

Plankton

My high school was a bacterial breeding ground for social stereotypes.

The food chain began with the ever-predictable sharks of the sea. Your atypical school bullies with three layers of replaceable teeth. These girls were feared, not respected. There were times, be there few, when a student would be idly walking down a seemingly quiet corridor, and look down to see a chunk of hair blocking their path. Such tokens of hair were soon considered as unwanted trophies of the WWE matches that scattered around the school.

The dolphins fell lower on the marine chart. Admired by their beauty but never truly taken seriously, these creatures were otherwise known by the Latin word 'Oompa Loompas' (a title well deserved for their orange skin and bleach blonde hair that used to turn green after every swimming carnival). They were the kind that would scream bloody murder if a pigeon made its way into the classroom, clutching nearby pupils as human shields due to the predatory and ravenous nature that such birds are renowned for. However, a note of caution must be considered when dealing with these dolphins, for whilst this species is known for their beauty and grace, just like dolphins they can be nonetheless as vicious as the sharks that rival them.

Following the bottle-nosed beauties were the clown fish. The jesters of the school. Clown fish were the kind of people who would boldly stand out in front of a crowd of your general, monochromatic aquatic student. They were bright. They were funny. They were admirable due to their fearlessness and were deemed the true leaders of the ladder.

Then you have the sports-fanatics. The sailfish: the fastest fish in the ocean. It may come as a surprise but even at an all-girl's school you still have your clichéd jocks. To be frank, there's not much I have to say about the jocks, most likely because the only sport I ever did in high school consisted of long walks to the canteen and back.

And then you had your plankton, which were an assortment of art geeks, nerds, dorks, goths, weirdos and lastly, emos. These were my people. The underdogs.

“Plankton comes from the Greek word ‘planktos’ meaning wandering or drifting.”

- Thurman, H.V. 1997.

Much to my family's dismay, for a short period during my high school life, I donned the black eyeliner, sported the 'My Chemical Romance' shirts with pride, and grew a side-fringe that would be the envy of Justin Bieber himself. I was deemed 'the happy emo' in the graduation books, the girl who wore black with a smile. When someone told me the glass was half empty, I would reply by saying 'at least you had water left to drink'. Hell, the only time I had been told off in class was when a graphics teacher deemed me 'too happy,' and barked that it would 'be a refreshing change if I were depressed'. I replied simply that I would come to the next class with a packet of Zoloft to appease her, and then was subsequently ordered to spend the entirety of the lesson staring at the back wall.

Contributing to the fact that I dressed up as Harry Potter on my graduation day as well as the fact that I knew the school library like the back of my hand, this didn't make for ideal social climbing. An interaction with my first dolphin proved this well. I saw the pod lining up for art class. Mustering up my small yet courageous planktonic heart, I walked up to them.

"Oh and that Victoria girl? *Urgh*. She is *such* a nerd."

I tapped the dolphin on the shoulder. She turned around as if I had just shown her a can of tuna.

"Oh." She covered her shock with laughter, "I meant the Victoria in the other year seven class. She's *so* annoying!"

I later found out that I was the only girl named Victoria in my whole year level.

"New evidence has been compiled by marine scientists that prove the normally placid dolphin is capable of brutal attacks both on innocent fellow marine mammals and, more disturbingly, on its own kind."

- Blundell, N. 2008

Plankton is stereotypically quite hard to see by the naked eye so I shrugged this off dismissively and went on my way into the class. Plankton is indistinctive. Forgettable. And yet, at the same time they are the very source of all marine survival. Without plankton, you don't have a shark.

Three years went by from that day and the insults grew worse. 'Freak', 'anorexic' and the ever eloquent, 'bitch' being the bulk of the vocabulary used. Soon, the 'Victoria in the other year level' ceased to exist and so the bottle-nosed beauties began overtly talking about me within earshot.

It wasn't until one day, when one bull shark decidedly shoved me against the lockers that I had had enough. The high school food chart would be usurped and I was just the plankton bold enough to do it. And I would start with a great white shark.

“Highly adapted predators, the mouths [of great white sharks] are lined with up to 300 serrated, triangular teeth arranged in several rows, and they have an exceptional sense of smell to detect prey.”

-National Geographic, n.d.

Looking back, I dashed into the battlefield with a toothpick and a target sign painted to my chest. And by that I mean that it was casual clothes day and I sported a black shirt with a rather large white skull imprint. With my lanky frame, it was hardly intimidating. Armed with but two Zooplanktons, I decided to go up to the alpha of the group. Upon the predictable issuing of ‘goth and emo’, a brilliant idea hit me. I decided I would use my pseudo-dark nature to my advantage. Narrowing my eyes, I turned around and marched right up to the shark, feeling my stomach rise to my throat.

“I curse you!” I lowered my voice for dramatic effect.

“Oh no, it talks!” She mocked. I did not look away.

I decided rather than issuing a peace treaty, which would no doubt be ripped to shreds by such a magnificent animal, I decided to go for the sore spot of any fifteen-year old girl: Vanity.

“On the second day of the second full moon,” I interrupted, “all your hair will fall off. Every single strand. Til you’re left completely and utterly bald.”

The girl was instantly confused.

“What?”

Rather than replying, we walked off. My face was straight the entire time.

“What did you say?” she called after me. Coincidentally, from that day onward, she never called me names again and even added a ‘hello’ in the mornings. Perhaps it’s just me but I even think her hair was shinier ever since that fateful day. Sometimes I like to picture her buying large quantities of conditioner – all in the meanwhile, staring at a moon chart comprised next to her cupboard door.

“Some of the types of plankton, which form red tides, produce the most potent nerve poison known to man. Depending on the species, the plankton can cause paralysis or trick all the nerves into constantly firing. Other plankton blooms can cause people to lose their memory.”

- National Oceanography Centre Southampton, 2007.

My next encounter would take place a year later with a bottlenose beauty in the confines of a maths class. For this class, our teacher designated assigned seats judged by those who were known to be quite reliable and those who were somewhat struggling (a polite terminology for the rebels of the classroom). It was the teacher's belief that this would foster a more harmonious aquatic environment. Begrudgingly, I sat down next to a renowned dolphin whose reputation preceded her. I swallowed as she looked me up and down. I would have to sit in this same seat for the entire year. The dolphin was not amused. I was notorious plankton. We came from different stock.

For the first week, we sat in uncomfortable silence. She made a habit of reaching over my desk to wave at her pod at the other side of the room. The second week, we muttered out a small 'hello' to one another as we sat down. The third week, I heard her sigh heavily and throw her pen to her book.

"Christ" she muttered, ripping the page from the edge.

Then I uttered the three simple words that would change the way I viewed dolphins forever:

"Need any help?"

I had always been good at math. Numbers came easily to me. And besides, I knew she needed help. From our three weeks of miming, I could see the E's plastered on her test papers. After a long conversation involving the magic of algebra, a brief wave of comprehension welled up in her eyes. She gave me this lovely smile that was dripping in honest gratitude.

"Oh my God, I think I love you."

That was the day I made friends with a dolphin.

"Dolphins are very sociable animals that generally live in groups. Their friendly, cooperative behaviour is vital to their survival. When a dolphin is sick or injured, its cries of distress summon immediate aid from other dolphins, who try to support it to the surface so that it can breathe."

- Wonderclub, n.d.

It was my last year of high school when I came across the final leaders of the ladder: The clown fish. The most idolized fish of them all. They were untouchable. No one dared to throw insults their way due to the invisible sea anemones that surrounded them.

In my final year of high school, the leader of the clowns came up to me, and asked me if I wanted to perform a comedy dance for the annual arts festival. I told her how I wasn't the

funniest girl in school, yet she disagreed. She believed that I had a great sense of humour to which I respectfully declined. Yet, after a constant stream of ‘please please please’, my arm was bent, and soon I would be practicing a comedy-styled dance in the confines of my living room. One in which I was convinced I would ultimately fail. I could almost feel the oncoming hoard of tomatoes that would fly my way once I came on the stage. I could envision the taunts of ‘emo’ and ‘goth’ that would echo the hall. I could see the jeering faces and feel the stares. I was immediately regretting saying ‘yes’ to the plea.

And so, within time, the big night came. As clichéd as the moment had been, we were the last group to grace the stage. The stage was dark amidst the single spotlight and I felt my nerves grapple my throat. The music blasted from the speakers. Shaking my shoulders, I decided at that moment that I had nothing left to lose, and ran on stage for my solo and danced my little planktonic butt off. I threw up my hands exaggeratingly in the air, kicked my feet like a can-can dancer, and made an absolute fool out of myself. It was freeing. Within each Macarena-inspired dance movement, I released a portion of my fears. And for the first time in my high school life, I didn’t care about the social consequences.

The music stopped. I heaved heavy breaths as I stood at the front of the stage. There was the briefest pause that lasted a lifetime. I winced momentarily at the fruit that I knew would fly. The catcalls that would echo onto the stage. The booing that was sure to come. I closed my eyes.

And then I realized they were all cheering my name.

I opened my eyes in disbelief. The bottle-nosed beauties stood up and clapped. The sharks smiled and cheered me on. The sailfish and clownfish joined the crowd. And when the music stopped, they all stood up for me. And I remember seeing the plankton in the front seats, beaming with delight, with an expression on their faces that were almost smug. Because they knew I had it in me all along.

Despite being so small, plankton blooms can be seen from space.

- Debrain, 2010.
