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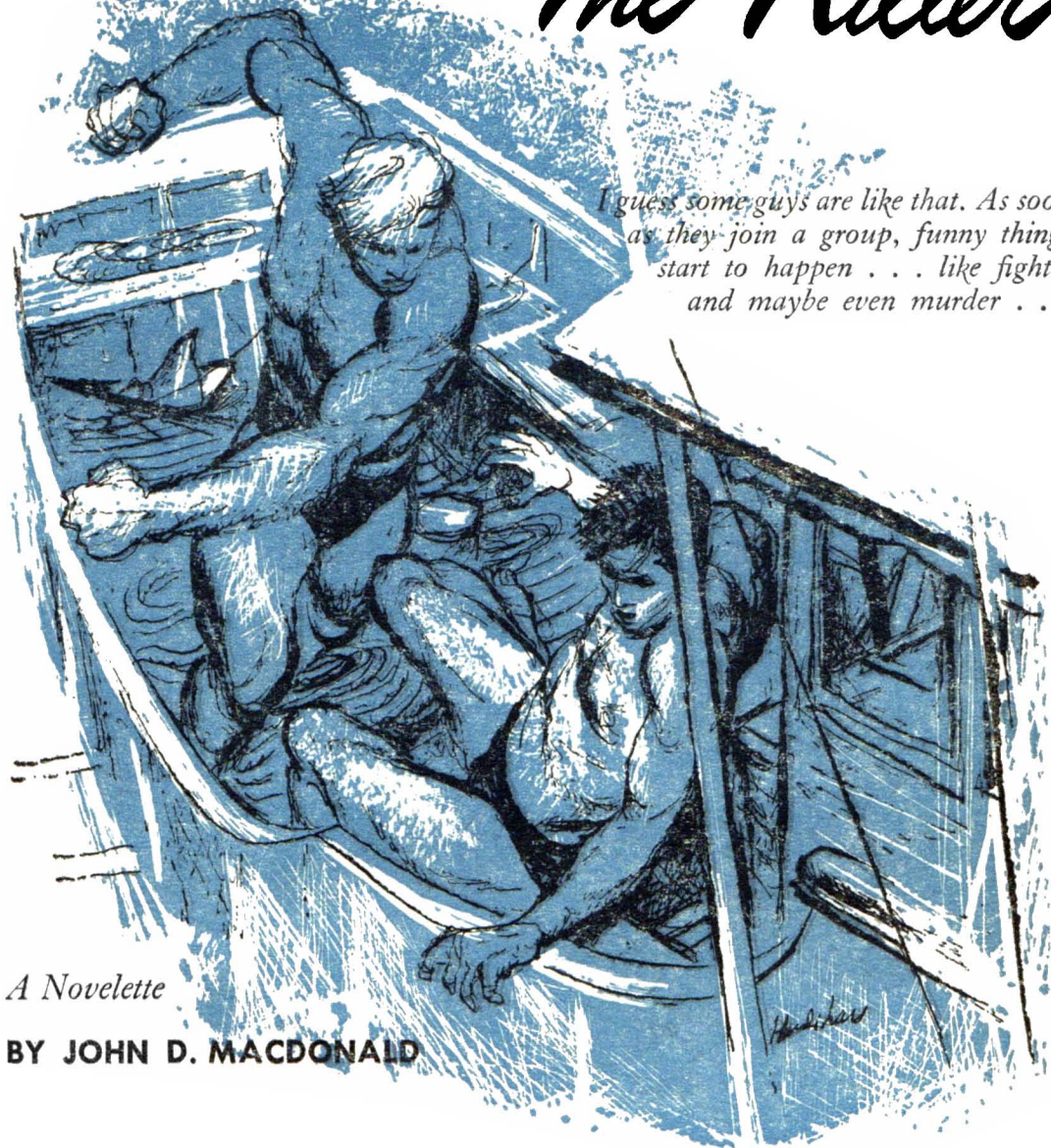
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The Killer

I guess some guys are like that. As soon as they join a group, funny things start to happen . . . like fights, and maybe even murder . . .



A Novelette

BY JOHN D. MACDONALD

WE CERTAINLY got sick of John Lash. A lot of the guys stopped coming after he started to attend every meeting. It's a skin diving club—you know, just a few guys who like to swim under water in masks and all, shoot fish with

those spear guns, all that. We started originally with six guys and we called ourselves The Deep Six. Even when it got up to about fifteen, we kept the name.

When it started we just had masks and fins and crude rigs. We live and

work on the Florida Keys. I work in a garage in Marathon. Dusty has a bait and boat rental business in Craig. Lew manages a motel down on Ramrod. That's just to give you an idea of the kind of jokers we are. Just guys who got bitten by this skin diving bug. We tried to meet once a week. Dusty had an old tub that's ideal for it. We meet and pick a spot and head for it and anchor and go down and see what's there. You never know what you'll find. There are holes down there that are crawling with fish.

Once the bug gets you, you're hooked. There are a lot of little clubs like ours. Guys that get along. Guys who like to slant down through that green country, kicking yourself along with your fins, hunting those big fish right down in their own backyard.

We got better equipment as we went along. We bought snorkel tubes when those came out. But the Aqua-lungs were beyond our price range. I think it was Lew who had the idea of everybody chipping in, and of putting in the money we got from selling the catches. When we had enough we bought a lung and two tanks, and then another. In between meetings somebody would run the four tanks up and get them refilled. There was enough time on the tanks so that during a full day everybody got a crack at using one of the lungs.

It was fine there for quite a while. We'd usually get ten or twelve, and

some of the wives would come along. We'd have food and beer out there in the sun on that old tub and we had some excitement, some danger, and a lot of fish.

Croy Danton was about the best. A little guy with big shoulders, who didn't have much to say. Not a gloomy guy. He just didn't talk much. His wife, Betty, would usually come along when she could. They've got some rental units at Marathon. He did a lot of the building himself, with the help of a G.I. loan. Betty is what I would call a beautiful girl. She's a blonde and almost the same height as Croy, and you can look at her all day without finding anything wrong with her. She dives a little.

Like I said, it was fine there for a while, until Lew brought this John Lash along one day. Afterward Lew said he was sorry, that Lash had seemed like a nice guy. In all fairness to Lew, I will admit that the first time John Lash joined us he seemed okay. We let him pay his dues. He was new to the Keys. He said he was looking around, and he had a temporary job tending bar.

One thing about him, he was certainly built. One of those guys who looks as if he was fat when you see him in clothes. But in his swimming trunks he looked like one of those advertisements. He had a sort of smallish round head and round face and not much neck. He was blonde and beginning to go a little bald. The head didn't seem to fit the rest

of him, all that tough brown bulge of muscle. He looked as if a meat axe would bounce right off him. He'd come over from California and he had belonged to a couple of clubs out there and had two West Coast records. He said he had those records and we didn't check, but I guess he did. He certainly knew his way around in the water.

This part is hard to explain. Maybe you have had it happen to you. Like at a party. You're having a good time, a lot of laughs, and then somebody joins the party and it changes everything. You still laugh, but it isn't the same kind of laugh. Everything is different. Like one of those days when the sun is out and then before you know it there is a little haze across the sun and everything looks sort of funny. The water looks oily and the colors are different. That is what John Lash did to The Deep Six. It makes you wonder what happened to a guy like that when he was a kid. It isn't exactly a competitive instinct. They seem to be able to guess just how to rub everybody the wrong way. But you can't put your finger on it. Any of us could tell Dusty his old tub needed a paint job and the bottom scraped and Dusty would say we should come around and help if we were so particular. But John Lash could say it in such a way that it would make Dusty feel ashamed and make the rest of us feel ashamed, as though we were all second rate, and John Lash was used to things being first rate.

When he kidded you he rubbed you raw. When he talked about himself it wasn't bragging because he could always follow it up. He liked horseplay. He was always roughing somebody around, laughing to show it was all in fun, but you had the feeling he was right on the edge of going crazy mad and trying to kill you. We had been a close group, but after he joined we started to give each other a bad time, too. There were arguments and quarrels that John Lash wasn't even in. But they happened because he was there. It was spoiling the way it used to be, and there just wasn't anything we could do about it because it wasn't the sort of club where you can vote people out.

Without the lung, with just the mask, he could stay downstairs longer than anybody. Longer than Croy Danton even, and Croy had been the best until John Lash showed up. We had all tried to outdo Croy, but it had been sort of a gag competition. When we tried to outdo John Lash some of the guys stayed down so long that they were pretty sick when they came back up. But nobody beat him.

Another thing about him I didn't like. Suppose we'd try a place and find nothing worth shooting. For John Lash there wasn't anything that wasn't worth shooting. He had to come up with a fish. I've seen him down there, waving the shiny barb slowly back and forth. The fish come up to take a look at it. A

thing like that attracts them. An angel fish or a parrot fish or a look-down would come up and hang right in front of the barb, studying this strange shiny thing. Then John Lash would pull the trigger. There would be a big gout of bubbles and sometimes the spear would go completely through the fish so that it was threaded on the line like a big bright bead. He'd come up grinning and pull it off and toss it over the side and say, "Let's try another spot, children."

The group shrunk until we were practically down to the original six. Some of the other guys were going out on their own, just to stay away from John Lash. Croy Danton kept coming, and most of the time he would bring Betty. John Lash never horsed around with Croy. Croy, being so quiet, never gave anybody much of an opening. John Lash never paid any special attention to Betty. But I saw it happen. Betty wasn't going to dive after fish. She was just going to take a dip to cool off. John Lash had just taken a can of beer out of the ice chest. He had opened it and it was a little bit warm. I saw him glance up to the bow where Betty was poised to dive. She stood there and then dived off cleanly. John Lash sat there without moving, just staring at the place where she had been. And the too-warm beer foamed out of the can and ran down his fingers and dropped onto his thigh, darkening and matting the coarse blonde hair that had

been sundried since his last dive. I saw him drain the can and saw him close his big hand on it, crumpling it, before throwing it over the side. And I saw him watch Betty climb back aboard, sleek and wet, smiling at Croy, her hair waterpasted down across one eye so that as soon as she stood up in the boat, she thumbed it back behind her ear.

I saw all that and it gave me a funny feeling in my stomach. It made me think of the way he would lure the lookdowns close to the barb, and it made me think of the way blood spreads in the water.

After that, John Lash began to move in on Betty with all the grace and tact of a bulldozer. He tried to dab at her with a towel when she came out of the water. If she brought anything up, he had to bustle over to take it off her spear. He found reasons to touch her. Imaginary bugs. Helping her in or out of the boat. Things like that. And all the time his eyes burning in his head.

At first you could see that Croy and Betty had talked about it between meetings, and they had agreed, I guess, to think of it as being sort of amusing. At least they exchanged quick smiles when John Lash was around her. But a thing like that cannot stay amusing very long when the guy on the make keeps going just a little bit further each time. It got pretty tense and, after the worst day, Croy started leaving Betty home. He left her home for two weeks in a row.

Croy left her home the third week and John Lash didn't show up either. We sat on the dock waiting for late-comers. We waited longer than usual. Dusty said, "I saw Lash at the bar yesterday and he said today he was off."

There were only five of us. The smallest in a long, long time. We waited. Croy finally said, "Well, let's go." As we took the boat out I saw Croy watching the receding dock, no expression on his face. It was a funny strained day. I guess we were all thinking the same thing. We had good luck, but it didn't seem to matter. We left earlier than usual. Croy sat in the bow all the way back, as if in that way he'd be nearer shore, and the first one home.

2.

Croy came around to see me at the garage the next morning. I was trying to find a short in an old Willys. When I turned around he was standing there behind me with a funny look on his face. Like a man who's just heard a funny sound in the distance and can't figure out just what it was. He looked right over my left shoulder, and said, "You can tell him for me, Dobey, that I'm going to kill him."

"What do you mean?"

"He came around yesterday. He was a little drunk. He scared Betty. He knew I wouldn't be there. He came around and he scared her. The

Sandersons were there. She got loose of him and went over where they were. He kept hanging around. She had to stay with them most of the day. He's got her nervous now. You tell him for me if he makes one more little bit of a move toward her at any time, I'll sure kill him stone dead." He turned around and walked out with that funny look still on his face. It was the most I ever heard him say all at one time.

At noon I went over to the bar where John Lash was working. He'd just come on. I got a beer and he rung it up and slapped my change down. He seemed a little nervous.

"Get anything yesterday?"

"Les got a big 'cuda. Croy got some nice grouper. Where were you?"

"Oh, I had things to do."

"You better not have any more things like that to do."

He looked at me and put his big hands on the bar and put his face closer to mine. "What kind of a crack is that?"

"Don't try to get tough with me. You messed around Betty Danton yesterday. You scared her. She told Croy. Croy came in this morning and gave me a message to give you. He says you bother her in any other kind of way at any time and he's going to kill you." It sounded funny to say it like that. As if I was in a movie.

John Lash just stared at me out of those little hot eyes of his. "What kind of talk is that? Kill me? With

all the come-on that blonde of his has been giving me? Why don't he come here and tell me that? You know damn well why he didn't come here. By God, I'd have thrown him halfway out to the road."

"He told me to tell you. It sounded like he meant it."

"I'm scared to death. Look at me shake."

I finished my beer and put the glass down. "See you," I said.

"I'll be along the next time."

I walked out. One thing about that Lash, he didn't scare worth a damn. I would have been scared. One of those fellows who do a lot of talking wouldn't scare me much. But the quiet ones, like Croy, they bottle things up.

It was nearly three o'clock when Betty came into the garage. She had on a white dress and when she stood there it made the old garage with all the grease and dirt look darker than ever before. She is a girl who looks right at you. Her eyes were worried. I wiped my hands and lit a cigarette and went over to her.

"Dobey, did Croy talk to you?"

"He was in."

"What did he say?"

"Wouldn't he tell you what he said?"

"He just said he gave you a message for John Lash. What was it, Dobey? He won't tell me. He acts so funny. I'm scared, Dobey."

"He told me to tell Lash if he messed around you he was going to kill him. He said Lash scared you."

"Well, he did scare me, sort of. Because he was drunk. But the Sandersons were there. So it was all right. Croy says I have to come along with you next time. What did Lash say?"

"What do you think he said? You can't scare him off that way. I don't think anybody ought to go out next time, Betty. I think we ought to call it off. I think it's going to be a mess."

"Croy says we're going. He's acting funny. We'll have to go. You've got to come along too, Dobey. Please."

3.

That's the way it was. It was something you couldn't stop. Like one of those runaway trains in the old movie serials. Picking up speed as it went. I had time during the week to get hold of the other guys and tell them what was up. I don't know now why we didn't form a sort of delegation and go see John Lash and tell him to move along, off the Keys. There would have been enough of us. But there was something about Lash. Something wild and close to the surface. You could have done all that to a normal guy, but he wasn't normal. I'm not saying he was crazy.

Anyway, I loaded the little Jap automatic I had brought back from Saipan and put it in the paper sack with my lunch. That's the way I felt about the day.

Dusty and Lew and I were the first ones to arrive. We put the gear in the old tub. Lew had gotten his new Arbalete gun with the double sling and we hefted it and admired it and then we talked about maybe getting our own compressor some time for the two double-tank lungs. I crushed a damp cigarette and rubbed the glass on my face mask. Two more of the regulars arrived. There was the feel of trouble in that day. A different shimmer in the water. A different blue in the sky. A car door slammed and pretty soon Croy and Betty came around the corner of the fish house and down to the dock, laden with gear. For a time I guess we were all hoping that John Lash wouldn't show. It would have been a good day then, like the days before he came along and joined us.

But as hope grew stronger and Dusty started to fool with the old engine, John Lash came down to the dock, walking cat-light, carrying his sack of gear and lunch and beer, his personal Saetta gun in his other hand, looking slimmer and frailer than it was because it was John Lash who carried it, walking toward us, sun picking sweat-lights off his brown shoulders.

I expected it right then and there. I saw Betty hunch herself a little closer to Croy and start to put her hand on his arm and then change her mind. But John Lash came aboard, saying a lot of loud hellos, banging his gear down, opening the ice chest to pile his cans of beer in there.

He didn't seem to pay any special attention to Betty, or Croy either. He sat on the rail back near Dusty at the wheel while we headed out and down the coast. It was enough to make you want to relax, but you couldn't. The water had a greased look. We had agreed to try Gilman's Reef. There is good coral there, and rock holes. I don't know whether we were trying to keep a lid on trouble, but the other five of us did more talking than usual, more kidding around. But laughter had a flat sound across the water. Lew checked the Aqua Lungs. I had me a beer.

When we got close I went up and stood on the bow and had Dusty bring it up to a place that looked right. I let the anchor line slide through my hands. It hit bottom in twenty-five feet, which was about right. We drifted back and it caught and we swung and steadied there, about twenty feet off the reef shallows. No trouble had started and it didn't look like there would be any. Croy and Lew went down first, Lew with a lung and Croy with a mask only, just to take a look around. I noticed that when Croy lowered himself easily into the water he glanced at Betty and then back to where John Lash was working his feet into the fins. He ducked under and one fin swirled the water as he went down.

John Lash got his fins on and flapped forward to where Betty sat on the rail. He laughed out loud and wrapped a big brown fist in that

blonde hair of hers and turned her face upward and kissed her hard on the mouth. She struggled and clawed at him and fell to her hands and knees when he released her.

"Hard to get, aren't you, blondie?" he asked.

Dusty said, "Cut it out, Lash. Cut it out!"

"This is nothing to you, Dusty. Keep out of it! This is me and Betty."

"Get away from me," she said. Her eyes were funny and her mouth had a broken look. I picked up the paper sack and put my hand inside and got hold of the automatic. I couldn't tell what he was going to try to do. He stood spreadlegged on the deck watching the water. Betty moved away from him toward the stern, beyond me and Dusty.

Croy broke water and shoved his mask up. He was a dozen feet from the boat.

John Lash stood there and laughed down at him and said, "I just kissed your woman, Danton. I understand you got ideas of making something out of it. I got a message from you."

Croy took one glance at Betty. He brought the Arbalete spear gun up almost off-hand and fired it directly at John Lash's middle. I heard the zing and slap of the rubber slings, heard Betty's scream, heard John Lash's hard grunt of surprise as he threw himself violently to one side. I don't know how he got away from it. But he did. The spear hit the end of the nylon and fell to the

water on the far side of the boat. John Lash recovered his balance. He stared at Croy as though he were shocked. He roared then and went off the side in a long flat dive, hurling himself at Croy. There was a splash of water, a flash of brown arms and then they were both gone. I got a glimpse of them under the water as they sank out of sight. Betty screamed again, not as loud.

4.

Nobody was set to go down. We all started grabbing gear at once. I went off the side about the same moment as Dusty, and at the last moment I had snatched up John Lash's Saetta gun. It was cocked and I don't know what I expected to do with it but I took it. I went down through the deepening shades of green, looking for them. I saw movement and cut over toward it, but it was Lew wearing the lung. He saw me and spread his arms in a gesture that meant he hadn't spotted anything worth shooting. He didn't know what was going on. I motioned him to go up. I guess I looked as though I meant it. He shrugged and headed up.

I looked hard, but I couldn't find them and I could tell by the way my chest felt that it was nearly time to head up. I took it as long as I could. I thought I saw movement below me and to the right but I was close to blacking out and I went up. Dusty was hanging on the

side of the boat. Betty stood staring down into the water. I knew from her face that they hadn't come up. I took deep breaths and turned and went down again and got part way down when I saw them. John Lash with a look of agony on his face, was working his way up, kicking hard, one hand holding Croy by the waistband of his trunks. Croy was loose in the water. I went over and got hold of Croy by the wrist. I fired the spear off to the side so the gun would float up. Lash was having a hard time of it. I got Croy up and we got him over the side and put him face down on the bottom and Les, who had the lung and tanks off, began to work on him. Somebody behind me helped John Lash aboard. Dusty had to grab Betty and pull her away from Croy so Les could use the artificial respiration without her getting in his way.

She turned against Dusty and she was crying. Those were the sounds. The small noises she made, and John Lash's labored breathing, and the rhythmic slap and creak of the respiration.

"Tried . . . to kill me," Lash said. "You . . . you saw it. Then . . . tried to drown me. Tried to hold me even . . . after he'd passed out."

Nobody answered him. The boat moved in the offshore swell. Loose gear rattled. Croy retched and coughed. Les continued until Croy began to struggle weakly. Les moved back then and Croy rolled over,

closing his eyes against the sun.

Betty dropped to her knees beside him saying words that did not make sentences. Croy raised his head. He looked at her and then pushed her aside, gently. He got to his knees. I tried to help him up but he refused the help. He got to his feet with an enormous effort. He stood unsteadily and looked around until he saw John Lash. As soon as he saw Lash he bent and picked up a loose spear. He held it by the middle, the muscles of his arm bunching.

John Lash moved quickly. He got up and said, "Wait! Hold it! Croy, wait . . ." Dusty tried to grab Croy but he moved quickly. The spear tip gashed John Lash's arm as he tried to fend it off, and as Croy drew back to thrust again, John Lash hit him flush in the face with one of those big brown fists. Croy bounced back and hit the engine hatch and rebounded to fall heavily and awkwardly, unconscious.

Betty reached him and turned him and sat, his head in her lap, arm curled protectively around his head, murmuring to him. Lew wet the end of a towel and gave it to her. She wiped the blood from his mouth and looked at John Lash and then the rest of us with cold hate. "Why didn't you stop him? Why are you letting him do this to Croy?"

"I had to hit him!" John Lash said, his voice a half-octave higher than usual. "You saw what he was trying to do. Why didn't you guys stop him?"

Croy's mouth puffed rapidly. He mumbled something. Dusty started the engine. "We better get back. You want to get the anchor up, Dobby?"

I broke it free and hauled it in, coiling the line. When I moved back I saw that Croy was sitting up. Betty was holding onto his arm. She was saying, with a gradually increasing edge in her voice, "No, darling. No. No please, darling."

But Croy was looking beyond her, looking at John Lash. Lash was trying to grin. It wasn't a grin as much as it was just a sort of twist he was wearing on his mouth. He'd look at Croy and then look away. Croy got up then with Betty holding onto him. He lurched over toward the rail and grabbed one of the gaffs. Lash came back up onto his feet quickly and said, "Grab him!"

Croy shook Betty loose. Lew and I grabbed Croy. It was like grabbing hard rubber. He lowered his head and butted Lew over the rail. Dusty swung the boat to keep the prop clear of Lew. It made me lose my balance. As I staggered Croy rapped me across my shins with the handle end of the gaff and hot stars went off behind my eyes from the sudden pain of it. When I could see again I saw him going for Lash with the gaff. They were poised for a moment, muscles like they were cut out of stone, both holding onto the long gaff. Then John Lash, with his greater strength, hurled Croy back toward the stern again. Croy fell,

harder than before, but he hadn't been hit.

"Keep him off me!" Lash yelled. "Keep him off me!"

Croy got slowly and clumsily back to his feet and started back toward Lash. I was set to take another grab at Croy. Lew was climbing aboard. The other two guys were having no part of it. They were plain scared. Just as I was about to grab Croy he put his weight on his left foot and went down. I could see the ankle puffing visibly. He never took his eyes off John Lash. He had fallen near his gear. He fumbled and came out with a fish knife with a cork handle. Holding it in his hand he began to crawl toward the bow, toward John Lash again, the handle thumping against the cockpit boards every time he put his right hand down. I fell on his arm. I could hear Lash yelling. I couldn't make out what he was saying. I got Croy's wrist and managed to twist the knife out of his hand. Lew had him around the middle. We hauled him over and tried to sit on him. He kept struggling with stubborn, single-minded strength. Once he broke free and started crawling again toward Lash, puffed lips pulled back from bloody teeth, but we got him again.

Dusty helped that time and one of the other guys and we held him and tried to talk sense into him, but he kept on struggling. We finally got heavy nylon line around his wrists and tied his arms behind him.

We thought that was going to be enough, but even with his hands like that he managed to get on his feet and, limping badly, try to get at Lash. Dusty put a length of the anchor line around the engine hatch and we tied him there around his chest, sitting on the litter of gear and water and smashed sandwiches and cans of beer, staring at John Lash and fighting the heavy line constantly.

5.

Once he was tied up, Betty kneeling beside him, trying to soothe him, John Lash lighted a cigarette. His hands shook. He grinned. "He get like that often?" he asked "Look at him. He still wants to get at me."

Croy's shoulders bulged as he fought the rope. Lash kept glancing at him. We were all breathing hard. Dusty examined skinned knuckles. "I never see him like that, not that bad. Old Croy he gets an idea in his head, you can't get it out. No sir."

"He'll get over this, won't he? When he cools off."

"He's not going to cool off at all," Dusty said. "Not one little bit. Tomorrow, the next day, it'll be just the same."

"What am I supposed to do then?" Lash asked.

"I don't know. I really don't know," Dusty said. "You got to either kill him or he's got it in his mind he's going to kill you. Known

him twenty years and he's never gone back on his word one time. Or his daddy before him."

Lash licked his lips. I watched him. I saw him sitting there, nervous. It was something he'd never run into. It was something I guess few men ever run into in their lifetime. I could see him wishing he'd never made any sort of a pass at Betty.

Croy fought the rope, doggedly, constantly, sweat running down his face.

John Lash lighted another cigarette. "He'll get over it," he said unconvincingly.

"I wouldn't want to bet much on that," I said.

There was that big John Lash sitting there in the sun, a whole head and forty-fifty pounds bigger than little Croy Danton. And without the faintest idea in the world as to what to do about it. Either way, there didn't seem to be any kind of an out for John Lash.

"He's nuts. You people are all nuts down here," Lash said.

I sensed what was forming in his mind. I said, "When we dock we'll see if we can hold him right here for about an hour. You ought to pack up and take off."

"Run from a character like him?" Lash said.

Croy's arms came free suddenly and he tried to shove the line up off his chest. His wrists were bloody where the nylon had punished them. Three of us jumped him and got

his wrists tied again. He didn't make a sound. But he fought hard. Betty kept trying to quiet him down, talking gentle, her lips close to his ear. But you could see that for Croy there were two people left in the world. Him and John Lash.

It took about forty minutes to get back in. Nobody talked. I didn't like to watch Croy. It was a sort of thing I have seen in Havana at the cock fights. I hear it is like that, too, at the bull fights. A distillation, I guess you would call it, of violence. The will to kill. Something that comes from a sort of crazy pride, a primitive pride, and once you have started it, you can't turn it off.

It was easy to see that John Lash didn't want to look at him either. But he had to keep glancing at him to make sure he wasn't getting loose. During that forty minutes John Lash slowly unraveled. He came apart way down in the middle of himself where it counted. I don't think any of us would say he was a coward. He wasn't yellow. But this was something he couldn't understand. He'd never faced it before and few men ever face it in their lifetime. To Lash I guess Croy wasn't a man any more. He was a thing that wanted to kill him. A thing that lusted to kill him so badly that even defenseless it would still keep coming at him.

By the time we got in, John Lash wasn't even able to edge by Croy to pick up his gear. We had to get it and pass it up to him where he

stood on the dock. John Lash looked down and he looked older in the face. Maybe it was the first time he had seriously thought about his own death. It shrunk him a little.

"Hold him for an hour. I'll go away," he said. He didn't say good-bye. There wasn't any room in him to think of things like that. He walked away quickly and a bit unsteadily. He went around the corner of the fish house. We've never seen him since.

Croy kept watching the place where John Lash had disappeared. Betty kept whispering to him. But in about ten minutes Croy stopped struggling.

"There, baby. There," I heard Betty whisper.

He gave a big convulsive shudder and looked around, first at her and then at the rest of us, frowning a little as if he had forgotten something.

"Sorry," he said huskily. "Real sorry." And that is all he ever said about it. He promised that he was all right. I carried his stuff to their car. Betty bound his ankle with a strip of towel. He leaned heavily on her to the car.

6.

That's almost all, except the part I don't understand. The Deep Six is back up to about fifteen again. We have a compressor now, and new spots to go, and we did fine in the inter-club competitions this

year. We're easy with each other, and have some laughs.

But Croy never came back. He and Betty, they go out by themselves in a kicker boat when the weather is right. I don't see any reason why he didn't come back. He says hello when we see him around. Maybe he's ashamed we saw him like that, saw that wildness.

One morning not long ago I went out alone on the Gulf side. I got out there early and mist hung heavy on the water. I tilted my old outboard up and rowed silently. It was kind of eerie there in the mist in the early morning. All of a sudden I began to hear voices. It was hard to tell direction but they kept getting louder. There was a deep voice, a man's voice, talking and talking and talking, and every so often a woman would say one or two words, soft and soothing.

All of a sudden I recognized the voices as Croy's and Betty's. I couldn't catch any of the words. I rested on the oars. It made me feel strange. I figured I could get closer and find out what in the world Croy could talk about for so long.

But then understanding came to me suddenly, and it wasn't neces-

sary to listen. I understood suddenly that there was only one subject on which a quiet guy like Croy could talk and talk and talk, and that the situation wasn't over and maybe would never be over. And I realized that embarrassment was only part of the reason Croy didn't come skin-diving with us any more; the rest of the reason was that the sight of us reminded him too strongly of John Lash. I turned the dinghy and headed off the other way until their voices faded and were gone.

Later in the morning after the sun had burned the mist off, I was spin casting with a dude and monofilament line over a weed bed when they went by, heading in, their big outboard roaring, the bow wave breaking the glassy look of the morning Gulf.

Croy was at the motor, Betty up in the bow.

Betty waved at me and Croy gave me a sort of little nod as they went by. I waved back. Their swell rocked me and then they were gone in the distance.

She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. You could look at her all day and not find anything wrong.



MUGGED AND PRINTED

JOHN D. MACDONALD is an amazingly prolific young writer whose work is consistently rated at the top of the list. He's the author of *Cancel All Our Vows*, a serious novel, and the new *Contrary Pleasures* — and he's also written many top-notch crime and suspense novels which drew rave notices and phenomenal sales. His byline has appeared innumerable times in all of the top magazines, over a variety of short pieces which always bear the fresh, tough trademark of MacDonald's writing. His first story for *Manhunt*, *The Killer*, is right up there with MacDonald's best work. We'll be bringing you more of his fine stories soon.



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