

Yellow Tale Nightmares

They stood by the fish cleaning station a step or two back from the weathered deckhand who cleaned their catch of the day. The father, a tall gangly man with slightly stooped shoulders and arms extended outward, looked like a robot. He wanted to do something but he had never cleaned a fish before.

He watched his son inch closer as the deckhand pierced the belly of the fish with a knife so sharp it could be a surgeon's tool. The sea-crusted man smiled, revealed a gap where teeth used to be, and reached in to pull out fish guts and throw them to the waiting pelicans and noisy seagulls. The boy's eyes widened as the man winked and wiped his knife blade across the front of his shirt already caked with scales, blood and goo from fish bait. The boy moved closer and placed his hand on the edge of the table.

The father, a computer programmer generally relied more on his brain than his hands. "Geek", they called him in high school. He couldn't recall a time when he ever gotten his hands dirty. His wife, Laura, was the gardener, planting her apple-red geraniums, hanging baskets of colorful petunias on their front porch and delicious tomatoes in old whisky barrels. She had planned this summer vacation to the Florida Keys for the entire family. His patient, beautiful Laura, the mother of his son.

That was right before she died.

He came on this trip to bond with his ten-year-old son. He wanted to make up for the sudden absence of his son's mother and the years of preoccupation with his work while he left the rearing of their son, just like the gardening to Laura. Now, he was losing ground to this leather-skinned, yellow-teethed, salt-for-blood, excuse for a man.

"He probably can't wait to grab his expected tip and head to the nearest tiki bar for happy hour, one with two dollar drafts." The father said to himself.

A driver, probably drunk, had crashed into Laura's new convertible as she was on her way home from an end-of-the year teacher's meeting. He had been reluctant to trade in his wife's mini-van for the Audi and tried to convince her to take his Volvo, but she fell in love with the bright yellow sports car, and he couldn't resist surprising her with the car for her thirty-fifth birthday.

"How hard could it be to clean a fish?" he thought, as he leaned in closer. The stench of fish mixed with this guy's body odor and stale cigarette smoke hit him in the face and pushed him back. Too late, anyway. The man had cut the last yellow-tail snapper from its throat to its tail and pushed it toward his son with a nod, who reached in and pulled out the long strand of intestines and organs and slung them in the water as bits of fish gunk dangled from his tiny fingers.

Laura's organs had been donated. It's what she wanted; what her driver's license indicated. Since it was a warm summer evening, she had the top down on her car. The driver of a stolen pickup truck ran a red light, and then fled the scene. She never regained consciousness and was pronounced dead soon after her arrival in the emergency room. He and Laura hadn't talked much about death. Why would they? There was so much future ahead of them, or so he thought. He dreamt about her organs living on in someone else.

The father held the sun-heated water hose on the dock and watched as his son washed the fish blood and guts from his hands. He reached in his wallet, pulled out a twenty and threw it on the cleaning station and grabbed his bag of cleaned fish.

“Thanks” he said.

Taking his son’s hand, he said, “Hey Buddy, what do you say we take these fish down to Lazy Days Restaurant and they’ll cook'em up for us for dinner?”

“That’d be awesome, Dad. It was fun today, but cleaning that fish was really gross. Can we go snorkeling tomorrow?”

“Sure son, whatever you want.” The father smiled as he glanced back at the deckhand who scrambled to grab the twenty before it blew away.

The "salty dawg" cleaned his knife and work area. “If I hurry, I can still make the happy hour at Porky’s.”

He unlocked his bicycle from a tree near the marina. No more driving cars for him. He reached in his backpack and took out a clean but wrinkled t-shirt that said, Just Do It. Some guy left it on the boat. "Dumbass tourists, don’t even know how to bait a hook." He said to himself.

Not that it mattered to any of his friends what he looked like or how he smelled. But he might wander over to the Brass Monkey Bar, later and hook up with some tattooed, stringy-haired chick who was as drunk as he planned to get.

Several months ago, after losing his license to repeated citations for driving while intoxicated, he had escaped from the cold northern winters, to this sun-drenched chain of islands, and found camaraderie with other tattooed, pony-tailed, chain-smoking cronies. Most of them were running from something – an angry wife, drug problems, alimony, or lost jobs. Some said they came on vacation and ended up on probation. Then there were the homeless ex-military guys with mental problems who lived in the mangroves behind

Home Depot. Most of these guys rode bicycles because they had either lost their driver's license or couldn't afford a vehicle.

Each night he and his buddies drank themselves into oblivion. Yet, all the booze and an occasional toke of a joint could not make his sweat-soaked nightmares disappear. The deckhand would be haunted forever by the nightmares of the little yellow car and the screams of the woman in the wreckage.