

## A School of Fish

The crash occurred on the night of her 25<sup>th</sup> high school reunion.

But before such bus-based business, Brooke splashed a path through the foreign waters of the old gymnasium, astonished by its turbulent sea of forgotten faces. It didn't help that the reunion committee had committed themselves to an extensive underwater theme. The entire gym bathed in waves of aquamarine, creating an alluring blue blur.

The buffet, which had become a habitat of its own, had a sign that read: The Reef Within Reach. And it was. The tabletop reef was a flush of eye-popping produce: painted cauliflower heads, cleverly disguised chanterelles, mossy kelp salads, kale bunches sporting their twisted-by-the-sea frills, and pretzel-stick sculptures that had been dipped and dyed to look like red coral branches.

None of it looked all that appetizing, but she had to admit: some overachiever had clearly done their homework.

It was a lot to take in. And Brooke was the last to arrive, so add to that the weight of everyone gawking—those vapid stares with fish-blank eyes undoing the distance that was the time between them.

Here they were, together again.

A grouping of former classmates made their approach, circling her like a shiver of sharks determined to suss things out. These were people whom she could no longer name—people who, for whatever reason, though, seemed to remember her. Or maybe they were simply sniffing out the fresh chum, investigating this new arrival the one way they knew how.

But they weren't here to devour her, at least not in any traditional sense. It took but a moment for recognition to shimmer amongst them, and Brooke herself was soon caught up in the current that carried them all down the riverbed of memory lane.

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Something was off, however. Whether with her schoolmates, her sight, or the setting itself, she couldn't say. But this was what she saw—a packed school of indistinguishable fish, hands-turned-fins flopping with mouths bubbling and lips flapping—a writhing mass of grey scaly flesh pooling beneath the fluorescents.

Had they been fish all along? She could not say, at least not in any definitive way. But here her peers were: silvery, slippery salmon once sheathed in human skin—arrowlike creatures destined to struggle back home, swimming upstream to the riverbed where they originated to drop and deposit their pearly ruby roe en route to death row. Brooke swore she saw their skin peeling already; there were bright pockets of beet red shining through the gaps, and shed flakes flecked the floor, stashing a wafer-sheet coating of bonito confetti.

And all Brooke could think was that they were trashing their flesh and futures for what? To push out some sushi-topper eggs? She didn't get it then, didn't get it now. She'd keep her skin, thanks.

Despite her determination to stay human, though, Brooke's body absorbed the pull her mind rejected. The surf lapped at her ankles, beckoning her to disrobe and bathe in their collective muck.

She shook off such compulsions and glanced around, only to notice an old track star hovering nearby. He seemed to be speaking at her, but all Brooke saw was a fizz of bubbles, words escaping. The old jock was a striped marlin now, and he sported his spiky dorsal fin like a sign of status, showing off his physique just like he used to. It reminded her of that cologne-soaked, minty seafoam green letterman jacket of the way-back-when days. His arrogance had a welcome familiarity, one that got Brooke grinning.

He was now, as he was then, a total catch, and such knowledge did not elude him. Marlin Boy was the one alum amongst them who was flourishing—not floundering about. His sharp new appearance made him stand out from the crowd; there was no debate clubbing that. And it was nothing new, mind you, but she got the sense that he was hoping she would appreciate his shiny, spiny anatomy.

Call it an urge. A flicker. Something was surging, and it wasn't the sea.

He looked at her with his olive-pit eyes, pleading for that holy trinity of ego-stroking: recognition, acknowledgment, and, of course, attention.

Brooke's eyes darted away like marbles flung from the ring. There was a certain nudity to the need that he conveyed, and it doused her in a flood of discomfort. Desperate for distraction, her eyes bounced around, studying the series of lightning-strike stripes running up and down his torso.

She stared too long, memorizing the layout of this stunning specimen as if her very future could be determined through a test of his biology. And had there been an exam next period, she'd have aced it.

Despite her reluctance to admit such trivial things, the moment was pregnant with a mesmerizing magic. And maybe, just maybe, there was something a tad bit predaceous about it. And yet, there was this new magnetism between them. He'd never lacked charisma, but this, too, was new.

Brooke's brain was buzzing—brimming with the temptation to reach out and run her fingertips along his ever-lanky torso, becoming one with the scales, the fins, the stripes, everything that made him him....

But she held stern. Openly flirting with the king crab of the jocks was a risky move, perhaps even more so now. Things could turn lethal in an instant; with a sword like that, he could pierce anyone here. All he had to do was select a target and storm ahead—

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A tsunami of reality hit. It washed away the flow of fantasy, bombarding her mentality with but one thought: she wasn't a fucking fish. Not yet, anyway. It brought Brooke back to her senses. She didn't belong in this freaky aquarium, hadn't come here to show off snapshots of her picture-perfect fishband and all their precious fingerlings up against the downright iridescent backdrop of their Lisa Frank dream home.

Why had she come then?

Again, she couldn't say. Curiosity, maybe. A guiding instinct, perhaps. Whatever it was, whatever led her here was now pushing her away. She hightailed it out of that messy ocean, sprinting away from that foaming swarm of discomfort, away from the slew of hormone-driven tempers that threatened to drown her in these halls so many tides ago.

Brooke let her legs take charge, praying they'd take her anywhere but here. And they did. Those reliable limbs transported her to a spot of long-lost comfort, a cushion of yesteryear—the high jump mat by the track. Still here, still ultramarine blue. Still on the verge of being swallowed by its rubbery oval perimeter.

She sighed and ran her fingers over the wrinkles of the ground-rooted mattress, remembering all the times she leaped over that barrier of a bar, dreaming of the day she'd inevitably sprout wings and fly off so far. The days when effort equaled growth, where her belief

in the equations of life still mattered. The days when she'd push and kick off the terrain at her feet, ready to take flight. The angst-filled days and all those trying-to-be-a-bird days.

Somewhere amidst her abstraction, the rains came. A torrential downpour. They appeared with a driving force, hammering her skin with an almost biblical persistence.

Everything was becoming engulfed in this damning deluge.

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Despite the pervasive wetness that seemed stuck on following her, Brooke felt relief wash over her. Out here, she was away from the hustle and bustle of that fishy reunion; she'd carved out a pocket of solitude and safety away from that bizarre haddock havoc.

But that, too, would be short-lived.

Marlin Boy had swum after her, slicing through the years and the distance like a knife through a goddamn pat of butter. She couldn't outrun him then, couldn't escape him now. He swiveled toward her, closer and closer, mouth agape....

Brooke braced for impact, prepped herself to be pierced, penetrated by this monster she thirsted for but didn't desire in any deeper sense. And as his daggered jaw closed around her....

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She woke up, blinking back both the rain and the hallucination. There he was—that blonde kelpy moss atop his head. The ears beside his face. His fingers, starting to prune like hers. Human, again.

It occurred to her that he was talking to her. Probably had been for some time.

Was she alright? Brooke was reluctant to answer that one. None of this made any sense. Even now, with her ironclad comprehension of the words oil-spilling from his mouth, responding was one endeavor her tongue refused to tackle.

She wasn't okay, and she knew that, but such an admission carried too much weight: a drowning, damning depth.

But time was a luxury they no longer had. The school grounds were flooding and flooding fast. They were evacuating everyone, he said. It was time to go. Now.

He pushed her through that parking lot sea like he still had fins, but then again, he'd always moved with this effortless grace like his body just fit and knew how to handle its shit.

Hers was a different story. Brooke watched the drenched campus dissolve into a smear of drops behind them, watched her feet follow his lead with zero resistance, watched her body lean into him with a trust he hadn't earned but was there anyway.

They half-walked, half-swam aboard one of those metal macaroni buses, which, lucky for them, the school had prepped as a nostalgic offering for alumni transportation. It was a well-intended gesture, despite the suddenness of this less-fun-but-way-more-memorable emergency evacuation.

But here they were, either way, crammed in again—that familiar feel of knees jammed up against the leather seats ahead, asses squished and numb the second they plopped down. No backpacks to hug close, but here they were, a mess of smushed sardines trying not to panic. Trying to repress the fear, the anxiety, the am-I-going-to-die-ty.

The rain, meanwhile, continued to pick up pace, pelting the windows with blinding fury. The glass panes seemed to sob as the scene outside dissolved into some smeary, swirly Van Gogh. Kids continued to pile in, squeezing much too close for comfort.

The second those aisles were full, Marlin Boy pinched the door shut and started to drive, manning that bus with his ever-convenient savior complex. The determination was stamped across his face, and Brooke felt herself slip into the skin of a cheerleader, praying he'd escort them all to safety, away from this storm, away from their pasts, away from this cramped place that made its business corralling people like fish.

As he drove, his dorsal fin began to peak back through the mop-top mess that covered his scalp; she watched it breach.

Every last one of them prayed Marlin Boy knew what he was doing, knew how to drive the bus, knew where he was taking them. Prayed the track star knew how to be anything more than the boy they'd watched running countless hamster-wheel laps so many years ago. He'd always been impressive, an absolute marvel, sure. But could his blessed-with-good-genes physicality prove itself practical?

They would soon see.

Brooke stuck her face to the window. Kept her eyes locked on the landscape. Well, what was left of it. She'd never seen so much water. Spur-of-the-moment currents roared like lions, reclaiming the street-adjacent cornfields, plucking sedans off driveways like stray hairs—chucking them out in the ditch-turned-canal; neighborhood residents, ghosts of the past, were

stranded everywhere, drowning in desperation, failing to make it even ten feet, but the bus kept trying, she couldn't say why, it just kept pushing, inching, shoving its way along until the tires lost their grip on the road and Brooke knew this was it, knew the bus was toppling, turning parallel to the ground, and as it shifted, she shot for that curved peak of a fin shooting up toward the ceiling, but it was too late, she wouldn't hear the glass crunch, just the shrill shrieks of all these panic-stricken krill as their futures flew out fractured frames, submerged into a sea of the unknown, colliding into this bustling coral reef, bursting into being from the pavement their feet used to pound.

### **Author Bio**

Abbie Doll is a writer residing in Columbus, OH, with an MFA from Lindenwood University and is a Fiction Editor at *Identity Theory*. Her work has been featured in *Door Is a Jar Magazine*, *3:AM Magazine*, and *Pinch Journal Online*, among others. Connect on socials @AbbieDollWrites.