

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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Chapter Thirteen of "The Green Season" (*Little Red Meat*)

NEAR THE END OF THE NEXT DAY on Esther Island I began releasing salmon from our lines...

I was bringing in the tag-lines when the idea occurred to me. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. Instead of having to wipe my face every five seconds to see what I was doing, I had to only do this every minute or so. Already two of the tag-lines were in. The first had come back with its bait still on; the second with its bait missing. Unfortunately, this third and present tag-line was proving more difficult. The small King salmon on the end of it was determined not to be brought in in an orderly manner. Three times it had jumped out of the water trying to spit its hook. It had nosedived so sharply a moment ago that I'd lost the line part of the tag and had had to re-thread and recoil the line through my fingertips all over again. This was particularly maddening now that I was so close to finishing. I was sweating beneath my raingear and was looking forward to stripping myself of it in the dry of wheelhouse. Finally, the fish seemed to be relenting: sixty-feet off starboard side, rolling side to side in our wake.

I'd been brooding all day over what I'd learned at HARRY'S FISH-BUYER. Having discovered that I'd earned no money, my work seemed pointless. Remembering Old Judge Peterson's remark that in the "old days" a green hand worked without pay just to learn the ropes, I realized I'd been wrong in expecting so much so fast with my modern day sensibilities. But was it wrong to expect something for my misery? Add to the equation that we were probably pirating Canada bound salmon on these Esther Island grounds and my work seemed worse than pointless: I, Adam Porter, was a shanghaied slave in Captain Swanson's galley!

Humiliating stuff ...

The salmon was along the left side of the trawler now, on about fifteen feet of line. I could see where the hook was set in a corner of its mouth. A few more feet and I'd be able to gaff and land it. The dry of the wheelhouse seemed that much closer. I could almost feel it beneath my damp clothing. And what was that skunky smell coming through the open door of the wheelhouse? Wasn't it my turn to pack and smoke a big bowl of my own?

I stepped out of the cockpit with my right foot, bracing it against the trawler's fender. I grabbed one of the three gaffs hanging by their hooks along the rim of the cockpit. Apparently, the fish was played out, on its side now. Threading the fish in, I began to talk out loud to it. This talk had become an occasional habit of mine to make the long hours pass.

"Well, hell, Little Red Meat," I began, switching my gaff carefully from my left to right hand. "What's the sense of looking at me like that? You suppose I wanted all this trouble? Hell, if it was up to me, I'd have cut you loose long ago!"

With a start, I noticed that Little Red Meat wasn't quite as played out as I'd imagined. Three strong swipes of his tail assured me of that.

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He was as close as I was going to get him. All that remained was walking him a little more to my left, then gaffing him just beneath the gills. But this had to be done very carefully and very quickly. The wood beneath my boots was extremely slick because of the drizzle. Also, there was always the chance a large swell might sneak up on me even though we were moving inland now.

“Come on, Red Meat. Take it easy,” I bantered, having to lean a little more over the side than I’d care to. “What’s all the fuss? This thing’s got nothing to do between me and you. It ain’t up to us. I get paid for bringing you in because there’s these things call People in places like Seattle and New York and San Francisco who pay big bucks to squeeze you between crackers! It sucks. But all of us—and that goes for you too, my friend—are subject to the demands of the market economy. Crazy, huh?”

I stopped talking. For an instant, the sun broke through the clouds, and I saw my shadow on the water, reaper-like with my hood and gaff in hand. Then, an instant later, my shadow dissolved as the clouds closed around the sun again.

Dizzied, I stepped back up on the fender. The rapid, needle-like rains made the water around me sizzle, adding to the surrealness of the scene. Time to quit screwing around. If I didn’t get out of this cockpit soon, I’d wind up going overboard, for sure. Vision or no visions.

“All right, little bastard! That’s it. Either you’re coming aboard or I’m going in after you. Let’s go!”

Little Red Meat was in position now. All I had to do was hitch him out of the water a foot or two, and plant the gaff-hook. Easy enough. But when I tried to lift him clear of the water, he did the very thing I’d feared all along. He rolled in against the fender.

“Sneaky little bastard!”

I chucked my gaff to the bottom of the cockpit. If I hadn’t been fooling around talking with a goddamn fish I’d be inside packing that bowl right now. Was I losing my mind? Unable to actually see Little Red Meat, I could hear and feel him flailing against the husk of the fender.

This was a bad situation all the way around. If I tried to raise him from the water, from where I stood, the hook would strip. I could climb out of the cockpit, walk him alongside the trawler’s flank and land him at mid-deck. But by that time the meat might be damaged to the point we couldn’t even sell it.

There was, of course, one other option.

I checked over my shoulder to see that Swanson wasn’t on deck. Sometimes he came out to check on our progress. But the deck proved clear. A flap of steadying sail had come undone again; a loose Styrofoam cup was alternately being swept across deck and then smashed up against the outer wall of the wheelhouse. It was the same empty stage I’d been looking at all day.

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Turning around, I gave the line a sharp little tug. Little Red Meat spit the hook, shooting out backwards in our wake, away from the trawler.

“Adios, amigos!” I joked, thrilled at the sight of and the feel of the limp tag-line flapping in the breeze. “Tell the others not to come!”

Although I know it is scientifically impossible, Little Red Mean winked at me.

He really did.

Releasing Little Red Meat felt so good, that I immediately released his two sisters—Medium-Sized Red Meat and Great Big Red Meat—on the last two tag-lines. Stumbling back into the cockpit when I’d finished, I laughed out loud. Why hadn’t I thought of this before? A wonderful healthy antidote to my despair! For every dollar Swanson swindled from me—I’d release salmon in kind. Set our balance straight—with interest added, of course.

I returned to my work refreshed; my faith in justice restored; my sentiments of goodwill towards our Canadian neighbors sated. I took extra pains coiling up these last three tag-lines, laying them neatly beside their somewhat tangled mates.

Like an omen from above, the rain and drizzle stopped. For the first time since noon, I was able to remove my raingear and let my body breathe. Through a large saucer-like opening in the clouds, the yellow Alaskan sun brought everything brilliantly back to life. The green green of the tree-rich islands and blue blue of the sparkling sea! 18,000 foot Mt. Saint Elias’s snow-capped peaks glowed bright orange and pink and white on the horizon, apparition-like, a distant Shangri-La! From now on, I’d keep tabs on how many fish we caught. And there’d be no more running around in dives like Roxie’s Kitchen. No, sir! From here out I’d walk the straight and narrow. Besides, even if the wages were low and the grub was worse, where else in the U.S.A. could one work and live and breathe in such magnificent surroundings!

Turning to climb out of the cockpit, I saw Philip Swanson moving about on deck.

“Here we go ...” I whispered out loud, my heart pumping loud.

Swanson was hanging the four tires we used as bumper when mooring. He’d been hoisting one of them over the side the moment I’d spotted him. I would openly confront him about the salmon I’d released. Obviously, he was letting on that he hadn’t seen me release them. But he must have! He was probably just waiting for the right time to nail me with it. But I’d tell him before he told me: and let him know what he could do about it.

Beat the bastard to the punch ...

He was standing directly above me now, behind the hayrack. He’d finished laying out the tires, and was smoking pot from his pipe. Through the cables and fairlead blocks, I could see that he was surveying the waters behind us. His predatory eyes roved from one side of the open inlet to the

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other; not focusing on anything in particular. I thought of the improbability that someone, even someone with as good an eye as Swanson's, could spot any of the salmon if they'd bellied up after I'd released them. By our present pace, the last salmon released was no closer than 200 yards in our wake, and the first salmon, Little Red Meat, a quarter mile behind.

"Look!" Swanson said, his eyes fixing on something directly behind us. "Behind you!"

"What?" I shouted, shading my eyes from the glare coming off the water. "I don't see a thing."

"No!" came Swanson's reply. He'd moved closer, standing with one foot along the rim of the cockpit. He pointed towards the sky with the step of his brass pipe. "Up there. Coming out from the trees."

There, appearing out of the shadows along shore, a huge bald eagle flew in a direct path towards where Little Red Meat would be if still floundering on the surface. The eagle's great wings flapped slow and steady through the air. When it reached the area, about a quarter mile in our wake, it began to circle. Then suddenly, as though one of its wings had broken in mid-flight, the eagle dropped from the sky. It spiraled down towards the glittering water, righting itself at the last moment with a furious pumping of wings. The large, hand-like talons broke the sea's surface, emerging a second later with Little Red Meat. Its wings still pumping, the great bird lifted itself and the salmon from the water; Little Red Meat's tail wagging in protest. In the same slow deliberate manner it had arrived, the eagle departed; flying the other way down the long stretch of inlet.

I was dumbfounded. All this had happened within a matter of minutes.

"Is that something else or what!" Swanson said. He stepped back from the cockpit; a horrible-smile and glazed-over look to his eye. "Damn! Look at that bird go!"

"You know ..." Swanson continued. "It's funny ... but I can always see this sort of thing happening way ahead of time. Even before the bird starts circling ... something to do with the way its wings are flapping. It just ain't flapping about like it sometimes does, but flying with that true purpose. Know what I mean?"

I smiled to show that I did.

Then Swanson said something to completely throw me:

"Well ... keep up the good work."

Mumbling something about expecting a call over the wire, Swanson reminded me to swab both the cockpit and main deck before coming in. Finally, without another word, without the slightest sign or gesture that he'd known a thing about any of the salmon I'd released, he returned to the wheelhouse.

My face burning in humiliation, I returned to my chores. Filling the bucket with water, I began to swab deck, scrubbing so hard that the steel fiber on my brush broke off against the wood.

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It was no good.

I couldn't beat him.

Even old Mother Nature was on his side!

These days were getting too long. Much much too long ...