

 MEG CASS

## Whirlpool

When the mermaid kit arrives in the mail, the creature is a dried out husk the size of a grasshopper. The girl complains. I got a dead one. Her mother shushes her, sets the mermaid carefully in the glass cube she came with, pours in the aquamarine crystals from their special suede baggy, then adds water. The mermaid's body pinks, her red hair swirls, her eyes open wide. She smiles underwater. "I'll name her Mara," the girl says, because it's close to her own name.

The mermaid comes with a pink castle and a tiny pink plastic guitar that has no strings. The girl loves gathering her food as per the instruction guide. Crayfish from the creek across the street, earthworms dug up from under rocks, millipedes, moths, slugs. The mermaid tears into abdomens, rips off heads, her incisors working frighteningly fast. Legs and antennae stick out of her mouth. Her long purple tongue extends to snap them up. "Disgusting. How can you watch her do that?" her father says, covering the cube in a dish towel. The girl moves the mermaid up to her room.

*Science Magic!*, the catalogue the kit came from, also has a sea witch kit, a sea king kit, and a prince kit. The girl's mother asks if she wants the prince for her birthday but the girl only wants another mermaid. "She's lonely. She needs a best friend," she says. Her own best friend lives across the street, smells like fire smoke and the lemon mint detergent her mother makes from scratch. The girl wants to see her every day after school. They've already invented three secret codes, stars and circles and numbers signifying when they will meet, what they will investigate in the forest down the road. Where does the creek begin? Who is singing late at night, their voice coming from somewhere beyond the pines?

The girl's mother frowns but makes the order. The second mermaid arrives and also seems dead at first. When she revives, her tail turns into pink tentacles and what looks like seaweed fronds. The girl thinks of the jelly fish she's seen washed up on the beach near her grandparents' house, slimy and glistening. "I'll send it back. They must have sent us the witch one by mistake," her mother says, but the girl insists on keeping her. She loves to watch her move, the lower half of her body like a bell skirt filling with wind, her tentacles trailing through blue. She comes with a purple castle, a palate with circles meant to look like fresh paint, a travel suitcase.

The girl keeps the two cubes side by side on her dresser. For a while the creatures seem unaware of each other, mostly sleeping in their castles, their fake arts strewn on the day glow bottom. Then one morning, she finds them staring at each other through the glass, mouthing what looks like words, though the catalogue says they're not capable of language, are closer to minnows in terms of cognitive capacity. Later, her parents will tell her she imagined it, how at night

they would surface and try to talk to her, their language a code as vague as the katydid chirps she hears out her window when she's lying awake wondering what it is like to live in habitats far beyond the pines, places with sidewalks, cafes, concerts, girls who don't fall in love with princes.

The mermaids grow larger than they were supposed to. By the girl's next birthday, they are the size of her fist, the seashell bras they came in straining over their chests. Her parents buy cans of seafood Fancy Feast, which the girl serves in the teacups her mother saves for special occasions. The mermaids eat the glop with their hands, make faces and sounds the girl knows must be complaints but they always lick the porcelain clean. Then they fall asleep, their bodies pressing against the walls of their cubes, their necks bent. The girl asks her parents for a larger aquarium. It's clear they need more space to swim freely, to explore together, a shared glass world. She is in sixth grade now. She can take care of it herself, watch for algae buildup, check the nitrate levels. We didn't sign on for a whole gemisch, her parents tell her. They're not even real pets. What about a dog?

Her best friend suggests a playdate in the parents' remodeled bathroom. They fill the tub with cold water, gather the mermaids in their hands. Their bodies are heavier than they imagined, the tentacles streaming down the girl's arms. Released, they swim around each other in tight circles, create a whirlpool. Waves splash over the edge. The girls step closer. Hands trace over scales and fronds, purple tongues push past lips. The girls laugh. It's ridiculous and terrifying and a little beautiful. The air in the room fills with ocean. They're dangling their legs in the surf, moving their faces closer together when the girl's mother walks in.

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It is winter and Mara is alone. The girl's parents claimed the jellyfish mermaid was dangerous, could reach out and sting the girl at any moment. They sent her back to the company for supposed treatment from which she will never come back, the way the girl's best friend won't be allowed back over to play again. *She's too wild*, the girl's mother says. *All that water everywhere, and putting those things in our new Kohler. Not the kind of influence I want for you.* Mara barely moves in her cube. She refuses the Fancy Feast now served in a white cereal bowl, refuses all insects and crustaceans. The girl plays her the new Poe CD, the new Mountain Goats. She gives a wan smile.

When the girl comes home from school and senses the mermaid is about to die, she cups her in one hand. She's shrunk to the size she was when she arrived, the length of the girl's index finger. Her eyes open and close slowly. Her tail is flat and dull. "It was just a toy anyway. I'm not that upset. I flushed her down the toilet," she'll assure her parents.

What she does instead is drop the mermaid into her open mouth and swallow. Her own body

must be useful for something. All that water, all those nutrients her science teacher says it contains. She imagines Mara swimming inside her, the still unnamed jellyfish mermaid there too. The paints on the palate turn wet and bright. The guitar grows golden strings. The suitcase is full to bursting.

“Stay alive, stay alive, stay alive,” she sings to herself.