

## The Squid

It sounds like a factory floor in here. Machines aren't making the sound, not really, but water isn't making it either. It's some unnatural child of the two—the sound of water being pushed, blocked, siphoned through turbines and metal. Pumps spew water into brown plastic tanks, where it idles, fluttering, strangely wind-swept in the still room.

Below, two elegant squid flit across the tank. I'm ashamed to admit it, because I studied biology, but I really have no idea what's propelling them. It seems impossible that these flimsy fins create the squid's confident speed. Far more likely that the squid's cone head holds a huge brain, capable of underwater teleportation.

"Got it." The graduate student I'm supposed to be interviewing strides back in with a smile and a pair of forceps. Rivka's thick Israeli accent makes her "got it" sound deeply concave. She trades her forceps for a net. "First, we have to catch the *squeed*." Of all the ways Hebrew echoes in her words, *squeed* is the most beautiful of all. Like a ripple of water with a stone dropped through, the sound expands, then collapses in on itself.

I am blissfully unaware of what is about to happen, happy just watching the strange animals' snap-quick movement away from her net. When I heard she was studying the giant axon of the squid *in vivo*, I took it literally. *In life*.

With a violent sigh, she herds one of them toward the tank wall. A patch of black fog rolls through the water, slipping through the mesh net. "You see, there is the ink!"

I am very excited by this. I have never seen a squid ink before.

She scoops one up. All that silence and speed erupts from the surface with a smash of water and a yank on the net. I can see its strength in Rivka's locked arms and braced legs. She makes a grab for it. Tentacles wheel through the air, meeting nothing. Rivka smiles triumphantly, holding it up by the head for my benefit.

She lays it down to go find her scissors. "It's changing color," I say.

"Oh? Yes look, it's camouflaging." Tiny points of brown appear across the squid's shining skin, until it matches the tank wall beneath.

But it cannot hide from Rivka. She finds it and lifts it into the air. Her scissors *snick* open.

I cover my eyes. Right before I do, I see the squid's eyes staring ahead, its tentacles searching frantically, its skin being overtaken by waves of color.

There's a noise—a hum that does not come from the machines. Maybe it's the blood rushing in my ears. Maybe it's something else. With a pair of red-handled scissors, Rivka cuts the squid in half.

The roar fills the room; a wave so tall it casts a shadow before it plummets to the shore, shattering like glass. We stand in the center of the churning water. Something—like a scream—pierces the air. A final shout of no, of never, of refusing to go. For a split-second, that is all I hear. Not the whirl of the room. Not the wet *schlick* of the blades.

Its eyes and tentacles drop into a plastic bucket. The water is sucked back out to sea. Without it, the room is silent, dripping wet and still now the storm has passed.

"You can look now," Rivka says. I do.

I watch her spread the squid's cone head on her dissecting table. "Is it hard for you to kill them?" I ask, barely able to push the words through my tight throat.

She says no, and doesn't say anything more. Perhaps I've offended her. She hits a switch, and a ring of light flickers under the squid, making its head transparent as dried Elmer's glue. She shows me the gills embedded in the rubbery flesh, and the slick white filament of the axon. In the center is the ink sac, a black pearl squeezed beneath the skin. She cuts it away and throws it into the bucket, where it lands with a plop in a wet pile.

Beside it, lying against the bucket's side, what remains of the squid is pulsing. Tiny movements shudder down its tentacles. They rise and fall perfectly in time, like breathing.

Rivka is guiding the long thread of the axon out of the squid's head, chatting happily. I should be taking notes for the article, but I can't listen. I watch the bottom half of the squid in the bucket, still gulping air. The silver eyes are huge and flat. I know eyes that big could seem to be looking anywhere. But right now it looks like they are staring at me.

That's when the squid comes back to life. The half-a-creature arches upward, like it's trying to climb up out of the bucket. The tentacles spread open, and the tiny black beak inside yawns wide. The eyes watch the sky, huge with longing. The squid opens, as if trying to draw a final breath.

My heart is hammering. For a moment, I believe it really has come back to life. It looks so human, arching its back toward heaven as the death rattle shakes the soul out of its ribs.

“Well, they can’t feel, you know,” Rivka says. I tear my face away from the bucket and point it at her. She’s been talking about other things for minutes now, and I don’t know why she’s suddenly returned to this. “They’re very smart. But they can’t feel.”

I try to watch her cut free the pulpy, stringy thing she needs for her research. But the head is still now, flabby and white. It has become no more interesting than Rivka’s forceps.

What’s left of the squid in the bucket has gone limp. The arching ended, and with it, the perfect symmetry of the arms. Now they lay flopped flaccid across the squid’s body. The eyes, listing sideways, don’t seem to be staring at anything anymore.

It’s still changing colors. The entire squid shimmers, like liquid bronze is running beneath its skin, pooling around its unblinking eyes and coursing through its tentacles. As long as I watch, the shimmering never stops. When the axon is finally ripped from the head and Rivka stands up, the squid is still blinking like a beacon down in the bucket. When we go, the cells are turning white to brown and back again, over and over, refusing to die. But dying anyway.