

Old Cole

The fisherman brought his fish into the house. Cole had hooked five—two stickleback, two yellow perch, and a burbot, known as the freshwater cusk. The fisherman's wife would be happy, particularly with the cusk. It tastes of cod, she would say, the pleasure of her Welsh forebears in her smile.

Of the other item he'd hooked, she wasn't so happy. The darling thing! she said. What did you do to her?

Cole hung his head. It wasn't my fault, he answered. I felt the tug, and when I brought it up, there she was.

The loon lay on the countertop next to the fish, her speckled wings, clean black head, carnelian eyes. The eyes were as red as sunset, swirled with jet black. It was the eyes that bothered old Cole the most.

Should I bury her? he asked, his head still down. Or should we....

His wife, Seren, looked up from the bird, who'd been peering into the loon's open bill. Should we what?

Should we eat her?

Eat her? Seren pointed toward the bird. Who would eat her? We don't eat loon.

Well, yes, I know. I just thought.... He shrugged.

What?

That it would honor her.

His wife shook her head. Take her around back and bury her, Cole. I'm not dressing a loon for supper.

He picked up the bird, cradling her head gently with one hand. Yes, he said, you're right. He looked at his wife, her brilliant green eyes, the green brooch she wore like a talisman on the breast of her sweater. Loons and magical wives—why did it seem, all the sudden, that he lived in a fairytale?

I hope we're not cursed, he said, with a laugh. As he hoped, his wife gave him her beautiful smile.

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Cole settled the bird into the hole he dug next to the potting shed. After he sprinkled soil on top, then finished the job, he thought about watering the dead bird like a plant. It seemed like the fairytale thing to do.

He'd heard of it before, loons taking a hook, swallowing the silver minnow used as bait. The tale, as told by the fishermen who told it, was typically accompanied with a furrowed brow, a lowering of eyes. I sure am sorry about it, the fishermen would say.

Cole took a drive to the river mouth, the white clapboard bait shop that stood back from its banks. He needed some new line. On the porch he found a gathering of two other fishermen and Gail, the bait shop owner.

Cole, said Gail, a nod of the head, how are we?

Well, he answered, I'm fairly well. There was a look to Gail that was unusual, a pinch to the face rather than her customary rough humor.

We heard about your bad fortune, she said.

Oh yes? he asked. How did you hear? Cole wasn't sure which fortune she referred to.

Old Jim here was out on the lake this morning, she said. Gail gestured toward the fisherman on her left, who nodded at Cole at the mention of his name. Cole was familiar with Jim, as he was with most fishermen, though they weren't good friends.

That so? Cole said.

I was, said Jim. And I happened to see the business with the bird.

Oh? Old Cole was surprised. He hadn't seen any old Jim on the lake that morning. He hadn't seen anyone at all.

Jim shuffled his feet, a momentary embarrassment. I was behind that stand of cattail. He shrugged. You wouldn't have seen me.

Cole was about to ask why Jim hadn't called out to him, as was customary among fishermen in those parts, when Gail interjected.

In any case, Cole, she said, we sure are sorry to hear it.

I was sorry myself, he answered. He was too. He was thinking of the bird, its keen and beautiful eyes. Beautiful animals, he added.

They are, said Bill, the third of the fishermen. Beautiful animals.

Were you on the lake as well? he asked.

Oh no! said Bill, a color just then to his cheek. Just...just old Jim here.

In any case, said Gail, we were wondering how you were.

He shrugged. Well I—

No new coughs? she wondered. No unusual aches? She thought a moment, one finger in the air. Seren is well?

Old Cole was put back on his heels. Well yes, he said. I mean, yes Seren is fine. No, no new coughs or unusual aches.

Very good! Gail said, the usual humor back in her face. You lucky old dolt!

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That evening, Cole and Seren were at the supper table, eating the fish he had caught. Seren's green eyes were alight; she feasted heartily on the cusk. Mmm, she exclaimed, among other noises of delight.

Are you not hungry? she said, between forkfuls of fish.

I am, he returned, though he hadn't yet had a bite.

The strangest thing, he said.

What? What's that? The green brooch on her sweater reflected the light of her eyes.

Well, I.... Cole wasn't sure how to begin. I was at the bait shop, to buy some new line....

Yes?

Oh. Well old Gail....

Yes?

Well, she was asking about the bird. He gestured with one thumb toward the back of the house, where that noon he'd buried the loon. She, well old Jim, well, he'd seen me this morning on the lake. He'd seen the business with the bird.

He saw you on the lake? Seren's eyes moved from his face, to her fish, back to his face.

He did. He was behind the stand of cattails. And well...well that wasn't the strangest part. Though it was strange he didn't call out, but what was strange was....

Cole! said his wife. Get on with it, man.

The strange part, the odd part, was Gail asking how I was. She asked, and this was odd, had I developed any new coughs, any new aches. She even asked how you were!

Seren set down her fork. The color had risen to her cheeks. She was flush with some small embarrassment, much like old Jim and old Bill down at the bait shop. Cole didn't know what to make of this. What was she, never mind the two fishermen, one of whom *should* have called out to him on the lake, to be embarrassed about?

When his wife had quite recovered from her blush, she peered at her husband. How *are* you? she said. Any new coughs? Unexpected aches?

No, said Cole, delicately exasperated. I'm quite fine.

Seren smiled, went back to her cusk with aplomb.

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Cole had a dream that night he was a schoolboy again. He had left his mother at the doorstep, she had kissed his cheek, and he was walking spritely to school. It was only when he was in sight of the redbrick schoolhouse that he remembered he'd forgotten his rucksack. In it was his homework, his pencil and eraser, the small book of poems Miss Cummings had passed out at the end of the day before.

Cole woke feeling cramped. His limbs were heavy. There was a fine mist in his head.

He was on the way to his coffee, filling the house with its scent, when he remembered the dream. He remembered the feeling of shame on having forgotten his rucksack those years ago. He remembered the book of poems, and the long poem they'd been assigned by Miss Cummings to read.

Samuel T. Coleridge, he recalled, and the small swell of pride when Miss Cummings had said to the class, Just like our old Cole here.

He recalled reading the poem after supper, how difficult it was for him, a young boy, to understand. There was something about a sailor and how the sailor had stopped a man on his way to a wedding to tell the man a story. The sailor, it seemed, had killed a seabird, and for this the sailor was very sorry. As Cole sat in the corner the next day at school, punished for forgetting his bag, Miss Cummings explained to the class that the sailor felt great shame, great guilt, for his crime of killing the seabird.

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It was late morning before Cole had his boat on the lake. This was unusual, for Cole, for most of the fishermen of those parts. It was too warm on the lake, the sun too high, and the flies were biting his neck.

After pulling in just one sunnie and one blue, the fisherman decided enough. He brought his small catch into the house and placed it on the counter.

Seren looked at the two fish, small where her husband had put them. I guess it will be potatoes, she said, to fill our stomachs tonight.

Why don't we drive to the market? said Cole. It's been fish, anyway, every night this week.

Sure, said his wife. That will be fine.

It was a glum ride the whole way. Seren leant against the frame of her door, as Cole steered the car through the mist in his head. How are you, dear? he asked his wife, to which she answered she had a headache. Cole couldn't be sure, but he sensed it was something other than that.

Neither of their moods were leavened as they drove by the site for the new shopping center. It was meant to replace the supermarket they were on their way to just then, as well as the movies closing on the far side of town. The center was meant to have fountains, food from many places, a grand courtyard to sit in.

The construction site was a wrack of root balls thrust into the air, the trees, the walnuts and maple, languishing miserably on their sides. The green forest where they'd had sex as young lovers was now the graveyard of rabbits, caught by the dozers in their dens, the jack-in-the-pulpit trampled under work boots and tractor treads.

Oh, Cole, said Seren, a hand to her eyes, Oh, dear old Cole. She said that and nothing else as they bought their steaks and drove home.

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A few evenings later, Seren was out at her book cub. Whatever had been ailing her the day of their trip to the market had lifted. She'd left the house happily, pecking his cheek, her eyes green and bright. You are a witch! he said. One fetching old witch!

Cole, after watching part of a movie, decided he might use a beer.

A Capstone, he said to Linda, the owner of the bar. And give me a shot for a chaser. An Old Gull, if you like.

Yessir, she said. As she placed the drinks in front of him, she said, a note of concern in her voice, How you doing, Cole?

Haha, he said, I'm fine. No new cough, no unusual aches.

What's that? Is there something going around?

He had his beer and chaser, a second Capstone for good measure. Hitting the head, he told the bartender.

The bathroom was at the back of another small room, off to one side of the bar. He was surprised to see Seren in one of the booths. She was huddled close to a woman, Deborah, the wife of old Jim. The pair were laughing together, looking at something on his wife's phone.

Cole, said Seren, when she saw him. What are you doing about?

Having a drink. He nodded toward Deborah. What are you two doing about?

She shrugged. We decided to skip out from book club, said his wife. Neither of us thought we could take old Leslie and her eczema tonight.

I see, he said. And a drink at The Cat was your plan?

She shook her head. We decided on the fly.

He stood looking at the bottles on the table in front of the women. Alright, he said, when nothing more was said. I'm hitting the head and going home.

Good thinking, Cole, said his wife. She and her friend returned to the phone.

When she got home that night, frazzled and smelling of smoke, she was in as good of a mood as that when she'd left. Old Cole! she said, a second peck on his cheek.

He went to bed, a bit buzzed, a bit puzzled, happily enough.

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The day the EPA closed down the lake, *an abundance of caution* the officer had said, the fishermen gathered in front of the bait shop. They say its only for a day or two, said old Bill. Until they can do more tests, give us the all-clear.

Gail was not so sanguine. I don't know. They said that about Lake Walleye two months ago and still it's closed. I got bait to sell, boys.

Old Jim hacked into his fist. Lake Walleye is fine. I was up there two weeks ago. It's your typical EPA bullshit.

Jim, you dolt, said Gail. It's not *fine*. None of this is *fine*.

Jim shrugged. He hacked into his fist.

Without the lake, the fishermen had little to do. They went bowling at noon, as soon as the alley opened for business. They spent time at The Cat, too much time. They bothered their wives, who were too busy running the town.

Cole took long walks. There was a patch of wild field, a forested stream, a half mile from the back of their house. As it was the ending of summer, the field was ablaze in yellow grass, a white-petaled flower with a bright yellow eye. The forest was yet green, as were the stones under the trickle of the stream. Cole came upon a deer browsing the undergrowth, her brown eyes deep and aware. Had it been in season, Cole might have been hunting her. Instead, he looked upon the animal with great feeling in his chest.

Home from one of these walks, he was surprised to see old Jim's wife on his couch.

Hello, Cole, said Deborah.

Hello, Cole, said his wife.

He nodded to the two women and went back outside to sit in the yard. He thought of his wife with a great feeling in his heart.

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It was now fully into fall. The maples had turned their full reds, the walnuts their yellows. As anyone had feared, the lake was still closed. They were threatening to close another, 40 miles southwest.

The cold weather will help, said old Bill. Whatever that stuff is, the poisonous slime, dies off in the cold.

Gail had turned to selling tumblers of liquor out of the shop. It was not legal, The Cat didn't like it, but no one was going to tell her to stop. Bill, you old dolt, she said.

Where's Jim? asked Cole. Where Jim would stand, to the left of Gail, another man named Carl now stood.

Gone, said Bill.

Dead? asked Cole.

Gail shook her head. No, no. You've never heard? Old Jim, he split up from Deborah, packed up his gear and went home to his people.

Oh, I see, said Cole. He left the bait shop, parked outside of his home, alongside Deborah's pick-up. Without heading inside, he tromped off to the field, where the yellow flower was now gone, to the wood that bordered the stream. He looked for the deer. He wanted the deer. She was not to be found.

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One night in December, old Cole woke from a deep sleep. There was an unfamiliar weight about his middle. Not an unknown weight, but one it seemed a lifetime since he'd felt. Seren's arm was thrown about him, the warmth of her front against his back.

He shifted his wife's arm so he could turn in her direction. Seren? he said, softly in the darkness.

She was asleep but at the mention of her name, she opened her eyes. Hello, dear, she said.

What's happening? he asked her.

What do you mean?

You're asleep.

Well, yes?

Here. You're asleep next to me.

Yes, old man. She took a deep breath, smiled in the darkness. It was the thing he'd hoped for, her beautiful smile. She closed her eyes then. It will be ok, she said. In the spring, the lake will be open.

How do you know? he said.

She shook her head. I don't. But it will be open. It will be ok.

Old Cole could not breathe, for the feeling in his chest. The old flame was burning, the unnamed incumbrance of his guilt nearly gone. Yes, he'd wait for spring, the lake and its waters, the cattails and birds.