

A Jellyfish Daydream
by Adrik Kemp

A circular window glowed with underwater lights in the dark viewing chamber. Amelia's eyes had adjusted and she could make out an empty bench before her with a standing ashtray to the left. Distant sounds of children's laughter and squealing filtered in from outside the Taronga Zoo aquarium. Footsteps echoed everywhere but for the moment she was without company. In his walker, baby Donnie whimpered. Humming, Amelia shook a rattle to soothe him. All the while, she stared at the creature undulating in the water before her.

Its body was yellow as sulphur, but soft and diaphanous, like a petticoat. It opened and closed like a babe's mouth, propelling it ever around its small tank. Its tentacles trailed beneath like a bride on her wedding day, with whites, earthen yellows and hints of red. It mesmerised her.

Outside, a set of footsteps approached. Ever louder, they pulled Amelia from her blissful fugue.

Another young woman stood before her, but she could not have been more different to Amelia. Where Amelia's blonde hair was in perfect waves under her floral bonnet, the stranger's was short and unruly. Brunette locks fell over her neck, which plunged into a rough, man's shirt. Amelia's hand fluttered over her neckline as she realised the stranger was wearing suspenders over a set of trousers. In the woman's left hand, curls of smoke rose from a cigarette, reminding Amelia of the jellyfish she had been observing.

As Amelia stared, the new arrival turned and gave her the kind of smile that is done with the eyes and a half-lift of the mouth. She put the cigarette to her lips and took a drag, puffing it out in rings.

“You here alone, ma’am?”

Amelia shook her head. “My husband is outside. I just wanted to show Donnie the jellyfish.”

“Is this Donnie?”

Amelia nodded, rocking the walker.

“He’s very charming.” The woman held out her hand. “Florence. My friends call me Flo.”

Amelia looked at the outstretched hand a moment before taking it and shaking.

“I’m Amelia.” She couldn’t help but giggle.

“Something the matter, Amelia?”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever shaken another woman’s hand before.”

“I’m sure there are a great many things you haven’t done before.”

Amelia blushed and was glad of the darkness.

“What attracts you to the creatures of the deep?”

Amelia looked again at the lonely jellyfish. “They’re lovely. Like something from another world.”

“As are you.”

“What?”

Flo smiled. She took another drag of her cigarette before stubbing it out in the ashtray. She pulled a pack from her pocket and tapped another out, offering it to Amelia.

“I couldn’t.”

Flo smiled. “It’s 1921. You can do whatever you like.” She lit the cigarette with a match. The momentary flame illuminated a smooth, clean face and kind, pale eyes. Her eyes reminded Amelia of the portal behind them.

“You have lovely eyes.” Flo said, putting her palm against Amelia’s cheek. “I could get lost in their depths.”

Amelia felt her heart race at Flo's touch. Her skin burned and her head spun with unwitting desire. She inhaled a short, sharp breath and her eyes widened as Flo leaned forward and pressed her lips against Amelia's in a delicate kiss. The sensation of Flo's soft mouth, her cool skin and the vision of the jellyfish making idle circles behind them etched itself into Amelia's mind.

"Amelia?" A voice came from the darkness. "Where is that damn woman?"

Amelia pulled away and touched her lips. She was a moment recognising her husband's voice before he barrelled inside. His belly strained against his waistcoat and his trousers were large and tucked in to his knee-length socks. Cigarette smoke trailed behind him, nowhere near as captivating as Flo's had been.

"There you are. How long are you expecting me to wait in this heat? Surely the boy's seen enough by now." He took Amelia's arm and went to leave, almost barrelling into Flo in the process.

Flo gave a nod and tipped her cap in imitation of a young paperboy. She winked at Amelia and trotted from the room. Amelia watched her leave in stunned silence.

Amelia's husband shook his head and guided her from the room. "Girls today. Don't know what to make of them," he said.

Amelia pushed Donnie's walker around to follow him from the room, a new sparkle in her eye and the sensation of Flo's lips on hers still dancing in her mind.