

Catherine Smith

Jellyfish

You're slicing onions when Emily's text pings. White letters on a black background. *10 pm to collect? I'll have a taxi waiting. Hope that's OK.*

No kisses, of course. Not even her initial. You type, *Fine. I'll have your stuff ready.*

5 You hesitate. *Stuff?* Shouldn't that be *worldly goods* or *precious possessions*? Emily works in Marketing. She's always teased you about your 'cautious' vocabulary. But no point, now, trying to please her. You press send and take a large swig from your glass of Merlot¹, then go back to slicing the onions. Emily hated slicing onions. They made her weep. An onion's defence mechanism produces an irritating chemical, propanethial s-oxide, meant to stop the plant being consumed by pests. Once it's released, it quickly evaporates, finds its way into eyes and dissolves in the surface water to form sulphenic acid. This irritates
10 the lacrimal – tear – gland. It affects some people, but not others. Onions have never made you cry.

Three evenings ago, as you sat opposite each other at the kitchen table, Emily sobbed as she confessed to an affair which had been going on for five months. She was so sorry, but this person – *Dana* – was just the most amazing woman she'd ever met and she couldn't go on pretending everything between the two of you was OK.

15 You felt sick, and miserable, but you weren't shocked. You watched her lips move, and desperately wanted to kiss her, so she'd have to stop talking, and the soreness in your chest would ease and this horrible thing she was telling you wouldn't be true. She told you she was going to move out that evening, and that you could decide which of your shared possessions to keep and which she could have, because that was only fair. You let her finish talking and crying. You both agreed she would pay her share of the rent and bills until
20 the end of the month, then you'd take on the tenancy yourself. She said it wasn't your fault, it was hers. She'd changed, you hadn't. You wanted to scream, *change back and love me again because I still love you and this Dana can fuck off, you can forget her.*

But you said nothing more. You sat in the kitchen as she packed, called a taxi, left. Then you stripped all the bedding, shoved it into the washing machine and selected the hottest programme.

25 After washing up, you wonder about having some time to yourself before you decide what to give Emily. But there's nothing you want to watch on TV or Netflix. You and Emily had been watching the latest series of *Killing Eve*²; or rather, you realise now, you'd been watching. She'd been staring through the window, fiddling with her hair.

30 You dig out four Bags for Life³. You check her wardrobe and drawers. She's taken nearly all her clothes – smarter, more expensive than yours – and her nicest underwear and tights, but she's left both sets of pyjamas, which causes a fresh wave of bitterness. You hate to think of her sleeping naked with Dana. You fold the pyjamas anyway, and place them in a bag. You take down the white fairy lights she'd strung over the headboard and throw them on top of the pyjamas. In the bathroom cabinet, you find her pomegranate

¹ a type of wine

² *Killing Eve*: British spy thriller tv series produced by the BBC

³ *Bags for Life*: reusable shopping bags

body butter (a birthday gift from your mother) and her shower cap. You pack those, and two of the
35 expensive white bath sheets (the older ones) and a hand towel.

In the kitchen, you decide she can have the juicer, two white plates, two white cereal bowls, two white
mugs and a fistful of cutlery. But not the stove-top percolator. Let her new, amazing woman make her
coffee. You wrap them all in the oldest tea towels and put them in a separate bag.

So that just leaves the living room. From the bookshelves, you take down and pack her novels, and books
40 on Eastern philosophy and popular psychology. The furniture came with the flat, but together you'd bought
a grey, lambswool blanket and matching cushions for the sofa. Sometimes, in the past, you and Emily made
love on that sofa, her head resting on one of those cushions, and you would wrap her, afterwards, in the
blanket. Will Dana be making love to Emily right now? You feel bile burn your esophagus. You decide they
can have the cushions and blankets, all of which, when you hold them to your face, smell faintly of Emily's
45 vanilla scented shampoo. You hope they'll feel so guilty they'll have to get rid of them. You stuff them into
the bag.

To the right of the chimney breast there's a small, built-in cupboard. The glory hole, Emily called it. Inside, it
smells musty. You find a bag of obsolete phone chargers, their wires tangled, and a box containing her lava
lamp.

50 She bought it six years ago, at the end of a day trip to Brighton⁴, shortly after you both left the beach on
your way back to the station – scurrying into a shop full of touristy tat because, suddenly, there was a
thunderstorm with heavy rain, and neither of you had an umbrella. You'd both been drinking wine all
afternoon, and were giggling, whispering, trying to decide how long you could take shelter in this busy,
over-stuffed shop. You were considering buying each other mugs with comic messages – *Galley Slave* and
55 *You Don't Have to Be Mad to Work Here But It Helps!* – when Emily spotted a shelf of boxed lava lamps. The
one at the end was set up and working. Lurid blue globules of wax were rising and falling through green
liquid.

“Look, isn't that the most gorgeous thing ever?” she shrieked. “Those blobs ... they're like ... they're
squashy tomatoes, blood platelets...”

60 “They're blue,” you pointed out. “Tomatoes and platelets are red.”

She rolled her eyes, took a box off the shelf and marched up to the counter. On the train, she cradled it on
her lap. Back at the flat, she placed the lava lamp on the coffee table, plugged it in and insisted you sat and
watched together, whilst it heated up, to see ‘all the little miracles’. The one she'd bought had orangey-red
wax and sky-blue liquid and a lightweight silver-coloured base. You thought it looked silly and kitsch, out of
65 place in a room full of muted colours.

“Look,” she said, snuggling up to you. “Can't you *see*? They're little *creatures*. They can be our pretend
pets.” She laughed, and leaned forward, pointing. “Better than pets – they won't need any maintenance.
Actually, forget pets. *Look!* A headless buddha, bumping into a detached placenta. That big one, there ...
that's a spacehopper⁵. Don't you just *love* them?”

70 You didn't. You saw heated globules of wax squeezing themselves up from the base and rising to the top of
the lamp, and hanging around for a few minutes, before falling down to the base, occasionally colliding

⁴ city in South East England

⁵ a rubber ball toy for bouncing on

with another lump of molten wax. You explained the science to Emily, telling her liquid and wax are different densities, so they can never dissolve or blend. As the wax blobs heat, their molecules move further apart, they become lighter, they rise. And when they reach the top, they cool, and their molecules
75 move closer together, so they become denser, and fall.

But she wasn't listening. She told you she thought the globules were a metaphor for the life cycle and reincarnation. Everything was impermanent, everything that seemed to be solid will fall apart, re-form, appear again. To humour her, you tried to look as though you'd received an amazing epiphany, and nodded.

80 Now, you unravel the flex and plug it into a power socket. The light pings on immediately, but nothing happens for several minutes, as the wax heats. Then slowly an orange-red globule squeezes itself into a spherical shape and begins to stretch upwards, followed thirty seconds later by another globule. The molecules are moving further apart. You remember Emily's enraptured whisper, the warmth of her head on your chest as you stroked her hair. "They're singing to each other, can you hear them, Kirsty? Little ghosts.
85 They're singing laments."

She grew bored with it, though, after a few weeks, decided it was a tacky impulse buy. You came home from a year seven parents' evening to find it gone. You assumed at the time she'd given it to a charity shop.

90 Outside, it's already dark. You draw the curtains and turn on the spotlights, clipped to the bookshelves. The lava lamp looks less garish, now there's more light. You retrieve the blanket and cushions from the bag and curl up on the sofa, with the blanket over you and a cushion under your head.

An hour later, you wake slowly, stretch, and watch the lamp glowing, the wax blobs rising and falling. You sit up properly and try to see what Emily saw. The blobs representing something beyond themselves. After a few minutes, concentrating hard, you identify helium balloons, but this feels unsatisfying. Not original enough. You borrow Emily's images. Spacehoppers, yes. Headless buddhas, yes. Detached placentas, no.

95 Then suddenly, you see them. Jellyfish. The way they drift upwards. How they pulse and flex. Jellyfish! You lean forward and brush the sides of their red-hot glass with your fingertips.

100 You fetch the Merlot and a glass from the kitchen and drink rapidly, staring at the lamp. Your attention is riveted by what you now see as a whole bloom of small, trapped jellyfish, rising and falling. You remember the first time you saw a single jellyfish pulse upwards in its huge tank – you must have been nine or ten – in a dank-smelling, echoey Sea Life Centre. From the phylum Cnidaria⁶; their bell shape pulsates to provide propulsion and locomotion. Jellyfish have no eyes, noses, brains or hearts. They can live for a few hours, or a few years. In some species, their stings can be lethal.

105 You jump, spilling wine down your jumper, as you hear a key scraping in the lock, the front door opening. You hear the front door click shut. Then the living room door opens. Emily wears a short, white raincoat you don't recognise, and her wavy hair is tousled and damp. She looks fresh and pretty. Younger. She smells nice, too – some grapefruit-scented body lotion or spray.

She stares at the lava lamp, and passes a hand through her hair. "Oh my God, that thing! It still works?"

"Of course."

⁶ *phylum Cnidaria*: a type of jellyfish

“Wow. I’d forgotten all about it.”

110 You stand up, take her hands and pull her into the room. Her fingers are cool. She doesn’t meet your eyes.

“Remember you said they were squashy tomatoes, or platelets?” She frowns. “Then you said headless buddhas. You did! Headless buddhas bumping into detached placentas –”

She pulls away and folds her arms. You so badly want to hold her close, kiss her. “Ugh, placentas, really? I was probably pissed –”

115 “But I’ve worked it out. They’re jellyfish, trapped jellyfish.”

She laughs uncomfortably. “No, wrong shape. And they’d have those, those trailing things if –”

“You’re being too literal. You have to really *look*.” You sit on the sofa and pull her down next to you. “*Really* look, and then you’ll see what I can see.”

120 You both sit for a few minutes, the jellyfish rising and falling, rising and falling. She says nothing, though occasionally she clears her throat, in that delicate, almost silent way of hers. You sense how much she wants to leave. How she’ll be thinking about the taxi outside. And Dana. Maybe, under the white raincoat, under her clothes, she’s wearing expensive, lacy underwear Dana’s bought her.

You try to stop your voice from shaking. “Can I keep them?”

“Them?”

125 “The jellyfish. You don’t want them?”

“No, no. You keep it.”

“*Them.*”

She stands up, hands you her keys. “Kirsty,” she says gently, kissing the top of your head – a sharp waft of grapefruit – “be happy.”

130 You hear rustling as she gathers up the bags in the hallway, hear the front door bang and an engine start. You sit alone with the jellyfish, trapped in their glass tank, watching them rise and fall, rise and fall. You lean towards them, close your eyes, certain you can hear a faint, low-frequency hum. Maybe the lamp’s electricity?

135 But then you hear *them*, really hear them. They’re not silent. And they’re not singing laments, or anything else. They’re sniggering as they collide, they’re colluding, whispering about how they will each sting somebody to death.

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