

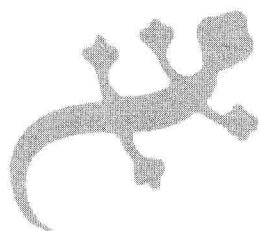
CARL HIAASEN



BASKET CASE

A NOVEL

# Basket Case



Carl Hiaasen



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*For my sisters,  
Judy and Barb*

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This is a work of fiction. All names and characters are either invented or used fictitiously.

However, the frozen-lizard episode is based loosely on the tragic true-life demise of a voracious Savannah monitor named Claw, who now sleeps with the Dove bars.

# **Basket Case**





# 1

Regarding the death of James Bradley Stomarti: what first catches my attention is his age.

Thirty-nine. That's seven years younger than I am.

I'm drawn to the young and old, but who isn't? The most avidly read obituaries are of those who died too soon and those who lasted beyond expectations.

What everybody wants to know is: Why them? What was their secret? Or their fatal mistake? Could the same happen to me?

I like to know, myself.

Something else about James Bradley Stomarti: that name. I'm sure I've heard it before.

But there's no clue in the fax from the funeral home. Private service is Tuesday. Ashes to be scattered in the Atlantic. In lieu of flowers the family requests donations be made to the Cousteau Society. That's classy.

I scan the list of "survived-bys" and note a wife, sister, uncle, mother; no kids, which is somewhat unusual for a 39-year-old straight guy, which I assume (from his marital status) James Bradley Stomarti to be.

Tapping a key on my desktop, I am instantly wired into our morgue, although I'm the only one in the newsroom who still calls it that. "Resource Retrieval Center" is what the memos say, but morgue

is more fitting. It's here they keep all dead stories dating back to 1975, which in a newspaper's memory is about as fresh as dinosaur dung.

I type in the name of the deceased. Bingo!

I am careful not to chuckle or even smile, as I don't wish to alert my ever-watchful editor. Our newspaper publishes only one feature obituary each day; other deaths are capsulized in brief paragraphs or ignored altogether. For years the paper ran two daily full-length obits, but recently the Death page lost space to the Weather page, which had lost space to the Celebrity Eye page, which had lost space to Horoscopes. The shrunken news hole leaves room for only a single story, so I am now cagey about committing to a subject. My editor is not the flexible sort. Once I tell her whom I'm writing about, there's no turning back, even if someone far more interesting expires later in the news cycle.

Another good reason for not appearing too excited is that I don't want anyone to suspect that the death of James Bradley Stomarti might be an actual *news* story; otherwise my editor will snatch it away and give it to one of our star feature writers, the way a cat presents a freshly killed rat on the doorstep. This piracy of newsworthy assignments is the paper's way of reminding me that I'm still at the top of the shit list, that I will be there until pigs can fly, and that my byline will never again sully the front page.

So I say nothing. I sit at my desk and scroll through the computer files that inform me in colorful bits and pieces about the life of James Bradley Stomarti, better known to the world as Jimmy Stoma.

That's right. *The Jimmy Stoma*.

As in Jimmy and the Slut Puppies.

Stashed somewhere in my apartment is one of their early albums, *Reptiles and Amphibians of North America*. Jimmy sang lead and sometimes played rhythm guitar. He also fooled around with the harmonica. I remember really liking one of the band's singles, "Basket Case," off an album called *Floating Hospice*. That one I lost to a departing girlfriend. Jimmy was no Don Henley, but the ladies found him very easy on the eyes. The guy could carry a tune, too.

Stoma also got arrested on a regular basis, and was unfailingly booked under his given name. That's how I got the computer to hit on "James Bradley Stomarti."

From the morgue:

December 13, 1984: With Steven Tyler, John Entwistle and Joan Jett in attendance, Jimmy Stoma marries a chorine turned professional wrestler in Las Vegas. He is arrested later that evening for urinating on Engelbert Humperdinck's stretch limousine.

February 14, 1986: Mrs. Stoma files for divorce, alleging her husband is addicted to alcohol, cocaine and aberrant sex. The Slut Puppies open a three-night stint at Madison Square Garden, and from the stage Jimmy introduces his new girlfriend, a performance artist who goes by the name of Mademoiselle Squirt.

May 14, 1986: Stoma is arrested for indecent exposure during a Charlotte, North Carolina, concert in which he takes an encore wearing nothing but a Day-Glo condom and a rubber Halloween mask in the likeness of the Rev. Pat Robertson.

January 19, 1987: With the Slut Puppies' fourth album, *A Painful Burning Sensation*, poised to go triple platinum, Jimmy Stoma announces he is canceling the band's long-awaited tour. Insiders say the singer is self-conscious about his weight, which has inflated to 247 pounds since he gave up cocaine. Stoma insists he's simply taking a break from live performing to work on "serious studio projects."

November 5, 1987: Jimmy Stoma is arrested in Scottsdale, Arizona, after punching a *People* magazine photographer who had tailed him to the gates of the Gila Springs Ranch, an exclusive spa specializing in holistic crash-dietary programs.

November 11, 1987: For the second time in a week, Stoma is busted, this time for shoplifting a bundt cake and two chocolate eclairs from a downtown Phoenix bakery.

February 25, 1989: Stoma and an unidentified woman are injured when his waterbike crashes into the SS *Norway* in the Port of Miami. The collision causes no damage to the cruise ship, but surgeons say it might be months before Stoma can play the guitar again.

September 25, 1991: Stoma's first solo album, *Stomatose*, is panned by both *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*. After debuting at number 22 on the *Billboard* pop charts, it plummets within two weeks to number 97 before—

"Jack?"

This would be my editor, the impossible Emma.

"What'd you do to your hair?" I say.

"Nothing."

"You most certainly did."

"Jack, I need a story line for the budget."

"It looks good shorter," I say. Emma hates it when I pretend to flirt. "Your hair, I mean."

Emma reddens but manages a dismissive scowl. "I trimmed the bangs. What've you got for me?"

"Nothing yet," I lie.

Emma is edging closer, trying to sneak a glance at the screen of my desktop. She suspects I am dialing up porn off the Internet, which would be a fireable offense. Emma has never fired anyone but would dearly love to break her cherry on me. She is not the first junior editor to feel that way.

Emma is young and owns a grinding ambition to ascend the newspaper's management ladder. She hopes for an office with a window, a position of genuine authority and stock options.

Poor kid. I've tried to steer her to a profession more geared toward her talents—retail footwear, for example—but she will not listen.

Craning her pale neck, Emma says, "Rabbi Levine died last night at East County."

"Rabbi Klein died Monday," I remind her. "Only one dead clergyman per week, Emma. It's in my contract."

"Then get me something better, Jack."

"I'm working on it."

"Who is James Stomarti?" she asks, peeking at my computer screen. With her intense jade-green eyes, Emma has the bearing of an exotic falcon.

I say, "You don't know? He was a musician."

"Local guy?"

"He had a place on Silver Beach," I say, "and one in the Bahamas."

"Never heard of him," Emma says.

"You're too young."

Emma looks skeptical, not flattered. "I think more people will care about Rabbi Levine."

"Then bump him to Metro," I suggest brightly.

Emma, of course, isn't keen on that idea. She and the Metropolitan editor don't get along.

"It's Sunday," I remind her. "Nothing else is happening in the free world. Metro can give the rabbi a fine send-off."

Emma says, "This musician—how old was he?"

"Thirty-nine."

"Yeah?"

Now I've got her chummed up.

Emma says coolly, "So, how'd he die?"

"I don't know."

"Probably drugs," she muses, "or suicide. And you know the rule on suicides, Jack."

Newspapers customarily do not report a private death as a suicide, on the theory it might plant the idea in the minds of other depressed people, who would immediately rush out and do themselves in. These days no paper can afford to lose subscribers.

There is, however, a long-standing journalistic exception to the no-suicide rule.

"He's famous, Emma. The rule goes out the window."

"He's not famous. I never heard of him."

Again she is forcing me to insult her. "Ever heard of Sylvia Plath?" I ask.

"Of course."

"Do you know *why* you've heard of her, Emma? Because she stuck her head in an oven. That's what she's famous for."

"Jack, you're not funny."

"Otherwise she's just another brilliant, obscure, unappreciated poet," I say. "Fame enhances death, but death also enhances fame. That's a fact."

Emma's fine-boned lower jaw is working back and forth. She's itching to tell me to go screw myself but that would constitute a serious violation of management policy, a dark entry in an otherwise promising personnel file. I feel for her, I really do.

"Emma, let me do some checking on Stomarti."

"In the meantime," she says sharply, "I'll be holding twelve inches for Rabbi Levine."

A death notice isn't the same as an obituary. A death notice is a classified advertisement written and paid for by the family of the deceased,

and sent to newspapers by the funeral home as part of its full-service package. Death notices usually are printed in a small type known as agate, but they can be as long-winded and florid as the family desires. Newspapers are always happy to sell the space.

The death notice of Jimmy Stoma was remarkable for its brevity, and for what was omitted:

STOMARTI, James Bradley, 39, passed away Thursday in the Berry Islands. A resident of Silver Beach since 1993, Jim was a successful businessman who was active in his church and neighborhood civic groups. He loved golf, sailing and diving, and raised thousands of dollars to help restore damaged coral reefs in the Florida Keys and the Bahamas. A cherished friend, devoted brother and beloved husband, he will be deeply missed by his wife, Cynthia Jane, and his sister Janet Stomarti Thrush of Beckerville. A private family mass will be held Tuesday morning at St. Stephen's Church, followed by a brief shipboard ceremony near the Ripley Lighthouse, where Jim wished to have his mortal remains committed. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that contributions be made to the Cousteau Society, in Jim's memory.

Odd. No trace of his life as a Slut Puppy, the six million records sold, the MTV video awards, the Grammy. Music wasn't even listed among his hobbies.

Maybe Jimmy Stoma had wanted it that way; maybe he had worked so hard to put the wild years behind him that he'd wanted nothing, not even his own death, to revive the past.

Sorry, pal, I'll try to be gentle.

There is no James or J. Stomarti in the county phone book, but a Janet Thrush is listed in Beckerville. A woman picks up on the third ring. I tell her who I am and what I'm writing.

"Sorry," she says, "it's a bad time."

"You're Jimmy's sister?"

"That's right. Look, can you call back in a couple days?"

Here comes the dicey part when I've got to explain—very delicately—that when it comes to obituaries, it's now or never. Wait forty-

eight hours and nobody at the paper will give a rat's ass about your dead brother.

Nothing personal. It's the nature of news.

"The story's running tomorrow," I tell his sister. "I really hate to bother you. And you're right, there's lots of stuff I could use from our clippings. . . ."

I let this ghastly prospect sink in. Nobody deserves an obituary constructed exclusively from old newspaper stories.

"I'd prefer chatting with those who knew him best," I say. "His death is going to be a shock for lots of people all over the country. Your brother had so many fans. . . ."

"Fans?" Janet Thrush is testing me.

"Yeah. I was one of them."

On the other end: an unreadable silence.

"Jimmy Stoma," I press on. "Of Jimmy and the Slut Puppies. It *is* the same James Stomarti, right?"

His sister says, quietly, "That was a long time ago."

"People will remember. Trust me."

"Well, that's good. I guess." She sounds unsure.

I say, "There wasn't much information in the death notice."

"I wouldn't know. I didn't see it."

"About his music, I mean."

"You talk to Cleo?"

"Who's that?" I ask.

"His wife."

"Oh. The funeral home gave the name as Cynthia."

"She goes by Cleo," says Jimmy's sister. "Cleo Rio. The one and only."

When I say I've never heard of her, Jimmy's sister chuckles. A television murmurs in the background. *Meet the Press*, it sounds like.

"Well, pretend you know who Cleo is," she advises, "and I guarantee she'll give you an interview."

Obviously Sis and the widow have some issues. "What about you?" I ask.

"Lord, don't mention my name."

"That's not what I meant," I say. "I was hoping you would talk to me. Just a few quick questions? I'm sorry, but I'm on a tight deadline—"

"After you get hold of Cleo," Jimmy's sister says, "call me back."

"Do you have her phone number?"

"Sure." She gives it to me, then says: "I've got an address, too. You ought to go out to the condo."

"Good idea," I say, but I hadn't planned to leave the newsroom. I can do five phoners in the time it takes to drive to Silver Beach and back.

Jimmy's sister says, "You want to get this story right, you gotta go meet Cleo." She pauses. "Hey, I'm not tryin' to tell you how to do your job."

"I appreciate the help, but just tell me one thing. How'd your brother die? Was he sick?"

She knows exactly what I mean. "Jimmy's been straight for nine years," she says.

"Then what happened?"

"It was an accident, I guess."

"What kind of accident?"

"Go ask Cleo," says Jimmy's sister, and hangs up.

I'm on my way out the door when Emma cuts me off. She's almost a whole foot shorter than I am; sneaky, too. I seldom see her coming.

She says, "Did you know Rabbi Levine took up hang gliding at age seventy? That's good stuff, Jack."

"Did he die in his hang glider, Emma? Crash into the synagogue, by chance?"

"No," she concedes. "Stroke."

I shrug. "Nice try, but I'm off to visit the widow Stomarti."

Emma doesn't budge. "I like the rabbi better."

Hell. Now she's forcing me to show my cards. I glance quickly around the newsroom and notice, with some relief, that none of the young superstars are working today. That's one good thing about a Sunday shift, the newsroom is like a tomb. Emma wants to take away my story, she'll have to write the damn thing herself.

And Emma, bless her sorority-sister soul, has never been a reporter. Judging by the strenuous syntax of her memos, she likely would have difficulty composing a thank-you note.



So, here goes.

“James Stomarti was Jimmy Stoma,” I say.

Emma’s brow crinkles. She senses that she ought to know the name. Rather than admitting she doesn’t, she waits me out.

“Of Jimmy and the Slut Puppies,” I prompt.

“No kidding.”

“Remember that song, ‘Basket Case’?”

“Sure.” Emma turns slightly, her raptor eyes scanning the rows of cubicles. The plan, I know, is to hand off Stoma to another reporter and dispatch me to do the dead rabbi.

But Emma’s coming up empty. The only warm body on the city desk is Griffin, the weekend cop guy. Griffin is sixty years old, nasty and untouchable. Emma has no authority over the police reporters. Griffin looks up from his desktop and stares right through her, as if she were smoke.

With a trace of a frown, Emma turns back to me. “Suicide, right?”

“Nope. Accident.”

Grudgingly, Emma moves out of my way. “Twelve inches,” she says curtly. “That’s all we’ve got, Jack.”

“For a dead rock star,” I say drily, “a Grammy Award-winning musician who dies tragically at age thirty-nine? Honey, I promise you the *New York Times* will give it more than twelve inches.”

Emma says, “Not on the Death page, they won’t.”

I smile. “That’s right. Not there.”

Emma’s expression darkens. “Ungh-ugh, Jack. I’m not pushing this for Page One. No way!”

Jesus, what a hoot. The *Times* won’t put Jimmy Stoma out front—he’ll be lucky to end up as the lead obit. But Emma’s in a sweat, rattled at the possibility of me breaking out of the dungeon. No doubt she perceives that as a career-threatening crisis, for part of her mission as a junior editor is to see that I remain crushed, without hope of redemption. The next best thing to canning me would be to make me quit in disgust, which of course I’ll never do.

This is too much fun.

I say to Emma: “You might mention Stoma in the budget meeting, just in case.”

“Twelve inches, Jack,” she reiterates sternly.