

How to Survive on Land

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Let me tell you about my mother, a mermaid: For years, despite her handicaps, she embraced land life in Okanogan, Washington—the drizzly winters and sun-soaked summers—with a steadfastness both impressive and exhausting. She read us stories with the ardor of a human mother; bagged our lunches; brushed our hair. For years, she was just Mom: Mom who snuggled up to us on the couch with a book; Mom who packed Tupperware containers full of watermelon and whisked us away to the town pool on humid summer days; Mom who cooked themed meals (Tuna Tuesdays, Waffle Wednesdays); Mom with her perpetual ocean smell and unruly laughter. Of course, there were harmless omens of her first loyalties: shellfish for breakfast, kelp pods strewn like confetti around our living room, the shrill whale-speak whines that filled our house in the mornings, our Nereid names and Mom’s insistence that my sister Thetis and I explain to every curious land-dweller our sea-nymph heritage. (My name, Amphitrite, means Queen of the Ocean, after all.)

But the voyage that changed our life began with another devotion of Mom’s, one I dreaded beyond the others: she loved to chaperone our school field trips. Our father, a marine botanist, willingly ferried her wherever our class embarked, and my teachers, with begrudging smiles, tolerated her. I, in mortified horror, pushed her around museum halls and tree-lined sidewalks in the aqua chair Dad had designed, for mobility and to protect her sleek scales from the anhydrous decay that sometimes afflicted land-dwelling Nereids. The chair, huge and coffin-like, was a hybrid between wheelchair, wading pool, and Conestoga wagon, and sloshed like a boat in need of bailing. Dad had installed motor-assisted handrails on the sides of the chair so Mom could wheel herself, but she insisted that I be the one to push her. Every smothered whisper or titter of laughter from my classmates sent dread through me, and to add to my guilt, her stories trumped any lesson: night raids on whaling ships, bull shark attacks, harpoon-armed youth groups, her years in the Undersea Army. She’d start quietly, musingly, to one or two of my classmates, and soon they’d all be clustered around her, wide-eyed, to hear about Mom’s battles with vampire squids. Far from

disapproving, the other mothers seemed equally rapt, and I often caught Mom laughing with them later and gossiping in that soft-voiced way about us kids.

It was worse when she brought things no one had ever seen: the slender whalebone blade she wore around her neck; a purse made of dried doliolid plankton, which crinkled like crushed shells when she opened it; earrings of live goose barnacles, still clinging to flakes of the Galician rocks from which they had been ripped. But most popular was her tail, four and a half feet of fish, which she'd lift out of the stretching-hatch at the tip of the aqua chair as though summoning some netherworld sea monster, or Scylla herself, Mom's namesake, a sea goddess of great and murderous repute. It smelled like the brackish shallows under the Fields Point Pier in Chelan. She'd sometimes clip jewelry onto the stringy ends of her caudal fin, and when kids would ask to touch the glistening, blackish scales, dark and silky as a snake, she'd flick the fluttering wet ends whip-like, the pendants would clink and crackle, their hands would jerk back, and Mom would laugh.

In those moments, Mom's tail poised inches from our faces, no one, not even our teachers with their impatience and desire to "focus on the lesson at hand" would break the spell. It was then that I'd let my embarrassment dissolve and marvel that I was somehow connected to her, of her, a creature so wondrous and alien that it both awed and terrified me.

Thetis, my twin sister, had none of my embarrassment about Mom, whom she viewed as the rebel leader of our family. We were twelve that year, but Thetis was tall and lanky like Mom, and because of our perceived dissimilarity in age, she often acted older. We still played and laughed together, yet more and more her voice was knife-sharp with a practiced authority.

Our status as half-Nereids was subtle and hard to observe. Ostensibly, we were normal: hazel eyes, freckles across my nose and sprinkled on Thetis's forehead, but we both had Mom's preternaturally long fingers. Our hair, no matter how we combed it, reverted to tangled kelpy waves. Mom would tousle it and laugh playfully and say that was the way a true Nereid's hair always grew. Thetis had the faint sheen of ingrown scales on her shins, so sleek and sun-catching that we used to pretend it was the source of a secret superpower. My superpower was less flashy: a fleshy webbing between my toes that was only noticeable if I flexed and splayed them apart. And while Thetis wore shorts and skirts whenever possible in order to display her shiny shins, I gratefully hid my trademark feet, the slimy, fishy, inhuman part of myself, in thick socks and toed shoes. Still, in the halcyon years before the voyage, we'd spend hours as our sea princess alter egos, battling invisible squids and make-believe krakens, straining to be like our fearsome mother.

That fall, when my class visited the zoo, Mom chaperoned. We spent the ear-

ly part of the day wandering through different buildings: the dimly-lit Mouse House, the jungled hunting grounds of anacondas and pythons, the Ancient Oceans Touch-Pool, the African savanna with its painted-on sunset, and an in-ground aquarium in which floated a milky beluga whale, dull-eyed and smiling. Most of the enclosures were outside, and the air was dense with late-summer humidity. Mom, who always seemed invigorated when the temperature was oppressive, insisted on wheeling her aqua chair herself, so I wandered off alone, liberated.

For my school report, I had decided on the African spiny mouse—an intriguing little creature that could regrow up to sixty percent of its skin and tail—and was already mentally compiling a list of its unusual qualities, when a loud shriek came from outside, and then, to my horror, the sonar keening of whale-speak. I ran through the crowds, past the Ancient Oceans Touch-Pool, down the stairs to the underground viewing window. Crowds pressed to the pane, and I pushed my way through.

You could see her through the glass: Mom, framed in the center of the window, her arms swirling through the aquarium water, the beluga poised a few feet from her like a curious monster. Her movements rippled through the water like liquid light, and her arms reached forward in an attempted embrace. She was still wearing her floral-print blouse, and her hair and shirt billowed with weightless beauty.

I had never seen her like this: both fish and woman, something ancient and forgotten, no longer an invalid in an aqua chair, but mythic and powerful. For an instant, the world was buoyant and frozen.

“It didn’t understand,” Mom said later. “It had no knowledge of what it was. I called to it in its own language, but it didn’t understand.”

Screaming filled the air, and I covered my ears. It was a sound I had never heard, ear-scraping and skull-rattling, and it came from the water, and I couldn’t tell if it was the whale or my mother. Then the whale turned sharply toward her—thrashed at her, convulsed violently as though electrocuted—and Mom, in response, brandished her blade, and through the churn, the next thing I saw were bright red streaks that flashed and floated through the aquarium like paint dissolving and diffusing. The screaming didn’t stop, and I shut my eyes and pushed out through the crowds. Someone was shouting blurred words through a megaphone. A little girl was wailing, and there was a raw smell of ocean gone sour.

After that day, Mom began to change. The whale had died, and the newspapers in Okanogan ran conflicting headlines: “Beluga Killed in Cold Blood” (*Okanogan Valley Gazette-Tribune*) and “Set Aside Ceticide: Whale’s Death Is Suicide!” (the trashier *Omak-Okanogan Chronicle*). A lawyer came to our house, bald

and unsmiling, and our parents talked to him in hushed voices in the kitchen. We were all terrified, and Mom's silence on the matter seemed like a harbinger of the worst kind of change.

It began almost imperceptibly. Mom, who used to scold us for wasting water, started to leave the kitchen sink incessantly dripping. A few days later, it was the bathroom sinks as well.

"Turning the house into a pool, Scylla?" Dad joked, but we all eyed each other tensely, aware of the windows that were now left open when it rained and the hose left running outside, making the yard a swamp.

"I like the sound," was all she said.

The houseplants were the next to feel her effect. They drowned slowly, from overwatering. Mom, who often told stories of the ruthlessness of her undersea homeland, had no mercy.

"How weak," she said, as though she had expected more from them.

Often we heard her in the upstairs bathroom, practicing her whale-speak whines and screeches, a bone-rattling keening that made the house feel haunted. There, she spent hours in the bathtub, the feathery ends of her tail splayed over the tub's enamel edge like her own rebel flag. But the worst change was Mom's absence from herself. Although she'd smile and ask how school was, the emptiness in her was loud as TV static. I'd pry at her for moments of connection: to help me with homework, to watch *Space Invaders* (our favorite TV show), to French-braid my hair, but even when she sat with me at the table or took my thick mane in her fingers, she felt hollow.

When Thetis and I first heard our parents talk about the voyage north, I formed my own theory: Mom had forgotten how to live on land. When they finally told us, officially, the reason given was "a brief respite from land life." Wide-eyed with excitement, we paraded around the house, wearing our baby-eel earrings and hand-sewn fish-tail skirts. The voyage, we were told, was a kind of quest, an introduction to our ocean heritage, and of course a palliative trip for our mother—yet secretly we understood the reason behind our rushed departure. We would be gone before an arrest could take place.

When we arrived at Coal Harbor Marina in Vancouver, our springboard to the Arctic, we stood staring: Our ship, complete with a five-man crew, was a real research vessel, a stronghold of mechanical contraptions stacked two floors above an icebreaker hull. It was chartered through the Navy under the convenient guise of plankton collection and study, thanks to Dad's connections from his government research days. "Cheaper than a rental car," he bragged to us, then just to me: "You know I'll need an assistant." The wet decks were piled with gear: marine cranes, utility cranes, winches, and coils of traction wire. Thetis and I boarded the ship behind our parents, stepping over buckets and heaped

nets, our wheelie suitcases squeaking.

“Smells like home,” Mom said and squeezed our shoulders with genuine warmth.

The first slight indicator that all was not as we hoped came when Mom refused to leave the deck. We’d all been standing port-side, watching the sun set over the small, glacial chunks of ice that bobbed in the water like broken teeth. As we turned to head down below, Mom made no movements to follow.

“I’ll stay here for a bit,” she said, her hair whipping around her shoulders. “Don’t worry about me.”

Hours later, Dad took me out to where the ship’s propellers thrashed the water into a foamy wake, to pull in the plankton nets. I stood fascinated and shivering, my hands deep in my pockets, watching as Dad clipped the crane onto the winch. Shakily, with the power of mechanical hands, he lifted the nets from the water like sunken treasure.

Night was the best time for plankton hunting, Dad said. Just stick your blue-green lights underwater, get out the mesh cages and ring nets, and it’s a phytoplankton party under disco-light stars. I found myself wondering furiously if this was how my parents met, on some research ship out somewhere remote with no sight of coastline, just stars and water. I imagined Dad, who had a beard like an ancient explorer, grinning at Mom through the ship’s underwater viewport. What had she been like back then, my mother, before she ever set tail to aqua chair?

It was when we were heading in that I caught sight of Mom, still sitting by the rail in her chair, now in complete darkness.

“Hey Sweetie,” she said, smiling as I approached. “I’ll be in soon. Just trying to soak it all up.”

She’d been out there for hours, and her hair was wet, soaked from the spray, yet she turned her face toward it, eyes half-closed. I stood near her, squinting into the cold, the wind-whipped ocean mist pelting us. I was determined to show her I could face-off into the spray. When Dad arrived, before I slunk back below deck leaving them alone, she turned to me:

“Isn’t it refreshing?”

It stung like ice, but I nodded.

We were nearing the Aleutian Islands when my mother announced she was going swimming in the polar water.

Dad looked up at her from where he was stacking crates. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Definitely,” she said. “This water is perfect for swimming.” Then, turning to us, “Anyone feel like taking a dip?”

We had never swum with Mom in any place other than the town pool, where—until very recently—we had always used water wings and an abundance of foam noodles. Even then, we had seldom ventured into the deep end, and our mother had always happily frolicked with us in the shallows.

“Let’s do it,” Thetis whispered to me. Then, before I answered, she was volunteering herself, hand raised. “Me, I do!”

It was mid-November, our third day at sea, and even in the sun, I could see my breath, like a wisp of cloud. The Aleutian Islands were gray smudges on the horizon, and in a few days, we’d be entering the Bering Strait. That morning, we saw our first real icebergs: Big as barges, they gleamed an unearthly blue. Underneath the water, Mom said, they loomed like chunks of the moon, sometimes opening into undersea caves, the secret hangouts of her Nereid youth.

Dad put down the crate he was holding and walked over to where we sat around Mom’s chair. “I don’t think this is smart,” he said. “The water’s freezing.”

Thetis nudged me for support, but I stared at the deck.

“In my experience,” Mom said, flicking her eyes up to Dad’s from where she sat, “the water above the thermocline warms all summer.” Her words were composed, nonchalant. “I think Amphitrite and Thetis will be naturals.”

“Can we please?” Thetis begged.

Mom was staring at him, a ferocity in her eyes, and it was clear she was not asking permission.

Our father sighed, then, “Girls, give us a minute.”

We shuffled a few feet off and looked away, pretending not to hear our parents’ voices, ebbing and swelling in vicious half-whispers:

“You promised you wouldn’t—”

“That doesn’t mean you can control—”

“You must really . . . if you think—”

“If I think what?—”

“I’m just trying to hold this family together—”

“So I’m a prisoner now?”

“Quit being so dramatic! You know the reason we’re—”

“If the girls want to come—”

“No!”

“They’re half—”

“No!”

“They’re mine too!”

“No!”

“How did I ever live with—”

“Why did you have to change?”

“People change, Dan. You got a problem with that?”

When Dad walked off with no further words, I knew Mom would have her way. A part of me leaped to swim beside her, to be like her, but another part stirred deeper down, afraid of this gesture that divided our family, that exposed an unmet need in her that ran deeper than the unity of our clan.

“So who’s coming in?” she asked. Her voice trembled only a little. She had already slid from her aqua chair and dragged herself to the edge of the loading deck.

“Me!” we answered, though the triumph behind the shouted word was all Thetis.

“It won’t feel cold,” Mom said, “since you both have recessive scale genes. Just remember not to open your eyes for the first minute, until scotopic vision kicks in.”

The three of us jumped like a single creature. The water hit me hard, a bitter slap across my body, and for a second I waited, the numbing cold a kind of elation. I opened my eyes to green murk, to clouds of brown, to sightlessness. I splayed my toes and kicked furiously, trying to move the water like Mom, to feel my own power, but I was floundering. I heard her voice, shouting at me, then her hands grabbed me, and my mouth filled with water even as she heaved me up. I coughed and thrashed for air, and Mom was under me, hoisting me surface-ward on her shoulders as though she were Atlas and I was the whole world. I gasped and grabbed for the ladder and clung there, heaving. A few yards away, Thetis kicked and coughed, her eyes red and raw.

I waited, watching as Mom shouted instructions. Then I climbed out onto the deck and sat, cold and shaking.

“What’s wrong with you?” Thetis hissed between sputters.

Mom emerged beside her. “Why don’t you try again? These things take practice, you know.” They both looked at me.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’ll just watch.”

Two years ago, when I’d placed second in a school tennis tournament, Mom had beamed, had told me how she and Dad agreed that it was *her* I took after—how like her I was with my athleticism. But the truth was, I was scared of Mom’s quiet need for the water, of the whale-speak whines that none of us understood; I was scared of my awkward movements, so different from Mom’s; of the way I had sunk, stone-like and heavy; of my webbed feet, a false promise, a sleek and slimy lie.

That night, I was in bed hours before I heard the wet patter of Thetis’s feet outside our cabin. I wanted our easy chatter about favorite bands and the boys we left behind at school; I wanted to play our invented word games and to re-hash our plans to save our family. I wanted everything to be like it always had been, but something had shifted: I had been left out of a process that would go on without me. Thetis was caught up in it, but it would go on without her, too,

if it must. When she crawled back into her bunk, she said nothing, and I closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

When we were small, Mom used to read *The Little Mermaid* to us. We'd curl up next to her, eager to hear this popular tale regarding our ancestry, only to be barraged by the ineluctable sermon that would follow.

"Cornflower blue" was certainly not the real color of the ocean at the bathybic depths where Nereids lived.

"Try telling that to an anglerfish," our mother would scoff.

And what about this coral palace of the sea king?

Our mother would laugh, and we'd seldom make it beyond the first few pages. The historical inaccuracies were vast and unforgiveable, and we must be disabused of our misconceptions. Hans Christian Andersen really got it wrong, according to Mom.

The ocean, in Mom's stories, was a battlefield, and the enemies were omnipresent: Dragonfish lurked in the darkest, deepest recesses; frilled sharks, bull sharks, and great whites prowled the temperate seas. Polar bears, deadly jellyfish, walruses, orca whales, and sea monsters abounded, and Nereids, defenseless in the nacreous eyes of the creatures of the deep, occupied a tenuous place on the food chain.

"We're between stingrays and swordfish," Mom would say matter-of-factly, as though just having read it in the pages of the *Encyclopedia Oceanica*.

"No!" Thetis and I would shout in tandem. Together we felt a vulnerable disbelief at the frailty of our bloodline.

"Yes," our mother would say. "And without body armor and weapons, we would be even lower, on the level of crustaceans."

Mom said everyone wore low-grade Kevlar vests, battle-ready titanium helmets forged in hydrothermal vents, and stolen night vision goggles, pilfered from the decks of Russian frigates.

"I can't tell you how many times I've averted run-ins with snaggletooths and viperfish just because of those goggles," Mom would say, and we would nod wordlessly in ostensible understanding.

Like a journalist from some war-torn world, she'd tell us of the kelp forests woven into inviolable walls that canopied over sea-bottom cities, of trident-armed scouts drafted for shark patrol, and the radioactive sea moss—the final defensive barrier against attack—that cloaked the cities in a pale orange glow.

"Ceilings lined with barbed nets," she would say. "That's what's down there, not coral turrets."

On the fifth day, against gray skies and gale-force winds, we neared the Bering Strait. The currents were swift, and the roiling chop of the shallower waters was

nothing short of treacherous, yet still, that evening and the next, I heard Mom and Thetis shouting and laughing as they swam. Sometimes, I caught Thetis shivering on the deck while Mom frolicked far out in deeper, colder waters. Thetis's eyes had taken on an irritated redness that she seemed to shrug off as proof of her ability to tolerate the frigid ocean. At those times, when she was shivering and alone, I tried to talk with her, but she answered in angry sonar screams: She was shunning me for my "disloyalty" to our mother, to our heritage, which she said was closed-minded and boring. It was then that I'd retreat below deck, where Dad sorted and froze hundreds of plankton samples: Tentacled medusas, copepods like tiny tweezers, pancake-shaped thallassos, and gelatinous masses of solmaris. Under the ship's aquarium lab microscopes, they pulsed like tiny heartbeats. Dad and I would stare at them for hours, and he'd say they were tiny fragments of beauty. "Pure beauty," he'd say. "Just perfect."

On night number seven of our voyage, somewhere in the Chukchi sea, Dad and I were sitting silently in the galley, he stirring soup, me making tea.

"You know," he said musingly to me, breaking the silence. "Your mother once said that you're more like me, anyway."

I smiled. "Thanks." It seemed like a good thing, a compliment, to be like Dad, my scientist father who gave bear hugs and piggyback rides even though I was too big, yet I sensed sadness in his words.

That was when we heard it: a low humming. It could have been the kettle, but it billowed higher into a canopy of sound. Dad put down his spoon. He glanced at me, then out the porthole window.

"What is it?" I said. Something about his face told me he knew.

"Whales," he said.

The only whale I had heard had been the beluga, screaming as it died, yet this sounded different.

"They sound glad," I said.

"Ignore them." His voice was stern. "They want to steal her back."

A deep fear clubbed me. Later, I learned that whales gather and sing as a kind of reception, to celebrate, to mourn, or to welcome you home. My father would tell us, when we were older, that he'd heard the same sounds in those first days of courting Mom in his submersible, she a watery figment on the other side of the glass.

Dad went to the door. I heard him outside in the corridor, the quick-to-anger voices of both parents, a door slammed, then silence, just the whales continuing their chorus. When he returned, he ushered Thetis, scowling, into the galley.

Thetis was in rebellion: "If they want Mom, why aren't we up there? I'm going!"

"You're not going anywhere!" Dad was in front of the door. "We're staying

down here,” he said. “All of us. No one goes out there.”

The three of us waited in the kitchen, the TV blaring as loud as possible. It was an awful time: the old movies my parents brought talking at us, the whales siren-screaming in the background. Dad tore the back off a Cheerios box and taped it over the porthole window, tapped his foot nervously, even forced some laughs at the TV to fool us. I think he was terrified they’d take us too. Sometimes he’d press his fingers to his temples, so hard his knuckles turned white.

But in an hour, the whales still raucousing, Dad threw down the remote, muttered curses under his breath, and stormed out, ordering us to stay put.

Of course we didn’t. Thetis was at his heels, and I followed right behind, all the way up to the deck, a deep, sick fear alive in my stomach.

Outside, the wind was slashing over the winches and coils of utility line, ripping at us as we made our way to the stern railing. My legs slowed and stiffened, the cold knifing through my parka and jeans. It was a glacial night, no moon; the stars gleamed mercilessly, sharp white pinpricks in the endless dark, and the smell of sea life—of ocean, gelid and frozen—was all around us.

I had never seen anything like it. The water frothed with whales, hundreds of them, moaning and breaching in the pale starlight. I imagined if you saw it from a chopper far up in the sky, it would look like a streambed rippling with salmon, hurdling and churning in their upstream flight. A few rolled their dark masses against the ship, and I stumbled, grasping for Dad. You could see them all around the ship, from every side, as far out as the water stretched. Then, emerging from the waves: the quick and vanishing mirage of a face, then another, then one with dark streaming hair, another with a glinting helmet, several holding what looked like the spired ends of narwhal tusks. Nereids.

“Quiet! Please!” my father yelled, his neck straining and heaving. “What do you want?” He was shaking, coatless, in the frigid air. “All right! Fine!” he shouted. “Fine!”

He pulled a key from his pocket and turned to Thetis. “Go to the supply room below deck. Get your mother.”

“You locked her up?”

“Just get her.”

When I looked up at him, Dad’s eyes were glassy, shining. “I should have known it would come to this,” he said.

I felt his resignation, and the fear struck me again.

A few minutes later, Thetis emerged from below deck, pushing Mom in the aqua chair.

All around us, barnacled fins slapped the water. The whales heaved themselves up in walls of spray, water rivering over the landscapes of their rubbery sides, but my eyes were glued to the ghost-glimmer of Nereid faces, silent and staring

out of each pitching wall of water.

“They know I’m here,” Mom said. “They’re waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” I asked, but no one answered.

Mom pulled me and Thetis to her, one on each side. It was the first time she’d hugged me since we boarded.

“My girls,” she said. “My little half-Nereids. How little you know of your world.”

We pressed against her, breathing in the sweet algal smell of her hair, the soft cotton of her sea-spattered shirt, her tail swishing over the aqua chair hatch.

“Promise me—” she said, then stopped, her voice caught in her throat. Then, “Get off to bed now. Both of you. I need to talk to your father.”

I don’t know why I went so easily. Maybe it was the marrow-deep knowledge that what was about to happen was as inevitable as the turn of the seasons, as inexorable as growing up. Or maybe denial reigned in some resilient and hopeful part of me, and I still believed we could go with her, or she wouldn’t go at all. Inside, in the cabin overlooking the stern deck, we peeked out of the small window. Our parents huddled together, Mom in her chair, Dad standing near her, like a sheltering tree. We watched, trying to decipher. When our mother slid from the aqua chair onto the loading deck, the whales crescendoed, their song so shrill that the dread of that aquarium day filled me, although this time it came with a new feeling: a nervous bead in my stomach that grew anvil-heavy with the weight of something unspeakable, and I watched our mother, with not so much as a backward glance, slide into the deep. Dad stood there, his back to us, as the night returned to familiar sounds: the slosh of water on the gunwales, the tug of wind on tarps.

The night the whales called our mother home, I used my full strength to keep Thetis with me. After Dad went inside, she tried to follow, but I barricaded the cabin door with my body. When she pried me from it and forced her way out, I flung myself at her legs and grabbed a foot. I wedged myself in the doorframe and held tight. She cursed and thrashed and hit, but I imagined myself the kraken and clung to her with the full force of my own anger. We were both crying and heaving as we fought, both using all of the moves we’d honed on each other.

When she broke free, I chased her to the stern. The ocean was calm again—empty, it seemed—and before I could grab her, Thetis was over the railing, jumping before I could say her name. I stood icicled to the deck, calling to her, watching her thrash and swim, plummeting down as far as she could, then shooting like a cork up for air. Her short breaths punctuated the night, and I watched until I heard her words, “Cramp! Help, Amphitrite!”

I dove without thinking, and felt the same cold slap of terror as I hit the water. For a moment both of us thrashed near the ladder, and again I felt myself sinking. For a blurred moment underwater, I thought I could do it: dive deep, hold

my breath for hours, find Mom somewhere down there. But at the peak of my certainty the burning in my lungs began: an air-thirsting pain in all my cells, millions of tiny voices screaming their need at me, and I clawed and kicked my way to the surface. My mother was gone, gone, gone. The words pounded in me like my own heartbeats, and I wanted to rip the ocean with my fingers, to rise out of the waves with the vengeful majesty of monsters, to roar over the world, but all I did, all I could do, was to lock my feet around the ladder, reach for Thetis, who kicked and clawed in her own solitary struggle, and reel her in.

The next day, and the slow trickle of days that followed on the voyage home, I stalked and guarded my sister. Inwardly, I raged at Mom; outwardly, I forced heroics.

“Thetis!” I called, racing around the decks when I lost sight of her for a moment. She hated me for following her, but I did it with a kind of life-or-death urgency that needed no one’s approval. Usually, she sat on the steps of the stern deck, making low sonar whimpers. Sometimes, I found her wrapped mummy-style in her blankets on the top bunk, the way we slept when we were little so the sea monsters that lived under the bed wouldn’t get us.

“Hey,” I said, unable to restrain my need for her. “We’re almost home.”

She let out a Morse code stream of throat clicks.

“I’m not a whale, Thetis.”

“Fine,” she said, and I took this as a small triumph.

I remember a time years ago, when Mom had been sad, and I had asked what I could do. “Write me a list,” she’d said. “Of all the things I like most.” I hadn’t done it. How was I supposed to know the things my mother liked? Why didn’t she write her own list? But as we left the iceberg-fraught waters behind, the idea took on a new meaning, and on our last day at sea, sitting in my bunk staring out at the silt-blue water, I began a letter. It was the list—part promise, part memory, part tiny childish me begging her to come back—and it had everything: suggestions for bathtub frippery and aqua chair embellishments; plans for an in-ground pool replete with sea stars and shimmering *Noctiluca* for night-time swims; it had memories of walks in thunderstorms, a lifetime’s supply of seaweed crackers, and an aquarium-grown garden of rose coral, Mom’s favorite. It had her favorite field trips she’d chaperoned, listed chronologically; the names of other mothers she’d liked; my father, and Thetis, and me. I left the last bullet point blank. It felt like that blankness should be part of the list of what she loved, like the most important idea was the one I couldn’t include, couldn’t even express. I rolled the page into a tight spyglass and slid it into an empty bottle I scrounged from the kitchen. It fit nicely. I tiptoed outside to the deck, and flung the bottle out over the water.

Sometimes I dream there are no more oceans. That Mom has returned, that our family can rewind and survive. Sometimes I want this so hard I feel numb. It's not until years later that I see past all the trappings of my parents' words and our childhood fantasies and imagine the voyage as what it maybe was: a kind of chaperoning of Mom back to where she needed to be. Maybe Dad knew the truth of it, or maybe he only feared it. Years later, I will realize that the survival instinct, that knife-bright push toward the surface, is different in all of us; that it is something personal, intimate, so infused with our own secret ghosts that the quest it prompts is often a lonely one.

On our last morning at sea, though, this was all very far from my mind. I watched the bottle, my hope, bob in the waves. I imagined it dropping past the sunken harbor detritus: old cars with their doors ajar, rust-caked motorboats, and discarded microwaves; past all the debris of the land world, I imagined my message falling into Mom's silent realm, with its seahorse circuses and mid-ocean ridges, where my mother swam in silent squid-hunting parades, armored and strong. I clenched my eyes shut; opened them; glanced up at the sun, the Vancouver Marina, the prow of our ship heaving into port.