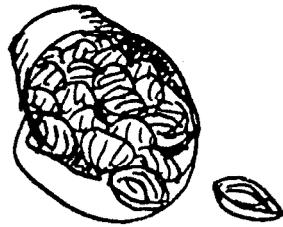


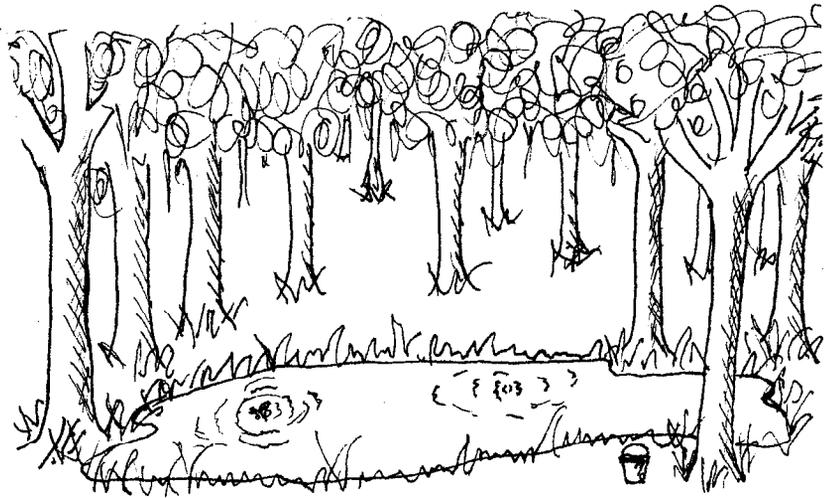
Alec And The Clams

A Short Story
About
Being Polite
To Fish

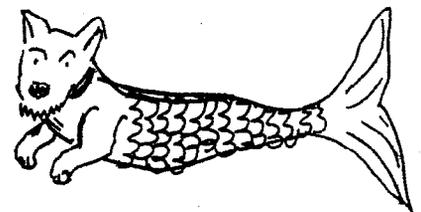
by Stuart Baum



Way back in the woods, there is a small, but deep, pond. It's just a few trees further back than where your Mother will let you go. You can only see it when you are standing right on its banks, almost in the water. In this pond are some of the most amazing fish you could imagine. There are dogfish that actually look like dogs, catfish that actually look like cats and mousefish, which do not look anything like mice at all. There are fish that Dr. Seuss would love to have seen, but he never was allowed to go to the pond either.



The only one who has ever been to the pond is a little boy named Alec. No one knows his last name. He might not have one. Alec is eight years old and has no Mother and no Father. He was raised by the animals in the forest, mainly the deer. The deer taught him to be afraid of people, so Alec runs off as soon as anyone gets very close. Perhaps you've heard something running away as you approached the pond you did not know was there. It was probably Alec, running off just like a deer.



Alec's favorite color is a soft, light brown, the color of deer in the Springtime. Since he likes light brown so much, he wears only light brown clothes. Once, a hunter mistook him for a deer and almost shot him. But the hunter missed. Which was lucky for both of them. The hunter would have lost his license and Alec would have been dead.

Alec fishes at the pond. He scoops the fish up with his yellow bucket as they swim by. When he catches one he asks it, "I am very hungry, would you mind very much if I cooked you and ate you?" He asks so nicely that many of the fish let him. Other people, they reason, would not even have asked. Other people would have eaten them regardless of how they felt about it. A few of the fish that Alec catches are so very old they would probably be caught by one of the mean-looking, pointy-toothed predator fish and be eaten soon anyway. They would rather be eaten by Alec because he is so polite.

One day Alec caught a predator fish in his yellow bucket. It looked somewhat like a shark, with its big, pointy teeth, but it was electric-blue colored like an eel. The predator fish had arms like a human being, but instead of fingers it had tines like a fork on one hand and razor sharp knife-like fingers on the other.

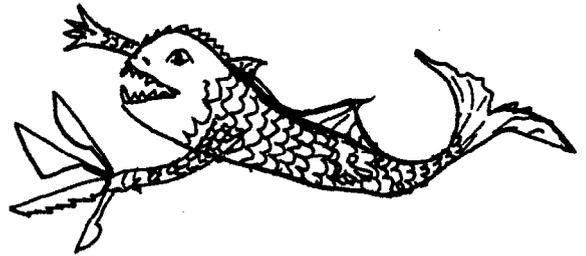


Alec was a little scared by how mean-looking the predator fish was, but he was hungrier than he was scared. "Do you mind," Alec asked, "if I ate you? I am very hungry and have not eaten since yesterday."

 One of the fish who was watching from inside the pond yelled, "Eat him! Alec. He's mean! He ate my brother!" This fish quickly swam away.

But Alec said to the predator fish, "If you don't want me to, I will not eat you, no matter how dangerous you are."

The fish looked at Alec and said, "I would rather you did not eat me. I may look very dangerous and I may eat some of the other fish's family members, but I cannot help it. I get very hungry, too. And the



only thing I like to eat is other fish. In fact, most of us fish eat only other fish. I just happen to be scary looking when I do it." The predator fish then became very sad. "I did not choose to be scary looking. I did not choose to have to eat other fish. And if you let me go, I will be nicer about it. I am very young," he begged. "I do not want to be eaten. Please, please do not eat me!"

"Do not worry," said Alec. "I will not eat you. If you do not want to be my lunch, you do not have to be. I know you can not help eating other fish or looking scary," Alec reassured. "I bet you would not be very tasty with all the sharp points and teeth, anyway."

With that, Alec gently lowered the yellow bucket into the water and let the predator fish swim away.

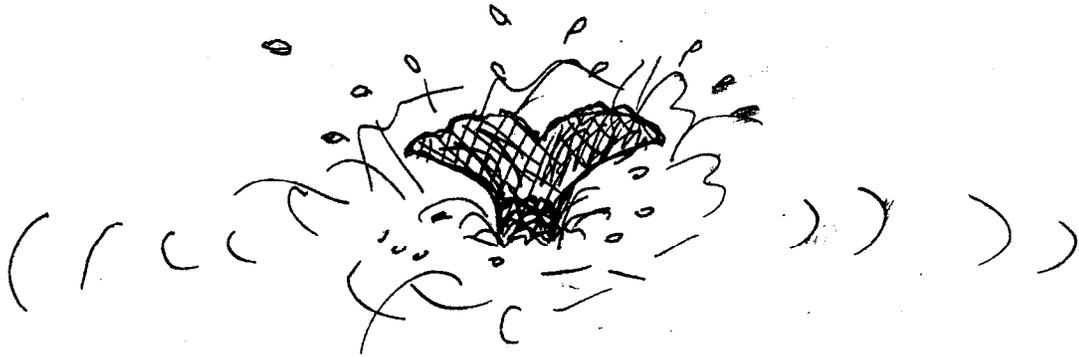
Before the predator fish swam away, he said to Alec, "If you catch me when I am older I will let you eat me. I promise. I will also be tastier then."

"Thank you," said Alec. Alec continued fishing, but he could not catch any fish in his bucket that agreed to be his lunch. Soon lunchtime became naptime and Alec's hunger gave way to his need for sleep. He put the bucket down by the edge of the water, walked a few feet away from the pond and lay down against the nearest tree.

He was almost asleep when he heard a tremendously loud splashing sound by the edge of the pond. Suddenly, from out of the water jumped the largest, scariest predator fish Alec had ever seen. It was nearly as big as he was! This might not seem like a big fish to you, especially since you know that Whales are bigger than houses, but Alec did not know about Whales. He did not even know about oceans. In fact, before finding the pond, Alec had only ever seen small creeks and springs.

Though Whales may be very big, they do not have long, sharp tines on one hand and razor blades on the other like the predator fish do. The predator fish in front of Alec had fingers that were nearly as long as your arms and sharper than your Mother's sharpest kitchen knives. Imagine that!

The large predator fish grabbed Alec's yellow bucket, leapt back into the water and swam away.



Alec was very upset. "How will I ever catch my lunches and dinners, now? I will never eat again!"

No sooner had he finished lamenting over his lost bucket than the large predator fish returned with an even louder, more thunderous splash. It stood on its tail and looked right at Alec.

Alec was terrified. He no longer worried about what he would eat, but what the large predator fish might eat. "Pl-pl-please don't eat m-m-me," he stammered. "I know I have eaten s-s-s-some of the fish from this pon-pon-pond, but I was very, very hungry. And I never ate any fish that didn't w-w-w-want to be eaten. Besides," said Alec, "I am only eight years old. And humans, which is what I am, live to be sometimes over twenty. Which means that I am very young for a human."

"Don't worry," said the large predator fish, doing its best to smile through its huge, pointy teeth. For a vicious looking fish, it had a surprisingly soft and soothing voice. "I am not going to eat you. I wanted to thank you for not eating my little son. He is my youngest child and I love him very much."

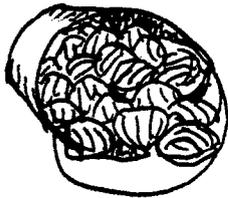
"He did not want to be eaten," said Alec simply, "so I did n-n-not eat him."

"Other humans," said the large predator fish, "would not have asked. They would have eaten him whether he wanted to be eaten or not."

"If you are happy with me, then why did y-y-you take my bucket?"

The predator fish reached one of its hands back into the water, pulled out Alec's yellow bucket and put it down by Alec's feet. It was full of clams.

"What are *those*?" asked Alec, more curious than scared.



"They are *clams*," said the large predator fish. "and they are my gift to you for not eating my child."

"What are clams?" asked Alec.



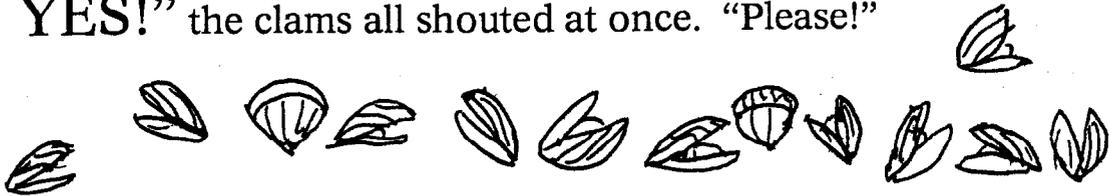
"Clams are found underneath the pond, in the slimy mud," explained the large predator fish. "And there are millions of them in this pond. You open the shells like this." The large predator

fish inserted a razor finger between the two clam shells and pried them apart. "Then you boil them in water for about ten minutes and eat them. Best of all, clams have no bones or scales to get caught in your throat."

"But do they *want* to be eaten?" asked Alec. "I will not eat anything that does not *want* to be eaten," Alec said firmly.

"Ask them yourself," said the large predator fish.

Alec asked the bucket of clams if they wanted to be eaten and the response was very loud and excited. "Yes! Yes! YES!" the clams all shouted at once. "Please!"



"You see," said the large predator fish, "most fish do not like clams. We think they look and taste yucky. This makes the clams very sad. They want so much to be liked. I have heard that humans like clams very much. Since you let my son go, I will get you as many clams as you can eat. And you will never go hungry. Just place your bucket on the side of the pond, right here, and I will fill it up with clams every morning."

"I would like that very much," said Alec. "Thank you."

Alec took the bucket over to his campfire and cooked all the clams. He had a most delicious and filling meal.

Before he went to bed that night, he placed the empty bucket by the edge of the pond. In the morning the bucket was full of clams again. And all of the clams were happy to be Alec's meal.



Which is why Alec, the boy by the pond that you did not even know was there, eats only clams to this day.

