

## *Jellyfish*

Jasmine, who'd been distracted staring at the pitcher of Sapporo and shared plates on the table, looked up at her not-boyfriend Alex just in time to catch him popping one of his dad's dick pills into his mouth and winking at her.

He didn't need them. Not in the least. For months they'd been consistently fucking (unmedicated) three, four, five times a night, three, four, five times a week. The sex itself was consistent, efficient, even tender, albeit underwhelming. When he did take the pills it had nothing to do with functionality. They were meant to be erotic, to bring about the aura of sex, to compel her to sit in her chair in the low-grade white noise of this Japanese spot off St. Mark's and imagine what they would do that night. Moreover, they were meant to mechanize or automate the thing demanded of him during sex. To take the task of getting hard, however achievable and banal, out of his hands. To lend something transcendental or supernatural or unnatural to his erection. To make the fact and fluid of fucking inorganic and therefore amorous.

He'd taken the pills twice before with her, once on their first night together and again on Halloween. She understood the motivation for the former; she supposed making a first impression on a new body required him to prove himself a man before her, a stranger and therefore every woman. But on the latter occasion, Halloween, she'd considered the costumes, the rain, the running hand in hand from the party to his dorm erotic enough. He'd gotten hard even before he swallowed the small blue thing. Then and tonight she wasn't sure who the pills were for.

Not that medicating wasn't in character for Alex. While Jasmine's entire relationship with pharmaceuticals consisted of a low dose of Adderall here and there to make it through a paper or final, the dozens of pill bottles lining Alex's shelf were no secret. Almost every night she watched

him pop tranquilizers before bed. She knew medication was part of his schtick, the appendage of a neuroticism she found sexy. The pills also granted her a degree of emotional independence from him: as long as he continued to tinker with his medication in search of wholeness or completion or whatever, she remained unaffected by his projections. The pills, and thus his moods, were not her problem.

He rolled a cigarette and paid the bill. The server pointed at his bag of tobacco, *nice*, and with that they, a three-month kind-of couple, were once again seen from the outside, the relevance of their positionality to each other displaced. They stayed unified walking arm in arm down the avenues, stealing kisses when momentarily unseen in dark alleys to remind themselves of the fact of being in public. Upon entering the lobby of his building he grabbed and held her from behind, turning them both towards a large unframed mirror. They watched their reflection, a totem pole, his eyes ten inches above hers, the sleeves of his oversized white parka wrapped around her knit black sweater, the hollows of their cheeks aligned. “We look good,” he grinned. Jasmine took his hand and led him to the elevator.

She was pinned between him and the ladder of his childhood bunk bed when she felt him suddenly exit her and collapse on the bottom bunk, flushed and erect, eyes unseeing. “Whoa,” Jasmine slunk beside him. “Are you alright?”

She could tell just watching his chest that his heart was contracting too fast and his breath was quick and shallow. “I just nee- I just need a break,” his eyes rolled to the back of his head.

Jasmine propped herself up on her elbow. “Okay, but like,” she paused, cupping his cheek in her hands and turning his face towards her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he closed his eyes and shook his head. “The pills were just a little much, I think.”

“Okay, well do you mind if I, like, keep going?” She tried not to stare at his erection.

He opened his eyes and grinned, “Why, were you close?”

“Kind of,” she lied.

“Maybe I can just hang out inside you while you touch yourself?”

Jasmine paused. She’d been asked to do this by another boy, two years ago. Not asked – forced. She’d hated it. But there was something so disarming about Alex’s condition; no part of her was scared of the boy handicapped by his father’s ED meds. Besides, they’d had a great evening and she liked him and there was no sense in ruining the whole thing by getting in her own head about his request. So she pulled him on top of her, smiling as she pushed his torso away from hers, creating space between them into which she slid her arm. She touched herself systematically, mindfully following her interior intuition, taking her time to let the end come close and slip out of her grasp again and again. Alex’s presence, the weight of his body and gaze all over her, was titillating but superfluous. The eroticism, that aura of sex, was shared, but the sex itself was distinctly hers. She sped up her motions, arching her back and grinding her pubic bone against his.

She watched his eyes widen as her muscles around him contracted. When she came she felt the release of her dramatic muscular undulation working against his body, knowing her heart beat on his cock just as it always did on her fingers. But then the slack-jawed, paralyzed look on his face reminded Jasmine she’d never come as hard with him as with herself. Thrilled, she watched him, entrapped, succumb. All at once she felt him fall all the way on top of her, thrust into her, and hit his head against the bed frame. For just one moment she, or maybe they both, wondered if his heart

might explode as he capitulated upon her completion. She threw her limbs around him and took slow, deep breaths, hoping he would do the same. With a dopey expression plastered on his face, he pulled his head back, and she laughed at the cord of drool stretching to his lips from behind her ear.

Of course, the scene was all she could masturbate to for months after. Nearly every time she'd touch herself she would reconstruct his gaze in her mind, measuring the pulse and squeeze of her relief against her imagination of his phantom appendage. She'd close her eyes and picture his widening.

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Once she'd asked him if he could ever feel the strings of her IUD during sex. The epiphany crossed his face, brows raising and eyes widening. She'd phrased it coyly, as if to give the impression that probing her birth canal was an accomplishment, a feat of exploration. As if the plastic which protruded from and swaddled her cervix was the freshly discovered edge of what was hidden inside her, innate to her and unknowable to him. But really she'd just wanted to remind herself of the device implanted in the part of her he would never reach: the final defense in the citadel of her interiority, negating any search and destroy aspect of his sexuality. To remind herself of the plastic now leaking hormones which granted her absolute freedom from the fear of growing and birthing his, or anyone's, unwanted, parasitic child. Conception was off the table yet its basic mechanics were still required of him; when he would exhaust himself inside her, the gob of refuse posed a threat to only the bedding. This was the sexiest thing to her.

She was eighteen when she'd gone to her mother's gynecologist, Dr. Liu, to get the thing inserted. Jasmine had never so much as entertained the possibility of unprotected sex, but nothing scared her more than getting pregnant, and she figured this would be a body modification not unlike

the beloved piercings adorning the thick parts of her ear: a chance to conquer pain and customize her body to prove herself her own sovereign. The gyno hadn't wanted to do it. *She's young, you know? This is kind of an extreme option..* Her mother pushed back, telling the doc about all the complications Jasmine had had with the pill, and how *she* had an IUD and it worked just fine so if her daughter wanted one she would get it.

Dr. Liu was beautiful in the youthful, healthy way people in California pull off in middle age, slick shiny hair and clear eyes. Her looks comforted Jasmine. When Dr. Liu held out a Kyleena in one palm and Mirena in the other, Jasmine could only notice that her own hands were more wrinkled than the doctor's. She was thinking exclusively of how to preserve her body as Dr. Liu had when she realized she had chosen the Mirena.

Jasmine laid back and slipped her naked, clammy feet into the stirrups, feeling the metal leech the warmth from her skin upon first touch. Dr. Liu handed her a lollipop, told her sugar helps with fainting, told her to grab her mom's hand, told her the speculum was going in, told her she was opening the speculum. Then she watched the doctor hold up an extra long q-tip, telling her it was time to measure the depth of her uterus. Jasmine stared at the white tile ceiling and tried to imagine herself in a fluorescent world, a faraway reality free from the terrible pinch she felt between her belly button and her spine. Dr. Liu was highly skilled and the insertion couldn't have taken more than ten seconds. Quick, but more than enough time to alert Jasmine to the existence of an organ left previously undisturbed. A brief pain like nothing she'd known.

She bled straight for a month or two after, then not again for four years. At first she'd loved the device unconditionally, relished being totally liberated from the threat of an unwelcome fetus breaking her body to birth itself. But after a few years the thing just became another breach of her

interiority, a foreign apparatus, a plastic tourist leaking hormones into the ripe lining of a part of her she could never see.

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Eleven months into whatever she and Alex were doing, they'd sunk into domestic patterns of comfort, homey nights in, for the most part content in each other's company. One night at his place uptown Criterion wasn't working on the projector, so they scrapped their plans to watch some Fassbinder slog he'd been going on about, deciding instead on *Fat Girl* (directed by a *woman* and available on three of the streaming platforms to which he subscribed). Both his roommates joined, silhouettes filling the reclining chairs on either side of the medicinal-smelling brown leather couch upon which Jasmine now sat. They intimidated her, his roommates, well-read, worldly and wordy Columbia undergrads too loud to realize she was smarter than them. The apartment was nebbish and masculine: chess sets and French literature, walls bisected by refined wooden lines, shades and shades of brown. Suddenly worried she could be in their favorite spot, Jasmine abandoned her post on the right arm of the couch, opting instead to set her head on Alex's chestplate. From this disadvantageous viewpoint, however, the subtitles were blocked by his hookah. She tried to follow along anyway.

At the image of a pubescent child, maybe barely fourteen, rolling her kohl-rimmed eyes, one roommate sat up, kissed his fingers, and, walking out of the room, obstreperously proclaimed, "There's nothing like a French woman sitting at a cafe!"

Jasmine, the only one to react, rolled her eyes. She ignored it but it upset her. She tried not to let her head lay too heavy on Alex's bones. She tried not to move too much. She tried getting high. Projected onto the wall was the moving image of the child naked in bed with a college-aged

man, the image of her pushing him away, the subtitles telling a story of manipulation and coercion. She went to the bathroom.

When she came back the camera was now watching the titular character, the fat girl, listening to the naked child scream as she was penetrated. Jasmine returned to the right side of the couch, drew her knees to her chest, laid her right cheek on the perfumed leather armrest, and began to cry easy tears into the pillow. She didn't want to watch or hear that, a fact of a feeling which embarrassed her. So she left again. But to reach Alex's room she had to cross the stream of projected light, the source of which was rendered invisible to her by what it expelled. She could sense what the boys must have seen: the optics of the visually implied rape, now splayed over her body, permitting them to conceptualize what she had no choice but to intuit. She could also sense what they could not see, the shadow she cast on the scene. As the child cried out in pain the sound moved through Jasmine and tightened the knot below her stomach.

She reached the bedroom, threw her glasses down, pressed her face into the dark of the mattress (she wasn't wearing any mascara; his white bedding would remain unblemished), and felt the space under her eyes grow hot and wet. Jasmine felt her body shake and lose form, her conceptual and emotional autonomy suddenly lost to the archetypal sensation. She heard the movie pause and thought she saw Alex come in and maybe ask her something. Though she understood completely what she felt, there wasn't any way, nor any need, to verbally convey this emotion to him, or at least to do so under any pretense of objectivity. That is, she couldn't and wouldn't explain it. She had lost her voice. Speaking into the pillow, she told him she needed a minute. She could feel him hedge in the doorframe, frozen. Jasmine lifted her face, exposing to him her contorted

expression, her red puffy eyes, the too-muchness of the flow of tears. Swallowing something acidic, “Please, just give me a minute.”

The next morning they had sex upon waking; she didn’t *not* want to. He tried to make her come and she tried to let herself come but then, right there at the crucial moment, muscles tightening and heart rate quickening, she stopped feeling her body, started feeling herself as an absence under his weight, maybe part of the mattress even, maybe above herself, above the both of them. She felt him move fast and deliberate inside her, grab her by the hips, a quiet rigor mortis, a whimpery return to birth. There wasn’t room for the both of them in there.

While he confronted whatever small death, whatever womb-tomb nightmare, she felt no pleasure or pain, a soft unfeeling, an unfeared disengagement. Later she asked him if he felt distance growing between them, too, or was she just being crazy?

A week later, as he was breaking up with her, Jasmine summoned the courage to reveal she’d faked it almost every time. Three weeks later, she’d see him again, and he would tell her he hadn’t wanted to touch her enough to make her come. Even though she knew he was lying, she would later find herself squeezing the fat deposits on her thighs and hips, wondering what it could be that made her unfuckable.

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Before dating Alex, who’d grown up there, Jasmine had really only ever spent time in NoLita doing clinic defense outside Old St. Patrick’s. Every Sunday worshippers would walk the three blocks to the Bleecker Street Planned Parenthood and spend hours outside the entrance displaying their most predictable propaganda, the bloodstained open palms or winged corpses of poppyseed



fetuses. The coalition Jasmine joined tried to slow their walk, barricading the sidewalks and pushing slogans from their throats, clear and loud. Those early Sunday mornings were Jasmine's first introduction to real protests, the kind where the cops pick a side (not hers). The first time she'd gotten lost in the crowd, losing the distinction between her edges and the people around her falling over their ankles in the slow-moving mass, the people yanked aside and zip-tied, the people singing jubilantly to drown the macabre gregorian bullshit coming from the other side.

Men in grey robes with beards to their chests would lead the anti-abortion group, forcing their six-foot-tall crosses like scythes through the pro-choice mass. Jasmine sometimes found herself face to face with the men. They were less terrifying from up close, the superb machine of their imperial Catholic bureaucracy negated the second she noted the terror in their eyes. There was no mistaking the painful furrowing of their brows. It could have been nothing but fear. Fear of her, fear of the ragtag team of hungover kids squaring up against the threat of arrest or violence in the name of abortion rights.

Of course, part of her wanted babies, dreamt of the delivery room, of her mother at her side, of the push, of the sparagmos and reconstruction of her body. But she'd be damned before she'd let them invent a sky-cult which protected themselves from the dreadful bounty of nature while subjugating women to its awesome violence, all because they were scared of that most natural belly-magic.

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Jasmine hadn't expected that being raped would be so boring. Of course it was terrifying, degrading, gruesome, soul-stealing and embarrassing before it was boring. But it was still pretty boring. It wasn't like it was some new kind of pain like her IUD insertion was. None of the people

who had stolen her had ever said anything particularly fucked up or notable to her during or after. Once she'd bled a color she'd never seen before, but that was about it.

Maybe the most interesting time had been the last, a year before she'd met Alex. A girl, that was unlike the other times. A very pretty girl at that, with soft blonde hair to her waist, a Hello Kitty obsession-cum-fetish, and a reputation at Barnard that preceded her.

And it had been in public, too – that wasn't like the other times. The girl had taken Jasmine to Ocean Beach, at the western edge of San Francisco proper where a two-lane highway separated the salt-rotting Victorians from the sand dunes and verbena. They'd stripped to their swimsuits and laid three feet apart, closing their eyes and turning the delicate skin of their faces into the sunlight. At some point the girl had collapsed the space between them and kissed Jasmine, who kissed her back. She took Jasmine's hand in her own, to which Jasmine had said *no, not here, no*, but still she'd guided Jasmine's hand and commanded her to *stay*. Every time Jasmine tried to pull her hand away: *stay*. So Jasmine sunk into it, going through the motions of sex while turning her head away to watch the violent and undulant Pacific. It was windy and the girl's long hair moved around them like the waves. That was the part Jasmine found interesting.

When it was over she shuffled down the sand dunes towards the water, her weight displacing the coagulated grains with each blistering step. She passed a dozen-odd other parties, families with small children and men without homes, ostensibly all at this beach to feel close to the same ocean she did. Jasmine approached the surf and bent over, swirling her hands in the freezing seawater. It was humiliating, and she hoped the girl was too ambivalent about it all to watch her from the dune.

It was then that Jasmine noticed jellyfish lining the shoreline: hundreds of gobs of translucent albumen drying at the mercy of the sun, chthonian and placental. Even posthumously

they posed the threat of a unique kind of pain, the feel of a sting unknown to Jasmine. She tried to place their visceral familiarity before realizing these creatures were not unlike clear versions of the uterine shreds she used to pass on the fourth day of her periods, back before her IUD had dried them up. Watching them, ankles and wrists still submerged in the sparkling saltwater, Jasmine began to feel an empathic hysteria well up in her throat, analogous to the force of the crashing water maybe, either way, a consuming, unbound will to destruction. There was no dignity for these jellyish in dying only to become sun-bleached corpses. She wished the poor creatures could be dissolved. She wished she could be dissolved, holding her breath and moving flaccid under waves until it all washed off of her.

She knew it was time to stand up, turn around, wipe the tears from her eyes. She held her head high as she walked east, ignoring the dreadful pull of the Pacific behind her. If she had known better she wouldn't have feared the ocean in that moment. She would have realized its vortex was sublimely eternal and, more importantly, absolutely oblivious. She could have abandoned her selfhood to a force of nature which had no interest in it. She could have stepped outside of herself without being taken. She could have learned that there were bigger things to feel than control.