

Pink Sky in the Morning

On the morning she was born, the sky was pink. It breathed out its pinkness over the sea so it also claimed that expanse. Her father was the storm that had struck in the night, and her mother was the great cliff face. Quite suddenly the fresh clam after the tempest was broken. A chunk of rock tumbled away and crashed down onto the beach. Nobody saw or heard this happen, this being a cove at the very edge of the world. From the gaping opening in the cliffs she fell, and fell, and fell. The fall should have killed her. Several seconds after impact, her eyes startled open.

It would probably help if I told you she was beautiful. I will do this, but I will not tell you about the colour and texture of her hair, the shade and shape of her eyes, or the curves of her body. She was born from the sea and the air and the land, and she was beautiful like all of these. I will tell you that the terrible beauty of the storm and the lovely peace of the sunrise played in her eyes.

And of course nobody was looking at her, so you can tell me what beauty really means without an audience. Her beauty was undisturbed and unconsumed. She would spend her days playing in the water like a child and climbing up the cliffs trying to find the spot with the clearest view. At night she lay on the beach and looked up at the stars and felt giddy and giggled hysterically. But what charmed her most of all were the paths the moon cast across the water. They were silver-throated calls to the horizon. Only a matter of time before she tried to follow them.

Maybe you think you know this story, but you don't.

We all know that a beautiful girl is nothing until she goes out to join society. Is she not designed to be admired, like the sea and sky and cliffs? One night she stepped off the sand and placed her foot on the moonpath, like a streak left by a fingertip trailing across the pane of glassy water. She believed, believed, believed that this quicksilver would turn solid for her. She should have drowned. But half in a dream she walked across the sea. The further away she travelled from the edge of the world, the more ships she passed. Whenever the people aboard saw her they would shout and point and call others to come and see. Nearer the shore men in fishing boats would call out to her, turn their course towards her, or even jump into the sea to try and follow her. She didn't see what became of the ones who were so foolish. She just kept putting one foot before the other, sending excitements of ripples across the surface of the water until she set foot on land again. She walked even further on land, until she had found a city.

Beautiful girl arrives in big city. Of course it picks her up and carries her with the force of its whirling movement. And there was something about her. Something that made people want to let her stay in their apartments for nothing and give her free food and drink and clothes and jobs for which she was totally unqualified. It made absolutely everybody want to be her friend. What is this power, she wondered. It is not the wind or sea or sun. She began to realise that people took the same pleasure in her that she took in the view of the sea from the highest point of the cliffs, and the sight of the stars from the beach at night. Except there was something else, also. Soon they wanted to take pictures of her and film her and put her on screens. Soon strangers started coming up to her in the street.

She was born on a deserted beach at the edge of the world and no-one had prepared her for this noise. It made her head ache and ache and ache. It should have made her go insane. At night she dreamt of home and woke expecting to find somewhere a real, gaping wound. This pain was so alive, so determined to be known, so insistent in its noise and movement. It was unbearable, except she was bearing it. She fantasised about tearing down all the tall buildings brick by brick with her bare hands so her nails broke and her fingers ripped and bled. Also about filling whole streets with water, because these people had nothing like the sea. She lay down in the middle of the street at night to look at the stars and people stepped over her. They couldn't see her face, so she was just an object lying in their way. How did they breathe? How was she breathing?

The something else became clearer to her. Men shouted at her in the street, only it was a different kind of shouting to the amazed people on the boats. They followed her when she walked around at night. They touched her when she was in public places. Soon enough the whole city felt like an unspoken threat. She could not relax anywhere where there would be men she did not know, or it would be dark and she would be alone. Soon she could not relax at all. Before the darkness had been a known friend, a comfort, covering the distracting world with darkness in a natural invitation to sleep, and revealing the stars to watch over her. Now she knew what it was to fear the dark.

So the men did not just want to look at her, to be close to her, to do things for her that would make her like them. They wanted to take something from her. Slowly she came to realise that they believed they had a right to take it. They believed she was made for their use. Why else was she beautiful? So she spoke to some other women and they helped her come to realise the only possible solution. She let one of them in. She let him buy her drinks and take her back to his home and ever after she let him take care of her. Certainly he had a temper. Certainly he had expectations of her, demands to make. Certainly he liked to be in charge of things. But she no longer felt afraid to walk the streets at night when he was at her side. She simply did as she was told and she would be safe.

Except one night he woke to find himself alone in bed. She was nowhere in the apartment. Eventually he went out into the street and found her lying there, staring up at the sky. She had missed the stars too much to be afraid. He dragged her back inside, kicking and screaming. Whatever he did after that changed everything. She would not speak a word to him the next day, which made him even more furious. That night, she crept silently out of bed and whispered in his sleeping ear : *you think I was made for your own use? You think you have claims upon me? Fool, my father was a storm and my mother a great cliffface.* And to prove her point she let go and tore his apartment to pieces before she left.

And she walked all the way back to the sea. The moonpath was waiting for her, the trail of a silvery insect on the surface of the water. It carried her again, carried her home. When she arrived back on the beach at the edge of the world the sun was rising and the sky was pink. She climbed up the rockface and ripped great chunks away, her hands raw and bleeding, until she had made a small opening in the cliff. She curled herself into the dark and quiet and never stirred again.