

## TIDE WILL TELL by Alex Elgue

This place is a shithole.

Tides of pulsating music wax and wane in the smoky air around us. The club reeks of sweat and sex; already I can taste alcohol souring on my tongue. There is no chance of me showering the stench away before my mother notices. Not that I had been particularly optimistic- I had resigned myself to fate since I took that first sip of vodka from the pink plastic bottle Allison's had since Year Five. My mother is a bloodhound when it comes to spirits.

The bottle is still with us, stuffed in the bag that hangs by Allison's bare midriff. Her navel ring glints in the throbbing lights. The infection lurking there hides behind the flashes of colour painting her a dozen different blushes: magenta, teal, honey, splatters of abstract art against her canvas of skin. The boy she is swaying against can't keep his eyes off her. Maybe he's not sure she's real, confused by the surf of drugs and sound.

There is a boy pawing at my arm, but all I can think is that I have seen Allison's shirt before. The sequined strip sparkles, reflecting the spinning light show, and I find that I cannot turn away. She is hypnotic. Then, all at once, it comes back to me: it's the top she wore to my Disney party when she was small enough that the sparkles draped to brush the tops of her thighs. Matched with her long skirt and hair, she had been the most beautiful mermaid I had ever seen. Now, the scrap barely stretches across her breasts. She's lost, tiny. She's beautiful. Her eyes roll away from her partner, and it's glaringly obvious that she is high. Her pupils engorge to swollen moons, masking any trace of blue. She leans back to drape her arm over me so that her body odour is impossible to escape, defying the defence of Rexona women. I try to remember what she smelled like earlier that evening, but those memories have vanished. She is vodka now. She is tobacco. She is something else too, something sweet and strong and completely illegal.

"Meg," she drawls. "Meggie, Meg, Meg." The boy clings to her like a limpet, nibbling her throat. Half-heartedly pushing him away, she does not complain when he latches himself onto her again, making the slobbering sounds of slurping up a milkshake. I wonder if she knows he's there.

“Ali,” I grin back at her. She beams back and she is six years old again, delighted by the sensory stimulation surrounding her. Then she burps, releasing foul-smelling vapour, and the moment passes.

“Are you having a good time?” she slurs. Lost for words, I slip my hand through hers, surprised to find it small and warm in mine. It has been so long since I’ve held her hand that I’d forgotten what it feels like.

Allison is barely upright now. She swoons, and I am transported back to my Disney party. I remember the cyclic music stopping when my mother called for cake. Above all, I remember Allison refusing to stop spinning- even when the room emptied, she had continued to spiral in silence.

I had stayed with her. It had always been that way with Allison and I- she was my rock in the tide, something greater and stronger and more complex than I.

“What are you doing?” I’d probed.

“I’m spinning away.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere far away. I’m a mermaid now...I can spin and spin and the sea will take me away.”

“Can I come too?” I had sounded like a child and hated myself for it. Still, Allison had smiled.

“Always,” she had promised. Years later and it was her twining around me, her fingers clenched as though she thinks I’ll drift away. She sways slightly. She is shaking.

The image lurches and I wonder whether I will remember this come morning.

When Allison speaks, her voice is a droplet in the ocean, barely making a ripple. “Don’t leave me,” she begs, and though she is smiling there are tears in her eyes.

“Never.” We sway in the pulsating storm, our fingers twining once before breaking apart.