

# Sliver of Silver

**Sadie Butt**

Special mention

The little girl dove under the frigid water, her goggled eyes roving the belly of the cove, searching for anything interesting. Day after day, she visited this harbour. Her poppy trailing behind her down the narrow gravel path, each of them navigating through the tangle of overgrown plants and reaching alder branches on either side. She never found much interesting. Floating driftwood, a rock with a white line circling it, a couple of connors, maybe. Not much. But she still came every day the sun was shining, and the waves were calm. She preferred the feeling of water to land. The pulling, turning, twisting, rocketing sensation, the feeling of it being so unpredictable, so unsolid, so fleeting, made it enticing to her. The land was too steady. Too solid. Too... predictable.

The girl giggled as she breached the surface again, spitting out the salty water that leaked into her mouth. She smiled at her Poppy who was sitting on the shore, reading a book with his feet crossed under him. The water reached up the rocks of the beach, close enough to reach him. He usually sat as close as he could to the water. He always has, since she was a kid. He felt the same thing she did, about the water. He smiled back at her, raising his eyebrows and waving at her with the soft-covered book.

“Anything interesting?” he asked, voice almost indecipherable against the splash of waves, index and thumb fidgeting with the next page of his novel. She watched as he fumbled with the page, his fingers flickering. The girl

shook her head, frowning.

“No. I’ll find something today though, Poppy!” she said, her voice radiating determination and childlike innocence. He smiled faintly at her.

The girl sunk back into the water, her brown hair following her head like trails of smoke. Her hair was tinged with blonde from the sun, and her face was dotted with brown, the freckles that popped up whenever she was outside in the summer. The sun was entrancing, the girl thought, how it could change the little details of you by just being out in its light. Her dad said the sun was billions and trillions of miles away from them. She always wondered if she could make a light that changed people from so far away. Maybe she could. Her dad said her heart was made of light. Maybe she could give her heart light to people who didn’t have any. Her Poppy didn’t really seem to have any light anymore. Could she bring his back?

The water tightened around her the deeper she went. She wanted to go deeper and deeper, but would the water tighten so much she couldn’t escape? Couldn’t breathe? How do fish escape the water?

A sliver of silver slid through the water in front of her. The water whispered ahead, following the movement. She thought maybe it was a conner, but then it turned and passed by again, slower. She stilled in the water, cheeks puffed out to hold her breath. It was a large fish, elegant, calm. Its mouth opened and closed, eyes assessing. It was shimmering, the light that shot through the murky water highlighted the shining beauty of it. It slowed to a stop in front of her. She stared at the fish, watching, waiting for the next move. It was staring, too. Staring at this otherworldly, supernatural creature invading its space, it’s quiet. It was as though it wasn’t sure what to think of her. She wasn’t sure what to think of it, either. The fish was eerie to her. The eyes were too round, the fins too small, the little, tiny white pinpricks of teeth in its mouth, wrong. Wrong, but striking. Wrong, but glorious, breathtaking, spectacular. The rocks crinkled under her as she shifted her feet, and the sound was a low, slow-water sound that echoed up and around them. Her fish startled, swimming away into the murky water, disappearing as quickly as it came. The girl reached out, feeling as though she had lost something.

“Fishy?” she said, the droplet of desperation in her voice, at least, was not

muddled by the water, though her voice was distorted. Bubbles rose out of her mouth and the words traveled no further than a couple inches in front of her. She could hear her sound escaping — muffled and far away — as her mouth filled with water. She panicked, heart thudding. She pushed off the bottom to rocket to the top, coughing out the water when she breached the surface, her throat burning from the salt as she tread water in the deep, her legs beating to keep her safe. She squinted through her goggles that at least kept the salt out of her eyes.

“You okay?” asked her Poppy, voice still faint. He put down his book, unfolding his feet from under himself as if he was going to go get her. “I’m okay, Poppy,” she replied, coughing again. She swam over to where she could touch the bottom and rested for a moment, breathing in and out, relieving the panicked feeling in her chest. She stared at the water, contemplating.

She was no older than three when she first visited the beach. Her parents were worried about the cold of the water, so she stayed on the beach with her Pop, his voice still the booming, loud sound that she remembered. Even then, her curious mind never wavered from the water, and she spent her whole time on the beach staring at the waves as they splashed over her Mom’s swimsuit, face and hair. Even now, at seven, her Poppy liked to tell her the story, his voice no longer booming, of how her eyes lit up that day when he brought her a bucket of salty water to play with, how he could almost feel the yearning of her heart to get into the water. He said he remembered it well because she was a quiet child back then and seemingly impartial to everything else. She still couldn’t remember why his voice got quiet. She was five. And her parents were considerably sadder about it than she was.

Every time they went down to the beach from that trip on, she ran as fast as she could to the water, her Poppy next to her as she propelled herself forward with giggles and bright laughter. She grew up with the water. The salt, the seaweed, the little kelp strands she pulled onto the beach, the seashells, the snails, the rocks, the fish. Oh, the fish. Whenever she visited her grandparent’s cabin, she ran out onto the wharf, hanging her arms down over the side of the wood planks, the planks her Poppy had placed there himself, and watched as the groups of conners swam around. She gathered sea snails that hung

onto the side of the wharf and smashed their shells under rocks, though her stomach twisted in guilt, to use their soft bodies as bait to catch and release the conners. Maybe once or twice, she caught a beautiful sculpin, though many wouldn't describe them as so, and she scrambled to find a bucket to put it in so she could show her parents.

She remembered the days out in the boat, where the wind whipped her and little droplets of salt water sprinkled her face. Sticking her hand over the side of the boat, catching the spray of water from the wake, she would cheer, watching with anticipation as her big brother pulled a huge fish over the side. She would sit at the bow and gasp as she was bumped into the air — the boat speeding over the tall waves. Oh, she missed those boat rides. Why wouldn't her Poppy take her on them anymore?

She grew up with the water. Maybe that was the pull she felt. Maybe the pull was the wonder of it all, the incredible stories her Poppy told her, or that the ocean, for the most part, was a mystery to her. Maybe the pull was from deep inside her. Something indescribable.

She breathed deeply, finally feeling settled. She rubbed at her goggles and turned towards the ocean again, searching for any flash of silver. She dove once more, swimming about the bottom, but she was tired. Her limbs were like weights, sluggish and slow-moving. Seeing nothing, she waded to the shallow of the shoreline and got out, wrapping a towel around herself and ambling over to sit next to her Poppy. He closed his book and looked over at her, smiling. He slowly stood up, grunting and wincing a little, his bones squeaky and stiff. He held out a hand to her and she got up too, and they started walking home. Her poppy still trailed behind her, no matter how slow she went. He was getting weaker every time they visited here. Quieter and quieter. Slower and slower. The towel was damp and got colder as they travelled, but she ignored it, ignored the goosebumps and uncomfortable, damp cold, focusing on other things. She thought of that silvery fish all the while home, though it was a short walk. When she was eating supper, she thought of the fish. She thought of the fish before she slept. When she closed her eyes, she imagined the deep bottom of the dark green ocean — the flash of brilliant silver.

It approached her, its scales reflecting the light of the small rays of sun slicing through the waves.

“Fishy?” she said. Bubbles rose from the fish’s mouth, as if it were trying to reply. Its eyes rolled around in its sockets, and it swam around the girl, bubbles rising. She felt as if she were flashing in and out of the moment, like rushing water. Nothing sure. Her movements were flickering, her hand, held in front of her, was blurred. The bubbles rose and rose, more and more.

“HE’S NOT...” the voice boomed. “H-H-H-H-HE.....REAL.”

The bubbles were suffocating. The tight, deep, inescapable water was pulling her in every direction. She couldn’t breathe. Her mouth was filling with water, filling and filling and filling...

She gasped awake. Disoriented, she registered that she wasn’t in the ocean. There was no booming voice. She was in her bed, though the sheets were twisted around her, tight as deep water. She knew she had to go back to the ocean, to find the fish. What was it trying to tell her? Was it looking for her, too? The time, when she checked the clock, said 6:24AM. No one was awake in her house yet. She could go if she wanted to – she knew the way. And she really, really wanted to go.

She silently got out of bed, moving through the house to pick up a towel, a faded pattern dotted with lemons and cut watermelons. She dug through a couple drawers until she found her goggles, and slipped on her swimsuit, then the bright blue dress her mom got her. She tried to sneak quietly through the living room to get to the door, but someone caught her.

“Where are you going?” asked a faint voice. She turned and saw her Poppy, holding the same soft-covered book he had at the beach. She jumped a little and tried to hide her towel and goggles behind her back, guiltily.

“Nowhere?” she said, smiling in what she hoped was an innocent way. Her Poppy chuckled and got up, dusting off his lap and tucking his book into the waistband of his jeans.

“To the beach, right? I’ll take ya. You’re a seal sure, you are.” She smiled at him gleefully and ran out into the slowly brightening day, eyes wide as she skipped the road to the ocean along the gravel shoulder, her Poppy following behind. She headed down the small turnoff, and into the cove. The sun was

just rising, and it looked like the sky was glowing. She felt her heart reach out and pull her along, thinking of the fish and hoping it would still be there.

When she got to the beach, she took in the sight of the waves. They sounded louder than yesterday, crashing onto the beach. She was apprehensive, but the pull of the fish was too strong to ignore. She looked back at her Poppy, and he smiled at her encouragingly. She put on her goggles and waded into the water, shivering in the cold that had accumulated over the chilly night. The salty water splashed onto her shins, hands, and belly as the large waves surged over her. Pieces of floating kelp wrapped around her ankles. The water covered her knees, her stomach, and finally reached up to her neck. And then she was floating, bobbing up and down in the waves. She breathed in, and out, and in, one last big breath, and dove. The water felt colder than she was used to. She searched for a flash of silver, the goggles slightly blurring her vision, but the waves pushed her back to shore. She surfaced and grunted in frustration, before swimming out again and diving once more. The bottom of the ocean was blank and gray. Rocks, rocks, rocks, no silver of any kind.

She dove and dove, but eventually gave up and swam back to shore. She wrapped herself up in her towel and sat, frowning, on the damp rocks, her Poppy next to her. She watched as the sun rose up over the sea, higher and higher.

The squeal of tires and spit of gravel sounded behind her, along with the crunch of rocks under the quick footsteps of someone. There was a shout of the girl's name, and she looked behind her, but couldn't see who it was before she was enveloped in the arms of someone, someone who was crying. "Mom?" she smiled, happy to see her. "What are you here for?" she asked, curious as to why her mom was crying. Her mom laughed, incredulous.

"I didn't know where you went! You have to tell me before you go off alone!"

"Alone? But Poppy's here?"

Her mom looked at her, her eyes confused, cheeks still streaming with tears.

"Poppy?"

"Yeah, he's right there!" she said, gesturing to her Pop, who had moved from sitting next to her to standing by the water, smiling sadly.

"Honey," her mom started, voice sweet, "no one's there."

“Well, yes there is!” she said, voice indignant and defensive.

“Your Poppy... he’s not here, sweetie.”

“But he’s right. There,” she said, trying to get up to go get him, but her mom held her down gently by the shoulders.

“Honey, Poppy’s gone. He’s... he’s dead. He passed away. You know what that means, right?”

The girl put her hands over her ears and shut her eyes tight.

“No.”

“Yes, sweetie.”

“No. No. No. NO! You’re not LISTENING to me. He’s right there!”

She squirmed and screamed and wiggled out of her Mom’s infuriatingly gentle hands and ran down to the beach. Tears and snot streaked her face as she ran to her Pop and grabbed at him, but he flickered.

He flickered.

She stared at him, everything slowing around her. Her Mom’s concerned eyes in the distance.

Her Poppy’s hair glinted silver in the light.

Her blood was beating in her ears, pulse jumping in her wrist. Her head was light. Her hands were cold, numb, bleeding because of her stubby-bitten fingernails digging into her palms.

She screamed.

Her voice cracked on a sob and her Mom ran to her, holding her head to her chest, crying with her. Her Poppy watched, still smiling sadly, before walking away towards the woods. The shadows took him.

“Stop! Stop! You can’t take him!” she sobbed, crying and reaching towards the woods.

“Please! He’s my Poppy!” She strained against her Mom, but she held tight. Crying as well.

“You can’t take him!” Her Mom held her, shushed her, until she couldn’t cry anymore. Until the cold had seeped into her bones. They walked home together, hand in hand, Poppy no longer there. Not next to her, not trailing behind.

Behind them, the ocean lapped and beat the shore.

OCEAN PEOPLE INSPIRE

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