

(Excerpt from short story “New Rochelle,” part of Sarah Berger’s 2023 MFA thesis collection

*The Magic Tampon Machine and Other Stories*)

New Rochelle

*I Will Slip Away, Like a Mermaid, Into the Sea*

“When I switch at Grand Central tomorrow, I’m totally not getting on my train home,” Ricky said. He was dabbing the green surface of the water with his fingertips. He lay with his chest pressed against the wood, his arms hanging off the dock. It was the second to last day of their two weeks at Paul’s grandparents’ house (and—they worked out the cousin-math—Ricky’s great aunt and uncle), and they had come here to satisfy Ricky’s pronouncement that they must bid the pond farewell. The sun wasn’t up over the trees yet, and in the Catskills, even in high July, mornings were as soft and shy as spring. “You know this is a luscious opportunity, taking the train, instead of being driven home,” Ricky said.

“Where will you go, if you don’t get on your train home?”

“Oh, you sweet pink and white bouquet,” Ricky said, throwing a diagonal look at Paul, who leaned against the pile at the end of the dock, not far away, but giving Ricky the space he required, the space he filled with all the jingling accoutrements of his personality. Ricky pushed himself up and did a kind of dance thing, flipping onto his back and then raising his arms into the air and bending his hands like flamingo necks. He was long and lithe and did things with his body that Paul couldn’t imagine doing with his own soft, nondescript body.

“I’m going to the Village. There’s a bar I know.” Ricky looked at the sky and exhaled as if his lungs were full of smoke, even though he had very dramatically run out of cigarettes yesterday. “I’m going to do drag shows.”

Paul's silence was a question mark.

"Darling."

"Well, go ahead and tell me," Paul indulged.

"What, drag shows? Oh Paul," Ricky said, lifting his legs one at a time, pointing his toes to the sky. "A drag show is like, oh, it's just the best night of your life, every night."

"Have you been to, like, a bunch of them? What... happens?"

"I've only been to one, but Paul," Ricky said briskly, hurrying to the good part, "people sprout wings and—no, they don't 'sprout' them. That sounds small, quotidian. Wings just *billow forth* from them, from these gorgeous humans. And they soar. It's truly magic."

Paul wasn't so reticent anymore about at least sometimes asking Ricky what the hell he was talking about, but he stopped himself from saying, wry and dry, "So, it's an aerial show?" He didn't think that's what it was—he knew about the basic concept of dressing up in drag, and he could tell by how Ricky searched for the right way to describe it that, whatever it was, it meant something to him.

"Don't you have to be, you know, 21?" Paul asked. "Or at least 18? To even get in?"

"I managed to get in. You just have to make friends with the right handsome stranger. And performers—they lie about their age all the time, so why can't I? And Paul," Ricky said, still addressing the sky, "I have a *persona*. I have a name, a whole schtick. You want to hear my name?"

Paul nodded, as if Ricky could see him, as if Ricky needed encouragement.

"New Rochelle."

"Like, in Westchester County?"

"Yes, but—just think about it."

Paul thought about it. "It's kind of funny. I get it. It's like if your name were 'Santa Monica,' sort of?"

Ricky turned to Paul. "Yeah, that's actually cute. Yes kind of like that. But mine's better. Emphasis on *New*. I'm going to be newly forged. I'm going to be aflame with magnificence." He spat out

every consonant. He got to his feet triumphantly and stood beside Paul. He was two years older than Paul and stood almost a head taller. He had turned 16 in the spring and Paul couldn't understand why on earth he hadn't gotten his driver's license yet. "I much prefer to be chauffeured," Ricky had said. "And in New York nobody drives anyway." He spoke as one possessed of burdensome experience.

Now, looking from Paul to the pond, gesturing to it as if to a vast sea, Ricky said, "Do you know how Jimmy Stewart says *I'm gonna shake off the dust of this town*, and he's all fired up about leaving Bedford Falls and seeing the world?"

Paul had watched hundreds of old movies with his mom, burning through the tapes at the neighborhood video store and the public library. This one he knew right away, since it wasn't any ordinary movie filed under Frank Capra or Jimmy Stewart; this one he watched every New Year's Eve, so it was in its own special category, like *The Wizard of Oz*, which they also watched once a year when it was broadcast on TV.

"You know how he's got his little trunk and his travel brochures and his big wide eyes and—well, that's me," Ricky said. "However, I am not George Bailey and I'm *not* getting stuck in Bedford Falls. And anyway," he added, looking sideways at Paul, "just between you and me, I was always more like Jimmy Stewart's slutty little friend Gloria Grahame in her dress with the static cling."

Paul watched as Ricky turned and walked the length of the dock away toward shore, then spun on the ball of his foot and strutted back, a model draped in nothing but dirty cutoff jeans. Paul said, gently, "tomorrow you'll get yourself another pack of cigarettes."

"Damn right," Ricky said, showing his teeth and cheekbones to the pond, the trees, the enormous sky. He sat down again. He pressed his hands in his lap, and his legs dangled from the dock. "Damned dead-Sunday town."

Paul shifted his weight, curling his toes around the edge of the damp boards. He looked down at the fine, humid moss of the dock, then pushed up his glasses. "You want to know exactly what

George Bailey says to Mary?" he said, running his toe along the dewy moss. "He says: '*I'm shaking the dust of this crummy little town off my feet.*'"

Ricky stared up at him. "Say it again."

Paul repeated the line, with just the right amount of Jimmy Stewart bluster.

"Yes! My God, you know something!"

"Oh come on," Paul said, smiling. "You know I know a little something. Ask me about math or physics."

"Shit, no!" barked Ricky. He stood up again and squared his shoulders. His body was calm, less nicotine-twitchy than it had been a minute before. "I will slip away," he said in a faraway voice, "like a mermaid, into the sea."

Before Paul could fully absorb this announcement, Ricky had made of his body a quiet arc that cut the air, and then the surface of the water, before disappearing under the algae. The pond closed around him and was still for long seconds. There were idle sounds of dragonflies and a bullfrog; a woodpecker tot-totted a red pine. A few more seconds passed, and then more seconds. Had Paul ever even seen Ricky swim? They had only tooled around in the rowboat and Paul couldn't remember. Panic moved his body, one foot slipping on the moss. "Ricky!" he shouted into the enormous quiet air. He hadn't meant to shout, but he couldn't suppress the reflex.