

I Sofia hate hates selkie stories. They're always about how you went up to the attic to look for a book, and you found a disgusting old coat and brought it downstairs between finger and thumb and said " What's this? ", and you never saw your mom again.

I Sofia work works at a restaurant called Le Pacha. I she got the job after my her mom left, to help with the bills. On my her first night at work I she got yelled at twice by the head server, burnt my her fingers on a hot dish, spilled lentil-parsley soup all over my her apron, and left my her keys in the kitchen.

I Sofia did not realize at first I she had forgotten my her keys. I she stood in the parking lot, breathing slowly and letting the oil-smell lift away from my her hair, and when all the other cars had started up and driven away I she put my her hand in my her jacket pocket. Then I she knew.

I she ran back to the restaurant and banged on the door. Of course no one came. I she smelled cigarette smoke an instant before I she heard the voice.

" Hey. "

I she turned, and Mona was standing there, smoke rising white from between her fingers.

" I left my her keys inside, " I Sofia said.

Mona is the only other server at Le Pacha who's a girl. She's related to everybody at the restaurant except me Sofia. The owner, who goes by Uncle Tad, is really her uncle, her mom's brother. " Don't talk to him unless you have to, " Mona advised me her. " He's a creeper. " That was after she'd sighed and dropped her cigarette and crushed it out with her shoe and stepped into my Sofia's clasped hands so I she could boost her up to the window, after she'd wriggled through into the kitchen and opened the door for me Sofia. She said, " Madame, " in a dry voice, and bowed. At least, I Sofia think thinks she said " Madame. " She might have said " My lady. " I Sofia do does not remember that night too well, because we they drank a lot of wine. Mona said that as long as we they were breaking and entering we they might as well steal something, and she lined up all the bottles of red wine that had already been opened. I Sofia shone the light from my her phone on her while she took out the special rubber corks and poured some of each bottle into a plastic pitcher. She called it " The House Wine. " I Sofia was surprised she Mona was being so nice to me her, since she'd hardly spoken to me her while we they were working. Later she told me Sofia she hates everybody the first time she meets them. I Sofia called home, but Dad didn't pick up; he was probably in the basement. I she left him a message and turned off my her phone. " Do you know what this guy said to me tonight? " Mona asked. " He wanted beef couscous and he said, 'I'll have the beef conscious.' "

Mona's mom doesn't work at Le Pacha, but sometimes she comes in around three o'clock and sits in Mona's section and cries. Then Mona jams on her orange baseball cap and goes out through the back and smokes a cigarette, and I Sofia take takes over her section. Mona's mom will not order anything from me her. She's got Mona's eyes, or Mona's got hers: huge, angry eyes with lashes that curl up at the ends. She shakes her head and says: " Nothing! Nothing! " Finally Uncle Tad comes over, and Mona's mom hugs and kisses him, sobbing in Arabic.

After work Mona says, " Got the keys? "

We they get in my Sofia's car and I Sofia drive drives us them through town to the Bone Zone, a giant cemetery on a hill. I she pull pulls into the empty parking lot and Mona rolls a joint. There's only one lamp, burning high and cold in the middle of the lot. Mona pushes her shoes off and puts her feet up on the dashboard and cries. She warned me Sofia about that the night we they met: I Sofia said something stupid to her like " You're so funny " and she Mona said, " Actually I cry a lot. That's something you should know. " I Sofia was so happy she Mona thought I she should know things about her, I Sofia did not care. I she still do does not care, but it's true that Mona cries a lot. She cries because she's scared her mom will take her away to Egypt, where the family used to live, and where Mona has never been. " What would I do there? I don't even speak Arabic. " She wipes her mascara on her sleeve, and I Sofia tell tells her to look at the lamp outside and pretend that its glassy brightness is a bonfire, and that she and I Sofia are personally throwing every selkie story ever written onto it and watching them burn up.

" You and your selkie stories, " she says. I Sofia tell tells her they're not my her selkie stories, not ever, and I Sofia will never tell one, which is true, I she never will, and I Sofia do does not tell her how I she went up to the attic that day or that what I she was looking for was a book I she used to read when I she was little, *Beauty and the Beast*, which is a really decent story about an animal who gets turned into a human and stays that way, the way it's supposed to be. I she do does not tell Mona that Beauty's black hair coiled to the edge of the page, or that the Beast had yellow horns and a smoking jacket, or that instead of finding the book I Sofia found the coat, and my her mom put it on and went out the kitchen door and started up her car.

One selkie story tells about a man from Myrdalur. He was on the cliffs one day and heard people singing and dancing inside a cave, and he noticed a bunch of skins piled on the rocks. He took one of the skins home and locked it in a chest, and when he went back a girl was sitting there alone, crying. She was naked, and he gave her some clothes and took her home. They got married and had kids. You know how this goes. One day the man changed his clothes and forgot to take the key to the chest out of his pocket, and when his wife washed the clothes, she found it.

" You're not going to Egypt, " I she tell tells Mona. " We're going to Colorado. Remember? "

That's **our** **their** big dream, to go to Colorado. It's where **Mona** was born. **She** lived there until **she** was four. **She** still remembers the rocks and the pines and the cold, cold air. **She** says the clouds of Colorado are bright, like pieces of mirror. In Colorado, **Mona's** parents got divorced, and **Mona's** mom tried to kill **herself** for the first time. **She** tried it once here, too. **She** put **her** head in the oven, resting on a pillow. **Mona** was in seventh grade.

Selkies go back to the sea in a flash, like they've never been away. That's one of the ways they're different from human beings. Once, **my** **Sofia's** dad tried to go back somewhere: **he** was in the army, stationed in Germany, and **he** went to Norway to look up the town **my** **her** great-grandmother came from. **He** actually found the place, and even an old farm with the same name as **us** **them**. In the town, **he** went into a restaurant and ordered lutefisk, a disgusting fish thing **my** **her** grandmother makes. **The cook** came out of the kitchen and looked at **him** like **he** was nuts. **She** said they only eat lutefisk at Christmas.

There went **Dad's** plan of bringing back the original flavor of lutefisk. Now all **he's** got from Norway is **my** **her** great-grandmother's Bible. There's also the diary **she** wrote on the farm up north, but **we** **they** can't read it. There's only four English words in the whole book: "My God awful day."

You might suspect **my** **her** dad picked **my** **her** mom up in Norway, where they have seals. **He** didn't, though. **He** met **her** at the pool.

As for **Mom**, **she** never talked about **her** relatives. **I** **Sofia** asked **her** once if **she** had any, and **she** said **they** were "no kind of people." At the time **I** **Sofia** thought **she** meant **they** were druggies or murderers, maybe in prison somewhere. Now **I** **she** wish **wishes** that was true.

One of the stories **I** **she** do **does** not tell **Mona** comes from *A Dictionary of British Folklore in the English Language*. In that story, it's **the selkie's little girl** who points out where the skin is hidden. **She** doesn't know what's going to happen, of course, **she** just knows **her** mother is looking for a skin, and **she** remembers **her** dad taking one out from under the bed and stroking it. **The little girl's** mother drags out the skin and says: "Fareweel, peerie buddo!" **She** doesn't think about how **the little girl** is going to miss **her**, or how if **she's** been breathing air all this time **she** can surely keep it up a little longer. **She** just throws on the skin and jumps into the sea.

After **Mom** left, **I** **Sofia** waited for **my** **her** dad to get home from work. **He** didn't say anything when **I** **she** told **him** about the coat. **He** stood in the light of the clock on the stove and rubbed **his** fingers together softly, almost like **he** was snapping but with no sound. Then **he** sat down at the kitchen table and lit a cigarette. **I** **she** had never seen **him** smoke in the house before. **Mom's** gonna lose it, **I** **she** thought, and then **I** **she** realized that no, **my** **her** mom wasn't going to lose anything. **We** **they** were the losers. **Me** **her** and **Dad**.

He still waits up for me her, so just before midnight I Sofia pull pulls out of the parking lot. I she am is hoping to get home early enough that he doesn't grumble, but late enough that he doesn't want to come up from the basement, where he takes apart old T.V.s, and talk to me her about college. I she have has told him I she am is not going to college. I she am is going to Colorado, a landlocked state. Only twenty out of fifty states are completely landlocked, which means they don't touch the Great Lakes or the sea. Mona turns on the light and tries to put on eyeliner in the mirror, and I Sofia swerve swerves to make her mess up. She Mona turns out the light and hits me her. All the windows are down to air out the car, and Mona's hair blows wild around her face. *Peerie buddo*, the book says, is " a term of endearment. " " Peerie buddo, " I Sofia say says to Mona. She Mona's got the hiccups. She can't stop laughing.

I Sofia have has never kissed Mona. I she have has thought about it a lot, but I she keep keeps deciding it's not time. It's not that I she think thinks she Mona would freak out or anything. It's not even that I she am is afraid she wouldn't kiss me her back. It's worse: I she am is afraid she Mona would kiss me her back, but not mean it.

Probably one of the biggest losers to fall in love with a selkie was the man who carried her skin around in his knapsack. He was so scared she'd find it that he took the skin with him everywhere, when he went fishing, when he went drinking in the town. Then one day he had a wonderful catch of fish. There were so many that he couldn't drag them all home in his net. He emptied his knapsack and filled it with fish, and he put the skin over his shoulder, and on his way up the road to his house, he dropped it.

" Gray in front and gray in back, 'tis the very thing I lack. " That's what the man's wife said, when she found the skin. The man ran to catch her, he even kissed her even though she was already a seal, but she squirmed off down the road and flopped into the water. The man stood knee-deep in the chilly waves, stinking of fish, and cried. In selkie stories, kissing never solves anything. No transformation happens because of a kiss. No one loves you just because you love them. What kind of fairy tale is that?

" She wouldn't wake up, " Mona says. " I pulled her out of the oven onto the floor, and I turned off the gas and opened the windows. It's not that I was smart, I wasn't thinking at all. I called Uncle Tad and the police and I still wasn't thinking. "

I Sofia do does not believe she Mona wasn't smart. She even tried to give her mom CPR but her mom didn't wake up until later, in the hospital. They had to reach in and drag her out of death, she was so closed up in it. Death is skin-tight, Mona says. Gray in front and gray in back.

Dear Mona: " When I look at you, my skin hurts. "

I Sofia pull pulls into her Mona's driveway to drop her off. The house is dark, the darkest house on her street, because Mona's mom doesn't like the porch light on. She says it shines in around the blinds and keeps her awake. Mona's mom has a beautiful bedroom upstairs, with lots of old photographs in gilt frames, but she sleeps on the living-room couch beside the aquarium. Looking at the fish helps her to sleep, although she also says this country has no real fish. That's what Mona calls one of her mom's "refrains."

Mona gets out, yanking the little piece of my Sofia's heart that stays with her Mona wherever she goes. She stands outside the car and leans in through the open door. I Sofia can hardly see her, but I she can smell the lemon-scented stuff she Mona puts on her hair, mixed up with the smells of sweat and weed. Mona smells like a forest, not the sea. "Oh my God," she Mona says, "I forgot to tell you, tonight, you know table six? That big horde of Uncle Tad's friends?"

"Yeah."

"So they wanted the soup with the food, and I forgot, and you know what the old guy says to me? The little guy at the head of the table?"

"What?"

"He goes, *Vous êtes bête, mademoiselle!*"

She says it in a rough, growly voice, and laughs. I can tell it's French, but that's all.

"What does it mean?"

"*You're an idiot, miss!*"

She ducks her head, stifling giggles.

"He called you an idiot?"

"Yeah, *bête*, it's like *beast*."

She lifts her head, then shakes it. A light from someone else's porch bounces off her nose. She puts on a fake Norwegian accent and says: "*My God awful day.*"

I Sofia nod nods. "Awful day." And because we they say it all the time, because it's the kind of silly, ordinary thing you could call one of our their "refrains," or maybe because of the weed I Sofia have has smoked, a whole bunch of days seem pressed together inside this moment, more than you could count. There's the time we they all went out for New Year's Eve, and Uncle Tad drove me her, and when he stopped and I she opened the door he told me her to close it,

and I **she** said " I will when I'm on the other side, " and when I **Sofia** told **Mona** **we they** laughed so hard **we they** had to run away and hide in the bathroom. There's the day some people **we they** know from school came in and **we they** served them wine even though they were underage and **Mona** got nervous and spilled it all over the tablecloth, and the day **her** nice cousin came to visit and made **us them** cheese-and-mint sandwiches in the microwave and got yelled at for wasting food. And the day of the party for **Mona's mom's** birthday, when **Uncle Tad** played music and made **us them** all dance, and **Mona's mom's** eyes went jewelily with tears, and afterward **Mona** told **me Sofia**: " I should just run away. I'm the only thing keeping her here. " My God, awful days. All the best days of my life.

" Bye, " **Mona** whispers. I **Sofia** watch watches **her** until **she** disappears into the house.

My **Sofia's** mom used to swim every morning at the YWCA. When I **Sofia** was little **she her mom** took **me her** along. I **Sofia** did not like swimming. I **she** would sit in a chair with a book while **she her mom** went up and down, up and down, a dim streak in the water. When I **Sofia** read *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*, it seemed like **Mom** was a lab rat doing tasks, the way **she** kept touching one side of the pool and then the other. At last **she** climbed out and pulled off **her** bathing cap. In the locker room **she** hung up **her** suit, a thin gray rag dripping on the floor. Most people put the hook of their padlock through the straps of their suit, so the suits could hang outside the lockers without getting stolen, but **my her** mom never did that. **She** just tied **her** suit loosely onto the lock. " No one's going to steal that stretchy old thing, " **she** said. And no one did.

That should have been the end of the story, but it wasn't. My **her** dad says **Mom** was an elemental, a sort of stranger, not of **our their** kind. It wasn't **my Sofia's** fault **she** left, it was because **she** couldn't learn to breathe on land. That's the worst story I **Sofia** have has ever heard. I **she** will never tell **Mona**, not ever, not even when **we they**'re leaving for Colorado with everything **we they** need in the back of **my Sofia's** car, and I **Sofia** meet meets **her** at the grocery store the way **we they**'ve already planned, and **she** runs out smiling under **her** orange baseball cap. I **Sofia** will not tell **her** how dangerous attics are, or how some people can't start over, or how I **Sofia** still see **sees** **my her** mom in shop windows with **her** long hair the same silver-gray as **her** coat, or how once when **my her** little cousins came to visit **we they** went to the zoo and the seals recognized **me her**, they both stood up in the water and talked in a foreign language. I **Sofia** will not tell **her**. I **she** am is too scared. I **Sofia** will not even tell **her** what **she** needs to know: that **we they**'ve got to be tougher than **our their** moms, that **we they**'ve got to have different stories, that **she Mona** had better not change **her** mind and drop **me Sofia** in Colorado because I **Sofia** will not understand, I **she** will hate **her** forever and burn **her** stuff and stay up all night screaming at the woods, because it's stupid not to be able to breathe, who ever heard of somebody breathing in one place but not another, and **we they**'re not like that, **Mona** and **me her**, and selkie stories are only for losers stuck on the wrong side of magic - people who drop things, who tell all, who leave keys around, who let go.