

Henrietta – A strange name for a goldfish

By Dante Harker

‘Hello, I didn’t notice you arrive – been here long?’ The other goldfish didn’t reply.

‘Hello?’ Henrietta tried again, she could see the other fish staring at her but she couldn’t work out why she wasn’t replying. ‘Are you one of those slow goldfish? Not all of us have been blessed with a brain – at least not a useable one. I came from the circus, thousands of us all living in one tank – praying we’d get scooped up as the first prize on the Hook-a- Duck stand – and out of all those thousands of fish only my mother and me appeared to have a working brain.’

Henrietta swam up and down her tank as she spoke, the memories of the circus were crisp and vibrant in her mind. Her childhood reminiscences felt like only yesterday, unlike the thoughts of what had actually happened yesterday, or this morning for that matter, which she’d started having trouble holding on to. It had been such a happy time, surrounded by her friends and family; though even back then she’d known she was special. So many of the other fish

would just swim backwards and forwards, blank looks on their faces; faces that broke into a smile every six seconds or so as they swam past the tank's castle and saw it as if for the first time.

'We're special, Henrietta,' her mum had told her one day. Henrietta's mum was a large, powerful fish, queen of the tank and though well-travelled, she had never dropped the cockney from her accent. Sadly, her size had kept her from ever being scooped and bagged – the children wanted their fish small and cute. Still, that had meant she'd travelled with the circus and seen the world, meeting fish from all parts of the globe.

'Most fish are stupid, every time they see something it's like they're having a whole new experience – which is great for them, all very exciting – but it makes them terrible conversationalists. Still, if you ever just want to chat, pin one of them in a corner and they'll be all ears for as long as you need. But you and me Henrietta, we're different, call it a blessing, call it a curse but that's the way it is. We can think and talk and more importantly we can learn.

'Of course, the reason most goldfish don't remember anything is because they're trapped in a tank all day long. Who wants to remember that? Still, if you're lucky my girl, you'll be taken in by a nice family who'll look after you. Soon you'll learn to understand human and then you can just

watch and listen all day long. And then, if you're really lucky you'll come across a smart fish and you can have a nice long chat – tell them all you know. And failing that you'll get housed with one of the dumb fish and they'll just listen – listen, listen and then listen some more – and when they do, tell them everything, rant and rave, don't worry about the order or going off at tangents, just go for your life. There will come a time when you really have to get everything off your pretty golden chest.'

Her mum's words had stuck with Henrietta these last sixteen years. And in that time the little goldfish had seen a lot but sadly had not had much chance to speak.

Twice her owners had tried to give her some company. First, there had been an odd fish, speckled red and white with a flashy tail. He did nothing but race around the tank. He never stopped long enough to chat; he lasted only a couple of days – his frantic movements attracting the attention of the cat!

The second fish seemed to have some manner of deformity. She had a huge head and large bulbous eyes – if she could speak, she didn't; though Henrietta was sure she heard her cry when she popped one of her balloon- like eyes on the turret of the tank's castle. It took three water changes to clean up the mess!

Henrietta moved closer to the new fish, who moved closer to her. 'Oh I see, you're not in my tank – that's bright of him. Him being Jared, my owner, well I guess your owner now, too – this way I get some company but you get your own space – clever.' Henrietta whooshed around her tank, excited that at last she had someone to talk to. The ache in her bones that that had grown these last few months and the call to close her eyes and surrender to the dark, left as the excitement took her – she had so much to say, a lifetime of thoughts needed to be set free.

Noticing that the other fish was also giddily swimming around its tank, Henrietta swam back up to the end of her tank and asked: 'I know you can't talk, but can you at least hear me? I have so much to tell you, I have views and opinions; my mind is full of random stuff that I really want to share. Can you hear me?' Henrietta asked again, nodding with her head to see if she could get the other fish to make the same gesture. 'Hooray!' Henrietta cried as the other fish nodded back.

'Yay, at last I have someone to talk to.

'Well... now, I don't know where to start.

'Oh, ok, I know, I'll tell you some important stuff that lets you know where my opinions have come from, I'd hate you to think me opinionated without at least thinking that I've given

my opinions some thought.'

Henrietta smiled at the other fish, who smiled back and then she continued: 'I guess the most important thing is that I can understand and read human. Understanding the language was easy enough. My mother said it would be and she was right. I guess you can't spend every waking hour around it and not eventually start to understand. The reading was harder. But I think I've been lucky, Jared has a younger brother, and when I was first brought home I was a present for the both of them. I used to be in a room with the brother, who was six, and Jared, who was twelve. Every night one of their parents would come in and read to them, spending extra time with the younger one, helping him pronounce words – I guess just general learning-how-to-read-type stuff – but soon enough I could read, too.

'When the family moved house and the two boys got their own rooms I went with Jared, and I've been with him ever since. I went to his University – heady days – and now we're here, in his flat. We've been here two years. It's perfect for me, I can see the TV, which never gets turned off and I have a perfect view of his computer screen, so I get to know what's going on in his world – ideal.'

Henrietta was happily swimming up and down as she spoke, every so often flitting back to the end of her tank to see if the new comer was still listening and every time she was there,

returning Henrietta's smile.

'Of course our owner here, used to be a much happier man,' Henrietta said, looking out to where her owner was in his customary place in front of his computer. 'He was care-free, always partying, lots of friends around. But then he met his girlfriend and fell in love – which was amazing for a while. But then on their first holiday together she sadly died in a freak accident – she was hit by a coconut. But I know what you're thinking; it must have fallen from the tree and landed on her head – which would have been bad enough. Oh no, our man here picked one up and threw it at her. He screamed "heads-up" and assumed she'd catch it. She didn't, the thing hit her square in the face, not pretty and worse, she had a weak skull – fell down dead, then and there.

'He was cleared of all charges, it being an accident and all, but he's never forgiven himself. Neither have the rough and ready family of his departed girlfriend. They regularly egg the windows and put all manner of unsightly stuff through the letterbox – sick really – and you wonder where they store that much waste matter until they're ready to post it.'

Henrietta paused for a second to let that last, vulgar, idea process, and then went on.

'But for me, at least it's not a bad life, I've got the TV on all day long – usually a news channel – and when he's not aimlessly flicking from website to website, our man here's a writer.

'Oh, as a side note, the sites he flicks between are “social networking” sites. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?

'This man hasn't been outside in over a year, he's the epitome of anti- social. Yet he blasts off messages, leaves comments, sends all manner of flashy things – hand shakes, nudges, beer mugs. None of his messages is longer than thirty words and yet he has a thousand plus “friends” on one site alone – imagine, the idea of calling someone you've never had a proper conversation with a friend, or for that matter getting excited about the fact that someone has added you to their contact list.

'Look at our boy here, whenever he is forced into a social situation – usually nothing more than having to answer the phone to his mother – he freaks. He can barely manage more than a “yes” or “no” – it's crazy.

'I think, if anything, these social sites do more harm than good. They damage people's ability to form proper relationships – before they came along, people had to speak to each other, they made links (real links, not hyperlinks), I

would even argue they cared for other human beings more.'

Henrietta could feel herself turning from her usual shade of washed- out orange – it used to be bright orange but the years had taken their toll – to a rich crimson as her rant blazed.

'Now-a-days, people are members of online social groups and that excludes real-world interactions. They have affairs online, arrange to meet up with people and never go – why would you when that would require the use of more than thirty words? And if people ever do get brave enough to meet someone, they've already talked so much that they've created a fantasy, a dream of what the person would be like in real life. Of course, that is just asking for trouble because fantasies are just that – fantasy – they aren't real and people get disappointed when reality doesn't live up to their delusion. But then if there is one thing humans can do well, it's to create and live inside a delusion. '

Henrietta, realising that she was already raving and she hadn't been talking for more than a few minutes, slowed her pace around the tank. She gulped down the oxygen-rich water as it passed over her gills – the equivalent of a fish taking a deep breath – and then popped back to see that her new companion was still listening.

The newcomer still smiled brightly, so Henrietta continued:

'It seems to me that humans are constantly trying to escape their lives – or at least parts of their lives. Western society expects certain things, get an education, get a job, get married, buy a house, have kids, retire and die. Maybe not always in that order, though you would hope that dying would be last on that list!

'But you have to admit that those things are so dull. It seems that everything that humans “have to” do, they rebel against. They want out; it's as if all the things that society expects are actually a punishment rather than offering the average person any kind of a fulfilling life.

'I guess that's why so many people watch “Reality TV” shows. Have you seen them? I think you have to wonder when they say “Reality” whose reality they're talking about because the people they dredge up for these shows inhabit no reality I'd like to be part of. Marx called religion “the opiate of the masses” but I think it's clear that for the last ten years it really should be changed to; “Reality TV is the opiate of the masses.”

Henrietta doubted that the smiling fish in the tank next to her had a clue what opiates were, and she only knew because she was effectively just regurgitating an article she'd seen Jared write once. Still, she'd grown accustomed to thinking through her owner's words, and she had seen enough

Reality TV shows over the years, to accept his opinion as her own and, with this in mind, she continued:

‘Of course, perhaps all you have to look forward to in life is sixty years of working, broken up by that yearly holiday you can’t afford followed by another one your credit card really can’t afford.

‘Plus maybe you want a few kids (who may or may not turn out to hate you, but are sure to turn into something that is unlikely to live up to your grand expectations).

‘ Then you may come to a quick end – perhaps because you got up too quickly in the middle of the night and it triggered a heart attack. Your already-depressed wife (who chokes down anti-depressants and sleeping pills as if they were Smarties) is then only woken when the growing stench from your death-emptied bowels invades her nightmares. Or, if you’re really unlucky, you get a slow, drawn-out demise that requires countless bedpans and no matter how hard you try you can’t remember what you had to eat that morning, never mind any of your life’s “accomplishments”. Of course, with all that joy to look forward to, no wonder the average man turns to Reality TV – it’s a perfect way out. It makes sense, the man, his wife, their friends; none of them are as bad as the people they see on TV.

‘None of them have dreamed of being “the next singing sensation” since being a small child.’

Henrietta looked out at her owner who was doing what he often did in the early afternoon – take advantage of his high-speed internet access and the delights of “X-Tube”.

‘I’m not sure why,’ Henrietta continued, preferring to divert her eyes rather than watch the slightly melodramatic proceedings, ‘but Jared screams at the TV every time he hears one of the “never-going-to-bes” say those three words “it’s my dream”, to which Jared replies: “It’s not your dream at all you stupid, delusional sap. You were just told to say that by the producers. Even if you did win – which is unlikely given you look like a pig that’s been taught to walk and sound like a man raping a dog – you’ll have the Christmas number one and then disappear, like every other sad Reality TV show winner – fucking Celebritards!”’ Henrietta winced at using a swear word, her mother had told her never to use the ‘F’ word in polite company and, if you ever did, quickly apologise – which she did. Her companion returned the smile, which told her that no harm was done.

At least she’d not used the ‘C’ word – that was much harder to recover from – bad, bad word.

‘He’s a writer, you know,’ Henrietta said as Jared got up and wandered off to get cleaned up. ‘Well, he has two jobs, he

has one that pays the bills and the other, well sadly that wouldn't keep him in tissues – though he does go through a lot to be fair – but still he seems to like it – the writing I mean. The paying job is as a travel researcher – he wanted to be a full-on travel writer and he has travelled a fair bit – they were fun times, I used to go and stay with his mother.

'She had prayer meetings three times a week – oh, I used to laugh. All those old grave-dodgers, gathered in Margaret's "best room" – she had a perfectly good living room, but when the church folk came around she liked to use the room she kept for best. Of course this meant that the seven or so attendees were always on tenterhooks for fear of making a mess. At times there were as many as ten, though often people were excluded, well, not excluded, just advised not to come.' Henrietta was struggling to find the right words. She didn't want to make Margaret sound at all mean as she always meant well. Henrietta tried again.

'It was just that the "best room", being so spick and span, kept even those who did attend from ever sitting fully back on the sofas and making themselves comfortable for fear of over-crinkling the cushions. So the idea of an old dear turning up with a weeping sore or the slightest whiff of incontinence was entirely unthinkable.'

Henrietta's heart warmed at the thought of her times with Margaret – her husband, Jared's dad, had died at forty.

Margaret had woken up one morning to find him perched on the toilet. He had pushed a little hard and his heart had given out. Still she never complained and soon enough God took the place of her husband; well, God and her “Rabbit Warrior” a pink plastic friend that arrived one day wrapped in discreet brown paper.

Henrietta again took a deep breath; all this talking was getting the better of her. She knew she was getting old, if nothing else because Jared asked her with every feed, ‘how you doing there, old girl?’

Apparently, fourteen was old for a goldfish – really old. And it was at times like this, when her body ached and all she wanted to do was sleep that she was glad she wasn’t a Christian. At least she would never have the disappointment when she found out there wasn’t a God. Margaret loved her Lord – she prayed to him at least once a day, twice when the bible group were around. Of course her real prayers were never answered because not once had her departed husband come walking back into her life.

Henrietta liked Margaret; her loneliness had meant that she had talked to her, a lot, whenever she had gone there to stay. Margaret had even asked if Henrietta could stay after Jared returned from his last trip. But that had been the trip where his girlfriend had been killed and he wanted to hold on to some sense of normality. So he took Henrietta home,

but not before getting his mother a kitten, which she loved and hugged so much he didn't make it more than three days. 'Don't worry mum, I think it must have died of cat 'flu – I'll get you another one, a grown up one thats stronger', Jared had told his mother when she rang him after the kitten had died. He replaced it with a bruiser of a cat, a big tom that liked the idea of being fed and warmed by the fire but didn't like to be touched. This turned out to be a fine arrangement for both parties as Margaret was happy just having someone to talk to.

Henrietta was resting on the bottom of the tank now. She glanced over to the other tank but the fish had disappeared out of view. The old fish rested and thought of what might come next. Margaret had told her that fish didn't go to heaven as they didn't have souls. Not the most caring words, Henrietta had thought and from that point on she decided that it was best not be believe in God. This had seemed a prudent move because it wasn't long after that when Jared started work on his second writing job – disproving religion.

Like his mother, Jared had been swept up by the Christian Vampires who prey on the weak – if they didn't how else would the church get its new roof or the vicar the money to wine and dine all those handsome young choir boys?

After his father had died, Jared liked the idea that there was a “better place” that people went to after they died. He even went to bible meetings and prayed.

But Jared was a smart man, no sap or pushover and certainly not the kind of man who just accepts things as fact without any actual proof. So alongside his Christian readings he liked to read works that offered an opposing view – he always liked to see both sides of an argument. And because he wasn't good at hiding inside a delusion, it didn't take Jared long to see that the Church and the bible were just a collection of lies, all bound together in a neat package aimed at controlling the masses. Of course his views didn't go down too well at his church and one bright spring afternoon, he was taken to one side by the vicar and asked not to attend any longer.

So, now shunned by the Church, Jared decided that God was just a social construct, something dreamed up by the people in charge to keep others in check – a means to start wars, to keep women down, to punish free thinkers, single parents and men who loved other men. With his new enlightenment, Jared set about a one man hate campaign. He had already secured his job as ‘travel researcher’ – basically someone who reviewed travel websites and moderated the travel boards of a couple of well-known travel sites. It didn't pay great, but it paid enough for him to keep his flat and have all his food delivered by the local Tesco.

Internet shopping! Every lock-in's dream.

Now, sat around all day long, Jared managed to bad-mouth religion around the internet so much that he managed to get himself noticed. A website called 'livelifeandbedamned.com' contacted him and asked if he would write for them. The pay was poor but Jared didn't care, he'd been given a forum for his work and that was more than enough payment.

The following months he went berserk; he spent hours researching, making sure that he didn't just come across as a ranting fool – he wanted proof that God and not just the Christian one – all gods – didn't exist. Plus, it was his aim to show the world the destructive nature of religion and that to follow any religion was proof that you were delusional.

The strap-line for the website was 'Prove it, come on, just once!' Not the catchiest of phrases to plaster across a site but it did stand up there as a challenge to anyone, from any religion around the world to prove that their deity did actually exist. No-one took up the challenge. Of course in reality very few people actually read the site, well they did, but they were mainly already converted to atheism.

Every so often one of Jared's articles would catch some mainstream attention. The one about how the Christians had invented the Devil hadn't gone down too well. In it, he had only said that there was no devil until the crusades. He

argued that in the first set of battles, the Christians tramped across Europe killing in the name of their God – but that wasn't enough to win any battles. That was nothing better than just conquering. They needed something more, something evil – a stick to beat the locals with, or more exactly a sword. And like magic, the devil as we know him today was invented. Of course the idea of a devil existed long before the crusades, but he didn't have form, he lacked horns and hooves. So, the Christians knew of the ancient God Pan – a man with the legs of a beast and the body of a man, a man with horns. This old God made a perfect devil. Now whenever the Christians found anyone worshiping Pan, or any God who wasn't their own – they could proclaim them devil worshipers and rightfully kill them – and they did, in the millions.

It was Jared's comment about it being funny that even after nearly a thousand years nothing much had changed. Modern, and if you believe Michael Moore, illegally-elected Warlords, were still killing thousands of people in the name of the same God.

A tirade of abusive emails had packed Jared's inbox for weeks. Mostly these were about how the troops were protecting civil rights – Jared just saw it as the troops disobeying one of their primary commandments – thou shalt not kill – it's either a rule or it's not. In fact this line was all Jared ever used to reply.

Henrietta's eyes popped open, she'd been dreaming about her owner and his job as 'Sanity Crusader – warrior for the non-delusional' – a tag that he included at the bottom of all his emails.

After stretching out her old bones, Henrietta swam back over to the corner of the tank where her bright-eyed companion looked ready to hear more of her tales.

'So, there was this one time when Jared's articles got him in some real trouble,' Henrietta picked up where her thoughts had left off, not bothering to explain them for the new-comer, but still the other fish was smiling and appeared to be listening. 'In fact, one particular article caused so much trouble that he was actually told not to write anymore about one mainstream religion – Islam. To be fair, given that Muslims have a habit of declaring holy war at the drop of a hat or, if not a hat, at a book of offensive poems – not all Muslims of course, just some of them and if they are going to kill you, upsetting one of them is clearly enough – then writing what Jared did was more than a little stupid.

'He wrote something called "Buy them all Alarm Clocks", it was an article written after he'd been watching the news. There were a group of Muslims who wanted to sing the "call for prayer" out across a small Yorkshire town. Of course the locals had freaked at the idea; five half- hour calls in a

language they didn't understand, blasted out of loud speakers from the local mosque and all starting at 4am was more than they could bear. There was talk of burning the place to the ground, of all out war. The "call to prayer" was never sounded, but it was enough inspiration for Jared.

'He wrote about how the "call for prayer" had originated. It seems that way back when people never used to wash. Disease was rife and people were dying. So when their holy book was first being dreamt up, some bright spark decided to include in five-times daily "call to prayer" – the clever part was that before you can kneel down to pray, you had to clean yourself up – no God wants to see one of his minions with dirty hands and face. Is that clever or what?

'Of course, pointing out that something Muslims hold so sacred is no more than a reminder to wash didn't go down well. He also suggested that if they just got themselves alarm clocks they could wake themselves up and pray without bothering the less delusional – Jared does like to over-use the world delusional. Well, talk about hate-mail! It wasn't helped by the fact his remarks were picked up by the local newspaper and then a national paper. He was called a bigot and a racist. He just asked anyone to prove him wrong – no one did. Thankfully no one did kill him; I'm not sure who would feed me if they did.'

Henrietta pondered for a while and then said, 'to be honest, I don't know what I make of religion. I don't hate it in the same way as Jared does, I just don't understand it. I don't get how there can be so many gods – in some religions, like Hinduism where they have a myriad of them. So do all these Gods live in the same place, alongside the Greek Gods? You would have thought by now that they would have fought it out for top God – I know in Hinduism there is a top God, one who is in charge of the others, but surely the gods from other religions should have fought it out before now?

'But nothing. We'd have heard of it if they had – surely the results of a fight like that would be posted on the internet within minutes. And I find it odd that people just pick and choose the bits that they like. They tolerate one thing but not another – everyone is equal and welcome, as long as they behave in a certain way.

'Religions to me are clearly about control. I guess nothing much has changed. In times past, leaders needed a way to control the masses and fear is the best way to do that. For a country to be successful they need a hardworking populace, who spend what they earn and don't get any ambitions about leaving their homeland.

'In the days when the bible was being made up, fear was generated by the invention of a God – if you did wrong, you went to hell and if you did really wrong, hell would take reign

over the earth – ooh!’ Henrietta wagged her fins for dramatic effect.

‘I think the control thing is still clear today, it’s just that western governments are less obvious about how they exercise their control. Look at debt, we’re told it’s a bad thing, but is anything ever done about the countless adverts for credit cards on TV – the fact you can get as much money as you need pretty much within twenty-four hours? No!

‘But then, why would the government act, I’m sure they like seeing their people in debt. If you’re in debt you have to stay put, and you have to work hard in order to pay it off. And it starts even before people leave school; people are told that if they want a better life they must get a degree. But what no one ever tells them is that the debt they get from seeking this better life will keep them tied down, until the rest of society’s wants and “must have”s gets their claws into them and they are chained down like everyone else. A nation in debt is a nation that doesn’t leave, they pay taxes and they die – ideal. Of course people are dying later, which seems to have caused a bit of a problem. What people are never told when they go seeking a degree as a key to a better life is to get a degree in something that qualifies you to do something.

‘Each year Jared rants on about the results tables universities publish – all declaring the nation’s getting

smarter – he says all it means is more people are passing degrees and that's not the same thing. I have to agree with that, given the number of people who sign up for those awful Reality TV shows I was ranting about earlier.

'No one ever says, "if you want more out of life, you have to do more with your life – and getting into debt isn't the way to do it". Everyone seems so worried about their retirement – the crappy end of your life, where there is a good chance you'll be wearing nappies and dribbling food down your bib anyway. Do things while you can, that's what I'd do if I were human. I try to tell Jared the same thing – but of course I have no way of communicating with him. It is so sad, because I swim here and watch him frittering away his life. Still, as far as society is concerned he is a good citizen. He has his own place, pays a mortgage, has a car – not that he uses it – has some debt, and even has a flat-screen TV – his life is made!'

But Henrietta knew her owner's life wasn't made and that made her feel sad. She swam to the other end of her tank so the new fish wouldn't see her shed a tear – she so wanted her owner to be happy, to lead a wonderful life, a life that starts now, not one that's saved for and hoped for in retirement, when his knees won't be up to doing all the cool stuff that he could do if he just got off his arse and did them now.

Henrietta felt weak; all her ranting had taken its toll. And yet there was so much she had left to say. She wanted to know why everyone on Jared's travel websites thought that Laos was such a chilled-out place when Jared always called it Thailand without the charm. He said that people only thought it chilled-out because most of the people who go there spent their entire time either drunk or stoned. He'd called it lots of other things in an article once, but he'd been told he couldn't post it because it was racist. People said the same thing about his comments on the Philippines. He'd said that Filipinos were lazy and that they saw every westerner as a walking ATM, plus almost all of them thought they could speak English when the best they can managed was a mashed-up version of their own language, Taglish rather than English. I personally think this is a little mean. And it's never a good idea tarring an entire nation with the same dirty brush – but then I'm a goldfish and by nature we're far more rational than your average human.

As Henrietta lay on the bottom of her tank; several fleeting thoughts rushed through her head. There was so much to say and yet she could feel time slipping away.

She lay for a while and rested. While doing so, Henrietta was able to read what Jared was typing. This was her favourite pastime; she loved her owner and had longed to be able to tell him things, to talk to him and make his life better. Silly thoughts. She watched him typing about the country he

hated most, one he'd spent seven hellish weeks in once – the aforementioned Philippines. He really wanted to write something that expressed his feelings for the place that he could actually post without fear of being called a racist. He wrote:

I think there are many ways we can judge a country. There are different ways to round up our thoughts and feelings and offer a final summary of our time spent there. I think one of the most interesting ways is to look at how a country goes to the cinema.

In the UK, I think the cinema is traditionally a quiet affair. People will watch the film in near silence and, very rarely, if the film is particularly special people may give a round of applause at the end. Who that's aimed at I'm not certain, but still, I'm sure it makes the projectionist smile. If the worst happens and some people are talking then people generally... do nothing. Well, a couple might whisper about how rude it is to talk through a film, some may even offer the offenders a dirty look. But rarely does it go further than that. When it does, it will be a rushed change of seats, getting as far away from the talkers as possible or, occasionally and as if by some kind of telepathy, the entire cinema will 'hush' the talkers (not by choking them to death on the overpriced popcorn, but by all actually saying the word 'hush').

When I've been to the cinema in the States it has been a much louder affair. The audience seem to take a greater part in the film that unfolds. People will scream at the screen, offer advice to the actors, cheer and even boo! It doesn't make it easy to watch the film but it can be even more fun just watching the audience.

Laos doesn't have any cinemas. This, I think, says a lot.

So to the Philippines; the way they go to the cinema exactly reflects the nation as I found it.

In the giant mall nearest to my hotel there was a clean and new cinema. Ten screens, sadly not ten screens in the one place, they had decided to split them over three different venues at different ends of the mall. There is no central booking office, each ticket has to be bought at each separate venue, so if you want to watch more than one film, you would have a fair walk to pick up your tickets. When building a new mall, I don't think its rocket science to put the cinema in the one place, still that's just the start.

When you buy a ticket, it allows you to see the film as many times as you want throughout the day. A nice idea, if you wanted to see the film by yourself in the morning perhaps, and if it was good you could go back later with friends. But this is not how the ticket is used. Instead, Filipinos rarely bother to come in and watch the film from the start. They

arrive at any point throughout the film, even ten minutes from the end. And then they'll just sit there until they have seen it all – not seeming to care that they are watching it in the wrong order.

What this means is that people are wandering in and out of the cinema all the time you're trying to enjoy the film – a perfect example of how the country as a whole is run.

Henrietta smiled, 'another piece of writing that's bound to offend,' she thought.

Her smile carried with it warmth that drifted up through her body. She knew that thought was nearly her last – it was time to go.

She was only left with a few simple observations. She was about to die. She hadn't said goodbye to the new fish, which was a little rude. And as she floated towards the surface of the tank she realised that there was a heaven and hell after all – but not in the way that the Christians saw it.

There is a common belief that our lives flash before our eyes as we die. Now if our lives have been full of woe, if we've done nothing more than what society expected of us, then welcome to hell. The last thing you'll see before you disappear into the darkness is your own failed life, the

disappointment that you have left nothing, achieved nothing, are nothing – your life has not marked the world – that would be hell. But if you’ve been someone, done something, stepped away from the norm and denied society its expectations then your last memories will shine – welcome to heaven.

As Henrietta’s life flashed before her there was an overwhelming sense that it was far from complete – there was still more to come – her life was yet to be lived.

* * *

‘What’s wrong with my tongue?’ Henrietta tried to say. But rather than the customary bubbles that sprang from her mouth whenever she spoke, all that vented forth was a stream of drool and a low growl.

‘What’s going on? I don’t understand?’ she said – more drool, more growling.

And then she heard familiar voices: ‘I think it’s a really good idea that you’re getting a puppy. I’d rather you just found yourself a girlfriend but at least this is a start.’

Henrietta recognised Margaret’s motherly tone and hoped...

‘You’re right mum, it is a good idea to get a dog – I need something to force me out of my flat; can’t keep moping around all day long. Plus, now Henrietta’s passed on, I could do with the company.’

Henrietta moved towards the voices and for the first time she realised that she had legs, four of them in fact but none of them were doing as she asked. She took one step and then tumbled over. As she struggled to stand she realised that it wasn’t night time, she just had her eyes shut – she wasn’t used to having lids that actually shut out the light. Forcing them open, Henrietta only saw a blur. All she could see was fur, it seemed to be coming down over her eyes giving the world the impression that everything was fuzzy. She shook her head and promptly fell over. On her feet again she shook her head, gentler this time.

The fur parted allowed Henrietta to gauge her location. She was in a cage, and given that it can’t have been more than two-feet tall, this meant that she can’t have been very tall herself. She tried to give herself the once over but this just resulted in her, once more, falling over.

‘What about this one?’ she heard Jared ask.

‘Oh no!’ Henrietta yelped. ‘I’m obviously some kind of freakishly hairy pet and if he doesn’t notice me soon, he might pick another one.’ Henrietta rushed towards the front

of the cage; after falling over her front feet and getting a mouthful of hair she made it. From her new vantage point she could see her owner. Jared's eyes were moving from one pen to the next; he seemed disappointed somehow, like the puppies before him were of scant value as a replacement for his lost pet. Margret on the other hand was cooing up a storm – if she could she would've taken every one of the adorable puppies home.

Realising that any minute Jared might come across a puppy that would 'do' – Henrietta yelled: 'Look at me, Jared, Jared, look at me – it's your Henrietta! I know I'm some kind of foul, horrendously hairy freak-dog – but it's me! Arrrrrrr awwwwww – LOOK AT ME!' The diatribe leapt forth and filled the room; the sound's presence tangible – inescapable.

'What the hell was that? Did a puppy just die?' Jared asked as he searched out the offending noise.

As Henrietta watched Jared move from cage to cage, getting closer to hers, she shook her head slightly so that her excessive fringe would get out the way so that she could look into her owner's eyes, licked her lips to make sure she wasn't drooling and then did her best to offer up a smile.

'Wow, Mum, look at this one. It's so cute, it looks like a ball of shaggy wool.' Jared said as he looked into Henrietta's eyes.

“It’s” a “she”, and you’ll never guess what?’ Margret said, happy at the bright smile that had washed onto her son’s face and happier still as she read the white name card at the side of the kennel.

Jared didn’t reply, he was transfixed by his new puppy ‘who’s a pretty girl then? You are, you are’.

Realising that Jared wasn’t going to ask ‘what?’, Margaret read out the name card.

‘Let me introduce you to Henrietta, an adorable 8-week old long-haired sheep dog.’

Henrietta smiled her biggest smile and moments later she was up in Jared’s arms being held warm and safe. As she fell asleep in his arms, Henrietta’s last thoughts were of reincarnation, not that she was sure a drooling, shaggy puppy was a step forward but it was certainly something. And as she dreamt, she imagined that next time she would be reborn as a beautiful woman and that she would see out the final third of her life as Jared’s wife. Of course, somewhere in her dream she realised that the idea of reincarnation was entirely against her belief structure and as a voice barked that perhaps she needed a re-think, a brightly-coloured ball was thrown and causing Henrietta to gallop and yap in her dream, an action that just made Jared

hold on even more tighter.
