

STEVE TOMASULA

## ENTANGLEMENT: FISH NOT STORIES

### THREAD ONE: THE FISH'S TALE

I woke up in the middle of the night with these pains in my chest that made me think I was having a heart attack. So I woke up Holly and said she had to take me to the emergency room. Groggily, she said she was too sleepy. I insisted, I said we had to go right now. It's probably nothing, she yawned. I'll take you in the morning. Holly is younger than me; she doesn't understand yet what it is to find more and more hair come off in your comb or to wake up sore in the morning without having any reason to be sore in the morning. But I couldn't go back to sleep. I went into the living room and laid down on the couch, twisting and turning and worrying that I was dying, and it must have worn me out because I don't remember sleeping at all but when I woke up the sun was shining. And there were people there—beautiful, glowing people silhouetted in bright, streaming light, looking down at me. *Had* I died? Gone to heaven? No. They were Holly's friends. They said they were going to breakfast with her. I said, But she has to take me to the emergency room; I'm having a heart attack. They said, You look fine. Why don't you come with us to breakfast instead? We're going to have breakfast burritos. Then Holly came out and started putting on her sandals. She'd taken a shower, gotten dressed, and painted her toenails red, and she was looking very beautiful. Somehow her beauty and her youth got to me, as in deserted me, and I said, I can't *believe* you won't take me to the emergency room, and she said she'd do it after breakfast, and I said, You're just going to leave me here like this?, and her friends started telling her that they invited me but that I wouldn't listen (again), and they couldn't understand how someone would rather go to a hospital than a restaurant with a nice outdoor patio and mimosas and great burritos. That just got me angry, so I started yelling, and Holly started yelling, so I started yelling louder, and Holly started yelling louder still till she shouted, Forget it!—I'm leaving! But

I wouldn't let her leave. I grabbed her by the arm, so she swung at me, and we went on this way yelling and grabbing and pulling and slapping until the police arrived. One of her friends had called them. The police told me that if I didn't settle down they were going to arrest me. So I told them I was having a heart attack. They said, So why don't you go to the emergency room? And I said, I wanted to, but Holly wouldn't take me. So she said, He does this all the time—especially when I want to go out with my friends. Then her friends said it wasn't like they were leaving me out because, after all, they'd invited me to go to breakfast with them, and they couldn't understand why I'd rather go to a hospital than that restaurant with the really great outdoor patio, and the cops wanted to know if they meant the restaurant on the strip or the one out by the garden shop and if the burritos there were as good as everyone said, and Holly's friends said they were great and began to describe all the different kinds—with tofu-salsa, black beans, or guac—and how even the whole-wheat tortillas were made in-house—till the cops turned to me and asked, So why don't you want to go? Maybe a burrito would settle you down, they said, which only enraged me—I mean the idea of me having a heart attack and them telling me to eat all that spicy food! What was this—a conspiracy? Then Holly tried to leave again, so I went for her, but she screamed and tried to scurry behind the cops, and the cops got in the way, so I tried to push past them, but they only twisted my arm up behind my back, held me as she got away, and then took me out to their car.

I sat in the cop car, telling them I had to go to the emergency room, but they said that I had just made a big mistake, that if I had just gone to breakfast none of this would have happened, but now, because I wouldn't listen, they were taking me downtown. That's what they said, "downtown." I thought only cops in movies said "downtown," and anyway we live in Buena Vista Terrace, one of those made-up housing developments; we don't have a "downtown," and I told them so. One cop just ignored me, filling out some kind of paperwork, but the other one said, Wise guy. I thought only cops in movies said "wise guy," but by this point I was starting to get the picture so I kept my mouth shut till I realized that by "downtown" they didn't mean the emergency room at all but the police station! So I started hollering and screaming police brutality! and they're killing me!, but they just locked me up in this holding pen.

Ten a.m. and there were already four other guys in it. One was drunk or high and just sitting, clutching himself in a corner, rocking back and forth. Another was sleeping on the top bunk. An old hippy sitting on the bottom bunk asked me what I was in for, then said, Wow man, that's heavy, when I told him that they locked me up because I was having a heart attack. Everything's illegal now!, the stoner moaned. Then the other guy, a shriveled old bonsai-tree of a man, came shuffling at me, telling me how last year he'd been abducted by the KGB. Don't laugh, he told the stoner, who he thought had laughed but had only let out some kind of pathetic squeal. I'm a Russian Jew, the bonsai-tree explained, and these things happen to us. For days I had no idea where I was, he said. There was a black bag over my head that they only took off to let me eat. When they did, I could see I was in some kind of metal room. Even the light was imprisoned—a single bulb in a metal cage on the ceiling. Pipes ran along the wall, everything was painted grey, and there were no windows, like it was some kind of bomb shelter. For five or six days—or I don't know, it could have been a week—I endured this isolation. I could only estimate time by how often they fed me, he said, but they could have been varying this too to throw off my sense of days. There was no night or day, only a monotonous, faint vibration in the floor, in the walls, everywhere, as though some heavy machinery was being run deep in the bowels of the building where I was being held. Then, a week—or, for all I know, it could have been a month later—they let me out. My head in a black bag, they led me up a metal ladder, then another ladder, then yet another ladder still. As I climbed this last one I could smell the sea. I could feel a breeze that grew stronger as I climbed. Then, emerging from some kind of manhole at the top of the ladder, they removed the bag from my head and I could see the stars above. It was night. And all around me was a submarine. I had been in a submarine the entire time! They had me climb down a rope ladder into a rubber raft where two men all dressed in black were waiting. Once I was secured in one of the net seats of the raft, they began to row. In silence they rowed, and I will never forget the sight of the stars, brilliant above, and the glow of some unknown city on a dark landmass that the men were rowing toward, putting their backs into the rowing, the raft gliding along silently but as swiftly as if it were powered by a motor. When we were close enough to feel the tug of the tide, they motioned for me to get out. I'm not a fish!, I exclaimed, meaning that I could not swim. But somehow they either knew that this was a lie or didn't care, and by the look of their stoic, silent faces,

I could see that my choice was to either climb out or be thrown out, so I flopped over the side as if I were a large fish that they had caught and were throwing back into the sea. Then I rolled over so I could float on my back and let the tide take me in. Only once did I look back to see my captors—or were they my liberators?—but they had already vanished into the night. So I kept my eyes on the stars above, which were reflected in the waters below—back stroke, rest, back stroke, rest.... I began to lose any sense of up or down or left or right, as though I were less of a fish than an astronaut, weightless in that starry night. And this is how I came to America. Why did they kidnap me? I'm sure you'll ask. He shrugged in answer to his own question. To this day it is a mystery. But I'm hoping the judge at my deportation hearing will listen as attentively as you have. For you see, all I have are words, but words are what often make our lives what they are, do they not?

#### THREAD TWO: NOT A FISH TALE

For old times' sake I went back to the fishin' hole we used to go to as kids. It's really more of an inlet from the river, and by river I mean a drainage canal that runs between a string of factories, sort of a backwater that loops around a thick tangle of growth. But it must have been dredged out at some point because it's deeper in the middle and so a good place to catch catfish. It used to be our secret spot. Anyway, I only had my line in the water for a few minutes when I thought I saw something move in the bushes on the opposite bank. Sure enough, a few minutes later a face peeked out then just as quickly shot back behind a tree. I figured that it must be somebody looking for secret fishing holes and that he didn't want me to know he'd found mine. But then he peeked out from behind the tree a second time, and the way he hid again was so slow and so obvious that I thought he was really crappy at hiding. Then he did it again. And again. And I began to wonder if he *wanted* me to know that he was spying on me. Whenever I looked away his head poked out from behind the tree, but as soon as I looked in his direction he ducked back behind the tree so I couldn't see him. Only he always delayed a beat, didn't duck back until after I'd seen him, like he wanted to get caught spying on me. Then I was sure he wanted to get caught: he didn't duck behind the tree until he was sure I'd gotten a good look at him looking at me. That's weird, I thought, but I just kept fishing. Then he let more and more of his body show—a skinny hipster body—and when I looked over at him he

gave me a good, long, hard look before ducking back behind the tree. The next time I looked over he wasn't there, and I thought, Well I'm glad that's over. But then he appeared again and his shirt was off—at least that's what I thought at first but when he popped back behind the tree I thought I got a glimpse of hip—and sure enough, a minute later he stepped out from behind the tree and this time he was completely naked. He gave me that fixed stare and started coming toward me, an erection growing. Right about then I hooked a fish. He was walking toward me, his erection already full on, but I couldn't just leave because I had this fish on the line and it was a big one, bowing the rod, fighting. So I was working my rod, and the guy was working his rod, slowly coming closer, then he was in the water, twenty yards in front of me, furiously whacking off while I'm fighting this fish, and he started gyrating to match my tugs on the line, hip thrusting toward me when I pulled back the rod, then going limp when I whipped the rod forward to reel in the slack, like instead of a fish I was reeling in his cod. Fuck off, pervert! I yelled at him. But he didn't care. He knew I was trapped in the logic of the situation, and to be honest I didn't really care either. It was more irritating than anything—like when a mime starts following you on the street, mirroring your every move, which everyone finds so annoying because no one likes being imitated, no one likes having their movements counterfeited, because in a way the things we do are us and we are them, our ticks and gaits and shuffles and slouches as telling as the loops and slants of our signatures—even if they speak in silence.

As I was leaving, after I threw back my fish and the guy was spent, I saw him sunning himself on a rock as if nothing had happened.