

Mermaids

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When I was going through a mermaid phase in second grade, Daddy splurged by taking us to the Weeki Wachee. I spent time afterwards in the car drawing the fish women with their breathing tubes and their hair floating out like octopus arms. I drew in lipstick and sparkly jewelry and a cigarette for one of the mermaids.

Billy wrinkled his nose. "Nobody can smoke under water."

"Those women can. You saw them in real life."

Mama smiled as she exhaled behind cat-eye sunglasses.

"They can't smoke can they, Daddy?" Billy said.

Our father checked his Air Force crew cut in the rear-view mirror. "No, son, they can't, and I wish your Mama wouldn't smoke at all. Will you tell her that for me?"

She shot him a look.

"Mama, Daddy said—"

"I heard." She ground the butt into the ashtray, adjusted her headscarf and looked, out towards the scrub pines and billboards. "Let your sister use her imagination. She can draw how she likes."

At least she hadn't said it was dumb to draw pictures. Billy was being his usual self, making the two years between us seem like ten.

We'd been gone for several hours against Mama's wishes to stay home in front of the electric fan, the best way she knew to cope with sticky weather. Florida summers had never agreed with her. Sultry weather gave her headaches to the point of nausea, a scourge that kept her from being the mother she wanted to be.

“Hey look! Tarpon Springs, Sponge Capital of the World,” Billy read the billboard.

Daddy steered toward a parking place near the sponge dock. Mama sighed. The last thing she needed was another cleaning utensil. She used a large yellow sponge to clean the bath tub every other day, bending and stretching over the porcelain that didn't look dirty. I never wanted to touch the sponge, not so much because it was unclean but for fear that something creepy was lurking inside. Wasps might buzz out of the honeycomb holes with their stingers poised like hovering hypodermics. I'd been kissed by a wasp on the lip once, or so Mama said. “That old fellow gave you a smacker.” The stinger poison had sent me screaming for the better part of an hour. It was the first summer I could remember, when we still lived in Texas. Mama split open one of her cigarettes to make a tobacco plaster, but tasting those flaky brown bits made me gag.

We piled out of the car and sauntered to the gift shops. Freshly harvested sponges baked on vendors' tables: delicate finger sponges, frilly baskets and tough wools.

“Catch.” Billy tossed a round sponge toward me. I ducked. The oblong ball bounced its way across the concrete.

“Fraidy cat. It's not alive.”

Daddy put his hands on his hips. “Son, pick that up and put it back.”

Billy sniffed it and made a face. “It doesn't smell dead.” He shuffled over to the counter and did as he was told, but he poked at more sponges piled in bins and buckets.

“Do sponges swim like fish?” I asked.

“They aren't fish,” Daddy said. “They stay put on the ocean floor. Divers have to go get them. In the old days, they held their breath.”

He pointed to a life-size mannequin wearing a diver's suit a hundred times more bulky than the mermaid suits at Weeki Wachee. I imagined holding my breath long enough to fetch a sponge head first. It was a lot of trouble to go to for a scrub brush.

Billy ogled a miniature version of the diver in a shop where Mama leaned her brunette bouffant hairdo against the door post, her arms folded across her chest as her fingers tapped rhythm on her forearms. She hadn't wanted to go on the outing in the first place. Sundays mornings were for church, she said, and Sunday afternoons for reading the Bible.

"Then consider this calling on the mermaids," Daddy said. It was only after a promise of a seafood dinner did she give in, though the only food we'd seen so far that day was a fish sandwich.

I busied myself with a display of shiny tiger clams. Some were packaged inside of the other and covered in plastic to be sold as a set. The smaller ones would make perfect dishes for my Barbie doll while the colorful bits of coral might turn into something else if I thought hard enough. Elena, my Cuban friend, didn't own a Barbie, so she helped think up accessories for mine. Once we removed the spiked plastic insert from an olive jar and declared it was a coat rack. Another time we stripped the band from her father's cigar. Elena said it could be a doll's crown, though my Barbie wasn't a princess and didn't need one.

A sallow-skinned man poked his head out the door and sized up Mama. "May I interest you in something, ma'am?"

“Ask Mr. Tour Guide.” Mama pointed toward Daddy in his khaki slacks and rust-colored crew cut. Like me, he had freckles to fill in the parts of his skin that weren’t pink when we got sunburned.

Daddy looked over at us. “You kids want anything?”

It was a signal to think fast. Billy blurted that he’d like a tiger clam and of course I wanted the package of shells. Mama, upset that we were taking so long, slammed the passenger door.

The man asked Daddy if he was in the service, which of course he was more than happy to admit. They talked Air Force until Daddy told both of us to take our stuff to the cash register.

Mama’s fuse had burned to the nub by the time we got back to the car. Her cheeks flushed, she held her forehead in one hand and fanned herself with a roadmap. She didn’t look up until Daddy handed her a small paper bag. “For you, Dear Heart.”

“Gale, you shouldn’t waste money—”

“Just open it, but be careful. It’s a fragile thing, you see.”

Her anger appeared to evaporate as she unfolded the tissue paper. Inside was a perfect disc with a folded piece of paper titled *The Legend of the Sand Dollar*. She examined the sugar-white object with the outline of a cross and Jesus’s pierce marks like crucifix pictures in the Bible.

Mama read the note attached. “If the sand dollar is broken, tiny white doves will fall out.”

“Is that true?” I asked. “There really are little birds in there? How do they breathe?”

“There’s one way to find out,” Daddy pretended to grab the shell from Mama’s grasp, but she slapped him away. “Not on your life, Bastard.”

I’d never heard her call him that crass name before, but I remembered the moment that split the time when I knew everything was all right before it wasn’t.

Daddy turned suddenly solemn, shifted the car into reverse.

We never did have our seafood dinner like he promised. Not that day or any of the days that followed. Something uneven had shifted at the sponge docks. It had flown out and stung us all.

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