



The Fisherman, the Selkie and the Sea

Neil Allmark
Retold Fairy Tales

You see, the sea took me. But she let me go. She had me in her arms and she let me go. Seven years I had lived as a fisherman, taking the fish from her waters in my nets. Day after day, taking and never giving back. And then she took me. And as I was drawn deeper and deeper into that cold, cold blackness, I felt it was as it should be. This was her revenge.

The sea was rough that night, pulling the boat this way and that. My arms ached like my first trip with my father as I fought with the weight of my nets. It was sudden. Did the sky grow darker or was it the shadow of the wave that took me? You grow up by the sea, you spend your life by the sea, but nothing prepares you for the depth of its darkness.

Was I falling? Did I struggle? I cannot recall. All but the cold and the darkness. The weight of the waves at once holding me and pressing on me. And a whispering voice repeating,

– As it should be.

I closed my eyes. I had not the strength to struggle.

– As it should be.

And then suddenly and swiftly I was lifted up, back towards the light.

When I opened my sea-salt eyes, I made out a shape. A face, a figure. Leaning over me. She had eyes the

deepest blue. Like a summer sky you could lose yourself in with daydreaming. The figure said nothing, but pulled something around me, something so warm, so soft, so.... all-enshrouding, I almost felt myself go under once again. Yet my first movement was to pull its warmth closer around me. The figure seemed to be speaking, whispering. Or was that singing? A hushing rhyme, a lullaby. I closed my eyes.

– Pieter! Pieter!

Voices were calling me.

– Pieter! What has happened?

– Get away from him!

– What have you done? Get away from him!

– Leave him be!

Voices crowded in on me. The blue-eyed figure was roughly pulled away. I tried to speak, but my strength gave way. My attempts came out as groans and cries. The more they pulled her away, the more I felt her tears. Their rough arms lifted me up. And her tears seemed to pull me back under. I buried myself into fur and skin.

I dreamed of the sea. The incessant sea. It embraced me like a love I'd never known. Wrapped in its blue-green, I was pulled under again and again. Neither cold nor warm I seemed to grow lighter as I sank deeper. My first childhood steps on the sand. Held in my mother's arms. Held waist-deep in the endless blue. The first time I held my breath and saw beneath the surface. Watching the switchback of silvery fish flicker in and out of the light. The soft rush and hush of waves breaking on the sand.

In time I awoke. Reluctant to leave the fur skin I found myself wrapped in, I raised myself from bed. The soft beard on my chin told me I had been adrift in sleep for many days. I spoke to my neighbours. They told of the days when they thought I was lost, and of the strange creature who had attacked me and how they'd rescued me.

– No, no, she saved me!

I tried to explain. But their minds were closed. I found all the will in me I could, wrapped myself in her pelt and ran to where they held her. She had saved me. I loved her. I had shared her dreams. I wanted to be with her. To swim with her.

In a makeshift gaol she sat shivering. Her skin grew dry with each hour. The ropes cut into her wrists and

ankles. She pressed her palm against the bruise on her thigh. I could feel she longed for her pelt. She had no tears but she sang in pain like a storm at sea. She had saved me, she had wrapped me in her own fur and they had hurt her. They had yelped at her, snarled at her. Like animals. They held her with their rough, sere skin.

It was no time for doubt. I returned later under cover of night. I wrapped her in her pelt. Her eyes warmed. Black became grey became flecks of blue. I unslipped the ropes that held her, pressed her fur-skin close around her. I tried to speak to her and my salt-sweet tears fell onto her face. I half-carried her to the beach. She pulled her pelt tight around her. She turned in my arms. I could barely hold her. I paused at the breakwater and looked into her night-sea eyes.

– Take me with you.

I walked into the water. As she turned this way and that, I held on to her, on to her sea-soft skin. She looked into my eyes and I thought she was about to say something. To promise something. My heart felt like it was about to flood. And then she turned and, quick as thought, her tail broke the surface and she was gone.

I waited. I knew she would break through the waves and look back. Call me to her. I knew she would beckon me. Sing to me. She would swim back and brush against me, calling me in. I would follow her. Deeper and deeper into those same dreams. I would swim with her.

I waited the whole night. She did not return. In the early dawn a rookery of seals broke surface playfully to the east. But she did not come for me.

I walked the beach endlessly. Day and night. Night and day. I thought of her and cried my sea-salt tears. I tried to dream of the sea. But my dreams, like her, were gone.

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