

Face Paint

“Just a sec... and you're all done,” the fin was fully formed, the gills appeared functional and it seemed that blood had been dripping from his teeth.

“Cool. RAWRR!” Rawrs are usually reserved for vicious cats, lions, tigers, but this shark found no qualms roaring at the other sea creatures that had been floating around Urchin Central Annual Fish Fry.

The feeding frenzy centered around the delicious morsels that had been prepared by the parents of all these sea creatures. They looked down and smiled at their offsprings' decorations. When the Shark, or the Crab, or even the Tropical Fishy asked if they too wanted paint or sparkles, their parents swatted them away with a scoff. The elders ink foolishly warped, sagged, faded into much less attractive depictions of much less attractive things.

It was one of those warm sweet days early in the summer. The feeding frenzy was held just off of the major passage way. The Shark, Crab, Tropical Fishy, Dolphin, and the lowly Snake “swam” in the vastness that separated the shallows where all the food was and the passage way. The elders stayed in the shallows, too old for the games being played by the young sea creatures. A coolness rushed by with every vehicle that motored past.

The Shark had been trying to take bites out of everyone, even the Dolphin, despite the fact that sharks largely left dolphins alone (she had done a book report earlier that month on the topic). Unfortunately for the Shark, the Crab, Snake, Tropical Fishy would miraculously dodge his chompers at the last second, sending him dumbly into a chair or an old boot, or a license plate.

It was a open field of grass waving in the wind. Beyond that there was nothing for miles but trees and broken homes. They fell from their foundations, everything shifted slightly away from where they had intended to stand. The Shark lived with his father in a house that seemed to flow with the wind. The house was up on a mound that overlooked all of that nothing.

The house had been built by his grandmother. She was as big as a whale and as strong as one too. Her husband had started building the house but was unable to finish because he had been struck by a falling rock, a boulder. The state had been blasting out a tunnel through one of the mountains. The Shark's grandfather had been watching along with other members of the community. His attention had drifted, he had noticed some hawks flying above. He loved the hawks in the area. It was one of the reasons why he had chosen to move himself and his young massive wife to the area. He loved how they would just glide seemingly forever. With a single pump of their wings they could be miles from where they started. It all was so effortless. In his free time he drew the hawks, crudely, with dull pieces of charcoal. He heard the other observers yell "Watch out!" just in time to see the boulder inches from his face before it crushed everything. They were unable to move the massive rock and were unwilling to use any of the dynamite. The solution they came up with was to cover the exposed body parts with cement. The Shark's grandmother was fine with the arrangements. She saw it as extremely practical.

The Shark's grandmother declined any help from the men of the town to help finish the house. She was hardly pregnant and anticipated finishing the house herself before the end of her first trimester, and the winter. She built into the house secret passageways and nooks. At first they were the results of mis-measurements but eventually the mistakes all met in corners and behind hallways. Air flowed through the house effortlessly. It wasn't particularly drafty, she was very sure to take her time squaring up the windows and doors, but because of the strange ducts that riddled the house like a block of coral, wind seemed to generate on its own and blow in every direction at all times.

The house stayed in the family after the grandmother died. It mostly had to do with the fact that the Shark's father dropped out of school and worked medial jobs here and there. The house was long paid off. The sharks mother had abandoned her husband and him just a few years before the Fish Fry. She couldn't stand the town.

She had grown up with the Shark's father. She had lived in the center of the town, with everyone else. They didn't have many friends. The Shark's mother did, but his father had none.

He had spent most of his time growing up ditching school and wandering around the woods, occasionally getting beat up by the other boys. They thought he was strange, he was always damp for some reason, and he always had a look on his face. It looked as if he was thinking very hard about something, and whatever that something was troubled him. Perhaps it was all the moisture that constantly clung to him. Perhaps he had something important on his mind.

The Shark's mother, though, had many friends. She was bookish but when she got older she became more and more concerned with being accepted by her classmates. One day, before she made all those friends that would eventually vote her prom queen, she met her future husband. She had been reading down by one of the many creeks that ran through the town. Dozens of these dirty brown streams ran down the hills. She liked to imagine that they were clear and full of colorful fish. She liked to read by them because she wanted to believe that the water would carry her mind down to the city, past the town, in the valley, the one with all the lights.

She had noticed the Shark's father looking at her from behind a tree. She asked him what he was looking at. He didn't answer just walked down and sat beside her in the sunlight. They eventually got to talking and fell in love. She liked that he seemed deep and thoughtful. When they were in high school and she had many more friends than he did, she being his only one, she tactfully avoided him during the day. It wasn't terribly difficult, he ate his lunch alone behind the school where he sometimes saw rats. He had dropped out three years before graduation. He spent more and more time in the woods. He would stay out for days at a time if the weather permitted. He didn't feel strongly about anyone's company, it was neither attractive to him nor did it bother him. It was a matter of him enjoying alone time.

He stayed in Urchin because his mother had died of a heart attack due to her weight which had increased steadily since he was born. The Shark's mother stayed in town after graduating because her family could not afford to send her away to college. She was forced to work at her father's convenience store. She believed that being alone was only special because the rest of the time should be spent

around people. After graduation she spent more and more time with the Shark's father up at this house because she thought that she was getting the best both situations. She thought she had found a place where she could both be with someone, eventually a family of her own, and have it be apart from the rest of the town.

They had gotten married in the town church, her family and friends took up both sections of pews. Nine months later they gave birth to what would become the Shark.

For a while she enjoyed the lonesomeness up on the hill with her little family, but it got to her. The strange wind haunted her every night. The wind seemed to be blowing the house around from the inside. Every whistle the air made threading itself through the labyrinth of tunnels made the house disfigure further, sliding, widening, shortening. Their lack of income, the mother bringing in the majority of it from the convenience store, and the father wasn't able to hang on to many jobs due to his tenancy to wander off in the middle of the day. He wouldn't go home but to the woods, to get lost.

The house vibrated when the Shark's birth givers seemed to be more full of liquid than usual. They would argue about money, boredom. His mother did most of the yelling. His father simply listened with that troubled look on his face. When they were that drunk they didn't sink or float, they just vibrated, very harshly at times. When it was too much for the Shark, he just hid in the shadows, in those nooks and passage ways that kept him cool as the vibrations boiled around his parents.

She left without much fanfare, she simply left a note, "What kind of person are you if you don't keep any company?" She did not say where she went. She had a cousin that lived a few states over. It could be assumed she went there. She had told the Shark about cities, massive places where everyone talked to everyone, where no one was ever alone unless they seriously tired. She could be in one of those. Looking down from her high up window smiling at all of the people walking by saying hello to each other as they passed.

The other homes down in the town boiled with the same intensity. They would all vibrate but because they were so near the next house it was usually calmed quickly. The people in the town seemed

to be in it together. When one neighbor was too aggressive a friend would step in and smooth things out. All the blood boiling would simmer down and things would return to normal, always back to normal.

When the Shark's mother left, the Shark spent little time at school. His father sympathized with him, never enjoying school himself. He didn't give the Shark a hard time, he never had, even when the Shark gave him reason too. The Shark would spend hours crawling through the tunnels and voids that riddled the house, catching his elbows on rusty nails and screws, the blood clotting with the help of dirt bandaged with spiderwebs. His father told him not to get stuck. He always told him that getting stuck is the worst thing that can happen to him.

The Shark still made an effort to put on the charade that him and his father were apart of the town. The Shark was not disliked at school, he enjoyed playing with the other children. Especially on days like the Fish Fry when he would be included in their games, even if he was the one they all ran away from. He always volunteered himself as "it". He felt right in that position, making everyone scatter like mindless terrified minnows.

The Shark would tell his father that he was going to school, go out the front door then walk into the woods. He didn't like going to school, sitting still for that long, listening only to what the teacher said, being reprimanded when he would look out of the windows at the town, and beyond it, the woods. He knew that just past that thin fragile pane was all that freedom.

Once while he was wandering in the woods he came upon his father standing beside one of those muddy creeks like the one that he had met his ex-wife at. The Shark's father didn't seem to be lamenting, or longing for the creek to change its appearance and take him down to the city, he just looked at it as if he were thinking hard about nothing. The Shark didn't bother his father. He just half crouched behind a bush, ready at any moment to drop if his father was to look up. Somehow the Shark's father sleeve had gotten wet. He must have fallen over one of the down trees that cross-hatched the woods.

The house would be completely empty when the two of them were out on their separate but simultaneous excursions. Sometimes, most times, they would leave a door or window open all day long. Small creatures would find their way into the house and settle into one of the many cozy, yet never stagnant passage ways. Often the Shark would have to rapidly shimmy backwards out of one of the tunnels after becoming face to face with a fierce rodent protecting its nest.

When the Shark told his father of these encounters, suggest that he remove them, his father would simply reply, "You shouldn't be in those tunnels and vents anyway, you could get stuck." The Shark would eventually stop telling his father about his run ins with the wildlife that was becoming part of the house.

Right before the Shark's mother left them, his father had taken him on a camping trip. The trip was to the woods behind their house. They set up an old tarp tent and made a fire. They tried for some time to catch something to eat but the only creatures that lived in those woods were tiny mice and squirrels that even the hawks had a difficult time tracking down. They ended up bring out hot dogs that they had in the fridge in the house. The Sharks mother laughed as she gave them the soggy package.

The Shark had taken a break from the game. The other kids were being called over by their parents to come sit down and eat. He had been sweating, trying his hardest to get ahold of one of the other sea creatures. Even the Snake, who was twice the weight of the Shark, easily avoided him.

The Shark's father was sitting alone at one of the tables on the fringe of the eating area. He had attempted to involve himself in the conversation with the other adults but found nothing to say. He just sat, looking at his boots. The Shark got himself a glass of water and sat down next to him. The Shark's father didn't regard him, but instead looked out to the field where the kids had been playing. His head moved as if he were following one of them with his eyes. He looked on with concern, perhaps that one of those ghost children was in some sort of danger. He knew, though, that those ghost children would be okay. Still he thought about them.

The Shark finished his water without saying anything to his father. He waited for more of the kids to finish their dinners and return to the field where he would spend the rest of the cool afternoon chasing after the other kids RAWRing and diving to the ground and into folding chairs. The Tropical Fishy and the Crab would always get away. Everyone was always getting away. When the Fish Fry finishes the other families will return to their homes, perhaps have a vibration over one of the kids leaving out a bike all day. The Shark and his father will take the long ride back to their house in silence then go to bed. In the morning they would both leave without closing the door and wander to all of those places where it is impossible to get stuck.