

## The Diver

It was early evening. The waning sun was sliding towards some scattered marshmallow-white clouds congealed along the pencil-straight horizon where the sapphire sky meets the endless sea.

Earlier on this particular day, the sun had been raging hot, and now the sand was still warm, and the water was cool, a perfect evening to be at the beach. The waves were gentle, lapping like sparkling silk against the sand, the surfers and paddleboard people zipping their wetsuits off and heading home.

Families were there with their little tots smothered in sunscreen, all decked out with inflated arm bands and pretty little sun hats. Older kids built sandcastles at the edge of the water, the waves making a temporary moat, or sometimes a stronger surge of sea water would wash the entire castle away, scattering the carefully arranged shells and seaweed.

Some folks were having dinner, and the girl's mouth watered at the sharp tang of the vinegar sprinkled liberally over the piles of hot chips and shards of golden-crust ed fish fillets spilling from crumpled mountains of greasy butcher's paper. Seagulls waited impatiently nearby, their orange legs bright against the sand, their hissing and cawing muffled amidst the gentle crashing of the waves and the chatter of human voices.

The jetty stretched out into the sea like an elegant arm, fishing rods and twine draped over the edges like cheap jewellery. During the day this spot was where those brave enough jumped into the churning ocean, to feel the temporary weightlessness before the body plummeted into the briny depths. Those jumping were mostly teens like her, while little kids watched on in awe, and older adults shook their heads and muttered how youth was wasted on the young.

She'd jumped in a couple of times that afternoon, just to check. The waves were more ferocious earlier, and she didn't want her body dashed against the clusters of knife-like black barnacles clinging to the jetty legs.

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So she sat on her faded blue towel with the wonky pink circles on it and waited, her too-small yellow t-shirt dried stiff with the salt, her hair long and brackish. She'd painted her toenails red a few days ago, and now absentmindedly dug her toes into the warm sand, breathing in the humid evening air, feeling connected to the beach scene, but somehow still terribly alone.

As the sun melted away behind the horizon and the sky paled to baby pink, she stood up suddenly, as if the decision had been made. As if that was the very time and day that she'd been waiting for all her short life. She walked towards the jetty with her head held high, her back straight, her path determined, the corner of her towel on the sand now lolling in the breeze.

The patchy bitumen surface of the jetty was still warm beneath her feet from the now retreating sunshine, sea spray and a humid breeze slithering between the gaps. Long-necked Cormorants and dark-haired Terns waited at the far end of the jetty, the evening gusts rustling their feathers, their beady eyes fixated on the fishing lines bobbing in the water.

She stood down there at the end with the birds, and no one took any notice of her in the half-light of evening.

An unusual buffeting wind tugged at her saffron t-shirt and whipped her hair into tendrils, like seaweed caught in a rip. She stared out to sea, to where the sun had all but disappeared into the ocean, turning the sky pink, now ochre, now purple, the colours of bruises, as if it mirrored her soul.

The water was almost black already. It looked dark and cold and scary, foaming around the wooden struts of the wharf. The opposite of the welcoming waves of an hour or two previous.

She hesitated, her bare toes with the patchy red nail polish gripping the edge of the grey, flaky wood at the end of the jetty. The barnacles hissed as the waves lapped over them, and a school of tiny silver fish darted past like a fleeting thought.

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She raised her arms and closed her eyes, as nearby fisherfolk glanced her way and marvelled at the energy and beauty of youth.

She dived in, as lithe as a dolphin, barely disturbing the surface of the water as she entered. Bubbles rose to the surface and drifted toward the weathered pylons, encrusted with those sharp little black shells.

The people with their fishing rods returned their attention to the evening's catch.

The couples and families who were promenading along the aged wooden decking may or may not have seen the child dive. They were all fussing with ice creams, and making sure their own kids didn't trip over the fishing lines. Grey-footed Pelicans soared effortlessly through the copper-tinted sky, as a fish thrashed in a bucket on the jetty, drawing its last gasp, its eyes wide and terrified.

The girl was forgotten, but not by me.

It's later, quite a bit later, when she is found.

Bobbing like a fisherman's float, her hair spread out like a clutch of kelp, her arms embracing the sea.

A woman screams, and then yells at her children to come in out of the water. Quickly now!

People run away, others move in closer.

Who is she?

Does she belong to someone?

Didn't she dive earlier?

The waves undulate over her back, revealing angry, red gouges under a torn yellow shirt.

A rush of squeaky sand beneath boots, blue uniforms and big lights.

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A sheet is cast over the body and she is dragged in. Heavy now, her soul flit.

The area is cordoned off, people have scurried home, holding their children tight like the treasures they are.

I stand next to the body. I see its small shape beneath the saltwater-soaked sheet. I see the officials trying to identify her, fingerprints, photographs, possessions.

Nobody cared when she was alive, why would they now when she was not?

A disposable gloved hand picks up the faded blue towel, shaking sand off the wonky pink circles, and puts it into a clear plastic bag.

Near midnight, they take her away, where I don't know.

I am left here in my torn yellow shirt, as insubstantial as the breeze, as temporary as the fine grains of scattering sand, ever shifting, ever changing. The hiss and suck of the waves are rhythmic, and the waters reflect the yawning black sky above.

The beach is bereft of people. Seagulls huddle in the sand dunes and wait for the sun to come back, as skittering sand slowly covers the footprints and the wheel marks, erasing the evidence.

I stand on the shore, as the water laps at my feet, spilling past my bare toes with the patchy red nail polish.

I walk away, my feet leaving no tracks. The wind passes through me and whistles through the pylons under the jetty.

I am as insubstantial as the mist in the air, as the sea foam blowing away on the blackened beach.

The waves keep lapping in and out, like the slow, deep breaths of the earth.