

Ligonier Valley Writers' Flash Fiction Contest 2022

Honorable Mention

Love Is Love

by April Serock of Smithfield, PA

Meara Bran flipped to her back in the water and sighed. The full moon glowed softly above the tranquil forest pond, and the waxing and waning hum of frogs and crickets buzzed in her ears as she floated in the still water.

She sighed again. Her name meant “filled with mirth,” but lately Meara was filled with unhappiness instead. She smoothed a paw over her sleek head. Her family raft of otter selkies got smaller every year. Her grandparents’ deaths had left a gaping hole in their float, and just this afternoon, another cousin married a full-blooded human.

It wasn’t for her, but she didn’t blame her relatives for marrying humans. *Love is love*. And it wasn’t as though there were dating sites full of single selkies to choose from. Especially of the otter variety. *Lutra lutra* selkies were the rarest of the mythical Irish shapeshifters, and every generation of interbreeding with humans diluted their selkie genes a little more.

Selkies used to be compelled to return to the seas when they stayed in human form too long. Now most lived quite happily as humans the majority of the time, and their cravings for the water life could be assuaged with a trip to a seafood restaurant and a long bath.

But Meara preferred to visit this isolated pond to satisfy her watery yearnings. Her whole raft used to frolic here every full moon, but now it was only a few times a year. The wedding today had left everyone so exhausted and so pleasantly full of shrimp cocktails that she had the pond to herself. Again.

A splash cut through the thick night and a dark shape flowed past her in a smooth wave. A man powered through the water with a fluid overhand stroke. Meara quickly righted herself and stared after him. She’d never seen a human here before. Intrigued, she dove under the water and followed him.

She flipped over and observed him from below, hidden by the dark water. The moonlight silhouetted his form. Like a line from a Billy Ramsell poem, he was *a shape of rippling muscle*. His tiny swim briefs bared his firm skin and even firmer muscles.

Her lungs seized as he reached the bank, and she surfaced.

The man pulled up short. “Hey, beautiful. Nice night for a swim, isn’t it?”

She tilted her head, but said nothing. He was the beautiful one: all dark, gleaming hair and warm, dark eyes, and a charming, white smile that made her heart beat faster.

“Want to race me to the other side? I could use a training partner. I have a meet coming up.”

He was a professional swimmer? Of course he was. Ordinary people didn’t have bodies like his.

He still looked at her with that disarming grin. Waiting, as if he expected an otter to answer him. Did she want to race? Her feet started moving of their own accord, and her tail twitched in anticipation. Apparently she did.

With an easy twist of her body, she took off for the far bank, unexpected excitement thrumming through her veins.

“Hey!” He chuckled. “Wait up!”

The water stirred behind her, so she swished her tail and sped to the shore.

Moments later, the man stopped beside her, breathing hard and laughing. “That was exactly the push I needed, friend.” He climbed out of the water, skin gleaming, and grabbed a towel and his backpack. “See you tomorrow.”

Then he walked away.

The next night, Meara waited in the rushes for him to appear again. Anticipation made her tail twitch restlessly until he walked out of the woods, set his bag on the bank, and dove in again.

She watched in silence as he swam back and forth across the pond, barely making a ripple. He seemed so natural in the water, so happy to be gliding and twisting along under the stars. Finally, breathing hard, he flipped onto his back in the middle of the pond and smiled up at the sky. When was the last time swimming had brought her that kind of joy?

She didn’t date humans, but his quiet bliss called to her, and she couldn’t stay away. She swam to him silently, but he noticed her immediately.

“Hello, again,” he said, and her heart leapt. “I hoped I’d see you tonight.”

If otters could smile, she’d be in danger of grinning.

“Up for a race?”

With a flick of a tail, she was off, him trailing behind again.

Every day for the next week, Meara went to the pond and swam with the beautiful man who talked to her as though she could understand.

“My name’s L.J.,” he told her one night.

“Someday I’m going to win,” he panted another night after losing to her yet again.

“I really wish you could talk to me,” he said yet another night as they rested on the bank. Meara’s heart ached. She wished that too.

There was no rule against it, other than the standards she set for herself. What good was preserving her heritage if it meant she turned her back on happiness?

She took a deep breath and stepped from the water, shedding her otter skin along the way. “I *can* talk to you,” she whispered. “I’m Meara.”

He smiled. “Lutra.”

“L.J. is short for Lutra? Your name is Lutra?”

“Lutra James.” He laughed, warm and low. “L.J. is less pretentious, don’t you think?”

“But—” she stammered. “But Lutra means—”

His brown eyes twinkled as he pulled a sable pelt from his bag and slipped it over his head. In a flash, he was diving sleekly into the pond, all silky fur and rippling muscle.

“You’re not going to win tonight!” he chattered merrily and was off with a swish of his tail.

Her heart pounded. Joy crashed through her veins, and the corners of her mouth lifted in a helpless grin. Meara snatched her pelt and slid into it.

She chose happiness. She’d already won.

April Serock is a retired teacher and a newly un-retired writer from Smithfield, PA.