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### Sirenia

Chris steered his boat past the jetty on Government Cut and headed south towards Virginia Key. It was still early, before 8:00 a.m., so the only traffic on Biscayne Bay was the various workboats that plied their trade on the water. There were ferries transporting car passengers from Fisher Island to Terminal Island, there were low-slung diesel transports that delivered fuel, and there was a yellow tug with the big letters P-I-L-O-T painted on the hull. It was ferrying a ship's pilot, a specialist, out to the designated offshore anchorage area where deep-draft tankers waited to be navigated into port. Considering the latter, Chris knew that ships with more than a seven foot draft required an expert, one who knew the waters of Biscayne Bay like the back of his hand in order to steer the large vessels through the dredged-out cut and into the Port of Miami. Before they could even begin the maneuvering, the pilot had to board the huge ship, which often meant a precarious climb up a rope ladder dangling from the ship's rail, not an easy task in heavy seas.

The big boats were a visual anomaly, considering that the depths of these waters were mostly a mere four to five feet, and in some places less than that, so if you weren't paying attention, it was easy to hang your boat up on a shoal. Often, boaters new to the bay's shallow landscape got themselves into trouble, which put a damper on their recreational plans, but with their props and deep-V hulls caused havoc as they plowed

through the beds of sea grass below them. The huge swaths cut through the lush undersea prairies and scarred the fragile ecosystem, depriving the many sea creatures like Seahorses, Cowfish, and the rose-scented Sea Hare of their nutrition and habitat.

Towboats could be seen drifting near the commonly known high spots waiting for the inevitable ill informed, insensitive, and incensed boaters to go aground. In all his years on the water, Chris could see that nature didn't stand a chance as long as people, hell-bent on having a good time, were at the wheel of a fast speedboat.

From his steering console on the wooden flats-boat, Chris glanced back towards the receding skyline of Miami, which towered from the oolitic ridge that formed the geologic backbone of the mainland. The international banks and office towers that crowded the water's edge were a disparate counterpoint to the aquatic world a stone's throw away. East of the mainland, and connected by man-made islands, were the glamorous jet-set hotels of South Beach and their glitterati-condos hemorrhaging onto the beaches, which interested Chris not in the least.

He had been born at a Miami hospital but he might as well have been birthed from the inner water of his mother's womb directly into the saline waters of the bay, as that was the only world he knew. Chris was at home in these waters and there was no place he would rather be. For as long as he could remember he was snorkeling, fishing, or boating around the bay, first in his youth, then now, as a Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve officer. His normal duties took him daily from Haulover Cut to the north and down to Homestead in the south, monitoring all the waters in between.

Mostly he performed routine assessment of the rich biotic ecosystem in Biscayne Bay. Some days there were Leatherback Turtle nests to move, or signs to post to warn

beach-goers of new Crocodile breeding habitats, or tests of underwater samples to monitor fragile *Cauleppa* and *Auramillae* algal populations. It didn't matter much to Chris as he would rather be on the water, these waters specifically, than anywhere else on the planet.

In his youth his father, a biology professor at the University of Miami, taught classes in phyto- and zooplanktons, but his true passion, other than Chris' mother, was fly fishing for *Cynoscion nebulosus*, *Centropomus undecimalis*, and his favorite, the *Albulidae vulpes*; otherwise known as Sea Trout, Snook, and Bonefish. He would often lecture from his perch; the poling platform built over the boat's outboard Merc, to his wife and son, a world away in the bow. She would read from one of her many books on metaphysics, which amused Chris's father to no end, while the youngster was anxious to move off the flats and into one of the many coves for some snorkeling and exploring the world beneath the surface.

It was to one of these coves that Chris was now steering his boat, the same boat his father used as a floating lectern so many years ago. The rising mound of Red Mangroves emerged out of the overcast morning sky as Virginia Key slowly came into view. He pushed on towards the dense lowland key. As he approached the oncoming shore, he spun the steering wheel hard to the left, causing his boat to veer sharply to port, laying out a spray in his wake.

Chris felt good; in fact, he was feeling better than he thought he would today. General gladness was his predilection when he was in his natural habitat, but then his mood dissolved a bit as his thoughts brought him back to the reason for this journey to Virginia Key. The overcast clouds would soon burn off as the insistent sun climbed

higher in the south Florida sky, but his somber mood was not contingent on the weather. This day was bound to upset him as he was awash in childhood memories, the only memories from his childhood that mattered-- the last time he remembered them all being together, the last time his mother smiled at him in the dreamy way she did, and the last time he remembered being really, really happy.

He vividly recalled that long-ago day. They were on the boat as usual, his dad was sending out long graceful arcs of fly line, with a crustacean pattern tied on the line's tippet, into the prowling bonefish's predatory view. His mother was curled up in the bow, a languid hand absentmindedly fingering the water as the slow drift of the boat carried them all along. She was reading as usual. Today it was a book on reincarnation, one of his mom's favorite subjects. She glanced over the top of her book at the bored ten-year-old boy and asked him if he could be anything, other than what he was, and what would he be? Chris said he would be some kind of a fish but he didn't know which because he loved them all. Then his mom put in plain words to her son, in words he could understand, ideas about karmic law and the wheel of reincarnation. She carefully explained to him how a person's life experiences were recorded on the individual's soul. If the person learned the current lessons on the soul's current journey, especially without hurting anybody or anything, the person would come back in the next life as a higher-evolved being to continue the soul's mission towards spiritual progress. If, on the other hand, the person made choices against his soul's path, which manifested in hurting him or others, the soul would return as a lesser-evolved being, in order to revisit earlier lessons and glean the necessary wisdom before a reincarnation to a higher vibration was possible. His mother loved everything concerned with spirituality and the 'great mystery', as she

called it, and always assured Chris to be unafraid and to embrace life with love, wonder, and respect. While it was his father that instilled a scientist's knowledge of the natural world it was his mother's intuitive grasp that nurtured a deep love and respect for Nature in which Chris lived his life as a grown man.

Chris' boat circumnavigated the key now and he cut the boat's speed in half as he came up to the south of the island. He knew by feel and the accumulated knowledge of a hundred such passages to the cove of his youth that he was nearing the place where he always came back to—where he always returned to remember.

The sun was higher in the sky now. The last, nearly extinct, beds of Johnson Sea Grass, would be waving in unison below his hull as the inter-tidal flats once teeming, but now scarce with Sea Urchins, Blue Crabs, Spotted Eagle Rays, and the occasional Bottlenose Porpoise, which would often swim ahead in his boat's bow thrust in the clear warm waters. Chris knew from direct observation that the health of the bay had deteriorated significantly during the last 35 years he had been coming out here, but on the surface nothing looked out of place; everything looked exactly the same as it always had.

He could see the cove now, but more apparent to him, he could feel it. It called to him; he was drawn back to this sheltered lagoon each year at this time, on this particular day, to feel his soul and to connect with the happiness he had once known so long ago when he was ten. It was here in the journey, at the first glimpse of the hidden cove, that he would go back in his mind to the precious memory of that that long ago day.

After the morning spent fishing, they glided their craft into the softened waters of this inlet for a beach picnic. Young Chris finally got to don his mask, fins, and snorkel and do some serious exploration of the quiet cove. Mother set out a spread of cucumber,

tomato, and onion sandwiches, potato salad and lemonade; while Father quietly annotated his fishing diary, ever the scientist recording numbers, lengths, and widths of fish caught and released. After a lazy lunch, the two of them stretched out on the blanket in the shade, their hands touching, as they drifted off into a shallow sleep, the boy was much too interested in the nearby underwater world to sleep now.

Chris returned to the water and it was here, in the silence, as the slanted light cascaded into the shallow pool, that his life made sense. Dad warned him of the intrusive shark and the dangers of certain jellyfish and rays that could sting and paralyze him. While he occasionally encountered these creatures, in his heart he was too filled with his mother's karmic-infused gentleness and love to be much bothered, let alone afraid. Every now and then a playful Porpoise would enter the hidden bay in search of Goby to gorge on. A school of Sergeant Majors darted amongst the waving sea grass as a baby Octopus extended its tentacles and pulled itself inside an abandoned Conch shell. Yet there was no animal, plant or otherwise, that attracted the young explorer's attention, and kept it in thrall, than that of the Manatee.

There were always Manatees in this cove. Usually they would be grazing the lush sea grass beds, which were rich with life and plentiful extending from the bay right into the shallow inlet. There would often be several of the large animals, sometimes with calves, resting or even 'playing' in the protected pool. Air-breathers, Manatees rose to the surface every few minutes to take some air in through their nostrils, followed by a plunge into the shimmery vegetation often leaving a 'plume' of water pulsating at the surface when they made their dive. Chris snorkeled to within inches of the huge animals but was always respectful of their space; his mother often reminded him that it was he

who visited their lagoon, and not the other way around. Even still, he couldn't help reaching out to touch the smooth leathery skin on the single flat fluke as they passed by.

Chris' mom especially loved the Manatee. She would say that above all other animals the Manatee was the one she would reincarnate as in her next life. They were gentle and quiet, spending their days grazing grass, resting in the shallows, and nurturing their young. They didn't appear to be afraid of anything and were never seen to be in a hurry to do anything either. Chris' mom laughed gaily saying that—certainly nothing could be more of an exalted, or evolved, life form on this planet.

Chris emerged from the pool quickened by the company of the many aquatic animals and beamed from his close proximity to the gentle giants. When Chris mentioned his having being so close to them, his father said something to the effect of, "Ahh, a *Trichechus manatus*, of the Sirenia family-- mammalian, air-breathers, and herbivorous," while his mother sighed longingly and said, "Love, and be one with all and everything, my little Manatee pup!" Chris tossed his dive gear to the side and joined his parents on the blanket.

Though not cold he shivered a bit as his mother dried his hair; his father then produced a small cake with candles on it. He lit them and they sang Happy Birthday in a jangling chorus to the contented wife and mother. Finally after a pause, she emerged from her closed-eye trance to blow out the candles. Chris pleaded to hear her wish, but all she did was cast a glance at the rising plumes of a nearby Manatee's soft underwater passage, smiled and assured him that in his soul he already knew the answer.

Father produced a small package wrapped in colorful paper and ribbons, which mother unwrapped slowly and very carefully. Chris jumped out of his skin; didn't she

know you were supposed to tear into these things with abandon letting the paper and ribbons scatter to the four corners? Even still, she paused as each unfolded layer came to reveal a small cardboard box, which protected a smaller still, black felt box. Mother paused and pressed the hinged case close to her breast, but before opening it she reached out to both her boys and pulled them into her, kissing them both, father on his lips and Chris on the cheek. She then reminded them that they were her favorite gifts of all. Then, finally, holding the box close to her face she radiated joy as her face broke into a hundred smiles. She withdrew a golden necklace. A delicate chain held an even more delicate image of an angelic girl holding a small white pearl. Young Chris didn't know it at the time but the golden girl was actually a golden mermaid. It was exquisitely carved, perfectly simple, and gracefully reminiscent of his mother's youthful face. Chris' father asked her without any trace of dry scientific candor, "Would you be my mermaid?" Gleefully she replied, "Of course, you handsome merman." Then embracing her son, she said, "And you are my lovely, lovely merboy."

The much older Chris nosed his slender craft into the still waters of the cove. Nothing was that much different from the days of his boyhood, the day of that long-passed birthday celebration. Except now there was a sign posted at the entrance of the cove that proclaimed it to be a protected Manatee sanctuary; this was a 'No Entry Zone', no boats of any kind, no humans, boated or otherwise, were permitted in the quiet waters within.

Here was a refuge, one of the last, which was set aside exclusively for Manatees to graze the clear still pools for the diminished sea grass, rest in the glade-like opulence,



and nurture their playful calves free from the incessant throb of the powered, human, existence outside the magical stillness within this sheltered break.

Chris shouldn't be there either, even with his government-sanctioned status, but none-the-less he was. He cut his motor completely and tilted the prop out of the water. He untied the pole, which hung in a special place under the gunwale and proceeded to the back of the boat where he climbed up onto the casting platform. Chris used the pole to push his boat into the shallow waters, aware now that if someone were to see him in the protected cove, there were sure to be consequences.

But now, as every time before, he let go the things of the outer world-- fear, anger, resentment; all the things he experienced soon after that birthday so long ago, soon after the rare and fatal disease that took the only thing, the only person, that ever mattered. It seemed like it was only days after the gay beach celebration that the effects of the mutating cells revealed the other aspect of perfect love, that being perfect suffering. The cancer spread quickly through his mother and as efficiently as any swimming creature under the sea of her swelling skin, and too soon, too final, she was gone; gone forever from his life, from his once treasured serenity, from his and his father's broken hearts.

A continual and never ending loneliness crept into his being. He never really connected with people after his mother passed away. His father ceased fishing and became distant from the little boy. Chris' only relief came when he was on the water, when he was swimming amongst the many sea creatures, when he sojourned in the nurturing presence of the quiet Nature. And so he grew up, the once happy little boy

became a sad isolated one eventually growing into a quiet introspective man living his life in the slowly diminishing sea.

He let all of that go now, as he always did, as he forced himself to learn how to, but especially here in the cove where only good memories were allowed to exist. He saw the pain rise up from the depths of a murky place and then with the gentle strength of a learned habit he let it melt into the nothingness from where they'd emerged and turned his being, the vessel of his soul, over to the place of his true abode, into this, the holy of holies, the glistening pool.

From this instinct, from his soul's code, he knew they were here as well, as they always were, as they always had been. Lolling in the clear waters and every few minutes or so rising for a lungful of air before sinking to the bottom, Manatees were surfing the soft vegetation. Chris continued on until the bow of the slender watercraft nosed onto a spit of sand. He sprightly hopped ashore and pulled the boat up onto the beach a bit farther before he slipped out of his clothes. Naked, except for the golden mermaid dangling from his neck, he waded out into the water. Submerging into the gentle pulse of an aqueous light, Chris could feel their solemn presence and see several of the tranquil beings nearby lounging.

Soon enough he was swimming in their midst, gliding by their pliant skin and reaching out to caress the graceful animals as they slipped by him in the iridescent light. An older female, with her juvenile close by, were foraging in the grass. After a few minutes they began to frolic with the others in the warm waters. Chris swam in tandem mirroring their swoops and rolls, rising before they did to gulp refreshing air before returning to the depths and their gentle company. The elegant underwater ballets

continued for a while until the matriarchal Manatee allowed Chris to stroke her back and gently caress her single fluke. On one of her many circuits of the pool she paused and floated into a tail stand and let Chris approach her face to face. He brought himself up and held her flipper. After a few moments he nuzzled her neck laying his head onto her shoulder for a few moments before gently pushing away to gaze into her softened eyes, and then from deep, deep within his heart he visualized in his mind's eye the words he knew she could sense—Happy Birthday Mother, I love you.