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Finding your Feet

A boy walks into a fish shop.

‘Hey Ella,’ he says. ‘Got any salmon?’

Ella bats a fly away from the pollack and looks up into the green eyes of Gary Ingram.

‘Yes,’ she says, in her coolest voice. ‘We have whole salmon or salmon steaks.’

Gary starts to snigger and looks around to the boys who have followed him in. ‘Salmon-Ella!’ he snorts. ‘Wouldn’t touch your salmonella!’

They all start to laugh then, high-fiving each other and patting Gary on the back, they turn and shuffle out onto the street where they stand for a moment, look back in through the window, stick their fingers down their throats and make vomit sounds, before running off.

‘I’m done,’ says Ella, throwing off her white cap and tearing at her overall. ‘This is unbearable.’

Her sister Lydia sighs and points towards the window. ‘Oh God,’ she groans, ‘they’re coming back.’

This time it’s Steve Jansen who comes up to the counter. ‘Hi Lydia,’ he says. ‘Got any clams?’

Lydia, who is older than her sister, cocks her head to one side and glares at him. He freezes, unnerved by her poise, then, egged on by the boys behind him, he says, ‘I asked if you had any clams Lydia? Have you got *chlamydia*?’

Again, the boys double up with laughter and turn, pushing each other out of the door and cavorting off down the street.

‘This is pants,’ says Lydia. ‘Let’s close up early. Dad won’t mind.’

‘Dad won’t know,’ says Ella and she walks to the door and turns the sign to closed.

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Two girls walking on a beach come across a mermaid.

‘Shit, you gave me fright,’ says the mermaid. ‘I thought I was on my own.’

‘Are you for real?’ asks Ella.

‘Are you for real?’ mimics the mermaid. ‘Of course, I’m for real!’ She’s half immersed in a large rock pool and long tendrils of green rope-like hair snake around her ashen shoulders. Her eyes are golden. ‘Hey,’ she says pushing at her breasts and carefully rearranging the shells that cover them. ‘Why does a mermaid wear sea shells?’

The girls look at her, bemused.

‘Because ‘b’ shells are too small?’ she says, jabbing out her chin and tipping her head back like a gull. Her mouth opens wide and emits a cawing shriek of such seismic magnitude it sends ripples across the surface of the pool.

Ella looks at her sister. ‘I think she’s laughing,’ she says.

The sound stops as quickly as it began.

‘Of course, I bloody am,’ says the mermaid, looking offended.

‘Your laugh,’ says Lydia. ‘Is weird.’

The mermaid sighs and flips onto her belly. ‘What are you girls doing here?’ she asks.

‘Could ask you the same question,’ says Lydia.

‘I like it here, and I asked you first.’

‘We had a bad day. Came to the beach to get some air,’ says Ella.

‘Hmm,’ says the mermaid, looking them both up and down. ‘Boys was it?’

‘You could say that,’ says Ella, moving to sit on a rock close to the mermaid.

Lydia remains standing. ‘Shouldn’t you be out at sea, singing some poor fisherman to his death?’ she says.

‘It’s all sailors, not just fishermen,’ says the mermaid, flicking a green tress of hair from her neck. ‘We’re not fussy. Today I’m having a rock pool day. Very relaxing.’ She sighs and points a webbed finger at them. Her nails are claw-like and deep green. ‘Care to join me and hang out with a merwoman?’ she says seductively.

‘Technically you’re a *mermaid*,’ says Lydia tartly.

‘Am I now? Well, you’d know all about that sort of definition, wouldn’t you *ClamLydia*.’

‘Hey,’ winces Lydia. ‘Why did you say that?’

The mermaid grins, exposing sharp little teeth, and looks across to Ella. ‘Got any salmon?’ she asks.

Ella flushes bright red and looks at her sister. She gets up from the rock she’s been sitting on and backs away. ‘What is this?’ she says.

‘Oh, chill your beans. This is just me opening my big mouth too soon. I have no filter sometimes. Please sit back down. I’m Dorrys Regina, by the way.’

Ella looks at Lydia.

‘Rude! Don’t smirk. All daughters of Oceanus are called Dorrys.’

‘Okay,’ says Lydia. ‘But Regina... Really?’

‘In honor of his majesty Oceanus, of course.’ says Dorrys, obviously miffed. ‘Anyway, you can talk. At least my name doesn’t sound like food poisoning or an STD.’

The three of them glare at each other for a moment.

‘Do you want my help, or not?’ asks Dorrys.

‘With what?’ says Lydia.

‘Those boys, the ones who torment you. I can make their lives, shall we say, difficult...’

The sisters lean in towards her, hopeful. ‘How?’ says Lydia.

‘Well,’ says Dorrys. ‘Perhaps it’s time their taunts were reversed. Perhaps it’s time Gary got salmonella and Steve got chlamydia.’

‘Yes!’ says Ella, punching the air. ‘Could you do that?’

‘I could,’ says Dorrys. ‘In return for a certain favour...’

‘Here we go,’ groans Lydia, starting to move away.

‘Wait,’ says Ella. ‘Hear her out.’

They look at Dorrays who smiles, coyly, and pulls herself further out of the rock pool, inching towards them. Along the tide line the waves heave and roar and a sharp gust of wind smacks across the sand, pulling at their hair.

‘I have powers,’ she says as the waves pound louder, and the seaweed shivers. Loose rocks scurry from the cliff face making Ella jump. A dark cloud blots out the sun, pitching the beach into an eerie grey light. The girls move closer together. In the gloom Dorrays’ eyes glow through her dark green lashes.

‘But I would relinquish them all. I’m done with life in the sea. It really isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. And mermaids, well let’s just say they’re rather lacking in certain departments.’ She raises an eyebrow.

‘Gross,’ says Lydia.

‘It’s not just that,’ says Dorrays sighing. ‘It’s everything. I really need a change and the thing is...’ she pauses. ‘I would like to become human.’

The cloud moves on and sunlight and warmth return. A gull cries, and the sound of the surf dips to a gentle hum.

‘Okay,’ says Lydia. ‘But I’m not sure we can help.’

Dorrays, tips her head back and starts her cawing shriek of a laugh. The sound bounces up to the cliff face and echoes back across the sand. ‘You, Lydia, cannot,’ she says. ‘It’s Ella that I need.’

Now Ella moves toward her sister, suddenly afraid. Lydia grabs her hand. ‘What do you mean?’ she asks.

‘For me to become human, I need to drink the tears of a virgin,’ says Dorrays. ‘And I believe only Ella can oblige in that department.’

The sisters exchange a look and Lydia starts to nod, but then Ella shouts out. ‘I’m no virgin. I’ve done it loads of times!’

‘No, you haven’t,’ says Lydia.

‘Have too! How would you know anyway?’

‘Who with?’

‘With whom,’ corrects Dorrays.

Ella ignores her. ‘A boy,’ she stammers, looking at her sister. ‘You don’t know him.’

Lydia’s heart races. She looks at her sister’s adolescent body and wants to cry with rage. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I don’t have to tell you everything.’

‘But your virginity. It’s a huge decision, not something to be taken lightly.’

Ella feels her annoyance growing. Lydia has become far too mumsy around her lately. ‘You never asked,’ she says.

‘But we promised. We promised each other that without...’

‘A mother!’ Dorrays interjects. ‘Without a mother you will always confide in each other, because you only have each other, and you will always look out for each other because you don’t have a MUMMY!’

‘Shut up!’ snaps Lydia. ‘That has nothing to do with you.’

Dorrays flips onto her back and props herself on her elbows looking out to sea, sulking. Her tail swishes angrily in the water.

‘Lydia,’ whispers Ella. ‘She can help us with the boys.’

‘No, she can’t,’ snaps Lydia. ‘Because you’re not a virgin!’ And she struts off across the sand.

‘Whoopsie,’ says Dorrays, turning. ‘You seem to have upset your sister.’

‘I didn’t. You did!’ says Ella.

Dorrays points to her tail. ‘I didn’t lie about the status of my virginity,’ she says. ‘Dorrays Regina has no vagina, so I can absolutely assure you that I am one hundred percent virgin. And you and I know that YOU ARE TOO!’ Her voice booms across the beach and the wind swirls again. ‘I don’t like liars,’ she hisses.

Ella stands. ‘I’m not lying. It’s true. And we don’t need you. Goodbye.’

‘Hasta la vista baby,’ says Dorrays, plopping back under the water with a splash.

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One girl, walking across the beach is looking for a mermaid.

‘Dorrays,’ she calls. ‘Dorrays, are you there?’ She’s arrived at the side of the large rockpool and peers into its gloomy depth. The seaweed undulates gently, and she moves closer in. Suddenly golden eyes appear, blinking out of the mirk and she rears back, slipping on the bladder wrack and grazing herself on the barnacles. A head appears out of the water.

‘What a lovely day,’ says Dorrays. ‘Care to join me?’

Ella, stands, brushing sand from her shins and pretending she doesn't hurt. 'My mother always swam in this rock pool,' she says.

'Did she now? What a coincidence.' Dorrays turns towards the shore line, flipping her tail. It smacks down across the water, splashing Ella. 'Sorry,' she says with little meaning. 'What can I do for you Ella?'

'Oh nothing,' says Ella, ignoring the chill water that's creeping through her t-shirt. 'I was just passing.'

'Oh, great. You want to hang out?'

'Yeah, okay. If you've got nothing planned.'

'Nah, I'm just chillin'. Why don't you plant your butt on that rock over there, and we can chat?'

Ella moves slowly towards the rock and sits down. Dorrays floats across and heaves her bottom on to a ledge in the rock pool, just below her. She readjusts her shells and pulls at a strand of her green hair. 'Your legs are so long,' she says.

'Thank you,' says Ella.

'And your skin is such a lovely colour.'

Ella looks at Dorrays' pallid skin. It reminds her of the Brill she was gutting that morning. She wonders if mermaids get sunburn.

'I never get any colour,' says Dorrays and Ella flushes. 'But then, sunbathing really isn't my thing.' She smiles, her little teeth glinting in the sun.

They look at each other for a moment. Ella is the first to speak.

‘Those boys...?’

‘The horrid ones?’

‘Yes. Can you help us with them?’

Dorrays swishes her tail in the water. ‘Why do you think they pick on you?’ she asks.

Ella reaches a hand to her face, subconsciously hiding the acne that plagues her chin.

‘Because we haven’t got a mum, and Dad, well, he’s out at sea a lot, so we’re on our own.’

‘Hmm,’ says Dorrays. ‘So, you’re vulnerable. But what do you think is the real reason?’

Ella looks down and shrugs.

Dorrays lifts her tail and thumps in down hard. A mighty wave rises out of the rock pool and hurtles towards Ella. She leans back, bracing against the rocks behind her, but it stops suddenly, melting away, sending a barrier of water cascading out across the seaweed-topped rocks. ‘Well...?’ she says.

Ella sighs. ‘I’m top of the class, always getting A’s, and all they care about is surfing and making out.’

Dorrays turns her golden eyes to Ella. ‘Ha!’ she snorts. ‘That’s the real reason.’

‘Dad’s never home now, he’s always out on the boat, and Lydia, she could have gone to University, but she has to run the shop since Mum died.’

Dorrays nods her head, encouraging Ella to go on.

‘At school it’s even worse,’ she says.

‘And you want them to stop?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well I think I can help you.’

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A mermaid sits in a rockpool contemplating life and looking for her navel. One hasn't appeared yet, but there's something happening. It's like an itch, deep down. It makes her want to wriggle, and the scales on her tail feel loose and flakey. There's a patch halfway up where they've gone completely.

She doesn't feel guilty for upsetting the girl. It was so obvious she was lying. Making her cry was easy.

‘It must be so awful without your mother,’ she had said. ‘So sad not to have her to talk to about... things. And Lydia being such a bitch can't help.’

She'd watched Ella swallow hard and knew she was on the right track. She'd hardly started on Gary Ingram, how he'd ignored her after they'd kissed, denied it to his friends, never called, avoided her at school, and that was it. Flood gates opened! A whole waterfall of tears had cascaded down her virginal cheeks. Dorrays had simply leaned in and licked them up.

She feels a tingle in her tail. The tide's coming in. She'll be able to swim to the safe Cove she's ear-marked soon, then she can relax and let the transformation begin.

She doesn't want to go back to sea, not ever. She's had it with the trite and narcissistic mermen, flipping about all day and flexing their tails, and with her mersisters jiggling their shells, and singing their stupid songs, waiting for their eggs to be fertilized. There's no point to

any of it; no commitment, no cause, no challenge. She wants to fight for her right to choose who fertilizes her eggs, she wants to sing songs about sisterhood and combatting pollution and things that matter. She wants to make a difference.

Her mersisters keep telling her she's boring, she should chillax, have some fun. They're quite content swishing through the water, singing banal ballads and hoping to lure in a hunky merman to fertilize their eggs. Why bother? Mermen are notoriously promiscuous, they'll be off to the next set as soon as they fancy another song.

From what she'd seen of human behaviour, though, it could be different. Humans marry for life, the women get to know their offspring; they even spend time nurturing them. Those idiot boys who were picking on Ella could be easily sorted. It was just a phase, and unlike the mermen, they'd grow out of it.

**Comment [Office1]:** Humans marry for life?  
Humans are married for life?

Thoughts of leaving the sea-world have been growing ever since she'd first seen the human woman swimming above her in the rock pool. Dorrys had lost track of time and been stuck, waiting for the tide, when she'd looked up and seen a pair of human legs, splashing through the water. She was intrigued. The legs were white and smooth. She ran a cool hand along them, feeling their softness where scales should be, and the woman kicked at her, thinking she was seaweed.

After that she couldn't keep away. She'd roll up on the high tide and wait. She loved looking at the woman's feet. Her ankles and toes were grotesque, fascinating, beautiful. Dorrys wanted some for herself.

When the man came, she knew something was wrong. He sat on the rocks and he put his head in his hands. 'Isla,' he wailed, 'I can't do this life without you. Don't leave me, don't die.'

Dorrys watched him from the dark corner of the pool, fascinated by the depth of emotion being expressed. She'd never seen anything like it and it stirred something in her; a desire. The level of commitment was awesome, his weakness compelling. She wanted to *feel* – she wanted to be human.

She reaches down and rubs at the bare patch where her scales have fallen off. Not long now until the tide turns.

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A girl walks in to a fish shop. 'You ready?' she asks.

Lydia finishes wiping the counter and takes off her white overall. 'Yep, I'm ready. How was school?'

'Okay,' says Ella smiling.

'Good,' says Lydia walking out from behind the counter and turning the shop sign to closed. 'It's been manic in here. Takings are way up.'

They walk up the steep cobbled street, passed the butcher and the greengrocer and around the corner, to where the road turns into a little track that leads to their cottage. The sun has moved west, poised to sink over a swelling sea, and the sound of the surf roars up to greet them.

Lydia looks at the white water pounding the rocks below and thinks of the rockpool and that strange encounter last year. Ella and she have never mentioned it, never talked about that day, but sometimes she wonders if her sister was telling the truth.

Their father greets them at the cottage door. He's freshly showered having slept all day. He'd brought the catch in at 5.00am. Huge squid, hake, monkfish, mullet and dab. She'd never seen such a haul. No wonder they'd been mobbed all day at the shop.

'She's not here yet,' he says to them. 'She said she had lots to do today.'

Last night he'd asked them to meet her. 'She's good for me,' he'd told them. 'She even comes out on the boat with me and loves it! Let me introduce you. I know you'll like her.'

The girls had looked at each other, unsure. Was it too soon? They couldn't deny he was much happier and they were grateful for that.

A knock at the front door sends him scurrying off to open it. They hear voices and then he ushers in a tall woman with impossibly long legs. She proffers a pale hand. Her fingernails are sea green.

'I'm so sorry I'm late,' she says, grinning. Her teeth are little and pointy. 'I've been chasing my tail all day!' Then she laughs, jabbing out her chin and tipping her head back like a gull. Her mouth opens wide and emits a cawing shriek of such seismic magnitude it makes the window panes rattle.

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