

The Sea Woman

And Other Stories

1.

Say that the woman who rises from the sea, from the garbage and the toxins thrown off the pier, is not a nuclear waste beast here to grow one hundred feet tall, destroy the power plant, knock down the skyscrapers, and lay waste to the city.

Say she's only a malformed woman, coiling seaweed for hair, sea rocks and shells on her bosom, a red, yellow, and white McDonald's straw sticking out of her belly like an umbilical cord. Her skin drips with tar and her mouth is an unholy opening green with waste. Gulls pick at the bits of spoiled chow mien in her arms. Coca Cola caps and Pepsi tabs punctuate her spine in rusted circles of aluminum. One of her eyes is a marble rubbed white by the sea and the other a doll's painted eye with chipped iris and flaking pupil. Her heart, and she has heart, is an empty egg shell, perfectly formed, save for the small, uneven hole in the side.

2.

Broken heart. BRO like brother, friend, mutual companion. KEN like you are kin to me, like you know me as I know you. HEART like a *part* of something but with a strong *heft* to it, as if you're breathing hard.

3.

The Sea Woman, glimmering with chemicals and shining with spilled oils, rises from the seabed as if waking from a deep slumber. Mud pours off fingers that have no fingernails. A gushing, roaring voice escapes like wild wind from a throat without a larynx. With a drawn-out, formless cry, she takes her first steps onto the white-yellow, white-hot sand.

4.

Marcus Blank put the note in Deborah Max's locker at five past two. He checks his watch again, waiting, hoping, praying, doubting, suspended over

a boiling pit of acid as a candle flame eats his rope, for her to meet him outside at the yellow fire hydrant next to the flag pole. The school bell rang fifteen minutes ago and he is still (STILL) waiting for her to show up. He did not bother to glance out the window during ninth period English to see Debbie blowing a pink bubble of gum as she rode out of the school parking lot. She leaned on Emilio McAlister's strong, broad shoulder as his Dodge '98 purred beneath them. Debbie wrapped her soft arm around Emilio's thick, bull neck and pressed her fingers into his dimpled chin just as Marcus was filling in bubble "D" on question thirteen of the multiple choice portion of his test.

5.

Picnicking families and sunbathing beauties, all gender and size, abandon their towels, beach blankets, and umbrellas in effort to get away from the Sea Woman. Parents rush back to grab their toddling children; one sun-oiled, old woman makes a mad dash for her plastic casserole dish and then sprints back to the car lot. A little boy eating an orange Popsicle doesn't move. He looks at the Sea Woman carefully, thinning his eyes to scrutinize her in the midmorning glare. She nears him with slow, heavy strides.

6.

Horace Orville (stage name Sirena Clandestine) did not get the part. He checks the list again, and then again. He licks his full lips, wipes the sweat off his brow, swallows thickly. He did not get the part, and he is about to cry.

7.

See, Angelina thought Brittany had sent an invitation to *every single one* of their friends except *her*, and you can't do that to a friend, you can't, you can't, you can't! But then Angelina's stepbrother, Jonathan, and his best friend, brown-and-puppy-dog-eyed Dirk said, "Hey! Let's egg her house! Oh my God, it'd be such great pay back for you, man," Angelina thought about it. Angelina thought about it for a night and a day, and then she said, "Sure."

So, they bought the eggs at the dairy mart, the toilet paper at the drug store, and then the plastic forks at the supermarket to stick into her lawn. Brittany called the next day, screaming, knowing everything, having not yet told her parents.

Angelina squealed, "But you didn't invite me to your PARTY!" Brittany promptly hung up and, holding the dead receiver, Angelina's eyes widened.

The empty dial tone echoed in the earpiece.

8.

The boy with the Popsicle smiles at the Sea Woman, colored ice melting down his fist. The Sea Woman stops, feet boiling on the sand. In the distance, in the sky, there are sounds like the flies buzzing over her flesh, but louder. And then – and then – gently, with her muddy not-mouth, the Sea Woman smiles back.

9.

Clancy didn't mean to come home early, of course not: he just didn't think the meeting with Eldritch Inc. would be so brief. But, quietly opening the front door, he saw Betty-Ann putting white tablets into a green glass filled with water. He watched them dissolve clear. In effort to avoid her, he stumbled into the kitchen, and found a letter from the man Betty had said she had been meeting for coffee, lately, which, yes, he'd known about, but had dismissed entirely. It explained, in short, everything, and how Betty and the man-from-coffee would be able to catch a plane to Las Vegas to get married after the obstructions had been removed for their true, true, wonderful love. Clancy then went around the back of the house and "came home" once more. Betty-Ann, and Clancy, for that matter, refused to act out-of-the-ordinary, and both grinned at each other in a way that was strained and above normal. At dinner, she proudly and *specifically* offered Clancy one of the green glasses at the table. He asked for something from the kitchen, and she, perhaps a little annoyed, Clancy could never tell, went to go get it. While she was gone, Clancy switched the glasses: each was green, after all. He smiled at her when she returned to eat their dinner.

10.

Down from the twirling, black helicopter, a sniper falls, landing in the soft sand in a crouch. He pulls out his gun and, frightened, fires a volley of shots before the Sea Woman can turn around. The little boy lets out a cry and drops his Popsicle stick. One bullet pierces the Sea Woman's skull, and another goes through her chest. It leaves the eggshell, her heart, broken. She falls to the ground, lifeless, as the little boy falls to his knees.

11.

Dirk begins to sleep by the phone, but Jonathan knows Angelina won't call again. He went along with it when they began to date each other and was secretly relieved when they broke-up, but now they've gone about hurting

one another. So, Jonathan gently puts a pillow between Dirk's head and the coffee table, and goes upstairs to bed. He feels like a lone audience member in an empty theater, watching a sad show where his sister and his best friend studiously play their parts.

12.

The little boy who almost met the Sea Woman grows up. His name is Emilio McAlister and he hates beaches. It's a month after Deborah left him (with some sonovabitch named Marcus Blank) that he gets a phone call from an agency attached to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "We're reopening a case," the polite, gentle woman over the phone tells him, "and we'd like to get some information. You were there." Emilio immediately remembers the Sea Woman, her muddy, nuclear waste body lying on the beach, black oil running from her wounds like blood. His father had taken him to their family pediatrician afterward to make sure that none of the radiation had begot cancer. Against his better judgment, Emilio goes to the large medical building where the polite woman directs him. He meets the woman, dressed in a sterile black suit, at the building's entrance. Two boys in wheel chairs gleefully race each other; a doctor in a white lab coat passes by, a clipboard tucked under her arm. Together, Emilio and the woman go to an area that isn't marked on the helpful hospital maps inside the elevators. The first thing the woman does is solemnly take out a plastic baggie holding, she says, the only body part of the monster that was devoid of radiation: a broken egg shell, green with age. Emilio stares down at it, holding the Sea Woman's heart in his hand.