

Rachel L. Slotnick

Tales from My Fisherman Father

In Tiburon on a Wednesday, I saw a seabird with my father's face.

"Why don't you get yourself a decent boyfriend?" it cawed.

It spiraled up and vanished, casting a flicker on the sand by my feet, like the limb of a tree breathing out slowly.

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That night, I dreamt that my father was eaten by a bear. It swallowed him whole, like a shot of Slivovitz, and expressed disgust at the aftertaste. The bear's belly bulged, and his chin sprouted a long, tangled beard. When the bear began to hoard flashlights and parked himself in front of old Star Wars reruns on the Sci-Fi Channel, I grew suspicious. When the bear began to snore with all the rhythm and force of the ocean, I realized there was salvation in hibernation.

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When I turned seven, my father's beard filled with salmon and seaweed. His cod eyes darted from reef to reef. When he gargled his words like death, everything sounded underwater. This was his lullaby. It was the sort of burbling tonality I needed in order to believe in things like that stuff that shifts the clouds.

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When my father was a child, a shark bit off his arm. He replaced it with a wooden stump.

Naturally, he became a shark hunter, and he hated all trees for daring to resemble him. Stumps were the worst of the trees, because they were already dead.

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My father was tormented by winter fish. He saw them everywhere: dangling from the trees, hanging in the air like reflective lures, swallowing the sky and hiccupping green ocean. I tried to explain to him that they were only apples. “*See, they’re not fish at all,*” I said as I plucked a red, ripe one, but his scaly skin tautened, and so, like he had taught me so many times, I threw it back. I watched it fall like an unanswered plea until at last, the apple hit the ocean.

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“*My skeleton is shivering,*” he said to me once, when his thoughts turned to winter.

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One Passover, I brought home a handsome, rich, fish of a boyfriend.

“*Is he Jewish?*” asked my father, clutching the neighborhood in the palm of his hand.

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Once, in the hospital, my father ate an octopus. As he chomped, his eyes rolled back like a hungry predator. I watched all the legs and legs and legs. I remember he had looked like an octopus, all those tubes growing from his arms. I had never felt my fingers so concretely, so many unnecessary digits. That was when I first noticed it, supple and strange, a perfect tentacle sprouting from the heart of my palm.

“*If you follow your hands, you can shake the winter fish from the trees,*” he said.

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There we stood, just two humans looking out the hospital window, at the edges of the fish bowl, talking about the weather.

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My father’s stump arm flailed wildly as the train shook. When we went underground, my father got confused. “*Look,*” he insisted, “*There’s a beautiful glowing fish at the end of the tunnel.*”

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“We’ll call him Charlie,” my father said once of a tremendous rainbow trout, as he gutted it and the paint colors spilled out. The clouds were gray as fish skin. My father wiped the purple blood on his pants and said, *“Don’t worry, Sweets. He’s already dead.”*

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I knew when the clocks were still in the fish skin sky, and the carp rained down from the dying trees like ripe apples. *“Be still,”* said my father, fishing for forbidden fruit. The leaves hummed, and everywhere were tentacles for hearts. I knew then that this was the beginning of something slow.

