Bodies of water

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Bodies of water

by

Clifton Brashear Johnson

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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"Gentility is what is left over from rich ancestors after the money is gone."

- John Ciardi

CHAPTER ONE

We are shiner fishing, my brother Mark and I. Neighborhood kids may be with us—they often are—but I can't remember. We are small, no older than six or seven. We use poles rigged with monofilament filched from a spool in my father's tackle box. Our red and white bobbers and one-ought hooks have come from other suppliers. This is rookie paraphernalia; my father is strictly pro.

A bagged half-loaf of Winn Dixie white is our bait. Like the line, we take the bread without asking. If you ask, our mother offers the old, stale stuff—heels mostly. Old and stale crumbles on the hook, so why ask? Bacon is always preferable to even the freshest bread—it's snakey through the water and the fat makes succulent chum. But the "I'll skin you alive if I find one slice missing" is sobering. I know what this is like first hand; I've seen fish skinned.

Mark and I are barefoot. We know about the water moccasins and cottonmouths, hookworm and ringworm. But this lakeside marl, the bed of this fauna, is the reason we shuck our Keds. Warm, tar-black, peppered with bits of fresh water shell, it is stuff so viscous that with my toes I can rake it into a clod dense enough to punt, either in Mark's direction, or out over the water. If the target is Mark's chest, then the
mud will land with a thwack, sticking there long enough for him to scoop it off and fling it back.

Family ground. South east Florida. In 1937, the lake wasn't a lake, but a mud dimple in the center of twenty acres of sandy loam, savannah and trees, much of it too wild for agriculture. Waldo Sexton, a land-poor rancher, held the title. He put it up for sale, figuring the spread wouldn't move for some time, this being the Depression. But Waldo was well connected--and lucky. He got a tip that there was someone looking for property: young fella, married, not from here. For the past couple of years, the family had been renting a place across the Indian River on the beach in Riomar--one of those families.

Rich, idle, Yankees--Riomar folk. They hailed from New York or Chicago or Cleveland or wherever. To them, money was like sand; they sprinkled it about, letting it sift away with astonishing abandon. They rode the Florida East Coast Railroad down for the winter, played golf, fished a little, drank a lot. Come spring, they'd hoist their pink, pampered selves back up north, leave their "beach cottages"--big houses, really--idle for the remainder of the year. Waldo knew this stereotype to be accurate enough, but he'd met exceptions. Regardless, his cohorts were the commoners and Crackers who lived in Vero Beach, the town this side of the river and a little ways in.

The potential buyer's name was Clarence Johnson, my grandfather. Forever known as "Kit," he stood squat and a bit plump, his
build that of an athlete gone idle. A thin, straight mouth and square, forward chin slightly countered the magnanimity in his gaze.

Waldo invited Kit out to walk the property; my grandfather accepted. He would have bought nothing sight unseen.

The tour began at the north east boundary, near the road they had driven from town to get there. Waldo was no flimflam man; he made it clear that the land had little commercial value. Kit explained that he hailed from Charleston, West Virginia. He knew nothing about cattle or citrus and had no inclination to dabble in either.

They paused under a canopy of loosely woven oak, pine, and cabbage palms. Much of the ground here was shaded, clean of underbrush. A veneer of castaway leaves, needles and fronds gave and popped underfoot. This was the high spot, said Waldo, one, maybe two feet above the rest; a good place for a house.

From his hip pocket, Kit took a bottle of antacid. "For my gut," he said, toasting Waldo matter-of-factly. The medicine left a chalky, pale blue sheen on his top lip. He wiped the residue away with the back of his hand. "Cigarette?"

Kit tapped out a Camel and offered it. Waldo took the smoke. With the toe of his shoe, Kit scraped away a foot-square patch of the veneer; with his shoe's heel, he knocked a wedge in the exposed dirt. His ashes went into this hole, and, eventually, so did his cigarette's butt.

"Beyond the trees," said Waldo, pointing south, "lies the other two-thirds of what's for sale. What you can see is pretty much what there is: twenty acres, most of it open, occasionally soggy, grassland." From his
vantage, Kit gauged the grass to be knee high and thick enough to make walking through it tedious.

"Where those cattails are, in the middle there, that's where it all bottoms out--what I call the muck pond," Waldo said. "Water varies depending on the time of year. In the winter, there usually isn't much; it's mud mostly, sort of a marl hollow. But now, and especially into July and August, it's hard to tell what will collect and where it will go. During the hurricane of '35, everything flooded."

They left the trees and moved into the open. In places, Kit high-stepped to dodge small puddles. Sand spurs and bur seeds stuck to his shoelaces and the cuffs of his trousers. Half-moon circles of sweat migrated out and down from under the arms of his shirt.

They skirted the marsh, looping around to its far side. The assaulted grass was beaten flat into a question mark-shaped trail reaching back to the canopy. Before them, cattle egret spooked and flew a safe distance--maybe a hundred yards.

At the marsh, Waldo pointed out tracks in a narrow ribbon of mud. Bird prints, some tiny, others palm-sized, were everywhere--a mad mosaic of indecipherable dance steps. Visiting mammals left signs more orderly. One set of paw impressions marched down to the water and straight back. Another set paralleled the water; it was if the maker was too cautious to take a drink.

Alligators? Yes, said Waldo, alligators perhaps nested here; he'd seen small ones--four, five footers--sunning themselves. What about

Waldo was asking a hundred an acre, all or nothing. Kit gladly paid it. He would, I suspect, have paid far more. Since making his way south, my grandfather had been on a quest to find a sanitarium without walls—a place where he could recuperate from the ferocious stomach ulcers that had, for some years now, been literally eating him alive.

Family is what churned him so. Johnsons then were old money, and such a legacy was a consequential thing. Namely, you didn't go your own way. When Kit was fourteen, his father, a prominent Charleston businessman, died. His mother, whom my grandmother always called "Mrs. Johnson," was, in every sense, a grande dame whose dictates were immutable. The one picture I have of my great grandmother—sepia-toned, fading—shows her perched atop a camel, the Egyptian pyramids framing the background. No studio shot, this; she was there on vacation, and she insisted that her presence be recorded in this way. Such was her character: astride, aloft, commanding.

She commanded her sons; their road would be their father's road: prep school, the Ivy league, the family business, suitable country club membership—no exceptions. Kit had three brothers: a twin, Howard, and two older siblings, Charles and Rodolph. Schooling came first, but only the right schools. For Kit and Howard, that meant attending the Pomfret School in Pomfret, Connecticut. Doing well, both academically and athletically, was compulsory; success meant going to Cornell, the
university Mrs. Johnson deemed suitable for her boys' professional training. Howard, Charles and Rodolph made it to Ithaca; all three studied what their father had studied—Electrical Engineering. Kit barely escaped Pomfret. He slogged through Thucydides and the pythagorean theorem, boned the Polypenisian wars with an enthusiasm usually reserved for cleaning one's toilet, found solace only in the field house and on the football field. I told him once that I hated school. "Me too," he said, with a rancor reserved for absolutely nothing else that I can recall. "Never had much use for it."

Following school, the boys eventually joined the Charleston Electrical Supply Company—the family business. Founded by Mr. Johnson in 1900, Charleston Electric sold power equipment to coal mining operations in West Virginia; later, the business was a major retailer of home appliances. Through its storefront windows on 914 Kanawha Boulevard, East, Charlestonians viewed the latest Hamilton Clothes Dryers, Capehart Phonographs, and Apex Dishamatic Dishwashers. That Kit wasn't to be classically trained for the profession did not negate his debt to the family. Instead of the Ivy League, he entered the bush, attending a vo-tech school that gave him a "practical" orientation to the trade. While his slide rule-wielding twin, Howard, calculated voltage equals current times resistance in freshman double E, Kit, clad in coveralls, was bent over the guts of an electric motor, studying coils and bushings, assembly and disassembly. My grandfather was, if anything, a practical man, and exceedingly good with his hands.
He never spoke of his technical training; I learned of this from my father.

At twenty-one, Kit became Charleston Electric's junior salesman in the Mining and Industrial Division. In a company car, he ranged the dirt and asphalt roads connecting the coal mines of his assigned territory. Whether he hawked successfully, I do not know. I suspect that the calling's traditional bonhomie and barter were not his bag: the backslapping, the coffee clubbing, the swapping of randy jokes with the customer. His behavior may have been of this sort—considering, after all, his age—but I fancy it otherwise. My grandfather was, as I knew him, a rather laconic man, not unkind, but not one to dally, either. I suspect his pitch came down to: Here's the product; it's a good one. I'll back it with my word. Buy it.

I want to believe that many of his customers bought Kit's offerings. But regardless of his gross sales, Charleston Electric was in a slump. The business should not have been in trouble during this time—these were pre-depression years, there was plenty of business about, the economy was strong. At fault, believed Mrs. Johnson, was her husband's successor, Clarence Peck. A long-time family friend (he had helped Mr. Johnson start the business) and surrogate father to the boys, Mr. Peck had, as my father put it, simply "lost his touch." The company's future was at risk, Peck had to go. Since his brothers were away, Mrs. Johnson ordered Kit in from the field to do the sacking. This act, this having to walk into office that had once been his father's and now
belonged to a man whom Kit respected, this having to sit across from that man and find the words to ask him to resign, cost both of them. "I didn't want to do it," said my grandfather in a rare moment of candor. "But Mother said I must, so I did what I was told. That's when I began to have problems with my gut."

The company found a new president—sanctioned no doubt by Mrs. Johnson. In his senior year, Howard left Cornell and joined the firm. Three years later, Charles came aboard. Charles had received his degree a few years before, and in that intervening time, he had duded on a ranch in Wyoming. Of the four boys, Charles was perhaps the least conventional, inclined to flights of fancy. Rodolph, the eldest son, was in South Africa. His wife, whom he had met at Cornell, was from Johannesburg; they were there visiting her parents. He had every intention of returning, but he died abroad from a perforated ulcer. The story goes--my grandmother, who was oddly taken by things medical, was fond of telling it--that Rodolph was stricken at his in-law's breakfast table, a piece of toast the assassin. Evidently, Rodolph failed to properly chew the fell crust, and the partially masticated stuff slide down his gullet--wonder it didn't rip anything there--dropped into his stomach and forced the mortal breach.

Rodolph's death, regardless of how it happened--and family lore is sketchy here--was unquestionably ulcer-related. This frightened Kit. Also unsettling was the now poor economy. At first, Kit handled it all; seemingly he handled it well, at least externally. Internally, he hoarded feelings like a squirrel does nuts.
His ulcer began to manifest itself. He grew pallid, tetchy. A cruise, reckoned his mother, would be sufficiently curative, would ax the strain. They'd stroll the promenade, lounge in deck chairs, play shuffleboard on the fantail, trump fellow passengers in bridge. Mrs. Johnson paid first class fare on a liner making passage from New York to San Francisco via the Panama Canal. Invited along was Florence Avis, a Charleston widow and friend who was socially, temperamentally, and circumstantially a contemporary of Mrs. Johnson. In less than a year, Mrs. Avis would become Kit's mother-in-law, though he didn't then have an inkling of this future.

If Mrs. Johnson was the grand dame, then Mrs. Avis was queen bee. She died in 1957, two years before I was born. I call her "Great Nana" because that's how her daughter, my Nana, referred to her mother. "Great" was more than a generational demarcation; it defined in my grandmother's mind what her mother was.

And what she was was a belle--a southern belle: propriety served up with a splash of "pee and vee" (piss and vinegar)--Nana's words. Great Nana's father had been the tenth governor of West Virginia; she was a Daughter of the Confederacy and a Colonial Dame who believed, given such a pedigree, that she could do anything she "damned well pleased." Her husband, Samuel Brashear Avis, was a lawyer who served one term in Congress and was the prosecuting attorney for Kanawha County. People called him "Captain Avis" in deference to his stint in the
Spanish American War. His passion was golf, and he died while playing the game. A bolt of lightning took him out.

I have always thought Captain Avis' demise lent a properly eccentric flavor to my family's history. It seems to me that his death was peculiarly southern. One might picture him straddling the eighteenth hole, holding up his nine iron and ranting at God for not guiding a fifteen foot putt to the flag. So stirring would have been his invective—he was evidently some orator—that the Lord must have decided there and then to call the captain home to fiddler's green. Great Nana might have been inclined to tell it this way; the truth, however, is less colorful. He was standing under a tree, taking refuge from a passing storm, palming a club. What happened is obvious; he should have known better.

A footnote: My great grandfather wore a gold signet ring. The electricity passing through him charged the ring, causing the monogram to melt; the letters were transformed from block style into a sort of art deco script, still plainly visible, but now with a funky cast. Great Nana had the ring made into a collar pin that she passed down to my grandmother, who wore it often. I must have been nine or ten when she first showed it to me "My father was wearing this the day he died," she said, fingering the artifact. Did she gaze wistfully afar as she told the story? I can't remember, but I do recall feeling that the showing and the telling were sort of wacky in a way I couldn't appreciate when I was younger, but have a clearer understanding of now.
On that recuperative jaunt taken with his mother and Great Nana, Kit somewhat modified the agenda afloat. Evenings, he'd escort the ladies to the lounge, hail a steward, order each matriarch a toddy, and escape. A girl was waiting below. She was dusky, dark haired. Mrs. Johnson knew what was going on; she didn't approve. Evidently, this person was not titled, not a So-and-So from Such-and-Such. Her complexion was wrong, her behavior suspect.

I can imagine my great grandmothers sitting there, discussing this, grave tut-tuts emanating from plumed hens who sipped Dubbonet from crystal and planned strategy like two generals mapping out a military campaign.

Mrs. Johnson: It's about time Kit settled down with the "right" girl—his older brothers had at about this age.

Great Nana: Someone like my Sissy would be perfect. She's finished whatever needs finishing at Miss. Eastman's; she's already made her debut; at seventeen, she's of marrying age. My, what a grand idea. Shall we arrange it?

My grandmother was born Florence Miriam, but everyone called her Sis, or Sissy. She bore a striking resemblance to Katherine Hepurn. One of two children, she had brother ten years older. Both were named after their parents, down to the middle names. The brother's nickname was Buck.

I think both mother and daughter worried about life after finishing school. Marriage, really, was the only course. Thank God for Sis' looks. She was well turned out, no doubt about that—and well
mannered, and genteel, though a little bit high strung. Would this be enough? Could she find a husband willing to settle for a less than clever wife?

What she wanted was a gentleman--socially, she couldn't have fathomed marrying anyone beneath her--but what she truly needed was a gentle man. Kit met both requirements.

They first met in Bluefield, West Virginia on July 19, 1930, a week after the Panama Canal trip. The particulars of their first laying eyes on one another are lost. Whether their mothers had a hand in any of this, I can't truly say, but the courtship was brief and busy. My grandmother faithfully recorded the highlights in a dime store book of remembrances that I saw for the first time on the day of her funeral: "July 29, trip to Lewisburg; August 10, first kiss, side porch, 1204 Kanawha Street [the Johnson family home]; August 11, swimming party, Edgewood Country Club; August 21, Beach Haven trip [New Jersey; the Johnsons had a summer home there]; September 15, nose operation [Kit? Sis? I haven't a clue why she included this]; September 26, proposal, living room, 1204 Kanawha Street."

She kept every engagement announcement, every mention of anything related to the affair. "Florence Miriam, daughter of Mrs. S. B. Avis and the late Captain Avis, will wed Mr. Clarence Bardwell Johnson. . . . Miss Avis is a popular member of the younger set. . . . Numerous parties will be held in their honor. . . . It is the social event of the season . . ."
They were married at her Charleston home on December 6 of that year. About the wedding, my grandmother wrote just one line in her book: "It was a beautiful day."

Soon after their honeymoon, Sis went from being the center of attention to a bystander in a world that revolved around her mother-in-law, Mrs. Johnson. Newly wedded bliss was replaced by monotony, the sameness oppressive in the way a bad job that you can't afford to quit is oppressive. I first got a sense of this when I once asked her how she came to start smoking.

"I was bored," she said, perhaps a bit annoyed by my impertinence.

"About what?" Impertinence was my middle name; I was twelve, perhaps thirteen, when we had this conversation.

"Hon, why do you ask?" she said, weariness now tingeing her voice. She laid her hand over mine and gave it a gentle squeeze. We were sitting on the couch in her living room. "Are you thinking about taking up smoking?"

I told her I wasn't.

"Good," she said, "and don't you ever start." Don't do as I do, but as I say, was her motto.

I pushed harder for an answer.

"After your grandfather and I were married, we rented a cottage within walking distance of your Great Grandmother Johnson's house in Charleston. Since we were close by, she insisted that we dine with her
as often as we were able. Every night, it seems, we'd dress for dinner and stroll on over. I never minded it, really—not at first. The food was marvelous; her cook was a gem. And when the other boys were home from Cornell, they of course would be there, and the table could be rather lively. It was when it was just her, Kit and me that I went balmy. We'd sit and eat our meal around their large dining room table, she at the head, Kit opposite her at the other end, and me in the middle. I didn't say much; children are meant to be seen and not heard--"

This last thing she said confused me.

"In Mrs. Johnson's eyes, I was still a child--only seventeen when I married your grandfather. She often called me 'child.'"

"As long as we were eating, I was happy; I'd just concentrate on my supper. It was after supper, when the plates had been cleared and we were having our coffee, that I disliked. This was the time Mrs. Johnson chose to discuss business: family matters, Charleston Electric, what have you. She and Kit would talk, and I just sat there and listened."

"Why didn't you just ask to be excused? I said. "You could have asked to clear the table, or something."

"The servants did that."

"But--"

"Shug, please don't interrupt. It's not polite."

"They'd talk for what seemed like hours. Both of them smoked, sipped coffee, would go on and on about things that I either didn't
understand, or didn't care about. So, I started smoking, too. It seemed to help pass the time."

In her last years, my grandmother was a fiendish smoker. She looked it: drawn, diminished. She lived in an upscale retirement village run by the Christian Missionary Alliance--"CMAers" to Sis; "damned holy rollers"--and the CMAers forbade the habit. But that didn't stop her. On occasion, she managed to smuggle in cigs--we never figured how; a gardener on the take?--and she would enjoy her contraband furtively, somewhere on the grounds, tucked into some alcove or behind some bush. She was, of course, nabbed, and her private nurse would call my father and implore him to come on over--my parents lived three hours away--and have another chat with his mother. Echoing Great Nana, Sis would tell him when he got there, "I can do anything I damn well please." My father would say, "Of course you can, Mom. You can do absolutely anything you want, anything at all--except this. Remember what the doctors said?" "To hell with the doctors," she'd say. "To hell with them all!"

Secretly, I think she enjoyed the fight. But the cigarettes won. A week before Christmas 1994, she died of emphysema.

Kit went back to the business for a few more years; his ulcer went back to its business. In this interval, there was joy punctuated by pain. The joy was my father's birth in 1933. The event was celebratory and life affirming; they named the baby Rodolph, Rody for short. But the
pregnancy had been difficult, and before that, Sis had miscarriage after miscarriage. Rody's delivery itself almost did her in. She developed eclampsia, a massive jump in blood pressure, sometimes fatal.

Kit's condition grew progressively worse. Afraid that she might lose another son, Mrs. Johnson implored him to get help. The family doctor recommended a certain hospital in Baltimore. Premier gastroenterologists practiced there, some of the east coast's best; Kit would be in fine hands. And so too would Mrs. Johnson. She was not particularly well herself; her constitution was rather frayed, her puppeteering perhaps catching up with her. Why not, the doctor reasoned, get all of this illness taken care of here and now. Let the specialists have at it and be done with it. Mother and son could convalesce in adjoining rooms; Sis could stand watch, coddling her husband and her mother-in-law through their respective ordeals.

Three days after the trio stepped off the train and onto the C & O platform in Baltimore, surgeons operated on both Mrs. Johnson and Kit. Neither surgery was radical, though both were risky—invasive procedures in that time being somewhat dicey affairs. Doctors removed three-quarters of Kit's stomach, leaving a scythe-shaped, six inch scar just above his trouser line. I remember the scar as ropy keloid, a puckered swath seemingly hastily made, as if the cutter had to get in there quick to remove the malign tissue. My grandfather could have boasted that it was a war wound, a gut-shot (and, in a sense, it was), or a piece of shrapnel, and you would have believed him. It was that ugly.
Mrs. Johnson died in Baltimore, on the operating table. No one seems to remember why, or how, or even what she was specifically there for in the first place. What the family talks about when we talk about this episode is how Sis had to stand over Kit's hospital bed, watch him sleep off the anesthetic, and ponder how she would tell him about his mother.

Money emancipated my grandparents--Mrs. Johnson's money. Her estate, evenly split between Howard, Charles and Kit, guaranteed each son his patricianism. The doctor told Kit to retire, the means to do so now available. He and a professional life were not compatible, never would be, whether at Charleston Electric or elsewhere. If he shunned this advice--and it was his nature to do so--then the accompanying stress would surely take what remained of his stomach, and with it, his life. Leave Charleston, doctors said. Go anywhere, but leave--and for good.

My grandfather was thirty one years old.

Kit named his Florida home "Kanawha Acres." He took the "Kanawha" from the Kanawha--Can-awe--River that flowed through Charleston and within yards of his family home and the Charleston Electric warehouse. One could say that he'd been metaphorically fighting the currents of this body of water all his adult life--and losing badly. Kanawha Acres, then, was the bucolic back eddy into which my grandfather pulled himself. Here, he laid up and hung on.
Waterlogged, Kanawha Acres was hardly habitable. Neighboring landowners desiccated their property by digging deep drainage canals. Their swampland became tableland, and, as the drying occurred, muck clumped into friable clods soon pulverized into loamy sand. But Kit wanted his acreage to remain essentially unchanged. Rather than corral the glade's seasonably vagarious waters, he sought a way to nudge them into a mostly predictable ebb and flow.

My grandfather hired a civil engineer to solve the problem. The engineer proposed running a concrete sluice from, and perpendicular to, the county moat that fronted the property. This trough would stretch back through the canopy, a little beyond the trees, and disappear into a pump house. The pump was the mid point of the system; from here, Kit could mechanically draw excess water away. The aqueduct would continue on, parting the grass, skirting the marsh, ending at the property's southern boundary. This latter stretch would not be lined with concrete; needed here was a shallow and compliant channel.

A platoon of formerly unemployed townies began shoveling for depression-era wages--fifteen cents an hour. Near the marsh, these men toiled in black, ankle deep water, their straw hats their only shade. Each shovelful of muck protested leaving its bed like a cork protests leaving a bottle of wine: with resistance, then a sudden, almost startling pop! At the opposite end, the diggers had shade and dry soil, but more work. At ground level the sluice's width was six feet; at its U-shaped bottom, which was hoed level and tamped flat, it was half that. This span ran more than a tenth of a mile.
Parallel to this was the marl driveway, laid mostly by hand. This truck-wide swath turned right at the pump house and snaked through the trees to a clearing. The clearing was where Kit and Sis agreed their house should be built. The spot was spacious, open and sunny. When Kit brought Sis out to inspect the site, she supposedly stood in the middle and pointed out where particular rooms ought to go. When she smoked, I remember she had this habit of scissoring the smoldering fag between exquisitely manicured fingers and using it to make swift, exuberant gestures. Kit was a contemplative smoker, Sis an expressive one. "The kitchen! Let's have it here!" I hear her saying as she turns to her husband who is standing at the clearing's edge, his hands sunk deep into his pants pockets, his own cigarette hanging from his mouth. He nods once, smiles. She turns back and decides where the pantry ought to be--"here!" The dining room--"there!" The living room--"over there!" "A porch, Kit, we simply must have a porch--here! . . . "

A local contractor fashioned walls from whimsy. For my grandparents, he built a two-story, wood-framed house fronted with white brick. Its windows were shuttered green; it had three chimneys. Twin gables rose as sentries and guarded a screened entrance portico. Inside, Sis got what she wanted, where, pretty much, she wanted it.

Against the trees, the building seemed almost Lilliputian. The long axis of its roof ran north and south; its face and backside caught the full force of the sun in the late morning and early afternoon. Light bounced off the brick and was thrown into the trees and shredded there.
For almost a year, building Kanawha Acres had consumed my grandfather. He was on site every working day, solving problems, consulting with the contractors and foreman, making decisions. He got dirty; he'd wade through the mud, throw his weight behind a bottomed out truck, chip in when an extra hand was needed—and the hand he lent was sure, capable, and welcome. He was not above sharing a canteen with the lowest ditch digger, black or white. He'd take a swig and toast the offeree with no less gravity or appreciation than he would that of a gentleman who had just handed him a bourbon and water at a cocktail party. He was never ever in the way, never the pushy, micromanaging owner, the guy who'd change things at the last minute. He called such people "la la boys." He respected and liked men who built things, sturdy, common sense, folks. And when these folks realized that "Mr Johnson" was no snooty, foppish dandy, they accorded him a journeyman's respect. To my grandfather, there was no greater compliment.

But then the job was done. My grandparents and Rody moved in, and while this was most certainly a red letter day for all of them, Kit maybe harbored a twinge of regret because the building was over and the living began.

Had I been in my grandfather's place, I would have walked down to the Kanawha Acres gate and watched the house painters, the plumbers and the carpenters drive away, and then I would have slowly
tramped back up the marl road, maybe stopping at the pump house, perhaps going in and fiddling with the Ford Model A engine that had been mounted inside to drive the mechanism that drew the excess water from the marsh, and I probably would have wondered, What in God's name do I do now?

Did Kit have the same fear? Had he, I doubt he would have shared it—not even with Sis. He would have reached for his hip pocket and pulled from it that always present blue flask of his gut remedy, downed a slug, and got on with it.

He bought a boat. There were wild waters east of the Acres that he wanted to explore: first, the Indian River, six miles away, a mile wide in places, filigreed with mangrove sloughs and islands, oyster beds and sand bars, ocean inlets. In this water, stained deep brown from the tannic acid that leached out of the mangrove roots, were great schools of snook and redfish, sea trout and baby tarpon, bantamweights that cruised the shaded and narrow sloughs while manatee and porpoise played in the main channels. Fifteen miles beyond that, beyond Riomar and its beach, was the Gulf Stream. The heavies lived here: Sailfish and mahi mahi, giant marlin and wahoo, amberjack, swordfish and shark.

He named his boat the Kitsis; he kept her at the Fort Pierce Yacht Basin, twenty miles south of Vero. She was thirty-six feet long, twin-engined, clinker-built. Her cabin, rather spartan, had a forward V berth, a seatee, a small galley and a head. These accommodations extended from the bow to mid ships, and from there aft was an open cockpit.
Above the cabin was a flying bridge, just a wheel and a seat surrounded by a railing. Simple.

Kit equipped her for fishing. Two fighting chairs in the cockpit, bamboo outriggers port and starboard, plenty of tackle: rods and reels of every size, gaffs, harpoons, ice chests bait wells. For a crew, he'd shanghai whatever unemployed, or underemployed, friends he could find about town.

Kit made news with his angling. Pappy Phillips, in his "Tails with Fishes" column in the Friday, August 11, 1939 edition of Vero's Press Journal, reported that Herb Guy, local pharmacist, caught while fishing from the Kitsis "the biggest giant blue marlin ever landed in these parts." According to Pappy, my grandfather had a hankering to do some night fishing for sails. He rounded up a party consisting of, in addition to Herb, laundry owner Clark Rice, Clark's teenage son, Bud, and Marshall Mitchell, president of the bank. They boarded the Kitsis at dusk, began stowing gear and rigging ballyhoo for bait while Kit motored the Kitsis through the inlet and out to sea. At two in the morning, wrote Pappy, Kit slowed the boat to a trolling clip. Clark spooled out the two inboard baits; Herb did the same with the outboard offerings, attaching these lines to the outriggers. Marshall went below and put on a pot of coffee.

Sunrise brought the first hit; a sailfish surfaced and struck a bait. Marshall took the rod and lost the fish. Two more sails hit in rapid succession, and, reported Pappy, "all of them [were] nicely fumbled." By
mid-morning, the party had had enough. Loopy, groggy, caring more about sleep than the quarry, they convinced Kit to head for home.

As was his habit, my grandfather kept the baits in the water, hoping that this might conjure a last minute something. Pappy wrote: "No sooner had the experts laid themselves down for a much needed snooze than His Majesty [the marlin] cruised up from the depths and knocked down the port outrigger line. From there he went to Herb's bait and batted the daylights out of it and as a casual gesture after Herb had missed him he moseyed over to Marshall's and larruped his bait a few licks."

I see pandemonium in the cockpit, the men falling over one another, snatching rods out of their holders: "He's going after mine!" "The hell you say, he's after me, now!" "You're both wrong. It's my bait he wants!" Kit's at the wheel, coaching: "Bud, watch those lines, make sure they don't cross . . . Your bait's off, Marshall, reel 'er in . . . Clark, give Herb a hand with the harness . . . Stay calm, boys, we don't want to flub this one. . . ."

The fish veered from bait to bait, swatting each with its bill, but mouthing none until finally coming back to Herb's ballyhoo and deciding his was the most inviting. The marlin took it "like a case of dynamite going off," said Pappy. "For fifteen minutes [the marlin] paid no attention to the drag of the reel and then it came out of the water in a magnificent twenty foot jump and a frenzied thrashing, tail walking run that threw tons of water high in the air and emptied the line to the very bottom of the spool."
Herb fought the fish all that morning and into the afternoon and then it began to rain. "Cold driving sheets blown before the short violent gusts of a summer squall made the cockpit floor so slippery it was nearly impossible to stand, and wet all parties to the skin. Everyone but poor Herb stripped down to shorts and it looked like a nudist colony on parade."

For another hour, Herb tussled with the marlin, the Kitsis pursuing "old Spidlesnoot" as it "set a straight course for the southern tip of Greenland and lit a shuck." The Kitsis chased "wide open and a bone in her teeth and Herb not quite able to keep the reel half full of line put him to moaning and wailing." This last flight was it—or so they thought; Herb "pumped" the marlin to the boat, and Kit "touched" him with the gaff. (I love Pappy's use of "touched." It is as if a king is anointing with his scepter an especially valorous knight.) The touch, though, roused the fish, and "in a shower of spray he leaped the full height of the starboard outrigger and started greyhounding." Herb hung on and Kit again gave chase. Five hours and six minutes after it was hooked, the marlin leaped once more, fell into the water, and died.

Dockside scales proved too puny to lift and measure the trophy. The only hoist muscular enough to do the job was downtown at the Vero Beach Ice Plant, in what is now Pocahontus Park. The fish was winched onto a flatbed pickup and trucked across the Indian River. Slowly, as if to a funeral, the truck made its way into the center of town. Trailing were Kit, Herb, and the others. The procession stopped traffic.
Drivers gawked, pedestrians pointed. A crowd gathered at the weighing-in. You would have thought the circus had come to town. When they finally strung it up, three hundred and twelve pounds was the official heft. Herb had his prize stuffed; it was too big—twelve feet --for his living room wall, so he displayed it in the local bank. There, it graced the foyer, forgotten.

The *Miami Herald* ran a picture of another catch taken from the Kitsis, this fish noteworthy because of its rarity. By the Spring of 1941, Kit was fishing regularly with Ottie Roach, the projectionist at Vero's bijou, the Florida Theater. Ottie grew up in Vero; his father owned a garage on South Dixie Highway. My grandfather had learned to fish off the stern of his parents' fifty-five foot yacht; for Ottie, a cane pole and a cork bobber were most likely as fancy as it got when he was a boy. He'd ditch school, hop the morning train to Sebastian, fish all day along the Sebastian River, and ride the southbound back to town in time for supper--a twenty minute jaunt from station to station. Telling this story to my father, Ottie said, "Some of the fancy passengers going to Palm Beach or Miami didn't appreciate me sitting near them with my sack of fish. . . . I was a fishing fool."

Ottie was almost a head taller than Kit, and lanky. They were the same age. He was most certainly able-bodied; Kit wouldn't have cottoned to his mate being a bumbler afloat. Pictures of Ottie capture a regular joe sporting a captain's hat which, it seems, he wore always. He
was content, content to his core—the pictures, I think, reveal this—but he wasn't simple. He was contemplative, serious minded.

So far, this particular day was, in most ways, like countless others offshore. This time, Kit's guests were his insurance agent and his doctor—Reed Hutchison and Harry Nye. It was Thursday; Ottie got someone to cover for him at the theater. They were trolling north of the inlet by noon, having raised the usual bounty of fish that morning. Ottie had the helm, spelling Kit who was standing beside him, stretching out kinks acquired from hours spent steering the boat. Flying fish skipped just above seas running at a light chop. Reed and Harry were in the cockpit below, lounging in the fighting chairs.

It was then that my grandfather spotted a very large fish on the surface, one-fifty, maybe two-hundred yards off the port quarter. "And what do you suppose that is?" he said, as much to himself as to Ottie. He repeated the question, louder this time. The din of the boat's engines muffled his speech. Ottie reached up and pulled back the dual throttle controls. The boat slowed and settled. "Beg pardon?" said Ottie. Kit pointed.

They motored over, dead slow. Kit again had the controls. Ottie moved up to the bow, dropped to his haunches, leaned against the bow rail and craned for a look. Reed and Harry stood at the port gunwale. The shifted weight caused the boat to list. Kit pulled parallel to the fish, though he gave it ample berth. Then he brought the boat closer; the fish didn't start, nor did it churn. Ottie said, "You reckon its sick?" Kit shrugged. The fish swam languorously, as if sunning itself. A slice of its
ridged and spotted back was awash. Through the water, the men saw a
wide, blunt head and a body that tapered back to a slowly sculling
whip. It seemed about half the Kitsis' length; later, on shore, the fish
measured eighteen feet.

"You know what I think this is?" said Ottie.
"Whale shark?" said Kit, loudly from the flying bridge.
"Ever seen one before?" said Ottie.
"Only in pictures. You?"

Kit motored completely around the fish. It remained oblivious to
the boat.

Ottie proceeded to tell my grandfather what he could remember
reading about this species of shark—if that's what it was, and, really,
what else could it be, given the distinctive shark-like features: the
pointed and swept dorsal fin, the scythe-shaped tail, the fluid,
sinusoidal way it moved. Reputedly, the fish was harmless, said Ottie.
No man-eater. It had tiny teeth, teeth good for nothing since it fed not
by chomping, but by scooping. When hungry, it would jack open its
mouth and swim through clouds of small fish and shrimp, using its gills
like a strainer, culling its meal from the brine.

Did Reed and Harry wonder if this projectionist-cum-deck hand
know what the hell he was talking about?

They harpooned it. My grandfather figured that the shark's liver
might be worth something to the shark fishermen based out of Fort
Pierce. Ottie threw the shaft, burying the weapon just behind the head.
While no Quequeg, he had some experience doing this, having harpooned countless sea turtles from the bow of the Kitsis.

The fish took two hours to die. Tethered to the boat, it slowly dragged the Kitsis out to sea. There was no fight, no sport to any of it.

The men agreed to take turns watching the fish. Should it sound, either Kit or Ottie could pay out a bit of line, but not much. If the fish decided it go deep to die, as marlin sometimes did, then they'd cut it loose. For this purpose, one of them always kept a knife within reach.

When the shark stopped, it did not spasm in death; it just quit swimming like a toy whose batteries are spent. To confirm its passing, Ottie yanked fiercely on the rope. No response. He yanked again. Nothing. Kit brought the Kitsis alongside; Ottie tried to free the harpoon, but couldn't. He then floated a loop of rope around the tail and cinched tight the hawser, securing this to a transom cleat. Kit kicked the boat ahead and the shark trailed tail first.

By late afternoon, they made landfall. Kit followed the coast south to the inlet and plowed through.

In the yacht basin, Kit laid his boat alongside the gas dock; the shark bobbed aft. Seagulls dive bombed the carcass; harbor flotsam lapped against it; palm-sized snapper and sheepshead nibbled at its flank and belly. Ottie hopped ashore and trotted off to see if he could find a shark fisherman who might be interested in buying the catch. Reed and Harry tidied the boat; Kit fielded questions from the harbormaster who then walked back to his office and phoned the local newspapers with the story.
Ottie was soon back, not only bringing with him a potential customer, but also a crane operator whose rig was parked at a construction site nearby. The craneman said that he could easily pluck the thing out of the water—and, for a fee, he did, first laying the fish on the asphalt so that it could be inspected and measured, then hauling it up to its full length for pictures.

The shark guy said it was impressive, but of no commercial value; my grandfather never mentioned why. The hanging drew gawkers, and there was most likely a Ripley's Believe It or Not feel to the whole affair that Kit perhaps found a bit unseemly.

Evidently there was some talk of stuffing the fish and putting it on display, though where exactly was never mentioned. But it was Ottie's shark, and Ottie didn't make in a year what Pfleuger's taxidermy would charge for stuffing what was essentially a two thousand pound seagoing elephant. So, my grandfather ordered the catch lowered back in the water and he arranged to have it towed back out to the stream where scavengers—sharks, most likely—would pick it apart.

Sis fished. She also volunteered at the local hospital, she lunched and gossiped at the Rexall, and she looked after Rody, who was four when my grandparents moved to Florida.

And she threw some memorable wingdings. Her annual Christmas day open house at the Acres was a much anticipated soiree, if only for the variety of guests it was likely to attract. Invited were most of my grandparents' Vero Beach and Riomar cronies, people who spanned the
county's economic divide—considerable then, considerable still: Waldo Sexton and his wife, Elsabeth, were there every year, Herb and his wife, too. Prescott Gardner, a wealthy Riomar bachelor who often fished aboard the Kitsis never missed a Johnson party. The Rices were regulars, ditto the Mitchells, the Hutchisons. The contractor who built Kanawha Acres, Bill Hensick, popped by.

But Ottie and his wife, Irma, never made it. They weren't "social," said my father. Were they not social, or did Ottie simply know his place? He was, after all, Kit's second, and therefore technically considered "help," though I don't think he was ever paid for his work on the boat. My grandmother had an iron clad rule: you were gracious to such people when it was warranted, but never ever "familiar." Once while having dinner out with my grandparents, I thanked a waiter for topping off my water glass. When the person was out of ear shot, Nana gently scolded me for this faux pas. "It simply isn't done, dear," she said. "They are trained to be invisible, and you must learn to treat them as such."

Always fifty to seventy people attended the Christmas party, dressed to the nines. Woman wore pastel dresses, men wore coats and ties. It was an inside/outside affair; hats were de rigueur for reasons other than appearance—the sun could be merciless, even in December. The afternoon began as a rather elegant cocktail function, more Charleston than Vero in its sensibilities. The bar was well stocked and frequented often. As the party wore on, the heat built within the house; fans, but no air conditioning, worked to cool the rooms. The women,
properly decorous, tended to stay seated indoors, their perspiration sapping the starch from their frocks. Their husbands had no such pretensions. They shucked their coats, refreshed their drinks, and took to the front lawn.

Stepping out one year, the men were greeted by a small alligator that had wandered up from the marsh, perhaps drawn to the house by all the commotion.

"It needs capturing," said my grandfather, coolly to his guests.

A friend who had had less to drink, disagreed. "Easiest thing to do would be to shoot it."

"No, I don't think so," said Kit.

The men gathered in a rather generous horseshoe around the animal. The woman joined the men outside, though few of the ladies left the porch steps. Sis made sure that Rody was in sight and a safe distance from the action.

My father remembers Mildred Kitchell exclaiming, "Is this a joke, Kit Johnson? If it is, it's not one damned bit funny."

The gator twisted and hissed; surprisingly, it stayed put.

"Someone fetch the ropes hanging in the garage," ordered Kit. He then asked Sis to run upstairs and get his movie camera.

Lou Tiller wanted to know he planned to do with it when he captured it--if he captured it.

"Let McKee Jungle Gardens have it," said Kit. McKee Jungle Gardens was the local wildlife park just south of town on U.S. Highway
One. A bastion of tropical kitsch, it had your usual assortment of reptiles and monkeys, peacocks and parrots.

Whoever held the camera must have been a nondrinker because the 16mm projection of the capture is steady and well focused. The alligator is center frame; the field of vision is wide enough to catch some of the bystanders who are to the rear of the action. You see them milling about, wearing pith helmets, their ties snugly knotted at their necks, pointing, joshing, sipping their drinks.

The two men doing the actual work are out of frame; I assume my grandfather is one of them. Lassoes are being launched left and right at the head and tail of the increasingly agitated reptile. I'd always heard that a gator will charge when provoked; all this one does is yawn and snap. The rope from the right falls around its head and is pulled taut. The gator thrashes about, flips onto its back. The other rope snags the tail. Both handlers give slack and the gator throws a fit, wrapping itself in the rope and becoming so tangled that it can barely move.

The film runs out. Off camera, my grandfather and his fellow wrangler used the ropes to flip the "guest" up and into the back of a waiting pick up. They hauled it off to the Gardens where it lived in a man-made, fenced and walled-off pool for another thirty years, growing long and fat. I think I saw it when I was a kid; it was the biggest gator at the zoo by far, torpid in the sun, and on the day I saw it, it was clearly the center of attention.
CHAPTER THREE

The war came and temporarily halted my grandparents' routine. Kit knew the regular branches of the service wouldn't take him on account of his stomach, so he signed-up with the local Coast Guard Auxiliary. During most of 1942, auxilians who owned boats and could navigate offshore were sent into coastal waters to spook German submarines stalking allied merchant shipping. The idea was that the captain of a submerged U-boat would mistake the *thrum-thrum* of the Kitsis and her civilian sisters for the engine noises of small, depth charge-equipped naval patrol craft, and would slink away rather than chance discovery and a subsequent pounding.

Nightly, Kit, first mate Ottie (4F because of a hernia), and a couple of deckhands—men too lame or too old to serve—would motor the Kitsis out at sunset, head for buoy 10A five miles out in the Atlantic, swing north and make the twenty mile run up to Vero Beach, then reverse course and cruise back. They'd keep this up all till sunrise, spelling one another at the wheel, using the onboard compass and pinpoints of light off the beach to fix their position. For protection, Kit stowed a Remington pump-action sixteen gauge shotgun and a .22 caliber pistol.

In April, two torpedoes struck the Java Arrow, a southbound tanker making a Gulf Stream passage bound for Curacao in the Netherland Antilles. The attack happened off Vero Beach, an hour before midnight. One of Kit's deckhands first spied the red distress flare. The signal was just visible on the eastern horizon. Kit swung the Kitsis
toward the light, bumped up his boat's speed, and headed out to sea. Twenty minutes later, Ottie, who was posted as the forward lookout, spotted a lifeboat off the port bow, its gunwales packed with twenty-seven Java Arrow seamen. My grandfather came alongside and ordered the men transferred to the Kitsis; the fantastically overloaded lifeboat was about to sink. Kit ferried the survivors back to Fort Pierce, handing them over to the Coast Guard "regulars" who manned a station there.

Up and down the eastern seaboard, U-boats continued to sink merchant ships with relative impunity. What did the Nazis have to fear? The Navy couldn't muster sub chasers to answer the threat—the service was still reeling from Pearl Harbor; the only armed assets available were dive bombing OS2U-3 patrol planes, but for these to be effective their pilots had to catch a sub operating on the surface. U-boats were known to do this after dark; it was the only time they could safely recharge their batteries.

In mid-July, Kit and Ottie joined the crew of a small fishing boat ordered by the Coast Guard to perform overnight picket duty off Bethel Shoals. My grandfather and his mate were asked along because they knew these particular waters far better than the boat's captain. Also aboard were two navy signalmen, there to operate a powerful two-way radio capable of summoning the planes based forty-five miles north at the Banana River Naval Air Station.

They saw three enemy submarines that evening, slowly cruising together, emerging from the darkness as if apparitions, the massive conning tower of the U-boat closest to them not more twenty-five yards
away. Quiet chaos ensued: the Navy guys were crouched in the stern, frantically turning dials and whispering into their radio's microphone; Kit was on the bow, attempting to raise the anchor while muffling the clank of its metal chain; the boat's captain was trying to prime his engines and get them running; Ottie, who was off watch and sleeping below, was rolled out of his bunk by the commotion.

Two of the subs maintained their course and speed, the third veered towards the now retreating boat. Full throttle, the fishing boat did twelve knots; U-boats were capable of seventeen. My grandfather saw a white light wink once from the sub's tower. The sub drew closer. Ottie strapped on his life jacket. "If those bastards come alongside," he said to Kit, "I'm going overboard. I'd rather be floating fourteen miles offshore than be taken prisoner."

Ottie told my father that it was Kit who probably saved them. He was the only one who kept his head that night. When Ottie reported that he was bailing out, Kit told him that he'd take his chances with the boat. My grandfather figured that while they couldn't outrun the sub, they could probably out maneuver it. He scuttled up to the captain who was standing at the helm, fully exposed from the waist up, and suggested that he jink his boat, first to port, then to starboard. The man took my grandfather's advice and spun the wheel. The 200 foot sub tried to match the zigzagging, but couldn't. It drooped back and disappeared.
And the air cover? Banana River told them to keep reporting their position relative to the sub's, but the Navy didn't launch any planes that night. Kit and Ottie were not privy as to why.

At the end of that year, my grandfather's volunteer service was impressive enough to warrant the Coast Guard ordering him to active duty. The ulcer would be overlooked; the malady had so far not affected his performance afloat. He could lead—he'd amply proven that—but he wasn't officer material; he had no college. They made him a petty officer, a singularly fitting title, given what he did for the rest of the war.

He was put in charge of a decrepit, seventy-five foot houseboat, requisitioned by the Coast Guard and based out of Tampa. The houseboat served as sort of a mothership for smaller craft assigned to patrol the west coast of Florida's peninsula. But these waters had no strategic value; the only vigilance required here was in sprucing up weather-beaten aids to navigation--buoys, channel markers. Between Naples and Steinhatchee, Kit's command chugged up and down the peninsula, his charges armed with scrapers and brushes, ready to man their boats and go do battle with rust and peeling paint.

Sis shadowed Kit by car. All their married life, they had never been apart for more than a night, and she was not about to let this assignment come between them. They boarded Rody at the Florida Military Academy in St. Petersburg; he was nine. Sis took hotel rooms near Kit's ports of call. These places--Crystal River, Cedar Key, Suwanee-
were mostly rough and rowdy Cracker burgs. For protection, Sis concealed Kit's .22 in her car's glove compartment. As far as I know, she never had cause to brandish the pistol at a would-be attacker, but, had the occasion arisen, my grandfather said that Sissy knew how to take care of herself.

I wonder. My father tells the story of my grandmother springing him from FMA one weekend. She was driving back to Vero to check on the house and she wanted company. Kit was on duty and couldn't take leave.

They pulled into Kanawha Acres around mid-afternoon. Chickens skittered before the car. These birds, along with a few ducks, were my father's pets.

Out of the flock, Sis selected a chicken for the night's supper. My father didn't object. To traipse on down to the Piggly Wiggly and pluck a breast out of the freezer was somehow contrary to the wartime spirit of sacrifice and rationing.

Killing the yardbird was the hard part, said my Dad. "I remember telling mother that you had to catch it and ring its neck, but she was squeamish, so she decided to shoot it with the pistol"

"Stand back," said Sis. The boy stood way back. The victim pecked the sand, stationary, unsuspecting. Sis planted her feet, closed one eye, took aim.

The pistol's report was a sharp crack!, like two blocks of wood clapped together.
She missed. The noise and the small explosion of sand near the chicken's head caused it to start, then run. It squawked, beat its wings, ran figure eights around the palmettos and pines. She fired again, and again, leading the bird like Kit had taught her, but not leading it enough. Tiny geysers of sand, dirt and grass marked where the bullets struck the ground.

After the fourth shot, she lucked out, striking the bird in the leg, blowing it clean off its feet, stunning it for a moment. But then it was up, in the air. It disappeared into a palmetto thicket.

They let the casualty be. Knowing my grandmother, she probably needed a drink; certainly she needed a smoke. So fortified, she hauled Rody into town where they had a nice sit down supper at the Royal Park Inn.

My family once spent a week on Sanibel Island, which sits in the Gulf of Mexico, a couple of miles off the mainland. A lighthouse rises from the southern tip of the island. It is archetypal, this lighthouse; so too is the beach that fronts it and bends around it. Then--this was 1968--that beach was a fine place to cast for fish, and an even finer place to hunt for shells. We had come here to do both, but my father first wanted to show his children "a little part of our history."

Rather than flushing us towards the sand, which was directly in front of where he'd parked our Volkswagen van, he instead waved us the opposite way, down a path lined with tall pepper trees and even taller Australian pines. You couldn't see the sky for the foliage; it was
dark here, spooky. My father drew us along by reporting that the beach was "this way, too." We passed by the men's and women's bathrooms. "Daddy, I don't need to go," said my sister, nicknamed Kit in tribute to my grandfather (her true name is Katherine). This, I recall, was unusual; Kit always needed to go. "Fine, honey, just keep walking," said my father. "We're almost there." And then we were. The Sanibel lighthouse stood before us. "This is what I wanted you to see." He pointed skyward. The lighthouse was ochre from top to bottom, except for its lamp glass. I had to crane my neck way back to see the glass. "Your grandfather and his men painted this during the war. . . . The war against the Germans," said my father. As I recall, there was no irony in his voice as he told us this; there was no lack of pride, either.
Kit was medically discharged from the Coast Guard in early 1944, his ulcer not up to the duty. It seems that he was far better suited to voluntary forays into hostile home waters than to a mundane uniformed life on the opposite side of the state. Perhaps the job's lack of glamour had something to do with the flare up; perhaps the sourness in his stomach had something to do with the sour dispositions of most of his men. My father remembers Kit's charges as a rather loutish bunch of recruits, farmboys and rednecks from the boondocks who knew little about boats and seamanship and had no inclination to learn. Their chief aims were ladies and liquor and such pursuits usually landed one or more of them in some jerkwater town's pokey. Kit was forever placating a local sheriff or a justice of the peace, cajoling that person into doing his part for the war effort by freeing one of my grandfather's "boys."

Perhaps Kit missed Kanawha Acres. His days there before the war had been idyllic; it seems fitting that he would long to settle once again into a pastoral life with Sis and Rody. And, for a few months, that is essentially what he did, picking up where he left off. But it wasn't enough. I don't think he was bored, just unfulfilled. He had a driving compulsion to do something worthwhile with his life, something lasting, something that mattered.

The accomplishments of his brothers—especially those of his twin brother Howard—continued, I imagine, to be faintly nettlesome. Howard had always been the family standard bearer. He had quarterbacked
Cornell's varsity in '27, was all Ivy League in wrestling his junior and senior years. A Deke (like brothers Rodolph and Charles), a clubman. I remember my grandmother saying that Howard was "a Beau Brummel," always impeccably dressed. Did he sport an ascot? I believe he did. I know he drove a black Mercedes. After Mrs. Johnson died, Howard and his wife, Pye, built a spacious Charleston home that they named "Plum Nearly." A maid coined the name, remarking that the house sprawled plum out of the city and nearly out of the county.

In 1941, Howard was made Vice President and General Sales Manager of Charleston Electric; clearly he was being groomed for his father's seat—the chairmanship. Then came Pearl Harbor, and Howard's credentials easily won him an officer's commission in the Navy. He dazzled the brass. He ascended to the rank of lieutenant commander, captained a minesweeper, participated in the invasion of North Africa and, later, in the Battle of the Leyte Gulf in the Pacific Theater. He returned to Charleston wearing dress blues festooned with campaign ribbons and decorations.

Charles stayed home, too old too fight. He was not as smooth as Howard. A large man, a sweet man, Charles. The company's treasurer. He married a Yankee, a Biddle from Philadelphia. Her name was Marion. She was a Quaker, complete with "thees" and "thous." (One of Philadelphia's oldest families, the Biddles are also among the wealthiest and best known. Sidney Biddle Barrows, notorious in the early nineteen-eighties as the "Mayflower Madam," hailed from the libertine side of that family.)
Charles and Marion's home was not far from Pye and Howard's; they named it "ChasMar" and it stood at the end of mile-long "Johnson Road."

The war's consequence for Sis' side of the family was tragic, yet odd. This too must have bothered Kit. Sis' brother Buck (Samuel Brashear junior) had enlisted in '42. He was thirty-nine that year, by regulation, ineligible for military service. But you couldn't keep him away. An Avis had fought in every American conflict; family honor demanded that he go. As his namesake, and someone who appreciates honorable intentions, I am naturally curious about what happened. Evidently, his profession gave him a way in. Like his father, Buck was a Charleston attorney. He was able to finagle a captain's commission in the judge advocate general corps, the Army's lawyer guild. He shipped overseas and was assigned to General Patton's Corps. A sweet plum, this. Great Nana and Sis could tout that Captain Avis was serving "with Patton." One pictured Buck in battle regalia, riding a Sherman tank into the fray alongside his great general. Army lawyers, of course, rode desks, not tanks, and while Patton was chasing Rommel across North Africa, Buck was tagging along with the headquarters staff, processing courts martial. For this distinction, and other similarly mundane duties, Buck left a behind a thriving practice, a stunning wife, three sunny daughters. Buck's family, along with Great Nana, moved to Vero for the duration. Kit and Sis were, if rarely in town, at least within a day's drive; this was some comfort to the Avis women.
When Patton was disgraced for slapping a soldier and ordered back to England, Buck and his desk were part of the retreat. In London, catastrophe befell my uncle. One of Hitler's buzz bombs went off above the shelter into which he had dived for cover. Buck's head was rattled by the explosion, severely rattled, and he was forever changed. He began drinking—heavily. The vice was as much a family proclivity as was their love of military service: Great Nana had gone on a serious bender after her husband was killed, serious enough to warrant sending Sis, then eleven, to live for a time with Great Nana's sister Nell.

The Army let Buck go at the end of the war. Outwardly he looked fine; inwardly there was not a smidgen of his pre-war self. He couldn't practice law; he was invalided as surely as if that bomb had taken his legs. Upon his discharge, he went back to West Virginia; his family stayed in Florida. Why the separation? I don't know. Did he turn mean? Unmanageable? Was the family name sullied? Whatever happened, he died in West Virginia three years later. He was buried with full military honors--gun salute, taps--but not in Charleston. Instead, the family planted him in Vero's Crestlawn Cemetery.

Of the tales told about Buck when I was growing up--his lawyerly skill, his harrowing experience in London, his rather sudden death--never once was drink mentioned. The family fiction was, "He died from a war wound." Prying anything more from anyone was fruitless; we bury our ancestors with the dirt that soils them. I learned of Buck's alcoholism from my Uncle Hugh Farrior, married thirty-five years to Buck's oldest daughter, Ellen. What I heard, I heard on the sly. He was
talking with my parents, over drinks as I recall. They were sitting on the front lawn of a Riomar cottage Uncle Hugh and Aunt Ellen had rented for a couple of weeks one summer not long ago (the family lives in Richmond, Virginia). I was eavesdropping. He said, and I remember this clearly, though I can't remember how it came up: "Ellen told me before we were married that her father had been an alcoholic. Even though he was long dead, she thought it important that I know this fact in case I wanted to back out of the engagement." He smiled. He still thought her admission sweet. I thought it sad.

The year after Kit left the Coast Guard, he started a business. Sporting goods became his trade, that and a guiding service: fresh and salt water charter fishing, plus shooting safaris west of town. Kit fronted most of the capital; Horace Giffford, the manager of Vero's Standard gas station, put up the rest. A Vero native, Horace proudly boasted that he was the first white man born in the county. He was big-boned, ham-fisted. He loved the outdoors. Like Ottie Roach, Horace was deft, hard working.

Ottie had drifted away from my grandfather's life by war's end. They were cordial, Kit and Ottie; when they met in town, they talked fishing, swapped stories, but were no longer the daring duo of the high seas. Ottie now had a full time job: he was a fireman. Eventually, he would rise to the rank of lieutenant and retire as the city's chief fire inspector.
Kit and Horace named their enterprise the "Florida Sporting Goods Company, Inc." Their corporate headquarters was a storefront and adjacent lot in downtown Vero. A small, professionally lettered sign planted in the lawn advertised: "FISHING TACKLE" . . . "HUNTING AND FISHING TRIPS ARRANGED." Inside, they displayed floor to ceiling every imaginable outdoor appliance: rods, reels, guns, ammo, bikes, bats, balls, lawn furniture, camping gear. Outside, under a corrugated aluminum roof, they sold boats and motors. Kit bought a jeep and had the company logo stenciled beneath the windshield. Company stationary included a trademark—a silhouetted gun-wielding bird hunter taking aim at a quarry winging just off the page—and the names of the principals: "C. B. Johnson, President . . . Florence A. Johnson, Vice-President . . . H. H. Gifford, Secretary and Treasurer."

My grandfather used this paper to correspond with the family back in Charleston. Some of the missives to his brothers he addressed to their Charleston Electric offices. Was he telling them that, finally, he too was a player? A typed letter to his brother Charles dated December 31, 1948 reads:

"Dear Boots:

Sorry we have not taken better care of your order. The Day-Night Flare will be shipped direct to you. I have so far been unable to locate the Nylon covered life rings. Prices and delivery dates on the other material will be forwarded to you very shortly.

..."
A year after opening for business, Kit decided they needed more room and bought property at the corner of 21st street—known in Vero as "Miracle Mile"—and Ponce de Leon Circle. Here he and Horace built the new Florida Sporting Goods. The building was single story with a curved facade that swept the entire block; the company name was boldly emblazoned in relief just below the roof line. Beneath the letters were seven plate glass windows shaded by jalousied panels extending over the sidewalk. Four thousand square feet of floor space accommodated every piece of gear in the inventory from the boats to the beach blankets. It was a first-class set up. My father said it rivaled Abercrombe and Finch in New York; a sportsman's magazine trumpeted it as "one of the largest tackle stores on the east coast of Florida."

It is, I think, an interesting coincidence that Kit's business sat at the place where the "miracle mile" cut the road named after the sixteenth century Spanish adventurer who came to Florida in search of the Fountain of Youth. My grandfather, like Ponce de Leon, was drawn to this land by a sense that the water was restorative. De Leon never found what he sought; my grandfather was still looking. And both men needed miracles: Ponce had prayed for a divine miracle; how else would he find his mythical fountain? Kit, who wasn't much for praying, hoped for a business miracle, one that would bring droves of customers into the store and satisfy his need for success.

The draw, figured Kit would be the guiding service. Certain men, men who had money, men who prized trophies once-live, would, he
reasoned, pay big sums of money for a day of being led on a hunt, whether this be on the Kitsis or in a jeep.

A white hunter, Kit Johnson, spiritual kin to the monied English gents who in the first part of the century shucked convention and migrated to Africa. Respected by natives and nabobs, these expatriates were solitary gunners of the veld, one shot heroes for hire. Kit would have scoffed at this comparison, would have found the affectations of such fellows a bit much—"Tea at two, what?" But he was of their class, certainly of their temperament, especially during the chase: cool, calm, deadly with a weapon, whether it be a rod or a gun.

Kit loved the interior of the county as much as he loved the Gulf Stream and the Indian River. What he found in Kanawha Acres—the trees, the scrub, the space—he found manifold just minutes west by jeep. Sandwiched between the Dogpatch vills of Fellsmere and Yeehaw Junction, this hundred plus square miles of land was as picturesque and as varied as the game that lived there. Wood duck lighted upon the Fellsmere grade, a reed-spotted shallow that was navigable only by airboat or canoe. Quail and wild turkey nested in pine and palm hammocks. And there was Blue Cypress lake, so named because of the stands of pecky cypress, bearded with spanish moss, that rose straight out of the water. In the shadows of these trees, along the banks, were deer, wild pig, swamp cats, furtive, fleeting.

For their private hunting reserve, Kit and Horace, along with three friends, leased five thousand acres. The men tacked together a shelter
on one corner of the property, nothing more than a three-sided, slat-floored enclosure with a canvas roof. Folding stools, a Coleman stove, a two-by-four nailed between two trees and used for bleeding and dressing game completed the layout. The men called it "Camp Imperial" after the cheap, Imperial brand whiskey that was their preferred snort after a day in the field.

Sis and Kit sometimes hunted together there. She was a "trooper," said my grandfather, referring to her willingness to hunt "hard." The sport was tough going for a man, doubly so for a woman. Typically the day began when you shinnied out of a sleeping bag way before sun up, donned your clothes by lantern light, and maybe got a cup of coffee off the Coleman, but only if someone had the presence of mind to brew a pot. October to January was hunting season; these Florida mornings were chilly, damp. The grade was twenty minutes by jeep over rutted roads. There, you loaded the canoe, paddled out to a palm frond blind that stood in a reed thicket and after you put out the decoys, you hunkered down in the bottom of the canoe and waited for the dawn that coaxed hungry ducks out of their flight and down to feed. By mid-morning you had probably bagged your limit, so you returned to camp for breakfast. Horace was camp cook; he might have rustled eggs, grits, maybe venison sausage, hunks of white bread, more coffee. Tidying the camp took till noon, and then it was back out in the field, this time for quail. You spent the afternoon ranging scrub flats dotted with pine, flushing coveys and downing only the number of targets my grandfather stipulated--Kit was first and foremost a conservationist,
hell on anyone who decimated a covey by shotgunning more than four
or five birds out of a family of ten to fifteen; he called such sportsmen
"game hogs" --poachers to his way of thinking.

All their married life, Kit led, Sis followed. He went her way only
when it suited his fancy--which was rarely. My grandfather was a
selfish man; this was perhaps his worst fault. It never occurred to me
that this was so until my mother once mentioned that my grandmother
had for sometime--maybe all her life--a hankering to tour Europe.
"What's keeping her from going?" I asked. "Your grandfather," she said,
"would rather stay home." In Kit's mind, the continent was littered with
statues of long-dead fops who built castles in the clouds (for a well-bred
man, he could be about certain things rather provincial). Sis could go
abroad alone, or with a friend, and Kit would wish her a hearty bon
voyage, but he wasn't budging, thank you very much. Oh, this irked
But he couldn't break down and go with her to France."

About this, my father was silent; he didn't share my mother's
righteous anger--or if he did, he kept this to himself. His parents were
happy together; he had no reason to think otherwise. He'd never heard
a cross word pass between them. His mother had always seemed to
enjoy doing whatever it was her husband was doing. And as far as he
could tell, Sis wanted for little. Yes, there was Europe, but it wasn't as if
she pined daily for it. I wonder, though: was Dad missing something? He
could be (he can be), on occasion, rather obtuse. Did my mother see things my father didn't?

My father's upbringing was odd—at least odd to my experience. As a baby, Rody was looked after by neither parent—black nurses cared for him, his favorite nanny was a woman named Erlina. Sis took over only when her boy was potty trained. Kit was physically there, but emotionally aloof. Said my father, "I hadn't really known my Dad during"—and before—"the war. I was too young; he was too busy."

Rody was twelve before he spent any time alone with his father. As Kit's life was the outdoors, his son was asked along only when he was deemed "old enough to handle a gun." This also meant that he was old enough to behave like an adult, at least for short periods of time. My grandfather didn't tolerate foolishness. Controlling a loaded weapon required competence, presence of mind, maturity—attributes my grandfather prized in men above most anything else.

"Dad started me out on a small 410 shotgun," said my father, "but before I was allowed to put a shell in the breach, Dad coached me on safety. I carried the gun empty when we first started hunting to prove that I could keep the barrel toward the ground, that in the excitement I would not point the gun at someone. After I had proven myself, I was allowed to hunt with the men." Once, Rody had trouble zeroing in on particular birds within a covey taking flight. The quarry exploded out of the brush, "flushed," said my father, "in a cloud of whirring wings." This startled him. He swung his 410 up and fired, but he peppered only sky. Kit quickly diagnosed the problem. Next time, said my grandfather, pick
out a single bird, track the bird's trajectory, pull the trigger, then go quickly, but smoothly to the next target before it flies out of range. "That advice," said my father, "was a lesson on life."

Kit taught other lessons, countless others. But he did so without fanfare, and in as few words as necessary. There were no lengthy father-son talks that my Dad remembers, no fireside chats. Praise came sparingly, and when it came, my father knew he'd earned it. Reticence defined their relationship. Said my father: "After the hunting, Dad and I would load our gear in the jeep and drive home. We would ride in complete silence, totally comfortable in our closeness and the day we had shared. Dad might say, 'That was good shooting this morning, Rody.' I'd reply, 'Yes sir.' And that would be the trip's conversation. Of course, there weren't too many times I had those good shots."

Camp Imperial was a seminal place for my father, a parade ground where this benign drill sergeant, Kit, marched a shy recruit, Rody, through a sort of basic training. This ended when my father left for boarding school. This was mostly Sis' idea. She wanted her son to get out of Vero and hobnob with other boys of similar background. The question was where. Kit's alma mater in Connecticut was too far away. Closer was Woodbury Forest School in Orange, Virginia. Situated in the rolling hills of the Shenandoah, Woodbury had been prepping the scions of Southern aristocracy since just after the Civil War.

My father joined the class of '52. He'll tell you matter of factly that his four years there were good ones; the place suited him—the academics, the athletics, the dormitory life. Specifically what the
experience gave him, he can't say; he hasn't thought about it much. But I have. I'm a public school product (my parents didn't have the means to send four children away), and I wonder what I missed. There is about my father a certain je ne sais quoi. He is gracious, gentle--far more so than I. He opens doors for women, still yes ma'ams and yes sirs his elders, all without making a big production of any of it. In a world where most men either strut or stutter through their lives (and I have walked both ways), my father simply strolls. Heredity accounts for some of this; I wonder whether his schooling--first at Camp Imperial, then at Woodbury--explains the rest.

During the summers between his years at prep school, and before he followed his uncles to Cornell for college, Rody worked at the Florida Sporting Goods for thirty-five cents an hour. Kit believed that work built character; he thought it important that my father appreciate the satisfaction of an honest day's labor. (This notion took in my father; he insisted that we children find employment when out of school.)

To call what Rody did "labor," however, is a bit misleading. There was little for him to. The customers who my father might have waited on, monied people in the market for, let's say, a Penn Senator 4-0 reel, two hundred yards of Barbour Linen line, a Vom Hoff eight ounce tip rod--package price a cool one-hundred and twenty bucks--had gone north to dodge the heat. Year-rounders sulked through the season; seeking shade was their primary recreation. As for the hunting and the
fishing, the pursued were like their pursuers—sluggish, unresponsive, often absent.

My father remembers summer days at the store as especially hard on his father. Idleness bedeviled Kit's nature. After lunch, he would have had enough of this infernal standing about and convene a director's meeting around the cash register. Horace would be called away from some task, perhaps tidying ranks of lures scrambled earlier by the morning's lone customer who had wanted to know, "What ya'all got for reds?"

Kit: "Slow going."
Horace: "Yep."
Kit: "Waste of time for the two of us to be hanging around."
Horace: "Right-O, Kit."
Kit: "You know where I'll be if anything comes up."
Horace: "What's playing?"
Kit: *Red River,* I think."

The Florida Theater became Kit's house of refuge. Here he spent his afternoons with Hollywood's he-men. He sat there, in the last row, in the middle seat, a now middle-aged, balding, deeply tanned man dressed in khaki pants and a white, open collared shirt. A tub of popcorn rested in his lap; he chain smoked, waiting for the lights to dim. Ten, fifteen, twenty rows up, unchaperoned children bobbed and chattered in their seats; they'd been dumped there by frazzled mothers needing time to themselves. An usher, Rody's age, walked down the aisle, intent on settling the rabble. As he passed my grandfather, the
usher said, "Hello Mr. Johnson." My grandfather smiled his thin smile and nodded. It was a small town, Vero, and everyone knew everyone else's business.

Vero's smallness was the primary reason why Florida Sporting Goods failed. When Kit and Horace began their enterprise, they gambled their success on two things: One, that Vero Beach would grow quickly, far beyond it's pre-war population of 4,000. And, once word spread about the astonishing quantity and variety of game in these parts, serious outdoorsman would traipse on in and sign-up for offshore or backcountry trips. Neither of these things happened to the degree necessary for success. In the late forties and into the early fifties, more and more of the marshes west of town were drained for citrus and cattle. Duck and quail began nesting farther inland; these birds were no longer "local" quarry. And Vero stayed a five-and-dime community, too plebeian to support a store offering gold-plate merchandise to people with tin-plate taste. Summers were the nadir of a yearly business cycle whose zenith barely edged above the break even point.

Florida Sporting Goods' hung on for a few more years, finally closing for good in 1954. Kit's magnificent building at the corner of Ponce de Leon and Miracle Mile sat vacant for awhile, and then a car dealer swooped into town and occupied the showroom--a perfect spot, the dealer said, for selling his Rambler sedans and station wagons. But the dealer turned out to be flimflam man who welshed on his rent and reneged on other obligations. Kit, fearing that the shyster would, at
night, attempt to secret cars off the lot rather than surrender them to creditors, parked himself at the Patio Restaurant across the street and kept a lookout for anything shady.

My father joined his father at the Patio to keep him company during the surveillance. Dad remembers how the whole affair rankled my grandfather. How Kit sat there, nursing a drink, silent, cagey. How, had the bastard across the street tried anything, my grandfather would have strode on over and quietly, yet forcefully, told him that he'd better stay put if he knew what was good for him.

There they were, father and now grown son, side-by-side, quiet, watchful from their ersatz blind, ready to down the bird should he flush. It was sort of like hunting again, said my father. Just like old times.
I'll dig you a lake," said Jesse Swords to my grandfather. Jesse was in the fill business. He dredged dirt from where it wasn't needed, loaded it into dump trucks and deposited it where it was needed—usually future homesites. He was forever on the lookout for more dirt, and he knew my grandfather was sitting on tons of it. The men were out at Kanawha Acres, standing in the treeline that bordered the grassy field that fronted the marsh. The house was behind them.

Florida Sporting Goods had closed the year before; the car dealer caper had yet to happen. Kit was forty-nine; if you asked him what his business was, he'd tell you, "I'm retired."

"Picture it," said Jesse, walking twenty yards into the open, then stopping, "three acres of water stretching from here to there." Using his finger, he traced in the air the rough outline of marsh. "Maybe you'd sort of dogleg the bank, uh—over there, on the far side. This'd give a natural look, like the lake had always been here. But whatever you want Kit—whatever's fine with me. All I ask for in return is the dirt."

Kit cottoned to the idea; he thought the addition would enhance the beauty of the property, and also up its value. A handshake settled it. Surveyors moved in, took their measurements, staked out the corners. By their plan—approved by my grandfather—the body of water would be roughly T-shaped, its long axis running east and west. The T's foot would butt the ditch running down from the pump house. A culvert pipe would mate the ditch with the lake.
Digging a body of water was some undertaking—in Jesse's mind, a mining operation of sorts. First thing to do was extend the Kanawha Acres driveway down to the marsh. This would prevent heavy machinery from getting stuck in the mud, especially the dump trucks hauling away the dirt. Jesse planned on laying a hundred yard spur off the existing road, but my grandfather talked his friend into plowing a quarter mile scenic drive that looped all of Kanawha Acres.

When the road was finished, the dozers and draglines rumbled in and commenced gouging and scraping. The soil beneath the muck was mostly clay and loam, so the work went relatively quickly during that Fall. From the kitchen, my grandmother could measure progress by watching the degree to which men and machinery gradually sank below the surface of the earth. Come November, all that was visible was the top of the dragline's cab.

It was at this depth—about ten feet—that the diggers uncovered a shell deposit. Someone took a picture of the discovery. In the shot, the band of shells looks like a ring of soap scum on the sides of a bathtub. Besides revealing that all of Kanawha Acres—all of South Florida, for that matter—was once covered by ocean, the bed is significant for another reason: at about the same time the shell layer was excavated, pieces of bone began turning up in the dirt.

The first artifact unearthed was a basketball-sized, wedge-shaped fossil with a striated face. A dozer may have pushed it out of the strata; perhaps it slid one or two feet down the bank face, then stopped. How it first came to be seen, who knows? Someone must have spied it,
stopped what he was doing, investigated—as good an excuse as any to take a quick break from the job. Over the next few days, the men found more pieces. All of these were more bone-like than the wedge; they had an unmistakable skeletal architecture—knobs, ridges, shafts, spines, symmetry—and were of various sizes. Kit ordered the cache laid out in his garage.

To determine what he was dealing with here, my grandfather called the University of Florida in Gainsville; an operator patched him to the paleontology department. A scientist came on the line. They spoke for awhile. Finds such as this, said the expert, were common state-wide. For some years, he added, lay people had been accidentally unearthing the bones of long extinct animals.

Extinct how long? asked Kit.

Between ten thousand and a million years plus, said the scientist. It depends on the species and the depth at which they're found. Hard to tell what's what, and when, unless the bones are studied. Would it be possible, he asked, to ship the artifacts COD to the college?

Kit said that was certainly ok, but were there any special handling instructions?

Yes, said the scientist, and he explained what they were.

No problem, said Kit, he'd build the crate himself.

Two months later, an envelope came from the university. It was my grandmother's habit to collect the mail and sort it: bills and anything official looking she normally stacked on Kit's desk in their upstairs bedroom; the rest she opened and, if need be, answered. But
this letter was special; Kit would want to see it, pronto. She guessed this
because once or twice over dinner, he'd mused about what the
highbrows were doing with his bones.

Sis walked out of the house and over to the lake site. Kit was
down at the far end of the pit, operating a tractor with an attached
blade, using the blade to smooth some dirt. He was intent on his work;
he didn't see my grandmother standing above him on the rim and
waving the envelope.

One of the workers noticed her and saluted. Sis was known by all
the men; she came down to the site almost daily, usually to bring Kit's
lunch. (She was forty-two then, and she still turned heads; she had kept
herself wonderfully trim.) By the time the worker alerted Kit to Sissy's
presence, my grandmother was striding over to the truck ramp that
sloped down to the floor of the lake. She met her husband, offering him
the envelope. Before taking it, he wiped the sweat and grime from his
hands on his pants. They read the contents together:

Dear Mr. Johnson:

The fossils found while excavating your property belong to
species of animals that roamed much of North America at the
end of the Pleistocene epoch, between 100,000 and 120,000
years ago. These animals are, as evidenced by the bones:
saber-tooth tiger, wooly mammoth, mastodon, deer, tapir,
giant tortoise, and alligator.
Other bones may lie on, or up to five to six feet over, the underground shell deposit. Perhaps you will find some human artifacts in the bone bed. If so, I would be especially interested in hearing about these. . .

Kit let the state have the collection, minus the wedge, which had been identified as the right molar of the wooly mammoth (those striated lines were the give away; they were clearly--clear at least to the paleontologist--a grinding surface). Why my grandfather decided to have this particular artifact sent back to him is a mystery. I might have liked the tiger bone, or the alligator's remains, but it was the mammoth tooth that he fancied.

And he did an interesting thing with the tooth. He had it suspended in a block of Lucite so that it hung face up in the crystal matrix, much the same way it had been trapped in dirt and clay for umpteen thousands of years, and before that, locked in the lower jaw of the hairy pachyderm that had reigned and died here. As for the animal's specs, surmised, of course--height, weight, appearance, diet, territory--the paleontologist sent Kit the data, and my grandfather paid a calligrapher to copy the information on card stock suitable for framing.

But none of this was going in the Kanawha Acres house where it might have sparked waning conversation at cocktail parties. Kit had something else in mind: he rang Howard's Charleston Electric office and told his brother that he was sending him one of the fossils from the
lake—Howard knew about the bones; Kit had written him and Charles about the discovery. When he received it, asked Kit, would he display it somewhere suitable in the company headquarters? Howard, who perhaps thought this an odd request, but who could deny his twin nothing, said sure, it would get the best showing possible. And it did, smack in the middle of the appliance showroom, next to the gleaming electric ranges and refrigerators, across from state of the art televisions and the electric clocks with their self-starting synchronous motors guaranteed to keep perfect time.
The Pomfret School Baseball Team, 1923. Kit Johnson is fourth from left, third row. Howard, Kit's twin, the Beau Brummel of the family, sits second from left, second row.
Mrs. Johnson in Egypt; astride, aloft, commanding. Center camel.
Great Nana.
The entrance to Kanawha Acres. The concrete-lined sluice running to the pump house is left of the road.
The front of the Kanawha Acres house.
Petty Officer and Mrs. C. B. Johnson. Lieutenant Hank Lewis, a family friend, is at Sis’ right.
Kit, Sis, and Rody at Camp Imperial.
Herb Guy’s record-setting marlin, caught off the Kitsis. Kit is on the left; Herb is right.
Rare Shark Caught by Local Anglers

The whale shark. Left to right: Oottie Roach, Kit, Harry Nye, Reed Hutchison.
The old Florida Sporting Goods. Kit is left; Horace Gifford stands right.
The new Florida Sporting Goods at the corner of Miracle Mile and Ponce de Leon Circle.
Kit Johnson.
My grandfather's Florida life was regulated by a tidal to-and-fro of birds and fish. This tamed his ulcer. But he couldn't kill it, fossilize it, case it in Lucite. His successes and setbacks had a tidal rhythm, too, and these fed the sore. The highs were marriage, Rody, building a home, rescuing the survivors of the torpedoed Java Arrow, starting the Florida Sporting Goods. The lows were, of course, leaving Charleston, uniformed military service, Howard's shadow, failing at business, and one other--selling Kanawha Acres.

Selling the property may only be a low in my mind. To my grandfather, putting the house on the market and parcelling the acreage made sense. This he did in 1959. Why? I'll guess it's because he had run out of things to do there. The place was perfect, almost edenic. He couldn't just sit back and enjoy what he'd done; repose was still out of the question.

When they left Kanawha Acres, my grandparents didn't go far. Kit and Sis moved six miles east, across the Indian River into Riomar. They settled in Great Nana's winter home, willed them when she died the year before. A two bedroom, two bath on Painted Bunting Lane, the bungalow was within walking distance of the beach and a golf course.

Kit had played golf off and on since prep school; now he spent the relatively cooler winter months perfecting his game. The sport became an obsession. He won the links championship two years running; he scored two holes-in-one. He also began to drink more than ever before.
The golf club atmosphere contributed to this. He'd play nine holes in the morning with some of the Riomar snowbirds; they'd break for a leisurely lunch and a couple of Gin and Tonics, then they'd tee off into the afternoon. He'd be home by four and join my grandmother for a pre-dinner "snort."

I remember kissing him and loving his smell, the tang of Aqua Velva and Gordon's Gin.

In 1963, my family moved to Florida from Southern California where my father had been an unhappy corporate rocketeer with North American Aviation. The pay on the West Coast was great for an EE packing an MBA--Dad's bonafides--but the freeways and sprawl were more than he could bear. He took a job with Radiation, an electronics company in Melbourne, Florida, a thirty minute commute from Vero. His salary was less than before--evidently much less--but otherwise he believed he'd bettered the family's quality of life.

My parents built our home on a corner lot in Kanawha Acres. Across the lake, screened by the line of trees, stood my grandparent's old place. The Luthers lived there then; they live there still. A large, lively crew, those Luthers. Each kid's first name began with "J." My grandmother said the family was "common." I think it irked her to no end that they were in her house, all eight of them probably supping barefoot in what had been her formal dining room.

My own family numbered five. We became six in 1971 when my brother Charles was born. We were strictly middle class. Johnson money
sustained Kit and Sis' lifestyle; what remained was not enough to buoy
us to their level. We had Volkswagons in the garage, shoes from Sears,
tuna fish casserole for more dinners than I now care to think about.
Steak was rare (scarce rare); our lone TV was a Zenith black and white
with a hair trigger vertical hold that my father kept until Ronald Reagan
took office--then we got color. (Was Dad in a celebratory mood?) But if
we lived like everyone else in Vero Beach, I knew early on that we
weren't like everyone else. The proof was in the living room of my
grandparent's Painted Bunting house. Heraldic crests hung on one living
wall: Avis and Atkinson from Sis' side; Lewis from Kit's. What these
shields looked like, I can't remember--they were shelved when passed
down to my parents--but I recall them having a sort of Knights of the
Round Table aura. And then there were the family pictures, also in the
living room, arranged rank and file on a Queen Anne drop leaf like so
many candles before a patrician altar. Profiles, obliques, frontal
photographs of The Governor, Great Nana, Captain Avis, Mr. Johnson,
Mrs. Johnson, Uncle Buck, my grandfather in his Coast Guard uniform,
my grandmother in her wedding dress, my parents, us children. Those
pictures were an affirmation of the line, precious metal proof--some of
the frames were sterling, others gilded--of our ascendancy. Sis
surrounded the artifacts with rhetoric, adding to their weight, their
importance in my mind. You were born a gentleman, she'd tell me, and
she began doing so as soon as she thought I could comprehend what this
meant--I think I was around ten years old when she made this point.
You come from a long line of gentlemen and ladies, she added. Your breeding, therefore, makes you special.

I wanted to tell people. I especially wanted to tell Jerry Luther, the youngest boy of that tribe from across the lake. "I'm special, and you're not!" I'd imagine myself saying to him. Though we were the same age, he was bigger, faster, cockier, the better fisherman. He fished the Kanawha Acres lake like he owned it, confidently walking the bank, working the water with his cane pole. He even had the audacity to trespass on my side of the pond. I'd join him sometimes, a tad wary of his physicality. These were the moments when I most ached to boast about what I'd been told I was. I kept my mouth shut, of course. It would be unmannerly to say anything; it would also be stupid. Jerry Luther could whip a head lock on a person faster than anyone I knew.

I wondered: What, exactly, was it to be a gentleman? Sis said I was one, but shouldn't I feel something? Oh, I had first class table manners. Which fork to use—I knew this; how to butter a dinner roll—I was a pro. But these things didn't count for squat anywhere but at home and at my grandparents'. Gentility didn't help me with Little League; I sat the bench every year I played. As for school, I was the most polite boy in class, but I couldn't master multiplication tables and had to repeat fourth grade. Something, I figured, must happen. You woke up one day and you felt like a gentleman--whatever that was like--and with the feeling came special powers, super powers that helped you rise above the Jerry Luthers of the world. I likened this change to puberty, and I waited for it with as much anticipation.
I began spending a lot of time with my grandparents, especially my grandfather. I sensed that perhaps the answers were with him.

Islamorada in the Florida Keys was where I truly came to know Kit. Each year, he and Sis spent May and June fishing the thin, phenomenally clear water—the cliche is "gin clear"—that veils the turtle grass flats surrounding the islands. Elusive, stealthy game dine in these shallows; my grandfather sought the stealthiest of them all—the bonefish.

Kit wanted me to catch one of these fish. I could say that he wanted me to learn something about myself from this experience, but I'm not sure this is true. I tend to make too much of my grandfather's motives. He and Sis invited me to join them in Islamorada, probably for no better reason than they wanted their eldest grandson to themselves for awhile.

I rode a Greyhound down from Vero and stayed for two weeks. Every day we fished—all day. It was work, this life. You got up early, ate, loaded the boat. We'd take out with the incoming tide, speeding through the cuts and channels at twenty, twenty-five knots in his Boston Whaler skiff, heading for a particular flat—Shell Key, Indian Key, Calusa Cove. Before I knew it, we'd be there, and Kit would have shut down the motor, tilted the propellor out of the water, freed the push pole from its chocks, and started poling us across the shallows. He'd prod me to my feet: "Up and at 'em, Bucko. Get rigged. Get on the bow."
I'd stand forward; he'd pole aft. For hours it seemed, we'd zig-zag over the shallows and peer under the water for fish. His clothes, those khakis he always wore, would be drenched with sweat by noon. He guided me about, pushing us along using the pole, the boat skating over the surface like a wind-driven leaf. I never saw him pick up a rod, though I knew he kept one aboard.

Oft times there wouldn't be anything worth taking on a particular flat, no bonefish, that is. There'd be what he called "trash fish" galore--small bonnethead sharks, sting rays, needlefish, puffers, but I was to ignore these. We were after bones, only bones.

Sis had her prejudices regarding classes of people; Kit judged certain types of fish. "Trash fish" were either inedible, or they didn't fight worth a damn. Bones were battlers. They weren't very big--six to twelve pounds--but they were dynamite. You'd hook one, it would explode the water, then scream across the flat; you'd horse it to the boat, thinking it was within reach of the net, and it would be off again. Seven, eight, nine times it did this before giving up.

Sometimes he would make me practice my casting. "Imaginary bonefish at three," he'd say suddenly, meaning the ghost was directly off the starboard side of the boat. "Fifty yards." I'd flinch, swing to my right and whip my bait where I was told. He'd have picked out a spot on the bottom, a patch of sand amid the grass that I was to hit. "Too far away," he'd say if my aim was off. "Bone'd never sniff that. Reel her in. Try again." With practice, my accuracy improved and towards the end
of the second week I caught the real thing, an eleven pounder, a record fish for an eleven year old kid, which I was then.

What entranced me about the Keys was the water. Its clarity magnified everything. Every detail stood out. You could discern individual scales on the flank of a passing fish; turtle grass blades beating in the current were as defined as fingers waving toodle-oo. Kit said you had to "read the water" to tell which way to go. Dappled, pale water meant the shallows, the flats; deeper water was sometimes emerald, other times sharply blue. Often when the sun was directly overhead, it was all a monochromatic wash, like a grand ink stain bleeding beyond the horizon and into the sky.

There was no excuse for misreading the water, said Kit. To do so was to run aground, to mire your boat on a flat, to spook the fish you were after. Beaching a boat deliberately was one thing, but there was no excuse for carelessly hitting bottom. You damaged your boat; you risked the safety of your passengers; you destroyed habitat. I remember him pointing out hundred yard long furrows on Shell key flat, perfectly straight lines obviously plowed by boats. "Damn fools out joy riding," he said, shaking his head. "Didn't have enough sense to slow down, or stay in the deeper water."

"You ever run aground, Gramps?" I asked, perhaps then, perhaps some other time.

"Never did," he said. "Was always careful not to."
But one of his boats did run aground, and the event would forever change who he was—who we all were.

Kit, Sis, and I were making a run in the Kitsis from Flamingo to Islamorada, a thirty mile southerly trek across Florida Bay. I was seventeen; he was seventy. This was open water, the "back country." The back country is an archipelago of mangrove islands, flats and channels, tight, snakey labyrinthine ways, stretches of shoaling, open water. There are few aids to navigation; you go armed with a chart and a compass. It's a moderately tricky passage, not recommended to amateur skippers. Kit had done it, had gone here many times.

He had laid it out for me the night before. We sat in the stern of the Kitsis, studying the chart. We slid parallel rules to and fro across the paper, tip-toed dividers from point A to point B, figured course and speed, calculated our estimated time of arrival. I did the work, the math. I penciled the course on the chart, drew the lines, recorded each heading. I had been schooled in this; he'd made me take a boating course when I was fifteen; I knew something about navigation, something about seamanship. He scrutinized my work, retraced my marks, double checked my figures. Serious business, this. We'd be out of sight of land for a brief time tomorrow. No room for error, he said. Shove off at eight, he said, should be there by two, three at the latest. He called ahead, let the folks at the Islamorada Yacht Basin know we were coming.

As planned, we cast off the next day. The basin where we had spent the night was a hot, mosquito-infested, stagnant place. The breeze
freshened as Kit swung his Kitsis out into the bay and pointed her bow at the compass heading. I sat beside him at the helm. Sis was aft, reading a book. What happened next is, for me, fuzzy, dreamy. We'd been running for maybe a half hour. Kit had been reading the water, the compass, occasionally glancing at the chart, and his watch. He was intent on his work, seemingly relaxed, but alert. I'd been rubbernecking, I think, checking out the wilderness, the fish and the birds that we passed. I should have been paying attention to my navigation, but I was, and still am, easily distracted.

Kit slowed the boat. We were in a channel maybe a hundred yards wide; flats were on either side. Kit took the chart, studied it hard, said nothing. Sis glanced up from her book, and then returned to it. Kit lit a cigarette, absently tapped the ashes onto the deck. He was not someone to whom you asked, "What's wrong?" so I stayed mum. He smoked and studied for perhaps a minute, then throttled up the boat and resumed our present course.

Perhaps fifteen minutes later, we stopped again. I was concerned, so too was my grandmother. "Something the matter?" Sis said. I don't remember Kit's reply, but I do recall his agitation. We took off after a bit, still on course. I checked the compass, glanced at the chart to make sure. He was chain smoking now. Sis was now up, beside him. I was beside her. We stopped again. The boat idled, drifted slowly to one side of the channel. All sureness in him was now seemingly gone. He palled like a commoner. My grandfather was not my grandfather. Who this person was, I hadn't a clue.
Kit seemed incapable of steering the boat, and steering himself. He was befuddled, at a loss. Sis suggested that I take the helm. She was cool, calm; she'd been a nurse's aide; she'd dealt with sick people. But this was her husband, the man she had always looked to for everything. I reflect now and find her poise amazing. This may have been the first time in their married lives that she had been more able mentally than he.

I remember my trepidation. I'd taken the wheel before; I knew how to operate this boat, but I'd always done so with my grandfather—my steadfast grandfather—watching over my shoulder. What was wrong with him? Stroke? Had this happened today, that's what I would have thought. But what do seventeen year-olds know about such things? My grandfather was ill, that much I understood. But I also recall thinking maybe he was just tired. Sis may have said, "Gramps is worn out. Think you can take over for a while."

We swapped places. Away from the controls, he seemed somewhat more at ease, less riled. I knew this because he told me to slow down. I was running the boat too fast for his taste—maybe ten, fifteen knots. He was forever telling me to slow down. This was not the original Kitsis we were on, but number VI in a line of Johnson boats stretching back to that pre-war wooden sportfisher. Number VI was a smaller, faster, fiberglass Aquasport cruiser.

I halved our speed, stayed the course, bobbed my eyes between the compass and the water before me, trying to read both. And then I ran the boat aground. It was not a jarring experience; I didn't slam into
the sand. I sort of rode the bow of the boat up and onto the flat, plowing the turtle grass bed. I turned to my grandfather, expecting--Christ, I didn't know what to expect. This was something absolutely unprecedented in his, or my, experience.

His response was gentle. He touched me and perhaps said, "It happens." And then he told me how to extricate the boat. Mine was a simple grounding, easily fixed. I reversed the engines and backed off, swinging the Kitsis' stern out into the green water channel.

We made Islamorada, a little late, but without further incident. I brought the Kitsis in, nestled her against the yacht basin's fuel dock. My grandfather handled the lines. I remember feeling fantastically relieved when the boat was snugly tied in her berth.

My grandfather was diagnosed with Alzheimer's shortly after this incident. He had lost his mind that day. He and Sis left Vero Beach and moved into the Christian Ministerial Association retirement village in Fort Myers. At first, they lived in a spacious high rise on the grounds, partied and golfed with sporty neighbors, and generally lived the high life. But Kit grew progressively less able to function; he bounced between stretches of lucidity spiked with episodes of dementia. Once while getting a checkup, he turned mean, reared back to strike a nurse, caught himself and began to cry. He was transplanted to the village's nursing "pavilion," given drugs to mellow his mind. Sis traded their condo for an efficiency and began her one woman guerrilla war against the CMA "Nazis" over her right to smoke. She of course saw Kit daily,
walking beside his wheel chair as his private nurse pushed him about
the village's grounds. Sis dressed for these visits as she had always
dressed for any outing--a gay frock, matching heels, matching purse.
She insisted that Kit be dressed too; no bathrobes in public. Standards,
she said, we must maintain our standards.

Up in Charleston, twin Howard was diagnosed with Alzhiemers at
about the same time Kit succumbed to the disease; Howard died shortly
after. Charles passed away not long after that; he too may have had the
illness; he was, as Sis put it, "diddly" in the end.

I harken to my grandmother's credo that breeding makes you
special. There is chance that along with the manners and mores of my
family, bred into me is a gene that will cause Alzhiemers, if not in me,
then in a child of mine. Knowing this is perhaps why I felt compelled to
tell my grandfather's story. Lord knows, even if he were able to tell
these tales--and he's still alive, though totally in a vegetative state--he
wouldn't have told them himself. Storytelling, he would probably say if
he could, giving the notion a dismissive wave, is the stuff of la-la boys.