

## **Drowning by a Goldfish**

The first time I died, it was because of a goldfish.

At least, that's what the obituary said.

It was printed in the Thursday edition of a newspaper that no one in my town remembered subscribing to. My name was spelled correctly. The photo was from sophomore year, the one where I wasn't smiling because the photographer told me to "look natural." Under cause of death, it said: Drowning.

The strange part wasn't the headline.

The strange part was that I was reading it at breakfast.

My mom was at the stove, humming off-key. The air smelled like burnt toast and something sweeter—like oranges left too long in the sun. I folded the paper carefully and slid it into my backpack. I figured there was a logical explanation. There usually is.

On the bus, no one sat next to me. Not because I was unpopular. Because every time someone tried, they'd pause halfway down the aisle, blink like they'd forgotten something important, and choose another seat.

By third period, I started noticing the clocks.

They weren't synchronized. The one above the whiteboard said 10:17. My phone said 8:03. The analog clock at the back of the room had no hands at all—just numbers trembling slightly, as if nervous to be watched.

“Time is subjective,” my physics teacher announced suddenly, though no one had asked.

“Especially after an incident.”

He stared directly at me when he said it.

At lunch, I opened my backpack to grab the newspaper again, but instead I found a small glass bowl. Inside it, a goldfish circled lazily, its scales flashing like tiny coins. The water was filled to the brim.

There was no lid.

A sticky note clung to the side of the bowl:

You forgot to breathe.

I don't remember standing up. I just remember the cafeteria stretching—tables elongating like shadows at sunset. The ceiling lowered, the fluorescent lights flickering into a pale, underwater blue. Conversations slowed into muffled echoes.

The goldfish stopped swimming.

It looked at me.

And I swear—this is the part no one believes—it opened its mouth and said my name.

Not in a voice. In a memory.

Suddenly I was six years old again, kneeling on the bathroom tile. My first goldfish had leapt from its bowl while I slept. I found it in the morning, small and still, its scales dulled. I had cried so hard I thought my lungs would split.

“You forgot to breathe,” my mom had said then, pulling me close as I hyperventilated.

Back in the cafeteria, water spilled over the rim of the bowl. It flowed upward instead of down, forming a sphere around me. I should have panicked. Instead, I felt calm—like slipping into a dream you’ve had before.

Students walked through the floating water without noticing. Or maybe I was the one moving.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

A text from an unknown number:

Second death pending. Please confirm.

Below it were two buttons: YES or ALREADY HAPPENED.

I pressed ALREADY HAPPENED.

Everything snapped back into place.

The cafeteria was normal again. The bowl was gone. My tray held untouched pizza, stiff at the edges. Across from me sat a girl I didn’t recognize. She had ink-stained fingers and eyes too old for her face.

“You’re not supposed to remember between drafts,” she said, flipping through a notebook.

“Drafts of what?”

“Your story.”

She turned the notebook toward me.

On the page was the first line:

The first time I died, it was because of a goldfish.

“That’s not possible,” I said. “I’m not a character.”

She tilted her head. “Then why does the plot keep resetting?”

The bell rang.

But instead of students rushing into the hall, they froze mid-motion. A fork suspended in the air.

A laugh cut off halfway through. Even the light seemed paused.

Only the girl moved.

“You’re glitching,” she said gently. “You weren’t supposed to read the obituary this early. It changes the pacing.”

“Who are you?”

She tapped the top of the page where a name was scribbled and crossed out repeatedly. None of the names were mine.

“I’m trying to get it right.”

The room flickered.

Suddenly we were standing in my bedroom. Night pressed against the windows. My backpack lay open on the floor, the newspaper spilling out like a secret.

“You die differently each time,” she continued. “Car crash. Falling star. Vanishing in a mirror. The goldfish was the quietest version.”

“Why do I have to die at all?”

She hesitated.

“Because it’s a coming-of-age story.”

I laughed, but it came out hollow.

“That’s not how those work.”

“Sometimes it is,” she said. “Sometimes you have to lose the version of yourself that thinks the world is solid.”

The floor rippled beneath my feet.

I felt it then—that thinness. Like reality was just a page, and someone had pressed too hard with their pencil. The edges of my room curled upward, revealing blank white space beyond.

“Wait,” I said. “If you’re writing this... can you change it?”

She looked uncertain for the first time.

“I can try.”

The lights went out.

There was no dramatic drowning, no pain. Just silence. And in that silence, I understood something terrifying:

I wasn't afraid of dying.

I was afraid of being unfinished.

When the lights returned, I was back at breakfast. The smell of burnt toast. My mom humming off-key. The newspaper wasn't on the table.

“Did anything weird happen yesterday?” I asked.

She turned, confused. “Yesterday?”

For a moment, I felt lighter. Maybe it had been a dream.

Then I noticed the fish tank in the corner of the kitchen. We didn't own a fish tank.

Inside, a single goldfish circled slowly.

On the glass, written in condensation, were three words:

Final draft approved.

The fish stopped swimming.

And this time—

I remembered to breathe.