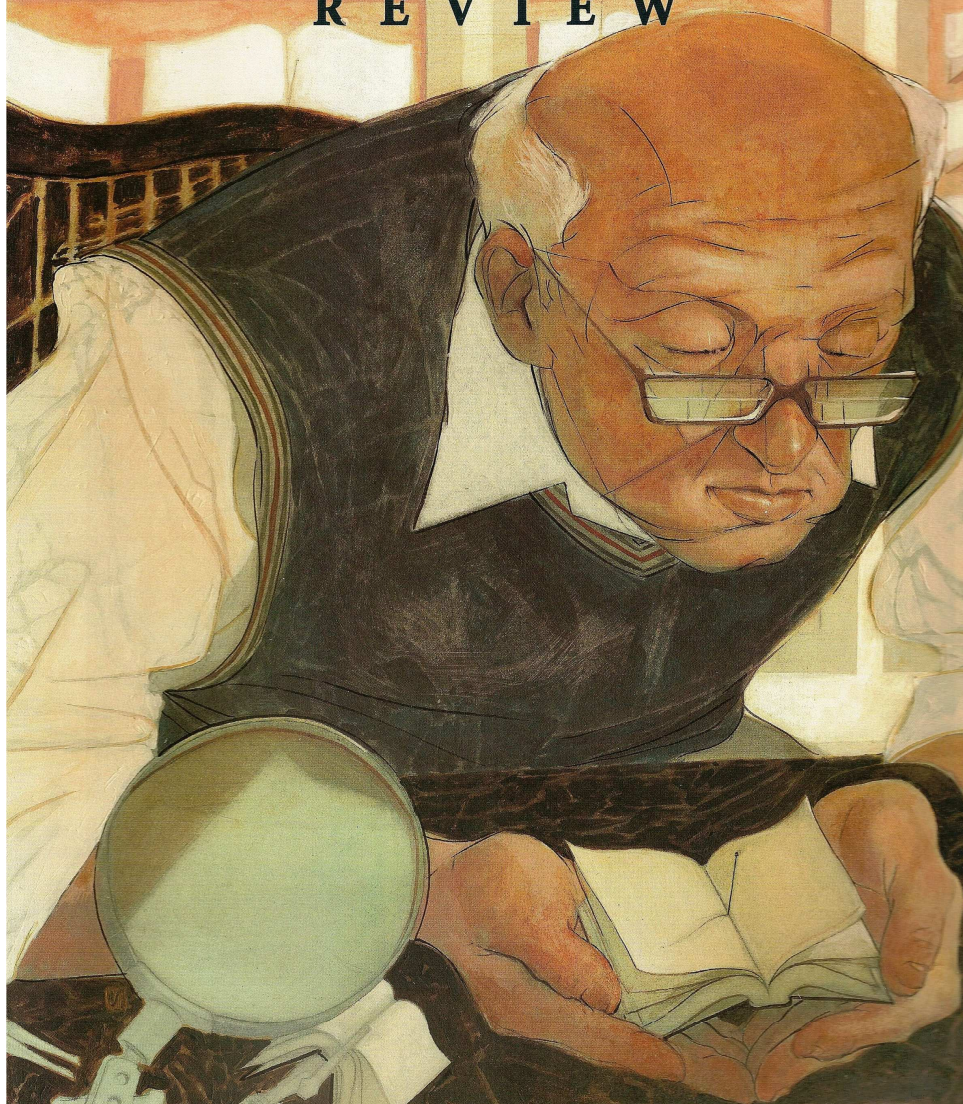


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## FIGHTING FISH A STORY BY BABAK GOVAN



Ashleigh Ford

**T**he rains poured down fast this year, and the streetlights were lit early to substitute for the sunlight. I remembered myself as a young boy. My older brother Billy and I had gone to the Enchanted Seas Aquarium Shop with the few cents that jangled in his loose jeans' pockets. Anxious to see what colors of male Siamese fighting fish had arrived, we made our monthly excursion after Billy had polished our landlord's classic midnight streamliner in the underground garage. I didn't have any money of my own yet, but our mother always told Billy to take enough money to buy two fish.

I had always dreamt of buying an Australian Leafy Sea Dragon. They looked just like the dragons from China, and I imagined fire coming out of their mouths, but Mr. Jones said that they were found only in fancy fish books.

The Siamese fighting fish danced in their individual jars, lined up across the aquarium lids, with their elegant long fins and tails—looking like French bustles—waving slowly through the water like pieces of silk—blues, reds, magentas, and iridescent greens. Every time two of the fish faced each other, their gills flared out and their fins extended outward to show their grandness, ready to fight. Any leftover hues were used for the females at the end of the row. With their patchy coloration and dumpy fins, they looked little different from males injured after a fight.

Mr. Jones emerged from behind the velvet gypsy-like drapes that separated his small office from the showroom in the front. With an unusually giant smile, he walked towards us grasping

a jar firmly between his hands. As he approached, he opened his hands, revealing a red crown-tail fighting fish with double rays—the back fin segmented like the flames of fire.

"I saved this one just for you," he said to me, "one of my greatest customers!"

The fish was magnificent—crown-tails were hard to get, but one with a double tail! It was as beautiful as any sea dragon I had ever seen in a book; we had never owned one like it. I turned to look at Billy and he winked back and smiled.

The cold air always gave me an appetite for hot tomato sauce. I grabbed my long coat from the rack, put on my black leather gloves, and walked to the cozy Italian restaurant a few blocks south of my townhouse.

As the automobiles clotted the darkening wet asphalt, the sounds of soles on the sidewalk became softer, the streetlights grew brighter, and the aroma of fresh garlic bread came closer. Nat King Cole played "(I Love You) For Sentimental Reasons" on the small hand radio at the side of the counter, and the makeshift vases—empty soda bottles—with pink carnations looked out of place now that the rains had come. Dusk had fallen early, and except for Nat King Cole's melancholy song, the restaurant was quiet. The only other customer sat at a small table beside a large window blurry from the rain, eating spaghetti and reading the newspaper. He was an old man hunched over with his feet crossed below the table. His brown oxfords were meticulously polished and his matching



slacks looked recently pressed, his gray coat blending favorably with his diagonal-striped tie. Below his gold cufflinks, brown blemishes and blue veins colored the hands that occasionally lifted the few strands of white hair that fell over his forehead.

He looked lonely, dressing up in such a casual place just to sit and pass time, watching the passersby outside. I wondered what older people thought about; so many of them looked lonely. But the old man had placed a picture against a vase and he looked at it as I watched him.

And then, abruptly, he placed his hand over his chest, his shoulders curled in, and he dropped his fork onto the floor. I ran towards him and he fell sideways into my arms with a quiet, miserable moan. Fortunately, a hospital was nearby, a few blocks north. Holding him in my arms, I yelled to the busboy in the back kitchen to call the emergency line.

In a few minutes, the paramedics arrived and were hurrying the old man towards the ambulance, when he mumbled, "The picture. I need the picture." The busboy behind me grabbed it and we rushed outside into the then heavy rain.

A distressed nurse walked into the lobby calling for Mr. Adam's son. I explained that I was only a witness. She told me that his condition was grim. Realizing I might be his last contact, I asked to see him.

He lay in his bed with numerous gadgets connected to his ailing body. As I sat quietly beside him, he looked faintly towards me. I waited for him to speak, but he finally opened his fist instead. In his palm lay the picture. It was of a young man and a young woman dancing, with the words "Respite finem" handwritten on the back.

"Her name is Gabriela Hensley," he suddenly spoke with a quiet voice. "Please contact her and tell her that I loved her, that I never stopped loving her . . . that I never wanted to do anything to come between them—but I will always be waiting. I just wanted her happiness," he said.

I took the picture and his palm lay open.

The rain continued to pour heavily for the second day. I remembered my crown-tail fighting fish. When we returned home, Billy and I placed our newly purchased fish next to the other jars and it was the best one yet. I moved the crown-tail to the middle so that everyone could see him.

Later that evening, after our parents were asleep, Billy and I turned on our lights and went to work. Billy tiptoed to and from the kitchen, holding a large glass bowl in between his hands when he returned. I sat at our desk in the corner of the room where I had placed the jar housing the crown-tail and another jar housing a beautiful dark blue fighting fish on top of the table. We also had a green fishnet ready to become the losing fish's hearse or ambulance as it traveled to the bathroom toilet.

Billy scooted next to me on the chair so that we could both get a ringside view. He whispered for me to pick up the jar with the crown-tail and to dump it into the glass bowl on the count

of three, and at the same time, he'd pour in the blue fish. "One, two, three."

And the two fish went at it. We leaned forward to see all the action. The fish aligned their bodies parallel to each other in the center of the bowl, extended their fins, and flared out their gills. Billy and I had to keep all of our excitement inside, but we were ready to burst. Billy looked over at me with his hand over his mouth and his eyebrows raised.

The blue fish turned around and rammed itself into the crown-tail's rear, biting off some scales. The crown-tail swam quickly in circles around the jar. The blue fish chased it and took unsuccessful nips at its double tail before tearing off more scales from the rear. I couldn't believe it. I grabbed Billy's arm. He had his palm over his forehead now and his mouth was open in awe. The fish swam to the center of the bowl again, raised and extended their fins, and flared their gills. Unexpectedly, the crown-tail rushed toward the blue fish and tore off an entire gill. The blue fish was stunned. I looked over at Billy and I had never seen his face so elongated. The crown-tail continuously charged at the stunned fish and tore off large chunks of flesh from its body. The blue fish struggled to swim through the cloudy water to the bottom of the bowl. Before giving the injured fish its final blows, the crown-tail extended its fins and remained in the middle of the ring for a few seconds—it seemed to know we were watching and wanted to show off. The fight was over.

Billy and I didn't fall asleep until early morning. We lay in our beds across the room from each other discussing the play-by-play of the best fight we had ever promoted.

The flames in the fireplace drew twisted shadows against my living room walls. I had located an old telephone directory at the public library, and called the numbers of five Hensley families before I located the home of Gabriela. Her husband said that she had passed away years before.

I looked at the picture of the old man and Gabriela smiling and dancing as they looked at the camera and at me. Their hands still looked warm, blushed, and real. I wondered where he was now, imagining him walking through a misty flower garden, holding hands with Gabriela and glowing with laughter, listening to the greatest music one can hear.

I wondered if the old man had fought for her. I imagined him in his younger years, jumping up and down in the corner of a ring while facing his opponent, Gabriela's future husband. Or maybe it was a swordfight—an old duel—but with both men dressed in white, like they do in fencing. The match starts, they duel back and forth in a straight line, advancing and retreating, thrusting and cutting. And then there is a victor. The loser is holding his abdomen, where a blotch of red is quickly growing under his jacket until it begins to form into thin streams of blood running down his abdomen and past the hip. The body falls to the floor, the metal sword rattles against the ground. He puts his head back, his hands slowly lose their pressure against his abdomen and slide by his side to the floor, smearing the red blood against the legs on their way to hopelessness. □