

A FISHING LINE

A man was walking on a remote beach. He came across a girl cooking fish on an open fire. The fish smelt beautiful and he was overcome with desire to taste it. The girl, seeing his longing, offered him a bowl of the fish. It was moist and tender and quite unlike any fish he had ever tasted before, even though he had eaten at all the best restaurants and could afford all the most expensive dishes. When his bowl was empty he said to the girl, 'I have never tasted fish like that before.'

She smiled and said nothing.

From that moment on, the man could think of nothing else but tasting the fish again. The next day he woke with an intense hunger. It was less a hunger of the belly than a hunger of the spirit. His hunger was for the fish, cooked by the girl over an open fire. He walked down to the beach and in the distance he saw the girl fishing. He stood and watched as she cast and played the large sea-rod. His anticipation grew along with her struggle, as she reeled the fish in. He watched her deftly gut and fillet the fish and place it on the fire to cook. His nostrils were filled once more with the delicious aroma. His whole body craved to taste the fish again.

He sat beside the girl as the fish cooked. 'I would love to taste your fish again,' he said. 'What can I pay you for it?'

The girl smiled. 'I do not pay the sea,' she said and handed him a bowl of the freshly cooked fish.

Meal after meal the man came back to taste the wonderful fish, cooked over an open fire by the strangely beautiful girl who seemed to spend all her time fishing, cooking and tending her fire. No matter how many times he ate the fish, his hunger never abated and his thirst grew for understanding of the girl. He wanted to find a way to repay her, but he did not know how to.

One day as they ate their fish together he said, 'Your fish is so delicious I am sure it would fetch the highest price at the markets and would grace the tables of all the fashionable restaurants throughout the world. If you caught twenty or thirty a day instead of two or three...'

'Why would I want to catch twenty or thirty fish a day?' she asked.

'With the money that you made from catching the fish you could buy things to make your life easier,' he continued.

The girl looked at the man and smiled. 'Two or three fish a day,' she said, 'is all I need. You suggest I should spend all my days fishing. How would that make life easier?'

'Ah,' the man replied, 'but with the money you made you could employ other people to catch the fish for you. You wouldn't have to work. You could take it easy, enjoy life.'

'And how should I enjoy life?' she asked.

'Money buys freedom,' he said. 'You could go to the city, travel, do whatever you wanted.'

She smiled. 'Eat fish at one of your expensive restaurants?'

The man felt that she was laughing at him. He was trying to help her and she did not seem to appreciate his advice. He looked at her, saddened. Then he noticed that her face had lost its smile and had become serious.

'So your advice is that I catch more fish, make money by selling the fish, with the money I can employ other people to do the fishing for me, leaving myself enough time to do whatever I want to with my life?'

'Exactly,' he replied. 'Finally, she had understood him.'

'But I do what I want now,' she said. 'I catch fish, I cook fish, I tend my fire. I can sit all day thinking, and all night looking at the stars. I do not have to bother with money or employees or profit, or whether I can afford to eat fish in a fancy restaurant. If I do all the things you say I will only end up where I already am. At best with more effort at worst less happy. What is the point of that?'

The man had no answer to her question. As he licked the rest of the fish from his fingers he realised that far from showing the girl a way that she could improve her life, she had perhaps shown him a way to improve his. He looked around the beach.

'Let me stay here with you,' he said. 'Teach me to catch fish so that I too can sit by the fire and live as you do.'

The girl held silence for a time.

'I catch fish, I cook fish and I eat fish,' she said. 'That is enough for me. But you crave fish, you dream of tasting fish, you want more and more and more. It is not the same. You would not be happy with this life.'

As she spoke, the aftertaste of the fish turned sour in the man's mouth and he realised that she spoke the truth. As long as he stayed on the beach he would have an obsession, a craving which he could not fulfil. He would never be able to taste enough of the delicious fish and his life would become more and more miserable. He realised that the only thing for him to do was to leave the beach, leave the girl and never taste the fish again. He stood up, sad but somewhat wiser.

'Think of me when you eat fish in one of your fancy restaurants,' the girl said.

'I will never eat fish in a restaurant again,' he replied. 'But I will think of you all the same.'

The man left the beach and only when the fire was a speck in the distance did he turn round to allow himself a last look at the girl with the perfect life.