

HEROES

Steven LaBree

A hint smoke from the morning fire fell across the camp on this cool October morning. The sun would peek above the horizon soon and launch a flood of orange tint across this river of grass called the Everglades. The songs of the crickets and katydids echoed across the clearing as I stretched my tired body.

The sleeping cot was uncomfortable, so I decided it was time to rise. I pulled on my pants, slipped into my boots, and unzipped the canvas door. I stepped onto the dew covered grass and could see a small campfire, surrounded by carefully laid stones, dance off the deep rutted lines of his face.

The coffee pot hung across a wired grate just above the glowing embers and a soft morning haze hovered above the moist earth. The light from the campfire reflected his silhouette across the grassy ground as it danced along the edge of the sawgrass clearing. An old stump, cut from a large loblolly pine, felled long before we arrived served as his seat. I approached him with respect and caution.

“Good Mornin,” I yawned through a full stretch, “What’s for breakfast?”

In his uncompromising, resolute manner, he glanced up, raising his head just enough to see me, and said, “You catch it.”

I looked away, as if embarrassed by my silly question, knowing beneath this shield of unrelenting armor beat the heart of a gentle man.

I watched the radiance of the flames echo the years of hard work evidenced on his leathered skin. He came of age at just twelve years riding the rails through the Depression, surviving in a world when he should have been playing stickball with friends. In his life, there were no handouts, no charity. He earned his way as a steeplejack, a farmhand, a factory worker. He turned to construction, working on skyscrapers, and building monuments to rich men of power and authority. He labored hard each day in sweltering sun to support his family. I knew this weekend meant a lot to him.

He raised a steaming mug of coffee to his face, his arms immense, defined by years of demanding toil, stretched; nearly bursting sleeves. In silence, I turned, picked up my fishing rod, and headed toward the path leading to the dark water.

Ahead, my eyes gazed over the vast expanse of river grass as streaks of red, blue, orange, yellow, and gray, the creation of dawn, exploded toward heaven like a celebration. Cool air brushed my cheeks while walking in silence through a foot worn path. Sticks and grass clicked gently beneath my feet warning the fish of my approach. In grand anticipation, my thoughts focused on the hunt, and I couldn’t wait to wet my line with first cast.

Nearing open space by waters edge, my ears focused on the sound of an Osprey’s call. Gliding gently overhead, a dark figure cast against a bluing sky, his sharp eyes spied the earth searching for sustenance. A Great Heron walked the bank, his intense gaze never leaving the water; long thin legs pushed his elegant frame through the stream with

stealth, as if floating across the surface. He shared space with two small Purple Gallinules paddling behind as if to chase the big bird along in his quest. I stopped and watched.

Without warning, the magnificent creature shot his head into the dark surface with lightning speed returning with a small fish wriggling at the tip of his massive yellow beak. The prey wriggled in desperate attempt to escape the infallible grip of death. A meal foreordained to satisfy the need of the Great Heron as the cycle of life in this wonder called the Everglades moved on without approbation. He flipped his graceful neck toward the dawning sky flinging the tiny morsel into the air and then catching it perfectly headfirst. I wanted to applaud as if watching the circus juggler toss his art into the air but watched in silence. The vigilant bird glanced in my direction and in single motion of a slight bend of powerful legs, wings spread across the great waters. With a graceful push of the air, he sailed off.

Replacing the Great Heron's presence with my own, the Gallinules showed their displeasure cackling as if I was intruding on their territory. I glanced toward them paying no mind. Soon, they accepted me and continued to glide across the smooth black water. I studied the surface, looking for the right spot to grace my first cast.

The gentle current moved quietly and unwearied northwest bending gently through grass and small cypress knees lining the rocky banks of this was a natural stream. Beauty untouched by man, flowing long before I arrived, it carved life through limestone for thousands of years under the caressing hands of nature. This was a natural world where man was the intruder.

I stood at the banks of a gentle tributary flowing south from Lake Okeechobee creating a meandering passageway to the river and beyond. To the west, a small village may have worked the land to survive, finding this small torrent to traverse between trading posts or other villages throughout the boggy vastness, south to the Miami River or across the county seat to Chokoloskee Bay. The Tequesta and the Calusa Indian tribes spreading across the Atlantic coast from north of Palm Beach to Miami and on to the Keys with a village on Cape Sable at the southern end of the Florida peninsula in the 16th Century. They built their villages, cared for their families at the mouths of these rivers and streams creating what would become their history. Throughout the area, on inlets from the Atlantic Ocean to inland waters, on barrier islands and the Keys they hunted, traded, living among natural beauty.

Today, nothing much is left of these great tribes except some artifacts and shell mounds. Lost in the details in the name of progress as the new pioneers came to conquer and build cities with concrete monuments to their own existence these peaceful people destroyed, their spirit kept alive by our writings; pieces of existence swallowed by mother earth.

With arm outstretched, I cast my line with perfect precision across black water to a small stand of river grass. A small ripple against the bank indicated a fish and I felt this would be a good start. My first cast came up dry, but I knew there were fish in the shallow. I could see the small swirl again and it was the key to my breakfast. Cautiously, I laid my line across the black water. Too close and spook the prey. Too far, the cast is wasted. It had to be perfect. I had to be perfect.

I cast my line in a different direction as if to say, "I don't care that you are over there." After giving my prey a period of relief, and with hope, lapse of memory, I reeled in and prepared to cast once again; this time the exact spot, forcing my prey to react.

I felt the pressure of the lure as the rod passed my head. As the lure rounded, I felt the flip of pressure in my attempt to release the trigger perfectly without force. I watched the lure float through the air as if in slow motion, the sun's first rays hitting it with brilliant reflection, floating through the morning dew as if carried by a magical hand. My line drifted across the air above the black water guiding my tasteful treat in all its glorious colors across a small limb only to dangle mere inches above my prey's grasp. I closed my eyes in pure exasperation.

I gave the line a tug, a small tree branch waved as if to say, gotcha, now go away. I pulled the line straight, leveled my rod stepping backwards. I heard a snap sound and the unmistakable zing of line without lure flying towards me at the speed of light. Covered in monofilament, wrapped around my cap, feeling dejected without my breakfast, a hand touched my shoulder.

"Whatcha doin?" he said.

"Fishin', what else?"

"Squirrels?" he said.

"Yup, but he got away." I mustered all my strength to show I had not failed to catch breakfast. I was just, delayed.

He knelt to look at my rod seeing the line had stretched beyond use. Without condemnation, he silently took up his rod. "Mind if I give it a try?"

I looked up at this big man standing next to me and said with confidence, "I don't think the squirrels will mind."

With an unyielding look of determination, a fierce focus on his face I had seen a hundred times, steel blue eyes threw a gaze across the black water. His arm glided gently to his side as he flicked his wrist with the precision of a master, landing his lure in the perfect spot.

Hitting his target, the line softly followed and stretched the expanse falling onto the surface. I watched the lure dive below the surface in a splash and bob upwards. Then, within a split second, another larger splash of water and the tip of his rod curved forward as if bowing to the water. He pulled back and his muscles bulged through the shirt.

A large Bass erupted through the black surface leaping into the air, reflecting its acrobatic talents. A few glorious minutes of gallant fight, and this masterful creature submitted to the power of man.

He held the creature by its lower jaw, removed the lure with a twist, and handed it to me.

"That's one," he said with a grin across his face. His flawless casting continued as I watched the lure float across the water landing with perfection each time.

My father and I walked back to the camp that morning with the warm sun at our backs and our future ahead of us. With camp in sight, a hint of smoke from the embers wafted toward the morning sky. I placed our bounty on a large rock, and he pulled his long knife, sharpened by years of delicate use, from a tattered leather sheath. With the skill of a surgeon, he prepared our catch. A well-worn and seasoned skillet was waiting for the abundance provided by nature, a pot of grits slowly bubbled.