

The Sea Woman

(A traditional story from Ireland)

A solitary fisherman walked home along the shore, his net as empty as the life he led by this deep un-giving sea. Wearily he walked to his cottage, threw off his salt-stained boots and lay down to sleep.

His sleep was as restless as the sea. He tossed and turned and then he began to dream and it was then that he saw her. It was her. Pearl. He dreamt of the night they'd met, not the night they danced. Then he dreamt of the night she disappeared. In his sleep he called her. "Pearl! Pearl!"

Suddenly he woke. The moon shone through the window. Quickly he dressed, picked up his net and walked to the shore. He sat on a rock watching the moonlight dance a path across the water. Suddenly a group of seals rose out of the sea. They shed their skins, ran up the shore and danced in the moonlight before him. "Seal women!" The fisherman whispered in astonishment. He watched. His eyes were drawn to one alone. "Pearl?" He cried. "My Pearl?" Returned from the sea after all these years. Her seal skin lay within hands reach. He jumped up shouting her name and grabbed the skin. At the sound of a human voice the Sea Women grabbed their skins and ran back to the safety of the sea, except for one. Alone she stood. Terrified. "Pearl?" He cried. "Returned to me after all these years." He cast his net over her, holding her fast and carried her back to his cottage.

Leaving her locked inside the fisherman hid her seal skin high in the loft of his barn. "Now, you are mine forever," he whispered. Without her skin the sea woman could not return to the sea and so she accepted her fate. She and the fisherman were married, for he was not an unkind man and he loved her very much. Time passed and soon a child was born to them; a beautiful baby girl. The fisherman would bring home treasures from the deep sea caught in his net for his wife and daughter. But somehow, in a landlocked air the gifts lost their shimmer and sparkle. The barn became one of the girl's favourite places to lie and dream. One day, as she lay in the loft, her hand came across something hidden under the hay. It was old and shrivelled. Curious, she ran to her mother immediately and asked her what it might be. Her mother knew straight away. It was her seal skin, lost all those years ago. The Sea Woman grabbed her skin and then kissed her daughter a blan and running towards the water's edge hurriedly slipped into her seal skin and slid beneath the waves. Out in the bay she rose from the water and cried, "I love you my child, always remember, I love you. But I have a husband and children in the sea who have for many years missed me." And with that she glanced one more time at her daughter, she turned, raised a seal arm in farewell and vanished beneath the dark waves.