

THE MERMAID AND THE SMOO

- A LITTLE BOLSHY BOOK ABOUT INCLUSION -





nce upon a time, there was a mermaid named Lucy.

Unlike other mermaids, Lucy lived in an ordinary house on an ordinary street.

Her home was filled with water – just enough water to swim in, and just enough water for people to paddle through.

One day, Lucy's parents decided that she needed to go to school. All the other little girls were at school, and Lucy was no different – except she was.

Lucy's mother rang the headmaster.

'Well,' said the headmaster. 'There is no water at the school – oh, except in the SMU – the Special Mermaid Unit.'

'What's that?' asked Lucy's mother.

The headmaster laughed. 'The other children call it the "Smoo", he said.

'The Smoo is the place where mermaids go. We have a lovely big tank and all our staff members are trained to swim.'

Lucy's mother hesitated. Lucy hadn't grown up with other mermaids – she had grown up with her twin brother, Corey. It didn't seem right that she would have to swim in a tank all day.

'Are there no other alternatives?' she said finally.

The headmaster shook his head. 'Well, there's the normal classes. But the only water that's available are out of the drinking fountains, and they don't always work. Lucy will dry out in no time, and we can't have that.'

'Perhaps we could squirt her with a spray bottle,' Lucy's mother suggested helpfully.

'We don't have the staff to do that,' said the headmaster sadly. 'But the Smoo is a wonderful place for mermaids like Lucy. We'll see her in the New Year.'

When Lucy's mother told the family, her brother was horrified.

'Why can't she be in my class?' he said. 'I can spray her at lunch time. Why can't they just fill one classroom with water?'

Lucy's mother shook her head. 'I asked that, but they don't have enough water. And family members aren't allowed to help. It's the rules.'

Corey shook his head angrily. Lucy was smart and kind and when the sun shone on her scales, they glinted every colour of the rainbow. And she was the best swimmer he knew. In the Smoo, she would never have a chance to attend the school's swimming carnival. Worst of all, other people wouldn't get to know Lucy – except other mermaids.

Lucy's mother stroked his head. 'We have no choice, Corey,' she said. 'And Lucy will get the help she needs in the Smoo.'

On the first day at school, Lucy's mother drove the twins to the school. Lucy sat in a shallow pool of water in the back of the car, combing her hair nervously.

'It will be all right,' her mother reassured her – and Corey watched her as she wheeled slowly to the Smoo.

The Smoo was a huge tank at the back of the school. There were special tail descalers and staff members who cheerfully donned their scuba gear every day to swim with the mermaids. There were combs and shells and pearls and singing lessons every day. They swam with each other from nine til three every day. And Lucy liked the other mermaids – but at lunch time, she looked wistfully from the tank, out at the children who were sitting in the quadrangle.

The tank became fuller as the year moved on, and things changed. Money was tight, and the Smoo suffered. There were fewer combs and shells, and when Lucy asked if she could learn maths, they laughed.

'Why would a mermaid need maths?' a staff member said kindly. Lucy bristled.

'What if I want to get a job?' she retorted.

The staff member smiled and patted her tail. 'Who would employ a mermaid? The only place you could get a job is in the Tank down the road, working on the comb production line with other mermaids. There are no other Tanks.'

'What about a real job?' asked Lucy. The staff member looked confused.

'Why would you want a real job? Even if you could find one?' she asked.

From that day, Lucy became sadder. The future stretched out in front of her – first the Smoo, then the Tank. She didn't want to share her worries with her mother, who was already worried about what would happen to Lucy when she left school. Where would she live? What would she do? No, Lucy's mother had enough problems. And so she sat at the bottom of the tank, refusing to comb or sing or participate in other mermaid activities.

Graduation soon came round and Corey was excited about the idea of graduating from his class. Being a teenager, he didn't mention it to his mother until the last moment, and she sighed.

'Corey, you'll need a suit and Lucy will need a dress,' she scolded him. 'You know these things take time and money.'

Corey grinned unrepentantly. 'It was a bit last minute, Mum. The parents organised it, not the school. And you know how that works... but do you want the great news? They're fundraising for the Smoo. You know how unhappy Lucy has been lately – maybe this will lift her spirits.'

Lucy's mother agreed. 'It would be a lovely surprise. Maybe we could secretly buy a new dance wheelchair for Lucy. And maybe a really pretty dress to match her scales.'

And so it happened – Corey went with his mother to pick out the dress,

a beautiful shimmering concoction of seagreen chiffon that blended seamlessly with Lucy's scales. Lucy tried it on, and the old glow came back into her eyes.

She twirled in her wheelchair, and the chiffon floated about her. Every five minutes, a fine mist from a special spray wheelchair attachment misted her scales. She looked just like another girl who used a wheelchair, and she felt beautiful.

It was the day before that she decided to take her dress to the Smoo, and gracefully flipped into the tank. Her hair floated about her and her radiant glow took the other mermaid's breath away.

'Why Lucy,' said a staff member admiringly. 'You're beautiful. But what's the occasion?'

'Graduation,' Lucy said happily.

The staff member laughed. 'But that's the school graduation. We don't have a graduation for the Smoo.' And she didn't notice Lucy's tears, because they blended with the water – she hurried away to prepare the next singing lesson.

When Corey arrived home, Lucy had locked herself in her room. He knocked on the door.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'Go away!' shouted Lucy, and burst into tears.

It took a phone call to the school to understand why Lucy was so distressed. Her mother tried to console her, but Corey went to his room and stared at the wall for a long time.

He didn't understand. His sister had worked hard this year, but she couldn't graduate like he could.

She would never dance with a boy from her class.

She wouldn't be able to get a job, a real job, and she wouldn't be able to live in the same way that anybody else could.

He thought and thought, and his fury grew.

In the morning, Lucy didn't want to go to school. 'Why should I?' she argued, and her mother threw up her hands in the air. Corey looked at Lucy.

'You need to go,' he said with a note of finality in his voice. 'And wear the dress.'

Lucy opened her mouth and closed it again. There was something about Corey's tone that brooked no argument.

The staff looked at Lucy as she swam into the Smoo, and said nothing. At lunchtime, an hour before the graduation, the headmaster came into the Smoo. He pressed his hands up against the glass and beamed delightedly.

'Mermaids,' he said, smiling. 'I have a great treat for you.' And he beckoned to where a tiny television set was perched on the outside of the tank.

'CCTV. You can watch the graduation from here. Isn't that wonderful?' The mermaids looked at him sombrely and his smile faded.

'Mermaids...'

'We're students,' corrected Lucy, and he flushed and left the Smoo.

Nevertheless, the mermaids gathered around and watched the graduation. Girls dressed in all the colours of the rainbow, the colours of a mermaid's scales when the light catches them. Boys, looking older than their years, presented immaculately. And music – the songs that the mermaids had sang to all year. Their music, outside the Smoo.

Suddenly there was a crash, and Corey rushed to the tank, a huge hammer in his hand.

'Stand back,' he cried, and swung at the glass. There was a cracking noise, and the mermaids looked at each other, terrified.

'What are you doing?' shouted Lucy.

Corey looked at her. 'What the school should have done,' he said, and with one almighty swing, the glass shattered, shards catching the light

and spilling rainbows across the Smoo.

The mermaids dived towards the light and listened to the angry cries as the graduating students found water swirling around their waists. But, Lucy realised, both mermaids and students could swim and wade through the water – the staff looked confused and angry, but the students soon settled, and laughed at the chaos.

‘Out!’ The headmaster cried. ‘We need to evacuate!’

But both students and mermaids were looking at each other curiously, and the music started up again. The changing lights glinted on the mermaids’ scales, and the satins and chiffons and silks seemed dull in comparison. Soon boys were dancing through the water with mermaids and girls were dancing with the mermen – and soon, the staff couldn’t tell the difference.

‘Perhaps we should leave them to dance,’ a teacher said, finally.

‘No!’ the headmaster blustered. ‘Think of what could go wrong! Just think about it.’

‘But,’ the teacher said softly, ‘What if something could go *right*?’

And as the teachers gazed at the scene, it seemed to them that some strange thing was happening. What was it that seemed to be melting and changing?

The teacher looked at the dancing students, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the students. The teachers outside looked from mermaid to student, and from student to mermaid, and from mermaid to student again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.

- A story by the Bolshy Divas Mermaid Division - with a nod to George Orwell

