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THE LUMP

Steve Calamars

Charlie Greene can feel the lump on his inner right thigh. He steers his car with one hand and pushes on the lump with the other. He prods the thing going down the road, experiencing strange, foreign sensations while maintaining control. Charlie can feel that the lump is not hard or stationary, but soft and transitory, being able to move the mass beneath his skin either down toward the knee or up closer to the groin. He pulls into the parking lot and backs into a space. Charlie checks the mail and walks upstairs to his apartment.

He drops his keys and a few envelopes on the kitchen counter. Charlie immediately walks into the bathroom and removes his gray slacks. He sits down on the side of the tub and inspects the oddity. It is the size of an egg beneath the skin. He pushes on the lump and moves it along the leg. He experiences an awkward, unidentifiable sensation. He has no prior memory of the lump and has only been aware of it since his lunch break, when he was using the urinal in the restroom. Persuaded more by curiosity than fear, Charlie now stands up and walks over to the medicine cabinet.

He takes out a straight-razor and sits back down. Opening the instrument, he holds the lump steady and makes a small incision. He rips off a clump of toilet paper and dabs the blood, before poking his finger inside and feeling around. Charlie runs up against an object, a structure, soft, scaly and warm. He removes his finger and wipes the blade clean. He holds the lump steady and expands the incision meticulously. He is now able to work two fingers inside and grip it.

Stretching the incision open with one hand and gripping with the other, Charlie is able to remove the lump. He pulls out a small, plump goldfish with tiny black speckles and massive black eyes. He holds the fish up in the light and looks at it. The fish looks back at Charlie, mouth contorting, gasping for air. He experiences an uncomfortable sense of sympathy for the fish, dropping it quickly into the toilet to stop its suffering. It breathes

deep and swims small figure-eights in the bowl. Charlie watches warmly as his leg bleeds out onto the bathroom floor.

He opens the medicine cabinet again. This time he takes out Band-Aids and a bottle of iodine. He uses iodine-soaked clumps of toilet paper to clean the incision and applies numerous Band-Aids to contain the bleeding, which continues to flow from the surgery. Charlie checks on the fish and finds it still swimming small figure-eights. He knows a toilet is not an appropriate home and walks over to the tub.

Turning on the hot and cold faucets, Charlie begins to fill the tub with water. He is exacting with his adjustments, aware that if the water is too warm or too cool, the fish will die immediately upon entering the tub. He stabilizes the temperature and cuts off the water. He wipes blood off of his leg and walks over to the toilet.

Charlie submerges his hand in the water, and the fish seems almost to swim into his palm. He carries the thing carefully and releases it into the tub. It breathes deep and swims large, slow figure-eights. Charlie sits and watches quietly.

The fish, breaking its figure-eights, comes to the surface of the water. Mouth contorting, it stares up at Charlie. He thinks it might be hungry, whether correct or incorrect, he gets up and goes into the kitchen. He opens a loaf of bread and removes a slice. A small pool of blood collects on the kitchen floor. Charlie wipes his leg with a dish towel and returns to the tub.

Tearing off bits of bread, he rolls them into tiny white balls and drops them one at a time into the water. The fish eats the tiny bread balls and hovers near the surface. It eats the entire slice of bread, before Charlie begins to get dizzy.

He looks at the thin stream of blood running down his leg and coagulating into a small puddle at his heel on the floor. Charlie manages to wipe some of the blood away before finally losing strength and falling. He lies there peacefully and gradually loses consciousness. His eyes close, his breath shallows—

In the tub beside him, well-fed and content, the fish breathes deep and swims long, slow, meditative figure-eights.