

The Expert

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“The moment of truth, Rusty,” Wade Embry says, “comes when the matador faces the greatest danger and plunges his sword over the horns and into the bull’s heart.” To demonstrate, he lunges toward me across the deck of the sleek white cruiser with an imaginary sword as a yellow and black-winged butterfly flits past on the breeze.

I know Wade fenced in college, but he just doesn’t seem that deadly to me.

When I don’t react, he asks my wife if she’s ever read *The Sun Also Rises*.

“In high school, but that was a long time ago,” Paige says.

“Not that long,” he tells her.

A faint blush highlights her cheeks as she tosses her russet curls, smiles, sits up a little straighter on the gunwale, and I realize the son-of-a-bitch is flirting with my wife! Paige’s new best friend, June, notices and gives him a piercing stare. We’re on the stern beside the gnarled dock in Key Largo waiting for the last three equipment-laden tourists to straggle aboard. Low clouds on the horizon hint at possible rain, but under this blazing tropical sun it seems improbable that anything can ruin such a day.

Unless it’s Wade, who’s now leaning on the starboard rail, squinting in the glare coming off the rolling blue-green Gulf, flexing his muscles, the dumbass. Who does he think he is—Ernest Hemingway? He doesn’t seem afraid. But he should be because he lacks the proper training for this. I’m afraid he’ll pose a danger to all of us underwater.

He’s talking about Hemingway, I believe, because he’s obsessed with machismo. Also because we’ve been in Key West. I’ve been telling him how I spent the last six weeks getting ready for this trip by studying Boyle’s Law and Archimedes’ Principle and sitting on the bottom of a pool turning the air in my tank off and on.

At the dive shop, it wasn’t the mermaid posters promising “wet dreams” and “divers do it deeper” that got my attention, but a faded canvas diving rig like Captain Nemo’s, equipped with black rubber hoses and coarse brown rope, threaded into a huge riveted windowed copper helmet bristling with wing-nuts, joints, hinges, and valves. I’d told him about the shop keeper,

who saw my intrigue with the rig. “I see you’ve met Jacques, one of our elder instructors,” he’d said.

I felt Jacques was beckoning me toward underwater adventure.

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“Rusty, all this training and risk-taking and passion sounds like someone bent on becoming an aficionado. Are you?”

I’d thought about that yesterday while standing on the second floor balcony of Hemingway’s New Orleans-style home, which is surrounded by abundant plantings and a rough brick wall. Hemingway and a pal built the wall back in the Thirties to keep curiosity-seekers away. Ironically, now the place was teeming with tourists like us. Of course, the bigger question was, why were we down here with these people?

The answer seemed obvious: otherwise, Paige wouldn’t have come. She had no interest in scuba diving and even less in Hemingway, whom she considered a philandering braggart and bully. She just wanted to go shopping with June. Or savor the purple and white bougainvillea, palms, and Gumbo Limbos. Or walk around the metal-roofed Bahamian-style houses whose porches sometimes had purple planks, pink walls, and sky blue ceilings.

We’d moved into the master bedroom, where one of Hemingway’s famed six-toed cats lay curled up on a pillow, and I overheard a tour guide saying the cats now had computer chips implanted to foil would-be thieves. When Wade began sharing his knowledge of that technology, I slipped off to Hemingway’s study over the pool house, where many of his most famous stories and books were said to have been written on his old portable typewriter, which still remains. I imagined him standing at the wide window sills where he might’ve placed the typewriter when terrible back trouble drove him to write standing up. I wanted to touch the keys and feel the magic. I wondered if the old man had ever written any diving stories. At first, I didn’t think so. But then it came to me: ‘After The Storm,’ where Hemingway’s hero made multiple dives trying to get treasure out of a wreck off one of the Keys—breaking every rule in the book, I might add, beginning with diving alone.

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Paige and June and I are sitting under a canopy, admiring circling gulls and gliding pelicans, as we begin the seven-mile run out to the reef, where the diving starts and the talking stops. Paige is wearing a yellow sundress with a striped beach towel wrapped around her head. Dark sunglasses perch on her nose and when I slide closer, she smells like Coppertone and squeezed limes.

“You’re a lucky man, Rusty,” Wade murmurs, and smiles at my gorgeous wife.

“You’d better believe it, buddy,” she grins back at him.

Bastard.

The dive boat slowly winds through mangrove-covered shoals and finger channels, where the captain, who stands at the wheel in nothing but his shades and Speedos, says small game fish may be found.

“Where’s the best diving you’ve ever seen?” I ask him.

“In twenty-six years of diving all over the world,” he says, “I’ve never found any better than right here when conditions are right.”

“Did you hear that, Wade?” I say.

He strokes his Vandyke.

“Unfortunately, conditions today are nothing to write home about,” the captain says. “Visibility is only twenty to thirty feet.”

“If that’s bad, what’s good?” I say.

“Forty or fifty, so you can see all the way to the bottom.”

We emerge from the channel mouth, and the boat rears up and starts slicing through the waves, unspooling foam in our wake.

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Back in that famous bar on Duval Street, where there is still Cuban tile work and jalousie doors, I noticed yellowed press clippings and framed photographs of Hemingway up on the wall. In one dusty memento, the thirty-something novelist stood holding a fishing pole.

“Hemingway drank gimlets,” I said. “You should drink gimlets in Sloppy Joe’s.”

But Wade insisted on ordering a bottle of Beaujolais. He poured it into his glass, swirled and sniffed, and held it up to the light that glittered on the rim and wine trails.

“Thicker legs mean higher alcoholic content,” he said, smiling again at Paige.

By now, I wanted to strangle him with my bare hands. The more he drank, the more erudite he became about the thin-skinned low-tannin Gamay grape.

“Must you go on and on?” June said.

“I’m not going on and on.”

“Well, whatever it is you’re doing, I wish you’d stop.” June turned to me. “Scuba diving makes me imagine being either terrified or supremely confident, Rusty. Which are you?”

“Hell, June, if you’re that impressed, maybe I ought to go diving with him,” Wade said.

I looked at him. “Are you serious? You have to be certified to buy air, even in the Keys.”

“A guy down at the docks today told me I could get certified in an hour.”

“Don’t be a fool, Wade,” June said. “You could drown.”

Wade let out a huge sigh. “Sometimes, a man just outgrows a relationship.”

“You mean the same way a woman outgrows a man?” June looked away. “Maybe you’ve had enough.”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve had enough, my dear.”

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“If Hemingway were a fish,” I say, over the roar of the engine and the surf, “what kind of fish would he be?”

“A trout,” Wade says. “Hemingway loved fly fishing.”

“A dolphin,” Paige says.

“Why a dolphin?” I ask.

“Because they’re almost human.”

“Well, I say a great sperm whale, for obvious reasons,” June says in her deep southern accent. She’s a nice-looking woman, but modest; her swimsuit conceals more than it reveals. “What about you, Rusty?”

I think of Hemingway’s close brushes with death. “Probably a battered marlin with fourteen hooks in his mouth.”

“Hemingway, Shmemingway,” June says. “What about *Jaws*? What about sharks?”

“The sharks,” Wade says, “who rip apart Santiago’s big fish in *The Old Man and The Sea* are considered by some a metaphor for Hemingway’s critics.”

After ten minutes of that, the captain cuts the engine. “Molasses Reef. Gear up.” Paige and June are going to snorkel while we’re diving. The captain throws a rope over the stern for them to hang onto.

“Y’all are going to have a great time,” I say.

“Be careful down there,” Paige says, hugging me.

“Why are you rubbing Vaseline over your moustache?” Wade asks.

I strap on my weight belt, Buoyancy Compensator, and tank.

“Seals the mask.”

“Can I have some?”

I hand him the little plastic container.

“Remember to keep the regulator in your mouth at all times,” the captain’s telling us. “Even if you feel sick underwater, don’t ever take it out or you’ll drown. You can do whatever you need to through it. Even vomit.”

When we break up into buddy teams, I’m with Wade. “Stay close down there,” I tell him. “I’ll wait. We’ll go to the bottom together.”

“Stick with Rusty,” June says. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“Oh, yes,” he smirks. “Follow the expert.”

I lean back and fall in.

Others are ahead of me. I wait for Wade but don’t see him until I set off for the bottom, where he joins me on the white sand. The boat’s hull seems far away, with only the anchor line as a reassuring link to the surface. I flutter-kick to the reef and hang motionless in the slightly turbid water. In seconds, I’m surrounded by shimmering, iridescent orange and blue fish holding steady against the current until I reach out, and in a blink, they’re gone.

We’re supposed to signal the captain every ten minutes so he’ll know we’re okay, and I do so faithfully. But I’ve never seen anything like this before. Tiny sea horses bounce on invisible currents. Blue-green intricately-patterned fish dart through a forest of stag horn, elk, and brain coral. Black striped fish with yellow tails bolt through sea fans and plumes and whips.

When my air gets low, I signal Wade that it’s time to go up. Instead, he shakes his head. I try again, more emphatically. He turns and swims away. You’re never supposed to leave a fellow diver, but now I have no choice. I surface.

“Where the hell’s your buddy?” the captain snaps.

I try to explain what Wade has done.

“I don’t care. Get your ass back down there and find him. Don’t come back without him.”

I descend once more and search. No Wade. A camouflaged ray explodes out of the sand under me and flaps off. Wade finally locates me, breathing very rapidly—a sure sign of panic—and points to his tank just as his air runs out

He wants mine.

I could share—or let him drown. After all the shit he’s pulled, I’m tempted to do just that. But you can’t really, not if you’re a normal human being, so after several quick deep breaths, I remove the regulator from my mouth and pass it to him. He grabs it like a drowning man, unleashing torrents of effervescence.

But when I signal that it’s my turn for air, he won’t give it back. Knowing the leading cause of drowning is panic, I try to relax. He’s not going anywhere without me; the regulator hose is attached to my tank. But if I try to wrest it away from him, he may drown us both. I’m considering my options when he uses up the last air in the tank. Now there’s only one option left. I grab him, unbuckle his weight belt, and pop his CO₂ cartridge. As the belt drops and the B.C. inflates, the sudden change in buoyancy rips the regulator out of his mouth and he shoots upward.

I make my own emergency ascent, forcing myself to exhale slowly so

I don't get the bends, even though it feels like my lungs are empty. There's always a little air left. The pressure outside my body will lessen as I rise, and the air inside will expand and fill my lungs.

I hope Wade remembers to exhale, assuming he's been taught to during his one-hour crash course. Otherwise death could follow.

By the time I cork up fighting for breath, the captain is fishing Wade out.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" I scream. "Were you trying to drown me?"

Wade doesn't reply. Maybe he can't.

I climb the stern ladder on my own, tricky with the wind kicking up and the boat rolling. Wade is in the middle of the deck, flopping around like a gaffed tuna. June and Paige, dripping wet, hover over him expressing concern as I sink exhausted against a gunwale.

"Wade, Wade, are you all right?" June says.

"What's wrong with him?" Paige says.

"What the hell happened down there?" the captain says as he puts the dive boat in gear and hurries back to shore.

"A moment of indecision," I say.

But I doubt if he can hear me over the engine noise.