

## The Book of the Sea

### The Fisherman's Son

Ever since he was 5 years old Leo had loved the sea. In the early mornings he would rise out of his bed and disappear. His mother would search high and low but he was nowhere to be found. Then in the evenings when his father came in with his catch, he would find him sitting down by the edge of the sea, waiting for him. His son waved him in. His father pulled the boat in and then scooped him up in a hug.

"Have you been here all day, my son?"

"Yes Father, I played here all day. But I'm so hungry!"

"Then we must get you home and fed," the fisherman chuckled.

After that Leo's mother made sure he took some bread and cheese with him in the mornings. He came back home for lunch and afterwards she sent him out with a slice of cake or a biscuit. And there he stayed till his father came in and they headed home to eat the day's catch.

"What do you do down there all day?" Leo's mother asked him once.

"I play," he told her, "down by the rocks. And I sit and watch the waves."

When Leo was 15, his father became sick. He caught a cold and it developed into pneumonia. His wife nursed him all day and kept watch over him at night. Kept watch so his soul did not fly away. Both she and Leo feared the fisherman would die.

Now Leo must go out in the boat, catching the fish, He must sell at market on Saturday. He was glad for the chance to be out on the sea but worried and unhappy about his father.

A fortnight after the fisherman fell ill, he turned a corner and after that he began to recover. His wife fell to her knees and praised God. The fisherman said in a weak voice, "I owe it all...to the gods of the sea." When Leo went out in the boat the next morning he threw some cake and a treasured stone he had played with as a child into the water, as thanks to the sea gods.

The fisherman grew stronger with each passing day but he never quite recovered his former strength. He returned to fishing but Leo took on more and more of the work. Everyday he sailed out to help catch the fish and permanently took over the Saturday stall.

The year moved into autumn. The weather grew colder and the winds stronger off the sea. Leo loved the ocean and he loved his job and working with his father, but he was lonely. One October afternoon he walked along the shore, the freezing wind blowing wildly and numbing his skin. The beach was deserted, save for him.

"I wish I had somebody to love," he thought.

The wind blew harder, whipping his straw coloured hair in his face. When its wail subsided, there was silence. Leo doubted he had been heard.

The next day was Saturday. When Leo returned home from the market in the afternoon, he usually ate his lunch and then rested, often taking a walk in the early evening. This evening he almost didn't go. His body felt tired through and through, his bones heavy. He sat watching the fire burn, while his mother sewed and his father dozed in his chair. The slim black cat that had adopted the family the previous year meowed and weaved in and out of the objects in the room, rubbing against people's feet.

The room was growing darker as twilight fell. Leo's eyes were closing as he watched the embers but suddenly he felt an urge to go outside and walk the shore.

"Are you going now, Leo?" his mother asked as he rose. "It's getting dark."

"Just for a little while, Mother," Leo answered. "I'll be back in time for supper."

"Alright," his mother smiled, catching his hand as he went by. Leo squeezed it gently and slipped outside.

It was the coldest evening so far. The wind was blowing hard as if it was fixing to be a gale. Leo pulled his jacket tighter around him, thinking that he mustn't be long but he really had to get outside.

After walking for about 10 minutes Leo felt like he should turn back. It was too bitterly cold to carry on, the wind went through him like a knife and by the look of the clouds rain wasn't far off. But just as he changed direction he heard a thin wail. He held himself still to listen but heard nothing more. Maybe he had imagined it...

No! There it came again. He must see what it was. Someone could be hurt or lost; a child perhaps or an animal. He couldn't live with himself if he didn't at least try to investigate.

Following the sound of the cry, Leo trudged towards the water's edge. The tide was coming in, the water moving further up the beach. The wail would sound every so often, stop and then come again. But it sounded louder, so he must be getting near.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, Leo could hear crying in front of him. He stopped. It was getting hard to see, so he crouched down and peered into the water. There! There was the source of the noise, a tiny bundle.

Leo gently scooped it up in his arms and got to his feet. The bundle was a grey blanket and inside was a baby! Or it appeared to be a baby but there was something different about it... Its skin had a faint silvery sheen. A few tufts of hair poked out of the blanket but they were of a colour Leo had never seen- sort of orange and coral mixed in with deep purple. The baby's eyes were shut. It appeared to be naked. Leo opened the blanket to check and gasped- on the bottom half of its body the baby had not legs but a tail! A shimmery, greeny tail with elements of blue that despite the growing darkness he could see clearly because they shone brightly. It seemed as if he had found a tiny mermaid.

It began to rain and thunder rumbled. The baby opened its eyes and started crying. Leo was stunned by the baby's eyes- a bright blue, a colour not seen around this area that was certain!

The baby cried harder and Leo made the decision to take it home with him. He must get it out of the storm.

Everything after that was always slightly blurred in Leo's mind- the long walk back to the house, explaining to his parents what had happened and what he'd found. The longer night warming the baby and soothing her (his mother took one look at her and said, "It's a girl."). She woke-up and cried, on and off, bursts of crying followed by quietness. Then he rocked and rocked her until she fell asleep and he did too.

The next morning Leo woke with a feeling that something was different. At first he couldn't think what it was but then there was a cry from the corner and he remembered.

The baby lay on the floor wrapped in her blanket. In the light of day it no longer looked grey; instead it was a strange sparkling greeny blue, similar to the baby's tail. Leo crossed the room and picked the baby up, noticing the blanket smelt of seaweed. She cooed up at him. Today her hair looked more purple and coral and less orange.

"Who are you?" Leo said softly. "Where did you come from?"

There was no answer.

Over the breakfast table Leo repeated his story from the night before and discussed with his parents what they should do. His mother said she would ask in the village if anyone had recently lost a baby (or given one away) but apart from that there wasn't much they could do. Unless the baby's parents were from the village they would be near impossible to trace. There had been no sign of a shipwreck but perhaps someone had come in a boat and deliberately abandoned her. Leo's mother concluded by saying that they could either keep her or see if anyone in the village would take her.

“She would be your main responsibility, mind,” she added. “Except when you’re at work. As long as you don’t mind, Sam?”

“I don’t mind,” her husband said. “She’s quite a pretty little thing!”

Leo was immensely relieved to hear his parents’ words. Already he couldn’t bear to part with her. But first...

“There’s just one thing,” he said. “Her...tail. She does look awfully like a...mermaid...don’t you think?”

His father shrugged. “Well, if she is, she’s the first I’ve seen and if they’re all like that I ain’t got no objection to them!”

“It could be a birth defect,” said Leo’s mother but he knew she didn’t really believe that.

“We’ll keep her then. And I promise to take on most of her care.”

“I will check in the village but I think she’ll be staying here. Have you thought what to name her, son?”

“No,” admitted Leo. “It should be something out of the ordinary.”

There was a silence and then suddenly Leo said, “Eliana! It came to me just like that.” At the sound of his voice, the baby giggled and then the matter was settled. Eliana she became.

### The Cradle Of The Sea

Down below the depths  
In the cradle of the sea  
What mysteries lie down there  
Far below me?  
20, 000 feet below sea level  
Down in the dark  
Whatever is inside  
Inside the sea’s heart?

## Sacrifice

In the village they have a saying that if you really want something you can make a sacrifice to the sea and it will be granted. You must sacrifice something that is very important to you, of great value. Then the sea gods will listen.

This is why one evening young Ariane steps out of the house. She is making her way to the sea to ask the gods for help. Her stepfather is closing his fist tighter, tighter over the house, hurting everyone in it. See the bruises on her arms? Ariane can stand it no longer, she must do something.

So down to the sea she goes, dressed in nothing but her thin white nightdress, feet bare. The moonlight shining in her golden hair. She stops at the edge of the shore and opens her hand. Inside are two golden bracelets, her most treasured possessions. Back from the days when things were good.

Ariane's mother gave them to her. "These are for when you get married," she told her. "Wear them on your wrists the day you wed your sweetheart, as I did." She was laughing as she said it, her dark hair framing her face.

This was just 5 years ago. Two years later Ariane's father died and a year after that her mother, swallowed up by grief, married her stepfather Joseph and was swallowed up by him.

For the past two years Ariane has watched her mother lose her spark, become gaunt and haunted and now she thinks, "No more."

It is a calm night, the moon glittering on the ocean. Ariane looks at the bracelets one last time and then throws them into the water.

"Sea gods hear me!" she shouts. "I sacrifice my most precious possessions to you. I ask for your help, save us from my stepfather Joseph Millward. Save us, my mother and me! I beg of you. Please."

She had thought she would cry at this point but she is dry eyed. A wave swirls in, takes the bracelets and washes them back out. A wind springs up from nowhere and whirls Ariane's hair around her head. Just as suddenly it subsides and she knows it is over.

Quietly Ariane returns home, she sneaks back into the house, slips into bed and closes her eyes. She sleeps long and hard.

Two days later her stepfather is killed by falling lumber from a house he is working on. He dies quickly. When Ariane hears she is shocked to think that her actions have resulted in his death. She imagined that he would leave, not that he would die. Perhaps it was a coincidence...But she cannot quite bring herself to believe that. Not after what she has asked for.

There are not many who mourn Joseph Millward; drunkard, wife beater, child beater, thief. Still, he was a person who lived and he deserves a funeral like everyone else. The ceremony is brief and afterwards at the wake, Ariane sits quietly while her mother cries and is comforted by two of her friends. More people have attended the wake than the funeral, likely for the free food and drink. Ariane is sad and she regrets but most of all she feels relief. Relief that he is gone, that they are free.

But in the long nights to come, she feels guilt and grief. Guilt for what she has done, grief for her mother and- and for him. For Joseph, despite all the bad things he did.

She has nightmares where Joseph is down in the depths of the sea, some kind of dark monster now. The storms that come are his rage. He lures unwary sailors to their deaths. Through the dreams he grabs Ariane and shakes her, shakes her, tries to break her bones. Hisses at her, "See what you have done to me!"

In vain she cries, "I'm sorry!" He doesn't want to listen. And now what good does it do?

In time Ariane moves on. The secret of what she did is like a stone in her heart but the first time she sees her mother smile, sitting in the sunlight, she remembers why she did it. For her mother and herself, so they could be free. Because she loves her mother so much.

At 19 Ariane marries Michael and moves into his house. Michael is good, a man you can trust. He will treat Ariane and her mother well, perhaps now Ariane can rest. Well, maybe she could, if not for the dreams. They still wake her up at night in a cold sweat. Michael holds her, asks what's wrong and she can say only, "I had a nightmare." Then he will stroke her hair and soothe her until she falls asleep again.

The years pass. Ariane gives birth to a child, then another. Her life is taken up with being a mother and a wife, the steady rhythm of her life. Slowly but surely a quiet happiness sets in. She comes to believe she has done the right thing.

One autumn her mother dies of pneumonia. Ariane mourns but underneath it all she is grateful that her mother had a good life these past 20 years. That she helped it to happen.

The autumn Ariane is 40, she finds herself alone in the house one afternoon. Her children are almost grown; Eliza, the oldest is 19 now and Seamus 17. She is no longer needed as she once was, they are moving on with their own lives. Eliza is soon to marry Peter, a local man from the village. She will start a family and Ariane will become a grandmother. Seamus is working as a carpenter with his father but he has plans to attend a college in the city. Ariane knows she will miss them both. When she thinks of her babies leaving, she is gripped with a fierce ache. But Michael will be left, steady, dependable Michael. Ariane still loves him as much as the day she married him. She has spent every day of her life with him since their wedding, opened up to him and loved him so. Only one thing has stood between them- the death of her stepfather and the role she played in it.

This particular afternoon Michael and Seamus are at work and Eliza is visiting her fiancé and his family. Ariane has been baking cakes, ready for when they get back this evening. As she bends to take them out of the oven the wind shrieks, banging the back door and she jumps.

All day she has been like this, nervous and jumpy. The wind has been wild since this morning, making her restless. It sets her on edge, makes her feel as if something terrible is waiting around the corner.

Ariane sets the cakes on the table to cool, looking round the room as she does so. Why does she feel as if she's expecting something to leap out at her? The wind moans again. Enough! Ariane decides she will go for a walk. Maybe getting out of the house will help her feel better, clear her head. Grabbing her heavy winter shawl, she goes out.

It's cold but not too cold, although the wind is fierce. Ariane walks towards the beach. She feels suddenly as if something is calling her.

Down at the ocean's edge the sea is wild. It's high tide. Ariane's heart is thumping in her chest. The sea spray hits her skin, causing goose bumps to rise. It feels like someone is waiting. The feeling presses down on Ariane, recalling the atmosphere of that long ago night.

"Silly!" she scolds herself, brushing her hair out of her eyes. "There is no one here, just you and the sea."

Still she cannot shake the feeling. Why did she come out here anyway? Thinking somebody was calling her! There is no one here. Time to go home.

Ariane turns and is just about to head for home when something catches her eye in the gloom. She spins round back out to sea, the breath catching in her throat. There is something on the waves! Coming closer...closer...She wants to run but is paralysed.

"Please! Leave me alone!" she thinks, shutting her eyes.

Suddenly something rears up in front of her, a huge dark shape. She is battered by the sea.

"Ariane," a voice whispers, a deep, rumbling whisper that travels through her bones. "Ariane!"

It keeps on and on until she is forced to open her eyes. Then she can scarcely believe what she sees. Before her is her stepfather, looking as he did the day he died. Not a minute older. But he is bigger than he was in life and looks colder and darker, if that is possible. In a rush Ariane understands- he has become part of the sea kingdom and everything that is dark and cold about that world, he has now become. He has absorbed it and it has absorbed him. His rage, his pain, his fear. Just like she dreamt, his moods control the storms and the seas. And now he has come to punish her.

"Ariane," he says in the deep rumble, "look at you! Still as beautiful as ever, that same golden hair. Tell me, do you regret what you have done to me?"

Ariane struggles to speak; her voice seems frozen in her throat. "I-I-I am sorry, Joseph! When I asked for help I did not know what it would mean. I was a young girl, frightened out of her mind. I thought only to save myself and my mother."

"You were a selfish little bitch!" shouts Joseph, his voice whipping the waves up. They crash wildly over the beach but the sand around Ariane stays dry. She is trapped on her own little island.

"You consigned me to this existence without a thought!"

He reaches out and grabs Ariane's wrist, his fingers digging in. His touch is cold and wet and Ariane feels it snaking around her, seeking to hurt her, squeeze the life out of her body. Anger grows in her, remembrance of the times Joseph hurt her and her mother. All the times he beat them, shouted, made them afraid.

"Stop!" she shouts. "Let go of me! I'm sorry I did what I did! It was wrong to cause you to lose your life and I have regretted it every day since. But I did it because I was afraid, because you were hurting us, my mother and me. You were a bad man, Joseph, you always were and nothing's changed. You were a bad man and it's not my fault!"

With that she yanks her wrist backwards. There is a wrenching sound and she topples onto the sand. A huge wave comes up behind her stepfather, swirls around him, round and round. She watches as his face and body are swallowed up by it. The sea roars, dashing the rocks and sands violently.

And then suddenly it is gone, leaving only Ariane, drenched to the skin. It is some minutes before she is able to move. Finally she gets up slowly and looks out to the sea, now as calm as if nothing has ever happened.

“Thank you,” she says to whoever is listening and then, “Rest in peace,” bowing her head. When there is no answer she gets up and walks back along the beach, returning to her family.

### Rules for interacting with the Sea Gods

Be clear on your intent.

Be respectful.

You must sacrifice something very dear to you and then the gods will know that your intent is true.

Do not broadcast your intention to others.

Tell no one what you witness during your visit.

The sea gods favour gold.

Approach them under the light of the full moon.

Make your request without fear

And then wait.

Whatever comes next

You will know what to do.

### The Sea Wife

One day the villagers discovered that Connor had a wife. She just appeared all of a sudden, as if she had arrived one night under cover of darkness. She was very beautiful, a tall, slim girl with long dark hair and deep green eyes. But she spoke not one word. If anybody talked to her she would just smile and nod. If you asked Connor about it he would only say, “She’s foreign, she doesn’t understand you.”

“Where is she from, Connor?” people asked and he would just point vaguely in the direction of the sea and say, “That way somewhere. I don’t know for sure.”

The villagers thought the situation very strange but then Connor had always been a strange man. He kept himself to himself. Of course it could be a solitary business being a fisherman but there was no need to isolate yourself unnecessarily. Still, now he had his wife. Perhaps she would civilise him a bit. Even though she was a bit unusual herself it was clear to see that Connor adored her. Maybe that was why they were attracted to each other.

He was also very protective; he didn't like to leave her alone. He had no choice most days though, on weekdays he went out fishing and his wife was left by herself at the cottage. Sometimes people would see her walking the shore, a lovely, lonely figure.

Some people sympathised, like Leo Turner whose daughter Eliana had her own connection to the sea. And Seamus Wilson who was in love with Eliana and could understand about fascinations with otherworldly women. Connor's wife was very beautiful.

For months no one knew her name. Then one day Connor told his acquaintance Marcus that it was Jennifer. But the name didn't seem to fit her somehow.

Connor's story of meeting her at some port and marrying her when he took a trip along the coast was vague, like his explanation of where she came from. He claimed that they came home by back roads and that's why nobody had seen them arrive. He grew exasperated with all the questions and finally said, "She's my wife now, so stop asking questions and accept her as she is! It doesn't matter where she came from; she's started a new life with me."

The year wore on and Connor and Jennifer went about their lives. The villagers started to become used to them. They lived quietly and happily, at least that's how it seemed.

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*At night the Sea Wife dreams. She dreams of the blue ocean depths where she came from and longs to go back there. Alas she cannot- for the day Connor caught her was the day her freedom ended. He put his net over her and claimed her for his wife.*

*Not that he isn't good to her, he is. He treats her very well. He loves her; she knows that because she can see it in his eyes and feel it in her soul. But she cannot forget how she came to be his and the fact that she had no choice. Her voice was taken away, in more ways than one. She does not speak on land because the humans wouldn't understand her. And no one calls her by her true name, Marissa. No one knows it.*

*Connor took her true skin too and hid it somewhere. Marissa wishes she could find it, perhaps if she could see it again just once she wouldn't feel so much as if a part of her has been torn away.*

*She tries to forget her former life but she cannot, never. She wants to go home, thinks about it night and day. Misses it so much it's like a physical pain in her heart, dragging her down. When Connor asks her, "You're happy aren't you, Jennifer? Happy enough?" she smiles and nods. But deep inside she is wondering if she will ever see her home and her family again. Ever feel the touch of the waves on her true skin.*

A year after Connor had brought his bride to the village, he came home drunk. He'd stayed too long at the pub and had one too many mugs of ale. When he returned to his house he expected to find Jennifer waiting there but she was nowhere to be found.

"Jennifer?" he called, swaying about slightly. "Jennifer! Where are you?"

He searched every inch of the house and then finally stumbled outside. It was a hot summer night with only a breath of wind. He looked up and down the beach, searching for a figure, footprints in the sand, anything. Where on earth could she be?

Suddenly something caught his eye, out on the sea. A silky grey flash. He recognised it, it put him in mind of...God no! Connor went cold as it came to him what it was. The first and only time he'd seen that flash (prior to this) was the day he'd caught Jennifer in the water. He had thought it was a giant, grey fish or a seal and caught it in his net. Then he'd realised it was in fact a woman (very beautiful) covered in a fine skin and he'd been unable to let her go. He knew he'd caught a seal woman and remembered what to do in a case like this. So he had said the magic words he knew from old stories and bound her to him as his wife, taking her skin for safekeeping.

And it had worked! He could hardly believe it but it had. She had been his wife for a year. But there were rules to follow, things to abide by and Connor had failed to keep to them all.

One of them was that you must never strike your sea wife. This one he'd kept, but lately he found himself raising his voice in anger to Jennifer once or twice and he had started to become afraid that his temper would get the better of him. He had believed that once he was married all his problems would disappear but recently he'd felt his dissatisfaction with life returning.

He must also never leave her alone at night, for there was a certain time when the light and weather were just right and she would be guided to her seal skin and thus able to escape. It seemed that tonight was just the time.

Connor felt fear grip his heart, fear and sadness at the thought of Jennifer's loss. He berated himself for relaxing about her this past year, thinking that she wouldn't run if she had the chance. He stayed half an hour longer, looking out to sea but deep inside he knew it was no good to search any longer, she was gone. Eventually he gave up and trudged home to check the chest where he kept her skin, already knowing what he would find- an empty chest.

*From the waves, Marissa watches Connor go. She is grateful for the love he has shown her but in recent months she has become afraid of his temper. She has felt the sea calling her more than ever. And when he left her alone she saw her chance and took it. She saw a light shining, guiding her to her seal skin and now she is back where she belongs.*

*The sea flows around her, soothing. She can feel her family down in the depths, waiting for her.*

*"Bless you, Connor," she says, "may you find the happiness you seek. Find it with someone who comes to you of her own free will. May you never take someone without her consent again. Bless you."*

*After one last look she dives below the waves and vanishes.*

#### Prayer for Safe Voyage/Sailors' Prayer (1)

May the Gods of the sea  
Watch over me  
May my voyage be safe  
And my vessel glide  
Smoothly over the waves  
And when I return to shore  
May I land safe  
Here's to a successful voyage  
And many more!

## Ghosts

It is not just the living who walk the seashore but the dead too. Ghosts of those who have gone before. People who had hopes and dreams once but no longer.

Sometimes, if the time is right and the light (and you are that sort of person) you can see them. See them walking there by the shore, watching the tide come in or going out into the waves. You can see best when it's a grey day, not a sunny one because the light hides them. They slip through the cracks in the brightness.

It is a haunted shore, heavy with energy. Go there if you wish, just be aware you're not alone. They are there too. For nothing ever really dies, it just transforms.

## Wind

The wind blows across the shore, taking people's hopes and dreams with it. Their despairs and regrets are taken too. Sometimes villagers will go for a walk on blustery days to be washed clean by the wind.

Some days the wind is absent, others gentle and light, barely a breeze. And still others it is fierce and strong, you can feel the power in it. See it whipping up the sea. On those days the waves crash against the shore and the people keep to the top of the beach, especially at high tide. On such days the wind sounds mournful and anyone who hears it is reminded of the things they lost, or long for but don't yet have.

Tonight there is a gale; it has been blowing since the afternoon. Now it's growing dark and the villagers are drawing in, preparing meals, gathering around candles. This is the time

when stories are told. Children beg their grandparents to tell tales, spooky ones that chill the blood and thrill the soul but leave you with a sense of gladness for being safe indoors.

“It was on just such an evening as this,” Grandmother says, “that the highwayman rode. Along the road he came, riding, riding, riding. The king’s men were after him and so he made for the beach, galloping at full speed. They pursued him over the shingle, thinking this was madness! Once he reached the water’s edge he would have nowhere to go. But he made right for the sea and then- what do you think he did?”

“Surely he didn’t go in, Grandmother?” Johnny gasps. He looks up at her, waiting. She smiles down at him, drawing out the moment.

“Oh yes, he went right in! Into the waves, deeper and deeper! And then the water closed over his head and he was never seen again.”

“But where did he go?” asks Johnny.

“Some believe he went down to the sea kingdom, far beneath the water and he lives there yet. Lives like a king among the merfolk.”

Once more she smiles down at her grandson, who is growing tired. The day is winding down; there is just time for the evening meal and bed. Grandmother kisses Johnny’s head and they go to join the rest of the family round the table.

That night in bed, Johnny listens to the wind howling outside. The gale is raging but Johnny is safe in his bed. He snuggles down under the covers and as he drifts to sleep, his mind is full of images of the highwayman riding into the sea.

### Sailors’ Prayer (2)

May the gods of the sea watch over me  
May my voyage be safe  
And my vessel strong  
May my heart be glad  
And my life long.

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