

BAD FISH: A STANLEY CRUMPLER NOVEL

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. SMALL TOWN - STREET - NIGHT

A runt of a car sputters down the road, piled high with items strapped to the roof, including suitcases, a surfboard and one of those plastic kiddie pools.

A bungee cord holds the trunk lid closed. It bounces with every bump in the road, barely containing more stuff inside.

INT. SMALL CAR - NIGHT

STANLEY, early 30s, nerdy bachelor type, drives. He's surrounded by an odd mix of stuff: a skateboard, small TV, a blender -- random items -- lots of 'em.

Though he's dressed in shorts and there's no sign of winter anywhere, he drinks from a Christmas-themed coffee mug.

He sets the mug aside, lifts a small recorder to his mouth and presses the record button.

STANLEY

Untitled Stanley Crumpler novel.
Chapter one.

He nervously taps the steering wheel.

STANLEY

Call me Stanley.

He shakes his head, rewinds. Begins again.

STANLEY

Untitled Stanley Crumpler novel.
Chapter one.

Stanley looks at the rearview mirror. The back seat is similarly overflowing.

STANLEY

They say you should meet a person
where they are. And, Albert was
surrounded. By baggage. Mountains
of it.

A rubber ducky ricochets off the back of Stanley's head.

Stanley hits pause, frustrated. Again, he looks at the rearview mirror.

STANLEY

Of course you can have things. I just -- I didn't expect this much.

Stanley steers the car around a corner.

STANLEY

How is that racist?

He adjusts the rearview mirror down a tad.

STANLEY

Gold is not a race.

He glances over his shoulder, to the back seat, where...

ALBERT, goldfish, mid 1s, swims in a bowl, strapped in place by a seatbelt, between an electric guitar and a snowboard.

ALBERT

(a small burst of bubbles)

STANLEY

(holds up a water gun)
What does a fish do with a Super Soaker?!

Stanley tosses the water gun into the back seat.

ALBERT

(a steady, aggressive stream of bubbles)

Stanley whispers into the recorder.

STANLEY

Though small in stature, his mouth was big. And, his words had bite.

A squirt of water hits Stanley in the back of the head. He stops the recorder, looks to the back seat.

ALBERT

(more bubbles)

STANLEY

Alright, alright. I don't want to get off on the wrong foot. You can put any extra stuff in my room.

Stanley drops his head.

STANLEY

Yes. Including your wading pool.

INT. STANLEY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Stanley, hands full of Albert's luggage, fights to close the front door.

The living room behind him overflows with organized clutter. Stacks of DVDs fill one corner, video games another. Books lie interspersed throughout.

It's an open area, including the dining room and kitchen.

He drops the luggage, flips through a pile of mail. The TV pops on behind him.

On the couch, Albert swims in his bowl, next to a remote. (Albert is always in his bowl.)

The doorbell RINGS. Stanley dives behind the couch as the TV goes silent.

ALBERT
(bubbles)

STANLEY
Religious people.

There's a KNOCK at the door.

YOUNG GIRL (O.S.)
Mr. Crumpler? I'm selling cookies.
I thought you might like some.

STANLEY
(whispers)
Yeah, right.

The door swings open, answered by Albert - though he's hidden from view by the couch.

YOUNG GIRL (O.S.)
Just one?
(beat)
Thank you.

The door swings closed and a box of thin mints slides next to Stanley. The TV snaps back on.

LATER

Stanley watches TV with Albert: A documentary about sharks. He pops a cookie into his mouth, looks at Albert.

STANLEY
What?

He shrugs, drops a thin mint into Albert's bowl.

LATER

Stanley sleeps, slumped on the couch. Cookie crumbs cover his face and chest.

Next to him, Albert floats upside-down at the top of his bowl. Empty beer cans litter that end of the couch.

Stanley stirs awake, sees his inverted fish.

STANLEY

Albert!

Albert flips over.

ALBERT

(one, large bubble)

INT. STANLEY'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Stanley tears open a small package, drops a round tablet into Albert's bowl. The water immediately begins to fizz.

STANLEY

You shouldn't drink so much.
Especially on an empty stomach.

He pulls out a small can of fish food.

STANLEY

Pet store guy said to feed you once
a day, but, he didn't say how much.

He looks at the label, then back to Albert. But, Albert's gone. Stanley sees the refrigerator door swing open.

A package of sliced ham arches into view, landing hard on the kitchen counter, followed closely by a bag of sliced cheese.

Stanley rushes into the kitchen.

STANLEY

No ham. No ham!

LATER

Stanley and Albert sit on opposite sides of the table.

Albert swims angry circles in his bowl, next to a plate of untouched pizza. A steady flow of bubbles stream to the surface from Albert's mouth.

STANLEY

The package says lunch meat, not
dinner meat. I bet a lot of thought
and testing went into that.

Stanley carefully cuts the crust from a slice of pizza.

ALBERT

(bubbles)

Using a napkin, Stanley picks up the crust, sets it on its
own plate.

STANLEY

Monday is pizza night. Same as
Friday. Tomorrow is --

Stanley looks at Albert...

STANLEY

But, I always throw the crust away.

He sighs, drops the crust onto Albert's plate.

Stanley takes a drink from his Christmas mug.

ALBERT

(bubbles)

STANLEY

It's my lucky mug. From my dad.

Stanley spins it gently in his hands. He's remembering.

STANLEY

Christmas present. 1984.

Stanley sets the mug down. That's enough of that.

ALBERT

(bubbles)

STANLEY

Well, I like it.

Stanley pulls out the recorder, hits record.

STANLEY

Even from the beginning, he had a
way of pushing my buttons.

Stanley's head snaps up.

STANLEY

Rude? How is that -- ?

Stanley tracks Albert as he, out of view, heads for the kitchen. The pantry door opens, Albert hidden by the counter between he and Stanley.

Something lands with a THUMP in the trash can. Seconds later, Albert's empty plate frisbees onto the counter.

Stanley slumps forward, head on the table.

STANLEY

Fine. Pick something else.

The freezer door swings open, Albert still hidden from view.

KITCHEN

Albert stares into the freezer.

ALBERT

(a steady stream of angry
bubbles)

DINING ROOM

STANLEY

What could possibly be wrong with
my freezer?!

SMASH CUT:

KITCHEN

Stanley and Albert stare into the freezer.

STANLEY

Oh.

Inside, below stacks of frozen pizza -- rows and rows of bright yellow boxes scream: FISH STICKS

Stanley grabs the boxes and tosses them into the trash can.

STANLEY

How is that worse?

ALBERT

(bubbles)

STANLEY
So, what should I do?

SMASH CUT:

EXT. STANLEY'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - NIGHT

Stanley tosses a shovelful of dirt onto a nearby pile.
He places a box of fish sticks into a freshly-dug hole.
He scrapes the dirt back into the hole and jabs a tiny
popsicle-stick cross into the ground next to it.

STANLEY
Thank you for your sacrifice.

Multiple matching popsicle-stick crosses dot the yard.
Stanley turns to Albert. Small piles of food surround his
fish bowl: cans of tuna, bags of frozen popcorn shrimp, etc.
Stanley picks up a bottle of caesar dressing.

STANLEY
Seriously?

ALBERT
(bubbles)

He looks at the ingredient list.

STANLEY
I didn't know that.

Stanley digs another hole.

STANLEY
I'll finish up here. You should
probably get to bed.

ALBERT
(bubbles)

STANLEY
I'm not telling you what to do, I
just thought --

The screen door slams behind him.

STANLEY
(to himself)
But we were having a moment.

Stanley takes out his recorder.

STANLEY

The sky was dark. The mood
darker...

INT. STANLEY'S HOUSE - MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

Stanley, in bed, writes in a thickly-bound journal as he listens to his recorder.

STANLEY (V.O.)

(from the recorder)

... But, there was a flicker. A
tiny connection. A chance.

The bedroom overflows with Albert's stuff, including the plastic kiddie pool, leaned against the bedroom wall.

He sets the recorder aside, tosses the journal onto a nearby pile of matching books.

All but the latest have handwritten titles: THE DONUT JOB, NIGHT SCHOOL, A NEW HOUSE, etc. A note follows every title: A STANLEY CRUMPLER NOVEL.

Stanley turns off the light.

He stares at the ceiling. Eventually, his eyes close.

Stanley's eyes immediately snap open at the sudden, very loud drum of a bass beat. WOOMP. WOOMP. WOOMP.

HALLWAY

Stanley pounds on Albert's door. A picture on the wall next to him rattles, pulsing with the loud music.

He pushes the door open and presses into

ALBERT'S BEDROOM

The room is, of course, loaded with stuff and Albert sits on a table in the center of it all. A giant boom box blares from atop a dresser.

Stanley plugs in a pair of headphones and angrily snaps them over the fish bowl. He points to his watch.

ALBERT

(loads of bubbles)

Stanley lifts the headphones...

STANLEY

Yeah? Well, maybe I don't like your fishy smell!

He lets go of the headphones. They snap against the side of the bowl. He spins, stomps from the room, SLAMS the door behind him.

HALLWAY

Stanley's shoulders slump. He pulls his recorder from his pajama pocket, hits record.

STANLEY

Sometimes a goldfish brings out the worst in you.

The bedroom door opens. Stanley looks down the hall.

STANLEY

Where do you think you're going?

Something SHATTERS in the other room. Stanley's eyes go wide.

He runs to the

DINING ROOM

Albert sits next to the shattered remains of Stanley's mug.

STANLEY

Bad fish!

Stanley spins, disappears down the hall. Within seconds, he reemerges, wrestling Albert's large wading pool.

Back in the dining room, he clumsily attempts to tear it apart. Though, his efforts are largely unsuccessful.

The front door SLAMS. Stanley runs to the window, watches as his car lurches out of the drive and peels away.

Into the recorder...

STANLEY

That's when I learned he could drive a stick.

INT. STANLEY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Stanley's journal sits on a side table, freshly labeled:
BAD FISH, A STANLEY CRUMPLER NOVEL.

Stanley grabs his recorder. As he paces...

STANLEY

Having a goldfish in your life,
even for a few hours, changes a
man. Though, I was finding, not
always for the better.

There's a KNOCK at the door. Stanley dives behind the couch.

OFFICER BLEETS (O.S.)

Stanley. We found your car.

Stanley starts for the door. Stops. Slinks lower.

OFFICER BLEETS (O.S.)

And your fish.

Stanley leaps for the door.

OFFICER BLEETS, 60s, round and ready to retire, casually
munches on a churro.

OFFICER BLEETS

Turns out the gold alert worked.

STANLEY

Where is he?

OFFICER BLEETS

Did you know that goldfish are the
third most likely pet to run away?
It goes dogs, cats, goldfish. Then
hamsters.

STANLEY

Where is he?!

OFFICER BLEETS

Now, geckos, that's a whole other --

Stanley punches Bleets in the nose.

The officer shakes it off.

OFFICER BLEETS

I'm gonna ignore that, seeing as
how you're clearly stressed. Car's
down the street. 'Bout a mile. Fish
is hitchhiking. Out on Country Road
12. Wouldn't let us bring him home.
I can take you to --

Stanley bolts down the street.

The officer massages his injured sniffer, shakes his head.

OFFICER BLEETS
Of course, Mrs. Crumpler. I'll keep
an eye on your boy...

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Albert sits on the road's shoulder. A handmade sign leans
against a suitcase. It reads: GULF OF MEXICO OR BUST

Stanley's car skids to a stop next to him.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - NIGHT

Stanley lies on the shoulder, stares at the stars. Albert
swims next to him, both in the light of the headlights.

STANLEY
(into his recorder)
They sat in silence. Shame washed
over Stanley, for he knew his
shortcomings, and he desperately
wanted to overcome them. He wasn't
used to sharing.

ALBERT
(bubbles)

Stanley stops the recorder.

STANLEY
I just said that.

ALBERT
(more bubbles)

STANLEY
I literally just said I'm sorry!

Stanley calms.

STANLEY
At least, I meant to. I know it's
all new to you. And, I realize it's
your house, too.

Long seconds pass.

STANLEY
Are you sorry for anything?

ALBERT
(bubbles)

STANLEY
(mocking)
I'm sorry I broke your stupid mug.
You're right. It is a stupid mug! I
never even met my father. I just
liked the idea of it -- someone
thinking about me at Christmas.
Feel better?

Stanley, frustrated, spins for the car. As he walks, into
the recorder...

STANLEY
Albert was even worse at apologies
than I was.

ALBERT
(bubbles)

Stanley whips around...

STANLEY
I don't know why I adopted you. I
guess I thought it'd be nice to
have a friend.

INT. CAR - NIGHT

Stanley slams the car door shut, squeezes the steering wheel.

The passenger door opens. A seatbelt pulls, CLICKS.

Stanley looks over to see Albert, strapped in the passenger
seat, suitcase wedged on the floor in front of him.

Stanley starts the car.

INT. STANLEY'S HOUSE - MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

Stanley lies in bed, near sleep. Behind him, the bedroom door
slowly swings open.

CLINK. Something lands on the nightstand and the bedroom door
slowly closes.

Stanley turns over to see: his mug, very roughly glued back
together, sitting on the nightstand.

FADE TO BLACK.

FAKE DELETED SCENE/POST CREDITS:

FADE IN:

INT. PET STORE - NIGHT

It's dark and eerie, shadows everywhere. The Shopkeeper slowly hands a fish bowl -- and Albert -- to Stanley.

SHOPKEEPER

Keep him out of the light. And,
don't feed him after midnight. But,
whatever you do -- and this is most
important -- whatever you do --

Stanley, eyes wide, takes the bowl.

SHOPKEEPER

-- Don't get him wet.

Stanley looks at Albert swimming happily in the bowl.

The Shopkeeper laughs an evil laugh, then suddenly stops.

SHOPKEEPER

Just kidding.

He sets some fish food on the counter.

SHOPKEEPER

All you really have to do is keep
him fed.

FADE TO BLACK.