



Jessica Au

# Nautilus

**Y**ou knew this girl once. She had red hair, and a gimpy leg.

She was a swimmer.

You loved her for years.

This was way back. Back when Bob and Zeppelin still ruled the airwaves and mustardy, bong-smoked Kombi vans shunted between the dunes. Back when your mother and father were still soft with love and things were new and unspoiled. The beaches were as raw and uncultured as pearls in those days. Some nights, the sand whiter than salt.

Back then you still thought your older brother Chris, the fucker, was the coolest thing ever. With his surfboard, vintage records and second-hand bass. You turned fourteen.

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That summer, things begin to happen.

Your brother starts up a two-bit band, buys a car, and screws a few wannabe groupies in the back. You discover the wonderfully filthy passages of Salinger and Hunter S Thompson, learn about the commies at school, and hide a two-page spread of Ursula Andress under your bed. You grow quiet that year. Silent and furious. Your brother gives you sly, knowing looks over

the kitchen table, like he can see the tortured, grimy thoughts that toss and buck in your head at night. Your mother becomes docile in the eyes of your new rage, and even your father quakes a little in his humble carpenter's boots.

You start to think about the swimmer. At your school, but older, taller. Distant. Thick bangs, apricot lips, and a bung leg. Severed just above the knee-cap, the stump pale and fleshy like uncooked pudding. Like something pale and scalped rolled up in butcher's paper. But she's beautiful anyway. At least to you, and you can't even say why. A look maybe. Her face flushed and pink with the rush of endorphins. Broad shoulders in black, razor-backed bathers, the blades just like the nub of wings, her skin shining with the love of all that saltwater. Or maybe it's the sight of her pummelling through the sea like a climber in the tired heat of the afternoon, splitting the surface as easy as a knife on a rotten plum.

At first, it's almost nothing to you. It's enough to catch a few careless glances of her limping through the school gate in the muted grey of the early morning, sitting with her back to the world on the dry, yellowing oval at lunch. A shadow in the window as you walk down her street on the way home. So you go on as usual. Help your dad build skeleton houses for rich inland tourists, and feel a strange, guilty tug of shame in your gut when you see the way they swindle and swing him, the way he lets them. Watch your brother surf those big, blue, curling breakers and wish desperately that you could do the same. Read your precious, spine-cracked books by torchlight.

But soon, it gets you. Something like a hunger, like a slow starving. To your horror, you begin to follow her. To the milk bar, white sand-spits, the crook of the shallow, open bay. Just to watch her gentle, odd gait. Her body growing small as she chases down a string of orange buoys into the distant sea. Her hair like a red fan in the water. All the while sweating at the transparency of your movements, half-convinced that she can see you. That surely she must know every aching thought written on your burnt, frowning face.

One day, your brother catches you at it. Loitering round the edge of the old pier, staring at the frothing, watery peels of her wake. Hooks a cruel arm around your shoulder and laughs.

*What the fuck, kiddo? You got a crush or something?*

You curl away in shame.

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It's then that you take up swimming. In the man-made saltwater pool on the back-beach. She's there sometimes. Doing a few quick laps before or

after school, weaving in between pink toddlers and old codgers with their tits hanging out like deflated balloons. You flounder and flop your way about the water like a drowned ferret, and live for the moments when she riles past, leaving a scream of bubbles burning up your right side. And at night, you half-dream, half-live pulling her close, sliding your hands under the tightness of her bathing suit and finding the soft, wet places your brother so viciously teases you about. Your fingers across the grooves of her ribs like strumming over the hollowed naval of a guitar.

For weeks, you say nothing. Clumsy and struck dumb as you are. Instead, you watch as the cold water parts in your hands, your face browns, and you discover a man's muscles hidden in your lanky boy-body.

Then one day, you just do it. Walk up to her with two bottles of Coke tight in your fists. Hold one out, say her name. And you talk. More than you've ever done in your life. You vomit and spew out words, great mouthfuls and knots of them. Things fall from your lips like sand through the split seams of a bunker bag. You gulp at the air like a drowned man, as if you're trying to suck down the sky, and say more than you can remember. You tell her about your banned books—smuggled, dog-eared copies of *Catcher in the rye* and *A clockwork orange*. About your boredom, the ignorant tourists, your carpenter father and his sweet, crippled mouth. Your big, hopeless plans about a different kind of summer: road-trips inland, warm swags under black skies, brown rivers as narrow as a plank of wood. Lies about wanting to swim marathons and visit foreign coasts, winning the pier to pub. Nothing about the leg. The artificial limb is creamy and tight beside you, the plastic catching the white sheen of the sun.

She's quiet at first, wary. Listening, smiling a little. Telling you about her open-water swims. Her hopes for later. Bass Strait, Gulf of Carpentaria, the English Channel. Her name printed in the record books, making local headlines.

Then, she asks shyly about your brother, and you're too struck and soaring to wonder why.

For a while, things seem brighter to you. Your old man plants a kiss on your mum's pale, puckered neck as she stirs the soup at night, and for the first time you understand why. Your brother brags and boasts, but it doesn't touch you. You find yourself grinning at odd moments.

You swim in the open sea; the water is soupy and rolling with silt, sun and plankton. You feel your muscles pump like a heart and the burn in your arms.

When you reach the last buoy you stop, float and roar mightily into the long throat of all that deep, dark water churning beneath you. It's a sweet, satisfying feeling.

Later that week, word gets out about a thing on the beach. The rumour rises and soon everyone at school is buzzing with talk. Tents are pitched on the dunes, eskies filled with booze and kegs rolled down from the bottle-o. There will be flares, Chinese lanterns, tarps, city girls and garden dope. Your brother gels his hair back, jacks up his guitar, and hustles his mates into finding a couple of amps. The girls pull out their bikinis, pump their lips and strut down to the beach in packs.

The day is blisteringly hot, the night sublime. You can hear the throb of the party, the moan and swell of the crowd, even from your tiny bedroom window. You wait till your parents are asleep before you slip out.

Down at the beach, it's mad and beautiful. There are bonfires bigger than haystacks, smoke as thick as wool in the air. Red steamers and broken glass, couples nestled in the shadowy cusp of the dunes doing ... doing *what* exactly? Your brother's jumped on top of a battered car with his band, fingers screaming up the neck of his guitar, his boots stomping dents in the roof. He looks like God, up there with the black-starred sky over his head and the crowd baying at his feet. The bass thuds in time with the veins in your head. Over there, some guy's pouring beer over a girl on her knees in the sand, her head thrown back, mouth open. Further out, a group of boys sprint barefoot along the length of the old pier, dive into the water, and bodysurf back to shore. There's so much going on you don't quite know where to place yourself. You end up on an old log near a dying fire, sitting with a circle of stoners who put their arms around you and sing *Blowing in the wind* over and over again.

It's a long time before you see her, but suddenly you look over your shoulder and she's there. Wearing something light and blowy, a blue flower in her copper hair. The hem is short enough so that you can see her thighs, her knee, the gammy leg. Her bare skin.

What happens next is like being clubbed awake from a deep sleep. For the rest of your life, these memories will come up on you like a sudden, stabbing flash of light. And you won't be able to help but think with a burst of adolescent jealousy, with rage, she should have chosen *you*. You were the right brother; you would have loved her better.

But that night on the beach, you're still too awkward and stumped to know any better. So you wait while you try to work up the balls to get up and

say something. You watch as she holds the hair away from her face, pulls nervously at her dress. You watch as carefully, shyly, she ambles up to your brother and stands next to him as he lights up and takes a drag. She puts her hand on his arm, smiles. And he turns, his eyes sleepy from alcohol and smoke, and blinks, a cocky, slack grin pasted on his face. Then she's murmuring, laughing, leaning in, her other hand on his neck, and all the while you're reeling, breaking, falling.

Her plastic leg brushes against his thigh and suddenly your brother seems to jerk awake, a strangled yell of recognition bursting from his mouth. You watch as he pushes her roughly away, swearing angrily some mumble about freaks, sluts and fake legs. There's laughter as the crowd draws back, and you can see that she's down on her knees in the wet, hard sand. Her face silent and hateful, her body curled up into itself like a nautilus shell. She doesn't move or speak as your brother and his mates walk away towards a throng of giggling city chicks. Or as the fires finally go out and everyone is left yelling and scrambling in the darkness. She says nothing at all when you walk over in the night, pick her up and, with your heart rocking in your ribs and her quick breath hot on your neck, carry her up and away from there. When you get to her street she squirms in your arms like a baby and you set her down gently, whereupon she turns away and begins to limp slowly, painfully home.

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From then on, things begin to change. Your brother bombs out on his exams, packs his bags and heads down south even before results come out. You're not sorry to see him go. You make the junior squad, win a few local meets and suddenly, before you know it, you've got an outrageous scholarship to some plush city school.

You still see her out there sometimes. But you keep your distance, say nothing. You finally see how things are. In any case, by next term you're out of there. And in the beachless, loveless city, you can begin to forget.

Within a few years, you'll have carved out a mediocre sporting career for yourself. Your brother will grow a pot belly and a bald patch and you'll wonder how you ever thought him glorious. Your parents will get a divorce and, to help your father through it all, you'll take some time off to help him build a quiet wooden house by the river.

Then, one day, you'll open up the paper to see her name stamped in the headlines, breaking records. And you'll remember that there was a girl once. That summer, when you were fourteen, angry and hopeless.

Broken and beautiful.



With red hair, and lovely legs.  
A swimmer.

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Jessica Au lives in Melbourne, where she reads, writes and tries to finish her law degree. Her stories have been published in the *Sleepers Almanac*, *UQ Vanguard* and other youth media. Sometimes, she likes to watch the *Wizard of Oz* while listening to Pink Floyd's *Dark side of the moon*.

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