

A Bloom of Jellyfish

by Danila Botha

People say you remember your first time with a clarity like no other. I remember following Mo down the stairs into this guy Chris's basement. He was from Labrador City, and even though everyone said he tried to hide it, it was there, dangling from every *best kind* and *where I'm to* that dripped quietly out of the sides of his full mouth. He was heavy set, with loose red cheeks that hung like a basset's and a sandy blonde buzz cut he was always running his thick fingers across. But he was friendly enough.

He motioned to me to sit beside him on his huge grey sectional, with people standing and lying on the floor, or draped over the sides, talking over a hip-hop mix. On the wall behind us was a huge LED 75-gallon fish tank, though he seemed more interested in telling us about the specs than the fish themselves. He talked about the filter and the heater, which cost two hundred dollars a piece, but I lost him, staring at all the fish. There were fish whose faces were a surreal purplish silver and had glowing orange stomachs, dotty backs, and it made me think of a book I'd loved as a kid about a beautiful fish who was lonely and gave away all its glittering scales to make friends. There were thin, brown polka dotted fish that looked like hyenas with bulging eyes. There were delicate fish whose see-through tails and fins hovered like dragonflies, and tiny black and white fish that looked like drops of watercolour paint blurred by rain.

The fish that excited Mo most of all were the clownfish. "Look it's Nemo," she said, her white shiny nails a perfect match for their thick middle stripes. She walked around, her plum bob sticking to the glittery blush on her cheeks. She said she didn't have anywhere to sit, and before I knew it, she was straddling some guy, kissing him. I wished I could shrink myself to the size of the fish, or maybe slightly bigger. I wished I could jump in and swim in circles with them while the filter made small gentle bubbles above our heads.

A little while later, she got bored with the guy and flopped down beside me. She threw her legs over mine and called Chris over. He said he had a present for both of us.

I got all excited, knowing the anxiety I was feeling was going to pass, and then finally, I'd be talking, talking so much, so much to strangers that my jaw would hurt. It wasn't coke even though it looked like it. I breathed it in, the soft white powder like sea foam. The water in the tank crashed like ocean waves.

Mo started giggling first, slapping her legs, telling me she couldn't move them, that she felt like she was sitting in a tub of maple syrup, or better yet, the rubber cement we used in one of our art classes, and it was funny but scary. And me? I felt like I was floating, like the tank had expanded and we were all swimming, languidly, or suntanning, like seals sunning ourselves on the sand.

A Kendrick Lamar song was playing, and I swear he said "Backbone don't exist/born outside a jellyfish" and I felt the skin on the inside of my arms ripple and swell and suddenly I wanted to learn everything about these beautiful, gutless creatures. I googled what a group of jellyfish was called, and it turned out it was a bloom, and I wished I had a group of terrified eccentrics to swim away with so we could form our own bouquet of creatures. I didn't like the artists in my program, there was no way of knowing what they really thought or cared about or believed in.

Even Mo, whose real name, I'd recently found out, was Monet, as in the guy who painted the famous water lilies, and not as she'd told people, Monique. I'd known her for two years, had been roommates with her for one, and the other night, her ID fell out of her pocket when we were drunk and I picked it up before she could stop me. It was like finding out that a friend named Tammy's real name was Tamarind. If a person can deceive you about something as fundamental as their name, what else are they lying to you about? Is anything you think you know about them true?

I didn't open up much, but if I did, I told people how ridiculous my parents thought my wanting to be an artist was, how they acted like I told them I was taking out a loan and moving across the country to go to clown college, and Mo always said her parents were equally unsupportive, though it was clear now that they weren't.

We stumbled home that night, after I flirted with some girl and she slept with some guy, and the next day we were dehydrated and had headaches, but she made me go jogging in Point Pleasant Park, which woke me up a little. The sweating and coconut water did it for her. The salty brine and calm greenish blue with rocky sand that surrounded us, even if it was full of harbour run off, was enough for me.

"It's stupid to live in Halifax if you're not going to enjoy the ocean view," she said, which was true. I'd tried donairs and sea scallops wrapped in bacon. I'd drank pints of Oland's and Alexander Keith's and saw local bands play, but nothing connected me to the east coast like the Atlantic Ocean.

Mo and I were both from small Ontario towns near Lake Simcoe, but we didn't know each other until we got here. Mo's specialty was drawing, mine was painting. We worked hard in the studio, stayed for hours to get things right, or good enough, to submit to our professors, and then on weekends she always wanted to go out.

Mo loved to party, and I kept partying with her, because why not, what else were we going to do? She always knew where to go, how to get in for free, and how to score for free. The alternative was gallery crawling, taking photos on our phones or listening to people romanticize the down-to-earthness of artists who painted boats and harbours, maroon and powder blue clapboard houses and water melting into the yellowing sunset.

We went to lounges and clubs, houses and bars and we sweated and danced, or lay down and felt the rush of water floating all around us, filling up our ears.

When Mo lay on the floor beside me, her full dark hair splayed out around her like glossy acrylic paint, she looked like a mermaid. Sometimes when I took K, I imagined that scene in the Little Mermaid where Ursula's spell came into being, and the mermaid's tail was split into two legs. It was like that for me, but in reverse: it bound my legs together and formed a tail, it cut tiny slick gills into my ribs, it made me who I didn't even know I wanted to be.

I wanted to feel calm all the time. When Covid hit, I started buying Ket during the week, and it wasn't long before I was doing it every day. Our friends who dealt thought I was cute enough not to pay, most of the time, but before I knew it I was going through over a thousand dollars a month on Ket, sometimes two if I'm being honest.

I didn't have many side effects, no nosebleeds or guilt, just the feeling that I was uncovering something vital. I'd been reading about how jellyfish had no brains, or hearts, or bones, but they could sting or inject poison that immobilized their prey. They could produce their own light and use the water in their bodies to help them move around. There were so many kinds of jellyfish, but the best, I decided, were the Immortal ones, the ones who swam freely and when they reached maturity, preyed on other jellyfish if they wanted to, and when stress inevitably came, reverted back to their tiny innocent selves, living to see the cycle repeat indefinitely, with infinite chances to do everything over.

Mo found some guy she liked named Will, who liked to surf at Lawrencetown. The waves were good, he insisted, even in the beginning of April, and we sat huddled together on the sand, our feet resting on pebbles, the wind and dampness blowing inside our bones.

My bladder had hurt a lot lately. I'd needed to pee with alarming frequency, and before we left, I could have sworn something else came out of me.

I walked for about ten minutes, took off my pants and underwear and waded into the water. I heard Mo laughing and shaking her head, like this was going to be a great story to tell our friends, something to roll my eyes about later.

A stream of gelatinous goo poured out of me. It curled and swirled like a tentacle, a tentacle made of dark, blood-orange coloured jelly. Soon I felt more tentacles shooting out of me, four, or five, then countless more, forming a lion's mane around my face and body. They were retractable, and I found myself curling them in, the pain as blinding as the sense of clarity, the knowledge that I was finally being re-formed.

I felt my body tightening and shrinking. I felt the last of my clothing float away.

I tried to lift my head above the waves, to have one last look at Mo and even Will before I submerged myself forever, and I waved one of the thickest of my many tentacles as high as I could. I'm not sure she saw me. I saw her get up, her body a blur as she ran in my direction, and I thought that I might miss her a little bit before I saw some three red jellyfish in the distance, their skin lit up like flaming cranberries against the floating seaweed all around them, and I felt my tentacles reach for them like celebratory sparklers. This time, finally, I would bloom. I felt tears run down my body as I finally stopped thinking. I let my viscid, undiluted body take over.