

Fish Face Fools

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Dry Lake is dry again. Yep, all the way down to the bottom of the bottom, just like twenty-two years ago. Not a puddle, not a drop of water. It's been that way for six months.

Ancient bald cypress trees ring the wide shallow basin. Hot air rests heavily on the deeply cracked, gray-brown mud. Long heat waves undulate slowly across the flat desiccated surface, pushing a thin low line of dust. In the middle is a weathered, splotchy blue-green rowboat, stuck fast in the mud. A well-beaten dirt track leads from the boat to the trees, where two old men stand in the shade.

"Looks like a mighty good day to go fishing," says Scooter Bartlett in his high-pitched quavering voice. "Not a single cloud in the sky. Whadaya think, huh? Say, yes, and it's your turn to bring the beer."

Scooter is the older of the two, accumulating 87 years. That's more than ten largemouth bass years, mind you. He's a stringy little guy, probably no more than 125 pounds. His shock of white hair stands straight up like dry, gone-to-seed grass when he isn't wearing his lucky red-and-white Red Rose Feeds cap. Small, round, thick, wire-framed glasses sit on the end of his pointy nose. The Florida sun has left his face and hands looking like the bottom of Dry Lake, cracked, wrinkled and gray-brown. Blue bib overalls loosely tucked into his untied black work boots cover a long-sleeve, red and green plaid shirt.

"Yep, looks purty good, don't it?" mumbles Louis Hodgkin. "Guess I'll check with the wife. No, better not say nuttin'; she might have some work or

want me to haul her skinny ass somewhere. You know, seeing how things are and the kids being gone, I ought to teach her how to drive. Anyway, I'll get my stuff and be back in a flash."

Taller than Scooter, Louis carries almost 280 pounds on his big bones. His size requires those gray, cotton zip-up-the-front jumpsuits that Scooter calls "honey-do pants." Unlike Scooter, he is a quiet fellow. His wife Thelma, less than Scooter's size, dominates everything he does. Louis is pale-skinned and almost bald, with the final long white strands hanging down over his collar. He is content to have lived 85 years and to have enjoyed one of life's greatest experiences, fishing. He huffs and puffs a lot as he moves around, and forget about bending over. He did that once, and it took Scooter, Thelma and Scooter's wife, Maybelle, to bend him back upright.

"A flash? Big old mossy-back turtles like you don't move in a flash," squeaks Scooter. Giggling, he breaks into uncontrolled coughing, ending in his working up a big gob that he spits out. "Damn, I hope something can be done about this cough!"

Pushing back his floppy yellow straw hat with a ragged hole in the crown, Louis shakes his perspiring round head. Then, with a deep rumbling laugh that pops and whistles, he trudges, wheezing deeply, up to the little steel-roofed white house nestled among large live oaks draped with Spanish moss. Loaded down with fishing gear from the storage shed and carrying a small cooler, he starts his slow ponderous walk back to Scooter, pausing now and then to catch his breath.

Scooter and Louis have fished together for years, almost a century it seems. In that sense, they are more married to each other than to their wives. They went fishing together long before they met Maybelle and Thelma. The Bartletts live two blocks around the lake's south shore, but fishing always starts at the Hodgkin's house for some years-past reason.

“Well, you sure live up to being a turtle.” Making snoring sounds, Scooter says, “I almost fell asleep waiting. Let’s see if we’ve got everything. Rods? Good. Tackle box? OK. Fish stringer? No? Go and get it! You know I lost mine when we went out on the lake last week. Remember? I had a whole load of fish on it, just ready to take home and clean. That sure was a piss! Now, let’s see. Beer? Ha, for once you didn’t forget!”

“You know what Scooter? You drive me ‘most as nutty as Thelma. Here’s the stringer, snapped on my belt. We have everything; let’s go.”

Slowly they move along the packed-dirt trail across the dry mud bottom of the lake toward the boat. Scooter says, “Wait a minute, forgot the oars.” Turning around he shuffles back to shore and returns, dragging the oars, leaving a rising trail of dust.

“Ha!” says Louis. “Looks like you need my Thelma to tell you what to do.”

Scooter drops the oars and raises a bony fist and waves it at Louis. “I don’t know why I put up with you! Ha! To you! You forgot the net!”

Louis sets down his load, careful not to go into a full bend. “OK! OK!” Plodding back along the dirt path, he gets the net out of the shed and returns.

Louis climbs into the back of the rowboat and sits down, placing his tackle box, two fishing rods, the net and beer in front of him. The boat creakily tilts up out of the cracked mud so that the front lifts up two feet into the air.

“Louis, you barrel of lard, you know you’re supposed to sit in the front, not the back. Makes me feel like I’m way up on the poop deck when you do that. Move, move!”

“Well the poop deck is where an old shit like you is supposed to sit!”
laughs Louis. “But to keep you from having a stroke – I’ll move.”

“Any sign of action?” asks Scooter, glancing over the dry lake bottom as he moves his stuff into the back of the boat and climbs in.

“Yeah, there’s a bass bumping those reeds. What? You don’t see it? Clean those little bottle-bottom glasses, you fish face fool!”

“Fish face fool? I’ll show you a fish face fool! You say there’s a bass over there and I say it’s mine. Watch this!”

Grabbing his rod, Scooter slips a purple plastic worm onto a No. 5 bass hook with a matching purple cone weight above it. Giving the bait a quick spray of his special fish attractant, homemade from leftover sardine oil and beer, he is ready.

“They love this, you know. They taste the sardines and then get drunk on the beer. Easiest way to catch a fish, get ‘em drunk. Watch my technique! What a cast! There, he took it! Shit, got away!”

“He’s still there. My turn!” Louis puts a pumpkinseed colored worm on a hook, spits on it for luck and casts out over the dry lake bottom. “A strike, what skill!”

Excited, Scooter shouts, “Play him right! It’s fighting hard enough to be a bass. I’ll get the net! Where’s the net?”

“I put it in the boat when I got in. Must have fallen out when you made me get in the front.”

“Lip it, lip it! It won’t bite you. Don’t mess up now. Damn, almost got away!”

“Quit flappin’ your own lips! Give me the stringer. Not a bad one, huh?”

“You sure that’s a bass? Looks like a shoe or something.”

“Don’t give me grief! Of course it’s a bass! Even looks like you, fish face!”

“Oh damn, I dropped my rod! Can you see it down there? I can snag it with a hook.”

Then, “Looooouis! Looooouis! Come home now. I’m going over to Maybelle’s. You know I can’t drive. Get over here right awaaaaay!

“You hear someone yelling, Louis?”

“Hear sumpin’, but it’s too far away. Is it a foghorn? Sure sounds like one.”

“See any more fish out there?”

“Some yearlings jumping near that grassy area. Here, use my extra rod. Your reel is probably full of mud from the lake bottom.”

“Looooouis! Looooouis!”

“Wheee-uu, is my Thelma mad! I bet she wants to fillet me just like a fish!”

“Ha, it would take all day just to cut through your blubber! Pop us some beers and let’s get serious about fishing. Let’s try to get some of them little ones; they’re the tastiest.”

Casting about randomly over the dry lake bottom, Louis turns to Scooter. “Scooter, what did your doctor say?”

“About six to eight months; if I don’t start the chemicals. You, Louis?”

“No transplants are available now.”

“Things are looking pretty dry, aren’t they? Just like this lake.”

Pausing, looking out over the mud, Louis turns and looks Scooter in the eye. “You know what Charlie Jenkins told me? Huber Lake has a lot of water in it yet and the fishin’ is good. Maybe it’s time to try it. Who knows what a change in fishin’ holes will do.”

“Sounds reasonable; let’s pack it in. Anyway, I think I hear that old foghorn blowing again.”