

The Fisherman's Mother's Tale

When I became single again, I started going on group holidays, walking in remote places. We stayed overnight in isolated retreats and hostels and it became the custom for the evening entertainment to be story-telling, each one taking his turn. However the teller was given the theme by the group and so the story had to be spontaneous. On one particular night, the conversation had turned to fishing and I wondered what I would talk about if they gave me that subject. I have never caught a fish in my life and in fact I am really sorry for poor fish, being hoisted out on a cruel hook and being killed or simply thrown back to sink or swim. But if a story had to be told I would give them the Fisherman's Mother's Tale.....

It was a tricky situation. My son, Pete and I were staying for a month in Australia with my old flame, Giles and his wife, Tina. Originally I had planned to go on the trip alone to accept, at last, a very long-standing invitation. Then Pete had to have an operation on the main valve of his heart and had a year off university to recuperate. So it seemed a great idea for him to come with me. Giles and Tina graciously accepted this addition, and were kind enough to ask about Pete's likes and dislikes so that they could be ready to make

him welcome. I did not want to harp on his bad points (ie. that he looked like a vagrant) so I said that he would certainly prefer strumming his guitar on a balcony than going to a posh restaurant. I imagined them worrying about the arrival of a dysfunctional teenager in their midst. Pete, I suspected, had mixed feelings about the trip too. He was excited at the prospect of the trip, but knew that he was likely to be surrounded by aged adults and not really able to do his own thing. He must have felt his worst fears were realised when we found that Giles was a health and control freak and Nita, kind and motherly and missing her children, pandered to his every whim and to anyone else's should they make them known.

But they were attentive hosts and had arranged several expeditions for us. One of these was a fishing trip. According to Tina, Giles loved fishing but had very rarely let himself indulge his passion. His sons had been unenthusiastic and his sense of responsibility would not allow him to just take off and leave her and the young family. Now, she would be happy to accompany him but he worried that she would be bored and so he wouldn't enjoy it anyway. She certainly seemed a bit apprehensive about this trip and by the end I understood why.

We started early and did an inland trip through Nimbin (the hippy town). Giles hated Nimbin but thought that we (especially Pete) would like to see it. The place reeked of "grass" but it didn't seem to do anything to calm Giles temper. We made for the coast through a tortuous network of dirt roads. It seemed to take for ever. Giles' driving became more and more frenetic, skidding round the bends and bouncing over the bumps. Finally, rather late, hot and thirsty, we skidded to a halt before the bait shop. Disaster! - there was no bait left. Giles with a face like thunder listened to long-winded instructions as to where to find a good place for beach fishing and for bait collecting in the estuary.

Giles got out of the car and starting striding off towards the beach. "Giles, aren't we having any lunch." called Tina tentatively. Giles was on a very strict no-added fat, salt or sugar diet and started the day with an enormous bowl of mixed grain porridge that seemed to last him all day. He had little patience with the weaknesses of others needing to eat at regular intervals.

He came back glowering and began throwing things out of the back of the Range Rover - picnic basket, chairs, cool box, blanket, and giving out orders. "You carry this. Pete, grab hold of this. Tina, take this.. no, not like that... hold it

UPRIGHT...." Laden, we all stumbled after him towards the beach.

We finally got settled beneath a sand ridge on a rather bleak windswept stretch. Giles disappeared. Tina prepared a huge fat-free, vegetarian sandwich for him. Pete looked on hungrily; he had not had much breakfast at all.

"He won't want this," she said. "All he wants to do is to get on with the fishing. Just look at him now."

He was in the sea, the water up to his knees, doing what looked like some sort of tribal dance, twisting his hips from side to side.

"What is he doing?" I asked, trying to keep my face straight.

"Trying to find bait with his toes." We burst out laughing and remained in a somewhat frivolous mood which only served to heighten Giles's grimness and dedication to the task. He bolted the sandwich and said, "Come along, Pete. Let's get started. We need to get the bait gear from the car." Pete rolled his eyes and trailed off, clutching his stubby of beer.

Tina and I settled down for a two-hour chat about family

matters, mine in England and hers in Australia. It was the first time we had really spoken and fortunately we got on well. It was not warm on the beach. We huddled in our jackets and watched the rollers crashing in. Finally we got stiffly to our feet and gathered up the picnic things. "They should be well started on the fishing by now," said Tina, "but where are they? I would have expected them to fish from the beach."

What a sight met our eyes when we finally found them in the estuary. Giles with mud up to the level of his special fishing shorts frenetically wielding what turned out to be a "yabby" pump, and squirting muddy water at Pete's feet. In the mud were "yabbies", little shrimp-like things, and Pete had to scabble about and pick them up before they scuttled away and submerged again. Pete's ragged combat trousers were rolled to his knees, his legs mud-bespattered, his blonde hair whipping in the breeze. The expression on his face was enigmatic, slightly resigned and slightly amused, as if he were humouring a child that was being tiresome but in some way funny.

Just as we approached, Giles threw the pump at Pete and said, "You pump for a bit. I'll grab them. You're not quick enough."

Tina turned to me. Again we were perilously close to laughing. "I think that's a dangerous move," she said, "Pete might just

squirt it all over him. Might be a good thing - he's out of control."

Then she called out. "Haven't you got enough bait yet? Thought the fishing would be all over by now."

Giles raised his eyes from the mud and glared. He saw the broad grins on our faces and was not amused. "No, we haven't," he said shortly, "We've had to spend hours getting this damned yabbie pump mended. But we'd better get started now. The tide's about right."

We set off in a ragged line towards a little beach on the estuary. It was dusk and the waves were marching into the river mouth and hissing on the beach. Tina and I tried to get comfortable on a rock. Giles busied himself with the first rod and was soon giving Pete his first lessons in baiting a hook and casting a line. Peace reigned for five minutes while Pete stood quietly with his line in the water and Giles tried to prepare the second rod. The line was hopelessly tangled. His actions became more and more agitated. He tried to untangle the line while instructing Pete as to what he should be doing. "You've got to keep reeling the line in a bit - to move the bait. That's it. Try again. Darn this thing. Who left it in this state? Have you any bait left on the hook? Reel it in and

see, and if not, re-bait it. Curse this damned thing....."

Darkness was falling. Pete had to re-bait. He came and squatted in front of us gazing into the pot of wriggling shrimps. His long fingers hovered over the pot and then withdrew.

I was suffering with my son. I knew that he didn't want to bait the hook. The thought of squashing some living thing out of existence would be horrible. I wanted him to say so and nearly shouted out myself. But I held my tongue. He wasn't a child any more; he needed to fight his own battles. I didn't want to make him look like a mother's boy, a lily-livered Pom.

As his hand came over the bait or the fifth time Tina asked, "Are you all right, Pete?"

"I don't know which one to choose....." he said. I understood perfectly. He didn't know which of the squirming mini-lobsters to condemn to death. Finally his hand plunged into the bucket and the fingers tried unsuccessfully to squash the pinkish-grey mass onto the hook. His distaste was palpable. Finally Giles came to his rescue, deftly baited the hook and telling him he would have to learn to do it for himself if he wanted

to be a fisherman.

Giles's rod was sorted out. For five minutes the two of them fished quietly in the gathering dark. Then Giles threw down his rod. "It's no good here. We'll have to go onto the jetty."

Again the ragged procession struggled up the beach and with difficulty picked its way down the stone jetty. "You get down on that rock, Pete." said Giles, indicating a wet, dangerous looking place about two feet above the wave line. Again my heart was in my mouth as my darling son clambered in his ungainly unlaced boots down towards the seething waters. In my mind he was swept away, out to sea, never to be seen again.....For the first time in our long acquaintance I was angry with Giles. Why did he keep pitting my son against these dangerous and unpleasant things?

Pete managed to keep his footing on the rock, and then began the battle of the torches. There were only two of them and it was now so dark that all operations required their assistance. Tina and I, who had tried to keep out of the range of invisible flying hooks, kept being called in to help in holding rods and shining lights. The torches kept getting lost and there was no light to find them.....Tempers were fraying when the call came up from Pete, "I think I've caught

something." Great excitement. Giles gave instructions as to how it was to be hauled in. It was landed - a great mass of seaweed. Tina and I gazed at each other in horror. "We'll be here all night," she said sadly, "He won't go home until someone catches a fish, preferably him". The whole performance had to be gone through again in the dark. Then as our fingers began to freeze, she cry again, "I think I've really got something." YES. A medium sized bream was flapping in the torchlight.

"OK, Pete. Your fish. You need to cut off its head just below the gills." Not again! I imagined the thoughts going through Pete's head. "I've got to kill this poor thing, that a moment ago was swimming in the sea. I have to kill this beautiful silver creature. I have never killed anything before."

"Say you don't want to, Pete," I prayed, "Say if you don't want to. It doesn't matter what he thinks. So what if he thinks 'Feeble bloody Pom.' What does it matter."

The guitar-playing fingers took the knife and started to cut. It was not a clean, swift act but a slow, bloody hack. Finally the job was done. Tina and Giles had already collected up the rods and were disappearing down the track. My son sat back on his heels and surveyed the fish and his scaly, bloody hands.

He smiled.

"I'm glad I've done that," he said, "Now I know I can do it if I have to."

So he hadn't hated every minute of it. So I didn't know how his mind worked and I could stop worrying about him. He knew where he was going even if I didn't. Thank goodness I had kept my mouth shut and not given him any other problems to contend with.

We ceremonially grilled and ate the fish for supper and found it good. Then Pete lured us all out onto the deck to sing, and see the glory of the stars.

(2130 words)