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## Up The River, In The Dark

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## Up The River, In The Dark

### **Author Bio**

Caleigh Flegg is a sophomore majoring in English and double-minoring in Writing and Business. She has been writing since before she could talk, and she has utilized her passion to become the editor-in-chief of her high school's literary magazine, a general fiction editor of *The Mercury*, and a contributor to *Women in Read*. Caleigh is fond of any literature but has a soft spot for E.E. Cummings's poetry and Jandy Nelson's prose.

## Up the River, in the Dark

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Katherine's hair streams behind her like a flag. She's driving, because of course she is. Meg has this theory that, in driving, Katherine frees her alter-ego; loud, fast, and confident. Meg's Beetle is breezing up the coast at what feels like double the speed limit, black road melting away into blue ocean in the rear-view window. Katherine weaves in and out of the lanes, shrieking at the top of her lungs every time someone encroaches on whatever microscopic opening she has spotted. Meg doesn't even flinch at the noise, just stares out the open window, her eyes fixed on the sea, somehow crashing even more recklessly than Katherine's driving.

Meg grew up in the ocean. On Sundays, the one day her father escaped the limp sunlight of his Los Angeles office building, he would swing her onto his shoulders and set off on an exquisite journey across the street. Meg used to tell herself a story as they bounced along the street: she was a young mermaid, plucked from the ocean by her father. Her human mother didn't want a girl who didn't understand life on land. So Meg took whatever chance she had to slip underneath the waves and forget her, while her mother sunk herself into a different kind of liquid. She would toddle away from her father and go under, under, under until she and her mother, the girl of sea and the girl of land, were connected in their drowning.

Meg still imagines this world, even at eighteen, even being almost positive that she wasn't actually born part fish. She knows Katherine is from the ocean too, knew it as soon as they met. They were seven, and Meg's neighbor, Jack, had cornered Katherine on the beach. The two were hunched over something, and Meg could see Katherine's shoulders heaving.

As she approached, she noticed something small writhing on the sand between their feet. A fish, glinting like a chip of glass, slowly breathing poison. Katherine's hands were wet, dribbling water and tears onto the fish, while Jack whacked at it with a piece of driftwood. The sight of it made Meg's chest ache, but not as much as the sight of Jack did. Meg remembers stomping over to him and whacking him in the shin, explaining to him as he doubled over that maybe the fish was hurting too. She gripped it by one fin, ignoring the feeling of soggy tissue paper as she motioned to Katherine to help her drag it back to the ocean. Of course, it didn't swim away, just bobbed up and down in the surf, one still eye turned towards the blue. Katherine was sniffing a bit, so Meg whispered, "boys drool, right?" and decided she and Katherine were best friends in that exact moment because she had never seen someone nod so emphatically.

Eleven years later, they pull across the sand and gravel onto an overlook, about an hour after passing Meg's future university, Pepperdine. Katherine's summertime buoyancy deflates as she turns the engine off.

"Wanna get out here?" she asks, and even though "here" is a patch of cliffside dirt next to a busy highway, Meg absolutely does.

The blankets in the back seat are grass-stained, wine-stained, gasoline-stained. They smell like summer nights on the beach with Katherine, squealing at boys, and afternoons driving up to Francheschi park, smoking like they knew

what they were doing, looking into the veins of their city. Meg spreads the blanket on the hood and curls her toes into the grill, first hoisting herself up and then yanking Katherine to lie next to her. They fall into silence, hands linked, chests rising and falling as the waves crash.

And then Katherine breaks the reverie.

“I’m gay,” she says, with the tone of someone who is setting their entire world on fire.

Meg’s heartbeat is all she knows. She hears it in her ears, drowning out the ocean and the cars and the sound of Katherine’s waiting. She feels the groove of Katherine’s knuckles bumping against hers and jerks back like she is the one being burned.

Katherine stares at the place where they were connected, at a red wine stain she had made.

Neither says anything for long moments.

Katherine’s eyes darken towards her lap.

Meg is breathing fast, faster, sucking in all the air in southern California. Her mind is all jagged edges. She thinks for a split second of changing in front of Katherine, lying on her floor in just a bra for hours. She thinks of sharing a bed with her, thinks of Katherine’s face every time she’s looked at her. Too many times to even count. Thinks of the last time she called someone a dyke. Thinks of the way she laughed with the breathless thrill of the forbidden. Wonders if Katherine was swept up in the rush or if she felt a small dark part of her heart break. Thinks about her father, a few years back, cussing at a TV that showed a pixelated frame of a skinny, mean-looking girl in front of a neon sign that read “Stonewall.”

She thinks of July, two years ago. Meg’s dad was probably paralyzed on some highway, constantly trying to come home but never quite making it. The noise of her mother clinking bottles in the sink was suffocating her thoughts. So she had crept to Katherine’s house, breezing right in, opening the door to her room. Katherine was laying on her fluffy pink bedspread, peering into the glossy darkness of a magazine. Of *Playboy*. Meg had never acknowledged herself before entering Katherine’s room, but the exhausted eyes of the woman on the page screamed at her to get out. She tiptoed backwards, thanking God for the shag carpeting that muffled both her footsteps and the way her heart was hammering her ribs.

Meg said, “Kath, I’m coming in!” in a voice she hoped could cover up the swell of embarrassment in her stomach. She heard the splash of paper-on-paper just as she opened the door, met with Katherine’s flushed face and saucer eyes. She never said a thing.

“Nothing has to change,” Katherine says, barely audible over the waves, like she’s scared of letting her hope out.

“Everything changes,” Meg says, her voice coming from a mouth that’s not hers, from a body she can’t control. She can’t remember ever being mad at Katherine. Katherine is the one person she could never be mad at, except she doesn’t know her now.

She slides off the hood of the car, yanking the blanket out from under Katherine. Joni Mitchell is still drifting from the open window: “*Dancing up*

*the river in the dark, looking for a woman to court and spark.*” Katherine’s hands are smacking the radio off before Meg has a chance to feel the words burrow under her skin.

Meg gets into the car, driving this time. She grips the faded leather wheel as tightly as she can, imagines feeling the impressions Katherine’s fingers left there. The sharp press of her foot on the gas jolts both of them back into their seats, and Meg vaguely hears a horn scream at her as she cuts out of the overlook. Katherine freezes with one leg curled up to her chest, murmurs “shit,” more defeated than Meg has ever heard her sound.

Meg looks into the rearview just in time to see the blanket, the red wine, cigarette, grass-stained blanket, slip off the roof of the car and curl up in the breeze, out of sight as they go around a hairpin curve. Katherine stretches her body around and splays her fingers against the closed window as if she can snatch it from the wind, tuck their childhood safely back into the car.

But Meg keeps the car dancing up the road, into the dark.

Two hours later, the light at Sea Chest is unflinching. Stretched out, soft like tissue-paper, it makes its way into every splice in the clapboard walls of the old restaurant. Here, Katherine looks like she did when they were kids, tailing their dads up to meetings in San Francisco. She looks like she’s trying to fold up into herself, except this time Meg can’t see how to unfold her.

This is probably the longest Meg has gone without speaking in her life. Her hands twitch with the urge to grab Katherine, to shake her, to yell *why now* and *why us*. Instead, she asks her to pass the salt.

Except it comes out as “have you ever kissed a girl?” The words are hushed like the secret isn’t out yet.

Katherine says yes, her face as red as the checkered table cloth but her voice steady.

It isn’t even the thought of the kiss that makes Meg’s stomach flip; it’s the idea that Katherine has kissed someone, has felt sparks and butterflies and first-time tingles without immediately jumping into Meg’s bed and telling her all about it.

Meg feels the knot in her chest untie and she’s finally crying, two hours of unfamiliar silence later. Salt trails down her face and splashes on the vinyl tablecloth as the couple at the table next to them tries desperately not to look. Meg thinks that maybe she and Katherine look like a couple right now, crying over the slow rot of their relationship. And then Meg thinks that Katherine probably doesn’t find her attractive, snot-streaked and scene-making and wrapping her arms around her stomach to keep everything inside. The thought is just enough to make her snort a laugh and she repeats it to Katherine in little hiccuped words.

Katherine gives a real smile then, a five-year-olds-on-the-beach smile, a looking-at-each-other-in-the-mirror-before-the-homecoming-dance smile. She says, “You’re not my type anyway.”

Meg doesn’t think she can handle knowing what Katherine’s type is. The guys she’s been with are all surfers, built like tree trunks and about as soft. Would she want a real girl, or one of the girls Meg sometimes sees smoking

super-lights in front of the Ralph's, with their hair buzzed so short she can see the sun bouncing off their pale heads?

So she asks, "Do you want people to know?"

The dollhouse of high school is over, thank God, and Meg has heard Brown has a lot of lesbians, but that doesn't mean Katherine will be okay everywhere.

"Oh my God, no. Not here. Not my parents. Maybe at school, if there are other..." she breaks off, "...people like me, you know."

And then Meg's real fear sinks in like feet in sand; this is something they will never have in common, the biggest rift in their seas. She is no longer like Katherine. A life of sharing clothes, stories, grades, even a boyfriend once, for a few hours, and now this. Meg wishes more than anything that they could drive back down the coast, drive over Katherine's words until they were ground to dust and Meg knew nothing.

But she does know, and she isn't sure if she wants to know more. Katherine's face is a blank map, and she has no idea where to turn.

"So, why did you tell me?" she asks, a sharp left.

"You're my best friend," Katherine says, "and you know, like, every single other thing about me. And it felt so, so wrong to keep this inside because every day all I wanted to do was tell you and have you see me."

Meg sucks in a deep breath, brushing off a concerned-looking waiter.

"I do see you. I think I see you, you know. It's just--" she drops her head again, can't look at Katherine who, for some inexplicable reason, appears calmer than she has since they took off this morning.

"I thought I had been seeing you this whole time. We've been friends for, what, eleven years? And I thought I knew you."

"Oh my god," Katherine says, using the same voice she does when Meg yells too loudly in public or declares that she and Katherine need to drop their lives, move to Carmel, and adopt a couple hundred cats. "You're, like, the dumbest person I've ever met."

Meg wrenches back from the table, mouth open, ready to regale Katherine with all the ways she is not dumb, even if Katherine was the one who got into Brown.

"This isn't as big as you're making it, as usual. It's just something. Like, if I dyed my hair blonde, we wouldn't be crying in a restaurant."

Meg interrupts, the words "this is the biggest thing in the world" pouring from her mouth.

"Meg. It's just not. We've been through everything else, high school and your mom and my parents and soon we'll survive being two thousand, five hundred and sixty-two miles away from each other."

Meg's heart clenches up but feels huge in her chest. Of course Katherine memorized the miles.

Meg meets her eyes, the mirror blue of her own.

"You know I love you, no matter what," she says, the words feeling small in the face of this love, but they're all she has.

"I know you do. Me, too," Katherine smiles, the sun breaking through her face.

She asks, "Do you want to go to the butterflies?" and she sounds so young and so much the same that Meg can't help but say yes.

At Pacific Grove, the Monarchs cover everything. Meg could start to see them flocking even as the girls wound up the coast, all of them born with the knowledge of exactly where to go.

She sighs, “They’re so pretty, aren’t they?” thinking that the word is inadequate. Katherine interrupts with “they’re beautiful, radiant, amazing, stunning, incandescent, anthropomorphic—” until she cuts herself off laughing and can’t hear Meg call her a show-off in the same voice she has been using for years.

She pulls into the parking lot and winds the windows up, watching Katherine bouncing up and down in her seat like a child.

Katherine calls, “I get to drive back!” and Meg is more than happy to let her, even if it means seven near-death experiences in an hour.

Katherine is still yelling at her for being slow, so Meg races ahead of her, stumbling into a confetti storm of butterflies. The air is thick with them, the sound of their wings beating like a heart, and the sun is so close that Meg feels like she could touch it. She reaches her hand up, imagines casting a shadow over the earth. She sees Katherine do the same and can’t tell exactly what she’s thinking. But somehow, she doesn’t mind. Meg watches the beauty and thinks of her mother and her father and Pepperdine and Katherine and the mermaids, shining in the sun and hiding in the sea.