**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** notremember 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 jewelly 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.