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# WHAT WAS LOST

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Melissa Hart

It's a fantastical premise—a dad and two kids embark upon a routine river rafting expedition, hit a dimensional portal, and plummet 1,000 feet down a waterfall to come face-to-face with a pretty sorry-looking *Tyrannosaurus rex*. But my sister and brother and I, crammed butt-to-butt in my father's orange-plaid easy chair, flinched and worried as one, with eyes fixated on the Sony 17-inch and *Land of the Lost*.

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TV producers Sid and Marty Krofft dug narratives of children trapped in other worlds—in this case, a prehistorical Hollywood soundstage replete with hirsute cavemen and hissing, reptilian antagonists. If another world existed outside the chic Los Angeles suburb in which I lived, I didn't know it. When the episode ended, I left my siblings to *Sesame Street* and stood outside the tiny attic room my father had just built for my mother. The pages of her art history textbooks crackled. Her typewriter keys clicked. Previously, she'd been available for all manner of games and snacks, but now I confronted a closed door, as smooth and unyielding as the Krofft brothers' "time doorway" through which—according to their show's mythology—if someone enters, someone else must leave.

The year was 1976. Jimmy Carter entered my world from the mysterious Deep South. Come January, he'd enter the White House, too, and Gerald Ford would have to leave, trailing the troubled wake of Nixon's pardon. But I didn't know that on November 2. That Tuesday morning, in my neighborhood's country club polling place, a man exited the voting booth, and my mother slipped through the red-and-blue curtain and disappeared. My younger sister stood outside the booth and echoed our father's dinner table pronouncement. "Carter is a peanut!" she yelled, and my mother stalked out, ballot in hand, and addressed the tittering Tupperware crowd waiting to vote.

"For your information . . ." Her eyes grazed my four-year-old sister's white ponytails and her neighbors' "People to People for Ford" election buttons before settling triumphant on my face. "I voted Democrat."

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There was no mother in *Land of the Lost*. She didn't go on that fateful rafting trip. Up until episode seven, which detailed her death, I pictured her languishing in a crystal-and-china two-story like mine, sipping sangria and pruning her rosebushes, wondering idly where the hell her family had gone.

The men in the show didn't interest me. They were all bluster and bravado, the teenage son's shirt open to his navel and both of them sporting Michael Landon curls. It was Holly who captivated me—Holly, the prepubescent daughter/sister, with her long blond braids and thick bangs and her omnipresent red-and-white-checked shirt.

The actress looks scared out of her mind as her father's raft bumps bottom and a T-rex stands over it and roars. But her wide, blue eyes reveal another emotion as well . . . excitement. She races, not quite child and not quite teen, among plastic boulders and fiberglass trees with boys in their shaggy fur suits. It's a new world, and she gets to learn bravery beyond the bedroom night-light and the privilege of walking alone on the path to the gated community pool.

It was Holly I missed after *Land of the Lost* went off the air for a time, just before Jimmy Carter swore his oath on the Capitol steps. Two years later, my mother buckled my siblings and me into the backseat of our station wagon and drove away from our tree-lined cul-de-sac. In half an hour—the time it took between each episode's familiar banjo-heavy introduction and its final line (almost always a failed attempt at wit)—we left our chic neighborhood and came to rest in front of a street of upended shoebox duplexes lined perpendicular to the ocean.

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My siblings and I blinked in the glare of sunlight, seaweed stink instead of L.A. smog in our nostrils. I flipped my brown braids over the shoulder of my checkered shirt and craned my neck theatrically. “Where are we?” I cried.

The Sleestak intervened. “It’s just down the block. It’s safe.”

I slipped away down the stairs before my siblings could protest. I was free.

Silver Strand Beach sits at the southwest

jingling spare change for an orange bag of Reese’s Pieces.

In six months, I’d be nine. Dan White, convicted of manslaughter instead of murder for assassinating Harvey Milk, would inspire the White Night riots six hours north of Silver Strand Beach. The Lesbian Mothers National Defense Fund, set up in 1974 to help newly out moms to keep their kids, was going strong. But I knew none of this. I sat in a classroom with the children of lettuce and strawberry pickers and wandered the hulls of half-built houses, collecting spilled nails, pretending new adventures in new lands.

And then a knock on the bottom door of the duplex. One of the teens climbed the stairs for my mother, face grim and dwarfed in her nest of brown frizz. “Your ex is here,” the teen said, and I ran down to find my father, business-suited, his lips stretched into a toothy smile.

“I want to take the kids out to Sambo’s for burgers and fries.” He appraised my braless mother in her ragged Superman T-shirt and cut-off denim shorts, a world away from the buttoned-up polyester wife he’d escorted each Sunday to the Baptist church.

“Fine,” she told him.

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THERE WAS NO MOTHER IN *LAND OF THE LOST*. SHE DIDN’T GO ON THAT FATEFUL RAFTING TRIP. UP UNTIL EPISODE SEVEN, WHICH DETAILED HER DEATH, I PICTURED HER LANGUISHING IN A CRYSTAL-AND-CHINA TWO-STORY LIKE MINE, SIPPING SANGRIA AND PRUNING HER ROSEBUSHES, WONDERING IDLY WHERE THE HELL HER FAMILY HAD GONE.

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My mother shouldered two packed tote bags and picked up a box of college textbooks. “Silver Strand Beach.” She headed toward one duplex, called over her shoulder: “We’ve left your father.”

The enormity of what we had left astonished me—our house, my school, my Brownie troop, my father with his six-figure income and his temper that blackened my mother’s eyes and fractured her nose. No forwarding address waited for him that night when he stepped into his vacant palace still full of our toys and clothes, our portraits on the walls, the orange easy chair in front of the TV. I pictured him, dazed and scowling like Rick, the dad in *Land of the Lost*. “I don’t know how we got here or why,” he told his son and daughter, “but I think we’re in another world.”

What I’d gained wasn’t immediately evident. My mother and siblings and I were to share the duplex with four overalled teenagers balancing giant frizzy hairdos and their mother, an insect-eyed Sleestak of a woman whose denim jacket reeked of Marlboros and spilled Budweiser. The teens had the bottom floor. My siblings and I would share the bedroom above them, three mattresses on the carpet.

“Where will you sleep?” I asked my mother, noting the lack of couch.

“In the other bedroom.” She lit a stick of Nag Champa and waved it over the bowl of spaghetti on a blanket spread picnic-style over the living room floor. The Sleestak sat down beside me, her bulging eyes merry as they appraised my mother’s hair pulled out of its beehive and dyed back to its original brown.

“May I go to the beach?” I asked after the pasta. My mother frowned. “I’ve got to unpack.”

tip of Oxnard, California, a handful of streets perpendicular to the ocean. Unincorporated, and as yet undiscovered by the surfing world in the late 1970s, the beach stretched out, deserted. I ran from the mussel-encrusted pier down the sand to anemone-filled tide pools, skirting the three-inch crabs that threatened my toes. Old hippies and surf bums wandered the streets, smoking cigarettes and stronger stuff; their leashless brown dogs trotted everywhere.

On days she wasn’t searching for work, my mother threaded her way through the dog

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HE APPRAISED MY BRALESS MOTHER IN HER RAGGED SUPERMAN T-SHIRT AND CUT-OFF DENIM SHORTS, A WORLD AWAY FROM THE BUTTONED-UP POLYESTER WIFE HE’D ESCORTED EACH SUNDAY TO THE BAPTIST CHURCH.

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packs and walked us out to the shipwreck. Eight years before, high winds capsized an old cruise liner anchored off Silver Strand. The Navy dumped rocks and sand into the abandoned ship, creating a breakwater and a haven for both fish and anglers. We climbed the south jetty and gawked at the rusted lower hull surrounded by boulders. “Sometimes,” my mother told us, “good can come out of a wreck.”

I felt the truth of her words, barefoot and braided, my prim ruffled dresses a memory packed away in my father’s house. Alone, my mom busy with my siblings and the employment ads, I turned boulders over to examine crabs and walked into the cool corner market

I don’t know why she let us go. Guilt, perhaps, or fear of his fists if she said no; he still wore the gold-and-garnet class ring that had cut her below the eye. He appeared once a week for three weeks to treat us to dinner. Under a mural of a boy eating a stack of pancakes under the vigilant eyes of a tiger, I answered his questions.

“Where does your mother sleep?” he asked me.

“In the bedroom with her girlfriend.”

“Do you like the woman?”

I frowned over my chocolate milkshake. I’d become used to the Sleestak; she’d given me her old guitar and taught me three chords. “She scares me a little,” I said. *Like you*, I wanted to add, but he’d sprung for hot fudge sundaes, and so I stayed silent.

# THE BIRTH OF JAGUAR GIRL

Pascale Petit

You come out hissing,  
bite off your own cord,  
gobble the afterbirth

and lick me off your fur.

You stumble into the garden  
to chew ayahuasca leaves,  
get so high

your tail's a fer-de-lance  
to play catch with,

your rosettes tarantulas  
pouncing through sunlight.

Your new eyes  
are blue as morpho butterflies  
drunk on fermented fruit.

When the doctors catch you  
you leap up the buttress roots  
of their trousers.

They press a black scorpion  
against your chest  
to listen to your heart –

that spider monkey  
swinging through your ribs.

You barely last the day  
before they drug you,

my cub-Mama, fire-girl,  
too dangerous for the ward.

Soon, your mouth fills  
with vampire bats  
and burrowing owls.

Every time they sedate you  
I have to carry you in my belly again,

pad on all fours  
over the Pantanal of the corridors.

Months, I grow heavy with your visions,  
until it's time to give birth

to my Yaguara Beast,  
She-Who-Kills-With-One-Bound –

who claws her way out.

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Sid and Marty Krofft never produced a definitive final episode of *Land of the Lost*. In the first of three seasons, the father falls into a temporal pathway and accidentally returns to Earth. The kids, however, are stuck in prehistoric limbo.

I longed for such a fate the day my father showed up on my mother's doorstep with a court order and police escort. My siblings and I plunged, backpacked and howling, down the duplex steps and got into the back seat of his Buick. His lawyer sat in the front seat. The man, red of face and smelling of whiskey, turned and rolled his eyes at my mother sobbing in the denim arms of her girlfriend. He spat three syllables.

"Deviants."

I sat between my siblings in the car and craned my neck to look out the back window. Red and blue patrol lights whirled around my mother, standing stricken in the sand. Behind her, Silver Strand Beach stretched, gunmetal gray under a duller gray sky.

I wondered, lying in my father's house nights, how Holly could ever return to Earth after her grand adventure. Surely the Krofft brothers knew that no kid would want to watch her back at school, encased in pink Laura Ashley gingham, roller skating or cheerleading or kissing some Izod-clad Noid. Or maybe, mourning her loss, she'd turn quiet and shy, withdrawing into herself as she tried to exist in two worlds—neither of them real enough now to be fulfilling.

In the ten days between the first and third weekend of the month—the weekends the judge allowed my mother to pick us up and transport us back to Silver Strand Beach—I walked home from school and read in a patch of sunlight that moved across my new stepmother's plush carpet. I ate her fine dinners at our oak-and-crystal table, avoided my father, did homework in my bedroom, and tried not to hear the familiar sound of screaming from his. I thought of my mother walking the beach alone, one in thousands of mothers who dared to explore new territory and found themselves abandoned.

Everyone lost in those days. All that was left were the children, sitting butt-to-butt in the big orange chair for years afterward, flinching and worried as one. ❧