

## Cajun Reeboks

By Taylor Brown

Ruben stove his feet into the white rubber boots he wore on the boat. Cajun Reeboks, shrimpers called them. They rose knee-high, no laces, much brighter than his yellowed socks.

When he pulled the truck into the gravel lot of the marina, Old Wilfred and Pettit were smoking cigarettes near the busted soda machine, the circular imprint of dip cans in their back pockets. They were both drinking Coca-Colas, and Ruben knew they'd spiked the shiny red cans with slugs of the hard stuff, their cheeks red-flushed, their voices loud.

They stood smack between him and *The Georgia Wild*, his 60' shrimp trawler. Built in '79, wood-hulled, with twin K19 Cummins diesels, she'd seen better days. Her white paint was flaking, the galley and bunkrooms long rusted like a ship scuttled aground. He was the sixth owner. The bank still owned better than half, but hardly anybody owned his own boat, not these days.

He closed the truck door with a creak and slammed his butt into the dented side until it clicked. He grabbed his gear from the bed and slung it over his shoulder and started toward the dock.

Sundown, red, bled along the mainland west. Cars along the causeway had just begun to turn on their lights, their taillights and turn signals blinking in the dusk. They made a low and unbroken whoosh over the rivers and marsh grass.

He could overhear the whiskied old men as he approached, their talk hardly new. "It's the goddamn Chinese," Wilfred was saying. "They undercut ever' damn thing. Price of wild-caught's dropped forty percent since they started all that, that—"

"Aquaculture," said Pettit.

"All that goddamn aquaculture. Them farm shrimp got no taste, you ask me. Like munching celery. Why anybody buys them is beyond me."

"No margin left in it," said Pettit, shaking his bald head. "You know them Gulf Browns going for a dollar a pound. Paid out the same in 1960."

Wilfred nodded. "World's getting ugly, Pettit, and don't you go thinking otherwise."

Ruben walked up. "Evening, gentlemen."

Old Wilfred eyeballed him, bloodshot. His white-coated tongue caressed the chapped flesh of his bottom lip.

"You sure getting out late, ain't you Ruben?"

Ruben, younger by decades, shifted his weight back and forth, foot to foot. "Naw," he said. "Just getting out early."

Wilfred squinted at him. "Got you a real sweet honey-hole you want to get to, that it?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe. Or maybe you got you a little bit of something else," said Wilfred. "Maybe you got you little of that 'square grouper'."

Ruben looked at Pettit, who just shrugged and looked at his own white rubber boots, dark with old fish guts and blood. Ruben hitched his duffle higher on his shoulder. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I got work to do."

He turned his shoulders edgewise and walked between them.

"Bet you he does," said Wilfred to Pettit. "Bet you he's got a whole load of the square stuff."

Ruben's boots clopped hollowly down the floating dock, no time to bicker with the old man, Wilfred, his sun-splotched face twisted to a righteous sneer.

Ruben couldn't blame them, not fully.

A half-hour later and *The Georgia Wild* was rounding the eastern jetty, the boat's big diesels rumbling underneath his boots, black smoke curling over the white V of the wake. Ruben lifted one hand from the wheel and spread it wide before his eyes, the black-lined palm, the fingerprints grease-inked. He'd been fixing mowers all day to make rent. Then came the call about tonight's catch.

He rubbed one palm against the other, hard, making tiny filaments of dead skin, grit-black, but his hands were no cleaner. He rounded the jetty, out of sight of the marina.

The boy, his contact, had wanted to meet him back at the dock, but Ruben knew better. He knew the geezers like Wilfred would be hanging around, spittle-lipped and jealous of cash-in-hand. They might talk to somebody, looking for a handout.

Ruben looked past the last jagged rocks of the jetty and saw the neon blue kayak floating several hundred yards off the beach. The boy raised his paddle. Dusk purpled the water. The kayak was bright and alien on the water.

Ruben pulled to a float alongside and pulled the boy aboard. They hauled the kayak over the side by the lanyard, and then Ruben pointed to a tarp.

"Cover it with that," he said.

The boy wore a clean white wife-beater, no wrinkles. He was tattooed with fancy designs, green-scrolled with hieroglyphics Ruben knew nothing about, nor wanted to. The boy worked as a bartender at a fashionable pub where tourists went. He looked at the tarp, gleaming with fish scales and scum.

"Why?" he asked.

Ruben's boots stopped on their way to the wheelhouse. He turned. "Cause if anybody sees us from the air, they'll be damn suspicious what a little blue thing like that's doing on a boat like this."

"How come?"

"How much that thing cost?"

The boy shrugged. "Thousand bucks."

Ruben turned toward the wheelhouse. "That's why," he said. "Now cover the fucker up."

He heard the boy wrestling the tarp behind him.

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A mile out, nightfallen, clear water gone dark. The boy gave him a slip of notebook paper, the edges torn from spiraled binding. Coordinates scribbled in ball-point. Ruben typed them into the GPS and steered them onto the correct heading.

The boy spent most of the cruise seaward sitting on the topdeck, smoking skunk-grass from a glass pipe. He offered Ruben some and Ruben said no. He watched the boy lounge on the deck, his arms curled round the rigging, his cargo shorts clunky with equipment.

Ruben tried not to dislike him.

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Midnight they reached the honey-hole. The drop point.

“This it?” asked the boy.

Ruben nodded.

“You sure?”

“Yeah I’m sure,” said Ruben. “I been finding fishing holes since you were sucking milk.”

“This is more than a fishing hole,” said the boy, the whites of his eyes gone red. “People I work for don’t like slip-ups, and me neither.”

Ruben wanted to tell the kid where the fuck he could stick his slip-ups, but kept his trap shut. Somewhere in that boy’s cargo shorts was an envelope of bills, good for rent and boat payments for three months at least, and kicking his cocky ass overboard wouldn’t please the landlord, his ex-wife, or his little girls.

The boy stepped into the wheelhouse, hands deep in his pockets. He shivered. “Fuck it’s cold out here. It was ninety degrees in the shade today.”

Ruben could see the goseflesh on the uninked parts of the boy’s shoulders, the white bellies of his forearms. Ruben spat on the floor and rubbed the white bubbles into a dark stain with the toe of his rubber boot.

“That was on land. There’s no metal or plastic out here to trap the heat, nothing to block the wind.”

“Colder without all that shit, I guess.”

“I’d of thought you knew that.”

The boy huffed. “Course I do, but it wasn’t ever this cold the other times.”

Ruben sniffed. “Never gets much warmer than this. Maybe you should of invested in a sweatshirt stead of all them tats.”

The boy said nothing, and Ruben felt sorry about the comment, an ugly thing to say. He looked down at the stain of his spit. It had taken on a shape, looked like. A shape he sought: hook-bodied and antennaed. Maybe just his interpretation, maybe not. He toed his rubber boot into it, like stamping out a bug, trying for something else.

“Fancy boots,” said the boy, watching.

“Cajun Reeboks,” said Ruben. “Damn fancy.”

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Two a.m. they heard the far-off drone of the drop plane, low as the peal of thunder across the waves. The gentle rock of the boat seemed to grow less friendly, the sea grown meaner, more uncertain. Ruben scanned the horizon for the lights of other boats, saw none.

The boy took a device from the huge thigh pocket of his cargo shorts. It looked like a short flashlight but no light showed when he punched the power button.

“Infrared,” he said, his back to Ruben. Then he walked out into the bow of the boat and raised the device like a torch, unlit, as the sky caterwauled louder and louder.

The boat rocked harder. Ruben knew the sea must be white-capping out there but couldn’t see it, the stars sparse, no moon. The heavens obscured by a low ceiling of scud. No problem for the drop plane, he guessed. It began to circle them, the pilots surely picking out the beacon with night vision optics.

He thought for some reason of his ex-wife, Andrea, a spare-bodied girl with black hair that zigzagged her face. The image of her still hurt him. She worked at the bank now. Was dating a loan officer, he’d heard. His two little girls like miniature versions of her, no mark of him in them he could ever see, and good for them. He didn’t suspect foul play, just their luck.

But when he thought of that bank man patting their little heads, a viciousness flooded his veins, something glandular, and the fear of what was happening here, now, was snuffed out by greater prerogative. He’d show those sleek-haired bank men, so few lines in their faces, so clean their nails, and neatly-trimmed. He’d show them he could pay his debts, and then some.

He saw the boy waving the beacon in a wide circle, the halo of light visible to men high above, invisible to him.

The drone descended right down on them. Ruben stepped out of the wheelhouse to watch. He saw nothing. Just a black thunderclap of sky and the crash of water. The drone trailed away.

The boy came aft. “You got a flashlight?”

Ruben went to a locker outside the wheelhouse and got the big spotlight.

“Fifteen million candlepower,” he said. “We should find it.”

“Them,” said the boy. “Find them. There ought to be three.” He pointed randomly. “Shine there.”

Ruben sniffed but did as he was told. Nothing.

“There,” said the boy, pointing in another direction.

Ruben scanned the waves. Still nothing. They looked for ten minutes, no packages. Before, he’d half hoped the boy would get seasick, shut his ass up. Now he was glad to have somebody else to share the building worry.

The boy jumped and pointed to starboard. “There!”

Ruben caught sight of two packages just before they dropped behind a swell. He handed the light to the boy.

“You keep on them,” he said. “I’ll steer.”

Five minutes later they were hauling the squared-off packages over the side with a hooked gaff, careful not to puncture the outer layer of burlap, the shrink-wrapped bricks stacked inside. They situated the big cubes side-by-side on the afterdeck, the boat’s most lucrative catch. There was a still a third one out there. They searched and searched and turned up nothing.

“Think they only dropped two?” asked the boy.

Ruben shrugged. “I’m just the boatman,” he said. “Hell if I know if your buddies gyped you.”

The boy pinched his bottom lip between his fingers. “Way I see it, you and I are in this together now, whether we like it or not. So let’s cut the shit and find it.”

Ruben almost wanted to pat the boy on the shoulder, but didn’t. He looked at the gooseflesh on him, like some kind of scaled skin. They took turns using the spotlight to scan the black hills of water, naked save glimmers of windswept foam, no packages. Ruben had not realized how difficult this would be.

They’d drifted away from the drop point. Ruben motored back to the very heart of it, hopeful. He came out of the wheelhouse and took the light from the boy. He was scanning in a southerly direction when the light exploded back at him, reflective, the white gleam of a fiberglass hull. He blinked and saw a center console kingfishing boat, tri-motored for offshore work, rolling just off their stern, the name *Cashflow* scrolled along the waterline, a pair of men hauling the third package over the gunwale.

The image of Wilfred at a payphone exploded in his mind, the receiver gleaming with the old man’s saliva.

“Hey!” yelled the boy.

Ruben turned, saw the boy, saw him yank open the flap of a cargo pocket, pull free a semi-auto pistol. Small, black, expensive. The boy worked the slide as Ruben lunged toward him, across the deck, his free hand outstretched to bat down the weapon, his eyes set on the kingfish boat. He saw a third man come round the far side of the control console, a carbine leveled at his shoulder. Ruben thought to drop the spotlight a second too late. It clattered; everything went black save the staccato burst of gunfire, blue in darkness.

Ruben slipped on a bit of loose rigging and crashed to his knees. He put his hands down to steady himself and felt something liquid on the deck, thicker than water. He heard the manic wail of outboards in flight.

He scrambled all-fours across the deck until he came to the body of the boy, the sound of ragged breath. He tapped his hands everywhere for the spotlight, found it, worked the on/off switch over and over until it came back to life. He shone the light on the boy, his face ghosted whitely in the overstrong beam, his blood so dark on his chin, his throat. Ruben swung the light down his body and saw the black stars in his chest, three abreast.

He went back to the boy’s face. His breath was jagged in his throat, his eyes wide, his chest heaving. Ruben thought of all the fish he’d seen gasping on the deck, gaffed and asphyxiating, and this boy with as white a belly as any of them, working with just such mania for life.

The boy’s eyes rolled once into his skull and then came back, looked at Ruben, the pupils dark-welled despite the white blaze of the spotlight, as though they could no longer keep out all that light. “Call somebody,” he said. “You got to.” He reached for the light, his hands ice-cold over Ruben’s. “They can help me.”

Ruben stood into darkness. He looked down at the boy cradling the spotlight to his broken chest, his face alight. He knew who would come if he radioed for help: the Coast Guard. Cutter, helo, maybe both. They’d put him away a long time for this. He could already hear Wilfred saying he’d hauled in a record catch of square grouper, gotten his worthless ass twenty years.

The boy coughed, liquid in his windpipe, his face messy-mouthed as a boy in a highchair, his eyes still white-bulbed with some kind of wonder. Ruben turned and

staggered toward the wheelhouse, his vision blinded by so much candlepower. Inside he pulled the mike off its hook above the wheel and tuned the VHF dial to the emergency frequency and keyed the transmit button. The line went silent, no crackle, waiting for him.

Ruben opened his mouth to speak the boy's fate but nothing came, no will to speak his own. He waited a long minute, then let off the transmit button. The mike crackled in his hand, static.

He looked for something to help with the bleeding and found a dirty rag that lay wadded against the windshield, rigid with sweat and oil. He went back to the boy and looked down at him and wrung the rag in his hands, too late, the boy's face gone porcelain in the spotlight, frozen, his chin and throat all black with unstaunched spirit.

Ruben stood over him. His face tight, lips grim, his forearms torquing the rag. At the edge of the pool of light, he could see the once-white toes of his rubber boots dark-flecked with butchery, liquid but already drying, crusting. He looked down at them a long time. He looked until his hands quit wringing and he could see nothing very different from how his boots always looked after a day at sea, at work.

He squatted down and removed the light from the boy's face. He slipped his hand into the cargo pockets and found the envelope, fat-wadded with bills, and stuck it in his back pocket, bent double like a wallet. He patted the deck until he found the pistol. A Sig. .40 S&W. He stuck it into the waistband of his pants, the round left chambered in case the kingfishing boat came back for the other two packages sitting on his deck. He went to an aft locker and removed a rust-bleed anchor, a length of chain.

The chain slid loudly across the deck. Ruben lay it out flat and rolled the boy inside, mummifying him in stainless links. He set the strangely mean shape of the anchor on his chest and dragged him to the stern of the boat, grunting as he hauled him onto the gunwale. He rested the chained body there a long moment, catching his breath, and then he pushed him overboard. Ruben watched the boy sink, a ghost retreating into oblivion, his mighty-inked limbs flailing slowly, their designs shorter-lived than the legions they would feed.

Ruben pushed the parcels overboard as well. Let the kingfishers find them, be satisfied. Then he took up the spotlight and cut the light, cloaking the boat in darkness.

He could not go back. The other boat could be waiting to ambush him off the coast, and what of the boy's employers? They'd think he'd tipped off the hijackers, get rough, threaten him with his little girls, his ex-wife. God knew the banker couldn't protect them.

He bent down and cleaned his boots with the rag, a short-shrift job, the rubber left glistening like fresh-bought sneakers on a Friday night. When he was done they shone strangely against the deck, too bright, like they might give him away. He went to the wheelhouse, stepping carefully to keep his boots clean, the newest deck-blood puddling into the old, drying into the dark stains of loggerheads, blue crabs, other bycatch.

Inside the wheelhouse tiny electronic lights blinked and burned, unfazed, his only stars. Ruben set a course eastward. Toward Bermuda, maybe. Then south to Nassau. The Tortugas. That's all he planned. No thought of the past, the future. He looked only to the horizon, squint-eyed for the pale blade of dawn to cut his darkness, but saw nothing, the lighted world too distant, faraway as Europe, Africa. He held his gaze into the black. Finally his eyes began to adjust, his pupils dilating to darkness, his vision

delineating the pulleys and rigging of his little world, his wood-decked island on the sea. Past that lay the black shifting of the sea, the darkest hour given depth and shape, no light to thwart his vision.

*A native of the Georgia coast, Taylor Brown's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in CutBank, Pindelyboz, The Dead Mule, The Liars' League, The Press 53 Open Awards Anthology, and Press 53 Spotlight. Taylor's short story "Rider" won the 2009 Montana Prize in Fiction.*