

Mermaid

By Odetta Le Ran Li (10-April-2011)

“Then the nice woodcutter jumped through the window and took his axe and chopped the big bad wolf for being so naughty and eating up the old lady and the little girl which you must never do, and the big bad wolf died and the woodcutter took him home and ate him for dinner. And so everyone except for the wolf, the old lady, and the little girl lived happily ever after.”

My little sister said nothing as she stared out at the glistening crystals on the beach we were walking past. The hungry waves lapped away at the beach, sucking sand away with each retreat, then regurgitating it as it advanced. The soft crash of the waves thrummed in the background.

Then she looked up, gazing straight at me with rich brown, puppy dog eyes. “Is the story real?”

I laughed. “It’s as real as you make it, Kathy.” We continued along the path quietly. I was trying to find the horizon beyond the horizon when Kathy suddenly froze, her eyes fixated on the cluster of rocks on the beach. She lifted one small, trembling hand and whispered, “What’s that thing on the rocks?”

“It’s nothing, silly. It’s only-“I broke off. There was something on the rocks. I marched off onto the beach, tugging Kathy along with me. “Come on, Kathy. Let’s go see the thing.”

I halted abruptly around ten paces from the rocks. The ‘thing’ was a manatee calf. It lay helpless on the jagged rocks, blood oozing out from gashes in its wrinkly grey skin. If manatees could look sad, this one did. Its dim black eyes winced at the unbearable heat, which was slowly drying out. It weakly lifted a flipper, which flopped back on the rocks. Then, it shifted a little, so its left eye directly bored into mine, and chirped, just once. The calf was pleading for help.

I took a few tentative steps forward, and stopped. The manatee looked huge, much bigger than I had thought. It was easily a meter long. The razor edges of the rocks grinned and beckoned. I envisaged for a moment the prospect of joining the

manatee, my blood slowly trickling into the ravenous jaws of the rocks. Just one misplaced step would do it. I turned away. I reasoned that a thirteen year old like me would never be able to lift the calf back to the sea anyway, and that it would be foolhardy to attempt it. But for some reason, part of me wasn't convinced.

Neither was Kathy. "Why don't you help the mermaid?" she asked, confused. "She's hurting." I tried to explain to her that we were going to fetch help, but she wouldn't listen. "But she'd be dead by then."

I tried to drag her along, back to onto the path, but she resisted. Suddenly, she yanked her hand out of mine and dashed back out onto the sand, towards the manatee. I yelled for her to come back; the rocks were sharp, I shouted, and she could crack her head like a coconut if she fell, but she paid no attention. I could only watch as she clambered nimbly over boulders to where the creature lay. Then, in one sweeping motion, she scooped up the creature with strength that was astonishing for her six year old body and carried it to the sea. She gently placed the calf down and stood guard until the next wave swept it away, before bending over the water, plunging a hand in, and drawing it out again curled in a fist.

"What is it?" I asked as Kathy headed back. She stared at me, long and hard, before gingerly uncurling her fist. On her outstretched palm lay a small pool of water. Abruptly, she poured the water all over herself.

"The mermaid says it's for me because I helped her cool down so she's helping me back." I smiled proudly and tousled her now dripping hair. But inside, I was humbled. I would have walked past the calf. My six-year old sister Kathy had saved it.