

Little Mermaid

by
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Then.

Rusalka

The heart is like a knife she said.
It will cut you through.
You must cut it out.
You must be like the howl in the wind, the foam on the sea.
You must be nothing.
Or they will find you.

Many, she said,
have set out on this path
and many have stumbled.
She cries no tears.

But I am not afraid.
I have seen the bright lights of Odessa.
I have walked with the doll women who eat air.
I am stronger than iron.
And all of me is still mine.
My fingers have fingertips, my mouth teeth.
I was not found scattered and torn.
I was not the rats' or the crows' feast.

I take the passport,
hold it to my chest,
hold it where my heart is not supposed to be.
I hear the beating in my ears.
But she cannot see.
I have hidden my heart deep.

Safe from the wolves and the bears and the sharks that swim in the black black sea.

Outside, the sound of an engine.

It is time she says.
Are you sure she says.

And I nod my head.

Here you are a princess, she says.
You go to the best clubs with the best men.
You wear the best clothes and the best perfume.
You are washed and dressed.
You are taken care of.
You are bright.
You are loud.
You are seen.
There you will fade to grey,
grey against a grey sky.
Like mist on the marsh on a warm day.
You will be the coffee brewed, the toilet cleaned, the sandwich made.
They will rip the tongue from your mouth.
And there is no turning back.
No I'm so sorry.
No my mind, it has changed.

I am sure I say.
And I am,
because of him.

Before then.

Rusalka

He is different.

He is soft like rain.

I see him first in Odessa amongst the silks and the furs as we stand in the line and they look,

up and down,

up and down.

And he looks up and down

but he is reluctant to choose.

The funny English man, too polite to take what he wants like a Russian would.

And the Russians are laughing.

What kind of big shot businessman is he?

This man who cowers at the sight of beautiful women.

He shakes and he wiggles and he worms but then he understands the kind of men they are.

That this is hook from which he cannot squirm his way free.

He looks in my eyes

and I can feel him drowning so I say,

choose me.

Left alone, I take the lead.

I bend forwards,

I bend backwards,

I lick my fingers

and I show him all the places he could go and all the pleasure he would find and all the pleasure I would show him that he made in me.

He is unmoved.

Like the rocks of the coast.

Like the roots of the trees.
And when he dares to touch,
it is to cover me.

He makes us horrible milky tea.

But there is something in his eyes that is warm and safe like my grandmother's soup
and my heart starts to speak like it hasn't in years
and I tell him about my sisters and the ducks and the mallow on the field and the river and the singing of the railway tracks,
and about my father ...

And even though he cannot understand my words, he knows
and he tells me in his words of a home in a place called Basingstoke
and of its many roundabouts
and heavy clouds.
Of playing football with mates
and of pints in pubs,
and of how he hates his job and his boss
and the field of telecommunications
and how he doesn't understand
how he found himself
in a place like this.

And again I feel him drowning.

So I take his hand
and I promise him
I will take care of everything.
I will scratch myself and bruise myself and make myself bleed.
And they will see how he took me,

how he marked me,
how he hobbled me and split me in two.
And then they will know it is a real man,
this man they do business with.

He listens,
he cries
and he holds me very tight,
and I sleep and still he holds me.
And in the morning he is gone.

After then.

Rusalka

The sun does not shine here.

The streets are wet
and half dark.

In the orange light of night, they swarm with the people who wobble and puke.

This is his world,
not mine.

Each step is strangeness
and hurt.

There are daggers underfoot, in people's looks, in the words that are sharp and thin.

But I am learning to walk in it,
in this dry world,
learning winding ways to what I want,
learning politeness.

All day in the kitchen, it is cut bread, cucumber, tuna mayonnaise, cut bread, cucumber, tuna mayonnaise.
Sometimes it is cut bread, tomato, cheese.
Mostly it is cut bread, cucumber, tuna mayonnaise.
It is like torture.

But I serve his sandwich with a smile.
I relish
the touch of his hand as he pays,
the sweet stab of separation as he turns
to walk away.

He calls me blondie.
I am his favourite sandwich serving girl,
he says.
But he does not know me.
And I do not know myself,
this pale ghost in the mirror
staring
staring at me.

At night, I wait for him.
Follow him home,
press my feet into his footprints.
Watch outside his windows
until the lights go out.
Watch
and wait for him to see.
I do not count the shadows.
Both him and I,
I think,
are sleeping lonely.

And this I think
as the nights turn into days,
and the days to weeks
and the weeks to months
and still he does not know me.

Before now.

Rusalka

The key he leaves beneath the mat.
It is a sign or a gift.
I have been tested
and found true.

In the hall,
the ticking of the clock counts out spaces of silence.
The air is sweet
with him
and I breathe it in.

I do not see the second coat upon the stand, the second bag, the second shoes in the rack.
I see only the distance between two worlds closing.
The possibility of impossibility.

I am worn and torn with time spent,
heavy with hope.
My heart hangs on tender hooks.
The ascent is steep
but my step on the stairs is light.
I float.
There is no weight that can sink me.
Something stirs
deep deep inside.
What was empty is now soul-full.
And I rise
and rise.

I float
but I have forgotten the lessons that I learnt far away in the city by the sea
where lights are bright
and the doll women eat air.
I have forgotten
that the world is iron and fur.
I have forgotten
the cry of the wolf
and the roar of the bear,
but now their echoes
reach me.

There are two
in the bed.
Two
not one.

Her skin
is loose on the bone,
her hair
stained sackcloth.
She is
not beautiful.
If she opened her eyes they would be
dull as dust.
But he sleeps with his arms clasped tight around her, her arms clasped tight around him.
You cannot see where one starts and the other begins.
They are welded.
There is no space between.
No gap to widen.

No place to lever in.

The heart is like a knife she said.
It will cut you through.
You must cut it out.

I watch his chest rise
and fall,
like the waves.
I observe
his being.

And I take the knife from my heart and I do it.

In the stillness, the years clear like the breath on a mirror.
I stand in the grass on the edge of the meadow and listen to the singing of the railway tracks
to its siren song of places far away,
of the new and the fast and the thrill.

Then I turn my back and I walk away,
walk back through the fields to my father's arms and my sisters' laughter.

Far away there are treasures untold,
and there is blood,
but it cannot reach me.

I am the howl in the wind, the foam on the sea.
I am nothing.

I am free.