

## The Last Fish

The knife is in my hand, squeezing blood from my cracked dry palm. *Do I have the energy to do this?* My stomach snarls at the mere implication that I don't. *This PAIN... this HUNGER... it MUST be assuaged.*

Max whimpers as I tower over him. In his eyes I see the reflection of a face whose teeth are clenched, whose eyes are bloodshot and bulging out of their sockets. On its head are ears that refuse to listen to these cries for mercy. They *can't*. Not with this *pain*, this *hunger*, this caustic poison that disintegrates a lifetime of love and affection as if it were *nothing*.

My mind frantically searches for something else – *anything* but that look in his eye.

*The sand grating against your feet.*

*The two lone trees you've shared this island with for six weeks.*

*The bones of the fish you've had to live on.*

*The congregation of flies that's formed around them.*

But this *HUNGER* is tenacious. Its tendrils slither into my thoughts and molest my mind, refusing to let me get distracted.

*What does human flesh taste like?* It's not *me* who asks the question, but a voice that sounds so much like my own. It pries open my mind and peels off my eyelids so I am forced to watch myself tear into Max's arms, then his legs, then his chest and torso, and all I can feel is *RELIEF*, all I can think is *FINALLY, THE PAIN HAS GONE AWAY*, and yes that relief will soon fade and regret will replace it but for now I relish the taste, I nibble the meat down to the bone and pick the specks from my teeth as I wonder *which part of him is this? The hand he used to strum his guitar? The ankle he twisted in gym class that left him bedridden for a week?*

The *HUNGER* has reduced me to this creature, stripped me of the deep, visceral desire to protect this child from the infinite perils that would have him dead in an instant. *But you can't protect*

*him from yourself.* Can't protect him from the primitive urge to *survive*, to overcome the excruciating *HUNGER* I feel bursting in my skull, boiling in my veins.

I remember changing his diaper. I remember teaching him to ride a bike. I remember that time he snuck out, got drunk and wouldn't answer his phone, and I stayed up all night until he snuck back into the house and I was so relieved that I couldn't muster the energy to yell that speech I'd rehearsed about what he'd put me through...

*What's it all added up to? Every hug you ever gave him, every football game you attended just because you knew it meant something to him, even if he spent all four quarters sitting on the bench... it's all lead to THIS moment.*

*No... stop thinking these –*

The *HUNGER* won't let me finish. It chokes me, whispers in my ear and tells me this *has* to be done.

*Either YOU or HIM.*

*This is about SURVIVAL.*

*Think a fourteen year-old boy can survive on this rock without his dad?*

*No sense in BOTH of you dying.*

*Didn't hesitate before killing those fish. Is this any different?*

"STOP!" scream the words that never leave my lips.

*I'm gonna be sick.* I heave but nothing comes out. There hasn't been food in my stomach for *seventeen days*. If there had been, it would now be a heap of waste and bile splattered across the floor.

*DO IT*, the hunger commands. *ENOUGH WAITING.*

My heart skips a beat as it pumps adrenaline through my bloodstream. Sweat saturates every inch of my body. The mosquitoes pluck at my skin and the hot, blistering sun rises directly above my head. *Everything's so loud... so loud and dry and hot and it HURTS and the HUNGER will not GO AWAY!*

*He's not your son anymore. He's nothing more than a few bones on the pile, food for the flies to pick at. Just another fish unlucky enough to get caught in your net.*

I've already plunged the knife into him. As the realization washes over me, everything goes blurry and I stumble back, clutching my gut.

"I'm sorry, Dad..." I hear Max sob.

*Sorry for what?* I choke on the words, unable to breath. Then I feel a prick in my abdomen. It feels wet before Max's teardrops fall onto it, but their salt makes the open wound sting just a little more.

As I feel the knife ripping me open and draining the blood from my body, I finally remember why I'm holding it in the first place.

One of us had to die. It was only a question of whose body would end up on the pile.

Now I know who the last fish is. The last fish is *me*.