

Crown-of-thorns

by Rachel J. Fenton

It's supposed to resemble the sea bed. These fish have never seen the outside of an aquarium and even if they had, they are reef fish, they'd probably get the bends and die if they went to the bottom of the ocean where the chances of them finding a ceramic settee are pretty slim. They must be living in a state of perpetual — short term perpetuity — nightmare. If only my memory were as short.

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Tissue thin, the voile rises and falls at the window like the valve of a new-born's heart, a pulse in slow motion.

I still have the photograph. I thought you looked daft in your flippers, something about the scale of them and the perspective; something about the way you filled the frame made you appear bigger, a trick of the camera maybe. I should have known better than to analyse you, to look too deeply. Some things simply aren't there, no matter how much we convince ourselves they are.

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"Help me pull the wrap off these, Lisa."

"There might be bugs."

"Months taped inside here, with all this stuffing? I assure, nothing can survive."

"Dead or alive, I'll pass, thanks, dad."

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They think I left them but I drowned.

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I didn't remember hearing her crying but I must have. I didn't know how I found myself in her room but I figured I'd only been asleep about an hour, two, tops, and sleep isn't so easy to get out of your system when you've only just gulped it down. I felt around by the door frame and flicked the switch and the light brought a shock shutter of black down over my eyes which took a few seconds to dissolve and reveal Lisa cowering on her bed, by the pillow.

"What is it, baby, bad dream?"

"Where's daddy?"

"Here I am, sweetie, what's up?"

"Jeez, Chris, you made me jump."

Chris looked at me like he always did when I'd caught him sneaking up behind me.

"Something bit me, dad."

"Where, let me see?"

Lisa stretched her leg out towards him. By the ankle bone above her left foot was a small inflammation. I sent them to go wash it. As soon as they were out of the room I stripped back the sheets. A white tail, about the size of a five cent coin, was making off down the side of the mattress. If Lisa had seen it she'd never have gone back to bed. I grabbed a book off the bedside cabinet but scuffed the wall as I lunged. Lisa came running.

"What was it, did you get it?"

"It's alright, it was only a mosquito, a pretty big one but nothing sinister."

"But you got it, right?"

"Oh, we've had words."

I turned the book in my hand: *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*.

"Dad, will you check?"

I scraped the book against the sill. The Poe-faced spider stuck for a second then dropped like a glob of spit. I listened but it was pointless, I couldn't hear the sea from this house.

"Shut that, mum. Dad, will you tell her?"

"Honey, you'll roast."

"No I won't, I'll leave the sheets off. Dad, please."

I said goodnight, leaving Chris to close the window and talk her to sleep, and hoped that would be the end of it.

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It's another world down there. I'd expected it to be silent but was caught in a sound net: the oxygen through the valve; the tidal pulse; my heart thumping in my chest cage; and you at the centre of it.

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Lisa woke us at six a.m. to ask if we could help her with the power tools: she wanted to make something. Chris tried to convince her to go back to bed for about the time it took for his hard on to wear off before resigning himself to a weekend of DIY. I tried to go back to sleep but all I could think of was that photograph of you.

* * *

"Is the sea meant to be this cold?"

"Come on, you'll love it."

"I can't swim."

"I'll teach you."

"I could drown."

"I'll save you."

"You're married."

"I'll leave."

"You have a daughter."

"It'll work out. Trust me."

* * *

I thought my heart was going to stop and I must have swallowed a pint of water when I gasped from the shock of the cold on my chest.

* * *

By nine I'd made breakfast and fed the fish on my way through the lounge. We seemed to have so much more furniture since we moved here, it all looked so big. Ridiculous. I half expected to see tags hanging off the stuff saying *eat me, drink this*. I tried to think what else we could get rid of as I went down to the garage to see what was cooking there.

"Just in time."

"No more mozzies." Lisa grinned.

You could slide a window in between them, call it a mirror. Sometimes I almost believe Chris gave birth to her himself. They both have the same mass of unruly brown hair, more like a hawthorn bush than a hairstyle: a surf style, sun bleached at the thorns. Always joined at the hips. And they have the same taste in everything, right down to the food they eat.

We ate out on the deck and afterwards Chris fitted the voile screens onto Lisa's windows while I caught up on some paperwork. I suppose that's what gave me the idea.

Since my business folded and Chris went back to construction work I haven't been able to justify having an office but I like to keep some of the old routines. Eleven years of working for myself is a hard habit to break. I'd had Chris put the filing cabinet in the corner by the dining table. All the paperwork was still in boxes and it took me twenty minutes of organising before I managed to alphabetise you. I couldn't believe what I'd done, still can't.

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There are over one hundred and fifty thousand species of fish on the Great Barrier Reef, all dependant on that one mass for existence. The reef itself looks to space for its own condition; controlled by the moon and primitive rhythms, cycles beyond bodily or earthly control. I started with what I could control.

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"There, see, you survived."

"That was amazing. What were those prickly things?"

"Urchins?"

"The ones you were injecting: what were you doing to them?"

"Crown-of-thorns? Starfish. Killing them."

"I thought you were supposed to be a conservationist?"

"Conservation means assessing what has a priority to life and assisting it. The reef is the most important thing here; without it there can be no other life."

* * *

One roll isn't going to be enough, I'm going to have to go get in some supplies. I'm spared having to explain because Lisa's watching sports with Chris so I take his truck as it's out on the road already. It's too big for my needs but I can be there and back in the time it'll take me to juggle the vehicles on the drive to get mine out.

The stationer's is pretty deserted but the supermarket's stuffed with holiday shoppers, panic buying as though there's going

to be some festive apocalypse; perhaps they know something I don't.

Chris and Lisa are still watching the game when I get back and don't even notice me take the box into the basement. I begin with the laundry room window.

It takes a bit of practice to get the plastic wrap taped up without it creasing over and sticking to itself. I reckon I waste about half a roll before I get the hang of it. After that the door's easy and I get through the next three rolls without wasting much. The stairwell's trickier, on account of the poor lighting and the angles, but it's good for getting the technique sorted before I go into the room where it matters.

We both shriek when I bump into Lisa on the landing.

"I didn't know you were back."

She hardly ever calls me mum, not unless she wants something.

"I didn't want to disturb you: you looked so cosy with your dad."

"Yeah, it's great having him back home. We're going to grab burgers for lunch, dad said to ask if you want to come?"

"Nah, I'll pass, got some laundry I want to get out of the way, thanks though."

I wait for the truck to pull off before I get my box from the basement and then I get to it. I know there are a few extra tubes of sealant in the garage but I'll do that last; first things first.

I stack all the furniture at the far side of the lounge, by the table, and start by taping over the sockets: I don't want to electrocute myself. The light switches are next and then I let fly with the glad wrap. The static from the carpet makes it easy and it takes less than ten minutes to cover the floor as far as the settee and things. I lift the smaller furniture from the matte side onto the shiny side of the room and mark out the position for the structure, making sure to leave a gap in the middle. That's important. I position the settee last and at one point it looks like I might have to give the job up as a whole load of wrap gets snagged around the casters. Another roll of wrap has it fixed though and I look at the clock: one

fifteen. I wish I'd asked them to run errands for me now: stalled them. I hope they eat in the burger restaurant and don't bring take out home.

Twenty minutes later I have the whole lounge covered and I get going with the sealant. It's quick drying but it stinks and I have my doubts as to how safe it will be but I can't stop now, can't give up for the sake of wondering. And then, the part I've been looking forward to the most.

* * *

"How is she?"

"Seems okay, Chris, remarkably, considering..."

"She's engaging in normal activities?"

"She's here now if you want to talk to her?"

"Hey, hon, how - don't go. What? Don't hang up

"What did she say, dad?"

"She forgot salt."

* * *

It was the tap water that did it, apparently, the shock of the cold; it would have been enough to stop anyone's heart. The water's warmer on the reefs but how would the fish have known that? I only hope they got to see Chris and Lisa's faces. I'll never forget Chris' expression when he saw me in the cave.

Waiting rooms always have aquariums. They're saying you've gone but I know you're still inside me, waiting in the dark. Now it's just a case of treading water; of holding my breath.

