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Fish Out of Water

I saw a fish out of water today.

I was biking home from school, wireless headphones blasting techno, drowning out my thoughts with hard bass and vocals so digitally distorted that it sounded like a robot singing instead of a real person. It had to be that loud, otherwise I'd end up thinking about the test I failed, and how Miss Williams made me look like an idiot in front of the class because she called on me – she called on me because she knew I wasn't paying attention – and the sandwich I was supposed to have for lunch that that jerk Ryan stomped on, and how the girls sitting up front in math class started laughing at me because I was staring at the back of Rachel Lee's head because her hair looked nice today. They say I barely make their Top One Hundred guys in our school. They never said it to my face, but I've heard them whispering about it, typing down names on their phones when they think the teacher's not looking. The guys do it too. You'd think we'd have bigger things to worry about. Like graduating.

When I rounded the corner, I was so stuck in my head that I almost ran it over. All I saw was a flash of orange before I swerved, and I ate asphalt when my bike twisted off the curb. Blood burned where I'd busted my lip, and it tasted bitter and metallic in my mouth. My palms stung. I could feel all the tiny pebbles and specks of dirt sticking to my ripped skin.

But I forgot it all when I saw the fish again. It's a goldfish, a big one, around the size of my fist. I didn't know they could get that big. It flopped around on the sidewalk, fins sticking to bits of glass, mouth open and gills flapping, searching for water that pooled around it too shallow

to breathe. It just stared up at me with those empty black eyes, pathetic and ugly and desperate. But somehow, it made my throat close up.

"You and me both, buddy," I said. The goldfish just stared at me as I crawled over to it, flopping once when I carefully poked it with my finger. The scales felt slimy and cold. I dug my water bottle out of my backpack and unscrewed the lid. My palms burned from the friction. I ignored it and set my bottle on the ground. Then, as gently as possible, I scooped it up with one hand and let it slide into the metal container. Touching the fish's cold body made my palm burn less. I peered into the bottle, waiting. After a few seconds, the fish wriggled and swam up to stare at me. I felt a grin split over my face.

"Better, right?" It didn't answer, of course, but I thought I could see a new light in its blank eyes. "It's a little cramped, but I'll fix that as soon as we get home."

It wriggled again. I laughed and stood up. "You're damn lucky I didn't hit you. Man, what asshole just tossed you out on the sidewalk?" I picked up my bike with my free hand and started walking. "But hey, now we got each other."

The goldfish blew a couple bubbles.

"Let's get you home, buddy."