

The Paradox of Fossils

by Michelle Christophorou

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IT WAS JIM WHO SUGGESTED THE MAGIC MUSHROOMS. He knew a guy in Lyme. This was the summer of 1990, just before I left for university, when I was still green as common eelgrass. Fiona said her parents would be away the following weekend, so we could do them at hers. I wasn't sure about that: had been passed a joint at the beach a few times, but always shrank from anything stronger. Fiona assured me it would be a great laugh, though, and Janey agreed: psilocin was perfectly natural, not like LSD at all. Even by that stage, I usually did what Janey said, so I didn't need too much convincing. Plus, I didn't want to look like the square I obviously was.

In truth, I still couldn't quite believe I was hanging out with those three. When I'd arrived at Bridport High in the early eighties, I was what the other kids called a nerd. In those days, there was little to recommend geekdom: before the rise of Microsoft, being a nerd was unlikely to make you a billionaire. My limited topics of conversation included my ZX Spectrum, the space shuttle programme, and the wonders of the periodic table; my only interactions with classmates, hastily granted requests to copy my physics homework.

Somehow though, in my mid-to-late teens, my awkward body thickened just enough, and my jawline filled out, became strong (or so my mother told me) so that, on the surface at least, my light began to shine. But the cool, intellectual girls would

soon find me out. I hadn't read *On the Road*, hadn't seen *The Graduate*, thought the Velvet Underground were simply poor musicians.

Then, in sixth form, I met Janey. She had a Kate Moss slenderness, and the ability to convey a casual-yet-studied look in torn 501s and a plain black T-shirt. I would bump into her coming out of my Tuesday afternoon maths lessons as she was going in to hers: I was studying Maths and Further Maths; she was re-taking her GCSE as, despite choosing arts subjects at A level, she wanted to read Psychology. At first, I'd glance away as she passed but, after a few classes, I plucked up the courage to raise my face to her. She looked me in the eye and smiled. Three weeks later, she asked if I'd help with quadratic equations. We met at the café opposite school and, the fourth time I walked her home, she took hold of the lapels of my jacket and kissed me.

I prayed that this time, with this girl, things would be different.

And for a time, they were. When I took Janey to watch a meteor shower, she gasped in all the right places. Though she was equally keen on removing my clothes so that, soon, she was astride me and, mentally, I was reciting the planets in reverse order from their closeness to the sun. I mean, I wasn't complaining – nerds have hormones too – but we'd only been together five minutes. I'd hoped we would wait for our

first time to be seismic.

Afterwards, I told her, 'If you were a moon, you'd be Charon.'

'You're so funny,' she said, and kissed my nose.

If there's one thing I'm not, it's funny. Well, not intentionally. In my experience, it's amazing what some women will put up with for a sense of humour. Emotional abuse, infidelity, living always on the dark side of his moon. 'Oh, but he makes me *laugh*.' My own father loved a joke as much as he loved our local and the barmaids in it; being the centre of attention; and turning his ample wit to a never-ending deluge of snide remarks.

When my mother finally tired of him, she and I ended up here on the Jurassic Coast with Grandpa, where my love of the cosmic, and the prehistoric, began. Other boys grew up worshipping Superman and Bowie, but my hero was always Mary Anning.

A few weeks before the mushrooms, we went on an overnight trip to London, to celebrate our exam results. Jim and Fiona had organised it, and invited Janey and me along. I told Janey I wanted to take her to the Natural History Museum in Kensington. Grandpa had accompanied me there on my first pilgrimage when I was twelve and, in turn, I longed to show her the casts of magical monsters that Anning

had risked her life to uncover from Black Ven, those very cliffs that had formed the landscape of our adolescence; to explain how Mary, along with Darwin, was denounced as a heretic for daring to demonstrate that the world, and humankind, could not have been created in six days; to tell her how every man, woman and child knew the name of the king of the tyrant lizards, but hardly anyone outside Dorset had heard of Mary. Or, at least, they hadn't back then. But the others had wanted to do the Ripper tour. So that's what we did.

That night, when we were finally alone in our floral-patterned hotel room, I gave Janey a fossil I'd found on Charmouth beach, a perfect palm-sized fools-gold swirl of an ammonite. She didn't say much, except that Jim had bought Fiona a jade necklace. To be fair, jade would also have demonstrated the vastness of time, but it was the discovery of this prehistoric creature using nothing but goggles, a hammer and my bare hands that really resonated. I should have known from her reaction that Janey was not for me. I'm sure I did, deep down. But at the time, I wondered if – instead – an ant suspended in amber might have been enough to impress her. Convince her of our tiny enormity.

According to Grandpa, every star in the sky, every crater in the ground, every fossil in the sea was created by God. He told me they demonstrate the infinite nature of space and time, and bring into focus the tiny speck of a miracle that is humankind. That contemplating the blink-of-an-eye existence of our race shouldn't lead to inner

turmoil, that it's a paradox: how can we feel insignificant when this vast thing we're a tiny part of was made for us? On the other hand, when we find ourselves crushed or confused – a husky-spitz Laika hurtling into orbit – we can tell ourselves that our struggles are nothing new, that they're unimportant given the weight and timelessness of the universe. And that can bring us comfort, too.

Or so the theory goes.

The train back from London stopped at Weymouth, and a strange melancholy descended, as though the end of an era had begun. A physical journey can shake things up inside like that. The taxi from the station pulled up first outside Janey's house. She jumped out without kissing me goodbye.

A few weeks later, the four of us met at Fiona's to take the mushrooms. She made a pot of tea with them, and we sat in the orchard and waited for it to brew.

When Fiona handed me my mug, her green pendant fell forward on its silver chain like a taunt. The soil-tasting liquid was so rank, I downed mine, then lay back tickling Janey's feet with a grass stalk, watching the others take slow sips with disgusted expressions.

Jim was the last to finish. After he drank the dregs, he jumped up, clapped his hands, and rolled his shoulders. Then he said we should make our way to the beach

before the psilocin kicked in. It was a warm breezy evening, and Fiona excavated a kite from the shed. On the way, we necked bottles of Bud from the six packs Jim and I carried. Janey began to sing Abba's 'The Day Before You Came', mimicking Agnetha. I tuned into the lyrics, their sadness and their ambiguity, which I'd only half-noticed before. I began to weep.

Ashamed, I fell back to tie the lace of a Converse, but, instead of fading, Janey's soprano and the others' chatter became louder and I couldn't work out where the sounds were coming from. Sometimes they were behind me, but then their voices were rushing past my head with the wind. I started walking faster, and became aware of the boom of my heart.

When I reached the beach, Fiona and Janey were battling a tartan rug. They spread it on the sand, and Janey sat while Fiona collected rocks to anchor each corner. After they placed the third one, they disintegrated into giggles. Were they laughing at me? The burn of my heart migrated to my throat.

I dropped onto the rug, handed them both a beer, had a few gulps of my own. I pulled my knees into my chest and my heart began to quieten. Fiona lay back, arms aloft, staring at the backs of her hands as she brought them towards her and away again in a way that, before then, I had assumed was a cliché.

The sun had just set. Silhouetted against the indigo sky, Jim came into focus.

He stood looking down on us all.

‘Who’s up for a swim?’ he said.

Fiona protested that she couldn’t move, but Janey got up and started running with him towards the ebbing tide. They shed their clothes as they went, and I watched, as though through a camera lens. Fiona handed me some pistachios and, as I split them from their shells, I imagined my nails, beds and all, crumbling like the cliffs behind us. Eating them was no better: I became conscious of the machinery of my teeth and my tongue, of the possibility of molars grinding into the flesh of my cheeks, of my mouth filling with blood. I pictured my teeth dropping into the sand, to be washed up in the surf like tiny fossils; my body cracking open to reveal my throbbing organs. I abandoned the nuts and listened to the thump of my heart in my ears.

Out at sea, Janey and Jim were splashing around. They came together and seemed to kiss. I felt both of their tongues in my mouth.

Fiona was up now, unwinding the string of the kite. I grasped its body and ran along the beach until it launched. For a moment, my spirits soared with it, and I was bouncing off the pebbles, feet scrambling, tugged aloft with its tail, skimming over fragments of shells and plastic buckets until I was flying up there too, looking across and down to Black Ven. I laughed but my noise was an insane croak, echoing

through my head, the geological hammer of it splitting me in two.

I sat and grabbed at my head: I remember pinching clumps of my hair to centre myself. Jim and Janey returned and shook droplets over me.

‘What’s up?’ asked Janey.

‘Everything feels crazy.’ My voice came from a place above my scalp.

Jim laughed. ‘Chill out,’ he said, ‘you’re just having a good time.’

‘I have to go.’

Janey didn’t even offer to come with me.

Back at Fiona’s, I found the spare key under the stone toad where she said it would be. By now, my insides were squirming, and I relieved myself in the guest bathroom. I was outside of my body, had to run my fingertips over the grain of the painted floorboards to convince myself I really existed.

In bed, I longed for the respite of sleep, but when I closed my eyes it was like the top of my head had been lifted off and my thoughts were expanding, spreading out of it, like I could see both infinity and my own tiny, shameful being at once. But – despite what Grandpa had claimed – there was no comfort in it. So I opened my eyes again, only to watch the walls melting, pulsating, like the chambers of my heart.

Later, I heard Janey outside the bedroom door. Certain that, if I told her what

was happening, she would laugh it off as Jim had, I lay facing the wall and feigned sleep. She slipped into bed, smelling of salt and smoke. She didn't curl into me, but faced the opposite way. I could sense the warmth from her body: despite feeling exiled from my own, hers was hyper-real, and it was all I could do not to turn and touch her. Instead, I focused on her breathing, tried to anchor myself with it, let my body settle into her patterns. But, once she was asleep, her breath turned into a half-growl that vibrated inside my chest.

In the morning, before we even went down for breakfast, Janey told me it just wasn't working, and I couldn't deny it. I know now – and probably knew then – that we were ill-matched, but part of the pain I felt was the knowing but still wanting to hold on to the fantasy, the possibility of her, the way she took me outside of my skin. How, just lying with her on the West Beach, swigging from a flask of vodka and orange, and tracing letters on her back with my index finger – V-E-N-U-S – felt like the summer-saline smell of the sea and the shimmer of moonlight had melded with my bones. I knew I would never feel that way about anyone else. And I never have.

I was numb for a few weeks afterwards, experienced some flashbacks, but when I started university, I felt like I'd grown a thin shell that separated me from the intensity of my experiences. It was not unwelcome.

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All that was thirty years ago. I'm only thinking about Janey because I dreamed of her last night. It rarely happens and, when it does, I usually wake with a thirst on my tongue, and that sense of being cracked open and exposed, of longing and vulnerability, that we only really know when young. But this time was different: I felt the haunting knowledge of my inadequacies, my Dog Star pedestalling of her, my running a race I always knew deep down I'd never win. I saw it all, lucid as the perigeon new moon, and, for the first time, I was horrified. The morose, Smiths-album charm of her was gone.

This morning, I walk along the East Beach, my dog Sirius leaping into the surf. Ahead, there's a woman with a boy – perhaps eight years old – and they're bending as the waves roll to their feet, plucking their treasures like blackberries. The woman smiles as I pass, more at Sirius's capers than me, but I feel a rare warmth. A few metres on, I bend too, lift from the foam a cone-shaped belemnite. I breathe deeply, feel the spray on my face, and take a moment to marvel at whatever brought this perfect ossified cephalopod to my feet.



Michelle Christophorou lives in Surrey, UK. Her short fiction has appeared in various places online and in print, and her story 'Wearing You' (FlashFlood journal) was included in the BIFFY 50 list of best UK and Irish flash 2019/20. She is the author of novella-in-flash, KIPRIS (Ad Hoc Fiction, 2021), shortlisted for a Saboteur Award. In 2022, she won the Free Flash Fiction competition and had work shortlisted in both the Bath Flash and Short Story contests. Michelle is a recovering lawyer. Find out more at www.michellechristophorou.co.uk, or on Twitter @MAChristophorou.