



SLQ Young Writers Award 2014 – Runner up

Fish

by Lucinda Bopf

“What’s your name, love?”

The ambulance officer shone a piercing torch beam directly into each one of Helen Fisher’s eyes. Fish didn’t respond. Black spots dominated her vision, and the man’s voice seemed very loud inside her head. She opened her mouth then closed it again.

“Like a stunned mullet,” her mother would have joked if Mother wasn’t in three pieces and smeared across the Bruce Highway.

Aquatic jokes were the norm in Fish’s family. Nobody called her Helen. She was Tadpole before she was born, and Fish thereafter. Fish pointed out that she should have been Frog, but Fish’s parents were stupid and happy and it didn’t matter to them.

The man was touching her now. He ran both hands over her ribcage, gently applying pressure in certain places and awaiting her response. Fish stared at him.

When she was three, she slipped and fell down a full flight of stairs in her parents’ apartment. Both of her parents screamed and cried and howled. Fish just stared. They rushed her to the local doctor, who examined a calm and uninterested child and declared her to be unharmed. It was only three days later, when Fish couldn’t take a breath, that they took her to hospital and discovered three broken ribs and a punctured lung.

The ambulance man was frowning now. Fish thought he looked a bit like a toad: fat, with round, bulgy eyes, and a downturned mouth. She would have told him this, but her lips were numb and it wouldn’t have come out right.

Fish wasn’t a talker. That’s what her father told people, and the reason her mother gave for Fish’s apparent inability to maintain friendships or complete her school work properly. Some people thought Fish was just stupid, but Fish knew it was the other way

around. Teachers asked her questions to which they clearly already knew the answers. The boys in her class punched her arms and asked her if she could feel it. The girls said vapid things that weren't really questions, like, "it must be so weird not to ever get headaches or period pains". Fish found that nodding was easier than outlining the complexities of *Congenital Insensitivity to Pain with Anhidrosis* to each group and inviting more idiotic questions. So, the boys called Fish a 'freak of nature' and the girls called her a 'weirdo slut'.

Fish looked her condition up on the internet when she was twelve, and learned that she couldn't feel pain or temperature, couldn't sweat, and would likely be dead from unintended injuries by 25. The boys were right. Fish liked boys much better than girls. Girls said things they didn't mean, and were always mad or upset or jealous. Fish's mother said that's why they called Fish a slut. Fish understood jealousy. She was jealous of girls with big tits, because boys did anything they said. Boys did things that Fish wanted too, once she learned to bargain.

Fish had sex when she was fifteen. A boy in her class offered to help her study, and give her test answers, if she let him touch her breast. The arrangement continued through the year, and eventually the boy wanted Fish to have sex with him. Afterwards, he told Fish that he loved her. Fish asked when she would get the test answers.

"She's in shock," the ambulance man croaked to another man in a paramedic uniform. He lifted one of Fish's arms then lowered it gently. Fish saw blood and knew it was her own. The two men loaded her onto a stretcher and put her in the ambulance. She hoped they were taking her home. A girl in her class was having a party, and Fish wanted to get drunk again.

She'd assumed from her research that drugs and alcohol would have no effect on her body, and the beers she'd stolen from her father and guzzled in her room had left her burping and disappointed. Only last month, when another boy had given Fish a half bottle of vodka and felt her up, had she experienced the wild abandon and heady pleasure that other teens craved. She'd even talked to people, although they still bored her quickly. One girl showed Fish her hand, bleeding and pulpy from an encounter with broken glass, and grinned. "Now I know how it feels to be you," she'd slurred.

Her mother had been angry, and then she'd cried, which made Fish confused because Mother wasn't sad.

"You're already in danger of serious injury without knowing it," Mother said. "Why do you have to increase your chances with stupid behaviour?"

It was a stupid question, so Fish didn't answer.

Now the ambulance man was asking her for her name again. She watched as he inserted a cannula into the crook of her right arm and attached a bag of saline. She wondered which hospital they would take her to. She'd been to all the ones in Brisbane at least once in her life. Hopefully there would be a TV in her room.

A radio crackled from the front of the ambulance, and the man moved closer to the driver's seat to listen in. When he came back, he knew her name.

"Helen, can you hear me, sweetheart?"

Fish blinked at him, the way paralysis patients did.

"Great," he said, but his toad mouth remained frowning. "Can you feel this?" He was squeezing her left hand.

She blinked again, then closed her eyes. She was bored and tired. She wondered if there was a blink sequence that would indicate "take me home".

The man was shaking her shoulders now.

"Helen, stay awake for me, OK? Helen?"

Fish opened her eyes and glared at him. She noted surprise in his tiny eyes, then something else that she couldn't identify. She realised that she was wet. She looked closely at her left arm now. The skin was reddish-black with blisters, and further down part of a white bone had split the skin and was jutting toward the roof. The limb was streaked with shiny blood, which the toad had been washing away with more saline. When she raised her eyes again, he was staring at her.

"Do you feel pain, Helen?"

It was a stupid question.

"Obviously not," she managed to croak before she passed out.

She woke up in the North West Private. She could tell from the layout of the ward, and the colour of the nurses' uniforms. A fat orderly was pushing a gurney lazily down the corridor, and a blow-by-blow rundown of the latest episode of Jersey Shore, punctuated by gasps and giggles, drifted down from the nurses' station. Private hospitals had tiny Emergency Departments. Fish preferred to watch the frantic action of the public system. People would stream in, bleeding, spewing, screaming. It made the waiting bearable. Now she lay in a spacious room with three other beds, only one of which was occupied. The old

man in the bed was asleep, and Fish knew by the number of tubes and monitors around him that he probably wouldn't be alive much longer.

The bone in her left arm must have been set, and the whole limb was bandaged tightly. She remembered the burns and wondered if they would scar. Scars were an inevitable part of CIPA, and one of the only things that concerned Fish. Men didn't like girls with scars.

The only people in the hallway now were a young doctor and a rakish blonde nurse, locked in conversation. Fish knew the nurse wanted to have sex with the doctor because she was twisting her hair and pushing her non-existent tits towards him. The doctor seemed distracted, glancing down the hall towards Fish's room. Fish looked again at her roommate and considered yanking his tubes out so she could sneak away in the melee. When she was six, she'd been in a bed next to someone who was having a heart attack. All other patients were abandoned at the sound of that alarm. The nurses had pulled the curtain around the woman's bed, but Fish still heard the repetitive thud as they tried to massage her heart into its normal rhythm, and the exhilarating jolt of the defibrillator. Fish wondered whether 1000 volts would even tickle a CIPA patient.

She managed to free one leg from the blankets before the young doctor entered the room. Fish stared at him expectantly. The doctor faltered. He grabbed the chart from the foot of her bed and flicked through the pages thoughtfully. He caught her gaze and smiled awkwardly. No wonder the nurse wanted to fuck him.

"How are we feeling?"

Fish almost laughed.

The doctor made a circular motion in front of his face. "Some of your face was burnt and will be quite fragile for a while."

She wondered what the chart actually said.

"With minimal scarring, of course," he added quickly.

He busied himself tapping the drip bag and taking Fish's pulse. A nurse had done the same only ten minutes before. She continued to watch him. He hadn't come in here to offer platitudes about her face. He obviously wanted something. Maybe they could strike a deal. She wanted to ask him to take her home. She could offer him sex. She was already on a bed. He could close the door. Her roommate was not likely to wake up.

“I’m Dr Faris, by the way,” the doctor continued, as if this explained his presence. “You were in a car accident. Your arm needed surgery, but the break should heal nicely. The burns will take a little longer, but...”

Fish hated doctors. They always lied about the severity of her injuries and treated her like a child.

“They told me you were conscious when they found you,” the doctor went on. He’d stopped fiddling and was looking at her point blank. “And that you didn’t react to your injuries. We’ve located your medical history. You really feel no pain?”

So that was it. He’d got wind of the medical marvel, the specimen to be prodded and poked.

“I feel some things. Perhaps you’d like to examine me,” Fish replied in her best husky voice.

The doctor’s mouth dropped open. Men always blanched at such open offers. But their surprise was usually quickly overtaken by lust. She couldn’t tell what Dr Faris felt. He seemed about to answer, when they heard a loud voice from the hallway.

“I told them at the front, her name is Helen Fisher!”

Her father.

A nurse replied more quietly, “Of course, Mr Fisher. I’ll take you through to her in a moment. I just need a few details.”

“Details? Like what?” He was shouting now. “Helen Fisher. DOB 22.07.96. Medical history: fucking long. CIPA compounded with clinical psychopathy. Got enough?”

Fish didn’t hear what the nurse said in reply, but she heard footsteps. Dr Faris stepped quickly back from her bed. Fish didn’t care anymore. Father would take her home.

Her father walked through the door and made a strange sighing sound when he saw her. He was crying. Fish knew why: because Mother was dead. She watched his face crumple and his nose grow red. She studied the lines that had slowly crept over his skin in the last five years. She knew it was sadness because there were tears, and because he kept saying, “I’m so sorry, Fish”.

She let him hug her, and wondered who would cook their dinner from now on.