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Paddling With the Jellies by Jane Langille

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The ocean is a flat sheet of emerald glass as my 13-year-old son and I set out in a tandem kayak. We glide in soft rhythm as each stroke takes us into Newman Sound, one of the long fingers of Bonavista Bay that reaches into Terra Nova National Park to tickle the eastern shores of Newfoundland.

We dip slowly along the shoreline to see orange and purple starfish, spiny sea urchins and multicolored rocks. Our plan is to paddle past The Narrows to Minchin's Cove for lunch and then return, a 12 km round trip. We clear The Narrows easily within an hour and head out across open ocean.

Suddenly, Jamie throws his paddle over his head and yells, "There's nowhere to go!" Hundreds of jellyfish in all sizes are all around us, brushing past our kayak and sinking into the depths below.

There are huge red lion's mane jellyfish, some with bell diameters as large as car tires. Their tentacles float willy-nilly at the surface or twinkle in sunlight bands as deep as the eye can see. Translucent white moon jellies with little tentacles pulse by, the size of baseballs. With four white circles in their centres, they are nature's failed attempt at Venn diagrams. Some of them are tangled in the red jellies' tentacles, slow feasts for the commanding species.

Jamie shouts, "I can't paddle; there are too many!" He bangs his paddle across the bow to see if noise will scare them away. We don't want to flip a tentacle onto bare arms because a sting can be painfully itchy.

But we have to keep going, so I paddle while Jamie plays spotter. At 13, he is a curious paradox: he won't permit hugs anymore, but he is happy to embrace a backup plan when the going gets tough.

In the dead wind, I paddle gingerly to avoid stringers. I distract him by asking why he thinks there are so many jellies: Is it global warming? Has the whale population decreased? He calms down and says they are really quite peaceful, drifting as if listening to some primitive command that only they understand.

We finally pull into Minchin's Cove and devour sticky peanut butter sandwiches. Deer flies target our arms for their own lunch, and we laugh about how funny we are, trying to eat and swat flies at the same time.

Back in the kayak, the sky is now ominous and the wind whips up whitecaps. Jamie cannot see any jellyfish now, because they have gone deeper - a good thing because we need his strength now to make any headway against the waves.

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We make it back to shore, burning up every last lunch calorie. Exhilarated, Jamie grins and says, "It was so cool to see the jellies!"

We are on an interesting journey through time as mother and son: sometimes the balance shifts, but the truth is we need each other.

Jane Langille is from Richmond Hill, ON

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Oswego wrote:

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This is a marvelous piece of writing. Impressive. Great mix of human story and science story. Original and interesting. The description of the jelly fish is fascinating. Then - the inference that their numbers might have been influenced by global warming or changes in whale population brings out a new and relevant aspect - deeper than a mere personal essay. GREAT. I don't know what will follow, but for me, this one wins.



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