

A Mirror in the Darkness

Will Donnelly

When the snake bit Luke, Luke jumped back and barked. Marshall had been collecting blue crab traps off the shore when this occurred, and he turned his head in time to see the red-brown hide of a narrow snake sidling away into the marsh grass. Marshall grabbed Luke around the neck to keep him from giving chase.

At the house, Marshall's father, Isaac, tied a bandage around Luke's shoulder.

"He's not swelling any, is he," Isaac said.

"No sir," said Marshall.

"This doesn't look like nothing. Just a love bite. No poison, I don't think, but we'll keep an eye on him."

Marshall knew fishermen on White Oak Key, friends of his father, who had received the harmless bites of copperheads and moccasins before. It was unusual, but when the snake did not sense danger, it might only prick its fangs into a victim and save the venom for another enemy.

By midnight, though, the area around the bite had grown to the size of a softball, and a few hours later, Luke

was moaning on the floor, unable to stand, with bits of foam bubbling at the corners of his mouth.

“You going to need to take him in to Dr. Winston up in Cypress Key, soon as it gets light out,” Isaac said when he found Marshall sitting with Luke in the kitchen in the still-dark hours of the morning. “You can take the johnboat. Give him some water for now, and keep giving it to him. He’ll make it long as you keep flushing the poison out.”

Marshall poured water across Luke’s tongue. When it pooled on the floor beside his head, Luke lapped up as much of it as he could.

A fog materialized during the night, and by first light it cloaked the woods along the island shore in a haze so thick that one tree could barely be distinguished from the next. Mist even clouded the ground, and even the earth seemed chalked out and blurred.

“It’ll burn off in an hour or so,” Isaac said, glancing out the kitchen window. “Here, take these.” He lined four gallon-jugs of water along the counter, then handed them to Marshall and picked Luke up to carry him outside.

“And what if it stays?” Marshall said, stepping off the porch into the yard.

“What, the fog?”

“Yes sir.”

“It won’t.”

Isaac knew the waters and the weather off the coast. He had lived for fifty years on White Oak Key and had seen fogs like this before, especially in late summer when the nights grew long but the days were still warm. Out of a long, hot night would grow clouds along the earth to make the woods as thick and blinding as steamed milk, as silent as the surface

of the moon. Walking through the yard, between the trees, the only sound that Marshall heard was the crushing of pine needles and the snapping of wet sticks.

The johnboat's hull made a scraping sound as it slid off the sand into the shallows. Isaac lay Luke against the bench seat in the boat's bow, then reached into the water and tossed the rope to Marshall.

"You keep giving him that water now," Isaac said. "You give him a little bit every fifteen minutes. And you know where Dr. Winston works?"

"Yes sir, just down F Street by the grocery."

"You're going to do just fine. Ought to be there by noon, or just a little after."

Marshall pulled the cord to start the outboard motor, and the rattle of its engine roared through the silence and the mist. Oily smoke blossomed across the wake. Marshall steered the boat out, but even before the boat was into a channel, before it drifted out of sight and into a white nothingness, he saw Isaac spit on the sand, turn, and walk away.

Luke was still. Only his eyes moved. They were nearly closed, and his tail, most days long and furry and waving, now braced itself stiff against the hull.

"We'll get you back to health, boy," Marshall said. "We'll be fishing again before you know it." Marshall opened one of the gallon-jugs and poured some water against Luke's tongue, then closed it again. "This got to last us," he said. "I'll give you more later."

In darker water, Marshall turned the outboard handle, feeding power to the engine. To the port side, a channel marker materialized, an old plastic milk bottle painted orange that bobbed in the wake of the boat, then disappeared into

the fog. Waves slapped the bow in gentle rhythms, and when one was taller and louder than the rest, Luke raised his head, wincing, then lay back softly. Marshall strapped the emergency oar against the gunwale to keep it from banging.

Marshall could not hear birds or the crickets or the frogs or any other living thing on White Oak Key. The fog and the sound of the motor blotted out all sounds and left Marshall in an auidial blind. He only knew that he needed to steer the boat west out through the channels, then north along the mainland coast until he saw the pier lights at Cypress Key, or the pier itself, if the sun was out. From the pier, he would only have three blocks to walk to Dr. Winston's clinic.

Luke had visited Dr. Winston before, once to be fixed and once for a strange illness that had robbed him of his appetite for four days and nights and left him worn and almost dead. Yet Luke had lived nine years on White Oak Key without a local vet, and it made Marshall angry when people called him old.

Morning passed, and the sun became a tarnished nickel against the fogged out sky. Waves lapped the johnboat hull, but the water was invisible more than ten or twelve feet to either side. Even a depth marker more than that distance away would disappear.

"Luke," Marshall said, but he said it for no reason other than to hear something in the whiteness of the mist. Luke raised an eye and turned his head a little. "You're a good boy, Luke." Marshall gave him a little water from a jug, then took a swig of his own.

The fog did not change in brightness or in hue, the day stood motionless, and the sun, which had never materialized completely, began to fade again behind a bank of cloud as

thick as concrete. Two hours passed, and Marshall trimmed the motor to a hum. The waters could be shallow – there was no way to tell – and a broken propeller might mean a night at sea. He gave Luke water every fifteen minutes, keeping an eye on his watch and monitoring the compass that Isaac kept on all his boats in case of an emergency. It told Marshall that the boat was heading northwest, but he couldn't shake the feeling that this was wrong, that he should have passed Yankeetown already, but he had seen nothing.

He aimed the bow due north and continued. The coast slanted to the northwest, so traveling north would bring land into sight eventually. There was no sun anymore, though. The fog was rooted to the sea. Marshall watched for the dark line of trees along the mainland, but saw nothing, only whiteness. He gave Luke more water and held a northward course.

More hours passed, and though the sun had never appeared, the sky began to grow darker. The color of the clouds changed from thick white to soiled gray, and though rifts sometimes showed between the cloudbanks, they did not reveal blue sky. By dusk, with no lights or stars, navigation would become impossible.

“We might just have to camp tonight,” Marshall said. “You’re going to make it, though.” He fed the dog more water, now from the second jug since the first was empty.

Night brought with it a darkness more suffocating than any Marshall had seen. Still he had not found land, not even passed a channel marker, and the thickness of the clouds inked out all stars. Only around the edges of the boat did there seem to cling a glow in the mist, like St. Elmo's fire, but dim.

Marshall had cut the engine and was now drifting, waiting for the fog to clear, and realizing that though they did have water, they had no food aboard. There were a jug and a half of water left, but Luke's tail had gone completely limp. Marshall thought of his father, how he would worry but refuse to show it. He knew that Marshall could spend a night at sea if he had to, that both Marshall and the dog could go a day and night without food, if necessary, and Marshall would not fail him. He had never tried to survive at sea, but it was a step he had to take eventually, before he could take the big boat out on his own to fish, before he could fish for himself.

Still, he looked eastward, searching for a dark line of trees, a lighted depth marker, or the lights on the pier at Cypress Key. He listened for the clang of buoy chains or the fog horn of a barge. But there was nothing: only blackness and fog and the lap of waves against the hull.

"At least there's no storm," he said to no one. "Though we could use the water."

And then, with a glance to his right, he saw it, small, bouncing like a moth in the distance: a yellow light. As soon as it appeared, it was gone again, swallowed by the fog.

"Hey!" Marshall called.

There was no response.

And then the light appeared again, bouncing a little. Marshall pulled the engine cord once, twice, and it caught.

"I'm coming in!" Marshall shouted.

He drove toward the light, watching it disappear and then reappear again a few times before finally becoming steady, and he saw that it was not moving at all in fact, but that he was, and that the light was fixed.

“Land,” he whispered to Luke. “It’s land out there, and we’re about to hit it.”

Luke panted and braced himself again against the waves as the boat sped toward the light. But the light was closer than it had appeared at first, and Marshall had to cut the engine before the propeller ran aground. He took the oar out of its strapping and began to paddle, guiding himself toward the light, which now seemed to flicker.

He shouted again, but still there was no sound, and then he saw a shadow pass between the light and himself. It moved quickly and seemed to amble from side to side, though Marshall only saw it for a second. Marshall shouted at the shadow, but heard nothing until there was the splash of wading into shallow water. He saw a tattooed arm reach out onto the bow of the boat and begin to pull, but could only see the man’s back. He walked quickly through the water, even when it came nearly to his waist.

“You gon’ get out and help me?” the man said.

Marshall’s stomach sank. The voice was filled with haste and anger, layered in a sort of gritty drawl. It was the voice of someone missing teeth.

“Well?” the man said, almost turning around. Marshall dropped the oar, which banged against the hull, and he jumped out to help push the johnboat from behind.

“We got to hurry,” the man said.

“Who are you?” said Marshall. “My dog’s dying. We’re hungry.”

“You just come on.” When he said it, the man stopped for half a moment to glance at Luke, still resting in the hull and blinking his eyes. The glance was not enough for Marshall to see his face, though, and when he turned back he nearly

leaped up to the sand, pulling the boat as far up toward the edge of grass there as he could.

“Where is this? What’s your name?” Marshall said.

“That ain’t important,” the man said.

“My dog is dying.”

“My name ain’t important to you,” the man said, running over to Marshall and tapping at his chest. His was the face of a young man who had lived hard. A scar ran down his forehead, across his nose, his chin and neck and into the neck of his t-shirt. Two top teeth were gone and at least one bottom, and a patch of blond hair was missing from the side of his scalp. His jeans, now soaked with seawater, were torn and faded, and his t-shirt had a large hole near the waist. He looked at Marshall with a pair of sapphire eyes that seemed to Marshall somehow beautiful. “My name ain’t important to nobody right now,” the man said. “You bring that there water and come with me.”

“My dog—”

“You just come,” the man said, gripping at something inside the waist of his jeans.

Marshall lifted the jug and a half of water out of the boat and said to Luke, “It’s okay, boy, I’ll be right back.” His voice shook, though, as he said it.

“Come on,” the man said, already deftly navigating the roots and limbs of the forest floor ahead.

As they grew closer to it, Marshall could see that the light came from the window in a small, plankboard house. The window was minuscule, but it was the only opening in the place that Marshall could see, aside from a narrow door. The man walked toward the door and opened it, standing just inside to wait. Marshall walked toward him, but nearly fell

across the doorstep when he got there. The man reached out to steady him.

“Step down now,” the man said.

The dirt floor inside was lower than the ground around it, and the house at first appeared to have only one room, all of it lit by a single oil lamp on a table by the front wall. Marshall looked around and saw a small wood stove in one corner, built both for cooking and for heat, and an old insurance calendar tacked to the wall that included a faded photo of a vast, undulating orange grove, its trees aligned in rows of perfect green. There were a table and a chair, both made of rough sawn wood, and a cot to one side of them. On the cot, Marshall saw the legs and feet of another man, supine, his feet inside a pair of boots, these on the end of a pair of stained blue jeans. The rest of the man was hidden from view by the table.

“Go on,” said the first man, “you take that there water over to him.”

As he walked closer, Marshall could see that the man on the cot was breathing deep and quick, and that his stomach was large and round, protruding like a sphere above the rest of him. He was not wearing a shirt. And there was blood, dried and brown and smeared across the man’s enormous abdomen, issuing, it seemed, from a wound in his chest that had been covered by a large gauze patch. Marshall noticed a smell in the room like wet copper, underlaid with humid soil and rotten earth.

“Sweet Jesus,” the fat man on the cot whispered. “Oh, sweet Jesus.” His voice was hoarse and labored. Marshall saw up close that he was bald and pale and that his eyes were also blue, the same sapphire tint as the thin man’s, but that they

rolled up toward the wall, then toward the ceiling, then down at Marshall, then back around again. “Oh, sweet Jesus,” the man whispered again.

“He done lost a whole bunch of blood,” the thin man said, standing close behind Marshall.

“My dog,” Marshall said. “He got snake-bitten late last—”

“You want to know how much blood he lost?” the thin man said.

“My dog is going to die.”

“You see that there gallon jug?” the thin man said, motioning toward the jug with his chin.

Marshall looked back at him, trembling.

“About that much,” the thin man said. “And now he’s losing his mind.”

“If he lost that much blood, he ought to be dead,” Marshall muttered.

“And yet he’s *alive!*” the thin man said, suddenly angry, pointing at the fat man on the cot. “He *lives*. But he ain’t going to live much more now if you don’t pour some of that water across his tongue. There ain’t a well out here that works, and I done give him all we brought already.”

Marshall looked again at the fat man, seeing now that his face and scalp were as white and smooth as the bellies of fish and that his forehead was covered in tiny globes of sweat. He looked to be the same age as the thin man, but also rough and hard lived.

Unable to face the fat man’s rolling eyes for long, Marshall looked to the table by the cot. On it were two piles of money and a large pistol. The money was collected into bricks of twenty-dollar bills, tied with rubber bands. The pistol, a large revolver, aimed toward the wall and clearly loaded, was

longer and more frightening than any that Marshall had ever seen.

“What’s that?” Marshall said, not meaning to speak but finding the question coming through his mouth before he could stop it.

“That don’t concern you,” the thin man said.

“What have y’all been doing tonight?”

“He got stabbed not five hours ago. *That’s* what we been doing, and *that’s* all you need to know. Now give him some water.”

“My dog, Luke, I need to get him to Cypress Key and give him this water, save it—”

“You’re looking at a dying man,” the thin man said, his eyes narrowing at the words. “You don’t give him that water, I’m going to give it to him.”

Marshall unscrewed the half-jug of water, lifted it, and poured a little into the fat man’s mouth. When the water touched his lips, the fat man closed his eyes and slurped, pulling some in between his teeth and forcing the rest down his chin and across his face, down to where it stained the cot dark.

“More,” the thin man said.

Marshall poured a slow stream until the jug was empty. When the water stopped, the fat man lay back and breathed more slowly, his eyes now relaxing, his legs stretching out, then shifting back into a more comfortable position.

Marshall reached for the other jug, the last full jug.

“Not yet,” the thin man said. “You got to feed it to him slow. You got to wait.”

“I need to give this to my dog,” Marshall said. “I got to get to Cypress Key and get us something to eat.”

“You going to give it to *him*,” the thin man said, pointing with his head to the fat man. “You just sit down on that chair there and wait till he needs more.”

Marshall sat down, not yet willing to let go of the water jug, and stared at the fat man. Marshall saw that though the man’s face and head were white, his torso and his arms were bruised in places, cut and scarred in some. He looked like a wounded soldier back from battle.

The thin man waited a moment, thinking this over, then said, “He got a dysfunction. He cain’t feel no pain of any kind. Had it since he was a baby.” The thin man stopped and waited a moment. Light cast by the oil lamp wavered across the room, leaving parts of it in shadow. “I once seen him get his foot run over by a truck, and he just stood there, looking at it, like he didn’t know how that could’ve happened. No pain at *all* in him.” The thin man grinned. “Now what you think about that?”

“Can he feel where he’s hurt now?” Marshall said, pointing to the gauze-covered wound.

“He can feel something there, but it don’t hurt him none,” said the thin man, serious again.

“What happened?”

“He done got stabbed, like I said.”

“How?”

The thin man stared at Marshall, then spat on the floor. “That ain’t none of your goddam business,” he said. “Give him some more.”

Marshall opened the full jug of water, the only one left, and began to pour it into the fat man’s mouth. The fat man breathed and lapped it in, and what was left trickled down the sides of his face and darkened the deep green cloth of the cot. Marshall poured a quarter of it and said, “I need to save this.”

Suddenly the fat man lifted his head from the cot and hissed, "That dog of yours is *dead!*"

Marshall shook at the sound of the fat man's voice and spilled water on the his gauzed wound as he stared into the fat man's eyes, which were now steady, even, and open wide. The fat man's face was wild and angry, and with his hairless scalp, his face contorted to the face of a screaming infant, furrowed with frustration and rage. He looked down at his gauze, touched it with a thick hand, then lay back again, his hands at his sides, watching Marshall all the while.

The thin man jumped up and ran to Marshall's side.

"Give him some more," the thin man said.

Marshall poured a little more, emptying half the gallon jug, and he started to cry.

"It was fate that taken you here tonight," the thin man said, seeing the tears on Marshall's face. "Fate taken you to save a man's life."

"Where's Cypress Key?" Marshall said, choking on the words. No one spoke. "Where'd that gun—"

"I bet you didn't know when you got up this morning that you'd be saving a man's life today, did you?" the thin man said, smiling again, his hand on Marshall's shoulder.

Marshall capped the jug and sat down again, wiping his face on the sleeve of his shirt. The thin man took the fat man's hand in his own for a moment and leaned over his face, then left him and sat down again across the room. Where he sat, his face was half in shadow.

"I bet you didn't think about nothing like that," he said finally, finishing his thought from before. "You done a real kindness, a great act, and that man over there on that cot ain't never going to forget it."

Marshall tried to think about what his father would have done, if he would have grabbed the gun and shot the men and left. But no, Isaac would never commit an act of violence against another unless his own life or Marshall's were in danger. Marshall tried to think that his father would have done the same thing, that he would have given the water to the man to save his life, that he would have had to let Luke die in the hull of the jon boat outside. He would have done it all the same, except that he would not have cried about it. He would have kept all that inside. Marshall felt ashamed, took a deep breath, and wiped his eyes.

"You didn't have to keep me here," he said to the thin man, composing himself. "You could've just taken my water and given it to him. You could've let me and my dog go on."

The thin man looked at his hands and breathed for a moment. Finally, he said, "You got something else we need."

"What?"

"A boat."

A lump moved into Marshall's throat. "Are you going to leave me here?"

The thin man ran his fingers through his hair, snorted, and said, "Give him what's left."

Marshall poured more water into the fat man's mouth, but when he had poured half the jug, the fat man sat up and pushed the jug aside. He rubbed his face and pulled a t-shirt on over the wound, then grabbed the jug out of Marshall's hands.

"I'll drink it as I want now," he said. He dabbed at his face with a tissue from his pocket and sat still, breathing. Then, to the thin man, "I'm ready. We ain't got time to waste."

"You sure you feeling all right to leave?" the thin man said to him.

“I’ll make it,” the fat man said and took a swig of water from the jug.

“Let’s go then,” the thin man said. “Come on.”

The thin man stuffed as many bricks of money as he could into the pockets of his jeans and dropped the rest into a small cloth bag. Then, pistol in hand, he blew out the lamp and motioned for Marshall and the fat man to follow him.

The room was lacquer-black without the lamp, and the only light was that of moon from the outside coming in. Marshall walked toward it, feeling the fat man’s breath behind him. Again, the thin man held the door for him to walk through. He stepped up and out into the yard and, looking down toward the Gulf, saw that other than a low mist that now clung to the bases of trees, the fog had cleared away. Above, he saw the stars between the pine boughs, bright and cold and still. They lit the roots and pine cones on the ground and allowed the three of them to navigate their way down to the johnboat, behind which the reflection of the moon made a rippled silver line across the water.

“That your dog?” the thin man said as he pushed the boat in. Marshall said nothing. The three of them waded knee-deep, then climbed in. Marshall and the thin man helped the fat man over the side. He moaned with his injury.

“I thought he couldn’t feel pain,” Marshall said.

“He don’t feel no pain, but he feels something.”

Marshall lifted Luke into his arms and lay him across his lap. The dog’s body was perfectly limp, but still warm. His eyes were partly open, as was his mouth, but his tongue had disappeared inside it, and there was a stillness in his body that felt, to Marshall, unnatural.

“How much gas you got in this thing?” the thin man said, but Marshall didn’t answer at first. “Huh?” the thin man said a moment later.

“There’s a spare five-gallon tank next to the one I was using already.”

“Ought to be plenty,” the thin man said, squeezing the hand pump on the fuel hose.

The thin man pulled the engine cord hard, and the motor started immediately. He steered the boat out into the deeper water, away from but not out of sight of the shore. When they were far enough out, he twisted the throttle and gunned the engine, turning the boat to the south.

“You was coming north?” he shouted to Marshall.

Marshall nodded.

“Then you done passed Cypress Key?”

Marshall looked at his watch. He had been in the house with the men for just over two hours, and the sea was now clear of fog. In the darkness, the stars were bright enough to see the waves ahead and the white V of the wake that spread behind the boat. The Milky Way spread over them in a great, white wing.

“Where are we going?” Marshall said, but no one answered. The fat man, his face serious, watched Luke. Marshall saw Luke’s fur blowing a little in the breeze and felt what he thought might be his breath, the rise and fall of his ribs, but realized that it must be the movement of the boat across the water, bouncing as it did across the wakes and waves.

They passed miles of forest without a light in sight, and never saw another boat. At one point, Marshall thought he saw a channel marker floating in the water, but it may have been a crab trap line or a piece of trash.

As the boat moved southward, dolphins began to break the water before its bow. Their backs were black and smooth and shining in the light of all the stars. Marshall watched them, noticing how fast they moved through the water, how easily they glided up and down, their dorsal fins curling over when they crested, then standing up again when they dove. He looked back at the men for their reactions, but the thin man stared only forward, glancing sometimes toward the shore, a lock of hair blown back from his face by the wind, while the fat man sat on the floor of the boat examining his fingers.

Dolphins meant that there were fish in the water, as Isaac had said to Marshall many times, and they meant protection, too. Dolphins liked to escort a boat from which they thought they might receive a fish or two in return. Marshall thought that if they knew who was aboard this boat, if they knew that they would receive nothing from him or the men, who had nothing to give, that the dolphins might leave. Still, he watched their backs break the water, wondering at their innocence, hoping they would stay.

Finally, in the far distance, he saw a light. It was not the light of an oil lantern, but the strong, white fluorescence of a vapor lamp. As they approached, more lights appeared in an even line behind it, and Marshall could see that it was the pier at Cypress Key, extending outward from the town into the ocean.

The thin man turned the throttle and steered the jon boat towards the pier.

“We going to drop you off here,” he said, his voice lower now, not having to fight against the sound of the engine.

Marshall felt Luke’s body for any sign of life, for a pulse deep within his neck, but he felt nothing. He looked to see

the dolphins again, but they had left when the boat slowed down, and the water around the bow was now a glassy calm, unbroken.

As they rode past the deserted beach, Marshall saw the salt-blasted buildings of the waterfront looming tall and dark, stilted just above the sand. In one window, he saw the thrown blue flicker of a television's light, but otherwise the town was sleeping, still, and silent.

The thin man cut the engine to almost nothing and pulled the boat gently up to an empty floating dock, bumping the boat against the tires that hung along the wooden piles. The air was redolent with the smell of fish and oysters.

"You can get out," the thin man said.

Marshall climbed out and kneeled on the dock to lift Luke. The fat man stood and took Luke up in his arms, looking him over carefully, and then he leaned down and whispered something in the dog's ear. Marshall tried to hear what the fat man said, but he could not. When he was finished, the fat man handed the dog carefully up to Marshall, then leaned back and sat down.

"You done a real kindness tonight," the thin man said to Marshall, his voice low and measured.

"I won't never forget what you done for me," the fat man said. "You done saved my life, boy, by what you done. I surely thank you for that, and I won't never forget it. Never."

Marshall nodded.

"You had a choice to make between the life of a dog and the life of a man, and you made the right choice, the noblest choice."

"I had no choice," said Marshall.

“Oh yes you *did!*” the fat man said, his face contorting. “Yes you *did*, and you chose a man’s life before a animal’s. You had a choice and you made the right one. You chose my life when you could’ve taken that revolver and shot the both of us, me and him, turned and walked right out that door.” The fat man turned and rubbed his eyes, then thrust his jaw again at Marshall, his eyes wide and clear and blue. “A man’s life is *always* the right life to save. And I won’t *never* forget you for that.”

The fat man’s voice grew softer as he spoke, and when he finished, he sat back down. The thin man pushed the boat away from the floating dock and turned the throttle, moving the boat away from the pier and out into the blackness. “Never!” the fat man shouted again, shaking his head as the boat moved away.

As they steered back out and into darker waters, Marshall stood and watched the fat man, who looked back at him, his head still shaking, a worried look across his sapphire eyes. Even after the johnboat rounded the end of the pier and left his sight, following a southward course, Marshall heard the whine of its motor and smelled the fumes of gasoline, which stuck to the dock. When he could no longer hear anything except the clap of waves against the piles and the breeze, he climbed the steps to the main pier and walked, Luke in his arms, toward the mainland.

When he reached the shore end of the pier, there was a chain link gate that had been closed and locked for the night. Marshall pushed it open a foot or so and helped Luke through, laying his body on the concrete on the other side. Then he climbed the fence, picked Luke up again, and walked out into the street.

There were a few cars parked along the street, but the town was deserted. Marshall listened and thought he heard snoring from one of the windows far away. He began to walk, whispering to himself, “F Street, F Street, F Street,” and watching carefully for street signs.

In the shadows of a palm tree beside a utility shed, Marshall saw a hose and spigot. He hurried to it, set Luke down, and turned the spigot on. When water flowed from the hose, he poured it into Luke’s mouth, watching for movement. He thought he saw his tongue move a little, just a little, but thought then that it may have been pushed by the water. He realized, suddenly, that he was thirsty, too, and brought the hose up to his own mouth and drank, gulping it down, feeling it move down his throat and filling out his empty stomach with coolness. He drank until he was full, then wiped his mouth and poured a little more for Luke, wishing there were something nearby to eat. But there was not.

“Come on, boy,” he said. “Drink. Come on.”

He lay the hose in the grass and put his hand by Luke’s nose to feel for breath. He felt something, but it may have been the breeze, which rattled the palm fronds above him. He turned the spigot off, picked Luke up, and walked further into town.

When he found F Street, he followed it, walking faster now, seeing Dr. Winston’s office in the distance. Several of the yellowed vapor lamps on F Street had burned out, and the path was dark and treacherous. More than once, Marshall nearly tripped across a buckle in the pavement.

The glass door of Dr. Winston’s office acted as a mirror in the darkness. Luke in his arms, Marshall examined his shadowy reflection in the glass. He looked at his face, his

eyes like dim sockets, and then at Luke. He thought of how, without much light, they seemed a single being in the ripples of the glass, joined together at the level of his chest.

He set Luke down upon the step before the door. Again he felt for breath, and for a moment, he thought he felt the movement of air from Luke's mouth. He put his hand into Luke's fur, against the dog's neck, feeling for a pulse. His body was still warm, and Marshall felt the faintest beating of a heart deep within.

"It's going to be okay," he said. "You're going to be all right. You're going to live." He stroked the soft fur around Luke's neck.

And then he said, "Good bye."

Anyone awake in Cypress Key at four o'clock in the morning, anyone looking out his window at that dead hour, might have thought he'd seen a scarecrow walking past. That was, in fact, what Bill Winston thought he saw at first from the window of his house along the beach, the house in which he lived with his wife, three dogs, nine cats, and ten loud birds: he thought he saw a living scarecrow, or at least a man who looked like one, limp and haggard, walking slowly through the streets and toward the pier.

Bill Winston sometimes sat up two or three nights straight, unable to find sleep, unable to relax in the rare nocturnal silence of his home, even as his wife snored away. He sat that night as he always did, by the ocean window, his face lit by the glow of the orange tip of his cigarette, watching the exhausted stranger climb up over the fence at the pier, then amble down it toward the end.

"What's that fool doing out there?" he whispered in the quiet, leaning toward the window screen to see more clearly. A dog's ear moved at his feet, then fell back into slumber.

He watched the weary figure reach the end of the pier and climb upon the top of a large concrete pile, carefully avoiding the fluorescent glare of the pier lamps, hanging his legs over the side, over the water, and resting his elbows on his knees.

The figure grew completely still, completely quiet and alone.

Bill looked out to where the stranger fixed his gaze and picked up his binoculars. With them, he searched for a boat or an airplane or a light, for whatever the stranger was watching for out there, but he saw nothing, nothing in the sky or on the water, nothing on the beach or in the waves; Bill looked until the sky grew pale with dawn, until the stars had faded and the moon had disappeared, yet he saw nothing past the pier, nothing but the vastness and the blackness of the Gulf.