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FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Short Story

1

All night I thought about the upcoming fishing trip, twisting and turning side to side, glancing at the clock on my cell phone repeatedly—afraid to oversleep. That evening I had set the electronic alarm for five a.m. A few times before going to bed I also reminded my dad to likewise set the alarm on his cell phone for five a.m. “Tomorrow I will catch a *looooot* of fish!” There is nothing more amazing than going fishing! Ice cream, bike riding, even computer games cannot compare to fishing. Of course, this doesn’t mean that I don’t like to eat ice cream, ride a bike, or especially play computer games, but fishing is something special.

When my parents ask me who I want to be when I grow up, I have a ready answer—a fisherman. Recently I told my parents that I want to drop out of school. “Why?” “Because I know how to count, read and write, and a fisherman need no other knowledge. A fisherman needs luck.” We argued a lot until I finally relented. I will finish school but I will not go to college. I will buy a boat, pulleys, and high rubber boots right away and I will fish day and night. I will sell the caught fish. For this purpose, I will open my own store and hire workers; maybe even my parents will agree to clean the fish there and work as cashiers. We will have a real family business. My dad and I shook hands on this business deal. My mom muttered that “college would need to be finished all the same.”

2

“Once I visited Italy with your mother; you were not born yet and were inside your mother’s belly. So, in Florence we went inside the famous cathedral Santa Croce. There, in one Chapel behind the glass, a frock of Saint Francis of Assisi is stored. This man lived long ago,” my father told me when we were riding in the car in the morning. “This dark brown frock lies behind the glass, along with a rope which Saint Francis used to tie.”

Yawning, I looked out the window where in dissipating twilight the shapes of trees flashed.

My father continued, “We were observing the frescoes on the walls in that chapel. Your mother went ahead and I stood before the frock behind the glass as if I was chained and could not move from the spot! All of a sudden, I don’t know what came over me, I felt blessed by God, and started to pray and thank God! I almost started to cry, imagine? A piece of rough material and an ordinary rope provoked this. Yes, sometimes in life something happens which is hard to explain... Coming back from Italy to New York I read about the life of St. Francis. It turns out he was a remarkable person, giving the last he had to the people. By the way, he preached not just to people but animals, birds, and even fish.”

“How?”

“If there was a river or lake on his way he went there and from the shore taught the fish to love God. They swam up to him with their mugs protruding from the water. At the same time listeners such as frogs, snails, and turtles gathered on the bottom. Birds flew in from everywhere,

and animals joined. Everyone listened to St. Francis. They say that even today he helps people and all living creatures, that he still roams the Earth.”

My father continued saying something, but my lids grew heavy and I drifted off to sleep.

3

Trrrr! The line spooled through the spinning reel quickly unwinds; the dark sinker with two dangling hooks flies over the water. I firmly hold the fishing rod and watch as the sinker falls into the water with a splash and sprays scatter from the place where it dropped.

“Good job!” My father praises me. “You learned how to throw it in well.”

I attempt to secure the rod between two rocks but it falls. Picking it up, I accidentally stepped into the water, soaking my socks and sneakers. If my mother was with us now, she would have forced me to put on dry socks, but today my mother didn’t come with us and my father didn’t even notice that I got my feet wet.

“Yup! Yup! I hooked one!” I exclaimed.

Oh, this heavenly moment for which you can give up everything in the world—ice cream, bicycle, and even the computer! When a fish bites and the rod shakes in my tense hands, it appears to me that I am on cloud nine from joy.

I wonder what is on the hook?

4

“Did you catch anything?” a man walks up and asks.

This man is homeless. His tent is located not far from the place where we fish, in the thicket. We pass by it every time when walking to the shore along the path. There is a real dump by the tent. Empty jars and bottles are scattered everywhere; there are blankets on the ground with burned holes, and there's a wheelchair for the disabled with heaps of garbage on the seat. As my dad says, this man is homeless and an alcoholic. It's not clear what age and race he is—he could be black or Latino. He is always unkempt and in rags, with trampled sneakers without laces or else completely barefoot. Last time he also approached us asking if there is any bite. The weather was bad then and the fish were not biting, so the man left shortly.

“My son just caught a porgy,” my dad responds and nods in my direction.

“Boy, come show and brag about what you caught,” the homeless addresses me. He reeks of booze. Not waiting for my answer, he takes out my fish cage with the caught fish from the water. “What a beautiful fish! Give it to me!” he asks looking at me with a sly squint.

“No, I won't!” I grab the fish cage from his hands. “It's my fish!” I feel like swinging my pole and hitting him with it!

He twists his face as if in pain. “You're a bad boy. You're stingy. Fuck you,” he grumbles.

“Don't say that to my son,” my father meddles, “you can't talk that way to children.” The homeless man slowly turns to face my dad and makes huge dirty fists. They stand opposite each other; the bum is taller than my dad, with broader shoulders. If he charges my dad and kills him what will happen to me? I want to run home to my mother. “Sorry, my fault,” the man apologizes. Then he steps away, sits on a log and starts smoking.

Not far from us, a grey heron stands in the water on thin legs. Occasionally bending down, it pierces the water with its sharp beak and pulls something out. Another black heron

stands at some distance from it. It occasionally happens that the black heron breaks off from its spot and flies in our direction, but the grey one fly with a scream “to intercept” asserting its ownership. Every time we are here I observe this scene—the war of two herons.

“Ooo! Yoo!” Suddenly the homeless man stands up and yells, raising and extending his arms forward. Either he is singing or he is laughing. A flock of ducks, sea gulls, and herons fly off at once from the opposite shore towards him. The birds know that now they will be fed. Continuing to sing and laugh, the man takes out bread from his pocket, rips it apart into pieces, and throws to the birds.

I see a cat emerging from the bushes! A wild striped cat runs towards the tramp jumping across the fallen branches and puddles. The cat gets on his hind paws and presses against the tramp’s legs with his front paws. Then he dances on his hind paws. The tramp grabs the cat by the neck, picks him up and ... kisses its mug.

How terrifying!

It is so beautiful here at the salt marsh! The sky is high and so is the grass, as if plated in gold by the sun; the bay water gleams in such delicate shades that it’s hard to put into words. If I did not wish to be a fisherman, I would definitely have become a painter.

5

“So, we spent a whole day here but managed to catch only one porgy,” my dad says, taking the fish cage out of the water. “Should we take it home, or better to let it go and let it swim?”

“Let’s take it,” I grudgingly respond.

“Fine,” he agrees, “then let’s get ready; it’s time to go home.”

We pack the fishing gear and walk through the grove to our car along the path. We pass the tent of the homeless alcoholic. He is sitting on the ground, his legs half in and half out, shaking strangely without even looking our way.

“Aaah!” he suddenly lets out a bloodcurdling scream, falling to the ground with his face on the stones and branches. “Mmm ... hrrrrr...” he wheezes gasping for air.

My father places his bag on the ground and quickly approaches him. Squatting down next to the homeless man, he turns him onto his side and then throws away few empty metal cans next to him to avoid cutting his face. I’m standing a few feet away; I see that the tramp’s face is covered in blood, dirt, and leaves. The man is wheezing and continuing to shake. His legs are convulsing like a frog that has just been struck with a stone. My dad takes out his cell and makes a call. “I don’t know his name; he looks to be around fifty. He is homeless. He appears to be having an epileptic seizure. Will you come soon? Okay, I will wait here.”

6

We are in the car headed home. The scene of the paramedics putting the tramp on the stretcher, tying him down with belts, and carrying him to the open ambulance plays out in front of my eyes. He is sick, dark, filthy, and scary.

“We should’ve given him our fish,” my dad said, breaking at the turn. It seemed he was upset by something.

I am overcome with such rage that I start to hit the back of the driver’s seat with my feet.

“Stop!” my dad commands. “Your sneakers are wet and dirty.”

Out of spite I hit the back of the driver's seat even harder with my legs. It is my fish and I will not give it to anybody!

7

I was never as unhappy as I was during this last month of the summer.

As before, we went to the bay. My dad and other fishermen managed to catch something, but as for me not even a bite! It was as if some evil sorcerer put a spell on me.

I often cried at night. Not knowing whom to ask, I directed my prayer to Francis of Assisi. "Oh Holy Francis! You help all unfortunate souls, even frogs and crabs. Why don't you want to help me? Why isn't any fish biting?"

The homeless alcoholic did not return. My father said that he was probably undergoing treatment in some hospital. "After treatment he will get assistance with his living situation. It's doubtful he will return here anymore." That is too bad! To be honest, the salt marsh looked empty and boring without him. Nobody fed the birds anymore, or sang songs to the crabs, or trained the wildcat.

Moreover, I felt guilty that I did not give him my fish then.

8

That autumn morning the weather was marvelously warm. Dad and I walked on the lane to our spot at the shore of the salt marsh.

When we passed by the tramp's tent I saw smoke swirling on top of the huge bonfire and smoldering firebrands, and a wildcat suddenly jumping out of the tent and disappearing into the bushes.

"The homeless man returned!" I exclaimed and ran towards the shore.

"Hello!" I extended my hand to him. Only now I understood how much I missed him.

"Hello boy," he squeezed my hand in return.

The man was smoking and sitting on a large rock by the water in a dark robe tied with a belt. Now he seemed more or less put together and not as disheveled and filthy as before.

"You're healed?" I asked.

"Yes, I had surgery and the hospital sent me to rehab, but I escaped."

"You did the right thing by running away," I said in support. "Don't tell my dad about this. He is a nurse and will want to send you for treatment again."

"Thank you for the heads up."

"Do you want to go fishing together?"

"No, some other time, not today," he squinted suspiciously at my approaching dad.

"Okay, boy, I have to go, someone is waiting for me," he threw down the cigarette butt, got up, and walked along the beach.

The grey heron noticed him first, focusing its tiny sharp eyes on him and flapping its wings.

On that day my fish cage was full of fish!

Late at night I lay in my bed with my eyes half closed. It seemed to me that I am not at home but still at the salt marsh holding the rod and someone mysterious in the water is pulling on the hook. I blissfully breathed in the smell of the seaweed and fallen leaves.

A man in dark sackcloth tied with a rope came across my vision in a haze. It was either Saint Francis or the homeless man. Drowning in the gold grass, he didn't walk but rather glided across the earth on thorns and broken bottles, barely touching them with his bare feet, and the places where his blood spilled grew flowers.