

AQUARIUM

Rich always thought that if faced with death, he would prefer to be eaten by sharks. The flash of teeth, the splashing of blood, the fins slicing through boiling water: how could death be any more spectacular?

Painful, maybe. That was the major drawback. Rich wasn't a big fan of pain, and even a paper cut could reduce him to a crouch and a quiet "Fuck!" which had already happened several times this morning, only a few hours into the new job. In response, the mothers glared as they grabbed the tickets off the counter and pulled their children's arms like they were leashes. Luckily, supervisor Sherry was nowhere to be seen.

But anyhow, if he could get past the pain, and needed to die for some reason, it would most definitely be via shark attack. Rich was still pondering this when Sherry appeared, her frizzy red hair surrounding her head like a halo.

"Break time, buddy!" she shouted and touched his arm while taking his place behind the counter. Rich tried to smile back at her and failed.

He decided to use his 100% employee discount to walk through the aquarium, which he had not yet seen. Having arrived in town only a week before, he'd been sleeping all day on his brother's sofa bed until John had picked up the sheets and thrown him on the floor. Rich took this as a hint and decided to walk around downtown, searching for "Help Wanted" signs in any of the dreary souvenir shops and seafood joints.

The aquarium was bizarrely out of place in the center of town—a new, modern-looking building that dwarfed its run-down and pastel-colored neighbors. But here Rich spotted a sign in the front window, a plain sheet of paper that announced "Apply Within" in flowery letters. Sherry had granted him an interview immediately, and he started the next day.

As the ticket man. Holy shit. Rich tried to forget about the hours of intense boredom ahead as he set off down the main corridor. It narrowed and wound around,

becoming dark with tanks on both sides that radiated shifting blue light. He slipped off the sunglasses he'd worn all morning to hide his reddened eyes. His buzz was almost completely gone, but the darkness of the hall made some of the dream-state return.

Noisy children whizzed past him, running up to the glass and beating their fists against it. "Hey fish! Hey stupid! Wake up!" They quickly gave up and raced to the next tank, leaving only nose-smears on the glass behind them.

Rich realized that the fish did look kind of morose. They stayed in one spot as if suspended by strings, with only their wavering fins and bobbing mouths providing any movement. He named them as he walked past each tank: anorexic fish (the boney one), paranoid fish (the one with the huge eyes), dominatrix fish (the spiny one), imagining himself a twisted Dr. Seuss who would write children's tales of fish committing atrocious sins and getting eaten by ignorant tourist fishermen in the end.

He read the sign beside the spiny fish, which was (he learned) more commonly known as the clown fish. It was orange and black striped, loaded with long barbs that swayed in the water like shreds of cloth. When he was a little boy he'd had a goldfish named Bruce that he thought was lonely. So he had bought another goldfish, brighter and shinier, to keep Bruce company. The next morning he'd come into the living room to see that Bruce's fins had been completely shredded by the new one, somehow. He flushed the new one immediately and told his mom it died, an easy fabrication in regard to the fragile lives of fish.

One of the clown fish was larger than the rest, and started moving closer to him. He thought he was imagining it at first, given his current state of mind, until the fish actually bumped into the glass. Rich watched in disbelief as the fish did it again, its bobbing mouth softly kissing the glass. He smiled and nodded at the fish, wanting to appease it, before backing away and continuing onward.

Sometimes the corridors opened up into larger rooms. One held an enormous shallow pool holding flat

creatures that zoomed around, past the outstretched hands of children. Manta rays: not harmful, according to the sign. The next large room housed a vast collection of sea-shells arranged in glass cases covering the walls. Yeah, pretty, but kind of boring. Rich continued through the winding corridors, slowing in front of each tank to watch the fish come to the glass to stare back at him. Wild. Knowing it had to be an illusion, he decided to enjoy it. He nodded and pretended to tip an invisible hat at each stop.

The final room cut off his amusement at once. It held a huge tank that went up almost three floors, and at first glance appeared empty with only some seaweed and rocks on the bottom. Then Rich looked up and saw them; two dark shapes moving swiftly, their large tails whipping back and forth.

Sharks. Rich looked at the sign on the wall and read that they were both tiger sharks, second only to the great white in numbers of unprovoked attacks on humans. Apparently these were caused by innate curiosity and an indiscriminate appetite.

The sharks didn't look at him as the other fish had. They continued to surge through the tank, almost

running into the glass before turning at the last second, as if they were searching for a secret way out.

It wasn't until he arrived back at his post an hour later that Rich remembered breaks were only supposed to be 15 minutes long. Sherry stood in his place, idly flipping through a *People* magazine and ignoring a teenage couple making out behind the brochures. The room was otherwise empty: an apparent lunch-time lull.

"There you are," she cried and straightened up, looking him up and down. "I thought you'd fallen into a tank and drowned. Lucky there's been no problems today." She motioned to the small radio clipped to her hefty waist.

"Sorry," Rich murmured and slipped his sunglasses back on. "I got lost." Sherry shook her head but smiled. She patted his ass on the way out. Rich found it entirely depressing and sighed through the rest of his shift.

Sherry stopped him in the coatroom as he was checking out his time card.



Ooda Group (Shaun Owens-Agase, Tyler Peterson, Kristof Wickman), *Office Kiss*, ceiling tile, carpet, plywood, 2x2's, fan, CK Contradiction, CK Truth, 2004

“So, Richie Rich,” she said, slipping on a huge sweater. “I got a question for ya.”

“What’s that?” he asked, attempting to match her over-enthusiastic tone, and wondering if Richie Rich would become his new, hated nickname.

“Well, where I’m from, which is here, we only use sunglasses when we’re outside. And only then if actually sunny.”

Wait, didn’t you come from a cave? Rich realized he was required to provide an explanation instead of standing there smirking, and he removed the sunglasses and squinted. “I actually have weak pupils. They don’t get as small as they’re supposed to, so when I’m subjected to a larger amount of light, even indirect, my eyes can’t handle it. And there are a lot of windows in the lobby.”

Sherry scrunched her forehead as she buttoned her sweater. Rich waited patiently for her to question and perhaps fire him. She was kind of old, probably in her late 30s, but she couldn’t be as dumb as she appeared if she was running such a large aquarium. He pictured the aquarium at night, the lights out and the fish drifting around in complete darkness.

“Does anyone else stay here over night?” he asked, hoping they did.

She nodded. “Of course. We have night people that keep things running. I heard this horror story a couple years ago about a terrible aquarium in Anaheim where the night people all left to go to a bar, and when they got back in the morning all the fish were floating on top of the water. The central heating system had blown out and they weren’t there to fix it.”

“That’s awful!” Rich cried, and Sherry nodded.

“I know,” she said, her mouth frozen into a brave grimace. “It was a sad day for that aquarium.”

Nothing more was said of Rich’s eye condition, so he went back home to John’s. He fell asleep early and dreamed about sitting on the bottom of the ocean, watching dark shapes approach him from a distance.

The next day at work, another stranger stood in his place; a small girl with thick blond hair and clear braces.

“We’re not quite open,” she told him. “I haven’t turned on the cash register yet.”

“I work here,” Rich said. “This is my shift.”

“No,” the girl said, her friendly tone gone. “It’s mine.” He shook his head and turned to walk back out the door, wondering if he had enough money in his pocket for breakfast at Denny’s, when she called, “Oh, are you

Richard? Sorry, I forgot. Sherry told me to tell you that you’re helping Lisa today. You’re feeding the fish. She said something about it being easier on your eyes.”

Richard smiled and started down the corridor.

Sherry was nowhere to be found, so he searched for Lisa. He saw the net before anything else, waving slowly through a tank of tiny green fish and dropping little food particles into their path.

He wondered how he could get her attention, since she was above the tank. He walked to the tank and crouched down, looking up through the seaweed and school of tiny fish. A girl’s face appeared above him, bluish-white like a corpse, with her mouth and eyes dark holes. The face looked oddly detached; a severed head floating at the surface. The tiny green fish sparkled as they flitted through their food. He stood transfixed by the sight until something else appeared next to the head: a waving hand. He waved back, but the head and hand disappeared.

A minute later something grabbed his arm.

“Rich.” The corpse in its entirety. Only she was much more beautiful up close, her skin smooth and translucent like mother-of-pearl, her dark green eyes full of the same radiant sheen of the tiny fish.

“I’m Lisa,” she went on. “You’re going to help me for a couple weeks, until Carson gets back. Have you ever fed fish before?”

“Just my goldfish,” he said truthfully, and was surprised when she laughed.

She turned and walked away, the thin gold sheet of her hair fluttering against her back. Rich followed her and felt as if they were both underwater, and though he was moving as fast as he could he wouldn’t be able to catch up.

They fed the manta rays next. Lisa said they were her favorite, and Rich told her they looked like flying carpets, which made her grin at him like they were sharing a private joke.

Lisa brought out two buckets of fish innards and set one by Rich’s feet before walking to the other side of the circular pool. For once the room was empty, and they were alone.

“Just grab a piece like this,” she said and held a dripping pink mass under the water. “They have to eat from our hands, because it’s too much of a pain to drag the extras out after they’re done.”

“What spoiled manta rays,” Rich said, grabbing a

piece with his gloved hand and holding it underwater. He suddenly realized what he was doing and wanted to snatch it back out. What if the rays bite him? They obviously had plenty of teeth to chew this food, let alone his hand.

“Don’t worry,” Lisa said, watching his expression. “They don’t bite.” A dark shape flew by her, and she held up her hand, unharmed. “See?”

Rich nodded and concentrated on the several creatures heading straight towards him, their thin bodies rippling. His face felt very warm, though his arm shivered from the cold water. The largest one, probably three feet across, swished sideways over his hand and sucked up the food like a tiny vacuum. He held up his hand and showed it to Lisa, who pretended to send him a high-five through the air.

A group of middle-school boys wandered in, yelling and punching at each other. They ran up to the pool and started splashing each other.

“Stop!” Lisa yelled with the ferocity of a lifeguard. They paused mid-splash and stared at her. “Do anything like that again and you’ll get kicked out,” she said.

“Fuck you, fish lady!” the tallest said, too quiet to be truly defiant. The other boys giggled and they all sprinted into the next room.

Lisa rolled her eyes, but a grandmother and some little girls came in before she could speak. They continued to feed the manta rays in a peaceable silence, and Rich soon became brave enough to touch the rays with his other hand, feeling their velvety softness brush past.

Fish Lady, he thought when he looked over at Lisa, and saw that she was petting the rays as well.

By the time they got to the shark tank, Rich felt like he had known Lisa since kindergarten. He had no idea he could joke around so easily with someone new, but after a few hours his throat felt raw from talking and laughing so much. It was thrilling, especially given Lisa’s gorgeous smile. Rich had never experienced any deep-rooted self-esteem issues, but he thought he viewed himself more accurately than most. He was twenty-six, and had stopped talking about going back to school more than a couple years ago. He had worked a variety of jobs since high school, including truck-washer, encyclopedia salesman, and even a hair salon receptionist. It hadn’t really mattered in the past; Rich had thought that eventually, when he and Jane got married, her Dad would be forced to give him a job at his company, and then he would stop being such a slacker and would work his way up the corporate ladder so that their kids could wear Baby Gap

clothes and go on family vacations to Disneyland. It had seemed reasonable at the time, and Rich was so content that he never heeded Jane’s complaints that he was wasting his life and wasn’t going to go anywhere if he didn’t get his shit together. Then they’d watch a DVD and he’d think that was it, just a small obligatory outburst from time to time to make her feel she was fulfilling her duty as the supportive, encouraging girlfriend. And after six fucking years he had found out that she was actually serious. Since his ex-best friend Dave’s aspirations of rock-stardom were utterly ridiculous, he realized that Jane would have been happy with any delusion, which he’d always been too realistic to have.

“These are the worst,” Lisa said as they stood atop a bridge that extended over the top of the shark tank. “They’re always hungry. We used to keep other fish at the bottom of the tank, but these guys kept eating them, so they had to be moved.”

Rich nodded, swallowing. They looked much bigger from above, their thick bodies winding around in an intricate pattern, speeding up as if they could sense the humans above and were excited about the possible chance of one falling in.

“Have there ever been any accidents?” he asked. Lisa shook her head.

“Not here. I’ve heard of that happening in other places, though. They seem so peaceful right now, but they really are killers.”

Peaceful? What was she talking about? Lisa grabbed a basket-ball sized chunk of meat, raw and dripping, and dropped it. Immediately one of the sharks chomped it, tearing off half with an efficient head-twist. The other grabbed the rest, and it was gone.

“Do you want to?” she asked. Rich nodded, gripping the small metal railing that stood only a foot from the floor of the bridge to keep their crouched bodies from tipping in. He picked up another piece of meat (disgusting), and let go. This time both sharks attempted to grip it in their mouths at one time, and they crashed into each other, their giant bodies churning the water. The slightly bigger one won and gnawed and tore the meat until just a few floating particles remained. As they tossed down more and more meat, Rich began imagining that it was his body instead that plopped into the water. He pictured himself floating, treading water with a startled expression on his face. What would they go for first? An arm? A leg?

By the time the buckets were empty, Rich had to excuse himself to run to the bathroom. He vomited twice



Christine Carlson, *Schism*, mixed media on paper, 2004

before returning to Lisa and pretending that nothing had happened.

Time with Lisa only got better from there, and not just because his contact with Sherry dropped to zero. Even virtually non-verbal brother John said something when he noticed that Rich had stopped watching all-night MTV marathons of reality shows.

“Things good at work?” John said one night as they feasted on spaghetti noodles and ketchup.

Rich just nodded and smiled. The constant thoughts of *Jane, Jane, Jane* had begun to attenuate, making it less necessary to smoke and drink as much as he had been doing. And finally, it happened. He wasn’t sure exactly how it occurred, but one night he and Lisa ended up grabbing dinner after work.

“So what’s with the eye thing?” she asked as they bit into their hamburgers.

“What?” He had been concentrating on her loose green sweater, trying to picture what was beneath it.

“Your eye condition. Sherry said you were having trouble at the ticket counter because it’s so bright in the lobby. But you look okay now.”

“Oh.” Rich shrugged and bit into a fry. “That was a lie, actually. I smoked weed that morning and couldn’t go in looking like Frankenstein.” The words were out before he could stop them, and his shoulders sagged. Lisa

didn’t look like the type of girl to condone smoking on the job, or marijuana in general. It was all over; she’d label him a loser and that would be it.

She stared down at her plate with a fry frozen in her hand, her expression serious. Then she looked up and smiled. “Promise you won’t tell anyone?”

He nodded, drinking some Coke to avoid an enthusiastic verbal affirmation.

She folded her hands on the table. “When I was twelve I learned about Tourette’s syndrome from some movie, after we’d just moved from Chicago to San Diego. And on the first day of seventh grade, on one of the breaks I just started screaming at this girl that had been bitchy to me the whole morning. I said the most awful things; I don’t even know where I’d heard them before. And then of course I was forced to go to the principal’s office, and I started crying and I told them I had Tourette’s. They called my house that night, and I answered the phone and pretended to be my Mom so I could confirm the story. And for the rest of junior high I randomly yelled at people that pissed me off, and sometimes my friends, for no reason.”

She looked up, her green eyes huge and shimmering in the sunlight.

“That’s amazing,” Rich said. *Jane. Jane who?*

Things came crashing down exactly two weeks later, when Carson returned. Rich remembered hearing

about him vaguely on the first day, but in Lisa's glowing presence he had completely forgotten about Carson's existence. So of course it was quite a shock to skip into the clock-in room that morning and find Lisa covering her face and shaking as a dark-haired stranger gripped her shoulders.

"What the fuck," Rich cried, and grabbed the man's right arm. They both turned to him. Lisa uncovered her face, and Rich saw that although her eyes were red and runny, it was from laughter.

"Rich," she said, as if his sputtered profanity had never occurred. "This is Carson." He removed his arm from Rich's grasp and passed off a grimace for a smile.

"Carson," Rich said, still not knowing.

"He's the original fish feeder," Lisa said. "He just got back from Argentina, so I guess you'll be able to go back to drugs in the morning."

The comment hung in the air, obviously supposed to be a joke but coming out flat. Carson held out his hand. "Good to meet you, man." His voice was smooth and deep, the perfect complement to his chocolate brown eyes and faultless features. Rich shook it and nodded, remembering suddenly that he had forgotten his sunglasses.

Carson offered to take Rich's spot for the day, given Rich's dilemma of having to work sans-sunglasses and explaining this miraculous healing to Sherry. It was a nice gesture on Carson's part but it made Rich hate him even more. It did give him one last day with Lisa, though.

Rich had a terrible suspicion that he wouldn't see her again after this. They had connected (he was sure of that), and an hour before he would have put money on the fact that they'd start to officially date in the next couple weeks. He'd even begun planning the perfect situation in which to kiss her and feel her soft lips against his.

But the way she had been looking at Carson that morning, and was now blathering on about him non-stop made Rich seriously question the longevity of their relationship.

"I would love to go to Argentina," Lisa gushed as they sprinkled food into the clown fish tank. "Carson says it's so gorgeous. God, he's been scuba-diving all over the place. Last summer he went to Australia and swam in the Great Barrier Reef. Can you believe that?"

But we laughed together. I know one of your secrets. Rich tried to smile at the required moments when she looked at him. The fish seemed to sense that something was wrong. In every tank the food fell to the bottom, untouched.

"That's weird," Lisa said. "I wonder if there's something wrong with the water."

The manta rays wouldn't even come near them. They stayed on the bottom of the pool, their flat bodies completely still.

"Come on, guys!" Lisa called to them, shaking the bait in the water. "Lunch is served!" Rich leaned against the tank and watched them, not bothering to hold out any food.

Maybe he and Lisa would pass in the clock-in room from time to time, saying hello and awkwardly attempting jokes. She might mention his eye condition. He'd nod and chuckle and feel like crying.

And perhaps Carson would come in, and Lisa would look at him and beam with the smile that used to be solely for him.

Lisa's exuberance heightened throughout the day, until Rich thought she was acting manic. He, conversely, sunk lower into a swirling pit of resentment and jealousy. He had thought Lisa was his rescuer, his savior, but it had all turned out to be a pathetic mistake on his part. How could such a luminous being feel anything but pity for such a worthless creature as himself?

On the way to the shark tank they walked through several corridors, where the fish aligned in rows near the glass and watched them pass. Lisa didn't seem to notice. They stared at Rich as if he were a prisoner being led to the chair and they were the other inmates leaning against the bars. He walked behind Lisa and tried to make eye contact with all of them, winking courageously and rolling his eyes in defiance. He wished desperately he could save them, maybe load them all into a huge tank in a van and drive them to the coast and release them into the sea. They would turn and wave their little fins in gratitude before swimming away.

"These guys are crazy today," Lisa said, staring down into the water. Ben and Jerry (who they'd named to make less intimidating) looked as if they were moving in fast-forward, swimming much faster than usual and causing ripples on the surface fifteen feet above their bodies.

Rich didn't reply. He leaned onto the thin railing. He felt exhausted and slightly dizzy. The room seemed too dark, and the tank below looked blindingly bright. The sharks were huge and black, their apparent energy making them twice as large.

"You little guys must be hungry," Lisa called down

to the sharks in a baby-voice Rich had never heard before, and which grated on his nerves. She pulled on her gloves and dragged the bucket closer to her. "What have you been doing to work up such an appetite?"

"Don't talk to them like that," Rich said. His voice sounded strange, strangled and too high. He wiped his forehead, forgetting he already had the gloves on, and it left a pungent fishy smell on his skin. His stomach clenched upon itself.

"What's wrong, is Richie scared they're going to bite me?" she asked and, her laugh sounded malicious, as if she knew that he had loved her.

"Is Richie scared of the big bad sharks?" she asked. She leaned over the side and splashed her hand in the water. "Well, I'm not afraid."

"Don't do that," Rich said, irritated. He grabbed her hand out.

She grabbed her hand away and splashed again. "Here, sharkies. Come and get me."

They were swimming close to the surface now, closer than Rich had ever seen them before. He caught sight of their black

eyes, gleaming on both sides of their flattened heads. Ten feet. Five feet.

"Lisa, don't," he said. "They're too close." The room seemed even darker now, and he rubbed his eyes, ignoring the fishy smell all over his face.

Lisa still had her hand in the water, no longer splashing but just slowly waving back and forth. She

watched it as if in a trance. "Do you really think they would bite me?" she asked, leaning further over the railing. The slightly larger shark, Jerry, swam up suddenly and passed by only a foot from her hand.

"God, what the fuck are you doing?" Rich said. He gripped her arm and pulled it out of the water.

"Stop, you're hurting me!" she cried and jerked

away. Rich felt her body tipping over the railing almost before it started happening. Her face changed; her mouth opened and her eyes became wide.

He reacted quickly, pulling her body back with all of his strength and tossing her away from the water. And with that wrench, his own weight shifted over the railing and he felt himself falling. He was then in the water, shockingly cold, and from below the surface he could see Lisa's face, white as a corpse, her mouth and eyes two shadowy holes.

The terror Rich would have expected didn't come, but he found he couldn't move. He stared up, watching Lisa's face grow smaller as he began to sink. Something brushed his

outstretched fingers, and he turned to watch Jerry glide past, staring at him with one black marble eye. They circled him, so close he could catch glimpses of their yawning mouths lined with little white teeth. He moved his hand and touched the end of a fin as Ben slid by, and it burned against his fingers like sandpaper. There were now tiny red dots on his fingers.



Melissa Cooke, *Throne of Wisdom*, gouache, 2004

That was when Rich kicked and pulled his arms until he broke the surface, gasping and reaching for the small bridge. Lisa was shrieking and she grabbed his hands and tried to pull him up, but she wasn't strong enough.

The railing was too far above him to reach. He treaded water and looked around him at the fins now cutting through the surface of the water. Holy fuck. This was ridiculous. Jerry brushed past his hand again. His fingers were now releasing thin ribbons of pink into the water.

Lisa continued screaming from the bridge; Rich couldn't process the words. Instead, he continued treading water and felt strangely calm. He really couldn't have planned it any better. He would finally be put out of his unending misery, and the world would be free of his body doing nothing but taking up space and creating waste.

He felt kind of bad for Lisa, who would probably blame herself in some capacity. But would she really? Or would she just tell everyone that he had fell in because he was a dumb-ass and leaned too far over? Yeah, they'd talked a lot when working together, but it was always about old TV shows and bands and never anything important, except for that one flash of intimacy at the burger joint. But really, how well did he know Lisa? Would he have ever expected her to purposefully tease the sharks?

He had to stop this; Lisa was just a person, as full of blame as anyone else. She was not perfect, not an angelic Fish Lady. And neither was Jane, for that matter.

Then Rich actually became afraid, and threw his head around at the fins. But they swiftly sank into the water, and he watched as the sharks swam towards the bottom of the pool, circling around at a much slower pace as if he'd bored them. Rich grabbed again at Lisa's outstretched arm, who pulled him up enough so he could clutch the railing. He managed to hoist himself up and roll over onto the bridge. Lying on his back, he panted and stared at the ceiling. Lisa clutched at him and laid her head down on his chest, moaning a stream of profanities that didn't sound right, coming out of her mouth.

After a second Rich sat up and stared into the water. The sharks' power was apparent, even from up here. And they'd given him a second chance. He looked at his fingers, which spilled bright red droplets through the grating and into the tank. He stood up and walked across the bridge and down the stairs, back into the aquarium. Lisa followed a few steps behind, still blubbing.

The fish were actually swimming now, and they ignored him as he passed. Some of them looked almost

playful, chasing each other and hiding behind bright pieces of coral. Maybe they weren't trapped, like he had thought they were. They could be perfectly happy. They were only fish, after all.

When Rich entered the lobby, Sherry looked up from behind the cash register, where she and the blonde girl were smacking at the machine as a long, annoyed line formed.

"Where are your sunglasses?" Sherry asked, and then, in a higher voice, "why are you wet?"

"Ask Lisa," he said as he breezed by. "I can't work here anymore. I'm going to go find something better."

Outside, the sun warmed him immediately. He looked all around him, at the honking cars and bikers and rollerbladers shooting by. Seagulls screeched down from the sky, and he looked up at them with a hand over his eyes. They swooped and shrieked, as if announcing how great it was to be a bird, even if they did eat garbage from time to time.

Rich grinned. He shook his head and droplets flew out of his hair, sparkling in the light. Then he started walking down the sidewalk, leaving wet footprints in his wake.❖



Weston Ulfig, *Daytime Monster*, serigraph, 2004



Andrew Hutchison, *Pacifist*, oil, 2005