

Mermaids
A ten-minute play
By Jessica Huang
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Copyright: Jessica Huang
7350 Cactus Curve
Chanhassen, MN 55317
(952) 240-0420
JessicaRH.1207@gmail.com

Characters:

DON wears a large hooded sweatshirt and, almost an afterthought, a plaid scarf. He might be balding, but he hides it well.

CECILIA is bundled in a puffy coat, hat, mittens and scarf – the works. Under the hem of her coat, though, hangs an impractically spring-colored floral dress.

Setting: The play takes place near the Atlantic Ocean somewhere in New England. Everything – rocks, waves, trees and benches – can be implied or silhouettes. Or not. It's cold, rainy and miserable.

(Lights up on DON and CECILIA, standing center stage. DON's hands are thrust deep in his sweatshirt pockets; the hood is up. He shivers, a little, bounces from foot to foot and whistles. CECILIA's long, floral dress billows in the wind. She is silent.)

Well, here it is. DON

(nods)
That's it. CECILIA

Happy Birthday. DON

Thanks. CECILIA

(DON takes a step toward CECILIA. She notices and folds her arms)

Are you cold? DON

A little. CECILIA

I told you to wear pants. DON

I wanted to dress up for my birthday. CECILIA

It's freezing. DON

I bought it for today. CECILIA

Still— DON

It took me four hours at Macy's. CECILIA

DON

(he shakes his head)
Cecilia...

CECILIA

It's impossible to find something that both looks nice and hides the—

DON

It's beautiful, Ok? Sorry. I just want you to be safe.
(CECILIA is silent)
So. What do you think?

CECILIA

About what?

DON

The ocean, darling. The Vast and Blue... um, gray today I suppose, but still, it sure is mighty, isn't it?

CECILIA

(turning to leave)
It's a big lake.

DON

Oh, Cecelia. Look. For miles and miles, there's no hint of another shore.

CECILIA

Miles and miles and miles. Of lake.

DON

Maybe I built it up.

CECILIA

Maybe.
(she gestures for him to follow)
I'm hungry.

DON

Just wait a little longer. The tide's coming in. You'll be more impressed when the tide comes in.

CECILIA

Let's go somewhere and get meatball subs. I used to love those – just dripping, oozing, with mozzarella cheese and marinara sauce—

DON

We just had breakfast.

CECILIA

I only had cereal. And it was hours ago.

DON

Well, we'll get lunch soon. Ok? Whatever you want.

(She says nothing. He smiles, nods, and swings his arms)

Now listen, Cilia, when the tide comes in, you'll see these – enormous – breakers and the sound of the waves on those boulders out there, well, you'll just have to—

(He holds his arm out and turns to look at her. CECILIA had taken a cigarette from her purse and, with some difficulty, lit it with her mittened hands. She takes a deep drag, smiles and exhales slowly, playing with the smoke.)

DON

You're smoking? The doctor told you—

CECILIA

I wish I could see one.

DON

You can't keep—

CECILIA

A mermaid. Like in fairy tales.

DON

Now's not the time.

CECILIA

It's my birthday, Don.

DON

I know, but—

CECILIA

So I think I'm entitled to a little celebration.

DON

That's not a good idea.

CECILIA

It's not like one cigarette would make up the difference anyway.

DON

But if you look at it that way, darling, it'll be one and then another and then another. And you know what else? You weren't going to eat red meat anymore either. You've got to try to take care of yourself.

CECILIA

So? There aren't any mermaids anyway.

DON

I don't understand

CECILIA

All this way for nothing.

DON

You mean out there?

CECILIA

(nodding)

When the tide comes in.

DON

(smiling)

No, Cilia, no. No mermaids.

CECILIA

All those antique maps, those fairy tale stories.

DON

Oh. Well, you see, they were written, drawn, before whales or dolphins – you know the like– had been discovered. Those old sailors must have been a little homesick you know? For their beautiful wives, or girlfriends, or whatever. And worried too, no doubt, it was treacherous out there. And they fantasized that they saw some bare-breasted creature alongside the ship.

CECILIA

That's so sad.

DON

It's rather romantic, I think.

CECILIA

That, too. I wish they were out there, though, singing their songs and flipping their fins. Things don't really work out the way you expect, do they?

DON

Sometimes they do. The ocean is beautiful anyway. Doesn't it smell... bright?

CECILIA

Can't we go, Don? I'm getting tired.

DON

(springing to her side)

Here, why don't you sit down for a minute.

(he leads her, gingerly, to a bench)

Sit for a minute, ok? I want you to see the tide. When you hear those breakers, you'll see.

CECILIA

Will you sit with me?

DON

Of course.

(He sits. Fidgets.)

CECILIA

It doesn't smell all that bright to me. It smells like dead fish.

DON

There are dead fish in the ocean, too, I suppose. But I mean the spray. You'll see what I mean when the tide comes in.

CECILIA

I doubt it. All I'll smell is seaweed. And dead fish.

DON

Try to sniff around it.

CECILIA

You know what happens when fish die, Don?

DON

Cecilia, look. You've got to cheer up and think positively, ok?

CECILIA

They decompose.

DON

Plenty of people have to take two or even three swings at it before they kill it for good. And you're stronger than most of them.

CECILIA

That's what happens. Things rot and disintegrate and later, there's no sign they ever even lived.

DON

(Jumping up)

You know what'll help? Some nice, hot tea. It'll warm you up. You know? I saw a little shop about a mile up the road. Why don't you stay here, and I'll run back and get a mug for you. "It's a Grind," I think it was called. How clever.

CECILIA

They have those in every town.

DON

It'll make you feel better. You know it will.

CECILIA

I don't like tea.

DON

Hot chocolate, then.

CECILIA

Please, just sit with me.

(He does. They stare at the ocean for a moment)

CECILIA

Let's stay one more night.

DON

We can't do that.

CECILIA

Skip work. Call in sick. You haven't skipped work in so long.

DON

I wish I could. I do.

CECILIA

Just one more night. We'll have four martinis at the bar. Eat french fries and beans and get fast food for good measure. Spend hours having incredible drunken sex...

DON

You have an appointment tomorrow.

I'll reschedule.

CECILIA

That's not a good idea.

DON

Or maybe I'll just skip it all together.

CECILIA

You have to be kidding.

DON

I'm not kidding.

CECILIA

You can't skip treatment.

DON

I'm not kidding, Don.

CECILIA

Be rational, honey.

DON

I'm not kidding. I'm not kidding, I don't like tea, and I wanted to wear a dress on my birthday.

CECILIA

(She sits tall on the bench and turns her gaze to the ocean)

And there aren't any mermaids.

DON

Look at me.

DON

(she does)

CECILIA

What?

DON

You're going to be fine.

DON

You don't know that.

CECILIA

I do. Last time—

DON

CECILIA

I know, Don. But there's always a chance.

DON

Well if there's a chance of that, then there's a chance of mermaids.

(The two sit in silence for a moment.)

CECILIA

Tide's coming in.

DON

Listen.

(The waves crash on the rocks. There might be a song, low, female, faint, beneath the waves)

CECILIA

(leaning her head on Don's shoulder)

Skip work tomorrow.

(The song, if that's what it is, grows just slightly louder. DON rests his head on CECILIA's and looks out at the water.)

DON

Alright.

(The waves splash. The tide rolls in. And in the distance, maybe, the silhouette of a fin crashes into the ocean.)

(End of play.)