

# The Little Black Fish

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It was the longest night of winter. At the bottom of the sea an old fish gathered together 12,000 of her children and grandchildren and began to tell them this story:

Once upon a time a little black fish lived with her mother in a small pond on the side of a mountain. Their home was behind a black, moss-covered rock, under which they both slept at night. The little fish longed to see the moonlight in their home just once. From morning till evening, the mother and child swam after each other. Sometimes they joined other fish and rapidly darted in and out of small crevices. The little fish was an only child, for of the 10,000 eggs which the mother had laid, only she had survived.

For several days the little fish had been deep in thought and had talked very little. She swam slowly behind her mother around the pond and did not play with the other fish. Her mother thought her child was sick and would soon be well. In fact, the black fish's sickness was really something else!

Early one morning before the sun had risen, the little fish woke her mother and said

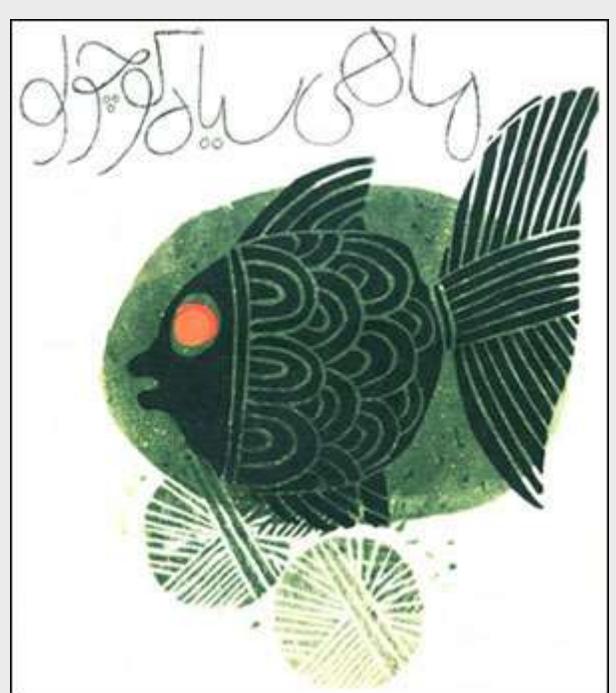
"Mother, I want to talk to you."

Half-asleep, the mother responded

"Child, this isn't the time to talk. Save your words for later. Wouldn't it be better to go swimming?"

"No, Mother! I can't go swimming anymore. I must leave here."

"Do you really have to leave?"



The Little Black Fish; painting by: Farshid Mesqali

"Yes, Mother, I must go."

"Just a minute! Where do you want to go at this hour of the morning?"

"I want to go see where the stream ends. You know, Mother, I've been wondering where the end of the stream is ... I haven't been able to think about anything else. I didn't sleep a wink all night. At last, I decided to go and find where the stream ends. I want to know what's happening in other places."

The mother laughed - "When I was a child, I used to think a lot like that. But, my dear, a stream has no beginning and no end. That's the way it is. The stream just flows and never goes anywhere."

"But mother dear, isn't it true that everything comes to an end? Nights end, days end, weeks, months, years ..."

"Forget this pretentious talk," interrupted the mother - "Let's go swimming. Now is the time to swim, not talk."

"No, Mother, I'm tired of this swimming, I want to set out and see what's happening elsewhere. Maybe you think someone taught me these ideas but believe me, I've had these thoughts for a long time. Of course, I've learned many things here and there. For instance, I know that when most fish get old, they complain about everything. I want to know if life is simply for circling around in a small place until you become old and nothing else, or is there another way to live in the world?"

When the little fish finished the mother exclaimed - "My dear child, are you crazy? World! ... World! What is this other world! The world is right here where we are. Life is just as we have it..."

Just then, a large fish approached their home and said: "Neighbor, what are you arguing about with your child? Aren't you planning to go swimming today?"

Hearing her neighbor's voice, the mother came out of the house and said, "What's the world coming to! Now children even want to teach their mothers something!"

"How so?" asked the neighbor.

"Listen to the places this half-pint wants to go!" replied the mother. "Saying over and over again 'I want to go see what's happening in the world.' What pretentious talk!"

"Little one," said the neighbor, "Let's see. Since when have you become a scholar and philosopher and not told us?"

"Madam," answered the little fish, "I don't know what you mean by 'scholar' and 'philosopher,' I've just gotten tired of these swims. I don't want to continue this boring stuff and be happy as a

fool until one day I wake up and see that like all of you, I've become old, but still am as dumb as I am now."

"Oh, what talk!" exclaimed the neighbor.

"I never thought my only child would turn out this way," said the mother. "I don't know what evil person put my sweet baby up to this."

"No one put me up to anything," said the little fish. "I have reason, and intelligence and understanding. I have eyes and I can see."

"Sister," said the neighbor to the little fish's mother, "do you remember that twisted-up snail?" "Yes, you're right," said the mother. "He used to push himself on my baby. God knows what I would do to him!"

"That's enough, Mother," said the little fish. "He was my friend."

"Friendship between a fish and a snail," said the mother, "I've never heard of such a thing!"

"And I've never heard of a fish and a snail being enemies," replied the little fish. "But you all drowned the poor fellow."

"Let's not bring up the past," said the neighbor.

"You brought up the subject yourself," said the little fish.

"It served him right to be killed," said the mother. "Have you forgotten the things he used to say everywhere he went?"

"Then," said the little fish, "kill me too since I'm saying the very same things."

To make a long story short, the arguing voices attracted the other fish. The little fish's words angered everyone.

One of the old fish asked, "Did you think we'd pity you?"

"That one just needs a little box on the ears," said another.

"Go away," said the black fish's mother. "Don't you touch my child."

Another of them said, "Madam, if you don't raise your child correctly, you must expect it to be punished."

The neighbor said, "I'm ashamed to live next to you."

Another said, "Let's do to the little fish what we did to the old snail before it gets into trouble."

When they tried to grab the little black fish, her friends gathered around and took the fish away from the brawl.

The black fish's mother beat her head and chest and cried, "Oh, my baby is leaving me. What am I going to do? What a curse has fallen upon me!"

"Mother, don't cry for me. Cry for the old fish who stay behind."

"Don't get smart, half-pint!" shouted one of the fish from afar.

"If you go away and afterwards regret it, we won't let you come back," said a second.

"These are useful fancies. Don't go," said a third.

"What's wrong with this place?" said a fourth.

"There is no other world. The world is right here. Come back! Said a fifth.

"If you turn reasonable and come back, then we'll believe you really are an intelligent fish," said a sixth.

"Wait, we've gotten used to having you around ..." said a seventh.

The mother cried, "Have mercy on me. Don't go! Don't go!"

The little fish didn't have anything more to say to them. Several friends of the same age accompanied the fish as far as the waterfall. As they parted, the fish said, "My friends, I hope to see you again. Don't forget me!"

"How would it be possible to forget you?" asked the friends. "You've awakened us from a deep sleep. You've taught us many things that we had not even thought about before. We hope to see you again, learned and fearless friend."

The little fish swam down the waterfall and fell into a pond full of water. At first the fish lost its balance but after a while began to swim and circled around the pond. The fish had never seen so much water collected in one place.

Thousands of tadpoles were wriggling in the water. They laughed when they saw the little black fish, "What a funny shape! What kind of creature are you?"

The fish looked them over thoroughly and said, "Please don't insult me. My name is Little Black Fish. Tell me your names so that we'll get acquainted.

"We call one another tadpole," replied one of the tadpoles.

"We come from nobility," said another.

"You can't find anyone prettier than us in the whole world," said another.

"We aren't shapeless and ugly-faced like you," said another one.

The fish said, "I never imagined you would be so conceited. That's all right. I'll forgive you since you're speaking out of ignorance."

In one voice the tadpoles demanded, "Are you saying we're stupid?"

"If you weren't ignorant," replied the fish, "you'd know that there are many others in the world who are pleased with their appearances. You don't even have names of your own."

The tadpoles became very angry. But since they knew the little fish spoke truthfully, they changed their tone and said, "really, you're wasting words! We swim around the world every day from morning till evening, but except for ourselves and our father and mother, we see no one. Of course, there are tiny worms, but they don't count."

"You can't even leave the pond," said the fish. "How can you talk about traveling around the world?"

"What! Do you think there's a world other than the pond?" exclaimed the tadpoles.

"At least," responded the fish, "you must wonder where this water comes from and what things are outside of it."

"Outside the water!" exclaimed the tadpoles, "Where is that? We're never seen outside of the water! Haha ...haha ...You're crazy!"

Little Black Fish also started to laugh. The fish thought it would be better to leave the tadpoles to themselves and go away, but then changed its mind and decided to speak to their mother.

"Where is your mother?" asked the fish. Suddenly, the deep voice of a frog made the fish jump.

The frog was sitting on a rock at the edge of the pond. She jumped into the water, came up to the fish and said:

"I'm right here. What do you want?"

"Hello, Great Lady," said the fish.

The frog responded "Worthless creature, now is not the time to show off. You've found some children to listen to you and are talking pretentiously. I've lived long enough to know that the

world is this pond. Mind your own business and don't lead my children astray."

"If you lived a hundred years," said the little fish, "you'd still be nothing more than an ignorant and helpless frog."

The frog got angry and jumped at Little Black Fish. The fish flipped quickly and fled like lightning, stirring up sediment and worms at the bottom of the pond.

The valley twisted and curved. The stream became deeper and wider. But if you looked down at the valley from the top of the mountains, the stream would seem like a white thread. In one place, a piece of large rock had broken off from the mountain, fallen to the bottom of the valley, and split the water into two branches. A large lizard the size of a hand, lay on her stomach on the rock. She was enjoying the sun's warmth and watching a large, round crab resting on the sand at the bottom of the water in a shallow place and eating a frog he had snared.

The little fish suddenly saw the crab, became frightened, and greeted him from afar. The crab glanced sideways at the fish and said, "What a polite fish! Come closer, little one. Come on!"

"I'm off to see the world," said the little fish, "and I never want to be caught by you, sir!"

"Little fish, why are you so pessimistic and scared?" asked the crab.

"I'm neither pessimistic nor afraid," answered the fish. "I speak about everything I see and understand."

"Well, then," said the crab, "please tell me what you've seen and understood that makes you think I want to capture you?"

"Don't try to trick me!" responded the fish.

"Are you referring to the frog?" queried the crab. "How childish you are! I have a grudge against frogs; that's the reason I hunt them. Do you know, they think they're the only creatures in the world and that they're very lucky. I want to make them understand who is really master in the world! So you don't have to be afraid, my dear. Come here. Come on."

As the crab talked, he was walking backwards towards the little fish. His gait was so funny that the fish couldn't help laughing and said, "Poor thing! You don't even know how to walk. How did you ever learn who runs the world?"

The black fish drew back from the crab. A shadow fell upon the water and suddenly a heavy blow pushed the crab into the sand. The lizard laughed so hard at the crab's expression that she slipped and almost fell into the water. The crab couldn't get up.

The little fish saw that a young shepherd was standing at the edge of the water watching the fish and the crab. A flock of sheep and goats came up to the water and thrust their mouths in. The valley filled with the sounds of "meh meh" and "bah bah."

The little black fish waited until the sheep and goats had drunk their water and left, then called the lizard, "Dear lizard, I'm a little black fish who's going to search for the end of the stream. I think you're wise, so, I'd like to ask you something."

"Ask anything you want."

"All along the way, they've been frightening me a great deal about the pelican, the swordfish and the heron. Do you know anything about them?"

"The swordfish and the heron," said the lizard, "aren't found in this area, especially the swordfish who lives in the sea. But it's possible that the pelican is farther down. Be careful he doesn't trick you and catch you in his pouch."

"What pouch?"

"Under his throat," explained the lizard, "the pelican has a pouch which holds a lot of water. When the pelican's swimming, fish, without realizing it, sometimes enter his pouch and then go straight into his stomach. But if the pelican isn't hungry, he stores the fish in his pouch to eat later."

"If a fish enters the pouch, is there any way of getting out?" asked the fish.

"There's no way unless the fish rips open the pouch," answered the lizard.

"I'm going to give you a dagger so that if you get caught by the pelican, you can do just that."

Then the lizard crawled into a crack in the rock and returned with a very sharp dagger. The little fish took the dagger and said: "Dear lizard, you are so kind! I don't know how to thank you."

"It's not necessary to thank me, my dear. I have many of these daggers. When I have nothing to do, I sit down and make daggers from blades of grass and give them to smart fish like you."

"What?" asked the fish, "Have other fish passed here before me?"

"Many have passed by," the lizard replied. "They've formed themselves into a school and they give the fisherman a hard time."

"Excuse me for talking so much," said the black fish, "but if you don't think me meddlesome, tell me how they give the fisherman a hard time."

"Well," answered the lizard, "they stick together. Whenever the fisherman throws his net, they get inside, pull the net with them, and drag it to the bottom of the sea."

The lizard placed her ear on the crack, listened and said, "I must excuse myself now. My children have awakened." The lizard went into the crack in the rock. The black fish had no

choice but to set out again. But all the while there were many questions on the fish's mind. "Is it true that the stream flows to the sea? If only the pelican doesn't catch me! Is it true the swordfish enjoys killing and eating its own kind? Why is the heron our enemy?"

The little fish continued swimming and thinking. In every stretch of the way the fish saw and learned new things. How the fish liked turning somersaults, tumbling down waterfalls, and swimming again. The fish felt the warmth of the sun and grew strong. At one place a deer was hastily drinking some water. The little fish greeted her.

"Pretty deer, why are you in such a hurry?"

"A hunter is following me," replied the deer. "I've been hit by a bullet ... right here!"

The little fish didn't see the bullet hole, but from the deer's limping gait knew she was telling the truth.

At one place turtles were napping in the sun's warmth. At another place the boisterous noise of partridges twisted through the valley. The fragrance of mountain grass floated through the air and mixed with the water. In the afternoon the fish reached a spot where the valley widened and the water passed through the center of a grove of trees. There was so much water that the little black fish had a really good time.

Later on the fish came upon a school of fish. The little fish had not seen any other fish since leaving home. Several tiny fish surrounded Little Black Fish and said:

"You must be a stranger here!"

"Yes," responded the black fish, "I'm a stranger. I've come from far away."

"Where do you want to go?" asked the tiny fish.

"I'm going to find the end of the stream," replied the black fish.

"Which stream?"

"This very stream we're swimming in," answered the black fish.

"We call this a river," stated the tiny fish.

The black fish didn't say anything.

"Don't you know that the pelican lives along the way?" inquired one of the tiny fish.

"Yes, I know," answered the black fish.

"Do you know what a big wide pouch the pelican has?" asked another.

"I know that too," replied the black fish.

"In spite of all this, you still want to go?" exclaimed the tiny fish.

"Yes," said the black fish, "whatever happens, I must go."

Soon a rumor spread among all the fish that a little black fish had come from far away and wanted to find the end of the river. And the fish wasn't even afraid of the pelican! Several tiny fish were tempted to go with the black fish but didn't because they were afraid of the grown-ups. Others said, "If there weren't a pelican, we would come with you. We're afraid of the pelican's pouch."

A village was on the edge of the river. Village women and girls were washing dishes and clothes in the river. The little fish listened to their chatter for a while and watched the children bathing, then set off. The fish went on and on and on, still farther on, until night fell, then lay down under a rock to sleep. The fish woke in the middle of the night and saw the moon shining into the water and lighting up everything. The little black fish liked the moon very much. On nights when the moon shone into the water, the fish longed to creep out from under the moss and speak with her. But Mother would always wake up, pull the fish under the moss, and make it go to sleep again.

The little fish looked up at the moon and said, "Hello, my lovely moon!"

"Hello, Little Black Fish. What brings you here?"

"I'm traveling around the world."

"The world is very big," said the moon. "You can't travel everywhere."

"That's okay," said the fish. "I'll go everywhere I can."

"I'd like to stay with you till morning," said the moon, "but a big black cloud is coming toward me to block out my light."

"Beautiful moon! I like your light so much. I wish you'd always shine on me."

"My dear fish, the truth is, I don't have any light of my own. The sun gives me light and I reflect it to the earth. Tell me, have you heard that humans want to fly up and land on me in a few years?"

"That's impossible," exclaimed the fish.

"It's a difficult task," said the moon, "but whatever they want, humans can ..." The moon couldn't finish her sentence. The dark cloud approached and covered her face.

The night became dark again, and the black fish was alone. The fish looked at the darkness in surprise and amazement for several seconds, then crept under a rock and fell asleep.

The fish woke up early in the morning and saw overhead several tiny fish chattering. When they saw that the black fish was awake, they said in one voice: "Good morning!"

The black fish recognized them right away and said, "Good morning! You followed me after all!"

"Yes," answered one of the tiny fish, "but we're still afraid."

"The thought of the pelican just won't go away," said another.

"You worry too much," said the black fish. "One shouldn't worry all the time. Let's start out and our fears will vanish completely."

But as they were about to set out, they felt the water all around them rise up and a lid was placed over them. It was dark everywhere and there was no way to escape. The black fish immediately realized that they had been caught in the pelican's pouch.

"My friends," said the little black fish, "we've been caught in the pelican's pouch, but there's a chance to escape."

All the tiny fish began to cry. One of them said, "There's no way to escape! It's your fault since you influenced us and led us astray."

"Now he's going to swallow us all, and then we'll die," said another.

Suddenly the sound of frightening laughter twisted through the water. It was the pelican. He kept on laughing and said, "What tiny fish I've caught! Ha. Ha. Truly, my heart bleeds for you. I don't want to swallow you! Ha, Ha ..."

The tiny fish began pleading, "Your Excellency, Mr. Pelican! We've been hearing about you for a long time. If you'd be so kind as to open your distinguished beak a little so that we might go out, we'll always be grateful to you."

"I don't want to swallow you right now," said the pelican. "I've some fish stored. Look below." Several large and tiny fish were scattered on the bottom of the pouch.

"Your Excellency, Mr. Pelican!" cried the tiny fish, "we haven't done anything. We're innocent. This little black fish led us astray ..."

"Cowards!" exclaimed the little black fish, "are you crying like this because you think this dishonest bird is merciful?"

"You don't know what you're saying," said the tiny fish. "Just wait and see ... His Excellency, Mr. Pelican, will pardon us and swallow you!"

"Of course I'll pardon you," said the pelican. "But on one condition."

"Your condition, please, sir!" begged the tiny fish.

"Strangle that meddlesome fish, and then you'll get your freedom."

The little black fish moved aside and said to the tiny fish, "Don't agree! This deceitful bird wants to turn us against each other. I have a plan ..."

But the tiny fish were so intent on saving themselves that they couldn't think of anything else. They advanced towards the little black fish who was sitting near the back of the pouch and talking slowly.

"Cowards! Whatever happens, you've been caught and don't have a way to escape. And you're not strong enough to hurt me."

"We must strangle you," said the tiny fish.

"We want freedom!"

"You've lost your senses," said the black fish. "Even if you strangle me, you won't escape. Don't fall for his tricks..."

"You're talking like this just to save yourself," said the tiny fish. "Otherwise you wouldn't think of us at all."

"Just listen," said the black fish, "and I'll explain. I'll pretend I'm dead. Then, we'll see whether or not the pelican will free you. If you don't agree to this, I'll kill all of you with this dagger or rip open the pouch and escape while you ..."

"Enough!" interrupted one of the fish. "I can't stand this talk. Oh, wee ...oh, wee ...oh wee ..."

"Why did you ever bring along this crybaby?" demanded the black fish upon seeing him cry.

Then the fish took out the dagger and held it in front of the tiny fish. Helpless, they agreed to the little fish's suggestion. They pretended to be fighting together. The black fish pretended to be dead.

The others went forward and said, "Your Excellency, Mr. Pelican, we strangled the meddlesome black fish ..."

"Good work!" laughed the pelican.

"Now, as a reward, I'm going to swallow all of you alive so that you can have a nice stroll in my stomach!"

The tiny fish never had a chance. Quick as lightening they passed through the pelican's throat and were gone. But, at that very instant, the black fish drew the dagger, split open the wall of the pouch with one blow and fled. The pelican cried out in pain and smashed his head on the water but he couldn't follow after the little fish.

The black fish went on and on and still farther on until it was noon. The river had passed through the mountains and valleys and now was flowing across a level plain. Several other smaller rivers had joined it from the right and the left, increasing its water greatly. The black fish was enjoying the immensity of the water.

Soon the fish realized the water had no bottom. The fish swam this way and that way and didn't touch anywhere. There was so much water that the little fish got lost in it! No matter how far the fish swam, still the water was endless. Suddenly, the fish noticed a large, long creature charging forward like lightening. There was a two-edged sword in front of its mouth. The little fish thought, "The swordfish! He's going to cut me to pieces this very instant!"

Quickly the fish jumped out of the way and swam to the surface. After a while the fish went under the water again to look for the bottom. On the way the fish met a school of fish-thousands and thousands of fish.

"Friend," said the fish to one of them, "I'm a stranger. I've come from far away. Where is this place?"

The fish called his friends and said, "Look! Another ..." Then replied to the black fish, "Friend, welcome to the sea."

Another said, "All rivers and streams flow here, except some which flow into swamps."

"You can join our group anytime you wish," said one of the fish.

The little black fish was happy to have reached the sea and said, "I'd like to travel around first, then I'll come join your group. I'd like to be with you the next time you pull down the fisherman's net."

"You'll get your wish soon," answered one of the fish. "Now go explore. But if you swim to the surface, watch out for the heron who isn't afraid of anyone these days. She doesn't stop bothering us till she's caught four or five fish a day."

The black fish then left the group of sea fish and began swimming. A little later the fish came to the surface of the sea. A warm sun was shining. The little black fish enjoyed feeling the sun's bright rays on its back. Calm and happy, the fish was swimming on the surface of the sea and thinking, "Death could come upon me very easily now. But as long as I'm able to live, I shouldn't go out to meet death. Of course, if someday I should be forced to face death-as I shall-it doesn't

matter. What does matter is the influence that my life or death will have on the lives of others . . ."

The little black fish wasn't able to pursue these thoughts. A heron dived down, swooped up the fish, and carried it off. Caught in the heron's long beak, the little fish kicked and waved but couldn't get free. The heron had grabbed the fish's waist so tightly that its life was ebbing away. After all, how long can a little fish stay alive out of water?

"If only the heron would swallow me this very instant," thought the fish, "then the water and moisture inside her stomach would prevent my death at least for a few minutes."

The fish addressed the heron with this thought in mind. "Why don't you swallow me alive? I'm one of those fish whose body becomes full of poison after death."

The heron didn't reply. She thought, "Oh, a tricky one! What are you up to? You want to get me talking so you can escape!"

Dry land was visible in the distance. It got closer and closer.

"If we reach dry land," thought the fish, "all is finished."

"I know you want to take me to your children," said the fish, "but by the time we reach land, I'll be dead, and my body will become a sack full of poison. Why don't you have pity for your children?"

"Precaution is also a virtue!" thought the heron. "I can eat you myself and catch another fish for my children. . . but let's see . . . could this be a trick? No, you can't do anything."

As the heron thought she noticed that the black fish's body was limp and motionless. "Does this mean you're dead," thought the heron. "Now I can't even eat you! I've ruined such a soft and delicate fish for no reason at all!" "Hey little one!" she called to the black fish. "Are you still half alive so that I can eat you?" But she didn't finish speaking because the moment she opened her beak, the black fish jumped and fell down.

The heron realized how badly she'd been tricked and dived after the little black fish. The fish streaked through the air like lightening. The fish had lost its senses from thirst for sea water and thrust its dry mouth into the moist wind of the sea. But as soon as the fish splashed into the water and took a new breath, the heron caught up and this time swallowed the fish so fast that the fish didn't understand what had happened.

The fish only sensed that everywhere was wet and dark. There was no way out. The sound of crying could be heard. When the fish's eyes had become accustomed to the dark, it saw a tiny fish crouched in a corner, crying. He wanted his mother. The black fish approached and said: "Little one! . . .Get up! Think about what we should do. What are you crying for? Why do you want your mother?"

"You there . . . Who are you?" responded the tiny fish. "Can't you see? ...I'm ...dy...ing. O, me ...oh, my ...oh, oh ...mama ...I ...I can't come with you to pull the fisherman's net to the bottom of the sea any more ...oh, oh ...oh, oh!"

"Enough, there!" said the little fish. "You'll disgrace all fish."

After the tiny fish had controlled his crying, the little fish continued, "I want to kill the heron and find peace of mind to all fish. But first, I must send you outside so that you don't ruin everything."

"You're dying yourself," replied the tiny fish. "How can you kill the heron?"

The little fish showed the dagger. "From right inside here, I'm going to rip open her stomach. Now listen to what I say. I'm going to start tossing back and forth in order to tickle the heron. As soon as she opens her mouth and begins to laugh, you jump out."

"Then what about you?" asked the tiny fish.

"Don't worry about me. I'm not coming out until I've killed this good-for-nothing."

The black fish stopped talking and began tossing back and forth and tickling the heron's stomach. The tiny fish was standing ready at the entrance of the heron's stomach. As soon as the heron opened her mouth and began to laugh, the tiny fish jumped out and fell into the water. But no matter how long he waited, there wasn't any sign of the black fish. Suddenly, he saw the heron twist and turn and cry out. Then she began to beat her wings and fell down. She splashed into the water. She beat her wings again, then all movement stopped. But there was no sign of Little Black Fish, and since that time, nothing has been heard.

The old fish finished her tale and said to her 12,000 children and grandchildren, "Now it's time to sleep, children. Go to bed."

"Grandmother!" exclaimed the children and grand-children, "You didn't say what happened to that tiny fish."

"We'll leave that for tomorrow night," said the old fish. "Now, it's time for bed. Goodnight."

Eleven thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine little fish said goodnight and went to sleep. The grandmother fell asleep too. But try as she might, a little red fish couldn't get to sleep. All night long she thought about the sea .....