

The Woman and the Sea

There was a German woman who used to swim across the bay at Fish Hoek, in Cape Town. They said she was taken by a Great White shark.

Clemmie thought fleetingly of her, as she floated on her back in the clear, green sea. Her red-painted toenails bobbed in front. She spread her toes, then gasped. Seawater rushed into her mouth and she choked.

Between each toe was a half inch, scaly nodule with a tiny frill; small buds waiting to unfold. They shimmered purple-blue in the sunlight. Her chest constricted. It was revolting.

She made her way to the shallows and sat on the sand. A shadow fell across her body. A girl of about five stared down at her.

“You’re a fish,” she accused.

Clemmie tried to sound playful. “Perhaps I’m a shark.”

The child scampered towards a young woman nearby. “That lady’s a shark,” she shouted.

The mother looked apologetic. “Lovely morning.”

“Beautiful.” Clemmie nodded, turned away.

She must keep it secret from George. ‘Don’t say you’re sixty, you only look forty,’ he liked to say. How could she tell him his wife had sprouted growths between her toes?

He dozed in a deckchair on the holiday villa patio, English skin turning red. She hurried indoors. In the shower, the iridescent nodules had turned grey, like fat ticks.

For the next few days she wore trainers, and avoided the sea.

George patted her hand. “Are you alright? You don’t seem yourself.”

Clemmie looked at the untouched prawns on her restaurant plate. She wanted to tell him, but bile rose to her throat. “My tummy’s a bit upset. I’ll be fine in a day or two.”

It was midnight when she woke. The nodules throbbed. She got up and looked out the window. A full moon shone on the water. George snored gently behind her; she’d heard that sound all her married life. She opened the patio doors and smelt the sea tang, heard the waves swish on the shore. She had to go.

The water was still warm; its silky smoothness caressed her. The discomfort between her toes vanished.

Later, she saw him sitting on a rock. She came slowly out of the sea.

“What are you doing, for God’s sake?”

Tears ran down her face. She gestured at her legs. “Look, George.”

The buds had unfurled into soft webbing that completely covered her feet. The skin above them was now covered in shiny scales, right up to her thighs.

George put his head in his hands and started to cry. Then he vomited.

She held him and stroked his head, over and over. "I'm so sorry, my love. I wish I could be as I was, but I can't."

They say the old man goes down to the sea at night, and a mermaid sometimes swims in the shallows nearby. Others say the English woman was taken by a Great White. But there were no sharks in the bay that year.