

Sea Legs

by Sophie Overett

“Okay,” he says, knocking a sand-covered knee against hers. “You have to tell me why.”

And she gives him *that* look. The one that’ll sleep in the folds of his nail beds for days.

“I don’t have to tell you anything.”

He laughs like he gets it, which he can’t, because if he did, he wouldn’t have asked in the first place. She pulls her towel a little closer.

“Maybe I can’t swim,” she says.

“In Australia?”

“Maybe I got in a tangle with a jellyfish.”

“I mean, sure.”

“Maybe I drowned. Maybe you’re talking to the ghost of me. Maybe my mother drowned, and you’re rubbing it in.”

The sand is crusty on the sides of his glasses, caught up in the hair on his lower belly, just above the lip of his swim trunks.

“Maybe I’m a mermaid,” she says. “And I gave it all up for you.”

And he laughs again, heady. The sun has already kissed his cheeks, nose, shoulders. The shells of his ears. Pressed itself to the curve of his back. It means she



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can't tell if he's blushing when he starts humming – badly – *Part of Your World* – and she wants to tell him that that song isn't hers. She was never a princess.

He was never a prince.

Not that he knows the rest of it either.

She wonders about telling him though. About life before legs. When she didn't breathe through her mouth, but scaly flaps at her neck, or the way the water felt – not like the air does here, thick, dirty, carrying the writhing bodies of insects, the tangled limbs of mosquitoes, to latch their little mouths into your plump flesh, to catch in the fold your thigh makes when it meets your crotch. She'd torn their wings off once, just to see what would happen, but they'd just died, like she could now too, a smear of blood and a twitch of catharsis.

The water she would tell him of is not a water he would recognise.

“You're sure you don't want to come in? We don't have to swim. Knee deep, you'll cool down. I'll look after you.”

He grins something close to charming, and maybe it would be, if she was somebody else, and she thinks *I gave it all up for this*, and he keeps smiling, kind and oblivious, the ocean lapping at the shore behind them like the gentle open and shut of a door to a home that isn't hers anymore.



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