

## Undeleted, Nautical Remembrances

by Breana L. Burgos

The flashbacks hardly ever happen anymore. My brain has deleted nearly all of the memories of him--good, bad, and in between. Fine with me. Just as long as I don't forget where I put my keys or whether or not I paid my Netflix bill for the month. Other than that, my mind can delete whatever it wants. There is a name for that, psychologically speaking, but I forget. I have come to trust the handy termination of certain undesired mental files, so when you mentioned going swimming I was surprised an old megabyte of memory popped back up.

I stopped calling my father 'dad' or 'daddy' a long time ago. Such words have strong connotations of affection, when all I have for the man is a denotative appreciation that he has contributed chromosomes to my existence. But normal people don't call the donor of their extra X chromosome father anymore, so I avoid the subject altogether if I can help it.

You've never really asked, because I've never really told. My silence and selective memory has become a source of pride for me, a tribute to my ability to move toward the future and not get stuck in the past. I am a shark, I couldn't swim backward if I tried. But I can't help it, you wanted to go swimming and you said you could beat me in race. Of course you're wrong, you can hardly float. So I boast a little bit, tell you I use to be a swimmer and that my father use to call me a fish because I could hold my breathe for so long. You wouldn't stand a chance. Your expression is slight, hardly noticeable, but it's there and I instantly regret my slip. I change the subject quickly, but the damage is done, you are curious.

"Father?" you ask.

"Ya. My father. Come on let's go," I reply anxiously.

“You’ve never mention him before. I thought he had passed away when you were a kid. Why don’t you call him dad?”

Whosh. There it is, the pull. My mind panics. Not again, it’s been so long since our flashback. Hadn’t this file been expunged like the others? No, it’s still there. A trojan horse lying in wait for the moment it could be seen and heard and felt once again. For a split second, I leave you. I am gone.

The water feels cool and perfect on my sun tanned skin. It’s late by my childhood standards, for the sun has begun to set and the crickets have begun their nighttime serenade to the lazy grasses that cloak them in green safety. I am five, maybe six years old and I’m swimming in the community pool. He is yelling for me, it is time to go.

I refuse and dive down to the bottom of the pool where my kingdom awaits. My pink goggles allow me to see the watery fortress of Atlantis. Breast-stroke arms and dolphin kicks propel me downward toward the magnificent palace. Brilliant purple and orange fish swim about the halls and arches of the underwater castle, swiftly dodging mermaids as they go. I swim between two pillars, past the sea sponges and crabs. Making my way to the southern part of the structure, I greet the mermaids and mermen. The sea people acknowledge me casually. They already know me. I visit them all the time.

Atlantis is easy to navigate given my superior knowledge of its layout and understanding of the cultural customs. I know that you cannot see Neptune without feeding the five massive dolphins that guard the entrance to his quarters. I know that all the mermaids wish I was one of them and that I could stay with them, down here, forever. I know that he, my father, can’t hold his breath and dive down this deep to get me. And I know that when my ears start to pop, I have to go back up.

I avoid the king’s guarded room and swim around the halls looking for Ari. She’s my favorite mermaid and we spend all of our time together. She loves telling me stories about her dad,

Neptune. She says he loves to tell her bed-time stories, and he has been teaching her how to fish, and how he will not drink anything but water. I can't find her, though, and my lungs began to burn. Pop go my ears. The time has come to go back up to the unfortunate desert above. Waving good-bye to the residents of Atlantis, I swiftly kick my legs and pull my arms upward. I emerge for air-- my least favorite element.

My father says my full name and commands I get out of the water this instant. I break the fifth commandment. I inform him I am not meant to be up there and dry. I have grown gills and would like to stay here in my nautical home. I challenge him to a duel-- if he wants me, he has to come and get me. Defiant, I stay in the middle of the pool, just above the deepest spot in case I need to dive back down.

Somewhere my little mind tells me this is a mistake. If he's had too much, I'll taste the sharp tang of leather. He never finds me amusing when he's had too much because, unlike Neptune, he drinks a lot more than water. I was walking a very fine line. But he laughs. A miracle of biblical proportions. He's had just enough to satisfy his bottomless thirst, and thankfully not enough to unlock whatever unknown creature is always thirsty.

"You're a fish my girl," he chuckles. Giddy warmth encompasses my little body because he is happy and for a moment we love each other. I felt it, for just a second. His smiling eyes are radiant and proud of his half-mer child.

"My fish, you were down there for so long. I couldn't catch you in the water little guppie, even if I wanted to. How about you come on out and I'll buy you some ice cream? Hmm, bet you can't get ice cream down there," he laughs.

I won't push my luck, I am smarter than that. I was offered ice cream and a glimpse of adoration. For my six year old self, that is enough for the moment.

"Can I get mint chip?" I ask innocently, as I cautiously swim over to the side.

“You can have whatever flavor you want my little fish.”

I am sold and climb out, away from my liquid home. I glance back down at the water and see Ari beckoning me to come back. The other mer-people must have told her I was looking for her. I walk back to the edge of the pool. Quietly I whisper, *He is going to get me some ice cream, like Neptune would. I'll see you tomorrow.* She smiles in understanding, then disappears into the depths of the pool.

His eyes were red like Tapatio sauce and his hands like jello as he struggled to get my towel out of the swim bag. Finally, he succeeds and hands it to me. The blue fluff of my cotton towel smells like nail polish remover, burning my nose. I pull the towel away from my face.

“Whoops, sorry. Daddy spilled a little of his juice on accident and he had to wipe it up.”

“It’s okay dad. Can we go get ice cream now?”

“Of course, my little fish,” he assures me. Throwing his arm around my shoulder, we walk to the parking lot and I tell him all about Atlantis and the dolphins and Ari and Neptune. He listens intently, only stopping for the occasional swig of his nail polish remover.

I come back now. You are still looking at me as your question hangs in the air like an unfulfilled promise. Eyes pleading, searching my face for the hint of an expression. But there is nothing in the north because there is nothing in the south; the cave where the muscle is suppose to beat stopped when Atlantis crumbled.

“Let’s get some ice cream,” I say through a forced, numb smile.

“What?” you asked confused.

“Come on let’s go!”

I laugh and run ahead.