

A Love Affair

by SCC Overton

When I think back on it, it's hard to believe that it even happened at all. Then again, most love affairs are like that, especially those that are spontaneous and impassioned and ultimately tragic. Time and experience both serve to create a distance between the affair and its subject, and thus its object becomes removed from reality, and takes on a mythical status. Only in this case, the object of my passion really was a myth. The affair was such an unexpected and unprecedented and unique experience in my youth that it doesn't usually register in my daily thoughts (except for today, of course) and so I don't think I've especially learnt from it. Furthermore, being so strange and precious, any wisdom that may have been gained from the experience would itself be too rare to be applied elsewhere.

But my thoughts are cast back to her today because she has arrived back in Spain after an absence that roughly spans the period of our separation. She has been installed in a permanent exhibition in a museum in the small seaside town where we both used to live. Her bones are now exhibited in a glass case, along with some blurred, grainy photographs and some vague facts about her life; in much the same form as the travelling exhibition of the same, that visited minor cities and large towns on a world tour just concluded.

We live in sceptical times, where everything is assumed to be impossible or fraudulent until proven otherwise beyond all doubt. Proof beyond proof and then general consensus. This only goes some of the way towards explaining the

indifference of people around the world to the travelling exhibition and its resultant unprofitability. But it doesn't bother me that her last mortal remains were reduced a passing amusement in the community centres, town halls and public-private theatres of the remote places of the world. In a way, it heightens the myth; at least in the way I understand mythology, which is a kind of negative doubt: a faint suspicion that the world is not as it appears, or a faith that there is yet more to be discovered.

I went to the opening of the museum this morning. It was scarcely attended; only a few local people had the leisure to stand by and watch. There were a few local dignitaries present, and also the delivery men responsible for the repatriation of my former love, possibly curious about their mysterious, fragile consignment or perhaps just impatient to obtain a signature for it. The ceremony was curt, but reverent. That the museum had even reached this stage was thanks to an anonymous donor who had made up the shortfall in what the world tour should have earned.

As I skulked at the back of the main salon, the mayor pulled away the thick red curtain to a smattering of applause. And there were the bones, all seven foot of them, hanging impossibly above the floor of the case, standing out with a renewed sharpness and clarity against the black background; a fine contrast to the low-resolution newspaper pictures that had filtered back to me in the preceding few years.

The bones themselves hold little emotional status for me. Naturally, they bear little resemblance to the once befleshed woman whom I loved. There are little reminders though: the pelvis, for example. In the main, her skeleton is

rather ordinary. She has typical Mediterranean proportions throughout her torso: a certain strength to the shoulders, a certain suppleness to the waist. Her back bone tapers into that legendary pelvic bone, but rather than coiling into a useless coccyx, it continues for the same length again or more, further and further until the vertebrae are almost too numerous to count and finally there is the delicate structure of her fin with its minutely fine, flexible bones, spread out like a gypsy fan. Her fin looks fragile like this, although it was as tough as leather when it was complete, when she was alive, just like her whole tail. Now, with its rib-like bones curving through almost one-hundred-and-eighty degrees out from the vertebrae below her pelvis, it's hard to associate it with the powerful limb that it once was. Biologically speaking (as I find myself doing, having been confronted with this explicit autopsy), her muscle structure was much more interesting, and alluring; but the muscles cannot be preserved as bones can. Besides, I had heard that her tail flesh had been filleted and sold on some aristocratic black market as the most expensive (and morally questionable) sashimi in history. I prefer to think of that as nothing more than an ugly rumour, although as time goes by I can see the perverse attraction of it, especially as I eventually 'consumed' her myself.

She could stay out of water for six or eight hours without any obvious side effects, and when she was 'in the dry', her lower two-thirds would secrete a pungent mucous; something almost the consistency of oil, but thicker and slower moving. I don't recall exactly when it was that I first touched this lubricant and experienced its properties. While I was intrigued about it, as everything about her intrigued me, I erred on the side of there being some form

of etiquette surrounding it, so I refrained from a direct examination. I do however recall the first time I got covered in her tail mucous, which was, of course, the first time we made love.

At the start of our affair, we would sit for hours: she naked and sunning herself, warming her blood, brushing off the sea salt as it formed in the September breeze. I was undressed too, most of the time, although I never felt naked as such, just as she never appeared to be undressed because she had never worn clothes in her life. As we played and communicated in gestures and sand pictures, I would gaze at her, all of her, the familiar and unfamiliar. Physically, she seemed to be in her twenties; a little older than I was. On the other hand, she displayed no sign of ageing, no scars, pockmarks, lines, dimples or anything to suggest she had been occupying her body for that length of time. She would gaze at me too, but only at my eyes and at my legs and feet. She adored my legs, even though to me they were pale and undeveloped. She would massage the muscles in my legs, exploring their strangeness and the strangeness of the bones and joints. She would comb the coarse, bleached hairs and brush the sand from my skin.

We had a wonderful child-like relationship that started just as a child's might start: just as a child might walk up to someone he likes the look of and simply ask 'do you like fire engines?', and thus make a friend for life. We had no common spoken language (she didn't speak at all, only huffing or sighing occasionally, but not with the same meaning as we may ascribe to these sounds) but had we had one, the first question would have been 'do you like the sea?' She took me out swimming and diving that first day. She seemed to think that

my two legs would have given me a proficiency and strength in swimming that was equal to or greater than hers, and she also assumed that I could hold my breath for as long as she could. But these were the only misunderstandings we ever had, and they were soon resolved. We would swim just below the surface, and I would squeeze her hand when I needed to come up for breath. She would guide me through the warm, gentle sea to places I had never imagined existed.

It was at one of these hidden bays, as we sat where most likely no other people had sat before, that we first made love. It was a few days after we first met, and I think she understood that I had a sexual yearning for her. We traded naiveties: she was older, and yet had never been exposed to humans and their intimate ways before; and I was younger and in her possession, and yet I was the one who was scarred and experienced - even jaded. I was feeling fresh and energised after coursing through the surf, and I leant across and kissed her lips. She looked surprised and then curious, and then a lucidity came over her. Taking this acknowledgement as a kind of permission, I kissed her again. This time she reciprocated. We kissed and sucked and licked at each other's mouths, like a mixture of some primal mating and grooming rituals. I laid her back in the sand and she parted the scales at the root of her pelvis and we made love.

We made love and swam and explored every day for what felt like weeks, but was probably around ten days. Each time we made love, I would end up covered with her strange, sickly-sweet tail mucous, which gave me strength and suppleness and vigour - at least, I imagined it did. In the arrogance of my youth, I imagined myself becoming a greater and stronger man each time we were together. I imagined myself transcending the species itself, just as she did; I

imagined myself becoming king of everything that I could see. I was Midas and I was Herod. I was Icarus.

I became petulant. Our childishness had become animal-like. We were becoming foreign to each other. I would keep her out of the water for longer and longer, and I would her allow less and less recuperation time in the salt sea that was her habitat. After making love I would scrape the mucous from her tail and plaster it on myself. I would farm it, making her turn slowly and evenly so as not to miss a single inch of it.

And so, on a particularly dry day she dived back into the sea and was gone. She had been gazing at me until the end, but her innocent look had been replaced with a look of sadness. The sadness of loss - the loss of everything.

She was discovered in a tuna net, drowned. She caused a sensation, of course, but it quickly died away. She was dissected and the rest I have already explained. My seed was discovered inside her, but as her death was not suspicious, and as she had been regarded as 'animal' rather than 'human' up until that point, there was no further investigation. A hearing has been set up to decide whether she was in fact human enough to be regarded as such, but it's already too late. She is little more than an artefact now, for the whole world to begin to disbelieve. And for me, her bones are a monument to all that we ever gain and all that we ever lose.

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