

## Bottom Feeding

by Tim Pratt

**Tim Pratt's story "Hart and Boot" (*Polyphony 4*) will be reprinted in the 2005 *Best American Short Stories* anthology. His first novel, *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*, will be published by Bantam in December. Tim is an editor at *Locus*, who has lost both a Nebula and a Campbell Award. He lives in Oakland with his fiancée, Heather Shaw. They co-edit a little 'zine called *Flytrap*. "Bottom Feeding" marks his first fiction appearance in *Asimov's*.**

\* \* \* \*

Graydon sat in a lawn chair beneath a bedraggled weeping willow, by the pond where Shiteater lived. A canvas grocery bag rested in the mud on his left, bulging with his most prized possessions, carefully chosen that morning—a mason jar filled with smooth stones and sea glass that he'd gathered during childhood summers at the beach house; the copy of *Watership Down* his brother Alton had been reading before he died, tattered bookmark still in place; a twist of braided blonde hair Rebekah had given him to remember her by, the summer she went off to Ireland and met Lorrie; the program from the first play he'd ever directed in college. All the things he was finished with. All the things he had to trade.

Graydon sipped strong coffee from his thermos, and watched the sun begin its day's climb up from the east. Graydon had been here for an hour already, mostly in the dark. He was crying a little, off and on, almost absent-mindedly.

A loaded spear gun lay across his lap, bought two days before at a sporting-goods superstore in Atlanta for more money than Graydon had expected. The clerk had asked where he was going fishing, and Graydon said "A pond behind my house." The clerk had laughed, thinking it was a joke, and gone over the basics of handling the speargun with Graydon, who'd never used anything more complicated than a rod and reel before.

"All right, then," Graydon said, wiping tears away from his cheeks. He lifted the speargun in one hand and the canvas bag of treasures in the other. He waded into the murky green water, up to his waist, and upended the bag upon the waters. The braided hair floated, as did the book and program, their pages darkening with water, but the full mason jar sank, ripples spreading around it.

A light rain fell, making more ripples, and thunder rumbled. Those were good omens for this kind of fishing.

"There's your bait," Graydon said. "Come on, Shiteater." He held the speargun as the clerk had shown him, and waited for the thing he hunted to swim up from the depths.

\* \* \* \*

The salmon of knowledge lived a long time ago, in the Well of Segais, where

the waters ran deep and clear as rippling air. He swam there, thinking his deep thoughts, coming to the surface occasionally to eat the magical hazelnuts that fell into the water from the trees on the bank. Every nut contained revelations, but the salmon was not a mere living compendium of knowledge—he was a wise fish, too, and so chose to live quietly, waiting for the inevitable day when he would be caught and devoured. The salmon dimly remembered past (and perhaps future) lives, experiences inside and outside of time, from the whole history of the land: being blinded by a hawk on a cold winter night, hiding in a cave after a flood, running from a woman who might have been a goddess, or who might have been a witch.

The salmon did not look forward to being caught, and cooked, and eaten, but knowing what the consequences would be for the one who caught him, he had to laugh, insofar as fish (even very wise ones) are able to laugh.

\* \* \* \*

Graydon started fishing the summer after he got kicked out of college. Lacking any other direction, still stunned by his brother's sudden death, Graydon had returned to his hometown of Pomegranate Grove, Georgia, and rented a two-bedroom house with a fireplace on the edge of town. He had a spare room full of Alton's things, as he was the sole inheritor—their father was long dead, their mother in a nursing home, victim of early-onset senile dementia. Every day Graydon sorted through the piles of his dead brother's things, touching objects both familiar and foreign, and one day he found a rod, reel, and tackle box. He and Alton had gone fishing often when they were children, and suddenly that seemed like the proper monument, a way to honor Alton's memory and simultaneously pass the empty days, so Graydon made a lunch and took the rod and tackle out back, to the pond by the woods behind his house. It wasn't much of a pond, maybe thirty feet across at its widest, with a few reeds in the shallows and one big weeping willow close to the water. These ponds could be deep, though, and it wasn't trash-strewn or visibly polluted, so he thought there might be fish.

Graydon sat on the bank and put a flashy red-and-yellow lure on the hook. Probably all wrong for whatever kind of fish lived in this pond, if any, but he didn't care if he caught anything—he just wanted to sit, and think, and hold the pole, and watch the red-and-white bobber float. That's what fishing was about, he recalled. Actually catching anything was sort of an optional extra.

He cast the line out into the middle of the pond and settled down with his back against the willow tree, thinking about Alton, who'd taught him how to climb trees, and cheat at poker, and, when they were older, how to take a hit off a bong. Graydon hadn't used any of those skills in a long time. Alton had taught him to fish, too, though neither one of them had ever been any good at it. Graydon wondered if the two of them had ever fished in this particular pond, and couldn't remember—it was possible, as they'd tried little fishing holes all over Pomegranate Grove.

The bobber sank under the green surface of the pond, and the rod moved in Graydon's hands. He reeled the line in slowly, wondering what kind of fish had been

fooled by the flashy lure, but whatever had snagged on the hook didn't move like a fish, or like anything alive. Something dark and round broke the surface, as big as a human head but smooth and shining. Graydon reeled it in the rest of the way and bent over the water to fish it out.

He'd caught a motorcycle helmet, a black one with a star-shaped crack on one side. The line was tangled around the chin strap, and Alton's flashy red-and-yellow lure was gone.

Graydon turned the helmet over and let the water run out of it, into the pond.

Alton had died in a motorcycle accident, had lost control and smashed into a guardrail on a bridge, then gone flying off the bike into the shallow swamp-water below. He'd landed face-down, probably knocked unconscious, and though his head struck a rock in the water, the blow didn't kill him—the helmet had protected his skull. Instead, Alton had died by drowning in two feet of water.

Graydon touched the star-shaped crack, then threw the helmet violently back into the pond. Remembrance was one thing, but pulling up something like that was too morbid by half. The helmet hit the water and floated, open-end-up, like a little plastic boat.

Something broke the surface of the water, mud-brown and slickly shining. It was a catfish, the biggest Graydon had ever seen. Its huge head stayed out of the water for a long moment, teacup-sized black eyes staring at Graydon. Long whiskers sprouted from around its mouth in nasty profusion. The catfish dove under the water again with a flip of its stubby fins, then re-emerged beside the floating helmet, its gaping fish-mouth open wide enough to swallow a basketball.

The fish ate the helmet in one bite, and disappeared beneath the ripples.

Graydon whistled. He'd heard of catfish that big—they were the stuff of Southern rural legend. Huge catfish, decades old, and when they were finally caught and cut open, all sorts of things were found in their bellies. If this fish was big enough to eat a motorcycle helmet ... well. Graydon wasn't going to catch a fish like that with Alton's old rod and reel. There was little chance of catching it at *all*. That fish was older than him by many years, probably, and had doubtless outwitted scores of better fishermen.

Still, that would be something, wouldn't it? Catching something so big, so old, so wily. Even if he didn't succeed, it would be fun trying.

And just like that, Graydon had a goal for the summer.

\* \* \* \*

Here are some things that have been found inside the bellies of large catfish in the American South:

License plates, diamond rings, steel buckets, beer bottles, lugnuts, picture

frames, doorknobs, alarm clocks, boots, credit cards, stolen hotel ashtrays, rubber duckies, cowbells, candles, dinner plates, floppy canvas fisherman's hats, spectacles, wallets with money still inside, one-armed Teddy bears, other fish, snapping turtles, spark plugs, toy pistols, hubcaps, wheelbarrow tires, coffee cups, thermoses, roofing shingles, human hands, telephones, and screwdrivers.

Here are some things that have never been found inside the bellies of large catfish in the American South:

Solace. Hope. Lost ideals. True love. Things that smell nice. Glory. Everything you ever dreamed of having, but never received. A reason to go on living.

\* \* \* \*

On Friday, the week he started fishing, Graydon drove into Atlanta to have coffee with his oldest and most bewildering friend, Rebekah.

Graydon arrived at the Pelican Café first, and took a table by the windows, beneath an art student's painting of sinister mermaids fencing with human thighbones. He ordered a glass of chardonnay and sipped it, thinking of catfish, mostly, until Rebekah showed up, only fifteen minutes late, her honey-colored hair knotted in a profusion of small and not very tidy braids. She wore white shorts that showed off her legs and a pale-yellow blouse, open at the throat. Graydon had adjusted to the situation with Rebekah long enough ago that he no longer felt a pang at her loveliness, but he still noticed it. They'd grown up together in Pomegranate Grove and dated briefly, in high school, before Rebekah met Lorrie and realized she was a lesbian. After a few bumpy months following that revelation, the two of them had become friends again, though Graydon still had trouble warming up to Lorrie, with her sharp features and her New Age affectations, her astrology and proselytizing vegetarianism.

Rebekah apologized for being late—she might as well apologize for being Rebekah, Graydon thought—and spread her things out on the table. Textbooks, a notebook, hi-liters, pens, a cup of coffee, a bottle of beer, all squeezing Graydon onto a tiny edge of the table, with barely room for his wineglass. Rebekah's things always expanded to fill the available space, and her personality did much the same.

"How's life?" Graydon asked.

Rebekah shrugged. "Schoolwise, I'm getting fluent in old English, for what that's worth. Chaucer's never been funnier. The freshmen I'm teaching are functionally illiterate, and the professor I'm TA'ing for is more interested in my T & A than my ideas. Lorrie's gone from vegetarian to vegan, and if I see another bean sprout I'm going to scream. I've been sneaking out to eat cheeseburgers for months now, and I'm getting tired of living a dietary lie. Lorrie says my aura's getting all black and spiky, which I figure can't be good. But mostly I'm too busy to worry about how I'm doing." She smiled brightly. "You?"

"I've been fishing," he said, and told her about catching the helmet and seeing

the catfish, though he hadn't seen the fish again in the three days since, despite spending hours at the pond each day.

"I've heard of that fish," Rebekah said. "Dad told me about it. We used to live about a mile from your place, you remember that? At least, I guess it must be the same fish. I'm surprised it's still alive. Dad said people have been trying to catch it since he was a kid. I think trying to catch that fish used to be a major pastime in the grove, but I suppose that kind of thing's gone out of style."

"I blame video games," Graydon said.

Rebekah ignored him. "The fish even has a name. Guess what it is."

"Mr. Whiskers?"

"Shiteater. Except when my Dad told me about it, he *started* to say 'Shiteater,' I think, and then decided to protect my delicate ears from such profanity."

"Shiteater," Graydon repeated. "That's charming. When I catch him, you can come over, and we'll have a big catfish dinner."

"I'm coming over anyway," she said. "You're going to let me stay the night next weekend, and I won't take no for an answer. I've *got* to get away from Lorrie for a while. She won't even eat fish anymore, that used to be our big compromise, but now she says it's 'morally repugnant.' She only ever ate salmon anyway, she said everything else was too fishy-tasting. I mean, c'mon, it's *fish*. What *should* it taste like?"

"Catfish is pretty bland, I guess," Graydon said.

"It's not bad, fried with the right spices," Rebekah said. "So can I come over? You can cook for me, though I don't think you'll be feeding me Shiteater, as appetizing as that sounds. You'd need more than a rod and reel to pull him in anyway."

"I don't know," Graydon said, thinking of the mess in his house, all Alton's things in the spare bedroom, also thinking of how hard it would be to sleep in the same house all night with Rebekah and not be able to touch her—he hadn't had sex since a bad one-night stand at school in New York. Rebekah knew that, and she must know that he still had feelings for her; he hadn't made it much of a secret. But it sounded like things were going badly with her and Lorrie, and Rebekah and Graydon *had* been lovers, before, in dim pre-college antiquity, so...

Rebekah snorted. "Come on. Like you're too busy? You've got too much other stuff to do?"

Graydon didn't answer, didn't let any expression touch his face at all.

"Oh, hey, I'm sorry, Gray," Rebekah said, reaching across the table to touch

his hand. “I didn’t mean anything by it, you’re getting your head together, figuring out what you want to do, and that’s fine.”

Graydon nodded, but he didn’t think Rebekah believed what she’d just said—for her, life *was* work, being active, moving forward. She wouldn’t be treading water if she were in Graydon’s position. Hell, she’d never have let herself get into Graydon’s position in the first place, blowing off classes, avoiding advisors, finally being “invited to pursue graduate studies elsewhere,” as he’d been. Rebekah didn’t have much patience for self-pity.

“Sure,” he said. “Next Friday?”

\* \* \* \*

Salmon aren’t much like catfish. Salmon are beautiful, insofar as fish can be beautiful, with silver scales and graceful bodies. Catfish are ugly, whiskered, mud-colored, slow. Salmon are wiser than other fish, wiser than many people, wiser than some bears. Catfish are not wise, but they are wily. Salmon, it is said, eat hazelnuts. Catfish eat shit and garbage and dead things. Salmon are patient as gods, only hurrying to spawn. Catfish are patient as death, only hurrying to feed. The flesh of salmon is delicious. The flesh of catfish is bland as rainwater. Salmon sometimes grant wishes, when that seems the wise course. Catfish can grant wishes, too, but different wishes, for different reasons.

Salmon know more than catfish, but catfish remember everything.

\* \* \* \*

That weekend, Graydon studied how to catch giant catfish. It was surprisingly uncomplicated, at least in theory, according to the books and websites he consulted, but the definition of “giant” seemed to be thirty or forty pounds, which he thought was far smaller than Shiteater. He looked further, and discovered that the largest catfish ever caught in the U.S. had come from a pond in Tennessee, and weighed one hundred and eleven pounds. Graydon had no idea how big Shiteater was, but he suspected it was bigger than that. The record-breaking fish had been caught with deep-sea tackle, but one trip to a sporting goods store showed Graydon that he couldn’t afford that kind of equipment, not with the dregs of his student loans running out.

Still, Graydon was hardly an expert on catfish, so perhaps he’d overestimated Shiteater’s size. Starting Monday he tried the recommended approaches for catching giant catfish from the shore, setting multiple poles and lines on the bank, with hooks set at various depths. He tried different baits, from small fish to rotten chicken and beef, but none of it worked, and the bait came out again sodden but untouched, and there was no sign of the big fish at all, not even a ripple.

Graydon didn’t catch *anything*, as if there were no other fish in the pond at all, which he supposed was possible. Shiteater could have eaten them all. By Wednesday Graydon had given up on catching the monster, already bored and

frustrated by the effort. It had been hubris to think he could catch such a monster, just one more instance of his reach exceeding his grasp.

On Thursday he sat on the bank with his dead brother's fishing rod jammed into the mud, line in the water, staring at the sky. The fishing rod was almost a formality now, just a prop, set-dressing. It justified his sitting by the water, in the shade, listening to the willow's drooping branches sway in the breeze.

The rod fell into the water. The bobber was submerged—had Shiteater bitten the hook and pulled in the rod? Graydon splashed into the pond, up to his knees, going after the rod, which was already floating away.

He reached for the rod ... and something passed before him, brushing against his legs. He looked down, and there was Shiteater, *far* bigger than one hundred and eleven pounds, as big around as a barrel. Shiteater took the fishing rod into its mouth, like a dog picking up a thrown stick, and dove with it, disappearing.

Graydon stared down into the water for a moment, then shouted and slapped at the water angrily. "You fucking fish! Bring that back!" Shit-eater ignored food, it ignored everything, but it tried to eat his brother's *fishing rod*? What kind of beast was this?

Graydon slogged out of the water and sat, dripping, beneath the willow tree, thinking dark thoughts about fishing with dynamite, or about blasting Shiteater with a shotgun, but he didn't have dynamite, or any guns at all.

Something drifted on the surface of the water, eddying gradually toward the bank, until it floated just offshore in front of the willow. Graydon leaned forward to look at it.

It was a dreamcatcher, a wooden hoop threaded with string and hung with wet feathers. Alton had given one of those to Graydon years and years ago, after a trip he'd taken to an Indian reservation in the Southwest. Graydon had lost it in one of his many moves, and he'd missed it, a little. Graydon reached into the water and lifted the floating dreamcatcher out.

It was the same. The same snapped threads, the same gray-and-white feathers, the same size, everything. It was the dreamcatcher he'd lost, the one Alton had given him, he'd almost swear to it.

Graydon looked at the pond for a while. He'd baited his hook, that first day, with one of Alton's lures. He lost the lure, but found a motorcycle helmet. Now he'd lost Alton's fishing rod, and found a dreamcatcher.

The thoughts that occurred to him were ridiculous.

But, on the other hand, they were testable.

Graydon went back to the house, and came back a bit later, carrying some of

the things Alton had left behind.

\* \* \* \*

There are myths about salmon, but catfish don't warrant much more than folklore. Some say that catfish bite well when it thunders, or that they're easy to catch when it rains; that catfish will bite a hook dipped in motor oil, or that you'll be lucky fishing for them if your pockets are turned inside out. If an owl hoots in the daylight, the catfish are easy to catch.

All of those beliefs are true. But some of them confuse cause and effect.

\* \* \* \*

By nightfall, Graydon had thrown almost all of Alton's possessions into the pond, and received an equal number of things in return. Throwing in Alton's class ring brought back one of his brother's running shoes, his initials written in permanent marker on the inside of the tongue. Throwing in freshman algebra class notes brought back a sparkling geode Alton had used as a bookend, though Graydon had to fish that out with a net after Shiteater swam repeatedly over the spot where it rested, like Flipper the dolphin from that old TV show, trying to explain something to the stupid humans. Shiteater ate almost everything Graydon threw him. Graydon intentionally threw in a few things with no connection to Alton—a used paperback he'd picked up at a yard sale for a dime, a salt shaker that came with the house, a handful of change. Shiteater ignored those things, and nothing came back in return. After an hour of casting in and receiving back, Graydon sat by a pile of returned objects, all of them things lost years before.

“Did you eat my brother, you fuck?” Graydon asked, but knew it was absurd. Alton had died in a body of water that was little more than a creek, miles from here. The connection between his brother and Shiteater was stranger than that, more complicated, more mysterious. Perhaps it would prove too mysterious for Graydon to understand. When it grew dark, Graydon started to gather the objects Shiteater had given him, or allowed the pond to give him, or whatever. But why would he want to keep those things? They were just lost things, some with a charge of sentimental value, most lacking even that. Graydon began tossing the objects into the water, as he'd thrown back the helmet that first day, and Shiteater rose up again and swallowed it all, wolfing the things down as quickly as Graydon could throw them in.

It was hard to tell in the dark, but Shiteater seemed larger than he had been before. Nothing new came floating out of the pond after Graydon finished throwing everything in, and Shiteater didn't break the surface of the black water again once he finished eating. Graydon kept only the dreamcatcher—he suspected he might need it, as nightmares seemed inevitable—and trudged back to his house, thinking.

\* \* \* \*

In psychoanalysis, “fishing” refers to a process whereby subconscious thoughts, feelings, and motivations are drawn up randomly, without any attempt to



order or explain them until later. The process is poorly named, since it is more like dredging or using a drag-net than the precise efforts of an angler—it pulls up everything, garbage and treasure alike. It's a technique that only a catfish could love.

A good fisherman, on the other hand, knows just what sort of bait to use, and where to cast his line.

\* \* \* \*

Graydon woke early on Friday morning and decided to continue his experiments.

He threw in one of his mother's good china cups and received a small jar, labeled with a piece of masking tape, that contained the gallstones she'd had surgically removed when Graydon was fifteen. He remembered visiting her in the hospital, remembered her telling him that the doctors were going to give her the gallstones, how she planned to throw them into the ocean next time they went to the coast. She was already starting to lose it, then, her mind beginning its slow unraveling, but it had seemed like simple eccentricity in those days, not the full-blown dementia it would become.

Graydon looked at the jar for a while. This was a valuable discovery. This meant the fish didn't have anything to do with Alton, not specifically. Graydon threw the gallstones back into the water. Shiteater was—was—

He didn't know what Shiteater was. Something to do with the dead, maybe. Or memory, or loss, or grief, or hope, or closure. Graydon couldn't figure it out. It wasn't like in stories, where things were neatly explained, where the mystery had a function, however obscure, where the operations of the supernatural could be explained. This was something else. Something magical, but incomprehensible, which was perhaps the nature of real magic. But Graydon couldn't ignore it, couldn't turn his back and go on living, forget about the pond, and the creature that lived in it.

There was a story about a magical salmon. Rebekah had told him about it, after her trip to Ireland, where she'd met Lorrie. There once was a wise salmon that lived in a pool, and ate magic nuts, and some great Irish hero caught the fish, and roasted it, and that was a pretty good deal, because whoever ate the fish would gain its wisdom.

What would happen if Graydon ate Shiteater? Would he gain wisdom? Or magic? The ability to call the dead, speak to the dead? Or the ability to *forget* the dead? There was supposed to be a river in Hell whose waters made you forget, and Graydon suspected that, if such a river were real, it would be inhabited by fat brown channel cats, just like Shiteater. What better fish to have the flesh of forgetfulness than a bland catfish, fed on garbage?

Hadn't Rebekah said the fish was also called Sineater?

It didn't matter. He'd never catch it anyway.

Graydon lay under the willow tree, and looked up at the sky, and after a while he fell asleep.

Someone nudged Graydon in the ribs. He opened his eyes, and there was his brother Alton, standing over him, wearing his motorcycle jacket, boots, and jeans. His hair was wet, even his stupid little goatee. "You're more full of shit than that fish, bro," he said.

"Alton?" Graydon said. The tree was making a low noise, like weeping, and the branches were moving despite the lack of wind.

Alton squatted down beside Graydon. "Oh, don't get up," he said ironically. "I'm not offended. I'm dead, after all. But *you're* not."

"Alton, I don't understand," Graydon said. That was the simple truth, and it almost made him burst out crying—he didn't understand why his mother had lost her mind, why Rebekah had fallen in love with a woman, why his brother had died, why grad school had been so difficult, why Shiteater was eating the physical reminders of his loss without taking the memories themselves away.

"Nobody understands," Alton said. "Maybe that's for the best. Listen. You don't want to eat that fish. I don't know what would happen if you did, but it's a big monster that eats dead things, it's not shiny and silver and full of magic nuts. Let it go. Quit wallowing. Get your life back together, while you still have one."

Alton had never been so blunt in life—he'd always been very live-and-let-live, but maybe death had changed that. "Shit, Alton, it's *hard*, you don't know what it's like."

"Nobody knows what it's like. And just because it hurts your feelings when I say you're wallowing, that doesn't mean it isn't *true*. You can't go on like this." The tree was moaning more loudly now, and night was falling quickly. "I have to go," Alton said. "It's getting late."

"Alton, no, I still don't—"

Someone nudged Graydon in the ribs. He opened his eyes. Rebekah stood over him, the sun behind her and a bottle of wine in her hand, looking down at him with a grin. "Have a nice nap? Shall I assume dinner isn't ready?"

Graydon groaned and sat up. "I had a dream...."

"I bet," Rebekah said. "Did it involve me and Lorrie and warm oil?"

Graydon grimaced. "Lorrie isn't my type."

"I thought all you guys got off on the idea of two women together."

“I like it better when the women are interested in me, too.”

“Well, hey, it’s your dream,” she said. “Come on. I brought steaks.”

“I was supposed to cook for *you*.”

“Knock yourself out. I don’t mind if you do the cooking. I just brought the food.”

“Does Lorrie know you’re eating steak?”

“What Lorrie doesn’t know...” Rebekah said airily, and Graydon wondered what *that* meant, if Rebekah had other things in mind for tonight, more things Lorrie didn’t need to know about.

He went back to the house with her, and for the first time in days, he didn’t think about Shiteater at all.

Graydon made steaks while Rebekah good-naturedly insulted his housekeeping.

“You never used to care so much about tidiness,” Graydon said, standing at the stove, sautéing mushrooms.

“You try living with Lorrie, you’ll start to care about tidy, too. One of us has to, and it’s not going to be her.”

“Sounds like you guys are going through a tough time.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think Lorrie realizes it. She can be pretty clueless sometimes.” Rebekah had opened the wine right away, and now she sipped from a full glass. “Her newest thing? She says I drink too much. I have a few beers on the weekends, maybe a glass of wine at night, and she says I’m an ‘incipient alcoholic.’”

“Sounds like she’s worrying about all the wrong things,” Graydon said.

“I didn’t come here to talk about Lorrie, Gray,” Rebekah said. “No offense, but it’s a subject I’m a little tired of, having to live with it every day.”

“Sorry. What *did* you come here to talk about?”

“Honestly? I’d hoped we could talk a little bit about you, Gray.”

He kept cooking, unsure how to take that. Rebekah always favored the direct approach—she would just ask, in his position—but Graydon was not so comfortable. So he said, “I’ve been trying to catch that fish. I see it, all the time, but I can’t get it.”

“Try a speargun,” she said. “They’re pretty accurate over short distances. If you really see it that often, you can probably get it.”

“Yeah? Nothing I’ve read suggested a speargun.”

She shrugged. “Well, you could try dynamite, but I figure you want to get the fish out in one piece. Should I take this change of subject to mean you don’t want to talk about you? Because I’m worried about you, Gray. I think you’re sinking here, and I’m trying to throw you a rope.”

Graydon turned off the heat under the mushrooms. “Oh,” he said. “And here I’d hoped you were planning to confess your love.” He said it lightly, but he could tell from her expression that she saw past that. She’d always been able to look straight through him.

“I wish I could, Gray. I know you’ve carried a candle for me all this time, but...” She shook her head. “I’ve got to stick things out with Lorrie. We’ve been in it too long to just give up.”

“But if things don’t work out...”

Rebekah looked into her wine, then shook her head, her braids swaying. “No, Gray.”

“I thought you always said you were bisexual?”

She half-smiled. “It’s not about the sex. It’s ... I don’t know. I just don’t see you that way anymore. Romantically. I’m not sure I did even when we were dating. You were the nicest guy I knew—you still are—and that’s what attracted me, but as for any real spark, chemistry ... I don’t think it was there. I wanted it to be.”

Graydon poured a glass of wine for himself, trying to keep his hands steady. “That’s great, Rebekah,” he said. “Telling me you never loved me at all.”

“I always loved you. I still do. Just ... not that way. And I think you needed to hear that, so you’d stop holding out hope, if that’s what you’ve been doing. The way you look when I tell you I’m having problems with Lorrie, you try to hide how happy it makes you, but I can see it, and I don’t like it. Maybe it’s my own fault, for not saying this before.”

“Understood,” Graydon said, turning back to the stove. “I’m going to make salad.”

“Do you want me to leave?” she said.

Graydon stood stiffly for a moment, then slumped. He sighed. “No. I like having you here. Obviously. You can’t blame a guy for hoping, can you?”

“I guess not,” she said.

Dinner was subdued, but after a few more glasses of wine Graydon began to relax. He felt oddly burned-out inside, hollow, but not tense. The reason for the tension was gone. Besides, maybe Rebekah was just fooling herself, maybe in time

she'd see how good he was for her.... He thought of his dream of Alton, his dead brother telling him to move on. But he wanted to move on with *Rebekah*. What else did he have left?

Midnight came, and went, as they talked about books, movies, old memories. They didn't talk about Lorrie, and Rebekah didn't bring up whatever she'd wanted to say about Graydon wasting his life and his time. Finally Rebekah stretched and said, "So where do I sleep?"

"You can take my bed. I'll take the couch."

She nodded, then looked down at her hands in her lap, uncharacteristically shy. "Listen, Gray, I know you must be feeling very isolated and cut off ... if you wanted, you could come to bed with me. I know how hard it is to be alone, to crave intimacy and not find it. Things haven't exactly been warm between me and Lorrie lately, and I could use some comfort, too. It wouldn't mean anything, except that you're my friend and I love you, but, if you want..."

In that moment, Graydon realized that Rebekah didn't know him, not really; or if she did, she was deluding herself now, or just using him for her own needs. If Graydon made love to Rebekah, he *wanted* it to mean something. He wanted it to mean that she was coming back to him, that they would be lovers, that they would be together. To have sex together, without any of that ... it would be a killing thing. He would hate himself tomorrow, and this hollow feeling might never go away. He should say no.

But how could he say no to the chance to make love to Rebekah?

"Yes," he said. "I'd like that."

\* \* \* \*

Here is the reason the salmon of wisdom laughed when it thought of being eaten:

It was prophesied that the hero Finegas would catch the salmon, and cook it, and eat it, and gain all knowledge, and thus become a greater hero. Finegas caught the salmon, but, being a hero, he was not accustomed to doing his own cooking, and so he had his apprentice Fionn roast the fish instead. The apprentice would not have dreamed of eating his master's meal, but he accidentally burned his thumb while turning the fish on the fire. Without thinking, Fionn stuck his burned thumb into his mouth and sucked it.

Thus tasting the fish. Thus gaining all its knowledge, and leaving his master, the hero, no wiser than before.

That is why the salmon laughed.

\* \* \* \*

The morning after he slept with Rebekah, Graydon was perfectly charming,

cooking breakfast, laughing with her, kissing her cheek. Inside, his heart was a cinder. He bid her farewell, promising to get together with her later in the week.

When she was gone, he took four bottles of wine to the pond. He drank two, and poured the other two into the water. “Have a drink with me, Shiteater!” he shouted. “You’re my only friend!”

The catfish did not surface.

On Sunday, Graydon didn’t fish. During his research he’d learned that it was bad luck to fish on Sundays, and it seemed like a good time to be superstitious. Besides, he was hungover, and didn’t wake up until midafternoon. He thought about going to Atlanta, but the stores would be closed already—nothing stayed open very late in the South on Sundays.

On Monday he went into the city and spent most of his remaining money on a speargun. He practiced in the yard with it all afternoon, shooting his sofa cushions for practice. There was no reason to rush. He wanted to do this right.

Tuesday he rose before dawn, took the speargun and a bag of his most precious things to the pond, and waded into the water. He scattered his bait, and called for Shiteater as it began to rain.

The catfish came out of the water and began to eat the things Graydon had scattered. Graydon watched, not moving, rain soaking his hair and filling the pond with ripples. As Shiteater swallowed the last floating thing—Rebekah’s braid—Graydon pointed the speargun at its head and fired.

The spear sank deep into Shiteater’s head, and the fish spasmed, tail flailing against the water. Graydon wrapped both hands around the shaft of the spear and began pulling Shiteater toward the bank. It was easier than he’d expected, because the water buoyed the dead fish up. Graydon climbed onto the muddy, slick bank and wrestled Shiteater’s vast body onto the grass. He went back to the house and returned with a wheelbarrow and some scrap boards. After bracing the wheelbarrow’s wheel with a brick, he leaned the boards against the wheelbarrow, creating a make-shift ramp. Graydon shoved Shiteater’s heavy corpse up the boards until it flopped into the wheelbarrow, then wheeled it to the concrete patio behind his house. As he pushed, the rain stopped, just a brief summer shower, there and gone.

Graydon dumped Shiteater onto the concrete and stood looking down at it, expecting some thrill of triumph, but he was still all cinders and stones inside, and felt nothing. He went inside for his knives, then set about gutting and cleaning the catfish, referring often to a book he’d bought that explained the process.

After a while Graydon examined the contents of Shiteater’s stomach, but found little of interest, not even the things he’d most recently fed the fish—just weeds and mud. That was a disappointment. Graydon had hoped there would be ... something inside. Something special.

Well. He could still eat the catfish. That was the main thing. And it would cause something to happen—kill him, give him transcendent wisdom, make him forget, give him oblivion. Something.

While Graydon cleaned the fish, the phone rang, but he ignored it, and eventually the caller gave up.

Graydon was covered in blood and fishguts by the time he finished cleaning Shiteater. He wrapped the edible parts in plastic bags to keep the bugs from getting at them, then went to clean out the fireplace—Shiteater was too big for the oven, and Graydon wanted to cook him all at once.

When the fireplace was clean, Graydon put charcoal and lighter fluid under the grate and started a fire. Once it was burning well, he put Shiteater on the grate. Soon, the fish began to roast. The smoke was strangely odorless.

Graydon went into the bathroom and took a shower, letting the blood and guts cascade into the tub, letting the hot water pound on his over-strained muscles. After a while, afraid the fish would burn, he got out and wrapped a towel around himself.

Rebekah was in the living room, kneeling before the fire, looking at the fish. “Hey, naked guy,” she said. “I tried to call, but you didn’t pick up. I figured you were out fishing. I guess I was right. This thing’s enormous.”

“What are you doing here?” he said, thoroughly derailed. He hadn’t expected to see Rebekah again so soon, and he wasn’t sure what to do—as if, having successfully captured Shiteater, he had no further inner resources, and could make no more plans.

“God, Lorrie and I had the worst fight, you wouldn’t believe it,” she said. “I had to get out of there for a while.” She leaned closer to the fire. “I think your fish is starting to crumble and fall apart,” she said, and reached out to nudge the flesh more securely onto the grate.

“No!” Graydon shouted, stepping toward her.

Rebekah hissed and said “Shit! I burned myself.” She stuck her thumb in her mouth and sucked.

Graydon watched her, holding his breath.

After a long moment, Rebekah took her thumb out of her mouth. A string of glistening saliva still connected the ball of her thumb to her lips.

She looked up at Graydon, into his face. The string of saliva broke.

Rebekah’s eyes went wide.

Copyright © 2005 by Tim Pratt.