

WHAT DO FISH HAVE TO DO WITH ANYTHING?

BY AVI

Every day at three o'clock Mrs. Markham waited for her son, Willie, to come out of school. They walked home together. If they asked why she did it, Mrs. Markham would say, "Parents need to watch their children."

As they left the schoolyard, Mrs. Markham inevitably asked, "How was school?"

Willie would begin to talk, then stop. He was never sure his mother was listening. She seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts. She had been like that ever since his dad had abandoned them six months ago. No one knew where he'd gone. Willie had the feeling that his mother was lost too. It made him feel lonely.

One Monday afternoon, as they approached the apartment building where they lived, she suddenly tugged at him. "Don't look that way," she said.

"Where?"

"At that man over there."

Willie stole a look over his shoulder. A man, whom Willie had never seen before, was sitting on a red plastic milk

crate near the curb. His matted, streaky gray hair hung like a ragged curtain over his dirty face. His shoes were torn. Rough hands lay upon his knees. One hand was palm up. No one seemed to pay him any mind. Willie was certain he had never seen a man so utterly alone. It was as if he were some spat-out piece of chewing gum on the pavement.

"What's the matter with him?" Willie asked his mother in a hushed voice.

Keeping her eyes straight ahead, Mrs. Markham said, "He's sick." She pulled Willie around. "Don't stare. It's rude."

"What kind of sick?"

As Mrs. Markham searched for an answer, she began to walk faster. "He's unhappy," she said.

"What's he doing?"

"Come on, Willie, you know perfectly well. He's begging."

"Do you think anyone gave him anything?"

"I don't know. Now, come on, don't look."

“Why don’t you give him anything?”

“We don’t have anything to spare.”

When they got home, Mrs. Markham removed a white cardboard box from the refrigerator. It contained pound cake. Using her thumb as a measure, she carefully cut a half-inch piece of cake and gave it to Willie on a clean plate. The plate lay on a plastic mat decorated with images of roses with diamond like dewdrops. She also gave him a glass of milk and a folded napkin. She moved slowly.

Willie said, “Can I have a bigger piece of cake?”

Mrs. Markham picked up the cake box and ran a manicured pink fingernail along the nutrition information panel. “A half-inch piece is a portion, and a portion contains the following health requirements. Do you want to hear them?”

“No.”

“It’s on the box, so you can believe what it says. Scientists study people, they write these things. If you’re smart enough you could become a scientist. Like this.” Mrs. Markham tapped the box. “It pays well.” Willie ate his cake and drank the milk. When he was done he took care to wipe the crumbs off his face as well as to blot his milk mustache with the napkin. His mother liked him to be neat.

His mother said, “Now go on and do your homework. Carefully. You’re in sixth grade. It’s important.”

Willie gathered up his books that lay on the empty third chair. At the kitchen entrance he paused and looked back at his mother. She was staring sadly at the cake box, but he didn’t think she was seeing it. Her unhappiness made him think of the man on the street.

“What *kind* of unhappiness do you think he has?” he suddenly asked.

“Who’s that?”

“That man.”

Mrs. Markham looked puzzled.

“The begging man. The one on the street.”

“Oh, could be anything,” his mother said, vaguely. “A person can be unhappy for many reasons.” She turned to stare out the window, as if an answer might be there.

“Is unhappiness a sickness you can cure?”

“I wish you wouldn’t ask such questions.”

“Why?”

After a moment she said, “Questions that have no answers shouldn’t be asked.”

“Can I go out?”

“Homework first.”

Willie turned to go again.

“Money,” Mrs. Markham suddenly said. “Money will cure a lot of unhappiness. That’s why that man was begging. A salesman once said to me, ‘Maybe you can’t buy happiness, but you can rent a lot of it,’ You should remember that.”

“How much money do we have?”

“Not enough.”

“Is that why you’re unhappy?”

“Willie, do your homework.”

Willie started to ask another question, but decided he would not get an answer. He left the kitchen.

The apartment had three rooms. The walls were painted mint green. Willie walked down the hallway to his room, which was at the front of the building. By climbing up on the windowsill and pressing against the glass he could see the sidewalk five stories below. The man was still there.

It was almost five when he went to tell his mother he has finished his school assignments. He found her in her dim bedroom, sleeping. Since she had begun working the night shift at a convenience store – two weeks now – she took naps in the late afternoon.

For a while Willie stood in the threshold, hoping his mother would wake up. When she didn’t, he went to the front of the room and looked down on the street again. The begging man had not moved.

Willie returned to his mother’s room.

“I’m going out,” he announced – softly.

Willie waited a decent interval for his mother to waken. When she did not, he made sure his keys were in his pocket. Then he left the apartment.

By standing just outside the building door, he could keep his eyes on the man. It appeared as if he had still not moved. Willie wondered how anyone could go without moving so long in the chill October air. Was staying still part of the man’s sickness?

During the twenty minutes that Willie watched, no one who passed looked in the beggar’s direction. Willie wondered if they even saw the man. Certainly no one put any money into his open hand.

A lady leading a dog by a leash went by. The dog strained in the direction of the man sitting on the crate. His tail wagged. The lady pulled the dog away. “Heel!” she commanded.

The dog – tail between his legs – scampered to the lady’s side. Even so, the dog twisted around to look back at the beggar.

Willie grinned. The dog had done exactly what Willie had done when his mother told him not to stare.

Pressing deep into his pocket, Willie found a nickel. It was warm and slippery. He wondered how much happiness you could rent for a nickel.

Squeezing the nickel between his fingers, Willie walked slowly toward the man. When he came before him, he stopped, suddenly nervous. The man, who appeared to be looking at the ground, did not move his eyes. He smelled bad.

“Here.” Willie stretched forward and dropped the coin into the man’s open right hand.

“God bless you,” the man said hoarsely as he folded his fingers over the coin. His eyes, like high beams on a car, flashed up at Willie, then dropped.

Willie waited for a moment, then went back up to his room. From his window he looked down on the street. He thought he saw the coin in the man’s hand, but was not sure.

After supper Mrs. Markham readied herself to go to work, then kissed Willie good night. As she did every night,

she said, “If you have regular problems, call Mrs. Murphy downstairs. What’s her number?”

“274-8676,” Willie said.

“Extra bad problems, call Grandma.”

“369-6754.”

“Super special problems, you can call me.”

“962-6743.”

“Emergency, the police.”

“911.”

“Lay out your morning clothing.”

“I will.”

“Don’t let anyone in the door.”

“I won’t.”

“No television past nine.”

“I know.”

“But you can read late.”

“You’re the one who’s going to be late,” Willie reminded her.

“I’m leaving,” Mrs. Markham said.

After she went, Willie stood for a long while in the hallway. The empty apartment felt like a cave that lay deep below the earth. That day in school Willie’s teacher had told the class about a kind of fish that lived in caves. These fish

could not see. They had no eyes. The teacher had said it was living in the dark cave that made them like that.

Willie had raised his hand and asked, "If they want to get out of the cave, can they?"

"I suppose."

"Would their eyes come back?"

"Good question," she said, but did not give an answer.

Before he went to bed, Willie took another look out the window. In the pool of light cast by the street lamp, Willie saw the man.

On Tuesday morning when Willie went to school, the man was gone. But when he came home from school with his mother, he was there again.

"*Please* don't look at him," his mother whispered with some urgency.

During his snack, Willie said, "Why shouldn't I look?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That man. On the street. Begging."

"I told you. He's sick. It's better to act as if you never saw him. When people are that way they don't wish to be looked at."

"Why not?"

Mrs. Markham pondered for a little while. "People are ashamed of being unhappy."

Willie looked thoughtfully at his mother. "Are you sure he's unhappy?"

"You don't have to ask if people are unhappy. They tell you all the time."

"How?"

"The way they look."

"Is that part of the sickness?"

"Oh, Willie, I don't know. It's just the way they are."

Willie contemplated the half-inch slice of cake his mother had just given him. A year ago his parents seemed to be perfectly happy. For Willie, the world seemed easy, full of light. Then his father lost his job. He tried to get another but could not. For long hours he sat in dark rooms. Sometimes he drank. His parents began to argue a lot. One day, his father was gone.

For two weeks his mother kept to the dark. And wept.

Willie looked at his mother. "You're unhappy," he said. "Are *you* ashamed?"

Mrs. Markham sighed and closed her eyes. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"Why?"

"It hurts me."

"But are you ashamed?" Willie persisted.

He felt it was urgent that he know. So that he could do something.

She only shook her head.

Willie said, "Do you think Dad might come back?"

She hesitated before saying, "Yes, I think so."

Willie wondered if that was what she really thought.

"Do you think Dad is unhappy?" Willie asked.

"Where do you get such questions?"

"They're in my mind."

"There's much in the mind that need not be paid attention to."

"Fish who live in caves have no eyes."

"What are you talking about?"

"My teacher said it's all that darkness. The fish forget how to see. So they lose their eyes."

"I doubt she said that."

"She did."

"Willie, you have too much imagination."

After his mother went to work, Willie gazed down onto the street. The man was there. Willie thought of going down, but he knew he was not supposed to leave the

building when his mother worked at night. He decided to speak to the man the next day.

That afternoon – Wednesday – Willie stood before the man. "I don't have any money." Willie said. "Can I still talk to you?"

The man lifted his face. It was a dirty face with very tired eyes. He needed a shave.

"My mother," Willie began, "said you were unhappy. Is that true?"

"Could be," the man said.

"What are you unhappy about?"

The man's eyes narrowed as he studied Willie intently. He said, "How come you want to know?"

Willie shrugged.

"I think you should go home, kid."

"I am home." Willie gestured toward the apartment. "I live right here. Fifth floor. Where do you live?"

"Around."

"Are you unhappy?" Willie persisted.

The man ran a tongue over his lips. His Adam's apple bobbed. "A man has the right to remain silent," he said, and closed his eyes.

Willie remained standing on the pavement for a while before retreating back to his apartment. Once inside he looked down from the window. The man was still there. For a moment Willie was certain the man was looking at the apartment building and the floor where Willie lived.

The next day – Thursday – after dropping a nickel in the man’s palm – Willie said, “I’ve never seen anyone look so unhappy as you do. So I figure you must know a lot about it.”

The man took a deep breath. “Well, yeah, maybe.”

Willie said, “And I need to find a cure for it.”

“A *what*?”

“A cure for unhappiness.”

The man pursed his cracked lips and blew a silent whistle. Then he said, “Why?”

“My mother is unhappy.”

“Why’s that?”

“My dad went away.”

“How come?”

“I think because he was unhappy. Now my mother’s unhappy too – all the time. So is I found a cure for unhappiness, it would be a good thing, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose. Hey, you don’t have anything to eat on you, do you?”

Willie shook his head, then said, “Would you like some cake?”

“What kind?”

“I don’t know. Cake.”

“Depends on the cake.”

On Friday Willie said to the man, “I found our what kind of cake it is.”

“Yeah?”

“Pound cake. But I don’t know why it’s called that.”

“Long as it’s cake it probably don’t matter.”

Neither spoke. Then Willie said, “In school my teacher said there are fish who live in caves and the caves are so dark the fish don’t have eyes. What do you think? Do you believe that?”

“Sure.”

“You do? How come?”

“Because you said so.”

“You mean, just because someone *said* it you believe it?”

“Not someone. You.”

Willie was puzzled. “But, well, maybe it *isn’t* true.”

The man grunted. "Hey, do you believe it?"

Willie nodded.

"Well, you're not just anyone. You got eyes. You see. You ain't no fish."

"Oh." Willie was pleased.

"What's your name?" the man asked.

"Willie."

"That's a boy's name. What's your grown up name?"

"William."

"And that means another thing."

"What?"

"I'll take some of that cake."

Willie started. "You will?" he asked, surprised.

"Just said it, didn't I?"

Willie suddenly felt excited. It was as if the man had given him a gift. Willie wasn't sure what it was except that it was important and that he was glad to have it. For a moment he just gazed at the man. He saw the lines on the man's face, the way his lips curved, the small scar on the side of his chin, the shape of his eyes, which he now saw were blue.

"I'll get the cake," Willie cried and ran back to the apartment. He snatched the box from the refrigerator as well

as a knife, then hurried back down to the street. "I'll cut you a piece," he said, and he opened the box.

"Hey, that don't look like a pound of cake," the man said.

Willie, alarmed, looked up.

"But like I told you, it don't matter."

Willie held his thumb against the cake to make sure the portion was the right size. With a poke of the knife he made a small mark for the proper width.

Just as he was about to cut, the man said, "Hold it!"

Willie looked up. "What?"

"What were you doing there with your thumb?"

"I was measuring the size. The right portion. A person is supposed to get only one portion."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"It says so on the box. You can see for yourself." He held out the box.

The man studied the box then handed it back to Willie. "That's just lies," he said.

"How do you know?"

"William, how can a box say how much a person needs?"

“But it does. The scientists say so. They measured, so they know. Then they put it there.”

“Lies,” the man repeated.

Willie began to feel that this man knew many things. “Well, then, how much should I cut?” he asked.

The man said, “You have to look at me, then at the cake, and then you’re going to have to decide for yourself.”

“Oh.” Willie looked at the cake. The piece was about three inches wide. Willie looked up at the man. After a moment he cut the cake into two pieces, each an inch and a half wide. He gave one piece to the man and kept the other in the box.

“God bless you,” the man said as he took the piece and laid it in his left hand. He began to break off pieces with his right hand and put them in his mouth one by one. Each piece was chewed thoughtfully. Willie watched him eat.

When the man was done, he licked the crumbs on his fingers.

“Now I’ll give you something,” the man said.

“What?” Willie said, surprised.

“The cure for unhappiness.”

“You know it?” Willie asked, eyes wide.

The man nodded.

“What is it?”

“It’s this. What a person needs is always more than they say.”

“Who’s *they*?” Willie asked.

The man pointed to the cake box. “The people on the box,” he said.

In his mind Willie repeated what he had been told, then he gave the man the second piece of cake.

The man took it, saying, “Good man,” and he ate it.

Willie grinned.

The next day was Saturday. Willie did not go to school. All morning he kept looking down from his window for the man, but it was raining and he did not appear. Willie wondered where he was, but could not imagine it.

Willie’s mother awoke about noon. Willie sat with her while she ate her breakfast. “I found the cure for unhappiness,” he announced.

“Did you?” his mother said. She was reading a memo from the convenience store’s owner.

“It’s ‘What a person needs is always more than they say.’”

His mother put her papers down. “That’s nonsense. Where did you hear that?”

“That man.”

“What man?”

“On the street. The one who was begging. You said he was unhappy. So I asked him.”

“Willie, I told you I didn’t want you to even look at that man.”

“He’s a nice man . . .”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve talked to him.”

“When? How much?”

Willie shrank down. “I did, that’s all.”

“Willie, I forbid you to talk to him. Do you understand me? Do you? Answer me!” She was shrill.

“Yes,” Willie said, but he’d already decided he would talk to the man one more time. He needed to explain why he could not talk to him anymore.

On Sunday, however, the man was not there. Nor was he there on Monday.

“That man is gone,” Willie said to his mother as they walked home from school.

“I saw. I’m not blind.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I couldn’t care less. But you might as well know, I arranged for him to be gone.”

Willie stopped short. “What do you mean?”

“I called the police. We don’t need a nuisance like that around here. Pestering kids.”

“He wasn’t pestering me.”

“Of course he was.”

“How do you know?”

“Willie, I have eyes. I can see.”

Willie glared at his mother. “No, you can’t. You’re a fish. You live in a cave.”

“Fish?” retorted Mrs. Markham. “What do fish have to do with anything? Willie, don’t talk nonsense.”

“My name isn’t Willie. It’s William. And I know how to keep from being unhappy. I do!” He was yelling now. “What a person needs is always more than what they say! *Always!*”

He turned on his heel and walked back toward the school. At the corner he glanced back. His mother was following. He kept going. She kept following.