

Clara Henssen

Polka

Jacob's hands are swathed in disposable gloves; he's bathing Jeneke. Water descends from the tap into a soapy foam landscape. Jeneke's skin is bright red from the scalding hot bath water.

'Too hot!' she yells, at which Jacob takes action, moves the tap from red to blue and swishes his hand through the bath water over and over to mix hot and cold.

A few years ago, Jeneke's hormones started dancing the polka. At regular intervals, blood, secretions and dead membrane now flow out of her body and into a thick, absorbent sanitary towel. The sebaceous glands on her back and forehead now produce their greasy secretion at full speed, dark wiry hair has sprouted under her armpits and between her legs and her breasts have a size that can be measured: 38C. She also sweats like a pig. 'You're a woman now,' her mother says, so Jeneke has to learn not only to wash regularly, change her sanitary towels and use deodorant, but also that there are two kinds of touching. One kind is the kind with gloves, when a family member touches you to wash you, or a doctor to examine you. The other kind is the one without gloves, when a stranger touches you and wants to hurt you. Jeneke is not interested in a private sphere; there's no clear boundary for her between inside and outside. And even if that boundary did exist she'd be constantly crossing it, because she's used to a flurry of hands wherever she goes. Her mother swiftly tugs Jeneke's blouse into place, a friend of her parents strokes her cheek, and her brother shows her how to wash properly. That's why they use gloves – they're supposed

to help her find her way in this complicated world full of hands, to distinguish the good hands from the bad.

‘Jacob?’ Mrs Jacobsen calls. ‘Jacooooob!’

The bathroom door is ajar; Jacob hears his mother calling and jumps up, saying: ‘I’ll be right back. Stay where you are,’ and goes to find his mother. He helps her to move the heavy oak table in the dining room and then dashes back to the first floor. A brief panic wells up inside him as he climbs the stairs. Did he leave the water running, he asks himself, is it overflowing? He almost reckons on the water flowing towards him at any moment, pouring down step by step and washing him away. Or maybe Jeneke reacted and turned it off? He runs the last few steps to the bathroom, a paralysing feeling rising within him; fear.

He pushes the door, holds his breath and then sighs with relief. No flooding in sight, everything dry. But where is Jeneke? She’s not where he left her, she’s clearly pulled the plug out and let the bath drain. He approaches the bathtub. A scream comes out of his mouth.

A slippery transparent saucer writhing amidst crackling, shrinking foam, four pale pink circles shining through the surface.

‘Jeneke?’ Jacob calls out, first hesitant and then desperately loud. ‘Jeneke?’

He goes out on the landing and calls for her there. No answer. But deep inside, he knows Jeneke won’t answer, because Jeneke has turned into a jellyfish, the terrible thing in the bathtub. He feels compelled to run away, far away, but he knows he mustn’t leave her alone now. She can’t speak but she communicates silently with him, telling him how she absorbed water until she was made up almost entirely of it. Now she needs his help, she needs a water tank with a current, or else she’ll die.

‘This is all just a nightmare,’ he thinks, it can’t be true. So he puts aside his doubts, pulls on the gloves, grabs the thing, which lies in his hand like jelly, and after a brief hesitation he flushes it down the toilet.

‘I didn’t kill it,’ he consoles himself as he lies down to sleep after a thorough hand-wash.

There’s a reunion the very next morning. Opening the toilet lid to pee, Jacob gets such a shock that he drops it instantly, the lid banging onto the seat. Jacob stumbles back.

He returns to the toilet and opens the lid with a trembling hand. There it is again, the jellyfish. Floating in the toilet water as though nothing had happened. Its hood rising and falling; it’s breathing. And once again it seems to be communicating with him, silently telling him, ‘It’s me,’ and Jacob does know it’s really her, his sister Jeneke. Because she’s been missing without a trace since yesterday evening; the whole family is looking for her. Their parents were up all night, eventually informing the police.

Since then, Jacob has felt heavy, burdened by guilt. He must have done something wrong with the bath, he thinks, otherwise none of it would have happened. He shouldn’t have left Jeneke alone; his mother warned him often enough. ‘Don’t let Jeneke out of your sight!’ she always says, but that was exactly what he’d done. Except his mother had called for him, made it impossible to fulfil both duties at once. What should he have done?

It’s his fault that she’s turned into this indefinable thing floating in the toilet water, so far removed from humanity that he has to ask himself how to treat her right. Can she feel anything? Can she see him?

At the zoo, he once read that jellyfish don’t have brains, hearts or lungs. They consist of ninety-nine per cent water. They do have nerves.

But what does that mean for him now? Does he have to take care of her, or can he get rid of her?

He keeps her for a few weeks in an aquarium he buys at a pet shop, in his room, under his bed. Now and then he gets it out to see if she's still alive. The worst thing is not that Jeneke is no longer a human being and has changed into this creature, but that the sight of the jellyfish stabs at his conscience every time anew. At the sight of the creature, he doesn't see what's there; he sees his mistakes. He left her alone. He didn't take good enough care of her. He brought suffering to his family.

Jacob can't take these pangs of conscience for long. Telling himself he wants to find out about jellyfish, he soon takes Jeneke in her tank to the city zoo. He talks to a keeper, opens his bag and shows her the jellyfish.

'That's a common saucer jellyfish,' the woman tells him. 'Did you find it on the North Sea or the Baltic coast and take it home with you?'

'Yes,' Jacob answers. 'I found it on the beach at the Baltic and saw it was still alive.'

'Interesting,' the zookeeper says, and asks him to come with her. He follows her along corridors, through hidden doors to the very back, from where they have access to the aquariums.

'I assume you've come to release it here?' says the woman, raising the lid of a gigantic tank using a pole with a hook at one end.

'You can just throw it in here with the others,' she says. 'Saucer jellyfish aren't dangerous or poisonous. You can take it out with your bare hands.'

'It would be the best, wouldn't it?' Jacob asks, but the woman doesn't answer. He looks down into the tank filled with different kinds

of jellyfish, sees the zoo visitors' brightly coloured clothing distorted through the water and the children's faces and hands pressed to the glass.

He reaches into the small aquarium and takes out the jellyfish, which seems to resist in his hand. 'But jellyfish can't think,' he says and throws the creature unceremoniously in to the others of its kind. There's a brief plop and then it's all over.

Just before he leaves the zoo he turns around one last time. He knows exactly which of the many jellyfish is Jeneke. And he knows that she's silently calling to him.

'Jacob, don't leave me alone!'

He sees the children's outstretched fingers pointing at the strange creatures, hears them shouting 'Look! Look!'