

## UYA Story #7

*Arturo*

By Kristen Gandrow

Snapshot from Jalisco, mx. An uneasy truce stood between the pelicans and the men. At last the lines of birds had cleared. Arturo gathered and threw his net, scattering the few lingering birds as the weighted edges brushed their feathers. The pelicans, like the men, had exact methods of fishing together in the surf. Their range was limited so their lines of attack were much closer together. Their elastic gullets worked differently than nets. But they clearly had a system. Perhaps theirs was instinctual, not taught by old Manuel or any one of the dozen seasoned grandfathers who perched on overturned five-gallon buckets in a circle at Arturo's Fishing and Dive Shop every afternoon.\\

The birds retreated and Arturo's thoughts turned to the co-op and the too-small fish in his net and Maria Rosa's comment about Berto's new boat and if it meant anything. Technically, Herbierto was his cousin but because of their age difference, Arturo had always called him nephew or even son, if you wanted to translate *hijo* literally. He saw no need to be specific about what or with whom Albertina chose to spend her time. Arturo loved Herbiearto, and if Berto's taut skin on his belly appealed to the gringas and caused them to hire his boat for jaunts to Tamarindo or Tenacatita, then good for him. It was good for business to haul around chatty gringas who'd tell others to rent the boat and Berto with it for snorkeling or sunning on a nearby beach. Berto was a smart boy, he'd soon be snatched up by a girl from town who, post-quinceañera, wanted to find a man to settle down with. All that would be much more like Arturo's own youth. He'd never dreamed of middle-aged gringas on beaches or gringos going out to sea with him as solo captain and crew in his boat, to fish. It was never with another smart local man along because the gringos didn't want to pay two men. Didn't those pink fools know or understand the strength of a 70-kilo fish pulling your boat out to sea on the end of a line? He didn't actively think the gringos were stupid, but they seemed to focus on wildly unimportant ideas while the certain and vital actions of men or animals were invisible to them until it was nearly too late. A few of the gringos knew about fishing placid freshwater lakes in Canada, but they'd never have saltwater in their veins, or the respect the sea demanded of a man in a boat, miles out. Sometimes the ocean was just like an angry mistress, and Arturo was again glad he'd bought the expensive GPS radio. If

foolish gringos insisted on only one local man in a boat, at least he could reach the circle of far cleverer fishermen at the shop if he and his clients got into trouble out there.

When Manuel had those idiots from North Dakota aboard, Manny had called in on his fancy radio and it was the collective brain of the circle that figured out a fix and dispatched Berto's neighbor to help. Berto didn't go that day, he was still in school, but he learned a valuable lesson, same as if he'd gone but without any of the danger that fool gringo got the boat into.

Arturo never again wanted to hear the church bell toll for another lost boat and its inhabitants, but there were so many gringos now, with their pockets full of money, that Arturo knew he'd see that trouble and loss again in his lifetime. It was only once so far, and that scenario was awful. But he expected it two or three more times before he died. He prayed silently to the Virgin and St. Christopher that it wouldn't be him or one of his family. Especially if a gringo also drowned. The arm of the law when those foreigners were involved was far more vindictive than if only local folks got in trouble. The sea, she demanded your attention, and if you got distracted by fool gringos, you could easily be a goner.

Arturo snapped to attention at his net called to the others nearby—he was landing something right now and his dreaming halted abruptly with the pull on his net. David waded into the chest-high surf to grab the weighted side of Arturo's net and help pull in the fish. The sun was setting, this was it for today, so Arturo hoped the weight was something worth keeping. He and David pulled the net as a team and stared into the water at its contents. Still laced into its white leather athletic shoe was a foot and ankle. It almost goes without saying, it was a gringo's.

Now what? Arturo thought. The pelicans hovered and dove near the boat, helping themselves to fish not scooped up by the men. David's eyes met Arturo's. Could they let the net slip a bit, and lose its troubling contents? There weren't many fish so it wouldn't be a loss. And such a better story later, with no consequences, than involving the county sheriff now. Who knows, the *federales* might have to get involved, too. This kind of thing was often linked to drug runners, right?

With just a slight nod and shared glance, the two men knew what they would do, had to do, as the sun dipped away beyond the horizon and painted the sky in bright colors above the suddenly dark tide of dusk. A whoop arose from the tequila-swilling gringos gathered in a line of lawn chairs on the beach, facing the sea. And the day ended.