

Yann Martel: Life of Pi

begins at end of page

This work is © Yann Martel

CHAPTER 61

The next morning I was not too wet and I was feeling strong. I thought this was remarkable considering the strain I was under and how little I had eaten in the last several days.

Yann Martel: Life of Pi

It was a fine day. I decided to try my hand at fishing, for the first time in my life. After a breakfast of three biscuits and one can of water, I read what the survival manual had to say on the subject. The first problem arose: bait. I thought about it. There were the dead animals, but stealing food from under a tiger's nose was a proposition I was not up to. He would not realize that it was an investment that would bring him an excellent return. I decided to use my leather shoe. I had only one left. The other I had lost when the ship sank.

I crept up to the lifeboat and I gathered from the locker one of the fishing kits, the knife and a bucket for my catch. Richard Parker was lying on his side. His tail jumped to life when I was at the bow but his head did not lift. I let the raft out.

I attached a hook to a wire leader, which I tied to a line. I added some lead weights. I picked three that had an intriguing torpedo shape. I removed my shoe and cut it into pieces. It was hard work; the leather was tough. I carefully worked the hook into a flat piece of hide, not through it but into it, so that the point of the hook was hidden. I let the line down deep. There had been so many fish the previous evening that I expected easy success.

I had none. The whole shoe disappeared bit by bit, slight tug on the line by slight tug on the line, happy freeloading fish by happy freeloading fish, bare hook by bare hook, until I was left with only the rubber sole and the shoelace. When the shoelace proved an unconvincing earthworm, out of sheer exasperation I tried the sole, all of it. It was not a good idea. I felt a slight, promising tug and then the line was unexpectedly light. All I pulled in was line. I had lost the whole tackle.

This loss did not strike me as a terrible blow. There were other hooks, leader wires and weights in the kit, besides a whole other kit. And I wasn't even fishing for myself. I had plenty of food in store.

Still, a part of my mind—the one that says what we don't want to hear—rebuked me. "Stupidity has a price. You should show more care and wisdom next time."

Later that morning a second turtle appeared. It came right up to the raft. It could have reached up and bit my bottom if it had wanted to. When it turned I reached for its hind flipper, but as soon as I touched it I recoiled in horror. The turtle swam away.

The same part of my mind that had rebuked me over my fishing fiasco scolded me again. "What exactly do you intend to feed that tiger of yours? How much longer do you think he'll last on three dead animals? Do I need to remind you that tigers are not carrion eaters? Granted, when he's on his last legs he probably won't lift his nose at much. But don't you think that before he submits to eating puffy, putrefied zebra he'll try the fresh, juicy Indian boy just a short dip away? And how are we doing with the water situation? You know how tigers get impatient with thirst. Have you smelled his breath recently? It's pretty awful. That's a bad sign. Perhaps you're hoping that he'll lap up the Pacific and in quenching his thirst allow you to walk to America? Quite amazing, this limited capacity to excrete salt that Sundarbans tigers have developed. Comes from living in a tidal mangrove forest, I suppose. But it is a limited capacity. Don't they say that drinking too much saline water makes a man-eater of a tiger? Oh, look. Speak of the devil. There he is. He's yawning. My, my, what an enormous pink cave. Look at those long yellow stalactites and stalagmites. Maybe today you'll get a chance to visit."

Richard Parker's tongue, the size and colour of a rubber hot-water bottle, retreated and his mouth closed. He swallowed.

I spent the rest of the day worrying myself sick. I stayed away from the lifeboat. Despite my own dire predictions, Richard Parker passed the time calmly enough. He still had water from the rainfall and he didn't

Yann Martel: Life of Pi

seem too concerned with hunger. But he did make various tiger noises-growls and moans and the like-that did nothing to put me at ease. The riddle seemed irresolvable: to fish I needed bait, but I would have bait only once I had fish. What was I supposed to do? Use one of my toes? Cut off one of my ears?

A solution appeared in the late afternoon in a most unexpected way. I had pulled myself up to the lifeboat. More than that: I had climbed aboard and was rummaging through the locker, feverishly looking for an idea that would save my life. I had tied the raft so that it was about six feet from the boat. I fancied that with a jump and a pull at a loose knot I could save myself from Richard Parker. Desperation had pushed me to take such a risk.

Finding nothing, no bait and no new idea, I sat up-only to discover that I was dead centre in the focus of his stare. He was at the other end of the lifeboat, where the zebra used to be, turned my way and sitting up, looking as if he'd been patiently waiting for me to notice him. How was it that I hadn't heard him stir? What delusion was I under that I thought I could outwit him? Suddenly I was hit hard across the face. I cried out and closed my eyes. With feline speed he had leapt across the lifeboat and struck me. I was to have my face clawed off-this was the gruesome way I was to die. The pain was so severe I felt nothing. Blessed be shock. Blessed be that part of us that protects us from too much pain and sorrow. At the heart of life is a ruse box. I whimpered, "Go ahead, Richard Parker, finish me off. But please, what you must do, do it quickly. A blown fuse should not be overtested."

He was taking his time. He was at my feet, making noises. No doubt he had discovered the locker and its riches. I fearfully opened an eye.

It was a fish. There was a fish in the locker. It was flopping about like a fish out of water. It was about fifteen inches long and it had wings. A flying fish. Slim and dark grey-blue, with dry, featherless wings and round, unblinking, yellowish eyes. It was this flying fish that had struck me across the face, not Richard Parker. He was still fifteen feet away, no doubt wondering what I was going on about. But he had seen the fish. I could read a keen curiosity on his face. He seemed about ready to investigate.

I bent down, picked up the fish and threw it towards him. This was the way to tame him! Where a rat had gone, a flying fish would follow. Unfortunately, the flying fish flew. In mid-air, just ahead of Richard Parker's open mouth, the fish swerved and dropped into the water. It happened with lightning speed. Richard Parker turned his head and snapped his mouth, jowls flapping, but the fish was too quick for him. He looked astonished and displeased. He turned to me again. "Where's my treat?" his face seemed to inquire. Fear and sadness gripped me. I turned with the half-hearted, half-abandoned hope that I could jump onto the raft before he could jump onto me.

At that precise instant there was a vibration in the air and we were struck by a school of flying fish. They came like a swarm of locusts. It was not only their numbers; there was also something insect-like about the clicking, whirring sound of their wings. They burst out of the water, dozens of them at a time, some of them flick-flacking over a hundred yards through the air. Many dived into the water just before the boat. A number sailed clear over it. Some crashed into its side, sounding like firecrackers going off. Several lucky ones returned to the water after a bounce on the tarpaulin. Others, less fortunate, fell directly into the boat, where they started a racket of flapping and flailing and splashing. And still others flew right into us. Standing unprotected as I was, I felt I was living the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. Every fish that hit me was like an arrow entering my flesh. I clutched at a blanket to protect myself while also trying to catch some of the fish. I received cuts and bruises all over my body.

The reason for this onslaught became evident immediately: dorados were leaping out of the water in hot pursuit of them. The much larger dorados couldn't match their flying, but they were faster swimmers and their short lunges were very powerful. They could overtake flying fish if they were just behind them and lunging

Yann Martel: Life of Pi

from the water at the same time and in the same direction. There were sharks too; they also leapt out of the water, not so cleanly but with devastating consequence for some dorados. This aquatic mayhem didn't last long, but while it did, the sea bubbled and boiled, fish jumped and jaws worked hard.

Richard Parker was tougher than I was in the face of these fish, and far more efficient. He raised himself and went about blocking, swiping and biting all the fish he could. Many were eaten live and whole, struggling wings beating in his mouth. It was a dazzling display of might and speed. Actually, it was not so much the speed that was impressive as the pure animal confidence, the total absorption in the moment. Such a mix of ease and concentration, such a being-in-the-present, would be the envy of the highest yogis.

When it was over, the result, besides a very sore body for me, was six flying fish in the locker and a much greater number in the lifeboat. I hurriedly wrapped a fish in a blanket, gathered a hatchet and made for the raft.

I proceeded with great deliberation. The loss of my tackle that morning had had a sobering effect on me. I couldn't allow myself another mistake. I unwrapped the fish carefully, keeping a hand pressed down on it, fully aware that it would try to jump away to save itself. The closer the fish was to appearing, the more afraid and disgusted I became. Its head came into sight. The way I was holding it, it looked like a scoop of loathsome fish ice cream sticking out of a wool blanket cone. The thing was gasping for water, its mouth and gills opening and closing slowly. I could feel it pushing with its wings against my hand. I turned the bucket over and brought its head against the bottom. I took hold of the hatchet. I raised it in the air.

Several times I started bringing the hatchet down, but I couldn't complete the action. Such sentimentalism may seem ridiculous considering what I had witnessed in the last days, but those were the deeds of others, of predatory animals. I suppose I was partly responsible for the rat's death, but I'd only thrown it; it was Richard Parker who had killed it. A lifetime of peaceful vegetarianism stood between me and the willful beheading of a fish.

I covered the fish's head with the blanket and turned the hatchet around. Again my hand wavered in the air. The idea of beating a soft, living head with a hammer was simply too much.

I put the hatchet down. I would break its neck, sight unseen, I decided. I wrapped the fish tightly in the blanket. With both hands I started bending it. The more I pressed, the more the fish struggled. I imagined what it would feel like if I were wrapped in a blanket and someone were trying to break my neck. I was appalled. I gave up a number of times. Yet I knew it had to be done, and the longer I waited, the longer the fish's suffering would go on.

Tears flowing down my cheeks, I egged myself on until I heard a cracking sound and I no longer felt any life fighting in my hands. I pulled back the folds of the blanket. The flying fish was dead. It was split open and bloody on one side of its head, at the level of the gills.

I wept heartily over this poor little deceased soul. It was the first sentient being I had ever killed. I was now a killer. I was now as guilty as Cain. I was sixteen years old, a harmless boy, bookish and religious, and now I had blood on my hands. It's a terrible burden to carry. All sentient life is sacred. I never forget to include this fish in my prayers.

After that it was easier. Now that it was dead, the flying fish looked like fish I had seen in the markets of Pondicherry. It was something else, something outside the essential scheme of creation. I chopped it up into pieces with the hatchet and put it in the bucket.

In the dying hours of the day I tried fishing again. At first I had no better luck than I'd had in the morning. But success seemed less elusive. The fish nibbled at the hook with fervour. Their interest was evident. I realized that these were small fish, too small for the hook. So I cast my line further out and let it sink deeper, beyond

Yann Martel: Life of Pi

the reach of the small fish that concentrated around the raft and lifeboat.

It was when I used the flying fish's head as bait, and with only one sinker, casting my line out and pulling it in quickly, making the head skim over the surface of the water, that I finally had my first strike. A dorado surged forth and lunged for the fish head. I let out a little slack, to make sure it had properly swallowed the bait, before giving the line a good yank. The dorado exploded out of the water, tugging on the line so hard I thought it was going to pull me off the raft. I braced myself. The line became very taut. It was good line; it would not break. I started bringing the dorado in. It struggled with all its might, jumping and diving and splashing. The line cut into my hands. I wrapped my hands in the blanket. My heart was pounding. The fish was as strong as an ox. I was not sure I would be able to pull it in.

I noticed all the other fish had vanished from around the raft and boat. No doubt they had sensed the dorado's distress. I hurried. Its struggling would attract sharks. But it fought like a devil. My arms were aching. Every time I got it close to the raft, it beat about with such frenzy that I was cowed into letting out some line.

At last I managed to haul it aboard. It was over three feet long. The bucket was useless. It would fit the dorado like a hat. I held the fish down by kneeling on it and using my hands. It was a writhing mass of pure muscle, so big its tail stuck out from beneath me, pounding hard against the raft. It was giving me a ride like I imagine a bucking bronco would give a cowboy. I was in a wild and triumphant mood. A dorado is a magnificent-looking fish, large, fleshy and sleek, with a bulging forehead that speaks of a forceful personality, a very long dorsal fin as proud as a cock's comb, and a coat of scales that is smooth and bright. I felt I was dealing fate a serious blow by engaging such a handsome adversary. With this fish I was retaliating against the sea, against the wind, against the sinking of ships, against all circumstances that were working against me. "Thank you, Lord Vishnu, thank you!" I shouted. "Once you saved the world by taking the form of a fish. Now you have saved me by taking the form of a fish. Thank you, thank you!"

Killing it was no problem. I would have spared myself the trouble-after all, it was for Richard Parker and he would have dispatched it with expert ease-but for the hook that was embedded in its mouth. I exulted at having a dorado at the end of my line-I would be less keen if it were a tiger. I went about the job in a direct way. I took the hatchet in both my hands and vigorously beat the fish on the head with the hammerhead (I still didn't have the stomach to use the sharp edge). The dorado did a most extraordinary thing as it died: it began to flash all kinds of colours in rapid succession. Blue, green, red, gold and violet flickered and shimmered neon-like on its surface as it struggled. I felt I was beating a rainbow to death. (I found out later that the dorado is famed for its death-knell iridescence.) At last it lay still and dull-coloured, and I could remove the hook. I even managed to retrieve a part of my bait.

You may be astonished that in such a short period of time I could go from weeping over the muffled killing of a flying fish to gleefully bludgeoning to death a dorado. I could explain it by arguing that profiting from a pitiful flying fish's navigational mistake made me shy and sorrowful, while the excitement of actively capturing a great dorado made me sanguinary and self-assured. But in point of fact the explanation lies elsewhere. It is simple and brutal: a person can get used to anything, even to killing.

It was with a hunter's pride that I pulled the raft up to the lifeboat. I brought it along the side, keeping very low. I swung my arm and dropped the dorado into the boat. It landed with a heavy thud and provoked a gruff expression of surprise from Richard Parker. After a sniff or two, I heard the wet mashing sound of a mouth at work. I pushed myself off, not forgetting to blow the whistle hard several times, to remind Richard Parker of who had so graciously provided him with fresh food. I stopped to pick up some biscuits and a can of water. The five remaining flying fish in the locker were dead. I pulled their wings off, throwing them away, and wrapped the fish in the now-consecrated fish blanket.

Yann Martel: Life of Pi

By the time I had rinsed myself of blood, cleaned up my fishing gear, put things away and had my supper, night had come on. A thin layer of clouds masked the stars and the moon, and it was very dark. I was tired, but still excited by the events of the last hours. The feeling of busyness was profoundly satisfying; I hadn't thought at all about my plight or myself. Fishing was surely a better way of passing the time than yarn-spinning or playing I Spy. I determined to start again the next day as soon as there was light.

I fell asleep, my mind lit up by the chameleon-like flickering of the dying dorado.