

—FISH BAIT

by John Everson

“Not the best stuffed fish I’ve ever seen,” Wayne ventured, staring up at the five-foot long trophy on the bar’s wall.

“You got that right,” whispered Terry, who raised an eyebrow in lieu of pointing upward. “It’s some kind of small shark right? They fuckin’ nailed it to the damn wall!”

While normally a mounted fish had an almost plastic, fake sheen to it thanks to the preservatives the taxidermists used, this one was marred by an array of ragged, uneven scales that popped out into the air away from its body. The silver of its belly, interrupted by the rusty head of a nail, shaded into a deeper hue at its top fin where another nail head intruded. Its whole form was wrinkled, shriveled. Worst was the head. An empty, desiccated eye socket topped a gasping mouth that looked poised to snap with a row of twisted, yellowing teeth.

“Hope the beer’s a bit more appetizing,” Wayne agreed. “Though I suppose anything’d taste good at this point.” He shrugged off a backpack and nodded toward the bar.

“What do you want?”

Wayne and Terry had been hiking and camping in the back end of the Rockies for the past five days. They’d left their car with an old friend of Wayne’s in Estes Park, and trudged immediately off-road through the deep woods of the national park system with the intent of getting as far from civilization as possible. They took a bag of beef jerky, some canned beans, and an illegal handgun to hopefully add some game to their diet. They had no jobs and figured to return to civilization only when hunger drove them back to a road to hitchhike back to their ride. Terry had hoped they might disappear for most of the summer.

“Whatever’s on tap,” Terry said. He scratched idly at the growing black stubble curling across his cheek.

Wayne nodded and walked across the stained wood floor to the bar. A dirty blonde bartender in red plastic glasses, who apparently had an issue with underwear (as in, it was obvious that she wasn’t wearing any), nodded at him and bent over to grab two glasses. Terry could see the blur of tattoos beneath the edge of her stained, white, ribbed tank top as she turned. He wondered how her faded khaki shorts stayed up. He had seen the triangular edge of her hips when she faced them, and the pants barely hung off her ass when she bent. He wasn’t surprised to see Wayne try to score small talk with her as she filled the glasses at the tap.

As he turned to carry the two glasses back to the stools of their table, the bass

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pound of Heart's "Barracuda" segued to Seger, and Terry found himself humming along to a "life on the road" song. He was liking this bar already.

They'd been camping just a few yards away from a small gravel road the past two nights, not realizing how close they were to a town in the dark mesh of branches and brush. The trudge of their boots across the rocky ground, the whisper of the wind through the cathedral of pines, and the steady hiss of a nearby mountain runoff stream were all they heard. But this morning, they'd stumbled across the gravel road and Wayne had suggested following it downhill a while to see where it led. After only three long curves, they'd found themselves entering the town of Winston, population 57, according to the faded wooden sign.

The town seemingly consisted of a bar, a three-aisle grocery, a handful of scattered shacks and a tin silo that was apparently a nondenominational church (it bore no name, but a silver cross dominated the air above its silver doorway.)

"I'm not impressed," Wayne had said as they stood at the mouth of the town, sizing it up.

"Well, we can at least restock and grab a beer," Terry answered, nodding at the neon Coors sign just a few meters and three decaying buildings away.

"I suppose."

They'd passed the tin church and what appeared to be a private house before stepping up the wood plank steps to enter the bar. A sign above the door labeled it as "Carioca Morte."

"I hope that means death to karaoke," Wayne had grinned.

"Whatever," Terry said. "As long as they have beer. I can't believe we forgot to pack alcohol."

"Where there is Coors, there is a hangover," promised Wayne and they pulled open the rough-hewn wooden handle of the bar door.

They were well on their way to hangovers two hours and four beers later. While they'd sat, the bar had begun to fill with a strange mix of overalled rancher types and tattooed, punkish youth. As a band began to set up a xylophone and assorted guitars and amps in the corner, the loosely clad bartendress slipped out from behind the bar to sidle over to their table, tanned belly swaying ever so slightly as she walked. Terry smiled as he noted the blue-etched shark that threatened to swallow her bellybutton with its teeth.

"Hi there," she said, flashing a line of teeth beneath a face of pale freckles. "I'm Jasmine. Glad to see you boys in here tonight. I'm guessing you ain't from anyplace near?"

When neither answered quickly, she offered, "Get you boys something from the kitchen?" she held up a small order notepad. Terry thought the point of her chin looked as thin as a nail. He shrugged away the image of his tongue licking it.

"Can you get me a burger?" he hazarded, and Wayne took a sip of his beer before answering.

"Got a menu?"

"We can do burgers and dogs," she said. "And catch of the day is salmon. Cook fries it if you care. We don't print a menu. We just make what we got."

"Got any tilapia?" Wayne asked, and grinned when she looked at him sidelong, confused.