

A Thanksgiving Bear



The Short Stories of
Doug Pinkston

This collection of short stories represents the best of Doug Doug Pinkston's short works, compiled over a 30-year span of writing novels, and non-fiction books, present a host of entertaining adventures, characters, places and action.

A Thanksgiving Bear: The Short Stories of Doug Pinkston

By Doug Pinkston

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**A Thanksgiving Bear
or
The Story of Jim Rose and
the Grecian Urn**



Cast of Characters

Aaron Rose - father of Jim and Patricia (Patty)

Elizabeth Rose - wife of Aaron Rose

Lilly Rose McIntosh - sister of Aaron Rose and Doris, mother of Jill Allen

Horace McIntosh - husband of Lilly

Doris Rose Finch - sister of Aaron Rose and Lilly

Barrett Finch - husband of Doris

Patricia (Patty) Rose Chase - daughter of Aaron Rose, older sister of Jim Rose

Zachary Chase - husband of Patty

Elizabeth and Caroline Chase - twin daughters of Patty and Zachary

Jill Finch Allen - daughter of Doris

Tom Allen - husband of Jill

Melanie Allen - daughter of Jill and Tom Allen

Kip Apple - friend of Melanie Allen

Jim Rose Through the Looking Glass



Part 1

I don't know which part of this story provides me with the most arousing memories. The influence of time and changing perspective always seems to color different moments. I've never been one to romanticize the mundane, turn into poetry simple facts. Too often I'm drawn to the flaw in the stone and, besides, I can't rhyme a lick.

It all started with this glass bottom boat. It was some time ago, when I was a bit younger and a bit heartier. It hadn't been too many months since I got out of the Navy. I'd been overseas, the Vietnam thing had begun to get out of hand and, my commission being complete, I felt it a darn good time to leave it with 'em and see what life in the real world was all about. Turned out, looking back now, the advantages of hindsight with me, the real world is not so easily cornered and made to sit for a snapshot.

Key West, in case you haven't had the exceptional good fortune to set foot on it, is a singular island in all sorts of respects. Sitting at the last reaches of the American southland, scattered chain of over 1500 islands, it sits between the deep expanse of the Atlantic to the east and the wild and gorgeous Gulf of Mexico to the west. Unique and solitary, one nevertheless feels a certain unity with the universe from this strange viewpoint. Hot enough, on some days --- under a cloudless sky --- to melt your thongs onto the shell-covered pavement, occasionally cool breezes will fill up your shirt sleeves like a sail, carrying you to the shade of the nearest palm tree for a rest in your hammock and a cold, cold beer. I had my share of long days in the sun and some rather trying circumstances, but on the whole I grew to love the island ,as well as the people, and next time I'm around you can be sure I'll stop in and see old Tranquillo and Alice, and Susie; and Pinky

--- if he's still around --- maybe even take a ride on The Mad Hatter.

Well, when I first came to the island, like I said, I was new to commerce and my only experience was with boats and the ocean. I saw an ad for a diver on a glass bottom boat and even though I hardly knew the first thing about free-diving, I went by to see if I knew enough to fool whoever ran the ad. The boat was owned by Tranquillo Rodriguez, an old Mexican fellow who had been running the boat for about seven years. I gave him my credentials, puffed up my experience about ten yards and got the job. I found out later he knew I was a fakery when he asked my flipper size and I told him 10 C (you see, they only come in small, medium and large.) Small consequence, he needed someone quick, and I was the closest thing to a serious applicant he'd seen in a month. Tranquillo took me out one afternoon, showed me how to dive for coral, allowed me to fully embarrass myself in the fine art of free diving, then he put me on show the next day. I must've looked ridiculous that Sunday, flapping around like some drunken sea elephant. I tried to pull loose a beautiful piece of brain coral, thinking I could jar it free with a few solid yanks, only to discover it had grown quite accustomed to its neighborhood and was no more going to break loose than I was going to pull up the entire coral reef. The tourists undoubtedly peered down at me suspiciously, sneering aloud and wondering who the hell hired me. In time, however, even a klutz like me learned how to maneuver a little under the water, and I came to recognize the various types of coral and the nature of the formations, which ones would come loose with a single strong grasp and which ones might need the encouragement of a chisel and hammer. I also became familiar with the beautiful varieties of tropical fish which made their home on the reefs, knew their habits: from the striped grunts which swam in schools everywhere prospecting for trouble; to the butterflyfish,

brilliantly marked, pecking on the coral, always watching you from the corner of their eyes; and the blue and yellow damselfish, politely inquiring into my business while they explored crevices for tiny morsels of food. After a while I became such a common fixture of the reefs that some of the fish recognized me on sight, as I did them, and I even gave some of them a name, brought 'em little shrimps.

It really was a great time for the most part. All that was required of me was to ride out on *The Mad Hatter* once in the morning and once in the afternoon, visit with my oceanic friends and act foolish. I met Pinky, Tranquillo's driver, a short, chubby guy who chewed tobacco and was proud of his collection of South American hats. He was from Mississippi, a nice enough fellow except I didn't care much for his habit of spitting into the gulf in the middle of the show, or when he used the boat for a place to sleep off particularly heavy drunks. He'd been kicked out of the Navy for fighting.

I spent my free time there getting to know Key West and the other islands in the chain, establishing a few local watering holes and saving what little money I had left over. There were a few ladies I met during my stay there, too often blond, with immaculate tans and lots of money; girls who, if they gave me the time of day, it would be the wrong time zone, and by the time my watch was re-set they'd be long gone. I did find a few local ladies who I could take sailing or deep-sea fishing and show them a good time, or sometimes we'd roast oysters by the shore, and I'd try to bait them up to my apartment with a bottle of champagne. Tranquillo and Alice had a daughter named Susie with whom they were always trying to fix me. She was sweet and shy, but carried a little too much extra luggage for my liking and when she had too many beers would always get hiccups. But that's another story.

What happened was that Tranquillo was really more interested in the motel business than glass bottom boats. After he had saved up enough money, he got his chance to buy a little run-down motel and he made a down payment on a place called The Blue Marlin. He offered the boat to me at a price I could barely manage and having no better sense I took it. That's how I found myself in the glass bottom boat business. So much for my free time and peace of mind. I knew at the time even less about business than I did about skin diving. But, as in the former case, with practice and enough stupid mistakes, I learned to feel my way around the sharp edges and could sense when a barracuda entered the waters. After a while I even got used to being the boss. I put most of the money back into the business I painted half The Mad Hatter, overhauled the engine (there were several parts -- including a carburetor -- which the boat had needed for some time), and then bought some lousy radio equipment; even tried to get Pinky into some more respectable duds, but it was hopeless. Best he would agree to was a spittoon cup. It was a haphazard operation, and I can't tell you we became millionaires, but at least we had style.

There were few regular customers. The usual assemblies consisted of a collection of sunburnt tourists, half-drunk, or pre-occupied with tending to their uncontrollable children. It was natural that after a while the faces began to appear featureless, without dimension beyond their relative weight load on a lumbering sea craft. Thus, whenever a gem appeared that outshone even the glittering aquamarine of the gulf stream, I became immediately engaged. I met her on a balmy Thursday. In time her light would possess me, and comfort me, and before the brilliance faded, envelope me in a strange and fascinating blindness. I have seen beauty take many forms, but I've always been its subject. She was a young, Latin lady with curly black hair and a face that grew more attractive each time I secretly

caught a glance of her standing at the bow, enjoying the sea spray. She wore big, round dark glasses and had bright red lips and I noticed when I made a corny joke or pretended to lose my balance and fall in, she always laughed----more from kindness than humor I guessed----but a warm gesture, nonetheless. Well, I naturally found myself drawn to her, not only from curiosity, but from a sensual impulse common whenever sailors set eyes on Latin women, or, for that matter, any women with geography similar to the contours this lady possessed. Slipping beside her on the stern bow, I made small talk, looking away from her as if being congenial solely for the purpose of public relations. She was charming. To my surprise she had an easy sense of humor, a rare quality for such a lovely woman. She said she was originally from Cuba, put her hand on my arm as she spied a dolphin, mixing her cologne with the sea breeze, charging up my reflexes.

I began to realize that this lady was much more adept at the game of love than a mere novice like me. She pulled her shades down, revealing a pair of soft brown eyes that made my feet melt right in my sandals. And then: I could have sworn she winked at me. It was all so strange and her presence so overpowering I had trouble distinguishing the present from some distant reality. She told me she worked in New York as a hairdresser and that she had come to Key West to get away for a while. Seems she had a rich uncle from Ohio who had died and left her some money. I asked her about the uncle (you see, I used to live in Ohio), but he must not have been a close relative for she knew almost nothing about him. She thought Cincinnati was the capital. Before I could gather my wits, we had reached the reef and I excused myself to dress for the next dive.

The coral and the tropical fish glowed brilliantly that day and I know Homer and Achilles, and Helen, must have known there

was something on my mind as I felt my way around the staghorn coral to some nice fingers of porites fucata and clumsily knocked it loose. I looked up and saw her face smiling down at me through the glass and nearly dropped the whole load. After I fumbled through the presentation and peddled off most of the pieces, Pinky cranked us up and swung us around for the ride back to the docks. As I headed for the dressing room, standing only in my Hawaiian shorts, she came by and pulled me aside to the railing. She hooked my arm and smiled, then asked me out for dinner, even offered to pay. What could I say? After all, good business often requires sacrifice.

Now, for me, these kinds of things usually end up terribly, but not this night. We went to a little restaurant on Atlantic Boulevard, near George Smathers Beach. Tranquillo had introduced me to the owner some time back, so I thought I might drop a few names and make a vivid impression on my Cuban Princess. Perhaps it worked, for the service was splendid and in no time she agreed to join me on the beach for a bottle of wine and some lazy conversation. She said she had seen a nice beach at the end of Duval Street. I knew the place well. There was a small brick church up the hill and an ancient, overgrown cemetery. Perhaps there were other, more secluded beaches where we could spend the midnight hours, but I liked her selection well enough and there was no reason to push my luck.

We must've talked until three in the morning. She told me about her childhood growing up in Cuba, in a small town near Camaguey. Her father ran a cigar warehouse and had done pretty well for himself. Semina said he had always been popular in the village and that he used to give an occasional sermon at their Catholic church, or he would tell the kids stories out on their wide front porch, the smells of sugar cane and tobacco in the tropical air. The neighborhood kids would sit at his feet,

excited faces held quiet by the old man's captivating Spanish tongue. They had a grand piano in their front room and her mother used to play hymns and Spanish sonatas which filled up the house like butterflies. (As Semina spoke I noticed a tear falling down her cheek.) She told me how she had learned to play a few tunes and how she and her sister would play in parts, their stubby fingers plodding through one of John Wesley's traditional hymns as they struggled to push each other off the bench. After school she would stop by her father's warehouse and dance under the hanging tobacco, rich and golden yellow, the dirt floor covered with broken leaves. They used to go for picnics on Sunday afternoons and sing Cuban folk songs until the sun grew large as a pumpkin and disappeared, her father told them, into an old Mexican volcano, where it rested awhile before beginning the next day's journey. We held hands as she talked and I saw her look off across the water, the full moon sitting peacefully over her homeland, and I watched her lick a salty tear, too proud of her heritage to forget a single moment, too full of sadness to hold back the sorrow of lost dreams and hopes long ago put to rest. There was nothing I could say. Politics and war all seem so spooky to me, the turbulence of ghosts. I passed her the bottle. She smiled, gripped my hand tightly and pulled me to her. As I kissed her lips tasted like seawater.

Let me say that I've always been open to the wanderings of love and jeweled women who gaze at men like me through veils. We walked to my apartment, finishing the wine on our way and then quietly we slipped into the covers. The tides rolled in, washed away the night and left me with eyes full of stars. I have never known anything like it. In the morning, I left her reluctantly and headed for work. I was already a half hour late and I knew they'd be waiting for me at the docks, checking their watches and wondering who the hell sold me the boat. It was

difficult to concentrate on the tasks at hand, the day so warm and the water so inviting. I decided to snorkel it that day, compete for the riches of the sea on equal terms with the inhabitants. I guess I was swelled up with infatuation (or perhaps love). I floated freely and without care. I completed the round, had lunch, and then returned to the docks, hoping Semina would join us for the afternoon show. I waited, boarded the customers, stalled for time, but she never showed. Running late once more, I pushed us off, confirming in my mind my impressions about the luck of the common sailor, but not without some hope. It was a small island; a small world. Her soft eyes could not stay long concealed in any universe.

After the show I cleaned up the boat and began combing the area. As I rode down the strip in my 64 Fairlane convertible I heard over the radio reports of a hurricane picking up steam off South America. It didn't sound pretty. It was appropriate, I was thinking, that hurricanes are given female names, being so unpredictable. I hastened my efforts to locate Semina, to at least say goodbye, to make clear the feelings she had stirred up in me. Fred Johnson, at the public pier, said he might have seen her on Duval Street, but there was no sign when I arrived. I raced through town, listening to the weather reports.

That night I had promised to attend a party on a big houseboat owned by Colonel Strickland. Somehow or another Tranquillo got some invitations, and he set me up to go with him and Alice, and Susie of course. At the party I witnessed the strangest of sights. I wasn't much on these types of affairs, folks in tuxedos and dress whites, women in dresses so long they could hardly walk. I never thought my uniform fit me good enough and I had no idea what to pick when they brought around the snacks. In any case I and Susie got there after it had been going for a while and I did my level best to make small talk and not appear totally

out of place. As the evening wore on the mysterious food began to taste better and the sparkling women look more beautiful. I was introduced to the Colonel and his wife, and I met Captain Newby, who was in the Naval Reserve. We found enough conversation to keep our mouths dry and the beer flowing. It was just before midnight when we suddenly heard this low-pitched drone in the sky. The Captain turned calmly to locate the source of the noise, and I too turned, then crouched by reflex as I spotted the lights of a seaplane gliding right over the boat, its engines out, propellers stopped. In another moment it exploded into the Bay View Hotel. A fireball spit out, lighting up the bay. We could see, in the fireworks, the tail of the plane, jutting out of the fourth floor, hanging by a wing and a few wires. The crowd, of course, was up in arms. A tall lady in a long black dress scampered toward safety, hit a puddle, then slipped and fell. The Captain turned to me. "Now that was a sight, wasn't it?"

The following day I took another look around the island for Semina, checking the usual tourist traps, quizzing the area bartenders. I stopped by to see Tranquillo and received an unwelcome proposal. He wanted me to escort Susie off the island. He slipped me a fifty and a confident handshake. Him and Alice would ride it out on the island. I knew resistance would be futile. Besides, I figured I owed the guy.

I checked on the outboard, single-hull I purchased a few months back. It was a small boat and old, but it had a dandy little motor. I felt sure it could make the trip to Miami. I called a former bunkmate of mine from the Navy, Ted Mink, who was now working with the Coast Guard and had moved to Miami. He had gotten married, then, as quickly, divorced. He was gracious enough to invite me over for a few days to see what would happen with the storm. On my way back from the docks I picked up a newspaper to get some updated information on the storm.

What I came across first, however, was so startling I read through it twice, then set the newspaper down, wiped the sweat off my face and read through it again. The body of a young Latin gal had washed up on the shore during the night. She'd had her hands tied behind her back. I knew at once it was Semina, an intuitive realization with the power of a lightning bolt. I considered the horrifying article, working up a way to solidly confirm or deny my beliefs. If I identified her at the police station, they'd no doubt bring me in for questioning. I had to know.

I changed my clothes, my mind suddenly frantic (I would need to get some oil, lube the steering cables), then I walked nervously to the police morgue. I told them the truth: that I had met a girl on my boat a few days back who might fit the description. They got my vital information, distant eyes looking me over from half-opened doorways, then they escorted me to the basement.

The smell was nauseating down there. They introduced me to the examiner, who offered a clammy hand then directed me to the drawer, pulled it open and drew back the sheet. It was a hard day: all wounds released: the contrast of her face looking back at me the last time I saw her, in the sheets of my bed, the sun in her blinking eyes, yellow sleep on her face and the waxy blue of her cold still form as it lay heavily before me now, through with the storm, almost did me in, crack my composure. "No," I said, "It's not her. This girl was much younger, very thin." I stepped away, avoided the examiner's eyes and found my way up the cement stairway to the light of day, across the street into a gas station bathroom where I sat down to weep. The search was over.

About the Author



Doug Pinkston is the author of a novel, a collection of short stories and a non-fiction book on catering. His previous works include *American Season* and *Catering Complete*. He is a software engineer in the Atlanta area.

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