

The Siren Dialogues

By Lisa Meltzer Penn

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Prologue

What kept her there wasn't the ocean, the waves, the sand beach. It wasn't the forest sunk low—a bridge running out over a swamp—paths coming to complete halts in the middle. And it wasn't Jasper, though the boat ride back and forth to get to him constituted a reason if one was needed. A path was formed, a wake, her fate taken apart in her hands.

“Ready?” he said, as if they'd just been talking. Without getting off his bike he took her bag on his shoulder and rolled slowly down the boardwalk, wheels bumping along the boards—a sound and vibration becoming part of the place.

She walked along beside him, her white sneakers lifting and pressing down the padding, jagged blue lines marking their sides. She was marked. Already the shoes were part of her feet, unnoticed once put on. With every step she felt the small breach between boards, let her foot go over it as if it were solid. On warmer days she might walk with bare feet over the dry, splitting boards and feel the whole roughness and sparseness of them.

It was quieter now than in May. The last of the fragile daylight was precious and belonged to them alone, empty of voices as it drew a curtain over the water route to the mainland.

Up a ramp she lifted herself on twin railings, swinging her feet up to the second floor of the house, the sliding glass doors glowing as behind them the sun prodded the horizon. Nerves in her fingertips discerned the minute texture of the wooden railings, even to the rings. A third eye opened in her forehead, eyestalks of a butterfly, sensing. Everything moved through her.

“Here we are,” said Jasper.

Chapter 1

The lens of a camera can see further than our eyes— into the pores, into wrinkles, into someone’s thoughts, into the third eye. It can see the way a flower thinks, the way a holly bush bends to the wind like a knee joint. The holly has a less fixed range of motion. It might go past what the knee can do without tearing.

And the feel of a duck as it falls, cupped loose by the air—can a camera see that? Can the naked eye? Can a Siren?

Maybe. The duck is a warning as it falls.

Jasper wound a bright blue thread in a tight ‘X’ around a metal eye hook, securing it to the fiberglass rod. He tied it off neatly.

“Rachel,” he said, and Rachel looked down from the ceiling. “You’re still thinking about that duck, aren’t you?” It wasn’t really that bad, you know. Krafty’s just an idiot.”

That blue made things look taller, Rachel noticed. More substantial and flashier than the dark crimson on hers. She looked at Jasper, her hand with the thread poised in front of her. “When I talk out loud I feel like I’m speaking into a tape recorder.”

“Well, there’s no one listening but us.”

“But the Siren. Don’t you think...”

Jasper laughed. “You want her to be alive, don’t you?”

“Yes. I do. I don’t know that I want her listening in all the time, but I want her to hear.”

“And what makes you think a Siren would be alive or would listen?”

“Of course she listens. Or how would she know to call? She doesn’t look like a mermaid, Jasper, she’s a Siren. You have to try to hear her.

“Well, then, pretend you knew what you wanted to say.”

Outside the wind picked up.

“Do you think another storm’s coming? The doctor said I might feel the weather in my knee, but so far I don’t.” It had been several weeks now since the surgery, the ligament grafted onto bone with titanium screws. Finally she could come back to the island. She had looked forward to having some minor new power from all this, but perhaps she wouldn’t after all.

Jasper leaned back in his chair with the rod. “You didn’t feel the last one.” He put down the rod and thread. Anyway, I think this one’s pretty much worn itself out. I’d

better go check the beach, see if we lost anything. The Miller's cottage was looking pretty shaky after the last storm."

The wind blew harder than Jasper had predicted, the colored lights fireworking on the back of her retinas. The walls and eaves of his house were all wood—beams, two by fours. They were stained light well before her time, and over the years had turned dark—wood smoke, breath—everything left its mark. It was the dark rich brown of a cabin, of an interior, of thought.

The room itself was quiet. What would she say now, when all that remained were the things?

Open shelves framed the living room to the plank stairs. She curled into the long flat couch below the shelves which housed meticulously painted ducks—clearly defined mallard greens, softer brown and whites. And white conch shells curving outward from a concealed beginning, a center she couldn't see.

The amorphous, almost-liquid body of the picture window breathed long, slow breaths, its hundred tiny imperfections reflecting like the eyes of a scallop, tiny mirrors collecting the flickering light and reflecting the room curved and flipped like the back of a spoon. Rachel became the picture in the picture window glass, reflected for the pleasure of the bay. The bay came right through. A long time before the glass was sand, before that rock, and that, the spleen of the earth, rock hard, diamond. Once before that, red-hot lava, boiling forever in the deepest cove.

“Siren,” Rachel asked aloud finally, “what are you? What form? Are you simply sound? What transformation do you embody?”

Vision. Auditory. All sensory. The lights.

“But...a form. I can’t see you. Don’t you need a form?”

Rich laughter bubbled up, sonorous across the water where a party boat floated that shouldn’t have been there. Or was it just lights on the surface?

A sound, my love. I can be found through sound and memory. Surf, skidding across the surface of the water, traveling just below. Swimming just below is faster than on top. You don’t have to go far but those few inches bring you to the other world, the other element. The birds fly just above for their delight. I travel just below. See what mysteries come up from the surface of your own skin. Approach me as this and I will give you a form. A shell. Something to mark me with. To mark Jasper.

What would it be? A tattoo of a mermaid, a mark on the skin, the skin cells coming up to the surface ten times faster than normal, too many layers crushed together at the surface and flaking into silvery scales. The skin was a secondary exit from the body, a flawed emergency route. This was how she knew herself.

And how does it feel to draw the salt to the surface, not to cry or sweat or bleed but right up to the top, like fat on a cooling stew—visible, white, by morning hardened like candy? Could you see that? Could you hear it rise? Could you feel the balance of your body shift?

Falling, speechless. Silence inside. Outside a roar. One moment activates another.

What I long for, Rachel, is to stop transforming. To hold still long enough to breathe. To have my story be told, rather than edited with each gasp. It's no good to see me. The form means nothing.

“But I need to see you,” said Rachel. “I need to believe.”

It is not necessary you believe me, believe in me, believe anything. I am nothing to you but a guide. Don't you want to follow one story from beginning to end? Instead of transforming each beginning and never moving forward? What am I to you?

“An icon. A force.”

Shoo, fly. Shoo fly pie to you, Rachel. Get your own life!

“I don't like my own history. I would change it. I would edit.”

Dismember?

“Stop!”

It's true—it's what you did, and it's what you're doing. Don't you know it yet? What would this story be without me? If it's nothing without me, it's nothing. Where are you going? Leave this place where nothing moves, only transforms. Leave my voice, then.

“No.”

Yes. Leave me. I'll go back.

“Do I hold you captive, Siren?”

A whole life plays out continuously till no thing remains the same but the beating heart, the warmth the blood sends into the core of the body. The bodies I press against me, astonished they are warm, living beings.

Stop looking so hard, Rachel. Just listen and answer, and then you will see me everywhere. My form sleek and silent, or large and big-boned, or tiny and lavish. I am the voice that calls whatever is inside you up to the surface like salt.

Chapter 2

Does the body miss the parts that are gone, the anterior cruciate ligament, the sloughed-off layers of skin, the missing strands of tangled hair? Does it miss the eggs fallen loose, the blood driven out monthly, the minerals that fall with it—iron, magnesium, ferrous sulfide? Does it miss the child? When Rachel dreamed, it was always to the edge of birth. Too late to go back. Too soon to know what would emerge, good or evil, devil or messiah.

The new ligament in her knee was from a donor, an Achilles tendon carved and grafted onto bone to grow and live again, walking across territory hitherto unknown to it: city streets, beaches and paths, bending into the shape of a lap and bouncing babies on its knee. Who knew where the knee would go now? And what of the known territory? Later, much later, some of her friends' children had to be coaxed into being. They resisted, sometimes for years despite the super ripening and enhancing chemicals dripped into their mothers' bodies, and all the tears dripped back out, until finally they held on, pulsing and waiting until it was time, whole rushing subway cars rising up from the tunnels.

The tendon was doused in solutions to rob it of who it was, take away all memory of its other body. But does the body retain its own memories regardless? Can we negate

them? Was her own knee anonymous as well? Someone had decided the ligament would live again. But it took time. At night, she still felt the leg lying there, a heavy, dead weight. The whole leg, not just the small dead section.

I can hear you, she dreamed. I can almost feel your breath in my ear, rippling the waves onto the beach, cajoling the planet to spin on its axis. Blue hair, black eyes, dreaming low and elegant, in and out of the womb.

Chapter 3

The truck bumped along the rutted dirt path between cottages in the center strip of island. Jasper tipped back the bottle of soda water and drained what was left, flattened bubbles echoing against his throat. Ahhhhhh. The truck thumped to a stop and in one long motion Jasper was out the door. Eventually the underside would rust. The salt had its effects. Rust and the rest. The rain had stopped and the sky was gray and dull, tired from its production of weather.

The cottages were all intact. There was probably water damage here and there and maybe a few things broken. He walked through the nearest break in the fragile dunes they built up each fall in anticipation of the storms, scooping up the sand into the beds of trucks and moving it from a wide place to one more narrow in hopes it would work. They had to do something, try something. Still the wind howled, *How dare you move my island? That is for me to do!*

He tried to tell them not to bother, the old-timers, the younger ones— his generation eager to become men like their fathers. Must Terrence III do just what his father would have expected? Did Dover love doing his job? Did Krafty love sitting behind a desk and racing through the subway to meetings? Jasper was the only one of them who boated across in winter, until the ice, the only one who stayed. And the truck, what did he do before the truck? He waited for the truck. There were only a few dozen permits for the whole island. The first few years he hoped for the truck.

It was low tide, seaweed and flotsam thrown up on the beach and abandoned. He picked up a big branch tossed about by the waves and used it as a walking stick for a few paces before dropping it again.

What brought him to the island, what held him there, were the voices of the trees, the wind and the water, they were simply home. He would not say it in that way to anyone he knew. It was the sound of the hammer against the boards and the sander scraping the floors clear of dirt and used-up surfaces, getting down to the layers that counted. Everything was held up by stilts, perched civilized, yet transferable to the wild, a place in-between.

He was a place in-between, stuck, but not stuck, a place he lived in as if it were his own. His own heart, his own true love, the Third Eye spot in his forehead. Rachel couldn't press it hard enough for him. Dig in with the thumb on bone, print her thumb onto it till the pressure encircled his skull. What was Rachel doing there, anyway? What was she doing with him? Once they had lain on the sand, heads on pillows of dune looking up at the night sky, and shooting stars came down in perfect arcs, too excited to stay up there where they belonged.

He walked along the beach in the direction of the club. The club was old and wouldn't last much longer.

There were bills. He had to write out bills for the work. Some of the bills were old. Cottagers sometimes pretended not to remember, for example, someone in the middle of a divorce, waiting for the estranged spouse to pay. They'd have to remember—he had done their work. How could it be forgotten?

His mother was threatening to come out early. At least she'd have Rachel to talk to. She was crazy but she liked Rachel. His mother never let him forget this wasn't his house. It was only hers by divorce, not by right. He lived on the island and she lived in her own mother's house in a town across the water. No wonder Sister went across the country, clear as far as she could go without falling into the next ocean. And no wonder Brother decided to be born again. Born of something else. Jasper wondered if he could cut her genes out of him, too. Brother thought he was inside something now.

He had to get started on the linoleum. She'd be wanting the linoleum. Screw it, though, he thought. It could wait till spring, till just before the renters arrived on the boat.

Had he saved a house? Really there was no saving them. A few more steps, the sand flat and soft and damp beneath his beat-up leather work boots, a band of white breaking the stretch of beach, the salt waves lapping over it, washing and covering, washing and covering.

Storms had cut away at the legs of the houses closest to the beach, the ones that used to stand hundreds of feet back, now set in the water and begging, imploring. It was the truth no one would speak about their own, only of others. If a house was going to be taken, it was. He could only prolong its life long enough to say goodbye. He just

extended the lease when he could. They could come out one last time if they chose, retrieve some of what they lost, start over again or go away and never return.

What would the builders have thought? They thought they built so far back. Or would they not be surprised? The ocean had thrown the island into being millions of years before. Now it kidnapped the sand grain by grain. Someday it would swallow it all back again, long slippery tail of island straight down the gullet, and the storms would hit the mainland directly. But not today.

Rachel got up from the couch. She went out to find Jasper. Though the cane was no good in the sand. She limped, stiff-legged, toward the beach.

“Rachel?” called Jasper across the dunes. “Is that you? Come, quick!”