

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

**FISH
TALE**



HARTLEY STEVENS

Fish Tale

A Living-In-The-Country Short

In all respects, this is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is unintentional and coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 by Hartley Stevens

All rights reserved.

Fish Tale

Published in the United States of America

By Big Toe, Writes, LLC.

Cover & Website www.HartleyStevens.com

design by Sharon Julien

www.sjulien.com

Editing, provided by Graeme Hague

Polgarus Studio

www.polgarusstudio.com

Original songs by Douglas Haines

www.douglashainesmusic.com

Fish Tale

A Living-In-The-Country Short Tale

By

Hartley Stevens

Scalloping isn't a dangerous activity or a contact sport. Allegedly.

Some years back, my childhood friend and college roommate, Jody and I were invited by two seasoned outdoorsmen, Chip and Harry, to accompany them for a day of scalloping. We'd all been out fishing, hunting and golfing many times before. Jody and I were in our early twenties, Chip and Harry were a generation ahead. Most of our joint activities together included the great Florida outdoors — as well as beer.

And so... the day began early, before the sun. Jody and I, met the experienced scallop hunters at an old barn, where we loaded gear into Chip's truck, which was towing Harry's boat

and we drove cross-county to the beautiful Waccasassa River, where we consolidated supplies and found the launch ramp.

The boat wasn't one you would give a name. It was a blue-collar, workman-type vessel with an aluminum hull and a metal bow-rail, meant for leaning over to spot schools of fish or gig frogs at night.

The sun began to peek as we hustled along the serene setting of the Waccasassa. Years earlier, Tarzan movies were shot here with Johnny Weissmuller. We left the mouth of the river and planed out onto the placid waters of the Gulf of Mexico. We ate egg sandwiches on white bread and drank our first beers for breakfast.

I should explain that the *real* fun behind all of these fishing, hunting, golfing and other outdoor adventures was teasing each other harshly and relentlessly. I was an easy target. Although I grew up *country*, the son of a farmer, I didn't know much about the recreational sporting aspects of rural life.

Harry took us to a "hot spot" for scallops — according to accumulated knowledge, the ocean temperature and the lazy tides. At least, that's what he told us. I think he really just made most of that shit up.

The hell-giving began as I was issued equipment and instructions. Harry tossed me a set of flippers. "Try those on."

One flipper fit like Cinderella's slipper, the other one was three inches too long. "Harry, I think I got one wrong flipper. This one's huge, my foot will never stay in."

All of Harry's funnin' was in his head. He never let his face betray his emotions. "Sorry boy. Here, try this one."

It was yellow and looked suited for a toddler or an elf. I gave him the look and threw it back at him. The whole boat had a good laugh. We drank more beer.

After the laughing died down, Chip said, "You don't need flippers for scalloping. All you need is a mask, snorkel, a hand rake and a net bag to put 'em in."

We all lathered up with sunscreen. Harry dropped anchor, telling Jody and I to jump over the side. The water was shallow, and I do mean shallow. As soon as we were over the bow, we stood and the water was, only up to our chest level.

Jody and I stood in the bathwater and spit-soaked our masks to prevent fogging. We tested our snorkels and, of course, I found mine had a hole punched in the side. Everyone laughed some more as Harry tossed me another.

Standing on the aft edge of the boat, Harry gave us instructions. "Stay close to the boat, that's the important thing, no more than fifteen or twenty yards out. There'll be heaps of other boats out here today and we don't want you rookies getting all ground up like manatees by propellers, if the boats don't see you."

Stay close to the boat. Check.

"Alright boys, let's get to it. Let's see you practice. Get your face down in the water and start using those rakes. You college boys have heard of digging for clams. Get down in that bottom sand and dig boys, dig."

I'd seen scallops before, but only at Red Lobster or backwater fish camps.

“Ah... Harry?”

“Yeah?”

I looked over at Jody. He had the ever-present grin of mischief he never leaves home without.

“Harry, what does a scallop look like?”

He and Chip slapped high-fives and got their true giddy on. Ha-ha.

“You are the most naïve country boy I’ve ever seen. All you know how to do is plow and plant and castrate bulls. You don’t know much at all about country fun, do you boy?”

Ha-ha, and yippity yay. But the truth was the truth. All I really knew how to do, when it came to rural life, was *work*.

Jody didn’t know either, but he had a good old laugh at my expense.

Chip came to my rescue. “Looks like the Shell sign at the gasoline station.”

Oh.

Harry and Chip, still in the boat, spit-soaked their masks.

“Ah... Harry?”

Feigned frustration on his part. “What now?”

“How deep? How deep do you have to dig for scallops?”

Harry almost smiled, Chip gagged on the beer he was drinking. “No more ‘en a foot or two. Just scope out some good sand. Hold your breath, then get down there and dig for all your worth.

Good sand? What the hell was *good sand* on the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico?

Still, Jody and I set our masks and trolled the waters around the boat. We both stayed real close. I saw a blue crab scabble sideways from a lumpy mound of white sand. I grabbed some breath and dove, going to work with the tiny hand-rake. When I ran out of breath I’d surface briefly and grab some more, then get back to digging like a prisoner.

This went on for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes and all I’d done was stir up a hazy cloud of white sand. I finally stood with exasperation, heaving for breath. The laughter fest on the boat was epic.

Just so you know, if you ever go scalloping... you don’t *dig* for them

After Chip and Harry got their funny-cramps all worked out, our lesson continued. Harry said, “A scallop has one shell on top and one on bottom.” He demonstrated as if conducting a kindergarten class with his hands, vertically clapping. “They use this motion to breath, move and to cling to sea grass. That’s where you’ll find them, clamped onto sea grass.”

And so with all four of us finally in the water, we began our treasure hunt. An hour later I'd found exactly two and they were puny, worthless. Harry got our attention and motioned us all back to the boat. We boarded and showed our wares. The experts had a few more, but not many.

"Your *hot spot* seems to be running kinda cool, there captain," I taunted.

Chip pulled the anchor, while Harry cranked the engine. "You know how to drive a boat, navigate? Could you even point us in the direction of home? Probably be best you not tease the captain, it's a long swim."

We got moving, our skin cooling in the mid-morning wind of the boat's passage. We drank more beer.

The next stop gave nearly the same results. We couldn't fill a coffee can with the scallops we harvested even while they were still in the shell. This happened two more times with the same outcome. It was all still fun, but we weren't catching many scallops.

Lunch was sandwiches again, bologna and cheese on white bread. And, of course, more beer.

Mid-afternoon, we anchored the boat for what would be our final try. Many other boats had come and gone and we were further away from them and from land than we'd been all day.

As we prepared to jump in the water, Harry said, "This is it, boys. If we don't find any here, then I guess you gents are just bad luck."

In the water, we all headed off in different directions, spanning a clock-faced circle about twenty yards in diameter. Then I found them. Lots of them. It was almost too easy. I used one hand to comb through the sea grass and scoop them into a mesh bag I held in the other hand.

I was mostly swimming now, head down, breathing through the snorkel. I combed and plucked and my bag got heavier and heavier.

After pulling four or five particularly big ones and tucking them in the bag, I looked out ahead, still underwater. Maybe three yards away, looking directly back into my eyes, was a long, sleek silver fish with a black smile. A nervous prickle rippled from my head to my toes. The fish seemed to smile wider — then it charged.

It moved so quick, a silver streak of lightening. Just before it reached my face, I threw up the bag. The fish rammed into the bag and darted away.

Holy shit, what the hell was that, I thought. My heart-rate increased substantially. I put my feet down and discovered that I was in much deeper water. I could barely stand with my face above the surface. Then, I thought about the fish. I plunged my head back into the water and looked around. There it was, a little further away. Before I could register another thought, it charged again. When it reached arms-length, I punched it again with the bag. The fish absorbed the shock and slashed away. Tendrils of blood squirreled in the water.

Now my heart was *really* hammering. One chance encounter... okay. Two... it was doing this on purpose. Standing on tip-toe, I surveyed the scene above the surface. A giant iron hand squeezed my chest as I realized I was a hundred yards from the boat and further still from Harry, Chip or Jody.

My lizard-brain sent some more neuro-lightening. *Remember the fish.*

I ducked my head back below the surface. I looked around a hundred and eighty degrees. It wasn't there or worse yet — I couldn't see it. I was stirring up a mighty cloud of sand with my fitful feet.

I settled some, but not much. The sand cloud sank and I saw it, nine o'clock over my left shoulder. It charged. I threw up the bag, but this time even though I hit it with the bag, he slapped me with his tail.

I stood on tip-toe point and yelled for all I had — through the snorkel. Which was barely better than screaming under water.

I poked my head below again, saw nothing but sand, then looked above the surface. I got a bead on the boat. I hip-hopped and swam a few strokes. Then looked below. There it was. He charged again... and again I battered it with the bag of scallop shells. I hollered, yelled and shrieked through my snorkel pipe.

Suddenly, I gained some higher footing. I could actually keep my whole head above water while standing. I chanced a quick look below, then I stood and spit out the snorkel and screamed, yelled, bellowed. I saw Harry look in my direction, then Chip. I plugged the snorkel back in my mouth, dropped below the surface and did the one-eighty survey again.

It'd gotten a head start and I barely had time to throw the bag in front of my face. SMACK! Fin to the face, then the same darting away.

This went on for twenty-seven hours.

Okay, not really — probably only ten minutes, but it *seemed* much, much longer.

My friends weren't coming and the boat was still eighty yards away. It finally occurred to me, I was really going to have to fight this damn fish.

And that's just what I did, all the way to the boat.

A little system developed. I'd smack it, the fish retreated. I'd tip-toe and side stroke, plant my feet and find it. He'd attack... and I'd smack him again with the bag of scallops. Over and over and over again. I was in excellent physical shape, thank goodness. But, I was struggling to keep water out of my mouth while breathing like a winded runner and yelling at every opportunity.

Finally, I reached the boat. My friends were all still gathering scallops far away in various directions.

The water around the boat was deeper again, over my head when I stood. This wasn't the kind of boat that you boarded on a ladder. You were meant to grasp the side and haul yourself over the edge. The bow sat high in the water, the stern was only eighteen inches above the surface.

I used my feet to find the anchor line, constantly keeping the smiling devil at bay with strikes of the bag. It was undaunted, tenacious. That fish wasn't big enough to eat me but, by God, I was swimming in its backyard and I was sure it had teeth and could bite real hard.

Keeping my head below the surface and still breathing through the snorkel, I found the edge of the boat with one hand. It was the bow end. I'd smack the bastard then blindly shuffle my other hand against the side of the boat. The attacks became more frequent and vicious.

When I thought I was in as good a position as possible, I developed a plan. I'd wait, draw the fish in, smack it hard. I'd do this two, maybe three times. Then, I'd drop the bag and lurch over the side of the boat to safety. It was a good plan.

It charged; I smacked. It charged and I punched. *Get ready boy*, I thought. It charged again and I hit him as hard as I could, then dropped the bag. I dipped down, found the sand and exploded out of the water. It was a good plan — until I realized I was still at the front of the boat. Where the bow was high above the water with the metal railing.

Didn't matter. I'd dropped my only weapon and now the devil would surely be turning around for the kill bite.

My hands found purchase on the rusted metal railing, but my ass didn't clear the water. No matter, I grew monkey-hands on my feet and flailed and grasped with my toes against the side of the boat until my toenails scrapped against the metal rail. All the while I was in a permanent, bent-shrimp crunch, trying to keep my ass out of the water.

I hauled myself over the railing and flopped on the gritty surface of the boat's deck. I lay there heaving. Oxygen was my elixir and I couldn't get enough.

Then I thought about my friends. They were still in the water. I scabbled against the side of the boat and came to my knees, then my feet. The mask and snorkel were slung around my throat.

I waved my arms, croaked and tried to get their attention. They were closer now, maybe fifty yards out.

“... OUT of the water! Get out of the water!”

They all stood and looked at me with mask-smushed faces. “What?”

I grabbed a towel and began waving it dramatically. “Get OUT! Out of the... the water.”

They began sauntering towards the boat. Harry hollered, “What the hell are you yammering about?”

I sucked in oxygen. “Get out of the water! There’s a huge fish out there. It’s been attacking me. Get *out* of the water.”

All three eyed me suspiciously as they took their slow, sweet-assed time coming back towards the boat. I moved around the inside of the vessel, glaring into the water, looking for the demon. I couldn’t find it.

When they were close, maybe ten yards out, I held up my hands, palms out. “Be careful. He’s meaner ‘en shit.”

For the first time, I noticed streaks of blood running up and down my forearms and legs. My hands were bleeding as well.

Harry said, “You say a *fish* attacked you?”

“I can’t see him, be careful. Get in the boat,” I said, as I furiously went back to searching the water.

Chip asked, “What’d he look like?”

I held my hands as far apart as possible. “Huge, silver... looked like a giant mullet.”

Big grins and eye-rolls all around. Harry said, “A mullet? You’re yelling like a bitch and bleeding to boot — ‘cause you got attacked by a giant mullet?”

My face flushed. I was getting seriously pissed. Here I was trying to save them and they thought it was all a joke. Big funny. “It’s not a mullet, you ass. It just *looks* like one. I don’t know what kind of fish it is, but it’s been trying to bite me for an hour.”

The ribbing continued as they casually loaded their bags, then themselves into the boat.

They were all in the boat. I flopped down in exhaustion on a large white cooler. Chip came over grinning, yet, still concerned about all the blood. “The fish did all this to you?”

I was spent, physically and emotionally. Crimson drops of blood dripped onto the deck. “I don’t know... not sure. The bastard was tracking me, striking and attacking. But I might have done this to myself, trying to get in the boat.”

This produced the day’s biggest roaring belly laughs from everyone — but me.

Harry said, “Damn killer mullet beat you all to hell. Looks like he nearly skinned you alive.”

“Assholes. I told you it *looked* like a mullet. I think I banged *myself* up, not the damn fish.”

Finally, Jody got in on the fun, “You got any teeth marks, like when *Jaws* bit that surfboard?”

I actually looked all over my arms and legs. They thought this was just too damn funny.

Harry popped the top on a beer and handed it to me. “Take twelve of these and call me in the morning. I mean it — call me in the morning. I need you to tell me this story again.”

Chip pointed at the water. “I’ll be damned.” We all looked where he was pointing. “Well, it ain’t a mullet, it’s a *little* barracuda. Cute fella.”

Yeah... real... cute.

The End

Before You Go...

If you enjoyed this story, please visit www.HartleyStevens.com for more short stories, novels and songs.