

Teenage Wasteland: An American Love Story

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VT & NYC

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ISBN 978-1-952600-03-6

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Progress

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Cover design by Richard Buchanan.

First Whisk(e)y Tit paperback edition.

I

She doesn't remember what it's like to swim, the mermaid tells you after she finishes the first bottle of wine by herself. The mermaid says it's the only way she can feel underwater as she uncorks the second bottle. You're not sure if you should reach for her hand. You want to caress where you think her gills used to be. You think it's the neck but you didn't pay attention during sex ed about the biology of merpeople.

You cough up something oily and you've gotten used to this. You have always coughed up something oily for as long as you can remember. You ignore the burn in your throat, in your lungs. Your parents barely remember what it was like for them to breathe tolerable air, drink tolerable water. You barely remember what it was like to be human, your body a greenhouse of cancer, like all other non-mutated humans.

It is 9:03 PM. You try and get the mermaid's attention. You want to point out a star that you think you can see through the haze of still wheezing smoke stacks. You hope after she sees the star that she'll offer you at least a glass of wine. You like this mermaid. You hush the impatience on your tongue and in your hands.



You told everyone in second grade that you were really a mermaid. They believed you once you rolled up your pants and showed them your fused legs, the scaly psoriasis all over them. When your classmates asked what happened to your gills, you told them how your father took them away when you decided to live with your mother on land. When your classmates asked you what it was like to live underwater, you told them how your father took those memories away so you wouldn't need to miss him. Your best friend, the one with the melting face,

hugged you and then everyone in class agreed that yes, you were really a mermaid.

Boys started paying attention to you more than the other girls who had two legs, or even one leg, under the full moon of their hormones. You discovered they were more interested in the mythology you made out of your body than who you were when their hands wandered during slow dances at school district sanctioned dating events. You slapped their hands away, warned them how her father would curse them.

You agreed to hang out with this boy, the one who coughed up oil, when he said he wanted to just talk and get to know you, when he promised to sit on his hands to prevent his impatience from getting to them. You steal two bottles of your mother's wine, tell the boy how the only way you can remember what it was like to feel underwater is by drinking the wine. The boy sits on his hands even after you polish off the first bottle, and open the second. The boy starts blurring. He takes his right hand out from beneath him, points at the sky, says, *look at the scar*, but you think that's impossible because there are no scars in the sky.

2

You watch as the guard feeds today's lesson into the VCR. The smell of gun oil from the guard's AK-47 reminds you to pay attention or else.

You try to focus on this installment of American history, how their version of the truth lost to the right version of truth as the American god intended, how the country is blessed to breathe in the holy spirit day in and day out. You cough up something oily in your hand, study the flecks of blood in the gob resting in your palm. The cock of the AK-47 tells you to look up and pay attention, or else.

You are grateful that the mermaid's last name starts with C and yours starts with M. You are close enough to map the beauty marks on the nape of her neck. You think about what her earlobes would taste like, whether her sweat is chemically equivalent to the pills you take to reduce how much oil and blood you cough up. The mermaid must feel your eyes because she turns her head to look at you. Just as your eyes meet, the guard fires a warning volley above your heads. Blood trickles from the fresh bullet holes in the ceiling and covers up how hard you're really blushing.



The guard feeds today's lesson into the VCR. It's the same one as yesterday as it was the day before. You know this when the orange-faced teacher in his American flag blazer appears on the screen. He pulls the pointer out of his blazer, extends it, and says let's begin in the way that conveys he's excited to teach you this lesson, as he was yesterday, as he was the day before yesterday.

You are used to seeing the same lesson over and over and over again. The state believes in the importance of repetition. You know better to

question their facts after you watched your best friend, the girl with the melting face, almost lose her kneecap when she disagreed with the proctor of your science midterm.

You still feel underwater after last night, your mouth stuffed with wool, but it was worth it. The boy who coughs up oil maintained his composure. Even as he showed you the first star you've ever seen, he kept his hands and mouth to himself. You turn your head to look at him. Just as your eyes meet, the guard fires a warning volley above your heads. You watch the blood trickle from the bullet holes in the ceiling onto the boy's forehead and cheeks. You turn back to your lesson after the guard cocks the AK-47, again.

You hope the boy doesn't do anything stupid. The last boy who was into you, the one-armed one, rushed the proctor who shot your best friend. You thought it was romantic, even when he tried to say goodbye through the new hole in his throat, his vocabulary unable to clot. You used to think you were worth dying over until someone died on your behalf. You want to ask the boy who coughs up oil out, make the first move, to show him there is hope, to show him there is something worth living for, as intact as a boy who coughs up oil could be.

3

You take your shirt off in the bathroom and look at the scars riddling your torso. You thumb the one your father gave you after you fell from a desiccated tree outside of your house, how the bullet burned as it burrowed. You wanted to move your arms up and down to make angels from your blood in the dirt but you were too weak. The doctors discovered the greenhouse of cancer throughout your body after they removed the bullet and encased your leg in plaster. Your father kept what was left of the tree intact as a reminder of how it saved your life.

You wonder how the mermaid will react when she finally touches your skin, whether her hands would flinch at the scars until the right lie encourages her to teethe your neck. You know how the last boy she was into died and why. The mermaid forgets you were in the same testing room when the proctor shot her best friend, the girl with the melting face. You watched the boy rush the proctor, the bullet go through his throat, the mermaid cradling the dying boy as he tried to say goodbye, his blood where you wanted to be: all over her. You remember what the sex ed lesson said about the aphrodisiac of nobility: *heroism is the best way to begin a relationship.*



You weren't surprised when the boy who coughs up oil stammered after you asked him if you could hang out again after history. You had to whisper so the guards wouldn't catch you asking him to see you outside of a school sanctioned dating event; any semblance of like or love is only allowed on their time, on their terms.

Your best friend, the girl with the melting face, asks you during lunch what makes the boy who coughs up oil worth your time. *He's the first boy*

who knows how to behave around you alone, you say. A yes is a key to a cage you might not want to open, the girl with the melting face says. You look away when she takes a bite of her sandwich, covers her weeping cheeks to make sure the food doesn't escape. You're used to seeing things fall out of her face but you know how impolite it is to stare. Where will you two go, the girl with the melting face asks after she successfully swallows, and you shrug.

You haven't thought that far ahead. Even though you did the asking, you still expect him to tell where and how the way a man is supposed to tell you where and how. You remember how the sex ed tape told you how you can't trust a man that doesn't know how to plan, how to lead. You know you've already broken a rule by asking him to see you again, instead of him asking to see you again. Maybe you'll ask him to take you to the place you met last time, where he showed you your first star. Maybe you'll let him hold your hand if he can find another one.

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