


TROPIC

THE MIAMI HERALD AUGUST 31, 1980



**Two Key West
fishermen
discover
the surprise
of their lives in**

'LOCAL COLOR'

**The winner of
Tropic's first short-story
competition**

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Sunday Punch

By Lary Bloom, editor

The Winner

A couple of years ago, a Broward County woman sent me a very long manuscript, at least 50 typewritten pages. A story that length usually makes me nervous, and takes me at least an hour to read. So I did what I usually do in such cases; I ignored it.

Within a few days, it wormed its way to the bottom of my pile, and it wasn't until a week later that I saw it again. The story was about a woman and an extraordinary boy, and it seemed to me to be written competently. I wrote a note to the writer and told her that. "But please give me a few more days to make up my mind."

When she received the message, she called and explained apologetically that she had never written before and she was worried. "Waiting for word from an editor is like being naked. Leaving myself so vulnerable. I've wondered whether I have any talent." I told her I understood her feelings.

Later, when I still hadn't made up my mind, she asked if she could send her story around to other editors. Sure, I replied.

Several days passed, and I read the story again. This time, it overwhelmed me. I was moved, almost to tears. I wondered why I wasn't affected that way the first time. In a fit of triumph, feeling the way a prospector must when he strikes gold, I picked up the phone and called the writer.

"I'd love to use the piece," I said.
 "Uh, would you mind," she asked, "if I withdrew it from your consideration?"
 "What?"

"Well, Redbook just called and they want to pay me \$2,000 for it."

It was shocking news. I hated to lose the piece. Yet, I'd had my chance and blown it. And besides, Tropic couldn't match the \$2,000 or Redbook's national circulation.

The rest of the day, and for weeks thereafter, I regretted my indecision. To this day, I've never really gotten over the loss of that article.

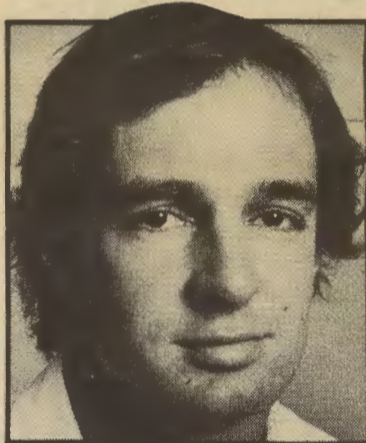
I could use this tale of an editor's woe to illustrate many points, but for today, it is simply that writing is such a subjective matter. What one editor thinks brilliant, another may think worthless. Indeed, often an editor will change his mind on an

article, just as I did. You can understand what effect this has on writers, whose egos are more fragile than you might imagine.

I knew, too, that when we announced Tropic's first short-story competition last spring, there were going to be a lot of writers and would-be writers out there with their egos on the line.

I took that seriously. I wanted to give each story careful attention. But that wasn't so simple. We received 604 entries, far more than I'd ever imagined. It was an enormous responsibility to judge the worth of each of them and choose a winner.

We sought the aid of the Miami-Dade Public Library, which divided the manuscripts among 60 "professional readers" — librarians throughout the system. They were very efficient and uncomplaining, and even agreed to help us in our second annual short-story contest (which we will announce next spring). Eventually they whittled the huge pile to 11 finalists. The winner was then selected by a panel of Herald editors and library director Edward Sintz. He is Rick Telander, 31, of Key



Rick Telander

West, who wrote a story called *Local Color*.

When the decision had been made, I called Rick and told him that he was our winner. "You're kidding!" he said.

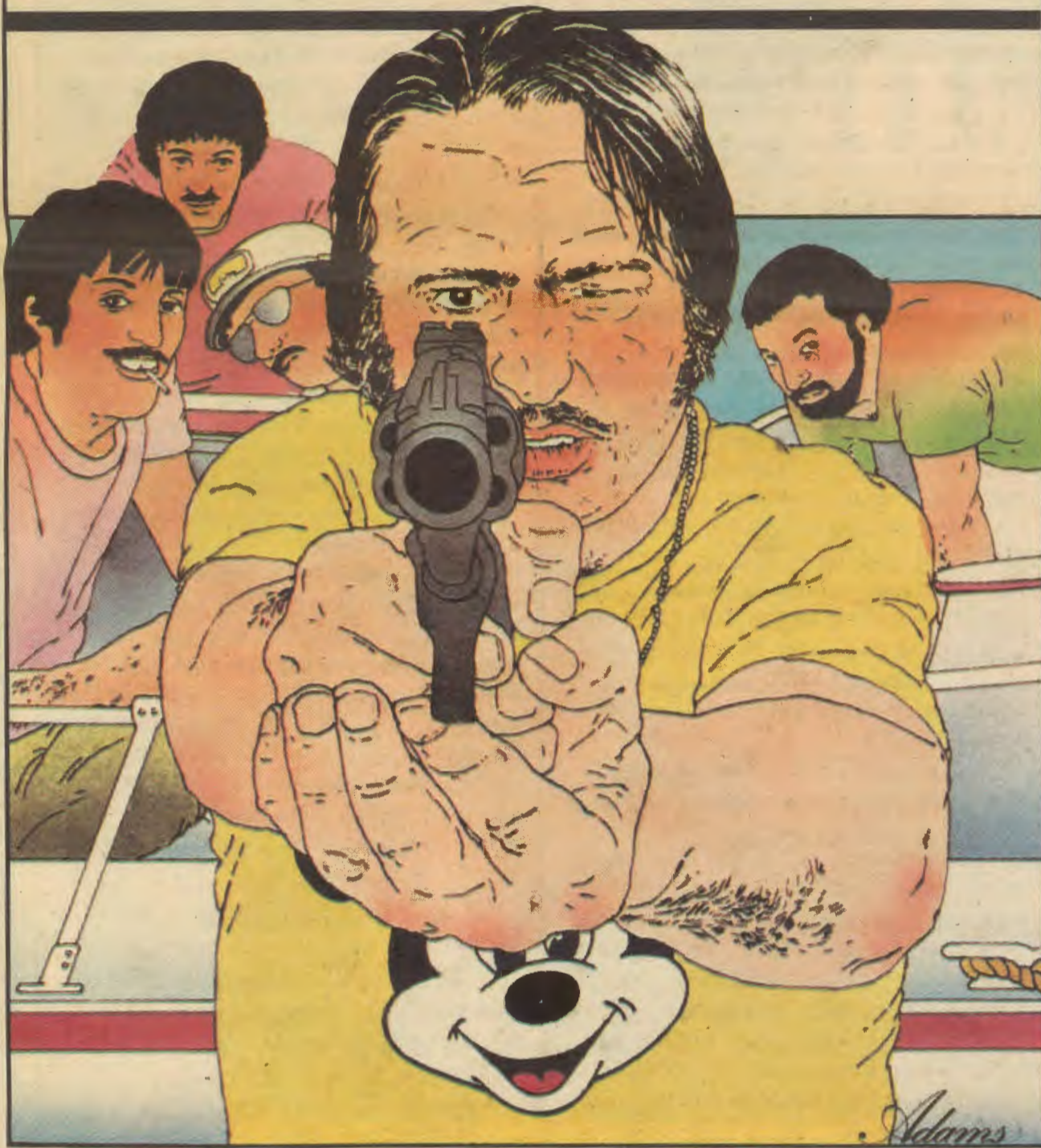
He confided that for years he has written nonfiction, but this was his first attempt at a short story. He regularly contributes feature stories to *Sports Illustrated* (the latest on the Villanova track coach) and he has an article coming out in the October *Esquire* on knee injuries.

He said he'd always wanted to be a writer, and that he had majored in English at Northwestern. I told him I was impressed by his accomplishments. But Rick said he always worried about his writing. The doubts resurfaced while he was working on *Local Color*. "It felt so strange to write fiction. It's hard to build up confidence in this business. You get so little feedback. I'm really glad you guys liked it."

And now, a few words to the 603 losers: Please try again next year.

LOCAL COLOR

Fiction by **RICK TELANDER**



"Before he climbed into his boat, the captain pulled a gun and fired a shot . . ."

They were coming in on a rising tide, sometimes with the current, sometimes against it, as the water worked its sinuous way between the Atlantic and the Gulf. They were close to Key West now; the moon heralded their approach.

Their fish were gone. They'd released them because the oxygen bubbler wouldn't run without the battery, and because pulling a live bucket caused too much drag. The battery, admittedly a cheap one, had gone dead after powering the running lights for a half-hour or so. They never packed a flashlight; indeed, they never planned to be out at night. The air was calm and hot and blended into the dark water they pushed behind them, the still spaces between the mangrove islands and the tidal flats. They had stopped talking, in part because there was a nickel-sized hole in the boat motor, the kind, Vic knew now, that a bullet makes.

The day had started ordinarily enough, promising little but the usual sun and heat. The alarm clock had rung and Vic had risen, scratching his beard, and walked onto the front porch of the small cigar-maker's house he shared with his friend, Charlie. Together he and Charlie had driven down from Ohio five years ago. The trip had been planned as a brief let-off-steam vacation after college graduation, but it had grown, taking on dimensions of its own until Vic realized it was no longer a vacation but something different, open-ended. The first two years had gone by in a haze of sunburn, rum, and late nights. Years three and four had calmed the young men some; they tried various jobs, dived, took and lost girl friends. Year five, with the acquisition of minimal possessions — a used couch, a P.O. Box, the boat — established them more or less as residents. Clad only in his jockey shorts, Vic squinted off at the tallest palm tree on Olivia Street, its fronds tooth-like against the sky. Inside, he flipped on the TV and learned what he already knew: it was sunny out, hot, chop negligible, chance of rain nearly zero.

Standing there, his throat dry, his

head hammering, Vic felt momentarily vertiginous, unsure of anything. They'd been to Che Che's again. They went to Che Che's almost every night now. They played pool, shot the breeze, drank whatever seemed right. It had started as a lark, checking out the local color and hobnobbing in a real place with Merle Haggard on the jukebox and dusty fish on the walls. But now they knew all the old men by name: Wendell, who'd worked for Henry Flagler and laid stones at the post office, Arthur Bones, who used to dive for quarters Mr. Hemingway threw off Mallory Pier. Sometimes it was a nice way to impress girls or friends from up North — to let them see the old geezers, their buddies — but the thrill wasn't the same anymore, and Vic wondered if novelty could exist once you became a part of it.

Charlie was up, eating a candy bar and drinking coffee. Vic poured himself glass after glass of orange juice, and together they carried their gear to the Whaler parked on a trailer in front of the house. They threw in their fins and masks and tanks, their fish bags, nets, a push pole, two paddles, two rods, their hollow plastic slurp guns, the bubbler, a bucket with five live shrimp in it (down from seven the night before), the Igloo cooler. Charlie went back to the house and grabbed four pre-made balogna sandwiches and four Milky Ways from stacks of each in the freezer. He tossed them into the cooler with staccato thuds, saying, "These are the best I've ever seen."

At Garrison Bight they waited while two teenagers dropped in a candy-flake Cigarette, then they backed the old trailer down the ramp and gently lowered their boat into the water. It was a good little craft — 15-foot long, flat, triple-keeled and open, a white Bimini top folded neatly over the bow — bobbing in the oily water like a splinter of soap. One of the features of Whalers, Vic had learned, was that they wouldn't sink. He'd even seen a photo of one, chain-sawed into thirds, floating merrily; and sometimes when he was depressed, the thought of that could cheer him. They'd paid \$700 for the boat, used, trailer included. The engine, a 1969 40-horse Evinrude Norseman, they'd acquired for \$275. It rattled and the top cylinder was scorched, but Charlie was good with

tools and he generally kept them moving.

They bought gas and ice and two sixes of Busch; then Charlie took the wheel and they motored slowly down charter-boat row, under the bridge and past the white Navy houses along Sigsbee Park. When the City Electric stack lined up with marker 17, Charlie turned right and put it on a plane. Vic crouched on the bow and pointed his nose into the wind, into the surrounding bell of azure and emerald. Surely, he thought, colors are what keep me here.

They ran past Tank Island and out Calda Channel to the edge of the Gulf, where they turned east and followed the ledge between the flats and the open water. They ran for a mile or so, then slowed down and began searching for heads. The water was slack, level, transparent. Even the violet Gulf seemed glassed and seamless.

Charlie idled over a section of brain coral 20 feet below. Leaning out and shading his eyes, Vic could see reef fish skittering around the fissured, orange ball like pieces of a mobile. They anchored and put on their gear. As he descended into the tepid, light-flinging water, Vic was only vaguely aware of entering a new element. He felt a closeness, an attachment, but as always he felt it slipping away even as he perceived it. The fish and the violent colors drew him on. He had read in books that though most of the markings on reef fish had evolved for biological reasons — mating identification, camouflage, etc. — many had appeared for no reason at all. The colors were gratuitous, hinting at a world influenced by whimsy, and therefore, it seemed to Vic, somehow frightening.

Vic probed a hole under the head and a Nassau grouper honked and shot off. Vic rose in a whirl of carbon dioxide BBs and stabilized. He leaned into a small cloud of black-striped high-hats, galloping vertically over the coral face like tiny zebras, and inhaled half a dozen with his gun. He moved to a lower hole, aimed, and added a thumb-sized beaugregory. With a full tube he rose to the surface and squirted the contents into the live well dangling by the motor.

Later he and Charlie would count and sort the fish, put them into

water-filled bags and hurry them to the airport for the 5-o'clock jet to Miami. In Miami the bags would be picked up by a pet-shop wholesaler named Lawson, who would skim off the dead fish, count the live ones, and send Charlie and Vic a check. Each fish had a price, ranging from 65 cents for a high-hat or a wrasse to \$50 for a baby hammerhead. At one time Vic and Charlie had been worried about aiding in the depletion of the reef, but they'd been told that a formation will support just so many fish, no more, and when one creature is removed, another will come and take its place. After a month or so Vic and Charlie had seen that this was true — at least at the spots they visited — and had been comforted.

Before noon they climbed into the boat, raising the canvas top to protect themselves from the blazing sun. Key West shimmered in the distance like a stilt village. They opened beers and ate their sandwiches.

"Not bad," said Charlie. "We're doing OK. For a couple of bums."

Vic looked at his friend. Charlie had sandy hair, a deep tan, a puppy's face, a swimmer's body. Charlie had no difficulty letting things meld from vacation into work, into life. He had schemes, plans, a hundred moderate skills, none of which made him unique. Vic, however, was drifting and planless. In college, he'd majored in English, and though he had been a conscientious student, he found it strange now that he'd never considered the value of that subject in the outside world. He enjoyed the water and the fish and the keys' life, but they did not seem real to him. In just 2½ years he would be 30, and he'd always thought something would hit him long before he reached 30, that a point would come when he'd simply know what his life plan was. It had only recently occurred to him, and with some pain, that a person could mark time forever.

A month ago he'd gotten a call from his parents.

"What are you doing?" his mother had asked, her voice tentative, distant. Vic thought of her gray hair and his dad's limp, of their brick house in suburban Ohio, his old room.

"Catching tropical fish."

"Oh Vic."

Then there was silence and he'd

measured himself by his own fear.

They pulled anchor and motored to another coral head. Thermal puffs drifted out from land, but they were dry and benign-looking.

At the new spot Charlie caught some rusty gobies and several immature blue tangs, while Vic spent his time chasing after a single queen triggerfish. Dazzling and reluctant, the plate-sized fish was too big for the gun. Vic tried to corral it with his net. Around and around the head they went, the triggerfish fluttering in various narrow crevices before being flushed and leading the diver on. At one point Vic got his net partway around the fish, but it thrashed and broke away, abandoning the coral head for the open water. Racing across the white sand in a fading blur of pink, orange, and lime, the fish resembled a hurled palette; seeing this, Vic wished that he were an artist. Perhaps, he always told himself, he could paint what he saw, immerse himself that way and have it out.

When Vic surfaced, Charlie was transferring fish from the live well to the bucket on deck. "Cold one?"

"Sure." They drank the beers fast, savoring the chill.

"I figure we've got about \$80 worth here," Charlie said. "Too bad that queen wouldn't

cooperate — they're going for 20 bucks a throw. Want to get some snaps and head in?"

"Might as well."

They raced farther east and then turned into the mangroves a mile or so before Snipe Point. From here they could easily weave over to Jewfish Basin and then plane across the flats to Harper Key and back to Garrison Bight.

They followed a winding, light-green channel into the heart of the islands and tied up to a cluster of branches that bent low over the water. The densely-treed patches of land were close together here, like pieces of a puzzle, and with the motor off the boat was enveloped in silence. In the shadow of limbs overhanging the bend just ahead, a dozen or so mangrove snappers nosed troutlike into the current.

Charlie hooked one of the four remaining live shrimp and cast 20 feet from the boat. The current carried the slack line and its scurrying, translucent cargo for a few seconds before the water was torn by a loud slash of silver and black. Line sang out as Charlie cranked down on the drag. "I want my shrimp back, asshole!" he yelled. He jerked the pole hard. Thirty yards away a big, grimacing barracuda jumped, the line popped, and Charlie reeled in.

After that they broke the shrimp in two, figuring it looked good enough dead, put split shot on the line, and caught three fat snappers in five minutes. Vic baited with the second to last chunk of shrimp, dropped his line over, and immediately hooked another snapper. Carelessly, he let the fish run into the

mangrove roots, tangling the line around a branch in the process. They drifted up to the spot and Charlie reached out to free the line. He stopped suddenly.

"Vic," he said. "I think maybe I see something." Vic followed Charlie's eyes into the trees and saw a glint of shiny black. They cut the line and motored around the bend. Fifty yards away there was a clearing and a small sand beach. They ran the boat aground there and leaped ashore. A path led off to the left under dense growth. They charged down it and stopped 30 feet away, blocked by a pyramid of black, plastic-wrapped blocks.

"Oh Christ," whispered Charlie. "Oh God." He pulled one of the blocks toward him and ripped through the garden bag encircling it. Underneath was a heavier, clear plastic wrap, fogged opaque from the humidity. Charlie poked through it with a stick, gouged a larger hole, and immediately the pungent, green-sweet smell of marijuana filled the clearing.

Vic felt faint. Wild visions filled his head: first, mounds of cash, then possessions, then the sense of freedom, direction, of flying low and fast over the green-blue back country. What was it Camus had said?

"What?" yelled Charlie. "What?"

"Nothing. Wasn't it Camus who said it's intellectual hypocrisy to believe you can be happy without money?"

"I don't know, Vic. But, my God, these bales are pure Colombian and they weigh

Our Critic Reviews The Short Story

By WILLIAM K. ROBERTSON

Of all literary forms, the most deceptive is the short story. The writer, flexing his literary muscles for the real creative business ahead, decides to warm up with one. After all it is so, well, short, and, thus, easy. Oh, America, how come you so often confuse the long with the significant?

Just how difficult the short story is can be illustrated in 604 ways, which is the number of entries this magazine received in its writing contest. The stories were read by librarians from throughout the Miami-Dade Public Library system and editors at *The Herald*, and only the barest handful were considered good enough for publication.

That harsh judgment is not meant to embarrass any of the people who sent in their work. Their writing seems earnest and sensitive, and refutes the commonly held assumption that no one these days can write a coherent English sentence. The nicest way to look at it is that the contestants lack of fa-

cility with the short story puts them in some pretty fancy company. Of well-known American authors, only a few have a reputation that includes artistic success with the genre. Nathaniel Hawthorne knew how to write a story, Herman Melville didn't; Ernest Hemingway did, F. Scott Fitzgerald didn't. Fewer still have taken the story as their chosen form, preferring the latitude — not to mention the financial reward — of the novel.

In recent years especially, the short story has fallen on lean times. With the decline of general-interest, mass-circulation magazines, there are very few places for writers to publish stories, and the journals that do publish them tend to have a stylized approach that limits the possibilities for individuality. (There is, for instance, a "New Yorker story," though its practitioners and the editors of that wonderful magazine protest otherwise.) Television, which gets the blame for just about every other social and cultural ill, is probably the blunt instrument the short story

has been struck with. It is far easier to spend 30 minutes watching a rerun than taking the time to read a story; the challenge that we stimulate our own senses is one that too few of us are willing to accept. Yet for all that the short story has going against it, people persist in writing it, and those of us who like to read it try to develop a standard for deciding how good it is, or, more honestly, how much it pleases us.

A short story is not always so short. Though at its most diminutive it may have as few as 500 words, it might run upwards of 20,000 words (Examples of excellent not-so-short stories include Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" and William Faulkner's "The Bear"). Its chief characteristic, however, is not length but a quality Somerset Maugham once defined as unity of impression. More than any other reason, the short story is difficult to write because every character, scene, setting, every line of dialogue, indeed every word, must contribute to that impression.

Rick Telander's "Local Color" follows a textbook pattern of story development. It introduces characters with a problem, explores complicating factors, has a climax and a solution. Telander's story concentrates locale, action and character. It takes place in a clearly defined geographic area over a short period of time, and its characters are lim-

ited in number. Though locale and action contribute to the story's unity, character is the essential element. From beginning to end, Telander shows us Vic's interior landscape, charting his movement from one level of consciousness to another, though just what this heightened sense of knowledge is remains ambiguous.



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"Local Color" depends, however, not so much on the situation as the response it provokes in Vic's mind, which forms the story's mystical conclusion.

The ultimate worth of a story rests on the same principle as all good fictive art: the words must in some indefinable way mean more than they say. Does "Local Color" meet that standard? The story is before you; dear reader, and the question is one you must answer for yourself.

WILLIAM K. ROBERTSON is *The Herald's* book editor.

100 pounds. That's \$25,000 a bale."

They thought quickly then. This was somebody's stash and it surely wouldn't be here for long. Charlie and Vic would take five or six bales in now and transfer them to the car at a deserted stretch off Key Haven. Then they would race back out and either take more bales in or hide as many as they could on another island, where they could pick them up later. On their boat Charlie and Vic would cover the bales as best they could with the Bimini top, but if stopped by the Marine Patrol they would explain that they had no radio and were bringing the dope in to authorities. In town they should be able to make a few calls and get rid of the stuff fast.

They carried one of the bales to the beach. Sweating hard, they tore the canvas off the metal Bimini frame and kicked their gear into piles fore and aft. The fishing rods kept getting tangled in the ropes; with a shrill giggle Charlie grabbed both poles and threw them into the mangroves. They surveyed the open deck. Well, yes, maybe they could get more than six in, if the weight weren't too much.

Vic was bent over the live well when he heard something nearby.

He turned around and saw the bow of a large boat emerging from the mangroves. It was a crawfish boat, nearly 40 feet long, peeling badly, with empty traps stacked on the stern deck. Vic was amazed that such a large craft could negotiate the twisting, narrow channel. He reasoned that it must have a custom low-draft hull and a short-shaft motor.

There were five men aboard. All had dark skin, black hair and were wearing sunglasses. The man at the wheel, in a Disney World T-shirt and a network of gold chains, appeared to be in his 50s. The other men were much younger and Vic thought the man at the wheel might be their father, or perhaps an older uncle. The boat bumped lightly ashore and the men climbed off. One stepped onto Vic and Charlie's boat and searched it. The captain faced them.

"Do you find anything here?" he asked.

The bale of marijuana with the hole gouged in it lay shamelessly near their feet.

"You would like some pot?" asked the man. There was no threat in his tone, but he had, like each of the others, a pronounced, angular bulge at waist level beneath his shirt. "Sit," he suggested.

Charlie and Vic sat down. The man put his hand into the bale and withdrew a clump of weed. He tossed it to them. Then he threw them a packet of papers. He made rolling motions with his palms.

Charlie and Vic each rolled a joint. "Dos," said the man. They each rolled another. The man walked over and extended a lighter. Charlie and Vic leaned forward and puffed from the transparent flame. As they inhaled the smoke, they watched the four other men carry bales to the boat, splashing and tripping over protruding roots. There must be 50 bales, Vic thought. He started to multiply, but stopped.

They finished the joints. The captain extended his lighter, indicating they should smoke the other two as well. The four crew members were arranged silently aboard the crawfish boat, a funny little pirate's brigade,

Vic thought. The captain watched Charlie and Vic smoke, then he asked for Charlie's joint and took one shallow hit. "Very good stuff," he said.

Before he climbed onto his boat, the captain pulled a gun and fired a shot into Charlie and Vic's motor. The echoing thunder was followed by the sound of wild-fluttering, as white herons and gulls left the surrounding mangroves.

"Go quiet," said the man. "Go slow."

They began working across the basin then, one poling, one paddling, trading off at intervals. It was slow going, accompanied by the low whisper of turtle grass against the hull. Several times they got off the track and had to get out and walk, sinking almost to their knees in the loose marl. The tide was beginning to come in and Vic could see permit tailing away on the flats, their fins like reeds against the darkening sky. The hardest part was when the bottom dropped away and he and Charlie had to paddle across the deep channels.

The moon rose, three-quarters full, illuminating. Vic thought of another moon rising over the moon, somewhere else — a moonscape like this. The dope had done its work.

"A hundred-fifty thousand dollars," Charlie said several times. "God almighty." They moved past Coon Key.

"Do you think we could have gotten away with just one? Did they know we were there the whole time?"

Vic shrugged. For the sensation, he pushed hard on the pole, analyzing the spread of pain through his shoulders. An hour or so went by in silence.

"I guess we can look at it in other ways. It wasn't ours," said Charlie. "There's morality here. We could've been caught." He paused. "Those goddamned thieves."

Vic observed a constellation. He was open to more than the primary colors now. He received but could not discharge, and again he wished he were an artist. He had seen a flash of something when the bales appeared, had seen it go away. "Charlie," he said. "Let's do this one thing."

"What?"

"This never happened. No dope, no men, no adventure. This is not true. We'll just let it pass."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, just that. It never happened. It wasn't even a dream."

"Yeh. What about the hole in the motor? That looks real as hell to me."

"I don't know, Charlie. We'll get a new engine or something. But for me this never happened."

They were silent then. They pushed and poled and traded places, and occasionally just sat. A falling star whisked toward the south — gone almost before it could be appreciated. They passed Old Dan Mangrove and drifted lightly across Back Basin Channel. A tarpon rolled. Key West lay twinkling before them, a necklace, a separate thing, and Vic thought to himself: what a pretty night to be on the water.

RICK TELANDER is a regular contributor to Sports Illustrated. He lives in Key West.



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