



The Department of Remorse

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She named the fish Hamilton, after another secretary, another fish. The name seemed absurdly grand for the tiny being that occupied the bowl on her desk, with its seeming affectations — every morning swimming backwards in anticipation of being fed. To her, this was an affectation, an unwarranted display, which meant what? A dance, a preparatory dance — to the crumbs of food it would get in its artful, yet perhaps too minimally described bowl. She coddled this fish, she made sure its water was sparkling, re-warmed, fit for a governmental fish. She didn't neglect it, no matter what happened at work, to do so would have allowed a measure of emotion to permeate her aspect, which she would not do.

The fish had been a gift of her employer. From her employer's son, actually. Indirectly, via his wife. The wife had bought the fish for the child, but neither had the capacity to care for it. It was thus that her boss had turned up one morning, long-faced, with the fish, and the request that she find a person — any person — who

would be willing to take over its care. He had a vague idea that the person should be some kind of expert — an expert in the saving of fish? Where could such a person be found? Did such a person exist? It would be her job to discover. She concluded that what was necessary was a person who did not shirk his responsibilities, but she did not say so. She would never say so. To say so was not her job.

But it took her only a few phone calls, to animal rescue, to a local veterinarian, to discover that for all the forlorn pictures of dogs and cats one might encounter, they had rescuers aplenty. But no one, no one rescued fish. So as she had expected it might, from the moment the situation had been presented to her, the role of rescuer fell to her. Or executioner. It might be a reasonable interpretation of her mandate to provide the poor unfortunate a humane passing. She might claim to have placed it with someone and discreetly, efficiently flush it down the toilet. This was of course the essential moral question for the secretary of a man whose goal in life was to avoid any responsibility for anything at all. Since she defined her boss' understanding of the world around them, she might tell him whatever she wanted. She might tell him the sky was green and he would never check. As far as he knew the fish might be living a life of luxury in the city aquarium. It might be called upon to do tricks. It might become a fish celebrity. It might grow unduly large. She was aware that her boss' willful ignorance depended on the assumption that she was honest. He preferred to believe whatever she said.

But she did not wish to perpetrate a fraud, she wished to propagate the truth. The very minute the fish was in her hands — the bag it came in, not the fish itself — she decided to make it clear to her boss that when a living being was passed into another's care, the right thing, the appropriate thing, was for that caretaker to in fact *take care*. Thus did Hamilton Fish take up residence in the middle of her desk.

She would prove her point. Mr. Fish would not just live in water, but in baths — he would soak. She herself was an advocate of the warm bath. The revitalizing soak. She was of the opinion that from soaking, so much could be gained. She made sure to do so as often as possible. Hamilton Fish would not want warm water, however. It might be dangerous for him. She would make it cool, not freezing, but cool and very, very clean. Lunch hour would be cleaning hour, several times a week — Mr. Fish in a glass of water while his primary residence received a scrubbing and new water was filtered and prepared. And what about decoration? She imagined underwater trees of various types — treasure chests, the kinds of things one saw in aquariums at pet stores or in children's movies. But they all seemed so foolish, so insincere. And she was not particularly fond of undersea vistas. Was that what she wanted to look at each day while she answered phone calls? No. She did not think so. Not even for the amusement

of Mr. Fish. Anyway, in the end, she after all, had saved him. Didn't it follow that he was for her amusement?

He did amuse her. Every day. Not only with his celebratory backstroke, but in other ways. The tenor of activity outside the bowl never seemed to affect him. The phones could ring nonstop and Mr. Fish would make his merry way back and forth across the bowl.

She wondered sometimes if Mr. Fish were deaf. Did fish hear? Because it could get noisy in the office. It was her duty to answer several phones. She had typing she was required to do. And then, about the middle of each day, she was required to deal with Mrs. Boss (the name she only half seriously appended to her, in her mind, when she was sure no one who could possibly know her was nearby), who was in the habit of making a mid-day phone call in order to resolve certain mundane difficulties she was in the habit of getting herself into. Mr. Fish had been one such difficulty. This was the one call Mr. Boss was sure to want to take. There were, it turned out, no other calls he was sure to take. About this they had not had any particular discussion. She had simply gleaned it from the fact that Mr. Boss would emerge from his office at a moment proximate to the moment that the phone call would come and look at her plaintively as if they both knew that this call would be the one he could not prudently avoid.

She had her first sighting of Mrs. Boss some days following the arrival of Mr. Fish. She appeared near the lunch hour and stood, purposefully, in front of her desk, waiting for her to finish informing a caller that the boss was not available though it was clear to her and to him and now to Mrs. Boss that this was not the case.

Mrs. Boss did not comment. Instead, she looked at her, it was wrong to say vacantly — insistently — as if there was something she should know about her being there. As if Mrs. Boss should have been expected. Planned for. But planning, she must know, was not the way of Mr. Boss. Exhibit A: his always-empty datebook. She opened it with a prosecutorial flourish. But there it was: “Lunch with Anne”, written in Mr. Boss' troubling scrawl. She ran her finger down the page, as if scrolling past innumerable other engagements, and allowed it to land in a practiced manner upon the engagement in question.

“He will be with you in just a minute,” she said, knowing full well there was nothing to stop him from standing up right now and walking out and indeed, much to her chagrin, there he was, standing right behind her.

“Thank you, Miss Granger,” he muttered and the two departed without a word.

They were an attractive couple. And it was pleasing to her that they should lunch together. Someone had told her at some point that she might accurately gauge the promise of an employer by the importance he accorded to family. Appreciation for the structure life has provided one was an auspicious indication both of temperament and of staying power within an organization.

They were both young, in their early 30s, tall, lanky, brunette (as a blonde, she observed this dispassionately). She imagined they were the type of couple who exercised together, which was how they stayed so slim.

There was an urgency between them that she didn't understand. That was it. That was the thing she couldn't quite get hold of. They seemed somehow to be coasting through the rest of life, but for each other they seemed to turn on. Mrs. seemed to explain Mr. — as if the effort required to deal with her justified his comparative exhaustion the rest of the time.

Mr. Fish jumped and performed a vigorous series of laps. It was not a cleaning day. The phone rang, but she ignored it.

She would eat too.

But not too much. What happened? She went out to lunch and owing perhaps to the confusion of the morning, purchased not just her regular tuna with lettuce on rye with an ice tea, but a bag of chips, a cookie and an ice coffee. A redundancy, she realized, part way through ordering — she really only wanted the chips and the ice coffee. She decided that when she got home (back to the office, not home), she might prudently put the sandwich and the ice tea into the office fridge for the following day to save herself the trip.

But when she had returned to the office, the phones had not rung. They seemed to have gone dead. She began an article on the subject of improving one's organization and was through the sandwich and into the chips before she knew what had happened. She ate the cookie and feeling by now severely bloated, resigned herself to the ice coffee in hopes it would forestall the postprandial stupor that was sure to ensue. When it didn't provide the necessary spark, she consumed the ice tea.

Really, this was not characteristic. But she had not been herself since coming to work for Mr. Boss. Indeed, that was something of an understatement. She felt as if she might have become someone else completely. But whom? And how?

She remembered coming in for her interview. She had worn a green dress, pumps. Gold earrings. Hoops. Trashy. Someone else's idea of an outfit she should wear. Whose?

Her mother's. Her mother had been given a say — why? — because she had been visiting, hovering. She believed that her daughter was sequestering herself, that a job was a place to get out and meet unusual people, different from herself, try out a new persona. But trashy?

The interview had also been her mother's idea. She had said to her, "It is time to begin. You cannot remain poised on the edge of things, you must dive."

But there had been a problem about the pool. There was not much of one available. Or to put it another way, there wasn't very much water in it. She had wanted to make her mark, but didn't want that mark to be in the middle of her forehead.

When she had told her mother about the business of the fish, her mother had frowned thoughtfully. "Don't let's be taken advantage of," she had said. "We have to learn to look out for ourselves."

When her mother had said this, she had laughed aloud. The idea that she was being taken advantage of by Mr. Boss seemed somehow both so improbable and pathetic that she didn't know how to respond.

Anyway, she had been nervous. Why shouldn't she have been? The office had all the trappings of importance. Glass partitions. A hum in the air. Modern equipment. A gigantic clock over Mr. Boss' desk. She should have known better.

He had asked her about her experience. They had discussed the weather. He fingered a small object on his desk, a curiosity of some sort. He had not discussed the particulars, which should have made her suspicious. She had asked about her duties.

"I will trust you to take care of me," he said. That was when she really should have been alerted that something was amiss. "In my previous employments — and indeed for much of my life, I have not been well taken care of."

She hadn't said anything. Another mistake. There had been five minutes of silence by Mr. Boss' loudly ticking clock. She kept murmuring to herself, unusual people, different from herself. Finally, she had stood up and walked out of his office and sat down in the seat she was to occupy if she took the job, as if in a trance.

She was not stupid. She was being paid of course. The next morning, a Mrs. Axelrod had appeared, with the necessary forms for her to fill out.

"You are the New One?" she asked, as if that were to be her formal title. Mrs. Axelrod had a bland and unseeing gaze. That is, it was as if she could not or did not care to see her.

“Miss Granger,” she said, pronouncing her name as if it were French. “You will have no doubt guessed that the position you have accepted is unusual.”

It developed that this statement was rhetorical.

“I had gathered that,” she said, uncertainly.

“Perhaps it would be prudent of you to ask questions.”

“What is our business?” she asked, straining against the feeling that this was inappropriately inquisitive.

Mrs. Axelrod took a deep breath. “We are in the business of — “ she paused. “Let me put it another way....”

At length she had gleaned nearly nothing from their conversation, other than the insistent instruction that she should answer the phones and if a letter needed dictating she should be prepared to receive it. She was proficient enough at the bare particulars of the job — typing, phone etiquette — to feel that she could wing it until the job explained itself. Now time had passed and that had not happened. One took a job, but one also joined a company. One was given a role, an understanding of the general purpose, a hand in one’s own fate. Otherwise, how was she any different than Mr. Fish? An ornament in her own glass-enclosed case with fish food sprinkled on her six times a quarter. She needed to feel part of a team — she needed to be inspired — or if not inspired, at least included. That was it.

She wanted to be a Mr. Fish — Hamilton Fish — for someone herself. She had studied Hamilton Fish as part of a course in politics in college. He had been the absolute best of secretaries — of state. Ulysses S. Grant had trusted his advice above all others.

Her affection for the Secretary, for political history, had been what had inspired her mother to suggest “practical” employment. She referred to her as “My daughter the Mayor,” and “My daughter the Historian,” in obvious tones of maternal derision. Anticipating this maternal doubt, she had also acquired typing skills in college — and yet the self-referential joke of naming Mr. Fish, Mr. Fish, could on occasion fill her with melancholy. Keeping him happy, in a sense, was like keeping a side of herself happy. There was a wider pool out there for her still, she could believe, if she desired to dive into it.

Work did materialize. In flurries. Their job seemed to be to decline proposals. These refusals required specific, rather florid wording. She took to thinking of their department as the Department of Remorse. Ten or fifteen times a day she was to type a letter that began, “We regret....” What we regretted changed from letter to letter as did the given reasons, but the gist was, invariably, that the company wished it had the

vision, the capacity, the cash flow to make the recipient's ingenious idea a reality. If one read the letters' meaning literally, the fact that the recipient's idea, of such significant worthiness, imagination, innovation, and invention, did not fit with the company's current ventures, appeared to imply that the company's ventures were by comparison rather quotidian. At first she felt her letters must be the culmination of concerted discussions and assessments that only at the very end had gone against funding the recipient's idea. After some time, she gleaned that this was not the case. In fact, the ideas were being refused out of hand, not as the result of lengthy and deliberate consideration. The only care the company was taking was in the refusal. Refusing appeared to be Mr. Boss' entire *raison d'être*. Perhaps the recipients of the notes were well to do. Family. Children of the well-to-do. Politicians. Decision makers who might influence the outcome of matters of concern to the company. But the ideas were never seriously considered. And the letters never varied in the degree of remorse they offered. Indeed, if theirs was the Department of Remorse it was remorse of a rather shallow variety.

Still, she sometimes imagined the recipients of her missives, sitting in lonely rooms somewhere, eyes gleaming in expectation. This made her sad and slightly curious. She wondered what it would be like to have ideas. To think of things others had not thought of before and to have the ideas be so pressing that she was moved to suggest them to large corporations with at least some reason to believe they might be considered. What might she invent? The idea of this made her smile to herself; which, in turn, she thought, made Mr. Fish awaken, turn a quick cartwheel and jump again. Really, she was happy to have Mr. Fish. He helped her through her days.

Which was more than she could say for Mr. Boss. How little it would take, really, for him to unburden himself. Asking for help — especially from the person whose job it was to help you — was such a simple act. Why was it so difficult?

It was getting on for two now. She had nearly completed the small pile of correspondence she had been given for the day. She prided herself on being a hard worker. Working like this made no sense to her. She was a person who preferred to at least understand the big picture. To grab ahold. To understand the full scope of the work and come up with ways to organize it, control it. This approach felt nerve wracking — torturous. She had no idea, from hour to hour, morning till afternoon, of when she would have to expend energy and when she would not. As there were never any visitors, there was almost no variety to the day. Even the weather was uninteresting.

For the ensuing six days, Mrs. Boss appeared at just the same hour. And Mr. Boss would materialize moments after Mrs. Boss did as if he had been watching his oversized clock. They did not lunch as long as they had that first day. They returned as

mute as they had left. But on the seventh day, Mr. Boss did not come out to meet his wife. When it was clear this was not an oversight — he was on a phone call which he made no signs of intending to finish — Mrs. Boss asked for a piece of paper and composed a note, which she folded and placed, rather pointedly, under a corner of Mr. Fish's bowl, dislodging a solitary drop of water, which fell on the folded missive, creating a gradually expanding blot.

An hour later, Mr. Boss called her into his office.

“Sit down,” he offered.

She sat down.

“Ms. Granger, I hope I'm not inconveniencing you, but I must ask that you stay late tonight.”

“Of course,” she replied, with what she hoped was an appropriate level of interest.

“Thank you,” he said. “Your enthusiasm is appreciated.”

“Sir, may I ask why?”

“You certainly may.”

She waited a moment. “Is there an important project?”

“There may be, Ms. Granger,” he said with what she would have to say was uncharacteristic enthusiasm. His right leg bounced and he kept looking about him.

“There may?”

“Ms. Granger, I am not in a position of much power. I do not have the purview I hoped to have at this stage in my career. To be honest, I had expected more, much more. I would prefer to be able to predict what our activities will be from day to day. That I cannot is, I assure you, as unsettling to me as it must be to you. I have dreams, Ms. Granger, as I imagine you do too. We both have lives. Spending a Thursday afternoon into evening waiting for the phone to ring is not usually how I want to spend mine. And yet...” his eyes veritably twinkled briefly, then resumed their previous opacity.

This, indeed, turned out to be the schedule. As she always did, she made the most of it. She took the opportunity to become more extensively acquainted with the hallway and as a result, the company's most proximate functions. If she had been visible to her mother, right at that moment, she would have emphasized the fact that her curiosity indicated that she was a person who liked to learn — absorb facts. Just meeting new people was not the only answer, not the only way for a person to widen.

Each of the doors bore a number. The numbers were all odd. None were higher than ten. They were in room nine. Rooms 1 and 3 appeared to be large typing pools staffed entirely by persons wearing headsets. Room 5 was much like her own but with magazines spread neatly across a low table and a selection of chairs, two of which were occupied. Room 7 was a curiosity. It was not accurate to say it was a room. It had a glass door with a number 7 on it opening onto a long hallway with a blue rug leading into the distance. Down the hall, it was not possible to see any evidence of human activity.

At about 10 p.m., a cleaning lady materialized down the hall going about her rounds. She was preceded by the sound of tinny music — a love song of some sort? — emanating from a radio on her cart and the faint squeak her wheels made as she inched forward along the hallway. She found the sound distracting and then mesmerizing. It buzzed near and far like an alighting bee, like the sound of approaching menace in a movie. Bzz, bzz, squeak! Plink! She felt a splash of water hit her face. She opened her eyes. Had she been dozing? She stood up. There appeared to be no one in Mr. Boss' office. Perhaps he had gone out to get them both dinner. Perhaps her fairy godmother would come and take her to a ball. It was midnight or it was later. For some reason her eyes wouldn't focus on the clock in Mr. Boss's office or perhaps the clock itself had gone fuzzy. The door opened. The cleaning woman entered.

“Clean?” she asked.

“Sure,” she said.

She stumbled out into the hallway and went home..

The next morning she arrived half an hour late to find the hum was back in the office. Mr. Boss was talking on the telephone. Mr. Fish? His bowl was empty. The note had been left open on her desk: it had a crease across the middle and “Had to go” written in a fishy scrawl. Next to it, separated by three drops of water, liquid ellipses, was the tiny carcass of Mr. Fish, who had jumped his last jump.

All at once she was filled with a kind of self-righteous anger. She was angry on behalf of Mr. Fish. It was wrong that a fish should die simply because a man had lost track of his calendar.

“You need to stand up for yourself,” she said, walking into Mr. Boss' office, where in fact he was as always sitting down.

Mr. Boss muttered something incoherent.

“Stand up!” she said.

Mr. Boss obliged. They stood staring at each other. “What were we waiting for? All that time?” she asked, frustratedly.

Mr. Boss looked at his hands. “I don’t know what happened,” he said. “They told me this was going to be the one.”

“The one?”

“An idea — an idea such as we had never seen — one that really, really might have provided the answer — an idea with promise. It was thought that the corporation might in fact finally give the green light — say yes — do what was necessary. Instead, I was betrayed. A matter of internal politics. Someone who let us say does not have my best interests at heart. Does not want me to succeed. Derailed me. It — the derauling — prevented the idea from coming to fruition, derailed our fruit-ing it, to be exact.”

“THAT IS NOT EXACT!” she said, unable to think of anything else to say. “Fruit-ing is not a word.”

“Miss Granger, I share your frustration,” he said. “I believed this was going to be the opportunity by which I would be able to emerge victorious. When I heard the news, I said to them, ‘At long last.’ They wondered if I would be able to endure a little inconvenience. And I said I was willing and I volunteered you as well because I believed you would too. I was perhaps overly enthusiastic, but it is my experience that one must give the impression of full willingness at all times. To not do so might be to give the wrong impression.”

“But had you any reason to expect anything different than what had happened in the past? What if this whole thing is just a farce? The only part of it that is real is my fish?”

“Your fish, Miss Granger?” he replied, tartly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, immediately.

He looked down at his desk. “No, it’s all right. It’s important to take ownership of one’s job.”

“I felt like he was mine,” she said, in a small voice. “I even named him.”

He looked at her with something like benevolence and then stood up and went to the window and looked up and out. She followed his gaze. His office surveyed a tiny and not particularly pleasant swathe of wall. Above was an anemic swatch of sky.

“Do you ever feel that we are marionettes on a string?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

“Try to look at it differently than it seems. Perhaps what we do here is not our main purpose, here in this room. Perhaps it is something completely different. Perhaps we are acting out a kind of play....”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” she said. “What did they tell you?”

Mr. Boss sat back down at his desk heavily. “This is a family business. And the family that owns it is my wife’s. I am here because my wife’s family felt it would be useful for me to — how did they put it — get out in the world a bit. Meet unusual people. I did not welcome this appointment....”

He went on for a time. His words folded into the disappointing morning. When she tried to explain the scene to her mother later she was unable to remember much of what he’d said. “Well, you gave it a try,” her mother allowed. “At least you gave it a try.”

Many years later, as an adjunct professor at a small university across town, lecturing on secretaries of state, she ended up near the old office around lunchtime and went into the restaurant that had been her favorite. When she emerged feeling bloated once more, she saw Mr. Boss on a street corner looking forlorn and a bit bedraggled. “She left me,” he said. “Or threw me out and here I am, on the street.”

She thought about the ways she had imagined him. The life she had invented looking in on his. “I hope you survived our little experience,” he said, apologetically.

“I made an excellent friend,” she replied.

Genre: Fiction

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Jonathan Sapers is a writer living in New York City. This is his eighteenth published short story. His stories have also appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Confrontation*, *Construction*, *Eclectica*, *Northwest Review* and *Raritan* among others. He has just finished a novel, about summer houses and memory, set in a small town in the Canadian maritimes.

Issue:

62

Navigation

[Home](#)
[Search](#)

[Submit content](#)

[Editorial board](#)

[Browse content by month](#)
[Browse all news](#)

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