



# Belinda's Rings



a  
novel



CORINNA CHONG

NEWEST PRESS

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*For my brother and sister,  
in whom I see what I hope to be.*



Hybridize or disappear; family *in* place.

— FRED WAH, *Diamond Grill*

# 1 Bathyspheres

**SQUID'S GOT THREE MOTHERS** who can't spank him.

That's what my stepdad Wiley used to say when Squid got into the goo. Back when he was a baby, you had anything gooey and Squid'd find it. Peanut butter, craft glue, ketchup, little bits of melted tar on the street — smeared all over his cheeks faster than you could say 'fudge.' That was code in our family for 'Squid is covered in something gooey,' except you had to yell it out, *FUUUUUDGE*, like a swear word. Mum doesn't know that people say 'fudge' to mean another f-word, so sometimes I'd yell it right in her face to make Jess laugh. Jess never did it herself, squeezed her eyes shut like she was jumping off a building whenever she yelled fudge. She didn't yell nearly half as loud as me, either.

The problem with spanking was that it didn't work. Mum only tried it once, in the supermarket. I was there and remember it perfectly. She'd let him out of the shopping cart to toddle around. He was just little. Only a couple months before he'd still had that mini-drunk-person sort of walk that made me want to follow right behind him, holding out my

arms, thinking he could topple over any second. By this time he'd gotten to the stage where we had to actually run after him 'cause he'd take off when you weren't looking. But we were in the cereal aisle and we didn't think he could do any damage, so we let him scamper around. He liked to punch the cereal boxes, the ones on the bottom shelves that no one wanted anyway. So he was punching, punching away, and every box he could reach was getting a punch, Squid made sure of that. Mum was looking at the generic brand of Frosted Flakes, the one that came in a big milky-coloured bag with no box, so most of the flakes were crumbled into powder.

That's sick, I told her. Can we please just get the Kellogg's?

It's all the same, Mum said. You're just paying for the name.

It looks disgusting, I said, holding the bag up to the fluorescent lights. I will not eat that. It's like sawdust.

That was when I was in grade six, and my friend Marnie would come over after school to watch TV. She was obsessed with Frosted Flakes, the Kellogg's kind. We always had a bowl each. I couldn't give her the generic brand. She'd notice. But while I was arguing with Mum, neither of us noticed that Squid had stopped punching. He was standing in front of us with a giant grin across his face. You could see all his pointy little baby teeth.

He'd stuck a fist into his diaper and got it all covered in — goo. Shit. This mustardy-brown, pasty kind of shit. The Squid special. And now he was waving the gooey hand above his head, his feet hammering the linoleum. Mum and I stood there for a second, staring at him, and then we both lunged at the diaper bag sitting in the shopping cart. Fudgefudgefudge, I said, Mum and me both pulling at the Velcro flaps and our hands just getting in each other's way. That gave Squid enough time to walk up to a lady who was bending down for a box of Grape Nuts. He swung his mucky hand like a club — SPLAT — right on her back. Squid's four fingers, imprinted in yellow slashes on her black suede coat.

The lady dropped the Grape Nuts, cranked her head around to look. She couldn't see the damage, but her eye caught Squid's pasty hand waving as he ran down the aisle squealing. Mum chased after him with tissues, her handbag slapping her ribs.

The lady stood up slowly. I thought she might puke, but she just stood there, her tongue jutting between her teeth. She was watching Mum chase Squid. So was everyone else. There were a couple of snickering high-school boys with a basket full of Doritos and Mountain Dew. A mom with her baby perched in the cart, quietly nibbling a soggy Arrowroot biscuit in two hands. They waited for what they expected. Punishment. I waited too.

Mum caught Squid by the collar and reeled him in. She grabbed both wrists and held his hands out in front. When she whipped her head to flick the hair out of her face, I could see her eyes darting around, noticing all the people watching her. It might have been the way the lights reflected off her eyeballs, but she looked like she was about to cry.

That was when Mum spanked him. Let go of one of his wrists and *thwack*. Squid's eyes bulged, his hips pulled forward, his little bum caving in on itself. He spun around and looked at Mum. At first, his face started to crumple up, and here we go, I thought. But then he just stopped. Blinked. His face smoothed out again, and his mouth did this funny thing where it turned into an oval. It was hilarious. A perfect oval, aimed right at Mum's snarling face. And then he laughed, gleefully, like one of those evil Chucky dolls from the horror movies. Ran down the aisle, feet going so fast that his wobbling body could barely keep up. He disappeared around the corner, Mum trudging behind him.

I watched Grape Nuts lady peel off her coat. She rooted around in her purse for tissues. It was hurting my stomach not to laugh.

I'm really sorry, I told her. I offered some fast food napkins I had stuffed in my pocket.

Can you believe that child? Grape Nuts lady said. She had this

really embarrassed smile, and she was trying not to look anyone in the eye.

That mother needs to learn a thing or two about discipline, she said.

Oh I know, I said. I shook my head, and so did she. I was surprised how easy it was to play the part. At that moment, I was just some random girl shopping by herself. Another stranger, eyeing that bad mother's abandoned shopping cart with the gummy bears and Chef Boyardee and cheap bologna.

It boggles the mind, she said. I held her coat by the shoulder-pads as Grape Nuts lady swiped at it with balled-up napkins. I wondered what 'it' was exactly that boggled the mind — Squid or Mum.

What did you feed him, Grace? Mum asked me when we got to the van. She smeared a baby wipe between Squid's fingers, bunching and folding.

I don't know, I said. Cheerios. One of those cans of creamed corn?

The Heinz ones? Mum asked, huffing out one of her it's-all-your-fault sighs. You know the Heinz ones give him diarrhea.

I thought it was just the beans ones that made him do that, I said. Besides, it's not my fault. He's a baby, last time I checked.

Mum plonked Squid into his car seat and buckled him in, didn't bother to readjust his scrunched-up hood behind his neck. I climbed in next to him, pulled his hood out from under the seatbelt. Mum heaved the door shut so hard the whole van shuddered, like she always told me never to do.

It was the first time I knew — really knew — I was alone. Me, separate from Squid and Mum. Mum drove home like a zombie, arms limp and back hunched. Even from the back seat of the van I could tell she was making movements she'd memorized from driving this route again and again, week after week. The sound



of the brakes at the stop sign, the rhythm of the engine, the timing of the turn signal, left here, then right there, familiar as a song that gets overplayed on the radio. I watched a few raindrops river down the window and imagined us underwater, all separate, in our own little bathyspheres, roving around the deep ocean. We were trapped inside, looking for the same route to the surface.



Back then, Squid was going through a vegetarian phase. If we tried to hide a little morsel of sliced ham in his mashed-up squash, he'd just suck off all the squash and eject the cleaned ham chunk neatly like a tiny VHS tape.

The funny thing is that squid — the giant kind, with eyes the size of dinner plates — are carnivorous. When I first read that in one of Wiley's *National Geographics* — *giant squid have eyes the size of dinner plates* — I imagined being eaten by a squid. I don't know why. Maybe it was the mention of 'dinner.' But I imagined the tentacles shooting out, all of them at once, and cinching around me, wrapping around and around. And for some reason I wasn't wearing any clothes, so I could feel the slimy tentacles slithering all over my body. I felt the suction cups sucking great big purple rings into the skin of my arms and legs, my naked back. My cheek squishing into an enormous black eye, my mouth filling with jelly flesh. I imagined it like a great big squiddy hug, except the squid squeezed so tight that my ribs broke and my lungs burst like balloons.

I found out later, when I really got into marine biology, that it wouldn't happen that way. Squid actually only use two of their tentacles — the two longest ones, shaped like spears at the ends — to grab their prey. The other eight tentacles are really just for show. It's only because they look so different from us — foreign, like they belong to another world — that we find them so threatening. It's like that old saying goes: we fear what we don't understand.