

Ligonier Valley Writers' Flash Fiction Contest 2022

Third Prize

A Curious Soul

by Helen Liptak of Hartsville, SC

Curiosity killed the cat. I don't know what a cat is, some land dweller that doesn't like water? I've never met one, but I guess that warning's about not being nosey. Except being practically immortal means mermaids always have to find new adventures to keep life fresh. Either you're at least a little nosey or you're bored to tears.

So cruising around, tired of the same old same old, I noticed this pirate. Captain York, his friends called him. Or maybe they weren't his friends. ... Anyway, York was tall, muscled, handsome for a human, with kind eyes the color of kelp and hair the same shade as the ocean floor. He seemed ... special, and I had to know why.

I followed his ship relentlessly until I found his hideout, a pirate cave with a convenient tidal pool. I know. Stalking humans is a punishable offense, but I was still in my early hundreds so it was just a juvenile violation.

York went there a lot, so I hung around too. Turns out he was a privateer, not a pirate. Not sure what the difference is, but his crew made a big deal about it so I guess it's important. Some morality thing.

I watched their pirate fights; sometimes I even saved a sailor who got knocked into the water. Their fins are so skinny they can barely stay afloat, so yeah, I helped. Sometimes. Just for fun.

York was unhappy and talked about retiring and living on land. He was my only entertainment so I stayed close, looking for a way to stop him. One night he was staring at this portrait stolen from a Spanish galleon and talking to himself. He did that a lot. I think he was lonely, another reason I shadowed him.

Anyway, he fell asleep and—I swear I am not making this up—the girl from the portrait came to life.

He woke up muttering that he'd dreamed her, but I saw her too. He hid her portrait in a metal tube when his crew came back bringing prisoners. One was that girl. It was like York dreamed her to life.

She was snippy and puny, a real guppy, but she and York did that arguing thing humans do when they're fighting attraction. So lame! I don't know what he saw in her, but she fascinated him.

Pirates bicker a lot, so I didn't worry when York's crew accused him of liking that girl too much, but things got ugly fast. The portrait tube rolled into the water, but it was important to York, so I took it to Atlantis. I might have splashed that girl a little when I left.

I came right back except for a side trip to the Bermuda Triangle, but York was gone. No matter how I searched, I couldn't find him anywhere. I haunted that cave for years with no sign of him or the girl.

Life was so boring with no York, I hooked up with some sketchy eels for excitement. When I got out of juvie a century later, I visited his cave. New pirates were using it for "hooch" and talking about York in the past tense.

That was boring, so I was about to dive when I heard York's voice. I almost tail walked!

He was there. With *her*, that annoying girl from the picture. It took me a minute to realize they were ghosts. Bianca, that was portrait girl's name, was complaining about bootleggers in *her* cave. York listened while she whined about being trapped for eternity with only him for company. She never appreciated him.

I was so excited, I introduced myself. It's not breaking parole since they weren't technically human. York was just as fascinating as I remembered, and she was still obnoxious. I ignored her. To get her off his case, I said I'd find out what was keeping them earthbound.

I roamed all seven seas, interviewed a ton of spirits, and learned ghosts mostly like to complain. *Life is unfair, people are mean, blah, blah, blah*. Once I sifted out all their whining, the common thread was unfinished business. What was that for York? And Bianca.

It took about a hundred years to get back to the cave. This movie company was in there, filming a rip-off of York's life that was nothing like the real thing. I wasn't even in it. York got so furious at their stupid portrayal, he materialized. I did not see that coming.

He terrified the technical advisor, who started babbling about Bianca's portrait. Maybe that's the unfinished business. I remembered where I'd stashed it, so I got it and tossed it to the humans.

Some connection between it and Bianca made both ghosts solid. That movie crew freaked out! Most entertainment I've had in millennia.

Turns out Velasquez, this human artist, had painted Bianca's soul into the portrait. Why's that a big deal? Mermaids don't even have souls, and we do fine. Once Bianca and her soul reunited, she was free.

But what about York? Maybe her soul was the attraction I'd seen between them years before. I didn't get it then, I still don't. York's all handsome and noble, and, okay, she's nice looking, but so shallow and annoying I had to ask why he cared about her.

That made Bianca flip out, accusing me of being mean to her. Some nerve after I spent centuries figuring out how to free her! York got her to apologize and I sort of apologized, too. Not something I'd normally do, but he was worth it.

After all the drama everybody forgave everybody and, long story short, they disappeared to wherever humans go when they die. Leaving me behind.

So now? Well, it was sort of entertaining researching York's problems for a few centuries, so sometimes I help other humans. It kills time and I kinda like feeling useful. Maybe I'll find someone else like York. Or a soul.

***Helen Liptak** has lived on three continents, in three countries and six US states, all but one by the sea. Author of over twenty young adult comedy/dramas and four books, with flash and short fiction in online magazines, she now weaves her stories in her home state of South Carolina.*