

And Now, Five Stories That Say Equally Little

*Suddenly, I realized what all the TV chanting was about: they were counting down towards a new year, our new year, mere seconds away after we'd been apart for so long. And as the ball dropped, so did I, neck tied to the same branch you hung from; the last ornament on a Christmas tree we would never put away.*

“Wow! So good,” the younger fisherman said, tossing the skull downstream once he'd retrieved what he needed. “The Christmas motif, the circular beginning and end— did you catch that? Even the same ornament comparison. This one's a keeper.”

The older fisherman grunted in vague recognition, hidden eyes fixed on the discarded skull as it tumbled out of reach.

“Gaia-Shiva made their skulls vessels for her own convenience,” the older fisherman wheezed from beneath a bristling mustache like steel wool. “I hope these folk treated them as gifts.”

The reeds' usual choir of insectoid grating and scraping remained mute as the thought hung in the air, leaving the fishermen and their gurgling, ashen waters in comfortable silence. The two stood silhouetted against the blistering atomic sunset; one tall, one stout, both equally shrouded by their broad, tenebrous hats, trimmed by a veil of hanging hooks and bait. They stood stolid and still against the spindly skyline beyond, only occasionally stooping to dip into the oily river below, like storks, to retrieve another skull. The younger fisherman spoke:

“It's ironic, ya know— you're in for a good sunset when you've been burning a lot of coal, or just live within range of an industrial plant. See, you only get these deep crimsons and vibrant oranges when the sunlight is being refracted through a clogged atmosphere. So really, the prettier the sunset... the worse the environment. Great beauty must first come from great pain.”

The older fisherman snorted.

“What?” protested the younger fisherman. Already, he seemed injured.

“Nuthin’. I’m just sure you’d think so.”

“Well, it’s a fact.”

“Mm hmm.”

There was a tug at the line before them. With a sloppy *splunk*, the younger fishermen dipped his hand into the water and scooped another skull from the net. He moved artfully despite his inexperience, easing off the cranium far more gracefully than the top half of an abalone shell and sliding his slick, tarred fingers along the vacant bowl within.

*I wish you hadn’t listened the last time I told you to clean up after shaving. Your absent ghost leaves no hairs in the sink.*

The pouch at his hip sagged lower as the memory settled in. His hat turned as he looked down to his older companion, but his remark was drowned out by a deafening thunder and the shrieking of steel beams bending under weight they could no longer bear. On the horizon, the ragged remains of a skyscraper were finally collapsing. Before the dust plume had obscured the rest of the skeletal city, a concrete avalanche came roaring down the valley. The fishermen looked on unblinkingly as a leviathan lahar of rubble churned past them, phasing straight through their unfazed figures as though no one was there at all. Amidst the din and debris, the younger fishermen mimed chucking the skull downstream, where it would be obliterated in an instant. The older fisherman sternly signaled for him to do nothing of the sort.

When the river had finally settled, the water was opaque with urban accretion. The older fisherman looked up at his younger companion, thumbs tucked beneath the armpits of his netted vest, withered face wrinkling disappointedly.

“Why do you always throw their skulls away?”

“What?! I already found something good in this one, didn’t you see! You gotta look for the nuggets of gold amongst all this fish crap, you feel me?”

“Just give them to me once you’re done,” the older fisherman growled, catching the skull that had already been tossed his way.

Neither pursued the subject any further, and the tension soon flaked away, washing downstream with the rest of the city’s monuments.

“My money’s on the crows,” remarked the younger fishermen after a moment, squatting down to whisk another skull from the muck at their feet. “In terms of who’s inheriting the Earth now that humans are gone, I’m sayin’. On account of the fact that they can use tools, ya know? Any old pooch can do tricks for treats, Polly even speaks for a cracker, but tools? I’m tellin’ ya, that’s dangerous.”

He ran his fingers along the inside of the skull.

*With a snuffle, she stamped the final staple into the post, accepting that anyone who could lose someone this easily didn’t deserve someone at all. “Lost Dog Max,” the sign read.*

*“Reward: A Dog.”*

“Mmm,” gurgled the older fisherman, as though a frog was lodged in his throat. “My bet’s the octopodes.”

“Really? And it’s actually octo-*pi*,” corrected the younger fisherman.

“Octo-*pees*,” countered the older fisherman.

“Nah, the crows’ve got them beat. They’re already on land, you know— and in the skies! They’ll colonize the new Earth in no time.”

“Mm. What new Earth? I ain’t see no exploitable surface metals to facilitate a new iron age. What I see here is cancer city. All that can change in a few million years— given time, mountains can rise and fall, metals can grow beneath the surface. And octopees... well, octopees can walk on land.”

The younger fisherman was already sweeping two fingers through the slime in yet another braincase.

*They tell me I can give my wife an intervention before she overdoses, or they tell me I can raise a motherless child. But they never tell me Would You Rather? has a third option.*

“Wow! So powerful,” exclaimed the younger fisherman, his lanky, free arm swooping up to thoughtfully caress his chin.

The older fisherman clicked his tongue, cutting the acrid air.

“How so, huh? How so?”

“Well, of course, it’s the *implication* of this memory that’s so potent, on account of the fact that the third option of ‘would you rather?’ is always ‘kill yourself.’”

“And *that’s* why you want to bring that memory to the Sapient Species Symposium?”

“Gaia-Shiva’s gonna like that one.”

“Will Gaia-Shiva like it? Or will you? ‘Cause this ain’t about either of you. It’s about *them!*”

The younger fisherman scoffed, now openly peeved.

“And you think I don’t *get* that, old man? Are you trying to trivialize my work? I’ll smoke the other worlds, I’ll— I’ll give them the best trifold they’ve ever seen! I’ll show them why their investment was worth it! They’ll laugh and they’ll cry at the memory of humanity’s epic highs and lows, and they’ll know it was worth it in the end!”

The older fisherman choked out a sticking sigh that grated like the absent crickets and katydids.

“If you told someone my best day and my worst, they wouldn’t know a thing about me,” he croaked.

“So what’ll you show them then, huh?! Since you’re the smart guy here, why don’t you tell me what memories *you* think made humankind so special?!”

The younger fisherman slung the open skull at his companion like it was meant to knock him dead, but it slapped straight into the older fisherman’s open palm all the same.

“I don’t know, son,” he admitted, running his fingers along the open cranium. “Let’s keep fishing and find out.”

*I only bought the lemon bar because it was the cheaper of the two, but I’m not sure if I’ll regret my purchase until the cashier rings me up and says she’s never tried it. “Come sit with my friends,” I say, “we’ll split it.”*