

“Honeymoon on the Key”

by Michael Coblenz

Gayle had planned every minute of the honeymoon. On Thursday afternoon she was having a spa day, and I was supposed to go bonefishing. I'm no fisherman and had no idea what bonefishing was, but Gayle had planned everything meticulously, and I wanted to keep her happy. (My Dad's one bit of fatherly advice just before our wedding was to give in on the little things to keep your wife happy.) So I went, but about a block before the harbor I walked by this little bungalow with a rusty sign on the roof that said “The Bonefish.” Next to the door was a faded chalkboard that said: “Happy Hour. 4—7. 2 / 1 Beer.”

The place was small, with a bar running along one wall, about a dozen tables, and a small raised platform in the corner opposite the door. It was dark and musty inside, and smelled heavily of cigar smoke, which was probably because a Hemingway look-a-like was sitting at the end of the bar smoking a big cigar. Hemingway look-alikes were everywhere in Key West that week because of some kind of Hemingway festival. This guy was pretty good, husky, close cropped white hair, but he'd let his beard go, it was maybe a foot long, much longer than Hemingway's beard in the pictures that were all over the Island. Besides the faux Hemingway and the bartender, the only other people in the place were a young couple sitting at one of the table. They were locked in conversation with their heads pressed almost together. I sat down in the middle of the bar and ordered a Red Stripe.

The faux Hemingway looked over at me. “Hey friend!” He stood up, grabbed his beer, and walked over to me. My beer had just come and I hadn't paid, so I couldn't get away.

He sat down next to me and clapped me on the back. “What'ch you on the Key for, friend?”

“Honeymoon,” I muttered.

“Ah.” He nodded. “Needed to take a break? Give the old willy a rest?”

“Uh, . . . “

“Name's Nick.” He extended his hand, big and beefy.

“Alex.”

“Where ya from, Alex?”

“Chicago.”

“What'ch ya do there?”

“Commercial real estate.”

“Ah. I sell cigars. You like cigars?”

“No,” I said.

“I can give you a free sample, if you'd like to try one?”

“No thanks, I don't smoke.”

He leaned in and lowered his voice, conspiratorially. “That's because you've never tried a Cuban. I can get you some Cubans if you'd like.”

“No, thanks, I don't . . . “ I started to say when cold liquid splashed across my back.

“Bitch!” the guy at the table behind me shouted at the girl. They were now both standing.

“Manny, you are so immature.” She grabbed another glass off the table and tossed it at Manny. The glass and most of its contents hit Manny, but some splashed Nick.

“You bitch,” Manny said and slapped the girl.

“Hey!” Nick yelled. He looked at me and winked. “What would Papa do?”

He picked up his beer bottle and smacked it against the side of Manny's head. In the movies the bottle shatters and the guy goes down, out cold. But here the bottle hit with a nasty spine tingling “thunk” and Manny bent over and grabbed his head.

“Aaah,” he moaned. “Son of a bitch,” he yelled. He moaned for a second, then dropped down to his knees,

still cradling his head.

“Manny,” the girl yelled and kneeled down next to him. He started to crawl, moving his back legs and sliding across the dirty floor on his arms. It was an unnerving sight. He slid all the way over to the small platform, moaning the whole way, with the girl yelling “Manny” over and over again, and crawling next to him.

Nick just stood there looking at him, with a strange smile.

Manny squirmed around by the platform, and then slowly struggled to his feet. He had something in one hand, which I noticed was an old busted guitar string probably abandoned long ago by some Jimmy Buffet cover band.

“Son of a bitch,” he was muttering as he came towards us. I noticed he had tears running down his face, and I really felt for him. Maybe his honeymoon wasn’t going very well, maybe he’d been in a little argument with his new wife, and now he’d had his head busted up by some deranged Hemingway look-a-like.

“Son of a bitch,” he said again and he swung his hand with the guitar string. I got my arm up just in time, and the string whipped across my hand, cutting it across the heel.

Nick’s laugh was disturbing. “Come to Papa,” he said, and smacked the guy in the head again with the beer bottle. I ran out the door.

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“Look,” Gayle said, “I had no idea bonefishing would be so boring, but that doesn’t mean you have to make up stupid stories.”

“I’m not”

“Oh? You spent the afternoon in a bar with a deranged Hemingway look-a-like named Nick, and a drunk guy named Manny? You don’t think I get the references?”

“I’m serious,” I said.

“Man, you are so immature. If you didn’t want to go fishing you should have said something.”

“I”

“How do you think this marriage is going to work if you’re too immature to be honest about things?”

“But I”

“If we can’t agree on the little things, like going fishing, how are we supposed to work through the big things?”

“But, I really”

“Then why’s your face all sunburned,” she yelled back.

“Because I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the island, trying to calm down. That’s when I saw the little fishing boat with the fish skeleton strapped to it.”

“Oh, for God sakes!”

The last thing I saw of Gayle was her back.