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Chicken
House

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For Owen

'Instantly one of those long arms glided
like a snake into the opening,
and twenty others were quivering above.

With a sweep of the axe,
Captain Nemo chopped off
this fearsome tentacle,
which slid writhing down the steps . . .

Seized by the tentacle and glued to its suckers,
the unfortunate man was swinging in the air at
the mercy of this enormous appendage.

He gasped, he choked, he yelled . . .

The poor fellow was done for.'

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

by Jules Verne

Pitiful Pete was sitting right on the edge of the Jellyfish, facing out towards the far coast, and a few of us had gathered round to watch.

‘What do you think your chances are this time, Pete?’ called James. He bit into a piece of dried fish, ripping off the tail with an expert flick of his wrist. One thing about James is that he does eat disgusting foods in a non-disgusting way.

Pitiful Pete shrugged his shoulders, his eyes focused on the waves. He always takes a while to work himself up to it.

‘Your problem’s been with the tentacles in the past,’ said James helpfully. ‘If you can just get beyond those, you should be fine.’

‘Your problem’s with *your* face,’ said Lana.

‘My face is fabulous, and you know it,’ said James. He puckered up his lips and gave a dramatic toss of his matted hair. His face wasn’t exactly fabulous, if I’m honest. His eyes were grey like the sea on a dull day, and his hair was probably dark blond, though it was tricky to tell because it was so

coated in dirt and salt. But there's always been something about James's face which makes you want to keep watching it. It seems to move more than other people's faces, as though he feels emotions more than everybody else, and most of those emotions are about being happy – even at times when that doesn't seem possible.

The tentacles of the Jellyfish were moving from side to side in their normal, irregular fashion. They might swipe over to the left with a swoosh, then waggle a bit, before swiping back to the left again. But then the next time they might do a waggle before swooshing to the right, or maybe a quick wiggle somewhere in the middle. It was pretty difficult to work out a pattern.

'Pete, why don't you come back from the edge?' said Kate softly. 'I can fetch you a nice cup of hot water and we could play bottle-top chess.'

Pete didn't respond.

'There's a lovely driftwood fire going over by the Big House,' she added, putting her hand on Pete's shoulder. 'And it's such a beautiful day. You've got so much to offer us here, and we'd be sad if you died. I'd really miss you.'

'Kate, what the . . . ?' James glared at her. 'The man wants to jump in. Can't he even do that in peace?'

'I respect everybody's decision,' said Kate. Lana rolled her eyes. 'But I'm just not sure that he's happy. I think Pete might feel more like himself after a nice chat.'

'I *think* feeling like himself is what's got him into this

situation. I *think* it'd be totally rubbish to be Pete,' said James.

I felt like I had to step in at this point. 'James!' I said. 'Rude!'

'It's true though, isn't it, Martha?' he said. 'The man's stuck on a giant jellyfish, for whatever mysterious reason. He hasn't eaten anything other than bony fish and seaweed for ages and he has to sleep in a crappy shack with a load of miserable, smelly people.'

Pete gave a big sigh and lowered his head.

'Some of those people are my best friends!' I said, loudly.

'The loveliest people in the world,' said Kate. 'Who care for you deeply, Pete.'

'Some of your best friends are complete losers,' said James to me. He took another large bite, picking out a couple of bones before he chewed. There was only the head of the fish left now. Its eyes were glazed and crusted over with salt.

Lana nodded. 'I know how Pete feels. Almost everybody on here is a loser, Martha. Especially you.'

'And some of your best friends are the smelliest in the shack,' added James.

'No!' I said.

'It's true,' he said. 'I pride myself on it. My farts last night were amazing.'

'Seriously, Pete,' said Lana, smoothly steering James away from one of his favourite topics. 'What's your plan?' Pete sighed deeply again, but didn't reply. 'I think if you stand up to do it, you'll get further when you jump in,' Lana said.

'Yeah, that's a good idea,' said James. 'And if you want to stand on my back, that might give you an even better chance? You know, if you say, *1, 2, 3, Go*, then we'd all push.'

Lana nodded. 'Or do a running jump?'

'No!' said Kate. 'You're not going to help him do this.'

At the other end of the Jellyfish there was a sudden burst of laughter, followed by a few shouts and calls. It sounded like the morning catch of fish was starting to arrive. It had probably landed on somebody's face again. It was always brilliant when that happened – there's nothing funnier than wet fish flapping in somebody else's face.

With a shudder, Pete stood up. His hair was clumped together and claggy with seaweed, so that it was hard to tell what was beard and what was hair. All the salt water made it stick up like the mane you'd draw on a lion when you were little and you'd run out of yellow crayons, so had to use the greys and browns.

'You can do it, Pete,' said James, slapping him on the back. 'This is your day. Come on, man. We believe in you!'

'There's still time to change your mind,' said Kate. 'We love you and think you're great.'

Pete turned and shook her hand, then offered it to the rest of us in turn. We all shook it.

'Guys!' I shouted over to the Big House. 'Pete's going to jump again.'

'Come on, Pete,' said Lana. 'Go for it!'

He took a few steps backwards and paused.

The tentacles slowed for a split second. There was a light waggle of movement, a lull. The breeze dropped too, and it seemed, for that moment, as if it might just be possible. Even the sway and pull of the waves seemed to pause. But then the larger tentacles swished sharply over to the left again, and the bits of jelly beneath them gave a roll, almost to show off.

‘Good luck,’ I said, and the others offered their goodbyes.

Pitiful Pete gave a nod in reply.

Somewhere behind us, the shouts and laughs came again. Nobody else was coming to watch Pete jump in.

He took a deep breath, looked once more up at the submerged houses and factories on the coastline, then took a step forward to launch himself towards them. He sprinted five paces, his ragged shirt streaming out behind him, and his bare feet slapping on the jellyfish mesoglea. He bowed his head and raised his arms as he reached the edge, before leaping off in a practised dive so smooth he barely made a splash.

There was another cheer from the Big House.

Then that lull again. The tentacles slowed. It was almost as if the world had stopped, as though time had paused. Lana looked round, eyes wide, and Kate put her hands up to her mouth. James raised his hands to keep us quiet.

None of us moved. I could see Pitiful Pete’s dark shape sliding through the water. First one metre, then five, his arms scooping small trails of bubbles in the water behind him. He’d never got this far before.

There was a kerfuffle over by the fire again, and somebody

started to sing.

'Attention, attention!' Soldier John was shouting about something, probably trying to organize unwilling slackers into groups to gut the fish. There were the usual groans of complaint and more laughter. But at our end, we hadn't moved. We'd barely breathed.

Pete was still going. As he broke the surface he turned in confusion.

'Go,' I whispered, urging him on.

'Quick, quick!' hissed James, gesturing to him.

Kate covered her eyes.

Pete turned back again and started towards the coast. He was doing front crawl, his arms sleek and powerful like two diving seals. He was trying to go as fast as possible, but it's tricky to do that when you're also trying to avoid disturbing the water.

'He's past the tentacles, isn't he?' Lana whispered.

I'd been holding my breath. *There's still the longer ones underneath*, I mouthed back.

He was edging onwards, another metre, then another. He was into the open sea now, the waves higher and breaking against him, pushing him forwards. *Nobody* had ever got this far.

'You can do it, Pete,' I whispered. 'Come on!' I dug my fingernails into my palms to stop myself from shouting. But then it came, the same as always. A sudden, swift slither through the waves, the dark buzz of the powerful tentacle

cutting through the air, and then the thudding splash as it hit the water and scooped Pete out. He landed back on the surface next to us with a dull squelch, dripping and quivering.

‘Did you see?’ said Lana. She was so excited her hands were shaking. ‘He almost did it.’

‘Oh, bad luck, Pete,’ shouted Soldier John. ‘Are you still stuck here?’

‘Yes, of course he is,’ said Lana. ‘But he almost friggin’ escaped.’

And that was the start. That was when we started to believe we could do it. That maybe . . . we could escape.