

“Girl”

In a small fishing village lived a girl who was just now ripening into a woman. Her name was Girl. The village was a very peaceful self sustained community, where children ran and played in the streets, youth met at the local meeting place and more and more married men, who were not fishermen, went up the hill at daybreak to work at the new factory, and came down the hill at supper time to sit with their families on the verandas to eat their dinner and listen to and tell tales of the day.

Girl kept company where everyone else from her village did. It was the place where people exercised their minds and spirit, took refreshment and even found love.

For Girl, it was not just a place to titter about future husbands, or shyly steal a glimpse of those who were courting, something that was strongly supported by the community that was dwindling in size. For her it was a sanctuary. She would sit on the expansive, rolling, velvet green lawns and push her fingers onto the soil, and feel it's thrill alight up her arms, or contemplate the river that cut through town, where men fished; She would spend long hours cloistered in the private rooms where others welcomed company, and meditate on purging her soul, although one might wonder what she had to purge; And in that vain, she would meticulously practice her stretches, offering up each strain of her muscles towards the heavens.

Girl was a stranger to those around her. Her parents were elderly, but that was not it. It was because it always seemed that she was doing what others did not do. It was not out of vanity, or because she had been instructed differently in life that she was different, but because of her own convictions. Each action had a feeling of rightness for her, and it was her belief that in following her beliefs, with a kind and open heart, only purity would result. Still, Girl was unsettled. It was her most fervent hope that she should be allowed to share her peace and her love with others. Don't misunderstand, Girl was not shunned, but it seemed there was not a kindred for her in the entire village. This had begun to trouble girl to a greater and greater degree as her peers became of a marriageable age, but by this time, girl had been an anomaly for so long that she didn't know how not to be herself.

One day though, as she did her stretches, contemplating the burn, Girl felt a burn of a different kind. She had known Man for a long time, although not much conversation had ever passed between them. This day he merely offered Girl a mat, which she declined, never using them herself, and with that he shrugged and turned away to begin leading the stretching group as he always did.

She liked his commitment to the class, the way he would demonstrate each exercise precisely, as the others only languidly placed their arms and legs in this position and that to match his own. Fascinated, Girl drew instruction from him in her own technique, something she had not done in a long time.

Man also contemplated Girl, something he did inwardly and often. He regarded her as his best student, and being the sensitive teacher that he was, he felt her twinges

of pain as she stretched under his instruction. It was gratifying to him, and he regarded her even more highly for it.

After stretching, they all took tea, as was the custom. The traditional delicacy was to put boiled and peeled fish eggs in the cup and when one got to the bottom, to savor each egg. Girl though preferred to take her tea clear, which was almost like denying her heritage as her own father had been a fisherman, before he became an old man, but she felt that the tea cleaned her blood and that no embellishments were needed. The other girls took this as haughtiness and the men that she was unsupportive of their heritage. Girl sipped her tea and contemplated Man in a gentle and warm way, wondering what it might be like if he felt the same way about her. When tea was done, Girl shook off her dream and walked back through the village for supper.

The village was different than she had ever seen it in her whole life that night. Instead of quite meals on the porches, the young men were openly, drunkenly carousing in the streets, proclaiming the end of the world. When Girl finally reached her own front steps, her family was just about to set out looking for her. "What is all this about?" Girl asked looking all around her. "Girl, come inside, it is not safe outside now," said her father. "The factory was shut down today and the men of the village are beside themselves, not knowing how they will provide for their families," said her mother. "Aren't we a fishing village? They can become fishermen," said Girl naively. "But that's just it Girl," said her father with a heavy regret in his voice, "They can't. The factory has polluted the river and the fish are sick and dying. That is why it has been shut down." "It explains a lot," said her mother, "So few babies. So much sickness." "Thank the heavens I am just an old man, not strong enough or rich enough to put more than fruit or rice from our garden on the table," her father rejoined. "Yes, thank the heavens," her mother replied, casting a concerned look at Girl.

The next morning the streets were quiet as Girl made her way to the meeting place. She silently considered everything around her and how it would change. She thought of the men with no work, the hungry bellies that craved fish, knowing they could not have it. The newly married who may never have a child of their own, and the heritage which they loved, that now seemed like a passing pastoral dream.

Girl reached the meeting place and her same set of peers was there. There was no tittering. Courting couples held each other, shaken. All sat, together, as if waiting for an answer. Girl sat with them and clear tea was handed around for all. And then Girl had a feeling, a conviction that she should speak to the group. So with a true and open heart she started. "Have hope yet. The river is lost to us for food and a livelihood, but the factory will re-open again and we can learn to farm." "But what of the families? We have all been fed on fish our whole lives and drank tea with eggs. We don't stretch with the same vigor that you do. We are not accustomed to clear tea like you are. We are fading with sickness and we have been ourselves so long that we do not know how to be otherwise," said a young man, as many nodded and jeered in agreement.

With that the young women looked at Girl with new and spitefully jealous eyes. Girl felt her heart sink and looking around the room in desperation, her eyes alighted on Man.

Man watched Girl with the glimmer of a thought in his eye. When he began to walk towards her, her heart missed a few beats and then hit hard in her chest when it restarted. He stopped when he was beside her, gave her a look and then spoke to the crowd. "I can hear that what Girl has said comes from the heart, and I can see that there is a way forward." Everyone listened to him. They were accustomed to following his example in classes and respected him as a good leader and teacher. When there was silence and with all eyes towards them, Man turned to Girl and said, "Girl, I am a strong man, a healthy man, who has respect for you and your willingness to do things the way you choose to do them. I hope we soon come to know each other better, because it is my intention that we be married." This public proclamation was as good as a sealed bond between the two, and truly the two knew that it made all the sense in the world, but Girl wanted to know that it made sense in Man's heart as well as his head and to his pride. She wanted him to regard her as warmly as she had him the previous night.

But, there was little time for Girl to consider, or swoon over the engagement, as the others were still looking towards them for direction. It was a difficult situation to be in. Girl and Man could give the villagers all the answers they craved, but unless they came to see them, understand them, and believe in them they would still look at the two with the same amount of skepticism as they did at the present moment.

Girl had never seen herself as a speaker but with Man beside her she grew braver and spoke her heart again, speaking sense, "We need to continue with routine as much as possible and from it find strength and the answers we seek. We need to do our stretches." "Girl is right," said Man. "from them we will find physical, mental, and emotional strength."

Some of the villagers stayed to stretch and take instruction; some began to slink away, embraced by a blind sorrow that they just couldn't shake off. Of those that stayed more than a few left over the next few months until only a handful of villagers were left. They had seen the light. It was they who gave direction, secretly, to the Elders of the village, that is how they were permitted to eat without working in the new fields that now cropped up to sustain the village.

It was Girl who first noticed that the stretch for "Reaching Out" really meant "Reaching Out To Our Brothers." It burned, in the arms, in the calves, in the quads, the burn of pride, of muscles unused, fat from sustenance and self-assurance. But, reaching out to neighboring villages that did not depend on fishing for their sustenance was the burning way forward. And Girl spoke these words in a fevered mantra as she stretched, so all who stretched and felt the burn with her could feel that: "Yes! It was true! That was the way forward."

Soon others were speaking out during stretches, and Mary-Ann was saying that the "Push and Pull" partner exercise was a trade route that needed to be developed. And some of the most basic preparatory stretches reminded Saul that irrigation ditches could be dug from neighboring villages to divert clean water to their crops, and man-made ponds could be sustained, where fish could once again spawn.

And it came to be that all of this was accomplished, despite naysayers and detractors, and Man looked at Girl with love and pride in his eyes, and she noticed the difference.

"Man," said Girl "now that the village is prosperous once more, I feel that it is time that we can marry, if you will still have me?" "Girl," said Man "I will have you a million times over," said Man "If you will have me?"

No more needed to be said. The shy girl leaned over and kissed Man, confirming their union - Body, Mind, Spirit and Soul.