

# Key West with Poo and Company

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Excerpt from Flamingo Heaven

I stay in Key West. I don't call anyone. I don't ask questions. I write articles for the Island Gazette, sometimes three a day and I feel alive. The TV says the Key West Amusement Park in Orlando is doing well. Early one afternoon Zeb stops over. Zeb feeds the cat for me. In return, I edit Zeb's mystery writing.

Zeb is six feet six inches tall and weighs nearly three-fifty. He lives just behind me. The wooden floors in his two room cabin bend beneath his feet. To the outside world, Zeb appears a menace. With his huge tapered head and pocked face partially hidden by a short beard, I always think of him as a bedraggled satyr. Zeb baits hooks on the Crown Lena. He sells tee-shirts on Duval Street two nights a week. He's always writing a book.

Zeb moved to Key West to escape the hugeness of himself. Somehow in Key West, he can be left alone. He stays out of bars because he gets in trouble in bars. Although he doesn't drink, people think he's the perfect person to fight with because he looks mean. He doesn't fight, not because he can't handle himself, but because his heart isn't in it. His book plots are preposterous. His women talk like dolls and all of his men smoke cigars. He's so naive, he's priceless. Political correctness is lost on him. Not a mean hair in his beard; he lives alone with five cats and a hamster named Anthropology.

Guess who shows up with new rings, a red wig, and a pink dress with a plunging neckline, lipstick smeared on her cracked lips, green eye shadow and pink flats. A gold anklet adorns on her thick left ankle. Her cold gray eyes are clear, her great eyelashes dark

and kitten like. Her picket fence teeth are bright. I wonder if she still has the black hair by her naval. Poo!

Poo sits back in the big rattan chair that Zeb always sits in, but he gracefully gives it up. It's hard to believe this big man could be so gentle, setting a TV tray in front of Poo with a napkin. He sets an ashtray shaped like a blue butterfly with red spots by her cigarettes.

In this outfit, I have trouble picturing Poo as the women on the boat telling me stories of blue crab exorcisms and folk singing. I never got much more out of her concerning the exorcism. It wound down to, "If you'd care to insert your opinion in the jukebox, you got a song coming." Now she seems suddenly older, a mask, a simulation. Even when I saw her almost naked standing with her arms around D. in the motel, maybe it was too dark, I thought she wasn't a day over thirty-eight. The day I first saw her hustling Bobby and Rocker on Miami Beach, she just seemed like a woman with a little mileage on her.

Zeb bows. "Would the princess like me to light her cigarette?"

"The princess lights her own cigarettes, thank you very much," Poo replies with great dignity. She lights up and blows smoke straight at the middle of the room.

Zeb smiles like a great moon man. "And how's Spider?" he says to me. My eyes remain fixed on the great Poo, who at this moments needs a bunch of grapes to pop in her craw to round out said persona.

"Spider's fine." I snap a beer out of the fridge and hand it to Poo.

Zeb sits on the huge threadbare woven rug. The floor gives slightly.

Poo blows a long cloud of smoke across the room. "How is that alley cat of yours?"

"She's a Bombay cat. Spider Cat is on a diet," I say.

"Hasn't got a handle, but she has a place to put one," Poo says.

"What does?"

"Your cat."

"Right."

The truth is I heard Poo had come to Key West to "restart" her singing career. I've avoided her for weeks. I need to stay clean. I want desperately to know what happened to D., to see her again, but I want to stay out of jail, thank you very much

"So you have to come over to the club and hear me play tonight. I'm doing *my* rendition of *Evita*."

"She plays beautifully these days," Zeb says. "I'm putting her in my new novel. Did I tell you about my new novel?"

"No, not yet," I said. "But you will."

"Of course I will." Zeb is certain. "It's called *Only Dolphins Die Twice*. Great title."

"Intriguing," I said.

"What do you mean, intriguing?" Poo says. "This is the book that will make Zeb one of the names in Key West. He may even get to play volleyball with the rich and famous Tommie Clifford and Amelia Canard. Or Fanny Snow. Won't that be hot? They might even have him over to that pool, you know the one, and have some drinks. That is if Amelia doesn't decide you're not in her god damn club. Speaking of which, you got to meet Henry."

"Henry?" I say. Five weeks, day, whatever time ago, you were sitting on Bobby Adamciek's lap."

She blows a steady stream of smoke into the room. She sips beer. "Just one more blue crab I had to get rid of. Another Florida love affair. I loved him. God he was hot."

"I can see that."

"She's the Queen Bee of the Folk piano," Zeb says. "You should hear her play."

"What happened to Judy Henske and Bob Dylan?"

"There ain't no Bob Dylan," Poo says. "It was all a lie. I was in the Winn Dixie and they played "Blowin in the Wind," as muzak. He let it just go to hell in a wheelbarrow? What a phony he turned out to be."

"You mean to hell in hand barrel," Zeb says.

Two neighborhood cats, a tiger and a manx slip into the room and begin circling his great thighs. I must have left the back door open. Another, slightly larger tiger cat sits on the kitchen drain board staring out the kitchen window to my left.

"Dylan got old," I say.

"I still believe the sixties didn't go far enough," Poo says. "They all lost their nerve. Too soft. When it all came down to the damn nitty-gritty, they laid down and got to be Yuppies. And, now," she smokes faster. "Now, up in Seattle. Did you read that?"

"Read what," Zeb says. "I've been working on my novel."

"In Seattle. Now that they've fleeced the whole god damn country. Now that they ate all the god damn ice cream. Now they want to DROP out and live off their earnings. Or they sit in front of their computers all day and steal. You'd think, to hear them talk, they were doing something. They want it both ways. I want to live with people and I want to smoke my cigarettes and play my piano and wear my rings."

The small tiger cat jumps on Zeb's shoulder. Zeb never flinches. "Let me tell you about my novel."

"Just the plot," I say.

"Oh tell us the whole thing," Poo snorts. "Where the hell have you got to go anyway, Harry?"

"The plot?" I said.

"Two dolphins."

"Of course. Gay or straight?"

"Male and female. Georgia and Hamilton sent to search for a couple lost in plane crash originating in Ocala. Couple are 91 and 89. Left at noon. Georgia and Hamilton thwarted by counterintelligence. Plane last heard from just southwest of the Tortugas. Single engine. Smuggling. Hamilton's wife needs kidney. Drugs. Government needs drugs to buy guns to finance domestic insurgency. U.S. Government broke. No money to pay mercenaries or DEA either. So talk dolphins into going to find

cache. Can't afford to pay, so plan to kill dolphins so they won't tell. I can't tell you the end."

"Very good," Poo says.

I watch the larger tiger cat drop from the drain board and saunter out of sight.

"You can tell a lot from the title," Zeb says. "Is that your phone?"

"You can tell a lot from titles," I say.

"Are you going to answer your phone?" Poo says.

"I'm afraid. It's trouble. It has to be trouble."

"Maybe it's money," Zeb says letting the Manx walk back and forth across his lap

under the alternating palms of his great hands

"Or a story," Poo smokes.

"I'm on overload now." I push myself out of the chair and walk lazily to the phone that stops ringing. Spider Cat follows me to the phone. Too late. The answering machine kicks in.

"Harry? Harry? Is this you? It doesn't. Never mind. It's you. Harry, can you call me. It's me. Maggie. It's about Reisha. You know Reisha. The one I said would be a good friend in Florida. She thinks like you. Remember? I thought you should know. Her brother. You remember the brother, Ken? He went to the Nocturnal Café with us? Remember? No, you don't because you didn't go, but you remember when we pulled in the yard. We went to the Paula Nelson Folk, Poetry thing? That one? Remember I told you?"

"Jesus, Maggie, get on with it," I say to the machine.

"We left early because Paula just ranted and Ken was just divorced. You don't remember. Well, anyway, the brother, Ken, he was so angry. Remember how angry he was when he saw the menu for Ethiopian coffee, he wanted to know if they brought you an empty cup? Remember I said, 'No they bring you a cup with a dead baby in it.' Now you remember. Then I told him his women bashing was too much and to just cut it out? That's the one. Ken. Well I got a call from Reisha's sister; at least I think it was her sister. Ken is dead. I called Reisha three times and she doesn't call back. Reisha

can't talk because of the Jewish thing. They buried Ken. My father thinks they bury Jewish people straight up and down. I know you like Reisha. I'm going over. It's Friday morning. Harry, he was murdered. We should go over. I hope you get this today. I'm going now. I love you. And Dr. Lenzel is not going to press charges. Oh, and I got the results of my neuropsych tests. Bye, bye."

I wait for the red light on the phone to steady.

"Seems like the Ethiopian coffee arrived," I say. "And Dr. Lenzel is not going press charges? And the neur-whatevers, are in. Let's just imagine what all else this means."

I sit down wondering what the hell I'll say to Maggie. Poo interrupts my thoughts.

"D. wants to see you," she says, lighting a cigarette. Spider drops to floor and disappears in the kitchen.

"What's she up to now?"

"She asked about you."

"Rocker?"

Poo laughs. "He went back to his painter.

"And Bobby?"

"Poor Bobby got a job at Office Depot. He had to take a drug test. He said he was going to quit after he got enough money to get a portfolio for a talent agency. He wants to model. Was that your ever-loving Maggie?"

You should put this in your book, "I say to Zeb.

I watch Zeb run the scenario, such as it is, through his mind.

"What about Si Lee?" I say.

"The papers said he swindled something from somebody," Poo says. "He was part owner of the Blue Crane Inn. By the way, how's Maggie?"

"Just my luck. She calls when you're here."

"Go up and see her."

Poo drinks her beer and then another. She smokes three more cigarettes and by that time there are no cats to be found in my

house. "I'm playing tonight." Poo says. Poo adjusts one of the rings on her left index finger.

I can't get past the red wig. "I'll try," I say.

"Run up and see D.," she says.

After she leaves, Zeb and I sit for a half hour or so without speaking, which is very nice. I think Poo is just one big trip, one metamorphosis of many in my life. Who's to say? The cat neighborhood cats slips out. Spider Cat eyes me warily and proceeds to snooze. I know I'll have to drive north.

