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Mary Kemp

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Aquarium Love

By Mary Kemp

Max sat in the neon glow from the tropical fish tank, and I could have sworn I was looking at an angel. Something otherworldly filled the dorm room – and maybe it was just the ethereal, electric blue light from the aquarium, or the upper I had taken before visiting my friend’s room – but I was certain it was magic.

“Zooney, you wanna help, or are you just gonna keep staring at the fish?”

I startled, catching Max’s polite, amused expression. He definitely caught me staring, but he wasn’t the type to assume he was being looked at. He never seemed to think he was worth the perception of others, and that just made me aggressively want to prove that he was worth it. He was more worth it than all of us.

I think I’m a narcissist, but I happen to love humble people. And I loved Max most of all.

His brow furrowed as he flipped through his essay that I was about to edit for him. I watched his tortoiseshell glasses slipped down his nose, and I wanted to push them back up.

This had been our routine, habitual and comforting, since our freshman year. He’d show me his essays about whatever he was reading in his medieval literature class, and I’d edit them, harshly and lovingly, as I did everything in my life.

I was a severe critic, but that was precisely why Max called upon me.

“Is this thesis stupid? I feel like it’s stupid,” he said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“It’s not stupid,” I replied.

Max was glowing. He was cerulean and perfect.

I couldn’t stop looking at the fish tank.

We used to visit this local aquarium our freshman year. I always liked the electric blue neon lights, the artificial plants in colors that were anything but natural, the fish swimming, uncaringly, in the cool, blue water. The whole place felt alien and serene. No other place in the world has made me feel true peace except for there.

Aquariums always made me feel like that.

“Is my thesis too broad? I feel like I’m lacking nuance here,” Max said, scratching the back of his neck.

“I think it’s perfect.” I THINK YOU ARE PERFECT TOO.

The fish swimming behind him were neon. There was blue, shimmering light everywhere. The room was starting to fill with water.

I met Max our freshman year in a world literature class. He made an absurdly good joke about *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and I knew I was in the market for a friend.

He liked that I had read the same things as him, and I liked the way his eyes crinkled when he smiled. I liked the way he said my name, like it was just any other word. Max was the first boy to ever make me feel like a regular old human, and that was a feeling I hadn’t known I was longing for.

I crossed through a sentence and scribbled some comments into the margin. Max was a decent writer, but his mind always got ahead of his hands. He was a run-on sentence fiend.

I glanced up at Max, and he was warm and blue, like the sun-soaked ocean. I could practically feel the fluorescent glow of the aquarium. It was inside Max, and it was beginning to get inside me too. Water was filling the dorm room up to our waists.

I kept editing. Max kept watching me edit.

By the end of the night, the rose and sapphire light had seeped inside us, and I saw Max glowing an electric blue. I looked down, and rays of neon purple radiated from within me. I couldn't pin down a source, maybe there wasn't one, I just felt the warm, otherworldly magic pouring out all around us, inside us.

The water from the aquarium was warmer than I expected. I thought it would be harsh, cold, and bracing, but it felt like an extension of my own body heat. Perfectly natural. We were born to swim here.

The aquarium swallowed us up until we were as much a part of it as the fish. Max's dorm room was the fish tank, and the fish tank was Max's dorm room. And there was just us – floating in a blue dreamscape, two hearts beating underwater.

I looked over at Max, and he was treading water, looking at me. He smiled, and I smiled, and I wanted to live in this aquarium love forever.

He always elicited my devotion, but something about us existing – suspended together – in the neon water, made me love him even more reverently. The water ebbed and flowed around us, warm ripples against our skin. I reached out and interlocked our fingers together.

Fish passed by, lazily, passively. The rainbowfish with their scales of every color, the little guppies with their feathery tails, the iridescent tetras, all blinked their eyes neutrally at us. They were about as big as our heads. I'd never been inside a fish tank before, and I'd never thought about what it would be to be the size of a goldfish. I found I liked it enormously.

Max winked, and I laughed, accidentally taking the water into my mouth, but it came as easily as air.

It was just us, swimming in his fish tank.

I think I want to stay here forever.

