When I Dreamed of Mermaids

The camping trip was my father’s idea. He wanted my mother to meet Katerina and Vasili, and he wanted them to meet my mother. Why, I do not know. If I were my father, I would have kept these two worlds as separate as possible. But it goes without saying that my father was his own man, and that there were many inexplicable decisions in his life.

The trip he arranged was to Hunt’s Island, a peninsula off the Carolina coast, where visitors could see endangered sea turtles and piping plovers, alligators and great white herons. It boasted “the last truly undisturbed coastline in the country.” At eleven, I imagined Hunt’s Island as a serene place, a refuge from the hurt and turmoil of my home in the mountains. Could my family last, in this place with no disruption?

I was not part of the original plan. An adult’s weekend, my father said, but my mother wouldn't have it. She guessed, rightly, that she would need an ally on her side.

“I ain’t leaving Becca here, to get into God knows what, while we go traipsing off on some island,” she told my father, the night he proposed the plan.

“Don’t you think we’d have more fun, just us couples?” my father asked. He rubbed her fingers between his, wheedled her with his eyes. I knew there would be no intimacy between them. He didn't want me there as witness to his incredulous infidelity, my mother’s denial of it all. Still, she blushed.

“I won’t stop worrying,” she said, taking her hand back, turning her wedding ring nervously around its joint.

And so, two weeks later, we all packed into our tight sedan and headed east. We brought fishing poles and bourbon. Wire hangers to hang hot dogs and marshmallows over the fire. Tents and ratty sleeping bags and a cooler of ice and sandwich meats. Extra packs of smokes. Paper back novels and fold-up nylon beach chairs. I brought my bathing suit from last summer and my dead grandfather’s binoculars.

My father and Vasili sat up front, the three women sandwiched into the back of the car. I was stuck in the middle, my mother’s sweaty thigh pressed against one side, Katerina’s coffee-colored leg blissfully close on the other. Katerina smoked with the window rolled down, her signature cherry smoke rolling into my hair, stinging my eyes and making my head spin. In the front seat, my father and Vasili played old cowboy music and shared a bag of Chex mix.

We checked into the campground that afternoon. The air smelled of salt and sunscreen. The park ranger at the front desk was muddied by sunburn, except for a white strip where his sunglasses perched over his nose.

“Y’all be careful now,” he said. “We’re expecting some bad weather this weekend.”

My father grinned and shook the park ranger’s hand.

“Oh,” he said. “We’re ready for anything.”

I wasn't sure that our tents were waterproof.

The camp site was shaded by tall loblolly pines, which had dropped a soft bedding of needles onto the gravel square. A rusted iron fire pit and charcoal grill squatted next to a picnic table. A previous party had left the bodies of Coors Lite cans in the ashes of the pit, and I poked these with a stick while my father and Vasili assembled our two tents.

“We’ve got the lady’s tent over here,” my father said. “And the guy’s tent over here. That way y’all don’t have to smell our nasty feet.” He laughed and Vasili smiled. Katerina took her bags into our home place for the next two nights and set them down with a sigh.

“I cannot fucking believe this place,” she said. We were the only two in the tent. “I cannot believe I let him bring me here.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said. They have a shower.”

Katerina laughed, a high ringing that set my ears ablaze. “Shower?” she said. “More like a hotel for bugs.”

That first night, after we’d set up camp and cooked hotdogs, after the adults were sleepily drunk and I was exhausted from the day’s excitement, we fell asleep in our piled sleeping bags and pillows. I awoke three hours later, my bladder hurting from too much Kool-Aid and Sprite. There was a flashlight by my pillow. I took it and stepped over my mother and Katerina, who were curled fast asleep on either side of me.

Once out of the tent, I turned on the flashlight and sheltered the brightness with my palm. The campground was quiet except for the laughing of some far off campers and the pipping of tree frogs in the woods. I found the gravel path and, hoping I remembered the way, tiptoed toward the restrooms.

It turns out that Katerina’s judgement was correct. The showers smelled of mildew and something vaguely offal. An extended family of granddaddy long legs seemed to have the run of the place, and my flashlight spotted on paper wasp nests and the long cones of mud dauber hives. The sound of dripping water echoed and my flashlight shone back at me from the streaked mirrors.

Though the fear nearly rent a hole in my chest, I made it to and from the toilet without incident. No boogiemen jumped out at me from the dark, no silent killers were waiting in the bushes. I didn't run into any alligators or bears or deer, which scared me just as much as tigers, with their large reflective eyes and sharp hooves.

Back at the camp site, I turned the light off and stumbled toward our tent. I was almost inside the door when I heard the noises, the moaning and grunting. I remembered these sounds from the abandoned house, not long ago, when I’d seen my father bent over Vasili’s back, the two of them tossed into that strange dance adults called love.

I paused outside of the tent, afraid that my footsteps would wake Katerina and she would find her husband engaged in such an act with my father. I don't know why I felt the need to protect her. She wasn't gentle, she wasn't kind. She was a monstrous force, capable of destroying our lives in a way my mother wasn’t. So I guess, in a way, I was protecting myself.

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In the morning, I climbed out of the tent to find my father threading fishing line through the eyelets on his pole. The other pole leaned against the picnic table, already laden with the bobbers and weights and lures.

“Vasili and I are going fishing,” he told me. He whistled as he pulled the line to the top. He selected a bright orange float from the tackle box sitting in the gravel.

“Can I come?” I asked. I picked out a Poptart and poured luke-warm Kool-Aid into a plastic cup. My mother and Katerina were nowhere to be seen. Maybe they had decided to brave the bathrooms and shower the salt and bug spray from their hair.

“Oh no,” my father said. “I don't think so. You ladies are going down to the beach. That will be fun, right?”

I knew then that I was meant to act as mediator between my father’s wife and his lover’s. My father’s viewpoint must have been *well if she has to come, might as well make her useful*. I wanted to tell my father that I knew. That I’d seen him and Vasili, that I knew all the facts, that he wasn’t pulling one over my eyes, no sir. But I just shrugged and crammed the too-sweet pastry into my mouth.

Katerina and my mother came up the gravel road, barefoot and in sundresses, like women from some wild tribe.

“Go put your swimsuit on, sweetheart,” Katerina said. “We’re going to the beach.” She had a slight lisp around the edges of her S’s, a pattern of speech I wished to emulate. I knew it would only sound stupid on me, like her fuchsia lipstick and kohl-lined eyes. Small town girls couldn't even fake sophistication.

My mother went into the tent to find my swimsuit and Katerina lit a cigarette. She perched on one of the lawn chairs by the fire pit and blew smoke into the ashes.

“You boys ready for your big adventure?” she asked in a teasing lilt.

My father laughed and winked at Katerina. “Oh, don’t you worry. I’ll bring your man back in one piece.”

Vasili emerged from his tent, disheveled from sleep. He walked over to Katerina and bent down to kiss her.

“Gentle,” she said. “Gentle. You’ll smudge my lipstick.” They pecked like birds sharing food and Vasili drew back.

“Why are you wearing lipstick to go swimming?” he asked her.

“Swimming? I’m not swimming. No sir. There are too many sharks and jellyfish. I am going to sit in the sun, and read a trashy novel, and get a tan.”

Katerina was already tanner than anyone in town who wasn't black. Anything she wore shone, as if the world were a complimentary color to her skin.

“And drink,” she added, as an afterthought. “I’ll probably drink.”

My mother came out of our tent and threw my swimsuit at me. I caught it, and she followed with a bottle of sunscreen.

When I came back from the bathroom, Vasili and my father had already left, taking the car down to the marina where they’d rented a boat. Katerina and my mother sat perched at opposite ends of the picnic table, not talking to each other. My mother stared into the woods beyond the gravel path as if waiting for some deity from the forest to emerge and tell her what to do.

“You ready?” Katerina asked me. She sprang up from her seat and handed me a bag to carry. We each had an over-packed bag and a lawn chair. Katerina wheeled a cooler of slushy ice and snacks and fruity drinks. The walk to the beach was only about a half mile, but laden down with the sun bouncing off of my back, I felt like a refugee from a foreign, sandy nation.

My childhood was not filled with vacations. This was one of a handful I could remember. While my mother and Katerina sat in their chairs and drank pink wine coolers, I ran into the surf and watched the sand catch at my toes. I went as deep as possible, salty water stinging the scrapes on my knees and the scratches from blackberry brambles and wild rose. I dove beneath the surf, rising with handfuls of sand and hermit crabs, bewildered alien creatures that skittled over my heart line.

I walked down the fault between sea and sand, picking up broken shells and fragments of sand dollars. I found the tail-ends of painted whelks, slippery halves of shark’s eyes, golden slipper shells. I found a spiral egg case, the hulk of a horse shoe crab, the limp body of a ghost crab. Everything in this surf was either broken or dead. In tide pools formed in the sand, finger-length minnows sparkled, searching for escape.

When I got back to my mother, she and Katerina were sun-drunk and laughing. My mother rinsed my hands off with a half-bottle of water and I made myself a turkey sandwich from the cooler. She handed me a slippery bottle of Coca-Cola and opened another drink for herself.

“You need to get a Brazilian,” Katerina said. She lit a cigarette. My mother laughed.

“Oh god, no, I’m too old for that. No, that ship has sailed.”

“It feels nice,” Katerina said. “Smooth. Sexy. Becca, shut your ears.”

I nibbled on my sandwich and tried to be quiet, as if I could fade into the background and the adults would forget I was there.

“What? You get Brazilians? Where, in our town, have you possibly found a place that does Brazilians?

I finished my sandwich and buried the crust in the sand. I was trying to figure out exactly what a Brazilian was, and why someone might want one.

“No,” Katerina said. “I do the whole puppy. Makes everything easier. Clean up, you know.”

My mother laughed so hard she scared a flock of gulls into the air.

“You don't feel like a little girl?” she asked, still choking on her laughter.

“I haven't felt like a little girl since I was a little girl,” Katerina said. “Besides, go to that place in the strip mall. The one that does eyebrow threading and black ladies’ hair? They’ll do it. Not all of it, but a Brazilian. Not bad, too. Plus, they’re funny.”

“I’ll think on it,” my mother said. She stubbed her cigarette out on the sand and picked up a romance novel laying face-down in the sun.

“I buy a kit online,” Katerina said. “It includes all the wax, everything. Got different scents and everything. Makes my pussy smell like raspberries.”

It all clicked into place. In fifth grade, in health class, we had learned about puberty and the things that happened to your bodies. Periods, hair in new places, boobs— which the teacher called *breasts*. We didn't talk about sex but we didn't have to. Most of us had enough older siblings or friends to have garnered a basic understanding. It started with kissing. Then, you fell in love and felt warm. Then you got married and had babies, unless you were like some of the girls in the high school, who had babies and moved to the trailer park with their baby daddies.

But no one had said anyone about shaving.

I thought about this phenomenon for the rest of the afternoon. I knew men shaved— I’d seen my father in the mornings, his face soapy and his low curses as he slipped and cut his cheek or jaw. I’d never seen my mother shave before, so I guessed that this ritual was done in private, which meant it must involve private places.

Still, I could not imagine bringing a razor so close to *that.*

Back at the campsite, my mother and Katerina walked to the showers together, arm in arm like old friends. I stayed in the tent, wincing as my pink lobster skin brushed against the nylon of my sleeping bag. Vasili and my father still hadn't returned and the campsite was quiet. I took off my bathing suit and a sprinkle of sand littered the tent floor. I looked down at my pale white stomach, pink belly button twisted in the center, the red splotchy heat of my thighs and calves, my toes with purple-glitter nail polish still chipped to them. My body didn't look like my mother’s, which was worn and wrinkled, spotted and lined like a map. It didn't look like the smooth brown canvas of Katerina’s, either. Little girl. Did they mean like me? I didn't want to imagine Katerina that way, but at the same time I did.

Once a woman took all her clothes off in the IGA parking lot. She was wigging off, my father said, a phrase I didn't quite understand but took to mean that she wasn't all here. Her stomach hung over her panties, which were pale yellow and baggy. Her breasts swung as she danced, chaotic and screaming, until a group of women came with a blanket to swaddle her until the cops arrived. The skin under her arms hung like vestigial wings, as if she kept flapping her arms she might remember to fly. Her nipples were wide brown spots, like coffee stains on her breasts.

My body didn't look like any of these women. I put on my underwear and overalls and left the tent, just as my mother and Katerina returned, their hair wet and shining in the sun.

By the time we had unpacked the coolers, the sky was hung low with thick gray clouds and the air had a static greenness to it. We sat by the campfire, the women smoking, me reading a book about a prince who is turned into a fox. My mother kept checking the time on her phone.

“Those men need to hurry,” she said. “Or they’re going to get trapped in this. And this isn't the type of storm you want to get trapped in.”

Katerina shrugged, nudged the fire pit with her toe. “They’ll figure it out,” she said. “They’re adults.”

My mother lit another cigarette off of the butt of her first one. She shaded her eyes and looked up into the clouds, which were hanging low and gray over the trees.

“Come on, Becca, let’s not just sit here,” Katerina said, standing and stretching. “There’s a little museum at the camp center, let’s go there.”

My mother looked up from her worry. “Don’t be gone too long,” she said. “It’s bad enough with Vasili and Keith out there.”

“We’ll be fine, we’re just going up the road,” Katerina said. She gave my mother a look. “I think it’s good for her to go do something, get distracted.”

My mother conceded. “I’ll stay here,” she said. “Wait for them to get in.”

We left the camp site and walked up the gravel path to the park center, which was crowded with tourists trying to decide what to do.

“My mom is afraid of thunderstorms,” I told Katerina.

“Really?” she asked. She looked concerned. “Maybe we shouldn't have left her alone back there.”

I didn't want to lose my alone time with Katerina. I shook my head. “No, no, she’s okay. She’s afraid of a lot of stuff. Snakes, spiders, cockroaches.”

I knew I shouldn't be listing my mother’s secrets, but I wanted something to give away.

“Well, she’s lucky she has a brave girl like you to keep her company,” Katerina said, and squeezed my hand. I squeezed back. You could see me shining, I thought, at Katerina’s words. Brave, like a soldier or a warrior or an adventurer in one of my books or games. Brave was a sword I now carried, a magical amulet, a fiery arrow.

The Touch Tank was crowded with children, most smaller than I, trying to touch the sand dollars and flounder and sea urchins and starfish. I didn't want to approach the tank; it seemed babyish, but Katerina pulled me close.

“Oh, look at this,” she said, lifting a starfish to the edge of the water. I could see its millions of suction-feet, all swaying and grasping to find purchase. I let her lay it in my palm.

“It tickles,” I said.

“Please don't pick up the flounder,” said a teenaged employee in the corner. “They have sharp teeth.” I watched a small boy drop the flounder, which zoomed through the tank to the shadows out of reach.

“Starfish have every single organ in each arm,” Katerina said. “It’s called radial symmetry. That means that if you cut off an arm, you can grow a whole new starfish from it.”

“That’s mean,” I said.

“Yes, but it’s good if you get in an accident.”

“Why do you know that?”

“Well, I wasn't always a small town girl,” Katerina said. She winked at me and placed the starfish back in the tank. “Come on, let’s look around.”

We walked around the education center and Katerina told me about the difference between salt water and brine water, how alligators carry their babies in their mouths, how sea turtles mistake streetlights for the moon. I learned that Katerina used to work as mermaid at the aquarium in Myrtle Beach, and she was a good listener, and that’s how she knew so much about the ocean.

“Every morning, we’d slip on our tails and colorful wigs. I went on all the tours, saw every special exhibit. I could probably tell you about the feeding habits of great white sharks in my sleep.”

“I can’t believe you were a mermaid,” I said. “I want to be a mermaid when I grow up.”

“Well, it’s not all fun and games. Its hard work, and sometimes people are mean to you. You have to be really strong too, to be able to swim all day.”

Katerina bought me a plastic sheet on finding birds in the marsh and we walked back to the campsite in a misty rain.

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The storm grew louder and closer, rain pelting the tents like hail. We ate turkey and ham and slices of white bread in the lantern light. The men still hadn't returned, and my mother had grown even more anxious. She kept stepping out into the rain to smoke, but her cigarettes were drenched and wouldn't light.

“They’re fine,” Katerina said, rubbing her back.

“What if they’re not?”

“They’re probably just waiting out the storm in town. It’s dangerous to drive back in these conditions.”

I read my plastic bird guide and tried not to worry about my father. I’d already decided he was dead, so there wasn't much else to lose. I felt strange and calm, like my mind was floating out of my body.

“The redwing blackbird can be distinguished by the bright red and yellow band on its shoulder, and its loud and lively song,” I read. My mother was crying and Katerina was rubbing her shoulders.

“Mom,” I said. She looked up at me. “Did you know that Katerina used to be a mermaid?”

My mother looked at Katerina, confused.

“It’s true. I swam in the show in Myrtle Beach,” Katerina said.

“I would have never guessed,” my mother said.

“Well, it wasn't for a long time. Just for a couple years after I graduated high school. My mother wouldn't let me stay unless I got a job, and I didn't have any skills. Swimming was the only thing I was good at.”

“Why did you move to the mountains?” my mother asked. “There aren't many mermaids there.”

Katerina laughed and shrugged. She opened a bottle of whiskey and poured some into her plastic cup. “Well, I met Vasili, and I followed him home. Being in love trumps being a mermaid, any day.”

“And are you?” my mother asked.

“What?”

“In love?”

Katerina swallowed a drink of whiskey and sighed. “Who really knows anymore?” she asked.

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I dreamed of my father and Vasili trapped on their little boat in cresting gray waves, white foam surrounding them as the boat swung and bobbed. I imagined the storm rolling over them, sheets of water so thick and gray that you couldn't see. The boat shatters, and my father and Vasili are separated, clinging to different sheets of wood. Then, Katerina appears as a mermaid, her tail long and turquoise, her breasts full and smooth, nipples brown and tender. She swims in long powerful strokes and crests near her husband’s limp form. She gathers him into her arms like a child. In the dream, I am there but not there, and I scream for Katerina to rescue my father as well. He is clinging to the shard of wood, too small to support his bulky frame. She looks at him, her pupils small and slitted, and dives beneath the waves.

I was awakened by sirens. I’d fallen asleep while my mother and Katerina passed the liquor bottle back and forth and talked in whispers and the rain pelted the tent, a musical orgy of rain and thunder and lightning cracks. Now, the rain had quieted and the sky was dark. The tent was empty. I stepped out to see a herd of people milling around the camp ground, shouting and talking. A fire truck was parked parallel across the gravel lane, blocking my view. I squeezed through the crowd, looking for anyone I belonged with. No one noticed me. I arrived to the scene of the commotion barefoot, rain glistening off my skin and my clothes darkened with water and sweat.

The park center was orange and gray from the flames and smoke roiling over it. It reminded me of flamenco dancers I’d seen at the fair once, with bright ruffled skirts and twirling legs. Firefighters stood around the entrance, spraying chemical-smelling water into the windows and doors. Park employees in their khaki uniforms stood around crying or arguing with the fire chief. I didn't see my mother or father and immediately knew that they had died in the blaze. I began crying, at the fruitlessness of it all. A woman saw me sobbing and knelt to my level.

“Honey?” she asked. “Honey are you okay?”

I shook my head.

“Are you lost? Where’s your family, darling? Who did you come here with?”

Still I couldn't bring myself to speak. What did I have to say to this woman? All the adults in my life were dead, drowned by mermaids and burned by lightning flame. I had nothing left but the mountains, and those were hours away with no map to get there.

The woman led me to a police man standing idly next to his car. She explained the situation and the officer spoke something into the radio on his shoulder. A moment later I was taken to an ambulance, where it was determined I was completely fine. The ambulance workers wrapped a blanket over my shoulders and gave me a cup of water. The woman who found me stayed by my side, rubbing my shoulders.

“What’s your name, sweetie?” the officer asked.

I told him. I wiped the tears off my cheeks with dirty hands and felt stupid. I looked up at the burning center, where hundreds of animals were boiled alive. I thought about how none of us can be saved.

“Do you know where your parents are?” he asked.

I told him I didn’t. I told him I’d woken up when I heard the sirens and the camp site was empty and I was afraid. I told him my father had gone fishing and hadn't returned, that my mother was afraid of thunderstorms, that I was in love with a mermaid.

After I’d calmed enough, the police officer drove me in his squad car back to our campsite. Most of the crowds had dispersed and the fire was gradually dying.

“I’ve never been in a cop car,” I said.

The officer laughed. “That’s usually a good thing,” he said.

“I’m gonna be a mermaid when I grow up,” I said.

“That’s a good plan.”

“My dad is in love with his best friend,” I said.

The officer didn't respond. We got to the campsite, where my mother and father were sitting out by the fire pit, which was lit with a small and stubborn flame. I started crying when I saw the fire.

He let me out of the car and I ran to my father, my feet bruising on the gravel, and leapt into his arms. My father caught me and held me. He smelled like sea salt, cigarettes, fish. He smelled like fire and rot. I cried on his shoulder and he rubbed my back.

“Now where did you go off to?” he asked.

“I thought you died,” I said.

“Naw, sweet-bug, we just got caught in the storm. We’re all okay.”

My mother thanked the officer and he left. I didn't let go of my father’s arms.

There’s one more piece to tell. In the morning we packed the campsite and drove away in silence. Bright yellow tape marked off the burned educational center. All that was left was some broken glass and the hulking stone frame. I watched out of the rear-view mirror until the ruin disappeared. I thought about the animals, the flounder with his sharp teeth and the wavering star fish. Mermaids carrying the bodies out to sea. Katerina in her scales and fins pulled Vasili back to shore because he was the one she loved. Would she save me? My mother? Would I?

As we drove home, Katerina and my mother fell asleep, their heads lolling against opposite windows. I leaned back into the seat and watched Vasili run his hand through my father’s hair, his fingers pulling at the gray strands along his neck. Was he afraid, on that boat, in the storm? Did he cry, like my mother did, when the thunder clashed? Did my father hold him, arms around his shoulders, lips near his ear, as the rain fell? I imagined my father’s body, cold and wrecked in the surf, washed up on the sand among broken bits of shell and drift wood, sharks’ teeth and clumps of algae. I remembered the taste of his cheek, like charcoal and salt water, warm and beating and alive. I knew that for my father, there was no radial symmetry, no mermaids in the deep. As we barreled northward, I wished for my father all the sweet love he could glean from this world.