

Fishing with an Angel
by Valerie Cole

I didn't have to be at the shelter until 3 pm. It was the second day of our new schedule, and Marcia was working the day shift. I had been sick on my day off, and hadn't been able to go anywhere to either see the devastation or see the country. The smells and dirt of the shelter were getting to me; every time I thought about going there, I felt a little queasy. I knew I needed a moment or two in "nature."

I planned to drive to the Gulf. I knew that I would find areas impacted by Hurricane Rita, but I wanted to be near water nonetheless. Perhaps I thought the water would wash away the dirt I felt from the shelters and from my discomfort. Perhaps I just wanted to hear waves, or smell the salt air. I just knew I needed to drive and be alone.

I drove for a couple of hours, getting totally lost and turned around at one point, but finding myself back on the map not too much later. I tried to go down one highway which was blocked off, washed out, and ended up on a detour instead. Finally I was on a road heading south about 60 miles west of New Iberia, heading toward Pecan Island.

The National Guard stopped me at the intersection of the last turnoff. The soldier was very friendly, and asked what I was doing. I explained that I was a Red Cross volunteer, showed him my badge, and said I was simply sightseeing, and that I would be happy to turn around if he wanted

me to. "Have a good day," he said, and waved me through.

The only traffic on the road were trucks going the other way. Occasionally, a military vehicle would pass, but mostly it was trucks. For ten minutes or so I would be alone on the road, and then there were more trucks. I stopped at one point along the road to take pictures of a home that was still under water, with cars and tractors poking out of the lake which used to be a farm. At times, the road was washed out, and I drove through shallow ponds of standing water. Other times I simply skirted around the water, avoiding the deep ruts. There was an ominous, quiet feel about the area, a feeling of the life having abandoned the homes, a feeling of emptiness.

I had been driving for twenty minutes or so and I was beginning to tire. I began to believe I would never be at the ocean, and that all I would see would be destruction. The peacefulness of my solitary drive was sinking into despondency.

Off to my left, I saw a sign for "Henry's Public Boat Launch." There must be water there, I thought, and turned the car onto a dirt road. The road ended at a gravel area that appeared to be the end of a lake. There were a couple of cars already parked there, and a short wooden pier that jutted out into the lake. Next to a car parked near the end of the pier was a Guardsman squatting on the ground looking for something.

He was skimming through the gravel around his feet, and in his left hand he was holding a fishing rod. My first thought was “damn, I wanted to be alone.” But something else drew me to help him find what he was looking for. Almost before I thought about it, I was next to him, asking if I could help. I rooted through the gravel beside him, and found the fish hook he had dropped.

He had a genuinely calm and pleasant aura about him. We chatted a little about fishing, and he showed me the bag of shrimp a local had given him to use for bait. He baited his line, and walked out onto the pier. Part of me thought to leave to be alone, but a stronger part of me wanted to simply sit on the pier with him and fish. I grabbed my soda from the car and joined him.

We fished for an hour or so. As we sat there, we watched schools of minnows weave in the water. We saw a crab swimming just under the surface. A kingfisher perched in a tree just across the inlet, and then flew around the lake, just to show us what it could do. The only sounds besides the birds were the trucks rumbling past us on the road hidden behind the trees.

Our conversation was light, direct and sincere. We talked about what each of us had been doing in the disaster relief effort. He was a chaplain who had recently been stationed in Mississippi. I told him about the shelter. I told him about Rochester, and he shared a little of his life in Utah. I mentioned my friend, Bernie, who had been a chaplain’s assistant, and he told me of his aspirations to be a counselor. There was no flirting, no

competition, no subterfuge; we just talked and shared a little of ourselves with no pretense. I felt my edges softening, my heart opening, my suspicion fading. I relaxed into the moment and began to feel at peace.

My friend went back to his car to get another type of hook for his



line. While he was gone, I cupped my hands and breathed into them all my frustration, my sadness, my anger, and my disgust. I filled my hands with the resentment, guilt, and helplessness I felt and then let it go.

I threw the blob of negative feelings out into the lake, and shook the residue off my hands and fingers. By the time he returned, the blob had floated away.

He caught a catfish which had completely swallowed the hook. I watched him struggle with the fish in order to release the hook, and throw him back in the water. He was gentle yet insistent. His hands became bloody and scratched. But he succeeded, and the fish, though wounded (perhaps mortally) returned to the lake, and his hook was retrieved. We discussed the differences among “nibbles, bites and swallows,” and he had me hold the pole when the next catfish bit.

He went back to the car to get his camera to take a picture of this second catfish. It was bigger than the first, and a cleaner bite. I held the pole, and left the fish in the water while he was gone. As the fish flopped around, another creature came to investigate. The alligator barely made a ripple as it gracefully approached. I would have never seen it if my friend hadn't spotted it as he came back from his car. And, as soon as the catfish was out of the water, the alligator had disappeared once again, under the surface, out of the light.

I didn't want to leave. I could smile and laugh and be myself and feel completely accepted on this pier. I knew my soldier chaplain and I probably had many differences, but at that moment, we were together. I trusted him, maybe more than I trust even my friends. I trusted him to listen to what I said, to hear what I was feeling, and to simply be with me. I trusted him to be himself, and to let me in just enough. In that one hour, I remembered that people are good and loving. I remembered that nature nurtures our souls, and that there is joy in the flight of a bird, and the movement of minnows. I felt cleansed and whole again.

I left, but not until we saw the alligator sunning itself on the banks of the lake. I came back to take pictures which will probably be dark and obscure, and the alligator

difficult to discern. As I drove away, I realized that I had a picture of the soldier's hands holding the fish, but not a picture of his face. I didn't turn back; for me, he was an angel, and I didn't need his face. I only needed the memory of his soft voice. I wasn't even sure that he was real, but it didn't matter. I had found my purifying water, and I was ready to go back to the shelter, and work in the pollution of that imperfect world again.

