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Junior Short Story Category – 3rd Prize 2021

PEARLS

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The boat skims over the water like a falcon in the wind. My hair flies behind me in a mess of brown knots. I hold onto the railing of the front of the boat and close my eyes.

I am a majestic eagle, soaring over the harsh and barren plains of the Australian desert, no thoughts in my mind except the long journey ahead. Sprigs of grass dot the red canvas that the sand makes, looking like a grasshopper on a rose petal. None shall forget the day that –
“Harper!” my Dad yells. “Get yourself over here!”

He’s a tough man, who’s generally stubborn. I see him make phone calls. He always answers “what?” if it’s a friend, or “yeah?” if it’s a stranger. I don’t know how in the world he married someone, let alone had a kid. Obviously I’m grateful for it, but I don’t see how his personality in the body of a massive, muscly, stubbly-bearded man could ever love anybody. But he does. I skip over to where Dad is. He’s wearing his usual denim shorts and New York shirt. He points into the foaming water next to where he is.

“Look!” he says.

I can tell there's pride in his voice, and I know that doesn't sound very tough, but to anyone else, it would. It's just that Mum and I know him so well, we've learnt to figure out every precious little hint that his voice gives us. As you've probably guessed, he isn't the most open and welcoming guy. I peer into the water and see a glimmer of green. And grey. My first thought was a mouldy dolphin, but Dad looks sad. I can tell because his nose flares slightly and his eyebrows lower a little way. A mouldy dolphin would make him happy. I look harder and see it's severed fingers and fuzzy domes. I recoil in horror. Dad nods.

“Sad, right? I mean, all those living and breathing creations...gone...”

I suddenly wonder why Dad brought me here. I know he runs a fund for the Great Barrier Reef. He has since he was 21, firstly because a dude in the pub said he couldn't do it, and secondly because he is, deep down, a genuinely nice guy, even though he tries very hard to disguise it. So why has Dad taken me to an abundance of severed fingers and fuzzy domes?

“Carlijn, turn off the engine!” Dad calls out.

The engine stops and my mum hurries out. She's a flighty, tense, tall, caramel-haired genius. She's originally from Amsterdam, and you pronounce her name Carlayn. At least, that what Dad has always called her.

“What is it?” says mum, slightly distressed.

She's beautiful. She's smart. She's nice. But she worries over everything. I almost had a perfect Mum. Dad points into the water and Mum peers over. From the way she tries to stand further back while leaning forward, I'm pretty sure she thinks it's a shark. Mum slaps a hand to her mouth like it's even worse. And severed fingers are. She's also part of Dad's Great Barrier Reef fund. She was his main donator – that's how they met. I think Mum struck his soft spot. Now she's Co-Manager. Mum places a trembling hand on my shoulder and holds it so tight I feel like she snapped my bone in half. She feels me flinch and lets go.

“Chris, that's – that's – ”

Mum's lost for words. Dad smiles sadly at both of us; one of the few treats no one else receives.

“Well, we better go check it out,” he says weakly.

I gape, aghast.

“Dad, that’s – no! I don’t want to see severed fingers!”

Dad frowns at me, then starts laughing. I glare at him. Severed fingers aren’t funny. He shakes his head.

“It’s coral, Harper! Relax!” Dad chortles.

I open my mouth to argue, but I look closer and see it is actually coral. And that’s what the fuzzy domes are as well. Except it’s grey and there are no fish. My heart sinks. It’s all dead. It’s horrible. It’s like going to the cinema without popcorn or a movie. I raise my eyebrows, confused, and Dad wanders into the cabin section of the boat. Mum steps forward and kneels in front of me.

“I know it’s bad, Harper. But it will be OK. This is what we care for. We’ll help.”

I know that this is what is happening to the entire barrier reef. An explosion of colour and life reduced to some grey scraps. I stare out at the water, and a single tear wells in my eye. Mum stares at it, too. She looks sadder than I’ve ever seen her. Mum continues.

“We – we will. We will help.”

But she sounds doubtful. How can my highly-strung mum, my dad that can’t tell anyone his feelings and a scrawny kid like me save the entire barrier reef? We needed more money, something we didn’t have. I remember a class in Humanities I hadn’t really been paying attention to, but I should have. I try to summon up all I could.

“I think thirty percent of the Great Barrier Reef is lost forever,” I said.

Mum bites her lip and nods. I remember something else clearly.

“At this rate, the Great Barrier Reef will be gone completely by 2050.”

And the worst thing about that is I will be alive then, and I will experience it disappear.

Adults are destroying the reef and leaving it for the next generation to fix and suffer for it.

Not fair. And this next thing is something even I can see without using Google.

“It will affect humans, right? I mean, if the reef disappears, heaps of fish will die, other reefs that rely on those fish will die, people and animals that rely on those reefs and fish will die, there’ll be no more seafood, no more reef tourism, and people will lose their jobs, and people will run out of money, and food, and will be hungry, and won’t buy anything so other people will get poor, and then everyone will be poor and we’ll all starve.”

I said this so fast it took mum ten seconds to take it all in. When she did, she sat down on a crate, staring aimlessly at the sea.

“I know you see it, Harper,” she said softly, “but no-one else does. They think...they think that fish and coral and beauty doesn’t matter. But they’re wrong.”

Mum’s Dutch accent makes it sound even sadder.

She curses under her breath, and I can faintly hear “we hebben meer hulp nodig.”

I immediately know it is Dutch, because that’s her first language.

“What does that mean?” I ask her.

Mum looks up quick with wide eyes, half like she hadn’t expected me to hear, and half like she was regretful of saying it at all. Mum opens her mouth, but Dad comes out dressed in a wetsuit, and holds two others.

“We’re going snorkling!” he said, trying to sound cheerful but failing.

You are a graceful giant, popular to the smaller people. You are floating over an abandoned city, once loved and bustling with life, but now in ruins. You see hints of past life, such as a fragment of colour, soon to be decayed and lifeless like the rest. Occasionally you see small troops of citizens returning to their childhood homes to raise their own family, joyful and excited, but they see it in ruins. They search through the remains, hopeful it is all a mistake, but slowly turn around and look for a city further away. Tiny hearts and big hearts all crushed in one go.

If the water was cold, I didn’t feel it. It was shallow. Dad was in front of me, picking up

sticks of coral then letting them float back down. Mum was behind me, just staring at it all, hopelessly miserable. I take off my snorkel and grip it tightly. I swim down, my flippers paddling wildly, and touch the seabed. I run my fingers through the sand and remains of the coral. I look at what was once a shelter for baby fish, and a cradle for eggs, and a breeding ground for others. Where little animals met old friends and found new ones, where there was trust and loyalty, teamwork and protection, betrayal and death. I push off the seabed because my lungs are aching and burst into the air, gasping for breath. I look down into the rippling water and see a blur of grey. I think I see a shimmer. I frown and peer closer. Yes! There definitely is something shiny. I dive down. Life, maybe! It might be recovering. I swim down with my goggles firmly on my eyes. It's a giant clam. It's probably dead. My heart sinks to the bottom of the seabed. Still, it interests me. I swim back up for a breath, then dive down again. I grab a stick of coral and poke it and tap it. No movement. I take another breath, go back and swim around to its open mouth. There's something in there. A pearl! Except it's huge! Thoughts whizz through my head. Amazing! This will give us money to save the Barrier Reef! Well, some of it, at least. It's bigger than a football! It's in perfect condition, shiny and untouched. It reminds me of an opal I found in the desert when we didn't have enough money to fly back home. I'm very good at finding valuable stuff at the right time. I suddenly realise my lungs ache for air, so I swim back up.

"Mum! Dad!" I yell.

"Shark!" Mum replies.

Shark?

I hardly think about it before I'm doing my best freestyle back to the boat. My arms look like windmills as I speed through the water. Once I've climbed up the railing and am watching Dad tread water patiently, I realise it was a false alarm. If only a shark had been chasing me on the school swimming carnival. That would've gotten me first in every race. Mum looks embarrassed.

"Don't worry, Harper!" Dad laughs. "It was my flipper, not a shark fin she saw!"

Mum goes as red as a beetroot. I sigh with relief and annoyance, then remember what the adrenaline had made me forget.

“Mum, Dad! I found something!” I cry.

They both look at me, amazed, as I show them my discovery.

The pearl was sold for a lot of money. I don't know how much, because that's not the sort of thing I pay attention to. Who cares about metal circles and colourful pieces of paper? The only thing I knew was that it was enough to save the part of the Barrier Reef near where we found the pearl, so the fish with nowhere to go had somewhere to go. You cannot imagine my excitement and joy to see the explosion of colours and life. It felt like going to the cinema for the second time and finally getting popcorn and seeing the movie. Despite the positivity of it all, I still wasn't happy because – firstly – Mum and Dad had kept some of the money for us. I would have much preferred it to go to the reef. And – secondly – it wasn't enough to save the entire reef. We only helped about one percent of it. So unless Aussies like me do something now, all of the Barrier Reef will be gone way before my generation goes to heaven. I'll only be 41 when it goes. All of it a junkyard of death and misery. Fifty percent of it is already dead or dying. We can save those dying reefs, but the rest of it is gone forever. At this rate the entire reef will be gone by 2050. And later I searched up what Mum had said in Dutch under her breath.

She was right.

We need more help.