Selkie Stories Are for Losers

I hate selkie stories. They're always about how you went up to the attic to look for a book, and you found a disgusting old coat and brought it downstairs between finger and thumb and said "What's this?", and you never saw your mom again.

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I work at a restaurant called Le Pacha. I got the job after my mom left, to help with the bills. On my first night at work I got yelled at twice by the head server, burnt my fingers on a hot dish, spilled lentil-parsley soup all over my apron, and left my keys in the kitchen.

I didn't realize at first I'd forgotten my keys. I stood in the parking lot, breathing slowly and letting the oil-smell lift away from my hair, and when all the other cars had started up and driven away I put my hand in my jacket pocket. Then I knew.

I ran back to the restaurant and banged on the door. Of course no one came. I smelled cigarette smoke an instant before I heard the voice.

"Hey."

I turned, and Mona was standing there, smoke rising white from between her fingers. "I left my keys inside," I said.

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Mona is the only other server at Le Pacha who's a girl. She's related to everybody at the restaurant except me. The owner, who goes by "Uncle Tad," is really her uncle, her mom's brother. "Don't talk to him unless you have to," Mona advised me. "He's a creeper." That was after she'd sighed and dropped her cigarette and crushed it out with her shoe and stepped into my clasped hands so I could boost her up to the window, after she'd wriggled through into the

kitchen and opened the door for me. She said, “Madame,” in a dry voice, and bowed. At least, I think she said “Madame.” She might have said “My lady.” I don’t remember that night too well, because we drank a lot of wine. Mona said that as long as we were breaking and entering we might as well steal something, and she lined up all the bottles of red wine that had already been opened. I shone the light from my phone on her while she took out the special rubber corks and poured some of each bottle into a plastic pitcher. She called it “The House Wine.” I was surprised she was being so nice to me, since she’d hardly spoken to me while we were working. Later she told me she hates everybody the first time she meets them. I called home, but Dad didn’t pick up; he was probably in the basement. I left him a message and turned off my phone. “Do you know what this guy said to me tonight?” Mona asked. “He wanted beef couscous and he said, ‘I’ll have the beef conscious.’”

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Mona’s mom doesn’t work at Le Pacha, but sometimes she comes in around three o’clock and sits in Mona’s section and cries. Then Mona jams on her orange baseball cap and goes out through the back and smokes a cigarette, and I take over her section. Mona’s mom won’t order anything from me. She’s got Mona’s eyes, or Mona’s got hers: huge, angry eyes with lashes that curl up at the ends. She shakes her head and says: “Nothing! Nothing!” Finally Uncle Tad comes over, and Mona's mom hugs and kisses him, sobbing in Arabic.

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After work Mona says, “Got the keys?”

We get in my car and I drive us through town to the Bone Zone, a giant cemetery on a hill. I pull into the empty parking lot and Mona rolls a joint. There’s only one lamp, burning high and cold in the middle of the lot. Mona pushes her shoes off and puts her feet up on the dashboard

and cries. She warned me about that the night we met: I said something stupid to her like "You're so funny" and she said, "Actually I cry a lot. That's something you should know." I was so happy she thought I should know things about her, I didn't care. I still don't care, but it's true that Mona cries a lot. She cries because she's scared her mom will take her away to Egypt, where the family used to live, and where Mona has never been. "What would I do there? I don't even speak Arabic." She wipes her mascara on her sleeve, and I tell her to look at the lamp outside and pretend that its glassy brightness is a bonfire, and that she and I are personally throwing every selkie story ever written onto it and watching them burn up.

"You and your selkie stories," she says. I tell her they're not my selkie stories, not ever, and I'll never tell one, which is true, I never will, and I don't tell her how I went up to the attic that day or that what I was looking for was a book I used to read when I was little, *Beauty and the Beast*, which is a really decent story about an animal who gets turned into a human and stays that way, the way it's supposed to be. I don't tell Mona that Beauty's black hair coiled to the edge of the page, or that the Beast had yellow horns and a smoking jacket, or that instead of finding the book I found the coat, and my mom put it on and went out the kitchen door and started up her car.

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One selkie story tells about a man from Mýrdalur. He was on the cliffs one day and heard people singing and dancing inside a cave, and he noticed a bunch of skins piled on the rocks. He took one of the skins home and locked it in a chest, and when he went back a girl was sitting there alone, crying. She was naked, and he gave her some clothes and took her home. They got married and had kids. You know how this goes. One day the man changed his clothes and forgot to take the key to the chest out of his pocket, and when his wife washed the clothes, she found it.

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"You're not going to Egypt," I tell Mona. "We're going to Colorado. Remember?"

That's our big dream, to go to Colorado. It's where Mona was born. She lived there until she was four. She still remembers the rocks and the pines and the cold, cold air. She says the clouds of Colorado are bright, like pieces of mirror. In Colorado, Mona's parents got divorced, and Mona's mom tried to kill herself for the first time. She tried it once here, too. She put her head in the oven, resting on a pillow. Mona was in seventh grade.

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Selkies go back to the sea in a flash, like they've never been away. That's one of the ways they're different from human beings. Once, my dad tried to go back somewhere: he was in the army, stationed in Germany, and he went to Norway to look up the town my great-grandmother came from. He actually found the place, and even an old farm with the same name as us. In the town, he went into a restaurant and ordered lutefisk, a disgusting fish thing my grandmother makes. The cook came out of the kitchen and looked at him like he was nuts. She said they only eat lutefisk at Christmas.

There went Dad's plan of bringing back the original flavor of lutefisk. Now all he's got from Norway is my great-grandmother's Bible. There's also the diary she wrote on the farm up north, but we can't read it. There's only four English words in the whole book: *My God awful day*.

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You might suspect my dad picked my mom up in Norway, where they have seals. He didn't, though. He met her at the pool.

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As for Mom, she never talked about her relatives. I asked her once if she had any, and she said they were “no kind of people.” At the time I thought she meant they were druggies or murderers, maybe in prison somewhere. Now I wish that was true.

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One of the stories I don’t tell Mona comes from *A Dictionary of British Folklore in the English Language*. In that story, it’s the selkie’s little girl who points out where the skin is hidden. She doesn’t know what’s going to happen, of course, she just knows her mother is looking for a skin, and she remembers her dad taking one out from under the bed and stroking it. The little girl’s mother drags out the skin and says: “Fareweel, peerie buddo!” She doesn’t think about how the little girl is going to miss her, or how if she’s been breathing air all this time she can surely keep it up a little longer. She just throws on the skin and jumps into the sea.

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After Mom left, I waited for my dad to get home from work. He didn’t say anything when I told him about the coat. He stood in the light of the clock on the stove and rubbed his fingers together softly, almost like he was snapping but with no sound. Then he sat down at the kitchen table and lit a cigarette. I’d never seen him smoke in the house before. *Mom’s gonna lose it*, I thought, and then I realized that no, my mom wasn’t going to lose anything. We were the losers. Me and Dad.

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He still waits up for me, so just before midnight I pull out of the parking lot. I’m hoping to get home early enough that he doesn’t grumble, but late enough that he doesn’t want to come up from the basement, where he takes apart old T.V.s, and talk to me about college. I’ve told him

I'm not going to college. I'm going to Colorado, a landlocked state. Only twenty out of fifty states are completely landlocked, which means they don't touch the Great Lakes or the sea. Mona turns on the light and tries to put on eyeliner in the mirror, and I swerve to make her mess up. She turns out the light and hits me. All the windows are down to air out the car, and Mona's hair blows wild around her face. *Peerie buddo*, the book says, is "a term of endearment." "Peerie buddo," I say to Mona. She's got the hiccups. She can't stop laughing.

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I've never kissed Mona. I've thought about it a lot, but I keep deciding it's not time. It's not that I think she'd freak out or anything. It's not even that I'm afraid she wouldn't kiss me back. It's worse: I'm afraid she'd kiss me back, but not mean it.

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Probably one of the biggest losers to fall in love with a selkie was the man who carried her skin around in his knapsack. He was so scared she'd find it that he took the skin with him everywhere, when he went fishing, when he went drinking in the town. Then one day he had a wonderful catch of fish. There were so many that he couldn't drag them all home in his net. He emptied his knapsack and filled it with fish, and he put the skin over his shoulder, and on his way up the road to his house, he dropped it.

"Gray in front and gray in back, 'tis the very thing I lack." That's what the man's wife said, when she found the skin. The man ran to catch her, he even kissed her even though she was already a seal, but she squirmed off down the road and flopped into the water. The man stood knee-deep in the chilly waves, stinking of fish, and cried. In selkie stories, kissing never solves anything. No transformation happens because of a kiss. No one loves you just because you love them. What kind of fairy tale is that?

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“She wouldn’t wake up,” Mona says. “I pulled her out of the oven onto the floor, and I turned off the gas and opened the windows. It’s not that I was smart, I wasn’t thinking at all. I called Uncle Tad and the police and I still wasn’t thinking.”

I don’t believe she wasn’t smart. She even tried to give her mom CPR, but her mom didn’t wake up until later, in the hospital. They had to reach in and drag her out of death, she was so closed up in it. Death is skin-tight, Mona says. Gray in front and gray in back.

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Dear Mona: When I look at you, my skin hurts.

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I pull into her driveway to drop her off. The house is dark, the darkest house on her street, because Mona’s mom doesn’t like the porch light on. She says it shines in around the blinds and keeps her awake. Mona’s mom has a beautiful bedroom upstairs, with lots of old photographs in gilt frames, but she sleeps on the living-room couch beside the aquarium. Looking at the fish helps her to sleep, although she also says this country has no real fish. That’s what Mona calls one of her mom’s “refrains.”

Mona gets out, yanking the little piece of my heart that stays with her wherever she goes. She stands outside the car and leans in through the open door. I can hardly see her, but I can smell the lemon-scented stuff she puts on her hair, mixed up with the smells of sweat and weed. Mona smells like a forest, not the sea. “Oh my God,” she says, “I forgot to tell you, tonight, you know table six? That big horde of Uncle Tad’s friends?”

“Yeah.”

"So they wanted the soup with the food, and I forgot, and you know what the old guy says to me? The little guy at the head of the table?"

"What?"

"He goes, *Vous êtes bête, mademoiselle!*"

She says it in a rough, growly voice, and laughs. I can tell it's French, but that's all. "What does it mean?"

"*You're an idiot, miss!*"

She ducks her head, stifling giggles. "He called you an idiot?"

"Yeah, *bête*, it's like *beast*."

She lifts her head, then shakes it. A light from someone else's porch bounces off her nose. She puts on a fake Norwegian accent and says: "*My God awful day*."

I nod. "Awful day." And because we say it all the time, because it's the kind of silly, ordinary thing you could call one of our "refrains," or maybe because of the weed I've smoked, a whole bunch of days seem pressed together inside this moment, more than you could count. There's the time we all went out for New Year's Eve, and Uncle Tad drove me, and when he stopped and I opened the door he told me to close it, and I said "I will when I'm on the other side," and when I told Mona we laughed so hard we had to run away and hide in the bathroom. There's the day some people we know from school came in and we served them wine even though they were under age and Mona got nervous and spilled it all over the tablecloth, and the day her nice cousin came to visit and made us cheese-and-mint sandwiches in the microwave and got yelled at for wasting food. And the day of the party for Mona's mom's birthday, when Uncle Tad played music and made us all dance, and Mona's mom's eyes went jewelly with tears, and afterward Mona told me: "I should just run away. I'm the only thing keeping her here." My God, awful days. All the best days of my life.

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“Bye,” Mona whispers. I watch her until she disappears into the house.

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My mom used to swim every morning at the YWCA. When I was little she took me along. I didn’t like swimming. I’d sit in a chair with a book while she went up and down, up and down, a dim streak in the water. When I read *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, it seemed like Mom was a lab rat doing tasks, the way she kept touching one side of the pool and then the other. At last she climbed out and pulled off her bathing cap. In the locker room she hung up her suit, a thin gray rag dripping on the floor. Most people put the hook of their padlock through the straps of their suit, so the suits could hang outside the lockers without getting stolen, but my mom never did that. She just tied her suit loosely onto the lock. “No one’s going to steal that stretchy old thing,” she said. And no one did.

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That should have been the end of the story, but it wasn’t. My dad says Mom was an elemental, a sort of stranger, not of our kind. It wasn’t my fault she left, it was because she couldn’t learn to breathe on land. That’s the worst story I've ever heard. I’ll never tell Mona, not ever, not even when we’re leaving for Colorado with everything we need in the back of my car, and I meet her at the grocery store the way we’ve already planned, and she runs out smiling under her orange baseball cap. I won’t tell her how dangerous attics are, or how some people can’t start over, or how I still see my mom in shop windows with her long hair the same silver-gray as her coat, or how once when my little cousins came to visit we went to the zoo and the seals recognized me, they both stood up in the water and talked in a foreign language. I won’t tell her. I’m too scared.

I won’t even tell her what she needs to know: that we’ve got to be tougher than our moms, that we’ve got to have different stories, that she’d better not change her mind and drop me in Colorado because I won’t understand, I’ll hate her forever and burn her stuff and stay up all night screaming at the woods, because it’s stupid not to be able to breathe, who ever heard of somebody breathing in one place but not another, and we’re not like that, Mona and me, and selkie stories are only for losers stuck on the wrong side of magic--people who drop things, who tell all, who leave keys around, who let go.