

O'Malley and the Mermaid

It was Devlyn that first saw the mermaid.

Low tide, it was. The three of us taking a shortcut across the beach towards the pub—likely ending in O'Malley performing “Rose of Tralee”, Devlyn trying to pick a scrap at closing time. Nobody dared challenge Devlyn at the fighting, no-one matched O'Malley's tenor.

The creature's golden hair glistened in the dying rays of an April sun. She crouched down in one of the deep pools that form within the rocks.

She must've been trapped by the tide. Dragging that tail over the barnacle-crusting stones might be painful, although I'm no expert on what a mermaid might feel. When she saw us, she folded her arms over her breasts and started screaming in a strange language. Kind of sing-songy like Italian, with a bit of a German guttural thrown in. In other circumstances, I'd have guessed Romanian.

Devlyn tried to speak to her. The screeching just got louder. I moved to the edge of the pool. O'Malley stayed still. She began to throw shells and stones, forcing us back.

'My, but she's got some spirit,' said Devlyn.

O'Malley said nothing—unusual for him.

'Got to be a hoax,' I replied. 'Student prank. Or maybe some TV show, you know, when they have a secret camera.'

I couldn't see any third-rate celebrities lurking to embarrass us for the sake of ratings. The beach was as empty as a tinker's wallet except for her and us.

Devlyn dodged a flying crab. 'She's a fine girl.'

'Anyone got a camera?' I asked. 'Picture of a mermaid should be worth a few euros.'

'Picture?' Devlyn laughed, a dirty throaty roar, as a fusillade of seaweed flew by his head.

'Actual feckin' thing would be worth a lot more. The three of us should be able to get hold of her.'

The too-silent O'Malley shook his head.

I wasn't too sure either. 'She looks a bit slippery.'

Slippery in more ways than one, I was thinking. It wasn't just her tail, iridescent, silver turning to deep blue, morphing into turquoise. Her eyes shone trouble—cold as emeralds, a demon's stare. Beautiful, but you'd never say pretty. Her hair reached her waist.

She'd run out of missiles, strange screams her only weapon now.

Devlyn advanced again, causing her to shrink back against the rocks, her face a mask of fear and hate. 'We need a net.'

'We should get the boys from the pub,' I said.

'Bollocks,' shouted Devlyn. 'She's worth millions. Circus, if nothing else. Why should we share it, let alone give it away?'

O'Malley finally spoke. 'Let her go.' He slumped down, shivering on a rock by the pool. 'Don't feel right.'

'Don't feel wrong,' snapped Devlyn. He nodded at me. 'We'll borrow a net from Byrne. He won't know, be enjoying the craic at the pub. Big sack as well.'

'Sure O'Malley'll be okay?' I asked as we walked back along the beach. 'She's scared the bejesus out of him.'

Devlyn turned to stare at O'Malley, who remained downcast near the pool. 'He'll probably sing her "The Rose of Tralee".'

'Won't she dry out?'

He grinned. 'Top half won't. That's the bit folks'll want to see.'

We theorised about the sex life of mermaids until we reached Byrne's mercifully unlocked shed. It took us a while to shift the rubbish, but we ended up with a net that Devlyn described as "holier than the Virgin Mary" and a large tarpaulin. I wasn't certain of Devlyn's plans once we'd captured the creature, but he wasn't the sort of lad you'd start an argument with.

The two of us hurried back, knowing that the sea would soon invade the shoreline again.

Devlyn pointed. 'Feckin' idiot's not there. Probably gone for a piss.'

As we got nearer, we shouted. Only the mocking gulls replied. Sure enough, O'Malley had deserted his post. A scan of the pool confirmed the mermaid had gone as well. The vanishing sands offered the only clue: a few depressions quickly obliterated by the oncoming tide. If they were made by feet, then the owner would have walked from the rocks directly into the ocean.

Suffice to say, we never saw O'Malley again. Eventually, the Garda got involved, and Devlyn and I were in the frame for murder. Old O'Connell had seen the three of us setting out, and some nosey biddy saw just the two of us mount the raid on Byrne's shed.

The investigation was running out of steam when they found the leg. Washed up on the beach, found by a dog and its consequently hysterical owner. They didn't have O'Malley's DNA, but they obtained his brother's, which proved the loose limb belonged to a close family member. Thing is, old man O'Malley was a singer with a showband in his youth, so the Lord alone knows how many little O'Malleys are running about after some of dad's one-on-one performances with

fawning fans. The boffins couldn't say how the leg got detached—current theory is it was a ship's propellor, but the tear was too decomposed to be sure.

The fingers still pointed at Devlyn, so he left to become a bouncer in Dublin. I know some reckon I was involved, but O'Malley was a strange one, and time and drink soon solve most problems.

Nobody mentions O'Malley anymore. The Garda went back to searching for illicit stills, and the talk in the bar returned to the routine mix of the banal and the unbelievable. Kelly claimed he met a leprechaun on the road to Dublin. Burke saw the Holy Mother outside his kitchen window. The only time I didn't laugh was when an old fisherman swore that on a dark moonless night he heard the strains of 'Rose of Tralee' echoing from the deepest depths of the ocean.