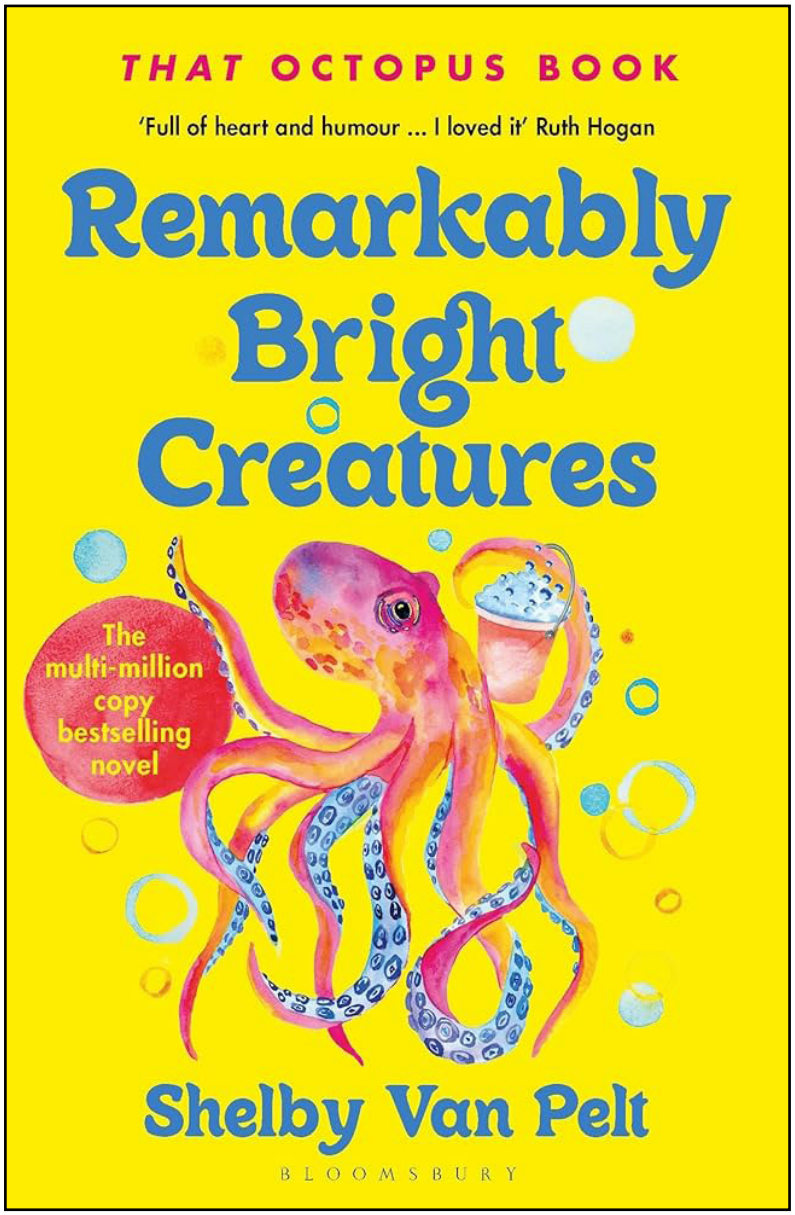


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Day 1,299 of My Captivity

DARKNESS SUITS ME.

Each evening, I await the click of the overhead lights, leaving only the glow from the main tank. Not perfect, but close enough.

Almost-darkness, like the middle-bottom of the sea. I lived there before I was captured and imprisoned. I cannot remember, yet I can still taste the untamed currents of the cold open water. Darkness runs through my blood.

Who am I, you ask? My name is Marcellus, but most humans do not call me that. Typically, they call me *that guy*. For example: *Look at that guy—there he is—you can just see his tentacles behind the rock.*

I am a giant Pacific octopus. I know this from the plaque on the wall beside my enclosure.

I know what you are thinking. Yes, I can read. I can do many things you would not expect.

The plaque states other facts: my size, preferred diet, and where I might live were I not a prisoner here. It mentions my intellectual prowess and penchant for cleverness, which for some reason seems a surprise to humans: *Octopuses are remarkably bright creatures*, it says. It warns the humans of my camouflage, tells them to take extra care in looking for me in case I have disguised myself to match the sand.

The plaque does not state that I am named Marcellus. But the human called Terry, the one who runs this aquarium, sometimes

shares this with the visitors who gather near my tank. *See him back there? His name's Marcellus. He's a special guy.*

A special guy. Indeed.

Terry's small daughter chose my name. Marcellus McSquiddles, in full. Yes, it is a preposterous name. It leads many humans to assume I am a squid, which is an insult of the worst sort.

How shall you refer to me, you ask? Well, that is up to you. Perhaps you will default to calling me *that guy*, like the rest of them. I hope not, but I will not hold it against you. You are only human, after all.

I must advise you that our time together may be brief. The plaque states one additional piece of information: the average life span of a giant Pacific octopus. Four years.

My life span: four years—1,460 days.

I was brought here as a juvenile. I shall die here, in this tank. At the very most, one hundred and sixty days remain until my sentence is complete.

THE SILVER-DOLLAR SCAR

Tova Sullivan prepares for battle. A yellow rubber glove sticks up from her back pocket like a canary's plume as she bends over to size up her enemy.

Chewing gum.

"For heaven's sake." She jabs at the pinkish blob with her mop handle. Layers of sneaker tread emboss its surface, speckling it with grime.

Tova has never understood the purpose of chewing gum. And people lose track of it so often. Perhaps this chewer was talking, ceaselessly, and it simply tumbled out, swept away by a slurry of superfluous words.

She bends over and picks at the edge of the mess with her fingernail, but it doesn't budge from the tile. All because someone couldn't walk ten feet to the trash bin. Once, when Erik was young, Tova caught him mashing a piece of bubble gum under a diner table. That was the last time she bought bubble gum for him, although how he spent his allowance as adolescence set in was, like so much else, beyond her control.

Specialized weaponry will be necessary. A file, perhaps. Nothing on her cart will pry up the gum.

As she stands, her back pops. The sound echoes down the empty curve of the hallway, bathed in its usual soft blue light, as she journeys to the supply closet. No one would fault her, of course, for passing over the blob of gum with her mop. At seventy years old,

they don't expect her to do such deep cleaning. But she must, at least, try.

Besides, it's something to do.

TOVA IS SOWELL BAY AQUARIUM'S oldest employee. Each night, she mops the floors, wipes down the glass, and empties the trash bins. Every two weeks, she retrieves a direct-deposit stub from her cubby in the break room. Fourteen dollars an hour, less the requisite taxes and deductions.

The stubs get stashed in an old shoebox on top of her refrigerator, unopened. The funds accrue in an out-of-mind account at the Sowell Bay Savings and Loan.

She marches toward the supply closet now, at a purposeful clip that would be impressive by anyone's standards but is downright astonishing for a tiny older woman with a curved back and birdlike bones. Overhead, raindrops land on the skylight, backlit by glare from the security light at the old ferry dock next door. Silver droplets race down the glass, shimmering ribbons under the fogbound sky. It's been a dreadful June, as everyone keeps saying. The gray weather doesn't bother Tova, though it would be nice if the rain would let up long enough to dry out her front yard. Her push mower clogs when it's soggy.

Shaped like a doughnut, with a main tank in the center and smaller tanks around the outside, the aquarium's dome-topped building is not particularly large or impressive, perhaps fitting for Sowell Bay, which is neither large nor impressive itself. From the site of Tova's encounter with the chewing gum, the supply closet is a full diameter across. Her white sneakers squeak across a section she's already cleaned, leaving dull footprints on the gleaming tile. Without a doubt, she'll mop that part again.

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