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If I Had to be Caught

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ble. There is always his sidekick above the elbow-deep vats of scalding water (also called “sinks” by people with a more colloquial lexicon). The high pressure hose blasts food from the plates. A great pair, but they always leave you with at least a few burns. There is always a waist-high metal table near Hobart, with at least one soiled mug or plate from snacking staffers. It can pile up to about two feet of solid dishes during meals and prep times.

At camp there are two kinds of warm chocolatey drinks. There is hot cocoa and hot cocoa. Hot cocoa at camp is bland. Tending towards piss-water status, it does warm you up, but with a flavor that barely registers on the palate. This is the drink of choice for the campers, who somehow have been duped into believing that you only use one cocoa packet per cup. Bah! What folly! The staff always drinks Hot Cocoa. Deep, dark, and rich, this frothy brew warms the very marrow of your bones. After hours in the freezing rain, the Hershey god’s sweet nectar brings you back to the world of the warm. Just sitting in the warm kitchen around the island, drinking your cocoa is, perhaps, the best possible memory you can have at camp. The kitchen is the Ellis Island of the camp, accepting the cold, homeless, and soggy staff immigrants from times of work.

At my camp the pantry in the back is bear-scarred. With claw marks on our floor, and a beaten wall, we’re surprised that there hasn’t been a repeat incident. The bear climbed through the wall’s weak point, an old window frame that had been patched over, and began to gorge itself for the oncoming winter. Our chef walked in at 5:30 in the morning, wondering why her pantry was full of black fur. After getting over her flabbergastation, our chef fled to the head wrangler’s house. Wrangler Nick grabbed his gun, but by that point the bear had vamoosed, apparently more afraid of the Herold family than in love with food.

Finally...the smell! I absolutely adore the smell of camp kitchens. Part propane, after burn smell. Part baking bread, part pine, part garlic, part mysterious and rich musk, and part sweet. It smells like friendship, good conversations, late nights and early mornings. It smells downright warm and cozy...like a hug, it wraps you in its warm embrace. It smells like a thousand good memories. It smells like home.

If I Had to be Caught
Jeriann Watkins

It is a gorgeous day. I swim freely in my lovely, fast-paced stream, loving life. When I first left the cave-pond that had always been my home, I feared I would regret it, but my mind was made up; I needed change. So I left, and I absolutely love life in this action-packed river. And though I have been sheltered, I am not ignorant of the ways of this world. I know the dangers that lurk around every corner, waiting to catch me unawares.

So of course, your bait does not fool me. Yes, that plump worm is tempting, floating there, just begging to be snatched up, but I know that hiding beneath that fleshy mass is a wiry hook – a hook that has caught many fish already, and will catch many more. I refuse to be one of those fish.

Still, the concept is interesting. Can so many fish be that dumb, that unobservant, that reckless – to fall for such a blatant trap? Honestly, to be that oblivious, not to take two seconds to see the slight bit of metal, the line of wire extending from the worm – who is in an extremely odd pose if you stop to think about it– not to notice all these signs is inexcusable.

Could it be that these fish, your previous dinners, were driven by starvation? No, not in this stream. Perhaps they saw all the signs, but there was something else, some reason, another factor that made it worth the risk.

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Now I am curious.
I swim about, observing the worm, the hook, the line. I know you see me; you are willing me to bite. I stare back at you. I am smarter than those other fish.

Suddenly, there is a change. Something is moving around me. The worm is being dragged out of the water. That poor annelid must have horrid vertigo by now. You pull in your line, set the pole against a rock, and kneel down right at the water’s edge. I see your fingers brush the water causing ripples to spread across the surface. How warm your fingers must be.
Woah. What am I thinking? You are a human being. You fish for sport. You catch way more than you need to eat. You are irreverent and not to be trusted.

And yet, I can see why the whole world goes a-flutter when your kind appears. There is something so… intriguing: dangerous, but also exciting. Now, as I watch you watch me, I swish about, teasing you. How close can I get? Close enough that your fingers will brush against my scales? I am too slick for you to be able to grab me. Plus, I am too careful to get caught.

"Here, fishie fish. Yeah, I see you. You’re beautiful, aren’t you?"

Oh, aren’t you just so charming, Mr. Fisherman? I know what you are. You can’t fool me, no matter how interesting you are. I turn my back, making as if I’m going to leave. What will you say? I move much slower than necessary, hoping to hear you call me back, when I feel another disturbance in the current. Something’s entering the water! I feel myself being lifted. A net! You had a net all along! I flop about, trying to jump out, but to no avail. The mesh sides are too high.

"Shhhh, calm down, it will be ok. Shhh."

Your voice is soft, low. I want to believe your words. But I know better. I should never have swum so close.

"Let’s take a look at you.” You’ve lifted the net out of the water and swung it over the dry land. Even if I did jump out now, I wouldn’t be able to make it to the water. You reach inside as if to grab me. Fat chance. You betrayed me. I’m not going to make it easy for you. I flap my tail, moving my whole body as rapidly and erratically as possible.

"Shhhh…. I’ve got you."

After only a few attempts, your rough, calloused hand grips me firmly and lifts me out of the net, which falls to the ground as you use both hands to keep me still, looking directly into your eyes. Maybe you’re not lying. Maybe it will be all right. You don’t seem like the humans I’ve heard stories about. You’re not loud. You’re obviously patient, having spent so much time watching me. I guess the best I can hope for is that you’ll kill me quickly, and treat my body respectfully. Please don’t waste me. As a fish, we know that someday we will end up as part of the food chain. The worst thing would be to have my death serve no purpose. But I don’t think you would let that happen. Would you?

“Yeah, you are a beauty. That’s right, calm down. See? That’s not so bad is it? Let’s measure you."

If I had to be caught, I guess I’m glad it was by you. I can accept my fate now. I look back up at you from the rock you’ve placed me on. I hope you hurry up with this measuring; I’m starting to get parched. This rock is so dry and uncomfortable. I see you shake your head.

“Too big, what a shame.”

And without another thought, word, or glance you throw me back into the chilling water.