

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

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The singing mermaid

YOU ARE A MERMAID! A SINGING MERMAID!

The message was a sprawl. And dramatic! Written in three different crayons for better visual effect: blue, orange and red. It began in the center of the white tissue paper and moved in an upward slant, stopping breathlessly before the brittle edge, on the right-hand side. Below the short verdict was a series of wavy lines. At the top- middle was a big dot radiating small and big lines. Sun! Few broken lines suggested clouds. A harbor scene? Below, in the center, perched atop a boulder, was a slender mermaid.

Kiran was taken aback. She checked with the exiting urchin.

"It is for you."

The thin boy confirmed and then ran out of the multi-brand store fast. She did not know how to react. She re-read. Looked up. Nobody looked back. They hardly noticed the letter or her startled expression. Standing mute and blank like mannequins. She felt relieved. In her corner space, alone, she again opened up the tissue paper. The three-colour announcement leapt out of the paper and floated before her in wavy lines. And the mermaid turned back and blinked.

How can it be?

Me, a mermaid? Some prank by a staff member or a friend?

Wrong recipient of some esoteric code? Somebody mocking?

So many questions. She carefully folded it back and kept it in her red purse.

Is it possible?

But mermaids do exist. In childhood, she had heard about them. Read also.

I cannot be a mermaid. Can I?

The answer came in the afternoon. After lunch, the puny sales-girl would take a short walk at the Worli sea- front, Mumbai. Sea fascinated. She heard the waves whistling during these short breaks from a punishing schedule in the store. Distant silhouettes became pirate ships where a handsome dark hulk waited eternally. The dolphins leapt out of the sea. Kiran heard the songs of sirens in the Arabian Sea. Once she told her widowed mother about these strange sightings. The thin woman worked as a cook. She went pale but said nothing. But her *believing* niece, bespectacled and buck-toothed like her, went mad with joy. She jumped on her bed, ran out of the room and shouted at the top of her voice, "My aunt Kiran is special. She is a friend of dolphins! Aunt can see what others cannot!" They both laughed and jumped and danced in the flat of Kiran's elder sister. There was nobody around. The two enjoyed the absence of the frowning adults who always wanted to control everything nineteen-year Kiran or nine-year-old Neha, the naughty niece, wanted to do.

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"So, aunt, what else you see there?"

"Oh, Neha, lots of things. Shipwrecked sailors floating on rafts. A pirate prince about to take me in his strong arms. Sirens. Dolphins staring me in the eye and following me along the sea front, as faithful aquatic pals."

"Wow!"

"You do not doubt?"

"Na. Why should I? I can hear them singing too."

"How?"

"Whenever, I read comics or fairy tales, these creatures jump up before me. The rabbits, the birds, the butterflies, the elves, the dwarfs spring out from the pages and roam about freely in the hall, kitchen, room. My silent house gets filled with these cute people who talk in your language."

"Wow!" It was Kiran's turn to exclaim. She knew there were things better understood by the kids and writers than the calculating cynic adults. She opened up the paper and bent a quick look. The strange message was still there.

But I cannot be a mermaid!

The answer was waiting. A girl-child tapped her during her walk along the promenade and delivered another folded napkin.

You are a mermaid...because you are always sad. Many mermaids are sad, looking wistfully at the humans passing by, while they sit on the rocks, at the edge of human society, invisible. They want to be part of this human world but are frightened of being exotic and different!

Singing mermaid... because your sad eyes sing!

She was taken aback! Is she transparent? She looked around. There was no trace of the messenger.

Who is this guy? How does he know these things about me? Does he live nearby? Or, some guy in the office?

She looked at the fluttering tissue paper. It was Saturday afternoon with few strollers. Most offices closed early on Saturdays and people left, post-lunch, for their distant suburban homes. She felt light.

A singing mermaid!

She smiled secretly, increasing her pace along the promenade.

Then: a loud crash. The pirate ships berthed suddenly. The dark prince swung out of the biggest ship, swords and pistols dangling from his sinewy body and took her to the ship. They set sail. Sea was rough but friendly dolphins calmed the choppy waves and sang to the drunken sailors!

My queen!

She smiled. Her buck teeth stretched the small mouth. Adjusting her spectacles, Kiran walked softly, as the sailors saluted her and her fawning muscular pirate-prince.

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The boss was angry.

"Where were you?"

Kiran went pale. She started stammering. An old habit.

"You not paying attention to your job, Miss Kiran. I can see that. You are always distracted. Lost. Thinking of something..."

"Not...a...t...al...l, s...i...rrrr," said the little girl, trembling.

"YOU DENYING ME?" The boss was in utter shock. Almost about to faint. "YOU DENYING ME? HOW DARE YOU?"

Kiran thought boss burst out and foamed at the mouth, a cruel little mouth, set in a cruel unsmiling face.

"I hired you because your dad was my old worker. He is dead. That is why I hired an ugly duckling like you. No client wants to come to you. Other sales girls get more clients. They are smart and good-looking. Yet, you do not understand my goodness. Always having a far-off look. I will not tolerate late-coming. Will sack you, a foolish dreamer. Understand, you dumb girl?"

"But, sir, I am very punctual..."

"Shut up! Already late by five minutes! You are here to work, not to take long strolls along the sea, ogling at the men. Next time late, you are fired. UNDERSTOOD?"

Kiran dissolved into hot tears of shame and humiliation. She went to her corner and stood alone, crying. Her female co-workers giggled. Nobody came down to hug or comfort her in the shop. The boss got diverted by a call. She went to the little toilet and looked at her face. An ugly duckling looked back. She fled from the washroom, after drying her pimply face.

Mermaids do not cry! They sing, whenever they are sad!

Another message at closing time. It failed to revive her. She stepped out hurriedly and walked fast on the street, avoiding lecherous drunks, hustlers, street-walkers and old homeless folks, the denizens of the pavements of an Asian megacity.

She, however, kept the three tissue papers in her red purse. Testimonies of her worth--to somebody, at least!

An anonymous admirer? Well, well...

Who he can be? Finding an ugly and poorly-paid shop assistant, his singing mermaid? Some loony character? Some stalker? Or, some angel?

That night, in her dream, Kiran sang as a pining mermaid, sitting on the rock, in the choppy waters, looking wistfully at the strange human world. A world of princes and paupers, ugly and beautiful, old and young, man and woman, boss and the servant, successful and failure and

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so on, while in the mermaid-world, there was only one reality: everybody was a mermaid or merman only.

Next morning, Kiran reached the office early. At nine rather than nine-thirty. A boy tapped her. Another tissue paper. With beating heart, the little sales girl opened it up. Her charcoal likeness stared at her from the pure-white tissue paper!

Who could he be?

Another afternoon-message popped up on her cell: *Source may not matter; message is important. Believe in it and accept your destiny! Bye, bye!*

She was a mermaid! Finally!

That is why sea fascinates. Dolphins follow her steps on the crowded waterfront. Pirate ships wait at the harbor. I can understand the sea better. The aquatic life. I am not land person. I am meant to float. Half-fish; half-child; half-woman!

She looked around. The sales-girls, decked up but bored stiff, were staring outside. The bunch of teenagers never mixed up with Kiran. They were from Mumbai; she, from the far-off suburb. Her specs and stammer complicated things. She preferred to stand in her corner; they, in their allotted places along the long polished counters. Most were drop-outs and came from poor families. They chatted with the counter clerks and occasionally flirted with the boss and the cashiers. Kiran never liked this open flirting. She got few customers. Most went to the slim and dusky sales girls in stilettos, faces painted and rouged. They would smile coquettishly and speak in husky voice. Kiran was largely ignored by the clients. Boss had given her the extreme corner that stocked branded watches and toys for kids. And kids never went by the looks. She would guard her corner like a sentinel for a 10-hour duty. Her feet will give way by the end of the day. Aloof, she would stand. Kids came often and see a smiling gentle didi there, patiently showing the soft toys and watches and other games to them. She never scolded or hurried them up. Often, allowed them to run a train or some helicopter as well, refused by their stern dads to them. Those delightful moments! They liked the freedom given by her to play. Those were the saving graces for the overworked sales girl. The message had intrigued her.

She was other-worldly.

I am a singing mermaid! They do not know my history. I am exotic! Very different from the pedestrian others.

Then, on 31 December, 2010 evening, Kiran became a mermaid!

The store had staged an event where the workers were permitted to come in fancy clothes. There were lights gleaming. Trees in pots were covered with tiny bulbs and wisps of cotton to suggest fake snow. The walls were festooned with ribbons. Light music played in the background. Outside, it was chilly. Excitement was in the air. Most boys were wearing

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Santa caps; the girls, glittering crowns. Customers were circulating in the large store spread out on the four floors.

Hey, look, a mermaid! A kid shouted.

The kids thronged around a surprised Kiran turning fast into a fused fish-woman body. They shrieked in delight, as Kiran turned a mermaid, her fish-body slithering easily on the cold floor. Boss turned around and saw many happy customers, with screaming kids, around a strange creature. He said nothing. As long as there were customers around a sales-girl, he did not mind her being a mermaid or a unicorn. They looked at her for some time, the excited kids and then, bored, moved away. Her colleagues ignored her as usual, smirking at her transformation. After an hour, nobody paid any attention. It was a mermaid-paradox: *In a culture where everybody wants to be fundamentally different, everybody, at the same time, looks and remains the same!*

Un-noticed, beckoned by the calls of sirens and the sea and fellow mermaids, Kiran as the new mermaid, slid out of the store and moved towards the waterfront. The busy window-shoppers looked at her and then resumed conversations, without glancing second time. She slid down the waterfront effortlessly, amid indifferent casual strollers and tourists, following the call of the dancing dolphins. Old year was ending. The stars glittered. People were everywhere, cocooned in their little portable worlds. She smiled. Nobody smiled back. They looked away from a friendly mermaid. The sirens sang. Dolphins leapt out of joy. Her mermaid sisters gestured happily at her, inviting her.

And, suddenly, she found her voice. She began singing in a loud and clear voice, drowning out the music of the waves. She began singing. And became a true singing mermaid, finally! Fulfilling her destiny, the prophecy. Proving the verdict of an anonymous source.

Then, beckoned by her mermaid sisters, she slid down into the hungry sea, wanting to return to her ancient aquatic home, in the depths of the waters, to a loving primeval society, where everybody was either an ordinary mermaid or a merman....