

## Deep Blue

I loved the ocean. For much of my early childhood, my walls were plastered with kodak prints taken by my grandparents. Goatfish, surgeonfish, parrotfish, triggerfish, morays, seahorses and silver clouds of minnows watched me sleep with beady black eyes. I would press my back against their paper scales at night to protect my nape from the vampires and flitting shadows who lived in my closet. I'd lost count of how many times I'd seen Blue Planet, and each time I'd find myself just as wonderstruck and wide-eyed by the creatures that lived beneath the waves as I had been on my first viewing. So when my parents told me we were going to Bonaire, the island paradise which I'd seen so many photos from and heard so much about, I couldn't contain my excitement.

Bonaire was deceitful. A barren, roasted landscape spattered in sand, salt farms, and graffiti coated colonial ruins. Devoid of life except for Dutchmen and giant green iguanas. My family clambered into a rental pickup truck and bounced away from the airstrip towards Buddy's Dive, the only motel/diving pier combo on the island at the time. Our journey there was fraught with horny lizards, who liked to play chicken with two ton trucks on the island's single highway to try and impress potential mates. Most of the time this did not work in their favor, and they instead ended up as tire imprinted lizard patties, unceremoniously sizzling on sunbaked asphalt in front of the cold blooded lady lizards.

After arriving at Buddy's Dive, I met Barry Cade. Literally more fish than man, his entire body was covered in an ever-growing tattoo of a coral reef. After each diving expedition, he'd add another colorful species to the inked ocean that slowly spread down his back, and over his arms and legs. Though an accomplished diver, Barry was not a particularly nice man, who

seemed to enjoy tormenting children. He had simultaneously introduced me to himself and the Caribbean Ocean by tackling me from behind as I stood oblivious on a pier, dragging me screaming and clawing into the depths below. This would be far from the last time he would do this, but I was willing to look past it for a chance to go scuba diving. The day after the involuntary trust fall, he was handing me a regulator and demonstrating how to properly breathe in order to conserve our shared air supply. The key was to not panic, which seemed easy enough at the time.

We made quite the sight. The Bonairians looked on as a large British man engraved with fish wearing nothing but a speedo, scuba gear, and a ten year old cinched onto his chest prepared to dive off of the pier. I closed my eyes, felt my stomach drop as Barry's feet left the pier, heard the muffled boom as we hit the water. I opened my eyes, and breathed in. The regulator hissed, and canned air filled my lungs. I was part fish now, like Barry, and it was exhilarating. I gesticulated wildly towards the reef, watched my new pair of arms give me the OK sign and propel me towards it, watched a stippled yellow moray bend and weave its way along my muscled right bicep. It was like piloting a mech suit, with Barry moving obediently in whatever direction I pointed.

The reef was breathtaking. Filtered sunlight danced along the rainbow staghorn coral, tiny fluorescent fish tentatively peaked out of sponges. Barry pointed out one of the siblings of the moray on his arm, which cautiously watched us with unblinking eyes while its long body coiled and disappeared into a dark crevice in the reef. Cleaner shrimps scurried around and preened a morose looking grouper. My grandmother had told me that the shrimp would trim your cuticles if you stayed still enough, but the aquatic manicurists had more important clientele and

ignored my outstretched fingers. As I looked around the reef in wonder, I saw it, or rather the lack thereof. The steady flow of bubbles exiting my regulator abruptly stopped.

I had been so distracted by the colorful world around me that I had failed to notice that Barry, the reef, and I were floating over the edge of a coastal dropoff. Once I saw the yawning blue-black abyss, I could not look away, though I desperately wanted to. There was something indescribably terrifying about it. It produced in me the same brand of fear that made our ancestors hide in caves and huddle around dancing flames at night, that instinctual dread that comes when faced with the unknown and the immense. In its unending depths, I felt something unknowable watching me, saw the same flitting shadows from my cursed closet back home, undulating just out of sight. It was so vast, too vast. I shivered in the temperate tropical water, unsure if the sudden cold was from the deep sea water wafting up from the depths, or from my body signaling to me that it sensed danger. I wanted to listen, to claw my way to the surface, but nylon straps firmly held me in place, exposing my soft underside to whatever was down there like an obedient dog rolling over for its master.

The hissing of the regulator began again, but this time with more urgency, streams of bubbles rapidly shooting from its ports. I pointed firmly and repeatedly towards the shore, eyes glued to the void. When Barry's tattooed hand made the OK gesture again in my peripheral vision, I vehemently shook my head. The arms pointed upwards and crossed, signaling that we could not ascend. I resigned myself, The Bends were more frightening than anything that could be in the pit below. Barry was merciful enough to swim up and away from the edge, and we enjoyed the reef from a safer vantage. Despite that, I kept a wary eye on the dropoff, ensuring that nothing clambered over its coral encrusted lip without me knowing.

That abyss lurked in the back of my mind long after making landfall. It still does to this day. But I don't fear it in the way that I used to. I have a morbid fascination with it, maybe even an obsession. When my mind wanders, I find myself drawing tentacles, spiraling appendages which decorate the margins of any paper placed in front of me, intertwining with one another like some kind of nautical illuminated manuscript. I draw monsters with bulging deep sea eyes, long anglerfish teeth, scaled and webbed fingers. Lovecraft's rich language and stories of aquatic horrors beyond human comprehension occupy my mind and my bookshelves. They make the ocean no less terrifying, but add a degree of mysticism to its depths.

Lately, I've found myself thinking about it more than usual. Perhaps it is time to face the monsters hiding in my closet. Perhaps it is time to return to the deep blue.