

The Fishbowl

By Hannah Leatherbury

"Yeah fat ass, better run before we catch you!"

I never say a word. Not a word to Mike Sontry and his gang. He just knows that I am the one. I am the kid that can't stand up to anything. I cringe when raindrops hit my head. I sit in the back corner of the classroom and peel off the old tape from of the cinder block walls. I eat by myself in the lunchroom and spill the pouch of CapriSun all over my sweatpants because I can't ever poke the straw through just one side. Leave me alone, Mike. Just please go away.

"You think I'm going to let you run far, Tubby? Better think again. Here are the rules...you get a head start. I wait for you to run and I watch you jiggle up and down, and then I come and beat your ass.... Fair?"

It's never fair, but I don't say a word. My voice isn't the size of my body and it's so much easier to scream inside. Just like a balloon, I'm stretched out and empty feeling the shouts and echoes bounce inside of me. I never ask anyone to listen. These screams are only for me to hear. So leave me alone.

"I'm gonna count to ten, you piece of shit, and you run."

I take off like an airplane. My wings jiggle. I don't know where they won't find me. I don't know where the apartment is anymore. I thought it was so much closer. I thought I could find it without counting the numbers that line the street. My eyes lie to me, nothing looks right. My fists hurt because my nails are digging into the palms of my hands as my feet pound on the sidewalk. Even running feels like a beating. Smash, smash, smash. My heels are like bowling balls.

"Seven...six...you're pathetic! I don't think you're scared enough..."

I am choking on fear, but Mike's throat is wide open and screaming—the shark with the sharpest teeth. I know this dread like it's a dessert and I've taken too many bites of it. They're the kind of bites that are so thick they sink right to my middle and stick. It only takes one spoonful to make me sick. I always try to chew things before I swallow. Mom tells me to chew seven times before swallowing. She knows that I swallow quickly when my jaw is swollen. She'll know that I got beat up again when she walks in the door and finds me asleep, wheezing and sweaty on the couch. She won't do anything but kiss my cuts and cry herself to sleep. She won't understand why I can't go back. I'm not ever going back.

The houses look so familiar here. Behind the windows there are people watching, but they just pretend that their shades are closed, they do not want to interfere. I hear the neighbor's

dog, but it's not really him. It's some other dog. And I don't know what fence holds him back. I can't run in any direction that Mike's not in. There's a Mike Sontry everywhere--at Sunnydale, at Woodridge, at Columbus Middle. They all follow the current and wait for the others who swim upstream. They want to watch me fall. They want to see how hard my whole body hits when it meets the ground. They want to feed me dog shit. I never say anything. I just run. I run until my breath is all I hear—sounds like screaming children. It's high-pitched and panicked. It's louder than the thumping weight in my heels; it's louder than my bowling balls. Louder than my blood pumping, although the blood feels like my savior right now. It's the only thing that reminds me to keep running. My heart is still pumping, furiously, somewhere.

"Three...two...one. That's right, say your prayers, faggot."

He's right behind me. My breath can't shut him out anymore. He's here. The fists come in a hurry. One right after the other.

"Why don't you say something? Why don't you yell for Mommy, you sorry sack of shit? How does that feel huh?"

I'm down on the ground and everything freezes. Things keep happening, fists roll off of my body like water, but I'm numb to the dull ache. It's soothing after awhile. The grass is soft here. It's the kind I want to be buried under someday. Then it won't hurt when Mom kneels down to pray over my gravestone and her flowers will rest on a soft cushion. The ground feels like a thousand tiny sponges, getting me dirty and washing me clean again. I never say a word.

I don't know how long I've been here, but the grass has stopped feeling soft. Mike and the others are gone. There's blood on the grass, but it is dry. So is the blood around my nose, a peeling crust like salt water when it dries on skin. I see that I am not really far from the apartment. Only three blocks. When I stand up, I face the sun and the light hits my eyes like a mirrored reflection, somewhat unreal although just as painful. My heels have gotten heavier. My eye bulges when I blink it, but I like the way it makes me feel even more swollen. Even more like myself. I'm bruised and bloody and I feel brand new. I'm alone. Without Mom's kisses or my kid sister waiting with her card games and magic tricks.

I buzz the landlord's apartment. I don't want tears or kisses.

"Apartment 3A."

"Jake, is that you? Why don't you buzz your Mom?"

He asks every time, forgetting that she is never home during the day. He asks, but he lets me in anyway. He doesn't really care, goes with the flow. He recognizes my voice, but he doesn't even notice that my words are slurred because my tongue is swollen. I must have bitten it. No one has to notice--it's all right. It's all right.

I climb the stairs. I jiggle all the way up. I keep listening to hear my heart again. But this time the bowling balls come through clearer. They echo in the stair well.

The key turns easily. I see Suzie's fish sitting in front of the window opposite the door. Its surroundings are so bland. The water and glass bowl are so clear that only the fish interrupts the transparency atop the table. My kid sister loves that goldfish more than anything. She won it at my school carnival. Mom brought her along and I tossed some rings around a pole. Suzie picked out the goldfish to take home, like it was her best dream come true. Like it was everything she's ever wanted. But, it was only the shining orange scales that made it seem so great.

Come on. Just kick it over, that bright twinkling fishy and his invisible bowl. The water folds around my unsuspecting victim.

Given everything, aren't you little fishy?

Just brush the wobbly legs of the table that pedestal keeping him afloat and on top of the world.

It's your time little fishy. We're going to make waves on the floor. We're going to wave Gooooodbye. Can you see me now little fishy? Can you pick up that shining fin and wave? Pick it up...

Pick up the pieces. Your bowl looks so lovely shattered beneath you. The crystal-like pieces making their own sort of water reflection. I can see your eye looking away, I bet it sees in three different directions, I hope the glass reflects an image of me. Are you trying to escape? Because you're not going to just stop breathing, not until you see me towering over you like Goliath. And I win this time Fish.

You won't swim again. I know it and I'm not sorry. What do you care? She named you Fernando and sang you kid songs, but you were going to die in two more weeks anyway. She only gets a dollar a week for an allowance and she wouldn't have gotten enough rocks and plastic castles to make you happy before you got old and dull. Maybe you'll come back as a bird or something. Flying is better than swimming any day. I'm going to fly. I'm going to get my clumsy hands to make a pair of eagle wings—they're over six feet long.

Fernando's scales aren't shiny anymore. Not now that the water's all soaked up.

Mom will be home and Suzie's bus will be dropping her off soon. I wonder if she will see Fernando waving on top of his shattered invisibility. I feel sick.

I get out of the room and back into the hallway. I want to vomit, just puke my guts out right here outside of Ms. Jenkin's door. The metro train is only a few blocks from here. I'll just ride until midnight. I'll just ride until the conductor kicks me off and this sick feeling stops.

I pass the soft green grass with the bloodstain. I forgot to look at my hands. Yes, they are tinted green. A mutual exchange.

The pass machine in the station is broken, it smells like wet cigarettes and my hands are shaking. I go to the next one and feed it; it spits out a crisp card. I have enough to ride to the end of the line and back if I don't get off of the train.

The warning lights blink just as I make it up the escalator. The train pulls in like silver lightening. I take the first seat. It is mostly empty. Everyone will be riding in the opposite direction right now. The cars sway from side to side on the track, they give the tunnels their everything. The rusting track barely controls them; their energy is limitless.

I have not stopped feeling sick. I am tired of my swollen eye. I want to erase this day. I want to pick up the goldfish and bathe him. I want these tears to be a magic cure. Maybe if I found a bowl and collected them all, if goldfish could live with a little salt in their bowls, maybe then he'd swim again and I would never have to say another word.