

# Ligonier Valley Writers' Flash Fiction Contest 2022

## Honorable Mention

### Mermaid Gumbo, the House Specialty, Served Steaming Hot

*by John Frochio of New Brighton, PA*

At the Mermaid Tavern, the house specialty was mermaid gumbo. First-time visitors were shocked until they learned no actual mermaids were among the ingredients.

Most laughed about it except for weary, wayworn Samuel, who wandered into our humble establishment one stormy afternoon.

"No laughing matter, them mermaids. They'd kill you as soon as kiss you."

I was tending bar that afternoon, Georgia was in the kitchen, Molly was waiting tables. Strong winds battered our old building. Occasionally, the lights flickered. I prayed we wouldn't lose power.

Molly hollered, "Two bloody Marys, Rob." She spun away, long brown hair swirling.

Samuel sagged like a rag doll.

I said, "So you've run into one or two?"

His shaggy capped head nodded like he'd just attended a loved one's funeral. "Many."

I set his whisky in front of him.

He looked up. "My story's tragic."

A few heads popped up. Our patrons were always ready to hear a story. Such was a bartender's fate.

"I'm a mercenary seaman for hire, a modern-day pirate. Was. Not anymore. I was hired to capture six mermaids. I didn't ask why."

An unearthly stillness radiated out from the old mariner.

"I'd seen nests of them on past voyages. I knew the hot spots. I've watched their siren calls lure many an unsuspecting man to his doom. Now I had to trap six of them. A dauntless task.

"I worked out a scheme where I'd wear earplugs and fake being under the spell of their hypnotic singing. When I got close, I'd net them and haul them in.

"A perfect plan I thought. My first capture worked beautifully. I tied a captivating redhead in my hold and taped her mouth shut.

"However, the second one, a stunning blonde, swam away before I reached her. The third, a haunting brunette, did the same.

"I confronted my first capture. Though her mouth was covered, she sang a song into my mind. I found myself untying her. Before I released her into the sea, she kissed me. I blacked out.

"When I came to, my entire crew was missing. I hurried away from there, steering the ship alone.

"Now, weeks later, I'm weary and hungry. Might I have something not from the sea?"

At that moment, Sully popped in carrying a large ice chest.

"Some mermaids for ya, Rob."

Samuel jerked.

"Great," I said. "Take 'em back to Georgia."

After Sully disappeared into the kitchen, I noticed Samuel's ashen face.

"They're not really mermaids. Probably crabs."

"I think they're following me."

"The ones who hired you?"

"The mermaids. They're out to get me."

"Well, you're safe here on land."

"They know magic."

I winked. "You've outwitted them before."

His eyes shifted back and forth, his face twitched. He leaned forward and whispered, "How long have those wenches in the corner been here?"

First time I noticed them.

I called Molly over. "When did those three ladies arrive?"

"Huh? I didn't notice. I better get their orders."

I watched Molly wait on them. All young and attractive: a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. They moved like cattails in the wind, breezy and smooth. They'd never been here before. I'd have remembered them.

Molly ordered three margaritas and mermaid gumbos.

Magic. Mermaids. I shook it off. All this crazy talk was getting to me.

Sully came out and we negotiated his fee. I paid him in cash.

Thunder rumbled and the lights flickered.

Sully said, "Storm's fierce. I barely beat it to shore. Better stay put a while."

He sat next to Samuel, water dripping from his poncho. He spotted the three women and stared.

"Want a burger?"

"Yeah, and gumbo."

Samuel leaned toward Sully. "You see them wenches?"

"Yeah. Probably college girls."

"They're mermaids."

"They ain't got tails." Obviously he noticed their lithe legs.

"They know magic. They're after me."

Sully looked at me. I shrugged.

"I'm Samuel, able seaman."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Sully, fisherman. I'll tell you what. I'll keep my eyes on them for you."

"Thank you, kind sir."

The gumbos came out. Molly delivered steaming hot bowls to the mystery women. Samuel's eyes bulged following the bowls.

Thunder crashed, lights flickered. I winced.

Sully was mesmerized by the women. I could see them easily luring men to their doom with their ethereal beauty.

Imagine: real mermaids at the Mermaid Tavern!

I chuckled and focused on washing glasses.

Sully's burger and gumbo came out. As Sully dived into his food, Samuel lurched away from the wafting aroma of clams, crabmeat, scallops, shrimp, onion, garlic, cayenne pepper, and a host of other spices. Perhaps he'd had his fill of seafood in his seafaring years.

The mystery women stood up; the redhead came toward the bar. As I stared into her emerald green eyes, she handed me the check and a handful of bills.

She said, in a voice like a lilting harp, "Excellent gumbo. What's in it?"

I rattled off a laundry list of sea dwellers and spices.

"No mermaids?"

I smiled. "No. It's just a snappy name. We'd never put real mermaids in it."

She smiled back. Her skin glistened like pearls.

"That's good."

I handed her the change. Our hands touched. I felt a surge like electricity pass through my hand and body.

That's when the lights went out.

No roar of thunder, no lightning flash. Just darkness.

Panic welled up around me. I tried to keep everyone calm.

"Nothing to worry about, folks. Emergency lights should come on shortly."

It seemed like forever, but the emergency lights finally came on.

Everyone returned to their seats, but the mystery women and Samuel were gone. His cap and a pair of earplugs lay where he'd been seated.

I figured once Samuel remembered where he'd left his cap, he'd be back for it. Then he'd tell the rest of his tale, how he thwarted the mermaids once again. We'd celebrate his victory over a steaming hot bowl of mermaid gumbo, the house specialty.

*John Frochio lives in Pennsylvania and recently retired from developing and supporting steel-mill automation systems. His stories have appeared online and in various anthologies, including Triangulation Parch, Time Travel Tales, Visions VII: Universe, The Chronos Chronicles, Hidden Histories, Something Wicked This Way Rides, Unbreakable Ink, and Strange Wars.*