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PROMOTING INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING & HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH ENGLISH

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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION  
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Second Prize in the Open Division

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*Little Fish*

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*Little Fish*

Ever since I first knew he was there, I've thought of him as my little fish, swimming around in my tummy. He's not so little any more. I picture him pressed up against the sides of his fishbowl, head tucked between his knees. Sometimes he punches out with a strong little fist, testing the boundaries. But he doesn't swim around anymore. That's a worry, because his little bum is where his little head should be.

"Turn, little fish," I whisper, walking slow laps of the apartment.

"Flip around, little fish," I coo as I flounder on the couch, beached.

The girls on the forums say I should be walking outside in fresh air, but it doesn't feel safe to go out there.

I keep vigil in the apartment. There isn't much to see on the streets below. Just my cranky old neighbour, pruning and weeding her tiny plot behind the bins.

Dan used to go down with a bucket and sponge every Sunday, buff his precious car until it gleamed, like it was a sports car and not a cheap hatchback. Not that I wanted to drive it, but he'd never let me if I did. Now I've lost track of how many weeks it's been since I've seen him, or the car.

Every morning I wake while it's still dark and turn the radio on. After the heraldry of the news jingle, I steel myself for the new day's horrors. How many infections, how many have died, which new suburb has an outbreak. It feels like the early scenes of a horror movie.

Some nights I can't stop scrolling, the screen lighting my face blue in the dark. There's no one to stop me. I search out stories of women giving birth in locked down hospitals, alone, with overworked doctors faceless behind their PPE. At least I don't have to worry about whether they'll allow partners into the birth ward.

"Turn, little fish," I sing in the bath, splashing water over the taut, marbled skin that somehow holds him in. The bath turns out to be a mistake. I spend twenty minutes trying to extricate myself, swivelling like a trapped animal, the water long gone cold.

In bed, turning from one side of my body to the other has become a strategic operation. I have googled whether it's possible to hire a small crane for home use.

Other things I have googled:

Pregnancy weight gain normal

Breech baby how to turn

COVID baby deaths

Breech home birth

Chocolate delivery Sydney

I order groceries online, nappies, aromatherapy oils for calm, relaxation and clarity. I order tiny organic cotton bodysuits and miniscule socks.

I was a dancer. Strange, how I think of my life in past tense since my little fish started growing inside me. As though my body is no longer mine. Now I fly through the air in my dreams, leaping impossible distances. In dreams I am lighter than breath, spinning and sprinting, hung in a betrayal of gravity. But the days are heavy legs, swollen feet and tree-trunk ankles that would make my mother weep.

Dancers know our bodies better than anyone; we have to be conscious of millimetre-precise movements. Yet so much of life as a dancer is switching off our awareness of certain sensations; otherwise we'd never function beyond the screaming pain in our blistered, bludgeoned toes.

My body knew my little fish was there before my brain understood I was pregnant. Unexpected tendernesses. An influx of blood roaring through my veins. The sudden swell of my breasts. Dan noticed those before I did.

"You look good," he said when I put on my yellow dress. Spring was in the air and that dress had called out to me. When I walked out of the bedroom, he looked at me greedily, the way he had the first time he saw me dance back in St Petersburg. It made me blush the same way it did then.

He had watched me for a long time before he spoke to me, back then. I pretended not to notice, but I felt his eyes on me even when my back was turned.

We got married and moved to this place. Dan would be gone before the sun came up. I stopped asking what time he'd be home. It got too stressful when he wouldn't appear until hours, sometimes even days, later. He worked so hard, prided himself on

being a good provider. If I asked a question about money he'd say, "Don't worry, Lena. I'll take care of it."

Now I move around the apartment, the spaces he used to fill. He is not watching anymore. He could walk back in any minute, though, so I leave all his things as they are.

His toothbrush glares at me every night when I brush my teeth, inspecting myself in the mirror. His razor in a cup on the sink, still speckled with spiky short hairs. His favourite coffee cup stays in its spot in the cupboard. I don't open the jar of pickles that are his favourite, even though my mouth floods with covetous saliva every time I imagine that salty-sweet-sour crunch.

Sometimes I open the closet and run my fingers across the hanging shirts just to remind myself he was real. But it gives me a shiver. I imagine him striding in and catching me, and I slam the door shut again.

And besides, I'm not alone.

"Don't you want to roll over, little fish?" I coax. I lie on my back on the floor and prop my feet up high. I lean on my forearms on the kitchen counter, arse in the air, hamstrings twanging discordantly like a neglected instrument.

Ana calls.

"Elena, how are you feeling?"

I tell her I'm fine. She annoys me, but we're stuck with each other.

"Has your baby turned around?"

"How should I know?" It's ridiculous, a midwife visit over the phone. Someone should be touching my stomach, checking my blood pressure, monitoring my little fish's heartbeat. But I do know. I know my little fish is still in the wrong position.

"We're trying to keep women safe by minimising their exposure to the hospital," Ana says, speaking slowly like I'm a child. "But if your baby is still breech, we'll need you to come in for examination. The risks are higher and labour will likely require more intervention if your baby tries to come out feet first."

*Tell me something I don't know, Ana.*

"Elena?"

"Yes, I heard you. I don't think he has turned. But he will."

She asks me all the same questions as she does every time. Am I eating well? I look away from the McDonald's cheeseburger wrappers piled up in the bin. Am I sleeping well? *Have you seen the news, Ana? What do you think?*

Today there is a new one.

"Have you packed your bag for the hospital?"

"Yes, Ana."

"Good. Keep it by the door now. You and your husband should plan the route you'll take to the hospital, when your labour starts."

I grunt. She doesn't know about Dan. I haven't lied about anything. But she hasn't asked any direct questions, so it hasn't come up.

"What should I do, Ana? What will make him turn?"

"Some women say music helps. Play a song you love with the speaker at the bottom of the uterus so he turns towards the sound."

I snort.

"Or temperature," she continues over my laughter. "Some say placing something cold at the top of your stomach, where the baby's head is, and something warm at the bottom can encourage the baby to move."

"Thanks, Ana. Thanks a lot."

"I'm going to call at the same time next week. If he hasn't moved, we'll organise for you to come in."

"Fine." I hang up. You'll turn, I know you will.

Won't you, little fish?

Dan loved to fish. Sometimes I think he's just lost track of time, sitting in his nylon folding chair on the pontoon, watching his rod bend towards the water. Only when my belly got so big I started to waddle did he finally stop expecting me to sit there with him.

Thank god for you, little fish. Was anything ever so boring? The gzzzz of the line flying out. The tick-tick of it reeling in. Hours of nothing in between. Except that time the two guys in cheap leather jackets showed up and Dan sent me to get coffee.

I always had to look away when Dan would thread the worm on the hook. So cruel. I'm sure it's also cruel killing a fish when you catch one, but that was never a problem

Dan had when I was there. If he ever caught anything it was too small to keep, or some junk that had been mouldering in the water.

For such a practical man, his dedication to this activity baffled me. So much wasted time, so many emptied beer cans. Finally heading home, legs stiff and no fish to show for it.

But the police would hardly let a man sit for days on end on a pontoon now, would they? I am forced to concede that Dan is not on an extended fishing trip.

“Don’t worry, little fish. Daddy will be home soon,” I say. I don’t want him to worry, so I never voice my fears out loud.

I find *Swan Lake* on my phone and turn up the speaker, resting it on my pelvis. Even distorted by the phone, rattling and shrill, the music makes my body ache for the freedom I once had on stage. Before I was bloated with too much blood, and my trapped little fish.

“Pirouette, little fish,” I say. Although what’s really called for is a somersault.

There’s a bang at the door. The banging continues for the five minutes it takes me to heave myself up from the couch and reach the doorway. It’s the neighbour from downstairs. She stands at a safe distance and scowls, points to her ear with a pained expression, then my phone, still blaring in my hand.

I roll my eyes and turn it down.

“I’m trying to get my baby to turn,” I say, gesturing at my vast stomach. She understands nothing, though her eyes go wide when she sees how large I’ve become. She mimes rocking a baby.

“Yes, he’s coming soon.” I sigh. What rotten luck that the first person I’ve seen in weeks can’t understand me.

The next morning the doorbell rings. By the time I open the door, there’s only a plastic bag of figs on my doorstep.

A few days after the figs, a shoebox of capsicums waits outside the door. I slice them roughly and crunch the sweet-bitter flesh. Another few days, a bag of oranges. I dig my teeth into the quarters, leaning over the kitchen sink, juice dripping from my wrists.

Sometimes, looking down from the kitchen window, I can see the old woman pulling weeds from the soil, pruning her trees, graceful in her dance with the nets that

protect her fruit from the birds. I never catch her at the door. She must ring the bell and then race down the stairs. Whatever. It's not like we could chat.

I couldn't tell her how I held the hot water bottle and the bag of frozen peas over my huge, naked body. How I waited, knowing it wouldn't work but hoping it somehow might, until the peas were tepid and slimy. It didn't work, did it, little fish? Nor did the music, the yoga, the herbal teas.

I haunt the forums online in the hours I can't sleep. Lost, lonely women all over the world, typing into the darkness. *Is it normal to feel like this? Is your husband doing this too? What does this mean?* And a hundred other women with no idea typing back. Everyone has a different answer, but they all somehow make me feel like I'm doing it wrong.

Ana calls again.

"You're going to have to come in, Elena. Eleven o'clock tomorrow, at the clinic. Can your husband drive you? He'll have to wait outside."

"I can get there," I say, although I'm not sure how.

"Come on little fish, save us the trip," I say, blasting *Swan Lake* at my crotch.

The neighbour woman is at my door again.

"Can you take me to the hospital?" I ask, even though she doesn't understand me. I find a brochure and point to the hospital's address. Her eyes go wide. No, I shake my head. No baby yet. Just an appointment.

"Eleven. Tomorrow," I say. And, finally, she nods.

In the morning I dress carefully. I wrap a scarf over my hair and hook the elastic of the surgical mask over my ears. I even put on cotton gloves. What if it isn't enough, my little fish? What if the virus gets to you anyway? They don't know what it does to babies.

I pause to bring my feet together after each downward stair, like a bride.

Finally I am outside, feeling sunshine on my skin for the first time in weeks. The shrillness of birds. Leaves crunching underfoot. Everything so bright, so loud. The air doesn't feel like it's full of invisible evil, but I remind myself that it is.

My neighbour is already waiting at the gate. She points to her car parked down the block. As we slowly advance down the footpath, I spot Dan's car. It's still parked on the street, strewn with fallen leaves. *He doesn't even have the car?* I put my hands against the glass of the window, leaving prints in the dust. The tinted view of the inside offers no clues.

My head spins. I reel. The old woman tentatively puts her hands at my hips, worried I will fall. There is a terrible pushing inside me. I lean over, brace my hands against the car. My little fish, what are you doing?

Dan would always scoff about how weak women are. I'd like to see him bear his body weight on shattered toenails and blistered joints, and smile. I'd like to see him haul around 12 kilos of baby and blood and fluid rearranging his organs. I'd like to see him handle this.

But we won't be seeing him, little fish. It's just you and me.

My little fish is heaving, straining. Not a fish but a whale, turning his belly to the sky and arching back his head. Turning around.

It's probably a matter of seconds, but it feels like hours. Finally I'm back in the moment, gasping. My burning cheek pressed against the cool windowpane, my eyes focusing on the crocheted blanket spread across the car's back seat. The old woman is rubbing my back. I turn back to her and smile.

Pain is dull to me. I am strong, I am here, and there is so much of life still ahead.

We will meet each other soon, my little fish.