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Opening extract from

The Madness

Written by

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I

A Mermaid on the Beach

By the time she was fourteen years old, Marnie Gunn could swim like a fish. Hardly a day went by when her flannel shift was not hung out by the fire to dry. Often as not, it was still damp in the morning when she pulled it back on and went to the beach with Ma to attend to Smoaker Nash's bathing machines.

It was Ma that'd made Marnie go in the sea every day to begin with. 'The best cure in the world,' she said. 'Make you strong and hearty, it will.' Marnie was only five at the time and thought Ma was trying to drown her. She would yell and hit Ma with her small fists, and kick at her with her one good leg. But Marnie was only little and no match for her mother. Ma would put Marnie under her arm and carry her down to the iron-grey sea. She would grip Marnie tight around the waist and plunge her under the freezing waves again and again. Marnie's voice would shrink to nothing with the shock of it.

'I won't have no cripple for a daughter,' Ma would say. Marnie

soon learned not to protest. For worse than the piercing cold of the ocean was the hot sting of the horsewhip that Ma would crack over the backs of her legs to 'harden her up'.

Marnie had no choice but to learn to love the ocean. After a while Ma began to loosen her grip and Marnie was astonished to find she could swim. It was easy and natural.

Soon, Marnie couldn't imagine life without her daily bathes. It was true what Ma said. She did grow stronger every day, and while she was in the water, she didn't have to use her stick or think of her twisted leg or the cruel taunts of the village children who would spit and laugh at her because she was different.

When the children gathered on the lane to trundle their hoops or play tip-cat, Marnie would hobble past as quickly as she could. Sometimes, she would thrust her stick out into the path of a rolling hoop and send it toppling into the hedgerows. It felt good to spoil their silly games. She let their angry cries and nasty words wash over her as she hurried down to the sea. '*Imbecile!*' '*Muttonhead!*'

Marnie didn't care. She had something they didn't. She had the sea and its soothing whispers and comforting embrace. She could swim for further and for longer than any of them. When they hoiked up their skirts and rolled up their britches to splash in the shallows, Marnie would swim far out, past the breakers, where the screech of the gulls and the idle sighs of the waves were the only sounds she could hear. From that distance, the village children looked like nothing more than stray dogs and Marnie could see the bathing machines spread out along the shoreline and the figures of Ma and the other dippers standing solidly in the water.

Ma was the best dipper in the whole of Clevedon. Ladies came from all over to take the sea-cure and they all wanted Ma to dip them. She had a way about her that had the ladies laying in her arms like docile babies.

The ladies didn't look anything like Ma. Ma smoked a pipe for one thing. She was broad and stout with arms as thick and brown as the blacksmith's. She was almost as strong as the blacksmith too, and could stand up to her waist in the sea most of the day, holding the ladies afloat on the waves.

The ladies came on the train from Yatton Junction. They brought huge leather trunks with them and piles of fancy bandboxes. All the ladies were pale and fragile-looking, like they'd never seen a bit of sun or wind. Marnie thought they wore far too many clothes. They were covered in layers of velvet and lace, with tight jackets and huge skirts that seemed to take up the width of the esplanade. They wore close-fitting bonnets decorated with frills, ribbons, flowers and stuffed birds. Their hands were enclosed in tight white gloves, even on the hottest of days. Marnie thought she would die if she had to wear that many clothes.

Marnie liked to watch the ladies, though. She would stand bare-foot at the top of the beach steps and stare wide-eyed as the pale creatures glided along the esplanade twirling frothy parasols in their gloved hands. Although she wasn't aware of it, Marnie's raw beauty drew the stares of the visitors too. With her yellow hair hanging down her back like thick ropes of tangled seaweed and with eyes as startling and blue as hedgerow cornflowers, she could have been a creature of myth washed ashore in a storm.

But then the visitors would glance down and spy her stick and twisted leg. They would recoil and move away to the other side of the esplanade, as though by being too close they could catch something nasty. A long time ago, the stares of the ladies used to hurt Marnie, like being struck by sharp stones. But now she was used to it and the disgust in their eyes bounced off her salted skin without leaving a mark. She had learned not to cry. It didn't change a thing. Instead she would stick out her hand towards the ladies, making them back away even further. 'Spare a penny, madam?' she would ask, trying not to smile as they spluttered and blushed. On occasion she would be rewarded with a few coins and would treat herself to the biggest pastry in Miss Cranston's shop window. She would eat her prize slowly, licking the cream from the centre and letting the buttery pastry melt on her tongue. It tasted all the sweeter if the village children walked by and saw her; she relished the greed and envy in their eyes more than the delights of a dozen of the creamiest pastries.

Marnie always made sure her lips were free of crumbs before she went back home to the cottage. Ma would have beaten her black and blue if she ever caught wind of her tricks.

It was a warm June morning and Clevedon was busy. The guesthouses were full to bursting and Miss Cranston's Tea House was doing a roaring trade. Smoaker Nash's bathing machines were fully booked now the tide was at its highest. Marnie knew she couldn't go in for another swim, not now the water's edge was packed with the machines. Ma had told her time and time again that the ladies needed their privacy. She

couldn't go over to Byron's Bay either. That's where the men bathed naked and now that Marnie was fourteen, Ma said it was high time she practised modesty.

Marnie was bored. She didn't want to go and help Smoaker in his proprietor's hut, although she knew Ma would expect her to. She was too hot and listless. She usually liked collecting the sixpences that each bather paid for a half-hour use of a machine. She liked to drop the silver coins through the slit in the top of Smoaker's tin box and hear them rattle to the bottom like small pebbles. She liked to help clean out the bathing machines too, after the horses trundled them back up the beach and the bathers emerged, fully clothed again, but shivering and bedraggled.

Marnie would climb up the wooden steps of the machines and into the snug interiors that smelt of damp wood and the flowery scent of perfumed ladies. With the doors at either end shut it was dim inside, the only light coming from tiny windows set high up on the sides of the machines. After Marnie had gathered up damp towels, she would sweep wet sand from the floors and look under the benches that ran the length of the machines to see if anything had been left behind. Once she'd found a fancy button that shone like the inside of a shell. Another time she'd found a hair comb with broken teeth. It was carved with swirls and curls and looked as if it was made out of bone that had been washed by the sea. Marnie had put these treasures in the pocket of her frock and hidden them under an old firebrick in the backyard of the cottage in Ratcatcher's Row.

But Marnie wasn't in the mood for treasure hunting now,

nor did she want to be carting about heavy armfuls of wet towels. She wanted to be back in the sea, cooling herself in the clean, bright water and imagining herself to be all alone; just a dot in the middle of the wide, wide ocean.

Marnie sighed. She wandered away from the esplanade and back down to the beach; she didn't want Smoaker to spy her if he poked his head out of his hut. Marnie was tired of the busy season now. She couldn't wait for the ladies to pack up their trunks and go back to Yatton Junction to catch their trains home. Then the sea would be all hers again for a while, and she wouldn't have to share it or put up with anyone's pitying stares.

Above the noise of the lapping waves, the heavy crunch of horses' hooves on shingle and the creaking and rumbling of bathing-machine wheels, Marnie heard the din of voices. She turned to look and saw a small crowd gathered on the slipway outside Smoaker's hut. There seemed to be an excitement in the air. People were pausing from their usual business and turning their heads.

Marnie held up her hand to shield her eyes from the sun and saw two footmen, dressed in gold livery coats, black breeches and white stockings, carrying something heavy on to the beach. Their powdered hair had come loose and was sticking to the sweat on their foreheads. There were several maids in black dresses and starched white aprons running to and fro, flapping their hands about, and a boy in a blue suit standing very still in the middle of it all.

Then there was Smoaker, marching down the slipway towards a bathing machine that was being towed into the sea. He

called to the attendant to stop and banged on the side of the machine, shouting, 'Time's up! Time's up!' He pulled open the door and there was a shriek from inside. Smoaker stuck his head in the doorway and a moment later a red-faced lady clutching a bonnet to her chest with one hand and carrying a pair of boots with the other stumbled down the steps and shrieked again as her stockinged feet trod on shingle. The horse was turned, and the empty bathing machine was pulled back up the beach towards the footmen. Marnie saw then that the thing that had been carried on to the beach was a bulky Bath chair, and reclining in its depths was the most beautiful lady Marnie had ever seen.

She was swathed in layers of creamy lace and pale golden hair trailed in curls from under her huge straw bonnet. She had smooth ivory skin that shone like a polished pebble and her eyes were the deep green of the sea on a stormy night. Marnie wondered if she might not be a mermaid that had been stranded on the rocks. She watched closely as the footmen lifted the lady from the Bath chair and carried her into the bathing machine. Was she being returned to the sea? Marnie looked carefully, trying to catch a glimpse of a fishtail or the shine of scales under the layers of lace. But there was nothing. Two maids followed the lady inside the machine, and then the footmen came out and shut the door.

The fuss in the air calmed then, as the bathing machine was towed down to the water's edge. The footmen and the maids sat on rocks at the bottom of the slipway, gossiping quietly and dabbing at their faces with handkerchiefs. It was only then that Marnie noticed the boy in the blue suit again.

He had moved away from the rest of them and he was on the beach, standing with his back to the sea. He had his hands in his pockets and he was staring right at her.

2

The Journal of Noah de Clevedon

Clevedon. JUNE 15th 1868, Monday

We arrived in Clevedon last night. The journey here was tedious. Mother was unwell for the most part and had to resort to her smelling salts on several occasions. The servants went ahead of us last week to prepare for our arrival, but despite the fires they have lit, it still feels cold and damp in the old manor. My bed sheets have the tang of mildew about them.

I miss the noise of London already. It is far too quiet here. I wish I could have stayed with Father. I don't see that I can be of any use here. Mother has Clarissa to look after her and the servants to run the place. But Father's wishes are to be obeyed, and he is busy with pier business, so here I am. I don't know what I shall do with myself. At least I have Prince to keep me company. He won't mind being here with the endless countryside and countless rabbits!

Mother went to take the sea-cure this morning. We caused quite a fuss on the seafront with our army of servants and Mother in

her Bath chair! The cure is said to be most beneficial. I can only hope it lives up to its promises and that Mother gets well as soon as possible, so that we can return to London.

There was a strange girl on the beach. I could not help but stare at her. She looked a wild little thing, with a tangle of dirty yellow hair. But she had the most beautiful face I have ever seen. I am sure she cannot belong in this place. Though I suspect I shall have plenty enough time on my hands to find out more about her.

I dined with Clarissa this evening as Mother took to her bed early.

3

Inside a Seashell

Ma was full of it. All that evening she could hardly sit still. 'Can you believe it, Smoaker? Lady de Clevedon back at the manor after all these years! Is Sir John come home too, I wonder?' She bustled around the kitchen, carving chunks of bread for the supper table and stirring the thick pea soup on the stove. She stopped now and then to glug from her pot of beer and to top up Smoaker's pot from the jug on the table. 'This'll be the making of us, Smoaker! Soon as word gets round I've been asked for special by the *Lady* herself, they'll be coming from all over. Reckon we can put our prices up, don't you think, Smoaker?'

Smoaker Nash never said much about anything as a rule. But he was as excited as Ma was and he patted Ma's behind and pinched her cheek between his thumb and forefinger, as though she were a chubby baby in napkins.

'I reckon you might be right, Mrs Gunn,' he said.

'She hardly weighed a thing, you know,' Ma continued. 'As

light as a gull feather. She almost floated by herself. Quite lost her breath when I dipped her, mind. She was only strong enough for the once under.'

Smoaker nodded knowingly. 'A proper lady. Fancy that, Mrs Gunn. We've got ourselves a proper lady.'

Marnie chewed on her bread and tried to feel excited too. But she couldn't help being disappointed that the beautiful lady in the Bath chair hadn't been a mermaid after all.

Ma ladled the soup into bowls and Marnie sipped at hers while Ma's chatter filled up the room. Marnie broke a piece of crust from her bread and held it under the table for Nep. The cat snatched at it, then ran to the corner of the kitchen where it swallowed the bread in two bites. Nep was Smoaker's cat, through and through. It sat on his lap most evenings and Smoaker would stroke its back, tickle its chin and whisper, 'Who's Papa's baby?' in its ears. It would never sit on Marnie's lap. It knew she wasn't quite right, and like everybody else, the cat didn't want to come near. The only way Marnie could ever catch its attention was by offering titbits. Usually Ma would have scolded her for wasting her supper on a cat, but she was so taken up with the day's events that she didn't notice.

Smoaker belched loudly and mopped up the last of his soup. He was as small as Ma was large, with a huge belly that hung over the belt of his trousers. Tufts of grey hair grew behind his ears, but the rest of his head was bare. The sun and the wind had roasted it reddish-brown, like the thick crackling on a Sunday leg of mutton. Nep jumped on Smoaker's lap and purred noisily as it licked its paws. Marnie was envious of the cat. She hated that it had a Pa when she didn't. She wished

every day she had a pa to dote on her like Smoaker doted on Nep. She wanted to know what that would feel like.

Ma had told her often enough that Smoaker wasn't her pa. He was just 'a dear, dear friend'. Marnie knew he was a *dear friend* to Ma because sometimes Ma didn't come to bed at night and Marnie would hear thuds and the squeaking of bedsprings from upstairs in Smoaker's room. This made Marnie feel left out and empty. It was as though Ma, Smoaker and Nep were the real family and she was just a visitor.

Whenever Marnie asked about her pa, Ma's face would go all tight, like someone had tied a knot in the back of her head. 'You don't have a pa,' she would say as she tapped the bowl of her pipe. 'I found you washed up on the shore, I did, curled up soft and pink inside a seashell.' Marnie knew that wasn't true, of course. She knew she must have had a pa at one time. She wasn't daft. She knew that a man had to have shared in the making of her. He was out there somewhere, she was sure of it. She dreamed about him all the time. He was a fisherman with a dark-brown leathery face and yellow hair. He smelt of the sea at low tide; of warm fish and seaweed. If Marnie squeezed her eyes shut tight and held her breath for a moment, she could conjure up a memory of a rough woollen gansey pressed against her cheek and a pair of strong arms holding her. Marnie imagined her pa had gone out in his fishing boat one day and got caught in a storm while chasing a shoal. She never believed the sea would have taken him away from her, though. He had just got lost somewhere and was sailing around the world right now, trying to find his way back to Clevedon. She was certain he would come home one

day, and she wanted to be the very first thing he saw when he pulled his boat up on the beach.

When Marnie went to bed that night, Ma and Smoaker were still up drinking beer, smoking their pipes and celebrating their good fortune. Marnie knew it would be one of those nights when Ma never came to the bed they shared. The bed felt big and lonely. Even Nep wouldn't come and curl up on her feet. She closed her eyes and listened to the shush of the sea and the rasping noise of shingle being dragged by the waves and flung back on to the beach. She tried to breathe in rhythm with the ebb and flow of the tide.

In, out . . . in, out . . . in, out.

She slowly drifted to sleep. She dreamed her feet were cold and wet. She was shivering, her skin was damp, and she could smell the fishy tang of seaweed and the salty air. She stood on the edge of the sea looking out at Pa in his wooden boat. Green paint flaked from the hull in long curls, like peelings of sunburned skin, and waves rocked the boat backwards and forwards as though it was an infant's cradle. Pa stood underneath the cotton sails, beckoning to her with a raised hand. But as hard as she tried, Marnie couldn't move. Then she looked down at her feet and her twisted leg, and saw instead a golden fishtail. A wave swept over her and pulled her into the sea and suddenly she was swimming through the water, faster and faster, whipping her tail through the foamy waves. But no matter how fast she swam, Pa never got any nearer. He stayed just out of reach, beckoning her and beckoning her with his outstretched hand.