

Under Water

by Jan Alexander

When I was six, my father brought home a fishbowl. Look out for the inhabitants, he said. You can play Neptune in their microcosm of the sea. My father planted a seabed of purple gravel and decided who would live there, though. Fish by fish, week by week, flapping fins would catch his eye when he passed the pet shop below his office.

The first week we had only three fish. Electric blue triplets, lords of the manor, shimmying along the glass as if they wanted only for me to watch how they glowed. To work the seabed, my father brought the frantic little carp, six motley little mariners with their washed-out shimmer. They mined the gravel, they commuted to the brim and back, forging bubbles.

I could shake the bowl and start a tempest. My father caught me and said he'd take the fish back where they came from if I did that again. Be a kindly goddess of the sea, he commanded, just watch them and come to their aid if they ever happen to need you.

That week I didn't get any creatures that would live or die by my power play, but my father couldn't resist a mermaid with yellow lotuses around her neck, made of porcelain. Life, he said, is far more fragile than she is. I lowered her down through the slither, the siren of the depths. The plebeian carp gurgled at her bare bosoms, slapped her nose with their back fins. This is a worthy kingdom, I decided. They question what's before them, they touch before they believe.

I redeemed myself, and my father gave me fancier fish. My favorite was the blowsy ladyfish with her gold scales and bridal veil of fins. How she fluttered to and fro, her mouth gurgling in silent song. I saw how the blue lords wriggled when she passed them, how the carp collided with each other as they tried to catch her bubbles. She was at the top of her career, and now she wanted to marry, I thought, and she seemed to like the flat fish that would meet me face- to- face, his eyeballs bulging like bronzed pectorals. A

tinted zebra, he had brown and white stripes. I predicted he would love a chase.

Lady Bride followed him too closely, nibbled his tail fins. He tickled her nose with his rear-end regalia until the Sorceress arrived, the beauty with her lean triangle body, yellow and black on top, a ruby belly and blue phosphorous fins that beckoned Mr. Zebra, and he paddled after her as she preened herself in orbit. The new fish had stolen Lady Bride's love. I asked my father if he'd take away the evil temptress.

It's my republic, I reminded my father. Who stays, who goes should all be up to me. Had I been too petulant? My father looked ruefully at the Sorceress. He was sure I'd love the way she glowed, he pleaded. She cost more than any of the others.

Besides, he said, we can't undo love when it arrives.

The bowl developed a bitter green cast. I wondered if wanting love is always a baptism of tears.

Clean the water, my father reminded me. I scrubbed it to a crystal sparkle; he said a little luxury will cheer them all and brought a tree of freeform coral, dazzling orange. When I grow up, and my future husband proposes to me, I decided, he will give me a ring with a stone like this. A diamond of the sea lay down there now, and no one tried to steal it. From the new bag filled with water, though, my father added a curious battalion. I didn't think we needed policemen, but the four new fishes, rosy-cheek pink with gold blades for fins, were surely the guardians in armor.

Within the week, I learned how wrong I'd been, how much poor Lady Bride's broken heart had distracted me from greater crimes. A carp slunk lifeless along the purple bed, his pale flesh sloughing away in bite-sized chunks. The lords and workers dove at his corpse with mouths agape. Lurching in a circle, their eyes watchful, carp throats bulging with pieces of their own brother. And where were the policemen? Two flapped around Lady Bride. Two interrogated Mr. Zebra just for sport.

It fell to me to scour out cannibalism and corruption.

I found the net with the too-short handle and stood on a chair. Slogged down into crystalline dank, such a long way to the bottom and was that the body or its reflection?

I tipped the bowl for a closer view. Then the world crashed.

My face hit a glass dagger. A ruby belly lay crushed under my elbow, a blue lord thrashed in a pool of deeper red, and all I could do was scream.

Then came a hailstorm of parents and car keys and the mask that swallowed me.

When I tell the story, it ends with the mask. I don't mention how my father couldn't look at my face, and my mother cried, and I heard them saying you never know, cosmetic surgery could go wrong, and how one day I told them I like the scar running down my cheek, it gives me a story.

Without the scar I would have had to stay in the undertow of gray briefings that was law school; they would have looked at me there with eyes that said you're one of us. But I could tell they were thinking a proper attorney would never wear the remnants of battle.

Between a year of treading where I wasn't wanted and a quest that may go on forever, I wait tables down here. The café owner gave me a whole wall to hang my photographs, the realistic ones of crashing surf — the ocean as it is, not as it should be. We turn on tiny spotlights over the art but otherwise the interior is dim, so my scar is less noticeable than the brooding faces and the stoned slouches of the regulars here, those who sip their beer slowly and write thoughts on napkins. I wear a bright, orange streak in my hair; last month it was pink but the orange feels, somehow, like the right signal.

Vacationers with no other commitments can get immersed in these islands. As weeks wear on they come to the bar even when the sun is shining, day by day wringing themselves out a little bit more. Tonight a guy named Gil is on his third beer; that's how many it took before he peered into my face and asked, in an expectant tone, as if he imagines his own answers lie near the ocean floor, if I

got my scar in a skirmish with a great white shark. He's young, and I like his shoulders, so I've stayed past my shift to tell him how I learned that love must be a sideshow. He listens but grows a little squirmy and asks at the end, "Mr. Zebra? Why do you think they were interrogating him?"

I've learned to read faces in the dark. This guy will explore our waters and then move on, pretending he doesn't wish someone would want to catch him. For a few months, I lived with a poet bartender who said the carp might have died of yearning for Lady Bride; turns out that a man who imagines he could perish in the name of love starts picking fights when he sees that you aren't swimming away from him. But I have expectations of my own. Last night a diver headed south was toying with the idea of coming back. He asked me about the scar too; after nearly 18 years I can judge people by whether they ask me and what they say afterward. I told him the story the same way I always have. He thought about it a while, ordered another beer, and then he mused, you know, God is often klutzy too.

