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Ultramarine

by Verna Bryan

We were in the jellyfish exhibit when the world exploded.

Just seconds before, Adam and I had been gazing at the gelatinous bodies of the jellyfish as they floated around the tank's electric blue water. This part of the aquarium had the somber ambience of a cathedral; its dim lights seemed to hush the voices of all who entered, including the middle school field trip that had been trailing behind us since the admission desk. My gaze wandered to the left of the tank, where a sign hung reading

Immortal Jellyfish (Turritopsis dohrnii)

The "Immortal Jellyfish", belonging to the Hydrozoan class of the Cnidarian phylum, is named so because it's among the few species of jellyfish with the ability to reverse its biotic cycle. This allows the Turritopsis to revert back to its polyp phase (see Figure 1.B below), rendering it biologically immortal. In nature, however, most Turritopsis are likely to succumb to predation or disease in the medusa stage, without ever reverting to the polyp form. But how does their incredible ability work? Like most other Hydrozoans, Turritopsis begin their life as tiny, free-swimming larvae known as planulae...

I felt my eyes glaze over as the text diverged into an undecipherable mass of scientific jargon. Behind me, the effect of the exhibit's tranquility was rapidly wearing off on the young students; with each passing second their whispers and laughter seemed to increase in volume. The magic was wearing off on Adam, too. I heard him exhale loudly and braced myself for his inevitable urging that we move on. Sure enough, within a few seconds he turned to me and prompted

"Hey, let's keep moving. I think the shark tanks are up next."

My eyes didn't meet his; they remained fixed on two especially luminous jellyfish that had just collided and were now being propelled backwards by the force of the action. This was typical Adam behavior, always focused on the future, always planning ahead. The exact opposite of myself. I loved how he was constantly on the move, but I also loved persuading him to slow down from time to time.

"It must be nice to be one of them, just floating around aimlessly forever." I remarked in an attempt to stall him.

"Can you imagine how simple life would be? If we could just float aimlessly?" I continued, unwilling to leave the exhibit's peaceful atmosphere.

"I mean, isn't that essentially what you're already doing?" He scoffed.

"You could say that." I replied. There was a faint smile on my face when I said it; we both knew that he was right. If anyone else had said such a thing to me it would've hurt, but the three-year long relationship I'd shared with Adam allowed for us to make such jibes at each other.

I'd been unemployed for a few months, fresh out of university with a philosophy degree that was gathering dust on a bookshelf in my apartment. Throughout my undergrad years, law school had been the post-graduation plan I would confidently tell anyone who asked, but as the days leading up to the application deadline flew by, I found myself growing increasingly nauseated with the whole thing. I didn't want to go to law school. I didn't want to do anything. In the throes of my quarter-life crisis I found myself disgusted by my own free will. I could see my future branching out in front of me in a thousand potential paths, and I had no idea which one to follow.

In an attempt to make some type of sense out of my life, I was developing an affinity for visiting places that I had loved in my youth. During

my past few months of restlessness, I'd explored dozens of museums, parks, and schools. There was a rush of Déjà-vu that came over me when I entered a place that I had strong memories attached to but hadn't physically been to in years. I was essentially seeking solace by getting high on nostalgia. It made me feel like I was rediscovering a past life. That's how Adam and I ended up at the aquarium for our date rather than one of the usual /restaurant/movie theater/bar combinations; I was curious if it could stir the sense of wonder that it had woken in me the last time I'd been there, what seemed like a millennium ago.

The afterlife has given me much time to reflect upon my little life, and with hindsight, I was obviously overcomplicating things, searching all over for some kind of sign to tell me what to do next. I could've picked any one of those future paths for myself, law school, office job, whatever, and things would've worked out more or less the same. That goes to show what four years of non-stop, collegiate-level philosophical thought will get you. A fucking headache. Honestly, it's probably a blessing that things ended so early for me. At least death snapped me out of my existential crisis.

"Let's let them get ahead of us, first." I said in response to Adam's urging, tilting my head back slightly to indicate the loud group of students. He nodded in agreement, and we retreated to a bench facing the largest tank.

"The color of the water, it's incredible." I said. "It reminds me of a painting I once saw."

"Which one?"

"Ah, I can't remember the name of it."

"What, you can't give me anything else?" He laughed. "Maybe I can help you guess it."

I thought for a moment.

"The subject was definitely people, but I wouldn't call it a portrait. They were all standing in a circle, dancing, I think. I guess you could say it was abstract? But the background was the

same blue as that water. Ultramarine."

Adam nodded his head pensively before replying. "Something about that sounds familiar. I might've seen it before. I can't remember the name either, though."

"Oh, well."

We lapsed into a comfortable silence. The setting was perfect for crowd gazing. The bodies of people standing around the gallery formed dark silhouettes against the glowing glass tanks, and if I squinted hard enough, I could watch their features fade away, leaving me in a room of shadowy figures milling about. As I watched the shadows move through my barely parted lids, I recalled the last time I had been in this gallery, over a decade ago. I'd done the same thing I was doing then, squinting around the room in order to see how differently I could make the world appear. The thought comforted me, and I was content as I felt the hazy sensation of nostalgia begin to wrap around me like a thick sweater.

That's the last mundane memory I have, sitting in the gallery comparing my past and present. It couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds from the time we heard the explosion to the time its effects physically reached us, but those couple seconds seemed to stretch on for infinity in anticipation of the imminent disaster.

Adam had just started to raise his phone towards me, likely to show me Google image results for potential identities of my mystery painting, when he was interrupted by a noise loud enough to make the floors shake. The sound came from the adjacent room, a room containing a glass tunnel surrounded above and on either side by an enormous fish tank that was stocked with enough flora and fauna to make anyone passing through feel like they were walking on the floor of a coral reef. It had been a beautiful sight to behold when we walked through it minutes before, but now that the sound of an explosion was emanating from it, I felt significantly more skeptical about the idea of a few sheets of glass holding back all those thousands of gallons of water. My skepticism was validated as sounds

of creaking metal and rushing water filled the area.

Adam and I barely had time to exchange a look of terror before the water came crashing into us, crystal-clear and swirling wildly with schools of brightly colored fish and fragments of broken glass. All of us in the gallery issued a unanimous scream and scrambled towards the exit, but the water moved faster. It slammed into the jellyfish tanks and sent cracks spiderwebbing across them. As the water pushed people against those cracks, the surfaces of the tanks gave way and added new streams of glass and aquatic life.

I got caught in the crossfire of one of these powerful streams and was pulled into an under-current. I lost all sense of direction the moment I was sucked underwater. There was no way for me to tell which way was up and which was down, all I could see were the shadowy outlines of those around me, their arms and legs flapping as they also struggled to orientate themselves in the vortex.

The ultramarine LEDs in the ruins of the jellyfish habitats were the only sources of light. When an especially jagged piece of glass came into my field of vision it caught the light with glittering perfection, and the little herd of seahorses rushing past were illuminated by it like a spotlight. Yes, I knew I was going to die, and yes, I was terrified, but there was still a surreal beauty to the scene that I had to acknowledge amongst the chaos.

News stories covering sudden tragedies of any kind had always managed to unsettle me in a way that few other things could. Against my better judgement, whenever such a report would come on TV, I would find myself watching with the rapt attention. Ruptured gas lines flattening city blocks, structural flaws bringing down buildings, mile long pileups of cars on freeways; My mind loved to sadistically envision myself as a victim in such scenarios, obliviously going about my daily routine, then being suddenly and violently ended by some bizarre anomaly or engineering fluke.

My anxieties were usually quelled when I reminded myself how infinitesimally small my chances were of being offed in such a manner, but it always managed to survive as an irrational fear lurking in the back of my mind. A freak accident, that's what the news called the incident that killed me, Adam, 2 middle schoolers, 1 chaperone, 5 general admission tourists, thousands of fish of assorted tropical breeds, a Sand Tiger Shark, 13 Moon jellies, 46 Turritopsis dohrnii, and a colony of sea anemone. What a shining example of poetic justice, that I should die under the same circumstances that had always haunted me.

As my mind's consciousness made its final attempt to cling to my body, the elusive name of the ultramarine painting happened to spring into my mind. The Dance, a Matisse. There had been a print of it hanging on the wall of my dentist's office. What had prompted me to suddenly recall this?

"Oh, I have a cleaning appointment tomorrow." I thought vaguely. I could've laughed at the absurdity of it all if I hadn't been in a pretty significant amount of pain.

I wanted to turn to Adam and tell him that I had remembered the painting's name, to ask him if the one he'd found on his phone had been the same, but as I made the attempt to turn my head to look for him amongst all the movement of the water and the fish and the people, I registered that I was moving upwards rapidly. My vision blurred, then brightened. I was looking down now, at my body floating aimlessly amongst the debris.

"Oh, so I'm dying." I thought. It felt so real.

It was real, but it felt realer-than-real. I've spent countless hours thinking about what it would be like to die, trying to imagine what could possibly happen during and after, and now that the moment had arrived, I didn't know how to process the overwhelming reality of it.

I was still moving, but not up or down. It felt like I was moving in all directions, dissipating like fog into ultramarine light.