

THE BOY AND THE SILVERY FISH

By
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On the very edge of the sea, a fisherman named Luka lived with his grandson. The waves came up to their beds and the wind came even closer. But their house stood up bravely against wind and waves, as well it might, for the walls were made of stone, the floor was made of stone, and even the roof was made of thin stone tiles. What could the sea or the wind do against a house like that? The boy and the man loved their home like a loyal old friend, but even more, they loved their old wooden boat whose ribs had been tried by many a storm.

At dawn, when the moon and the sun trade places, Old Luka would go down to the open sea and bring in his nets. How the fish glistened in the fine mesh! And the shells and snails gleamed bright, like children of the moon. Still, the old man was unhappy. He had been fishing for fifty years. For fifty years he had been prowling after a great silvery fish, and for fifty years, the fish had been escaping him, leaving behind torn, ruined nets.

"Well, now, I'm going to catch the Silvery Fish", said the old man one morning, and his grandson sadly drooped his head, praying that the fish would spy the net in time to escape. There are so many fishermen, in the world, so many fish. But there isn't one to equal the Silvery Fish who lures fishermen out to the wide sea and dives like a moonbeam to underwater forests of seaweed and coral. Who else is so crafty, so wise? Far away on the open sea, sailors can hear it singing to charm ships away from their familiar paths over the ocean. Its scales gleam silver in the moonlight, and those who see it stand and watch as though bewitched.

All that night the boy gazed at the trail of the moon on the waves, and he was sure that he saw the Silvery Fish playing. When dawn came, seagulls cried in the air and the boy jumped up as though something had stung him, took the boat and rowed out to the bay where the old man had dropped his net the night before. The boy sped along, knowing that he had to hurry, and he was right. Out in the bay, tangled and struggling in a double net, was the Silvery Fish. The old man knew what he was doing

when he borrowed nets from the whole village and when he stretched out an iron chain! The fish was tiring. When the boy reached it, the fish could hardly move its fins.

"Don't worry, Silvery Fish!" The boy touched the powerful neck of the fish, and looking it right in the eye, he cut the net with a knife. Then what a whirlpool arose in the water! Who would win, the fish or the net? The fish was strong and brave, but the rip in the net was small. The boy leaned out to make the opening larger, but he rocked the boat and the waves closed over his head. How cold and dark the water was! The boy felt himself drowning and his last cry went out to the fish:

"Forgive me, Silvery Fish! I just couldn't get you out!"

Who knows how far down he went after that? Did he really reach the home of the Sea King, or did he only imagine the palace made of coral? Then he opened his eyes, he was lying in the bottom of the boat, soaked with sea water. Everywhere around him, the ocean foamed and swirled. He tried to prop himself up on his elbow, but he had no more strength than a stone has water. The boy sank back to the bottom of the boat, plagued by thoughts of his worried grandfather and of the captive fish. If he had only been stronger, if he had only made the hole bigger, the Silvery Fish would have been able to go free. If only!

But where was his boat speeding to? The boy could sit up now, and what he saw made everything clear. It wasn't an iron chain that pulled him, it wasn't a rescue ship bringing him to shore. The Silvery Fish had wound the torn net around the prow of the boat and was pulling him to safety. The boy stretched out his hand, touched the mighty tail, and whispered,

"Thank you, Silvery Fish, thank you!"

Was that a cry of gulls in the sky? The hushing of the waves? Or did the great fish really say something? Later, no one could say. But what about the fishermen's stories that the boy and the fish had laughed together? And where does the story of the boy and the fish come from?

When the fisherman Luka found his grandson, as you would find crabs and shells tossed up on the sand after a storm, the child did not have the courage to look at the man. He was shaking with fever, the boat was smashed to bits, and the nets were ruined beyond repair. But the old fisherman was wise. He made no sign that he missed the boat, and said no harsh words to his grandson. He took him in his arms, carried him to the house, and murmured,

"Don't be sad, son. We'll build a new boat, mend the nets..."

But the boy couldn't help reproaching himself, and he knew he would do the same thing again. The Silvery Fish was the only one like that in all the world. But then he stopped crying and his eyes shone as brilliant as the sea at noon. The Silvery Fish was alive! Alive! It had won over the nets and the waves, it was swifter than the wind, more silvery than the gull. The boy smiled to himself all night, and when dawn knocked on the window and sleep tricked the old man, the boy ran to the shore. The waves splashed at his feet, and he heard the voice of the great fish:

"Climb onto my back, boy! Hold tight to my fins. That's it!" And away he went. Was the wind whistling past the boy's ears or was the fish singing? They were running off to infinity on the crests of the waves! The shore was becoming thin and distant, with the tops of the mountains fading from view, when the fish commanded,

"Hold tight, and don't be afraid, boy. We're going to dive!"

But he didn't need a warning. When the boy was with the fish, he was not scared of anything, not the waves, not the octopus, not the black, black dark through which they dove, far beyond the reach of the sun. Through dense underwater forests the Silvery Fish plunged like a white deer, until they reached the bottom, all overgrown with coral and sea lilies, all sprinkled with sea stars and shells of every possible shape and colour. Like little moons, the pearls shone from the petals of a shell the fish called the mother-of-pearl rose.

"Take one!" The fish gave the boy an enormous pearl, bigger than all the others, and he put it into his pocket, thinking how happy his grandfather would be.

As though answering his thoughts, the fish said. "Tell him you found the pearl on the shore. Let the ride on the waves stay our secret."

Now the fish was silent. There was no need of talk between the two of them. By the waving of his fins, the boy could tell which way the fish was turning. By the way the boy hugged him, the fish could tell whether he wanted to stay in the sea or whether he wanted to return to the shore. They had never agreed where to meet, but at the moment when the sun rises out of the waves, the fish would always be waiting for the boy in the shallow water. And the boy never told anyone where he found the enormous, shining pearls.

With time, the fisherman Luka became rich and built a huge house with a roof that glowed red from far away. But both the old man and the

boy continued to sleep in the hut built of stone. When the wind raged and the waves ran far up on the shore, it seemed safer to them.

And then one day, the old man discovered that his grandson was creeping out of the house before dawn. So he watched and followed through the darkness. There was not a breath of wind through the leaves of the fig trees, and the sea gleamed as though covered with oil. Then a silvery trail started moving in from the open sea to the shore. The old man crouched behind a rock and watched his grandson climb onto the back of a fish and ride away over the waves.

"It's that accursed Silvery Fish!" whispered the old man and went back to the hut, more gloomy than a thundery sky. Could the fish be stealing his grandson's heart?

Secretly, the old man began making an iron net. Then he made a boat swifter than the wind, and one night, when only the stars were awake, he began to chase the silvery Fish. All night he hunted it, and when he came home with an empty net at dawn, he swore to himself,

"Either I catch the Silvery Fish or my life is done!"

In his rage, the old man did not notice how sadly his grandson looked at him and wondered. Why couldn't his grandfather understand that the Silvery Fish was the most beautiful fish in the world and his best friend? Keeping watch on each other they both spent the night thinking about the fish. At dawn, when sleep surprised the old man, the boy kissed his grandfather on the forehead, put on his fisherman's cap, slung his cape around his shoulders, and went down to the shore. As he went, he whispered,

"Forgive me, Grandfather, forgive me! I can't let you kill my best fiend." The boy ran, whipped along by the salty wind. The sand was cold and damp under his feet, and the spume over the waves was whiter than the old man's hair. Once, the boy turned back to the hut, because it seemed to him that his grandfather was gazing reproachfully through the window. But he fought back his sorrow and ran to the water.

The waves are silent and do not tell the secret of how the boy mounted the fish's silvery back. The wind and the gulls don't tell the secret either. And yet, there's still a story going 'round among the fishermen how, on nights filled with moonlight, a silvery fish rises out of the sea with a rider on its back, a boy with long hair bleached by the sun and the waves.

Translated from Serbian by G. G. Champe