

Fishscale: The Very Best Very Short Stories of James Burt

Instagram Famous

It was the ultimate hipster joint, a pop-up restaurant in a burning building. Fans kept the worst of the smoke from our table, but it was hot, and we heard occasional crashes as parts of the roof collapsed. We giggled nervously while doing our best to enjoy overcooked, overpriced steaks. For dessert we had ice-cream. It was cooling and we gulped it down, desperate for relief from the heat. My friend wanted to take a photo for Instagram, but the plastic on her phone had melted. "No one will believe us back home," I said, as my hair caught fire.

Final Draft

For Sale. Baby Shoes. Real babies.

Long-Term Storage

Uncle Tommy referred to it as his 'box of clowns'. It was actually a padlocked shipping container in his yard, holes punched in the sides for air.

We let them out – not because we felt sorry for them, but because we wanted to watch them run about. They'd been inside for a while, so moved slowly. Coming out of the dark container, the clowns covered their eyes against the light, tottering in big shoes. They reminded us of new-born calves. My uncle laughed as the farm hands rounded them up once more.

Rapunzel 1

The boys waited below the tower-block for the paper planes. They fought over them, to be the one to carry them back to her.

Vole

I played scrabble with my girlfriend. I had the letters I, L, O, E and Y, O, U. I placed a sentence across an exposed V. She protested the 14 points: "That's not a word." When I argued she told me that rules were rules. I scored 7 for VOLE and no longer loved her.

Rapunzel 2

Bored of both princes and witches, Rapunzel shaved her head.

Pinocchio

He sits all day, trapped in his glass prison. Sometimes he taps against that glass, drawing the museum visitors closer, so they can hear what he says. Pinocchio's nose is not large now. He has learned his lesson and long since given up lying. Instead, he tells the truth.

Life is short. Hunger always returns. Everyone dies.

The museum's guides sometimes cover the case with a cloth in the hope that will quieten him. It doesn't help.

You are growing apart from your son.

The cat isn't coming back.

It is cancer.

Always the truth, whether you want it or not.

Safe-word

There is a safe-word for Planet Earth. Say it aloud and you get to go home. You were given it before being born. Do you remember?

Wave of Clowns

The curse was lifted. Too late. The clowns kept coming.

Bathtime Apocalypse

In an infinite multiverse, there are an infinite number of ways for the world to end. Some are tragic – and some are silly. On one sad earth, it was sentient bathtubs that did it; a world reduced to a charnel house by plumbing that came to life. News anchors wept as much from the indignity as from the doom. The last human was glad when it was all over.

The Grandmother

Jonnie loved granny's Sunday visits. Less so, after her funeral.

Alex and the Face

We were in 6th form when Alex found the face. He was happy to share it and we all took turns wearing it. At first, the new features made my skin ache, with its tighter cheekbones and small nose. I soon grew to love the feeling of being someone else – there's a thrill to playing about with your identity when you're a teenager. Sometimes we'd go to the pub and swap it between rounds. I still sometimes see the face in town, and long to say hello, but I don't know for sure if it's one of the old gang.

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