

## Cephalopod

Ingrid's head turned into an octopus eight months after her fiancé died. She woke one morning, looked in the mirror, and where her head should have been sat a complete cephalopod, eight legs and all.

Initially, she was terrified. The moment she saw the thing propped up on her shoulders, she screamed, but all that came out was the gurgling sound of someone drowning. Maybe the octopus had crawled into her bed in the middle of the night and slipped its mouth around her head, like some sea faring parasite. She put her hands around the octopus and pulled as hard as possible, but her neck felt as though it was being severed in two.

The octopus's tentacles lay on her shoulders like a mane of slimy hair, the mucus membrane soaking through her pajamas. She couldn't read the expression on her octopus face, but she was trying to emit disgust. She slapped the slimy beast clear across its face, which was actually her face, in an attempt to swat it away and check that she wasn't having a nightmare. Her hand slipped across the surface, leaving her with only the sting of having just been slapped. She knew this day would come eventually.

#

Ingrid's fiancé Charlie died in a tragic scuba accident. He didn't actually dive, but worked in the factory that made the oxygen tanks. He loved the ocean, but was always too afraid to stick his head under water. One day he went into the storage room, tripped on his shoelace, fell into one of the racks, and was crushed to death by all the tanks.

Charlie was always clumsy. The day he met Ingrid, he fell right on top of her. Ingrid, spread out like a starfish, was laying in the sand, eyes closed, enjoying the warmth of the sun on

her cheeks, when suddenly Charlie, engrossed in watching a pair of seagulls fight over a bag of chips, tripped over a seaweed pile and landed face first into her knee.

As they sat in the emergency room together, delusional with pain, they became friends. They learned they both hated Swedish fish. They both loved orchids because they looked like strange sea creatures and every time they visited the beach, they both secretly hoped they'd see a dead, washed-up animal.

They were taken into separate rooms and patched up. Ingrid was left with a dislocated knee and Charlie had gone temporarily blind and would have to wear an eye patch for a month. Ingrid secretly liked it because she thought he looked like a pirate. She didn't even mind that she had to walk with crutches or, as the doctors had told her, that she might have a slight limp for the rest of her life.

As the nurses wheeled them out of the hospital, they hopped into one cab instead of the originally planned two, driving the twenty minutes to Charlie's apartment, where they became an entangled, awkward mess of crutches, eye patches and laughter. Ingrid stayed the night. And the night after that. And the night after that until three years of nights had passed.

One day Charlie took Ingrid down to the docks. Instead of a diamond, he thought a pearl would be much more beautiful because a living being produced it.

He didn't even wait for her response, but grabbed her hand and fumbled to put the ring on her finger. It slipped from his grasp and tumbled through the wooden slats into the sea below. His face fell just as far as the ring.

"Yes," she said to the question he never asked.

#

Ingrid learned quickly that it's quite hard to breathe when your head is an octopus. Her asthma hadn't been bad since she was a kid, but this gave her that distinct feeling of rocks rattling around in her lungs. An inhaler did her no good now, so she resigned herself to laying in her tub filled up to the brim with water.

She experimented with adding different kinds of salt to the water. Epsom. Kosher. The Himalayan pink kind you have to grind up yourself. Sometimes all three just for fun. Sometimes, if she was feeling up to it, she would walk down to the beach with a bucket and bring back some fresh sea water. People would double take as they saw her walk past, but then go back to whatever they were doing, as if they had never even seen her.

She had called out of work indefinitely for "medical reasons." Sylvia, the HR lady, answered the phone when she called. As Ingrid talked, all she could hear was indistinct gurgling, but Sylvia seemed to understand perfectly what was said.

"That's a shame, Ingrid. We're very understaffed. Is there no way you could pull yourself together?"

Ingrid gurgled back.

"Well, alright then. I'll put your absence in the calendar. Feel better." Click. The receiver went dead and Ingrid was left alone in silence.

She submerged herself back into her cocktail of salt water. She stayed there for days at a time, usually forgetting to eat. She wasn't even sure how she was supposed to eat now. Should she be eating people food? Or octopus food? She wasn't even sure where her mouth was

anymore. She'd listen to her stomach growl for a while and then slip back under the water. If she didn't eat, surely, she could just die peacefully in her watery tub grave. It would be better than being stuck with this head.

But octopuses, unlike humans, can go much longer without food. And as part octopus, so now could Ingrid. Three weeks had gone by and she still hadn't died from starvation like she had hoped. She easily could have just laid outside in the sun, without any water for a few hours and the deed would be done, but she felt starving herself was somehow easier to go. She would just drift off and never wake up again.

But that didn't happen, so she finally resigned herself to eat. She watched a few videos online and found that she should have a hard parrot-like beak hidden beneath her tentacles. She searched under the mucus-y tendrils – the suckers clung gently to her skin – and eventually found her new mouth. Even though the videos had told her what to expect, she was so startled to find such a solid mass, in her otherwise squishy head, that she bit her hand.

She looked down and saw the blood begin to ooze out of her finger. And then she saw the floor coming closer towards her. And then black.

#

Charlie and Ingrid always talked about their ideal way to die all the time usually in bed, right before sleep.

“I think I'd like to die in my sleep.” Charlie would say. “Not tonight. But if I'm going to die a certain way that's how I want to go. I want to be too old to move, lying next to you.”

“I don’t want to be lying next to your old, dead body.” She would push his shoulder and smile.

“No, I mean, I want us to both die when we’re really old. I also have to die first. I don’t think I could ever go on without you.”

“Well I could get on perfectly well without you,” she would say. “I’m imagining it right now. Old me, finally getting some peace and quiet.”

Charlie would roll his eyes and she would snuggle into him.

“How do you want to die?” Charlie would ask.

“I think I would like to die in an adventurous way. But nothing prolonged.” she’d say. Maybe she would fall off a rickety bridge over a ravine and hit a rock that would instantly kill her. Maybe she would visit Hawaii and get hit by a rock as a volcano violently erupted. Maybe she would become a lighthouse keeper and save many ships from crashing into rocks, but not be able to save herself from falling on a rock. She wasn’t sure why all of these scenarios involved dying from rock related injuries, but they were all she could think of. Maybe she thought of all these violent deaths for herself because she never wanted them to happen to Charlie.

She never wanted anything bad to happen to Charlie.

“Too intense for me. Well goodnight.” Charlie would say, yawn and then immediately fall asleep with his mouth agape.

In reality, Ingrid didn’t want an adventurous death. She wanted what Charlie wanted; to die peacefully in her sleep next to him. She hoped they died at the same moment because she didn’t want him to live without her and she couldn’t bear to go on without him there.

#

Ingrid woke up laying on her bathroom floor. There was a small patch of dried blood from the bite wound on her finger. She felt woozy as she stood up. Blood had never bothered her before, but she had never been an octopus before either. What she had failed to surmise in her internet research, was that octopus beaks are venomous and she had essentially poisoned herself. Next time she ate, she would only do it with chopsticks so there was no way this would happen again.

She looked at herself in the mirror. This was just how it was now, wasn't it? She wished Charlie was here because he would know what to do. He would tell her it was okay. He'd try to make her laugh by doing a silly dance, lose his balance and fall into the toilet like he did so many times before. They'd have to wait for the plumber to come get him out as they sat in the bathroom eating take out.

That night Ingrid ordered take out and sat on the toilet and shoved take out into her beak with chopsticks.

#

Charlie snuck up behind Ingrid, placing his hands over her eyes, startling her half to death.

“What the hell, Charlie?”

“I have a surprise for you. Keep your eyes closed.” He removed his hands and gently placed a cold, glass box in Ingrid's lap. She tried to open her eyes, but Charlie stopped her.

“I'm not done just yet.”

“What is this?”

“Just hold on one second.”

“Charlie, what did you-“

“Open.” Ingrid opened her eyes and looked down to see a cuttlefish swooshing around in a tank. Its little fins rippled through the water, its skin cascading into different colors and patterns. She stared at this little creature, mesmerized, unable to say anything.

“So? Do you like it?” Charlie wrung his hands.

Ingrid looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

“You...hate it?” He slid both his hands down his face. “I thought you said you always wanted a cuttlefish? Wait, was it a sea cucumber? It was a sea cucumber.” He plopped himself down next to Ingrid, defeated.

“Charlie, you’re stupid. And I love you.” She raised the tank up and met the cuttlefish’s gaze. Her heart swelled as she looked at it. “This is perfect.”

#

Sylvia, the HR lady, called Ingrid six times in a matter of a single afternoon asking when she thought she would be back in.

“I know you’re not feeling well, hun, but we really do need you back in the office. Work is piling up so high, the paper work is nearly touching the ceiling. Could you find it in yourself to come in?”

Each time Ingrid gurgled her response: “No.”

Each time Sylvia would call back in more of a panic. “Please, hun.”

Finally, Ingrid snapped. She would be there first thing tomorrow morning.

“Wonderful! See you then. It’s donut day!”

Ingrid dragged herself out of bed to get ready for the day. How was she supposed to brush her teeth? She hadn’t been around people for a while so she hadn’t done it. Did her breath smell? She didn’t even have teeth anymore. Was oral hygiene important to an octopus?

She dipped the brush into some salt water, squeezed out some toothpaste, and headed toward her beak. Before the bristles made contact, one of her tentacles grabbed the brush out of her hand and flung it across the floor.

Confused, she picked it up, washed it off, and tried again. Once more, the tentacle grabbed the brush out of her hand and threw it, this time harder, across the room. It plopped right in the toilet, like Charlie.

Charlie once told her that an octopus’s brain was located around its esophagus. It wasn’t very large, but there was a vast neural network in each tentacle, which lead many scientists to believe the tentacles might have minds of their own. Did that tentacle have a mind of its own? What did the other tentacles think of the bristles? Did she have an octopus brain around her esophagus? Where was her human brain?

I don’t need these thoughts today, Ingrid told herself. She fished the toothbrush out of the toilet and threw it away.

On her way into the office, her lungs felt like bags of pebbles again. She was going to need to bring her salt bath with her. She grabbed one of Charlie’s old fish bowls, scooped some



water out of the tub and strapped it over her head. She had to duct tape the bottom around her neck to keep as much of the water in as possible, but it still leaked out onto her paisley blouse. The tentacles kept sliding out and pulling the duct tape off leaving her soaking wet when she stepped into the office.

Water dripped off Ingrid, forming a long line of puddles behind her as she walked to her desk. Steve From Accounting made eye contact with her. His eyes drifted to the tentacles suctioned to the inside of the glass bowl.

“Ing—” He stopped mid-word. His eyes glazed over in the way that only happens from staring at something too long.

Ingrid cleared her throat, which released a stream of bubbles in her helmet. Steve From Accounting shook his head, clearing the glaze from his eyes. “Ingrid. Nice to see you.” His eyes immediately drifted back to her tentacles. One slipped out from under the lip of the bowl and waved at him. He gulped. “I have to go.” He walked swiftly in the other direction.

Everyone else in the office stared. Maya From Sales. Juan From Marketing. Kimberly From Customer Service. She could feel all their eyes on her as she made her way back to her desk, but anytime she looked in their direction it was like she wasn’t even there.

Ingrid’s desk had a thick layer of dust all over it, except for the generic greeting atop her keyboard. It was yellow with a simple smiley face and said “You Can’t Be Sad With a Smile on Your Face.” She crumpled it up and tossed it in the trash. Ingrid gurgled and the rest of the water spilled out of the bowl.

“I’m gonna name him Jeremy.” Ingrid lay on her stomach in the living room staring at her cuttlefish as it swished around in its tank.

“How do you know he’s a boy?” Charlie handed her a glass filled with her favorite banana milkshake.

“I don’t. I’m just assigning my own biases to him, I guess. He’s a Jeremy to me.”

“I like it. Jeremy. Has a nice ring to it.” Charlie lay down next to Ingrid and they both watched Jeremy into the night. They would often lay around and just stare at him mesmerized into the wee hours of the morning.

But it was always Ingrid who watched Jeremy the most. Charlie would fall asleep and leave Ingrid under Jeremy’s trance until dawn. She was infatuated with this weird, little creature. And this infatuation grew stronger and stronger with each day.

When they would leave the house, Ingrid would always be worried that something would happen to Jeremy. Someone could break in and steal him. The neighbor’s cat could leap in through the window and eat him. He might jump out of his tank and suffocate.

Charlie would always assure her that these things were very unlikely to happen. Jeremy would be fine. Nothing to worry about.

Then one night, after coming home from a beach bonfire, they found Jeremy’s tank smashed on the floor. Their upstairs neighbors had been dancing the night away, causing Charlie’s knot tying trophy to fall off the shelf, shatter the tank and catapult Jeremy across the room, where he died shortly after.

“You told me I had nothing to worry about!” Ingrid yelled as she scooped up Jeremy’s body and desperately tried to bring him back to life by putting him under the bathroom faucet.

“I’m sorry, Ingrid.” Charlie grabbed Jeremy out of her hands. “But he’s dead.”

She collapsed into his arms.

The next day they built Jeremy a funeral pyre made of toothpicks and set him ablaze on a paper boat headed out to sea. Ingrid thought it was the only fitting way to send off such a magnificent creature.

Ingrid and Charlie’s friends sent them messages of condolence. Her mom sent her some flowers. But after the first few days, the messages stopped. People moved on. Even Charlie moved on. He was just a small little mollusk after all.

About a week after Jeremy’s death, Ingrid snuck out of the apartment in the middle of the night, once Charlie had fallen asleep, and stared into the waves. Of course, she could just get a new cuttlefish. That’s what everyone told her. But she just couldn’t do it.

Tears rolled down her face. As she wiped them away, she felt a strange mucus-y patch under her eye. She thought it was just her imagination at first, but this patch was squishier than the rest of her face. The mucus formed a thin strand on her index finger as she pulled it away. She rubbed the spot harder and it changed texture, going from smooth to rough.

She ran home, barreling into Charlie as she opened the door. She tried to explain what was wrong, but blacked out in his arms.

Next thing she knew, she was in a hospital bed. The doctors explained to her this was pretty common. Just go home and don't worry about it. The cephalopod skin would disappear from her face in no time.

#

Ingrid filled up the fishbowl in the office bathroom, pouring in the entire kitchen supply of kosher salt as well. Each time she'd catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she would feel the urge to look away, just as Steve From Accounting had.

Why couldn't Charlie just be here? Why did she have to look like this? Why didn't this happen when he first died? Why do people keep expecting everything to be okay?

The fishbowl shattered, slicing into her hand.

Shit. She didn't realize that she was holding it so tight.

Blood oozed out of the gash in her hand, getting all over the counter and floor. She tried to wrap her hand up in paper towels and wipe the mess up at the same time, but no matter how much she wiped the blood left streaks in the linoleum counter and tiles.

#

The cephalopod skin did eventually go away. Ingrid slowly forgot the pain of losing Jeremy. She and Charlie were happy. They were planning their wedding. Charlie was hand decorating all the invitations because he had taken a calligraphy class the summer before. Things were okay.

And then the accident.

Charlie. Gone. Just like that. Poof.

The apartment was overwhelmed with flowers and chocolates and casseroles and cards. Ingrid had to take her sewing needle to the bouquet of balloons her step dad had sent her because there wasn't enough room.

People were constantly over. Constantly checking on her. Her mom. Dad, Grandma. Grandpa. Cousins. Friends she hadn't talked to in years.

It was okay if she laid in bed all day. It was okay if she didn't shower in a week. It was okay if she got mad and threw a wine bottle at the wall. It was okay until it wasn't okay.

The flowers wilted. The chocolates melted on the windowsill. The casseroles got moldy. The cards were replaced with bills.

And Ingrid would stay in the same sweatpants, rubbing the once mucus-y patch of skin under her eye.

#

Ingrid filled up another one of Charlie's old fish bowls and stuck it over her head. She dripped water everywhere as she waited in line for the aquarium. Mothers pulled their pointing children away from her when one tentacle slipped out and waved at a screaming child.

Her hand was still wrapped up in bandages because of the bathroom incident. She had to get twelve stitches and more than that in angry phone calls from Sylvia about the blood stains in the bathroom. This was also her and Charlie's favorite place to go. She wandered around passing the sea lion show, the penguin parade and the jelly fish touch pond. Kids jabbed their fingers so hard into the jellies, she was sure they would kill them.

As she entered further into the aquarium she passed a small tank that stopped her dead in her tracks. Three cuttlefish. One looked exactly like Jeremy, even down to the tiny slit he had in his left side mantle fin. She got as close to the glass as possible, her fishbowl hitting up against the side. It must be him.

A mega phone interrupted Ingrid's thoughts.

"Everyone please gather round to learn about Victoria, our Great Pacific Octopus!" Ingrid looked around to see the source of the voice was a blonde man with an aquarium staff shirt and "Brad" name tag. A crowd was gathering around him and, with a last glance at the cuttlefish, Ingrid joined the crowd.

"Victoria here is the pickiest octopus to ever grace the aquarium's tanks. She will only eat crab. Nothing else. She only likes one keeper." Brad pointed to himself. "And she never comes out of her cave." People groaned and the crowd started to disperse.

"Wait," Brad tried to wave them back, but most people were already gone, disappointed they wouldn't see an octopus. Ingrid was the only one left.

Brad waved her over. "You can come closer."

As she approached, he grimaced, seeing the octopus head clearly for the first time. He composed himself before addressing her further.

"Victoria is being particularly stubborn. She's always stubborn, but more so today." He knelt down beside her tank. "Come a little closer. She won't hurt you."

Ingrid knelt down too, but kept her distance. She wasn't entirely sure she wanted to see Victoria.

“Come on.” Brad motioned her closer. She reluctantly slid in closer.

“Do you see her?” Brad pointed to the clump of tentacles under a fake rock overhang. Her eyes were hidden from sight. “Even though she won’t come out, doesn’t mean you can’t see her.”

Victoria shifted around lazily, revealing one of her eyes. Her eye turned in its socket and met Ingrid’s gaze. At that moment, she flew out of her cave and landed sucker side out on the glass. Her tentacles moved over the glass with such ferocity that Ingrid thought she might break the glass.

“I’ve never seen her act this way.” Brad sprung up, grinning from ear to ear. “I think she likes you.” When he turned around Ingrid was no longer there.

She ran into the bathroom and slammed the stall behind her. Her heart was nearly pounding out of her chest. Why had that scared her so much? She sat on the toilet and pulled her knees up to her chest. She watched one of her tentacles idly suck on the glass of her fish bowl.

She wasn’t sure how long she stayed like that, but it must have been a while because the loud speaker blared, “The aquarium will be closing in five minutes.” Ingrid didn’t move and eventually the bathroom lights turned off.

What am I doing, she thought. She got up and walked out of the bathroom. The aquarium was completely empty and dark except for the glow from the tanks. She walked towards the exit when one of her tentacles tapped on the glass.

“What?” she gurgled to it.

It tapped again and pointed towards the Staff Only door.

“No.” Ingrid kept walking. The tentacle kept tapping.

“I said no.”

The tentacle poked her in the eye.

“What is wrong with you?”

The tentacle pointed again at the door.

“Fine.” Ingrid looked around to double check the coast was clear and then snuck through the door.

She stepped into a room of walkways leading around the top of each giant aquarium tank. A soft blue glow emanated from each pool of water. The tentacle tapped on the glass leading Ingrid forward until they reached a tank that looked completely empty. The tentacle pointed down into the water.

“You want me to get inside?”

The tentacle gave her the equivalent of a thumbs up.

“No.” She looked down into the tank and saw a tentacle slowly reach out from behind a rock. It was Victoria’s tank. Ingrid’s heart started racing and she turned to leave when her tentacle slipped out from under the lip of the fish bowl. All the other tentacles joined in, forcing it off her head and tossing it into Victoria’s tank.

Ingrid tried to grab the bowl but missed and it quickly sank to the bottom of the enclosure. She looked at the troublemaker tentacle. “I hate you.” She hopped into the tank.



Ingrid landed on the bottom. Peebles floated through the water from the impact. She reached for the fishbowl as Victoria slid out from her hiding place and stopped in her tracks.

Victoria glided over to Ingrid, reaching out with all of her tentacles. Ingrid's lungs felt like rocks even though she was in the water. Victoria grabbed one of Ingrid's tentacles in hers. Ingrid gasped and jerked away.

Victoria approached again and reached out a single tentacle as if asking Ingrid to take it. Ingrid didn't move. Her heart beat so fast in her chest that she feared it would burst from her chest.

What was she even thinking climbing in here in the first place? This was such a stupid idea. Why couldn't she just be normal and stick to admiring the octopus from the outside? How was she going to get out? She was going to get stuck in here. She just knew it. This is where she would meet her watery end. Even though she could breathe perfectly fine underwater, she knew deep down in her soul that she was going to drown and the aquarium workers were going to have to deal with her body in the morning. Her heart beat harder and harder in her chest.

Victoria's tentacle was still outstretched, waiting. Ingrid swooshed her bandaged hand through the water to swat it away, but Victoria wrapped her tentacle around her wrist. Ingrid tried to pull away, but Victoria tighten her grip. It wasn't drowning that would end Ingrid. It was octo-cide.

As Ingrid further tried to loosen Victoria's grip, the troublemaker tentacle reached out and grabbed hold of one of Victoria's tentacles.

Yes, thought Ingrid. You got me into this mess, Troublemaker. You can get me out of it.

But Troublemaker didn't fight off the other cephalopod's grip. It pulled her further in until Ingrid was face to face with Victoria. The disembodied version of Ingrid's head was reflected back at her.

As she looked at Victoria, her heart slowed. Her mind stopped racing.

Victoria released Ingrid's wrist and with each free tentacle she grabbed one of Ingrid's. She gave each tentacle a little squeeze. The kind of squeeze from a reassuring hand hold or hug.

Ingrid let out a breath she didn't even realize she was holding in. The bubbles from her mouth rose and popped at the water's surface. Victoria released all of her tentacles and drifted back into the enclosure's rock cave. The tank looked as if she was never even there.

For just the briefest moment, Ingrid felt something other than bad. She wasn't sure what exactly. Just that she felt not bad.

#

One of Ingrid's favorite memories of Charlie was when he took her to a fancy sushi restaurant for their first anniversary. He still wanted to impress her. He ordered the calamari because he had never had it and tonight was a night for adventure. When it got to the table they both giggled as they poured soy sauce on the tentacle and watched it wiggle around like it was still alive.

He grabbed a tentacle and slipped it into his mouth, making a face she knew meant he wasn't enjoying it. He gave her a thumbs-up anyway. Ingrid grabbed a tentacle, forcing it onto her own thumb and gave him a thumbs-up back. He laughed so hard he started to choke. He almost turned blue, but not before she gave him the Heimlich.

The whole restaurant stared as the calamari was launched from his gullet, through the air, and hit the head chef square in the mouth. They weren't allowed back.

She knew then that she would never be able to let Charlie go.

#

As Ingrid walked back to her apartment, her clothes soaking wet from the aquarium, she felt the sensation of the air on her skin. She couldn't remember if the wind had always been there or if she had forgotten about its existence. Maybe the wind had forgotten about her.

She stood in a puddle on her bathroom floor, braiding her tentacles like she used to braid her hair. The troublemaker kept throwing the hair tie in the trash. She laughed to herself for the first time. She would miss that tentacle if it ever faded away.