

Nothing fishy about this story



A dinner with my wife, Yolanda, our son, Michael, and one of his lifelong buddies, stirred thoughts of days gone by (and warm

weather). Of little boys and girls and ball games, basketball in the backyard and books at bedtime. Preschool, Yolanda or I reading to Michael or his sister, Anissa. Grade school, them to us. Then the kids reading on their own as Yolanda and I stood in the doorway to wish them a good night's sleep.

A scene from 25 years ago popped into my head as well: the day I met my four nephews who grew up in Yolanda's Gulf Coast hometown of Port Isabel, Texas. The boys ranged in age from 6 to 3. They stood in front of me from tall to short, four black-haired, brown-eyed reflections of each other, round heads tilted back, taking my measure.

"How tough are you, man?" the oldest shouted.

Then he punched me in the gut.

I was 28 at that time, playing in three-on-three basketball tournaments, working out at the gym, so I grunted and stared him down. My toughness test passed, he corralled his two younger brothers and cous-

in and raced into the backyard to play ball. They played ball a lot over the years. Football and baseball their primary sports, hunting and fishing their loves.

Like Michael, they are no longer little boys, and I'm no longer playing basketball and working out at the gym, 3-mile runs several times a week followed by pushups and sit ups more my speed. The boys are all college graduates. The younger brothers are lawyers, the oldest works on a ranch and the cousin with his father. Like Michael, who is 24, they are men.

But they still play.

So two years ago when Michael and I were in Port Isabel and wanted to go fishing on the bay, the cousin and rancher were quick to accept. Serious fishermen, they go out every day possible, catching speckled trout and huge red fish with light tackle and 20-pound test lines. In the interest of full disclosure (the two lawyers love that talk), I confessed that Michael and I were rank amateurs who have fished a half-dozen time with Zebco rods while planted on terra firma.

Not a problem, they assured us.

Early the next morning, we piled on a flat, white fishing boat and skimmed across the glass-smooth water to

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shallows in the middle of the bay. The cousin cut the engine, and the boat drifted. First, they handed us shrimp for bait and showed us how to place it on the hook, popping the tip through the black dotted brain. Next, how to cast. Pressing the right index finger on the line, standing at an angle to the water, they raised the rods over and behind them and rotated through, releasing the line at the top of the arc, like a tennis player hitting a serve. The lines whistled, soaring toward the cloudless blue sky, the bobbers plopping into the water far from the boat. The guys reeled in the slack, jerking the rods, bobbers bouncing.

Watching this effortless dis-

play and having played tennis as a teenager, I thought, "I got this."

Michael and I, bait in place, trigger fingers itching, reared back to fling our lines skyward. Instead, our outstretched arms locked.

Yep, we tangled our lines in mid-cast, fiberglass rods cracking against one another. Our hooks never glimpsed the water. Curly and Mo minus the slapping.

The rancher separated them, while his cousin assured us it happened all the time "to people who have no idea what they're doing." Humbled, Michael and I separated.

On our next casts, we struck water.

"That sure helps our odds," I hollered.

We still had issues casting, releasing too late or early, but we didn't tangle our lines.

Early on, I caught some perch and whitefish. But it wasn't until I hooked a trout that I felt a solid jerk and worked the fish to the boat. At times, I struggled to set the hook, rushing the fish to the boat, but occasionally, so did my nephews.

I realized it's difficult to hook and reel in a larger fish. It takes skill and patience unappreciated by those who have never tried. My nephews made

it look easy with their repetitive metronome casts, hook-setting tugs and steady reeling, nonchalantly netting the fish at the boat.

But even for them, fish shook loose, never caught until they're caught.

At high noon, South Texas heat rising, we retreated to shore, my nephews taking care of their now 50-plus uncle from the north. They cut the fish into filets and spread them on a sizzling grill. Minutes later, they squeezed lemon juice over them and handed me a plate filled with whitefish and trout along with a glistening can of cold beer.

I'll always remember that day. The aroma of the fish, the taste of the beer, of how Michael and my nephews laughed as they ate.

And I'll always remember them as boys, even though the oldest is older than I was when we first met, 25 years passing as quick as the flick of a rod and reel. But they'll be no singing of "Sunrise, Sunset." I'll take a stomach filled with fresh fish over a punch in the gut every time.

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