



Four extracts from The Gloaming

Kirsty Logan

When Mara was little, she thought that babies hatched from eggs. When mums were making the eggs, their bellies got bigger and bigger, and when their bellies were tight and round and the egg was ready, they went into hospital where the egg was removed somehow (through the belly button? some sort of hatch? the details were unclear). The mums had to stay in hospital for a few days while the egg sat under a heat lamp to make it hatch, which was why when new babies were brought home, they were red and wrinkled like they'd just come out of a hot bath.

In Mara's defence, this was what Islay had told her. Long before Signe began to fatten with Bee, Mara put down her dolls one winter morning and asked where babies came from. Islay told of the eggs (though she left out the detail of how the egg was removed, as she wasn't sure herself), and of the heat lamps (if Islay had stopped to think about what she was saying, she'd realise she'd invented this, though as it did make sense she took it as fact). She added a further fingerprint to the tale: the mums kept mementoes, and in every mum's bedroom there was a container with little bits of shell inside. And that was the proof.

Mara kept watch at the door while Islay crept into Signe and Peter's bedroom. She crawled under the bed, but found only lost socks. She laddered her way up the wardrobe shelves, but found only a dead fly. She stretched to tiptoe and ran her hands along the mantelpiece and her hand caught on something cold: a little china box in the shape of a heart. She kept her back to Mara so she wouldn't notice – just for a moment, she wanted these shards of their beginnings to belong to her alone. Islay opened the box. It fell to the carpet, spilling its contents as she ran out of the room.

'What? What?' whisper-shrieked Mara as she passed. Too afraid to go in and check what had frightened her sister, Mara ran to her bedroom and slammed the door. Later, Islay crept back into the room to return the teeth, counting them into the china heart. The teeth smelled sweet and bad. She slipped one into her mouth to feel its sharp edges on her tongue.

Mara never told Islay this, but she went back into Signe and Peter's bedroom to open the box and see the thing that had given her sister such a fright. She was disgusted and disappointed by the teeth. She'd wanted something other-worldly, something horrifying, something that would teach them a truth. But it was just old pieces of herself.

Although neither of them found the pieces of shell, for years after that both Ross girls still believed that babies hatched from eggs.

In Islay's defence, this was what Signe had told her. And as the hallway of their house featured a photo of a young Signe on stage, crowned with feathers, her limbs as thin and pale as bird bones, this seemed perfectly believable. If their mother were part bird, then of course they'd come from eggs.

In Signe's defence, the subject of pregnancy was a difficult one, and it seemed easier to make up a story. Soon after she met Peter she fell pregnant with triplets, and all the beauty and possibility of life was laid out in front of her. She should have known that nothing is that simple. During Signe's sixth month of pregnancy, one of the babies died. She would have

done anything in the world to keep the other two, or even just one of them. Any living child; it did not matter which. She would have promised anything, climbed anything, killed anything, eaten anything, avoided anything. But we cannot make deals with nature. Just when Signe thought she'd suffered the worst possible grief, another triplet slipped away, and a further depth was revealed. But one child held on and Islay emerged, wrinkled and wailing, into a world that would never contain her sisters.

Two years later, another girl-baby followed without fuss. Signe had never told anyone that she planned to name two of the triplets Islay and Iona, a pair of islands; and the other Mara, to be the calm one, the sea between. Surely there was no harm in using one of the names for this child – and so she named her Mara.

Signe felt lucky enough with two living children, and was content to stop – but Peter wanted a boy, and she wanted what Peter wanted. They tried again, and lost two more. She agreed to one more try. One, and then her heart could not take it. And then came Barra, her little Bee, as solid and beautiful as the island for which he was named. He was her seventh child, the one blessed or cursed, depending on which stories you believed.

But Signe didn't need stories to love this child. He was her final creation, her last grasp at perfection. The marble-carved mounds of his cheek, his thigh, his shoulder, showed her where she'd fallen short before. She thought she knew love and grief already – but the thought of losing this child was past bearing. She would do everything she could to keep him in this world with her.

Signe never did tell her daughters that children were not hatched from eggs. They must have found out the truth somewhere else. When she thought about it, she felt sad that she'd missed that moment: the flash of realisation, the firmer grasp on the world, the click as things fell into place. The letting-go of old fairy stories. But then, she soothed herself: we cannot be held responsible for every pretty lie we tell to our children.

Tumshie

When Mara was Bee's age, Islay told her that sugar was made of ground-up teeth, and if you ate too much of it then the tooth fairy would come and pull out your teeth and grind them up to replace all the sugar you'd taken. Islay felt a spiky, slippery sort of pleasure in seeing that Mara still had to blow all the powdered sugar off the tops of pastries before she could eat them.

Islay told her that if you put a part of an animal in your mouth, you could speak its language. Mara spent a week collecting hedgehog spines and cat whiskers, holding them in the pockets of her cheeks, sliding her tongue along their lengths, trying to twist their sharp edges inwards. Neither of them ever told Signe why Mara ate her dinner so hesitantly, her mouth aching and swollen with cuts.

Islay told her if she bit her nails then a goblin with knives for fingers would come in the night and cut off her hands, and that if she took extra portions at dinner then her stomach would explode, and that if she told tales to Mum and Dad then her tongue would turn into a slug. Mara believed all of it – well, why wouldn't she? Islay was big, and she knew everything.

And then they grew a little bigger, and moved to the island, and life felt endless. Magic was real and the girls roamed wild as cats. The sea encircled the entire known world. The grimy remnants in the shed. The chalky float of steam in the bathtime air. Pieces and jam for supper. Stacks of books on the hall floor, used as stepping stones over shark-infested

seas. A dead bee put to rest in an acorn cup. Bright orange lobster creels piled clattery in the harbour. Crabbing on the quayside with bacon and string. Marshmallows held over candle flames, toasted hot enough to blister.

The days stretched slow as toads. Stitching squares for a quilt, the jab of the needle into a thumb, blood beading bright. A stray cat at the harbour, licking fish guts from the stone. Crows biting out newborn lambs' tongues so they can't suckle and die the day they're born. At low tide the land changed, the waves sucking back to reveal caves and shores gaping wide like open mouths, the sharp jag of rocks that weren't visible before – but they were always there, ready to rip at your sea-kicking feet, waiting to tear the bottom out of your boat.

And among it all: two girls, ten and twelve, not ready yet to be women, but ready to think about starting to try, if not now then very soon. Then came Bee. They both told him stories, but not the stories that Islay had told Mara. They told him tales of friendly sea-creatures, tales of lovely objects washed up on the shore, treasures meant only for him. Only pretty things. Sweet things. For Bee, they would remake the world, newer and better. A world worthy of the bright gold of him.

Laldie

The Ross girls were raised on fairy tales. The kind of books that would curdle your blood. Ravening beasts and handless maidens and hacked-off toes. Stepmothers dancing to death in red-hot shoes. Mermaids turning into sea-foam, ugly sisters having their eyes pecked out by birds, little red-hooded girls being eaten by wolves. All sorts of lovely things.

Signe read them the stories – but the stories she told weren't the same as the ones in the books. Every single tale she told was given a happy ending. Terrible things happened, of course they did – a story couldn't be a complete lie, especially not a story told to small girls, who are very good at recognising the grate and catch of a lie. But the terrible things weren't the endings. No matter how dark things looked, there was always a happily ever after.

Islay and Mara spent a lot of time acting out the fairy tales they'd heard. They were most interested in the part just before the end, where the princess dies. They weren't quite so interested in the part where she comes back to life and gets married and lives happily ever blah blah blah. They mostly argued over who got to play the dead girl. It was clear that the dead girl was the most-desired one.

Islay was the best Snow White; her cry of pain and sudden swoon after she bit into the apple was so perfect that Mara got nervous that she really had died. She was also great as the Little Mermaid; she could stay underwater for so long, and under the waves her red hair looked like an illustration from a book, like a pool of spreading blood. She was perfect as Beauty (the one with the beast) and also Beauty (the sleeping one).

One of Mara's happiest memories is of the time she was allowed to play Rapunzel. In the story that Signe told, Rapunzel didn't technically die, but Islay had read somewhere that a corpse's hair keeps growing after death, and it was clear to them that a single lifetime couldn't be enough years for a girl to grow hair long enough to reach out of a tower and all the way to the ground. She must have been dead for an awful while for her hair to grow so much. Mara lay on her bed of leaves for hours, her hair spread out, making her breath slower and slower so her chest barely moved. She stayed there for so long that Islay got bored and wandered off to play something more fun. But still Mara lay there, playing dead, playing beautiful.

Besom

In the whispering dark, Pearl told Mara stories. She'd been working in the mermaid show for many years now, and like most people who have done things for a long time, her feelings about it were conflicted.

Mermaids, said Pearl: let me tell you about mermaids. Those sinister, shifting fish-girls who want to sing you to your death. Who want to drown you in salt water. Who have shark-teeth and fingernails like claws. Breasts hard and cold as carved ice, a belt of sharpened shells slung over hips more scales than skin.

Forget that. For a woman, there's no living to be made in death and glory. Think instead of pretty little sea-maids. Think sweet smiles and beckoning fingers. Think crowns of starfish and combs of clamshell in hair the colour of childhood.

To be a mermaid, you need three things.

You need hair.

You need a tail.

And you need to know how to breathe.

Pearl had many wigs as part of her mermaid show. All of them were long and all of them were beautiful, made specially and at great cost so that they could be attached with waterproof tape to her temples and nape, the long lengths flowing and twisting perfectly under the water. Sea green, sky blue, shell pink. Of course they were bright. Of course they were beautiful. What would be the point of a mermaid who looked like any other girl? Why would you pay to see her if you'd already seen someone just like her out in the street? The hair was such a vital part of the mermaid that, ten minutes after a performance, Pearl could whip off her wig and her tail and walk anonymous among a crowd who had been staring wide-eyed at her moments before.

The tail takes some getting used to, but everyone is so eager to believe that they're easy to please. To make a tail, lie on a large piece of wetsuit material while wearing a diver's monofin and have someone trace your shape. Your tail must be tight to your skin, because it's not skin, and so water can get inside and slow you down. Don't forget the zip, so you can get in and out – a very strong stainless steel is best, one that won't rust or break, the sort used to make garden awnings. You'll need scales, of course, and for that you need screen-printing paint. And why not some sequins too? You must be pretty. Sew it all shut, or use waterproof glue. We know that the real swimming fins are on the inside, but you should add some decorative ones too. Flexible plastics are best, the sort used for floor matting.

Breathing is hardest of all. No amount of sequins or pink hair will help you here. You'll need to practise yoga and breath-holding, as well as exercise to strengthen and expand your lungs. Start by blowing up a large balloon every day. When you're ready to try in the water, slow down your breathing so your heart slows. Deep-breathe for one minute, keeping your exhalation slow. One, two, three long breaths – and you're ready. Of course, it's easy to run out of breath. It's easy to black out and drown. It's easier than – well, than breathing.

Waterproof tape, steel zips, flexible plastic: it's not so glamorous when you know how the magic trick is done, is it? Perhaps it's best only the magician knows.

Unless – Pearl grinned in the dark. Unless the magician only pretends it's a trick, so you won't know that the magic is real.

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