

When Fishing in Belize

By: David Lettis

I met Jerry on my first day. He was sitting at a small table outside of the Papuseria with a café au lait and half-eaten papusa, observing the slow motion of life around him and then nonchalantly scribbling in a little notebook. His skin was sun-worn and leathery and his white fedora covered graying and sloven hair. None of his features were sharp and he appeared at ease under the sun. Except for the stark contrast of his white skin to that of everyone else, he fit in in every way.

He noticed me in between his scribbles and motioned me over with a two-finger flick and a nod. I approached him, upset that his fedora fit him so much more naturally than mine did, and accepted his invitation to sit.

“You look lost, sailor,” he said, scanning my eyes for any hint of truth. “Or perhaps you’ve been found.” I didn’t respond. I smiled and looked down at my newly-pressed linen khakis. Finally, he said, “Or maybe a little of both, huh? New in town?” He paused. “Of course you are! I’d know you if you weren’t.”

I nodded and confirmed, “Just got in this morning. Have a little place up north a couple of miles.”

This piqued his interest. “Indefinite, huh? There was a time that fact might have upset me, you big city folk showing up. But not anymore. Now I’m pleased to meet you. New blood keeps the heart strong, as they say.”

“They?” I asked.

“They,” he confirmed with a wink. “Ambergris Caye is a small island. You’ll meet *they* very soon.”

We talked for the better part of an hour. He told me there’s no better place to find an honest conversation than in Belize. I told him how I left my banking job in New York and bought a small place up north and have no plans, but honest conversation sounds nice.

Any New Yorker knows that you should leave on your own terms, so I soon excused myself to continue my exploration of the town.

“By the way,” he said, “the name’s Jerry.”

“Fenway,” I replied. “Fenway Thomas.”

“Fenway? I thought you’re from New York?”

I smiled. “The name’s Fenway.”

“Well, Fenway, I’ll tell ya what. I’m going to write up my observations on this encounter when you leave. Why don’t you do the same and we’ll compare perspectives and we’ll decide who has a more honest outlook.”

It was a confusing proposition, but I nodded with the grace of a stern executive and left him to his morning musings. I naively assumed we wouldn’t cross paths again.

The next morning I was roused by a knock on my front door. I could feel the cool morning wind sneaking through gaps in the windows and smells of cinnamon filled my nose and made my stomach groan. I rolled out of bed and answered the door and am greeted by a handful of paper in my chest.

“Morning, sailor,” he said. “That’s my write up. Where’s yours?”

I looked at the paper and accepted it reluctantly. “Christ, Jerry, what time is it?”

“Who cares?”

“Do you sleep?” I asked.

“Is anyone ever really awake?”

“How’d you find me?”

“Do you think you were a secret?”

I looked at the papers. There must have been ten pages.

“I’m not exactly done yet,” I said, actually feeling ashamed I let him down. “I’ll finish it up this morning.”

“This morning? We met yesterday. How can you give an honest perspective on yesterday when it is now today? Eh, don’t worry about it. Come on, put some pants on, let’s go fishing. Did you drink last night? I don’t want you getting sick out there?”

“Did I, what? Did I drink? No, I did not drink last night?”

“You didn’t drink? Well what kind of rum did you have?”

“Rum? None. I told you I didn’t drink.”

He looked at me suspiciously, like I was lying.

“It’s ok. Put some pants on. I’ll wait out here.”

Jerry parked his boat a few docks down. We walked along the dirt road and kicked broken coconuts out of the way. Dark-skinned school kids in white Polo shirts were scurrying past and a man and woman were opening a small taco stand. I waited outside while Jerry ducked into a small market and emerged minutes later with a loaf of fresh cinnamon bread and a bottle of Plantation Rum.

“Abuelo from Panama is the best,” he said, “but this works.”

I followed him past four or five houses and we stepped onto a dock that softly rocked in the gentle waves. Three men sat waiting for us. The oldest, Norm, had been a journalist in Tennessee and Michigan. He relocated to the small Belizean island nearly ten years earlier and submit stories to the Times and the Post and other small publications that had an interest in this once key drug-smuggling hub. Tracy, another middle-aged white man in flip-flops and a faded tank top, had actually published a novel when he was a young up-and-coming writer from New York. His second book was widely panned, though, and he had spent the past eight years running charter fishing trips for Americans who don't feel comfortable out on the ocean with local Belizeans. The third man, a local Belizean, couldn't have been more than thirty, but as Jerry would later tell me, had a fine appreciation for word choice and good syntax.

“Mornin', Mon,” Anders, the Belizean said. “Da wedder be fine. Welcome, welcome. Ya'll love it, ya will.”

I nodded politely as I boarded.

Jerry passed the bottle and bread to Tracy and said, “You know what *Anders* means? Stands for manlike and brave.”

He didn't elaborate. In my industry that would have been considered a veiled threat. Here, I had to assume it was merely a statement of fact. The bottle and the bread made their way around the group – Tracy filled a coffee mug with Rum as he pulled the boat out from the dock – until Anders handed them to me. I ripped off a chunk of the bread and put the bottle to my lips. The warm rum so early in the morning burned my throat and the spice made my mouth tingle. I took a bite of the bread, which melted on my tongue and masked the rum as the boat picked up speed. I settled back and let the wind blow my hair back as Jerry took the bottle and bread.

“We’ll fish until the bottle’s gone,” Jerry said without a hint of irony. “We have to make our way to a gap in the reef to get out to the open water. It’ll take a few minutes. The rum will help the queasiness if you aren’t used to the ocean.”

“So, Fenway,” Norm said, “you a writer?”

“Not really, no,” I said.

“He’s a banker,” Jerry corrected.

“A banker?” Tracy shouted from the front. “Why’d you come to Belize?”

I shrugged. “Because I didn’t want to be a banker.”

They let me off at the dock a few hours later. I was drunk and hungry and slightly seasick and happy to be on solid ground. I had reeled in a red snapper and Anders snagged a three-foot barracuda. Jerry promised to come get me for the fish fry later in the afternoon.

I stumbled back to my house and passed out on an old hammock in the backyard that had been left hanging between two coconut trees. I dreamed of the life I abruptly left behind, the smirking faces of my colleagues on my last day and the cold, distant look of Nancy as she walked out of an uptown condo. I dreamed about the epiphany I had after Nancy left of disappearing in a paradise. I dreamed about the brochure offering home purchases in Belize and the moving company that put all of my belongings in storage. When I woke up, the sun was overhead and I had sweat through my shirt. I pushed my hand into my forehead to fend off a mid-day hangover and then took a cold shower.

I was already sweating again when I walked a mile or so into town, past the fishermen and tour operators trying to sell snorkeling trips to a quiet, open-aired bar by the water. The dark-skinned bartender was cleaning glasses and put a napkin in front of me.

“Wad’ll i’be?” he asked.

“Just a Diet coke, maybe some lunch?”

“Chicken n’red bean rice, yeah? Tasty tasty, very Belizean.”

“Perfect.”

I pulled a small notebook out of my pocket and stared at the blank page. I had never written anything of consequence before outside of monthly bank updates. I don’t know why I started then. Kind of a *When in Rome* situation. Jerry insisted. I figured if I began to turn down what others considered normal in this new life, I would be accepting that I wasn’t ready to fully take the leap.

I started to jot a few sentences about fishing. I ate the chicken and beans and rice and tried to remember the morning. I wrote about how welcoming my new friends had been and how Norm and I argued about U.S. policies and how more and more expats are coming to Ambergris Caye. He assured me that I was different and welcome.

As I wrote and ate, a woman from the states came and sat near me.

“Whatcha writin’?” she asked with a southern twang.

I shrug. “Nothing worth reading, that’s for sure.”

She laughed flirtatiously. “Don’t be so modest. How long are you in town for?”

“Actually, indefinitely. I just moved here.”

Her eyes lit up. “I’m jealous! I’d love to pack it up and move here. I think it’s a little too *third-world* for my husband, but a girl can dream, right?” I smiled and nodded and kind of snorted, unsure how she wanted me to continue the conversation. I hadn’t been here long enough to be the creepy local who hits on the tourists, so I turned back to my notebook. It was apparently the wrong reaction because she asked, “Have you had the Tamarind Margarita yet?” I

shook my head and made a face that suggested I'm unfamiliar with the concept. She held up two fingers to the bartender. "My girlfriends and I have been sipping on these things all week."

"Your girlfriends?" I asked.

"Bachelorette party. Hey, we're all meeting here tonight for some dancing. You should come!"

"Sure," I said.

"Hopefully you have more to say in that notebook of yours," she joked as she paid for the two margaritas. "You can buy me a drink tonight and even up."

She smiled and walked away. I looked at the bartender who was laughing, "Belize, huh, mon?"

I made my way home as the sun grew heavy in the sky. I figured I could clean up and buy some tacos and enjoy the sunset. I shouldn't have been surprised when I stumbled upon the whole morning-fishing crew sitting out front of a small beach-front house. They all had notebooks and laptops and a barbecue was smoking as fish fillets shimmered and crackled over the coals.

"Fenway!" Jerry bellowed, causing the others to look up. "Take a seat. Dinner's almost ready." I'm too drunk and too drained to object, so I sit. "Where ya been?"

"A bar down the way. Sounds like there's a party tonight."

"Ah, yes, young blood. Have your fun. I suppose we should go and chaperone. Now you know where to find us. Been writing?" he asked as he pointed at my notebook.

"Trying."

He took it from me and flipped through the pages. He nodded approvingly and occasionally wrinkled his nose. He then slammed it shut and handed it back to me.

“We have to stick together, you know?” he said without offering any sort of feedback or criticism.

“Why is that?”

“Because otherwise you’ll get lost. You’ll get lost in the sunset and the fish and the weekly women.”

“The rum,” Norm said as he hands a bottle to Jerry.

“Yes, the rum as well. Easy to get lost. Very easy.”

“Is that a bad thing, getting lost?” I asked.

“Not necessarily.” He took a sip. “But it’s easy to forget how ugly the world can be. If you can remind yourself by keeping it on the page and indulge a few old has-beens, you might not lose your mind along the way. At least not like old Tracy over there.”

Everyone laughed as Anders appeared and placed plates of fish in our laps. He got one for himself and came and sat next to me. In between mouthfuls, he asked in his Belizean dialect, “So you’re from New York?”

“I am.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to New York.”

“For what?”

“The excitement! The literary center of the world. Imagine.”

“It is that. You should relish what you have here.”

“Here? I’m just a poor fisherman.”

“With fresh fish and good rum and a great view,” I said. “People spend their lives getting rich to come live your life. Believe me. I know.”

He laughed. “The rum is good. I’ll give you that.”

We all show up to the dance later that night as the moon rose and illuminated the small ripples of the tide. A local reggae band played bouncing tunes and Tiki torches created an aura of romance and ease. There were many more locals than I had seen gathered in one place before, mixing joyously with the tourists. Everyone seemed happy and drunk. I found my new friend in the center of the dance floor surrounded by her friends and a steady flow of leering men, dark and light.

I think she saw me and I gave her a casual head nod, but she turned and was consumed by her friends as they bounced and danced. I made my way to the bar, forgetting about Jerry and the gang, and bought two margaritas. She must have been watching me because as soon as I paid and picked them up, she was there waiting for me.

“For me?” she asked. “Or did another random woman also buy you a margarita today?”

“Oh,” I said, “which one were you again?”

She laughed and threw her head back and took the drink from me.

“Very smooth, aren’t you? I’m thinking our meeting this afternoon was actually a smooth pick up line on your part.”

I smiled but didn’t refute her logic. “I never got your name.”

“No you didn’t,” she said coyly.

“Well I guess it’s for the best.”

Her jaw dropped with histrionics. “Tell me your name!”

“Fenway,” I said.

“Fenway? I love it! Carissa.”

We smiled at each other and sipped our drinks and then Jerry approached and dropped his arm over my shoulders.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us to your new friend?” he said.

“Uh oh,” she responded, “the local Mafioso. Do I have to pay you for his time?”

Jerry laughed and said, “Don’t be ridiculous. He’s a free man.” But he said it in a way that made me think it might be something that could change in the future.

“Well good. I’m taking this free man to the dance floor.”

Carissa grabbed my hand and led me away. We danced and spilled our drinks on one another and even kissed a bit. I didn’t see Jerry or Norm or Tracy or Anders and assumed they had left. At one point during a slow song, Carissa asked, “So is that what you aspire to?”

“What, Jerry?” I asked.

“Whoever that creeper was.”

“I don’t really know what I aspire to.”

“Well, you don’t want to be like that. Old and creepy and lost.”

When she said it, I felt like I finally understood what Jerry was trying to warn me about. He felt lost.

“I guess you’ll have to come back and check on me.”

She smiled with wide eyes and nodded.

We leave together a couple of hours later. Her arm is through mine and she’s leaning on me. Jerry and the guys are waiting outside.

“Hey, Fenway!” he shouts. “Fenway, we’ve been waiting for you. Come on, we’re heading elsewhere.”

We stop and look at them. They’re drunk and swaying in the wind.

“No, I think we’re headed back. Calling it a night.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “Come on. It’s early. You can’t go home until you’ve put in appearances in at least three fine establishments.”

I look down at Carissa. I’m tempted to agree and say we’ll tag along, but I came to my senses.

“Next time, alright? I’ll catch you guys tomorrow.”

We began to walk away, but Jerry wasn’t finished.”

“You can’t just walk away! Hey, Fenway, you’re part of this now! You can’t just walk away! There’s no *tomorrow*! There’s only today! You can’t just walk away.” I just nodded and we continued to walk. I could sense Carissa getting tense but I tried to play it cool. “Hey! Get back here! You don’t walk away from us! Fine! You’re nothing, you know that? Nothing! Just another American who thinks he’s hot shit! You’re nothing! Weak in the mind!” I hear him laugh and gather his friends and they walk the other direction.

“Cool friends,” Carissa said.

When we got back to my place, we made love. I didn’t ask her about her husband, but I do wonder if they made love the way we were making love. She fell asleep in my arms.

The next morning I awoke to a knocking. I looked around the room but Carissa had gone. She had probably snuck out early before the sun rose, likely embarrassed and not wanting

to give any sort of impression that this was anything more than a fling of a woman on vacation with a man going through a midlife crisis.

I got out of bed and answered the door.

“Morning, sailor,” Jerry said. He handed me a cup of coffee. “Figured you could use this this morning.”

I accepted it reluctantly. I didn’t know what he wanted or if I even wanted to see him. I wanted to climb back into bed and hoped that Carissa had just been in the bathroom and was there waiting for me.

“Last night was…” I began, trying to choose my words carefully.

“Last night? Forget about last night. You said things. I said things. Forget it. You got someone in there?”

I saw him trying to peer inside for a better look and got the sense he had no recollection of bumping into Carissa and me.

“No. No one’s inside.”

“Shame.” He pulled back to look at me. “Well, come on. Get dressed. The boat’s waiting and the rum has been opened.”

I took a sip of my coffee while I contemplated how to respond. Jerry smiled and breathed in the fresh air of the new day. He would have waited for hours, perfectly content in allowing seconds and minutes and hours to blend together until they were altogether nonexistent. I checked the house to make sure Carissa had actually gone and then nodded. A few minutes later, I joined Jerry and walked with him to the dock. I didn’t say hi to Norm, Tracy, or Anders, but I climbed onboard the boat and took a seat atop the white wooden bench along the wall. As Jerry went to untie the boat from the dock, Norm leans over and hands me the bottle of Rum.

“Sorry about Jerry,” he said professorially. “He just likes you is all. Doesn’t want to see another protégé get away from him.”

I accepted the bottle of rum and frowned at the implication. “Is that what I am now? Jerry’s protégé?”

“We all are,” Tracy chimed in. “Don’t let him scare you off. He means well.”

I looked at Jerry as he climbed aboard. He’s smiling at me with his head cocked to the side. We make eye contact and I sense a layer of hostility. Norm asked, “So how’d it go with that girl?”

“I knew you had someone inside!” Jerry bellowed. “I knew it. Litte ole’ Fenway, baggin’ the girls on his own. It’s as though he doesn’t need his trusty wingmen. Put her into words for us. Write it up this afternoon and I’ll write about this woman who swung by a few months ago. Remember her boys? Tanya, I think. Ooh boy, swung right through here like a hurricane. Kept me up for days and spit me out the other side like an uprooted palm tree. Is that what happened last night to you, sailor?”

I smiled and nodded and took a swig of the rum. I don’t respond, but a hurricane seemed like an apt description of Jerry. It was hard to look away from him, but feeling the need to ride out the storm didn’t sound like a healthy friendship and one always had to consider evacuation.

I got back to my hut a few hours later, once again drunk and feeling like I should go pick up some more tacos or get my own loaf of cinnamon bread. I instead go to my bedroom to see if Carissa had come back and was waiting for me. When I saw an empty room, I sit at the small desk in the corner and pull my briefcase up from the side where I had stashed it out of sight. I began to pull out my papers of separation from New York Financial. The papers described the

terms of my two-year paid hiatus from the bank, given to a small subset of employees who had devoted more than ten years of service and had a mental breakdown inside the office from the long hours and the demands of clients. The next document was the official medical record from Manhattan Medical that described the breakdown in great detail, a requirement for insurance to pay out disability. I was sure if I called Mitchell and told him I had recovered that he would take me back in a heartbeat. I then pulled out a picture of Nancy and rested it on top of the documents. New York Financial wasn't the only one who had little interest in staying connected to a man suffering from depression and mental breakdowns. I shoved all of the documents off of the desk and let them scatter to the corner, once again out of sight. I got up and grabbed my notebook and walked to the open-air bar by the water where I immediately ordered a margarita.

When the bartender put the drink in front of me, I asked, "Hey, that girl hasn't come by, has she?"

"Carissa? No, mon, she go-a flyin' to da States. You bad fa bidness."

I smiled and accepted the joking critique. It was as I expected. She had come and gone, just as I assumed most people I would meet would do. They come for vacation, not to call it home. Everyone, that is, except Jerry, Norm, and Tracy.

"Sorry," is all I could say.

"How bout you, then? When you leave us all behind?"

"Me? Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'll leave tomorrow." I tapped my finger. "Although the fishing's nice."

The next morning, I awoke to the sun and a headache, but no pounding on my door. Jerry had taken the day off. I got out of bed on my own accord and threw on my soiled linen

pants and a t-shirt and stumbled out the door. I stop by the liquor store and picked up a bottle of rum and then I made my way to the dock where Norm, Tracy, and Anders were waiting in the boat.

“Where’s Jerry?” Norm shouted.

“I assumed he was here with you all. I thought maybe I had worn out my welcome.” I say it semi-jokingly.

“You? Never.”

I step on the boat and hand them the rum.

“Should we wait?” I asked.

“What for, mon? We have da rum now,” Anders said with a grin.

Everyone seemed content with the logic so we all scanned the coast for Jerry, say nothing, and then allowed Tracy to take us out once more past the reef and into the ocean.

“So,” Tracy said as he maneuvered the boat to where his radar showed some fish, “think you’ll be sticking around awhile?”

“I don’t know. Not sure I’m cut out to live here fulltime.”

“Yeah, I said that once myself. Hell, I said it lots of times.”

“If ya go back ta New York, take me wid ya,” Anders said while stringing up some bait.

“I will, but, well I think I’ll stick around for at least a couple more days.” They all laughed and nodded. I looked back at the coast that fell in and out of view as the swell lifted the boat and then dropped it back into the water. “So where do you think Jerry is?”

“Where he is,” Norm said nonchalantly. “You don’t get it yet. Where he is and where he isn’t, where you are and where you aren’t. You still think like a New Yorker. You are here, that’s all that matters.”

“You don’t care where Jerry is?” I asked. “You don’t care if something happened to him?” I think about the smirking faces of my esteemed and loyal colleagues as security guards held me down to a gurney and wheeled me out of the island I had created at the bank.

“No,” Norm said without a hint of irony.

“No,” Tracy confirmed.

Anders yanked his pole up as the string went taught.

“Got a big one here!” he yelled.

Norm attached his pole to the boat and went to help the young Belizean. I turned away from them and took a sip of rum as I dropped my line in the water. I decided right then and there that I really enjoyed fishing. Maybe I’d even write about it in case I ran into Jerry.