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The Little Fish

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When I came home from school, Grandma was sitting in her favorite chair. She was reading a book. I opened my backpack and took out a piece of paper my teacher had given everyone in class today. I got her attention. “Grandma?” She looked up at me and put her book on her lap. “Grandma, for my class I have to ask someone about an important event they remember. Can I ask you?”

In the deep blue ocean was a bright, colorful reef. All sorts of families lived in the reef. There were blue fish and yellow fish, fish with spots and fish with long, thin fins. And then there was me, just a Little Fish. I lived with my parents in the reef. I didn’t have stripes or a long tail fin. I didn’t think there was anything special about me—except that I talked with my fins. In the reef, some fish talked with their mouths and some fish like me and my family talked with their fins. I didn’t know why. So I asked my mother one day, “Mama? Why aren’t the others like us?”

My mother smiled at me. “Who isn’t like us, Little One?”

“The Ros-the Ros-“ The name was just so long!

My mother patted my head. “Our neighbors the Rosenbergs? Do you mean why they talk out of their mouths?” I nodded. My mother was so smart!

“Some fish are big, some are small. Some fish are red, and some are purple with white spots. Some fish talk with their mouths, and some fish talk with their fins.”

Of course! All fish are different, that is what makes the ocean so colorful and pretty.
Outside the sun was shining down through the water, and I played all day long. I saw my friend the Baker and said hello. He talked with his fins too, and he gave me a muffin. Then I saw my neighbor Mrs. Edelman. She was a big green fish, and when she talked her face wobbled. I waved and she wobbled back at me. I didn’t know what she was saying because she didn’t use her fins to talk, but she smiled at me and then swam back into the coral.

I love our reef. I love playing in coral and tumbling through the seaweed. I love meeting all the new fish when they move in, and making all sorts of new friends.
One day my mother and father and I were swimming. "Papa, where are all the little fish?"

"What do you mean, Little One?" He asked me. I looked around and saw big fish and blue fish and striped fish, but there weren't any little fish.

"Where are the little fish?" I asked, "Where are the fish like me?"

My mother told me, "You are the littlest fish. You are the only little fish we need."

"But who will I play with?" Even a very little fish needs friends.
My father waggled his tail fin. "You can play with me, Little One. I'll race you to that rock!" And off he swam, but I was faster. I swam to the big rock and then I wanted to swim even more. I love swimming. My parents were a little out of breath when they caught up with me and I laughed.

"I'm the fastest!" I said, and they agreed with me.
It was a cloudy day, so the water was cold to swim in. I wanted to go out and play in the reef to get warmer, but my mother made me promise not to leave the coral. “Why mama?” I asked. “I’ll let you keep up with me.” But she didn’t answer. She glanced out from behind the coral. I swam beside her and looked out too.

Out in the water there were great big ugly fish. They were swimming all around the reef. Were they moving in? “Look Mama! That one is like us!” He didn’t really look like us, but his fins were twitching at his side like he wanted to talk. “We should go say ‘hi’ to them.” I said to my mother.

“No, Little One.” She said, and she made me promise not to go over to say hello to our new neighbors. My mother said they didn’t want to talk, but they were talking to each other.
What was wrong with these strange fish? Why didn’t they want to make new friends? I watched them as they put a sign in the middle of the reef. I wanted to know what it said, but little fish can’t read well yet. Sounding through the big words was hard. “Mama, what does that sign say?”

“It says that all the green fish have to wear special hats all of the time.” My mother said. I looked back at the sign. I wanted to read it for myself.

“That’s weird. Why should they have to wear hats?”

My mother was still looking at the sign. “So that everyone will know they are Green Fish.” She looked at me. “It also says that we have to talk with our mouths now.”

“But why? I like talking with my fins.” I said, “I don’t understand when people talk with their mouths.”

My mother looked sad. “You have to try, Little One. We all have to try to do as they say.”
Hats required to be worn on ALL green fish and talking with fins is strictly PROHIBITED!
The ugly fish? Why should we do what they say? I asked my mother, and she told me the ugly fish are in charge, and we have to obey them.

Then my father came home, and Mrs. Brenner was with him. She was a green fish, but she talked with her fins like we did. "Hello Mrs. Brenner." I said, just like my mother had taught me.

"Hello dear, how are you?" She asked me.

I thought for a moment and then said, "I'm very confused. Do we really have to try to talk with our mouths now?"

"Yes, Little One. We have to try." My father sounded very serious. "This is crazy!" Mrs. Brenner said. "We can't just change who we are!" She swam around angrily, her short tail fin flipping back and forth.

"We have to try to follow these new rules." My father said to me.
I tried to talk without using my fins. I moved my mouth just like the others, but it didn’t make any sense. How can you speak to someone just by moving your mouth around? I tried again and again, but if I needed to say something it was just so much easier to use my fins. Flopping lips was just a silly idea. Talking with my mouth wasn’t natural. I talked with my fins. That’s who I was.
It wasn’t long before some of our neighbors started to move away. A fat green fish and his wife left while I was asleep. Then a blue fish with black spots who used her fins like us left. A few days later Mrs. Edelman, who wobbled when she talked, moved away. The next morning I asked my parents why they had all moved. Didn’t they like living here? “There are other reefs. The ocean is a big place.” My father said. I asked him if we were going to move away too.

He didn’t answer for a long time. Maybe he didn’t see me asking, so I repeated myself. “Are we moving too?”

My father looked sad. “Yes, I think so.” I didn’t have to ask why he looked so sad. I was sad too. I liked our home, it was so colorful and fun to play around. Would other reefs be as nice? I didn’t know.
It was bedtime when my mother came to get me. “Wake up, Little One.” She told me. “It’s time for us to go now.”

“Now?” I asked. I was so tired. “But I’m going to bed now.” She made me get out of bed and we swam outside. We weren’t the only fish moving. I saw green fish huddle together, and an orange and purple fish with uneven fins, and some fish that talked with their fins. Even Mrs. Brenner was there. But now no one was talking. In front of this group of fish were three of the big ugly fish. “What are they doing here?” I asked my mother. She told me to stay quiet.
One of the ugly fish started coming towards us. It was the little one that used his fins like us. "What's happening?" I asked him.

"Please be quiet, Little One." My mother said to me, then she turned to the ugly fish and her mouth started moving. I watched her, trying to understand what she was saying. But I couldn't.

"Mama? Mama, what are you saying?" She didn't answer, but the ugly fish looked at me.

"Everything is alright." He told me that we were all going to move together to a new reef, and I didn't have to worry about anything. My mother didn't look happy, but I was relieved that someone was finally talking to me. I thanked him and he swam back to the front of the group, where his lips waggled as he talked to the other ugly fish.
We swam for a long time. When I got tired my father would carry me. I thought we would never get there, and when I asked Mrs. Brenner if she knew where we were going, she didn’t answer me. Finally everyone stopped moving. I looked around and frowned. This looked nothing like home. It was dirty and dull. There was no color, just a strange ugly reef.

"Is this our new home?" I asked, but no one answered me.

I didn’t like the new reef. No one wanted to play any games, and I was hungry. It was so crowded that sometimes I had no room to swim at all. Everyday I wanted to go back home to our reef, but my father said we had to stay here.
One morning I woke up and my mother looked very sad. "What's wrong Mama?" I looked around. "Where's Papa?"

Her fins shook a little bit. "Your father is sick, Little One. He had to go see a doctor." I told her that was weird because I didn't remember my father ever being sick. She threw her fins around me and hugged me tightly. I wanted to ask her when he would come back, but my fins were stuck between us.
It was a groggy morning when the ugly fish came again. The big ones talked with their mouths and I didn’t understand them. The little one swam up next to them and told us that we all needed to go with them to a new reef. He kept talking but I couldn’t see him because my mother had pulled me behind a big fat blue fish. She started talking so fast, I barely understood. “When they take us outside, you need to swim away.” She looked strange, her eyes shiny. “You must swim away as fast as you can.”

I didn’t know why, but my throat started to burn. I swallowed, but that didn’t make it stop. “I don’t understand, Mama. Where are we swimming to?”

She shook a little bit. “You need to listen to me, Little One. You have to swim far away, as fast as you possibly can. I know you can do it. You can’t worry about me.”

I was scared. “No! I am not going to go anywhere without you.”

She looked around us. “Please, Little One. You have to do what I say. You have to swim away, and don’t look back.”

The ugly fish were leading everyone out of the reef. We slowly made our way out. My mother looked at me with wide eyes. “I love you so much, my Little One. Now swim!”
I didn’t know which way to swim, but I started swimming. I kept swimming, and I didn’t look back. I swam as fast as I could and I didn’t stop even when my fins started to hurt. I swam when it was dark and I was still swimming when it was light again.

Finally I couldn’t swim anymore. I was so tired. I curled up in a patch of seaweed and I fell asleep.
When I woke up I was scared. There were strange fish around me. I wanted to swim away but I was so tired. They looked at me and started talking to me with their fins, but I couldn’t understand them. Their fins moved quickly, but it was so strange and different. Then a new fish swam up to me. I didn’t know who he was. He was small and grey, but he looked at me and started talking. He told me I was safe now, that they would all take care of me.
Grandma was quiet. Then she asked me what I thought of the story. “It was sad, Grandma.” I told her.

“Yes it was.” She said and touched her grey hair. “I think it’s almost your bedtime.”

She helped me brush my teeth and put on my pajamas and then she tucked me into bed. She went to turn off the light but I waved my arm to stop her. “Grandma, what was the Little Fish’s name?” I asked her.

“Ellie.”

I thought for a second. “Wait, Grandma. Isn’t your name Ellie?” She nodded. “Yes, yes it is. Now it is your bedtime, so I want you to go right to sleep.” And she turned off the light.