

Medusas

by C.J.F

I didn't kiss Odgeir because I fancied him, I kissed him because I knew other people fancied him. We were in Ding's, a dirty, black-painted nightclub where mirrors surrounding the dancefloor were misted with breath and sweat. Green and red and blue lights made faces look swollen and ill, and the carpets were sticky, and I was drunk enough to have one eye almost constantly closed.

My day had been spent watching a tank full of jellyfish at the aquarium. The way they pumped their freakish bodies upwards, tiny tentacled spaceships lit up by UV, the facts on the thick cardboard signs; I was enthralled.

Odgeir was standing by a black pillar watching the dancers. I thought, That's the one. His Nordic hair flapped above his forehead in some mysterious current, ventilation or a draft, and I thought how funny it would be if I asked him if his hair wanted to dance. It turned out it wasn't funny; it was embarrassing, but it meant that I could stand on my tiptoes and shove my mouth against his in a sort of kiss.

The next day he text me and we arranged to meet at the beach where we quickly got wasted, looking at the sea. He told me about his various girlfriends, and the different speeds at which they had climaxed, and I listened, keeping my mouth shut while making what I hoped were worldly, suggestive eyes. Drunk, he looked at me a certain way, and I hoped I had become his personal challenge.

I couldn't stop thinking about jellyfish and so I looked up what was needed to keep my own. A tank placed out of direct sunlight and away from electrical equipment, heat sources, aquarium gravel, glass marbles, and a heater set to 77 degrees fahrenheit: the jellyfish's climate of choice. The whimsical little freaks could be here in a week.

Odgeir and I continued to meet up. We competed at being aloof, boasted about not getting dumped and hearts we had broken — always by accident, of course, we weren't malicious — and I recognised a certain coldness in him. He confessed to masturbating

on breaks at the care home for the elderly where he worked nights. What do you think about when you touch yourself, he asked, and I admitted that I thought about nothing at all.

These sex-rich conversations would end at the bus stop where I would leave him, hangover kicking in, and walk home to bed. Early evening light fell through my window as my hand moved frantic in my pants, trying to get somewhere. I lay under the sheets imagining what he would think of this room if he saw it.

The next morning he rang.

I have a night off tomorrow, he said. D'you want to hang out?

Of course, I said.

Online, I learned more about jellyfish, about how they progress through a number of forms. The one we all know is the adult, with its bell-shaped body and long tentacles, but that's just one of several stages. Fertilised jellyfish eggs turn into planula, which are small caterpillaresque forms that sink to the bottom of the ocean. Planula latch onto the sea bed where the next stage of transformation takes place.

Transformation!

Night arrived and everything felt different. Going to meet Odgeir at the beach it was like a safety net had been taken away from underneath us. Things passed in the same way, the teasing, boasting, posturing, but when all of the vodka was inside us we left the beach uncertain. We stopped at the bus stop.

Well, he said.

Well.

We realised we had no idea where the other lived, and swapped addresses. My house was closest.

D'you want to come back for a coffee? I dared myself to say.

We sat at my kitchen table carving the wood with our fingernails and drinking tea. We talked about our childhoods and what we were like at school — he was popular, I was studious — and I wondered if the closer we got to the bedroom the less we would talk about sex.

So, Odgeir said, after his second cup of tea. When are we going to have this coffee then?

Ah, I said. We may have a problem.

He looked at me.

I don't have any; it makes me jittery.

You led me here under false pretenses?

I did.

We were looking right at each other and something was happening, and it could have been sexual tension but it could have just been nerves. His eyes were pale blue like a drained slush puppy, his eyelashes white. A dirty plaster clung to his index finger. I felt a shiver of something.

Do you want to come up to my room?

He nodded.

First door at the top of the stairs, I told him, and I collected our cups and rinsed them and turned them upside down on the draining board, and I thought, Where's my sense of urgency?

Which brings me back to jellyfish.

The second stage of a jellyfish's lifecycle can take years, and it gets more complicated now, so you have to concentrate. The planula transform into polyps, which cannot move. The polyps sit on the ocean floor eating and reproducing themselves asexually to make a kind of column. Imagine the polyps stacked like plastic cups: this is the strobila.

As the strobila continues to wait on the oceanfloor it begins to develop stratified rings. These rings begin to break off. The broken off pieces are ephyra, another intermediate creature in the lifecycle of a jellyfish that looks like a tiny gelatinous starfish, or a serrated wild mushroom. As the ephyra floats away in the ocean, feeding and growing, it evolves into its fully mature form. The medusa.

And this is what we recognise as the jellyfish.

On my way upstairs I slipped my hand into my knickers to check. I cleaned my teeth and wet my fingers and ran them across myself. I washed my face and moisturised, I couldn't stop preparing. Perhaps I wanted to leave Odegeir alone long enough for the momentum required to build up or fade completely.

I pushed the door open, and there he was, not even in my bed.
Crouched in front of my CD player, he held an album.
Can I play you something? he said.
Uh-huh.

The room was quiet and I heard every single movement of the CD player as it pushed out its mechanical tongue. Is this sexual tension? I asked myself, and from somewhere came decisiveness. I pulled off my top.

I unbuttoned my jeans as the CD whirred and span, not yet music, and the noise of my fingers picking away at my jean buttons was entirely audible, and I recognised a feeling of nausea and thought, Is this sexual tension? I pushed my jeans down self-consciously, even though Odgeir wasn't even facing me and stared at the back of his neck, which I knew would be warm and soft like mine was, like all of the backs of necks I had ever touched in my life had been and I focused on that, as I felt the material slide down my legs.

And then the music started much louder than anyone was comfortable with and Odgeir went to pieces, like an old person with no clue about technology. He flapped, useless, and I ran over one leg still in my jeans, denim trailing behind me like a tentacle.

I can't find stop! he said.
And I thought perhaps this is a sign, as I turned the volume down.
Sorry, he said.
It's alright, I said. Neither of us mentioned that I was wearing only my bra and pants, or that we weren't doing anything about it.

The music played, a soothing, plinking kind of music, and I lay back on my bed, and it was cold, but I stayed on top of the sheets.
My hairs stood up.

I felt the mattress sink as Odgeir climbed onto it.
Do you like the music? he asked.
I do, I said.

It sounded like an aquarium

He trailed his hand down my stomach, lingering on the material of my pants and I arched my back to meet him, out of habit. On the

upward stroke I felt that plaster, coarse like a beach-hardened heel.
He put his mouth on my belly button and I shivered.

