



THE WAVES WE MOTHER

by Christopher D. DiCicco

TERRANCE and Simon saw her first, her wet tail and arms heavy against the sand. Her skin, drained of color, could have been any shade skin wanted—but it was death and white and nearly translucent. She was a thin blanket on a morning bed of sand, and I was thankful I didn't find her first.

Terrance said, “Mermaids can carry terminal disease” and for a moment we all agreed to bury her, but when Terrance returned with the remains of a child's broken shovel, Simon reached his hand out and said, “Wait, maybe we're being hasty.”

And we were.

Simon touched her first, slipping his fingers over her scales. “She’s kind of soft,” he said, running a hand over her. “I didn’t think there were any left.”

“Or any at all,” interrupted Terrance. “Honestly, I didn’t think they were real.”

Simon elbowed Terrance. “Don’t be daft. They’re real. Look in front of you.”

“Well, you never—”

“Ask Eric, he’ll—”

“Shut up,” said Terrance, kicking at the sand. “I know, only thought he might be, that it wasn’t true. That’s all.”

Terrance turned toward me, his face a mix of sorry and so what and he waited for a reaction, but I didn’t speak, shout, or forgive. I wanted to and considered saying something about local history, but instead I ran my tongue across the back of my cheek, sliding the tip down until it touched the molars and hurt. And then the moment was gone and I nodded my head, keeping my eyes cast down on the sand.

“You don’t think this shit can happen,” Simon said, “and then it does.” He held the mermaid’s hand. “Rubbery,” he said. “She feels like a dead water balloon.”

“They feel like people,” I said. “Ones straight out the bath.”

Terrance snorted and leaned down, resting a knee in the sand. He examined the mermaid, reaching his own hand out to touch a torn piece of cloth that clung to her chest. He rubbed the material between his thumb and fingers. “What the hell you think she was wearing? Some sort of smock or dress or—”

“A hospital gown,” I said.

Both Simon and Terrance turned to me, trying to decide whether or not to argue, but neither one said a word. With the sun at my back, glaring down on them, they couldn’t be sure whether I was kidding Eric or serious Eric or something else. They only knew I was Eric, a shadow looming over the mermaid and neither one wanted to take it too far. A coastal wind gusted off the sea and after one more look at me, Terrance nodded. “A hospital gown.”

It was agreed.

Simon traced two fingers along the mermaid’s neck. “No pulse.”

I stared at her, crumpled on the sand, hair tossed about the shore and her shoulders. Her long tail curled into her thin arms like a sliver of moon as if she were the night sky reaching for her toes. On the shore, the crabs crawled and the sand blew and she was a fragile crescent of a patient washed out and away from the hospital I imagined denied her treatment.

“She was probably refused service and later dumped,” I said.

“What makes you say that?” asked Simon, raising an eyebrow. “Guess you can just tell, huh?”

“Shut it,” said Terrance, giving Simon another look. “Always pushing shit.”

Again, I wanted to speak, but instead, like a crab before dead fish, I only opened and closed my mouth, tasting what could happen next.

“Probably knocked up by a sailor,” huffed Terrance, “and *then* refused service. The poor witch was probably so hard up, she quit and drowned.”

“And *drowned*? Fuck you, Terrance. You don’t know that,” I said, but it didn’t matter. He said it and too late and not now and whatever and I wanted to wash them away, only I stood there instead again, like I always do, doing nothing, letting my feet sink deeper into semi-wet sand until the sucking around my boots told me to step away.

And I did, removing one boot then the next, but not before Terrance cocked his head and shot me a, *really, you think I'm the bad guy* look. He wasn't. I knew that, but after what I'd said, he ignored me, and touched the mermaid's cheek and then her hair, pulling his fingers through wet kelp and curls. When he ruffled the mermaid's hair, her ear poked out, exposed and naked, and it was more of a thin membrane over a raised hole than flesh and extremity. Terrance said, "Do you think that's a gill," and Simon said, "Shut up, it's an ear, moron," then poked the sensitive spot with his finger. The membrane popped and Terrance gagged. Simon said, "She smells like death," and no one else spoke for a while.

The beach was white and cold and November empty. The surf sprayed us with mist and seagulls called out to one and another, spying possible carrion to peck to the bones. We stood close and the mermaid stayed where she was. I imagined her dead and forgotten, and it bothered me, her rib cage revealed to the world, a tiny skeleton of a sailor's child stuck inside her for human children to point at on a warm summer morning when the inevitable Welsh family—wealthy and bored—dug her loose after building their three-story sandcastle complete with double-garage for mum's weekend coupe. I could see tourists touching her bones, hear them making touristy accusations they couldn't understand the half of: *She was so close to*

water. What a shame. This is how they all end up. Heard they can have human kids. Probably drowned her own son rather than have one with legs. There was a concert on the pier the other night, probably attracted to all the singing and beached herself after getting drunk. That's just their way.

“I think we should bury her, too,” I said, kicking sand onto the mermaid’s stomach. The white grains rained down on her and, for a moment, I felt like maybe we shouldn’t, like I was wrong or didn’t know how I felt or like the water would bathe her better. A hole in the sand could only shelter her from the tourists for so long. Funeral by ocean or shore burial, neither seemed right, and I dragged my foot through the sand. Grey waves sucked up the sun. Seagulls flew, beating white wings. Water breaking. I remembered something from a book, a story, or it could’ve been one of my mother’s, maybe it was a song, but it was something about a woman who followed an ancient turtle from the depth of the ocean, clinging to her back. She traveled through the sea with the turtle and like the ancient shell, she washed up in the night on the beach where she bore her young.

On the sand before us, the mermaid stayed where she was, stretched thin and waiting. In a way, she was beautiful—statuesque—like my own mother who had passed in her sleep. The mermaid’s skin was wet paper

and white sickness and in the sun, she shined a purplish iridescent at certain angles, oil after rain, blotches of wet rainbow I wanted to feel. I stretched out an index finger and grazed her navel, dragging it along her skin, letting the coarse grains of sand stick and fall. She wasn't as cold as my mother had been, but I couldn't recreate that temperature in my mind. Not anymore. I only knew my mother was cold, covered in a bedsheet, and that I'd loved her. The morning I found her, she was in our bathroom, sunk in a damp tub, blanketed and unmoving, and I'd held my head to her stomach, keeping my cheek there until my father gently pried us apart, carrying me away to my own bed where I spent the remainder of the day curled up beneath a blanket, slipping in and out of dreams I cannot remember. Those dreams I want, but cannot have. Sometimes, I imagine my mother took them with her, scooped them up in her hand and drifted out of our house, up into the atmosphere where she hid them in her pockets and floated, watching the waves break and me wanting her below. Other times, I am certain there are no dreams, only synapses firing, creating subconscious structures with grains of memory. Only sandcastles. Those times, I run the bath, and try to remember her voice, how my mother sang to me when I couldn't sleep.

When Simon shoveled another load of sand onto the mermaid's stomach, saying, "My mum would kill me if she found out about this," the mermaid coughed, twisting a little in the sand. A thin line of spittle leaked out of her mouth, and her wet lips vibrated with life. She trembled and we stared at her. No one said a word. How could we? Simon opened his mouth but nothing came out. Terrance shifted from one foot to the next. The mermaid coughed again, rolling onto her stomach, so we could no longer see her face. Her hand struggled in the sand eventually reaching the side of her head where Simon had poked his finger through the membrane of her ear. She kept her hand there, buried beneath a sea of curls and kelp, but when she coughed again, her hair shifted and her fingers moved, exposing what we saw—a blood, black and thick, dyeing her fingers inky wherever she touched near her ear.

Simon looked away, studying the surf. Terrance said, "Knew you shouldn't have done that. Knew it," and Simon shot him a look until Terrance closed his mouth.

I stepped away from them, walking to the ocean until the water touched my boots. The cold water bled into the leather. With my eyes closed, I tried to remember the song my mother sang to me as a child. She would hold my head to her and sing with the window open so the sea

across the street would rock me to sleep as well. The song was something about the tide coming in at night. It was beautiful and haunting, and like my dreams, gone from my memory. I could almost hear it, almost touch the melody when the waves crashed up and down like a drowning metronome—but, in the end, it escaped me.

When I returned to Simon and Terrance, they were still ignoring each other. Simon faced the coast, examining the rocky cliffs, and Terrance whistled studying the vacant beach.

“Well, she’s drying out.” I held up the discarded bucket I’d discovered wedged between two recycling bins along the path. It was yellow and cracked at the top, but, in my hand, it seemed like an IV, something I could nurse her to health with if we tried.

“She’s what?” said Terrance.

“Probably drying out or missing home or fucking dying, I don’t know.”

“Jeez, don’t have to be so cross about it,” Terrance said, taking the bucket from me.

Simon turned from the cliffs, looking at my soaked boots, the dark leather stained with salt. He stepped over to us and snatched the yellow bucket from Terrance. “This is stupid,” he said, stalking off to the water.

For the rest of the morning, we took shifts carrying the bucket of water to the mermaid and dumping it on her. The sea was cold and each time Terrance dipped the bucket into the waves he would announce, “We could let her die, you know,” but each time he said it, he smiled and carried the bucket to her anyway, and I knew he didn’t mean it. Simon said little, though, brooding with quiet steps. He threw the water at her once, and I said, “Don’t.” We didn’t speak after that.

We carried the bucket, over and over, and when we poured the water over the mermaid, she would cough and shiver. Saltwater would sputter across her green lips and slip down her neck and over her gills, three thin slits beneath her jaw, above her carotid artery if she had one, that would vibrate with each soaking.

We nursed her until our clothes dripped.

“Maybe we should drag her into the water,” Simon said without a smile. “Let nature take its course.”

“Or maybe we should call someone,” said Terrance. “Let them deal with her.”

“We could do all those things. But if we pull her into the water, she’ll wash away, then back again, pushed onto shore where we’ll have to pretend not to see her struggle.”

Simon rolled his eyes and dug his shoe into the sand. “Who cares, honestly.”

“And if we call someone and she survives, she’ll be their mermaid, not ours,” I finished.

“Well, that absolutely doesn’t matter,” Terrance said.

Simon said, “Are you serious? You know you’re probably the only who cares because—”

“It does matter.”

The mermaid shivered and convulsed, writhing in the sand.

Terrance bent down, leaning over her and touched the mermaid’s shoulder. He rested his hand on her, moving it in a small, comforting circle. “We’ve done this much,” he said, looking up at me. “We might as well keep at it a little longer.”

Simon let out an exaggerated sigh. “C’mon, the water or the sand. Let’s take care of this one way or the other. I don’t want to be here all day.”

Terrance stepped back and I stepped forward. “She’s alive,” I said, looking from Terrance to Simon.

“So?” said Simon. “She’s barely clinging on probably.”

“You don’t know that,” I said, reaching down to brush a stray curl from her face.

Terrance shrugged his shoulders and handed me the bucket.



That afternoon we struggled on, carrying the bucket as the wind whipped about us, blowing off the ocean in cold gusts. Our clothes clung to us stiff with saltwater. Simon glared with each soaking of the mermaid and Terrance stopped speaking, occasionally humming, but only when the mermaid shivered on the sand, rolling in seemingly painful convulsions.

But as the afternoon faded, so did her shaking, and some of the color, an almost salmon pink flushed back to her skin. Her breathing steadied and Simon said, “She’s probably fine now if we leave her.” I shook my head, not wanting to leave her to the tide or the seagulls, but when I came back

with a bucket of cold water, Simon was gone. Terrance said, “He went to get sandwiches, but I don’t think he’s coming back.”

I nodded.

“Eric, hey,” Terrance said, resting a hand on my shoulder. I could tell he wanted to say something uncomfortable. He had a habit of pausing and sucking in his bottom lip when he thought things should be put carefully. “Simon was talking about the tide, and besides being an overly pissed ass, he said no matter how comfortable we make her, it’s not going to stop the ocean from taking her back. I hate to say it, but maybe he’s right. Nature and all. Maybe we ought to do something else, you know. I mean, what are we even doing? Like what is this accomplishing?”

I shrugged my shoulders and poured the water over the mermaid slowly. “It just feels right.” The water cascaded over her, and she slid in the sand, writhing back and forth until she settled, letting the water replenish her in some way.

Terrance turned and put his hands on his hips. “Okay,” he said. “But think about it.”



That evening, the sun dipped and the water rose, washing about our boots and the tail of the mermaid. Seagulls circled. Crabs slid in and out of holes, and when the mermaid finally opened her eyes, I almost dropped the bucket, spoke, or maybe shouted, but my mouth went dry, and I could feel my tongue clicking away at my teeth. The mermaid looked up at me and I saw in her eyes the ocean and a storm, schools of lost fish, men stuck in caves, children clutching rafts and swirls of green. Mainly green.

She closed her eyes, and her chest moved up and down, as she sucked in sea air purposefully, steady, refilling her lungs. When she inhaled, it was as if her whole body momentarily expanded, not just her lungs, her skin from fin to face, and I imagined her like a porpoise, preparing to descend into the deep. On her neck, her gills quivered, fluttering almost, like kite strings or guitar chords. She opened her eyes again and looked at me, and then her lips moved, and she mouthed something that might have been *thank you* or *love you* or whatever else I wanted her to say.

“You can go,” I told Terrance. “I’ll take her home.”

And I did, but Terrance helped, lifting her tail onto his shoulders. “Like carrying the tree for mum.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Dad hurt his back, and I carry the tree for Christmas with Tommy now. At least for the last two years.”

“Wait, what do you do?”

“Carry the tree. My mum asks me to do all this shit and gets teared up, *saying it's the difference between a boy and a man, the weight you can lift.*”

“What the hell does that even mean?”

“Got me,” Terrance said and, for a moment, I almost forgot we weren't brothers hauling the family tree home. We laughed and struggled and the mermaid moaned and we carried her up the beach, up the path, through the cliffs, beneath the calling seagulls, over the dunes, down through the back alleys of our coastal town, navigating its quiet streets. We carried her to my father's house and down the hall and up the stairs until we reached the tub where we laid her, and we slept, exhausted from the endeavor.

When I woke later, Terrance was gone and the mermaid slept with a small smile on her face. She breathed and rested and I drifted off again, trying to reach a dream I felt was almost there.



That night, I filled my bathtub with sea salt and cool water and the mermaid mouthed, *thank you*. She coughed and closed her eyes, and at one point, she motioned me closer. With arms outstretched, she embraced me, pulling me to her until my head rested against her stomach, and I held her like that, and she held me, and together we drifted into an exhausted sense of sleep. When she woke, I patched her ear with cheesecloth, rubbing alcohol, and a trembling hand. A tube of adhesive glue sat half-empty in the cabinet, a remnant of stitches, and after rummaging through expired pill containers, I found it. The tube stuck to my fingers, but I managed to let go, and it fell to the tile with a crack. I undid the top and placed a few sticky drops on the tip of my index finger. Then, carefully, with the mermaid's permission, I ran my finger over the edges of the cheesecloth, sealing the thin cloth to the mermaid's skin, and not once during the process did she study my hands. Instead, she kept her eyes focused on my own, and I could only imagine what she saw there. I held her hair off the wound while I worked, and the mermaid continued to study me and I'd be a liar if I said I didn't know what was happening. There was a moment

when a part of me wanted to shut my eyes and bury myself in my own sand, but I didn't.

There is a tale, a story my father tells, about the way we look at the sea and how it is the same way a woman who swims out of it can look at you. She can swim into your head and know what lies deep within you.

My hands slid across her skin, sealing the wound I wasn't sure I could heal, and small breaths escaped her mouth and passed over her lips and across my own skin like sea wind coming to shore, and she didn't ask how she came by her injury, and I didn't ask how it was she found herself abandoned on the beach, but later, in the bathroom, when I left her side and slumped against the toilet, slipping in and out of consciousness, she began to hum, and I knew what would come next.

Before morning, the mermaid sang, drifting into my sleep like waves, and she hung there, her deep notes resonating against the ceramic tiles and inside me. I wanted to dream so badly that night, to wake up and know I'd been somewhere better, but I struggled to find something more than peace as the mermaid moaned in intermittent cycles, interrupting her song and breaking the melody. She coughed and sputtered, but eventually, as the night wore on, her rhythm came with the moon, and she sang steady, continuing in pain, and she held her stomach, and maybe cried, or maybe

she didn't. The faucet dripped and the mermaid inhaled enough breath, and it wasn't my mother's song, but I dreamt it was anyway, imagining her voice floating out the window and across the sea where it would sink into the waves instead of rising away from me.

The sun began to rise outside my father's house and slivers of light slipped through the single, small window until thin rays showered the mermaid in some measure of warmth and, in my half-sleep, I tried to hum along as she sang, but I didn't know the melody or what would happen next and I couldn't catch the tune, so I descended deeper to the place I sank at night, a dreamless bottom where I found myself in darkness until the mermaid and her song found me there and she wrapped me in dreams or caught me in them, it didn't matter. And in those dreams, she swam around me, cutting through the inky night of nothing. Her skin and scales radiated with life, a purple iridescent glow I reached for. She took my hand and together we swam up and out until we broke the surface where we breathed in long pulls of the oxygen we no longer needed.

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Christopher D. DiCicco is a high school creative writing teacher, and the author of *So My Mother, She Lives in the Clouds and other stories* (Hypertrophic Press). His writing has been nominated for Pushcarts, Best of the Net, Best Indie Lit New England, The Million Writers Award, earned semifinalist for Best of Small Fictions, and has appeared in such publications as *Maudlin House*, *Psychopomp Magazine*, and *Gigantic Sequins*.

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