

## TUNNEL OF FISH

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If Eddie could have chosen, he would have been a fish. A large fish without enemies, free to spend all day swimming lazily amongst the reeds and rushes in clear, blood-cold water. His mother, June, said not to worry, he was half-way there already, with his mouth hanging open all the time like a particularly dull-witted amphibian, not to mention the thick lenses of his spectacles that made his eyes bulge like a haddock's.

Afterwards, of course, June had regretted saying that but sometimes Eddie was so infuriatingly gormless that she couldn't help herself. June had hoped that the removal of his adenoids when he was eight would make Eddie look more intelligent. It hadn't. She had had the same expectations at nine for his spectacles. Most people she knew looked brainier with glasses, yet somehow Eddie contrived to look even more dopey. June thought that the grommets in his ears at ten would raise him from the undersea world of

the deaf and theoretically they had done, according to his ENT consultant, yet Eddie still behaved as if he couldn't hear a word June said. Which was just as well, June thought, seeing as half the time the things she said to him were not very nice.

For reasons best known to himself, Eddie had recently become an obsessive cataloguer of fish. He had already worked his way through shells, coins, stamps and flags. June wondered, not for the first time, if Eddie was mildly autistic. She hoped his eccentricities were genetic and nothing to do with her haphazard mothering.

It was a year now since Eddie had started secondary school and every day June expected a policeman at the door, telling her that her son had been beaten to a pulp in a corner of the playground or thrown himself in boyish despair from the top of the science block. (June was a pessimist by nature.) Eddie, June knew, was exactly the sort of boy who even kind children were exasperated into bullying and normally decent teachers were driven to persecute. In some ways it was a relief when, at the school's first parents' evening, June discovered that none of Eddie's teachers had any idea who he was.

June was carrying Hawk's child. She liked that phrase, 'carrying a child'. 'Pregnant' made her think of animals – cows and sows and dogs, and the hamster ('Hammy') which was the only pet her parents would let her have when she was a child because both of them were ridden with allergies. She had felt sorry for Hammy's solitary existence, mirroring her own, and had let him play with her friend's hamster, Jock, and 'play' turned out to be a euphemism and 'him' turned out to be a 'her' and the outcome was that June ended up with a litter of tiny naked rodents that looked like miniature piglets and which gave her the creeps. "Oh, June," her mother sighed when she saw them. That was what she always said - 'Oh, June' – so much disappointment packed into two such small words.

June didn't inherit her parents' allergies although that didn't stop them from expecting her to drop dead at any moment, if not of an out-of-the-blue asthma attack then from choking on a sweet or being run over by a car (or a bike or a train, not to mention being decapitated by a low-flying plane, as if such things were common in Edinburgh). Her father was a risk assessor for Standard Life and said that he came across too many accidents, bizarre or otherwise, to ignore the danger that lurked around every corner. The worst thing was that having spent her childhood and adolescence shrugging off their pathetic fears she was completely prey to them herself now.

June blamed her parents. June blamed her parents for everything, although it seemed a bit of a shame to blame her father who had died in his bed, not from an accident but “worn out” according to June’s mother. “By what?” June asked. “By his life,” her mother said. His standard life. That was the one thing that June had been terrified of having – a standard life, an ordinary life, a life like her parents – living in a pink sandstone semi-detached villa in the suburbs with a neat garden and an en-suite master-bedroom with fitted wardrobes. Now she would rather like it. In their flat they didn’t even have a bath, just a shower and a toilet. And a wardrobe, fitted or otherwise, would have been a great improvement on the overloaded garment rail on which they all kept their clothes.

And also June could see that once you were thirty – which she was three weeks ago – it was probably time to stop holding her parents responsible for all the things that had gone wrong in her life, especially as if she had taken their advice she would now have a degree and a job and a decent house and probably even a husband instead of living in a crappy tenement with Eddie and Hawk, although she knew Hawk was only living with them because he didn’t have anywhere else to live.

There was the dog as well, which didn’t help. Tammy was an over-enthusiastic terrier-cross that she’d got from the dogs’ home at Seafield so

that Eddie wouldn't have to spend his childhood without a pet the way she had, but then of course it turned out that the allergies had only skipped a generation and Eddie snuffled and sneezed and wheezed every time the dog got near him, which was all the time because the flat was so small. And the dog was pregnant. Carrying puppies.

June was just eighteen when she had Eddie (what a big, sorrowful 'Oh, June' that was) whereas her mother was forty-two when she had June. June fully expected to be dead by the time she was forty-two. Her parents were old, really old. That was why they'd given her such an old-fashioned name. June, because she was born in June. If she'd been born in November would they have called her November? June was a name for women in sitcoms and soap operas, the name of women who knit with synthetic wool and follow recipes that use cornflakes, not the name of a thirty-year old with a ring in her nose ("Oh, June.")

At least she knew she was pregnant this time - for the first five months of Eddie's unfledged existence she had just thought she was getting disgustingly fat. Of course, June had never really wanted Eddie and in her heart she was sure that had she wanted him he would have turned out a different child - a loud, rude, shouting boy who ran around football pitches and had no fear and no defects. June knew that Hawk's baby was her second

chance, the only way she could redeem herself for the mess she had made the first time round.

Eddie wanted to scramble back down the evolutionary ladder. He wanted gills instead of a clogged-up nose. And scales of silver and pearl instead of his own pale-and-prone-to-dermatitis skin. Eddie wondered if there was such a word as ‘unevolving’. He had a list of Latin prefixes in the ancient Latin grammar that Hawk had found in a skip and had been trying to teach himself the language ever since. Eddie didn’t go to the kind of school where Latin had ever featured on the curriculum. There was a mystical power to Latin names. When he incanted the gorgeously impenetrable names of fish - *Pomacanthus imperator* (the Emperor angelfish), *Zandus Cornutus* (the Moorish Idol!) - Eddie felt like a sorcerer.

In-volve, re-volve, de-volve. Eddie pored over the grammar and stroked an imaginary beard, “‘Retro-volve’, perhaps, professor,” he said out loud to himself in a silly voice. Most of Eddie’s conversations were with himself. His mother thought he was being bullied at school but Eddie knew he wasn’t important enough in the school hierarchy to be bullied. He was part of the ranks of the invisible, but it was okay, there were quite a lot of invisible boys, they formed an unofficial, invisible club. They made feeble

jokes to themselves about themselves – the Ancient Geeks, Geek Gods - and they all secretly believed that the geeks would inherit the earth.

A few months ago, Hawk had found an old fish tank and a goldfish to put in it but the fish had never thrived and had acquired all kinds of strange lumps and fungal growths until it was a relief when it went bleached and belly-up and put Eddie out of his misery. That was pretty much when Eddie had lost faith in Hawk. He knew how to get things but he didn't how to keep them.

Hawk's real name was 'Alan' which didn't have the same heroic ring to it. Hawk was English, from Cheshire, a place that was a mystery to both June and Eddie who could only think of cheese and cats. His raptorial soubriquet was the result of a night in a sweat lodge in the Highlands when his true self – the hawk-headed sun god Ra – was revealed to him. 'Kind of like a totem,' he explained to Eddie. Eddie didn't tell Hawk that he also knew his own true identity – revealed to him by a huge, solid carp, patterned like grey and white marble, that lived in a pond in the hothouses in the Botanic. Eddie knew it was his totem because it had spoken to him.

Eddie often thought about the baby inside June. He had been charting its embryonic progress with an old medical encyclopaedia from the same skip haul as his Latin grammar. From tiny tadpole to gilled fish to froggy

foetus he had wondered about his unborn sibling. Brother or sister, he hadn't really minded, he just thought that it would be nice to have someone else in his family. Now it seemed it was going to be a girl which Eddie thought would probably be better for his mother. He kept the ultrasound photograph of his soon-to-be sister by the side of his bed.

June rubbed baby oil onto her stomach. The skin on her belly was like a drum. The drum was being beaten from the inside in an irregular tom-tom and she wondered if the baby was kicking or punching. The baby was a girl. The technician doing the ultrasound had asked her did she want to know the sex or did she want to be surprised? June hated surprises. She had been surprised enough when she found out she was pregnant with Eddie. She wasn't surprised this time because she had stopped taking the pill and she pretty much only had to look at a man and, hey presto, she was pregnant. Carrying.

Sometimes June wondered if she attracted fertility. In the olden days she would probably have been burned as a sacrifice or something to help the crops.

Eddie wasn't her first, there was the sexless embryo that had had to be disposed of when she fifteen ("Oh, June.") Her mother had tried to persuade



her to keep it but June was having none of it. Now she thought about it a lot. A 'foetus' she'd taught herself to say over the years but now it had become a baby again in her mind. Not that she was against abortions in any way.

Terminated. It always made her think of Arnold Schwarzenegger. She was the terminator. It would have been fifteen and it wouldn't be an it, it would be a boy or a girl, an older brother or sister for Eddie, someone to guide him and be a friend (and, God knows, he could do with one). Maybe that was why she was having this baby. To make up. To atone.

Hawk was very surprised by her pregnancy, of course, because he didn't know about her coming off the pill and she told him it must have stopped working because she was sick that one time. She hoped the baby would make Hawk stay. Clip his wings. Although she knew it wouldn't.

She was glad it was a girl because she hadn't had much success with a boy. She could buy pretty clothes for a girl and plait her hair with ribbons. And she could call her a nice, old-fashioned middle-class name like Sarah or Emma or Hannah. A girl would like dolls and ice-skating and ballet lessons. A girl would read novels and stories, not old encyclopaedias from skips. A girl would want to learn French knitting and the recorder and how to make a cake (that bit might be difficult). In fact a girl would want the childhood that June had once had, the one she had despised so much when she became

a teenager. Would her daughter grow up and treat her, the way June treated her own mother? That would be ironic, wouldn't it, like punishment fitting the crime. The baby gave her a double punch, right upper cut, left hook. Perhaps it wouldn't be the kind of girl that June imagined. That would serve her right too.

She conceived Eddie on holiday. Things had never been the same for June after she terminated that foetus. She'd been top of her class at Watson's before but afterwards she lost interest in academic achievement. She'd limped on to the end of school and gone on holiday to Greece with a group of friends from her class. To Crete, although she'd never been sure where that was on the map. Eddie knew where it was on the map because he'd asked her, straight out, where was I conceived? She'd caught him reading one of her baby books (she wished she could get Hawk to read one) it seemed unnatural for a boy of his age to be interested in things like that. June wondered if it was a sign that he was gay. She wouldn't mind if he was, it was neither here nor there, she was all for gays – the more the better in fact - as long as it didn't make his life more difficult than it already was.

Eddie had been reading June's baby books. He thought it was odd that women had to read books to know how to be a mother, although he could

see that his own mother needed a bit of a hand. He was looking forward to helping with the baby. If he helped with her she would love him even more. And he'd be a big brother, a hero to her. He liked the idea of being a hero.

He supposed she had been conceived in his mother's big, never-made bed. He knew the mechanics of it and he could hear them at it all the time. It had obviously never struck his mother that if she could say "Eddie, come in here," from her bedroom without raising her voice and he could hear her in his own bedroom (although he usually pretended he couldn't) then it was more than likely that he was also going to hear her when she was yelling her head off in there going "Ohgod, ohgod, ohgod." It wasn't clever and it wasn't funny, as Mrs McFarlane, his English teacher, would have said.

Eddie, on the other hand, had been conceived on the island of Crete, which was Greek and in the Mediterranean and to which he hoped to sail one day on a fast wooden boat with a white sail like a wing. He had a book called an 'Ancient Greek Primer' which he'd found in a jumble sale, but if he'd thought Latin was difficult then Greek took the biscuit, as his grandmother would have said. But it was beautiful to look at. They had done 'Ode to a Grecian Urn' in English which had proved a bit too advanced for them, as Mrs McFarlane herself had admitted, but not before breaking down in tears, although that was probably because of her divorce rather than

the Grecian Urn, but he had remembered the thing about beauty and truth because it seemed profound which was his word of the week.

Tammy lay on her back with her legs in the air while he tickled her huge stomach. She looked as if she was going to burst any minute. He'd had to get a book out of the library on dogs because it didn't look as if either Hawk or his mother were going to make an effort to find out about whatever the word for dogs was. Puppybirth. Ha ha ha.

Another Parents' Evening. Surely one a year was enough. June found schools oppressive, all those female teachers looking at her, wondering how old she was when she had Eddie, judging her. It was such a schemie school. She wished she could afford to live somewhere better, send Eddie to a good school. His life would be different (his future would be different) if he went somewhere like Watson's, the teachers would take more interest in him, care about him more. At least a few more of the teachers knew who Eddie was now. "Eddie's developing quite a personality," his science teacher said. What did that mean? "Eddie," his maths teacher ruminated, "he's quite the comedian, isn't he?" (It was never good when they said that.) "Eddie never seems to be quite with us," the French teacher said, "but he's pleasant enough."

“Are you all right?” his English teacher asked her. She made a sympathetic face at June, cocking her head on one side and smiling at her. “I can get you a cup of tea, if you want?” she offered, “I remember how tiring it is when you’re carrying such a weight around.” It took June a second to realise she meant the baby. June had left her contacts out and she squinted to see the English teacher’s name on the handwritten sign in front of her. “No thanks, Mrs...McFarlane.” June felt about six years old. “Oh call me, Pam,” the English teacher said cheerfully, “everyone else does,” and June felt glad that ‘Pam’ was one of Eddie’s teachers because she seemed the caring sort but then she saw that little frown pinching her round maternal features as she said, “Eddie...” and June could see that she couldn’t remember which one he was.

Despite her plump, mumsy look she had a neurotic air about her - exactly the kind of woman June had always dreaded turning into. “One minute they’re a bump,” Mrs McFarlane laughed, “and the next minute they’re huge teenagers. And then they’re gone.” She leant across the table in a conspiratorial way. June shrank back. “Make the most of every day,” ‘Pam’ said, “every day is precious.”

“Yeah, right,” June said.

June couldn't imagine Eddie leaving home. He was days away from his twelfth birthday. Every time Eddie had a birthday June tried - and usually failed - to disguise the fact that he had hardly any relatives and no friends at all. In order to increase his pathetic tally of cards June's mother sent him two birthday cards, one from herself and one, written with her left hand, from an anonymous, mysterious admirer, the same one who sent him a Valentine every year.

June was sure that Eddie would never win a fist fight, never have a good job and never receive a Valentine from anyone other than his grandmother. And it would all be her fault somehow. She imagined him when she was dead - a solitary middle-aged man ('pleasant enough') living in a stained and soiled flat, obsessively collecting newspapers and cereal packets.

The American flagfish - *Jordanella floridae*. A good name for a girl, Eddie thought. "Oh yes, and may I introduce my girlfriend, Miss Jordanella Floridae?" he chortled. His nearly-adolescent antennae sensed his mother watching disapprovingly from the doorway and he deliberately picked his nose to annoy her. He was looking forward to having a girlfriend, he knew

he'd end up with a geeky one but he didn't mind. They'd be pals, the way he was going to be pals with his invisible sister.

June regarded Eddie with despair. He was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the carpet, bent almost double over an old book and cackling manically to himself. The new baby fluttered inside her, elbowing more room for itself. June wanted to tell Eddie that she loved him but instead she said, 'Don't pick your nose, Eddie.'

"Do I look like my father?" he asked when she had already left the room. "I can't remember what he looked like," she shouted from the hallway. Which was more or less true. He didn't often ask but when he did she always said his father was 'some guy she met on holiday.' Which was also more or less true.

"What do you want to do for your birthday, squirt?" Hawk asked. Hawk was staring at the table in front of him on which the innards of a barometer, acquired at a car boot sale, were laid out in a way that suggested they would never go back together again.

"Deep Sea World," Eddie replied instantly.

"Again?"

"Again."

“Oh, not again,” June sighed as they headed out across the Forth Road Bridge in Hawk’s tinny old van. She was doing her best, but she felt sick. “It’s the fourth time this year, Eddie.”

“It’s my birthday, I get to choose,” Eddie said cheerfully.

“We could have gone to Butterfly World,” June said, more to herself than anyone. The baby would like Butterfly World. A girl who would like butterflies. Hawk’s van smelt of wet dog as they drove across the Forth Road Bridge, the water grey beneath their wheels.

June didn’t like the sea. She had done once but not after Crete. It had been her first holiday abroad, her parents had never been comfortable with the idea of foreign holidays, they contained too many potential hazards. There were four of them – two boys, Andy and Mark, herself and a girl called Joanna, who was a midwife now (June had seen her at the ante-natal clinic) which you would never have thought would be her fate if you’d have met her then.

They had taken a little boat out onto that vast expanse of azure as different from the Firth of Forth as was possible and when they were a long way from shore they all decided to go swimming off the boat. They’d been drinking retsina and smoking dope after a big lunch of oily moussaka and green beans (her father would have said they were going out of their way to



die) but they were all reckless, or maybe they all thought they were immortal. June wasn't sure that she thought at all at that age.

June was a strong swimmer, her parents had made sure she could swim as drowning was always high on their list of likely ways to die, and she had loved the feeling of kicking out in all that warm water with the sun like a bronze mirror in the sky, beating down on her back. They had seen flying silver fish and a school of dolphins before they dived in the water and June was hoping that one of the dolphins would come back and find her. She had seen a mosaic once, in some Roman villa on one of the sunless British holidays her parents took her on, and in the mosaic a boy was riding on a dolphin's back and June thought if she could do that, if she could ride on a dolphin she would be happy. And if she could actually turn into a dolphin, then she might be happy for ever.

At first, she thought that maybe it was a dolphin that took her down because, without any warning, she found herself being dragged abruptly to the bottom of the Mediterranean. Straight down, not the floundering bubbling chaos of cramp or tiredness, but a speeding, rushing drop as if an anchor had been tied to her feet. And the odd thing was - when she arrived on the seabed, stepping lightly off the rock she had landed on as if getting off a bus - she could still breathe.

She could remember seeing shells and fish, squid and crabs, she could remember the sunlight on the surface, a long way above her head. She could even remember how it felt to glide as effortlessly as a water nymph through the sea, but after that everything was confused in her memory and what happened next was so very rich and strange that she thought that someone must have given her acid. Certainly dropping acid was the only logical explanation she could come up with afterwards for the underwater kingdom - the massive throne of green marble decorated with gold and red coral and mother-of-pearl and cushioned with sealskin, the sea-beasts that swam around like lap dogs, the massive white horses whose manes were huge waves endlessly breaking around their heads as they pawed the sand, impatient to be harnessed to his chariot. And only some serious psychotropic drug could have accounted for his colossal, roaring presence of which she only seemed to catch fragments - the disgusting smell of fish and whale fat, the fronds of seaweed entangled in his great beard, his seed like pearls, gushing into the blue water -

“You alright?” Hawk asked her.

“Fine,” June said.

“What shall we call the baby?” Eddie asked from the back of the van and June’s heart gave a little flap at the word ‘we’. June and Eddie. June and

Eddie and the baby. A family. She wanted to squash Eddie to her breast. Instead she said, “Close your mouth, Eddie. If the wind changes you’ll stay like that.”

Eddie liked everything in Deep Sea World but the thing he liked most was the ‘Underwater Safari’ - the moving walkway in the huge acrylic-that-looked-like glass tunnel that took you down, down, right into the kingdom of fishes – from the forests of sunlit kelp where the little fish darted, to the sandy flats where the skate hid on the bottom, to the depths of the abyss where the scary conger eels lurked, to the open ocean with its shimmering silver fish. June was convinced that the weight of the water would break the tunnel and they would all be swept away on a North Sea tsunami of cod and salmon and sea bass. She reminded herself to think happy thoughts for the sake of the baby.

Someone called Jamie had a birthday today. Eddie knew that because there was a handwritten sign stuck up in the tunnel amongst the seaweed fronds, a sign that said ‘Happy Seventh Birthday, Jamie’. Eddie didn’t suppose anyone had done the same for him but that didn’t stop him hoping.

“Shite,” June said when she saw the happy birthday sign, “Shite, shite, shite,” Why didn’t she know you could do that? Because she was a crap

mother, obviously. She imagined how happy Eddie would have been if he'd had a sign. She felt sick again.

Afterwards, they ate in the cafeteria, an indifferent meal of chips and baked beans because it seemed wrong to eat fish. It was wet and windy outside and so cold that for once Hawk's van felt warm. June wanted a cigarette, surely the baby wouldn't mind just one cigarette?

Going home, they got stuck half-way across the bridge in a rush-hour traffic jam. Hawk drummed a tuneless tune on the steering-wheel. The water beneath was a wretched steel colour with a curdled froth on the wind-whipped waves. June wondered how long they would survive in the water if the suspension cables snapped.

Eddie had his nose pressed to the back window of the van. The rain had cleared behind them, bathing Fife in a watery gold sun. Down in the water Eddie could see mermaids leaping out of the river like salmon, their goldfish tails catching the sun. Nereids sunbathed on Inchcolm Island while a huge shoal of silver fish whirled the Forth into a vortex, in obeisance to their secret god – Eddie, King of the Fish. “Thank you, loyal subjects,” Eddie said, giving a regal wave to the inhabitants of his watery realm.

“Don’t talk to yourself, Eddie,” June said, “it’s the first sign of madness.”

June wondered if Hawk would hang around long enough to see the baby born. She wished he would leave now instead of putting her through the misery of waiting for him to go. Hawk himself was thinking that he fancied joining a tepee community. The baby inside June wasn’t thinking at all, it was leaping for the joy of leaping.

Eddie laughed to himself because he, and only he, knew what the great grey and white marbled carp had said to him that day in the Botanics.

Eddie leant forward and put his small, hot, dirty hand into June’s hand and said, “Everything’s going to be okay, Mum. Trust me.”