

The Moral of the Story

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Characters

The Female Subject of the Story

The Male Subject of the Story

*She sits cross-legged,
maybe on a cushion, maybe a
little raised - traditional
story-telling look. He
lies at her feet. Her feet
are bare. He wears shoes.*

FEMALE SUBJECT

A man on a beach sees three beautiful women, three beautiful naked women. Singing. They see him, see him watching them. They snatch up seal skins from the sand beside them - he hadn't noticed the seal skins before - and they run to the ocean, pulling the skins over their heads, turning into seals in the surf. Good luck catching a seal once it's in the water, man. Man on the beach starts his day very early the next day. He hides in the rocks by the sea. He watches three seals pull themselves out of the waves, slip out of their skins as beautiful women with no clothes. He dashes, grabs, snatches up a skin. Two women run back to the sea, turn into seals. The third skitters in the surf, just a naked woman having a panic attack. The man standing there with her skin in his hands.

MALE SUBJECT

I see. Touching her skin. Stroking the skin of a beautiful woman as she lies naked on the beach.

*He reaches out for her
foot. She, maybe without
even noticing that he was
doing that, jumps up and
begins to walk rapidly in a
circle around the stage.
He gets up too, following
her with his eyes but not
his feet.*

FEMALE SUBJECT

He walks away and she has to follow him. Stay with him, marry him, have his children. He keeps her skin hidden away. I go through this part of the story quickly.

*She starts to go back to
where she was sitting, but
he catches her by the
wrist.*

MALE SUBJECT

But that was his happily ever after. She marries him. She wears the clothes he gave her; she had no clothes of her own.

He slips his hand around her stomach, under her shirt.

He brings her food.

He puts his hand over her mouth.

After she's stopped asking him where it is, pleading with him to give it back. She lies in his bed (she has no bed of her own) and he touches her human skin and maybe she begs for other things. And every morning he leaves her sleeping - he's good about waking up early - and slips to the loose stone in the floor where he keeps her seal skin. Every morning he rubs it with oil.

He steps away from her slowly. She looks at him evenly.

FEMALE SUBJECT

Did he always know he'd have to do that, or did he watch her get sick and grey in the face before he figured out that she'd collapse if the skin dried up and cracked?

MALE SUBJECT

If he hadn't known, wouldn't he just have burned it? He must have known. You figure these things out if you're clever. And she had babies, two babies, two of his babies. One little boy and one little girl. Such big dark eyes like hers. Such fast little feet like his.

He grabs towards her again but she dodges.

FEMALE SUBJECT

She never seemed very good at having feet. So when the little girl - who's good about waking up early - sits staring at her as she works and then asks her why daddy keeps a seal skin in the floor, she runs with a stumbling kind of run to pry it out, and runs with a stumbling kind of run into the sea, and in the surf becomes a seal.

MALE SUBJECT

And he comes home and his house is cold and his children are crying and they ask him when she's coming back and how long can he go on saying soon, soon, someday soon? How long can he go on telling himself that she must really have loved him a little?

Somehow he's found himself off his feet.

FEMALE SUBJECT

She saves him. Later. He's in a storm at sea, he's going to drown, and she saves him.

He's hugging his knees.

MALE SUBJECT

As a seal. Not as the woman he held and loved.

SUBJECT

She couldn't have saved him, except as a seal.

Pause.

Do you think he would have taken her skin again, if she'd let it slip?

Longer pause. He gets up, moving, not leaving but wanting to go somewhere, not looking at her.

What is the moral of this story?

He turns back toward her, or perhaps to the audience.

MALE SUBJECT

The woman in your bed is a wild animal; she will run if she isn't held; it doesn't matter how many times you've held her when she slept, or cried, or cried in her sleep - she will leave you alone and cold and lying to everyone including myself to make myself feel better but feeling worse since I know that I'm lying every time I say she loved me.

Very definitely to her:

Hold her down. That's the moral. If you want her, hold

her down; it's the closest you'll get.

FEMALE SUBJECT

Run. The moral is, run. The man who says he loves you is a jailor and a thief. He should never have had your love in the first place; he had no right to it.

MALE SUBJECT

Everybody knows the only way to get somebody's heart is to steal it. Asking never works; there are hundreds of volumes of poems by men who are begging to be loved, and none of them did a damn bit of good; they all end up the same: alone and fucking miserable, writing poems. That's how they go. She turned away and broke my heart. Her hair was yellow and I was undone.

FEMALE SUBJECT

I am undone, said the lady in the ballad. She finds she's come undone with all the things to do in life still left undone because he's done her and she knows that what is done can't be undone but now he's done with her.

*She makes a violent gesture
of finality. Done. Over.
Silence.*

That's a lot of doing, but do you hear what I mean?

Silence.

You think I never woke up with my head against nobody's shoulder, remembering that nobody thinks I'm worth coming back to?

MALE SUBJECT

It isn't always children. I mean, it's a folk story; it's different every time. So sometimes there are no children. There's a knock on the door on a stormy night and there's a stranger at the door.

FEMALE SUBJECT

Did you hear what I said?

*He takes her place, where
she had been sitting,
cross-legged. She stays
standing.*

MALE SUBJECT

And the man lets the stranger in, and they give him food and a place to sleep by the fire. And the stranger stares at the seal-wife, as she cooks the food and gets on her knees to smooth out his blanket. And he pretends to close his eyes but instead he narrows them, watching as the man holds tight to his wife through the night, and early in the morning as he pries up the stone and takes out the skin. And the stranger pretends to leave but when the man's gone, the stranger comes back to the house and he takes out the skin and he holds it out to her.

FEMALE SUBJECT

How could you not hear what I said?

MALE SUBJECT

Which version makes you hate her more? The one where she abandons her children, or the one where she leaves him for another man?

Silence.

It's objectively bad to abandon children, right?

He gets up, pacing - she steps back, afraid he's chasing her, though he isn't.

And the kid who told her about the skin blames herself for her mother's leaving. And maybe her father does to, and even if he doesn't say so, doesn't she feel it? And maybe he does say it, maybe he gets drunk or angry or both and screams it. And her brother standing there with this roaring current of blame and rage running back and forth between his father and his sister and his mother is gone; it's like standing so close to the third rail you think you can hear your skin sizzle; it's like standing on shore watching somebody dragged out and smothered by the rip tide; *if she hadn't gone it wouldn't have to be like that.*

FEMALE SUBJECT

You weren't listening when I - but - if she'd stayed - the current between the two of them, hate and dependence and one of them calling it love -

He grabs her by the throat.

MALE SUBJECT

But I hate her more for leaving with the stranger. So the man's a jailor, a kidnapper, a thief. He hurt her, forced her, broke her. *Whatever*. I concede it. For the purposes of argument. The point is, *he did the work*. Her life as a woman - he made it. And the stranger gets that - how she talks, how she fucks, how she cooks and wears her clothes - he *profits* from her husband's work, and she *doesn't* even *hate him for it*.

He's not aiming to cut off her air supply - he only means to hold her - but his hands get tighter and she's fighting him, which is not a fight she could win unless he wanted her to.

She really ought to hate him, don't you think?

He lets her go. Silence. She looks at him. He doesn't look sorry at all. Slowly she goes back to her place, crosses her legs.

FEMALE SUBJECT

I mentioned the end of the story. An end of the story. He sets to sail at a bad time. He can't help looking at the sea, but he doesn't understand it; he doesn't get what he's seeing when he sees the choppy waves and white caps and all. So he sets to sail, and he's smashed out of the boat, no way out of the water - which is freezing cold - swallowing and swallowing without meaning to. And then underneath him something warm comes,

He lies at her feet again.

and he throws his arms around it, and he's pulled, faster than he's ever moved, anywhere, anytime, dragged. The seal pulls him to where he can almost stand, and then she turns in his arms to look at him and then she dives out of his arms. And good luck catching a seal in the water.

He strokes her bare foot. She lets him. He looks up at her.

MALE SUBJECT

There's another ending. It's a folk story. Everybody tells it differently. So there's an ending where he goes to sea. And from the boat he sees a seal. It looks at him; he knows those big dark eyes. And he shoots it dead.

She tries to get up but he holds tightly to her foot.

I wouldn't. I never would. I never, never would.

FEMALE SUBJECT

Let me go.

MALE SUBJECT

What's in the sea? Fish and kelp and cold water. I can bring you fish and kelp and cold salt water. The sea can't bring you me.

FEMALE SUBJECT

I know. Let me go!

MALE SUBJECT

You love me. Don't you? I know you do. *I know you do.* I can feel it in your skin; there's a charge, there's a current!

FEMALE SUBJECT

Let me go!

MALE SUBJECT

Why. Why should I. Tell me why I should let you go and do something that leaves both of us worse off - remember? I can give you the sea; the sea can't give you me.

FEMALE SUBJECT

I know; I know; I love you; let me go; let me fucking go.

MALE SUBJECT

Why?

She tries even harder to get away than she had been, and he pulls harder at her heel, and she falls. He drags her underneath him and holds onto her.

The woman in my bed is a wild animal; she will run if she isn't held, and it won't matter how much I love her and I do and maybe it's not perfect selfless open-handed love but anyone who says they love like that's a liar -

FEMALE SUBJECT

The man who says he loves me is a jailor and a thief -

MALE SUBJECT

But what should I do?

*She lies still. Silence.
He rolls off.*

You wish you'd never met me.

FEMALE SUBJECT

No.

MALE SUBJECT

Because when she sees him on the beach she runs. He can stay far away and quiet and watch her. What kind of choice is that? A shitty one. Pretty hopeless and sterile and really much lonelier than I think anybody could stand. And it's that or steal, so...

Silence.

Doesn't it get lonely in the ocean? Cold water and kelp. Fish make lousy conversation; they're never sympathetic to your problems, and if they make you laugh it's only by accident.

She laughs or smiles a little. Helplessly:

What am I supposed to do?

FEMALE SUBJECT

Suppose he went and walked on the beach. Let the seal woman and her sisters run away when he came. Suppose he kept walking. They were singing when he saw them. Suppose he walked on the beach and sang. Maybe a girl from his town comes down to the beach and hears him.

He gives her an incredulous look.

MALE SUBJECT

That's your advice. Go find a nice girl.

*She goes back into the
storytelling pose.*

FEMALE SUBJECT

She's not just a *nice girl*. Maybe she comes and talks to him. Maybe he really likes her. Really likes her a lot. She's hotter than a seal woman, really. She has blue eyes. She wears her clothes *really* well; they *really*... fit her, you know? She walks lightly in the sand, on slender feet; you can tell she knows how to dance. You can tell that if you saw her dance you'd know she knows how to fuck. Her voice walks that line between whiskey and candy shop. You wouldn't have to *make* her beg; she'd know you liked that and she'd do it for you. Maybe later, there in the sand. And if the seal was watching with it's head just above the wave; you wouldn't notice and you wouldn't care.

*A very, very long silence.
Long enough to do some
thinking in.*

MALE SUBJECT

She'd know - that girl would know he'd like it if she begged. Where'd she learn that? Who told her that that's a thing men like?

FEMALE SUBJECT

I don't know. Somebody. You pick these things up.

MALE SUBJECT

That's not an easy thing to tell somebody. When you go to bed with someone, it's hard to ask for that.

FEMALE SUBJECT

You wouldn't have to. Like I say. She'd have picked it up.

MALE SUBJECT

Somebody else would have done the work. The dirty work of telling her. So to speak. He'd profit from it.

Short silence.

And what if he still went to the beach sometimes and watched for the naked woman who was a seal from time to

time? Left the blue-eyed girl asleep in bed and looked for her? Is that how this story ought to go?

FEMALE SUBJECT

Is the man in her bed a wild animal? Should she hold him down? You think I've never been left? Never woke up with my head against nobody's shoulder?

Very gently, he pulls her down to him, holds her, her head against his shoulder. Then he slips away and assumes her place, cross-legged.

MALE SUBJECT

Maybe he walks on the beach and sings. Maybe he sings and the seal hears him. Maybe she swims to the shallows and listens to him, the stupid catchy pop song he's singing. It's got a good beat; maybe he taps his foot on a rock. You could dance to that beat. Even if you weren't good on your feet; some people are bad on their feet but good with their hips. Maybe you'd like that song enough to come out of the ocean.

FEMALE SUBJECT

Maybe.

He starts untying his shoes.

MALE SUBJECT

Or maybe you'd just be curious, and even if you didn't come out of the sea right then you might slip after him at night, watch him when he slept. See how lonely he is. Just like you're lonely in the sea.

FEMALE SUBJECT

Maybe.

MALE SUBJECT

Or maybe, okay, *fine*.

He throws one of his shoes away.

So he's done it already. Fucked it up. Stolen her. Made her follow him home. Maybe he sees how much she fucking

hates him, and so he takes the skin and throws it back to her, *fine,*

He throws the other shoe.

fine, go back to the fucking ocean. Enjoy the fucking fish. See if I fucking care, because I fucking don't, okay? And then he goes dancing with the blue-eyed girl, who is really good at it, and he takes her down to the beach so he can kiss her right there in front of all the fucking sea-life, and after he takes her home he goes back to the ocean, and there's the seal woman -

FEMALE SUBJECT

Maybe!

MALE SUBJECT

Yeah! Maybe! Maybe that's how the story goes! Maybe that's the story I'm going to tell!

She strikes the storyteller's pose, right back at him.

FEMALE SUBJECT

It's a fucking folk tale! You can tell it any way you want to! That's the fucking point of folk stories! Everything depends on who gets to tell it!

They inhale and begin:

MALE SUBJECT

So, once upon a time, there was this man who was walking on the beach -

FEMALE SUBJECT

So, once upon a time, there was this woman who was also a seal -