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Zombie Sharks with Metal Teeth

IT'S SUPPOSED TO be like killing a mouse, killing this mouse, that's what Ronald said, but it isn't.

"Ronald," I say, trying to make my voice loop over my shoulder to him.

He's in his chair by the specimen refrigerator.

"Just do it," he says.

"He's looking at me, though."

Ronald's chair scrapes, air hisses through his teeth, and then he's there, with me.

"You're supposed to be a research assistant," he says, taking the mouse from me, the syringe riding from its back like a tranquilizer dart, "not a trainee."

The mouse. I was thinking about naming him Mr Cheese. Or Danger Bob, from his trick with the wheel.

Ronald slams the plunger down and it doesn't even have to be sodium pentathol. There's enough of it that it could be water, or even more blood: it floods Danger Bob's internal organs, stretches his skin taut so that it's pink under his white hair, like an old man going bald.

Sodium pentathol isn't really standard for mice, but neither's what Ronald had been doing do it for the last week.

He holds it up to his face, watches it die, and I think maybe Danger Bob is going to whisper something to him finally, some secret of biology, of rodent psychology, but then, instead, all we get is a drop of sodium pentathol seeping out Danger Bob's right nostril, spidering down to the end of a whisker.

Ronald drops the mouse cadaver—his term, like with everything—into the red biohazard bag and looks around the lab for the next great experiment, his eyes narrowing on each station, each cage, each device.

I hate my job.

In the supply room after work I mouth a silent prayer for Danger Bob, and nod again like I'm watching his trick on the wheel.

The next morning Ronald gets to the lab before me, leaves the door chocked open. I walk in slow, trying to see everything all at once, and Ronald's in his chair by the fridge, watching me.

"Good morning," he says.

I nod, shrug, tell him to tell me, please.

He's already smiling.

It's Danger Bob, back from the afterlife.

I take a long step back.

"He was sleeping by the door to his cage," Ronald says.

"This isn't Bob," I say.

"Ask him."

I watch his eyes after this, not sure I heard right.

"Ask Bob?"

Ronald nods.

"You could have just painted that on his back," I say.

Ronald agrees.

"Ask him," he says again.

I don't want to but I do.

"Louder," Ronald says, like it should be obvious.

"Are you Danger Bob?" I say, again, and it's only because I've been here for four months now that I notice Ronald's right hand is behind his back. His trigger finger. The vein in his neck

rises with the tendons in his bicep when the mouse who isn't Danger Bob shakes his head no, and Ronald can't help laughing now.

There's a little white-furred, radio-controlled servo collar around Imposter Bob's neck, its copper leads wired into the neck musculature. So he can shake his head no.

"Quit fucking around," Ronald says, still smiling. "I've got something new for us today."

Some days I'm not sure who's the lab mouse.

The project Ronald was working on when he hired me involved applied telekinesis. What we would do is anesthetize gophers and moles and whatever else we could buy, sever their spinal cords up near their brain stems, then try to condition them to use their own bodies as puppets, lurch across the stainless steel exam table.

The servo collars were what Ronald had to finally use when the financial backers sent their people to check on their investments. It was then that Ronald told me the secret of funding: never do enough to make money, just do enough to get people to give you more.

He thinks when I empty the red biohazard bag, I empty it into the small green medical waste dumpster in the parking lot. But I don't. Instead I fill my pockets with dead rodents then go up onto the roof during break, lay the limp bodies in the white gravel. The hawks scream with delight, fall all around me, and take the moles and gophers and rabbits away. For the mice, because they're white, I have to push all the white gravel away, frame them against the tar. I tried standing them up with toothpicks at first, for dignity, but finally had to just lay them on their sides, their forelegs curled up against their chests.

We're going to hell, of course, me and Ronald. Not just for the animals we kill with truth serum and electricity and surgery, but for the birds that fall sick from the sky into the lives of ordinary people, far, far away, wherever they are.

What Ronald has for us today that's new is beyond telekinesis, beyond Danger Bob's faux-prehensile tail.

I watch him and listen and feel my face making expressions of doubt, then curiosity, then think of a green butterfly for a while, because now he's practicing his pitch on me. Everything bullet points, something Edison would have thought of if he'd had access to the formative experiences of Ronald's childhood. Or if he'd hated mice.

The green butterfly is an angel, of course. She has the face of a girl I knew in high school.

I nod for Ronald, and for her.

What we're doing today is removing a late-stage mouse fetus from its mother then immersing it in the oxygen rich solution left over from the experiment with the two squirrels. Immersing it in there so it can breathe.

"Nutrients?" Ronald asks, as if I'd said it.

I nod, as if I'd just been about to say it, yes.

"They're in there," he says, dismissing my lack of education, staring at me to be sure I get the point.

"Sorry," I say. "Go on."

He smiles, does.

After the mouse—I'm already calling him Zipper Boy—after the mouse is successfully transferred to his glass womb, the fish tank the squirrels had died in, too stubborn to evolve gills, after the mouse is in there, that's when the real science begins: his arms in the long rubber gloves, Ronald will remove Zipper Boy's cartilage skull, exposing the still-developing brain.

He touches the side of his own head to be sure I'm following, not picturing myself on the roof, holding Zipper Boy up in my palm, eyes cast down, a great, moist shadow darkening around me, the underside of her wings iridescent.

I touch my own head back, right in the temple, and Ronald stares at me, looks away.

"The folds," he says, "it's the basic mammalian characteristic, right? Why are they there, though?"

"So the brain can fit," I say back.

He nods, smiles, says it again: "So the brain can fit. Because, if it didn't fold, then the mother's pelvis would break and there would be no rearing of the young, and it wouldn't matter how smart we were, how many tools we could eventually make."

I tell him okay.

He shrugs, like I'm challenging him. "So what do you think we could accomplish without that limitation?" he says, low, still paranoid that the bats that were delivered by accident are actually industrial spies.

I'm supposed to be catching them, but keep not doing it.

"Anything?" I say.

He nods.

"Anything," he says back, and then for the rest of the morning I have to hold the suction tube to Zipper Boy's head while Ronald performs minor surgery. I'm supposed to catch the blood, keep the water clear, cycle in more.

"Scuba Mouse," Ronald says, through his mask.

I shake my head no.

Two weeks later, Zipper Boy's brain blooms open in the tank like the enhanced pictures you see of distant, exploding galaxies.

I find myself holding my breath each morning in my car, before I walk in. It's not enough.

By the forty-second day, the investors want to see what they're paying for. I lay on the roof looking over the edge. Their cars pull up just before lunch. The only thing different for them about Ronald is how he's bald now, shaved. The eye solution he uses to hide the red around the rims is his own compound. He offers it to me on a regular basis, and on a regular basis I decline.

I walk down the metal stairs in time to hear his latest pitch for time travel, how of course you can't send living tissue through any kind of disintegrating field then expect it to be reassembled properly on the other end. But inert matter, yes. Ronald's solution

is typically elegant: the time traveler should simply offer to be killed moments before passing through the field, moments after his team has pushed through all the medical equipment and information brochures the people on the other end will need to revive this dead man from the future, or the past.

I see one of the investors holding his chin, nodding, thinking of the tactical uses this could provide, but when he sees the way I'm looking at him he stops, rubs his cheek.

"Don't worry about him," Ronald says about me.

They don't.

Eight minutes later—the same amount of time it takes sunlight to get here—Ronald is demonstrating what they all saw last time: the modified television set he's learned to tune the future in with. One hour in the future, anyway. For the area right around the specimen table. He's not showing them the modified set so much, though, as what's on it's screen: the investors, all signing checks. It's really a tape of them from last time.

"Show us why, though," one of them says.

Why they'll sign. Ronald smiles, nods, is already standing amid all the bent silverware before Zipper Boy's tank, waiting for them to see it.

"Like he's a god?" one of the investors says, looking around for support. Like Zipper Boy's a god is what he's saying. One we bring offerings to.

Ronald shushes him, his teeth together.

"I don't think so . . ." another investor says, staring hard at Ronald, as if reading his eyes. "You didn't leave this for him did you, son?"

Ronald shakes his head no, his dimples sucking into a smile he's trying hard to swallow.

"No way," the third and final investor says.

Ronald shrugs, is a carnival barker now, holding his hand out for the third investor's stainless steel, monogrammed pen.

Zipper Boy bends it into a nearly perfect circle with his unfolded mind, then, bored with it, allows it to clatter to the

ground.

The milky surface of his water bubbles.

He could live forever in there.

The girlfriend I choose, because I want this all to be over but for it not to be my fault, she's ASPCA. Militant, probably a vegetarian even. I wear leather to get her to introduce herself, then lure her to my car, to lunch, a series of dinners and movies and phone calls, until one day, not on accident, I leave an expired rodent in my right hand pocket, plan to pull it out to open my car door with, only notice it's a mouse when its nose won't fit into the keyhole.

The movie we see that night is about a submarine family chosen, for obvious reasons, to be astronauts. Which is all good and fine until the mother has her third child, her first in space. The amniotic fluid floats through the space station and into the ventilation system, then, with the help of alien spores or cosmic rays—a movie device—transforms the whole station into a womb in which the family gestates, emerging nine months later to look down on earth's blue sphere, and cry, the vacuum of space wicking their tears away. Finally, the firstborn son flares the new membrane around his neck out and it catches the solar wind and the family holds hands, retreats into the outer reaches of the solar system, still together.

My girlfriend—Mandy, I think, if I heard right—cries with the aliens, holds my hand, and I hold onto the armrest.

Afterwards, by the water fountains, I try to tell her about Ronald but fail, just lead her out to the parking lot for my charade, which fails too when I open my pocket and, instead of a dead mouse, pale green butterflies flutter up around us.

Mandy starts to catch one but I stop her, and my hand firm around her wrist is the beginning of the end for us: that I would deny her that.

The next morning Ronald asks me how my experiment went?

I'm tapping vitamins into Zipper Boy's tank when he asks

it, and I'm not sure if his lips move, or if they move with the words he's saying.

On the surface of the water, dead, is a pale green butterfly.

Love is a spoon, Zipper Boy says to me in my head.

Across the room, Ronald waits for me to answer, to agree.

Zipper Boy's brain is seventeen times the size of his body now.

We're not sure what he can do if he really wants to.

The thing I notice about the silverware on the ground that afternoon is that it's real silver. Which should be less of a challenge, really. An insult. Another thing is that it's straight, all of it. I bend down to it, know instantly without wanting to that this is Ronald's mother's mother's silverware. And that the only reason it would be straight, now, on the ground, is that Ronald brought it to Zipper Boy bent.

Across the lab, Ronald is hunched over the circuit board of the echolocation device he's retroengineering from the dolphin head he had delivered in a cooler of ice. It cost four thousand dollars, is supposed to locate the bats for us somehow. When I opened the cooler, the dolphin had been smiling. But maybe that's all they know how to do.

I don't care about the bats, really.

But the silverware. The swimming goggles Ronald's wearing now, each lens sloshing with his compound.

Love is love, Zipper Boy says in my head, like he's finishing an argument.

Without looking at his tank I think back that he was never even born.

The surface of his water undulates with thought, and either he speaks back to me through Ronald or Ronald speaks back himself: "A mother's love for her unborn young is the purest love there is," he says. "Because it hasn't yet fallen victim to the large eyes of infancy."

I sweep up the bat guano until noon then climb the stairs

to the roof.

Danger Bob is waiting for me. I cry into my hands, think maybe the whole world can see me up there.

"It's okay," Danger Bob says from behind his three-inch exhaust pipe, and to show, he scurries furiously across the white gravel, invisible until the last moment when his small body is about to silhouette itself against the low, brick-red retaining wall.

I see whiskers, the shadow of an ear, then look away.

In my pocket now is all of Ronald's mother's mother's silverware. I don't know what to do with it.

Two days later I find the first draft of the article Ronald's writing for the neuromags. In it, Zipper Boy is Scuba Mouse, and I've been betrayed.

Beside me, too, I can feel Zipper Boy watching me.

It's something Ronald's tracked in his article—how his Scuba Mouse is now discovering his body, learning to use it, look through it. In a footnote, Ronald sketches out the helmet he's going to build his Scuba Mouse. It's filled with water, a failed diving bell. There will be no leash, either, no air hose, no tether. Just a mouse, teetering out into the world, wholly unaware what love is, even.

Already all the other caged rodents in the lab are dead, overflowing from the red biohazard container.

Ronald says Zipper Boy tells him it's not murder, because they were never really alive.

He's the one talking to a mouse now. I don't tell that to him, just shrug, look away, at a bat crawling nose first down the wall, stalking a cricket.

Ronald throws the dolphin head at it, misses.

My hand is shaking from something—from this.

When Ronald collects his precious dolphin head he finds the cricket lodged in the basal ganglia and stares at it for an unhealthy period of time. Embarrassed, I look away. Zipper Boy's water is 92 degree Fahrenheit. The phone rings fourteen times,

and fourteen times, we don't answer it.

When the human race ends, this is the way it will happen, I know.

That night I kidnap Mandy a little bit then sit with her—bound hand and foot in the trunk of my car—and watch the city bats coalesce above the three-inch exhaust pipe of the lab. Insects are swirling up out of it, clockwise, and I smile, rename the insects manna bug, moses beetle, and realize I can't take Mandy into this place. That I either love her too much or I could love her too much, which, really, is the same thing.

I inject her with a non-lethal dose of sodium pentathol and lead her into her building, careful not to ask her any questions, even in a disguised voice. Her doorman takes her without question, nods to me once, and I fade back into the night.

The green butterfly from the girl in high school was the one I found on her windshield one day at lunch, when I'd finally got my nerve up to wait for her, say something.

From across town Zipper Boy says into my head, in her voice, Hungry there? and I sulk away, my hands in my pockets.

Love isn't a spoon, I say back to him from the parking lot, the next morning, and this time when I walk in Ronald has the dolphin head on a long, metal stick.

"Scarecrow," he says, about it, then explains in his most offhand voice how bats are really just mice with wings, meaning the mouse part of their brains must still remember the long winters spent under the snow, walking lightly, because the coyotes were up there somewhere, listening, listening, finally slinking off to the water's edge, for clam, then fish, then they keep going out deeper and deeper, testing their lungs, until they're dolphins. "Look at the teeth," he says, running his finger along the dolphin's jaw line.

I close my eyes to think.

"They—they weren't coyotes then, though," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose between the thumb and forefinger of my

right hand.

"Doesn't matter," Ronald says. "They didn't know they were mice then either, right?"

He stares at me until I nod, hook my chin to the tank.

"You fed him already?"

He shrugs—maybe, maybe not. This is kindergarten. The new title of his article on Zipper Boy is "Tidings from the Tidal Pool." Even I know it won't translate well—that, being a scientific article, it needs to—but before I can tell him, something pops above our heads.

Ronald doesn't look up from his paper. I have to.

"Security," he says.

It's a row of cameras, motion activated. Bat-activated.

"What?" I ask.

Ronald shrugs. "Scuby here says their REM patterns are—unusual for rodents. Like how when a dog dreams about chasing a car, its leg will kick?"

"Maybe it's having a karate dream."

"Whatever. It's a luxury bats don't have, right? One kick, they're falling . . ." He shrugs again, already bored with this. " . . . think it has something to do with circulation to their brain. Probably need to get an opossum in here to see, though—upside down, all that. It's a marsupial, though, I don't know . . ."

"I'm not doing it," I tell him.

"What?"

"Sleep upside down."

"I'm not asking."

"Okay."

"Well."

"Yeah."

I work at my table counting salmon eggs into vials, careful to keep my back to the leering dolphin.

Love isn't a spoon, I know. It's got to be something, though.

That night while I'm gone, Ronald somehow manages to spray the dolphin head with liquid nitrogen, to keep it from rotting.

Over lunch, from his office, I call Mandy's work number to report a crime but she doesn't answer. I hang up, hold the phone there for what I know is too long.

Through the plate glass of Ronald's open-air cubicle, Zipper Boy watches me, manages to rewind my memory to the movie about the submarine family then play it again, without the zero-g amniotic fluid. This time, the birth is achieved through a primitive but functional teleportation device: one moment, the baby isn't there, and the next it is, the mother's stomach already deflating, the father guiding it back down like deflating a raft.

I shake my head no, don't want to see anymore, but Zipper Boy forces it on me, in me, and I have to watch this infant grow into an adolescent who appears normal until we follow him into his cabin. There, he reads books on what appropriate emotional reactions are to certain social stimuli, then, as a young man, standing over the father he's just slain, we understand that the reason he is the way he is is that he was denied the essential violence of birth. That his whole life he's been searching for that.

It's Zipper Boy's story. He's never been born either.

I'm sorry, I think to him, but it's too late, he's dreaming with the bats again, flitting with them through their night made of sound, his small, atrophied feet perfectly still.

I envy him, a little. But the rest of me knows what's happening.

The mechanism I'm reduced to is ridiculously simple, as most are: I simply take Ronald's mother's mother's silverware down to the pawn shop, get a ticket for it, then leave it on the bulletin board.

Ronald sees it first thing after lunch, stares at it, and walks away, then comes back again and again, until he looks across the room to me.

"You do this?" he says.

"We needed supplies," I tell him.

Zipper Boy's water gurgles. Ronald looks from it to me.

"Supplies?" he says.

"Guess the lab fairy skipped us this month," I say back.

Ronald smiles; it's what he told me my first week here, when I forgot to pick up everything he'd ordered—that the lab fairy wasn't going to bring it, was she?

I have no idea what Zipper Boy is telling him.

Ronald shrugs, stands, looking in the direction of the pawn shop already.

"It wasn't really as great as you thought it was," he says, in parting. "Number four's trick."

Danger Bob, on his wheel.

My right hand wraps itself into a fist and I have to look away, swallow hard. Science isn't cold. Not even close.

Ronald laughs on his way out, trailing his fingers over his shoulder.

"Stay off the roof, too," he calls back. "I think it's shaking the cameras."

I stare at him until he's gone then track up to the cameras. Because there's no way in a world of brick and stone that my footsteps could come through the ceiling. But Ronald was just saying that, I see now; what he wanted me to see was that each camera is on one of the old, radio-controlled servos. That he still has the trigger out in the parking lot. That the guidewires their board is hanging from is the perfect antenna. That he's going to be documenting whatever I wanted him out of the lab for.

Zipper Boy smiles, with his real mouth. His teeth dull from disuse. From never-use.

But his mind.

I take a step towards his tank and the room fills with pale green butterflies, the dust on their wings graphite-fine, and I have to breathe it, can hear the cameras snapping me in sequence, one after another, down the board, and the butterflies start to fill me. Light-headed.

But no.

Like the girl from high school said, meant, I take the first one I can catch, take it between my teeth, and swallow, and then the next, and the next, until they're all gone, and I say it to Zipper Boy: that every experiment needs a control. Someone to exercise it. That I understand that now.

He's just staring at me now.

Love, he says in my head.

You understand, I say back. That's why I'm doing this. Please.

In his water, for me, Zipper Boy tries to do Danger Bob's trick with the wheel, to save himself, but he's not a mouse anymore, and there's no wheel anyway, and it's too late in the game for gymnastics to save us from what we're doing here.

The tears he cries for himself are bubbles of carbon dioxide—spent breath, his infant lungs still new, uncoordinated. The bubbles seep from the corner of his eye, collect on the surface of his water, and he nods, looks away to make this easy on me, but it's not.

Through the cameras, in what will be time-capture, Ronald is watching me, a future Ronald, an hour-from-now Ronald, and I'm sitting by him, trying to explain, to keep my job.

Listen, Zipper Boy says, a kindness, and I do, and the-me-from-then knows, has it right: what I have to do now is what I can feel myself already doing—move my arms from the wrist, my legs from the foot, my head from the chin, so that, on film, when I take the salt shaker, empty it into the tank, it will look like suicide. Like Zipper Boy had made me his puppet. Chose me instead of Ronald because I was weaker.

It's a thing Ronald could buy. That he would buy.

But then, without meaning too—scientific curiosity, the reason I responded to Ronald's ad in the first place, maybe—I look too long an hour into the future, past him accepting my explanation for homicide, to the way he stands up from his chair smiling, holding one of the early bat-dream negatives up to the light, so that the colors are reversed. This is one of the images

from the camera on the end of the board, which was aimed wrong. Instead of the bats, it had been snapping pictures of the dolphin head, only—looking along his arm I can see it in the modified television set—the dolphin's teeth in the reverse-color image are silver, silver nitrate, metal, and from the angle the camera was at the dolphin isn't even a dolphin anymore, but a predator that can never die, not if Ronald builds it right, this time. Not if it keeps moving.