

# CHAPTER 1

## Goldfish Gibberish

Vernon wasn't happy. It was a cool day, and the dragonfly nymphs were in abundant supply. From the bottom of the pond, he watched with bated breath for his chance to take the bait when the order came in.

"Don't do it, Vernon. Mrs Googlyeyes has been watching you, and she's put the word out. You'll have to settle on the mosquitos and the tadpoles for now," said his best friend, Gilford.

"Oooh, she makes my blood boil. Who does she think she is bossing us around all day? Hmmm? One day I'm going to show her what for. Schmakko! – right in the kisser. That'll put her fins in a twist. Oh, I'm sorry, Gilford. It's just...well...it's just that I've tried so hard to fit in."

"I know you have, and believe me, you're not the only one that feels that way. Better to not poke the bearfish, Vernon, wouldn't you say? Besides, rumour has it that she's heading off for the duckweed soon."

"The sooner the better as far as I'm concerned. Let the frogs deal with her."

"Sir Filbert won't take any of her nonsense. I can assure you of that," said Gilford.

"Yes, you're right. Oh, I shouldn't get so upset, but she has been yanking my chain lately. Oh, this pond just isn't big enough for the both of us, is it?"

"Come. There's no point floating around feeling sorry for ourselves, but I have to tell you that she wants to see you."

"Oh, yes. I wonder what that old blubber fish wants now."

"Now, now. I know she's a trifle interfering, but she means well."

“She should just mind her own business. What, with the cricket choristers singing their annoying songs at dusk and with her warbling antics, I can never get any peace – none at all.”

“My, we have got up on the wrong side of the seabed today, haven’t we? Come along. There’s no point salivating,” said Gilford.

“Oooh, they do look tasty though.”

“Come along, Vernon. I’ve had quite enough conflict for one day.”

Reluctantly, Vernon and Gilford meandered away from the tasty morsels up above through the slimy backwater trails of the agglomerated silkweed and algae proliferation towards the glamorous goldfish gathering at the gloomy globule gardens located far away in the south western province of the pond. Busy as usual, Mrs Googlyeyes chatted away incessantly when Vernon and Gilford approached.

“Ah, there you are. Mrs Toadfish and I were just discussing how inappropriate the accumulation of the snail sludge trail and slime infestations are around our grotto. I was under the impression that the *both* of you had been selected for that task. Now, I don’t want to cause a fuss, Vernon, but of late, I find this wilful neglect of your duties to be quite unacceptable.”

“Oh, yes, entirely unacceptable. If the local Goldfish Government were to hear of this, there’d be hell to pay,” said Mrs Toadfish.

“Be that as it may, I don’t want to cause a fuss. Now, I expect that the both of you should have it as clean as a whistle weed before the day is out. Do I make myself clear?”

Vernon and Gilford shrugged their pectoral fins when they accepted Mrs Googlyeyes direction. She was not a goldfish to be messed with. After all she was a sitting member for the Duckweed Electorate, a single heralded honour for any blue-blooded goldfish of the Carassius line.

“Yes, Missus Googlyeyes,” said Vernon.

“Oh, by the way, I bumped into your mother and father, Vernon, and I informed them that we were not happy at all. He’s going to have a quiet word with you.”

Vernon rolled his orbital eyes. “Will that be all, Missus Googlyeyes?”

“Hmmm, well, I’ve heard that Percy Tench is applying for an internship with Doctor Sturgeon.”

“He’s going places you know. You should think about joining the medical program, Vernon. Infections are everywhere,” said Mrs Toadfish.

“No thanks. I’ll leave the bootlicking for Percy. He seems to be an expert at it.”

“Oh, ho, ho, ho. You do have a sense of humour. Oh, yes, well, run along now, dear, and wish your mother well from me,” said Mrs Googlyeyes.

Vernon and Gilford nodded their understanding as they swished their pectoral fins before they made their way for home. Sunlight streamed in from up above. Its cosmic energies penetrated the water of the pond with a radiating warmth. It was quiet, so beautifully quiet that a stillness hung in the air. Paused to perfection like a perfect oil painting, the glorious silence was maintained until, if one listened well enough, you could hear the crickets chirping amongst the bullrushes and sedge fields. Listen again, and the croaking of the frogs could be heard amongst the rustling of the leaves and the chirping of the thrushes in the trees. Nothing is ever truly silent, is it? Vernon liked it here in the middle of the pond. He was able to escape the annoying chattering of the goldfish fraternity and the clumsy schools of larger Koi that gobbled everything up in sight. After negotiating their way back through the slimy, weed-infested growth of the watery abyss, Vernon and Gilford eventually found their way home. Vernon was in a somewhat sullen mood.

“Why can’t they see that I’m just as worthy as Percy? What does he have that I haven’t got, Gilford?”

“Hmmm, well, for one thing his father is a member of Whistleweed Hospital’s Committee, and Mrs Tench is highly regarded on the social scene. It’s just the way things are, Vernon.”

“Well, I don’t like it, not one little bit. I’ll show them. I’ll show those trumped-up snobs that a lowly goldfish can do anything and more. Why, they’ll come to me begging for forgiveness. I’ll be the toast of the town at the Grand Fish Ball. Oh, Gilford, I can see it now – Vernon Carassius – hunter and conqueror. Oh, yes. Once they realize that I’m different, they’ll come knocking at my door.”

Vernon was a dreamer. He liked to think big in his small pond. However murky life became amongst the caliginous sludge of the pond, Vernon’s dreams remained pure and defined.

“One day, they’ll listen to me, Gilford – one day!”

“I must be off, Vernon. I can hear father chomping at the bit.”

“Is he all right?”

Gilford brought his pectoral fin up to his chin.

“No, not really. Ever since he lost his job at the mussel cleaning factory, he’s been a right pain. I mean, it was his life, Vernon.”

“Hmmm. It seems that we’re never truly happy, are we? See you tomorrow then, Gilford.”

“Tomorrow then.”

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All the while, Doctor Caesar Carassius, a most esteemed doctor amongst the fraternity of goldfish fellows, waited patiently for his son's return.

"And just where have you been, Vernon? Hmmm? I've just endured Mrs Googlyeyes chewing my otoliths off about the snail trail sludge excess for a good twenty minutes now. I thought I made myself perfectly clear."

"Father...I...."

"Don't *father* me! Right, you are hereby banned from seeing *that* commoner fish until all the work is done. Is that clear?"

"But Father..."

"No buts, Vernon. I've had it up to here with your silly notions of work ethic. You'll never be selected at this rate. – never. Your mother is quite distraught I must say."

"But Father..."

"And what's more to rub salt into our wounds Doctor Sturgeon tells me that Percy Tench has been accepted. Oh, what will they think at the institute?"

It seemed pointless for Vernon to argue with his father when he was engaged in one of his furious rants. Better to just swallow the humility pill and be done with it.

"Yes, Father."

"Now, get your slippery tail down to the sludge pile and make damn sure that it's crystal clear by this afternoon. Do you hear me, Vernon?"

"Yes, Father."

So it was that the life of a teenage goldfish was fraught with parental expectation. Begrudgingly, Vernon departed his father's company who made his way down the back-street, weed-infested alleys, past the conglomerated piles of detritus and rubbish strewn across the pond's lowermost depths until he arrived at the hideous sludge of the snail trails. It was exhausting to say the least when he just sighed at the inevitability of it all.

*"Why me? Why do I have to do all the work? It's not fair. Some day I'll be the one giving the orders. Some day they'll all look up to me, and father will be proud – someday."*

In a reflective mood of melancholy, Vernon then launched into song.

**“Someday” – sung by Vernon Carassius.**

“Someday when the murkiness clears, I’ll see my name in lights.  
From this awkward, pitiless destiny, I’ll scale the greatest heights.  
From the bottom of this wretched pond, I’ll rise to be a king.  
That should make my parents very proud and give us voice to sing.

**Chorus**

Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
May the goldfish sing and the minnows glow.  
Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
Yes, there is light way down below.

Someday into the future I can see momentous change.  
Where the lilies in their harvest should ultimately exchange,  
A pleasantness of scent that will draw the insects in.  
We’ll live in peace and harmony devoid of ugly sin.

**Chorus**

Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
May the goldfish sing and the minnows glow.  
Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
Yes, there is light way down below.

Someday I’ll own a patch of weed, the envy of the pond.  
The crickets will all sing with pride to which I shall respond.  
**(Spoken with recitative)**  
Take note, my dear servants, I declare with national pride.  
You can run all you golden Tench. You can run, but you cannot hide.

**Chorus**

Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
May the goldfish sing and the minnows glow.  
Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
Yes, there is light way down below.

Someday there’ll be a rainbow amid a golden sky.  
There’ll be an end to all our struggles. I just don’t know the reason  
why.  
The trumpet fish will announce the news the common fish shall hear,  
That diplomacy shall rule the day devoid of crime and fear.

## Chorus

Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
May the goldfish sing and the minnows glow.  
Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
Yes, there is light way down below.  
Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
May the goldfish sing and the minnows glow.  
Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la-lo.  
Yes, there is light way down below.

It was a fitting song that reflected Vernon's variable moods when, gathering his enthusiasm, he began sweeping the sludge into a large pile. Desperate thoughts ran through his head.

*Oh, what I wouldn't give for a mouthful of damsel fly larvae. Just look at this mess. I'm going to have a word with those sludge sleuths if it's the last thing I ever do. Yes, indeed.*

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The pond glistened in the summer's sun. Shimmers of soft, reflective light glanced off its fluid surface whose majesty provided a living, liquid territory for reproduction of all the living, insectivorous creatures. Two such energetic dragonfly souls buzzed down to set themselves freely upon the relative safety of a lily pad.

"Haven't you heard, Mavis? Oh, dear. The blackbirds are at it again. Only the other night, poor old Mr Jarvis was swallowed up whole. Oh, it's been quite the nightmare," said Deidre, the beautiful dragonfly.

"One day, they'll get their comeuppance, Deidre. Why I heard the parliament of owls debating *that* very issue. Too big for their bobbly beaks I should think."

Deidre moved in closer to whisper. "That's not all, Mavis. I heard on the grapevine that they intend to set up camp beside the pond. What in the world is life coming to? Can't an innocent dragonfly buzz around in relative safety anymore? Oh, it's not like the good old days – remember? You know, when the kids flew everywhere with not a care in the world. Now, you're likely to be snapped up by any number of carnivorous clods. Perhaps we should all stay suppressed under the willow leaves. At least there we don't have to cope with the constant harassment."

"Well said, Deidre. No one gives a damn anymore. I've made my feelings quite clear, but they just refuse to give credence to my complaints. – Nature That's what they call it, but it's not their tail on the

line. Oh, no. They'd rather hide in the caves than face our fury. Well, something has to change or there'll be an uprising. Wings will be clipped and heads will roll. I just know it."

"It can't happen soon enough if you ask me. I'm tired of all their gibberish. Why, if it were up to me, I'd seek an alliance with the owls."

"Deidre, why on earth would the owls want to help us? It could be very dangerous – even fatal."

"Well, someone has to raise the alarm. If it's not you, then I shall have to speak up."

"No, no. It's quite all right. I mean, we're the best of friends, aren't we? No, we'll go together. Perhaps we should ask Darwyn to accompany us."

"Yes, if you can get him away from his watering hole long enough."

"Oh, no. He's not at it again, is he?"

"Drunk as a beaver's backside. I just can't keep him away from the sugary nectaries."

"I'm *so* sorry, Deidre."

"Nevermind. His children are the ones that really suffer. Well, best we not dwell on things that we can't change. How's Randolph anyway?"

"Oh, just the same. Always has the pointed end of his antennae immersed in some godforsaken legislation. Just can't let it be."

"Well, thank God I say. We need all the powers that be on our side at the moment. What, with all the unrest in the forest."

"Tell me about it."

**Song – "What In The World!" Sung by Deidre and Mavis Dragonwings.**

**(First verse sung by Deidre Dragonwings)**

"What in the world is going on?  
Who can we trust anymore?  
Why do we hide in the nooks and the crannies?  
We're no longer free to explore.  
Surely the owls understand our dilemma.  
It's very clear to see.  
That this world is a very dangerous place,  
Not just for you, but for me.

**(Second verse sung by Mavis Dragonwings)**

What in the world has happened to us?  
It seems that we're on the run.  
I remember it as clear as yesterday,  
When all of us could have some fun.  
But now when we fly, we look over our shoulder.  
With fear in our wings and our hearts.  
Despite the intentions of those seeking power,  
We live in a world of upstarts.

**(Third Verse sung together )**

What in the world are we going to do?  
Where in the the world should we go?  
Who in the world would listen to us?  
Surely someone would know.  
How in the world should we tell our story?  
What in the world is to gain?  
If only those pompadeering old sods,  
Would consider our pleas and our pain.

**(Recitative – Mavis)**

I suppose if you consider things long enough,  
The answer becomes very clear.  
Despite the intentions of those imperious snobs,  
They'll do absolutely nothing, my dear.

**(Remaining verses sung by Deidre)**

What in the world am I going to do?  
Who in the world should I see?  
Why in the world would I risk my life,  
To be in exalted company?  
What in the world should be gained from exposure?  
Whose life should be dragged through the mud?  
It seems that when my life is finally over,  
Reality will crash down with a thud.



What in the world is, indeed, the question.  
I must consider the needs of all.  
For, in valuing the lives of all my contemporaries,  
We could rise or we could fall.  
Perhaps it is better to err with caution,  
Let it be shown in silence,  
That peace is what we wish for most.  
Not the travesty of force and violence.

So let it be known that I've made up my mind,  
Set in stone as sure can be,  
That we, the dragonflies of Rutherford Glen,  
Shall seek out our destiny.  
That we should travel unhindered in flight,  
To float in the air like a queen.  
To the far outposts of this very pond,  
And all the worlds in between.

It was a wonderful story when both dragonfly ladies remained loyal to their natural existence. Despite the very many dangers surrounding this miraculous pond, they collectively decided that their presence was required and their freedoms would not be denied. Pity the poor blackbirds that should think otherwise.

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Meanwhile, high up in the treetops, a cantankerous collection of corvid cretans watched eagerly as they gazed down at the pond.

“‘ere, Rufus, whaddya fink them dragonflies are doin’ down there on tha’ lily pad. Oooh, I love dragonflies – so crispy,” said Ruprecht.

“Wonder you can see anyfink, mate, after the nigh’ you’ve bloomin’ ‘ad.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Gawd blimey, mate. You snored louder than a bloomin’ freight train. I ‘aven’t ‘ad a wink of sleep. Better lay off the booze. Awl them agave sugary nectaries aren’t doin’ ya no favours at awl.”

“‘es righ’, Ruprecht. You weren’t arf ‘n arf. Sloshed like an elephant’s trunk ‘n awl,” said Raymond.

“Codswallop! I never felt betta in me life. And you should talk – what, wif all them pills ya take.”

“‘ere, there’s no need to get narky, Ruprecht. I was only sayin’”.

“Oh, bugger it. Them dragonflies ‘ave gone and fly away somewheres amid all the chatta. Never could learn to keep quiet, could ya Ruprecht?” said Rufus.

“Quiet! You gotta be jokin’. All the wind that comes outta your posterior. Don’t make me laugh, mate.”

Things were beginning to escalate when Raymond stepped in.

“Look, there’s no point gettin’ yer knickers in a twist. Juz settle down – all right?”

“Well, he started it. What, wif all ‘is nit-pickin’ ‘n awl,” said Rufus.

“I started it? I seem to remember a certain black bird snorin’ ‘is lungs out last nigh’, and it wasn’t me.”

“Leave it! Leave it! said Raymond as he spread his wings out.

Amid the stand-off and stares of frustration, Raymond started to laugh.

“Caw, caw, caw, caw, caw.”

“What’s so bloomin’ funny, Ray?” asked Rufus.

“Caw, caw, caw. You two. Oh, you’re priceless – absolutely priceless. Caw, caw, caw, caw.”

“I really don’t see wot is so amusing,” said Ruprecht.

“Everytime you two start a conversation it ends in an argument. Just once I wish you’d get along. But no. You seem to get yer tail in a twist over anythin’”

“Well, ain’t you the lord of the manor. ‘ere, Lord Raymond of Rutherford Glen Catchy, in’it?” asked Ruprecht.

Raymond was getting hot under the collar. “ ‘ere, wot you playin’ at?”

“Oh, forgive me, Lord Ray, I fought you were’s done talkin’ to us commoners. Caw, caw, caw, caw, caw,” laughed Rufus.

All three corvid cretans then squawked with laughter as the leaves in the trees shook vibrantly.

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In the meantime, down below nestled amongst the lily pads and bright pink lily flowers, the fraternity of the Frog Fellowship were meeting in earnest. Chief amongst this crooked creed of credible croakers, the esteemed, imperialist governor, Sir Filbert Frogmore, delivered his words of worldly wisdom.

“Croak, croak. Please! Please, if you would all settle down, we can get to the bottom of this. I assure you.”

“What are you going to do about the Koi? They think they own the place,” asked Freddy Frogsworth.

“Yes, yes, I’m well aware of their menacing ways, but raising your voice won’t deliver us an outcome, will it, Freddy?”

“We’re running out of room. Why only a month ago there was only a few hundred or more. Now, it seems that a whole school has invaded the pond. Really, something must be done, Governor,” said Forsyth Froggleton.

All the frogs at the meeting started croaking their concerns loudly before the governor spoke once more.

“I understand your frustrations, but we must consider the bigger picture. It’s been a bumper crop of larvae this year. I’m afraid that despite the growing numbers of Koi carp young, we must learn to live in peace.”

“That’s all right for you, guv, but we gotta live next door and listen to all of that horrible munching and Koi hoopla. Someone’s gotta tell ‘em. I’ve had a gutful,” said Ferdinand Frogman.

Frank Frogsly was just as, well – frank. “We don’t all live in ivory palaces you know.”

“All right, all right. I’ll deliver them a message myself. Now, is there anything else you wish to discuss?” asked Governor Frogmore.

“Yeh. The bleedin’ crickets. Don’t they ever shut up? I work the early morning shift, and, well, their noise is just intolerable,” said Freddy Frogsworth.

Forsyth Froggleton’s anger was rising. “Ain’t that the bleedin’ truth. Can’t get a wink of sleep past six in the evening. Surley they can sing a bit softer, guv.”

“Look, I’ve already spoken to Lady Crossly. She’s informed me that they’ll stop rehearsals by seven. Now, that’s the best that I can do.”

Lady Frances Frog-Gillingsworth was none too amused. “Well, your best just isn’t good enough, Filbert. I agree entirely with these rabble-rousing commoners. You must simply try harder.”

Freddy Frogsworth was hopping mad. “Who are you calling a commoner, you, croak, croak, croak, trumped-up tramp?”

Amid the relative peaceful environs of the gentle lily pads, it was on for young and old until Forsyth Froggleton, an esteemed member of the Frog Fellowship stepped forward to offer his solution.

“Well, that’s certainly not good enough. Absolutely not! My poor wife lost twenty of our tadpoles last year to that insensitive racket. I must tell you that she felt quite distraught, and your elected councillors offered us no compensation whatsoever. No, this has to stop, Governor, or we’ll be forced to take the law into our own webbed feet.”

The governor looked duly displeased as he attempted to lay down the law.

“Croak, croak. No one’s going to do *anything* without the proper authority and certainly not you, Forsyth. No. We shall take a vote. Let the majority decide.”

It was readily agreed that the the proper protocols of frog democracy were to be abided by in a properly conducted election. After all the raised, webbed feet were counted, the governor announced the result as he croaked into song.

**Song – “The Ayes Have it.” Sung by Governor, Sir Filbert Frogmore.**

“Croak, croak, croak, croak.

It has come to my attention that when the crickets are in song,  
A noise of much antipathy ensues.

Should we conduct this election amongst this croaking throng?  
For it would seem we have everything to lose.

In my wildest estimation, I should have not thought it said,  
That in consideration of this troubling botheration,  
We should guesstimate – no estimate and contemplate instead,  
A meaningful solution for this frog nation.

**A question asked in recitative by Lady Frances Frog-Gillingsworth.**

**Q.** What of my reputation, my most prestigious altitude? Who should approach with cap in hand? For it is beyond my heart-felt dignity, my sincerest hoped benignity that this problem be solved, you understand.

**Response given by Sir Filbert Frogmore**

I hear your faux objection and shall react with weighted cause,  
For the cricket chorus must be brought to silence.  
Perhaps we should consider a more deliberated pause,  
Whilst we entertain the thought of an alliance.

**A question asked by Mayor Filbo Froggins.**

Forgive me, Sir Filbert, but I must protest most strenuously, indeed, most contentiously, that in consideration of the relevent, pertinent facts. Why should the Fellowship contemplate a partnership to instigate the due process the legislation enacts?

Croak, croak, croak, croak.

I understand the necessity of maintaining the intensity,  
For *we* must uphold the strictest rules,  
But if I allow complacency despite the Koi's adjacency,  
I fear that that they shall think that we are fools.

Now, I propose a new alliance despite their fierce defiance,  
With the queen of those buzzing, bumbling bees.  
Perhaps a common venture could promulgate a censure,  
Of those hideous cricket chants if you please.

So my dearest poikilotherms, we must come to a vote,  
To decide a course of action to be had.  
Cast aside your differences and irrelevant said inferences,  
For the time is now upon this lily pad.

After an exhaustive count of over one hundred raised web feet, it was unanimously decided that they would indeed approach when Sir Filbert Frogmore made his announcement.

“Croak, croak – the ayes have it.”

Who says democracy is dying?

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In the meantime, amid the beautiful glaze of the pond, Percy Tench attended to his duty as he watched with bated breath the undeniable skill of Doctor Sturgeon, the pre-eminent physician in the whole of the pond.

“Now, one must be very careful, Percy, not to pierce the olfactory bulb when putting in the pondweed stitches. Observe! Yes, just like so, and...yes, that's it, we're finished. Nurse, you can place him into post-operative care now if you please.”

Nurse Serena Sturgess fluttered her long pectoral fins. ‘Certainly, Doctor. Will there be anything else?’”

“No. No, I think we're done for the day. Just be sure to lock up before you go please, Serena.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

Percy was fascinated when he asked the doctor what had caused Mr Guppie's wounds.

“Well, I'm afraid they're quite territorial in the sunny quarter. Best you avoid going south, Percy.

“But Doctor Sturgeon, mother has reserved a vacation for us at the Ritz Bisque.”

“Hmpf! Absurd name for a hotel if you ask me, but you should be quite safe if you stay away from the masses. Can’t mix the purebloods with the commoners, can we, Percy?”

“No, no, of course not, Doctor.”

“Well then, I shall see you upon your return. Remember to study your manual, Percy. One cannot become a surgeon without the greatest of commitment.”

“Yes, Doctor Sturgeon.”

Having wished Percy well, Doctor Sturgeon swam down to the bottom of the pond where his wife, Eleanor, had prepared him a meal of delicious shrimp. All the while, Percy began his laborious swim through the marshy bog down towards the beautiful waterlily gardens. He liked it there. It was a peaceful place where the glow of the summer’s sun filtered down through the ripples in the pond and warmed his face. A mesmerizing, hypnotic place full of wonder, Percy glided through the crystal, clear water in a dream. How he hoped that he could appease his father and make him proud. Philip, Percy’s older brother, had already achieved that singularly heralded honour of passing his final examinations. Two doctors in the family gave Doctor Telman Tench great cause for pride, but three would be unimaginable for his academic and social standing. Percy sighed at the inevitability of it all as he blew bubbles into the passing water before he finally arrived home safe and sound at Clam Shell Pews, the very regal residence of Doctor Telman Tench and his wife, Audrey.

“Mother! I’m home,” said Percy.

“Oh, Percy, how was your surgery observations with Doctor Sturgeon today, my dear?”

“Oh, much the same. I did learn how to apply pufferfish anaesthetics though, although Doctor Proctor told me that one must complete studies for over seven years to be an anaesthetist. Hmmm. I don’t know. I think I would prefer to be a surgeon.”

“That’s lovely dear. Now, go and wash your fins. I’m serving dinner in five minutes. Oh, by the way, Philip is returning tomorrow.”

*Philip, Philip, Philip. That’s all she ever thinks about. Philip did this, Philip did that. Well, I’ll show her. Once I graduate there’ll be no more social posturing, no more grandiose platitudes over his overly stated achievements. No, my name will be up in lights for once. I’ll be the toast of the town. Why yes, I can see it now – Percy Stench M.D. That’ll put a catfish amongst the sturgeons I’m sure.*

“Who have you invited to the ball? It’s only a few days away, and I’m worried about your suit.”

“Mother, you know that I’ve already approached Mrs Tenchwell for her permission to take Kitty to the ball who advised me that she was most willing.”

“Wonderful! She’s quite the catch, that girl.”

Percy rolled his large, fishy eyes. “All right, all right. Don’t get any silly ideas. It’s just a ball, and it’s only dancing.”

“My boy! Oh, how you’ve grown up *so* fast. I could remember when you were just a mere nymph of a lad, but I knew then that you were special. And now, here you are ready to go to the ball. I’m so proud,” she said as she planted a big, sloppy kiss on his forehead.

“Mother – please! You know that I’m too old for that.”

“You’re never too old for the affection of your mother, Percy,” said Doctor Tench.

“Father! Did you hear? I observed Doctor Sturgeon today operating on an infected fin. Doctor Sturgeon said I have great potential.”

“Ah, that’s my boy. You’ll have your own practice before you know it. Now, where is that shrimp cocktail? I’m starving.”

After a ravenous, gorging feast, Doctor Tench settled down onto his favourite algae-covered rock armchair. It was customary for him to read the day’s events in the Piscean Periodical when he glanced over the headlines.

“Hmmm. Says here that Prime Minister Tenchwell is going to offer the Koi a neutral zone. Well, I hope they’ll agree. There’s been nothing, but trouble up north. What is it with those ravenous rioters? We were all quite happy until that avalanche of carping clods invaded our space.”

“Really? Oh, I knew that he was right fish for the office. Perhaps, we’ll get the filtering grounds back.”

“Ha! Don’t count your chickenfishes, Audrey! They’re quite scandalous and don’t give a toss about anyone else. The sooner the eels control them, the better I say.”

“Well said, dear. Now, try not to worry. Here, have one of these snail digestif drinks. It’s a new recipe.”

Doctor Tench brought the gloopy liquid to his quivering lips who gulped down the lot.

“Burp!! Ah, that was rather refreshing, I must say. All right, I’m off to bed.

“Goodnight, Audrey.”

“Goodnight, dear.”

Such a perfect existence seemed to prevail in the sleepy hollows of Clam Shell Pews. Rest well, Doctor Tench, for the days ahead should test the resolve of even the most resolute of fish.

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Poor, old Gilford. He really was from the wrong side of the pond. With his father having lost his job at the mussel cleaning factory, things were looking grim.

“Don’t you be wandering off today, Gilford. There’s chores to be done, and Mrs Scales is visiting for morning tea. You can start by taking out the garbage.”

“But, Mother, I promised Vernon that we’d catch up later at the mall.”

“Do as your mother asks, Gilford, and after you’ve done that, you can help me clean out the weed pit. It’s a right mess,” said Walter Wigglefin.

“But Dad, that’ll take forever.”

“Well, the sooner you start, the sooner you can go to the mall.”

“Why can’t Ryan do it?”

“He’s busy with his studies. At least one of *our* children will get somewhere. Now, come on.”

Against his will, Gilford was dragged to the weed pit that was covered in a murky sludge and accumulated debris. Feeling a developing melancholy, he launched into song.

### **Song – “Why Is It Always Me?” (Sung by Gilford Wigglefin)**

Do this, do that, it just seems so unfair.  
Why must I complete all these chores?  
I feel nothing, but frustration and a feeling of despair.  
Why must I obey my parents’ laws?

### **Chorus (Sung by the Snail Collective)**

Just put a smile on your dial,  
Forget your troubles for a while.  
Let nature takes its course for the day.  
Before very long, you’ll remember this song,  
And the work will seem a million miles away.

Wash here, scrape there. Oh, my life is such a trial.  
If I was a smaller fish, I’d simply throw it in.  
To hell with all the grown-ups, well, just for a while.



I suppose I had better cop it on the chin.

**Chorus (Sung by the Snail Collective)**

Just put a smile on your dial,  
Forget your troubles for a while.  
Let nature takes its course for the day.  
Before very long, you'll remember this song,  
And the work will seem a million miles away.

Clean this, clean that. What a total mess!  
Why is it always me that cops the blame?  
It's really not my fault, but the snails who confess,  
That this sludge pile is their problem and their shame.

**Chorus (Sung by the Snail Collective)**

Just put a smile on your dial,  
Forget your troubles for a while.  
Let nature takes its course for the day.  
Before very long, you'll remember this song,  
And the work will seem a million miles away.  
So, in a final conclusion, I shall put my sponge away,  
To rest my weary bones upon the weed.  
For if the work isn't done by the setting of the sun,  
Tis nothing less than I had guaranteed.

**Chorus (Sung by the Snail Collective)**

Just put a smile on your dial,  
Forget your troubles for a while.  
Let nature takes its course for the day.  
Before very long, you'll remember this song,  
And the work will seem a million miles away.

Slowly, he cleaned and cleaned until the weeds were restored to their former pristine state. Gilford was eager to depart.

“Can I go now, Dad – please?”

“Yes, you can go, Gilford, but be back by six at the latest.”

Swimming freely through the open waters of the pond, Gilford made his way past the matted chara weeds and through the forest of the purple loosestrife until he arrived at the the Azolla mall. It was a place where the cool kids of the pond regularly gathered. Vernon, who was over by

the side of the algal slime bar, was busily engaged in conversations with his friends.

“Whatz-up, Vernon, ma man?” asked Sonny Sunfish.

“Oh, nothing. Its’ just...well...my father keeps pressuring me. He wants me to become a doctor just like him.”

“Hey man, I get your drift. My old man, well, he says I’m wet around the gills, but that don’t stop me from playin’ ma music.”

“Music?! You can really have a career with music?”

“Sure can. Say, why don’t you come to the gig tonight.? We’ll be jammin’ until midnight.”

“Ergh....I don’t know. My father would have a fit.”

“Come on, man. You’re not gonna live in your old man’s shadow, are ya? Hey, Gilford, I was just askin’ Vernon if he wanted to come to the gig tonight. There’ll be heaps of chickfish. You dig?”

“Come on, Vernon. It’ll be so much fun. I’ll tell dad that we were at Grosvenor’s place. It’ll be a blast.”

“Yeh! Don’t be such a square,” said Sonny.

“All right, all right. Where’s the gig anyway?”

“The Clamfish Hotel. Be there or be square, my man,” said Sonny.

Now, Vernon didn’t know what to do, with the social pressure of appearing to be cool ever present in his teenage consciousness. Having committed himself to their engagement, Vernon and Gilford swam slowly back home.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t have said yes. What if father finds out?”

“He won’t find out. Grosvenor is one of my best friends, and he’ll cover for us. Stop worrying, Vernon. Everything will be all right.”

“I certainly hope so. I can’t afford to get in my father’s bad books again. He thinks...ergh...well...he thinks that fish from your side of the pond are common.”

Gilford was incensed. “Common! My father worked at the mussel cleaning factory for over thirty years. Someone had to provide the community with better sleeping quarters.”

“Oh, don’t get angry, Gilford. I know he’s a bit of a stuffed shirt, but he means well.”

“Well, my father says all the fish in the pond are equal. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Koi, a goldfish, minnow or a Chinese High-Fin Banded Shark. He believes that we all breathe the same water and eat the same food.”

Gradually, Vernon slowed to a stop.

“Well, he’d be right, but just tell the Koi *that*. I’m really worried that they’re going to take over the pond, and then we’ll have to live near the sludge pits.”

“That’s not going to happen, and besides, your father sits on the committee, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, but I heard him talking to my mother the other night, and they’re really worried.”

“Politics! Who would ever be a politician? I’m sure the Prime Minister shall think of something.”

“Maybe Mrs Googlyeyes was right. We should have voted in one of our own.”

“You worry too much. Come on. I’ll race you home.”

So it was that Gilford accompanied Vernon home before he set off towards the darker, eastern side of the pond where he lived amongst the thick bullrushes and sea lettuces. Hopefully, their little ruse would avoid disciplinary action if they were to be discovered. Such is the life of a teenage fish.

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“Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. Alleluia, alleee-luuuuuuiaaaaaaaa.”

On and on the praise echoed throughout the reeds of the pond as the cricket choristers sang with grit and gusto. It was a deafening noise that permeated the very inner ear canals of the pond’s abundant life forms. Ladybug Lucy couldn’t bear it any more.

“Oh, I’d wish they’d shut up. They’ve been at it for over an hour, and I’m nearly stone deaf already.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more, Lucy. We must have a word with the choir director. It’s just intolerable – absolutely intolerable,” said Majorie.

“Well, I wouldn’t hold your breath if I were you. I’ve heard he’s quite the tyrant. Mrs Buglhuis once approached him. Well, he told her that there’d be an aphid revolution if she didn’t mind her own business.”

“Really?! How rude. Well, there must be another way.”

Lucy leaned in closer to have a quiet word.

“I should have a word in Sir Filbert’s ear if I were you. The sight of a few frogs at the perimeter should scare them off for a while, wouldn’t you think?”

“Oh, Lucy, there’s no doubt about you. Yes, I’ll go and see him myself. I know that the Frog Fellowship are quite fed up as well.”

“Well, then, that’s all settled. Care for a cup of mealybug tea, Majorie?” said Lucy.

“Lovely. Now, where is that no good husband of yours?”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Oh, probably betting on the seahorses again. He simply refuses to come home. I am at my wit’s end, Marjorie. I just don’t know what to do.”

“At least you know where he is. Why, with Stan, I’m never quite sure when he’ll turn up next. One minute we’re at the super market shopping for beetle bugs, and the next thing I know he’s off trading shares in Wallbug street. It really is quite bewildering.”

“Hmmm, but better the devilbug you know, wouldn’t you say?”

Marjorie leaned in closer to whisper. “Yes, well, have you heard?”

“Have I heard what?”

“Well, it’s only a rumour, Lucy, but I’ve heard that Lady Leandra has been seen cavorting in the company of Lenny Lewis.”

“No!! It can’t be true.”

“What’s more she hasn’t even finalized her divorce yet.”

“Oh, the utter scandal of it all. What will they think at the girls’ club?”

“Mums the word. Let’s keep it to ourselves, shall we?”

Of course, that was a very improbable scenario, for within a few hours everyone who was anyone knew of the developing scandal amongst the ladybug community. As they say, bad news travels faster by word of proboscis than any other form of communication.

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Who would have thought that so many stories could be told in a pond that measured twenty feet by twenty feet? At first glance, it would appear as just a lifeless, green murky mess, but that was so very far from the truth. Millions of lives depended on this special body of water whose ripples flowed across the surface like wandering minstrels in the night.

The sunlight streamed down upon the surface. It was both life-giving and life-preserving. Giving rise to tiny animals floating in suspension, this solar energy nourished the lives of many whose whole existence depended upon such an abundant food source. A clarity of purpose occupied the Koi whose voracious appetites cleansed the pond of algae and scum as they fought the good fight to survive. In the meantime, the goldfish goons patrolled the perimeter whose agenda for social visiting rights was strictly not to be tolerated. Way down below, the stodgy sturgeon trailed in the mud as their sniggering snouts looked for morsels of shrimp and snails to eat. It was a tireless exercise executed with military precision as they glided freely amongst the softness of the weed beds. Diverse in nature and diverse in cultural identity, this wholesome

home of fish overgrown was a melting pot of extraordinary talent and genetic breeding. Who would succeed and who would fail would depend on the fate of this wonderful tale. So, read on, my friends, if you value this story, this miraculous, spectacular, fable of glory.