

Michael Paul Hogan

Key Blanco #1

He was the only Chinaman who had ever held a commercial fishing license in Key Blanco and his silhouette, when he stood in the stern of his boat in either the early morning or the late evening, delicately steering through the mangrove channels that led to the freedom of the open sea, was reminiscent of an ink-brush painting, being of three slender strokes that made the curve of the boat and the straightness of the pole and the enigmatic Chinese character of the man himself, neither purely ink nor purely water, but very straight, and tall too – tall not just for a Chinaman, but for any man – and perfectly balanced against the movement of the sea. The name of the sea was the Straits of Florida and the name of the Chinaman was Song Qiang and he fished for yellowtail and snapper and filleted them himself on a trestle table he set up in the garden of the house he lived in on Flagler Street and then took them to the fish-house, insisting the scales were cleaned of fish blood and fish scales before he allowed his own to be weighed. The receipt for the weight of the fish he studied under the fluorescent light nearest the window and then smiled and folded it into the left-hand breast pocket of his faded-nearly-white blue denim shirt and then went to Bobbie's Clam Shack for a cigarette and a beer.

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He had only managed to earn a commercial fishing license after three long years of trying, because the way they work it is this: They issue you a provisional license and then make it valid for ninety days and then set you a target for sales to the fish house that is impossible to meet. No fish not recorded by the fish-house is legal and no fish under twelve inches is legal and no fish is legal caught outside that window of ninety days. And if the target is not literally impossible, it is as near as humanly-possible impossible. Because if they cannot make commercial fishing a closed shop, they can at least sincerely damn-well try. One way to tilt the odds ever so

slightly in your favor is to fillet the fish yourself before taking them to the fish-house – the rate is better pro rata for the work you save them, plus theoretically you can catch undersize fish and no-one will know. But fish are not just measured at the fish-house, they can be measured by coast guard inspectors at any time while your boat is on the water, and no true fisherman, no true Florida Keys fisherman anyhow, not from anywhere no matter how far, not even if far is as far as San Francisco or Shanghai, will deliberately keep an undersized fish. They may not be particularly honest men, they may cheat freely with cards and with landlords and with other men's wives, but they are old-fashioned in the way of all fishermen since the Phoenicians and have an atavistic respect for the laws and traditions of the sea – plus the fact that a legal inspector can suspend your license, fine you a maximum of \$20,000 and impound your boat. Song Qiang had never filleted an undersized fish and therefore lived at peace, albeit an uneasy peace, as indeed did they all, with the gods of Monroe County and the old gods of Florida and the even older Gods of the sea.

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During those three years he had often fished at night, firstly as a necessity during the intense ninety-day periods of trying to gain a license, but subsequently because he had formed an emotional attachment to the stars.

On one particular night Song Qiang had fallen asleep holding the rod despite being aware of a twelve or thirteen-foot shark circling his boat. The knowledge of the shark had begun because he had hooked a fish that he knew was a red snapper not less than two pounds in weight, knowing it to be a snapper not a yellowtail by the strength of its resistance to the hook. But just as he had drawn the fight out of it and was reeling it in there was a massive strike on his line, a strike that was as brief as it was violent, that would have torn the rod from his grip had not the shark that had taken his snapper almost simultaneously bitten through the wire tracer and left him in possession of an eight-foot rod with no more substance than a blade of grass.

That had been in the mid-afternoon, a mile or so beyond Pelican Key where there is a shelf that drops suddenly to about eighty feet and where, anchored on the edge of it, thirty minutes later, Song Qiang had seen the fin come up and slice the water and had said,

“Xian zai wo kan dao le ni, Sha yu, shi wo de yu de tou qie zhe.”

and had surprised himself – not by speaking out loud, but by speaking in Chinese, a language he had spent the past several years unlearning and indeed had not spoken with any frequency or serious meaning since his time as a chef in San Francisco’s Chinatown, since before his long journey by Greyhound that had culminated in far-away Key Blanco, finding himself at nearly midnight on a poorly-illuminated strip of dusty pavement and surrounded by Panama-hatted tourists and palmetto bugs. He repeated the sentence in English,

“Now I see you, Shark, who is a stealer of my fish.”

and watched with satisfaction as the fin sank down below the level of the sea.

Four times between mid-afternoon and evening the shark had resurfaced, and no man who is alone in a seventeen-foot boat likes the company of a twelve or thirteen-foot shark, especially when night is falling and the boat seems to contract as the darkness expands. He said,

“Sha yu xian sheng, yi wang wu ji de hai yang, nin he wo de chuan dou you kong jian.”

and then, afraid the fish might not understand,

“The ocean is big, Mister Shark, there is room enough for you and my boat.”

and then strained his eyes to catch another glimpse of the slate-colored fin amongst the shifting slates that made the surface of the sea.

After that neither the end of the evening nor the beginning of the night was unusual other than that strikes on his line were reduced to one every ten or fifteen minutes and his catch by midnight hardly justified the effort of staying awake. He had reeled in then and lit a hurricane lamp and eaten the salami and blue cheese dressing sandwich and drunk half of the flask of sugar-stiffened black coffee that Mrs. Ramirez, his landlady, had made for him, and read the note (by the light of a match) that Mrs. Ramirez had written in china-graph pencil on the wax paper that wrapped his sandwich. It said,

Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them. Psalm 89.

and Song Qiang smiled and ate the sandwich and drank the coffee and imagined the shark carving its own messages through the ink-black strata of the sea...

He awoke with a start and was immediately relieved to see that the rod was still in his hands and that the boat upon which he sat was still a boat and that the sea that surrounded the boat was only sea. He had been dreaming a strange dream in which he was sweeping the debris of peeled prawns from the pavement in front of a restaurant in Shanghai and large black American automobiles constantly drove past, jeering white-painted faces pressed against otherwise impenetrable glass. He reeled in a stripped hook and secured it in the guide nearest the reel and propped the rod against the fish box in the stern. He remembered there was still coffee in Mrs. Ramirez' flask and felt suddenly strong again, as though he had survived something or as though a task to be feared had been accomplished with neither loss nor pain.

The coffee was by now only barely-warm, but so heavily sweetened that it spread within him an almost rum-like sense of well-being. He leaned back against the wheelhouse and wondered at the beauty of liquified sugar sliding over his tongue, and somehow knew that no shark would bother him again tonight. He said,

“Farewell, Mister Shark. Another time, maybe.” He paused, he added, “my friend.”

and leaned back his head and was contemplating the familiar beauty of the stars when

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and knew that what he had never seen previously he had seen now – something more wonderful than contained in any of Mrs. Ramirez' psalms; a meteor plummeting from Heaven as though God had struck a match and let it fall. A shooting star.

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He had docked at Key Blanco's Fishermen's Wharf shortly after sunrise and followed the usual routine of filleting his catch, delivering it to the fish house and then strolling down to Bobbie's Clam Shack for a beer and a cigarette. But he was uninvolved and taciturn, even by his normal standard of self-containment, and spent the rest of the morning at a table in the corner, barely acknowledging any greetings that came his way, wrapped in a cloak of solitude as impenetrable as any oilskin ever worn at sea.

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So it was that Song Qiang went night fishing at least once, maybe even twice or three times a month, delicately steering his boat through the mangrove channels that led to the freedom not just of the open sea but also the open sky. If I spoke previously of emotional attachment that was because I hesitated to use the word love, and yet there can be no doubt that Song Qiang felt the same combination of anticipation and anxiety (as his boat picked up speed and headed out in the direction of Pelican Key) as a man in love with a woman might feel during the taxi ride to an all too infrequent rendezvous. But that is a poor analogy, for he loved the stars with a love that was simultaneously innocent and profound and felt in their presence a combination of wisdom and wonder such as might have been felt by holy men on mountain-tops in the land of his birth. He fished until midnight or thereabouts, poured out some coffee and allowed himself then the wonderful panorama of the stars. This is not to say that the nights were without drama – his friend the shark (or maybe the shark's brother) used his fin to slice a delicate fillet of salt water from next to the ribs of his boat and one time a loggerhead turtle, merely surfacing as a turtle might, neither with malice nor design, nearly tipped him sideways into the appalling vertigo of the open sea, but always Song Qiang returned home with at least an average catch and a sense of fulfillment, of spiritual equilibrium, of profound and abiding calm.

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Mrs. Ramirez' husband had sailed from Havana to Key Blanco in a vessel that was little more than a jazzed-up banana crate and had lit off from Key Blanco to Miami in the company of an Americano nightclub singer who was little more than a jazzed-up waitress, leaving Mrs. Ramirez with nothing but an immigrant's work ethic and a fierce sense of injustice, both of which had been translated, six years later, into a small but popular Latino deli and a two-story house on Flagler Street, the upper floor of which she rented out, preferring to keep for herself the street-level convenience of strolling from her veranda and across the small width of garden to chat with passersby. It was the same small width of garden upon which her current tenant, Song Qiang, set up a trestle table in the afternoon three or four times a week to fillet the yellowtail and red snapper he had caught in the morning or two or three times a month in the morning to fillet the red snapper and yellowtail he had caught during the night. Notwithstanding the fact that Mrs. Ramirez was in love with Song Qiang and Song Qiang was not only not in love with Mrs. Ramirez but also naively unaware of the fact that there was even a love that

he failed to reciprocate, theirs was a tenant / landlady relationship as nicely balanced as a boatman on a boat steering a passage through a mangrove channel, the coffee and sandwiches for his night fishing excursions graciously accepted as merely a token of appreciation for his unobtrusive presence upstairs and for the fact of his rent always being paid with punctilious regard for the day it was due.

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Song Qiang reeled in a yellowtail, threw it into the fish box, and secured the hook in the guide closest to the reel. His shoulders ached pleasantly from a good night's fishing and he already knew that he would not have to take his boat out again for at least another four or five days. A small storm previously forecast to strike the Florida Keys at about three a.m. had been downgraded to a strong wind and repositioned thirty miles west, leaving him free to pour his coffee and unwrap his sandwich (Swiss cheese on rye) and enjoy his first proper scan of the night sky. There were several stars that he recognized instantly, greeting them as he might have greeted friends on first entering a crowded party,

“Ni hao, Xing Xiansheng, hen gao xing jian dao ni.”

before turning his gaze in one beautiful and enormous sweep as though to gather into his soul the entire contents of the universe. Underneath his boat, his seventeen-foot boat, unseen, his friend, Sha yu, all twelve or thirteen foot of him,

“Sha yu xian sheng, yi wang wu ji de hai yang, nin he wo de chuan dou you kong jian.”

circled in search of newly-hooked snapper or yellowtail, and in the well of Song Qiang's boat there was a folded square of wax paper upon which had been written, in china-graph pencil,

He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names. Psalm 147.

while on a veranda on Flagler Street Mrs. Ramirez looked up at the star-endazzled sky and said a prayer for a Chinaman on the rim of infinity, loved without knowing he was loved, anchored off Pelican Key.