RANDI FAUST

Displacement

Jake had seen so many ships launched into the greasy, green bayou that he'd long ago stopped counting—Navy and Coast Guard ships, commercial containers, tankers, tugs, barges, offshore supply vessels, floating docks. He'd seen Mather Marine, Inc., christen and launch pretty much anything that would float, and he'd seen the launches from both sides of the bayou. First, as a teenager—one of the many ashen-faced spectators across the narrow waterway that separated the locals from the shipyard; and now—twenty years later—on the opposing bank, as Mather Marine's hired cameraman.

During those early launches—those grand events of his bland adolescence—before his family had fallen apart, before his idea of who he was had become a joke—he'd spent each pre-launch afternoon seated on—or rather, being continually unseated from—his father's packed beer cooler, sneaking off, now and then, to smoke cigarettes or share sips of pilfered beer with his friends.

In Labadie, Louisiana, a launch was a lunch was a party. Every family had their particular spot, and the people never changed place, nor vice versa. Jake's family-spot was prime launchophile real estate. It offered its audience a nice wide-shot of the ship, while sparing them the image of chaos generated by Dumb Hébert and his soon-to-be-swimming chickens.

For years, Hébert had caged his chickens on the shoreline, locked up tight with an old Yale and Towne brass padlock his great-great-grandfather had carried down from Nova Scotia. The antique lock, with its raised "Y&T" logo, was a monster—so big it could be seen from across the bayou, and people joked that Hébert had the only maximum-security chicken pen. "You can't tell," they'd say, "if he's trying to keep somebody from stealing his chickens, or just keep them birds from escaping to higher ground before the next launch." And there was always a next launch.

Days before each big event, the unofficial Labadie ladies' league began working the telephone lines—calling back and forth across town, coordinating who would bring what. They soaked and sorted beans, fried catfish and chicken, smoked sausages, cleaned and

breaded okra, shredded cabbage for coleslaw. Their daughters stood vigilant at the stove, stirring their mamas' burnt-orange roux while brownies baked, lemon squares cooled, and pots of red beans simmered and steamed. The morning of each launch—hours before there was any sign of life at the shipyard—the people of Labadie and the surrounding area would descend upon the banks of the bayou. By the dozens they'd come, toting their portables and potables, until the grassy shore blossomed with picnic baskets, jugs of sweet tea, ice chests, colorful straw hats, bandanas, and baseball caps. They'd set up their family camps, just as homey as you'd please. Then the kids would run off together and the adults would instinctively split up by gender.

The women typically gathered in groups of twos and threes, their hands moving mechanically while they talked—alternately fanning themselves and shooing the flies and dogs away from the food. They adjusted their skirts and shifts and culottes, and squeezed themselves into aluminum lawn chairs—the green woven seats sunbleached and torn, and haphazardly repaired with twisted lumps of black electrical tape.

The men clustered on old blankets or collapsible hunting stools, speculating and pointing at the stationary ship, which—being launched in the standard sideways position—ran parallel to the shoreline. They passed the time smoking cigars, invoking the stories of past launches, and placing dollar bets on the exact time of the splashdown at hand.

More often than not, at least one old-timer would pipe up with a harmonica or an accordion and then, by God, let the games begin. The brief piece of land next to Dumb Hébert's property, festered with the parasitic onslaught of neighbors, friends, first, second, and third cousins, each staring and straining with hands held against foreheads to block the sun; waiting across the bayou in buzzy, half-drunken anticipation for the shipyard workers to give the ready signal.

Then it was all here, and "all clear," and the quick shock of an air horn blast sang out pain and delight. One dirty thumb's push of a red button, and the shrill trill of compressed air sheered through the opacity of the Gulf Coast afternoon, across the narrow waterway, forcing the crowd into a moment of stunned sobriety, clipping short the squeezebox player, and calling the gawkers to attention.

From the not-so-distant shore, they could just make out a woman—no, not a woman, a lady—typically blue-haired and Chanel-suited, who would say a few profound, historical words they'd never hear, take her best swing and smash the red-white-and-blue-ribboned champagne bottle smack against the ship's hull, then as quickly as she could, descend the raised platform.

The next short burst of the air horn would start the process, and the three flagmen would raise their flags—each one a visual signal for their corresponding partner with the blowtorch, at the ready to score three neat, consecutive slices into the steel cables that held the ship on dry ground; held her towering above the rolling platform of slanted skids where they'd assembled as much of the vessel as they could out of the water. When the bow, midsection, and stern flagmen lowered their flags, it meant the first slice had been cut. The air horn would sound again, and again the trio of raised blaze orange flags would whip to the "up" position. The next burn would be made down the line of torch-bearers, and the flags were down, down, down. Like clockwork. It had to be like clockwork, because if one cable snapped ahead of the others, the ship would go in stern first or bow first; too crooked or too slow or too fast. The third horn—now, that was the horn that meant business—would finally blare, and the flare of the torches would fire up again. The final cut. The one that would render the whole thing unretractable; a done deal. When that horn ceased, the torches were snuffed, the flags slapped down, and the ship was free. After that, it was the guy with the air horn who carried the day—who volleyed the one, long, continuous screech of a siren, the victory crow, the final blow that pierced without discrimination the air and the ears and the heirs of the shipping kings (whose prosperity held the fate of Labadie in their manicured hands) and the paupers, who resided in another world on the opposite shore and, having grown used to the intrusion, considered these events community theater at its finest.

It was this third and final cut, the snap of thick-as-a-man's-arm steel cable, the start and then the never-ending wail of the air horn's long, menacing dirge—sneering its industrial nose up at the waning wetlands of the delta—that sent the virgin vessel on her irreversible slide into the bayou. The slide, the slide, the slide, then—pow—five hundred tons of welded, unforgiving steel crashing into the bayou, cutting through the once impenetrable mat of vegetation. And the

water submitting; giving in and giving up and rising into a tidal wave that smashed the opposite shore, showered the onlookers and inevitably drowned every last one of Hébert's chickens.

For the past twelve years, Jake had been videotaping each launch event, then racing off to the post-production house in Lake Charles, where he would sit in near-darkness; logging, editing, and mixing; dubbing, labeling and packaging the tapes. The next morning, he'd walk into Mather Marine with multiple copies of the finished product, and twenty minutes later, walk out with a check that would last him until the next gig. Every launch was pretty much the same as any launch, and consequently, the same held true for the videotapes. But what they lacked in originality, they more than made up for in customer satisfaction and bottom-line goodwill. It was big business and the frills were important. After spending several million dollars and change, it was a damn thrill to christen the tub and drop her into the water. For Jake, however, these events had become routine; formulaic; something, he'd joked, he could do with one eye tied behind his back. Which was why he'd been surprised to awaken this morning with his old, childlike enthusiasm intact.

Although the shoot was still hours away, for Jake it couldn't start soon enough. He checked his tape supply, loaded his camera and tripod into the van, then the black sack, bulging at the seams with clamps and batteries and cords. He moved through this rote process with renewed vigor—with the same youthful eagerness that had churned inside him before each elementary school field trip. He tossed his oversized fanny-pack—stuffed with every imaginable troubleshooting doohickey—onto the passenger seat and drove off into the restless morning.

It was a stupid place for a launch, and everybody knew it: a stretch of living bayou not fifty yards across, repeatedly forced to endure these assaults; something equivalent to the water displacement caused by dropping a freight train engine into a backyard swimming pool. Not to mention that a person lived on that bayou's edge—within bird shot distance of the shipyard—even if it was Dumb Hébert. But the ships were a product of Mather's side of the bayou—had been for some twenty-five years now. This was Mather's domain, and consequently, his call. Besides, nobody ever got too upset on Dumb Hébert's behalf. If Hébert was stupid enough to pen up his chickens

on the bayou's edge and leave them there during the launch, then he got what he deserved. Dumb Hébert was the town joke, in a town that was itself a joke to other towns.

Of course, Hébert hadn't always been Dumb Hébert. Like Jake's father—like most Labadie men of that generation—Charlie Hébert had spent his better years working the asbestos mines. Twelve-hour shifts of chipping, digging—sometimes clawing by hand—at the veins of asbestos that ran through dense rock. The men struggled against the earth, enveloped in a haze of dust and the dank chill of subterranean moisture that cast an eerie sense of impending danger on their every move. They labored under the constant threat of injury, suffocation, and cave-ins. It was nearly impossible to breathe; to see; to return every morning. But a job was a job. It was steady work and the pay was decent. They were among the employed, and that in itself was something to be grateful for.

Among the miners, payday was viewed as a holiday—a cause for celebration; an excuse for near-debaucherous behavior and reckless spending—as if each paycheck came to them as a wonderful surprise. On Friday evenings, the men would return home, slough off their dusty work clothes, shower, and rejoin socially. Many of the men went straight from the mines to the bars, dispersing a trail of asbestos fibers in their wake, and spending in one night what had taken them treacherous days to earn. Significantly milder in his interpretation of payday, Jake's father preferred to mark his successes at home with family and friends.

For over a decade of Friday nights, Jake's parents sat at their card table with Hébert and his wife, drinking and smoking and playing cards, way into the Waffle House hours. Jake's father and Charlie Hébert worked side by side, blessing and cursing their lot, unsuspecting that instead of cementing their futures they were paving their lungs, one sharp shard at a time. His mother and Mrs. Hébert shared carpooling duties, kid care, and—despite their rich Cajun culinary heritage—recipes from the new ladies' magazines that invariably featured Campbell's condensed cream of mushroom soup. Jake, in turn, had grown up with Hébert's two daughters, playing Twister and Operation, post office and doctor. For a young boy in a small town, these were the good times. But as a thirty-four-year-old man, still living and working in the stifling place of

his birth, Jake scrolled through these memories now with Oedipal repulsion.

It had been years since Jake had mourned his father's death, but those days hung with him still. Jake was twenty-four when his father died, broke and broken; his lungs pierced through with glassy slivers of asbestos, each one surrounded by a sclerotic envelope of impotent scar tissue. His every breath was a painful, Sisyphean effort, both to him and to anyone who had the misfortune to witness it. His last eleven months, he lay wasting—diminishing daily—until it seemed more likely that rather than die, he would simply disappear.

Which, in essence, is what happened. For after all her years of consistent well-woven lies, Jake's mother chose her husband's funeral as her moment to finally speak a truth; the unbearable truth that Charlie Hébert—not Leslie White—was Jake's father. Jake had asked his mother only one question that day: "Does Hébert know that I'm his son?"

His mother nodded. "He knows. But he don't know *you* know, and I'm not gonna tell him. That'd be up to you."

Jake had no intention of telling Hébert, nor anyone else. Bad enough that he had lost his father twice in the same week; that his pathetic life had just been taken down yet another notch. He didn't need people searching his face for signs of Dumb Hébert.

But the signs were there; the sunken eyes, the crooked smile, the wide forehead, the wan, pale skin Jake's parents never had. He could see it when he shaved, when he brushed his teeth, when he buttoned his shirt collar, when he closed his eyes at night.

By the time Jake cruised up to the Mather Marine gate with his vanload of gear, the neighborhood soirée across the bayou was just cranking up. There were already close to a hundred people on the shore, and still more were arriving—by car and on foot—not a one empty-handed. A trio of dirty-kneed boys skipped stones across the water, crowing their triumphs in piercing pre-pubescent screams. The cornflower-blue sky was perfect for a shoot. A light breeze blew across the bayou, carrying with it the smell of burgers grilling and the faint sprinkle of women's laughter. It was a job, like any other, but even so, the launches still stirred in Jake a pleasant nostalgia for his days on the opposite shore. They were mostly

happy memories—his first cigar, his first car, his first kiss—but Jake wasn't kidding himself. He was better off on this side of the water. Over there he would never be anything more than an anonymous onlooker, passively waiting for something to happen. Here, on Mather's side, Jake could make things happen. He became somebody else; somebody significant. The shipyard guys treated him as if he were a celebrity. They marveled over his fancy television equipment; his easy unflappable manner; his intuitive knowledge of each of the mind-shattering number of buttons and dials that required tweaking; the confidence with which he performed such seemingly complicated feats of high-tech wizardry. He was a one-man band of cameras, cables, batteries, headphones, mikes, monitors, and lights. Jake would always be "more" on this side of the bayou, but he would never be enough. Nothing could really get any better until the bayou, Dumb Hébert, and the rest of Labadie were a dot in his rearview mirror.

The sun had just achieved that brief satisfying moment—somewhere between comforting and oppressive—and Jake had the distinct thought that for once, he had things in control; that his life was finally about to turn around. He pulled into a "Reserved" space, did a quick check-in with Shelly at the office, then, armed with equipment, headed straight for his opening shot. He wished he'd been able to wangle a two-camera shoot so he could relax a little and enjoy the "visual" of Dumb Hébert's impending folly, but he'd already upped the production value of this series of launch tapes as much as he'd felt comfortable doing—seducing Mather into a more upscale music montage. "Combine the shoots, lots of fast cuts, transitional effects, patriotic soundtrack, the whole deal," he'd said. No matter. Even without the second camera, Jake would be able to see what he needed to see. He stared across the still waters at the growing crowds who stared back at him, then over to Dumb Hébert's place—conspicuously unchanged in the years since Jake's only visit.

It was a shotgun bungalow in the old style—clapboard and asbestos siding, tin roof with a little smokestack that entertained the ethereal wisps of drowned, smoked chicken rising up from the wood-burning stove. Hébert had managed to outlive his friends, coworkers, Jake's father, but at what cost? At the first sign of his asbestosis,

Hébert's wife had packed up their girls and fled to her mother's house in Houma—retreating from the burden of Hébert's dismal prognosis. And Charlie Hébert surrendered. Alone and sick, unable to work, he withdrew into a stubborn reclusion on his little patch of bayou shoreline.

In his solitude, he grew angry, suspicious. He ran off well-meaning church-folk, social workers, neighbors, and old friends alike with the same vehement aggression. He toiled at insulating and isolating himself—barking threats and obscenities to anyone who came within a foot of his property—until finally there was no one left who was willing to bother with him. He was—as his great-great-grandfather had been—a loner; a crazy, old Cajun eking out an existence any way he could.

It had been a different bayou back then. A vital, viable source of life; fertile and lush with native lilies and grasses, crawfish, and oysters—just about anything a man would need to survive in the old ways. When the shipyard expanded—moving directly across the water from the old man's shack—Hébert hung layers of black plastic sheeting and garbage bags over his windows, shutting out the sun and the sight of progress and industry that blocked his view of the hills and the trees, the old sugar plantation and the southern sky.

It had probably been years since anyone had ventured to call on Dumb Hébert, and the usual rumor had begun to cycle around again: that the old man had finally checked out. Of course, it was probably just talk—no one had thought it worth the trouble of investigating. Jake didn't even believe it, but then again, it was a possibility. If Hébert had died, then Jake wanted to know it with certainty. And on the chance that Hébert was still even a little alive, well, Jake wanted to know that too. It was the only way he could think to quiet the shameful hunger he had, the need to look his natural father in the eye—just once—before it was too late.

From Hébert's porch, Jake could hear the low drone of sitcom laughter from an old TV. A dusty gray goat with a distended belly was tied to a post on the front porch. Brass wind chimes hung motionless from the eve, wrapped in the silence of a thick tangle of spider web. Even from outside, Jake caught the lonely smell of one man's cigarette habit.

Though not accustomed to visitors, Hébert ushered Jake inside with a gesture of his hand. Tethered to his wheeled oxygen tank,

Hébert trailed in behind his guest. A couple of chickens strutted into the house through the open door with familiar confidence, threatening flight as the screen door slammed behind them. Hébert motioned toward a greasy, torn sofa for Jake to sit.

Jake stepped over a pile of yellowed newspapers and seated himself on the very edge of the soiled couch. The television was loud, but Hébert seemed not to notice or care. He settled into a chair across from Jake. In front of the chair on a worn rug lay a decrepit old hound dog, his bloodshot eyes caked with yellow matter. The makeshift window coverings made the house so dark that it took Jake a few blind minutes to adjust. "Still got that old dog, huh?" Jake talked over the television, now on a commercial break from a *Sanford and Son* rerun.

"Yeah, 'bout dead though, I think." Hébert stretched out his bare foot and stroked the dog's back with his toes. His feet were a ghastly white, his toenails thick, disfigured claws—grungy and yellow from neglect. His heels and soles were scaled and scabbed with sores and dead skin. "I was sorry to hear about your dad," he said, breathing heavy through a gargle of fluid. "He was a good man."

Jake nodded—listening for something in Hébert's voice, something between the lines that he could pity or hate. Among the things which Hébert had evidently shared with Jake's father, the disease was easily the most forgivable. Jake recognized at once the combined effects of asbestos mining and cigarette smoking; the resulting years of desperate, constant sucking to draw each new breath. He knew the way that every inhalation became a singular, crucial project; significant enough over time to physically reshape a man.

Like Jake's father, Hébert's ashen cheeks had fallen in on either side of his sharp nose. Beneath the thinning grayed undershirt, Jake could see the concave valley of Hébert's chest; everything about him toiling to exhaustion to take in just what he needed to survive that moment; to hold his own in a constant tug-of-war with the uncooperative air.

Even his house seemed to be imploding from his efforts. Patches of ceiling peeled and hung downward, and the sheeted paneling of the walls bowed in. The floors were stacked with piles of old *T.V. Guides*, hunting and trapping magazines, empty cigarette cartons, and glass jelly jars of spat-out tobacco juice. A Folgers coffee can on

the aluminum tray table next to Hébert's chair was filled to overflowing with dirty sand and Viceroy cigarette butts.

"Well, what can I do ya for?" Hébert struggled unsuccessfully to suppress a cough. He held his head down until it passed, then adjusted his nasal cannula, pushing the clear plastic tubing up hard into his nostrils and straining to pull in enough oxygen to settle the coughing.

When things were quiet again, Jake said, "I just came by to see about maybe setting up my camera over here sometime for a launch. It's a good view from your place and it'd be somethin' different."

Hébert pointed to the floor. "Here?"

"Well, outside. Maybe out back, from up top of my van."

"I don't think so," Hébert said. "I'm not of a mind to be helping those folks." He nodded in the direction of the shipyard, somewhere beyond the black, plastic tarp that covered the glass pane.

"I understand," said Jake. "Just thought I'd ask. Doesn't hurt to ask." Jake wasn't going to press it. He didn't care to shoot the launch from Hébert's side of the bayou, and even if he did, there were plenty of places to set up on the public side of Hébert's fence. He'd needed an excuse to come. That was all.

They sat in clumsy silence, watching Sanford hatch out the plans for another get-rich-quick scheme, while "and Son" tried unsuccessfully to dissuade him. Jake and Hébert allowed themselves to be lulled by the canned laughter until their silence had become either comfortable, or all that was left to say.

When the credits rolled over the Sanford junkyard, Jake slapped his hands on his knees. "Well, I best be goin'," he said. But Hébert was asleep—slumped back in his chair, wheezing. Sleeping like the dead, Jake thought. He was a pitiful figure. A bent-in hermit of a man; a shadow of a shadow, agonizingly negotiating life in a house that knew only night; friend only to a half-dead bloodhound and the fickle companion of his cigarettes. Even so, Jake found something soft and familiar about the sleeping Hébert; something familiar in the labored breathing, in his sad, fragile face. Like it or not, this man was his father, as gentle and harmless a man as the one who had raised Jake.

Jake watched Hébert for a moment, then stood and turned off the television. He picked up an old afghan from the couch and held it to his face, breathing in the stench of stale smoke that infused every-

thing in the house. Bending over his father's body, Jake draped the small blanket over the small man and gently readjusted the oxygen tubing. Then he took the smoldering cigarette from the old man's yellowed fingers and snuffed it out in the makeshift ashtray. There was no point in saying goodbye, even less in "see you later." "You're gonna blow yourself up, Hébert," was all he said.

Because of Jake's affinity for Mather's side of the bayou, he knew things that the others did not. For starters, he knew that those chickens were Hébert's livelihood, but not in the way most people understood it. Since that first launch-related chicken incident, Mather had been paying off Hébert—and generously so—to compensate the Cajun for his periodic poultry losses and to keep the shipyard trouble free. Of course, Mather knew that Hébert's chickens were being deliberately sacrificed, but the rest of Labadie believed that Dumb Hébert was really that dumb.

"Let's just keep that between you and me, now son," Mather had said to Jake after one such incident. "I don't need any more crazy Cajuns trying to squeeze me where it hurts, if you catch my drift."

Jake had agreed to keep quiet about it—hell, there was just about nothing he wouldn't do for Mr. Mather, but he didn't understand why a man like Mather would kowtow to a lowlife like Dumb Hébert. "Screw him," Jake had said. "Why don't you just stop paying him? What's he going to do—sue you?"

"Hell no," Mather laughed. "I got an office in New Orleans, with a crapload of the sharpest lawyers you've ever seen. Just the same, I like to keep a low profile. Let's just say there are a few regulatory agencies with whom it's possible I am just a mite into the gray area of compliance." In fact, there were many—EPA, DOT, OSHA, and more—an alphabet soup of potential fines and shut-downs. "So, once a quarter I cut Hébert a check. He's happy; I'm happy. Everything remains copasetic."

Jake didn't fault Mather for his approach. The man was like the father Jake wished he'd had. He ran a successful shop, took care of his customers, and employed half the town to boot. If Mather cut a few corners, finessed the system here and there, well that was just a fact of doing business; a necessary protection against failure.

Dumb Hébert was another matter; a lowly man who'd slept with his best friend's wife, who drowned his own chickens for the extor-

tion money, who lived in solitude like some feral dog. He was a constant reminder of everything Jake worked at forgetting.

But not for long, Jake thought. *That all stops today.* He balanced his tripod and clipped the camera into the quick release, zoomed in across the bayou to Hébert's shack, his chicken pen—for once—empty. Jake had won. His discovery the month before in the edit room had uncovered Hébert's secret, and the jig was up.

He'd sat with a cup of Starbucks in the big edit suite, feeling like a rich man—a far cry from his amateurish home-video days, where he'd counted every minute that ticked by, even in the cheap do-it-yourself edit room—a chintzy afterthought of a room with its Wal-Mart desk lamps, metal folding chairs, and indoor-outdoor carpeting. Now he was hangin' with the big dogs, in the high-tech, pampered plush of broadcast quality video. Jake had been working his way up the video food chain ever since he'd won Mr. Mather over with that first launch video, shooting it on his own and presenting it to Mather along with an offer to produce more. It was a ballsy move, and at the time Jake hadn't been sure whether Mather was going to hire him or take him to court, but it had proved fruitful. Over the years, Mather underwrote Jake's education in video production, giving him the freedom and the cash to make each tape better than the last. Mather Marine purchased the equipment, giving Jake responsibility for it, as well as unlimited access and the green light to use it for other jobs in his spare time. As long as Mather Marine's jobs took priority, Mr. Mather was satisfied with the arrangement. Jake worked weddings and other small jobs, but the launch gig was the sweetest job of them all, and getting sweeter.

The previous spring, Mather Marine had signed one of its biggest deals ever, contracting to build three identical oil-spill response vessels—part of a fleet of 210-foot ships that would slog after the slop of errant oil tankers, saving the shoreline, saving the mangroves, saving the world. It was big money—oil money—and with the ships reaching completion, Jake could hear the launches clicking off like "cha-chings" on an old cash register. It was the first of the three launch tapes in the series, and Jake had installed himself in a rolling leather chair to direct the edit, when a shot of Hébert's property entered the frame. "Hold it Willy. Hold it," Jake said to the editor. "Go back."

Willy hit the controller's pause button and jogged back a couple of seconds to the beginning of the shot. "Right here?" he asked.

"Yeah, play that for a second, would you?" said Jake. Willy pushed play, and the shot rolled. It was just pre-launch stuff—nothing they would normally use in the tape. The Admiral's wife had just started climbing the steps to the christening platform, guys on the platform in suits laughing and shaking hands, nothing happening yet. The lens zoomed into the woman's left eye for a clear focus, then out again to frame the shot that would become the bottle-smash. But off, beyond the platform, on the opposite bank was Hébert's property. Then the camera went to stand-by, waiting for the show to begin. "That's it," Jake said. "Go back again."

Again the editor replayed the shot, then again, and finally Jake said, "Give me a close up of that, right there."

"The cage?" Willy said.

"Yeah, put it up on the big monitor, and pause it right there," Jake said. He leaned forward in his chair and looked at the blow-up version of that cage. "Well, I'll be damned, Willy. What do you see there?"

"Looks like a cage, with...what...a bunch of carpet scraps in it?"

"Can you go any bigger?" Jake stood up now and moved directly in front of the monitor. Willy drew a digital frame around the cage, punched a couple of buttons, and poof. There it was—big as life. Jake let out a whoop. "Son-of-a-bitch," he said. "Carpet scraps."

"Looks like—" Willy redrew the frame and exploded out the image of one of the gray-white blobs. "Old, shag carpet wrapped around chicken wire?"

"Damn straight," Jake said. "That's exactly what it is."

"You don't want that shot in the tape, do you?" Willy asked.

"No, no," Jake said. "But stick in a blank tape, would you? I'd like a copy of that. Just that one shot."

When Mather saw the tape the next day, he was silent at first. Then he started to laugh. "Well, now that *is* interesting. Isn't it, Jake?"

The second of the three launches came and went—with Hébert's carpet scraps taking a terrible beating. The bayou was even higher than usual, and Jake had joked with Mather, "Between the wave and the water hyacinth, those poor carpet remnants didn't stand a chance."

"Pity," Mather had said. "I was hard-pressed to find any consoling words for Mr. Hébert when he came looking for his check." Mather slapped Jake on the back. "I just told him that I was mighty sorry for the way we had soaked that cage-full of his old yella rugs, but I knew that no amount of money could make up for that." He laughed at himself. "You should've seen that Cajun when I told him I was considering asking for all the previous money back. 'Well, Mr. Hébert,' I said to him, 'Now I'm not too bright about these matters—that's what I pay my lawyers for—but it seems to me that I've got a pretty good case here. Wouldn't you agree?' Whoo Jake, I wish you'd had the camera in here for that one." Mather winked.

Jake's face had a grin that was almost too big. There was nothing more spectacular on the highlights tape of his small life than having Mr. Mather joke with him like they were comrades. He loved the sarcasm and the smell of cigars, the unlikely fresh flowers that Mather had delivered to his office every Monday morning, the mahogany desk, the glass-encased models of ships, the leather chairs, the photographs of Mather with senators and tycoons. Each time they talked, Jake sensed the possibility that he might someday have a piece of all this. Not as owner of a major shipbuilding company, but maybe his own video production firm. Why not? With Jake as the hands-on guy and Mather as the benevolent mentor—a man with an appreciation for the entrepreneurial spirit—Jake could take their little venture into the big time: Houston, Chicago, New York, maybe even all the way to the West Coast.

Jake stood in the ready position, waiting for the shipyard foreman to give him the sign that things were about to start. It was the prettiest time of year for a launch. The Japanese water hyacinth was at its thickest and most beautiful, blanketing the bayou with dense purple flowers that floated on the surface, swaying in synchrony to each ripple on the water, rising and falling as a single unit—a giant, grandmotherly bedspread of purple blossoms. They were awesome and overwhelming, but they were not indigenous and their lingering presence was neither welcome nor appreciated.

Jake had grown up hearing the story from his maternal grandmother: how Japanese horticulturists—exhibitors at the 1884 New Orleans World's Fair—had given away thousands of the flowering plants as souvenirs, each one accompanied by instructions for

its care. Without a thought, the grateful recipients followed the directions, taking the seedlings home and tossing them into water gardens and fishing holes, ponds and creeks. The plants furrowed down into the bayous and channels, taking root with the singular motivation of their own aggressive proliferation and survival. They swept through the channels, blocking off waterways and utility lines, harboring the larvae of billions of mosquitoes and choking off the once prominent water grasses and flowers native to the bayou.

Before anyone could think to worry about it, the water hyacinth had spread like a lovely cancer. It covered the water's surface, first killing the bayou flora that required clear surface area and sunlight, and then the fauna that required the flora. It went on, unchecked, until the bayou was home only to the most vile of living things: the alligator, the water moccasin, the mosquito, and the Japanese water hyacinth.

Everything about the bayou was a mixed blessing. Where there was beauty, there was also danger. Where there was the promise of life, there was the threat of death—extinction.

From Jake's perspective, it just made for great video. It couldn't have been any better unless it were all set to music right on the spot. There was drama, action, noise, nature yielding to man, and the potential for disaster. There would always be somebody who'd complain about progress. But it would have to be somebody other than Jake.

For years now, and with great effort, Hébert had fought against these invaders—wheezing his way through life—working his little patch of shoreline, fishing and raising chickens, living the way the Cajuns had lived before the asbestos mines, before tract housing and convenience stores, before the Mathers and the water hyacinth had moved in and established themselves as naturalized citizens of the delta. It was obvious who would outlast whom. All one had to do was look at Hébert's ramshackle house, the crowds of drunken onlookers waiting for the launch as if it were the second coming, then pan over to the shipyard—its huge steel carcasses of ships and barges, a fleet of cranes and forklifts and all manner of heavy equipment sprawled over ninety acres of land that no one, but Mather, had thought usable. As for who and what would survive, the evidence was all around: in the violet-velvet surface of the hyacinth-

covered bayou; in the bloody coughs of the last few miners; on the videotapes of every launch; in Dumb Hébert's vacant chicken pen.

The launch foreman waved over to Jake and gave him a thumbs-up. Jake reciprocated, then turned his eye to the camera's lens.

He could hear the pounding thump of bad-radio bass from the other side, maybe from someone's car radio, or more typically, one of the many boomboxes that had supplanted the accordion as pre-launch entertainment, and then the short shock of the ready signal from the air horn, and the small crowd on the launch platform quieted. A minister brought in by the ship owner said a blessing over the ship, and Mr. Mather passed the ceremonial champagne bottle to an elegant woman with a bright smile—her crisp, white pantsuit and sailor collar the perfect patriotic accent to the red and blue of the ship's hull.

Jake did a quick pull, zooming in for an extreme close-up of the woman's left eye; focusing and refocusing on the blue of her iris until every starry spire of color, every eyelash, every laugh line, every detail was in perfect focus. Then he pushed back, framing up the woman and her husband, the minister, Mr. Mather, and the sweet spot on the hull where the bottle would explode into whistles and applause. The eye focus was critical—one of the little tricks that separated the amateurs from the pros, one that Jake had gleaned from his Mather-financed schooling. It was simple, but it made all the difference; focus on the subject's eye, then push out, reframe the shot, and the whole person is in perfect crisp focus. From the moment he'd first used this device, all of his productions could be separated at a glance into two categories: those soft, unclear images which he'd produced in ignorance of the "eye-focus" technique—those early, dusty-looking videos that distanced the viewer from the subject; and the utterly realistic shows which came after—the ones that made the viewer feel as though they were right there.

The woman leaned over and said something to Mather, and he put his hand on her shoulder and pointed at the spot where she was to hit the bottle. Jake shook his head—he'd seen this so many times he knew what was being said on that platform. No matter who it was christening the ship, their big fear was always that the bottle would not break. The bottle always broke. Still, they had to ask.

Mather was a reassuring man, and after his gesture, she proceeded with aplomb. Unlike other women who had done this, Jake

thought this one unusually confident—not wincing or squinting on the backswing—but diving into it with gusto, smiling on the backswing, giving the camera her full complement of emotions: resolve in her eyes as the bottle cut through the air; her mouth wide open in surprise and joy as it crashed into the hull in a spray of grand fizz; and then the laugh—jubilant, ecstatic—as pure and unrestrained as a little girl's.

Then all at once, she was being led off the platform and Jake was running—moving his tripod into position for the big shot. This was *the* spot. Had been for years. From here, the camera could catch it all: the flags, the blowtorches, the snap and slide—everything from the first flag-up to the rolling, roiling, suffocating wall of bayou water and hyacinth as it careened over Hébert's shore.

Jake finished the quick set-up, and pulled back to reveal the breadth of the vessel from bow to stern. Things would get back to a normal pace for Jake after this launch—it could be months before the next event—even the wedding gigs were slowing down again—though the fall always brought a couple of school-jobs—first-grade plays, choir concerts, the occasional call for backup to a news crew. But Jake wasn't worried. This last crop of launches had treated him well. If he watched his money, he'd be fine for a couple months at least. Not to mention that Mather had generously rewarded Jake's discovery with what he called a "loyalty bonus." Initially, Jake had tried to refuse, but Mather had pressed the check back into Jake's palm. "No. You take it, son," he said. "Hell, you saved me ten times that, exposing Hébert's little scam."

When the christening woman and her entourage were in safe distance to view the launch, and the crew was ready, Jake rolled tape. The first of the three launch horns sounded, and the flags went up, sending the blowtorches down on the cables. For the next minute or so, Jake was on autopilot. This ship was an exact clone of the last two, and he planned to use this long shot, intercutting it with close-ups and cutaways from either of the two previous sister-launches, making it look like it had been a three-camera shoot. The combination of shots and angles would make this particular tape a showpiece for Jake—something to use when pitching potential clients. He let the camera roll, and he stood back to enjoy the moment.

Across the way, the folks in the cheap seats were standing at attention, the way they usually did once things got moving. Over at

Dumb Hébert's, there was no activity at all. Not a decoy chicken, not a scrap of rug to be seen.

The flags were back down; the first cut had been made. Jake checked through the lens—looking good—then back to the other shore. Dumb Hébert had come out of his house. This was a first, thought Jake. Hébert's scam had always relied upon his feigned ignorance of the launch schedule. Jake considered the irony—that of all the people in Labadie, Hébert was probably the only one who had never had the thrill of watching a launch. Now, here he was today—poorer for sure, but finally with the perfect view. A front-row seat for the event.

The second air horn sounded. Flags up, torches blared. Jake checked his camera. The torches found their spots and the flags went down. *Get ready to rock and roll,* thought Jake, *do the push back, then pan left, and ride that wave.* He glanced back across the shore, and saw what looked like Hébert crawling inside the chicken pen. "What the hell is he doing?" Jake said out loud.

The third horn sounded, and again the torches dropped to meet their cables, scoring, singeing, burning through hot steel, sparks flying, making that final cut, the one that would release the ship into the bayou. Disregarding the shot at hand, Jake panned his camera to the opposite shore and zoomed in on the cage. Hébert was inside all right, pulling the gate shut and snapping closed the big, brass jaws of his ancient padlock onto the door of the pen.

Jake waved his arms at the flagman nearest him. "Hey," he yelled, but the cut was nearly done. He spun around and looked back across the waterway, once almost comically narrow, it now appeared impassable, impossible. The ship had begun her slide, and the final horn screamed its scream across the bayou. The air horn blared Jake into paralysis; held him fixed to his camera. He peered through his lens at the image of Hébert locked inside the cage. Still as the August air, knees pulled up to his hollow chest, Dumb Hébert seemed to look, not at the ship, not at the oblivious crowds, but at Jake. Jake stared across the unfathomable distance of the thin ribbon of bayou; at the small caged man, then back through his viewfinder. He zoomed in all the way—as if it would bring him physically closer to the other side. He set his focus on Hébert's left eye, which stared straight into the camera's lens, gray and bloodshot and so far away. Jake pushed back just enough to frame up Hébert's face, his folded

body, the pen that surrounded him, the padlock that secured his fate. The heavy log casters slid the boat as smooth and as fast as the slice of a guillotine's blade. Jake opened his mouth to scream, and maybe he called out and maybe he didn't, because just then the air horn blew triumphant, and the ship crashed into the bayou, separating the waters—pushing the bayou up and over Hébert.

The ship listed then righted itself, and the first wave was followed by a second and a third. And the people on both shores clapped and whistled. The air horn rang its deafening, endless crow of celebration. And the tape rolled.