

The Lame Mermaid (A purely private episode)

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When of an evening old Kornii plodded across his garden to the river bank, his back bent under the weight of a long, crooked oar, someone would be bound to call after him over the fence, “Mind the mermaids don’t tickle you to death!” and then roar with laughter.

Perhaps that’s why Kornii was setting off after dark, as always, to clear his nets—so nobody would bother him.

The old man’s cottage looked like an old mushroom that had sat and sat in the middle of a meadow and then just collapsed from exhaustion. It was also the cottage nearest to the river. At the end of the old man’s garden glistened a small fish pond where he had constructed a wooden dock with a ladder to help him get down to the water. Ever since the pond has been known as Kornii’s bathing pool. This was where he moored his boat. A narrow channel through the rushes led from the bathing pool to a calm part of the lake where the old man set his nets.

With his bushy gray beard, and white linen shirt, old Kornii was as bright in the darkness as if he were covered with luminous phosphorus. Seen from afar, few would have doubted that a jasmine bush might be blossoming in the boat. Above the surface of the water mist gathered in large white balls of cotton and the old man’s big hands, which occasionally disappeared into them, looked as though they had been clumsily fashioned out of red clay by an inept potter who had dozed off (no doubt after strong drink) and left them in the sun too long, so that deep cracks had formed on them as on parched earth in the desert. Unsuspecting mosquitoes alighting on these hands would wander futilely over their tough surface and eventually give up and fly off with nothing. When the old man leaned overboard to draw up a net his gray beard would inevitably get soaked in the dark water, prompting the thought: what if some river sprite were to grab the old man by the beard and drag him out of the boat? Since Kornii was rather old now, he went about his work unhurriedly, as though relishing it. As the mist thickened, in looking at the old man it was impossible to tell for certain whether it was he sitting there or whether the sight was just a cloud of mist in the shape of a hunchback.

That evening the bottom of Kornii’s boat was covered with large roundish carp glittering like huge gypsy earrings. The old man examined

them and muttered in satisfaction. It was a beautiful July night. Kornii had cleared all the nets but he wasn't eager to row back to shore. The old man looked up and stared intently at some distant star, twinkling goodness knows where in the pitch-black sky, and he fell to dreaming.

Some time passed before Kornii took his mind off that star and gradually came down to earth. He pricked up his ears—he sensed, or perhaps actually heard, something splashing beyond the rushes where his bathing pool was. Surprised by the sound, he seized his oar and rowed toward it. At the end of the channel, where the water of his bathing pool glistened, he pulled his oar from the water and froze. The boat ran into some young reeds and came to a stop.

"Well, I'll be!" the old man's lips moved so feebly that the words got tangled up in his beard and couldn't get out. By his dock, just a few oar strokes away, was a mermaid. She was on the ladder, her legs in the water just below the knee. She looked like a young girl with long blonde hair that fell below her waist. Except for those tresses, nothing covered her body. Indeed, she was naked. The mermaid had her back to Kornii and she seemed to be coming down the ladder into the water. She descended one rung more, and the dark surface of the water now covered the mermaid's knees and reached her thighs. At that moment the water rippled and seemed to retreat in embarrassment. The mermaid turned toward the water, and what the old man saw in the dark might just as well have been a real young girl. Her pale body, not exposed to the sun, was quite unlike what Kornii would have expected. "A river sprite ought to be green and have a tail. But she has legs! Though they're nothing much to speak of, those legs!"

Who knows, perhaps it's natural for a man to remain a man, at least in spirit, even at his age: caught between the conflicting emotions of fear and temptation, the latter overcomes the former.

The mermaid leaned forward, submerged her arms, and splashed water over her body. She repeated this several times; then she drew herself up to her full height and, staring up at the sky, let out a prolonged, trembling sigh. Her wet body glowed in the night, shimmering in the moonlight. Droplets of water rolled down her firm white breasts, upturned like the snub noses of little girls, and fell into the watery deep. Kornii's moustache bristled and he muttered something. It was impossible to tell exactly what, but at that moment the old man thought: "What if I just went ahead and took them in my hands and felt them? Just held them in my palms?" Had this been half a lifetime ago, he probably would have. But now he held back. "What if she really is a water sprite who will tickle you and drag you down into the murky deep? Just try shouting for help then—who'll hear you?" And so, quite casually, gesturing in the air, as it were, Kornii made the sign of the cross.

Meanwhile, the river sprite—scarcely less alluring, as you already know, than a real woman—continued to exist. The mermaid leaned forward

again and splashed water over her body. This action was apparently part of a ritual, and the mermaid seemed to be whispering something as she performed it. All the old man could make out was two names, Peter and Paul, which were repeated frequently.

"Why does she keep saying Peter and Paul?" Kornii wondered. "Just a minute, though. Tomorrow is ... what's it called? Yes, yes—the feast of Saints Peter and Paul." Kornii scratched behind his ear, "Hmm!... So that's it!... Yes.... Still, she's a pretty demon, can't deny it. Fair-haired, quite fetching. It's no sin to pilfer crumbs. She's nice and shapely. A mermaid, you know!"

These were old Kornii's thoughts in his advanced years. Although this was the first time in his life that he had seen a mermaid, Kornii didn't doubt for an instant that such she was. If Kornii had borne in mind that the night shows its own peculiar reality, different from what daylight reveals, who knows how certain he would have been about what his eyes saw. And if this mermaid had appeared in the daytime, and if her white body had been dressed in the clothes she usually wore, if her hair had been gathered up and her face were visible, covered with freckles as it was year round, Kornii would have recognized her as redheaded Leska, a neighbor's daughter, or lame Leska, as she was often called—the girl had been born with a deformed leg. In that case, Kornii would have been unlikely to take such an interest. Leska was dreadfully disturbed by her disability and by her freckles, numerous enough for a whole class full of kids but all unhappily spread on her skin. So the girl always shunned company, and when anyone might see her she was always wrapped up, swaddled and concealed in her very ordinary clothes. The only friend Leska had was the old dog Dasher. Even her mother sometimes felt ashamed of her daughter, especially in company: she virtually disowned her when Leska's little sister was born with her pure white face and nice straight little legs. When Leska glanced into the cot and saw that pure little face, apprehension tempered her feelings towards her little sister and inhibited her love for her. Leska could not bring herself to stretch out her freckled hand and touch that little white face in case it might catch her freckles and be contaminated by them. Who could tell, or even imagine, what was going on beneath Leska's simple attire? Beneath those reddish upturned breasts beat Leska's solitary heart, concealed from everyone, but longing for motherly warmth, friends, emotions, love, and passion. It also held her most heartfelt desire, the dream that comforted Leska in her nocturnal thoughts and dreams and yet also saddened her, causing her to regret that it was so unattainable during the daytime, when people drove her away with their despising, doleful, alarmed, indifferent, transient, evil, and haughty glances. Oh, how frightened she was by all those looks. Only old Yivha, the hundred-year-old woman known in the village as the Witch, was kindly disposed towards Leska, as though she were oblivious to her misfortune.

It was Yivha who suggested Leska take advantage of that special night. She had taught her what to do, and how. The chance came only once a year, on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. If a girl were to bathe in the river that night without any clothes and utter certain prayers, mysterious forces would work a miracle. Many girls who longed to be beautiful or wanted some handsome young man to fall in love with them embraced this ritual. Who can tell what good it did them, whether it worked? But it was said that those who firmly believed in the uniqueness of this night succeeded in fulfilling their wishes. Normally Leska was afraid to go to the river at midnight, let alone undress and enter the dark water. Nevertheless, that night Leska set off to the old man's bathing pool, bearing in mind old Yivha's advice to ignore everything else and resolutely pursue her goal. This was her last hope of winning back her mother's affection, her little sister, and regaining love and happiness.

Leska contemplated the deep, clear, dark water in which the stars twinkled and the moon rippled across the waves. She scooped up the cool water in the palms of her hands and poured it over her freckled body, whispering old Yivha's sacred prayers over and over again till she became entranced. Suddenly the miracle happened. Leska saw the water running off her body and taking her red freckles with it into the darkness. It was washing them away as though they had been dirt. Leska's body was becoming clean and white, like her little sister's face. Leska couldn't believe her eyes. She turned towards the moonlight and marveled at all the parts of her body that now seemed someone else's, as she had seen it only in those exciting dreams of hers that she had wanted never to end. The miracle had happened. Now it wasn't only old Kornii who wouldn't recognize lame Leska. Her body was pure, young, and attractive. Her face seemed changed, too. Happy, smiling, she relaxed in the light blue aura. Like a child Leska played with the water in the river, splashed it over her body and face, as though thirsting after it and unable to resist slaking that thirst. She had no care in the world—she was happy. Suddenly, she cried out. Mesmerized, Kornii had accidentally dropped the oar. It struck the side of the boat and fell with a splash into the water. At that moment Leska caught sight of a big gray beard in the darkness. Old Kornii stared at the river creature, wondering what would happen next.

"Why is she going on shore?" is all the old man could think of before the mermaid's shining form dissolved into the night mist.

The dock was dripping wet.

"Well, I never!" sighed Kornii finally. "Like a mirage, as if she'd never been ... just like that. That's how it was! But who'd believe it now? Nice girl, but she limps. Why would a mermaid limp?" The old man sighed again, "No, it's unbelievable. Nobody will believe it!" And he wistfully picked up his oar again.

No one saw Leska running across the fields to her back yard. Out of

breath, wet, and clutching her clothes against her chest, she rushed into the hallway and locked the door behind her. All was quiet in the cottage—everyone had gone to sleep long since. She glanced out of the window—all was quiet there too. Nobody was chasing her. Dasher sat on the doorstep sniffing himself all over, rooting out those hateful fleas. When she had calmed down a little, Leska recalled the miracle. Then she looked at her body and collapsed on the bench. By the bench was a bucket of water, and in it swam a handful of stars. Warm tears fell from Leska's eyes into the bucket among the stars. They fell on her red knees and arms, covered with so many, many freckles. It was not a dream. Afraid of waking up her mother and her white-faced little sister, Leska didn't cry or yell out loud. She just whimpered softly like a puppy hiding under the bench, now and then whispering to an unknown hearer:

"If only you knew! If only you knew!"

Translated by Patrick Corness and Natalia Pomirko

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