

## Conch Chowder

Danny and his college buddy, Todd, had picked Conch Cay for their Spring Break. Ignoring the more popular Nassau, they decided that a week of fishing and boating was the way to go. They flew into Abaco and it was only a short taxi ride to the ferry.

“Todd...look at this place,” said Danny standing on the ferry dock. “It’s beautiful. turquoise seas. Better than Nassau with all those tourists.”

“I can’t wait to start fishing,” said Todd. “And eating lobster.”

“And don’t forget the conch chowder,” said Danny.

The ferry ride to Conch Cay was only a 20-minute trip. They were the only passengers.

Standing on the Conch Cay dock was a thin tall black man. It was hard to estimate his age. His closed cropped hair and fine features suggest a vigorous thirty something, but the graying hair on his temple reveals a man in his late forties, maybe even fifty. He extends his hand to help them on the dock.

“Welcome to Conch Cay! I’m Kendall McCain!”

“We’re glad to be here. It’s a big change from New York.” said Danny shaking Kendall’s hand, “I heard you’re the best bone fishing guide in the Bahamas.”

“I’m your man. Your cart is parked behind mine. I’ll show you the way to your cottage. You’re staying at the Mahogany Bay Villa?”

“Right.”

“And who’s the quiet guy?”, said Kendall.

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“That’s Todd.”

Todd gave him a big smile and a tip of his baseball cap.

“He don’t say much does he?” said Kendall.

Kendall loads their luggage onto the golf cart.

“Do you mind if we stop and get some beer?” said Danny.

“No problem. Just follow me.”

The little grocery store in New Bristol is the only grocery store on Conch Cay. It’s on Royal Street, a lingering namesake of British rule before the Bahamas became independent. The town was settled in 1783, when the Loyalists fled from the American colonies and were resettled in the Bahamas. New Bristol was one of their first towns. Skillfully crafted with wood reflecting the shipbuilding traditions of the first settlers, it was a quaint version of a New England town that today would be on the National Register of Historic Sites.

The grocery store had been operated by the McCain family for over a hundred years. Painted a bright blue with large windows and hurricane shutters, the small wooden sign on the door that read “open”. Behind the counter is a man who looks to be in his sixties. His creamy white skin seemed unaffected by the harsh Bahamian sunlight, almost as if he had never been outside. He wore a long-sleeved white shirt and dark blue pants, but what was most conspicuous was a large hump on his back stretching his shirt upward like a balloon ready to burst.

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“How can I help you,” said grocer Edwin McCain.

Danny said, “Where’s your beer?”

“In the back refrigerator down that aisle.”

“And we need some bread and bologna,” said Todd.

“We have it all. Second aisle.”

Danny encounters an older woman placing groceries at the back of the store. She is heavy-obese in fact. But what rivets his attention is the large bump on her back- even larger than the man at the front.

Danny pulls out two six packs of the local beer from the refrigerator and turns to the woman.

“Excuse me...do you have any conch chowder?”

The woman barely looks up, seemingly enraptured by the cans of sardines she is placing on the shelves.

“Not today. We’re all sold out. Maybe the fishermen will bring some conch in on Monday, when the weather settles down. You got to use what you got when you get it.”

Danny returns to the counter and pays for the groceries, and jumps into the golf cart.

“Gee, that’s quite a couple,” said Danny.

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Kendall smiles a wide tooth filled grin. "Now...you have met our town's most outstanding citizens."

"They're both hunchbacked. Husband and wife?" said Danny.

"No, "brother and sister. The McCain family were our first white settlers."

"But your name is McCain too!"

Kendall laughs, his smile even wider than before.

"Ain't no relation. I has their name because my ancestors were their slaves."

"Well, that's a revolting fact," said Todd.

"We never revolted. We were emancipated," said Kendall laughing.

"You see, that McCain family goes way back. They're descendants of Loyalists. They came here after the American Revolution. They brought their slaves and everything they could carry to start a plantation- just like what they had in America. But plantation life don't work so well here. Too much sand. No good soil. So they started fishing to survive. Now that first McCain had a son Benjamin that takes a love to the sea. He takes his boat out every day and always finds the fish. The story goes that one day while conching he spots a mermaid."

"A mermaid? That's ridiculous," said Danny.

"That's the story told here for generations. I heard it when I was a boy when my father passed it on to me. Benjamin tells his father that he saw the mermaid coming out of a giant conch. She be so beautiful with flowing golden hair and skin like a white pearl, and not a stitch of clothing."

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"I like that part," said Todd.

"He like her too. He took her to the bay next to his house and every night he slept on the beach to be with her."

Kendall arrives at the cottage. It is small - only 200 feet from the beach, situated between two Australian pine trees. Kendall points at the boat docked at the pier.

"That's my boat. Now we are going to do some serious bonefishing," said Kendall, "I'll be here at dawn to pick you up."

The next day was long and exciting. They hooked three bonefish, and Danny felt that he had fulfilled one of his fishing dreams. The power of a bonefish, racing the line tested a man's endurance and fishing skills to the utmost. It was like the rush he felt when he played Lacrosse.

He and Todd slept well that night, the kind of deep sleep you get after extreme physical exertion. Danny woke up after nine a.m.

"We're out of beer," he announced with a groggy voice.

"We also need some coffee," said Todd.

By ten they are back at the grocery store. Mr. McCain is at the counter.

"How are you boys doing?"

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“Great.”

“You catch some fish?”

“Three bonefish and a grouper.”

“Good eating that grouper.”

“Kendall’s going to bake it, ” said Danny, “ We need some beer-- and limes.”

Todd adds “and some conch chowder.”

“Emily is in the backyard preparing some now.”

Mr. McCain walks to the back screen door. “Emily, we need a quart of conch chowder.”

Emily is bent over a large blocky wooden table. She is dicing onions and tomatoes on a cutting board. There are strips of meat piled next to the board.

“I’ll get to it when I can,” she said with a tone of irritation. About fifteen minutes later she shuffles into the store carrying a quart-sized plastic cup and hands it to her brother.

“Best conch chowder in the Bahamas,” announces Edwin McCain. “Here, take a bite.” He opens the lid and hands a plastic fork to Danny and Todd.

“Damn! That’s delicious!” said Danny.

“That’s what I’ve been praying for,” said Todd.

The rest of the day was spent relaxing. The conch chowder was quickly consumed,

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washed down with cold beer. They slept through the afternoon and then cooked the grouper marinated with lime. By nine they were out of beer.

“It’s about time for another beer run,” said Danny with an obvious buzz.

“And conch chowder,” said Todd, “but it’s almost ten. The store closed at five. They’re probably sleeping.”

“Well, let’s wake them up. Our money is as good at ten as it is at noon!”

“Are you kidding. I’m tired. I’m not going anywhere. You can’t go bothering people in a village like this at ten at night,” said Todd.

“Sure I can.” Danny staggers outside to the golf cart. He turns on the ignition and speeds down the rocky driveway turning on the road to the village. The wind is blowing hard.

The houses along the road are dimly lit. Danny stops the cart opposite the store, leaving it in the road. He staggers to the door peering through the window of the unlit empty store.

“Hey! Open up! You got a customer!”, said Danny pounding on the door. His voice is drowned by the wind. He continues banging on the door, but no one answers.

“I want some beer! I need beer and Todd needs conch chowder!”

Danny sees that the store has two stories and thinks that the McCains probably live upstairs. He peers up at the second story windows and sees a small sliver of light through a crack below a window shutter. He wraps his hands around the porch column and shimmies up the post, pulling himself on to the balcony. Going to the window, he turns the shutter’s latch

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and pulls the shutter open with tremendous force.

The shocked look on the faces of Emily and Edwin McCain will be immortalized in his brain for the rest of his life. They are standing naked in the bedroom. What had appeared to be large bulbous humps on their backs were giant conch shells-each attached to the McCains' back, attached by a thick rubbery ligament that runs down their spine. Their shock soon boils into anger.

Edwin raises a wooden cane and smashes it into Danny's head. He collapses to the floor with what was a fatal wound.

Edwin turns to his sister, "It's your turn to do the clean-up. I'm going to move his cart."

The next morning at 7 A.M. Kendall pounds on Danny's cottage door. Todd, half asleep, comes to the door.

"Hey man. What happened to my cart?" demands Kendall.

"What's happened? I just woke up."

"They found my cart at the foot of the cliff. What the hell did you do to my cart?" "I don't know what you're talking about. I've been asleep."

"You owe me \$6000 for my cart!"

"Danny took the cart into town last night. Let me get him. Hey Danny!"

Todd opens the bedroom door. The bed is empty.

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“He’s not here! He never came back! Maybe he’s hurt!”

“Aint’t no one down there in those rocks but my cart!”

“Kendall, I don’t know what happened. He went to McCain’s Store last night around 10. We’ve got to find Danny! Will you take me to the McCain’s store? Maybe they saw him!”

“Okay, man. I’m cooling down, but someone gotta pay me for my cart.

In twenty-minutes they were at the store. Edwin was behind the counter, counting the cash in the register.

Todd said, “Did you see Danny last night?”

“You mean your friend?” said Edwin.

“Right. He said he was coming here last night to get some beer.”

“I never saw him.”

Kendall interjects, “That boy has disappeared. My cart is wrecked at the foot of Hinson Cliff. He must have driven off the road.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” said Edwin. “He sure didn’t get here.”

“Maybe your sister saw him,” said Todd.

“No, she was with me.”

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“I just want to ask her,” insisted Todd.

“She’s in the backyard making conch chowder.”

Edwin led the way to the backyard. “Emily, that young man who came in yesterday has had a terrible accident. They found his cart wrecked off the cliff. They can’t find him.”

Emily looked up, expressionless. “That’s a God given shame about your friend. Maybe the sharks took him out to sea.”

Kendall said, “Why you sure got quite a pile of conch meat there.”  
On the table were bowls of onions and tomatoes. Piled high were fresh strips of meat. Lying next to the meat was something shiny and golden. Tim picked it up and recognized Danny’s ring with the emblem of Long Island State across its face. Tim’s stomach tightens and he feels faint.

“You know that conch is in short supply. It’s nearly extinct,” said Emily. “Got to use what you got when you get it.”