

A Mermaid's Garden

"You're not a real mermaid."

The hardest part of my job is learning not to argue with kids. Every one of them thinks they're the first to point out that I, with two legs, sitting in a plush chair at Seaworld, am not a real mermaid.

"Is that your mother over there?" I ask.

Another lesson I learned: use mother, not mommy. Father instead of daddy. The formality helps sell it.

The boy nods.

"Would you like to know what I do all day?" And without waiting for an answer, or worse another accusation, I dive right in, "I listen to humans."

"Grown-ups too?"

"Especially grown-ups." I glance at the line. He's near the middle of the pack and I'll be damned if he hasn't brought it, just like he said he was going to.

"What do mermaids eat?"

I answer the boy. I tell him what time mermaids go to bed. I never end our talks on my own. I allow them to expire naturally and when I sense the boy growing restless, I put my arm around his shoulder and point at the camera.

"That woman there is going to take our picture."

I don't encourage them to say cheese--would a real mermaid do that?--and I smile. The boy doesn't.

The camera clicks.

#

Seaworld started doing this five years ago. Intended for children, they sell picture packages of your mermaid encounter. One package includes a doll, the other doesn't, and when you leave the mermaid's lagoon shelves of merchandise await you.

I never thought I'd work at Seaworld. I majored in Public Relations. No scholarships for me, no parents rich enough to pay California's high tuition, and those tales you hear about people working through college, paying it off by working low-wage jobs? Where do these people come from? I took out loans. The interest grows every year and I cannot afford to pay it off.

I looked for jobs after graduation, but everyone wanted a year or two of experience. Wasn't college supposed to help me? I settled on an internship at Seaworld. My parents let me

live with them rent-free under the promise that my internship would lead to a job and the further unspoken promise that this job would lead to me leaving their home.

I'd hoped the internship would lead to a full-time offer, but as it became clear that my unpaid time would be a resume line and nothing more, I asked around. Turns out Seaworld was hiring, for a different position.

A year and a half later, I'm still a mermaid.

#

A few more children file through. One girl clings to her father's arm. Sometimes kids get scared. Fortunately, I'm an old hat at this.

I reach behind my chair. "Guess what? I found something for you."

I hand her a seashell doll. She hesitates, only accepting it after her father nods. She holds it, unsure of what to do. I place my hands over hers.

"Did you know if you press your ear to a seashell you can hear the ocean?"

The girl presses her ear--to the wrong end. I correct her, gently, and after she listens I press my ear to it.

"Wow. Can you hear that?"

She listens one more time. Then we pose for the photo and I wave on my next visitor.

Derrick.

He comes at least once a week and wears the same white tank top every time. When he first started, he was as shy as some of the kids. He's since warmed up to me, but today I can tell something is wrong.

"Good morning Derrick. How are you feeling today?"

Derrick doesn't respond. He dwarfs me and the chair. This was designed for kids and I'll admit that the first time he came through I didn't know what to say.

I press on: "Last night I collected some seashells from the bottom of my lagoon. Would you like to see one?"

He shrugs. Swift, and barely noticeable. I reach behind the chair and pluck another seashell doll from the basket I keep hidden back there. I hold it up.

"Did you know you can hear the ocean?"

Derrick shakes his head.

"You can't?"

He mumbles something. I ask him if he wants to hold the seashell and he takes it in hands big enough to crush it.

"If you put your ear to this end," I indicate the opening, "you can hear the ocean."

He whispers, "No."

"Oh." I feign disappointment. "Why not?"

"This isn't a real seashell."

I put my arm around Derrick. My hand barely reaches his right shoulder blade. "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"Hot today."

"Yes. We're in summer. You can expect many hot days."

Talk to children long enough, you develop a manner of speaking which becomes second nature. You find yourself explaining things to adults like they're children, and while I have to catch myself when I do this at home, here it's expected. Derrick doesn't mind.

"I don't want to get sunburnt."

"Do you wear sunblock?"

"My mom didn't put any on me this morning."

I pat his shoulder. "Well maybe you won't get burned. How was the walk?"

Haphazard about the sunscreen, Derrick's mother will not drop him off. She doesn't drive him anywhere, far as I know.

"I almost got hit."

"Oh," and I hope I sounded genuine because I was. A man like Derrick shouldn't be walking anywhere on his own. "What happened?"

"The green man told me to cross. I crossed. A car turned and honked at me. It almost hit me."

"Some people are awfully rude." I think about the Fatal Four, the four intersections in San Diego with the most fatalities. As I can attest, it's not always easy to see who's going to cross. And drivers here will wedge themselves into the space beside you and turn, even scraping the curb if it means saving a few extra seconds.

One thing I've never figured out is where Derrick lives. At first, I thought he must live close because he walks, and close means Mission Bay or Pacific Beach. But if Derrick's mom can afford to live there, why can't she afford to drive him?

"Did it scare you?"

Derrick nods. Not a pleasant topic. He has a habit of doing that. Bringing up something terrifying, then shutting down. I know the people in line are staring. They might not whisper amongst themselves here, but they'll do it first thing when they leave.

Paul adjusts the tripod. Beside him, Ana wrinkles her nose, signaling time's up. It's bigger than yesterday. Too many people, and their kids.

I hand Derrick the seashell. "Take this with you. Remember what I said about listening to the ocean."

"It's not real."

"Okay, how about this? Next time you go to the beach, you bring me back a real seashell, and we can compare. Deal?"

And Derrick says his next words so quietly I almost don't hear them.

"I don't know where the beach is."

#

When they first put me in the makeup and the costume, I asked Ana, "Do the kids really believe this?"

"The little ones do."

"What about the older kids?"

And she laughed at me. Older kids do not come to Seaworld to see a mermaid. They barely come at all, dragged along by their parents. Then she told me that the strangest thing sometimes happens: adults.

"They'll drop down in your lap, so be careful."

And they do. All kinds. I've seen grown men cry. I have consoled an old woman after the death of her husband. But Derrick stands apart and the questions which want asking--where do you live? What about your mother?--seem to have no answers. Derrick knows the way to Seaworld, to the mermaid and little else, and someone is either paying for him to come every day (unlikely) or they've bought him a yearly pass (likely), and for what reason? To give him something to do?

He doesn't know where the beach is. I grew up here, so I've gone to the beach all my life. I've been to all our beaches, from Imperial Beach to La Jolla. You can hardly escape it here, yet...

The San Diego people imagine is not the one that exists. The San Diego of your imagination is this pleasant coastal city with comfortable weather year-round, and if you were to come and stay in La Jolla or Point Loma or Pacific Beach, I can see how you'd think that. But San Diego is bigger than the coast; there are the inland regions, clusters of houses and curbside cars arrayed in rows on steep hills. Gangs, drug trafficking, homelessness. Drop in a scattered military presence and temperatures exceeding 100 in the summer, and you have the real San Diego.

Derrick did not grow up in the same San Diego as me.

#

The summer grew hotter. The kids lined up, we talked, took pictures. Some bought the photo packages, others didn't. I went on with my routine, checking the line for a familiar hulking presence, a giant with the ferocity of a bunny rabbit.

He returns wearing the same white tank top and when he sits down beside me I greet him and reach behind the mermaid's chair. I keep my purse back there. They told me to never break character and keep everything that might remind them I'm a mid-twenties woman out of sight.

I wrap my fingers around the seashell and hold it out to Derrick.

"I brought this for you."

"What is it?"

I know other people in line can hear him. With the kids I lower my voice and they know to copy me. I drop my voice further, leaning in.

"A seashell."

Derrick stares at it.

"Where did you get it?"

"My rock garden under the sea."

Derrick nods.

"If you hold it to your ear, you can hear the octopus swimming by."

Again, Derrick holds the wrong side to his ear. I gently correct him. He presses his ear to the opening and wonder sweeps over his face.

"Wow."

"Lovely, isn't it?"

He lowers the seashell. "A real octopus?"

"They love playing in my rock garden."

Derrick tries to hand the seashell back to me and I stop him.

"Keep it."

He looks from me to the seashell, uncertain.

I smile. They told me off-the-record that I need to use whitening strips on my teeth. Their reason? Mermaids have perfect teeth. They made me smile during my interview.

"It's a present from the mermaid," I say.

#

After work, I go to the beach.

The best beach in San Diego is Imperial Beach, though my friends would smack me if they knew I'd said that. La Jolla? Too crowded. Coronado? Mission Beach? The only thing Mission Beach has going for it is the boardwalk, and the real gem comes from the strip of sand close to the Mexican border.

I walk along the wavefront, the foam caressing me. The sand slides under my soles on the waves' retreat, seashells plunged into the sand like placement markers. I squat, and pry one free. A wave washes over my hand. It's a decent-sized seashell, good form, and I press it to my ear. The sound of eternity. An alien world contained in our own. I regret giving Derrick that seashell. Not because of attachment but because it's not real; I bought it from a souvenir shop in Honolulu, my first spring break in college. And besides, I don't want Derrick thinking that all seashells are that big, on the off-chance he finds his way to the beach or that mother of his deigns to take him. I cup the shell in my palms. As big as a Pringle. I raise it, listening to the gulls cry in the early evening, and then I chuck the seashell back into the ocean.

#

The line is long today and I'm not paying attention. I don't notice Derrick until he's next up and he drops down beside me, chin on his chest.

"Did you listen to the ocean?" I ask.

They told me in training I must embrace the role. Don't say *ocean* or *sea*, call it *home*. Like with the fin-pants I have to wear. They make getting up to go to the bathroom impossible, but as my boss told me with complete seriousness, mermaids don't go to the bathroom.

"I went to the beach yesterday," I tell him, aware that I'm breaking character but I don't know what else to say, "it was beautiful. You said you haven't been?"

"Mermaids can't walk."

"Right. We can swim, and when we come ashore, did you know--" and I proceed to explain how mermaid fins can turn into legs. I say this with the conviction of a child's belief in Santa.

Derrick grins. His teeth are crooked. "Mermaids are neat."

"Where do you live?"

The question leaps out of me, and I compose myself. I try again. "I live in a rock garden.

It's so serene down there. How about you? Do you live in a rock garden?"

Derrick shakes his head.

"No? How about a... people-house?"

Derrick shakes his head again.

"No? How about...is it big? Small?"

Derrick withdraws. I place a hand on his back, and he flinches.

"Sorry. It hurts?"

Derrick nods.

"Sorry," I say again. "Here," and I slip my arm around his shoulders and describe my beautiful rock garden. I even tell him about the naughty octopus who likes to steal my rocks, though he always brings them back when I ask nicely. Derrick relaxes. My hand drifts over his back, lightly touching here and there.

Derrick flinches every time.

#

I lower my phone.

Part of knowing what you're going to say differs from saying it, and while it makes sense to me it will not make sense to the police.

I think someone's being abused raises questions about that someone, and how I know.

Well, how do I know? He flinches when I touch his back? Is that all?

No, you have to look at his demeanor too.

But Derrick is slow. He'll act that way regardless of abuse...?

I don't know what to do.

#

I play my mermaid role during the day and evenings I walk along the beach. For thousands of years no European saw the Pacific. Then Vasco Núñez de Balboa came along and waded into the cold waters, claiming it for Spain, and I think of the others who've touched it before and since, numberless and nameless. I kneel in the sand. Seawater foams about my knees. A pile of dead seaweed. The wave surges, recedes and the seaweed doesn't budge.

When Derrick visits me again I sink into my role. He seems the same. Sometimes I think he can't remember longer than a few days ago, and I ask him about the seashell.

"I can hear the ocean."

"That's good," I say, and I mean it. The seashell belongs to him now and he can hear whatever he wants in it. "Would you like to see my rock garden?" I take his hand. "I would really love to show it to you."

Derrick's face lights up. "You would?"

I nod, and lower my voice. "First we have to go to the beach. Can you meet me there?"

"I think."

"Good." I smile, showing off the hard work of this morning's whitening strips. "Where do you live?"

He shakes his head. I ask him to point in the direction, and I ask if there are a lot of people where he lives.

He doesn't know this either, but the direction means Ocean Beach.

"I'd really like it if you could meet me at the Pacific Beach Pier this evening? Can you do that?"

"I don't know."

"The pier. You'll see a big sign for it."

He seems unsure, but this is the best I can do. Next step is taking him there myself.

He gathers his strength. "Okay."

#

I show up to the beach that afternoon. I tell myself this is a stupid idea. Derrick doesn't know how to get here and if he tries he'll get lost and then what?

I have a margarita from a drink stand. I walk the beach. A lifeguard truck passes me. I step into the rugged paths left by the tires and I slide close to the water. A wave washes over my sandals, trapping a sealeaf between my toes.

I make my way to the pier and spot Derrick, alone. He's wearing the same shirt and I bound up to him, the leaf between my toes.

"Hey you made it."

Derrick lowers his head.

"What's wrong?"

"What happened to your fin?"

"Oh that?" I slip back into my mermaid character. "Mermaids can turn their fins into legs when they need to walk around, remember?."

"Can you turn your legs back into a fin?"

"Not here silly." I lay a hand on his shoulder, and he blushes. "Beautiful isn't it? Look at that sunset."

"Where's your rock garden?"

"Under the sea."

"I want to see it."

"Derrick," I say, hooking my arm through his and leading him onto the sand. "Did you walk out here?"

He nods.

"Did you walk far?"

He nods again. Maybe he doesn't live as close as I thought.

"Did you tell anyone where you're going?"

He shakes his head, barely, and the question makes him uncomfortable. I glance at his back. "The beach is pretty, isn't it?"

He doesn't answer me, but I think he feels the same way. We stop short of the waves and I go ahead, letting them wash over my feet. The leaf stays put between my toes.

"C'mon. The water's fine."

Derrick trudges up beside me. Waves wash over his feet, soaking his lower pantlegs.

"See? Not so bad."

Derrick goes deeper into the water, soaking his pants to his knees.

"Don't go--"

He laughs.

I've seen him smile, but this is the first time I have heard Derrick do an honest-to-God laugh. I want to get my phone and capture this moment.

He goes deeper into the water.

"Hey wait. You're still wearing your clothes."

He looks back at me like a child. I run up beside him and hold out my hands. He copies me.

"Feel the waves coming at us. Like this."

#

It's night before we're through. I buy Derrick an ice cream cone from a boardwalk stand and chatter rises from the beach bars and restaurants and a waiter sparks a furnace on a packed patio.

"Do you feel cold?" I ask. I take him to my car and give him my towel. It barely covers him. I open my car door and Derrick is hesitant to get in. "It's okay. I'll take you home."

"I can walk."

"It's too dark."

Derrick hesitates for another moment, and gets in. As I drive, I ask him where to go. He gives me directions like Straight or Left. We don't get on the freeway and Derrick isn't directing me anywhere close to the beach. I don't know this area but the houses are situated on hills. We find ourselves on an uphill street. No neighborhood watch signs here. Just nice cars and houses whose appearances don't indicate their cost.

"Where to?" I ask.

"Up."

My little car groans. We're past his house when he points it out, a one-story with a garage and a Honda sitting in the driveway. The living room light is on, the curtains drawn shut.

I park at the curb. "Need me to come in?"

Derrick shakes his head.

"Did you have fun?"

Derrick nods.

"You can go there yourself now."

"And see your rock garden."

I chuckle. "Yes, and see my rock garden. The sea is a wonderful place."

"I won't let the mean octopus steal your rocks."

I give him a stern look. "Make sure you don't."

"Okay." He opens the door.

I tell him Good Night. He tells me Good Night too and shambles to his front door. He knocks three times before it opens and spends a few minutes talking to someone through the steel outer door. I can't tell what they look like. I watch Derrick's cheer fade or maybe it's my imagination filling in the gaps night has created. The outer door opens, Derrick goes in and both doors shut.

I drive uphill, turn around and head home.

#

I play my role as summer ends and the crowds dwindle. School begins and we're left with the normal weekday visitors plus the weekend swell. I chat with the kids, telling no one else about the rock garden, keeping an eye out for the white tank top and a big frame.

The weeks pass and I go back to Pacific Beach, where I walk along the wavefront till sunset, lifeguard trucks passing me and a young couple exchanging kisses on the sand. I take refuge from the nighttime chill in one of the beachside bars and order a Long Island Iced Tea.

The bar chatter is quiet. A voice rises above the din, "--I'm telling you, that's why--" and I turn my focus on two men a couple stools down. Shirtless surfers with bleached hair. I listen.

"--lifeguards not paying attention?"

"What could they do? Dude was like 400 pounds."

"He was not 400 pounds."

"Whatever he was, I'm telling you what I heard. I mean, lifeguards tried of course, but it was too late."

"Who'd you heard all this from?"

"Ph--"

I leave their conversation. I leave the bar.

I head to the beach.

The kissing couple has left. A ribbon of clouds on the horizon. I sit close to the boardwalk watching the waves and thinking. They could have been talking about anyone. I don't own a TV. I won't look it up on the news. Tomorrow I'll sit in my mermaid's chair and there he'll be, ready to tell me about the rock garden and how he protected my rocks from the mean octopus. If that mean octopus is going to listen to anyone, it's a big guy like him. I love the rock garden. I bet it's beautiful.

THE END

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