

Mermaids Need Other Mermaids

by Jillian Black

"It's your turn to tell the story, Bee," Josephine whispered. Her bed was near enough to Bianca's that the sisters could reach their hands across and press them flat against each other, palm to palm.

"It isn't." Bianca's eyes were glazed by moonlight. She lay flat on her back, staring at the ceiling, her body slim as a board beneath a blanket.

"It is. Last time a tree fell outside and collapsed a telephone line. You wouldn't talk. You were listening for lost conversations."

Josephine turned, considered a moment leaping across the small gap between their beds. She lay still, though, in the knowledge that she wouldn't have to make her sister talk. She never had to. Bianca couldn't keep secrets. There was a particular drawing of breath that Josephine knew marked the moment before Bianca would speak, and when she heard it, she was not surprised.

"Alright, fine. Listen.

"Two sisters share a room and burn up all the batteries in the house keeping each other up at night. They used to be afraid of the dark, that is to say, one of them was afraid and the other pretended to be so she wouldn't feel alone. They used to make animals in the light they cast on the wall with the flashlight, but now they are grown up and give each other the finger, the gesture big and rude and beautiful from ceiling to floor. Fucking is about the best shape to make in the dark.

"They share a closet, too, but they close it before they go to bed each night. They prefer to be kept awake by their own whispers than the gossip of their clothes. There are secrets in their sweaters and uniform skirts. For one of the sisters it's the boys she's kissed. For the other it's the boys she won't let kiss her."

“Bullshit,” Josephine muttered. Bianca took no notice and continued.

“When their clothes aren't gossiping together they're practicing sailing knots. The cardigans and the scarves and the silk belts are the best, the dress pants complaining loudly that the sweaters have an unfair advantage. Arms are meant for delicate work and so are the things made for arms. Everything is wrinkled in the morning and each sister will blame the other for having left the laundry crumpled in the basket or on the floor. They care nothing for looking professional or scholarly, and probably never will, but the creases don't sit right. The lines in their sleeves are like maps to places they'll never visit, or places they've been that were very boring. They can't help but squirm.

“The prettier sister, we'll call her Bianca, is very daring and so she strips off the wrinkled sweater and stuffs it into her locker at school, and then she crawls in after it. The cheap steel is cold against her skin. She presses all the way back, flat against the places where she's posted a class schedule she doesn't follow and photographs of friends she'll want to avoid when she graduates in three years. She slips through a rusted seam and into the walls. She's creeping like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's worst fucking nightmare. She listens to the secrets of the teachers in the teachers' lounge. She listens to the secrets of the principal in his office. She listens to the secrets in the locker room and watches the dressing and undressing bodies like she doesn't know any better, but she does. It's lucky for her that girls forced to dress communally for gym take comfort in facing the walls, their hasty stripping allowing her to imagine for a moment they're ready to dive behind the cement and plaster and join her.”

Josephine sighed. “You know you're the only lesbian at school.”

“Not for long. Now shut up and listen.

“Bianca climbs out of the wall after band practice, last period, and steps carefully between abandoned brass instruments and big kettle drums. She recovers her sweater, which is even more wrinkled than before. She does not join her sister on the bus to go home but

hurries instead down to the parking lot where the juniors and seniors smoke and pair up and switch and smoke again before getting in their cars. She leans a hip against the '92 Ford Taurus that belongs to Pauleen Vine. Her skirt lifts enough to show a sliver of white flesh between knee sock and tartan pleat because it's been trying and failing the rolling hitch every night.

“ ‘Where you going, Red-’ Bianca likes to think of Pauleen as titian because it's something from Nancy Drew she's always remembered. She'd happily be the moonstone mystery unraveled by Pauleen, the haunted library gutted, the old grandfather clock searched inside and out.

“Pauleen's glance is flirtatious, her tone leading. ‘Wouldn't you like to know, Bessette-’

‘She loves that Pauleen avoids saying her first name, loves her surname in that mouth, the quick syllables, the slight enunciation of the last vowel. She doesn't want to be seduced, though. She wants to do the seducing.

“ ‘Why don't you take me with you-’

“Bianca settles against the hood, crossing her arms. Plastic bracelets knot at her wrists. Her stomach jumps when Pauleen climbs into the driver's seat, leans to push open the passenger side door. Their eyes meet. She could be full of sand or water she seems so slow, she can't move fast enough to get into the car. The upholstery sweats and she does, too. When Pauleen starts the engine loud music pours into the interior of the car, and Bianca jumps at this, too. She reaches instinctively to turn down the volume, blushing when her hand brushes Pauleen's doing just the same.

“ ‘My boyfriend,’ and when she speaks, Pauleen's smile is apologetic, ‘he likes that noise.’

“ ‘Not much for conversation, I guess,’ Bianca hazards, her eyes following the crumpled gum wrappers, empty soda bottles, and tissue weight magazines that roll with the momentum of the car as Pauleen pulls out of the parking lot. She can't look at Pauleen now, she can only dart glances at her browned thighs beneath the

steering wheel, the play of light passing through the windshield to touch against flesh.

“ ‘No, not really,’ Pauleen seems to have no trouble in eyeing her driving companion. Bianca wonders if Pauleen looks at her boyfriend in just this way, and she smiles extra wide in hopes that Pauleen won't spare a thought for him.”

“He's her boyfriend, Bianca. She's always thinking about him,” Josephine interrupted, sitting up in bed. She flashed the light against Bianca's pillow. “Didn't you think about that-”

Bianca snorted. “If you had a boyfriend maybe that's what you'd do. Not Pauleen, though.”

“Yes, Pauleen!” Josephine's whisper was sharp, and Bianca waved a hand to hush her so they wouldn't wake their mother. “You can't pretend everything.”

“Shut up, Jez. This is my story.

“Pauleen's house is in the part of town where the garages are bigger than the whole of the apartment Bianca lives in with her sister and mother. Her lawn is as green as Oz and Bianca knows that there is no, no, no place quite unlike home. She flushes from nose to toe as she follows Pauleen up the carpeted stairs to a private bathroom, an extension of the girl's own bedroom. Pauleen's parents are not at home.

“ ‘They both work late,’ Pauleen offers with a smile, ‘it really sucked when I was a kid, but I guess it's paying off now.’

“Bianca considers a moment the luxury of maybe switching places with Pauleen instead of seducing her, wearing the coordinating bra and panty sets underneath of her school uniform, the ballerina flats in shades to match; she imagines a cup size more generous, long legs, singing first soprano. She'd make a fine spoiled daughter, she thinks. And why not- Even her own mother says people should get what they deserve.”

“Only when it's you getting grounded,” Josephine corrected. Bianca ignored her.

“When Pauleen runs a bath with foam high enough to disguise her bared breasts and shoulders, Bianca strips quickly and settles in

across from her. She can only focus on one thing at a time, and she's committed already to seduction, not life swapping. The tub jets tickle and burn. She gets wetter, but keeps her distance, the faucet pressed into her back like a warning. It's a bath big enough for two. Pauleen stretches experimentally and Bianca is sure their toes could meet under the water. Bianca knows, too, that she's not the first.

“ ‘You're cute, Bessette.’ Pauleen doesn't close the space between them but inclines forward, hair dragging foam. ‘Everybody thinks so.’

“Nodding, Bianca's fingers travel terrible distances under the water; her belly, her knees, all foreign places now. She doesn't want to see herself like Pauleen must see her, young and stupid, young and stupid and cute. Her heart hammers distress and it radiates like waves across the tub. She wonders what Pauleen must feel. She thinks she doesn't want to switch places with her after all, because Pauleen probably doesn't feel anything. There are a half dozen expensive soaps lined up on the rim of the tub, towels embroidered with various sets of initials that Bianca assumes must belong to Pauleen's parents. She isn't at all sure now why she's here, what she intended. She wants to tell Pauleen all of the secrets she learned today before she forgets them, she wants to keep talking so she doesn't have to do anything else.

“Leaning and leaning and somehow never getting an inch closer to Bianca, Pauleen's neck strains like a swan's above the foam. ‘Do you like me-’

“Bianca nods. She thinks about the Spanish teacher who cried in the lounge because she'd had to flush her daughter's goldfish down the toilet. She thinks about another girl in her year who's shaved herself bare. She thinks about Pauleen Vine's boyfriend, nuzzling the neck of a freshman in the basement hall when they both should've been in class. She can't tell Pauleen. She can't tell Pauleen anything, because if she does she won't have anything left to tell.

“Bianca nods again, deep, her chin grazing foam.

“ ‘How much-’ ”

“Look, Bianca,” Josephine tries to soften her voice even though it's just a whisper. She scoots to the edge of her bed, throws her feet over. “I know what happened. I heard you crying and I heard Mom... talking to Pauleen's parents on the phone.”

Bianca did not respond. Josephine clicked off the flashlight and took the few steps between her own bed and her sister's. She sat down on the edge.

“I know he was there. That they'd tricked you.” Her whisper was at its lowest. “They wanted you to watch but you... you ran out. It's alright, Bee,” Josephine waited for Bianca to cry because crying would make sense. Bianca did not cry.

“That's not what happened,” her sister's voice was stony, “Not this time.

“This time Bianca slides across the slick tub bottom right into Pauleen's lap. She hooks an arm around Pauleen's neck and she kisses her. But it's not just kissing. She's teaching Pauleen to breathe, to breathe underwater, because now they're pulled straight down, slim as hairs slipping down the drain. They kiss for as long as it takes to reach the sea. Their legs have changed and they could breathe free of each other if they wished, but they don't. Their new gills blend oxygen and carbon. Their eyes spike like urchins in the limited glow beneath the waves.

“When Pauleen speaks she's better than the girl she's been. So much better.

“ ‘The mermaid and the sailor can never live happily ever after. Someone always ends up drowning.’ ”

“Bianca.”

Josephine is insistent now. She's given up whispering.

“Yeah-”

“Pauleen's a bitch.”

Josephine held her breath. Bianca filled the silence with a sigh. After a moment, she spoke.

“I know.”

Their fingers found each other's in the dark. Bianca's grip was tight, and Josephine could feel the grooves of chipped nail polish on her nails.

"Maybe I should tell the story next time."

"Tell the story now. Tell me what happens next."

Josephine knew better than to try and deny her. She drew her knees up and kept her hold on Bianca's hand. She knew she could tell the story they both needed to hear.

"What happens next is more real and more important than what happened before. What happens next is a plane crash, a ship wreck, a hurricane, it's blended disaster at sea.

"Pauleen tries to split open her legs because she doesn't understand how to love someone without them. Blood colors the green slick of her lower body and her shrieks are choked by water. Bianca sees the bubbles and wants to catch them in her mouth, to swallow Pauleen's cries. Vessels rupture in Pauleen's skin, she thrashes and dives, she wants to go deep where she can't see what she is anymore. She isn't ready for any of the secrets. She doesn't know how to keep them.

"Bianca can't stop her. She's being pulled up as Pauleen struggles down, caught in a net with lesser fish. When she breaks the surface there is enough of her human still that she can manage short, shallow breaths. She's a prize among salmon and tuna, tangled on the deck of a narrow ship. The net loosens and everything in it spills forward, including Bianca. She's face to wooden foot with a woman twice as tall as any man, dressed lavish in a snow white surcoat whose folds contrast a highly polished wooden leg. Bianca is enamored of the coat and the leg immediately, and the woman's face, when she bends to examine her haul, is soft and pleasant. It is a wonder someone can stay so clean and nice at sea.

" 'I'm the captain of this vessel.'

"Bianca wants to bury her face in the snow white coat and scratch her nails against the leg. Her tail twitches and slaps against the deck. 'And I'm the captain of this one,' Bianca says, because she is a

feminist, and because she's only going to get the chance to say something like that once.

"She dines with the captain that evening but neither of them touches a thing, nearly overturning the table in their haste to be near each other. They don't bother with proclamations of love. Bianca learns a thing or two about her tail. The captain shows her how best she likes to be pleased with her leg."

"And there's a tropical parrot named Josephine who likes to watch," Bianca whispered in the dark, and Josephine was sure she was smiling. Josephine smiled, too.

"There is not.

"In the morning Bianca is more mermaid than girl. The sun never seemed so bright and she's having trouble breathing. The captain, though, wants her to stay.

" 'We can live on my island. I'll build a new home on the beach that moves with the tide.'

" 'It will wash away.'

" 'Then I'll build a sea and you can live inside it.'

" 'It will be too small.'

" 'Then I'll become a mermaid, too.'

"Bianca does not remember Pauleen, but she knows this will mean only disaster for the pirate. She does not remember, really, that she was Bianca. She wants to see the glimmer and murk of her home; she feels too heavy on the ship, like she might sink right through the planks and the hull. She reaches for the captain's coat to touch the woman just once more, but when she opens the white folds she does not find a body, instead it's dark and rough, like a shadow, like a forgotten thing, like a crumpled sweater.

"She pulls and she pulls and she pulls the sweater out of the bottom of her locker and puts it back on. She shakes the salt out of her hair and keeps a promise she made to meet her sister, to take the bus home, to tell stories in the dark."

They were only their breathing now, regular and human in the dark. Bianca wasn't crying but her shoulders were shaking, Josephine could feel it travel across the mattress. She lay down

beside her, a narrow fit on the bed, but fit enough. When they speak it sounds like a lot of things that it isn't, but mostly it sounds like thank you.

“Goodnight, Bee.”

“Goodnight.”

