

## Cephalopod

I was once an octopus. I woke one morning to find a complete cephalopod, eight legs and all, where my head should have been. The tentacles lay on my shoulders like a mane of slimy hair, the mucus membrane soaking through my pajamas. Maybe the octopus had crawled into my bed in the middle of the night and slipped its mouth around my head. I put my hands around the body and pulled as hard as I could, but my hands slid right off the slippery skin.

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. I never noticed when my lungs were working, but I sure noticed when they weren't. I felt around for the octopus's gills and found them sealed shut. I needed to open them. I needed air. I tried sticking them under the tub faucet, hoping they would open, but to no avail. I forgot octopuses needed salt water.

I ran down the street toward the beach as fast as I could, tentacles flapping behind me in the wind. I was sure a few non-tentacled, human heads turned as I passed.

Without any grace or dignity whatsoever, I fell face first into the rushing waves.

Never had I felt such ecstasy as when those gills sputtered to life.

But that ecstasy was soon replaced with fear. The tentacles started dragging me across the ocean floor. I tried to pry the octopus off me once again, but my hands just slipped off its mushy head. The monster had suctioned itself to me in the middle of the night, tried to suffocate me, and was now taking me to my watery grave.

Suddenly, the tentacles stopped dragging me. I looked around. A gray sun filtered through gray water, hitting gray sand. Everything was gray. Had everything been gray this whole time? I reached for the octopus's eyes, sure what I was thinking was wrong. I poked an eye and reeled back in pain. These were my eyes, my gills, my tentacles.

The only time I left the house was to collect salt water to fill up my tub. I couldn't let my octopus head out of the water for more than a few minutes or I risked suffocation.

On my trips down to the beach, I hid my head under a blanket so no one would see. I brought along a few squirt guns filled with salt water to keep my skin moist on the way. By the end of each trip, I'd have two buckets of water, two empty squirt guns, and a soaking wet blanket. It took five trips to fill the tub up completely. Once I got back I would just lay there in the water.

But I soon grew sick of just sitting there. Over the next few weeks I designed a fish bowl helmet so I could try and go outside. I ordered all the parts I needed online and waited in the tub until they arrived.

Many of the early versions, sprung leaks and soaked my clothes and any furniture I happened to be sitting on. It took me a few weeks to finally figure it out. If I was going to be an octopus, I was going to do it right.

Most of my experiments to create an octopus-sustaining helmet failed. My apartment suffered quite a bit of water damage. If I knew if my landlord found me I would surely be kicked out, but once I had a functioning, leak-proof helmet, I didn't care.

I slipped the final helmet on, filled it with water, and looked in the mirror. Some of my tentacles suctioned themselves to the glass. Others explored curiously. Others sat idly by. I still wasn't used to seeing my head as a sea creature, but at least I could keep myself alive outside of the tub.

#

I called out from work indefinitely for medical reasons - called out being a figurative phrase considering I could no longer speak as an octopus.

On my first day back, I felt like I might throw up. I wasn't sure if my octopus form could even throw up. During my time in the bathtub I learned octopuses have three hearts in their bodies. I figured that meant I now had four. And every single one of them was pumping as hard and as fast as they could when I walked through the door.

I wore a gaudy, frilly, paisley blouse hoping it would distract from the tentacles and the glass globe encompassing my head. But when I stepped into the office it was as if nothing had changed.

"Welcome back, Ingrid," said Steve from accounting. He kept walking as if my long brown hair hadn't been replaced by suckers.

"I hope you're feeling better," said Margery from sales. "I love that blouse."

I stood there, dumbfounded. Finally, I walked to my desk. A bouquet of "Get Well" tulips sat in an arrangement. I had no idea what color they were.

#

My 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 I met him, he fell into my lap. I was laying in the sand, he tripped over a pile of seaweed, and his eye went straight into my knee. We both howled in pain. I thought he had dislocated my knee. He thought he wouldn't be able to see again.

We went to the emergency room together. Delusional with pain, we became friends. We learned that we both liked sushi, but didn't love it. We both loved orchids because they reminded

us of strange sea creatures. And every time we visited the beach, we both secretly hoped we'd see a dead, washed-up animal.

We were taken to separate rooms, patched up, and parted ways. But over the next few months, we stayed friendly. And got even friendlier. And even friendlier. We finally got so friendly that after three years Charlie took me down to the dock, got down on one knee and pulled out a ring with a pearl instead of a diamond. He thought a pearl would be much more beautiful because a living being produced it.

He was so nervous he didn't wait for my response. He grabbed my hand, but as he was about to put the ring on my finger, he dropped it. Through the slats in the wooden dock it went, lost to the sea forever. His face fell as far as the ring.

I said yes to the question he never even asked.

Charlie's been dead for two years.

#

After a week back at work, everything started to feel normal again. I barely even remembered that my head wasn't human. I made copies as usual. I answered phone calls as usual. I went to lunch with Katherine and Jason as usual. It was a little harder to eat than normal with a fish bowl on my head, but I made due.

But whenever I went to the bathroom, I'd catch myself in the mirror. My octopus eyes would stare back at me instead of my human ones. I think my human eyes were green, but it had been so many weeks since I'd seen anything in color that I wasn't sure.

If an octopus could cry, I would have. Instead my slimy skin just changed different shades of gray.

#

How was I supposed to brush my teeth as an octopus? I stood in my bathroom one morning holding my toothbrush, realizing that I hadn't used it in about a month.

I carefully took off my fish bowl and set it in the bathtub. I had to be quick so I wouldn't dry out. I dipped the brush into the salt water, squeezed out some toothpaste, and headed toward my beak. Before the bristles made contact, one of my tentacles grabbed the brush out of my hand and flung it right into the toilet.

Charlie once told me that an octopus's brain was located around its esophagus. It wasn't very large so there was also a vast neural network in each tentacle, which led many scientists to believe the tentacles might have minds of their own. Did that tentacle have a mind of its own? Did I have an octopus brain around my esophagus? Where was my human brain?

I fished the toothbrush out of the toilet and threw it away.

#

After Charlie's death, I had a hard time relating to men. I tried meeting people online, but none of them ever worked out. Almost all of them would say something off-putting in the first few minutes of meeting. One man in particular asked me if I wanted to see the extra toe that was growing out of his back. I stopped the online dating soon after that. It was best to not even try as an octopus.

And then I met Jeff. He accidentally backed his shopping cart into me at the grocery store. His clumsiness reminded me of Charlie. I couldn't resist. I took him home with me.

Like my coworkers, he didn't seem to notice the eight extra arms or the globe around my head. He kissed the fish bowl as if he was kissing my mouth. I couldn't kiss him back, but he didn't seem to care. I didn't care either. We wrapped ourselves around each other in a messy ball of human and cephalopod.

Suddenly, I was overcome with a desire to eat Jeff. This strange human courtship had awakened a carnal octopus instinct in me. My salt water helmet came off. I'm not sure when. I'm not sure which one of us took it off. I didn't even notice at first. My tentacles explored Jeff on their own, tasting his skin with their suckers, ready to strangle him. He tasted like freshly minced crab. My instinct went into overdrive.

One tentacle, the same one that threw my toothbrush, wrapped itself around his neck. Jeff still kissed my octopus form, not seeming to care about the pressure around his throat. He was probably into some kinky stuff. However, as the tentacle squeezed harder, he started turning blue. Or at least I imagine he was blue. I couldn't tell.

He gasped for air. So did I. When my helmet came off all the water spilled onto my bed. I let my tentacle slip from around his neck. My gills desperately needed water.

I pulled Jeff's gasping body off my bed and tossed him into the hall, locking the door behind me. I ran to the bathroom just in time to pour my emergency supply of salt water into my gills, collapsing onto the floor. I don't know how long I laid there. My thoughts drifted to Charlie, but I couldn't focus. I needed to breathe.

Through the bathroom door, I could see Jeff's clothes lying next to my bed. He was walking home naked.

#

About two months into my fishy existence, I visited my parents. I hadn't seen them in more than a year. I didn't like them much anymore. Every time I saw them, they found something new that was wrong with me. I stopped visiting altogether after Dad told me I was his most disappointing child.

Mom called me one morning to ask if I'd be coming to her birthday brunch. She and Dad planned one every year. I agreed so I wouldn't be more of a disappointment.

Throughout the hour-long bus ride to their house, I tried to think of ways to disguise my new form. My parents picked out the tiniest of faults. What they would say about my face? I tried tying my jacket around my fishbowl helmet to hide, but it was too small. I would have to go as is.

I rang the doorbell. Mom answered.

She paused.

I was sweating.

She smiled and pulled me inside. She asked about my trip up and showed me what they'd made and told me who would and wouldn't be coming.

When I reached the living room, Dad was plopped down in front of the TV. I said hello. He didn't look up.

Everything was the same for them.

I sat through brunch quietly slipping one tentacle out of the bottom of my helmet to bring pieces of a salmon omelet to my beak.

#

I started volunteering at the aquarium on the weekends. They gave me a polo shirt that I assume was blue to fit with the ocean theme. I got a shiny new name tag, embossed with "Ingrid."

Because I still couldn't speak as an octopus, I put on my volunteer application that I was mute. It wasn't a problem to the aquarium. They trained me briefly, gave me a pamphlet and a wipe board so I could communicate with people.

It wasn't a hard job, and, for the most part, I enjoyed it. I was treated just like my normal, human self. I was mostly ignored like all the other volunteers. Maybe I wasn't even an octopus. Maybe I had always been an octopus. I was almost beginning to believe that my appearance was normal. That is, until I met Victoria.

#

Victoria the Great Pacific octopus was known as the pickiest creature to ever grace the aquarium's tanks. She would only eat crab. Nothing else. She only liked one keeper, Brad. And she often hid from guests whenever they walked by her tank.

One day after my shift, I passed by her enclosure. Brad was crouched outside the tank, peering in. He heard me approach and turned to see who it was.

He welcomed me and gave me a hug. I hadn't hugged anyone since the bedroom incident with Jeff. It was nice. He told me that Victoria was being particularly stubborn today and wouldn't come out of her cave to eat. I knelt down next to Brad. My human heart pounded loudly in my chest. My octopus hearts pounded loudly in my head. I wasn't sure why. Brad motioned for me to get even closer. I scooted in a little more.

Brad pointed to the clump of tentacles under a fake rock overhang. Victoria shifted around lazily, revealing one of her eyes. It turned in its socket and met mine. At that moment, she flew out of her cave and landed sucker side out on the glass. Her tentacles moved over the surface with such ferocity that I thought she might break it.

Brad was saying something about how he'd never seen her act this way and how she must really like me. He seemed practically giddy, but I couldn't pay attention to him. I stared at Victoria, and she stared back at me.

#



Soon I was removed from my normal volunteer post in front of the penguin exhibit to Victoria's tank, where hordes of people came to see the never-before-active-but-now-incredibly-active octopus. Brad said he'd never seen her stay out of her cave for so long. It wasn't typical behavior by any means, but it was better she remained interested otherwise she might get bored and try to escape. It had happened before.

Whenever the crowds would die down and it would just be me and Victoria she would turn her eyes to meet mine. At first, I thought she might want to eat me the same way I wanted to eat Jeff. But the longer I was around her, the more I knew that wasn't true. Her eyes were so similar to the ones that I had grown accustomed to in the mirror. It felt nice looking at my eyes on someone else.

I would come in early to see Victoria before guests arrived and stay late after the aquarium closed just so I could be alone with her. We would just look at each other. If I'd been able to smile, I would have.

#

Charlie took me to a fancy sushi restaurant for our first anniversary. He still wanted to impress me. He ordered the calamari because he had never had it and tonight was a night for adventure. When it got to the table we both giggled as we 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 I knew meant he wasn't enjoying it. He gave me a thumbs-up anyway. I grabbed a tentacle, forcing it onto my own thumb and gave him a thumbs-up back. He laughed so hard he started to choke. He almost turned blue, but not before I gave him the Heimlich.

The whole restaurant stared as the calamari launched from his gullet, through the air, and hit the head chef square in the mouth.

I knew then that I wanted to marry Charlie.

#

Victoria died suddenly one night. I got a call from Brad. Victoria slipped out of her tank when no one was looking. The tank had been octopus-proofed so many times, but Victoria had found the chink in the armor. Brad found her lying on the floor when he came in the next morning. It was unfortunate, but Victoria was smart and they weren't surprised.

I wasn't sure what to say. I hung up prematurely. Brad called me back a couple times. He left a voicemail saying they were going to have a small "remembrance party" for her and I was invited. He wanted me to give him a call back if I wanted to come. I didn't call him back. I don't know how I ended up there, but I found myself sitting in my bathtub fully clothed. There was about an inch of saltwater in the bottom that soaked through my jeans. I wasn't sure how long I was in there. Would Victoria have liked living in a bathtub?

#

My tentacles were restless. As I wrote a routine email, the toothbrush-stealing-tentacle slipped out the back of my helmet. My mind was so numbed by the glare of the computer screen, I didn't notice at first. It must have been searching around on my desk because the next thing I knew, a stapler was flying through the air. It hit Johnson right in the forehead.

"What the heck, Ingrid?" He rubbed his forehead.

All my coworkers turned toward me. There were so many eyes. Looks of confusion. Glares of disgust. I imagined this is what it would have felt like had my coworkers recognized what I was on my first day back. But this was somehow worse. I got up and walked out the door.

#

I walked down to the beach to collect my weekly ration of salt water. I stood at the water's edge for a while. Small waves lapped at my ankles. I don't remember what I thought about. Nothing perhaps.

But soon, I was overcome by the impulse to rip my helmet off and dive right into the sea. I did just that. I didn't even bother taking off my already wet jeans.

I swam as fast, far, and deep as I could, eventually settling myself onto the ocean floor. Everything was still gray like the first time, but I barely noticed now. A few fish swam past me. My stomach growled. I forgot to eat after the news of Victoria. Instinctually, I reached out with my tentacles to catch a fish, but I was too slow. I wasn't much of a hunter.

I pushed my hands through the sand to see if I could find something. I wasn't sure what I thought I'd find. I wasn't sure why I was doing it in the first place. I could have surfaced and eaten something at home. But I was compelled to stay.

My hand hit something. A clam. I ripped it open, channeling the contents into my beak.

I didn't notice the pearl until I coughed it up. A few chunks of clam floated out with it. One of my tentacles caught it, and I pulled it free from a sucker. I rolled the opalescent ball along the palm of my hand. It was just like the pearl Charlie tried to give me and lost to the sea forever. Part of me hoped it was the same one. He would have laughed about my transformation. He would have loved it even. I clutched the pearl, staring out into the vastness of the ocean. He never got to see it. It was beautiful.

My tentacles floated freely around me as if they weren't there at all.

#

That night, I awoke suddenly unable to breath. My lungs were on fire. It felt like the time I almost drowned in the swimming pool at Aunt Carol's when I was 10. My lungs filled with so much water I thought I was surely dead.

I rolled out of my bed, unable to stand, hitting the floor with a hard thud. I clawed at my helmet, trying desperately to hold my breath. I couldn't understand what was happening to my gills.

After some struggle, I finally yanked off the fish bowl. Salt water pooled around me as I coughed up on the floor. I was breathing air.

Confused, I felt around for my gills. I couldn't find them. Or the tentacles. Or any sea creature-like parts. I felt the foreign peaks and valleys of my face as I wobbled to the bathroom. When I got there a green-eyed woman with sopping wet, brown hair stared back at me. I felt nauseous at the sight of her. At the sight of me. I wanted to see my tentacles again, but they were gone.

I pulled at my hair searching for suckers. My fingers caught in a knot and my breath stuck in my throat. It was just hair. My plain, old, regular hair. I should have smiled at that, but I didn't. I wasn't sure I knew how to smile anymore. I wasn't even sure what my teeth looked like.

I looked into my green eyes, shocked by how green they were. They didn't feel like mine. I was seeing too many colors. I already missed the gray.