

Out of Water

As far as she could tell, he lunged to his death. Claire couldn't determine if it was a suicide, or if his confinement to the small, glass house drove him to it—a desperate attempt to escape an unfathomable life.

She had rescued him. And for a time, at least as far as she knew, he was contented to move in small circles. Maybe, Claire thought, she should have provided plastic plants or a fluorescent house with open windows and doors. But the perfectly round, cut crystal bowl, placed precisely in the center of the glass-topped table, was breathtaking with just one orange, fantail fish. Each evening, a stream of light penetrated the bowl to partner the fish in a slow dance of homage to the setting sun. Amber light leapt through the glistening globe to paint the curved walls with fleeting explosions of hot, white fireworks. And, just before the sun dipped below the sill, trapezoidal spectrums of color flickered on and off to the pirouettes and plies of the almost translucent creature.

Claire had believed the fish was satisfied, but looking into the abandoned bowl, she doubted her estimation of its psychological wellbeing. Small puddles on the table led her to the still, orange body on the floor. The fish, she deduced, had exerted great effort to leap out of the bowl and splat onto the table. Then, with one more heroic burst, he plunged to the floor—where he was suffocated by the air.

Claire bent down to pick up the fish which had begun to adhere to the wood planks. In her lifting, the scales from his left side were peeled from his body, leaving behind a glistening silver shimmer. Remembering her mother's cure for the ailing fish of her childhood, Claire placed her lifeless companion back into the bowl and darted to the kitchen. She returned with a dish of warm, heavily-salted water and lay in the limp, little body. Just as it had worked for her mother, life twitched back into the tiny creature. And, after an hour, the fish sputtered in the water, making desperate attempts to right itself. Unfortunately, having lost a front fin to the floor, the fish could

Out of Water

maintain only a 45-degree angle and compensated through increased speed and furious flapping of the remaining fin.

Claire knew this resurrection was yet another of her failures. She had fashioned a fish environment suited only to please her aesthetic eye. She had filled the bowl too high, had mutilated the poor creature, and revived it only to suffer until its demise. Before closing her eyes that night, Claire prayed, (to no God in particular), for his death, and, in the morning, found the poor thing afloat. Dead of exhaustion.

Claire remembered the internment of only one of her childhood fishes, although she suspected there were many. For a coffin, little Claire had selected a cardboard ring-box, lined with cotton fluff. After she dug a four-inch hole into the earth, she prayed five Hail Mary's and two Our Father's. In eulogy, Claire proclaimed, "Angel was a good fish." She peeked once more at its papery body, pressed the box into the hole, replaced the dirt, and marked the spot with a palm-sized, oval, backyard rock. After a month, she dug under the rock with a kitchen spoon. Claire had imagined a flawless fish skeleton, but when she opened the box, nothing had survived but the shredded, soggy remains of the cardboard coffin. Not a trace of fish.

For the present fish, free-floating in its salty bath, Claire considered a solemn, fish-flushing funeral. *Too coldhearted.* That's what Kyle would have said. *You're so indifferent. Were you always like this? Am I just noticing it now?* To prove him wrong, Claire selected a more traditional burial. However, she would need time for planning. She plucked the fish out of the water by its tail, wrapped it gently in cellophane, and placed it in the freezer.... right next to the cat.

Before any of her companions, and way before Kyle, Claire had inherited the condo at Marina City from her mother, who inherited it, and megabucks, from her second ex-husband. He had left her mother after only seven years for a younger woman (who quickly divorced second-ex for a younger man, triggering his first and final heart attack). Three years later, someone passed out

Out of Water

cancer-pink rubber bracelets at her mother's funeral. Claire threw the bracelet into Lake Michigan only hours after the service. It bobbed back to her on a wave, as if playing a game. She left it sitting in the sand. The next day Claire quit school as an undecided major but kept her part-time bank teller job. She liked being locked in a cage with large deposits, challenging herself to count rapidly while turning the bills in the same direction and detecting counterfeits by the feel of the paper. When Claire moved into the condo, she donated all her mother's furniture. She packed away every photo, managing to hardly look at them by neatly wrapping from the face-down position. Claire decided to deal with these later, when she was ready, and tucked them into the closet.

The cat was acquired after Kyle left. Right after he called her a *greedy, selfish, little bitch*, which she later shortened to GSLB. His rant had come after her elective abortion—elected by her without informing him. Kyle's dramatic response reminded her of the trajectory of all her previous relationships. The enticing intimacy, insatiable passion, and inevitable waning of desire—on her part. There would be futile efforts to paddle backwards which only served to exhaust and overwhelm Claire. Intimacy complaints would follow; accusations that she was *just lying there, uninterested* (which she was). Theatrical arguments would ensue followed by excessive drinking, the first blow-up and make-up, several more blow-up/make-up cycles and the final scene. The storming out. With Kyle, it was different. Somewhere after the *lying there uninterested* phase, but before the dramatic exit performance, Claire turned the litmus stick pink.

Her decision was made within nanoseconds of seeing the pink line. She gave no consideration to an alternative. This was a mistake—unplanned, unexpected, and correctable. She didn't wish to strain her already-doomed relationship with the news of an unwanted pregnancy. Claire hadn't meant to tell him at all, but her two days of recovery from the DNC demanded an explanation as Kyle stood over her bed, arms crossed, looking concerned. Claire thought he would be grateful she had acted decisively and spared him the trouble. She thought incorrectly.

Out of Water

“Did you ever think that I might want it?”

“Want what? The pregnancy?”

“The baby, our baby!”

“It wasn’t a baby, just multiplying cells.”

“*Our* multiplying cells that *would* have made our baby. Part you and part me.”

“No, I didn’t, I just thought you wouldn’t want to be bothered by the drama of all of this.”

That’s when he said it.

“Because you are a greedy, selfish, little bitch!”

His tirade was unanticipated, but alas, his storming away was as expected—though a bit premature. The thunder of the slamming door brought familiar comfort rather than the intended angst. Proof, that this relationship would not have weathered a storm. Comfort, that she had chosen correctly. *Unless she was wrong.* Claire wondered then, briefly, about the gender, the eye color, the tiny hands, and about the reality of mortal sin and hell.

A week later, when Claire felt alone, because she was alone, she bought a cat from a brother and sister soliciting door-to-door. “Lady, you want to buy a cat?” Now she had something that would not leave her, or threaten to leave her. Something warm and soft, like a child—*erase that, it was simply a cat.* Claire hated inappropriate thoughts. She named the cat SC, for Second Chance.

SC was a lot like her, aloof and quiet. They studied each other. SC only liked touch if she initiated it, and that was a lot like Claire. SC liked to knead Claire’s stomach before coming to rest on it. Claire wished that SC would do this to her back but could never train the cat to be interested in becoming her masseuse. Claire liked to sleep late and SC liked to be fed early. This was a battle of wills that Claire would win. SC would become contented to stare for hours at Claire’s sleeping face. Claire didn’t notice the cancer because SC’s prodigious plume of fur concealed the growing lumps until it was too late. The vet whispered to Claire that it was *time*, but Claire couldn’t do *it*,

Out of Water

and took SC home. The next morning SC bled out. A pool of blood the consistency of thin pudding turned much of SC's white fur deep plum. Claire held the cat until her final breath escaped and SC lay limp in her arms.

Kyle had been right, she thought, she was a "greedy, selfish, little, bitch." She should have put the cat out of misery the day before, but no surprise, Claire's needs superseded those of her cat. Her selfish desire to feel SC knead her stomach again and purr in her lap again, led SC to an atrocious death. *GSLB, GSLB, wretched, wretched GSLB.*

Claire debated what to do with the body of SC, but after two hours of crying she decided that she needed more time to decide. She hopped a redline bus to Bloomingdale's and selected a baby blanket she thought SC would appreciate, if she were not dead. At home, Claire sang a lullaby as she wrapped the cat's body, thick with sticky, matting blood, into the pink and blue, satin-trimmed softness. Claire practiced crisscrossing the blanket corners across SC to overlap them as evenly as possible. She wrapped and tucked and smoothed until she was satisfied with the final swaddle-around and tight tuck. The flawless folds were pleasing to Claire, but then she chastised herself for being distracted from her grieving. With nothing left to do, she placed the bundle into her empty (except for two ice trays) freezer so that she could figure it all out later.

Claire read ferociously after that. Her goal was self-perfection, or at least self-improvement. She read the how-to books feverishly: *How to make a Million Dollars, How to Clean your House in Minutes, How to Become your own Best Friend, How to Make Friends, and How to Change your Life.* And, she made meticulous notes and lists about what she needed to do in response to each book. It was not until she read *How to Quit Smoking* that she made a step. Not towards stopping smoking. Claire had never smoked. She had picked up the book out of curiosity and decided to read it in case anyone ever asked her for advice about quitting. She determined, after reading, that she had been in a *pre-contemplative* state of change for most of her adult life and needed to progress

Out of Water

to the *action* state. Taking out her numerous lists from the books she had read, she placed them face down on her bed. She shuffled the papers a bit, closed her eyes and picked one. She turned it over and read from the top. Book Title: *How to Love Again*. Things to do: join a social group, join a church, join a sports league, get a pet, volunteer in your community. Claire decided on the *get a pet* option because meeting people made her nervous.

Her visit to the pet store led her, eventually, to look at the fish. And finally to the tank that read: *Goldfish - 6 for \$1.00 or 25 cents each*. She concluded it would be a loving act to rehome the fantail. The Waterford crystal rose bowl, \$275 *plus tax*, was purchased from Bloomingdale's on her way home. It was paid for while holding the fish, not yet named, in a plastic bag with a twist tie.

Now there were two dead creatures in her freezer. Claire fretted she might be incapable of loving. Perhaps a pro-active, loving response would be to bury the fish at last and allow it to return to the earth and become one with the cosmos (she was again reading self-help, this time: *Leaving the Material World behind: Transcendence into the Spiritual Realm*). Claire needed to be selfless and selected the wooden box with inlaid silver, given to her by Kyle. It was barely bigger than her fish with a hinged lid that certainly would not keep out worms or bugs. For protection, she added tape around her frozen fish wrapped in cellophane. Then she placed the fish body into the box and circled tape around the box, until the tape was gone. Finally, Claire put the box into a Ziploc and squeezed out the air before pressing it closed. For good measure, she placed it into another Ziploc. Of course, this would delay his return to the earth, but it would keep out the worms. Fish ate worms, not the other way around.

The fish was buried on a November night, as far down as her metal serving spoon would dig into the sand at Lake Shore Drive beach. Claire knelt and said five Hail Mary's and two Our Father's and asked the God she no longer conversed with, to take the soul of the fish. She pushed

Out of Water

the little box into the hole and apologized for her poor caregiving, for her selfishness at no painted fish house or plastic weeds. As she scooped sand on top of the tiny coffin, she vowed to become a better person. Claire thought for a moment about what a shame it was to bury such a lovely box and then reminded herself that the box was only a material possession and therefore unimportant in the greater scheme of things, especially the spiritual realm. It was hard to be a better person with earthly attachments to little wood boxes.

As she stood, Claire remembered she had forgotten to bring a flower (which immensely disappointed her). She poked her spoon into the spot that concealed her companion and sought out a worthy rock to mark the sacrosanct place. She choose, however, an ordinary grey rock void of any noteworthy qualities, except perhaps that it was, she thought, as ordinary as one could possibly find. It could be extraordinary in its ability to most perfectly represent the ordinary within the rock world. Claire thought this could be a profound epiphany of sorts, and might be a sign from her Higher Power that this was, in fact, the rock destined to mark the fish grave. There was a message in all of this, *how ordinary can be extraordinary simply by being ordinary*, and she vowed to find deeper meaning at her next (which would also be her second) yoga meditation session. Finally, she returned to the fish spot and pushed the spoon all the way down into the sand until it was stopped by Kyle's gift. *She was not attached to spoons*. Claire smoothed over the sand and placed the tomb stone on top. With empathic conviction.

A frigid surge of the Lake Michigan breeze brought Claire to a standing position and she forgot to speak her final words of remembrance and gratitude. She regretted this on her walk to the bus stop, wondering if she should return now, or tomorrow, or if it would count to think the eulogy thoughts as she walked. She started to head back multiple times, each time getting only a few feet before a bite of wind spun her towards home again.

Out of Water

The next day, Claire determined she could likewise bury the cat and scouted for a final resting place by walking the beach after work. She reasoned that she would, however, need a shovel this time. Each night Claire walked past where she had buried her fish, and each night she felt the same strong urge to dig it up and look to see what had become of her neglected companion's body. She resisted this urge over and over, even as it grew stronger each evening. At last she settled on Montrose Beach as a burial site for SC. There, a cradled of rocks kept the sand from washing out. At high tide the lake water would transform the rocks from chalky grey to glistening ebony. Waves would smash into the rocks, burst upward and rain down, before pooling into the nest of rocks and seeping slowly into the sand.

On Saturday evening, Claire removed SC's body from her freezer. Although she tried to look at SC one more time, the blood had soaked through the baby blanket and fixed it tightly to the frozen cat. She placed the cat's body into a plastic grocery sack, picked up her folding garden shovel and the daisies she remembered to purchase, and navigated towards Montrose Beach. As she passed the fish grave, it called to her loudly for an unearthing and, had it not been for the task at hand, she could not have resisted. She *promised* that once this burial was completed, she would resurrect the stamp-box coffin, and pour the caged remains into the water where they belonged (although she wondered if there would be any remains).

Claire found the beach comforting; the cacophony of traffic noise was hushed by the rumbling waves rushing to shore. She placed the flowers and shovel and plastic bag under a circle of streetlight illumination. Claire removed the frozen bundle, wrapped in its pink and blue (stained with plum) blanket and placed it on the plastic bag. *How long do turkeys take to defrost?* Claire hated inappropriate thoughts. As she dug, Claire began to sing the lullaby of her childhood.

She was besieged by thoughts of her mother and then of the aborted fetus, not a child, but the hope of a child, potential comfort and love, opportunity and immortality. Claire could keep

Out of Water

nothing alive. She picked up the shovel and dug until the dry sand was wet sand, and the hole was as deep as her knees. Claire did not see the hand-holding lovers staring at her as they walked by. She did not hear the cars speeding along Lake Shore Drive, not the whipping wind or the blaring sirens. Nothing. She was utterly adrift in her sonorous solitude.

In the dark of night, brightly lit by halogen street lamps, she scooted out of the sandy pit, picked up the swaddled cat and placed her in the hole. Kneeling there, Claire began to pray. She prayed with her hands in perfect prayer position, her fingertips matched up precisely, attempting to the picture on her first communion prayer book. Kneeling at the precipice of wisdom attainment, Claire wondered how far she should hold her hands from her chin. Within nanoseconds, the essence of her being would be revealed. With one more un-intruded instant, enlightenment would penetrate her consciousness and reveal her path.

“Chicago Police, raise your hands over your head.”

Claire was yanked from her transcendence. The pillars of knowledge crumbled away.

“Chicago Police, raise your hands over your head.” It was louder this time.

She could see the dark outline of a police officer backlit by the streetlamp behind him; she could see that he was in *ready position* with one hand on his holstered gun. She scrutinized him to make sense of his presence.

“Ma’am, I want you to raise your hands above your head, where I can see them.” His voice was softer this time. Claire felt her body comply. He walked around her. “Now place your right hand behind your back.” Again Claire obeyed, thinking about which was her right hand. *I pledge allegiance*. It dawned on her that burying pets on the beach was likely illegal. And then she felt the officer’s warm hands grasp her wrist and slip a plastic handcuff around it. “Place your other hand behind your back.” She felt the plastic tighten. *Click, click, click*. His hands moved over and around

Out of Water

her body from shoulders to ankles. At her thighs, she thought about Kyle. She had the right to remain silent.

“Ma’am, is this your child?” The police officer was looking into the hole she’d dug.

“This is SC.”

“Did you kill Essie? Did you kill your child?”

Claire didn’t understand how the officer knew about the abortion or why he was questioning her about it now. “You don’t understand, I didn’t kill a child, it wasn’t a child yet, and I am sorry that I did it now. I should have told Kyle.”

“Who’s Kyle?”

“The father, well he wasn’t a father because it was never a child. I didn’t know he wanted it.” Claire heard the officer call for backup. *A possible 187*. He instructed her to sit on the sand near the gravesite. She watched him move towards the cat, pick it up and try to pull away the blanket. “She’s dead. I froze her, so you won’t be able to get the blanket off.” The officer held his ear to the blanket and finally placed it back down in the sand, positioned exactly as he had found it.

Claire’s started to cry, not just to cry, but to wail. She cried because her mother died, and SC, and the fish with no name, and she cried about the end of her pregnancy and the end of Kyle. Claire mourned deeply and loudly and profoundly. Her body trembled, and she gave into it until she heard her noises stop, until all she could hear was her breathing, until she could feel only the icy air being taken into her mouth and swallowed into her lungs.

More police arrived. They pivoted heavy rust-ridden steel garbage drums around the hole and strung yellow do-not-cross tape. Claire knew officers were speaking to her, but she couldn’t understand their words because of the hum in her head. Their voices grew louder and softer like someone was playing with the volume on a radio. When the coroner arrived, he announced the child, Essie, would need to be thawed overnight before conducting an autopsy. Claire protested,

Out of Water

“SC’s not a baby!” but then resumed sobbing until she vomited. She was helped to her feet by two officers who began walking her down the beach towards the waiting police car—towards the fish grave. She heard the fish calling more loudly than ever for its release from captivity. As they neared, she struggled to break free and dig up the fish. Claire had *promised* to release him on her way back. It was important. It was essential. She threw herself to the ground, falling onto her knees and screaming, “Just let me do this one thing!”

When she wouldn’t walk with them, they carried her. At last, she let her body go limp. Claire had managed, in her flailing, only to kick the perfectly ordinary rock to a new place that marked nothing but an ordinary place on the beach.

In the days to follow (after the misunderstanding was corrected), Claire bought a metal detector and located the buried spoon. She returned the liquidated body of her fish to the water and said five Hail Mary’s and two Our Father’s and proclaimed, “Fred was a good fish.”