

Fishing

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Life beyond the catch

J. W. Jansen

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Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,

Henry David Thoreau

*Many man go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they
are after,*

Henry David Thoreau

Never forget that only dead fish swim with the stream,

Malcolm Muggeridge

Stay close to nature. It will never fail you,

Frank Lloyd Wright

*Hell, if i'd jumped on all the dames I'm supposed to have jumped on, I'd have
had no time to go fishing,*

Clark Gable

I have laid aside business, and gone a' fishing,

Isaak Walton

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Prologue

It all started with a line break.

It was around Christmas, and I was sitting all alone, freezing my ass off in my tent, waiting for a bite. There were plenty of fish in Lake Andreas. No monsters, but when you had to test yet another so-called revolutionary bait for your boss in the dead of winter, you wanted to catch something fast, snap a few pictures, and then head straight for the pub to find a warm bed and a warm body to curl up against. Well, forget it. I'd been struggling for three days without so much as a glimpse of a fish. Revolutionary my ass—more like useless bait.

On the fourth day, some nutjob showed up. The kind of guy who'd hang around for hours because he used to fish a lot but didn't have the patience for it anymore. His brother owned a tackle shop in the village, and business was booming, so they needed extra staff. Especially in winter, when fair-weather anglers went on their buying sprees. It was only a few minutes by bike from my tent at the Andreas, and that was reason enough for me to reel in my rods and head over there. Not long after, I was strolling around a wonderfully heated tackle shop. What a dream job, I thought. Piece of cake. Just bullshitting about fishing all day and getting paid for it. And if I ever got sick of it, I could always hide in a tent in the camping section.

I think it was my second day on the job when a couple walked into the shop. Three of my colleagues pounced on the man like hungry pike, dragging him away from his wife. She was left behind, bored. Not exactly young, but

by no means unattractive. A little on the heavy side—especially her ass and tits. She caught me looking at her. She smiled, then, startled by her own boldness, began fussing around, pretending to look for her husband. But he was off in fishing gear heaven, where wives ranked only third—after rods and reels. I could see she felt uncomfortable, but I just kept staring at her body and couldn't have cared less.

When she walked over to me, I suddenly felt a knot in my stomach. I mean, there had to be a reason her husband had suddenly developed the urge to go fishing, when he had this gorgeous specimen waiting for him at home, right? She talked, and talked, and talked some more. Then it came out. Her husband was fifteen years older than she was and had just retired last week. By day two, he was already bored, and by day five, he'd decided to take up fishing. She made a face at that.

I guided her toward the camping section and plopped her into the first tent with a bedchair inside.

"Wait, what if my husband comes looking for me?"

"He's just letting himself get talked into buying a new rod. After that, he'll need a new reel, line, hooks, and bait. We've got all the time in the world."

She didn't need telling twice and jumped right on top of me. "What's a gorgeous man like you doing here, anyway?"

I zipped the tent shut and unzipped my pants. She really knew what she was doing—clearly, she'd been neglected for decades.

The next day, she came back to the shop, and somehow, we were back at it again. The magic had worn off a little, but Jesus, I thought—fishing and fucking. Now this really was the perfect job for me.

Hell yeah!

-CHAPTER 1-

*The Thousand
Pound Marlin*

So I took some courses. *Selling for Dummies*, *Math for Dummies*, *Operating a Cash Register for Dummies*—I passed them all with ridiculous ease. Every day I half-expected some kind of adventure with a woman, but nothing happened. Soon enough, I began to suspect that the woman, the tent, and the bedchair—each of which I had managed to defile on my second and third workdays—had merely been initiation gifts for all new employees.

The Big Fish of the tackle shop was a decent sort and let me drift through the shop for the first few days. They gave me a uniform: a shirt with a faded print of a fish and a pair of waders in which the sweat sloshed audibly by the end of the day. Still, it was better than my old white dress shirt and jeans with the crotch so torn open that my jerkbait was permanently exposed to the breeze.

After a few days, I was told to report to the Bait department. The head of that department was Angus, a man with a face as smooth and slippery as an eel. He had complained to the Big Fish that he needed more staff because of the extraordinary success of his section. In truth, the slimy fellow wanted to run the Rods department, which carried far more prestige than Bait. Yeah, that plan sank fast. Too bad for Angus, worse for us.

There were five of us underlings in Bait—Garcia, Albatross, Korda, Cor Moran, and me, JeeWee Jansen.

Being the last to arrive, I got the thankless job of tending the maggots, worms, and ragworms. Every morning at four o'clock sharp, I had to be ready to supply the sea anglers with bait. And God, there were no customers more irritating. They would arrive before sunrise, shouting for ragworms, bragging endlessly about their catches. But in my eyes, anyone who didn't need a landing net wasn't really an angler. Casting and hauling in, casting and hauling in—it was like pleasuring yourself without ever climaxing. And don't start about catching heaps of small fry. Nothing compares to one big fish. That, at least, was Iris's philosophy—the girl whose backside I occasionally had the honor of leaning against.

Despite all my complaining, starting at four in the morning never really bothered me. For as long as I could remember, I'd begin drinking around ten at night, crawl into my sleeping bag at three, and zip the tent shut behind me. Now it was just coffee first, then off to work. And there I'd wait for the first poor soul in his oversized neon jacket, desperate for ragworms. Believe it or not, about fifty of them showed up every morning. I packed their Tupperware tubs—lifted from their ever-patient wives—with heaping scoops of worms whose stench was so rotten it sent my whisky and black bile surging back up my throat. According to Angus, the last man who held this job had hanged himself with braided 60-hundredths line. He said it with a laugh, which told you everything you needed to know.

By eight in the morning, the worst of the rush would be over, and you could finally give your aching hands a little rest. Not for long, though. The moment Slippery Angus saw the life return to your face, he'd glide your way with his little beady eyes. "JeeWee! Good looks alone don't make money. Fill up the bins!" And off you went again. Mondays and Thursdays were the worst. That was when the supplier arrived, unloading crate after crate of bait and stacking them on the doorstep like a bad omen. We had to haul them into cold storage. The maggot tubs,

filled with sawdust, weighed maybe ten kilos apiece—not too bad. But the earthworm crates came in at forty kilos or more. You dragged them, grumbling curses at first, and soon enough you were scouting them so loud the cashiers up front heard every rotten word. Yes, body and spirit were both being wrung out. Slippery Angus made sure of that.

Men like Angus only survive because their underlings obey. Let's be honest: work must be done to earn a wage, but no one truly wants to sweat for it. Angus exploited that fact with relish. Every day he put one of us "in charge" while he and the other department heads held their endless meetings on purchasing, sales, turnover—and above all, the ever-increasing bra-size of the Big Fish's trophy wife. Angus had it made. We begged him to make us boss for a day, and cursed whoever got the role instead. Angus always kept himself above the fray.

I'd been working in the Bait department for about three weeks when I realized I had never once been chosen by Holy Angus to take the lead. I had a feeling he was out to get me, and when he told me flat-out at the strawberry-and-vanilla boilies shelf, "I don't like you," it was confirmed. How someone in customer service could be so cruel and unhelpful, I couldn't fathom. My colleagues didn't care—they followed him like little minnows trailing a stinking bream. The labor union was basically a branch office of management, so no help there either. I decided to write a thirty-page internal complaint and handed it to the General Manager's secretary.

An hour and a half later, a little man with eyes like a cross-eyed perch beckoned me into his office and began shouting before I'd even sat down.

"You're one of those, aren't you?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"One of those over-educated, handsome types who think they're too good for this job!"

"Insults never got anyone anywhere, sir."

"You're a bastard with four master's degrees and you love to flaunt them, don't you?" He fed my letter straight into the shredder. "ANGUS IS AN EXEMPLARY PROFESSIONAL AND, ABOVE ALL, A DECENT MAN."

"How do you figure? The man's rotten to the core. He'd eat his own tail if it meant a promotion."

"How long have you worked here?"

"A little over three weeks."

"ANGUS IS A GOOD MAN. HE'S BEEN MARRIED TO MY SISTER FOR FIFTEEN YEARS. She's not the prettiest, nor the easiest, but he sticks by her."

If the desk hadn't been between us, I'm certain the poor fellow would have leapt at me. Brother-in-law on paper, perhaps—but a reaction that fierce? That only comes when two men occasionally share a fishing rod.

"Fine," I said. "Angus is a fine man. May your swim bladder rot." I went back to the department and told fine man Angus I was taking the rest of the day off. That was fine too—unpaid, of course. Just what I needed.

Next morning, four on the dot, Slippery Angus was already there waiting—devil's grin plastered on, mouth shut. I couldn't have cared less. The night before, I had swapped my tent for the warm bed of Iris, the love of my life... at least for as long as Lake Andreas remained frozen solid. The absence of fishing didn't matter that time. Because after two bottles of whisky, we spawned as if spring had already come.

A day off worked wonders. I smiled at the first sea angler of the day and gently filled his pink Tupperware tub with ragworms.

"Why so early, buddy?" I asked. "Time passes more generously for an angler than for anyone else. A few hours in the sun, in the wind, in the fresh air—alone or with a buddy—and your troubles sink like a bobber heading for the bottom. The hour you start has nothing to do with it."

"But the fish feed more in the early morning," the sea angler said. "And you do want to catch something, don't you?"

"Ah, you're one of those. Then let me tell you about the greatest fish I ever caught— a thousand-pound fish, if ever there was one."

"Maybe next time," the sea angler said. "Can I have my tub back now?"

"I was standing barefoot in the warm waters of Hawaii. It was a more civilized hour than now, but still early morning, with dark rainclouds pounding the mountains behind me. Deckhand Maui held up four fingers. "Four bonito. Don't mention it."

He helped me into the small but, according to the captain, seaworthy-enough boat, and we set out toward freedom.

After an hour's sailing, we reached the spot where we dropped a bonito into the ocean. The clouds were behind us; ahead, sky and water blurred into one. Not a ripple, not a breeze. This was the sea I loved to fish, though it was too calm to catch anything. We drove an 8/0 hook through the bonito and cast it overboard. Maui opened the reel and the 40-hundredths line ticked down from fifteen hundred to a thousand metres. "Perfect. Don't mention it," he said. "Now we wait." Can you imagine it? Fifteen hundred metres of line, and—believe it or not—I would need every metre of it. I didn't have to wait long. First the faintest ticking as the line slipped from the drag, then, before I even reached the rod, a shriek as dozens of metres screamed off into the deep with a force unlike anything I had ever witnessed.

"THERE'S A GIANT MARLIN ON!" the captain roared from the wheelhouse.

The fish exploded from the water, showing itself in all its glory. My heart skipped a beat. It was like a monster from some forgotten 1930s claymation horror flick, the kind nightmares owe rent to. With a deafening crash the marlin slammed back into the ocean and plunged into the

depths. Five hundred metres of line had already vanished when I finally dared to close the drag. My hands trembled. Useless. Even with the drag almost locked, the line poured off as if nothing had changed.

"Water!" I shouted at Maui. "WATER!"

The sheer speed and power with which the fish tore at the spool had the line nearly catching fire. I had no choice but to ease off to reduce friction. "Throw water on the reel—quick!" Maui dumped a bucket of ice water over it.

"Right on time, Maui," I said. "He's winning, but we're still in the race." I tightened the drag ever so slightly, as if the fish would notice. The marlin wasn't tiring, but at least I felt the hook was buried firmly in its flesh. The captain looked down at me, panic in his eyes.

"We've got to chase him!"

The captain nodded, yanked the lever, and the boat shot forward. I cranked like a madman, trying to claw back line. "Once we're within two hundred metres, throttle down!"

At least five times we closed to two hundred metres, but each time the boat slowed down, the marlin tore off again, vanishing to nearly a kilometre away.

For hours the cat-and-mouse went on. Fifteen times the marlin leapt from the sea, and each time I nearly had a heart attack fearing the line would snap on its fall. Still, the great fish was tiring. He fled the boat every time he saw it, but slower, weaker. I realized I was winning. Whatever happened, I would not, could not, lose him now. It's hard to explain, buddy—especially to a shore angler like yourself who do little more than cast out, reel in, and hope some flatfish lighter than the lead has nibbled. But this... this was a true adversary. And at last he seemed ready to surrender. The marlin hung tens of metres beneath the boat, tail nearly spent, probably wondering why it had ever signed up for this. But suddenly, short jerks ran up the rod tip, as if the fish was mocking me. But when I looked over the railing, my heart did a little dance of terror.