

Margaret's Mermaid

by M. Barns

When she was eleven, Margaret still believed in mermaids. She would fasten the neon diving rings that her mother gave her to her ankles and swim around in the pool for hours. By the end of the afternoon, with chlorine-swollen skin she would wince as she tried to take them off, and imagine that she was making a wish that would come true that very instant— a wish to walk on land for just one evening.

When she slept she dreamt of oceans, and algae that looked like flowers beneath the water's surface. She could feel the waves passing over her body, and often fought her alarm in the morning. To her, the world was simple. There were believers and non-believers. People who were filled with magic and those who resented it. Luckily for Margaret, her mother was one of the few who did not lose their innocence as they aged— one of the even fewer who was able to balance the magical world of make-believe with adulthood.

She encouraged her daughter to live in a land of magic from a young age. When she was four they built small houses out of sticks and mud for the Dew Fairies, who only came out for a few moments before the sunrise, to make everything glimmer like new. Margaret would often try to wake up early, before the sun, so that she could catch them but by the time she rose they were already gone, and the grass was kissed by their cold breath. She would walk through the morning mist, looking into their houses for signs of life. When she would find a missing stick or a fallen leaf from their roof, she would quickly run to show her mother and they would fix the house together.

When she was nine, her attention turned to the lawn gnomes in her mother's garden. She was sure that they came to life at night. She was also sure that they needed something more to eat than the flowers that were often missing petals in her mother's garden. On her way home from school she would pick wild mushrooms and

mustard grass. When she was home she would place them in a small basket that came with one of her dolls. It was the perfect size for the gnome's little hands, and she was sure they would want to keep it their food in some sort of structure, so it wouldn't be spoiled by the rain.

But the book *Peter Pan*, which her mother started reading to her when she was ten, was what solidified her belief in Mermaids. Even though she was at the age where many of her friends no longer believed in the fantasies of their youth, Margaret still grasped them with a ferocity that can only be matched by the feelings of one's first love. As she aged, many of her friends would criticize her for living in the world of magic, rather than the world of reality. They called her simple, and dim-witted.

It was when her sixth grade class visited the Ripley's Believe It Or Not on the Atlantic City boardwalk for their annual end-of-the-year trip that Margaret was able to prove them wrong.

Just inside the door, after you crossed the shaking bridge, and before you got to the shrunken heads, was a small, shriveled body of a real-life mermaid. It was smaller than Margaret had thought, with balding spots across its scalp. The eyes had been stitched shut, but she remembered the tour guide telling her that *indigenous people* would sew the orifices of their enemies shut. She had tuned them out when she saw they were talking about a mermaid, and imagined what it would be like to live underwater.

When Margaret left that day she vowed to always carry that feeling with her. The feeling she felt when she knew she was right. The tingle in the back of her throat when she held back an *I told you so*. The way her fingers dug into her palms when she was excited. The magic she could feel pulsing through her heart.

It wasn't until many years later, when Margaret revisited Ripley's on the boardwalk that she realized the mermaid had not been real. She was two years out of graduate school, and struggling to make ends meet teaching adjunct classes at the local community college. The magic that had once been part of her was drained out by years

of all nighters, too much coffee, and meaningless relationships with men she tried to convince herself that she could love.

But being there, among the mermaids, real or fake, made her feel like she did when she was eleven. Like everything she wanted was still waiting for her, just beyond the tip of her grasp, and with a simple wish, or the right kind of magic it could all be hers. That night, after her classes let out, she went to the YMCA and floated in the pool for hours. When she prepared to leave she saw a small girl with a bright orange ring around her ankles, swimming through the water.

You know they're real, she said as she felt a distant tingle begin to form in her throat. *I met my first one when I was eleven.*

