

Gus Edwards

SWIMMING AND DIVING



Down here people laugh when you tell them you teach diving for a living. They look at you and say, “Man, you should get yourself a real job. You fooling people and thieving they money.”

See, everybody down here know how to dive. And if they don’t know it, that mean they don’t like to swim, or mess around in water at all. Now Americans is different. They like to jump into any kind of sea water they see.

So the next thing people ask is, “What there to teach bout diving? Everybody know you jump in the water, hold you breath, then move you hands and feet. Even a idiot know that, so what is it you teaching white people?”

“Man, I teach them technique,” I does explain. “How to wiggle they body and slide through the water faster. Plus I show them how to hold they breath and stay under longer. I show them people what kind of fish to look out for and where is the best place for swimming and diving.”

See, the thing tourist people like best is shooting fish with a spear gun. So I take them to where the biggest, prettiest and most harmless fish swim. That’s why the people pay me. Still the people down here don’t think I doing any real work. But I don’t care. They can laugh. They can laugh all they like. Long as I making money, that’s the important part.

And they don’t know the half of it. You don’t spend all the time on the job diving. You spend a lot of time socializing too. Eating lunch, answering questions, showing people the sights.

About a month ago a white man come to me and say he want to do something really

exciting. Exciting and dangerous. I ask the man what he mean.

“I want to go out in the water and do something really different and heart-stopping.”

I look at him and ask, “Man, what you planning to pay for such a thing?” He look back at me and said, “Name your price.”

I didn’t know what to tell this man. Every time you go out to sea, it exciting and dangerous. You hit the wrong weather or go out in a small boat too far and don’t know what you doing, that ocean will swallow you up.

Caribbean Sea might be pretty. But it treacherous too, if you don’t know how to show it some respect.

I still didn’t know what to tell this man. I ask around about him and people say the man had a lot of money. Say he was some kind of writer who like to put exciting things in he stories. So I think and think. Then I call the man and ask him if he knowed anything about serious diving.

He tell me yes. Then he say he was bringing he wife and his daughter along. “We’ve been all over the Caribbean and have done every kind of diving imaginable.” That sound okay to me plus the women belong to him, not to me so I didn’t care. I told him my price, he agreed to everything and that was that.

We went out to a place called “The Hole.” Ain’t nothing there. Just a patch of sea in the middle a nowhere. But it so damn dark and deep that most fishermen like to stay away from it. Superstition had it that the devil live there and you stay round it long enough, he will pull you down.

“Here is where we gon dive,” I tell him. “This is the spot.” The women went below and when they come back, they was in they bathing suits. I got to admit, I had to take a second look. The older one who musta been in her forties had a shape on her look like something you would see in a magazine or in a movie. As I look at she, I found myself wondering why would a woman shape like that marry a man with gray hair and beard and a big belly? Must be for his money. That’s all I could think. Must be for his money and his fame.

Then the daughter come out. Oh God, don’t even talk about her. She musta been about nineteen or twenty. But, oh Lord have mercy, she was something too.

We get into our wet suits, fix on the air tanks and flip in the water. I kinda circle them around a little bit, just to get a feel a the place. The water was calm and the sun was shining bright. You could see a good ways down. Not the bottom, of course. Too damn dark and deep for that, but a good ways down anyhow.

All kinds of fish was floating by, moving closer and closer, giving us the eye. The man, Bill, he want to shoot one with his spear gun, but I signal him no.

A big grouper swim between us. I don't think I ever seen a fish like that before. Thing musta been as big as the side of a car with colors just sparkling in the sunlight.

I give the signal and we went down a little deeper to just where it was starting to get dark. Not much but a little. A Barra pass and I didn't like the way he was looking at me. Barracudas is some dangerous creatures in the sea because they unpredictable. One minute they standing still in the water, next minute they teeth in your side tearing out your flesh. I don't like them and I don't trust him. I don't trust them at all.

This one pass by me twice with he long silver body. The next time he pass I shot him right in the side with my spear. The point shoot through from one side of his body to the other. He wiggle and shake and then fall away with blood coming outta him like smoke.

Right away I swim from the spot because I could sense a little danger. I wasn't wrong. Sharks. The first one show up like he was curious, just looking around. When he see the dying Barra, he hit it. That hit and the noise musta draw them other sharks because before we know it the place was pack with them.

I shot another fish. A big one and all them sharks went after it. I'm talking sixty, seventy sharks maybe. Bill get brave and shot one of the sharks. I shot one then his wife did, too. After a while even the daughter get into it. And as fast as us would shoot one, them other sharks would tear into it. They wasn't bothering with us. All they wanted was that wounded fish. Man, the whole ocean look like it was all filled with blood and pieces of flesh. The man, Bill, start swimming right to the spot where all them sharks was going crazy. I try to signal him. Try to tell him to stay away. But he didn't see me. He just went right in. Then his wife follow him. She, I know, see me signaling them to stay away. But the woman ignore me. She swim right up close to her husband just so they could be right in the thick of things. "What's wrong with these people?" I ask myself. "Is they crazy or what?" I watch them but I didn't go near. Then when the daughter join in, that's when I knowed that I had seen everything. What you had man, was maybe a hundred sharks eating like it was Judgment Day and these three people damn near in the middle of it shooting them with the spear gun when they get too close. The whole thing was like a dream. A crazy, bad dream that wasn't a dream but real.

I still didn't join them. I keep my distance. See, I ain't no fool. They can risk they life if they like but I ain't following them there. But they musta start running outta air or all the

spear heads was used up because I see the man swimming away and the woman following him, and the daughter after that.

When we get back to the boat, everybody was tired and the weather was starting to act up. I didn't want to take the chance of trying to sail all the way back, so we dock in a nearby cove to spend the night.

Bill, the man, couldn't stop talking about what a wonderful adventure it was.

"Jerry, boy, you really did deliver. That was certainly exciting and dangerous. And boy, oh boy, being so close to death. Feeling its power. Its force. Its vibrations. There's no experience like it. No experience at all." And his wife agree. That woman agree with everything.

By this time, all of us was drinking. And outside, the sea was stirring up, rocking our little boat back and forth. Then it start to thunder and rain. So I lock everything up tight and tell everybody goodnight.

I was so drunk to tell you the truth, I ain't exactly clear on what happen after that. What I remember was opening my eyes in the dark little cabin. Thunder, lightning and rain was still going on outside. Right across the way I could see Bill and his wife when the lightning flash. The two of them was naked, moaning and groaning and holding onto one another. Even with the weather outside so loud, I could still hear them. I didn't know what to do, so I turn my back and close my eyes, figuring I would fall asleep again.

And I guess I musta. But the next time I wake up it was still night and the girl, the daughter, Andrea was her name, Andrea was lying next to me on the bunk. We didn't talk. We just start to touch and kiss. When the real business start to happen, all I could think was I wish that I wasn't so drunk. But, somehow we manage.

Again I musta fall asleep, because when I open my eyes again, it wasn't Andrea next to me. It was the mother. She and I start to kiss and do things, too.

Next morning when I wake up the cabin was empty. I was the only one still in bed. I was naked and my shorts was on the floor. I pull on my pants and went up. The sun was shining, the three of them was on deck all dressed.

"Good morning. You were dead to the world," the wife, Phyllis, said. "So we decided to let you sleep."

"Thanks." I look around, the sea was calm.

"Nice day, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

“The storm doesn’t seem to have done any damage,” the man tell me.

“No.”

“Want some coffee,” the wife ask.

“Sure.”

We sit and talk some more. And all the while we talking, I’m looking at their faces to see if I could get any kind of clue as to what went on last night. But I didn’t get a one.

When we was alone, getting ready to sail back, I ask Andrea if she sleep well.

“Well enough, considering,” she tell me.

“Considering what?”

“Well you know, the bad weather and all.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know what you mean.”

We dock back on St. Chrispus three hours later. Bill paid me and said it was “one hell of a trip.”

People tell me I was lucky to find a cove for shelter because the storm was bad. Four boats was lost and the Coast Guard was out looking for them.

Some fishermen who was out at sea say that in the middle of the storm they see the Virgin Mary with the child in one hand and the world in the next. And when the lightning flash she tell them that the world was getting heavy and she thinking ‘bout dropping it.

People can laugh when they hear the kind of work I do. But I’ll tell you something. It ain’t all just swimming and diving.