

1 The Spark

I've been away from my 'puter for a while, felling dragons here and there. I think it's time for a new book. I'm feeling very sexy now, following a prolonged period of indifference. I'm surprised. Ten years have quickly blown by me. Today I feel much as I did when I first met Joseph Robert Rossi, also known as the Thrillkiller. Smart as a computer, hung like a horse, and wrapped in a body too hot to be earthly, he was delightful, delicious, and highly addictive. Tall, dark, and dripping tactile virility, he had an inviting, fuck-and-suck physiognomy, with a straight nose just wide enough, pillowy lips, and perfect, white, smiley teeth. His collar-length hair was dark brown and wavy. Last and not least, his large brown eyes were luminous with long, thick eyelashes.

Joe Bob Rossi and I conducted a two-year-long assignation. I call it that, because at the beginning of it we were both married, and at the end I emerged alone and covered in sleaze. Soon into it, we fell in love (or so I thought), and we promised to divorce our respective spouses and marry each other. I kept my end of the deal; Joe Bob did not. He waffled, and admitted he was ambivalent. To me, ambivalence has always been at the low end of human nature, but I had neither the willpower nor the common sense to suggest that he shit in his hat, pull it over his ears, and end it then and there.

Rossi and I broke up at least 25 times, at which point I lost count; we were on-again-off-again and during our brief on-again intervals we had low-rent rendezvous, usually at my condo, with the lion's share of our time spent in the bedroom. Occasionally we met first for drinks at a seamy bar. On the worst nights, in the midst of lovemaking, when I was nearly touching the brass ring, Joe Bob Rossi stopped doing what he was doing, announced that he had to split, and went home to his wife. "Orgasm deprivation," I think the S&M crowd calls it. Hence the apt moniker, the Thrillkiller.

Thoroughly enmeshed with the Thrillkiller, I began my battle with refractory depression. He stood me up repeatedly, choosing to spend our appointed time with his wife. This happened once too often, and I belted him, a roundhouse right with most of my weight behind it. He stayed standing, so I clocked him several times, until my arm was exhausted. If he had hit me back, I think I would have left him for the last time and made it stick. But he didn't hit me back. Without asking him, I've always wondered why.

I was sufficiently devastated to consider suicide, and began pulling together a plan. I consulted my girlfriend Sal, and she took me to see a hit man she knew, to put a contract out on myself. He had a greasy balding head, squinty eyes, a beer belly, and light green moss growing on his upper and lower teeth at the gum lines. A hard pack of Marlboros protruded from his turned-up tee-shirt sleeve. Hanging out with him on the black fur sectional couch was a markedly underage female with stringy hair, dirty hands, and chipped black nail polish. She sat sucking on the saliva-soaked dregs of a doobie at the business end of a roach clip. The hardened hit man told me that he didn't believe I wanted to die, and that if I were truly ready to die, I would give him a blowjob. "No," I said, "I'd rather die than give you a blowjob!"

Eventually it occurred to me that staying alive might be more rewarding than dealing with Joe Bob on his terms. It took another year for me to scrape the raging virus of him out from under my skin, with the help of intense psychotherapy and psychopharmacology.

Carly Michaelson, M.D., my shrink, has me on a precariously balanced antidepressant cocktail—Tofranil® (Imipramine) and Desyrel® (Trazodone), designed to modulate the norepinephrine and serotonin reuptake in my brain. I have earned a clump of labels detailed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, including Major Depression, Panic Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

I have my dysfunctional family of origin to thank for the PTSD. Although I'm a practicing Buddhist, I don't believe that we all choose our parents and siblings before we begin this lifetime, so that with them we can assimilate some valuable "life lesson" and thereby reach a higher level of consciousness. I think I would have had to murder at least a million babies in a previous life to earn such "karmic justice," or simply be dumber than a dumb blonde to appoint such waste products to populate my life.

Carly also has me on Librium® (Chlordiazepoxide) for anxiety, and is making noises about switching me from Librium® to BuSpar® (Buspirone), which she thinks is less likely to become addictive over the long term. She's also an addictionologist, and hypervigilant about such possibilities. However, combining the BuSpar® with Desyrel® can cause a certain liver enzyme to go up, which can be "problematic." The Tofranil® and Desyrel® both have a most unpleasant side effect—constipation. More often than not I have a pain in the ass, even though Carly has prescribed a hydrocortisone foam for me to squirt up there. Most mornings I bite the bullet and force myself to see the half-empty glass as half full. I talk myself into feeling grateful for the chance to participate in a new day filled with my breath.

Today I'm more than grateful, because I have found the one man whose magnetism is more potent than Joe Bob Rossi's. Big-love material, I think he is. The Thrillkiller pales in comparison. I'm scheduled to deliver a talk at the next monthly Marketing Mission Meeting at Blank Bancorp, a commercial bank in Hollowell, a large, affluent suburb of Boston, Massachusetts. For the past ten years, I have been running the Bank's Investment Center, following a brief tenure as a financial consultant at Makecentz, Inc., a New York Stock Exchange broker-dealer across the street. Today, my boss Harvey Raznick, a Vice President, asks me if I would give the next presentation since he and the Bank's Portfolio Manager, Donald, have each given one. Don's tutorial covered the fixed annuity last month, so I tell Harvey I think it would be a natural for me to segue into the variable annuity. It's far more complex than the fixed annuity, so if I nail it, I'll come off as Superstar and Grand Poobah of Investments, with a cap full of feathers. Harvey and Don both sat down for their talks. I'll stand.

I'll stand, because he will be listening to, and looking up at, me. He. John Lauria, the Executive Vice President who now runs the Marketing Mission Meetings, and the one, larger than life, who's peeled the ten years since Joe Bob Rossi, right off me. For all this time, Lauria has been on my radar and I have looked forward to our chance encounters and short, scintillating chats during the workday. He has always seemed overjoyed to see me and speak with me, albeit briefly. As part of a reorg a few months ago, the Bank's President, Kyle McCann, assigned him the task of running the marketing meetings, which have prompted us to work together on deals fairly often. Before the reorg occurred, Lauria walked into my office only once, shortly after I began working at the Bank. At that time he sought some investment advice, which I gave him and he took. We sat together at my conference table, and he opened a \$100,000 account, which has grown quickly and well.

My first lunch alone with John Lauria takes place this noon, in the Executive Dining Room. Blank Bancorp's Executive Dining Room is off the Board Room, on the basement level of the 15-floor office building, and reserved for those of us who are at Bank Officer level and above. It has one entrance/exit door, which remains closed at all times.

I ask John why he has all those names: Samuel John Carmine Lauria, Jr. “Because my father had them all, too, except for the Junior, of course.” “Oh! Right. I’m guessing everybody called him Sam and you John, so you wouldn’t both answer at once.”

Lauria laughs softly, “Yeah!” That is the first time he laughs with me. Then he lets my name roll slowly off his tongue. “Sherrill Meleney. I remember the day we first met. Harvey brought you around to my office and introduced us.”

I’ll never forget that day, ten years ago. In his large corner office, John Lauria stood up from his massive mahogany desk, walked around to the front of it, and shook my hand. He held it in his for a few heartbeats longer than necessary. He smiled at me, his eyes crinkled around the edges, and his distinctive bedroom voice with a New York accent told me, “Hi, Sherrill. Welcome aboard. I’m glad you’re here, and I think we’re lucky to have you.” He must have seen my credentials, to say that. He got my attention then, and he’s had it ever since.

I remember I gave him my best, confident-but-humble response. “Thank you. I appreciate hearing that.”

Then Lauria asks me, “Do you have a middle name?”

“I do. It’s Aileen. I’m half Irish, which is where the Aileen and the Meleney come from.”

“Sherrill Aileen Meleney. It’s a pretty name. Just like...” His voice trails off right there. I’m half-expecting him to say, “Just like you.” His follow-up question is, “What do you like to be called?”

“Sherrill or Sherry are both fine. I’ll answer to either.”

He smiles and laughs again. “Okay, Sherry.”

We talk about where we come from, where we grew up. My words flow readily, without censorship. I’m that comfortable; he has an uncanny ability to inject tranquility into a room. With a broad brush, I paint a picture of what it was like to grow up in upscale Weston, Massachusetts, with a pair of humorless, hypercritical parents. “Each time I jumped over the bar, my parents raised it. Their message to me always was that I was almost but not quite good enough. I suppose this was where my drive came from, to skip two grades and enter Yale University when I was 16. They liked to incite animosity between me and my brother, Mickey, who was three years older than I, and my parents’ favorite. I disliked him intensely.”

John Lauria waxes sympathetic. “Oh, Sherry. I’m sorry to hear that. It must have been tough, and I can see you’ve emerged strong, and fearless. But I believe there are many more positive experiences that can bring that about.” Lauria grew up in a middle-class, loving Sicilian family in Brooklyn. “My Dad owned a small department store, and over time he opened up a few more. Eventually we moved out of Brooklyn, into one of the more affluent suburbs—Short Hills, New Jersey. My parents both supported me in everything I did. They believed I could be whatever I wanted to be, if I stayed focused and put my mind to it. If I screwed up, they didn’t insult me or punish me. They just asked me if I learned anything from the experience that might help me make better choices the next time.”

“Wow,” I say. “I envy you. Your parents sound like they were the best possible.” I steer the conversation onto a lighter subject, and share that I’m writing a novel. “It’s my work away from work.”

“That’s great, Sherry. I wish I had the talent to write. What’s it about?”

“Well, I’m trying to help my readers come to terms with death, and other events that require saying goodbye. I’m learning to accept these milestones, such that I believe life’s worth living, even though life always runs out of breath. My two main characters will encounter a number of life-shattering events and emerge wiser, and my job is to bring them closer to a state of unconditional love. I think it’s a tall order, and I hope I can pull it off.”

“I bet you can.” He says this to me, looking me in the eyes.

In this moment I would like Lauria to be my friend. In fact, I would like to be friends-in-love with him.

Later on this afternoon, I glance in my tinted glass floor-to-ceiling window to check myself out as I approach my office. I am pleased with how hot I look, wearing a sleeveless yellow linen dress and a dark tan, and I happen to see something else I’m not supposed to see. It is John Lauria, following close behind me and gazing at my backside, leering like the wolf that leered at Little Red Riding Hood, and peeling off my clothes with his eyes.

It makes sense for me to wait until Lauria stops staring, turns, and walks up the stairs to his office. Then I pivot 180°, and take a lengthy gander at his cute, tight little ass ascending the stairs. On a man at least 6’6”, it’s criminal. He looms large in my life again at the end of the day, when I join him on the elevator up to the parking garage. He smiles down at me and talks softly in the voice he seems to trot out just for me, the Don Johnson equivalent that belongs only in bed, and threatens to crumble my rubbery knees. “Sherry. I enjoyed having lunch with you today. Have a good weekend!”

“Thanks, you too.” I manage to croak it out as I stumble to my car. I have major heart palpitations, breathlessness, and an all-over feeling of coming unglued, whenever this man enters my field of vision. What I’d like to do to John Lauria and his tight little ass right now is unprintable. If Joe Bob Rossi was an 11 on the scale from 0 to 10, then John must be a 21. Besides dripping with raw sexuality when he looks at me and engages with me, he has an endearing, cute little-boy demeanor that’s incongruous with the man-candy image, a complete surprise. These two characteristics coexisting in the same body pack a deadly, one-two punch. Hence the 21.

My talk... Shit. I need to start pulling it together and practicing. Just two weeks left, and I know they’ll fly by faster than a Stealth Raptor, and there I’ll be, feeling ill-prepared. Me, the Princess of Procrastination. To jumpstart my mental rehearsal, I give my mind permission to wander, and it does, full speed ahead. I pick up my sketch pad and a #2 pencil, and I draw a head-and-shoulders portrait of John Lauria. I look it over, and decide not to change a thing. I know that if I bring the sketch to lunch, we’ll both see that it’s a dead ringer. That’s how good I am at what I do. Sometimes I’m an artist first and a writer second. As I mentally rehearse my speech, I’m a writer first, creating what I imagine to be the best-case scenario.

Sherrill Meleney rehearses in front of an imaginary audience. She plants a couple of real names into her presentation, to help the group of Bank officers relate, and to introduce an element of entertainment that will hold their attention.

“A variable annuity works like a turbocharger. It helps your investment develop more horsepower. Let me explain. Tax-deferred compounding relates to the portion of your interest and capital gains that you don’t have to cough up for Bill Clinton and Paul Cellucci every year, and that extra amount gets fed back into the engine.

“To show you how, I’m going to hand out a couple of hypotheticals that tell the story of Kyle McCann, the President of a bank, and his friend John Lauria, the Executive Vice President of the same bank. They each have \$100,000.

“McCann walks across the street and asks his Makecentz, Inc. broker what to do. Sherrill Meleney knows his blustery, blowhard broker very well. She has belted back more than a few see-throughs (chilled Krolewska Vodka with a vermouth bottle passed over it) and traded war stories with him at the local bars, after the market’s closing bell. McCann’s broker blows in his ear, and snows him. He convinces him to invest in an aggressive capital appreciation mutual fund—with a high front-end sales charge and a high annual maintenance fee—to supposedly stay ahead of taxes and inflation.

“John Lauria doesn’t cross the street with McCann; it’s raining outside. Instead, he walks downstairs to the bank lobby and into the corner office, where a high-energy, savvy lady runs the investment center. Sherrill Meleney is tan and tawny with a lion’s mane, curly and blonde like Goldilocks.

“Unbeknownst to McCann, she convinces Lauria to deposit his \$100,000 into an ultra-aggressive fund—one that invests in foreign currency futures—but with the tax-deferred compounding power of the variable annuity. Over the past ten years, its average annual rate of return has been 39%.

“At the end of ten years, McCann is ready to retire at 59½. Lauria has completed his seven-year annuity contract period, and has kept his investment tax-deferred for three more years. It has been an ideal investment vehicle for retirement, given that there is no limit on periodic contributions, like there is on IRAs and 401Ks. Lauria has already funded Contributory and Roth IRA accounts, to which he adds the maximum, year after year. His accrued contributions to his 401K plan have ensured a maximum match from the Bank.

“McCann has a little more than \$500,000 in his account, and is grateful to his Makecentz broker. The day he picks up his check, he takes his paunchy, pool-playing broker out for an obligatory drink at the Pie-Eyed Peacock. With the \$499,731 he has left after a night of sharing war stories, he drags himself down to his yacht club in Plymouth to indulge in his lifetime dream—to outfit his Mariner 40 and sail down the east coast to South America, through the Panama Canal, to parts unknown.

“The same day, Lauria cleans out his office, tosses all of his books and papers into a giant wastebasket on wheels, and then pays a visit to the honey blonde who still runs the investment center at the bank. He tells her he wants to liquidate his entire annuity account. He wants to retire early.

“Sherrill looks him in the eye, and tells him that he will have to pay taxes on all of his accrued dividends and capital gains, plus a 10% early withdrawal penalty, because he’s under 59-1/2.

“Lauria is agitated, until the beautiful, brilliant lady tells him that even after the taxes, plus the early withdrawal penalty, he’ll walk away today with just over \$2.2 million. The foreign currency futures sub-account has averaged a 40% annual return over the past ten years. More than grateful, he tells her that his one dream before he gets too old to do it is to set sail for South America and the Panama Canal, along with his friend, McCann. Since his sailing experience has been limited to a few stolen afternoons in a rented Rhodes 19 on the East River with his 35-year-old high-school homeroom teacher from Brooklyn, he makes her an offer she can’t refuse. Over the years he has heard tales of Sherrill’s extensive offshore sailing experience, through all kinds of weather.

“He buys her a seaworthy ketch made for long-distance offshore sailing, and signs himself on as First Mate. They take a few days for provisioning in Plymouth, and the two boats head south. After they motor through the Cape Cod Canal, they spend the night in rented slips in Marion Harbor. She’s uptight about their first night alone together, aboard her ship bound for South America. Lauria is amused by and attracted to the shyness that he never expected from the high-powered money manager who has helped him do some of the biggest deals of his life. He pours her an extra glass of wine and winks at her. She winks back, still scared.

“When they finish eating dinner, he fires up a cigarette and they exchange some jokes over steaming mugs of fresh ground coffee and snifters of Martell Cordon Bleu, laughing about leaving their lives and all the bad people behind. Soon a blanket of silence covers them, and they realize their time is at hand. John Lauria decides to hit the ball into her court. He guesses that if she can be led to believe she’s in charge, she won’t be so nervous. *Here comes the night, and it belongs to us*, he thinks. *Let me not blow it.* ‘Sherrill,’ he says, ‘in case you’re anxious about how this night’s going to unfold, we could play a game around it. If we have some fun with it, can you relax a little?’

“The truth is, Sherrill is petrified by the idea of John Lauria seeing her naked; but perhaps there’s a way to take the onus off her, yes, a way for her to see him naked first. ‘Yeah. I’ve always been a pretty good poker player. How ‘bout we play five-card stud for clothes instead of money? I think I’d enjoy that!’

“Lauria’s answer is a winner. ‘Me too! But you know it’s your game, baby.’

“‘And I hope I’m going to win!’ She’s depending on her expertise and experience in five-card stud to give her the edge she needs.

“They play only one hand, it turns out. It’s extremely close, and the two of them lean forward, their excitement mounting as Sherrill, as the dealer, flips each new card face up. Cautiously they both check, after each card. Lauria has three aces showing at the fifth card; she’s showing a Jack, Ten, King, and Queen of Spades. Now he bets into her heavily on his three aces. ‘All in,’ he says, indicating he’s willing to risk all of his clothes. He assumes he will win; he looks up at her and chuckles.

“‘Call,’ she says.

“They turn over their hole cards. As luck would have it, Sherrill Meleney keeps the power; her hole card is John Lauria’s missing ace, the Ace of Spades. She’s holding a Royal Straight Flush—the same hand that blew the Cincinnati Kid out of the water. Lauria has picked the wrong time to bet ‘em like he’s got ‘em. ‘Better you than me,’ she tells him, and sits back in her chair, more relaxed now. She puts her feet up, and smiles. ‘Well?’

“John Lauria stands. He faces her, looking down at her as she smiles up at him and giggles. She can’t help but notice what’s trying to point at her from underneath the skintight white pants. She can’t help eyeballing its outline, in proportion to the long, broad-shouldered man standing before her. She’s afraid it’s going to kill her. Slowly Lauria unbuttons his shirt, and slides it off his shoulders. She watches intently. As she’s suspected, he has abundant, curly chest hair and a firm belly with six-pack abs and more curly black hair. She tentatively reaches out to touch his fuzzy belly, and he steps back, out of her reach.

“‘Uh-uh-*unh*-unhhh! Don’t touch the merchandise until it’s out of the bag!’ His raucous laughter ripples through her. Then he unbuttons his pants, unzips the fly, and hooks his thumbs over the waistband, all in slow motion. The slowness of it, and his forbidding her to touch him, ratchet up her eager anticipation.

“Suddenly he jumps up and his pants come down past Heaven. Heaven springs back up in its reverse arc, pointing at her midway, and settles back up there, snug to his belly. She figures she’d have difficulty fitting a frozen orange juice can over it, let alone... OMG! He is circumcised, perfectly.

“He steps out of his pants, comes closer, takes Heaven in his hand, and hits her with it playfully, on the arm. ‘You wondering, Goldilocks? How you’ll handle this? Does it upset you?’ He looks down at it.

“She nods; she quakes. Stopped like a deer in headlights, frozen, she waits for him.

“‘Stand up, okay?’ He asks her, and she does. He wraps her in his arms and strokes her back. Then he holds her out, in front of him. ‘You all right?’ He asks her, softly.

“‘Um, I’m okay, I guess...’ Her voice trails off.

“‘Angel,’ he says. ‘I won’t hurt you. I promise. We won’t do anything you don’t want to do. I’m happy just to be with you. Okay?’

“‘Okay,’ she answers him tentatively, half-convinced. She wants him so much, but can’t imagine how the one-eyed water moccasin that’s attached to him won’t hurt her.

“‘I’ll be careful, honey,’ he tells her. ‘So careful.’ He holds her gently, and covers her face and mouth with tender kisses that grow ardent—warm, wet, and wild. Languorously, he unbuttons her dress, slides the straps off her shoulders, and lets it fall. Happy that she’s wearing no underwear, he holds her full, firm breasts in his hands, and whispers, ‘You’re so beautiful, and I’m so lucky.’ Her nipples are already stiff and sore. As if he knows this, he bends down and kisses one and then the other, so that neither feels cheated.

“Once more he kisses her deeply on the mouth, and then reaches down with one hand to explore her. He is pleasantly surprised by her closely manicured, nearly bald pussy. He hears her breathe in sharply. He breathes in too, through his teeth, then sighs. ‘How long has this been going on? You’re so juicy!’

“‘It seems like forever,’ she says, faintly. ‘It’s due to you,’ she finishes the thought.

“Still kissing her, always kissing her, on the face, on the neck... in between kisses he says, ‘Let me feel you...’ and following her wetness, he takes a trip up inside her. He feels her grasp his finger, and he groans. ‘Oh God, you’re so tight. You feel like a virgin.’ Amazed, he asks her, ‘Are you?’

“‘I feel like I am... for you, Lauria.’

“I want to make all your dreams come true,’ he tells her, ‘no matter how long it takes me.’ Kneeling before her, he draws his finger out slowly and delicately spreads her apart until he can see her jewel there, glistening in the moonlight. He takes it into his mouth and goes back into her, with his other hand this time. He grunts softly in appreciation while he eats her—she tastes so sweet—and with his wet finger he lightly strokes her back door and pokes inside, just a little bit, and then in-and-out.

“He feels her tense up. ‘I love you so much, and I just want to show you...’ She can barely hear him. ‘...and I’m not going to hurt you.’ She hopes he means it.

“I adore you,’ she answers him. She plays with his black and white curly hair as he plays with her. Still standing, she can’t hold back any longer. She has to let go, and her knees buckle. She hallucinates, purple and black billows of differing sizes, shades, and shapes. It is the ultimate orgasm, and she gives it a name— Purple-Black. She screams, over and over; she feels him grunt and then laugh against her as she squeezes his fingers involuntarily, again and again.

“Beautiful Sherrill Meleney. I’m so happy,’ he tells her, as he stands up. With his bird finger still inside her, he leads her to the bedroom in the fo’c’s’le, kissing her along the way. She notices the Cheoy Lee is rocking in the gentle surf. He lays her down on her back, and stretches out alongside her.

“She reaches over to play with him—his two balls and his great, magic bat. He twitches as she holds him in her hand; and she feels him weeping, longing for the satisfaction that he has coming, that she will give him.

“Oh John,’ she says. ‘You’re so beautiful. And so big. I love it, but it scares me.’

“It’s for you.’

“Slowly she flips over, kisses his virile pride, and rubs his rear exit gently. He tries to lie still and let her control him. With her tongue she tastes a few teardrops oozing from him. She swallows. Up there he’s still tasting her, and gently stretching her with both hands. She keeps coming, little orgasms close together.

“He turns her around, and climbs on top of her. She lies still as he pushes himself into her, bit by bit. She’s way out there, somewhere on the thin line between pleasure and pain. He takes her hand and places her finger on her love-button, and tells her, ‘Show me; show me how to win you.’

“Near her threshold already, she takes only a few strokes to show him. He pierces her repeatedly as she arches up against him. They both cry out, and then hold each other tight. She takes his head in her hands. ‘Oh, John. My love. Maybe it was my game, but I think we both won.’

“‘Sherry. I’ve never loved anyone in the world I’ve left, as much as I love you.’

“‘Me too.’

“They go to sleep, lying loosely in each other’s arms, rocking, and rolling with the motion of the ocean.

“Shortly after dawn, Sherrill and John Lauria set sail south across Buzzards Bay to Woods Hole. Following the current charts in the *Eldridge Tide and Pilot Book*, they expertly navigate the Woods Hole channel at slack water. On a broad reach, they arrive at Martha’s Vineyard and pick up a mooring in Oak Bluffs for the night. Sherrill dives for some tiny illegal scallops—enough to cover the bottom of a frying pan—and sautés them with lemon, capers and wine, for hors d’oeuvres. Lauria grills a couple of thick tenderloin filets—marinated in olive oil, balsamic vinegar, dill weed, tarragon, basil, and brown sugar—on the hibachi off the stern.

“McCann decides to sleep until noon in Marion Harbor, and doesn’t make it to Woods Hole in time to proceed through the channel at slack water. Rather than head into the current, he decides to sail southeast to Cuttyhunk, spend the night there, and then go on to Martha’s Vineyard the following day. Off Cuttyhunk, in a severe squall, McCann panics. With marginal sailing experience, he anchors in the harbor instead of heading out to sea and riding out the storm with a sea anchor. In gale-force winds, the anchor drags; his Mariner 40 washes ashore and breaks up against the rocks. Luckily McCann bails out just in time, and finds a pay phone after wading and then walking several miles. Using the lone quarter that he pulls out of his pocket, he calls his wife collect and asks her to pick him up. She is pissed off, permanently.

“Meanwhile, Lauria spends significant time on his hands and knees in the cockpit, under the pretense of swabbing the deck. He discovers that Sherrill is wearing nothing underneath her short sundress, and takes a taste test tour, around the world. Consequently the set-and-drift calculations (Lauria’s responsibility) are inaccurate. We sailors all know that if we stay just two or three degrees off-course long enough, we can miss whole continents. Sherrill Meleney and John Lauria are never found, but eventually they settle on an out-of-the-way, secluded island, with the best sex toys ever—each other, unlimited U-turns under the sheets, and more—with no

stress and no bad people. Sherrill wonders, *maybe 21 on a scale from zero to ten is too low.*

“So, ladies and gentlemen, which would you rather end up with after ten years? \$500,000 or \$2.2 million? Here is a pile of variable annuity applications. Please feel free to take one, and make an appointment with me to complete it, if you decide that you want what you deserve.”