

REVENGE PLOT WITH FISH

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MACKENDRICK HAD MADE THE LUNCH reservation at Tierney from the hospital waiting room and, at the time, he hadn't known about the curved aquarium that stretched along the back wall of the restaurant. Standing at the hostess station and taking in the place now, he thought the hundred-twenty-gallon tank seemed an especially nice touch, a detail that would add an extra twist of bitterness to the scene of reprisal he'd imagined.

He requested a spot near the back and was led past tables that had mostly emptied out, the mid-week business-lunch crowd come and gone. Quiet was good, he thought. As planned, his father wouldn't arrive for another half hour—more than enough time for MacKendrick to make a few pressing phone calls and still work out exactly what he wanted to say. What he wanted was alcohol, but, with his father coming, he settled for coffee. MacKendrick hadn't slept in thirty-some hours, so coffee was better anyway.

Inside the wood-finish aquarium were two dozen ugly fish circling to nowhere. All one species, they were an uneven black with orange flecks and upturned mouths that gave them a look of arrogant pride. Probably an aggressive species, MacKendrick figured, one that wouldn't live peaceably with others in a single tank. Maybe his server would know what they were.

All that he knew about tropical fish was the handful of names he remembered from early childhood. Malawi eyebiters, black phantom tetras, marbled hatchfish, bigspot barbs and chocolate gouramis. Decades ago, tropical fish had been one of his father's asinine hobbies and enduring passions, a dinner topic he could hold court on at great length. Through repetition, the fanciful names had lodged in the memories of MacKendrick and his little brother Brian. The names stuck around much longer than their father.

The server returned with his coffee and a diminutive steel carafe of cream on a tray, and MacKendrick noticed that she was beautiful. Mid-twenties, her hazel hair worn up in a loose bun, held by some sort of clamp. When exactly was it that the sight of such a lovely woman changed for MacKendrick? When was it that such soft clean skin and healthy beauty

brought on more paternal thoughts than licentious ones? Heartened, he asked her about the fish.

“Oscars,” she said.

“Oscars?”

MacKendrick was impressed.

“Oscar cichlids.”

With a blush, she admitted that customers asked all the time. She didn’t really know anything about tropical fish.

Charming.

With a rush of affection, MacKendrick had the illogical urge to open his briefcase and show her the three fish he’d purchased from Pet Smart before coming to the restaurant. Such a gesture would probably have been odd, though, and he stopped himself. Lack of sleep made him distrust his own emotions and, fortunately, he knew enough to keep his mouth closed.

“Oscar cichlids.” He gave a nod and explained he was waiting for someone.

“Call if you need anything.”

The coffee was hot, but, tired as he was, he drank down half the cup. The previous morning, shortly after he’d pulled into the MacKendrick Buick lot, Sylvia called to tell him she’d just spoken with the police. Brian had overdosed. His third overdose. That had been thirty-some hours ago, and MacKendrick had spent that whole day and night at St. Leonard in the ICU waiting room—trying not to dwell on the image of his little brother unconscious and unmoving in his hospital bed. The heart monitor. The IV line in and the catheter line out. The waiting room had a television, and MacKendrick flipped it on, dozing in a hard-backed chair and dully staring at the History Channel. Elderly war criminals hiding in South America, Soviet gulags, and ethnic cleansings in God-knows-where for God-knows-what possible motive. The world could make you feel powerless, he thought. It wore away at you. At one point, MacKendrick fell into a half-sleep and woke abruptly just as *From Russia with Love* was beginning. What business did James Bond have on the History Channel? MacKendrick didn’t know, but he wound up watching the rest of the thing.

In Tierney, fortified from coffee, he took out his cell and telephoned the dealership. After Sylvia’s call, he’d had to rearrange his schedule in a rush. The floor manager took over for the day, and things were probably under control. Two Regals were coming in that morning, though, and he

wanted to make sure the odometers were double checked. His second call was to the hospital, where he had to key through three separate automated menus before he was forwarded to the ICU. No changes from this morning. Brian still hadn't woken and his blood pressure was still down. MacKendrick thanked the unit nurse and called Sylvia.

"No change from last night," he said.

"Did you get his records sent over?"

"Not yet, but they know his history."

"Did you manage to get some sleep?"

"A few hours. Sort of."

"Come home."

"In a bit."

"Did you call your father?"

"I'm meeting him in a few minutes, actually."

"Meeting him?"

"Yeah, I'm in a restaurant waiting for him right now."

"In a restaurant?"

"Tierney."

"Tierney?"

"I haven't told him about the overdose yet."

"You didn't tell him Brian's in the hospital?"

MacKendrick fell silent. The questions were annoying him. He didn't have the energy to explain himself, and he wasn't sure he could. Fortunately, he had married well. Okay, she said. The boys had gone off to school fine, and the house was quiet. She might pop out early for a few groceries before picking them up.

"What did you tell the boys last night?"

"Nothing. Said you had a business dinner. No point getting into it yet."

The thought of telling his sons about their uncle made his throat tighten and face grow warm. MacKendrick had to remind himself he was in public. He was in public, and he was emotional because he hadn't slept. Tearing up like an ass wouldn't help anyone. It was strange, he thought—and not for the first time—how very much alike paternal and fraternal affection could be. Maybe they occupied the same part of the brain. When the boys were young, he was forever calling one of them Brian by mistake. Being an older brother must have been good preparation for being a father. This had occurred to him before. He hoped he would never let his boys down as he had Brian.

“Still there?” Sylvia asked.

“Yes.” His mind was jumping around, and he had to give his head a shake. “Just tired.”

He needed to get off the phone, but promised to be home before dinner. He switched the cell to vibrate and caught sight of his reflection in the curved surface of the aquarium. The tank was probably some thick clear acrylic, custom-made for the restaurant. Inside, green strands of cottony vine swayed, propelled by the submerged current of the water filter, he supposed. Two oscar cichlids drifted side by side and toward MacKendrick through a decorative arched stone as if slowly promenading. It was beautiful. It was beautiful and very much unlike the images he recalled of his father’s long-ago aquarium. Instead of dark, subtly sculpted stone, cheap figurines decorated the bottom of his father’s fish tank. A sunken treasure chest containing rubies and jewels. A topless mermaid with painted cherry nipples wearing the most alluring of come-hither expressions. A miniature Poseidon wearing a seaweed crown and wielding a tiny trident. God, MacKendrick hadn’t thought of that Poseidon in years. Maybe it was Neptune, now that he thought about it. Could the aquarium have been as tacky as he remembered, and how could his father have ever held the thing in such high value? And if it meant so very much, why would he keep it in the basement family room where young boys would be tempted to muck about with it?

Because their mother knew it was best that they not be underfoot when their father returned from work, MacKendrick and Brian spent much of their early childhood in that narrow townhouse basement. Save for an unfinished laundry-boiler area, the family room took up the entire basement. Closed to company and full of second-hand furniture, it was where they went to avoid trouble and where they were sent when they were in trouble. Once they got in trouble for stuffing bananas in the Filtre Queen and switching the thing on just to see what would happen. Another time it was for peeing in the laundry-room sink because the commercial breaks during *Lucan, the Wolf Boy* weren’t nearly long enough to run all the way upstairs and back down again. Another time, they melted an entire sixty-four-colour box of crayolas on the driveway.

Their father’s punishments were predictably harsh, but unpredictably creative. Scrub the driveway clean with toothbrushes. Write a hundred words explaining why their favourite television show was rubbish. Once, in a particularly inventive stroke, their father instructed them both to select

one toy from the other's shelf and destroy it. At first, MacKendrick hadn't understood. Was it a trick? If they cheated and chose something insignificant, would they get into more trouble? Too young to know, they betrayed one another as instructed. MacKendrick cut his brother's Stretch Armstrong open with a pair of scissors and Brian snapped the wheels of MacKendrick's Evel Knievel supercycle.

The worst punishment was the aquarium. MacKendrick and Brian had eliminated their father's entire collection of tropical fish with a single healthy serving of Frosted Flakes scattered on the surface of the water. *They'rrrrre great!* Later, the brothers told each other that the cereal looked just like fish flakes, but it was a lie even they didn't believe. After scooping out the bodies and the mushy clumps, their father left the tank sitting in the basement family room and forbade anyone from cleaning it. The thing gave off a stale odour, but the smell was bad only up close. Worse was the sight of the thing. As the water evaporated, it left dusty brown rings around the inside of the glass. Weeks and months passed, and the water level slowly went down, down, down. Eventually, Poseidon or Neptune and his trident poked up out of the surface of the water, and a few weeks after that, there was no water left at all, just chalky synthetic pebbles. The reminder was the punishment. The sight of the thing made MacKendrick feel powerless, but even at that young age he recognized the cruelty as intentional and, in a way, the recognition lessened the punishment. Brian wasn't so lucky. His powerlessness wore away at him.

The cell vibrated from within MacKendrick's jacket, and he checked the number before answering. It was Sylvia again.

"Why don't you just come home?"

"I'm all right."

"You can just tell your father about Brian over the phone, you know."

"I know."

They both went quiet. MacKendrick wondered who would break the silence first. He did.

"I'm all right," he repeated.

"The boys and I love you."

They said goodbye and MacKendrick slipped the phone back in his jacket. It'd been Sylvia's idea for him to reconnect with his father, and in some indefinable way, she must have felt sorry. At the time she'd been right, though. His father had left when he was ten and Brian seven—some twenty-five years had already passed, and, as Sylvia said, the man couldn't

possible hurt MacKendrick anymore. The dealership was prospering and they had boys of their own. She was right, of course. With time, marriage and children, his hatred had lost its full force. And though the old man had been a crap dad, he turned out to be a passable grandfather. He came to the boys' soccer games and remembered their birthdays. He hadn't had a drink in nearly twenty years, and that went a long way to changing his character.

The burmese border loach, the masked julie, the flowerhorn cichlid. MacKendrick's mind was jumping around again. That morning, after leaving the hospital, he'd stopped in at a Pet Smart and walked slowly along the long walls of aquaria. Malawi eyebiters, black phantom tetras, marbled hachetfish, bigspot barbs and chocolate gouramis, all the wonderful names were there. And then, at the end of an aisle, he found what he was looking for. The bettas, Siamese fighting fish. It was a scene in *From Russia with Love* that had given him the idea. In the movie, some evil mastermind described the east and west as Siamese fighting fish that will destroy one another, leaving them both vulnerable to SPECTRE. MacKendrick's idea was to buy three bettas, pour them into the same plastic baggie and let the nasty little bastards sort it out amongst themselves. He would eat a nice lunch with his father and make sure he worked that long-ago aquarium into the conversation. Then, at just the right moment, he would tell the old man about Brian's overdose and simultaneously bring out the plastic baggie. His father would get the message. Maybe the three fish would have all killed each other or maybe they'd still be fighting. Whichever. His father would get the message.

In the ICU, MacKendrick's tired mind had figured the revenge would be gratifying. Sitting in the restaurant and drinking his coffee, he couldn't quite reassemble the logic of the thing. He was going to make his father feel guilt with a plastic baggie from Pet Smart? With dead or near-dead fish? Was that the thing of it? Bloody hell. It had somehow made sense at four o'clock in the morning.

Bright sunlight came in as the front door at Tierney opened wide. MacKendrick squinted and saw his father at the hostess stand, steadying himself against it just the way MacKendrick had. The man looked impossibly old. Old and frail, like a war criminal hunted down in South America. MacKendrick understood that the baggie of dead or near-dead fish would stay in his briefcase. There was no point in taking them out. Even a sensible, well-executed revenge plot would make no difference. Instead, he would tell his father about the overdose, and they would feel sad and powerless together.