

# FISH

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As I slipped through the gathering crowd, I felt insignificant. Like a petal falling into a bustling river, I wound around men and old women who barely acknowledged my passing as their necks strained like herons to see above the others out into the street. No doubt looking at the new shipment of FISH. Females Inciting Senseless Harm. We knew that that name was nothing but lies. Another excuse to label women as something evil so men could put them in their place.

I managed to peer through the gawking crowd and caught a glimpse of the show. Lined up in rows, dozens of women were held in place by masked soldiers with batons in their belts and guns slung over their shoulders. My eyes followed a girl, maybe twelve. She was wearing lime green shorts which did nothing to protect the fragile skin on her knees which was pressing painfully into the asphalt.

A gust of wind blew my hair over my eyes, a gentle reminder to continue on. But as my gaze lingered on the women, I couldn't help but make the connection that, like salmon, struggling to beat the current, they thrashed in the grips of their captors.

The girl with the lime shorts was fighting with particular vigour, until the masked soldier holding her pinned her arms to her side. Bile rose up in my throat when I noticed the cobalt ribbon around the female soldier's arm. She'd been sterilized.

"To their knees!" A commander shouted, not even bothering to speak to the women he knew would rather die than obey his order. He aimed his command at the masked soldiers. I continued walking, wincing at the clean sound of batons whacking the back of the women's knees.

I used to think about helping them. About joining protests or forcing myself through the crowd to save them. That was before I realized how insignificant I was. One person against an army is the equivalent of an ant against a tsunami. Surely every last person in this crowd had made that connection. That was why none of us did anything when the commander shouted again. “Raise your guns!”

I put my hood on as though that feeble fabric would shield me from the deafening sound that was bound to erupt at any moment, and I finally made it away from the crowd. I walked along a roadside ditch until I found the familiar trail that led to the river where I caught my food. I needed to come back home with something. Another night without a meal and I feared my brother wouldn’t wake up tomorrow.

The forest was eerily quiet. My footsteps rustled some twigs and I could hear birds flitting above me in the sun buttered branches. I breathed in the smell of the dirt, the trees, and the rushing river. Then my heart caught in my throat.

BANG.

Gunshots rained. I didn’t dare turn my back even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to see anything from where I stood. I covered my mouth with my hand and my shoulders shook with each ear-splitting scream. Suddenly the forest’s beauty didn’t feel like a blessing. It felt like a mockery, taunting me with its peaceful perfection while our city was torn apart from within.

When the government started solving overpopulation by sterilizing females, obviously there was resistance. The government labelled the resisters as enemies of humanity and commenced executions en masse. A quick fix to the population problem.

When the shooting finally stopped, my downcast gaze led me to a bush heavy with orange gold berries. I was viscerally reminded of the women as I dropped to my knees. But

hunger triumphed over sorrow, and I began filling my trouser pockets with sour-sweet sustenance.

I imagined my brother's face, how his eyes would alight with pride when I returned. How he'll wait for me, nursing his bad leg while I marched to his bedside with berries he hasn't had the chance to eat since last spring, when he risked everything to protect me.

Mindlessly, my hand drifted to my *own* cobalt ribbon.

I hadn't wanted to comply with this new world. At one point, I even considered joining the FISH to fight against the injustice. One afternoon, I was seated at the edge of my bed, lacing up my boots to prepare to join a protest when my brother came bursting through my door. Only, he was barely recognizable. Layers of crimson poured from his wounds. I leapt to my feet.

“What happened?”

He looked at my boots, then his eyes shot back to mine. “Don't fight,” my brother urged. “Take this.” He slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a bloody bag, tossing it to me since he couldn't leave the support of the doorframe.

I moved out of pure shock, unwinding the laces of the bag and beheld the cobalt-coloured armband inside. I looked back up at my brother, horror etched on my face. “What did you do?” The look in my big brother's eyes was cold, resolved and unfeeling. “What I could. For you.”

“You took this from someone! Someone who sacrificed everything to survive, and you took that away!” I couldn't believe it.

My brother rolled his eyes and I nearly vomited at the stranger who stood before me. “Oh grow up. I didn't want the world to turn into this either but here I am, *adjusting*. Making it so we don't lose another damn family member to these protests! Now tie that around your left arm and get the first aid kit.”

The shock wore off while I cleaned my brother's wounds, and I too understood what I had to do. *Never fall out of line. You'll only become a burden to those who really matter.* With each stitch I sewed I grew up. I grew until I was so high above my past self that I could pass the executions as though they were nothing more than tragic news stories I would soon forget on my way home.

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I headed back down the path, my hands hovering over the precious berries in my pockets. My nose crinkled as I turned onto the same street where the slaughter had taken place. Nobody had gotten around to moving the bodies yet, probably to teach a lesson to anyone else thinking about rising up.

I watched a man kneeling over a woman. It seemed as though he were grieving over her body, his hands clasping the woman's, his body heaving with—oh. He slipped the watch from her wrist and the ring from her finger.

He stood up sharply and shoved his winnings into his pocket as his gaunt eyes met my own. For a moment, caught in my stare, he looked guilty, his eyebrows drawing together in fear, his teeth clenching in shame. Then he saw my cobalt ribbon and all his features turned into a sour self-righteousness as though he were in a position to admonish me for selling my soul. I glowered at his back as he trudged away.

I kept my eyes forward as I continued my walk past the bodies, but the corner of my eye caught it, that lime green colour. I stopped in front of her. She had fallen in a peculiar way. She was still kneeling, propped up on her heels, her head lolled in a way that kept her in balance.

Kept her from seeking rest on the blood-stained street. I didn't blame her corpse for seeking a final shred of dignity.

I couldn't help but look at her knees. It looked like so much pressure, even though her skin had now gone bloodless. I shrugged off my jacket and knelt before her, carefully placing the soft fabric beneath her knees. At least in death, she could feel less discomfort. That's the best a person like me could do.