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English IV

Jan. 12, 2014

Dead Squid and Cheap Cigarettes

The sharp air was salty and cold, the sun’s rays unable to beat back the unforgiving chill of the offshore wind. The man pulled his collar up and his cap down. Wind still whipped into his eyes, tearing them up and giving him goosebumps. He sighed tiredly under his breath and looked out across the harbor. From his perch on the concrete wharf he could see clear out to the horizon, noting the whitecaps breaking sporadically and the fishing trawlers lumbering slowly. Clouds hung low at random, passing wisps of white lying still and quiet in the sky. The man sighed, lit a cigarette, and picked up his fishing pole. Pulling the line lightly with an experienced brown thumb, he could feel the hook was still empty save for the bait. It was down there somewhere in the murk. A big shiny circle hook -- double barbed and connected by a swivel -- upon which a chunk of dead squid was speared. He knocked some ash off his stogie and watched it drift into the cold water.

The harbor was spread out beneath the man like a puddle of oil, gently oscillating up and down. It was empty there, the boats having left long before dawn. There was no sign of human life except the garbage floating on the surface and lying crumpled along the wharf. The ocean itself was a dark sheet of slate, dead still save for the wind, whipping water off the surface and dropping it on shore and on the man. Again he pulled his cap down. Again he checked his surroundings.

Across the narrow breadth of the harbor loomed an old dockyard. It was mostly just rust now, years of sea salt and wind eroding it to rotting red metal. The wooden piloti somehow still held up the sloping corrugated roof covered in thick white from seagulls roosting. Machines of unknown use sat in dusty disrepair, the cogs and gears long since stalled and useless. The dockyard was empty and forgotten now, a relic of a distant past jutting sadly out of the water.

The harbor itself was resting in a cove. Brown dead hills rose shapelessly from the shoreline and enclosed the inlet. There was no vegetation. Only rocks, concrete, rust and dirt. There was no wildlife. Only the gulls and the pelicans, and somewhere in the dark water, the fish.

The man turned his attention back to this side of the harbor. Ocean swells lapped against the concrete wharf rhythmically. Resting his weary face against a leathery hand, he closed his eyes. The fishing pole was lying flat, all twelve feet of it, over half dangling off the edge of the barnacle-encrusted precipice. Beside it was his knapsack, a sad affair that looked worn and tired, its contents a jumbled mess of hooks, lines, and beer cans. He hung a black-booted foot over the edge and the ocean spray bathed over him.

It was quiet. Occasionally a seagull squawked, but mostly the only noise was the sea churning beneath the man and the wind whistling through the taut line of his pole. He opened his eyes briefly, just enough to be blinded by the glare, and closed them again. From his lips the cigarette dangled loosely, the smoke whipping around his head like gray snakes. The man just sat on that damn uncomfortable little stool, the foldable type made of canvas and cheap metal, and breathed deeply. The sharp briny scent of the sea was especially putrid, reeking of rotted kelp and decomposed fish. More spray catapulted up the harbor and into his eyes. The man drew himself further into his coat, coughed, and closed his eyes once more. He listened. He waited.

Somewhere far off a boat was blowing its horn and somewhere near by a seal was barking. The lonely bell of an unseen buoy rang in the distance. But one sound in particular caught the man’s attention. The mechanical zipping of the fishing reel was loud and unexpected. The bait had been taken. His heart dropped, skipped a couple beats, then returned to its naturaltempo. With an eager quickness he stood and lunged for the pole, the cigarette falling from his mouth. He pulled sharply with the whole pole to set the hook before reducing the drag of the reel. The fish was running now, whipping the line out at a breakneck pace. The man firmly planted both feet and counted slowly to five to let the fish tire itself out. Then, easily and fluidly, he reset the drag tension, pulled up with the fishing pole, and started reeling in.

But the line didn’t move. The pole shook and bent, the fish thrashed and fought violently. With the cork handle nearly jerked out his hands, the man took a few steps backward before trying again to reel in. And again, there was little progress. No matter how much he pulled and dragged, the man couldn’t get the fish to move. Hands cramping and heart thumping, he sat down heavily on the stool.

Wedging the pole firmly between his knees, he used both hands on the reel. The veins on his brown wrists popped and the sweat was pooling in his palms. A wave crashed into the concrete harbor wall, shooting spray and water upon the man. He shivered and tried the reel again.

This time he was able to turn it. Slowly, yes, and painfully, but it was moving nonetheless. The man didn’t smile. He just reeled, pulled, reeled, pulled, until his arms were shaking. The fish must have been pretty close now. It must have been one hell of a fish.

The line snapped.