

## THE GEFILTE FISH GIRL

Here's the first in our trio of cover stories. Mike Resnick is a Hugo-and Nebula-award winning author. He's also been nominated for the Best Editor Hugo for the editing he's done on a wide variety of anthologies, including an excellent alternate history series published by Tor.

"The Gefilte Fish Girl" isn't alternate history. It's fantasy, but not necessarily of the dreamy kind.

So I walk up to her and say, "Ma, we gotta talk."

And she never looks up from the TV, and she says, "Not during Homemakers' Jamboree, Marvin."

And I say, "Ma, I'm Milton. Marvin is your goniff brother who is serving six to ten for passing bogus bills." (Which he is. He's a great artist, even the judge admitted that, but he just doesn't do his homework, and printing a bunch of twenties with Andrew Johnson's picture on them is probably not the brightest move he ever made.)

Anyway, she says, "Marvin, Milton, what's the difference, and did you know that Liz Taylor is getting married again? What is it for her now --the thirty-fourth time?"

And I say, "You know, Ma, it's funny you should bring that up."

And she says, "Funny? Okay, Mister Big Shot, tell me what's so funny. Are you the one she's marrying? Go ahead, make my day."

And I say, "Lots of people get married, Ma. Some of them even get married to women who aren't Liz Taylor, hard as that may be for you to believe."

And she says, "Lots of mature people, Melvin."

And I say, "Melvin is my cousin who ran off with the gay lion tamer from the circus. I'm Milton, and speaking of mature, I'm thirty-four years old."

And she says, "You'd think someone who's thirty-four years old would know to change his socks without being told." Suddenly she curses and says, "See? You made me miss today's health tip. Here I sit, waiting to go to the hospital for a nerve transplant from all the tsouris you cause me, and I can't even watch my television in peace."

So I say, "You're in great shape, Ma. Every artery's as hard as a rock."

"Feh!" she says. "God has reserved a special place in hell for ungrateful sons."

"I know," I say. "It's probably right next to where He puts all the henpecked husbands."

"Don't you go making fun of my dear departed Erwin," she says.

"I wasn't," I say. "And besides, all we know is that he departed in one hell of a hurry. We don't know for sure that he's dead."

"If he isn't, he should be, that momser!" she says.

Well, I can see the thought that he may be alive and God forbid enjoying himself is about to drive her wild, so I try to mollify her.

"Okay, okay," I say, hoping the Lord is otherwise occupied and does not hear what I am about to say.

"May God Himself strike me dead if he's not your late husband."

"Well, he was late for most things," she agrees, leaning back in her chair. "Except in the bedroom."

I try to change the subject again.

"We were talking about marriage," I say.

"Someday, when you're old enough," she says, "you'll get married and ruin some poor Jewish girl's happiness, just the way your dear departed father ruined mine, and the only good thing that will come of it will be a grandson who, knock wood, won't take after his father and his grandfather but will show me a little respect and compassion."

I begin to see that this is going to be even more difficult than I thought, and I try to come up with a subtle way to break the news to her. So I think, and I think, and I think some more, and finally I say, as subtly as I can, "Ma, I'm engaged."

And she looks away from the television set and takes her feet off the hassock and plants them on the floor, and stares at me for maybe thirty seconds, and finally she says, "Engaged to do what?"

"To get married," I say.

She digs into her sewing kit, which is on the floor next to her, and pulls out a scissors.

"Here," she says, handing it to me. "Why waste all afternoon rushing me to the hospital's cardiac unit? Just stab me now and be done with it."

"Jugular or varicose?" I ask.

"Schmendrick!" she says. "How can the fruit of my looms talk to me like this?"

"I'm the fruit of your loins, Ma," I tell her. "Fruit of the Loom is what I'm wearing beneath my pants."

"All right," she says. "Just stand there and watch me breathe my last."

"Your last what?" I ask.

She glares at me and finally says, "Before I die, at least tell me the name of this female person you're engaged to do whatever with."

"Melora of the Purple Mist," I say.

"Melora of the Purple Mist?" she repeats. "How can I fit all that on a wedding invitation?"

"Just use Melora," I say.

"And what bowling alley or topless club did you meet Miss What's-her-name of the Purple Mist at?" she asks.

"I met her at work, kind of," I answer.

"I knew it!" she says, poking a pudgy forefinger into the air. "I knew I should never let you take that job with the sewage company!"

"It's a salvage company," I say.

"Sewage, salvage, what's the difference?" she demands. "It's that Gypsy who walks around half-naked with her deathless beauty sagging down to her pupik, right? I told you she had her sights set on you!"

"She's not a Gypsy, and it's not her. She's just another diver."

"So you're marrying some other girl who lies around on deck with her tuchis soaking up the sun," she says. "I should feel better about that?"

"She doesn't lie around on deck," I say uneasily.

"On deck, below deck, big difference," she snaps.

"Bigger than you think," I say. "The truth of it is, she spends most of her time about fifty feet below deck."

"So she's a diver," she says.

"Not exactly," I answer.

"What, then?"

"Try not to get real excited, Ma," I say.

"I'm not excited, I have convulsions all the time," she says. "Just tell me."

"She's a mermaid," I say.

"As long as she's not that Gypsy girl," she says, fanning herself with the TV Guide. "Or that lady bartender from last summer. Or the bug woman."

"The entomologist," I correct her.

"Whatever," she says. "So tell me about this Purple Mist person."

"Like I said, she's a mermaid."

"Like what has a tail and spends her whole life in the water?" she asks.

"That's right," I say.

"Does she wear a bra?" she says suddenly.

"Ma!" I say, outraged.

"You heard me -- does she wear a bra?"

"No," I finally answer.

"Figures," she says.

"What a thing to ask!" I say.

"What do you want me to ask?" she says. "My son comes home and tells me he's marrying someone who's covered with scales and spends all her time swimming in salt water, despite what it must do to her complexion. So can she at least get us a price on fresh fish?"

"It's not something I'm real concerned with," I say.

"Of course not," she says. "You're as impractical as your late father." She sighs. "All right, so where did this female person go to school?"

"I don't think she did," I say.

"Ah!" she says with a knowing nod. "Rich family with a private tutor. What temple do they belong to?"

"Who?"

"Her family," she says. "Try to pay attention, Martin."

"Martin is your nephew who went broke manufacturing the folding waterbed," I say. "I'm Milton, remember?"

"Don't change the subject," she says. "What temple do they go to?"

"They don't," I say.

"They're Reformed?" she asks.

I take a deep breath and say, "They're not Jewish at all," and then I wait for the explosion.

It takes about three one-millionths of a second -- a new record.

"You're marrying a shiksa?" she bellows.

"I'm marrying a mermaid," I say.

"Who cares about that?" she screams. "Call my doctor! I'm having a coronary!"

"Ma, try to understand -- there aren't any Jewish mermaids," I say.

"It's my fault?" she demands. "It's bad enough that you want to give me grandsons with fins-- and how in the world will the rabbi perform the bris? -- but now you tell me that their mother's a goy?"

"I knew I was gonna have trouble with you," I say unhappily.

"Trouble?" she shrieks. "Why should there be trouble? Your Uncle Nate will come by with a knife and a cracker and say, 'Is this a jar of beluga caviar?' and I'll say 'No, it's forty thousand of my grandchildren.'"

"Will you at least meet her?" I ask.

"Some conversation we'll have," she replies. "She'll say 'Blub!' I'll say 'Gurgle!' and she'll say 'Glub!' and I'll say 'I'm getting the folds,' and she'll say --"

"That's the bends, not the folds," I explain.

"Bends, folds, what's the difference?" she says. "I plan to be dead of a heart attack in two more minutes."

"She speaks English," I say, getting back to the subject.

"She does?"

"With a beautiful lilting accent."

"I knew it!" she says. "You're too young to remember, but they drove our people out of Lilting before the last war..."

"Lilting isn't a place, Ma," I say.

"It isn't?" she says suspiciously. "Are you sure of that?"

"I'm sure," I say. "She really wants to meet you."

"I'll just bet she does," she says. "She probably wants to feed me to her pet lobster."

"I don't think lobsters eat people," I say.

"Aha!" she says. "But you don't know!"

"We're getting off the subject," I say.

"Right," she agrees. "The subject was my imminent death."

"The subject was Melora."

"What does this fish person who doesn't wear a bra want with you anyway?" she demands. "Why doesn't she go elope with some nice halibut?"

"I met her while I was hunting for treasure," I say. "It was love at first sight."

"So what you're saying is that you went down there looking for gold and what you came up with was a female person of the Purple Mist?"

"You're making this very difficult, Ma."

"You bring home a cod for dinner, and instead of cooking it I have to give it my son, and I'm making this difficult?" she says, just a bit hysterically.

I figure it's time to play my ace in the hole, so I say, "She's willing to convert, Ma."

"Into what -- a woman with two or more legs?"

"To Judaism," I say. "I told her how important it was to you."

"How can she convert?" she says. "Do we know any rabbis who can hold services fifty feet under the water?"

"She can come to the surface," I say. "How else would we talk?"

"When did you ever talk to a girl?" she says. "You're just like your departed father."

"We talk all the time," I say.

She considers this and finally nods her head. "I suppose there's not a lot else you can do."

"Don't get personal, Ma," I say.

She raises her eyes to the heavens -- which are just beyond the lightbulb in the middle of the ceiling--and

has another of her hourly chats with God. "He wants me to welcome a lady fish into my family and he tells me not to get personal."

"A lady Jewish fish," I point out.

"So okay, she won't be just a fish girl, she'll be a gefilte fish girl, big deal. What do I feed her? If I give her lox, will she accuse me of cooking her relatives?"

"She eats fish all the time, Ma."

"And when we leave the table to go watch Oprah, do I carry her or does she slither on her belly?"

"Actually, she doesn't watch Oprah," I say.

"She doesn't watch Oprah?" she says, and I can tell this shocks her more than the fact that Melora is a mermaid. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's never seen a television," I say. "They don't have them in her kingdom."

"What are they, some kind of Communists?" she demands.

"They don't have any electricity," I explain.

"You mean she doesn't even have a food processor?"

"That's right," I say.

"That poor girl!" she says. "And no disposal unit in her sink?"

"None," I say, and I can see that suddenly she's working up a head of sympathy.

"How can anybody live like that?" she says.

"She manages just fine."

"Nonsense!" she says. "Nobody can live without a trash masher. My son's wife may be a fish, but she isn't going to slave thirty hours a day just because I had to!"

"That's very thoughtful, Ma," I say. "But --"

"Don't interrupt!" she snaps. "You bring her by this afternoon. I'll have some knishes ready, and some blintzes, and maybe a little chopped liver, and we'll watch Oprah and I'll show her my kitchen and ..." Suddenly she stops and re-thinks her schedule. "Bring her earlier and we can watch Donahue, too. And tonight they're re-running that old series with Lloyd Bridges. It should make her feel right at home."

"You'll like her, Ma," I promise.

"Like, shmike," she says. "If I have to go through life without ever being able to point to my son the doctor, at least I can point to my almost-daughter the gefilte fish girl. Mrs. Noodleman down the block will be so jealous!" She pauses. "We'll have to put a little meat on her bones."

"You haven't even seen her," I say.

"That's all right," she says. "I know your taste in women. Cheap and skinny."

"Ma, you think any woman under two hundred pounds is skinny."

"And you think any woman who doesn't ask for ice cubes and a straw with her wine is sophisticated." She gets up, and I can see she's getting set for a couple of hours of serious puttering. "Now, you go get her and bring her back, while I prepare something for the poor undernourished thing to eat. And I think I'll invite Rabbi Bernstein, since we need someone to work with her, and he's always fishing when he should be at Temple, and..."

As I leave, she is trying to remember which company sells the pens that write under water so she can send out wedding invitations to the bride's family.