

Little Fish

John lived in a small, quiet house far away from the busy center, hidden amidst the dense forest cut short by the barring cliffs of rocks molded by an angry ocean. Upon entering, was a small anteroom made for hanging furs, cleaning coats and dropping off shoes. If he had needed keys to protect his home -he didn't- these too would be left here, as the room was fit for that as well.

He had a routine for everything, something which made him happy. This one went as follows: open door to a 45° angle, take a large step towards the greeting mat (placed indoors for tactical reasons), take off his boots and place them in a small wooden crate, covered with plastic, along his other two pair of shoes; hang his overcoat to the left, the coat to the right, accidentally glance in the mirror, tear eyes away from the image reflected, cross the threshold, start a fire, head towards the kitchen, put on a kettle for tea; while waiting for the water to boil, he would enjoy the silence and the loneliness; grab a book from the bookshelf, sit on his reading chair next to the fireplace, place the mug on his hand-crafted table, and read until dinner.

John did not enjoy music, restaurants nor pubs. He did however, take sheer delight in reading biographies of famous men and battles. Never autobiographies, subjective as they were, but always objective, factual biographies.

Due to his extremely silent nature, he had seldom, if any, friends, yet he was the most diligent librarian north of the entire river. His recording, classifying and cataloguing were impeccable, as was his memory. He knew exactly where every book was kept, and what each was about. The downside of the occupation was that everyone looked at him, but nobody saw him. How dreary and lonely a life could be.

The townsfolk rarely got a chance to catch a glimpse of him, and thus, turned morning mass into a gossip sanctuary. He was not a spiritual man, or rather was, and in fact a lot, though not in the way that is fashionable; Reason trumped Faith. How wonderful would the world be if only people would choose reason above all things!

On one of the many days -too many- of holiday, a parade ensued, and John, who had failed to read this last in on the paper, found himself in the middle of decorated floats, fake giant heads, and shrilling French horns, cornets and cymbals.

He was reprimanding himself for his mistake when a boy rushed to his side and asked for his help. John was heartbroken for failing his routine once again, but there was no way around it, he seemed the only sober person there. No wonder the boy chose him. He turned his head and glanced at him, fully appreciating this funny looking little being. He seemed to be older, but his minute appearance made him look quite young. His eyes were double the size of those of a grown man. Seeming to compensate for his bulging eyes, this boy's nose was no more than a sorry bump with two nostrils. His whole palate was edged forward and ended in what might appear a horse's mouth, or, more accurately, a fish's.

- I need water - the boy cried with raging urgency. -Please! I need water.-

He carried a barrel with him, ingeniously roped so as to allow it to roll while he walked. John led him toward a nearby pub, barrel rolling behind, and after talking to the barman, offered him a pint sized glass of water. The boy's eyes grew wide with renewed urgency.

- I need water for my barrel. Sea water- he added rapidly, sensing that having said too little last time was the cause for this confusion.

John nodded and now led him down to a makeshift beach created by a cave and two huge jagged cliffs. The child appeared to be getting sicker and sicker, like a fish out of water.

The boy's mouth opened so his eyes covered all his face and he now, unfortunately, had the façade of a featherless pelican. Then, suddenly, he ran wildly into the black, winter waves, swerving skillfully between the giant rocks. John ran towards him.

- I don't think that is such a good idea. - He called after the boy.

- Wow! I can fill so many barrels here. Where is here? Thank you, sir. Do you know where we are? -

Is what the boy had wanted to say but, although he'd yelled forcefully, the waves muffled his voice and manipulated his words, so that all John could hear was this:

- Wow! Cans. Barrels. Here. Here. Thank you. War. -

The boy came out of the water twice his size, barrel in hand, filled all the way up with salt water. John couldn't help but wonder why would anyone need so much salt water? But

his musings were cut short by a frozen drift, like needles on John's face.

- You'll catch a cold. Here. -

John took off his overcoat and handed it to him. The child had jumped in with all his clothes, and now was drenching wet. John fixed the sleeves and tail so as to fit the ten year old, and keep these from getting soiled.

- Thank you very much, sir. My name is Kala Vähän.

- Pleasure to meet you, young Callahan, my name is John.

- John?

- John.

- John.

- Yes, John.

- Just... John?

- Plain John.

The boy looked disappointed but John seemed not to notice. He was grateful for that name. It was one that drew no attention, ever. And that was nice.

They began walking back to the city center.

- Where are your parents?

- I don't know. I lost my way. - He then added cheerfully: - You must surely know where we are.

- Yes, this is Covent Cliff.

- There's a cliff next to my house, too! It's my favorite place.

- What is your street adress?

- Milton Lane, 1. You know, that's where I was fished out.

John motioned towards Kala Vähän to start moving, and they headed back from where they came from, taking left turns now and then.

- My dad fished me out. Of course I don't remember that. I remember going for a grand looking feast ahead of me and then waking up on a boat. I didn't know what a boat was then of course. I'd only moments ago been fished out of my home.

- Your home was the sea?

- Yes. - Kala Vähän said proudly. - I was born in the sea.
- Oh,- said John slightly impressed - on what vessel?

Kala Vähän looked at John confused. They walked on in silence. After some minutes, Kala Vähän asked to stop for a bit, and climbed into his upright barrel.

- I need this to breathe.
- Have you a medical condition of some kind?- John asked, almost concerned. The boy laughed.
- Maybe. I'm still growing lungs.- he chuckled.
- Pardon?
- I told you, I was born in the sea.
- I don't see any relationship.

John was starting to feel cheated, mocked somehow.

- You can't breathe underwater with lungs, now can you?-
- You can breathe underwater?- John said scoffingly, though the boy didn't notice and continued.
- Of course! Not with my lungs, though.

They resumed walking, Kala Vähän's barrel rolling behind. John was now feeling quite agitated. This boy was clearly lying through his teeth, and that just plain wrong. Lies leave too much to the imagination. John had never liked imagination.

- I think they're called jills. The other things that are not lungs. That's how I can live underwater. It's so nice down th...
- You don't have gills. Little boys don't have gills.
- I do, too.
- You do not.
- Do too!
- Do not.
- Do too!
- What you are saying is fiction not fact!
- Is not!
- Is...

John collected himself. These were the fantasies of a ten year old boy. He was just a boy. John was the adult. Oh, how he detested fiction!

They walked on in silence for some time. Suddenly Kala Vähän ran down a road, or tried to, as he fell often. He stopped in front of the only house standing upon a cliff's edge, precariously leaning towards the precipice. John had read about these old fishermen's dwellings, why and how they'd been built, and subsequently destroyed. All but one, it seemed. John eyed the boy dubiously, sensing another hoax, but he was weary, and had already said more than enough. He just wanted the boy delivered to whoever was his guardian. So, he followed the child towards the doorstep, and was about to knock on the door, when a gray haired lady dressed in brownish layers opened it.

- Mother! - Kala Vähän cried delighted.

She took Kala Vähän in her arms jovially, noticed the overcoat, and looked at John. She smiled gratefully at him and invited him in for tea. John refused, but the old lady insisted in such a way no one could be moved to decline.

As they moved through the small quarters of the house, John could not help but gawk at the most amazing pieces of decoration he'd ever seen. This adventureless man was hit in the face with scenes of feats and exotic trips, real and imagined; literature, music, and art assimilated into the harsh world of fishing; things hung so that John had to glide past them, maps of faraway lands adorned the walls, books as big as John himself stood like pillars, or were opened on one page; Don Quixote rode his horse in a wire statue.

Once in the kitchen, John saw a man sitting by the stove. He seemed to be restoring an old fishing rod.

- Ismo, look who's back! - the old lady said to him fondly.

The old man turned and John could see his rough features, and was reminded of the hardship of a fisherman's life. Upon seeing the boy, his coarse face lit up, especially his tired eyes.

- Kala Vähän, my boy, I thought we'd lost you.

- No, papa, John helped me get back. There was a parade, and someone knocked over

my barrel, but he helped me fill it up again, and brought me here.

Ismo looked at John with grateful eyes, and took out a stool for John to sit on. The old lady put the kettle on the small table, and they all sat down for tea.

They told him of Kala Vähän, how Ismo was out fishing on a bitter day and suddenly a little boy of five was caught in his net. He was unconscious and flopping around like the other fish. Ismo woke him, and the boy started gasping for air, so he put him in a bucket full of seawater. He couldn't believe his eyes. They had always wanted children, but were unable to conceive. And then, out of nowhere, this wonderful little boy appears into their lives.

It was hard for John to swallow his tea properly; what kind of talk was this, a magical boy appearing out of nowhere. The old lady sensed his skepticism and said:

- We thought he had gotten lost, and fallen into the sea. Gorges are no place for children. And you know how violent the waves are around here. But, when he came home, Kala Vähän could not breathe out of water, nor could he walk, nor use his hands normally. Ismo filled the tub with salt water, and slowly taught him how to breathe air. He took such a liking to him, didn't you love? He taught him how to walk, that took a while, but we were patient, we were so happy just to have him here. He would only eat fish, luckily for us. Ismo taught him how to eat using his hands, then a knife and fork. After a year or so he learned to talk, and he was so sweet, so loving. We also taught him manners, didn't we Kala Vähän?

Kala Vähän nodded proudly.

- Ismo gave him that name. It's Finnish for Little Fish.

- You encourage the boy's fantasies? - John asked, bewildered.

- It's not a fantasy, it's the truth! - Kala Vähän replied quickly.

- Truth? That is not truth. It's an insult to it!

John didn't mean to lose his temper, but this was just too much. What irresponsible parents, he thought to himself. No wonder the boy is such a liar.

- What is truth, John? - the old lady asked him, and without giving him a chance to

answer, continued. - It is what we choose to believe, is it not? Even truth is made up.

- Truth is fact ma'am - John interrupted.

- Facts can be manipulated, my dear John. This is Kala Vähän's truth; who are we to refuse it? Not only can truth be made up, but each person has his or her own personal truth.

John was not a philosopher. This lady made a good point, but not a great one. How was he to rebuke her, he had no wise words to offer, he just knew what his ideas let him know. And he had never been good with words. But all this talk was making him ill at ease, and he knew he had to leave. He got up, thanked the elderly couple, and was about to walk out the door when he heard running and falling and running and falling. Kala Vähän came up to him, visibly tired.

- Will you come see me John? I won't make you mad, I promise. -

The boy had charm, he had to admit. And he did enjoy the company. But the boy did not fit into his routine. Could he spare his routine, for just one day? He'd already broken it today. But it had been a nice day, and he did enjoy the company. Maybe he could come for a bit after work. Maybe.

- I'll come back tomorrow, if your parents allow me to do so. - he blurted out, his mouth disobeying his brain.

The old lady, who had walked him out, nodded, smiling. John walked back home feeling something change inside him. He had, at last, made a friend.