

Ligonier Valley Writers' Flash Fiction Contest 2022

First Prize

The Real Mermaids

by Lindsay Flock of Conyngham, PA

Angelina glided through the water, cold and glossy against her skin. Her mother would have chastised her for not wearing a wetsuit when it was this cold, in the early summer when the ocean had not yet grown warm. Angelina did not care.

Up ahead was her cove. She went there most mornings, not bothered by the warnings that spilled out of adult mouths. Their beaches, once a sanctuary of paradise for residents, were becoming dangerous. Seedy types, drug users, predators—they supposedly loitered in the sand, especially at night, looking for trouble.

Angelina thought the talk was a bunch of nonsense. As if kidnappers and drug dealers and junkies all got some memo that said *Come to the north beach at midnight for some corruption!*

In the pre-dawn hours, when the sky was frothy gray, hints of orange at the seams promising sun—that was when Angelina went. She was only twelve; she was already twelve. She was old enough to take her surfboard and walk the three blocks from the ramshackle beach cottage to the water. She had been raised by the ocean, so drowning was of no concern. Sometimes ocean swimming was easier than breathing air.

“Angelina, you were a mermaid in another life,” her father would say with pride, a rare moment when she came in out of the surf, salty water dripping from her long hair. He’d ruffle her head, crack open another beer, and lie back on the blanket. He had been the one to teach her to surf, but now he mostly drank, worked, slept.

Her mother also drank, so it was easy to slip out the door undetected, head to the cove and to Madeline, and return before anyone arose. As seasonal bartenders, her parents were out late, drank on the job, slept in. It wasn’t hard to keep secrets.

Madeline, though, had a real secret. She was the mermaid.

Angelina pulled out of the water and walked to the jetty. She knew it wasn’t a cove, but she called it that because it sounded more romantic and mermaid worthy. In her mind it was a cool haven of saltwater and stone.

Madeline wasn’t always here in the mornings, but today she was. When the tide was right, she waited against the dark wood beams, her feet in the murky, foamy water that swirled around bits of trash caught in the seaweed.

Angelina approached her, wishing she had brought food today. Madeline was often hungry, although sometimes not. She was thin and lithe, and Angelina thought she was the most beautiful mermaid ever. Her hair was sun-kissed like Angelina’s, her eyebrows bleached white. She had eyes like sapphires and long, delicate fingers.

“Hey, Angie,” Madeline said, without looking up. “How’s my girl?”

Angelina squatted down next to her. “I’m good. You?”

Madeline looked at her. She struggled to form her words, like she sometimes did. “I need a big favor from you. Okay?”

“Sure, anything!” Angelina remembered when Madeline still lived at home. Always something: *Get me a water, get me a snack, can you bring my book upstairs?* She’d give anything for those kinds of favors now.

“Want me to come back with sandwiches later?”

Madeline shook her head back and forth in slow motion, as if it were heavy and full of sand. “No, no. Here’s what I need. Take this bag home. Just keep it for me and I’ll let you know when I’m ready for it back. K?” She handed her the dingy green backpack she always carried.

“Where are you going?” Angelina asked, concerned. Madeline never lost sight of that backpack. It was all she had. Last time, she hadn’t come back for days.

Madeline winked, again in slow motion. “Back to the sea, baby.” She nodded toward the ocean. “I’m a mermaid, remember?”

It was a joke, but sometimes Angelina wondered. She knew what was wrong with Madeline. She knew from the way her eyelids hung and the whispers of their parents, who had given up. But it was easier to believe that she was a mermaid. That this was some metamorphic process, the fairy tale they’d spun to each other years before, bobbing in the sea, far out beyond the breaking waves.

“Yeah, I know.” Angelina offered a smile. “What should I bring next time?”

Madeline shook her head. “Nothing,” she said. “I don’t know if I’ll be here tomorrow, but soon.” She squinted in the sun, which had arrived unnoticed above the sea. At once, it was gloriously bright. “You better go. Mom will snap if she catches you.”

Angelina nodded, turning to leave with the heavy, horrid-smelling knapsack over her shoulder. She rearranged her thoughts on the way home. Her morning had not consisted of leaving her passed-out parents to go make sure her drug-addict sister was still alive. It had not consisted of Madeline once again asking her to hide her drugs, to keep them safe. She did that sometimes, usually when she owed someone money.

This morning was *not* like the others, when she brought food and begged her sister to eat. It wasn’t like when she slipped twenties out of her mom’s pile of tips, knowing she would be too hung over to remember the amount, and gave them to Madeline.

No, as she headed into the sun, Angelina became the story they had whispered to each other as they lay in hot sand years ago. She’d swum to the cove in darkness, the magical place where the sun rose. There waited the beautiful and amazing Madeline, the girl who was really a mermaid. A shapeshifter, a shadow, a mirage. Her sister.

Angelina cast one last glance over her shoulder, but Madeline was gone. The morning sea sparkled like diamonds, like it always did when the real mermaids went home.

***Lindsay Flock** was born and raised in Pennsylvania, where she now resides with her two budding teenagers. She's a bookkeeper by day and a writer by night (when she's not busy being an Uber driver for her kids!). Lindsay enjoys writing both serious nonfiction and fun, lighthearted creative fiction.*