

On the Verge Contest

Red Cedar Confessionals of the Rich Man's Sport:  
*A Satire of Wealthy Excess and Environmental Neglect*

"They're killing all the fish, and I don't understand why." The weight of these words creates tension in the space between the shoulders of old man Adam, a seasoned regular who continuously chooses not to wear the sunscreen recommended by the lodge. Adam's frail shoulders slouch towards the bar as he lights the cigar from the front of his polo, "Why do they not encourage catch and release?"

Arguably, the answer to his question is buried somewhere in his pockets, as that is what continues to bring him and others like him here. Adam turns his head towards the water as he pushes out a cloud of exhaust from the second most expensive cigar offered on property. His question lingers beneath the red canopy we stand under, polluting the afternoon sun.

"It's guest choice," I say with the intent of ending words there, but Adams smoke smothers me into reciting, "We cater to creating the best guest experience."

Adam ignores the recycled lodge motto by waving his hand in an act of physically brushing away the overused line. His bony wrist clatters against a watch that appears too big for his body. I notice the crown resting above the printed oyster name, and how not a single mark from sand or coral is seen on the band.

"The guest experience," Adam mocks with the cigar now bouncing in his mouth. "Not much of an experience in waiting for the line to get snagged. But seeing a fish soar up onto the dock while sitting here, now *that* would be an experience!"

Like the many guests whose boats come in early, and for the simple reason of standing behind a bar, I get to hear the many inner thoughts of men. The girl who worked before me said that when guests get off the water, *they are drunk from a day on the water and high off*

*testosterone*. She complained about how they would only talk about the importance of business, money, and their success in stocks. When she quit, her last verbal blast was that *a man really ought to be behind the counter*. In contrast to her, most of what I hear is either the failure of their sons, problems they have with their wives, or the odd piece of advice about investment opportunities.

“My own business principles are not the best,” Adam says while glancing back at the water. I recognize his dramatic gaze as one which is followed by a story. Chats with Adam are joked amongst staff as biblical. The man almost always has something to say.

He continues, “I do business with people from countries where human rights do not exist - mainly the Saudis. But I do business with them to keep mine alive! To model a business from a principle of the total raping of what it requires to survive ...” he shakes his head, “All that I’m saying is that it doesn’t make sense - from a business perspective.” Another large sum of smoke from his cigar is exhaled into the canopy before he continues, “*These people* don’t pay tens of thousands of dollars because they’re starving.” For some reason, I notice his perfectly white teeth as he twists his cigar between his lips. Strange how the most unhappy people have the most expensive smiles. “People used to come here to catch the fish of a lifetime ... I used to come here and see whales for Christ’s sake!”

The red cedar counter, tainted with the spilt drink of those who have depleted its genius, has again served as one’s confessional. But there is irony in what has gnawed at Adam’s heart, as his vision of the role he plays is clouded by his lucrative appetite. Elites like Adam here have been flying their fancy planes and helicopters to play heritage fishermen in beautiful places like this for years. Yet in response to global disapproval, they eat more fish than families who live along the coast; communities who choose to ration for the future health of the ocean.

Adam's shoulders lurch with a typical old man cough, all while keeping the cigar perfectly balanced on the side of his mouth. His movement reminds me of where I am and what I should be doing.

"Can I grab you a drink, Mr. Charlot?" I ask.

He nods while motioning to one of the labels on tap.

"It's been good to see you again this season," I say while pulling his pint. "But if you don't mind me asking, what brought you back?"

"I wanted to take my son and grandson fishing" his voice trails off while turning his head towards the mouth of the Naden. "But I thought God might bless us with seeing that Blue Whale too. The one all over the news – you've seen it?"

I shake my head, "Afraid I haven't sir."

The mythic Blue Whale. I've heard it argued that the last Blue Whale will either starve like the humpbacks or drown in an oil spill, like the last pod of killer whales. If you view the data optimistically, the whale will most likely be coated in oil and smothered to death, as the oceans could *never* run out of fish. But if you're the recently arrested biologist, Dr. Dylan Walker, [or argued activist depending on where you stand politically] the final whale will starve within the next five years. This death would mean the end of our oceans, and unofficially, it will mean the end to the multitude of Indigenous coastal cultures. But if you asked me, it feels as if the whale has already died.

"Has your father taken you fishing?" Adam's question pulls me back.

I nod, "When I was younger."

"Ocean fishing?"

"A few times. Dad's research compared the decline of freshwater and ocean fish-".

“A biologist,” he interjects while puffing on his cigar, “his findings?” he adds with a mouth full of smoke.

The answer to Dad’s work with COSEWIC<sup>1</sup>, is a total ‘no go’ topic under management policy. But even if I was going to answer Adam honestly, it was clear he had already constructed some sort of answer for what he had asked.

He hums a low sigh in response to my silence. “Did he know that Dr. Walker fellow?”

“No sir,” but Dad would have agreed.

Last year, Dr. Walker released a virtual countdown alongside his article, “The Death of Our Oceans”. However, shortly after publishing, he was quickly arrested for sharing information under charges that claimed defamation against GASPF, the Global Agreement for Shared Pacific Fishing. His hope was to bring awareness to the rapid depletion of fish in the Pacific, and for the most part, his idea worked. People started to freak. But regardless, the Pacific will always be the largest and deepest of our five oceans; and for this reason, it will always have the weight of the entire world relying on it for food – until it is empty.

“Well,” Adam says while placing his cigar in the ashtray; leaving it alone in its slow burn to dry up. “I haven’t killed a single fish in over thirty years”, the smoke leaks into my nostrils, and I press my tongue against the roof of my mouth in protest. “Yep. Not one has ended up in those ugly black tubs. Not on purpose anyway. Not that I hook up on many these days.” He laughs, “But if I ever came across a tyee ... I might have to bring that sucker back to the missus.”

The days when guests would catch a tyee are an unspoken fatality here. Instead, management focuses on having guests fill a black tub with fish not yet valued as endangered by the GASPF. My manager says he remembers when the death tubs used to overflow with fish,

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<sup>1</sup> Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada

most of which were too large to fit inside. But today, the number of fish pulled from the water is dwindling, and they seem to be doing so quickly. During the last few months, the daily hauls have been the smallest the lodge has ever seen; maybe one or two per day.

“Was the fishing that slow today?” I ask.

“Well, I wouldn’t be chatting with you if it wasn’t. You pull an okay pint boy, but you’re not quite as good-looking as the ladies they had working a few years ago.” Adam says while pushing away a nearly full glass. “Thanks for the company, Gabe. I’ll see you next year. Oh, and I hope your dad finds a solution.” Then with a firm pat on the table, he leaves.

“Yes sir, I’ll see you next year.” *I hope my Dad does too.*