

A Mermaid's Tale



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WHEN WE MOVED TO PINE Island, we first lived in a house on a canal. Every evening I fell asleep with the windows open, listening to fishermen reel off whoppers—stories not fish—while the breeze tickled the curtains and my fancy was tickled by mermaid dreams. Instead of the one that got away though, I always caught the one with honey-colored hair and green eyes. What a delectable way to drift off, amidst the beautiful lies of old men in boats and my own floating imagination.

I believe that somewhere back in the far reaches of the human mind, there's a twilight moment where fantasies such as mermaids really *do* exist. Where, in fact, they *must* exist, perhaps for our own sanity—or sanctity—or something.

The night I'm talking about, I was dreaming of mermaids (definitely plural)—and I the only merman. Suddenly, I awoke to a big fish-splash by our dock. If it had only splashed once, I would've gone back to dreaming. But the noise was insistent. It sounded as if something fishy were trapped between the dock and a hard place.

So I got out of bed and went to see what it was. Standing in my boxer shorts peering over the edge, I saw little in the dark, but I heard a distinct inhale-exhale sound. The deep, unmistakable diastolic breath of an animal much like me in size, if not in form—or so I thought.

The maternal waters that surround Pine Island are

fecund with everything from salt-water crocodiles to playful otters. I looked around the dock, but there was nothing I could see.

Then, behind me, I felt a hard, cold nudge. My heart jumped into my throat. Swiveling around, I met my 150-pound Great Dane, Zeb, whose nose is always one degree below zero. He came closer and gave me a monumental Dane lean. This is akin to the leaning tower of Pisa only, in Zeb's case, a lot heavier. Why Great Danes lean on people is about as mysterious as how mermaids get out of our dreams and under our docks. Oh, well.

As Zeb did his best to lean me into the canal, I heard a big *Ka-bump*. Something was down there all right, and by the sound of it, it was Zeb-like in size.

Lying flat and peering over the edge, I saw a sharp-looking stinger poking out of the water. I ran into the house and woke up my wife, Lorry, who followed me back to the dock asking, "Any idea what time it is?"

She kneeled down, took a look and gave me a look. "Is *that* what you're talking about?" she asked. "That's some kind of antennae. But what's it connected to?"

At that, the thing, the-whatever-it-was, slipped back under the dock. We heard it dinking around down there bumping against the pilings. Then it came out of the shadows and glided out into the starlight. At the place where a head should've been, I saw that outrageous antennae sticking up into the air.

"It uses that thing to send messages," I murmured.

"Brilliant," Lorry said.

"When it passes by us again, I'm going to reach out and touch it."

"More brilliant," Lorry added. "Don't do it." However reasonable her request, I used my male initiative to reach out and touch it.

"It's alive!" I gasped. Zeb, the perfect Apollo of canines, stared at us from afar with a furrowed brow.

The wand wavered, then moved

forward away from the dock. Wending away from us now in the half-light of the mangrove moon, it left a starry wake gleaming behind its massive yet shapely tailfin.

Suddenly I had a revelation. "The funny wand thingy," I announced. "The fish and wildlife people put those on creatures they're trying to track. I'm pretty sure it's nothing more than a manatee with an antennae on its head."

Lorry smiled beatifically at my wondrous explanation. "That's got to be what it is! Well, scare's over, let's go back to bed."

And so we did—but my dream of a real, live mermaid had slipped away with the tide. I'd wanted it to be a mermaid, the same way a kid wants it to be Santa.

Next morning, our neighbor caught me hanging over the dock, in the hope of another sighting. I told him of our late-night encounter of the watery kind, and his fourth-generation-Floridian chuckle further punctured my dream.

"They monitor manatees," he said, matter-of-factly. "You know, Mote Marine."

Still, my stubbornly romantic writer's brain kept riffling through visions. For a while, at least, I had a mermaid on the line. And what does my practical neighbor know about them? Has *he* ever been tantalized by green hair and purple eyes? Does he know they prefer writers over other mortals?

Manatees, I suspect, are those mermaids of the 15th century that Ponce, Vasca and the other explorers reported seeing. Those guys loved a good mystery, and here was one as large as North America—the woman with fins, scales and tail.

Today, more than ever, our final frontier is not outer but inner space. And that's where mermaids swim in abundance, through the folkloric, six-dimensional world of the human psyche. They exist, if nowhere else, in the saltwater ether of the mind.

The other night while dining in Matlacha, Lorry and I watched the

manatees push slowly across the pass, surfacing and breathing and moping along with grayish, whis-kery forethought. You couldn't call it grace but rather the seaward flow of a flippered cow whose thoughts are way beyond our land-lubbery discernment.

How could a mermaid—even a mermaid *myth*—spring from that bovine beast? The early explorers witnessed the same corpulent mam-mal that we saw on our dock and now, again, at Moretti's restaurant. Did they see it with the eyes of an expectant child? A child who shapes and shadows things? From a dun-colored water cow to a lovely lady of the sea?

The sea chanteys of olden days tell of mermaids that are not the least bit dreamy. They're vicious sea harpies that sink ships. Even today on certain Caribbean islands, story-tellers say that looking into the winking eye of a passing mermaid can bewitch you forever.

While I was doing narrations for the History Channel's program, *Haunted Caribbean*, I interviewed an old Calypso singer in Jamaica, who said that a mermaid had given him the evil eye and after that, he was never the same. It may have been hard on his nervous system—seeing fantastical things always is—but his step-and-go singing just got better as he aged. The mermaid's gift, so his friends said.

In the end, we *see* what we *want* to see. As Paul Simon said in *The Boxer*, "a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."

The next time you see a manatee, think about history and the connec-tion between the legendary mermaids and the mammal.

No, think *herstory*. For this is a maternal tale. The story of the mam-malian mother who bears live young, and who breathes salt air the same way we do. She's a lumbering, lim-ber *moomah*, as they say in the West Indies, a woman with a wand, the old woman of the sea. †