

## 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, my back pressed securely against their paper scales to protect my nape from the vampires and the flitting shadows living in my closet. I'd lost count of how many times I'd seen Blue Planet, each time just as wide eyed and fascinated by the bizarre creatures that lived deep beneath the waves. So when my parents told me we were going to Bonaire, the mystical island paradise that I'd seen so many photos of and heard so much about, I couldn't contain my excitement.

Bonaire was deceitful. A barren, roasted landscape powdered with sand, dotted with salt farms and graffiti coated colonial ruins, devoid of life except for giant iguanas and Dutchmen. My family huddled into a rental pickup truck and bounced away from the airstrip towards Buddy's Dive, the only motel/diving pier on the island at the time. Our journey there was fraught with many lust blinded lizards, who played chicken with two ton trucks to impress their cold blooded ladies. Half of the time, this did not work in their favor, and they ended up becoming lizard patties, sizzling on sunbaked asphalt in front of their unimpressed mates.

Upon arriving at Buddy's Dive, I met Barry Cade. Literally more fish than man, he'd add another colorful species to the inked ocean slowly spreading down his back, and over his arms and legs after each diving expedition. Though an accomplished diver, Barry was not a nice man, who seemed to enjoy frightening children. He had simultaneously introduced me to himself and the Caribbean sea 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 surprise trust fall, he was handing me a regulator and demonstrating how to breathe in order to conserve our shared air supply for as long as possible. The key was to not panic. 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, 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 at high speed towards it, a stippled yellow moray bending and weaving along my muscled right bicep. It was like piloting a mech, with Barry moving obediently in whatever direction I pointed.

The reef was beautiful, 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, cautiously watching us with unblinking eyes, its long body coiling and disappearing 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, a yawning blue-black abyss. Once I saw it, I could not look away, though I desperately wanted to. There was

something indescribably terrifying about it, the same instinctual dread that comes with the unknown, the same feeling that made our ancestors hide in caves and huddle around dancing flames at night. In its unending depths, I felt something unknowable and immense 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 a tattooed hand made the ok gesture in my peripheral vision, I vehemently shook my head. The arms pointed upwards and crossed, signaling that we could not ascend. I relented, I was more afraid of The Bends than 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 nothing clambered over its coral encrusted lip.

The 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 in class or even at home, I find myself drawing tentacles, spiraling appendages which decorate the margins of my notebooks, intertwining with one another like some kind of primitive 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 earthly comprehension occupy my mind and bookshelves. They make the ocean no less terrifying, but add a degree of mysticism to its depths.

Recently, I've found myself staring at thalassophobia images on google. Perhaps it is time to face the monsters hiding in my closet. Perhaps it is time to return to the deep blue.