

The Fish, the Fisherman, and the Sea

by Rachel Lora Simmons

My father is remarkably clever. That is, for a rundown, henpecked fisherman. He has caught me again. He has me slung over his back in a rickety lobster trap and I can hear him huffing and the water in him sloshing and though I can't see his face, I imagine it is ruddied with concentration as he makes the climb to our tiny little house that blows with the wind on top of the hill. I can't help but smile though at the funny sight we must make, him with bristly whiskers sprouting from his ears and minnows swishing in his giant rubber boots and me with my winking tail and my long, sea-mussed hair.

He keeps my mother on a bowl on the kitchen table, where she flashes her own sea-green scales in the sunlight and oversees the workings of the house. She is without a doubt both the pride and the pants of the household. My tail is bedecked with the same sea-green jewels, but my hair is the same golden auburn that my father's once was, before the years of dealing with fish both at home and at work turned it white. I'm sure the taunting from the fisherman didn't help. Had they never read "The Old Man and the Sea?" Even if they had, I suppose falling in love with a fish—even a glimmering one like my mother—was too laughable. And my father never asked for a cottage, or a mansion, or a castle, or to be king. This too was laughable. He only asked for me.

And I paid him back by running away to the sea, endlessly, without hope of ever staying put. My mother won't help him either, she just swims back and forth, eying him, saying, "I live in a bowl, don't you see?" But love blinds him and it blinds her, though not enough that she won't advise me to sing him softly to sleep with songs of the sea and then slip and slide down the beach to the salty-sweet ocean. For such a good, clever fisherman, he's remarkably

stupid sometimes. But she lives in a bowl, swimming back and forth, shimmering for the onlookers, so I have to try to live in the sea. It is once again not the deal he imagined in marriage, not the life and love either imagined. But she is a fish, he, a fisherman. I, strangely, am both.

My mother, you see, is not my father's first wife. He was destined, it seems, to be tied to the sea, far more than any ordinary fisherman. He once lived in our tiny tipsy house with his first wife, Adeleide and everyday he went to sea to fish and that was simply all that he did. Yet one fate-twisted day he was sitting and staring at his line when it suddenly was pulled into the depths of the crystal water. He pulled it up—labourously, mind you, for my father is not a stocky, strong fisherman—and when he did he found on the end of his line a fish unlike any he had ever seen. The light played and danced on its scales and it swished and swam there, just as patient as could be.

“Mr. Fisherman, listen please,” it said, “I am not truly a fish, but an enchanted princess. No good would come to you to kill me and I am positive I wouldn't taste very good, I'm not truly a fish. Won't you release me back into the water and let me go?”

“You have no need to worry, “ my father said, for he really is rather kind. “You are so pretty, you are meant to be looked at and not to be eaten. I would have thrown you back anyways.” He then released her from his hook gently and watched as she disappeared into the shadows of the sea. My father then stood and turned around towards home to be with his wife.

“Husband,” Adeleide asked pointedly, “Didn't you catch anything today?”

“No,” my father said, “I caught the most beautiful fish but she said she was an enchanted princess, so I let her go.”

“Idiot,” his wife said. “Didn't you wish for anything?”

“What do I have to wish for, dear wife?” my father said.

“Do you really want to live in this hovel, this tiny toppling house? Go back and call this princess and tell her that we wish to live in a darling little cottage. I'm sure she'll grant you this one wish.”

“But we're happy here, there's no reason to go back to make such a request.”

“Of course there is, we can't be happy here forever. Besides, she is bound to you because you caught her and let her go. Now get!”

Of course my kind-hearted father did not really want to go, but he lived to make his wife happy. So he trudged back to the sea, where the water was no longer crystal, but rather the water looked as though it had been sitting and rotting in a puddle too long.

“Princess, princess in the sea, if you are a woman, speak to me. Though I do not care for my wife's request, I've come to ask it nonetheless,” he said. The beautiful fish came swimming up and said, “Well, fisherman, what does she want?”

“Oh, “ my father sighed, “my wife thinks me stupid for not wishing for something because I caught you. She doesn't want to live in our little tippy house, she wants a cottage instead.”

“Go on home,” sang the fish. “She already has it.”

When my father returned home, Adeleide was no longer sitting in their leaning house. Instead, she was seated under a rose arbor outside a cozy little cottage. She smilingly took him by the hand and led him in, saying, “Come inside, dear husband. Isn't this so much better?”

My father took a look around, taking in the pleasant roominess of the cottage, how the sunlight filled the rooms, the delicate wallpaper and careful molding, and the perfection of it all. “Yes,” he said, “This is very nice. Now we can live here quietly and happily.”

“We'll see,” said Adeleide. At that she then cooked up a nice meal and, after pausing to sit in front of their new fireplace, the two of them, they went to bed. A few weeks then went by at this pleasant pace and everything was well until Adeleide began to feel unsatisfied once again. She complained and nagged until finally my father trudged back down to the sea and made his wife's request for a new house, this time, a great stone castle.

When he returned, Adeleide once again led him around on a tour of their new magnificent home and once again, he wished that they could stay content. “We'll see, “ was all his wife could say.

A few weeks passed and my father was beginning to see a pattern. His wife, hungry for more power than merely over him, demanded that the fish make her king. When it was done, her impatience lasted yet again a mere few weeks until she required to be made emperor. And then pope. Each time my father made his trip to the sea, he noticed the growing unrest of the swirling waters, until finally they grew black and treacherous and threatened to storm. He became more and more frightened to make his wife's request, yet more and more frightened to deny her wish.

Adeleide the Pope still wasn't satisfied. "I want to be God," she said one day to my father.

"Don't you think Pope is enough, Adeleide?" he replied in desperation. "I don't think my fish can make you any more than you are."

"No, you insolent fool! I simply don't have any power as pope and I will not bear it. Go find your fish at once. I want to be like God!"

My father trudged down to the sea like the henpecked fool he is and called out once again to the enchanted fish, shouting over the crashing waves of the angry sea.

"Princess, princess, in the sea, if you're a woman, speak to me. Though I do not

care for my wife's request, I've come to ask it nonetheless."

And he watched as a shimmering light came closer to him, as the beautiful fish emerged from the dark depths of the black waters.

"Well, what does she want?" the fish asked.

"Oh fish," my father cried, "She wants to be like God."

"And what is it you want?" the fish-princess asked.

"Me?" my father said, surprised, for he had not yet thought of this. "I just want to be happy in our little house again, but Adeleide cannot be pleased, not in a cottage, not in a castle, not as king or emperor, or even as pope. And certainly not in our tiny little house that blows in the wind on top of the hill."

"Go back home. You will have what you want." And so my father climbed the familiar hill, much as he climbs it now with me, to our tiny little house that blows in the wind on top of the hill. When he

opened the door, he found my mother, a beautiful enchanted fish swimming charmingly in a bowl on the kitchen table.

My father did not ask for a cottage, or a castle, or even to be king. He simply asked for me. It is not the happiest tale or the perfect arrangement—far from it. But it is ours, and we are strangely happy in our own way, each of us living a life that we can never really have.

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