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Dangerous Fish

The Forse River was barely big enough to be called a river. In the dry, hot summers, it dwindled into a stream, and in the winter months, frozen, it looked like a ribbon of dishwater some Forse housewife had thrown out her back door. The spring and the autumn were the best months; the spring because of the melting snow and the autumn because come the first of September the rains came to Forse. In October, the river—impressive enough to be called a river, temperatures usually in the high sixties, water, too shallow to swim in, too rocky to enjoy wading—became the best fishing grounds for miles around. Bass, pickerel, breakfast perch and an occasional lunge were to be found, and on some days, usually when the sun was hot and the shadows of the trees were like umbrellas for the poor golden fish, an occasional catfish was landed or a sucker, both of which were promptly thrown back.

No-one knew exactly where the Forse River had its source. Mr. Plant, the druggist and often considered the most intelligent man in town, swore he once knew, but all the names of the various tributaries, some smaller than Forse's, confused him so all he was really sure of was that the water began with the lake in the city, although that lake probably joined another lake somewhere even Mr. Plant hadn't heard of. Once, about ten years back, a man from the city had visited Forse in early October, cautioning all the residents not to eat the fish or drink any water that didn't go through a purification treatment. Something about chemical poisoning, a mistake. No-one went to the Forse River that year until winter had arrived with its coating of ice. Since you couldn't swim or wade, there was nothing to do but to look at the water, watch for the reflection the sky made on the surface: things the townspeople thought of as idle and definite wastes of time.

The river wasn't talked about again until the year of the overly rainy September. It was accepted in much the same way as the sun was—having been there too long for any fuss to be made. But if the

sun had exploded or mysteriously disappeared one morning, conversation would have ensued. And so with Forse River.

If it had been Sparling Linder who'd first started acting strangely, everyone would have thought it isolated; she was already eccentric, writing articles for city magazines and never marrying. If it had been Claud Cort, it would have seemed natural; after all, he couldn't even remember where he lived half the time. Even Lillian Byington wouldn't have caused much scandal. She was known to be slightly hysterical and people would have thought she'd had a bad fight with her husband or that her blueberry pies had been raided by ants. These people could have been ignored as could have Mrs. Grand, the oldest woman in town, or Dr. Merriwether, who lived in a world of his own. But not Clu Byington, Lillian's husband. He was a mechanic and his mind worked like a well-oiled engine. He was the logic in the town of Forse, much like Mr. Plant, only not as abstract. If suddenly, the lights of the town went out, Clu Byington knew the reason within minutes. If a toaster burnt the bread or a lawn mower gave the grass a brush cut, he had the solution before anyone else had stopped complaining. It was a fact around Forse that Clu Byington had never said a silly word in all the years he'd lived there (his whole life, discounting several years as a young man when he went to the city in search of success). Actually, he could be trusted even more than Mr. Plant, because Mr. Plant did occasionally get carried away on a concept and lose everyone's attention, finally his own.

Clu Byington was the most avid fisherman in the town so it really shouldn't have been a surprise that it happened to him. It was just that at first, no-one knew what had happened or more correctly, how it had happened in Forse. Forse admired intelligence and cultivated it with one fine library and a yearly dramatic evening put on by the Ladies for the Forse Elderly. But the kind of intelligence they admired might have been termed etiquette in the city, or protocol abroad. Alice Brinks, the town gossip, especially admired men who knew enough to open car doors for her or who didn't look ignorant when she mentioned Margaret Mitchell and *Gone With The Wind*. Constance Malone, who everyone said was too smart to be just a housewife, made sandwiches of different colours whenever she had a party and never wore green with blue. Books were not necessarily anything special, at least not novels or poetry, and philosophers were considered nothing more than chocolate eclairs unless they knew when to get a haircut.

The reason that Clu Byington was the first to seem strange (in the city he'd be called pretentious) had nothing to do with the fact that he

had a mechanical mind, although everyone had thought that at one time, but because he ate the most fish. As simple as that. He left his garage in the care of his assistant, Todd Hamilton, and in October, he fished from dawn until dusk, cooking the fish he caught for his lunch and his supper.

The first person to notice anything different about Clu was Constance Malone's husband who joined him on the river bank one afternoon. He later told Alice Brinks that Clu had acted peculiar, talking about mankind in much the same way as farmers talked about cows. That in itself would have been enough to send Alice to the telephone, but to add to it, she met Clu on her way home from the grocery store that very day.

"It's going to be a red sunset tonight," she said, checking him over for signs of sunstroke. "You know what they say: Red sky at night, a sailor's delight." At

Clu Byington looked a little confused as if he were trying to remember where he'd heard that expression before, then, without batting an eyelash or blushing even the tiniest bit, he answered: "Just remember, the days that make us happy make us wise."

By dusk at least half the women in Forse knew that Clu Byington had said something strange. They recounted Alice's story to their husbands, each with their own version, so that Clu Byington was credited with saying: "Wisdom is happiness" and "The sun makes the wise happy" all on the same day.

It might have been forgotten if Lillian Byington hadn't been Clu's wife. When Alice phoned her the next morning, Lillian was in tears, hardly able to talk, managing only a weak "I don't understand," before she broke off into sobs. Alice was in the grocery store when Clu came in later that morning to buy more bacon to bait his hooks. She moved close to the cash register. Usually Cameron Shill, the grocer, didn't talk much so Clu might have gotten out of the store without having to open his mouth, but Alice cleared her throat and said: "I hear Lillian is feeling poorly."

Clu looked at her with surprise. He hadn't noticed she was there. He smiled, an odd crooked smile, and said: "Where the apple redens never pry—Lest we lose our Edens, Eve and I."

If Alice had had any of the nervousness that Lillian had, she might have fainted. As it was, she felt dizzy for a moment and was unable to speak until Clu Byington had left the store, his brown paper package of bacon under his arm.

Mr. Plant, whom Alice went to immediately, was happy to hear of a problem in Forse. It seemed no-one ever got sick in October, so he

had few chances to give his brain a good workout as he did in the winter months, substituting Dr. Merriwether's sometimes lethal prescriptions for more sensible ones. Dr. Merriwether prescribed medicines because he liked the sounds of their names. Mr. Plant was in the business of saving lives.

"It's all that fishing," Alice said, a little out of control, enjoying the abandonment. She thought that Lillian Byington might have something with her hysterics, something free and refreshing. "He's turning into a fish."

"Fish don't quote poetry, Alice," Mr. Plant said, rubbing his hands together. He was thinking it might be a brain tumour or at the least, a little hardening of the arteries.

"Maybe not," Alice relented, disappointed at how quickly she was convinced, "but something strange is happening to Lillian's husband."

Mr. Plant closed the story early and headed out towards the Forse River. Clu Byington was the only one fishing, although Bobby Hamilton, Todd's brother, was sitting a ways down the bank, just sitting on the grass, chewing a long weed.

"How are you, Clu?" Mr. Plant said, sitting down beside him. The pail where he kept his catch had three fish in it. There was nothing out of the ordinary and when Clu answered him, he sounded as normal as always.

"Catching a mess of fish. Care to join me?"

Mr. Plant stayed for lunch. A fat pickerel sizzled over a makeshift fire. The smell of the cooking caught on the wind and blew over the river. For a while, they just chatted, until the fish was ready. They ate from paper plates, putting the fish bones on the grass. It was during the third or fourth mouthful that Clu Byington caused Mr. Plant almost to choke.

"Did you know that all originality comes from reading?" Clu asked.

When Mr. Plant had recovered from coughing, he was aware that he was party to a very important moment. He might be the one to get to the bottom of Clu Byington's strange utterances. "I didn't know you read, Clu."

"The only problem with reading is that reading is a confrontation with truth and the greatest enemy of any one of our truths may be the rest of our truths." Clu Byington's brow was wrinkled and his eyes were extremely blue and alive.

Mr. Plant listened to him talk for fifteen minutes. Clu had stopped eating so that Mr. Plant ate the majority of the fish, trying to cover up

his nervousness and excitement. It was near the end of the meal, when the fish bones were piled high on the grass, that Mr. Plant forgot to observe and became involved in the discussion. "At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, don't you agree, Clu?" he asked, thinking it the most natural question in the universe.

Everyone who had ever left Forse for the city at one time in their lives, and that was nearly everyone in the town of Forse, had studied books; some had even achieved obscure degrees. Whenever it happened that a quotation was brought up (seldom) or a writer was mentioned (Margaret Mitchell or Shakespeare), something would twig in someone's brain: a memory, something blue and faded, words coming from a city teacher's mouth. Everyone had once heard of William James, if only in passing. Everyone felt a twinge of nostalgia at the look of a white page cluttered with omnipotent black letters.

When Mr. Plant arrived back in town to open his store for the last hours of the day, Alice Brinks saw him coming and met him at the door of the drugstore. She was breathing heavily from running across the street and her curiosity was dazzling in her eyes.

"Did you see him? What did he say? Do you have any idea what's wrong with him?"

Mr. Plant looked at her fondly. He took one of her hands in one of his and said gently: "Calm down, Alice. Peace comes of communication."

The town was buzzing like a beehive. Alice couldn't contain herself just to making phone calls. She ran from house to house, telling her story so quickly that few knew what she'd been talking about once she'd left. But these people phoned their friends regardless and soon the entire town knew something uncanny was happening to Mr. Plant as well as to Clu Byington. Alma Gaines closed the library early and dashed over to Lillian's place to console her and, with luck, learn more about what was going on.

Alice Brinks, once she stopped running, had to admit that she had no idea what the cause of it all might be. She had a vague uneasiness about fish and had been sure to don a hat in case the rays of the sun were acting up. But nothing definite was in her head and that made her boil; she was used to knowing everything about everyone, sometimes before the people in question knew it themselves. The only think she could think of was to talk to Sparling Linder, the town eccentric, as Alice had termed her.

She swallowed her pride, which wasn't very difficult—curiosity was the bigger lump at the present. Alice was one of Sparling's worst enemies, although Sparling didn't think so, in fact, she didn't think

of it at all. But a few years back when a plague of birds had hit Forse, she had blamed the whole thing on Sparling. Now, dressed impeccably and with a false smile covering her face, she headed for Sparling's house.

At various times, Alice Brinks had gossiped about Sparling's being a witch, a fast woman and a loony. But as she knocked on the front door, all she thought of Sparling was that she read books and wrote magazine articles and would surely know why perfectly ordinary men suddenly started quoting philosophy. Sparling Linder's new label was that of "educated".

Alice didn't waste much time with amenities. She made herself at home as if Sparling's place were almost as familiar to her as her own. She immediately got down to business.

"So," she said after explaining, "what do you make of it?"

"I think it's lovely," Sparling said.

"Besides that," Alice sighed.

"Well, I really don't know what to make of it. It is lovely though. Perhaps it is the fish, as you say. Fish is supposed to be brain food."

"Could that be it?"

"I don't really know. The River Forse full of superfish." Sparling threw back her head and laughed.

"Maybe the water has something in it, a chemical of some kind," Alice suggested. Her mind was working as quickly as it ever had, like a machine, one of those modern computers.

"Anything's possible," Sparling said, throwing up her hands. "I think I'll catch myself a few of those fish. You can never be too smart."

Alice went away, half-contemptuous, half-crazy with anticipation. She muttered a few things to herself about Sparling Linder. The nerve of the woman to think such a tragedy lovely. By evening, everyone in Forse knew about it. They were not to eat the fish.

Clu Byington wouldn't comply of course, nor would Mr. Plant. Lillian Byington almost lost her head trying to convince her husband of the danger and finally, collapsing in a heap on the living room couch, she resigned herself to being a widow.

But Clu Byington, Mr. Plant and Sparling Linder made quite a team. Sparling had gone to have lunch with Clu the day after Alice had visited, and they passed the afternoon discussing illusions in everyday life. She was already an intelligent woman (in city terms) but the fish made her feel positively brilliant. It wasn't that they weren't aware of the changes within themselves, they were just enjoying them too much to dwell on them. They wouldn't even discuss them, except amongst themselves.

Sparling gained the reputation for being a fast woman once again—after all, she'd had two men to herself for most of the days in question. But the only thing remotely sexual to occur was a conversation on the limits of physical love. They ended that particular day by deciding that a spiritual communion between man and woman was decidedly the superior form of relationship.

No-one knew what could be done to put an end to the fish situation. Some of Forse were tempted to start eating fish again since the three culprits seemed to be having more fun than the rest of the town. Alice sensed this. She wouldn't give a victory to Sparling, not if she had to sew the entire town's lips together, so they wouldn't be able to eat a thing. But a logical solution escaped her until the day when she bumped into Mr. Plant in front of Muriel Avens' clothing store. She was about to say something rude to him when he spoke first.

"A true gentleperson is one who is never unintentionally rude."

That did it. She didn't stop long enough to figure out exactly what he was saying. The look on his face was condescending and she knew she was being mocked.

Over the next few days she collected support from every resident of Forse. Even those who at first declined to be a part of her plan came around when they saw how many people she had on her side. If her plan worked, they'd be ostracized for life. Finally, everyone was on her team but the three intellectuals.

They met by the river in the middle of October, a sunny day that was a bit chilly, the clouds in the sky looking fat as if they were beginning to collect the first snow. Every man and woman had a fishing rod, some made of branches and string, others professional and new. They'd bought out all the bacon in Cameron Shill's store and if there hadn't been a breeze, the riverbank would have smelled like a butcher's back room. They fished for the entire day, the young unmarried men, who hadn't yet left Forse in search of success and a wife, kept Clu Byington, Mr. Plant and Sparling Linder from getting too close to the river. A riot might have broken out if the three thinkers hadn't already decided a few days ago that violence on its own solved nothing.

Hundreds of fish were caught. The last several hours yielded nothing. It seemed the Forse River was fished dry. The entire catch was taken off into a field and a giant grave was dug. Mr. Plant remarked later that it was like a burning of books. Sparling Linder said loudly: "Each man carries within him the whole form of the human condition."

A few fish still straggled into the river from somewhere upstream

and Clu Byington managed to catch one or two of these, but the crop was definitely at an end. It was soon after that the first frost arrived and it wasn't long after that that the river became meagre and skinny and what little water was left, froze. Clu Byington and Mr. Plant were probably never the same again, but they lost a great deal of their deductive powers and the abstract once more became just that: abstract. Alice Brinks was finally satisfied when, several weeks later, she overheard Cly Byington in the grocery store saying: "Genius is . . . is . . . now what the heck was it?"