

# A STORY *in the water*

BY REBECCA FRAIMOW

She tells him stories; every night, after she's tired himself out with trying to find a way home, she tells him a story.

"Once upon a time, there was a woman," she tells him. "She was pretty as humans go—not as beautiful as me." Her tone implies obviousness. To judge from her voice, she is almost always explaining the obvious. "Her skin was that terrible pale pinkish-brown color you have, and her hair was thin and straight, and she kept it tied up."

She runs a hand through her own flowing green locks, waving wild in the water, and smiles. "But all the same," she says, "she was very pretty; and she broke your heart."

He remembers the woman she's talking about, though not as a woman. He remembers her as a young girl. He remembers deciding that he wanted to marry her. He thinks—although he is not sure—that he did.

"She was my wife," he ventures, and the storyteller shrugs graceful shoulders with an air of supreme indifference.

"What do I know about wives?"

That ends the story for that night.

"Once upon a time, there was a man," she tells him. "He was not a very handsome man, but he was a good man, as humans go."

He thinks she may be talking about him. It's sometimes difficult to tell.

"He was in love with a woman who couldn't be his, and it was really very hard for him." She sounds pitying; she is pretending to be kind, but she is not very good at it. "He brought her gifts, pretty dresses and things for the house, and books about love

that conquered all odds. She gave the dresses to her sister and the things for the house to the poor, and the books about love to her friends, who read them and cried. Some of the better ones she read, too—she liked stories—but she wouldn't keep them. She tried to give the man to her friends, too, but he was stubborn, and wouldn't be given away."

"Good for him," he says, still wondering if she's talking about him, and she looks at him in scorn. He knows the look. It means he's misunderstood, and she's wasted her time.

"You didn't think so then."

That ends the story for the night; but he stays up a long time, after, trying to remember the men he's known. He remembers working, long days squinting against the glare on the sea, and long nights drinking with the other men—fishermen?—after that. He remembers laughing. But he can't remember any faces except his own, and he doesn't remember knowing anyone who believed that love conquered all odds, except maybe the girl with the thin straight hair that he thinks might have been his wife.

"Once upon a time, there was a man," she tells him. "He was not a very good man, but he was a handsome man, as humans go. He had a good job, and a woman who loved him, and everyone told him he should have been happy." Her eyes glint like they're speckled with salt. It is clear that this idea amuses her beyond measure.

"Maybe he wanted something else," he says; then, more hesitantly, "Maybe he didn't love the woman."

"Oh, he loved her," she answers, more entertained than ever. "But he was

afraid, and jealous, and he was a fool. The woman was very pretty, true, but not pretty enough to drive men mad. He had no excuse for his foolishness, and a human would say that if he had not been a fool, they might have been very happy indeed."

"And what do you say?"

She smiles at him, pleased, and stretches out a slender finger to caress him under his chin. The finger has no nail.

"I say that if a man acts as foolish as that for no reason, he is of a nature that is likely to make him unhappy regardless of a very pretty, very human wife. I say that a man acting as foolish as that is a sign that he wants something more, and I would say that a man like that would count himself very lucky to have found it."

But he's not listening anymore; he says, "Wife?" and then, "I thought you didn't know anything about wives."

She frowns, drawing back her hand. "I don't," she snaps. "But you *will* keep using the word."

She leaves him, and that ends the story for the night.

"Once upon a time, there was a woman," she tells him, "and you acted very foolishly towards her. You shouted at her, and told her to go, and she thought you meant it, and left, and didn't come back."

He doesn't remember shouting. He remembers a book, and a girl with thin straight hair reading it, and laughing. He remembers wondering where she got it. He remembers asking her, but he doesn't remember shouting.

"I remember a book," he says, out loud.

"You tore out the pages," she answers. "You dropped them in the water. I have them now."

"Do you take everything that falls in the water?"

She laughs, and runs a hand through her thick green hair. The expected, flirtatious answer: "Only the things I like."

She looks at him, and he knows what she wants him to think. It might even be true. But he can't remember it; he can't remember seeing the water from land, and he can't remember lusting after it. He can imagine himself with the book, tearing out the pages one by one and dropping them into the water, but he can't remember it. He can't remember jumping in after them.

He looks away.

"I think I'm going to sleep now," he

says.

That ends the story for that night.

*Once upon a time, the book says, there was a boy and a girl. The girl had golden hair and eyes of blue that flashed violet in her fits of passion; the boy was dark, with sullen grey eyes and more money than he knew what to do with.*

Or at least, so the man believes; some of the letters are unreadable, worn away with the water. He has pieced together the story that he believes to make the most sense, filled in words in his mind if not on the page—he has nothing to write with, nothing that works underwater.

The story has nothing at all to do with him. He does not remember blonde hair. He does not remember money, any money at all, except perhaps a coin handed over a counter here and there. All the same, he

found the pages himself, folded carefully beneath a rock; they were not given to him by her hand to keep him content or discontent, and when he reads he tries not to hear the words in her rhythmic whispering voice.

There are many pages to the story, though not as many as were in the book. It will take him a long time to read through, longer to weave the broken bits together with the most likely strands of narrative. He will keep it secret, he thinks. He will read it every night, and it will be his story.

And by the time he has finished it, he promises himself, he will be gone from here; he will return the pages to the girl he perhaps took them from. He thinks that whoever she is, she deserves to be able to read the end.

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"DREAMS," SARA SISUN