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Talking With the Tide

By Alea L. Simbro

Like all the other people in my hometown of Searose, I grew up speaking to the ocean. It wasn't until the summer I turned thirteen that I ever considered the possibility of the ocean speaking back.

"I'm finally out of school," I remarked to the calm waves. "I did alright on the end of year tests, so I think I should be all set for further advanced classes next year." The waters which the town was named after gave no response, but I wasn't expecting one anyway. The Lady of Searose Bay, if the legends could be believed, had given up on the town long ago, when her people had dared allow industry and tourism into our small town and stopped believing in her existence.

Self-sworn to silence, The Lady hadn't been heard from in centuries, if you were one of the people who hadn't given up on that sort of urban lore. If you were my mother, then you had given up on legends at the same time you had given up on properly communicating with other people.

"You know, she always promised when I turned thirteen she'd tell me about what happened with Father." Not Dad. Not Papa. Only Father, referred to once in a blue moon, when she was feeling nostalgic and had had a little too much to drink at one of the mayor's wife's parties.

I wiggled my toes in the wet sand, patting it into a mound with my feet only to kick it apart. Covering the little clam creatures under the sand back up with an apology, I stood and waded farther into the retreating tide.

"What if..." I didn't know how to finish that sentence. Whatever truth I was going to receive tomorrow from Mom was bound to be more disappointing than any of my childhood fantasies or explanations. I highly doubted my absent father was a pirate.

The ocean didn't react to any of these words or thoughts beyond continuing to ebb out farther, a sign that whatever one-sided conversation we were having was done. I turned to head back up the beach and rinse off my sandy legs when something brushed against my foot.

Reaching downwards, I caught the object before it could be swept away. It was an old-fashioned glass bottle, like one you'd see in a pirate movie that contained a treasure map. The decaying cork was crusted with little barnacles, and I tugged fruitlessly at it in an attempt to free whatever it contained. I was sure it contained something. Not only could I hear a noise when I shook the bottle, but it wouldn't make sense otherwise. Maybe in another town it would've been more likely to just be beach trash. But beach trash didn't wash up here. Not in this town. Not from this ocean.

Even the tourists and non believing locals agree that there's something *other* about Searose Bay. Call it superstition, call it a mythical minor sea goddess, but if you compared

Searose Bay to any other part of the Atlantic, you would know that Searose is the kind of town things happen in. The kind of coastal town novels are set in. I've lived here all my life and I've never had so much as a summer romance or mermaid sighting, but that doesn't mean there's no possibility.

I would never admit it to my friends or mother, but I believe this beach, this town, this tide *is* magic. Maybe not the kind of conventional magic fantasy readers would come to expect, but magic nonetheless. The kind that goes hand in hand, almost paradoxically, with both familiarity and mystery. The mystery of talking to a stranger you know you'll never see again compels you to admit things you never would to your closest friend. The simple enchantment of watching the sun paint the sky gold at the beginning of the evening with your family makes you rethink everything you thought you knew about love and beauty.

That's the sort of magic I believe in. Everyday magic but also once in a lifetime magic. The magic in an old routine and a brand new experience.

So I knew, deep down in my heart that this bottle was a magic of its own. Why else would the waves bring it to me? I continued to try and open it, and was just about to resort to using my teeth when I heard someone call my name. "Caroline!" Kora trotted over to me breathless. "It's dinnertime, are you coming over or not?"

"Hmm?" I stopped with the bottle raised halfway to my mouth.

A melodramatic sigh. “Are you talking to the ocean again?” She meant it as a joke, but I think Kora believes the bay is magic too.

“It’s cheaper than therapy.” I replied.

Kora snorted. “Spoken like someone who has no idea how much tourists pay for a vacation house on the beach.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t know, I’ve lived here my entire life.”

She bumped my shoulder and recoiled at how soaked it was. “Right. It’s not like the last six generations of your family have lived in the same old mansion that’s worth thousands in modern real estate.”

But we have. In another small town I might have been embarrassed and/or mad at this fact, but I wasn’t. You might have even said I was proud.

We headed up the beach and retrieved our bikes from the rack they were resting on. Only tourists were suspicious enough for bike locks. I set the bottle in my basket, and Kora just then noticed it. “What’s that?”

“Something I found. I hope it’s got something inside of it, wouldn’t that be cool?”

“Ooo, tell me if there is!”

“Of course! I’ll see you at six!” I called as we parted ways. Kora took both her hands off the handles to give me a double thumbs up and nearly fell off. I rolled my eyes and smiled as I set off for home, the mystery bottle rattling all the way.

Lady's Rest is set apart from the rest of the neighborhood on a hill that is quite the leg workout to bike up. I think my ancestors thought it would make them special without realizing the walk up the drive would also make them tired.

When I reached the top I was dry enough that I could just go up to my room to change, but I stood outside a little longer trying to open the bottle. Maybe I should've left it on the beach. Maybe the ocean was just like my mother, refusing me her secrets. It was none of my business, whatever she was hiding. But I cared about her, and maybe if I understood her I could help. Maybe in earning one of the ocean's secrets I could prove to myself I was worthy of others.

I took a long breath in, and when I let it out I smashed the bottle against the driveway and it shattered into several large pieces and many glittering ones, like some sort of danger confetti. For a moment I froze in shock, not sure what came over me. I wasn't one to give into negative impulses. Then again, it wasn't negative if I cleaned it up, right?

Starting to carefully pick up one of the biggest pieces of glass, I saw there was a small slip of paper that had been sealed in the bottle. It had water damage, but I could still make out the words. I read them aloud to make sure all of this was real.

“9pm at the Southern Rocks. I’m ready.”

Oooh. How romantic! I mean, it could’ve been people who weren’t romantically involved, but still! I wondered if the intended recipient of the bottle met up with the sender regardless or if they had never seen each other again. Maybe they were going to run off together!

On second thought, probably not. If the stakes were that high, the sender most likely wouldn’t have risked the recipient never getting the message. Tides aren’t always consistent. It must not have been anything too dramatic then, since it would be foolish to rely on the current as a mail carrier.

Feeling euphoric at my discovery anyways, I cleaned up the glass and skipped up to my room with the paper in hand. I put on a dry sundress and poked my head into my mother’s room to see if she was ready to head over to Kora’s for dinner. “Hi Mom! Are you done yet?”

She looked up from the mirror, halfway finished with pulling the brown-blond hair we shared into some sort of twisty hairstyle. “Hmm? Oh, yes, after I get done with my hair. Did you find out when we’re supposed to be there?”

I nodded even though she wasn't looking. "Yup. 6 o'clock."

"I better hurry up then. You can go ahead downstairs and get the car started." Mom returned to her hair, and I did as she suggested, but not before I considered taking the note with me to show to Kora. It might've gotten damaged further though, so I left it on my dresser.

Dinner was lovely, and I told Kora about the note. She agreed that it was romantic but silly to put it in a bottle out to sea. "What did they think they were, pirates?"

I was too tired to shower when we got home, so I was about to plop into bed as I was when my mom came in. "Did you have a good time?" she asked.

"Uhm hmm," I started brushing out my hair, which was still tangled and stuck together from the ocean water. "Kora's dad makes good hamburgers."

"And how was the rest of your day?"

I yawned. "Also good. I swam around the beach a bit, oh! You'll never guess what I found!"

"What? Another shell for your collection?" Mom gestured to my shelf of seashells I had gathered over the years. I did have some pretty ones.

“No! Look,” I scrambled off my bed and retrieved the paper. “It was in this glass bottle that washed up. I had to smash the bottle to get it out. But I cleaned it up, don’t worry!” I added when I saw her expression shift.

“That’s good. I’m glad you didn’t accidentally cut yourself.”

“What then?” I prompted.

“Nothing.”

I tried to be patient with my mother, but she couldn’t just imply that there was something and then not tell me. “I tell you everything about my life.”

She bit her lip. “You do. And I’m sorry I don’t talk that much, I…”

No point in pressing her further. “Nevermind,” I climbed back into bed. “Goodnight.”

“No.” I looked up, startled. I didn’t think she had meant to say it that loud, because she looked surprised too.

Mom came over and sat on my bed. “You’re thirteen tomorrow, close enough.”

“Does that mean…?”

“Yes. You’ll think I’m silly for not telling you sooner, but I needed to know that you’d... believe me.”

I was rather confused, but too excited to care. I finally got to hear about how she met my father!

“I hope you know he had no idea you existed and it wasn’t his fault he left.” I did know that. It was all she would ever tell me, and I was glad it meant he wasn’t an awful person. I might blame him if he left on purpose, but not if he had no clue he had a daughter. Was it my mom’s fault then, for not reaching out?

She settled down and pulled my sheets around us. “It was a typical summer romance. He was staying for the summer with his family and started hanging around with my friend group. We fell in love, I got pregnant, we were going to leave together, I’m sure you don’t need the details.”

I probably didn’t. “Why didn’t you? Leave together, I mean.”

“Again, it wasn’t his fault. I promised him I’d send word of when and where to meet me. We were adults, albeit young ones. It wasn’t like we were sneaking off. Both of our parents knew.”

My grandpa lived a few houses down, and had always helped my mom with me. I couldn't imagine him being happy about my mom moving away, but I wasn't too shocked he was supportive anyway.

“I sent the message and waited. He didn't come. The next day, he and his family had already left. I was heartbroken, but it wasn't until three days later I realized he had never gotten the message and must've thought I changed my mind.”

“Did the mail not work?”

My mother huffed out a breath. “Sort of. She was supposed to give it to him.”

“Who?”

“The Lady of Searose.” My mom looked cautious, like she didn't expect me to believe her. I almost didn't.

“You mean the urban legend you're always denying is real?” I just felt the need to make sure.

She nodded carefully. “I don't know why, after all those years I was the one she chose to have contact with. But I trusted her. She first spoke to me when I was ten, and helped me through my mother's death.”

Did I believe my mom? I didn't know why she'd lie, unless the truth was something worth hiding. The truth was, my truth was, that I wanted to believe her. So I decided that unless I found evidence against my mother's story, I would assume she was correct. Innocent until proven guilty, true until proven false.

“But if she knew how much he meant to you, shouldn't she have let you go?”

My mom looked like she did when she felt something she didn't want to, going all still and silent, like if she became a statue the feeling would go away. “We had a big argument when I confronted her about it. She claimed I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't, not really. I knew that I loved your father though, and wanted a complete family for my baby. The Lady had already tried guilt, logic, and fear to make me give up my determination to leave, and decided to take things into her own hands.”

I tried to imagine my mom in a fast-paced, passionate argument and couldn't. “She said if I loved her I should have stayed, and I said if she loved me she should've let me go. Maybe she did protect me from heartbreak later on, but I never saw or heard from her again, which was equally heartbreaking.”

“Do you miss him?” I asked when Mom came to a pause.

She nodded. “I do, although I don’t know if I’m missing him or the life we could’ve had together. I love Searose and I love you though, never forget that.”

I still had one more question. “Do you miss The Lady?”

“Of course,” she sighed, resettling herself so the blanket covered us better. “I know from what you’ve heard you would be justified in having a bad opinion of her, but for years she was the only mother I had. I told her everything, and she helped the best she could, consoling me when I was sad and celebrating with me when things went well. I love my mom, and I miss her even though she died when I was little, but I’m glad I had The Lady for as many years as I did.”

“Thank you for telling me all this. It probably wasn’t easy.” Maybe the reason I talk so much is to make up for my mother’s tendency to stay quiet. Maybe there’s nothing wrong with either saying too much or too little, as long as you’re expressing yourself somehow.

“It wasn’t, but I’m glad I did. I love you, goodnight.” My mom got up, and I kicked my blankets off the bed so I wouldn’t get too hot. I could properly fold and put them away tomorrow.

“Goodnight, love you too.”

It didn’t take long for me to fall asleep, and while I didn’t remember my dreams, I felt like they involved the ocean.

I woke up to get ready for school and only remembered that I was on summer break after I'd already gotten dressed. Oh well. I was awake now, and hungry, so I decided I might as well go downstairs and get breakfast.

The house was silent, so I assumed my mother was still asleep. After last night's revelations, I figured she should be allowed peace and rest. I felt restless, like nothing had changed but something wasn't the same. Could I swim in and voice my secrets to the sea knowing that it was the reason my mom was so unhappy? I couldn't imagine being raised in a city where there were no major bodies of water, but I could imagine having a dad, and maybe even younger siblings. Would I need the ocean if I had the life my mom had envisioned for us?

Was I allowed to wonder what life would've been like with a full family? Was that fair to my mom? Other than Kora, she was one of my best friends. She was kind of quiet, and sometimes I thought she was kind of scared to mess up. But I didn't care about that. I cared about her. I didn't have any right to what she didn't feel like sharing anyways.

I was surprised to realize that I didn't miss my dad, or even the idea of him like I thought I would. Searose is a small town, I had plenty of father figures, like my grandpa, and my friend's dads. Maybe my mom wasn't sad because he left, she was sad that loving him had led to the loss of someone she considered a mother figure. I knew she had loved him, she must have, but that was a long time ago.

I felt awful about how many times I had bothered my mother about her life before I was born.. What if she felt like she wasn't enough? I wanted to barge upstairs and apologize for asking too much and understanding too little. I wanted to explain how in wanting to understand her I hadn't considered that I didn't have to in order to love her.

I chewed on the muffin I had grabbed thoughtfully. There was still one more thing I didn't understand, and it wasn't about either of my parents, or even myself. Why hadn't The Lady just let my mother go if it was what she wanted? I mean, she must've not wanted to lose her, but there was clearly some miscommunication and misunderstanding there.

For the first time in my life I was mad at the ocean. The time she swept away my toy when I was little had nothing on this. What right did she have to stop talking to the townspeople and expect to still be able to meddle in their affairs? If she was half the role model my mother had described her as, she should've cared more about the girl she considered her daughter than her own whims.

Before I could think about what I was doing, I ran outside barefoot, all the way down to the beach, tripping over driftwood and feeling small shell fragments bite into the soles of my feet. I stopped once I had waded in several feet, shivering from the cold water. I gathered up the breath I had lost on the run down in order to shout what needed shouted. "Hey! Lady of Searose! I'm Liliana's daughter and I know you can answer me. I know you're out there, and I need to talk to you. No, I need you to talk to me!"

There was a wave of silence that fell over the beach, accompanied by the smell of saltwater and a rising tide. “That’s new. Usually you just chatter about yourself and your problems without asking my opinion.”

I whipped around and a woman I knew was The Lady stood behind me, arms crossed. “You look like an older version of my mom.” were the only words that came to my mind. What generally comes to my mind often comes out of my mouth, so I said it out loud.

“I can look however I want. Is this about your crush on that one classmate?”

“No,” Thankfully my cheeks were already red from the sun. “I need to know why you broke your vow of silence for my mom and then abandoned her.”

The Lady flinched. “She was going to abandon me, so I showed her that that boy she was head over heels for wasn’t worth it. He never even tried to reach out to her after he left.”

“Probably because he thought she wasn’t interested in him anymore. But that’s not my point. You lost her anyway, when you proved she couldn’t trust you. You didn’t even try to understand things from her point of view.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh, and you’re the expert on that now?”

“I never said I was, I’m just pointing out that you aren’t either,” I crossed my arms in an imitation of her stance. “Why even talk to her in the first place when you had abandoned the people of this town for so long?”

The Lady bared her teeth and I was reminded of all the predatory creatures that lived in the deep of the sea. “Again, they abandoned me first. You’re fond of maybes, did you ever consider maybe I was lonely? Maybe Liliana was the first person in centuries to listen to me instead of talking about her own problems even though she had plenty of them? We helped each other and she was ready to throw that away.”

I felt guilty of talking too much and listening too little again, but The Lady still wasn’t blameless for what happened over fourteen years ago.

“So you’re saying that you gave up on her anyway? That’s not what family does. Family tries to understand and support each other, and doesn’t let miscommunication get in the way of that. Maybe you and my mom didn’t listen to each other as well as you thought you did,” I was good at talking, and now all the words I needed to say were rising up in a tide. “I think that you know all this already though, but won’t admit it. Even nature can be wrong sometimes. Did you send the bottle up as a peace offering?”

“I sent it up so Liliana would perhaps share her feelings with someone else for once. She thinks that silence is safe, but it kills her slowly.” Was that the case? The Lady’s strategy had worked though, my mom had told me everything.

“She misses you. And you miss her. Why don’t you just talk?”

Were those tears running down her face, or just saltwater? “Not everyone is comfortable verbally spilling their feelings all over the place like you, Caroline.”

“I think you should talk to her though. What if I tell her that you miss her?” This was my chance to fix things for my mom!

“And if she refuses to see me?” The water was up to my knees now, and churned unhappily at these words.

She wouldn’t, would she? “She won’t, but if she does then you two can go on ignoring each other and pretend nothing happened.”

The Lady pursed her lips and tried to look like she wasn’t struggling inside. I wondered if my mom had picked up the mannerism from The Lady or vice versa. “You’re a good daughter Caroline.”

“Only because I have a good mother who had a good mother figure.”

“I wasn’t,” she sighed. “A good mother figure, that is. I should’ve never meddled in her love life, or abandoned her when she was left alone with a newborn baby.”

Looking back, I remembered all the times I had swam out too far and the waves had gently carried me back to shore, and how the tide never collapsed my sandcastles as a child. I had the sensation The Lady hadn't abandoned us as completely as she suggested, but had been watching from the waters of the bay, trying to make life easier for my mom and I in any way she could, the whole time.

“You loved her the best you knew how to. I don't think you could have done anything more.” It wasn't like an immortal ocean spirit would automatically know the intricacies of human families or how to help advise a young girl.

I wasn't angry at The Lady anymore, not really. I was angry that she and my mother had never acknowledged the way they had let themselves be torn away from each other, or even communicated.

“Where are you going?” she called as I ran up the beach, sloshing through the saltwater.

“I'm going to get my mom! And you can apologize!”

If The Lady responded, I couldn't hear it, only the roar of the salt scented wind, and I burst through our side door dripping wet with sand in between my toes. My mom looked up from the breakfast nook, bagel in hand, alarm in her eyes.

“Mom, I’m sorry I talk too much and pressure you to share stuff and didn’t understand that it was never about Dad and took you for granted, but you really need to come outside and s...”

My mother stood up, dropped the bagel and hugged me. “Caroline, I love you and I love how you try to understand everyone, and I’m the one who’s sorry.”

I hugged her back, and then tried to drag her out the door. “I love you too, but you really need to come with me, I promise!”

“Now?” My mom looked back at her unfinished bagel and cup of tea.

“Yes, now!”

“Okay then!” We ran down to the beach together, laughing as sand flew up into our faces, and when I fell down she hauled me back up so I could continue leading the way down to the shore. I looked at her, barefoot, hair flying everywhere, a glint of something new in her eyes, and I decided that’s how she must’ve looked that summer by the ocean, when she fell in love with the possibility of love, and lost but won.

The Lady of Searose is still waiting there, and I run back up the hill to give her and my mother some privacy. I see them stand still, and then they must’ve apologized to each other

because I see their mouths moving and then their arms open for a hug thirteen years overdue. My mother looks up at where I stand and gestures for me to come over.

I do, and when I get added to the embrace it feels like forgiveness, understanding, and love.

