

FISH TANK



A FABLE FOR OUR TIMES

BY
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* A MountainWorks Press Book *

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ISBN 978-0-9825947-1-1

LCCN: 2011904318

Publisher—MountainWorks Press

An imprint of MountainWorks, Incorporated
(www.emountainworks.com)

Front material quote from: Orwell, George. *ANIMAL FARM*. New York:
The New American Library, 15th printing, 1963.

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FOR THE CHILDREN

FOR THE FISH

FOR TOMORROW

Creatures of the aquarium

Ally	seahorse
Altair	seahorse
Big Moe	crab (big claw)
Dolly	damsel fish
Dusty	flounder
Flecky	clownfish
Gabe	angelfish
Hammy	parrotfish
Hansom	goatfish
Jessie	turtle
Push	puffer fish
Roop	crab
Sanger	squirrelfish
Sarin	crab
Tommy	tang
Zuriela	angelfish

*It was soon noticed that when there was work
to be done the cat could never be found....
But she always made such excellent excuses,
and purred so affectionately, that it
was impossible not to believe
her good intentions.*

Chapter 1

PROFESSOR BROWN COULD HEAR Augustus banging around down below and wondered what he was doing. For the hundredth time the good professor shuddered at the thought of leaving his precious work in the hands of a full-fledged bumbler, an imbecile of the first order.

The professor stood at the top of the stairs to listen. More banging, this time sharp and metallic. He cringed.

Professor Brown buttoned his tattered sweater, then grabbed the railing and started stiffly down the long set of stairs to the aquarium. He told himself once again that he *had* to go to Australia; that this was surely his last shot at a sabbatical. Even this one seemed absurd. He'd been out of active research for

15 years and these days held only a cursory appointment at the university.

But Professor Brown had gotten lucky. For over four decades he had concentrated on a little studied, oft-forgotten, endangered seahorse measuring only an inch in length. And now a new oil discovery threatened one of three known populations of “his” seahorse. The deposit lay beneath the Indian Ocean floor right under the seahorses’ home reef. Within a month of the oil discovery an ocean research institute in Western Australia had offered him a year-long sabbatical—paid, with a fully outfitted lab and a research assistant.

How could he possibly turn that down?

As he reached the bottom of the steps Professor Brown saw just how: Augustus, all square head and greasy overalls, was beating a rusty valve with a ball-peen hammer. The crack of metal-on-metal resounded through the room.

“What on Earth are you doing?” the professor asked.

“Tryin’ to loosen the valve to let the fresh seawater into the fish tank, like youse showed me,” responded Augustus, an accent from the old country coming through.

“It’s an aquarium, Augustus, *not* a fish tank—how many times do I have to tell you?!” Professor

Brown pulled off his glasses, then rubbed his mustache, a habit past students recognized as meaning he was annoyed.

“And look here, Augustus, all you do is lift this catch and then the valve opens easily, just like I showed you yesterday—remember? You don’t have to bang on it! Besides it’s supposed to be open all the time. Why did you close it anyway? Did you pay *any* attention during our training sessions?!”

“Oh yea, profess’r, sorry,” Augustus said, stepping backwards and stumbling over a pipe wrench lying on the floor. “I remember all that, I do. I really do. Don’t youse worry none, I’ll ‘member it all. See look, look—I filled the binny to feed all them fish for three or four days, jus’ like ya showed me. See there?”

The professor did not look at the food bin. Instead he stared at Augustus in consternation. How can I trust this man? he thought. I have no choice, he realized once again. No one else had answered his ad for a caretaker; there were just not many people on this remote section of coast. So no one else was available, at least not at the price he was able to pay. He was stuck with Augustus, who said he could only come down to check on things twice a week owing to his job at the mill.

“Just go get the car, OK?” said the professor, turning away and putting his glasses back on. “You’ve got to get me over to the Eugene airport.”

Augustus dropped the hammer on the floor, muttering something the professor couldn’t make out, and started up the stairs. Professor Brown turned to follow, but then paused. One more look around, he thought. It’ll be a year until I see this place again.

The aquarium had been his life’s work, started 50 years earlier when he had taught inland at the university town. In those days he had only lived part time at the beach house. Still he had carried out all of his lab-based seahorse research here. The professor would proudly tell anyone who’d listen that he had authored over a hundred peer-reviewed publications based on work done in the basement aquarium at his beach house.

The beach house was an odd place on a remote section of the Oregon coast. It sat right at the end of a long, narrow basalt inlet, like nothing they’d allow you to construct today. Professor Brown had built the house over a cave of sorts, twenty feet down, then run two 50-foot pipes to link the base of the aquarium to the ocean. One pipe channeled sea water into the aquarium and hence brought his living lab to life. With each ocean wave the aquarium

received a fresh surge of new water. The surges made the aquarium gently pulsate, giving the sense that the aquarium itself was a living, breathing being. A sump pump in the aquarium floor, screened at the inlet so that no creature could enter or exit that way, carried water back out to the ocean via the second pipe. A second sump, also screened, protected the room outside the aquarium.

The aquarium itself, as big as a Hummer, was a masterful work of thick, smoothly cut glass and caulking built into the corner of the cave. Two sides of the aquarium were relatively normal and boxy. The cave wall made up the third and fourth sides. One of the places the rock and glass came together was relatively smooth and the seal could be made fast and strong. The other seal, however, held the glass to a very rough section of cave wall; the roughness meant that the fourth corner of the aquarium required caulking every year or two to hold its seal.

The professor noted with satisfaction that his new caulking job from the previous day looked smooth and bright white.

The aquarium currently only housed two of the seahorses on which Professor Brown had made his career. At one point he had several dozen, but now the aquarium mostly consisted of an odd assortment of crustaceans, coral, and fish, all remnants from the

time when he'd tried to make it as much like the seahorses' warm water environs as possible.

The professor brought in sun through a tube in the ceiling. Heating coils allowed him to gently heat the cool Oregon coastal waters to match the warmer waters where the seahorses lived.

While Professor Brown usually fed the creatures of the aquarium by hand—he always thought it best to spend time seeing how his creatures were doing—he was quite proud of the feeder he'd built for those times when he went away. It looked a bit like an inverted funnel with a hopper on top for fish food storage and a narrow tube that dropped from there into the water. The end of the tube allowed food to slowly fall into the aquarium for the fish to eat. Just above the tube, mounted on the side of the aquarium, was a valve that could be turned to adjust how much food was dispensed each day.

For a moment now Professor Brown did glance at the food hopper and indeed, as Augustus had said, it was full. The professor had designed the food hopper with enough volume to supply the aquarium for a week, the longest he'd ever been gone at a conference or on vacation. With Augustus hired to come in twice a week for the next year, the safety factor seemed sufficient.

Satisfied that the food was in place, the professor knelt and pushed his nose against the glass. Even at 78 he retained the child's joy of gazing into the aquarium, never tiring of wondering what the fish were thinking, wondering if they knew they were not in the outside world but instead in an environment of his creation.

At that moment the two seahorses hovered opposite him across the glass. "I will see you in a year," Professor Brown said as much to himself as to the seahorses. "In the meantime I'll see what I can do for your brethren down south." The seahorses seemed to stare right back at him, gill plates rhythmically opening and closing, almost as if they were in conversation.

"Professor, we gotta go." Augustus's call from upstairs brought Professor Brown out of his reflections. "I forgot ta gas up the car like youse told me so we need to hurry or ya might be late."

Professor Brown sighed. He stood and walked to the stairway, then shifted his cane to his left hand and reached for the light switch. Suddenly the professor had the odd sensation of being watched and a chill ran down his spine. He took one last look back. At that moment the aquarium's lone turtle—a young Ridley he'd relatively newly acquired—floated at the top of the water column. It was a

creature that would eventually outgrow the aquarium, the professor knew, but he had agreed to take it as for the moment it was small and unobtrusive.

As the professor watched, the young turtle lifted its head above the surface and looked at him. Professor Brown drew up short—for one sublimely strange moment his eyes locked with those of the turtle and he was certain he could sense a look of worry in the turtle's gaze.

No, couldn't be, you crazy old man, he thought. The professor turned, switched out the light, and began the long climb up the stairs.

Chapter 2

THE TURTLE'S LOOK, INTERESTINGLY enough, *had* been one of concern. For the young turtle, whose name was Jessie, knew that with Professor Brown gone and no one to watch over them, the crabs—Sarin, Roop, and Big Moe—could be trouble.

It all started soon enough, just five days after Professor Brown departed. The crabs called the creatures together. They convened near the corner where the aquarium glass mated with the rough wall of the cave. The cave wall had a large ledge there, a stage of sorts. Sarin, the crab ringleader, stepped into the center of the ledge flanked by compatriots Roop and Big Moe.

“Listen up,” Sarin said. The creatures shushed. They were variously circled around the crabs: the shrimp stood at attention; Tommy Tang, Sanger the squirrelfish, Hammy the parrotfish, Push the puffer, and Hansom the yellow goatfish floated quietly. Small schools of wrasses, gobies, and grunts flitted back and forth, finding it hard to stay still. Dusty, a curmudgeonly old flounder, lifted a sleepy eye from beneath the sand while Flecky the clownfish peered out from the protection of some anemone stalks. Jessie the turtle looked down from above the rest.

“It’s been five days since Professor Brown left and we have not been fed,” said Sarin the crab. “The professor would have been here every day. But you heard what he said before he left—he is gone for a year and has left us to the devices of that idiot Augustus.”

“Yes, Augustus,” Roop, the others crab, chimed in with disdain. “Aren’t we lucky to have brilliant Augustus? Perhaps we should call him ‘AgainstUs’ instead.”

The other creatures chuckled.

“Yes agreed, AgainstUs is more appropriate. But this is *not* a laughing matter,” Sarin continued, silencing the chuckles. “AgainstUs has been coming for three weeks and done nothing for us, nothing, even during the time when Professor Brown was

right upstairs! AgainstUs simply looks down from above with that big stupid grin of his, watching us, treating us like children.”

“That’s right,” said Hammy the parrotfish. “AgainstUs couldn’t even open the inlet pipe without messing up. What use is he anyway?”

“Well of some use, I should surely think,” replied Hansom, a goatfish so respected for his intellectual bearing that within the aquarium he was known as “Doc”. Hansom continued, rubbing his whiskers in contemplation, “Without Augustus we won’t get fed. Assuming he does return—don’t forget he’s getting paid—I would call that being of some use, wouldn’t you?”

A murmur went through the crowd.

“*Get fed*, what do you mean *get fed!*!” It was Push the puffer now, his face bloated and turning crimson. “Even if AgainstUs shows up he’s only going to be here twice a week!”

Tommy the blue and gold tang swished his tail lightly to move into the circle. “I dare say, Push, you are the last one of us who should be worrying about getting his feedings.”

More laughter. Push glared at Tommy....

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