

Watching for Mermaids

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PREFACE

The Truth.... Mainly

My two older brothers, my parents and I were all packed into the small dining room-turned bedroom in which my ailing, 82-year-old, bed-ridden mother had resided for over a year. We'd all been trying in vain to rouse her from a deep sleep.

“She’s practicing being dead,” my light-hearted oldest sibling said.

“No, she just doesn’t want to listen to another one of David’s sea stories,” my middle brother jabbed.

“What did you say?” my nearly deaf father said.

“Dad, they’re making fun of my sea stories,” I said toward him.

“What worries?” my ever-positive dad asked.

“STORIES. Making fun of my stories, not my WORRIES, Dad,” I shouted. Just then my mother moved in bed. We all stopped and looked at her. She opened her eyes. Then she said something. Very weakly. She was looking in my direction.

“She wants you, Dave. I think she wants to talk to you,” my brother Skip said.

“HI MOM, WHAT IS IT?” I asked, leaning over her, inches from her face. “It’s me, David.”

“After 47 years I know what you look like,” she said. Then she coughed in several short spasms. I adjusted the oxygen tube to her nostrils. After a few moments she caught her breath. “I’ve been listening, and I’ve been wondering,” she said. “I’ve been wondering about these sea stories of yours. You know, David, if you actually *did* all the things you say you’ve done, the truth is you’d be twice my age by now.”

“Mom, I don’t make this stuff up... well, not all of it,” I said. “And I like telling stories.”

“Then why don’t you write them all down and be done with it, so we can all get some rest,” she said with a weak smile.

So, that’s what I’ve done, Mom. And they’re dedicated to you.

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I.

CHILDHOOD

There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition.

*For Reality, You See, Is Something Created by Man
To Dignify His Limitations*

Rod Serling

*Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such a dulcet and harmonious breath,
That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music.*

William Shakespeare
A Midsummer Night's Dream

The Truth About Mermaids

15 June, 1608

Off the Artic Coast of Russia

In 1608, the English navigator Henry Hudson was skirting the polar ice off the arctic coast of Russia in his second attempt to find a northeast route to the spice markets of China. Near the coast of Nova Zembla, Hudson made his log entry of 15 June:

This morning, one of our companie looking over board saw a mermaid, and calling up some of the companie to see her, one more came up, and by that time shee was close to the ship's side, looking earnestly upon the men: a little after, a Sea came and overturned her: From the Navill upward, her backe and breasts were like a woman's.., her body as big as one of us; her skin very white; and long haire hanging down behinde, of colour blacke; in her going down they saw her tayle, which was like the tayle of a Porposse, and speckled like a Macrell.

351 Years Later

July, 1959

44.04N/68.35W

A small island just east of Isle au Haut, Maine

The Stem knows.

No one else until now, though.

Fifty one years ago, when I was nine years old, I saw two mermaids. Really. I understand why you might doubt me. So be it. But when I was nine years old I saw two mermaids. Period.

It could have been just another false sighting, another apparition, like the ones in those handwritten captains' logs of square-rigged vessels roaming the oceans looking for whales, or from the sailors' journals aboard the spice traders journeying back from Zanzibar. It could have been written off as just one more incident out of a young boy's imagination. But a stream of events flowed from that moment when I saw them, on that hot, languid day in July of the year 1959, that made me much different from other nine year olds. But more on that later.

Early on that morning of the sighting, my Dad and I had hidden from the heat under the canvas awning in the cockpit of *Phyllis*, our old wooden cutter. We were anchored in a rocky Maine cove which was somewhat open to the Northeast. Dad had hoped for a breeze to cool us, but it was not to be. The anchor line lay limp off the end of the bowsprit. The world seemed so still, I remember. Dad was working with a piece of manila anchor line in his lap. He held a small spool of heavy waxed thread between his

knees, and was winding it around the end of the rope. On the end of the thread was a long, curved and rusty sewing needle. After he had wound about a half inch of thread around the line, he poked the needle through the middle of the line and pulled it tight. He did this several times. I watched him working so intently and with focus. I also watched a large drop of sweat run down the side of his face, hang for a moment at the end of his chin, and then drop onto his canvas pants. “What’s that called, what you’re doing?” I asked. “Whipping,” he said. The word startled me, and I shifted on the canvas cockpit cushion, then leaned back, and looked away. “It’s a sailor’s term for tying off the end so it won’t unravel. It’s a way of caring for the life of the rope,” he continued. “I’ll teach you.”

But I was suddenly nervous and wanted to get away by myself.

“Maybe later Dad,” I said.

“Why don’t you get in the dinghy and practice your rowing?” he asked. I nodded. “Nice and calm now,” he continued. “Good time for it. But don’t forget your lifejacket...and please wear your hat.”

The dinghy’s bow line hung limp like the anchor line of the bigger boat. The totally calm and clear sea looked like a thick gel that held the reflections of the bow lines of the two boats in its midst like fruit in a jello. My sudden movement into the dinghy was startling in a world so still. I untied the bow line and pushed away from the big boat, picked up the wooden oars and slid them into their oar locks. The sudden shuffling of the oars echoed against the shore. “I might go ashore. Ok, Dad? Might do some beachcombing,” I said.

I pulled toward shore, my eyes aimed down at my feet. The oars were adult oars, too long and heavy for me, and I had to concentrate. There was a small pool of water in the bottom of the boat, and I watched it move forward and aft with each motion of my oar strokes. I spread my feet to the side of the bilge, trying to keep them dry. Then I looked over my shoulder to check on my progress toward shore. The sandy beach and rocks and pine trees were getting close, and I began to smell the decaying seaweed left behind by the tide. The tide had been dead low and its flood was just now beginning. I knew that in its retreat six hours before it would have left other things behind. It would be a good time for beachcombing, I thought.

I walked perhaps a half mile, a long ways for a nine year old. Combing was good. I found three horseshoe crabs, those foot-long shelled creatures that look like miniature brown army tanks, their tails like great canons coming out of the turrets. I remembered, a couple of years earlier near my home in Massachusetts, when Sam Cooper and I spotted our first horseshoe crabs. He had wanted to smash them with a big rock, either to kill them or see what was inside. Or maybe both. I remember trying to distract him as he lifted the rock, lying that I just spotted a deer in the high marsh grass, but Sam was intent on his goal. "Don't Sam," I said at the last second. He dropped the rock anyway, crushing the foot-long crab. Sam looked down at the gooey mess, then back at me. "Damn, you are such a wimp loser." Then he kicked over the crab and turned to look toward the tall marsh grass. "Now let's go find this wimpy deer of yours."

I moved on down the Maine beach, lost in my world of exploration. I found a bottle with a cork in it (though no note inside), a bright yellow orphaned lobster buoy, and a broken hockey stick. The bottle excited me the most because someday I knew I'd find one with a note in it. It might be a note from someone who was in trouble, and needed my help.

I was thinking about that, imagining where the note would be from, and how I would help, when I rounded a bend in the shore. I didn't realize it at first because I was looking down, but I was walking into a U shaped indentation made by years of hammering and then funneling of the Atlantic Ocean against the shore. It was a secluded nook, about thirty yards deep and fifty yards wide, and framed by two high, narrow arms of protruding rock. The nook's only access was at low tide, around these jutting walls, and along a short, normally submerged stretch of beach. The only other access was by boat, and I could see numerous nasty ledges now uncovered to seaward. A gull flew close overhead, crying, but I didn't look at it. I didn't look at it because I was frozen by another site. At first, it seemed just another scene from my vivid imagination, only this time I realized I hadn't willed it.