

Back on The Road To Key West

By Michael Reisig

CHAPTER ONE

Key West, Summer of 1982

It was late afternoon in the capital of the Conch Republic, last stop in a string of sandy pearls that curl indolently into the Gulf Stream at the Southeastern edge of America — native habitat for the adventure-loving, rum-soaked, and loosely-wrapped. Key West, the southernmost domicile of unabashed hedonism, shameless larceny, and priceless recollections.

We parked our car under the canopy of an old **banyan** tree on Front Street, a block from Mallory Square, and began a leisurely stroll toward Duval. Our meeting wasn't until 9:00 p.m., and there was time to kill.

On the horizon a gaggle of heavy, gray and white cumulus clouds rose off the sea, swallowing a fading sun as it rimmed them in silver and gold. Above that remarkable display, a blue sky was being washed with streaks of rose and mauve, those colors gradually melding and climbing into the darkening heavens. The waters of Key West Bight reflected the vision, and a collage of sailboats and shrimpers basked in those last rays like contented seabirds, drifting quietly into the evening.

The light breeze carried a tart sweetness of key lime and jasmine, buoyed by a crisp aroma of fried fish, conch fritters, and the perennial salty richness of the sea. Music drifted through the air like a fragrance, changing tempo, rhythm, and volume depending **on** how close you were to the next saloon.

A sense of muddled serenity in the movement of the people on the street suggested that no one was anxious to be anywhere — being right where they were

felt...good. There were, of course, some who were well ahead in the unannounced race to inebriety, but hey, this was the islands. Life was a perpetual vacation with an occasional bump regarding love or money.

You either loved The Keys with a born-to-it passion or you didn't care for them at all. You either bonded with the enterprising, excitable Cubans, the slow moving, easy-going Bahamian people, the misfits, artists, adventurers, alternate lifestylers, and perpetually passionate fishermen, or you didn't. There were those who never wanted to leave and those who couldn't wait to get back to Michigan.

As my buddy, Will Bell, and I strolled onto Duval, decked out in Dockers shorts, tropical shirts, and our best Kino sandals, we were engulfed in the heavy, early evening air. I couldn't help but be reminded of our early days here, and our incredible experiences.

The 1970s were an intoxicating collage of events for us. We had moved to the Florida Keys to become nothing more than commercial divers — tropical fish collectors. But life refused to provide us such simple fare. Upon our arrival to that sun-drenched, palm-covered paradise inhabited by the slightly intrepid and mostly besotted, adventure had come calling, grabbing us by the short hairs and whisking us away. In the process, we discovered a sunken Spanish treasure, became the target of modern-day (if not somewhat dysfunctional) pirates, and found the girl of our dreams (one girl, two dreams, unfortunately — but it worked itself out).

Stumbling along, we had inadvertently become immersed in an international smuggling operation, and had ended up possessing, for a short time, an ancient golden pyramid with very unique properties — given to us by a wacky Jamaican soothsayer

with a dubious but fascinating heritage. It was all fairly heady stuff for a couple of funky white boys from the mainland.

By the late '70s both Will and I (my name is Kansas — Kansas Stamps) had settled down somewhat, found ladies that satisfied most of our criteria, and had begun to live relatively normal lives. Well, not exactly the shoe salesman, auto mechanic, stockbroker kind of normal. We were adventurers of sorts, making our living with a diving business and doing a little treasure hunting on the side. Admittedly, we weren't the Harrison Ford *Raiders of the Lost Ark* type of adventurers. More often than not, trouble had a way of finding us rather than the other way around. Neither of us had much of an appreciation for violence or a high pain threshold. We were generally better at talking our way out of situations or out-thinking our opponents. Unfortunately, in the process, we were having such a good time at it all, we lost our wives. Oddly enough, they left us for each other. I remember the scene as if it were yesterday...

“What the hell do you mean ‘you’ve found someone else,’ and just how in the hell did it happen to you and Angie at the same time?” I said, my voice coming out a tad shriller than I would have liked.

Celeste shrugged, standing by the counter in the kitchen, dressed in soft white bellbottoms and a tie-dye T-shirt. “It just happened. It’s your own fault,” she added firmly, with a mixture of empathy and defiance, one hand on her hip, a wisp of blond hair drifting carelessly across her eyebrows. She brushed it back briskly, as if it were another element of her exasperation. “You and Will are gone half the time on one crazy adventure or another, and that left Angie and **me** alone here, on a freaking island 30 miles from

Key West, and well, damn it, we just got to liking each other's company."

My wife paused, almost contrite, but any attempt at apology was lost to a mischievous smile and the impish glitter in her green eyes. "More than we expected..."

The implication hung in the air like late summer thunderheads, both alluring and ominous, conjuring a brief parade of images in my head, not all of which were unpleasant. I grinned incredulously, pushing my long, dark hair back behind the nape of my neck in nervous reaction. "C'mon, you gotta be kidding me. You and Angie? Like, together? This is a joke, right?"

"If it is, it's on you and Will," she replied. "Your 'joined at the hip' buddy is getting the same news from his wife as we speak."

The phone rang, jarring me from my reverie. I picked it up.

"Are you believing this crap?" Will said without preamble, anger and shock obviously winning out over distress at the moment. "Our wives are leaving us for our wives!"

It wasn't great grammar but the point was well taken. The whole thing was like a bomb exploding in the living room of my brain. "How did we not see this coming? Besides that, they're sisters."

"You know Celeste was adopted by their parents when she was 13. They're not really related, even though they do look a lot alike, and she goofed us by telling us they were twins when we first met," Will replied with a resigned sigh. "Does that make you feel better?"

It didn't. Not at all...

As heart-wrenching as it was, we discovered over the next couple of weeks that

our wives had made up their minds. It was a strange damned thing — to be abandoned in favor of a woman. My head and my ego didn't know quite what to do with it. On the other hand, it didn't seem quite as painful or as hard as being cuckolded by another man. Celeste and Angie weren't really angry with us — hell, they were getting what they wanted. It was Will and me whose lives had just done a major flip-flop.

In the end, the divorces went through without too much rancor or squabbling over things, but that didn't lessen the pain. The girls took Angie and Will's canal home on the west side of Big Pine Key, and Will and I got my place on the southeast side of the island. Will kept his 22-foot Mako workboat, and of course, I kept my Cessna 182 amphibian floatplane that had carried Will and me through so many adventures over the last few years. Angie and Celeste took the little 31-foot sailboat of which my partner had been so fond. They also made us give them half of the ancient coin collection we had — given to us by our strange friend, Rufus, the Jamaican Soothsayer, years ago (and therein lies a remarkable story in itself). The coins were so old and so rare that selling only a handful each year and investing intelligently had kept us fairly comfortable. With this new development I realized we might actually have to go back to work — at something.

C'est la vie, amigo. Life stumbles on...

Sometimes you pursue intoxication, like an octopus stalking an old blue crab, rolling out tentacle after tentacle trying to snag it and draw it in. Sometimes it lurks in a darkened corner like a moray, hanging underneath a coral ledge, and just zaps you when you least expect it. That night in Key West, while waiting for our 9:00 appointment, Will and I got zapped.

I think the problems started with Will's sarcasm and twisted wit.

We walked into Captain Tony's on Greene Street just as the last of the sun's rays were gilding the high windows. A four-piece band thumped out a vigorous version of "Brandy" (*...you're a fine girl and what a good wife you would be. But my life, my lover, my lady, is the sea*). The place was already well into happy hour (as if that made a difference in a town whose motto is, "It's five o'clock somewhere"). Bartenders and waitresses were scuttling about furiously to the chorus of voices vying for their attention, and over the music bottles clanged, registers sang, and the frenzy of euphoria began to rise as inexorably as the tide two blocks away.

We went in, found a table and ordered drinks, but in the process we couldn't help but noticing the alternate entertainment. A rather heavy girl had obviously pulled well ahead in the race for inebriety and had climbed up on one of the tables near the bar. She was wearing a stretched-to-capacity tube top that was losing the battle with gravity as it struggled desperately to contain her voluminous, bouncing breasts. Her way-too-tight miniskirt had risen up past the point of sensuality and was nearing the point of lewd spectacle. Apparently underwear had been optional that night and there was stuff peeking out from under her skirt that looked like a Pomeranian might be hiding there.

Will looked at me and muttered with a grin, "How'd you like to see that lumbering at you in a pink nightie?"

In some places, such a spectacle might have driven customers from the bar, but this was Key West, and those who lived there had come to accept its strange amalgam of normal and bizarre in the same fashion we might accept the myriad characters of someone with a multiple personality disorder. It might be weird, but it's never less than

entertaining. Truth was, The Keys thrived on the bizarre. Like As Will used to say, “You want everything the same, every day, live in Montana. In The Keys, the only thing you’re certain of is the sun’s gonna rise in the East.”

Will decided to hit the restroom. He stood up, pushed back his long blond hair with the fingers of his hands, brushed down his colorful tropical shirt, then strolled casually toward the head with those long-legged strides of his. He walked by the girl, who still was gyrating like a beached mackerel, throwing her hair from side to side in sensual abandon, the Pomeranian becoming more visible by the moment. He glanced down at the table then up to her, and their eyes met. “Extraordinary legs,” he said with a wry smile, his pale blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

Losing a little of that wild fervor she returned the smile. “Thanks, big boy.” Her eyes danced with a lascivious glimmer. “Extraordinary, huh?”

“Yeah,” said my buddy. “Most tables would have collapsed long before now.”

Much of life is nothing more than timing. Sometimes your timing is perfect and things go well. Sometimes you just do the wrong thing at the wrong moment.

Maybe her boyfriend had dumped her recently. Maybe she’d heard one too many fat jokes that day. Who knows exactly. 1 But as Will turned, heading for the restroom, the girl slowed to a stop as if someone had just pulled her plug. Her eyes widened in shock, which quickly slid into umbrage, then danced right into fury. With a howl somewhere between an attacking Indian and a wild cougar, she hurled herself off the table in a leap that would have done Batman proud (especially remarkable considering she was right around 200 pounds). Will had just enough time to turn at the sound of the anguished shriek and see the overhead lights eclipsed by the very image of heavy animosity. My

partner's eyes suddenly garnered that same look Wile E. Coyote gets when he's just stepped off the cliff.

Arms spread and teeth bared, she body-slammed Will like Hulk Hogan with tits. The tube top surrendered its tenuous hold in flight and those giant boobies surged out like airbags in a head-on collision. I'm fairly certain that Will would have been pummeled soundly, and very possibly suffocated by those two gelatinous mountains had I not grabbed a leg and hauled him out from under the enraged behemoth. She was still hurling curses while struggling to get her top back in place as I threw some money on our table and we made our escape, to the outrageously pleased roar of the crowd.

"How in the hell is it that these things always happen to me?" Will moaned, brushing himself off as we paused about a block away.

"I don't know," I said, deadpan. "Couldn't have anything to do with your abrasive wit, could it?"

He grinned. "What makes you think you're so smucking fart? All I did was comment on the legs of the table."

"Whether or not I'm smucking fart has nothing to do with it. She would have beaten you to a puddle of jelly if your loyal sidekick hadn't been there."

Will chewed on the corner of his lip, as he often did when weighing a situation. "Yeah, you're right. Thanks, Tonto." Then he smiled again. "Did you see that freaking chick fly through the air? Did you see that? It was like Fat Albert on crack!"

We decided to work our way down Duval, create a buffer zone from our little escapade. We had actually come into town to pick up some stone crab claws from a friend of ours, Johnny Bolin. He had a boat and a legitimate trap business, but like so

many of the folks in The Keys, his occupation had bled almost naturally into the illegitimate. He put his traps out in areas with a lot of the big boys in the business and seemed to pull his at night more often than not, and he somehow brought in more crabs than his few traps could possibly have produced. Everyone expected to find him wacked and drifting in with the tide one day, but until then, he sold crab claws at about half the price of his competitors — mostly at night, and for cash only. We had agreed to meet him at Sloppy Joes about nine o'clock. We were early. There was almost no alternative but to drink for a while. We walked back to The Hog's Breath Saloon, because it was close to the truck, and settled in for an hour.

We got to laughing about Will and the heavy chick and that led to the retelling of some of our other escapades. We started out with a couple of beers but somewhere along the line we started adding a shot or two of tequila. If that damned waitress hadn't been so cute and persistent, things that evening might have turned out differently, because by a quarter 'til nine we were pretty well swacked and we still had a stone crab transaction to deal with.

We went back and got our pickup, then drove around to the back of Sloppy Joe's and parked. The yellow streetlamps in the alley cast a pale amber glow, throwing arcane, angled shadows of inky grays and ebonies. The aging bulbs were engulfed by erratic swarms of enraptured insects, drawn to the light in a perpetual summer dance with the same perennial surety and circumstance as the movement of the tides — ahhh, summer in The Keys.

While surveying the alley I noticed "Umbrellaman" (one of the many street people so unique that they had been given pet names by the local populace) was asleep in

a corner by the loading dock, the perpetual umbrella over his shoulder and his shopping cart next to him, containing all the man's worldly possessions, including his tiny dog. It was campy and melancholic, and charmingly picturesque at the same time. There were others like him — Cigarette Willy, who wandered the streets with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders summer and winter, an unlit cigarette continuously dangling from his lips; and Crazy George, with his strange clothes, wild eyes, and the bizarre tales he told to pry a dollar from tourists and locals alike. It was all part of the colorful kaleidoscope that was Key West.

Sloppy Joe's was unusually sloppy that night. The crowd was extraordinarily boisterous, happy hour having bled into pie-eyed delirious hour. The band was a little too loud, hammering out a shoddy rendition of a Jimmy Buffett song about cheeseburgers and paradise, but no one was complaining. The waitresses and bartenders, as high as they could afford to be and still perform, scampered to and fro, shouting orders to each other like a boarding party in the midst of an assault, while struggling ceiling fans sliced the noise and the stratus clouds of cigarette smoke sending them swirling back down into the melee. As we entered, we began looking for a fellow with a red ball cap — that was what Johnny told us to watch for. He rarely did his own transactions anymore.

Halfway back, along the wall, there was a guy sitting alone at a small table. He had a purplish ball cap on, which looked close enough. Long, scraggly blond hair spilled out the back and sides of the hat as he hunched over his beer ~~like he was~~ as if he were protecting it. He was an old guy; as thin as a hungry lizard, with bushy gray eyebrows, deep furrowed squint lines, and the craggy, hardened features of a man who's spent lots of time on the water and in the sun. But his copper eyes held steel in them, and a wisp of

wicked humor.

We worked our way through all the seekers of paradise and stopped at his table. “You got something for sale?” I said, trying to act sober and a little innocuous.

He skewered me with a pugnacious glare. “You got the money?”

I pulled an envelope from my back pocket.

He nodded. “Have a seat.”

As we pulled out chairs and ordered a couple beers from the waitress, I couldn’t help but notice a couple of guys about three or four tables from us, paying more attention to our exchange than was necessary. They were dressed in tropical shirts stretched by their burly torsos, but they didn’t look like tourists — no Hang Ten shorts, more like uptown slacks and hundred-dollar shoes — trying hard to blend in. When they realized I was watching them watch us, they went back to their drinks. About that time the band took a break and things quieted somewhat.

Our new acquaintance glanced around nervously, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a manila envelope. “Okay, let’s get this over with.” He slid the envelope over to me and I passed him the money, thinking it was strange that Johnny would be giving receipts, and noticing that the transaction hadn’t gone unnoticed by the guys in the Hawaiian shirts and Florsheims. *Maybe Johnny is becoming more legitimate*, I thought. I was guessing we’d slip outside and transfer the crab claws from truck to truck. As I stuffed the rather heavy envelope into my jeans pocket, the old fellow spoke, looking at me.

“Tommy Fields told me you was a good man so I’m giving this to you. The money don’t matter. My time is just about here.” He tapped his heart. “Bad ticker. Doc

says less than two months and I'll be on life support." He offered a savage, determined smile. "And that ain't gonna happen. Mostly I'm giving you this to keep it away from Penchant and his bunch."

"Rick Penchant?" I asked, suddenly realizing that we were apparently part of a serious misidentification here. "The treasure hunter Penchant?"

He nodded emphatically. "Yeah, that squirrely bastard."

Will and I exchanged glances. Penchant was fairly well-known in the business. He was also fairly well-known for having the ethics of a spider. If you got in his way he usually had somebody fix the problem. At that point we both knew we should say something like, "We're really sorry but we're not the people you think we are." But we didn't. What was happening was just too damned intriguing.

The guy continued. "I found that (nodding toward the envelope he'd given me) in verily a slit of a limestone cave near Spanish Wells on Crooked Island not two months ago. Stuffed in an old black glass gin bottle and sealed with a cork and rubber tree sap, it was. Been there the better part of three hundred years, I'm guessing."

That brought another glance from Will. Now the boy really had our attention. We had been to Crooked in the Bahamas once or twice.

"But I got a bit of rum in me one night and got a little loose-lipped, and Penchant found out about it," he added.

We didn't know it at the time, but about a mile from us, on Roosevelt Boulevard, there had just been a fender bender. A fellow named Benny Swarez, wearing a red ball cap and carrying a hundred pounds of crab claws in the back of his truck, had just sideswiped a Ford Mustang owned by a Malcolm Bledsow, who was a minor league

treasure hunter and a personal friend of local philanthropist Tommy Fields.

I was reminded of our old Jamaican soothsayer buddy, Rufus, and an expression he used occasionally: “The Gods, they be bored easily, and sometimes they make coincidences. They have a fine sense of humor and irony — these be some of their favorite things.”

I exhaled hard, my conscience catching up with me a little. “Listen, we may not be — ”

“Don’t start with the crap about you don’t feel right about takin’ this from me, okay?” the guy spat. “Somebody’s got to have it. Somebody’s got to dig up what’s on that map, and unfortunately it ain’t gonna be me. Like I told Tommy, just make sure half of what you find gets to my daughter, Vanilla Bean, up on Grassy Key. I’m Jack Bean. That much you better promise me or I swear I’ll come back from the dead and — ” The sentence was broken by a deep rasping cough that seemed to exhaust him.

A map! A freaking treasure map! My mind screeched as Will shot me another wide-eyed glance. I turned back to Jack. “Okay, buddy. Okay. I promise. We’ll do it.”

Without any further ado the old man slugged down the rest of his beer, drew himself up slowly and exhaled hard, then offered a strangely knowing, almost benevolent smile. “Good hunting, amigos, and don’t forget about my daughter, Vanny.” With that he turned and was gone, melting slowly into the miasma of smoke, bodies, and lights. The two guys behind us let him go. They’d seen the exchange. It was clear what they were after.

“Well, that went remarkably well, didn’t it?” Will chimed, easing back in his chair. “We came here to buy a box of crab claws and we’re leaving with a freaking treasure map.”

“That’s the good news,” I said. “The bad news is those two fellas over there who have been watching us like vultures waiting for a road kill to quit twitching.” Before Will could do it I added tersely, “Don’t look at ’em. Just drink your beer.”

“Where are they?” Will said without looking.

“Three tables behind you and two to the left.”

He nodded and casually pushed his cocktail napkin off the table. As he bent down to pick it up, he took a quick glance. “Big dudes, tropical shirts,” he said as he put his napkin back under his glass.

“Yeah, you got it.” I looked around at the exits and entrances. There was a hallway by the stage that led to the bathrooms and the back alley. “I think we’re gonna need a diversion. You got any ideas?”

Will glanced around, chewing on his lip in concentration. He looked at the stage and smiled. He caught a waitress’ attention, handed her 10 dollars and told her he needed to borrow a pair of scissors and a phonebook. When my partner had them in hand, he took a quick jaunt to the restroom. As soon as Will got back, he handed me a thick stack of about 200 pieces of phonebook paper cut into two-inch by four-inch squares. “Okay, this what I’m gonna do and this is what you’re gonna do...”

A moment or two later Will got up and headed toward the hallway with the restrooms again, but as he got close to the stage he turned and bounced up the three stairs, then walked over to the band’s microphones like he owned the place. Waving to the

people in the audience, he grabbed a mike and turned it on. “How’s everyone doing tonight?” he yelled. “Are we getting right?”

The audience replied with a roar, glasses in the air. When everyone settled down he continued quickly, “Just want everyone to know that Jimmy Buffett will be doing a concert in Miami this Saturday! Yeah!”

That brought another roar. The bouncers slowed their approach to the stage, now figuring that this was a promotion of some sort.

“I got great news for you!” my buddy shouted. “We’ve got one hundred free tickets to that concert here tonight!”

Another roar.

Will pointed out into the crowd, right at the two dudes who had been paying too much attention to us. “See those two guys with the tropical shirts at the table by the bar?”

I quickly stood, moved over near them and pointed enthusiastically.

“They have the tickets. The first hundred people to reach their table get free Jimmy Buffett concert tickets!”

That was my cue. I threw the pieces of phonebook paper into the air, over the top of the two men, and yelled, “Free tickets!”

A hush filled the room for a moment, as if the air had just been sucked out. Then an old shrimper at the bar stumbled off his stool and staggered toward our antagonists. “I want a damned ticket,” he slurred. That was it. In the next second pandemonium ensued, as about 200 people attacked that table with the frenzy of blood-crazed ~~makes~~.

At that point I headed for the hallway and the back door to the alley, where Will joined me. I do remember looking back and seeing those two guys glaring hatefully at us,

but that was instantly transformed into the Wile E. Coyote look as the glazed-eyed, slobbering, shrieking congregation charged at them feverishly with outstretched hands like *The Night of the Living Dead on Cocaine*. The last thing I saw was their table going over, asses and elbows in every direction.

I just love it when a plan comes together.

Just slip out the back, Jack, make a new plan, Stan, you don't need to be coy, Roy, just get yourself free. Hop on the bus, Gus, you don't need to discuss much, just drop off the key, Lee, and get yourself free.

— Paul Simon