



The Wee Mermannie

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Retold Fairy Tales

Once upon a time, almost the whole of the Earth was covered with water. Even more so than today. There was just one big mass of land, called Pangaea, and it was surrounded by a super ocean called Panthalassa

Because so much of the world was water, the people who populated it were mermaids and mermen. They gambolled and frolicked in the oceans like cute little otters.

But in the early-middle Jurassic period, Pangaea began to break up. The oceans boiled. Soon, very few of the adorable little sea people were left. The ones who remained began to swim towards the poles and cooler waters. Then one day, as the lands shifted and rifted, the survivors were trapped in a land-locked loch far to the north. The waters there were terribly cold, and partly because of that, the merfolk didn't live terribly long. Some of them became a wee bittie crabbit. But not The Wee Mermannie. He would play with his friend the long-necked plesiosaur and swim and splash and sing.

Although The Wee Mermannie lived in a kingdom that was awfully wet and cold most of the time, he was happy. The cold, wet kingdom was very beautiful and he wanted for nothing.

One morning, The Wee Mermannie was looking for his big friend. He wanted to play, and she could be a little shy sometimes.

'Whaur are ye, Nessie?' The Wee Mermannie called.

He heard a splashing, and turned around, expecting to see his pal. But no! It was a beautiful, black seahorse. Well, not a seahorse, you understand, but a horse. That lived in the sea. Or the loch. But you get the idea.

‘Hullo,’ said The Wee Mermannie. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Karen,’ replied the beautiful black seahorse. ‘Would you like to be friends?’

The Wee Mermannie thought that would be lovely. Karen was just about the prettiest thing he’d ever seen, and he told her so. He was a naive and guileless wee mermannie.

‘That’s nothing,’ Karen told him. ‘I once went up on the surface and saw the most beautiful creature you could possibly imagine.’

‘What did it look like?’ The Wee Mermannie asked, his eyes as big as a big plate of fish and chips.

‘It’s hard to explain. But I’ll show you.’

Karen’s appearance began to morph and change, into a young landmaid with wise eyes and a kind smile, and long, dark hair. If Karen had been just about the prettiest thing The Wee Mermannie had ever seen before... Well, this was something else altogether. As well as long, dark hair, the landmaid had long, lithe legs that tapered down to the cutest little feet you ever did see. The Wee Mermannie had never seen feet before, and he was transfixed.

Then, even more quickly than she had changed into a humanoid, Karen snapped back into her equine form.

‘Aw! Change back!’ cried The Wee Mermannie.

Karen explained that she couldn’t, because shape shifting took up so much energy. If she changed too often, she’d die! But she did have a suggestion.

‘Why don’t you go up on the surface? You can run and jump and bask in the sun. And landfolk live for a full threescore years and ten!’

Now The Wee Mermannie was convinced. ‘That sounds barrie!’ he said, leaping in and out of the water in excited arcs. ‘I might even live long enough to see us win the World Cup!’

‘Let’s not get carried away. And imagine you with your clumsy mermannie body, flapping around on the

surface.' Karen tossed her mane. 'What a fool you'd look. You wouldn't be able to get anywhere at all. But maybe there is one thing...'

'Whit is it?' The Wee Mermannie asked excitedly.

'No, I couldn't,' said Karen. 'I shouldn't have said anything.'

But The Wee Mermannie wasn't having any of it. He begged and pleaded and thrashed and splashed until the kelpie revealed her secret.

'I could help you change your form, I suppose. But that's even harder for me than changing my own shape.' She paused. 'Though, if you could do something for me, maybe I could find a way to help out.'

'Aw, thanks sae much!' The Wee Mermannie said. 'Whit dae ye need? Whitever it is, sign me up!'

Karen hesitated.

'You know, don't even worry about it for now. Anything to help the course of true love.'

She told The Wee Mermannie to grab onto her mane, and she pulled him up onto the shore where the process could begin. Pebbles rubbed against his scales.

'Stupid scales,' he thought. 'I'll be well shot o them.'

Then pains racked his body and he writhed on the shore. The gills on his neck began to seal up. That wasn't so bad. He was used to breathing through his nose and mouth. But the pain as his glorious, powerful tail cleaved in two! And then again, as calcified deposits spun and fused into new bones that chafed against his insides. The pain was so terrible, The Wee Mermannie lost consciousness.

Eventually, The Wee Mermannie came to. He had no idea how much time had passed. Groggily, he looked down at his brand new legs. They looked like they'd retained the power of his tail, and he decided give them a go. Walking felt funny at first, but he soon got the hang of it. Karen trotted over.

'Legs are magical, aren't they? I wish I could have given you four, like me,' said the talking sea horse. 'But then you'd look a bit odd.'

Watching quietly from the far shore, Nessie thought he looked a bit odd already.

'Why don't you hop on?' Karen said to The Wee Mermannie. 'I can give you a lift to The South – that's where the

beautiful princess lives.'

'Really? Oh, I cannae thank ye enough!'

Karen was true to her word, and more. She magicked up landman clothes for The Wee Mermannie and galloped all the way to The South with him on her back. When they reached The Big City, they rode around for hours to see if they could find the beautiful princess, but to no avail. Towards the end of a fruitless day, they decided that they would have to ask for help.

The only problem was, nobody they asked knew where The Wee Mermannie should go. All he knew was, he was looking for a pretty brunette with two legs and two feet. Or rather, the only problem was, nobody knew where The Wee Mermannie should go, and they all sounded terrible. They'd say to him things like –

Awright geezzaa! Yer lookin fer an ocean? Sounds like you fancy findin a bit of trouble. Just keeps yer plates movin and have a right good butchers. Knoworrimean?'

The Wee Mermannie had no idea what this meant. He was just looking for a girl. He might even like to find a wife. So he just decided to keep walking and have a good look around.

And as he did all that walking, people kept on stopping and trying to help him, offering all sorts of advice. The noises they made were awful. Some never used h's. Others used w's instead of r's. It was agonising! Everything was coming to a head in his head as someone came up behind him.

'Excuse me,' she said, 'but do you know your ears are bleeding? Is there anything I can do to help?'

Unfortunately, the questions just made things worse, so The Wee Mermannie turned round to try to signal with his hands that all the talking was hurting his ears something rotten. And he found himself looking into the wise eyes of a young woman who had a kind smile and long, dark hair. And as well as long, dark hair, she had long, lithe legs that tapered off down by her sandals into the cutest little feet you ever did see.

They tried and tried to communicate, but The Wee Mermannie's ears just kept bleeding. He looked so miserable and forlorn that Princess Ethel – for it was she – just gave The Wee Mermannie a big hug to let him know that she could see he was feeling pretty awful, and that she wanted to help.

The Wee Mermannie didn't know how to feel about that. He'd lived in a cold, watery climate all his life, and this warm dryness – except for that damp bit around his eyes – felt strange. But Ethel seemed to know just

what to do. She beckoned The Wee Mermannie to follow her back to her palace, where she had so many towels that she was more than happy to soak some in hot water and help him clean up. The Wee Mermannie wanted to thank her for this kindness, but whenever he spoke, it seemed to Ethel that he might as well be talking to her from the bottom of a lake.

So, instead, he took a sheet of paper and tried to draw his gratitude and the path of his adventure for her. Ethel had never seen the sorts of things he sketched, from the handsome, sleek horse, stronger than any of her stable of white stallions, to the gracefully undulating lake monster, to the young woman who was so beautiful that The Wee Mermannie couldn't have described her in words if he had tried.

'Is that your sweetheart from home?' she asked, and The Wee Mermannie could only shake his head and laugh a gravelly laugh all the way from the bottom of the sea.

The young couple spent pleasant days trying to communicate with each other through drawings and mimes and facial expressions. But even though they laughed a lot and came to easily understand each other's mood, The Wee Mermannie became impatient with their progress. One day, while Princess Ethel was tending to her horses, he walked in the woods surrounding the palace where he found Karen enjoying the sun and the stately surroundings.

'Och, A'm right uggit, Karen. We've come aw this way, an A can tell Princess Ethel likes me, but A cannae tell her how A feel!'

The horse pawed at the ground as she formulated her response. Then she fixed her huge, onyx eyes on The Wee Mermannie.

'Do you remember, when I helped you change, we agreed that you could do me a favour in return one day? Why don't you give me your accent, as a kind of a gift? Then you'll have paid off your debt, and you'll be able to talk properly with Ethel.'

The Wee Mermannie could hardly contain his excitement at the prospect.

'Ma accent?' he said, wrapping his arms around Karen's neck. 'Och, why did ye no say? That's nae bother at aw. Everybody thinks A speak like an orc onywee.'

Karen agreed that he did sound brutish and aggressive, and that this didn't fit his romantic and peaceful

nature at all. But if The Wee Mermannie blew into a special ball of leaves and gave it to her, that trouble would be behind him.

So The Wee Mermannie did as he was instructed, and ran back to the stables.

‘Ethel! Ethel! I have the most wonderful news! Listen, my love – I can speak like a proper prince!’

Ethel hadn’t even looked up from her careful brushing.

‘Who the blazes are you?’ she asked in her most majestic voice.

‘It’s me, of course!’ exclaimed The Wee Mermannie. ‘The Wee Mermannie! With the bleeding ears! We’ve spent these past days enjoying each other’s company!’

The Princess snorted dismissively.

‘Don’t be ridiculous! That little merman had the most beautiful voice – it was musical and melodious. Even though he was hard to understand, when he spoke I could tell he had the soul of a poet. Quite unlike you, you deceitful wretch!’

Well. Now The Wee Mermannie could understand Princess Ethel completely, and it was breaking his heart. And there was no need for her to raise her voice like that! His ears were beginning to hurt again. And just when it seemed his misery couldn’t deepen any further, a young man with long, shiny black locks and the darkest black eyes rushed into the stables.

‘Yer Highness! A heard a right stooshie goin on – is this bawheid botherin ye?’

‘Why, yes he is! And he is impersonating one of your honourable countrymen – quite atrociously, I should add. Remove him from my sight as once!’

And Karen the shape-shifting kelpie smiled to herself as she dragged The Wee Mermannie from the premises.

Thereafter, The Wee Mermannie took to spending each day and night lying moribund in The Dark Forest. The rainiest, greyest days came to be his favourites. One day, as he sat on the bank, he was perversely and ruefully happy to see the water darkened by a long, ominous shadow that seemed to reflect the conditions of his life.

Well! Imagine his surprise as a small head broke the surface, followed by a long, long neck.

‘Nessie!’ he cried. ‘What are you doing here!’

‘I’m a magical sea creature, ye great gowk!’ Nessie explained. ‘I could feel you were in a bad way, and thought ye could use a wee bit of company.’

‘Well, of course! But *how* did you get here?’

‘I got a taxi.’

The Wee Mermannie boggled.

‘But how was there enough room? And how did you pay for it?’

‘Easy. It wis one of they taxis with the three seats facing the two jump seats. And how hard would you push a twenty-five tonne magical sea monster for a cab fare? Never mind that, though. Did ye find that pretty landmaid you were looking for? And why are ye talking so funny?’

The Wee Mermannie told Nessie his tale of woe, and as befits an ancient sea monster, she had wisdom to offer. He should just be himself, she told him, and now that he could speak to Princess Ethel plainly, he should explain to her that any missteps he had made were motivated by his love for her. Even though The Wee Mermannie thought that sounded very frightening, by the time he waved Nessie off again in her cab, he was much encouraged. He set himself on heading to the palace in the morning to act on Nessie’s advice.

But the next day, The Wee Mermannie was woken early by a sound that plunged him back into the deepest, darkest despair. The court crier could be heard clearly, even deep in the woods.

‘Hear ye! Oyez! Hear ye the joyful news! Our beloved Princess is to be betrothed to The Noble Kieran! Join us in our rejoicing! Oyez!’

Quite taken aback by the speed and suddenness of this courtship, The Wee Mermannie cried bitter, salty tears.

‘If only Karen was here,’ he thought. ‘She could take me back to The Loch and turn me back into a wee mermannie!’

As he was rolling these dark thoughts around in his mind that night, the dark young man who had ejected him from the stables strode into the forest.

‘Get lost,’ The Wee Mermannie muttered, defeated.

‘But A thought ye wanted tae see me,’ The Noble Kieran replied, tossing his black hair in what The Wee Mermannie thought was an obnoxiously arrogant fashion. Then he gasped as those black tresses tumbled down into a long, black body with a long dark tail and four powerful legs.

‘Karen!’ The Wee Mermannie cried. ‘Is that you?’

‘Aye, it is. A’ve come tae see ye because A need tae call in a favour. Remember, from when A helped ye change yer shape? Ye see, A thought it wid be fun tae take Princess Ethel from ye. And tae be fair, it was hilarious, wasn’t it? But, for the love of the centaurs, she’s annoying. All niceness and grace and ugly human feet!

‘And now she’s gone aheid an had our nuptials announced, there’s nae backin out. But if you just kill her for me, A’ll be your escape steed. Ye can change back intae a mermannie and hide from the world while ye live out yer mercifully short span.’

In his deep dolour, The Wee Mermannie forgot Nessie’s wise counsel. He realised he should have just stayed at home in The Loch, never knowing that someone as lovely as Princess Ethel could exist, nor knowing that she wouldn’t want to know him because he was such a fraud. Now he had to face the thought of her spending her life with Keiran or someone else who wasn’t The Wee Mermannie. And living through a full threescore years and ten of watching his countrymen fail in the World Cup. What a mug!

So Karen presented The Wee Mermannie with a dagger magicked out of her dark hair. The blade was as cold and hard and black and brittle as obsidian and reflected The Wee Mermannie’s heart perfectly as he boosted himself up onto Karen’s back.

Just outside the view of the palace walls, Karen transformed back into Kieran, to escort The Wee Mermannie past the palace guards and up to Princess Ethel’s chamber. Kieran waited at the door. And waited. And waited some more. He paced the hallway. Finally, he strode into the chamber to find out what was going on – The Wee Mermannie and Princess Ethel sitting on the bed, chatting affectionately!

‘Oh, hello, Karen,’ said The Wee Mermannie. ‘Sorry to keep you. Ethel and I have been comparing notes. We’ve

both been terribly rash, and we've missed each other's company very much. What's more, we've decided that nobody needs to die, and that you should be banished from this palace and these islands forever.'

'Cursed humans! Infernal mermen!' Karen brayed, even in her human form. 'I was about to have this palace for myself. Well, as we kelpies always say – If you want a murder done properly, you've got to do it yourself.'

'Not another step,' The Wee Mermannie warned, wielding the pitch-dark dagger.

'You can't kill me,' Karen laughed. 'My magic dies with me, and you'll be left a flapping, landlocked fool. A fish out of water! You and this flibbertigibbet won't understand a word each other say.'

Princess Ethel had had quite enough of this, and pulled herself up to the fullest extent of her regal resplendence.

'That's where you're wrong, Kieran! Or Karen or Kevin or Kathy or Kenny or Kelly or whatever it is you're calling yourself today, you big fraud. It's not important how people talk, or whether they have two long, lithe legs or a powerful tail. It's what's in their hearts that matters. We'll work at understanding each other and being good to each other. My Wee Mermannie has told me he's happy to stay in the moat, but I'm happy to live by the Lochside and swim every day, too.'

'And that's what we're going to do!' The Wee Mermannie chimed in.

Kieran (or Karen or whatever) was furious, and advanced on the couple.

'You weak fools!' he spat contemptuously. 'Soppy sentimental simpletons!'

And those were the kelpie's last words, as she strode onto the dagger that The Wee Mermannie was holding in self-defence. The brittle obsidian broke into a million shards as it entered Karen's cold, hard heart, and when she died the magical dagger disappeared into nothingness. Which was handy, because that meant there was no evidence of the involuntary manslaughter The Wee Mermannie had inadvertently committed. He and the beautiful Ethel were able to travel north to The Loch quite unmolested. After they arrived, they were able to gambol and frolic in the water with their good friend Nessie and their lovely raft of little children who were cute like cute little otters.

And they all lived happily ever after.