

Excerpts from *Beyond the Devil's Elbow*

This, from the second chapter, shows the fishing that provides a backdrop for the other drama:

"I was enjoying myself as much as I ever have on a day of fishing, giving my customers the best stretch of shore but walking into a wad of willing whoppers to call my own. Feeling none of the pressures that accompany a slower bite or tougher conditions, I was released into a titillating private world in which I could see right where the fish would be and where I found a happy marriage between two related types of anticipation, first the thrill of waiting for the tell-tale thump that would signal a bite and then the subsequent dream of how big each fish might be. The hooksets transferred energy down my graphite rod, through my hands and into an internal sensor I used to try and guess the size of every trout I hooked. A few jumped out of the water and showed me their dimensions, but others stayed under the surface, prolonging the mystery. Some pulled harder than others and at first seemed larger than they turned out to be; all provided an energized and pleasantly lingering fight."

The main character descends into a dark world:

"But every afternoon, when we went our separate ways, the dense and suffocating depressive state settled over me like an upside down, transparent jar which cut off my supply of oxygen and distorted my perception, as though I were trapped in a damp and musty terrarium in which mists constantly fell. The bright lights and colors of the world all faded, replaced by a permanent, drab gray. On the vines beside my house, canary-yellow and rose-red blossoms seemed to shrink into their stems, and the soggy leaves dripped, ever dappled with dew. Though I'm sure other birds sang, I could not hear their cheerful chirping; my ear focused on a single mourning dove who took up residence in a bougainvillea tree in my yard, wailing on and on, filling the air and my soul with his plaintive and somber monosyllabic song. "

The fishing and the darkness become intertwined:

"Filleting the fat trout for those people brought on a rush of confused feelings, disgust at the ignorance of the man who caught and killed it, sadness tinged with guilt in knowing that I had brought him to the fish and then left them together in the fish's domain. I felt I had abdicated my power over the fish and its fate, and had frivolously placed it in the hands of one who had not earned the right to wield it. I seethed with anger, a fierce and brooding anger aimed at a world crammed chock full of cruel realities and twisted fates. The trout's mouth was fully agape, its colors all faded when I lifted it, cold and stiff, from the ice bath in which it had ridden away from its rightful place among the grass and mud beneath the waves, as if the fish had been sculpted in one final position in order to confront me with the permanent consequence of what I'd done."

The lights of a last Christmas provide hope:

“And there were beads and tinsel and strings of lights. She had sacks and sacks full of twisted cords carrying bulbs of countless colors, but we decided we’d use only white. As the afternoon sun pouring through the front windows faded into evening, I strung the strands among the chosen ornaments, and when I plugged them in, a glorious, pure, apparently innocent light filled the cozy den of my mother’s quiet country home. It seemed that love and hope were alive in the room, bathing both of us in a comforting and soft glow.

We sat arm in arm admiring the tree when it was done, our eyes reflecting the twinkling lights, as though their radiance emanated not only from the multitude of tiny bulbs held up by the arms of the tree, but also from a source somewhere inside us. Outside, night came on and the colored lights on the eaves signaled to all who passed by on the winding country lane that light and life still shined in that house.”

The guide tries many things to distract his mind from harsh reality:

“I rolled into a club called Scandal with a pocket full of cash left over from the previous fishing trip. Any man with a pregnant wallet is welcome in places like that, and I soon found myself with one girl perched on my lap and another clinging to my arm. They smiled and giggled and licked their lips as if they were genuinely happy to see me. I knew it was all an act, but I didn’t care; for a while I actually forgot my internal agony.

One at a time, they stripped and danced to the music while I watched, rubbing their hips and legs all over my lap; then they took my money and put on their costumes again. After a few sips of our drinks and a cigarette or two, they stood and performed all over again. Each girl that came stayed for as long as I maintained steady eye contact with her, but as soon as my gaze drifted away, another strutting and smiling stripper took her place. Then I would watch the new one bare her body, dance and take money from my hand.”

The old boy seeks solace far down Padre Island National Seashore:

“When I had gone perhaps forty miles down the barrier island, I found a place where the dunes had been cut low, probably by the storm surge of some hurricane. I parked my truck and made a crude camp there in the gap between two sandy mounds, figuring that by settling into such a spot, I’d find some relief from the winds that persistently whistled, whined and pushed waves onto the shore, fueled by the differences in temperature and pressure on the land and adjacent waters.

My “camp” consisted of nothing more than an aluminum folding chair, a gallon jug of water, and the bag of snack foods. Leaning back in my chair behind the truck, out of the wind, I sat silently for a couple of hours after I stopped driving, nibbling on chips, listening to the constant singing of the wind and the relentless droning of the waves; together they performed a duet irregularly enhanced by the shrill squeaks of passing shorebirds.”

Eventually, a divine vision comes to help the man rescue himself:

“In the vision, I stood alone on a moonlit beach, gazing out to sea. Far offshore, a beacon of light moved toward me, not a spotlight like the kind used by boats to navigate, but a softer, more ethereal luminescence like those that flash across the arctic sky at night.

As the light moved closer to where I stood staring, I began to discern the shape of its source. Eventually, I could clearly see a female specter draped in a gossamer gown. She projected a heavenly, pale glow; her fine, flowing white locks danced on the breeze. Her bare feet and slender toes stretched down, nearly touching the tips of the waves, but she did not actually walk on the water, rather she skimmed over the sea supernaturally, moving with all the agility and seemingly effortless grace of a hummingbird.”