

Fishing with Vitale

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On a cool December morning, my little brother Mark and I threw our stuff in the back of my truck and drove from Sherwood, Arkansas to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We were looking forward to fishing with my friend Eddie, who is quite possibly the best fisherman on the planet. I'd been fishing with Eddie a bunch, but this was the first time for my little brother. As we drove, I told Mark just how good it was fixing to be. "We'll catch fish!" I said. "We'll bring the ice chest back full of fillets, and I mean full." Mark's eyes got big.

"We fish three days. We catch our limit three days."

"Do you think?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. We'll slay 'em."

Mark smiled. "Speckled trout?"

I nodded. "Do they fight?" he asked.

"They'll pull your arms off." I glanced at him; Mark was about to cry.

I call Mark my 'little' brother, but we were exactly the same size and I was only two years older. Mark and I had fought bitterly growing up. At times we hated one another. We shouted, cussed, hit, kicked. It was...ugly. But I left home for college and things changed. We became civil. We started hanging out together; and occasionally enjoying it! By the time I graduated from college, we were friends. We both got married and our wives became friends. One day I realized that, at age 32, my little brother had become my best friend.

We spent the night with Eddie, got up and drove south to the marsh. We stopped at Thibodeaux's Store to buy some food for the day. The proprietor of the place was an old,

wrinkled Cajun who, at 5:30 in the morning, smelled a little like shrimp and a lot like whiskey. He greeted us with a grin revealing a solitary gold tooth. We got enough to keep us fed and watered; it was at least eight dollars of food. Tooth, he stared at our food and his lips moved like he was adding up the total in his head. "T'ree dolla."

"He's lit," Eddie whispered. Mark said, "That can't be right."

"Two dolla." We were in a hurry, so I threw a ten on the counter. We got out the door and Tooth called out to us, "De ga' war' he be bah in de bayou. He han' fa' hund dolla foin. You don bot yo'loisan, eh?" We looked at Eddie. Since he was from Baton Rouge, maybe he could interpret. Eddie said, "He's lit." We put the boat in the water and motored down Bayou Barre.

The marsh of Terrebonne Parish is a labyrinth of bayous, canals and shallow lakes surrounded by stiff, golden marsh grass, interrupted only by an occasional chicken tree or oil rig. The water is brackish and the air is thick and pungent. Brown pelicans, blue herons and various species of gulls are everywhere. Shrimp dance on the surface of the water. I got excited; Mark was about to pee in his britches. We started fishing, throwing plastic cockaho jigs. We fished cuts and dead end canals for three hours. We caught...nothing. Eddie said, "The wind is keeping the tide up. The fish won't turn on until the tide turns."

We fished hard for three more hours. We caught...nothing. Eddie said, "If the wind lets up, we'll catch some specs." Mark looked at me. I detected some doubt in his eyes. We fished hard for three more hours. We caught...nothing. The sun set, we loaded the boat and checked into the Sugar Bowl Motel. The Sugar Bowl catered to fishermen. We figured that out by the hand-written sign on the door, "No clean fish on floor. No fry fish in room. No smoke in bed." We had no fish to clean, no fish to fry and we didn't smoke; we went to bed.

The next morning we stopped at Thibodeaux's. Tooth smelled like shrimp and whiskey. We got eight dollars worth of food. Tooth said, "T'ree dolla." Mark protested. "Two dolla." I left him a ten. Tooth hollered at us, "De ga war he be bah in de bayou. He han' fa' hund dolla foin. You don bot yo' loisan , eh?"

We fished Bayou Barre for three hours. We fished Wonder Lake for three hours. We fished the weir for three hours. The wind kept the tide up. We actually caught some Sheepshead, but Eddie considered them trash fish and he made us throw them back. We didn't catch any spec's. None. My ice chest was empty and Mark looked discouraged. Maybe he didn't believe my stories of catching boatloads of fish. Maybe my little brother was losing faith in me.

The Sugar Bowl Motel had ESPN on TV! At the time, ESPN was still a novelty and Dick Vitale was their voice of college basketball. For the uninitiated, Dick Vitale is a New Jersey Yankee that talks with a distinct nasal quality. He gets excited and he's subject to wild hyperbole which can range from funny to obnoxious. That night he was funny, or at least we thought so. Oh, man did we laugh. We went to sleep laughing.

The next morning we stopped at Thibodeaux's. Tooth smelled like shrimp and whiskey. We did the, "T'ree dolla'/Two dolla'" routine. Tooth delivered his Cajun soliloquy. Then Eddie, with great ceremony, opens his wallet and shows his fishing license to Tooth. He told me and Mark to do likewise. Tooth studied all three of our licenses. Then he grinned real wide, revealing a second gold tooth. Oh, my goodness! I had given Tooth a false nickname! In the boat, Eddie explained that he finally understood what Tooth was saying: "The game warden, he be bad in de bayou. He hand five hundred dollar fine. You done bought your license, eh?" Why, Tooth was just trying to help us avoid trouble! Bless his heart.

We fished till noon and caught a few throw-away Sheepshead. No speckled trout. We were so tired, so discouraged. We stopped fishing and just looked around for a moment. The marsh can be one of the most serene and beautiful places on earth. The sunrises are warm; the sunsets are brilliant, rich and so colorful. Both sunrise and sunset can last for hours. And we had been here, surrounded by this beauty for two and a half days and...we hadn't caught the first speckled trout! Forget the beauty, where were the fish?!! Eddie sadly announced "Fellows, let's call it a trip." I looked at Mark. His head was hung low. We started putting our gear away when, I swear, the wind just died and I noticed the slightest little movement in the tide.

I threw my cockaho jig toward the back of the canal. I felt a sudden THUMP and then a hard jerk and pull. A 21-inch trout leaped in the air. Without thinking, I did my best imitation of Dick Vitale, "It's unbelievable, Baby!"

Eddie threw out and instantly his rod tip bounced. He yelled, "It's dunkaroo time!"

Mark threw out and three seconds later he yelled out, "He's a prime-time-player!"

We had three big specs on the line at the same time! We got them in the boat and did it again, each time mocking Vitale when the fish hit the jig. We caught trout on nearly every cast, with the strictly observed rule that you had to announce your catch with a Dick Vitale phrase. If the law had been in the marsh that day, they would've locked us up. We didn't care. We were catching fish! Folks, it was pure joy for two hours. And then they just turned off. Over. So we cleaned the fish and headed back. We celebrated that night by eating at Ralph and Cackoo's in Baton Rouge. We had crawfish etouffé; it was good. Mark was so tired that he actually nodded off asleep between bites a few times. On the trip back home, I asked him, "You want to do this again?" He looked at me funny and said, "Are you kidding me?!"

We talked about the next fishing trip for months. We circled some dates on the calendar and we let Eddie know we were coming in a few weeks. The phone call came early on a Saturday morning. “Mark took sick last night. We called an ambulance. We don’t know what’s wrong, but it’s bad. Real bad.” I jumped in my truck and drove fast, but spinal meningitis took him before I arrived. I’ve been fishing in the marsh with Eddie at least twenty times since, bringing home an ice chest full of filets nearly every time. The fishing trip to Terrebonne Parish has become an annual event that I look forward to all year. My little brother never went fishing again.