

Vanishing Black Fish

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Fog crept up the inlet to the marina clinging to the hemlock and douglas fir trees. An orange pink glow to the east showed where the sun would rise. A father with his two children carried fishing gear down the steep ramp to the dock. The smell of low tide and diesel exhaust mixed with fresh sea air with the sun still under the horizon was something the dad wanted his kids to know as sacred. This time of the morning was steeped in family tradition as deeply as church and logging.

"Starfish Dad!" the daughter screamed pointing at the purple invertebrate.

"I see munchkin. When I was a kid there were thousands of starfish all over the rocks. Get a move on grandpa is waiting."

"Where did the starfish go?"

The son answered, "A virus caused them to die off."

"That's sad," the daughter said running to catch up with the others.

They walked down the dock to a twenty-four-foot welded aluminum boat named Black Fish. The name was hand stenciled in big letters that were almost weathered off. A similarly weathered painting of a killer whale head graced the waterline like the tiger's mouth on a World War Two fighter plane. In the stern grandpa was checking the fishing gear while the engine idled.

The father said, "Coming aboard dad. Anything I can help with."

"We can cast off once the kids and gear are onboard."

The daughter started giggling loudly.

Grandpa asked, "What so funny?"

"Grandpa, you are wearing the same clothes as dad!"

The men were wearing similar dark gray wool shirts, pants, and chainsaw logoed ball caps, all well-worn from many days in the bush and on boats. Grandpa responded, "My pink unicorn sweatshirt like yours is in the laundry. Get in the boat munchkin we are going to be late. The fish are biting!"

The son snorted, "There is no rush, we can't catch salmon. We are only bottom fishing."

"Yay! Catching rock cod is more fun! Salmon fishing is boring," the daughter jumped on the boat and took a seat in the cabin.

Expertly grandpa guided the boat out of the slip and into the calm foggy inlet with the glow of the sun getting stronger on the horizon. Once the boat was up on the plane, the dad poured coffee from a well-worn green metal Coleman Thermos. Quickly, they came to the point that marked the end of the inlet. Past the point, to the east the fog burned off as the sun rose. The sun was not more than a quarter above the horizon. Dad turned to the kids pointing at its splendor and watching the sun rise with them for a minute. Raising his voice loud enough to be heard above the engine dad said, "I'm so grateful you are taking us fishing. I should be taking you out on my boat, but it has been a hard few years. It was the boat or the company."

Grandpa reassured his son, "It is a harder business than when I was in it. You made the right choice. You are welcome to come out on my boat anytime."

The daughter interrupted, "Grandpa catches more fish!"

Dad turned and messed her hair up with a hand. He turned back to grandpa and said, "Business is a lot harder, there is almost too much red tape to make any money. The government is making more land into preserves for old growth trees. The pecker poles we can take don't make any money. We can't cut close to a stream, even one with no fish. There are environmental audits, safety audits, rectal audits, all of which cost me time and money. It is like saying I don't care for my crew or land. It is a fucking pain in the ass."

"Dad! For frick sake," the daughter admonished.

"It is a fricking pain in the butt. I care about this land more than anyone from the city. We've been here for generations. We know the land. We care for the people. But the government is making it harder for us to be loggers."

Grandpa reminisced, "When I started, all you had to do was prove you could work hard, and you would make a good living. When the mill got out of the tree falling business and I started Black Fish Inc. grandma could do all the paperwork. We got all our work from the mill and did not have to mess with bidding on contracts. I know I wouldn't have the patience for all the regulations now, what a waste of money they are."

"I remember when you started Black Fish, it was good. We had a high margin. But now, I run a gyp-o-logging company so I can pay my employees and me. I've sold my boat to keep the company afloat. I'm even wondering if my boy should get into logging. Gramps did you ever think I should not get into the business?"

"No."

The boy said, "Dad I want to work in the bush too. Maybe I could work with you this summer?"

“You are still a little young. Perhaps next fall. I’ve got a log salvage contract and some sideline work falling trees on private property you could help with. But you gotta do well at school.”

Grandpa lamented, “I never worried how you did in school. I knew you would get a good job logging or at the mill. Now, it seems the government doesn’t want to help us. There is money for Indians, parks, and druggies but they won’t let us make the money to live. It might be the end of a culture.” He glanced back at the kids and winked, “You two, don’t be like your dad. Do well at school. Learn computers, Microsoft has good jobs in the city.” He turned to his son, “You got the log salvage contract, great. That is steady work, if not high paying. Work those private connections, cottagers always need a tree felled for cash.”

Dad liked his father’s attempt at optimism. Reality was more pessimistic; this would be the last generation of loggers in this family. “True, it will keep me working. And I can always make a buck with chainsaw sculptures,” He joked. “I still worry if it will be enough for the boy.”

Grandpa pointed to a point with gulls and diving birds on the inside of it. He steered the boat towards it. As they closed in, bait fish pushed out of the water like heavy rain. “Look at that bait ball. Probably a bunch of black bass is under it. The bottom is at 100 feet and rocky. Fish the jig just off the bottom.” He slowed the boat to a stop next to the bait ball without spilling the coffee.

The kids bounded out of the cabin to their rods. They casted their jigs before their father had left the cabin. The boys jig hit the bottom and in two jigs he had a fish. Matter of factly he said, “Rock fish.” He began reeling the bent rod up.

Dad said, “Munchkin, has it hit bottom?”

“No dad. It is still dropping.”

“Check it.”

The little girl flipped the bail on the heavy spinning reel that looked gigantic in her hand and lifted the rod. Immediately the rod doubled over. The girl squealed. She was pulled into the gunnel by the pull of the fish. Line peeled out. Dad stepped over to hold his daughter. She said, “I’m fine dad, it scared me. It is a big fish. I don’t need your help.” The rod tip thumped. The angle of the line went from 90 degrees to 45 degrees with drag being taken.

“That’s a big salmon,” Dad said.

The boy said, “Spring salmon.” He did not want to be out done by his sister. He got his black bass to the boat. He through it in the fish locker and cast his line out. He stopped the jig from dropping to the bottom with a jig. Excitedly he said, “Fish on.”

For the next five-minutes dad guided the two kids around the deck of the boat keeping the lines from tangling. All the time telling the kids to keep their rod tips up. Grandpa instinctually kept the boat in the right spot. The son’s fish was smaller than the daughters and was next to the boat first. Dad netted the fish and let the son unhook it. Then dad got back to coaching the daughter, her fish was a hog.

“It is a shame we can’t keep him,” the son said letting the salmon go. “Damn government. There’s salmon all over the place but the poor killer whales need them. When was the last time we got a chinook double header?”

Grandpa said, "I hear you boy. Where are the scientists to see this?"

Dad watched his daughter proudly as she slowly got back line from the tyee.

The son continued, "For my science class I researched orcas in the North Pacific. There are three types of killer whales. Oceanic that live far offshore, eat large fish, and are rarely seen. Transients that are increasing in numbers because they eat seals, sea lions, and whales. Residents that live near the coast and only eat large chinook and chum salmon. The southern residents that live around here are endangered because supposedly there are too few salmon."

The salmon that was slowly coming in got a second wind and took off in a blistering run. The daughter screamed, "I can't stop it!"

The dad yelled, "Gramps, chase the fish!" Shortly after he said that the water a hundred yards away in the direction of the line exploded. A gigantic bull sea lion shook the thirty-pound king salmon by the tail and the line snapped. The daughter sadly reeled in the broken line. "You did great munchkin. Come and get a hug."

Indignant the boy said, "That is why there are not enough salmon. There are too many sea lions and seals eating all the fish. Why can't we shoot them? We need a cull."

Grandpa answered, "Commercial fishermen did when I was a kid. It was not legal, but no one cared. There were more salmon and whales then. Now, the government won't let us."

The son ranted, "Scientists say killer whales teach their young what to eat. They call the behaviors they taught to the young whale's culture. The difference between the transient killer whales and the residents is how they learned to hunt! How crazy is that? If that is true – and the scientist say it is – why don't these smart whales learn to eat mammals? If you were starving wouldn't you change?"

Dad answered, "Seems reasonable to me. Let's move to a different spot. Too many salmon and sea lions here."

"Get your rods stowed kids. The fog has lifted we are going for a run offshore." Grandpa ran the boat flat out on the mill pond water. Dad poured the coffee.

"Dad, Black fish!" the daughter shouted.

Grandpa took notice and turned to get in front of the pod of killer whales. He came closer than the Coast Guard's guidance or the law allowed. He stopped the boat a couple hundred yards in front of the traveling orcas. "Keep your eyes out in that direction," he pointed to water off the stern. The distinctive sound of a whale's blow came from the left aft side startling them. The orca was only two boat lengths to the left and one behind the Black Fish. The family watched as whale after whale surfaced within feet of the boat. They could see the whales under the water as they swam passed.

The son quipped, "These look like the stupid type of killer whale."

The others did not let his remark take them from this blessed moment. Dad said to the daughter after all the whales had passed by, "What do you think about that munchkin?"

"I think we are just like the black fish."

Dad looked confused, "What do you mean?"

"We like fishing. We need to change. And we need help."