

THE SECRET OF MERMAID LAGOON

by Thom Bennett

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“The Secret of Mermaid Lagoon” is a story inside the
book “13 Tales from the Dark”

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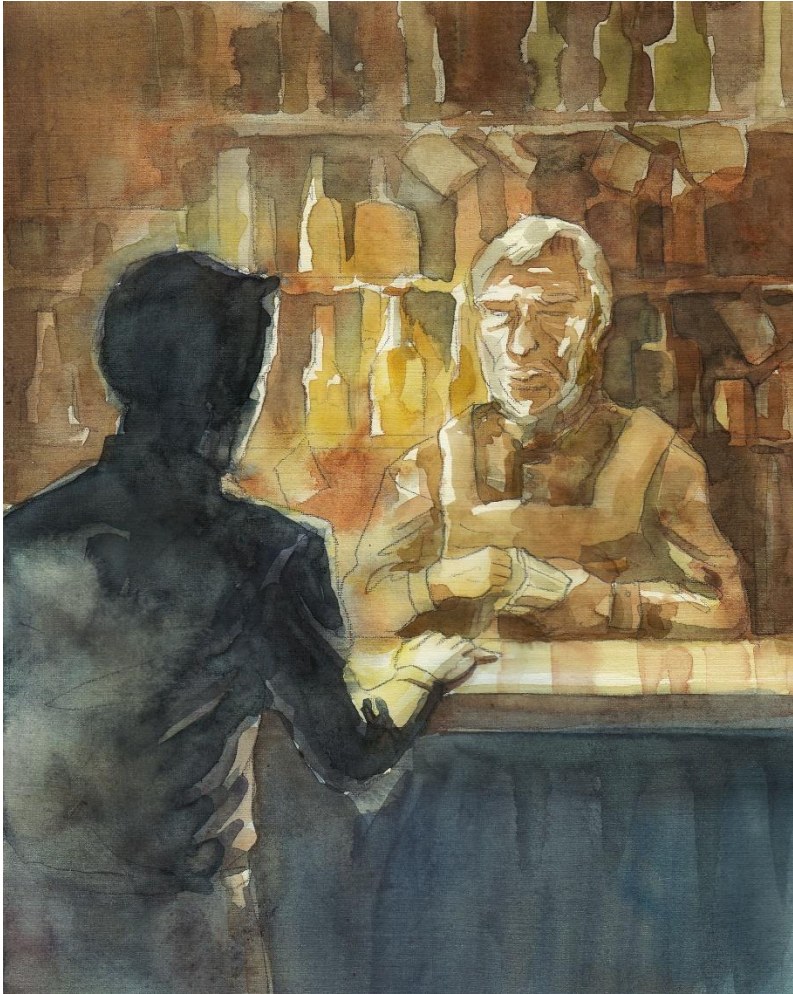
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I first heard about Mermaid Lagoon when I was studying *Myths and Legends* at Florida State University. It was supposed to be located somewhere on Barracuda Cay, in the Bahamas, and it was supposed to be very hard to find -- not to mention very dangerous. Naturally, I was intrigued by the idea there might be living creatures that bear a striking resemblance to mermaids -- and the challenge of searching for them in a mysterious lagoon was too much to resist. So after graduation, I packed up my SCUBA gear and headed for the tiny island of Barracuda Cay, in the southern extremity of the Bahamian islands. It was an expedition that would seriously change my life.



"Mister, you don't really want to go there," said a grizzled, old Englishman on the day of my arrival. He was the owner of a smallish restaurant in Laurence Point, the capital of Barracuda Cay, and he was drying off some glasses with a less than clean dish rag.

"Why is that, sir?" I respectfully asked, as I dug into my lunch of conch salad and High Rock beer.

"Well, first of all, it's devilishly hard to find, unless you hire a guide."

"Where can I get a guide?" I asked, setting aside my fork and taking a draw from my bottle of beer.

"I was coming to that," said the man, "but first, let me tell you about the Blue Hole." He put down his dish rag, disappeared under the counter and came up with a beer for himself. After he'd joined me at my table, he took a large swig of his own drink, burped happily and continued with his cautionary tale. "The Lagoon is not what you'd describe as being *out in the open*. You've got to dive for it, and the dive is filled with more danger than a room full of dynamite in a lightning storm."

"So, the Lagoon is near a blue hole?"

"Not *near* a blue hole, but right *inside* it!"

I stopped eating my conch salad and stared at the restaurant owner. If what he just said was true, this was going to be a very difficult dive.

"Know anything about blue holes?" queried the old man, and his watery, pale eyes seemed to bore into me like two icicles in a winter storm.

"Some," I had to admit. "I got my diver's certificate back in Toronto, and had it renewed by the Underwater Society on Grand Bahama. They taught me a bit about blue holes, but I've never explored any."

"If you explore this one, it might be your first, *and* your last!"

After lunch, I headed off down the road in my rental car to find a place called Papa John's Divers Shack. The old man's directions were pretty precise, and as I made my way across the island, his words still rang in my mind. And I must admit, his words rang pretty cold in my heart.

In spite of my schooling about blue holes, he had joyfully taken the time to explain that they were inland, underwater sinkholes. They were circular, steep-walled depressions filled with water and so named because of the dark blue colour of their depths and the contrasting, lighter blue of the shallows around them. Their depths can range from 100 metres to over 500 metres, with the deepest blue hole on record measuring almost 700 metres -- nearly 1,300 feet deep! Some of them actually lead to a string of underwater caverns that eventually reach the sea. According to the old man, "Mermaid Lagoon is rumoured to be found inside one of these subterranean caverns."

"But nobody knows for sure?" I had asked.

"That's correct," he replied. "I was coming to that." And he'd taken such a deep pull on his beer that it was gone in a few swallows. A healthy belch followed, and the old restaurant owner continued. "A lot of this stuff is hearsay, a lot just plain old wives' tales. But the truth of the matter is, these rumours have been around Barracuda Cay for years and years. And nobody's seen a mermaid that I know about."

"So where did the stories start, if nobody's actually seen one?"

"That's the nature of myths and legends, I suppose. You'd know better than me. They just get started, somehow, and the stories build from there -- generation after generation. But I *do* know that people have seen some pretty strange things around this island.

"Like what, mister?" By this time, I had forgotten all about my conch salad and beer. "What kind of strange things are you talking about?"

"Like disappearing animals."

"What do you mean, *disappearing*?"

"Just what I said. Every year, or so, there are reports of animals that wander too close to the edge of a blue hole, and are never seen again. Their footprints lead right up to the rim of the hole, but they never lead away."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, the markings on the sand around the rim seem to suggest there's been a struggle of some sort, and then nothing can be seen. Only water. People say that something big, something strong has grabbed their cows and goats, and taken them down into the depths of the blue hole. Never seen them again. Same with . . . the children."

"The children? You mean that kids have disappeared, too?"

"I was coming to that," he said, for the third time that afternoon. "That's why I told you earlier that *you don't really want to go there*."

But regardless of his warning, the old man had given me directions to Papa John's Divers Shack. There, I could fill my tanks with compressed air, rent any extra equipment I may need and hire a reliable guide to take me into the blue hole -- a journey that just might lead to Mermaid Lagoon.

* * * *

"You know, sonny, many people believe there are monsters living down there."

I had driven my car to the divers' shack without incident, and was talking to Papa John, himself. He was a brown-skinned native of the island, spoke perfect English and was negotiating with me about a possible dive into the mysterious blue hole. It was hard to tell if he was forty or eighty years old. His face was so lined that it looked like a road map, but his

eyes seemed more enthusiastic than a teen boy's on his first prom date.

"I've heard about the monsters," I replied. I know about the disappearing animals and children."

"And you still want to go?"

"I do. If you know where Mermaid Lagoon is, I'd like to go there."

"You're either very brave or very stupid, my friend."

"I'm a paleontologist, sir, working on a paper about the myths and legends of the Caribbean. The possibility of finding evidence of fossils related to mermaids would make my reputation."

Papa John only smiled, and remained silent. I was sure he thought I was a young idiot.

"It's going to be expensive," he said, and quoted me a price that was a lot more than I had counted on. But I was committed to the venture, and would have paid double the cost. "That will be in American dollars, young fellow. And I'll need a deposit ahead of time . . . for the trip, the guide, and for the boat. In case something goes wrong."

"What could go wrong?" I said, with a chuckle, but inside, I felt a growing sense of unease. Nevertheless, I gave him my credit card for the deposit, signed a contract for the dive and agreed to return at nine o'clock the next morning.

It was very weird, but I couldn't get rid of the idea that something bad was going to happen to me.

* * * *

That night, I tossed and turned in bed, and didn't fall asleep until well after two o'clock. When I finally nodded off, I was plagued by nightmares that flung me about in a maelstrom of dread and loathing. I was being chased by something down a long, dark alleyway in a strange city, and as I ran, I kept turning around, but I couldn't see what it was. However, I knew it was something big, something strong -- and it was gaining on me -- getting closer and closer, and I could feel its warm breath on the back of my neck.



Suddenly, I was no longer running in an alley, for the walls of the buildings on either side of me were starting to melt and were becoming waterfalls that quickly flowed together to form a dark,

underwater landscape beneath the surface of that strange city. I was half-running, half-swimming in this submerged world of gloom. I was thrashing away, conscious that it was getting harder and harder to breathe, and the sounds of something swooshing toward me were getting closer, and the water around me was getting warmer. Then I could feel it, a powerful embrace that wrapped itself around me in a strangling clasp, a maddening grip that seemed to pull me down, down to the . . . floor of my bedroom. There, I lay in a tangle of bed sheets. I could see daylight outside, as the night was over and my nightmare was starting, already, to fade away.

An hour later, at five to nine in the morning, I was showered, shaved and was pulling up to the front of Papa John's Divers Shack. The dream had all but disappeared, and I was more than ready for my big adventure in the mysterious blue hole. As I started to get out of my rental car, I saw Papa John motion for me to drive around to the back of the building. A few minutes later, I had parked the car, and was pulling my SCUBA gear out of the trunk, soon to be joined by Papa John. Acting like a young man in his early twenties, he took my tanks from me and hauled them over to the back door of the building, swung them around and set them down on the ground with great agility. Each tank weighed over 34 pounds empty, and he had just hefted nearly 70 pounds without breaking a sweat. I brought over the rest of my gear and Papa John turned to the doorway just in time to see a young woman come outside. He introduced her as Nerissa, his granddaughter. She offered her latte-coloured hand to shake and said *hello* in a soft, melodious voice.

"Pleased to meet you, Nerissa," I said, and held her hand a second or two longer than was normally polite.



To say she was beautiful was an understatement. Her appearance was beyond traditional beauty. It had an ethereal quality that held hints of smoke and mists and jungle drums that beat in the

darkness of long-forgotten nights. She was as tall as I was, and she held herself erect and proud. Her cheek bones were high, and perfectly framed a nose that was straight and noble, like Aztec royalty. Her lips were full and glistening, and her hair was dark and long and gleamed in wet, wavy strands that seemed to suggest she had just stepped out of the shower. But it was her eyes that struck real joy into my heart. Shining out of all this beauty were two of the most striking eyes I had ever seen in my life. They were so pale blue they appeared almost white, and they were so piercing, so charged with visual energy, that I felt, at first, to have been struck by a lightning bolt. I couldn't take my eyes off hers, yet at the same time, I wanted to tear myself away from them, so fearsome were they in the early morning sunshine.

"Nerissa is going to be your guide today," said her grandfather, and I could not have been happier. Yet, at the same time, I felt a slight rush of dread spread throughout my body.

* * * *

Nerissa and I were bouncing along a crooked, old dirt road in her grandfather's truck. It was a new F250 Crew Cab with an extended bed that accommodated all of our diving equipment, as well as a very strange addition. I only had two questions about the truck -- how could he afford such a swanky, new vehicle, and what was the rather large bathtub-looking device doing in the back? I asked Nerissa about the new truck, but her answer was rather vague, suggesting that business had been very good the last few years. I decided to skip asking her about the bathtub, but it still bothered me, for it was much bigger than a regulation-sized tub -- it looked more like a tank -- and it was more than half-full of water. Then, as if reading my mind, she said it was for keeping big fish fresh, just in case we caught any. I told her I was looking for *evidence* of mermaids, not the mermaids, themselves. She laughed a musical sound that gave me a happy, little flip-flop in my stomach.

"You never know, my dear," she said. "We may find one or two of those, down there, too."

Nerissa giggled some more, as she drove slowly over the twisty turns and massive bumps of the ancient road, that, at times, was no wider than a sizable footpath. It seemed we were driving for hours, but eventually we arrived at our destination and parked on the shores of an almost perfectly round body of water, that was surrounded by sand and mangrove fringe. We quickly organized our masks and fins, and then attached waterproof watches to our wrists, and proceeded to strap on our tanks, which Nerissa's grandfather had filled to capacity. Both of us wore a single tank, equipped with a J-valve and a hose regulator with a mouthpiece. The compressed air went straight into our mouths and would keep us breathing under water for up to thirty minutes. Next, I pulled on my flippers and awkwardly slapped my way across the warm sand and into the water. From force of habit, I bent down, spat into my mask to prevent it from fogging up, washed it out and put it on my face. When I turned around, Nerissa was standing beside me. We gave each other a thumbs-up sign and quickly submerged ourselves into the waters of the blue hole.



The descent was gradual -- two streamlined bodies with legs kicking in steady rhythms. Behind us, bubbles gently burbled away, leaving a trail of white spheres that resembled the release of hundreds of fish eggs from two alien sea creatures. My breathing became easier, as our lungs adjusted to the ever-changing depths, and strange as it may seem, our bodies felt warmer the deeper we dove. Down and further down we descended, kicking in a smooth and regular cadence, our aquatic cosmos changing with each downward beat. And then, we were skimming the bottom, a level, satiny blanket of white, which rose

up to meet us and welcome the two creatures from another realm. We soared along, inches above the floor, marvelling at the simple purity of the seascape. I could hear the steady *bloop-bloop* of air bubbles trailing behind us, and as I kicked on, quietly cruising the terrain, I felt a sense of contentment induced by the mellow strain of my muscular workout. Then Nerissa was tapping me on the shoulder and signalling that I should follow her. I did, and within thirty seconds, or less, we had come to the end of the blue hole, abruptly halted by a smooth wall that rose upward through the ascending depths to the daylight world above.

As I stared at the wall, I almost panicked, thinking I was back in my nightmare again. However, before the terror took firm hold of me, I saw that just beyond was a large crevice and Nerissa was swimming through it. I quickly followed her and was in a passageway that started to gradually ascend what must have been twenty or thirty feet. Suddenly, the channel split, and Nerissa was taking the left fork. I briefly remembered classroom warnings about depth limits and quick ascents, but I had no time to give it any serious thought, for Nerissa was moving on quickly and I had to keep up, or I would be lost. After more forks, and a series of confusing left and right turns, we came out in what appeared to be a cavern-enclosed lake. We stopped, treaded water and Nerissa raised her mask, took out her mouthpiece, and shut off the air valve. "Well, my dear," she said. "Are you happy?"

"Why?" I mumbled rather stupidly into my mask.

"We've just entered Mermaid Lagoon."

* * * *

Ten minutes later, we were lying out on a small beach that separated the lagoon from a rock cliff. We had taken off our diving equipment and were resting after our exertions in the blue hole. Nerissa was telling me that the rock cliff was really the interior of an extinct volcano, and that the water had been trapped inside the cavern in order to form the lagoon.

"Does the water end here?" I asked.

"No. There are other channels that lead away from the lagoon. They run down into other caverns and eventually empty out into the sea. There's enough runoff to insure that the lagoon doesn't overflow."

"What about creatures? If there's a direct link from the blue hole to the sea, isn't it possible that other marine life can enter from the sea?"

"Of course," she said, with one of her melodious laughs. "I've seen many here, including barracuda and small sharks."

The thought of swimming in waters that might contain such predators suddenly made me turn cold with dread.

"What's the matter?" Nerissa asked. "They won't harm you, even if you meet up with one."

"How can you be so sure," I almost stammered.

"Because of the others."

"The others? Wha-what others?"

"The mermaids, of course," she laughed, and I thought that she must be joking. Then, her face turned serious. Very serious. "You wanted to find mermaids, didn't you? Well, my dear, you've come to the right place. And they'll protect you."

I stood up, starting to realize that she was either serious or half mad. "But that can't be," I said. "In spite of the rumours and myths, I never really expected to find such things as . . ."

"Mermaids?" Nerissa finished. "Of course they exist. Just listen."

Listen, I did, and for the first time, I could hear them -- a faint chorus of soprano voices, very quiet, but quite unmistakeable, singing an ethereal song that was sweetly clear and distinct, almost a soothing lullaby. But not quite. Here, the lullaby seemed to turn my blood to ice.

"There's nothing to fear," cooed Nerissa, in her musical tones. "They're my friends." And she gestured toward the lagoon, with a gentle sweep of her hand.

I was afraid to look, but I couldn't resist -- my head swung toward the waters as if I had no control over it whatsoever. And what I saw was this -- as the singing continued, little waves seemed to be approaching us from three parts of the lagoon. But now, I could tell that the music was muted, slightly indistinct, as if it was coming from underwater. Then the waves unfolded and three small heads popped up above the water's edge. Where a moment before, there was only air kissing the surface of the water, there was now the faces of three, young women -- but they were not the beautiful women of myth and legend. No, not these Sirens. Instead, all three of them had eyes that were blood-red, shining like demented signal lights -- and the once sweetly-clear, lullaby music, now shrieked from out of black-gummed mouths that were filled with razor-sharp teeth.

And their eyes . . . oh, those eyes feasted on me in ravenous expectation. For they had come for *me*!

"Don't be alarmed, dear man," murmured Nerissa, in a near-hypnotic voice. "There's nothing to fear."

"But they . . . they want me," I stammered, as I backed away from her. "They've come for me."



"Of course, they've come for you. But you won't feel a thing. I promise."

So fearful was I that I backed off the strand of sand and was now wadding out into the lagoon. I could barely feel the warm grip of the water, as panic now took hold my mind, and I was seized by the first stages of uncontrollable terror. I looked back to the beach, but

Nerissa was no longer there. I looked back to the lagoon, where I had last seen those dreadful creatures of legend -- they, too, were gone.

In a mad frenzy of hysteria, and without my SCUBA equipment, I started to swim across the lagoon in an attempt to escape. But I didn't get very far. Within seconds, the mermaids' song had crescendoed into a cacophony of blood-curdling screeches, as the three creatures caught me about the arms and legs and neck. Trapped in a horrific grip that permitted no movement whatsoever, I found that it was completely useless for me to struggle.

I screamed once, "Nerissa!" And she answered me from behind my head.

"Yes, my dear," she sang, and her voice was still melodious, and -- dare I say it? -- loving. "What can I do for you?"

"Save me. Please, save me."

Then the three creatures turned me around to face her, as she said, "Oh, I will, my darling human. I will save you. And you won't feel a thing."

And that was when her beautiful face began to dissolve, transform and elongate into something that looked just like a barracuda. Something with lots of very, sharp fangs.

Then, it lunged straight for my throat.



* * * *

Many, painful hours later, we were trucking back to Papa John's Divers Shack. Nerissa was driving and I was at the bottom of the over-sized tank in the truck bed, resting after my ordeal. She was talking happily away, as if nothing had happened.

"I told you there was nothing to fear."

I remained silent in the tank.

"You'll find life a little different now, my dear, but there's really nothing to worry about. You'll be well taken care of."

I remained silent in the tank.

"And your little operation -- I said you wouldn't feel a thing? Sorry I lied."

I remained silent, because I couldn't speak underwater. *Yet.*

"Just think, my dear, you'll make a wonderful addition to some rich person's private collection. Won't you?"

I remained silent in the tank. It would be a long time before my transformation to a merman was totally complete. But I would make it, in the end.

Luck me.

Fin



About the Author:

Thom has published five plays, including his most performed work “Dark Rituals” and the thrillers “Club Dead” and “Ravens Cliff”. Others include a stage version of the Anthony Hope classic “The Prisoner of Zenda” (co-authored with Elizabeth Ferns), and his popular family fantasy “Return to Wonderland”. Book publications include “The Death Merchants”, the illustrated Halloween collection “13 Tales from the Dark”, and “The Christmas House, 12 Tales of Holiday Magic”.

Look for “The Man With Hemingway’s Face”, a sequel to “The Death Merchants”, featuring the enigmatic detective Cass Gentry.

A former teacher, Thom has a PhD in Educational Systems Development and is a recipient of the Canada 125 Award.