

Entanglement

Take the rickety, diesel train with your grandmother one overcast morning, after the rush-hour, when the tickets are cheap.

Get off in the boonies, and walk with her to a place she remembers from you don't know when.

Listen to her explain why the weather is just right, how sun will drive them to shelter, how they choose only the cleanest places to live.

Swing her flax kete: sandwiches, two chunks of her dark Christmas cake, orange cordial, an old tea-towel, her line and spare fish-hooks, her favourite knife – sharpened for the occasion and wrapped in yesterday's news – and an old jam jar stuffed with leathery pig liver, green from rotting in the warm shed for a couple of days.

Follow her. Through bracken and blackberries, down a narrow dirt track she knows.

Come out at the edge of creek that you didn't know existed.

A roving hunter and survivor of the Great Depression, she is always surveying,

always gauging the potential yield of any fruit tree, any bramble, any body of water.

She nods. The dappled creek is flowing at just the right speed. Smooth stones nearby will do for your seats. She fossicks around the creekside and comes back with a stout branch, from a storm-damaged, drooping ngaio.

"I've seen them take a duckling, quick as you like. Very intelligent," she says.

"Good at hiding. Under logs, along the riverbank, under boulders. They come out at night, mostly."

Something so secretive, so stealthy and nocturnal only makes you more curious.

And scared.

She reaches into her kete and passes you a brand new, hand-line. All yours, your prize for being grown-up-enough. A big girl. She warns you about entanglement, then shows you how to double-thread a chunk of the stinking, slimy liver onto your hook.

“Eels are strong and cunning and greedy, but they hunt by smell.” She winks.

“This’ll bring ’em out alright.” She is already settled on her rock, stick at her feet, her tough nylon line slicing the creek. “Eels hear everything,” she murmurs.

Wonder, why she would want to hunt and kill a creature she so clearly respects.

Sit still and quiet, determined that you will not put them off.

Gawp as they come, swarming and writhing for the stinking liver.

Know from her smile that she loves their fight.

You want to thank them. Reward them for coming so fast, for putting on a show.

For being so strong.

Then one takes your grandmother’s bait.

Hunter turns hunted.

“Eh tuna, come here, you greedy so-and-so,” she says, completely calm.

Pray to the god of eels: snag her line on tree roots and reeds, slink beneath a safe boulder, make her give up now.

But the god is unresponsive and the eel does not know your grandmother. Bare feet wide apart, she stands, holding fast, strong and stubborn, guiding her prey away from any safe haven. Lets him fight on, thrashing until he tires into a feisty, fake performance that slows to a real, deep fatigue. He knows now: he cannot win.

With a flick of her arm, she hoists the exhausted eel from the water. The moment he lands beside you on the moist bank, he’s slithering and writhing towards the water, keen to make it home, keen to survive.

“See how strong he is? He’s brave, plenty of fight, eh tuna.” She examines him tenderly, then holds open his big mouth. Rows of small, sharp, white teeth make an arrow shape on his gaping upper jaw. “Careful, those teeth are sharp as razors – he’ll have your hand off.”

Step back, nervous, bewitched, your eyes fixed on that slippery, beautiful monster.

Shiver. Tell her it’s because you’re standing in the shade.

“He’s a good one, alright. Look at that fat, silver belly. They can travel for miles on land.” The eel hears her and flicks his escape. “Quick, get me my ngaio stick.”

You obey, and she snatches it from your hand.

Thwack!

One hard hit on the tail-end. The eel stills. She points her stick. “Stunned him.

Nerve endings there. No pain now.”

As you doubt this, she stabs him once at the back of his head with her sharp knife and swiftly finishes the job. She slits straight along the centre of his taut belly and guts him.

Clucking her tongue because he’s swallowed her bait, she retrieves her barbed silver hook from his gaping mouth, then washes it clean in the creek. She wraps her catch tight in a couple of dampened pages from the Courier.

Place the parcel in the shade.

She straightens her silver fish-hook, bent from the force of the eel’s last fight.

Proud and sick, accidentally catch an eel. Wonder whether the two fish are related.

She helps you land him on the muddy bank. He’s over a foot longer than her eel.

“Big,” she grunts. “Takes them a long time to grow that size.”

Your fish receives the same gentle, yet brutally effective despatch. Whistling, she threads a strip of flax through the gills of each eel then knots it, a string for a slimy necklace.

“Plenty for us. Never take more than you need.” She winds up her line, then flicks the innards back into the creek with her killing stick. “Don’t turn your nose up, the other eels will get a good feed now.”

Ugh. Smart, sneaky, slimy, nocturnal, amphibious...and cannibals.

“What about the skin?” you say.

She shakes her head and puts the stick back under the ngaio tree. “The skin and the slime keep them fresh.”

Pack up, everything – even your rubbish – into in her big, battered kete. Put the wrapped eels on top, so they don’t bruise.

Turn for a last look.

It’s as if you were never there.

Take the rickety train home before the rush-hour, when the tickets are cheap, knowing the smell of diesel fumes will always remind you of this day.

Silently recite all the steps when catching an eel. Not listed in Every Girl’s Handbook but if you can remember them, you know that you can survive anywhere in the world.

Arrive home, neighbours spying and prying, wondering what you’ve been up to now.

Boil the water. Let the tea brew in the pot. Find her favourite cup, then add milk and pour till it turns the colour of rust.

See her rinse the serpents in her stainless steel kitchen-sink.

Touch the clean, shining eel-skin, feel fine sandpaper.

Stand back and watch her expertly peel off their coats like a couple of black socks.

Feel the thud of her sharpest knife, reducing the eels to white medallions on the thick, wooden chopping board.

Dust the flesh in pepper-speckled flour.

Hear the butter sizzling and bronzing, smelling sweet and nutty in the pan.

Set the table.

Eat the golden steaks with salt and lemon juice.

Chew with your eyes closed. They taste good. Really, they could just be any fish. Not the ones you saw a couple of hours ago, alive and swimming, wide-mouths grinning at you.

Then fighting for their lives. But now you've thought it, you can't send that picture back to your memory bank.

Open one eye, see how happy she is that you've had this day together, and come home with a catch.

Understand, years later, when she is gone and most of the eels are gone too.

More than fishing for a good, free feed, she was hunting echoes of her past; sharing memories, making them fresh – journeys with other people, her own Maori childhood in the backblocks, where she first learned to fish. She was feasting on memories.

You haven't fished for many moons. Proud and embarrassed that you cannot manage the killing.

Realise that where-ever you are, her lifelong gift reverberates; the memory she made for you of a good days eeling, entangled with her enduring sense of possibility.

Pass that wide, tidal, history-ridden river near your house.

Be seven again.

Wonder, what lurks in that muddy water, and what you might catch, if you were just to...

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