

The Fishbowl

Prose — Ciaran Francis

The Fountain of Youths flows from a speed pourer, smooth as glass. Three shot glasses are filled, and the patrons drink to their limitless health and are satisfied with a grimace. This is O'Neal's: an Irish bar only in name and in reckoning. It lies in a college town and so on the weekends it belongs to the undying horde. On the weekdays it goes to the vultures, townies, and whatever other creatures take pleasure in picking at dry bones. Those days are quiet. This is Friday. This is Bloody Sunday. Here, suffering and joy are divine.

But so many inescapable questions were lost in this moment of trespassing, late in the night. Two girls huddled in a closed stall in the men's restroom. Jean jacket was retching over the bowl and the curly haired one held up the other's ponytail from a standing position with the other hand holding a cup. The pose lended itself more to a garbage bag than a lock of hair. Jean's stomach threatened to come up next, and Curly thought of many things in those long moments in and around heaves. None of these were on the absurdity of the situation. Long gone were her obsessions with "the other" and the facilities they require. She didn't so much as glance at the urinal, nor at the piss-soaked floor below. She stared at the mortar between cinder blocks and at the shape that made an "I", much like she did in detention all those years ago. Her eye got caught up at the bottom portion of the shape and she traced it over and over again with great care.

Only moments before, the two had barged into the restroom. Jean clung to Curly's arm as she pushed the swinging door. The wrong turn was not a blunder, but a calculated decision. The men's was always near empty, but the women's had a line five deep out the door. Had there been a moment to lose, the pair would've gained the ire of everyone who made their way over to the restroom. There was no time for negotiations or gender performance when her friend was so close to disaster. This calculation, however, failed to take into consideration the sheer volume of contents that needed to be disposed of. Jean had her whole stomach to give, and her generosity was not nearly through. The men's was usually nearly empty, true, but that didn't mean there wasn't a constant flow in and out. Rude steps entered the small room, and most immediately recognized what was going on. Curly rolled her eyes as one made a joke, and the other laughed. Her arm was getting sore and if they thought it was so funny, they could take the reins.

Meanwhile, Jean kept up her usual pace, spitting and cursing as the bowl reflected every gasp for air. She had no concept of what was outside this little fishbowl, other than the allpowerful spinning and the evil in her stomach. A person promises funny things when they're in a situation like that. She was totally absorbed in this little, porcelain world, the cold liquid touching her knee, the strange stain that wouldn't go away no matter how much she flushed. She forgot about rage and fear and what she wanted for her upcoming birthday. In these few moments she knelt there, she was closer to God than she had been in almost ten years.

The two men from the bathroom had other business to attend to. The conversation white shirt and combat boots had left carried on without them and welcomed the pair back with bitter unrecognition. Red shirt and trucker hat were still talking, Red going off on another tangent and Trucker listening well enough for someone so far into a tab. They stood close, side by side; for people more reasonably distanced it was almost impossible to hear what they were talking about over the music. The two knew each other from a class they had a while ago. Red had spotted Trucker while trucker was making his way around the bar with White and Boots in tow.

Boots kept getting lost in his own thoughts as he stood there. White was listening closely but the liquor from last night was still disagreeing with his sensitive stomach and disagreeing with each new drop. Red was talking about his brother now, or at least his brother was mentioned and that he was going to some other university north of here. It's a nice town, apparently, with enough restaurants for the pair to go down a list of. Boots had pre-gamed too hard, and with too much variety, and he had just remembered this. Every detail he was able to pick up on, his mind just ran with until another was heard. He was feeling stuffy, like he should say something or pace around for a bit. The conversation was boring, apathetic, he was going to say something. Current affairs were making him sad, and he couldn't intellectualize why.

The conversation shifted to Trucker's dog, who was going blind. That poor creature can't do anything by herself anymore. That's sad. But then there was a lull in the conversation, a perfect opportunity to get himself included.

"The other day," he began, looking for whether the others would listen. Nobody looked at him, but nobody kept talking, "I was walking down to the library. There was a guy in front of me walking too, and he had one of those canes blind people use. Well, I started following him. Full national geographic style, ya know? I was fascinated. Until this point, I hadn't ever seen a blind person in real life. I kinda assumed they were pretty helpless. I was thinking, *ell maybe he'll need some help getting to*

where he needs to go, but nope. That cane of his found every bump in the sidewalk. I asked myself, *how does he know when there's a crossing*, but his cane found the little bumps. You know the little bumpy plates at crossings? I asked myself, *how does he know where he is on the sidewalk*, but if he ever got off to the side his cane found the grass first. He even held his cane different depending on where he was and what he was doing.

"I got so excited to see how he would tackle the next thing, ya know? But I also got kinda ashamed. This guy was unstoppable, a real machine, ya know? Like he ever needed my help. People really do find a way in the face of adversity. I was seeing the world in a whole 'other way. Like, what am I experiencing right now? If he's doing pretty good, can I start doing pretty good? Well, I'm way past the library at this point, I'm way past. There were more questions like, *wonder how he's going to find that street sign*. Well, he found that one with his face. He really slammed into it, like you could hear it ring a little bit. It was disappointing. He might've been independent and capable, but he was still blind as shit I guess. Or human at the very least. I was pretty embarrassed myself. I had just been watching this guy the whole time like an idiot, so I just decided to leave him alone and hope he didn't notice me. I don't know what I thought of that... It was pretty funny I guess."

Red pursed his lips a little and nodded solemnly. Trucker took a sip of what must've been his fifth beer or tenth drink. White laughed a little, he seemed to really picture the story but didn't say anything. Boots reckoned with what he was doing there, both at the bar and with this group of people. There really wasn't much else he could do. There slight sting of embarrassment to go with it all. He let go of his obligation to listen or to contribute, so too did he let go of the small island his friends inhabited within this turbulent sea of people. Soon the world around him grew larger, so large that he lost where exactly his tiny body had gone. The song changed, and with it Boots began to fade. He became translucent. Through osmosis he left the group, carried away by some current or another. He became like a petal on the wind. Through embarrassment or some more bitter resentment, earned or unearned, he ascended into something just short of annihilation.

Late in the night, a vending machine gazed out into the crowd with immaculate, unblinking hatred. It occupied a dark corner of the bar. All light seemed to be sapped there. At the top of its window was a light, hich illuminated all that was inside. Off all of its rows, only half a dozen or so were occupied with cigarette cartons. Red and green boxes dotted the black mechanical background. These, as the machine understood, were colors closely associated with a celebration of gift giving and generosity. These cigarettes where different from food or drink in some

ay, but this difference didn't matter to the machine. The chemical processes made possible by the cigarette would never be relevant to the machine, except that people wanted it. It loved to watch the faces, those twisted masks, and it loved to see them change when it ate the paper bills and gave nothing back. It watched this particularly interesting night from behind the glass. He watched the animal dance.

Witnessing the ascension of Boots was Curly, who coolly sipped at her cup as her blonde, battered friend lost five dollars to the vending machine. That was one of the boys she had been talking to in the line.

Trucker had ascended the que inexplicably. In the freezing cold he had talked his way from group to group, climbing with skillful abandon along the side of the bar. As soon as he became acquainted with one person, he had gained the interest of another, leaving Boots and White well behind. Boots watched in awe as Trucker ascended and wondered how another person could move with so little regard for anything, how someone could learn to fly as he did. Boots wondered if this feat of social genius was just the virtue of a dog wagging its tail, guided only by the scent of piss and over eager hands. Trucker left nothing behind but a general stirring, but in his wake there was at least a shred of opportunity.

Behind Boots and White, there was a group of girls who had been so stirred and had not forgotten the conversation that had just left them. Most of them talked amongst themselves, not so interested, for one reason or another, in mingling outside the group. The exception was a curly haired girl and her jean jacketed friend. Boots had made an offhanded comment about how quickly Trucker had made it up the line, and that he'd be inside in no time at all.

"It's kind of impressive," Curly said, "but it makes you wonder if, ya know, there's anything wrong with the guy."

"What do you mean?" Boots asked.

"Well, sometimes people like that have something wrong with them. They're so good at putting on a friendly face because they've practiced it. Maybe he's just trying to cut in line..."

"No," White said, keeping the conversational tone, "I've been roommates with him for two years now. He's one of my closest friends. He really is just that nice."

They all looked up the line at Trucker, who was a full six groups ahead of them. Boots said, "he really is like a golden retriever with his tail agging." Neither of the other two seemed to agree with what he said.

"I could be wrong. I'm a neuroscience major, so I think about these kinds of things. It's sort of common among people like that to be so outgoing. Take John Wayne Gacy for example. He was a popular, local politician up north. He also had like thirty boys buried in his crawlspace."

"You don't think someone like our friend could be well intentioned?" asked Boots.

"I'm not saying that he isn't, I'm just saying that it's a thing."

"Nah," said White, "nah, he really is just that nice. He's always like this. That's how we met. He just came right up to me, and we became friends. He really is just that nice."

Curly gazed at Trucker the exact same way that Boots had. She dropped her assertion, but she too tried to pin the climb. It wasn't between dog and its opposite for her, though. What Trucker wore was a twisted mask, and she wanted to know what was beneath it all. She wanted to open up the back of his head like a present and see what all that clicking was about. There was no plan to put him back together, either. Such violence was justified when someone like that was walking around, someone so much... She didn't even want to finish the thought. Trucker had made it in, despite the speculation of everyone he left behind. For all their faults, the others remained in the cold for just a little longer. They were able to go their own separate ways and to enjoy the fountain of youths.