

A Life In a Day

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Mom and Aunt Patty shared one bathroom, squeezing under and around each other primping into one mirror, standing in a bouquet of perfume, nail polish, and hair spray. Uncle Ed drank a glass of Canadian Club and talked to my father as they sat on the backyard deck waiting for Friday night to begin. Soon they would be dancing at the local club.

I stood at the door of the bathroom watching my mom and aunt putting on their makeup while scrunching noses and forming their mouths into O shapes, amused by their faces.

“Whatcha want hon?” Aunt Patty said, while turning her face side to side inspecting her make-up in the mirror.

I said nothing, and she looked down at me and said, “Well?”

“He’s just watching. He always does,” Mom said. She talked as if I wasn’t standing there. I decided reading my book was more interesting, so I went outside.

Walking past my dad and uncle, I relaxed on a pile of leaves; my back against the tree’s trunk, my knees elevated. White clouds passed under a cobalt sky as dappled sunlight danced on the pages.

“What the hell’s the matter with your boy?” Uncle Ed asked. “Can’t he do nothing but read them books? By god, when I was his age, I was working a full time job.”

Uncle Ed, too cheap to buy drinks at the dancehall, would start drinking early, get loaded, and then shoot off his opinion of everything from work, people and world affairs with increasing bravado as the liquor fortified his boldness. In this tirade, I had become the subject of the conversation. My father, a man of few words who rarely touched liquor, said, “He’s a good kid; quiet, keeps to himself.”

I think that was his way of saying I’d never be a football star.

Mom’s arrival, with Aunt Patty behind in a mist of Chanel, interrupted Ed. “We’re leaving honey,” she called out from the deck. “Come here so I can kiss you bye. My heels will get stuck in the lawn if I walk out there.”

“Okay. Have fun,” I said.

“Can I get a kiss?”

I rolled my eyes and I got up, walked over and she planted one on my cheek leaving a red lip tattoo. Aunt Patty gave me another on my forehead.

Mom loved dancing and Friday was her night. Dad loved fishing and the weekend was his. Reading was the malady I developed in order to escape the insanity of my life when I had to stay home and watch two sisters, a brother, and any number of cousins visiting from all over the state, crammed into our two-bedroom house.

School mornings introduced giggling sisters, pushy cousins, a cranky brother, hair spray, perfume, curlers, bobby pins, and other feminine products, while waiting in line at the bathroom door — Mother reminding us we were going to be late.

I preferred the outside: camping, fishing, and even the reading, and simply because there was more room outside of the house than inside.

The happiness of the weekend arrived, as my father jolted my brother and me from bed with his no nonsense baritone voice, "Grab the gear, and let's move," he said. "We're going to be late."

Still sleeping, little brother Rob received a ceremonial punch in the arm. "Dad's not gonna wait," I said. Rob yawned, stretched, and then rolled out of bed.

We ate dry cereal, straight from the box, riding in the backseat of our station wagon, while heading south on Highway 41. Rob fell asleep as soon as his belly was full, and I sat up between the seats, talking to my dad.

"How long before we get there?"

"An hour and a half," he said.

"Who we meeting?"

"A guy I work with and his boy."

"What's his name?"

"Paul Violet."

"Violin?" I couldn't hear above the sound of Hank Williams crooning through our radio.

"No. Violet like the flower."

"Oh," I said, and settled back into the seat.

If Dad could have his way, his days would be spent fishing and camping rather than breaking his back working in construction. We always camped and fished at Chokoloskee, a small fishing village on the west coast. I loved it if only for the open space and the freedom to be able to stretch my arms without bumping into someone. I also liked the feel of a tight line, and the bend of a fishing rod, under the crystal blue skies, or trolling the edges of the mangroves in search of snapper, grouper or tarpon. Our plans on this weekend were to camp the Chatham River and our mouth's were set on enjoying grouper or snapper cooked over an open flame.

As we pulled into the lot, I sat up on the edge of the seat anticipating the day ahead. Dad pointed to Mr. Violet as he eased his boat into the dark water. Dad parked and ran over to help, and I nudged my still sleeping brother. Rob rolled out of the door, and we unloaded the fishing equipment. A boy approached and waved. He grabbed the tackle box and walked away.

"Name's Sam," he said over his shoulder.

"I'm Jimmy," I said, "and this is my brother Rob."

After getting the boat in the water and tying to the dock, Dad walked to the office to register, and I followed. At the front of the desk a nameplate read, M. Perez, Dock Master. A small, wrinkled man of age sat while reading a paper. Maps of the backcountry and pictures of fish and other fishermen with smiling faces hung on the walls.

"Good morning," Dad said.

"Buenos Dias," Mr. Perez replied. "What can I do for you?"

It sounded like, wacanadofurju, but my father understood him perfectly and explained we would be staying in a small cabin on the Chatham River.

"No problem," he replied. "See you Sunday."

The morning held a low fog, and the old Mercury motor pattered leaving a trail of smoke, as Mr. Violet navigated the boat into the channel leading to Chokoloskee Bay. Salty air touched our faces as we sat on the bow, legs dangling with the cold water splashing our feet as the motor turned up to a fine tuned hum.

Mr. Violet turned into one of the rivers and continued through a winding tea colored waterway lined with mangroves as the sun climbed into the sky. Soon we stopped to fish in one of the tidal pools.

“Looks like a good spot boys,” Dad said. “Grab your rods and let’s catch dinner.”

We climbed off the bow taking our place on the stern. The men took their place on the bow. In about ten minutes, Dad’s fishing rod doubled over and the whoopin’ and hollerin’ began — that’s what we did when hooking a fish. After a five-minute fight, and fish acrobatics, he landed the prize.

“What is it? Rob asked.

“It’s a fish, moron,” Sam said.

“I know that, stupid” Rob shot back. “I meant what kind of fish.”

Dad reached down, unhooked the flapping ribbon of scales, and tossed it into the water.

“Hey, what was that about?” I asked.

“Ladyfish,” he said. “Ain’t good for nothing but catching.”

After an hour of fishing and about thirty more ladyfish, Dad said, “Let’s head toward the campsite.”

We stowed the gear, and Mr. Violet turned the ignition key and the motor sputtered to life in a cloud of blue smoke. There was turn after turn through the river and it seemed we spent our time leaning one way or the other, but soon the boat motor fell silent, and we drifted.

Mr. Violet was the first to cast, and the first to catch — another ladyfish. We fished off the stern again, and after a few minutes, Rob pulled in a Blue crab. We laughed, keeping focus on the water for snapper or grouper, because no respectable angler would choose to catch a crab on a fishing rod.

Dad’s fishing rod bent over, and once again — a ladyfish. Rob caught another crab, then another, and then another. I felt a light tug on my line, and slowly reeled in a crab. Sam caught another crab. Dad and Mr. Violet continued their skills with the ladies.

We fished several other spots as the sun crested overhead reaching into early afternoon. Much to our dissatisfaction, we’d filled two large coolers full of blue crabs and only a few fish.

Mr. Violet said, “Let’s head for the cabin.”

“Looks like crab for dinner,” Dad said.

Mr. Violet navigated through the Chatham, deeper into the mangrove jungle. From the stern, I watched the wake and the low-lying blue smoke left from the pattering motor and imagined Bogart piloting the African Queen through the waters, while watching for the Empress Luisa. Sam and Rob rode the bow, feet dangling.

We arrived at a one-room shanty perched on stilts nearly three feet above the water with a long dock running across the front. The river as our front yard, the back held nothing but mangrove. Sitting on one end of the dock, I saw a small structure with a slanted roof.

“What’s that?” I asked while pointing.

“The toilet,” Dad said.

I looked at the other boys with a raised brow and said, “The what?”

Dad looked over to Mr. Violet, shook his head and laughed. “Toilet, outhouse. You gotta go, you go in there.”

Of course, being curious boys, we clambered from of the boat to check our newfound treasure.

“Open the door,” Rob said.

“You open the door,” Sam answered.

I opened the door.

Inside the small space, we saw a platform where one would sit, however this seat had a hole cut through it.

"I guess that's where you go," I said, as we all looked down the hole, which gave us a view of the greenish water below, and a couple of snapper.

"There's the fish we been looking for," Rob said.

The primitive site provided no water, electric, TV, or radio — a square room with beds hanging off the walls, bare floors, a table with six chairs, and open cabinets with canned goods. Someone had fashioned a cooker at the other end of the dock, and Mr. Violet filled a large pot with the fresh water we'd brought. As the water began to boil, we tossed the crabs into the pot and then, with cooked crabs piled high, and we sat on the edge of the dock and enjoyed our dinner.

At the dawn of morning, we set off to another fishing spot with Dad and Mr. Violet deciding the outside waters would hold more luck. We traveled back through the river and into the bay for about an hour, and stopped and fished, without result. We moved on, and moved again, and it seemed as if we would continue this habit until we arrived at the right spot. I never understood how one would know where the right spot should be, and apparently my father nor Mr. Violet had figured out the secret in that we continued this action of moving about, several more times until we were well outside the view of land. It was about that time when Mr. Violet turned the key, and the old motor gave nothing more than a grunt. Dad looked back at Mr. Violet, and then to us, and then back to Mr. Violet.

"That didn't sound good."

"Nope. Sure didn't," Mr. Violet said.

They stepped to the stern and pulled the cover off the motor, tapped a few things, and tried again, and received another grunt from the motor.

"It's not the battery," Mr. Violet said.

"Yeah. Sounds like the lower unit's jammed," Dad said.

"That don't sound good," Mr. Violet said, while looking over at us.

They decided, since we didn't have a CB radio, the only choice in the matter was to continue to fish. Since we were in the bay, we'd keep a look out for other boaters and wave them down.

As time passed, so did a boat in the distance. Mr. Violet discharged a handheld horn, but they were too far away to hear.

As cool as the weather in fall can be, in Florida the sun has no mercy, and on this day, it was a perfect, cloudless cobalt blue sky with a light southern breeze. It would have been a lovely time, but we were stuck in the middle of the bay without food, little water, and no shelter.

I thought if fate found fortune upon us, the light breeze would push us across the Gulf of Mexico toward Key West, unless we drifted too far out, which meant we could end up near Cuba. The thought of drifting into the Straits of Florida and across to Havana intrigued me as I gazed across the bay. I couldn't help but think of Hemingway's Santiago and wished we had our own Manolin to watch over us. I looked at my father as he watched the horizon and remembered the line from the book, *"Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated."* And I knew we would be safe.

As the sun became a quarter circle of orange on the horizon, our backs stung with the memory of the day. We prepared makeshift beds not knowing what the darkness of the bay would bring

and I wished for the comfort of our primitive cabin and prayed. As I raised my head, my father raised his, and then cocked his ear to the distance.

Mr. Violet sat up and asked, "Hear something?"

Dad placed his finger to his lips, and then pointed toward the horizon.

In the distance, we could see a small spot moving toward us. We stood and waved our arms, and there was a flash – the blue flash of a Florida Wildlife Officer's light.

The hum of boat became louder and as they approached, the officer driving, the dock master pointed and tossed a rope to our bow.

"How'd you know where to find us?" Mr. Violet asked.

Mr. Perez pointed to my father and said, "He say to me where you go, and it was getting late. I call the ranger and figure — don't know why — you head out to the bay. I did a crisscross, and I spot your boat."

Loading the car, a long day behind us, Mr. Perez walked over to our car.

"Thanks again, Señor Perez," Dad said.

"My pleasure sir," he said, and then looked at my brother and me, "but around here, everyone just calls me Manny."