

## DO NOT TAP THE GLASS.

It was written by hand on the front pane of the aquarium at the end of the aisle.

The fish store wasn't very big, and it smelled of too much humidity and too few customers. It was a little dank and dark, but felt more contemporary than it did forgotten. Dave walked the single aisle and appreciated the fish, plants, rocks and driftwood inside them. A couple dozen aquariums, each with barely an inch between them, lined the densely packed shelves. Their filters tinkled water in little one-inch waterfalls. Their aerators buzzed with bubbles (some had lost their air tubes, and added a distinct hissing sound to the overall racket). Everywhere was life; ripples undulating at the surface, gravel gleaming at the bottom, and jewelled colours of fish and greenery between them.

Most of the tanks measured no more than a couple of feet across. These held plenty of fish that Dave had no familiarity of: jewelled guppies, vibrant tetras, garish barbs, energetic catfish, playful loaches, gentle gouramis and reverent angelfish. In the majority of tanks, they mingled in the same water. In some, they swam among gorgeous arrangements of grasses and beach stones, ferns and sunken wood. And everything was for sale. Some tanks were oddly shaped, more tall than they were long, or more long than they were tall. They all had several fish of

some kind in them. None were empty. And then there were the big tanks.

None of these larger aquariums were more than, say, four feet wide, and the largest few housed the largest fish. Six lean koi, muscular and fit and destined for an outdoor pond. Five large ornamental goldfish, squat and bulbous and each sporting a unique growth on their upturned face. Four discus, demure and still, accompanied by a tidy school of red-nosed characters labeled “Rummynose Tetras”. And the last tank in the row, without any decoration of any kind, held one lone fish. No gravel, no greenery, no tankmates. The same handwriting labeled him as “OSCAR \$85.00”.

Reddish on its sides and greenish along its back, it was almost a foot from nose to tail. It had a sort of raw spot on the top of its head, where some of its skin hadn't formed properly. Desperately playful and energetic, it seemed to scream with its gaping mouth, bobbing up and down along the aquarium's patchy algae-skinned glass. It was bordering on frantic; why would such a creature have such an agitated energy? Dave was face-to-face with it and he could see an indentation in its bottom lip, dented as it smeared an eager face against the clear pane.

It was off-putting and viscerally repulsive, but he was drawn to the Oscar. Dave instinctively began to raise his finger to rap at the glass, but felt the shopkeeper's gaze from across the room. Reading the handwritten warning, he thought better of it, and

ended up awkwardly pointing at the fish. This gesture only made the Oscar swim even more maniacally, gasping and absolutely vibrating with vigorous energy. Its tail splashed water, and its eyes bugged as it shook, hyper-focused—as far as the Oscar was concerned, Dave’s finger was the greatest treasure in the whole world.

Given that its vision probably didn’t exceed more than a few feet away, Dave thought, the finger might as well have *been* its whole world.

He broke his stare with the Oscar and wandered back down the aisle of aquatic sights and smells. He was drawn to stay with the thing, which moved even more frantically as he walked away, but felt it might be weird of him to play with the fish if he wasn’t interested in buying. The shopkeeper leaned forward on the counter, and, with his face turned towards Dave, asked him what “kind of aquarium” he had. Dave wasn’t exactly sure how to answer, as he thought there was only one kind – glass, right? – so he simply told the truth: the last tank he’d had was a goldfish in a bowl, back when he was a kid.

The shopkeeper grunted and relaxed his shoulders. Quietly, almost to himself: “You’re not s’posed to keep goldfish in bowls, y’know. Stunts their growth, and they turn the water to shit so fast. Don’t last very long.”

Dave didn't know how to tell him that his goldfish had lived at least seven or eight years, so he just sort of half-shrugged one shoulder. Sheepishly, he feigned interest in a canister of flake food, which looked like it was imported straight from Asia. He inhaled deep breaths through his nose, trying to calm down from his morning's work.

He was tired. It had been a long month, and the campaign they were all working on was stretching everyone a little too thin. Dave was a stoic sort, and he won more arguments in his imagination than he did in reality. He hated to ask for support, never hesitated to take on a favour, and often felt like he ended up carrying everyone else's burdens. People loved it – Dave wasn't even sure that he disliked it, himself – but it always caught up to him. One of these days, he'd really have to learn how to ask for help. It made him a great coworker, but it exhausted him in a private way that most of his peers didn't see. Every now and then, Dave wished he was a smoker. The ability to leave his desk every hour or two for a short break? Some days, lung cancer felt like a fair trade for momentary sanity. Today, he couldn't stand it any longer. His cheeks flushed and his jaw clenched as he received one email too many. The hell with it: he left for an impromptu walk. And he found the fish store less than a block away.

“It'll be here a while; they always are. Bought it off a regular a couple months ago. Australian.”

At this point Dave realized the shopkeeper had been talking to him for at least a few sentences now. He shrunk behind his bashfulness, and tried to piece together what was being talked about.

“The Oscar.”

The man was talking about the big ugly brute in the untappable glass near the back.

“They *do* grow big, and most people can’t keep ‘em past a certain point. Makes it tough to sell ‘em, but they’re always a good trade-in. And, if they *do* sell, it’s for a pretty price at least.”

The shopkeeper seemed to fade into himself as he finished his one-sided conversation, and Dave knew he was nearly free to leave the shop. But he couldn’t just yet—there’s a social grace, a kind of “politeness dance” that exists in some situations. Dave felt he owed the shopkeeper just one more pass of the store before he could leave. One more look at all the colour, energy, and bubbles that he wouldn’t be buying. He turned to his right, and wandered down he aisle of fish again.

The shopkeeper’s phone rang as Dave passed the second-last big tank, and he wound up nose to nose with the bouncing, desperate, agitated Oscar once more. Why *not* tap the glass, anyway? He was sure it wouldn’t bother the fish, and that he’d spent too much of his life following rules. Without turning his head, (he could see the counter, as well as his own face, in the

aquarium's reflection) Dave confirmed that the man on the phone was facing away. With no change in his expression, Dave raised his right hand, hovered it over the bottom corner of the glass, and wondered what on earth could inspire such frantic movement on the fish's behalf. It trembled and shuddered and convulsed.

With a complete lack of flourish, and doing it quickly so that it was over fast, Dave rhythmically tapped the glass. Immediately, everything shifted.

Dave didn't understand what he was seeing, or even *how*, exactly, his view of the scenario had changed. His reflection, staring back at him just one second before, wasn't the same. It had changed, somehow, even though his face was still there. But it *wasn't* still there, he realized: he wasn't seeing his reflection, he was seeing *Dave*. And not reflected in spotted glass, but *through* it. Terrified, and without anything remotely resembling good sense, he reflexively glanced over his shoulder, fearful that the giant spastic Oscar would be inches away, rushing at him like a twisted version of a vicious junkyard dog. He didn't see it anywhere. He did see an empty aquarium. Not before him, but surrounding him. It was then that he began to interpret where he was. *He was in the tank*. The realizations that rushed to his mind in a blinding flash were overwhelming and instantaneous.

He was cold, and the air felt dense around him, almost like a fog heavy enough to slow your movements. It smelled acrid, and it thrummed thickly with a roar of rising bubbles. It felt like he couldn't breathe fast enough, and he gasped for air, oxygen, *something*. He couldn't hear the shopkeeper's phone conversation anymore. He couldn't see as far as the counter now, either; at least, not clearly. He had a dim perception of the outdoor light at the shop's front window, silhouetting the blurry shopkeeper as he waved a lazy goodbye to the Dave-shaped figure that was walking toward the front door. The human was leaving, and the Oscar watched helplessly, swimming desperately.

He pushed forward, felt his face pressing against an invisible barrier and knew it was a patch of algae-covered glass. He gasped with a gaping mouth and literally vibrated with panic. He splashed. His eyes bugged. And he found himself wildly wishing that he'd heeded the handwritten warning. The last sight he ever had of his Dave-body was a hazy figure disappearing into the white sunlight, leaving him trapped here. Here, in an unadorned glass box, watching with horror through the handwritten markings that now read:

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