

# Goldfish for Sale

By Kyr Bylychev

*(translation by Seva Gunitsky)*

The only pet store in the town of Greater Bard shares a space with a stationery shop. On most days the counter is empty. Boys stop by to gawk at the aquarium but they never buy the fish here. They get them cheap from Tall Kolka, who waits outside swinging a jar of guppies. In his other hand he holds a paper cone with fat bloodworms.

But it's not like Zina, the store clerk, has no customers at all. The pharmacist owns a canary and comes in twice a week on his way from work. Grubin, an inventor and a failed man, drops by sometimes. He is interested in all of God's creatures and holds out hope that an Amazonian macaw will find its way to the store so he can teach it to speak.

There is another person here, a store guard, a former firefighter named Erik. He comes in quietly and stands in the corner behind the aquarium, his empty sleeve tucked into his belt, and the burnt side of his face turned to the wall. A couple of years ago an old lady forgot to turn off her iron and went to bed. Erik was the first to arrive and began to pull her outside. A beam collapsed from the ceiling and Erik received a disability pension at twenty-three, but remains employed by the town, a guard for a store that needs no guarding. He is learning to write with his left hand but does not go outside much.

Erik settles into his usual spot behind the aquarium. Sometimes he glances at Zina, whom he loves unrequitedly. How could it be otherwise? Zina is beautiful. She gets attention from many boys at the local college, and pines for the handsome biology professor. Yet Zina never says an unkind word to Erik.

...

The day turned out windless. From the window one could see down the hill to the river and even the woods on the far bank. The river, a deep azure that shamelessly mimicked the sky, carried barges, rafts, and boats. Clouds drifted slowly, spreading themselves apart so each could be admired individually.

Zina had received new stock the night before. She came to work early and hung up a sign on the door:

“GOLDFISH FOR SALE”

Overnight, the fish in the large aquarium had perked up, swimming self-importantly and gently fluttering their tails. There were about two dozen, and they were truly extraordinary. Each about

five to six inches long, their backs bright gold, with bellies shading into pink like polished copper samovars. Their eyes were large and black, and their fins bright scarlet.

The shipment also included a canister of bloodworms, which Zina emptied into a deep photo-developing tray. The worms wriggled in a crimson mass, trying to climb up the slippery white enamel.

“Ah,” said Vera, arriving for work and seeing the fish. “What beauties. It’s a pity to sell them. I’d keep them as decoration.”

“All of them?”

“Maybe half. You’re going to have a big day today.”

At that moment the door banged open, and in walked old man Lozhkin. He marched straight to the counter, stood for a moment, muttering to himself, then pinched a worm between two fingers and said:

“Capital worms. Top quality.”

“What do you think of the fish?” asked Zina.

“Common goods,” replied Lozhkin, maintaining a bored expression. “Chinese origin. In China these fish are kept in every outdoor pool for decorative purposes. By the millions.”

“Oh don’t say that,” protested Vera. “Millions?”

“You ought to read the academic literature,” said old man Lozhkin. “Look at the invoice. It will tell you everything.”

Zina took out the invoice.

“See for yourself,” she said. “It says nothing about China. These are our own fish. Two rubles forty kopecks each.”

“Too expensive,” Lozhkin declared, adjusting his glasses. “Let me see that.”

At that moment, Grubin walked in. He was tall, disheveled, and quick in his movements.

“Good morning, Zina,” he said. “Good morning, Vera. Any news?”

“No,” said Zina.

“Have they updated the order?”

“Not yet— probably still searching.”

In truth, Zina had never placed an order for an Amazonian macaw, correctly suspecting the regional office would laugh at her for such a request.

“Strange fish you got,” said Grubin. “They have a characteristic golden hue.”

“Characteristic of what?” said Lozhkin suspiciously.

“Of these fish,” replied Grubin. “Well, I’m off.”

“Frivolous man,” Lozhkin muttered after him. “There’s no Latin name for these fish on the invoice.”

At that moment, Tall Kolka poked his head into the shop. He was quite short and his face, despite being over forty years old, was totally free of facial hair, making him look like a large frightened infant. On most days Zina didn’t let him near the place and greeted him with shouts and threats. But today she smiled triumphantly and said:

“Step in, private sector.”

Kolka approached the counter cautiously, sensing a trap. He had the bag of bloodworms tucked under his arm and the jar of guppies behind his back.

“I’m only here to look at the goldfish,” he said quietly.

“Look all you want,” said Zina. “Why would I mind?”

But Kolka wasn’t looking at the fish. His eyes were fixed on the bloodworms. Lozhkin noticed his gaze and said:

“The government price is half what you bloodsuckers charge. And the quality of these worms is better.”

“We’ll see about the quality,” Kolka retorted as he backed out the door, bumping into a group of children skipping school.

Old man Lozhkin left the store five minutes later, went home to get a jar and three rubles, bought a goldfish, and spent the rest on bloodworms. By then Erik had hobbled in. He brought a small bouquet of asters and discreetly placed it near the aquarium—afraid that Zina might somehow mistake it for a gift, which it was, and laugh at him. She was tossing a net into the aquarium while Lozhkin, hunched over and pressing his face against the glass, was directing her motions.

“No, not that one,” he said. “Don’t try to pawn off the bad ones. I am well versed in fish behavior. Move your net to the left, to the left! Let me do it myself.”

“No way,” said Zina. Today, she was in complete control. “You point, I grab.”

“I’ll do it myself!” the old man insisted, trying to pull the net towards himself by the wire handle.

“Stop it, sir,” Erik intervened. “She’s doing her best to help you.”

“Quiet!” snapped Lozhkin. “Since when am I supposed to listen to you?”

Erik was about to reply but thought better of it, and stepped back against the wall.

“I wouldn’t sell fish to a person like that!” Vera called out angrily from behind the stationary shop’s counter. She was holding a large protractor, as if ready to strike.

Lozhkin shrank back, said no more, and held out his jar. The solitary fish carefully slid out of the net and pressed its golden snout against the glass.

Zina weighed out the bloodworms for Lozhkin in silence, took his money, and handed him two kopecks in change. The old man tried to leave the change on the counter, but Zina sternly called him back. He picked up his change and shuffled out, looking even more dejected.

...

“What did you bring?” asked Lozhkin’s wife from the kitchen.

“A half-liter in a jar, and a good morning to you.”

“Oh,” said the old woman without turning around. “So you’ve already had a drink.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re talking nonsense.”

The old man didn’t argue. He moved aside the cactuses on the windowsill, winked at the canaries, who chirped in confusion at the sight of the jar, then fetched the old aquarium and carried it to the kitchen sink.

“Move aside,” he said to his wife. “I need to fill this with water.”

When his wife realized that her husband wasn’t drunk, she wiped her hands on her apron and went to peek into the living room.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “A goldfish is just what we needed!”

The old woman bent over the jar, and the fish poked its snout toward her, opened its mouth as if gasping for air, and said softly:

“Won’t you, comrades, let me go back into the river?”

“What?” said the old woman.

“Please convince your husband,” the fish explained in a theatrical whisper. “Without your influence, he will never release me.”

“What?” said the old woman again.

“Who are you talking to?” the old man asked, returning from the kitchen with a full aquarium.

“I don’t know,” said his wife. “I don’t know.”

“Isn’t she a beauty?” asked Lozhkin.

“I’m not sure,” his wife said, sighed deeply, and then added, “You should put it back in the river. It’s bad luck to keep it.”

“Are you crazy? I paid two rubles forty kopecks for it at the store.”

“In the state store?” his wife asked. “They’re selling these now?”

“Yes, but no one buys them. People don’t get it.”

“I’ll give you three rubles,” said the wife. “I’ll buy you beer. Just let it go.”

“You’re a madwoman,” the old man declared happily. “We’ll transfer it to the aquarium right now.”

“Do as you wish!” The old woman started to cry and went to the kitchen.

At that moment, the fish could not hold out any longer.

“Don’t leave!” it cried. “If you let me go, I’ll grant you three wishes.”

The old man dropped the aquarium, shattering it.

“We don’t need anything!” shouted the old woman from the kitchen. “Get back to your river! Nothing but trouble.”

“So-o,” the old man said slowly, water pooling around his ankles. “What’s this then?”

“I gave you my offer,” the fish responded. “And it is final.”

“How can that be?” the old man asked, pulling up a soaked pant leg. “Fish don’t talk.”

“I’m a hybrid,” the fish explained. “It’s a long story.”

“I’ve heard about this,” the old man said. “Isotopes?”

“Sure. Isotopes.”

“Throw it out,” yelled the old woman.

“Wait,” replied Lozhkin. “Let’s test it. Go ahead, restore the aquarium to how it was, put it back on the windowsill, and dry up the room while you’re at it.”

“And you’ll let me go?” asked the fish.

“Can you grant three wishes?”

“I can.”

“Then I’ll let you go. If it works, I’ll head to the store and buy another dozen. Are you the only talking one?”

“We all do it,” confessed the fish.

“All right, restore the aquarium.”

There was a brief shimmering in the air, noises like a large bird fluttering, and suddenly the old man found the aquarium, unbroken and full of water, back on the windowsill.

“Two wishes left,” the fish reminded him.

“This aquarium is pretty small,” pondered Lozhkin. “Could you make a new one, a hundred liters maybe, with real seaweed?”

The old woman quickly approached her husband. She was now possessed by a new fear—that her husband, with his frivolous nature, would waste all their wishes. And what if the fish was lying? What if it was the only one?

“Wait!” she yelled. “Buy the others first. We need a new house with a garden more than a big fish tank.”

“All right,” the old man agreed. “Get the money from the cupboard and bring a bucket. While I’m out, keep an eye on this rascal.”

“So, no oversize aquarium then?” asked the fish, not sounding especially hopeful.

“Not a chance!” the old man snapped. “You’re too clever for your own good. You’ll work as part of a collective. I’ve got plenty of wishes—don’t think that just because I’m old, I don’t have dreams.”

...

Ksenia Udalova had knocked on the Lozhkins’ door to ask for salt just minutes before. She had not in fact run out of salt. But the walls were thin, and the door was slightly ajar, and since they were such good neighbors she saw no reason not to poke her head in and see what the fuss was about. The old couple had finished their excited conversation with their backs turned to the door, and if the fish had noticed her, it had not given a sign.

Ksenia Udalova was a sharp-witted woman and not easily startled. Just as quietly as she entered, she quietly left, calculated that the Lozhkins would need time to gather a bucket and fetch the money, and then rushed out into the yard, where her husband Kornelius Udalov was playing dominoes under a linden tree, and commanded in a loud, authoritative voice:

“Kornelius, come here!”

“Apologies,” Kornelius said to his domino partner. “Being summoned.”

“Sure,” the partner grinned. “Be quick.”

Ksenia handed her husband a poorly washed jar with an eggplant label on it, along with five rubles, and whispered:

“Run to the pet store and buy two goldfish!”

“Buy what?” Kornelius asked, taking the jar.

“Goldfish. And pick the biggest ones.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask questions! Hurry up, and don’t tell anyone. Don’t spill the water either. Go! I’ll stall them.”

“Stall who?”

“The Lozhkins.”

“Ksenia, darling, I don’t understand a thing,” Kornelius said, and the tip of his button nose began to turn an innocent pink.

“You’ll understand later!”

Ksenia heard footsteps inside the house and dashed back in. Udalov uncertainly began making his way to the gate.

“Where are you off to?” asked Sasha Grubin, a neighbor. “Shall I accompany you, my friend?”

“Yes yes accompany me, my friend,” Udalov replied, still bewildered. “I’m going to the pet store to buy goldfish.”

“That can’t be true,” said Poghosyan, his domino partner. “Ksenia has never done anything like that. Maybe to fry them?”

“Yes you are right. Probably to fry them,” Udalov said, feeling calmer. “Let’s go, Sasha.”

No sooner had the footsteps of Udalov and Grubin faded down the alley than Ksenia again appeared in the doorway. She was slowly backing out of the house, her body swaying as if holding back a powerful force.

This force was none other than the Lozhkins. Her husband was lugging a bucket of water while his wife was helping push Ksenia out of the way.

“And where are you rushing, dear neighbors?” Ksenia crooned.

“Let us through,” the old man insisted. “We’re off to get some kvass!”

“With a full bucket of water? I was hoping to borrow some salt from you.”

“I will give you salt later, let me through.”

“You’re not heading to the pet store, are you?” Ksenia asked slyly.

“Even if we were,” said the old woman, “you have no right to hold us back.”

“How did you know?” Lozhkin fumed. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“What is there to eavesdrop on?”

The old man twisted around, nearly knocking Ksenia over, and dashed towards the gate. The old woman clung to Ksenia to stop her from chasing after him.

“Oh dear,” said Poghosyan. “He’s running for the goldfish, too. What’s the rush?”



“We have lived without goldfish,” replied Katz, “and we will live without them. Throw the dice.”

“Oh dear,” Poghosyan repeated. “Ksenia is such a smart woman, sometimes she scares me. Look, she’s running too.”

“Valentin!” Katz’s wife shouted from the second floor. She had heard the commotion in the yard. “Valentin, do you have money? Run to the pet store and see what they’re giving out.”

Within two minutes, nearly the entire building was rushing down Pushkin Street toward the pet store. Some had jars, others had bottles, and a few empty-handed people followed along just out of curiosity.

...

Greater Bard is a quiet town and life here follows well-worn paths. People go to the local cinema, to their place of employment, to the technical college, maybe to the library. But if something unusual happens, a wave of anxiety and excitement ripples through the town instantly, as if in an anthill where news spreads through all the tunnels in a fraction of a second. The ants have an extra sense for such things. The residents of Greater Bard too have such a sense, and that is why by the time Udalov and Grubin reached the pet store, a crowd had already begun to gather in front of the sign.

Udalov and Grubin, panting, pushed through the crowd and burst into the store not fully understanding why they were here. Udalov, out of breath, handed Zina five rubles and said:

“Wrap up two goldfish for me in a newspaper, please.”

“Is that you, Udalov?” Zina asked, surprised, as she lived on the same street. “Did Lozhkin recommend these? Why are all these people outside? Do you want a male and a female?”

“Zina, don’t sell them the fish,” said Erik from behind the aquarium.

“Young man,” Grubin interrupted, “out of respect for your heroic past am I refraining from objecting. Zina, forget the newspaper, here’s a jar, dump the goods.”

Zina picked up the net and dipped it into the aquarium. The fish darted away in all directions. Now there was commotion at the door—old man Lozhkin was trying to push his way closer to the counter with his bucket.

“Go ahead, don’t hold back,” Udalov said. “We’re just going to fry them anyway.”

“Give me one! Give me one!” Lozhkin shouted from the doorway. “I’m a fish lover. I am a connoisseur. I won’t fry them!”

A general noise drowned out his cries. Suddenly hands holding rubles reached out to Zina from all directions. In an attempt to protect her from the chaos, Erik lifted his fist, struck it on the table, and shouted:

“Silence! Maintain order!”

And there was silence.

And in that silence, everyone heard the fish, its head sticking out of the aquarium, say:

“It is utter madness to fry us. Do you people not read books? You are killing, uh, hens that lay golden eggs. We will complain.”

A hush fell over the store.

The second fish swam up next to the first one and added:

“We must be given guarantees.”

“What kind of guarantees?” Grubin asked in a thin voice.

“Three wishes from each of us. No more. Then—freedom.”

A pause followed.

Five minutes later, it was all over. The store was empty, and on the now-bare counter stood an empty aquarium. The water in it was still rippling. Zina quietly sobbed as she counted the money. Erik was standing in the corner, rubbing his bruised side. He bent down, picked up the undamaged bouquet of flowers, and laid it back on the counter.

“Don’t be upset, Zina,” he said. “Maybe they’ll send more next time. If I had bought one, I would have given it to you.”

“I’m not crying about that,” Zina cried. “It’s the greed in people. So embarrassing. And old Lozhkin shouting, ‘Give me ten!’—what for?”

“I’m very sorry I couldn’t get you one,” Erik repeated. “Goodbye.”

He left. Vera, who had been waiting for the shop to empty out, approached Zina, holding a lacquered box. Inside were two fish.

“I managed to buy them,” she said. “You didn’t even notice. I knew if I waited for the chaos to end nothing would be left. You didn’t even think to set a few aside.”

“No chance,” Zina said. “I’m so glad you got some. I didn’t see a thing. It was such a commotion—I was just taking money and catching fish.”

“One is for you. You can pay me back later.”

“I don’t need it,” Zina refused. “I don’t have the right to take it.”

“Then I’m giving it to you as a gift. For your birthday. And don’t be crazy. Who refuses happiness? You don’t have a fur coat, and winter is coming.”

“I could never!” And Zina started sobbing even harder.

“What’s the big deal,” said the fish from inside the box. “No one can make more than three wishes anyway, no matter how many fish they have. A hundred fish or just one—it’s the same. And you do need a fur coat—I’ll make one right now. Do you want mink or sable?”

“Great,” Vera said definitively. “Where’s the net? We’ll transfer one for you. I’m so glad.”

“How could I possibly take it?” Zina protested.

A stranger poked her head in the door and asked, “Are there any fish left?”

“Sold out,” Vera Yakovlevna replied, closing the lid of the box. “Stragglers will start coming in soon,” she said, turning to Zina. “Shall we close up shop? What business do we have left today?”

“I need to write a report to the regional office,” Zina said. “I think they sent this stock by mistake.”

“You can write it at home. Let’s go.”

Zina obeyed. She took down the sign, locked the front door, and hid the money. Vera took out another box and transferred one of fish into it. The two shopkeepers left through the back door.

“Do you remember who bought the fish?” asked Vera.

“Well, at first, before all the commotion, Lozhkin came in. Then the young naturalists from the middle school. And Savich. Then that tall guy from the city health department, and Udalov and Grubin each took one. Then Lozhkin again. As for the others, who can guess?”

“I’m afraid it’s too late to guess,” said Vera. “Soon the results will become clear.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think people will wish for?”

“I don’t know. Probably money.”

“Money is not allowed. Limited sums only,” the fish interjected from the box. Its muffled voice was barely audible through the lacquered lid.

“Oh!” Zina gasped.

They walked down the alley, which had been dusty and uneven in the morning. Now it was covered in smooth, glistening marble. The grand new fences along the alley were a pleasant green, and flocks of geraniums bloomed in the front yards.

“Nothing to see here,” Vera said, already steeled for miracles. “Someone from the city council fulfilled the regional beautification plan.”

“What’s going to happen next?” Zina asked, carefully stepping onto the marble sidewalk.

“I think,” Vera replied, marching across the marble, “I think I’ll get my own apartment. But no rush, little fish. Let me think about it.”

...

At home, Zina found a large jar. She carefully transferred her fish from the box and carried it to the kitchen to add more water.

“You’ll have fresh water in a minute,” she said. “Just hang in there.”

She turned on the tap, and a stream of clear liquid gushed into the jar.

“Stop!” the fish shrieked. “Are you out of your mind? Do you want to kill me? Turn off the tap! Take me out, immediately!”

Panicked, Zina grabbed the fish, holding it tightly in her hand. A pungent smell of vodka filled the kitchen.

“What is this?” Zina exclaimed. “What’s happening?”

“Water...” the fish whispered. “Water... I’m dying...”

Zina frantically searched around the kitchen and found a kettle. Luckily, it had water in it. The fish revived. The stream of vodka continued to flow from the tap.

“Where’s the water?” Zina wondered aloud.

“Some idiot decided to waste his wish,” the fish explained. “Looks like he got an inexperienced fish. If it had been me, I would have refused. That’s not a wish, it’s sabotage.”

“So where’s the water now?”

“The vodka will run out soon. Or someone else will probably wish for things to go back to normal.”

“And if they don’t?”

“From there it could end up in rivers, lakes—it could wipe out all the local wildlife. You know what, Zina? I have a personal request for you. Use one of your wishes to turn the vodka back into water. In return we’ll design you a unique coat.”

“I don’t need anything unique,” Zina said. “I just want a Bulgarian sheepskin coat. My aunt in Vologda has one.”

“So we’re spending two wishes at once?”

“We are,” Zina agreed, though she felt a twinge of regret.

A sheepskin coat appeared on the back of a chair. It was light brown, delicate, and warm, adorned with a white fur collar.

“I also lined it with mink,” the fish confessed. “It’s a pleasure to help a good person. Would you like to make your third wish now, or wait?”

“Can I think about it for a little while?” Zina asked.

“Take your time. Have lunch. And sprinkle me some crumbs. After all, I’m a living being.”

“Forgive me, please. I completely forgot.”

...

Grubin stayed outside to share the exciting news with the neighbors, so Udalov and Lozhkin entered the house together. As they climbed the stairs, Udalov was fuming.

“You wanted to keep it all to yourself, huh? Buy them all up in secret?”

Old man Lozhkin didn’t reply.

“Thought you’d be living high off the hog, while the whole town stays poor? Shameful.”

“Well, your wife was eavesdropping!” Lozhkin snapped, and darted through his apartment door, knocking over his wife who had been standing with her ear pressed against it.

Udalov was about to reply with something nasty, but his own wife burst out of their apartment, grabbed the jar from his hands, and asked angrily:

“Why only one? I gave you money for two.”

“Grubin took the other one,” Udalov explained. “We went together.”

“He should have bought his own,” Ksenia fumed. “You’ve got children, and he’s single.”

“Come on. Won’t three wishes be enough for you?”

“We could have had six! The Lozhkins have six.”

“Don’t be upset, comrade,” the golden fish interjected. “No one can have more than three wishes, no matter how many fish they have.”

“Wait a second,” Ksenia said. “So Lozhkin ran for a second fish for nothing? He wanted to buy a dozen for no reason?”

“For no reason. Could we get on with it? And when you’re done with your wishes, please let me go.”

“Be patient,” Ksenia said firmly. “Kornelius, go wash your hands and sit down to eat. The food is getting cold.”

At the sink, Udalov encountered a pleasant surprise. Someone had replaced the water with vodka. He didn’t make a big fuss about it. He washed his face, though it stung his eyes, drank some from his palms, and filled an empty pot.

“Where have you disappeared?” his wife called impatiently from the room.

“Coming!” Udalov replied, his tongue already growing thick. He pressed the pot of vodka to his belly and gingerly carried it into the living room.

“Look at this!” he told his wife. “Get the snacks ready. This wasn’t my wish,” he added quickly.

Ksenia understood immediately and began filling the empty bottles with vodka.

“What a man! What a socially-minded genius!” Udalov praised the unknown benefactor. “They didn’t just wish for themselves. They brought joy to the whole town. Wait till Lozhkin finds out—he’ll think I did it!”

“What if he did it himself?”

“Never. He’s too selfish.”

From outside came the sound of slurred singing.

“There,” Udalov said. “Do you hear? People are already taking advantage.”

Meanwhile, back in his apartment, Lozhkin washed his hands with the vodka, spat it out in surprise, realized what was going on and wondered whether he should consult his wife. But by the time she arrived the vodka had turned back into water. His wife scolded him for his indecisiveness, and they began to squabble over how to use their remaining wishes.

...

Grubin made his first wish right in the yard.

“I’d like you, golden fish, to get me a Brazilian macaw parrot that can be taught human speech.”

“Easy,” the fish declared. “After all, I too can speak.”

“Agreed.” Grubin placed the jar with the fish on the bench, took out a comb, and smoothed his hair in preparation for the long-awaited moment. “So. What’s taking so long?”

“One second. It’s a long way from Brazil. Three, four, five.”

A massive, multicolored, proud macaw perched on the branch of a tree above Grubin, tilting its head to observe the residents of the yard below.

Grubin tilted his head back and called out, “Come here, my dear bird.”

The parrot hesitated, considering whether to descend to Grubin’s outstretched hand. Just then, Poghosyan and Katz appeared, arms slung around each other, singing loudly as they walked into the yard. They had just discovered that, completely independently of each other, they both wished for the town’s drinking water to be turned into vodka. Delighted with the results of their experiment and the affinity of their wishes, they were now off to share the news.

“Carramba!” the parrot squawked, lifting heftily from the branch and flying above the rooftops. It made a circle, scattering the crows, its wings shimmering in the sun.

“Carramba!” it squawked again and then flew south, back to its native Brazil.

“Bring it back!” Grubin shouted. “Bring it back immediately!”

“Is that your second wish?” the fish asked slyly.

“No, still the first! You haven’t fulfilled it yet!”

“Didn’t you ask for a parrot, comrade Grubin?”

“I did. So where is it?”

“It flew away.”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“But it was here.”

“And it flew away. Why wasn’t it in a cage?”

“Did you ask for a cage, comrade Grubin?”

Grubin pondered this. He was a fair man.

“All right,” he said. “Give me a macaw in a cage.”

Thus Grubin used his second wish. Carrying the cage in one hand and the jar with the fish in the other, he headed home. That’s when Erik appeared in the yard.

Erik had been wandering all over town. He was searching for a fish for Zina, not knowing that she had already received one as a gift from Vera.

“Hello,” he said. “Does anyone have an extra golden fish?”

Grubin hunched over and quietly walked toward his door. He had only one wish and many desires. Poghosyan and Katz, holding onto each other, began stumbling back toward their own door. They had also partially used up their wishes.

Windows in the Udalov and Lozhkin apartments slammed shut.

“I’m not asking for myself!” Erik shouted into the empty yard.

...

The first wish of the middle school biology club—who collectively owned one fish—was to create a zoo in the schoolyard, complete with tiger cubs, a walrus, and many rabbits.

Their second wish was a guarantee they would not have homework for an entire week.



The third wish caused some disagreements and a lot of noise. The arguments lasted until evening.

Many other strange things occurred in town that day. Some remained the private affairs of individuals and their families, others became known to all. There was the children's zoo, which to this day remains one of the town's attractions. And the newly marbled alleyways, and the sudden abundance of French perfumes in the department store, and the legend of vodka in the sewers. By evening, as time approached to return the fish to the river, most of the wishes had been used up.

A crowd moved slowly down Pushkin Street, heading toward the embankment. The Udalov family led the way, with young Maksim riding his new bicycle in the front. Ksenia clutched a cloth she had just used to dust their new grand piano.

Grubin came next. He carried the jar with the fish but also the parrot cage. He wanted everyone to see that his dream had come true.

The Lozhkin couple followed. The old man wore a new tailored suit made of vicuña wool, and eight more fine suits were hanging in his wardrobe at home.

Arm in arm, Poghosyan and Katz strolled along, carrying a large bottle between them. They did not plan on saving it for tomorrow.

Zina was there.

Savich, too. And everyone else.

They gathered at the riverbank.

"Wait a minute," said one of the goldfish. "We are grateful to you, residents of this town. Your wishes, though often hasty, have pleased us with their variety."

"Not all of them," cried the fish from Poghosyan and Katz's jar.

"Not all of them," the first fish agreed. "Tomorrow, many of you will start to feel regret. You will scold yourselves for not wishing for golden palaces. Don't! I tell you now: tomorrow, no one will feel disappointed. This is our final and collective wish as fish. Understood?"

"Understood," replied the townspeople.

"Fools," said the macaw, who had proven a quick study and already knew a few words.

"Now, release us into the water," said the fish.

"Stop!" came a shout from behind.

As people turned they shrank back in horror. A man with a dozen legs and a similar number of arms was running toward them, or rather nearly rolling at them with great speed, waving his limbs frantically.

As the man drew closer, the crowd recognized him.

“Erik!” someone exclaimed.

“What’s happened to me?” Erik shouted. “Who did this? Why did this happen?” His face was free of burns and his hair was tousled.

“I’ve been running all over town, asking for a fish,” Erik continued, gesturing wildly with several arms. “I lay down for a rest, and when I woke up, this?”

“Oh no,” Zina said. “It’s all my fault. What have I done? I just wanted to help. I wished for Erik to have a new arm, a new leg, and for his face to heal. I had one wish left.”

“I’m to blame as well,” added Lozhkin. “I thought, why was I so rude to the young man? I wished for him to have an arm as well.”

“I did too,” Grubin admitted.

“And me,” Savich said.

In total, eighteen people confessed to wishing for various limbs. Someone nervously chuckled in the stunned silence. Savich then asked his fish:

“Can’t you help us?”

“No, unfortunately,” the fish replied. “All the wishes have been used up. You’ll have to take him to Moscow and have the limbs surgically removed.”

“This is quite a letdown,” Grubin muttered. “If necessary, take back my damn parrot.”

“Fools,” the parrot said.

“That won’t help,” the fish replied. “Wishes cannot be undone.”

At that moment, the middle school biology club members finally arrived at the river bank.

“Does anyone need an extra wish?” one of them asked. “We used two but couldn’t agree on a third.”

The kids saw Erik and were terrified.

“Don’t be afraid, children,” the goldfish reassured them. “If you don’t mind, we’ll use your remaining wish to restore Erik to his normal form.”

“We don’t mind,” the young naturalists replied.

The air shimmered for a moment and Erik returned to his natural state. In fact, it turned out he had been a rather handsome young man.

“Hah!” the golden fish shouted in unison, and with a bright flash leapt from their jars, aquariums, and containers, vanishing into the river.

They had to reach the Sargasso Sea to lay their eggs, and they were in a hurry.