

## Fish Story

For five years, I lived in the town of Marathon, in the middle of the Florida Keys. Since the Keys are not really known as a hotbed of culture, there really isn't much to do there other than fish. One of my friends was a fishing guide, so he taught me all of the ins and outs of catching one of the largest game fish in the Keys, the tarpon.

One of the things I truly miss about living down there is tarpon fishing, but we go down for vacation every year, so I at least get a taste to hold me over for a while. I look forward to these trips all year, so it's no surprise that on the last one, I took my gear and headed for the bridge the very first night I was there. For the next two weeks, I grabbed every chance I had to try to land at least one fish, but night after night I came up short. The last night I was in Marathon, while everyone else was packing, I decided to give it one final try.

It was about 9:00 in the evening and very dark when I got to Vaca Cut, but the street lamps up by the road gave off enough light for me to find my way down the rocky path to the waters edge. There was no one else around when I got there, which was just fine with me. The tide was still coming in, and there was a good running current, which made for perfect conditions. I set up my gear, and hoped for the best.

I made my first cast, and immediately got a bite. The next few casts brought a few more hits and misses, and I was beginning to believe this would be my lucky night. Sooner or later something had to latch on to the lure I was throwing. It always amazes me that a fish can hit one of those things and get away, since they have two very sharp treble hooks of impressive size on either end with only about three inches between them. It's not that easy to avoid the hooks when you're handling the lures, so I don't know how the fish can be so lucky.

On my next cast, something shot out from the shadows and slammed into my lure. I finally had a fish on the line. I couldn't tell what it was in the dark, but he was putting up a pretty good fight. When I finally got him up to the rocky shoreline, I could see I had hooked into a barracuda about three feet long. I was disappointed, but still glad that I had at least caught something.

As I stood there looking down at the thrashing fish, it occurred to me that all though I was prepared to catch fish, I wasn't prepared to catch a fish that was not only very unhappy about it's predicament, but also hade a mouth full of very nasty teeth. In my hasty departure from the house I had forgotten to bring any kind of tool to remove hooks from fish.

I had caught lots of barracudas before, so handling him wasn't the problem. The fish didn't appear to be too badly hooked, so I bent down, slipped my hand into his gill, and lifted him from the water. He seemed to be tired out at this point, so I thought I might as well try to remove the lure with my fingers and drop him back in.

As I reached to grab hold of the lure, he exploded. He threw his head and body violently from side to side trying to get himself free, shaking me like a rag doll and sending the loose end of the lure whipping around until one of the hooks

went completely through the end of my left middle finger. Now I don't know how many people have found themselves standing by a bridge in the moonlight with a three foot barracuda hanging from their arm, but I can honestly tell you I would not recommend trying this at home. He was pretty unhappy about being out of the water, and I was not really interested in putting him back until I was no longer attached to him.

Of course, I still had no way of removing the hook from his mouth, which means I also had no way of removing the hook from my finger. If the hook had only gone through a small layer of skin, the next time he thrashed the problem would have been solved. However, I had the hook buried so deep into my finger that I was able to hold him completely out of the water suspended from my hand like some act in a circus side show. To make matters worse, there was no one around, even within yelling distance, to ask for help. I had no idea what to do. I thought I was going to have to kill the fish, and then drive down the road with it hanging from my hand out of the window of the car.

As I was trying to decide how to kill the fish as humanely as possible, it began to thrash again, spinning his body (and the flesh on the tip of my finger) completely around in a circle. This managed to pull the hook, and a substantial amount of my skin, free from my hand. I began to bleed a bit, but at least I was no longer attached to a garbage disposal with a bad attitude. He made his way back into the water, and since he was still attached to the lure, I had to dive for my rod to save it from disappearing into the sea with the fish. Now, of course, I was back to square one. I still had the fish on the line with no way to get the hook out of his mouth.

I figure about this time God grew tired of laughing and decided he should intervene on my behalf. As I was holding the rod under my arm and trying to slow the bleeding from my finger, the fish gave a last mighty thrash and threw the lure free from his mouth.

After I did the obligatory male "It doesn't hurt at all" dance, I went up to the car to find something to wrap around my finger. The only thing I could find was a plastic shopping bag, but that was enough to cover my finger. Since it was still pretty early, I decided there was only one thing to do. I made my way back down to the water and went back to fishing. The bag on my finger made it a little hard to cast, but I got by. I fished for another hour and, although I never landed one, I did end up fighting a couple of nice sized tarpon. Just having them on the line for a few minutes made everything worthwhile.

I'm sure there's a moral buried somewhere in this story, but for now it escapes me. That's probably why next year, if you want a good laugh, all you'll have to do is go down to the Vaca Cut Bridge in the heart of the Florida Keys and look for me. I should be easy enough to spot.