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Dreamt an Ocean

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I sit in the cubicle like I always do. It is 1:59 P.M. In at least six minutes, maybe more, she will arrive. I am sitting in my cubicle, the man beside me is typing too loud and forceful like he always does, and the cup of green tea beside my own keyboard is getting cold, the little Lipton paper hanging limp over the lip of the mug. It is an East End coffee shop mug, from my happier days when I went out at night into the cold dark air and smelled the smoke and the streetlamps and the skin and drank coffee and spoke with people. Now I see water. Cold, murky, green and blue, and full of algae and passing fish who watch me with their darting eyeballs trying to decipher me.

She will come in soon. I wonder if I will get in trouble if I put on headphones. The girl across from me plays the radio from her telephone set, and it pauses every time she gets a phone call and talks for several long minutes, playing with the slightly greasy strands of her blonde hair and chewing on pink gum I can smell from my desk. She eats a Tupperware container of slimy salad every day, dripping with oil and blue cheese that smells disgusting. I have to look away when she eats, and I wish I could plug my ears and I want to go into the bathroom and put my head under the running water from the sink, the cold tap, not the hot.

On my lunch break we are allowed to leave the office for a short time to get ourselves a bite to eat. I feel heavy, like my boots are full of water clomping down the cramped wooden staircase that leads from the office on the second floor down to the whitewashed sidewalk of downtown. Walking down the sidewalk feels like being on the ocean floor as I weave between the tall, shimmering buildings and schools of barracuda and herring orienting themselves in one direction and circling their confused predators. I hold my breath and kick pebbles as I walk. I wander in and out of cafes and markets, looking for something I want, and finding nothing.

I trudge back up the stairs with a small loaf of bread wrapped in crinkly plastic wrap and a small package of rosemary

butter that cost too much at the organic grocery store down the block by the apartment complex on the edge of downtown. I imagined myself in my cubicle buttering the small slices of bread and eating them daintily. It sounded romantic and pretty, and maybe I would look pretty. The bread would be soggy from the water in my daydreams but I would hold my breath and eat it and enjoy it.

I eat a small bite of bread. Nothing is ever quite as good as one imagines it. The bite is dry as sand and collapses into a mouthful of crumbs on my tongue which I struggle to swallow as I realize I have nothing to drink. With my mug in hand I carefully weave through the cubicles to the break room, where I overturn the tea into the deep sink and wash it down the drain. The dripping tea bag goes in the trash.

At 2:13 P.M. she arrives. She wears a burgundy trench coat that cinches around the middle and shows off her trim waist. Her face is clear and soft like a china doll. She is all laughs and smiles in a cloud around her head, glowing like a halo as she smiles and smiles and perches herself on the lap of the nearest man sitting in his cubicle, fumbling with his pen. She is Mr. Collier's daughter, so she can do whatever she likes. She flits through the desks, her bones hollow like a tiny red and brown sparrow darting from branch to branch. She slips into her father's office on the corner with the windows. I duck my head down into my cubicle and slurp on my fresh mug of tea. I take a big gulp so my cheeks bulge with hot water and hold my breath for as long as I can. I count to thirty one before my throat tightens and my skull threatens to collapse.

She comes every third Friday, when she drives home from the university because she has no classes on Fridays. Somehow I have always eluded her. She chats with her father and romps around the office like it is her playground, teasing the men and annoying the women. Her father takes her out to a big lunch and they always return with squeaky Styrofoam boxes of leftovers. I gulp some more tea and wait for them to emerge and fly away together, watching with my eyeballs hovering just above the fence of my cubicle walls

Oh my god, she says. I know I am caught. Hi, hello, how are you! And she taps at my glass and sticks her head up close so her

features are warped. I surface from the water and the words bubble up through my lips to say oh hi, I am fine, how are you.

It's been so long oh wow I can't believe we haven't seen each other here before have you been working here long oh don't you miss high school, she says. Don't you go to school or is this part time, what have you been doing since graduation? I shrink deeper into my chair and bury my mouth and nose into the steamy circle of my mug and peer up into her waterfall of questions. I say, I am well. I do not go to school. I have worked here for a few months. The carpet is wet under my rubber soles. She does not stop smiling and asks me what else I have been doing.

Gray water swells from inside the file cabinets and slides silently down the cold metal. The fluorescent lights overhead flicker with moisture that drips into her hair, and she doesn't notice. My tongue freezes. I say nothing and hold my breath inside my nose. We should catch up, she says, her voice obscured by the dripping. The rest of the office is a clatter of professional e-mails and phone receiver murmurs. It's been so long, let's get brunch this weekend!

I place my mug on my desk with caution. I remember that I was at thirty one before I started trembling and brace myself into my chair. I resist drowning in her words and letting their black seaweed fingers twist around my ankles and pull me into the cool dark. She straightens up and waves, and her little hollow bones float across the glassy water pooling around our feet like a tiny leaf suspended on a creek surface. She clings to her father's arm. I spin my chair back to my computer, where water bubbles up between the letters on my keyboard and over the edge of my small clay flowerpot. Mr. Collier opens the office door and a rush of foamy water slaps him in the face and sweeps her off her feet. They float beneath with their faces unchanged. The water rises quickly, reaching my knees and my elbows and my neck. The men and women and birds and bugs paddle their way to the top, their mouths opening and closing for air. I grip the arms of my office chair tight and hold my breath, just like I practiced, as the salt water creeps toward the ceiling.



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