

Silkies

A man named Eran once lived by himself in a town beside the sea. His parents were dead, and he lived alone. Eran was a boatbuilder, and a fine craftsman. He was proud of his skill in his work, but he was a lonely man. The people of the town loved strange stories about mermaids and silkies, the seals that take human shape, and how to catch them and defeat their tricks, but Eran liked to think of himself as a practical fellow who was too intelligent to pay attention to such nonsense. Often, where the talk turned to such topics, he would leave his friends and walk by himself along the shore. Eran loved the sound and smell of the sea.

One evening, he was strolling on the beach in his favorite cove. It was the best time of day. The cliffs behind the beach held the light of the sun as it sank to the horizon, so that the air seemed filled with golden light, and a soft breeze blew from the water. The townspeople were all at home having their suppers, and the only sounds were the gentle splash of the waves against the sand, the cry of an occasional gull, and the seals, far off on the distant rocks. Eran was not completely alone, however. On the other side of the cove, facing away from him, a woman was walking. She wore odd brownish-green clothes that hung loosely around her, and the very long black hair that fell down her back was tied with a red ribbon. Eran was curious. The town was large enough that he did not know everyone, even by sight, but he knew everyone who regularly walked alone the beach, and he had never seen such a woman before. As he hurried towards her, there was a sudden gust of wind, and the ribbon blew away from her hair, right towards Eran. He caught it easily, and ran up to return it to her.

But as he came up to her, with the ribbon bunched tightly in his fist, she turned around, and he stuck the ribbon in his pocket and completely forgot about it.

For the woman was the most beautiful he had ever seen, and he fell instantly and utterly in love, even though a moment before he would have said that love at first sight was ridiculous. He could not even have described what it was that made her so beautiful. He only knew that he wanted to have her with him forever, and that he felt that he would die if she would not love him in return. Only she was looking at him as if she felt exactly the same way. She looked as if she were lost, and he were the only guide that could help her.

By nightfall, they were on their way to the church to ask the priest to marry them. Marta, for that was her name, told him that she too had no family, and that her home was far away. She was a wanderer, who had come to that place by chance, but now he would be her home, and she would stay. So they were married, and for ten years they lived peacefully together. Eran worked during the day, and his business prospered, for his boats were steady and quick in the water. Marta collected shellfish, her favorite food, on the beach. Their house was filled with odd and beautiful shells she had found, and although she was often dreamy and absent-minded, and not a careful housekeeper, she was always attentive to her husband and always sweet-tempered. Marta bore two children, a daughter named Elise and a son named Bran, and Elise had some of her mother's beauty, while Bran looked exactly like his father. All of them walked on fine evenings in the cove together. Marta did not make friends with other women in the town, but she always said that her family was enough for her.

Then it happened one day that Eran and Marta were invited to a grand party at the mayor's house. They dressed in their finest clothes. Marta was looking at herself in the mirror, and Eran stood behind her, admiring her loveliness, for she was every bit as beautiful as ever. All at once it occurred to him that she would be even lovelier if there were a spot of color to set off her black hair, and he began to rummage in the dressing table for ornaments. At the back, he saw the red ribbon Marta had worn the day he met her, still crumpled there where he had left it so many years ago. Smoothing it out, he came behind her and tied it into her hair, and as he gazed at her in the mirror he saw a sudden look pass over her face, as if she had just awakened from a long sleep and were not yet sure where she was. In a moment it had passed, and she was smiling at him. That night she was especially tender when she kissed the children goodnight, and whispered the odd promise to them that they would always have the freedom of the sea. At midnight, she told Eran that she had been dancing for too long in a stuffy room, and needed fresh air. She went outside to the terrace, and never came back. The mayor summoned the police, and all night and through the morning the townspeople searched for her, but they found nothing but her shoes, on the sand in the cove. Then people began to say that she must have been a silkie. Anyone but Eran, who had refused to listen to the old tales, would have known. As long as you hold anything that belongs to a silkie maiden, she must love you, but once you give it back to her, she is free again and she will surely return to her own.

You might have expected that Eran would be broken-hearted, but he was not. As soon as Marta was gone, he found that she no longer haunted him. For ten years he had been wildly in love, but now, all at once, he was not. Instead of

pinning for his lost wife, he became a sociable fellow, whose adventure with the woman from the sea gave him a certain standing among the story-tellers in town. None of them could say that he had held a silkie in his arms. He told the story of their first meeting over and over, to his children, to his friends, and to strangers he met in the tavern, and it never lost in the telling. It was not long before he married again, a good ordinary woman who put away all the strange shells and painted watercolors of flowers instead, and who cleaned out all the drawers so that no scrap of ribbon would be forgotten for ten years at a time. She was a good mother to Elise and Bran, and they loved her as they should.

Still, Elise and Bran never forgot their first mother. Because of her, Elise hated the sea, and never walked on the beach anymore. As soon as she was old enough, she moved away to a village far enough inland that gulls did not fly there, and soon married a farmer who had never seen the sea. She never spoke about her mother the silkie, and perhaps it was mere coincidence that her son became a great sailor and explorer. Bran, though, continued to love the shore, and when he was grown up, he used to walk there in the evening as his father had. He did not blame his mother for abandoning him, because he knew that she had only done what her nature demanded, once the enchantment was past. Still, he dreamed often of seeing her again, and in his dreaminess was a solitary young man, as his father had been. He missed her, not the way any boy whose mother has died would miss her, but with a dull ache that was always in his heart.

So, on another quiet evening, when Bran was walking alone in the evening glow, amid the sounds of the waves, the gulls, and the distant seals, when he saw a woman sitting by herself on the rocks at the far end of the cove, a

woman who wore greenish-brown clothes that hung loosely around her, his heart pounded and he ran furiously towards her. She was turned away and he could not see her face. As he came closer, though, he realized that her hair was not deep black, falling down her back, but was brown, and was tucked into a loose chignon under a straw hat. He slowed a little, disappointed. Then she must have heard him approach, for she stood up, and as she turned to face him the breeze seized the little hat and carried it to his hand. And as he caught it, he saw her.

She was nothing like his mother. Not only was her hair a different color, her eyes were different too, and her mouth was a different shape. She was also very young, barely more than a girl. But although she was nothing like his mother, she was the only woman he had ever seen whose beauty matched her mother's. In that instant, he fell hopelessly in love, and he saw the returning look in her eyes. In the next instant, he did the most difficult act of his life: his hand felt as if it were bound where it was and every movement was an unendurable effort, but he slowly lifted the hat and held it out to her, and when she did not move to take it, he pressed it into her fingers until, with a start, she seized it. At that instant, the dreamy look left her eyes, and she gave him a sharp glance as she stuck the hat back on her head, and her mysterious smile turned into an ordinary grin.

He had expected that she would disappear, but she did not. Instead she laughed, and thanked him. A moment later he found himself walking along the beach beside her. He had never been happier or in more pain. He felt as if his heart would break because this time could not go on forever, and because it might have gone on forever if he had been willing to take power over her when chance offered it. But he would not steal her that way, even if it meant he would

have to live without her. Meanwhile she was playing and dancing in the waves, without a care in the world.

Then she began picking up shells for him to admire. Reaching into the water, she gave a little cry: she had cut her hand on a sharp edge of rock. Without even thinking, he pulled a linen handkerchief out of his pocket and wrapped it around the tiny wound, and the moment he let go of it, he was no longer on the beach. He was swimming quickly through the salt water as the evening light poured over him, and he knew that she was beside him. He was in a different body, and although he could not think clearly, he knew that he must have become a seal. Again he was very happy and grieved at once. It was wonderful to be out in the sea, swimming deep under the water, and his love was with him, still beautiful whatever shape she was. He had never enjoyed as much as this. Yet he knew that he did not want to stay this way forever, because this was not his true shape or his true home, and he was afraid that he would never be able to return to the land, where he belonged.

After a little while, though, he suddenly found himself back on the beach, and the girl was sitting next to him on the rocks. His handkerchief was in his hand, wet through and smeared with pink, although he himself was quite dry. The girl reached out and took his hand.

“You see,” she said, “I could not bring myself to hold you, as much as I wanted to, because you chose not to hold me when you could have. I could see that you knew the power that you had, and that you wanted to.” So he told her the story of how his father had caught his silkie mother accidentally, and how the love he felt for his mother had told him that it would be wrong to do the same on purpose. And they too walked up the hill to the town to ask the priest

to marry them, but Bran's wife Phocida never had to dream wistfully as she tried to remember what it had been like to move freely in the sea. Sometimes, too, he joined her and they would swim together out under the wild waves. Whether Bran ever found his mother there, I do not know; but I know that he never felt the terrible ache for her again, because he knew that she had given him the freedom of the sea.