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Fish Story

July 14, 2013 | By Rick Bragg | Comments (0)

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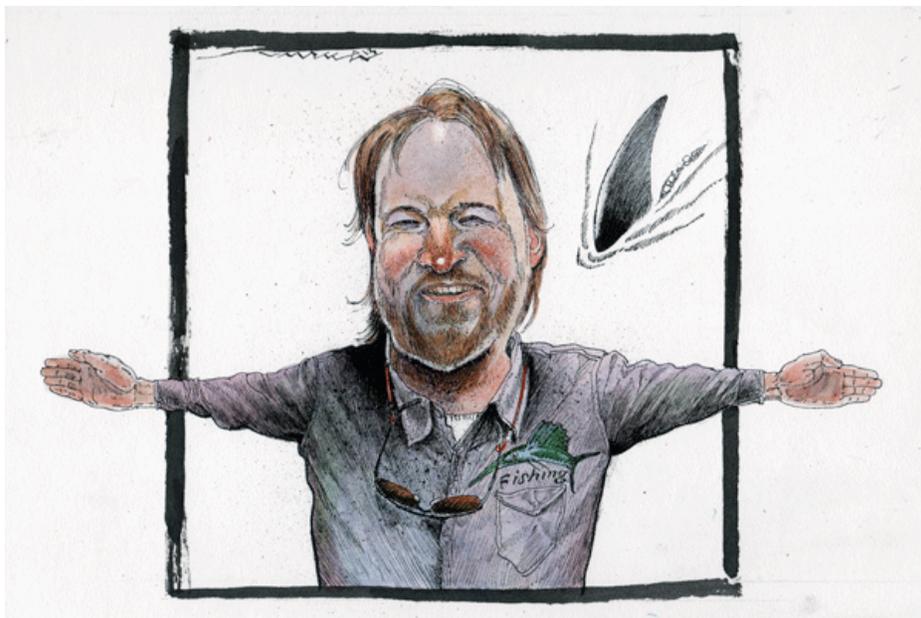


Illustration by Jack Unruh

This is a fish story. That said, it is still mostly true.

"We need to go fishin' out in the Gulf, on my boat," said my friend Randy Jones.

"Not," I said, "if you are driving." I had never heard of any great seafarers from Sand Mountain, Alabama, and had this awful image in my head of him and me playing dominoes in a Cuban prison.

"I'll get somebody good," he said.

There were five of us the day we put out from Orange Beach on Randy's 40-footer, Earlie Tide. "Because my daddy's name was Earlie," he told me, and if that is not the perfect reason to name a boat, I don't know what is.

I do not recall the day. "Just say it was the hottest day of the year," Randy said. It was me, him, and my stepson Jake. The skipper was Fred Williams, whom Randy described as "a car salesman and wannabe sea captain." But I looked him in his squinty eyes and knew him to be a capable man. Crewing the boat was Dr. Wayne Hyatt, a pioneer-ing laser surgeon and, Randy said, "the most expensive deckhand in maritime history."

We went 27 miles into the blue, and when we stopped, the sun seemed to be trying to bore a hole through the deck of the Earlie Tide. "I got air-conditioning and a big-screen TV in the cabin," Randy told me, but I told him, "Naw, I came to fish like a man." Besides, the TV wasn't hooked up.

Jake was oblivious to the heat, and cranked in fish after fish. I lasted about two hours and began to

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perish. My face burned red and my mouth went white, and I began to see things in the water that were not there. "We can read your last rites right here," my good friend told me, "'cause I ain't givin' you mouth-to-mouth."

But I wobbled around the deck another hour. Hemingway would have, I told myself, and he would have been knee-walkin' drunk at the time. Just about then, in my weakened state, I felt that pull on my line even bad fishermen dream about. I tried to keep the rod pointed at the sky, but whatever was on the line nearly pulled me into the water. Do red snapper get this big? Do Spanish mackerel? I fought and I fought till my stomach began to flop around inside me, and then with one last pull the hook, bait, and a portion of, well, something, came flying into the boat.

"It's the jaw of a red snapper," someone said, solemnly.

"Pulled his lips off," I said, tragically.

It takes a man, I told my shipmates, to separate a fish from his lips.

Yeah, they said, that must be what happened. Then Wayne posed with it and got his picture made. Most likely, a shark took the fish as it rose on my line. I choose not to believe that. But it was a failure, I suppose, another failure for the worst fisherman in my family line. I asked Randy why we even try. He explained that it was natural, to try and fail and fail again. We have this man in our head we want to be, a fisherman.

"So," Randy said, "we go."



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