



# The Aquarium

by Magen Toole

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ART BY JOHN DAVID BROWN  
READ BY MIRACLE JONES MUSIC BY GOODMAN CARTER



There was an octopus on Lily Mackie's front porch when she arrived home from work, keys jingling in her hand and hair slipping from the sloppy bun it was pinned in ten hours earlier. The thing was dead, sprawled across the warm concrete in a small, shriveled slump of arms. Its head was flat, gluey, and slick like a placental sack stinking in the late afternoon sun. Setting down her purse and jacket beside the heels of her red pumps, Lily crouched beside it with her breath held and a cautious hand. She brushed her index and middle fingers across the sloping crest above the animal's eye, now a wad of yellow jelly in a round socket, crowned by a swarm of greedy flies. She scrunched her face at the wet, soft sound it made when pressure was applied, and then touched it again.

It was nothing, Lily decided aloud. Surely it ended up here by way of some practical joke by the neighbor's children, or even a bird, scooping the creature up from the bay and dropping it while flying to its nest. Perhaps it was from some unstable vagrant, drifting through the neighborhood breaking into homes, or hurling things at peoples' houses. Like the ones her mother was always going on about, wringing her thin hands while watching the six o'clock news.

Crime was everywhere, after all. Lily was often reminded of this on Sunday afternoons spent with her mother after church. Since moving to the city that was all Lily ever heard about from her mother, the crime rates and tabloid television. It was depressing sometimes, but Lily never complained. Whatever it was that brought the octopus to her doorstep, it stared up at Lily with cloudy eyes, wet and dead. For a moment, sitting on sore knees with creases of dirt forming in her black pencil skirt, Lily stared back.

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Lily was seven-years-old when she saw an octopus for the first time. It was a family trip, just Lily, her mother, and her father. One of the trips they used to take before he left them for the promise of another wife in another town with two children that Lily would never meet, packing a suitcase three nights before Lily's ninth birthday.

They went to the Aquarium on this trip, where Lily held onto her mother's hand, sporting a small, toothy smile and wearing a green patterned dress. Lily had only ever known octopuses as caricatures in children's cartoons, with brightly colored faces and soft fat bodies with curly-q's for arms. Octopuses were supposed to smile with blocky white teeth and blue eyes and sing songs about sharing. Instead the octopus at the Gladewater Aquarium stared at Lily, eyes dead through the deep glass plate of its invisible cage like something from Mars.

It did not smile. Lily did not know if she wanted it to, even if it could. Its face lacked the playful mouth and blocky teeth, and all of the other loveable features of its Saturday morning counterpart. The eyes were yellow starbursts, like fireworks, giant glass marbles beneath exaggerated brows -- ageless and unkind. Molasses-slow, the octopus moved like an unfurling umbrella of bumpy, pigment-dotted flesh, an alien in black water, drifting in unreal time.

Squeezing her mother's thin hand, Lily thought it was beautiful. For her ninth birthday she would ask for an octopus to keep in a tank on her dresser. Her mother simply laughed at the time.

After her father left, the laughter stopped altogether. When Lily was thirteen she would discover boys. Then high school, college, broken hearts; things wanted and things left behind. She would never think of octopuses again.

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Lily put the shriveled body of the octopus in two white plastic grocery bags and set it in the trash can on the curb. This had seemed undignified. She knew she had a hand shovel sitting on the floor of the kitchen pantry by the dustpan, and a small spot in the garden by the driveway. But Lily did not know if she could explain to Mrs. Hume across the street, sitting on her front porch with her daily crosswords and reading glasses, why she was burying an octopus in the flower garden.

Instead she threw it atop two empty boxes of Cheerios and some used AA batteries. It was another piece of trash, Lily assured herself, closing her front door and switching on the porch light. She made pasta for one, watched television alone, and went to bed. The shadows on the wall above the headboard curled like tentacles in slow-motion over her cold sheets, but Lily paid them no mind.

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On Monday, Lily took lunch fifteen minutes early. Mr. Berkley could not say no, after all, waving her off with a nod and the beginnings of a smile. Not after the nights spent at her desk when everyone else had gone home, and the holidays she had worked because Sally and Rachael already had plans. It kept her from having to spend them in an empty house, but Lily never mentioned that.

Instead of the cafe on 5th and Chambers, where Lily usually picked up the Monday tuna-on-rye special, she parked outside the Gladewater Aquarium. She stared up at the unassuming brick face building with her hands tight on the rubber steering wheel cover. The tiny square windows dotting the building's exterior in lined rows were now a tired green under the television-colored midday sky -- not at all like the ocean blue of her memory. Lily swallowed tightly, and thought of her octopus.

Her childhood octopus was long dead and Lily knew that. It had either been tossed out in the trash, or left to rot on the floor of its tank until picked clean by fish. There was something fragile about the thought as Lily walked through the corridors of tanks, inexplicably nervous. Her stomach knotted, tight with a slick, strange fear that she could not name, her red pumps clicking against cold tile. Octopuses lived brief and solitary existences, living long enough only to produce their young in clutches of perfect eggs, then dying. There was something noble in that, she thought; the kind of tragic beauty that came with living up to one's purpose. Lily could admire that.

Animals swam by in a shimmer of scales and Technicolor. Sharks roamed the tanks in circles like trained dogs, following tropical fish with angular faces and gaping mouths that moved in a slow rainbow of eyes. Lily stared at the inky black water lit by man-made light, and felt somehow worse for it.

"Are you waiting for something?"

Lily looked up and saw the woman standing a yard from her left elbow in a layered black outfit, covered in buttons and straps. Dark hair framed her round features in a sharp, heavy fringe, cut like an inverted crescent above her brow line. The rest of the choppy strands were pulled up into loose buns on either side of her head, held in place by sections of red ribbon. Her eyes were light and spotted (like fireworks), her mouth pulled into a curious smile at one corner, lit up by the fake blue glow of the tank lights. Then again, the smile could have been a trick of Lily's imagination.

"Oh." Lily flinched, swallowed, and smiled weakly. "No, not really," she half-plied, and shuffled slightly in her red pumps. "Just felt like watching the fish for a bit. It's supposed to be calming...I could use some calming today, I think."

"Oh," the woman mimicked, although in a lower affectation. Her eyes did not leave Lily's face. "I guess we all could, these days."

There was a pause between them that settled between their bodies and the fish swimming around them in their manmade sea. "You just looked like you were looking for somebody," the other woman said, disregarding the silence. It made Lily's fingers tighten around the strap of her shoulder purse. "Maybe a friend."

Lily only smiled. "No." Looking at the glimmer of passing blue scales, Lily said nothing about the octopus. "Not today."

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Lily did not speak of shadows, nor dead octopuses, to anyone. She took her tuna-on-rye at her desk and did not ask Mr. Berkley for any more favors. She did not contemplate strangers at aquariums, nor rotting flesh at the bottom of the sea, nor what was in her trash can. There was nothing to explain, nor nothing to tell.

Sometimes on the street Lily passed a woman with fireworks in her eyes, but said nothing of that either.

It would be three days before Lily saw the shadows again, curling from behind the bedroom door in broad black arms. She paid them no mind at first. Blamed it on an overactive imagination or bad late-night television and willed herself to sleep, face buried in her pillowcase with a determined sigh.

Instead of finding sleep behind closed eyes, Lily's mind conjured visions of black water and firework starbursts. The creak of the bedroom door – old hinges, she assured herself – gave her goose-flesh and she sucked in a breath between her teeth. She blamed that on the television, too. Perhaps she should be more like her mother and only watch the news. Her mother would like that.

Tendrils crept around her bedroom walls. With the slow, sticky sound of wet flesh the octopus arms wound down her bedposts in languid stop-motion to drop, drip, winding out across the floor beneath her bed-frame and slipping beneath her sheets. They curled to touch her toes, greedy suction cups biting into the bottoms of her feet, curling around her ankles as they slithered up her calves, wet and cold and alive. Each arm had its own mind, slow, determined, like the touch of the lover she did not have. Lily gasped.

Something tight and dreadful knotted in her belly as she felt the limbs move around her, holding her. Cradling, molding their lengths to the curves of her thighs and hips. A single limb curled around her belly in a slow caress, slipping inside the waistband of her sleep-pants to the elastic of her panties. It pulled them down; dipping passed the cotton to catch its teeth on the skin of her pubic bone and in the soft thatch of hair there.

Lily had meant to scream. She wanted to, but no sound came, sucked back into her chest by a dry sob. With shaking hands Lily reached down to where her sheets writhed, pulling back the covers and finding nothing there, save two legs and tousled bedclothes.

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For days Lily drove passed the exit ramp to the Gladewater Aquarium on her way to work, staring at the highway sign as though it held some small parcel of knowledge. Some answer. She knew better than that. Palms damp with nervous sweat on the steering wheel cover, Lily bit her lip and watched the sign speed by in a blur of green metal. Afterward, she felt nothing, only a hollow pit in the core of her belly; just as there had been when her father left.

On the third day there was note sitting on her cubicle desk, yellow notebook paper folded twice over. Words in a short, feminine hand, scribbled in black ink. "What are you waiting for?" Lily stared at the slip of paper, and thought of the jelly eyes of the dead octopus. She tucked the note inside her purse and told no one, waiting for five o'clock to come.

Across town it was already near dark by the time Lily arrived at Gladewater Aquarium, just as the doors were being locked for the night. She put her car in park and sat there, hands on the steering wheel and her hair already slipping free of its haphazard bun. She did not know what she was waiting for, what had brought her here at all, or if it would bring her some peace. Her childhood octopus was long dead, and what did any of it matter? There were no answers for the shadows on her walls, the octopus on her stoop, or the letter left on her desk.

Blinking, she caught sight of plastic and straps from under the stoplight across the street. The woman walked towards her car with black-gloved arms, her heavy boots carrying her dark-swathed frame. Instead of shrinking back, starting the car, and driving away, Lily held her breath. Smiling curiously, the woman lightly rapped on her passenger door with a single thin finger.

"You got my letter."

Swallowing, Lily did not hesitate to unlock the door.

They did not speak, creeping through the congestion of uptown traffic after dark. The woman in Lily's passenger seat wore black lipstick and looked like she fell out of some exotic fashion magazine, all flowing black and pristine. Perhaps one of the Japanese or Italian journals Lily had often seen while in line at book stores, but which she never picked up. Lily did her best to watch the traffic ahead of them and not be mesmerized by the play of jaundiced streetlight across the woman's smooth features.

"You were waiting for me." Lily's voice was barely above a whisper. "Why are you doing this?"

"What am I doing?"

"You're..." Something tightened in the pit of her chest. Feeling her eyes dampen Lily bit her bottom lip and felt vulnerable. "You're frightening me."

"I'm sorry." The yellow and gold seemed to change colors in the woman's eyes. "That's not my intention."

"Then what is your intention?" Lily asked, knowing better.

The mimic canted her head, features smoothing of all emotion. "To care for you," she said, imitating Lily's dry murmur, her black lips catching the glint from the lamps outside. Gloved fingers reached up to curl around the curve of Lily's chin. For a moment Lily did not notice the tears swelling in the corners of her own eyes as they slid wetly down her cheeks.

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Lily did not ask the woman's name as they walked up the steps to her house, silent save the hitch of her own breath and the click-clack of her red heels on concrete. Neither did she ask her name as she took her by her hand and led her to the bedroom. They were beyond the point of questions when the strange woman's fingers threaded through Lily's fingers.

The woman's mouth tasted like salt water when Lily kissed it as she slid her fingers into her black hair. Hands found Lily's hips and waist; her back and her breasts, plucking her blouse open gingerly, her gloved digits sliding inside and pushing it from her shoulders. Black lips kissed Lily's cheek, chin, and collarbone, and her thighs felt weak beneath the fall of her pencil skirt. Her fingers struggled with buttons and snaps, layers of fabric and texture, as Lily brought a free hand to the other's hair and tugged, wanting to pull her somehow closer until their flesh and clothing melted together.

When she finally removed the woman's outer layer, strange hands came to her chest and pushed. Lily let out a cry as she fell back, sprawling across the

bed behind them. Without a pause, the woman's mouth was on hers again, her slender black body stretching over Lily's and her fingers slipping beneath her skirt. Lily moaned, an unnatural sound, the tips of her well-manicured fingers pulling at the last stays on the other's shirt and tossing it aside.

The skin beneath was cold to the touch, pulled tight over a thin framework of bones. Lily gasped, pulling away and looking over the woman's chest -- thin, frail, her breasts smooth of anything resembling human nipples. It was then that Lily noticed the spots of rough skin dotting the nearly translucent expanse of the woman's long torso. The change in pigmentation travelled from the crook of her arms in a leathery hide down to her extended fingertips in textured flesh once hidden by gloves. Touching it now, Lily thought of the dead octopus and shivered.

Her hand, still tangled in the other's black hair, became slick, caught by the toothy suction cups of tentacles hiding between the strands. The tentacles curled around Lily's fingers, up her wrist and along her arms in a half-dozen spindly limbs, keeping her there as though she would wrench away in rejection. Another arm curled around her chin, others still between her thighs and around her hips: wet, sticky and unreal.

It was then that Lily realized the tentacles' origins, the boots and bottoms of the octopus lying on the bed in a heap of fabric. Eight tendrils, thick and winding, sprouted from her waist where her legs should have been, writhing around Lily of their own will. Each limb was wide and fat like the length of an eel, black and leathery to the touch, all musculature and no bone, pulling, holding. Like a writhing mass of flesh, engulfing Lily in her small cold bed, all touch and caress.

"Is this what you wanted?" the octopus asked. Her voice was a loving murmur, low and heavy and pulled from the depths of the sea itself.

A single tentacle pushed stray hair from Lily's brow -- wet and cold. She melted away into the creature's embrace. "Yes," she whispered, if only to hear herself say it.

*Magen Toole is an author and artist from Fort Worth, Texas. Her work will soon be appearing or has been featured in Literary Fever, The Battered Suitcase and Every Day Fiction.*