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The Little Mermaid

Reading level 13 · 2644 words

Far out at sea, where the water is as blue as a cornflower and as translucent as glass, the ocean is so extraordinarily deep that no anchor has ever touched the bottom, and it was there that the Sea King had built his magnificent palace. Its walls were made of coral, its tall windows were cut from clear amber, and its roof was a crown of mussel shells that opened and closed with the movement of the tide, every one of them holding a luminous pearl. The king lived there with his aged mother and his six daughters, who were all mermaids, and the youngest of them had the most enchanting voice in the entire ocean, together with eyes as dark and blue as the deepest water.

Each of the princesses kept a little garden outside the palace wall,. One shaped her flowerbed like a whale and another like a mermaid, but the youngest made hers perfectly round, like the sun, and planted it with nothing except flowers as red as the evening sky. In the middle she set a marble statue of a handsome boy, which had fallen from a wrecked ship. She was a contemplative, reserved child, and she loved the hour when her grandmother described the world above the waves, with its cities and forests and singing birds. "When you are fifteen," the old queen promised, "you may rise to the surface and sit on the rocks in the moonlight." One after another, the elder sisters ascended and returned with extraordinary accounts, but the youngest had to wait the longest of all.

When her fifteenth birthday came at last, she rose through the water as lightly as a bubble, and her head appeared above the sea just as the sun was sinking. A magnificent ship lay stationary on the calm water, with lanterns suspended from every mast, and music floated across the deck, where the mariners were dancing around a young prince who was commemorating his birthday. Fireworks burst over the water in red and gold, and the little mermaid, who had never imagined anything so spectacular, could not take her eyes away from the prince. She remained beside the vessel, enchanted by the entire celebration, until long after the dancing had ended and the stars had appeared above her.

Late in the night, a tremendous wind rose, and a tempest came roaring out of the darkness. The enormous waves piled themselves into black mountains and flung the vessel about like a plaything, until the masts cracked and the sea poured over the deck and the whole vessel broke apart. The little mermaid, who had thought the storm thrilling, suddenly saw the prince sinking into the water, and she remembered that human beings cannot live in the sea. She plunged between the heavy timbers, which might easily have crushed her, and found him with his eyes closed and his strength gone. She supported his head above the surface and allowed the current to carry them both until morning, when the storm was over and the sun

rose red and tranquil.

She brought him to a green shore, where a white building with a golden dome stood among tall trees, and she gently laid him tenderly on the warm sand with his head elevated toward the sun. Then she hid behind some rocks in the foam to watch who would come. Bells began to ring, and a group of young girls came out into the garden, and one of them discovered the unconscious prince on the beach and ran for help. He opened his eyes and smiled at her, but he never knew who had truly rescued him, because the little mermaid remained hidden. She watched him being carried inside, and then she dived back to her father's palace, more melancholy than she had ever been.

She confided in nobody about what had happened, but she could not forget it. Again and again she returned to the place where she had left the prince but she never once saw him. At last one of her sisters, who happened to be acquainted with the prince's kingdom, told her where he lived. Then the little mermaid went to her grandmother and asked the question that had troubled her for so long. "Do people live forever, if they are not drowned?" "No," said the aged queen. "Their existence is considerably briefer than ours. We live three hundred years, but when we end we become foam on the water, because we have no immortal soul. A human being has a soul that goes on living in the sky when the body has crumbled into dust."

"I would give all my three hundred years," said the little mermaid, "to be a human being for a single day." "You must not even think of it," said the aged queen. "We are considerably happier down here than the unfortunate people above." But the little mermaid could not be consoled, and at last her grandmother told her the truth. "There is only one possibility. If somebody loved you more than his own father and mother, and a priest joined your hands in marriage, then part of his soul would flow into you. But that can never happen, because the tail that we think so beautiful is regarded as hideous on land, where human beings possess two clumsy supports that they call legs." The little mermaid sighed and contemplated her tail, and then she resolved to consult the sea witch.

The witch lived beyond the roaring whirlpools, in a desolate swamp where the trees were half animal and half plant, and every branch reached out like a serpent. The little mermaid was so petrified that she almost turned back, but she thought of the prince and swam on. The witch sat in a cottage constructed from the skeletons of drowned mariners, and she laughed when she saw her visitor. "I know precisely what you want," she said. "It is extraordinarily foolish, and it will bring you sorrow. I will prepare a potion, and you must swallow it on the shore before sunrise. Your tail will divide and shrink into what people call legs, and it will hurt as if a sword were passing through you. But everyone who sees you will say that you walk more elegantly than any person they have ever met."

"I will do it," said the little mermaid, and her voice trembled with apprehension. "But remember this," said the witch. "Once you have a human shape, you can never be a mermaid again. If

the prince does not love you enough to marry you, then on the morning after he marries somebody else, your heart will break and you will dissolve into foam on the waves." "I will do it," said the little mermaid, as pale as a ghost. "And you must pay me," said the witch. "I will have your voice, the sweetest in the sea, for my own spells." "But if you take my voice," said the little mermaid, "what will I have left?" "Your lovely shape," said the witch, "your gliding walk, and your eyes, which can say a great deal." So the little mermaid gave her voice away.

She swam up past her father's deserted palace and her sisters' gardens, and she rose through the blue water toward the land. Before the sun had risen, she sat down on the marble steps of the prince's house and swallowed the witch's potion. It burned like a two-edged sword, and she collapsed and lay there as if she were dead. When the sun came up, she opened her eyes, and the young prince was standing over her. "Who are you, and where have you come from?" he asked gently. She could only gaze at him with her deep blue eyes, which expressed an entire language of sorrow, for she was unable to speak. He led her into the palace, and every step she took felt like walking on sharp knives, which she endured willingly because it was possible to be near him.

They dressed her in expensive silk and muslin, and she was the most graceful person in the entire palace, although she never uttered a word. One evening some singing girls came to perform for the prince and the king, and one of them sang so sweetly that the prince smiled and applauded her, which made the little mermaid sad, because she had once sung with far greater skill. Then she rose up on her toes and danced, more elegantly than anyone there had ever danced, and her eyes spoke more deeply than any song. Everyone was delighted, and the prince most of all, who called her his little foundling and declared that she should never leave him. She slept on a velvet cushion outside his door, and she danced until her feet were bruised, and nobody knew it.

She rode beside him through the forest and climbed with him along mountain paths, until they stood above the clouds and watched them sail beneath their feet like flocks of white birds. At night, when the entire household was asleep, she went down to the water's edge and bathed her burning feet in the cold sea, and thought about her home below. One night her sisters rose together out of the waves, singing a mournful melody, and she waved to them, and after that they came every night. Once she even observed her venerable grandmother, who had not been above the water for years, and the Sea King with his crown upon his head. They extended their hands toward her, but they did not dare to come as near the shore as her sisters.

The prince cherished her as one loves a dear child, but it never occurred to him, even for a moment, to make her his wife. "You are dearer to me than anyone," he told her one day, "because you have the most compassionate heart, and you remind me of a girl I saw once and shall never see again. I was on a ship that sank, and the waves washed me up near a convent, where a young girl found me and saved my life. She is the only person I could ever

love." Behind her silent expression, the little mermaid reflected, "He does not know that it was I who carried him through the sea. But the girl from the convent is more beautiful than I am, and it is she whom he adores."

Before long the announcement arrived that the prince must marry the daughter of the king next door. "I will not," he told the little mermaid. "I cannot love her. If I must choose a bride, I would rather choose you, my silent foundling with the speaking eyes." But when he travelled to meet the princess and saw her, she was the very girl from the convent, now fully grown and as radiant as a spring morning. "It was you!" he cried. "You found me on the beach!" and he held his bride in his arms. "I am so happy," he told the little mermaid, "and you will be glad for me, because you love me more than anyone does." The little mermaid kissed his hand, and she felt that her heart had already been broken.

On the wedding night, the bride and bridegroom went aboard a ship that carried a tent of purple and gold. Lamps glowed in the rigging, and the mariners danced, and the little mermaid danced as well, although every step felt like a knife. She understood perfectly that it was her final evening to breathe the air he breathed, or to look at the deep sea and the starry sky. Long after midnight, when the ship had grown quiet, she stood alone at the rail and looked toward the east for the first pink light of dawn, which would be her last. Then her sisters came up out of the waves. They were as ghostly pale as she was, and their long hair, which had once streamed in the wind, was gone.

"We gave our hair to the witch, so that you would not have to die tonight," they said. "She gave us this knife. Before the sun rises, you must plunge it into the prince's heart. When his warm blood runs over your feet, they will grow together into a tail, and you will become a mermaid again and come home to us. Hurry, because time is almost exhausted! Either he or you must die before sunrise. Our grandmother is lamenting so deeply that her white hair is falling out, as ours was cut off by the witch's scissors. Kill him and come back to us. Do you not see the crimson streaks in the sky?" Then they sighed deeply and sank sorrowfully beneath the waves.

The little mermaid drew back the purple curtain of the tent, where the bride lay asleep with her head on the prince's chest. She bent down and kissed his forehead, and then she looked at the sky, where the dawn was growing brighter, and at the knife, and at the prince, who murmured his bride's name in his dream. The knife shook in her hand, and suddenly she flung it far out into the waves, and the water turned red where it fell. She gave the prince one final look through her tears, and then she threw herself from the ship into the sea, and she felt her body melting into foam.

The sun emerged over the horizon, and its warm rays fell upon the cold foam, but the little mermaid, to her astonishment, did not feel as if she were dying. She saw the bright sun, and above her floated hundreds of translucent, graceful creatures, so ethereal that she could see

the ship's white sails and the red clouds through them. Their voices were like music, far too delicate for human ears. She comprehended that she had a body like theirs and was rising higher and higher out of the foam. "Where am I?" she asked, and her voice also sounded like music. "With the daughters of the air," one of them answered. "A mermaid has no immortal soul unless she wins a human being's love. But we can earn a soul by our own good deeds, and so can you."

"We fly to the hot countries, where the stifling air carries disease, and we cool it. We carry the fragrance of flowers through the sky to bring comfort and healing. When we have done all the good we can for three hundred years, we receive an immortal soul and share in the felicity of mankind. You, poor little mermaid, have tried with your whole heart to do what we do. You have endured suffering with patience, and you have raised yourself into the world of spirits. Now, by three hundred years of good deeds, you may win a soul of your own." The little mermaid lifted her shining eyes toward the sun, and for the first time they filled with tears.

On the ship, the noise and the commotion had begun again, and she saw the prince and his bride searching for her. Mournfully they gazed intently at the pearly foam, as if they knew that she had thrown herself into the waves. Invisible to everyone, she kissed the bride's forehead and smiled at the prince, and then she ascended with the other children of the air to a rosy cloud floating high in the sky. "In three hundred years, we shall float into the kingdom of heaven," she said. "And we may arrive sooner," whispered one of her companions. "Unseen, we float into the houses where children live, and for every day that we find a well-behaved child, who is a delight to his parents, our time of probation is made shorter."

Questions

1. What did the little mermaid do when the ship broke apart in the storm?

A. She swam home to her sisters
B. She found the prince and held his head above the water
C. She hid behind the rocks

2. What did the sea witch take as her payment?

A. Her tail
B. Her pearls
C. Her voice

3. Why did the little mermaid throw the knife into the sea?

A. She could not bear to hurt the prince who did not know her
B. She was afraid of the witch
C. Her sisters asked her to

4. In this story, "graceful" means —

A. moving in a smooth, lovely way
B. very angry
C. hard to find

5. What happened to the little mermaid at sunrise?

A. She turned into foam and vanished for good
B. She became a daughter of the air and could earn a soul
C. She grew her tail back and went home

6. What does this story suggest about the little mermaid's love?

A. She gave up everything for him, and her kindness was rewarded in the end
B. She should have taken the knife
C. She was foolish to leave the sea

Words to know

amber: golden-brown stone
immortal: never dying
foundling: child found alone
whirlpools: spinning water
rigging: ship's ropes
graceful: smooth and lovely

Answer key: The Little Mermaid

1. B. She found the prince and held his head above the water
2. C. Her voice
3. A. She could not bear to hurt the prince who did not know her
4. A. moving in a smooth, lovely way
5. B. She became a daughter of the air and could earn a soul
6. A. She gave up everything for him, and her kindness was rewarded in the end