

The Old Man

by Colin J.S. Thomas, Jr.

Editor's note: We feel that an occasional short, light non-legal story or article in the Virginia Lawyer might be appreciated. The author is a former chair of the Senior Lawyers Conference and is an active attorney with the firm of Timberlake, Smith, Thomas & Moses in Staunton, Virginia.

Any merit that I might have as an amateur writer is, I believe, related to my habit of people watching. People watching, if done properly, is unobtrusive and harmless. Whether in the airport or at weddings, it is, to me, a joy to play the game—figure out who people are.

I first saw the old man when we were docking at Oden's Dock in Hatteras, North Carolina. I had taken my twelve-year-old grandson fishing on a head boat in hopes that we might catch some fish. He and I fish together in fresh water. We had only a week at the beach. We had no luck fishing from the beach and from the pier.

On this trip he caught two sea mullet and a nice sized bluefish. Not great, but the "skunk" was gone. The boy was, on a comparative basis, satisfied. Several other kids on our boat were going home empty handed.

The old man was driving an older Carolina Skiff with three younger men aboard. Half a dozen ultra light fishing rods were attached to the center console of the skiff. The old man was brown, what I think of as deep water brown. He had on cheap sunglasses with pink rims. As he came closer I saw that his gray-brown baseball hat said "Fish Fear Me." A sun-bleached, very pale blue t-shirt, khaki shorts and Docksidiers completed his uniform.

The skiff slowed, seemed to make a lazy spin and then backed into a very narrow

space beside a larger boat. No part of the skiff touched dock or boat until one of the younger men stepped onto the dock with a dock line. I wondered how many hours of driving a boat it took to enable that.

The skiff's younger passengers lifted two coolers onto the dock. They were obviously heavy.

The old man held up his hand and waved in our direction. I looked around. I saw the young man who was our mate on the head boat wave back. The head boat had been half full. The lack of a crowd had actually made it better, despite relatively few fish. As we walked down the ramp onto the dock the young mate said that he would immediately clean the fish that had been caught. He also said that some other folks had come in and had fish that they did not need. There would be fish for all.

I looked over at the young men whose fish the mate was obviously talking about. That was nice of them.

I had it. The old man was a guide and the younger men were his party. They had caught a lot of fish. On the way in they had advised the old man that he need only clean some of the fish because they did not need them all. The old man and the mate on the head boat were part of the local fishing community and knew each other. By hand sign the relative fortunes of the two fishing boats was conveyed, as

well as the fact that there were extra fish available if the mate wanted.

The young men carried the coolers to the inside part of the dock where there were several fish cleaning tables. One of them emptied one of the heavy coolers onto the table. I felt a real pang of envy. The cooler was full of speckled trout. It was obvious that the old man knew where to fish and that the younger men with him knew how. Putting together what I had seen and heard I figured that the young men were either at the beach without wives, or, if they were with wives, then the wives would only countenance, and cook, so many fish.

The old man had with him an inexpensive white handled knife with a blade approximately 8 inches long. The blade was wider and thicker than the filet knives we are familiar with. He also had a sharpening stone which was deeply curved from long use. I wondered how many knife blades it had taken to do that.

I didn't say anything, but I pulled my grandson to where we could watch the old man. I knew he would be good.

He took one of the fish, made a diagonal cut just behind the gill and then made a cut along the back fin. He laid the knife at the front of the gill cut, sharp end toward the tail of the fish. Without effort he ran the blade along the length of the fish. Perfect filet. He flipped the fish, made his

diagonal cut behind the gill, effortlessly ran the blade the length of the fish producing a second perfect filet. Left on the table was a fish head to which was attached an absolutely perfect skeleton and a tail. Two quick cuts removed the cavity bones.

The old man saw my grandson. He took a second fish, made his little cuts and again ran the blade the length of the fish. He did not cut the perfect filet away from the tail as he had with the first fish. He looked around at my grandson.

"If you don't want skin, you do this." With the knife blade he flipped the perfect filet so that the skin part was down on the table and the flesh part up still connected to the tail of the fish. He took his knife and ran it the length of the filet holding onto the body of the fish. The result was a skinless fish filet. An ant could not have made a meal from the fish flesh left on that piece of skin.

My grandson and I have fished together for several years. He has seen me clean fish. He is learning. Compared to mine, his fish filets are pretty ragged. He is amazed at my skill.

"Did you see that, Granddaddy?" In that instant, I would have paid almost any price for the old man's skill.

"Yes," I said. "You have to clean fish for a living for a long time like that old man to do that."

We watched as the old man worked. One of the younger men came out of the tackle and supply store behind us. I was just near enough to hear him say to the old man "Beer or Coke?"

The old man looked around at my grandson and several other youngsters who were watching. "Coke."

The old man never hurried. He never varied. Seemingly without effort and in less time than I could possibly have imagined he had cleaned the entire cooler full of fish throwing the head, skeleton and tail part into the water at the back of the cleaning table.

As many as a dozen of us watched the entire time. Watching him work was as mesmerizing as watching storm waves from the beach or the flames of a good wood fire in wintertime.

The mate from our boat had finished his cleaning. The old man winked. The mate moved over to where the old man had been standing and where the perfect fish filets were piled. He took a hose and sprayed and washed the filets. He called to the people from our boat and began putting fish filets into oblong cellophane bags.

We waited until everyone from our boat seemed satisfied and happy. The mate had cleaned my grandson's fish and placed them in a bag on the cleaning table. Did we want some extra fish? Yes, thank you, we did.

"You caught more than the others."

My grandson looked at the mate and smiled. That was nice. He was happy. Both he and I knew that his grandmother would serve fried fish along with eggs and grits for breakfast.

The mate started away. I spoke.

"Excuse me, could I ask you something?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Could you tell me the name of that old man, the guide?"

The old man and his fishing party had moved over to another cleaning table. One of the younger men was using the hose to wash perfect fish filets and filling cellophane bags. Another one brought the old man a second drink. It was a Coors Light.

"I would like to thank him and his party for the fish."

"His name is Barton, but he's not a guide."

The three younger men and the old man were walking toward us. One of the younger men carried the cooler full of filets. Another had the knife, stone and small wet once-white towel. As they passed I said, "Thank you all so much for the trout. That's a real treat."

"Yes, Sir."

The younger man who carried nothing stopped beside my grandson. "Mate said you were the best fisherman on the trip. Keep it up."

My grandson looked up. I knew how he felt. From one good fisherman to another.

"Thanks."

The younger man carrying the knife, stone and towel branched off and put them back on the skiff. He caught up with the others. The cooler went in the back of a king cab pickup.

"If he isn't a guide, who is he?"

"He's a retired lawyer from somewhere up in Virginia. Has a place here. That's his son and two sons-in-law. Those boys come down in the summer to fish with the old man. Been doing it for years." 