



## LUCKY FISH

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### *Doris Plantus*

I noticed she was missing the minute I walked into the kitchen. He tried to hide the deed by bragging about how clean it was, the kitchen, indeed it was, but the empty kind, so I wasn't impressed.

My heart walked over to the counter next to the sink to have a better look. Yes, she was gone, alright. Other things were missing too—a spice rack from my mother, with full bottles of pulverized seeds and slivered rosemary and garfunkeled-thyme, stiff warped bay leaves with missing pieces and faded coarse stubbled bits of parsley, more yellow than green. Spiky cloves. But even so, it was a gift from my mother. Gone. And the bread box that was too small for serious bread, whose door stuck besides. I used to put silly things in there like tiny brown bags I had folded neatly, in the event that I would need such a bag, but never actually did. Also gone. It's true I couldn't remember just how many utensils stood like a slanted bouquet with wood and stainless steel stems in a stout ceramic vase, but the spoons—those worn, smooth handles that loved the touch of my grandmother's fingers when she wrote stew, or scribbled sifted flour into hot oil with minced garlic, propped one against the other in that ceramic pot—not there. I moved aside with my eyes the indifferent square sponge and the sink with the dull blameless finish; the wall shined as my eyes rolled across it, so now it was obvious that she was simply not there.

“Hungarians are clean,” he said with magnificent tone.

I can't remember a more oppressive heat in July. The air was mushy, the molecules like invisible fish eggs clumping against my skin, making me heavy with despair.

"Where is—"

"I don't know. It's clean. I made it clean, see?"

"But where—"

"Hungarians are clean. When I was a child, I was always cleaning and even my mother, who was also very clean, thought I was strange because I was always cleaning. See how nice it looks? *Clean.*" His mother was right.

"Where is—"

He turned away. He did not answer. He did not see my heart on the counter, or my eyes on the wall. I took the rest of me and went looking in a loud sort of way.

"I put it over there. Somewhere," he said, as if giving a grand speech, pointing his thick fingers in the direction of a tiny room off the kitchen.

I saw the spice rack and bread box huddled together in a cardboard box but she wasn't with them.

"Maybe I threw it out," he added with such hollow intonation that it echoed in my chest and eye sockets. *It.* And a smell like blasphemy made rancid curls in the air.

It was Tuesday afternoon, which meant the garbage that had been hauled to the street some 400 feet away had been simmering in the hot sun all day. I hate garbage with an unusual zeal because the raccoons routinely get into it, gleaning the sordid contents with wild abandon, which meant I was forced to spend time with it—the garbage, raking it, flicking the far flung particles of stained wrappers and dead vegetable peelings back into the can. And the smell.

This was different, however. It was 96 degrees and muggy. I could hear the garbage truck a short distance away so I hadn't much time. I could feel my heart and my eyes looking after me from the kitchen window. I left them behind the way you do children who need to be protected when you say "Wait here."

There they were, four large rubbish cans in a neat row

along the side of the road. When I lifted the flaccid plastic lid off the first one a burst of stagnant warm putrid air hit my face. My nose diverted the function of breathing to my mouth as if to spare my lungs the sickening odor, so the noxious fumes dove straight to my stomach, as if I could fool my own brain into thinking the stench didn't exist, simply because I had bypassed the olfactory. Quickly I hunted through the smelly foam gurgling from sagging fruit and rotting tomatoes scraps. I hadn't had time to bother with gloves or even a shovel—anything but my fingers. Fingers it was. I didn't find her. I opened the second can and it was drier, but no less disgusting. Half I emptied into the first, sifting through the refuse like the raccoons that vex me. Nothing.

The third can of garbage was wet and ugly, soft deformed rinds of melon, withered seeds (I had a dove named Noah), sticking to my hands, papers damp with condensed swill of mingled juice and slime. She must be in the last one. *She*.

What was he thinking? Who does this kind of thing? I was incredulous, but I was hurt too, yet more sad than hurt, more hurt than angry. I rummaged through the fourth can of garbage, feeling a nausea in my mind and a burning in my bones; there, at the very bottom beneath some gnarled chicken bones was my icon of the Virgin Mary on a long key chain with a fish. I should explain the fish. When my sons were young we had a little aquarium, and gave names to all the fish. I chose Lucky. For my next birthday they bought me a fishing lure and said it was a "lucky" fish. So I removed the hooks and wore it on my key chain. Over the years I received many more lucky fish so that in a while they were everywhere, attached to things of importance, or not. It happened that I had a very long key chain, and a very long lucky fish. It used to hang on a nail on the wall in the kitchen, important unto itself, until one day I put a silver icon on it too, and hung it on the kitchen window. She had been there for years, the Madonna, with the Child, and the lucky fish.

I pulled her from the rubbish the way one would pull a drowning child from the water. If ever I thought the Virgin

would speak to me, it was then, but then I feared her reproach: “How could you let him do this to me, my child?” (And for a split second I imagined she was adding a tender appellation to me, before I realized she was referring to her son).

When I got back to the house I collected my heart and eyes that were by now so anxious and swollen with emotion they scarcely fit back in their usual places.

He was elsewhere.

Hours passed before I could even bear to look at him. I restored her to her place by the window and took a long shower. When I saw him later that evening, I said,

“How could you do such a thing?”

My voice was hard. He stood before me absent of anything familiar. He seemed abundantly vacant and queer. I felt God shudder and a dust settled upon the obsessively clean Hungarian him like a curse.

I felt a wee bit vindicated only months later when I heard he had been deported. Still, I continued to throw slender pointed missiles at his picture on my dart board. It was a small picture that I offset intentionally from the bull’s-eye on account of the small target and my inferior aim. Plenty of holes, though. There weren’t enough holes even so.

Two years later on a cold-cold night I got a most unexpected phone call.

“Janos is dead,” said the man’s voice.

I looked at the icon.

“What?”

“You sent him to his death,” the man said with a thick angry voice.

I looked at the dart board.

“He hanged himself. His mother found him.”

He was three days shy of his birthday. What a pathetic jerk. When I told my son that Janos was dead, he said,

“Wouldn’t that be something if it a big giant dart just happened to run him through as he was walking down the street? Wouldn’t it?”

Funny. Well, maybe not so much. Actually, it was. Funny, I mean, like a Far Side comic.

Still I could not reconcile the matter in my conscious mind. Five years would pass before I would dream he was digging his fingers into my chest and I woke up gasping.