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SO LONG, AND THANKS FOR ALL THE FISH

I had a good grip on the scissors when they plunged into Frank's skull, so naturally I felt the firm resistance, then the sickening, slippery slide into his brain. I hadn't known that it was Frank's head, of course. I'd been reaching around the tall plants with my pruning scissors, slicing at the ones with woody stems.

'Frank,' I shrieked, when the plants parted and Frank fell forward onto the gravel, grey matter bubbling forth from the gash in his head. 'Frank!'

It was a lethal injury. I was stricken, and the scissors shook in my hand. The kindest thing would be to plunge them back in, finish the job in a flash. I knew that. I knew that. But, could I do it?

Frank gazed up at me, his large brown eyes lolling in their sockets.

'I'm so sorry,' I whispered.

There are moments in your life that should define you. And then there are the moments that do define you. For me, stabbing Frank was one of those.

Frank was a dwarf variant of the common *hypostomus plecostomus*, one of those spotted sucker-mouthed catfish with comical expressions, prehistoric scutes and a sail-like dorsal fin. Some people might call him a bottom feeder or an algae eater, as if he was nothing more than a janitor in my aquarium. But plecos have personality, which is why their owners are fiercely loyal to them, and Frank and I had had a tender relationship for about six years at that point. He would eat from my fingers and sometimes if I put my palm against the glass in the evenings, he would attach himself to the other side by his mouth. He seemed to bask in the attention, eyes swivelling when I said something witty or particularly self-excoriating, but he'd always disappear behind a rock if anybody else came into the room.

I don't think my children or my husband ever knew the extent of my love for Frank. They indulged my passion for the hobby, but to them, as to most people, one fish is pretty much the same as another. But among fish, Frank was my *besht* (soulmate). He was also a piscine therapist. When the kids were unhappy in school or my mother planned Easter lunch on Passover or the manuscript I'd agreed to edit for free turned out to be 500 pages of (really bad) porn, I would stick my fingers in the tank, wiggle them until Frank came up with his round head for stroking, and tell him all about it. Frank would listen intelligently, and it may

have been Frank's quizzical lack of engagement that gave me the courage to homeschool my youngest. And when my parents' health declined and I spent more and more of my life on the bus so that I could look after them, Frank was always there in the evening hours, up for a visit.

I set down the scissors and knelt to keep Frank company.

Frank did not die quickly, the way a person who had been stabbed in the brain would die. Frank lay there, exposed, the way that no pleco ever lies. The barbs and shrimp pretended to ignore him, but I knew that they would eat him, even his bones, if I didn't remove his body as soon as he'd taken his last breath. It is the way of the aquatic world.

The neuropsychologist smiles at me from across her round, family-sized table. Her office backs onto the forested banks of the Capilano River on the North Shore, and as my bus has deposited me here early, I have enjoyed a half-hour walk along the riverbank. The water is running high, frothing over boulders. I'd forgotten how close to the wilderness the city of Vancouver is. My anxiety has washed away, diminished by the vast height of the trees.

I am in a good mood as Dr. Mead-Westcott opens the folder containing the results of my cognitive testing. 'I am pretty sure that I did well,' I say. 'I was firing on all cylinders that day. I really tried hard.'

She smiles. 'You did try hard. I could tell.'

We go over my results. My scores are high. Many of them are very high. I'm elated. One good score stands out for me. 'I thought I did terribly on that one,' I exclaim. 'It seemed impossible.' Those crazy shapes.

'That one's hard for everyone,' she says.

It's all going to be okay. I can't wait to call my husband.

'But,' she says, and I look up into her eyes. They are sombre. Then she shows me. I am devastated.

'What was the last book you read?' she asks.

I haven't finished a book in three years.

She nods. Points with her pen to another number. It is worse. 'For your age,' she emphasizes, and I grasp that if I were 20, the score would be even lower.

'Your memory is fine,' she tells me. 'Excellent even. But only if you make a memory. You have difficulty making memories because it is difficult for you to hold two things in your head at the same time.'

I don't have to write her words down: She gives me the printed report.

'So, is this the MS?' I ask her. I've had multiple sclerosis for years. It comes and it goes. This could get better. Or maybe it's just the last bite of breast cancer? I forget to take cancer into account sometimes, but it's been just three years since my diagnosis. Cancer messes with every cell in your body, your head most of all.



“ I SAT NEXT TO THE TANK, PALM AGAINST THE GLASS. ”

She tells me those things are possible, but the way that my scores have lined up, not likely.

I get that sick feeling. I've had that sick feeling before. 'So,' I say, slowly. 'It could be...like with my mother?' My mother, some of her brothers, her father, her sister.

I used to take my mother in her wheelchair to feed the crows next to the local Safeway. I would shower her, change her diaper, slide shoes onto her feet. Sun or rain or snow, we would sit out front at the table meant for staff on cigarette breaks, and toss bread and cheese into the parking lot. For the last years of her life, she would leave home only for the crows.

Dr. Mead-Westcott nods. 'It could be.'

I think of Frank, then, the scissors piercing his skull, his life bubbling out. I think of Frank lying there on the gravel, his eyes swivelling as they followed the shadow of my hand.

'Come back in two years,' Dr. Mead-Westcott says kindly. 'We'll have a better idea then.'

I am sure that the expression on my face is a lot like Frank's.

Frank rolled onto his side, unable to keep his position in the slight current coming from the filter. I could see that he was not only in pain, but was completely helpless, and although I kept an inventory of aquarium medications, I knew there was no tincture that would cure a crushed skull. I went to my computer and asked my fellow hobbyists the question that I'd never thought I'd ask: 'Best euthanasia method?' I typed. I couldn't bear the thought of scissors.

The answers came within moments: 'Put him in the freezer'; 'Dose him with clove oil from the pharmacy'; 'Decapitate him with your sharpest knife.'

One person, with the name sharkbomber98, suggested that I run Frank through my blender. 'It sounds cruel, but it's fast so he won't suffer,' he or she wrote. I calculated that sharkbomber98 was 14, at best.

All these methods required more ice in the veins than I could muster, since I liked to rescue sick fish, not kill them. I sat next to the tank, palm against the glass. Frank's eyes slowly filmed over.

At the age of 13 in the 1970s, as a lonely emigrant from Montreal with a too-big nose and massive plastic-rimmed glasses, I was lured into the aquarium hobby by a North Vancouver librarian wielding a pristine copy of Herbert R. Axelrod's 1955 classic, *Handbook of Tropical Aquarium Fishes*. Hooked, I saved babysitting and house-cleaning money until I was able to buy a 30-gallon Hagen aquarium, a wrought iron stand and an air pump. My parents—from a long line of Prairie people and working-class immigrants who thought fish came kippered in cans with scroll

tops—were perplexed by the aquarium gear that soon overtook my bedroom. But, as this was a hobby that could not lead to pregnancy or drug addiction, they were tolerant. When a couple of years later, after one of those epic mother-daughter conflicts, my mother asked me to move out, I found a home with a hippy religious cult. I arrived at their commune toting a gallon jar containing a blue betta, likely the only recruit to show up with a fish instead of a guitar. He flourished on their kitchen counter until a visitor put him out in the front yard for a bit of sun and his home was overturned, probably by the neighbour's free-range black Labrador. Meanwhile, back in repugnant middle-class suburbia, my mother kept the water topped up in the Hagen tank and fed my kribensis. In this way, that aquarium became a silent symbol of ongoing maternal love that otherwise I might not have detected. When she became incapacitated, my mother would sometimes remind me of that tank as I was helping her into the shower, the spray of the water bringing to mind one good thing in a period of our lives we would both come to regret.

Decades later, it was this still-watertight Hagen tank that was Frank's home the morning I stabbed him. By then, I was a married mother of five mostly grown-up kids, with my own home, a career of sorts, and my own copy of Axelrod's book. The Hagen's plastic plants had long been replaced by wide-leafed anubias, tall hygrophilia, and floating water lettuce. The undergravel filter that required a noisy air pump had been replaced by a nitrogen cycle-nurturing biowheel. And Frank's aquarium was now just one of many. I had become a breeder of two kinds of small fish that were extinct in the wild. That is, they were breeding themselves. My only real job was to find good homes for their fry—usually home-schooling mothers, aging computer scientists or members of the killifish club, who I met through an active online forum for aquarium hobbyists. I learned the hard way never to give a bucket of free fish to anyone who said they were picking them up 'for a friend.' More than once, the 'friend' turned out to be a monster fish with big jaws and an insatiable hunger.

At the time of Frank's unfortunate accident, my home was also serving as an unofficial fish hospital and rescue centre. If someone asked about euthanasia on the forum, I would offer to take their fish. I also took in fish that had become homeless. Therefore, I was watching over several crowded aquariums belonging to Aquaman, an older hobbyist who had lost his disability insurance and his apartment a year earlier. Scholz, a film editor in his 30s, had entrusted me with three tanks of shrimp while he took his beloved on an extended trip to Mexico, where he planned to propose. Upstairs, a kitchen counter had been turned over to bowls of Siamese Fighting Fish, their fins eroding, their bodies bloated and covered in slime. Most likely, their owners were new to the hobby, coaxed into fish keeping by the fiction that these beautiful fish are low maintenance, and poor water conditions had sickened them. I would change their water

every day, dose them with antibiotics or some other cure if necessary. About half lived, although many tended to pinecone, then die.

‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ fellow hobbyists would write, when someone posted notice of a death (or, sometimes, the loss of their entire stock) on the forum. Or, ‘Sucks, man.’ I could tell whether the poster was a keeper of small, colourful tropical fish, or of saltwater monsters by the way they expressed solidarity.

With aquariums you can go years without losing a fish to disease or injury. A mature set-up can almost maintain itself. If you have the right kind of lighting for the plants—not too bright, so that algae blooms; not too dim, so that the plants die—you can get by with just topping up the water now and again. But once things go wrong—you add a new fish to the tank without quarantining it, and it’s got worms or an infection, or your power cuts out and the healthy bacteria in the filter suffocate, allowing ammonia to rapidly build up in the tank—things can go south very quickly. You add medications and bacterial starters and adjust the pH or gH, but fish die en masse or one by one. It can be very hard to come back from that, sometimes. Sometimes, you just have to take down your entire set-up, disinfect everything and start again.

Some people don’t have the heart to start again.

American existential psychiatrist Irvin Yalom has written extensively about death and dying, mostly because he seems to have been afraid of death since he was a young man, and that fear has not eased any in his old age. (He is 85.) One night, as I lie in bed listening to a recording of one of Yalom’s books, *Momma and the Meaning of Life*, in which he reflects on the ‘golden period’ experienced by some patients with terminal cancer who are inspired by their imminent deaths to make the most of their time remaining, I notice something. Yalom describes how his patients have motivated him to make the most of his own life. But he never asks this question: Can there be a golden period if it is your mind, and not only your body, that is dying? Yalom, like so many doctors and academics who write about death or the fear of death, dwells mostly on physical death. That may be because the patients a psychotherapist remembers most vividly are, understandably, the ones who engaged him intellectually, who were articulate and thoughtful, and therefore they are the ones he identifies with. I am not sure if people with dementia or serious cognitive disorders ask for, or are often offered, psychotherapy. But it may also be that the possibility of your brain dying ahead of you is too terrifying to dwell on, even for someone who has spent his whole life exploring the human psyche.

The year that I stabbed Frank, 2012, was the year that I was diagnosed with cancer and my mother died of it. It hadn’t felt like what Yalom would call a ‘golden period’ at the time. For one thing, I was look-

ing after my father, and much of my focus was on him. For another, I resisted the idea that a person who was diagnosed with cancer should also be required to suddenly become a better, or wiser, person. But listening to Yalom, I reflect that, yes, although ‘golden’ isn’t the way that I would have described that period of my life, encountering my mortality (and my parents’) had spurred me to do some things I’d been leaving for a future time. I looked for, and found, the daughter I’d put up for adoption 30 years earlier. Finding her brought me great joy, but also a renewed sense of loss and guilt, as we both worked to figure out who we were to each other. I applied to grad school and began classes. With my husband, I came up with a reconfigured plan for my life—for our life together.

As this ‘golden’ period went on, however, something was draining away from me. It had been draining away for some time before then, but I’d been trying to ignore it. Since my early 20s, I had worked as an editor, ghostwriter and writer, but now in school I struggled to remember my classmates’ work long enough to give them feedback in workshops. Where I used to be able to hold in my head the lives, loves and petty hatreds of all the characters in the stories I was writing, I would now look at a manuscript in progress and not even remember writing it. I hoped that it was stress, or aging, or MS (which had often played havoc with my memory), but I could not ignore that there were some things that I used to be able to do easily that I could no longer do even with difficulty. Cancer had taught me that time is limited. The psychologist’s report now warned me that the ways that I might be able to spend that time might be limited, too.

It’s one thing to optimistically pursue a dream, even if you know that you might die before the dream is realized. It’s another to pursue your dream (of getting a degree, for example) when it’s a different sort of life you might require if you go on living. This isn’t a purely existential question, as neither my husband nor I have pensions and we have to consider income. Is it time for me to set aside my life as a writer and editor or even student, and get a job that won’t rely on clarity of thought? Do I have other qualities that would make me, a middle-aged woman with a cane and some murkiness in her brain, who likes fish, employable?

At what point do you take down the whole tank and start again?

There was a moment when I was sitting there with Frank that I suddenly became aware of the state that my tanks were in. My tanks and the tanks I was babysitting. My fish hospital looked more like an abusive orphanage from some dystopian YA novel: All the denizens were potential Franks, potential victims of my care. I had excuses, good excuses, but they largely came down to this: There just wasn’t time to do everything.

Still, this had snuck up on me, and signs of neglect were obvious now that I was looking: filamentous algae streamed from the stalks of plants, transforming open swimming areas into marshland because the congested

filters had slowed water flow to a trickle. In low-lying areas of gravel, there was uneaten food, decaying in bacterial clouds. Normally I siphoned detritus out every few days, but I hadn't done that for...weeks? Not since I'd gotten an infection and my oncologist had suggested that sticking my hands in water teeming with fish tuberculosis and antibiotic-resistant bacteria was a bad idea.

In the following days, I cleaned all the tanks and took stock: Some of Aquaman's serpae tetras had disappeared and I couldn't tell if his innocent-looking Mexican orange crayfish had been plucking them off one by one at night with his big pincer, or whether they'd succumbed to disease. I sent him messages through the aquarium forum: 'Do you have a place to live yet?'; 'Can you take your tanks back?' But he was still living in his truck with his dog, Pepsi.

To keep the tanks in good health, I needed to drain and then replace at least 30 imperial gallons of water a day. That meant swinging 60 gallons, or 600 pounds, in 20-pound batches, every day, and several times that once a month. And then there was the cleaning and pruning. If I'd been maintaining the tanks properly, the plants in Frank's tank would not have been so overgrown and it's unlikely I would have stabbed him in the head. I knew that I was not able to look after my own fish anymore, let alone other people's. Members of the fish community pitched in. But all the help of my friends could not stop the inevitable: My tanks had begun to go south.

As soon as Aquaman found another friend to host his fish, I quit the hobby. Friends came, tore down the tanks and rehomed the occupants. My aquariums and equipment went to hospitals and schools. My old Hagen tank—Frank's home—rusty now under the rim, was carried away by a family of homeschoolers who hoped to raise pink axolotls. Their daughter waved at me as her parents tucked it into the trunk of their car. She was holding my copy of Herbert R. Axelrod's *Handbook of Tropical Aquarium Fishes*.

I fell asleep next to Frank's tank, and in the morning, as I'd expected, Frank was gone. The barbs and shrimp were going about their business as usual, and I suspected that there was a little of Frank in each of them.

When I said that stabbing Frank in the head was a moment that defined me, what I meant was this: I learned that something profound can happen to you that you are fully aware of, and yet you might not be able to make sense of it at all. I lie on the floor under the kitchen skylight sometimes, trying to make my brain work, trying to think of the thing that I have to think about, to write the thing that I have to write, and my brain responds exactly as if scissors are cutting deeper and deeper into its tissue, as if grey matter is bubbling uselessly out.

Nothing that I think seems to hold together. Ideas bleed into other ideas and then they bleed into nowhere at all.

Two years, Dr. Mead-Westcott had said. Two years, and then we will know. Or did she say, *might* know?

I understand that the possibility of something bad happening is not the same as something bad actually happening. The difference between the two can be as vast as the difference between killing Frank with my scissors and not even nicking him. But sometimes frightening possibility does become harsh reality. So I know that it is simply impossible right now to have all the information I need to make decisions. And yet, I have to make decisions. Every day I look at the work before me, much of which seems impossible to do, and I have to choose: Do it. Or, do something else.

Stabbing Frank in the head was the moment that defined me, because it was only then that I understood: Scissors.

Because of her dementia, which was not the Alzheimer's kind and settled in when she was relatively young, my mother forgot how to have friends, then how to cook, and then to wear pants when her grandsons came to visit. If we put her glasses on her face so that she could see the television, a primitive reflex made her pull them off even though she needed them. But she never forgot this: 'Crows are God's smartest creatures,' she would say as they followed my mother in her wheelchair, my father with the bag of bread, and me, along the forested path to Safeway.

The crows were keeping something of my mother alive that we could not.

A few months after receiving the cognitive assessment, I start to dream about aquariums again. It has been three years since I've had a tank, and that's an awfully long time to go, for an aquarium addict.

One day I drop by the forum. I still remember my password. They still remember me.

'Suggestions for a nano tank?' I write. Responses roll in. Newcomers make suggestions. Old-timers send photos of their kids, ask about mine, phone.

'We feared the worst when you stopped posting,' CRS_Fan tells me.

'What? That I'd died?'

'No. That you were tankless.'

As soon as I'm back on the forum, people offer me tanks. Charles, who imports fish and then sells them from the basement of his home in Marpole, offers me a 30-gallon tank and stand for free. OCD_Fishies offers to give me back the hex tank she got from me years ago, now that her Oscar is no longer using it, and one day when I drop in to see the owner at one of my favourite aquarium stores, we exclaim over how

grey we are both getting, and she gives me a carton of ground cover plants—enough to fill a tank. I try to pay her and she just shakes her head no. She tells me how her kids are doing. I tell her that I've gone back to school and about the essay I'm working on. It's about medical marijuana, and so she jokes about sharing some with me at the back of the store.

I track down Aquaman, find out that he's got a trailer near 100 Mile House and is busy with his dog Pepsi, four rescue mutts, a few cats and, of course, his tanks.

Scholz contacts me, too, and we meet. He did not marry the woman who had accepted his proposal in Mexico, back when I was babysitting his shrimp. He has a baby now by someone else—it's too complicated to explain, he says—but he's not with her, either. Times are hard, but his baby is his joy and he shows me photos. That baby has one of the biggest smiles I've ever seen on such a little person.

'Hunter is so lucky to have you for his dad,' I tell him.

'Why?' he asks. He's been worrying about that.

How can I explain? I have never met anyone who could have such a broad overview of things and be fascinated by all the small details, too. I know that his little boy will grow up in wonder.

'I once based a character in a novel on you,' I tell him. The character was a young father, actually, although Scholz wasn't a father at the time that I wrote it. 'Remember when you showed me a stained-glass window that you'd brought back from Mexico? You told me that you loved that window, and that were planning to build a house with it one day on a beach somewhere, for the woman you loved?'

He nods.

'Well, who starts a house with just one window? Only you. You've got to have real vision to do that,' I say. 'The dad in my book has a window like that. It's how you know he is going to be okay.'

Scholz thinks about that for a bit, looking at the photos of his son.

Then I remind him of the tiny planted universes he'd built for his shrimp, every detail taken care of so that they would be self-sufficient. When the other tanks in my rescue centre deteriorated, Scholz's flourished.

'I'm happy you put me in a book,' Scholz says.

'Me, too,' I say, smiling like crazy.

I have two small nano tanks now. One of them is planted, bustling with red cherry shrimp that climb the stalks of the new plants I am experimenting with. Two miniature otocinclus rasp the algae from the glass with their sucker mouths. That tank is filled with light. I watch for signs of trouble like an obsessive mother.

The other is empty, still in its box. It's a white Fluval Spec with an LED and I have just the spot for it on the hutch in my dining room, next to the

bookcase. I even have a bag of sand, which I've shared with a member of the forum who is setting up his own nano tank. But I don't take that tank out of the box.

The truth is, I ordered the Fluval from Graham at Noah's Pet Ark mostly so that I'd have an excuse to hang around his store. My days of running a fish room of my own are likely over. Graham, as always, is unrushed and approachable in a shy sort of way, and as we stand there in the overcrowded aisles with tanks and fish food and boxes of supplies stacked high around us, he tells me about how he got degrees in psychology and social work, but he found that while his training had taught him to listen, it had not taught him how to really help anyone with their problems. He found this painful. He gave up counselling and bought a pet store, and he's noticed that people seem happier when they have something to care for. And if he can't help his customers with their problems, at least he can help them with their fish.

I wonder, not for the first time, whether I have missed my calling.

When my friends helped me take down the Hagen tank so that it could be given away, we found Frank. He was alive. The gash in his head had improbably, but entirely, healed, except for a thick grey scar. He'd been hiding for weeks behind the rocks and plants, not venturing into the light. Not coming out to greet me. Of course, this was entirely normal pleco behaviour.

'Schrödinger's fish,' my youngest dubbed him. Frank had been dead and alive at the same time.

A young man with a 200-gallon tank at home was delighted to adopt him. As he drove away in his truck, his wife holding the bucket containing Aquaman's crayfish and Frank, I was glad that my *beskert* was going to a bigger home, to people with more youth and energy. I hadn't really noticed how much he'd grown until I scooped him out of the tank with my hands.

My friends left with full arms, too.

'So long,' they said. 'So long, and thanks for all the fish.'