

Still Life in a Bowl

by Ann Bogle

I sent my husband George away. He went yesterday to buy my fishbowl. Do you see what I care? What man needs two days downtown to find a parking place and buy a fishbowl?

George is very picky about where he parks. Indecisive, I call it. He always pulls in and pulls out, and my tongue is lolling waiting for him to decide.

George, what's the difference where you park as long as it's not handicapped and not compact?

We could have a whole discussion about compact cars. The way I see it, it's a bad thing to ride around in a car a block long in the 1980s. Black clouds when we start it and trouble when we park it. George hits Mrs. Miller's mailbox and pansy garden. He should wear his stronger glasses.

If that old woman wants her pansies, he says, she should get them off the street.

They're not on the *street*, Dad, says Vanessa, our daughter. They're in her garden.

Vanessa is literal like her father. She makes all his distinctions, like the best parking slot in a ten-story ramp.

There's no such thing as the best parking slot, George. They're all the same. Just pick one that's big enough.

He doesn't listen to me. His ears work fine.

Mrs. Miller doesn't have a car, but her son has one, a red gas-saver for the eighties. Brady Miller lives nearby and buys groceries for his mother.

Brady impresses me, and not only me. Vanessa. And all the people on the freeway who see his Peugeot when he goes to the chemical plant. Brady has a desk job. We went to his promotion party. He has an in-basket and an out-basket.

Vanessa lives across town in Stamford Maples, a security-locked community. There's a swimming pool, a game room, a barber

on the premises. Vanessa works with Brady at the chemical plant. She reads tube contents with a microscope.

It's not reading, Mother, she says. Everything is not reading.

What I mean by literal. But she's not irrational like her father. She's thought about things.

Vanessa comes for dinner on Tuesdays. She'll be here tonight with a loaf of French bread and a kiwi or an artichoke. I'll make creamed corn and heat up the ham.

The floor in the kitchen needs a good scrubbing. In my house the place for the mop is between the wall and the refrigerator. The handle gets warm standing by the fridge. That is a remarkable thing.

I am never warm. I need a hot water bottle under my feet just to fall asleep. The complaint of our marriage. The doctor says it's genes alone. My mother and her mother had bad veins. Not a shame, just an error of nature. Nature's prepared for errors and gave us two sets of veins. If the low road gets clogged, blood gets on the high road, runs just the same. Blood gets around. Just you're colder and a different color.

I explain this to George. He pokes me and says he married to a blue woman.

Yesterday I thought I would like to buy some fish. I had fish as a girl. My father had a hatchery. There were long ponds and ducts for the water and wheels to circulate the water. We had goldfish mostly and tadpoles and minnows. Nightcrawlers crept up around the edges of the pond, came up from under the cement. They didn't have minnows at the Tropical Pet. I bought a dozen goldfish and a sucker for the bottom of the bowl. I went home with the groceries and back for the fish.

I sprinkle seaweed over the water and all twelve rise to feed. Two of them went down the hole but knew to come up. A toilet has mouths and caverns, not a bad place at all for fish.

I take the mop water to the basement.

See, George, it's no trouble. We have two toilets and not one fishbowl.

George watched me pour the fish in the toilet and thought I meant to destroy them.

Why would I do that, George, making a special trip back for them the way I did?

"Regina," he says, "buy a fishbowl for cripesakes."

You buy a fishbowl if it bothers you so much, and find one that's big enough.

Life is a mystery. Just the other day I saw Mrs. Miller bending way over her pansies taking weeds out with her red fingers.

"Hello, Mrs. Miller. It's a fine day for gardening."

"No such thing as a fine day for gardening," she said. Mrs. Miller has had a garden since before we came here in 1957.

I never had a garden because it's easier to go to the grocer. Isn't that the way? You do what's easier, feel simple because you don't have a garden, then you find someone who does the hard thing, and she's unhappy just the same.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Your garden is beautiful year after year."

"Look at these, Regina." She shook her fingers at me, ten radishes in a row. Mrs. Miller is older, at least ten years older than I am. She's earned surliness.

Sometimes, in the silence after the door slams, I imagine divorce court. No more choked meals when George would rather be eating his mother's food. No more arguing about what our grown daughter should be doing with her life.

When Vanessa came back from France, she perked with ideas. She tripped around in sandals she had got in Paris. She ate celery sticks that she carved into palm trees.

"Dad," she said one night, snapping on a celery, "Even though I was born here, and I love this country, I don't feel like an American anymore. My soul is French."

George turned red in the neck.

"I don't mean un-American like communist. I mean, I feel more worldly than the people around here."

"See what you caused here, Regina. Sending her to Paris. Stealing my money."

Vanessa and I didn't steal it. We just didn't tell him. In twenty years of marriage I had learned to economize. Mostly she used her babysitting money.

He sent her to college, but he said, nothing too funny now, Vanessa. Easy on the French. He's proud she learned the lab work, says she got it from her mother.

We have a black rotary phone from years back. The dial moves easy, not like the new ones that move so hard. It makes a soft phone noise when you dial, like George's ratcheting under the hood.

I have half a mind to call the ramp on 7th where George parks.

George starts trouble, but he doesn't finish it. He sees he's made a wrong turn, then backs up until it's right. Some men are too proud to do that.

George says Brady didn't need his Peugeot except to impress us, impress Vanessa, who should have seen right through. She doesn't see, he says. Man with a promotion, fancy desk equipment. Men with paperwork have women on their mind.

George works with machines. He can fix a machine even while it's running. He can read the paper when the TV's on. All that noise he doesn't take in. He sticks to business through it all.

I turn the light on in the bathroom so the fish can see. George would say it's a waste of electricity to give the fish light. If his mother were here, sleeping on the guest bed, as she does a month out of every year, I'd flip her lights off. I'd say, Violet, it's a waste of our money to give you light. And she wouldn't see a thing.

I lock up the house and loop my basket over my arm. I found it in a box of Christmas ornaments and carry it like a prize. Mrs. Miller

is at the top of the driveway where our two driveways meet. She's got her back to me and her hands in the pansies.

"Hello, Mrs. Miller." It's another fine day.

"Hello, Regina." She's smiling like a sister. She knows Vanessa comes on Tuesdays. "Where's George's car?"

"At the station since yesterday. If they don't fix it this time, we're buying a Toyota."

"Good for you," she says.

When I get home, the phone is ringing. I drop my basket in the doorway and the peppers roll around on the floor. It's a pathetic ring, a rasp like a flea in an old woman's throat.

The warning pattern that I should put the receiver down blares in my ear. But I keep holding it, as if it has an answer for me, as if someone inside here wants me.

I lob creamed corn into a saucepan and turn the flame low so it won't stick. The phone rings. I dribble corn on my chin because the spoon is too big. I wipe my hands on my apron and scrape my chin with the spoon.

"George, is that you?" I call it out to the empty house.

Across the yard I see Brady Miller's Peugeot in Mrs. Miller's driveway. Brady climbs out. Vanessa climbs out. They go inside. They go inside to Mrs. Miller who has pansies in a green bowl on her dining table.

Vanessa, your mother is here. Mrs. Miller's not new. She's old as the hills. She won't admire your flowered skirt the way I would.

I lie down. I have never in thirty years lain on my carpet and seen the ceiling. The walls are green, the carpet is green, the couch is green. The ceiling is all white with short white scales.

If I wrapped the phone cord around my neck, the fish would die.

George, I'm not cold. Maybe I'm warm. All these years I thought my veins were bad, I was cold. Now I know it's the bed not me.

When I get to the kitchen the corn is burned.

My neck is stiff from pushing against the tub. Someone is in the living room. A light is on.

"George?"

There's no answer, but he's home. I hear his shoes hit the floor and his wallet slap the dresser.

"George, Vanessa didn't come for dinner."

I crouch over the toilet and put my arms around the seat. Their tiny mouths skim the surface. I could drown them, pull the silver lever, let them die. A good wife would not send her husband away over fish. But it's something else. See how simple they are, only needing water and light.

