

## TODAY IS A FISH

The last one was a handsome martial arts instructor who proposed marriage by proffering a ring the color of grass. If ever the thing were flung off in anger, it'd be impossible to find, was his thinking. Well, I lost it, and now we miss each other. Except I lost it on purpose—that's the real problem.

The fisherman and I have a fine time, however. At restaurants we practice mind-reading. Occasionally I develop cravings for fish bones, which is what I transmitted to him, the other day at our favorite taqueria. *Fish bones, fish bones, fish bones*, I said with my mind. "Fish," he said, pausing with his taco aloft. "And. I'm getting something else. The fish is coming through loud and clear but there's something else. Is it . . . Scones?" "Oh, my God!" I cried, and leapt for him. "I'm right? Am I right?" he managed, incredulously. "Oh, my word!" I was still saying, awestruck. My arms I'd thrown around his neck. "Close," I said.

Speaking of "close," the thing between the fisherman and me, it isn't serious. We haven't discussed it, due to my skepticism of this specific medium, the conversation, but it's not difficult to diagnose. Serious means proximity, and the fisherman's habits—drinking without me, for example—amount to estrangement.

"Off by a consonant. It was fish bones," I said. "How'd you manage that?"

"Fish bones," he repeated, without judgment. "You know why people started pairing lemon with fish in the first place? The lemon was supposed to dissolve all the unintentionally swallowed bones."

"You know what the next step is, don't you?" I said. "After mind reading?"

He grinned. "Mind *control*."



Nothing's really going as it should, but nothing's really going as it shouldn't, either. Between Sirs Tae Kwon Do and Tuna I started using lotion, so that's something.

Another development is, I'm in the process of kicking my sushi habit. There's the fear of mercury poisoning, and also I found out the hard way: nothing is good enough for the fisherman. So these days, meaning for a month now, it's been fresh-caught tuna or nothing at all.

He came to me bearing a bad burn on his forearm—that's how we met. The patient prior had broken some hand bones on account of a woman, and was back to have his cast sawed off. He'd punched a brick wall—*repeatedly* punched—when she announced intent to leave him. "All this because of a woman? Give me a break," I'd said at the time. Then: "Oh, guess you already have." It's this stupid joke I recycle, often when jokes aren't appropriate, but he smiled for me anyway.

There was a woman's name tattooed inside this man's wrist, I remembered. Once the cast was off, he noticed the name and seemed astonished, as though—in these weeks—he'd forgotten all about it. What they should do is invent a special erasing cast, for this kind of situation. He'd spent this whole time healing, you know. And now there was this, that remained.

The fisherman's burn was nothing to joke about, either. "From when the fishing boat caught fire?" I asked, after he'd apprised me of his profession. "No, cookies," he said, as I bandaged it.

He announced a desire to donate platelets. It required an appointment, so he settled for blood which—unlike platelets—is a drop-in affair. Both arms in bandages, the fisherman proposed drinks after my shift. The immediate impulse was to flee, but the next thought was: why turn it down? We took a lengthy walk to The Lone Palm, where we drank innumerable Moscow Mules, shared sweet potato tamales, and exhausted our respective joke supplies. I could already tell he was the sort of guy I'd spend our whole time together wanting to impress, and I liked that. I liked that he wanted to impress *me*.

At some late point in the night, a man in a biker vest sidled up and said, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a dirty mind like mine?"

"Hey, not cool," said the fisherman, who'd gone to the bar, and now approached, pitcher of draft beer in hand.

"Look, forget it," I said. "It's nothing. Why don't we go?"

Tae Kwon Do would have never picked a fight, but there was the fisherman, talking out of his ass and spitting teeth from his mouth. This was a wrong—but lasting—impression.

We wound up at his place in the Lower Haight, the second floor flat of a three-story Victorian. He said he was in-between roommates, and—collapsing on the couch—that I should take his bed. It wasn't true about the cookies, he mumbled from the living room, and I said I knew. What I meant was, I am well-

versed in spotting sadness.

"I should've warned you," he told me in the morning.

"What," I said. "That you're a drinking man with a fishing problem?"

"But it's worse than that," was what he said, when he kissed me.

The next week he suggested dinner, to which I suggested my place, so that Friday he came over, plus tuna. He chiseled ice cubes into little sculptures of roses and floated them in my water glass. For dessert I tried my hand at Baked Alaska, which I'd never done before. It seemed like something he'd like. Even the name sounds epic. How can you bake *Alaska*? How can you *not*?

"You know about the Frozen Florida?" he said. "Made possible by the modern convenience we call the microwave. It's frozen meringue and inside there's hot liqueur."

This is Mr. Fish, versus Mr. "Way of the foot and fist."

Tae Kwon Do once said, "I glove you," thinking I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Unbelievable that I am still in occasional love with him.

During breaks at work my habit is to persuade the doctors to diagnose me. Difficulty breathing and weakness of pulse are the primary concerns, but lately my extremities have been going numb more often than usual. Take it easy, Ruth, they say pretty unanimously. But where can I find "easy," I want to say. And how would I "take it"?

Right by the medical center there's the Kezar Stadium, and whenever I grow weary of life—which is every other day, just about—I eat a few Falafel Planet falafels and attempt to run myself into a euphoric state. It never works, but I never give up—just make like a hamster and run. If I am lucky I can run myself into a stupor, which is the next best thing.

The other day I noticed what appeared to be my fingernails emitting sweat and jogged briskly back to the hospital, where Grooms, M.D.—on her break, sucking diet soda—said, "What now?"

The thing is, I'm due for something real bad to happen, I know it. Both my parents are alive, and what's more they love each other. I have not, in recent memory, been wounded deeply. In fact it's me who's done the vast majority of wounding, and—even if it sounds like it, which I am aware that it does—it's not something I'm proud of, believe me. In each and every case it has been to preempt eventual mutual wounding.

The only real tragedy I can lay claim to is I used to have a twin brother. He died when we were two. He walked through the open sliding door into our swimming pool and drowned. Right away, my mother had the pool emptied and

filled with cement. In high school my friends used to come over and ask why our pool wasn't a pool any longer. You can bet the ones who asked in front of my mother were never invited back.

But even this, see, is not really my tragedy. It's my mother's, and it is my father's. I was two, and I—despite all my trying—do not remember him.

When the fisherman gets really drunk he utters phrases at random. First I was wary of the habit and now I am fond. String the utterances together and you get haikus, several of possible quality. At the bar after trivia night last Wednesday, he said, very seriously, looking at me, "Beer in green bottles, I fell in love." Another few beers and he said, "Today is a fish." "Elusive? Slippery?" I offered. Another drink, and his head found its way to my lap, mumbling something along the lines of, "Remorse is the cousin of sparrows."

"You mean sorrow?" I said, but he shook his head, like it was sparrows he truly meant.

This was after he'd correctly answered what drupaceous fruit Hawaiian women were once forbidden to eat by law: the coconut. This was after he told me that, under microscopes, salmon resemble trees. Meaning, he said, they keep track of the years. Meaning look closely, you'll find growth rings on their scales.

His family's holiday party was two Saturdays ago, at his sister's house in Berkeley. I got there first, and awaited him near a punchbowl of mulled wine that reeked of clove.

"Is gin a kind of beer?" I heard one of the fisherman's nephews ask.

"Yes," another one said, with great confidence.

The fisherman approached with a forlorn look, when he finally arrived.

"Man, I thought they were Cheetos," he said, gesturing to the bowl of baby carrots. My heart turned over, right then.

The following morning, we were in Dolores Park when the fisherman said, "Hey, would you look at that," and held up this familiar green ring. Just my luck, I thought.

"Ruth," he joked, "I'm going to change my last name to Less and then marry you."



What I'm ill-prepared for is love. That's what I was thinking, walking home from work the next day, when out of nowhere—all of a sudden, it



seemed—there was a gun pointed against me and somebody demanding that I hand the purse over.

“Five bucks and Juicy Fruit?”

“Sorry,” I said. “There’s this gift card, also.”

“Fuck this,” he said, taking off with the cash and card, anyway.

Why my instinct wasn’t to walk straight home I’m uncertain. Instead I flagged a cab down, told the driver “east,” and dialed the fisherman.

“Ruth,” he said, and the way he said it, it was obvious he was drunk. “What’s up? You’re lonely for me?”

“It’s worse than that,” I said.

Lately I’ve been thinking about drinking: the distance of it, mainly, and how it puts people miles away. That’s why when somebody starts drinking the other person is required to drink, too. Not because drinking brings you together, to the same place, but because it does the opposite: it keeps you separate. When you’re that far apart, you eliminate the possibility of ever coming close. You forfeit the chance to bridge the distance between two people, which is more or less the point of sober relations.

The thing is, when you’re sober, and you and someone else are a yard apart, let’s say, that yard seems conquerable. There’s the opportunity of inching closer, and there’s this hope you’ll make it, even though—let’s face it—you can never get close enough. That’s the disappointment built into being sober. When you’re drunk, when you’re communicating from miles apart, it’s perfectly acceptable if things go misunderstood or don’t really get to the heart of anything. You can blame it on the distance.

“The moment *passa*,” he said. The moment *passes*, I thought.

Which is preferable—drinking or not, I mean—I haven’t yet figured out. All I know is, it’s why somebody drinking without you can be hurtful, because it suggests you want to stay separate. It implies you’d rather not try.

“Ruth?” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“Never mind,” I said. “Turns out, it’s nothing.”

I apologized to the cab driver, and asked would he turn around, toward home. The fare I wound up paying for with my debit card.

Which brings us to last Sunday, when the fisherman and I borrowed a friend’s sailboat and sailed the bay. We sailed out by Alcatraz, then looped around past Marin. Seals were out and flipping about, and from out on the water the foggy streets of our city looked like furrows. Everybody knows how pretty San Francisco is, but you don’t know how pretty it is until you see it like

this, all at once, when the sight of it’s not only pretty but powerful enough to erase all bad thoughts.

“Have you ever seen a fish fly?” he said, and when I shook my head he said, “Well now you have,” directing my attention to a small, blue, skimming thing that skipped the ocean’s surface like a stone.

He produced champagne, which I’d anticipated. In fact, to preempt the estrangement and remain one step ahead, I’d polished a bottle off before I left the apartment. Of course after the first one he produced another, and I matched him drink for drink, because it is something I do, on occasion.

“Whoa now,” he said. “Take it easy.”

“What’s the closest you’ve gotten,” I don’t know why I said.

“Ruth, what are you saying?”

“Surely you had somebody, too.”

He looked at me, and after a long moment, said, “Annie.”

“Annie,” I repeated.

After we’d docked he asked, “Should I take you home?” A question of turned tables.

“Should you, shouldn’t you,” I said, not helping.

My thinking is constantly: why prolong what you know can’t last? One problem is he’s permitted to be sad, but I’m not.

“I thought we could do this,” he said, soberly.

“So did I,” I said.

He produced Tae Kwon Do’s ring slowly and solemnly from his pocket. This was a parting gift he had no idea the significance of.

“You’re lovely, you are,” he said.

“But,” I said.

Nights on Market Street, everyone looks extra serious, pretending they’re not as drunk as they actually are. You can tell, though, by how intentional—how deliberate—their steps.

On the stumble home, I dialed Tae Kwon Do.

“Ruth,” he said. “What’s the matter?” after my fourth try. I don’t mean four rings, but four separate occasions of calling him. One of his deals is, he’s cautious. One of my deals—when I’m drunk I mean—is I’m shameless.

I asked what to do with expired bottles of water. The main query was: does water truly expire? The earthquake kit had outlived our romance, and now the case of water took up most my closet space, along with the emergency blankets, the flares, the assorted meat jerky. And though there haven’t been any large earthquakes since Northridge, my mother’s instilled this fear in me—the

need to always be prepared. It was something Tae Kwon Do and I shared, this paranoia.

"Ruth, what's this really about?"

I said, "You know what my problem is?" and stopped, too ashamed to answer the question.

"Take it easy, Ruth," said Tae Kwon Do.

"Body aches, dizziness, heart palpitations," I declared, next day at work.

Grooms took a quick glance and pronounced, "Hangover," without skipping a beat.

"Have I ever told you what a fine doctor you are?" I said.

Later I steeled a patient for her tracheotomy, and held a clubfooted baby for his tired mother. That night we might've gotten dinner, the fisherman and me. He called twice, but left no messages. Instead I made my way to the track and ran. I ran as fast as I could, intending I don't know what. I thought maybe I could get my heart to stop, and would it be so bad if it did?

The next morning there was a frightening storm that I saw from the hospital window and first I was thinking this was good weather for the leftover Shepherd's Pie in my fridge. My second thought regarded the fisherman, whose boat—it dawned horribly upon me—had likely been caught in the storm. My third thought reprimanded myself for not concerning myself first and foremost with human rather than casserole—this human, for whom—who was I kidding?—I not only cared, but cared a great deal.

"Are you alive? Please tell me you're alive," I said to his answering machine.

I didn't hear from him the next day, or the next. In my typical fashion, I assumed the worst.

*Be okay, be okay, be okay,* I tried to communicate, with my mind.

"It's this sinking feeling," I said to Grooms, and today, instead of "Take it easy, Ruth," it was, "Let's go."

We took her car, stopping first by my apartment for the case of expired water. Then we drove to Muir Woods, which is probably my favorite spot in the world for feeling like a trespasser, and also legitimately like there's no point in despair. We watered the redwoods there, emptying every last bottle at the base of them, and on our way back, stopped by the recycling center. They refunded us \$16.65 for all the plastic. We spent it on soup dumplings. Grooms told me that Brady, her ex-husband, had sent her flowers. What he wanted was a do-

over; what he wanted was to give it his best shot.

"What'll you do?" I said. *Considering you're both alive,* I thought, but didn't say.

"Forgive?" she said. "Forget?"

Back at work, my next patient turned out to be the fisherman, looking sheepish.

"Oh, hi," I said.

Apparently, he'd avoided the storm by *oversleeping*, having drunk too much the night before. For the next three days, he drank continuously. Here he was newly emerged from this bender, with this despairing look about him. Here we were, sober as judges, considering what it was we had, now, on our hands.

"So," I said. "What's wrong with you?"

"Your guess," he said, "is as good as mine."

Then he added, "It's a matter of the heart, I think."

I took his temperature, and recorded his pulse.

"The heart? Give me a break," I said, knowing it sounded like an invitation, and recognizing—the moment I said it—that it was.

