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## My Soul Swims in a Goldfish Bowl

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This terrible cough. It tears me apart every morning when I rise, like a dawn wind: the cold of morning meeting the warmth of the night and sucking it out of me. That's the picture I have of it, as though I'm sleeping in some yak tent on the high steppes somewhere, not in a town flat. It's been happening for over a week now: ten, fifteen minutes of convulsive, hacking strain; irritating to Mary, who thinks it's deliberate, a mannerism, a parody of middle years, a protest. It's all dry; nothing comes of it.

The Doctor tapped my chest last night, harkened to his stethoscope, peered down my throat. Nothing.

Congestion? Something stuck in my windpipe. No. Tonsillitis? No. Digestive troubles, tickling the coughing reflex misleadingly? None that I've noticed. He has me booked for an X-ray, but the possibility remains, as Mary believes: habit spasm, hysteria. Myself doing it. To protest at something in our lives, in my life.

So it comes. In the bathroom, the awful hurricane from within. And I grip the firm white washbasin with both hands, as lungs implode and eyes bulge, as I shed tears of blood (so I fancy). Will I burst a blood vessel this time? Will I have a heart attack?

And at last, *at last*, this morning I do cough up something. Something quite large. Rotund, the size of a thumb nail. It lies squirming on the white enamel. Phlegm alive.

What is it? I wonder in disgust as the tears clear. Part of my lung? A living gob of lung, still breathing the air – fresher air out here than in my chest? It pulses gently, wobbles, throbs. It's alive. What on earth is it?

A cancer, a tumorous growth, still growing fresh cells, unaware that it has lost its host? Some other unknown parasite that has been living in me? Surely no such thing is known. Look, it still quivers with undoubted independent life.

An abortion, a thumbnail foetus has erupted not from the womb (which I obviously don't have) but from my chest, and rests there, still alive. Some of the spirit of sickness, finally exorcised, which my bloodshot overstrained eyes somehow perceive – in the style of some jujitsu witchdoctor who spies out the soul of disease. The Philippine faith healers supposedly pull impossibilities, nodules, out of the body to cure it...

Have I, then, become a faith healer *in extremis*? Can I march up to sick people now, plunge my hand into their bellies and chests and tubes, and haul out their diseases, alive and squirming? I prod it with my finger. Wormlike, it contracts, bulging another way. Yes, it's a living being – or antibeing. Dare I wash it away? Or should I shuffle it into a matchbox, keep it prisoner?

I tap the plug in the sink, wash warm water in – and it floats, swims around like a sluggish tadpole.

"Mary, come and see! I've coughed something up. It's alive!"

She comes into the bathroom, then, and peers into the bowl.

"Can you see it Mary? Here!" I poke it, and it tumbles over in the warm water, rights itself. "You do see it, don't you? Say you do. It came out of me just now. It lives."

"Oh I can see it"

"Maybe that's the spirit of the sickness. I've coughed it out at last?"

"It isn't that, Tom." She backs off, her expression diffident. "Don't you realize? It's your soul. You've lost your soul."

"My...soul? You're joking! How can it be my soul?"

She retreats from me. Detaches herself. The bathroom is very white and clean and clinical, like a surgery. The thing in the sink circles, executes a flip.

"What else can it be, Tom? What else lives in you? What else could you lose?" She peers at me.

"Your[You're?] soulless now. The soul's quite a little thing, you see. It hides inside everyone. Nobody ever finds it, it's a master of disguise. It doesn't have to be all together so long as its atoms are spread out around the body in the right order, one in this cell one in that. But yours has clotted together, it's condensed itself – and you've ejected it. Lost it."

"But," I poke the thing gingerly, "what gives you so much certainty? Such conviction!"

"You don't feel certainty anymore? That's because you lost the thing that gives conviction, faith, belief. I know. Because I still have mine, spread throughout the whole of me. But yours has been narrowing and congealing for months now. It went from your lips, your heart, your fingers. It went from your eyes, from your belly, from your penis. It's been retreating, pulling in on itself all these months. I know, dear."

"Supposing," I grip the bowl, "for the sake of argument this is my soul, do I scoop it up and gulp it down? Do I get it back inside of me that way?"

The living object somersaults, ducks underwater, surfaces lazily. It seems to have no particular sense organs or organs of any sort or limbs. It's all just one and the same thing. A living blob. Does it eat? Does it absorb energy?

"Can I reincorporate it?"

"Unlikely. You'd only eat it, dissolve it in your stomach acids, excrete it out. Parents lose their children,

mothers lose their babies from their wombs, you've lost your... Well," she shrugs, "it's gone its own way now, Tom. It's outside you".

"Is this some cruel joke of yours? Do you really hate me so much? Have you been hating me all of these years without telling me?"

"Hatred, dear, doesn't apply if the soul is gone; nor love. Besides, how could I possibly love or hate *that*? But life goes on, obviously. You'll have to look after it, Tom."

We have what used to be, once, a goldfish bowl on top of the drinks cabinet in the dining space; now a flower bowl with a posy of anemones, artificial ones of silk. The goldfish died after a few months. Of loneliness perhaps – if a fish can feel lonely. Of emptiness, and the horror of the empty world being so bent round upon itself. I can't very well flush my soul down the drain, like an abortion, can I? Even if there's only the merest suspicion that it really is my soul. So I take the bowl, laying the posy on the dining table – then rush back in panic in case Mary pulls one *on me*. My soul's still there. Mary's back in the bedroom, humming, putting on makeup. I scoop my soul carefully into the bowl, add more water, remove it to the safety of the drinks cabinet beside the little drum of daphnae, undiscarded year in year out. Do I feed it on daphnae? It appears not to possess a mouth.

"Mary – I've put it in the bowl. Please be careful, won't you? God, the time! Do I go to work on the day I lost my soul?"

"Don't worry, Tom, it'll be safe. Today's like any other. Better than a pet rock, isn't it – a pet soul?"

A pet. But it looks nothing like a pet, any more than an amoeba could be a pet. There it is, a huge amoeba, afloat, semimobile, doing its own thing oblivious of me. Goodbye, Soul, for now; I'll be home at six. Don't get bored, don't do anything I wouldn't do.

It circles, rotates, pulses a bit.

Mary will get her hair done, then pick up the food and wine for the meal tonight; Tony and Wanda Fitzgerald are coming round. Brittany artichokes, steak and strawberries, I suppose.

So off to work I go. While my soul stays at home.

If Mary put the bowl on the cooker and heated the water up, I wonder would I feel the searing pains of being burnt alive? Agonies at a distance? I should have found a better place for the anemones.

However, no such agonies arrive. Indeed, all day long as I examine my sensations, I feel very little sensation indeed. I coast in neutral. Things get done. I entertain a client to lunch; does he notice my soul is absent? Apparently not. I wonder whether people really have souls at all – perhaps I was the only one? After lunch I call in on impulse at a church. I ring the confessional bell, I pull the curtain. This is how I believe one goes about it. I've no practical experience of such things.

"Yes, my son?"

"Father, I'm sorry but I don't know the right routines. The formulas. What one does. I've never been in a confessional before—"

"If you suddenly feel the call, plainly there's a need. What is it?"

"Father, I've lost my soul"

"No soul is ever lost to God, my son."

"Mine is lost. To me. Well, not exactly lost. No – I still have it in a sense, only it's not in me any more—"

Useless. I stumble out.

Work.

Home.

Mary's hair is exquisite, if over-precise. I smell the tarragon in the Breton sauce prepared for the artichoke leaves, and hurry to the drinks cabinet, heart thumping, absurdly fearful that my living soul is chopped into the sauce with the tarragon leaves. So vulnerable I feel with my soul detached from me; yet at the same time curiously I feel very little about it... But no. My soul still circles slowly there, aloofly. I prod it. It ducks, bobs up again, like jelly.

Tony and Wanda arrive. I pour gins and whiskeys.

"Whatever's that?" asks Wanda, pointing.

Mary smiles brightly. "Oh, that's Tom's soul."

Everyone giggles, even me.

We sit down. We eat, we drink. Conversation does its glassy best to glitter. Smoke fills the air. Mary places the bowl with my soul in it on the dining table as we drink coffee and some odd beetroot liqueur from Rumania. My soul circulates. Tony offers it a stuffed olive on a skewer, the olive being the same size as it is. It butts against it, declines the offering; how could it nibble it? When Tony withdraws the olive I look twice to ensure that he has not exchanged my soul on a skewer for an olive bobbing in the bowl. But all is well.

"It really is his soul, you know," says Mary. "But don't imagine it feeds or thinks or does very much! It's just something that *is*."

"An essence. How existential," nods Tony. After a while my soul is relegated to the top of the cabinet again. Where it rotates, quite slowly, mutely in its bowl.

After a while longer its presence seems to overcast the evening; Tony and Wanda leave rather early, murmuring excuses. It's disconcerting to see someone's soul, looking just like that and no more. If only it was radiant, with wings! A hummingbird. A butterfly... But it isn't, alas. This miracle, this atrocity, this terrible event is too small and simply protoplasmic, too tadpolelike. Where is the amazement? Where is the awful revelation of loss? And this is why I know now, with absolute certainty, that my soul does indeed swim there in the bowl. Lost to me utterly; so utterly that not even a thread of awe or a spider's strand of sickness unto death can connect me to it.

Such is the nature of real loss, irreparable total loss; no possible attachment remains. So it is true that I am soulless; for there it is. Just that and no more.

While Mary rinses the plates, I sit patiently watching it as it turns, and turns, limbless, eyeless, brainless, mouthless, turning nevertheless, occasionally ducking and bobbing in its tepid water in the bowl.

My soul, oh my soul.