to see these, though.

I rowed some more. In a way it felt good. I was no longer locked up in that hot cabin with two dead people. In a way it was scary. This place is really, really remote and to not have any lights to be seen for an entire three hundred and sixty degree sweep of the horizon is unnerving.

I tried not to think of my remoteness. The Coast Guard was just over the horizon. My wife was anchored just over the horizon. Lets see, she had gone about two hours before making radio contact. That would be a maximum of ten to twelve nautical miles. I might be able to row that during the night, if I can keep my strength up.

I saw a pinpoint of light to the south. It was heading north from Marathon. It was coming fast. It passed way to east of me, over the mangroves. It was a helicopter. I guess the Coast Guard had finished rescuing the Cubans and had sent the

copter back to search for me. I could also guess that no contact from me for the last several hours had freaked them and maybe introduced a renewed urgency. I knew Sky would be frantic. The copter disappeared to the north. Had I really come that far? There might be boats. I may hear them. But, in the darkness I could not get their attention and they would pass me by. I was not concerned that they would over run me; I was too far to the west. Or, maybe not. The Coast Guard may be so afraid of the mosquitoes that they would stay far out from land. If that was the case, then there was a chance they would over run me.

"Did you feel a bump?" I could hear one Coastguardsman say to another. "I wonder what it was?" "No, I didn't feel anything. Probably just your imagination." And there I'd be, floating in the water hanging on to the pieces of my Boston Whaler.

I decided that I had to listen carefully. If I heard a boat I would make all the noise I could. Something gently touched my foot! I couldn't see anything in the darkness. I reached down and felt around. I found a can rolling against my foot as the boat rocked in the water. I picked up and recognized the spray can of DEET. "Where were you when I needed you?" I addressed the can out loud. I secured the can for when and if I needed it.

I continued rowing.

In the darkness the odor around me changed. The air was becoming heavy with moisture. It would soon start condensing around me. My desire for water intensified.

I rowed.

I fell into a monotonous rhythm. I don't know how much time had passed but I discovered almost everything, even my skin, was covered with a thin coat of condensation. I started licking. I licked everything I could. I didn't care what it tasted like. I needed moisture. I probably took in as much salt as I did water. I didn't think about that. I thought about spreading out my clothes to catch more water. I could wring them out into my mouth.

But I had sprayed my clothes with DEET. I could end up poisoning myself. I could see the headlines in the Miami Herald: "Dead man found afloat in small boat in Florida Bay. Died of DEET poisoning."

I rowed.

"J'oo nee tinny hep?"

I jerked awake at my oars. I looked into a bright light and heard the subdued put-put-put of an outboard engine at idle.

"Yoo awl rite, fellah?" The voice was disembodied and seemed to come from the light itself.

"Water!" At least I attempted to ask for water. What came out of my mouth was unintelligible even to me. I choked and sputtered and tried to gather enough moisture in my mouth to speak. "I need some water." This time it came out. At least I understood what I said. The light wavered around. I made out a figure around the light. Then the beam swung to the interior of an aluminum boat loaded with fishing gear.

The figure leaned over and handed me an old plastic jug. I drank heavily.

"Thank you. What are you doing out here?"

"I'm fishin'. More t' thuh point, what tha hell 're yoo doin' out here? Yoo look perdy tuckered."

"You can't stay out here!" I warned him. I told him about how bad the mosquitoes were. I did not go into detail about the

dead people.

"Is that whot all that Coast Guard stuff is? Warnin' everbody t' stay clear of this area. A bunch a skeeters? Man I gotta make a livin'!"

"I gotta get to where my wife is anchored. She's somewhere off the channel south of Cape Sable."

"I come clear 'round there. Lotta Coast Guard. I reckon I found ya so now I gotta save yure ass. Climb aboard; I'll take yoo there."

I did not need a second invitation. I climbed aboard and tied Residual to the stern cleat. Before I knew it we were speeding through the water towards the east.

"Yoo was perdy far out ta be talkin' 'bout skeeters."

"I guess the tide must have carried me out. What time is it?" As he looked at his watch I noticed that the fishing gear was not much used.

There were two radios mounted under the dash, a VHF and SSB. On the seat was a hand-held radio that did not look like a marine band. In the dash was mounted a depth sounder but I did not see a fish-finder. Most fishermen who are into electronics have fish-finders. A fish-finder can be used as a depth sounder as well as show schools of fish. The landing net was too clean and I bet if I smelled it, it would smell as new as when it came from the sporting goods store.

"Pert neer five 'clock" my rescuer said. "Tide's been fallin' last four hours. Yoo sez yoo wuz ta Lil' Shark River?"

Maybe I had told him that, maybe I didn't. I had taken him for what he had appeared to be, a cracker fisherman. Now I had my doubts. He could be a scout for smugglers. We were heading to the east, so maybe my worst fears were not coming true.

"Yeah," I told him. If he knew already there was no reason to conceal the fact.

"Tide's brung ya a long way then." Maybe it was an innocent question, after all. I relaxed a little.

"Name's Buddy Davis." A calloused hand poked my chest.

"Aaron Bowe." His hand shake was firm.

"Say! There's a writer felluh by that name. I read some of his books. I don't s'pose yure him?"

What could I say? Of course I'm him! "Yes. I am."

"Well Gah'damn! I'm mighty proud ta meet ya." He insisted on shaking my hand again. "That there Ee-gyp-shun one was a good un. I read it twy-st. You made it sound like yoo was really there."

As Buddy blathered on, I couldn't help but feel pride in what I had written. More down to earth I saw Cape Sable off to our left. Buddy made a wide sweeping turn to the right towards Marathon.

"Yure wife is anchored a couple miles South."

How did he know? I'm sure I hadn't told him that much. But then he continued, "I spoke t' 'er 'bout midnight. I'm undercover with the Sheriff's Department. 'Twas myh friend that bought it up ther' with yoo.

Flannigan sent me out ta look fer yuz. Didn't know if yoo wuz et up or what."

It was a relief to find out who this guy was. More relief to see the anchor light of First Novel hove into view. As we got closer, I could see several smaller boats anchored around her. There was also a Coast Guard patrol boat tied up to her.

The next thing I know Sky is hugging my neck, people are shaking my hand and I have an immense feeling of coming home. Davis and a Coast Guard officer, I later find out is Flannigan, are together on the deck of the patrol boat talking. There are medical people taking my pulse, temperature and inspecting the many bites all over my body (and I mean all over). Sky is alternately grinning and crying. Eventually, Flannigan comes aboard and, after introducing himself, fills me in on the state of things.

Upon first getting my wife's distress call, Flannigan admitted to being skeptical. Either my wife was being hysterical or a prank was being played.

With the loss of the deputy and, later, the Coast Guard crew, the situation was starting to look serious. That's when Flannigan and I had the heart to heart on the SSB. Then I stopped communicating and everyone thought that I too had been overcome by the mosquitoes. That was when the entomologist, from the University of Florida had been called in. And that was only a little over twelve hours ago. Seems that two of these experts were already in Marathon, found in a bar. They were sobered up and brought to the scene right away. They seemed to have some knowledge of the situation already and, when pressed by questions, related the story of a batch of genetically altered mosquitoes that were being studied in, of all places, Little Shark River.

It seems these guys had brought a bunch of altered bugs down here and had them housed in a screen enclosure to study them in that environment. One of the researchers had accidentally torn a screen on the enclosure while swatting the indigenous mosquitoes. You guessed it. Before the researchers could mend the tear, the entire population of the screened enclosure escaped to the wild. That was two weeks ago. The new bugs interbred with the local mosquito population and produced a new, much more aggressive strain. The bite was much more painful also. It also seems that the head researcher back at Gainesville also knew of this new strain of mosquito. He had advised the Health Department but somehow the word never reached the rest of the population of the State. The whole Entomology Department, including the two sheepish-faced field researchers, were anxious to help and were glad that they were now being taken serious. Plastered with some kind of medication that eased the discomfort of the bites, I passed out into a deep sleep, content to be alive and safe aboard First Novel again. When I awoke, around 1640, Sky prepared me a large meal, with lots of iced tea. I think there were a couple of beers in there, also.

Flannigan and Davis joined us just before dark. All the bodies had been recovered. All were in the same condition of the couple in Dansk Mar, desiccated and covered with tiny dark spots. "In sides ther' noses an' mouths," Davis told us, "evin in their eers!"

"The bodies will all go for autopsies," Flannigan said. "You two can go on with your vacation whenever you like."

"I'd sure like to know the autopsy results." I said. You never know, I might decide to write about all this. "No problem," Flannigan answered as he handed me a card with his name and phone number, "Just contact me. I don't think this thing will be classified or anything. Besides you kinda already know about it."

I didn't really need the autopsy results. Sky and I had been to Little Shark River once before. The mosquitoes there were so unbelievably thick that they covered every inch of our boat. The white fiberglass had been gray with all the mosquitoes. When I went to haul the anchor, even though I was dressed from head to toe, mosquitoes covered my body and found ways inside my clothing. The bite of these mosquitoes was surprisingly mild. I easily understood that when bitten by the more aggressive, genetically altered mosquitoes, with a painful bite, the natural tendency for anyone would be to slap at them, maybe even gasp, as the mosquitoes flew up their noses, in their ears and, into the mouth. Once inside these orifices the mosquitoes continued to bite, putting the victim in more frightening pain. As the tender tissues inflamed and started to swell, panic took over, the victim lost control and continued to swat, choke, scratch and, probably cry out. All of this allowing more mosquitoes to bite until the victim passed out. The mosquitoes would continue to bite until all fluid was sucked from the victim's body. Somewhere in this gruesome process death occurred. Being depleted

of fluids, the body would not putrefy in the normal way; it would turn into something resembling a mummy. I imagined the terrible death the Danish couple had gone through. I had not learned their names. I knew nothing about them except the manner of their deaths. By the time they wrapped themselves in their blankets to protect themselves, it was too late. Their deaths were begun. They had no warning and no way to prepare for what had happened to them.

The weather system that had moved through the keys was past. Sky and I sailed on to Marathon. What would be done to eradicate the aggressive mosquitoes was yet to be worked out; or, maybe mankind would have to learn to live with another screw-up from messing with nature, such as killer bees and AIDS. For now this man and this woman relaxed in the beauty of the day, the scene and, the boat.

Sky had suggested that in the future, when we sail south again, should we not by-pass Florida Bay and, especially, Little Shark River?

I agreed with her.

