

The Catfish King and I

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I'd just finished scooping the “tubby” toys into the mesh bag and sent the two year-old out the bathroom door when the twins came bursting in.

“Gramma tell us a story! Gramma tell us a story! Tell us the story about how you were saved by the Catfish King. Please!” They bounced up and down in their footed “jammies” looking like golden springs, their feet landing dangerously close to the puddles from Ryan's “splash-a-thon”. I motioned them back out of the doorway while answering in the affirmative.

“ How did you know about that?” I was puzzled, because I never told them before.

“ Member, Momma called today. An' she said ta ask you. Please. Please. Tell us. Please!”

During the baths, I'd been thinking I might tell them how I met and married Grandpa; but, that would, of course, be the same story.

We snuggled together on their parents' giant bed. I was grateful to finally get off my feet. Ryan grasped his nightly “ba”. You might say it is bad for his teeth and he's too old for a bottle; but I was determined to let his mother deal with that habit. They all fussed with their "blankies" as I wrapped my neck with a microwavable pad. Since their mother and father left for vacation a week ago I read books to the children every night; but, I was more than happy to oblige by telling this story, since re-thinking my adventure with the Catfish King always reminds me how very lucky I have been.

“Well,” I began, knowing full-well a start like that wouldn't do for an older audience, “ all of you have been in a swimming pool. I know that you girls are already know swimming basics. And you, Ryan,“ he stopped sucking and looked up so I knew he was listening, “ are just starting

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lessons. I also learned to swim when I was young and by the time I was in high school, was an excellent swimmer. In fact, I won ribbons and a medal for my school!”

Ellie and Maressa looked at me questioningly as if they could not believe an old lady could ever have done such a thing. Ryan, however took my statement as a matter of fact and, still sucking, started to close his eyes.

“ The summer between my junior and senior year in high school, I was invited to my best girlfriend's house in a city far away. She and her family had just moved. My parents agreed, because I got such grades.” I nudged the girls. “And every day we went to the local pool. Of course Carrie and I swam most of the day, but we also did a lot of watching others swim. Mostly, we watched the life guards. One in particular was very handsome.”

“ Oh Grandma!” the girls chorused, pulling their blankets over their heads. Ryan, on the verge of bliss startled and, were it not for the girls' giggles, would have cried.

“ I remind you, I was not always old. I was young once too and not too bad to look at, if I must say so. He, however was wonderful to look at. He was very handsome.” I emphasized 'very'. “ But he didn't pay any attention to us. Finally we understood that he was there to work and we were there for, well, to have fun. So Carrie and I gradually began to challenge each other to races, dives, and such. One of the things we did was to toss a penny into the water and dive after it. It was on the third penny toss that my great adventure began.”

The girls snuggled closer and Ryan let go his bottle, not quite empty. I resumed. “So, that time Carrie tossed the penny for me, it landed in the deepest part of the pool on the very edge of the drain and balanced there. The drain in the pool, was more like a large square screen down at the bottom. Like this: ” I spread my fingers in front of me and crossed my right hand over the left to

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make a model screen. “ Anyway, I dove in and headed for the drain. Well, you know how when someone is far away they look small and the farther away they are, the smaller they look?”

The girls nodded in exaggerated agreement, their curls bouncing wildly, while Ryan nodded off to sleep. “ So....”, I dragged it out, “ the closer to the drain I swam, the smaller I looked to Carrie.” The girls nodded again. “But, I not only looked smaller, I really became smaller. In fact, I became so small I could swim right through the screen holes which were about this big.” I held up one thumb and index finger indicating a half-inch. “Right away, I knew something extraordinary was happening to me, and the first things I saw were fabulous, gorgeous lights!”

“Really?” the girls asked in unison, waking Ryan.

“Really.” I confirmed. Their eyes grew to the size of saucers and they whistled slightly as they sucked in air. Ryan sucked in air too and let loose a loud burp. I wiped his mouth and continued. “ I could hardly believe it myself. But I was swept downward and downward in what seemed to me to be some sort of tunnel. The water was bright and full of silvery sparkling bubbles so pretty it was like fireworks exploding under the water. Then, I landed in what I guessed was a sea and there the water was so beautiful, not just the blue you have in your pool, but turquoise and purple, bright green, brilliant blue and silver. And all around me were all kinds of sea creatures—starfish, schools of colorful fish of all sizes, gracefully waving sea plants, clams, crabs, sea urchins, sea anemones, sponges, corals and jellyfish. You saw all those at the aquarium once.” Curls flew as they nodded. “Well, this was like being in the water on the inside of the aquarium instead on the outside looking in.

“As you can imagine, I was thrilled to see all these and began to explore. Glittery pink bubbles rose all around me tickling my skin as I swam. I saw a big school of tiny skinny fish that

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were striped in bright green, purple, silver and gold. They flitted all around me as if trying to figure out who I was while I investigated them. They were followed by a school of spotted shrimp that paddled by me with tiny legs, all of them moving in the same way together like miniature soldiers. I saw many kinds of starfish in all colors, not only ones with five arms, but some with twenty arms, all of them waving at me. I waved back. Thank goodness I had new goggles, because I could see schools of clown fish and gold fish. And above me were the prettiest jellyfish of pink and purple and blue with long glistening tentacles reaching and swaying as the water moved. I started to think how Carrie would love to see this too, and wondered if she had followed me; but when I looked back I didn't see her.

“What I did see was something else; and it frightened me! It was a giant octopus and all its eight arms were swimming fast toward me, its giant eyes tracking my every move. I tried to hide from it and ducked behind a rock. Then, I swam even further down where the water was darker. It was also much colder; I got goose bumps. It was then that I started to think about my mom and dad and how I wished they were here to help me. Although it was beautiful and exciting down under the sea it was also pretty scary. I wished I could swim home. Every time I tried to escape, the octopus stuck out its tentacles and grabbed at me. Once it caught my leg really hard, but I wriggled out.”

I squeezed the girls legs and they screamed, waking Ryan again. So I picked him up and held him. When he settled down, I continued. “ The octopus was much bigger than I was—bigger even than any of the other fish I saw. I noticed as it dashed toward me how all the other creatures swam away in such a hurry that some of them bumped smack into others. I say 'it,' because I didn't know if it was a boy or a girl octopus. For that matter, I didn't know if any of the other

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creatures were boys or girls. However, I did know that the fish that approach me next was a boy fish. He was a huge catfish. You know, they can grow up to 600 pounds. That's bigger than dad, mom, all three of you and me combined! I knew this catfish was special not only by his size, but because he was wearing a crown on his head. That's why I knew he was the Catfish King. Now, I never before thought that catfish were particularly brave fish, but I was overjoyed to see that when the Catfish King approached me, the octopus backed off. That is, it backed off at first. Then, as the Catfish King swam around me to protect me, the octopus got angry and kept trying harder to grab me. It grabbed my other leg so hard it made huge round marks." I started to pull a knee up under the blanket. "But those are gone now." I let my leg fall straight again.

"I was really afraid that I wouldn't ever see my parents again, or ever see Carrie either. All I could see were the flailing arms of the octopus fighting this huge catfish. When the octopus grabbed my body and squeezed I knew I was trapped; but, the Catfish King charged it with with its huge head and beat at it with its strong tail and long whiskers. The battle was terrible! Then the octopus released me and squirted out its ink and suddenly we were in total blackness. Even with my goggles, I couldn't see a thing. I could only feel the terrible cold. My body shook all over and I was unable to move my arms or legs. I thought that this would be the end of me, that my mom and dad wouldn't even know where I was, or what happened to me. That made me real sad." I drew down the corners of my mouth and paused. This time the girls said nothing,

I went on. " But, then I was surprised to feel the Catfish King swim right under me. He came upward, landing me on his back. I held onto his long whiskers as he swam away rapidly. He was the fastest thing I ever saw in the water. What a thrill it was to ride on the back of the Catfish King! He was extremely graceful for being such a big fish. And he was so strong. We swam

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through strong currents and around all the other fish and sea creatures. Soon I felt warm again and saw many more fish and plants around us, but we didn't stop there. The Catfish King swam right up through the bright tunnel with the silvery sparkling bubbles. The next thing I knew, he brought me right up to the very pool drain that I had gone down. But before he left me to go back through, he... he..."

"Then, what Gramma? What did he do? What?" the duet chimed.

I paused briefly, knowing how squeamish four-year-olds are about such things. "Well, he kissed me. Not just a little peck on the cheek, like you might expect from just any catfish, but a great big kiss on the lips." I paused, not for effect it might have on the children, but because every time I think about it, it takes my breath away.

"Then, what Gramma? What happened next? Tell us what happened next!" The girls squirmed, jiggling the bed, knocking Ryan's bottle onto the floor.

"Well," I continued, overusing that word, "the next thing I knew I was out of the water lying on the deck of the pool and all the people at the pool were around me. That handsome lifeguard was over me giving me mouth-to-mouth breathing. Carrie was crying that she 'didn't mean to' over and over. Her parents were there clinging to each other crying, and I could hear someone say, 'Come on now, wake up. Come on now'. I coughed and sputtered and rolled onto my side and barfed pool water... and my lunch. I was pretty embarrassed. But, the handsome lifeguard patted my hand and stroked my forehead. I fell instantly in love with him."

"What happened then Gramma? Yeah, what happened to the Catfish King?"

"Then, I dropped the penny onto the deck." I paused. "I never saw the Catfish King again; but, I did see the lifeguard again. Carrie invited me again the next year; but, we didn't play that

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dangerous game again. We played water polo, and swam, and talked to people. Mostly, I talked to the lifeguard when he was off duty. He remembered me, of course. The next year I went back there again on a college break. I was studying nursing at that time. That handsome lifeguard was also in college. He was studying engineering in that town. We spent a lot of time together and the next summer we spent all our spare time together. Then, I brought him home to meet my family; and I met his family. Then we got married. He is your grandfather.”

“Really?”

“Yes really. There's a photograph over there!” I motioned with knobby fingers. “ It was stored in a trunk and I just had a copy made for your mom.”

Since the story was over, I got up (fortunately without waking Ryan) and walked to the dresser and picked up the frame. I kissed the photo and brought it over for the girls to see. “This is our wedding photo: me in my lovely gown and grandpa in his best suit.”

“Wow!” they chorused, Then Ellie noticed something.

“ Gramma, look: he has hair just like us! And look at that big mustache!” It was a long blond mustache extending below his chin.

“Yes,” I agreed, “Just look at it. Big mustaches were popular then. Later he shaved it off.”

And, as Maressa looked more wonderingly at it, she traced her finger from his cheek downward. “ It looks just like....”

“Yes, I know.”