

Fishing

Short story by Allison Fine
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1. Dishonor for Reconstituted Lives

Fascism means corporate control of a country, like we have in this country, the notorious Michael Bronsky, a federal law official from Arizona spoke to the crowd of primarily young people. I heard this story from my friend, the old woman with the white hair who used to finger all the vegetables in the supermarket: Ginger Grant, who has since died inside of the small apartment she had near Speedway and 22nd. Bogue prosecutions and corrupt activities force many of us to din up some charges, Michael continued, and I answer to the law, not the Administration. It is important for me to defend the Constitution so that ultimately our civil rights will not be in jeopardy.

After the short speech he sat alone with his back to the crowd, (it was less a crowd than a trickle) looking at the map on the wall. It was a National Geographic map of Earth at Night—with the East coast of the United States lit up and vast regions of the world in complete darkness. The lights of the room, bright and artificial, competed with the strong sun streaming in from the windows. It was a glorious evening in the desert and the young group itched to get outside of the room to go and sit under the air-conditioned awnings of their favorite bars and restaurants. But they did not; could not—the music just wasn't there for that and most of them swayed to a certain kind of a beat and it wasn't the beat of that night, in fact it wasn't the beat of the night previous or the night following, but no one was to know that.

Michael went home. Wendy was waiting for him, it was the night he usually cooked but because of the Town Meeting, scheduled at the Tanque Verde Recreation Center, he told her she'd have to whip up something. This brought silence from her as it usually did when plans changed.

At home Wendy was actually upstairs in her strapless black bra and boxer briefs, behind the closet, rooting around among the pile of shoes at the back of the closet. Michael came into the room pulling his tie off with frustration, anguish and boredom.

I'm fed up, he said to no one in particular. Wendy came out of the closet with a hairpiece dangling from her arm, looking like an endangered animal.

So am I and that's why what I am about to tell you shouldn't surprise you at all.

You're leaving me? he asked with hopeful expectation.

Well, not exactly. I mean, we are parting, of course but you're the one who's going to actually leave. Physically, I mean.

I'm taking my fishing rod with me, he said.

Who the fuck cares about your fishing rod?

Just wanted to clarify.

Be warned, she snarled at him, shaking the hairpiece in his direction, whatever you don't take with you I am throwing out.

Fine. Is there someone else?

Don't be corny.

Just wondered.

I'm sick of you that's all. You're boring, your stupid and you're terrible in bed. And yes, there might be someone else but I'm not serious about him.

Good, because he'd soon find out you're all show and no go.

Michael brushed past Wendy and went into the bowels of the closet to search for his fishing rod and a few other clothing articles to take with him.

Don't drink, don't smoke and don't get laid, she said as he crawled out of the closet, fishing rod in one hand and a pile of shirts in the other.

I'll do whatever I want, he told her.

Once upon a time, in another era, an up and coming lawyer and a skinny girl with big tits explored each other and found it pleasing. That was the beginning of their marriage. Fifteen years later had produced nothing, except a great deal of misunderstanding in two separate languages: male and female. Now Michael was a federal law official, Wendy was a fitness instructor and he was about to get thrown out of his home. He looked forward to being lost in the streets of misery—it was tailor made for the interrogating thoughts about life in general that had invaded his waking moments lately. He left the house on the spur of Wendy's moment, fishing rod in one hand and sticking out over his left shoulder, and a work-out bag in the other hand filled with underwear, socks, four shirts and an extra pair of pants. In the side pockets he stuffed the *Talmud* his grandfather gave him for his *Bar Mitzvah* and a worn copy of *Anna Karenina*. He had no idea where he would go but he ended up downtown past 22nd Street, where the only whores in town hung out.

In some circumstances, hapless saps end up feeling forlorn but Michael was not on the train to forlorn, he was on the bus to loudmouthed pigheadedness and that was a new law on the books.

Saul Bellow:

2. Why Marriage

Passing a man in a wheel chair, (he always hated people with infirmities, repelled by the reminder that weakness and death were just around the corner), he went into an establishment called *Phase* advertising massage and relaxation. He felt anything but relaxed as he faced the young girl at the desk who leaned forward to look into his eyes with her own, a pair of green eyes that advertised that no matter *what*, she intended to give him or any other man a hard time, a time that could be grotesquely public or private, but a time nonetheless, that carried with it the main source of wish fulfillment as a hard currency, and such currency would go rotten, lose it's worth out in the market, become devalued, but then in the circumstances, could he really be a chooser? In a beggar's world everything is abnormal and most men are looking to get laid, so whether they show up as stellar sack artists or not it's really irrelevant—their dreams have been kept alive in storage, as it were, and one doesn't question the moth-eaten, dusty remains of a lifelong dream when one pulls it out of the closet.

Do you want a massage?

Yes. What's included with that?

The full massage is \$250.

And what do I get for that?

That's arranged between you and your masseuse. Will that be credit or cash?

You don't take checks?

No. We don't.

He pulled out his wallet. He had four fifties and a twenty and some ones and odd change in his pocket. He might need that for the hotel. Although, perhaps he would be spending the entire evening at *Phases*, as part of the beginning phases of his new life as a liberated male, not that any male needed liberating, and as he recalled Heraclitus guided him on this—the unexamined life—unless a man reflected on experience and examined himself he was doomed to living a dream-like existence, but then as Michael looked around *Phases*, with the mirrored walls and rose-colored wall paper, the chandeliers with faintly tinkling glass, the soft, subdued, spiritual incense-inspired music, the scent of sandalwood or wormwood or whatever it was, designed to tingle his senses and send a Syrian sensation up his chakra system, smooth, lighted, moonlike, as the face of this woman who looked like a Candace or a Sylvie or a Bronwen (perhaps not that—it was too Eastern, too sympathetic to the halls of Ivy) what would Heraclitus think of him now? Wasn't this the height of dream inside the conception of divine fire? His divine recollection of fire, since he hadn't experienced the passion of fire in such a long time, years in fact, logos—the world's explanatory principle! Heraclitus was completely useless, Michael realized, and especially now as Candace pursed her expanded, swollen, deeply ruby-ed lips and tried to smile at him.

Visa?

Yes, put it on my Visa, what the hell, he said handing her the American Express card from his wallet.

We don't take Amex, she told him, sorry.

Why not? What kind of establishment doesn't take an American Express?

We don't. We're not set up for it. Visa, Mastercard, cash—

How much for just sitting and talking?

What you do is between you and the masseuse. Say, are you a cop or something?

You're too young for this conversation. You ought to be home watching the Simpson's or smoking weed in the back ally. Well, not that I suppose.

Are you coming in or not?

Fine. He grabbed the Amex card from the desk and put it back into his wallet.

Here. You know—why did I ever get married? I got married because I wanted sex all the time. Isn't that a laugh! Don't you find that funny?

I guess if you say so, said the girl. Afsana is free. There you are. Sign this.

The girl ripped the paper from the printer and set it in front of Michael. He took a pen with a yellow plumed top to sign with. After signing he looked up and saw a print of a Frieda Kahlo painting on the wall behind the desk.

Isn't that a bloody fetus?

Do you think that massage therapists can't appreciate good art?

I'm not sure I would classify that as good art. It's disturbing.

It's bitter. It's real. It's the vacillating limit between the visible and the invisible.

Is Oksana going to make conversation like this? Because if you must know, my wife, the one in the boxer shorts that just threw me out—well, I was willing to go, let me tell you, I was very willing, however, she was a very intelligent woman herself and filled with the bitterness, the kind of sense of it makes your intellect reel, of course she got it from her father and maybe even those ferocious eyes of her Great Aunt Dottie, who was from Elgin, Illinois, well born there, not raised there. She was raised in Chicago.

You know it's your time. You have an hour for two hundred and fifty, and it started when you signed the credit card slip. Here's your receipt.

I'm paying two fifty for this? Are you kidding me? I could have had this conversation for free!

Not with me. Oksana is not Oksana, it is Afsana. She is up the stairs behind me to the right and in room 314. You can knock first. I'll let her know you're coming.

But the conversation wasn't over yet, he felt, even though this young woman clearly signaled that it was. You only had a person's word for it in the heat of social interaction, and certainly there could always be room for negotiation. He was certain of this as clearly as he felt a sensation that he had become other than a human man opening out into the night beyond him—he felt as if he were an entertainer that was called upon to smell himself and come up with the fragrance of scattered intelligence he once called personal history—the man who was old who was middle aged who could still be young! He worked very hard to make sure that the tension of his absolute phoniness would comport with the image he tried so hard to reflect to the outer world as the greatest imposter of all ages. He did not want to be known! It was important to take a position.

What's your name?

Look, are you sitting on a dog or something? Your time is ticking away, sir.

I just want your name.

Victoria Breeze.

Breeze, as in wind?

As in, get upstairs before your hour is up.

As in 'get blowed'? He laughed at his own joke.

Oh, and watch that fishing pole—I don't want you injuring someone's eye or something.

The phone rang and she sneered at him briefly before reaching a long, slender arm with manicured, blood red claws extending from the fingers to pick up the flashing metallic blue cell lying on the desk.

Phases, this is Victoria, how can I help you?

Michael's refusal to go with standard behavior was not unusual for him, but he had a feeling Victoria was a divorced woman with a psychiatrist for a lover who banded excuses out like candy, made meaningless banter as a come-on so that men would traipse upstairs and kill themselves over women complicit with the fantasy behind the times. Or ahead of the times. Or perhaps, in plain truth, time had nothing to do with it at all.

Hemingway:

3. Riding and Shooting

Michael threw his canvas workout bag on the floor once Afsana opened the door. There was no window in the room, nothing but the dingy walls and the thirteen bottles of vodka and gin and bourbon lined up on the floor. A light from the bathroom threw a shadow of yellow into the room. There was no natural light. The air, filled with cigarette smoke, smelled like stale bodies and human sweat.

Afsana got up from the bed her head haloed in smoke and a blue cast coming from a lamp. Michael didn't worry about his feelings anymore, because the feeling he had was that it was always more about lying than loving. He did not love her and he found that he did not love his wife either, but that didn't matter. This was not a love

transaction but a money transaction, but then all the women he had ever known, those he had taken as lovers and the two he had taken as wives, had always been women who thought more about money than love. It didn't matter that he had integrity and talent at one time, although the talent might be put to question; he certainly had once fronted integrity. The only thing he proudly possessed now was his fishing rod and this moment. Women, children, lovers, he had been dissatisfied with all of them and the rich bitch who just dumped him the most disgusting of them all. We're all cut out for something, he thought, and this tall, bleached blond standing in front of him with the large rump and hanging breasts, she is cut out for this.

Now she came up to him, her robe coming open at the throat revealing a wrinkled neck. I have two grown up children, he thought, and this is the last thing they would think their father would do. Maybe I ought to go home and open a bottle of Scotch and read a book. He liked to read a book with a bottle of scotch next to the bed, but now, he understood, he had no bed. He had no home. This was his home. He needed to get drunk enough to sleep and he wondered if Afsana had enough to make him drunk.

Want a drink? she asked, as if his thoughts had been spoken aloud. Perhaps they had.

Yes.

Put down that fishing rod and come over here.

He had already put the gym bag on the floor, but the fishing rod was special.

Could you put that down? she asked.

What for? He despised her already and they hadn't even started drinking. Maybe the drinking would help.

Here. She handed him a glass filled with deep, golden brown bourbon. He took a sip. This is good. He smiled. She smiled back. That was part of her training, she was trained that way; the way a dog is trained to shit next to a tree instead of on the carpet.

Now she walked back to the bed, her glass in one hand. She lay down upon the bed, spreading her dingy, gauzy robe around her body. Michael was overcome with snobbery and something else—he had always been the envy of all his friends because of the life he led, but what would they think of him now?

I'll put the fishing rod on the end of the bed, he told her. The rod stretched across the bed and the reel hung down over one side.

That must be some rod, she said.

Of course it is, he said. He put down the glass of bourbon on the bed table and unbuttoned his shirt. I've loved Africa. Really, it's the most fun, if you ignore the AIDS and the poverty.

You were in Africa?

On a state visit two years ago. His shirt was off. He noticed the drawer to the bed table was half open. What's in there? he asked.

Nothing. You better move over to this side.

What for?

I'm better from the right.

Oh.

As he moved to the right side of the bed he glanced into the half open drawer. There was a buck-hunting knife; an alpha cross lock with a gut hook on the end, a pack of Marlboro Lights, kitchen matches and a picture of a hyena.

Do you like Hyenas? he asked as he slid onto the bed next to her. Her robe itched the naked skin on his chest.

Take off your pants, she said.

He took off his pants, carefully rolling his wallet and keys into the right leg. He put the pants neatly on the end of the bed.

You're a neat guy, aren't ya?

I'm a little wobbly today.

You are?

Yeah.

Why?

She put her hands on his naked back. Does that feel good?

What are you? A waitress?

I'm a massage therapist.

So, where's your massage table and the your massage oil?

I massage from the inside out, she said. How do you like it?

The picture of the Hyena slipped lightly along the edge of his consciousness. Why did she have that picture?

Have another drink of your bourbon, she said and smiled.

You have a gold tooth, he said.

Yes. I like it.

They made love. He did not call it love. It was sex, and he had traded comfort, security and boredom for this? He liked the way Afsana moved her ass and even though he couldn't stand the smell of her, the bourbon had dulled his senses so he was able to

ignore it. She fell asleep afterwards. So did he. He wondered if the hour were up. He felt as if he could get up now and destroy her. There was this overwhelming urge to do so. Destroying her would only be a blessing. To rid the world of one more middle-aged woman who was already destroyed.

Gogol:

4. Interview with a Rod

They slept for several hours. Michael's main concern was that he would have to pay for it.

Afsana woke and shut the drawer to the bedside table.

If you show a knife you must use it, she said.

Michael woke with a dead feeling in his mouth. The fishing rod had fallen off the bed onto the floor.

This is a breakthrough, Afsana said.

This is a breakthrough?

Yes, she said, you don't need to repeat that.

Well, Michael said, I am baffled. Maybe, with all that's happened in the last—(he consulted his watch)-- six hours or so, I can't spot a breakthrough any more.

He realized that he had spent much more than two hours in Afsana's presence and worried about whether he would be responsible for paying for the extra hours. He hastily pulled on his pants and shirt, putting the wallet and keys into his back pocket; slinging the gym bag on his shoulder he left the room while Afsana was in the bathroom. Victoria was on the phone when he ran out the door. Out on the street he smelled the smell of dog

shit and human piss, he worried about Victoria charging him extra because she had his credit card information and realized he had left the fishing rod in the room. In addition he felt something hard hitting his thigh and reaching his hand into his pants pocket pulled out the buck-hunting knife with the gut hook. He did not remember putting it there, unless Afsana did and he could not figure out a reason why she would do this, but certainly the world was a completely bizarre place so anything was possible. Especially the last few hours of the world and its collision with his life, or perhaps he was dreaming and would somehow return to his house and wake up next to Wendy and find out that this had all been an imaginary excursion.

But this was not to be.

Further down on 22nd Street he spotted a small man with dreadlocks standing by a dilapidated storefront that had been a drycleaners but was now empty.

I know what you looking for, the man said.

You do? asked Michael, because even I don't know that.

You looking for a place to stay, warm, good food, TV, hot bath—am I right?

That sounds about right.

Follow me,

Why should I follow you?

Because you got no place else to go, am I right?

Michael followed the man about half a block. The man stopped and turned, pointing upwards to a stairway on the side of a building leading to nowhere.

Wait a minute—

You motherfucking asshole! the man yelled, threw a punch at Michael's face and kicked him repeatedly when he was on the ground. Then the man reached into his pocket and grabbed the wallet. He didn't get the knife. Dreadlocks ran leaving Michael groaning in pain, bruised and bleeding on the ground. He had half a mind to chase after the guy and slash him with the knife but he could hardly move. It must be 3 a.m. he figured, and he had no idea where to go, without money he was stuck, and he didn't even have the fishing rod for comfort.

Slowly rising to his feet he followed the distant sound of a television he could hear over the stillness of the night air. He came to a small house with the front door open. Inside a young, dark haired woman was smoking and watching television.

Come on in, she said, I've been expecting you. Look at this, she said, pointing to the television, interview with Paula Zahn.

Michael crept into the room, face bleeding, shirt half off, pants torn in several places.

Who are you?

Monica. Friend of Victoria's. She said you ran off without paying for your extra time. Now is that honest, my friend?

She turned around in her chair to look at Michael. She was a young girl in a gold-embroidered pair of silk pants, yellow, dark straight hair, gothic-looking, deep brown eyes, very fair and lovely skin—Michael fell instantly in love.

Don't get attracted to me, she told him, I'm taken.

Are you related to that guy with the dreadlocks that just attacked me?

Do I look like I'm related?

I mean, do you have a connection?

We're all connected, my friend, she said and turned her attention back to the television. Don't sit on the couch—blood stains. Go in the kitchen and wash yourself off.

Michael went into the kitchen and found some paper towels. He put his head under the sink and washed the blood off his face, trying to wipe his pants and shirt the best he could. Back in the living room Monica had turned up the sound.

Look at this! she pointed at the television. Michael looked and there was his fishing rod sitting in a chair in the CNN studio across from Paula Zahn who was wearing a very tight light gray pencil skirt and a sexy pale yellow blouse open at the throat. At that moment Michael hated Paula Zahn for looking like that while interviewing his fishing rod, and what was his fishing rod doing on television anyway? And he hated Monica for being here and making him watch it! In fact, he hated everything right now and also thanked God the knife was still inside his pants.

We're not a political organization, we're an economic development organization, his rod was saying, but we ought to be more concerned with terror inside of our borders, than anything out there, if you know what I mean. Paula Zahn was nodding her head in agreement.

So, do you believe your organization, *Gone Fishing*, is heading us in the right direction?

You bet your trout I do, the rod said, smiling, if a rod could be said to smile, and I am all for it.

All for what, exactly?

We're here to benefit the lesbian population, don't forget.

You mean, the Lebanese population? she asked, to clarify.

Don't be ridiculous! the fishing rod exploded, not that I have anything against Lebanon or the Lebanese people, but I am more concerned with Lesbians.

Why? Paula asked, crossing and uncrossing her long, lean, gipsy legs.

Well, why not for Christ's sake? As if there needed to be any kind of explanation for this sort of thing, and I can't predict where politics will go, so my area of expertise is really optimistic, economic and leisurely at the same time.

Sounds intriguing. So *Gone Fishing* is, in essence, a licensed way—

To go a little crazy, take some time off and watch lesbians. Does that answer your questions? Anyway, in regards to supporting the common effort—

Turn this bloody craziness off! Michael shouted to Monica, who swiveled around in the chair.

Your fishing rod is explosive and wild, she said.

Perhaps it is, but it's also completely out to lunch!

This happens. You ought to find the bastard and reel it in.

Michael suddenly disliked Monica intensely for this pun and grabbed his gym bag to head for the door.

Don't forget, she shouted after him, you owe us money!

I'll pay you when I find that damn fishing rod, Michael said as he slammed the front door of Monica's apartment behind him. Looking back he saw Paul Wolfowitz bowing and scraping on the screen where his fishing rod had sat moments before. At that moment he realized he would murder the fishing rod. It was not a formal plan of any

kind, just a sudden understanding that to heal the wounds of this night something must die and he knew it was his fishing rod.

Eudora Welty:

5. Golden Boughs and Songs Farewell

Lurching down the street feeling angry, baffled and hurt, Michael came to a storefront that looked to be a converted church. Inside the place was filled with people sitting on benches listening to an enormous African American man preach at the front of the room on a makeshift pulpit. An all-night church for the desperate to be healed, the alcoholics, the losers, the people who careened about the dark streets of night at 4 a.m. looking for solace and drowning in the hopeless moment of their dismal existence.

Why even Thursday I can find the meaning of life! the man was saying, and the group, all of them looking like forlorn stragglers, alley cats that had dropped in from purgatory, shouted yes! And Friday! Yes! Light flickered from a row of candles along the sides of the windowless room. Michael stood at the doorway, it was by no means possible that he could find his fishing rod here, and he couldn't really identify with this class of people, as he termed it, *class*, but he felt strange that he was in a sense a participant inside of the action of the moment anyway, albeit an outsider.

Come in, my friend! the large man at the pulpit shouted. Heads turned.

Oh, no, I'll just stay out here.

Suit yourself.

There is some hope, my friends that as you die you see the dark magenta sunset all purple glowing in the sky, that's God! You see the door to love and understanding, not closed to you, oh no, but with the chinks open for you to climb through, that's God! You make plans to be friendly to dreams, to color bursting forth, to summer laden with its flaming trees and say farewell to death. It's a sunny day! That's god! Amen. The congregation screeched Amen. It was pathetic. Michael was brought to despair by their hope. It was so desperate and unfounded. He turned away from the lighted room; the sad heads bowed in reverence on the dirty wooden benches and went back out onto the street where he saw Monica running toward him, his fishing rod in one hand and his gym bag in the other.

Your stuff. You forgot your stuff.

You found my rod.

Victoria brought it over.

Did she get it from CNN?

I don't know. There could be duplicates.

I think it has to die.

What?

Michael pulled the knife from his pants pocket, took the rod from Monica's hands and slashed off the nylon line cutting it into pieces. He sliced off the reel and cut the rod in half, then broke it into pieces over his knee. Throwing the rod onto the ground he stomped on it repeatedly and threw it into the street.

I feel better now, he said.

So do I, she said. Want to go eat some pie? I know an all night diner down on 22nd.

Michael and Monica headed for the diner, *Melody's*, together, his gym bag slung over her shoulder.

Are you going to leave your rod just to die alone in the street without a burial?

I couldn't care less, he said. It's already dead and if that's what it takes to heal the pain, then so be it. The thick, heavy night hung on the sky like apples about to fall from a tree. Summer had turned the night into a world of heat and despair and oppression—it was a hopeless time and the memory of all that had past followed them just as the cry of the mockingbird from a far off tree left a lingering echo of sound on the air. Inside the diner the light was fluorescent, glaring; the place filled with people whose only virtue was that they had endured the night, endured their lives, had endured the curtain of inky black sky dotted with stars.

All those people in that church were black, he said as they sat at a booth inside of *Melody's*.

So what? Are you a racist?

Of course not. But my fishing rod is some kind of pervert who likes lesbians.

Your fishing rod is dead. What kind of pie do you want? The pecan pie makes your teeth hurt.

Looking at Monica made his chest hurt. She was, quite possibly, the most beautiful woman he had ever known and the night was not even over yet.

