

INTO FOAM

Her garden, unattended all these years, resembles a broken heart. Where a rainbow of corals once flourished and carpeted the little patch of ocean floor, the sandy bottom is now a cemetery of crushed dreams. The corals are dead and splintered – destroyed, pieces strewn by angry hands, mine. Little by little over the years, the current has carried off the remnants of anguish, reminders too tragic to remain. Even fish no longer drift here except perhaps to sigh at the memory of a princess who was once the most beautiful in our world, a princess who was my sister – she who gave her life for love.

It is sixteen years this day since she left, and yet her absence continues to linger like a sullen, stubborn companion unwilling to part. I see her everywhere I swim – in each kelp leaf, behind every pillar, in the light that filters through the water into our world. The images of her once ebullient life consume my mind and rob me of peace. The ocean was forever changed when she traded her tail for legs, but the silence – oh, the silence – felled us like an executioner's axe when she melted into foam. Sorrow seeped into the water like poison. I watched it wrap its arms around my grandmother that day and keep her in its dark embrace for months until the morning she, too, dissolved into foam.

They say death changes things, that it either unifies or disperses. My family became uncomfortable strangers in the aftermath. Loss, unexpressed, lingers in every room. Pain shadows every smile. My father roams the ocean now like a king who has misplaced his belief in joy.

I wonder if he remembers her, the human Prince whose heart my sister chased and never caught. Her cheeks had flushed pink when she spoke of him. A faraway look possessed her kelp-green eyes at the mention of his name. She would steal away in the darkness just to swim to the surface and watch the lights of his castle, to listen to his music whilst hoping to catch a glimpse of his face.

She had a delicate heart, an undying dream of love and a steadfast belief in its salvation. Our vast world was not big enough to contain her imagination. She wanted the air, mountains, sky fishes that flew and sang, and she envied the rigid stumps humans walked on. But mostly, she loved him, the Prince she rescued from a sinking ship the night of his sixteenth birthday. Theirs could have been a romantic tale that ended happily if not for treacherous fate.

Did he ever see her as I did, as I still do? Did she inhabit a place in his heart as he did in hers? Love, it seems, is a dangerous muse who pushes for broken boundaries, uncommon sense, and hazards. My sister took foolish risks. Her kindness was an enemy she did not know she had. She held out her heart to the world as if it was not hers to keep.

I watch him from behind the swells, marvelling at his survival, jealous of his still-beating heart. My sister's ghostly form looks over the pearl-white balustrade, searching for me amongst the ripples, waving her hands at the ocean where her family lives.

He stands straight-backed, hands behind his back, his gaze towards my ocean home. Does he think of her? Is he doing so now? What do human men think of love? Of sacrifice? Does he even know the depths of her devotion? Does he care?

My bosom throbs with the familiar ache that comes at the thought of her, at the injustice of her sacrifice. I would drag him to the bottom of my home if he were within reach. Or would I? My sister had loved him, and that knowledge had stayed my hand in the past. She once told me that love was the ocean current that took you to the deep trenches towards your death or out into open water where newness awaited. To avoid the currents was to live in fear. She said that, but my sister did not know what fear was. Otherwise, she would still be here with me.

The Prince moves down stone steps towards the water's edge, the same steps my sister used so long ago to sit and wait for me at the water's edge in darkness whilst cooling her aching human feet in our healing ocean. It would be easy to grab his arm and swim down, down into the trenches.

The years have given him fuller cheeks and a thick, blond beard. Upon his once unadorned head of hair now nestles a golden crown. His life is an intimation of her lack of it. How simple it would be to seize him now, to turn him into foam as my sister did.

I swim closer, closer than I had in years, hidden behind the waves. I see my sister laughing at me, splashing water into my face. I see her dimpled smile, her kelp-green eyes twinkling in the reflection of the water. I swim closer. Closer.

Papa! A young girl's voice echoes from the balustrade above and jars my thoughts. Her voice tinkles like fairy bells.

I move back into the shadows. A girl with hair the colour of sunshine smiles down at him from above.

What are you doing down there all alone, Papa?

His lips curl. Just thinking of the past, my darling.

What past, Papa? You look sad.

Don't you worry about me, my darling. They're just old memories of times past.

Do you need cheering up? Should I come down?

No, no, my darling. I will come up shortly.

Come soon then, Papa. We are waiting for you for dinner, and I am hungry.

He smiles, eyes glistening in the firelight of the torches that line the path. Yes, yes, Naia. I will come.

My heart turns into a pebble that clatters to the ocean floor, and my breath catches in my throat. Naia! He has given his daughter my sister's name. Had she told him in writing those years ago, or had he chosen it without realising it was hers? Was it love or cruel coincidence that made him name his offspring after her?

I stay behind the swells and watch the two bodies walk away into the distance towards the castle. I stare a hole into the Prince's back, my mind a jumble of incoherent thoughts. He must have felt my gaze because he stops and turns his face towards the ocean as if searching for a sign. But after a few seconds, he turns back and hand-in-hand with his Naia, they become two dots in the distance.

My sister's apparition waves at me, curled lips on her ever-happy face. Despite my fury at her departure, despite my anguish at her loss, she remains joyful as if her torment had been

worthwhile, as if everything she did in her tragic, short existence as a human had been significant.

I watch the craters in her cheeks deepen as her smile widens whilst an ache throbs within my chest, chiselling at my heart. I had thought it was a betrayal what she did to our family. I thought it foolish to love a human. But she had chosen this for herself. None of us could have changed anything. Love, it seems, has its own designs. Maybe he loved her in his way. Maybe she knew that. And maybe it was enough for her. If she was at peace, perhaps I could find it in me, too.

I take a last look at the castle lights; at the place where my sister was happiest. I wave at her ghostly form, at her memory. Then, I dive into the ocean, leaving behind the story of Naia, the little mermaid, to the world above.