

Little Plastic Shipwreck



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CATE KENNEDY

Cate Kennedy was born in Louth, Lincolnshire, England, where her father was on a posting with the air force. She returned to Australia in her childhood and lived in several states around the country with her family. After graduating with a BA in literature from the University of Canberra, she worked a wide variety of jobs, including for the Australian Customs Service, as a tutor, waitress, life model, kitchenhand, community arts worker, theatre director, and for a microcredit cooperative for peasant farmers in Mexico. These experiences have fed into her writing: in 2005, she published the travel memoir *Sing and Don't Cry* about her time in Mexico, and her short story *Habit* (2001), which tells the story of a woman who dies while smuggling Cocaine across the border, is inspired by her time working for the Customs service. Kennedy's writing has spanned a variety of genres, including fiction, non-fiction and poetry, but she is best known for her short fiction. In 2001, she published her first collection of short stories, *Dark Roots*, to critical acclaim. Her latest collection of short stories, *Like a House on Fire*, was shortlisted for the prestigious Stella prize in 2013. Cate Kennedy teaches creative writing in schools and Universities across Australia. She lives on a farm on the Broken River in North-East Victoria.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Little Plastic Shipwreck" broaches the topic of the mistreatment of intelligent animals in marine parks. This reflects the mounting controversy around Seaworld (in Orlando, Florida), where a captive orca named Tilikum was involved in the death of three people between 1991 and 2010, sparking discussions about the conditions of marine parks and the ethics of keeping large intelligent animals, such as orcas and dolphins, in captivity. This may have influenced Kennedy's decision to make Declan's callous attitude towards Samson central to her story. In addition, *Little Plastic Shipwreck* addresses some of the issues associated with contemporary capitalism, including consumerism and job insecurity. The story's publication coincided with a period of general economic decline between the late 2000s and early 2010s, known as the Great Recession. Kennedy's portrait of a dilapidated business struggling to keep afloat, as well as of a protagonist working a job he hates in order to support himself and his wife through a medical catastrophe, reflects this economic and social climate in subtle ways.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In a 2006 interview, Cate Kennedy cites two other Australian authors whose work has had an influence on her own: Peter Carey and Tim Winton. Peter Carey is a novelist and the author of two short story collections, *The Fat Man in History* (1974) and *War Crimes* (1979). Tim Winton is a novelist, playwright and author of six short story collections, including *On Her Knees* (2004) and *The Turning* (2005). Like Winton and Carey, Kennedy's works often reflect a contemporary Australian cultural context. In the same interview, she also mentions authors of American fiction between the early and mid-twentieth century, including John Steinbeck (*The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939), Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1960) and Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*, 1953). Like Kennedy, these writers all created fiction that reflected and commented on aspects of the world around them: for John Steinbeck, the Great Depression; for Harper Lee, racism in the deep south; and for Ray Bradbury, the horror of World War II. American fiction during this period was also largely characterized by a restrained, observational writing style and realistic dialogue, the influence of which is noticeable in Kennedy's own writing

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Little Plastic Shipwreck
- **When Written:** Unknown
- **Where Written:** Melbourne, Australia
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** The story largely takes place at Oceanworld, a dilapidated marine park
- **Climax:** Roley quits his job in a gesture of protest against his boss' cruel attitude towards the deceased star dolphin at Oceanworld
- **Antagonist:** Declan
- **Point of View:** Close 3rd person, tied to Roley's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Culture shock in her own country: Kennedy's disillusionment with contemporary Western culture was largely sparked by her experience working with incredibly poor farmers and their families in rural Mexico. Upon returning to Melbourne, she suffered culture shock at being back in her own country, as described in the memoir *Sing and Don't Cry* (2005): "I'm here, and there's no getting round it. My culture, with its dumb, neurotic obsessions, its sickening surfeits, its dreadful, overfed narcissism, its blind, smug, dopey acquiescence. I can hardly bear to be in my skin."

Lucky Break: One of the proudest moments of Kennedy's career was when her short story "Black Ice" was published in the prestigious *New Yorker* magazine in 2006. She had submitted the same story to Australian journals three or four times and faced rejections each time. Kennedy said that this was a lesson to her that there's a time and place for every short story; it just sometimes takes a while to find it.



PLOT SUMMARY

Roley, an employee at Oceanworld, arrives at work to find that Oceanworld's only remaining dolphin, Samson, has died (presumably of old age). This leads him to reflect on his wife Liz's recent accident, which has left her with severe brain damage. He recalls specific moments and speculates on the gruesome details of the operation. It appears that he is still in a state of shock and disbelief about what has happened.

When Roley's boss, Declan, arrives at the pool and sees Samson's body, he orders Roley to haul it out using the chains, freeze it in the cool room, and "cut it up" when it is frozen. Roley silently vows not to do this. He recalls Declan's irritatingly chipper spiels about Samson during the popular dolphin show, in which Declan boasted about the "special bond" between dolphins and humans. This contrasts with Declan's cruel attitude towards the dead dolphin.

Remembering the moments when Samson's "calm, loving eye" was "fixed on him alone," Roley speculates that the reason visitors loved Samson so much was that "he was the only creature at the aquarium who seemed to be able to create a facial expression." In contrast, he thinks of the blank expressions of the other creatures at the marine park: the fish, the sea-turtles, and the blind sea-lion. He recalls a conversation with his co-worker, Kaz, about the fact that goldfish have no short-term memory: "You put one in a fishbowl, and they start swimming around in circles, and every time it's like: *Look, a little plastic shipwreck!* Five seconds later: *Look, a little plastic shipwreck!*" There is an implicit connection between these thoughts and Roley's sense that his wife's brain is now a very different thing than what it once was.

Roley's co-worker Kaz comes to help him wheel the body to the cool room, and together they think fondly on a particular dolphin show during the school holidays. Roley was supposed to reach for a fish from the bucket, cueing Samson to jump just as Declan gestured. He deliberately missed his cue, ruining the moment. He reflects that this was the only day of work at Oceanworld that he'd actually enjoyed, despite almost getting fired.

Roley wonders where else he could find a job that would let him off at 3 in the afternoon each day, and he thinks back to a time when he worked well-paid night shifts at the munitions plant. He'd had to quit this job after Liz's rehab therapist said that it

made her anxious waking up to find him gone. Following this train of thought, Roley finally recalls the moment of Liz's accident at a friend's party. Liz had been taking around a platter on the unfinished deck when she'd turned to answer a question, tripped, and fell off. The fall was only a metre and a half, but she'd hit her head on a rock below. Roley recalls the shocked moment of the accident, the arrival of the ambulance, and seeing his "lovely, witty wife" in a plastic body brace. He observes his ongoing failure to comprehend this moment: he has to "re-learn" it each time he remembers it.

At this moment Declan walks into the cool room and orders Roley again to freeze Samson's body and cut it up. With his hand affectionately on Samson's flank, Roley refuses. Declan fires him on the spot. As he walks out of Oceanworld, Roley steals several plastic trinkets from the gift-shop, including a **snowdome**. When he arrives home, he presents the snowdome to his wife. Instead of shaking it she holds it passively. Grimly, Roley thinks that they should put tiny brains inside the snowdome instead, "something to knock around uselessly" while "some big hand somewhere just kept on shaking."



CHARACTERS

Roley – The protagonist and narrator of the story, Roley works at Oceanworld where he cleans and cares for the animals. He is grieving on two accounts: first for his wife, Liz, whose recent brain injury has left her severely mentally impaired, and second for Oceanworld's dolphin, Samson, whose death he discovers at the beginning of the story. Roley, recognizing Samson's intelligence and affection, relates to the dolphin on a near-human level. This sets Roley apart from Declan, his boss and the lead dolphin trainer, who appears to value Samson only as a source of profit. Having lost both Samson and the person his wife used to be, Roley is an intensely lonely figure: there is only one other person in the story with whom he feels any affinity (Kaz, his co-worker), and even then, it is mentioned in passing as more a vague allyship than a friendship. The story reveals little about Roley before the accident, but the fact that his wife's accident occurred at a party suggests that perhaps his loneliness and isolation throughout the story is a direct effect of his grief. Much of the story is told through his internal monologue: he reflects on the decrepit state of Oceanworld and the animals that live there, and suffers flashbacks to traumatic moments in his wife's accident, operation, diagnosis, and rehabilitation. His reflections suggest a bleak and nihilistic view of the world, one perhaps shaped by loss. Though he defies Declan and quits his job over Declan's inhumane treatment of Samson's body, the sense of empowerment this grants him is short-lived. By the end of the story, Roley's thoughts imply that he has lost everything: his wife, his friend, his job, and all hope.

Samson – The only dolphin at Oceanworld, Samson is the star

attraction of a marine park that is clearly past its prime. At twenty-five years old, he dies at the beginning of the story. Readers learn about Samson through Roley's reflections, remembering the dolphin fondly as a forgiving and intelligent creature with humanlike facial expressions. This distinguishes Samson from the other animals, who, according to Roley's characterizations, are devoid of emotional or intellectual complexity. The story is peppered with memories from the dolphin show, in which Declan recites rehearsed statistics about dolphin behaviour and anatomy, and claims to share a bond with Samson. This clashes with Declan's callous attitude to Samson's death, particularly his command to Declan to "cut it [the body] up." Roley refuses, and quits his job in what appears to be a final act of loyalty to Samson.

Liz – Liz is Roley's wife. Sometime before the timeframe of the story, she was handing around a tray of food at a friend's party, fell off the unfinished deck, and hit her head on a rock. Readers know very little about her before the accident, save Roley's description of her as his "lovely, witty wife." Similarly, the extent of her brain damage is revealed only through Roley's observations. He remarks that she appears to have lost all will or desire. She responds to his queries with empty, vague statements and cannot find the words for objects. Liz is also highly dependent: Roley quits his night-job when Liz's rehabilitation therapist informs him that it "makes her nervous" to wake up when he's not there. Without having Liz's own perspective in the story, the reader's perception of her hinges on other characters' observations, and she becomes an object of pity, but also of mystery: the lack of information that surrounds her creates a conspicuous absence in the story where her character should be.

Declan – Declan is Roley's boss who runs the dolphin show at Oceanworld. Unlike Roley, he expresses no sadness at Samson's death, instead looking at the body and ordering Roley to "cut it up." Declan behaves in an authoritarian way, and it is suggested that he has a tendency cut corners in terms of his responsibilities. He speaks to his employees without respect and harshly punishes any challenge to his authority: Roley recounts almost losing his job when he (deliberately) failed to reach for the fish on time in the dolphin show. Declan acts as the lead trainer and MC of the dolphin show, and puts on a completely different demeanour for this role. The story has excerpts from his script, full of rhetorical questions and recited in a "golly-gee" voice, which contrasts with the cold and callous man Roley knows him to be offstage. When Roley finally refuses to cut up Samson's body, Declan fires him unceremoniously.

Kaz – Kaz is Roley's colleague. Like Roley, she is affected by Samson's death. He reminisces with her about the time that he defied Declan in the dolphin show, suggesting that they are allies in the face of Declan's authoritarianism. When Roley leaves Oceanworld, he thinks distractedly that he'll write a card

to Kaz. Nevertheless, he does not say goodbye, and it seems possible that he'll never see her again.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



HUMANS, ANIMALS, AND CONSCIOUSNESS

In "Little Plastic Shipwreck," Roley grieves for his wife, Liz, who has been left with brain damage after an accident at a friend's party. Simultaneously, while Roley is working at Oceanworld theme park, an elderly dolphin named Samson dies. Cate Kennedy draws parallels between Samson's humanlike intelligence and emotion and the "lovely, witty" person Liz was before the accident. Furthermore, Roley's descriptions of his wife post-accident resemble his descriptions of the other animals at Oceanworld—the fish, the turtles, and the old blind sea-lion—who lack discernible emotions. Through Roley's struggle to navigate the blurred lines between humans and animals, Kennedy suggests that so-called "human" consciousness may not be anything special—for humans and animals alike, what looks like a coherent personality may just be arbitrary, impermanent quirks of brain function.

From the beginning of the story, Kennedy's descriptions of Samson blur the line between human and animal. The story opens with Roley going to "say hi to Samson." Without any context, readers assume that Samson is another human until Kennedy reveals in the second sentence that Samson is a dolphin. Roley continues to describe Samson in ways that give the dolphin human characteristics. In the first paragraph, for example, Roley calls Samson a "faithful old crowd-pleaser." He also hopes that the dolphin died in his sleep, suggesting that he considers Samson to be on the same emotional level, and therefore worthy of the same empathy, as a human being. Furthermore, when Roley's boss Declan refers coldly to Samson as "it," Roley responds by calling the dolphin "him," saying that he "wasn't going to call Samson an 'it.'" This, again, suggests that Samson is humanlike in Roley's eyes. Significantly, Roley theorizes that Samson resonated with the crowds at Oceanworld specifically because he was so humanlike: he was the "only creature at the aquarium who seemed to be able to create a facial expression." Facial expressions give insight into someone's inner thoughts and feelings, so Samson's expressive face gave audiences (and Roley) a sense that the dolphin had a complex, humanlike inner life.

While Kennedy describes Samson as humanlike, she describes

Roley's wife, Liz, as resembling an animal. Roley describes his wife as having an "emptied, passive face," much like the "vacant" turtles and the fish that had "no expression whatsoever." Her brain damage left her without discernible emotions or desires, and Roley has become more her caretaker than her companion—a relationship that echoes his work with the animals at Oceanworld. One of the animals Roley cares for is the old, blind sea-lion who has eyes "fogged over" with cataracts and who behaves in a repetitive, compulsive way. Roley describes Liz in a way that mirrors the sea-lion: he notes her mysterious tendency to repetitively run "her hand slowly over her face as if memorizing its shape." Even though Liz is human, her current existence doesn't seem so different from the sea-lion's. Kennedy's repeated ocean imagery also creates parallels between Liz and the other Oceanworld animals. Roley describes the aquarium's penguins as "Gimlet-eyed," a word that he vaguely associates with "something ice-cold...that twisted in the deep." Kennedy echoes this description later in the story when Roley comes home to his wife and "watches her stop and consider, slow as a tide turning." As he does with the penguins, Roley seems to intuit that his wife might still have an inner life, but it is buried deep, making it as mysterious as **the ocean** and inaccessible to him.

The death of Samson, alongside Roley's obsession with the sudden randomness of his wife's accident, leads Roley to meditate on the fact that ultimately humans (like animals) are no more than bodies. Through Roley, Kennedy suggests that consciousness and so-called humanity come from nothing so enduring as a soul, but are instead haphazard combinations of neurology and physiology. Roley suffers as he remembers the moment of his wife's accident as being "like someone dropping a melon on concrete." The gory physicality of this image recurs later when he thinks of Declan describing to the audience the part of Samson's body that is responsible for echolocation: "A kind of big FOREHEAD like a melon!" In describing both human and animal minds as simple "melons," Kennedy highlights the total dependency of complex intelligence on physical, breakable, and ultimately unglamorous bodies. Looking at Samson's dead body, Roley notices its defining "nicks and cuts, marks and old scars." This leads him to think, "sick with grief," of his wife's body, specifically "the small secret place under her hair where there was still a tiny dent." Dead Samson, it seems, is equivalent to Liz after her accident: Roley sees both as bodies emptied of their once-vibrant personalities and consciousness. Roley also notes that outward expressions are no guarantee of inner life. Liz's new scar gives her "permanently quizzical expression, as if she was raising her eyebrows knowingly, ironically: a look long gone." That is, she looks thoughtful, which only makes her changed personality all the more painful for Roley. This moment echoes Roley's description of Samson's seemingly expressive face; he once took Samson's face of a sign of his unique personality, but it's no longer clear if that face reflected real consciousness or just masked blankness.

Through this parallel, Kennedy draws attention to the often-arbitrary ways in which humans interpret expression and intelligence.

At the end of the story, Roley brings his wife a **snowdome** from Oceanworld, which she holds passively instead of shaking. Despairingly, he thinks that "what they should put in them [...] is a little brain, something to knock around uselessly in that bubble of fluid as snow swirled down ceaselessly and never stopped, while some big hand somewhere just kept on shaking." With this metaphor, Roley reduces the human brain to the importance of a cheap, mass-produced object. The final image of the big hand suggests not only that humans no more special than animals, but that the whole idea of intelligent, active participants in the world is a farce: like the animals trapped at Oceanworld, humans are no more than fragile lumps of flesh, subject to an overriding randomness.



HIERARCHY, AUTHORITY, AND COMPASSION

"Little Plastic Shipwreck" is a story defined by the hierarchy of the protagonist's workplace,

Oceanworld, in which Roley is positioned between his boss Declan at the top and the animals at the bottom. However, despite the apparent rigidity of this hierarchy, Roley succeeds in subverting it in subtle ways throughout the story through moments of compassion. By depicting the ways in which compassion can work as a counterforce to an oppressive hierarchy within the small-scale environment of Oceanworld, Kennedy is arguing in favor of compassion as a kind of antidote to broader systemic cruelty, though compassion can't transform these systems on its own.

Oceanworld is a place dictated by an inflexible hierarchy, reflecting the ways in which hierarchies pervade every aspect of human existence. Both Roley and Samson the dolphin are shown to have little to no agency within the hierarchy of Oceanworld. The spectacle of the dolphin show epitomizes this: Declan flings a hand out to the pool, which signals to Roley that is supposed to make a move to retrieve a fish from the bucket, at which Samson jumps out of the water. The audience are supposed to believe that they are witnessing Samson's eagerness to meet them, but really, they are watching a command being passed down the chain, from Declan, to Roley, to Samson. By portraying this hidden structure beneath what is portrayed to the public as a genuine, spontaneous interaction, Kennedy thus suggests that authority and hierarchy are present everywhere, even when we might not detect them.

There's even an implicit hierarchy among the animals at Oceanworld. Samson's proximity to human characteristics makes him the most popular animal at the zoo, and for this reason, the one who is able to generate the most money: "the reason visitors loved Samson so much was that he was the only

creature at the aquarium who seemed to be able to create a facial expression". After Samson's death, Declan delegates the violent, messy task of cutting up Samson's body to Roley, his inferior. Roley's instant aversion to this command shows that he considers this objectifying act to be a betrayal of his friend, while Declan's insistence that Roley carry it out implies that he is perhaps aware of the deep bond that existed between Samson and Roley, and in particular, that he's aware of the threat it poses to his position in Oceanworld's hierarchy. Kennedy thus illustrates the toxic nature of hierarchies, and the way in which people are pitted against one another in order to maintain the status quo.

Within a hierarchical structure, compassion and friendship are subversive forces. Samson's death causes Kaz and Roley to recall fond memories Samson. Kaz tearfully recalls a moment in a past dolphin show when Roley delayed reaching for the fish, causing Samson to miss his cue. Despite Roley nearly losing his job over this, he maintains that it was "the one day of work that he had actually enjoyed." This moment illustrates a closeness among Kaz, Roley, Samson and the other employees, showing that Roley's subtle moment of revolt had not only been for his own sake, but for the sake of everyone else at Oceanworld with whom he had a bond, including Samson. The closeness of Declan's subordinates is a direct threat to Declan's authority, as encapsulated in the image of Kaz and Lara "trying so hard not to laugh" at Roley's act of mischief.

The stakes of Roley's revolt against authority are heightened at the end of the story, when Roley refuses to cut up the body of Samson, looking at Declan with "his hand on [Samson's] flank" and saying "you fucking do it." The affection with which he notices the "nicks and cuts, the marks and old scars" on Samson's body prior to this refusal shows that his love and compassion for Samson are what give him the courage to defy Declan's authority. As Roley leaves Oceanworld, he thinks of Samson's eye "holding Roley's own before moving to his hand in the bucket, full of such understanding, and such forgiveness." The fact that Kennedy mentions "forgiveness" here suggests that Roley perhaps even feels a little guilty for his participation in the dolphin show, in so far as it exploited Samson's charisma for profit. This deepens the reader's sense of their bond showing that it had a complexity that is surprising for a relationship between a human and an animal, suggesting that the hierarchy within which they are forced to operate at Oceanworld is artificial and able to be diminished through compassion and friendship.

Despite the cruel, rigid hierarchical structure within which Roley and Samson work, they have managed to form a deep bond with one another that keeps the systemic cruelty of the system in check. Yet it is doubtful that Roley's final subversive act ultimately stimulates any real or lasting change to the culture of Oceanworld, since the way in which Declan eventually fires him makes him seem disposable. However, the

fact that Roley's bond with Samson remains intact at the end of the story, despite Declan's forcefulness, shows that the presence of compassion can at least limit the way cruelty is passed on within a hierarchical system, allowing friendship to flourish within it.



ARTIFICE VS. REALITY

In "Little Plastic Shipwreck," Cate Kennedy sets up an opposition between the way things really are and the people want to present things. The shining, glamorous, happy place that Oceanworld advertises sits in sharp contrast with the bleak and decrepit reality of the park. Furthermore, Declan's persona as the enthusiastic, knowledgeable and compassionate dolphin trainer poses a stark opposition to his shallow and rather cruel personality outside of this role. Through this series of oppositions, revealed through the point of view of Roley, the grieving protagonist, Cate Kennedy suggests that underneath the seductive artifices that humans construct, there is a bleak and cold reality that can't be escaped.

Roley describes how Oceanworld, though decrepit, presents a glittering façade to draw in audiences. Kennedy describes "a sad cluster of concrete pools and enclosures surrounded on all sides by murals depicting a far bigger, shinier aquatic adventure park, like those billboards of sleek apartment blocks which were nailed up around the shabby prefab bunkers on building sites." This description suggests that the practice of advertising something far brighter than the truth is not specific to the marine park, but is instead widespread. Roley's duties also emphasize how gritty Oceanworld really is. Kennedy writes that Roley must "break shards of packed dead fish out of the freezer and get them into buckets, and wipe away the wriggling lines the catfish made as they sucked their way through algae on the insides of the big glass tanks." Through the urgency with which Declan commands Roley to deal with Samson the dolphin's dead body ("get it into the freezer room so nobody sees it when we open the gates,") and the horror of the implied image of visiting children stumbling across the body of a dead dolphin, Kennedy suggests that often, people may not even be aware of the darker truths that exist just beyond their perception.

Kennedy epitomizes this disconnect between surface and reality through Declan's performance during the dolphin show, which goes against Roley's knowledge of his true character. Declan coldly refers to Samson the dolphin as "it," instructing Roley upon Samson's death to "cut it up." Meanwhile, during the show, he waxes lyrical about "the special bond between humans and dolphins, how he'd trained the dolphins here at Oceanworld, how they could divine his moods." This creates a sharp contrast between Declan's performed persona and his real character. Furthermore, Declan's language during the performance is characterized by all capitals, exclamation marks,

and rhetorical questions, suggesting a false enthusiasm. Indeed, Roley calls this persona “that golly-gee voice he put on.” But outside of the show, Declan’s dialogue characterized by short, cold remarks that are “spat” rather than said. Even Roley is complicit in the construction of artifice: it is his job during the dolphin performance to put his hand to the bucket of fish, prompting Samson to jump out of the water. The audience is supposed to believe that Samson is responding instead to Declan gesturing towards the water “like a game-show host.” The allusion to a well-known display of shallowness and artifice—the game show—further emphasizes how deceptive this moment is.

Despite the story’s emphasis on Declan’s duplicity, Kennedy ultimately suggests that everyone engages in this kind of deception sometimes. Roley sees parents willfully deceive their children, who ask about the repeated actions of the old sea-lion: “‘What’s he doing?’ kids would ask as they watched him, and their parents would look grimly for a few moments and then answer, ‘Playing.’” Through this example, Kennedy suggests that glossing over unpleasant truths is intrinsic to human nature, not just a strategic business practice. Furthermore, Roley’s recollection of a time when he heard “real laughter” from the audience at the popular dolphin show suggests there are many times when he’s heard fake laughter. That is, the audience doesn’t just consume the false joy of Oceanworld; it helps create it.

Through the example of Oceanworld and its particularly duplicitous lead trainer, Declan, Kennedy presents the grim notion that creating artifice to disguise bleak realities is a pervasive part of human behavior. What’s more, the story suggests that something dark is always lurking underneath happy surfaces, even when human don’t actively try and hide it; after all, Liz’s devastating injury occurs during a casual gathering of close friends. No matter how seemingly pleasant the situation, Kennedy seems to argue, the potential for horror is always close at hand.

that “what they should put in [snowdomes] is a little brain, something to knock around uselessly in that bubble of fluid while [...] some big hand somewhere just kept on shaking.” Here, Kennedy draws a comparison between the flimsy, simple snowdome and the human skull, which houses the brain in a “bubble of fluid,” much like the inside of a snowdome. In comparing the human brain to this piece of mass-produced “worthless junk,” Kennedy strips the brain of its complexity and miraculousness. Through this comparison, she suggests that human beings, too, are “worthless” and easily breakable, as Liz’s accident has demonstrated. Furthermore, the “big hand” that “kept on shaking” calls to mind the idea that human lives are subject to a cruel overriding randomness. This is an idea that has deep roots in literature: In Shakespeare’s [King Lear](#), Gloucester laments “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods, / They kill us for their sport.” (Act 4, Scene 1) Kennedy’s reference to “some big hand” is an even more nihilistic metaphor than Shakespeare’s: while there is at least something majestic about the idea of “gods at sport,” the shaking of a snowdome—a child’s toy—is a careless and inane gesture. Kennedy thus degrades not only the value of the human brain, but of life itself, suggesting that there are no mysterious laws governing our existence, just cruel chance.



THE OCEAN

Throughout *Little Plastic Shipwreck*, Kennedy uses images associated with the ocean to symbolize the frightening and mysterious darkness that lies beyond consciousness. While the name “Oceanworld” seems almost ironic due to how profoundly the sea creatures seem disconnected from the ocean itself, there are references to a deeper underwater world that lies just beyond the periphery of the understanding of both narrator and reader. Roley describes the penguins, for example, as “gimleteyed,” without knowing what this word means. It is as if the word, which he associates with “something ice cold, anyway, that twisted in the deep,” has come to him through a subconscious thought process. This unintended metaphor is sinister and unsettling, as if Roley has tapped into the world of the deep ocean without intending to. Furthermore, Roley describes lying next to Liz at night and feeling her hand graze across him “like seagrass in the current,” imagining “silvery bubbles escaping their mouths.” This dreamlike passage draws an explicit connection between the subconscious territory of dreams and the ocean. Whereas here it is almost peaceful, his earlier reference to something that “twisted in the deep” implies that the deeper realms of this underwater dream world are much more frightening. Reflecting on his wife’s induced coma, Roley imagines “how it would feel waking up knowing that’s where you’d been.” In comparing the induced coma to a *place*, Kennedy appears to suggest subtly that Roley, at least *subconsciously*, believes that Liz in her induced coma has travelled to a state comparable to



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SNOWDOME

The snowdome, which Roley presents to his wife Liz as a present, symbolizes the arbitrariness and fragility of human life. The snowdome is one of several cheap plastic objects (“worthless junk”) that Roley essentially steals on his way out of Oceanworld after having quit his job. When Liz holds it passively instead of shaking it, Roley is confronted with the full extent of the change in his wife. Her failure to interact with this simple child’s toy causes him to grimly reflect

the dark, inaccessible realm of the deep ocean, and that perhaps part of her is still there.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribe Publications edition of *Like a House on Fire* published in 2012.

Little Plastic Shipwreck Quotes

“And Oceanworld, clearly, was teetering on the edge of bankruptcy anyway; a sad cluster of concrete pools and enclosures surrounded on all sides by murals depicting a far bigger, shinier aquatic adventure park, like those billboards of sleek apartment blocks which were nailed up around the shabby prefab bunkers on building sites. It was only once you'd paid your money and clicked through the chrome turnstiles and properly looked around, scenting that whiff of rotten fish on the air, that you realised you'd been had.”

Related Characters: Roley (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

After arriving at Oceanworld to find that Samson, the theme park's last remaining dolphin, has died, Roley muses on the decrepit state of the marine amusement park and the way in which it presents a false image to the public. Kennedy's use of a simile here that compares Oceanworld's murals to a billboard advertising “sleek apartment blocks” around “shabby prefab bunkers” suggests that this tendency towards artifice and deception is not unique to Oceanworld, but rather widespread among human beings. It also highlights the irony of the name Oceanworld, as the park seems to be dominated by human structures (“a sad cluster of concrete pools and enclosures”), with only the “whiff of rotten fish on the air” to suggest that there is any link to the Ocean itself.

The theme of artifice vs. reality recurs throughout *Little Plastic Shipwreck*, manifesting not only in Oceanworld's appearance, but also the behavior of Declan, the manager, whose chipper show persona is at odds with his callous behavior towards his employees and the animals.

“They hadn't taken any of her brain out, the doctors had explained to Roley; they were definite on that point. They'd put her in an induced coma until the brain swelling went down, then somehow pieced those sections of her skull back together. How did they do it? Riveting? Gluing? Roley had no idea. He imagined them with a tiny Black & Decker, a wisp of smoke rising, putting in a neat line of holes then stitching it with wire.”

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Liz

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

This description appears the first time Kennedy introduces Roley's wife. The crudeness of the doctor's assertions that they hadn't “taken any of her brain out” conveys the violent physicality that dominates Roley's thought patterns about his wife's accident. His language, full of questions, highlights his shock and disbelief, signaling to the reader that he is still processing the accident and its consequences. His speculations on how they performed the procedure strip medicine of its glamour and professionalism, likening surgery to everyday maintenance performed with a tiny “Black & Decker” (manufacturer of power tools). Through this imagery, both violent and absurd, Kennedy suggests that Roley has come to see human bodies as mere breakable objects, rather than miraculous and complex organisms. This foreshadows the end of the story, when Kennedy likens the human brain to a worthless snowdome souvenir.

“Declan swore long and low when he came over and looked into the pool.”

“Use the chains,” he said dismissively. “I reckon that thing weighs one hundred and fifty kilos. Haul it out and then drain the pool.”

“What will I do with him?” Roley couldn't help the personal pronoun, wasn't going to call Samson an “it.”

Related Characters: Roley, Declan (speaker), Samson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186-187

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first time that the character of Declan appears in the story in real time. His authentic personality jars instantly with his show persona, which Kennedy has already introduced by this point through snippets from his spiel during the dolphin show, as reported speech. Declan reacts to Samson's death "dismissively," referring to the dolphin as "it" and "that thing." This, combined with Roley's response, sets up the relationships among Roley, Declan and Samson: Declan has no real bond with Samson, while Roley, refusing to call Samson an "it," has much more of an allegiance to Samson than he does to Declan. Roley's conscious refusal to use the impersonal pronoun is the first point in the story where Kennedy shows Roley revolting against Declan's authority, albeit in a minor way. This highlights a tension between the two characters that will escalate throughout the story.

●● Roley would crouch at the edge of the platform, following Declan's repertoire of gestures and punchlines, the rhetorical questions ("And do you know WHY they breathe that way, kids? I'll tell you why!") until he reached the point in the script where he'd say, "Well, now, a dolphin can stay underwater for up to FIFTEEN MINUTES, but luckily for us here today Samson can't wait to meet you!" and Roley would reach casually into the bucket and Samson would arc up like clockwork and break the surface, his calm, loving eye on Roley alone.

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Samson, Declan

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis


This quote occurs when Declan, after seeing the dead body of Samson the dolphin, orders Roley to drain the pool and "haul it out." There is a major contrast between Declan's theatrical and shallow "repertoire of gestures" and Roley's quiet bond with Samson, which is deep enough that it can be expressed through gestures and facial expressions. We learn through this anecdote that Samson was Roley's friend, and the reader can understand the weight of his grief at losing Samson. The allusion to Samson's "calm, loving eye" also sets up the importance of the dolphin's facial expressions. This establishes Samson both as different from the other animals at Oceanworld, and from Liz, who we learn is no longer able to express complex emotion through facial expressions. Roley's straightforward grief about

Samson's death, therefore, brings up his more complex grief about Liz—his observation of the qualities Samson possessed that made Roley able to love him makes him realize what he has lost in his wife.

●● Roley had a theory that the reason visitors loved Samson so much was that he was the only creature at the aquarium who seemed to be able to create a facial expression, apart from the sea-lion Rex, whose eyes were so fogged over with milky-blue cataracts [...] The turtles were totally vacant—they had the hateful, icy glare of an old drunk—and of course the fish had no expression whatsoever. Just looked at you as they cruised past, a vegetable with fins. No short-term memory, that's what Kaz said when he told her his theory. "That's the cliché, right?" she said, tapping the glass of one of the tanks. "Nothing going on. You put one in a fishbowl, and they start swimming around in circles, and every time it's like: *Look, a little plastic shipwreck!* Five seconds later: *Look, a little plastic shipwreck!*"

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Liz, Samson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Roley's theory about Samson's facial expressions ties into the story's complex ruminations about human and animal consciousness. Samson is set apart from, and elevated over, the other animals at Oceanworld for his capacity to generate a human-like facial expression. However, this apparent hierarchy of animal intelligence is disturbed by the fact that Samson is also implicitly elevated over Liz, a human, whose blank expressions more closely resemble those of the fish, who have "nothing going on," and whose short-term memory and simple thought processes are highlighted by the anecdote of the "Little Plastic Shipwreck." By making this the title of the story, Kennedy further emphasizes the fact that whatever it is that distinguishes complex from non-complex intelligence is incredibly fragile: in just a short moment, a human can go from being someone's "lovely witty wife" to being no more sophisticated than a goldfish.


This passage also has the effect of exposing, in a darkly humorous way, the grim and mundane realities of life at Oceanworld: the sea-lion has "eyes fogged over with milky-blue cataracts," the turtles resemble "an old drunk," and the

fish are “totally vacant.” Far from being the happy and glamorous marine park it presents itself as, Oceanworld is depicted as being depressing and dull, and even more so now that the only creature there who was truly loved by visitors has died.

●● And the penguins, even the ones with the little tufty eyebrows, still had to quirk their whole heads even to convey a response. Mostly they just looked shifty. Gimletheaded, thought Roley, whatever that meant. Whatever gimlets were. Something ice-cold, anyway, that twisted in deep.

Related Characters: Roley (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190


Explanation and Analysis

Here, Roley continues to elaborate his theory that Samson is so loved by visitors to Oceanworld because he is the only creature there with human-like facial expressions. He compares Samson, with his “calm, loving eye,” to the penguins, who “had to quirk their whole heads even to convey a response.” But in the process of describing the penguins’ look, he resorts to a word he doesn’t know: “gimletheaded.” The word comes to him as if through subconscious association. Attempting to explain this association to himself, he decides that gimlets are something “ice-cold, anyway, that twisted in the deep.” Roley’s thought process here ventures into the subconscious, and also ventures into the world of the deep ocean. Kennedy thus sets up a link between the ocean and the subconscious that feeds into the story in subtle ways, operating as if just beyond the limits of language.

●● Sometimes at night he'd feel Liz's hand land uncertainly on him and graze back and forth. Like seagrass on a current, it felt to him, and just as random. He'd take her hand and imagine silvery bubbles escaping from their mouths, floating up towards the ceiling fan, him keeping his breaths measured and even.

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Liz

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

This surreal and dreamlike imagery occurs in a passage in which Roley is describing the day-to-day reality of living with Liz, who is now highly dependent on him after her head injury. Roley quits his night job after imagining his wife in an induced coma, waking up in the night knowing “that’s where you’d been.” The ambiguous allusion to a *place* in this earlier line, which could refer either to a coma or to sleep, seems to be explained here in his dreamlike usage of ocean imagery, which sets up a link between the ocean and the subconscious. It is unclear in this passage whether Roley himself is awake, thus highlighting the strange logic of dreams, and suggesting that his own subconscious is feeding into his narration of the story. By the end of this passage, there is a strange harmony between Roley and Liz—their breaths are “measured and even,” and there seem to be none of the tragic failures of communication that characterize Roley’s relationship with Liz in waking hours. It is as if in sleep, Roley is able to descend to the world that Liz inhabits permanently, below the surface of consciousness.

●● They'd stepped through the sliding doors barred pointlessly with two chairs because the thing had no railing, and his lovely, witty wife, looking for a way to help out, had taken a heavy platter out there to pass around and, turning round to answer someone's stupid question, had stepped straight off the edge of the deck, falling to the ground below. [...] “Nobody's fault,” Roley kept saying, breathing fast through his mouth, panting, he couldn't help it [...] and every time he circled the stunned minute of what had happened, it hit him afresh, obliterating everything else so he had to learn it again, piece by piece.

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Liz

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 193-194



Explanation and Analysis

Kennedy doesn’t describe the moment of Liz’s accident until close to the end of the story, which heightens the surreal

shock of its randomness and mundanity. The language, though simple in its recounting of the series of events, conveys the complexity of Roley's grief. He expresses a strong sense of anger at the role other people played in the unfolding of events ("sliding doors barred pointlessly" and "someone's stupid question"), despite the fact that later on in the story he is described as repeating, stunned, that it was "nobody's fault." Through this, Kennedy depicts the way in which grief evolves from shock into a yearning for explanations. Furthermore, the tragedy is heightened by the fact that this passage contains the only allusion in the story to the person Liz was before the accident, and the fact that she was "looking for a way to help out." These allusions are totally at odds with the highly dependent, vacant and passive person who has been described up to this point in the story. Through the anecdote of the accident, therefore, Kennedy conveys that Roley's is grieving in a similar way to how he might grieve if his wife had died, but without the same closure: he continues to revisit "the stunned minute" of what had happened, searching for explanations. His sense of normalcy is disrupted by the fact that his beloved wife, once "lovely" and "witty," was so easily taken from him, reflects the fragility of human personality and the nihilism Roley grows to feel toward consciousness.

●● Roley looked at Samson's grey flank, noticing the nicks and cuts on it, the marks and old scars. He thought, sick with grief, about the way his wife's fingers sought out the small secret place under her hair where there was a tiny dent, still. He laid his hand on that flank, feeling its muscle, and he heard the moment waiting, and said into it, "You fucking do it."

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Declan, Samson, Liz

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Declan walks into the cool room to find that Roley has not cut up the body of Samson as he was instructed to. The graphic physicality of this scene recalls the recurrent motif in the story about the fragility of bodies—Samson is covered with "nicks and cuts" and Roley's wife's head has a "tiny dent" in it. Yet, here, it is infused with intimacy and tenderness rather than violence. In light of his earlier musings on the way Samson differed from the other animals in the zoo, this passage shows that Roley is processing his grief about his wife's accident through his grief about

Samson's death. Samson, in some ways, embodies the qualities that Roley feels he has lost in his wife: her intelligence, empathy, and ability to communicate with him.

Rather than aggression, it is the tenderness and love that Roley feels in this moment that gives him the courage to defy Declan, as shown by the fact that he keeps his hand on Samson's flank protectively as he says, "You fucking do it." Through this, Kennedy shows the way in which compassion can serve as an antidote to both brutality and authority.


●● "I'm home early," he said.


"Are you?" she replied.

"Can I get you anything?" he said, emptying his pockets onto the dining-room table, watching her stop and consider, slow as a tide turning.

"No," she said finally, "there's nothing I want," and Roley thought, that's right, there's nothing: want was what they had taken out of her, back when they were assuring him nothing was removed.

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Liz

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis


After quitting his job at Oceanworld, Roley arrives home. Liz's illogical and uncertain responses to his questions convey the difficulty that Roley has conversing with his wife after her accident. As with earlier in the story, Kennedy subtly associates Liz with the underwater world, describing her as "slow as a tide turning." This reinforces the suggestion that Liz is now as mysterious and inaccessible as the deep ocean, trapped somewhere below the surface of consciousness. However, the following line is more nihilistic, as she responds, "there's nothing that I want," suggesting that Liz has not merely been changed, but in fact emptied of desire. Kennedy pinpoints here the fact that "want" is what makes us human, and likens this to a physical thing that can literally be taken out of someone. She thus strips humanity of its mystery, reducing it to something as fallible as a physical organ.

“Here,” he said cheerfully, “I got you this.” He gave her one of the snowdomes, and as she held it he realised she was the first person he’d ever seen cradling one and not shaking it. She just held it obediently with that emptied, passive face, gazing at the plastic penguins inside.

What they should put in them, thought Roley, is a little brain, something to knock around uselessly in that bubble of fluid as snow swirled down ceaselessly and never stopped, while some big hand somewhere just kept on shaking.

Related Characters: Roley (speaker), Liz

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

After quitting his job, Roley leaves Oceanworld, grabbing a few pieces of “worthless junk” from the giftshop on his way

out as “severance pay.” He presents one of these, a snowdome, to Liz when he arrives home. Roley’s cheerful tone contrasts with the grim realization that follows, as he finds that Liz cannot even engage with a simple child’s toy whose function should be intuitive. Instead of shaking it, she stares at the plastic penguins inside, with an “empty passive face” that recalls Roley’s earlier descriptions of the eyes of the penguins, fish, and turtles themselves. It is as if Liz is looking at her own reflection in the snowdome.

In that moment, Roley is faced with the full force of his loss. He reflects that there is nothing special about the human brain, and that it is as worthless and breakable as a plastic snowdome and subject to the same cruel, random twists of fate as if held by “some big hand somewhere” that “just kept on shaking.” Kennedy’s language here implies a cruel, never-ending cycle of death and breakage (“ceaselessly,” “never stopped,” “kept on”), through which she conveys that Roley is not just confronting his own individual tragedy, but the meaninglessness of all existence.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LITTLE PLASTIC SHIPWRECK

At the start of a shift at Oceanworld, Roley goes to “say hi” to Samson. He sees a “grey familiar shape” floating on the surface of the pool: Samson, a dolphin, has died. Roley leans his mop against “the slightly peeling paint of the Oceanworld mural” and sits by the side of the pool staring at Samson. He hopes that Samson—a “faithful old crowd pleaser”—died in his sleep.

Samson, the star of the daily dolphin show, is the last remaining dolphin at Oceanworld. The peeling mural depicts four “fit and shining” dolphins leaping in the air beside two bikini-clad women. Roley doubts that, with Samson gone, they’ll “bother to paint over” this mural. The mural’s depiction of stands “jam-packed with summer tourists” is “wishful thinking”: Oceanworld seems nearly bankrupt. It’s just a “sad cluster of concrete pools” flanked by these murals that depict a “far bigger, shinier” place. Once the tourists have paid their money and “properly looked around,” they realize “that they’ve been had.”

Roley recalls the moment when his wife, Liz, returned from the hospital after the accident she suffered. She seemed “cautious” and “fearful,” walking “as if she were still hooked up to machines.” The doctors assured him they hadn’t taken any of her brain out; they’d put her in an induced coma to reduce the brain swelling and then “somehow pieced those sections of her skull back together.” Roley has no idea how they did this, and he imagines them using tiny power tools or glue.

When Roley went to the “Special Room” to meet with the surgeon, his own brain “hadn’t been working too well.” The room put him on edge: it was “full of bad vibrations” and the only thing on the table was a box of tissues, which was “the last thing you wanted to see.” Roley had trouble paying attention to the surgeon because he kept imagining “some lowly admin person” whose job was to keep the tissues stocked. He imagined the meeting in which the hospital decided to make a bare room stocked with tissues—a room to deliver bad news and then “walk out of, busy, blameless, relieved” while the person inside has to think about “a head being wired together.”

From the way Kennedy introduces Samson into the story, the reader assumes he is a human. It is only when Roley finds him dead, floating in the pool, that we learn he is a dolphin. This sets the tone for the characterization of Samson throughout the story, which blurs the boundaries between human and animal.



Kennedy sets up early on in the story the fact that Roley does not think highly of Oceanworld or his job there. Samson’s death causes Roley to reflect on the disjunction between the way Oceanworld presents itself, as a glamorous and glittering entertainment venue, and its actual decrepit state. Here, the theme of artifice vs. reality is introduced, as Roley begins to think of Oceanworld as a giant ruse that tricks visitors into paying for entry.



The seemingly random and violent ways in which Roley’s brain returns to the memory of the traumatic period of time after his wife’s accident shows that he is still very much grieving. The memory of the doctor’s reassurance that that they hadn’t “taken any of her brain out,” and the graphic nature of this image, suggest that Roley’s experience of living with his wife has led him to feel there is something fundamentally missing from her since the accident and operation.



Roley recalls his dissociative experience of the hospital, again giving us an intimate portrait of his grief and shock following the accident. Kennedy creates the sense that Roley is still trying to come to terms with what has happened; his anger and grief here becomes channeled into the absurdity of the hospital’s detachment from the bad news that its employees have to deliver. As with the previous passage, the technical and gory imagery used by Roley to describe the operation suggest that he is beginning to think in a nihilistic ways about human bodies and the crude ways in which they break and are repaired.



“Funny what did you in,” Roley thinks. The worst part wasn’t the “shaved head,” the “blanket stitch,” Liz’s “black eyes,” or even the “spreading bruise on her forehead” by the “spot where the skin had split open like someone dropping a melon on concrete.” (He has to force himself not to think these thoughts when he looks at her). What truly “killed him” was her remaining hair, which still had dyed blonde streaks on the ends, remnants of “a time when she still looked in the mirror and cared enough.”

Upon arriving home, Liz “had a hard time even finding the word for mirror.” Roley occasionally catches her running a hand over her face slowly “as if memorising its shape,” either marvelling “that it was all in one piece,” or “unsure that she was all there.”

Declan arrives at the side of the pool where Roley is still standing beside the dead body of Samson. Declan “dismissively” tells Roley to use the chains to “haul it out,” and to drain the pool. Roley replies “what will I do with him?” silently refusing to call Samson “it” as Declan had done.

During the dolphin shows, Declan often goes on about “the special bond between humans and dolphins” and how “he’d trained the dolphins at Oceanworld, how they could divine his moods,” using the plural as if “nobody in the scattered audience noticed” that there was only one dolphin. Roley would follow Declan’s rehearsed spiel and wait for his cue to reach for the fish in the bucket, at which point Samson would jump out of the water with his “calm, loving eye on Roley alone.”

The violent imagery continues, this time gruesomely describing Liz’s injuries, only to assert that the most disturbing thing for Roley was the sight of her recently dyed hair. Again, by showing how Roley’s attention is drawn to absurd details, Kennedy shows the unpredictable ways in which grief works. The allusion to “dropping a melon on concrete” also foreshadows the moment in the text when Declan references the “melon” on Samson’s forehead, establishing the ways in which Roley’s grief about Samson’s death brings up his complex feelings about his wife’s accident. The straightforward, sentimental grief that Roley feels for Samson is contrasted with the more complex and unpredictable grief he feels for his wife, who is still alive, though a significant part of her has been lost.



Rather than detailing in a straightforward way the extent to which Liz’s brain has been damaged by the accident, Kennedy reveals her current state through small details, mirroring Roley’s own experience of trying to figure out, through observation, how much of his previous wife is “still there.” With her lack of words and mysterious physical gestures, Kennedy suggests that Roley may now perceive her as being more animal than human.



Declan’s use of the impersonal pronoun “it” here, which is highlighted by Roley’s refusal to do the same, sets up the antagonism between the two characters and the difference between their perceptions of and relationships with Samson the dolphin. Whereas Declan views the animals at the park as inferior to him and ultimately disposable, Declan feels a sense of kinship with Samson.



Declan’s objectification of Samson clashes with the persona he puts on during the dolphin show, creating the impression that he is a shallow and deceitful character. Kennedy further emphasizes this by highlighting, through Roley’s observation, the way he tries to pretend there is more than one dolphin. Declan is painted as rather pathetic, performing to a ‘scattered audience’ and ignorant to the fact that they can clearly see through his deception. By contrast, Roley sees himself as the silent hero, who has the real ‘special bond’ with Samson and can communicate with him with just a slight move of the hand. However, the reader can perhaps infer a touch of irony from Kennedy: does Samson really give Roley a “calm, loving” look, or is Roley perhaps just deluding himself, wanting to see love in Samson’s expression when really the dolphin only wants the fish from the bucket?



Roley speculates that the reason visitors loved Samson so much was because “he was the only creature at the aquarium who seemed to be able to create a facial expression,” with the exception of the old sea-lion, Rex, whose eyes were “so fogged over with milky-blue cataracts” that he looked “like something out of *Village of the Damned*.” Rex would compulsively skim up on the concrete and then “plop back into the water,” “like a big fat kid alone on a slide.” Children would ask their parents what he was doing, and the parents would “look grimly for a few moments and then answer, ‘Playing.’”

Then there were the turtles, who were “totally vacant—they had the hateful, icy glare of an old drunk,” while the fish had “no expression whatsoever” and just “cruised past, a vegetable with fins.” When Roley voices this to Kaz, she recalls the cliché that goldfish are known for their short-term memory: “Nothing going on. You put one in a fishbowl, and they start swimming around in circles, and every time it’s like: *Look, a little plastic shipwreck!* Five seconds later: *Look, a little plastic shipwreck!*” To Roley, the penguins look “shifty,” or “gimletheyed,” a word that makes him think of something “ice-cold, anyway, that twisted in the deep.”

Roley’s reverie is broken by Declan telling him to “get the chains” once again. Roley suggests that Declan needs to notify the wildlife authority and “fill out paperwork or something.” Declan replies tartly, “yeah, thanks, I think I know how to manage my own regulations.” Roley suggests that he’ll bury Samson, and Declan, after giving him “a penguin look,” commands him instead to move the body to the cool room and cut it up once the body is frozen. Roley nods but silently vows not to do this

Kennedy draws attention to the ambiguity of Samson’s look in the previous scene through Roley’s theory that he’s loved because he’s “able to create a facial expression.” This foreshadows a moment later in the story when Roley reflects on the fact that his wife’s scars give her a ‘permanently quizzical expression’, raising the question of what makes a facial expression genuine. Following the theme of artifice vs. reality, he contrasts the charismatic Samson with Rex, the old, blind sea-lion, whose abnormal compulsive behavior (grimly suggestive of mental illness) is deliberately misinterpreted by parents, to please their children, as “playing.” Kennedy thus shows that even the visitors to Oceanworld are complicit in upholding its façade as a joyful and entertaining place.



Roley now begins to analyze, almost obsessively, the facial expressions of the different animals in the zoo, drawing anthropomorphic connections to familiar human expressions. Given the earlier allusions to his wife’s vacant behavior, Kennedy shows that Roley is grappling with the change in his wife’s personality, as if trying to situate her on a scale of animal intelligence in order to understand exactly what of her, or how much of her, has been lost. The fact that the story takes its title, “Little Plastic Shipwreck,” from an anecdote describing the capacities of a goldfish’s short-term memory, suggests that Roley holds a bleak opinion of his wife’s current state. The reference to the “gimletheyed” penguins is particularly strange, set apart from the other descriptions in that it is more eerie and mysterious than straightforwardly satirical. Through the way Roley recalls the word almost subconsciously, Kennedy creates an aura of mystery around the deep sea, which will recur later in reference to Roley’s wife’s coma.



Roley’s meditations are interrupted by another confrontational scene with Declan, in which Roley passively asserts his authority by reminding Declan of his duties, implying that he is incapable as a boss and somewhat dishonest. Roley’s suggestion that he’ll ‘bury Samson’ again presents him as a hero compared to Declan, who callously commands him to cut up the body. Through these small moments of tension, Kennedy create a sense of a slow escalation of conflict and Roley’s gradual rebellion against the unfair hierarchy of Oceanworld. The violence of the image of ‘cutting up’ a body also reminds us of the violent ways in which Roley had reflected on his wife’s accident earlier in the story, reinforcing the idea that Samson’s death is bound up with Roley’s grief about his wife.



Kaz comes to help him move the body to the cool room, giving Roley a “tearful smile” as she goes to get towels to cover the body. She asks him if he remembers “that day in the school holidays.” Roley smiles, recalling Declan “hammering on about echolocation.” He’d pointed out on Samson’s head “a kind of big FOREHEAD called a melon” which transmits clicks and receives echoes.

When Declan reached the point in his speech that was Roley’s cue to reach for the fish (“Who’s ready to say hello to him?”), he flung a hand out towards the pool “like a game-show host.” But Roley, who “couldn’t have said why,” didn’t reach for the fish, and Samson didn’t surface. Declan, with a “tight smile,” explained to the audience that “Samson must be feeling a bit mischievous today,” and that dolphins are “HIGHLY INTELLIGENT with a WILL OF THEIR OWN.” Then Roley had moved his hand and Samson leapt out of the water to “real laughter and applause.”

Despite that being the one day of work he had actually enjoyed, Roley was almost been fired. He asked for a second chance, wondering where else he would find a job that would let him off at 3:00 in the afternoon. Previously, he’d had a well-paid job working night shifts at a munitions plant, but Liz’s rehab therapist said that it made Liz anxious to wake up at night to find herself alone. Roley had “thought about the induced coma, how it would feel waking up remembering that’s where you’d been, and put in his notice.”

Roley shares an emotional moment with Kaz, his coworker, who is the only living character in the story with whom he seems to have something resembling a functional relationship. They both think back affectionately to a moment when Roley had defied Declan, suggesting that he is an unpopular boss. The allusion to Samson’s “melon” recalls the earlier image of Liz’s head being like “a melon on concrete,” further reinforcing the connection between Liz and Samson in Roley’s view.



Roley’s decision not to reach for the fish becomes a subtle act of revolt against Declan’s tyranny. Declan, aware that Roley is the one who is responsible for the disruption, again shows himself to be deceitful by pretending to the audience that it is Samson who is asserting his will. The fact that the audience here responds with “real laughter and applause” when Samson finally exists the water emphasizes the fact that their enthusiasm is perhaps usually inauthentic, and that they have sensed a moment of real drama unfolding behind the scenes in this instance.



Kennedy reveals to us here that Roley truly dislikes his work – the only day he’d enjoyed was the one where he’d defied Declan – but holds onto it for financial reasons. This adds another layer of tragedy to his story and foreshadows the bleakness to come at the end when he eventually quits. Through describing the fact that he had quit another well-paid job due to his wife’s nighttime anxiety, Kennedy gives us a glimpse in to the day to day struggle of supporting an incapacitated loved one financially and emotionally. Furthermore, the reference to Liz’s coma, which here Roley describes as akin to a physical place (“that’s where you’d been”) recalls the eerie mystery inherent in his description of the “gimletheaded” penguins. Kennedy may thus be hinting at the fact that Roley imagines his wife’s experience of a coma was something similar to how he imagines the deep ocean.



These days, Roley “gently [wakes] [Liz] and [gets] her sorted” before work. At Oceanworld, his duties include breaking “shards of packed dead fish out of the freezer” and “wiping away the wriggling lines the catfish made” in the algae on the sides of the tanks. At night he’ll sometimes feel Liz’s hand “land uncertainly on him and graze back and forth.” It feels to him “like seagrass on a current” and “just as random.” Lying beside her, he “take[s] her hand and imagine[s] silvery bubbles escaping from their mouths”, as if the two of them are under the **ocean**.

Liz’s accident occurred at a friend’s party where they were celebrating the installation of a new Jacuzzi. Roley’s “lovely, witty wife” had been handing around a platter of food on the unfinished deck when she’d turned around to “answer someone’s stupid question” and fell off the edge. The fall was only a metre and a half, but she’d hit her head on a rock, one of “three artfully arranged boulders placed there for landscaping.” He recalls the moment of shock when it happened, and the sight of her, once the EMTs came, in a full body brace, with her arms folded across her chest “like it was a sarcophagus.” Every time he recalls this “stunned minute [...] it hit him afresh, obliterating everything else, so he had to learn it again, piece by piece.”

Roley is thinking about the accident as he goes into the cool room with Samson’s body. He rests his hand on Samson’s “round, perfectly evolved head,” and strokes his blowhole. At that moment Declan walks in and commands him again to cut it up. Roley has his hand on Samson’s flank and is thinking about “the way his wife’s fingers sought out the small secret place under her hair where there was a tiny dent, still.” He says to Declan, “you fucking do it.” Declan tells Roley that he’s got until the end of the week, then he’s fired. Roley walks out on the spot.

The grim reality of working at Oceanworld is conjured up through a series of gruesome and grueling tasks, but the emphasis in this passage lies more strongly on his Roley’s life, where he cares for his wife in a way that is not dissimilar from how he cares for the animals at Oceanworld. The connection between his wife and his work takes a more abstract turn here, as he lies awake and imagines them both underwater at night. Through this dreamlike image, Kennedy uses the metaphor of the ocean and the idea of going under its surface to explore the mysteries of the brain and the subconscious mind.



Finally, relatively late in the story, the reader learns what has happened to Liz. This accident is described with an almost absurd detachment, which calls to mind his earlier musings on how they’d repaired her broken head. The fact that she hits her head on a boulder which had been “artfully arranged” has a strong level of grim irony to it, through which Roley appears to be criticizing the way in which something as meaningful as the personality of a loved one can be lost to something as shallow as a landscape garden and a party celebrating a Jacuzzi. The shallowness of the situation in which Liz’s accident happened recalls the disjunction between Oceanworld’s joyful façade and the grim reality underneath. Furthermore, the image of Liz in “a sarcophagus” emphasizes the fact that for Roley, though Liz survived the accident, a part of her has died.



This scene is colored by the grief inherent in the previous description of Liz’s accident. The link between Samson and Liz is explicit this time, as he strokes Samson’s body and thinks of Liz’s scars. Kennedy creates the sense that for Roley, who is here confronting the fragility of bodies in general, it is as if he is being asked to cut up the part of his wife that has died. In this highly emotional scene, Roley channels his grief into anger towards Declan, walking out on the spot in what seems, at first, to be a moment of triumph.



On his way out, Roley grabs several plastic trinkets (“worthless junk”) from the gift shop, calling it his “severance pay,” including a couple of **snowdomes**. He thinks again about Samson’s “merry eye,” and his gaze “holding Roley’s own” during the dolphin show, that eye “full of such understanding, and such forgiveness.”

As he enters into the house, Roley announces that he’s home early, and Liz responds, “are you?” He asks her if he can get her anything and she says, “there’s nothing I want.” Roley reflects that “want” was what was taken out of her, “back when they were assuring him nothing was removed.” She looks at him and he notices that the scar on her forehead “gives her a permanently quizzical expression, as if she was raising her eyebrows knowingly, ironically; a look long gone.” Cheerfully, he presents her with one of the **snowdomes**, saying “I got you this.” She is the “first person he’[s] ever seen cradling one and not shaking it.” Grimly, Roley thinks that they should put a little brain there instead, something to “knock around uselessly” as “some big hand somewhere just kept on shaking.”

Roley grabs things from the gift shop on the way out, almost as an afterthought, as a means of asserting himself over Declan. Given that they are only “worthless junk”, this is a feeble gesture, and Kennedy creates the impression that Roley’s moment of revolt has not caused any real disturbance to Oceanworld. Furthermore, his reflection on Samson’s eye being full of ‘understanding’ and ‘forgiveness’ suggests that perhaps Roley has been more complicit than he would like to admit in maintaining the hierarchical structure at Oceanworld, in which he – though subordinate to Declan – ultimately had power over Samson.



When Roley walks in the door, Liz’s strange response to him announcing his arrival at home (“are you?”), as well as her eerily conclusive statement, “there’s nothing that I want,” further emphasizes the degree to which her previous mental function has been impaired. Having circled the question throughout the story of exactly what Liz lost in the accident, Roley concludes that it was her desire, through which Kennedy implies that it is our desires that makes us human. He presents her with a gift that is “worthless” and casually stolen, which seems less a genuine gesture of affection than a sort of charade, as if he is testing her. When she fails this test, holding the snowdome instead of shaking it, Roley’s cheerful mood collapses, as if he is finally confronting the full extent of his loss. Kennedy uses the snowdome—a cheap, mass-produced and breakable object—as a symbol for the brain, illustrating that Roley’s grief has led him to speculate that humans too are breakable, cheaply-made, and essentially “worthless”. The object is, in this sense, a representation of the manmade illusion of Oceanworld, as well as a reflection of the easily-disrupted illusion of human consciousness. The fact that Liz’s scars have given her an ironic expression seem to grimly emphasize this point, suggesting that perhaps the very idea of the “intelligent brain,” human or animal, is a myth. Behind every seemingly expressive face, even that of Samson, is just a useless machine-like brain floating in a bubble of fluid, waiting to be broken.





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