Beauty Salon

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Anything inhumane becomes human over time.

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A few years ago my interest in aquariums led me to decorate my beauty salon with colored fish. Now that the salon has become the Terminal, where people who have nowhere to die end their days, it’s been very hard on me to see the fish disappear. Perhaps the tap water is too chlorinated or perhaps I don’t have time enough to care for them. I began with royal guppies. The people in the store assured me that these were the toughest fish and therefore the easiest to breed. In other words, they were the ideal fish for a beginner.
They also tend to reproduce rapidly. Royal guppies lay eggs, they don’t need an oxygen pump and the water in the fish tank doesn’t need to be changed to keep the eggs alive. I didn’t have much luck the first time I began to breed fish. I bought a mid-sized aquarium and put a pregnant female, a virgin female and a male with a long, colored tail inside. The next morning the male was dead. It lay on its back among the multicolor rocks that covered the bottom of the tank. I immediately fetched the rubber glove I used to dye my clients’ hair and pulled out the dead fish. Nothing much happened over the next few days. I tried to figure out the right amount of food to give the fish to prevent them from overeating or starving. Controlling the amount of food also helped keep the water crystal clear at all times. A relentless persecution was unleashed when the pregnant female gave birth. The other female tried to eat the babies. The newborns, however, were blessed with strong, fast reflexes, which kept them alive. Of the eight that were born, only three fish survived. The
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mother died a few days later for no apparent reason. Her death was very odd. After she had given birth she remained motionless on the bottom of the tank. Her swollen belly never shrank. Once again I had to get the glove I used to dye hair. I took out the dead mother and flushed her down the toilet behind the shack where I sleep. My co-workers never approved of my love for fish. They believed fish brought bad luck. I ignored them. Over time I began to acquire new aquariums and the accessories needed to keep everything functioning well. I bought small motors for the air pumps disguised as sunken treasure chests lying on the bottom of the sea. I also found little pumps in the shape of frogmen from whose oxygen tanks bubbles constantly appeared. When I finally got the hang of it with some other royal guppies I had bought I began collecting fish that were more difficult to breed. I became interested in golden carp. I believe it was in the fish store where I heard that the very act of contemplating carp was considered a pleasure in certain cultures, and that’s exactly
what happened to me. I spent hours and hours admiring the light reflected by their scales and tails. Someone later remarked on this strange form of entertainment.

The increasing number of people who come to die in the beauty salon is no form of entertainment at all. It’s no longer just friends of mine who are in an advanced state of the disease, the majority of the people here are strangers who have nowhere else to die. If it were not for the Terminal their only option would be to perish in the street. All the aquariums are empty now. That is, all except one. I try very hard to keep something alive. I use some of the aquariums to store the personal belongings family members bring to the guests living in the beauty salon. To avoid confusion I place a piece of tape with the name of the person on the tank, and that’s where I keep the clothes and candy that I allow others to bring them. I only allow family members to contribute money, clothes and candy. Everything else is forbidden.

It’s strange to see how fish can influence
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peoples’ moods. For example, when I first got interested in golden carp, in addition to the tranquility I derived from observing them, I would always add something gold to the dresses I wore at night. It could have been a gold belt, gloves or stockings. I believed that wearing something gold would bring me good luck, perhaps save me from bumping into the Goat-Killer Gang that operated in the center of the city. Many people were killed by their attacks, but it was even worse if you survived a run-in with them. The victims of the attacks were treated with contempt when they were brought into the hospitals. Often they weren’t even allowed in for fear of infection. Which is why I began to help wounded comrades who had nowhere to go, and perhaps that is the beginning of this sad Terminal I have the misfortune of running.

But back to the fish. At one point I grew bored of having only guppies and golden carp. I think it’s a personality flaw. I grow tired of things very quickly. The worst of it is that afterward I don’t know what to do with them. First it was
the guppies, which at a certain point seemed to me too insignificant for the majestic aquariums I was creating. Without any feelings of remorse I gradually stopped feeding them and hoped they would eat each other. I threw the ones that survived into the toilet, just as I had done with the dead mother. Soon I had empty aquariums for fish that were more difficult to breed. At first I thought of getting goldfish, but then I remembered that they were very dull, almost stupid. I wanted something colorful and full of life so that when there were no clients in the salon I could watch the fish chasing each other or hiding behind the aquatic plants I had stuck into the rocks at the bottom of the tank.

I worked in the beauty salon Monday to Saturday. Some Saturday afternoons, however, when I was very tired, I would leave someone else in charge and go to the public baths to relax. My favorite one was run by a Japanese family. It was a place exclusively for men. The owner, a short, older man, had two daughters who worked there as receptionists. Like the
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sign outside the baths, the wooden counter in the lobby, with multicolor fish and red dragons carved into it, was an attempt to create a Japanese look. The two young women working there were always assembling giant jigsaw puzzles. Whenever someone arrived the girls would put aside the puzzles and attend to the guests. They would give visitors a clear plastic bag in which they could store their valuables, and then also a numbered disk that was to be worn on one’s wrist. The Japanese girls would then put your bag into a numbered locker and usher you into the next room. Inside, the decor was completely different. The place looked like the bathroom of a soccer stadium I went to once with an amateur soccer player. White tiles reached halfway up the walls and above that were paintings of leaping dolphins. The colors in the pictures were so washed out you could barely see their fins. The same man always sat in this room and he would take my clothes. I always made a point of wearing men’s clothes when I went there. After I undressed right in front of him he would
stretch out his hand in a mechanical gesture to take my clothes. He would check the number hanging on my wrist and then carry the load to the corresponding locker. Before doing this, though, he would hand me two worn but clean towels. I covered my genitals with one towel and hung the other one over my shoulder.

The last time I visited the baths I remembered a story a friend had told me one night while we were out cruising for men on a busy street corner. My friend would always get all dressed up, with feathers, gloves and other accessories. He told me how his father had given him a trip to Europe years ago as a gift and that he had learned to dress like that from his travels. In this city, however, such high fashion went unappreciated, which is why my friend would spend hours standing alone on the corner. Not even the neighborhood police patrolling the area would take him for a ride. I remembered him at that moment because he once told me how his father used to go to a bathhouse on weekends, a place much fancier than this Japanese
bathhouse. My friend told me how on one of his first visits to the bathhouse his father’s friends abused him in a shower stall. My friend couldn’t have been more than thirteen at that time and he was so scared he didn’t say a word about what had happened. These baths are different because unlike the one the father of my friend used to go to everyone here knows what they are getting into. Once you’re wrapped in your towel you can do what you wish, you just have to walk downstairs to the basement. A strange feeling overtakes your body while you’re walking down the stairs, and your sense of space quickly becomes confused inside of the steam emanating from the main room. A few steps more and your towel is immediately stripped away. From then on anything can happen. At that moment I always felt like I was inside one of my aquariums. I felt revitalized by the thick water, by the oxygen bubbling up from the pumps, by the jungle of underwater plants. I also experienced the same strange feeling as when the larger fish hunted the smaller ones. At that moment, the
lack of any possible defense and the thickness of the clear walls of the aquarium became a very palpable, all-encompassing reality. But those times are gone now and I’m sure they will never return. The state of my skeletal body keeps me from going there anymore. My spirit seems to have completely abandoned me, and all this is now just something of the past. I find it hard to believe that I ever actually had energy enough to spend whole afternoons in those baths. Even when I was in my best shape I would leave there totally drained.

I no longer have the energy to go out at night and cruise for men, either. Not even during summer when it is not at all unpleasant to get dressed and undressed in the gardens of the houses located near the pick-up spots. The whole transformation must be carried out there, hidden from sight. It would be crazy to return at dawn on an all-night bus dressed in my nighttime work clothes. These days I’m responsible for managing the Terminal. I have to give a bed and a bowl of soup to the victims who have seen
the disease spread across their bodies, and I have to do it all alone. Help is scarce. Every now and then some charitable institution remembers our existence and they help us out with a little money, or they donate some medicine. I should make it clear once again that the beauty salon is not a hospital or a clinic, it’s simply the Terminal. The only things that remain from the beauty salon are the rubber gloves, most of them with holes in the tips of the fingers, the dishes and hangers, and the little carts that used to carry the cosmetics. I sold the hair dryers and the reclining armchairs I used to wash hair in in order to obtain the things I needed for the new phase of the beauty salon. With the money I made from the sale of all the old things I bought mattresses, iron cots and a kerosene cooker. I made the difficult decision to get rid of one very important element, that is, the mirrors, whose reflection had multiplied both the aquariums and the transformation of the clients as they underwent their beauty treatments. I feel that, despite the fact that I’m getting used to the
way this place looks now, infinitely multiplying the suffering, as mirrors facing each other tend to do in such a strange way, would be too much for anyone here to handle. I also seem to have gotten used to the smell of sick people. Luckily, I have gotten some help with the business of the beds. With knock-off fabric that a factory donated we were able to make bedclothes that I usually stack in different-sized heaps depending on the number of sick people here.

Sometimes I worry about who will take charge of the beauty salon when the disease spreads inside me. Until now there have been only a few signs, mainly external ones like weight loss and low spirits, but no inner changes. A few moments ago I mentioned how I seem to have gotten used to the stink here. My nose hardly registers the smell anymore and I only notice it from the looks of disgust visitors make as soon as they step into the place. Which is why I keep two or three feeble fish alive in one of the aquariums. Although I no longer take care of them like I used to, the aquariums make me feel
as if there’s still something fresh in the beauty salon. Something, however, seems to be keeping me from giving the aquariums all the attention they deserve. Yesterday, for example, I found a dead spider floating on its back in the tank.

Before it was converted into a communal place to die, the beauty salon would close up shop at eight o’clock. It was a good hour to do so since many of the clients preferred not to come to this neighborhood so late at night. A sign hanging on the entrance announced that beauty treatments were available to people of both sexes, nevertheless, very few men ever crossed the threshold. The women didn’t seem to mind being attended by male stylists dressed in women’s clothes. The beauty salon was located far from any public transportation and to get here people had to walk a great distance. There were three of us working in the salon. A couple of times each week we would all get dressed up after closing time, pack up a small suitcase and head off to the center of the city. We couldn’t travel dressed as women for we had already gotten into
dangerous situations more than once. Which is why we packed up our dresses and our make-up and carried them with us. Before standing on a busy street corner dressed as transvestites we would hide the suitcases in a hole at the base of statues of national heroes. Sometimes we would get tired of putting on and taking off our clothes so often and instead we would go and have some fun in the lobby of an all-night porn theater, even though it meant we wouldn’t make any money. The three of us would have a good time, especially when filmgoers would head to the bathroom. Our trips to the center of the city lasted until the early hours of the morning, at which time we would get our suitcases and head back to the beauty salon to sleep. We had built a wooden shack in the back-yard where the three of us stylists would sleep until noon. We all slept together in one large bed.

Decorating the beauty salon was the most important thing for me at that time. New beauty salons were opening up in the neighborhood and in order to compete the salon’s decor was
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fundamental. The idea of installing large aquariums occurred to me right at the beginning. The hope was that while the clients were being attended to they would feel as if they were submerged in crystal-clear water, rejuvenated and beautiful once they returned to the surface. Which is why the first thing I did was to go and buy a seven-foot-long tank. I still have it, although it’s not the tank that houses the three fish that have managed to survive.

You might not believe me but I can almost never identify the guests. It’s come to a point where they’re all the same to me. At first I would get to know them, I even got close to some of them on occasion. Now, however, they are nothing more to me than bodies on the verge of disappearing. One of them in particular comes to mind, someone I knew before he got sick. He had a subdued kind of beauty, like foreign singers on television. I remember how the winners of the beauty pageants we organized always asked to have their photograph taken next to him. He seemed to give an international flavor
mario bellatin
to the events. He often traveled abroad. It was rumored that he had a wealthy lover who abandoned him when he got sick. The boy didn’t want to return to his family. He told them he was going on a trip and instead came and stayed in the Terminal. He sold his apartment and gave me all his money. Before he got so sick that he was in a constant state of delirium he told me how he had traveled not just for pleasure but also for smuggling drugs. He explained to me in detail the methods he used to hide the drugs, including the disgusting act of introducing little bags into different parts of his body. The fact that a person as beautiful as he was had been used in such a way by his lover really shook me up. I guess I felt something special toward him, for I stopped looking after the other guests and throughout his time of suffering I only cared for him. As a special gesture I put an aquarium full of fish on his night table. I was touched to see that this young man was not oblivious to my concern. He also showed me a certain amount of affection. A few times I even came into intimate
contact with his ruined body. I didn’t mind his jutting ribs, his dry skin, nor even his crazed eyes, for, strangely enough, he still had the ability to experience pleasure.

Don’t think, however, that I was suicidal and that I gave myself to him completely. I took precautions. But as I’ve said before, my tastes change frequently. From one minute to the next I completely lost interest in him. That’s why, at a certain moment, I took the aquarium away from the side of his bed and treated him as distantly as I do all the guests. Almost immediately afterward the disease flared up violently. He died soon after. In his case, the disease wound up attacking his brain and he went into a long, delirious diatribe that was only interrupted when sleep overwhelmed him. At certain times his voice grew louder than usual and his feverish words drowned out the other guests’ complaints. A little while later he was attacked by full-fledged tuberculosis, I believe, for he died after a coughing fit. By that time the boy’s body was just another body I had to discard.