

Piranhas, Pickle Joe, and Me

Melissa Yuan-Innes

My best friend is a pickle.

By that, I don't mean that his last name is Pickle.

I mean that he is a long, thin slice of dill pickle. His name is Joe.

Every night, I meet him in my dreams. Last night, I was swimming up the smoky green waters of the Amazon River, and Joe was swimming right along with me. His body rippled and waved through the water. The sunlight turned his body a clear, light green, except for seeds in his middle and the thicker, bumpy green skin that outlined him.

Suddenly, a fin flashed by my eyes. Soon the water churned thick with fish, their merciless black eyes and razor teeth trained on me. Piranhas!

I screamed. Water rushed down my throat. I choked. The piranhas were so close, their rough scales brushed against me and their bodies blocked out the sun.

I kicked. I punched. Tiny teeth closed on my left calf.

First blood.

I screamed again. I felt the fish swarming around me even as I fought.

My fist hit something smooth. Not fish.

Pickle. Joe wrapped around me, making a ribbon tube out of his body with me in the middle. The piranhas bumped against him, furious, trying to get at me. But they weren't vegetarians and they couldn't get through Joe. He stayed there until every last piranha was gone.

He tightened a little – a quick hug – and unravelled himself.

I was still breathing so hard, I saw black spots. But I ran my hand down his bumps.

"Thank you," I mouthed.

Joe bent his top part like he was nodding. He pointed ahead. We had to go on. We both swam slowly now, tired and beaten. But we kept going.

In the morning, as usual, my parents wouldn't believe me. Dad even said, "Son, maybe you should talk to someone."

So I shut up. I was fine. My leg didn't even hurt that much. I just had to get through the day and go back to sleep so I could keep going down the Amazon with Joe. There was going to be a big battle at the end and I had to be there.

That night, Dad followed me to bed. "Don't go to sleep yet. I'll read to you." He lifted up a book called *How Things Work*.

I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to grow up and stop imagining stuff. I said, "Okay."

Dad tucked my steam train blanket around me and read to me about the telephone. "Amazing, huh?"

"Yeah, Dad." I yawned. "I think I'd like to be an engineer when I grow up."

His smile was the last thing I remembered before I dissolved into a white room smaller than my bedroom. There was no furniture. No windows. Just smooth white walls, floor, and ceiling. No food. No water.

No Joe.

I yelled for help. I jumped up and down. I waved around. There had to be cameras, right? But no one came.

I could die here.

I was so tired. My arms ached. My throat rasped. The scab on my leg was starting to ooze and stink and turn all red and puffy. I sank into a corner, wrapped my arms around myself, and fell asleep again.

When I woke up, I smelled brine and seaweed.

Joe loomed over me.

He looked different here, in the white room. The little seeds in his middle almost made a face with eyes and a mouth that moved when he talked. He bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for, Joe? Let's go!" I jumped up and pounded on the walls. "Get me out of here!"

"I can't," he said.

I turned and look at him. Joe had taken me to the moon, dreamwalked me along the Great Wall of China. Why couldn't he escape the white room?

"You're trapped." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I can't stay with you."

I yelled, "Who trapped me? I'll kill him!"

Joe sagged until he was almost bent in two, but his seed eyes stared at me from the other side of his head.

"Tell me, Joe!" His eyes didn't move. Finally, I got it. "Who did it? Me? But I—" And then I knew what he meant. I was trying to be normal. I was trying to forget. "Just when I'm awake. It doesn't matter, does it?"

Joe tried to straighten up, but he was too wobbly. He started to fall back the other way.

"No!" I grabbed him. His pickle body began to slip through my hands. "No!" But even as I screamed, I thought, why can't I do both? Why can't I be normal in real life and make my mom and dad happy, and still have adventures with Joe every night?

Joe's head touched the floor. The rest of his body went limp and liquidy, like a cucumber rotten in its rind. I could hardly hold him anymore.

I had to choose.

I swiped away my tears. "Joe."

He didn't move.

"Joe." My voice didn't waver as much this time.

He sighed. Flopped his tail.

"Come on, Joe! We have to get going!"

The seed-face shifted under my fingers before it went still again. I stroked down the back of him and whispered, "I'm not going without you."

He took a breath. His seed mouth twitched. Was it my imagination, or did his body feel less slimy?

The walls of the white room fell open, like a box.

The waters of the Amazon flowed in from the top of the box. I couldn't see the source, but it gushed over my toes, my feet, and Joe's saggy hide.

I screamed a wild, ragged scream. My leg ached. I might die here. I might drown in my dream. I might never see my parents again.

But by the time the water reached my waist, Joe had kicked away from me, and I followed him. Joe and I were swimming again. Swimming toward justice. Swimming for our lives. Swimming, just swimming, down the Amazon together.

Melissa Yuan-Innes rarely swims with piranhas, but she hopes to make friends with a pickle any day now. She writes and dreams outside of Montreal, Canada. More peculiarities at melissayuaninnes.net