

Fish Bowl

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Dust swirled around that world. Around all the world he knew. But inside his tank, his fingertips pressed against the glass, he could not fathom it.

Little girls and boys stared up at him, at his blue-tinted water, at his gills. They were covered in it. Covered in the dust that had spread like a quiet infestation. Their lungs were full of it. Their skin was caked with it, red and brown, where his was slick and fish-scale green.

Mortimer spun in the tank, large enough for he and one other, then did a somersault through the water. He swam like a fish, which is what he happened to be. An impossible primate with webbed digits and gills. A man who filtered air from water when everyone around him breathed red dust. He was born like a dolphin, into the water, and never left.

A crowd formed around his tank and peered through the clear wall and water to his body, his face, and spindly fingers. He swam suddenly, toward the glass and allowed the crowd to see his second set of eyelids, his suction cup tipped fingers, and they gasped then laughed as he did a backward flip, and swam to the bottom. A little girl tapped on the glass. It was so near to inaudible that Mortimer would've missed it completely if he hadn't turned in time to see her.

Fine grains of dirt covered her pigtails and a faint, rusty layer clung to her pink cotton candy but, Mortimer figured, she probably didn't notice.

A plume of fire shot into the sky as Johnny, all tattoos and sweating skin, exhaled into the night and the crowd moved on.

Mortimer allowed himself to float to the top of the tank so he could look over the rippling waves created by his own movement. His pale hands curled around the rim of his home as he watched the red and orange flames licking at the sweet carnival air, crackling the bits of dust into tiny sparks. He loved the smell but couldn't breathe it for long before dunking his neck under the water to keep from drowning.

"It's almost time to move on."

He smiled, but tried not to let it show, as he turned to Victor who tilted his head sideways while he adjusted his fake diamond wrist cuff.

"How many shows tonight?"

Victor grinned and stared over his shoulder at the main tent.

"Three. Has it been a good crowd?"

Mortimer nodded toward the children, their faces aglow, watching Johnny eat and breathe fire.

"Not bad."

Mortimer tried not to look at the dust that covered the once jade green satin of Victor's costume and ballet shoes as a trumpet sounded and Evander, the talker, stepped onto his podium with a megaphone to turn the tip.

"I have to go!"

Victor sprinted around to the back of the tent where, Mortimer knew, Victor's aging parents and younger sisters would be waiting for him before their grand entrance. He sank to the bottom

of his tank and watched the crowd file into the big top, handing cash or tickets over for a seat to watch Victor, now the head of his family, fly through the air without the safety of a net.

As Evander cleaned the midway and the last of the crowd disappeared in a haze of red dirt and blue cotton candy and cigarette smoke, he heard the band playing and he knew that Victor and his family would soon climb the ladder on which they'd been raised. He swam to various corners of his tank, like a mouse in a maze, trying to see into the tent but it was of no use. Only a bright glimmer emitted from an opening in the canvas and Mortimer settled into watching the others prepare for their next show.

Two men in black suits and fedoras crossed in front of the tank. Mortimer blinked his inner and outer lids, twice. These men were not covered in dust. Their suits were perfectly black. Not townies then. Travelers maybe. Officials? The Advance Man, Rocko, had paid off the law, like always. Mortimer looked backward. He spun in his tank to look for Johnny or Evander or Sal/Sally, the Half-and-Half, to let them know. Everyone was watching the show.

A few years before, two men like this had shown up just before their Strong Man left. Since then, Victor had seen him on the cover of comic books. This is how men became heroes. Carnies, freaks, geeks—they could become something new. There were rumors. There had been whispers for as long as there had been circuses. Two men could take you away to become something else and Mortimer wanted more than anything to be one of those people.

He watched the men. The men watched back. One smoked a slow cigarette and felt no shame in staring. It was a freak show, after all. One man, with a scar that ran across his crooked nose, approached Mortimer's tank, leaned slowly toward the glass, then made a gentle tapping with his

first finger. Mortimer tilted his head and watched. The man gestured upward and Mortimer swam to the top and looked down on both of the suits.

“What’s your name, son?”

Mortimer blinked his inner eyelids.

“Mortimer.”

“Where you from, Mortimer?”

Mortimer looked from one man to the other and dunked under the water to get another breath before speaking again.

“Lake Erie.”

The men laughed. One threw his cigarette to the ground where Mortimer smelled it fizzle as hot tobacco mixed with dust.

“Are you the men? The men who turn us into heroes?”

The men looked at each other but didn’t say anything. Mortimer dunked his neck again and when he raised his body he noticed what a quiet night it had become.

“Who are you here for?”

One man cleared his throat and looked up at him.

“What all are those gills good for?”

Mortimer laughed, a sound like sweet tea poured over ice.

“They’re not a gaff if that’s what you’re asking. I can’t breathe without the water.”

The man with the scar nodded like he expected this answer and Mortimer narrowed his eyes to focus on the man’s hand. His fingers were curled around a gold timepiece.

“You’d better put that away. Probably already somebody’s mark.”

The scarred man shook his head and opened the pocket watch.

“No. I’m not.”

The man behind him finally spoke up.

“We’d better go. She’s expecting us.”

“See you tomorrow, Mortimer.”

As they walked away, into the dust, Mortimer could hear the sounds of the carnival again. He could smell the grease joint where everyone ate. He could see the twinkling glimmer of light where Victor was flying through the air, and he could feel the cool water all around him, filling with electric energy as he thought about his visitors who no one else seemed to see.

“What did they look like?”

Victor sat on the edge of Mortimer’s tank as they spoke. Victor’s legs floated in the water while Mortimer rubbed his feet, red from the tight straps of his shoes. The rest of the men were playing drinking games or cards, listening to whatever ballgame their radio could get, or in their bunks with their girl or some townie they’d managed to pick up. Mortimer and Victor were under the sky as they always had been.

“I don’t know.”

Victor cocked his head to the side and smiled crookedly in the way that Mortimer loved.

“Well, they both wore black suits. One had a scar and one smoked.”

“That’s it?”

Mortimer nodded.

“And you think they might take you?”

Mortimer dunked under the water so he could sigh with a sufficient amount of thrust. When he rose to the surface, he looked at Victor’s dark eyes, the darkest place in the carnival, and

nodded again. Victor stared away from him, into the sky. It was clearer than usual. They needed rain. This whole country needed rain. Mortimer and Victor had both seen it.

“Maybe you could come too.”

Victor shook his head.

“I can’t. You know that. My family’s here. This is all we know how to do. They can’t do it without me.”

Mortimer leaned in, toward Victor’s feet, and kissed the bruised top of each one.

The two men returned the following night.

“What do you do here?”

Mortimer rose to the top and looked down on them again. They’d come at the same time—when things were slow. They brought the same peculiar presence with them—the quietness that Mortimer only experienced under the water, the electric buzzing of magic, the lofty thoughts Mortimer only dared to dream in private.

“I swim and look mysterious.”

“That’s it?”

Mortimer nodded and dunked under the water, did a few somersaults and spins then pressed his fingertips and face to the glass. He rose to the surface again and looked back at them.

“That’s it.”

The man nodded.

“Ever swim in open water?”

Mortimer thought of the endless traveling he’d done. Thankfully, this carnival took care of its freaks. Every time they came near a river or a lake, they’d stop so he could swim and the

roughies could fill his tank with new water. If they ever camped near a lake, Victor would come get him and wrap layers of soaking cloth around his gills so they could run to the water and swim alone.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to come with us?”

Mortimer managed to contain his excitement.

“How do I know who you are?”

The men exchanged glances and moved closer to the tank.

“We took Sam and Evangeline Jones year before last. I expect you’ve seen him since then.”

The man with the scar held up a newspaper with a picture of Sam, the old Strong Man in a new costume. Now he called himself, “The Baron” and saved people in cities.

“He’s one of ours now. You could be too.”

Mortimer nodded. The man with the scar folded the newspaper and rested it under his arm.

The man behind him lit a new cigarette with a silver lighter that gleamed like a star when the carnival lights hit it.

“Victor can come too.”

Water swished in to Mortimer’s gills and he knew he looked more defensive than he ought to.

“We’ve watched you for some time, Mortimer.”

“Alright. When do we leave?”

“We’ll be back tomorrow night.”

Mortimer blinked both of his eyelids and watched as they walked away and the sights and sounds of the carnival blared back to life.

Victor's eyes burned into Mortimer the next morning. Victor had brought him some fried fish and boiled eggs for breakfast and took the news of the men in clean suits to heart. He looked at once crestfallen and angry, which put a painful throb in Mortimer's chest.

"You're going?"

"I have to. I can't stay in this tank forever. You have the whole world. This is it for me. For as long and as far as I can see—it's just this tank. You can come with me."

"I can't."

They were quiet for a long while. Victor sat on the edge like he always had and stared at the carousel while Mortimer searched the ripples around him for the right thing to say. He came up short. All he ever wanted was to leave and Victor had known that. They'd grown up together, had been best friends, and loved each other for as long as they had known anything, but the desire to be a part of a larger world filled Mortimer with something he couldn't explain, not then or in all the years he would live. He was certain of only one thing—he had to get out of this tank.

Victor continued to stare, refusing to return Mortimer's gaze.

"They're burning the lot tonight."

Mortimer sunk below the water and took a long, deep breath. The grit in the water blew through his gills.

Evander called the ballyhoo while the rest of the group hustled the town for all it was worth. They'd be gone before the city-folk went to sleep that night, probably never to return. They left the crowd with just enough gas money to get home and Mortimer watched as it happened. The carnival wrapped up early and moved everyone out, pushing them hard back into the dust.

The suits were not there. They did not come.

Mortimer sank to the bottom of his tank and looked up at the stars through his hazy, dust-filled water. Soon enough it would turn to mud, he thought.

As the group began packing the tents away, headlights appeared on the horizon. A call went through the grounds and everyone there turned toward the approaching lights. The cars encircled the tents and shacks and trailers as the keen buzzing of familiar danger swept through the carnival community. The townies looked inward at their fellow humans and then they turned off the lights.

“Hey RUBE!”

Loud and long, in his booming voice, Evander shouted and all men and able women manned their stations, ready for a fight.

Mortimer could only watch from behind glass as his carnival was lost in a storm of red and brown dirt—as Johnny fell into a fight with three town cops who’d been on the carnival’s take—as Evander and Sal/Sally rushed into a group of rubes with baseball bats, as a few roughies and green men revved up engines and toiled away at packing the show—as Victor disappeared in the crowd and the dust swallowed them all whole—and as a man with two young boys crashed his bat into Mortimer’s tank and he watched the glass crack like an intricate web before the water surrounding him burst from its case, sliding onto the ground, onto the glass, onto the footprints of a town pushed too far into desperation.

Mortimer’s gills fluttered as he gasped for air. He cupped water in his hands and held them to his neck so he could breathe but was soon knocked down by one of the townies, or one of his own, he wasn’t sure. He knelt on the ground, holding his ribs, fighting for air while his water drained into the thirsty earth.

Soon, he felt hands upon his back. One man snapped a metal collar, filled with water like a ring shaped glass of water, around his neck. Cool and clean it rushed in and out of his gills and he finally breathed for what felt like the first time in his life. The man with the scar picked him up as if he were nothing, just a boy, and the man with the lighter touched both of their arms and they walked through the fighting and the clamor and the people, as if it were nothing—just dust.