About the Author

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THE FISH WERE ALL MOTHERS

NADIM S SILVERMAN

Some days the lake grew so large, it lapped at our doorstep. The wet slap of water would wake everyone, no matter the hour, and the day would begin. The fishermen—my dad included—waded out until they were almost completely submerged. Dad could be up to his hips in water by the time he reached the edge of our front yard. Nets in hand, they would haul in more fish than our village could eat or sell. Most was salted, turned to jerky. But my memories of these periods of abundance taste like fresh fish, not jerky. The soft flesh was like a drug. We ate with violent impatience. Bones went down easy as meat. Only mom still kept an air of civility around the dinner table.

Even funerals became occasions to dance and sing. At dusk, Big Rosie would play her tuba atop her thatched roof. My parents, hearing this celebratory call to arms, would dress up, wearing skirts and pants so long they kissed the top of their shoes. I'd be asleep by the time they got home. It felt, at the time, as if a mass delirium took hold of all of us. Almost all of us.

You see, in my dreams, the waters swelled, creeping beyond thresholds, pushing open blinds. I'd run from room to room and the current would chase me, like a tiger after a deer. Our house was small even in my dreams. Eventually there was nowhere left to turn and the waters would swallow me whole. I knew, in the way dreams allow, that

the waters were angry—a rage born from deep sadness, from loss. These dreams were most vivid when the lake was largest. But the lake never stayed that way. The adults in our village were always preparing for its contractions or so it seemed—hence the jerky. It was during one such shrinking that my father disappeared.

That morning, pond became puddle. The fish vanished, leaving behind a single orange roe. And the deer who had come to sate their thirst left disappointed. Have you ever seen a disappointed deer?

"It's just like me," mom would say of the lake. "I was the slimmest girl in my year. Your grandma worried the wind would carry me away. Then I met your father and I ballooned like you wouldn't believe. That was your fault, you know. You were my helium. My fish, swimming and eating your heart out inside me. All of you, seven pounds, came out of nothing."

"I know how babies are made."

"Yeah? Tell me."

I hesitated, sensing a trap. Her eyes were heavily lidded, and still somehow caught so much light. Under her stare, my tongue loosened.

"The boy puts his penis in the girl."

"And how does that make a baby?"

"It just does!" I was frustrated—feeling like she was moving the goalposts.

She laughed, then looked past me. She was always wandering like this, never settling for long. She said she deserved a diagnosis. The doctor—the only one for miles—disagreed.

"Look," she said, pointing towards the lake, which was only a pond that day. "It's pregnant. Tomorrow it will be bigger. Your dad will go out and hook some big ones."

She wasn't wrong. But the lake didn't always grow so predictably.

"Yes, well that happens to women too," she murmured, a mist settling over her expression.

The waters were as shy as they were capricious. If watched, they refused to move. One night, Rafa and I stayed up late, our eyes burning, locked open, determined to test the lake's resolve. We peeled open our eyelids with pointer and thumb, afraid the water would shift the

moment we blinked. When the strain became unbearable, we'd call out a warning—"I'm gonna go!"—and the other would brace himself, holding on just a little longer while the first gave in, lashes fluttering shut in brief surrender. My little mind thought that these games of ours were part of a long courtship that, sadly, never ended up materializing. It burns my cheeks, thinking about these old dreams.

In the end, we lost. An unnaturally thick mist settled on the space between us and the edge of the pond. White wisps so opaque it felt like you could touch them, drink them in. Rafa swore he drank some, said it tasted like milk. I ran home and cried into Mom's stomach, so overcome with jealousy.

"Boy, calm down. It's good you didn't. Your stomach can't handle that much lactose. I should know."

It took a full twenty-four hours for her shirt to dry.

Every fish my dad caught was brimming with roe. Two weeks before he disappeared, I saw him carve open a trout. Orange jewels spilled out from its belly.

Perched on the kitchen stool, I asked, "Can a baby get pregnant while it's still inside the belly?"

I thought that was what I was seeing. Mom said I was her fish. It terrified me to think I could be filled with those jewels too.

Dad slapped me. The stool wobbled. My eyes watered before the sting set in.

"You're ok," he told me, turning back to the fish on his cutting board. "That's just a bit of my love."

I nodded, though I don't think I knew what I was agreeing to.

"I can't send you into the world with a twisted tongue. Talking nonsense. Your mom, she knows what that's like… she knows… Yeah, you're ok. It's just a bit of my love."

Mom says the lake, the pond, the puddle was once a river with direction.

"Imagine that!"

Rafa and I weren't the only ones watching the waters.

At village meetings, I sat in Mom's lap beneath the gazebo on the hill. Dad said they picked the spot because they knew it would never drown.

"How do they know?"

"Precedent!" he announced with that rakish smile I could never recreate, no matter how hard I tried.

That season he disappeared, the pond refused to grow. It didn't seem to matter that there was unusually heavy rainfall. Grandma said the lake was making a fool of the sky, getting some kind of revenge

The elders called a meeting three months into the contraction. Rafa and his family sat directly across from us. His father, solemn by nature, didn't usually speak up at these events. Instead, he was the kind of man who would stick his finger in the air and follow wherever the wind was blowing. But that day, before anyone had time to talk, he stood up, red faced, bone thinned, and unspooled his plan to "tame" the lake.

"I'm not the only one who's tired of eating jerk fish morning, noon, and night."

He proposed building a watchtower that would always be manned. He had already thought about which trees we would need to fell for timber—including my favorite oak behind the preacher's hut. The next time the pond swelled into the perfect sized lake, those chosen would cast an oppressive gaze over the waters, fixing it in place. When he stopped talking, the village seemed to split in two—men in favor, women against.

When it became clear the men would win, merely because there were more of them, Mom leaned in close and whispered, "They think they can keep a woman pregnant forever. Imagine that."

The first watcher who disappeared was a famous philanderer.

"He's finally had enough," Dad muttered as he watched the man's wife cry, bent on her knees as if in prayer, at the shoreline.

Then two more men vanished. Dad turned sallow. Three more gone in one night. He started losing weight, became uncharacteristically quiet.

"We should've built the watchtower sooner!" Mom joked.

The morning of his watch, his hands wouldn't stop shaking.

"Look at me," he laughed. "I've gone silly. Worse than your mom. Worse than her mom too"

When he wasn't looking, I saw Mom slip a few glugs of whiskey into his coffee. She winked at me, trusting me with this secret. He took an age to put on his boots. I was almost embarrassed for him, felt this sick urge to chase him out the door. Looking back, I wish he had taken longer.

We knew he was gone the moment we realized the lake had changed shape, shrinking to a puddle the size of my hand. No one alive had seen it so small.

There was a sort of informal wake. Everyone came over without invitation. Rafa was there too, but he couldn't meet my eyes, like it was his fault. Throughout it all, mom couldn't stop laughing, talking nonsense about the little things of life, like what she wanted to plant in the garden. Tomatoes. Green onions. Fresh grass.

"Oh the water can take him. Isn't that how that old fishing song goes? We took a lot. Had some good years. Good fish, too. All of them mothers. Did you notice that? Course you didn't."

Naturally, people were unnerved. Conversation died down until she was the only one speaking. Rafa dropped his spoon and the clatter rang loud as thunder. They didn't see her the way I did. They didn't understand that the webs of empty talk she spun were helping her handle her grief, helping her wander away from it.

Everyone fell asleep early. The watchtower stood empty. There were no volunteers. Rafa's dad said they would hold a vote in the morning. His face was pale like my dad's had been during his final weeks. It was like all the men in the village were catching the same sickness.

I waited by mom's closed door. When I heard the soft notes of her snoring, I dressed in my darkest clothes and snuck out through my open window. There was this pounding in my ears, blood pumping, as I descended into the empty basin. The ground outside my house was wet from rain, but here, in the gully where the lake should have been, it was dry. I felt like I was on the edge of something—something vast, immeasurable. I walked to the center, where the little bit of lake remained. Standing over the puddle and its single orange roe, I felt like a god.

The puddle reflected my face, swelling, shifting. I looked older—strong-jawed, like my father. The roe's color bled into the image, a molten orange shine in my eye.

I don't know if I was fully awake for what happened next, or if I was in some kind of dream-state. But suddenly, I was filled with this unbearable thirst. My body moved on instinct, hands pressing into the cracked earth, head bowing low. Up close, the water smelled sour, like milk left out in the sun. My stomach churned, upset by the smell. The thirst remained.

I drank.

At first, nothing. Then, warmth—too much of it. A burning in my belly, like something was swimming there. I doubled over, pressing a hand to my stomach. I thought of the fish, my father, the roe cracking open.

The ground beneath me was wet again. I couldn't tell if it was the water rising or if I was sinking in.