

MAGGIE

By Rob Johnstone

She moved with the measured grace of a dancer, fluid and supple. Her rich auburn hair cascaded across her shoulders and down her back. She was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. I would catch glimpses of her along the Riverwalk, but could never get close enough to speak to her before she disappeared. I would seek her out, but could never find her. I was obsessed with her, and had been for many years.

Only my older brother, David, knew this and he would just roll his eyes and shake his head whenever I mentioned her. He should have been a little more understanding, since he was the one who introduced me to her when I was twelve years old. Even back then, he tried to convince me that Maggie had been dead for over 50 years. I knew he was wrong.

Maggie's disappearance, and supposed drowning, was a well-known cautionary tale to adventurous kids living along the river. In truth, it scared the hell out of me.

Maggie was the teenage daughter of the head lightkeeper of the Desdemona Sands Light, in the Columbia River. The keeper's family lived in a house at Fort Stevens, but Maggie loved to take their skiff out to the light to visit her dad while he worked. She had no fear of the water, and was comfortable at the throttle of the small boat.

Shortly after the Japanese shelling of Fort Stevens, in 1942, the light on Desdemona Sands was automated, and the keepers were no longer needed. Maggie was greatly distressed at this; especially in light of the need for increased vigilance against the threat of enemy submarines entering the Columbia.

One night, in late 1942, just before the family was to relocate to another station, Maggie's sense of duty compelled her to take the skiff to the abandoned lighthouse to hold vigil against the threat of incursion at the mouth of the river. A steady blanket of rain fell over the area, obscuring her view of Fort Columbia to the north, and Fort Stevens to the south. She was also unable to see the navigational lights of the lightship Columbia, five miles out to sea, but supposed the lightship could see the light from Desdemona Sands. Save for the intermittent flash from atop her station, Maggie's shrouded isolation was complete.

Nobody knew exactly what happened that night, but Maggie was presumed drowned, though her body was never recovered. David convinced me that she became one of Persephone's sirens, and lurks in the shallows to this day, but my knowledge of Greek mythology, at the time, was insufficient enough to cause me to doubt.

One November day, I cajoled David into taking me crabbing with him out on the Columbia. It was an unseasonably nice day, and we motored out of the Hammond marina in our 16-foot skiff. David was an experienced boater, and I had no concerns for his judgement. We planned to crab at high tide, on Desdemona Sands, believing the flood would bring them in. We anchored in twelve feet of water, just before slack, and threw in our two rings and the pot we had recovered earlier that summer, from Social Security Beach, on Clatsop Spit.

As we let the bait soak, David told me we were anchored over the remains of the Desdemona Light. He renewed his stories of Maggie's drowning, and how her voice could be heard on dark nights across the water. She sounded – to some – like a terrified woman in distress, but David convinced me it was Maggie calling out to unwary mariners. I genuinely feared the specter of an animated drowning victim climbing into our boat.

When a sudden fog covered the mouth of the river, we were already at the leading edge of a running ebb, and my anxiety over Maggie's death was a palpable presence. David had miscalculated how quickly the tide would turn, and we found ourselves fighting to pull our gear and our anchor. Once it was all aboard, David turned the boat across the current, to head for shore, but a sudden east wind caused our windward port side to act like a sail, and we turned turtle. I fell into the water, clutching the pot line, not realizing it would drag me to the bottom once it cleared the gunwale. Sinking to the bottom, I was sure I was dead.

At that moment, as the imminence of my death was my only conscious thought, I saw Maggie swim along side me and pull my hand free of the rope. She then pushed against my back until I broke the surface. David had already managed to climb atop the boat, and was pulling it over.

He hauled himself into the swamped boat and started bailing with our crab bucket. I grabbed the gunwale and heaved over the side. We proceeded to bail enough water to clear some freeboard, then skulled it toward Jetty Bay.

Once we beached the boat, I told David how Maggie had saved me. He stared at me for a long time, then admonished me to tell no one of what happened. We made our way home, wet and exhausted – with no crabs – but maintained our story that we fell into the harbor trying to trailer the boat, so we left it moored. I knew Maggie had saved my life, but David refused to indulge me.

For the next 20 years, I would catch glimpses of Maggie along the Riverwalk. Then, one morning as I walked along the waterfront, I saw her straight on. She was lying on her back on the sand behind the Holiday Inn Express. She was naked, and she was dead. Her auburn hair enshrouded her lithe body, but people were already gathered around her and were calmly cutting into her supple skin, dissecting her – without ceremony – right there on the beach.

I approached the group slowly, suppressing the scream in my throat, as I surveyed my Maggie. As a terrorized youth, sinking under the Columbia River, she had saved me from certain death. She had, since then, sporadically brightened my days along the Riverwalk, and become the idealized woman I had sought as a young man. But the terror and the myth had blinded me to who Maggie really was. She came to me as a dead girl, animated under the waves, and lived near me for 20 years.

Unable to bear what I was seeing, I staggered toward the Maritime Memorial and leaned against the broken arch that signifies the soul's ascension to heaven. The haunting visceral image of the reality of Maggie's death caused me to hyperventilate until I nearly passed out. To this day, I don't know if I was there for five minutes, or an hour. But at some point, leaning against that symbolic arch, I regained a clarity of mind that released me from the madness I'd harbored for 20 years.

As I looked back at the dissection still in progress on the dead sea lion, I realized that Maggie was now free. As was I.