



The Selkie Bride

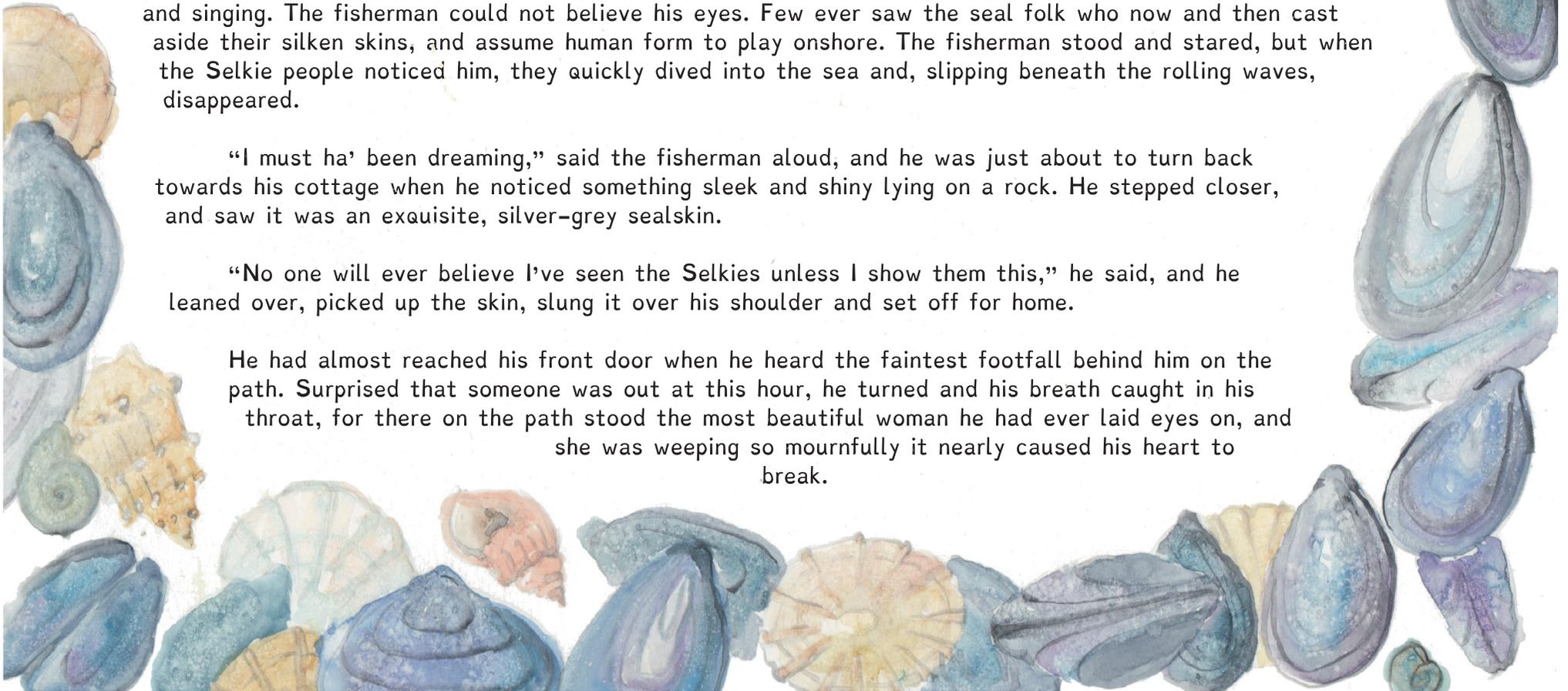
Once, long ago, on the wild Scottish coast, there lived a young fisherman. He spent all the day out at sea and, when night fell, he rowed his catch to the shore and beached his little boat.

One night, as he walked across the pebbly beach, he heard voices singing a sweet and lovely tune, a song more beautiful than any he had ever heard. He scrambled over the rocks towards the sound and saw what few have ever seen. There, near the water, in the light of the moon, a dozen Selkie people were laughing and playing and singing. The fisherman could not believe his eyes. Few ever saw the seal folk who now and then cast aside their silken skins, and assume human form to play onshore. The fisherman stood and stared, but when the Selkie people noticed him, they quickly dived into the sea and, slipping beneath the rolling waves, disappeared.

“I must ha’ been dreaming,” said the fisherman aloud, and he was just about to turn back towards his cottage when he noticed something sleek and shiny lying on a rock. He stepped closer, and saw it was an exquisite, silver-grey sealskin.

“No one will ever believe I’ve seen the Selkies unless I show them this,” he said, and he leaned over, picked up the skin, slung it over his shoulder and set off for home.

He had almost reached his front door when he heard the faintest footfall behind him on the path. Surprised that someone was out at this hour, he turned and his breath caught in his throat, for there on the path stood the most beautiful woman he had ever laid eyes on, and she was weeping so mournfully it nearly caused his heart to break.





“Woman” he said, “why do you weep?”

Looking at him with her soft brown eyes, she said, “Sir, you have taken my sealskin. Kindly give it back, for I belong to the Selkies, and I cannot live under the sea without my skin.”

The fisherman’s heart felt for her plight and yet he already knew he would not give her back her sealskin. You see, in that moment, he had fallen in love with her, and thought he could not live another day without her as his wife. He held the sealskin to his chest, and said gently,

“Fair One, be my wife, for I have fallen in love with you. Come and live with me on the firm, dry land. I’ll make you happy, that I promise.”

“Never could I be happy on land!” she cried, “Let me return to my brothers and sisters in the sea!”

But the young man was stubborn. He smiled as sweetly as he could,

“Dear woman, my cottage is a cosy place. I’ll keep you warm by the fire, I’ll feed you plentifully all the fresh fish you could ever wish to eat. I promise you will live a happy life on land as my bride.”

The young woman was powerless without her sealskin, so she said, “I fear I must go home with you until you will return my skin.” And so the fisherman took her by the hand and led her into his house.

For many weeks the fisherman kept the sealskin close to him for he feared his bride would steal it and slip away. But after some time she began to settle into her life on the land, and when the fisherman saw her growing happiness, he stuffed the skin inside a crevice in the chimney. "There she will never find it," he said to himself.

Another month went by and time passed very nicely indeed. They led a good life, for though the fisherman was stubborn, he was also kind and generous. He truly loved his wife, and he always worked hard to make her comfortable.

After a while the Selkie woman grew to love her husband, and sometimes she would sing to him in her beautiful voice. On those nights he was the happiest man in the world. The months became years and, with their passing, the couple had seven children, all brown eyed and with the sweetest singing voices, and the Selkie loved these lads and lassies with all her heart.

Most of the time the family was very content, though every once in a while, when the children were playing on the shore or hunting for seashells, they would find their mother gazing out to sea and, following her gaze, would ask, "Mother, why do you look so sad?"

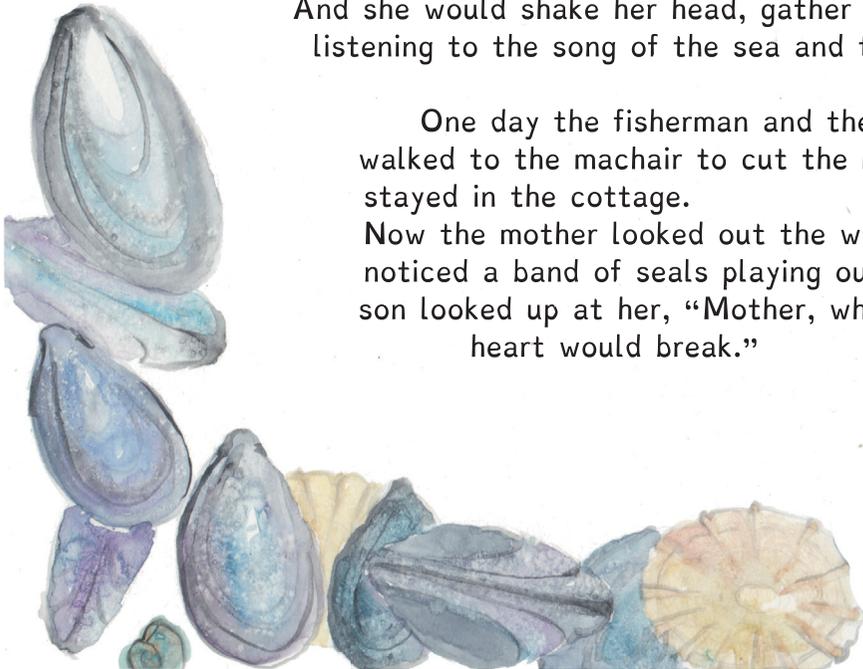
And she would shake her head, gather them to her and kiss their foreheads. "Never you mind," she'd say, "I'm only listening to the song of the sea and the music of the waves."

One day the fisherman and the three eldest children went out in the boat to catch fish. The next three walked to the machair to cut the marram grass for thatching the roof, and the mother and the youngest son stayed in the cottage.

Now the mother looked out the window and watched the waves crashing onshore. Far in the distance she noticed a band of seals playing out in the bay. She sighed deeply, and her eyes filled with tears. The youngest son looked up at her, "Mother, what's wrong?" he asked, "whenever you gaze out to sea, you look as if your heart would break."

Without thinking, and without shifting her gaze, she said, "I'm sad because I was born in the sea and I ache with longing for it. It is the home to which I can never return, because your father has hidden my sealskin."

Now the boy, like all children in Scotland, had heard tales of the Selkie folk, so right away he knew what his mother must be, and he ran to the fireplace, reached up into the chimney space and pulled the sealskin from its hiding place. He held it out to his mother. "How did you find it?" she asked, in astonishment.



“One day I was here alone with father,” said the boy, “and he took this from its hiding place and stared at it. I knew it was special, and now I understand what it is.”

The woman held the sealskin close to her, and then she reached for her child and embraced him.

“My dear child,” she said, “It is time for me to return to my home. The sea calls me and I must answer.” And then, having embraced him one last time, she ran outdoors and down to the shore. At the water’s edge she slipped into her sealskin, dived into the salty water and swam out into the bay, her heart nearly bursting with joy.

Soon after that moment, the fisherman and his three elder children were rowing homewards and they passed a group of seals, playing in the rise and fall of the water.

The fisherman noticed one sleek grey seal gazing at the boat with a strange expression in her deep brown eyes. As they passed by the seal gave a long, plaintive cry and slipped beneath the waves.

When the fisherman arrived home, he learned what had happened, and lamented the loss of his beautiful wife, but he understood that his son had done what he never could, and had shown true love and compassion in letting her return to her people.

Forever afterwards the fisherman and the children missed the Selkie Woman, but knowing she was happy in the world where she belonged gave them a measure of joy. And once or twice when they were out in their boat, and the weather turned rough and the waves grew wild, a group of seals would appear alongside their boat, steering and guiding it to the safety of the harbour. So the children knew that their mother and her people watched over them still. And they and their children’s children were mindful to never hurt any seal, for fear of harming a Selkie.

