



ILLUSTRATION: TUBA TUHRA KHAN

FISH TANK

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If someone were to ever ask me what the outside world looks like, it would instantly put a frown on my face. I would try to come up with an answer that would discreetly hide the glass wall that separated me from the outside world, which would cover up the fact that I had never really seen the outside world.

Nobody asked me though. Why? Because I never met them.

My life has been all about swimming in little circles in the fish tank that I've called home. For as long as I remember, it has always been me here, alone, in this world that seemed so big when I was small. However, now it barely seems spacious.

I've memorised how many tiny pebbles there are here. I am not scared of the toy diver inside. It's just a toy, it can never swim and it certainly can't eat me alive. I can now swim back and forth in mere seconds. And that has been suffocating. I know I belong in the wide expanse of the sea, of an ocean of which I would never grow tired of.

Sure, there could be other marine creatures, monsters even. There could be whirlpools that might swallow me in. Or there might be a tsunami that could carry me offshore and I wouldn't be able to survive. But it'd still be the outside world. The real world.

The world outside the ever-gloomy glass walls of my tank had three humans (a boy and his parents). I assumed that they were my owners but I hated the notion of it.

They were very wealthy – I could easily tell.

In the room I was in, there was a huge screen that engulfed the wall adjacent to the tank I lived in. It was called television. And every day as a ritual, the three humans would sit in front of it and watch something.

At first glance, it looked endearing. However, I have been their silent audience and I know for a fact that whatever show they watched featured people who were much happier than they were.

The three would only blink at the screen and it seemed that they would steal surreptitious glances among themselves to ensure that they were aware of the invisibly huge distances between them.

The boy would every now and then, look out from the window. I would too. Beyond the window of their house overlooked the edge of the sea – its blue and grey waves swelling and crashing gently onto the sandy beach.

Every time I looked at the sea from there, which was often, something inside me cried. Was it longing? Was it some sort of dream? I didn't know.

All I knew was that it was an emotion that swelled like the waves in my chest and filled me up until it felt like I would choke. And the aftermath of that was my anger of being trapped inside this miserable fish tank.

Until one faithful day.

I didn't know what really happened but it was the boy's doing. He would always talk to me in hesitant whispers ever since he was a child. He would draw lazy circles on the glass of the tank and talk about his

day which was spent within the walls of his house. The excitement he had when he was young kept waning as he grew older. His whispers were now little tufts of fury, and sometimes a concoction of sadness, frustration, and hopelessness.

Today he almost looked proud when he walked up to the tank. He thrust his hand into the water and quickly scooped me up in a plastic bag of water. I wasn't scared because sometimes they did that when they had to clean the tank. Today, however, the boy's hands were slightly trembling as he held the plastic bag.

He took huge breaths before he opened the door, and it dawned upon me what exactly he had been doing.

He was finally going out.

I had seen the boy look out the window for so long. I've seen him quietly wrestle against everything to leave. I've heard his voice fading when he wanted to speak up for himself for so long that it's only pride and happiness, I felt for him. It never really occurred to me why he had been taking me with him.

But both of us saw the outside world. The outside world is painted in brighter colours – a contrast to the subdued tones of the house. The boy's hands trembled even more as he, no, we took in everything around us. I could barely keep up with the jostling water and him, with the people around him. But when his pace picked up and he took a turn, I understood where he was going.

There was a hurl of emotions as the water toppled over, induced by the boy's

sprint. Thrill, anticipation and with a sharp pang – fear. I've complained about the fish tank for so long, but it was my familiar space. It was safe and tranquil.

The sea in front of me was even more beautiful than what I saw from the window. It's a mighty and roaring expanse of blue and grey. Moving and unmoving at the same time. But it's the deep unknown, the place where I could get lost so easily.

I looked at the sea, the boy looked at the people around. We looked at the house we've called home – so close yet so far away. We looked at everything we have had and could have. It's almost as if we had an eagle-eye view and saw ourselves in stark miniature against everything. A small step for us – that's probably bigger than our whole lives.

The lines smear and maybe I am the boy and he is the fish. Either way, we both were in a fish tank and now we needed to step out of it.

And suddenly the boy gently tipped the plastic bag forward. There was a small surge and I was finally in the sea, where the roar of the waves was deafening. The pull was too strong, the surface too tight, the toss of waves too mighty but it was so devastatingly beautiful and I tried to swim in.

But I caught a glimpse of the boy's face from under the water and I knew he realized it too.

This is just another fish tank.

Maisha Nazifa Kamal has lost track of time and is living in a world where she never existed. Break her reverie at 01shreshtha7@gmail.com