Breathless

A Short Story suggested by Veronica

By Maryanne Peters

I have always been able to hold my breath for a long time. On long car rides I would sit in the back seat and just hold my breath for minutes on end. I would do it in my room too – not take a breath for the length of song, then two songs, then three. I loved to swim and stay underwater as long as possible. I would watch other people try to match me and end up breaking the surface gasping for breath, while I just stayed there. And then they would come down again and have to go back up again before I did.

My mother used to say: “Well at least you have a skill, but it is not a skill that you will ever be able to put to use”.

That is not entirely true. In school I discovered the sport of underwater hockey. Have you ever heard of it? It’s a tough sport where you push a puck around the floor of a swimming pool. You have to pass to somebody else when you need to go up for air, but if you don’t need to go up, you can just stay on the puck. I was not as big as some of the other players, but I could push the puck the length of the pool, including ducking and weaving, without surfacing. I made it to the USA national team and fresh out of school, I went to the Underwater Hockey World Championships in Korea 2019.

It was there that I got the offer of a job, using the skill my mother said would amount to nothing.

“We are recruiting for a mermaid show,” said Larry Fierstein, “The longer you can stay underwater the better. But you need to look good underwater too. You need to move gracefully, and you have to fit the costume.”

I could do all of that. I suppose I thought that I would be like a “merman” or something, but Larry soon put me straight on that: “No. We have a couple of guys for that. Big muscular guys. But people come to see the girls. You’ll be one of them. In costume, that is.”

What are you going to do? Turn down a job using the only special skill you have because of a costume? Hell no. I had no other plans. Truth is, I was not bright enough for college, or to stick it out there anyway. And this was show business, or sort of. It seemed exciting. Of course I said yes. And I called my mother, just to tell her that she was wrong.

“Fortunately your hair is long enough to have extensions in,” said Larry. “People expect mermaids to have long hair and wigs don’t work underwater. The girls will show you how to look after it. And they will give you all the help you need with the costumes and the makeup.”

It was sort of like being caught up in a whirlwind. I was suddenly surrounded by five girls all treating me like a novelty, a kind of living doll that they could dress up. They were all very nice, and also very attractive, but somehow I didn’t have time to chat them up or even properly admire them. They were all over me prodding and plucking.

I said: “Hey, what with the hair and now the eyebrows I am going to have trouble looking like a guy!”

“Don’t bother,” was their advice. “You are one of us. Hang with us when we are not in the display pool. We train and we rehearse, and we have fun when we are not performing.” It was like this was the show business life. They all loved it and they were sure that I would love it too.

There were two guys in the troupe too, but I was hardly one of them. They were both tall ex swimming jocks, concerned with staying buff. They looked at me as if I was insignificant, which I suppose I was.

But I was better than any of them when it came to holding my breath. In the glass sided pool there were air stations that could allow everybody to breath in some air while staying underwater, but all the moves were while holding breath. But I could take centre stage while everybody else was taking air, so I sort of became a central figure with some solo moves. Over time I would become “Marina, the mermaid princess”.

But after the first performance, we all agreed to hit the town to celebrate, and I had to find a way to live with my new look.

I had long thick brown hair freshly installed and a face that did not look manly. In addition, I was completely shaved down. I could have not shaved my legs as for the show these were inside the sleeve of the mermaid tail outfit, but even the guys shaved down to work underwater, so I was smooth all over. The eyelashes and makeup had been removed after the show, but with hair tied back and in a tee shirt and shorts, I looked like a girl.

After going to our first bar and every guy staring at me with a sneer, one of the girls suggested that we go to another bar but that I should wear and little lipstick and mascara. I was reluctant at first, but when I discovered in the next joint that there were no more sneers, it seemed Okay. There were still the stares, but not the sneers.

“Are you the mermaids from the show,” one guy asked us. All the girls looked at me to say the words. It was a mean trick. There I was having to clear my throat and warble the words: “Yes, that’s us”. All the girls laughed, but the guy had no idea what the joke was. Suddenly I had found a female voice, which was to come in handy.

But that is how it all happened – on that night after my first performance I sort of accidentally moved away from being a guy.

It was just easier. I hung with the girls. After the show we would get out of our mermaid costumes and put on something nice to wear out. For quite a while I chose clothes that I guess they call unisex or gender neutral, but after a while I borrowed clothes from the girls that were not that. I some cases they were a long way from that.

I got used to doing things the way the girls did; talking the way they did; acting more like them. It was not deliberate. It just happened.

Larry approved. He said that this was not an underwater drag queen show. Nobody knew I was really a guy and that was the way he wanted it. He said that he would prefer me to appear off stage as a woman, just like I did during performances and promotional occasions. And because it was easier all round, I was OK with that.

The one day Larry called me into his office. Apparently, some guy had raised a question about a lump in the front of my costume. I mean, it had always been there, and I suppose people might have thought that it was something in the outfit, or a wardrobe malfunction. Anyway, the question had been asked and Larry was not happy.

I said something like: “Geez, Boss. What can I do about it?”

He said: “You will need to use tape or something, but Marina, I would be happier if you lost that lump completely.”

He called me Marina all the time. I mean, people use the character names all the time. Like: “Ariel, you tumble to the right, Calypso, tumble left”. In rehearsals you talk to the character, but it occurred to me that Larry had called me Marina from my first show, and nothing else.

I told him that I would fix it, but I remember I walked out of his office with a strange feeling in my chest. It was sort of breathlessness, which for me, was very strange.

He bought me a dress. Larry bought me a dress. It was a floral sundress, green so that if set off my eyes, so the girls explained. I loved it.

A couple of days later he asked me whether I would travel with him to a neighboring state to look at an aquatic show with him. “But you will need to travel as a woman. I mean … I mean, it is just that …”.

I knew what he was talking about. I just said: “Sure”.

I wore the dress he bought me. For some reason I taped myself tight before we headed off. It was not something I did outside the show, although I used control panties. It was just that in that dress and sitting in the passenger seat as he drove, with my dress on and checking my makeup in the vanity mirror, I just felt better being tucked up tightly.

We saw the show and It was not as good as ours. There were too many bubbles which confirmed the value in having people who could hold their breath longer. But there were a few tips we could pick up, so it was a worthwhile trip. But it was late, and he suggested a diner meal and a motel room, and an early start in the morning. I just said: “Sure”.

It was one of those motel rooms like a million across the country. Two double beds and a bathroom. Guys in business share them all the time. It was not like a bridal suite or anything. So like anybody else he slips of his shoes and takes of his pants and turns on TV. And I am there in my green dress wondering what to do. Should I undress in the bathroom? Why?

So the dress falls to the floor, and I am in my body shaping garment. Larry looks away from the TV. He looks me up and down, and I just stood there. Maybe I was even trembling a little. I don’t know why.

“You have great legs,” he said. “They are always in the tail costume so I never see them top to bottom.”

“Thanks, Larry.” I guess I said that.

“And I love the camel toe.,” he said. “And the breasts.”

They were all fake. I had junk in my panties and gel in my bra. I felt ashamed. I knew what he wanted in that moment. He wanted me to be a woman. And in that same moment, that is what I wanted too. I don’t know where it came from but I felt that tightening again, and before I knew it I was sobbing quietly.

Larry got up off the bed and came over to me. He pushed my curls away from my face and looked into my eyes. I had always thought that he was a good boss and a nice guy, but in those eyes I saw something else. He was a better man than I thought. Maybe even the best there is.

And he kissed me. It was not a hungry kiss. It was a gentle reassuring kiss. The hunger came from me.

We made love that night. He left me breathless.

The End

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Author’s Note:

This is based on an idea sent to me by Veronica, along with this link:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrP0Mqj9U\_c(link is external)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrP0Mqj9U_c)

It's a bizarre and occupation that would be even more bizarre for a biological male to somehow wind up in, a member of the sisterhood of sirens … I'd love to see what you could do with this theme