

Steer Crazy



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OUR FIRST NEIGHBORS on Pine Island were Kathleen and Larry, both natives of this state and each an encyclopedia of Floridiana. Here's how I met Larry: One morning I woke to the rhyth-

mic chink of a shovel biting into the dirt. Climbing out of bed, I looked out of our bedroom window and saw a shrouded figure digging a hole in the adjoining yard. "Are you digging a hole to China?" I asked.

The digger paused, stroked his chin, shook his head and chuckled. Then as he got back to his solitary task, I offered to lend him a hand. And thus a friendship was born.

I'll never forget that morning because Larry wasn't planting a tree; he was digging a grave. A hole in the ground to bury his beloved dog Breeze. Is there a job that tugs the heart more than that?

We were alternately shoveling sand and wiping away sweat and tears, and we somehow got Breeze buried. After which, Larry invited me over for a beer, and I met his menagerie of deaf cats, psychic rabbits and Buddha-bellied Labrador retrievers. In addition to these, Larry and his wife, Kathleen, had a number of roadside casualties they cared for, including a grown-up osprey that Kathleen had found as a broken-winged nestling.

Indeed, this was the friendliest osprey I've ever known. A few days later, when my wife and I went on a tour of Charlotte Harbor with Larry and Kathleen in their somewhat sinkable Penn Yan, I watched in amazement as the osprey flew along with us, keeping a watchful eye on our excursion.

"It's like a grown child now,"

Kathleen explained, “who won’t leave home for very long.” There’s probably nothing more affable than a people-loving, fish-eating, stay-at-home osprey. Kathleen also introduced me to Larry’s latest acquisition, a gopher tortoise that had recently been run over by a car and had suffered a badly crushed shell that Larry glued back together with superglue and an old piece of tire. “The tire part stretches as the turtle grows,” Larry said.

“What about the glue?” I asked.

“We’ll have to see about that,” he said. But as the months went by, we did see—and it was a miracle of backyard science.

Because I had such a fondness for gophers, as they are known, Larry took me out into the Sound in his Penn Yan and introduced me to a whole island of gophers. A harsh desolate paradise of cacti and gophers smiling and blooming under the hot subtropical sun. My kind of place.

The resident gophers of this tiny island had it all to themselves, or so it seemed.

ANOTHER TIME, WHEN LARRY invited me out on the Penn Yan, he told me about this special place out in the Gulf that only he and a few old salts knew about. “It’s a hole in the Gulf,” he said, “a sort of blue hole that’s full of fresh water from a natural spring deep under the sand. You have freshwater fish and the water’s clear and just about drinkable, and once I saw a 10-foot rattlesnake swimming out there.”

“What was it doing?” I asked.

“Swimming,” he said.

We had engine trouble in Charlotte Harbor that evening. “Now, listen, Cap’n Gerry,” Larry warned, “I need you to take over

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the wheel while I go down in the hold and see what’s the matter. Don’t drift to starboard ‘cause there’s a tanker over there off Boca Grande, and they’ll get cranky if we bang into them.”

“What if we drift to larboard?” I asked.

“Nautically impossible,” Larry said with a chuckle. “No, seriously,” he chided, “You go over there where you see those greenish lights, and we’re in real trouble. That’s all tarpon fishermen, deck to deck, far as the eye can see.”

I allowed as to how I couldn’t see anything except those eerie lights like a constellation of fireflies. “If you drift too close and bang into them, they’ll shoot at you.”

“Serious?”

“Never was before I met you,” he answered. Then he gave me a nod, and headed down to that deadbeat engine. I had the utmost faith in Larry’s marine know-how because he was one of the best boat mechanics on the west coast of Florida. But I hadn’t a grain of faith in my ability to keep the Penn Yan on course.

As I had expected, we were soon drifting close to the Boca Grande tanker. “Get her on course,” Larry hollered from down blow. “I can feel ‘er driftin’.”

“OK,” I shouted. Then I worked the wheel like a lunatic. It spun like the steering wheel of one of those little sparky cars at the amusement park.

Just as soon as I’d managed to correct the warp sucking us toward Boca Grande’s tanker dock, up came the tarpon decks, gleaming in the green glow of those twilight running lights. As I whipped the wheel to and fro to avoid collision, I imagined the tarpon men lined up and taking turns shooting at me. It didn’t help that Larry yelled up from the bilge waters—“How’s it going, Cap’n Gerry?” Before I could phrase my frustration, he added, “Seems like we’re gonna bang into those tarpon boats. Tell me I’m wrong.”

I didn’t. Mainly because I couldn’t. To me, it seemed the Penn Yan was moving in circles drawn by the magnetic poles of tanker and tarpon.

Still, Kathleen took pity on me and brought me a glass of merlot. “You’re doing a good job,” she confided, her eyes sparkling. Then, to ease my nerves a little, she engaged me in a conversation about eagles.

“The thing about eagles,” Kathleen said, as I worked the wheel in a futile spin, “is the way they fly. Did you know that most of the eagles living on Pine Island like to fly as the crow flies?”

THE DANCING GREEN LIGHTS danced closer. I corrected, I thought, aiming again

for the tanker. The tarpon lights neared even more. I couldn't get rid of them or the fog-bound tanker no matter what I did.

Kathleen continued, "Yeah, I've seen an eagle go all the way down Stringfellow Road, straight as an arrow. Can you believe that? They use the roads as we do, only they fly above them. It's a lot safer that way."

I was really intrigued by this, but the tarpon guns loomed large in my imagination. I was quailing at my

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post, until Larry popped and barked, "Steering's fixed, Cap'n Gerry."

"Steering? I thought it was engine trouble."

"You would put it that way."

Larry winked. "How's the merlot?"

But you couldn't stay miffed at Larry, not even for a minute. He'd enjoyed seeing his friend harrowed at the sailor's wheel, yet the moment he started laughing, I was right there with him laughing at myself. †

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