

*plastic fish*

A sperm whale washed up last week on the beach outside Celia's house. Researchers cut its thin body open and in its stomach, they found plastic bottles, rope, and other sorts of items that the whale definitely shouldn't have tried to digest. "Such a shame," they said, and clucked their tongues about the amount of pollution. The rancid stench of rotting whale flesh lingered for days after, and Celia's mother kept the windows and doors locked firmly shut.

It was two weeks later that Celia walked out with a camera firmly in hand, intent on taking pictures of where the sea and earth kissed in a tumbling roil of rock and water. She slid down a craggy rock and nearly fell off when someone shouted, "Hey!"

Celia craned her neck to look over the rock and saw a cross-looking boy standing there, clutching a fistful of plastic six pack rings and wearing only a ragged towel around his waist. For a minute, she wondered if he was a homeless child, and then figured that he seemed harmless. "What do you want?" she asked, clambering over rocks to make her way to him. "Is it about the sperm whale? Because the researchers already carried it off. Its body was stinking up the beach."

"I already know about James," the boy said, waving his free hand at her in impatience, tossing back long black hair from his shockingly teal eyes. Up close he had a strange green tinge to his skin that made him look sickly, and his legs were wobbly like a newborn foal's. When she drew nearer, he flung the six pack rings at her. "You see this?"

Celia wrinkled her freckled nose as the plastic settled onto the ground in front of her. "Yeah, they're the things that connect sodas together."

"Why on Neptune's beard would you fling them into the ocean?" shouted the boy, bits of spit flying out of his mouth and causing Celia to cringe as a few landed on her. "Do you know how many fish are strangled by these? *My gods.*"

"Look, I live here," said Celia, annoyed. "So if there's anyone who doesn't want plastic trash littering the beach, it's me, okay?"

"You—" The boy's eyebrows dropped and he spluttered in outrage, holding a pale green hand to his face like he couldn't stand the sight of her. "You may live here on the land, but I live out there, okay?" He waved a hand at the ocean.

Celia blinked at him. "You live on a boat?"

He pointed at the ocean. "Are you stupid? I live in the ocean, idiot. I'm seafolk, and you stupid humans are *ruining my life.*"

As she goggled at him and tried to work her brain around this proclamation, he paced and ranted and raved. "I've lived five hundred years, no? And we were like, okay, humans gotta eat fish too, that's cool. But this is outrageous, the amount of fish you're killing and the trash! The trash, the amount of it, makes me want to drown every single one of you!"

Celia backed away slightly.

"I've gone to the earth multiple times and every single appearance I return to the earth even more disappointed in humanity. Your languages are pathetically easy to master, and the air you breathe everyday is foul. Do you realize how much carbon dioxide your stupid pollution has released into the water? Fish can't breathe carbon dioxide. They can't *breathe.* I've gotten over a hundred breathing charms made by the witchfolk in the past decade alone!" The boy stopped, shook his head. "Never mind, let me just *show* you."

He reached for her arm and she jumped back, startled. "What? What are you doing?"

"Taking you into the ocean," he said, very matter-of-fact. "So you can see the havoc that you humans have wreaked."

"You literally said like, two minutes ago, that you want to drown every single human. I," she said, gesturing at herself, "am a human. That you wish to drown."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, but I'm trying to prove a point to you," he said and heaved a sigh. "On Neptune's beard and trident, I promise not to drown you."

Celia looked back at her house, and then sighed. "How long is it going to take?" she asked, already shucking off her shoes and placing her cell phone and camera neatly inside them, and then hiding the whole lot behind a rock. "Because I think my mom would worry if I disappeared for a year."

"Less than a day, I promise," said the merman, beckoning with one hand, the other already stretched out towards the ocean. They waded in until they were thigh-high in water, her shorts heavy and soaked, and then he offered her his hand.

She eyed it for a few moments, and then, slow and careful, she placed her hand in his. His skin was slightly slimy, and her nose crinkled up almost automatically in disgust. In response, he grinned at her, sharp and feral.

"What's your name?" Celia asked him, gripping his hand tight.

"There's no direct translation in English," the boy replied after a moment, brows drawn together. "But I've been around for many years and I was very impressed by one of your humans that I met a few hundred years ago—Thoreau, yes. You may call me that."

With that, he yanked her arm with surprising strength and they both went tumbling into the water.

She did not see the transformation, as panicked as she was. All Celia knew was that one moment, he had bare legs, and the next minute, there was a dull green tail that was easily as long as she was tall. She shrieked in surprise, for though she had believed him, it was an entirely different thing to see firsthand the seamless transformation of scales to skin at his waistline, or to see the webbing between his hands. His hands, which were cupping her face, held her head still and his mouth slotted against hers. In the most unromantic kiss ever, she found the ability to breathe.

“Mermaid magic,” Thoreau said, pleased, as Celia gasped in water. “Told you I wouldn’t drown you.”

“Where are we going?” asked Celia once she reassured herself that she was not, in fact, going to drown, no matter how much water she sucked in.

“We won’t have to go very far.”

It confused her at first, and it was with a dawning horror that she realized what he meant. Around her, plastic bottles filled with water were half-hidden with sand on the floor while fish swam casually with six pack rings around their necks. Eels made their habitats in plastic bags, while octopuses wrapped their tentacles around coat hangers. As Celia watched, eyes wide and mouth agape, a turtle casually snapped at a plastic bag, tearing off parts to swallow.

“Oh my god,” said Celia, looking at the toothbrushes sticking out of the dirt and the plastic bags that floated around like unearthly ghosts. “I—”

Thoreau watched her, mouth set in a grim line. His tail flicked back and forth sedately in the water. “Come,” he said, more gently than she expected. “You don’t have eyes like mine. This is as deep as we may go before there is not enough light for you to see.”

He guided her to an outcropping of coral and they sat there on its rough surface, watching the fish swim past in the muddied swirl of plastic trash. “There’s so much of it,” Celia said wonderingly. “I—I never thought that there would be quite this much.”

“It accumulates.” Thoreau glanced at her and then turned his gaze back out to the fish. “My tail—it used to be much greener. There’s something in the toxins that humans have been pouring into our oceans, or perhaps it’s the toxins released by the plastic bags themselves ... whatever it is, it’s leeching the color out of my skin. There are places where there is such little oxygen that we suffocate, and we’ve memorized them and try to get the sea creatures to go around.” He tapped his tail, drawing a patch of ragged scarring to her attention. “I got caught up in some netting and it shredded part of my tail. I still can’t feel anything when someone touches that section.”

He sighed, tipping his head back. “I wish you were born a thousand years earlier,” he said suddenly. “It was much livelier. There were more fish, more color, more everything. Sure they ate each other, but that’s just nature. Now, the fish eat plastic bags because they look like jellyfish. Even on land, your birds feed their youngsters plastic trinkets that they mistake for food crumbs.”

A turtle swam by close. Celia outstretched a hand to it and it butted its head to her palm before swimming away. There was a scar on its leg, presumably from a fishing hook.

Thoreau never stopped talking, saying in bewilderment, “It even affects their *reproducing*. They stop reproducing when their bellies are full with plastic. It baffles us.”

“Can’t you just...take the plastic out of the water?” asked Celia. “It takes like, thousands of years to decompose, right?”

“*Thousands of years?*” he repeated, eyebrows arched high. “They break apart into littler pieces to be easily consumed by the fish. There’s no way that we’re going to be able to get all this plastic out when there’s a few million tons being hauled in every month.”

“Oh,” said Celia. “We were—we were never really taught that in school.”

“How about this?” he asked, sarcasm lacing his words. “You dump plastic into water. Fish eats plastic. Plastic slowly poisons fish and all its children until one day, they’re hauled up by some dumb fisherman to be sold on the market. Then, you humans eat the fish. You are eating your own *trash* and you don’t even know it. You’re poisoning yourselves, your children, and making no attempt whatsoever to stop it.”

Celia opened her mouth, attempting to defend her species, and found herself at a loss of words, recalling the countless plastic water bottles in her house; the plastic bags she used for grocery shopping; the plastic of her mechanical pencils.

“Why are you even telling me this?” she asked instead. “What if I don’t even care about fish? I could just spill the fact that mermaids exist to the entire world.”

He blinked at her, slow and self-satisfied. “But you won’t,” he said, mouth curled up in a smile, dark hair floating around his face in an unearthly halo.

Celia ducked his gaze, instead choosing to look beneath her feet and into the darkness of the ocean beyond them. “No,” she said finally. “I won’t.”

They sat there for a while, two tiny figures weightless in the sea with dull fish swarming around them, and then they left. Thoreau gently tugged her up through the water, and helped her remember how to breathe real air, muttering incantations as she coughed up water. Dripping and cold, she sucked in sour air and made her way to shore.

“Don’t forget what you’ve seen today,” said Thoreau, human once more, watching her jam her feet into her shoes and pick up her cell phone and camera with care. “Don’t forget me.”

“Don’t let me forget you,” countered Celia, smiling at him. “Visit.”

That startled a smile out of him as well. “Very well,” he said, and then paused, looking slightly uncomfortable. “Er. It seems that I never got your name.”

“Celia,” she said.

They would see each other again, time after time, as he finally braved up and walked into her house on human legs to be introduced to her mom as “Just a friend, Mom, God!”. They’d keep in touch for years, brainstorming ways to clear the ocean of pollution. They would lose hope momentarily as the seas slowly filled with plastic, but they would never stop trying, and in a future far, far away from them, perhaps they would succeed.

But for now, Celia watched him dive back into the ocean, tail disappearing into the water with a quiet sound, and she swore to remember.

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Ever since I was young, I loved how fantasy tempers truth. Fantasy books can teach lessons of racism, sexism, and the inner nature of the human psyche, all while casting a gossamer veil of unreality around the whole story. It is one thing to teach a child about the Holocaust, and another to teach them about prejudice against a select group of people, e.g. how *Harry Potter* treated the prejudice against Muggles. As a child, I was always fond of mermaids, and even fonder of stories of clueless humans being sucked into the fantastical world. That, as well as my love for female protagonists and the subversion of gender roles, inspired me to write this story about a girl who meets a merman. There's something magical about being in the ocean, an intangible feeling of mystery and loneliness that I tried to contradict with the horror of plastic pollution. This contrast of peace and chaos is something I attempted to show as my characters sit in a ocean filled with filth and plastic and watch the fish swim by. It is my greatest hope that after finishing my story, my readers will come out dazed, like they themselves were in the ocean and were breathing in the poisonous waters.