

STEADY COLOR

The guide killed the outboard engine and, for a moment, the skiff hissed forward on its own to settle, silent, above the cream-white sand of the mangrove-rimmed bay. He climbed atop the pedestal in the stern and wrapped his charcoal-black hands around the long, wooden pole.

“Alright, gentamen,” Rupert said. “Who’s going fust?”

Curt and Lanny eyed each other. The tight quarters in the skiff and the wide arc needed for fly casting meant that only one person could fish at a time.

"This is your sport,” Curt said. “Show me how it’s done.”

“You go,” Lanny said. “I’ll catch what you miss.”

Curt picked up his fly rod and stepped onto the casting deck in the bow. He was dressed all in white—long-sleeved shirt and pants and long-billed cap with a neck flap to shade his freckled skin from the Bahamian sun. He squared his broad shoulders to the water. “What am I looking for, again?”

“Shadows,” Lanny said. “You can see a bonefish’s shadow on the bottom before you can make out the fish, right Rupert?”

The guide nodded, leaned his tall, wiry frame into the pole. A muffled crunch emanated from the bottom, followed by a steady drip as the poll cleared the surface. The boat slid forward without a ripple.

Curt gazed at the vast watery plain running to the thin, green horizon. Salt air filled his nostrils. The reflected sun shone like a heat lamp on his sun-cream lathered face. Beneath the boat, the water lay clear as a swimming pool and half again as deep. It shouldn’t be too hard to spot a fish, though the wavering surface made everything appear to be moving. In fact, there was something now. He called, excited. “Is that a bonefish?”

Rupert shook his head. “That’s a conch shell.”

“What about there?”

“That’s a stick.”

In the middle seat, Lanny peered around Curt’s muscular calves, trying to get a view of the water ahead. He soon tired and resorted to fingering the gaudy pink fly at the end of his leader. It was supposed to resemble a shrimp. Amazing what a fish would fall for.

Again, Curt called out. “Now, that’s a fish!

Rupert glanced at the shadowy form darting across the bottom.

“That’s a cowfish,” Rupert said.

“Should I cast to him?”

“No, mon.”

Curt’s shoulders slumped. He turned to Lanny for an explanation.

“I told you about this,” Lanny said. “We’re only here for bonefish. If you want to catch just anything, go bottom fishing with cut bait.”

Curt scowled. In most ways, he considered himself smarter than Lanny. He asked questions. He got answers. Lanny tended to be silent, lost in himself. Every now and then he’d pop up with one of these smartass remarks.

Curt resumed his watch. The sun beat down. The boat slid on.

"Oh! Oh! Bonefish coming dis way. Tree o'clock."

Curt scanned left and right.

"Tree o'clock, mon!"

“What did you say?”

Lanny jumped to his feet. “Three o’clock! To the right!”

The night before, the owner of the island resort had described to his new arrivals how bonefish travel in fast-moving schools, and that the guide, standing on his pedestal in the stern, would likely be the first to spot them. He would call out the school’s position by the hands of an imaginary clock. Twelve o’clock meant straight ahead. Nine o’clock, forty-five degrees to the left. Curt understood the concept, but out here on the water, it was all happening too fast.

“They’re going away,” Rupert cried. “Cast to them!”

Curt saw something. Was it a school of fish or just reflections on the surface? Suddenly, the light went flat. The colors of the bay faded, the features below the surface disappeared. He turned to Rupert. "What happened?"

"We lose the sun."

"Can we still find them?"

"No, mon. You can't see nutting without the sun."

Lanny shook his head. He knew this would be difficult for both of them, but especially for Curt. His idea of fishing was sitting in a lounge chair in the back of a sport fisherman, cruising across the open ocean. You set your rod in a holder and sipped on a beer, waiting for a fish to strike.

Lanny'd done that exactly once, at Curt's invitation. They'd caught plenty of fish, everything from five-pound dolphin to fifty-pound tuna. But it was blind luck. When at the end of the day they posed on the dock with their bloody catch, Curt beaming like Howdy Doody, he had to hide his disappointment behind a wan smile.

Lanny preferred fly fishing, stalking the boulder-strewn shore of a mountain stream, searching out the dark pools where the brook trout lay. That was sport. You cast a fly light as a fingernail into the current, held your breath as it disappeared in a sudden whirl. You might only catch three fish in a day, and none larger than a pound, but what you caught, you earned.

The sun emerged from behind the cloud. "Alright, gentlemen," Rupert said. "Let's find some more fish."

Curt stared at the shimmering bay, the air heavy with salt. He felt hopeless at this task of spotting. Standing was hard. Concentrating was hard. Sweat beaded on his forehead, sending suncream into his eyes. He set his rod down, took a towel out of his pack and wiped his face.

"So, Rupert, of all the guys you've taken out, who's caught the most bonefish?"

"Mmm, Stanley Cohen. From New York."

"Stanley Cohen. How many fish did he catch?"

"Twenty, thirty, something like that."

"Thirty bonefish in one day. I'd like to meet that guy."

"Let's focus on catching one," Lanny said.

The skiff slid forward. The bottom came on and on.

"Oh! Twelve o'clock. You see that navous water?"

"That what?"

"Nervous water," Lanny said. "See those ripples?"

"Those are fish?"

"Yes, those are fish," Rupert said. "Cast to them!"

Curt whipped his rod back and forth, feeding out a paltry few yards of line. The school bore down on the boat, caught site of Curt's flailing arms, and scattered as if hit by a grenade.

"Damn it, mon. You spooked them. You can't be making those false casts."

"I couldn't get enough line out."

Rupert scoffed. "Let your friend try."

Curt slumped back to the middle seat. He knew what was coming. Lanny would probably see a fish in five minutes, reach it with a perfect cast. He'd never been bonefishing before, but he seemed to pick up on the subtleties of things.

Rupert poled the skiff toward a line of mangroves, their crab-like legs submerged in the salt water. With the tide fully up, the bonefish would be hunting among this submarine forest. No sooner had they arrived than a silvery tail broke the surface.

"Look at that fish," Rupert said. "'im tailing for shrimp."

Lanny nodded. "He's a big one."

"Throw your fly in front."

Lanny made three slow casts, unfurling the line in a graceful loop. The fly landed a yard before the fish.

"He's coming to it. Lie still."

The bonefish hesitated. Lanny jerked the rod back. The fly skittered to the surface and the bonefish fled in a trail of mud.

Rupert slapped his forehead. "Why did you move your line?"

"I got too excited."

"How excited are you going to be when you come home with nutting?"

Nothing is exactly what Curt and Lanny had at the end of the first day. They gathered up their gear at the dock and slunk through the palm grove, past the dining lodge where the other guests were gathering for cocktails. They stayed in their cabana as long as they could, showering and reading until the dinner bell rang.

At the lodge, they found seats next to one of the "non-fishing wives" who eagerly told them about the shells and skate eggs she'd found on the beach. Lanny nodded politely, all the time listening to the voices of the men at the neighboring tables telling of how many fish they'd caught.

After dinner, Curt announced he was going outside to call his wife, Lynette.

"Do you want to call Rita?" he asked.

Lanny waved him off. He lingered at the table, listening for snatches of conversation that would reveal what type of fly the others were using, where they'd found fish.

He finished his peach cobbler and stepped outside. Curt stood down the path, cellphone to his ear. Lanny wandered out beneath the darkened palms to the water's edge. They called this a beach, but it was just a thin layer of sand atop the coral. Waves lapped feebly against the shore, their energy sapped by the barrier reef. Still, he was glad to be alone, away from the dinner crowd, away from Curt. The air was warm, the stars dazzlingly bright. He thought of Rita, curled up in front of the TV. She had wondered about his going on this trip with Curt.

"I didn't think you were such good friends," she'd said when he announced his plans.

"We had a pretty good time on that offshore trip," Lanny said.

"That was one day. You're talking about four."

"We'll be alright, as long as we're catching fish."

Rita sighed, whether out of concern for him or worry about being alone he wasn't sure. He put down his magazine and gave her a hug. "I'll bring you back a big one," he teased.

"Thrills," she answered in kind.

The wind picked up, rattling the palms above Lanny's head. He retreated to the cabana, got a book from his dufflebag and collapsed on the bed. Curt came in, shaking his head with a self-satisfied smile.

"Everything O.K.?" Lanny asked.

"Yeah, Lynette misses me already. She is *so* sentimental."

Curt stripped naked, displaying his hairy chest and big bent dick. He took out his toothbrush, and without adding water or paste, stood in the middle of the room brushing his teeth.

"How come you don't call Rita?" he said.

Lanny kept his eyes on his book. "When I'm away, I like to be away."

Curt pulled out a length of dental floss and began popping it between his teeth.

"Everything O.K. between you guys?"

"We're doing alright."

"That sounds pretty non-committal."

Lanny turned the page. "Not enough sex."

As soon as the words were out, he regretted saying them. Even Curt seemed surprised.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Lanny shrugged. "Isn't that every guy's complaint?"

"Lynette and I have a great sex life. We did it on the kitchen counter the night before we left."

Lanny imagined Curt and Lynette making love. He was surprised at their passion.

"Of course, when we fight, she makes me sleep on the couch."

"How often does that happen?"

"About once a week. You work through it and move on to something else." Curt tossed his dental floss in the dufflebag. "Have you guys talked about this?"

"We have talked about it."

“Keep the love coming, man. Don’t sulk. You don’t want to lose her.”

Lanny closed his book. *Lose* her? Curt didn’t know what the fuck he was talking about. It was true, there were times when Lanny and Rita had trouble connecting emotionally. Or rather he had trouble. But that didn’t put their relationship at risk. God!

He went into the bathroom to change into his flannel undershorts, then lay back on the bed and turned out the light. “Let’s hope we do better tomorrow.”

Lanny woke from a troubled dream to find the sun streaming through the open window. Curt’s bed was empty, his clothes gone from the chair. He rose and walked to the door. A groundskeeper was raking up the palm fronds that had fallen during the night. Curt stood down by the beach, practicing his flycasting by aiming at a stick in the water.

After a quick breakfast, the pair met Rupert at the dock. He acknowledged them with a barely audible greeting, then fired up the engine and followed a turquoise channel through the reef and into the deep blue of the open ocean. Twenty minutes of pounding ride brought them to yet another mangrove island with its sheltered sand flat. Rupert shut off the engine and got out his pole. They didn’t wait long for contact.

“Bonefish coming,” Rupert said. “Ten o’clock.”

Curt saw them. And his morning practice paid off. His fly landed short on his first attempt, but the second was on the mark. A fish broke from the school and chased the fly down.

“Got him!” The reel screamed as the fish charged away. “Man, these things are strong!”

“I told you,” Lanny said.

Then, the reel fell silent. Curt lifted his rod. Nothing. He retrieved his line to find that the fly was gone. “Shit! The fish broke my line!”

Rupert examined the twisted end of the monofilament leader. “He didn’t break it, he pulled the knot out. You can’t be tying no simple bowline for these fish.”

Curt turned to Lanny, who was already biting off his fly and retying the knot.

"It's called an improved bowline," Lanny said. "You have to loop the leader through itself a second time to give it more strength. I didn't know we'd need it."

Curt retreated to the middle seat. "Your turn, Mr. Planner."

They had just rounded the backside of the island when three bonefish emerged from the mangroves. Lanny went into a crouch, using a sidearm cast to lower his profile. The fly landed a yard in front of them.

"Strip it," Rupert said. "Strip, strip."

Lanny retrieved the line in short bursts to make the fly skip across the bottom like a fleeing shrimp. The lead fish chased it down. Lanny waited a beat, then set the hook. The fish charged for deep water, sending up a roostertail of spray. The reel sang as the line flew out.

"Break him!" Rupert said. "Use your hand."

Lanny flattened his palm against the whirling spool.

"Reel in. He's coming back."

The bonefish swam within sight of the boat, turned and fled. Finally, the fish began to tire. Rupert stepped down from the pedestal, retrieved a net, and slipped it under the gasping fish.

"Now, we got the skunk out of the boat," he said.

Lanny lifted the fish from the net. It had silver scales, big golden eyes, and a downturned mouth. Such a sad face for a hard-fighting fish.

Curt raised his camera. "Smile!"

When the shoot was over, Rupert unhooked the fish and turned it loose. Lanny and Curt traded places and the hunt resumed. Halfway around the island, Rupert spotted a large school zig-zagging across the flat. Curt's cast fell short, but as luck would have it, the school turned toward the boat. One of the fish picked up the fly. This time, the knot held.

Curt said nothing as the fish charged back and forth. He played it with grim determination until Rupert netted it and lowered it into the boat. Then, he jumped down from the deck and pinned it with both hands. "Gotcha, you bastard!"

As Lanny snapped photos, Curt flashed his trademark smile. “Whose is bigger, mine or yours?”

When Rupert moved to set the fish in the water, Curt’s smile faded. “Aren’t we going to keep any of ‘em?”

“You don’t keep bonefish,” Lanny said. “They’re no good for eating. Too many bones.”

“Only if you mount him,” Rupert said.

Curt brightened. “Well?”

“Jesus, man,” Lanny said. “Let him go.”

The next fish, Lanny spotted on his own, a solo crossing the flat sixty feet ahead of the boat. He called the fish out to Rupert, waited until the boat was in position, then lured it with a perfect cast.

“Now, you’re bonefishing,” Rupert said.

With the fish turned loose, Lanny took out a Coke and relaxed in the middle seat. He understood it, now—how to spot the fish, how to tease them to the fly, the little hesitation before setting the hook. It might take Curt another few days to get all that down, time he didn’t have.

“Got another one!”

Lanny stared in disbelief as Curt’s rod bent to the weight of another bonefish. Curt’s first catch was a fluke, of that Lanny was sure. But he’d spotted this one on his own, cast to it without a word.

After releasing the fish, Rupert announced it was time for lunch. He anchored in the meager shade of the mangroves and dug sandwiches out of the cooler. Curt stretched out in the bottom of the boat. “This is perfect.” He covered his face with his hat, and began to doze.

Lanny stared at the horizon. A line of cumulus clouds approached like a fleet of ships. “Looks like we might get some rain,” he said.

Rupert glanced over his shoulder. “Couple of hours.”

By the time the men got under way, the first clouds were streaming overhead. Twice, Lanny saw schools approaching, but each time, the light failed before he could get off a cast.

Finally, the sun disappeared for good and the ocean turned choppy and gray. Rupert motioned for Lanny to step down. "Time to go."

The guide stashed his wooden pole and started the engine. Lanny and Curt huddled together, holding their hats against the wind. As the skiff banged over the waves, Rupert called out, "We'd a had ten fish if we'd had steh-ee culuh."

Curt furrowed his brow. "What did he say?"

"We'd have had ten fish if something."

Curt turned to Rupert. "We'd have had ten fish if we'd had Stanley Cohen in the boat?"

Lanny burst out laughing. "Stanley Cohen? If we'd had Stanley Cohen in the boat?"

Curt frowned. "You figure it out."

The next morning, the groundskeeper drove Curt and Lanny to the airport, a one-room cinderblock terminal with a gravel runway and a windsock. In the shade of a flowering poinciana tree, a trio of island women sat on the ground behind bedsheets covered with crafts. There were crude baskets made from palm fronds, coconut shells painted to look like pirate heads, stuffed porcupine fish in assorted sizes. Curt picked up a sand dollar pendant.

"I think I'll get this for Lynette. Are you going to buy something for Rita?"

Lanny shook his head. "She doesn't want any of this stuff."

He drifted toward the terminal. He was ready to be off this island, but for some reason he was apprehensive about going home. The troubling dream from the previous night lingered in the back of his mind. What was it about? He had come home to find Rita with another man. Curt! That was insane. Rita would never want to be with that clown. But he had something she needed, something Lanny lacked.

He wandered back to the craft blanket and picked up a pair of conch shell earrings. Rita would not be fooled into thinking these were anything other than the work of an amateur. But she would smile as he offered them to her, dangling them by the hooks so they caught the light. She would hug and kiss him, and he would kiss her back, reeling her in from the terrible distance.

With a deafening roar, the twin-engine Cessna lifted off the runway and droned out over the water. Lanny fingered his earrings, while Curt stared out the window. From this height, they could see it all--the cream-white flats, the aquamarine holes, the copper-colored splotches of coral reef. Here and there, patches of ocean lay shaded by clouds, the submerged features hidden beneath a dull sheen of gray. It was too bad they hadn't had continuous sunshine...

Curt popped his head back from the window. "Hey, Lanny, I figured out what Rupert was saying. Steady color. We'd have caught ten fish if we'd had steady color."

Lanny pondered for a moment, eased into a smile. "Good for you, mon."