

THE FERN, THE FISH, AND THE FAILED

A (magical realism) play in two acts

by

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Cast of Characters

THE FERN (FERNICE): Age N/A (voiced by an adult female)

THE GOLDFISH (GOLDY): Age N/A (voiced by an adult male)

JULIAN JONES (J.J.): 57-year-old retired on disability

MARY BURNS (MARY): 61-year-old live-in life partner

Place

An apartment in Los Angeles

Time

Present

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: A living room furnished with a couch, a coffee table, a T.V. set, are located on CENTER STAGE. Farther to the right there is a desk with a computer on it and a chair. Next to the desk, a wooden stand supports a potted fern. UP CENTER, a painted image of a large window with the sketch of overlapping freeway ramps against a dark gray background. UP RIGHT next to the window is the apartment entry door. UP LEFT a corridor/ramp leads to the rest of the apartment offstage not visible to the audience.

(After a brief moment of darkness, the spotlight fades in on the fern. A few seconds later, the lights fade in on the stage while the spotlight fades out on the fern as the focus switches to Julian Jones slouching on the couch watching T.V. with a beer can in one hand and the remote control in the other)

T.V. Breaking news! A threatening military alliance comprising of our most formidable enemies was established today in Beijing at 12:00 pm GMT. An emergency meeting has been scheduled at the White House to discuss the alliance's statement assuring a no holds barred nuclear weapons policy. In the face of this imminent danger to our national security, a Pentagon official said...

J.J. *(Turns off the T.V. then speaks to himself)* As if they didn't see this coming. *(Stands up and limps to the window UC where he stays silently looking outside for a few seconds before speaking out loud)* Look at those dark clouds! Or is it smog? Either way, it doesn't look good out there. *(Pauses)* We're in for nasty weather alright. The Sun may shine bright up above, but down here on Earth we live in the shadows of nuclear wars and climate catastrophes. Even in this so called city of angels it's a living hell. *(Pauses)* City of angels my ass! In L.A. we're all hell's angels, whether we ride motorcycles or not. *(Pauses)* What a mess! And just now they decide to hold emergency meetings. They should have held emergency meetings decades ago before

we reached the point of no return. Now it's too late.
(Pauses) And Mary wonders why I drink so much.

(Limps to the desk where he sits down while checking the computer for a few seconds until his cell phone rings on the coffee table. Stands up to answer it)

J.J. Hello, this is Julian Jones *(hangs up immediately looking agape toward the audience. Phone rings again a few seconds later and he picks it up)*. Listen, I've already talked to your collection department last week. I spoke with...oh jeez, what's his name... oh yes, Mark, Mark Pierce, I think, I wrote his name down somewhere. *(Pauses)* Yes, yes, I know, but we didn't discuss any payment plan and we... *(Pauses)* No, no, I'm afraid you don't have the correct information. We never talked about a payment plan and much less a deadline. *(Pauses longer)* Hear me out for a moment, will you? There is absolutely no way I'll be able to come up with the first payment by next month. *(Pauses)* Sure, that would be more reasonable. We can work out a long-term payment plan, as long as the first payment doesn't start next month. *(Pauses)* O.K..., O.K., I'll wait to hear from you again by early next month. Thank you.

(Paces about the living room with a concerned expression before limping back to the desk)

J.J. Shit! What am I going to do now? *(Slumps over the desk with his head buried under his crossed arms for a moment before raising his head while addressing the fern)* Look at you; you sit pretty all day doing nothing and have all your needs met. *(Pauses staring at it)* You occupy a small space, take water every other day, and suck bare minimum air out of this place without a care in the world. *(Pauses)* You're a lucky green living thing, and you're probably much better off than the rest of us. *(Sighs deeply and moves to the couch)*

(After a few seconds, Mary Burns enters through the door UR with a small round fishbowl in hand)

MARY Oh boy, what a terribly rough day I had!

J.J. *(Disregards her comment)* What's that in your hand?

MARY (*Disregards his question*) We need to talk. I don't know how we're going to make this work.

J.J. (*Insists on getting an answer*) What the hell is that in your hand?

MARY (*Irritated*) I just told you that I had a rough day and that we need to talk and all you want to know is what's in my hand?

J.J. Yes, let's start the talk with that.

MARY (*Walks to the desk and places the fishbowl down on it*) Isn't it obvious?

J.J. Looks like a fishbowl to me. Why the hell you got a fishbowl for?

MARY I didn't get a fishbowl you dimwit. I got a goldfish and the fishbowl comes with it. Where else do you expect a goldfish to live?

J.J. And why the hell you got a goldfish for?

MARY (*Exasperated*) Please J.J., knock it off. I had a terribly stressful day and we need to talk. It's very important.

J.J. Sure we can talk, but why the hell you got a goldfish for?

MARY (*On the verge of crying*) I had a very, very rough day and you're not listening to me.

J.J. And what a goldfish has anything to do with you having a rough day?

MARY I left the office feeling extremely stressed out. So when I was walking on Main Street by the pet store, I thought I could use a service pet.

J.J. And since when goldfishes became service pets?

MARY (*Looks at him defiantly*) The moment I decided it was the right service pet for me.

J.J. Just like that?

MARY Yes, just like that. As soon as I walked in the store it was the first thing I saw; right there on the center table staring at me puckering up its lips (*puckers her lips*) as if begging me to take it home. I just couldn't resist it. It was like love at first sight. After zeroing in on it, I knew I had to bring it home with me. (*Pauses while J.J. stares at her with a frown*) I wonder what you'd say had I brought a dog home.

J.J. The landlord doesn't allow dogs in his property.

MARY That's why I brought a goldfish instead.

J.J. But a goldfish makes no sense. How in the world can a goldfish be a service pet?

MARY (*Sighs*) Please J.J., I beg you as the goldfish begged me to bring it home. We have much more important issues to discuss right now than my goldfish.

J.J. (*Glances at the desk*) Are you going to leave that bulgy-eyed creature on the desk?

MARY (*Sighs loudly and exits UL without saying a word*)

J.J. Where are you going?

MARY (*Doesn't reply. She comes back with a round wooden stand where she places the fishbowl on the opposite side of the desk where the fern is*) There! Does it work for you?

J.J. (*Pauses looking puzzled*) This stand looks familiar. Where did you get this from?

MARY It's been buried in the hallway closet since you broke my lovely China vase last year, remember?

J.J. Given the option, I'd rather not.

MARY This is the matching pair of the stand the fern is on. Now it's back to its original place, but with a fishbowl on it instead of my China vase you broke.

J.J. It's not like a broke the damn thing on purpose. It was an accident.

MARY Please, try not having another accident and be careful moving about near my fishbowl. *(Pauses)* Do you have any other irrelevant questions?

J.J. *(Speaks to himself without looking at her)* Still, a goldfish as service pet makes no sense at all.

(A moment of silence ensues while Mary aligns the fishbowl and the fern in symmetrical fashion across the desk)

MARY There! Now we have both fauna and flora in our own living room.

J.J. You're always bringing something home. First it was this stupid potted fern you bought in a garage sale.

MARY Estate sale.

J.J. Same thing with a fancy name. And now you get this damn goldfish; and as a service pet for crying out loud!

MARY You are so insensitive to my needs.

J.J. No, I'm insensitive to you bringing home all kinds of useless stuff you see out there in the world.

MARY A plant and a goldfish are not useless stuff; they're live beings.

J.J. *(Pauses)* Fauna and flora in our living room! What's next? Some sparkly stars and a crescent moon on the ceiling?

MARY *(Sits down on the couch next to him with a serious expression)* We need to talk.

J.J. *(Looks at her askance)* What now?

MARY *(Fidgety)* Something really bad happened today.

J.J. Yeah, you got a goldfish as a service pet.

MARY (*Stands up and starts pacing about*) Truth be told, I saw this coming some months ago. Since the recession started worsening and corporate profits plummeted, I knew changes were on the way. First there were the pay cuts, though the higher ups compensation package never changed. Then, there was...

J.J. (*Interjects*) Cut to the chase, will you?

MARY (*Wrings her hands while moving back and forth*) Well..., you know, I've been in my administrative position for almost 20 years. I've been a dedicated employee and I've always been very good at my job and...

J.J. (*Interjects*) If you keep on beating around the bush, I'm the one who's going to need a service pet.

MARY (*Stops pacing then looks at him before speaking abruptly*) I was fired. I no longer have a job.

J.J. (*Jolts upright*) What?

MARY (*Stares at him*) You heard it. I've been dismissed cold turkey with a three-month pay severance package. After that I will no longer have an income or medical insurance.

J.J. (*Antsy*) You know that we cannot live on my disability benefit money alone.

MARY They fired me. What do you want me to do?

J.J. Find another job.

MARY (*Sarcastic*) Sure, what about tomorrow? (*Pauses*) You've been out of the workforce since you retired some five years ago on a disability claim for a questionable workplace accident.

J.J. (*Defensive*) There was nothing questionable about it. I fell hard and injured my leg on the job.

MARY A leg that was already compromised by a car accident a few years back.

J.J. Yeah, but I didn't walk with a limp before the workplace accident.

MARY In any case, you have no idea what's like out there in the employment marketplace jungle these days. There are more people lining up in the unemployment department than cars in a gridlock rush hour on the 405 freeway.

J.J. It's hard to picture any human crowd matching a freeway gridlock.

MARY What do you think are the odds of a 61-year-old woman to get a job competing with young entry level applicants in the middle of an economic recession? *(Pauses)* Do you understand now why I needed a service pet?

J.J. *(Pauses)* Damn! Forget about having a rough day. I'm beginning to dread a rough year ahead. Without your income, we won't be able to make ends meet.

MARY I'm going to file for unemployment benefits right away. In a few months we'll figure something out.

J.J. You think so?

Mary I know so.

J.J. I wish I could be as optimistic as you are.

MARY You could start by not being so pessimistic.

J.J. It's hard not to be pessimistic when bad news is what you hear all day long.

MARY Then stop listening to the news.

J.J. And now that you tell me you're out of work, it reminds me that I heard on the news that because of the prolonged economic recession, the unemployment insurance may run out of funds soon.

MARY They've been saying the same about Social Security for years; and yet, you're still collecting your disability benefits every month. Besides, we still have some money in our emergency savings account that you've been managing.

J.J. *(Discombobulated)* Oh yeah..., the emergency savings account.

MARY (*Skeptical*) It almost sounds like you forgot about it.

J.J. Of course not!

MARY (*Pauses*) And by the way, what's the current balance in the account?

J.J. I don't know... exactly from the top of my head. I need to check to make sure what the correct amount is.

MARY It should be close to ten grand by now with the accrued interests over the years.

J.J. Yeah..., it sounds about right. (*Changes the subject swiftly*) But now we have more pressing issues to deal with. We need to figure out what we're going to do next.

MARY In the worst case scenario, I'll get a domestic job cleaning the houses of the hoity-toity uptown.

J.J. A domestic job? C'mon Mary, you're an educated woman with a college degree.

MARY You have a college degree, too; and yet... (*Pauses*) Besides, I won't be the first, the only, or the last maid with a college degree in the country.

J.J. (*Mumbles*) A domestic job!

MARY We'll do whatever it takes to keep our heads above water.

J.J. I hope so. I don't know how to swim in an economic swamp. (*Pauses*) Sometimes I feel like I'm already drowning.

MARY Listen, we've been living together for almost a decade now. We've had our share of challenges and we've overcome every single one of them. This will be just another feather to add to our resilience cap.

J.J. (*Dejected*) I wish I could be like you, Mary; strong, courageous, and determined to overcome whatever challenges come your way. (*Pauses*) I'm lucky to have you in my life.

MARY (*Gives him a hug*) Alright, let's get out of this funky mood and get something good going here. (*Pauses*) I'll tell what: I'm going to prepare some yummy dinner we can eat while watching some brainless T.V. sitcom to distract our minds, then we go to sleep, and tomorrow will be another day. What do you say?

J.J. (*In jest*) Can I have the goldfish as appetizer?

MARY Ha, ha, ha, very funny. (*Exits UL*)

J.J. (*Paces about the living room talking to himself*) Oh boy, what a hot potato to juggle! Eventually, I'm going to have to tell Mary about the savings account. (*Pauses*) I wonder what she'll do when she learns what happened to it. (*Pauses*) She'll probably leave me like my first wife did. (*Pauses looking terrified*) I don't even want to think about it. I don't know what I'd do without her in my life.

MARY (*Speaks from offstage*) I can't find the oregano container. Where did you put it?

J.J. It's on the second shelf of the cabinet to the left of the stove.

MARY (*After a few seconds*) Got it!

J.J. (*Sits at the desk and talks to the goldfish*) Look at your miserable existence. You got fins to swim freely and far and yet you're imprisoned in a small round glass jail. You move back and forth all day in a vicious cycle of futility that leads you nowhere no matter how fast you go. (*Pauses*) You are cursed by your good looks. If you were an ugly creature, no one would want to lock you up in a round water prison bowl just to make a service pet out of you. I guess beauty can be a double-edged sword. (*Pauses*) No wonder they don't keep creepy-looking crabs in aquariums.

MARY (*Speaks from offstage*) Would you like some pepper on your salad?

J.J. Salad? I thought you said you were going to fix a yummy dinner. I was thinking more like a bloody rare New York steak and a baked potato with the works.

MARY (*Enters from UL*) Unless you want to splurge money we don't have to spare and run to the grocery store to get us some steaks, we're having Sloppy Joe with salad.

J.J. Sloppy Joe with salad it is; and no pepper on the leafy stuff, please.

(*Mary exits UL and J.J. resumes his interaction with the goldfish*)

J.J. I bet Sloppy Joe is much better than the flaky stuff you munch on. On the other hand, you don't have to pay for food, or rent, utilities, and all sorts of bills that show up regularly like the living nightmares I have about my accumulating debt. (*Pauses*) You may be locked in a filled-with-water glass prison, but you have no idea what is like to be an indentured servant to debt. (*Turns toward the fern*) But like this plant, you're both almost certainly better off than the rest of us people. You don't worry about economic recession, unemployment, ecological collapse, nuclear war, or even get to regret about unfulfilled dreams and the disappointments you carry in your broken heart.

MARY (*Enters from UL*) Did I hear you talking?

J.J. I was just thinking out loud.

MARY Thinking about what?

J.J. Nothing really important.

MARY (*Skeptical*) And why are you sitting at the desk instead of being on the couch watching T.V.?

J.J. I was checking something on the computer.

MARY And thinking out loud at the same time?

J.J. (*Dismisses the question*) Is dinner ready yet?

MARY It would be if you were in the kitchen helping me.

J.J. I'll wash the dishes.

MARY You mean load the dishwasher.

J.J. That's how the dishes get washed, isn't it?

MARY (*Exits UL*) Whatever.

(*J.J. moves to the couch with remote control in hand and starts switching channels*)

T.V. We guarantee you'll lose at least 15 pounds in a month with this new revolutionary weight loss pill... (*switches channel*); talk to your doctor to learn more about "depressless" to find out if it's the right medication for you; side effects may include heart congestion, kidney failure, stroke, suicidal thoughts... (*switches channel*); the axis of evil established a military alliance today that significantly heightens the threat of nuclear war... (*switches channel*); you can now buy the new Road Rage King Cab V8 Truck for only \$999 a month with no money down... (*switches channel*); for the cost of a cup of coffee a day you can help feed an impoverished child in America, send your donation today by calling toll free 1-800... (*switches channel*); the weather forecast for tomorrow is a scorcher with temperatures expected to reach 112 degrees by noon with high humidity and elevated smog levels... (*switches channel*); don't watch the football game tonight before downloading "Gridiron Winner" sports app for a chance to win \$500 on a \$10 dollar bet...

J.J. (*Turns off the T.V. and looks toward the audience with a perplexed expression*) Shit! And to think that I spend a lot of my time consuming all this garbage. (*Pauses*) My brain must be limping harder than my legs. (*Stands up and moves toward the window. After a brief moment of silence gazing out, he calls out to Mary*) Mary!

MARY (*Replies from offstage*) What?

J.J. There's nothing worth watching on T.V. tonight. What if we have dinner at the kitchen table and just talk about some lighthearted stuff?

MARY Sounds good to me. In fact, dinner is just about ready. Why don't you come over?

J.J. I'm coming.

(*Lights fade out as he exits UL*)

