



Captain John Paul Jellyfish



Douglas Evans

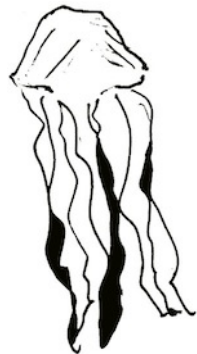
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1. The Fleet



The jellyfish fleet sailed over the grape-dark sea. Out from England for over three months, the jellied sailors had seen nothing but wrinkled ocean and smooth blue sky. Long Atlantic swells rolled under them. Salt spray stung their jelly sacs. Choppy white-capped waves pitched and tossed them dizzy. Up peak, down valley, up, down, up, down, that's how it was mile after mile, day after day.

With every wave Captain John Paul Jellyfish let out a low groan. His tentacles hung limply beneath him. His stomach turned somersaults. In short, this bold sea captain, the most celebrated jellyfish who ever sailed the seven seas, was seasick.

The Captain turned a full circle. The horizon appeared as a teeter-tottering gray line where ocean met sky.

"Bags! Oh, bags!" John Paul swore, as another wave broke over the bow of his red-speckled jelly sac. "If only *something* would stand still!"

A shout came from starboard. "Sir! Captain, sir! Over here, sir!"

John Paul turned to find his lieutenant, a yellow sea nettle jellyfish, cruising beside him.

The Captain, who hated being disturbed in this queasy condition, fumed, “What is it, Lieutenant?”

“There’s grumbling among the crew, sir,” reported the yellow sea nettle. “There’s more doubt than ever about this voyage, sir. Not one jelly in the lot thinks we’ll reach India by sailing west like this. Sir, the crew believes we’ll end up burning in the setting sun. Begging your pardon, sir, but they think your jelly’s gone fruity, sir. There’s talk of mutiny.”

More water slipped over John Paul’s jelly sac. His reply came over the howl of the wind and the swish-swash of the waves.

“I’m well aware of the crew’s concerns, Lieutenant. Those jellies still believe the earth is flat. Please remind them, I never said this journey would be a joy ride. But I can guarantee them this, the world is round, and we’ll soon be across this wretched ocean, resting our sacs in some calm, windless cove.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the Lieutenant answered. “The earth is round like a pancake, you say, sir?”

“No, like a beach ball, Lieutenant!” John Paul rasped. “This world is as round as a beach ball! You are dismissed!”

As the sea nettle turned, the Captain noted the wobble of disbelief in his first officer’s sac. Soon after leaving England he realized the Lieutenant was not a jellyfish he could count on.

“We *must* make landfall soon,” he told himself. “Or there *will* be trouble with the crew.”

The Captain ran a keen eye down the length of his fleet spread out on either side of him. Their number was small. Having scoured through the back coves and under every pier in Plymouth Harbor, he had found only two-dozen jellyfish willing to set sail with him. A slovenly bunch at first, few of the jellies could sail a straight line without getting their tentacles tangled, let alone knew the meaning of *trimming your sac* or *beating jelly bells to windward*. Yet over the past weeks the officers had drilled and shaped them into crack sailors. Their umbrella-shaped hulls now floated like silk parachutes in the water. Fine ribbons of tentacles dangled below each one.

Another rolling billow hoisted the string of jellyfish onto a snowy crest, and then dropped them like stones. John Paul Jellyfish thought he left his stomach behind.

“Mornin’-o, Cap’n,” chimed the First Mate, a brawny moon jellyfish, who came sailing up to John Paul’s side. His short tentacles rippled around the rim of his broad, gray jelly sac.

The Captain’s jelly sac puckered. “Good day, Mr. Brown,” he muttered.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Cap’n,” said the First Mate. “But you’re lookin’ a tad green-o around the jelly bell-o this mornin’.”

John Paul gave the moon jelly an icy stare. “Stow it, Mr. Brown,” he growled. “Attend to your duties, if you please.”

Being a seasick jellyfish and a sea captain at that was something of which John Paul was not particularly proud.

“Right-o, Cap’n,” came the First Mate’s snappy reply, and he hastened away.

This day passed like all others. The sun, a bright buttery ball, followed its usual course across the sky and sunk into the sea ahead of the fleet. As night came on, a stiff easterly wind sprang up. It whisked the jellyfish along at a terrific speed.

The night passed sleepless for the Captain. Not only did the wind keep his jelly wobbling, but self-doubts plagued him as well. According to his stellar observations, he should have reached land weeks ago. Could he be wrong? Would his fleet *ever* reach India? Could the earth be flat after all, and he was leading his fleet to folly?

To add to his concern the reports from an occasional passing fish were not encouraging. A humpback whale migrating south described huge chunks of ice afloat in the water to the North, while a swordfish only yesterday spoke of warm southern waters infested with teams of sinister hammerhead sharks.

Miserable, John Paul bobbed in the inky-black water. As sea spray slapped his sides, he gazed up at the spinning stars. Rolling a tentacle into a clench, the Captain cursed at the universe, “Bags! Oh, *bags!*”

2. Land Ho!



Day broke at last. Captain John Paul Jellyfish watched the stars blink out one by one. Before the North Star disappeared, he checked his bearings and determined that the fleet had retained its westerly course.

A blazing white disk rose out of the sea behind the Captain. “A brand new sun,” he observed. “Again I wonder where the new ones come from. Where did the old one go? So many mysteries in the world. So many things I need to know.”

First thing in the order of the day was morning inspection. During his rounds John Paul heard the First Mate dismiss the night watch and call up the morning crew. He watched the Lieutenant lead some hands through morning drills.

“I see slack in your jelly sac, sailor!” the yellow sea nettle barked. “Less wobble! Less wobble there! Don’t let those tentacles droop, or I’ll have the lot of you flogged!”

It was the regular routine of a jellyfish fleet at sea.

“Discipline and drill keeps a sailor’s mind away from mischief,” John Paul assured himself.

Toward noon, the Captain was wondering if this day would be like the others of swaying skies and pitching horizons, when the lookout cried, “Ahoy, Captain! *Flotsam* spotted off your *port* bow!”

Privately, John Paul was befuddled by these fancy sailing terms. Why, for instance, did seamen insist on saying *bow*, *stern*, *port*, and *starboard*, when front, back, left, and right would serve the purpose just as well? And for the life of him, he could not remember what *flotsam* meant.

Fortunately, the First Mate sang out, "I see it, Cap'n. A bit to your right-o. There's somethin' floatin' in the water-o."

John Paul saw it too. There, bobbing among the heaving waves, was a beer bottle.

"Lieutenant!" he cried. "Report to the crew that *flotsam* has been spotted, if you please. That bottle can mean only one thing. Land is near--land where people live and litter!"

Shortly afterward, a frigate bird glided over the fleet. Here was the first non-marine creature the jellies had seen in months, more proof that land was close. They let out a whoop as the bird swooped toward them.

"Avast there!" John Paul bellowed. "Cease that racket or the hungry creature will have you for lunch!"

All afternoon, the fleet sailed past other evidence that their journey was almost over--a patch of seaweed, a plastic spoon, a Styrofoam cup, and a light bulb.

"Smucker, take a sounding, if you please," John Paul ordered.

Smucker, a young mushroom jellyfish, dropped below and came up to report, "By the mark fifteen fathoms, Captain."

“Excellent,” said John Paul. “We should be sight land by sundown.

Sure enough, toward nightfall the lookout gave the cry all the jellies longed to hear, “Laaaaaaaaaand ho-o-o-o-o-o!”

The Captain peered northwestward. The horizon, for months a wavy line, now appeared as a pink smudge.

Excitement welled up inside John Paul’s jelly. “Mr. Brown!” he barked. “Alter course! Ready about! Shift the rudder! Down helm! Hard alee and all that! We have crossed the Atlantic at last!”

As the fleet turned in unison, the First Mate led the cry, “Three cheers for the Cap’n-o! Hip! Hip!”

“Hurrah!” sang the entire crew.

“Hip! Hip!”

“Hurrah!”

“Stow it, Mr. Brown,” the Captain broke in. “Kindly return to your station.”

At the moment, John Paul felt anything but a hero. While regarding the approaching coastline, a ripple of fear ran from his red-freckled sac to the tip of his tentacles. In the twilight, he could make out the silhouettes of tall buildings, church steeples, and factory chimneys. As they sailed closer in, gleaming storefronts, cross-crosses of streets, and rows of houses came into focus. Still nearer to shore, he spotted swarms of cars creeping along a freeway.

“Well, this isn’t India,” John Paul admitted. “This must be an entire new world, some uncharted land. I’ve discovered *something*. But I wonder what on earth it is.”

3. People



Early the next morning, the jellyfish fleet popped in choppy waters off the coast of the new land. A short distance away lay a stretch of sandy beach carpeted with people.

The Captain ran a trained eye along the crowded shore. “Lieutenant, notice that sign beyond the beach, if you please,” he said to the yellow sea nettle drifting alongside him. “It reads: AMERICA HOT DOGS. That’s what I shall call this new continent.”

“Hot Dogs, sir?” said the Lieutenant.

John Paul’s jelly quivered. “No, *America!*” he rasped. “I shall call the land *America.*”

Again the Captain checked the crowded sand. He had seen people before, plenty of them. Each summer they packed the seashores of southern England. Although none had ever done him any harm, they were creatures he cared to avoid.

“But something’s not right about *this* beach,” John Paul said inwardly. “Something I can’t quite put my tentacle on, Something’s off, and I’d give an ounce of jelly to know what it is.”

The Captain turned. “Mr. Brown!” he cried, and the brawny the moon jelly appeared alongside him. “Prepare the fleet to sail, if you please. We shall prowl the shallows for a closer look at this American beach.”

“Right-o, Cap’n,” replied the First Mate, but then he remained floating by the captain’s side.

“Well, what is it, Mr. Brown?” John Paul asked.

“Pardon, Cap’n,” the moon jelly said. “But in all me days at sea-o, I’ve seen miles of beaches covered with people-o.”

John Paul scrutinized the sand some more. “Yes, what about it?”

The First Mate’s short tentacles rippled bow to stern. “You see, Cap’n, I know how the landlubbers like to sometimes splash around in the water-o. Especially the wee ones. They find it clever to float on their backs and belly-os.”

“I’m well aware of the habits of people, Mr. Brown. Please make your point.”

“Well, Cap’n, notice the water around here. Not a single soul is swimmin’ in it.”

Yes, that was it! John Paul thought. Although the air is warm, the water is empty. So what is keeping the people from taking a dip?

“All hands, make ready to sail at once,” came the moon jelly’s command. “And keep it quiet, crew. Not a sound.”

Without further delay, John Paul spread his speckled jelly sac wide open. A quick pucker of the bell forced jets of water from his body, propelling him toward shore. His tentacles fluttered behind him like kite tails.

Closer in, the surf was gentle. Small waves lapped and hissed upon the sand like crooked tongues. John Paul knew better than to venture in farther. Any wave, no matter how small, could sweep his entire fleet ashore and strand it there as lifeless lumps of gel.

Nonetheless, the Captain had a sufficient view of the people sprawled on the sand. He marveled at the variety of shapes, sizes, and colors in which this creature came--short, long, flabby, curvy, white, black, and most shades in between. Plenty of little ones were busy with sand. Still no one entered the water.

“People! Revolting creatures!” John snorted. “Imagine having ghastly furry heads in place of handsome jelly sacs. Imagine having spindly legs and arms in place of splendid tentacles. And few people have enough jelly inside them to wobble whatsoever.”

Spying nothing suspicious here, John Paul led his fleet down the length of beach. He had become bored with people watching when a small girl in a pink bikini suddenly jumped to her feet. Flapping her arms like a bird, she shouted, “I’m a pelican! Pelican! Pelican!” and dashed toward the ocean.

The commotion this caused was remarkable. The instant the girl entered the water, grownups from all over sprang off their towels. In one grand chorus they shouted:

“SUSIESTOPSTAYAWAYFROMTHEWATERIT’SNOTSAFETOSWIM!”

Waves rocked the jellies as the girl in the pink bikini splashed back to shore.

“I’m a pelican! Pelican!” she cried, returning to her towel.

John Paul was baffled. Spinning a full circle, he spied nothing in those waters that spelled danger. To be sure, close by swam two genuine pelicans that were eyeing the girl indignantly, but they appeared harmless.

The Lieutenant swam up to the Captain. “Sir, could the people be leery of us sea nettles in the fleet?” he suggested. “You know, sir, what a smart sting we can deliver if provoked.”

“In our present position we are not visible from the beach, Lieutenant,” replied John Paul.

The moon jelly, who had dropped underwater to search the sea bottom, now resurfaced. “Nothing below, Cap’n,” he reported.

“Well something is striking fear into these American people, Mr. Brown,” snapped the Captain. “Something is making these waters off limits to those youngsters.”

John Paul turned to address the entire fleet. This marked an historic moment. Years later when old jellyfish tell their young ones the tale of this voyage, they still recite the famous words the Captain spoke that day.

Captain John Paul Jellyfish clenched a tentacle and tucked in his jelly. In a commanding voice, he gave this pledge:

“Fleet company, together we crossed a vast ocean. We have discovered a new land. However, there is peril here and our mission

is not complete. Now we must scour the coastline and track down the menace that is terrorizing its subjects. We must fight this scourge, whatever it is, wherever it is, and eliminate it from these shores forever.”

4. Along the Coast



Only the boldest of sea captains would have remained in those threatening waters. But that is what Captain John Paul Jellyfish intended to do. Hugging the shoreline, he caught a fresh land breeze and struck out northward with his fleet.

After a short distance the beach ended. The flat sand gave way to round sand dunes that turned into grassy bluffs that became high rock cliffs rising straight from the sea. Monstrous breakers burst into white foam upon smacking the tall dark walls.

“Pardon, Cap’n,” hailed the moon jelly. “Our scout discovered a sea cave-o in these cliffs.”

“Excellent, Mr. Brown,” John Paul replied. “I shall go below. Perhaps that’s where I can acquire some information.”

The Captain submerged and found the sea cave. With a tricky bit of seamanship he sailed into the long, winding tunnel. Mosaic patterns of blue barnacles, yellow sea anemone, and orange starfish decorated the walls.

“Good day, lads,” John Paul greeted the colorful creatures. “Begging your pardon, but my fleet is new to these parts. Would any of you be so kind as to answer a few questions concerning our whereabouts?”

The cave dwellers ignored the visitor. The barnacles didn't budge; the anemone still twiddled their thousands of fingers, and the starfish refused to wave even a single arm.

The Captain came about sharply. "Well, this certainly is a stuck-up crowd," he huffed and shot from the cave.

A mile farther on, the jellyfish fleet entered a forest of sea kelp. For over an hour the jellies threaded through a jungle of swaying green. More than once they halted for a crewmember to untangle a tentacle from around a kelp stalk.

Halfway through the kelp bed, John Paul came nose to nose with a bigmouth bass.

"This could spell trouble, sir," the yellow sea nettle whispered. "We'd best retreat."

"Notice if you please, Lieutenant," John Paul replied coolly. "We jellyfish are too big for this fish to slurp up for his dinner. Likewise, this fish is too big for us to snare in our tentacles for *our* dinner. I say it is a stand off."

Then, with a polite exchange of nods, the fleet and fish continued their separate ways.

Back on the surface, the Captain spotted a worn out sun slipping behind the rock cliffs.

"Mr. Brown," he shouted. "Find somewhere to anchor for the evening, if you will. Our search must continue in the morning."

"Right-o, Cap'n," said the moon jelly, who started barking orders.

The fleet had hardly begun to beat out to sea before--*Splat!*
Spunk! --the water exploded. A glance toward shore showed John Paul two boys dancing wildly upon the cliff tops. Each held a rock.

“Hit the jellyfish!” one of them shouted. “Two points for hitting the jellyfish!”

“Ready! Fire!” shouted the other, and their bombs came hurling seaward.

“Bags!” the Captain cursed. “Artillery! All hands! Battle quarters!”

Sploonk! Sploosh! The rocks pounded the ocean. The tremendous splash nearly blasted the Captain out of the water.

“Avast there, lads!” he bellowed, although he knew that boys could not understand a jellyfish. “We’re friends, not foe!”

Plonk! Plunk! Another volley split the waves. It missed its mark by inches.

Although the thought of retreat was detestable to John Paul Jellyfish, this time, caught under fire by surprise, what other choice did he have? A direct hit from that two-pound shot would send any of his crew straight to the bottom.

“Bags!” the Captain repeated, as another salvo whizzed over his jelly sac. “I *shall* return!”

That said, he turned and led his fleet toward the open ocean. By the time the next round of rocks struck the water, the jellies were safely out of range.

“Lieutenant!” John Paul rasped. “Battle report!”

The yellow sea nettle glided to the Captain 's side. "Sir!" he said. "No casualties, sir. But we thought those hooligans had sent you, sir, to the Jelly's Graveyard, sir."

"Those young sparks were just bored," the Captain sneered. "Since they're unable to swim and play in the water, what else can they do at the seaside but pitch rocks?"

"Har! Har! Boys overboard," went the moon jelly.

"Mr. Brown, set a course for the nearest safe anchorage," said John Paul. "Tell all hands to keep a sharp lookout for danger."

"Right-o, Cap'n!"

By the time the stars returned that night, the jellyfish fleet had anchored in the calm waters behind a sand bar. They enjoyed their first motionless rest in one hundred days at sea.

On this sweet, starry night, the Captain moored himself apart from the rest of the fleet. He allowed his thoughts to flow back to England, to Plymouth Harbor, and to his home underneath a certain pier there. That is where, he was certain, his true love was waiting for his return. Yes, tonight our hero was thinking about Emma, pink, soft, squishy Emma.

"There's plenty of jellyfish in the sea," John Paul sighed before drifting off to sleep. "But sweet Emma is the one for me."

5. The Storm



The next morning Captain John Paul Jellyfish awoke with a slap of cold water across his jelly sac. The sky was red and streaked with feathery white clouds.

John Paul searched his memory. “Red skies in the morning,” he pondered. “That certainly means something to a sailor. Now if I could only remember what it was.”

The First Mate cruised over to the Captain’s side. “Mornin’, Cap’n,” he piped out merrily. “*Red skies in the mornin’, sailors take warnin’*, so the little ditty goes. Looks like we’re in for some dirty weather-o, a hearty blow, don’t you know, Cap’n.”

“Quite right, Mr. Brown,” John Paul replied. “Prepare the fleet to sail at once. If a storm is approaching, it would be best to ride it out in deeper water.”

“Right-o, Cap’n,” said the moon jelly crisply, and in no time, the jellied mariners had put out to sea once more.

All morning a stiff northeasterly blew. Dark, smoky clouds mounted overhead. In the distance, thunder rumbled.

When the Captain was sure his fleet was far enough off shore to weather the storm, he ordered, “Heave to!”

Almost at the same moment, the wind mysteriously died. The air chilled and the water became mirror flat.

“It’s the calm before the storm-o, Cap’n,” said the First Mate.

“Sir! This tempest will be a whopper, sir,” added the Lieutenant.

“Order the crew to take in all slack, if you please, Mr. Brown,” John Paul ordered. “Lieutenant, have every jelly batten down his hatch.”

“Aye, aye, Captain!” the two officers chorused.

Within minutes a lightning bolt cracked the sky. The roar of its thunder followed. *Flash! Boom! Flash! Boom!* The sea heaved and a terrific wind tore through the fleet.

“All hands! All hands below,” the Captain commanded. “Dive! Dive!”

Buffeted by gale-force winds, pelted by heavy raindrops, John Paul Jellyfish stood watch as his crew disappeared beneath the tossing sea. The Captain would be the last one below. Frothy whitecaps raced past him like stallions. Zigzags of lightning made a jigsaw puzzle from the sky. More thunderclaps shook the air.

Flash! Boom! Flash! Flash! Boom! Boom!

Once the regular sailors had submerged, down went the First Mate. Down went the Lieutenant. Finally, knowing his crew was now safe, John Paul could go below himself. Instead, something dreadful happened. A tremendous swell rolled under the Captain and sent him skyward. At its foamy crest, the wave curled and batted the jellyfish toward shore like a badminton shuttlecock.

“Bags!” the Captain cried. He skipped across the wave, tumbling tentacles over sac. His tentacles tangled in knots. For an instant he glimpsed where he was headed, straight toward the rock cliffs he’d visited the day before.

Pitting all his strength against the great force of nature, John Paul attempted to swim seaward. But with tentacles fouled and the wind blasting his bow, he gained no headway. The waves clawed him closer and closer to the waiting rocks.

“Bags! Oh, bags!” John Paul thundered. “Am I to be dashed upon those walls like a wet rag?”

Now with the dark crags towering overhead, a huge white swell broke over the Captain. Tons of seawater plunged down upon him, pushing him deep underwater. Everything was whirlpools and bubbles.

John Paul, his jelly sac about to explode from the pressure of the ocean depths, made one last surge toward the surface.

“Emma! Emma!” he gasped.

That was the last thing he remembered.

6. The Beach



The world was hot and dry. Not the slightest breeze blew. Not the smallest wave splashed fore or aft. Captain John Paul Jellyfish lay on his side, his jelly sac covered with sandy grit, his tangled tentacles sprawled behind him.

He listened to far-off waves lap upon the shore. “I’m marooned on a beach,” he concluded. “What a fine kettle of fish for a sea captain to find himself in.”

From his careened position, John Paul had a sideways view of a short stretch of sand. Driftwood, plastic bottles, tangles of kelp, broken shells, and nylon rope tossed in like him by the storm, littered the place.

Directly in front, a fiddler crab popped out of a hole. The crustacean gave the Captain a quick once-over. Then, in his peculiar sidestepping fashion, he scampered over a dead fish and into a rusty can.

Toward the bottom of the picture lay a soggy mound of seaweed. Countless tiny sand fleas hopped about the green heap. Two of the more daring fleas leaped off the pile and onto John Paul’s flattened jelly sac. They danced around his tender skin, giggling about something only a flea could find funny.

“I say, small gentlemen,” said the Captain. “Would you mind partaking in your merrymaking elsewhere? You are causing a terrible itch.”

Unfortunately, this only encouraged the rowdy pair. The fleas frolicked twice as hard, and John Paul Jellyfish, unable to move whatsoever, was helpless to do a thing about it.

The Captain’s number one concern, however, was not the fleas, the sand, or even the two terns circling overhead. No, his main worry was the sun. Before the hot circle climbed much higher in the sky, it would shrivel his jelly bell like a deflated balloon.

“Bags,” John Paul muttered. “What I would give for a splash of sea water across my bow.”

As he spoke, a thin jet of water shot from the sand and splattered the Captain’s side. The sand shifted and the white shell of a steamer clam appeared. A long slimy foot, looking remarkably like the tongue of a bratty child, pushed the clam upward until it rested on the beach inches before the jellyfish.

“Good day,” said John Paul, relishing the refreshing water drops trickling down his sac.

“Good day? Good day, did you say?” the clam replied. “I hate to say this, jellyfish, but this may be a good day for me, but I reckon it could hardly be worse for you. Yup, I reckon the scorching sun will fry you like an egg by noon.”

The Captain sighed. "I try looking on the bright side of things," he said.

"Well, I hate to say this, jellyfish," said the clam, "but your bright side is getting blistered."

At that instant, a second squirt of water shot out of the sand, hitting John Paul squarely. The sand shifted and another steamer clam appeared next to the first.

Savoring the cool drops again, the Captain said, "Good day."

"No offense, jellyfish," the new clam said. "No offense meant at all. But you're new to these parts, aren't you? A tourist perhaps?"

"More than a tourist, an adventurer," the Captain replied. "I'm on a mission. I'm in pursuit of some peril that's plaguing these shores. It's true, however, that I've been on this coast only a day."

"No offense, jellyfish," said the second clam. "But we get foreigners washed up on our shores after every storm. Many of them are quite undesirable. Most end up in trouble and ask us for help."

"So tell me, if you please, where is this beach precisely?" asked John Paul, who wanted to keep these clams talking in case they spit more water in his direction.

"*Where?*" answered the second clam. "No offense, jellyfish, but *we* hardly care *where* this beach is. We simply call it *Our Bed*. We were born here, raised here, and never intend to leave here.

So, and no offense meant by this, jellyfish, why would we care *where* here is?”

No sooner had the Captain become parched again than one more water jet shot from the sand and splashed his side. Soon a third steamer clam sat with his mates.

“Good day,” John Paul said.

The third clam started in like the others. “Take my advice, jellyfish. Avoid these three words--where, what, and why.”

“Why?” asked the Captain.

“Those words lead to trouble. Look at the mess they got you in. Take my advice--curiosity kills the jellyfish.”

“But I sailed across a vast ocean,” John Paul said.

“I reckon from our point of view it looks narrow,” said the first clam. “We hardly care how others see it.”

“And I discovered this new land America,” the Captain said.

“No offense, jellyfish,” said the second clam. “But the only land we care about is this strip of sand.”

“But there is danger on this coast, and I made a pledge to wipe it out.”

“Why do we care?” said the third clam.

“Yup, I reckon we’re as happy as clams can be,” declared the first clam.

“Happy just to stay in our beds all day,” added the second.

“Now, take my advice, jellyfish, and clam up,” said the third.

How could John Paul explain to these shallow creatures why he had left the safety and comfort of Plymouth Harbor? How could he explain his curiosity for new things, his thirst for adventure, or his devotion to duty? How he wished to tell these boring bivalves to shove off, but at the moment survival was more important than pride.

As another soothing squirt of water splattered his bow, John Paul reminded himself, "It's a fact of life. At times one must tolerate fools."

Suddenly a dark shadow slid across the sand. It stopped directly upon the Captain. From above came a blood-curling cry, "*Quark! Quark! Quark!*"

"Bye-bye! So long! Gotta go!" said the clam trio. And each one stuck out a slimy foot and dug beneath the sand.

"*Quark! Quark!*"

The Captain knew too well what was making the racket above him. "Oh, bags," he swore. "A blasted seagull!"

7. The Seagull



The seagull swooped down and landed ten feet from John Paul Jellyfish.

“This is *not* my day,” the Captain said.

The bird was fat. His plump body teetered on top of two pencil-thin legs. Black eyes like periods held fast on the stranded speckled sac before him.

John Paul knew about seagulls. He loathed them more than any other creature, land, sea, or air. Not only did they rarely have anything of interest to say, but also they were lazy scavengers who lived off handouts, spills, and dead stuff on beaches. He had never known one who did an honest day’s work.

The seagull’s sharp, bloody bill opened to let out another raucous, “*Quark! Quark!*”

“Good day,” said the Captain, trying to check the tremble in his voice and the shake in his jelly.

“Well, hello there, chump,” said the bird. “Rather a good day indeed. Nothing like a big storm to bring in a first-rate feast onto a beach, I’ll say. Why, old bean, let me tell you about the exquisite banquet I’ve been having this morning. Deeeelicious!”

Triangle footprints followed the seagull as he stepped toward John Paul.

“For appetizers, chump, I had salted herring. All the rotten little fishies I could eat, crispy on the outside, nice and wormy on the inside. Simply delightful, chump! Deeeeelightful!”

The bird waddled closer to the Captain.

“Next came a fine salad of kelp. Yes, yes, I know kelp is a rather common green, old bean, but mixed with a few moldy mussels, dead sea snails, and some putrid shrimp, it was delectable. Deeeelectable!”

Hop! Hop! Hop!

“After that, came the main course, chump. Would you believe I dug my bill into the finest cod I ever tasted? My, oh, my, rancid to perfection. Slightly fetid on the bottom, filled with squirming maggots, covered with flies, and not too picked over by the other birds. Why, some of the guts were even left for me, old bean! I savored its stink for several seconds before gorging myself. I’m telling you, chump, it was divine. Simply deeeeervine!”

A short flap of its wings brought the foul gull within inches of the Captain’s jelly sac. Lowering his bloody bill, the bird said, “And so, old bean. And so, my tender *jellybean*, I’ve come to dessert. Eh? Now let me see, I fancy something light, but not too filling. Something to top off a perfect meal, the *pièce de résistance*. Eh? I think I’ll try some scrumptious, succulent, deeeeelicious *jelly*! Catch my drift?”

As the seagull’s bill descended, the John Paul made a fortunate glance between the bird’s legs. A boy, swinging a red

pail, was wandering down the beach. His head was bowed, apparently searching for morning treasures.

“We have a guest, pal,” the Captain said briskly.

The seagull looked up. “Well now, chump. So I see, so I see. Dessert must wait then. Eh? Beachcombers *are* a nuisance, I’ll say. Best not dally. Catch you later.”

The bird spread his wings and glided a short distance down the beach.

Meanwhile, the boy drew nearer. Often he stooped to collect a shell, an agate, or a polished piece of glass. With all the interesting stuff that had washed up on the beach, John Paul expected the boy pass by a sandy, half-dead jellyfish. But no, the boy did stop. The tip of his rubber sandal jabbed into the Captain’s spongy side.

“Good-bye, wonderful world,” the Captain said, who knew how boy’s on beaches liked to step on squishy things. “Farewell, beautiful sea. Adieu, darling Emma,”

Then, staring at the big foot pressing into his side, he uttered what perhaps would be his last words on earth,

“Don’t tread on me.”

8. King Charlie Vee



Captain John Paul Jellyfish waited for the foot to put an end to him.

The boy wiggled his toes.

“Here it comes,” said the Captain. “I’ll soon be nothing more than a messy smear of jelly on a foreign shore, a dead sea captain without a burial at sea.”

The foot, a bare shin, and the dangling red bucket, that was John Paul could see of the boy. Not until the boy stooped could the Captain see a face as well. Freckles covered it from the end of his chin to the brink of his bright red hair. The eyes were wide and blue.

Reaching out a wet finger, the boy brushed some grit off John Paul’s jelly sac.

“Behold! This jellyfish has freckles like me!” he declared.

Now John Paul heard something curious. The boy spoke again, but this time in a high, squeaky voice.

“Marvelous, Your Majesty. You both have many handsome freckles.”

The boy dug his knees into the sand. He poked John Paul with a finger.

“Not much to a jellyfish, is there?” the low voice said. “All skin, no bones.”

The Captain huffed indignantly.

The high voice replied, “Jellyfish are invertebrate, Your Highness. They’re little more than two pieces of skin with jelly in between.”

“Interesting,” John Paul said. “The boy talks with himself. I often hold similar private conversations. Perhaps this boy isn’t the type who steps on things after all.”

As if he understood these words, the boy leaped to his feet.

“Behold! I, King Charlie Vee, shall set this jellyfish free,” he said, and, swinging his bucket, he peeled off toward the ocean.

Sparkling water sloshed over the pail’s brim when the boy returned. With two fingers he dribbled some drops over the parched jellyfish.

Ahhh! The Captain wobbled in ecstasy.

“Behold!” announced the low voice. “This jellyfish is alive!”

To which the high voice replied, “Excellent, Your Excellency!”

Using his sandal, the boy scooped up the limp jellyfish and dropped him into the pail.

Ahhh! Bliss! Relief! Rapture! The instant John Paul’s jelly bell settled on the water it filled out handsomely. His tentacles unraveled to the bottom of the bucket. Oh, how marvelous it was to be floating again, no matter how small and red the world appeared.

In the round circle of a sky, John Paul saw the boy's grinning freckled face. *Swish! Swash!* went the water and what followed was the rockiest ride of the Captain's life. Finally the bucket tipped, and the seasick sea nettle splashed back into the ocean.

"My, how good it is to feel the sway of the sea beneath my hull again," John Paul said when his head stopped spinning.

"First, I must test my equipment."

A few trial contractions of his jelly bell and swishes of his tentacles satisfied the Captain.

"One main tentacle is torn slightly, but otherwise I'm in good repair," he said.

As for the boy, he was sitting on the sand, stripping off his clothes. Off came his T-shirt, shorts, and underwear, until, as naked as a seal pup, he sprang to his feet and dashed into the water.

"Ah, a skinny-dipper," John Paul noted, watching the boy dog paddle toward him.

When the boy reached the Captain, he floated on his belly. "Behold, jellyfish," he said. "I, King Charlie Vee, shall show you the *jellyfish float*." With that, he wrapped his arms around his knees and bobbed in a balled-up position for several seconds.

"Well done, sir," the Captain said. "What will people dream up next?"

John Paul was not above showing off some of his aquatic maneuvers himself. First he performed a fine three hundred and sixty degrees spin, before fluttering gracefully downward like a silk handkerchief. Underwater, he executed two loop-the-loops and finished off with a rocket shot to the surface. For a jellyfish that had just spent several hours stranded on a hot beach, this was a first-rate performance, and the boy showed his appreciation with a wide grin.

That night, long after King Charlie Vee had left, John Paul Jellyfish floated off shore in a reflective mood. Although eager to rejoin his fleet, he doubted his strength yet to face the open sea.

A full moon lay a wobbly moonbeam path across the ocean and spread silver dust over the beach.

While studying the white circle in the sky, the Captain thought, *There's that bald man peeping through his hole as he does every month. Why does he spy on me? He's a friendly-looking chap, though. I wonder if he had anything to do with saving my life today. So many mysteries in this world. Who could that man be?*

9. Bon Voyage



For breakfast the next morning, Captain John Paul Jellyfish thought he'd fancy a minnow or two.

"Just the thing to restore the old pep," he said, while sailing up and down the shore in search of the little creatures.

Any minnow that had the misfortune of swimming underneath the Captain was sure to run into one of his twenty-four deadly tentacles. When this happened, John Paul delivered a paralyzing sting. Afterwards it was only a matter of rolling up the tentacle and stuffing the hapless fish into his mouth.

This morning the sand was flat and damp like a playground on a rainy day. A squad of stubby-legged sandpipers was playing tag with the waves. A flock of seagulls had a game of keep-away going with a dead starfish, and everywhere sand fleas were playing hopscotch.

Still early, the freckle-faced boy reappeared on the beach. "Behold, jellyfish!" he cried, upon spying John Paul swimming ten yards off shore. "King Charlie Vee has returned!"

The Captain lazily rolled up a tentacle and munched on a minnow.

“I looked up *jellyfish* on the Internet,” the boy called. “A sea nettle, that’s what you are. Scientists call you *Chrysassaora quin ... quinquecirrah*.”

“Well, scientists should learn that name-calling is not polite,” John Paul muttered.

Now the boy picked up a stick and wrote in the sand:

C-H-R-Y-S

“Chyrs! Short for chrysassaora,” he said, raising the stick in the air. “I, King Charlie Vee, hereby dub thee, *Sir Chrys!*”

“Ah, so I have been knighted, have I?” the Captain mused. “Why thank you very much, my boy.”

Within seconds the boy had stripped off his clothes and jumped into the water. Today, however, his skinny-dip was cut short by the appearance of an old man on the beach. The man squinted at the ocean, and shook a finger toward the naked boy.

“Charles Vanilla! You there, Charles!” he called. “Get out of the sea! There’s danger out there, boy!”

Danger! That word was echoing up and down the coastline. Danger! The Captain remembered his mission and scanned the horizon.

The boy started dog paddling toward shore.

“I must leave this place, King Charlie Vee,” John Paul said, rocking in his wake. “I owe you my life, and as long as there is jelly left in my sac, I will be at your service.”

Enough rest. John Paul Jellyfish now felt an urgent need to rejoin his fleet. As he was about to part, however, none other than the fat seagull from yesterday sailed overhead.

“Well, chump,” he called. “So I see you made it off that toasty sand. Eh? Saved by that nutty kid. Eh? So I must wait to finish my fine feast.”

“Have no fear, foul fowl,” the Captain returned. “You will get your just dessert some day.”

“You haven’t heard the last of me, old bean, my scrumptious *jelly bean*,” said the bird. “Catch my drift?”

Without further delay, John Paul opened his umbrella wide. He slapped it shut and shot out toward the deep, blue sea.

10. Rendezvous



It was an afternoon for smooth sailing, a time when the wind blew the Captain's sac where he wanted, and the waves rocked his jelly gently.

Beneath him, the sea teemed with life. Along the way he spotted grumpy-looking codfish and armies of silver herring that flashed like new dimes each time they turned. He gave wide berth to a team of harbor seals, and glared disapprovingly at four flounder lounging on the silty seabed.

Later, the Captain called, "Good day," to an octopus who was pulling his way over a pile of rocks.

The eight-armed creature stopped to salute and salute and salute and salute.

"That will do, good fellow," John Paul said impatiently. "I'm searching for my fleet. Have you sighted any jellyfish in the vicinity?"

The octopus, apparently befuddled by the appearance of a sea captain above him, managed only to shrug and shrug and shrug and shrug, and by the time he was through shrugging John Paul had sailed on by.

Toward nightfall, a school of tuna crossed the Captain's path. He hailed them and inquired again about his fleet's whereabouts.

"It's a modest-size fleet," he explained. "Twenty-four hands strong...sea nettles mostly, yet in a variety of colors...one brawny moon jelly, as well, the best of the bunch...I suppose they'd be hard to tell apart from any other group of jellies on the coast, except by their accents...We hail from England, you see...the first jellyfish fleet ever to sail the Atlantic."

"Outta the way, Mac!" one tuna in the school shouted.

"Can't you see we're in a hurry?" cried another.

"Hey, watch where you dangle those tentacles, dude," said a third.

The Captain shook his jelly bell. "I never knew tuna were such rude fish," he said. "Is that what happens when you stay in a school too long?"

Not a jellyfish to be discouraged easily, John Paul next approached a sperm whale that was sunning himself on the surface.

"Good day, Great Spout," he called out.

The whale let out a geyser from his topside. "Call me, Ish," he replied. "And thank ye, mate."

"Thank you, Mr. Ish?" the Captain asked. "I don't understand."

The whale spouted again. “Thanks for not hollering *thar she blows* when you spotted me, mate,” he explained. “That’s what all the blokes around here cry, *thar she blows, thar she blows*, every time I spout. It’s a bit of a joke, and I’m bloody well tired of it.”

“I understand, Mr. Ish,” said John Paul. “Tell me, if you please, have you been sailing in these waters long?”

“Aye, I have, mate” answered the whale. “And who’ll be asking?”

“I’m Captain John Paul Jellyfish out of Plymouth, England.”

The whale’s big eyes grew bigger. “Well, blimey!” he said. “I’ve heard of you, mate. The name John Paul Jellyfish is mentioned by every deep-sea sailor around Europe. You’re the bloke who led the British fleet to victory against the Portuguese men-of-war a few years back, ain’t ye?”

The Captain shuttered at the memory of that terrible battle. “Much jelly was spilled that day,” he replied. “My crew did themselves proud.”

“Will you listen to him? What humility!” said the whale. “Why I heard tell that you were outnumbered in that battle three to one, Captain. A fierce tentacle-to-tentacle engagement that one was. I heard tell if it weren’t for your quick wit and cunning those men-of-war would have sunk the entire British navy. Say, don’t they have a nickname for you, Captain? *Old Ironsides*! That’s what they call you. They say your jelly sac must be as tough as iron to have survived so much fighting without being punctured.”

“Indeed,” the Captain said dryly. How well he knew that his skin was as thin as cellophane.

“Well, blow me down!” the whale blubbered on. “It’s an honor to meet ye, Captain. Aye, a right honor indeed. So whither ye bound?”

“I’m in pursuit of an unknown peril,” John Paul explained. “But it appears, Mr. Ish, for the moment I’ve lost my fleet.”

“You don’t say. Why that’s a bloody shame, Captain. But I seen a bunch of jellies sail by here bout an hour ago. A yellow sea nettle was in command. Doing a bloody poor job of it, though. Could they be yours, Captain?”

“That’s them,” John Paul said. “What were their bearings, Mr. Ish?”

The whale flipped his broad tail toward shore. “Headed for that harbor yonder. In a bloody hurry, they were.”

This was welcome news indeed. The harbor was close and John Paul was weary. “Very good, Mr. Ish. Now I must be shoving off. Cheerio!”

“Fare thee well, John Paul Jellyfish,” called the whale. “May luck stay with you, *Old Ironsides*.”

As the Captain sailed for shore, the whale honored him with a ten-spout salute.

“Thar she blows!” cried every fish in the area.

Within the hour John Paul steered into the small harbor. Careful to avoid the sailboats slipping in and out of the harbor’s

narrow entrance, he cruised toward a wooden dock on the lee shore. Beneath the dock, behind a barnacle-encrusted piling, he found his fleet anchored.

“Lieutenant! I’m back!” the Captain barked. “Mr. Brown! Anything to report?”

“Affirmative-o, Cap’n,” the First Mate said. “We encountered the enemy.”

A cold lump formed in John Paul’s jelly. “The Portuguese?” he snarled. “Here, on this coast?”

“Right-o, Cap’n. Fifty, maybe sixty men-o’-war,” the moon jelly said. “They chased us into this harbor.”

“Sir,” the Lieutenant spoke up. “During the chase, two of the crew--pink nettles they were, sir--deserted the fleet, sir.”

The Captain swelled with rage. “Fools!” he rasped. “Those jelly bellies won’t last a day on their own. So, Lieutenant, the enemy knows we are in here?”

The yellow sea nettle confirmed this with a tip of his sac.

The Captain cast a look toward the harbor’s mouth. “Bags!” he cursed under his breath. “An entire armada of Portuguese men-of-war! And they have us trapped in this place like sitting ducks.”

11. The Men-of-War



The presence of a large fleet of Portuguese men-of-war on the coast explained a great deal. No wonder children were forbidden to swim at the beaches. No wonder Charlie Vanilla was scolded for skinny-dipping. A Portuguese man-of-war is a fearsome jellyfish, the scourge of any sea it sails. It packs one of the most painful stings of any sea creature. No wonder when the warm currents bring these loathsome creatures northward, people watch out.

At the crack of dawn the next morning, Captain John Paul Jellyfish dished out orders to his officers. "Lieutenant, see to it I am not disturbed for an hour. Mr. Brown, keep a sharp eye on the mouth of this harbor. If the enemy knows we are in here, they will come after us with the morning tide."

Once alone, John Paul sailed to the end of the dock to survey the scene. A stone quay, whitewashed with seagull droppings, surrounded the harbor. Behind a bustling waterfront stood a row of white shops. The stale water, the stench of fish guts, the gurgling sound of motors all reminded the captain of many other fishing villages he had visited back home.

The water on this warm, clear morning was swarming with boats--sailboats, lobster boats, fishing boats, houseboats,

tugboats, canoes, kayaks, and speedboats. But one particular boat caught the captain's interest. A small skiff with a big-muscled man at the oars made regular trips back and forth across the harbor. It ferried people from the far end of the quay to the end of the dock.

Here the rowboat came now. John Paul shot out of harm's way as its bow bumped the dock hard. *Clump! Clump! Clump!* went sneakers upon the wooden planks above. Four people in T-shirts and Bermuda shorts stepped down into the waiting ferry. With a series of mighty pulls upon the oars, the ferryman turned his craft about and headed along the course he had come.

When the first puffs of morning breeze brushed the Captain's sac, and the tide pulled his tentacles, he knew it was time to act. "Time and tide wait for no jellies," he said inwardly. "Time to get these jellies out of this jam."

Returning to his officers, he gave the orders no one expected. "Lieutenant! Make all hands ready to sail at one! We are heading out to meet the enemy!"

Moments later, the jellied mariners were beating across the choppy waters of the harbor. None of them could guess what plan had gelled inside their Captain's mind.

"All hands heave to!" John Paul commanded, when the fleet reached the harbor's entrance. "Clear for action!"

The jellyfish grew tense and quiet. Strung out across the mouth of the harbor like so many beads on a necklace, they

waited. Not only did the flooding tide and steady breeze make it impossible to maintain position, but also the ferryboat sent them dancing in its wake each time it passed.

In no time, the lookout cried, "Sails ahoy!"

There on the horizon appeared the giant blue floats of two Portuguese men-of-war. Their number quickly multiplied to four...eight...sixteen...thirty-two...*sixty-four* men-of-war, all running before the wind straight toward the harbor.

The sight was staggering. Resembling the great Portuguese galleon ships of old, the inflated football-size blue sacs came bowling across the water, their rigid crests raised like gleaming sails. Beneath the surface each man-of-war carried maybe twenty feet of the deadliest tentacles.

Meanwhile at the harbor's mouth, the yellow Lieutenant swished back and forth. "We're finished, sir! Done for!" he wailed. "They'll sink us all, sir! They'll drag us to the bottom!"

"Stow it, Lieutenant!" John Paul fumed.

The First Mate gaped at the advancing man-of-war flotilla. "In all me days at sea-o, Cap-n, I never imagined such monsters. What *can* we possibly do against them?"

John Paul replied coolly, "When outnumbered, Mr. Brown, a sailor must remember his advantages."

"Beggin' your pardon, Cap'n, but I see nothin' that will prevent those blue devils from squeezin' the jelly out of us as easily as jelly doughnuts."

“Ah, Mr. Brown, but you have forgotten your marine biology,” the Captain said. “Jet propulsion! That is what we have and they lack. The Portuguese men-of-war, mighty though they are, remain at the mercy of the wind and current. They are just full of hot air really. And we, Mr. Brown, are about to knock the wind out of them.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” said the moon jelly. “Just give us the orders-o.”

John Paul spent the last tense moments studying the scene. His plan required precise timing. The ferryboat was now moored at the dock collecting new passengers.

Seaward, the men-of-war were so close he could see sunshine shining through their translucent blue floats.

Open, shut, the Captain’s jelly sac throbbed like a beating heart. As if mad, he snarled, “Come at us faster, blue blowhards! Speed it up, foul garbage bags! Faster! Faster!”

Suddenly a cry, more like a shriek, came from the Lieutenant. “*Sir!* Rowing craft bearing down on us, sir! We’re right in its path, sir!”

John Paul remained steadfast. He knew the tide had pushed his fleet back into the ferry’s route. Without turning he could picture the skiff’s tall prow plowing through the water straight toward them.

“Stand fast, lads!” the captain cried with only the slightest shake in his voice. “No one move until I give the word! Steady now! Steady!”

When the men-of-war stood a mere yard before the waiting jellyfish and one more stroke of the ferryman’s oar spelled disaster from the rear, John Paul gave the orders, “All hands! All hands reverse full speed!”

In one swift motion, the jellyfish closed their bells and shot back into the harbor. At the same moment the sixty-four men-of-war sailed across the rowboat’s path. As they did, the craft plowed right through them.

“Heave to!” cried John Paul Jellyfish, and he turned to witness the devastation.

One, two, three, four men-of-war exploded upon impact with the skiff. Six more disappeared under the churning water.

“Blasted nuisances!” cursed the muscled ferryman, who swatted three more blue floats with his oar. The remaining men-of-war scattered to the far reaches of the harbor, helpless to move until the tide took them out again.

A mighty cheer rose from the jellyfish fleet. “Victory! Hurrah for Old Ironsides!”

John Paul’s jelly sac puckered. As he ran an eye along the perimeter of the harbor, he spotted plenty of blue forms still stirring. What is more, a familiar fat seagull stood on a nearby piling.

“This was no victory, gentlemen,” the Captain said to his officers. “Once the tide turns, these men-of-war will regroup and come after us with greater fury. And next time I doubt there will be a handy rowboat to do the dirty work. This battle is won, gentlemen, but not the war.”

12. Striking North



The next morning the jellyfish rose early and struck out for parts unknown. Once upon the open sea, Captain John Paul Jellyfish caught a steady current that carried the fleet northward at a good clip.

This morning the jellies were in high spirits. The weather was splendid and the speedy current spared them a load of work. While sailing along, they told salty jokes and sang sea shanties. One rousing chorus went like this:

*Oh, this is the life for me...Hey ho!
To be free and made of jelly...Hey ho!
We wobble when we will,
And drink our fill!
Oh, we love this life of the sea...Hey ho!*

Toward noon, however, conditions changed. The horizon, soft and smooth all morning, became a puffy gray pillow. The closer the jellyfish sailed to the gloom the more somber their mood grew.

“Bags!” the Captain muttered, realizing what he was about to enter. “A fog bank.”

Into the dreary ghost-world the fleet drifted. The sun faded and then vanished altogether. The air turned thick and chilly.

John Paul stared into the swirling drizzle. He alone knew the perils of cruising along an uncharted coast in thick fog. For

starters, by now plenty of Portuguese men-of-war would be roving about, perhaps sailing along the same current. Then who knew what sharp-toothed or wide-clawed creature might emerge from these murky depths? Then again, how many jellyfish had run aground upon hidden rocks in similar soupy weather?

Later, something else disturbed the Captain. Out of the fog tumbled a deep, distant bellowing.

Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo! Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo!

“Sir! Sir!” called the Lieutenant. “That belching sound. What could it be, sir?”

Before the Captain could reply another *Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo!* shook the mist.

The moon jelly appeared at John Paul’s side. “Sounds like someone is sick-o, Cap’n,” he said.

John Paul’s steely stare remained forward. “Steady as she goes, gentlemen,” he said.

For the next hour the jellyfish drifted through the colorless world, while the deep repeating *Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo!* grew louder. When the sound was almost deafening, a beam of light, a single stiff white rod, pierced the mist. Yet as suddenly as it appeared, it vanished. *Flash!* It came again. *Poof!* It was gone.

The Lieutenant sailed close behind the Captain. “It’s a sea monster, sir,” he uttered. “A demon of the deep. Some phantom of the ocean.”

“It’s a blinking sea god!” said the First Mate. “Perhaps mighty Neptune himself!”

At that moment a breeze parted the fog, and there on a rocky island the thing stood, tall, round, and striped like a candy cane. *Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo!* It sounded. *Flash! Flash! Flash!* went the light at its top.

“Just look at the eye on that Cyclops, Cap’n!” said the First Mate.

“It sounds hungry, sir?” cried the Lieutenant.

The rest of the fleet gathered around their leader.

“What it is, Captain?” asked Smucker, the young mushroom jelly.

“It gives me the willies, Captain,” said a large cannonball jelly named Big Welch. “Where did it come from?”

Every jellyfish waited breathlessly to hear the words from their captain that would set their minds at ease.

Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo!

Flash! Flash! Flash!

The Captain scrutinized the curiosity before him. He took a long time before answering. Finally, he cleared his throat and said in a voice wrought with authority, “Fellow jellies, you have nothing to fear. This thing is harmless. Now let us leave this dreary place.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” said the Lieutenant.

“Right-o, Cap’n,” piped the First Mate. “Everyone back to your stations.”

The entire fleet, swollen with renewed admiration for their bold leader’s wisdom, sailed off into the fog, singing a merry shanty.

John Paul Jellyfish waited until his crew was clear of the rocks before drifting off by himself. Once alone he let out a long, slow sigh. Behind him another *Beeeeeeeeeee Oooooooooooooo* sounded, and the light beam cut through the mist.

“Bags,” the Captain muttered under his breath. “I haven’t the foggiest idea what that thing was.”

13. In the Fog



The current carried the fleet steadily northward. The fog remained thick and the air nippy. To make matters worse, the water became murky and began to stink. Now bits of plastic, pieces of Styrofoam, two Popsicle sticks, a champagne cork, and a doll's leg drifted along with the jellyfish.

Although nothing was clear fore or aft, Captain John Paul Jellyfish knew he was sailing through a busy shipping lane. Out of the gloom tumbled the growl of motors, the rattle of chains, the toll of bells, and the muffled shouts of seamen.

"Two points to starboard, Captain!" called the lookout.
"There's a rainbow, and it's floating on the water!"

John Paul raced forward to inspect the swirling band of colors resting on the surface of the sea.

"It's pretty," he said, taking a whiff of the stuff. "*Phew!* But we will detour around it."

Still later, the Captain spotted what appeared to be a fellow traveler—a yellow, three-legged sea creature with a pointy head.

"Ahoy! Ahoy!" he hailed, but received no reply.

"I'm a jellied mariner new to these parts," the Captain went on. "I wish to inquire about any protected place nearby where my fleet could sack out for the night."

At this point, the First Mate broke in, “Beggin’ your pardon, Cap’n.”

Ignoring the moon jelly, John Paul continued to chat with the silent sailor. “Now, good fellow, speak up, if you please. It is impossible to see things in this pea soup, and my crew, after a triumphant skirmish this morning, deserves a comfortable anchorage tonight.”

“Er, Cap’n, sir,” the First Mate interrupted again.

John Paul spun around with a wrinkled brow. “Really, Mr. Brown. What’s so important that you must disturb my conversation with this shy sailor?”

“With all respects, Cap’n,” the moon jelly said, lowering his voice. “But that thing you’re chattin’ with is no sea creature. It’s a banana peel, Cap’n.”

John Paul turned in time to watch the pointy head of the yellow fruit flop to one side. One leg rose before the entire piece of garbage sank out of sight.

The Captain checked the moon jelly’s face for a smirk. “Very well, Mr. Brown,” he said. “Set a new course, if you please. Head for shore.”

In no time the fleet reached the coastline. Here the fog was so thick that the lookout failed to notice a tall black, iron wall before sailing into it. This tall monolith, newly painted, raised straight out of the water, before sloping gradually outward to an amazing height.

The Captain checked the area. “No wind. Plenty of food. Good protection from a man-of-war attack. An ideal spot to drop anchor.”

What followed was the most peaceful evening the jellyfish had all journey. First, they feasted on a whole menu of seafood—mussels, barnacles, seaworms, and periwinkles—that lived by the iron wall.

After the meal, Skippy, a handsome bluefire jelly, who was the bo’s’n’s mate, entertained the crew by singing ballads in his sweet tenor voice. One particularly beautiful love song left not a dry eye in the fleet. It went like this:

*Away across the ocean lies my love Maggie.
Floating soft and smooth as a pint-size Baggie.
And my dying wish,
Is for one last squish,
Wrapped in her tentacles again.*

Sometime during the night, the fog lifted. The night watch had drifted off to sleep, so no jelly was awake to see the air clear. No jelly noticed where the fleet was anchored, in the midst of an enormous port. Surrounding them with all its lights, buildings, cars, streets, and 600,000 people, was the great city of Boston.

And what was the tall iron wall next to which the jellyfish fleet rested? That was the bow of the mighty ocean liner *Queen Mary II* which was about to set sail on a round-the-world cruise.

14. An Old Blue Lobster



PHOOOOOT! PHOOOOOOT! PHOOOOOT!

Three short blasts from the ship's horn shook Captain John Paul Jellyfish from his dreams. This was all the warning he had before the tall iron wall beside him began to move.

"All hands! Weigh anchors!" the Captain cried. "Turn out! Cast off! Get cracking! Swim for it, lads!"

From somewhere close people cheered. Dots of colored paper rained upon the ocean. Long streamers fell. The water began to bubble and the great hull of the *Queen Mary II* pulled out of its berth.

At first the ship moved slowly. It took tremendous power to get 150,000 tons of ocean liner, the length of four football fields, to push through water. The massive engines thundered. The gigantic propellers churned the water into a boiling froth.

Fortunately, by this time the jellyfish fleet was floating a safe distance out in the harbor. As the long length of ship passed them, John Paul remarked to his officers, "Notice her stern, gentlemen. She flies the colors of our country."

"Aye, aye, sir," said the Lieutenant, still half asleep.

"Right-o, Cap'n," replied the groggy First Mate.

Then the three jellyfish tried their best to salute the Union Jack while rocking wildly in the wake of the *QM2* now steaming full throttle out to sea.

With the turning of the tide an hour away, the Captain decided to explore the vast port. However, clouds of soapsuds, floating garbage, and more smelly rainbows hindered the way. Below the surface was even worse. John Paul stared in disgust at old tires, shopping carts, car parts, bottles, cans of all kinds, and a few old chests of tea.

At length, the fleet approached a long cement wharf. Among the stacks of plastic crates, lobsters pots, Dumpsters, and parked trucks sat old men with fishing poles.

John Paul Jellyfish studied the nylon fishing lines dangling from the poles. "I'm curious what's happening on the other end of those lines," he told his officers, and he plunged below the surface.

There the Captain spotted something disturbing. Crouched next to a hook at the end of a fishing line was a large, blue lobster. He had a claw raised and as nimbly as a safecracker was plucking the bait off the hook. When the hook was clean, a flip of its fan tail sent the lobster gliding backward to the next line in the row. He set about robbing this one in the same manner. So expertly did he clean each hook, without the slightest tug on the line, that the anglers topside never suspected that they hadn't a chance in the world of catching any fish today.

“You there, lobster,” John Paul called. “Living off easy pickings can get you hooked.”

The lobster’s small beady eyes set on the end of short, stalks turned upward. “Well now, me hearty,” he said, spotting the sea nettle hovering above him. “Life in the city is not easy, don’t you know. A poor lobster needs to eat somehow.”

“And what, may I ask, prevents you from hunting in the deep like an honest crustacean?” asked John Paul.

By way of an answer, the blue lobster raised a shortened front limb from which the claw was missing. “Notice me stump, Cappy,” he said. “Lost me pincher a while ago in a fight with a Great White, don’t you know. Aye, me and that monstrous shark wrestled for hours, we did. Gave the brute a good fight, too. But he made off with me crushing claw between his teeth just the same.”

“Come, come, my blue friend,” said the Captain. “I’m fully aware of a lobster’s handy ability to grow a new claw after losing one.”

“Well, now, Cappy,” said the lobster. “Ain’t ye smarter than the average jellyfish who strays into Boston Harbor? So there’s no use reminding you that us blue-colored lobsters are a rare breed and deserve a certain amount of respect. Why, only one in every ten million lobster turns out blue, don’t you know.”

John Paul chuckled. "I believe the odds are more like one in every two million. Still, that's no reason to hang around these wharves scavenging like a seagull."

"Easy for a jellyfish to say, Cappy," said the lobster. "You don't have a fleet of lobster men after your tail. But I've served me time in the depths, don't you know. Aye, I've hunted with the best of lobsters. You don't grow to be my size living in foul water eating fish bait."

The Captain watched a bare fish hook shoot upward and return shortly with a fresh shrimp on its end. He studied the lobster some more before saying, "Well, you seem like an able-bodied and resourceful sea creature. The fact is my fleet has a powerful enemy after our sacs. Your experience and knowledge of this coastline could be valuable. Why don't you sign on with me as fleet navigator?"

The lobster's long antennae lashed around his head like whips. "By Neptune, Cappy!" he exclaimed. "You mean you'd take on a loafing old lobster like meself?"

"I expect every hand to carry his own weight," said John Paul sternly.

"I'm a four pound lobster, and I can carry every ounce,"

"You're closer to a two-pounder," said the Captain. "And while you sail with me, I will hear no more of your tall tales."

"Agreed, Cappy," said the lobster. "When do we sail?"

With the turning tide, the jellyfish fish sailed out of Boston Harbor. The blue lobster kept pace with them along the sea bottom.

Wanting no slackers in his navy, the Captain kept a sharp eye on his new crewmember. That evening, however, he sniggered overhearing the lobster spin yarns to the younger jellies in the fleet.

“Why, me handsomes,” the lobster said, waving his clawless stump before their wide eyes. “I’ve been sailing these waters for over fifty years, don’t you know. Lost me claw to a giant squid near this very spot. Five times, don’t you know, I’ve been caught in the lobsterman’s trap. Why, once, me handsomes, the lobsterman even took me home and dropped me into a kettle of boiling water. Don’t you know, I was nearly cooked alive before I found me chance to escape and run ten miles back to the sea.”

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15. Night Glow



The old blue lobster served Captain John Paul Jellyfish well. Not only did he prove to be a skilled sailor, but an expert navigator as well. For the next week, as the fleet cruised up and down the coast in search of the man-of-war armada, he pointed out to the Captain important islands, inlets, harbors, and headlands. John Paul, who wished to make a thorough survey of the new land, was much obliged.

Even when the fleet left sight of land the lobster never lost his bearings. By day he followed the familiar hills and gullies of the ocean floor, and at night he followed the stars.

“The heavens are like our ocean, me beauties,” he instructed the younger jellies one evening, while pointing skyward with his single claw. “The sky is filled with marine creatures—sea constellations, don’t you know. Look there to the west...that’s Pisces, the fish. And across the sky...there’s Cancer, the crab. Now look overhead and you’ll find Cygnus, the swan, and near that is Delphinium, the dolphin. By Neptune, ain’t they a glorious sight!”

Indeed the night was filled with enchantment. Not only did the thousands of stars make thousands of squiggling reflections upon the water, but also beneath the surface was the Night Glow.

The undersea world teemed with jellyfish, phosphorescent ones that gave off eerie flashes of blue, red, and yellow. The entire sea glowed like a Fourth-of-July sky.

John Paul Jellyfish enjoyed chatting with these American jellies.

“This is an enormous continent you’ve sailed into, Captain,” a brilliant white compass jellyfish told him. “People say it goes from sea to shining sea.”

“And that other sea is far bigger than the Atlantic, Captain,” explained a beefy barrel jellyfish. “It’s called the Pacific Ocean, although to sail across it is anything but pacifying.”

Next a fierce lion’s mane jellyfish, whose jelly sac measured at least six feet across, mentioned, “And to the north, Captain, lies still another ocean. It covers the top of the world, and it lies under a thick sheet of ice!”

One conversation with three by-the-way sailor jellyfish provided John Paul with a vital piece of information. These small blue jellies, which looked like little glass dishes, told the Captain about meeting the man-of-war navy.

“They’re laying pillage along the entire Atlantic seaboard,” explained one by-the-way sailor. “Plaguing every beach they are blown upon. Stinging any person they find swimming.”

“And they’re after your jelly, Captain,” said the second small jellyfish. “They put a whopping price upon your sac.”

“The man-of-war commodore, he says to give you a message, Captain,” said the third by-the-way sailor.

“Indeed, my glassy friend,” said John Paul. “And what could that be?”

“He says you’d better leave this coast, John Paul Jellyfish, or, he says, they’ll hunt you down and send your entire fleet to a watery grave. He says, they’ll turn your jelly sac inside out, and rip every tentacle off your hide, he says. After that, he says, they’ll spread your jelly from here to the Sandwich Islands. That’s what he says.”

For the rest of the evening, the Captain drifted alone. A full moon sat on the horizon.

“Hello again, bald man,” he said to the white circle. “Is that a smirk on your shiny face I see? Are you scoffing me? Do you think I shall be defeated this time?”

16. A Cormorant



Winter came early that year. Overnight the temperature dropped twenty degrees, and the sky turned as flat and gray as a blackboard.

One dank, gusty morning Captain John Paul Jellyfish scanned the wobbly line of a horizon surrounding him. “The season grows short,” he told his officers. “Riding out a winter in these treacherous waters would be rough and unwise. We must sail for warmer seas.”

All morning the jellyfish prepared for the voyage south. They checked the trim of their sac and stocked their tentacles with fish. Shortly before departure, however, the lookout cried, “Ahoy, Captain! Sea bird off your port bow!”

“Bother birds!” snapped John Paul, who had seen dozens of waterfowl already that day.

“Captain, this bird appears to need assistance!” called the lookout. “He’s swimming in circles!”

“Oh, very well,” John Paul grumbled. “The first law of the sea is to aid any creature in distress. Lieutenant, follow me.”

The two jellyfish approached a slender, black bird that was swimming in around and around in the water. “May Day! S-O-S!” he cried. “May Day! S-O-S!”

“Attention bird!” called the Captain.

The bird craned his long neck upward while continuing to loop. “May Day! S-O-S!”

“Lieutenant, what is this bird trying to spell?” John Paul said. “And why does he call this May Day when the present month is October?”

“Perhaps, sir, this pitiful creature is spelling his name. Sos, sir. And perhaps, sir, in this miserable weather he’s just longing for the merry month of May.”

“Very well,” said John Paul addressing the bird again.

“Attention, Sos, what seems to be your problem?”

“Good golly! Goo! Goo! By golly!” the bird ranted.

“The birds loony, sir,” said the Lieutenant. “Let’s leave him be.”

“Correction, Lieutenant. This bird is not a loon but a double-crested cormorant. And something is undoubtedly troubling him.”

The bird flapped his long wings as if wanting to fly but couldn’t. “Golly gee! Goo! Goo!” he said. “S-O-S! S-O-S!”

At this point the First Mate sailed up. “Cap’n, the crew is ready to sail-o,” he said. “Shall I give the orders?”

One moment, Mr. Brown,” said the Captain, still studying the rotating bird. “Observe this cormorant’s feathers, if you will. Aren’t they smeared with black gook? No wonder the poor bird cannot fly.”

“That’s crude oil-o, Cap’n,” the moon jelly said. “It leaks out of oil tankers and floats on the water-o”

“Is that what it is, Sos?” John Paul asked the bird. “Did you sail through an oil slick?”

The cormorant stopped his swimming and faced the jellyfish trio. “Good golly! That’s what happened, by golly,” he said.” Golly! Just before starting my winter migration to Florida, I dove for some delicious fish. Golly gee, I came up through this black goo.”

The Lieutenant sailed close to the Captain. “Poor blighter, sir,” he whispered. “The bird’s a goner. Oil will never come out of those feathers, sir. He can’t fend for himself. Sir, there’s nothing we can do for him. Let’s leave, sir.”

“Lieutenant, I believe we have a saying in our navy: *Don’t give up the ship*. I believe I know a way to save this bird.”

At this moment the blue lobster shot up from the depths. His tall stalked eyes swiveled toward the cormorant.

“Good golly! May Day! S-O-S! S-O-S!” the bird started again.

“Stow it, Sos,” the Captain snarled. “He’s one of ours.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, Cappy,” said the lobster. “But seeing that the fleet is sailing south and all, I thought I’d take my leave and head back to the city.”

“Hold on, Navigator,” John Paul said. “Your services are still needed here. Lieutenant, set a new course. We are returning to

the beach where I was stranded. I know a boy there who will help this bird.”

17. Return to the Beach



With wide V's of geese overhead pointing way, the jellyfish fleet returned south. The old blue lobster glided silently along the ocean floor, while the oil-soaked cormorant swam in the rear.

The good bird tried his best to keep up with the fleet. With his webbed feet paddling hard and his long bill held upward at a proud angle, Sos kept saying, "I'm coming! I'm coming, by golly! Golly gee, here I come!" But with his feathers coated by the black, sticky mess, he weakened fast. Each hour saw him lagging farther and farther behind.

The Lieutenant talked to the Captain. "Sir, I don't think the bird will make it. It's rough going for him, sir. And even if we make it to the beach, sir, how can we be sure this boy of yours, this King Charlie Vee, will help Sos?"

"Because the lad is kind to creatures, Lieutenant," John Paul answered. "Even to the most humble and squishy of us. I am willing to bet a tentacle that when we reach the beach, the freckled-faced boy will find a way to scrub the cormorant's feathers."

All that morning the crew grumbled and griped about the change in plans. Having to spend another week on this cold, dreary coast caused more than one jellyfish to think of desertion.

But these complaints ended quickly when the First Mate appeared before the Captain with two mangled pink sea nettles in tow.

“I found these jellies floatin’ nearby-o, Cap’n,” he said. “These are the two nettles who deserted when we first encountered the men-o’war.”

The Captain glowered at the pink jellyfish. Both were in ghastly condition. Their jelly sacs were thin and tattered. Several tentacles were missing.

“Do you jellies know the penalty for desertion?” John Paul snarled in his all-hands-beware voice. “Flogging! Twenty lashes with the strongest tentacle.”

“Take pity on us, Captain,” pleaded one nettle. The men-of-war have already had their tentacles across our backs.”

“So you met the enemy after all,” John Paul sneered.

“Aye, Captain,” said the second deserter. “They held us captives for days.”

From here John Paul could guess the rest of the story. After the men-of-war had forced their prisoners to spill the information they needed, they released them for the captain to find as a warning.

“Take these jelly-bellies away, Mr. Brown,” the Captain growled.

For the rest of the afternoon the coastline remained visible to starboard. The fleet sailed past the small harbor into which the men-of-war had chased them and the bathing beach where they

first made land. Next appeared the dark cliffs where the boys had bombarded them, and just before the sunset, they dropped anchor off Charlie Vanilla's beach.

The cormorant arrived an hour later, nearly dead in the water. As he glided to a stop among the jellyfish, his head rose. His long neck craned toward the shoreline.

"May Day! S-O-S! S-O-S!" he said weakly.

"The bird's keen eyes have spotted somethin' close to shore-o, Cap'n," said the First Mate.

"What is it, Sos?" John Paul asked. "Why have you started spelling again?"

"Golly gee, balloons!" gasped the bird. "Lots and lots of blue balloons, by golly!"

"Balloons?" said the Lieutenant.

"Lots of them?" said the moon jelly.

"Bags!" said the Captain. "Those aren't balloons, Sos. Those are Portuguese men-of-war. And they have been waiting for us."

18. Running the Blockade



In every great university up and down the Eastern seaboard, marine biologists were wondering why the jellyfish species *Physalis physalis*, commonly called Portuguese man-of-war, had stayed so late this year in the cold waters of the North Atlantic. These experts had been certain that *physalis* was a warm-water jellyfish. Now they were stumped. Little did they know that the Portuguese men-of-war remained for the sole purpose of hunting down Captain John Paul Jellyfish.

In all, Sos reported fifty-six “blue balloons” strung out the entire length of the beach.

“It’s a blockade, all right,” John Paul muttered to himself. “Somehow those blue devils found out where, when, and why we were coming here. Now they want to stop us from bringing our bird to the beach.”

That night the Captain called a meeting of his officers. “Gentlemen, we have a crisis,” he said. “In order to get our bird, Sos, to Charlie Vanilla, one jellyfish must escort him through a tight blockade of the enemy. The cormorant must be on the beach by sunrise. That’s when the freckled-faced boy does his beach combing. Owing to the extreme danger of this mission, I will ask for volunteers.”

The moon jelly and yellow sea nettle swished side to side. The Lieutenant spoke first. "Sir, I regret that I'm not the jellyfish most suited for the job, sir. You see, sir, my yellowness stands out in the dark. Those Portuguese would spot me at once, sir."

"Sorry, Cap'n," said the First Mate. "But I've got a wife-o and four-hundred and thirty-two little jellies waitin' for me back home. If it weren't for my family needin' me, I'd be the first to volunteer-o."

"Very well," said the Captain. "I shall take the bird myself. Lieutenant, see to it that the crew remains here. If I'm not back in twenty-four hours return to England without me."

"You can count on me, sir," said the yellow sea nettle a tad too brightly.

"Good luck-o, Cap'n," added the moon jelly.

In the darkest hour of the moonless night, John Paul Jellyfish set off with Sos swimming close behind him. Despite the darkness, the Captain knew when he had reached the enemy lines. The men-of-war's rowdy voices, boisterous laughter, and lousy singing drifted over the still water.

"Sounds like the lot of them are drunk on grog," John Paul whispered to the bird. "From now on, Sos, not a word, Not a sound. None of your spelling. Understand?"

The pair sailed ten more yards. From here, the Captain could eavesdrop upon the enemy. A voice on his port side cried,

“Oi! Oi, Henry! My tentacles are turning to icicles! How long will the commodore keep us in this blankity-blank-blank water?”

“Until that John Paul Jellyscum gets here,” a reply came from starboard.

The Captain’s sac tightened. “Bags! We’re sailing between those two blue sad sacks. Both are within a tentacle’s length of us.”

“Oi! Oi, Henry!” the man-of-war on the left called. “How’s the commodore so sure that English jelly will come to this blankity-blank-blank beach?”

“The old man’s got a spy,” said the other. “Some seagull reports the British fleet’s position to him. I heard this seagull spy tell the commodore that the great jellyfish has a sick bird with him. Har! Har!”

“A bird?” the first man-of-war replied. “So when can we expect this brave Captain--Har! Har!--and his blankity-blank-blank bird?”

“I’ll let you know,” was the answer. “I can smell the blood of an English jelly a mile away!”

“Har! Har! Har! Har! Har! Har!” And while these louts laughed, John Paul and the cormorant slipped by them.

The danger, however, hadn’t past. Seconds later, a slight breeze swept across the water.

“Back, Sos!” John Paul cried. “Reverse, full speed!”

Before the terrified bird could move, a giant, blue bulk drifted out of the darkness. Shoved by the wind, the man-of-war and cormorant collided.

The Captain's mind whirled. In seconds, the man-of-war would sound the alarm. Seconds later, the entire Portuguese squadron would swarm around them.

Then a miracle. As swiftly as the blue float appeared, it vanished. The sea simply swallowed it up, leaving only a stream of gas bubbles in its place.

"Follow me, Sos," the Captain ordered, and he shot toward shore. Not until he heard waves spilling on the beach a short ways ahead did he stop.

"We're safe in the shallows, Sos," John Paul said. "Still I haven't a clue what sunk that man-of-war."

As he spoke, the Captain felt a tickle on his underside. Shortly, two antennae swirled around him. "Navigator? Is that you?"

"By Neptune, Cappy," said the blue lobster close astern. "You ought to be more careful, don't you know. Lucky I got a good grip on that man-of-war's tentacles and took him under with a single yank."

The Captain figured the lobster had trailed him from the ocean floor. He debated whether to give him a good tongue lashing for disobeying orders or praise him for saving his life. Instead, he said nothing.

Meanwhile, the cormorant had drifted to shore. Limp and lifeless, he rocked side to side in the small waves.

The jellyfish and lobster looked on in silence. They had run the blockade. They had brought the crippled bird this far. Now all they could do was wait for dawn.

19. The Next Morning



With the first light of day, Charlie Vanilla, head bowed, came rambling down the beach. The red pail hung in his hand. He wore long trousers and a hooded sweatshirt against the chill.

During the night the tide had pushed the cormorant high up on the sand. He lay half hidden under a pile of seaweed as still and drenched as a wet mop.

The Captain and blue lobster watched the boy's progress along the sand.

"The kid will miss spotting Old Sos," said the lobster. "He's bound to wander right past him, Cappy."

"The lad has sharp eyes," John Paul replied. "He spotted me, a small gritty jellyfish, didn't he?"

The boy did find the cormorant. He stooped by him and probed his feathers with his fingers.

"This cormorant is alive, Your Majesty," he said in his high, squeaky voice. "But his feathers are covered with oil."

"Then I, King Charlie Vee, will save the bird." replied the deep voice.

With the greatest care, the boy lifted the bird and carried him over a dune out of sight.

“Mission accomplished, Cappy,” said the lobster. “Right time we be getting away from this perilous place, don’t you know.”

“We will remain here, Navigator,” said the Captain

“By Neptune! Do you have water on the brain, Cappy? Don’t you know there’s a swarm of ornery men-o’-war floating between us and the open sea?”

“We can’t leave now,” said John Paul. “The boy will be back, and I have a rotten task to perform.”

Hours later Charlie Vanilla reappeared on the sand. At once he began stripping off his clothes.

“What’s the kid doing?” the lobster asked.

“He skinny dips daily,” said John Paul.

“Yeah, but, Cappy, these waters are crawling with deadly blue floats. This ain’t no place for a kid to swim.”

The lobster found himself talking to a blur of tentacles, for the Captain had shot toward the naked swimmer.

The boy, floating on his back, spotted the red-freckled jellyfish. “Behold, Sir Chrys!” he cried. “You have returned to my beach!”

The Captain kept swimming. He wanted to get this foul business over with. Straight under the boy’s backside he glided. As his tentacles swept over the boy’s skin, they delivered a sharp sting.

Looking at the boy's face was unbearable, but John Paul heard his yelp of pain. The Captain rocked in the waves as Charlie Vanilla swam to shore.

A lump formed in John Paul's jelly. "Sorry my trusting friend," he said, watching the boy go. "You felt my sting. But that was a pinprick compared to what a man-of-war can deliver. How else could I keep you out of the water today?"

In a rotten mood John Paul returned to the blue lobster.

"Aye, well done, Cappy," the lobster said, as the pair headed out to sea. "Sometimes, don't you know, a friend's sting can be the greatest sign of friendship."

Without Sos, returning to the fleet was problem-free. John Paul simply swam underwater with the lobster, well below the curtain of man-of-war tentacles. They found the fleet waiting for them just beyond the horizon.

"Sir, I'll give the orders to leave at once, sir," said the Lieutenant.

"Looks like our troubles are over for good. Right-o, Cap'n?" the First Mate sang out.

John Paul's attention turned to the sky. A fat seagull with a bloody beak was winging over them.

"Correction, Mr. Brown," he said gravely. "I believe our troubles have just begun."

20. The Chase



“*Quark! Quark!*” screamed the seagull.

Captain John Paul Jellyfish shook a clenched tentacle skyward. “Wretched stool pigeon!” he snarled. “Lieutenant, make ready to head for the open sea! Bear due east. Mr. Brown, send a good jelly to the rear as a lookout.”

The jellyfish fleet was underway in seconds. Nevertheless, before they had traveled far, Smucker, the lookout, cried, “Sails ahoy!”

The three officers turned to see a string of blue beads dotting the horizon.

“Sir! They’ve found us, sir!” wailed the yellow sea nettle.

“Those blue floats have the wind advantage, Cap’n,” said the moon jelly. “This brisk wind is pushin’ them straight toward us.”

The Captain gauged the current and wind speed.

“Gentlemen, we still have a half-day’s head start,” he said.

“Navigator, keep us on this easterly course, if you please.”

The chase was on—an armada of some fifty-odd Portuguese men-of-war pursuing a meager fleet of pint-size jellyfish. All that day came the Lieutenant’s driving commands, “Press on, jellies! Faster! Faster,” mixed with the First Mate shouting, “Keep those

sacs trim! No slack! No slack there!” But each time the two officers looked back, the enemy was closer.

The Captain sailed at the rear of the fleet. He knew the Portuguese pursuit tactics well. They advanced in a crescent formation—one large **U**. The speedier ones, he confirmed with a glance astern, sailed forward at the two ends of the **U**. The man-of-war commodore would be sailing at the crescent’s middle.

That evening John Paul explained the situation to his officers. “If we cut north or south, the two ends of their formation would close in and cut us off. Being heavily outnumbered our only chance of escape is to continue eastward, straight from shore.”

All night long the jellyfish fleet pressed out to sea. All night long the wind beat on their back and the waves rocked them to exhaustion. But despite this hard work, in the morning the jellies were in for a shock. The men-of-war had cut the distance between them by half.

“Press on! Press on, jellies,” cried the yellow sea nettle.

“Faster! Faster!” barked the moon jelly. “Let those blue whimps-of-war chase us all the way back to England.”

By the third day, the chase began to take its toll. The continuous running before the wind was too much for the large cannonball jelly named Big Welch, and Big Welch died. Immediately the Captain ordered his crew to stop a precious few minutes so they could give their mate a proper sea burial.

“Big Welch was every inch a sailor, from the top of his sac to the tip of his tentacles,” the Captain eulogized. “Big Welch’s body now returns to the ocean depths where it will decay and become food for small fish, who in turn will become food for us jellyfish. Thus the cycle of life in the sea goes around.”

All that day and night the chase continued. By morning, the men-of-war crescent had nearly overtaken the fleeing fleet. By evening John Paul knew running any longer was useless. At his command the jellyfish heaved to. Some fifty yards away the men-of-war armada did the same.

The Captain studied the long line of blue floats facing him. “The wind has died,” he told his officers. “The Portuguese commodore will wait for the morning’s breeze to begin his attack.”

The night passed fretfully for the jellyfish. Few slept. The ones who did had ghastly dreams. Every jelly knew that when the next sun appeared they would engage in a fierce battle.

The Captain spent these long, dark hours deep in thought. Sometime during the night he felt a tug on a tentacle and heard the blue lobster’s voice.

“Cappy, the way I figure it, you knew all along it would come to a fight with those men-o’-war, don’t you know. I figure you knew they would eventually find us and give chase. You wanted to draw them away from the beaches where the children might play, ain’t that right? That’s the real reason we’re far out to sea like this.”

“Indeed, Navigator,” said John Paul. “Is that all?”

“Well. Cappy,” said the lobster. “I also wanted to tell you that whatever happens in the morning it’s been a privilege to serve under you. Aye, a right honor indeed.”

At dawn John Paul Jellyfish assembled his fleet. Swimming before the shaking jellies, he delivered this address:

“Fleet company, it is time to meet the enemy. This blue scourge has pestered the American coastline far too long. All summer they made it unsafe for any American girl or boy to go swimming. Now it is time to teach these scoundrels a lesson. Any man-of-war we sink today will make the beaches safer in the future for the little people. They might never know what you have done for them, but if you fight bravely this day, you will be able to hold your jelly sac high and know you have done your duty.”

21. The Battle



Thus began the great jellyfish battle that history books would later call The Battle of the Medusas. It began as a slight mist rose off the ocean and dawn's breeze ruffled the water. It began as the man-of-war armada drifted slowly forward, and it began as Captain John Paul Jellyfish barked orders left and right.

"All hands! All hands, ahoy! Battle quarters! Hustle! Hustle! Here they come, lads!"

Much shouting and confusion and rushing about followed, as the jellyfish prepared for battle.

"Cleared for action-o, Cap'n," reported the First Mate.

"As ready as we'll ever be, sir," said the Lieutenant.

An eerie silence fell upon the sea as the valiant jellies waited and watched the great **U** of blue floats advance toward them.

The Lieutenant, First Mate, and Navigator gathered around their Captain.

"Gentlemen, here is my plan," John Paul said. "Our fleet will form two parallel columns. Both columns will sail straight toward the enemy lines and break up their formation. Meanwhile, the lobster will strike their flanks, preventing any blue bags from circling around and attacking our rear."

"The plan is brilliant-o, Cap'n," said the moon jelly.

“It has the John Paul touch,” admitted the yellow sea nettle.

“Furthermore,” the Captain continued, “Lieutenant, you shall lead the leeward column. I shall take the one to windward.”

“But, Cap’n,” the First Mate spoke up. “The lead jelly will be takin’ the brunt of their attack-o. Shouldn’t someone else take your place?”

The Captain, being John Paul Jellyfish, sneered at moon jelly. “You have your orders, Mr. Brown. Now everyone to your station.”

Moments later John Paul inspected his fleet, now formed into two crooked lines. He noticed the fear on the jellies' faces and the quiver in their jelly.

“Steady lads. Steady there,” he called out. “Don’t rush out. Wait for the word. *Remember England expects every jelly to do his duty.*”

Finally, as a good-sized wave rolled under the fleet, the Captain gave the orders. “All ahead full! Let’s burst their bubbles, boys!”

The two columns sailed headlong toward the giant blue sacs. At once, a large man-of-war on the far left disappeared beneath the waves. No doubt, the blue lobster had begun his pulling. Seeing this, the jellyfish let out a whoop and surged forward with greater zeal.

The Captain was the first to reach the enemy’s line. For several desperate seconds he fought alone.

“Take that, you overblown bag of gas,” he snarled, darting toward a man-of-war. “Feel my sting, foul bubblehead!”

John Paul stung quickly, and retreated before the other could bring a tentacle to bear. At once he started toward a second blue sac. “Pick on innocent children, will you! Well, take that and that and that and that!”

Now the other jellyfish sailed into the thick of things.

“Remember your advantages! Your advantages!” John Paul shouted.

The fighting, tentacle to tentacle, sac to sac, grew as fierce as any jellyfish could remember. Blue floats were everywhere. Over and over it was dart, sting, retreat; dart, sting, retreat.

In the midst of fighting, the Captain spotted a man-of-war snag a gray nettle and drag him under. Before John Paul could act, a gray sac returned to the surface, torn to ribbons.

As John Paul watched the grizzly scene, the First Mate shouted, “Cap’n! A Jelly Sandwich!”

“Bags!” John Paul shouted. Two men-of-wars were attacking his flanks, one to starboard, and one to port. The Captain shot forward, but too late. The men-of-war rammed him from both sides.

“Double bags!” John Paul cried feeling tentacles coil around his middle.

Luckily, the moon jelly was there. Again and again, he pounded the men-of-wars’ broad sides.

Twisting and tugging John Paul broke free of his foe's clutches. Almost free. One man-of-war still held two tentacles.

"Har! Har! Har, Captain!" the enemy snarled. "I'm gonna rip these spindly things outta your blankity-blank-blank hide!"

A sharp pain raked through John Paul's jelly. His whole sac jolted. He was free, but the two tentacles were gone.

22. The Battle!

Part II



At this point the English fleet might have lost the battle but for a stroke of good luck. A squall sprang up. The stiff wind drove the Portuguese northward, giving John Paul's weary band time to rest and regroup.

Captain John Paul Jellyfish lay still in the water. The First Mate and Lieutenant gaped at the gap in his jelly sac where the two tentacles were missing.

"Gentlemen!" John Paul rasped. "Stop gawking and give me your reports!"

"Cap'n, five jellies in our column have been sunk-o!" said the moon jelly. "Three more were knocked out of action. The lobster brought down four men-o'-war, but the rest of us sunk only three."

"Sir, we're licked, sir," said the yellow sea nettle. "My column took a terrible beating, sir. Surely their next attack will be the end of us."

The blue lobster came topside. "Beg pardon, Cappy," he said. "We have a visitor. While below, I spotted the underside of the seagull spy."

Sure enough, a few yards to starboard, the fat seagull floated like dirty soapsuds.

“Tsk! Tsk, chump!” he called out. “I say, old bean, you simply *must* take better care of yourself. The dear old man-of-war commodore gave me first dibs on your jelly. And now, chump, I notice some of my yummy dessert is missing. Catch my drift?”

John Paul turned his weakened side away from the bird. “Scat gullible gull!” he stormed.

“Why, old bean, how rude of you. I’ve flown all this way out to sea to watch this little fray and you shoo me away.”

“Spare us your squawking, seaswine!” the Captain sneered.

“But alas, chump. I’m here to deliver another message from the man-of-war commodore,” said the bird. “As I said, he’s quite a fine and fair chap. He said to tell you, and I quote:

‘Dear Captain John Paul Jellyfish,

Your death will be quick and painless if you strike your colors at once and surrender.’ End of quote, old bean.”

John Paul jolted as if struck by a bolt of lightning.

“Surrender?” he muttered. “Surrender, did you say?”

A new life seemed to swell in the Captain’s jelly. He swam up to the seagull and bobbed beneath his bloody bill.

“Surrender! Never!” he thundered. “Catch my drift? And now, my foul-feathered foe, I have a message for you to take back to the Portuguese Commodore. Tell that big blue windbag...

I HAVE NOT YET BEGUN TO FIGHT!”

With these immortal words still ringing in the salty air, the jellies followed their wounded leader back into battle. Soon the

deadly business began again. Within minutes the sea was thick with stinging tentacles and dodging jellyfish.

Despite his wound, John Paul fought on with added vigor. Blinded by rage and flying sea spray, he wheeled in circles lashing out at anything that approached him.

The moon jelly and yellow sea nettle fought by their Captain's side. Darting back and forth, the Lieutenant whooped wild battle cries and stung in a mad flurry. The First Mate fought savagely, taking on men-of-war three times his size.

In time, four men-of-war converged upon the jellyfish officers. Four solid walls of blue formed around them.

"Break out! Break out for all kind sea creatures!" John Paul cried and surged toward the barrier.

Two men-of-war, however, wrapped a web of tentacles around his middle. They dragged the Captain below and began a gruesome game of tug-of-war.

John Paul looked upward through a foot of ocean. The sun danced around the watery blue sky. Suddenly he saw something else. Scores of black missiles were falling toward him. With great splashes the black streaks hit the water and shot under him like torpedoes.

Calmness came over the Captain. He no longer heard the battle. He no longer felt the men-of-war trying to pull him apart.

"Oh, death," he uttered, "where is thy sting?"

Then everything went black.

23. What Happened Next



The sea was still and silent. This month's full moon stared down upon the smooth water. Sometime during the night, Captain John Paul Jellyfish awoke. The cold water and fresh air told him he was alive. A dull pang in his side reminded him of the terrible battle he had been in, no telling how long ago.

John Paul spoke to the bright circle overhead. "So you are watching me again, bald man. And this time what do you see? A defeated sea captain. A jellyfish fleet that is surely destroyed. Is this what you have been waiting month after month to see, bald man?"

The Captain lay without moving until morning. Expecting to find Portuguese men-of war patrolling the area, he remained low in the water. Instead, he spotted thirty, maybe forty black birds, double-crested cormorants, cruising around him, some with fish in their mouths.

John Paul's first effort to close his jelly bell caused great pain, and he moaned. The sound triggered a nearby cormorant. The bird began flapping his wings and shouting, "Good golly! A-O-K! He's A-O-K, by golly!"

"Could that be Sos?" John Paul wondered, watching the cormorant race toward him.

“A-O-K! A-O-K! Golly gee, he’s A-O-K!” the bird ranted.

“That’s Sos, all right,” said the Captain. “Him and his infernal spelling.”

In the bird’s wake sailed a parade of jellyfish, the First Mate and Lieutenant in the lead.

“He’s alive! Alive-alive-o!” cried the moon jelly

“Old Ironsides can’t be sunk!” said the yellow sea nettle.

“Three cheers for Old Ironsides! Hip! Hip!...”

“Stow it, Lieutenant!” the Captain barked. “Why isn’t the crew tending to their duties? Mr. Brown! These jellies look slovenly, very slovenly. Sos, what are all these birds hanging around here for?”

“Sir, we thought you had left us, sir,” said the yellow sea yellow.

“The cormorant saved the day-o, Cap’n,” said the moon jelly.

“When they came dive bombin’ out of the sky-o, you should have seen those men-o’-war skedaddle. People won’t be seein’ blue floats around these parts for a long time-o.”

John Paul remembered the black streaks falling from the sky. “Jolly good show, Sos,” he said. “How did you ever find us this far out at sea?”

“Golly gee. While a woman was scrubbing the goo off my feather, good jolly, an albatross in the next tub told me those blue balloons chased you eastward. Well, golly, as soon as I was A-O-K, I fetched my friends and flew out here as fast as I could, by golly.”

As the bird spoke, the other cormorants started flapping their wings.

“Golly gee! Golly gee!” Sos cried. “Our migration has finally begun, by golly. We’re off to Florida at last!”

The cormorant swam off to join his mates who were facing upwind. Flapping, flapping, flapping the flock made great splashes in the water with their wings. At first, they moved slowly like airplanes with too much cargo, but once airborne, they became sleek, black jets, joining high overhead in a big V.

“V for victory, by golly!” cried Sos, as the cormorants streamed southward.

When the V was no more than a period on the horizon, the blue lobster sprung up from the depths. “Well, Cappy,” he said. “It’s best I be going as well, don’t you know.”

“Where to, Navigator?” asked the Captain. “Back to the life of a city scavenger?”

“No sirree, Cappy. The way I figure it, there’s a freckle-faced boy on a beach back there who can use a friend, not to mention a bit of protection, don’t you know.”

There followed many words of farewell, much backslapping, and tentacle shakes with the entire crew. By now the lobster’s second claw had grown back completely. Finally, with a flip of his fan tail, the lobster shot backward toward land.

“Mr. Brown!” cried the Captain, after the lobster had gone. “Our mission on this coast is complete. Tell all hands to set sail at

once, if you please! Lieutenant! You may set a course for
England!”

24. Home Call



The voyage home was one long roller coaster ride. The jellyfish fleet encountered blizzards and icebergs and sub-zero temperatures. Waves as tall as flagpoles kept their jelly sacs constantly wobbling. Even by following the powerful Gulf Stream Current, the passage took forty days and forty nights.

Between bouts of seasickness, Captain John Paul Jellyfish spent the days reflecting upon the past, few months. As often happens to adventurers, he forgot the hard times and dwelled on the pleasant ones. Although he was eager to see homeport again, he felt the tinge of sadness that greets a traveler toward a trip's end.

One bright January morning the lookout gave his final cry, "Land ho-o-o-o-o-o!" The crew rushed forward to see the white chalky strip that marked the horizon.

"Our finish line, lads!" John Paul announced. "The white cliffs of England!"

That afternoon, without fanfare, the gallant jellyfish sailed into Plymouth Harbor. Once in familiar waters the jellies fanned out toward the island or inlet or seaweed patch they called home. Before parting, each crewmember received a good word from the Captain.

After the regular crew had gone, the First Mate sailed up to John Paul. "It's time to take my leave-o, Cap'n," he said. "I'm off to find my wife and our three-hundred and fifty-two little-uns."

"Very well, Mr. Brown," said John Paul. "May your sac always stay firm and your jelly steady."

"Right-o, Cap'n," said the moon jelly, sailing toward shore. "Perhaps we'll sail together again someday."

Next, the Lieutenant, who had been lingering by the Captain's side, cleared his throat and said, "Well, sir, it has been a successful voyage, has it not, sir? And well, sir, as you know it is customary after a journey such as ours, sir, to reward a faithful first officer with a small token of the Captain's appreciation...a promotion, for instance, sir."

"Stow it, Lieutenant," grumbled the Captain, and the yellow sea nettle turned a sharp about-face and sped off toward a nearby island.

At last John Paul was alone. His home lay a hundred yards due east under an old dock. It was a short wooden structure upon which crowds of people gathered daily. Once John Paul asked a pigeon what brought the people to this place. The bird in turn dropped a piece of popcorn in his mouth to read aloud some words off a brass plaque mounted on the end of the pier:

**FROM THIS DOCK IN THE YEAR 1620
THE PILGRIM FATHERS SAILED IN THE MAYFLOWER
TO SETTLE IN THE NEW WORLD**

John Paul fancied the idea of living under a dock from which people had once set off on a daring voyage, so he had brought Emma there to live with him. Now as he sailed underneath the wooden planks and rounded the third piling on the right, he knew she would be there waiting for him.

There she was. But to tell the truth, things worked out differently from the way John Paul had expected. Here is the conversation that took place between Emma and the Captain upon his return. It went like this:

John Paul: Honey, I'm home! (He gives her a small hug in his tentacles.)

Emma: Well, Johnny, it's about time. Where have you been all these months? Why have you kept me waiting under this smelly, cramped pier?

John Paul: I've been away on a great adventure, Emma, making great discoveries. I found a new land called America and fought a great battle.

Emma: Oh, Johnny, don't bother me with your wild travel stories. Now that you're home you can think about me. When can we start raising lots of little jellies?

John Paul: (gliding backward a short distance) Little jellies?

Emma: And we can find a big cove to live in and never leave.

John Paul: Never?

Emma: Just think of it, Johnny, a safe, easy life away from all danger, just you and me and maybe five hundred little ones.

John Paul: (sucking in a sacful of water) But, Emma, it's a big, beautiful world out there. There's so much of it I haven't explored yet.

Emma: Now, listen, Johnny, you're going to have to make a choice. You either have your world or have me.

(John Paul turns and exits)

In the gray mist of the following morning, a red-freckled jellyfish with two missing tentacles was seen sailing into every back coves of Plymouth Harbor.

"Hear ye! Hear ye! All jellyfish bold enough to sail with me!" the jellyfish cried. "I'm Captain John Paul Jellyfish, and I'm about to set sail for high adventure on the *Seven Seas*! I've just returned from sailing the North Atlantic! And I have six seas to go!"