

POOR RICHARD

Beverly Nieves

Angela had been in the pet shop many times since her mother's death, but never had she been so enthralled by the glow of lights coming from the manicured aquariums, and the nearly translucent beauty of the smaller fishes. Now a tiny creature half-hidden in a dark corner behind a piece of coral caught her attention. A newcomer to the collection, she thought. He was like a minute lobster with coppery gold tiger stripes running horizontally along his black body. The diminutive caudal fins looked like polka dotted veils to Angela, and his ribbon-like dorsal fins half concealed sharp streamers that undulated in the clear water. He was a frowning, shy little fellow no bigger than her fingernail. He was so sweet, so unprotected in that huge tank. She must have him!

She called the owner and pointed through the glass. "That one!"

"The lionfish?"

"Lionfish?"

"Because of its mane." Mr. Marvil explained. "Of the scorpion family. *Pterois volitan*. From the Indian Ocean and South Pacific. Those dorsal spines could give an awful sting if he was bigger."

"So beautiful!" Angela whispered. The coppery gold was like her favorite iridescent lipsticks: Cinnamon Blaze, Copper Blush, Sienna Glow, blends that went with her hair and skin. She was falling in love. He belonged in her sphere. Yes, must have him!

"Salt water, you know, Angela. There are a lot more fishes easier to care for."

"Oh, I've had them all, Mr. Marvil. Boring. A salt water scorpion is what I want now. He'll be perfect in my tank!"

The proprietor reminded her that the aquarium had to be prepared in advance: the water temperature just right, the salinity just

so, the plants and corals carefully arranged, the bubbler set....Angela listened politely. She knew all that. Mr. Marvil put a SOLD sticker on the glass right where the little lionfish was peeking behind the bit of coral as though timidly waiting for her return.

When her tank was ready, she returned to the pet shop to pick up her new possession. "It will grow as large as its environment will permit," Mr. Marvil said. Angela eyed a bigger tank, imagining her fish in a few months grown to twice its present size, but still cute and timid. The owner gave her three tiny guppies in a separate plastic bag for the newly purchased lionfish's first meal and warned her again of its poisonous fins, then rang up the sale.

At home Angela was thrilled at the way her tiny fish explored his new surroundings, languidly fanning out his coppery wing feathers, like a tiny, brilliant lobster-bird, lazily swimming backward and forward before finally settling on the bottom, among the pebbles and sand, waiting motionless for some unsuspecting prey. What should she name her lionfish? Rex? No, he was too sweet, too tender for such a graceless name. He needed something soft and loveable. How about Baby? No. Ah, how about Boopsie?

Angela released a new-born guppy from the plastic pouch. For a moment the tiny guppy swam about in the sea water she had collected the previous day, then curious, he poked his mouth into the sand. In a flash Boopsie caught it in his frowning mouth. What a good hunter he was for his size! She watched as Boopsie gulped down the two other tiny guppies the instant she released them from the plastic bag. What a good eater he was! She should have bought more guppies for her darling new pet.

After his dinner, Boopsie hung motionless among the reefs and swaying plants, his pouting expression unchanged. Angela tried to catch his attention, but he ignored her. He was trying his best to make her feel insignificant. The thought made her laugh. She realized she hadn't laughed in a long time. This little fellow, though small, had the charisma of a lion. When he got bigger, he'd have a great presence. She'd start saving for that larger tank.

The next morning she believed he'd grown. Boopsie was already larger than her thumbnail!

"How's the lionfish doing?" Mr. Marvil asked, the next day.

"Fine. I named him Boopsie."

He grimaced.

“I need more guppies.”

“Sure you do....How many?”

“Oh, half a dozen baby ones should do it.”

Marvil expertly scooped up half a dozen with his fine net and put them in a plastic pouch.

“Bye, Mr. Marvil. See you soon.”

“Bet you will!”

It became a routine. Every other day after work Angela stopped at the pet shop for guppies. Reaching home, she now felt excited as she put the key in the lock. Her depression was over. The house was no longer sad and empty.

One day as Marvil was scooping up a dozen guppies in his net, Angela said, “You know, I’ve changed his name. I call him Richard now.”

“Richard?”

“After Richard the Lion-hearted.” She laughed.

“Oh, right.”

“You should see him Mr. Marvil. Formidable!”

“That’s a lionfish for you.”

“Bye. See you Friday.”

But on Friday the store owner couldn’t supply her with guppies.

“All *sold out*? But you *knew* I’d be coming by for Richard’s food like I do every Friday.”

Marvil scratched his head. “I’m sorry.”

“And the weekend coming up! I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I don’t want Boopsie, er, Richard, to go hungry. He has to have his dinner tonight or he might eat his own feathers, I mean fins.” She tried to make light of it, but she was angry, frustrated.

“Really sorry, Angela. It’s out of my hands. The guy who delivers just didn’t show up. You know this island.”

“You can’t just turn your back on him, Mr. Marvil. You’ve the only pet shop on the island. You have a responsibility. Richard can’t go out and fend for himself, you know. What am I gonna do? Just tell me.”

Mr. Marvil scratched his head again. “I remember one of my

customers saying there's an abandoned well on the Northside, you know, where the Frenchies live? As I remember, he mentioned it's got guppies living in it."

That evening, driving to the northside, Angela found the described fork in the dirt road, recognized the stand of bananas, spotted the Frenchman's little green house, more like a shack she thought, and the stone well just a few feet from it. She went up to the house, nervous, for she had heard unsavory stories about those French farmers who never mixed with outsiders. She knocked. "Anyone home?" No one answered. A quarter to six, and no one home? She knocked louder and waited impatiently, then turned the knob. Inside, there was an empty hammock stretched across the small shuttered room. A shotgun lay across a bare shelf. No smells of cooking. No sounds of children. Was the house then abandoned?

Outdoors once again, Angela went to the well, and without the anticipated permission, removed the wooden lid. The interior was small and deep and had a pleasant mossy odor. There was an old bucket nearby with a convenient rope attached. She dipped in filling it to the top, then lifted it up and put it on the ground. Mr. Marvil was right! There were guppies—enough to keep Richard fed for the week-end. Since she had forgotten to put a container in the car, she took the bucket with her. Uneasy in her new role as thief, she thought: *Hold on, Richard, you'll eat tonight! By God, you'll eat tonight!*

After the lionfish's dinner, Angela drove back in the dark to the Northside to return the bucket. This time there was a dim light coming from the shack. When she knocked, an old Frenchie in a misshapen straw hat opened the door a crack.

"Wha you want?" asked a toothless man.

"I, I came to return something I borrowed."

The door opened a crack more and Angela offered him the bucket.

He glared at her, then at the bucket. "Who bucket that?"

"Yours, mister!"

"Where ya get that?"

She pointed toward the well. "When you weren't home I —"

"You trespassin?"

"Well, I, ah..."

“You don’t read no sign say No Trespass?”

“Well I...You see I needed guppies for my lionfish.”

“Wha?”

“I’ve got this lionfish. He’s got quite an appetite and I-“

“Ain’t no such ting as lionfish.”

“Yes, there is!”

“No there ain’t!”

“I’m telling you-”

“Only *lyin* is you! Trash! Tief! Me neighbor saw ya openin me house door. Get offa me property! I got a gun!” The old Frenchie turned toward the shelf where his rifle was resting. She threw a dollar at him. “...and here’s your goddamn pail!”

“Blashfemmer! Heretic!”

She ran, sorry she ever started up with him. She should have gone to the sea, gotten something there for poor Richard, though she didn’t have a net.

Home again, seated close to her aquarium, watching her reflection in the glass, her own reddish hair streaming over her face, she admired her lionfish. Satiated with the well guppies, Richard’s diminutive mane undulated in beautiful patterns, his astonishing fish-feathers decorated the otherwise plain fish tank. He had grown magnificent in the passing months, floating over his glittering domain now, like a king. But his mouth still frowned and his eyes seemed tragic. Her heart contracted in pain. He was lonely, needed a mate. The time had come for a more spacious aquarium, like the one Mr. Marvil had. In such a tank Richard would grow even larger, come into his manhood. Would a mate make him happy? She tapped on the glass with her ring. Eventually he turned, displayed his striped side, then gazed at her with an immutable eye. He was telling her something. Yes, a mate.

Although Mr. Marvil received regular shipments of guppies, Angela knew the same shortage would occur again. Doing business on an island was not easy. She would have to build a small pool, and raise her own guppies. She investigated plastic ponds versus earthen ones. A friend suggested another alternative: “It’s time to return Richard to the sea, Angela.”

“What? Part with my Boobsie—my Richard? My secret king Rex? Are you crazy? He’s given my life meaning. I’m going to buy a huge aquarium and get him a beautiful mate because he depends solely on me, his mother, his God—Do you realize I’m his God? I have that responsibility. Everything that nourishes him passes through my hands.” She held up her fingers, tipped with Bronze Glow, and looked at them as if they were touched with magic. Then she looked at her pouting, dark-eyed lionfish. She asked her friend: “Aren’t his colors astonishing? Isn’t he the most gracefully awkward creature you’ve ever seen? I mean the way he turns and swims backwards all of a sudden? The way his mane flows with majesty. I think he actually roars when he’s alone. Sometimes I think I hear him!” She laughed, kissed the glass, leaving her coppery lipstick mark there. Her friend had left.

After the visit, Angela sat for hours watching as Richard eyed the crystal bubbles or poked at his own image in the glass. Did he see himself? Did he know how beautiful he was, how superbly unique? How he had grown! Once again she was displeased with his name. He needed something more magnificent, more like the king of beasts of the sea. Magnifico!

What? The only pet store on the island closed on the day she’d used up the last batch of guppies in her own reservoir? Impossible! Angela wanted to kick in the glass window, steal Mr. Marvil’s useless guppies that were happily darting around in their bubbling aquarium. When she was a little calmer, she read the notice on the window. *Closed on account of death*. Oh, God! First Mom, now Mr. Marvil! Next she will be reading Magnifico’s obituary. Angela made quick inquiries, learned it was Mr. Marvil’s wife’s sister who had died. Thank God! But Richard, El Magnifico, had to eat, in spite of wakes and funerals. What to do? Call Marvil at his home. But she heard Mom saying it wasn’t decent to interrupt someone’s mourning.

Back home, in desperation, she opened a can of tuna fish and dropped a few flakes into the tank. If he were ravenous, as he seemed to be, Magnifico would eat. But when a sliver fell conveniently in front of his horned front feathers, he snapped his tail angrily and dove behind a chunk of coral. All she accomplished was getting the aquarium murky with grease.

Thank God she lived near the sea. Angela rushed down to the shore to get pails of sea water to replenish the putrid aquarium. It was windy, but she tried to catch some fry. Without a net it was impossible; they were too fast for her. Imagine, heeding her friend,

and returning Richard to this dark, rough sea! He'd be snapped up by a barracuda in a moment, her poor Richard!

She had an awful time getting the tank clean, the water the right temperature. But Magnifico was large and strong now; he could survive slight variations...it was only when they were cubs, or whatever young lionfish were called, that they died of hypothermia. Magnifico accepted the new water calmly. But he looked out at her with hungry button eyes. She trembled at his glance. Poor fellow hadn't eaten in more than twenty-four hours. She tried to console herself remembering that shortages of food occurred in nature. But she didn't want Magnifico to suffer; he was, after all, domesticated.

Once more she was obliged to return to the Northside. She recalled the suspicious, almost cruel expression on the old Frenchie's face. He would definitely not pity the hunger of an innocent lionfish that he didn't believe even existed. Parking far from the little cabin, she walked up on the dark road. When she was convinced he was sleeping in his hammock, and saw the neighbors' lights were out, Angela sneaked over to the well. Night creatures were singing: an owl gargled, a cricket chirped, an animal, probably a rat, ran into the bush frightening her. Carefully, she lifted the lid, smelled the mossy walls, sent down the rope and pulled up a bucketful of water. Quickly she emptied it into her own pail, looked around, then ran toward the road and her waiting car. The night was black behind her.

When she got home she saw her pail was thick with guppies. Once again, Magnifico was saved! He devoured the guppies, dozens of them, at a single snap of his snout. A moment later, he gave Angela a royal stare and moved on, wafting his brilliant coppery colors through the water like a carnival king. He turned, maneuvered a few backward slides and displayed the brilliance of his feathery mane. Was he thanking her? She wanted to stroke him. But he was too fast for her. Tears burned her eyes. Then he stopped, immobile, as though he were an exotic plate in a book of rare tropical fish. What a show El Magnifico was!

His recent spurts of growth in the new aquarium were keeping her too busy to think of a mate for him, too busy to see her friends, or even go to work at the lab. They were going to fire her, but it couldn't be helped. Her belts became loose, her pants dragged on the ground. She hardly had time to cook or eat, too tired sometimes even to bathe because of El Magnifico's constant requirements. One night she dreamed he had grown so large that both his pectoral fins were working against the sides of the aquarium. She awoke in a sweat

fearing he had split the delicate panels and was lying on the rug, gasping for breath. She needed to get back to the lab so she could afford to buy a yet larger aquarium for him.

Once again, she was out of guppies and had to visit the Northside well. She hated going there, but there was no alternative. Going into the sea at night would surely attract a ravenous barracuda, possibly a rogue shark. On this moonless night she parked her car around the curve and walked the quarter of a mile up the hill to the well with her empty pail, sweating with nervousness, avoiding the Frenchie's cabin, smelling her way in the dark. At last she felt the round stones beneath her fingers, the rough rope in her hands. Exhausted, she thought, why hadn't she listened to her friend and thrown Magnifico back in the sea?...What is he doing now, poor creature? Circling the aquarium, nibbling hungrily at his own beautiful streamers? No! No! As she was pulling up her pail of guppies, she heard a gunshot from the direction of the cabin.

Crouching behind a mango tree, Angela prayed that it was not meant for her. But she knew it was, and waited. Another blast shattered the quiet. She got up, ran in terror, stumbling, holding on to the pail, spilling water down her leg, feeling the guppies darting in the grass like jumping jacks. She was squashing some of them underfoot. Safe behind a mango tree, she heard the Frenchie's door finally slam, but she remained still. In her mind she saw Magnifico circling the aquarium, angrily poking his frowning moue against the glass, summoning his god. It made her tremble. Yet, as she squatted, waiting, she saw him dead, floating on the water, a huge, striped disk, feathery fins already darkened and limp, the water in his tank turning fetid.

Mister, mister, please fall asleep!... Suppose he was calling the police! No, those farmers didn't have phones, didn't care much for the Law. They had their own ways. Forget the sinister farmer. It was dark. She was going to pail up those guppies, and run like hell to her car. What a show Magnifico would put on devouring the stolen guppies! Tomorrow, she'd ask Mr. Marvil to order a female for Magnifico. It would be more work keeping two lionfish alive, but she had promised herself she would.

Now Angela was certain the old farmer was asleep in his hammock. Fumbling in the dark, she found the pail and lowered it into the well, feeling the pounding of her heart, the familiar wetness of the rope running through her fingers, hearing the small splash as the bucket hit the surface of the black water. She maneuvered it so it fell

over on its wooden side and started taking in water and guppies. The heaviness of the pail and the vibrations of the little wiggling bodies made her more nervous. She imagined Magnifico's watery roar as dozens of guppies entered his open mouth. Then she heard another sound, a shot, and felt herself falling into blackness and cold, taking wiggling guppies into her open mouth.

Beverly Nieves
Department of English
University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez