A Betta Named El Matador

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The porcelain feels cold and heavy on my fingertips. As I try to grasp the edge of the lip, the bowl slides in my other hand – ready to slip from my grip and smash to pieces on the floor. In one swift motion, I lift the toilet seat, letting it rest against the tank, hold the fishbowl with both hands and empty out its contents into the still water below. A single drop splashes back onto the floor. The bathroom will need to be mopped, with bleach. The foul smell of decay intermingles with unsightly, stringy poop strands, making it hard not to flush immediately. But I hold my breath, look down at the grey, bloated fish that lies motionless on the bottom of the toilet and will a prayer. But nothing comes.

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The automatic doors opened wide and a blast of hot air welcomed me inside, a much-needed relief from the nippy March winds.

“Welcome to PetSmart! Let me know if you need any help,” the greeter chirped as I walked past her towards the closest display. I thanked her over my shoulder and halted in front of the stacked cylinders. Three layers high, ten containers across, no idea how many prisoners were relegated to hard-to-reach second and third rows that were hidden from view. I gazed at the dazzling, shimmering, dancing aquamarines laced with pink and red, coral bodies flanked by pale yellow tails, white zebra stripes on royal blue, and mauves speckled with violet. It was going to be much harder than expected to pick just one betta fish to take home. And I could only take one home because Siamese fighting fish could not be housed together, no no no. That, the internet informed me, was a recipe for disaster; their territorial natures would dwindle two pets to a lonesome one.

It wasn’t just a single betta that I needed. This fish had to be the placeholder of a goldfish on my haft seen sofreh, the spread of the seven symbolic s’s; in plain English, the pinnacle of the Iranian New Year, Nowruz. Coinciding with the spring equinox, Nowruz brought with it two weeks of colourful festivities along with plenty of preparation. The Tuesday before the new
year, we would gather at sunset to jump over bonfires for *Chaharshanbe Suri*. As a child, we would drive to a park, and weave through what felt like thousands of people and dozens of fires to find the right, open flame with the right, familiar faces. Then, I would wait in line behind the other kids, watching doe-eyed to see if anyone would catch on fire. Nobody did. When my turn came, I’d dash and leap - momentum seamlessly transferring mid-air from Baba to me, as my little hand clasped his tightly to clear the crackling flames and emerge on the other side, purified.

The requisite spring cleaning that accompanied the holiday season was less glamorous – a marathon of decluttering, vacuuming, mopping, dusting, and endless polishing that made way for the *haft seen sofreh* to find its shrine-like locus, an offering to wipe the slate clean. It was the one time of year to eat herby, green rice and turmeric-stained fish with Baba’s special plum sauce. And finally, thirteen days after the new year, we would return to public parks for barbeques of kabob and charred tomatoes, where I would always eat around the soggy, wrinkled tomato on my plate. Baba would finish it.

It had been at least a decade since I had celebrated *Nowruz* properly. This year, I would get it together. I could commit to the culture and to a reconnection to rebirth and new beginnings. Even my unresolved new year’s resolutions from January – two and half months stale at this point – could get a second chance. I had the *seer, serkeh, sib, sonbol, senjed, somagh, sabzeh* – garlic, vinegar, apple, hyacinth, olives, sumac, sprouts – placed neatly in seven silver trays on a crisp, white sheet on my dresser alongside the mandatory mirror, painted eggs, and book of Hafez’s works. All that was left was the goldfish, a representation of life.

The dilemma was that goldfish need aquariums with a full aeration system. In other words, not in my budget and certainly not low maintenance. I considered drawing a picture of a goldfish or attempting embroidery, but that felt lacklustre and inauthentic. Inanimate could not embody the animate, I reasoned. My solution: the betta – an artistic and creative interpretation I thought would still capture the symbolism and ignite the magic of the new year.
I stared at the display wondering if I should get an orange fish to fool an onlooker – but mainly myself – that there was a traditional goldfish on my haft seen. The orange wasn’t rich enough, though. My eyes kept darting to the livelier colours, the bigger fins, the plumper bodies, the proportionality of what I thought was the perfect fish until I saw him: scarlet red save for a dime-sized patch of violet-blue behind his gills that shimmered in the fluorescent lights of the department store with every subtle wriggle and turn he made. I felt my indecision fade away. His tail fanned out in an almost continuous wave that extended towards his back and all the way to his belly. Clothed in this delicate red robe, he resembled a bullfighter: effortless with only his nearly invisible pectoral fins moving rapidly back and forth to keep him in place.

“El Matador,” I said holding the container up to my Baba in the car as he reversed out of the parking lot. “But we can call him Matty for short.”

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It’s unsettling to leave the deceased without parting words. I’m tempted to ask for forgiveness, explain to the ethers that I really tried all that I could to help out the sick betta upon the first signs that something wasn’t right. When he stopped eating; when his lustrous scales dulled and splintered; when quick motions slowed to tremendous efforts just to stay at the surface of the water to gasp for air, I ran to get antibacterial, then antifungal, solutions. This was not death by neglect.

This isn’t about me, I remind myself still unable to flush the toilet. The stifling humidity of July is clawing through the open window, maybe even hazing my usual efficiency.

I will the fish to start swimming again like that cheeky betta I had seen in a video. This won’t happen though. Matty’s decline in the last few days could not be mistaken for playing possum. In an erratic and desperate daze, he would stagger and swirl drunkenly at the surface of the
water. His once vibrant and inquisitive eyes now unfocused and glazed. There’s no divine intervention to witness in this toilet bowl.

I don’t know why I can’t just end his four-month life with me. I’m uncertain as to why his seemingly trivial death is giving me reason to pause.

This open-lid, toilet casket is the closest I have been to viewing death. The tumultuous goop running amuck in my mind clears briefly. Wait, I have been in this position before; yes, this is my second encounter with mortality. The first and last funeral I ever went to emerges from the crevices of repressed and forgotten memories.

Frozen in the heat of summer, I am momentarily transported to another place, another time.

A smaller me, 8 - but maybe 9 years, the specifics erased in a whirlwind of postmortem instability - looking down into a coffin. The body looks normal, just her eyes are closed. She is wearing her favourite cheetah print chiffon top.

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Amir had told me to come with him, so I took his hand and let him lead the way. Mummy whispered she would stay behind, so we weaved in and out of the guests to the front of the room where her body lay. Her face was soft and smooth. Are they sure she was in a car accident? I asked myself having anticipated some scratches, some indication of injury - like when I broke my elbow falling off the playground monkey bars and was all scraped up. Death looked so serene and so disconnected from pain.

"You can touch her," Amir said as he stroked his mother’s face, his voice catching on tears waiting for release.
Petrified, I shook my head. *It’s better to remember the good times when they were living,* I repeated my mum’s words over again silently.

He leaned over to embrace her lifeless body, and I hugged him unsure of what to do with Mariam, my stepmom who was no longer my stepmom. I already couldn’t picture what she looked like with eyes open, nor could I locate just yet the constancy and welcome mediocrity of blended family life that we cremated with her. A smoldering resemblance to Tuesdays, Thursdays, and alternating weekends with them; climbing the tree in the front yard, and calling for help to get down; times tables tears; quarrels; sitting in Baba’s lap to steer the black Jeep the last few metres home - from the top of our road to our driveway as he controlled the gas pedal and brakes.

I released Amir’s 13-year-old lanky limbs from my hold. “I have water for you,” I offered but he remained unmoved and his silent sobs became painful wails. A mob of uncles surrounded him, and I was left to tether myself back to Mummy in the corner, waiting for Baba to appear from the grieving crowd.

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The longer I stare at Matty, the farther away I stray from peace. I welcome numbness and prayerless confusion over the disorientation of lost details of a lifetime ago. Straddling another time, another place, is not restorative.

I’m discontented to think that people comfort themselves with phrases like “things happen for a reason” when this isn’t how it was supposed to end. A viable rationale eludes me. Matador was supposed to fight harder for his life. Mariam could have, should have left the car in the driveway on that snowy February day.
My shoulders feel weighed down, burdened with unresolved, unknown, unfinished loss. Reaching for the lever is strenuous. Caleb pops his head into the bathroom, “Hey, I need to piss.” I startle at the sudden noise, caught off guard. *Why did I tell him to come over?* I’m rattled. The moment is ruined. I push the lever and let the little fish swirl out of sight.

In the kitchen, the hot water rushes from the faucet into the fishbowl, rising furiously, sudsing excessively, spilling over into the abyss of drain land. I scrub with gloved hands, a clinical detachment feeling almost necessary, the glass feeling foreign in rubber.

Back in my room, I sit on the edge of my bed staring at the empty spot on my dresser where the fishbowl no longer resides. The sun is streaming in through my bay window, as it typically does in the early afternoon.

I should’ve drawn a damn goldfish for my *haft seen.*