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The Mermaid

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JOY TWISTS AND GLIDES IN the pool. She's pretending to be a mermaid.

"More like a manatee." Matthew taunts when she comes up for air. It's one in his curated stockpile of casual slander, delivered without looking up, not bothering to stop what he's doing. Right now, what he's doing is picking apart a scab on his knee. The stinging pain of it feels too good to not give it his all.

Joy scream-whines his name, but when he looks up scowling she withers, like a balloon pierced by a dart, remembering. Don't egg him on; it makes it worse. She knows this, finally, at age twelve: she has no ammunition. She chews on her bottom lip and turns in the opposite direction to stare at the ponytail palm in the neighbor's backyard. She dog-paddles toward it, then grips the side of the pool, and lifts her goggles up to her forehead. The diminutive tree looks like a person almost, with its squat bottom and drooping green leaves like rag doll hair.

She smiles at it. "Hello, tree, and how are you today?" *Uh, oh. Did he hear that?* She jerks her head in Matthew's direction. He'll tease her again, or maybe worse, but he's sitting on the patio floor bent over his cellphone and she lets her body relax. She dangles in the water and the warm concrete feels good on her flattened palms.

There is nothing wrong with me. I know how to do a lot of things.. So what if I talk to trees? It's normal. My daddy does it.

Their father has a condo twenty minutes away but travels often, as a horticulturist specializing in tropical plants. He's told Joy it's okay to talk to plants and it even helps them grow

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better. "You never know, especially with exotics; they need a lot of attention." He says exotics are special plants that come from other places and that she is exotic, too. Joy likes the flowering plants best, especially the one called beehive ginger. It's from Thailand with flower bracts that look like bright green, scarlet and yellow pinecones. Her dad had brought one home in a pot for her to tend. They'd looked up the Thai words on his computer: ปอดเตียบโต = Pord teibto. Please grow.

The shiny purple and green scales of Joy's mermaid bathing suit glint in the sun through the clear water. She sticks out her chest and whispers to the little tree, so low that she can't even hear herself, "Do you like it?" She jumps into the air and spins around, "I like the colors."

The suit was a gift for her birthday last year from an out-of-town aunt and now it's a little tight. Her mother had left it in its box, told her it was a stupid gift, that she wasn't a good enough swimmer to be a mermaid, and plopped it onto the high shelf inside her closet. Joy snuck a few weeks later and danced in it around the house, in her pink toe-nailed feet. It didn't have a fin, just a long tapered skirt with a ruffle at the bottom. She still felt like a real mermaid in it even though it was "just pretend, of course." The babysitter, a chirpy teenager who lived a few doors down, had glanced her way and smiled, but continued her phone conversation.

She's glad that Matthew isn't making her put on one of her regular bathing suits. She had begged him to let her in the pool. He didn't appear to mind, which seemed odd, but she was grateful. Maybe he'll be a good babysitter. He's never babysat her before, so she doesn't know. Anything can happen. Maybe she can have ice cream for lunch.

Meanwhile, Matthew is giddy with it. King of the house. He's lit up by his friend on the phone. "No, dude, just come over...Ben's comin' too...chill...I got you." He runs into the

house and comes back with a couple of bottles and some plastic cups.

Joy pushes off the pool wall with her feet and rolls onto her back, closing her eyes. It's a bit cumbersome to swim in the snug suit. *She's in mermaid training*, she tells herself and feels better. It's not her fault it takes her so long to do things! *Who cares? Everybody knows that practice makes progress.* Her teacher taught her that one last year. Matthew had pointed out that it was because she was in "the stupid class for dumb-dumbs."

He's standing up now, legs wide apart like a cowboy, glaring at her. She notices that his chest now has a few curly brown hairs on it, like the new one on his chin. *Teenagers are hairy and weird-looking.*

She has a funny feeling suddenly but isn't sure why. "You're not going to be extra mean to me today are you?"

Matthew shakes his head slowly. "Oh, no. I'm going to be real nice today." He says the word "real" in a measured drawl.

His face has a serious look to it and she believes him, as she flops backwards into the water and comes up again with a splash. After all, he's allowed her to wear her mermaid suit and go in the pool.

The pool is like a secret world. It is as big as an ocean. Joy hasn't been to the real ocean, though it's just a half an hour from her house, but she's seen it online.

She adjusts the goggles back over her eyes, holds her nose and dives like a one-armed dolphin. One, two, three, four... The longest she can stay underwater is ten seconds, but she's shooting for eleven.

Wriggling under water, she sees a school of silver fish swimming around jagged algae-covered coral rocks. Flopping behind them, *oh my*, it's a green sea turtle, wiggling forward with its stubby legs. A squishy jellyfish bounces along next

and Joy pops out of the water. *Those things sting. I'd better be careful.*

The only thing that would make being underwater better is if she could breathe under there, like mermaids do. *They exist, it's true!* They live on the other side of Florida, in Weeki Wachee Springs. She knows this because she'd searched online and found them. "You can see a real live mermaid. And they can dance in the water. They can, they really can," she tells anyone who will listen. Her best friend, Kaley knows about them too. They like to draw pictures of mermaids together. How lucky they are to live just a few hours away from Weeki Wachee, they agree. In fact, it is the deepest freshwater cave system in the country. One day, Joy will go there, she knows this in her heart. That's why she needs to practice swimming like one.

Weeki Wachee is the only place in the world where you can watch mermaids performing in the water. They use a special kind of hose to breathe; someone there invented it. But the real mermaids, the really real ones, live in a cave at Weeki Wachee under the cold spring of water. Kaley thinks so too.

Matthew told her once that if she went into one of the caves, she would suffocate and freeze to death, "You wouldn't see a mermaid; you'd probably see a dead body."

When Ben and Sean arrive, Joy is lying on her side, sunning herself next to the mango tree in the yard behind the patio. She likes the spicy-sweet smell, but she doesn't eat them because the stringy orange pulp will get stuck between her teeth. What she likes most is to watch them rotting on the ground. She stares at a little black worm crawling around on one until it disappears inside a fleshy crack.

At first, the boys forget about her, even though she's just

outside the patio, just a few yards away. She swats the gnats that hover near her nose and snuffles loudly from time to time. Between the trilling birds, the distant hum of a lawnmower, and their own ranting and grunting and cursing, they don't hear her. They tear off their t-shirts and sprawl on chaise lounges, puffing up their bony chests, and flexing their jaws. Then they take turns swigging from a bottle of something that makes their eyes squinch behind their sunglasses. Ben turns up a song on his phone, attaching it to a tiny speaker that plays loud enough for the neighbors to hear. It's a classical piece, a symphony. Ben plays piano; he knows every note.

But the music makes the place feel like somewhere the other boys don't want to be and Matthew grabs the phone and shuts it off. "This is crap."

It's a familiar game. "Haydn is a genius. You should really give it a chance."

For a while, they mock-bicker about it and someone tosses an old pink plastic kiddie chair in the direction of the pool. It thuds once onto the concrete patio floor then lands in the water and sinks to the bottom.

"Go get it, man."

"No, you."

"No, you."

"Damn chair," Matthew says. Joy's chair. She was too old for that thing. The thought of her squishing her butt into it makes him drunk-mad. Maybe his friends thought it was funny but he sure as hell doesn't. Matthew has an idea then. It sloshes out of him like the liquor from the bottle he's let fall to the floor. "Joy can do it. She's a mermaid." He jumps out of his chair.

Sean puts on something rappy and turns up the pounding beat. "You're crazy drunk, dude," he yells. "First of all,

mermaids aren't necessarily strong. They don't even have legs." He laughs at his own joke and dances like a robot around the patio.

But Ben's on board. He stands up, shoves his cellphone into his shorts pocket and looks around. "Where is she, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be babysitting?"

Matthew's at the patio door and he grabs the handle. "By the tree, c'mon."

Joy is sprawled out on her back, on top of her Minnie Mouse beach towel. The boys stand staring at her for a minute.

Matthew makes a snorting sound. "Ugh, look at her face."

A thin line of spittle drips from her open mouth onto the towel.

Sean picks up a mango on the ground and sniffs it. "Dang. She's your sister, man."

Matthew kicks at the grass. "Fuck you. My mother's right to beat the crap out of her. She's a pain in the ass."

He's remembering, in a flash, the time at school when Joy had seen him in the hallway. He was usually pretty good about making sure she didn't notice him but he'd been caught off-guard.

Joy had screamed his name, "Matthew, Matthew...Matty, Matty. How's it going?" She'd followed him all the way to math class and by the time they got to the door, his face was red with embarrassment. She hadn't noticed. "Matthew. You didn't see me. Hi. How are you? How's your bruise? The one Mommy gave you."

Matthew had pushed her away. "Go to your class, Joy." He'd slunk into his own class with his head down. Damn bruise. She'd pushed him up against the bathroom sink again. He'd been in long-sleeve shirts all that week to cover it up.

When he was younger, he'd let it slip out to a grownup who'd asked about how he got a mottled blue-black mark on

his thigh. It had been past his bedtime the night before and he hadn't taken a bath. His mother had dragged his limp body down the hall and thrown him into the tub. A week later, a man in a wrinkled suit with a clipboard and a pen came to their house and Matthew's mother served him lemonade. He promptly left: it wasn't child abuse without a broken bone.

"Can't she go to another damn school," he'd said to his mother when he got home from school. She had rolled her eyes, sighed loudly and left the room. It hadn't surprised him, not one little bit. *She-devil battle-axe bitch*. Matthew made a game of coming up with new names for his mother in his head. Recently, he'd made the mistake of saying one of them out loud. She'd taken his computer keyboard and hurled it against his bedroom wall. If her boyfriend hadn't been in the house, Matthew could have gotten her back, shoved her into the wall. He was still pretty scrawny but finally almost as tall as her. *One day. That's a promise.*

Later that night, he had barged into Joy's room, grabbed her arm and twisted it hard. "If you talk to me again at school, I will twist your arm right off." When her eyes teared up and she stayed quiet, he almost felt bad about hurting her, which just made him even angrier, and he'd stomped away, leaving her wide-eyed and sniffly.

There's a faint rumbling in the distance and the graying clouds hang low. An afternoon storm.

Matthew pulls a mango off the tree and tosses it. "Wake up, Joy. Wake the hell up."

Joy opens her eyes and sees Sean. "Sean, Sean. Ping Pong Sean." She'd met Sean a year ago at Matthew's fourteenth birthday party. They were in the pool and Joy had been marching around the patio like a one-woman band, her eleven-year-old legs keeping time. "Ping-pong, ping-pong, ping-pong. I'm bored. Ping-pong, ping-pong, ping-pong. I'm bored."

Sean had come out of the pool for a drink. He'd grabbed a paddle and hit some balls back and forth with her for a few minutes, until her mother dragged her back into the house.

Matthew kicks at her side. "Get up, Joy."

"Don't hurt her, Matt."

But Ben smiles down at her. "We just need your help. Can you help us, Joy?"

Joy pushes herself up from the ground, backs up to the mango tree, stumbling a little before falling against the brown trunk. Her hand flies to the top of her head; she's felt a drop of rain.

"What do you want me to do?" She sees Matthew's fists balled up at his sides. "Leave me alone."

Matthew walks over to her. She is behind the tree now, clinging to it. He swats at her and comes close enough to rip a neon green scale off her mermaid suit. She's howling now. The other boys glance at each other, shift their weight from one foot to another.

This is too much, even for Ben. "Come on, Matthew, let's do something else."

Sean nods. "Yeah, let's watch TV. It's hot out here."

"No. We need her services as a mermaid," Matthew barks. He's in deep now, too far to go back and the anger wells up again so that all he sees is Joy's stinking wet face and all he hears is the noise coming out of it. He grabs one of her hands and drags her in the direction of the pool.

The boys follow. Each is already thinking about the day ahead. This has not turned out well and soon they will hop on their bikes and ride over to the mall.

(Months later, they would tell everyone they knew. The story about the boy who got drunk—they were "kinda friends"—and the sister who dreamed of being a mermaid. *We wanted to stop him.*)

Matthew's hands are on Joy's shoulders. "You need to get that chair for us, Mermaid."

Joy is wheezing and her nose is running. Her chest heaves in and out as she struggles to breathe and cry at the same time. She wiggles, trying to pry loose from his grip, but she can't.

"Get it, Joy."

She is still sobbing when he shoves her into the pool. "Stupid idiot. Fat loser," he mutters as his sister thrashes in the water, arms flailing like octopus tentacles. The others watch. Matthew raises an arm to dry his forehead; he is dripping with sweat.

Ben glances at him. "I don't think she's gonna get the chair, dude."

Matthew is frozen, staring into the pool. "Shut up, Ben. She knows how to swim."

The seconds tick by, slowly like the storm coming in, and it begins to drizzle. A breeze sends a ripple through the allamanda flowers along the fence, their delicate yellow petals fluttering.

He's really gonna get it now, Matthew is thinking. *She'll squeal the second her Mommy gets home.* But he doesn't care. He isn't even mad anymore. He's just tired. *It's not Joy's fault. She's not the monster. He is.*

Joy's head tilts back and her face bobs in and out of the water. Her mouth is open wide, searching for air, but only water streams in. No one speaks. The only sound is the soft patter of rain and the distant rumble of thunder.

A few more seconds and they they can no longer see her face, only her hair waving on top of the surface.

"Jesus. She's drowning," Sean says.

Matthew jumps into the pool and lunges forward to grab

an arm. He pulls her to the side and the other boys drag her out.

Someone calls 911.

Matthew stumbles over to the dripping, flaccid body, looking down like he doesn't know how it's gotten there.

"Do something. Matthew," Ben yells.

The rain is pummeling down on them now and there's a flash in the sky, but they don't notice. Matthew drops to his knees. All he can see are her bluish lips and red-veined eyelids. Then, "Breathe," he whispers. "Breathe...breathe...breathe."

Remembering something from health class, he pinches her nose between his fingers, lifts her head up. *Will it be enough? It has to be enough. It has to work.*

Maybe she's playing dead again. When she learned about animals doing that, she'd started pretending, dropping to the floor, "I'm dead. I'm dead." She'd done it once at school. Right in the hallway in front of the cafeteria. Right in front of him. "Well, the cafeteria food finally killed me." Then she'd jerked her eyes open, "No it didn't. Kidding. Kidding," and popped back up to her feet. He'd wanted to die then. Wanted the hard, gray linoleum to crack open so he could disappear.

He bends forward and grabs her shoulders, shaking them. "Stop it. You're not a fucking mermaid." He's shaking too. Shaking and screaming. "Just breathe. Open your goddamn eyes and breathe." Now he's pushing down on her chest with his flat palms, pushing over and over. He doesn't know what else to do.

But Joy's hair is fanned out in auburn wisps and curls around her face and she's beautiful. She is beautiful and perfect, dancing underwater in a dream. She is all the colors of the world, a rainbow behind the clouds, an iridescent seashell. A happy, sparkly mermaid shining in the sun.

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