

TACKING IN MOONLIGHT

Joe Ponepinto

Being in this crowd was like being carried away by the waters of a flood. It was loud—far louder than Clark had expected, like the rush of a waterfall—and so dense with bodies he couldn't fight the flow, which had been battering him around the veranda of the Grand Hotel since he and Sherry had arrived. Crowds made him uncomfortable and the lack of freedom in this one only intensified the feeling. Glimpses of escape were visible at the edges of the throng—the marble railing, the door to the lobby—and he wanted to lunge at them, grab on and haul himself free, catch his breath and watch the spectacle from a safer distance. But that, he knew, was impossible. He needed a job, a decent job like the one he'd had at GM. The boat and the toys were gone. Now the house was on the line. Then

what—bankruptcy and the two of them crammed into a one-bedroom apartment? Not after the life they'd worked so hard to make. This conference was his best chance, maybe the last chance, of making a connection that would lead out of the abyss. He had to learn to swim in this current. A panic rose inside him, and for a few seconds he detached from the scene, saw himself as if from a helicopter surveying a disaster, thrashing in murky water and helpless against a tide that was sweeping him towards irrelevance.

Stay positive, Sherry had repeated. "Every day, in every situation, I find something to be glad about, whether it's making a new contact or closing a deal. If you stay positive, good things happen."

It embarrassed him that she held such a simplistic belief, promulgated to elevate the ordinary, and convince people that the mundane could be exceptional. It didn't take into account the reality of numbers, the ratio of jobs to jobless. As a research analyst, he'd been schooled to look at it that way. Worse, it valued cronyism over ability, a concept he disliked in principle and had loathed ever since Gunderson promoted one of his golfing buddies over him. He'd been forced to report to Ditmars, a man with little experience and even less tact, and this led, no doubt, to his being let go when the company downsized in '08. It should have been Gunderson and his crony out on the street. But it was a belief the people at this reception revered, and it

worked for them. Amid the state's persistent downturn they still shone of success, their Italian suits and St. John knits testament to the powers of networking and positive thinking. Here they were, the cream of Michigan's cream, crammed together for the opening reception of the annual Mackinac Conference, the requisite meet and greet for business and political leaders in the state, governor on down. They were not bothered by the crowd and the closeness. Their smiles and handshakes ignited sparks of opportunity. Clark took a breath and nudged in next to Sherry, who was chatting up a slim bald man in a gray suit.

Before he could introduce himself, the man slipped a business card into his hand. Clark strained to hear what he was saying over the crowd noise. "Your wife tells me you used to be an exec at GM," said the man, one Chip Strobaugh, COO, Vander Auto Parts, according to the card. He didn't look like a Chip.

What had she told him? He'd been an executive only in the most generous sense of the term. He'd managed no staff, made no decisions. But he'd worked in an office and drawn a salary, instead of hourly pay. "Yes, that's right," Clark said. "I helped run R and D."

So he'd lied. How many working relationships were built on spinning information, telling people what they wanted to hear rather than the facts?

Chip brightened. "Then you know Don Gunderson."

“Gunny?” Clark forced a smile. “His office was next to mine. Big golfer. Needs to work on his approach, though.” At least that part was true.

“And his slice.” Chip laughed. “What are you doing now?”

“Consulting mostly. But I’m always open for something permanent.”

“Why don’t you email me a resume when you get back home?” Chip said. “Maybe I can set something up.”

Sherry took Chip’s hands in hers. “That would be wonderful,” she said. As she spoke, Chip slid his hand up and around her wrist. She didn’t pull away. Instead, she gave him a warm smile and told him it was great to run into him, and that she looked forward to seeing him again during the conference.

Clark watched her as she spoke. Sherry was wearing her best business suit—a subtly striped charcoal that hugged her curves in a flirtatious fashion, for those who wished to read it that way, and clearly, Chip did. She still worked out—still looked great after fifteen years of marriage. Her affair had lasted only a couple of weeks, and her apology had been tearful and sincere.

When Chip left, Sherry asked Clark to get her another chardonnay and headed off to talk to some people she knew from an industry association. He slipped into an eddy of guests meandering towards the bar, and watched his wife join this new group. She was animated—laughing, gesturing, handing out business cards as though she were dealing blackjack.

As Clark waited in line he looked down the veranda, past the crowd and out towards the Mackinac Bridge, glowing steel blue in the late afternoon haze. He squinted, just able to see the tops of vehicles over the retaining wall, traveling to and from the Upper Peninsula, the summer getaway for the affluent, as green as Detroit was gray. The bridge bypassed this speck of island playground, leaving the resort in the junction of two Great Lakes accessible only by boat or Cessna. When he was working they talked occasionally about sailing up this way from the city in *The Gem*. It would have been a hard trip for the little *Catalina*, up Lake Huron, around the thumb, hugging the coast until the island came into view. Sherry was afraid a boat that small wouldn't be safe in a storm, but Clark had relished the idea of taking on the gusts and waves, his imagination then as full as a spinnaker in the wind.

As he stared out to sea, a silver-haired man in a striped suit cut in front of him and ordered two mixed drinks. Clark lifted his hand near the man's shoulder. If this had been another event, like a ballgame, he would have confronted him to regain his place in line. But the drinks were already poured. The striped suit grabbed them and Clark noticed the man was far too tan for being this close to the Canadian border. He noticed too that stripy didn't bother to tip the bartender.

Clark rolled his eyes at the barman, who smiled back. He had big white teeth and skin of mahogany. “What wouldja like, sir?” he asked. His voice sounded like singing even though he was talking.

Clark placed Sherry’s order, and added a cabernet for himself. “Where are you from?” he asked.

“Jamaica,” the barman said, accenting the “make.”

Clark had heard similar accents among the staff at the hotel they’d booked in town to avoid the expense of the Grand Hotel. “You’re not the only one, are you?”

“Most of the workers here come from the Caribbean.”

“Really?”

“Summer jobs. When the tourists come.” He seemed glad to be among the chosen. Clark stuffed two dollars into the tip jar, pausing to make sure the bartender saw.

He brought the chardonnay to Sherry and took a sip of his cab. She leaned into his ear and said, “Honey, I just want to let you know how much I appreciate you coming here with me.”

It was nearly eleven and he was just thinking about getting up.

Sherry was at a presentation on marketing trends, but not before they'd argued over his accompanying her. "There's no guarantee Chip will have a job for you," she had said. "You should meet a few more people."

"At a seminar? I'm not sitting through two hours of charts just to collect another business card. I can sleep here. Besides, you know how much I hate to play that game."

"But that's the whole reason we came," Sherry said.

"I'll meet you for that lunch with your friends," he said as she grabbed her purse. "Give me the morning off and I'll talk to anyone you want."

He heard a light tap on the door to the room and sat up—but no, it must have been down the hall. A key jiggled in the lock. The door swung open and a young woman came in with a bag to collect trash, leaving her bulky cleaning cart in the hallway.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," the housekeeper said when she saw him in the bed. Clark stared at a young face with unblemished skin, a few shades lighter than the bartender's. She had a wide mouth and seemed to be slightly embarrassed over its prominence, holding her hand in front of it when she spoke. He'd always been surprised when others displayed shyness, and it amazed him this woman would do so, especially since he found her so attractive. She was wearing a uniform the color of the distant bridge, with a white belt. The skirt was a little shorter than he expected for an employee,

and he pictured it shorter still. "I'll come back later," she said, then smiled behind her hand, and closed the door.

An hour later Clark walked the car-free streets, dodging droppings from the old horses that pulled the island's antique trolleys, on his way to lunch near the Grand Hotel. Sherry had mentioned her friends were potential employers, so Clark put on a jacket and tie.

He could have taken a trolley, but it was only a mile and walking was as fast as most of the nags. This way took him through Mackinac's tourist downtown and its old west storefronts, packed tightly along the waterfront, offering a curious repetition of restaurants, souvenir shops and fudge stands. Groups of children on field trips from mainland schools, in matching t-shirts, ran from store to store, looking for just the right trinket to take back to their parents. Teachers toting colored flags served as rendezvous points for the kids, and tried to keep tabs. Chubby senior citizens in white shorts and fishermen's hats waited patiently at trolley stops for rides to Fort Mackinac or back to their hotels.

Despite the sea breeze, the air was warm and heavy, and the sun reflected hard off every unprotected surface. Clark tugged at the collar of his button-down shirt to let in air. His neck was already sweating. The moisture from his underarms had overpowered his antiperspirant. Of all the people on the street, he was the only one wearing long pants and a coat. He stopped

for a breather at a spot where he could see between two restaurants out to the marina, and noticed a young man, bare-chested and browned to a teak-like hue, standing on a yacht, talking to a thin, older woman in a bikini. It was a perfect day to be out on the water, and he watched them for a while, though he was already late.

Clark was the last of the group to arrive at the restaurant. Sherry and four others were sitting at a patio table with an umbrella. One of them was Chip, and he had parked himself right next to her. The two men were wearing short-sleeved silk shirts and linen slacks. Sherry's women friends were in summer dresses, yellow and white, and each was working on a tall drink with a little umbrella of its own. They looked like spectators at a cricket match. There was only one chair open, on Sherry's left, and the angle of the sun and the tilted shade meant Clark would have to sit directly in the glare. Last night he could barely hear anyone; today he could hardly see them. He slipped into the seat and felt his forehead and ears burn.

Chip finished his drink in a gulp. "I met you last night, didn't I?" he asked.

How could he have forgotten? He'd asked for his resume. He'd practically offered a job. Clark said, "Gunderson's man, remember?" Might as well go all the way with the lie.

“Oh, right. Right,” Chip said. “Here’s to Gunny the Funny.” He pilfered the drink of the woman next to him, and helped himself to a swig. The others at the table laughed.

Clark borrowed Sherry’s drink and lifted it in another toast. “He’s a real honey.”

Chip laughed at this, too, and tapped his glass into Clark’s. He followed Chip’s lead and took another swallow. Clark surmised he’d been drinking for a while this morning.

“Careful, baby,” Sherry said. “That drink’s going to go straight to your head in this sun. Why don’t you at least take off the jacket?”

Clark loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. He started to shimmy out of the coat, but remembered how badly he’d been sweating under his arms. “It’s okay,” he said. “I’m actually comfortable like this.”

“Are you kidding, man? You’ll fry,” Chip said.

The sun was so bright that Clark began to shield his eyes with his hand, like a soldier saluting an officer. He tried to keep Chip’s attention and press him about open positions at Vander, but the bald man was more interested in holding center stage at the lunch. He kept the waiter busy with a string of drink orders, for himself and the other guests, and recited bad jokes between sips. After one quip that brought groans from the table, he gave Sherry a gentle punch in the shoulder, then massaged it as though he’d

injured her. She'd drunk enough that she didn't care, but Clark was still sober. A part of him wanted to lean across Sherry's lap and swat the stupid look off Chip's face. But no one but him had registered Chip's slight groping of his wife. And there was still the possibility of an interview.

Clark and Sherry took a trolley after lunch. She was woozy from the drinks, but determined to make it to an afternoon session. "Will Chip be there?" Clark asked.

"Don't get the wrong idea about him," she said.

"The wrong idea? What would that be?"

"Clark, it's called playing the game. As long as I tolerate him he might come through for you, for us. And he knows people. A lot of people I'd like to know. I could double my commissions with just one of the contacts he has."

"And in the meantime if he wants to get a little friendly..."

"Didn't I say I was tolerating him?" she said. When they stepped off the trolley, Clark raised his hand to block the sun slicing between two trees. "Wow," said Sherry. "You've really sweated through your shirt there." He'd held this same position during most of his conversation with Chip.

By next morning Clark's face and neck had the embarrassed look of sunburn. While he looked in their suitcases for ointment, Sherry invited him

to a morning seminar, but he declined. “You haven’t gone to a single session,” she said.

“I have an idea,” he said. “We’re on this beautiful island, the weather’s great—why shouldn’t we enjoy ourselves? Let’s just walk around and be tourists for a day. We could come back tonight, maybe bring a bottle of champagne and—”

“That’s not why we’re here,” she said. “We can’t just act like this is some fantasy vacation. You’re out of a job, remember? You’re out of unemployment. My job’s not enough. It’s like you don’t want to make contacts.”

“Why are you always all about business?” Clark said. “Look at this place. A few years ago a trip here would have been a romantic getaway, conference or not.”

She folded her arms, as though debating whether to answer. After a moment she said, “You know, Clark, it isn’t very exciting to get in bed when your husband thinks he’s a loser.”

“Is that what I think?” He tensed. “I’m glad you explained it to me.”

“I didn’t mean that,” she said.

“Now I understand. It’s really my fault I got screwed out of my job. It’s my fault I can’t find another. And then there’s your fling with what’s-his-face, the prick. I guess that’s my fault too.”

“Clark, no.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “Go off to your little seminar. Have lunch with the employed. Let Chip feel your leg under the table so you can make a sale. Play your damn game.”

“Baby, I’m sorry. There’s so much stress right now. I mean, as long as I’m the only one working...”

“Just go. Enjoy yourself. I’ll stay here so I won’t bring you down.”

She grabbed her room key. “When I come back we have to talk about this.”

He laid back on the bed, puts his hands behind his head, looked at the ceiling, and listened to the door click shut.

He woke up two hours later, close to eleven again. This time he heard the housekeeper before she got to the room. He pulled on jeans, slid into a shirt, grabbed a pair of sandals, and dashed into the hallway. “Hey,” he said, finding her parking the cart at the door, “I didn’t want to keep you from your job again.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I could have come back.”

She was wearing the same uniform as yesterday, but somehow it looked tighter, shorter. “I don’t suppose they’re still serving breakfast?” he asked.

Her answer sounded dream-like. “Noooo. I think you’ll have to walk down to one of the restaurants.”

“Are you from the Caribbean too?”

“Antigua.” She had a hint of accent, not as deep as the bartender’s.

“Someone told me most of the staff here comes from the islands.”

“It helps pay for college,” she said. She maneuvered her cart to just outside his door and smiled at him—the gentle breeze he was looking for at lunch yesterday.

“I can’t really go anywhere until I shower,” he said. “Do you mind if I talk to you while you work?”

The smile vanished. “Oh, no sir. I have to come back then. Please, take your shower and I’ll come back.”

“Clark, not sir,” he said. “Come on. They can’t be that strict around here. I won’t get in the way. Just talk.”

“I can’t. I could lose my job.”

“Okay,” he said, “You’ve made your official denial. You’re covered. I promise I won’t tell.”

“Most of the day I don’t get to talk with anyone,” she said. “Just the supervisor.”

“I’ll sit in the chair behind the door. No one will know.”

He slipped into the chenille guest chair. She smiled again, this time a little warmer, more relaxed. “You’re funny,” she said. “Not like most of the other guests. It’s nice.”

She began to make the bed and bent to fluff the pillows. The hem of her skirt rose and Clark watched the muscles of her thighs tighten under supple skin. He imagined those legs stretched out on the deck of *The Gem*, her feet dangling over the side, catching the spray of salt water. She'd be wearing a bikini, and have her elbows propped on a cushion, so that her body angled into the sun, with her breasts pushed forward, filling the top. He'd set the autopilot and kneel down next to her.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Cerise.”

“That’s a beautiful name. It sounds like... like the blue sky over the ocean.”

“It means cherry.”

“You come to Mackinac every year?”

She finished the bed and started gathering towels. Even this labor radiated grace. “Every year that I’ve been in school. I work here for four months, and then for eight months in Antigua.”

“What do you do there?”

“The same. Cleaning rooms. There isn’t much else.”

The idea of working at a job every day, after so much time unemployed, was now foreign to him, and Clark paused for a few seconds. He asked, “And when you graduate?”

She looked down at him with the towels bunched against her chest, and he knew she was visualizing her home. “I’d like to teach,” she said. “I was lucky to have the opportunity to go to college. I want to give other kids the same chance.”

“I’ve never been down there. I am sure it’s beautiful.”

“It is—parts of it. I like Mackinac, but it can’t compare.”

“Too bad the economy forces you to leave in the summer.”

“I don’t mind. You get to meet some nice people here.”

Clark smiled. “Thank you,” he said. He wanted to continue the conversation, but she looked as though she were ready to leave. “You’re going?”

“I have to keep on my schedule. I don’t think I need to vacuum in here today. Maybe tomorrow.”

“I’ll be sure to track some dirt in, just for you.”

She laughed, covering her mouth with her hand again, and closed the door behind her.

Clark cupped a glass of brandy in his hands as he sat in a restaurant across from the hotel. It was an hour until closing. He’d been sitting at the table since his dinner alone, looking out past the docks. Sherry’s seminar and lunch had turned into a meeting with Chip and the cronies from his auto

parts supply circle, which had turned into cocktails, and then dinner, and then, who knew? The last time she'd called she said the deal was big, big enough so they wouldn't have to worry about money for months.

Occasionally another customer looked over at Clark as he gazed at the glassy surface of the strait connecting the lakes. He didn't care who watched him—he was out there, tacking in moonlight, easing *The Gem* to port, changing course for someplace he had never been—a place where he could forget he was among the unemployed, the unwanted. He was brought back by the sound of the chair next to him scraping away from the table.

"I knew it was you," Sherry said, pushing up against him. "See? I told you I recognized my own husband," she said to Chip, who fell into the seat across from them. It was clear they'd both had more than a few drinks.

"Man, you missed a great dinner," he said.

"I wasn't invited, remember?" Clark said. "Everyone else call it a night?"

"Real lightweights," Chip said. He turned in his chair to flag down a waiter. He wasn't done drinking.

Sherry placed a man's business card on the table. "See that?" she said. "He's one of the biggest buyers in the state. Turns out it was worth me going."

Chip turned towards Clark and smiled. "Glad to see you chose the air conditioning tonight. Helps keep the clothes dry, doesn't it?" He saluted

Clark and wiggled his elbow to make sure his dry armpit made his point. He and Sherry laughed. She reached across the table and slapped his hand.

“Getting a little intimate, aren’t we?” Clark said.

Chip folded his hands in front of him and tried to look sober, but Clark could see his head bobbing, like a cork in water. “Hey, we’re all just friends, right?” he said. “I’m only trying to help Sherry meet a few people.”

Clark kept staring at Chip. After a few seconds he said, “That sure was a long dinner. You sat down at seven and now it’s almost eleven.”

“Oh, come on,” Sherry said. “What are you saying? Chip is trying to help you too. He’s going to get you an interview at Vander.”

“Well... about that,” Chip said.

“What, what do you mean?” Sherry asked. “You said you would.”

Chip eased his chair back from the table. He stared at Clark. “I really thought about giving you a shot at Vander. I like you.”

Clark stared back. “Sure you do. But?”

“But, you know, Gunderson... he’s here, at the conference. I saw him today at one of the sessions. He didn’t exactly give you the big build up.”

“What’d he say?”

“Just that he didn’t think you’d work out.”

Clark knocked back the rest of his brandy and slapped the glass on the table. “No. Really. What’d he say? What were his words?”

“Oh, I don’t think I can remember the exact words.” Chip looked at Sherry for support. “Just, you know, that it wasn’t a good fit.”

“Come on, Chip. I want to know.”

“I really don’t think I should...”

Clark took hold of the brandy glass like he was trying to choke it. “Tell me his words.”

“All right,” Chip said. “He said you were a joke. Always off in your own little world. Always questioning his decisions, but never had a better idea. Told me I’d be wasting my time even to give you an interview.”

“What does he know? He’s an asshole.”

“He’s also a friend of mine,” Chip said.

“Obviously. So fine, I don’t get the job. I couldn’t see me going from one asshole employer to another, Chip.”

Chip’s face reddened as he realized how angry Clark had become. He stood and said, “Listen. It’s been a long day. I’m sorry if I offended you, man.” He ignored Sherry and went out without looking back.

Clark was in no mood to wait for a bill and threw money down on the table. Sherry followed him out, across the street and to their room. They sat on the bed.

“Clark, I’m sorry,” she said. “We got a little crazy at dinner. I guess I had too much. Chip too. He shouldn’t have been so... direct.”

“Figures Gunderson would be here,” he said. “I tried to play your game and I got caught. Guess I should have more realistic expectations. Maybe I should look for work at Wal-Mart.”

“Baby, let me make it up to you.” She patted his leg and rose, and began unbuttoning her blouse. “You were right. This could be a chance for us to have some fun.”

“It’s kind of hard to have fun when you’re in *seminars* all day.”

“You know it’s all for us. With you out of work for so long, I have to...”

“You have to what?”

“Let’s never mind about that, baby.” She stood in front of him in her bra and skirt, her legs spread slightly. She tried to kick off her heels, but the drinks she’d had played with her coordination, and she stumbled, turning a shoe sideways and stepping down on top of it. She fell onto the bed next to him.

She looked as though she would pass out, but took the opening of his shirt in her hand. Clark said, “You have to what? You have to do whatever it takes to keep the money coming in? Or should I say *whoever* it takes?”

“Damn you!” she said, turning away. “Maybe you really are a loser.”

In the morning Sherry dressed while Clark pretended to be asleep. She left a note on the nightstand that read, “I’m at the appreciation breakfast.”

He turned it over to see if she'd written something on the other side—a sentiment, perhaps, but there was nothing.

He checked the clock—well after ten again. The air in the room was warm and moist, and smelled of the lakes. It felt good swirling in his lungs. A peek out the window revealed a cloudless sky. The sun would be high by now, heating the island and throwing harsh shadows down in the streets.

Clark felt himself becoming anxious as he heard noises down the hallway—feet shuffling against the carpet, implements handled, the squeak of a caster. He pulled off his t-shirt and sat up in the bed, propping himself with his hands behind him. It tensed the muscles in his shoulders, which were still evident from his handling the rigging on the Catalina. He sucked in his stomach. The noises came closer. The waiting was excruciating.

Finally, a light tap on the door—then another. He didn't move. Keys jiggled in the lock. Clark felt the beginnings of sweat on his body—but this time it was a good sweat, a masculine smell. One she would appreciate.

The door opened and Cerise started to walk in, but when she saw him she stopped. "Oh. Why didn't you tell me you were in here?"

"I wanted you to come in."

"I have to go. I'll come back later."

"No. Please. We had such a nice talk yesterday..."

"You don't look like you want to talk," she said.

“I do. I want to tell you how beautiful you are.” Clark swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. “Come in.” He walked to the doorway.

She looked at him. He was staring at her face, but lowered his look to the boundary between her legs and skirt, and let it stay there. He moved closer and touched her thigh, then ran his fingers lightly along her leg, under the fabric, until they reached her hip. He brought his face close to hers. She moved her hand until it hid her mouth, but he could see a smile form behind it. He nudged her against the wall, and gently moved her hand away. As they kissed they shuffled closer to the bed. Clark kicked the door shut behind them.

“I liked you from the start,” she said. “But it’s so hard to know.”

“It’s impossible,” he said.

A half hour later Cerise jumped from the bed and dressed. “If the manager finds out, I’ll be fired,” she said. She opened the door and checked the hallway. It was clear, and she pushed her cart quickly towards the elevator.

Clark stood, one hand on the doorjamb, and watched her get in and press buttons repeatedly until the door closed. The lighted numbers on the panel counted down: three, two, one. He tapped the doorframe twice and

went back into the room to get dressed. “It might be the best thing for you,” he said.

He showered, but did not shave. Near noon he was in the cozy downtown. He walked through one of the restaurants, out past the waterfront patio, down the adjacent ramp and onto the docks where the boats were tied. He climbed onto the bow of a Catalina Capri—a little smaller than *The Gem*, but just as seaworthy, and looked through the hazy light refracted off the water’s surface. A ferry was bringing the next group of tourists to the island. Some of them stood on the top deck, their faces into the wind, their hair blown straight back towards the mainland, to the shoreline that was Michigan’s Lower Peninsula—the Mitten—where he used to work, and where hundreds of thousands of others, laid off and desperate like him, scrambled for the meager openings available.

The Capri was no yacht, but with the right man at the helm, it could follow the coastline of the lakes, south, then east past the states of the Rust Belt, and up along the border with Canada, spilling finally into the Atlantic, vast and unpromising, a place of squalls and ill-advised chance. To the south was the Caribbean, warm, placid, an ideal cruise for a little Catalina. The trip would take weeks, and would be filled with dangers and deprivations, but what were they compared to a life of frustration? Soon enough, he would be in Jamaica, then Antigua. There, staid yachts pointed like fingers to the lavish

hotels where pretty girls worked, where they idled in bars and lounged by sapphire pools. Clark loosened the moorings in preparation to push away. As he worked he inhaled the warming air. For the first time in months it seemed as though there were opportunities everywhere.

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