

## One Fish, Two Fish

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"I killed her."

I looked up. A little kid, bug-eyed behind Coke bottle glasses, held out to me a plastic tank. In it a turtle lay inert on its back.

"I drowned her, I think," the kid went on. "I gave her new water this morning and then –" He cut a finger across his throat. "Kkkhhh. Can you save her, Fish Girl?"

Of everyone, I had been working at One Fish, Two Fish the longest. When it was just fish, I was the Girl or sometimes the Asian Girl, depending on who was talking. Then when Fred expanded – Fred the Owner, Fred the Pet Guy, and Fred the Fat Guy by those less sensitive – he brought in dog girls, bird ladies, and rodent boys. I of course became the Fish Girl. We had an amphibian guy, or rather a Reptile slash Amphibian Guy, but I'd sooner trust Dick with a cockroach.

<!--more-->"Let's see what we can do here." I found an empty yet warm turtle dish and placed the turtle under the heating lamp. "You have a very nice turtle here – what's your name?"

"Walter."

"You have a very nice turtle here, Walter."

"Roxanne."

"What's that?"

"Her name is Roxanne."

"Ah, yes, of course. Roxanne. You're very nice, Roxanne." The heat didn't seem to be working. Roxanne just lay here, her head halfway into her shell. "But I think we've reached the limit of my expertise here. Let's see what the other pet people have to say."

A mistake on retrospect. Flossie, her hands full of dirty, sudsy puppy, teared up and said, "Poor little guy. Poor little turtle." Phyllis looked down her nose through her red-framed glasses. "A proper burial is what it needs," she told us, then put a sunflower seed to her lips and let the parakeet on her shoulder take it like a kiss. Carl scratched his head. "Mouth to mouth resuscitation?" he suggested.

I knew I'd have to go to Dick. He must have known at least one or maybe two things about amphibians, since Fred had hired him and all, and Walter was getting more and more anxious. "What about brain damage?" he kept asking. "Will she have brain damage?" Just as we were walking towards the reptile room, the front door swung open and we almost crashed into a round-faced Asian guy walking in.

"Whoa, sorry!" I cried, balancing the tank on the edge of my fingers. He righted it.

“No problem,” the guy said. “Turtle crossing, I guess.” He peered more closely at Roxanne. “It is okay?”

Walter started jumping up and down. “I killed her. I gave her some water this morning and I killed her.”

“We’re trying to revive her,” I said. “We tried warming her up, but that didn’t do anything. And nobody had any other suggestions.” I glanced disdainfully at my co-workers. “Anyway, did you need any help with anything?”

Now Walter was galloping in place. “Brain damage! Brain damage!”

“Uh, yeah. I was looking for Fred the owner. Wanted to see if there were any job openings.”

“Fred’s in his office,” I said, trying to make myself heard over Walter. “You can go right in.”

“Thanks.” He started in that direction, then stopped. He straightened his glasses, which unlike Walter’s were small and crystal clear. “Do you think I can try something? With your turtle there, I mean.”

Have you ever had that corny feeling where you think you know somebody you’ve never met before? I’ve had that feeling once in my life and it was right then and there with Walter and Roxanne and the round-faced guy whose name I didn’t even know. But I tried to hide all this as I raised the tank to eye-level. “What have we got to lose?”

The one thing he – Ed, his name was – asked for was a towel. Everyone had gathered around by then and watched as he wrapped Roxanne up, held her above his head, and threw her on the ground.

We gasped. Walter jumped about ten feet in the air. But then Ed opened the towel and the turtle was still there.

“The quick movement,” he said, “might help clear the passageway.” He raised his arms and threw the towel again. “I saw it on Animal Planet.”

Carl pointed. “I saw that too! Except they did it with a kitten.”

“Now you remember,” I muttered.

Ed made two more swift movements and reopened the towel. Roxanne had begun to stir. Her feet twitched and her head strained till finally she gave a tiny turtle cough and spat out a black bug. No, a raisin.

“So that’s where it went!” Walter cried.

Everyone looked at each other and smiled. Ed and I looked at each other and smiled.

Uh-oh. Was something happening here? I stepped back.

“You wanted to see Fred, right? I’ll bring you to him.”

Ed looked startled a moment, then blinked and nodded.

Fred was coming out as we were going in. Another almost-collision.

“What’s going on here!” he yelled. “Why isn’t anyone working?”

“There was this turtle,” I said, and explained everything to him and introduced him to Ed. Fred cocked his head.

“So you brought Roxanne back to life, did you? Okay, have a seat and we’ll see what you’re about. And Meredith, go get Dick and show him the handiwork of a real amphibian man.”

Of course I was the one sent to fetch Dick, responsible Meredith, Fred’s right-hand gal. Everyone was still gathered around the turtle tank like they had just witnessed Lazarus’ resurrection. In fact Phyllis was asking Walter, “Have you thought of renaming your amphibian Lazarus?”

Walter ignored her. “I sure hope Roxanne doesn’t have brain damage,” he said, trying to feed her a piece of lettuce.

Dick had his back to the door, working on one of the tanks. He was a weird guy, pale with big ears and nervous, all the time nervous. Lately he had been cooping himself up in the Reptile Room for hours on end.

“Hey, Dick,” I said. “Fred said – ”

Dick spun around. He had a toad in each hand and something in his mouth. His eyes were wide and full of terror.

“Dick,” I said. “What are you doing?”

His mouth flopped open and a third toad hopped out. The one in his hand winked.

#

The first time I stopped in One Fish was winter break my junior year. Instead of going home, I’d wander up and down the streets every day, the Michigan cold biting off my nose and ears. Entering One Fish was like entering a giant salty womb, warm and damp with the smell of fish alive, which is very different from the smell of fish dead. The smell of the dead is at once metallic and tarnished, a heavy black gook inside your mouth.

I started with fish because I liked the names. Harlequin tusk wrasse, Achilles tang, personifier angel, named as though by some crazed marine biologist with the heart of a poet. I knew that other reef freaks didn’t care that a percula clown seemed covered in globs of white and orange greasepaint, or that a galaxia anemone resembled a field of waving green stars. All they cared about was the level of calcium nitrates in their water, if their snails were eating enough algae, and looking for signs of the dreaded ich.

I cared about these things too, especially after I started working at One Fish and set up my own tank at home, but sometimes I still whispered the names to myself – snowflake moray, royal granna, miratus butterfly – as I worked on my tank, or on long car rides, or as I tried to fall asleep at night. Because the real reason I had gotten into fish had nothing to do with their names or their beauty or creating a world in my living room. It had to do with thinking and not being able to stop. It had to do with an open mouth full of dying and yellowed hand slack on a towel.

#

You could hear Fred yelling from a mile away. All the while Dick denied that he had been trying to get a buzz from licking the toads' gooey secretions.

“So what were you doing?” Fred asked. “Eating them?”

We all watched as Fred dragged Dick to the door by the scruff of his neck. Dick struggled to turn around and look at me. “This is all your fault, Meredith!” he shouted. “You’ll be sorry!” I felt a chill, but then Ed looked at me and smiled. One tooth in the front was crooked.

“Great horny-toads,” he said.

I felt myself smiling back. Then I stopped. Was it happening again?

“Good job, Meredith!” Fred hollered as he returned. “I’m promoting you to associate manager! I’m giving you your own keys. Get over here.”

I went over to the counter where Fred clambered onto his stool. Fish Girl, I Christian thee the Duchess of the Deep Seas, the Lady of the Great Lakes, the Grande Dame of the Detroit River. The keys felt cool in my hand.

“And you,” Fred said, pointing at Ed. “You’re on, my friend. Ladies and gentlemen, meet your new reptile guy.”

“I promise not to kiss any lizards,” Ed said to everyone. Then to me, “You saved the day.”

Shrugging I hitched up my jeans. “Someone would have found him out eventually.”

“Still, it was good you caught him when you did. Before it turned into something really weird.”

Then we both laughed, like two normal people getting to know each other.

In the near distance there was a wet slap. “The toads!” In all our excitement we had forgotten that there were three amphibians on the loose. I followed the slapping sounds and found them in the fish aisle. I reached for one but it leapt away.

Beside me there was a chuckle. “Need some help?” Ed asked.

Then without another word he knelt on the floor in his clean pants and started plucking from the air

leaping toads, as though he had done so all his life.

#

After work that day I went to my dad's, like I do every day. Those first few weeks after my mother died, my father didn't eat. Katie and I didn't know he wasn't eating, she because she had run off to L.A. and me because I was wandering the frigid streets of Ann Arbor. Then his friend, really our mother's friend as all their friends were, stopped by and was appalled. Skin and bones, she said. Like a cancer patient. A holocaust survivor. So now I stop by every night and cook him dinner. Katie's still in L.A.

He was holed up in his study as usual. My father is an architect and designs office buildings mostly. The only house he designed was ours, at my mother's request. She was a plant fiend and had always wanted a house with lots of windows. "Why don't we live in a greenhouse?" my father joked, and that was how she got the bright idea. The ground level is practically all glass. From outside our house must have looked like a jungle with giant fern fronds and pots of bright flowers and miniature trees in every window. Now there were no plants and for the most part the curtains were closed.

I'm not a great cook. I can make simple things like burgers and steaks and pork chops, which was what I was making that night. My father is, or was, the chef. The last thing he made was chicken soup from scratch. Every day that week he'd bring my mother up a bowl and every day he'd come down with the bowl still full. Later Katie and I found them in the back of the refrigerator, covered with Saran wrap and carefully stacked, a tower of relics.

"You're making dinner," my father said, like he did every night, like it was something brand new.

"Yes, Dad," I said. "Just pork chops. Why don't you have a seat, Dad? They're almost done." He hesitated. Without his moustache his puffy lips looked even puffier. He had grown his moustache to please my mother, who once said she liked hirsute men like Burt Reynolds and Tom Selleck, and shaved it off after she died. Finally he went to the table.

My father and I aren't the talkative members of the family. When Katie's home she's full of stories about things that I'd have never thought were stories. My mother was the same way. So a part of me sometimes dreads these meals with my father, our silence as palpable as ice, and try to make sure to have a magazine or a book to read. But that day, I remembered as I set down the steaming platters of food, I had something to say.

"Dick got fired today."

My father looked up at me as he unfolded his napkin. "Who's Dick?"

"The reptile guy. I went to get him, he turned around, and guess what he was doing."

The napkin hung in mid-air. "What?"

"Sucking on a toad."

My father's eyes bugged. "What?"

Then I told him about the turtle and the toads and Fred hiring Ed on the spot. A ghost of a smile shimmered over my father's lips.

"What about this Ed? Does he seem okay?"

A round face, a crooked tooth, hands that could bring back the dead. "I don't know. I guess." I remembered I had something else. "And I got a promotion. I'm associate manager now." The words deflated as they hit the air.

"Oh, yeah? That's good. Associate manager. That's good." He was silent a second. "What were you before?"

I looked down at my pork chop. One part of it wasn't quite done, the meat pink, blood running in water. "I don't know. Nothing." The phone rang.

Every weekend one friend or another invited my father to different outings – karaoke, mah-jongg, dim sum on a Sunday – and almost every weekend he turned them down. "I'd rather be by myself," he'd say, "than with a bunch of people who feel sorry for me," and I could never argue with him on that. He let it ring three times before finally rising from his chair.

"Hello?" he answered, his voice guarded. Then he lapsed into Chinese, "A, ni hao?" becoming a slightly brighter version of himself. "When? Tomorrow?" He looked at the clock as though the days of the week were written on it. "I don't know. I think I have something." He paused, listening. "Really? Hmm. Well, then. Mm-hm, mm-hm. . . . What time? . . . All right. Hao de, hao de. Bye." He hung up.

I watched him as he sat down. "What's going on?"

"Steven's mother is in town. She'll be at dim sum tomorrow. You remember Steven's mother, don't you?"

I did. Although the Chus were the only other Chinese family on our street, we were never close with them. Mr. and Mrs. Chu didn't play mah-jongg or sing karaoke, and Steven was three years ahead of me and five ahead of Katie. He was also very smart and last I heard had gone to Stanford. His father died of a brain tumor my senior year in high school. After their house was sold, Mrs. Chu went to California to be with her son.

"Is she here for a visit?" I asked.

My father shook his head. "Actually she's moving back to Michigan. We haven't seen her in so long. It's the polite thing to do."

We. Sometimes my father still slipped and said we. Realizing this, he hunched over and began to eat as though his life depended on it.

#

Ed spent his first week rescuing everybody. Having saved Roxanne, I guess he felt the need to save the rest of us too. When some kids let Flossie's dogs out of their cages, it was Ed who thought of filling their food dishes so that in no time they came running right back to their pens. When Carl's albino rat Michael scurried up his pant leg and wouldn't come out, it was Ed who put an apple quarter on Carl's head. When one of Phyllis' prize myna birds got away from her and wouldn't come down from the rafters, it was Ed who dimmed the lights, pulled the shades, and lit a single flashlight by the myna's cage. It flew right down and sat on its perch, like that's what it had wanted all along.

I thought I was immune. Fish couldn't be let out anywhere nor could they crawl up my limbs nor fly into the rafters. Then at the end of that week while I was moving a light off a twenty-five gallon tank, I bumped it against a seventy-five gallon, and the next thing I knew there was a long crooked crack like a lightning bolt on its side.

"Oh, shit," I said. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit."

Footsteps running. "What happened?" asked Ed, breathless.

Reptile Guy to the rescue! My face felt red. "I cracked the glass." Water hadn't yet begun to seep out, but soon it would. The fish nosed the fracture. What did it look like to them? Like their sky had broken.

This being a pet store there were plenty of empty tanks in stock. Ed helped me empty the seventy-five and by the way he dipped his bucket, careful not to suck up any fish or corals, I could tell he knew what he was doing.

"Did you used to have a tank?" I asked.

He nodded. "Back east. I started with a fifty gallon, then went right up to a 120. It was sort of an addiction, I guess."

"Uh-huh." I knew how that was. "So you don't have the 120 anymore?"

"Uh, no. It sort of got – " He pursed his lips and stuck his chin out. "Destroyed."

"How did that happen?"

He nodded, as though to himself, as though resigned to the fact of some harsh yet unchangeable, inevitable reality. "Someone tipped it over."

I gasped. I couldn't help it. Just the thought of all that equipment falling, the bulbs popping, the tubes springing loose like dismembered limbs, then the water, gallons of it, so carefully mixed and tested, spilling all over the floor, followed by the poor flopping fish, the soggy corals and anemones, the struggling snails and crabs, just the thought of it all was enough to make my heart lurch as though I were one of those fish, one moment floating, content with my fish dreams, the next falling onto the dry hard floor.

"Who did that?" I asked.

“I’ll tell you about it someday. Like over dinner tomorrow?”

Smooth as silk. I didn’t answer at first. Dip, dump, dip, dump. It had been a long time since I was on a date.

“That answers that,” Ed said.

“No, no!” My bucket dripped onto my shoe. “All right. But this is just repayment. Me repaying you for helping me with my tank. Deal?” I dumped in the last gallon.

He smiled. What was that? A sliver? An eye opened and not closed? “Deal.”

#

I was dating someone seriously when I started sleeping around. Rich was really good to me the year and a half that we saw each other, and there for me when my mother died. Maybe too there for me, always calling, always dropping little notes in my mailbox, always asking me how I was, was I feeling all right. Everyone was always asking me if I felt all right.

Most guys were happy to fuck and run, but a few would try to get close, keep me in their beds talking about stuff you only talk about when you’re first having sex with someone, parents and lost dreams and confessions, and they’d try to get me to tell them something, like I owed them. I wouldn’t. Soon what I was doing got around to Rich. He dropped me in March, that soggy time of spring, crying all the while.

“What do you have to cry about?” I kept asking. “What reason do you have to cry?”

I always made sure to pick nice guys with both parents still alive. Usually I could smell death on someone from a mile away; it was my own smell, like sulfur, like rust, like the underside of a rock.

#

I didn’t tell anyone about Ed. I kept him hidden, a stolen diamond, a buried magic stone. I don’t think he told anyone about me either, at least not at One Fish. Across the kitty litter aisle we exchanged secret smiles.

Ed’s hair sprung up all over his head in a mess of curls and waves. He helped anyone in the store trying to lift something heavy, and he always opened the door. He almost flunked out of his school back east yet he was the smartest person I knew. Speaking with him was natural yet extraordinary, like breathing at the edge of a canyon.

It was his ex-girlfriend who knocked over his tank after they had one of their fights. “Of course we broke up after that,” he said. I smelled myself then, strong like a fart, and he looked at me like he smelled it too. I was thinking of my mother.

I told him she died seven years ago. I told him she was sick for a long time, how the cancer started in her ovaries then spread to her uterus, her lungs, her bones. He nodded and rubbed my shoulder. I even

cried, not a lot, just a little. Just enough.

We kissed. His lips were soft and warm. He touched my face and the curve of my waist. I said I was nervous, that it had been a long time, and he said that was okay.

Was I worried that Ed would find out about my past? Not especially. It had been years since anyone had come into the store looking for me, and I had a feeling Ed'd understand. I had a feeling he'd understand about a lot of things.

I was spending less time at my father's, not that he minded. He seemed different, brighter, but maybe I was projecting. In the refrigerator there were lots of leftovers: shrimp dumplings, turnip cakes, barbecued chicken feet.

"How was dim sum?" I asked.

"Good," he answered, and didn't go on to complain about the noise, the food, and the idiots he called his friends. "Mrs. Chu says hello."

#

As my shift ended on Saturday, Ed slipped me a note. On a clipboard under a stack of invoices he gave me to sign was a bulge of paper. "I'll pick you up at 7 at your place," it read. I glanced up. He was talking to a customer and seeing me gave me the slightest of smiles. I smiled back. Signing the invoices I realized I hadn't yet told my father I wasn't coming and hoped there were still leftovers in the fridge.

The phone rang four times before someone picked up. At first there was only silence.

"Hello?" I said.

Still silence. In the background there was the sound of frying. Finally a woman's voice said, "Mr. Wong's residence."

I didn't say anything. A wrong number?

"Meredith?" the woman said. "Is that you? It's Mrs. Chu, Steven's mother. It's been so long. How are you?"

Mrs. Chu? Had I called Mrs. Chu's house by mistake?

"Meredith?" she said. "Or is it Katie? Are you there?"

In the background the sound of frying stopped, and then my father's voice came on. "Hello?" I hung up.

I don't know how long I stood there. I saw nothing and heard nothing, except the sound of Mrs. Chu's voice saying over and over, "Meredith? It's Mrs. Chu." Then someone tapped me on my the arm.

It was Flossie. "Mer, are you all right? You look sick."

I blinked. Mrs. Chu's voice fell away from my ears. "Yeah," I said. "I'm fine." I looked around. I was in the back room by the pay phone. Fred was peering at me from the cash register. Flossie was looking concerned into my face.

"I have to go," I said.

I don't remember the drive home nor going into my apartment. My head felt swollen as though with water. Water water everywhere but not a drop to drink. Before my mother died she loved taking baths. Bath after bath after bath. It was the only thing that made her feel better, that made her feel momentarily not like dying. She liked me beside her while she soaked – neither my father nor Katie could bear it – and she'd tell me while I sat on the toilet, flipping through a magazine that I couldn't read, "You're the strong one, Meredith. You're like me."

The phone rang. My coat was still on and my keys in my hand. "Hello?" I said. My voice sounded not like mine.

"Meredith." It was my father. "I want to explain."

"There's nothing to explain. You don't have to tell me anything."

"Mrs. Chu and I are going to a dinner party together. I mean, I am taking her in my car. She doesn't know how to get to Mrs. Lee's house."

"You don't have to tell me anything, Daddy," I said. I hadn't called my father daddy in years. "Daddy, it doesn't matter."

"Meredith." His voice shook. "Please."

"Goodbye, Daddy. I have a date. I have to get ready." I replaced the receiver. I didn't get ready. I sat. I pressed my keys so hard into my hand, I bled.

I don't know when Ed showed. It must have been seven, his note said seven. My buzzer was ringing and I was going downstairs.

He stood on the walkway with his arms full of flowers. Orange and yellow lilies, their smell so strong it made my head spin.

"Hi," he said smiling. "You look nice."

I glanced down at myself. It wasn't true. I was wearing the same shirt and ratty pants from work. Ed, on the other hand, was wearing a blazer over a button-up shirt and new-looking jeans. He was being nice. Did I deserve someone so nice? He held up the bouquet.

"Should we put these in some water?"

"Why?"

He blinked. “Because otherwise they’ll die.”

So? I wanted to say.

Ed’s arms lowered. “We don’t have to. They’ll last a few hours. Let’s just go.”

I didn’t answer and followed him to his car.

In the restaurant Ed talked, but I heard nothing. His words sounded watery and far away. I thought of my fish: so this was what it was like. Maybe I had a brain cloud; maybe I had ich.

We were supposed to go to a movie afterwards, but I told him I didn’t feel up to it. “How about a drive instead?” he asked. “We can talk.”

I nodded, too tired to disagree.

We drove into the hills where we could see below the lights of the town. I used to take men up there and they’d think it was a special, a place of romance. As soon as Ed turned off the engine, I was on him.

He let me kiss him awhile before he gently pushed me away. “Mer,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“I want you,” I said. It was like riding a bike. “Can’t you see I want you?” I lunged at him again.

Now he pulled me away more abruptly. “Meredith. Stop it, please. I just want to know what’s the matter. You were okay earlier today. Now you seem upset.”

I sat back. If I told him, then maybe we could get down to business. “There’s this woman, a friend of the family. Her husband died a few years ago, of a brain tumor. Afterwards she moved out to California – that’s where her son went to school – but now she’s back. I guess my father wants to date her.”

Ed was nodding. “So that’s what was upsetting you.”

I nodded back, tapping my fingers against the dashboard. I hoped he had some condoms.

“That must be rough,” he went on. “Seeing your father with someone else. But, Mer, it’s been, what, seven years?”

I felt a pang. I wasn’t used to talking so much. “Yes.”

“Seven years. That’s a long time. Still it must be hard.” He shook his head and laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m probably not being very helpful.”

“No. You are.” I turned to him. “Maybe you’re right. Seven years is a long time. You’re so understanding. I really need to be with someone right now.” I was on him again.

This time he didn't even try to be gentle. "Meredith. Have you heard anything I said? Are you listening at all?" He seemed mad.

"I'm sorry," I said. By now, with the others, they'd be inside me and I'd be feeling, at least for a little while, something besides what I was feeling now. "I'm sorry," I said again. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Oh, jeez. C'mon." He touched my shoulder. "I didn't mean for you to cry."

"Tell me something," I said. "Tell me something you've never told anyone before."

He removed his hand. "What do you mean?"

"A confession. Something you've never said aloud. Please."

At first he was silent. With the others there'd have been confessions of underage drinking, pot smoking, taking the folks' car out for a spin at 15. There'd have been tales of petty thievery, cheating on girlfriends, cheating on the SATs. My smell was strong.

"Remember that story," he started slowly, "I told you when we first met? About my fish tank and my ex-girlfriend knocking it over?"

I nodded. "After you fought."

"Yes, we fought. And I hit her." His face pinched.

"Did you beat her up? Did she hit you first?"

He shook his head. "It was just one of those things. She said something nasty, I slapped her, and she pushed over my tank. I never felt sorry though, for hitting her. I thought she deserved it."

I was disappointed. So he had hit his psycho ex-girlfriend and thought she deserved it. She probably did.

"There's more." His voice shrank and he moved away, and my heart lifted.

"The night she knocked over my tank, she disappeared. Afterwards she stomped out of my room and that was the last I saw of her. The police questioned everyone who knew her, including me. Especially me. Of course everyone knew I had slapped her and what she did to my tank. They thought I wanted revenge." He snorted. "Revenge for a few dead fish."

I asked, "Did you do it?"

He glanced at me sharply. "No! They caught the guy. They found her in a dumpster." He swallowed. "But I can't help but think if I hadn't hit her, none of that would have happened. She wouldn't have knocked over my tank and left that night to go to that bar. She wouldn't have met that guy." He looked down at his hands. He seemed drained now, Superman and kryptonite. A moment later he lifted his

head.

“So do you have one? A confession.”

I looked out over the vista. The moon was high and bright, almost full, and turned everything below a dark silver. The smell was dissipating; it retreated to a little ball inside me, like a tumor.

“I used to sleep around,” I said. “I slept with every guy I saw, after my mother died. I slept with everything with a penis.”

He was nodding. He understood. Of course he would.

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My message light was blinking, but I didn't listen to it. I knew it was my father. I stood in my foyer till Ed's car drove away, then went downstairs and got into mine.

The end of my mother's illness was painful. The doctor said the cancer would probably spread to her brain next, and that we shouldn't be surprised if she started hallucinating or saying strange things. My mother was terrified of this, of losing her mind, and so didn't even like to take her painkillers. When she was aware of the pain, she said, at least she knew she was still aware.

The lights were on at the house. When I walked in, the first thing I noticed was the smell, of frying, of cooking. My father had made fish. On the dish rack lay a drying pan.

“Nyuer.”

He was standing in the living room. “Nyuer,” he said again. “Daughter.” Something he hadn't called me in years.

“We had an agreement, Daddy,” I said. I couldn't seem to stop calling him that. “We had a deal.”

“Nyuer, Mrs. Chu and I are only friends. We were to drive together to Mrs. Lee's dinner party. She didn't know the way.”

All I could smell now was the frying. I saw the fish shivering in the hot oil. “Did you cook for her, Daddy? Did you cook for Mrs. Chu?”

He blanched. “I cooked for the party. I cooked for everyone.”

“You haven't cooked in years.” I felt perfectly calm and cold, frozen Lake Michigan. “What made you start again?”

“Mrs. Chu. I mean, something Mrs. Chu told me.”

“And what was that, Daddy?”

He swallowed. “She told me that after Mr. Chu died, she stopped gardening. Everything in her garden died. Then years later when she began again, she was sorry that she had ever stopped. It makes her feel.

Alive.” His last words were so soft I could barely hear them. He looked up at me. “I didn’t even go to the party. Mrs. Chu went home. She and I are only friends.” Then he crumpled to the sofa and began to cry.

The living room sailed towards me, and I was standing beside him. “It’s okay, Daddy. You can start cooking again. It’ll give you something to do. But we had a deal. Right, Daddy?” Sniffing he lifted his head. “Mrs. Chu and I are only friends.”

“Yes, Daddy, that’s fine. Let’s just keep it that way, okay? You can give her directions to Mrs. Lee’s house. You can give her directions to all your friends’ houses. I can do it, if you want.”

He glanced at me sharply. “No. I’ll do it.”

“Okay. Should I come by tomorrow? Or do you have dim sum?”

“I – ” His mouth opened and closed. “I won’t go.”

“No, Dad. You should go. You should get out more.” Dad. There: we were back to normal.

He didn’t answer, only sat up stiffly, and wiped his face. Then he looked around slowly, like he didn’t know where he was.

#

I couldn’t stay there. I couldn’t go back to my apartment. The keys to One Fish were on the ring with all my others so that I’d never forget them, so that I wouldn’t have to remember.

On my mother’s last morning, I dreamed about fish. The night before had been bad. She lay awake moaning and writhing while we paced. What else could we do? By dawn the pain had subsided and now she was taking a bath while my father massaged her limbs. Katie had gone out for bagels and coffee while I dozed on the couch.

In my dream I was surrounded by perculas. They were gigantic and nosed me as though I were food. Below was a carpet of anemones: ritteri, sun corals, star polyps. I was afraid to stay up top where the clowns might eat me, but I was also afraid to float down and get stung. Then I didn’t have a choice because I was sinking, like I had pockets full of rocks, and no amount of struggling brought me back up.

But when I reached the anemones, I didn’t get stung. They felt warm and soft, their bulbous tentacles gently stroking me. All around me were pairs of perculas, snuggling in the arms of their hosts, and I realized that I was a clown too and my partner was right beside me, my mother, smiling and relaxed. She lay back in the coral as though on a waterbed.

It was my father who woke me. His hands shook as he straightened his glasses. “Nyuer,” he said. “Would you come upstairs?”

My mother was still in the tub. Every day she looked worse. Her skin hung from her in folds, and her

collarbone and ribs jutted out while her face remained swollen, a yellow sponge. Behind me my father was closing the door.

At first I refused. I told her she'd get better, but even I didn't believe it. "Do it," she said harshly, like she was telling me to study or wash the dishes. "Your father won't. He can't." Then she softened. "Ting hua," she said. Do as I say. "Guai nyuer. My good daughter." She said it again and again as she stroked my hand.

She only needed me to hold her down. She'd do the rest, she said as she went under, a line of bubbles streaming from her nose. She closed her eyes and looked peaceful, and for a moment I was glad. For a moment I thought I was doing the right thing.

#

In the store I turned on the lights of the tanks. The filters started with a wump and the sleeping fish wriggled awake. Seeing me they swam to the glass.

I dropped flakes in every tank, then went to the freezer to get the brine shrimp. Fred said I spoiled the anemones by hand-feeding them, but I wanted to make sure they got enough. Melting the frozen shrimp with warm water, I sucked up the mixture with a turkey baster and squirted it into their waiting arms.

The sound began as a tapping. I thought it was one of the pups, twitching in his sleep, but the sound got louder and a dog began to bark. I pulled the baster out of the water in time to hear a crash.

I jumped, dropping the baster and my keys. The first crash was followed by two more, then the bell over the door jingling and the door swinging closed. We had never been robbed before and now it was happening with me in the store. The fish aisle was closest to the cash register and the phone. I inched towards it.

The burglar was knocking things down. "Goddammit!" he shouted. "Goddamned motherfuckers!"

I paused. Why was he making so much noise? Then he said, "Cost me my motherfucking a job."

The voice was familiar. I stood on tiptoe and saw between the space of shelves Dick stomping on a bag of cat food.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" he shouted with each jump till he stumbled, dropping what he had been holding. A gun.

I ducked down, then dashed down the aisle. Hid behind the magazine rack. Cat toys, dog collars, and ferret pellets flew everywhere. He opened canisters of fish food and dumped the flakes. He squirted empty bottles of chemicals. I held my breath, hoping he wouldn't squirt them in the tanks.

That was when he spotted my keys. Puzzled he stooped over and picked them up. I was dead. He'd know someone was here. He made his way to the back.

The door to the reptile room opened and closed. A moment later Dick reappeared, a toad tank under his

arm. He was smiling.

I began to breathe easier. He hadn't even made the connection. Soon he'd be gone and I could call the police. Then at the end of the fish aisle, he stopped.

"Goddamned Fish Girl," he said, and raised his arm towards my biggest tank. He cocked his gun.

"Wait!" I cried, leaping out.

He was so startled he dropped the toad tank. The top popped off and the toads jumped out. "What the fuck!"

"Dick." I held up my hands. "Dick, it's me. It's Meredith."

He looked incredulous. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Dick, please stop. Before it's too late."

He tried to recover. He wielded his gun, though shakily. "It's already too late. You cost me my job and my reputation. I tried to get a job at Pets 'R Us and they laughed me out of the store!"

"I'm sorry, Dick. I didn't mean for that to happen."

"It doesn't matter what you meant to happen. It happened." He glanced at the toads making their great escape. "You didn't have to tell. You didn't have to say anything."

My arms were beginning to ache. "But you were doing something wrong."

"Oh, and you've never done anything wrong, have you, Miss Perfect Fish Girl? You've always been such a good girl."

I found myself nodding. Yes, a good girl, a good daughter. "Please don't hurt my fish, Dick. Please just leave them out of this."

It was the wrong thing to say. He grinned wickedly, pointed the gun, and pulled the trigger.

The tank exploded while Dick fell back, arms flailing. I threw myself on the floor, on the water and shards of glass.

"No!" I cried. "No!"

No, my mother said as I held her under water. I felt the jerk under my hands before her eyes opened. She had warned me her body would do this, that no matter how much she struggled not to stop. Her head strained and her knees bucked. I pressed harder still. Where was my father? Was he right outside the door, or sitting on the bed, or downstairs where he couldn't hear anything?

It was then that she looked at me. Her eyes were focused – what did I look like? a blur, a smudge? a

great looming shadow? – and her mouth moved, forming a word: No.

Then again, no. A third time: no. Had she changed her mind? Was she only scared? Did she realize that she couldn't do this to me, no matter the pain? I continued to hold her down, my arms locked, my brain detached from my spine. My soul left me with my mother's air.

Afterwards my father said, "Of course I won't be with anyone else." There was only my mother. There would always only be her.

The fish flopped around as I tried to catch them. The corals stung my hands. I sobbed. They were dying and there was nothing I could do about it.

"Hey." Dick rose from the floor. "What are you doing? Stop that. There's broken glass." He watched me trying to gather them all up, the purple tang, the algae blenny, the mandarin goby, the pygmy angel. "C'mon. I didn't think you'd get so upset. Maybe we can save them. Look, there's a bucket." He stepped over the water and glass, and grabbed a pail from the corner. "See, we'll put the fish and stuff in here." He squatted beside me. Next to him lay the gun.

It was heavier than it looked. There was the smell of oil and the metal was hot. He saw me and his mouth dropped open. I expected a toad to hop out. "Fuck," he said.

"I killed my mom," I told him. "I drowned her in the tub."

He was holding up his hands and backing away. "Okay. Whatever you say."

"She was sick. She was suffering. It was the right thing to do."

"Of course, of course. I'd have done the same thing." He had his back against the opposite wall of tanks.

I put the gun to my head. The muzzle burned.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" His eyes were wide. "Don't do that. For Christ's sake, Mer, don't do it."

I tried to pull the trigger. I was dead anyway. My mother and I died together that day, one fish, two, in the arms of an unkind anemone. I let my arm drop. "I'm a coward. I could kill my mother but I can't kill myself." Dick was still staring at me bug-eyed. "Here. You do it." I slid the gun across the floor. It bumped his shoe. "You want revenge, right? My fingerprints are already on it. You can say I went nuts, shot up the place, then shot myself. You saw me and followed me. You tried to save me. You tried to save the day."

He didn't move. He looked at the gun, then at me. He looked at the dying fish.

I said, "You're a coward too."

#

The police came soon after, along with Fred. I thought Dick would put the blame on me, telling everyone I was crazy, but he didn't. As he went with the police, he looked at me over his shoulder like he felt sorry for me, and I knew then that I couldn't get much lower.

Fred thanked me up the wazoo, but I could tell he was wondering what the heck I was doing there in the first place. He told me to take a couple of weeks off, to recover. From what he didn't say.

In those two weeks I moved out of my apartment and in with my dad. I was scared, I told him, to be by myself since what happened at the store. He seemed to believe me. I didn't leave a forwarding number, not that anybody would call. I didn't hear from Ed. Probably I had scared him off. Mrs. Chu, on the other hand, did call. I let my father talk to her, but I wouldn't leave the room. He spoke in Chinese, like I wouldn't understand.

I took down all the curtains and had them washed, as well as the windows. At first my father hid in his study, but eventually he came out, blinking at the light. I bought some plants and stuck them here and there. I hoped that I wouldn't kill them, but even if I did, I'd get over it.

Towards the end of those two weeks, a car pulled into our driveway. I was watering the plants and thinking about my mother. I had been thinking about her a lot lately, composing a letter in my head. Dear Mom, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I couldn't make Dad keep up his end of the deal. I'm sorry I'm mad at you for making me do what I did. I'm sorry for what I did. I'm sorry for everything. I knew the car and wasn't surprised when I opened the door.

"Hi," Ed said. "How're you doing?"

I didn't answer. My watering can was dripping onto the floor, and I smelled a smell. My smell. Only it hadn't been there before.

"I just came by," he said, "to tell you. To say." He looked down at his hands. He rubbed them together as though to get something off.

I took his arm and I pulled him in. "Come in," I said. "Come in."

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