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The Fountain and the Black Fish

by
Gwenyth E. Hood

I.

It was late afternoon when Oscar Verplank and his mother arrived at his Aunt Penny's apartment. The boards of the porch creaked as they crossed to the heavy oak door. "The house is more than a hundred years old," murmured his mother as she rang the bell. A buzz sounded and Oscar quickly opened the door. "They had to update the place to make it livable, Mother," he noted. As they climbed the creaky stairs, the door to the upstairs apartment was thrown open.

"Louise! It's been too long!" cried the woman who rushed out. As the sisters embraced each other, Oscar surveyed them. They looked alike in many ways. His mother was in her early forties, and Aunt Penny only three years younger. Both had brown hair, and blue eyes, and ample figures. Louise's dark-tinted hair, like her dreams, was cut short at her earlobes, while Penny's hair, frosted on the surface by natural grey, fell in bountiful curls upon her shoulders. Both had heart-shaped faces expressing a somewhat childlike sweetness. But Louise's was the tempered sweetness of a woman who had learned patience by taking back her dreams for alterations too many times; Penny had an ominously untamed vivacity about her.

Oscar was a well-built thirteen year old with horn-rimmed glasses and a turtleneck. He winced fashionably as his Aunt swept him into her arms and kissed him; then, glad that this awkward ceremony was over, he followed the women into the living room.

"Would you like to see the place first before we go over to the hotel? My bag's all packed, and I only need to throw it into your car—or my car if you prefer. It's only a mile or so down the road, walking distance, really."

"Hotel? I thought we were staying with you," said Louise.

"You are. I'm staying there too. I've made reservations for the week, and I've already paid, so don't give me an argument." She smiled teasingly. "It has a swimming pool. I don't."

Louise had opened her mouth to protest, but paused suddenly and finally spoke in some uncertainty. "Well, Penny, you know I hate to see money wasted. But with you, there's bound to be some hidden meaning in this, isn't there?"

"Louise--" coaxed Penny, her eyes

dancing.

Her sister let out a short laugh which was both accusing and conspiratorial. "With you, I never can trust the obvious!" Penny hugged her, and Louise surrendered. "Maybe I'll play it safe and do it your way this time!"

Oscar, meanwhile, was circling the room. "How many animals have you got here, Aunt Penny?" Two cats, one with a fluffy bluish coat, and another with short black fur, were rubbing his ankles. A third, a Siamese with cream colored body and black mask, was surveying him more warily from the top of a bookshelf level with his head. A canary was chirping merrily from a cage on the south side of the room. Against the opposite wall was a fifty-gallon fish tank where black striped angelfish drifted by the glass.

"I don't know how many, Oscar. I think of them species by species when I buy their food and one by one when I feed them. I've never thought to count them all up."

"You've never counted them?" Oscar echoed her, a little scornful.

"No, I haven't really. I have three cats and one canary, but I haven't counted the angelfish or the frogs recently."

"The frogs!" Oscar turned toward the wall facing the door and noticed a ten gallon tank there for the first time. Several small, dark shapes were floating near the surface, one of them half under and half above the water. "Are those the frogs?" he asked.

"Yes, there they are. African clawed frogs. They used to be sold in exotic pet stores, but since some of them escaped into the environment and started taking over, they're harder to get nowadays. But these won't get away from me."

Oscar stared around him in fascination. A feeling which he did not understand welled in him—was it anger or desire? Something was here, more than his Aunt had said, a darkness and depth, a sense of meanings and mysteries floating like fish just under the surface, just out of reach, waiting to be caught and pulled to light, to be counted, weighed and measured by Oscar. "This is really neat! I'd rather stay here than at the hotel," he said spontaneously. "What's wrong? Isn't there room?"

"Dear, if Aunt Penny decided—" began Louise.

"We can spend the evening here if you wish," conceded his Aunt, "and go to the hotel later. I had most of tomorrow's dinner ready for us anyway, so I can whip it up quickly."

The dinner pleased Oscar, especially the devil's food cake. In the after-dinner tour of the building, hoped to find more mysteries, and he did. In the room adjoining Penny's bedroom, which was itself large enough to be another bedroom, there was only one piece of furniture: a bare wooden chair set up near the southern wall, facing a single fish tank. The tank's aerator was bubbling constantly, and its floor was lined with tan colored gravel and small smooth rocks of brown and white. But there was only one fish in it, a fish some four inches long, solid black, with long fins and bulging eyes.

"A black goggle-eyed goldfish!" cried Louise. "I've seen them in stores and always wondered why anyone would buy one."

"They're Telescope Goldfish," Oscar informed her.

"They're specially bred to have that look, and they're much more expensive than the common goldfish."

An easel had been set up only a few feet in front of the tank, and in their eagerness to look at the fish, Oscar and Louise had passed in front of it. Now Louise turned to face it. "Is that your latest painting? Oh, Penny, it's beautiful!"

The picture was a swirl of silver, blue, green and delicate flesh-tones. It seemed to center on a splashing fountain, which was set in the midst of a grove before a stone building. Moonlight shone down on seven youths and maidens dancing there. Their flying hair melted into the moonlight and the white spray of the water, half concealing and half revealing their lithe bodies.

"I'm rather pleased with the way it's come out," admitted Penny. "It doesn't bring out the concept in my mind, but it's the best I've done yet."

The black fish suddenly rose to the surface of the tank and began to thrash around wildly. "What's the matter with him?" cried Oscar, turning.

"Oh, we've been blocking his view too long. Dr. Bache is used to having things his own way, Oscar," said Penny. Startled, the two stepped aside, staring at the fish. It returned to the bottom of its tank and stared back at them.

"Dr. Bache?" mused Louise. Then she grinned at her sister. "Penny, you're wicked! That was the English Professor back at Woodville, the one who gave you such a hard time! Wasn't it?" At Penny's nod, she suppressed a laugh. "But you know, you're right. He always did look something like a black, goggle-eyed goldfish."

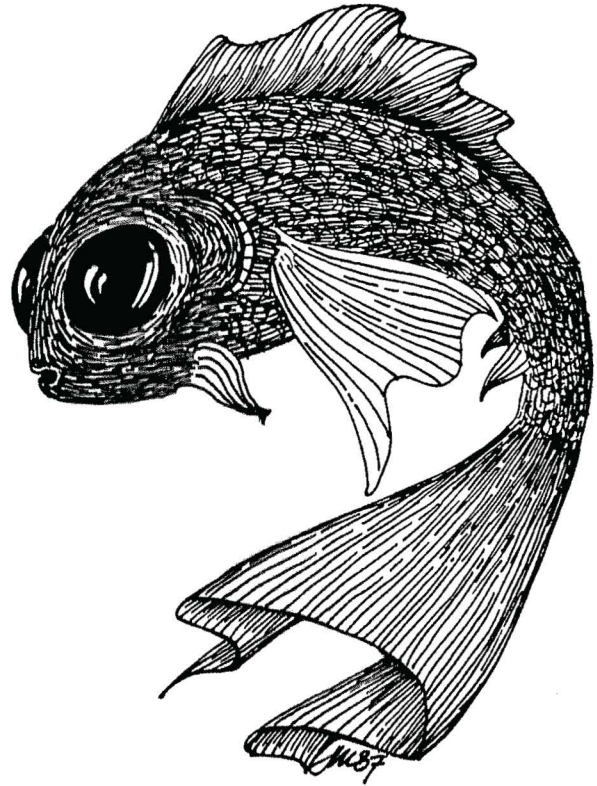
"A telescope goldfish, Mom," corrected Oscar.

"By the way, did they ever find out what happened to Dr. Bache?" continued Louise.

"No," said Penny with a strange smile. "He disappeared during examination period my senior year and was never heard from again."

Penny turned as if eager to leave the room, and Louise started after her.

"How come you have a stereo with earphones in this room?" inquired Oscar. "There's another in the living room, and that



must be more comfortable."

"Oh, for some blasted reason, Dr. Bache likes to listen to Igor Stravinsky's Rites of Spring," said Penny.

"With earphones?"

"I just attach them to the side of the tank. It seems to satisfy him."

As they left the room, the violent splashing began again. Penny turned. "What did I do wrong this time? Oh, yes, the marshmallows and graham crackers."

"Marshmallows and graham crackers?" cried Oscar. "Goldfish don't eat that!"

"Did I ever tell you he was a goldfish?" She winked at him. "You two wait out in the living room and I'll settle things here. It won't take long."

Oscar sat with his mother in the living room, but when Aunt Penny returned from the kitchen, he followed her silently into the tank-room and watched as she laid out two graham crackers on a table near the wall, and beside them four marshmallows enclosed in plastic. Next to these she also left a small jar of instant coffee and a hot pot with a plug. There were already two bowls set out there, filled with little packets of sugar and a non-dairy creamer. All this while the fish was watching intently from the corner of the tank nearest her. "There," Aunt Penny said, "it's all ready for you. If you want anything else, you'll have to go into the kitchen and get it from the refrigerator. Never mind the cats. A few cat hairs aren't going to kill you."

Then Penny turned around and saw Oscar. Her eyes widened for a moment and then returned to normal as quickly as if she had slipped on a poker-faced mask. "Oh, Oscar, am I taking too long?" she asked sweetly.

"You talk to a fish?"

"If you live long, you'll see stranger things than that, Oscar. Shall we get back to your mother?"

"How do you think he's going to get to the graham crackers over there?"

"He's done it before."

"That's crazy," said Oscar.

"So it is. Come on."

"It can't be true and crazy," said Oscar. "There has to be a logical explanation."

"I have great respect for logic, Oscar, but logic alone will not solve the mystery of the universe."

By this time Louise had come in. She had heard the last part of the conversation. For a moment she about to rebuke her son, but at last she turned to Penny instead. "Dr. Bache used to like graham crackers and marshmallows too. It was the only thing that kept me from hating him, when he made me come to his office for a chewing out. Whenever my stomach was getting all tied up in knots, I would focus on that bag of marshmallows, and then I would feel like laughing instead."

Penny nodded.

"Where did you get this fish?"

"I took him away from the fountain behind the library at Woodville. On graduation day. There used to be goldfish there, remember?"

"But not black goggle-eyed goldfish!" cried Louise.

"No, not usually. They're not as hardy and aren't usually kept in outdoor pools. This one appeared about two weeks before I left."

"About the same time Dr. Bache disappeared! Fifteen years ago!"

Oscar broke in. "But he couldn't have lived fifteen years! Telescope goldfish don't live that long!"

Penny smiled at him. "But this one has, Oscar."

Louise stared into her sister's eyes. "There's more to this than you're telling us."

"There is indeed. Do you really want to hear it?"

Louise hesitated, but Oscar cried, "Yes, I do!"

"Well, then, it's a long story," said Aunt Penny. She brought them to the living room and motioned them to sit down.

II

"Nineteen years ago," Penny began, "I started my undergraduate years at Woodville College. Your mother," she said to Oscar, "was already there, but she graduated at the end of the year. Then I was all alone, and I had to decide what to do with myself. I wanted to be a veterinarian, a lawyer and an artist with about equal energy. So what was I to do? I took a little bit of everything at first: biology and political science and art history and English. After a year or two of this, my desires were more focused, and they did not follow any of these routes exactly. In the life around me, in the records of history, and in the dreams and fantasies of

people long ago and people today, I began to see what seemed to be Hints or Keys to an overall Pattern or Shape. I wanted to trace those clues and find the Pattern. The more Footprints of this Mystery I found, the more ardent I was to track them to their source."

"I want to find it too!" cried Oscar, excitedly.

"Yes, it was only natural. But this is where Dr. Bache came in. Though my interest in all areas continued, I began to focus more and more on stories and literature, because that is where the human imagination takes its knowledge from every source and tries to fit it all together. During my senior year my eager search had let me to Medieval and Romantic literature, the subjects Dr. Bache taught. In fact since Woodville was a small school, he was the only one who taught them regularly. But his view of these dreams of our civilization was quite different from mine! He did not see them as a Key to a Great Reality. He did not even see them as the synthesis the human imagination makes of all its experience.

"He belonged to the school of literary theory known as Semiotics, the study of signs. To him, stories were not stories, but only texts, and the words within them were only signs. Signs did not refer to realities but to other signs. Signs referred to signs referring to other signs which referred to still more signs, and so on, endlessly. For Dr. Bache, proper interpretation in literature was not to search for a meaning behind the signs, but to trace the tortuous trails of signs leading to other signs, which led to other signs which meant the opposite halfway around the world until they all neutralized one another in elaborately unraveling patterns of delicately self-parodying irony."

Oscar gasped. "Um, what does that mean?"

"My own question, precisely. I tried hard to figure it out. I read Dr. Bache's books on Semiotics, but the more I read, the more convinced I became that it was an elaborate way of talking nonsense. But it was very elaborate nonsense and took time and great skill to do well. I was unwilling to spend that time because I feared that in pursuing his dead ends I would lose my own hot trail. So we were on a collision course. My papers came back from Dr. Bache all splashed with red ink. Conferences with him drove me to the verge of insanity. 'How can you write about what the text means?' he would ask sternly, and his horn-rimmed glasses made his eyes seem to glare even more. He always wore a black suit. 'What do you mean by meaning?' he would say, and my tongue would shrivel up.

"'Dr. Bache,' I croaked, 'I mean what everyone means by meaning. Everyone knows what meaning means.'"

"'Does everyone?' he would say. 'What does everyone mean, then?' And my mind would go into spasm.

Louise yawned. "I had him for Lit. Intro. my sophomore year. That's why I switched my major to Geology."

"I thought of switching majors too, but

the scent of my trail would draw me back. 'Surely my great treasure is worth braving a little of this dragon's breath to find,' I would think. So I stayed with English and took classes from him when I couldn't get them with anyone else. But he and the danger he represented were always on my mind. Mentally I argued every text with him, and its treasures became more precious to me because of his scorn. When I sat alone by myself in the library, I would feel the gleam of his eyes through his horn-rimmed glasses beating on the back of my head, and it would spur me on to greater efforts. I think I had the same effect on him, because his tone would become especially scornful whenever he mentioned ideas we had once discussed, as if he were still fighting them out with me in his own mind. Also, though I usually sat at the back of his classes, his eyes rested on me when he made his more emphatic points."

"There really was a kind of magnetism between you, wasn't there?" observed Louise.

"Yes, I think there was a kind of love at the bottom of our hate. Eros, the desire of one soul to complete itself by union with another—Eros finds outlet in antagonism when the chance for union is blocked. But the more advanced I became, the angrier he became at my resistance to his theories. Then the harder he graded me; the more red he splashed on my paper, and the more often he would call me to his office and tell me I was naive and simplistic. 'But Dr. Bache,' I protested, sometimes tearfully, 'as far as I can see, if there is no solution, then there is nothing to puzzle about.' He shook his head in disgust.

"Somehow I managed to pass his courses, usually with B's or A minuses, but each course I took with him I feared that this time he would finally flunk me. In the Lake Poets' seminar my senior year, this came close to happening. He had given me a C on my first paper for putting too much stress on the importance of the French Revolution for Wordsworth's Prelude, and a C minus on the second one for finding a biographical allegory in Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Now I had to write a ten page paper on "Kubla Khan," and unless I could make it abstruse, tedious and meaningless I might very well flunk the course. I pored and pored over the poem, searching for dust to throw across the page to please him, but I kept on finding pearls and rubies and diamonds instead, which shimmered and glimmered and kept me lingering over them in delight instead of doing my work.

"The night before the paper was due, I still had not written it. Dutifully I carried my notebook, notes and text to the library, hoping to leave at eleven with a good draft and spend the night typing it. But even then I kept finding diamonds and emeralds and did not collect enough dust. I left the library with no more than a few garbled paragraphs and an exhausted mind. Unless I could write a ten page paper by morning, not only would I flunk Bache's class, I would then not have enough English credits to complete my

major and so I could not graduate. So absorbed was I in these thoughts that I walked off in the wrong direction, to the dormitory where I had lived the year before instead of the one I belonged in that year.

"When I realized my mistake, I had to turn around and pass the library again. As I was walking in the quiet night across the nearly deserted campus, a calm descended on me with the sound of subtle music, and I realized that it did not actually matter whether I passed Bache's class or even whether I graduated. What mattered was whether the jewels I had found were genuine or false. What mattered was whether there truly was a reality behind that shimmering curtain of signs. I needed to know that, and that only.



"I walked on the footsteps of the wispy music which teased and wavered under the trees. It led me past the library and along the path to the fountain. There was a gibbous moon, just after full, shining in the sky, and its silvery rays flowed down into the water and seemed to become part of it. I stood still and breathed, and as I swallowed the moonlight, the music became clearer in my ears. The water shimmered, and as I drank in the sight, my vision became clearer too. Suddenly I saw figures dancing, dancing in the moonlight and the spray. There were seven or eight of them, springing with light feet and sure harmony, and in any instant I could not pick out a particular individual or tell whether they were naked or clothed in robes of starlight.

"But also as I stared I saw that they were not at the surface of the fountain. Somehow they were remote, deep within it, or within something else reflected in it. Yet the sight of them awakened such a tremendous longing that I thought I would go mad. Just as I was feeling that I would burst or faint if I stayed there any longer, their inviting voices sounded in my ears 'Come to us! Come to us, Penelope!' Without thinking, I leaped into the water.

"To my surprise, I did not land in the fountain but in the bed of a shallow river, in the midst of a strange wood. Clear water was rushing around my ankles in the starlight. I could not see the dancers now, but their voices still called, 'Come to us! Come to us, Penelope!' I walked on toward them and found myself climbing a smooth stone stream-bed upwards to a ledge from which there hung a shimmering curtain of water. Through it I could see the others dancing, still silver in the moonlight, and their voices were still singing, still calling.

"But I also saw then that the water was no ordinary water. It was mixed with fire, transforming fire which sparkled like diamonds, and as I stood there I knew that if I passed through it, I would never be the same again. Yet a man's voice, apart from the others and lower and gentler, called out to me, 'Come through to dance with us, Penelope. The fire will transform you to what you really are.' The sound swelled my longing so that I could endure it no more. Closing my eyes and clenching my fists, I plunged into the curtain. When the water touched my face it was cold as ice, but the next moment it became hot as fire. I cried out in terror, but my friend's voice called, 'Stretch out your hands, Penelope! Come to me! I am Pollux, I save the drowning!' I stretched out my hands and pushed on; for an instant I felt that every atom of my flesh had taken fire, and I nearly fainted then. Suddenly everything was ice again. Someone had seized my hands and pulled me forward and out.

Perfumed air fanned my face. I was in a fresh green meadow speckled with violets and daisies and wild roses. Holding my hands was a beautiful youth with silver hair and grey eyes like the starlight. I shrank away shyly,

but he called me by name, and I saw by the tender delight on his face that I also was beautiful in his eyes."

For a moment, Aunt Penny bowed her head and was silent, brushing away a tear. Oscar stared. After a moment, Louise said, "Do go on, Penny! Don't leave us hanging there!"

Penny looked up. "What more is there to say? We danced all night and in that dance I knew all there was to know that ever needed knowing, and all the history of human effort and failure unfolded before me like a vision and melted away in our joy at the dance. At dawn when it ended, I wandered to my dormitory, no more weary than if I had been sleeping peacefully, and my heart was still singing the wonders I had seen.

"I did not care that my dusty tedious paper was not written. I had seen the secret behind the curtain and that could never be taken away from me. None of the petty little troubles Mr. Bache could make for me mattered any more. I couldn't even get myself worried as, on my way to class, I rehearsed the tongue-lashing he was sure to give me.

It never occurred to me not to attend the class. I always attended classes except when sick, and with my mind absorbed in thoughts of Pollux, I was not ready to think out new patterns of behavior. Stumbling through established routines like a zombie was the best I could do. But my consciousness did have to resurface when I found Dr. Bache glaring at me. The four other students had handed in their papers and I, remaining seated, had become conspicuous. I met his gaze, and he said, perhaps repeated, 'Miss D'Angelis, do you have your paper done?'

"I tried to erase my smile and look apologetic, but despite my efforts I could feel joy radiating from every inch of my face. 'No, Dr. Bache,' I said.

"His frown deepened and he began to fidget. 'What do you mean, you don't have it done?' He shook his head impressively. 'You'd better have a very excellent and very plausible explanation!'

"I don't, Dr. Bache,' I said, trying to sound sad. 'I guess you'll have to flunk me.' My eyes were shining.

"He must have thought I was baiting him, saving a watertight excuse to embarrass him later. 'Miss D'Angelis, you will see me in my office right after class!' he snapped.

"Yes, sir,' I said.

"When I came, he was angrier than ever. 'What's the meaning of this, having no paper for me and no explanation?' he demanded.

"I have an explanation; it just isn't good or plausible,' I said.

"Well, let's hear it!' he cried.

"I can't write any more papers for you because I have seen the Reality behind the Curtain of Signs, everything has meaning for me now.'

"He looked as though his eyes would burst through his horn-rimmed glasses. 'What?' he said.

"I told him about the fountain and the music. He looked frightened, but he spluttered, 'Miss D'Angelis! I don't know



why you're trying these jokes! Or perhaps the joke's on you. Maybe I should alert the police, and they'll find what kind of dancing is going on at this fountain.'

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, if you were you,' I said. 'The curtain transforms you into your true self if you pass through it in joy to join the dancers, but if you go with a bad attitude, it might transform you into something unpleasant, like a grey cat or a black goggle-eyed goldfish.' He stared and I was surprised myself, since I hadn't known I was going to say those words until they were out of my mouth.

"Miss D'Angelis!' he said 'You may think this is amusing, but have you thought about how this will affect your academic standing? And your career?'

"His face flinched beneath his glasses and I suddenly understood his terror. Because he had never been through the Curtain of Signs, seeing other people tremble and wince because of his power, which he had so laboriously attained, was the only thing that made him feel alive and successful. My indifference made him fear that he had missed something more gratifying. He could not bear it. My smiling face was for him like the veil of fire and ice which marked the last border between ignorance and the true reality, and he feared to pay the price he had to pay to discover its meaning.

My heart warmed with compassion, and to comfort him I tried to wince and cry a little. I was only able to squeeze out one tear, a small one. 'I'm terribly sorry I got distracted, Dr. Bache. I've been so overwhelmed this semester. It's my senior year, and I've been so nervous about the future. Couldn't you give me just one more day?'

"I really shouldn't,' he snapped. 'At your age, you ought to have learned responsibility. What is your life going to be like if you always go about missing deadlines?'

"Inside I laughed at his feeble tyranny, but outwardly I pleaded, 'Dr. Bache, I've never missed one before, have I? Can't you give me a break?'

"The relief that burst out on his face was pathetic. 'All right. Just this once. Get me the paper tomorrow and I'll only dock you a grade level.'

"Thank you, Dr. Bache!' I cried. So even though I really wanted to think only about the dance, I went back to my room and whipped up a paper for Dr. Bache from the froth of the fountain, which was elusive and teasing enough to get a C from him, I thought. But he had disappeared before he could grade it, and the professor who took over gave me an A-. His only comment was, 'Wonderful writing, Penelope. I only wish you had made your meaning clearer.'

"The next three nights I danced with Pollux and the others. On the third night as we danced under the stars, the music suddenly stopped and Pollux faltered. 'Someone followed you here,' he said.

"I turned and saw the curtain of water hanging near us and there was Dr. Bache, in a

black suit with his horn-rimmed spectacles staring at us angrily. I shrank up against Pollux and asked, 'What shall I do?'

"Desire for our light shining through your face has brought him here. He is smitten with the same longing you were. But I fear he will not have courage to cross. However, no one can draw back with impunity after coming this far. We must help him if we can. Call him as I called you!"

"But I'm not sure I can--can't one of the others--"

"He is not capable of seeing or hearing them; you are the only one he sees."

My voice shook a little, but I called out to him, 'Come to us, Dr. Bache! Come across! There is fire, but it burns for only a moment, and then all is fresh and cool!' The voices of the others echoed around me, 'Come to us! Come to us,' I now sensed for myself that Dr. Bache heard only me. For a moment his face was blank with astonishment. Then hope lighted it. He stepped into the curtain--and then I knew the pain had hit him. 'Stretch out your hands, Dr. Bache,' I cried. 'Come across! I will help you!' I reached in for him as Pollux had reached for me, but I could not find his hands.

"He had leaped back from the curtain at the first tinge of pain. His face was contorted with anger now. His eyes were bulging. 'You're cruel! You cruel minx! Why do you torture me like this? Come back, come back or I'll come in and drag you out!'"

"I drew away, crying 'Look out!' But he had already closed his eyes and plunged furiously in again, his hands stretched out to seize me. I felt the pain hit him even harder in this position, and the curtain expanded, growing ever thicker to contain him as he strove ever harder to drive through it with brute force. I heard Pollux crying, "This must end! This must end!" Dr. Bache was doubled over in agony, screaming 'Help! Help!' I reached in but could not find his hands; I started to enter the curtain, but Pollux drew me back.

"Don't go. It's too late for you to help him," he said.

"Then suddenly Dr. Bache's cries stopped and through the curtain I heard nothing but a soft plop, as of a fish leaping.

"It was all I could do to keep him from drowning,' Pollux whispered in my ear. His hands were on my shoulders.

"It was grey dawn and everything dissolved. I found myself alone in the fountain under the dim light, and though I looked everywhere for Dr. Bache, there was no sign of him. But as I climbed up on the rim, I noticed a black telescope goldfish near the surface. I stared at him for a moment because I'd never seen one there before, and it seemed that he was staring back at me.' Aunt Penny fell silent again.

III

"Well," said Oscar, after a long pause.

"Is that all there is? Why did you take the fish from the fountain?"

"I noticed him the next day too. I came to look at the fountain and all the other goldfish in it, when suddenly there he was, in the water not inches from me, staring angrily at me with his goggle-eyes. By that time I knew that Dr. Bache had disappeared. That night I tried to find Pollux and the others at the fountain, but they were not there; I met them elsewhere long afterwards, but never again from that fountain. However, the black goldfish still swam up to me, and even in the moonlight I saw him staring. Every day I passed the fountain, and there he was staring and me. So finally I bought a fishbowl, and on graduation day I went to the fountain and filled it. The black fish swam into it.

"I've kept him ever since. He stares at any painting I put in front of his bowl, and sometimes I set up my poems or stories there and he stares at them, page by page. I always know when he's finished a page because he starts thrashing about when he is bored. He still likes graham crackers and marshmallows. At first I used to float them on the water for him, but one night I forgot and they were gone anyway. I think a few years ago he started returning to human form during the hours of the night after midnight when the star Pollux shone. I see other signs of it every now and then. The crackers and marshmallows are eaten and sometimes I find books have been moved during the night and records changed."

"Do you--do you think he'll ever change back completely?" Louise asked, nervously.

"I don't know. Before he does, he will have to go through the curtain with the eagerness of welcome, or else turn forever away from it and be content not to know the mystery. But as long as he only stares and fears to go through it, this will be his form."

Oscar spoke up. "Aunt Penny, I think that's the craziest story I've ever heard. You ought to have the fish x-rayed so you can know if it really is a goldfish. Maybe he's a mutant or a walking fish, with retractable legs! Maybe he takes them out at night! Maybe that's how he got to the fountain--by walking."

Penny smiled indulgently. "What creative suggestions, Oscar! But I have no reason to X-ray Dr. Bache. He's survived fifteen years somehow, and I don't see how irradiating him can help."

But Oscar was getting more excited by the second. "Can't we stay here tonight, Aunt Penny? I'll stay in his room with a flashlight and see what really does happen."

"That wouldn't be wise, Oscar. Are you prepared to face the curtain and join the dancers joyfully? Or would you rush in greedily to seize a mysterious walking-fish for irradiation? If you did that, I fear you too might be transformed into something unpleasant, like an African clawed frog."

"But I'm sure--" began Oscar.

Louise took his arm. "We'd better go to the hotel and get settled," she said firmly. Then she glared covertly at her sister. "Are

you sure a mile is far enough away?"

Penny grabbed her suitcase. "We could go to the next town, if you want," she said.