

The Merman

By Sam Healey

The merman washed up on Isla Vista sand with the sunrise. Newborn rays of light cast shadows on his body, a lump on the shore tangled in kelp. Will could see the dark outline on the beach from his balcony and set down his oatmeal to go investigate. It was a two minute walk from his house on Del Playa Drive to the spot where the merman lay, down the stairs that were etched into the bluff. The salty breeze that greeted him on the beach soothed his mild hangover. With a piece of driftwood, Will lifted the kelp off of the body. Due to its size, he wasn't expecting an ordinary fish, but still he jumped back with a yell after uncovering a humanlike figure beneath the wet leathery leaves.

"Holy shit," Will whispered. Already the gnats were nipping at the glistening silvery scales of the merman's lower body. From the bottom half, the creature resembled a gigantic fish, with a muscular trunk that gently tapered until flourishing at its narrowest point into a majestic tail that fanned out wide, fins flecked with vibrant streaks of red. Yet above his waist, the merman resembled a human man, with a chiseled abdomen, a toned chest, and sculpted arms. A tiny tattoo, the bare outline of a simple sparrow, graced the merman's left rib cage. His hair was long and matted from the waves that had delivered him ashore, and translucent sand-bugs had begun to establish a home in the raggedy locks. His beard was sandy and overgrown, his eyes softly shut, and a sad smile, one that suggested trouble below the sea, lined his youthful face. A dark crimson gash was beginning to scab over his right eyebrow.

Will hooked the merman by the sinewy shoulders, straining to drag him away from the foam that lapped at his tail. After staggering up the sand and propping him against the bluffs,

Will was out of breath. Rockfalls seemed to strike every other day, but Will figured the merman would be safe for ten minutes while he went back up to the house to rouse his friends.

He lived in a satellite house of Pi Kappa Phi, the fraternity that he was president of, with five other brothers—some of his closest friends. Will and his roommate Jose had become legendary in the frat during their freshman year when they had combined to down a fifth of Tito's in one night. Now as a junior, Will barely drank anymore; the half-bottle of champagne he had consumed at their date party last night was the exception to the rule. Jose, though, had not changed in the slightest, and when Will nudged him and mentioned the merman, he rolled out of bed only with considerable difficulty. Once Jose was standing on two feet, they roused the rest of the house. Each boy was battling hangovers of varying severities, but after getting some water they managed to get down to the beach.

The merman smelled of fish. His hair had fallen down over his face, hiding the gash, and Will crouched down to brush the strands aside with care.

“No way that thing is real,” Evan said.

Colin snorted. “Evan, you're a dumbass. How would this be fake?”

“My prof told me about this in my ES class,” Jose explained. “The waters are getting warmer and bringing all kinds of shit to the surface.”

“It's not one of our pledges, right?” Eric joked, and everybody cracked up.

Shane had brought a joint with him; it was the morning-after headache cure that he swore by. After lighting and taking a long hit, he offered his opinion. “He seems like a chiller.”

Colin kicked the merman's tail just above the fin. “It smells like ass though.”

“He's beautiful,” Will said. The boys fell silent.

“Is it alive?” Alvin asked, shifting his gaze from down at his feet back to the merman. Will pressed his hand to the creature’s chest but could not discern a breath or heartbeat, and there was no pulse at its wrist. Yet the merman was warm, far warmer than the ocean from which it had emerged.

“I’m gonna put it on UCSB 2026,” Colin said, pulling out his phone to take a picture.

Will swatted the phone down. “Dude, chill out. He needs our help.”

“The fuck are we gonna do?” Colin retorted.

“I have no idea,” Jose said. “We never learned about mermen in my class.”

“How would you know?” Eric responded. “You never even went.”

Will didn’t respond, instead sliding his arms beneath the merman’s torso, straightening his back, lifting up with his legs. Despite his exertion, the merman’s tail remained on the ground. “Help me out here,” he said with a grunt.

The boys didn’t move. “What are you doing?” Alvin asked.

“Let’s take him up to the house and get him some water.” Will set the merman down and stared at his friends.

“I feel like he has all the water he’d ever need right here,” Shane said.

“Yeah, I don’t know what bringing him up would do,” Evan added.

“Shut up, Evan,” said Colin, stepping up beside Will.

Tentative at first, the rest of the boys crowded around the merman and offered support, each holding different parts of the body like pallbearers. Together, they staggered up the stairs. With all six of them, the merman was not particularly heavy, but its body was cumbersome and slippery, particularly by the tail, so they stopped multiple times to rest. They passed nobody on

the stairs—it was seven-thirty in the morning, after all—but on the street a girl was out for a jog, and stopped with an astonished stare.

“Is that a merman?” she asked.

“I don’t know what it is,” Colin muttered.

By the time they had hauled the merman into the house their arms were well pumped. They sprawled him out on their balcony, right next to their Nicki Minaj American flag banner. Nobody spoke. The merman had not given the slightest twitch during the whole process.

Will grabbed the Brita water purifier and a cup from their kitchen, but the merman did not move when Will tried to pry his lips open with his fingers. Nor did it take to the Casamigos that Shane tried to pour down its throat. They tried the rest of the liquor from their minifridge—honey Jack Daniel’s, Malibu, Jagermeister—but nothing, not even the Fireball, could elicit a stir. Evan mixed a packet of Liquid IV with the water, but it was no help.

“Okay, it didn’t even go for the Pacifico,” said Eric at last. “If that won’t revive it, nothing will.”

“Hang on dude, we didn’t try the bong,” Shane replied. From their coffee table, a piece of plywood mounted on cinder blocks, he grabbed their centerpiece: a two-foot tall glass bong with the Greek letters of their fraternity emblazoned on the side above a picture of Ronald Reagan. Shane pressed the bong to the merman’s mouth, Colin lit the bowl, and Jose shouted at him to pull, pull, pull. But the merman did not pull.

“Maybe we should call the cops,” Evan said. The boys were so stumped that they didn’t even tell him to shut up.

“Will, what do you think?” Alvin asked.

Will had been deep in thought studying the merman but finally noticed that everybody was looking at him, waiting to hear what he had to say. They always did, even before he was president. He was very precise with the things he said and did, choosing them with deliberate intentionality.

“Let’s keep him here for now,” he concluded. “I’ll stay with him. If he’s not up by the afternoon, we can decide whether to bring him back to the water or to call the cops.” It was decided, and the boys dispersed, most of them back to their beds. Jose asked Will if he wanted to hit a post-hangover leg day, but Will shook his head.

With Jose gone and everybody else asleep, Will sat alone admiring the merman. Not since the time he went deep-sea fishing off the coast of Baja with his dad and brother to catch tuna had he seen such a big tail on a fish. But of course, this was no fish. Will ran his hands over the scales. They were beginning to cool, with a toughness that seemed to offer protection from even the most powerful shark bites. Will was most fascinated by the juncture where scales met skin. Cold smoothness gave way to a stomach that was rough from salt and the rage of the sea. Will traced the defined abdominal muscles with his fingers, feeling their hardness and the creases between. When his hand reached the tattoo of the sparrow, Will stopped. He didn’t exactly think there were tattoo parlors underneath the ocean, but then again, scientists only claimed to know about ten percent of the bottom of the sea. And Will was no scientist. Whatever lurked below the surface, he knew close to nothing about.

It terrified him, in a way. He remembered, about a year ago, he had stumbled upon Thalassophobia TikTok—people would post edited videos of nightmarish monsters lurking underneath wooden ships, creatures with tentacles and rows of teeth and garish eyes. The videos were accompanied by hypnotic sea shanties that were at least as scary as the visuals.

This merman, though, was different. Will never knew something from the deep sea could be so pretty. In his mind, there was no doubt that the merman was an important figure in the underwater realm. The merman's body had an aura of authority to it. Yet above water, laying here on Will's balcony, the merman was delicate.

Will laid his hands on the merman's cheeks. Even underneath the scratchy beard, Will could feel the edge of his jawline. He studied the merman's face. Despite the closing forehead gash, despite the rough delivery ashore, the merman's skin remained smooth. Well-maintained, somehow. If only the merman would open its eyes. Will thought that he would very much like to see what color they were.

Will glanced behind him. Everybody was still in bed, nowhere to be seen. A rush went over him, like his skin was a live electric current. Will could not tell if the merman had a beating heart or not but right now he could feel his own pattering in his chest with a considerable pace. Drawing in a breath, Will leaned in and kissed the merman on its bloody gash, just above the brow.

When he withdrew the merman's eyes were wide open. They were blue-green, the color of the Pacific. Will jumped back in shock and almost screamed, but at the last second did not permit the sound to escape his lips.

"Oh my god," Will breathed. "I didn't know—I'm glad you're alive."

The merman did not respond, but flopped his tail on the deck, drawing it in so that he could sit up straight. He stretched his arms and rubbed his eyes with his fingers.

"Do..." Will began. The verbal equivalent of dipping your toe into the water. "Do you understand me?"

The merman said nothing, instead shaking out water from his hair. Some droplets landed on Will. When the merman was done, Will scooted towards him.

“You don’t happen to speak English, huh?” Will asked, cracking a smile at the absurdity of the interaction.

The merman blinked and reached out a hand towards Will. Will took it. Their fingers interlocked, and Will could feel grainy salt where their finger pockets met.

“Some kind of water language?”

The merman smiled softly and pulled on Will’s hand. Will let himself be moved by the force, scooching forward until he was sitting with his hips touching the merman’s hips. If, Will thought, the merman had hips.

“So you do understand me!” Will exclaimed. “Man. Stop playing with me like that.”

The merman’s smile grew broader. Their eyes locked, and Will felt himself sucked in by the striking oceanic hue of the merman’s irises. In the back of his mind, he remembered that the lowest point in the ocean was the Mariana Trench—but the merman’s eyes felt somehow deeper, transcending physical dimensions altogether. Will was staring into the realm of souls.

It is you who understands. The merman had not opened its lips, but Will knew it had spoken. His voice was deep, reverberating in the alcoves of Will’s mind.

“Um,” Will said.

And then he understood. He detached his fingers from the merman’s, bringing his hands to cup the merman’s face, beard pricking Will’s palms, not in a bad way. As Will did so, the merman leaned forward, and they kissed.

The merman’s lips were dry with salt. They tasted like foam and seawater and tar and kelp and plankton and fish and floating garbage in the Pacific Ocean. They kissed again and

again and Will felt a sensation not unlike the polar plunge one New Year's at his ex-girlfriend's house in Long Island. Cold water throwing his respiratory and circulatory systems into overdrive, heightening alertness, providing clarity. A jolt. Will was wide awake.

Finally the merman pushed Will away with a gentleness like a light wave. *We need to return to the ocean.*

Will stood up and offered the merman a hand. But when he pulled the merman up, the merman just slipped right back down to the floor.

"Sorry," Will said.

As you can see, I don't belong above the water. I'm vulnerable here. You'll have to carry me.

"But I can't hold you," Will responded, with a lump in his throat.

Yes you can. Just not forever.

Will squatted and strained with all his might, thankful that he had been weightlifting at the Rec Center all three years he had been in college. Every muscle in his back burned. He felt as though he was moving in slow motion as, inch by inch, he lifted the merman up and into his arms. Will cradled him and proceeded through the house. The merman's tail knocked over a Coors Banquet can on their kitchen island and Will hastened his pace, not wanting his roommates to see them. Outside, people were walking around now, cleanup crews in yellow vests were picking up glass with grabbers, surfers were biking to Devereaux Beach. Heads turned at the sight of them, causing Will to flush red with embarrassment. He knew that they were looking at the merman, but he felt discovered. He hoped nobody knew it was the president of Pi Kappa Phi that had the merman.

Don't be ashamed, Will. But Will strode down the stairs in a mad rush, though part of that was due to his burning arms. The merman was getting heavier and heavier, and Will just barely escaped to the beach before the merman slipped from his grip onto the sand. The merman reached up his hand and Will grabbed it again, beginning to tug him towards the ocean. When they struck water, the merman wriggled into a depth that he could float at, and he turned to look up at Will.

Come with me into the water.

"I can't," Will said, hating the tremble in his voice.

Yes you can.

"No, I can't." Will took a step toward the merman anyway.

See, just like that.

Will glanced around him; nobody was looking. He closed his eyes and counted to five like he always did when making his biggest decisions. Then he took the merman's hand. With incredible speed, the merman began to swim away from shore. Will's feet flew out from under him and he jetted through the water.

Okay, here we go.

Will had time for only a quick gulp of air before he was yanked below the surface. He was keenly aware of his limited oxygen and felt disoriented. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't—

Open your eyes.

Will opened his eyes. The merman floated directly in front of him, tail flapping like a majestic flag. He was wreathed in sunlight from above the surface, causing him to look ethereal.

He drifted in slowly and kissed Will again. Even underwater, Will felt himself smile. He *could* live in the ocean.

Oh no. You're running out of air.

What? Will thought, and then he felt his chest ready to explode, craving sweet oxygen. He needed to go back above the surface. He clawed at the water, trying with desperation to motion himself upward. At last he broke through and precious air filled his lungs. He gasped with sheer relief. Then he looked down. The merman was gone.

“No!” Will yelled, smacking at the water. But his shout was met with no response, and he reddened, checking over his shoulder again. He treaded water for another minute, but knew it was useless, and finally swam into shore. His muscles ached as he stood up, and he paused to gaze out at the ocean.

Back at the house, Evan and Colin were making eggs.

“Wet clothes?” Evan asked as Will walked in, dripping from the ocean.

“Where’d it go?” Colin chimed in.

“You mean the merman? Back to the water,” Will responded.

“I’m not gonna lie dude, that thing was weird as hell,” Colin said.

Will stared at Colin for a moment, then nodded. “It needs to stay underwater.”