

My Life as a Mermaid

I get another letter from my sister who is in Honduras riding mules and skidding around the muddy mountain roads in a pickup truck. The roads have curves sharp enough to invite death, sharp enough to see yourself leaving. When the priest drives, she writes, he is the real danger, his faith too strong to be cautious. My sister, Kay, has learned to hope for days when the truck breaks down. Otherwise, she and the other relief workers cower in the open bed as the priest speeds through the countryside; they lean all their weight toward the mountain to keep the truck from sliding off the washed-out roads. Some days they leave their base camp and carry their supplies up the mountains by foot. They pack Tylenol, Imodium, vitamins. And antibiotics: Keflex, Pen-VK, Erythromycin, Lorabid, Roxar, tubes of anti-fungal cream, and everything for parasites.

Me, I stock up on Band-Aids and Flintstones chewables as I wheel my cart down the pharmacy aisle. Suntan lotion, cotton balls, hairspray, toothpaste. I gather toilet paper and paper towels—the jumbo pack—for all the spills I wipe. *Would a sponge work better, save some trees?* my sister might ask. But I am one to leave the sponge in the sink, smelly and sour, until the odor clings to my hands and infects everything I try to clean. “That

wouldn't happen if you squeezed it out every time," my husband instructs all of us, the kids included. He demonstrates his method over the sink, a surplus of gray water drizzling from the sponge, an army of germs exterminated. "Squeeze out all the extra," he says. I nod. The kids have lost interest. Still, I prefer paper towels. They absorb everything. Plus, there's the satisfaction of throwing them out—the illusion of messes going away.

In her letter, Kay says there's no indoor plumbing. No showers, no tubs. Toilets that do not flush "as you know it," she says, to emphasize the differences between us. On the other hand, she says, there is plenty of water. It rains daily for an hour or more. She washes in a pan of rainwater, one leg at a time, and keeps her bar of soap, gray and shrinking, in a Ziploc baggie. The Ziploc has become valuable, irreplaceable, and she folds it neatly to preserve it.

When her team of eight (the priest, a couple of saints, a paramedic, a skittish med student, and a teenage interpreter, plus bodyguards strapped in bullets) hikes back, exhausted from a day in the mountains, a day of shouting *"Atención! Atención!"* through a bullhorn to the trees, announcing the arrival of "*medico*" to treat infected hands and swollen limbs that should be amputated, diarrhea of all types, pneumonia, chicken pox, dengue, skin fungus, worms, and clogged ears—when she's finished distributing whatever antibiotics are left to treat the sexual diseases and parasites buried deep within the bodies of these people, my sister carries her bucket of rainwater to her stucco cell, where she soaps herself a leg at a time, an arm, a shoulder, trying to remove the day's dust and sorrow. The stench of sulfur water is not much better than the decay she's wiping clean.

Afterward, she gathers her clothes and scrubs and wrings them in her bathwater and hangs them to dry. Then she uses the twice-dirty water to flush her toilet in the corner of her cell.

She says she has not yet gotten used to the sourness that consumes her hair and skin and clothes. "How does a thing become so soiled? So black and unwanting of touch?" she asked in her letter. I don't know if she is referring to her cell or toilet or the countryside in general. I cannot answer, having never witnessed a thing so dirty as to be mourned.

Many years ago, we were two girls swimming in the ocean every summer. Family vacations, sand and sunburn, salty waves. If not the ocean, we swam in the pool until our lips turned blue. We knew how to make our bodies float or sink, how to dive away from our mother's voice when she pleaded with us to get out. "Girls!" she'd yell. "Girls, I'm warning you, if I have to pull you out myself!" Kay and I would plunge even deeper and isolate ourselves in the silence of the water. We taught ourselves to jump waves, to dive, to hold tea parties underwater until our bodies floated upward and our lungs ran out of air.

I have tried to teach this trick to my own children along with underwater handstands and somersaults, but my children do not swim like me. They have inherited their father's fear. They keep to the shallow end and drift to the sides. My youngest child is afraid to get his face wet, a screamer if he is splashed, hyperventilating until his face is red and purple. When this happens, I hold him close to my chest and gently glide back and forth in the water. But this has never soothed him as it does me. He is most happy playing on the grass, where his feet feel sure of the world beneath him.

There are other children at the community pool who dive deep and search the bottom. Their parents call them fish or mermaids. Lovely swimmers. But they do not belong to me.

On sunny afternoons in my suburban home I worry about my kids, my sister, the world. I fear catastrophe. I'd like to write Kay and ask her how she escaped these worries, but instead I write short letters begging her to be careful. Then I forget to mail them and use the envelopes as a place to jot down my list of things to do:

go to post office/bank
laundry
call therapist
get aspirin, ice cream, Diet Coke
nap

I fuss over my children in the same distracted, heartsick way while I count the tiny pairs of socks that come out of the dryer. I fold their miniature clothes into piles. Some days I feel like Gulliver, every part of me tied down by Lilliputians, as if, somehow, it is me and not my sister who has wandered into a strange land. The land of marriage, motherhood, matching socks. It's not what I expected. How did I choose this, wandering the grocery store with my squeaky cart? Nor is it clear how my sister escaped to Honduras. It seems impossible that all these worlds are connected, the past with the present, Honduras with here. Though in some ways, it could be as simple as purchasing an airline ticket and trusting the winds of God—the whims of God—to land in a small pocket between the slopes of two mountains, like finding shelter between the breasts of a giant mother.

Kay flew to Honduras after a devastating hurricane ripped through the country. The hospital in Tegucigalpa was flooded four stories high. Rushing water sucked bodies away from the villages, depositing death everywhere like sediment. I know this not from the news, which focused on wealthier parts of the world, but from my sister and her small band of relief work-

ers. They flew into a smelly tropical world for various reasons, among them compassion and the longing for a place to hide.

Kay writes, "I took a rare dip in one of the rivers today, surrounded by mangrove trees. I floated in smooth brown water where I wanted to live forever as a fish." I'm envious. I would run away; I would like to be the kind of person who could run away.

Some days I feel like I am at the bottom of an empty aquarium watching the world through a glass wall. The floor of my aquarium is covered with toys that have fallen apart or have missing pieces. "Somebody has to clean this up!" I yell to my children, who are upstairs in their rooms hiding from my voice. When no one comes, I bend down and straighten the mess myself. Pick up the pieces and put them in a pile.

I ask, How on earth can I, from here, straighten up the world? Absorb all the spills? Know in some concrete way how wasteful my wanting is? Every few weeks, I write out another twenty-dollar check to Unicef or the Fireman's Fund, the Police Youth camp, the world food bank. I stuff my checks into their pre-addressed envelopes and then I forget to mail them.

"Don't you think we could do something?" I say to my husband at night in bed. I sound like one of the children pleading to keep a stray kitten.

"You're suffering from guilt," my husband tells me. "Did you call your therapist?"

It's not guilt, I want to explain. *It's something else*. But my husband is a giant wall of a man whose back is turned to me. I draw invisible circles on his skin.

"Go ahead and deny yourself," he says. "But not the rest of us." He's fed up with the diet of rice and onions I've been serving for dinner lately.

“This is what your *Aunt Kay* is eating tonight, so lick your bowls!” I tell the kids. They love the idea of eating with their fingers. “In other parts of the world people are starving,” I remind them when they spit out the onions.

“We are civilized in this household. We will use forks,” my husband says, too late to stop the chaos at the dinner table.

“What about pizza, Daddy?” one of the kids asks. “We eat that with our hands.”

All of us except my husband scoop rice with our fingers, we lick and gobble like the dogs we are. This is play for the children, not a state of being. I cannot replicate the poverty of the world so anyone will believe me, fold hunger back on itself. I cannot pretend I am anywhere but here. We eat mangoes and bananas for dessert. Ice cream. The kids think life’s a picnic because we’ve been eating off paper plates. Since the drought this summer and the state’s call to conserve, I’ve stopped doing dishes. We haven’t hooked the hose to the lawn sprinkler, washed the cars, or turned on the birdbath fountain for weeks. My husband thinks this is enough sacrifice. Every evening, he studies the landscaping, which cost a fortune, and the browning lawn. Then he looks at the sky, waiting. I’ve been making the children bathe at the same time. Three at once is harder to handle, all the splashing and name-calling, the middle child squished in between. After their baths, we scoop the tub water into pots and carry the containers downstairs to soak the houseplants. We drip all the way to the herb garden out back and make circles of mud around the wildflowers and tomato plants. My clean-scrubbed kids parade in their pajamas; gray water the color of old soap dripping down their arms. Really, there is more dirty water than I know what to do with.

I tell them I’m going to the store to buy jugs of water, that I will be back soon. I buy ice cream instead. I buy ice cream regularly

these last few months, and each time I drive a little bit farther, looking for a different store, another flavor. We've hoarded several cartons of ice cream at home, gallons of water, so it isn't a need I'm chasing. Water is just my flimsy excuse to get away.

Lately, I've been taking refuge in the grocery store. I wheel up and down the aisles, amazed by the abundance. I study the shelves of canned vegetables, rows of soup. "Excuse me," I hear a woman ask the clerk. "Can you tell me where to find artichokes?"

She pronounces it "*heart-a-choke*," and I think, "They're everywhere. Poor choking hearts." For instance, this one: Kay wrote me about a woman with mastitis. The woman had a giant sloughing pit of a breast, a hollow where her body used to be. The worst case Kay's ever seen. I cannot picture it, except as black ash. A side of a woman ready to blow away.

Tonight, I finger the fresh produce. I stop my cart next to a bin of corn on the cob and pick out an ear. I pull back the husk and part the silk—the kids call it Barbie hair. They love to play with corn silk Barbie. Beautiful Barbie. Except squirming underneath the Barbie hair is a fat worm tunneling its way through the ear of corn. Even the worms of this country eat well. I think of the Honduran children Kay wrote about, some of whom had worms sprouting from their foreheads. The *torsala* flies that are everywhere in Honduras circle the children's heads like black halos. When the children are napping, the flies bite their foreheads and lay eggs. The larvae hatch from swollen pouches. Kay says it's a horrific sight, but not life-threatening, easy enough to treat with antibiotics and creams. How can worms bursting from a child's forehead not be threatening to life? To my life? I am haunted by these images when I bathe my children at night, their skin glowing gorgeous, as smooth as perfect fresh peaches, which, I notice, are on sale. I pick out a half-dozen flawless fruits and admire the beauty of things grown without deformities.

At night, when I count my children and make sure all are safe and sleeping, when I lie in bed with my husband and stare at his back, I think of letters I'll write my sister. "When you are taking care of other people's children," I'll ask her, "who do you count as belonging to you?"

I leave the grocery store with a gallon of water, a carton of ice cream, the peaches, and a bundle of paper towels. Weaving through the parking lot, I see myself in someone's side-view mirror, my hair in my eyes, my French twist loose and lopsided, my arm stretched around the jumbo paper towels. I balance them on my hip as if I am carrying one more child, the child who will clean up the world, wipe up the spills, absorb it all.

I carry my groceries through the parking lot, and then, before I move in time, an old woman backs her car into my hip. "Hey!" I yell. I pound my fist on her trunk and drop my bags. She's wearing a feathered hat and cannot fully turn her neck to see me. "Is that a condition of old age or of life—the not turning to see?" I want to ask. But the peaches are rolling across the asphalt, and the plastic jug has split. Clean, clear water seeps from the burst seam, forming small puddles and soaking the pavement like a stain. I can see the old woman's hands tremble on the steering wheel. She must be somebody's mother. I can tell she would like to help me pick up my groceries but doesn't know how. She cannot move from inside the safe bubble of her car except to wave and say she's sorry.