

FIGHTING MARLIN

Ace Boggess

His head snaps left, the white a silvery-blue under the yellow light. His hard-lined face scrunches as it strains against the invisible line. The eyes? Black and mean, angry and cruel—nuggets of coal shot from the back of a train. At first, he lurches backward, but soon can't resist the taut pull any more than were he a sea bass or menacing, ugly barracuda. Not a big one, he nonetheless puts his entire body into the fight as if he might escape by force, as if steeling himself against humiliation and a certain end.

The fisherman, laughing, tightens his shoulder and tugs, slackens, tugs. One hand spins the reel, decreasing the distance left to cover.

Everyone lines up to watch. Spectators cheer the fisherman on. They mock the catch. They are ravenous for entertainment, this the first break in the dead calm of their evening.

“You got him,” one says.

Another says, “Get the hammer ready. You can crack him on the head when he's close enough.”

The fisherman ignores them, focusing on the struggle. Tattooed arms, muscular from his daily workout, flex as if he's posing them for a photograph. “Come on,” he says.

Finally, the older man relents, moving a few inches forward, then a foot, two, before hopping to the right.

An hour ago, several of the men were gathered around a table, caught up in a poker game. The torn-up playing cards used for chips lay stacked in heaps in front of each contestant. A chip represented a dime, twenty—the minimum buy-in—a candy bar or bag of Mister Bee potato chips. The poker table built up like this every night, moving around the POD depending on which guard happened to be on duty, or into one of the cells if the officer's scrutiny grew too intense.

Tonight, C. O. Mayfield worked the POD—a four-hundred-pound childlike man who only ever walked the floor if he had to, his face flushing and air wheezing through the strangled opening in his throat. He joked with the cons, talked about movies, reminisced aloud about the sex life he used to have when he was only three-twenty-five. Most of the inmates liked him. He never wrote anyone up for smoking, inking, or gambling. More than that, he often gave advance warning if a greater threat might be at hand.

“You all be careful tonight,” Mayfield said, hovering over the half a dozen poker players. “Word is, the security team's gonna do a walkthrough soon, and it's you guys they're cracking down on.”

“Aw, hell,” said one of the cons, his stack the biggest at the table.

“Just telling you,” said Mayfield, with what might have been a shrug but came across more as a drunken rolling of his head on lazy shoulders. “Don’t let ’em see those chips. They mean to hit every POD before the night’s over. Captain’s orders. Probably come rolling in through the back door so you don’t have time to hide anything.”

No one thanked him, but it was understood.

He grinned and, red-faced, began the slow march back to the guard desk at the front of the POD where it was affixed to the golden stone floor inside a square of lined red paint. He dropped onto his chair, not intending to move again for an hour.

“This is some bullshit,” said one of the cons.

“I guess I’m cashing out,” said Big Stack.

Another said, “I want a chance to win my money back. I’m down too much to quit now.”

“Later,” said one.

“Tomorrow,” Big Stack said.

All counted their chips for the bookkeeper, who didn’t play cards but kept the numbers to earn some commissary of his own. When the books were updated, he swept all the ripped cards into a laundry sack and spirited them off to be hidden in one of the cells.

Gerard Ramey goes for it. He becomes the fish, dodging left and bobbing right, his short legs leaving the ground as if he’s breaking the surface of the Atlantic. His arms transform into fins, his flat nose a blade slicing air. He thinks only of resisting the line, the man he killed twelve years ago in a fit of road rage after an accident forgotten, as are his many stops en route to Boone County Correctional Center in southern West Virginia. His wife, remarried, and two daughters, grown, seem like smaller fish in the vast, dark ocean of his past.

The spectators cheer him on, hooting and shouting, laughing and calling his name. They applaud when he makes a move that catches the fisherman off guard. It’s as if they want him to win, break free, get away as though the rules of the game allow it.

Even C. O. Mayfield rises from his chair and leaves the desk to witness the sport. He grins as he watches, his tiny arms folded over his massive abdomen.

Ramey won’t win, though. No one escapes. He must accept his fate. After each jump, he moves a little farther up the POD.

Four remained at the poker table after the chips were gone: Ty Blackburn the skinny drug dealer from Detroit; Bud Smith, young third-offense drunken driver; bulky Benny Bollingen, the robber; and Ramey, seemingly with no fight left in him. A deck of cards still centered the table in front of the men, lingering there like the last slice of pizza in a box. Someone would grab for it soon, but who?

“Spades?” said Blackburn. “There’s four of us.” Even without poker, these men needed something to do besides watch the POD television or lie back on a bunk and read another James Patterson novel.

“I’m game,” said Ramey.

Smith said, “Sure, why not?”

Bollingen shook his head. “Not up for it,” he said. “No fun if there’s no money on it.”

“How about Hearts?” said Smith. “We could do ten cents a point to the winner.”

“That’s more like it.”

This time Ramey declined. He shook his head, his whitish hair slicked back with grease that made him look as if he were wearing a nylon wig. “I’m not good enough at Hearts,” he said. “I’d be throwing my money down a rathole. At seventy bucks a month, I don’t earn nearly enough for that.”

Blackburn said, “Yeah, I kind of have that problem, too. I’m already down at the poker table. Need to save my money until I can get back up.”

“Fool,” Bollingen said, “you’ll never get back up. You haven’t figured it out yet. They’re playing two-brothers-and-a-cousin against you, working teams. That’s how they always take you.”

“Then why are you playing?”

“I see what they’re doing. I know what to watch for and when to get out of the way.”

“Hell,” Smith said. “That explains a lot.”

Blackburn slapped his palm on the table with a champagne-bottle pop, startling everyone seated in the blue plastic chairs nearby. “If that’s true, somebody’s getting’ an ass-whoopin’.”

Bollingen told him, “That’s your call, but you got to catch them first. Besides, you think they won’t play two-brothers-and-a-cousin against you in a fistfight, too?”

“Hell,” Smith said again.

Ramey slumped forward and reached for the deck of cards. It belonged to him. “Sorry, fellows. Just can’t do it.”

“We could play for something else,” said Smith.

This time, Bollingen grinned, his lips parting to reveal a black-toothed landscape of volcanic mud. “Sure,” he said. “We could play for you-daddies.”

Bollingen stands on one of the hard-plastic chairs, smiling and yanking at his invisible rod. His whole torso moves, biceps pulsing beneath his white tee. His jailhouse ink showing through the thin fabric: a blurred, prayerful Jesus on one arm, a pentacle and the scales of justice on the other as though he can’t make up his mind whether he’s blessed or damned.

Inmates have lined up along the dayroom now, standing in front of the nicotine-yellow cinderblock walls and the four powder-blue steel-mesh cages on each side. No one smokes or watches TV. No toilets flush. It’s all about the dying fish and the predator out to finish him. The dayroom even seems to smell salty and oceanlike as if the imagined fish has called a sea into being.

Bollingen wrenches hard at the rod, the line tightening, the catch drawing closer. He’s no stranger to taking things. He robbed two gas stations and a Goodwill store that the police

have never pinned on him, braining the clerk at an Exxon when the cash register wouldn't open. He'd still be free if he hadn't gone for the pawn shop where security cameras put out clearer images than the rest. At one point during the heist, the sleeve of his black tee slipped and a tattoo showed. A stripper he knew recognized the sad-looking Jesus on his arm and ratted Bollingen out for the five-hundred-dollar reward. Still, even in the penitentiary, he's a taker—and, he thinks, a winner.

“Tough bastard,” he says, glancing behind him at Blackburn and Smith. “I'll get him, though.” He hauls harder on the rod, cranks the reel, pulls until his arms are so high above his head that he looks like a tight end ready to catch an over-the-shoulder pass.

You-daddies were the next best thing to cash or goods. They carried with them extreme possibilities for humiliation. The creditor could choose his moment, approach the debtor anywhere in the prison, and ask whatever question he pleased, the answer to which, in full view of other inmates, would be, “You, Daddy.” A good-natured victor might let the loser off the hook with a simple “Who's the nicest guy you know?” asked in the presence of a couple cons. Most went for something cleverer: “Who do you think about when you're in the shower?” said in the middle of a crowded dayroom, or “Who turned you out for dope?” said during a substance-abuse class. The questions could be more devastating, though, depending on how many you-daddies were owed. With a debt of three you-daddies, the questions might start out in the cell, move to the dayroom, then end up with a nuclear bomb dropped in the chow hall at dinner time: “Who's the coolest guy you know?” “You, Daddy.” “Who do you love most of all?” “You, Daddy.” “Who's got the biggest dick you've ever sucked?”

The potential for embarrassment was so high that few inmates would gamble for you-daddies unless they were sure they could win, or, in a game like Hearts where the two middle scorers were safe, at least not lose. The fact that Bollingen wanted to play for you-daddies meant he felt confident that, no matter what, he wouldn't come in last.

“No way,” said Ramey. The others seemed ready, but Ramey had too much pride. He had killed a man, after all—the only guy at the table with a body to his credit. Sure, he didn't know the man had a serious head injury from a previous traffic accident and would collapse and die after one solid punch to the chin. Still, Ramey landed the blow. He did it. He didn't feel guilty about it, but the state of West Virginia said he was. He took the plea deal he was offered: voluntary manslaughter, fifteen years. He went through the system and ended up here in medium security after longer stints at the more hardcore prisons. He was a killer, like it or not, and killers didn't say “You, Daddy” to anybody. “I'm not that good at Hearts,” he explained. “Still too much risk for me. I'll play for a Marilyn, though.”

Marilyn's were a different kind of theater. They involved the losing inmate standing on a chair and replicating the iconic photograph of Marilyn Monroe taken during filming of *The Seven Year Itch*, her legs bent, arms holding down a skirt caught in the updraft from a subway vent, mouth puckered in a surprised moue. Most cons didn't know what movie the image was

from or that the exact scene didn't appear in the movie, but almost all knew the pose. It could be replicated quickly—an easy debt, the laughter not lasting, an inmate's warm cheeks cooling by the time he sat back down.

“Not good enough,” said Bollingen.

Ramey shrugged. He'd rather not play than have to play for you-daddies.

Blackburn said, “How about a fighting marlin?”

Bollingen considered, stared at Ramey, grinned. “Okay, yeah,” he said. “Fighting marlin. You all good with that?”

“Fighting marling,” said Smith.

Blackburn grunted.

All eyes turned to Ramey.

“Fighting marlin,” he said. “I can do that. Been a while since I've been fishing.”

Smith replied, “How long's it been since you've been the fish?”

The security team sneaks in through the back door as they do at least twice a week—five of them cockily swinging their arms and moving their heads left and right as if they were the coolest cats on the dancefloor at disco night. There are four hardened correctional officers, all practiced with pepper spray, Tasers, and beanbag guns, all having been shot with those as well. The fifth is Lt. Rand, a bookish twentysomething who keeps to himself except when acting as the bloodhound on these excursions. Normally Rand and the others would sniff the air for cigarette smoke, listen for the sickly whir of a homemade tattoo gun, or study the movements of inmates that might be stuffing poker chips in the pockets of their khaki pants. Today, though, they stop beyond the door, Rand holding his arms out as if warning the officers danger lies ahead.

Cons lined along the POD go silent. They bow their necks, stare at their feet, pretend nothing's happening.

C. O. Mayfield shakes his head and gives the hand-to-throat gesture to Ramey who doesn't see the security team behind him. He can't see Mayfield either, though, too caught up in the moment. He has become the fish. He fights, gives ground, fights, breaks the surface, flies, gives ground, fights harder.

Bollingen does see the officers looming, but continues pulling against his rod, reeling in the catch. He knows it's too late to stop. If the guards want to write him and Ramey up for creating a disturbance or something worse, they've witnessed enough to do it. Quitting now would be to waste a win. He pulls harder, increasing his urgency, feeling the weight of an imaginary hammer strapped to his hip.

The security team keeps its distance. The five men watch as though enthralled by contest and spectacle. Then, when Rand lowers his arms, all the cons relax and resume their cheering.

Things started poorly for Ramey. The cards were dealt. He looked at his hand and knew he had a shot at a run. Again, when the second hand came, he believed he could collect all the hearts and the queen of spades to make everyone else at the table eat all twenty-six points. Both times, he missed, sucking up all but one or two of the necessary cards and suffering the damage himself. The four had agreed to play to a hundred, the loser reaching that number first, and Ramey was already halfway to defeat.

“See why you didn’t want to play for you-daddies,” said Blackburn.

“Fool thought he could sneak us on a run,” said Smith. “*Twice!*”

From then on, Ramey played defensively, dodging points as often as he could. He had fallen too far behind, though. He survived six more hands before Bollingen did complete the run and pushed him over the top.

“Good game,” said Ramey.

“Good game,” the others agreed.

Bollingen said, “You want to do this now?”

“Might as well,” said Ramey. He had to do it sooner or later. He knew that in prison you paid your debts or you suffered the consequences.

The fisherman gives one last tug at his rod, scowling now as though the fight has exhausted him. He feels contempt for his victory as if even this struggle hasn’t been enough. It’s a mix of anger and despair inside him—what all feel who seek the trophy but haul in an undersized lump, a minnow, a tangle of kelp. Channeling his frustration, he raises his pretend hammer and brings it down on the marlin’s head while making a clunking sound with his mouth.

The inmates cheer.

The correctional officers applaud.

“Quite a show you put on,” says Lt. Rand, walking forward. “Maybe the best fighting marlin I’ve ever seen.”

Ramey startles at the voice, then turns, stills, grins.

Bollingen grins wider.

Ramey says, “All in good fun.”

The officers gather around him in a circle. One says to Bollingen, “Come down off that chair now.”

Bollingen does. He looks down at his crumbling blue sneakers, tries to keep his cool.

Lt. Rand says, “You were playing for marlins, huh?”

Ramey says, “Just having some fun. No wagers here.”

“I guess somebody told you we were coming.” Lt. Rand aims a cold eye at C. O. Mayfield.

“Nobody told us nothing,” says Bollingen. He doesn’t see the officers on the security team smiling like they’ve spent the evening at a strip club.

Lt. Rand looks around the POD, then at Bollingen. He laughs. “All right,” he says. “Hold up your catch.” He lifts his hands, shaping them like mirrored parentheses. “It’s not complete until you get a picture with the fish.”