

To Plant a Fish

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(she/her)

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I remember the first time I saw a fish. My grandfather was celebrating his sixtieth birthday, and my uncle from the neighbouring village brought a fish as a gift. We did not have any water in our village — not a pond, or a river, or even a dingy well. We had to go downhill to a water hole each morning to fill up our water basin. But my uncle's village had a lake. Women washed there, and some children had drowned.

The fish was an exciting affair. I snuck into the kitchen and stayed in a corner to look at the alien shape struggling on the cutting board, all scales and gleaming. Between the moving legs of adults the world was cut into stop-motion frames, and I saw everything in snippets: first I saw the tail slapping, next the knife was coming down, then the head vanished. It rolled down from the counter and landed beside me, its glassy eyes bulging, its lips parted beseechingly. I yelped, knocking over a pile of pots, and the adults threw me out.

From then on I became obsessed with fish. I spent all my pocket money on fishing guides and snuck out to the lake whenever I visited my uncle. One day I persuaded my sister to go downhill to the river with me to try and catch one. We went on a gentle, muted afternoon, and as we splashed around in the water our laughter drowned in the chorus of cicadas.

Not surprisingly, we did not find any fish. Before we knew it, a chilly dusk fell, and a thin fog rose up from the river. A heavy hush fell over

everything like a stage curtain, and looking over at my sister I could see that her eyes were alert, sparkling and darting about.

My mind started giving meaning to the dimensionless darkness, filling it with fleeting images. Creatures hid in the corners of my vision, but when I turned I saw nothing. From the depth of the tall grass a force was gathering; a mystic beckoning surged. A bubble was created around us in which anything could happen. Fish swam around us in the air, slapping us with their tails when they passed, mocking us, teasing us, tempting us to join their ranks. In the rippling waves, I saw myths and monsters, ready to rear their heads up from the water and take us.

But then came the echoing sound of bells, a string of little chimes that wrapped itself around our waists, and roped us slowly back to reality. Tearing into the bubble, blazing out of the mist and chasing away the shadows, was my grandfather, on his bicycle, out of breath and furious.

“Don’t you know how late it is?” He scolded us. Don’t you know a boy drowned in this river just last month? And he herded us back uphill where there was no water, back to the warm light of home.

The next time I tried, I was prepared. I got nets and fishing poles, and I recruited my friends to help. So it was that five restless boys sat like statues with poles in hand, shirtless and sweating in the sun. Looking at my friends, I suddenly noticed their shoulders were wider than before, their tanned bodies slick and leathery. New muscles knotted on their backs, forming graceful, transient lines.

By some miracle, one of us caught a fish. It was a black creature, oily and disappointingly small in the bucket, completely unlike the colourful pictures I saw in my encyclopedia. I did not catch anything, and as I sulked, I overheard one of my friends whispering: “Maybe we should give it to him.” He said, “He wants it. It was his idea.”

So I went home with the creature, gleeful with the ignorance and selfishness of youth. I tried my best to care for it, feeding it bugs and corn, but still it died. My parents told me that I should bury it, because when you plant a fish it grows into a tree.

I didn't believe them and slowly I forgot about the tree altogether. I grew up and went away, each step of life taking me further away from my village until one day I was in a new country, a new continent. Despite this, even now, when I look out of my window, into the clouds floating above a foreign land, I see fish, drifting in and out of the rainbow, swaying on the currents of the wind.

I find myself thinking back to the lakes and rivers where I used to swim, and where other boys drowned. I like to think that the boys did not actually drown. Instead, I imagine that they were having the time of their lives, inebriated in the warm afternoon sun, addicted to the enveloping slickness of the black water, hypnotised by the muffled sound of the world, and for the briefest moment, their souls forgot themselves and separated from their bodies. And in that fleeting chasm, a mermaid swam up from the depths with her shoal of fish and siren song. I imagine the boys staring at her wide-eyed, this otherworldly entity, with seas for eyes and pearls for a crown. I imagine her smiling with the deepest compassion, then kissing each boy on the forehead and taking him gently, his soul draped over her arm as she swims away to the kingdom of lost things, where the forgotten ones swim with the fish through eternity.

One afternoon, my daughter burst into my office and bounced up to me, face red with excitement. In her hand was a plastic bag filled with water, with a little goldfish floating in it. I felt a familiar thrill in my brain, we eagerly put it in a bowl and bent over it watching intently like two children.

The fish didn't live for very long either. Its vibrant colour slowly bled out, and then one day it was floating upside down. As my daughter cried over the loss I suddenly remembered what my parents had told me, that if you plant a fish, it will grow into a tree.

My daughter seemed unsure, but together we buried it anyway. This gave birth to a new ritual: every morning she would go out into the garden, water the little patch of ground, and say: "Look, Dad, there's a little sapling right there!"

At first, I thought it was just her imagination. But after a while, it became clear that something was indeed growing. A stray seed, no doubt, had germinated because of my daughter's care. I told her that the tree would grow up alongside her, and thought no more of it, reasoning that it was just some weed that would disappear one day.

But it did not disappear. The little sapling kept growing, long after my daughter stopped believing in the story. When the tree finally caught up with her in height, she was packing to go to college. The tree looked weird, with a very smooth reddish bark, and sharp pointy leaves. The next spring it flowered: deep-blue, funny-looking blossoms, closed up like bubbles.

One night, a particularly heavy rainstorm raged outside. I did not sleep much, and when I did I was tossed around in a lucid, semi-conscious state, my head filled with strange visions and disappearing voices. When I got up at dawn, rubbing the webs of dreams from my eyes, I noticed the tree looked different. The leaves were all gone and the branches looked naked and exposed. The flowers had been replaced with some sort of dangling fruit.

I walked out into the crisp air in a sleep-deprived stupor, not sure what I was seeing. Then I saw that the strange fruit were fish of all different shapes, colours, and sizes, hanging off the branches, their mouths clasped around the stems from which they hung.

I stood in disbelief and tentatively plucked one off a nearby branch. It stayed motionless in my palm for a minute, then wiggled to life, battering its tail and jumping around, until it fell out of my hand. Instead of falling to the ground, however, it was caught by the air and started to swim.

I reached out a hand in amazement, but when I tried to catch it the fish deftly avoided my touch and swam upwards toward the clouds. I watched its silhouette get further away and felt a strange peace. Like all the other fish that had crossed my path, this one was not to be mine.

But no matter — I knew it would swim farther than my feet could ever carry me. I hoped it would visit my grandfather's grave, and kiss the dusty stone for me. I hope it would deliver messages to my sister and my friends, bless them and wish them well. I hoped it would find joy in the tumbling waters, and swim freely in its kingdom until the end of time.

****Note:** This piece is based on true stories that the author's father told her about his childhood growing up in rural China. It was written last year as a Father's Day present.