

The Mermaid

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The second time the boy saw the mermaid, she was in a glass tank. He had permission from Carlino to go back into the House of Wonders to look at her any time he wanted to. *Third door on the right, boy.* Carlino looked past him with hooded eyes that were slightly out of focus. Sweltering in the afternoon heat, the man passed a hand over his unshaven cheek and jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the heavy velvet drape that shrouded the entrance; then he took another long swig from the bottle he kept always beside him on the scarred wooden counter of the ticket booth. The boy parted the dusty curtain; it fell shut behind him, blotting out the sun, the day, and the world. He stepped softly as he made his way down the dim hallway, his dark eyes adjusting themselves to the murky gloom. He passed the other rooms without stopping. The Two-Headed Serpent, the Dog Boy – these did not entice him. He was here only to see her.

When he reached the room where she was kept, he hesitated before entering. His hands, he noticed, were clammy, his heart beating hard and fast.. He wiped his palms on the legs of his trousers and pushed aside the blue curtain, filmy and stained, that separated her from him. He stepped inside. The darkness of the hallway pressed into the room, but a spotlight had been affixed to the ceiling and its yellow beam spilled into the tank in the center of the floor, then spilled back out and floated on the walls, bobbing and waving. The tank was a giant aquarium, and the water within was a ghostly green, the green of the fog that rose from the ocean in the small morning hours. He wondered about the color of the water. Was it green because it was dirty, unhealthy? Or did blue water mixed with yellow light make green? Later he remembered that water in a tank should have no color at all. It should be transparent; one should be able to see through it. Having spent so much of his young life on the sea, in the small boats, he thought of water as being blue, like the ocean on a sharp, clear day. It was a small thing about which he was wrong.

The boy steadied his breathing and gathered his courage. He was not particularly brave, but he had a good heart, and sometimes that is enough. He moved closer to the tank. She was there, on the other side of the glass. Her eyes were closed and her dark hair floated in a halo about her head. She was very, very pale. Her body was that of a woman – shoulders, white arms and long, tapering fingers, small breasts, a torso. And then it was that of a fish – scales that glittered where the light touched them, iridescent and sleek, ending in a delicate fan of a tail. Her fish parts seemed to be all the colors at once. As she floated and the green water gently rocked her, the light played over her bottom half and gentle rainbows were revealed.

She had no navel. Her fish parts began where the navel should have been.

The boy gazed at her, wonder, fear, and something else, something he could not yet name, pulsing in his temples. He filled his heart with the sight of her, drank in the marvel that she was. As he stood enraptured, she opened her eyes.

She didn't see him at first. She blinked and blinked again, brushed a strand of hair from in front of her face, looked around the room. Everything she did seemed to happen in slow motion. She looked as light as a wish, yet she moved so slowly that it seemed as if she held the weight of all the world's sorrows in her heart. She found him with her eyes. She did not smile. She gazed at him, begging him without words, without sound. He felt the impact of her emotion and drew back a step. The force of her need was palpable in the air around him. He stood perfectly still and studied her, thought courageous thoughts at her, begged her in his own silent way to let him be. He knew what she wanted of him. Anyone would need only enter the room and look at her face to see how she was suffering in that tomb of glass. He knew that she wanted him to free her from this ghastly prison, to spirit her away from this awful House of Wonders and return her to the azure sea. But he was only a boy; what could he do? He had no way to help her. Surely she knew that. Surely she knew the difference between a strong adult and an eleven-year old child. Wherever she was from, the kingdom beneath the waters, the village in the ocean, wherever and whatever it was, there must be children there. *I can't help you*, he thought at her. *I'm only a boy. It's not my fault.* The mermaid pressed her hands against the glass of the tank. She made no other gestures, no other movements. Her hair danced around her shoulders and her eyes were stones. *I'm sorry*, he thought as he turned and walked through the blue curtain, back up the hall, and through the final heavy drape into the light. He blinked and blinked again, put his hands in his pockets, and started for his home, walking along the dirt road that led to his door. Two times a car passed him. Each time it was an old, wheezing car traveling in a cloud of dust, as noisy as a dragon wrapped in the smoke of its own fury. The grit in the air as the cars went by made him rub his eyes and cough. He longed for cool water. Finally he entered the tiny kitchen of his tiny home, where his mother was about to set his plate of rice and beans on the rough wooden table. *Eat your supper, my little man*, she said without looking at him.



The first time the boy saw the mermaid, she was in the sea. He was fishing with the men, but he was alone in his small boat with his net and his knife. The men were in their own boats, casting their nets over the warm water, yelling over the sea from boat to boat, joking with each other and anticipating the liquor they would drink that night and the women they would have. The men spoke often of women, although very few of them actually had one to call their own. They bragged shamelessly about girls they met in the dockside bars and went home with in the cool of the night (they said), of girls who flirted with them while walking in the streets (they told each other), of girls they had had in other towns, other bars, other times (they insisted). When they ran out of these tales to tell, they bragged about the girls who had walked in their dreams the night before. The boy didn't join in any of these stories. He was a child, nearly oblivious to the presence of women in his life. He just listened, as one listens to a radio playing in the background while one is writing a letter; he listened and he cast his net, and he listened and he drew back his net, and soon all the big talk became one with the waves and the gulls.

Each evening when the men returned from their day's work, they inspected their nets. With their tired, sun-brown arms, they spread the nets out on the dock like giant pieces of coarse lace. Then they mended any tears so that they would be ready to go out fishing before dawn the next morning. The nets were their livelihood, the food on their tables, the walls of their simple homes. For the few who owned a battered car or an ancient pickup, the nets were the fuel that kept them running. The men were meticulous with their nets.

The boy, however, was less conscientious. He loved going out on the sea with the men, loved playing at being a man – but he was not good at fixing tears and holes. He made repairs only when a hole had become so large that he was losing more fish than he was catching. On these evenings as the sun set and the air cooled and the men tended their nets, the boy listened to the stories that the older men spun. He loved the tales of the mermaids, the strange, beautiful creatures who lived beneath the sea. Every man wanted to spy one, to catch one. Though these beings were half women, they were not like the girls the men supposedly did things with at the bars. *They are pure. They are like angels.* The oldest man in the village said this to him one evening in a voice hushed with vague love and the dream of wondrous things. *What would you do with one if you caught her?* the boy asked him as the others mended their nets, breaking the lines with their teeth.. *I would touch her face and send her back to the sea.* The boy thought that was a good answer.

On the day he first saw the mermaid, the boy's net had developed a large hole in one corner. He fingered the edges of the tear, shrugged, and cast the net out into the water. The sea was very blue that day. The boy stood, preparing to draw back his catch and see what the ocean had granted him. The men in their boats were laughing; one was singing an old song, and as they remembered bits of it, the others sang along. The boy pulled on his net and nearly stumbled; it didn't come as it should. He braced his feet on the bottom of the boat and pulled harder. At one corner of the net, he saw something. A flash of color, a splash. The boy squinted in the sunlight. He pulled again. He felt the weight of the catch in the net.

As he pulled once more, trying to see what was caught in the guilty hole, a great silver tailfin surfaced, smacked the surface of the water, and submerged. He was about to call to the men to tell them in an excited voice that he had caught some sort of tremendous fish, some sort of prize, when he saw a hand break through the sea and enter the air. He hesitated. Who was in the water? It was not one of the men. This was a woman's hand, small and white. Puzzlement turned to amazement as he saw, emerging from the roil of the waves, a head, a face, two arms. It was a woman, but somehow she was entangled with the tremendous fish. She grasped his net with both hands, twisting her body this way and that, pulling at the mesh in which, yes, now he saw it, the mesh in which she herself was caught. For she was the fish.

The boy caught his breath. He wanted to bring her nearer, to look at her, to see her clearly so that he would always remember and, perhaps if he were truly lucky, to touch her face before he freed her from the net and watched her swim away. He pulled his net closer to the boat.

Hey, boy, what have you got there? The singing had stopped and the men were paddling their boats closer to his. He answered without looking back at them. *A mermaid. I have a mermaid.* The men were quiet. Some furrowed their brows, confused; some gaped, eyes wide, at the scene in front of them. The creature looked up at the men. In her luminous face there was no panic. She struggled still to free herself from the net, but there was no frantic thrashing; no terrified sound rose from her throat. She wriggled for a moment longer and then simply stopped and floated on the water, waiting for the men to take her. The boy knelt in his boat. Two of the men boarded his wooden craft and knelt beside him, drawing the net to them. It came easily now, and they ignored the load of fish trapped within to get to the creature trapped without. As they pulled her by her arms, the boy himself grabbed the net where it was tangled about her tail. With the blade of his knife, he pulled at the mesh, tearing a larger hole until her shining tail slipped free and thudded against the side of his boat. She lay on the wood bottom, not moving at all except for the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she breathed the air. The *hush* of the water and the *scree* of the gulls were the only sounds to be heard. The boy studied the creature. Was she a woman who dreamed of being a fish, who longed to slide through the vast,

cool deep like a swift shadow, a wraith of the sea? Or was this a fish who dreamed of the land and woke to find she had crossed over to humanity, though just part of the way? The boy could not decide. The silence began to tremble with the murmuring of the men as they once again found their voices, found that they, at least, had legs and lungs and the privileges and problems of men.

What will we do with her? Should we take her to the mayor? Should we have a parade? The men's voices rose, one lapping over the other.

Can we sell her?

Suddenly the wind changed, blowing the mermaid's hair across her eyes. She did not move to brush it away. Sell her? For money? How much could one get for a mermaid? To whom would one sell her, anyway? How would they split the profit they would make? Surely, the men who pulled her aboard would get more than those who merely watched from their boats. And the boy?

The boy? Why, he is only a child. What need has he for money? The boy barely heard them. He gazed at the mermaid, who had folded her hands against her stomach, turned her head to the side, and closed her eyes. He continued to kneel beside her, breathing deeply, as deeply as if he, too, had just swum up from the dark. He raised his hand, grimy and tanned by the sun, with fish scales under his fingernails and calluses across his palm. Slowly he reached for her cheek, and with his fingertips he stroked her wet skin. The salt water streamed down her face like tears. At his touch, she opened her eyes and found his. There was still no fear in her gaze, only quiet sorrow. The boy was silent, but he thought, *Don't worry. I will take care of you.* When he thought this, he believed that it was true. He knelt beside her all the way back to land, while the sun dropped, heavy and smoldering, into the sea behind them.

When they reached the docks it was night and the air was cool and damp. The dockside bars quivered with the noisy laughter of braggarts, liars, and fools. The men shushed each other, tying up the boats and holding the boy's craft steady as two of them lifted the mermaid up onto the worn boards. Still silent, she watched them as they handled her. Out of the water, she was heavy, much heavier than a normal woman her size would have been. The men strained and nearly tipped the small boat over as they struggled to raise her onto land. One of the younger men ran for his truck. He drove the rusting, noisy vehicle backward toward the dock and waited while the other men pushed and pulled and twisted and swore and finally lifted her into the truck's bed. Blue smoke chugged out of the exhaust pipe, creating an oily cloud around the men and their prize. The boy watched from the fringes of the small crowd of fishermen. He longed to climb aboard the truck with the creature, to touch her face again and to protect her.

Where are you taking her? he ventured, his voice steady but his heart beating so fast it was as if a small, frightened fish were flopping about on the floor of his chest. Bent over, hands on knees, breathing hard from his exertions, one of the fishermen looked up at him and pointed to a ramshackle building nearby. *To Carlino. Who else would buy such a thing?* The truck drove away, leaving a trail of smoke and shame.

The seventh time the boy saw the mermaid, she hardly moved. She had spent one week in the House of Wonders, but the true wonder was how she continued to exist. Carlino, for his part, tried to feed her, but what does one feed a mermaid? A two-headed serpent was still a serpent – one fed it two mice rather than one. A dog boy was, perhaps, more of a boy than Carlino would have people know, and therefore it ate that which a boy would eat. But the mermaid was neither fish nor woman. She was something between, something beyond, and though it was apparent that she must eat, Carlino could not find anything that she would accept. He started with fish, slimy and cold, that he caught in the harbor. He tossed them into the tank, but she pushed them away with her pale hands. He tried seaweed, pulling handfuls up from the shore, waving it in the salty water to rinse out the sand, and bringing it to her in her glass cage, where it sank to the bottom, untouched. He tried sea plants, shore grasses, and crustaceans, but the creature turned away from them all. Carlino made several half-hearted attempts then to remove them from the tank, using a small net tied to a broom handle, but many of the plants and most of the seaweed remained, making the water greener – it was the color of mist, then of glass, then of a precious stone. The boy grew more and more worried for the mermaid. With each day that passed, he was sadder, thinking brave thoughts at her, but all too aware that he was unable to help her. He could only stand in the weird light of the room and watch her, for hours at a time. Often her eyes were closed and she appeared to sleep, but the boy had no way of being sure if this was so. *I'm just a boy*, he repeated to himself. *I can't help her because I'm just a boy.* But then the creature would open her eyes and look about for him. At least he wanted to think that it was him she sought. She would find him and stare into his eyes, her gaze steady and unafraid, her unvoiced plea very clear. *She must know I'm not yet a man. She must know I have no power to return her to the sea.* As the boy thought this for the one thousandth time, the mermaid turned and drifted to the bottom of the tank. The boy moved forward, horror on his face, afraid of what was happening, but he stopped before he had taken three paces. The creature reached down, brought several strands of seaweed to her mouth, and ate.



The one hundred twenty-second time the boy saw the mermaid, the water in her tank was clear. When she was still, it was as if she were a curiosity sealed in a block of glass, on display for all the world, for all time. And as the weeks went by, all the world that the boy knew ended up in her presence. Carlino raised the ticket price to the House of Wonders when he saw how word of the mermaid had spread to the neighboring towns and villages. Every day, old and young filed into her room to point and gawk and knock on the glass. She turned away from them all – except the boy. Each day when he went to visit her, she touched her lovely hands to the glass of her prison and looked into his eyes. The boy never moved when she did this. *I can't return you to the sea*, he told her without words. *I'm just a boy.*

She had been eating the seaweed Carlino placed in her tank each day, so the boy was no longer afraid that she would die. In fact, the one hundred twenty-second time he saw her, she was not still at all – she was animated, even frantic. She followed him, swimming around in her tank as he moved about the room. She seemed determined to impart her message. She pressed the palms of her hands against the glass again and again, calling for help with her eyes. He crossed his hands over his chest. *Me. I.* He shook his head at her. *Cannot help you.* She nodded at him. It was the only time they had ever attempted to communicate with each other. She pressed her hands to the cold glass. He repeated his gestures, repeated the sentence in his head. But she would not be comforted or dissuaded. She kept nodding. She

kept following him. When he approached the glass and looked into her eyes, he saw something he had not seen before. He saw panic.

It had gone on too long. She was finally afraid.

And the boy knew that he could not be a boy any longer. He had to do this for her, do at least this for her.

He looked around the room. Nothing. With a glance back at the miracle in the tank, he parted the blue curtain and looked up and down the hall. There was no one about; it was nearly closing hour for the House of Wonders. He moved toward the main entrance, pushed aside the heavy curtain and stepped into the gathering dusk. Carlino was already gone. Most nights he would drift away, drunk from an afternoon of sucking at the ever-present bottle. He never locked the House. He kept nothing of value in there. In a corner of the front lot, leaned against a tree, was a pile of tools. Hammers and saws rusted in the damp; nails lay scattered about like flower seeds. The boy found what he was seeking – a black iron crowbar, heavy in his hand and still warm from the heat of the day. Holding it close to his body, he slipped back into the house and made his way to her room. Her hands still on the glass, she was waiting for him. He held up the crowbar in the wavering light. She looked at him for a moment longer, then she bowed her head, flicked her tail, and moved back, away from the glass.

When he swung the crowbar the first time, he was tentative and afraid, and it bounced off the glass and came back at him without doing any damage to the tank. He gripped the tool more firmly, planted his feet, and swung. The glass cracked, but held. The boy adjusted his stance, reared back, and with a scream that he tore from deep inside his heart, smashed the crowbar into the weakened glass. The side of the tank shattered, an enormous rush of water knocking him off his feet. As he struggled, the mermaid surged toward him, carried on the huge wave of glass shards and seaweed and clear, clear water. He dropped the crowbar and reached for her, but she collapsed with the wave onto the floor and was still. He sat beside her for a moment, stunned, trying to catch his breath. Trying to determine what to do next. He heard cries, noises, from the other rooms in the House, but there were only Wonders in those rooms, and none of them could escape. And they were not his concern – she was.

The mermaid sat up, brushing broken glass from her skin. Blood trickled from dozens of tiny cuts and scratches on her human parts. Her fish parts seemed to be more intact. The boy approached her and looked into her eyes. As he had done on that first day, he reached out and carefully touched her face. When he drew his hand back, his fingers were smudged with her blood. Then he moved behind her and looped his arms under hers. He began dragging her backwards through the slush of tank water and floor dust, glass and plant matter. She was very heavy, but he kept moving, tightening his grip and pulling her toward the doorway. The mermaid didn't move about, didn't help or hinder his progress. He staggered with the bulk of her, stumbled more than a few times as he dragged her down the hall and toward the outdoors. The harbor seemed so far away – that first night, when the men took her to Carlino in the back of the fisherman's truck, he could see from where he was on the dock as they unloaded her and carried her into the House of Wonders. But tonight, the water was in another country. The boy took a deep breath and continued dragging the miracle across the lot, across the thin, sickly grass that grew there. He still had to traverse the deserted dirt road that ran in front of the House, and then they would be on the sand. He was afraid to hurt her more than she was already hurt, afraid to scrape and cut her as he pulled her across rocks and pebbles and earth.. But he had no choice. He should have fought for her back on the boats on the first day, he

should have spoken up as they took her to Carlino, he should have protested as she suffered in her glass dungeon – but he was a boy then, and he could not.

The night air was cool and his clothes were soaked through, but he sweated as he made his arduous journey to the water's edge. The full moon, like a yellow spotlight, lit his way. Its glow reflected off the mermaid's fish parts; despite the blood and dirt, the moonlight made her colors flash. Pulling, straining, he stumbled again and again, unable to get a sure footing in the sand. The mermaid made no sound, no movements; she was in his hands. The harbor was close now, the waves stroking the shore, the sound of the ocean beyond rushing in his ears. *Soon, soon.* He was not a boy. No boy could do this. He set his teeth and continued his slow, unsteady progress.

NOOO! Suddenly a cry sliced the night, causing the gulls to rise screaming from their perches. Startled by the cacophony, he lost his balance and sat down hard on the sand. The miracle collapsed with him, her head in his lap.

NOOO!! What do you think you are doing? It was Carlino. Lurching out of one of the dockside bars, he had turned, mid-stagger, toward the docks, and spied the two shapes heading for the water. Suddenly sober, the man realized what he was seeing. *Are you mad? Stop!! That is my property!* His cries brought other men, other drunken sailors and fishermen, out into the moonlight. They all stopped, trying to figure out what was happening, trying to make sense of the strange scene illuminated by the brilliant moon. *He is helping her escape! He is sending her back to the sea!* Out on the sand, he scrambled to his feet. He pulled, harder than ever, willing himself to keep going, to get to the harbor's edge before the men overtook him, as they surely would. They were heading toward him now, stumbling over themselves from inebriation and wonder. Carlino continued crying out to him, exhorting him to stop moving, but the others only mumbled and swore. They were close now. He took another step backwards and felt the splash as his foot landed in the shallow water of a receding wave. He gripped the mermaid more tightly. Just one more step. And one again. And one more. And then suddenly, his burden was as insubstantial as the moonlight. The mermaid was in the water. As she slid out of his arms, he felt her trembling exhale. He turned with her as she moved past him into the oily water of the harbor. She flicked her tail and moved away from the shore, a flash of silver heading for the mouth of the harbor and the gentle, waiting sea. With the men waving their arms and yelling behind him, he ran across the sand and climbed onto the dock. His bare feet pounded the worn wood as he hurried to the very end of the platform, watching the miracle leave him. He peered fiercely into the darkness, certain that he saw her one last time as she freed herself from the harbor; certain that he saw her turn back, just for a moment. To look at him. And then she was gone.

Callused hands grasped his shoulders and spun him around. Carlino's breath was in his face, reeking of cheap liquor and wrath. *What have you done?! Thief!!* The boy drew himself up and faced the man, faced all the men. Though his legs were shaking from exertion, his voice was calm. *I touched her face and sent her back to the sea.* Carlino slapped him, hard, across the mouth. *Idiot!* He tasted blood on his lips. *It's what we should have done on the first day,* he said calmly. Carlino stopped breathing for a moment. Anger bulged his eyes and turned his ugly face crimson. *AAAYYYYYY!!* The scream ripped from the drunkard's throat, and he hit the mermaid's savior, once across the face, and then once again in the chest, and then once more, very hard, in the back of the head. The savior looked up at Carlino in surprise, then fell away, off the dock, toward the water. And as he fell his body twisted so that his head cracked against the dock piling with a terrible sound. He fell for a long time, into the harbor, blood from his wounds darkening the water around him. He no longer heard the men above him on the dock.

He no longer saw anything. There was no pain. There was just the water, the dark, mysterious water. As he turned and turned in the tide, he opened his eyes and saw a light before him, a radiance that turned the murky harbor water to gold. The underwater grasses gently waved, as if to beckon him forward. He was far beneath the water now and he was moving as if in slow motion. He was confident of his direction, strong in his conviction. He swam toward the light, toward the depths, toward the miracle. He was no longer a boy, and he was happier than he had ever been.