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Swimming

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Swimming

by

SD Williams



One bright day when had they had rowed out on the sound, Astrid laughed and leapt across the gunwale. Henry watched her turn with flutter kicks and glide beneath the skiff. She surfaced off the port bow and sang “come with me.” Her wet hair hung like kelp across her smile.

“I’m in my best suit,” Henry replied, not taking his hands from the oars. “I’m going to be the president of a bank, you know. It’s dangerous, and I have an appointment in half an hour.”

With a wave Astrid dove again, kicking the rolling surface with her small feet, and swam out of sight. Henry lit a cigarette and waited. He turned on the radio they had brought with them and listened thoughtfully to weather reports. At one moment he decided to join her and stood in the boat as if to dive, but he didn’t. He sat and put his hands on the oars

again. “She knows I have an appointment,” he said to himself. “She’ll have to find her own way back.”

He pretended callousness. He had feared losing Astrid since the moment he’d been drawn to her. His mother had warned him not to become involved with her after she had left home to run with the dogs in the hills above the village, but it was this that drew him. The other young women of the village painted their eyelids mauve and avoided the hills.

Henry was late for his appointment because he waited too long in the little rocking boat, fearing and longing for Astrid, whom he nonetheless abandoned. When he arrived at the bank he was told he wasn’t punctual enough to be a banker. The vice president mockingly offered him the opportunity to work as janitor. Afterward, outside the imposing building, Henry put his hands over his face and lied to himself that he hadn’t wanted to wear a gray suit. He alternately blamed Astrid and himself for his failure and

ran to the shore to look for her and to tell her the sad news. But she was nowhere to be seen.

Astrid swam in the sea. She liked the slippery feeling and enjoyed the caress of the kelp that had felt so horrible around her feet when she was a girl. Even the sharks appeared content, not the menacing protagonists of stories. Sometimes she missed things such as her telephone. It took weeks to learn to communicate with the undersea animals, and some she never did reach. Schools of fish engulfed her, and she jostled to swim at their center and liked the touch of their cat-tongue bodies against hers.

One wind-torn day she was caught in a fishing net. Fortunately for her it hung not from a large trawler but from a little boat that belonged to an old fisherman. His eyes widened in surprise and pleasure when he saw what he had caught, for, of course, her clothing had long since disintegrated, and she was young and very pretty. Perhaps fearing the vision would disappear if he hesitated, he jumped upon her and wrestled to undo his foul-weather gear.

“Leave me alone,” she cried, and thinking quickly she added, “I can bring you pearls from giant oysters and gold from sunken ships.”



The fisherman held her by her slippery arms and considered what she said. He wasn't sure he could trust her, and he knew the bird in hand is worth two elsewhere. And she was lovely. But he was wary, too.

“Will you curse me if I don't release you?” he asked, feeling smart to have thought of it.

Astrid had no power to place curses on

people and did not believe such things existed. She could see, however, that the fisherman's apprehension was genuine.

“If you believe so,” she replied.

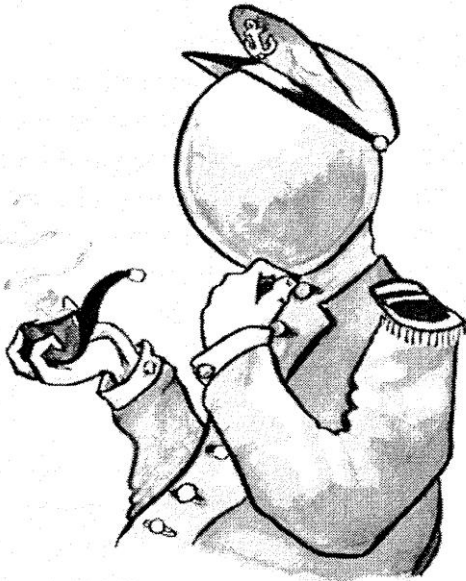
He let her go. Astrid did not lie or commit treachery, and so although she would rather have swum away, she dove to find what she had promised. She located a giant oyster in a deep canyon of the ocean and struggled to carry it to the surface. Inside was a huge pearl. She put the mollusk into the man's net and signaled him to haul it aboard. He was so excited by his good fortune that he immediately pried into the oyster when he'd pulled it over the gunwale and onto the decking. But in his greediness he was careless. He leaned inside the half open shell to claim his prize, and the halves closed, severing his head from his body. Astrid closed her eyes and dove back into the blue water.

The fisherman's boat drifted to shore after several days. His stout wife had kept a lookout for him. When the boat beached on a jumble of rocks she saw the giant oyster and her husband's body and head and began to keen, but she stopped when the head began to talk.

“Eyes like a dolphin, more lithe than the fish of the sea, a creature of dreams, bounteous . . .” and so on.

The head rhapsodized for hours. In the late night it began to invent poems. Having lost her husband to death and to another love on the same day, the fisherman's wife was overcome with sorrow and madness and struck the head with a large shovel until it stopped. She then smashed the oyster shell and placed the large pearl on her husband's shoulders, hoping no one would notice a difference about him—change was not greeted cheerfully in their small community. The ruse worked for a very long time, but eventually word about the mermaid spread through the village, and the men went to find her. Day after day they were

out on the sound in their boats, gesturing with their crotches and telling wishful jokes.



One day a man did see her. Astrid surfaced now and then to sunbathe at a secluded beach on a small rocky island. Sheer cliffs prevented anyone from reaching her by land, and of course she could see if anyone approached by water. She rested there on Saturday afternoons, a time she and Henry often used to swim or row together. Astrid hoped that he would find her there one day. Although she loved the sea, she was lonely for him and often called messages into the drain pipes that entered the sound from the village.

The man who saw Astrid knew he couldn't reach her. Instead he took photographs with a telephoto lens and sold them to magazines. The man made a great deal of money, and the photographs, though indistinct, intensified the search for Astrid. Men from the village looked among the coves and islands constantly in their small boats, drinking from the bottle and telling crude jokes to each other. Numerous false and drunken sightings were reported, and many men lost their lives due to carelessness on the

sea. The hunt incensed the women of the village, most of whom had grown passive and vengeful in body and spirit. Even the young and pretty women were ignored by the searchers in the sound. At homes in beds at night, couples lay awake thinking mutually exclusive thoughts. Finally, Astrid swam far out into the ocean, broken hearted that she had never seen Henry again but too exhilarated by life in water to return to land.

Henry had not been able to row or swim on Saturdays because it was the day he mopped and waxed at the bank. He had sunk into deep melancholy several weeks after Astrid had jumped into the sound. He had finally sunk so low that he accepted the bank supervisor's employment offer. He turned into a lonely and foolish figure. The women of the village believed their problems were his fault, and they made obscene gestures at him with their wide hips when they passed him on streets otherwise devoid of men. Henry knew the men searched for Astrid, and it only made him sadder. Often he went into the bathroom of his cramped apartment and closed the door and filled the tub with warm water. Soaking, he would imagine himself with Astrid beneath the waves and sometimes thought he could hear her voice coming from the drain pipe of the tub, but he told himself it was just the hallucination of a depressed man. He would put the razor back in the medicine cabinet and dress in his green custodian uniform. Love, he mistakenly thought, had destroyed him.

After many years he realized he preferred the hallucinations to his life, and soon thereafter he discovered the freedom of madness. He walked about the village giving unsolicited commentary, dressed in rags and laughing sarcastically. Eventually he walked up into the hills. Some say he went to live with the wild dogs, who also lamented Astrid's departure. They were also more than a little

insulted that she apparently preferred fish to them. Henry found a cave in the hills one day and went down into it, never to emerge. He found a cold mountain stream there and paddled in it night and day.

Legend has it that Henry followed his stream underground until it reached the sea and that he met Astrid there. No one knows this for certain, however. The only valid historical source was the fisherman with the pearl head. He lived a very long time and seemed to have a deep knowledge of these events. He was the only person to have had a conversation with and to touch Astrid during that period, and it was thought by some that he had never given a full account of their meeting. He cherished his memory of Astrid even though their encounter had been brief and he had not acted with dignity. He did nothing to counter rumors over the years that he engaged in a supernatural correspondence

with her. Whether it truly occurred or he simply enjoyed being the subject of such speculation was never known. He lived longer than even the last child born in the village. The villagers had stopped making them, and the streets grew lonely. After many years the village was abandoned altogether, and except for the fisherman, anyone who had been a contemporary of Henry and Astrid had died. Now living in not unsatisfying isolation, the fisherman would grudgingly declare to his rare visitors, when asked, that it would have been nice if Henry and Astrid really had met again, but he was not impressed with Henry and always said of him, "He threw his chance away." But this was merely the idle opinion of a man impugning his rival. At any rate, whatever remained of the truth passed with the fisherman, who left no record of himself and died shortly before the interstate highway was extended to the seaside.

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When Pachelbel Went To Sea

by
David Sparenberg

It was a lovely day in the mid of May, when the crazy-free musicians went out to play. They set up out of doors on a bulbous ledge overhanging the constant sea and played Pachelbel—the ethereal, spiritually teasing and delicate Canon D—to the accompanying surf; the tide curling in and curling out along the stout and bartered shore. The underscore of percussive sand and pungent salt-foam breathed long and low a whoosing sound.

Costumed clouds moved on the sky like rowboats manned by lazy crews. The musicians smiled

amid disciplined strings that exercised like slow fire, weaving soulful dreams on sun and ocean driven breeze. The star peeked in and out of layers of purple haze, spreading, on the ocean's rocking bed, a kingdom's profusion of liquid gold. Ah! Surely a miracle was happening, as fire and water wed!

The slender sailboats' sails were down, as the western horizon ignited. Boatmen dragged their scudding hulls ashore; the roll of tide washing their naked, encrusted feet. Their bronze arms gilded as they met

the sky face face to face. How sweet the blindness of that brilliant grace!

And angels—astonishingly revealed—danced with agile abandonment on the bubbles of Baroque. Even the dark and brooding shark, alienated and self-hating, in sulking rings around a sacrifice of blood, heard, from afar, echoes of that harmony, and wondered what it was to smile.

The whales already knew...The day that Pachelbel went to sea.