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## Smoke on the Water

It's a fine spring day, but a little chilly on the water. The ocean breeze is blowing in off the harbor, making my tie slither excitedly from one shoulder to the other like it's trying to say goodbye to someone as I lean on the railing and cup my hands around my cigarette and lighter. That's when I hear the voice.

"Excuse me, please," it says. "Sir? Might I trouble you for a fag?"

This isn't the first time I've been called a homosexual. I'm a poet, you see, and this sort of thing is supposed to happen to us poets, I know, just as we're supposed to chain smoke and drink and sob and cheer and then suddenly darken for no apparent reason other than we're poets and we know it's expected of us.

Except I haven't written a poem of any kind in close to two years. I'm an advertising man now, and we're not supposed to take any shit, not from no one; so I glance about the pier looking for the joker. Only the pier is empty. I can see all the way down its length, plankrow after empty plankrow. Just a couple of seabirds stalking about. I can see all the way into the parking lot of our office building, and that's deserted too.

"Oi!" the voice shouts. "Excuse me. Sir? Down here." It's a woman's voice, unmistakably British. It sounds sort of upper-class and posh to me, but what do I know.

Looking down over the railing now I see her, brown waves lapping at her bare shoulders. This is Boston Harbor in early May. The only people that swim here are the L Street Brownies, a bunch of crazy old codgers from South Boston who each New Year's Day try to scare off their hang-overs with an icy dip. An especially hot summer might make the water temperature bearable, but only for a quick couple of weeks in late August; and even then it's still filthy and brown and not anything you'd care to splash around in if you were at all sane.

She has long copper-colored hair. It's very pretty and very shiny and very wet, and it sparkles in the sun like the little waves that stir it.

"What are you doing down there?" I ask.

"May I trouble you for a fag, please?"

"A what? A fag?"

"Oh, right." Her voice is husky as she speaks the dreadful word. "A *cigarette*."

I pull the pack out of my breast pocket and open it. "Need a light?" I ask.

"Could you light it for me as well, please?"

"Yup." I say, and use the cherry end of my own butt to light her smoke.

"That's right," she says. "Very good. Well done. Now just drop it."

"Drop it?"

"Yes please. Just let it go."

"Really?"

"Oh just—*drop it!*"

I open my fingers and let go. Mad woman in the water. Maybe she just wants to chew on a soggy cigarette. I wait for the plop and fizzle. But instead a great churning lifts her up out of the water where she reaches out and plucks the tumbling cigarette out of the air, then gracefully settles herself back into the water. It's really very impressive; a neat trick. It reminds me of the dolphin show at the New England Aquarium, only with breasts. She's topless, too; but I hardly notice that because I'm too busy trying to make out the outline of her tail underneath her in the brown water.

"Cheers," she says, savoring her first drag. "Ummm. That's nice."

"I didn't know mermaids smoked," I say.

"Yes, well, it's not something we're naturally predisposed to."

"I didn't know mermaids had English accents either," I say.

She puffs away, not looking at me. When she speaks again she sounds bored.

"Yes, well, Days of Empire, you know, 'The Sun Never Sets On The British Empire,' and all that. Mind you, it used to be Greek. And before that Phoenician, Viking, or something. I can't recall. Anyway, we don't make up the language, you Americans do."

I introduce myself. "So what's your name?"

"Don't have one," she says quickly.

It's painfully clear to me that she doesn't want to continue our conversation. Now that she's got her cigarette all the polished politeness has vanished from her voice and her eyes have glazed over. All she does is study her cigarette intently. I don't get a second look.

"Well," I ask, "How do you know who you're talking to if you don't have a name?"

She finally looks at me. I wish she hadn't. I can already see she has an uncanny ability to make you feel stupid with a look.

"Whot?" she says. "*How do I know who I'm talking to?*"

"Yeah. You know—with the other merpeople?"

"We just do."

"Doesn't it get confusing?"

"Whot? *Confusing?* Why should it be confusing?"

"I guess." I look at my watch. "Well," I say, "Nice talking to you. I gotta get going."

"Carry on," she says, and disappears into the waves.

✱

My boss drives me nuts. "We gotta be great!" he shouts at me. "We can't compromise quality! We're making history here!" We're making junk mail here, I want to say. That's what we do. We produce direct mail for a stable of high-technology clients,

just me and my boss in a little two-man office along the waterfront. I can look out the window and see the harbor. I do it often, to relax my eyes after hours spent staring into the computer screen. I write lots of memos. My boss is memo happy. "Write a memo," he likes to say. "Show it to me before you fax it." He's paranoid, my boss. He thinks everyone is out to get him and he always has to have everything in writing. When I finish the memo I bring it over to him and he makes me stand there while he reads it, marking it up with a red pen, editing it as the mood strikes him, chastising me brutally for the slightest typo. "What exactly do you want it to say?" I ask him. "Take another whack at it," he says. So I do. But there's always something that's not to his liking, and I spend most mornings walking back and forth to his desk with memo drafts, back and forth, back and forth, tweaking a stupid memo that he should write himself because he's the only one that knows what his perfect memo looks like and all I'm doing is guessing incorrectly over and over again, until finally the phone rings and it's the client the memo was supposed to be going to; and in less than a minute my boss tells her what the memo was trying to say, and then we don't need that memo any more. Now we need another memo.

✱

The next day she's back, again showing me a pleasant face.

"Hallo," she calls.

I light up. "I suppose you want another butt," I say.

She sighs. "Well, I can't very well nick a box of fags 'neath the waves, can I? Tobacco doesn't grow very well down here."

I grumble and begin lighting one for her. "They're not exactly cheap up here either," I complain. "They're up to almost four bucks a pack."

"Is that very much?"

"It ain't cheap," I mutter, and drop the butt.

She rises up with a bubbly flourish and spears it. "It's a hard life, hey?" she remarks.

"So how does a mermaid get a nicotine habit anyway?" I ask her.

She's consumed with her cigarette again, examining it intently. "It is a bother," she admits finally. "I thought I might get some and store them on a little rock but everything kept getting all wet."

✱

My boss is a slob. He saves every scrap of paper and refuses to ever throw anything away because he thinks he might need it again at some future date. But he can never find anything. "Do you have this handy?" he asks me. "Do you have that handy?" This is one of his favorite words: *handy*. He scribbles notes on anything within reach. He prints out miles and miles of e-mails. He wants to keep every draft of every memo. It all goes on his desk, where it breeds, I swear. I don't know where it all comes from. It's like his desk is a petri dish and the paper is a particularly aggressive virus, dividing at a ferocious rate, trying to overrun its host, trying to swallow it whole. It's usually

around five o'clock on a Friday when he decides it's time to do some housekeeping. "Grab your pad," he tells me. He makes me sit across from him while he sorts through papers, holding them up and calling out the job title so I can scribble it down on the notepad, rip off the page, take the piece of paper from him, place it on the floor and cover it with the marker page. This is his system. He could do this himself, but he'd rather sit there and gleefully call out the job titles and watch me scramble and scribble, sorting everything into piles for him like he's a little prince. Pretty soon the entire floor is covered with piles of paper and I have to step carefully to field pages into the correct piles. If he did it himself it would probably take him an hour; if he let me do it by myself, I could probably get it sorted in about thirty or forty minutes. But he's afraid he'll miss something, and insists on staring into the face of each page before he hands it over to me. It usually takes us two or three days to go through it all. When we've finished he's always very happy. He pats his empty desktop and runs his hands over it like it's a brand new sports car. "Clean desk!" he says. "I feel purged!" But seemingly within a day or two the desk has reverted back to a shambling mess. When I ask him to try and stay organized, he bristles. "David Oglivy didn't have a clean desk," he says, and goes to the bookshelf to try and find the book that has the picture of David Oglivy's desk, but can't find it. "Being organized isn't everything, you know," he tells me. "There's a lot more that goes into this job if you want to be great!"

✱

Sometimes when I'm feeling a little mean-spirited, I like to tease her first with the cigarette. I lean over the rail and make her come for it, forcing her to rise up on her tail and stretch for it. "Good girl, Flipper," I cheer. "That's a good dolphin, that's a good chicken-of-the-sea."

I usually get a splash for my trouble.

"Dolphins are slappers," she tells me. "Don't you dare so much as put me in the same sentence as those chirpy slags. Dappy cows. They're worse than the manatee with all their preening and shagging. *Uhm, uhm. Give us a fish. Uhm.*"

"You sound bitter," I tell her.

"Whot? *I sound bitter?*"

"Yeah."

She scoffs. "Fuckin' too right, mate! I reckon you'd be a trifle upset as well if blokes were trying to have it off with you every time you went for a swim."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"Oh, you do surprise me," she groans.

"No, no," I explain. "With *girls.*"

"Whot? With your little dangly willy thingie?"

"Yeah."

"Go on then—whot do you do with it?"

"Well, you sorta, put it in."

"In whot?"

"In the girl's . . ." I hold up my hand and try to fashion a shape that will illustrate

what I mean. "It's sorta like, well . . ." I end up circling thumb and forefinger and sliding a finger in and out of the ring suggestively. I don't think I've done this particular trick since the fifth grade. "Something like that," I say.

She draws back, her mouth a shocked circle. "That's positively lewd!"

I shout, "Well what do you do?"

"We lay eggs," she tells me. "Loads and loads of eggs. Then after a while some bloke stumbles across them and, oh brilliant, sprays them all over with his manly musk or whatever and about a week later all the little babies hatch."

"Who takes care of them?"

"We do," she says. "They're delicious."

"You're not serious."

"My god—*there's thousands of them!* A few of them are bound to luck out and make it. We have an obligation to keep the population down, you see. There's only so much ocean to go round. Besides, we only eat the ugly ones."

I feel a little queasy. I don't know what to say.

"I don't know what to say," I tell her.

She snorts and shakes her head. "Are all Americans as thick as you?" she asks.

"Huh?"

"I was just taking the piss. God, you're gullible. Give us another fag. Oh, please?"

✱

I have parking woes. It's what living in the city is all about. Parking. Territory. Turf. People are rabid for places to park their cars. I pay \$100 a month for a parking spot down the street from my studio apartment; but lately when I come home at the end of the day, there's someone parked there. Someone with a crappy blue import with lots of bumper stickers on it. Don't they know this is private property? Don't they know people pay money for this spot? Do they think I like to come home from a long miserable day at work only to find someone parked in my spot? And what am I supposed to do? Park on the street? I'll get a ticket. That spot costs me \$100 a month. I search my car for a piece of scrap paper and a pen, manage to scribble a mean note on a disposable coffee cup and wedge it under the blue import's driver's side windshield wiper. But what to do with my car? If I park in someone else's spot, then I'm just as bad. So I park on the street, illegally, and go and call the person I rent the parking spot from, a Russian woman with a thick accent; but she's not home, so I leave a message with one of her kids and I wait and watch my car from the window so I don't get ticketed. When she hasn't called back by eleven-thirty, I call the towing company myself, give them the plate number and a description of the blue import, and peep through the curtains. But the tow truck's flashing lights alert the scofflaw, and he manages to run out and move his car before the tow truck driver can hook it up, so I don't get the satisfaction of seeing his car towed away. He parks his car on the street right behind mine. After about twenty minutes I sneak out and move my car off the street and into my parking spot, feeling like I'm committing some act of vandalism.

I check my mailbox. Bills and junk mail and more bills. I'm carrying over eight grand in credit card debt. All I eat is microwave pizza. I can't even watch television at the end of the day because I'm too tired. The only thing I pay close attention to anymore is the junk mail. I study it with a critical eye, the way I used to look at Keats or Eliot. I can't help it. In the morning there's a note on my windshield. *Lighten up, Sparky*, it says. And when I come home that night I find the same car in my parking spot and the whole thing starts all over again.

✱

My mermaid, as I have come to think of her (though it would enrage her if she knew I thought of her in this possessive sense, as if I were relegating her to some sort of pet status)—nevertheless, my mermaid is a difficult creature to deal with on a day-to-day basis. She likes to throw jellyfish at me. Whenever one of those gooey transparent circles comes tide-walking by, she snatches it up and flings it at me like a Frisbee, and then chuckles as I clean the yuck off my face. When I yell at her, she sinks below the surface and watches me from her watery silence with dark hurtful eyes, her anemone hair pulsing with the current's heartbeat. She seems to relish her difficultness, much like a small child. She is always studying her tail for the first signs of a barnacle, and frets loudly over the odd one she finds. She is prone to long morose pauses. She releases great exasperated sighs whenever I pose questions, none of which she particularly cares to answer.

From what I can gather the ocean is a very boring place. "Lots of floating," she says. "Loads of currents and tides and thingies." Sharks are thick, useless, and unsociable, forever getting caught up in nets and eating perfectly nice sea lions for no particular reason. As for mermen, they are always off being lads.

"What do you mean—lads?"

"Lads. *Laddish*. They're always off doing laddish sports like capsizing little boats and scrapping with killer whales and shagging slapper dolphins."

"Did you ever sing at ships?" I ask her.

"Whot? *Sing at ships*? Do you mean perch on a shiny rock and comb my hair and lure unwitting sailors to their doom?"

"Did you?"

She looks at her cigarette, tries to hold out, can't, and grins guiltily.

"Well, yeah. Before you Americans had those buzzy motor boats. We used to do it for a laff. Climb out on the rocks whenever we saw a sail, shout and flash our tits. You Americans are so stupid! Why do you reckon we're perched on rocks? To crash your bloody boat! But you just sail dead on right for us anyway. It's your own fault, really, for being so bloody thick."

Sometimes when she rises up I blush and giggle, or forget myself and stare.

"Whot?" she demands. "Whot?"

"Nothing."

But she is on to me. "Oh, right," she groans. "I'd forgotten your Americans fascination with tits." It has taken me a while to figure out that when she says *Americans*

she is talking in terms of species and not nationalities; *Americans* applies to all of us dry-land-walking human types.

She can't grasp the concept of the weekend, and always demands an explanation. I do worry about her on the weekends. I don't like seeing anyone else on the dock; but as the weather gets nicer, as the days become longer and warmer, I encounter more and more people taking in the ocean air. I eyeball them warily like trespassers.

She is a very sarcastic mermaid. I get the feeling, sometimes, that she isn't very happy. I wonder if she yearns for the land, like the little mermaid in the story. I wonder if she has secretly been in love with me the whole time.

"Do you ever yearn for the land?" I ask her.

"Whot? *Yearn for the land*? Are you mad? Who in their right mind would want to spend their life teetering about on those bloody stilt thingies you call legs?"

"So the story isn't true?"

"Oh, yes! And we use seashells for money and weave our blankets out of kelp."

"Seriously."

"No, it's not true. That's just a horrible story we use to frighten bad little kiddies."

"But it's a love story," I say. "Don't you like love stories?"

"I only like love stories with loads of death and dismemberment and horrible sad tragic endings."

I lean on the railing and look off into the horizon. I can hear gulls crying.

After a time, during which I imagine she has been turning my line of questioning around in her head, trying to get at the heart of it, she narrows her eyes suspiciously.

"Did you really believe for one instant that I should care to prance about up there with all you dodgy Americans?" she says.

"I'm sorry. I was just curious."

"*You're just stupid, is whot it 'tis!* I mean just look at you in your silly trouser thingies. You're ridiculous. Apart from the fact that you horrible hairy monkeys have no manners nor decency to begin with. You only make it worse by covering up. You're not fooling anyone, you know!"

✱

My boss likes to tell me to phone people and when I do he hovers behind me, shifting back and forth, rubbing his chin nervously like I was defusing a live bomb. When he hears something he doesn't like he rushes forward making a time-out sign. He is my panicked coach. I put the phone on hold and ask him, "What?" We bicker. I'm irritated. I don't understand what he's talking about; I can't grasp what it is he's trying to convey to me that he wants me in turn to convey to the person on the other end of the phone, and the on-hold light goes blink, blink, blink, until he finally picks up the phone. "You could have called her," I tell him after he hangs up. "I'm too busy!" he screams. But he always seems to have plenty of time to tell me what to do and then stand around watching me do it, so how busy can he be? My boss doesn't like me to go home at night. Not until he's satisfied that everything we needed to get done today is finished. He has a big notebook in which he jots down things to do. Most of them

are things for me to do. I wear many hats, he likes to say. When I complain I have too much to do, my boss wants to know why I'm never here on the weekends. The only thing I don't get to do is the copywriting. My boss does all that. He's an award-winning copywriter, he likes to remind me. There is a little brass plaque from the Massachusetts Direct Marketing Organization in the front of the office with his name on it. *Second Place*, the plaque reads, *Best Business-to-Business High-Technology Traffic-Generating Direct Mail Piece with a Budget of under \$10,000*. It takes him days to write a paragraph. He dicks around all week and then only starts writing at five o'clock on the evening before the draft is due at the client's, then complains because he has had to stay up all night to finish it. He peppers the copy with phrases like "What's more," and, "You betcha," and wrings his hands over the choice of verbs. "Make or produce?" he wants to know. The agony of his creative process floods the office during these times. Often I feel like the only reason I'm there is to play witness to it all. He seems to need an audience; he craves affirmation. When he finishes a draft he rushes over and makes me quit whatever else it is I'm doing and read it while he looks over my shoulder, beaming. "Is it great?" he wants to know. "Do you think it's great?" "Yeah," I say. "It's real good." "Bet I could teach those writing professors at your old college a thing or two, huh?" he says. "Bet I could be a professor there, huh? Don't you think?" I have a sick and broken smile on my face. I remind myself there's still eight months remaining on my lease, no money in my bank account, eight grand in credit card debt waiting for me, and that's not all. When I get home the blue import is in my parking spot. The next day I call in sick. I do it early, so I can leave the message on his voice mail before he arrives. Then I unplug the phone and sleep. There's nothing to eat in the apartment.

✱

Her lower half is not, as you might expect, fish-like or scaly, but more like the back half of a porpoise, with sleek powerful muscles and a horizontal tail. She's no delicate little piece of coral, my mermaid. More like a giant clam, oversized and sullen.

"Do you have a blow hole?" I ask her.

"Whot? *A blow hole?*" She acts insulted. "Do you mean an asshole? Yes, we take poohs just like you Americans. Happy now?"

"No. A blow hole. Like a whale."

"You are thick," she declares. "I have nostrils—*nostrils!*" She leans back and flares them at me to demonstrate. "What do you have? Oh, look. The same thing! Fancy that."

"You don't have everything I have," I say coyly.

"Whot? *Are you talking about your willy?* You do surprise me. That's all you Americans think about. Sex."

"Well, I couldn't help but notice—"

*"Couldn't help but notice what?"*

"Your, ah, lack of parts,"

"You are so rude!"



I apologize, but she's enraged, and refuses to settle down until I toss her another cigarette.

"Sorry," I say.

She ignores me.

"I said, 'Sorry.'"

She drifts about until her back is facing me.

"*Sorrie*," I croon.

"Do be quiet," she says. "I'm trying to enjoy my fag."

✱

I worry about postage all the time. How much does this weigh? How much does that weigh? First- or third-class? Paper stock, die-cuts, spot gloss varnish, merge/purge results, keycoding—these are the things that consume my days. My boss refuses to make decisions until the last minute, then paces back and forth in front of my desk while I try to get all the vendors on the line and update them that we will now be wanting clear perforated wafer seals or that we'll be mailing in drop lots of 1,000 every other week—and how soon can we begin mailing? But of course all of the vendors have gone home, so I get to leave messages for them all. "Things change fast in this business," my boss tells me when I complain. "You have to react." It's more work than you might think, producing junk mail. It's just going to get tossed out anyway. My boss gets pumped if we get a three percent response rate. That means for every one hundred pieces of junk mail that get mailed, three people actually fill out the business reply card and drop it in a mailbox—most likely to get the free giveaway, usually a T-shirt with the company logo on it or maybe a cheap painter's cap. So why am I pouring over data cards of rental mailing lists with a highlighter, guzzling cold coffee and trying to figure out how to get at senior MIS managers with plans to implement e-commerce strategies in the next four months? Junk mail, I think. I'm killing myself for junk mail. This is my job. This is what I do.

✱

I ask her if she's ever saved anyone from drowning.

"Whot? *Saved anyone from drowning?* Do you mean Americans?"

It's a hot day today and I'm stressed, sweating, and tired. I haven't slept well in a while. I only seem to be able to nod off about an hour before I have to get up. I haven't been shaving lately either. My boss thinks I'm growing a beard. He yelled at me this morning; he thinks I've been taking too many cigarette breaks.

"You know," I say, gesturing. "Some ship's going down and you see some good-looking sailor and decide to help him out, keep the sharks away, tow him to the shore of some deserted island where he can lay around bronzing on the beach, sipping coconut juice and wiggling his toes?"

She finds the suggestion amusing.

"Well?"

“Well, whot?”

“Have you or have you not ever saved anyone from drowning?”

“No,” she all but screams. “Of course not. Let them drown. The more the merrier, I say. Come on in then, the water’s fine.”

“Yeah?” I nod, lower my brow and jam my butt into the corner of my mouth and start taking off my tie. Next, my shoes and socks, and then the rest.

“Whot are you doing?” she asks. “Have you gone mad?”

I ball up my shirt and toss it at her. “Nice day,” I mutter. “Nice day for a dip in the water.”

She pulls a face. “Must you insist on polluting my water with your hairy body? Oh, god, look at you! *You’re white as a flounder’s bottom!*”

It feels good walking on the warm pier with my bare feet, the sun on my naked back, and I can feel the breeze rippling the hairs on my legs. The sunlight off the water is hypnotic. I take three steps back and get a bit of a running start before balling up into a cannonball and launching myself. Often I’ve thought about what it would be like kissing her, what it would be like holding a mermaid in my arms. The water around me is hissing, a-fizz with cool bubbles. My eyes are shut and I’m sinking. You can’t let a silly thing like an ocean keep two people apart, I think.