

**Chapter 1**  
*The Clean Line*



Toby Hemingway lived her life as she instructed her students. Adverbs and adjectives found no easy berth in her students' essays. She lived on the Gulf of Mexico in a house on a white sand bluff. It stood there like a beacon for 50 years and was lived in by only two families. When Toby and her late

husband Ron sailed into the bay, they could see it and the magnolia and pines that shaded it. The dock below it had been replaced after each hurricane, but the house was buffeted by a line of high dunes and sea oats whose roots held it together through storms. The house withstood.

Each morning Toby took a mug of coffee to a point on the bluff to watch the rising sun paint the horizon pink and cast the sea platinum. She sat on one of two chairs in which she and Ron had reigned over their kingdom for three decades. But now, Toby held no expectations that the empty chair would be filled by someone else. A stoic individual, her pen more often left a period than a comma.

She stayed until the sea turned teal and the sky cerulean.

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At the outset, retirement brought little change to Toby's daily routine. She rose at 5 a.m., put on a pot of coffee, fed her parrot, Columbus.

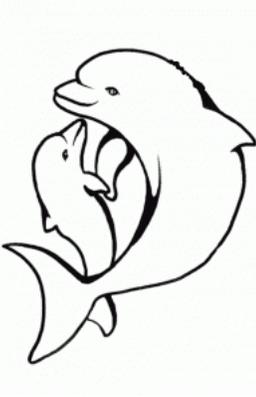
She did a set of yoga poses while listening to the old bird crunch sunflower seeds and to the rhythmic burping of the percolator. She allowed the ease of the yoga stretches to relax her body. Breathe in – *soft* – breathe out – *belly*. Toby's mantra.

For three decades Toby had kept this routine with Ron, rising early for work. With her husband gone and the passing of several years, Toby felt a subtle shift in flow. Days waxed organic as the clock faded from her awareness. Her habit was to sail as often as the winds allowed. She'd sold the forty-two-foot cruiser that had taken their family to ports south and on into the Caribbean. Ron the captain and Toby and their sons the crew. Now Toby captained a slender twenty-six-foot sloop she christened *The Clean Line*. With legs buttressed against the gunnels, she sailed close-hauled to the wind in defiance of prescribed behavior for persons *of her age*. Out on the bay or coastal waters, sailing solo, Toby let her thoughts roam over her life with Ron wondering how to go forward. Would she remarry? Find a lover? Or would she choose to live alone?

How she missed Ron. The warm scent of his sweaty, bronzed skin rushed into her memory, his avid love-making, taking time with her, bringing her along with him. Would her own sexual desire fade away now? She couldn't imagine life without it, the God-given bond of husband and wife, amalgam of a lifetime relationship. Toby and Ron had paid attention to this intimate bond, learning each other's likes and dislikes, their body's needs and pleasures.

Toby leaned to the wind, racing her craft with abandon, her unspent passion flowing into her sail.

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Each month of May it was Toby's habit to sail into Pensacola Bay, drop anchor, and fish for Spanish Mackerel and trout. Marsha, a fellow member of The Fishin' Chix, Pensacola's female fishing divas, had joined her. The two women were hauling them in with minnows as bait. Toby planned to grill their catch that evening for 'the girls' and their hubbies. It had been a regular event during the spring and Toby continued the tradition, seeking the company of friends.

She and Marsha watched the gentle swells, feeling a beer buzz and sunshine haze, when Marsha suddenly stood and pointed. Toby strained to see a dolphin pushing something toward the shore. It was not in a pod and the object rolled back and forth in the currents. Toby started the inboard motor and moved close enough to see what she was pushing.

It appeared to be a dolphin calf.

Toby cut the motor and she and Marsha watched silently for a minute or two. Marsha reached for Toby and held her hand, her eyes brimming with tears.

Toby called the Marine Mammal Rescue on her cell phone. She and Marsha stowed their fishing gear and remained near the mother dolphin until the rescue arrived. By then they were dangerously close to shore. It was clear the mother was pushing her baby to shore. Did she seek human help? The mother gave one last big shove and appeared to watch as the infant dolphin rolled into the onshore chop and current. Then she dove and swam toward the bay pass. A man fishing from the beach saw the dolphin as it washed onto the sand.

Toby called and directed the rescue unit to Navarre Beach, then pointed The Clean Line toward the marina. The two women remained silent, contemplating the tragic event. The tranquility they'd just felt burned away in sorrow and concern.

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On the following Monday Toby found herself traveling to Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge in nearby Ft. Walton Beach. A biologist there agreed to meet with her. His research on bottlenose dolphins encompassed the Pensacola Bay area east to the Choctawhatchee Basin.

Toby learned about a coordinated effort among many agencies and the University of Central Florida to study the local population of bottlenose dolphins, their feeding habits, and prey as a baseline for measuring future impacts from the oil spill. She wanted to know about the dolphin calf that was picked up by the Wildlife Refuge.

Dr. Steve Hadley explained that the analysis of tissue samples was still in progress and tests sometimes took months to complete. While he hesitated to blame the deaths on the oil spill, he explained that dolphins mate February to March. So, the spill which occurred in April would have impacted fetuses in their early stages of development if the oil was a cause of the dolphin's death. Many of the dead calves rolling up across the Gulf shorelines were stillborn Toby learned.

“What can I do to help?” Toby could not stand by and do nothing.



Steve was thoughtful for a moment. “Get involved with us. You can report activity of dolphin pods to the Institute of Marine Mammal Studies in Gulfport, Mississippi. They have a citizen science program. They take your information through an online database. We, the Refuge that is, are part of the NOAA marine mammal stranding network. You can

find an emergency number on our website to report strandings like the one you witnessed.”

Toby was taking notes furiously on her smartphone; she would get The Fishin' Chix and the local yacht club involved...members were on the water all the time.

“How come I haven’t heard more about this problem?” Toby asked.

Steve explained that the interest in the impact of the spill was suppressed by municipalities’ push to convince travelers who support the Gulf Coast’s billion-dollar tourism industry that everything was fine with the water and the wildlife.

“You mean the problem has been suppressed in the local media?”

His look said it all. He was being careful not to be quoted and Toby could see that the forces that keep the economic engines running had already exerted enough influence that it reached to the Refuge itself. She’d seen it many times before.

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## Chapter 2

### *A Brokered Peace*

Like the city where he lived, Marshall had changed hands many times.



Pensacola flew five flags--one for each nation that desired its deep-water port: Spain, Britain, France, Confederate, and USA. After his only parent died, Marshall lived in about that many foster homes before his father's brother surfaced. Uncle Albert took Marshall in when he was ten years old.

His uncle lived in a shotgun house in an historic black neighborhood. The house was so straight and narrow--unlike his Uncle--you could shoot an arrow from the front door right on through the back door. The old structure sat with hunched shoulders and faded yellow paint on a spotty yard of weeds and sand. It had been in the family for generations. Under Albert's watch, it was in serious need of care. Albert worked as a solid waste engineer with the county. He had never married. He was a nighttime alcoholic who somehow managed to sober up and go to work the next morning. He rarely kept food in the refrigerator except when the social worker stopped by to check on Marshall. The boy had learned to fend for himself. Getting out of the foster care system was the only good thing about living with Uncle Albert and learning bits and pieces about the father Marshall never knew.

After landing in Albert's sorry shack, Marshall consoled himself at night by gazing at the golden moon through the long tresses of Spanish moss on the big oak outside his bedroom window. On summer nights legions of frogs bleated and croaked an odd symphony. The first year he cried himself to sleep each night, scared, and feeling even more alone *with* Uncle Albert than after his mother had died.

Alcohol was his uncle's only companion. Even so, Marshall covered up Albert's inebriation and violent outbursts because the alternative foster system was, for him, far worse. Consistent neglect seemed better than inconsistent residence.

Thus, Marshall led a quiet life in the shadows of Pensacola, staying below the radar, keeping his sights on independence at age 18. As he grew, Marsh brokered a tenuous coexistence with his mercurial relative.

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Marsh survived the first year at Uncle Albert's with a cobbled strategy. He was not eligible for free breakfast and lunch at school due to Uncle Albert's salary being above poverty income. But one

thing old Al did right was teach him to fish. There was plenty of fishing tackle and poles in the storage shed. On his recycled bike Marsh met up with the trolley to Casino Beach and the Pensacola Pier where fishermen gathered to harvest the Gulf.

At first his attempts at fishing from the high pier were fruitless. But, being a good study, he noticed a veteran fisherman and copied his techniques. After the muscled elder pulled in a big red drum--enough steaks for Marsh and his uncle for a week--the boy ventured to talk to him directly.

Vern was impressed from the first moment he met the tanned, green-eyed boy with a golden cap of tightly curled hair. The boy curiously exuded an air of assurance.

"What you need is a Gotcha! Lure," Vern said. He held out a shiny lure with a cubicle head. "Here, try it."

Marshall detected a slight smile under Vern's silver mustache. The boy removed the old lure and tied on the new one as Vern watched. Marsh drew the pole to the side and back in a big arch and let it fly far out into the Gulf.

“Capital!” Vern shouted. He couldn't believe how quickly the boy had learned. Vern demonstrated how to move the bait through the water so that it “swam” in spurts on top of the waves.

“If you want to pull in the big guys, you'll need different gear. But for now, this will attract mackerel and Pompano just fine.”

With that Marshall felt a tug and his line went down. He pulled back strong, reeling in the line, released then pulled again. As he wound up his catch, he was surrounded by a fellowship of men, women and kids at-the-ready to celebrate the young fisherman's victory. He yanked a sparkling Spanish mackerel out of the Gulf's aquamarine waters.

That was how Marshall and Vern met. Their odd alliance remained like that from the beginning: good things always happened when they were together. Vern kept a regular pattern of fishing on Sunday morning, rain or shine. It was the same rise-early-



regimen he'd kept for 30 years in the Navy. After retiring, he took up fishing and tinkering in his garage, and lived in utter contentment in a little beachside cottage on Santa Rosa Island. He had a wife named Shirley who, by looking at Vern's gut, Marsh thought must be a terrific cook.

Vern was curious about the boy. He talked often about Marshall with his wife as the unlikely friendship deepened over time. Neither Vern nor Marshall ventured to extend the relationship beyond the pier. They implicitly understood that it was defined by the Gulf waters that surrounded them, unique and particular to that location. Weekend fishing in rain, sun, and surf provided a sustaining force for Marsh and a steady source of protein for a growing teenager.

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“Ain’t got no work for a kid,” Mr. Baker said, unloading boxes of Alabama sweet potatoes from an old green truck.



“I ain’t a kid. I’m thirteen years old and I can work circles around the best you have,” Marshall said blowing himself up as tall as he could.

Something about this kids’ spunk made old man Baker laugh inside. But the boy was under age and he couldn’t take on any more risks than he already had with his fresh market. Still he wished he had just one kid in his own family with as much ambition as this little guy.

“I’ll work for food...and I won’t tell a soul that I am working here.” Marsh was desperate, and the man could hear that but didn’t let on.

For the first year Marsh took home a box of produce, dozen eggs and a carton of milk each Saturday. Many of the laborers were from the same neighborhood as Marsh and knew his uncle to be a bum. They played the game, too, and sometimes they invited the boy to their homes for a meal or to join their congregation on a Wednesday night potluck.

The second year, old-man Baker put a ten-dollar bill in the box of produce with a don't-you-dare-tell look.

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At home Uncle Albert, who spent most of his money on booze, raided his nephew's hard-earned store without any remorse. Yet the boy remained grateful that his otherwise disgusting uncle kept social service at bay.

School offered its own challenges. There Marsh faced the true reality of his life: he didn't belong anywhere. He was too brown to be accepted by the lily-white crowd who no matter the rhetoric still considered blacks second-class citizens. And, he was not black enough, nor did he know the ways of black folks on his side of town. He was what people called "blended". He'd lived in a middle-class white neighborhood with his mother in a more tolerant town before he landed in the Florida Panhandle.

But there was this one girl at school who drew Marshall's attention. Shaundra Williams. A military brat, tall and willowy, with a great smile and ready laugh. "I'm a chameleon!" she said once when they were discussing frequent moves, being "strangers in a strange land".

"I blend perfectly in any environment."

Marsh had laughed. But he understood the skill and its underbelly. A person survived by fitting into the local beat, whatever it was. The trade-off survival.

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Toby sat on her couch taking in the scene. All her girlfriends had responded to her invitation to brunch and to learn more about the encounter with the mother dolphin and her dead calf. She

loved them all: fisherwomen, sailors, mothers and wives, and retired teachers—a formidable, comedic, colorful army of capable women.

The story touched their hearts like Toby and Marsha. There is nothing more tragic than the loss of a child. When young die it is contrary to what we know, what we expect. Generative, renewing, freshly-made with all the vigor and hope for the future, a newborn makes us feel more alive and grateful for life itself. We pour our hopes and dreams into them. Why should it not be the same for the dolphin mothers?

“There are actually scientists all along the Gulf coast who are monitoring bottlenose dolphins,” Toby explained. “So far there have been nearly 100 dolphin deaths, and these are just the ones that wash ashore.”

The sheer number drew outrage.

“How come we don't know about this?” someone shouted. It was Shirley a retired teacher and long-time friend of Ron and Toby. Her husband Vern and she had sailed with their young families on trips along the upper Gulf. Shirley was a Fishin Chix of long-standing.

Toby explained the implicit gag on reporting the science that the refuge scientist cautiously shared with her. Heavy influence from tourism and the business sector sought to prevent tourists from going elsewhere out of fear.

"That's tantamount to murder," another exclaimed. "If it's too bad to report, it's not safe for families."

Each woman began to comprehend the implications. Not only were they concerned for the dolphins, but each realized whatever was affecting them could be affecting their own family's health as well. They ate from the Gulf and their children played in its waters. The authorities had assured the public that the beaches were safe for swimming. But, the fact of Toby and Marsha's encounter with the dolphin mother and her stillborn baby drove home the implications more deeply. They were being lied to.

Their discussion went into the early evening with a plan to spread the word to friends and networks they each kept. They agreed to meet again in a month. Toby and Marsha could feel a united spirit among them. Nothing was more awesome than women defending their young. Nothing.

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On The Clean Line Toby stowed away her gear and tied down the cooler in which she had packed sandwiches, fruit, soda and plenty of water. She consulted the local NOAA station for conditions on the Gulf. Today there would be a steady SW breeze and, with the normal near shore current that ran west along coastal communities, Toby knew she would be running before the wind going but tacking to the wind on her return which would double the return time. She figured she could make it to the Institute for Marine Mammal Research by 10 am, stay until 1, and then get home right at nightfall, barring any changes in the weather. She checked the bow, stern, and mainsail lights and radio batteries. Stowed on board was a dry

box with sleeping bag, foam liner and blankets, rain gear, and a first aid kit and flares. She felt prepared.

Toby had been taking longer and longer excursions on the Gulf to harden up her courage and to make sure she could handle the lines and sheets in strong winds or inclement weather. But until today, she'd never tried a solo venture this far from her home port. She could have driven but Toby sought the solace of the sea.

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The pod moved through warm waters along the coastline. A calf was jumping and playing up ahead. She chased after him. He was coming along in his knowledge of the sea and pod life. Since losing her own baby, she had adopted the little orphan. The youngster was curious and quick to investigate a new situation – too quick.

It was July and the fishing had become more difficult along the Gulf shores. In fact, it had been harder for the pod to find food. The elders in the pod decided to join a group hunt farther out to sea. Larger fish swam there in abundance.

This would be the little dolphin's first experience in deeper waters away from the coastal shallows where he was born. She signaled to him to stay near her.

As days passed, more and more pods joined together until there was a dolphin herd. Together they swam out over the Continental Shelf. The flat sandy bottom gave way to deep canyons in the sea. Using sonar, the herd located a school of red snapper which would provide good protein for hungry dolphins.

The pod formed a ring of bubbles around the school of snapper, a living net. In turn each dolphin plunged amidst the swirl of snapper to grab a meal while others maintained the net. Red snapper bared rows of teeth like saws--powerful predators

and fast swimmers they made the hunt more fun. Life quickened in the face of death.

She had seen a bull shark feeding among the snapper. A fury of predators churned the water: sharks, dolphins, and red snappers rocketed across the conflagration. Size and speed made the difference in who lived or died. The infant dolphin used no caution. She swam to him and they left together for the surface where she kept him safe until the pod had satisfied its hunger.



As The Clean Line entered Pensacola Bay pass, a few young dolphins swam alongside before rejoining their pod heading into the bay. Toby loved the species' spirit of play, and their sheer exuberance as they rode the bow waves. The winds were not particularly strong, yet it was hard to tell when *running before the wind*. On a run, a sailor worries about jibing--a sudden collapse of the sail. With the sails full out, and the jib and mainsail wing-on-wing, it was difficult to see ahead. She studied the coastal waterway map to make sure not to stray into the shallows. The sun beat down; she lathered up with sunscreen and entered a state of alert meditation.

Alone, in silence, on a sparkling, translucent-green ocean, Toby studied the landscape--white sand beaches lined by oak forests, little bayous and inlets, and the horizon dark blue against an azure sky. Tears welled in her eyes in moments like this when all the elements of place, heart, and circumstance converge to a perfect moment. Then it vanished, just-like-that, the gods teasing with a taste of heaven.



Wahoo. Rows of sharp teeth, long dorsal spines, big bifurcated tails, blue/gold scales, and a tenacious spirit, the fish had spurred the local baseball team adoption. *The Blue Wahoos* were an up and coming regional team and national talent incubator. The Gulf was reflected in the cities along its edge with images, architecture, cuisine, fashion, and mascots.

She noticed an excursion boat with tourists straining to haul in a good-sized catch. Was it drum?

She found her binoculars. It was



eyes scanning the waves for the dark shapes of mullet that were running out from the bays and bayous to the shoreline to dine on shellfish.

As Toby headed downwind, she anticipated her meeting at the Institute, and reviewed what she hoped to learn. She pulled her pink hat low over her blue eyes, tightened the jib and let out the mainsail. A long train of brown pelicans flew at her side, broad wings arched for lift,

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from the intense sun while fishing on the pier and the arduous bike ride from the trolley with two King Mackerel packed in ice, strapped to the seat rack. They were both about 30 inches long and weighed over 35 pounds together.

Marsh gutted and cleaned his catch on the picnic table in the backyard. It was late afternoon on Sunday. He was feeling weak

Uncle Albert surprisingly offered to start a fire in the bar-b-que. Then, he sat down across from Marsh and began gutting a mackerel. He was an expert. A deep cut

along the long belly, pulled the gills up and cut them from the body, and with one hand grabbed the gills and gut and pulled the whole of it out. Then he cut along the spine to drain the blood. He was a master.

"What the f--- is that?" Uncle Albert was staring at a dark mass in the gut tissues.

Marsh cut the strange growth from the enveloping mesentery. He poked it with his knife, then his finger. It felt gummy. He picked it up and gave it a sniff. It smelled like something familiar. but he could not recall what that was.

Uncle Albert followed Marsh's observations with keen interest. "I've never seen a thing like that," he said. Then, he disappeared through the back door for a beer.

That was the extent of his Uncle's attention. Marsh was left to finish the cleaning and grill the fish. He put aside the odd mackerel with disappointment. It would have provided many steaks and fish tacos. But he was smart enough not to eat it. Instead, Marsh planned to take it to his biology teacher.

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Before school started, Marsh and Shaundra delivered the deformed mackerel to Mr. Paine. It was smelling ripe by then. Shaundra took photos on her smartphone. "This is strange, indeed." Mr. Paine examined the black clump of tissue through his bifocals. "Perhaps this could be a project for the two of you" he said as he laid the black mass underneath a dissecting scope and leaned down for a closer look.

"Whoa," he leaned back suddenly.

"What is it?" Shaundra said.

"I got a strong whiff of petroleum," he said placing the specimen in a collecting jar.

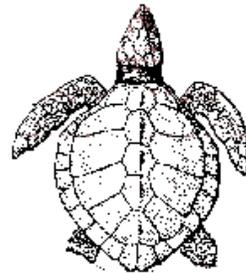
“That's it!” Marsh recalled that odor. “I couldn't place it yesterday, but that's right!”

The bell rang for first period. The teacher promised they could discuss the fish in science class later in the day. After the teens left, Paine wrapped the carcass and stored it in a cooler. It was probably too toxic for his students to work with, but he could point them toward reporting the find to the proper authorities.

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A student intern led Toby around the Institute research and rehabilitation area.

"These are Kemp's Ridleys," Molly St. John explained. Several small sea turtles swam around a large tank.

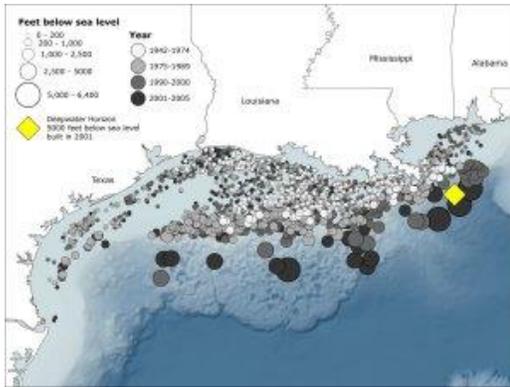


"I see these frequently from my boat," Toby said.

"It is one of the smallest of the seven turtle species found in the Gulf of Mexico. It is endangered," Molly said.

Toby studied the young graduate student. It was obvious she was perfectly placed in her chosen life's work. She was a graduate student focused on marine ecology at University of South Alabama.

Sea turtles, dolphins, and a small whale were being cared for in large tanks and pool at the Institute. They had been injured by boats, or caught in fishing nets or floating debris, and others suffered from a weakened immune system.



Toby and Molly had just left a meeting with an Institute scientist about the dolphin Toby and Marsha had reported to the refuge. He had suggested that Holly and Toby discuss ways Toby's community could assist the Institute in tracking the bottlenose dolphin population near their city.

The scientist confirmed Toby's suspicions that the impacts of the oil spill continued in the Gulf ecosystems. But it wasn't only the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. It was the combined impact of 4,000 oil wells in the Gulf.

"That, plus the fact that the Gulf leaks oil from cracks in its underlying bedrock. That's what we call a natural baseline of this particular marine ecosystem," Molly explained as they walked to her office. "It's a combination of forces that are changing the Gulf ecosystem. Climate change is not easily visible to the eye. Warmer temperatures shift the chemistry of the air and water interface, and microbial communities at the base of the food chain are also changing."

"So, how *do* ordinary citizens make sense of it? This requires more scientific literacy than most citizens possess, I'm afraid."

Toby plopped herself in front of Molly's disheveled desk. Molly put on a pot of coffee and offered Toby a power bar.

"I am impressed you sailed here on your own," Molly said sitting at her desk and flinging her long, tanned legs on the desk. Her golden hair swung above her sun-burned shoulders, and her bronzed face and warm brown eyes shown with youth's radiance.

"Me too." Toby laughed. "This is a first for me . . . to solo such a distance."

Toby shared a short biography with Molly who seemed engrossed in her story.

"We can build on your writing classes and experience in schools. I gotta meet the Fishin' Chix, too," Molly said. "I think I might like those girls." Shifting to the issue at hand and mindful that Toby had to get back on the water, she explained how Toby's community could help her with her research. "Adults and teens can submit data using a survey tool that we provide to monitor a particular area on a regular basis. And, you can use your experience as a writing teacher to get folks writing about the Gulf and advocating for conservation and rehabilitation. That," she emphasized, "could be more powerful. Raise awareness, send folks to City Hall."

"Could you meet with a group of us if I prepare them ahead of time, so we don't waste your time?" Toby's mind was racing ahead with a plan to engage her peers and through them multiple groups of stakeholders.

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It was dark when Toby arrived at a dock on a small inlet in Mobile, Alabama. She motored in slowly and tied up near the Banana Docks Café, famous for its Cajun cuisine and one of Toby and Ron's haunts. She would stay overnight in the small hotel on the harbor, then resume her trip at dawn.

After a dish of blackened grouper finished off with bread pudding and praline sauce, she would sleep like a baby. Before she dove into bed, Toby called Marsha to let her know her location. Her dear friend had insisted when she learned of Toby's solo sail. At that point in the trip it still seemed like a good idea. She'd overestimated her progress tacking-back against a steady SW current and offshore breeze. It was

okay with her. She needed the time to mentally plan how to mobilize her community, and to move City Hall in the right direction.

That night she dreamed of Ron. On waking it occurred to her that their relationship had been defined by the Gulf of Mexico. She loved that.

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### Chapter 3

#### Adopted Families



Marsh and Shaundra sat shoulder to shoulder in front of her computer screen. Mr. Paine had guided them to write to the local U.S. Fish and Wildlife office. They composed an email to a contact he provided them and attached the photos Shaundra had taken. Paine had frozen the fish carcass. They offered to deliver it to the office figuring Mr. Paine or Shaundra's mother would provide transportation. The friends had downed chocolate milkshakes, a bag of Fritos, and couple of apples in Shaundra's bedroom where they left the door open as required by Mrs. Williams, her mother. Their email was the leading edge of a wave that would grow over time. But for now, the friends just attended to the matter at hand.

Shaundra's home was palatial compared to Marsh's house. Her father was a Colonel at the Naval base, conferring beautiful housing for their family. The living room was filled with family photos, a piano, and comfortable furniture. In the family room a gigantic smart screen TV spanned one wall with a semi-circular couch in front of it for viewing movies together. Marsh suddenly understood his poverty.



"What's wrong," Shaundra said, looking at his facial expression. Like turning off the lights in a dark room, a shadow had passed over Marsh's face.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

Marsh had Shaundra's mother drop him off at DeLuna Plaza downtown. After they were out of sight, he walked the two miles to his Uncle's house.

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City Hall sat behind the dais in the public meeting room. His gut felt tight and his heart raced again. His doctor had just warned him he was under too much stress and needed to drop the thirty pounds he had acquired over the last ten years as a public servant. It was all too depressing. Every move to improve his city was opposed by a fierce minority who though few absorbed a great deal of his time.



"Thank you for your presence here today," he lied as he stood to respond to the 3-minute public comments. "I appreciate your concerns but as I've presented before, the city engineers assure me that widening the overpass will not affect the bayou."

A tall woman dressed in outdoor clothing stood and shouted, "And we are supposed to believe in engineers that work for development?" Sneers from the audience.

City Hall was a short man with a round belly and skinny legs. His hair was balding. He brushed it over the bare spots making him look ethereal when the lights shone overhead. Yet inside that lit up head storms raged, and dark clouds flew across his mind. He had grown to hate the public, at least the ones that continued to poke at him and his fellow council members whenever a development project was proposed. They represented everything he loathed: left-wing socialists, god damn preservationists. If they had it their way, the city would be a hamlet.

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"Anchors aweigh!" Columbus squawked as the living room emptied of women.

This was the grey parrot's usual utterance when he sensed a departure. How he knew it Toby's family had never discerned, but perhaps there was a change in activity or tone of voices unnoticed by them. Or, could the intelligent bird understand their conversation?

Columbus had come into their lives when a marina owner on a Caribbean island had asked them to adopt a young parrot that he was unable to care for. The man had named it Columbus. The bird was obtained from a small village on the Ivory Coast ending up in the ownership of the marina owner six years later. He'd had the bird for four years. By ten years of age, Columbus had acquired several hundred words in three languages. He understood numbers of things and possessed a fondness for wine corks and Legos. The Toby and Ron's boys taught Columbus to sing '*ooh, it makes me wonder*' from Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven--guaranteed to bring down the house. When Ron passed away, Columbus turned 20.

A few mornings after the funeral, when Toby fed him pieces of mango, he'd stopped eating, cocked his head at her, staring with one luminous yellow eye.

"Anchors aweigh," he'd said.

Toby was silent, stunned. "Yes, anchors aweigh."

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Marsh biked over to the local skate park. It was really cool. Brand new and not far from his house. He didn't own a board himself but there was always an extra that other skaters brought along.

"Hey, man!" Sky shouted.

A blond, super-tanned boy waved to Marsh from the top of a shoot. He jumped on his board and rode it to the lip, rocketed into the air and executed a high ollie, clapped down with arms spread like wings on the concrete runway and skated to where Marsh stood. They high fived. Sky's t-shirt and face were dripping with the sweat of exertion.

"Got a board yet?" he asked.

"Nope," Marsh said faking a grin. "I haven't got over to Waterboyz," he fibbed. He'd been there looking at the skate and surf boards and all the bright t-shirts and gear he could not afford to buy. Waterboyz was a great store started by a veteran surfer who loved youth. The owner had all kinds of classes going for kids. In an adjoining warehouse, a small skateboard course was frequented by neighborhood kids. It was always packed and the music great. Marsh so far was just an observer. Sky skated to the other side of the park motioning for Marsh to follow him. He pulled an old skateboard from his backpack.

"Here, this is the board I learned on. Keep it until you get your own," Sky said.

"Really?" Marsh said, thrilled. "I'll take great care of it, man, 'till I get my own."

"I know bro. Come on, let's get rollin'."

Marsh was a natural athlete. He got right in the thick of the action, made a few spectacular wipeouts but got right back at it, learning from Sky and other boys who were happy to lend advice to an initiate. Sky showed him "the ollie."

"You have to learn the basic motion. Step on the tail to raise the nose, slide your foot toward the nose but over the bolts, jump, then come down over both sets of bolts."

At one point, Marsh achieved a little hop with the board under him.

"Sick, man," Sky said.

"Hey! Give me a break, bro," Marsh said, frustrated.

"No, man, that means cool!"

Skateboarding came with its own language and rules.

"You should come to the tournament next Saturday. A bunch of us are competing with boarders from all around the South. You learn a lot. And there are girls."

"Yeah, I'll drop by. Thanks, Sky."

He strapped his borrowed board to his bike and headed for home. He was starving.

###



Toby formed a team: teachers in elementary, middle and high school; a local independent news agency journalist; artists and videographer; fundraiser, and one very successful community organizer listened to by both sides

of the aisle. She would engage the West Florida Literary Federation to sponsor contests for writers and poets and publish in their professional journal and online. Finally, the local League of Women Voters would be asked to train the public to write effective Letters to the Editor about conserving the Gulf.

She would bring a similar team of youth together after fielding recommendations from her leadership team. The youth team would be supported by the adult team. She wished to have structure but not too much of it to allow the Millennial- and younger- generations creative room. They would lead.

Molly St. John agreed to serve as a science advisor.

###

The Fishin' Chix, Bream Fishermen Association, Pensacola Canoe Club, and the Surfrider Foundation would participate in collecting and submitting data to the Marine Mammal Institute. University of West Florida Environmental Studies majors would be invited to join in.

At a meeting in the Community Center with about 50 adults and youths, Toby suggested a plan that would allow all the groups to work independently, during the normal course of their activities. In this way, no one carried a huge administrative load and any costs incurred would be covered by the groups. Meetings would be minimal.

Developing a crack team of writers would be hers alone. She knew how to turn out solid writers. No one understood the power of the written word more than Toby Hemingway. It had made the world throughout history. This would be no exception in the Magical Kingdom of the Gulf.



On a clear Fall night, she assembled the writing team for a potluck and planning. Among them was a golden-haired lad with green eyes full of excitement.

###



"Oh, Captain! My Captain!" shrieked Columbus as guests arrived.

Marsh was immediately drawn to the parrot. The two eyed each other thoughtfully.

"Hey, Matie," Marsh said in his best pirate-ese. The other kids gathered behind him enthralled with Columbus.

"Ooo, it makes wonder," crooned the bird. Most of the kids did not know the song but the adults laughed in surprise.

"This is Columbus, who, you can see, is in rare form tonight!" Toby said.

"The moon lies fair," Columbus said.

"Okay, everyone, get a plate and drink. "

Toby and Marsha directed kids, teachers, and journalists to the dining room table loaded with everyone's favorite dishes. The weather had turned raw and windy with a front moving in. Plans to barbeque were changed to a potluck inside.

After everyone had settled in around the living room, Toby picked up a dog-eared copy of *Call of the Wild*. She read:

*Buck did not read the newspapers, or he would have known that trouble was brewing, not alone for himself, but for every tide-water dog, strong of muscle and with warm, long hair, from Puget Sound to San Diego. Because men, groping in the Arctic darkness, had found a yellow metal, and because steamship and transportation companies were booming the find, thousands of men were rushing into the Northland. These men wanted dogs, with strong muscles by which to toil, and furry coats to protect them from the frost. ~ Into the Primitive, Chapter 1, Call of the Wild, Jack London, 1903.*

The room was completely quiet.

"What did the writer do in this first paragraph?" Toby asked.

The group rang out with ideas. She let the conversation grow and enrich itself as young and old responded.

"This is the kind of writing we need now." She stopped for a few moments. "Can you do that? Can we do that?"

This was how Toby began to teach her team the kind of powerful writing that emanates from direct experience. This kind of storytelling brings understanding, engenders empathy, and moves people to act together.



Marsh could not sleep that night. His chest was filled with excitement and the kind of anxiety caused by the wish to achieve something and the journey ahead to accomplish it.

He turned on the bedside lamp, found the journal Mrs. Hemingway had given him, and began to jot down ideas, words, and phrases. Then, he started writing. When he finally looked up, it was dawn.

###

### **Plastic - the facts**

- Humans have created 8300 million metric tons of plastic in the last 60+ years
- Every year between 4.8 and 12.7 million ton end up in our oceans
- A single 1L plastic bottle could break down into enough small fragments to put one on every mile of beach in the entire world.



There were fewer calves in the pod. No one knew why. Mating activity was similar to other seasons but not as many females became pregnant. And, there were stillborn calves -- a rarity in the pod's collective memory. Each baby was more and more precious to the pod members. Several grandmothers helped watch over the adopted calf giving her time to hunt. The pod responded to shifting locations of prey requiring more exertion and time. Since her stillborn baby, she'd puzzled over all that weakened their survival and joy. It surely must be related to The Changes.

###

It was October and fishermen at the Pensacola Pier were pulling in redfish. It was a bonanza. The fish migrated closer to shore to fatten-up on menhaden, mullet, and crustaceans for the coming winter months.

"It's a topwater lure you need this morning, Marsh," Vern advised and gestured toward a variety of lures he'd laid out. "I've been getting good action with the darker lure, but I see people around me with the light."

"I'll try the white Z-Man," Marsh said lifting the rubbery lure to his line.

They were casting far from the dock structure. Later they switched to live bait (mullet, shrimp, crab) for around the dock itself.

The redfish streaked across the translucent water where Marsh could observe their golden-dark shadows moving with speed and grace against the white sand below. Vern was quiet as usual. "We'll be able to fish for flounder next month. They migrate here to mate in November. Would you like to join me and my wife in our boat to fish for them?"

"Yes!" Marsh said without hesitation. "I didn't know you had a boat."

"My wife uses it mostly. . .she and her Fishin' Chix."

"The what chics?" Marsh laughed.

"Yeah, a bunch of women who are fishing fanatics," he said, reeling in a redfish.

"And none of them are your age, in case you had any aspirations."

Marsh didn't know too much about flounder but being with Vern in a boat fishing was a strong pull. And, anticipation of *Mrs. Vern's* good cooking.

"Hey, Vern. Did you find anything unusual when you cleaned your Kingfish last week?" He asked remembering the odd fish.

"No, why?"

"When my Uncle opened up one of the Kings, we found an ugly black growth that smelled like oil," Marsh explained.

Vern was quiet, thinking, fishing. "Tell you the truth. I'm surprised we don't find more life that with the oil spill and all."

"It made me think when I fixed the other one. I mean, I wonder if there is stuff, we don't see that's there, you know?"

"Keep thinking like that and you'll starve," Vern reminded him.

"Guess so," he said. Marsh wondered how many others like him depended on their fishing for a regular source of food.

Just then a shout rang out at the far end of the pier. Everyone was reeling in and walking down there. Marsh and Vern joined the crowd of fishermen.



Flopping on the pier was a sea turtle with a hook down its throat. It was 'swimming' through the air on its back, contorting to right itself. There were two fishermen who had lifted the turtle using a basket and rope that the Pier kept on hand just for this happenstance. It was part of a sea turtle conservation effort. By lifting it in a basket, they avoided further harm to the sea turtle.

Every year, legions of sea turtles were found impaled by fishing gear, slashed by churning blades or entombed in nets or plastic. It was not uncommon for the Pier fishermen to pull out a sea turtle. Today, these two men had already called the Sea Turtle Rescue team to take the sea turtle to a rehab facility. Once the turtle was tended to, the rehabbers would give it a thorough going over, make sure it was eating, and then release it back to the Gulf.

"It looks beat up," one observer said.

"Maybe it's old," another added.

"How can you tell," someone else asked.

"Don't know."

"I think you count the rings inside one of the scales," an older fisherman offered. Marsh noted the curiosity about the turtle including his own. For the first time he thought about what kind of job he could get that would keep him near the Gulf and doing this: following his curiosity and love for the ocean, and getting paid to do it.

###

High winds and near-shore lightening shut-down the Pensacola Pier. Without their usual fishing, Vern tinkered on his boat, and Marsh read *Call of the Wild*. In that rarity of moments when a soul is drawn into a still point -- when normal time continues around him, but he remains behind -- he saw his life in Buck's journey. Vern was his John Thornton, Sandra his Nig. This Navy-veteran never questioned Marsh's circumstances but befriended him in the present by sharing joy in being on the great big Gulf. Vern had fought his wars just as Marsh had fought his. Like Buck and John, they came together at the perfect moment as planned by some celestial event perhaps. For who can say why certain people come into our lives

when we need them most? And Sandra and her family helped restore a sense of belonging and legitimacy for him -- just as Nig, the little Irish setter in Jack London's tale, licked Buck's wounds until they healed. In *Call of the Wild*, Marsh found himself. His journey as an orphan had meaning, and like Buck, the harrowing journey had made him stronger and better in every way he could be. And like Buck who found his pack and his great love, Marsh could feel that call now as a path opened ahead for him as a writer, a scientist, and hopefully one day, a great father. As Marsh closed the cover on that timeless story, a new guide entered his life.

## Chapter 4

### Home Sweet Home

A house and its family eventually meld, especially when a long marriage and enduring love have warmed its walls with the voices of children, and the highs and lows of life's challenges, that blend to form a certain aura: "home".



Toby and Ron's house on the high bluff was home to two sons - Ron, Jr. and Thomas -- their parents, and Columbus. Various dogs had come and gone, their bones on the bluff where lawn meets the sky. A coastal oak

whose limbs dipped to rest upon the earth, protected them.

Columbus, perceptive creature that he is, stored the home's auditory memories with great accuracy, much to the detriment of the other occupants. A set of these memes were evoked with Toby sitting at her desk to grade papers. "The toils of Sisyphus!" He shrieked. This was interspersed with lines from Todd Rundgren's "I saw the light in your eyes," taught to him by Tommy who listened to rock tunes of his parents' era.

"I saw the light!" he crooned bobbing his head up and down which made Toby join in singing the whole song. It always made her weep for want of seeing her boys again. Plus, the glass of wine. Probably a ritual not well aligned with grading papers. Or, perhaps it was perfect for it.

###

You read and you read and then something comes into your hands that is original, fresh, like no other. Bedamned the grammar or even the sentence structure, the power is there. This was Marsh's first essay for Toby.

#### The First Line

*It was hunger that first made me love the Gulf of Mexico.*

#### The Next Line

*The truth is, I was poor, and fish were free.*

Marsh went on in a stream of consciousness to tell the story of how he'd found a rusted-out bike frame with no tires and how an old man -- the neighborhood recycler of everything metal -- clanged around in his yard to find parts and two tires.

*The yard and porches were filled to waist high with junk, Marsh wrote. Washing machines, outboard motors, old truck tires made into flower beds, shovels, ladders, metal swimming pools full of greening rain water, aluminum, tools. Ya Ya was a grandfather and beloved by all who knew him. He saw me, I mean he really saw me that day when I knocked on his door dragging the bike carcass behind me.*

*He'd sent me home with a bag of grapefruit from his tree. When I returned the next day, my bike was complete, cleaned and buffed to a shine. He'd found a bike seat and rack, and best of all, fishing gear. I told him how I wanted to fish at the Pier to get the bigger fish. He saw my hunger because he'd known it, too.*

*I'll come help you, I said, as payment for the bike.*

*He'd put his weathered hand on my shoulder and said, No. Go fish!*

*After that, I always brought him steaks and fillets when I had a good catch. Sometimes he smoked them on one of his many grills, and he always had a huge pot of collards cooking on his tiny stovetop, and we sat on fancy metal love seats under the oaks and watched the cars go by as the sun went down. Everyone knew Ya Ya. They waved, and some stopped the car in the middle of the road and gabbed with him for a while.*

*Ya Ya was the first storyteller.*

###

For a teacher and a mentor of a young person with exceptional talent, she carries a heavy burden. Youth are impressionable, their path malleable. How much does the guide intervene? When to direct, when not. What are the resources to bring to them and when is the right time for it?

These thoughts occupied Toby for most of the morning after she'd first read Marsh's story. She'd been doing this work for most of her life and knew well enough that a talent like his comes along perhaps once in a teacher's lifetime.

As she cleaned the house, and later prepared her gardens for the coming winter, she recalled his story. Should she say nothing, and let the boy unfold in his own way until he asked for her assistance? She'd never before considered such a strategy. She had treasured the timeless works of great writers from an early age. Each possessed a style that would be associated with them and emulated by many new writers. She observed that each broke with convention where it worked. Each story provided a window for readers -- a time, a place, people who would live on in readers' minds sometimes for centuries. Hugo, Dickens, Austen came to mind. Could Marsh be of such talent?

She wished to know more about Marsh. His writing showed that he was wise for his age, probably from hardship, perhaps loss. These were the elements of deep writing. It was also clear he possessed drive and that people gathered around him.

###

"Shirley, hi. It's Toby."

"Hey girl, what's up?"

"Have you got time to read an essay for me? I've, I've received something that is . . . well, totally unexpected."

Shirley was quiet, listening. "Sure. Are you home?"

###

Toby walked Shirley to the chairs on the bluff. It had been a singing blue day, and the bay and Gulf beyond it shimmered to the horizon. While Shirley read, Toby went inside to mix gin and tonics, Shirley's preferred libation.

When Toby returned, Shirley had put down the essay and was leaning back in her chair, staring into the blue.

"This boy, Marsh, I believe he is the young man that Vern has been talking about for almost a year."

Shirley filled Toby in on how Vern and Marsh had developed a durable friendship around Sunday Pier fishing, and how Vern had grown to love the boy but had not extended the relationship beyond their weekly sports activities.



They clinked their glasses sitting back to enjoy the sun's descent. The Great Artist filled his brushes and painted the sky gold, orange, and magenta.

"He apparently is living with an Uncle who is an alcoholic. The boy feeds himself and does pick up work around town to cobble together a survival strategy. Vern says he's a quick learner, too."

"What did you think of the essay?"

"He's an old soul. I've read nothing like it from someone his age."

"I'm struggling to know how to help him keep developing the talent. I've decided to do nothing, to just give him opportunities to publish and continue to write. What do you think?"

"Yes. With the Gulf conservation a purpose for the writing, he will likely be able to navigate his personal circumstances, finding ways to understand it."

Toby thought about Shirley's astute observation. She was right. Writing is that, all art is that: a way to understand, to celebrate the experience, to "come out ahead of ourselves" as Steinbeck reminded us.

That evening she reread the essay. Across the bottom, she wrote, *Continue!*

###

Toby, Marsha, and Shirley distributed copies of the Institute's survey for reporting stranded or injured marine mammals. There were also questions about other changes the observer might have made about the general health of the Gulf.

"Now, there may be other kinds of reporting that this form will not collect," Molly St. John said to a room full of Fishin' Chix and Canoe Club members.

"Witnessing dumping of trash or oil in the bays or bayous and rivers, harvesting species with endangered status, etc. there are call lines you can use or other organizations that can take the information."

She pointed to the smart screen in Toby's living room on which she projected the websites of partnering groups. She clicked on Bream Fishermen's Association and showed the women where they could be trained to take samples of water for testing.

"Bream Fishermen have been sampling your watershed for over 7 decades. They are great at what they do, and their work is essential to measuring change over time. So, you may want to do the sampling when you are out rowing or fishing.

"Now I am going to show you how to download the app for the Institute's marine mammal study on your phone. Anytime you sight a dolphin in trouble, just report through your phone app. It will prompt you to take photos and send any you have along with the report."

Everyone was murmuring and asking questions all at once. Molly put up her hands.

"Whoa, ladies. Here's the most important thing you can do for science. First, follow protocol. If it tells you to keep samples at a certain temperature, make sure you do it. If it tells you to sample at the same locations at regular intervals, you do it."

Molly explained why protocols must be observed, so that data can be compared.

"You can't compare apples to oranges, or samples from one place with samples in another, or morning samples with evening samples. It's very rigid. Once the process is set up, we have to follow it precisely. Any questions?"

There were dozens. Then Molly explained the most important elements of any study like theirs.

"Just do it on a regular basis for as long as you can. Bream has sampled for seven decades. They can show change over time. But even sampling and reporting for a year is important. You can sample weekly, monthly, or quarterly but just keep it the same collection schedule. What are some places you go to regularly to fish or canoe?"

Marsha answered that she and Toby fish by season and location of particular species throughout the year.

"Well, for you then, sample for one year in the locations you go to. Then do it again the next year and another if you can. Citizen Science is about observing over time and reporting your results. Once you get the process down, it doesn't take that much time," Molly continued.

"I'm going to get my kids involved," a Fishin' chic said. "They will love this and maybe they can use it for a science project."

Toby and Marsha went over schedules for the club to do their part observing and reporting.

Toby closed the meeting by saying, "You know we are just focusing our attention together as a club. Let's do this with the same swag we do everything else!"

To that all the women cheered.

###

The pod headed eastward along the shores of Santa Rosa Island, past Pensacola Beach and on out to Navarre where the waters were clearer, and a new reef had formed near the old pier.

The storm destroyed the pier. No humans had come there for a long time. On the crumbling cement blocks, a reef grew back with sponges, seagrass, then barnacles, oysters and crabs.

Many species got their start in life when they were tiny creatures by hiding in the safety of the reef's rocks and caves. The pod knew that the reef's smaller creatures attracted bigger fish and they in turn attracted even bigger fish. It was a Gulf food chain. The pod understood that the diversity of life on the new reef signaled everything was working right. Conversely, where they found diminished life on previously dynamic reefs, it signaled trouble for the pod.

###

On Pensacola Beach on Santa Rosa Island, Jimmy Buffet bought a half-completed hotel in 2010 after the Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill. Tourism - the region's main economy - plummeted and crashed. Purchasing the hotel was Buffet's gift to people of the Florida Panhandle to build back that economy. Buffet loved the Gulf coast.

Beyond the Margaritaville Hotel lies the Gulf Islands National Seashore—seven miles of white sand beaches, swaying golden sea oats, and translucent-green ocean. Way out on the tip end is Fort Pickens, one America's oldest coastal defense fortifications. The National Seashore is a place where sea turtles return to lay their eggs and sea birds migrate to raise their young, and where schools of fish, spotted

eagle rays, and pods of dolphin hunt, mate, and play. People swim and snorkel in the warm gentle waves and sunbathe on white sand made of quartz crystals carried by rivers from the Appalachian Mountains into the Gulf over millennia. Barrier islands formed and life eventually inhabited them.

Marsh's science teacher, Mr. Prince, decided to take his best students to the National Seashore for a three-day science adventure during the last semester of the school year. He decided to include Marsh. While not his top student, the boy showed keen interest in learning how science is done, and he was involved in a writing group focused on conservation of the Gulf.

###

Six months passed, the winter rains heavy on the coast. Toby and Marsha had been out on the bay about a dozen times for Speckled Trout, Bass, and Bull Red Fish during the cold-water months. It was Toby's favorite time to fish because the clear, cold water allowed her to observe schools of redfish attacking her bait in a fury.

Marsha was angling for trout and bass for a dinner she was planning for the Fishin' Chix leadership. Red fish would be on the menu, too, since the winter bay found them in schools of a hundred or more. But she loved the speckled trout best.

"I'm going to bake them this year in a in a white wine-capers sauce, and serve it with corn, glazed carrots, and broccoli," she told Toby as they fished.

"Stttoopp! My stomach is growling!" Toby said with a big grin. "Seriously, hand me a sandwich, Marsha. I'm ravenous."

Marsha grabbed one from the cooler for herself, too. Toby devoured hers and downed it with a soda. The cold air, adventure, sun, and vigor of the fish underneath the boat made her body cry for energy.

"I can't imagine living anywhere else, Toby said," as she swung a redfish overboard.

Marsha was quiet for a while. In fact, the women often went for hours with little conversation, lost in personal conversations with the sea.

###

Teachers and parents know that learning is best when students are immersed in an experience. The science camp took place on Ft. Pickens in late April. It was still cool enough for the mornings to be scintillatingly fresh. Osprey nests in scags or in the tops of pines dotted the landscape on the old fortifications. Crumbling bunkers told the stories of war and hardship. The end of the island jutted out into Pensacola pass where the Gulf empties into the Escambia Bay. Canons on three strategic points, two on the mainland and one on Fort Pickens, provided triangulation of enemy ships approaching the bay.

This was the time that loggerhead and other species of sea turtles return to the islands in the Gulf. Mr. Prince and a park ranger helped the students look for the truck tire tracks a female loggerhead leaves in the sand as she climbs toward the dunes. Marsh took the stories into his soul and wrote with passion about his new home:

*She looks from just under the water along the beach head where bright lights in hotels and restaurants, homes and gas stations could make her decide to turn away. She looks for a darkened beach, lit only by the silver moonlight. It's instinctual. Every May through September along the Gulf shores, female loggerhead turtles (Caretta caretta) return to lay leathery eggs in the dunes of their birth. Kemp's Ridley, Atlantic green turtles and sometimes leatherbacks also use these crystal white beaches as a nursery. It's been so for thousands of years.*

*Caretta caretta* has spent her youth in the Sargasso Sea, a body of water created from currents in the North Atlantic and where Sargassum seaweed covers over its surface. It is believed the loggerhead turtle feeds and grows in this protective cover.

When she comes of age, dozens of eggs grow within her as she heads back to the same beach where as a hatchling, she was just the size of a quarter and prize catch of shorebirds, crabs, and other beachside predators. She is one of the few lucky infant turtles that managed to survive to adulthood.

Now she returns to lay down the next generation. And, should she come ashore, will she struggle to navigate beach chairs, plastic inner tubes, or sandcastles?

What will happen to her offspring? Baby sea turtles are attracted to bright lights, an instinct that should turn them toward a moonlit sea. Will they head toward the hotel lights instead? Rangers report scores of tiny turtles destroyed by cars or desiccated in the hot sun among buildings.

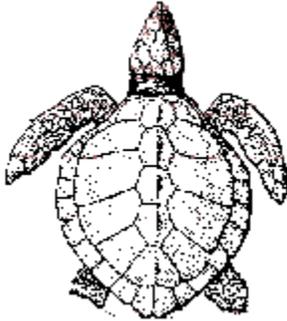
In today's world, with the human built environment, it takes countless volunteers to tend turtle nests, redirecting the young toward the ocean. Because of this, can we say that these species are self-sustaining?

There are seven species of sea turtles in the world today. Four of them lay their eggs here. That constitutes a biological treasure for this region, a remaining strand of a once diverse web of life just off these shores.

What if *Caretta caretta* disappears due to human interference in this annual ritual that replenishes her kind? Should we really care?

Reach back 100 years in Florida's natural history to an ocean teeming with life. Fish would be larger and more plentiful, and you could scoop up shrimp in the bay with your hands. There would be hundreds more dunes with waving sea oats, both habitat and nursery to many species.

*The loggerhead turtle is part of an ocean web that supports our fishing industry. The biodiversity of our beautiful islands is the basis of tourism, a principal industry. Somehow, we have to learn to maintain this natural treasure while going about our business.*



*We are working that out now. There has got to be a way. Floridians have never been short on ingenuity. For *Caretta caretta* we can turn down the lights, sit out on our decks and listen to the oncoming waves. We'll save money by reducing energy consumption and get a better view of the heavens.*

*Let's face it: life would be dismal without the beauty of nature. When we see a dolphin breach the waves, white terns dive and soar, or listen to ocean breezes, we are renewed and encouraged that all is right on this exquisite planet we are so fortunate to share with other species.*

*Caretta caretta...no, it's not a song. It's a symphony.*

###

The citizen science data and reports began to reach a substantial level after six months of mobilizing conservation and civic groups. There had been sightings of dolphin stillborn or sick dolphins, and a general drop in sightings of dolphins near shore. Many turtle rescues had occurred. Hundreds of trash reports from the bay and Gulf studies were in the data. However, Toby understood that even these efforts *alone* would be unlikely to change the *zeitgeist* of the community.

Tradition and pervading beliefs seem impervious to change, but it has happened in history that a new vision is suddenly present.

She sat at her desk in the den. Columbus looked on. He quietly studied her. He fluttered his wing feathers causing Toby to look up.

"Ooh, ... makes me wonder," he crooned. "New day, new day," he shrieked. The bird sang a line from "Stairway to Heaven". Toby rose to find the album among her collection and put the needle down on the turntable her boys had bought she and Ron many Christmases ago. Led Zeppelin's appeal twinkled in her den.

*And it's whispered that soon, if we all call the tune  
Then the piper will lead us to reason  
And a new day will dawn  
For those who stand long  
And the forests will echo with laughter*

*If there's a bustle in your hedgerow  
Don't be alarmed now  
It's just a spring clean for the May queen  
Yes, there are two paths you can go by  
But in the long run  
There's still time to change the road you're on  
And it makes me wonder*

Toby sang along. Tears streamed as she held herself, spinning in the room. Columbus bobbed to the music occasionally crooning the chorus. Was the song just a pipe dream from an age past? How could the small community reverse course after 500 years of precedent? Indeed, how could a nation do so?

## Chapter 5

### Detours

Marsh felt happy about his life for the first time since his mother had died. Mrs. Hemingway and Mr. Prince were like substitute parents for him. He grew to trust them, an achievement for one who had experienced abandonment.

Months before, when Sandra had announced her family would be transferred to California, he'd become depressed. There had been too much trauma. The Williams' home and his best friend had secured a sense of belonging and safety for him.

The friends texted and continued to develop their relationship. She was in the San Diego area and loving it. Marsh kept her up on his adventures on the Gulf and shared drafts of his new writing with her. Every now and then, Sandra's mom or dad texted Marsh. The one her mother sent frequently seemed to arrive with uncanny precision: *By the way, there is nothing you have to do today. The day is yours.* Or, from her Dad: *Call me if you need me.* Marsh often thought they may never know just how that small bit of encouragement and support had saved him emotionally on an otherwise abject day.

"This is so good, bro, if it weren't you, I would think it was plagiarized," Sandra wrote after reading his essay about loggerhead turtles. "You should send it in to a contest, or something."

Marsh had never thought about that. He was happy the local paper and the blog Mrs. Hemingway started had featured his writing along with other kids' work. His writing became a way for him to know himself. His writing coach said he was developing a strong "voice" and that was essential for any artist.

###

It was the Fishin' Chix leadership supper and Marsha's night to shine as Chef le extraordinaire. The cold beer and wine, fresh sourdough bread, and Speckled Sea Trout ala capers and wine sauce, brought sighs of appreciation.

After dinner the women gathered around Toby's den to discuss their participation in the conservation science activities.

"We're doing it, entering the data and submitting reports, but there is no feedback except from Molly St. John, and even that is sketchy," Shirley said.

"I know," Toby agreed. "If it is making a difference, we do not have any way to really know that. And as Molly said, we are working with change over time."

"Instant gratification," Shirley said. "It is our generational curse."

There was a long silence then. People thinking. Even Columbus was silent.

"You know the other day I was looking at the Pensacola Calendar of events (my sister's family is visiting soon), and realized all our festivals are about food, the arts, music, and our Spanish founding. Nothing celebrates wildlife or conservation," Barbara said.

She was the current President of Fishin' Chix and longtime friend of Toby and Ron. Barbara was involved in many civic clubs, her church, and her kids' schools. She was a Pensacola native which few could claim in a town with a long military presence.

"Crawfish Festival, Seafood Festival, Gulf Coast Arts Festival, Five Flags Festival, and even Pensacon -- celebrating Star Trek and all things paranormal," everybody chimed in.

"What if we develop a Festival that celebrates our transformation into a city that celebrates how it protects wildlife and natural habitats that make it famous? I mean, it was the editor-illustrator of our local paper that drove through the establishment of the Gulf Islands National Seashore!

"Earle Bowden's passion for historical preservation also saved the barrier islands and habitat for its wildlife," Barbara continued. "His editorials and political cartoons were read by all. He had the bully-pulpit!"

She gestured dramatically with one fist raised. Barbara was very tall and lanky with an oval face, almond-shaped eyes and perfectly arched dark brows. Her shoulder-length brunette hair pulled back from her face imparted a classy look. If anyone in the local nonprofit world held the veritable bully-pulpit it was their very own Barbara Scheritt. When the tall, slim leader stood, everyone listened.

"We need something/someone like that now to take us to the next level," Toby said.

There was a long silence. Toby and Marsha refilled wine glasses and coffee cups. Chatter among the four women continued. General business was done, too -- minutes approved, treasurer's report, next meeting. As the women hugged goodnight and left, Columbus yelled, "Anchors aweigh!"

After her guests went home, Toby dressed for bed. She looked in her full-length mirror, tossing a gown over her head. With both arms raised she noticed a disfigurement on her right breast, like a pull and a lump underneath.

"Oh, shit," she gasped. She palpated the breast. There was a mass for sure, in the chest muscle, small but definite. How long had it been there?

"Oh God, no. Please," she pleaded with the Fates.

###

The night's conversation kept Barbara awake. She felt that the club leaders including herself were dancing around something not visible yet. What was it? Later she awoke from a dream. "If he could do that, what can we not dream to do?" she said out loud. Bowden stood in front of a sign for the National Seashore looking right at her.

###

Jack had been Ron and Toby's physician for over two decades. During that time, he'd learned to read their emotions as well as their bodies. He watched the boys grow up and walked with them through Ron's struggle to keep his heart healthy, supporting Toby when her husband's genes won out. He was more than a doctor for them. He was a trusted friend who knew them all intimately.

"Don't you want to at least know more about the tumor...what you can expect?"

"Nope, the less I hear from you the better. When can you schedule the surgery?"

He sighed and chuckled. "Okay. I'll call you at home after I talk to the surgeon, I want for you. She's in surgery right now."

Toby walked the long corridors and took the spacious elevator to the lobby carefully not looking at patients in their gowns and medical paraphernalia. She felt nauseous. It must be what a tree experiences with the first blow of the axe—integument is still intact, but a gap opens suddenly into which the winds of doubt, fear, and shock start as whispers and rise to a howl. Oh, God!

On a comic level it was no more than waking from the dream of invincibility and long life with which every living creature is endowed at conception, insects the

exception perhaps. The announcement – the axe – was nothing more than delivery of the date of departure.

At home she took a long shower after which she stood in front of a mirror applying body cream. As she rubbed it over her breasts, she wondered how looking at the diagonal sutures and a flat chest on one side might make her feel. She'd never seen her mother's scars, nor did she ever discuss it with her. Back then even women's surgery was in the closet like some indiscretion on their part. Then the surgery was a complete mastectomy and stripping of the lymph nodes in the arm pit. It left women without use of their arm. Today breast surgery was as cosmetic as prescriptive. Toby didn't worry too much. She was more inconvenienced by the whole affair.

She guessed she should let the boys know but she'd rather not. Why make them worry? They'd come running and there was simply nothing they could do to help. She'd rather be with them later on when they could plan a visit and spend time sailing or snorkeling.

Toby called Barbara. Among all her friends, Barbara alone showed discretion and could be trusted with secrets. Also, no one could muster a laugh from Toby like Barb. She agreed to be handmaiden to Toby's rite of passage into the clan of one-breasted women. They made jokes about designing a one-cup bra called the Sling-Shot.

After she hung up, Toby wept. And, so did Barbara.

###

Marsh was smitten with Vern and Shirley's boat. After trying several categories of boats over 20 years of fishing, the couple had settled on a Hewes Redfish 18. He learned how to handle the 115 hp motor and loved fishing from a platform. The

boat was a category of flatboat that handles shallow water as well as bay waters. Oh, how he would love to have a boat of his own!

Shirley laughed. "Well, my friend, that would mean a trailer and a truck to haul it and some place to store it. There are a lot of things that come with the joy of fishing that you learn as you go!"

"And licenses, maintenance, and time to do everything before and after each trip," Vern chimed in.

"Not to mention all the fishing equipment, the clothing, etc," . . . Marsh joined in on the etc-chorus with Shirley.

"Okay, I get the point," he said with a grin. "That's why borrowing a boat makes a lot of sense." Marsh said with a deadpan face.

The couple laughed. "Gotta watch this kid, Shirley!" Vern said.

That day they had caught four good-sized flounder in the shallower waters.

"Come home with us. I'll show you how to prepare these flatfish for dinner,"

Shirley said. "Can you do that?"

Marsh's carefree demeanor abruptly changed. "Uh, I don't know if Uncle Albert would like that," he said.

"We could call him," Shirley said expecting it was a simple matter.

Vern knew better. He had not shared all the stresses Marsh dealt with at home with his wife. On the other hand, maybe it was time to push the Uncle to recognize that

Marsh had a life and was a terrific young man. Vern silently harbored ill will toward the guardian and his utter disregard for his nephew. Marsh deserved much better, but he also supported Marsh's strategy to stay in the same house no matter how bad. Vern would give anything for one son half as good as Marsh. Shirley and Marsh never could have children. The couple had adopted the teen. Marsh's circle of substitute parents had grown in the absence of a true family. It was a good thing, too.

###

The surgeon took only the tumor at Toby's request. She did not agree with her patient's decision to skip chemotherapy. Because Toby was in such overall good health, Dr. Lily Wong believed the chemo might reduce the probability of the cancer's return. On the other hand, Toby's tumor was the least dangerous type, self-contained, and relatively easy to remove.

Toby insisted she would not subject her healthy cells and organs to the devastation of cancer-killing drugs. It was a risk, but it was her body.

"Then I want to see you every four months," Wong insisted.

"Deal," Toby said as she stood to leave. "Thank you."

Wong nodded. After her patient left the room, the doctor wondered what she would do in a similar circumstance. Lily thought she shared much in common with Toby, her sureness and tenacity, but she would probably err on the side of caution.

###

Shirley suggested they just drive by Marsh's home to let Uncle Albert know about dinner plans and to invite him to join them. Marsh had great misgivings about it but at this point he was willing to see what happened.

As they turned the corner a squad car and blinking ambulance came into view in front of Albert's shotgun house. They pulled over a few houses away and walked to the patrolman talking into his cell phone. For a few minutes they just listened. Marsh felt no compulsion to run into the house. He had but little emotional attachment to the man Child Protective Services regarded as his guardian.

"He'd called 911 but must have died soon afterward," the officer explained to his precinct.

Just then two men carried Albert out of the house on a gurney. They had zipped him up in a bag.

Vern talked to the officer while Shirley held Marsh close to her patting his shoulder. Marsh was upset over what might happen to him. Would he be swept back into the system and sent to another city and family? He was in a near panic state thinking about it.

Their neighbor, Mrs. Reader, came over and introduced herself to Shirley. She opened her arms for Marsh to give him a hug. Mrs. Reader was a short black woman of considerable age but still vital. Her big chest and thick arms felt comforting to Marsh. Mrs. Reader had covered for Marsh on many an occasion, running interference with the unpredictable moods of Albert, and often cooked for the boy knowing the situation with Albert. She was another person in Marsh's large network of collaborators. He was that kind of kid: his struggle and his character drew admiration from everyone who came to know him.

Vern gave his information to the officer to take Marsh home with he and his wife as temporary guardians until social services and CPS could be notified. Mrs. Reader vouched for them and explained Marsh's situation to the officer. By then other neighbors had gathered around to support Marsh.

Shirley and Marsh went inside to get his clothes, tablet, and school books.

"My word, Marsh," Shirley said to the boy surveying the barebones of the living quarters, the mess in the kitchen. Marsh's bedroom was in good order with posters of marine life and his heroes, books, and writing materials. She smiled and felt a surge of compassion of this fine young man. She'd had no idea how bare his family life, how dire the circumstances. A little spike of anger toward Vern rose in her chest. Why hadn't he looked into Marsh's circumstances? For two years they'd been meeting up at the pier. Did Vern never ask any questions? As she helped Marsh gather some clothes, she noticed their worn and tattered conditions. His worn-out sneakers. Damn, even she had not paid attention!

###

Toby longed to see her sons more often than they managed. Global trade pulled them to Beijing and Honolulu. Their reunions were few but long. Usually they sailed and fished whether in Pensacola or ports of call. Toby particularly enjoyed sailing in the Hawaiian Islands where she encountered humped-back whales.

The "boys" were *six-foot and counting*, well-built men who dated but had yet to marry. Toby longed for grandchildren hoping that some of Ron may come through to prolong her physical relationship with the only man who commanded her heart and soul.

"There aren't any women like *you*, Mom," Robert, the oldest, teased.

But they both knew the boys looked for softer women than she had been in her days rearing the boys. Toby had rules. Her own mother made lists by the hour until the day she died. Toby found one in her office written that day her mother toppled as a felled tree...dead, but still in motion.

It was a different time. Couples often never married but lived together or apart sampling life like a long buffet in a half real/half virtual universe. Toby was envious. Life had delivered a lunch counter with a limited menu for girls growing up in the 50's. She remembers the extreme angst of adolescence that had made her will taut and her compass true. In that sense she was grateful. Without struggle would her boys be ready for disappointment and those periods when life is nothing but a dried banana chip?

Robert and Sam had sailed through their lives unscathed. Toby felt compunction to deepen their awareness of life's underbelly where she had plied her art for more than 30 years, in public schools with underprivileged children. Her generation raised kids to expect joy and abundance without the struggle to obtain either. But she came to realize that the inner fiber she developed was of a different nature than her son's generation. Their strength was not tenacious individualism that characterized previous generations of Americans. This fact was not apparent to Toby until she found herself quite alone one day.

###

Until Social Services and Child Protective Services could approve Vern and Shirley as foster parents, March was placed with another family. Their location necessitated he change schools. His networks and supporting mentors vanished overnight.

Marsh had a loving mother in his first 10 years of life, and even though his father abandoned them when he was a child, that stable, unconditional relationship had served him well since her death. However, even such a beginning can shatter when

subject to years of abandonment. Marsh should have been able to stay with Vern and Shirley. Anyone who bothered to get to know them and observe Marsh with them would see they would be fine caregivers. A bond had already been formed.

Protocols often get in the way of logic. Marsh began a painful journey to maintain a positive view of the world. He spoke to Sandra frequently, pouring out his feelings. Her parents talked with him by phone when he first moved to the foster family. But social service suggested that the foster family not allow these calls until the people could be evaluated by their staff. So, even that support was cut off.

Having had an independent life at Uncle Albert's, Marsh found his new environment stifling. There were four other kids in the house -- three foster kids. He was the oldest. The next in age was eight years old. His foster parents were very strict. He had a list of chores to do each day, homework was a sitting affair at the dining room table. If he finished early, he was asked to tutor the younger kids. Marsh experienced a loss of identity. Depression and anger followed. He plotted to run away and run away for good.

###

When Toby reconvened her writing group, she learned of Marsh's fate. Immediately, she began to intervene. Between Toby, Shirley, and Barbara, they amassed a legal team to get him back as soon as possible.

The loss of the boy to foster care infuriated Toby. Finding Marsh and getting him back to his community either at Shirley and Vern's or her home, or the home of one of the Fishin' Chix, became her new focus, and a direction to pour all her energy, to forget about the cancer that could return and take her life.

"You know I feel about the foster care system like I do about environmental policies," Toby said, sipping from her glass of wine. "For all the good intent, the system shoots itself in the foot."

She was sitting with Barbara, Shirley and Vern on the deck at The Fish House in Pensacola. They gathered to discuss how to speed up a court hearing for Marsh. Intuitively, they each understood that time was of the essence before real emotional damage may occur in the boy they'd all come to love.

