

THE AQUARIUM

I

I have been here for exactly one year. My soft and gentle skin, which I guarded jealously as I reared my daughter and for which I was praised as I raised my son, has transformed into a covering of harsh love, covered in pinky-red blotches. One year, exactly one year...People have been thinking of me as a fish for a year. I say *people*, though the fact is that three hundred sixty-five days have passed with these children, to whom I gave birth, amusing themselves with me.

When I bought the aquarium, I didn't realise that I was preparing my own coffin. Needless to say, had I realised, I would have chosen a really big one. I am at heart a worrier. The four rooms of our home, not to mention the aquarium, are spacious enough for humans, and we could happily have described our living room as large. As far as I was concerned, however, the broad Mongolian steppe, praised as infinite in every poem and song, this broad homeland of ours, stretching unendingly outwards, seemed to get smaller as we galloped further and further. I needed far, far more space, inconceivably far more space, than did the others.

But even though the space I would wish for would be this small aquarium, not even before the Buddha in a dream would I have chosen everything that has happened. An aquarium. That my space, my heart's desire, would be of such proportions!

My daughter said she would decorate the aquarium, and so I woke up and came to my senses with the beautiful oyster shells which I had collected over the past few years splashing against one another over my head. Small bones from the ocean which before had fit loosely in my palm were now ten percent bigger than I was. It was disturbing, I didn't conceal the fear that I would die, I began to leap about. And every time I leapt, my little daughter could not help laughing sweetly and hurling oysters at me from above. Her mother's every fear was a source of pleasure to her beloved little girl. *What have you done?*

Oh no, no, really this was not her doing. Nor was the Buddha involved at all. Why on earth should the Buddha have been involved? In fact, it was all Samsa's doing. I loved Samsa even more than Kafka. When I was a child, I loved Quasimodo. Quasimodo certainly pushed me strongly in Samsa's direction. Or at least that's what Samsa said...I don't know, I don't know. In any case, when I was asleep, I thought to whisper Samsa's name. And I woke up to this. All of this.

But I am a woman, and rather suspicious, and so I became not a centipede but a small fish with golden scales. Surely, too, there was my groundless fear of insects to take into consideration.

And there's another difference between me and Samsa. My family doesn't know that I have become a fish. My name is on the list of missing persons, the police conducted a very wide search, my poor husband used everything he had to find me, when night came he would drink glass after glass of arhi on his own, and as he drank I know that he whispered my name, he whispered

and he wept. He would weep at anything. And however small I might have been, this was a comfort to me.

Nor can I complain about my brothers and sisters. Previously they would come by once a year, at New Year, and now they come almost every day, they have a rota, they take turns to come and spend time with my two children, they take care of them. Not only that, my two elder brothers were standing once by the aquarium, they were whispering to each other how they were paying a private detective, separately from the one my husband had taken on, and how they were planning to follow and investigate him. The elder of the two thought it certain that my husband had killed me. They had decided together to remortgage their own houses in order to pay the detective. Listening to this, my tears started glistening. They say that fish don't have tears, but that's a lie. There are so many people whom I love and, when I think what they are prepared to do for me, I want to cry a little.

So there are many things which comfort me. But there are definitely more things which disturb me. With her constant "Get the fish out," my little girl is always looking after me. Because she is six, she doesn't understand what happens when water is cold, and when it is hot. And, on one occasion, she barely avoided killing her mother, replacing the food with black ink from a pen. Sometimes she goes two or three days without feeding me. But actually, I don't get particularly hungry. When Samsa made me a fish, he probably thought that I wouldn't need special food, I wouldn't die from hunger like the others. It's just that, when I was a human, I couldn't go two days without food, and this thought makes me jump at the food which the little girl throws to me.

So yes, I have become a fish, and this is a real change for my family as much as for me. My husband descended from the heights of his twenty years' struggle to the death. In other words, being the boss at work, he'd had no time to worry about me, and he'd totally abandoned me. There's no point in my hiding what was for me some really, really good news, the very best of news. He sat beside the aquarium, holding my daughter in his arms, talking about all this. "Daddy will always be with his little girl now," he said. "I won't carry on working." And I almost leapt out of the water.

My son had already stopped feeling sad about me. He had never obeyed me. He was too independent, he didn't want to be twelve, and I didn't particularly appreciate his precocious way with language. So, while I would say, "Please don't come home late from school," he would be late, and he'd come in saying, "So I played outside a bit after school – what's the big deal?" His obstinacy almost made me crazy. But that's not how he is any more. Not really. As soon as he came home from school, he wouldn't stop to take off his muddy shoes, but now, as my daughter was scattering earthworms into the aquarium, she whispered innocently to herself that he had polished and put on his houseshoes, and then I stopped worrying. Nonetheless, whether my son had drunk the tea which he had grabbed, or whether he had made light work of his chores, now he was off out to give the dog some fresh air. He treated the dog with kindness as though he was fighting with me. When he quarrelled with his younger sister, he would whine a little and then fall quite silent. Despite this, I heard him quietly and thoughtfully saying to his father "I'll go and cut my sister's hair."

My daughter is very changed. She spends her day talking with her fish (that is to say, with her poor mother). Previously, she would have spent her days demanding sugary juice drinks, clinging to my skirts and drooping weepily. There was no tasty and nourishing morsel, no attractive toy that we could give her which would satisfy her. *More, more* was all that fell from her mouth. As far as she was concerned, ten grains of sugar and ten sacks of sugar were the same. But this new situation made her straightaway aware. Nowadays, she only eats a little of the candies given to her and her brother, she has stopped hoarding them. I am delighted with all these changes, they are very much changes for the better.

At first, my aquarium had seemed tight and dark and chilly, but in the end, once I had gotten used to it, it had become, to my mind, not tight, not dark and not chilly.

As the third month passed, I was thinking, with some regret, *How, when I was a human, could I have bought so small an aquarium?* But as much as I totally forgot about it, I still felt how this little glass chamber held so very little room. I knew intimately every particular corner of this glass chamber, and it was all pretty agreeable to me. Wherever I looked, everything was clear beyond the glass. From my place on the writing desk in the center of the children's room, I can see my son or daughter from wherever I look.

I see how my husband gets the children to revise their schoolwork almost every day, how he combs our daughter's hair himself, how he puts out paints and paper for our son to practise his drawing, and this moves me. It is sweet how, in the evenings, he tells the children bedtime stories which he and I had loved. I know by his voice that they are asking about me, it makes me sigh. Most interesting, though, is that between the three of them they have not spoken about me much, and that my daughter, not even when she was by herself, has once said "mummy." This doesn't make me happy. But what can I say, they are already out of my control.

Once, when I was up in the topmost section of the glass container, I pushed myself out of the water, gazing out at my daughter. I was hoping that she would recognise me. But she didn't pay much attention. As I looked intently at my daughter, she said to me, with some conviction, "Hey, goldfish, give me three wishes!"

So she whispered her three wishes. First, *Make my brother give my mummy back.* Second, *Give the selection to my mummy.* Third, *Let me fall asleep in mummy's lap.*

My heart just about broke. And yes, fish do have hearts.

I was saddened because not once did they ask their father about me, nor did they weep for me. Nonetheless...my poor little kids...

I thought about why she might imagine I had gone off with another brother, but I couldn't work it out. The selection she had mentioned was of candies.

I felt immeasurable love for my daughter. But a fish is just a fish. It cannot speak. But if I could speak, I would talk to her, I would explain, I would say, *Think about how you care for someone.* Right? Right. That's how it is. Most people cannot go beyond their own suffering. So what is the difference between saying something and not saying something?

You might ask yourself, What does a fish in an aquarium think about? It makes me laugh. And if you say these little creatures feel sadness and loneliness and sorrow, I'll laugh myself silly. Really, I do feel sadness and loneliness and sorrow. But the fact that no-one knows this is the most totally and utterly miserable thing of all, the ultimate torment.

As the days pass, before I know it I have become used to my sadness, to my loneliness without human company, and to my extraordinary sorrow. In fact, this getting used to something is not a human process, but an animal one. I loved my son and daughter and my husband. But now that my family is living without me, it appears that they are starting to become used to this strange form of separation.

II

One night, eight months after I had become a fish, my husband brought home one of my close girlfriends. The children went off with one of my elder brothers. My girlfriend was sitting in my little daughter's room, and she started whispering about me to my husband, lawful and wedded as he was...and then they had sex.

I watched the strangely melancholic, aggressive way in which my husband did the deed, it was quite different from when he had been with me, and I was utterly amazed. Most interesting though was that I felt no sadness, no jealousy. Really, a fish is different from a human in that it doesn't begrudge anything. People are stingy, possessive things.

Later on, they told each other little lies. My girlfriend said, sadly, "I don't love my husband," and my husband replied, "I know, deep down I know that." When I was a human and not a fish, I had been unable to see this behavior in these friends of mine. From what my girlfriend was saying, my husband was the second man she'd been with. "Please don't lie," I shouted impetuously, "he is the fifteenth man you've slept with!" I wasn't jealous, I just didn't want to go along with her lie. But they didn't hear me. But, let's face it, there are no creatures on the earth who can be deaf like humans.

And from what my husband was saying, I had a secret lover. This man, my one and only upon this earth, his face betraying no sadness, whispered, "I guess she's with him now," and expressed in a peculiar tone his wish to have sex again. My friend agreed, she'd like that, and she smiled in a way I didn't recognise. I passed the night watching intently how they screamed with one another, how they ended up scratching at one another's backs.

My husband was utterly changed. But no, in fact he was become another man. And, I sighed as I thought about this, and the dawn grew light.

One morning, when my son had finished school, he took his journal and wrote a poem. He wrote a poem about a tree. When he had finished writing, he read it aloud in a whisper, beautifully, and suddenly the exercise book was no more, it was ripped into little pieces, and he ran around the room, scattering the pieces. My daughter made them snow and played all day, throwing them up around her.

Thus I understood why my son had become more and more angry, why he had strewn his exercise book, ripped up, around his room. My God, though, he was a born mathematician, "I planned it all earlier," he said. He had been

his own man, even when I was human. I swam then, morning to evening, thinking to myself, "Huh? Who are you imitating, making yourself a poet?"

Early that evening, my son came back inside, his face looked utterly exhausted. He sat for a while, looking around, and then suddenly got up and came near to the aquarium. It looked like he wanted to cause a disturbance. He began, one by one, to take the tins of paint and pour them into the water until they were all mixed together. I leapt all around, jumping out of this frighteningly poisonous mixture of red and yellow and green. And my son entertained himself with me until my little daughter, my savior, came in.

Suddenly...yes, it was all very sudden. I suddenly felt very tired.

A whole year has passed. Although a fish really does nothing, I am really tired. Completely worn out, from watching everything I shouldn't see.

Through my fishy eyes I have looked into the secrets of my nearest and dearest, I have sometimes been wounded, shamed, frightened, hurt, either by myself or by someone else.

"There are two aspects to growing up. In truth, it is enough to show one of these to others. If someone shows themselves to be good, that's great. Thinking about this, this was the side I wanted to show to others, I made it into a mask. Though the second is different, the person who uses this mask will have a hard time with others. If we resolve to strip away the mask, on the other hand, what need is there to see the flipside, the real face?" In coming, finally, to this philosophically considered conclusion, I am eager to be not a regular fish, but a contemplative fish.

Being a fish is actually quite pleasant for me. I don't expect to get any answers, I don't live for anyone's benefit, I don't love anyone, nor am I unhappy, I don't get angry, or upset with anyone, nor do I scold anyone, nor am I asked to scold anyone. This is what life as a human is like, actually. Why should I cause everyone and myself to suffer in this way, poor things? However...

Inside the aquarium, the slower the days passed, the simpler they were. At the beginning, everything had appeared like a revelation. Now this is not the case. I am quite used to some things being a fable, and some things being real life. People (of course, a person is not a fish. People must be people. I'm talking about fish. But sure, there's really no difference) – so people get tired of becoming habituated to certain things. But, thinking about it, we are surely wrong to say that we get tired from not becoming habituated to certain things. In fact, we get tired through having become too habituated to things.

III

I have woken up, not in my glass chamber, but lying on a comfortable sofa in my bedroom. Everything's back to normal. I'd like to believe that everything that has happened has been a dream.

My husband is at work now. My son is arguing with me, making me angry. My daughter has begun a quarrel about candied fruits. My girlfriend talks to me on the phone, laughing as she whispers how much more she loves her husband than before. Not only is my husband as he was, but when we have sex, he is as gentle and courteous as he was before, he controls my desires,

just as he always did. But I have been relating differently to my son. I have stopped doing his head in, stopped saying "Think about your numbers!" and I've given him some poetry books. Life continues apace.

But our life is different than before, it seems to have more flavor, more hidden aspects. I have recovered some things which I had lost, and I don't want to lose them again. I have been thinking that, in this way, everything that was good has returned to being good.

One time, I wanted to talk, unreservedly, without keeping anything back, about the time I spent away from my husband. I knew everything anyway, of course. But this is human, right? A fish doesn't have this approach.

Imagine what I heard!

I was really shocked by what I was told. My brothers had demanded money from my husband. He was upset, he told me how they had imprisoned him, and had extracted a guarantee from him, as the children's guardian, that he would make all our money over to them. They had gone to my husband's work every day and quarrelled with him until he became sick and quit working. My husband was extremely distressed as he explained how he had gone downhill, and had hit the bottle on his own almost every night.

But when my daughter came and sat with me that evening in the laundry room, she started crying and whispering to me, "Mummy, oh mummy!" And not only did my son make every decision as a mathematician, this was also how he made selections. He talked to me about what I knew and about what I didn't know. But he didn't mention the relationship with my girlfriend. I didn't ask about it. I know he doesn't talk about things which don't relate to him.

I love my husband, I am annoyed with my mean big brothers, and I weep for this. My aquarium was small, but I thought that everything was visible to me. The four sides were glass, so it seemed that I saw the world from every angle. But an aquarium is an aquarium. Outside it is also an aquarium. The life which thrives in these three rooms of ours was not visible to me. And what's more, there is everything beyond these four rooms where we live, it's all there...but we say nothing about this...

I knew what had happened with my brothers, I harbored a grudge against them, and so it comforted me to weep and weep. I asked my husband, "Is there anything you're not telling me?" When I said this, I certainly did not expect an answer. I just needed to ask.

But imagine what my husband said in reply!

"I slept with your best friend."

This is how this part finishes. In fact, this is how this story finishes. I heard what my husband said and I was suddenly overcome with a strange sadness. Whatever I had previously guessed at had been useless. I had trusted that my husband had been telling me lies, that he had not been telling me the truth. But no! He'd been telling me the truth. Thus I realised suddenly that I had in fact not expected the truth, I had not sought anything (or, more accurately, I had certainly not found anything). Everything I had been watching in secret had been lies. This was in fact my real life.

Did I want to know that I knew what was certain, not about others but about myself? My inner life was inside the glass chamber...

In the early part of the night, Samsa again came to me. But this time I decided to ask for everything on my behalf. He asked me, "Are you thinking about your aquarium?" I thought slowly. I decided to be a fish again. I said to Samsa, "The aquarium is all the better for being small."

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Belh