

The Blue Fighter
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my father was a man constantly building fish tanks.
he failed often. leaving behind
wet floors and shards of glass. once,
he bought a carnivorous fish because it was beautiful.
the following day it had eaten all the other fish
in the tank.
my mother said nothing of her husband's love for fish.

—from “my father’s hands,” a poem by vangile gantscho (unpublished)

The money poured out from Father’s pockets faster than he could patch the leaks in his latest aquarium project. I started noticing the changes gradually. First, the empty spaces in our pantry where the imported cereals and canned foods once stood. Then my mother's careful pencilling of grocery lists with precise calculations in the margins. She stretched the grocery money like elastic, making meals mostly with beans while Father spent his salary on silicone sealant and imported pumps. School uniforms were mended rather than replaced, and my mother began cutting my hair on the kitchen stoep with scissors instead of taking me to the barbershop.

"We're being economical," she would say, but I saw how she winced when the bills arrived, especially when they coincided with Father's trips to his supplier of exotic fish in Harare. He would return with transparent plastic bags of water gleaming with jewel-like creatures, his eyes bright with possibility, oblivious to the thinning envelope of cash in my mother's drawer.

One school term, I went without a winter uniform. While the other boys wore long trousers and navy blazers, I braved the morning cold in my thin khaki shorts and summer shirt, legs stiff with goosebumps. I told my friends I'd outgrown my old uniform too quickly, but the truth was there was no money for a new one. The fish tanks needed their filters and lights more than I needed warmth.

Father had quit his job before that term. Just walked away from the steady salary and the long, dusty bus rides, to focus on building tanks full time. “I’m not unemployed,” he said, when Mother asked how we would manage. “I’m a consultant now.”

He spent his days in the backyard or hunched over sketches at the kitchen table, drawing new tank designs on the backs of final notice letters. “This one will work,” he’d murmur to himself, tracing lines with a ruler as if precision alone could hold our world together. “This one will be perfect.”

Mother's face grew thinner, her cheekbones sharp as glass, but still she said nothing when Father came home with another sheet of acrylic. It was the unpaid rentals reminder that finally broke her silence.

"We can't afford this house anymore," she said one evening, placing the notice in front of him while he tested the seal on his newest creation. Not with anger, but with the quiet resignation of someone who had known all along this moment would come.

Father's hands stilled. For once, the water stopped dripping.

Three weeks later, we packed our belongings into cardboard boxes foraged from the grocery store. The fish tanks were dismantled one by one, Father standing before them like a man at a funeral. Most of the exotic fish were sold to a friend for a fraction of their cost. I watched the bright flashes of colour disappear into someone else's plastic bags, my father's dreams swimming away.

Our new home in Ngoni township was half the size of the old one, squeezed between identical houses in a neighbourhood far from the leafy mid-density suburb we'd known. The walls were thin enough that we could hear our neighbours arguing, the concrete floors cold against our feet. Two bedrooms instead of four, walls that sweated during the rainy season, and a yard barely large enough for a clothesline.

"We'll be closer to the bus stop," Mother said, helping me unpack my clothes. "And the rent is half what we were paying."

Father carried his fish tanks himself, refusing help even as sweat darkened his shirt and his breathing grew laboured. One by one, he positioned them along the only intact wall in the living room, the blue glow illuminating our new circumstances. There was no denying it now. We had fallen, and the neighbourhood knew it. The children on our street watched us with curious eyes as we arrived, instantly categorising us as outsiders. Not quite poor enough to have always lived in Ngoni, but no longer wealthy enough to stay wherever we had come from. The children whispered about us. "The fish people," they called us, though soon enough we became just another family squeezed into the township's crowded grid.

Father set up his smallest tank first. Just one, this time.

"We'll start again," he said, his voice hollow as he filled it with tap water. "Just need to treat this water properly. It's different here."

Mother nodded but said nothing. She was busy patching a hole in the kitchen ceiling where rain leaked through. The landlord had promised to fix it, but promises in Ngoni were as thin as the walls.

At my new school, the teacher introduced me as the new boy from "one of those nice schools," and the classroom fell silent, thirty pairs of eyes examining me like I was one of Father's exotic fish, suddenly dropped into the wrong tank. I learned quickly to hide any trace of my former life. I stopped talking about rugby and cricket. I learned to walk with my eyes down, to make myself invisible.

"Your father works for the government?" a boy named Tino asked one day during break time. Not a question, but an accusation.

I hesitated. Saying yes could make me a target for resentment, or worse, ridicule. Government workers were seen as either corrupt, connected, or complicit, especially those who still got paid on time, or at all. And anyway, what was my father now? Not the civil engineer he'd trained to be. Not the small business owner he'd attempted to become. Certainly not someone the government would be eager to claim.

"He builds things," I finally said, which wasn't entirely a lie. Tino nodded, seemingly satisfied with my vague answer. In those days, everyone had learned to speak in these half-truths. The real story always lived in the spaces between what was said.

At home, Father's fish multiplied again, though more modestly this time. The exotic species were replaced with hardier local varieties that required less specialized care. There was a silver tilapia with a torn fin that he called Chikondi; a convict cichlid he nicknamed Mambo for the way it chased the others, and a shy sharp-toothed catfish named Tariro that only came out at night. He found ways to cut corners, fashioning filters from plastic bottles and charcoal, breeding his own food cultures in jars on our windowsill. His ingenuity would have been admirable if it weren't for the electricity meter spinning faster than our budget allowed. Still, the gentle bubbling of the filters became the soundtrack of our new life, a reminder of what had brought us here.

The township had its own rhythms. The water came sporadically, sometimes disappearing for days, sending everyone into a panic of hoarding in whatever containers they could find. Women gathered at communal taps early in the morning, their laughter punctuating the dawn as they filled buckets and exchanged gossip. Mother joined these dawn gatherings reluctantly at first, then with increasing ease as faces became familiar.

Mother adapted faster than any of us. She joined the local women's savings club, contributing a few dollars each week to a communal pot that rotated among members. When her turn came, she bought fabric and a second-hand sewing machine, setting up a small tailoring business on our small veranda. Soon, the neighbourhood women brought her their children's torn uniforms and church dresses needing alteration. The money she collected in a chipped enamel mug grew steadily.

I watched her transformation with quiet amazement. In our old neighbourhood, she had been a shadow, moving silently behind Father's grand ambitions. Here in Ngoni, necessity pulled her voice from hiding. She bartered, negotiated, and when needed, argued fiercely for our family's needs. The sharp edges of her cheekbones softened as something like purpose filled the hollows beneath them. She never mentioned the fish tanks, but I noticed how she'd pause sometimes, watching Father with a gaze that mixed tenderness and resignation.

The day the electricity was cut off, something shifted between my parents. Father was at work, and Mother and I sat in darkness, the fish tanks eerily still without their bubbling filters. In the silence, I imagined I could hear the fish gasping at the surface, their mouths opening and closing in desperate search of oxygen.

"They'll die," I said, watching Mother's face in the candlelight.

"Yes," she replied simply. "They will."

When Father came home, he rushed to the tanks, frantically stirring the water with his hands as if this might somehow save them. "The oxygen levels will drop within hours. The filters..." His voice trailed off.

Mother stood in the doorway, the ZESA letter of demand clutched in her hand. "We need twenty thousand dollars by tomorrow or they won't reconnect us," she said.

"I'll get it," Father muttered, not looking up from the tanks. "I'll talk to Chikanda tomorrow. He might advance me some pay."

"Chikanda? The same Chikanda who hasn't paid you for three weeks?" She stepped closer, the candle flame making her shadow loom large against the wall. "There is no money coming, Baba Tinashe. There is only what we have, which is nothing, because of these... these glass coffins!"

Father's head snapped up. "They're not coffins. They're investments."

"Investments?" Mother's voice rose. "Look at us! Look at your son! We eat sadza and vegetables while these fish eat imported flakes that cost more than our weekly groceries!" Her voice rose suddenly, startling me. In our old house, arguments had been conducted in whispers behind closed doors. Here, with nowhere to hide, Mother's restraint finally broke. "Twenty thousand dollars for electricity because those tanks run day and night. For what? So you can pretend we're still living in Twinlakes?"

Father stood up, water dripping from his sleeves onto the concrete floor. "When they breed—"

"When they breed? When they breed?" Mother's laugh was sharp enough to cut glass. "It's been three years of 'when they breed,'" Mother continued, her voice now steady with resolve. "Tomorrow these tanks are going to Shamu's shop. He'll pay cash for them."

Father's jaw dropped, aghast. "You wouldn't."

"I already spoke to him. He's coming at seven." Mother crossed her arms, her shadow firm against the wall. "The money will pay our electricity and Tinashe's school fees for the term."

Father stepped away from the tanks as if she'd slapped him. "These are mine," he yelled. "You have no right!"

"And this is our home," Mother replied, gesturing to the dark room around us. "Our son needs light to study. I need power for cooking. What rights do fish have against that?"

I'd never seen my father look so small. He turned to me, searching for an ally, but I couldn't meet his eyes. Instead, I stared at the fish, their silver bodies glinting dully in the candlelight as they circled their shrinking world. The dying fish had become symbols of our decline, and in that moment, I found myself silently siding with my mother.

"Tinashe," he said softly. "Tell your mother..."

What could I tell her? That we should continue living in poverty so his fish could have air pumped into their water? Because he loved watching colourful creatures swim in circles? I wanted to stand with him, to protect his dreams as I had for years. But the truth pressed against my chest, demanding release. I looked down at my hands, betraying him with my silence.

Father's shoulders slumped. He looked at the tanks, then at us, as if seeing the distance between these worlds for the first time. Without another word, he retreated to the bedroom, closing the door with a soft click that somehow hurt more than if he'd slammed it.

Mother and I sat in silence, the candle burning low between us. The fish continued their mindless circling, unaware that their fate had just been decided. I watched one particularly bright silver fish bump repeatedly against the glass, as if it sensed the approaching end.

"Is he going to be alright?" I asked Mother, my voice small in the darkness.

She sighed, the sound carrying the weight of years. "Your father has always been a dreamer, Tinashe. The problem isn't the dreams, it's that he forgets to wake up." She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "Sometimes love means bringing someone back to earth."

That night, I couldn't sleep. Through the thin wall, I heard my father's muffled movements as he went back and forth between the bedroom and the fish tanks. I imagined him standing there, calculating impossible sums, trying to conjure money from empty air. The same magical thinking that had filled our house with fish tanks while emptying our cupboards.

In the morning, Mr Shamu arrived in his battered pickup truck. He was a heavyset man with calloused hands and a perpetual film of sweat on his brow. He ran the second-hand shop near the bus terminus, a place where the township's castoffs found new life. I watched from the doorway as he and Mother haggled over the tanks. Father had left before dawn.

"These filters are top quality," Mother said, her voice taking on the sharp edge I'd begun to recognise as her business tone. "Imported. The tanks are custom-built."

Shamu sucked his teeth, examining the silicone seals. "Custom, yes, but leaking here, see? And this one has a crack. Plus, who in Ngoni can afford fancy fish tanks?" He ran his thumb along the edge of the largest aquarium. "I'll give you fifteen thousand for the lot."

"Thirty thousand," Mother countered without hesitation. "The glass alone is worth that."

I watched them dance back and forth, Mother standing her ground while Shamu circled the tanks like a predator. In the end, they settled on twenty-four thousand dollars. Enough for the electricity and most of my school fees. Shamu peeled off four crisp new \$5,000 bearer's cheques, freshly issued and absurdly oversized, like Monopoly money. He added four crumpled \$1,000 notes and Mother accepted them silently. She counted the money twice, then a third time, the way people now did everywhere, as if the numbers themselves had become slippery.

The fish were transferred to plastic bags, their colours dulled by confusion, gasping in their shrinking prisons. Shamu loaded the empty tanks onto his truck with the casual efficiency of a man who trafficked in other people's failures. He whistled as he worked, seemingly untouched by the surreal reality that twenty-two thousand dollars could now barely light a home or send a child to school.

"What about this one?" Shamu pointed to the smallest tank, tucked in the corner. Inside, a single blue fish with trailing fins hovered near a plastic plant.

Mother hesitated, her hand moving to her throat. "That one's not for sale," she said finally. "It's... it's my son's."

I looked at her, surprised. It wasn't mine. I'd never claimed any of Father's fish as my own. But something in Mother's voice stopped me from contradicting her.

Shamu shrugged. "Suit yourself. Not worth much anyway." He wrote out a receipt and was gone in a cloud of diesel fumes that hung in the air long after his truck disappeared down the rutted road.

Mother stood watching the empty street, the bills clutched tightly in her fist. "Go get ready for school," she said without looking at me. "I'll pay your fees on the way to the ZESA offices."

I lingered by the doorway. "Why did you keep that one?"

Her shoulders tensed, then relaxed on an exhale. She turned to face me, her expression unreadable. "Everyone should be allowed to keep one dream, Tinashe. Even if it's a small one."

I watched the lone fish swimming in slow circles. It seemed confused by its sudden solitude, darting occasionally as if searching for companions that were no longer there.

"Will Father be angry?" I asked.

Mother was counting the money again, sorting it into a neat pile. "Yes," she said simply. "But anger burns out eventually. Hunger doesn't."

The house felt emptier without the tanks, the wall displaying rectangles of cleaner paint where they had stood. Mother moved quickly, sweeping away the last bits of gravel and wiping down water stains. By afternoon, she had rearranged the furniture to hide the evidence, pushing our threadbare sofa against the wall where the largest tank had been.

Father didn't come home that night. Or the next. Mother didn't seem surprised. She had paid the electricity bill, and light flooded our small house again, making the walls seem both cleaner and more obviously stained. The lone fish tank sat in the corner, its blue inhabitant circling endlessly. Mother fed it carefully, measuring the flakes as precisely as she portioned our mealie meal. Sometimes I caught her watching it, her expression softening in a way it rarely did anymore.

On the third day, I returned from school to find Father sitting at our kitchen table. He looked smaller somehow, his normally crisp work shirt wrinkled as if he'd slept in it. Mother stood at the stove, her back deliberately turned to him as she stirred a pot.

"Tinashe," he said, his voice hoarse. Our eyes met briefly before he looked away, focusing on his hands spread flat on the table. "How was school?"

"Fine," I mumbled, dropping my satchel by the door.

Father nodded as if I'd said something profound. "Good. That's good."

We ate dinner in silence broken only by the scrape of spoons against bowls. I watched Father notice the rearranged furniture, his eyes lingering on the empty spaces where his aquariums had stood. He said nothing, but his shoulders curved inward with each glance at the walls. Only when he spotted the small tank in the corner did his expression change, a flicker of confusion crossing his face.

"You kept one," he said, his voice barely audible.

Mother set down her spoon. "It was Tinashe's favourite," she lied, not looking at me.

A current passed between them, silent but powerful. I watched Father's face as he processed this information, the slight narrowing of his eyes suggesting he knew it wasn't true. But instead of challenging her, he nodded slowly.

"The Blue Fighter. Good choice." He glanced at me. "They're resilient. Can survive in almost any condition."

That night, I heard them talking in low voices in their bedroom. Not arguing. Their tones were too measured for that. But negotiating something fundamental between them. I pressed my ear against the thin wall, but I couldn't make out specific phrases, just the rhythm of their exchange: Father's voice rising with emotion, then Mother's steady response pulling him back to earth. Over and over, like waves against a shore, gradually wearing down resistance.

The next morning, Father left early again, but this time he kissed Mother goodbye. A week later, he brought home an envelope with cash. His first full pay in months. He handed it to Mother without hesitation, keeping only enough for his bus fare to work. She accepted it with a nod that contained neither victory nor submission, just acknowledgment of a new arrangement between them.

"Come," Father said that evening as I finished my homework. "I want to show you something."

I followed him, uncertain. Until now, he had cared for the remaining fish alone, his private ritual conducted in silence while Mother and I pretended not to watch. Father pulled up a stool and motioned for me to sit beside him.

"The secret to keeping the Blue Fighter," he said, tapping the glass gently, "is understanding that these fish fight when you put them in the same tank with others. That's why he's alone."

"Like us in Ngoni," I said without thinking.

Father looked at me sharply, then his face softened. "Yes, maybe so." The fish darted toward his finger, mouth opening and closing in what looked like aggression. He reached for a small container beside the tank. "Here. You should know how to care for him properly."

I took the container from his hand, the flakes inside so light they seemed to float even before touching the water. I pinched a small amount the way he showed me and let it fall gently. The blue fighter darted up, fierce and graceful, devouring each speck with urgent precision.

We sat in silence for a while, watching him move. Restless, beautiful. Alone.

"He's strong," I said.

Father nodded. "Being strong doesn't mean he's happy. But he lives. That's something."

His voice sounded distant, as if he were speaking to himself. I glanced at him, expecting to see the same hardness, the same quiet weight he wore like a second skin. But his shoulders had dropped slightly, and his eyes, though tired, were no longer far away.

Later, as I lay in bed, I heard the soft hum of the filter and the rhythmic splash of water against glass. I imagined the fish circling in the blue light, a lone survivor in a shrinking world.

And I thought, maybe that was us, too. Not broken, just learning how to live differently. Alone, sometimes. But still moving.

Still here.