

# **FILTER FEEDERS**

**Ray Aldridge**

**Fantasy and Science Fiction (January, 1994)**

*Ray Aldridge returns to F&SF after too long an absence. He is now the proud father of three children. The new baby took some time away from his writing, but he promises more short work in the future*

*Recently his short fiction has received quite a bit of acclaim, with two Nebula finalists under his belt. He has also written three novels, published by Bantam Books*

*"Filter Feeders" is not hard sf. Instead it is one of the most delicately written dark fantasies we have published.*

The Heron Hunted The water's edge. Across the inlet the sun's red disk settled to the rippled line of the dunes. Minnows flickered in the darkening water, tasty silver life, quickly receding. The heron gave all his attention to his hunting, crouching on stick legs, head low, snaky neck drawn back for the strike.

The sailboat ghosted in on the dying evening breeze, sails rattling softly. The heron glanced up for a moment—sometimes humans threw him stale bait, sometimes they tried to hit him with beer bottles—but the human steering the boat seemed a motionless lump, neither promising nor dangerous.

There in the water, a twisting gleam moved slowly enough that the heron knew he could catch it, and he moved forward with a quick jerking stride, his neck tensing.

But as his beak stabbed, a consuming sensation broke over him, a memory of frightening power. He found himself back in the rookery, the night filled with the squawk and rustle of the others, the scent of the pines, the faint purple glow of the Coast Guard station's lights filtering through

the trees.

He felt some strong emotion—a human might have called it happiness—remembering a thousand such nights along the bay. He felt it with an intensity far beyond the natural capacity of his primitive brain.

Memories flowed through him: mornings waiting with the other herons on the concrete footings of the bridge, watching for delicacies riding in on the tide. Walking a weathered dock, sun warm on his feathers. Flying against sunset skies, high in the pure air. And countless other remembrances, all clothed in some precious subtle perfection.

He remembered the nest, a heap of sticks in the girders of a range marker. He felt with an undiminished intensity the warmth of his mother's down, the satisfaction of tearing at his first fish, the fearful delight of leaving that safe haven.

At the very last he felt a suffocating pleasure, as he broke from the darkness of the egg into the world of light and experience.

The heron finished his strike, beak slicing into the water. The long neck relaxed, the body fell forward, empty of life.

The boat's rippling wake rolled the heron's corpse gently against the sand, and from the cabin came a sound like a sob, or a laugh.

For the longest time, Teresa continued to believe she was on the brink of glorious change. Soon. Next year, at the latest. Or if not then, the year after.

By her thirty-sixth year, she'd grown less hopeful. That summer she came to the Gulf and took a job waiting tables at The Bugeyed Sailor in Destin.

Just as the sun went down an old white-hulled ketch sailed into the harbor. Teresa watched from the outside deck of the Bugeyed Sailor, where she was serving a pair of drunk Louisiana businessmen.

The ketch might have been graceful once, but now it was an old shoe, scuffed and worn. It fetched up on the far side of the harbor, so Teresa couldn't tell much about the person who went forward to drop the anchor, moving like an invalid, with slow exaggerated care. Over the clatter of crockery, she heard the chain rattle out. The person stood motionless on the foredeck.

The light was fading and the boat seemed suddenly unreal, its outlines a little misty.

"Hey, honey," said one of the Boys from Baton Rouge, breaking into her imaginings. "How 'bout a few more of these 'uns?" He waved at the empty beer bottles clustered on the table.

"Right away, sir," she chirped, and that was the last notice she took of the boat, that night.

The Bugeyed Sailor clung to a piece of prime harbor waterfront in Destin, the Luckiest Fishing Village in the World.

The Bugeyed Sailor, while it might not actually have been the worst restaurant between Pensacola and Carrabelle, was surely the most notorious. The food was dreadful, but the ambience was worse.

The owner was an obese middle-aged troll who worked hard at augmenting his restaurant's notoriety. Every night the Sailorman dressed up in his stained Popeye costume—a costume the size of a tent but still a little tight. He would admire the obscene tattoos on his huge forearms, he would adjust the tiny hat that clung to his bald head, and then he would work the room. He would move among the tables, trailing a cloud of body odor, leering at the pretty women and the handsome children, slapping the men on the back, asking if all was well and moving on before he had to hear the answer. At unpredictable intervals he would burst into song. He knew only one tune, but many verses. "Oh, I'm Bugeye the Sailorman. I live in a garbage can..." he would sing, in a fairly good tenor. Or, "I love to go swimming'. With bow legged wimmin. I'm Bugeye the Sailorman." Occasionally some unamused child would ask him why he didn't use the right name. "Popeye stole my song" he would say with a ferocious, green-toothed grin, making his eyes bug out in an illustrative manner.

He played the lunatic genial host until closing. Then he would revert to his true form, the cunning brutal peasant. The help called him Bugger the Sailorman...the phrase also served as a satisfying epithet, to be muttered at every opportunity. The Sailorman's employees left the instant they could land a job elsewhere, which was why he had hired Teresa so readily, despite her obvious inexperience. And also she was still a somewhat attractive woman, not too old, and completely unattached—just the sort of person the Sailorman liked to keep under his dirty thumb. She'd have quit, but summer—and the tourist season—was ending, so the other area businesses were scaling back. Jobs were hard to find.

That night the Sailor man had devoted himself to harassing Nancy, a waitress who was younger and prettier than Teresa. Teresa's relief was tempered with a pang of guilt...poor Nancy. Then she looked at the Sailor man and thought: better her than me.

After closing, when the chairs were stacked on the tables and she'd given the busboy his share of her tips, she went home to her little room at the Golden Dunes Motel and Cottages. She watched an old movie and drank a cream soda, listening to the creaky whir of the window air-conditioner.

After the movie was over, she performed her bedtime ritual. With other women, she knew, this involved the application of various beautifying substances—but Teresa had largely abandoned hope in that area, as in so many others. Instead she got out her inheritance from her mother, a bottle of Nembutal. She contemplated it, while assessing her resolve. She sighed and thought about her mother.

If only that long-suffering person were still alive, Teresa would still be living at home, still taking the occasional course at the local college. Teresa's faith in glorious change might still be intact. But in fact her mother had died and left her nothing much but the Nembutal, which was so far past its expiration date it probably couldn't do the job anymore.

Just before she fell asleep, she thought of the old ketch, and felt a vague envy for its crew, thinking of all the lovely romantic places the boat must have visited.

Late the next morning she went to her part-time job at the Shipshape Chandlery. Her other boss, Bob Johnson, greeted her cheerfully. Bob was as attractive as the Sailor man was repellent, a tall athletic man with white-blonde hair and the mahogany complexion of Nordics who spend too much time in the sun. Bob would probably be crusty with skin cancer some day, but presently he seemed overwhelmingly healthy. And happily married. Ah well, she'd thought, when he'd told her about his wonderful wife.

"So, how's the novel going?" he asked, as he did faithfully every time he saw her.

"Coming along," she lied, just as faithfully.

"Good, good." He went to the back and began unpacking a shipment of

stainless fittings.

For all his regular polite inquiries, Bob no longer attempted to engage her in serious conversation regarding her alleged novel. She supposed that by now he understood her well enough.

In fact she owned a portable electric typewriter, a box of typing paper, several hundred pages of notes, and an opening chapter. At increasingly lengthy intervals she got out the opening chapter and retyped it, but she'd long ago realized she was never going to grow up and be Joyce Carol Oates. In the first place, nothing had ever happened to her, so what could she write about? Also, she lacked self-discipline. Luck. Talent. And all the other necessary stuff.

No, she was just one of the multitudes who use an imaginary writing career as an excuse for not having a life. She'd once said, in a burst of rare passion, to someone who didn't care: "When you're sliding downhill toward middle age and you work at shit jobs and you live in motels and you have no lover or child or friend, people want to know why. It's nice to have a halfway plausible excuse. And when you have no lover or child or friend, no one's going to care enough about you to try to correct your delusions. It works out fine."

Early in the afternoon she took her break in Bob's upstairs office, which had a fine view out over the harbor. As she sipped her coffee, she again noticed the old ketch, which had either moved or dragged anchor during the night, so that it was now much closer to the mainland side of the harbor.

Teresa could clearly see the woman who emerged from the main hatchway. She had short hair as white as Bob's, and at first Teresa thought it was white-blonde like his. She seemed young, despite the lethargic way she moved. She was thin and brown, she wore stylishly ragged cutoffs and a bathing suit top.

She boarded an old wooden dinghy and began to row ashore. She paused frequently, leaning on her oars as if catching her breath; this added to Teresa's impression that the woman was ill. Finally her dinghy grounded on the strip of dirty sand below the chandlery.

When the woman looked up, Teresa felt a little shock, though not of recognition, the woman was a stranger. Perhaps it was her unusual looks, which were not entirely lost. Actually, Teresa thought, with reluctant

admiration, she was still striking, with sweeping brows and large dark eyes. Her mouth was still wide and rich, her cheekbones dramatic, her skin unwrinkled.

She gazed at Teresa with what seemed a wistful expression. Teresa was abruptly uncomfortable, but she waved, and instantly the woman looked away.

She was at the counter by the time Teresa returned from her break.

"Can you help me?" The white-haired woman had a low soft voice and opaque eyes.

"Sure," Teresa said. "What do you need?"

The woman fumbled a wadded slip of paper from her pocket. She read from it, squinting slightly. She wanted a hundred feet of half-inch dacron braid, a tube of bedding compound, bulbs for the running lights, shaft zincs...and a dozen other items.

"Long list. Been out for a while?" Teresa asked, as she measured out the rope.

"Yes...it seems that way." The woman's eyes went a little cloudier.

"Where'd you come from?"

Her eyes never seemed to meet Teresa's directly, after that first time. Now her gaze slid away, she seemed to be studying the stuffed marlin over the Chandlery's front door. "Isla Mujeres. That was our last port."

"Oh? Was it nice?" Teresa finished bundling the rope and rummaged through the zinc trays. She didn't know why she kept attempting to make conversation. The woman clearly would have preferred an entirely businesslike exchange.

"It's nicer than Cancun," the woman answered, uneasily, as if she feared that Teresa would next interrogate her on the specifics of the matter.

But Teresa wasn't bold enough to keep trying. She gathered up the rest of the items and put them in two cardboard boxes. The woman paid, then stood looking at the boxes in perplexity. "I guess I'll make two trips," she said.

"I'll help you," Teresa said, and took the heavier box. Her customer

seemed surprised, but smiled dimly.

"Thank you. You're very kind," she said, as though Teresa were doing her a great favor.

Teresa helped the woman load her boxes into the dinghy, and her uncertain movements reinforced the impression that she was ill. She touched Teresa's bare arm lightly, thanked her again.

Teresa felt an inexplicable urge to prolong the acquaintance, such as it was. "Are you staying long? In Destin, I mean?"

The white head shook. "Just a few days. Until the boat's fixed, I guess."

"Is it just you and...your husband?"

"Thomas isn't my husband," the woman answered, in a voice that for the first time was almost alive. She made a strange fierce face; she looked frightened and proud at the same time.

"Oh," Teresa said uncertainly. "Well, if you decide to come ashore for dinner, I can give you some good advice."

"Thomas almost never leaves the boat."

"Is that right?" What an odd thing, Teresa thought. She wanted to ask why, but couldn't. "If you change your mind—and if you value your stomach—don't eat at the Bugeyed Sailor." She laughed. "That's where I work nights, so I know." She felt oddly giddy; she was never so easy with strangers. Only the most charming could get her to talk, and then she mistrusted them for their charm.

"Thank you for the advice," the woman said, and pushed the boat off the beach.

"I'm Teresa Martin," she said. She started to hold out her hand, then didn't, because the dinghy was already sliding away from the shore.

The woman's dark eyes grew darker. "Oh." Then just before she settled down and began to row, Teresa could have sworn she said, "I was Linda..."

Even if Teresa had misunderstood and she wasn't actually referring to herself in the past tense, Teresa had the very strong impression that Linda couldn't remember her own last name.

That night, business was even slower than usual at the Bugeyed Sailor. The Sailor was savagely bad-tempered; he fired Nancy, who had dropped a plate of rancid scallops en brochette. Nancy fled the premises, weeping and cursing, and Teresa envied her the vitality of her feelings.

She found herself out on the terrace at closing time. The ketch rode on a black mirror, unruffled by even a breath of wind. Light shone dim and golden from a line of portholes along the cabin and made a soft misty fan above a skylight. Teresa wondered what they were talking about, Linda and Thomas, those two intrepid voyagers.

The Sailor came up behind her on light little fat man's feet. Before she could turn and shrink into a defensive slump, the Sailor had pulled her against his chest and was kneading her breasts, pinching her nipples painfully: He wore his usual colognes: fish grease, old sweat, cheap rum. She twisted and railed her elbows and he let her go. "Hey," he said, with a phosphorescent grin. "Where else you gonna get some?"

"Please," she said, hating the pleading in her voice.

He shrugged and made a face, tolerant pity and infantile reproach. "Hey, just trying to help. I don't go where I'm not wanted."

Not until the next time, she thought.

As he went back inside, he said over his shoulder. "But you know, honey, if you don't get laid pretty soon, your pussy gonna scab over. That's what happens to old broads who don't keep it juicy."

In her room after a shower, lying naked in the dark, she still felt bruised and dirty where the Sailor had touched her. The can of soda rested on her stomach, making a disk of distracting cold there.

"Scab over," she said, feeling a shaky laugh trying to force itself up from her chest.

She'd had chances to avoid that fate since her arrival on the Gulf. There was the UPS driver who delivered parts to the Shipshape Chandlery, a slightly plump man in his early forties. He was very polite, he seemed reasonably worldly despite his grits-and-gravy accent. He'd asked her if she'd like to go to dinner at a nicer place than the Bugeyed Sailor. But how could she take seriously a man who wore Elvis sideburns?

Then there was the young deckhand from one of the charter boats. He'd



developed an inexplicable crush on her, even going so far as to risk the food at the Bugeyed Sailor, just so he could flirt with her. He might not have been terribly bright, but he was pretty—tall and sinewy, with clean features and china-blue eyes. But one night he'd suggested they go skinny-dipping in the harbor, and she had been so appalled at the thought of swimming in that soup of sewage and dead fish and spilled diesel that she had said something insulting, which had driven him away.

Just as well, she thought. There were terrible diseases now. And the whole business would certainly have been as messy and forgettable as it had always been in the past.

She wondered about Linda and Thomas aboard their old boat. Were they in bed, too? At least they weren't alone. She tried to imagine Thomas. A younger Sterling Hayden, perhaps, a craggy-faced seafarer who couldn't be happy unless he was sailing the blue water? No, her imagination wouldn't have it that way at all. A man who would make his sick girlfriend go ashore alone to do the shopping...he must be some sort of jerk. Did Thomas ever leave his cabin? Teresa was somehow sure it had been Linda who had anchored the boat, that first evening.

Now she was picturing some sort of pale subterranean creature, and she had to laugh. A sea-going vampire. But Linda hadn't seemed anemic, exactly. Mentally anemic? No. Something else. She couldn't put a word to it.

Teresa suddenly felt very tired. She set her soda can aside and pulled up the sheet.

As she drifted into sleep, half-dreams floated up, briefly vivid. Linda, naked, beautiful opaque eyes rolling, mouth open, thin legs wrapped around an amorphous male figure, which plunged into her as tirelessly and forcefully as a slow-motion piston. Linda clawed at her lover, bared her teeth in a grimace of ecstasy or pain.

The image faded, and she dreamed of the old boat riding serenely at anchor, white hull glowing in the shoreside lights. The boat moved to the rhythm of the man-piston, the rolling hull began to generate small ripples. The dim anchor light at the top of the mainmast arced back and forth across the starless sky and the waves spread out over the glassy black water of the harbor.

"Love waves," Teresa murmured, and even at the threshold of sleep, she

was envious.

Linda came into the Chandlery again the next afternoon, and Teresa felt a strange embarrassment, remembering her imaginings in the night.

"I need some flax packing," Linda said in her small voice. "Quarter inch."

Teresa went to get it. When she came back to the counter, Linda was leaning against the counter, looking as though her eyes were about to roll back in her head. Her tan had gone gray, her hands clutched the countertop, white-knuckled.

Teresa darted around the counter and held her up. She was astonishingly light.

Teresa helped her to a bench in the back, settled her there. "Put your head down," she said, and ran to fetch a paper cup of water from the cooler.

When she returned, Linda had dropped her head between her knees, and her trembling hands were interlaced over the nape of her slender bony neck. After a while she took a shuddering breath and sat up. She sipped the water, smiling wanly. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Have you been to a doctor?"

Linda looked vaguely alarmed. "It's nothing, I'm sure. Maybe the heat, the humidity. I'm not used to it, I guess."

Sure, thought Teresa. Linda had just sailed from Isla Mujeres, almost 600 miles south of Destin, right off the Yucatan coast...definitely a cooler, dryer climate.

"Maybe you're hungry," Teresa suggested.

Bob was gracious. "Go ahead," he said, giving Linda a brilliant smile, more charming than any smile he'd ever given Teresa. "Take your time, have a good lunch." Teresa felt another illusion crumble. Happily married Bob.

They walked across the highway to a ferny sandwich shop, where Linda showed a respectable appetite.

"Are you a sailor?" Linda asked after a while, dutifully sociable—or so it

seemed to Teresa.

"No. Actually, I've never done anything."

"Really?" Linda seemed wistful. "I always said the same thing."

Teresa found this difficult to accept. "I guess that was before you sailed away." Teresa felt a hot pang of resentment. By what right did an attractive adventurer like Linda claim an empty existence? That was Teresa's personal territory.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"But since then you've led a life of wild excitement?"

"In a way." Linda was almost whispering.

For a long time after they were finished with their lunch, they sat there in uncomfortable silence. Teresa eventually concluded that Linda was unwilling to return to the glare and heat of the afternoon. "Well, I suppose I ought to be getting back to work," she said, tentatively.

Linda gave a tiny start, as though she had been sleeping with her eyes open. "I'm sorry. I was just thinking about what you said."

This was an unexpected flattery. Teresa raised her eyebrows.

"Actually," Linda went on, "the sailing isn't all that exciting, to be honest. Seen one wave, seen 'em all." A wounded smile. "And I get seasick."

"Why do you do it?" Teresa was very curious. She might have described her job at the Bugeyed Sailor in much the way Linda had described her life of high adventure. Seen one businessman from Louisiana, seen'em all. And the grease fumes made her sick.

Linda hesitated. "It's Thomas," she finally said.

"Oh," said Teresa, in deep disappointment. She took the check and slid to the edge of the booth, determined to get away before she had to hear a catalog of the mysterious Thomas's virtues. She didn't think she could stand it; she might scream, she might gag, she might run away and lose all dignity.

But Linda was oblivious. "Thomas made me appreciate my life. He

made me understand that it hadn't been empty at all. That it had been as full as anyone's, as joyful as anyone's."

Teresa heard an ambiguous and eerie undertone in Linda's voice; she was startled from her annoyance. She couldn't think of a thing to say.

Nancy had been replaced by an ancient chain-smoking harridan and Teresa came to the uneasy realization that she was now the most nubile member of the Sailor's crew. He watched her with a more-than-usually speculative eye, and contrived to rub his grubby bulk against her several times in the narrow aisle by the steam table; each time he adopted an expression of lascivious expectation that would have been ludicrous had it not been so frightening.

But at closing time he became embroiled in a near-brawl with a customer who'd found a sauteed roach in his chicken fingers. "You think I don't know what you're up to?" the Sailor shouted. "You think you don't pay? You pay!"

The discussion became so acrimonious that the Sailor never got around to molesting Teresa, and she slipped gratefully away.

Tomorrow would be her night off; she wouldn't have to deal with the Sailor for two whole days. Maybe he'd hire another pretty young woman in the interim and be diverted. Otherwise she'd have to quit, tough job market or not.

At the Chandlery, Bob set her to inventorying the stock in a rarely used storeroom and she spent the morning in dusty solitude. Occasionally she wondered about the white-haired woman and her mysterious lover Thomas. She felt an unaccustomed optimism; she told herself that her curiosity was a good sign. Perhaps it meant that her vocation was stirring after its long hibernation, perhaps she might revive her "career." She thought about attempting a short story, perhaps a small polemic on the dependent women who sailed around the world with their men...unhappy and always complaining, but never brave enough to leave their uncomfortable adventure.

She set her inventory sheet aside and considered the idea. Aside from the unusual setting, what would distinguish the story from the graduate

student fiction that flooded the little magazines at the end of every semester? Women as willing victims, as whining appendages to men.

She felt her enthusiasm wane; she sighed and went back to counting turnbuckles.

A little later Linda came in on quiet feet and touched Teresa's shoulder, startling her so that she dropped her clipboard with a clatter.

"I'm sorry," Linda said, in her vague way.

"It's all right," Teresa said.

"Bob said I'd find you back here." Linda seemed quite uneasy, but her cheeks were a little flushed, her eyes were brighter, almost animated.

"Yes?"

"I told Thomas about you...about meeting you, I mean. He...we thought you might like to have dinner with us sometime. On the boat." She looked at Teresa anxiously.

Teresa found the invitation astonishing. Some of this might have shown in her face, because Linda evidently felt a need to explain further. "Thomas is a very good cook, actually." She looked away. "Thomas said you sounded very interesting."

This seemed entirely false to Teresa, who could not recall having said anything interesting to Linda. It occurred to her that perhaps she was receiving some sort of sexual invitation; Thomas sends the little woman ashore to fetch supplies, Thomas sends the little woman ashore to fetch a playmate.

"Well..." Teresa said, trying to find a polite way to refuse.

But Linda, apparently sensing her reluctance, looked stricken. "Please," she said. "It would be so nice to have a visitor. We almost never do."

Teresa softened; how many times had she been just as desperately lonely as Linda seemed to be now? "It sounds like fun. I've never dined on a yacht before. It'd be an experience."

Linda smiled a bit more vividly than Teresa would have thought she could. "That's great! Would you like to come tonight, for a late supper? I could pick you up in the dinghy after work." She seemed so eager that

Teresa became uneasy.

"Actually," Teresa said. "I'm off tonight. Could we eat early? Before dark? I had plans for later." She didn't, of course, but the lie might rescue her if the mysterious Thomas was planning on dinner and deviance. Besides, she wanted to meet him in the sunlight, just to be sure he wasn't a vampire.

Linda seemed pleased, which didn't necessarily reassure Teresa—perhaps the white-haired woman wasn't as sexually adventurous as her lover.

After Linda left, Teresa felt a little silly. All this sexual paranoia...what did it mean? Maybe the Sailorman had some grasp of her situation after all, despite his grotesque turn of phrase.

What an awful idea, she thought, with a little shudder.

Bob let her off early so she could go back to the motel and get ready. She showered, then put on a long loose white skirt and an aqua blouse—appropriate dress, she hoped, for dinner and a dinghy ride.

Linda met her on the beach behind the Chandlery. "You look nice," Linda said, with such an air of satisfaction that Teresa became uncomfortable, her suspicions stimulated again.

She got her sandals wet helping Linda launch the dinghy, but the ride out to the boat was uneventful and silent. Linda seemed to need all her strength to keep them moving, though the breeze was light.

They approached the old ketch and for the first time Teresa could see the boat's name, painted in faded gilt across the wineglass stern. Rosemary, she was called. Thomas could have had the grace to rename the boat after his current girlfriend, Teresa thought disapprovingly. "Rosemary," she said. "Who was that?"

The dinghy bumped the topsides lightly and Linda held the rail. "Not 'who.' 'What.' The herb...you know?" She cleated the dinghy's line expertly. "I forget the exact quote; Thomas can tell you. It's something from Shakespeare, something about rosemary being for remembrance."

"Oh," said Teresa, somewhat chastened but not completely convinced. While Linda held the dinghy steady, she climbed aboard into an empty cockpit of varnished mahogany.

Still no Thomas. But on a little table by the wheel there was a silver tray; it held three frosted goblets and a plate of crackers.

"This is nice," Teresa said and to her surprise it was. Though the boat's mildewed old hull had shown a little peeling paint, whiskers of green moss at the waterline, and the occasional rust stain, the cockpit was beautifully maintained, the varnish mirror-bright, the cockpit cushions a soft blue, the old bronze wheel polished to a warm glow.

"Let's sit," said Linda. "Thomas will be up in a moment."

Teresa settled on the starboard seat and Linda handed her a goblet. The wine was pale and almost sweet. Nothing like it had ever been served at the Bugeyed Sailor. Teresa took a sip, then another, resisting the urge to gulp. Curiosity filled her.

Linda sat beside her. The white-haired woman seemed for the first time completely at ease, sipping her own wine and gazing off across the harbor. She wore her usual ragged cutoffs and a sleeveless silk blouse, blue-white against her dark tan. She made Teresa feel overdressed and dowdy, but not resentful. Linda seemed so defenseless. Teresa had seen a face like Linda's before. The memory surfaced: Teresa had met a blind man, years before, who had briefly courted her. Only in his own home did the uncertainty and tension leave him. Only in a place where every object conformed to his memory could he feel reasonably safe.

This train of thought crashed when Thomas emerged from the louvered doors of the main hatchway. Teresa's first reaction was open-mouthed amazement.

She had never seen a more beautiful man, though his beauty was quite unconventional. He climbed through the hatch with an almost unnatural grace and vaulted into the cockpit, landing so lightly that his bare feet made no sound. He nodded to Teresa and took the last goblet.

"Hello," he said, in a voice so soft that she was sure it reached only to her ears and no further. He had some sort of accent, unidentifiable.

"Hello," she replied, in a voice almost as soft; she was breathless, her lungs seemed to have forgotten their function.

Thomas had dark wavy hair shot with white streaks, a shaggy mane perfect in its artlessness. Thomas's eyes were a vivid blue-violet, the lashes so long and thick that he seemed to be wearing mascara, and the soft full

mouth contributed further to the androgynous quality of his features. But this impression was countered by his skin, mahogany dark, which seemed at first glance quite old, or at least weathered, a membrane of age over the face and body of a much younger man. The skin stretched taut and burnished over the strong bones, but with a thousand fine wrinkles in the hollows.

She tried to guess his age; it was impossible. His hands were well-shaped and youthful. He wore faded jeans and an old cotton dress shirt without buttons, the sleeves hacked off at the elbows. His bare chest was striated with wiry muscle, his forearms corded like an oyster tonger's.

He seemed to feel no need for conversation; he gazed out across the harbor, smiling a faint smile. Teresa felt a hot piercing envy for Linda, and a sudden embarrassing hope that her sexual paranoia was well-founded, after all. She tried to maintain her equilibrium, she reminded herself that this was the man she had, with complete certainty, dismissed as a jerk. That idea now seemed ridiculous; she was actually ashamed to have thought it, despite the lack of any real evidence to the contrary. The world, after all, was full of beautiful jerks.

The silence grew less comfortable for Teresa, though her hosts showed no uneasiness. She cast about for something to say—something not too depressingly banal. "So..." she said. "Is this your first visit to Destin?"

Thomas fixed her with a neutral gaze. "Yes. The harbor is good, but the holding ground is poor." He delivered this remark without any discernible emotional coloration, and Teresa thought: this is a very odd person.

"I've heard that," she said. "Bob—the guy I work for at the Chandlery—Bob says the bottom is like thin soup. Whenever Destin gets brushed by a hurricane, he says it's like Keystone Cops out here. Boats dragging back and forth, lots of yelling."

Thomas's faint smile seemed like an artifact permanently affixed to his mouth; Teresa registered the odd fact that the smile seemed to cause no related lines in Thomas's face. "There are no safe harbors in a hurricane," Thomas said, without heat, in fact without any inflection that she could detect.

"Really?"

But evidently Thomas felt no compulsion to explain his assertion. The



silence resumed, until Linda said, slowly and dreamily. "That's because of the other boats, Thomas says. No matter how well your boat is anchored, someone else won't have been so careful, and his boat will carry yours away."

It seemed to Teresa that Linda was speaking of Thomas as if he were somewhere else, far away. "That makes sense, I guess," she said. "I guess you need to be the only boat in the harbor, if you want to be safe."

Perhaps it was her imagination, but his smile seemed slightly wider. "An apt observation," he said.

Linda's smile bore an eerie resemblance to Thomas's, though only for a moment, and Teresa shivered.

Thomas stood. "The air chills. We will go down to dinner." He held out his hand to Teresa; she took it. His touch was cool, perhaps from the wine goblet, his palm calloused hard as bone.

He helped her down the companionway ladder into the boat's main cabin, and again Teresa was pleasantly surprised. The cabin seemed much larger on the inside than she would have imagined. Varnished woodwork set off white bulkheads and full bookshelves. To either side was a settee upholstered in russet. Under a gleaming brass trawler lamp, a table had been unfolded from the forward bulkhead. A linen cloth was set with white china and polished silver. She smelled lamp oil and lemons and something Savory.

"Sit," instructed Thomas, and directed her to the side of the table set with one plate.

He served the meal. The next day, Teresa would remember few of the details, since her attention was less on the meal than on the cook, but there was a salad of baby lettuces and satsuma sections, a clear soup with shreds of carrot and scallop arranged in artful swirls, pasta with a sauce of rock shrimp and mushrooms, a crusty bread that must have been freshly baked.

There was no conversation; Linda ate with an intimidating concentration and Thomas responded to Teresa's compliments with that constant smile and nothing more. Thomas ate little, seeming only to taste each course, and Teresa began to wonder if he might be ill, too.

No one asked Teresa about herself, so that she had no need to trot out

her literary pretensions.

Occasionally the boat rocked slightly in the wake of some passing vessel, a pleasant motion. It was a little warm in the cabin, and a light gilding of perspiration made Linda's face shine in the lamplight, though Thomas seemed unaffected.

Dinner finished with a pale sorbet, a sweet fruity flavor Teresa couldn't quite identify. "Guava," Linda said.

Afterwards, Thomas cleared away the dishes and served coffee in small delicate cups. "I've never had a meal like that," Teresa said. She looked at Linda with fresh eyes. Perhaps the white-haired woman was not so severely exploited as she had feared. Perhaps they just had a different division of labors than most sailing couples.

Thomas set a bottle of brandy and three shifters on the table, and Teresa noticed that the portholes had grown dark. Night had come suddenly, and again she felt a bit of apprehension. For all his beauty and culinary talent, Thomas was a very strange man, and Linda a strange woman. Still she felt a curious sense of abandon; whatever happened, it would surely be interesting. The direction of her thoughts embarrassed her. She felt a flush rising in her cheeks, she found it impossible to look directly at her hosts for a moment.

Thomas poured brandy generously. "Now, music," he said, and opened a panel, behind which Teresa could see the gleam of expensive-looking stereo components. Sound filled the cabin, some delicate arrangement of strings and woodwinds Teresa didn't recognize. She leaned back against the settee cushions, holding her brandy under her nose so that the fumes rose into her head. Closing her eyes, she drifted into a fantasy: that the glossy wood interior of the ketch was the heart of some great complicated musical instrument and that she waited at its center while it played.

Perhaps she fell asleep, because when next she opened her eyes Linda was taking the empty brandy snifter from her cramped hand and Thomas was gone. "It's very late," Linda whispered: "Stay with us."

Teresa felt a strange mixture of apprehension and anticipation...and then disappointment, as Linda continued. "We sleep in the aft cabin, but there's a single bunk in the forepeak, quite comfortable. I've made it up with fresh sheets."

"Well..."

"Please," Linda said earnestly. "I wouldn't want to take you ashore now, in the dark. After the restaurants close, the transients come out of their hiding places and walk the shoreline; did you know? I'm afraid of them; some of them seem dangerous."

"I don't want to impose," Teresa said.

"No, no," Linda said. "We want you."

But not in your bed, Teresa thought sadly.

She let Linda show her to the guest cabin, which was small but pleasant. An overhead hatch let in the cool night air and a candle lantern threw a low dappled light on the woodwork.

"Sleep well," Linda said. Teresa watched her pass back through the main cabin, pausing to blow out the trawler lamp. Moonlight shone through the skylight; the white-haired woman slid a louvered door aside and went into a deeper darkness.

The bunk was comfortable and despite her expectations Teresa fell asleep quickly.

She woke later, from some vague, possibly lustful dream, a little overheated. She lay for a few minutes before she became aware of the sounds. They were very soft: a moan of pleasure, a gasp, almost a sob. Teresa raised herself on one elbow, turning her head, the better to hear. The sounds grew a tiny bit louder, and Teresa remembered her dream of several nights past. She noticed that the boat was absolutely still, no love waves. Her imagination attempted to picture a kind of lovemaking that wouldn't rock the boat, and at once a vivid possibility occurred to her. She noticed that her throat was dry; she had apparently been panting. Her hand slipped between her legs; then she resolutely pulled it up and held it with the other, gripping it so tightly that her hands ached.

She wasn't sure why she couldn't allow herself even that simple pleasure. Stupidity, perhaps.

Eventually the sounds faded into silence and she fell asleep again.

When she woke, it was to the sensation that something was moving across her face. Her eyes opened to a painful glare. It took a moment for

her vision to clear and then she was startled to see Thomas in the tiny cabin beside her, doing something to a curtain. She gasped and he turned toward her.

"I am too late," he said. "The tinkerbelle has already disturbed you."

"What?"

He moved the curtain aside briefly, to reveal the sun shining brightly through. "The tinkerbelle. So sailors call the sunlight that comes through an uncovered port. The boat's movement causes the light to dance about; it seems always to find the faces of sleeping off-watch crew."

"I see," she said, and looking down at herself she also saw that the sheets had become disarranged, so that she was more than half-naked. She hastily covered her legs but Thomas seemed not to notice.

"I serve breakfast in the cockpit," he said, and left.

Her disappointment annoyed her. What had she expected? That Thomas would crawl into her narrow bunk and set to entertaining her? Ridiculous. Besides, even if Teresa were irresistibly desirable—a hilarious thought—his night of revelry had probably exhausted his erotic energies.

She dressed and brushed her hair in a mood of sour self-criticism.

A plate of hot cinnamon rolls waited on the cockpit table.

"There is orange juice and coffee," Thomas said in his curious neutral voice, as earnest as a cruise-ship steward.

She took a roll and a glass of orange juice, which seemed freshly squeezed. "Thank you," she said. "Where's Linda?"

"Indisposed."

"Oh no. What's wrong? Can I help?"

He looked at her with those beautiful eyes. She could not describe his expression as cold, or empty—it was simply an expression new to her and thus unclassifiable. "No, you cannot help. Not yet."

This seemed so strange a pronouncement that she was a little afraid. She nibbled at her roll and sipped her juice. She finally noticed how lovely the harbor was, in the glassy calm of morning.

"Well," she said, when she had finished. "I'd better go; today I work at the Chandler."

"Take the dinghy."

"But...how will you get it back?"

He made a gesture of dismissal. "Do not be concerned. Perhaps one of us will swim ashore. Perhaps you will return it when next you visit."

"I'm not sure you'd want to swim in the harbor," she said with a little shudder of distaste. "And I have to work at the Bugeyed Sailor tonight."

He shrugged, clearly uninterested.

As Thomas was helping her to board the dinghy, she remembered her manners and said, "Thank you for a very pleasant experience. I really enjoyed it."

"And do you remember it well?" he asked, which struck her as a very odd question.

"As well as I remember anything," she said.

This answer seemed to please him; at least his faint smile seemed stronger.

The restaurant was unusually busy, which served to keep the Sailor away for a while, but toward closing, business flagged.

A young couple full of romantic sighs lingered on the deck, holding hands and gazing deeply into each other eyes. She didn't hurry them; she sensed a big tip. She waited in the farthest corner of the deck and looked out at the Rosemary, which during the evening seemed to have shifted her anchorage. The old white ketch floated quite near, perhaps only a hundred feet off. The portholes and skylight were dark; the boat exuded an air of emptiness and disuse. Teresa fell into a mood of vague self-pity.

The tip wasn't that big, she saw with some annoyance. She didn't realize how late it had become until the lights inside went out. The Sailor came bustling out, a gleam in his bulging eyes. Her heart sank; she wondered if she were alone with him. Had the other help already gone home?

"You gotta bust the table yourself, honey," he said happily. "Busboy took

off. But just stack on the drainboard. I don't make you wash. I'm good to you, right?"

She slid away from him along the deck's rickety railing, but almost immediately saw that she had erred by moving into the corner. There the Sailor man trapped her. He squeezed her breasts painfully; his belly bent her backward over the rail. He fumbled with his pants, then he pushed his hand up the leg of her culottes and dug his dirty fingers into her. In his enthusiasm, he ripped open the inseam of her culottes. "Now you got a chance to be good to me," he said. "I'm a big tipper, too."

If she screamed, would it do any good? Or would he just break her neck and throw her into the harbor with the other garbage? If the Sailor man killed her, who would know what had happened?

A sour cheesy stink assaulted her nostrils, even worse than the Sailor man's ordinary body odor, worse than his dead-fish breath. Disgust overcame fear, and she tried to dig her fingernails into his face. But they were too short to do any real damage and he chortled tolerantly.

She was almost ready to give up, when something changed. The Sailor man sagged against her, his weight crashing the breath out of her. His fingers ceased their assault.

A long moment passed, and Teresa noticed that he'd stopped breathing. Her panic, which had briefly subsided, instantly returned. She pushed at him, but he was immovable. Would she be found asphyxiated under the Sailor man's gross corpse, two bodies hanging over the corner of the railing, an amazing spectacle for the charter boats on their way out to the Gulf? What a dreadful thought. She writhed, trying to get away.

The Sailor man drew a long shuddering breath and pushed away from her. His eyes had gone dull, his body had slumped, his flaccid penis hung from the fly of his Popeye costume. "Excuse me," he said in a strange flat voice. "I just remembered something." He turned and shambled away, staggering a little, and disappeared into the restaurant.

She just stood there for a while, until her breath came back. She leaned on the railing, thinking she might throw up, and then she saw that Thomas was watching from Rosemary's deck.

He stood motionless, a silhouette against the lights across the harbor. She had a bizarre impulse to wave, followed by a sudden irrational

certainty that Thomas had done something to stop the Sailor. This was so strange a thought that it superseded gratitude. Suddenly she transferred the fury she'd felt for the Sailor to the man on the boat. Angry questions filled her. What was he? And whatever he had done to the Sailor, why hadn't he done worse? Should she go to the police? Why should they believe her version of the night's events? Would Thomas be a witness?

It was hard to imagine that he would; she remembered Linda saying, "Thomas almost never leaves the boat."

She paused to pin her culottes together, then hurried down the road to the Shipshape Chandlery, behind which the dinghy was still beached.

The night was breezy and dark, the moon obscured by low clouds. The harbor was disturbed by a fish-scale chop and the idea of rowing the dinghy out to the ketch was unappealing. Also the boat seemed to have moved away from the shoreline again; it would be a long pull. But she still felt shaky with anger, with the need to do something so she pushed off and began splashing her way across the water.

The ketch remained dark when she reached it, and Thomas was gone from the cockpit. She tied the dinghy's line to the cleat. Wasn't there some sort of etiquette involved in boarding a boat? One wasn't supposed to just jump on, she thought, and then was annoyed with herself that she could still be concerned about such a trivial matter, at such a time. Still, she rapped on the deck with her knuckles, as though knocking on a door. The sound was muffled by the thickness of the teak decking, but she was sure those within could hear it.

She waited, but after a while it became clear there would be no response. She began to feel a bit foolish. The outraged energy which had driven her across the dark harbor was fading, and she wished she had just gone back to her room, where she could wash the Sailor's stink off her and where the bottle of Nembutal waited patiently.

She looked back over her shoulder, toward the dark shoreline from which she had come, and saw two men standing there, lit faintly by the glow of their cigarettes. Were these the bums Linda had warned her against? The idea of rowing back to the beach lost all of its appeal, and she climbed aboard Rosemary, making a clatter.

The main hatch doors were hooked back, showing a trapezoid of

blackness. When she looked in, she saw, dimly, Thomas gazing back at her.

"I want to talk to you," she said.

He nodded and came up the companionway ladder.

She backed away, sat down on a dew-soaked cushion. "What did you do? To the Sailor?"

He stood beside the wheel, looking off across the harbor. "You make a large assumption, Teresa."

But there was no denial in his voice, and she began to feel more sure of herself. "Tell me the truth," she said.

"What did he say?"

This question took her aback. "Does it matter? He said he remembered something...an excuse, I suppose."

"What if it were not an excuse?"

She thought about that. She thought about the name of the boat, and the quote from Shakespeare: Rosemary, that's for remembrance.

"What did he remember?" she asked.

The moon broke through the clouds, so that his eyes glittered strangely. "An unpleasant man," Thomas said. "But not a detached one. At least this much can be said of him: he gets his money's worth from his experiences. He is not guilty of thinking too much."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, bewildered.

"The Sailor was remembering a day long ago, when he went fishing off a dock in Tarpon Springs on a day he should have been in school. He paid no attention to his fishing; he had just been rejected by a girl named Dorothy and he was planning, in cool blood, a revenge."

The conversation had become bizarre. She waited, hoping he would explain.

Thomas sat down beside her, and it occurred to her that he seemed so odd partly because he used none of the ordinary range of non-verbal expression. He did not shrug, or sigh, or make any other sort of gesture.



He still wore the same faint smile.

"I read many books," he said.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I have a good library aboard—the classics and various serious modern writers. And then, we trade paperbacks with other cruisers, so I get to read a good deal of ephemera as well." He said this with no air of judgment. "Recently I read a little anthology of science fiction stories. They were uneven in quality; most were forgettable." He spoke the last word very softly. "There was one that at least had an interesting line. The protagonist is in space, looking out at a big orbital billboard. It advertises a chemical memory stimulant. The billboard's message is: 'Now you too can remember those important things you were too stupid to notice when they happened.'"

"What?"

"Most people do not, you know. They do not notice many of the important things. Though it is not stupidity, that is not the source of their failure. You are not a stupid person, Teresa."

"What does this have to do with the Sailorman?" She grew annoyed by what she took to be a deliberate mocking obscurity.

Thomas looked at her and though his expression never altered she had a sudden strong sense of expectation. "I am something like that memory-stimulating product."

"I don't understand." But she was beginning to understand; she remembered Linda, in the sandwich shop, telling her that Thomas had shown her that her life had not been empty, after all. "What are you?"

"Do you mean: am I a visitor from another planet? A mutant? Some mythic creature, a vampire drinking the blood of unnoticed experience?" Though his language had become extravagant, his voice never changed. "I am an oyster. Or, better, a barnacle. Anchored to my hull, my good Rosemary, I extend myself gingerly into the stream of life, and filter from it my sustenance. And there you have it."

She had a strong impression that he had made this speech many times before, that it was reduced to its essentials, that he was making as clear a statement about himself as he could. "You...eat experience? People's

memories?"

"No. The truth is more subtle. What I 'eat' is the difference between the richness of my victims' lives and the poor pale perceptions they own. I notice what they did not, and this awareness feeds me."

"'Victims?' Why do you call them victims?"

"Unfortunately, the retrieval of lost memory is a destructive process. My victims remember with me, so at least they regain their lost lives, but eventually, when those lives are mined out, they die. I would like to be a symbiote, but I am a parasite. I only touched the Sailor. He will be a little dazed for a day or two, his employees will enjoy it while it lasts. When we arrived here, I killed a heron—thin food, but necessary. My hunger was great, and I dared not take any more from Linda just then."

"Why didn't you go ashore? Surely you could have found all the victims you needed there."

"Unfortunately, I am unable to survive in a crowd. It would be like drowning in soup, for me. A better metaphor: like having a high pressure soup hose forced down my throat. I cannot go ashore, except in deserted places. When the big charter boats pass us, I cannot breathe."

If Thomas was a monster, he was a remarkably forthcoming one. Still...she imagined going to the police with her story: yes, the would-be rapist was deterred by a memory vampire. No wonder Thomas could speak so freely.

"How is Linda?" she asked, seeking a diversion, feeling an unreasonable embarrassment that she hadn't thought to ask before.

"She is dying."

Teresa tried to summon a shock she did not really feel. Her shame deepened, as well as her confusion. "But...why's she here? Why isn't she in the hospital?"

Thomas shook his beautiful head. "Would you like to see her?"

She followed him to the companion way. From the cabin he said, "I will make a light." An oil lamp flared gold; he reached up a hand to help her. In the lamp's light his eyes seemed without depth, the eyes of an animal.

In the aft cabin, Linda lay on a wide transverse bunk, propped up in a

nest of pillows. She was pale, as though her tan had faded overnight. She looked very young. Her eyes were open, staring at the overhead, and at first Teresa thought she was already dead. At her gasp of dismay, Linda's eyes moved slightly.

Thomas slid the compartment door shut, leaving Teresa alone with the white-haired woman.

"Teresa?" Linda's voice was as soft as a breath. "Are you here?"

"Yes." Teresa said, and sat on the edge of the bunk.

"Good. I thought you would come. I told Thomas you would."

Teresa studied the face; it wasn't the face of a sufferer. "Is it true? That he's eaten your life?"

A spectral smile touched the pale lips. "Dramatic. I guessed you were a writer. I could see the signs. No...Thomas hasn't devoured me."

"But you're..."Teresa wanted to say: You're dying; instead she said, "You're so ill."

"Thomas doesn't always explain well. Listen. He gave me my life, he let me take from it all the joy and sorrow it held. I never noticed, when I was actually living my life."

"Your life isn't over. You're still young."

Linda smiled with slightly more vitality. "Thomas isn't a wasting disease, Teresa. He's very good for the body. I'm fifty-seven years old; I have three grown children and two grandchildren. If you stay with him, you'll look like a young girl, at the end."

Stay with him?

Linda struggled to look at Teresa directly. "No, no. Don't be afraid. You'll stay only if you choose it. Thomas is gentle, less dangerous than the oyster he considers himself to be."

"Why would you think I'd stay? Do you think I want to die?" The idea was grotesque, she had forgotten about the bottle of Nembutal.

Linda sighed, "Maybe I'm wrong about you. Maybe you're not like me. Maybe you've been able, a time or two, to live within the moment. Maybe

you haven't spent all your life grieving for the past, fearing the future. If you think you can really live the rest of your life, then that's fine."

A slow weary tide of sadness began to rise in Teresa's heart.

"But let Thomas show you what he does," Linda said. "If you want to leave after that, I wish you well. Though I fear for poor Thomas."

"Poor Thomas?"

"Yes." Linda's voice was very faint now. "He lives only through us. All his life is borrowed." Her body trembled beneath the quilt. "Leave me, now. I've been pretty lucid for a woman in my condition, but it won't last. If you decide to stay, send him to me. I want to finish."

When she reached the deck, Thomas had gone forward, to sit crosslegged with his back against the mainmast. The moonlight was brighter now, and he seemed no more intimidating than any other very handsome man. Perhaps Linda was just a lunatic, in the last stages of some mania-inducing disease?

But Thomas shared her delusion, or so it seemed.

Teresa went up the sidedeck and leaned against the lifelines. How strange, she thought. Here she was with a man who believed himself to be some sort of soul-eating life-draining monster. And for some reason Teresa wasn't swimming for the shore. It wasn't like any horror movie she'd ever seen. "Linda said we should be sorry for you. Poor Thomas, she said."

An ordinary human might have shrugged, but of course Thomas did not. "I do not understand her concern. I am as I am."

"Right. Well, listen, this has been interesting, but I'd better go. Got to look for a new job tomorrow; I'll be a busy girl. Could you take me ashore? You could drop me at the sandspit. Nobody lives there, yet."

"You are humoring me," said Thomas. "It is charming, but unnecessary. You may take the dinghy. Or, if you wish, I will show you what I am."

She retreated a step, but he made no threatening movement. "I don't think so," she said. "I mean, it's a terrific offer and all...I could relive my crappy life and then die, it sounds like great fun, really, but..."

He looked away, out across the harbor toward the darkened sandspit

that divided the harbor from the pass into the Gulf. "Then return to your room and your bottle of stale Nembutal." His faint smile never wavered.

Suddenly, she believed, and she wasn't even very curious about the source of his knowledge. "Is it...is it like some sort of super drug? One taste and I'm hooked for life?"

"For death, do you mean? In a way. Life is the most completely addictive drug. Those who are addicts can never get enough. They feel, all the time, as you will feel if you remember your life through me."

"And I can't change? I can't learn to feel as they do?"

"I don't know," he said. "Sometimes people do change. My impression is that you will not."

His words, spoken in that soft formal voice, seemed inevitable, and they finished the erosion of her will. Were Thomas suddenly to sprout long fangs and lunge at her throat, she thought, she wouldn't even attempt to stop him.

"Why did you help me? With the Sailorman," she asked, but without any real curiosity.

"You did not deserve to own so ugly a memory."

A time passed, and the breeze died.

"Show me," she said.

Thomas glanced up. "See," he said, pointing. "The moon is about to go behind a cloud."

She looked.

The blue Gulf was a beautiful soft dream, the first time she saw it. She parked her old car along a stretch of undeveloped beach, and felt the sun soak through the windows, warming her. There was an energizing tang to the air, she'd never filled her lungs with such delicious stuff before.

She got out and looked out across the ocean, marveling at the subtle gradation of hues, from the pale aquamarine in the shallows to the dense metallic purple at the horizon. A gentle onshore breeze carried a faint scent of seaweed and fish, an exotic smell, not at all unpleasant, with an even fainter undertone of coconut oil. The beach was almost deserted, in

comparison to other beaches she had known—only a few sunbathers were scattered over the brilliant white sand.

She felt a complex mixture of hope and anxiety, but the emotions were just a buzzing background to the lovely sensations of the moment. She'd left Atlanta in a frenzy of anger and disappointment, driven all night, thinking dark thoughts. All forgotten, at least for now.

She opened the trunk and got a cream soda from the ice chest. She sat on the hood, looking out over the Gulf, sipping the soda. She rolled the taste of it on her tongue—vanilla was such a round perfect flavor.

The sun felt so good. Later it might be too hot for comfort, but now, in mid-morning, it was perfect. She wanted to take off her blouse and let the sun touch her breasts, like a lover's warm breath,

Happiness surged through her, but it was a feeling that lived far away from her ordinary thoughts and emotions. She might have thought it very strange, were she not so full of delight.

By the time the sun rose, they were far out in the Gulf, the Destin condominiums sinking below the edge of the sea. Thomas showed her how to steer the course, how to watch the set of the sails, and then went below.

An hour later he came on deck with Linda's body wrapped in a sheet and weighted with rusty chain.

He gave her to the water without ceremony.

"What now?" Teresa asked.

"We will go south, to an island where no one lives, and the tidal range is large enough to careen Rosemary. She needs new bottom paint."

He took the wheel, and Teresa went to sit in the corner of the cockpit, where there was a little shelter from the wind.

She could not say she was happy, but at least she felt no pain. She could not say she had hopes, but at least she had expectations.