

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Clinton Rock **The Last Billfish**

Frigate birds circle beneath cirrus clouds like swirling spirits guarding the heavens.

"They're probably onto dolphin," Captain Hollis yells down from the flying bridge. "But you never really know out here." He begins easing the fifty-two-foot Hatteras boat in the birds' direction, sounds of wind and waves rising and falling against a low-throated moan of engines.

Just like the old days, Ted thinks.

Today Ted has stopped his running. Not as a fugitive of the law, but as an escapee of his past. Today Ted has ceased his solitary exile from fish and fishermen to stand on deck with the mate and three men and a woman aboard a deep sea fishing charter. Excited strangers clustering outside the cabin with the first report of possible fish, eleven miles from Cozumel.

One man says dolphin would be okay.

"You mean like 'Flipper?'" the woman says.

"He means like the fish—not the porpoise," adds another man standing close beside her.

"But aren't they both the same?" All eyes turn to the third man slathered with eighty-weight sunscreen in the pale morning light.

Ted asks if the man has done much offshore fishing.

"Oh yeah. I've been two—no—three times now!"

"Right," Ted says. He glances at the bridge, but the captain is staring ahead, watching the birds, cap brim pulled low against the haze of another day.

"Now I'm confused," the woman says. She is young and tan and wearing a yellow bikini. The top struggles to contain bulging breasts.

"How about if I explain it over some Kahlua and coffee," the man next to her says. His voice is practically a whisper. She smiles pleasantly and tosses sun-bleached hair over a shoulder as they head toward the cabin.

The boat churns a steady eight-knot troll, outriggers laconically rocking side to side in the rolling seas as two wire-rigged bonito baits skip and jump from dangling lines six waves back in the wake. Closer to the stern, two flat lines pull daisy-chains of purple, pink and red plastic teasers popping and flopping like fleeing squid. Lures offered to coax billfish into striking. Hopefully a sailfish, or a marlin.

Ted crosses to the ladder and asks permission to ascend.

"Rise up," Hollis says. He spreads his arms out wide.

Ted methodically climbs the rungs, feet and hands braced against sides of chromed steel as the boat swings and sways between waves.

"You're used to the seas, aren't you?" Hollis asks.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Ted confesses that he is. He moves next to the captain and scans the green diode screen on the fishfinder. Bends closer as if unsure of what he sees. "I've never fished in water this deep," he says. A wave pushes the bow sideways. Ted steps to catch his balance.

"We're over a small, deep canyon that doesn't appear on any charts," the captain says. "A fissure uniquely formed in the ocean's floor."

"A paradise for billfish, by the looks of it," Ted says. "We should find some fish here."

"Yeah," Hollis says. "I'll find some here, all right." He eyeballs Ted a moment, then leans across the railing and spits. The wind carries the stream neatly away. "So I'm guessing you've caught 'bills' before," he says.

"Plenty."

"In these waters?"

"No—out of the Florida Keys."

"You run your own boat?"

"Yes," Ted says. "Eventually."

The captain looks skyward at the birds. "What kind of an answer is that?" His tone is gruff.

"I hired someone to captain the boat. But he left—so I took over."

"Where's your boat now?"

"Gone."

"You sold her?"

"It burned."

The wind whines through outrigger wires as the steering wheel groans and the boat veers in a new direction.

"You're the one—aren't you," Hollis says. He realigns the boat with the birds.

Ted turns and watches the trailing baits and teasers dart among foaming swells. Down below, the two men who remain on deck mingle with the mate. They laugh and gesture, occasionally glancing towards the closed cabin door.

"Is that young lady part of your crew?" Ted says.

The captain grins. "No, more of a hostess, I'd say."

"Right."

"Which reminds me," the captain says, "just how much did you pay for that short straw?"

Ted turns and faces the man. "How'd you know about that?"

"A captain needs to know what happens aboard his boat if he expects to maintain any sort of order among the chaos of the seas." Hollis snorts, then sends another stream portside. The wind shifts and someone hollers below.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

Ted studies the unshaven captain beside him. A man close to his own age. Another “gringo” somewhere he did not belong.

“Two hundred,” Ted says.

“American?”

“Yeah.”

Hollis whistles sharply. “That’s a lot of dough.” He smiles, exposing a sparkling gold incisor. “That kind of money can get a man killed down here—if he’s not careful.”

Ted heads to the ladder as the frigate birds maintain their opportunistic orbit.

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Ted’s first yearning for deep sea fishing came in 1952 when the round-face boy read Hemingway’s, *The Old Man and the Sea*, in *Life* magazine. A story that sparked a fire deep in the pit of his soul, the writing allowing the young boy to catch a glimpse of the respect that can exist between man and fish. A relationship between predator and prey. A singular and defining moment in Ted’s life.

By 1970 Ted had become a rising star in the investment banking business, his dream of fishing the deep seas reduced to occasional charter trips. Fishing trips where customers watched while mates rigged lines and baits, then set the hook for a guest should a marlin or sailfish be induced to bite.

Yet Ted’s dream of pursuing the mighty pelagic fish never completely faded. When he purchased Hemingway’s, “*Islands in the Stream*,” he began jotting notes in the creased margins about tackle and techniques with the same deftness and determination that made him a successful businessman in New York City.

Then Ted underwent a bitter and stressful divorce. He retired and moved to the Florida Keys. “A man who feeds only his body—and not his soul—lives a contracted life,” he told his coworkers.

Ted soon bought a thirty-six-foot Grady White. But Ted knew nothing of boats, or offshore fishing, and he hired a retired captain to teach him to navigate the coral reefs. And to fish.

A childhood dream come true.

In the ensuing months Ted’s body slowly transformed. His soft muscles grew strong and sinewy as his skin turned brown and his beard became wiry and white. At night he bought rounds of drinks for fishermen who teased him for his uncanny resemblance to the late author he so admired.

But one day Ted began to keep the billfish he pulled from the sea. An act that caused his mentor to finally take his leave, the old captain citing how the big fish were in decline and that their death had become a detriment to sport fishing. That now catch-and-release was the only way to ensure the survival of the species. That the responsibilities of today’s fishermen did not parallel those found in the old days of fishing.

“Times have changed,” the captain said.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

But Ted continued to hoard his catch, bringing the stiff dead bodies back for display along piers and wharves where tourists snapped photos of him and his bounty.

A splendid sailfish with an accordion-like dorsal fin fully extended. A sleek white marlin streamlined for speed. And Ted always left the flesh of the fish for the locals to eat. Or to be used for chum, or lobster bait.

Just like the old days, Ted thought.

One night Ted's boat mysteriously caught fire and sank. An act witnessed by a reveling throng of people onshore.

A week later Ted had sold most of his possessions and began driving beside the Gulf coast with a smoldering hatred for fish and fishermen. Yet his chosen route did not allow him to escape sight of charter boats bobbing on the horizon, so he turned farther south to venture into the heart of Mexico.

Six months later Ted decided to stop running.

No longer able to resist the tug of the sea, he drifted towards the Yucatan Peninsula. In a bar in Cancun where the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea converged, he chanced to meet a man in town for a business convention. A man who was going fishing the next day. A man who said there was room for one more.

The next morning the guests had drawn straws aboard the boat to see who would battle the first fish hooked. Although Ted had drawn the longest straw, he soon paid cash for the privilege afforded the shortest. A straw originally drawn by a man who would be last on deck when the first fish came aboard.

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Ted is the first to see the tapered tip of the bill rising through the churning waves behind the bonito bait. He hollers to Captain Hollis as he sprints to lift the rod from the holder. Ted and the Mexican mate collide while Hollis idles back the engines.

"My job to hook fish!" the mate yells. His accent is thick and threatening.

"Right," Ted says. "But not this time." He has already begun free-spooling line. The mate turns angry eyes towards the captain perched overhead as Ted scrambles into the fighting chair with the rod.

Hollis simply shrugs. "He already knows what devils they can be," he says.

With the captain's words, Ted steels his patience and steadies his nerves as he affords the fish time to swallow the bait. Waves slap against the port side of the boat while diesel exhaust pops and gurgles as all eyes on deck focus on Ted.

Then comes the time to set the hook deep into the fish's jaw where mouth and bill converge. Ted engages the reel and cranks the slack from the line. He pulls back hard against the rod. Thick monofilament line rises sharply through surging sea, ocean droplets momentarily dancing along

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

the narrow edge connecting man and fish. The drag on the Penn reel screams as the fish attempts to escape from the biting pain in its mouth. Soon the fish jumps, a blue marlin great in size, cobalt-blue back and silvery-white sides iridescent in a rainbow halo of pristine light.

"That's one for the books, Teddy-boy," the captain hollers. "A real bona fide trophy you've got there!"

Just like the old days.

Now everyone is on deck. The men surrounding Ted laugh and holler. The woman jumps up and down, all eyes following her pendulous breasts. All eyes except for the man straining at the end of the line. The marlin leaps again, the length of the enormous fish that of three men, the spear-like bill thrashing violently through air. But soon the fish dives for the safety of the depths and the captain turns the boat, the line retreating slower as the vessel begins to follow the fish.

When a quarter of the spool empties, Ted leans forward in the fighting chair to tighten the drag oh-so-little so the great fish cannot break free. But the mighty fish continues to take line and after nearly an hour the line on the reel is almost extinguished. The mate looks up at the captain and sadly shakes his head. The others on deck see this and grumble.

"Try easing off the throttle a bit," Ted yells to the captain. "It might be our only hope."

The mate shoots Ted an odd look, but the sound of the engines are already quieting. Eventually the fish slows and the spool barely spins. The men on deck all emit heavy sighs. The man from the bar pats Ted gingerly upon the shoulder.

"Finally," someone mumbles.

The young woman bends down beside Ted, her hands on her knees. "Now that's a man," she says into his ear. She grins deeply above oiled cleavage, eyes wide and willing and the color of the great fish's back.

"Good work," Captain Hollis yells down. "Now everybody get the *hell* away and let him get some line back!"

"Not fair," the woman says with an exaggerated pout. She winks at Ted while straightening, fingertips riding upwards along smooth thighs. She moistens her lips with a circling tongue.

"Did I tell you how quickly young dolphin grow into adulthood—I mean the fish, of course," says the man who had sold his straw. He begins to lead the woman back to the cabin with his arm over her shoulder. She looks back once and smiles.

"Wet the fisherman down," the captain says. The mate grudgingly dampens a white towel and lays it about Ted's head and shoulders like a shroud. A half-hour later the contest seems to be at a draw, with neither man nor fish gaining line.

The fish begins to rise.

As the fish rises, Ted's mind slips into a familiar and comfortable place as he patently retrieves line. After what seems an eternity, the marlin

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

broaches the surface, sickle tail barely moving in the swirling current. The fish floats on its side as Ted strains against tackle to draw the billfish closer to the stern. The mate dons gloves to better grab the leader line as two men hover noisily near the man in the chair, gawking at the size of the fish. They clink iced-down Coronas in salute.

"It's my turn next," one man says.

Ted is exhausted. His lips are dry and cracked and his back aches. He imagines drinking heavily of the sea, salinity like tears, cool water washing sunburned skin while reeling birds fade against dimming heavens.

He does not feel like himself.

And the sea begins to choke Ted as he is towed through the water, blue waves washing over glassy orbs, a shimmering vision of man braced in chair, line taut so the hook cannot be thrown. Metal bites deeply into the corner of Ted's mouth as strands of sargassum grass wrap where line meets steel. And Ted begins to hate the man in the chair for all the fish he has killed. For all the rotted foul walls of flesh he has left at the edge of the sea, his resentment growing deeper than the darkest ocean floor awaiting all that falls from the light above.

The marlin summons strength to rise from the ocean one last time, tail-walking across waves. At first no one believes what they see, then a beer is dropped as men scramble to the sides of the boat as the belly of the beast crashes against the transom and the rapier bill thrusts into the chest of the man in the chair.

Fish and man become one, thrashing inseparably about the boat, blood and sea swabbing the deck in violent arcs of red. Then the fish and fisherman lay still. The cabin door bangs wide and the woman emerges topless and starts screaming. Yet all eyes remain fixed on fish and fisherman as the last man stumbles onto deck behind her.

Sea grass slowly sinks into a dark abyss as a squall line approaches from the direction of Cuba