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The Goldfish Bowl at the End of the Earth

Fiction • Gerrard Hanly

If there had been anyone for miles in any direction to look, they would have seen *Miss Fortune* as a shapelessly small point in the sky, crawling far above the vast geometric quilt of the Pacific. As such, the eternal bass groan of the B-25's fat twin propeller engines was audible only to her crew. Deafeningly so. Which was a blessing, truthfully, because Dullahan hadn't fucking shut up ever since he'd found the totem. He'd always been a twitchy little bastard, even before Wake Island, and after Wake he'd been nearly insufferable. But now, he was tuned to a whole different frequency. Now he was just a complete goddamn creep.

The totem, a fist-sized idol of a Japanese god cut from tar-colored volcanic rock, had grown in Dullahan's eyes until it filled the scope of his existence. Dullahan, who was a real, living human being, flesh and eyes where the totem had obsidian and a set of beady, glittering pearls. He talked to it, he laughed with it, he recited Shakespeare to it. It moved, without deviation, from the oil stained pit of his shirt pocket into his powder-black hands and then right back again, and Danby nearly got his thumb bitten off just trying to get it away from him.

Dullahan was the B-25's ball turret gunner. He used to sleep in the ball turret some nights they were on patrol, his flight jacket wadded up for a pillow. Now he spent all his time in there, and he didn't spend any of it sleeping. *My little goldfish bowl*, he used to call the acrylic bubble. It was a good joke the first few times. It had gotten stale after a while, sure, but he'd kept it going anyway, even after Wake. But now he didn't say it anymore, and when the others did, they didn't say it with a whole lot of humor. They'd talk about *fucking Dullahan*

and his *goddamn goldfish bowl*. For instance:

“Where’s Dullahan?”

“Fucking Dullahan? His *goddamn goldfish bowl*, where else do you think?”

The words had all the qualities of brimstone as they left Messner’s mouth. Lippmann turned to leave the lieutenant to himself, sorry he’d broken the sullen quiet that had settled over the crew. Then he realized that the only alternative to Messner’s wrath was the red-eyed melancholy of the others (or, of course, Dullahan’s inexhaustible bugshit insanity), so he opted to remain in the company of the pilot. At least boiler-pot rage could be entertaining.

Messner sat on a salt-eaten oil drum toppled over onto its side in the sand, map spread taut across his knees. Lippmann looked back at *Miss Fortune*. Her radio operator and co-pilot sat on one great dull green wing, sharing a cigarette. Smiling lasciviously down at them was *Miss Fortune’s* namesake, a pinup doll taken straight from an old *Esquire* and painted in repose just behind the cockpit, long legs and sequined skirt and cherry colored nipples, so abruptly beautiful on this crumbling tarmac, amidst this torched jungle, that she seemed fit to be on a cathedral ceiling. And beneath it all, cloistered in the shade of the bomber’s underbelly, her ball-turret gunner ranted and raved in his goldfish bowl.

They touched down on a new dot in the Pacific every other day, but Dullahan still preferred his goldfish bowl, dangling from his gunner’s stirrups or just curling up on the bare glass bottom like a dead bug in a lightbulb. He didn’t get out for the dense sweaty jungles; he didn’t get out for the island-sized ashtrays as burnt out as the whole crew felt. This one was somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, the green tangle punctured by grey wounds that smelled of cordite. He hadn’t gotten out here, either.

“How close to the *Saratoga* you reckon we are?” Lippmann eventually asked.

Messner took a second, sighed at the map, then wiped at his nose with the back of his hand and looked up at him.

“Three days, Lipp. If God even bothers to look at this part of the fuckin’ planet anymore.”

Sleep deprivation and the acrid miasma of gunpowder that permeated *Miss Fortune’s* cabin could have explained the stinging red halos that ringed all the airmen’s eyes, but each of them knew as well as the others that they all cried whenever they found themselves alone. All except for Dullahan.

Dullahan cried a lot after Wake, but then he found that Japanese statue, and now he just laughed. Like he did that one night, the night after they’d been separated from the squadron, when out of the dark a boiling horde of seagulls

came sailing right at them. Gulls don't fly that high or in that many numbers, but there they were, tearing headlong right into them, bursting against the cockpit fuselage and obliterating themselves in the scream of the propellers and it was like they wanted to get *inside* and Dullahan was laughing so hard he couldn't breathe and *for Christ's sake Messner, can't you shut him up, just shut him the fuck up, just for a fucking minute?* Finally Messner did, marching to the ball-turret with his eyes and nose streaming and pulling the hatch open and punching Dullahan so hard they all thought he was dead until he woke up the next morning. Still laughing. He always fucking laughed.

Dullahan would talk to Lippmann sometimes, probably because Lippmann still cared. Lippmann was younger than the others, and it was the first time he'd lost a friend without them being dead, so it stood to reason. Dullahan would take one knuckle and tap at the inside of the ball turret's hatch when he wanted to talk, and he'd only open up for Lippmann. He wouldn't talk to Taggart or Danby, and Messner never went near the *goddamn* goldfish bowl anymore.

It could be that that's why Lippmann was the one who went to the goldfish bowl that night, the night after Messner had said *three days*. Out of the dark, a noise came, a quick heavy staccato that pounded against the bomber's fuselage, then came again, and again. For a silent, nauseous minute they thought they had flown into another run of seagulls before they realized that they were being shot at.

The silver-skinned fighters came shrieking out of the night at the bomber, punching sucking portals to the stratosphere in its hull. Messner and Danby quietly sweated over the Byzantine flight controls like a pair of church organists. Taggart sent obscenities and tracer rounds flying out into the black from the tail gun, both about equally likely to reach their target. And Lippmann stood over Dullahan's goldfish bowl, jaw tight, holding a spanner from the repair kit like a club. There was nothing but quiet from below. He needed to get Dullahan out, and he needed the heavy guns that the lunatic was sitting on top of. *Or everyone is going to die*. In one great burst of impetus, he grabbed the hatch and pulled it open.

There was a hole in the bottom of the goldfish bowl. A perfect circle, the kind of thing that some kid might do to his neighbor's window with a baseball, and Dullahan was dribbling out of it. Lippmann let the hatch and the wrench drop, but couldn't get his hands up in time to keep from retching. He contemplated the mess on the cabin floor before easing the hatch back open again to see the mess that was below it. The phosphorus round glowed ember-like, whistling smoke from where it burrowed into Dullahan and died without detonating. In what looked like Dullahan's lap sat the idol, blood black on the

black rock, eyeing Lippman with its gleaming pearls. He let the hatch slam shut again and sat down on top of it. The shouts and gunfire from Taggert in the rear had stopped. So had the droning wails from outside the bomber. As the thunder of his own pulse in his ears slowly calmed, Lippmann realized that no other sound remained.

No. No, that wasn't true. Faintly, something took up where the clatter of the dogfight had been a second before. It was faint beneath the bass line of the propellers, but it was still there. Oh Christ, it was there.

Laughing. There was laughing from under the hatch, down in the ball-turret. Down in Dullahan's goldfish bowl. Steadily rising in pitch and mania like the screech of a kettle. And then, right under where Lippmann sat, past a mere inch of sheet metal, there came a tapping. The gentle tapping of a single knuckle.

The flying metal tube filled with screams, but for miles around the only sound was the deep monotone bellow of its engines, and, beyond that, nothing but the calm breath of the Pacific.