**The Fish**

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published in audio form in The Drum Literary Magazine, Issue 34, March 2013

www.drumlitmag.com

Come daybreak, Ida knew what they'd find – Jake standing over 120 of his cattle he'd managed to pen and shoot, one by one. She knew full well that he'd lost his mind and she'd never have him back. She knew that she was now a widow.

Her porch light showed two cows that had escaped, standing in the black morning near the ranchhouse and looking out towards Jake's hissing kerosene lantern, the only other light for five miles. She clicked off her light and sat in her porch rocker.

She'd called the sheriff, but by the time he got there Jake was two-thirds finished and they couldn't see him in the dark and "besides," as the sheriff said, "they're his cows anyway. No point in pushing a man into taking a shot at you." So he parked his patrol car up the dirt road and decided to wait for daylight.

A gunshot sounded from the corral and echoed off a mountain bluff a mile away. In the silence that followed, Ida heard the sheriff's radio crackle once, and then his voice calm and quiet, saying he'd presently be bringing Jake in. There was a garbled and mechanical reply, then the radio was turned off. The only indication of the sheriff in the darkness was the red pinpoint of his cigarette where he stood waiting outside his car. "He'll simmer down," he'd told her, "after he finishes."

But she knew there'd be no simmering down. It was the way Jake had said, "Goodnight, Ida," as he stepped out the screen door with his gun. On those words, whatever bond had held them together for 47 years snapped. And she saw Jake drifting into space like an astronaut who gets his cord cut to the mother ship in one of those sci-fi movies. She was on the mother ship. The mother ship was earth, and Jake was gone.

Her calmness surprised her. But she'd known nights like this before. She'd been through the death watches of both her parents, and was there and awake when the trembling took her father and he opened his eyes, knowing what was coming. And she remembered when she was a girl and her neighbors, the Ramseys, lost their house to fire and had no insurance. Her mother gave their two little girls cookies and read them stories while the men dug through the ashes.

All her years had taught her that no matter how horrible the night, the next day the world would always be different; maybe not better, but changed and set off on a new course. And all you had to do was let the world take you that way. Her mother once told her that you can't let your heart break if no good can come of it.

With her toe she pushed against the porch floor of the house and the rocker creaked back and forth. She knew the sun would be breaking through any moment to the east behind her. The fence had appeared in front of the house like a shadow and a shrub or two on the other side of it were dark blurs. Each morning from the porch she watched the first light come up from the ground across the ranch like mist, objects crystallizing before her. Now she could see three tumbleweeds pressed against the fence and remembered the tumbleweed snowmen she had made each Christmas since she got the idea 30 years ago.

She leaned back in her chair and thought of Florida and her sister and realized that was more than likely where she was headed. Good, she thought. Someplace different. Her sister had warned her against marrying Jake, said any man that would try and raise milk cows instead of beef cows in west Texas was crazy. "Jake's interested in milk," she'd heard herself say and regretted it the instant she said it. No way her sister was going to understand. Ida didn't understand herself, but she knew whatever made Jake want to raise milk cows against all common sense was tied in with the thing that made her love him.

To everyone's surprise, Jake somehow managed to turn a profit from his little dairy. The milk cows certainly weren't made for long-range, West Texas grazing, but he was able to cut a couple of good deals with local farmers for feed, and by irrigating was able to raise a few acres of alfalfa himself. And he sure didn't have to worry about competition for his milk.

Only when they first married did he say anything about the cows. He explained that he just liked the idea of feeding babies, of them going from their mother's breast to him and his cows, then growing up and into the world. He liked being a part of that.

Ida wondered how many gentle and fragile people lived full, happy lives because the one event that could have pushed them over the edge never occurred. For Jake, that event was the test the people from Texas A&M ran on his milk. It showed traces of lead and arsenic, just within legal limits, and more than likely on the rise. What Jake could not get from his mind for the next three days was the thought that babies had been drinking his milk. Today was the fourth day.

Some young people had approached them about it, pointing fingers towards groundwater pollution and a toxic dump site. They wanted them to take it to court. But for those three days after the test it was all Ida could do to take care of Jake, and now it was too late to matter. With Jake gone, she was surprised how easily everything fell from her shoulders, how easily she could let go of the burden of this beautiful, desolate land. This was Jake's country, and she could not bear witness to it without him. And without Jake, it lost its claim on her. It would be easy enough to leave this house.

She remembered driving down the dirt driveway that Friday morning after the doctor told them Jake couldn't father any children. She hated the doctor for that. He should've never said whose fault it was because it didn't matter. *They* couldn't have children, not Jake alone. Driving home he didn't say a word, and in the silence she became gripped by the fear he'd leave her. She knew he was thinking that he wasn't good enough for her, wasn't enough of a man. In bed that night she insisted he love her. Demanded it. And when he couldn't, and the coldness and distance swept into her, some dark part of herself opened and she did something she never thought she could do, then things she'd never even heard of. She was so shameless it scared him, but it woke him up and brought him to her. "It's not for babies," she told him. "It's for me. It's so you can please me."

A shot rang out, and she blushed, having been caught remembering *that*, then slowly began pushing those memories away. They didn't go easily. They seemed to flutter inside her like birds; frightened, insistent, white. She imagined opening a window and setting them free; watched them fly over the desert until the curves of their wings shrunk to pinpoints, then disappeared altogether into the sky.

There was nothing she could do to bring him back this time. She had nothing new to show him. He was through, and that was all. She knew him well enough to let him be.

"Accept, accept," she whispered as she slowly rocked. This part of her life was simply over. She told herself to count her blessings for 47 years with a man like Jake. And if her sister, Mae, brought it up, then Ida'd have to point out that *her* husband only lasted 25.

She thought again of Florida: she could get fresh seafood, and she remembered riding with Mae in the back seat of their Chevrolet the summer before the war when their folks took them to Galveston. Ida ordered flounder almost every meal. It infuriated Mae, who could see no point in eating a fish so silly it had both eyes on the same side of its face. But Ida explained that it simply wanted to see the sky. And Jake when he was courting her – she caught him lying on his back in a field in the middle of the morning. She walked out to him and asked him what he thought he was doing. "I reckon I'm just looking up," he told her. She watched him, then lay beside him. When he reached out and took her hand, she knew she was married.

Ida hadn't thought about the flounder since she was a little girl. She'd have to tell Mae, and Mae would tell her she was as crazy as Jake. Ida was surprised the thought could make her smile. It was daylight now, quiet, and she could see the sheriff ambling toward the corral.