

### **An excerpt from *Fish***

I dream often, these days, and primarily of fish. A quiet night, the sea still and unremarkable above, but underneath thousands of bodies welling up, who knows how many really, so thick and fast the sea turns silver, almost the colour of a bullet. Thousands of bodies, perhaps millions. All so taut with movement that even though there is no light when they turn the curves of their bodies glimmer.

A co-worker told me that you dream about what you are thinking of before you fall asleep, but in truth I have no cause to dream of fish. Are there this many fish left in our waters? In all the oceans, even? I keep reading that the fish are disappearing from the world, so I doubt it.

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This is something that flashes through my mind when Aaron asks me, over dinner, if animals feel pain.

“That’s a funny question,” Faye says. “Why do you ask?”

Aaron pokes at his chicken and shrugs. “I’m just asking. It’s kind of a natural question to ask, isn’t it?”

“You’re not turning vegetarian, are you?” Faye says, and laughs. But Aaron’s question has got me thinking. “It’s a difficult question,” I say. Faye reaches out and touches the back of my forearm, lightly. “Honey,” she says.

I put my hand on top of hers. “I mean, how do we know if any other person feels pain? You can’t actually feel what any other person feels.”

I watch Aaron as he uses his fork to push rice onto his spoon. “P-zombies”, he says.

“What?” I say.

“You’ve gotten him started”, Faye says.

“A philosophical zombie. We were discussing it in class today. It’s physically identical to a human, acts exactly like one, but doesn’t actually have consciousness. It does not experience anything, it’s like a machine.”

“What’s that meant to show?” Faye asks.

“What I think,” Aaron says, “is that it doesn’t matter. Because it doesn’t matter if I don’t know if you really have conscious experience. It’s good enough that you act like you have it. I mean, p-zombies are a silly idea.”

There is something thrilling to it, when Aaron turns contemptuous. “Have you caught a fish on a line before? Uncle Michael used to do it. Those things really struggled. They really looked like they felt it.”

“Maybe,” Aaron says. The way he says it makes me think I’ve made some kind of mistake, that he regards this as a wrong turn in the conversation.

Later that evening, out of curiosity, I idle through some websites discussing animal cognition. It turns out to be a very complicated topic. This is when Faye opens the door of the study and says, “You’ve got to be careful.” “I know,” I say. “I’m careful.”