

T O M

W O L F e



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About the Book

As a police launch speeds across Miami's Biscayne Bay - with officer Nestor Camacho on board - Tom Wolfe is off and running. Into the feverous landscape of the city, he introduces the Cuban mayor, the black police chief, an ambitious young journalist and his Yale-marinated editor; a psychiatrist who specialises in sex addiction and his Latina nurse by day, mistress by night - until lately, the love of Nestor's life; a refined, and oh-so-light-skinned young woman from Haiti and her Creole-spouting, black-gang-banger-stylin' little brother; a billionaire porn addict, crack dealers in the 'hoods, 'de-skilled' conceptual artists at the Miami Art Basel Fair, 'spectators' at the annual Biscayne Bay regatta looking only for that night's orgy, and a nest of shady Russians.

Based on the same sort of detailed, on-scene, high-energy reporting that powered Tom Wolfe's previous best-selling novels, *Bonfire of the Vanities* and *A Man in Full*, *Back to Blood* is another brilliant, spot-on, scrupulous, and often hilarious reckoning with our times.

About the Author

Tom Wolfe is the author of more than a dozen books, among them *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Right Stuff*, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *A Man in Full*, and *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. A native of Richmond, Virginia, he earned his B.A. at Washington and Lee University and a Ph.D. in American studies at Yale. He lives in New York City.

ALSO BY TOM WOLFE

The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby

The Pump House Gang

The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

Radical Chic & Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers

The Painted Word

Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine

The Right Stuff

In Our Time

From Bauhaus to Our House

The Bonfire of the Vanities

A Man in Full

Hooking Up

I Am Charlotte Simmons

To
SHEILA
AND TO THE MEMORY OF
ANGEL CALZADILLA

BACK TO BLOOD

A Novel

Tom Wolfe



Jonathan Cape
London

Prologue

We een Mee-AH-mee Now

You ...

You ...

You ... edit my life ... You are my wife, my Mac the Knife—the witticism here being that he may edit one of the half-dozen-or-so most important newspapers in the United States, the *Miami Herald*, but she is the one who edits *him*. *She ... edits ... him*. Last week he totally forgot to call the dean, the one with the rehabilitated harelip, at their son Fiver's boarding school, Hotchkiss, and Mac, his wife, his Mac the Knife, was justifiably put out about it ... but then he had sort-of-sung this little rhyme of his to the tune of "You Light Up My Life." *You ... edit my life ... You are my wife, my Mac the Knife*—and it made her smile in spite of herself, and the smile dissolved the mood, which was *I'm fed up with you and your trifling ways*. Could it possibly work again—now? Did he dare give it another shot?

At the moment Mac was in command, behind the wheel of her beloved and ludicrously cramped brand-new Mitsubishi Green Elf hybrid, a chic and morally enlightened vehicle just now, trolling the solid rows of cars parked side by side, wing-mirror to wing-mirror, out back of this month's Miami nightspot of the century, Balzac's, just off Mary Brickell Village, vainly hunting for a space. *She* was driving *her* car. She was put out this time—yes, justifiably once more—because this time his trifling ways had made them terribly late leaving for Balzac's, and so she insisted on driving to that coolest of hot spots in her Green Elf. If *he*

drove his BMW, they would *never* get there, because he was such a slow and maddeningly cautious driver ... and he wondered if she really meant timid and unmanly. In any case, she took over the man's role, and the Elf flew to Balzac's like a bat, and here they were, and Mac was not happy.

Ten feet above the restaurant's entrance was a huge Lexan disc, six feet in diameter and eighteen inches thick, embedded with a bust of Honoré de Balzac "appropriated"—as the artists today call artistic theft—from the famous daguerreotype by the one-name photographer Nadar. Balzac's eyes had been turned to look straight into the customer's and his lips had been turned up at the corners to create a big smile, but the "appropriator" was a talented sculptor, and a light from within suffused the enormous slab of Lexan with a golden glow, and *tout le monde* loved it. The light here in the parking lot, however, was miserable. Industrial lamps high up on stanchions created a dim electro-twilight and turned the palm tree fronds pus-color yellow. "Pus-color yellow"—and there you had it. Ed was feeling down, down, down ... sitting belted into the passenger seat, which he had had to slide all the way back just to get both his long legs inside of this weeny-teeny grassy-green Green-proud car of Mac's, the Green Elf. He felt like the doughnut, the toy-sized emergency spare wheel the Elf carried.

Mac, a big girl, had just turned forty. She was a big girl when he met her eighteen years ago at Yale ... big bones, wide shoulders, tall, five-ten, in fact ... lean, lithe, strong, an athlete and a half ... sunny, blond, full of life ... Stunning! Absolutely gorgeous, this big girl of his! In the cohort of gorgeous girls, however, the big girls are the first to cross that invisible boundary beyond which the best they can hope for is "a very handsome woman" or "quite striking, really." Mac, his wife, his Mac the Knife, had crossed that line.

She sighed a sigh so deep, she ended up expelling air between her teeth. "You'd think they'd have parking valets at a restaurant like this. They *charge* enough."

"That's true," he said. "You're right. Joe's Stone Crab, Azul, Caffè Abbracci—and what's that restaurant at the Setai? They all have valet parking. You're absolutely right." *Your worldview is my Weltanschauung. How about if we talk about restaurants?*

A pause. "I hope you know we're *very late*, Ed. It's eight-twenty. So we're already twenty minutes late and we haven't found a place to park and we've got six people in there waiting for us—"

"Well, I don't know what else—I did call Christian—"

"—and you're supposed to be the host. Do you realize that? Has that registered with you at all?"

"Well, I called Christian and told him they should order some drinks. You can be sure Christian won't object to that, and Marietta won't, either. Marietta and her *cocktails*. I don't even know anybody else who *orders* cocktails." *Or how about a little obiter dictum riff on cocktails or Marietta, either one or both?*

"All the same—it's just not *nice*, keeping everybody waiting like this. I mean really—I'm serious, Ed. This is so *trifling*, I just can't stand it."

*Now! This was his chance! This was the crack in the wall of words he was waiting for! An opening! It's risky, but—*and almost in tune and on key he sing-songs,

"You ...

"You ...

"*You ... edit my life ... You are my wife, my Mac the Knife ...*"

She began shaking her head from side to side. "It doesn't seem to do me much good, does it?" ... Never mind! What was that creeping so slyly upon her lips? Was it a *smile*, a small, reluctant smile? Yes! *I'm fed up with you* immediately began to dissolve once more.

They were halfway down the parking lane when two figures appeared in the headlights, walking toward the Elf and Balzac's—two girls, dark haired, chattering away, apparently having just parked their car. They couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. The girls and the trolling Elf drew close rapidly. The girls were wearing denim shorts with the belt lines down perilously close to the mons veneris and the pants legs cut off up to ... *here* ... practically up to the hip socket, and left frayed. Their young legs looked model-girl long, since they also wore gleaming heels at least six inches high. The heels seemed to be made of Lucite or something. They lit up a brilliant translucent gold when light hit them. The two girls' eyes were so heavily mascara'd they appeared to be floating in four black pools.

"Oh, *that's* attractive," Mac muttered.

Ed couldn't take his eyes off them. They were *Latinas*—although he couldn't have explained why he knew that any more than he knew that *Latina* and *Latino* were Spanish words that existed only in America. This pair of Latinas—yes, they were trashy, all right, but Mac's irony couldn't alter the truth. Attractive? "Attractive" barely began to describe what he felt! Such nice tender long legs the two girls had! Such short little short-shorts! So short, they could shed them *just like that*. In an instant they could lay bare their juicy little loins and perfect little cupcake bottoms ... for *him!* And that was obviously what they wanted! He could feel the tumescence men live for welling up beneath his Jockey tighty-whiteys! Oh, ineffable dirty girls!

As Mac trolled past them, one of the dirty girls pointed at the Green Elf, and both started laughing. Laughing, eh? Apparently they had no appreciation of how upscale Green was ... or how hip the Elf was, or how cool. Even less could they conceive of the Elf, fully loaded, as it was, with Green accessories and various esoteric environmental meters,

plus ProtexDeer radar—they couldn't conceive of this little elf of a car costing \$135,000. He'd give anything to know what they were saying. But here within the Elf's cocoon of Thermo-insulated Lexan glass windows, Fibreglas doors and panels, and evaporation-ambient recyclical air-conditioning, one couldn't begin to hear anything outside. Were they even speaking English? Their lips weren't moving the way lips move when people are speaking English, the great audiovisionary linguist decided. They had to be Latin. Oh, ineffable Latin dirty girls!

"Dear God," said Mac. "Where on earth do you suppose they get those heels that *light up* like that?" An ordinary conversational voice! No longer put out. The spell was broken! "I saw these weird sticks of light all over the place when we drove by Mary Brickell Village," she went on. "I had no idea what they were. The place looked like a *carnival*, all those garish lights in the background and all the little half-naked *party girls* teetering around on their *heels* ... Do you suppose it's a Cuban thing?"

"I don't know," said Ed. Only that—because he had his head twisted around as far as it would go, so he could get one last look at them from behind. Perfect little cupcakes! He could just see the lubricants and spirochetes oozing into the crotches of their short short-shorts! Short short short-shorts! Sex! Sex! Sex! Sex! There it was, sex in Miami, up on golden Lucite thrones!

"Well," said Mac, "all I can say is that Mary Brickell must be writing a letter to the editor in her grave."

"Hey, I like that, Mac. Did I ever tell you you're pretty witty when you feel like it?"

"No. Probably just slipped your mind."

"Well, you are! 'Writing a letter to the editor in her grave'! I'm telling you. I'd hell of a lot rather get a letter from Mary Brickell from six feet under than from those maniacs I get letters from ... walking around foaming at the mouth." He manufactured a laugh. "That's very funny,

Mac." *Wit. Good subject! Excellent. Or hey, let's talk about Mary Brickell, Mary Brickell Village, letters to the editor, little sluts on Lucite, any damn thing, so long as it's not I'm fed up.*

As if reading his mind, Mac twisted one side of her mouth into a dubious smile—but a smile, nevertheless, thank God—and said, "But *really*, Ed, being *this* late, making them all wait, it's really *so-o-o-o* bad. It's not nice and it's not *right*. It's so *trifling*. It's—" she paused, "it's—it's—it's downright *shiftless*."

Oh ho! *Trifling*, is it? Godalmighty, and *shiftless*, too! For the first time on this whole gloomy excursion Ed felt like laughing. These were two of Mac's White Anglo-Saxon Protestant words. In all of Miami-Dade County, all of Greater Miami, very much including Miami Beach, only members of the shrinking and endangered little tribe they both belonged to, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, used the terms *trifling* and *shiftless* or had a clue what they actually meant. Yes, he, too, was a member of that dying genus, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, but it was Mac who truly embraced the faith. Not the Protestant *religious* faith, needless to say. Nobody on the East or the West Coast of the United States who aspired to even entry-level sophistication was any longer religious, certainly not anyone who had graduated from Yale, the way he and Mac had. No, Mac was an exemplar of the genus WASP in a moral and cultural sense. She was the WASP purist who couldn't abide idleness and indolence, which were stage one of trifling and shiftless. Idleness and indolence didn't represent mere wastefulness or poor judgment. They were immoral. They were sloth. They were a sin against the self. She couldn't stand just lolling about in the sun, for example. At the beach, if there was nothing better to do, she would organize speed walks. Everybody! Get up! Let's go! We're going to walk five miles in one hour on the beach, on the *sand*! Now, that was an accomplishment! In short, if

Plato ever persuaded Zeus—Plato professed to believe in Zeus—to reincarnate him so that he might return to earth to find the ideal-typical White Anglo-Saxon Protestant woman, he would come here to Miami and pick Mac.

On paper, Ed was an ideal-typical member of the breed himself. Hotchkiss, Yale ... tall, six-three, slender in a gangly way ... light-brown hair, thick but shot through with glints of gray ... looked like Donegal tweed, his hair did ... and of course there was the name, his last name, which was Topping. He himself realized that Edward T. Topping IV was White Anglo-Saxon Protestant to the maximum, to the point of satire. Not even those incomparable nobs of snobbery, the British, went in for all the IIIs, IVs, Vs, and the occasional VI you came across in the United States. That was why everybody began to call their son, Eddie, "Fiver." His full name was Edward T. Topping V. Five was still pretty rare. *Every* American with III or higher after his name was a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant or had parents who desperately wished he were.

But Jesus Christ, what was some White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, some last lost soul of a dying genus, doing editing the *Miami Herald* with a name like Edward T. Topping IV? He had taken on the job without a clue. When the Loop Syndicate bought the *Herald* from the McClatchy Company and suddenly promoted him from editor of the editorial page at the *Chicago Sun-Times* to editor in chief of the *Herald*, he had only one question. How big a splash would this make in the Yale alumni magazine? That was the only thing that took hold in the left hemisphere of his brain. Oh, they, the Loop Syndicate corporate research department, tried to brief him. They tried. But somehow all the things they tried to tell him about the situation in Miami wafted across his brain's Broca's and Wernicke's areas ... and dissipated like a morning mist. Was Miami the only city in the world where more than one half of all citizens were recent immigrants, meaning within the past

fifty years? ... Hmmmh ... Who would have guessed? Did one segment of them, the Cubans, control the city politically—Cuban mayor, Cuban department heads, Cuban cops, Cuban cops, and more Cuban cops, 60 percent of the force Cubans plus 10 percent other Latins, 18 percent American blacks, and only 12 percent Anglos? And didn't the general population break down pretty much the same way? ... Hmmmh ... interesting, I'm sure ... whatever "Anglos" are. And were the Cubans and other Latins so dominant that the *Herald* had to create an entirely separate Spanish edition, *El Nuevo Herald*, with its own Cuban staff or else risk becoming irrelevant? ... Hmmmmh ... He guessed he already knew that, sort of. And did the American blacks resent the Cuban cops, who might as well have dropped from the sky, they had materialized so suddenly, for the sole purpose of pushing black people around? ... Hmmmh ... imagine that. And he tried to imagine it ... for about five minutes ... before that question faded away in light of a query that seemed to indicate that the alumni magazine would be sending its own photographer. And had Haitians been pouring into Miami by the untold tens of thousands, resenting the fact that the American government legalized illegal Cuban immigrants in a snap of the fingers but wouldn't give Haitians a break? ... and now Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Russians, Israelis ... *Hmmmmh* ... really? I'll have to remember that ... How does all that go again? ...

But the purpose of this briefing, they tried to tell Ed in a subtle way, was not to identify all these tensions and abrasions as potential sources of news in Immigration City. Oh, no. The purpose was to encourage Ed and his staff to "make allowances" and stress Diversity, which was good, even rather noble, and not divisiveness, which we could all do without. The purpose was to indicate to Ed he should be careful not to antagonize any of these factions ... He should "maintain an even keel" during this period in which the

Syndicate would be going all out to “cyberize” the *Herald* and *El Nuevo Herald*, free them from the gnarled old grip of print and turn them into sleek twenty-first-century online publications. The subtext was: In the meantime, if the mutts start growling, snarling, and disemboweling one another with their teeth—celebrate the Diversity of it all and make sure the teeth get whitened.

That was three years ago. Having never really listened, Ed didn’t get it right off the bat. Three months after he was installed as editor, he published part one of an enterprising young reporter’s story on the mysterious disappearance of \$940,000 the federal government had allotted an anti-Castro organization in Miami in order to initiate unjammable television broadcasts to Cuba. Not a single fact in the story was ever proved wrong or even seriously challenged. But there arose such a howl from “the Cuban community”—whatever that actually consisted of—it rocked Ed clear down to his shoe-shriveled little toes. “The Cuban community” so overloaded the telephone, e-mail, website, and even fax capacities at the *Herald* and at the Loop Syndicate offices in Chicago, they crashed. Mobs formed outside the *Herald* building for days, shouting, chanting, hooting, bearing placards emblazoned with such sentiments as EXTERMINATE ALL RED RATS ... HERALD: FIDEL, SI! PATRIOTISM, NO! ... BOYCOTT EL HABANA HERALD ... EL MIAMI HEMORROIDES ... MIAMI HERALD: CASTRO’S BITCH ... An incessant fusillade of insults on Spanish-language radio and television called the *Herald*’s new owners, the Loop Syndicate, a virulent “far-Left virus.” Under the new commissars the *Herald* itself was now a nest of overtly “radical Left-wing intellectuals,” and the new editor, Edward T. Topping IV, was a “Fidelista fellow traveler and dupe.” Blogs identified the enterprising young man who wrote the story as “a committed Communist,” while handbills and posters went up all over Hialeah and Little Havana providing his picture, home address, and telephone

numbers, cell and landlines, under the heading WANTED FOR TREASON. Death threats to him, his wife, and their three children came at him thick as machine-gun fire. The Syndicate's response, if read between the lines, labeled Ed an archaic fool, canceled parts two and three of the series, instructed the fool not to cover the anti-Castro groups at all, so long as the police did not formally charge them with murder, arson, or premeditated armed assault causing significant bodily wounds, and grumbled about the cost of relocating the reporter and his family—*five people*—to a safe house for six weeks and, worse, having to pay for bodyguards.

Thus did Edward T. Topping IV land in the middle of a street brawl on a saucer from Mars.

Meantime, Mac had just trolled the Green Elf to the end of the lane and was heading up the next one. "Oh, *you*—" she exclaimed, stopping short, unsure precisely how to insult the malefactor right in front of her. She found herself on the tail of a big tan Mercedes, that classy European tan, maybe even a Maybach it was, glistening in the diseased electro-twilight ... trolling the lane looking for a parking place. Obviously, if one came up, the Mercedes would get to it first.

Mac slowed down in order to increase the interval between the two cars. At that very moment they heard a car accelerating insanely fast. By the sound of it, the driver executed the lane-to-lane U-turn so fast, the tires were squealing bloody murder. Now it was coming up behind them at a reckless speed. Its headlights flooded the interior of the Green Elf. "Who are these *idiots*?" said Mac. It was just short of a scream.

She and Ed braced for an impending rear-end crash, but the car braked at the last moment and wound up barely two yards from their back bumper. The driver gunned the engine two or three times for good measure.

“What does this maniac think he’s going to do?” said Mac. “There’s no room to pass anybody even if I wanted him to!”

Ed twisted around in his seat to get a look at the offender. “Jesus Christ, those lights are bright! All I can make out is it’s some kind of convertible. I think the driver is a woman, but I can’t really tell.”

“Rude *bitch!*” said Mac.

Then—Ed couldn’t believe it. Just ahead a pair of red taillights came on in the wall of cars to their right. Then a red diode brake light on the back window! Up so high, the brake light was, the thing must be an Escalade or a Denali, some behemoth of an SUV, in any case. Could it be ... someone was actually going to depart those impenetrable walls of sheet metal?

“I don’t believe it,” said Mac. “I won’t believe it until it actually backs out of there. This is a miracle.”

She and Ed looked ahead like a single creature to see if the competition, the Mercedes, had spotted the lights and might be backing up to claim the space. Thank God, the Mercedes—no brake lights ... just kept on trolling ... already near the end of the lane ... missed out on the miracle entirely.

Slowly the vehicle was backing out of the wall of cars ... a big black thing—huge! ... slowly, slowly ... It was a monster called the Annihilator. Chrysler had started manufacturing it in 2011 to compete with the Cadillac Escalade.

The harsh light from the car on their tail began to withdraw from the Elf’s interior, then subsided sharply. Ed looked back. The driver had put the convertible into reverse and was executing a U-turn. Now Ed could see it more clearly. Yes, the driver was a woman, dark haired, young, by the look of her, and the convertible—godalmighty!—it was a white Ferrari 403!

Ed started pointing toward the rear window and said to Mac, “Your rude bitch is leaving. She’s turning around and going back up the lane. And you’ll never guess what she’s driving ... a Ferrari 403!”

“Which means ...?”

“That’s a \$275,000 car! It’s got close to five hundred horsepower. They race them in Italy. We ran a story about the Ferrari 403.”

“Oh, do remind me and I’ll be sure to look it up,” said Mac. “All I care about the wonder car at this moment is that the rude bitch has gone away in it.”

From behind them rose the wonder car’s omnivorous growl and then the screaming squeal of the tires as the woman burned rubber in taking off back the way she had come.

Ponderously ... ponderously ... the Annihilator backed up. Heavily ... heftily ... its gigantic black rear end began to turn toward the Green Elf in order to straighten up before heading down toward the exit. The Annihilator looked like a giant that would eat up Green Elves like apples or whole-grain protein bars. Evidently sensing precisely that, Mac backed up the Elf to give the giant however much room it needed.

“Did you ever notice,” said Ed, “that the people who buy those things never know how to drive them? Everything takes forever. They’re not up to handling a truck.”

Now, at last, they laid eyes on what had become a very nearly mythical piece of geography ... a parking place.

“Okay, big boy,” said Mac, referring to the Annihilator, “let’s pull ourself together and *move*.”

She had no sooner said “move” than the thrashing mechanical roar of a high-speed internal-combustion engine and an angry scream of rubber rose from the exit end of the lane. Godalmighty—it was a vehicle accelerating almost as fast as the Ferrari 403 but coming up the lane the wrong way. With the hulk of the Annihilator blocking their

view, Ed and Mac couldn't tell what was going on. In the next split second the acceleration became so loud, the vehicle had to be practically on top of the Annihilator. The Annihilator's horn and brake lights screeeeeaming red—shrieeeeeking rubber—the oncoming vehicle veeeeering to keep from hitting the Annihilator head-on—blurrrrring white surmounted by tiny blurrrrring blaaaaack streeeeeaks to Ed's right from in front of the Annihilator—hurtled into the miracle parking slot—laaaaaying down rubber as it braked to a stop right in front of Ed's and Mac's eyes.

Shock, bewilderment—and *bango*—their central nervous systems were flooded with ... *humiliation*. The white blur was the Ferrari 403. The small black blur was the hair of the rude bitch. It hit home faster than it would take to say it. The moment she realized a parking spot was opening up, the rude bitch had made a U-turn, sped up the lane the wrong way, swung around the walls of cars, sped down the next lane the wrong way, swung around the rows of cars at the exit end, sped up this lane the wrong way, cut in front of the Annihilator, and shot into the parking place. What else was a Ferrari 403 for? And what was a passive dogooder like the Green Elf to do other than good works for the desperately wounded Planet Earth and take everything else like a man ... or an elf?

The Annihilator gave the rude bitch a couple of angry blasts of the horn before heading down the lane and presumably the exit. But Mac remained. She wasn't heading anywhere. She was furious, livid.

"Why, that *bitch!*" she said. "That brazen little bitch!"

With that she drove the Green Elf forward and stopped immediately behind the Ferrari, which had come to rest on the Elf's right.

"What are you doing?" said Ed.

Mac said, "If she thinks she's going to get away with that, she's got another thought coming. She wants to play games? Okay, let's play."

“Whattaya mean?” said Ed. Mac had a definitely White Anglo-Saxon Protestant set to her jaws. He knew what that meant. It meant that the rude bitch’s transgression was not merely bad manners. It was a sinful act.

Ed could feel his heart kicking into higher gear. He was not by nature one for physical confrontations and public exhibitions of anger. Besides that, he was the editor of the *Herald*, the Loop Syndicate’s man in Miami. Whatever he got involved in out in public would be magnified a hundred times.

“Whattaya gonna do?” He was aware that his voice was suddenly terribly hoarse. “I’m not sure she’s worth all—” He couldn’t figure out how to complete the sentence.

Mac wasn’t paying any attention to him anyway. Her eyes were pinned on the rude bitch, who was just getting out of the convertible. They could see only her back. But as soon as she started to turn around, Mac hit the button that opened the passenger-side window and leaned across Ed and lowered her head so she could look the woman squarely in the face.

As soon as the woman turned about fully she took a couple of steps and stopped when she realized the Elf was all but penning her in the wall of cars. And then Mac let her have it:

“YOU SAW ME WAITING FOR THAT SPACE, AND DON’T YOU STAND THERE LYING AND SAYING YOU DIDN’T! WHERE DID YOU—”

Ed had heard Mac yell before but never this loud or with such fury. It frightened him. The way she leaned over toward the window, her face was only inches from his. The Big Girl had gone into the full WASP righteous attack mode, and there would be hell to pay for one and all.

“—LEARN YOUR MANNERS FROM, THE HURRICANE GIRLS?”

The Hurricane Girls were a notorious gang of mostly black girls, formed in a tent city for refugees from

Hurricane Fiona, who had gone on a rampage of assaults and robberies two years ago. That was all he needed. “*Herald* Editor’s Wife in Racist Rant”—he could write the whole thing himself—and in that same moment he realized the rude bitch hadn’t come from a girls’ gang or anything close to it. She was a beautiful young woman, and not just beautiful but stylish, chic, and rich, if Ed knew anything about it. She had shiny black hair parted in the middle ... miles of it ... cascading straight down before going wild in great wavy spumes where it hit her shoulders ... and a bit of a fine gold chain about her neck ... whose teardrop pendant brought Ed’s eyes right down into the cleavage of two young breasts yearning to burst free from the little sleeveless white silk dress that constrained them, up to a point, and then gave up and ended halfway down her thigh and didn’t even try to inhibit a pair of perfectly formed, perfectly suntanned legs looking a lubricious mile long atop a pair of white crocodile pumps whose to-the-max heels lifted her heavenly while Venus moaned and sighed. She was carrying a small ostrich leather clutch. Ed couldn’t have given any of this stuff a name, but he knew from the magazines that it was all à la mode right now and very expensive.

“—OR HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT A CHEAP LITTLE *THIEF* YOU ARE?”

Ed said, sotto voce, “Come on, Mac. Let’s just forget about it. It’s not worth the trouble.” What he meant was “Somebody might realize who I am.” As far as Mac was concerned, however, he wasn’t even there. There was only herself and the rude bitch who had wronged her.

Under Mac’s onslaught the beautiful rude bitch didn’t recoil an inch or show so much as a twitch of intimidation. She stood there with her hips cocked, the knuckles of one hand resting on the higher hip and her cocked elbow flung out as far as it would go, plus a suggestion of a smile on her lips, a condescending stance that as much as said,

“Look, I’m in a hurry and you’re in my way. Kindly bring your little tsunami in a teacup to an end—now.”

“—JUST GIVE ME ONE REASON—”

Far from shrinking from Mac’s attack, the beautiful rude bitch came two steps closer to the Green Elf, leaned over to look Mac in the eye, and said, in English without raising her voice, “Why you speet when you talk?”

“WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?”

The rude bitch took yet another step forward. Now she was within three feet of the Elf—and Ed’s passenger seat. In a louder voice this time and still drilling her eyes into Mac’s, she said, “*¡Mírala! Granny, you speet when you talk como una perra sata rabiosa con la boca llena de espuma,*¹ and it’s getting all over *tu pendejocito allí.*² *¡Tremenda pareja que hacen, pendeja!*”³ Now she was as angry as Mac and beginning to show it.

Mac didn’t know a word of Spanish, but even the English part coming out of the rude bitch’s sardonic face was utterly insulting.

“DON’T YOU *DARE* TALK TO ME LIKE THAT! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? A NASTY LITTLE MONKEY IS *WHAT YOU ARE!*”

The rude bitch snapped back, “*NO ME JODAS MAS CON TUS GRITICOS! VETE A LA MIERDA, PUTA!*”⁴

The raised voices of the two women, the insults whizzing like bullets past Ed’s pale, blanched face from both directions, petrify him. The furious Latina looks past him as if he’s nothing but thin air, a nullity. This humiliates him. Obviously he should rouse his manhood and put an end to the whole confrontation. But he doesn’t dare say, “Both of you! Stop!” He doesn’t dare indicate to Mac that she is in any way in the wrong, behaving like this. He knows that all too well. She would cut him to ribbons for the rest of the night, including right in front of their friends, whom they are about to join inside, and, as usual, he wouldn’t know what to say. He’d just take it like a man, so to speak. Nor

does he dare remonstrate with the Latin woman. How would that look? The editor of the *Miami Herald* dressing down, thereby insulting, some fashionable Cuban señora! That's half the Spanish he can utter, "*señora.*" The other half is "*Sí, cómo no?*" Besides, Latins are quick-tempered, especially Cubans, if she's Cuban. And what Latin woman in Miami could be this obviously rich other than a Cuban? For all he knows, she is about to meet some hotheaded husband or boyfriend in the restaurant, the sort who would demand satisfaction and thereby humiliate him even more. His thoughts whirl and whirl. The bullets continue to whiz back and forth. His mouth and throat are dry as chalk. Why can't they just stop!

Stop? Ha! Mac starts screaming, "SPEAK ENGLISH, YOU PATHETIC IDIOT! YOU'RE IN AMERICA NOW! SPEAK ENGLISH!"

For a second the rude bitch seems to understand and goes silent. Then, she reverts to her calm, haughty self and with a mocking smile says rather softly, "No, *mía malhablada puta gorda*,⁵ we een *Mee-ah-mee* now! *You een Mee-ah-mee* now!"

Mac is stunned. For a few seconds she's unable to speak. Finally she manages to come up with a single strangled hiss: "*Rude bitch!*"—whereupon she gunned the Green Elf and got out of there with such a lurch, the Elf squealed.

Mac's lips were compressed to the point where the flesh above and below them ballooned out. She was shaking her head ... not in anger, it seemed to Ed, but something far worse: humiliation. She wouldn't even look at him. Her thoughts were sealed in a capsule of what had just happened. :::::You win, rude bitch.:::::

Balzac's was packed. The babble of the place had already risen to the maximum we're-out-at-a-smart-restaurant-and-

isn't-it-great level ... but Mac insisted on recounting the whole thing *loudly*, loud enough for all six of their friends to hear it, she was so enraged ... Christian Cox, Marietta Stillman ... Christian's live-in girlfriend, Jill-love-Christian ... Marietta's husband, Thatcher ... Chauncey and Isabel Johnson ... six Anglos, *real* Anglos like themselves, American Protestant Anglos—but *Please, God!* Ed's eyes were darting frantically this way and that. Those could be Cubans there at the next table. God knows they've got the money! Oh, yes! *There!* And the waiters? Look like Latinos, too ... *bound* to be Latinos ... He's not listening to Mac's rant any longer. A phrase pops into his head from out of nowhere. "Everybody ... all of them ... it's *back to blood!* Religion is dying ... but everybody still has to believe in *something*. It would be intolerable—you couldn't stand it—to finally have to say to yourself, 'Why keep pretending? I'm nothing but a random atom inside a supercollider known as the universe.' But *believing in* by definition means *blindly, irrationally*, doesn't it. So, my people, that leaves only our blood, the bloodlines that course through our very bodies, to unite us. '*La Raza!*' as the Puerto Ricans cry out. '*The Race!*' cries the whole world. All people, all people everywhere, have but one last thing on their minds—*Back to blood!*" All people, everywhere, you have no choice but—*Back to blood!*

1 "Look at her! Granny, you spit when you talk, like a rabid mutt foaming at the mouth."

2 "your dumb ass of a man"; literally, "your little pubic hair."

3 "What a pair you make, you stupid bitch!"

4 "Don't fuck with me with your little fits. Go to hell, bitch!"

5 "No, my fat, dirty-talking whore ..."

The Man on the Mast

SMACK THE SAFE Boat bounces airborne comes down again *SMACK* on another swell in the bay bounces up again comes down *SMACK* on another swell and *SMACK* bounces airborne with emergency horns police Crazy Lights exploding *SMACK* in a demented sequence on the roof *SMACK* but Officer Nestor Camacho's fellow *SMACK* cops here in the cockpit the two fat *SMACK americanos* they love this stuff love it *love* driving the boat *SMACK* throttle wide open forty-five miles an hour against the wind *SMACK* bouncing *bouncing* its shallow aluminum hull *SMACK* from swell *SMACK* to swell *SMACK* to swell *SMACK* toward the mouth of Biscayne Bay to "see about the man on top of the mast" *SMACK* "up near the Rickenbacker Causeway"—

—*SMACK* the two *americanos* sat at the helm on seats with built-in shock absorbers so they could take all the *SMACK* bouncing while Nestor, who was twenty-five, with four years as a cop but *SMACK* newly promoted to Marine Patrol, an elite *SMACK* unit, and still on probation, was *SMACK* relegated to the space behind them where he *SMACK* had to steady himself against something called a leaning pole and *SMACK* use his own legs as the shock absorbers—

A *leaning pole!* This boat, the Safe Boat, was the opposite of streamlined. It was *uuuuuuug-lyyy* ... a twenty-five-foot-long rubbery foam-filled pancake for a deck with

an old tugboat shack stuck on top of it as a cockpit. But its two engines had 1500 horsepower, and the thing went across the water like a shot. It was unsinkable unless you took a cannon and blew twelve-inch-diameter holes, a lot of them, through the foam filling. In tests, nobody had even been able to tip one over, no matter what insane maneuver he tried. It was built for rescues. And this shack of a cockpit he and the *americanos* were in? It was the Ugly Betty of boatbuilding—but soundproof. Outside, at forty-five miles an hour the Safe Boat was kicking up a regular hurricane of air, water, and internal combustion ... while here inside the cockpit you didn't even have to raise your voice ... to wonder what sort of nutcase you were in for up on top of a mast near the Rickenbacker Causeway.

A sergeant named McCorkle with sandy-colored hair and blue eyes was at the wheel, and his second-in-command, Officer Kite, with blondish-brown hair and blue eyes, was in the seat next to him. Both of them were real sides of beef with fat on them—and school-of-blond hair!—and blue eyes! *The blond ones!—with blue eyes!*—they made you think *americanos* in spite of yourself.

Kite was *SMACK* on the police radio: “Q,S,M”—Miami Police code for “Repeat”—“Negative?” *SMACK* “Negative? You saying nobody knows what he’s doing up there? Guy’s up on top of a” *SMACK* “*mast* and he’s *yelling*, and nobody knows what” *SMACK* “he’s *yelling*? Q,K,T?”—for “Over.”

Sticky crackle sticky crackle Radiocom: “Q,L,Y”—for “Roger”—“That’s all we got. Four-three’s dispatching a” *SMACK* “unit to the causeway. Q,K,T.”

Long stupefied *SMACK* silence ... “Q,L,Y ... Q,R,U ... Q,S,L”—for “Out.”

Kite just *SMACK* sat there for a moment, holding the microphone in front of his face and squinting at it as if *SMACK* he never saw one before. “They don’t know shit, Sarge.”

“Who’s on Radiocom?”

“I don’t know. Some” *SMACK* “Canadian.” He paused—*Canadian?*

—“I just hope it ain’t another” *SMACK* “illegal, Sarge. Those dumb fucks are so crazy they’ll” *SMACK* “kill you without even meaning to. Forget about negotiating, even if you got somebody who can” *SMACK* “speak the fucking language. Forget about saving their fucking lives, as far as” *SMACK* “that goes! Just get ready for some Ultimate Fighting under water with some” *SMACK* “mook who’s a mile high on adrenaline. If you wanna know what I think, that’s the nastiest” *SMACK* “high there is, Sarge, adrenaline. Some biker on crank—he’s nothing compared to one a these scrawny little” *SMACK* “mooks jacked up on adrenaline.”

Mooks?

The two *americanos* didn’t look at each other when they spoke. They looked straight ahead, eyes pinned on the prospect of some dumb fuck on top of a mast up by the Rickenbacker Causeway.

Out the windshield—which slanted *forward* instead of back—the *opposite* of streamlined—you could see the wind was up and the bay was rough, but otherwise it was a typical Miami day in early September ... still summer ... not a cloud anywhere ... and *Jesus*, it was hot. The sun turned the whole sky into a single gigantic high-blue-domed heat lamp, blindingly bright, exploding bursts of reflection off every shiny curved surface, even the crests of the swells. They had just sped past the marinas at Coconut Grove. The curiously pinkish skyline of Miami was slowly rising at the horizon, scorched in the sunbursts. In strict point of fact, Nestor couldn’t really see all that—the pinkish cast, the glare of the sun, the empty blue of the sky, the sunbursts—he just *knew* it was all there. He couldn’t really see it, because naturally he had on a pair of sunglasses, not dark but the *darkest*, magno *darkest*, supremo *darkest*, with an imitation gold bar across the top. That was what every cool

Cuban cop in Miami wore ... \$29.95 at CVS ... gold bar, baby! Equally cool was the way he kept his head shaved with just a little flat helicopter pad of hair upstairs. Even cooler was his big neck—cooler and not easy to come by. It was now wider than his head and seemed to merge with his trapezius ... way out *here*. Wrestler's bridges, baby, and pumping iron! A head harness with weights attached—that'll do the trick! The big neck made a shaved head look like a Turkish wrestler's. Otherwise a shaved head looked like a doorknob. He had been a skinny five-foot-seven kid when he first thought about the police force. Today he was still five-seven, but ... in the mirror ... five feet and seven inches' worth of big smooth rock formations, real Gibaltars, traps, delts, lats, pecs, biceps, triceps, obliques, abs, glutes, quads—*dense!*—and you want to know what was even better for the upper body than weights? Climbing the fifty-five-foot-high rope at Rodriguez's "Ñññññooooooooooooo!!! Qué Gym!," as everybody called it, without using your legs. You want *dense* biceps and lats—and even pecs? Nothing like climbing that fifty-five-foot-high rope at Rodriguez's—*dense!*—and defined by the deep dark crevasses each mass of muscle dropped off into at the edges ... in the mirror. Around that big neck he had a fine gold chain with a medallion of the cool Santería saint, Barbara, patron saint of artillery and explosives, that rested on his chest below his shirt ... *Shirt* ... There you had the problem with the Marine Patrol. On street patrol a Cuban cop like him would make sure he got a short-sleeved uniform one size too small that brought out every bulge of every rock formation ... especially, in his case, the triceps, the big muscle on the back of the upper arm. He regarded his as the ultimate geological triumph of the triceps ... in the mirror. If you were truly cool and Cuban, you had the seat of the uniform trousers taken in—a lot—until from behind you looked like a man wearing a pair of Speedos with long pants legs. That way, you were suave in the eyes