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Swimming Upstream

Caroline Johnson

Nora walked slowly towards the fishing cannery near her hometown of Newport, Oregon. She passed her family's fishing boat, where she lived with her father. She worked for her dad on salmon runs and also for the fishing cannery. She desperately wanted to escape but, with competitors driving down charter prices, she knew her dad would never be able to afford a replacement. She had left one time, with Mark, but that was several years ago. Her dad seemed to flounder without her.

Once inside, she put on her hairnet, donned an apron and gloves, punched the time clock, and joined the "slime line," as the locals called it. Tall and thin, with long brown hair, she stood side by side with many Filipinos, who all brought their own knives to expertly slice the salmon as it floated down the assembly line. The production building was cramped and had no air conditioning. Twelve hour days were not uncommon. No overtime. Her boss, an overbearing Polish man with a thick accent, frequently blew up for no obvious reason.

She bent over the first salmon and furrowed her brows. The eye hung limply, staring back at her. She had heard that fish are sentient beings. Mark had explained this to her many years ago. They could feel pain just like animals or humans. Still, their nervous system was not as advanced. They felt some pain, but it wasn't the same. At least they have eyes, she thought. Eyes give hope. But they have no eyelids to shield the sun.

She closed her eyes and thought of Mark. He was 22, and she just 19, when they met five years ago. They were both working at the Tillamook County Fair, she as a cashier in a trailer where they made Elephant Ears, he shoveling manure in the stables. He had bought one of the pastries from her. The powdered sugar got on his face and shirt. He made her laugh, and they went out later and played arcade games.

The next day they went to Netarts Bay and used an old skiff to go crabbing and fishing; a foghorn sounded and waves bounced off haystack rocks. They found an island, made a fire and heated up big kettles of salt water to cook Dungenous crabs, eating them right there on the beach. Mark talked about the differences between oysters from Buckley Bay and those grown in Tillamook. He showed her a sea urchin and a starfish. Then they stretched out and made love with the sun filtering through clouds.

Mark grew up in Rockaway Beach with several foster families until high school, when he lived with a Blackfoot Indian named Vores, who used to beat his wife until Mark intervened. Later he moved out and lived with a man named Chris, who made him read the Bible. Later on Nora found out Vores was shot in a drug

deal, and Chris became mayor of the town.

She stared down at the blood on her gloves, cut out the fish's dorsal, then sent it down the line. I shouldn't have drunk so much last Friday, she chastised herself. She had blacked out after meeting Richard, an architect and trombone player who had taken her around Portland. At first everything was going well, then Richard sent her home, drunk, in a taxi. Abashed and stubborn, she got out of the cab and began walking towards the Wilamette River.

I just needed to feel nature, to feel one with the world, she thought. I just needed water. Maybe touch a sea urchin again. She could still see the gothic St. John's Bridge, all lit up. She walked towards it, thinking of Mark. I just need new eyes.

She looked up and locked eyes with Maria, a Filipino woman who was taking a break from skinning salmon. She wanted to talk to her, explain why she had gotten out of the taxi two nights ago. I just noticed the leaves on the trees, and how individual each leaf is. Oh! And how intricate the pattern on the leaf is, you know? Her head was exploding. And then the leaf just falls from the tree. Just like that. She had reached out to touch a leaf. That must have been when she passed out.

She woke to a police officer nudging her side. "Lady," the officer shouted. "Get up. Where do you live?"

Nora had slowly opened her eyes. "Netarts Bay," she whispered. The officers put her in the squad car and drove her back to Newport, two blocks from her father's boat. Her father came out with sad eyes and quietly walked her back home, not asking any questions.

She peered down at yet another salmon, its silver skin glowing. She thought about how her father almost lost the charter boat when the economy took a downturn, and how everyone in the Newport Food Pantry knew her by name. She thought about when Mark left her for good two years ago at a truck stop outside Moab, Utah. Then she thought of the journey of the sockeye, how they hatch in fresh water, migrate to the ocean, then return to fresh streams. They swim hundreds, thousands of miles, and only a small percentage make it.

She thought of all this as she stabbed the eyes from the fish, then sent it down the line.