

FEEDBACK

He said he wanted feedback.

The weather almost killed me. Yeah, I know, never start a story with *the*, or weather conditions. I forget who cautioned about the *the*, but it was Elmore Leonard who made the weather remark. He's the same guy who says he does the writing and someone else puts in the commas. Tell *that* to my editor.

Back to the weather ... I'm standing under a fifty-foot cabbage palm by my house in Duck Key. If you don't know south Florida, Duck Key is midway between Key Largo and Key West. I'm looking at the roof gutters. It's the regular afternoon thunderstorm with gusting winds and the gutters are, to use a cliché, whistling in the wind. I thought I'd fixed them, and I'm still looking up when lightning strikes the top of the palm; thunder arrives at the same time. No hair-on-end stuff, just a monster bang and blaze of light; I scamper inside. Who cares if the gutters carry a tune? Let 'em sing.

Weather aside, why my departure from novel-length manuscripts to short story? Call it insurance—someone on Duck Key doesn't like me.

Three years ago, Warner Books published my debut novel *Other Duties*. It came out in mass-market paperback and sold fifteen thousand copies. Then Johnny Depp

picked up the film option and *Other Duties* took off. I co-wrote the screenplay, and Johnny Depp got an Oscar for his role as Carlos Vega, the book's bad guy.

I made a lot of money. And I made a lot more with a sequel featuring my Secret Service protagonist, Ray Taylor. This time, Ray goes after a fellow agent who happens to be a psychopath. It's called *Secretary's Week*. Johnny Depp, busy playing a pirate, passed on the film option, but it was soon picked up by a Brentwood triad. (*Secretary's Week*, the movie, is still in production.)

So I keep my townhouse in Arlington and buy a place on Duck Key. I was an agent in the Secret Service for twenty-six years, five of those in the Miami office. I discovered Duck Key when President Bush (elder Bush) came for a visit. Duck Key is two miles long, low, rocky, covered with mangroves, and according to the last census has 427 people, 98 percent of them white. It also has Hawk's Cay Resort—expensive and famous. Bush stayed at Hawk's when he came down for saltwater fly fishing.

My place cost a million five and it's not fancy, but it's all in the location. What I do in Duck Key is drink, fish, and write (some). When my girlfriend flies down we tour the Keys or spend time with friends in Miami. Last night, alone (my girlfriend lives in New York), about five o'clock I drive to Cracker Jacks. Cracker Jacks is a bar and restaurant, a locals' hangout. It serves the best conch chowder on the island and their prices are a bargain compared to Hawk's. There's a restaurant section and a separate long zinc-topped bar overlooking the water, but then everything overlooks the water on Duck Key; it's an island.

The restaurant was packed, but at the bar maybe a dozen people. I order a Heineken and I'm looking at a menu when the owner of the place comes over and sits down next to me. His name is Jack Feaselman, thus the name Cracker Jacks, but Feaselman is no Florida cracker; he's from New Jersey. I know because we've talked before, briefly. I dislike the guy. When I think Feaselman I think weasel; perhaps it's the name, but he looks like a weasel. He's my age, low fifties with a thin body, thin hair, thick glasses and a fixed smile, more a smirk. He's rich. In addition to Cracker Jacks, he owns the Duck Key Marina. His house makes my place look like a pool changing room.

Rumor has it that Feaselman made his money in the drug trade. An FBI friend in Miami told me to be wary around Feaselman. Duck Key being small, he figured I'd run into him. He was right. The Bureau had a money laundering case against him, but it died when the informant disappeared.

Feaselman signals the bartender over and orders two specials. The special is a bottle of Absolut vodka with limes added. The bottle goes into the freezer. The drinks soon arrive in oversized shot glasses. Feaselman nods, says *salud*, and knocks his back. I nod, repeat *salud*, and knock back about half of the ice-cold booze.

"Ray Taylor would have finished it," Feaselman tells me.

I'm surprised. He's referring to my Secret Service agent in *Other Duties*.

"Yeah, but then I made him up," I reply. "I guess you read the book?"

"Read the book and saw the movie. Not in that order."

Unflattered, I tell him, "I'm flattered." Now we both wear smirks.

Feaselman jabs two fingers toward the bartender. Frozen specials arrive. I tell him that I need something to eat. He takes his drink and motions for me to follow, and we walk into the restaurant to a corner booth a bit removed from the other tables. “Better for *literary* talk,” he says. A waitress scurries over. Feaselman waves off the menus and tells her two specials, not Absolut this time, but catch-of-the-day and two cups of conch chowder for starters.

“Yellowtail,” he says to me.

“What?” *I can feel the vodka.*

“Catch-of-the-day ... yellowtail ... snapper.” He draws out the words, as if talking to a dim child, then, “In my opinion, *Secretary’s Week* is better than *Other Duties*. Your writing improves with time, like my vodka.”

“You read *Secretary’s Week*?” Now I am flattered in spite of being patronized and compared to lime-spiked vodka.

The food arrives. The portions are twice normal size. My cup of conch chowder was standard enough, but the snapper, cole slaw and fries overlap the platter. I’m hungry and eat everything; Feaselman toys with his fish like he’s catching it. He doesn’t toy with his drink and orders two more. With a couple pounds of food in me, I figure I can handle a couple ounces of vodka; besides, when it comes to alcohol I’m no quitter. And I’m known not only *to* take a drink, but *for* taking a drink.

With a curt sweep of his hand, Feaselman signals our hovering waitress to clear the plates. “You know there’s lots of killing in your books. Did you kill anyone when you were with the Secret Service?”

“No, but I broke some hearts.”

“Doesn’t count,” he says.

I could tell he was drunk or real close. “Look Jack, I write fiction. I make stuff up. You know, invent. If I wrote about the real Secret Service it wouldn’t sell and I’d be sued.”

“I’m an author,” Feaselman replies.

I don’t bite. This could go anywhere.

He breaks the silence. “I went to NYU, majored in business and took some writing courses. You *have* heard of NYU?”

Ignoring the sarcasm, I tell him I have heard, but, in truth, I don’t know if NYU is one place or several. I figure it’s in New York City.

“NYU has five major centers in Manhattan,” Feaselman tells me.

This asshole is drunk and clairvoyant.

“Come into my office.”

Says the spider to the fly comes to mind, but why not? I follow him behind the bar and through a door leading to a storage area, then through another door and finally into an office. It’s a small windowless room with a desk, a couple of worn leather chairs, a computer, and a compact refrigerator. From the freezer he takes out a bottle of, yes, Absolut with limes inside. He fills his glass and starts on mine.

“Half,” I tell him.

“Ray Taylor wouldn’t ask for half.”

“Fiction ... Jack. Think ... fiction.”

“I’ll show you fiction.” He jockeys his desk chair across the room and spins the dial of a safe that’s bolted to the floor; he needs to work the dial a couple of times. Inside I see a short stack of books; he takes the top one and hands it to me. It’s a thin volume, hardback in quality blue cloth. The title, in scripted gold lettering, reads: *Constellations* by Jack Conrad.

“A tribute to Joseph?” I ask.

“That’s correct.” Feaselman looks pleased.

I open the book. Inside: copy 1 of 10, Saltwater Press, Key West, Florida. Under contents there are nine titles. Short stories I guess.

“Nice,” I tell him and return the book.

He pauses and hands it back. “I’d like you to look at the book, read it . . . at home. You’ll be the first person to read *Constellations* other than me, but then I wrote it.

He finishes his drink and picks up the bottle. I extend my hand, palm up. Setting the bottle back on the desk, he leads me out through a service door to the parking lot, and we walk to my car. I thank him for the food and drink and get into my Porsche and take off. In the rearview mirror I see him still standing there, looking. He’s probably trying to decipher my vanity plate: NYTBS. I glance at the car’s clock. It’s only seven, seems later; in five minutes I’m home.

I check my answering machine for messages, none, and then sink into my Eames recliner with Feaselman’s book. Saltwater Press did a nice job with *Constellations*—paper, binding, typeface; the package is first rate. I thumb through it; there are nine short stories.

At two in the morning I finish: *Constellations* is a thinly-veiled self-indictment by Feaselman. He was crazy to let me read it. Yeah, writers need feedback, but this is a flat-out confession. How do I know? Call it visceral.

In “Blind Date,” set in New York City, his character picks up a woman at a bar, ten pages later he rapes, kills her. In “Off Key Largo,” a yacht takes on drugs from powerboats coming from the Bahamas. Loaded, the yacht motors up the Intercoastal to Lake Worth, where the drugs are off-loaded. In “Bimini Pirates,” two modern-day pirates approach a sailboat anchored off Bimini. As a precaution, the owner had scattered tacks on the deck before turning in. Feet meet tacks—yelps of surprise. The owner awakens, kills both men with his shotgun (one’s still in their dinghy), then tows them farther out to sea and cuts them loose.

Feaselman’s style is wordy, but no typos, okay punctuation ... surprisingly professional. I go to bed; *Constellations* doesn’t.

The doorbell rings. Startled, I manage to focus on the bedside clock. Seven-fifteen. I’m not happy. I go to bed late, sleep late. And before I attempt to talk I want breakfast, which is always the same: toast with peanut butter (crunchy), a banana, and two cups of strong coffee. Thanks to *Constellations*, I’ve had five hours of crappy sleep, no breakfast, and I don’t want to talk to Feaselman. And I know it’s him.

I open the door: Feaselman, his red Cadillac filling up the drive, doesn’t look happy either. And there is something different about him—his smirk is gone. Beyond the Cadillac, to the east, clouds are building for the afternoon storm.

“Come on in, *Conrad*. You want your book back?” I lead him into the kitchen and point to a chair. Feaselman ignores my hospitality, stands. I sit.

He hesitates, then, “I had a lot to drink last night ... about my book ... you probably didn’t have time to read it?”

It would be prudent to lie. Instead, “I read the whole thing, cover-to-cover.” I get up, go to the den, get the book, return to the kitchen and hand it to him; then I put a stainless-steel kettle of filtered water on a gas ring to boil. I need caffeine, bad. Always the perfect host, I offer him one of *my* specials—a cup of instant coffee, no limes.

He shakes his head, then, “So, what did you think of it?”

“Think of what?” *I can’t resist.*

“My book.”

It would be prudent to lie. Instead, “What did I think of your book? I think the police would like a copy. Reminds me of O. J.’s how-to book, you know, where he filets Nicole and Ron.”

Feaselman places his hands flat on the table and leans in toward me, real close, and says, “You could get hurt talking like that.”

I rarely lose my cool. I lose it. And my voice rockets; I sound like Pee-wee Herman. “Here’s what we’ve got, *Conrad*. I’ve made notes and I’ll make calls, say about your story ‘Bimini Pirates,’ and the girl you snuffed in ‘Blind Date.’ Further, I’ll write my agent and tell her about you and *Constellations* and Saltwater Press. And I’ll tell her to file my notes and if something happens to me to turn them over to the police.”

The water's hot. I'm not. I've cooled and I make coffee for one. Feaselman stands there, quiet.

"By the way, you overwrite," I tell him.

"What?"

"You're too wordy. You use too many modifiers and your nouns are weak."

"You mean my *verbs* are weak," Feaselman says; his smirk is back.

"Yeah, those too."

He grabs his book, bolts for the door and he's gone. I can hear gravel fly as Feaselman rips his Caddy out of the drive. I stay at the table drinking coffee and feeling better. *He said he wanted feedback.*

I don't e-mail my agent, nor do I make any calls. Perhaps I've read more into *Constellations* than warranted? Later, a friend phones and I'm invited out on his yacht for a sunset cruise; also on board, visiting, an English professor from Miami Dade College. She's apparently written a couple of true-crime books. And she's apparently good looking and divorced, so right away we have something in common. Maybe she'd like to take on Feaselman? I'll provide her the title: *The Cracker Jack Killer*.

But the next time I am in Miami, I will talk to my FBI friend about Feaselman and Saltwater Press. Saltwater should have if not a copy of *Constellations*, a copy of the manuscript, proofs, something. What really pisses me off is that I won't be going back to Cracker Jacks. I liked the place.

EPILOGUE

There was a storm every afternoon.

When Feaselman got home he went straight to his library and retrieved his copy of *Other Duties* and turned to the Acknowledgements. There was the standard thanking: a writers' workshop, people at Warner Books, friends who'd read the manuscript, his understanding girlfriend, his tireless editor, and his agent ... Liz Silver.

Feaselman sat down at his computer, connected to the Internet and quickly found Silver Literary Agency on Avenue of the Americas, New York City.

He then called his travel agent in Miami and told her he wanted to fly to New York the following evening with an open return and to make reservations for him at the Carlyle.

Next, Feaselman put together an overnight bag and then walked to his garage. He secured a five-gallon can of gasoline in the back of his tan Lincoln Navigator, which he used for hunting and drove to Key West. *Conchs*, as residents of Key West are known, worry (when sober) about two things: hurricanes and fire. The historic section of Key West is built of paint-layered wood.

Feaselman was home by ten the next morning. He'd slept poorly—the night filled with the sound of sirens and trucks racing up and down the narrow streets. The fire had destroyed over a dozen buildings including Saltwater Press. But it was quiet enough on

his deck, and looking beyond Pelican Point he could make out the house belonging to the author of *Other Duties*.

Later that afternoon, driving to Miami for his flight to New York, he recalled the whistling sound made by wind striking gutters, and more vividly he recalled the deafening sound made by a twelve-gauge shotgun fired inside a house.

In the Navigator's side mirror, he could still see a thin spiral of black smoke rising above Duck Key. Feaselman smiled. He was looking forward to his, rather, Jack Conrad's meeting with Liz Silver.

End