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A SMACK OF JELLIES  
JOE B. SILLS



Phil finds that bamboo sword in his basement, he beats it against a tree in his yard, he's laughing, he says he's sorry.

"Wanna try?" He asks, he holds out the sword.

No.

"You mad or something?"

No. Do you at least know where she went?

"Who cares?" He brings the sword back over his shoulder, it meets his neck, it meets his sweat, he lets it go. Bark splatters against our jeans. "She'll be back soon. Really."

Phil, I went to the police.

"Right, so you're mad. Look, I really thought I told you."

You forgot.

"Okay, fine, here, take the bamboo. Hit me as hard as you want, but not in the face and not in the balls, okay? Okay?" He nods happily.

Okay. Thanks. My fingers, they're squeezing into the leather handle, they're bobbing the sword up and down, they're understanding its weight. I crack Phil in the face and forgive him. Thanks, Phil. I do feel better, thank you. You alright?

Phil presses his forehead into the ground, knees tucked into his abdomen. He murmurs something, oozing sound into the grass.

Hey Phil. You alright? Phil?

Three months later he buys a dagger, says hey look at this, he stabs that tree.

The blade is rusted and there's a lion carved in the handle and Phil says dude it's gotta be from Thailand or somewhere.

Phil was right. Ruth comes back, she comes back filthy and cooks me pasta, she takes a shower. She walks up the porch, doesn't knock, she's filthy, I tell her to come sit down and she doesn't. She makes me dinner. I tell her that she is fine, just fine, and she agrees, "Yeah, I'm fine."

You're fine.

"I'm fine."

I went to the police.

"Why?" She slides the plate towards me, the ceramic grinds against dust.

Ruth, I say. I stand up and take her arms and I say her name, feel the mud in the shirt she's wearing. Is this my shirt? I wonder. She's biting into my lips. I think it's my shirt. I just say her name and go to the police again, I fill out more forms, I buy her that fishing pole she wanted. She doesn't even know how to fish. Never learned. I break it against my shin. She's sucking on my neck. And later, when Phil buys that dagger, she leaves again. It has a lion carved in the handle, the metal is brown and its edges are crumbling, he stabs that same tree and wants to know what happened.

"Well did you at least find her? What did I miss?" He stands on his toes and slashes through a leaf. "Dude, you should've fucked Dana. You fucked her, right? I mean, she had a cute face. You must've fucked her."

I went to the police. She's tugging at my hair. I just say her name, fingers recalling the shirt's texture, yeah, it's definitely my shirt. God, it's ruined. It's full of grainy streaks. I say Ruth, her name, don't do that again. Okay?

"Don't do what?" She's taking off my pants.

Phil says yeah, you fucked Dana. He says I must've fucked her, that there's no conceivable way in which I could not have fucked Dana.

No, Phil. I never fucked Dana. I went to the airport.

Dana drives me there, but we arrive too early, we look at each other over the roof of her car and ask well whatya want to do? So we go to the aquarium, that's what we do, we ogle over a jellyfish exhibit.

We're waiting in line for tickets.

I tell Dana. I tell her that there are too many kids here.

She whispers back, just above the hum of the crowd. She's so goddamn shy.

"When does your flight leave?"

About an hour I think. Are there always this many kids around?

She shrugs and a double-decker stroller squeaks past, leaned against by a worn man, he shuffles his feet, it holds two, pink, whiny faces.

We share a cigarette. We share a hot dog.

I can't have kids.

"Me too."

I'm going to live in seclusion.

"Me too."

It's horrifying, all these clueless parents with their shrieking little children.

"Yeah. I know. Ooh. I feel real gross." Hiccup. Hiccup. "When does your flight leave?" She stuffs the hot dog in my hand, we go inside and stare at jellyfish, I kiss her neck, she drives me to the airport, says she'll probably move to Connecticut, I think it was Connecticut, before I get back.

Maybe you could come visit sometime?

"Yeah, maybe," she whispers. "I'm gonna throw up, but good luck with your friend, okay? Have fun in Iceland." She weaves away, one hand over her mouth.

I woke up on the plane, I was so thirsty.

Ruth, I say, just her name, with my fingers in her shoulders and my lips by her ear. You're fine.

"I'm fine."

You're all dirty.

"I know."

Are you wearing my shirt?

"Possibly."

I don't think you're fine.

She makes me pasta, she's pulling me into the shower, she's fine. Don't do what, she asks. She leaves for Iceland, she tells Phil, not me. He buys a dagger at a

garage sale, stabs his trees with it, says oh yeah, definitely from Thailand, what do you think man?

The light in the aquarium was squeezed through glass and water and glass. Too dim to see. I groped against the walls, my palms slid down the tanks, Dana took my hand. Okay, I thought. We fell into an empty corner. Our heads thumped against a tank. We turned. We observed. A jellyfish floated, inches away. It bobbed, took its time. Rubbed against the glass, took its time. I began to think practically, in lists: the nine-hour flight, the rented car, the ridiculous search, no, I don't need any one of those. So I kissed Dana's neck. She turned. Didn't smile. Nothing. And then she asked me, What? What?

A mother diffused towards us. She stood at my side, a tiny head pressed into her fat shoulder, it's red, it's made of skin, it's screaming, it sucks in air, it's screaming, "I wanna be a jelly! I wanna be a jelly!"

I wanna be a jelly.

I walk into the kitchen and say hi, where's Phil?

And Ruth says "Hey I can't get this fucker open," her hair shaking angrily over a corkscrew.

I can't either, so we call Phil over. He was filling up water balloons in the bathroom and is waiting to ambush us, it's such great plan, he refuses to come out from behind the couch. He comes out. He grabs the bottle and breaks its neck over the counter, drinks half of it right there to impress us, swallows some glass, gets the x-ray framed, saves the shards in another bottle on the windowsill. My stomach feels weird he says. Ruth widens her eyes, takes a half-step towards him. Her hands out. We leave him on the stretcher, asleep with needles in his arms. We get breakfast. Pancakes.

She snorts a chunk of cantaloupe.

So, how do you know Phil?

"Met him at the supermarket." Coughs on a raisin. "We talk a lot about fishing."

What, you fish?

"Sure."

You. You fish.

“Yeah. Well. I’m thinking about getting a pole.”

Can’t get her bra open she has to do it for me. She doesn’t let me chase the raccoon out of my yard. We wake up and ask if our clothes are smelly. She knocks my toothbrush into the garbage, says oops, here, she hands it back. It’s entangled in used floss. I wasn’t going to look for her, I wouldn’t do anything like that, I told her she was fine.

Iceland isn’t as cold as I thought it would be and everyone speaks English which make me feel like a dick. The girls are pretty, they have pretty faces. It’s winter, and between these widened nights the sun barely rubs against the horizon and that’s a day, one day. I can’t see. And when I get to the town that I thought at least rhymed with what Phil had told me, nobody has even heard of her. There’s only one person there. She runs a hotel and I ask why aren’t there any glaciers.

“No, no, there are glaciers,” the woman in the hotel speaks slowly, so I will understand, “they are up north. They are melting.”

I can’t drive stick, I’m always yanking or pushing the wrong thing. The car grinds itself into sand under my feet. It has a digital compass on the dashboard I make it say N. I pop a tire and I don’t have any spares. I wanna be a jelly. I can’t cover all of the rent without you.

“Oh...I could get a friend to move in.”

She means Dana. She says they just met each other at the supermarket.

“I just have to get away for a bit. You know?”

Good, I say, too strongly? Good, that’d be good. For you.

“And maybe we shouldn’t talk for a while.”

That’s fine.

“I mean, I don’t think we should even write each other or anything, just for a bit.”

Yes. Fine. I’m telling you, fine.

“Yeah...” Ruth swats at the air. Go away, air. “I just think it would be healthy.”

Ruth sent all her things away in boxes and said she wanted something healthy, so I figured something beige, something cushioned, nodding relatives, low-fat



breakfast cereals in bed.

But no. It's winter, it's Iceland. I'm in the car. Dimly lit clouds, a leather interior, I can't drive stick. The road shines back. I swerve and pop a tire on a rock.

I walk back to the hotel, I'm wearing two sweaters.

Dana doesn't speak. Not for the first week we live together. Lots of yes or no questions. I make her tea. She doesn't speak. I tell a joke and wince because it's the same joke, only an hour old. Mint or orange spice I ask. Wait, we're out of mint. But this orange spice stuff is pretty decent, you should try some, here.

"Thanks," she says, barely a word. I'm not sure her lips moved. She whispers something else and hands me a letter from Ruth. It's been opened. The words are written on some notebook paper torn from its spiral spine:

These glaciers break quicker than you'd think. They could  
tumble right over me like a truck. Well, not exactly like a truck.

I don't know. I should be free on Friday. Is Friday good for you?

We get better, Dana and I, it's amazing, full sentences, I should teach children to read, the poor, the retarded children. Phil calls and says yeah, she's in Iceland, so? Thought I told you.

Great. Hey. Phil. Can you die from a glacier?

"What?"

I mean, can they run you over? I dunno. Like a truck?

"What?" She told him where she was going, not me, him. "Look, she'll probably be back soon, so don't think she's dead or anything. I thought I told you."

You forgot.

"Huh, weird." He saved the x-ray. We left him in the hospital. We got breakfast. She laid one palm over the menu and asked the waiter what can you put in my pancakes.

"Well let's see," he twists his eyebrow in his fingers, like he's winding himself up. "—raspberries strawberries cantaloupe raisins pumpkin chocolate blueberries pineapple—"

“Stop. I’ll take all of that. And a cup of coffee.” She says there’s too much stuff in the world and she can’t keep up. She says she sleeps in scattered places. I’m not listening. I’m just wondering about her breakfast, and what happens to it after she swallows, and once I see her naked I’m just as baffled. I get the check, I excuse myself, I walk outside, I call Phil. He says the surgery was just fantastic, they’re gonna let me keep the glass.

Cool. Hey. How did you meet her?

“We went out, couple years ago.”

Oh. Oh.

“Yeah, we met back in school, just before we both left. Great girl, right?”

A raccoon raided the compost again, the compost that the upstairs tenants hate me for, they hate me for my pile of rot. Ruth and I watched it from my window and I stood up to grab the broom but she pulled me back down to the couch.

“It won’t come back if you scare it away.”

Here we are, noses against the glass, watching a raccoon eating my moldy pickle ends. She heats up the cold fettuccini on a cracked plate inside my fridge, forgets the fork in the microwave, turns back around and completes a circle to the sizzle of tiny lightning.

“Hey,” she bends down to look, she calls to me on my couch, it still crackles, the raccoon has found an onion, “is this still safe to eat? Will we become radioactive?” She giggles and takes a bite.

Her waist. I could it snap it over my knee.

Phil stabs the tree, he excites the grass below him and jumps in place and asks why I’d bother to go to Greenland to find her. He bought a dagger with a lion carved into the handle. He sticks it into the tree, pulls it out, he flicks it into the air. “You should’ve fucked that other girl. Shit. What was her name?”

You said she went to Iceland.

“Yeah? I’m pretty sure I said Greenland.”

You definitely said Iceland.

“Oh. Sorry. Well shit. Did you find her? How is she? What did I miss?”

I toss Ruth's letter on top of the fridge, there's no real place for it, and jot a message back:

Good luck with everything.

But it doesn't matter how clever I think it is since her return address is smudged, it looks misspelled, I doubt she even knew the real one.

"Do you fish?" Dana breathes and looks at the fishing pole in the corner.

Phil probably would have told me to hit him with the bamboo even if he hadn't done anything wrong.

Hey. Phil. You're bleeding pretty bad.

The flight attendant poked at my neck, I peeled my face off of the backseat tray. She smiled down. "Anything to drink?" It floats behind her head, rubs slowly against her hair. Takes its time.

Water, please. The whole bottle.

I went to the police. Ruth comes back, filthy shirt on, my shirt, it went missing, doesn't tell me where she went, doesn't need my help, I buy her a fishing pole, she goes to Iceland, or maybe Greenland, she's fine, it breaks against my shin.

Do you fish asks Dana.

Dana sits by the window and reads. Drinks my tea. Never finishes a cup. I don't think she likes it. Her face, Phil's right, she does have the face. I lower a mug of peppermint tea in front of her, she looks up, yeah she has the face alright. I sit in the next room and masturbate.

I walk back to the hotel. It's dark. It's dimly lit. Ice is cracking. There's nothing to keep up with. I didn't have a spare tire, I had to walk, if I could see there would be some dirt and some road and some dirt, I wanna be a jelly.

She fed me some of her pancakes. They had turned purple with all that fruit inside.

Every night, she eats carrots before I go to bed. Eats them whole with the stems and leaves. Swats my ass with them as I slip past the kitchen table, flossing. Doesn't stop when I turn off the lights.

Can you at least chew softer or something? Maybe you could cook them.

"This is all I used to eat when I was a baby."

Yeah, you told me.

"My nose started to turn red I ate so many."

Yes, I know. It's four in the morning.

She slept on the couch, the floor, the porch. Now she wasn't sleeping at all. I lie on the bed and yell at the kitchen.

Go to sleep. Please. Now.

"I can't."

Take a pill. Take anything.

Crunching meanders past the door, it softens away into scraping footsteps on the front porch. I filled out reports on the fourth day, she came back, I filled out reports again, thanked the police who spoke sternly into their desktops and notepads and said yeah sure thing kid. She was filthy, wearing my shirt, it was ruined, I bought her a fishing pole, it snapped against my shin, do these pants smell bad? We ask each other in the mornings. What do you think? Here, smell 'em.

"They're good for another day or two." We never change clothes, there are holes in our underwear, handles for fingers, they pull off so easily.

Did you ever fuck Phil?

"That would be like fucking in a snuff film. Ever see a snuff film?"

No.

"Want to?"

I decide to sneak out after she falls asleep, because I can do that too. I can. I just have to wait till she's breathing with her mouth open. But she rolls right over me, says the bed's too hot, I'll be back, okay?

Oh. Yeah, just keep it down, I'm sleeping.

I leave soon after she does. Phil was setting off fireworks in his backyard, trying to hit the tree stumps, they careen off the bark and burst low in the night like harmless angry popcorn.

Hey, Phil. What's a snuff film?

"Hold on." His thumb wrestles with the useless flint of his Bic lighter, he sighs,

he discards it on the grass, he awkwardly hurls the firework in his other hand into the arms of the woods. "You got a light?"

No, I don't smoke anymore.

"Oh." The grass is wet under our shoes, and Phil's soles drunkenly chirp into the ground when he turns to glance at the pock-marked trees behind him. "Jesus, I'm so bored."

Phil says don't worry she went to Iceland and she's probably okay. He tells me on a postcard go fuck your roommate already and I have to burn it into smoke so Dana won't read it along with the rest of my mail. She drives me to the airport, we stop at the aquarium, I kiss her neck, she turns, doesn't smile. I was hoping she'd smile. It bobs against the glass, takes its time. Okay, she doesn't smile but that's fine, the face was all she had, that was it. But I was hoping she'd smile. Never fucked her, kissed her neck, a nine-hour flight, a leather interior and four-wheel drive and no spare tires, a jellyfish bobs against the horizon and that's a full day.

That shirt went missing from my closet months ago, and Ruth walks around wearing it and only it, no underwear, sets down a plate of spaghetti in front of me. Like nothing happened, like the shirt never belonged to anyone in the first place.

"You think I need help."

I don't think that.

"You thought I was dead," she's trying not to laugh, her mouth is doing that thing where it's working against her face, "and now you need to help me."

I wouldn't try to do anything like that.

"Sure you would."

You're fine.

I ask for water, rub my indented cheeks, there's a five year old chasing his sister, there he goes, he's chasing his sister down the aisle, I ask for the whole bottle, there's a jellyfish in the aquarium and in the flight attendant's hair and in front of the sun, it bobs against everything and takes its time. Phil taught me to drive stick, he taught me all wrong, the car is turning into sand, I'm getting lost and I wanna be a jelly, I would've done better floating in a glass tank.

We're lying on the bed. It's noon.

Where did you go?

Her face is in her pillow, she twists her mouth around her face and up out of the cotton so I can hear. "Just walked around."

That's great. But I want to know where you went.

She yawns, rolls in the bed, towards me. "I just walked around for a bit."

Clouds slide over the sun. The room dims, illuminates, dims, as if we don't know what time of day to be.

"I guess you could maybe come with me."

Oh. Well where are you going?

"I'll tell you."

When?

"When I go."

Her mouth slides down the side of her face. Back into the flannel.

She finds me another roommate to pay the rent. One with a pretty face that doesn't speak.

I can't see any glaciers.

There's a lion in the handle.

Phil says, Sorry, I was sure I said Greenland.

There's a lion in the handle and a chip in the blade and there aren't even any rivers around, I mean, christ Ruth you don't even know how to fish.

"I'll learn."

No, you won't.

"I will. It's easy. You just stand there and wait and then you get a fish. I have to learn these things."

What things? The rod is bent from that heavy coat hung over it, the one you never wore, the one that cost two hundred dollars, but you loved the feel of the pockets, like an extra pair of armpits you said.

I pop a tire, I get out of the car, walk back towards the hotel, the airport, the flight home. More children run through the aisle, I wonder what hole they're all seeping out of, what should be plugged up to control this leak of fresh humans. A smack of jellyfish hovers outside my transatlantic window. She ruined my shirt, I

bought her a fishing pole, you're fine I said. Not in the face and not in the balls. I never saw any glaciers, but I could hear them breaking open.

The landing, the airport, the bus home, the walk up the porch. I turn on the lights. The fishing pole in the corner.

I push it against my shin and it snaps, it hurts, these things aren't meant to break, I bought the one tested for twenty-pound trout.

So how did it go, he asks. What did I miss?

The pole. It snaps, I'm sweating, I snap the pieces.