



Sunken Mariner

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POLLY SAYS SHE WANTS A DOG, but really what she wants is an epoxy. We are coming apart, and a human baby is too much responsibility. The fickle diet, opaque emotional needs. Electrical outlets. What if one of us stepped on it?

A puppy has lower stakes. Still, I have doubts.

“What if we get bored with it?” (What if we get bored with each other?)

“Who’s going to feed it?” (Is our love nourishing? Do we have a surplus?)

“What if it gets sick?” (Would you stay with me if I was disfigured in a car accident?)

“Our apartment’s too small.” (What if I never amount to anything?)

We’re lying around in bed on a Saturday when the solution hits me. Well, not a solution, exactly, but a way to stave off solutions. A stopgap.

Lately, I seem to have become an expert in the art of the stopgap. I guess we both have.

At noon, she heads to her shift. I head to Sebastian’s place.

“I’m going to the pet store,” I tell him.

“Do I have to come?”

“Of course. It’s a mission.”

“Your codependency troubles me.”

The puppies look up at us with starving, pathetic eyes. I ignore them and head straight for the aquarium section. I pull a book from the rack: *Dr. Axelrod's Aquarium Handbook*.

The saltwater fish have toyish colors. Humorous mannerisms. Their habitats cost thousands, there are too many pipes and gauges. I tell myself, who wants to own cartoon fish anyway?

The freshwater fish are more subtle. Blander colors. Simpler needs. According to the aquarium book, they are less prone to death.

Sebastian finds a ten gallon starter kit. \$49.99 for the tank, lights, filter, heater, gravel, pH treatments, flake food. An ecosystem in a box.

"You should get a goldfish."

"Cliché. Besides, goldfish are dirty. It says so right here in the handbook."

We peruse the tanks. The employees seem unqualified and untrustworthy. Dr. Axelrod is our guide. Angelfish are beautiful, but too large. Gouramis have personality, but are tumorous. Never buy guppies from a commercial pet store. They are bred for color over longevity.

"We'll take half a dozen Tetras. Blackskirts. And do you have Southern Platies? The orange ones."

We try to choose the brightest citizens of each school, but the swoop of the net is indifferent.

"What about décor? You should get some plants."

The directions on the live plants are exhausting. We opt for plastic weeds. Sebastian disappears and comes back waving a skeleton pirate sitting on top of a treasure chest. Plastic gold coins pile up around his metatarsals.

"No way."

"Aw come on, look at this guy. Hilarious!"

"It's depressing."

"Fine. I'm buying it then. I'll use it for a hood ornament."

I set the tank up in the living room, on an oak cabinet beside the dining room table. The cabinet is a gift from Polly's mother, nicer than we could afford. Truth be told, I can't even afford the tank right now. I haven't worked in months.

I pour in the gravel and run a hose from the kitchen sink. The water comes out cloudy brown.

The fish peer up at me from their plastic bags on the floor. They look terrified.

The aquarium book reveals the problem. You're supposed to wash the gravel in

a colander first. I ransack the kitchen looking for one, and I'm surprised when I find it. Polly doesn't cook much anymore, and I never have. I start over.

The water is still cloudy. I start over again.

The third time, the water comes out clean. I add the pH balancing chemicals and plant the fake weeds. Clip on the filter and the water heater. The system whirs to life. I wonder if the sound will eventually get annoying.

At the bottom of the shopping bag, I find the skeleton pirate. Sebastian must have slipped it in before I dropped him off. He's always pulling little stunts like that to get what he wants. It's infuriating.

But I'm in a good mood, so I toss the pirate into the tank anyway.

Dr. Axelrod says to wait 24 hours before putting in the fish. Their plastic bags are starting to mist up. Is that from their breathing? What if they run out of oxygen?

I dump the bags into the water. The fish freeze for a moment, the shock of new surroundings, but they quickly recover and dart around the water. The Tetras nestle in the weeds. The Platies huddle around the skeleton pirate, their colors dulled under the shadow of his treasure chest.

Polly comes home and flops down on the couch. She says that being a hostess is just as tough as waitressing. I don't see how it could be.

She pulls a wet nap from her purse and smears away makeup.

"Did you send out résumés?"

"Yeah. Well, no. I've been a little busy."

I take her hand and try to coax her off the couch. She fights me.

"Terrence. You need to try harder."

"I want to show you something."

I lead her over to the tank, which I've covered up with a tablecloth for the reveal. I whip it off. Her face remains cryptic.

"This is what you've been doing all day?"

"What do you think?"

She kneels down and stares through the glass.

"I like the pirate."

"I know, right? Sebastian didn't want me to get him. He said it was kitschy."

"No. It's funny. Hello fishies!"

She taps the glass. The fish scatter from their hiding places.

“Cute! Do they have names?”

“Of course. That pretty red one there is Little Polly Junior. She’s a Tetra.”

“The fat one? What are you trying to say?”

She grants me a smile to let me know this is not a real fight. I relax. The tank is a success. I have bought us some time.

“And that little guy behind the weeds is Sebastian Junior.”

“What about that one? The orange one.”

“Terrence Junior, Esquire. He’s a Platyfish. The noblest of all the freshwater species.”

“Huh. His eye is wonky.”

I look closer. One eye is dislodged from its socket, fixed in a permanent upward gaze.

“That’s so he’s always looking up. He has high aspirations.”

She laughs and ruffles my hair. We microwave hot and sour soup from the restaurant and sit at the dining room table, watching the happenings of the tank. We try a feeding, but the fish are still nervous. The flakes grow soggy and sink to the bottom, undevoured.

“Isn’t this better than TV?”

“I guess. Maybe not if we could afford HBO.”

Oh well. At least, there’s no mention of a dog.

The next morning, I get up early to check on the tank. It’s a massacre. Fish corpses piled across the gravel, pale and swollen.

All that’s left is a pair of Tetras and the Platy with the wonky eye. Little Terrence Junior. I try to convince Polly that the other two are hers and Sebastian’s Tetras. Really, there’s no way to be sure.

“Why did the other ones die?”

(Because I was desperate. Because I thought I knew better than Dr. Axelrod. Because I am a reckless and irresponsible fish owner.)

“I don’t know. Maybe because we didn’t give them names.”

I vow to keep the survivors alive. This charge requires daily trips to the pet store. A pricey filter upgrade. Name brand fish food, enriched with Omega 6 fatty acids. Chemicals for the water. A rock cave for shelter. A light timer, to closely mimic the daylight patterns of their tropical habitat.

It works. The fish grow more energetic. They nibble up the flakes at feeding time. Their colors brighten. The Platy takes up residence in the rock cave, while

the Tetras seem content amongst the plastic weeds. All in all, they seem to be thriving.

But still, I worry it's only a matter of time before the next crisis. *Dr. Axelrod's Handbook* is full of cautionary tales of parasites and algae outbreaks that can claim a whole school overnight. When Polly wants to go out to see a band or a movie, I make excuses for us to stay home.

Cabin fever sets in. She starts withholding her body as punishment, which is new. Usually I'm the one who can't keep up with her in that department. Eventually, Sebastian calls up and invites us to a party. Polly won't take no for an answer. We go.

The lounge is called "The Collective." It seems like that's the trend now, impersonal nightclub names. Polly isn't listening to me. She's too busy inspecting the wardrobes of the people standing in line. There's a list at the door. I'm not on it. I wave Sebastian out, and he assures the bouncer we're part of the event. Part of The Collective.

Inside, it's a mix of local Young Hollywood and transplants from Young Wall Street. Sebastian works for a movie financier, but hates it. He's cooking up his escape—a business plan designed to make him financially independent. If the financing comes through, he'll need to move to Estonia for a year. He pulls out pictures. Mossy castles and cobblestone roads. Gray skies. Established looking trees.

"It's like if Transylvania had a tourism board," someone says.

Sebastian slots a plastic overlay over a snapshot of the capital. Electronic billboards now flash up around the Eastern European architecture.

"Hey," I say, "maybe after the billboards you can build another Euro Disney."

He deflects my sarcasm with a smile. He clinks our glasses together, as though I were a co-conspirator in the venture.

Polly seems impressed. Not just with the business plan, but with the whole atmosphere. She mingles with the Ivy Leaguers and laughs on cue at their jokes and accepts expensive drinks that I wouldn't be able to afford.

After a while, I can't stand it anymore. I pull her into a booth in the back and try to erect a quarantine out of conversation.

"So. Estonia. Can you believe he brought his little props with him?"

"I like it. It's ambitious."

"Ambitious? Like the Soviets were ambitious? Stalin? Like that?"

“Everything’s beneath you, Terrence. That’s why you can’t find a job. You’re so fucking negative.”

“I’m just saying! Sebastian’s fashioning himself into some kind of Eastern European robber baron. I’m supposed to be OK with that?”

“You need to grow up. The world isn’t tailored to your personal expectations.”

I can feel the walls of the quarantine crumbling. I try to think of something to say, something funny or kind. Nothing comes to mind. Polly heads back toward the party.

I try to follow, but I lose sight of her. I keep brushing up against impossibly broad shoulders and colliding with impossibly long legs. This isn’t my terrain. I wonder when it became hers.

The apartment becomes a nucleus designed to keep us in separate orbits. Polly’s orbit is larger than mine. Her shifts get later. She spends nights away, ostensibly with friends. When she is home, we hardly speak. The résumé inquiries become less frequent. Then, stop altogether.

I fill my days with minutiae. Furniture adjustments. E-mails to old college friends who never reply. Pointless errands. The tank helps—there’s always something to study up on and tinker with. By this point, I’ve read the aquarium book cover to cover.

Sometimes, when I run out of things to adjust, I just sit and watch. The sway of the fake weeds as the Tetras spiral up and down their stems. The silver bubbles burping out of Little T Jr.’s rock cave.

Dr. Axelrod says that people who keep aquariums have lower cortisol levels. They’ve done tests to prove it.

I start synching my alarm clock to the tank’s light timer. One morning, I wake up an hour before the lights and can’t get back to sleep. I check in on the tank. The fishes’ bodies are still in the water, fins wagging peacefully in the dark. I envy them.

I want to turn the lights on, but Dr. Axelrod says it’s important to maintain constant daylight cycles, for the circadian rhythms. So, I wait.

Polly’s already out for the day, or maybe she didn’t come home at all. I press my cheek up against the glass of the tank. My peripheral vision catches on something. White dots, snaking up a plastic weed, like a tiny string of pearls.

I panic. I’m thinking, fungus. I’m thinking, infestation. Aquatic worms.

I turn the lights on, circadian rhythms be damned.

The fish scatter in confusion, looping crazily around the tank. It has the look of a protest. They are angry at me for disturbing their dreams. Don't they know I'm only trying to save them?

I peer in at the white dots and grab the aquarium book from the table. Anchor worm? Negative. Planaria? Highly unlikely. Saprolegnia? No, definitely not.

I flip through all the pages of fish killers, but I don't find anything. I somehow end up in the breeding section. A picture of Tetra eggs. Roe, as the handbook calls them.

We have a match.

So. Does this mean Little P Jr. and Little S Jr. have been going at it?

I search for another explanation. Maybe the eggs belong to Little Terrence. Maybe he got pregnant in the pet store community tank and only now came to term. Of course, that would mean my fish proxy is a "she," but that's easier to swallow than the alternative. I flip to the section on his breed, the Platies. Dr. Axelrod says they are livebearers. They don't lay eggs.

When I look up from the page, Terrence Junior is nosing at the roe. A single pearl slips off the side of the weed and tumbles down into the gravel. The Tetras dart over and give chase. The three of them spiral around the tank. The Tetras are faster. They swoop in on Little T, on his wonky eye side; he doesn't see them swimming up to nip at his fins until it's too late.

I give the glass a punch and the water shudders. The Tetras freeze for a second and then scatter back to the weeds.

A scrap of torn dorsal fin floats in the water beside Little Terrence Junior. He turns and nibbles on it, and then, realizing what it is, spits it back out.

With a sad flick of his tail, he swims back down to the safety of the rock cave.

Polly doesn't come home for three days. I call her friends, but all I get is voicemail. I even call her mother, same thing. Finally, I try her work. Polly answers, a peppy, over-rehearsed restaurant greeting. I hang up.

I call Sebastian.

"Polly's been gone for three days. I just called her work, and she answered."

"Oh."

"What do I do? Do I go over there?"

"I don't think you should go over there."

"I think she might be leaving me."

"Terrence? We need to talk."

"What do you mean? Need to talk about what?"

“It’s about Polly. We should do this in person.”

I hang up. My brain shuts down. My lungs shut down. I tell myself to start breathing again, but when I do it comes fast and irregular, and I feel like I’m about to start hyperventilating.

I stumble into the bathroom. Check the medicine cabinet for Xanax. Nothing. Head to the liquor cabinet in the kitchen. A bottle of Bacardi. Raspberry flavored. I start drinking. Pull after pull, hard and fast.

I sit at the dining room table, staring at the tank, hugging the bottle. There’s about six shots left. I walk over to the tank, flip open the feeding lid, and pour in the rest.

The fish swim up to the top half to investigate the splashing. They sniff the water and speed back down to the bottom. The rum dribbles down onto them, oily and rainbow colored under the lights of the tank.

At first there’s a struggle. The fish dart around the water, desperately searching for less toxic spaces. There’s no outpacing the diffusion of the rum. They sink back down and resign themselves to its effects. The Platy down in his cave, the Tetras huddled up against their eggs on the weeds. Their fins slow. They start to twitch.

The twitching looks painful. It hurts my heart, watching it. What have I done? Am I not the caretaker of this aquarium? Is the wellbeing of this habitat not under my care? I rush to the kitchen and turn on the faucet, fill three glasses from the sink, and rush back to the tank. The net has slipped back behind the cabinet, out of reach. I scoop the fish out with my hands. They don’t try to swim away. They barely even flap around in my hands. They have surrendered.

I slide their tiny bodies into the faucet water. Side by side, one in each glass. The Tetras try to swim towards each other, but they bump up against the hard surface where the water ends. The barrier is beyond their understanding. They nose the glass, trying to push their way through.

I think about getting them a larger bowl to share. But thinking about it is as far as I go. Even under this much guilt, my kindness has its limits.

Down in the tank, the skeleton pirate is unfazed. His lipless smile seems widened by the rum. He is glad to be rid of the fish. No more stray fins to tickle his ribcage. No more wandering snouts to disturb his gold.

And sure, maybe in time it will get lonely. What does he care? He is rich.