

# THREE GHOST STORIES and MIRANDA'S TALE

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The evening begins and ends on a stretch of beach under the moon. A bonfire, a few people sing, some dance in the sand and the kids stir currents in the glow of tidepools full of phosphorescent critters.

Two brothers argue politics as smoke from the driftwood chases the rest of us from one side to the other. The brothers become a tad rambunctious at which point 10-year old Miranda demands a ghost story. The singing tapers off and the brothers cool down. Miranda declares a contest: the best ghost story wins a dinner at Miranda's Restaurant. I've been there. The menu is limited but Miranda's tap dancing is worth the price of admission.

Miranda declares herself judge and rule-maker: the story must have ships, ghosts, and lovers and it can't be too long, boring, or scary. The brothers grumble and everyone else cheers.

"Who wants to go first?" Miranda looks at the brother called Uncle Tony. He isn't part of the family but everyone calls him Uncle Tony. After a few aborted attempts at rock-paper-scissors, Uncle Tony agrees to go first.

"Okay, okay," he says. "Here's a story about a shipwreck off the coast near those rocks." He points at an ominous looking reef. He continues in his spookiest voice, "Every man aboard disappeared. And once a year, the seamen come alive

and slog ashore. Tonight, may be the night they come a-rustling outside your tent. Now that's a true ghost story; The End."

After a moment of silence, his brother observes, "Well it was short. And I wasn't bored until the end. Best story yet, Tony."

Uncle Tony begins to object, but Miranda like a good judge overrules and blurts out, "But what about the love story?"

Uncle Tony pauses then says, "Well two of the sailors love one another."

His brother puffs a little air, "You said all the sailors were guys."

Uncle Tony glares at his brother. "I told you it was a true story,"

Thankfully, Miranda is not interested. She wants a love story with a ghost. She chooses Rich Gonzalo, a close friend of the family, to go next. "Now Rich a real ghost story, not a joke, or a fairy tale, okay?"

Rich begins by setting the mood with a dark night at sea, circa 1875:

A three-masted schooner, the *Sunshine*, is off course and about to enter the Graveyard of the Pacific. The boatswain blows his pipe-whistle to gather the crew. When the men are on deck, the boatswain gives them some advice, "Mariners, we soon cross treacherous waters called by some a graveyard, a cemetery of the deep. Before we enter this haunted realm, I offer a few precautions to save ye backsides and maybe save ye souls. Listen and take heed. Cover all shaving mirrors lest the dead stowaway inside the temptation of the looking glass; parse ye lips but make no whistling 'til portside lest ye summon a storm or the devil, and by the gods of the sea, no idle talk of Jonah or sea monsters or other confoundments. Men, has any amongst ye ever seen a ghost?" Every man aboard raised his hand for sailors are a superstitious lot and have seen many a wonder in this world and in the next. "And has any amongst ye ever been touched by a ghost?" Half the hands remain raised while the men begin to look around at their shipmates. The boatswain's deep voice reaches into the hearts of the crew as he asks, "And has any amongst ye ever kissed

the lips of a ghost?" All hands drop to their sides except one old sailor in the back, teeth clenched to a meerschaum pipe and a curl of smoke circling his wild gray beard. The boatswain shouts out over the sound of wind whistling through the rigging, "Seaman Caliban ye mean to tell us that ye have kissed the lips of a GHOST?" With his hand still raised, the old mariner removes the pipe from his mouth and says, "Oh, I thought ye said the lips of a GOAT."

Everyone around the camp fire laughs, except Miranda. "Rich, you promised not to make a joke!"

Rich smiles. "That's not a joke Miranda, just someone who is a little hard-of-hearing. Wasn't it even a little bit scary?"

"No." Miranda huffs and folds her arms across her body.

Uncle Tony laughs and says, "I guess my story remains the best."

"Ah, but my story continues," Rich says as he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a brochure. "The *Sunshine* carried thousands of dollars in gold coin from San Francisco and according to this flyer that I picked up at Cape Disappointment . . ." Rich begins to read:

"On November 22, 1875, the schooner *Sunshine* washed up on the Long Beach peninsula keel up. No trace of the 25 people aboard or the gold was ever found. In the early winter, debris from the wreck appeared at Dead Man's Hollow. Pieces of cargo from the *Sunshine* and personal items such as found in a seaman's footlocker were discovered including a tin cup, a shaving mirror, and a mason jar filled with letters, coins, and a photograph of a goat."

"Let me see that paper," Uncle Tony complains. Everyone else, including Miranda, agrees the story is the best yet. And after studying the paper in the firelight for a minute, Uncle Tony hands it back to Rich with a weak concession, "Well, I don't see anything about a photograph of a goat. You made that part up."

But the contest moves on. After the rest of us tell forgettable stories, Miranda decides it is time to tell her story. True to the rules, Miranda's story is about lovers, a shipwreck, ghosts and I think I remember people turning into sea creatures.

I have some difficulty following her story because the chocolate cannabis infused caramels begin to kick in. And as a 10-year old, Miranda likes to talk about mermaids and heroines. The story includes a fisherman named Russell who falls in love with Laurel, daughter of a mermaid or selkie or some other sea creature. Of course, Laurel has a secret – someday she must to return to the sea. Russell knows but he is in love. Miranda acts out her story in the firelight as if it's a movie. The story is a mashup of "Splash", "The Little Mermaid" and "The Secret of Roan Inish".

Following her destiny, Laurel disappears one night and Russell goes after her, and then things become a little fuzzy for me. Something about his little boat, the *Peacock*, coming apart, she tries to save him with a magic wish and together they die happily ever after. Ghosts on a reef. Everyone applauds and Miranda bows and, of course, wins the contest.

As the campfire dies down, Miranda returns to swirling currents in glowing tidepools, Uncle Tony and his brother laugh and swap quotes from some movie about a bumbling naval officer called Admiral Benson. Rich and I take a long walk toward the moonlit cliffs.

When we're out of ear shot, Rich stops and cryptically says, "We are the stuff of dreams aren't we?" He points to the phosphorescent sparkle of waves cresting over what looks like a reef. "That's Peacock Spit. In 1929, a ship called

the *Laurel* with seven-million board-feet of lumber lost its steering and rammed into the spit. Under the monstrous waves it split in half and one seaman, standing in the wrong place, fell into the crack and perished. His name was Russell Smith.”

We walk further into the moonlight and Rich says, “As for Uncle Tony and his brother, mercy frees all faults. A year after the sinking of the *Laurel* a steamship called the *Admiral Benson*, crashed into the wreck of the *Laurel*. The watchmen reported seeing a man stranded on the wreck and a woman in the water hanging onto debris. Before they can respond, the *Benson* runs aground. A week later, after all crew and passengers are safe ashore, the *Benson* breaks apart in yet another Pacific storm. Strange.”

I have no idea what Rich is trying to tell me. “You mean to say Miranda’s ghost story is true?” Rich looks at me with a blank stare. After an awkward moment, I say, “Rich, have another caramel.”

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