

The Last Fisherman

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The last fisherman drags his rusting green boat up the large embankment and onto the rocky shore. He can no longer afford the paint to restore it. It is another disappointing day. Only a few small fish, like scraps of metal, rock back and forth along the strings of black netting at the bottom of the boat. Once upon a time he would have thrown fish like these back into the ocean.

This was before the wars and the illegal trawlers came. A time when young men clamored to join him on his boat and they would return, hands raw and bleeding, but with smiles glistening, like the scales on the massive pile of still flip-flopping fish that threatened to sink them.

In those days, everyone from the area was a fisherman. In those days, lifetimes of knowledge of boat and sky and sea would be passed down from grandfathers to uncles to fathers to sons. And before sundown they would return to a land of music and stories as colorful as the very boats they used to sail. The boats: small yes, but reliable. Now these same boats zigzag along the coast, some on their bellies, some overturned or on their sides, all beached and in various states of disrepair, a mass extinction of strange whales. Broken hearted, the owners have gone to find other work, leaving behind fading skeletons. Children have made their homes here. Some peek up at him now through jagged holes.

He walks along the path that leads to his home, wet, bare feet, shuffling, and picking up some of the brown crumbling dirt. The bottoms of his feet are so calloused now that he hardly notices the sharp little stones that bite into the lined flesh underneath.

It is nearly sundown, but as he returns, another group of men are leaving. They carry with them ladders, grappling hooks, thick rope. They pass around a large brown bottle, each wiping its dusty rim with the palm of a hand and then taking long swigs, braced against its heaviness by the two hands of the next in line. They laugh and smile. Their AK-47s and missiles and shotguns rest on their shoulders jauntily like a new style of cane. Young girls, prostitutes, even old women gather round to wish them a safe

journey. In flapping, tattered cloths, letting wisps of hair drop seductively from under shawls, they circle and dive, for a secret kiss, a handshake. Sea gulls fighting to catch the floating dollars.

This group of men called themselves coast guards and claimed to be collecting taxes from foreign ships. For illegal fishing they said. This is the type of man his first wife left him for. Tall, slender, beautiful and doe-eyed, she divorced him. She cited his inability to provide for her as a man should, blamed her barrenness on this inability, blamed the jutting bones in her neck on this inability (see! she pulls her shawl violently to the side, risking indecency in her desperation for flight). When there is no other law, wealth is the only truth. One of the speed boat men had taken a liking to her. They left the court room as strangers. He, even poorer than before. She, she was gone the following day. His last memory of her, the sound that came from the pages of the divorce papers that waved back and forth from her bony fingertips. *Cheke, cheke, cheke.*

Mogadishu.

At the port a foreign ship has just arrived. Word has reached town. The ship is stocked with food and supplies. Not fish. Land cruisers drive up and swerve dramatically to a stop in front of the dock. From the four gaping doors stream men in business suits, toting laptops in briefcases and pretending to have serious conversations on expensive phones. All clamor to be the official accountant, chief negotiator, business counselor. Petty traders and hawkers swarm like flies to the port as well. The smell of human exertion and something like promise is almost tangible in the hot desert air. Everybody wants a piece of something.

As the men push off the coast and ready the motor. They notice him watching and shout that even though he is an old man, they could still use his brains. He is only 30. But suffering has aged him. Through a tattered, drooping and yellowed undershirt, one can see that his skin, like brown leather, clings to the bones of his shoulders and thin

arms. He is missing a front tooth and a back one. His pants are tied around his waist with rope; he hitches them up, now, as he approaches the house.

A small boy, his nephew, runs out to greet him. His deceased brother's wife, now his own wife waits for him at the door of what was supposed to have been only a temporary shelter. A lean-to made of found things, when the winds come the roof of the house rattles and bangs together as if protesting the humble construction below. Cement blocks stacked row by row and side by side to form three walls, sheets of corrugated iron placed one on top of the other to form its roof. A dirty cloth cups and drums, the earth at the entrance, like fingertips.

She looks at him through folds of cloth. She looks at the small, plastic, bundle that drips from his gnarled tree-root knuckles. Her eyes are dark and hollowed by months of feeding really only the boy, her son. He had not wanted to marry again. But then his youngest and only brother, a successful business man in the capital, stepped out with the wrong foot, and suddenly found himself caught in the middle of crossfire between warring groups fighting to the death for lands and government posts and food stuffs and markets that they, in subconscious teamwork, had already destroyed. When the dust cleared, and bodies were found and counted and danced round the streets to the music of wailing, custom was the only thing that made sense. Life on the coast would be safer too, for the boy.

She does not speak. After prayers she serves to him a steaming bowl of broth rippling around a small piece of fish at its center. He eats this with a thin slice of bread. She joins him and he notices how thin her wrist has become as she lifts the spoon and tips its contents into her dry, parted lips. They each sit on stools. After, eating a thick bowl of cereal topped with a medium sized bit of fish, the boy cries that he is still hungry. It has been his only meal of the day. His mother has long since stopped hearing even the rumbling of her son's belly and silently takes his plate and her husband's to the back of the shelter to wash them. When she is alone like this, she thinks about how different her life would have been had her family had enough money to send her to school. The star

pupil of elementary one, she stoops down and with one dripping finger, traces her name into the dust.

The moonlight shines through the rusted holes in the iron roof. He goes to her because this is his duty as a husband but she refuses him by feigning sleep. He is relieved because he has not felt desire for anything in a long long time.

He goes outside to smoke. He spreads a straw mat onto the ground and sits with his legs extended before him, leaned backwards against the wall of the house. He takes his time to roll the cigarette, lights it with a match, and then one hand behind, the other raised, he holds the cigarette to his lips. Deep inhale in. It is soothing for him to watch as the gray smoke rises up to join the clouds.

The boy comes to him now, so distracted by the growling and churning of his distended belly that he cannot sleep. He has only recently stopped his night time keening for the father who had now joined the long line of others. Martyrs for “the cause” said the warlord of their area and who was fond of the boy’s father because he had helped him handle the complicated affair of collecting taxes from people who hoped that their obedience would buy them safety or at the very least a shift in the tide of the earth shaking rocket fire toward any other side but their own.

The boy asks for a story. His uncle thinks for a minute and then motions for his nephew to sit beside him. Once upon a time, the boy begins. Once upon a time, the man replies.

And so it was that in one far away land there was a famine. The people did not know what to do because theirs had always been a land of plenty. You did not see dirt everywhere like you see here today. Instead, surrounding every house were tall, green, trees that grew, from every branch, the bananas you like so much. There was also so much rice and grain and maize that the people would toss it about on holidays like brown and yellow sand. And of course there was lots of bread and always enough meat to fill a

pot of stew. This is why when the famine came the people did not know what to do. Then one old man in the village suggested that they go to the Oracle. The Oracle lived in a shrine that was so tall and thin that only one person could enter and once inside, no matter how far you bent your head backwards you could never see the ceiling. This is how he was able to know and see everything.

Before he could answer any question the Oracle told them to first bring to it water that had not been touched by any animal or human being. For seven days, they waited until rain came and they collected it in the cups of new leaves and in freshly hollowed gourds. After the Oracle had tasted the water and agreed, he told the people in a great voice that echoed throughout the land, that the famine was caused by a family of white spirits who had come in the night and taken the seeds of their crops. But because spirits don't actually need food they had used magic to use the seeds in order to grow a great city. When the people heard this they let out a cry of despair. Each year they worked harder to always ensure a better harvest than the last. How would they find the strength to start all over again? Quiet! The Oracle said to them, In order for the famine to end, you will need to find a way to capture these spirits and force them to replant everything they have stolen. When he finished he told them to take the water they had collected for him. While you wait, he said to them, you will at least have pure water to drink. This is a practice that we continue today. The people thanked the Oracle and returned to their homes, each imagining what such white spirits would look like.

Before the man can finish his story the boy has already fallen asleep. He carries him inside and places him next to the curled up form of his sleeping mother. An upside down question mark, she does not stir as her son turns and clings to her. The man does not sleep.

The following morning the man walks past his own boat and reports for coast guard training. He swears his allegiance to them and in response they clap him on the back, push a brand new AK-47 to his chest, stuff his pockets with bullets and pull him

onto their new speed boat. They will be joining a larger ship for his full initiation later that day.

He looks back at the woman and child as the motor boat propels him faster than he has ever gone, out to sea. Long ago, when the wars first started he remembers that his mother said to him, “When someone is hungry, he is capable of doing anything.” He looks to the shore once more, looks for his boat, a fast shrinking green speck that soon connects to the other remnants of bygone days that are dotted along the coastline. He looks up at the sunny, cloudless, sky and finally, at the pirate who stands hand on hip, with one foot confidently perched on the bow. The man sees all of these things and, feels, for the first time, lost at sea.