

The empty chair

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I was sittin in the back of the Tequila, havin an early beer before the rest of the sand monkeys showed up for the daily fishin report. This traveler was at the bar and I had seen him on the beach a time or two. Directly, he came walkin over with a fresh cold one that he set down in front of me.

“I don’t want to intrude but I have a question I’d really like to ask you.” He said in some sort of Yankee twang. “I see youse guys down on the beach every morning and I gotta ask youse, whas up with the chair youse guys always bring but never sit in?”

*Well, I am somewhat partial to a cold beer when it is free so I told him about the Chair-Man and the chair. Here’s the story. **JLS***

He was there every day, the Chair-Man. Most days he sat in his chair and fished, polite with any beach walkers that passed in front of him. However, he did point out that his line ran into the water right where they walked. Most, soon learned to walk behind him. Still, he was polite, often tipping his battered and salt-rimed hat to the ladies. We never knew his name or where he came from. Just one day, he was there, sittin in is chair and fishing as if he had been there 100-years.

We called him Chair-Man, not chairman. Chair-Man. I reckon that was due to his almost constant place in the chair, just at the edge of the surf. Also, we didn’t know of nuthin else to call him. Every now and then, he would wade out to the sandbar and stand ankle deep, casting spoons for pompano, blues or whatever hit. That was okay on calm days but just plain damn dangerous on days when the surf was up.

Them days, the riptide was fierce. Mostly though, when us regulars got to the beach, he was there, sittin in his chair.

He caught a lot of fish. For bait, like most of us he used either shrimp or "sand fleas" the small sand crabs he gave a local boy a couple dollars to catch for him. And, as it was with most of us, he caught a variety of fish, seldom keeping any save the occasional baby red or mullet. He would give fish to any who asked for some.

He always dressed the same, long-sleeve white shirt, khaki cutoff shorts and that ancient hat. He always sat in the blue, wood frame chair. He chewed tobacco and spit to the right. Sea Gull, that's what we call Robert, noticed this and brought it to my attention.

He was not much of a talker, the Chair-Man. When forced to, he would answer but made it plain he did not require conversation. He would talk briefly with me and Sea Gull about what was hitting and the weather. Then, we were subtly invited to move along with an "I heard they was hittin down the beach," or some such phrase. Least, he didn't talk to humans much.

We noticed right off, back when he first started coming down of a morning, that he talked to things more than people. He talked to a big blue heron. He talked to sea gulls, especially one he called Idgit, and he talked to pelicans. He seemed to have a special bond with a sand crab he called Eyes. I happened to be behind him one day and heard him talking to critters.

Funny thing, when Lobark died, we all remarked at how they found anyone to pay the funeral bill cause it was a good casket with a sure enough preacher. We all knew Lobark was about as broke as you can get. What little money he had, he drank up and we figured he lived on the fish he either caught or cadged. Some time later, we learned the Chair-Man had covered the bill. They didn't none of us know he had that kind of money cause we sure didn't have any. We wooled that around for conversation for a week or better. Finally, decided that was good thing to do. Gave us a new way of lookin at the Chair-Man.

They was a storm building out in the Gulf one night. They said on the weather, it was some 180-miles out and would probably miss us. That meant we would get the edge of it and some wind and waves. Not good for the fishin for a couple days.

I heard it during the night. The wind blew the screen off one of my sliding doors and I heard the surf building. I just turned over and went back to sleep. Knew there wasn't any need to get up early for the fish.

I woke up just after sunup and called Sea Gull. We agreed to meet at seven and try for a while anyway. I got to the beach first. I noticed right off, the empty chair. It was right where it always was except the Chair-Man was not in it. No bait bucket, no rod holder, nothing. By then, the surf had calmed and the sun was out. The beach was scoured clean of footprints and pretty as you could want. But no sign of the Chair-Man.

There was a set of footprints leading to the chair and maybe coming back. It was as if maybe he put it there and then went off to do something. Sea Gull walked up and just looked. "Reckon he tried to wade out to the sandbar?" He asked. We both of us knew what that would have meant, high as the surf had been early.

A day later, some guy come by and asked us all questions about had we seen him and such? Course, we had no clue. The guy said he had failed to show up for some appointment and folks at the clinic was worried cause he had to have his injections or something. They and I guess us regulars, was some worried and had no idea what happened or where he went. Well, I kinda had an idea but I kept it to my ownself .

We never found out for sure. There was never a trace of the Chair-Man again, just an empty chair. Stories circulated but they was all just rumor. Us regulars, out of respect I guess, we just left the chair where it was, where it belonged. Set on the beach. Empty.

After a bit, the surf or some thief got the chair and in time, we stopped talking about it much. Every now and then, some sand monkey would say, "Reckon whatever happened to Chair-Man? I wonder what went with the empty chair."

So, that is the story of the empty chair. As for the Chair-Man, he just went away.

My sister, she works at the clinic, she said it was his time to go anyway. I don't know what all he left behind. I heard it told he had a little money. I know he left his chair and most like it got stole. So, we got a chair just like his and set it up every morning just in case he comes back and needs it. Generally, I mentally tip my hat at it. I reckon he sees it.

The empty chair.

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