

## 'The Mackerel'

The Mackerel swam fast with his companions. Where they went, he went; when they turned, he turned: who was in control was never really clear - they just all moved together. The Mackerel was a strong fish, a handsome fish, but he did have a short temper.

One day he found himself on the outside of the shoal as it turned too close to the rocks. He found himself being buffeted against some rough barnacles. He felt a sharp pain. Immediately his temper flared. Silent bubbles screamed from his mouth. He was so, so angry; with the barnacles, with the shoal, with himself, with everything. Because there were so many fish and because they all looked the same, no one really noticed that he was in fact... beside himself.

"It always happens to me," he grumbled to himself, still fuming like a kipper.

The blood streamed from his side leaving a cloudy red trail in the water behind him. And it was while he was still angry that the smell of his bleeding reached the snub nose of a resting Lamprey. The Lamprey was lying cold and still amongst the rocks like a length of grey tubing. So pale was he that it looked like there was no life in him. And truly there was no life of his own. His sharp mouth-parts flexed in the warm scent from the Mackerel's wound.

Now a Lamprey is a bit like an eel and a bit like a leech. Smoothly and steadily he glided and snaked through the water after the Mackerel. By

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the time that the Lamprey caught up, the Mackerel was starting to contain his anger, grumbling quietly to himself. The Lamprey nuzzled along side the Mackerel in a comforting way and slid his mouth parts into the site of the graze. The Mackerel felt a bitter tug on his wound and his muscular body tensed again. And with that spasm the sharp barbs on the Lamprey's jaws dug firmly into the Mackerel's flesh. Immediately the bleeding stopped, or rather, the water cleared. The Lamprey's head glowed faintly red as he sucked silently on the Mackerel's life blood. The Mackerel swam on with the shoal, unaware of this uninvited companion. With an eye on each side of his head, a Mackerel can see everything but himself.

Now the Mackerel is indeed one of the most handsome fish of the cold seas. The patterns on his back sparkle and ripple like the very waves themselves. But this Mackerel was not as handsome as he should be. For not only did he have Lampreys streaming from his skin but he also had two hooks hanging from his mouth. These were from times when he had snapped at something sparkling in the water. On both occasions these had not been food, but bright and shining objects of desire. Objects that he knew wouldn't satisfy, but that he greedily desired to consume. He had snatched at these without pausing to think, because a pause would have meant loosing out to another in the shoal. The hooks constantly burned in his lip and Lampreys lived on these wounds too. He had learned to live with the pain of the hooks but the traces of line that were still attached often caught in the seaweed and jarred his mouth further. With all these

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wounds the Mackerel had gradually lost the joy of living. He resented the rest of the shoal; he distrusted the rocks; he feared the Fisherman. He had even come to despise himself for failing to stem this repeated cycle of injuries.

As he swam, he remembered his injuries and bit his lip. The shoal suddenly surged towards the surface and the Mackerel roused himself from his grumbling. He must stay alert or he might miss out. The fish immediately ahead of him lunged at a wisp of silver, but missed. This was his chance. Thrashing his tail he powered forward with his mouth open wide. There, he had it. But there was more to this sparkle, and another hook ripped into his cheek. His eyes opened wide in horror as the shoal turned away leaving him separated and unable to follow. The hook was pulling him towards the rocks. He knew that the only way to escape was to fight against, and snap, the line as he had done before. At first all he felt was naked fear, lonely fear, isolation. He fought and powered this way and that, the line held firm, tautly drawing him in a way he didn't want to go. And as he fought, his fear turned to frustration; anger that he was losing control. As he passed near the surface for the first time he caught sight of the Fisherman on the rocks, reeling him in steadily.

"Leave me alone," he thought. "I don't want to face you. What do you want with me anyway?"

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The Mackerel gulped his last mouthful of water and held his breath. He was now helpless. He landed on the rocks, but barely touched them. His whole body was vibrating. Why couldn't he get control back? He was so angry. Then the hand of the Fisherman grasped him firmly around the ribs and his rage was suspended. What would happen next? Was there now Mackerel on the menu?

"Don't be afraid. I'm not going to eat you," said the Fisherman kindly as he twisted the hook from the Mackerel's cheek.

The blood streamed across the Mackerel's eye and down his side. But he was just relieved that this was not the end for him. The Fisherman gently wiped the blood away with the back of his fingers.

"You've been in the wars haven't you?" he observed.

The Fisherman pulled one of the Lampreys out straight so to get a better look. And for the first time the Mackerel could see one of these creatures for himself. He was horrified. He knew exactly what they were. He had seen them on other fish, sick fish, pitiful fish. But how had this repulsive creature come to feed on him?

"You are such a beautiful fish," continued the Fisherman. "You should let go of these ugly blood suckers."

Let go? But it was the Lampreys that were holding on to him. How could he let go? The Fisherman looked deep into the Mackerel's eye and seemed to know his thoughts again.

"You are angry and bitter over many things," he said. "You hold to hurts from long ago and carry them with you as a purse full of grudges."

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This had a ring of truth to the Mackerel.

"Who will buy your grudges from you? Who can pay enough for you to give them up? Who is willing?"

The Mackerel pondered these questions. It was true. He was waiting for a kind of payment from those who had hurt or offended him. He felt that the other fish owed him an apology, but they hadn't even noticed that he had been hurt. He had felt that they should do something to make things up to him, but he couldn't imagine what that could be or how much would be enough. Why should he forgive them, when it was they who had hurt him?

"But who is carrying the burden?" asked the Fisherman holding up the Lamprey again. "No one can get this off but you. I can take your hooks out and I can show you how, but only you can let go."

And in that moment the Mackerel wanted to know. He wanted to understand. He wanted to be free.

"You must forgive," said the Fisherman earnestly. "You see the others as responsible and think it's their place to dress your wound but you're wrong. You have handed over control of your injury to them, in your mind. But truly they cannot do it for you - only you can. Take back control and choose to forgive. Forgive them for your own sake. Why let yesterday cast a shadow over today?"

The Mackerel struggled, but this time inside. Everything in him wanted to withhold forgiveness but the Fisherman offered him freedom from burden of the blood-sucking Lampreys.

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"I forgive you," spoke the Mackerel, in his mind, but not to himself. He was remembering each of the other fish, and the times of his injuries. He consciously released each one of them from debt and as he did the warmth from the Fisherman's hand radiated through his ribs and into his whole being. He relaxed into the Fisherman's grip. For the first time that he could remember the tension eased in his muscular body. As his muscles let go the Lampreys slipped one by one from his skin, their barbed mouths now having nothing to cling to. And the Mackerel bled again.

"Don't fear the bleeding," spoke the Fisherman. "It's meant to happen when you hurt. Bleed, but don't stay angry. Don't give the Lampreys opportunity."

The Fisherman covered the Mackerel's wounds with his other hand. When he took his hand away it was blooded and wounded itself, but the blood of the Mackerel's wounds had congealed and started to scab over.

"Blood comes with injury, but the scab covers the wound. Pain remains for a while, but healing works under the protection of the scab. Forgiveness is the scab. It's not pretty, it's not what you would choose, but it is the way to wholeness." And the Fisherman finished by saying:

"You're ready to go back now."

And he slipped the Mackerel gently back into the water.

The Mackerel felt clean and energized. The water had never seemed this clear, this fresh, and he breathed it deeply. There was still a dull aching

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from his wounds but somehow this seemed less important now. He caught sight of the shoal and turned joyfully to join them; yes, 'joyfully' - the whole world looked different now. As he swam he looked at the other fish with new eyes. He saw how laboured their swimming was and how each one carried Lampreys that trailed silent and pale from their sides. And he was suddenly filled with pity for them. How different life would be for the whole shoal if they only knew what he knew now? Moved by compassion he drew in close to the fish next to him. He wanted to connect with her, and to show her how to change, as he had. He swam close enough to brush her flank in a gesture of care. He wanted her to know that he understood her pain. But the touch nudged one of her own Lampreys. It fattened up and tightened its grip; its head glowed red as it gulped down her blood. This injured fish burned with fury at the Mackerel. She lashed angrily with her tail which caught the Mackerel full in the ribs. He winced with pain as his wound let out a puff of crimson blood. How could this fish do such a thing when he had only offered kindness? She had rejected him. It touched his very dignity and indeed, he felt indignant. But as his own anger began to rise, he remembered the Fisherman's words to him: 'Bleed, but don't stay angry.' And although it was counter to his feelings, he forgave the fish in his heart and let the debt go. Immediately his wound stopped bleeding and scabbed over. No Lampreys followed him. The Mackerel was delighted to have kept his joy. "I know the secret of happiness," he thought to himself. "I need never live with injury again."

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For the next few days the Mackerel swam with the shoal. He ate, he smiled, he laughed. His sleek body glided through the ocean like never before. His wounds were healing. But then the trace from one of the hooks that still hung from his mouth twisted through the seaweed and tugged on his lip. It was a dull but familiar pain that brought the Mackerel's attention back to the hooks and the Lampreys that he could now feel were hanging from his lip. Immediately the Mackerel's anger flared towards the Fisherman. These were his hooks. Why had the Fisherman left him with this pain? Why had he not taken these hooks out when he had the chance? Up to this moment, the Mackerel had started to think fondly of the Fisherman, but now his gratitude ebbed away as the Lampreys glowed red against his chin. The Mackerel feeling irritated and sorry for himself snapped at a passing flash of silver for some kind of comfort. But the sparkle was a barbed comfort. Again the Mackerel felt himself losing control of his direction to the pull from the rocks. It seemed just as unpleasant and difficult as last time. But while he thrashed and resisted the Mackerel's anger was now towards himself. How could he fall for such a temptation again? Had he learned nothing about hooks and lures? As he was lifted out of the water it was just as before. The Mackerel was a blur of vibrating rage. The Fisherman's hand felt familiar now but the Mackerel resisted its warmth.

"Are you caught again my pretty one?" asked the Fisherman warmly.

"Just let me go," thought the Mackerel. "Let me go."

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"You've more to learn about forgiveness," continued the Fisherman stretching a Lamprey out straight from the Mackerel's lip, so that they could both see it.

The Mackerel had felt it was there, and now he saw it, he felt sick to his stomach. But he knew all about forgiveness already. He'd learned well. He'd put it into practice, hadn't he? But there was nothing he could do about hooks. That was the Fisherman's doing.

"So who else do you need to forgive?" asked the Fisherman, again knowing the Mackerel's thoughts.

But how could he forgive the Fisherman? He knew that an apology could not be expected from this great and powerful man.

"Remember it's not about getting your debt paid back," said the Fisherman. "It's about letting the debt go. You need to forgive me for your own sake."

It seemed somehow wrong to presume to forgive the Fisherman, it felt somehow too proud to contemplate. But the Mackerel obediently did it anyway. And as the Lampreys slid from his chin a sudden realisation overtook him.

"You see now," agreed the Fisherman. "That there is a closeness between us but you were resisting it."

It was true. The Mackerel looked into the Fisherman's eyes for the first time. There he saw compassion, warmth, and unwavering attention. He felt the closeness that he had turned away from before. The heart in his chest swelled, and he loved the Fisherman back.

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"We shan't need these any more," smiled the Fisherman as he twisted the old hooks from the Mackerel's lip. "They've done their job." Their job? This was too much even for an enlightened Mackerel. He had broken the lines of these hooks himself. They hadn't done their job. They had failed, hadn't they?

"Yes, they've done what I intended," continued the Fisherman. "These hooks were never meant to catch you." The Mackerel's mouth was now gaping and, although this was partly due to being out of the water so long, he still was amazed. Weren't hooks for catching fish?

"Not these hooks," replied the Fisherman. "I gave you small wounds in order to heal a bigger one; to lead you to me. But there is still another you need to forgive."

Surely the Mackerel had forgiven everyone hadn't he? He racked his brains. There couldn't be anyone he'd forgotten.

The Fisherman had the answer:

"Who was it who kept getting caught, who kept getting hurt, who kept making the same mistakes, falling for the same temptations?"

The Fisherman was clearly taking about the Mackerel himself now. But surely he didn't need to forgive himself, was it even possible?

"Let me show you," said the Fisherman and unexpectedly pushed a finger down the Mackerel's throat. The Mackerel was so surprised that he didn't even resist. As the Fisherman withdrew his finger what came with it was the trailing tail of a long thin Lamprey. The Mackerel was horrified. How long had this ghastly, ghostly creature been living inside him?

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"I forgive me. I forgive me. Please get it out," begged the Mackerel. And with the Fisherman's finger came the whole Lamprey. The Mackerel wasn't just relieved, he was at rest. He was now at peace with himself. All of the tension had fallen from his body; all of the stress from his mind. And he breathed. Not gasping, not breathing water but breathing air. He had learned how to drown in the Fisherman's air; and it felt good. It felt right.

So finally the Fisherman let him back into the wide open sea again. And the Mackerel took with him both the secret of forgiveness and the secret of life. He could breathe in the water or gulp in the air of the surface. And from that day on he would swim back to the rocks of his own accord just to spend time with the Fisherman. He still gets bumped and grazed but never gives a Lamprey a mouth-hold because he understands that forgiveness is freedom for him.

These days he doesn't feel the need to always be part of the shoal, and he often finds that he does more leading than following. Sometimes he desires something bright and shining in the water, and sometimes he'll snap at it. But now when he is hooked he goes willingly and humbly without a struggle because he knows and trusts the Fisherman.