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*The Fish Shop Owner's Wife*

There was something about the fish shop owner's wife that made me think she herself was turning into a fish. Even though the transformation occurred slowly and painfully and over a period of years, it was on a cold day in December, early in the process, that I first came to realize what was happening. This gave me the opportunity to study the inexplicable and—for the normal consciousness—unacceptable phenomenon as it unfolded in the prism of the present, rather than having to look back at the whole event through the impressionable fog of memory.

The fish shop stood—and still stands—on the broad and busy shopping street that twists from the northern end of town toward the southeast. The street itself undergoes a transformation from its origin in the traditional neighborhoods with their tiny, dingy kiosks and sellers of lottery tickets and tobacco, into the vibrant Arab quarter with its Turkish delights, hairdressers, and shops full of silk and taffeta. In the middle of this street the fish shop stood as if it constituted a threshold between two worlds. Its presence was so quiet and discreet that people who had been living in its close vicinity for years, and who passed it many times during the day, never even noticed it and bought their fish instead at the supermarket or over the Internet. The façade was covered with tiny black and gray tiles; above the entrance a sign announced "FISH & GAME" in red capitals.

The first time I became aware of the wife's transformation was just before New Year's Day 2005. I went to the shop to buy some fillets of cod, as is our custom for New Year's, and I couldn't help noticing how the shop owner's wife moved as if the air consisted of water. She seemed to pull herself past the counter, negotiated the edge of the table, and propelled herself across the room, toward the window where the cod was displayed.

The actual selection of the cod, which involved delicately placing the pieces in a small, transparent bag, and her subsequent retreat to the scales behind the counter, consumed so much time that her husband, the fish shop owner, was able to serve two customers, one

of whom had insisted upon a tedious and time consuming filleting of his order.

None of the other customers seemed to notice the bizarre conduct of the shop owner's wife. It wasn't just her steps that were tentative and sluggish—as when people bathing in the sea try to sprint through the water but find their progress retarded by the relative impenetrability of this element. No, all her movements were subject to the same watery impression—the way she turned her head, the motion of her hand as it grabbed the fillets and lifted them up from the tray, as if the fish, the hand, and everything about her were subject to underwater laws. It seemed that the entire shop had become a gigantic aquarium around her.

Her appearance was also marked by what was happening. Her hair was short, reddish and rippled, giving the impression of a helmet of roe. Her figure was squat and her skin the palest white, almost glossy like the belly of a fish. I never saw her wear make-up except on her eyelids, which she painted in a bold bright blue. But it was the matte, staring circles of the eyes that was the most sensational aspect of the fish shop owner's wife. Never, in all the years I bought fish at the shop—not even once—did I see her blink those sea-colored eyes, their irises constantly shifting in shade as if reflecting a watery world.

The husband had a characteristically ruddy gruffness, which possibly served to insulate him from the appalling change his wife was undergoing. When the two of them moved about in the shop, it was as if they no longer thought about one another's presence. As time had gone by, their social routines had turned into something more like a ritual necessity than a true loving relationship, as when at certain holidays we mechanically perform such-and-such expected activities accompanied by such-and-such expected words.

Nevertheless, when in the shop I always sensed a certain watchfulness on the part of the shopkeeper, which revealed itself if I examined his wife with too unveiled an interest, a watchfulness I did not interpret as anything other than care and an attempt to build a discreet but effective fence around her.

Three quarters of a year were to elapse before I again stepped onto the shop's cool, gray tiles. This time I had come to buy some smoked cod roe. As before, the shopkeeper's wife embarked on her laborious journey from behind the counter, over the sawdust-covered tiles

toward the heaps of sea creatures in the window. But as she passed me in the middle of the floor, I noted with a hardly audible gasp that she had, in the intervening time, developed something that looked like gills just under the curve of her jaw. The new features in question were barely visible slits, which during her interminable voyage expanded and contracted like tiny mouths, gaping, grasping hungrily for oxygen and collapsing again so that the openings almost disappeared. She took longer than usual to wrap the cod roe in newspaper and punch the numbers into the cash register. Glancing at the shopkeeper during this torpid performance, I became aware that his covertly protective posture had grown more intense and apprehensive since my last visit.

It was not only the defensive net he cast about his wife. Nor was it merely his surreptitious way of protecting her from my curious stares—as for instance when he wound a rubber band around a fish wrapped in newspaper, making a sharp snap to disorient my attention and bring it back to the everyday practical world. It was also an inner defense against his own full realization of what was taking place. I found it doubly strange to watch them together, the husband with his attentive non-attentiveness, and the wife already living more of her life in the other, aqueous world than in his.

Sometimes, when I went for a walk in the neighborhood, I made it a point to pass by the fish shop. Standing outside the window to look at the iced goods on trays of steel, I allowed my eyes to wander from the trays to see how far the shopkeeper's wife had progressed in her transformation, how close she was to becoming a fish. It was again as if I were looking into an aquarium when I saw how she moved about, blue-aproned and fishlike. But the sea-change was incredibly slow, and sometimes I doubted my senses, questioning whether I had really seen what I thought I had. I reached for explanations of the kind that would satisfy science: that she was walking-impaired, that the gills were healing scars, that she never blinked because of a miscommunication of some nerves.

When I saw the fish shop owner's wife for the last time, nearly a year and a half had passed since she sold me the cod fillets. I went to the shop to buy the makings for fish fritters: ground fish, some remoulade sauce, and a half pound of crab salad. I prefer the fish to be freshly ground, so what I asked for was no simple exercise: first choosing the fish from the window, then processing it in the

blender, and finally loading two plastic cups with the desired quantity of salad and sauce. It was a long and tiring affair for the fish shop owner's wife. After a certain time, I seriously doubted that she would carry through. The fish shop owner looked at me from the corner of his eye several times during her journey. These were not looks of solidarity nor glances asking me to bear with his wife. Rather, they served to read my reaction, to fence in the wife and thereby protect her from the thoughts he imagined me to think. During the entire expedition, which lasted about half an hour, the wife said nothing. Not until she had added up my bill at the cash register did she open her mouth, to announce the amount I owed. She looked at me as directly as she could with the enlarged matte disks that were her eyes. No words came from her mouth; instead she expelled a large, brilliantly clear bubble, which, for a brief moment, stuck to her lower lip, vibrating before it let go and floated through the room, rising to the ceiling and bursting on contact with a distinct pop. The entire shop fell silent. All but one of us had followed the ascent of the bubble and had shared a little shock with its pop. Only the shopkeeper's wife had not experienced this awakening but maintained her unaffected, frosty stare. She tried yet another time to open her mouth, but this time the owner broke in with "That'll be 11.69, please." I was still completely lost in the spectacle of that bubble and wanted more than anything else to see another. But I paid up and walked home with my fish, full of wonder and wild thoughts.

Shortly thereafter, I visited the shop again in the hope of seeing the fish shop owner's wife produce another bubble. But this time she wasn't there. Only the owner's stocky shape moved among his aquatic wares, with the poetry of old women peeling potatoes. I wanted to ask him what had happened to his wife, but I didn't know him that well, and I was afraid he would take offense. So I placed my order, two whole red snappers and a nice French brand of fish stock. It was not until he handed me my purchase that I gathered the courage to ask. He didn't have to answer: in his eyes I saw what had happened. I read it in the reflection of their curved, sad stare.

One night not long after the incident of the bubble, he was awakened by the strangely grating sound of his wife's breathing. In the moonlight from the window he saw how the tiny gill mouths gasped for breath. He had never noticed that before, not like this.

In the morning, the couple always opened the shop together. According to their routine, the wife cut lemons, put ice in the window, stacked the newspaper for the wrapping, and prepared the salads, while the owner drove to the harbor, picked up the fresh fish, and brought it back to the shop in his van. Because of the wife's difficulty in penetrating the impassable medium that the air had become for her, it now took longer for her to complete these simple tasks than it did for her husband to drive all the way to the harbor, haggle with the fishermen, and drive back. By now, it had become an expected part of the routine that when he returned, he had to help his wife finish her chores. But not this morning. When the shopkeeper returned from the harbor with two large boxes full of the day's catch, he saw a gigantic fish lying, twisting and turning, in the middle of his tiled shop floor. The fish shop owner thought he was able to identify every kind of fish, but this one—he had never seen such a fish before. Like most ocean fish, it had a dark back and light belly, giving it camouflage toward the dark bottom, but also against the bright surface of the sea. What was most unusual about this particular fish—other than its size—was the reddish head with remarkable blue markings around the eyes. All in all, it measured about four feet from mouth to tail and could easily feed a dozen families. Were he to grind it up and make paste for fish fritters, he could fill up the large freezer and be amply supplied for a month or more.

But despite the fish shop owner's otherwise brusque and practical approach to life, he didn't think any of these thoughts. He made eye contact with the fish while it lay suffering on his shop floor, and he was struck by the humanity in it that he recognized. There was something oddly familiar about the fish. He sensed that it was a bit embarrassed—not on behalf of itself but for him. There was no time to waste. The shop owner dropped the boxes, ran to the fish and grabbed it with both arms. His arms barely reached around it. It twisted violently, as if in death spasms, and was incredibly heavy, with nearly the weight of a grown woman. Then, clutching the strange fish awkwardly, the fish shop owner ran with a jolting gait to the van and wrestled his burden into the passenger's seat. He sped through the city, careless of traffic lights and surrounding vehicles. Although by nature disinclined to sentiment and spirituality, the fish shop owner was driven by a sense of superhuman

urgency and importance in the survival of this fish. Finally reaching the harbor where the fishermen had begun to close up shop for the day, he stopped the van, its breaks squealing. The eyes of the startled by-standers followed him as he ran around the van, opened the door and grabbed something the fishermen could not see. As he turned away from the car's open door and revealed his companion, eyes opened wide and jaws dropped. None of the fishermen had ever seen anything like this.

The fish shop owner ran toward the quay to an empty spot where no fishing boats were moored, and without any sentimentality he threw the weakly floundering fish into the water. It made a gigantic splash when its belly hit the sea, and the fishermen ran from their boxes and nets to get closer views of the large creature. Only the bravest among them had ever dared to dream of catching such a prize. The fish shop owner also remained; he saw that the fish lived, but he didn't hear the questions from the fishermen as he watched the fish swim outwards, further and further from the coast towards the deep water. He hoped it would swim so far that the fishermen's boats would never be able to reach it. But he couldn't know, and every morning when he showed up by the harbor in his van, he was filled with a silent, cold terror that he would find a huge fish for sale with a red head and blue markings around its eyes.

All of this I saw in the curve of his iris. It was the last time I visited the shop.