

Remembering the River Woman

by Bruce Boston and Marge Simon

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Simple things. A few hours in a man's life. The rare pleasure of finding someone so close that for a time she filled his skin.

When a man is afraid of himself, everyone knows he's bad company. He was a big man, tall enough, and his shoulders could stand two bushels of grain. By day, he worked the docks of a river so vast you could tell time by its tides. He lived alone in a tin-roofed shack near the pier, avoided rum, spoke only when he had to.

Rumor had it he'd once shamed himself and his family. No one could remember how or why.

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When the tides rise, crafts from many lands come ashore. One day there was a River Woman among the passengers, dark and slim with smooth long hair that flowed with colors in the wind. When he first saw her, he forgot to breathe for a moment, and when he did he yelled out.

It was a huge wordless yell, the sound that comes from deep inside a needful man. When she heard him cry, she stopped and turned his way.

One by one, and then in groups, the people on the docks gaped when the creature took his arm to walk beside him. River Folk never mixed with humans.

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She nestled in his largest chair while he prepared a meal of bread and cheese. They washed it down with a local vintage, laughed often and for no reason. She told him stories he barely understood. He poured more wine, brushed her arm whenever he could.

Yet there came a time when he could tell that she sensed the fear within him like a bright lance of pain. Was it his glance, his touch, or could River Folk share the thoughts of others as the old tales told? And though she stayed to spend the night in his arms, he knew at that moment he'd lost her.

Afterward, he thought it out slowly, the way she'd come to him and why. Especially why. It took hours to relive: each gesture she made, each word spoken, her webbed hands splayed on the soiled spread. How she had taken his fear in her leaving and left the image of her wild beauty impressed upon his mind.

He thought about it all in moments of peace as he watched the tides of the river rise and fall.