

Home Cooking

An original Yarn Fiction by Anj Medhurst

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I open the layers of newspaper and look at the fish. It is larger than I expected and the eye that faces me is already dull and milky. Some of the scales have come away and are stuck to the paper with gelatinous slime. It smells vaguely of muddy riverbanks and damp leaves, not fishy at all. I momentarily turn my attention to the newspaper it rests on; a burned out shed; the aftermath of an EDF rally; reports of hate crime up 17%. It's a local paper, recent I think, but it could be from any week in the last year or so.

Laying the fish on the board, I use the back of my knife to remove the rest of the scales, scraping with small movements, from tail to head. I trim the fins before using the knife blade to make a clean cut from below the tail to the base of the gills, exposing the guts. I can see the shiny black bloodline and I pierce its membrane and wash away the congealed blood. I add the head, tail and entrails to the scales on the newspaper so that I can wrap them and seal them in a carrier bag before putting them in the bin. They will smell awful by the morning. I push my knife along the backbone, slicing away the flesh and then I cut it into chunks that I will add to the simmering pan of onion, celery, mushrooms and herbs before stirring in soured cream. Carp with mushrooms, cooked the old way. Just like Lukas's mother used to make.

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Lukas walked along the river embankment toward the museum. It was set in a large

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garden with ornamental ponds and famed locally for the mummified cat it had on display.

He liked to feed the Koi with crumbs saved from his rye bread crust. Dropping a few of the dry crumbs onto the surface of the water, then waiting patiently, perfectly still, for the reflections on the water's surface to flicker, shapes shifting just beneath. For the waterlily leaves to stir and a large oval rubbery mouth to break the water's surface tension, barbels quivering, to scoop up the crumbs before sinking silently back into the depths. Every day he stood, repeating the motion, dropping the crumbs, watching the giant fish surfacing and then disappearing, for twenty or thirty minutes. He favoured a large white fish with a distinctive orange mark on its back, saving his most tempting looking morsel of bread for its arrival. Sometimes an entire hour passed in quiet anticipation.

On this afternoon, the large white fish had not obliged him with an appearance and he had long since dropped the last few crumbs into the water, when a woman approached the pond. She was pulling a child's scooter behind her, slowing to a halt next to Lukas as she waited for a girl who dawdled some way behind, clutching conkers and kicking leaves.

'Seen any fish?' the woman asked, peering into the water. 'There's definitely less in there these days. My husband reckons the Poles are eating them, reckons they'll eat anything if it's free.' Lukas adjusted the words in his mind, trying to turn them into something less peculiar, as he formed an appropriate response.

'Really, the Poles?' His voice was clearly accented even though he had been in

England for more than twenty years and the woman had the good grace to flush slightly as she drew back her shoulders,

'Oh, you're one of them, are you?'

'If you mean, "am I Polish?" then no, I am not. I am originally from Lithuania.'

'What's the difference?' The woman looked him straight in the eye. Lukas nodded his head slightly, contemplating her rhetorical question, 'Well, that depends on what you mean by difference?' A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth, 'Geographically, Poland and Lithuania are very close, the countries share a small border, but the people are very different. For many years, we were enemies. It's not so bad now but some of the older folk bear a grudge. It can be difficult for some to see that neighbours are usually better friends than enemies.'

The woman had clearly not expected a reply. 'It's all the same to us though. Poland, Lithuania, Croatia, doesn't matter where you come from, there's no work for us since you all came over. You've taken all our jobs.'

He nodded, acquiescent, 'Well, that may be so. You are a classical violinist too? That has been my job for the twenty years that I have lived here, so yes, if I have taken your job I can only apologise.' She was silenced momentarily but he sensed her working to formulate a response.

'Now, if you will excuse me, I must get home, my wife will be wondering where I have got to. She is preparing supper while I come for my walk and to feed the beautiful fish. You are right by the way, carp is something of a delicacy in eastern Europe, both in Lithuania and Poland but not these Koi carp, they are not wild fish that we can catch,

like you catch your trout and salmon. You won't find a Pole eating Koi carp.' He smirked, 'Now, the Japanese on the other hand, I believe they are rather partial to them.'

Lukas dismissed the strange encounter with the woman at the pond almost instantly, delighting in his surroundings as he followed the path back towards the gates. Set against the backdrop of the fifteenth century museum building, he thought how beautiful the garden was; the leaves just starting to turn, a few whirling around his feet as he walked under a large Maple tree.

How blessed my life has been, he thought as he strolled. Not many men get to fulfil their life's dreams and ambitions in such a satisfying way, surrounded by the things they love most. His years playing with various Sinfonia and chamber orchestras had not made him rich and of course he had endured struggles as everyone does but at this moment, as he walked, he felt charmed.

Now, in his retirement, he would finally be able to properly appreciate his surroundings. The market town that they had made their home was, in many ways, a mystery to him, his work so often taking him away from it. It was Jelena who had been able to integrate over the years, the acquaintances she had made through her charitable work still unknown to him in the main. He looked forward to embarking on this next phase of their life together. Maybe he would be able to establish a small music appreciation group, by way of ingratiating himself with Jelena's friends.

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The previous afternoon, I watched the young man push through the doors and slope across to the group of teenagers in the corner. They all had cans of fizzy drink and were

eating crisps that they'd bought, or possibly stolen, from the newsagent shop next door. As I looked at them I heard one of them say something and they turned towards me en masse, laughing. I averted my gaze, turning to fiddle with the piles of leaflets I was supposed to be offering to visitors to the day centre. I couldn't make out what he'd said but I could guess.

I started volunteering at the community centre a couple of years ago, to make friends but I haven't made any. Although the other volunteers are pleasant enough, not one of them has ever suggested meeting for a coffee or invited me to join the local book club I've heard them talking about. Even though I've been here for twenty years and my accent has long since faded to a nondescript middle England dirge I am still too different, too foreign.

The boy, baseball cap pulled low over his brow, tracksuit pants hanging on his hips, slouches his way across the hall, holding a tatty looking Poundland carrier bag out in front of him, while the others watch.

He is grinning as he speaks to me, 'You still want this fish then, love?' I wonder what he is thinking, presumably that I am a mad old bat, or worse. I reach for my handbag, 'Yes, I do. Fifty pounds, as we agreed?'

'Yep, here you go then, one fat fucking Koi carp. The big white one with the orange mark on its back shaped like Italy. Had to fucking google a map of Italy before I caught it, mind.' He laughs loudly and Jim, one of the other volunteers, looks over at us, raising an eyebrow quizzically. I guess that he is checking I'm OK and I nod and smile, turning back to the boy.

I pull out the leaflet that I have prepared, stuffed with the bank notes I withdrew from the cash machine this morning. I'd avoided making eye contact with the man slumped against the wall next to the machine, as he muttered in my general direction, assuming him to be drunk, or worse.

The boy places the carrier bag at my feet and I hand him the folded paper, advertising a computer skills course at the local college. He sniggers as he takes it,

'Alright, alright, who'd you think you are? Double oh fuckin' seven or something?' Flicking the leaflet open he gives the notes a cursory check before stuffing it all into his pocket.

I'm not quite sure what the etiquette is for receiving stolen goods. 'I appreciate your help,' I say, 'I trust you'll keep this to yourself?'

'Too fucking right! I'm hardly going to go blabbing that I've nicked a fucking fish out of the park pond, am I?' He turns and walks back over to his friends, shaking his head and muttering, 'Fucking Poles.' They all turn and look at me again, sniggering and smirking. I don't care.

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While the fish stew cooks, I look out of the window at the garden, embarking unwillingly on its transition from green to bare. I don't believe anyone who says autumn is their favourite season, not with knowledge of what is to come.

I am fifty-five years old and am at a loss to understand how I have ended up in this ugly town, with its tatty shops and offensive graffiti. How I have ended up offering cups of tea to filthy, unemployed, foul-mouthed bigots out of the 'kindness of my heart'

for several hours each week. Twenty years spent living as a stranger, in an alien country, being viewed with suspicion, or ignored. I've eaten the terrible food, endured the godforsaken weather with its grey, wet summers and its grey, wet winters. And I've waited. Waited for him. Waited while he rehearsed, waited while he performed. Waited while he seduced the Czech Oboe player. He thinks I don't know about that but when you've nothing to do but cook and shop and get dress-suits dry cleaned, you notice the little things.

When Lukas retired, I had assumed that we would move back home but when I broached the subject he'd looked perplexed.

'Home? What on earth do you mean? This is home. Our friends are here; our lives are here. We would be strangers in Vilnius after all these years.'

He would rather stay here, a stranger, not in his world but in his own house. He still believes we are alike, as I believed we were when we arrived here all those years ago. He'd secured a short contract playing with the Sinfonia and we were ecstatic. Newly married, flushed with his professional success, relishing a life together in England. England! With its sophisticated culture, architecture and people. Oh, the people we would meet, the friends we would make. His short contract extended, one year, then two. Then a temporary move to the north east to play in a Symphony Orchestra.

Him, reassuring, 'But really, darling you should stay here, it's not worth the upheaval surely?'

Never the right time to go back to Lithuania.

'Why would we, darling? When things are going so well here?'

Never the right time to think about starting a family.

Occasionally dusting off my little black dress to accompany him to social events that require a spousal accoutrement and then carrying on, living my life in this alien town while he carries on thinking we are the same couple that arrived twenty years ago, so full of joy.

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Lukas hung his jacket carefully over the back of the chair and walked across the room to the stereo system, tapping his phone and wondering with amazement at the technology that allowed him to control it from the tiny device. Even though his entire collection was available digitally, he still mostly preferred to select a vinyl LP from the rack. He flicked through the sleeves, maybe this evening it would be Bartók that accompanied his meal. No too austere he decided, selecting instead a Sibelius concerto. He placed the record carefully onto the turntable and as the first notes filled the room he increased the volume a notch and sat at the table waiting for Jelena to serve their meal.

‘Are you not eating with me, my dear?’ He moved his napkin as his wife placed a bowl of boiled potatoes on the table, noting that it was only set for one.

‘No, Lukas, I’m not feeling hungry, maybe I’ll have something later. Don’t let me stop you enjoying your meal though.’ Jelena served her husband from the tureen of fish and vegetables and poured him a glass of red wine. ‘Gero apetito’ she proffered as she left him to enjoy his supper.

Lukas added an extra potato to his plate once she’d gone and turned the Sibelius up another notch. As he ate the fish he noted its full flavour and dense texture, the rich

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sauce complimenting it perfectly. He felt it lifting his spirits, his wife truly was an excellent cook.

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'I hope you enjoyed it. Your fish.' I take his empty plate and he looks at me, distracted momentarily from the music.

' Yes! It was wonderful. Just like the fish my mother used to cook. If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn it was carp. Carp from the River Neris, with its rich texture, its taste of the old country.'

He smiles at me as I turn towards the kitchen door. I put his plate carefully into the dishwashing machine and close the door, turning it on. I pick up my glass of wine and my book from the counter, walk into the hallway and look through the open dining room door but he has his headphones on now and is oblivious. I settle myself in the sitting room, open my book and sip my wine.

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