

Fruiting Bodies by jay griffith

Jordan first saw Lee in the park. This made them infinitely cuter, more organic, like something fresh-smelling and green. That spring she spent most of her time on a bench under a tall sycamore, people-watching and pretending to write. She had quit her copy-editing job and was trying to pursue freelance. Lee was a habitual walker, and paced past every day in bright pink headphones with a joint in their hand. Something about their movement captivated Jordan, confident in a way that was effortless and full of intention.

Jordan found them quickly on instagram. In their pictures, Lee's sharp face tilted up towards a raised camera; by the river, outside of clubs, with friends. Her finger hovered over the follow button for days. After listening to her lament her indecision for the third time, Jordan's friend Jen asked, "Have you gone just the slightest bit psychotic?"

Jordan had been out for years, but in a mostly hypothetical way. Secretly, she liked the certainty of boys, the distance and disdain she could maintain even in the heat of a crush. It was terrifying to think of herself as the one in pursuit. What if they didn't like girls, or had strict but sympathizable restrictions against white cis women living in Queens? Jordan was completely unmoored. Which made it all the more thrilling when Lee followed her back. *r u the girl i see all the time in the park lol? hiiii*

Their first date was over coffee, on a blanket, in the same park. Jordan listened to Lee so attentively that when asked a direct question, she would realize she had forgotten what they were talking about. She shredded a clump of grass so thoroughly it became a noticeable bald spot on the lawn. Lee was smart. They were generous. When they smiled, they had a way of cocking their head to the right which made them look both curious and delighted. The two swapped stories of eccentric neighbors and dramatic animal encounters. Lee promised Jordan that they would send her a long list of musicians to check out. As the afternoon fell away, Jordan inched closer beside Lee and draped her arm over into their lap. "Is this okay? For you?" she asked tentatively. Lee looked over at her without moving their head for a moment, then nodded. "You're very endearing," Lee said, as they hugged goodbye.

For the rest of the summer, Jordan and Lee were conjoined. Jordan packed them intricate picnic lunches. Lee took her to friends' poetry readings. Jordan made them laugh by imitating the postures of different Marys in the Met Cloisters. Lee brought her to her first nude beach. Jordan liked to curl up under Lee when they were napping, after sex, while laying watching TV. The bed felt empty as, night after night, Lee declined Jordan's offer to sleep over.

It was always that their morning schedules didn't align, that the roommate's leopard gecko needed feeding, that the weather looked bad for walking home later. Lee insisted it was nothing personal; Jordan took it personally. She would pout and put on a big show, and when left alone, drink two glasses of wine and wonder if the relationship was really worth it. She really, really liked Lee, but sometimes liking them felt like standing on the edge of a knife. She would resolve to end things while staring at her bedroom ceiling. And then she would see them again. In a rush of guilt and desire, her grievances disappeared and the two of them laughed, kissed, and danced. Then Lee would leave again.

Finally, one day in September, Jordan's hurt overflowed. When Lee began gathering their clothes, and phone, and purse, Jordan started to cry. "I want this," she told Lee, a bubble of snot puffing out of her

nose.

“I don’t think you know what this is,” they replied. Something hard and glassy slid behind their eyes. Jordan began to chew her hair. Again that feeling of balancing, that fear of falling.

“Will you stay the night tonight, please? I know,” Jordan put her chin on her knees and looked up at Lee, “I know that there’s so much I don’t get, or I can’t get, but I want to try. And I want you to want me to try.” Jordan started crying again all over again. Lee reached out and rolled their thumb over her hand.

“I do,” they said. “I do, I do, I do.”

Jordan woke to watch sun creep over the slumbering bundle that was Lee. She felt warm, she felt energetic. It was barely six. She made three times her usual amount of coffee and frothed milk with lavender syrup. She left the coffee, along with a plate of eggs and strawberries, by the bed. And went out, ecstatically, into her day.

When she returned hours later, arms heavy with groceries, medications, toiletries, the food and coffee were untouched. Lee was still bundled in the duvet, only a long foot visible. The electricity of Jordan’s productive morning dissipated around her. She placed her bags down and sat beside Lee. With a gentle finger, she pulled their hair back from their face. She kissed their chin. She stroked their arm. She whispered into their ear. When they didn’t wake, she shook their shoulders and called their name. Finally, she grabbed the ends of the blanket covering Lee and pulled.

Across Lee’s naked body, goosefleshed from a breeze coming in the window, was a trail of white tendrils that emerged from their nose, their mouth, their eyelids. Somewhat fuzzy, the tendrils seemed to fuse where they touched. They formed a strange veil over Lee’s face and spread downwards towards their chest. One long tentacle looped around Lee’s left nipple. Jordan reached out to stroke it. Firm and sponge-like, the tentacle was both soft to the touch and left a bit of clear mucus on Jordan’s fingertips. Lee was still breathing; Jordan could see where the loose web covering their face fluttered as they exhaled. Jordan looked with a tender curiosity. Lee was usually so guarded about their body, and Jordan felt both guilty and hungry staring at them, naked except for the tendrils creeping down across their chest. As alien as they looked, the growths seemed comfortable against Lee’s skin. The pattern they formed twisted in natural and mesmerizing shapes. Jordan suddenly believed she had been chosen for something very special and very new.

Jordan spent the next weeks becoming an expert in Lee, watching her lover in unspoken diligence. The tendrils, she discovered, were delicate at the tips but became thick and sturdy over time. They grew slowly enough that Jordan, spending hours by Lee’s side, could not perceive the change, but every morning she noted the gradual creeping that had occurred overnight. The growths secreted a liquid that didn’t stain, but did smell, mossy and clotting. Jordan bought a tarp that she placed under Lee to prevent her bed from molding and moved to the couch to sleep. From careful observation, Jordan learned that Lee needed moisture; otherwise, the tendrils would start to bruise brown and shrivel. She spent hours reading reviews of humidifiers, and twice a day used a spray bottle to mist the length of Lee’s body. Filtered water didn’t

seem to be different from tap, but Jordan filtered all of Lee's water anyway. In the evening, Jordan opened the windows for Lee, letting the cool night air rustle the little white hairs. In the dark, Lee's tendrils would emit a bluish, tender light.

Mundane tasks took on a domestic charm with her alien change in the bedroom. She found herself often writing beside Lee's silent form, her laptop glowing alongside them. But just as devotedly as she tended to the daily tasks ~ refilling humidifiers, changing out tarps ~ she worried about what might happen in her absence. What could happen to Lee; what could happen because of Lee. Despite the fact that they seemed consistent and content, Jordan was quietly afraid that, left to their own devices, the tendrils could continue on to consume the entire block. Visions of horrified guests kept her from inviting her friends over for more than a brief moment. Most of October passed with Jordan, at home, keeping watch over Lee.

Ten days into November, a freak heat wave promised pleasant weather. Jordan went to the park where she first met Lee. Everything was layered on top of itself. She lay down in the middle of the lawn, letting mud stain the back pockets of her jeans, and stared up at the sky. The freedom of the day was intoxicating; she wondered what to do with it. A gray seagull flew overhead. Her phone buzzed with a text, and Jordan suddenly found she had plans.

Tugging at the bottom of her dress, Jordan made her way to the elevator of the address Jen had sent her. Lee was set up at home, three humidifiers humming and the bedroom door firmly closed. The warmth had made Jordan nostalgic for her college friends, now loosely scattered around the city and often absorbed in their own lives. She was grateful for the chance to see them again. Alone in the elevator up to the rooftop, Jordan examined her reflection in the metal doors. She looked pretty tonight, the way she looked when she was twenty. When the doors slid open, she saw her friends waving from a table near the bar. A round of hugs, then compliments, then important reports; Christine had been passed over for a promotion at work, Cindy had a publisher expressing interest in her manuscript, Bea was thinking of moving to Boston. Jordan was impressed by how adult all these women seemed, how self-possessed and sure.

"How have you been, Jordan? Are you still seeing that same person you told us about?" This from Cindy, a mousy English major who had lived across from Jen and Jordan's dorm room freshman year. Jordan smiled shyly.

"Lee, yeah, I am. They're ~" Grasping for the words to describe Lee to her friends, Jordan paused and looked around the table. "They're actually living with me right now, at least for the moment. Just while they figure things out."

Cindy reached out and touched Jordan's elbow. "Jen told us a little bit about it earlier," she said gently. Jordan jerked back in surprise, then turned to glare at Jen. She had forgotten the conversation they had over the phone weeks ago, when Jordan was feeling particularly frazzled; she couldn't remember what exactly had been said. Avoiding Jordan's eyes, Jen spread her hand out on the table and examined her nails.

"Actually, Jordy, we've been meaning to talk to you about this whole situation."

"I don't know," added Bea. "It seems kind of, ugh, co-dependent?"

Christine now: "I get that you want to help, but also if they can't even communicate what they need from you, then why are they expecting you to just figure it out?"

"It's totally manipulative," said Jen. "Like, you've been seeing them for what ~ six months? Less? And now they're just bumming around your apartment, not working, keeping you from going out with your friends. We're worried about you, Jordan. You're not obligated to just cater to their every need."

The table spun as everyone else leaned in and nodded.

"It's not ~ I mean ~"

"It's okay." Jen wrapped her arm around Jordan's shoulder. "Just, when you're ready to prioritize yourself, we're here for you."

Jordan looked away. Off the edge of the rooftop, the hazy city skyline flattened like a cardboard cutout. "Yeah," she said. "I guess."

Then Cindy, gracious Cindy, always ready to defuse the situation, clapped her hands. "Enough, okay! Jordan looks upset. Let's go dance."

It must have been four when Jordan slunk, steaming drunk, into her kitchen. The night was hot, too hot for November, and dry. From under the bedroom door, she could see Lee's gentle, bioluminescent glow. Tomorrow, she'd have to make sure that the room was moist enough, maybe change the curtains so the windows wouldn't let in so much sun. Despite her best efforts to ignore them, her friends' words crashed around in her head.

Jordan overfilled a glass of water. Suddenly, she was tired of sleeping on the couch, tired of hearing the low rumble of humidifiers, tired of moving around her own home with the knowledge that something was laying in the room next door. She remembered desperately the simplicity of her life before Lee, without the nagging awareness of obligation. If only Lee could go back to their former self, the way they were this summer, then things would be easy again. They could still see each other. They could still date.

Jordan marched into the room. She put her hands on what she thought was Lee's shoulder and shook. Lee, as always, did not respond. Jordan shook harder, then harder still, until she found herself grasping at the carpet of white tendrils that covered them. She pulled. Beneath the first layer was more of the web-like substance. Jordan's teeth rattled. The strangeness of growths suddenly stung, and Jordan wondered if Lee had produced them just to see if she would do. She began to rip and tear, getting faster and more ferocious with each layer she pried off.

"Get out," she hissed.

Cream-colored spongy shreds littered the floor. One large, tentacle-like tendril seemed to lodge directly around their chest, and Jordan grasped it with both her hands. Bracing her foot against the bed she heaved, breathlessly, until it snapped with a sickening thwap. A hot, sticky substance coated its end. From

somewhere inside the white mound came a high keening, a strange sound that writhed in the dark bedroom. Jordan clapped her hands over her ears instinctively. Her temple throbbed. This was wrong. Lee was hurt. Desperately, Jordan tried to place the broken pieces back, running her palm over Lee's form to calm them. It's okay, she insisted to herself. When she pulled away, her forearms were covered in blood.

Panic rushed through Jordan. She ran to the bathroom and retched dryly over the toilet until she began to sob. Her chest felt hollow. Jordan stripped her sweaty dress off and ran her arms under the cool water of her shower. She grabbed a towel and clumsily returned to the bedroom to wipe the dry blood away from the dark gash she had created. She was relieved to see that it had stopped bleeding and congealed into a thick, mucused scab. With the spray bottle, she misted Lee's form, then again, and again, until beads of water dripped onto the bed. Slowly, she lay down next to them, nestled completely against their cool mass, which seemed to be pulsing in a dull, fungal pain. Lee was a part of her life, inexplicable and wonderful. This person, this being that lived with her ~ how could she have wished them gone? What did her friends know, with their empty, glistening apartments where nothing unhuman could ever live? How could they understand how right it was to tend to something beside yourself, to re-order the cold voices in your head that told you it was too much, too strange, too difficult? I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry, she thought as she pressed her forehead firmly against what used to be Lee's neck. Softly, she kissed them. The powdery taste of decay spread over her tongue.

Late morning sunlight woke Jordan, bright and warm. Under Jordan's sleepy fingers, the webbing covering them felt dry and brittle. Jordan opened and closed her mouth, trying to dispel the dryness that was there too. Her head pounded. In the center of the slightly spinning bed was Lee. Their breathing, normally low and rhythmic, was sudden and ragged. Some crisp hairs of the tendrils lay scattered on the tarp. A dark, bruised brown radiated across their torso. In the center of their chest, a pool of stiff blood and mucus swelled and caved with each of Lee's deep gasps.

Jordan screamed. For a moment, she considered running away. Lee could fade back into the anonymous tragedies of the city and she could pretend that these past six months had never happened. Then Jordan heard something drip onto the tarp. Twin droplets of moisture were pooling on either side of Lee's head from a little spring between the layers of white facial webbing. They were crying.

Hours later, Jordan, exhausted, sweaty, streaked with dirt, stood at the entrance to her apartment. Moss crawled out of the sink across the countertop under waving pale-green plants that sprouted from the drain. The cabinets and walls peeled at the corners, orange globules congregating on the exposed wood. Large, hollow stumps stood where her couch used to be. Jordan could hear the shuffling legs of centipedes and beetles and other crawling things making their way across what was the floor. The scene was illuminated by slanted afternoon sunshine, falling dappled through the vines and green boughs that she had hung from the ceiling.

Jordan walked into the bedroom and gathered Lee in her arms. They were lighter than she expected, far lighter than a human body. She placed a kiss on their forehead and carried them into the living room to a bed of rotting wood and leaves. And then she sat. And waited.

For a while, for a few hours, nothing happened.

Then Lee started to move.

Around the edge of the tear in their chest, small mounds appeared, then swelled. They crept outward, muscular towers erupting towards the ceiling. Across Lee's body, knobby shoots poked through the web that covered them. Everything seemed to stretch, expand, meld. Small, egg-shaped tips emerged. Ridged flesh, in pink and grays and blues, unfolded from the tops and bent upwards in tight clusters. Jordan thought of young coral waving brightly over a bone-colored reef. The new bodies murmured in an imperceptible breeze. Like strange umbrellas they spread open over Jordan and Lee. From above, fuzzy white droplets formed on the wrinkled underside and began to fall. It reminded Jordan of the cottonwood trees dropping cotton on the street where she grew up. She reached out a hand to catch one. It danced gently down into her open palm. On contact, it puffed open and melted into her skin. The feeling was prickling electricity, as if someone had rubbed a small balloon up and down her hand. A thrum of energy ran through Jordan, twisting in her gut and spilling out between her legs. And Lee was there, beside her, as they were before, as they looked now, their mouth open and smiling. Together, they plunged their hands into the rotten bark and leaf litter. Something passed from one to the other.

"Oh," Jordan gasped. "I see."