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## HEIR AND SEA

BY GEORGE SALIS

She swam as a fish among fish, a scaled and finned body. The sound of the churning water like an echo chamber. Then she was neither fish nor infant, but unborn baby. Fetus-formed, she backstroked in the russet sea of her mother's womb. She continued to perceive the fish beside her, around her. *What are you doing in my mother?* she asked the group of fish. *This is my home.* The slimy creatures looked at her with omniscient eyes. *This is our element, not yours,* they said. Then she was human again, in the shivering river, as she always had been. She was translucent now, red and blue veins like tattoos beneath her jelly flesh, deeper still was the soft chalk of her skeleton. *I'm not one of you,* she said. They hovered closer, as if to whisper in her ears. *No, you are not.* Her eyes slid like egg yolks to the side of her head, over her fragile temples. Fissures appeared at the hinges of her jaw. She thought that if she tried hard enough she could get used to this netherworld. *Can I be in your family?* she asked. Five of them laughed, pearly bubbles escaping from their pink mouths. Then they vanished. The water vanished.

She vanished.

A grassy knoll was the crib on which she awoke. Soaked clothing as blankets. The sun and clouds hanging, gently spinning round and round. This world was as scentless as the other. She had a tummy ache. Her stomach was swollen with little, glowing spheres. Thousands of fish eggs, pulsing. In her mind she gasped-choked-wailed at an ever-increasing pitch, until a woman came upon this stray urchin.



“Oh my...help! Someone help!”

They pushed on her stomach, they breathed air into her water-logged lungs. What was oxygen? Poison. They persisted for hours until she ejected the precious eggs and the half-formed organisms floundered against the floor. Her stomach was flat again, but with golden stretch marks rippling around her navel. She breathed the poison for the first time since her quarter-mile journey through the Styx. Her mother and father, the doctors and nurses, all faces familiar and not surrounded the bed. They regarded her as if she were a messenger from that underworld, as if she clutched the scepter of Hermes like a rattle, petite wings protruding from her ankles. But she wasn't. She had returned only as a deathless child.

Afterward, she grew into a gorgeous woman, but the doctors took note of the unnatural webbing between her toes, the barnacle-crust on her elbows, the translucency of her eyelids when examined up to the light. She became a competitive swimmer with the grace of a dolphin, winning medals throughout high school and into her freshman year of college. She was obsessed with the sea, that larger body of water which contained untold creatures—not just alien anglers, goblin sharks, and vampire squids, but also marine beings so deep within the trenches of the ocean floor that they were made of liquid darkness, held together by the very pressure of the earth's water. She seemed to connect with all of them on a telepathic level, as with the melancholy mantra of whales. To be terraqueous was to be a vagabond. At nightfall she swam in the sea, beneath the stirring surface for minutes or hours at a time.

Her classmates and teachers at school began to wonder. Where did she go? Surely not just for a swim? Those with more practical minds thought she used her mania for swimming as an excuse to defy her curfew and engage in nonsense with boys, singing from the rock-clustered dock in order to attract the most handsome of them. Some said that she was learning to breathe water itself, others said that she, being so beautiful, was the princess of an Atlantis-like kingdom and lived a double life. She knew of the rumors but ignored them, consoled by the subaqueous susurrates that her webbed toes detected on the shore of the beach, the veiny membranes quivering with obscure linguistics.

When she went missing, the rumors exaggerated, refracted, until everyone in the town wanted to know where she had escaped, where she had gotten lost, where she had been taken against her will. They searched not just the beaches but the lakes and rivers and marshes, too. Some listened to the groaning and clanging of their home plumbing in case she was sending them SOS messages. Those murmuring pipes suddenly tapped Morse code from within the walls of her family's home. Friends also reported sidereal patterns in the rain as it lashed their windows. Over time people began to forget, lose interest, allow distraction by the trivial yet urgent errands of daily life. The missing girl's father spent hours tending to Chiron, his pet steed, riding him in and out of rain, wind, hail, dusk, and treating a chronic occurrence of thrush on the left hoof of his foreleg that smelled of rotted wood. The missing girl's mother lingered on the porch, rocking back and forth on a chain-suspended bench and knitting a cable crown headband by day that she would unknit by night, beginning again the next morning.



The mother did this thirty times before it turned out that their daughter wasn't trapped in the sewer system like a fabled alligator, nor was she turned into a bog mummy amidst the Everglades. She was found washed ashore on the beach she frequented. Her body sponge-like, her eyes crystalline, her nails somehow grown twice their length. Within the seaweed of her hair was the rosy paste of a head wound. The coroner declared that she was tossed and turned within the frenzy of a wave and dashed against the sharp rocks by the dock she often dove from.

Her parents wanted to cremate her and throw her ashes into the foam of the waves she loved so much, even though water was twice the death of her, but her body was like permanently wet firewood, and refused to catch flame. All the incinerator did was cover her skin in a layer of ash. Her parents settled for a less conventional ceremony: a Norse funeral, where the deceased was pushed afloat in a miniature ship and then sunk by flaming arrows, for her classmates and professors had let it be known how much she adored the cosmic immensity of Yggdrasil and the uroboric wonder of Jörmungandr. When they performed this ritual, in the presence of family and friends and a massive crowd of uninvited onlookers, the ship burned and dipped below until gone, but her blackened body remained, and did so for days, a buoying void in the sea, until one night the sunset covered all the water with hues of pink and purple, and the hole of her was never seen again. Many believed she had descended the throne.

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