

FISHPATROL

by

Jeannette Dean

Lisa sat watching them swim. Silent Death, Jim had called them. Quickly she looked away when Detective Hearsh re-entered the room.

“Such a mystery,” he shrugged, stopping to watch the piranha in their gliding dance. “My officers have spoken with everyone in the building and the neighbors. No one saw your strange visitor. You say it was before midnight?” In a relaxed slouch, his minor belly nearly touching the smoked glass, he seemed to be addressing the fish.

Attempting to slow her breathing, she leaned back and gave a half-stifled yawn. “Excuse me, I’m just so tired. Yes, approximately. I came straight here from work. It’s a thirty minute walk and I left there at

11:00.”

“Yes, they confirmed that,” he was still talking toward Justice and Jaybo in a perpetual monotone. “Just, please, go over it again for me.”

“How about if I make coffee for both of us while I talk?” She needed movement to channel her tension and caffeine to sharpen her senses.

“Splendid idea.” He gave the impression of having all the time in the world. Neither nervous habits nor wedding band. Early forties, she reckoned, with some black blood. Clear skin the color of heavily creamed coffee, thick healthy hair without gray. Pity he was a pig.

She took a deep calming breath while pouring the rich dark beans into the grinder. She loved the sound, the look of them. Taking one, she handed it to Hearsh. He had seated himself on one of the wooden stools across the counter from her.

He rolled it around between his fingers, examined it closely while the rest were pulverized in the little electric grinder.

She lifted the lid with her hand. “Voila!” she smiled and presented the aromatic puree first to his nose then to her own. “That smell is magic, even better than the taste.”

He nodded, “But you’ve got to get inside, crack it open, to

appreciate it.”

“Not really. Every step of its life gives pleasure. From the sprouting to the flowering to the roasting of the green beans to stimulating the taste buds and conversation.” Filling the stainless French coffeepot, she sighed, “That’s what this morning’s been missing.”

He smiled, put the bean in his pocket. “Where were we?”

“I walked in, locked the door, and checked my answering machine. There were no messages.”

“You didn’t see anyone you knew outside or on the way home?”

She turned from his intense appraisal and put cream on to heat. “No, no one. Do you take cream?”

“Nothing, thanks. So then there was a pounding at your door?”

“Yes.”

“Your door is right on the street. Aren’t you concerned about whom you might open it to?”

“This isn’t a big city, Mr. Hearsh. Friends often come by late.” She was surprised how easily lies and half-truths were coming. “But, yes after last night I’ll be more careful.”

He nodded. "What was your first impression?"

"I thought he was lost. He looked upset, was dressed nicely, and was carrying that suitcase as if he'd just come from the train." She shuddered, "If only I'd known."

"But you weren't afraid, he didn't seem aggressive?"

"No, he was very polite. He said he'd seen me at the Weston Hotel. I tend bar there and remembered he'd come by a few times for drinks, not as a guest. He said he was late for an important meeting, could he leave his bag for half an hour. It seemed odd and I was saying so. But, he abruptly looked up the street toward town as if he'd heard something, threw the bag in and ran."

She poured the coffee, her hand steady. "I looked out to see what he was running from, half expecting to see the police. But, no one. I looked back, but he had disappeared. I locked the door, then just stood looking at the case. My imagination was in full swing. Fear and curiosity. It's funny looking back, but I certainly wasn't thinking clearly. It could have been a bomb."

"Describe him again, please."

Lisa frowned. "I'm beginning to feel like the one who chopped off

someone's finger, not the good guy who found it and called the cops."

"I'm sorry. I often find that if I have someone repeat descriptions of people or events, little things will come back, sometimes valuable clues. I'm sure you're exhausted."

She sipped her coffee. "He wasn't much taller than me, had thick gray hair, a smooth face, not too wrinkled. He was wearing a long brown coat and brown gloves, no tie, pink shirt." She closed her eyes, trying to see him again. "There was a slight part in his front teeth," she said proudly.

"See?" he smiled. "That is something that won't change, makes him identifiable."

He emptied his mug. "Now that's what coffee's supposed to be. Thanks." He stood up. "When did you open the bag?"

"What? Oh, this morning. Just before I called you. Anything else?"

"You didn't take anything out of the bag? It was just the finger in the jar and the clothes?"

"I took nothing out. I saw the finger, freaked, and called you. I didn't know what else was there until you went through it."

She was beyond relieved when he left. "Okay you two," she approached Justice and Jaybo, "where do we go from here? Am I a complete fool?" She put on a tape of whales accompanied by flute. "This'll relax us, then I'll feed you."

Lisa was religious about their morning feedings. She had started with three females, but had returned from a skiing weekend to find only Justice in residence. Well, they had warned her that piranha wouldn't share tanks. Unable to bear leaving Justice in solitude, she had purchased a male and christened him Jaybo.

She laughed, "Detective Hearsh would never believe that his coffee was ground in the same grinder as our cannabis leaves." She took the jar labeled 'Fish Food' from the shelf, uncapped it and sniffed appreciatively. "A little for you two." She put a pinch in a saucer. "And a little for me." She rolled a fat joint.

After finely chopping some raw chicken with theirs and sprinkling it in the tank, she lit her joint. While Justice and Jaybo conducted their feeding frenzy, she sat Buddha-like, taking long deep drags. She smiled contentedly, enjoying their daily ritual.

"The way I see it, you two are proof positive that if all world leaders had a little grass before their meetings there would be no more wars.

They'd just work it all out." She finished her smoke.

"I mean, look at how well you get along. They said it couldn't be done. Peace and love," she laughed and put away the small fish net she'd used a few hours earlier.

"Whew," Lisa stretched, "what a night it's been. Our little secret, eh, my Fish Patrol?"

After a lavender-scented bath she tried to sleep but eventually gave up, unable to prevent the gory severed finger appearing every time she closed her eyes. She sat down at her laptop, thinking she'd start an overdue essay on fish farming, but couldn't pull her concentration together. Yet another course she loved but was giving half-assed attention. She paced angrily.

She stopped beside the tank. "What has happened to Jim? Thirty minutes, he said. I didn't open it 'til dawn. Can't believe he showed up here last night...how did he know where I lived? He's always brought my grass to the bar at closing. I should have demanded he tell me what was in the bag before agreeing to look after it. Maybe I shouldn't have called the cops, but I just know something's happened. He was acting so weird." She sighed. "If he shows up, I'll take your tank apart again and give it to him."

Lisa gave a nervous laugh, ran her fingers through her short blonde curls. "\$200,000 in cash. If he hasn't come back by my thirtieth birthday in two months we'll make our move. I'll quit my job and just go to school full-time, get the degree I've been piddling at for so long. Or, sorry but this won't include you, I'll buy a little sailboat and go adventuring, like I've always dreamed." There was a knock at the dock and her stomach knotted.

"Sorry to bother you again," Detective Hearsh said pleasantly. "I believe we've found your visitor. He ran out in front of a car less than an hour after leaving here. You'll have to come with me to identify him."

"Was he badly hurt?"

"Knocked unconscious. Died a couple of hours later."

"Oh." Her entire body relaxed, then came a wave of nausea. Had she had willed his death?

"Are you okay?" He stepped forward and put his hand on her arm.

"Uh, yes. I, well, I guess it's just everything. Haven't slept."

The detective was at her elbow when she looked at the dead man, placed his hand on her back when the four-digit hand was uncovered.

She could say nothing, just nodded.

When they stepped outside Hearsh said, "You'll have to come to the station, Lisa. Your fingerprints were inside the case. So were traces of cannabis and heroin."

"But..."

"Don't say anything until you have a lawyer. We've been watching your friend for quite a while. We've seen you take deliveries from him."

Numb, she let him lead her to his car. As they pulled up in front of the station, she looked at him. "I wish you weren't a cop."

He sighed, "Sometimes I do too."

She gasped, "What about my fish?! I've got no one I can ask to feed them."

"It's on my way, I'll feed them every morning when I come in. I saw where you keep their food."

"No, I..."

He patted her hand. "Don't worry. I used to have a piranha. I know how to take care of them. And, if your stay is long," he looked away, "I'll move them over to my place until you're out."

He opened the door for her. "I thought that you couldn't keep two together. You'll have to tell me your secret."

finish