

How I Loved Her and the Colour of Her Hair

Michael Winter

After she left him, he went on long walks with the dog while the boy slept. There was that last morning, when he saw the fish. It was a cod, floating belly-up in the low tide. Its wide mouth open, the eye black and ringed and fresh and looking straight at him. He put one foot in the wet sand and lifted the cod out by its gills. The gills the colour of human gums. That big white belly and dark slick back, stiff in its last curl before death, about four pounds.

Then he slung it back into the water as far as he could. He wanted to get it away from the dog. He felt the nibbly teeth or the ridges of the gills against his fingers as he released it.

A large school of caplin veered around the dead fish. They were trying to spawn. The caplin were waiting for the tide, the sea floor has to be a pebbly texture. He knew the section of beach they preferred – they were near it.

He pushed on with the dog, to the small headland that, at low tide, you could get around between waves – his son's tire tracks from the day before vanished there into the sea. He had told him not to do that. "Don't get salt water on your dirt bike." But the boy was only here a month and then back to Toronto with his mother, who had gone early and said it was over, that was it, you are impossible.

He walked up the quad trail his son's friends – the twins – use, into the woods to the north side of the bay. There's a deserted house there that he dreamt of buying. It sits alone on acres of land that look straight out the bay. No one has lived there for several generations because people know how to live with one another now and this is a house only a strange old man intolerant of other humans would live in.

It wasn't low tide anymore so he had to turn around. The cod was still there, it had come right back in, floating, the sun shining off its overturned white belly. The caplin, like a curtain, slinking in and out around the fish. He had read about the grunion coming in to spawn in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, when the lovers embraced in the sea, so ridiculous when you summarize but the scene haunted him, had he ever loved like that? What had occurred between him and the boy's mother. Why couldn't he sustain a love.

He had come down the day before with his son, they had dip nets, and they had caught several buckets of caplin. They were drying behind the shed. He feeds them to the dog through the winter back in Toronto.

He lifted the cod out of the water a second time. The fish looked great. He

smelled it. There was no smell. The body felt cold and firm. He thought, why not. It was Tuesday, wasn't it? The recreational fishery was until sundown Monday night – that meant someone over by the lighthouse caught it, with a conventional rod (there were no injuries to the fish that a jigger would make). Someone who got excited and lost the fish at the gunwale. So it's been dead, what, twelve hours? In the cold sea.

He carried the fish home along the trail his son used on his dirt bike.

The fish hung from his two fingers. He did not carry it the way a fisherman would, with a finger and thumb hooked savagely into the eyes. He knew those ways but he did not always choose the ways. He wasn't cruel.

The dog did not make any mention of the fish. He got home, put the fish in the sink. His son was still upstairs in bed watching his shows. You could hear everything in this old house. He turned on the faucet.

"Hey hey hey," he said.

"Hunka bunkus," his son replied.

He stood the fish up and removed the fillets without gutting it. He worked from the nape and carved down either side of the backbone. This left the belly and the purse of guts untouched. They stayed with the

fish, as if the fish perhaps still existed and could be put back in the sea, intact, and he'd grow new sides. He had once caught a cod in his dory and tried to clean it while in the boat. He had slit its throat then gutted it and slung the guts over the flat calm sea because he liked the animated gulls swooping down to pick up the liver and what the old-timers call the britches. "The lady wears the britches." The britches were the roe sacs shaped like short pants. People on land knew he'd caught something when they saw the gulls, and he liked to project an air of capability. He had gutted that fish over the side of the boat and rinsed the fish in the water, held it by its gills. As he did this, the fish gave a tremor, it shook itself out of his grip. He had unwittingly forced water through its gills and the fish had revived. The fish shrugged his hand off and it swam away, the apron of its belly flared wide open, gutless, its tail propelling down. It swam back from where it came.

He rinsed the fillets and dipped them in flour in a clean stainless-steel bowl. He took down the frying pan and melted some butter in the pan, cooked the fish. The sizzle made his son call out, "Fads, what you cooking?" That's what his son called him, Fads. He drove two slices of bread down in the toaster. There was half a lemon in

the egg compartment of the fridge door. A box of salt on the table. Life was good! He sprinkled the salt and squeezed the lemon and sat down and ate the fish with a piece

His son returned and washed the bike down with the hose. They had a late lunch of cold chicken. There was no routine for it was summer. It was boys only, since she

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of the toast. His son came down and had a bowl of cereal and the other piece of toast with Nutella.

"Where did you get the fish?"

"I caught it with my bare hands."

His son took off on his dirt bike and that's when he began to have a headache.

If he was truthful, his stomach had told him not to eat the fish while it was cooking. His stomach had known it wasn't quite right. But he had overruled it, deciding his stomach had been biased by how he'd found the fish. His stomach was psychological. When she had left him, he hadn't eaten in three days.

He took it easy and read a book and then lay on the daybed.

had left. As his son ate, he noticed, when the boy turned, the faintest wisp of hair on his top lip. It was like the hairs had to be seen in profile, the hairs had to accumulate to make a smudge. But there was no doubt, that was something new.

"You're getting a moustache."

"I've got something on the go."

Then the twins from across the bay came over on their quads, his son rolled the bike out again. He was relieved his son found enough activity to do around the bay, three thousand kilometres from the big city and his mother. In the middle of the afternoon he went upstairs for a nap. He did this often, but today felt like a necessity. He always got up early, at six, two or three hours before his son. And so,

yes, he needed a nap. But today there was a numbness at his temples. He was grateful that he lived a life that allowed him to have a rest, if he so chose, in the middle of the day. The dog came up with him.

The numbness began to throb. He had a headache. He felt hot. His breath was short. He took a pill and he went up the stairs again feeling not good. He looked at the banister and the wainscoting and the painted wallboard and the strips of old board on the ceilings, all of it sanded and painted by him and the boy's mother, when they were together. She had been pregnant with the boy in this house and they were sanding and varnishing and painting and hammering and wearing masks for dust and they laughed a lot back then. The boy's first two weeks after being born were in this house.

He used his son's laptop to look up diseases. They could search the world from this house but they had no phone, no local service.

Ciguatera. Zoonoses. Even the words looked lethal. There were a lot of sites, all strongly against eating a fish found dead in the sea. As he read he could now visualize the small organisms, the ciguas, the zoonoses, swimming up the tide of his blood. He lay down on the fresh bed in the house

they had bought fifteen years ago and had prevented from falling down. Sometimes he nailed a thing to the wall and thought: this too, with enough time, will end up on the floor. Just like his marriage. He felt a tingle in his wrists. It made him realize his body ended at his wrists now – he couldn't feel his fingers.

Mycobacterium, erysipelothrrix, campylobacter, aeromonas.

He heard the bike return. His son would be tired. He called out to his son. "Get a neighbour," he said. "Tell them I'm not feeling well."

The boy didn't believe him.

"I'm serious," he said.

"Fine."

His son crossed the road in no hurry to the old woman. This woman came over sometimes with a cooked dinner when his son wasn't with him but still in the city with his mother.

He heard the door below. "There's no one home," his son said. Then the boy went back to his TikTok episodes and what have you.

He woke up again and it was dark. He realized several hours must have gone by. His son was calling out to him. His son was shaking him in the dark. "What about

supper." There's no routine but we need meals. He wanted the boy to remember, looking back on his youth, even with his mother gone, that dinner was on the table at six o'clock. The sun, where was the sun. He felt paralyzed, a dark buzz in his ears. His mouth dry and he was being shaken by his son. His son was shaking something distant on his body. "I'm going to go on the dirt bike," his son said, "and find someone." His son was in tears. He must have been shaking him for a while.

His son was outside, sobbing. He was trying to turn over the bike, but it wouldn't start. He was forgetting to pull out the choke. He was new to it. He had just bought it this summer. The father, trying his best to make a rural summer away from the city interesting for a boy of fourteen. The battery was going to die on him.

The engine came to life. He looked out and the boy, sucking in his tears, gave the bike some throttle. That bike has no headlight. Where was the dog? No longer on the bed. Had the boy fed the dog.

He thought of that fish he'd gutted

overboard the year before, how it had swum out of his hand while he was rinsing it. Swimming deep back down, without any guts.

What does it matter that he saw that fish trying to return home without his guts? Where had that animal gone?

He heard the sea coming in and out. Was the sea using the land. Does the land use us. Do tiny conscious particles of the universe construct us to create an idea? What is love? The journey is done now, the little pulses of will that truly run things are coming up on the tide within me to bring me home. I have a son. The son has a dirt bike and he will have this house. I once loved a woman and we created this boy by the sea – a miracle. I've had dreams where I can breathe underwater, it just clicks in, you sift air from the sea through a slit in the throat. Someone will lift me out of the sea of low tide by my gills. All will continue in one form or another, just listen to that wash of waves bouncing off the old painted slats on that ceiling. The moon must be on them or is it a headlight. The colour of her hair. I painted those. Or no, she did. 