

THE STRANGER

Nobody saw him come that day, and nobody save one, knew the manner of his leaving. And not even she could fully grasp who he was or why. To many eyes he was a wild-looking man, his hair tangled and askew in the wind, his clothes roughly made but his stance spoke of other things as he stood for a long time on the edge of the cliff over-looking the water, and then his eyes filled with a strange turmoil although his feet remained firmly lodged upon the yellow cliff stone.

It was a desolate place at the beginning of winter before a pattern of fires and warming substances had established themselves; it was that time between one season and the next when it seemed that the world expelled its breath for a long series of days before drawing it in again, setting things in motion once more. Yet it was here too, if you looked long enough, you sometimes caught the swish and turn of a dolphin or a porpoise, and sometimes the fish came near to the shallows performing a sequence of back-flips for any passing stranger who might chance to watch in the still of an afternoon.

It was on perhaps the third or fourth afternoon he had stood over-looking the ocean that she walked by, down below, clambering over the white stretches of sand and around the point, past the reach of human eye to sit, like a sea-bird, on a fossilized section of rock, running her tongue round the corners of her mouth catching a slight taste of salt in the whip of the wind. He had waited a long time he thought, but at last, and keeping out of sight he followed her, drawn by the length of her hair and her solitary figure, as if she had no need of any other human creature, so sure of herself was the way she walked.

The sun dropped out of sight, glowing like the full-bloated belly of a fish, soaking into the sea, only to be reflected up again through the water once it had gone down. For a few glorious sobering seconds it brimmed, slanting upwards; it was then that they sighted each other, both of them standing in the eerie half-light on separate portions of the headland, their trousers similarly rolled to the knee.

Those seconds spelled a quick destiny, as in fact he had planned, for she drew near to him as if he was something

luminous and magnetic, and they walked in the dusk light the long way round up the cliff then taking the road to her house.

Sitting opposite her sturdy wooden table in the kitchen under the rows of hanging onions and dried herbs, they talked a little; but well after darkness swallowed the cottage, and the night noises trebled in the paddocks pushing up against the eaves, they felt the pull of some deep longing, an undercurrent of ripening emotion. They grew at ease with each other.

Weeks afterwards he came to live at her cottage, helping her with the chicken coop and the goats, watching her in the evenings with a bemused twinkle in his eye, not without a deep fondness, as though he watched someone who did not appear quite real to him, as though all of this was a temporary interlude of pleasant dreaming in the course of his life.

On a peculiarly warm afternoon for that time of the year they walked the sands to the point and beyond, climbing and laughing over the rocks until they came to the tiniest of beaches with a small patch of sand and jutting mounds of seaweed where it seemed the whole world lulled and quietened; they savoured those hours together until as it began to draw chill, they kissed, certainly not for the first time, but a kiss which sent shudders through both of them of some transitory but brilliant emotion. Then, in the certainty that the beach was theirs and theirs alone they made love. And that was for the first time; it seemed they had been saving it up, hoarding the prospect of such pleasure. For a long time they lay together, the gulls silent, drifting into semi-sleep with the sweep of the ocean beside them.

She knew then, watching through half slits a lace of white spray pile into the air, stretching her neck to see further around the point, that their child had been conceived.

As winter progressed and she grew heavy, she lay awake some nights, eyeing her man as he lay in full sleep, and sometimes she heard voices in the darkness that for an instant or two could have been the voices of the sea — like the language of dolphins or other creatures, a trembling and swarming of sea light, until the language came in close to her ear as if such voices erupted from inside her, as if quite unaccountably she existed as part of an under-world, an enigma of the sea. But her

man only shook his head at her as she spoke of such things and felt in the night for her belly and the swell of the child.

By summer too much green was gone and the land shrivelled, but the cottage was cool at night, the doors left open, the wood shed firmly shut. The mid-wife was a sturdy, well-kempt woman who had seen many a birth in these parts and on each occasion she bustled through with a steady practicality and a no-nonsense sort of approach. She smelt comfortable and almost wise.

At the tail-end of the season towards dawn she leant before this mother's womb, urging softly, as she had all evening and into the night, until there, the last stages and out it came, a very white tiny creature, more white than any she had seen, almost an unhealthy phosphorescent white. And as it slipped from one world and into the next, it opened and shut one staring blue eye, as if making an uncanny cursory check on its surroundings before slithering into the midwife's waiting hands.

Ugly thing, she thought privately grabbing a towel, but as she held its ice-white body an involuntary shiver ran down her sturdy bones. A tiny babe, no doubt about that. But more to the point and to her undisguised horror where its legs should have been kicking sprightly no legs kicked at all, but rather, a delicate tail, white and scaly, flapped testily.

Often now, on his own, he took the child down to the sea, allowing it the pleasure of moments beside the cliff face, nestling into the sand.

He even dared to take it beside the water, letting its miniature tail tentatively swish about; the child hushed then, and on its face came the queer countenance for one so young of having found home ground. He was glad that this was the place he had chosen, free from prying eyes and stinging tongues, and watched with delight as the child's tail turned from white to brown to green, a shimmering green which darted at the glimmer of sunlight.

Late one afternoon, the three of them were down by the sea; a charming and picturesque scene they made from a distance, picking up shells or driftwood, though the woman had an

air of sorrow about her, one which she strained to conceal with a noble, upright poise. As they strolled along the sea-edge the sun dropped curiously out of sight, too soon it seemed for sunset. In that instant a thin vestige of darkness fell, enveloping all three. The woman blinked, once, again. Then as the sun flickered for the last time that day, slanting into her eyes, she felt the soft movement of his lips brush across hers, and for a second that same expression of joy born months before came rushing at her, as if to turn her inside out. In that moment she had time to glimpse this terrible surrender.

Her child, slippery and green-tailed, slipping with the waves into the water, flapping and tossing its tail with the tide and into the ocean. Like a billowing of sea-moss upon the surface.

Forgetting her man she plunged into the sea and swam, calling and crying, thrashing through the waves, diving with the current, pushing her arms with a fierce-faced energy.

As the sun went and the moon rose, full and beaming as if with some prior knowledge of this turn of events, she stood up, neck high in the water, ceased her thrashing and called again.

There was no answer, but a long way out, caught in the moonlight was a flicker of not one tail but two, darting on the surface with the faint menace of apparitions, until they were gone.

Except for the strain of a chilling waif-like song which snuck, muted, into her water-clogged ears, one strand high-pitched and callow, the other deeper and more familiar. Through the water came the ripple of a strung-out shudder, horribly magnetic, warming every vein in her body, tugging at her to move onwards, on into the moonlit sea.

But she dug her toes into the sandy bottom, staring ahead like a woman fighting off a trance, for something else tugged now, a confusion of earth and air and wind and sea, a silent heavy knowledge of the sea, and with it a soft, earth-bound longing. Before the song could tighten its grip, before the call of the ocean could pierce her drums, she swivelled, and waded back to shore.

Back in the cottage she huddled into the crook of an armchair, numbed and distant. It was only later, far down inside her, coming from a long way off, she thought perhaps some querulous balance of the ocean had been restored, and it had no need of her, not now.

Though too, often in her dreams she saw the queer puckering of her child's face grow beautiful, and heard a faint and perfect melody of some deep and ancient voice fall flooding through her ears.