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The Ones Who Walk Away From the Ocean

Katia D. Rubinstein
Gettysburg College

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The Ones Who Walk Away From the Ocean

Abstract

When a mermaid mysteriously appears on the shore of a Northern island, the town's children become enthralled with the newfound mythic creature, while the adults become wary and untrusting.

Keywords

mermaids, mystery, island

Disciplines

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Comments

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The Ones Who Escape the Ocean

Traipsing along the stony beach, we searched for mermaids in the frigid December. The salty wind stroked the waves before it found my ankles, tickling the skin my purple striped leggings left bare. I watched the wind dig tunnels through Lev's brown hair as he scanned the waves for signs of the mythical fish. Following behind, I rolled my sneakers along the stones.

"Do you think we can really find one?" I asked, my breath fogging the twilight.

"Yeah, but we have to look hard. If there was one, there has to be more." He trudged on, putting more bounce in each step he took. I wasn't so sure he was right. When we were younger, the ocean stranded a seal on the western shore. It was the middle of mating season and there were no other seals nearby. Weeks went by, but no other seals showed up that year, or the years after. If the mermaids were like the seals, perhaps the one they found a week ago was an anomaly, one that strayed too far from any others.

For a moment I stopped walking, taking a long glance out at the sea. The islanders believed the ocean ran through our blood. The water was a deep piece of who we were, so much so that many who lived here were sailors. Yet, the sea can be unforgiving, and some boats would leave and never return. Sometimes, when I would look at the water, I wondered if my father was still out in the ocean, stranded on one of the nearby islands like the seal. Most of the time, I knew he was there, but also nowhere – completely unrestrained by this reality.

I realized as we walked along, the sand crunching under our shoes, that no one had run by mocking us for our fascination with the mermaids. At first, I thought it was because of the one they found. Now that there was proof mermaids were real, no one thought our obsession with marine creatures was so amusing anymore. A few moments passed before it occurred to me that it wasn't the silence that was so strange, but the missing children. "Where is everyone?"

Lev shrugged in response, continuing to scan the horizon. He never did seem to care what others thought, even if I did. The wind whipped my ear, acting as the harbinger of far off calls. My mom's voice calling, *Emmy*, rode the wind until it reached me. "We should go home soon, it's getting dark," I suggested, heeding my mother's far off calls.

Lev looked toward the sky as if he didn't believe it was truly dark out, before acquiescing with a slight nod. The sky above was cloudy as usual, hiding the lights behind their hazy curtain. Far off in the distance, I thought I heard a scream, but when I listened closer there was only the beating wind dancing through the night. As we walked toward home, I clutched my jacket tighter, and when Lev didn't notice, I turned a corner without a word of goodbye. Ever since I turned ten, I wanted more attention from Lev, but I wasn't sure why.

The next morning, Lev knocked on my front door early enough that my mom scolded him. It's too early on a Saturday, my mother said, don't you have any manners? Although I couldn't see him from sitting at the dining room table, I could picture his sheepish smile in response. After my mom finished her chiding, he joined me at the table as I finished breakfast. He didn't ask why I left without saying goodbye last night. He remained silent and drew constellations with his fingers on the tablecloth. After breakfast, we put our coats on and went to leave, until my mom interrupted and asked where we were going.

"To look for mermaids!" we said in unison.

I expected my mom to smile or laugh at us, but she hesitated for a moment. Her eyes darkened. "Oh, that sounds like fun. Be careful," she said, forcing a smile.

As Lev and I grabbed the front door handle, my mom grabbed my shoulder and spun me back around. "Stay on the beaches closest to our house."

"Why?" I asked, raising my left eyebrow.

She ignored my question. “If you see anyone who seems...strange to you, run home, and if you find any, er, mermaids, come tell me. Okay?” Lev and I exchanged a look of confusion, but nodded.

We waddled down the street, headed for a new beach that was still fairly close to home, although all the beaches on the island were basically the same if you asked me. Everyone on this island usually roamed so freely, but on that day, the streets were desolate. “That was strange.” Lev fiddled nervously with his coat pocket.

“She’s probably scared of us drowning or something. It was only a couple months ago when Mrs. Winston’s daughter drowned.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Well, what do you think that was about?” I asked, trying to keep my hair out of my face as the wind kept blowing it forcefully against my cheeks.

He turned away briefly, examining the horizon as though waiting for daylight to come, even though he knew it wouldn’t. “It’s probably nothing, but it seemed like maybe she was hiding something from us.”

“Like what?”

“This might sound a little crazy, but what if she knows something we don’t? What if she knows where the mermaids are, but is hiding it for some reason?”

“My mom’s really smart, so maybe.”

“She knows all about the marine animals, too,” Lev said as though I didn’t know, as if there was someone on this island who didn’t know my mother or her illustrious job as a marine biologist, and who didn’t provide constant reminders of the career that defined her.

Filled with newfound hope, we wound our way around the beach. I searched the waves for mermaids with more excitement than before, hoping that somehow we could find a mermaid. If they existed, then maybe miracles did, too, and my father could still be alive. It was something I did years ago, after his boat never returned. After school, I would find myself near the ocean, and I'd watch the horizon for hours. One day, though, my mom asked me to stop, saying it was too painful for her. As we searched, a handful of other kids ran along the beach, but not as many as usual. For the next few days, we searched the waves looking for tails, to no avail.

On Tuesday, my mom wouldn't let us go out anymore. I accused her of hiding the mermaids from us, but she said nothing. As the nights grew longer, the town grew quieter. Lev and I would walk to school in the morning as parents stood watch on their porches, waving to us warily as we passed. There was an air of secret whispers amongst the parents, while the children whispered fantastical stories about mermaids. In a town where everyone would frolic to work every morning, cracking jokes like stones against the sidewalk, the parents' anxiety poisoned the usual atmosphere. None of the kids knew why.

During recess the next day, Tommy Brecht sat in a corner by himself. His friends didn't even seem to notice, but Lev and I wandered towards him. When we approached him, we saw that his lip was trembling.

"Did your friends do something to you?" Lev asked, his right fist clenched.

"No, no, it wasn't them," Tommy responded, his voice faint.

"I'll go talk to them." As Lev tried to walk away, I grabbed his arm and whipped him back around.

"They'll beat you up and you know it," I said, annoyed at his bravado. "Tommy, did someone else hurt you?"

He sniffled, wiping some snot from his nose. The air frisked by, colder than usual. “I saw the picture.”

“What picture?”

His eyes met mine for the first time in our conversation. “The one the parents won’t show us. Don’t look at it. It’s – it’s – it’s...” he said.

“What’s in the picture?” I asked.

Tommy stopped speaking, simply shaking his head. His skin was pale, and the snot dribbled down since he stopped wiping it away. Lev and I were about to leave when Tommy said, “They found Lily’s body.” Lev and I turned back around.

“Remember Tommy, they never found her. They said the ocean probably took her far away.”

“They found her, you just haven’t seen her because the parents won’t show us. I think they’re scared.”

As we walked away, my stomach felt heavier. At the mention of Lily Winston, my skin felt cooler, and I heard the cries the wind carried that day. I kept looking back at Tommy, but Lev said to just leave him be.

“We have to find that picture, or the real thing,” Lev said.

“Lev, maybe we should stop looking. If the parents don’t want us to know, maybe there’s a reason.”

Lev’s eyes hardened, and his voice became lower. “We can’t give up now. We have something to prove,” he said with an air of finality. Sometimes, I forgot his father was on that boat, too.

When Friday rolled around, Lev and I decided to sneak away to search for mermaids. My mom refused to even let me go out with Lev to watch the lights. “The sky’s clear tonight! We’ll stay right on the porch.” I was close to tears, seeming to agonize over the aurora.

As we ate dinner, I asked my mom about Lily.

“Did someone at school tell you that?”

I simply nodded in response, and my mom quietly chewed her food for a while.

“They had the funeral a while ago, so I figured you didn’t need to know about the body.”

“She can go to heaven now,” I mused.

“Huh?”

“That’s what Miss Patrino said when she died. She said she couldn’t go to heaven with a missing body.”

“What do you think about that?” My mom asked, swirling her sweet potatoes.

I shrugged. “A body’s just a body I guess. If ghosts can exist without it, I think Lily could, too.”

“You believe in ghosts?” My mom asked, chuckling a little.

“Yes,” I said quietly.

“Why’s that?”

I hesitated, but my mother looked at me expectantly. “Because Dad has one,” I whispered. My mom didn’t respond, and we finished in silence.

I was quiet and obedient the rest of the evening, and when the clouds parted revealing the radiant rays, my mom allowed us to go outside and watch them. As we settled into the snow shrouding the lawn, she lectured us about the importance of staying near the house. When she went back inside to put the dishes away, Lev and I ran off towards the beach.

“The lights will bring the mermaids out, I just know it,” Lev panted as we sprinted down the road. As we turned the block, one of our neighbors blocked our path.

“Well, what are you guys running around at this time of night for?” Mr. Nelson said, looking back and forth between the both of us. After a few moments of silence, he detected our caution and whispered duplicitously, “It’s okay, I won’t tell on you.”

“We need to find the mermaids,” Lev responded.

Mr. Nelson laughed, his wrinkles skipping across his face. “Why is it so pressing you find them now? Haven’t your parents told you it’s dangerous to be outside, especially with the current events,” the man who showed me the Kangaroo foot said. He had a shed full of animal artifacts, and he opened it once a year to let the children of the island gaze in awe at a world we’d never seen.

“The last one washed up when the lights were out, so we think they might be more active right now,” Lev said.

Mr. Nelson grew serious, looking around the street to find it deserted. “Do you guys like mermaids?”

“Of course,” we both said.

“I like mermaids, too. They’re fascinating creatures, you know? As people age, they forget about things like that, the wonders of imagination. It’s important to remember those things.”

We nodded emphatically.

“Did you guys see pictures of the mermaid?”

“No, our parents wouldn’t show us, but all the children know. We think the parents just want to keep the mermaids to themselves,” Lev responded.

“It’s really quite incredible. The transformation between the torso and the tail, the stringy hair, the scales – really fascinating craftsmanship.”

“Craftsmanship? You mean from God?” I said.

“Oh yes, sure. Do you two believe in God?”

Lev and I shrugged. Neither of us attended church frequently, but we prayed at large dinners. We spent our days with books of pirates, wizards, and magic in hand, and we spent our evenings acting them out. That was the mysticism we knew; the God of others was in my grandparents lecturing me to pray for Mrs. Winston and her family after her daughter drowned.

Mr. Nelson glanced at his hand, turning his wrinkled flesh in circles. “Do you think people could be God? After all, mothers give birth, fathers assist in creation. If we wished, couldn’t we create something we’ve always dreamed of, like mermaids for instance?” He was speaking to us, but his grey eyes fogged over, and he looked at the distant mountains.

Lev stepped backwards a few steps. “Isn’t that...wrong?” I asked, looking from Lev to Mr. Nelson.

“Is that what you think? You think it’s wrong for things to change, for humans to create? I’ve seen the way you two would search for mermaids before. You both have always been so curious.” Mr. Nelson’s tone grew sharper, and Lev grabbed my hand. The wind lashed my ear, carrying my mom’s voice with it. *Emmy*, the wind breathed. In a moment, Lev and I were running. I think he intended to take us back home, but somehow we were rushing towards the sands of an aquatic world we had dreamed of for so long.

When I glanced back, Mr. Nelson was gone, leaving only the darkness of night in his place. I contemplated what the mermaid had looked like when it washed up on shore. All the kids knew it wasn’t alive when they found it. We figured it probably couldn’t breathe and had

suffocated. I wondered what possessed the mermaid to leave its home, to claw at the sand until it escaped the clutches of the tumultuous ocean. After years of desiring the ocean, I couldn't fathom why a creature would wish to leave. Above, the lights swayed in the sky, and I could hear the memories of soundless screams. I could sense the washed up body of another mermaid, clawing at the sand to freedom from the embrace of her captor, her scales bleeding. The ones who escape the ocean only find the suffocation of a world they weren't meant for, but fate thrust onto them.