



Refuge From the Grownup Grind – A Tale.

Long ago, though not really *so* long ago, there was a vibrant coral reef teeming with life: big, small, fast, sluggish, toothy, gummy, prosaic, eccentric, angelic, and odd. Fish loved it; it was home. Then one day (no one is sure exactly when), things started to change. Bit by bit, the reef faded to a sickly non-color, pocked with gaping holes. At first, the fish were thrilled by the holes. They were spacious, with artsy shadows and ample food to scavenge. Everything looked pretty much the same, too, which was somehow reassuring. Conversations often went **like this**:

“This is great saltwater,” said Fish A, swimming lazily amidst the school.

“Yeah,” said Fish B. “Warm. Briny. It’s some kind of rare Tasmanian current.”

“Wow, that’s so...*global*.”

“Yeah.” Fish B puffed up a bit. “I’ve sucked Molto through my gill slits today.”

“Last week, I had Moltissimo El Niño,” Fish A gurgled. “It made me swim all funny.”

“Whoa, cool.” Fish B gulped a fleck of seaweed. “Fish, I love floaty bits.”

“Uh-huh.” Fish A was distracted by a rusty can. “But Floatzas™ are way better.”

“What are Floatzas™?”

“Get with the current, fish,” Fish A spurted. “The whole school loves Floatzas™! They’re all the wave at FloatyBitz™!”

“Oh, right.” Fish B paddled abashedly. “Um...where can I get some?”

“At *any* FloatyBitz™, reef-wide. I got one yesterday at Anemone Coral Pointe, in the dead zone where the anemones used to be. The grand opening of hole six-billion.”

“Whoa, I *love* things that are exactly the same, especially lots of them!”

“Anemone Co Po’s the best, fish. It’s got *everything*: FloatyBitz™, Gills-R-Us™, The Kelp Factory™, a bobbing spot for guppies. I got a great deal on a shiny fleck of best-selling jetsam at Sponges & Trawls™ - 40% off, every day!”

“I’m always up for some best-selling jetsam,” said Fish B. “Where do I go?”

“Just fin through the red tide past the gaping void and dead zone – you can’t miss it. That or swim around aimlessly with the school and you’re bound to drift into one.”

“Fish, I *love* Sponges & Trawls™!” Fish B sucked Tasmanian, fins twitching.

“They have piles of everything: sand, shiny flecks, oily globs. It’s a hip place to bob!”

“Big, too! They’ve got the best selection of Floatzas™ and jetsam in the reef.

The whole school goes there; squid and jellyfish, too. And they have a FloatyBitz™ right there, with premium brines, artisan algae, and Spongyblobz™.”

“Aw, cool! Fish, I hope nothing colorful *ever* grows here. I hope our bleached reef stays exactly as it is, where voids are huge and blobs are bountiful!”

“Molto, Fish.” Fish B slapped flippers with Fish A.

And then together: “Moltissimo!...”

And then, in a mellow swell, a **blue manatee** arrived. This changed everything.