

## Underwater

When I was eight I thought sex was kissing underwater. No one explicitly told me this, but I believed in it the same way I believed blocking people from view meant they couldn't see you. I believed in it like I believed in Greek Gods and True Love.

It wasn't till a perpetually sweaty 6<sup>th</sup> grader named Andrew Callaghan told me otherwise. 6<sup>th</sup> grade was a sex-obsessed year. I had never been so informed and misinformed on a specific subject. Driving down I-95, my frantic mother snuck a look at me through the rear view mirror. "Jenna do you know what a blow job is?" Yes, actually, I did.

Andrew Callaghan started wearing deodorant and decorating his locker with Pink Floyd foldout posters. I had my own locker interior dedicated to Queen.

Andrew would say I had bad taste in music and that I should listen to 'some real shit' on his Mp3 player. I sat in the back of the auditorium with him, sharing headphones, letting his hand accidentally brush my leg more than it needed to. I'd wear a skirt, once, and his fingers would become more intent on a destination. Halfway up my thigh I'd push his hand away, but he'd reach up with his other hand so quick it would make me jump. I'd focus on the school podium and think about how we hadn't even kissed yet.

I got a 'reputation.' I made incomplete decisions that didn't feel like choices at all. I was too embarrassed to talk to anyone about it. The heaviness of these new secrets weighed on my heart and in my stomach. I'd start throwing up a lot—which seemed to reinforce 'the reputation.'

As I transitioned into being a teenager I became a habitual non-believer. I stopped believing in my parents and true love and being on time. I started saying ‘fuck’ instead of ‘the f-word’ and started carrying more than one lip gloss in my pencil case. I’d stop carrying a pencil case. I’d listen to “Somebody to Love” and sing the words into my mirror like I was courting myself. I would learn Freddie Mercury died of AIDS and be crushed by it.

The Paddison kids had matching freckles and loved giving Indian burns, but not receiving them. Babysitting for the Paddisons one night would lead to stashing Mr. Paddison’s *Hustler* into my backpack. After putting them to sleep, and after kissing the red pocks on their arms to make them better, I would lock the door to the bathroom and look through the magazine.

I was partial to a photo spread titled Harry Hoe-dini. The centerfold was a blonde woman in magician’s clothes— there she is posing with a rabbit, there she is pulling something out of a hat (but the rabbit is over there). The last image is of her and her assistant in a giant fish tank. Harry Hoe-dini’s hair is sprawled out behind and she is being cut open— split in half to communicate her magical ecstasy. The rabbit is watching.

In 9<sup>th</sup> grade I switched schools. I became friends with a girl named Tania who also liked lip gloss and more importantly knew who Freddie Mercury was. She would be in love with Anthony Kiedis, and together we’d get past the traumas that afflicted our idols.

Tania had three older brothers who I took rounds having crushes on. She lived in Roxborough and my mother would drive me out there to stay for the weekend. It was a

shamelessly suburban existence— her mother collected lawn gnomes, and pillows with biblical embroidery.

When the brothers were out, we would look through their things, finding ourselves particularly enamored with whatever was under the bed (lighters/ switchblades/ girls' underwear).

Andy, the youngest brother, a year older than us, had a Japanese postcard under his bed. In the picture a pair of octopuses are attached to a woman's mouth and vagina like leeches. The back of the card was empty except for the title *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*. We went on Google. Tamatori, the woman in the picture, dived down into the ocean to reclaim a stolen pearl. She was then pursued by a dragon god and his army of sea creatures, including the horny octopuses. She cut open her breast in order to keep the jewel safe but bled out before she could reach the surface. In the illustration her head is tilted back as she kisses the smaller octopus, her eyes closed.

It seemed an appropriate time to show Tania the *Hustler* magazine I had brought in my backpack. She found it funny, but freaky. We wondered if it was real, and if the woman had scars where the machine teeth bit into her. Whether she showed them off the way people do when dangerous animals attack and you get to say you 'survived'. It seems that people who survive violence from other people don't get to find pride in their wounds. The only comfort comes from tentacle arms trying to grab at you.

I made a habit of looking into Andy's room and making excuses to talk to him.

"What're you doing?" I'd lean on the doorframe, my sweaty hands picking at the pills in my sweater.

“Trying to read.” He would look up, peeved. As I did this more frequently, Andy stopped giving me words, and would just hold up the book he was reading as if to say ‘don’t disturb me’. My crush settled on Andy. I liked that he was quiet, but that his face was expressive and you could almost always tell what he was thinking. I liked his messy hair and faint mustache.

One bold day I leaned against the doorframe. Andy was at his desk with a highlighter and handout.

“I know about the octopi.”

He looked up, brow furrowed with obvious concern.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The octopi and the Japanese woman and the... ya know.” I pointed at the dark space under his bed. Andy reddened and kept looking on at his papers.

“It’s octopodes for plural. Octopus is a Greek word not Latin.”

“Oh.”

“Yea.” He clicked his highlighter cap back on and faced me.

“Do you think it could happen in real life?” I was stalling.

“They have sex by the arm. Octopodes transfer sperm by a modified arm tip. The male octopus loses one of its arms when putting it inside the female.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Marine Biologists call it ‘Seven Heaven’.”

“That’s interesting I guess.”

“Scientists used to think octopodes were unromantic loners, but they actually flirt and hold hands. Tentacles I mean.”

“That’s kind of nice.”

“Kind of.”

Tania and I would stay close friends through the summer, spending most of our time in her pool. I would drop my head under water and let the chlorine sting my eyes. I liked how Tania’s legs looked from under there, like the beginning of a horror movie. In movies you always see the girl’s long legs before the shark attacks. Then thrashing and blood and the scene fades. You never see the dismembered parts sink to the bottom of the ocean. I think about the octopodes coming to find the dead and wrapping them in their tentacle arms. I imagine they do.

One day Tania and I went out to find a dead raccoon floating and bloated in the pool. Men came over to drain and clean it with harsh chemicals. I knocked on Andy’s door and said I saw the men staring at Tania and me while we were changing. They weren’t.

That night we all went out to the pool and smashed the lawn gnomes. Andy was the only one actively smashing. I sat with my legs in the now empty pool watching ceramic fly. Tania was throwing little pieces into the rose bush—feeling guilty.

“I cut my finger!” She yelled from the bush and stumbled out towards me, her hand bunched up in fabric, blood staining her tennis shorts. Andy was gripping onto the hat of a broken gnome.

“Let me see.” He handed me the gnome. A half eaten Easter bunny. Andy looked intently at her bloody finger.

“Looks alright. If you wash it off and grab a band-aid you should be fine.”

He kissed the injured finger and ruffled her hair like she was a little kid. Andy sat down next to me, his hand lingering on a patch of grass close to mine. I used the hollowed out half-gnome to shovel out that patch of grass, and his hand moved back into his lap. Together we watched the dirt cave in.