The sea is a crazy whore. That's what Granny Crimson always said, in the village where I was born. Stay on land, she said, stay to shore, farm and grow and provide for your families, eh, lads. You'll get nowt from that strumpet Ocean, na, na, she'll take everything you have, life and riches and beauty, and leave you barren and dead, washed up broken on the rocks, a thing for the crabs to eat. She'll do that every time, the sea will. Stay to shore, lads, and sow your seed here, on good sweet earth and in good sweet women, true sweethearts and honest wives.

Granny Crimson was no one's granny. She was our village madwoman, a small bent hag as crazed as she said the sea was. We all knew her story. On a warm spring morning when she was still young and beautiful, her own true sweetheart had taken the road south out of our village and set sail from the great city at the end of that road. Because he had never returned, she had never loved again, or married, or birthed babes. She had grown old long before her time, gray-haired and black-hearted and twisted around the kernel of her grief, not knowing if James was dead or had found another, knowing only that he had stopped sending letters and never come back.

One of his shipmates had come back instead, a stranger knocking at her door on a bitter winter's dusk ten years after James had kissed her goodbye. The stranger, Robert, told her that he had been a friend of James'. He asked if he could come inside.

They had been whaling in the northernmost seas, Robert said, standing stiff and shivering in front of Granny Crimson's hearth. She had gathered her wits enough to offer him a seat, but he refused it. Hearing the story so many years later, we all wondered what he must have made of her, already so different from the lovely maiden James had courted.

The hold was almost full of oil, Robert said; soon they would have turned homeward again, but a great storm had blown them off course, to a scoured island surrounded by jagged rocks, and from those rocks came singing, plaintive and powerful—lullabies and promises of heart's delight. No one could see the singers, but most of the men jumped from the deck, following their yearnings, and drowned.

"I was James' friend," Robert said. "He talked of you often, aye, and how he planned to marry you, too. I knew he would have wanted me to come see you, to tell you what happened. I'm sorry it took me so long."

"And you?' Granny raged at him. "They all jumped but you, you the only one pure enough to resist the salt strumpets! Aye, you're a monk, I suppose?" She cursed him, drove him out. Her mind shattered that night. She could, we all thought, have dealt with James' death by illness or accident; she could even have survived the news that he had taken another woman to wife. As much as she'd mourned him, as much as she'd already shrunk into the knotted creature of my childhood, those normal fates might finally have offered healing. But her James had been snatched from her by false voices, an ending that held no peace.

And so on quiet spring nights, when the road glowed in moonlight and the young men told fantastic sea stories and gazed longingly south, Granny Crimson told anyone who would listen about the horrible whore who had ruined her life, that salt strumpet with her wanton waves.

I never saw her cry, not once. Back then, I did not pity her. I scoffed at her along with the young men yearning for the sea, and dreamed with them, too, and dared tell no one but Gareth and his mother Jenny about any of it. Of all the folk in our village, only

Gareth and Jenny never told me that I must grow into a good woman and marry and raise babies. In my thirteenth year, when I grew into a thin woman with big feet and no bosom and elbows as awkward as a boy's, only Gareth never mocked me, and only Jenny ever told me I was beautiful.

She was the village wisewoman. Some called her a witch, but since everyone went to her for herbs and poultices, for fortunes and charms and comfort—and since she was far too prudent to twist her knowledge into gossip—no harm befell her. She had midwived me and attended my mother's deathbed, when I was still a baby. Whenever my father came home raging with ale, it was Jenny I ran to for supper and a quiet place to sleep. On the good nights, when only she and Gareth were there, I crawled into her lap and pretended she was my mother.

"Why can't I stay here?" I often asked her.

"Why, you can, child. You're staying here now, aren't you?"

"Always. I mean stay here forever. Why can't I do that?"

"Because no one ever stays anywhere forever, except the grave."

"Oh, you *know* what I mean! Jenny, why do you always act as if you don't understand me? I'm asking you plain questions, not riddles!"

She always sighed, when I got into those moods—which I did at least once every evening I spent with her—and stroked my hair, and looked sad. "Yes, I know you're asking me plain questions, and I'm answering them as plainly as I can. Your father's house isn't forever either, child. When he grows too crazed for comfort you can come here, and when you're older you can go somewhere else, as I know you dream of doing."

"When I'm *older*! That's years and years from now—"

“Not hardly that long. Why, you’re older now than you were—”

“Before I spoke. Yes, all right, I know, but I’m not old enough to go to sea and I couldn’t even if I were, because I’m a girl. That’s not what I’m talking about. I want to live here now, all the time, Jenny. Why can’t I? Why can’t you be my mother , and Gareth my brother? You found him and took him in; everyone knows that, but you’re still his mother. So why can’t you take me in?”

“Because to be your mother I would have to marry your father, child, which nothing on earth could convince me to do. And to take you in while he lives I would have to take you away from him, which would be a terrible thing, a hateful, hurtful thing, after everything else he’s lost. And because if Gareth was your brother you might find it harder to be his friend, and he needs you as a friend, and you him. No, Peg. You may use this as your haven as often as you wish, but it is not your home. Now go dream with Gareth, child, while I get supper. That will make you happy for a little while.”

There was no asking her questions when she spoke like that, firm and decided, with no playfulness or riddling at all. Sometimes I tried to talk to Gareth about what she meant, although his answers made me no happier than hers did.

“She says I wouldn’t be your friend anymore, but of course I would! I’ll always be your friend.”

“Brothers and sisters fight. That’s what she means. Like Luke and Lizbeth, always pulling each other’s hair and that. Quarreling.”

“I’d never quarrel with you, Gareth!”

“You’re quarreling now, aren’t you?”

"Not like Luke and Lizbeth! And why does she care so much about my father? All he ever does is get drunk. Doesn't she love me more than him? How could anyone want to live with him?"

"Aye, she loves you. That's why. I asked her once. She said it was bad enough you'd lost a mother; she didn't want you to throw away a father before you knew better."

"He's throwing himself away."

Gareth shrugged. "I'm just telling you what she said. Anyway, if I had a father I'd keep him, drunk or not. You're lucky to have a father."

"*You're* lucky to have a mother!"

"You get more care from my mother than I get from your father."

"No one gets anything from my father!"

He laughed. "Na, Peg. You're quarreling again. And I've seen him be gentle with you. He'll miss you, when we go to sea. I have no father who'll miss me."

My yearning for escape was a thorn in my heart. "I can't go to sea, Gareth. I'm a girl."

"Na, don't talk like that! You've heard the ballads of girls who become drummers or cabin boys."

"Those are only songs. And anyway, even in the songs they always run away to be with their sweethearts, and I don't want a sweetheart. Sweethearts are for people like Lizbeth." Lizbeth was the prettiest girl in the village, and she knew it. All the boys mooned over her, even Gareth, who usually had more sense. He said he didn't, but I could tell he did. Whenever he saw her his eyes became yearning and silly.

“They’re true songs, though. I’ve heard sailors who come through here tell stories like that.”

“Oh, aye! And stories of mermaids and magic fish and great beasts with golden scales who rise up out of the ocean!”

“And treasure,” Gareth said with a sigh. “And pirates. And whirlwinds that swallow whole ships. And islands so beautiful no one sickens there, or dies.” And we’d be off, dreaming together, telling each other tales even wilder than the ones told by the infrequent travelers who graced our road. We passed whole evenings telling each other tales. Those were the good nights at Jenny’s house.

On the bad ones, Granny Crimson was there, too. She had lost her own house to fire, not long after Robert came. Because she was our village madwoman, she belonged to all of us, and everyone took turns caring for her. In the warm seasons she stayed in barns and haylofts, sleeping under borrowed blankets and eating scraps, as the pigs and dogs did. But in the winter she would have frozen and died outdoors, and everyone knew it; in the winter she had to come inside. In the winter, when it came to actually taking Granny Crimson into a parlor or kitchen, most of the village wives’ charity froze as hard as the water in their basins. Jenny and Father Timothy, our priest, were the only ones who would help her then, and on any cold or wet or windy night she could be found in one or another of their houses.

Those were some of the worst hours of my life, I think, those bitter winter dusks when my father came home screaming and stinking of ale, when I ran to Jenny for comfort only to find Granny Crimson there, sitting by the fire, rocking while she raved about the wickedness of the wanton sea that seduced young men away from their

sweethearts and killed them. The sea she railed against was the only dream I had. I had not seen it, then, and believed I never would, because I was a girl who must stay at home. On nights like that, the warm south seas of the stories seemed more impossible than magic and miracles, and I despaired that anything in my life would ever be less miserable than it was then.

Jenny had her hands full tending to Granny Crimson on those nights, trying to coax sane conversation from her, trying to interest her in spinning or knitting or kneading dough, anything to help her forget for a moment the bitter theme of her life. And so it fell to Gareth to comfort me as best he could.

"You mustn't listen to her, Peg. She's a crazy old woman, and everyone knows it. Why, what does she know of the ocean? She's neither seen nor sailed on it."

"Neither have we."

"Oh, Peg, but we've met people who have! That peddler with the shells, last month, and the fellow just off a whaler, the month before that, and Lizbeth says that her uncle's best friend—"

"Married a mermaid," I said savagely. Damn Lizbeth, who would always be happy staying in the village, raising babies and trading tales! "How do we know any of it's true? It could all be just a peddler's pack of lies."

He shook his head impatiently. "You *saw* the shells! You held them to your ear and heard the sea! Do you doubt that?"

I closed my eyes against stinging tears. I had been entranced by the whorled shapes of the shells, smitten with their delicate colors and their strange music. But I could not afford to buy them, not even one, and the peddler had taken them away again. That

chilly afternoon when I stood in the road by the stubble of our wheat field, holding a shell to my ear, was as close to the sea as I would ever get.

I felt Gareth's hand on my shoulder and shrugged it away. I hated crying. Crying was what girls did when they stayed at home.

"I'm sorry I couldn't buy you a shell, Peg. I wanted to."

"No one could have bought them. They were dearer than gold or jewels or—or blood." Gareth touched my hand and I said, "Stop it. Save that silliness for Lizbeth."

"All right," he said quietly, and took his hand away. "If you want me to, I will."

I wiped away more traitorous tears and said, "Don't be like that."

"I'm only being the same way you are."

The hurt in his voice stung me as much as the disappearing shells had, although I wouldn't have admitted it then, to him or to myself. I sniffled and said stiffly, "I'm sorry, Gareth. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I didn't. It's just—if we're sweethearts you'll go to sea, and I'll stay here and cry myself to sleep every night, and then you'll die and I'll turn into Granny Crimson."

"Oh," he said with a laugh, sounding cheerful again. "And if we aren't sweethearts, you won't miss me at all?"

"What? No, that's not—"

"Peg, listen to me. You'll never turn into Granny Crimson. You have too much sense, even if I did die, and I have no intention of dying. People come back from the sea all the time, or how would we be able to hold shells and listen to whaling stories? The sea kills some, but so do bucking horses and burning barns and lightning. Granny Crimson's just a daft old woman. Why does she frighten you so?"

Because she reminded me of my father, and of the parts of my father I saw in myself, what I felt I was doomed to become. But that fear ran too deep for me to speak, lest it come true. “When you go,” I said instead, “will you promise to come back?” The sailor lads in the ballads always promised, and most of them indeed returned, even if only as ghosts or after so many years that their sweethearts no longer knew them. But this was no song. This was cold, bitter life.

“We’ll go together,” said Gareth, “and your father will cry his heart out with missing you, and when we come back his joy will make him a better man, and we’ll build him a beautiful house with our riches from the voyage.”

“And we’ll live happily ever after,” I said, as the wind howled around the chimney and Granny Crimson howled in front of the hearth and my heart howled within me. It occurred to me, on such evenings, that Gareth’s ability to flee into dreams was second only to my father’s. Of course I would choose such a fool as my best friend, aye, and probably fall in love with him, too, and pine away to my own death when he perished on the waves. It was my fate.

Whether my evenings with Jenny and Gareth were full of dreams or nightmares, the warmth of our fantastical south seas or the chill of Granny Crimson’s grief, the following mornings were always the same. Without fail, my father woke up sick and groaning, remembering nothing of his ravings from the night before, and without fail he came to Jenny for tea to settle his stomach. He always seemed surprised to find me there.

“Peg,” he’d say, blinking at me with bleary eyes, one heavy hand reaching to tousle my hair, “what’s my little mouse doing here, eh? You were up before me this morning, and thought to come here and bring me home my tea?”

“She came here last night,” Jenny always said, mildly enough, and always my father’s eyes flashed. I took that look for anger, then; only later did I realize it was fear and shame. For years I thought Jenny had put a charm on him, a charm to protect me, because he never said anything else about where I had spent the night, or punished me for fleeing his tantrums.

“Did she?” he always said instead. “And what medicine have you for my gut, Jenny?”

“An end to ale,” she’d answer, and hand him his tea. And then they’d discuss crops or weather or how many of the mares had foaled, and he’d take me back home with him and I’d help him clean the barn and tend to the animals; I’d cook and bake and wash, and he’d help me—oh, he worked, I can’t say otherwise—until the dark came. And always after dark he took his lantern and went to the inn, and always he came back howling, tossing chairs in his rage. And so I spent the days with my father, and the nights with Jenny and Gareth.

So went the years until I came to be fifteen. Lizbeth, grown luscious, was courted by ceaseless suitors. I was pole-thin, brown, calloused from work, a girl who wore trousers in the fields and wanted no lovers, only the sea wind in her hair. My body’s longings were urgent, but I had hands practiced at milking cows and doing dishes, and I set them to my pleasure as surely as my toil. Gareth confessed once, blushing, that he did

the same. “For Jenny says it’s rolling in the hay gets the girls with child, and how could I make some girl a mother and leave her behind?”

He tried to kiss me, several times, but I’d not allow it. I dreamed of him, often and vividly, but not as often as I dreamt of the sea. “If I must stay behind,” I told him one evening in early autumn as we fed the horses, “that will only make it worse, and if I go with you—well, then, it wouldn’t do. I must act the part of a man. We must be comrades, Gareth, not sweethearts.”

“Jenny says they’re not as different as people think.”

“Oh, aye, and everyone *else* says that Jenny isn’t married because she refuses to flirt, because she speaks her mind too plainly.”

“They’re scared of how much she knows,” he said, and smiled. “She knows you’re going to sea, Peg. She knew before I did. She told me when we were wee bairns that you and I would go to sea together. She dreamt it.”

My heart jumped. “Oh, aye. And why tell me this now?”

“Because I’m leaving soon, Peg. Next week. And we must get ready.”

The world tilted as if I were already on a ship, and my ears rang. “Next week? So soon? You never said—”

“I’m saying now, Peg, and when’s the last time you looked so happy?”

“Do you understand what it means?” Jenny said. “You must let no one know you’re a woman. No one at all except Gareth, who already knows. Do you hear me? And Gareth, you must treat her only as your friend, and you must never, ever tell anyone else her secret.”

“Aye,” Gareth said, laughing, “or the captain will propose marriage to her, as happens in all the ballads, and we know our Peg will never marry.”

“The captain might do a great deal worse than that, and so might his men.”

“They would be so angry?” Gareth said, frowning.

“They would be so lustful,” Jenny said bluntly. “Women on land die at the hands of sailors, when they come ashore crazed from months without whores or sweethearts. You must both promise me upon your parents’ graves to hide Peg’s sex as if your lives depended upon it, which they may.”

“My sex is not so difficult to hide,” I said quietly. I had as few curves as the broom I used to sweep my father’s kitchen; I would never look like Lizbeth.

“It may be more difficult than you think. A ship is much smaller than this village, child, and how shy can sailors be about their bodies? They mustn’t see your breasts, Peg, and you mustn’t piss or shit when anyone is watching, and you must hide from everyone your monthly bleeding, and you must pretend to shave every day. If you’re wise, you’ll take a northern voyage where everyone goes about bundled in furs to the nose.”

“We wanted warmth,” I said. “The south seas.”

“Where the sailors surely strip to the waist,” Jenny said, “and you would be done for.”

“We could say she—he—has an old war wound and is shy about showing it,” Gareth put in.

Jenny snorted. “And who’s to say sailors don’t brandish their war wounds as eagerly as young girls show off their ribbons at a fair? Better to avoid curiosity than to excite it.”

“Why not just make me a man?” I asked impatiently. “You’re a witch. You can do that, can’t you?”

Jenny went very still before she spoke. “I do not know if I am a witch, and if you love me you will not bandy that word about, Margaret. I know some things about herbs and simples; I know what plants can do for the body, and for the heart, and sometimes I can see a little way into the future, as you can see the next signpost on a foggy road. But I have no charms of power, nor do I want them. Do you understand me?”

“No,” I said. “You cured our pigs when they were ill; that’s power. You knew I’d go to sea with Gareth before I did; that’s power. When Widow Brown nearly died of a broken heart you made her live again; that’s power—”

“Power to heal, to make things how they should be, how God wants them to be, child. That is how I use my gifts, and that is why Father Timothy and I are friends, and why I have not been stoned or burned or drowned. I have no charms for falseness, nor would I use them if I did. I do not deal in disguises; that is the Devil’s work. God meant you to be a woman, and a woman you will stay.”

“An’ she were meant to be a woman, she wouldna have this lust for the sea,” a voice said behind us. I turned. It was Granny Crimson, who had come in while were arguing. I did not know how long she had been there.

I had thought myself safe from her at least until the first hard frost. “Why are you here, Granny? You can sleep in a loft tonight, can’t you? It’s warm enough.”

“Peg,” Jenny said with a frown, “don’t be unkind. Granny—”

“Have meself a cough,” Granny Crimson said. “Came for some o’ your special chest tea, and company, and talk. Wrong with that?“

“Nothing,” Jenny said. “But you should not eavesdrop.”

Granny Crimson sniffed “In this village? Everyone eavesdrops. Give her the boy-charm, Jenny. Ye can’t keep her from going. Give her the boy-charm to keep her alive on the ship, if not on the sea.”

“She is no boy,” Jenny said evenly. “She is a woman.”

“Oh, child, we’re all both things, don’t you know that? Some more than t’other. That Lizbeth, she’s nearly all girl, and her brother nearly all boy, aye, they divided it evenly. This Gareth, bless ’im, has a touch of the lass in ’im, what makes him so gentle and kind. And Peggy’s got a right healthy dose of boy, aye, keeps her searching the horizon. No wickedness to let it out. More wickedness to keep it under. Let the sailors see that side of ’er, as we see this.”

“You ask me to deceive,” Jenny said. She suddenly looked very tired.

“Deceive? Is it deceit to help her so she’ll not be raped or killed? What foolishness!”

“I thought you hated the sea,” I said, staring in wonder. I hadn’t thought her capable of conversation, let alone sense.

“An’ so I do,” said Granny Crimson, “an’ always will. What care you for my feelings? No more than he did, who left me so long ago, although he said he loved me. You two have never lied about that, at least. Let them go, Jenny. Give her the boy-charm and send them to their doom, like those that went before.”

I had expected the boy-charm to be some foul concoction, a mixture of noxious herbs and dried bits of dead animal, but to my mingled relief and disappointment it was only a

small leather pouch, drab and musty, that hung about my neck on a strong braided cord.

"You must always keep it on," Jenny said, dropping the thing over my head.

"That should be easy enough. Sailors are a superstitious lot, or so I hear; tell them it's a good-luck token, and you'll be right enough."

"Don't you have to *say* something?" I asked her. I had imagined an incantation or ritual, chanting and candles.

Jenny sighed. "No, Peg, although I will if you want me to." She waved her fingers. "Poof, you're a boy. Is that better?"

"No," I said. "I feel just the same." I examined my arms, my hands. Nothing had changed. I was no hairier or stronger or fiercer than before. "Do I *look* different?" I asked Gareth.

"You look like a wooden puppet," Gareth said with a laugh, "twirling to try to see yourself."

Jenny nodded. "Stop twitching, Peg. You look the same to me, but I know you too well. The charm works on strangers, not on friends."

"If I don't feel any different, how can I know if it's working?"

Granny Crimson shook her head impatiently. "Na, child, it's not to change you. It just makes folk see the boy-part that's already there, like I said. Makes 'em think that's the whole of it, as simple folk always do."

"What will I call her?" Gareth asked.

"Him," Jenny said, frowning.

"No—I mean—Peg, what's your name?"

"Her name's Will," Granny Crimson said, and for a moment I almost thought I saw a smile. "She has a stout will, this one does, and she will do it her way or not at all. William Stout, eh, lad?"

"Aye," I said, and wondered if I sounded like a man.

And so I became William Stout. We set off not an hour after that, following the road south, our packs on our backs. I had long known that men's clothing was more comfortable than women's, and it was a joyous thing to wear it without apology or excuse, fearing no pointing fingers.

We walked five miles that day, and a carter drove us another five, and by nightfall we had reached a little inn in a town neither of us had ever seen. Now ten miles seems like nothing to me, but then it was farther than I had ever gone or thought to go, and when the innkeeper accepted me as a journeyman without challenge I could have crowed for joy. That was the only reason we spent some of our meager store of money there, to test my new name.

Thereafter, as we journeyed further south, we slept as Granny Crimson did during the warm weather, in haylofts and by the sides of roads. Gareth coached me on men's ways, and I learned to swagger and to curse and even to flirt with maids on their way to market. I never did learn to piss by the side of the road; I was too afraid of being discovered, although Gareth offered to carve a wooden funnel in the shape of a prick for me.

"You'll need it on shipboard," he warned me, and I told him that maybe on shipboard I would, but on the road I preferred to learn to hold my bladder, thank you. He

began carving the prick for me anyway, and it became a great joke between us. He told me that mine would be larger than his, and I said, aye, but where would I put it when I didn't need it, and what would I do with it when the wood began to reek of piss? "Why, you'll stow it in your pants and jump in the sea to clean it when it smells," he told me cheerfully, "the same as sailors do with their real ones."

And so we went on, blithe and fearless, true comrades. The weather was glorious, as if the very season blessed our adventure, and by the time we reached the Great Port I was as brown and coarse and unwashed a journeyman as you'd ever hope to meet.

The port! What a mass of filth and brawl and humanity that city is, as dirty and snarled and reeking as a tangled fishing net. The towns we saw had been growing ever larger as we traveled south, but none of them had prepared me for the city. Too much of what I saw there saddened me: drunks lying in the streets, and canker-ridden whores leaning against lightpoles for strength, poor things, and horses beaten merely for being weary of their work, as who wouldn't be in that festering place? The cityfolk I saw made my father, with all his strange moods, seem like a simple man. Gareth and I felt simple there, too, simple and frightened and alone, for all we'd been happy on the road.

We spent two weeks there before finding berths on the good ship *Charity*, and in those two weeks I think I grew older than I had in the previous two years. Whatever the boy-charm did to disguise me as a rough and ready man, the city and its docks did more. That place taught me to love the sea more than ever my girlhood dreams did.

The sea is not a whore, for she is free and joyous, but she *is* a woman. She obeys the moon, as women do, and her depths contain both treasures and horrors, and men try to bend her to their will and rarely succeed, no matter how much money they spend in the

attempt. The sea does as she wishes, and anyone who would be her lover must be her partner, not her master.

Ships are women, too, but far tamer. The *Charity* was her own little world, smaller by far than our village. I learned to love her confines as much as I'd hated those of home, for on shipboard I could never forget the immensity that surrounded us, and that would kill us in minutes without the fragile shelter of decks and sails. I learned to love the sound of wind in the rigging, the slap of waves against the hull; I learned to love climbing the swaying mast, for from its heights I could look out on the ocean and on the horizon, those two vast powers from which the crow's nest kept me safe, as it did from the tiny deck below.

I learned all manner of shipboard chores. I swabbed decks and spliced rope and mended sails, patched the hull and painted the railings, peeled potatoes and chopped onions, and never complained at the drudgery. I grew browner even than I had on the road, and strong and happy and free.

And safe. The other sailors were far more modest than Jenny had feared, and avoided the sight of my body as I avoided the sight of theirs. They were kind, hard-working men: Tom Kincaid, the cook, who whistled jigs and always smelled of grease, and Jack Simpson, simple Jack who was afraid of the dark and who didn't know many words, but who cried when the ship's cat Mabel lost part of an ear to a rat—although she won the battle—and who nursed her back to health again until she was scarcely good for ratting, wishing only to tag about after him wherever he went. And Gully O'Shaughnessy, who taught me twenty different kinds of knots and whittled whenever he had free time. He carved wood or cork or bone, anything to hand; he made animals and

tiny ships and clever boxes, and always he talked of his sweetheart Fiona back home, how when he'd grown rich from voyaging, he'd go back and marry her. And always when he said so, I thought of Granny Crimson, and hoped Gully's tale might end happily.

There were many others even among the common sailors, let alone the officers. But those three, with Gareth, were the ones I came to love, and they were the ones, at last, who taught me the most. I learned more from them than from all the foreign wonders I had left home to seek: silks of every shade and texture, pungent spices, trees and fruit and flowers in colors I could not have imagined, and seas turned every color too, under foreign skies. Without my companions, all those marvels would soon enough have grown dull, and without them I would not have weathered that stranger, sadder wonder at the end.

The world we made together is gone now. Silk and cinnamon do not bring it back to me as clearly as the smell of potatoes frying with onions, or the purr of a cat, or the feel of a knot beneath my fingers. And that in itself is proof of how the voyage changed me, who set out only wanting to see anything new and different.

There is one evening I think of often. Gareth and I had helped Tom peel potatoes and wash pots afterwards, and he had given us some extra bread, and we had carried it up on deck, to sit with Gully as he whittled in the warm, soft air. Jack was there, too, splicing line as notch-eared Mabel purred in his lap. It was a breezy night with a nearly full moon, the blazing star-road stretched across the sky above us. We were off the coast of the hot southern lands, as far from home, we thought, as we would get. Soon we would

turn around and begin heading north, stopping in ports along the way for water, for trade and news and the occasional precious piece of mail.

Gully was carving a piece of ivory he'd bought at our last port. "What are you making?" I asked.

"A rose," he said, and showed me his work, the pale petals emerging from the bone as if they truly grew there. "A flower to send to Fiona, to show her I love her." His voice was rough, and he coughed, a rumble in his throat and chest. A malady had been sweeping the ship, a nasty thing of phlegm and sneezes, for all we were in a hot climate.

"Shall I help you write another letter to her?" Gareth asked. Gully couldn't read; nor could many of the other men on board. Nor would Gareth and I have been able to, maybe, if Jenny hadn't taught us. My father had asked her once why a woman needed to read, and she'd said, "To go places other than home, when she's stuck in the house caring for the likes of you, Vincent." And he'd laughed, because her own voice had been laughing and kind, and he had said nothing about my reading after that.

Gareth and I were both in demand among the other sailors. In what free time we had, we did a brisk trade writing letters in exchange for extra bits of food, or a coin or two, or simply goodwill. And in truth I'd have done that work for nothing; it was a blessing to hear the men's voices soften as they composed messages for parents and wives and sweethearts, children, neighbors. "I love you," they said. "I miss you." And, even at the farthest point of our voyage, always they said, "I'll be home soon, as soon as I can. Wait for me."

Gareth and I had both helped Gully write letters to Fiona. You'd have thought she was a goddess, the way he praised her golden hair and blue eyes. We noticed, though,

that he shared no memories of things they'd done together, nor of talks they'd had. We wondered if she was truly his sweetheart or if he only wanted her to be, and our doubts deepened when he got no letters back from her.

As much time as we spent writing letters, we spent even more reading aloud to those who had received them and couldn't read for themselves. The parents and wives and sweethearts, children and neighbors, all sent messages; one sailor even got a note from his dog, written in his daughter's hand. The mail was months old by the time we got it, and doubtless some letters arrived at ports after we had sailed again. That was Gully's hope, since nothing had come from Fiona, although he'd carefully told her as many of our ports as he knew or could guess before we left.

"Na," Gully told Gareth now, "no need to write another letter. I figure she needs more than words. I figure this flower'll be better." Gareth and I exchanged a glance; I was sure now, as I knew he was, that Gully sent his letters to woo Fiona, and not to continue a love affair already begun.

We heard footsteps behind us and turned to find Tom standing there, holding a steaming bowl. "She's a hard heart who doesn't value all you give her, Gully."

Gully looked up, frowning. "She's busy, that's all. She said before I left I should come back for her." He coughed and bent over his work again, and I saw him blushing in the moonlight. "We—she gave me a kiss, even. Many kisses. She wanted to give me more than that, but I was afraid o' gettin' her with child, and me away at sea and all." He looked around at all of us, his eyes fierce. "I guess you think me soft."

"Soft," Jack said, and laughed, and winked at me, and rubbed Mabel's ears. "Part of yer soft as my Mabel's fur, eh?"

Gully's blush deepened, but Tom smiled and said, "Some might take that as an insult, Jack, but we know you don't mean it that way." He glanced at the rest of us, his face a warning. There was no need. We all knew Jack was simple, and meant no offense. "For myself, Gully, I think it uncommon kind of you not to risk making a baby afore you left."

"She said I must na love her," Gully said. "She said it weren't her time to make a baby, and anyway there were ways to keep from getting with child."

There were, at that. I'd seen Jenny make up potions, heard her counseling the other young women of the village. She'd given me a bag of herbs before I left. "If you're forced, Peg, make this into tea and drink it. You'll get sick, but if a baby's started, it will stop." But her expression had been grim, and I'd thought of the tales I'd heard of young women who drank such things and sickened and died. It seemed to me I'd be safer risking a child. If it came to that, my secret would already be discovered, anyway.

By now in the voyage, although I still kept my modesty and my false name, I'd stopped worrying. Jenny's fears had been unfounded; perhaps there were ships as brutal as she said, but this wasn't one of them.

"'Twas love as stopped you," Tom told Gully, but there was an odd note in his voice. "And even if you were…soft"—and here Jack let out a guffaw, startling the cat, who leaped out of his lap—"that's no shame, is it? No shame not to stir when the time's not right. Or the person."

"She's right!" Gully's voice was fierce now. "I love her, always have, since we were mere bits of things!"

“Be calm,” Tom said. “I meant no harm. Here, Gully. I brought you some soup for that cough. It will soothe your throat.”

Gully put down his carving tools and took the steaming bowl. “Thankee, Tom. That’s kind of you.” He tipped the bowl to drink, and swallowed. “It’s good.”

“I’m glad,” Tom said. “Did Fiona make you soup, back home?”

Gully’s face tightened into a glare again, and he’d have spoken, except that a fit of coughing silenced him. I took the bowl so his shaking hands wouldn’t spill it. “Enough,” he managed, finally, and took the soup back from me. “I’ll drink your soup, friend, but you’re not to mock my love.”

“Wasn’t mocking. Just asking a question. I’m sure she’s a fine cook.”

Gareth, frowning, said, “Well, Tom, and what of you? Leave off questioning poor Gully. What of your own love life?”

Tom gave him a keen glance. “Oh, I think you know.”

“If I knew, why would I ask?”

Tom chuckled. “And how should I know that? William Stout, you know him better than I. Why would he ask?” He winked at me and nodded to the others. “I’ll be off to my berth now. Breakfast comes early. Gully, come see me anytime, if only to bring the bowl back. I always like having you about.”

“Thankee, Tom. It’s fine soup. Good night.”

Tom left, and after a few minutes Gully did, too, taking his tools and the empty bowl with him. Mabel had heard some noise and slunk off, her eyes narrowed and her body low to the deck; Jack went off in search of her. “She’s after something with a long tail, just you watch. I best make sure she’s not hurt again.”

That left me and Gareth on deck. “That was odd,” I said. “All that with Tom and Gully.”

“Aye.”

“Why did he say that to me? Do you think he knows?”

Gareth shrugged. “He knows we’re friends. That’s all it has to be, Will.” He always called me Will, now; it was safer. But for the first time, it irked me. For a moment, to my surprise, I found myself searingly jealous of Fiona, whose name Gully murmured so many times each day, as if by itself it were a charm against loneliness.

I was homesick, that was all; homesick at last, at the farthest point of the voyage. Tomorrow we would reach the southernmost port and take on supplies to begin the trip home, and after that each day would bring me closer to Jenny, and rooms with real furniture, and a bed that didn’t roll and heave while I slept.

We made port in a place with palm trees and chittering monkeys and subtle scents. Gareth and I strolled in the market there, and when I found myself eying a brilliant, billowing gauze skirt—because I was hot in trousers, and suddenly yearned to feel air against my legs—Gareth haggled with the merchant and bought it. “It’s for my sister at home,” he said, and turned to me with a smile. “She’ll like it, don’t you think?”

“She will,” I said, trying to match his jesting tone, and when Gareth roared with laughter, I realized I’d made a pun on my false name. But I was in a sour mood, sullen and skittish at the same time—it was the heat, I told myself, this infernal heavy damp—and when we were far from the stall and from prying eyes, I said, “So is that what I am now? Your sister?”

Gareth gave me a startled look, his eyes brightening. “Would you be more, then?”

The heat was a cobra around my chest and neck, strangling me. “I’d be somewhere cool! I’d be somewhere I can think! I’d be somewhere I don’t have to pretend and wear this damnable clothing! I’d be—”

“Ah,” Gareth said, and for a moment I was afraid I’d wounded him, but his face was still hopeful. “Soon enough. We’re turning homewards now.”

And we were, and when we got back on shipboard everyone seemed lighter, happier; the very ropes strained at the moorings, eager to be off. Everyone seemed more cheerful except Gully, who came to us ashen and trembling. “I’ve a letter from Fiona at last,” he said, “but it’s so short. I’m afraid—I don’t know what it says—”

He held up an envelope, addressed in a large, careful hand. I wondered if Fiona had written it herself, or asked or paid someone else to do it for her. “Give it here,” Gareth said quietly.

Inside was a single piece of paper. I looked over Gareth’s shoulder as he unfolded it. “Dear Gully, I am married to Cobb the blacksmith now and have a little boy but I wish you a good life. Your friend, Fiona.”

“Is it bad news?” Gully said. “Is she all right?”

“She’s fine,” Gareth said gently.

We told him. “A child,” he said, the words wooden. “A child already, and we’ve scarce been gone nine months. She never loved me, then.”

Even in his own tales, she’d never claimed to. She’d only wanted a farewell romp, a diversion. I couldn’t blame her—who knew better than I how confining life in a village could be, how welcome any escape, however momentary?—but I ached for him. “Gully,”

I said, “she’s happy, and you must be happy, too. You must find someone who’ll match your love and return it.”

“Who?” he said. “How?” And then he wept, that great strong man, sobbing openly as our shipmates scurried to and fro.

But we had work to do, all of us, and I knew that work was the best thing for Gully now. It would take his mind off Fiona; it would give his body something useful to do. All of us worked very hard for the rest of the day, and we set sail that evening, and not until late in the night was there a moment to be still, to think.

It had been a long day, a tiring day. Usually I’d have gone straight to my bunk, but we were still trapped in that infernal heat. So I took myself topside and curled up on my usual coil of rope, wondering if anyone else would join me.

After a while, Tom did. “There you are,” he said, and passed me something, a glowing dimness in the moonlight.

It was Gully’s ivory flower. “He gave it to you?”

“If only he had! I found him about to toss it into the sea, and I took it from him. I told him it was a beautiful thing that should go to someone who’d value it, and I valued it; aye, and valued him too, more than Fiona ever could. He’d not hear me.”

“He just found out. He only got the letter this forenoon. He’s not himself.”

“She never loved him.” Tom’s voice was tired, disgusted. “You and Gareth know that as well as I do. He was spinning fancies in his head, trying to fool himself about what he really is, mayhap.”

I shook my head. I was weary from all that work, and tangled in my own temper. “And what’s that, Tom?”

He went very still. “Don’t toy with me. What you are, Will; what Gareth is, too. What you two are together.” I blinked. Here was a riddle, for I was a girl in disguise, but Gareth wasn’t, and neither, I was sure, was Gully. But Tom was still talking, not waiting for my answer. “I’ve seen the way you two look at each other. I’ve seen you together. Folk say sailors make do with each other for lack of women on board, but you and I and Gareth know—aye, and many others—that some of us weren’t made for women any more than fowl are made for fish, whatever the preachers say.”

I blinked again, taking this in. I had seen things, surely, heard ruttings in the dark belowdecks; and that was bodies meeting their needs, no matter, but Tom was talking of something else, something deeper. “You love him,” I said.

Tom snorted. “You’d not known it afore? Aye, more than he loves his Fiona, who is only a fancy and a dream, and him fooling himself, mayhap. You’re a clever lad, and loyal to your own mate. Help me, Will. How do I make him see me?”

His voice was anguished, and I was at a loss. Jenny would have known just what to tell him, but Jenny was thousands of miles away. I thought of all the times we had sat on deck of an evening, all the hints Tom had dropped, plain as noon to me now, and Gully had not heard them. “You need to wait, I think.” I spoke slowly. “Wait and watch, and keep doing as you have been, and whenever he speaks of Fiona, remind him somehow that you’re here instead. Keep his flower for him.”

“Aye,” Tom said, and smiled, and reached to grip my arm, no caress but a hearty squeeze. I was all muscle then, with no fear that he’d discover my secret. “Thank you, Will. Indeed you’re wise.”

Was I wise? I realized as I said the words that I was only telling him what Gareth had been doing, all these long years—kind, patient Gareth, whom I'd spurned and pushed away and snapped at in the market that morning—and suddenly I knew my own heart fully at last, and felt it beating as if with great wings within me. I would speak to Gareth as soon as I could. I would tell him, and thank him, and say I was sorry for having been so blind. We had watch together the next morning. I would go belowdecks now, to my berth near his, and listen to his even breathing as he slept, and in the morning I would tell him what I knew and how I felt.

But before morning came I woke to a great pitching and rolling, to bells and alarms and shouts both above and below. I scrambled out of my bunk, checked Gareth's—he was not there—and made my way above, making out snatches of news as I went. A big storm, sudden, as none had seen coming, and we'd been blown off course and were taking on water, and the anchor had torn loose, and one mast was broken, and at least one man overboard. I felt a sickening fear, then. *Gareth*. But no, it was Simon the boatswain, whom I'd barely known, although God keep him and all who loved him, and then I was past that bit of talk, climbing above into hell.

The rain pelted down and the wind roared and feet pounded, and the deck bucked like a wild thing and then fell away as we toppled into the troughs of waves. The men up top had lashed themselves to the ship with rope around their waists, but I saw that at least one was dead, lolling in his bonds, drowned when a wave drenched the deck and he could not free himself. I would not secure myself so.

How long we were in that chaos I cannot say. I bailed and patched leaks and clung to whatever I could find as we heaved and rolled, as the waves broke over us. And

through it all, fear for Gareth flashed like lightning, for I had not seen him in the roiling maelstrom. And then another wave would come, huge and jagged and crashing, and I would be able to think only of myself.

I swallowed so much seawater in those hours that my lips and throat grew parched with salt. In any second of calm I turned my face upward to the pelting rain, to let fresh water wash away the brine. “The sea is a crazy whore,” Granny Crimson had said, and I remembered hearing one of the men—Peter, I think, who hauled pallets and crates and anything heavy that needed moving—saying to a friend that he missed the taste of his sweetheart’s other lips, salty as the sea. The other sailor had laughed, and I had blushed and hoped they would not notice.

The sea was indeed crazy in that tempest, although not whorishly. As wanton as she was—pouring herself over all of us, drenching everything, sweeping away anything not firmly fixed—she did it without thought of payment, unless line and sails and mast were payment, the very ship itself and all our lives.

For when the storm at last began to lose force, we knew not where we were. Farther south, someone said, off a strange coast of high green mountains and waterfalls plunging straight into the ocean, the shoreline jagged with terrible rocks. We were drifting toward them, aye, helpless to stop ourselves. We could neither sail nor steer, and although the wind was calmer, those rocks would still stave in the bruised body of the *Charity*, already broken and leaking.

Carried helpless toward that doom, we heard, all of us who were left—for perhaps a third of the crew was already dead by then—a soft and pleasing sound. Above and through the wind it came, sad and soothing at the same time, a song of longing whose

words I could not make out. It came from the rocks, and when I peered at them I saw beckoning shapes and vague unearthly forms: the curve of an arm, a delicate hand, all made of swirling spray.

All of us who were left gathered at the rails, drawn by the sound. I did not see Gareth, but Gully was there, and Jack and all the others—I wondered then, fleetingly, if poor Mabel were still alive—and the wind had picked up again and was blowing us toward the phantoms, and the voices came ever clearer. I heard Jenny offering me tea, saying, "There, there, Peg, it will be all right," and I longed to cry on her shoulder.

Around me the men, like people dreaming, murmured names, "Mother!" and "Frances!" and "my dear Jane!"

"Sally!" called Paul, our bosun, "Sally, Sally, I'm coming!" and over the rail he went, although I gasped and called and would have clutched at him had I been close enough. Too far, too far.

The wind picked up again, driving the broken *Charity* faster toward those fatal rocks, and the voices grew louder. "Mabel?" called Jack. "Don't you move! Don't you chase no rats! You stay there; I'll not let you drown!" And he too was gone.

I heard snatches of Jenny's voice, of my father's, of Granny Crimson's, even. I heard the voices of home. And then, stronger than the others, Gareth's. "Peg, do you love me? Will you say it at last? Come to me now, and tell me."

My heart lurched. He was out there; he wanted me, and I wanted him, and if I could just reach him, then—

"Will!" That was Gareth's voice, again, but it was behind me, not out on the water. "Will," he said, and I turned, weeping.

"I thought you—I heard you—I was going to jump, Gareth."

He hugged me, a crushing embrace, but before he could speak I heard someone else nearby. "Fiona! Fiona! I'm coming!"

"No!" I broke free of Gareth's arms and ran toward Gully, fighting the wind, sliding on the slick deck. Other men were going over the side now, calling out to the rocks as they jumped, but the phantoms had no more hold on me. "Gully, no! Fiona's not out there! Gully, look at me! Stop! Gareth, help me!"

I was next to Gully now, and then Gareth was, too, and I heard Tom's voice call "Gully!" and thought, good, they're safe—but then I saw Tom standing next to the rail, straining to see out into the heaving spray. "Gully! I'm coming!"

Tom heard Gully's voice on the wind. He must have thought that Gully had already gone overboard, and was finally calling him.

I grabbed Gully and shook him; I'd have done the same to Tom had I been close enough. "For God's sake, Gully, it's here, the love you want! It's right here, you silly fool! Gareth, help me!"

Gully was not a small man; it took all of our strength to drag him toward Tom. "Tom!" I called. "Gully's right here! Look!" And then to Gully, fiercely, my throat aching from screaming over the wind, "Say you love him! Tell him you love him, tell him he's your heart's desire, tell him the soup he made for you when you were sick tasted like no other soup in the world! That's what they want, those sirens, that's what they miss, and it's what you miss, too. But you have it, Gully. Right here, right now. You don't need a woman for that. You don't need Fiona who doesn't love you! Tom's pining

for you, Gully, it's you he's yearned for all along, and only you can save him, can't you see that?"

I was wild, and Gully kept fighting us, pulling toward the voices. I couldn't tell if he'd heard me, over the wind and the waves and the sirens. Through the spray I saw Tom starting to climb over the rail, and Gareth let go of Gully to grab Tom instead, and I knew I couldn't hold Gully by myself.

"Gully," I said, despairing, "he loves you. Tom loves you."

What finally made him hear me? I'll never know, but I'll never forget the moment when I saw him, at last, see Tom: that start of recognition, the glimmer of fear when you realize that someone you love is going to die.

He broke away from me. He ran to Tom and helped Gareth pull him back from the rail. He held Tom and cradled him there in the wet, both of them sinking to the deck, and I saw his lips move against Tom's ear, and Tom stopped fighting, stopped trying to move, relaxed into Gully's lap. He reached for Gully's hand, and Gully took his, and kissed it, and pressed it to his heart.

In the end, only we four were left, cast onto the shores of that island. Somehow we made it through the rocks, clinging to planks as the ship broke up. I remember nothing but huge roarings and churnings and terror that I would die as I clung and kicked. And then nothing, and then waking up in blessed sunlight on a rough beach, all my skin scraped and bruised and the boy-charm gone, vanished into the waves.

"I wasn't tempted," Gareth said, much later. We four had found a freshwater spring on the island, and mussels, and they kept us alive until we could signal a passing

frigate. She bore us to the next port, where Gully and Tom found berths on a ship heading even farther south, to the cold places where the great icebergs groan and heave. But Gareth and I took passage north. I called myself Will Stout, as before, and no one questioned me, and I knew that Granny Crimson was right. The charm had only made more visible what was already within me.

"I wasn't tempted, not even for a moment," Gareth said. "I knew you were right there, my own Peg, on the ship with me. What could they offer me, those wicked sirens?"

"Not wicked," I said. "Just lonely." The sirens, I believed now, were the ghosts of those who had died in shipwrecks. Grieving, they sang of home, their call a summons to anyone bereft or misplaced. I do not think all or even most of them were women. Whoever they were, they were just trying to go home themselves when they were dashed against the rocks, and now they will stay there forever, singing the comfort of the hearth, the beauty of bread and blankets and clean fresh wool; and, more powerfully still, singing welcome, and belonging, and love.

Gareth and I went home a safer way, and there were wonders, too, on that voyage. All I will say of them is that you should see them yourself, if only once in your life, because home is so much sweeter after time abroad. Gareth and I retraced our steps, making landfall in the great city and walking back to our village along the same roads we had used before. It was spring now, the air warm and fragrant, the trees bursting with that first fresh green, calves and lambs and foals gamboling in fields as we passed. We went home, and in a lovely blue dusk we walked up the main street of our village, and Jenny came flying to meet us, weeping with joy, for she had dreamed our return. And there was

tea and fresh bread and a roast chicken and pie waiting at Jenny's house, and we shared it with my father and with Granny Crimson.

My father had aged, and my heart broke to see him. He was nearly blind now, but he knew my voice, and wept when he heard it. "Peg. You've come back, my own girl. I feared you were gone forever. Feared I'd lost you, like your ma." He stank of whiskey and his words were blurred, but now I felt only pity for him.

"I'm not lost," I told him. "I'm right here." I had some inkling, then, of what it must have been like for him after my mother died, for everyone said he had truly loved her. She was dissolved into an ocean he could not sail, not yet, not except by leaping over rails that, for my sake, perhaps, he avoided. He drowned himself in drink instead. Jenny and Gareth and I were the only home he had left, and I wished I had known it before.

If my father had changed while we were gone, become more broken, Granny Crimson was much the same. "So ye've tangled wi' the whore," she said, eyes feral and glaring. "Ye've sailed the strumpet, the seducer—"

"Granny," I said. "You were wrong, about the sea and the sirens. When James died, it was your voice he heard on the wind, your voice he followed. He died trying to come home to you." But she did not hear me, and perhaps it was as well. If her anger at the sea for killing him had instead become anger at her own voice for luring him to his death, what then? Perhaps she would have grown quieter, but surely she'd have grown no more sane. I wondered then about Robert, who had come to tell her of James' death. Whom had he loved on board; who had made him immune to the sirens?

Gareth and I, having had our fill of salt spray and hardtack, took up farming. I wear skirts in hot weather and trousers in cold, and Gareth loves me no matter what I

wear. He tells everyone I saved his life, on the ship, but he saved mine, too. If I'd stayed in our village I'd have died of loneliness, as surely as he'd have done had he been without me in the storm while the sirens sang.

We haven't had any babies, though we've certainly made enough chances for them. But I can play with other people's children, and if we can't grow bairns we can grow crops, and when we tire of that, we can have adventures. Gareth's learning the lute, and I've begun to sing—not like the sirens, no one can sing like that unless they're dead and wailing—but tunefully enough. In a few years, after my father's gone, we might strike out and try our hand as traveling minstrels. The sirens taught us that it doesn't much matter where we are, as long as it's together.