

The Making of Mermaids

by Shalene Gupta

After he was finished with you, he zipped up his pants and slunk out into the night, leaving you to bandage the cuts and bruises, to file the police report, to take the pregnancy test. Then the trial, the testimony, the witnesses, and it was over. Justice had been served, he sat in jail.

It was not over.

You raced across the world, your milk white legs flashing. In nightmares and day dreams you could see men chasing you, always chasing you, past dark alleyways, through the continents, past the sea that somehow still sparkled, and then they found you, caught you, did they break you?

You ran so quickly for a while no one could find you. Finally, you sent us a report. You had retreated to the sea, you had your legs stitched together, you became a mermaid and were applying to join the school.

"You have to apply to get into mermaid school?" I thought but said nothing, because it would be a good life. You would swim beneath the ocean with a fleet of strong women, the water combing through your hair, seahorses bobbing alongside of you. There would be music for mermaids always sing, and you could have your revenge on men and their kind by shipwrecking sailors.

Mermaid school expelled you.

I don't know why, or what they were thinking. Perhaps it was because after the first few days of shipwrecking you started chatting with the sailors instead of singing to siphon off their souls, or because in the end, the singing started to sound like wailing—but you came home to us.

You hobbled into the room on crutches, your mermaid's tail flapping against the ground as you propelled yourself forward with the power of your arms. Your mother held you tenderly while helping you into a bathtub, and I stood next to it, watching you float in the water, while you told us stories of what you'd seen and heard:

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starfish and seaweed orchestras, coral castles, the slow dance of jellyfish at sunrise.

I pulled out the phone book, looked for the name of a good doctor who could un-stitch your legs so the scales fell off, so you could run and dance like any other girl, and the whole thing would be forgotten.

You laughed and shut the book in my hand.

“Friend, look at my tail,” you said, girl turned mermaid, far from the sea.

I looked and turned my head away, it was dark, oily, smelled too much like fish, and I did not want to see anything more.

“Look closer,” you said, and wiggled your tail so that a beam of sunlight shone on the tiny scales. I bent my head, breathed through my mouth, looked and found, between the oil and the shadows, the light of a thousand miniature rainbows.

