

Gone Fishing

Nicholas Kyriacos

Jim woke up at 4.00 a.m. Since he had retired several years previously, he found he no longer needed the alarm to rise early. His inbuilt clock served him well. Sitting on the edge of the bed he contemplated the streetlights seen through the slightly parted curtains, and wondered whether the fish would be biting that morning. The moon, like the streetlights, was wrapped in a fine and unusual haze—nonetheless, a full moon there was, and as far as fishing off the beach, he believed this to be a good sign.

As he sat on the bed, his feet involuntarily searching for his slippers, the heavy shape of his wife stirred. Jim turned to look at her, to see if his movements had awoken her, but it was more a sidelong glance, a slight shifting of his head. He knew her breath would be intolerably stale. Each morning he would attempt avoiding too close a contact with her.

She half-opened her eyes, mumbled some incoherent sounds, then rolled over, so that Jim now looked at the back of her head. Relieved that he would not have to engage in an unwanted conversation so early in the morning the man arose, quickly now, in case she awoke suddenly, but inadvertently knocked over a glass of water standing on the bed-side table in which his wife had placed her false teeth.

His wife suddenly opened her eyes, lifted her head off the pillow, then turned to look at her husband. 'Are you all right darling?'

'Yeah,' he replied. 'Fine, fine.'

'I heard a noise.'

'Sorry. Knocked something over.'

The woman paused a moment, her gaze following the line of his arm on the bed. She looked at his large grizzly hand which lay, like some inanimate object, on the sheet. She knew this hand. It had done countless hours of labour at innumerable building sites, repaired all the household odds and ends that needed work in this home they had shared for fifty-one years. It still wore the wedding ring which he sometimes boasted he had never, not once, removed from his finger since the day they were married.

For a moment Jim was apprehensive that his wife would reach across and touch his hand. He had followed her eyes. He knew her thoughts. He'd read the signs.

And he'd been correct, too. The woman had considered reaching out, but not to touch—no, she wanted to hold this hand, lift it to her face, place it against her cheek. But their only child had long since moved overseas, making her husband the only focus of her life; and what with this, and their many years together, she knew his thoughts and so resisted any show of affection. And perhaps Jim was right—such displays would only give rise, as they already had in the previous weeks, to painful scenes. For Jim's health was failing fast.

'Moon's out,' she sighed.

Jim looked out the window for what he already knew was there, for something to do. He couldn't very well walk out of their bedroom now that she was awake, not at least until some words had been exchanged.

'Strange glow,' she said. Jim nodded silently. 'Like a haze,' she added, before resting her head back onto the pillow.

Jim's feet had found his slippers. He would sit there, waiting till she was done, replying with the fewest of words. He was staring wide-eyed at the moon and its odd glow, imagining the sudden flash of silver as the fish he would no doubt catch that day emerged, struggling desperately, from the waves of Maroubra Beach.

'Are you all right, darling?' she asked again. She lay on the bed, facing one way while he sat, facing the other.

But Jim did not want to think about the inner struggle his body was waging. It was the fish, yes, the fish he wanted to preoccupy himself with, the nerve-tingling excitement you felt as it tugged at your bait, then the shock of knowing you'd caught one, that exquisite moment when your rod suddenly bent, that taut curve of the rod that was the most beautiful and symmetrically pleasing shape Jim knew, as if man and fish, beach and wave had combined in some union, some wholeness he could never have expressed in words, but felt in some deeper part of himself. Yes, it was the fish ...

'Go on,' she said. 'I'll see you after lunch.' He nodded and got up off the bed, smiling grimly as he placed her false teeth in the now upright glass. He was eager to escape the room and was grateful for her words of departure. He would, he knew, change quickly, rush through his breakfast then walk the short distance to the beach, greeting his long-time friends, then lose himself in the engrossing struggle of man and fish.

His clothes had been placed over the backs of the dining room chairs by his wife the previous evening, this chair for his shirt, that chair for his trousers. He could have dressed himself blindfolded, she

was that methodical and, well, predictable, too, as to where she placed things. Next to the front door was the lunch she had packed for him: three sandwiches, he knew, four pieces of fruit, a thermos of sweet tea, and a large piece of fruit cake, all neatly arranged in the worker's lunch-box he'd had for most of his working life.

Jim was dressing in the dining room, staring at this lunch box, and it was not as if its shape, its position by the door, the tomato stain on the brown bag which he could not see, but knew to be there, immediately called to mind his son. Jim had never associated this lunch box with him. Then what was it? The round parabolic curve caused by the flexing of the rod when a fish was caught that he saw in his mind's eye? His son loved to run his hand along the humming and trembling rod. But Jim went fishing regularly, and he hadn't thought of his son for some time. Was it, perhaps, his own sudden recollection of his lightly cracked rod guide which his son had given to him years before? Whatever the cause, Jim's eyes were focussed on the box so that, in the darkness of that moonlit morning, he saw the long succession of days when his only child's sounds once filled the house; saw him as he would grab his own lunch as he bolted to the door, excitedly confronting another school day. It was the boy's exuberance, the man supposed, his son's daily assault on the world which the father encouraged, his own natural tendency to recklessness long suppressed, that led him many years previously to move overseas, seeking new experiences. But the old man missed him, and had not, as yet, informed him of the disease racking his body.

Jim consumed his breakfast quickly. He checked to see that in his shoulder bag he had packed his knife, sharpening stone, an assortment of swivels and sinkers, a range of hooks and lines and a bait holder. Picking up his single fibreglass rod, he threw the bag over one arm, picked up his lunch box and set off for the beach, being immediately confronted by the haze that he and his wife had first detected through their bedroom window. Not in all his fifty-one years living at Maroubra had he seen a fog so thick and extensive. Jim suddenly recalled the sole occasion when he and his wife had flown—she was afraid of aeroplanes—and the tremor of excitement he felt when they passed through clouds. Certainly this fog was not so thick that you could not see the footpath, road signs, and houses. It was more a thick, transparent spray—but one that was all pervasive.

It was when he reached the end of his street, which was where the two hundred metre downward sloping trail began that led through scrubland to the beach itself, that Jim was stopped in his tracks. Most

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

of this scrubland, certainly the beach—the sand, the rock pool at the southern end, the waves, the ocean reaching to the horizon—had disappeared beneath a vast blanket of fog. From where he stood he could hear the waves and it was only their rhythmic sound that indicated the presence of the ocean. Jim smiled. His body trembled at the sight, glorious and unexpected. He set off vigorously down the trail, and it was not long before he set foot on the beach itself, rejoicing in the abundant damp fog, the indefinite shapes that loomed, perhaps in imagination, perhaps in reality, on every side. There was no defined earth, sky and sea—all had become one, lost in common obscurity, and he searched blindly for his favourite position near the water's edge. It was a challenge he delighted in and he found himself chuckling as a section of the fog would suddenly become penetrable to the eye, and Jim would lunge at such an opening before it inevitably and quickly closed, as occurred many times. And through the consuming cloud, mist, fog, salt spray—which one? all of them?—Jim could hear the relentless pounding of the waves, and it was to their sound that he directed his movements; that, and the muffled voices of the other fishermen, their cheerful child-like banter that the wondrous day had caused, and the thin cleft of the emerging sun, seen as a fine haze of tarnished gold.

Arriving at the water's edge—Jim could now see some ten to twenty feet around him in varying degrees of clarity—he set down his lunch box, shoulder bag and rod. His skin was aglow, his eyes wide with joy and disbelief. He could feel the quickening beat of his heart.

'Is that you, Jim?'

He turned to see a rod whose line had been cast out to sea, but not the man holding it, who was totally immersed in the fog. The rod hung in the air, suspended, a conjurer's trick, its line taut as it stretched towards the sea, only to disappear before reaching its destination.

'Tom?' Jim replied.

'Yeah. Bloody unreal. Never seen nothin' like it. And they're bitin' too. Some channels right in front of us. Sandpit somewhere to yer right. Good gutter 'longside the sandpit ...'

But Jim, bewildered by the continual thickening and lifting of the confused world, was barely listening. He was pleased, enchanted, too, and surprised at the soothing effect it had on his senses. He stood, untroubled, drawn in by the elements that embraced him, whetting his cheeks.

And then he saw her.

She appeared as a vision without having, it seemed, to have arrived.

She appeared without having placed a towel on the sand or removed the clothes over her one-piece blue costume. There was no towel. There were no clothes discarded on the sand. But she stood there, so close he could have taken two large strides towards her, and touched her.

She appeared as a vision so that he trembled—at her beauty, her proximity to him, at the perplexed world that seemed to have parted at her presence. She stood, her legs slightly apart, hands on her hips. Her blond hair was parted in the middle, reaching half way down her back. The lines of her face were well-defined, her nose, but for the slightest of curves at the bridge, meeting her forehead in a straight line. She stood erect at that juncture separating child from woman with a certainty in her pose, as she scanned the thinning and thickening fog, perhaps spying out the shallow sandbars, moving her head slightly from side to side, that proclaimed this beach, those waves, as her own.

Jim embraced the scene, was both humbled and rapturous as he breathed in the dampness, delighting in the song of the lurching waves and the vision of her beauty.

And then, just as suddenly as she had appeared she ran towards the waves, dived into the fog and surf, and disappeared. Jim stared hard, hoping for a further glimpse of her. He walked quickly into the surf, the water up to his knees. He could now see sections of the waves breaking and then, for the second and last occasion, he spied her.

The waves lifted themselves, it seemed, the newly risen sun a glowing indistinct presence on their crests, before tumbling and dispersing their music and momentum all about him. On one wave which rose, slowly, full bodied, he saw a flash of gold that he knew to be her. And then, out of a rolling bank of fog, the wave and the woman emerged. The water had risen out of the thick vapour to take a distinct shape, both the woman and the wave making their way towards the man. She rode the wave till it had all but spent itself, then stood, her body glistening in the filtered light of the obscured sun, every slight gesture proclaiming her youth and burgeoning sensuality. She threw back her hair then turned to look at him. She held his eyes for a brief moment then ran into the surf, disappearing once again.

Jim turned abruptly and began to walk. He passed his rod, lunch-box and shoulder bag; he walked straight past Tom, quickening his pace without seeing or hearing him, but Tom had seen Jim's face, and was concerned.

'Eh! Jim! Where yer goin'? Jim!'

Jim groped through the fog certain of his direction. He stumbled,

too, the walking made difficult because of his wet trousers, which clung to his legs, and his soggy shoes, which he had not discarded before going into the surf. He paused briefly, his wheezing loud and hurried, and threw off both shoes into the murky world before continuing. And so he stumbled onto the trail that led him up through the scrubland, its steep incline making clumsy his every step, until he was back on the street which led to his home. From there he ran, in his old man's way, until he found himself wheezing violently at his front door. He remained there for some time steadying his wild breathing, sat on the threshold, too, until the riot in his blood had been calmed.

He entered his home, walked through the dining room and down the corridor that led to his bedroom. He stood in the doorway and looked at his wife, who was asleep. He approached slowly, his eyes slowly becoming accustomed to the semi-darkness, and stood by the bed, then knelt beside her. He took in every detail: her hair mostly grey with some streaks of white; the lines around her eyes, mouth and neck; that space between the ridge of her nose and her eyes, where he once loved to surprise her with an affectionate kiss; and the eyes themselves now shut, of course, where his kiss would linger most.

He remembered their youthful passion.

He remembered how fiercely they had once held each other.

And he remembered the shuddering of her body as she, as inexperienced in the ways of love as he had been, first stood naked before him, his youthful bride, and how he, overcome by her beauty and his desire of her, had wept like a child, and how she had held and comforted him.

Still kneeling, and so as not to wake her, Jim reached across and gently stroked her hair. He then placed the coarse flesh of his hand on her cheek, where he left it for some moments.

Jim then got up and left the house. He returned to the beach. The fog had thinned noticeably. The young woman was nowhere to be seen. He was preparing the bait under the watchful eye of his friend.

'Where didya go?' Tom asked.

'Oh, just forgot something at home,' he replied.

And Jim then cast his line in a shallow gutter near the beach's edge.