

Dark Mermaids

By Anne Lauppe-Dunbar

1 The girl woke. She'd been dreaming of swimming through thick water, watching light ripple and snake across the pale blue and white tiles that lined the bottom of the pool. She'd been swimming as if life depended on speeding through the white water, hitting the pool wall just right, shooting under-and-through in a practised arch. She'd bit down against the need for breath – and glimpsed, just for a moment, barely an inch of time, the wavering figures leaning over the pool edge, their skin and eyes boiling to fuse as she gasped and swam deeper. Under the water the world had been silent apart from a distorted clicking and the distant splash of other swimmers. But then the water had curdled; lumpy and wrong, turning red.

2 Slowed by fear she'd blinked, turned to escape but a thick wet object bumped, drifted past her shoulder. The thing slid through her hand then drifted away as a second white spot in the distance came closer. It was, she realised, a delicate thing, drifting, bumping and riding the water – a child's limb, alabaster against the sticky redness.

Now she woke, sweaty from her nightmare, to nightingale song that lilted and warbled a strange melody through the night's sweet summer scent from the trees by the lake. Warm air itched the curtain from its metal frame in idle waves. In the gap, a sliver of moonlight rested, rippled across her bed, stretching its finger to the door that led out into the small hallway into the dark. As the curtain settled the light wavered then disappeared to sink into grey night.

She lay still, watching the returning moon's light for what seemed like forever, slowly waking, picking up the sounds from the adjoining room. There was a sultry murmur, that rose to reach a crescendo of frenzied gasped shouts, a moan that turned to a swear word, rich and guttural. Then the rhythm began - this time to shouts of encouragement and laughter. It was, she realized, the trainer's turn to perform.

3 The nightingale paused, hushed, as some dark predator stalked the base of one of the many trees that surrounded the one-story lodging. The bird sang again, this time close to the window – the sound thrilling, a vibrant aria that felt a natural part of the night's dark magic.

Sophia's skin was on fire. She showered, lathered on body lotion, stole some of Diertha's nail varnish and painted each nail in a hideous coat of purple. The paint felt heavy and connected, as if her fingers were webbed. She considered a dip in the lake that lay only feet away from the door, but knew because she'd fallen asleep; she hadn't left enough time.

In the next room, the trainer and girl were reaching a mutual climax, the bed heaved - one two three four, against the wall, dislodging a tiny slice of paint from the ceiling that floated like angel hair to the floor, delicate and insubstantial.

4 She didn't know their names. The girls had arrived the day before, raucous and bold, they'd steamed and grunted their way through training; the boy's voices were just as unfamiliar. Sophia took off her nightgown as the second pair yelled. A gasp followed, then brief moment of silence before more laughter followed applause, then murmuring voices and running water: doors opened and slammed as the boys left the room.

5 In the mirror she could see her stomach flat and muscled, her arms hulking on either side, too cumbersome for her body. Like a man's she thought, and stared down at her navel. Although she'd shaved that morning, pubic hair sprouted from her belly button down between her legs. She ran her hand through the wiry growth and wished they'd hurry, wished they would never come, wished she had some other way to appease the itching inside her. To make the time pass she decided to steal even more from nasty Diertha's make up kit and applied the cheap mascara along with electric blue eyeliner. Sophia's shoulders were so big that when she stood straight on she couldn't see them in the reflection. Like a giant bloody mermaid she decided and imagined the lake's water closing around her heavy muscle, pulling her down into the murky pond weed.

6 She heard them outside the bungalow window, Diertha's throaty laugh accompanied by a shriek as someone grabbed her and *squeezed*. There were four of them, late from an extended training session, high on drugs and success; because they'd smashed yet another record. Sophia's pulse began to race and she recited her weekly rule: never miss training, never ever miss training. Her coach had laughed when she had been foolish enough to ask him why they felt like they did. The need for sex. The crazy itching inside.

7 "You girls," he said. "You can't get enough can you? So, ok. Sex is good. Work hard, play hard." But he'd looked at her differently, squeezed up against her whenever he had the chance. Then one night he came along with the others; after the training session - to keep an eye on her he said as he moved above her; his eyes tight, mouth panting to reveal a coffee-stained tongue.

The four of them burst in the door, jostling, laughing as they stripped. Diertha laughed and blatantly stroked her first choice. She pulled him towards the second small bed, waving the others toward Sophia.

"She'll do what you want." She said.

8 The three remaining boys watched the two moving on the bed. They giggled, looked sideways at one another. One began to masturbate. The second turned and moved clumsily toward Sophia as she lay, legs spread, on her bed. He propped himself above her, shut his eyes and entered her hard and fast.

Sophia knew he was thinking of Diertha: her coy teasing come-on laughter, her explicit suggestion. The boy pushed into her again and muttered someone else's name and 'fuck,' as she lost herself in the sensation of movement. This was bliss. Her body and the heat, the clamour of her mind dimming until she felt only skin and sensation, a push of life, a glorious wave of relief and the silky explosion as she groaned and gasped.

The next moved to take his turn with gasp and jabbingly quick ejaculation; and the group roared with laughter. The boy flinched, blushed and edged away to watch some more.

9 Air thickened, turning purple and blue as the third one came. He turned her over to open her wide, bruise then caress. Sophia heard the door open and more boys arrived. The girls from the next room burst in and beds were hastily created on the floor, sheets and blankets protecting skin as the seething, jerky, fluid, motion escalated. Sophia opened her eyes. She could see the moonlight bend its light across naked flesh. Such beauty, she thought, such ugliness.

She sensed him standing, waiting in the shadows and knew he would be patient, his hand moving in practised rhythm, so she closed her eyes and lost herself once more.

10 Before dawn they left, some in pairs, some alone. Sound died. Shouts faded to murmurs and laughter. Then without warning she felt him, pulling her close, rougher than the others, making her bleed, cry out in pain and pleasure. Finally she could feel only the cool air on her skin, and hear the final notes of birdsong.

11 She woke the second time with the boy sleeping beside her. Lay stunned, thinking fast. They were punished if they didn't report for training by six a.m. well rested, ready for their training session. If they missed their classes they risked compromising the reputation of the training facility. Bad things would happen – not to them, they were too valuable, but to their family. The confiscated TV making a mockery of her parent's reputation, shopping tokens that never arrived, the car could be taken away, travel permits refused, your parents taken into Stasi headquarters for questioning.

12 She turned her head and looked at the boy. He was younger than she remembered, with dark hair, full lips, and a determined chin. He held her even whilst asleep. She wondered for a moment why. But he woke and in a seal-like movement turned and entered her, kissing her into silence, whispering that it was early yet, time enough to sleep after he'd gone. They

gasped as they moved together. Sophia staring into his eyes, aware they were steel grey and blue, his face holding the possibility of a cruel side, one that lay in the tight yet plump set of his mouth. He smiled making her heart tremble, kissed her mouth once more, and slid out of the bed pulling his trousers on in a long flowing movement. He was she realised, quite beautiful. Then she slept again dreaming of stillness, clean white sheets, winning the Olympics and escaping from this place forever.

13 Six in the morning and wide awake. Sophia tasted the night's deep sleep on her tongue, like tangy liquorice, blood, or metal, clear and optimistic. She tilted her nose, noticed the second bed was empty and Diertha wasn't in the shower and sniffed in the morning air smiling. Today Diertha was leaving.

14 Because she had a little time, she cleaned. Scrubbed all traces of Diertha's yellowing tobacco spit from the sink, dug her sticky pubic hair from the shower plug, and finally, with more force than necessary, Sophia shoved Diertha's clothing tightly into the bottom drawer of the clothes cupboard and stripped the bed. Diertha's razor, shampoo, towels, and toiletries were now wedged into the smallest corner of the bathroom window ledge.

15 Even though she knew it was going to be ok, she panicked every time someone came near the bungalow. She imagined Diertha coming through the door, turning on Sophia because she was touching her stuff, and you never touched Diertha's stuff. But each time the sound of feet continued past, and each time that happened, Sophia had stood taller and breathed easier - now all she had to do was insist she kept the room to herself.

16 She'd known for two long weeks that Diertha would be asked to leave. People like her roommate pushed too far, they ignored the obvious warnings and played too hard. Everyone knew that you could play, as long as long as you trained harder; and Diertha had done pretty much no training over the last few weeks. She'd been drinking and smoking, missing her exercise classes, disappearing all day to come back at night with boys from the training centre and then men. Men had little to do with the sports centre, men who wanted her for different reasons, men who hurt her.

17 It was too early to swim. If Sophia went to the pool, she risked being trapped in the empty changing rooms; her trainer would stand too near, no way out than to oblige him – her mouth, his dick. So she stood outside her room, head raised, smelling the sun-soaked grass and dried conifer - breathing in the thrill of being alive and giddy with anticipation. No training today. She was going to race against her one real competitor today and win. When she won she would have a room of her own.

18 Sophia grinned, rolled her shoulders to ease any tension and decided to walk to the lake jetty to watch the sun come up. Near the lake the small family of ducks had their heads tucked under their wings, one shook his head at her then waddled into the water to plunge, tail-sticking upright as he tipped upside down, looking for food.

God she was happy, something not felt for so long she wondered at the sensation, the warmth, the goldenness of not being tired, not having to escape from the constant threat of Diertha's teasing and bullying.

19 The jetty was covered in a thin veneer of pale algae. She walked lightly, with care, considering amused, that even if she were to fall in, the water was her friend, her ally, her place, much more so than the land. At the very end of the wooden platform, she sat cross-legged and gazed across the grey elbow shaped lake. The sun was mellow, creating a gentle dawn heat, it rose slowly, an orange-misted circle that sent mosquitoes into a zigzagging frenzy as the sun-heat met the lake. Water swirled in the distance; a fish blowing a circle of bubbles flipped its brown silver-finned body out into the air, then sank. More bubbles appeared and Sophia noticed a thick pelt of green pondweed near the jetty edge. It smelled of meat and sour apples. She leaned over the jetty side to get a better look. Bubbles trickled to the surface. A sweet and sickly stench, not apples. She leaned out further. A dead fish, or one of the many foxes that roamed about all night. With a gurgling sound, like a plug being pulled, the shape bobbed up and down then sucked itself out the water.

20 Sophia saw the top half of Diertha balloon from the water. Her legs were weighed down by metal disks and chains, her eyes purple and swollen. There was a squawk from the ducks as they took to the air, alerted to danger, wheeling high into the sky as Sophia ran towards land.