

HOW — To Escape The Illusion

Prologue

There is a fish in a bowl.

Born there. Living there. Circling the same glass every day and calling it home. It does not know about lakes. The ocean is not even a word it could imagine. For the fish, the bowl is everything. The bowl is the world.

The water is warm. The walls are invisible. Tomorrow looks just like today. Why would the fish want anything else? From the inside, there is nothing to escape — because from the inside, there is nothing else.

Most fish are like this. They learn what is realistic. What people like them do. What people like them never do. And slowly, they stop looking beyond the glass, and call the bowl life.

Then there is a second fish.

This one feels something. A discomfort it cannot name. It swims, hits a wall it cannot see, turns, hits it again. Something is wrong here. And every time it moves toward that feeling, a voice appears. Quiet. Reasonable. Patient.

You tried before. There is nothing outside these walls.

Who is there?

No answer.

So the fish keeps circling, and never dares to ask the question again.

Maybe you know that fish.

And then there is a third.

This one knows something is wrong. And this time, it does not look away.

One day it stops circling long enough to notice something above the surface. A single drop, falling from somewhere beyond the glass. And for one second, everything changes. The

ripple spreads. The light bends differently. A circle forms around the point where the drop touched.

And for the first time, the fish sees the shape of what it has been living inside its entire life.

The bowl is not the world. Something exists beyond it.

The ripple fades. The circle remains. And the fish understands something it cannot unfeel: seeing the surface is not the same as reaching it.

So it stops staring upward. It begins to move — using the only tool it has. Its fins. The movement changes. The descent gains force. And slowly, the motion becomes a spiral. Each turn revealing another shape of the bowl. Another illusion. Another truth.

The fish keeps descending. Deeper. Slower. The circles tighten. The surface grows distant. The light fades. The bowl disappears into darkness. Until finally, the fish becomes only a distant point of light inside the abyss of what it once called life.

If you are still reading this, you are probably the third fish.

You know why.

That is not your problem anymore.

Your problem is the how.

Introduction

The Orbit

The alarm doesn't startle you anymore.

It hasn't in years. Somewhere along the way your body learned to surface just before it sounds, as if even your sleep has been trained to stay within the schedule. Your hand finds the phone in the dark without searching. The screen goes quiet. You lie still for exactly the amount of time your body needs — present, not yet thinking — and then your feet find the floor.

The floorboards are cool. The air is the same temperature it was yesterday. Your body moves through the kitchen the way water moves through a familiar channel — not deciding, just flowing. The coffee machine takes two movements. You have made this coffee so many times that your hands complete it while your mind is already somewhere else, already running the quiet inventory of the day ahead.

You stand at the window and drink.

Outside, the street is doing what it always does at this hour. Doors clicking shut in sequence. Figures moving in the same direction with the same weighted rhythm. The sky is the particular grey that means nothing yet — not storm, not sun, just the colour of another morning that looks exactly like the one before it.

You check the screen. You scroll. Nothing surprises you. Nothing is meant to.

You finish the coffee. You leave.

You know exactly where to stand on the platform.

Your body simply knows — the way it knows which step on the staircase creaks and adjusts its weight without being asked. The train doors open precisely where you are standing. You step inside. You find a space. Around you, a hundred people doing the same thing. Most of them somewhere else already — that private distance people carry in the morning, the mind having quietly left before the body arrived.

Nobody looks at anybody.

Not rudely. Just practically. You are all part of the same current and the current does not require eye contact.

You watch the city move past the window. Buildings you have passed so many times they have stopped being buildings and become wallpaper. A street corner you could draw from memory. The particular angle of morning light on a glass facade that you have never once stopped to look at directly, only registered in your peripheral vision, the way you register most of your life during these hours.

The train slows. You stand before it stops. Your body already knows.

The office receives you the way it always does.

The machine hums awake. The inbox contains the same species of message it contained yesterday — requests for updates, follow-ups on follow-ups, the careful bureaucratic language of people managing the appearance of progress. You read them. You respond with the appropriate words. Your fingers move through the responses before you have finished reading them. There is a word for this kind of efficiency, and you have learned to call it competence.

At some point the morning becomes a meeting.

Twelve people. A rectangular table. A graph on the wall with a line moving gently upward. The person at the front speaks with the particular calm authority of someone who has given this presentation many times and stopped needing to mean it. They talk about what is realistic. What the numbers support. What people in your position typically do.

You nod. Everyone nods. The room has learned its own language and this is how it speaks.

And then — just for a second — you look out the window.

A bird cuts across the sky. No track. No schedule. Just movement, clean and purposeless and completely free of the agenda on the projector behind you.

Something tightens in your chest. A feeling with no name, there and gone so fast you almost miss it. Almost.

Then the slide changes. The light in the room shifts. The feeling dissolves back into the air conditioning and the hum of the projector and the quiet sound of twelve people agreeing to keep things exactly where they are.

You turn back to the graph.

The line is safe. The pattern is intact. And you are still inside it.

The evening is the morning in reverse.

Keys onto the tray by the door. The click of metal against ceramic that means the day is officially over. The apartment exactly as you left it — clean, organised, yours in the way that a place you pay for is yours, which is to say completely, and not at all.

Dinner is functional. You move around the kitchen with the same economy of motion as the morning, chopping and heating and plating without ceremony. You sit across from the person who shares this space with you. You ask how their day was. They say fine. They ask about yours.

Busy, you say.

Which is true. And which says nothing.

The conversation stays where it is safe — logistics, plans, the weather forecast for the weekend. Not because you have nothing to say. But because saying it would mean admitting how little has actually happened. How much of the day was motion without movement. How the busyness somehow produced no particular moment worth describing, no feeling you could hand across the table and say — here, this, today this happened and it mattered.

You eat. The forks hit the porcelain in a steady, ordinary rhythm.

You do not talk about the bird.

By the time you reach the couch the day has almost finished spending itself.

The television plays something familiar in the background. You are not watching it so much as using it — a texture of voices and light to fill the room while your thumb moves upward through the phone, over and over, the final orbit of the day. Images. Opinions. Other people's lives arranged to look like something worth wanting. The algorithm knows what keeps you scrolling. It has learned the exact frequency of your restlessness and it feeds it just enough to keep you moving without ever arriving anywhere.

Your eyes grow heavy.

The phone drops.

And for one unguarded moment, in the space between waking and sleep where the noise finally stops and something quieter surfaces, you almost feel it. The question that has been waiting underneath the whole day. Underneath all the days.

But sleep arrives first.

And tomorrow the alarm will sound — not suddenly, not surprisingly — at the exact same hour. Your hand will find it in the dark. Your feet will find the floor. The coffee will take two movements.

The water is warm. The walls are invisible.

And somewhere in the deep comfort of not having to decide any of it, you close your eyes.

And call this life.

The Friction

It does not arrive the way you expect it to.

Not as a crisis. Not as a breakdown. Not as any of the dramatic forms you have been told transformation announces itself.

It arrives on an ordinary afternoon.

You are standing in a supermarket aisle holding a box of cereal, or sitting at your desk watching the cursor blink, or standing at a traffic light with the radio on and nothing in particular happening — and something shifts. A quiet, physical misalignment. Your chest tightens without reason. Your breath catches somewhere below your throat. The day is exactly what it was supposed to be, and your skin feels too tight for your body.

You look around. Everything is where it is supposed to be. The apartment is clean. The job is stable. By every available measure, you are fine.

But the tightness does not leave. It sits there, vibrating.

So you do something you do not normally do.

You follow it.

Something in you turns toward the feeling before you have decided to — the instinct of someone who hears a sound in a quiet house and needs to know it was nothing. Your mind drifts toward the edges. The thing you wanted to do years ago and talked yourself out of before it became real enough to fail. The version of your life that lives in the part of your thoughts you visit briefly and then close, the way you close a window before the cold gets in.

Your heart rate lifts. Something in you leans forward.

And then the voice appears.

It does not sound like a warning. It sounds like you — calm, reasonable, patient in the particular way of someone who has made this argument many times and knows it works. It does not need to raise itself above a murmur.

You're just tired, it says. You're overthinking this.

And then, quieter, with the weight of everything it knows about you:

You tried before. Remember how that ended.

It does not invent stories. It uses yours. The real ones — the attempt that didn't work, the year that cost more than you expected, the specific feeling of coming back to where you started and having to explain yourself to the people who told you not to go. It knows exactly which memories carry the most weight and it places them in front of you gently, the way you place furniture in front of a door you would rather not open.

There is nothing outside these walls, it says.

And your body believes it before your mind has time to argue.

The adrenaline drains from your limbs. Your shoulders drop. The tightness in your chest does not disappear — it settles, heavier and quieter, into something more manageable. The feeling that was vibrating a moment ago goes still.

It is a relief. What you do not notice is that relief and resignation feel identical.

Who is there? something in you asks. Faint. Almost not a question at all.

No answer.

The voice has already receded — back into the background, back into the low hum of the everyday, back into the current.

You put the cereal in the cart.

You let the cursor blink.

The light turns green.

And here is the part that makes the second fish different from the first.

The first fish never felt the wall. It swam its whole life in the middle of the bowl, away from the edges, in the warmest water, and called it home without ever knowing there was a name for what it was doing.

The second fish felt the wall.

It moved toward the feeling. It leaned. It almost asked the question.

And then it learned something the first fish never had to learn — that the voice is loudest precisely when you are closest to something real. That the comfort arrives on cue, perfectly timed, as if it has been waiting just beneath the surface for exactly this moment. That the relief feels so much like wisdom that you call it wisdom, and carry it with you, and use it to explain yourself to the version of you that still wonders.

The second fish does not stop looking because it is stupid or weak or broken.

It stops looking because looking hurts.

And the voice knows that — has always known that. So it offers the one thing that works every time.

A reason to stop.

And the familiar warmth settles back over everything. The routine. The reasons. The comfortable arrangement you have made with your own life.

Maybe you know that fish.

Maybe you have been that fish for longer than you want to count.

And then one day you are not.

The Ripple

One day you simply do not reach for the surface.

You do not plan it. You do not decide it the way you decide things. The phone is there. The next task is there. The comfortable exit from the feeling is right where it has always been, one small movement away.

And you leave it.

You stay with the feeling instead. Because something in you is tired of the distance between where you are and where the feeling lives, and for once the tiredness pulls you toward it instead of away.

You go still in the middle of your own life.

And the silence arrives.

The silence has weight to it. The kind of pressure that gathers in a room just before something shifts — when the air changes temperature and the sounds of ordinary life drop an octave and you become aware, suddenly and completely, of your own breathing.

You are suspended inside a single second.

You look up.

Above the surface of your life, in the space you have never quite allowed yourself to think about, a single drop forms.

It hangs there, catching the light in a way that makes something in your chest contract. You do not think about what it means. Your body has already understood it before your mind has finished the sentence. You watch it fall.

You cannot look away.

And underneath the watching, something forms that is not quite a thought yet — only the oldest feeling you own. That you are not entirely where you are supposed to be. That something is waiting on the other side of a distance you have never known how to cross.

The impact is silent.

But the ripple moves through the water and through you at the same time — a physical fact, the way a sound travels through a wall you thought was solid. The familiar geometry of your

day warps for one second into something unrecognisable. And in the centre of it all, a perfect circle forms around the point where the drop touched the surface.

For the first time, you see the shape of what you have been living inside.

Not a feeling. Not a suspicion.

A shape.

The bowl is not the world. Something exists beyond it.

I know that moment.

For more than fifteen years, I moved. Not across town. Across oceans. A new country, a new continent, a new society built from completely different materials. I believed, the way you believe things you have never tested, that if I changed what surrounded me, something inside me would change too.

And for a while, it did. Everything was new. Everything had to be learned from scratch — the language of the streets, the unwritten rules, the way people stood in queues and what they meant when they smiled. Newness has its own momentum. It carries you for a while.

But after two years, something settled back into place. Underneath the new skyline and the new language, the same restlessness was there. The same questions circling without answers. The same voice, patient and familiar, telling me I was fine. I had not escaped my patterns. I had moved them to another continent. Packed them carefully, carried them across the water, and set them down in a new city where nobody knew they were there.

I was alone inside it. And I could feel, somewhere underneath the aloneness, a signal with no address — the certainty that something existed beyond the edges of what I was living, without the faintest idea of how to reach it.

One night — I no longer remember what pushed me there — I typed something into a search bar.

How can I change my life.

That was all. No precision. No eloquence. Just that.

A maze I had been wandering alone, and suddenly there were others in it — still lost, still drawing the map, but drawing it honestly.

I was not special for arriving there.

I had simply stayed still long enough to look up.

Then the ripple fades.

The light returns to its ordinary lines. The desk is a desk again. The window is a window.

But the circle remains.

That is the thing nobody warns you about. It stays, pressed into the surface of your world, and once you have seen it you cannot arrange your vision to unsee it. You look at the coffee cup and you see it. You look at the calendar and you see it. You look at the conversation you are half-present for and you hear, underneath it, the quiet sound of glass.

Your life looks the same. But it feels like something you are inside of now, rather than something you simply are.

You are not special for arriving here.

You have not been chosen. You have not been saved.

You are simply a person who stayed still long enough to witness the edge of what you had accepted as possible.

And that is enough. That is more than enough to make going back impossible.

The particular, irreversible knowledge of someone who has seen the shape of their own container. Who cannot unfeel the curve of the glass. Who cannot unhear the silence that lives just underneath the noise of a life that was never quite theirs.

What remains after that knowledge arrives is heavier than before.

And more honest.

And the truth that settles in, slowly, the way cold settles into a room after a window has been opened —

Seeing the surface is not the same as reaching it.

The Spiral

It happens the way most real things happen — quietly, without announcement.

The decision forms before you have named it. The direction shifts.

You cannot move through this in a straight line.

You curve. You circle. You find your angle through what you are carrying. And so the movement becomes what it must become.

A spiral.

The first turn is wide and slow.

It carries you back through the surface layer of your own history. The promises you made to yourself that the next season would be different, and then watched the season pass from inside the same routine. The moments when something almost changed and then didn't. The attempts that started with real momentum and ended somewhere before they were supposed to.

The spiral forces you to look at those moments without the mercy of distance.

The way a room looks when you finally turn the lights on after months of navigating it in the dark — the same furniture, the same walls, only now you can see exactly where everything is.

You see the pattern.

And the pattern is information. The first turn does not punish you for it — it shows you its shape, so you can stop mistaking it for destiny.

Something in your chest releases. Slightly. Cautiously.

You are still here. The first circle is complete.

The spiral tightens.

The second turn pulls you deeper, into territory that is colder and more honest. The memories here are the ones you have trained yourself not to examine too directly — the attempts that started with real momentum and ended quietly, without ceremony, somewhere between the beginning and the thing they were supposed to become.

You see them now in sequence.

The same shape repeated across different years and different contexts — the initial movement, the first real resistance, and then the moment you chose the familiar discomfort over the unfamiliar unknown. The moment the voice arrived with its reasonable, careful arguments and you agreed before the sentence was finished.

You were listening to the most convincing voice you had ever heard. The one that knew your history better than anyone. The one that had kept you safe for so long that safety and smallness had become the same word.

The second turn takes the story that it was always someone else's fault and leaves it quietly on the floor.

If these patterns were built from inside, they can be changed from inside. That is the first real piece of leverage you have ever held.

The light fades.

The third turn carries you into the part of your own life you have never willingly entered. The weight here is undeniable — the kind that makes it impossible to pretend you are somewhere else.

And here, in the honest dark, the voice returns.

Genuinely afraid.

If you keep going, it says quietly, I cannot promise you anything down here.

I know how to keep you alive up there. I know the rules. I know which risks are real and which ones only feel that way. I know which walls to avoid and which ones to lean against.

Down here, I do not know the rules.

A pause. Longer than the others.

And that terrifies me.

You do not argue with the voice.

You have always understood the fear. The voice is telling the truth — the territory here is real, and the map it has used for a lifetime does not extend this far. But you have understood something the voice has not yet reached — that the only way to get a map of a place is to enter it.

So you keep moving.

The circles tighten.

Everything you organised your days around grows distant. The desk. The routine. The particular weight of obligations and expectations that you called ordinary life. There is nothing left to navigate by except the movement itself. The spiral deepens. Each turn more precise than the last.

And something changes.

The descent stops feeling like a fall and starts feeling like a method.

Each circle is a layer understood. Each turn is a wall seen clearly for the first time. You are learning the exact dimensions of what has been holding you — the depth of the patterns, the curve of the limits, the precise shape of the life you stopped questioning — so that when the moment comes, there will be no guessing. No running blindly into the same resistance. No collapsing back to where you started from a jump that was never aimed correctly.

The spiral is what makes escape possible.

The turns tighten.

The distance grows.

The light fades.

Everything familiar disappears.

Until finally —

you become only a distant point of clarity

inside the honest dark

of what you once called life.

Ground Zero

The darkness does not break. It softens.

The depth slowly shifts — the pressure still heavy against your ribs, the weight of the descent still settled in your bones. You return carrying something you did not have when you left.

Your life looks the same from here.

But you know its shape now.

That knowledge costs something. You do not arrive at the bottom of your own life and come back carrying the same assumptions you descended with. The fish that returns is not the same fish that left.

You have seen the patterns.

You have heard the voice name its own fear.

You have felt the spiral build force from nothing but your own willingness to descend.

And now you are here — somewhere in the middle of the process with enough clarity to understand where you are for the first time.

That is not a small thing.

Maybe some of it felt closer than you expected.

I am writing this from inside that spiral.

My feet are not on dry sand. I have not reached the ocean. I am navigating the middle layers of the descent, tracing my own loops right beside you.

I still doubt myself on quiet mornings when the weight returns. I still lose momentum. The voice still speaks — patient, reasonable, offering the familiar exit from the feeling I was moving toward.

The change is small but permanent.

I no longer mistake it for wisdom.

The spiral taught me to look at the perimeter instead of the sky.

Before you turn the page, stop.

Which fish are you?

The one who calls it the world — who wakes at the same hour, follows the same current, and has never once felt the limits because the familiar warmth has always been enough?

Those who feel something is wrong but cannot explain why — who have heard the voice arrive on cue, who have turned back from the edge more times than they want to count?

And those who have already seen the ripple — who felt the circle form, who know the shape of what they have been living inside, who can no longer pretend the surface is the ceiling?

Take your time with that.

Then ask yourself one more thing:

What part of your life already feels like a bowl you keep calling home?

Sit with whatever comes to mind.

Because you are about to look directly at the glass.

Chapter One — The Illusion