

## Goodnight Mermaids

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Tomorrow I will paint over the *Little Mermaid* mural I created for my daughter's room when she was four. Now eight years old, she is no longer comfortable with the whimsy of mermaids and talking fish. She wants hot pink and lilac. No pictures, just walls.

When she was two, she wore an emerald and lilac sequined gown fashioned into fins. To the store and playground, I was accompanied by my glittering she-fish, who danced and twirled down aisles and lanes singing "Pawt of Ya Wowld." She played and slept in her scaly gown until the sequins lost their shimmer to everyone's eyes but hers.

Later that year, she met her mermaid in the grotto at Disney World. We waited in line for 30 minutes and were just about to enter when the attendant announced Ariel needed a bathroom break. I glanced down to see how this bit of reality was affecting my child's fantasy world. "I wonder where she goes potty," she said, her eyes large with imagining. We discussed the possibilities of this and soon the rope was lifted and we entered the grotto. Ariel smiled and held out her arms for my little mermaid. The awestruck look on my daughter's face as she spoke with her beloved Ariel blurred my eyes with tears behind the camera I was trying to focus. The fireworks had scared her, most of the rides overwhelmed her, but for that one moment the magic of Disney was alive and well.

When she was three, she announced to her preschool class her career aspirations of becoming a mermaid. By then the "*Little Mermaid II*" video was out and she was enamored with Ariel's daughter, Melody. That Christmas her only Santa request was for a Melody doll. The fact that no such doll existed was of little consequence to her. Santa would figure it out. I tried to talk her into one of the many Ariel dolls that filled the stores, but she would not hear of it. It was Melody who touched her. Melody she wanted to hold, hoping she, too, would discover, hidden beneath her human veneer, a true mermaid.

Santa's elf bought a dark-haired doll and hand-stitched a red-sequined mermaid tail to fit over the doll's legs. Christmas morning arrived and there under the tree was exactly what she had requested of Santa, a beautiful Melody.

One night, a few months later, she began to cry during bedtime prayers. She was praying God allow her to grow into a mermaid, but somewhere in the shadows of her maturing mind she was beginning to comprehend it was not going to happen. She was a preschooler being raised in the Midwest. She was land-locked and leggy, and not going to grow fins and swim away.

We talked that night about the importance of dreams. I told her no one ever accomplished anything new or different without keeping her dreams alive. She shared how hard it was sometimes to believe, when everyone tells you your dreams are not going to come true. I assured her that every dreamer faced the same challenge. Before drifting to sleep, she smiled at me with tear-swollen eyes and said, "I think I'll always dream of mermaids, Mama."

When she turned four, she moved into a bedroom of her own, away from the comradery and constraints of sharing a room with her sister. Thinking she might feel lonely or afraid, I painted a mural of Ariel and Melody on her wall. It took more than 20 hours to create an underwater world with Flounder, Sebastian, and the two beloved mermaids. I signed it: "Sweet Dreams, Love Mama."

For three years she loved them. She spoke to them at night when she was frightened. She swam with them in her dreams, and looked for their reassuring faces when she woke. They were her guardians while I slept.

And now dreams of mermaids have left her. Their smiling faces on her wall seem childish and silly. It is time. Time for little mermaids to go – to be painted over in broad, brave strokes of lilac and pink.

It's time to encourage the new spirit that will be born in a big girl room. And tomorrow I will. Tomorrow I will embrace the new, with smiles and cheer, and acquiesce to time with a grateful heart, but not tonight.

Tonight I sit in a darkened room, while my daughter sleeps. I sit silently in the company of mermaids and childhood dreams, and know how much I will miss them.

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