

It was on Morgan's first row that it happened... as a 'newbie' coastal rower she was nervous and keen to make a good impression but as the St Ayles' skiff left the harbour, the wind freshened and Morgan was desperate to tuck her neon top into her jogging bottoms - but she needed both hands to pull the heavy wooden oar. She shivered and suddenly she was transported back to the school office - sitting by a two bar electric fire being lectured by a school nurse - she must have been 12?

"What you young girls fail to understand is the health benefit of a woollen vest!"

Crikey, that was over 40 years ago she thought; had she learned nothing? Morgan fixed her gaze on the sunny bobble of the Cox's hat and gritted her teeth.

The Cox was wearing a matching navy woollen gansey and Morgan marvelled at all the different patterns. She had read somewhere that when fishermen were lost at sea, their wives and mothers could identify their loved ones by the patterns and darns of the hand knitted ganseys the dead men wore. Morgan bit her lip and reasoned that, if ... if this were true and she went overboard, then her body would be returned to the central isle of Lidl.

Moving out of town after the first lockdown she was excited to drive over the bridge and into a new life; she'd often walked the Fife Coastal Path and had always wanted to live by the sea. Over the summer Morgan loved having barbeques in her garden whenever city neighbours and friends visited, but when the autumn winds brought new restrictions Megan started to feel isolated and lonely so she decided, as soon as restrictions allowed, she would join the local coastal rowing club.

Travelling through the water backwards seemed odd at first but she started to enjoy it; the noise of oar blade slice through the water induced a semi-meditative state and silenced the negative voices in her head.

The Cox signalled and caught her eye and Morgan remembered the instructions before the trial row; to keep in time she should look at the shoulders of the rower seated in front of her and not at the blade of her oar. The rest of crew were 'old hands'; the bobbles on their matching bonnets jiggled in unison. Their navy bonnets were hand knitted and with their bright yellow bobbles the crew matched the colours of the boat.

"At what point do I get to wear 'the blue bonnet?'" Morgan had enquired after her trial row, wondering if she needed to pass a further test to do so.

"You'll just need to learn to knit one!" the Cox had replied but Morgan wasn't sure if she was serious; it was difficult to tell under the facemask if the Cox was smiling.

As they rowed Morgan noticed a couple of walkers on the coastal path, they were the size of Lego figures. Morgan realised she must stand out like a sore thumb on the horizon dressed in hot pink gym gear; it was only a matter of months since she'd been rubbing down the chrome handle of the rowing machine in the city gym.

The Cox signalled to hold water and pointed at Morgan; the woman sitting in Stroke turned squinted and raised a hand to shield her eyes and smiled, and then the next turned and raised an eyebrow and then the next girl giggled. Morgan adjusted her baseball cap to hide her hot flush, was she really rowing that badly? But then she realised that they were looking past her, not at her; the crew were looking over her shoulder so Morgan turned too, but as her glasses were misted up she could only make out the shape, the silhouette of a woman against the low sun. Morgan wriggled her nose and peered over the top of her varifocals ... the woman on the rock had long silver hair, so long that it covered her arms and her pale hands moved swiftly ... she was knitting. Four slim steel wires pointed at both ends held her knitting taught as a fifth needle flashed in and out of the blue-black yarn. She wore a leather belt that buckled at her waist and below the belt the woman's silvery legs tapered down to what looked, to Morgan, like a fishtail.

"What is she knitting now?" Hissed the Stroke.

"Not sure?" muttered Number 2.

"It's certainly 4 ply?" whispered Number 3.

"Whatever it is, it's too wee to be a gansey." The Stroke observed.

The wind carried the last comment to the rock and the knitter turned, raised an eyebrow, gathered up her needles, tucked her knitting into her belt and scowled and then she slid off the rock and into the sea.

"Ready to row!" The Cox called, but Morgan couldn't drag her eyes away from the rock. Then with a swirl of kelp, a silvery head broke the surface and Morgan found herself looking into a pair of deep brown eyes. The mermaid looked Morgan up and down; it was a cold look and Morgan sensed that she did not pass muster.

As the boat moved backwards, Morgan clipped a wave. Her oar thrust into her chest and knocked her backwards off the narrow seat. She landed in the bottom of the boat like a beetle on its back with her flowery wellington boots peddling frantically in the air.

"Hold Water!" the Cox ordered. Morgan could hear the irritation in her voice and she could see the shoulders of the crew shake with silent laughter. The girl in front of Morgan turned and held out her hand to help her up and, by the time she had got back on her seat, Morgan's face matched her top.

"Don't worry we've all 'caught a crab' in our time" the girl whispered.

“Ready to Row!”

At the Cox’s instruction they all pulled together but – ouch! Morgan knew she’d have some fine bruises to show in the morning; her mother always said that she bruised easily both inside and out.

Back on shore, as they washed and sanitised the boat, Morgan couldn’t help wondering at how nonchalant the crew had been at the sight of the mermaid - perhaps this was a common sight in this area? Morgan didn’t want to look any more foolish than she already felt, and her ribs were really starting to hurt, so she decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

Later that evening, after a hot bath, Morgan sat at her laptop and typed the word ‘Mermaid’ into the search engine. She was amazed at the amount of sightings; even Columbus sailing the ocean blue had spotted a mermaid. Morgan moved on to the conspiracy theories; many claimed that mermaids only exist in our imagination. Manatees posed as Mermaids, Inuit kayakers sat on rocks to dry out their sealskin kayaks and passed the time combing their long hair. Savage sirens sang songs to lure innocent lads onto the rocks and Morgan soon realised that mermaids were just manifestations of misogyny; outsiders like herself, distrusted, ‘other’.

Morgan had plenty of time to research over the next few weeks as she nursed her bruised ribs and she found out that there was more to your average mermaid than met the eye. A famous Coffee Chain had mangled a myth, stolen a mermaid, Melusina, for their logo and airbrushed-out her twin tails for modesty. Morgan also read about the Mermaid charity helping teenagers navigate transgender waters, she discovered that Hans Christian Anderson’s story *The Little Mermaid* was born from a broken heart, his unrequited love.

Then she found that in Edam, a mermaid had been taught to spin, and in Denmark another had been taught to knit. The general consensus was that we know more about the moon than the bottom of the ocean and so Morgan decided that Mermaids could exist.

She still had time on her hands so she decided it was time to learn to knit; she followed her local museum and discovered their new gansey website. She ordered the right yarn and a circular needle online and tried some You Tube basic tutorials ... but she lost count, she dropped stitches and then she lost patience!

“Practice makes perfect!” Her mother’s voice repeated in her head. What was the point? It was her mother who was the knitter in the family and she had obviously not picked up the knitting gene. As she cast off her last tangled and mangled attempt, Morgan felt hot tears stream down her face. Perhaps she was simply a townie after all, a fish out of water, a blow-in, perhaps she’d made the wrong move after all; her friends in Edinburgh had warned her to wait, because you should always wait a year after a bereavement - of any sort.

When she had recovered from her injury, her bruised ribs, rowing was restricted so Morgan returned to walking the coast and strangely, spookily, Mermaids purses started popping up, then she found Ariel, a plastic Disney toy, washed up on rocks and another week a friend sent her a notebook - the cover demanded that she embrace her inner mermaid.

On the shortest day of the year, Morgan trudged along the muddy coastal path in a grey mood. As she passed the windmill, a fog descended and in the distance she thought she could hear someone singing. Unsure where the song was coming from, she stopped to listen and then she found herself slipping between the thin wire strands of the council fence that separated the abandoned saltwater bathing pool from the path. She stopped to sit on the weathered stone steps of the old Lido and wondered if someone was wild swimming?

“Hello, is anybody there?” Morgan called into the fog her eyes searching for a swimmer or a frilly flowered bathing cap. The singing grew louder and as Morgan listened a breeze blew an oval hole in the fog and there she was - the Mermaid - sitting on the Lido wall, her long silver hair framed against the dark water.

Morgan’s Mermaid was inspecting the knitting in her hands; she was casting off and as she stowed the finished handiwork in her belt, Morgan saw a flash of colour. Placing the silver wires in her mouth, the mermaid reached over her head with one arm and gathered her hair over one shoulder. Morgan watched as she started to twist the hair round and around, and, as she bent her elbow, the coiled hank of hair sprang suddenly into a double loop, just like the yarn Morgan had received in the post. The Mermaid pulled the twist of hair up from the nape of her long neck, and speared it with her knitting needles to the back of her head. She lifted her arms above her head and arched her back and smiled. Morgan noticed that the Mermaid’s teeth were pointed ... maybe she was going to lure her to her death? Morgan remembered the way the Mermaid had looked her up and down when they first met; her mind turned somersaults as she remembered reading about the Sirens. Then the Mermaid smiled at Morgan and beckoned to her to join her.

Morgan started to undress ... then she looked around her to make sure they were quite alone, then she removed her socks placing them in her hiking boots and then she took off her glasses and placed them in her right sock. She pulled off her woollen vest and arranged her clothes in a neat pile on the top step then stepped gingerly down the steps that led to the pool. Morgan couldn't see her feet for her ‘Covid Kilos’ so she took the steps sideways like a crab and she was just balancing on a concrete boulder when suddenly she slipped with a SPLASH into the icy water. The shock made Morgan yelp, her lungs filled with water as the kelp tangled around her feet, her arms thrashed around in the water as she struggled to touch the bottom.... then she found her feet, her toes felt the rough surface of a concrete slab and Morgan pushed herself back to the surface and when she straightened her legs she found the water in the pool was only waist deep. With numb limbs Morgan scrambled back to the steps and took them two at a time - slipping and sliding - all she

could focus on was survival. As she reached her clothes she realised how ridiculous she must have looked and looked around expecting to find the Mermaid doubled over with laughter, but she was gone.

Morgan rubbed herself dry with her thermal vest; her skin - no longer grey - was now pink as a boiled lobster. Her fingers shaking with cold Morgan tried to dress quickly but on the inside she felt warm, inside she felt different, proud, courageous, free and her skin tingled all over.

“Fancy wild swimming, alone in the fading light, in December for goodness sakes! Honestly girl have you learned nothing?” Her mother’s voice echoed in her head but Morgan shook out her wet hair, pulled it over one shoulder and started to coil.

“Thank you and good bye!” Morgan called into the fog, into the past to the Mermaid and to her mother.

Then out of the corner of her eye Morgan spotted the fluke of a large silver tail and then she started to laugh and cry at the same time.

As Morgan pulled on her sock and her right boot she looked out across the dark sea and smiled she dug her hand into her other boot for her second sock when her fingers touched something fluffy instead, something round, the size of the head of a dandelion clock. When she looked down at her hands she could see the orb was yellow like a dandelion flower, and when she pulled it out of her boot she found it resisted - it was attached to something bigger - a soft dark dome slipped out of the neck of her boot and as she turned the object in her hands she realised what it was.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” Morgan called out over the sea, then she smiled - she had certainly earned this!

Back on the coastal path she placed the Mermaid’s gift on her head, and as she headed for home she could feel the yellow bobble on her new navy bonnet wobble as she walked and for the first time in a long time Morgan looked forward to the future, to her new life, and especially to her next coastal row - once restrictions allowed.

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