

BRADLEY SOMER



FISH BOWL

WHAT THE GOLDFISH
SAW AS HE FELL
FROM THE 27th FLOOR

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

1. In Which the Essence of Life and Everything Else Is Illuminated
2. In Which Our Protagonist, Ian, Takes a Dreadful Fall
3. In Which Katie Approaches the Seville on Roxy on a Vital Mission
4. In Which We Meet the Villain Connor Radley and the Evil Seductress Faye
5. In Which the Stoic Jimenez Tries to Fix the Elevator Despite Being Completely Unqualified to Do So
6. In Which Petunia Delilah Feels a Peculiar Twinge in Her Nethers
7. In Which Garth Returns to the Seville on Roxy with a Secret Cargo in Tow
8. In Which Claire the Shut-In Receives a Mysterious Buzz from the Front Door
9. In Which Homeschooled Herman Finds the Consciousness That He Recently Misplaced
10. In Which We Rejoin Ian the Goldfish in His Perilous Plunge That Has Yet to Begin
11. In Which Katie Demands Satisfaction from the Elevator Button
12. In Which the Evil Seductress Faye Bids Adieu to the Villain Connor Radley
13. In Which Jimenez Dares to Disconnect the Blue Wire but Leaves the Red Wire Attached

14. In Which Garth Finds the Center of Unadulterated Loneliness in the Stairwell
15. In Which Petunia Delilah Learns That Birthing Can Become Complicated and That Her Housekeeping Skills Could Use Honing
16. In Which Claire the Shut-In Immerses Herself in an Edible History
17. In Which Homeschooled Herman Makes a Startling Discovery
18. In Which Ian Learns of the Final Betrayal of His Body
19. In Which Our Heroine Katie Finds the Magic of Love in the Cleaning Supply Room Under the Stairs
20. In Which the Villain Connor Radley Sees the Signs and They Are Everywhere
21. In Which the Evil Seductress Faye Discards the Remnants of Her Love and Begins a Very Long Descent
22. In Which Jimenez Witnesses a Spontaneous Creation in the Blackness
23. In Which Garth Encounters the Evil Seductress Faye and Completes the Long Journey to His Apartment
24. In Which the Tripod Petunia Delilah Goes Door Knocking
25. In Which Claire the Shut-In Loses Her Job, Gains Some Groceries, and Calculates How Horny the City Is
26. In Which Homeschooled Herman Witnesses His First Life-Altering Moment
27. In Which Ian the Goldfish Realizes He Is Falling
28. In Which Our Heroine Katie Is Lifted Heavenward, but Only a Short Part of the Total Distance
29. In Which the Villain Connor Radley Judges His Heart and Finds It Wanting
30. In Which Faye Reminisces About the Rooting and Body Parts Connor Has Given Her
31. In Which Jimenez Gets All Slicked Up and Smellin' Good

32. In Which Garth Gets Scared, Gets Brave, and Then Gets Full-On Pretty
33. In Which the Tripod Petunia Delilah Finally Reaches Apartment 805 and Realizes She Has No Plan B
34. In Which Claire the Shut-In Comes to Terms with Losing Her Job at the PartyBox and Is Then Disrupted by an Urgent Pounding on Her Door
35. In Which Homeschooled Herman Suffers a Horrific Accident
36. In Which Things Below Are Rapidly Growing Larger from Ian's Perspective
37. In Which Our Heroine Katie Encounters the Evil Seductress Faye
38. In Which the Villain Connor Radley Admits He Made a Terrible Mistake and Then Inadvertently Makes Another
39. In Which the Evil Seductress Faye Judges a Cloacal Kiss to Be an Insufficient Source of Pleasure
40. In Which Jimenez Heroically Acts on the Final Service Request
41. In Which Garth Steels His Nerve and Performs the Most Courageous Act of His Life
42. In Which Petunia Delilah Reminisces About How She and Danny Fell in Love During the Zombie Apocalypse
43. In Which Claire the Shut-In Works Hard to Deliver Petunia Delilah's Baby
44. In Which Homeschooled Herman Holds a Life in His Hands and Sees a Life in His Mind
45. In Which Ian's Plummetous Descent Continues Past the Eighth Floor
46. In Which Our Heroine Katie Assaults the Crockery and Defends Her Heart
47. In Which the Villain Connor Radley Discovers the Impossibility and Certainty of True Love
48. In Which the Evil Seductress Faye Receives a Call from Guy #2 and Experiences Panties from Heaven

49. In Which Jimenez Finds That, Like Choosing to Live with a Leaky Sink, Loneliness Is a Choice
50. In Which the Glimmer of True Love Is Revealed to Garth and Happiness Spreads in His Belly Like a Gulp of Hot Cocoa
51. In Which Petunia Delilah Gets a Fucking Ice Cream Sandwich
52. In Which Claire the Shut-In Gets a Job and a Date and Possibly a Life on the Outside
53. In Which One of an Infinity of Homeschooled Hermans Bids Farewell to His Grandpa
54. In Which Ian Begins and Concludes His Perilous Plunge
55. In Which We Conclude Our Journey and Say Farewell to the Fine Residents of the Seville on Roxy.

Acknowledgments

Copyright

About the Book

Even a goldfish can dream of adventure...

From his enviable view from a balcony on the 27th floor of an apartment block, Ian the Goldfish has frequent – if fleeting – desires for a more exciting life. Until one day, a series of unfortunate events give him an opportunity to escape...

Our story begins, however, with the human inhabitants of Ian's building. There is the handsome student, his girlfriend, and his mistress; an agoraphobic sex worker, the invisible caretaker; the pregnant woman on bed rest; and the home-schooled boy, Herman, who thinks he can travel through time.

And as Ian tumbles perilously downwards, he will witness all their lives, loves, triumphs and disasters...

A truly original, philosophically joyful and charming novel with the unlikeliest of heroes. This is *Tales of the City* as seen by a goldfish.

About the Author

Bradley Somer was born in Sydney, Australia and grew up in Canada. His short fiction has appeared in literary journals, reviews and anthologies.

Fishbowl

Bradley Somer



EBURY
PRESS

For B. Tyler

1

In Which the Essence of Life and Everything Else Is Illuminated

There's a box that contains life and everything else.

This is not a figurative box of lore. It's not a box of paper sheets that have been captured, bound, and filled with the inkings of faith, chronicling the foibles and contradictions of the human species. It doesn't sport the musty smell of ancient wisdom and moldering paper. It isn't a microscopic box of C, G, A, or T, residing within cell walls and containing traces of everything that ever lived, from today back through the astral dust of the Big Bang itself to whatever existed before time began. It can't be spliced or recombined or subjected to therapy. It's not the work of any god or the evolution of Darwin. It's not a thousand other ideas, however concrete or abstract they may be, that could fill the pages of this book. It's not one of these things, but it's all of them combined and more.

Now we know what it isn't, let's focus on what it is. It's a box containing the perpetual presence of life itself. Living things move within it, and at some point, it will have been around long enough to have contained absolutely everything. Not all at once, but over the years, building infinite layer upon infinite layer, it will all wind up there. Time will compile these experiences, stacking them on top of each other, and while the moments themselves are fleeting, their visceral memory is everlasting. The passing

of a particular moment can't erase the fact that it was once present.

In this way, the box reaches beyond the organic to the ethereal. The heartbreaking sweetness of love, the rending hatred, the slippery lust, the sorrow of losing a family member, the pain of loneliness, all thoughts that were ever thought, every word ever said and even those which were not, the joys of birth and the sorrows of death and everything else will be experienced here in this one vessel. The air is thick with the anticipation of it all. After it's all done, the air will be heavy with everything that has passed.

It's a box constructed by human hands and, yes, if your beliefs trend that way, by extension, the hands of God. Regardless of its origin, its purpose is the same and its structure reflects its purpose. The box is partitioned into little compartments in which all of these experiences of time are stored, though there's no order to their place or chronological happening.

There are compartments stacked twenty-seven high, three wide, and two deep that house this jumble of everything. Melvil Dewey, the patron saint of librarians, would cringe at the mere thought of trying to catalog the details of these one hundred and sixty-two compartments. There's no way to arrange or structure what happens here, no way to exert control over it or systematize it. It just has to be left a mess.

A pair of elevators connects all of these compartments. Themselves little boxes, each with a capacity of ten people or 4,000 lb./1,814 kg., whichever comes first. Each with a little plaque attached to the mirrored wall near the panel that says it's so. The irritating pitch of the alarm that sounds when there's too much weight inside also says it's so. The elevators trundle tirelessly up and down their dingy shafts, diligently delivering artifacts and their custodians to the different levels. Day and night, they shuttle to one floor and then to the next and then back to the lobby. There's a

staircase too, in case of fire or power outage, so the custodians can grab the artifacts most dear to them and safely exit the box.

The box is a building, yes. More specifically it's an apartment building. It sits there, an actual place in an actual city. It has a street address so people who are unfamiliar with the area can find it. It also has a series of numbers so lawyers and city surveyors can find it too. It's classified in many ways. To the city it's an orange rectangle with black crosshatching on the zoning map. "Multi-Residential, High-Density High-Rise," the legend reads. To many occupants it's a "one-bedroom apartment for rent, with underground parking and coin laundry facilities." To some it was "an unbelievably affordable way to experience the convenience and excitement of downtown living. This two-bedroom, one-bathroom condo with uninterrupted city views must be seen to be believed," and is now home. For a few, it's a place to work on the weekdays. For others, it's a place to visit friends on the weekends.

The building was constructed in 1976 and has hobbled through time ever since. When it was still new, it was the tallest building on the street. Now that it's older, there are three taller ones. Soon there will be a fourth. For the time, it was an elegant and stately building. Now it seems dated, belonging to a period in architectural history that has its own name, a name that was not known at the time it was built but is applied knowingly in hindsight.

The building was renovated recently because it was in much need. The concrete was painted to hide the spalling cracks and compiled graffiti. The drafty windows and gappy doors to the balconies were replaced to keep the evening chill outside and the temperate air in. Last year, the boiler was upgraded to provide adequate hot water for washing up. The electrical was updated because building codes have changed. It was once a building entirely full of renters. Now, it is a condominium where most people own but

others still choose to rent out their suites to offset other investment risks, to “diversify their portfolios.”

The building fulfills an Arcensian mission of carrying everything mentioned thus far, housing the spirit and the chaos of life and those beings in which they reside, through the floods and to safety every time the water recedes. Depending on where you live, this box may be just up the street. It may even be within walking distance from where you read these words. You may drive past it on the way home from work if you work downtown but live in the suburbs. Or you may even live there.

If you see this building, pause for a second to ponder what a marvelous arcanum it is. It will sit there long after you turn the last page in this book and long after we are dead and these words have been forgotten. The beginning and end of time will happen there within those walls, between the roof and the parking garage. But for now, only a handful of decades old, it’s a growing marvel in its nascent days and this book is a short chronicle of its youth.

Spelled out above the front door, bolted to the brick in weeping, rusty black metal lettering, is the name of the building: the Seville on Roxy.

2

In Which Our Protagonist, Ian, Takes a Dreadful Fall

Our story doesn't begin with a goldfish named Ian's perilous plunge from his bowl on the twenty-seventh-floor balcony where he, for as much as he can comprehend, has been enjoying the view of the downtown skyline.

In the long shadows of the late-afternoon sun, the city is a picket fence of buildings. There are dusty-rose glass ones, reflecting a Martian sun. Others are gunmetal-blue mirrors, and still others are simple brick-and-concrete blocks. There are office tower thrones proudly wearing corporate logo crowns, and there are hotels and apartment buildings, prickly with balconies ribbing every side of their vertical space. All of them have been shoved into the ground, into a grid that brings some order to their apparent incongruity.

Ian looks out over this megalithic flower garden of skyscrapers and sees only as much wonder as his mind can muster. He's a goldfish with a bird's-eye view of the world. A goldfish held aloft on a concrete platform with a god's perspective, one that's lost on a brain that can't fathom what it is looking at, but by that fact, the view is made even more wondrous.

Ian doesn't take his plunge from the balcony until chapter 54, when a dreadful series of events culminates in an opportunity for Ian to escape his watery prison. But we start with Ian for a few reasons, the first being that he's a vital thread that ties humanity together. The second is, with

a fish's brain capacity, time and place mean little because both are constantly being rediscovered. Whether he takes his fall now, fifteen minutes from now, or fifteen minutes ago doesn't matter because Ian can neither comprehend place and time nor comprehend the order that each imposes on the other.

Ian's world is a pastiche of events with no sequence, no past and no future.

For example, just now, at the beginning of his career as a Cypriniforme skydiver, Ian remembers that his watery home still sits there on a thrift-store folding table with flaking green paint. His bowl is empty now, save for a few pebbles, a little pink plastic castle, a fog of algae on the glass, and his roommate, Troy the snail. A rapidly growing length of empty air spans the distance between the bowl and its former resident. It doesn't matter to Ian that this event doesn't actually happen until chapter 54 because he already forgets how it came to be. Soon he will forget the bowl he spent months living in. He will forget the ludicrous pink castle. With time, the insufferable Troy will not just fade to a memory; he will disappear from Ian's experience all together. It will be as if he never existed at all.

While falling past a twenty-fifth-floor window, Ian catches a glimpse of a middle-aged woman of considerable size taking a step across the living room. The glimpse, a fleeting flash in the mind of a creature with no memory, has the woman wearing a beautiful gown, her movements as elegant and graceful as the drape and flow of the fine material she wears. The gown is a stunning shade of red. He would call it carmine if he knew the word for it. The woman's back is to Ian, who admires the tailored cut of the gown and how it accentuates her voluptuous form and the valley of her spine between her muscular shoulder blades. She's in the process of stepping around a coffee table. The way she moves betrays a level of shyness and a hint of terror. Her toes point slightly inward, her knees touch

lightly together. Her hands are clasped on one side, one arm held apologetically across her belly and the other resting on her hip. Her fingers are knotted into a nest.

There's also a round hulk of a man in the center of the living room. The man has an arm outstretched to her, thick hair on his thick forearms, sporting a blissful look in his eyes. His face is calm, which is in contrast to the anxiety shown by the woman. A hint of a smile curves his lips. He wears the look of how a loved one's embrace feels.

All of this is a flash, an inert moment as Ian passes the twenty-fifth floor on his approach to terminal velocity. With a goldfish's sensibility, Ian cannot fathom the oddly divine nature of the existence of this constant velocity. If he could, Ian would wonder on the beautiful and quantifiable order that gravity imposes on the chaos of the world, the harmony of a marriage between a constant acceleration and an ultimate speed that all objects in free fall reach but don't breach. Is this universal number divine or simply physics, and if it's the latter, could it be the work of the former?

Having very little control over his descent, Ian tumbles freely and catches sight of the expansive pale-blue sky above and hundreds of fluttering white sheets of paper, twisting gracefully through the air, graciously flitting and swooping after him like a flock of seabirds to a trawler. Around Ian, swirling in the wind, are exactly two hundred and thirty-two pages of a dissertation in progress. One of these floating sheets is the title page, the first to fall and now teetering on a breeze below all the others, upon which is printed in a bold font "A Late Pleistocene and Holocene Phytolith Record of the Lower Salmon River Canyon, Idaho," under which is an italicized "by Connor Radley."

Their descent is much more delicate than the clumsy, corklike plummeting of a goldfish, which evolution has left ill prepared to pass a rapidly decreasing number of floors of a downtown high-rise. Indeed, evolution did not intend

for goldfish to fly. Neither did God, if that's what you believe. It really doesn't matter. Ian can neither comprehend nor believe in either, and the result of this inability is the same. The cause is irrelevant at the moment because the effect is irrevocable.

As his world pitches and spins, Ian catches flashing glimpses of pavement, horizon, open sky, and the gently swirling leaves of paper. Poor Ian doesn't think how unfortunate it is that he isn't an ant, a creature known to be able to fall a thousand times its body length and still hexaped on its merry way. He doesn't lament the fact that he wasn't born a bird, something that is obviously lamentable at present. Ian has never been particularly introspective or melancholic. It's not in his nature to contemplate or to lament. The core of Ian's character is a simple amalgam of *carpe diem*, *laissez-faire*, and *Namaste*.

"Less thinking, more doing," is the goldfish's philosophy.

"Having a plan is the first step toward failure," he would say if he could speak.

Ian is a *bon vivant*, and given the capacity to ponder, he would have found it a statement of the language's character that English has no equivalent descriptor and had to steal it from French. He's always been happy as a goldfish. It doesn't dawn on him that, with the passing of another twenty-five floors, unless something drastically unpredictable and miraculous happens, he'll meet the pavement at considerable speed.

In some ways, Ian is blessed with the underanalyzing mind of a goldfish. The troubles associated with deeper thought are replaced with basic instinct and a memory that spans a fraction of a second. He's more reactionary than plotting or planning. He doesn't dwell or ponder at length about anything. Just as he realizes his predicament, it blissfully slips from his mind in time to be rediscovered. He sleeps well because of this; there are no worries, and there is no racing mind.

Alternately, physiologically, the repeated realization of the terror of falling is quite draining on a body. It's the rapid-fire release of adrenaline, the repetitive pokes in his flight response, that stresses this gold-encased nugget of fishy flesh.

"Now, what was I doing? Oh my, I can't breathe. Oh shit, I'm falling off of a high-rise! Now ... what was I doing? Oh my ..."

Blessed indeed are the thoughtless.

But, as was pointed out earlier, when he was tumbling from the twenty-seventh-floor balcony, before he got here to the twenty-fifth, our story doesn't begin with Ian.

3

In Which Katie Approaches the Seville on Roxy on a Vital Mission

Our story begins about half an hour before Ian takes the plunge. It starts with Katie, Connor Radley's girlfriend. That's her standing at a pharmacy door two blocks up the street from the Seville on Roxy, looking out at the late-afternoon sun. She rests one hand on the handle, but instead of opening the door and leaving the store, she looks up Roxy. The sidewalk bustles with shoulder-to-shoulder pedestrians, and the road is clogged, bumper to bumper, with the mounting rush hour traffic.

There's a construction site next to the pharmacy, in front of which a billboard reads, "The Future Home of the Baineston on Roxy, 180 luxury suites now selling." A clean line drawing shows a boxy glass high-rise building bracketed by green trees, with people walking by the front. The trees and people are abstract sketches compared with the clarity with which the building is depicted. A sticker splashes across one corner of the billboard. It reads, "40% Sold." It peels and curls a bit at the edge, which makes Katie wonder how long it has been up there. Her eyes are drawn to the people in the sketch, anonymous and blurred with movement, bodies filling space more than people living lives.

The construction site had been busy with gawking workers wearing hard hats when she entered the pharmacy ten minutes ago. The air smelled like burning diesel and

concrete dust. She ignored their gazes. She could hear them talking but only caught enough lewd snippets of their conversation to inform her that she was their topic. It was enough to make her feel uncomfortable but not enough to inspire her to confront the pack of them about their impropriety, had she been able to muster the courage.

The site is now deserted, and the machines are all quiet. A solitary figure stands at the chain-link gate. He wears a blue uniform that has a "Griffin Security" patch on one shoulder and the name "Ahmed" stitched on the chest. There's a chair beside him with prolapsed orange sponge billowing through a rip in the covering.

Katie is a beautiful young woman with short brown hair, kohl-encircled pale-blue eyes, and a sharp chin. She hasn't been contemplating the street as much as waiting for the workers to grab their lunch boxes and leave. She pushes the pharmacy door open and steps into the street, her petite frame encountering the soft, round one of a mountain named Garth.

Garth is a scruffy, unshaven man who wears concrete-smeared work pants and a hard hat. He smells of physical labor, of sweat and work and dust. Garth has a backpack strapped to his shoulders, and he carries a bulging black plastic bag in one hand. With the other hand he reaches out to steady Katie as she takes an uncertain step back, ricocheting off of his bulk.

"Sorry," Katie mumbles. She's slightly embarrassed, but her mind is elsewhere. She's distracted by her task at hand to the exclusion of the world around her.

Garth smiles. He's ever conscious of his size and how intimidating he seems to those who don't know him. His default reaction is to try to defuse any ideas that he's a threat.

"It's okay," he says and stands in an awkward silence for a moment, seeing if Katie will say anything else. When she doesn't, he nods to her and carries on his way.

Katie watches Garth cross the street against the light, dodging the cars merging into traffic. He moves up Roxy in the direction of the Seville, his shuffling steps hurried. She waits in front of the buzzing neon pharmacy sign, not wanting to seem like she's following him and not questioning why she cares if it would appear that way. She mills about long enough to make Ahmed from Griffin Security eye her suspiciously. Katie doesn't notice Ahmed finger his walkie-talkie and drop his hand to his utility belt, resting it on his holstered 240 Lumen Guard Dog Tactical Flashlight. Indeed, Katie doesn't even know a flashlight could be tactical or what would make it so.

Standing in the traffic noise washing over the street, Katie thinks of Connor. She thinks of when they first met at the university. He was the teaching assistant for a class she was taking, and she had attended his office hours with questions about an upcoming exam. They went for coffee afterward and talked about everything but the class. Connor is handsome and charming, and she was flattered at being the center of his attention. He seemed so interested in her mind and thoughts. She immediately felt a connection with him, a chemistry that made her wonder if love at first sight could be real. It still seemed unbelievable that it could actually exist when all this time she had suspected it may just happen in romantic comedies and novels. Katie then thinks of the physicality of their relationship over the past three months, less a few days. Katie told him that she loved him, and lying in the tangle of sheets after a heated bout of lovemaking, he had merely grunted and was seemingly asleep.

In hindsight, beyond their first coffee together, there have been exactly two homemade dinners, three movie dates, and eight binge-drinking bar nights of booze and dancing (unlike most men, Connor is an amazingly sensual dancer, his body seeming to respond to her feelings). The

rest of their time together has consisted of a near nightly rooting in Connor's apartment.

Katie is aware of her affliction of falling in love more quickly and for fewer reasons than most need. It's not that she doesn't realize the heartbreak this has caused in her life, but she refuses to quell her romantic heart because it brings her joy as well. She thinks back to the string of men she has happily introduced to her family, having them over to dinner to meet her parents and her sister. She remembers the immersive, warm comfort of everyone talking, everyone laughing around the table. Then she remembers the number of subsequent family dinners she has attended alone, either having called it off for one shortcoming or another or having been told that it was not her, it was him. These end in quiet conversations with her mom and sister, late in the night, tending to her broken heart while her dad sleeps in his chair in the living room. Above their quiet whispers around the kitchen table, they could hear TV proclamations from the living room, from "Jesus is the answer" to "Call the PartyBox now, hundreds of beautiful singles are on the line waiting for you."

Katie's sure there are other people in the world with her ability to fall in love. She sees her affliction as a good thing and refuses to become jaded by her many rejections. Her belief is that love doesn't make one weak; it does the opposite. She thinks that falling in love is her superpower. It makes her strong.

Today, she's intent on finding out if Connor Radley loves her back.

A horn bleats from the traffic on Roxy and jolts Katie from her reverie. She blinks, looks up the street, and doesn't see Garth lumbering anywhere amid the herd of pedestrians. She decides that she has waited long enough. It's time for reckoning. She will either get reciprocation of her feelings or go back to her apartment alone, eat the junk food she has just prepurchased in the pharmacy, purge

Connor Radley from her thoughts, and start fresh tomorrow. With this firmed resolve, Katie sets off along the crowded sidewalk. At the corner, she waits for the light to turn in her favor and then crosses the street.

Ahmed of Griffin Security lets his muscles relax now that the threat has passed. There's a tinge of sadness that he didn't get to try out the moves he practiced with his tactical flashlight while standing shirtless in front of his bedroom mirror. He removes his hand from the flashlight's holster, and his fingertip slides from the corrugated plastic surface of the walkie-talkie button.

Katie cranes her neck and looks up at the twenty-seven floors of the Seville as she approaches.

He's up there, she thinks, in the concrete box at the top.

She can see the underside of his balcony and the little glass square of his apartment window. Then, too soon, she stands before the intercom keypad at the front doors. The doors are locked against vagrants, and beyond the street reflected in the glass stretches the lobby. It's dimly lit by rows of fluorescent lights and looks sad and empty.

Katie presses four buttons on the apartment intercom and waits while it rings. A few seconds pass before the speaker pops to life. There's a trembling inhalation, and then a timid voice comes through.

"Hello?"

Katie's distracted by a little boy bumping into her thigh. She looks into his surprised face until a man runs up and grabs the child under the arms.

"Gotcha, kiddo," he says and the child squeals and laughs at his dad. They carry on down the sidewalk.

Katie turns back to the intercom panel and hangs up. Wrong apartment number. She checks the directory. She had dialed Ridgestone, C., by accident, just one digit off and one line under Connor's. She runs her index finger across the names to double-check his buzzer number and

then pokes the four numbers for Radley, C. The intercom rings twice before an answer comes through.

"Yep," Connor's voice crackles within the small grated speaker in the intercom box.

"It's me," Katie says.

There's a burst of static and then silence. Connor's voice blares through the speaker, much louder than before.

"Who?"

"It's Katie."

There's another burst of static. It sounds like something being dragged over the mouthpiece on the other end.

The door buzzes, and the lock clicks.

*In Which We Meet the Villain
Connor Radley and the Evil
Seductress Faye*

Connor sits on his balcony, wearing only his sweatpants. The concrete is cool under his bare feet, the soles of which are coated with a layer of dust and sand. It's a refreshing feeling, moderating the warm afternoon air. The plastic lawn chair in which he sits is sticky with sweat, so he peels his back from it by leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

One hundred and twenty pages are stacked in his lap, and a ballpoint pen hangs from between his lips. One hundred and twelve pages have been stacked atop Ian's fishbowl and weighted down with a half-full coffee cup to fend off any errant breezes. Ian's bowl, in turn, rests on a folding card table, which is sidled up against the railing in the corner of the balcony. All of these items combined, coffee mug on paper pile on fishbowl on folding table on top-floor balcony, form a quiet shrine to the origin story of their being.

Connor is on the balcony because, in his small studio apartment, he feels the walls stifle his ability to edit. The place is too small for his thoughts. He's working through the first round of comments on his thesis, which he received from his adviser, and he's on a self-imposed deadline to finish as quickly as possible and get the hell out

of grad school. Connor finds it easier to think in the open air overlooking the expansive views offered to him from the balcony, so it has become his office. He has his lawn chair, a garage sale find and throwback to the seventies. It's made of hundreds of brown, burnt-almond, and dusty-green plastic tubes woven over an aluminum frame. He has his splintery, weathered card table, and he has Ian. Oh, and he has his coffee cup that reads "Paleoclimatologists do it in the dirt." A clever gift from Faye ... or was it Deb who got it for him? Maybe Katie?

Connor glares at the page in front of him.

Each printed letter is a simple symbol meaning nothing on its own. Combined, the letters make words that also mean little without their neighbors. All of these words together, however, convey a greater meaning, detailing the assumptions of the statistical analysis used in his research. On its own, the section is interesting, as noted by the jottings of his adviser in the margins, but it grows more meaningful when considered in the larger context of the thesis. Likewise, without context in world prehistory, the findings of Connor's study, about the impacts of paleoclimatic fluctuations on the ancient human inhabitants of Idaho, would be less interesting than they inherently are.

But right now, Connor isn't thinking in such economies of perspective; he's busily learning more about less, losing the context of the big picture by trying to figure out what his supervisor had scrawled diagonally across an equation. His brow furrows. He thinks it reads, "Awkward. Do better." He ponders what such a vaguely savage statement could mean.

It's math. Math can't be awkward and, by its nature, is either right or wrong, so how could he do better? Connor chews on the end of his pen and shoots a glance past Ian to the buildings beyond.

Ian doesn't ponder any of this. He doesn't have the capacity to. He resides permanently in his bowl on the folding table overlooking the city for a reason. Connor

tends to become bimaniacal when working on his thesis. His attentions focus to an unhealthy degree on editing and satisfying a chafingly powerful desire for sexual satisfaction. Connor feels embarrassed to be naked in front of the fish and definitely can't perform under his unblinking stare. For Ian's part, he's uninterested in Connor either way, clothed or naked, masturbating or copulating.

The cordless phone rings. Connor hears it, and Ian feels it as a frequency through the water.

Connor retrieves it from beside Ian's bowl, pokes the talk button, and holds it to his ear.

"Yep," Connor says into the receiver.

"It's me," comes a hollow voice, the static indicative of someone standing at the building's front door.

Connor isn't expecting anyone, and he can't place the voice. It's a female voice. It's definitely coming from the front door. The traffic noise rising to the balcony and that coming through the phone, the noisy motorcycle Dopplering past and the horn honking, all reach his ears in relative synchronicity.

"Who?" he asks.

"It's Katie."

Connor clasps his hand over the mouthpiece and says, "Shit."

Then he presses "9" on the cordless to release the lobby door and hangs up the phone.

Connor straightens the papers in his lap and then adds them to the stack atop Ian's bowl. He replaces the coffee-mug paperweight, less fearful of a smearing coffee ring stain than of a freak breeze kicking up and blowing the papers over the balcony railing. He stands and hikes up his sweatpants.

"Sit," Connor tells Ian as if he were a dog and not a goldfish.

Connor always wanted another dog. He grew up in the suburbs, a lonely boy in a neighborhood populated

primarily by retirees, so his dog, Ian, had been his best friend. They had spent long, idle summers together, hanging out in the backyard or playing in the culvert that ran through a green space behind the house. Ian always waited for Connor after school. He seemingly knew what time the bell would ring. He occasionally misjudged it, however, and Connor would see him through the school window, sitting by the bike racks, sometimes waiting for hours.

Then, one morning, the school bus ran Ian over. Connor had been so devastated his parents didn't risk buying him another dog because they weren't sure he would survive its eventual death. So through the rest of his summers, Connor had read comics in the backyard or halfheartedly played in the culvert alone.

Connor had told Katie this story. She made that sympathetic smile that said "You poor thing" and "That's so cute" and "I feel for you" all at once. Then she bought him the goldfish Ian as a companion, to temper the memory of his traumatic loss.

"Here's someone to share your time with when I'm not here," she said, smiling her beautiful smile and presenting him with the plastic bag containing Ian.

Deep down, subconsciously, Connor has grown to believe that Ian the goldfish is spiritually linked to Ian the dog, perhaps even to the extent that the fish is the dog reincarnate.

The Seville on Roxy doesn't allow dogs or cats or Katie would have bought him one, he is sure. Pets are only permitted with the approval of the building superintendent, a globe of a man named Jimenez. And Jimenez never approves pets except for single fish in small bowls. He believes that animals don't belong inside, all pets are unclean, and large fish tanks pose too great a threat of leakage to the building and its occupants. Hence the limit of a one-gallon bowl.

Connor grabs the cordless phone and slides the balcony door open. He steps into the apartment. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust from the sunshine. The air feels cool on his back where it had been sweating against the lawn chair.

After a few moments, he looks to the crumpled heap of pillows and sheets that crown his mattress and says, "You have to go. Right now. My girlfriend is coming up."

Connor crosses the room, trips on a beer bottle on the way, staggers a bit, and then recovers. He shakes the bed. "Get your stuff and go. I'll call you later." He waits a moment before whipping the sheets from the bed and dropping them to the floor.

Faye moans and rolls onto her back. She lies before him on the mattress, unashamedly naked, unabashedly exposed, and unbelievably sexy. She blinks at Connor in the bright afternoon light.

*In Which the Stoic Jimenez Tries to
Fix the Elevator Despite Being
Completely Unqualified to Do So*

Jimenez leans back in his chair and sighs. He pushes the front two legs from the floor, leaving it to totter on the rear two. The chair creaks a loud response to his shifting weight. The little room that serves as his office is hot and loud and white, lit by old fluorescent tubes that hum overhead. There's a plastic placard embossed with the word "Maintenance" on the door, which is open, though it does nothing to freshen the stagnant air.

In the next room, the massive boiler burner sparks and roars to life every fifteen minutes or so. Behind its rusted metal grille, a blue jet of natural gas flame heats a vat of water for the occupants of the Seville on Roxy. The jet ignites with a pop and whomp. The noise can be heard through the painted cinder block walls, and it reverberates within the vent that runs between the two rooms.

Jimenez finds the sound of the mechanical monster next door both comforting and marvelous, a clockwork dragon heating a cauldron for the masses.

That machine is the heart, pumping blood through the building. It provides unquestioningly and is overlooked by all but Jimenez. The hot water travels through the radiator pipes that send waves of heat into everyone's apartment on the cool fall evenings. That water comes streaming out of