It’s time. I push open the rubbery casing of my egg. My brothers and sisters have already swum away; I see them in the distance. I guess I’m the runt. My tail’s crooked, so I can’t dart away from the nets of little humans as fast as my brothers and sisters can. But in the middle of the lake, I’m safe from nets. No human can catch me here. However, there are other dangers in the lake. Like the huge, wicked trout who prey on minnows like me. I need to watch out for them.

I survey my surroundings. Large rocks tower around the cave where Mother laid her eggs. In a gap between two of the rocks, I catch a glimpse of glowing eyes in the darkness. Help! A predator! I dart under a small rock, but my crooked tail slows me down. Ahh! The huge trout catches me its jaws, but before he can bite down, a humongous sturgeon swims into the egg-laying cave. It bites the trout on the tail, with evilly sharp fangs, making it drop me. I dart under the nearest rock. The sturgeon shoves its mouth under the rock, but it can’t reach me. It pushes harder, and the rock flips over with a shower of sand. I dart away, swishing my tail wildly. Crack! The crooked bone in my tail straightens. Ow! I feel a jolt of pain that stays with me for a long moment. The dust is clearing, so I dart away from the big fish, faster than before.

I swim closer to the surface of the water where I can see better. Then I head west, feeding on algae and bugs along the way. As I get nearer to the shore, I see many small schools of human young splashing in the shallows and digging in the sand on the beach. I swish my tail, propelling myself toward the shore. I drift to a halt as I reach the sand, looking for other young fish to play with.

Finally, I spot a small group of young fish playing in the shallows. They dart back and forth, flicking each other with their tails, nipping each other on their fins, hiding under rocks and in the shadows of big rocks, and playing Big-Fish-Little-Fish. I swim up to the biggest one and nip its fins, asking it if I can play. Ouch! It bites me
on the tail, saying “Play somewhere else!” Then I realize that I’ve nipped the wrong fish. I didn’t notice the
group of Watchers guarding the younger ones. Instead of asking the young fish to play, I had asked the
Watchers, who see to the young fish in return for food. I swim away, humiliated.

I see a stream of orange water trickling from the shore. I swim over to taste the strange water. Ouch!
Someone bites me on the tail. I whirl around, and I see a Watcher floating behind me. She flicks me on the
head with her tail, as if to say “You should not drink that water.” She waves her tail through the water around
us, saying “There is nothing growing near this water.” Then she pretends to drink the water and die, telling me
“this water is poisonous. Never eat human things.” I give her a blink of understanding, then swim away in
search of food.

I propel myself silently through the shallows, swimming toward the algae rocks, stopping only to check
my surroundings. Wait! I peer suspiciously toward the middle of the lake, looking for trout. Help! A little
human shoves me into its net. I wriggle helplessly, gasping for water, until the little human dumps me into a
bucket of water. Oh no! Where is the lake? Where is my home? Where is my food? I don’t know.

The human drops a fluffy white object into the bucket. It looks good to eat. Forgetting what the
watcher said about eating human things, I nibble it. The human screeches and some other little humans land
swim over to my bucket. They all screech, and they try to grab me. Swish! Flip! Splash! I swim around and
around the bucket, deftly avoiding being caught.

Eventually the humans leave and I nibble the fluffy white thing, which is now waterlogged. Mmm! It’s
much tastier than bitter algae or chewy bugs. I eat all that I can, then look for a rock to sleep under. But there
are no rocks in my bucket. I propel myself over to the fluffy white thing, and tuck myself into the bite mark
that I made. Oof! Tight squeeze! But when I slap the walls of my fluffy white-cave with my tail, it spreads out,
giving me more space to rest. I curl up, head-under-tail, and fall asleep.

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Help! My fluffy white cave is being lifted into the air, and I can’t breathe! A little human shakes me out of the cave and I land with a splash in the water. Ow! My stomach hurts and it’s hard to breathe. My scales feel hard. Why did I eat that fluffy white thing?

Help! It’s an earthquake! My bucket is swinging around. Then the bucket is dropped. Splash! The water sways like waves in the lake during a storm, then stops. Then it begins to move again, but in weird way like it’s on top of something moving. It’s much faster than before, but less bumpy. I settle down on the bottom of the bucket and fall asleep again.

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Oof! My muscles are sore from not sleeping under a rock. Yum! Someone tosses a fly into my bucket. Then they toss in some sand that turns the water a murky brown. After the sand settles, a large human hand places a rock on the sand. Then it tosses and handful of seaweed and a few scraps of algae into the water. Yay! I twist through the water, flapping my fins for joy. I nibble at the algae, but it’s bitter, so I settle for the fly. Crunch! I take a few nibbles then settle under the rock for a nap.

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I wake with a start. Something’s wrong! Oh! There are five young fish in the water beside me. One of them has her eyes shut and floats on her back. Her eyelids flutter. She is in pain, but not dead. I look through her pale belly scales and I see that her fragile ribs are broken. A jolt of pain runs through me, and my heart breaks in two. Curse those humans! They must have hurt her. But what can I do for her? Should I feed her my fly? They might be good for bone building. Yes, I will give her the fly. I swim up, and grab the fly in my jaws. I touch it to her jaw, but she will not open her mouth.

Another young fish sees what I am doing. He swims over and blinks at me, as if to say “I have a plan.” He slips his tail between her jaws to open them. I bite off a chunk of fly, and push it into her open jaws. Fwoosh! I suck water into my mouth, and spit it into hers, making her swallow the fly. Yoink! The bigger male
pulls his tail out, and I push the injured female under the rock, curl my tail around her lovingly, and fall asleep.

Oh, I hope she gets better.

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Nooo!!! I feel something cold beside me. I blink open my eyes, remembering that I slept with the injured female. I check her heart. It doesn’t beat! Young fish are fragile, and her injuries were too much for her. Still, I can’t help blaming myself. I should have been able to save her! But she’s gone! Her spirit swims in another lake, under the sand of my lake. I would have mated with her when she got better, but she is no more. Feeling guilty, I drag her out from under the rock, where the other fish can see her.

Together, we wrap seaweed around her with our fins. Then we nudge her up to the surface of the water, and push her out of the water with our noses. She sails out of the bucket, and then she is gone.

Oh no! I notice that the smallest fish, a little male, has a rash on his stomach. I nuzzle it, and I smell something human. I wave my tail to him, saying “Come with me!” I lead him under the rock, bringing with me the fly. We share the last bits of it, then I nuzzle his rash until he falls asleep. After a while, I fall asleep too. I dream of helping other minnows.

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Yay! I feel a warm body next me. Thank goodness! The little male is not dead. He nuzzles my fin in thanks. I notice that his scales are hard like mine. Oh! I realize that our bucket is moving. I guide the little male out from under the rock, and we nibble a bitter scrap of algae. Swish! We swim around the bucket, exercising our fins and tails. We eat some more algae, then curl up under the rock and sleep.

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When we wake, the bucket is moving and the sky is dark. A human lifts up our rock. Uh-oh! The little male looks worried, but I nuzzle him on the fin to him. The human dumps the other little fish out of their nests
in the seaweed. They land in the bucket, dazed, and I nuzzle each of them. Help!!! Suddenly, the human dumps the bucket out! All of us crash into salty water. Help! At first it is a shock, but my hard scales protect me from the salt. Uh-oh! I turn to the little male, but he is also protected by his hard scales. He nuzzles my side, and I wrap my tail around him, saying “You’re okay.” He waves his tail to the other fish, as if to say “But they’re not!” I see that they are struggling. Oh no! They don’t have hard scales like us.

I see a little stream. Good! The water looks fresher there. It isn’t as cloudy as the salty water. I lead all four fish away, keeping the little male beside me. We travel down the little stream. The water has only a little salt, and the three fish who don’t have hard scales don’t struggle as much. Finally, we get to a lake. The water is fresh, and a school of minnows welcomes us.

Oh no! They tell of hard times, little food, and many predators. I know that the fish without hard scales can’t come with me, but I can take the little male back out to the salt water. We can learn to survive there. We might even find mates! I beckon for him to come, and he follows me upstream, back to the salt water. I see a school of minnows passing by. They all have hard scales like we do. A Watcher swims up to us. She waves her tail out to sea, saying “The salt water is very vast.” She opens her mouth, pretending to be a predator, as if to say “It is very dangerous, too.” Then she beckons to us to join the school. We follow her, to the very center of the school, among other young fish. As the sun rises, we look up to it. We are ready for a new dawn.