

I AIN'T LYING

Steven LaBree

I sat on the dock and watched a school of Snapper fight for bits of fallen scrap from the fish deck where we cleaned our catch the previous night. My boat, with engine trouble, sat at the far end of the dock waiting for the mechanic. My mind replayed the hundreds of trips taken through this waterway that flowed directly off the Atlantic allowing us to dock our boats at the doorway of the condominium. A sudden interruption in the calm water letting me know the mighty Silver King cruised nearby.

Years before, a fellow by the name of Robbie found a struggling Tarpon off the banks of his fishing enterprise. A boat prop sliced his face and the jaw hung precariously. He nursed the King back to health, and a legend was born. Scarface continued to frequent the docks returning each year. Soon, one by one, Tarpon began to show up at the docks of Robbie's. Today the mighty Silver Kings come by the hundreds. It is an amazing sight to see hundreds of these might warriors all in one place.

In the path of these mighty giants is the rocky point leading to the condominiums where I lived. The jagged coral rock sticks into the Atlantic like the thumb on your hand with your palm lying upwards. If you follow the thumb to the base, there is a private beach as your hand curves to the main finger pointing north called The Point. The Tarpon would lose their direction, finding themselves traveling this cut, ending up at our docks.

My son Bryan loved to fish here because of this. He would catch small ones, mostly under three feet, but one morning he watched his line moving and the tip of the rod bend. He called for his grandfather and pulled the rod from its stand. The line screamed as it left the spool and the fight was a dauntless victory as the mighty Silver King cleared the surface in a fight to escape. When the battle ceased, Scarface laid before him. Bryan released the beautiful legend back to the wild unharmed. I bragged about the fish to the local guides. "You can't catch Tarpon from a land," they would tell me. I would just smile.

On this morning, as my mind meandered through all of my quiet places, and secret fishing spots, a dozen children arrived. Leading the pack, my son said, "Dad, can you take all of us fishing!"

"The motor has a problem."

The kids huddled in a circle and then asked, "How about you take us to The Point."

Access to The Point was through an opening in a fence at the end of the road. Follow a path covered with mangroves heading east and then through the bushes, ending up on the sharp coral point with nothing in your view but ocean. It was one of the unspoiled areas of the Florida Keys.

We grabbed our supplies, and one by one, we squeezed through the hole in the fencing. We pushed our way through the bush and mangrove trees hiding the secret path

to our spot and emerged onto the rock sharp enough to cut your feet without shoes. I knew I wasn't going to get much fishing done, but that wasn't the goal.

I prepared the rods, and the boys promptly dropped their rigs into the fast running water. Each boy would scream, "I got one!" and I would unhook the tiny prey and toss it back into the water. I rigged my large rod and tossed my bait into the water. Soon, one of the boys presents a tiny Snapper on the end of the line.

"I can't get him off. Can you help me?"

I grabbed a couple of large rocks and propped my fishing rod. The rig was within my sight and I figured that if something hit the line, I could quickly grab my rod. I took the fishing rod from the boy and saw the fish swallowed the hook. Another boy yelled to the others, "Hey! Come here! I see a Manta Ray!"

All the boys followed in excitement. Not paying any attention to what I was doing, my thumb came too close to this little Snapper's snapper and it bit down on my thumb. I stood there for a moment pondering my options; I couldn't pry open the mouth with only one hand. I yelled to the boys, but the wind was in my face. After what seemed to be an eternity, Bryan looked back. He said something to the kids and they all came running up. Surrounded now by inquisitive small boys, they all wanted to know why the fish bit me.

During this, Tom Jenkins passes through the cut in his tri-hull after a morning of Dolphin fishing with his boys. I waved with my fish free hand. I turned my back on my rod.

I looked down at this little Snapper and decided since I couldn't do anything with this little guy on my thumb, I had to sacrifice him. Once removed, I examined the two holes left in my thumb. Bryan screamed, "Dad, your rod!"

I turned to see my Pflueger rod four feet in the air. I reached to grab it, and it lands on the rock. I heard a huge splash in the water. A dozen boys screamed, "Oh my gosh!" I grabbed my rod from the rocky ground discovering the line had cut.

Tom waved back with his arms fully extended in the air from side to side. I looked over to Bryan, and shouted over the wind, "What the heck was that?"

He uncovered his face, and said, "It had to be seven foot and two hundred plus pounds."

"What are you talking about?"

"The fish, Dad. The fish! It was the biggest Tarpon I have ever seen!"

I never saw the fish.

Moments later my father came from the path asking. "Imagination," I said. "Just the kids and their imagination."

"Not was Jenkins said," he replied.

"Perhaps." I didn't want to think about it.