

The Call of the Sirens

We had been planning this trip for nigh on two years, now. My mother claims she wanted to wait until I finished my studies for good; my sister already having done so a year before. We tried to tell her that we were good to go whenever, that we truly missed the ocean – despite everything – and that if anything, bringing some books to research on board would be somewhat refreshing. We were used to the sea, we missed the ships, we pined to be back on board something, *anything*. She conducted a whole farce of considering it, but the answer was always a no. We understood, and didn't press the matter, but it was frustrating.

The trip itself would have only taken five weeks, give or take a day or two for weather and unforeseeable mishaps, but considering what had happened to my dad, she wanted to make sure everything was planned – from the state of the ship itself being in peak sailing condition, to provisions, to the multiple destinations; she'd checked with coast guards of the waters we'd be sailing in, giving them a run-down of our trajectory and queried in to the possibility of sending search parties to trace our career should something go awry, and we didn't turn up within three days of the designated date.

She'd been in touch with other sailors who had crossed the same waters, and accosted them with what had turned in to a rigid checklist-turned-questionnaire, of which she would then cross-reference with the others – even though she had sailed these waters herself earlier in life. She needed to know how they fared, were there any causes for concern, any bad experiences that befell others and if so, what? how? when? was it avoidable? was it down to lack of experience? I knew that she'd always been one for details and preplanning, but this was a whole other level, and it broke my heart.

It got to the point that any brochure or article my sister and I would allow to galvanise our excitement – stating what there was to do at this dock, this port, this city – would soon be tainted and poisoned by her insatiable need to scrutinise every last detail. Literally, every last one. And that poison would affect her most – our symptoms were disdain and pity, hers a sickness of feverish research all over again. She usually commanded an effortless and quiet confidence, but now she was a twisted reflection, bedraggled, exhausted and stressed.

One of the reasons I wanted to go on the holiday so much was because she seemed almost desolate, now. It was like having a bastardised version of the lively woman I knew – her soul was geared toward ocean and sailing, yet here it was, dried, shrivelled, arid.

I hoped that having her back out there would instil that sense of purpose and belonging, and like some enchantment, the life and colour would return to her now wiry and greying hair; that the sunset blush would find its way back on to her pallid cheeks; that the cracking wrinkles would dissipate, giving back the years they stole. I knew that was all impossible – such a fairy tale reversion - but to be honest, just seeing that almost forgotten liberated smile of pure in-the-moment joy as the salty wind tickled at her hair would suffice.

We were always a seafaring family. My mum was an engineer in the navy, and my dad was a fisher – a pretty successful one, too. When her service ended, she worked freelance in dockyards, mostly repairing damaged vessels, or surveying others to gauge how seaworthy they were. But apparently, she was always eager to 'test' her judgements and demand the crews take her with them on their next venture. "If the floor isn't rocking, my heart isn't beating," was her general motto in life.

Her heart must be calcified with inaction now.

She was well-liked, even now people brought her presents and gifts and begged her to look over their vessels, which she would agree to do, but out of obligation more so than passion.

But back then, I've heard, it was all they could do to keep her away, sometimes she'd even wait below decks and clamber above, smiling smugly as the boat had drifted from land. Even if it was just a little fishing boat, she'd find a way to augment the dynamic of the crew itself, or if not, she'd nestle herself somewhere, and just imbibe the scene; bells ringing, sailors shouting, winches whirring, nets plummeting and ascending, a grunt of frustration with a pitiable catch, or the satisfied cheers of a decent haul. She could be in a submarine, on a dinghy, aboard a cruise – it didn't matter, all she needed was the open ocean to rejuvenate her soul.

This is, of course, how she first met my dad. He was three years younger, and she'd forced her way on to one of his voyages by charming the captain. Apparently, she was more help than two of the crew had ever been, and that was enough to win my dad's attention. The two hit it off, and whilst she joked he would never again manage a catch of her quality, he would joke that he was convinced she only got with him for a free ticket to the ship – it was the ocean she belonged to, and he was just part of the marriage.

Keep in mind that those who spend the majority of their lives rocking over lapping waves rarely get the chance to trial out their jokes, so both of these staples were always met with drunken guffaws and bellowing laughter at the biannual dock parties – an event in which everyone who had any relation to the harbour itself would be invited.

My sister and I were what the others would call, 'amphibious kids' meaning we were born on the sea, but spent a lot of our lives on land. (Again, I draw your attention back to the lack of sense of humour.) The reason we were anchored to one place was because my parents wanted us to get a decent education, and knew that moving from border to ocean, following the glistening stars in a black, cloudless night or overcoming torrential storms and turbulent seas would be exhilarating for us, but somewhat limiting in the real world of offices, skyscrapers, and nary a gull in sight. It didn't matter that we both claimed we wanted to work on the sea, that it had already won our hearts; they believed that was already an option – the default - so we may as well expand our learned horizons, and have choices.

Thus, we spent term time in books and tests, whilst holidays were spent exercising our sea legs, fishing for our meals, performing different and ever more complex tasks on the ship, whilst letting the vast distance between us and the horizon conjure countless curiosities from above the clouds, all the way to the sea bed. If you haven't sailed, perhaps it would be difficult to emulate this sense – I suppose camping with family would be a similar vein of experience. Just your blood, working together amidst the nature of the world. That togetherness, that tribal need, knowing that you were important, needed, and you were guarded – it was just, inexpressible, actually.

Even the difficult campaigns we'd go on, in which we were battered by the wild whims of the ocean, huddling together as we could see, creeping ominously in the distance, a thick blanket of shadowy storm clouds, rumbling with distant, threatening brontides of thunder and flashing with brilliant, contrasting fulminations – begging that it would not prowl our way, but preparing all the same. Or whenever we were caught in them, and our vessel itself was thrown about as if but a toy to Poseidon – clutching on to the safety hooks as we were almost vertical, bracing ourselves for impact as the wave died and the boat smashed back down; screaming orders and prayers, and crying with unknowable fear, until after what felt like a lifetime, the skies would clear, the slashing rain would fizzle, the sun would congratulate us, and we'd hug one another – thankful and proud – and begin to clean up the chaos within.

We'd love it... afterwards at least.

But the one thing that made it all worth it were the aforementioned dock parties. These were honestly the most amazing experiences, and I seriously cannot fault that pure joy in my heart when attending them.

I've seen reality TV shows, and documentaries, and read articles and heard stories and whatever media or platform you can think of, in which children are forced to come along to some god-awful line dancing event, or pageant, or faire, in which they're forced to wear matching outfits with their over-the-hump parents, and commanded to dance, or smile, or pose, or giggle, and hop to the rhythm as if the floor was scorching through their filigreed, pointed matching bootsies...

These dock parties were *nothing* like that. Mayhaps that's sheer bias, but I don't think so. Any one of you could attend these if you have a way in – they're quite common in sailing communities – and I'm almost certain you'd have an absolute blast.

The water would be littered with boats from the crack of dawn, if not the day or week before. Anything from near dilapidated dinghies that rocked precariously on even the shallowest waters, and would croak their creaking cries, begging for salvation rather than inevitable salvaging. To leisurely deck boats which often made a substantial amount of money from merely letting tourists drink on board as they sped to a popular spot; bizarre rock formations jutting out of the ocean, the mouth of a cave etched in to the base of a cliff or so on. To the diverse and, in my opinion, goofy looking catamarans, to sharp and gleaming cabin boats – humble or extravagant, to cabin cruisers, to motor yachts, river boats, and the odd canoe as well as a peppering of life boats... one or two on duty, the others happily 'volunteering'.

During these parties, the harbour and the boats alike became free game to all. Most people knew each other, just like my sister and I knew all the other kids, and because their social circles tended to exist entirely within this community, and on this day at that, there was little fear of theft, criminal damage and whatever else people on land have to entertain wariness of. I would be invited to sit in a rusted and barnacled vessel by someone who last party gave me a treat, or allowed to walk at my leisure through the motor yachts, exploring with the other kids – sometimes guided, sometimes not – the cabins, the kitchen, the engine room and so on.

Fabrics would be swapped; catches would be grilled, fried, smoked, seared, stewed, battered, or served as sashimi, as sushi, any way a fish could be safely consumed, it was here. Exotic fruits that were bright and vivid as the boats' eccentric coatings were offered freely, bizarre foreign confectionary was a standard with the kids that it was almost strange if you would end the day without tasting the varying childhoods of the world, and I soon learned as I got older, that the adults would acquire strange and appetizing alcohol; spirits and beers and ales and ciders and whatever else you never tried, some tasting similar with a hint of culture, others so different it was like a whole new concoction.

The kids would scream, play games, cackle and be encouraged to try this roasted tentacle (which taste nice, but the suction cups deter a second helping), or even sip the froth of that bitter, in which we'd wince and they'd chuckle, "Looks like the lad needs another year on his tongue, yet."

The teenagers whose parents weren't so interested in ensuring they had a balanced and varied education, knowing this was as like the best chance they would get to be around others of their age, would gravitate together having grown out of the squealing joy washing over the party like a tidal wave, before pairing off and, after consuming more of the spirits than is advisable, deigned to find an empty cabin, or deserted section of the docks to do whatever they couldn't most other days.

Amongst goods and treats, the adults would share, too, news of the last six months. The good and the bad, as well as offer one another personalised gifts they'd acquired, thinking their

ocean-kin may appreciate them; dresses, coats, ornaments, trinkets, rods, hooks, rare bait, precious stones, recipes, ingredients and whatever else. They'd mourn losses, celebrate successes, don the shawl, or sip the drink, or nibble at the meal and let the spirit of the party swallow any inhibitions in a whirlpool of joy and ecstasy

But, my favourite thing was the night time. The warmth of the day would eventually retire in the summer, or the persistent bitter chill would be bolstered in the colder months, and darkness would stubbornly invade across the sky in an attempt to drain the colour and joviality from the scene, plunging us all in shadow and silence. Of course, it failed.

On the inky blackness, on which the boats rocked placidly, the freshly invited stars above would allow their reflections to plummet, where they'd nestle sporadically on the surface of the water, and glimmer, glisten and ripple like the bloom of twinkling jellyfish I saw on a trip once – a sight that to this day has yet to be matched by anything land can offer.

On the boats, lights would flick on, offering an element of invitational warmth to emanate from within, or in the absence of those, mounted oil- or gas-lamps would flicker away, silently dancing to the din of the party, and ever-present bawdy ballad, waltzing its way from the lips of some huddled group or other.

In the harbour, heavy rusted barrels were filled with firewood, and lit up, creating orange pockets of comfort, in which energetic sparks would spew up and, like some ghastly octopus' tentacles, tendrils of smoke would escape and undulate, trance-like, tickling at the roof.

Pot stews and barbecues would prop up, giving the uneaten food one last chance to be plucked up and consumed before being offered to the seagulls that flock every party, squawking and screaming for feeding. That within itself is a sight to behold; a sudden, immense and all-consuming tornado of white-winged chaos, deafening screeching and eruptions of frenzied feathers, puffing out and peppering to the surface in which they'd bob, helplessly, amongst the watery stars.

This was always the sign that the festivities were coming to end, and everyone would gather around the barrels. From babies and toddlers, "eggs", to the kids, "hatchlings", to the teenagers and adults, "turtles", and the elderly, "archelon", everyone would gather around as one unified family, and then my favourite part would begin – the storytelling.

My earliest memory is being held in my mother's arms, watching the orange flames as they hypnotised me, and listening to these stories. I can't remember what specific story was being told, but they're recycled and embellished every year, so whatever it was, I'm bound to have heard it again during some evolution of its life, so that particular gap of knowledge doesn't bother me much. And from then, to even now – even with what happened to my dad – I still can't match that feeling of utter contentedness, enthralled in such an undiluted focus and wonder.

The stories were *amazing*, though genuinely chilling. Maybe one day I'll write them all down, compile them in to a series of books, and if they sell well, use the profits to bolster the sailing community somehow. After all, I believe it is those, married with the fires of festivity and often starved sense of community that made me want to write in the first place.

Shipwrecks looted, with the plundered gleaming trinkets and artefacts in evidence. The storyteller would pass around the very thing they salvaged – depths-effaced gold, blunted knife, rusted jewellery – as they're telling us about the death defying feats they performed to attain them, stealing too, our imagination.

Ships shimmering in the heavy shifting fogs that danced above black oceans, and below the wispy sailing clouds, before they disappeared suddenly, leaving not even a ripple of proof they were ever there, except the meagre sincerity of a drunk sailor's claims.

Sea beasts; krakens, leviathans, monstrous turtles, mile-long sea snakes, hydras, whatever. Varying in sizes from slightly bigger than the vessel that spotted them, some immense enough to be mistaken for a rare, uncharted island before it shifts and submerges, and others, so impossibly enormous that the stretch of shadow which disclosed their presence would spread from horizon to horizon, and who would invite a rupturing turbulence with the merest movement.

Fishing boats would talk about hauling in aggressive, razor-toothed and sharp-taloned mermaids, revealing gashes and scars on their bodies where they were swiped and attacked. Or retellings of how they had to speed to safety after being tailed by a school? a tribe? a pod? of them, hoping to slash the net and commandeer their catch.

Jaunty naval songs drifting across the open ocean surface like a caressing zephyr, but no boat in sight or blip on the radar to birth the melody. Sounds of cannons borne on the wind in what we were told were the echoes of downed ships and drowned souls, doomed to fight their final moments over and over – as eternal as the sea itself.

Too many to list here, I've heard them all. And even as I grew older, and the impeachable imagination of my childhood fantasies gave way to doleful scepticism, cutting cynicism and brutal realism alike, I still couldn't help but sit, dewy-eyed and mouth agape in wonder, with my sister between my mum and dad, as the others told, retold, revamped or introduced new stories.

It's not that I believed them. Perhaps I did, but I never wanted to admit it. I'm unsure. But I think they were all little droplets that fuelled the vast mysteries of the ocean, so whether I believed the subjects – ghostly or monstrous within – existed or not, they were a part of *this* community, and they were *our* stories. A sense of identity, in the same way old gods, near-dead fables, and tribal practices can define any other peoples.

I just truly adored them...

That is, until, my family became the subject of one of them. Or rather, my mother, sister and I, were destabilised by the ripple effects of the cast stone that authored this particular story. They still ebb and wax three years later, weathering away gradually at my mother's demeanour, vibrancy and sanity.

So much has been said and claimed, repeated and explained, but as is the nature of nautical foundation – nothing solid has rose to the surface.

What I do know is that my father suffered suddenly, a fit of madness that seemed to stem from nowhere. He was always a mild-mannered man, even during the sudden storms I'd seen him keep a level head and navigate the ship and water in such a way that I believed his sheer determination - barking a command as his body was heaved from bow to stern and tossed from walls, port and starboard - was enough to quell the chaos around us.

But they say he started growing agitated very suddenly and irksome to boot. That over the duration of a week, things escalated drastically. On the Monday, he was twitching and fidgeting, speaking to himself and grunting at the soaring birds for quiet. Then he began growing aggressive with the other sailors, challenging every decision and giving in to sudden bouts of capriciousness; one minute, saturnine, melancholic, introverted, and the next rushing to the deck and roaring visceral threats in to the blended horizon. Then begging with it, pleading for it to be quiet, until he'd attempt to throw himself overboard, meaning the crew had to physically restrain him, bring him to his bed and bind him at night when they couldn't all keep an eye on him. They said they could hear him struggling against the restraints, whispering toxic curses, trying to invoke fabled sea superstitions to shatter the boat, before weeping in to the darkness, until exhaustion stole him.

He was begging to anchor by the Thursday. He was screaming, saying that his mother had been marooned, that he could hear her calling for him. That there were others, he could hear them, too, crying for help, splashing and drowning and gasping and gargling and gulping as the ocean filled their lungs. When the captain refused, they claim my dad lurched for the rigging knife and attempted to slash at his throat. The knife was knocked from his hand, and he was once again restrained – this time indefinitely – and they say that as they were binding him, he was flailing and snapping and biting at them, rapidly and rabidly. Telling them they're going to die if they don't anchor, and now.

It just didn't make sense. I've heard of cabin-fever, or inexperienced people being stormed with a sudden madness in which the overwhelming nature of the ocean crushes their psyche, and they snap suddenly, helplessly... but my dad had been on decks since he was a hatchling, and was a capable captain by fifteen. There was no history of mania or madness, nor any worrisome defect. It was just so, sudden. So *unbelievable*. To the point that there was an official inquiry in to the suspicious nature of his death.

By the Saturday, they say, he was gone from the ship. The bonds torn from where they'd tied them, and loose frayed rope scattered unceremoniously across the decking. They tried going back, prolonging their time on the ocean by almost ten days until their provisions ran out, but there was no sign of his- him in the water anywhere. Nothing but the endless, untameable expanse.

Of course we were – and are - heart broken, and their return spawned inexhaustible searches for up to six months – the dock party that coincided that year was turned in to an all-out, fruitless search.

But it was something about what they were saying – the voices, the cries, his mother... it all sounded so familiar.

Maybe I wasn't the only one who thought it, but no-one else suggested it, even if they came to the same conclusion. I didn't want to suggest it at first, as my mother, though well aware – and even often amicably adherent – to the ever-waxing traditions, and always-flowing superstitions of the sea folk, would strike it out as stupidity and folly.

But from the various retellings – a quality of this tale, a modicum of that story, a theme in these ones – there created some netted lattice of logic between them all, that combined, alongside my misted memories and conjecture, a feast for my insatiable hunger for a full stop. The truth. My dad's fate.

All of those, mixed with the stories we've heard since he disappeared, bear a stark resemblance with: The Call of the Sirens. The distant creatures that, famously, lull sailors in with angelic, enchanting voices, bearing the visage of beauty – only to have them crush against the rocks, and seal their fate. Not quite the exact same, but the variations I've heard... Babies bawling, loved ones fretting, late-parents, as is my father's happenstance, calling to be reunited. It all just- I don't know. Perhaps farfetched, and just a desperate son wanting some answer, but, it just doesn't make sense.

We're set to leave pretty soon, and perhaps happenstance or controlled by some ghastly compelling duty, we'll be veering close to the co-ordinates of where they say he went overboard. And I'm going to document every noise, feeling, or worry – because I want to know what happened, I want the story to be righted - as like our boat in the storm - and if, in some level of reality, The Sirens exist, I want it to be known.

And, well, if nothing happens, at the very least I'll share other stories that harrowed and awed me, as well as those of The Sirens themselves.