

## *Goldfish*

*by Moe Cidaly*

Before this morning, Ed thought it was impossible to have the same dream twice. He first dreamt it five years ago: lying on his back on soft snow-covered ground, a dark sky above him, the touch of snowflakes on his skin and warm blood running out of his nose. And ever since, he had the feeling he had witnessed the last moment of his life.

He dreamt it a second time last night, and took it as a sign that today his life would come to an end, but when he rushed to his bedroom window and hastily pushed the curtains aside, he saw no trace of snow in the winter morning. He pressed his forehead and palms against the window and the sigh of relief fogged up the cold glass; maybe it was just a dream after all.

At work the thoughts of all the things he wanted to do before his death surrounded him. Sure, he'd read almost all the books he'd wanted to, and he'd been to most of the places he'd wanted to visit – he considered himself someone who lived life to the fullest. And yet, there were more things he wanted to do and he knew that there was no end to the wishes of a living man.

It was around twelve o'clock when he noticed that the sky had grown dark. When he looked out of his office window he saw snowflakes going down on the pavements and streets. The fine, fast-falling spots of white stood out clearly against the dark clothes of the people outside. He returned to his desk but he was restless and couldn't concentrate. He sensed that something was about to happen and sensed too that he needed to stop it. He sought for the reason behind his anxiety. He thought that maybe it was one of those obsessive thoughts he had to deal with every now and then. He had fought with them for a long time but apparently they were still there—it took a lot of effort for an obsessive mind to accept the fact that everything is in order except itself.

He made a cup of green tea, put on his headphones and played his favorite songs, took some deep breaths, but couldn't calm himself down; he needed to leave the office but he didn't know where to go. He decided to act according to his instincts. Ten minutes later he was on the bus home.

He looked at the digital clock on the bus; he knew that it must be half past one but the display showed four o'clock. By the time he reached his stop the dishonest clock read seventeen past four. He must be on the right track, he felt, because his anxiety was growing more and more severe.

As soon as he got off the bus, he started to run through the snow towards his apartment. The crunch of it under his feet echoed in the silence. He couldn't wait for the elevator so he took the stairs. His keys were already in his hands when he reached his door and some seconds later he was inside. He looked everywhere but found nothing unusual.

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He slumped onto his sofa and closed his eyes. The sense of anxiety was still there; his right leg was shaking involuntarily, his brain was resisting against the pressure of his shrinking skull, his muscles were stiff. His heart was bursting. The tightness in his chest made it tough to breathe. He frowned and pressed his teeth together; now he was worried about leaving work for no reason, too. He opened his eyes and looked at the fishbowl on the table next to the window. It was his habit to watch the movements of the animal to calm himself down when worried: watching the lone veil-tail fish—its long double tail, silver scales and the splashed patch of red around its head was like looking at a bride waltzing with a rose bouquet in hand. He was just starting to relax when the fish jumped out of the water and landed on the carpet. He knew that it was a sign. He picked up the fish and put it back in the bowl.

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He did not want to stay at home to avoid prophesy of the dream. He didn't want to take those feelings seriously. But then, if it weren't for his anxiety, his goldfish would be dead.

Saving the animal's life made him think as if now it owed all its beauty and movements to him—the savior. He despised the sentiment. It had made him uncomfortable for years, from the day it started: in a crowded pool with his elder brother, Mike. Ed was in the shallow part with another kid his own age. They couldn't swim. Mike was somewhere in the deeper parts swimming with his friends. Wanting to feel grown up, Ed grabbed the edge of the pool and started inching deeper. He was half way there when his hands slipped and he was plunged into the water. The leviathan of death grabbed his skinny arms and swallowed him deeper the harder he tried to grasp the edge. Flapping and choking, he struggled to get his head out of the water. Everybody was busy swimming and his friend was a statue, shocked. Nobody noticed him, not

even the lifeguards. When he needed to take a breath, there was no air. When he needed a helping hand, there was none. When he needed to scream, no sound could be made. And when he was too busy dying to know that he needed all those things, something grabbed his legs from beneath and pushed him towards the edge of the pool. The surface broke, lungs burned for air and weight of the whole world was lifted from his little chest. In the shock and confusion he saw the staring faces all around. The overwhelming relief at being above the water gave way to wonder – who out of all these people was his savior? He saw Mike's head coming out of the water.

The memory kept telling him that from then on, he owned everything to Mike—his savior. And it was hard for Ed to accept, for the brothers had been worlds apart their whole life. Their childhood wasn't a happy one, made up of financial problems and their unfaithful, irresponsible father who was kicked out of their lives by their mother. These problems had caused Mike to grow aggressive towards Ed.

Ed never mentioned to anyone, not even their mother, the way Mike treated him as a child. Mother's hands were already full of troubles. And so, in response to Mike's aggressions, Ed promised himself that when he became stronger he would make him pay for them. But when Ed really grew stronger—physically and emotionally—the rage was gone. Only a residue of coldness towards Mike remained in his heart. And this coldness forced Ed to avoid seeing his brother—save for the times their mother was around.

On the other hand, the memory of the swimming pool was constantly nagging at him. But to make peace with his brother he had to neglect a thousand bad memories and take only one into consideration.

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But given the feeling that today would be his last, there was one thing he needed to do.

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When Mike opened the door, he looked surprised. His little boy, Tim, sneaked out from behind his father and smiled when he saw Ed on the front step.

"Hi," Ed said to both of them with a smile.

"Is everything okay?" asked Mike.

"Why... sure."

"I mean..." Mike looked confused.

"Do I need to have a special reason to visit?"

"Of course not. Come on in," Mike said sheepishly, and with a forced smile gave way to Ed to enter.

Squatting down to his nephew's level, Ed gave the kid a plastic bag containing his goldfish. "I might go on a trip tomorrow, so I thought you could take care of it for a while?"

Smiling, the child nodded. Mike's wife seemed surprised but welcoming as the unexpected guest handed her a cold, empty goldfish bowl.

"Let it get warmed up a bit, then you can put the fish inside," Ed said as he winked at Tim. Then he sat down on the sofa and his brother fixed him a drink.

"You had dinner?" asked Mike.

"No."

“Good. Dine with us then,” said Mike as he went to help Tim to fill up the goldfish bowl.

Ed watched the father and son. He was happy for what he had done tonight. Maybe when he became a father, he thought, and Mike treated his own child with the same affection as he showed Tim, things would be different. But if it was his last day, then how could he have a child?

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Ed left the house with peace of mind after having dinner. He was the last person on the bus when he reached his stop—the beginning of a path on a vast pine-covered hill. He always imagined that the real world might change into a wonderland, that the driver would turn into some mysterious creature and the bus transform with some sort of witchcraft into a ghostly carriage. The thought made him want to stay on the bus to see the final destination for himself.

But when it reached the stop, the world was still the world, the driver was still the driver, and the bus was still the bus. He stepped down on the snow and looked around. It was dark, and snow was everywhere and so cold that the air inside his lungs froze and he started to cough. Even his nasal hair was frozen. It was dead calm—so quiet that he could hear the sound of the snowflakes falling down on his jacket and on the pine trees. Nobody was around. The snow fell heavily. When the bus had gone, the pale orange lamp of the bus stop was the only source of light, which made things in the world around recognizable. He began the walk back home: he didn't want to deprive himself of the joy of a stroll in a quiet, snowy night. Besides, tomorrow was Saturday and there was no rush to get to bed.

He was heading downhill when the roar of a car engine disturbed the silence, approaching from behind. When he turned to look, the car was just a couple of meters away,

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heading straight towards his fragile body; as if the driver could not see him in the darkness and the curtain of snowfall. The impact was unavoidable.

He lay on the soft snow-covered ground with his eyelids pressed tightly closed. He did not feel any pain. He didn't know how—everything happened so fast—but he was alive and nothing else mattered. Carrying his death further and further away from him, the car drove on and vanished in the darkness.