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Rick DeMarinis

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THE JADE MARIE

We drove up to Grassy Lake to meet a man named Carl Bowers. Gent was excited about something, I could see that, but his excitement had a tinge of gloom to it. Now and then the gloom would show through. One moment he seemed overjoyed, the next moment clouded over with doubt.

It was a boat. Carl Bowers was selling his sixteen foot cabin cruiser. "Damn!" Gent said as we drove down to the boat ramp where Bowers was waiting for us. "I've always wanted a boat like that!"

We got out of the car and approached Bowers. The boat was on a trailer down on the launching ramp, ready to go. Gent and Bowers shook hands. It was a solemn moment. Bowers looked as if he was about to cry. Gent took out his check book and wrote out a check for Bowers on the hood of the Roadmaster. Bowers squinted at the check and then stuffed it into his shirt pocket. "She's all yours," he said.

Bowers put the boat into the water for us, backing the trailer that carried it down the ramp. Some old men who had been fishing off the ramp had to move out of the way and they weren't too happy about picking up their gear and standing off to one side. Gent was at the helm and I sat on a seat in the stern of the boat as Bowers backed us into the water. When the boat was mostly in the water, Bowers set the handbrake of his truck and climbed out. He shoved us the rest of the
way in, then unhooked the trailer from his truck and drove away. Gent waved at him but Bowers never looked back. “I practically stole this little beauty from him, Jack,” he said, in a guilty whisper.

Carl Bowers’s wife, Gent said, had cancer, and Bowers had been forced to raise cash as quickly as possible to cover some medical expenses. He put his boat up for sale in the wrong season, and Gent’s low bid proved to be the highest. “I got it for a song,” Gent said, gleeful now, as we idled out toward the middle of the lake.

The light was December light — you sensed that darkness was never far away — but the warm air was June. I sat in the stern, trolling, wearing only a tee shirt and jeans, and Gent fished off the side in shirtsleeves. “You know what I’m going to call her?” he said.

“What?”

“The ‘Jade Marie.’ How does that strike you?”

“How come you’re going to call her that?” I said.

I saw his face then and knew I’d made a mistake. I hadn’t meant to question the logic of his choice of names, I just didn’t remember that Mother’s middle name was Marie. To make up for my mistake I said, “How come ‘Marie’? What’s the ‘Marie’ for, Gent?”

He brightened. “Well, that’s your Ma’s middle name, Jack. You didn’t know that? It’s a lovely middle name, don’t you think?”

I nodded.

“I love how it fits her first name. Jade, then, Marie. Jade Marie. It has music to it. Jade Marie. Jade Marie. I could write a song around that name. Dum da dee, dum da dee. Jack, it’s a lullaby of a name.”

He fingered an invisible sax as he hummed.

He smiled his long half-smile and reeled in. “I’m going to take a little snooze in the cabin,” he said. “You enjoy yourself.”

He climbed into the small cabin and shut the weathered door, leaving me all alone on the deck. I reeled in and put my pole up. The fish weren’t hitting. The unseasonable heat had sent them down to the bottom and it would have taken dynamite to bring them up. I sat on the bench seat in front of the wheel and throttle. “Jade Marie,” I whispered. “Jade Marie.” It was true — the sound of it could make a cobra tie itself into a granny knot and shit pretzels. “Jade Marie, Jade Marie,” I said, pressing the starter button.

The lake was glassy calm and black. I cruised to the far northern end of it where a few stony islands jutted up like the rough knees of
submerged giants. There were shallow channels between the islands where the water was pale green and clear. I cut the engine back to a slow idle. Schools of dolly varden dozed on the sandy bottom.

Once through the channels, I entered a swampy bay. I switched the engine off and baited my hook. On my first cast I got a strike. It was a good-size fish, but it had practically no fight in it. I dragged it toward the boat. Even when it was right next to the boat and could see me reaching down for it, it didn't try to escape. I dipped the net down under it and scooped it in. It was a good five-pounder. Then I saw what it was. A squaw fish, a dingy bottom-crawling sucker, yellow bellied and useless. I slipped it off the hook and flipped it back into the water. The big squaw fish gave one lazy shove of its tail and drifted a few yards away from the boat. It lay there, only a few inches under the water, half on its side, as if its one moment in the atmosphere had caused it to forget that it was a fish. I had the feeling that it was looking at me, mildly curious. It hung in the pale green water like a yellow stain.

The boat began to rock. I looked up, expecting weather, but there was no cloud, no wind, just the unmoving December air. I opened the cabin door and looked in. Gent, in his underwear, was sitting on a bunk, retching. He was holding a bottle of bourbon by the neck.

"You want to do that over the side, Gent?" I asked.

He looked at me, his eyes flat and fishy, no recognition in them. He stopped retching and took a long drink. Then he capped the bottle, set it down, and curled up on the bunk.

I closed the door. The squaw fish was still there. I thought maybe that it had died. Its blunt nose was facing the boat and its big transparent lips were almost out of the water. I threw the rest of my night-crawlers at it and the fish, as if this was just what it had been waiting for, opened its mouth in a delicate yawn.

"Names," Gent said, lying across the bow. He was pasting letters to the hull. They were the peel-and-stick-on letters you can buy in any hardware store. He was naming the boat Jade Marie. We were near a steep, stony shore, the sun a blinding flare of light in the western hills. "Names," he repeated, grunting with discomfort. "They tell the story, Jack,"
He sat up and took a deep, noisy breath. He was still in his underwear and very drunk. “Jade Marie,” he sang. “Jade me, Marie, oh, she laid me, Marie, for free, for free.” He rolled to his knees and crawled back toward me, dragging his bottle with him. “The job’s done,” he said. “The little bitch-boat is monickered.”

He climbed down into the cabin and came back out carrying his revolver. My heart jumped. I’d searched again for the gun that morning, thinking that I would hide it from him, but it was gone from its usual place behind the encyclopedia. “Names,” he said darkly, drawing a bead on a bleached stump on the shore. “They . . . (bang!) . . . tell . . . (bang!) . . . a (bang! bang! bang!) story,” he said, shooting. He fired the last shot and then refilled the gun with bullets from a carton. He put the gun down on the seat and took a short drink of bourbon. “You take Franklin,” he said. “There’s a name you can trust. I never knew a goddamned Franklin I couldn’t count on. A Franklin, Jack, will always give you a full dollar’s worth, no matter what he’s selling.”

He went on for a long while about names. He said that anyone could tell an awful lot about someone just by knowing the name they had grown up under. A name is like a severe birthmark, he said. You can’t grow up ignoring it. It affects the way you think about yourself. No ‘Uriah’ for instance, could ever really think of himself as a happy-go-lucky slapdash roustabout. A boy named Uriah must always think of himself as a careful old man, beyond the toys and whims of childhood. You just never mind that old crap about what’s in a name and a rose by any other label would still knock your eyes out. No, no, no. It just isn’t so. The name itself is the key. Call a rose a ‘hemorrhoid berry’ and watch if anybody sniffs it. So this Franklin fellow — forget the slant of his jib and the cast of his eyes — this Franklin fellow will not be satisfied until he’s got the job done.

It didn’t make much sense to me, this drunken theorizing about names, but I had the feeling that it didn’t matter to him one way or the other. I mean, I didn’t really believe that he was talking about what he appeared to be talking about. The words were just pouring out of him like a bright cataract from a grim hill. The cataract and the hill had nothing to do with one another. I was old enough at the time to understand that such a thing might be possible and so I let him ramble on without commenting or nit-picking. I might have said, “You mean that there was never a worthless Franklin in the history of the world or that some Uriah didn’t drink and screw himself into an early grave?” but I didn’t. But I was also young enough to think that there
might be a grain of truth in what he was saying, even though I felt that none if it meant very much to him.

Something moved among the large stones on the shore, an animal of some kind. It was a big-horn sheep. Three of them, in fact, moving slowly among a cluster of stones. They stopped and stared at us, curious. Gent sighted on one of them but didn't pull the trigger. Instead, he put the gun down and leaned over toward me. He cupped his hand on the back of my neck. His hand was cold and soft. He scratched at the hair behind my ears, and the big-horn sheep trotted off into some scrub pine. Gent chuckled. "Your Ma and I," he said, "we're having some troubles."

I nodded. He picked up his bottle and took a drink, then offered it to me. I took several swallows. Gent looked at me, somewhat amazed. "A seasoned tippler," he said. "You'd better watch that, Jack. It can get away from you."

He was no one to talk, but there was no point in saying this. "It tastes like gasoline anyway," I said, and it wasn't a lie. Gin, bourbon, scotch — all foul and fiery and no one, I believed, would ever touch any of them if it weren't for the splendid effect they had on the mind. "Part of the problem," Gent continued, "between your Ma and me is..."

"The saxophone." I knew his hobby, the sax, irritated her.

"What? The sax? No, Jack, not the sax! Where did you get an idea like that? No, it's the fact that I'm around the house too much. My office is in my home, my business is in my home and the nature of my work gives me a great deal of free time. My sax playing hasn't got anything to do with it." He drank, passed the bottle to me, I drank. "Now the point is, a woman cannot stand to watch a man taking his ease in his own home. It makes her anxious. It isn't her fault, mind you. This is something that's been bred into the female of the species down through the ages. They can't help themselves. See, tens of thousands of years ago, the man who relaxed around the campfire was as good as dead, and so was his family. Women got to thinking of a lounging man as a direct threat to their welfare — no matter that the larder is full and the checking account is flush. We're speaking of the primitive level, here, the thing that dwells underneath good sense and obvious circumstances. I have a very good business that practically runs itself. There's nothing in Far Cry by way of competition. As far as the folks of Far Cry are concerned, I am a relatively rich man. So, much of my time is my own. Oh, I do some cooking, and some household chores, but even so, if your Ma sees me lounging on the
divan reading one of my magazines, that age-old primitive anxiety surges up in her and she becomes peevish and out of sorts.” He took another drink, passed me the bottle. I held it for a few seconds, then took a sip. I passed it back to him and he took a sip. He gave it to me, and I gave it back, and he recapped it. I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t.

That’s it? I wanted to say. That’s what you think is wrong with Ma?

“What are you grinning at, Jack?” he said.

I rubbed the grin off my face with both hands. “Nothing,” I said. “You think I’m off the mark, is that it?”

I shrugged, fought the stupid grin twitching in my numb face. I grabbed the bottle and took a fierce pull. The sun was gone and the air was tinged with smoky blue as the long shadows of the hills swept the lake.

“She does things, I know that,” he said softly. “But it’s her way of telling me that she’s being let down, Jack. I suppose it’s true. I’ve been a bachelor too long. I guess I’ve let her down.”

“No you haven’t,” I said.

He looked at me sharply. “No, I guess I haven’t,” he said. He helped himself to a lengthy session with the bottle. He picked up the gun and sighted down the bow at nothing. He fired it and a piece of the boat flew into the lake.

“You hit the boat!” I said. I crawled up on the bow to see what damage had been done.

“The Jade Marie is nothing if not durable, Jack,” he said, taking a bead at something off the stern. He fired two shots, this time missing the boat. He had an ugly look on his face. An angry sadness turned the corners of his mouth severely down. His derelict eyes saw nothing but betrayal and defeat though the darkening lake and surrounding landscape reminded me of a picture-postcard I once saw that had the caption: “God’s Majestic Handiwork Unsullied by Man.”

He climbed back down into the cabin, taking the bottle and the gun with him. “Leave the gun here, Gent,” I said. He looked back at me from the doorway of the cabin. “I just want to do some shooting,” I said, trying to smile. He handed me the gun, grip first, then a box of shells.

But I didn’t do any shooting. I started the engine and headed back to our ramp, throttle open.
I gunned the engine and aimed at the ramp. When the Jade Marie hit the foot of the ramp, I switched the engine off. I woke Gent and pulled him out of the cabin. I climbed out of the boat and then helped Gent. Before he climbed down, he tossed two boxes of bullets up the ramp. He was as drunk as I'd ever seen him. He staggered as he stepped onto the ramp, almost pitching over into the water. He was still in his underwear, but he held the gun tightly in his right hand.

I walked up to the car, thinking to back it down to the trailer. I wondered if Gent knew how to winch the boat onto the trailer, but then realized that it didn't make any difference if he knew how to or not since the Roadmaster hadn't been equipped with a trailer hitch. There was no way to haul the Jade Marie home. This exasperated me and I turned to walk back down to the boat ramp, but as I turned I heard the gun go off. Gent had shoved the boat off the ramp and it was drifting about a dozen yards away. He was sitting on the wet concrete slab and firing rounds at the little cabin cruiser.

"Gent! Gent!" I yelled, running up to him. "What are you doing that for?"

"I'm sending her down, Jack," he said, reloading the cylinder. "I'm sinking the Jade Marie." He was speaking calmly, in the same tone of voice he would use to explain the temperature gauges on the pasteurizer.

I stepped back and watched him raise the gun and sight down the barrel. He fired and a hole the size of a quarter appeared near the bow, on the water-line. "Ho!" he yelled, pleased with his marksmanship.

I said, a bit lamely, "What about your clothes? Your clothes are in the cabin."

But he didn't seem to hear me. He fired again.

"What about Carl Bowers then?" I said, feeling the whisky come on me strong. "What about his wife? If it wasn't for her he wouldn't have had to sell you his boat."

But he didn't hear the tortured logic of all this and continued to drill quarter-size holes into the hull of the Jade Marie, near and under the water-line. There was only one valid logic at work: It was his boat, and he wanted to sink it.

He opened the other box of shells. The Jade Marie was beginning to list slightly. The impact of the large caliber slugs was driving it farther and farther out into the lake. The moon was up off the hills, bone white and full. "Sink bitch," Gent said calmly.
It was the worst thing you could do to a boat like that. It was such a pretty thing, a true ornament for a majestic, unsullied lake. It had a beautiful shape, clean white and perfect blue with a snappy orange flag flying off the stern.

There was an old man fishing off the shore, about a hundred feet from the ramp. He was not looking at us. It must have taken quite an effort to do that. I walked up to the car. I sat in the front seat, behind the wheel. In the rear-view mirror I could see the bow of the Jade Marie was under water and the stern was in the air. I got out of the car to watch it go.

But it didn't go. It hung suspended between life and death. Gent was standing now, watching it, the gun at his side. I walked down to him.

"I'm out of bullets," he said.

"Let's go home," I said.

"Look," he said. "She won't go down. There's enough holes in her to sink two boats, but not this Jade Marie of mine. What do you make of it, Jack?" He was grinning, like a man hopelessly amused at the perversity of the world.

I took the empty gun out of his hand. "Let's go," I said. He had planned the whole thing and it made me snap at him. The boat rolled over suddenly, but did not sink. Whatever had been done, it had been done to me too. "Goddamn it," I said.

Gent looked at me as if for the first time ever. I looked at him in the same way. We may have been right. I threw the gun into the lake as hard as I could. It bounced off the upside-down boat.