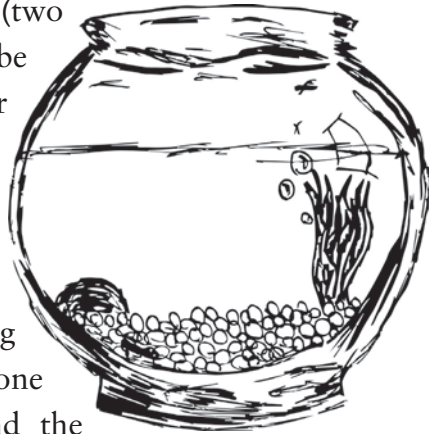


Fish and Chips

The action-packed story that I am about to tell you – a rollicking roller coaster of a story jam-packed with conversational thrills and spills – takes place entirely within the confines of a goldfish bowl. You may think that a goldfish bowl is an unpromising setting for an interesting story, and that it will yield about as much excitement as staring at a rock or a piece of spaghetti (two events which, if the truth be known, actually happen in our story). But if you think that a goldfish bowl is by definition an unadventurous place, you would be sadly mistaken. A very surprising and unexpected thing can suddenly happen to anyone anywhere in the universe, and the humble goldfish bowl will serve as a fine example of this controversial hypothesis.



Now, it is not uncommon to overhear exasperated people exclaim, “Ugh! I’m living in a goldfish bowl!” by which they do not mean that they are living in a spherical glass bowl filled with water and fish and decorative pebbles – unless, by some strange mischance, they actually *are* living in a spherical glass bowl filled with water and fish and decorative pebbles – but surely the number of people who live in actual goldfish bowls is not great, and so we need not

concern ourselves with them (although perhaps the police ought to be notified). No, when people cry, “Ugh! I’m living in a goldfish bowl!” what they usually mean is that they find themselves in a place or a situation in which everything they do can be clearly observed by everybody else, and there is no getting away from it. A classroom, for example, can have the feel of a goldfish bowl. It’s a smallish room filled with smallish people from whom there is no escape for an entire school year. And it makes no difference if the other students are like happy clown fish or like menacing piranhas – you’re stuck in the fishbowl together, all of you watching one another with your googly eyes and your gulping maws, and making life happy or miserable for each other according to the type of fish each of you happens to be.

Confusingly, our story takes place in a classroom, however it was not the classroom itself that was the goldfish bowl. It was a goldfish bowl that was the goldfish bowl – you know, a spherical glass bowl filled with water and fish and decorative pebbles – and this fishbowl sat undisturbed on a pile of forgotten geography tests on a dusty window ledge, surrounded by the usual things one finds in any classroom (metal cans full of tooth-marked pencils, gnawed to within an inch of their lives as if by a pack of starving beavers; boxes of tortured erasers upon which generations of children have conducted drilling expeditions with pens and pocket knives; and scissors so dull and loose in the joints they can barely

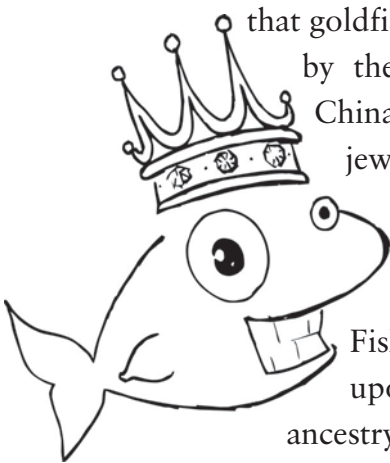


even cut a piece of paper, much less the ponytail of the little girl who sits in front of you). The only resident of the goldfish bowl – and you may not find this the least bit surprising – was a goldfish, but even less remarkable than his habitat was his name. It was given to him by the children of the classroom – the same sort of imaginative children who call their hamsters Hammy and their gerbils Gerby and so on – and so you have probably already guessed that the children decided to call their class pet Fishy, which was subsequently abbreviated to the nickname Fish. Just plain Fish. Mind you, being unable to agree on any other name, it's just as well they called him Fish, since most of the names they came up with were not suitable names for a fish at all. No self-respecting aquatic vertebrate wants to be called Trevor or Dwayne, and especially not Juliette or Susan because those are girl's names, and Fish just happens to be a boy. No, Fish the goldfish was happy with his name (especially his scientific name), though he was decidedly less happy with his circumstances.

You see, Fish lived in a goldfish bowl, by which I mean *both* that he lived in a spherical glass bowl filled with water and fish and decorative pebbles, and also that he lived in a place or a situation in which everything he did could be clearly observed by everybody else, and there was just no getting away from it. Of course, the only people observing him were the children, the teacher, the janitor, and occasionally – well, once – a couple of masked men who hastily cleared the room of all the computer equipment. Still,

it added up to rather a lot of people goggling at him all the time, and Fish felt the loss of privacy rather keenly. At the same time, however, Fish felt that if he was going to be observed anyway, then at the very least he ought to be able to hold the attention of his audience. Fish initially had high hopes in this regard because the teacher had originally acquired him to be the star of a science unit entitled “The Wonders of Nature” – and, though Fish was by no means a vain creature, it tickled him considerably to be thought of as a wonder. It especially thrilled him to learn that his ancestors had first mutated from the noble carp – though this fact had been mangled horribly by a girl with a ponytail reading aloud from a textbook, who had announced, “Goldfish mutated in China hundreds of years ago from crap.” The teacher corrected her (and Fish felt vindicated when he saw the girl blush, and the boy behind her reach for a pair of scissors), and he was positively enraptured when another child read

that goldfish had been considered to be royalty by the empress of the Song dynasty of China, and she had provided them with jewelled ponds and had forbidden people outside the royal family to own goldfish of the yellow variety – because yellow was a *royal* colour. Fish himself was a yellow goldfish, and upon hearing the news of his lordly ancestry, he swelled up like a puffer fish, and



wondered where his throne was to be installed and when he might expect to be fitted for his robes of state.

Sadly, the throne-installation and robe-fitting never happened, because the “Wonders of Nature” unit lasted an hour and a half, after which the children drifted away to their pencil-chewing and their eraser-abuse and their spit-balls. And after this, nothing exciting seemed ever to happen in the goldfish bowl. Invariably the children would glance at Fish, note that, royal or not, he was simply swimming around in a circle *again*, and then wander away, their attention caught by something far more exciting – a dust mote, for instance, or a crack in the wall, or an interestingly shaped stain on the carpet. Fish *himself* was not dull (his inner life, if only it could be known to us, would be the envy of all), but there was no getting away from the fact that his *habitat* was dull – as dull as dishwater, and even less interesting than that because it lacked soap, and dishes, and floaty bits of crust and gristle. And not only was his habitat dull, but let it be noted that it was also unforgivably inhumane. It is true that even the empress of the Song dynasty sometimes kept a single goldfish in a bowl, but note that this was for the purpose of *temporary display only*. After her royal subjects had admired her goldfish sufficiently (at the risk of having their heads cut off), she would return the fish to his enormous bejewelled pond, where he was able to cavort gaily with the other fish of the realm. You see, goldfish need space, and not only space but also other goldfish, because they are highly social

animals who swim in schools (grades 1 to 12), shop in malls (if the malls are submerged), and play in tournaments (if the cards are laminated). And so Fish was bored and lonely – living, one might say, in a state of perpetual ennui.

(By the way, “ennui” – which means to feel weary of life due to a lack of interest, and is pronounced “on-wee” – is a very useful word for the bored child because, as you know from vast personal experience, it is always risky using the word “bored” around your parents. They tend not to respond sympathetically to the innocent and true statement, “I am so bored,” and inexplicably perhaps, they do not cluster around the sad, apathetic child offering board games and a new puppy and tickets to Disneyland. Parents don’t treat boredom like an illness, but rather like an offence, and their almost hostile answer to boredom is likely to be leaf raking [if you have leaves], or dish washing [if you have dishes], or litter-box cleaning [if you have cats], or poop scooping [if you have poop]. A word to the wise, then: Instead of saying “I am so bored,” try saying, “Mother, Father – forgive me, but I am experiencing a state of ennui,” and then sweep grandly from the room, in the opposite direction of the rake, the dish cloth, the litter box, and the poop scoop. Other words to keep in mind as impressive substitutes for common conditions include *weltschmerz*, *bilious*, *élan*, *sang-froid*, *angst*, *weltanschauung*, and *Chardonnay*.*)

* *weltschmerz*: (velt-shmairts) literally, world pain; sadness upon thinking about the evils of the world.

Anyway, one afternoon while Fish was swimming around in a circle, very much like the circle in which he had been swimming around that morning, something unexpected happened that made him stop swimming altogether and just stare, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. A large object had suddenly been put into his fish bowl by a small hand – a smooth, black object that Fish judged to be either a moulded bit of plastic made to look like a rock, or an actual rock that looked more like a moulded bit of plastic. Either way it was something new to stare at blankly, and stare at it blankly Fish did, until he thought he could stare blankly no more. However, just as he was about to pull his eyes away from this new addition to his habitat, Fish saw something very strange indeed: entering his bowl from the waterline beside the rock was something that looked like a piece of cooked spaghetti

bilious: (bill-ee-us) being irritable and cranky.

élan: (eh-lahn) being enthusiastic, vigorous and lively. Not bilious.

sang-froid: (sahng-frwa) being cool and composed.

angst: (ahngst) feeling anxiety or remorse. Not sang-froid.

weltanschauung: (velt-an-shauw-ung) one's world-view;
the overall perspective from which one sees and
interprets the world.

Chardonnay: (Shar-duh-nay) a dry white table wine made
from the Chardonnay grape. Excellent with fish.

As guests.

– spaghetti with a glop of something clear and gelatinous attached to the end of it; and after about an inch of it was under the waterline, a second bit of spaghetti began its descent, it too with a glop of something clear and gelatinous attached to the end of it. Fish continued to stare (actually, without eyelids it's difficult to do anything else), but not to stare blankly. Rather, he began to stare with intense curiosity at the dangly, spaghetti-like things suspended in the water before him.

Fish stared for a long time – so long, in fact, that our story had its first brush with danger – i.e., the danger of you, the reader, getting a serious concussion as you pass out from sheer boredom and your head falls to the floor with a mighty crash. The danger eventually passed, however, as Fish had a brilliant thought, which was that maybe, just maybe, the dangly bits were attached to an entire *plate* of spaghetti that the children had positioned atop the rock. This would make a lovely change from fish flakes, which for as long as Fish could remember had been his appetizer, his main course, and his pudding – not to mention his elevenses, his afternoon tea, and his midnight snack.

Fish popped his head up out of the water to have a look.

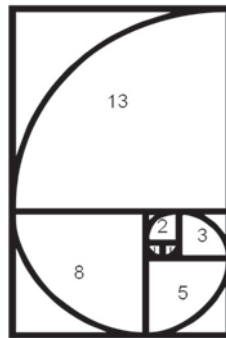
What met Fish's eyes was not, in fact, a plate of spaghetti. The dangly spaghetti-like bits were not attached to a plate at all but to a sort of a blueish, rubbery-looking thing protruding out of a sort of spirally coiled shell. It didn't look like something to eat at all (at least, not without garlic salt

and a little butter), and Fish would have felt disappointed if disappointment had not been crowded out by curiosity, and then by amazement, and then by mind-boggling astonishment.

For suddenly the spaghetti-like dangly bits attached to the blueish rubbery bit retracted, emerged from the water, swivelled, and seemed to stare right back at Fish. Ah! These were not spaghetti pieces, Fish suddenly realized. They were eyestalks! And these were not merely clear gelatinous lumps stuck to the ends of the spaghetti, but rather, eyes! And the blue rubbery bit was not merely a blue rubbery bit, but somebody's head! And the head was sticking out of a spirally coiled thing that wasn't merely a spirally coiled thing, but somebody's home! This was as far from being a plate of spaghetti as it is possible to be, Fish finally realized, and the emotion that flooded his noble brain was sheer delight! Finally, another creature to share his fishbowl! How he had longed for this day! Dreams of the future that he and this creature would have together flitted like butterflies through Fish's mind. Oh the quality time they would spend together – the serious philosophical conversations, the witty repartee, the long cozy evenings with Fish resting his head on the rock and his new friend stroking his scales lovingly with one of his sensory tentacles! At long last his lonely sojourn was at an end!

“Hello, Snail!” Fish finally chirruped happily, for a snail was what the new creature in his bowl most assuredly was.

Fish knew this for a fact because of the many hours he had spent staring at the “Wonders of Nature” posters that hung on the wall of the classroom. There was a goldfish poster, naturally (and it was from this poster that Fish had learned his true scientific name – *Carassius auratus auratus* – and whenever one of the children came to have a look at him, he always swam to the surface and said, suavely, “Just call me *Carassius*” – but Fish could not be heard over the cacophony of the classroom – chairs scraping, students chattering, teachers bellowing like mastodons – and so it looked as if he was merely gulping air). There were also posters of other animals – aardvarks, emus, larks, yaks, platypi, snipes, stoats, storks, and many more besides – including a poster of a snail. From this poster Fish had learned much about snails, including the astounding fact that snails construct their shells according to what’s called the Golden Ratio, and that the spirals on their shells are all mathematically precise and follow the Fibonacci series – 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, and so forth. There was a drawing like this:



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Fish and Chips!