

A Few Lucky Men

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With weather-beaten and salt-burned hands, the old man dragged his burnout canoe to the ocean every morning just before sunrise. He loved how the morning embraced him before slowly melting away into the beating sun of the day. He always brought two corn tamales wrapped in banana leaves. Sitting next to his canoe, he ate the first slowly, his toes digging down into the cool sand while the ocean rubbed fondly against his ankles.

The whitewash boiled against the bow, flecking the air with a fine spray that caught the twilight in an eerie, almost ethereal way. He worked hard to escape the surf, feeling his entire body tense with each stroke. Arms burning and the taste of iron on his tongue, the man split through the last break and made his way to the rock piles off the southern point. He dipped his paddle rhythmically into the water, puncturing the otherwise still surface with frothing puddles that spaced neatly behind the boat. After an hour, with the sun just beginning to warm the nape of his neck, he spotted a break in the regular ripples and a flash of movement beneath. Instinctually, he reached down and threw his cast-net high into the air; it hung like a parachute and fell gently over the undulations. He dragged the net in, and onto the dark cedar spilled a thousand silver blades that shook and shimmered in the early morning light. He pierced anchovies in one eye and out the other while searching for the next to hook on his long-line. Although he never asked them to, his sons tied all of the knots for him after his hands began to shake.

Before setting his bait, the man sat on a bucket and ate his second tamale. He took a long breath through his nose, tasting the salt and foam deep in his chest while the gentle lapping and rolling of the ocean filled his ears. He let himself float for a few moments before he threw his line over the gunnel and paddled towards the rock piles. He was a lucky man.

He returned home with a boat full of yellowtail, grouper, and snapper. The waves carried him on their backs as his sons ran from their perch on a gently leaning palm, kicking sand up behind them with each stride. As children, the boys saved enough money together from odd jobs to buy a decrepit fly rod between them. The cork handle was worn down to the nub, and it splintered grey shards of graphite into their hands--but they didn't care. It led them, together, to unfamiliar flats and up snaking rivers with swarms of mosquitoes so thick that they couldn't open their eyes. The old man watched them grow with distant curiosity, the younger fair-skinned, tall and quiet, the older a stocky, tan boy with a fierce disposition. They were inseparable until they began to know themselves, and from there they split apart jaggedly, silently, the way that comes and goes with stabbing pains in your stomach.

The younger son spent his days stalking the four-inch deep flats that meandered listlessly along the coastline, wading deliberately through the muddy silt, peering into mangroves which seemed to have no center, and ceaselessly scanning, squinting with one eye and then the other, bending the brim of his straw hat against the sun, all in hopes to see the playful tailing of a bonefish.

In the mornings, he guided wealthy foreigners with gleaming rods and bottomless pockets. He couldn't help but see his older brother in them, in the way they spoke circles around him without ever really saying anything. An expert at his craft, he watched with ambivalence as his reputation grew throughout the region, hailing him as your best shot to land an eight-pounder. Clients would arrive at three in the morning to squabble over a few hours on the water with him. He still preferred to fish alone. On these days, when all he could hear was the rustle of the mangrove leaves and all he could see was the wind-wrinkled surface stretched out before him, bending and ruffled like a field of barley and perforated with the odd white cap, when the sun sat just above the horizon, nothing else mattered. He knew that he was a lucky man.

The sunrise reached across a writhing sea, painting its violent surface a deep ruby red. Swells crashed over one another, coursing across the surface without intention or regard. The younger son caught nothing that day, and on his way back to the hut, found his father's empty, upturned canoe washed up onto the shore. His brother arrived by nightfall. They drank two bottles of rum and said very little, staring with empty eyes and pounding chests into the glowing coals, their lips slightly parted as if to let the breath escape them. The next morning, rubbing the sleep out of their eyes, the two brothers wrapped up tamales in banana leaves and left for a long day of fishing. Wind whipped across the flat, snarling the older brother's line until he slapped the old, ragged rod against the water. They worked their way to a calmer spot behind a large mangrove where several translucent tail tips pierced the surface, moving synchronously and spreading even furrows in their wake. The older brother made two false casts, laid his crab pattern neatly down in the mud, and hooked a large bonefish. It bowed his rod while line screamed off the reel. For half an hour he fought the fish, palming the spool high above his head in a delicate balance until the old rod snapped. The fish was gone. They turned to each other and laughed the kind of laugh that warms you inside, somewhere deep and unreachable. Afterward, they sat on the shore and ate, looking out past the mangroves, past the grey-green of the flats and into the sun, melting into the sea like a pad of butter.