

IN PURSUIT OF GIANTS

ONE MAN'S GLOBAL SEARCH FOR THE LAST OF THE GREAT FISH

BY MATT RIGNEY

“... What you see in the morning before dawn when you walk out onto the lawn is the long, dim curve of the beach and the silhouette to the east of a forest as it runs down to the water. After that, a small island, and after that, the line.

The line is the ocean horizon, cut with a razor by the rising sun that heats the morning sky until it glows, brightening in one spot over the forest until you think you will be pierced by what's coming. And all this time the water is going from black to iridescent turquoise and then to that searing tangerine-magenta, and then the sun blows up from behind the trees like a bomb but doesn't lose its perfect shape, and then the light does what you thought it would: it blasts you straight through like a shot.

If you are not fishing this morning you drink your coffee and shiver and wonder why you're not fishing, and you change your mind and drain the cup and get your gear together and head out to the boat, trying to forgive yourself for the lost half-hour, telling yourself as you did for many years that if facts are faced, you're no good as a fisherman anyway and have lost nothing, only gained a peaceful cup of joe and the memory of the sunrise. But you know you're lying to yourself, that you have been lazy, that that string of years when you caught nothing has been replaced by the last half dozen where you've caught something every time out, and that the reason you delayed this time was because of uncertainty. Uncertainty about the weather, about the boat, about the risks, and it is not cowardice or fear that stops you but calculation, because what you are calculating are your odds of getting a bluefin versus your chances of royally screwing up—of getting out too far where your 17-foot boat has no business going, the weather turned on you, the engine konked, something broken and you're without the radio and drifting ten then fifteen then twenty miles out to sea, and all because you were stupid and pushed it too far.

You've gotten better at the calculation, and you decide to head out. You have the toolbox, the spare battery, the extra 20 gallons of gas; the radio is working. You head out alone, trying to make up for lost time—not just today but a lifetime—going to where bigger boats and better fishermen go, because your calculations include the following factors, combined in a formula of singular importance to you: life is short, you never feel more alive than when you are beyond sight of land, and you have seen something out there that makes the risks worthwhile—even the risk of mechanical failure, of looking stupid if you are hauled back to shore, or worse, if you make the papers as a corpse or as that guy from New England who lasted two months at sea, eating birds and dead floating things and drinking his own piss.

You are going because you have to. You have to see them again and if you do it right, maybe you will get to tangle with one. You have seen bluefin tuna out there, and seeing them changed everything. It made staying close to shore a betrayal and a prison sentence to a part of you that is stronger and better, braver and freer than any other part.

The fish you saw that first time appeared hovering above the waves like a deity, its huge eye staring at you, and in that eye you saw the secrets of the ocean, the secrets of something so old and elemental that time was immaterial to it. Its eye held the eternal “is”. It was the wildest thing you'd ever seen, and your purpose now, the purpose that haunts you, is to see it again.

Most people have no idea what you're talking about when you tell them. They simply don't understand—not because they don't want to, but because they can't. They don't

have the reference points. But when you tell people that an adult swordfish fifteen years of age would fill their living room wall-to-wall, they stare at you. When you tell them that the great sportfish of the world are the size of beef cattle, only faster, more powerful, and more aggressive, a furrow crosses their brow—the brain trying to bend itself around the implausible. And when you describe how a giant bluefin tuna weighing 600 pounds will hit a ten pound bait at fifty miles an hour, and how that will set your reel screaming like it was being flogged with a length of red hot leader wire...people begin to suspect either you're lying, or that here is a realm of the natural world that challenges their vocabulary, their entire language of experience.

What they don't understand is that the fish you hook, if it is among the great sportfish species and has reached maturity, will fight you with every wild sinew in its body. It will fight you and disdain you in your comfortable fiberglass perch, and it will show you more nobility and dignity, more pure bravery and fight in the course of its five-hour battle for its life, than you are likely to be asked to demonstrate in your entire lifetime. The fact that you can subdue it is a testament to the technical capabilities of our species, but that is all. If you are a true fisherman, you don't allow yourself the delusion that you are superior to the fish you just caught, or that by catching it your stature is somehow improved or your worth increased. You're just a lucky bastard. The fish is better than you every time, and this, ultimately, is why you fish—so that you may enter momentarily into the presence of these gods; so that you may look upon their iridescent skin, at their fantastic shapes; so that you may be tethered to their power, joined to their spirits for a while; so that you may feel that burning envy, that want whose foundation lies in absence. You do it to feel the painful jealousy of *them*, because their lives, however brief, however solitary or hard, are pure.

Wild things from the deep, they know more about the ageless sea and the ageless force that created it than we ever will..."

~ excerpt from *In Pursuit of Giants*

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