

EXCERPT 5-2-25
CHAPTERS 1-3

ALIEN COAST

A Novel

V. E. Smith

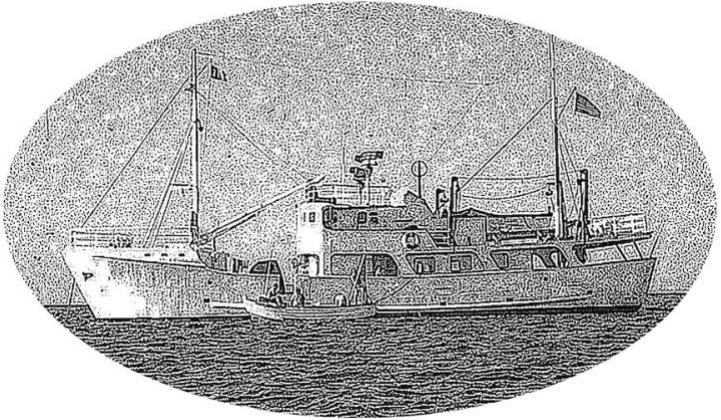
For my family

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ISBN: 978-1-7354383-2-0

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Cover design and photo by the author. Scene near St. Marks, Florida and the “Bay of Horses.”



Motor yacht *Aluna*

*History is the shadow cast by the dead.
So long as there's light, the shadow will fall.*

-Jill Lepore (The New Yorker, January 20, 2014)

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Area of St. Marks, Florida



The former villages of Apalache were located near Tallahassee, ~20 miles north of St. Marks.

1

La Costa

November 6, 1528 (Julian date)

By the Grace of God, we conquistadors have learned to survive at sea, but this latest storm has left us near the edge of human endurance. Our two boats were separated on November 5th after four days of navigating together. We had already lost sight of three others when the great river flow drove us out to sea. On this the following night, most of our 42 emaciated men huddle out of the wind between the rowing benches, some on top of others. We are all dumb with cold and exhaustion, some of us near death. The sea still runs large after the storm; we wallow and pitch in the waves interminably. With every roll, I can hear the foul bilge splashing onto their half-naked bodies. The oars are all shipped, and the tattered sail flaps above me untended. We barely make headway.

At least the stars are out. I recognize several old friends among them, our only true guides on this voyage of the damned. Lately, the wind has slackened and turned more southerly—a good sign. Perhaps, God willing, it will push us to a shore that offers some relief from this endless hunger and thirst. But we may well find more savages there like the last murderous bunch. If we land among hostiles again, how can we walking skeletons defend ourselves, let alone take from them what we desperately need to survive? We are cursed hostages of this alien coast.

Toward midnight, I sit alone at the steering oar, too wasted to sleep. Alas, the fatigue does not deaden my mind to memories of four days ago when we last saw

Governor Narváez. In traversing the great river mouth, our five open boats were scattered and blown out to sea. The next morning, two other boats were in view, including the Governor's. As we approached his boat, he asked me what I thought we should do in this dire situation. I said we should regroup and our three boats travel together, as God had willed it, for I was thinking of our pact of mutual protection during seven weeks of voyaging along this hostile coast. But the governor said he was determined to reach land before his crew starved to death—as though not all of us were starving—but we could follow them if we wished. We rowed hard after his boat all that day but could not keep up with them; their crew were the healthiest and strongest men of our force. I asked the Governor to throw us a rope so we might stay together; but he declined, saying they would do well to reach land alone that night. Then I asked him what, in that case, he was ordering me to do on our own. He said, and I shall remember the gist of his words to my death: Do whatever you think best to save your own life, for I intend to do the same. In short, let every man act for himself! This is unworthy of a Captain-General and the conqueror of Cuba, no less. Maybe the Governor's words were merely a prophecy that each of us would now live or die on our own, according only to God's plan.

I do not judge him by this incident alone. As my mind recoils from the present misery, it returns to the beginning of our expedition, to the very day six months ago when we landed on the shore of La Florida. On the day after, the Governor solicited our opinions on how the expedition should proceed now that most of the men and horses were on shore. His plan, supported by the majority, was to divide our forces and follow the coast by land and sea to the Rio de las Palmas, which was surely not far to the west. I and others thought it wiser to first confirm our location by sea, then establish a base ashore, gather

provisions, and secure local guides before launching an expedition to the interior. Since I opposed his plan, Narváez proposed that I go with the crew and women on the ships—a dishonorable choice, as he well knew. Of course, I could not accept the Governor's offer to stay with the ships, but even then, I doubted that our land party of some 300 men would ever see them again. The Governor's plan prevailed, I think as much because all were so weary and disheartened by the past year and more of storms and other misadventures at sea.

And on our long march through forests and swamps, Narváez would allow only one attempt to renew contact with our ships on the coast. Such was his desire for conquest and riches that he could think only of pressing on to Apalache. Once he made a decision, he adhered to it stubbornly, whatever the circumstances. When we finally arrived at that meager village of 40 huts and found only women and children, he took them hostage as insurance against an attack, which occurred nonetheless. In exchange for releasing them, Narváez took their chief hostage, but the Indian attacks continued all that month.

One of our officers who had served with Hernán Cortés in Mexico confided to me that the latter would have improved our situation from the beginning by treating this chief with respect while also remaining alert against treachery. Cortés would have staged a show of Spanish military prowess and then offered to ally with the chief against his enemies. But Narváez's instinct was always to win through intimidation and threat rather than by diplomacy and guile. It is all the more surprising that he learned nothing about the art of persuasion during his two years as Cortés's prisoner in Mexico.

There were other such instances of faulty judgment and missed opportunity. Suffice to say, they describe the nature of a man who, despite his imposing figure, his bold demeanor, and booming voice, has in so many ways

proved himself unsuited to lead soldiers, whose loyalty to him and our cause was never in question. These are the shortcomings of our Governor and Captain-General, Pánfilo de Narváez, commissioned by His Majesty the King to lead an expedition of five ships and some 600 men to conquer and colonize the vast new territory of Florida. And now, as I sit alone at the steering oar, I can only dread that we have yet to see all of the disastrous consequences of this policy.

These are my thoughts on this 6th day of November 1528. If it is God's will that we survive, I, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, vow to commit them to writing.

2

The Reenactor

June 30–July 1, 1981

It was a kind of rescue mission—not a timely one, but better 453 years late than never.

The 90-foot yacht *Aluna* had lingered for an hour before dawn off the Texas coast. Under a crescent moon, she rolled gently in a long Gulf swell. Her owner, Dr. Urban McLean, needed to view Follett's Island at first light. It was arriving now.

Captain Jake Thomas pointed his coffee cup at the green radar display. "You wanted to be three miles out," he said. "We're there."

To the north, they could just make out a darker line resolving between the monotone of sea and sky. As they watched, a part of the smudgy line disappeared into the murk.

"Not much to see," Jake said. He was a here-and-now kind of man. If something looked ordinary and normal at the moment, don't question it.

"It's enough," McLean said. To him this view was anything but ordinary.

Despite all of his reading, McLean always had to see the thing itself. At least the place where the thing had happened. You could never live another's experience, certainly not after four centuries. But it helped to conjure something like it with an image in the mind's eye. Only then could he turn his imagination loose and breathe life into the characters. The audience would know if you tried to paint a scene with no backup image. Later, from Galveston he would make a side trip to Follett's Island,

where he would stand on a wind-swept dune and imagine a boatload of ragged, starving Spaniards floundering through the surf and crawling up the beach.

“It’s what Cabeza de Vaca saw that morning of November 16, 1528, by the modern calendar,” said McLean. “They were rowing in after a big storm and could hear the surf. A big wave drove them onto the beach, and the half-dead crew dragged themselves onto land—some 42 of them. It was a cold day, but they found shelter behind the dunes, made a fire and roasted some dried corn. Three of the other boats came ashore on the coast just north of here and one much farther south.”

“Texas coast in late November.” Jake shook his head. “I’d have laid up around New Orleans. Overwintered there.”

“They were broken men, done with fighting. They thought Mexico was just ahead, but they still had another 500 miles to go, generally west-southwest.

“What kind of boats?”

“Hand-made from pine trees back in St. Marks, Florida, and launched at the end of September. We don’t know if they were proper boats or like barges. Some historians even suggest log rafts or horsehide boats. Regardless, each one was big enough to hold 50 people and their gear and food. Those boats were nothing fancy, but they held up for two months in open waters.”

“Two months from Florida to Texas? That’s got to be 600 miles or so.”

“More like 800.”

“Jesus.”

“They mostly followed the coast near shore. But getting around the Mississippi Delta added more distance. They must have averaged around 15 miles per day.”

Jake shook his head again. “Why did they take off from St. Marks?”

“Actually, they started from the Tampa Bay area as a 300-man land expedition. The leader, Pánfilo de Narváez, was a conquistador with a commission from the Spanish king to conquer and settle *La Florida*, a swath of land from today’s Florida all the way west to the Pacific. He hoped to duplicate the phenomenal success of Hernán Cortés’ discovery and conquest of Mexico and its riches, which had happened a few years earlier. Narváez was sent to take over governing Mexico—New Spain, they called it—but Cortés outsmarted him and took him prisoner for two years.”

McLean raised his binoculars and scanned the low shoreline as light crept up from the east.

“At least they didn’t see any smoke rising that morning. That scared them off landing a few days earlier to the east. My God, can you imagine how desperate they were at this point? They had to come in here or die of hunger and thirst. But they were in no shape to defend themselves any longer. This was the death knell of the expedition—their disintegration as an organized body of men. After this, it became a matter of individual survival.”

Just talking about it got McLean excited. This speaking tour project would pool all of his interests and skills. Latin American history and anthropology had been his bread and butter since grad school at the University of Texas. Even as a teaching assistant, he had honed his gift for serving up dry academic content in story form—dramatically, whenever possible. The anthropology prof he worked for could not have been happier to escape the lecture hall with its ranks of vapid faces. Along the way, McLean learned to speak passable Spanish and taught himself to read the archaic scripts of 16th-century Spain.

A few months after receiving his Ph.D., McLean got a job with a staffing contractor at the American Embassy in Bogotá, Colombia. His routine job of monitoring and

abstracting news reports gave him total immersion in the region's politics, culture, and history. Within two years, he became the embassy's go-to guy for preparing fact sheets and briefing visiting dignitaries. Returning visitors often asked for him by name. Dr. Urban McLean could sell bilateral relations like nobody else. The embassy hired him as a consultant to the Public Affairs Office, where he spent the rest of his career.

Jake scratched his head. "I've never even heard of this story. There's no movie about it?"

"Stories of failure don't sell in Hollywood. But damned interesting, just the same. I'm here to rescue this bit of history from obscurity."

"So, how'd they get from invading Florida to building boats and rowing to Texas?"

"Ah, well, Jake. Come to my first talk in a couple of days, and all will be revealed." McLean pointed toward the northeast. "Let's head for Galveston."

By 0800, they were moored at the fishing boat marina near Galveston's Pier 19. McLean had alerted Customs and Border Protection of their arrival, and the *Aluna's* crew were standing by with their passports and declarations. All but one, that is, the quasi-cousin of the McLean family, Teofilo—Teo—Macuagal. He had come aboard in Cartagena on rather short notice and without one essential item: his American visa.

McLean joined Captain Jake on the covered fantail deck before his wife Amy called them to breakfast.

McLean sniffed the air. "It smells like Amy's performed her usual magic with whatever's left in the pantry."

"Yeah, it's some miracle, like she just went to the store. I don't ask how."

"Well, you can get off in New Orleans if you insist. But she's staying on for the duration."

“Try telling that to the grandkids.”

Jake poured two coffees. “So, what’s going to happen to Teo without a visa?”

McLean glanced toward the galley. “That’s his problem. Maybe they’ll put him on the next plane to Bogotá.”

“He turned out pretty useful once he got his sea legs.”

“But no visa. Bet you a fiver it’ll show up here when he’s long gone. If at all.”

“Isn’t he part of your Colombian family?”

“My sister-in-law took him to raise since he was a baby and right through college. He’s the half-Quechua son of her Bolivian housemaid for nearly 30 years until she died a few years ago. My three daughters treat him like a brother. I never got that close to him.”

“You’ll be short a deckhand.”

“My youngest daughter Lana will join us in New Orleans. She’s finishing her junior year at UC San Diego. She’ll be bummed if Teo isn’t with us, but it’s his fault.”

Jake raised a warning hand as he saw Teo emerge on deck. “Morning, Teo. Any news from the galley?”

“She is making omelets and mango muffins,” Teo said. “*Incredible.*”

McLean watched Teo pour himself a coffee, then went straight to it. “You’ve got your passport and transfer letter from the embassy? Fine. But Teo, we’ve got four days here before we head for New Orleans. If your visa doesn’t catch up with you here, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. Immigration will have to escort you to Dallas-Fort Worth International.”

Teo calmly sipped at his coffee. “I suppose time will tell.” He shrugged.

Rather too complacently, it seemed to McLean. *Que así sea. It wasn’t my idea to bring him along.* His wife Marta and her sister Julieta had maneuvered him into it.

“He’ll be a big help, and Lana will love it if he comes,” Marta had said.

“You won’t even have to pay him, and he’s got his American visa,” said Julieta.

In the rush to leave Cartagena on time, McLean had forgotten to verify that. They were 200 miles at sea before he learned the truth: Teo admitted he had no visa but swore it would be waiting for them at the U.S. Customs office in Houston. Now in Galveston, McLean was still simmering about the needless risk that Teo had exposed them to on the cruise to Texas.

Except for an overnight stop at Cozumel, they had made a beeline from Cartagena to Galveston, staying well away from Central America and Mexico. Still, as they approached the Texas coast, they stood a good chance of being intercepted and inspected by the U.S. Coast Guard. With its Colombian registry, the *Aluna* would most likely be boarded and searched. The fact that the owner and captain were both American citizens would not allay their suspicions that *Aluna* might be running drugs. By now, it was a common practice of the cartels to use American citizens as captains and crews of courier vessels. And if *Aluna’s* crew also included a Bolivian national who had boarded in Colombia with no U. S. visa, that would raise another red flag.

It might all be sorted out eventually after calls to the American embassy in Bogotá, but McLean well knew how messy and time-consuming it could get before that. And the word would get around. How could a respected former official of the embassy do such a bone-headed thing as transporting an illegal on his private yacht? It was only dumb luck that none of that had happened. Now, the best course was to head it off quickly with Customs.

Two agents—one of them a dog handler—arrived as they were all finishing breakfast. The one in charge introduced himself to McLean, apologizing for the dog.

“We’re not Miami here, but we recently found a drug shipment on a private sailboat from Central America. The dog team is a routine precaution now. He’ll make a pass around the vessel once your crew is back up here with their documents.”

“I understand.”

As the crew went below to retrieve their papers, McLean said, “You probably know that I radioed ahead to say we have a crewman from Colombia who failed to secure his visa. I didn’t know that until we were already two days at sea. He claims the embassy assured him it would be waiting for him when we arrived here. Naturally, I’m very skeptical of that. If it proves necessary to deport him, I’ll completely understand.”

The agent opened his briefcase. “I suppose you mean Mr. Teofilo Macuagal.”

“He’s the one.”

“I have his approval with me. The Houston office passed it along a few days ago.”

McLean’s astonishment soon gave way to irritation. When Teo heard the good news about his visa, he didn’t seem surprised at all.

The 22-year veteran of the Bogotá embassy could only shake his head. *How in hell did he pull that off?*

McLean had plenty of other things to think about—his lecture to rehearse, venues to check out, and props to get ready. His first talk this evening was for the Galveston Historical Society in a church downtown. That would be good practice for a more prestigious lecture at Texas A&M University’s auditorium across the harbor the following night. Fortunately, his college friend, Art Billings, would join him for lunch and relay updates on

his speaking arrangements down the coast, from Texas to Florida.

Two other men had come all the way from Atlanta, Georgia to attend McLean's first presentations: Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The attraction for them was not Spanish history but Dr. Urban McLean, his yacht, and the schedule his speaking tour would follow along the Gulf Coast. The older agent, Carl Taggart, already knew a good deal about McLean. But there was no substitute for directly observing someone's behavior to understand their temperament and motivations. You had to know what made people tick in order to manage them effectively. Over the years Taggart had seen all kinds of behaviors and knew how to make use of them. This would be the final act of his 26-year career, and he meant to go out in style. The other agent and Taggart's new partner, Dean Spencer at 25 years old, was only two months out of the FBI Academy at Quantico, Virginia. He had flown to Galveston only the day before McLean's first lecture to meet Taggart already there.

On the lecture morning, the two agents sat in their rented car, taking their first look across the parking lot at the yacht *Aluna*, moored at Pier 19. Through binoculars, Spencer could see only one person in silhouette, moving around in the lounge. Taggart had not yet offered to brief him on the operation, and Spencer hadn't wanted to appear over-eager. Finally, he decided to take an indirect approach

Still looking through the glasses, he said, "I was surprised they picked me for this operation. I mean as the office newbie."

"I picked you," Taggart said.

"Really? Well, I appreciate the opportunity. I'm honored."

“Don’t be. You’ve had some experience that’ll be useful. We’ll get to that later.”

“All they told me was, this op involves a couple of informants from the CIA station in Bogotá. They’re Colombians?”

“Bolivians. Fugitives from the García Meza regime. One of them came up from Cartagena on McLean’s yacht.”

“Why not both of them?”

“The other one made a deal with the Agency to personally deliver a bunch of sensitive documents he copied from the president’s office. Both of them are getting some kind of asylum in the U.S.”

“So, we’re working with the Bolivian who’s here now?”

Taggart nodded. “Teo Macuagal. But it’s not so simple. He’ll know who we are and the basic plan, but he’ll be told not to acknowledge any of it.”

“We’re briefing him on that?”

“No, somebody from the Agency is taking care of it. We going to keep our distance from him.”

“Will Dr. McLean know?”

“Not until we’re ready to act.”

“And when is that?”

“First, we’re going to buy some time and flexibility. The Agency is working out an unconventional way to get the other informant here by sea—anonously. Political considerations, as usual.”

“Air travel is out?”

“This Bolivian is a cartel target as well. They’ll be watching all travel hubs, even private airstrips. So, the Agency plans to deliver him by fishing boat. But the timetable is still a bit squishy.”

“How will we buy this time and flexibility?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Taggart pointed at *Aluna*. “Meanwhile, looks like McLean has a visitor.”

Dr. Arthur Billings, Professor of U.S. History at the University of Houston, was joining McLean for lunch on the *Aluna's* back deck, commonly known as the fantail. He hadn't seen his old grad school friend for a dozen years, and he marveled that McLean still projected the same restless energy that only seemed to enlarge his six-three, 230-pound frame. The full beard and mane of gray-streaked hair added gravity to his bear-like presence.

Billings said, "It's a great story, Mac. But isn't your tour starting at the wrong end where the expedition ended?"

"Right, but I'm following the chronology of the expedition regardless of where I'm speaking."

"So, how are you pitching it?"

"Well, it's somewhat of a history mystery that ends in disaster. Only this isn't a who-done-it but a how-he-done-it, the he being Narváez. After a little intro by Charles V, I'll play him and three of the survivors at different stages of the expedition."

"And if I know you, they'll all be larger than life."

"That's the idea. Those were bold men."

"How are you going to manage all these characters in a one-man show?"

"I'll have a screen to step behind and quickly dress down for the next character until I finally end up in rags. While I'm briefly out of sight, my narrator's voice will set up the next phase of the story." McLean waved his hand. "It's old hat for me, Artie. I used to do this kind of guest performance for history classes at the University of the Andes in Bogotá. Now I get to do my favorite impersonation—Narváez. They'll come away thinking they learned about him on the nightly news." He pointed at his reddish beard, also flecked with gray. "By all accounts, I even look like him."

Arthur nodded. “But what’s to admire about Narváez, Mac? I read somewhere that contemporaries say he was big and loud, brash, full of himself. Tended to be impulsive and careless. And, some say, not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

“Right. The historian Oviedo compared him to a donkey you have to hit three times because he’s forgotten the first two blows. But they also say he was hearty and agreeable among friends, a fine conversationalist with good manners in polite company. Most importantly, King Charles V liked him and approved his expedition. Narváez was known to be bold and fearless in battle, though sometimes harsh with his troops and indifferent to needless cruelty. All those pros and cons make him more interesting. Depending on the circumstances, he might come off as a hero or a villain, a glowing success or a disgraceful failure. But always playing the role of the bold conquistador.”

“But not so good at actually doing it.”

“Exactly. He seemed to live entirely in the present, not reflecting on his past mistakes or planning to avoid future ones. He would never fail gradually or thoughtfully. I think he was always destined to blunder fatally and take his followers down with him. All of that makes him irresistible to me.”

“I’d say you’ve got your work cut out for you, playing a man like that.”

“Actually, of all my historical characters, Narváez comes easiest to me.” McLean’s gaze drifted into the distance. “It’s strange. Sometimes, when I’m practicing him, I get the feeling he’s somehow practicing me. Maybe it’s life imitating art imitating life—and so on.”

“Better remind him what century he belongs to. After the tour, then what?”

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“I hope to locate the long-lost Bay of Horses site, where the Narváez people built their five boats. I’ve studied the accounts and believe I know where to look.”

He wasn’t the only one who believed that.

3

The Searcher

July 1, 1981

On the day of *Aluna's* arrival in Galveston, Evan Raines and his friend Jim Cleary stood at the edge of a pine and palm forest near St. Marks, Florida. It overlooked a broad estuary formed by the union of the St. Marks and Wakulla Rivers and the vast coastal marsh surrounding it. Earlier, they had motored down the Wakulla into the estuary and worked their skiff up one of the many narrow inlets that snaked into the marsh. Now they looked southward across the prairie of waist-high sawgrass and needle rush that stretched to the horizon. Along the forest edge, stands of longleaf pine rose like ranks of parasols in the distance. A stone's throw into the marsh, a few remnant palm trees and bare trunks marked an earlier boundary, overtaken by rising sea levels. Farther out, a few small islands of palms marked slight elevations above flood tides. Some three miles away, the St. Marks lighthouse at the Gulf Coast was a mere speck on the horizon. They believed their view, except for the lighthouse, was similar to that seen by a party of desperate Spaniards over four centuries earlier.

Both young men were built for a frontier life, and they pursued it avidly. Evan was framed large and work-hardened. Jim was a head shorter but long-legged and sinewy. Both could wear a full pack, carry one end of a canoe, and walk any man into the ground. They put it all to good use.

Jim said, "Remind me, what are we looking for?"

“The Narváez Bay of Horses campsite. It’s where they built the boats, and it turned into a seagoing expedition that ended in Texas.”

“I mean, what’ll be left after all this time?”

“Bound to be something. When about 250 men are camping out in the woods and building boats for six weeks, they’re going to leave a mess. They built a forge, so there’d be charcoal and bits of iron and slag left over. They killed and ate their last 17 horses there, so we’re talking lots of horse bones and teeth. I’m sure they ate plenty of oysters, so maybe shell piles around the camp. And maybe other metal and ceramic odds and ends they didn’t bother taking on the boats. And there should be graves there since a dozen or so men died or got killed during that time.”

“So, where do we start digging?”

“I was hoping you knew.”

“We just keep on bushwhacking till we see something interesting?”

“That’s all we do in hunting season anyway. We just don’t need guns for this.”

Jim slapped his neck. “At least we don’t get mosquito bit then. Why are we doing this in mid-summer?”

“That’s when the Spaniards were here. Makes the hunt more authentic.”

“It would help if we knew how they got to this campsite.”

“You mean the route? Cabeza de Vaca dropped a few clues in his book. We know they left an Indian town called Apalache somewhere around Tallahassee and hiked south toward the coast for nine days. They were under attack for the first three or so, and the last day was especially hard. On day three, they also found a “very large river,” but he says nothing about crossing that or any other river. The Wakulla and St. Marks Rivers join at the estuary, but he didn’t mention that either. So, that’s

got to mean they came down either west of the Wakulla or east of the St. Marks.”

“What do you think?”

“I’ve got an idea, but first, I want to know what you figure out. I’ll lend you the book.”

Three years earlier, Evan had begun his freshman year at Florida State University with mixed feelings. In his view, college was simply a means to an end, a ticket-punching necessity. For every subject except his favorite science, biology, he was resolved to grinding it out through force of will, if nothing else. He’d already read biology textbooks, journals, and articles for years. Not that he knew it all, but most of freshman biology for sure. And there were other things about campus life he didn’t relish, like the mandatory first year in a high-rise dorm. But that turned out better than expected, thanks to his new roommate, Jim Cleary. They were matched by accident but immediately hit it off. For starters, they both hated their sixth-floor, hermetically-sealed room in a humorless dorm they labeled Fort Apache. Also distasteful were the amphitheater lectures, fraternity antics, and assembly-line foraging in the dining hall.

On the plus side, both of them came from fishing families. Evan’s dad ran a headboat out of Panama City that took tourists bottom fishing in the Gulf. In high school Evan had his own business as well. In blue crab season, he tended a string of traps with his 22-ft. skiff and sold his prime catch directly to a couple of high-end restaurants. Jim’s family owned the Wakulla Fish Camp at St. Marks, only 20 miles south of Tallahassee and FSU. He moonlighted as a fishing guide and had a list of loyal clients. Motivated alike, Jim and Evan took advantage of every hunting and fishing opportunity on the northeastern Gulf Coast. On the side, they bushwhacked through local swamps, dived in limestone sinkholes, and canoed

blackwater creeks that sometimes disappeared underground.

Another interest drove Evan to focus on the St. Marks area. In high school, he had read Fishery Bulletin 89: *Gulf of Mexico, Its Origin, Waters and Marine Life*. The first chapter was a history of the Gulf, from its early exploration to recent scientific findings. There, he learned about the ill-fated Narváez expedition of 1528 and the account of it by Cabeza de Vaca, one of only four survivors. One event, especially fascinating, was a major turning point in the expedition.

At an unknown place on the coast near St. Marks, some 270 Spaniards had built five boats to escape a hostile wilderness that offered no prospect of fame or fortune. During six weeks of boat building, they slaughtered and ate their beloved mounts—a tragedy captured in their name for that place, the Bay of Horses. The location of that historic site faded into history. But now, 453 years later, Evan Raines was pondering what route they had taken to the Bay of Horses and where their campsite was located. By now, he was pretty sure he knew where it should be.

On this day and for the next two, Evan and Jim drove their skiff up inlets and walked the forest edges for several miles on both sides of the St. Marks estuary. It was generally rough going through the spartina grass and needle rush, sometimes waist-high. Possibly, no one for centuries had searched so diligently for the Narváez campsite. They found no trace of it—which didn't mean it wasn't there.

Meanwhile, Evan was trying to sell his crabbing business, consisting mainly of a pile of wire crab traps stored in his parents' backyard. It might sell easier if he included his 22-foot skiff and outboard in the deal. But as long as he lived on St. Andrews Bay, he could not

imagine himself without a boat. Today, it was time to change the spark plugs in his beloved 50-horse Johnson outboard.

Maxine Gregory had wandered in for breakfast earlier and helped his mom make the pancakes. She was fetching as usual in her cutoffs and sleeveless blouse. He'd always liked Max, even loved her at times, but it worried him a little that his mother more and more treated her like a daughter-in-law. Certainly, the concept of someday marrying her had often crossed Evan's mind but had never quite landed—not yet.

After breakfast, Max followed him outside to work on the outboard. Typically, she would have offered to gap and install the new plugs herself; she was handier than most girls. But this time, Evan sensed she had something to discuss.

Sure enough: "Has Jay said something to you lately? I mean about me."

That would be Jalen Penzy, his erstwhile fishing and diving partner. In their diving buddy days, the younger Max had tagged along as their mascot and boat tender, helping with their gear, taking fish off their spears, and picking them up if they surfaced far away from the boat. She was a pretty good free diver, too. And when she blossomed at 16, she began dating both of them alternately. But there was never any serious competition for her affections. To them, she was more like a kind of seagoing girl Friday and girl-next-door companion. After the diving partnership was over, she still socialized with both of them on land.

Evan shook his head. "I haven't talked to Jay for over a year. Haven't cared to."

"Still don't get along?"

"Nope."

"Is it about the wrecks?"

"Mostly. He's into artifact theft, full time."

"For his personal collection?"

"He sells it now, too."

"Where?"

"Beats me. Do you still go out in his boat?"

"Nope. It's not fun anymore without both of you. He gets that Marvin kid to help him."

"So, what would he be saying to me about you?"

Max made a dubious face. "Well, he's started mentioning things. Like, what do I think of his long-range plan? And aren't little kids fun? And we're not getting any younger. Friendships can evolve—stuff like that. I think he's working up to a proposal."

"Would you accept?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"The alternative."

"Who's that?"

"Lee, you're so mean to me." She could at least needle him with his middle name.

"Pretty bad choice either way. Better raise your standards."

"In this town?" She sniffed. "Anyway, I don't know why he's talking it up now."

"I could make a guess."

"Which is?"

"With his wreck-raiding habit, he might think he's going to need a good lawyer in the family. And your dad's the best."

"That's pretty cynical."

"He is. And you don't want to be in his boat when he gets busted. Trust me, it'll happen."

"Thank you for your concern. So, when can I go out in *your* boat?"

"We could go floundering Saturday night. Want to?"

"Sure." Max laughed.

"What?"

"I was wondering how many girls would misinterpret that invitation."

His turn to laugh. "I'd say nearly all would. But I knew you wouldn't."

She eyed him. "But if I did, I might go floundering with you anyway."

"Good to know. And I'm honored."

"So, is that your best offer?"

"For the moment."

"Dinner included?"

"Always."

"Okay, I'm in."

New plugs were installed, they closed up the engine, and Evan walked Max home. The Gregorys lived in a big Victorian house on the bay, and the offroad way there was along the beach. That involved a shortcut down an alley that had once provided access to the ruins of an old fishing pier, now reduced to a single row of weathered pilings. Once, according to rumor, a jilted wife had thrown her diamond ring into the bay there. A generation of kids, including Evan, had dived for that diamond, which grew bigger and more priceless over the years. But the attraction this day was a huge live oak with a limb that looped down to make a perfect seat for two people. Evan and Max sat on it, as they had done many times. From there, they could look directly south into the Old Pass. Narváez himself had traveled by its original opening to the Gulf, now all but closed by sand bars.

Evan pointed that way. "There goes the tour boat to Spanish Shanty." The name referred to the hermit dwelling of some latter-day Hispanic who had lived on the bay side of the barrier island.

"By the way," Max said, "that person my dad knows at the National Archives says he'll copy and send you that Spanish document you asked for."

"The *requerimiento*? Great!"

“What is it?”

“It’s a proclamation, but more like a requirement. When conquistadors like Narváez landed and claimed some new territory for Spain, they had a ceremony and read this thing out loud, the *requerimiento*. It said that all this land and the people in it belonged to our king. If you agree to be Christians and our slaves and do whatever else we say, no problem. Otherwise, we’ll kill all of you, and it’ll be your fault! Of course, the natives didn’t know Spanish and had no idea what they were talking about. They found out soon enough.”

“Did they think that was fair?”

“Nah. Just their royal license to steal.”

“Are things all that different now?”

“Yes. Now they use translators so people will know who’s conquering them and why.”

“How did you learn about the proclamation and all that Spanish history?”

“Read, read, read. It helps if your mom’s a librarian.”

“Speaking of requirements, is FSU going to let you do a thesis to make up for your lost semester?”

“Yep. It’s good for six credits.”

“Do you think your dad’s okay on his own now?”

“As long as he takes it easy. Old Barry can pinch-hit again if he’s overdoing it. I wish I could run the boat for him.”

“Don’t you have your Coast Guard license?”

“Not the Master license yet for paying passengers. I’ll have more time to get the experience after I graduate.”

“So, what’s your thesis about?”

“Mariculture, sea farming. Raising marine critters so we don’t have to catch them anymore.”

“Will you do sea farming around here? Maybe I could help.”

He took her hand. “Max, I’ve still got a lot to learn. All I know so far is fishing and hunting and books.”

“And you know me.”

“You’ve been to Europe, at least. I’ve been to four states in my life, all of them on the Gulf Coast. I need to see what’s out there in the world.” *Unless I marry you.*

That was part of a thought experiment that crossed his mind now and then. According to that plan, when he finished college, he would gradually take over his dad’s sportfishing operation and take advantage of some newer trends in the business. The depletion of quality bottom fish was driving the headboats like his dad’s farther and farther offshore. Evan would lease that operation to another captain and invest in a smaller, faster trolling vessel for more lucrative billfish charters that he would run himself. That kind of multi-day offshore charter in the northern Gulf was just coming into its own. It would mean more time away from home, but loyal, big-hearted Max would cheerfully adapt to whatever he wanted to do. He couldn’t go far wrong with Max.

Another thought he had long nurtured was the idea of developing a mariculture business like shrimp or oyster farming. But he didn’t yet know enough about the science or economics of that. It might require an apprenticeship and eventual relocation to somewhere else in the world. Max would not take easily to that. She was a hometown girl, and the St. Andrews area was God’s country to her. If he loved her and wanted her to be happy, he would have to settle down here—for a lifetime. Choosing that wouldn’t be a mistake, exactly, but more like surrender.

She was smiling at him endearingly. “This will always be our home, Lee.”

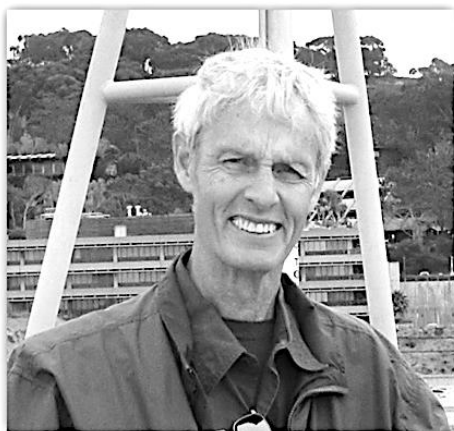
Because he couldn’t think of what to say, he kissed her, afraid she might be right. *But this could be a good life*, he thought, still unsure about his definition of good. The need for that decision would come sooner than he expected.

V. E. Smith

(END OF EXCERPT)

About The Author

V. E. Smith The author is a retired marine scientist raised in the Florida panhandle and now living in Boulder, Colorado. He received a Ph.D. at Scripps Institution of Oceanography and served as a Captain in the Army Reserve in Korea. For most of his professional career, he worked on and around the Great Lakes as an environmental researcher and consultant.



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