

—THE FISHING OF DAHLIA

by Ennis Drake

“There is no such thing as an insignificant life, only the insignificance of mind that refuses to grasp the implications.”

— Laurence Overmire

“My name is Job,” he said, speaking the words as if they belonged to an arcane language from some lost, dark epoch.

He was disconnected and in shock, but driven still by a vestigial inner valor he believed himself to possess. His mind was broken; his memory an ill-fitting puzzle composed, or so it seemed to Job, of second-hand albums filled with a stranger’s old photographs.

“My name is Job,” he said again—his single anchor of certainty—and throttled the boat.

The sun was cooling molten copper in the west. Cypress and heart pine stood along the north bank of the river like grim sentinels to an alien world. The only sound was the roar of the 225-horse Mercury, the sleek boat skipping across the water as it hurtled toward the river bank.

“My name is Job and it . . . it took her,” he said.

Lightning flared in his mind and time spun out. He never felt the impact.

When Job awoke, he was sprawled on the prow of the boat, his lip split and bleeding. Below him, water slunk and gurgled, slow-seeping its way through the shattered hull. He ran his tongue across his teeth, feeling the cracked canine and incisor; touched his lip with a trembling hand. Winced. *But were the wounds from the impact?* Job wondered. He didn’t think so.

“She . . .” he began, but trailed off, standing shakily. The boat rocked where he had grounded it and he lurched on the deck. “There was,” he continued, licking blood from his swollen lip as he tried to order the few fragments of memory he still possessed, “lightning in the woods. Right *here*,” he said, pointing at the river bank that rose before him, images tumbling out of the electric-charged blackness of his amnesia. . .

The river house. Stripped of most of its furniture. Boxes stacked everywhere. A man was pounding on the door. His son, Michael. . . his oldest. Michael was shouting as the door opened and, too quick to anticipate, he punched Job in the mouth, splitting his lip and cracking two of his teeth.

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The river house dissolved into the river itself. An osprey lunged into the sky from the water's edge, abandoning its nest atop an ancient cypress. The sun was copper, but not yet molten. Something thrashed and thumped against the deck of the boat. There was a flash of light, like lightning in the tree line. . . a tangle of blonde hair. . . a scream, and. . . there was blankness. . . and he was throttling into the river bank.

Job saw again the twist of blonde hair and bright pain like the blade of electric fire on an arc welder dug a furrow across the front of his brain, as if invoked by some outside Power to purge the memory from him.

"No! You're not going to take that from me!" he screamed in defiance, the lightning-pain threatening to sear his mind to smooth scar tissue, to rob him of memory and self. He hooked his hands through his thinning hair, pounded his temples, but for a terrifying, interminable span of seconds, he lost everything. He was, again, an empty vessel; dispossessed of *who, where, why, and how*. His muscles seized and there was familiarity in that. He convulsed and there was familiarity in that, too. He heard, again and again, like a distant echo, thrashing, thumping, and a woman's scream.

"Please, she's out there," he said, voice rasping like decaying machinery. "She's out there, Goddamnit! ALI!"

He fought his own short-circuiting mind and. . .

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Job remembered the bass. He remembered it and held the image in his mind's-eye like a talisman. The way it had thrashed and thumped against the hollow fiberglass deck, blood running from its mouth and gills, the monofilament line disappearing into its throat.

He'd gut-hooked it.

By then, the sun had ridden out the last of its track, an unblemished twilight left in its wake as it fell into the west to die its lazy, phoenix's death. The river had faded from chocolate to an ashen copper that reminded Job of the pennies he used to bury in coffee cans when he was a boy. He was fumbling with the bass, thinking of those pennies, when an osprey, frightened from its nest, lunged skyward from the water's edge. She had said something, then. . .

What did she say? Was it important?

. . . and that's when he'd seen it: The strange, stroboscopic light, pulsing like a living sapphire behind the veil of heart pine and palm scrub that piled along the north bank of the river. That's when it had taken. . . when she had. . .

Quicksilver pain slid along the curve of his skull.

"Just remember the bass," Job said, grinding his teeth together painfully to keep hold of himself.

When the pain receded, he moved further along the prow, watching. Sweat rolled down his sun-baked temples, crowded his high, lined brow. He was waiting for the lightning. The pulse. Whatever it was. He knew it would come—he remembered the hunger in that light.

And, moments later, the sapphirine light raged—as if Job had summoned it—throwing the trees into jeweled relief. He tried to look away, knowing the wyrd light was stealing his capacity to think, understand, and reason; stealing, if not his soul,