

Swim

Oreo is the latest fish to die. He started to look ill a couple days ago, and Dad and I did our best to save him, but there wasn't much we could do. Betta fish aren't supposed to live very long, but I seem to have incredibly poor luck. Oreo is the fifth to go in four years.

Dad kicks his boots against the shovel, which thumps against the hard dirt. It's late November and I shiver as snow lands atop my beanie. Mom stacks on another blanket and squeezes my shoulder. I lean into her and watch Dad try to dig. He said the cold makes the ground harder to break, but I begged him to try anyways. I can't let Oreo sit in the freezer.

He was a beautiful fish. White body and big black fins that rippled in the water like flags spun by a twirler. I got him after Ginger died eight months ago, and he's kept me company while Mom is at work and Dad is busy and I am alone in my bedroom, listening to children play outside and wishing I was well enough to join them.

Dad grunts, and the shovel severs a crack in the ground. He kicks down, unearthing a few inches of dirt. Progress.

I hold Oreo in my palms, wrapped gently in soft white cloth. I keep still, like he is fragile as glass, and as Dad slowly chips away at the earth, I lean down and whisper to the betta.

"I'll see you soon."

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Dad tucks me in, kisses my forehead and closes the door, but I'm not sleeping anytime soon. I fold my hands on my lap and wait, watching out the window as the full moon creeps out from behind a murky gray cloud. It's a fairly clear night and I can see stars twinkling above the tips of the pines. The moon takes view, shining a bright beam through my window and pooling bluish light on my bed sheets. Dust dances in the air, illuminated. I raise my hand and swish it, watching as the sparkling particles billow away.

I lower my hand and wait. It'll be any moment now.

Dia is the first to arrive. She was my second betta, but she's the most outgoing, always whipping and flashing her turquoise tail like a silk gown. Now her colors aren't as bright. She is translucent and wispy, but beautiful all the same. I see her outline glimmer in the moonlight at the foot of my bed, and the closer she swims, the clearer she looks. I hold out my palm, and she idles above it, looking up at me with expressionless black eyes.

"Hello," I whisper. She bobbles a moment, then swims up in a spiral, sending the dust shimmering out around her.

Ghost is next, who I never knew would be so appropriately named. In life he was all white, and now he's no different. He was my first fish. When he passed I didn't see him at first, not until I could see Dia too, about six months after my diagnosis. He is shy and slow, and floats near my knees.

Ginger swims into the light, rippling her orange fins and bopping into my nose, like she always does. I look around, holding out hope that I will see Ben. He's never swum into my room, and I think it's because Dad never buried him. Ben passed in a winter like this one, and Dad didn't want to dig in the snow.

Finally, I see Oreo's shape take form. He darts around the moonbeam, confused. Gently, I hold out my hand, and he cautiously approaches. Once he's close, he threads through my fingers, just like he would in the tank. I giggle as his wispy tail shimmers into dust as it grazes my skin.

The fish look especially clear tonight. Sharp outlines and detailed folds. When I first saw them they barely took form, instead swam through the light like puffy clouds of dust. I was so scared. I remember calling for Dad, but he couldn't see them even when they floated inches from his eyes. He told me it was a nightmare, and I reluctantly agreed.

Now when I see them, I tell no one. Mom and Dad would call me crazy, like they did Grandma. Before she died, she told everyone she could see her Pomeranian, Ladybug, running around the house at night. Ladybug had passed two years previous. Everyone called Grandma *senile* and *old*. I am neither, but I can see the fish all the same.

I think it's because, like Grandma was, I am also dying. I think I'm very close, because the fish are so clear, just like they were before my longest stint in the hospital when every day I wondered if I'd see the sun rise in the morning. I don't feel terribly sick right now, but tomorrow I have a checkup, and I'm guessing it won't be good news.

"Is it scary?" I whisper to Oreo, but he only stares back.

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The car rumbles towards the hospital, and I stare at the back of Dad's head, which has scraggly ginger locks he used to groom before he became my full-time caretaker. My hair was the same color, before I lost it all. They got me a wig, but I prefer hats that feel soft and warm on my skin.

The doctors warned me I'd lose it when they warned me about everything else, spewing side effects almost as fast as drug commercial disclaimers. I remember I used to think those were funny. I'd mimic them, yelling *blah blah blah* over the high-speed voice. There was no humor this time. Instead I sat and stared at the colorful tile, taking in every possible outcome for my body.

I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure they never listed *seeing ghost fish* as a side effect for dying. Maybe I missed it.

"You doing okay, sweetie?" Dad asks, glancing over his shoulder as he changes lanes.

"Mhm," I answer, though it's kind of a funny question, because objectively, no, I'm not.

Dad shoots me a forced smile. He's trying really hard to stay positive. He always does. I feel bad, because when he decided to be my father, I don't think he was signing up to be a nurse. I don't think he signed up to be a gravedigger either, but he's the one who buries my bettas. I stare at my fingers and wonder if someday, he'll bury me too.

The car jolts over a speed bump and as we pull into the hospital parking lot. I curl my fingers and wish Mom was here too. She usually joins us for checkups, but she couldn't make it today. She had an important work meeting, and Dad tells me she can't flake out because her work is what makes affording treatment possible. Normally I'm fine with that, but the fish last night worry me.

We enter the hospital and begin intake, which has become ritual. Waiting, weighing, examining, poking and prodding. I lay back on the plastic chair as they prepare to take my blood, and stare at the fluorescent lights on the ceiling, calm. The needles don't bother me anymore. I take a deep breath.

My eyes nearly close when I see something move. I blink, focusing. There's something in the light, swishing back and forth. Black and white. Shimmering like dust.

"Oreo?" I whisper.

"What?" The nurse replies.

The needle pricks me. I wince.

“Nothing,” I murmur, but it’s not nothing. I’ve never seen my fish in daylight, let alone at the hospital.

When she’s collected enough blood, I sit up as she leaves the room. Dad runs a hand through his hair and looks up from his magazine with a small smile. Then he sees the tears in my eyes and his face falls.

“Honey?” He puts the magazine down, moving closer. “What’s wrong?”

I wipe off my cheeks, but my eyes are dripping faster now. “It’s just not fair, Dad.”

He stares at me, leans down and takes my hand.

“Betta fish are supposed to live five years,” I continue, breathing in shakily. “Oreo was barely alive for one.”

“This is about... your fish?” Dad asks.

I nod. “It’s just not fair. He was dying before he really knew what it felt like to be alive. He’s never going to know. He’s just dust now.”

Dad takes a deep breath and presses his forehead against mine. I blink up. Oreo is still there, swimming around on the ceiling. Dia has joined him. Ginger and Ghost too. They swim in a circle. My eyes glaze as they loop around and around. I wonder if swimming through air is just like swimming through water.

The nurse walks back in, and Dad looks up. I keep staring at my fish, breathing in deep.

Then, one by one, they disappear.