

We Shared a Fish

by Al Douglas

My mother is both proud and stubborn. She never liked asking for help, she hardly complained, she bore her crosses without murmur, and when necessary, she moved with such precision to implement both blessings and beatings that you never saw her coming.

She has always been there for me and I never doubted her love, but love alone isn't enough to quiet a hungry stomach. Sometimes the hunger pains were so sharp I couldn't stand up straight, but my mother always somehow managed to keep her head high. The water to our place was shut because of financial difficulties. The electricity was also turned off, and we eventually had to move out. I wasn't sure if we were evicted because I was too young to remember, but I do remember we stored our drinking water in an aquarium. Once, unbeknown to us, we drank water that had mosquito larvae in it. Ironically, that night we had food to eat, but I couldn't keep it down. That night I lived on the toilet.

I remember my mother ashamed and afraid the neighbors would know we had nothing. Mother would fry old onions and garlic to make the place smell good. She even pretended to go out and buy groceries. She would leave with an empty crocus bag and return with a bag full of crumpled paper. This gave the casual observer the illusion of a bag filled with food. But our stomachs knew better. We went to bed hungry too many nights to forget. One night, to take my mind off the hunger pains, she decided we should take a walk to the wharf in downtown Kingston and try to catch a fish. Armed with some dough, a piece of string and a safety pin, we went to the wharf.

The lights of downtown Kingston blurred as we hurried passed shops closed for the night. These streets were no place for an unprotected woman and a child. At nights, gunmen, with lion hair and heavy hands prowled the streets. Thieves, some with a complexion as dark as night, **walked these streets. Police, with a "shoot first", "talk later" attitude walked these streets. We** stayed close to the lights and once or twice, stopped to look in a store window and dream. I remember the imposing darkness of the waters near the wharf. The invisible horizon almost tricked us into thinking we could never leave. As the waves crashed against the sea wall and splashed the salty water into the night, we had simple dreams. We dreamt of having full bellies.

We chose a spot under the light (the last place fish would hide) and we tossed our "bread upon the waters." It wasn't long before we lost the dough worm. The shiny point of the naked safety pin just wasn't enough of a lure by itself. We caught nothing. In retrospect, I don't think we ever expected to catch something but it was worth a try. We loitered long enough to dream of life beyond the horizon, and for the night to chill our bones. It was time to go home.

Just before we left, a man who was also hanging out at the wharf approached us. I don't recall the exchange of words, but I do remember him giving Mom a small Styrofoam cup with a

little fish in it. When she handed me the cup I was mesmerized by the little fish, and for a brief moment I thought of setting it free. On the way home, Mom and I discussed the fate of the fish and decided it was in the interest of all involved if we ate the fish. We reasoned that if I kept it as a pet it would die and no one would benefit, but if we ate it, then at least its death would not be in vain.

That night, we ended up eating that little fish, with no rice, no bread, and no dumplings. Mother and I ate that little fish with nothing but love between us.