

From *Mama Fish*

Every school has one. Every *class*, probably: the square peg, the kid that doesn't fit. He (assume male, although they could just as easily be female) always sits at the back of the class and will not speak until spoken to. He doesn't trade jokes or baseball cards, has no favorite teams—no interests at all, it would seem. He wears the same baggy clothes every day, sits alone at lunchtime, and always carries a letter from home excusing him from Phys. Ed. He gets ragged out behind his back because nobody wants to be on his shit-list. Most people are scared of him, even the teachers. They would never admit it, but it's true. They are scared of his rapt and resentful silence. He's the oddball, the freak ... the kid you would vote most likely to bring a semi-automatic handgun into the classroom and go postal.

1986. The school was Harlequin High. The square peg was Kelvin Fish. He was tall, big-boned, and had several huge boils on the back of his neck that you'd swear would glow in the dark. I am sure that no two teeth in his skull were the same size, shape, or color. He had a lazy eye. Scratch that—his left eye wasn't just lazy, the goddam thing was comatose. It would spend the day somewhere between open and closed, and by early afternoon there'd usually be a clump of orange gloop nesting in the corner (I once saw him dig this clump out with the tip of one finger and pop it nonchalantly into his mouth). Kelvin Fish. Not Fishy. Not Fishman. Never a nickname. When people referred to Kelvin Fish, it was always with both first and second names: *When do you think Kelvin Fish last took a shower? Did you see that brown stuff growing in Kelvin Fish's ears?* The teachers, too: *I'm still waiting for your homework assignment, Kelvin Fish.* He'd swamp through the day, shoulders hunched, always silent. His hair was

so thick that it never seemed to grow. It sat on his head, the same length, the same style, for almost as long as I knew him, like Elton John's weave.

Have you seen the color of Kelvin Fish's fingernails?

You might question my decision to get closer to him. You might think I was doing it out of pity or curiosity. I'm sure it was both of these things, but there was more ... something I was too scared to admit, even to myself. I knew there was a regular boy inside that Herman Munster-like exterior. A boy with a heartbeat. A boy with a soul. He would have a home life, a family, a mother who loved him. I mean, he wasn't *spawned*, was he? He didn't crawl out from under a damp slab of rock, or fall from the heavens in a meteor, like Superman.

Kelvin Fish farted in Social Studies, and the stink! Oh Jeeeee ...

I was sitting behind Kelvin Fish in Math, and I could see something moving under his shirt. Something on his back.

I never questioned my decision. Not for a moment. All I wanted was to get closer to him.

I wanted to be his friend.

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Before approaching Kelvin Fish I had, on occasion, tried to imagine what life in the old Fish Homestead was like. It was a fine way to pass the time, particularly during those interminable classes where the minutes moved with painful, marshmallow stupor.

My imagination presented an assortment of scenarios, with a weakness for the outlandish. I envisioned Kelvin Fish's house to be a bleak, tumbledown affair: peeling boards, rot spreading, windows shuttered and blind to the world. The garden was a sprawl of cancerous weed, choking the life from everything that was once green. It was a distortion, a ghost story. Children were afraid to go near it. There were no birds singing in the trees, no squirrels or chipmunks. Cars that drove by were often prone to some irregularity: the radio switching stations; the heater turning itself on; the windshield wipers flipping into life. Even aircraft buzzing overhead experienced the occasional glitch.

There were corpses in the foundation—hundreds of them—and a dungeon in the basement with prisoners chained to the walls (their vocal chords severed so that nobody would hear their cries). Masked guests would assemble every full moon. They would strip naked, bay into the night, and drink blood from a jeweled chalice. I had wiled away hours with imaginings of Kelvin Fish's

brothers and sisters: a brood of mutant children, brainless and nameless, locked in the attic.

Papa Fish had red eyes. He had a swastika etched in the middle of his forehead, like Charles Manson, and he would often punish Kelvin Fish and his freak siblings with a stock prod and a broken bicycle chain.

Mama Fish, however, was the star of my reveries. I sometimes saw her as a small woman with a kink in her spine that caused her to walk sideways, but more often she was as fat as a bear. She walked with the support of two canes that were as crooked as an old man's legs. Her hair was as red as her husband's eyes, hanging over her face in dirty strings. She usually had a mouthful of something—chewing tobacco or Twinkies. Her spit was the color of used oil, and if she didn't shave she would have a beard like a hockey player in less than a week.

Algebra II was made more interesting when I indulged mother and son in a little carnal activity. Nothing too graphic (my imagination maintains a sense of decency), but sufficient to titillate my bizarre sense of humor.

Mama would sometimes lay with her meaty legs spread to east and west, *sans* underwear, while Kelvin Fish massaged the calluses on the balls of her feet (*Like what you see, pumpkin?*). She would sometimes demand an 'inspection' of her boy—have him strip bare-ass and pirouette while she chain-scoffed Oh Henry! bars. Other times she would blow him, trying not to cry, hating every aspect of her tragic life.

Castles in the sky: imaginary sketches designed to pass the time and perhaps condition me for what was to follow. I must have known that the relationship between me and Kelvin Fish was going to get more interesting. I assumed my harmless mind-movies were a kind of defense mechanism, a way to help me cope with any situation.

But I was wrong. Nothing—no mental sensing, no X-rated movie, no natural disaster—could have prepared me for what was going to happen.

Nothing could have prepared me for Mama Fish.