

“The Sunbathers”

by Sophie Katz

My sister Beatrice always told me I’d imagined them, like I imagined the unicorn grazing in the field by the highway in Florida, and the dragon crawling under the rocks in the forest behind our Illinois house. But there’s a reason that all I wanted for my ninth birthday was to go to the zoo and watch the seals.

A few months before that, we were in Scotland, visiting my grandparents at their beach house. While the trip itself wasn’t very exciting (the road trip to Disney World we’d taken the previous summer had been *much* more fun), the best part was that as long as Beatrice was with me, and as long as we didn’t go too far from the house, our parents left us unsupervised. So, provided that Bea—who was thirteen years old but still okay with being my babysitter because of the power it gave her—was willing to spend the day outside, I was free to spend hours on the beach looking for mermaids.

One day late in the trip, I had ventured out again on my as-yet unsuccessful quest. So far, the mermaids had eluded me, not even sticking their heads out of the water when I sang songs from *The Little Mermaid* at the top of my lungs. When I told my parents about my progress, or lack thereof, they laughed in that way adults do when they don’t believe you but think they can trick you into thinking that they believe you. (How could they not believe in mermaids when we’d seen Ariel herself in the parade at Disney World?)

I’ve never been one to give up, so I set out that morning with a new strategy. One end of the beach, which I had yet to explore, was dotted with large, climbable rocks. I was sure that if I stood on top of one of those rocks, I’d be able to see far enough out over the water to finally catch sight of a mermaid.

But before I could check my view of the ocean, I looked down from the rock and saw a pair of sunbathers lying on a gray blanket. The rocks had hidden them from view before, but now I could see that aside from their ankle-length hair, which seemed like a garment in its own right, they were both completely naked, their breasts exposed to the salty air. I knew I shouldn't look at them; Mom had often scolded me for wandering the house naked, and definitely would have covered my eyes if she had been there. But Beatrice was making drip castles several yards down the beach, and so I was officially unsupervised and able to behave as I wished.

Even though they had human legs instead of fishtails, the women held my attention. I had no idea how old they were; back then, I indiscriminately saw anyone older than my sister as an adult. One was asleep, her head resting on the other's chest. The other was running her fingers through the sleeper's hair, her motions slow and tender so as not to wake her up.

The awake one looked up at me. It occurred to me that she was Beautiful.

I mention this because they looked a lot like the women in the magazines my mom left on the coffee table back home, advertising makeup and clothing that Mom (reasonably) and Beatrice (imperiously) told me I was Too Young To Wear. According to the captions, those women with smooth, pale skin, silky blonde hair, and big blue eyes were Beautiful. I didn't get why those traits made someone Beautiful, or why Beautiful made a person extra likeable or desirable. I assumed I would learn as I grew up, not yet having realized I was asexual.

The woman smiled at me, unbothered by my presence. She bowed her head, kissing the sleeper on the forehead.

I shifted my eyes away, unsure as always how to react to romantic behavior from adults, and that was when I noticed that the gray blanket didn't look very soft. Instead of fuzzy like my beach towel, it looked as smooth as their skin. Actually, there were *two* blankets, one

overlapping the other, each with a speckled pattern. And off to the side, attached to the blankets by thin membranes, were two little round earless heads—like hoods, but with eyes and nose holes.

This reminded me of something, but not a complete thing, so I climbed down off of the rock and ran back to my sister.

“Hey Bea?”

She didn’t even look up, intent on bringing her tower of sand blobs to new heights.

“What?”

“What were those people called in that book Grandpa gave us for Christmas?”

“What people, Helen?”

“The people in the fairy tale book,” I elaborated. “The seal people.”

“They’re called selkies,” she said, taking more wet sand from the little trench she’d dug to collect seawater.

“Selkies?”

“Yeah. You know the story; I’ve read it to you over and over.”

“Tell me again.”

Beatrice sighed with the condescending patience of a Teenager Who Doesn’t Have Time For This Nonsense.

“A selkie is a seal,” she said, “but when she takes off her sealskin, she comes onto shore as a woman. And if a man takes her skin, she has to stay and be his wife.”

I considered this. “I don’t think they’d like that very much.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, well, it’s imaginary.”

“Because they’re already girlfriends.”

Beatrice looked up from her drip castle, one eyebrow raised. “Who?”

I pointed over my shoulder. “The selkies on the other side of that rock.”

“Helen...”

I knew no amount of explaining would convince her, so I ran back to the rock, calling for her to follow me. I poked my head around the rock just in time to see two big gray seals disappear into the ocean. Of the women and their blankets, there was no sign.