

Saint Augustine Transfer

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SAINT AUGUSTINE TRANSFER

A Short Story by

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"Saint Augustine Transfer"

I barely remember the bike ride home, except when I missed being sideswiped by a horn-blaring Land Rover with glaring headlights. At the house, I hopped off the bike, ignoring the searing pain in my lungs and legs, and stumbled through the door. Meredith was sitting on the couch, staring at the darkened TV screen. She was still furious with me, her eyes narrowed and the sides of her mouth were pinched, but she refused to look at me.

It had been eight months since Meredith and I had stopped off for a couple of hours in St. Augustine after a whirlwind trip to Disney World. That day we fell in love with America's oldest city immediately. Meredith said there was something magical about the place, something that called to the soul. She was sure that anyone who set foot in the city, if they opened themselves up to its magic, would be bound to it forever. And she was. From the moment we stood on the Bay Front, looking out over Matanzas Bay, the lights of the Bridge of Lions twinkling like fireflies, she was hooked. When we arrived back home, it was all she talked about, and I knew it was just a matter of time before we would make the journey south.

Typical Florida afternoon. Thirty minutes ago, the sun was shining, not a cloud in the sky. Now, as pounding rain blew sideways into the darkened barn, I sat with four other carriage drivers at the entrance, chain-smoking cigarettes, waiting on some blue sky

so we could get our shift started. Every minute we weren't on the Bay Front we were losing money. No rides, no tips. It had been a rough month already. Three times we had been flooded out and it was barely the middle of August. Apparently the fifteenth-century city planners had not considered drainage when they built the St. Augustine streets. Any more than a half inch of rain in an hour and we saw gushing water up to the sidewalks. In water only two inches deep, our hard rubber tires would work their way off the steel and wooden wheels. No one wanted to be caught on the route with a lost tire. Changing a wagon wheel wasn't nearly as easy as changing a car tire, and only one man could do it. Losing a tire meant calling Rosie. He hated changing tires in the rain, and no one wanted to piss him off. So we smoked our cigarettes and waited. None of us saw the old man sneaking up behind us.

"What da hell you boys think you do in'?"

We threw our cigarettes out into the rain and snapped around, guilt all over our sunburned faces. It was Rosie, yelling at us through his missing teeth.

"You son's a bitches gonna catch my goddamn barn on fire. Where da hell'm I gonna sleep den, huh? Rosie gonna be at yo house, sleepin' on yo couch den, dat's where." Rosie lifted his head and cackled.

No one knew exactly how old Rosie was, but he had been with the Coolie family since they took over the Transfer in the 1950's. Rosie always looked the same. Dirty khaki pants tucked into black rubber boots, no shirt, his beard long, gray and matted, always a piece of straw hidden in there somewhere. Rosie was a legend at the Transfer. One simply had to look at the dust covered pictures in the makeshift office to see Rosie's

story. There he was in Old St. Augustine, top hat and tuxedo, sitting atop a limousine carriage pulled by a team of Clydesdale's. He was there on the front page of the paper, training horses in the 60's. Somewhere (judging by the clothes it was the 80's) the photos started to dwindle. It was as though Rosie had disappeared. You could follow that line of pictures to the end of the office wall and continue in the same direction until your eyes rested on a splintered wooden door inside the main barn. It was Rosie's room. The Coolies had offered the old man room and board. In exchange, Rosie took care of the horses night and day. It wasn't much more than a ten-by-ten room with plywood walls, but it was Rosie's home, and we all respected it. So naturally, we felt guilty when he yelled at us for smoking in the barn.

"You boys gonna git dem hauses ready to pull, or ya'll gonna sit round and jerk each otha off all afternoon?"

"Come on Rosie, it's pouring out there," I said. "We're not going anywhere today. It'll be six before we can get on the bay front. Christ, we might as well not even go out at that point."

"Bullshit. Rain'll quit in twenty." Rosie turned away, mumbling as he left us.

We all looked at each other for a moment and then jumped out of our seats at the same time, each running for our horse's stall. We only had one grooming station and it took a good man twenty minutes to get his horse ready. First one to hitch his horse was the first one to start making money, and if Rosie said we were going out today, by God, we were.

It was three in the afternoon. I was standing in a doorway on St. George Street, staring up at the swaying palms, the hot breath of the Florida afternoon on my face.

Remember this. Don't ever forget it.

My black and red herring bone corset was cutting into my ribcage, and the white peasant blouse underneath was matted, twisted and soaking wet. Every so often, I would yank my black velvet skirt up to my knees and swish it around, imagining a breeze to cool off my aching, sweaty thighs.

No one's gonna buy anything from me, I thought. I was sweaty, probably stinky, and about to die from heat stroke. There were five of us up and down St. George Street, all doing the same thing; trying to sell walking ghost tour tickets. No one seemed interested. By the time they got to me, the tourists had heard the sales pitch three times already. My best attempts were met by fake smiles and head shakes, dirty looks, or people who suddenly found the other side of the street particularly enticing.

This sucks, I thought. I had wanted this, to be here in the nation's oldest city, surrounded by ocean and palms since I'd first laid eyes on this beautiful little drinking village with a fishing problem. Now, when all of my dreams had come true, the reality was too harsh. Too much like real life. I believed that the magic of this place would've enveloped me and transformed my life into a fairytale. I tried to take a deep exasperated breath, but the stays of my corset were so tight I was stopped short, dizzy and nauseous.

After an hour of watching the happy, sunburned tourists go by, trying to lure them in with the promise of a creepy good time, I finally hooked some interested customers.

"How much?" The woman's nasally high pitched voice barked at me. It surprised me that voice had come out of that body. She was fat, with tightly permed dirty blonde hair, sausage-like arms jutting out of a fuschia tank top, and tight, black jean shorts that rode up her inner thighs, displaying skin the color and texture of cold oatmeal.

"Well, we have three different packages. The walking ghost tour is an hour and a half leisurely walk down the darkened streets of St Augustine by lamplight, or if you'd prefer, we have carriage rides on the Bayfront that do both ghost and historical tours. And, if you'll be in town for a while, I'd suggest doing both the walking and the carriage tours. More bang for your buck." *More bang for your buck?* Did I really just say that? *Idiot!* "The walking tour by itself is eight dollars a person. Both carriage tours are twenty a person, and if you decide on our combo package, it would only be twenty two for both the carriage and the walking tours."

"7w«(y dollars a person! Are you out of your mind? That's ridiculous!" The woman's shrill voice was attracting glances from people strolling down St George, and grating on my nerves.

"Well, ma'am, perhaps you'd rather do the walking tour, then. It's only eight dollars a person. It's really a lot of fun. Your tour guide will be dressed up and in the character of one of the many ghosts that haunt the city. It's quite a treat," I fought to keep my voice level. "And there's always the package deal. You'd get a discount on both. If you choose the combo, I'd suggest requesting Joey as your driver. He's the best tour

guide in the company!"

"How much is it to do both?" She asked, quieter this time.

"Twenty-two a person." I said.

"Well, that's not much of a discount is it?" She said.

Nasty bitch! I thought.

"It's actually a very good deal ma'am," I said.

"Well, I'll think about it. How late will you be here?" She asked.

"The tour starts at nine, so you have until then to get a ticket." She grabbed a flyer off of the table and wobbled off. I rolled my eyes, knowing that I'd never see her again. Just then, Stuart, my boss, turned the corner and headed toward the benches across the street from my booth. He always made me uncomfortable. He'd sit on that bench for an hour, just watching me try to sell tickets. He'd do anything short of standing on the bench and begging the tourists to buy a ticket from me. It was nerve-wracking. He always had his two Siamese cats with him, Sammie and Janie, both on leashes. He was the only person I'd ever seen walk a cat. But the cats didn't seem to mind, and the people passing by loved it. Granted, it helped sell tickets, but I still wished he'd go away.

"Sell anything today Miss Meredith?"

"Four for the carriage and ten for the walking tour so far," I said. Not good numbers. I knew he'd be upset.

"You gotta get out there and get more Miss Thing. Talk to *every* person that walks by dear. That's the only way you'll get 'em!"

I wanted to stick my tongue out at him.

"I know, Stuart. I'm trying."

"Well, try harder. You're working on commission you know," he added.

"Yeah I know." He wasn't listening anymore. He was talking to a couple who'd stopped to admire the cats. I turned my attention to the street.

"Would you like to join us on a ghost tour this evening?" I called out to anyone who'd listen.

An hour and a half later, I was still in the same spot, calling out the same old tired lines. I hadn't sold any more tickets, but at least Stuart was gone. Suddenly, the sun disappeared behind a foreboding cloud, and there was monstrous rumble in the distance. *Great. It's gonna rain. I'm going to get drenched, the car will get flooded, and there 'll be no one walking the street to buy tickets.* Sure enough, rain plopped slowly on my head, the coquina walls, the shell encrusted street. There was a loud crack of lightning somewhere near the fort that made me jump, and another loud rumble, closer this time. By the time that I'd shut down the ticket booth and gathered my things, it was pouring. Yanking my skirt up around my knees, preparing for the mad dash to my car, I wondered what the hell I was doing here. I ran out into the rain toward the Buick.

"Shit!" I yelled, splashing through a puddle up to my ankle, water pouring into my shoe. Rounding the corner, with the Buick in sight, I fumbled for the keys, running fast. I unlocked the car door, shoved my purse in and clamored inside. As I leaned out to yank the heavy door shut, I cracked my shin on the side of the door. *Damn it!*

Sitting in the car, a puddle forming under my butt from my dripping clothes, I

asked myself again why I was here. Sure, it was gorgeous (when it wasn't raining), but in the four weeks we'd been here, other than sleeping, Joey and I'd spent about two hours a day together. Rent was high and cash was tight. Joe was working doubles on the Bayfront six days a week, and I was busy selling tickets during the day and leading the tours at night. Even though we worked for the same company and were only about a hundred yards apart, we hardly ever saw each other.

The only time we really got to spend anytime together was on the carriage. When my 9:00 ghost tour was over, I'd walk the two blocks up to the Bay Front, and hop on the carriage with Joey for his last tour. I'd sit up front, both of us in our costumes, and we'd take turns telling ghost stories to the tourists.

It was my favorite time in St. Augustine, on that carriage. Joey would stop in front of the old captain's house and tell our passengers about the night that he heard a harpsichord playing from the attic, and the woman who starved to death when her jealous husband, lost at sea, locked her up there with only a harpsichord to keep her company. I would stare up at the house, willing the harpsichord to play its melancholy, otherworldly tune for us. When we first got our jobs as tour guides, I was giddy with excitement, wanting a "ghost experience" so badly I could hardly stand it. When Joey told me he'd heard the ghostly harpsichord, I was not only jealous, but also determined to hear it as well. For all the nights riding on that carriage with him, there were just as many driving up and down the street in the Buick, stopping in front of the captain's house as long as my nerves and traffic would allow, straining against the rumbling of the engine to hear, heart pounding. I never experienced it, and I was mad as hell about it.

Around 8:30 the rain had stopped and twilight had set in upon St. Augustine. I had changed my clothes and returned to the booth on St George Street for the 9:00 walking tour. After the tour was over, I walked the two blocks up to the Bayfront, the stones and shells on the street digging into my tired feet through my thin ballet flats, hoping to catch Joey's last carriage ride. When I arrived, he was loading a mixed-matched group into the white rickety carriage. I waved at him, and immediately went over to Pedro for a hug.

"Wanna ride?" He called as he hoisted himself onto the carriage seat.

"Sure." I pulled my skirt up, took Joey's offered hand and climbed onto the seat. I closed my eyes for a moment, listening to Pedro's big hooves clippety clonk on the street and Joey's booming voice, happy to be beside the man I loved, on a romantic tour of the city that held fast to my heart.

When we passed the Tolomoto Cemetery, with its creepy shadows and dank, dead smell, I could feel Meredith shiver slightly, and move a little closer to me, away from the open side of the carriage and away from the most haunted, and according to Meredith, the scariest cemetery in the United States. We continued the tour down Hypolita Street, stopping from time to time, to tell a story or give our passengers a better view, before we came up to my favorite spot on the tour. I stopped Pedro underneath the "Lover's Tree," an ancient oak intertwined with a palm tree growing right out of the middle of it, and told

everyone the local legend. If you kissed someone under that tree, you would be in love forever. Occasionally, the tourists would include newlyweds or engaged couples, and more often than not, they would blush and steal quick kisses as I urged Pedro on to our next destination. Mere and I would glance at each other, smiling, recalling a time in the not so distant past, when we too shared a furtive kiss under that tree. She would grab my hand and give it a quick squeeze, and I'd wink back at her. Life was good under the Lover's Tree. I could forget about all the tension that had been brewing between us lately, the lonely days and nights when we never saw each other, how we'd count out change for milk and Easy Mac.

When we got back to the bay front, we were the last carriage out. With the tourists returning to their hotel rooms, the streets were all but deserted. There would be no more fares tonight, so the bay front manager gave me signal to head back to the barn.

"Let's go home Pedro." That's all it took to get the trip back to the barn underway. I'd always heard that a horse knows his way back to the barn, but I never believed it until I saw it.

"Just like turning on the auto-pilot," I said to Meredith, dropping the reins in my lap and letting Pedro do the driving.

Auto-Pilot. There was a word I didn't use much anymore. One year prior I was living a mere hour south of St. Augustine in Daytona Beach, training to be an airline pilot. My father had encouraged my love of flying and financed my college career. That is, until I fell into the trap of partying in Daytona. Whoever decided to put a college in the spring break capital of the world should be shot. As my grades dropped off, my

father's generosity dried up. I moved back home to face the music, and after just less than a year, I couldn't take it anymore.

"Sixty-thousand dollars! Do you know how long I'll be paying for your fucking failure?" My father was not at all pleased with my performance. Frankly, neither was I. The move to St. Augustine with Meredith was a half-assed effort on my part to get back to school. The plan was to commute to the University in Daytona from St. Augustine. I was close enough to Daytona to drive everyday, but not close enough to find myself crawling home every night. Just a few more months of work and with my financial aid I would be able to afford to go to school part-time.

"It's amazing how he knows his way home. How do you think they do it?" Meredith was fascinated by Pedro's flawless navigation through the old city streets.

"Habit, intuition, I don't know. The same way that seagulls know to head south when the weather gets too cold, I guess. I'd say we all have a GPS inside that points home no matter where we are." Pedro turned onto an old, dark cobblestone side street. For a moment, with the clip-clop of his massive hooves on the brick and the light cast off of the lanterns on either side of the carriage, you could almost imagine yourself back in nineteenth century Florida. Meredith must have recognized the feeling as I did, because she turned at me and smiled half-heartedly in the lamp light.

"I always thought my GPS was pointing me right here." We crossed an intersecting street and caught a breeze from the bay as it whipped through the narrow alley. Meredith shivered as she spoke. "You know, now that I'm here, I wonder if maybe..."

"Maybe what?" I asked, although I already knew her answer.

"Maybe we made a mistake. No, not a mistake. Just that we didn't think things through. We should have waited a little longer, saved up more money. And honestly, I'm lonely. So damn lonely. I couldn't wait to get away from my parents, and now, well, I can't believe I miss them so much. I even miss the mountains. I have palm trees and ocean, and I miss mountains!"

"I need your support here, Mere. This is the only way I'll be able to fly again. Besides, we can make a new home for ourselves here. How can you not love this?" I gestured towards Pedro and the Road in front of us.

"I do love it, but I guess what I'm trying to say is, it's not home." Meredith turned her back to me, mumbling "and it never will be," as Pedro made the final turn towards the barn.

"Home is where your heart is, and mine is here with you." It was cliché, but it was the best I could come up with.

"Swing it wide Pedro," I said, grabbing the reins guiding the rig into the barn. Rosie waited at the end with my lead rope for Pedro. "Can we talk about this later?"

"Whatever." She wouldn't look at me, so I dropped it and made quick work removing Pedro's harness. Meredith hopped down off the carriage, and Rosie hooked up the lead and watched my horse as I pushed my carriage into its parking spot in the barn. When I was done, I looked up and Meredith was on her way out to the car.

"Dis hause work all day in da sun 'cause dat be his job, but all day he be wanting to go home." Rosie handed me Pedro's lead rope as he spoke. "You know why he want

to go home? Ain't got nuttin' to do with where his heart be. He want to go home 'cause he feel safe here. He know when he get home, he gots a comfy bed an a apple waitin' fo him. Home's what make a man, or a hause, feel right inside."

I didn't say a word to Rosie as I walked Pedro to his stall, and Mere and I didn't speak again that night. We rode home and went to bed in silence.

St. Augustine is barely a spec on the map, and we lived on the edge of it. Getting to work proved difficult some days since we only had one car, and not much of one at that. The old Buick was shit brown, though Meredith tries to tell me to this day that it was dark blue, and the doors didn't close all the way. God forbid we had to drive through one of the city's slightly flooded streets. We'd have to pick up our feet to keep them out of the puddles that would form in the floorboard. The car smelled of mildew and exhaust, always had trouble starting, and you could hear the rusty muffler from a mile away. But it ran. Working the odd hours that we both did, it was inevitable that one of us would usually get dropped off at work long before our scheduled shift so the other could be at work right on time. Typically that was me arriving two hours early, and I spent my time at the barn with Dave, Rosie, and the crew. Dave's father also worked for the Transfer, but he was getting old and wasn't capable of doing much. Pops still drove, but only two days a week, and someone else had to groom and hitch his horse. He was a grizzled old sea captain straight out of a Jimmy Buffett song. Pops smoked unfiltered Pal

Mai's, drank like a fish, and worked just enough to pay the weekly rent at a sleazebag motel over on Anastasia Island. When he wasn't drunk or driving a carriage, he worked at a small woodshop Dave had set up for him with some hand-me-down tools at the barn. Pops' eyesight was failing, and many mornings, while waiting for my shift on the street, I would be his eyes while he carved elementary designs from scrap wood found around the barn. He wasn't very good at it, but it kept him sober. Besides, Dave liked to keep an eye on his dad, and it was easier to do with him just next door. Pops mostly carved little signs with a jigsaw, mostly people's names, and he would proudly present them with a great deal of fanfare, always beaming over his handiwork. My job was to trace the person's name on the wood. When Pops was satisfied with my penmanship, he would have me help him guide the jigsaw across the thick black Sharpie lines.

One morning I walked into the woodshop to find Pops hard at work. On the workbench in front of him was a 1970's rust green bicycle. Pops had it turned on its back, working the pedals as he tightened screws. He smiled as I walked in.

"You know how to ride one?" Pops asked as though I'd never been a ten year old boy.

"Oh yeah! I grew up on one. My dad taught me how to ride when I was a kid. I spent more time on that bike than I did at home," I said.

"Found this one on my walk in this morning. Somebody just left it for the trash man! Left it sitting there, like it was nothing. I didn't think they'd mind if I beat the trash truck to it, so I rolled it across the bridge this morning. Got her fixed up. Reckon she'll do?"

"I don't know if you should be riding a rickety old bike like that. Christ, old man, you'll fall and break your hip."

"Well, hell Joe, I ain't planning on ridin' the damn thing. I'm planning on you riding it."

"Me? I've got a car, what the hell do I need that for?"

"Son, looks to me that if you had a car, you wouldn't be in here drawing names on two by fours with an old asshole like me. If I were your age again, I'd be home right now, stickin' it to the missus. Besides, that piece of shit Buick of yours scares the horses every time you turn onto King Street!"

"I can't take that bike from you. You put a lot of work into it. Why don't you sell it? Hell, I bet you'd get twenty bucks for it," I said.

"Tell you what. Let me work on it for another week, with your help as usual, and it's yours. You wanna sell it, go ahead. I gotta tell you though kid, getting dropped off at a barn by your woman in that old beater ain't something I'd be going for. Besides, maybe now you can spend some time with your girl 'stead of a drunk old man like me." He pulled a cigarette from the pack with his teeth, lit a match on the workbench, put the two together and breathed in the heavy tobacco smoke. He exhaled deeply and smiled.

Maybe Pops felt bad for my situation, maybe he was simply offering payment, but I've always believed he knew something I was just too naive to see. My relationship was falling apart. Maybe time was what I needed, maybe the extra mode of transportation would offer some relief. We worked on that ugly green bike for the next week, and when it was ready, I asked Dave for the day off and rode my new bike home to surprise Mere.

"Hello! Guess who's home?" I walked through the house and found her in the kitchen, doing dishes.

"I thought you were working today," she said. "How did you get here? Did you walk? All that way?"

"Pops gave me a bike, and Dave gave me the day off. I thought maybe we'd go get a picnic lunch and head to the beach. We haven't done that in a while." Mere just looked at me. Suddenly, I felt I should have stayed at work.

"A bike," was all that she said. She turned around to face the sink and stuck her hands back into the soapy water, noisily pulling out a plate.

"Mere? Meredith? Aren't you excited? I got the whole day off! Where's my hug? I've missed my baby." This wasn't going how I'd pictured it at all. Something was wrong, Meredith wasn't at all happy, and as usual, she was shutting down, not saying what she really felt, either to protect me or herself or the both of us, from yet another fight. I could feel the fight coming, hovering above our heads.

"What's going on?" I asked. "Don't ignore me. Aren't you excited?" I repeated.

"Yeah. Sounds great. I already ate lunch and I really need to do some laundry, but I can do that later."

Wow, I thought. Meredith rarely did the laundry. The washing machine and dryer were located outside, around the back of the house, about twenty feet away from overgrown, marshy swamp. The threat of snakes (I'd seen at least six in the past three months) and the numerous mosquito bites on Meredith's legs were enough to keep her away from that part of the house. I knew that if she was planning to do laundry, it was

because she was really pissed at me, trying to make a point, and by now, too stubborn to reason with. My sweet Meredith was gone, and in her place, irrational, fed-up Meredith had arrived.

"I should have stayed at work," I mumbled, apparently a little too loud, for Meredith whirled around, slinging suds all over the counter and through squinted, glaring eyes said,

"What the hell! Yes, you should have. Do you pay any attention at all? Look at this place. It's a dump! We can barely pay the bills as it is, and now you're taking time off work and wanting to spend money that we don't have? Don't you *ever* stop to think?"

"But, we never spend any time together. I thought it would be nice to have an afternoon..." she stopped me before I could finish,

"I'm done trying to spend time with you!" She was yelling now. "I've been trying to get you to take time off of work for months now, and you've refused to do it. Suddenly, when we're fucking broke, you decide it's a good idea to go on a goddamn picnic. You need to get your priorities straight!" Meredith yanked the wet dishcloth off the counter and flung it across the room, then turned back to the sink, scrubbing the dishes furiously.

"Whoa! I've been busting my ass everyday to pay the bills around here. I've been working 60 hours a week here in this gorgeous place that you wanted just as badly as I did. Now, you want to bitch at me for working too much? And now that I found time to spend with you, you want to bitch at me for not working? Fuck this. You've lost your

shit," I said. She spun around to face me, and as she did, the soapy glass she was cleaning slipped from her hands, hitting the linoleum floor and shattering into jagged pieces. She looked at me in horror and backed away from the glass.

"I just want to go home." She was crying now. "We've been together nine months. You took me away from my home, my family, my friends. You dragged me here to what you promised would be paradise and you left me. You left me sitting here in this empty house alone. I have no one to talk to, no friends, no family, nobody. My job sucks, I almost died in the heat the other day, and now, after having done all of that to me, you want to come home and try to make nice? Fuck that, and fuck you for thinking it was the smart thing to do." She pushed by me into the living room and stood with her arms crossed, back to me.

"Fuck that? Fuck me? Look, I've busted my ass to give you everything you ever wanted. Don't forget, you're the one who wanted to move here so you could paint. How much painting have you done since we got here? How much have you worked to pay the bills? What have you done to make this what we both hoped it would be? I can't take this shit anymore!" I slammed the door behind me, got on my rusty green bicycle, and rode to the only place that brought me solace.

It was barely mid-afternoon when I got to the barn. Dave seemed surprised to see me back so soon, and we sat on the grass outside the barn, smoking cigarettes as I filled him in on the events of the day. Dave took in a deep breath, exhaled deeply, flicked his cigarette at the street, stood, and nodded for me to follow him. Dave was not only manager of the barn, he was also the local furrier. He was a practicing blacksmith,

working everyday, turning steel into shoes, nails, and tack. Dave led me to his anvil, fired up the furnace and started stoking the fire. Over the roar of the propane fired oven, he shouted orders, and I followed. Working quickly with the hot steel, I helped him bend and shape horse shoes. Pounding that steel was more of a relief than I ever could have imagined.

After thirty minutes of hard labor, we had the shoes roughed out.

"Rosie! You want the good stuff? Get your crazy ass out here and I'll make it worth your while!" It was a standing joke at the barn that Dave supplied Rosie with a crack rock on occasion to keep him just crazy enough to keep doing what he did for a living. Hardly any of us believed it to be much of a joke.

"What da hell you want big man?" Rosie had obviously just woken up. When he came out of his room, his hair and beard were matted and unruly and he was barefoot.

"Go help Joey bring Pedro around."

"Goddamn newbie can't get his own goddamn hause?" Rosie refused to call anyone by their name unless he'd known them for years.

"Come on now, you know you want the good stuff. And you know how rough Pedro is with new shoes." Pedro was massive. At sixteen hands, he was a fifteen-hundred-pound Arabian who was terrified of getting new shoes. All the horses were shawed every month, whether they needed it or not. Asphalt was hard on the horses hooves, so we had to take extra steps to prevent injury.

"Dat ain't funny boss, an you know it ain't. Newbie, go get yo lead and come on."

I followed Rosie to Pedro's stall. Pedro heard me coming and stuck his head out to see me. Our greeting was always the same. He'd rest his giant head on my shoulder and I'd rub him behind the ears. He knew what came next, as I wouldn't dare enter that barn without an apple. It was strange, but that 'hug' from Pedro was relieving. We understood each other, and he knew it had been a rough day. Pedro was unusually calm as Rosie and I led him to the main barn. Dave, Rosie, and I spent the next two hours caring for my horse. When we had him shawed, I took him to the grooming stall and gave him a good wash. Pedro loved to be groomed. He was a proud horse, and I think he enjoyed the company. I know I certainly did. By the time I finished, it was almost dark. I led Pedro back to his stall, gave him the last piece of the apple, and headed outside. It was shaping up to be a beautiful evening. I got on my new bicycle and headed for the Bay Front

To the left, the Castillo de San Marcos, the oldest surviving fort in the country. At night, its coquina walls were illuminated by flood lights from the ground below. It was an eerie sight, one that conjured up images of Spanish soldiers, Seminole chiefs, and the ghosts of slaughtered French soldiers who dared cross into the bay. Directly to the front of the Castillo was the mouth of the Matanzas Bay. Just inside the inlet rested a multitude of sailboats, lit up with strings of white lights, all rolling slowly with the rhythm of the tide. To the right was the Bridge of Lions. One of the most photographed bridges in the US, it was certainly a sight to see on a clear night like this. I sat there on the stone benches, soaking it all in, trying to decide what to do. My cell phone broke the silence, and I reached into my pocket and ignored the call. I wasn't ready for another

argument. When the phone beeped, letting me know that I had a message, I reluctantly pulled the phone out and dialed my voice mail, fully expecting the message to be from Meredith. It wasn't.

"Hey sweetie, it's your Aunt Melita. I need you to call me back as soon as you get this message, ok? It's very important. I love you." I could hardly understand her. Her voice was wavy, like she was speaking under water. She was obviously crying. I wiped my suddenly clammy hands on my jeans and with shaking fingers, dialed her number. When I hung up the phone, I sat there a moment, staring at the calm waters of the Matanzas Bay. Matanzas. Spanish for "slaughter," honoring the day when 400 Frenchman lost their heads when they unsuccessfully tried to capture St. Augustine from the Spanish. I needed Meredith. With shaking hands, I picked up the bike and headed home.

Back at home, I stood in front of Meredith, waiting, numb. Rolling her eyes, she finally relented and said,

"What? What do you want? You fucking left me. Where the hell have you been? Do you have any idea how worried I've been about you?" She was trembling.

"Daddy had a stroke," I said.

"What?"

"Daddy had a stroke. It happened about seven. My aunt just called. He's in the hospital in Greenville. He hasn't woken up yet," I said. She covered her mouth with her hands.

"Oh my God, Joey, I'm so sorry."

"I have to go. I'd like for you to go with me."

"Ok," Meredith paused for a long time, staring sideways at the carpet. "Look, I'm..."

"I know. Me too."

Mere walked to me. She stood in front of me, looking up for a moment, then dropped her head and hugged me for what seemed like forever, the top of her head braced against my sternum, holding me up, keeping me from crumbling.

"You ready?" I asked.

"Yeah, let's go." We took a half hour to pack the Buick, shut off the lights, locked the door, and hit the road. It would be eight hours before we made it to the hospital in Greenville. As we pulled onto the interstate, Meredith turned to look back. Her fingers met her lips and then reached ever so slightly toward our empty, darkened house. She shifted back in her seat and sighed. The sound pulled my heart down into my stomach.

Shifting my eyes toward the rearview mirror, I took a long look, and then abruptly returned to the road. Meredith squeezed my hand and I leaned over to kiss her. Then we both faced north and took a deep breath together.