Alas! Alas! This Woeful Fate

Roger Zelazny

We shouldn’t have been living in California. Utah, maybe. Or Montana.

Or perhaps Kansas, which I understand is a dry state.

But not California.

No.

But I wanted badly to be near the ocean, so that I could at least look at it; and I didn’t think anybody would suspect, especially not Louise.

It’s all that damn Madeleine’s fault...

No, it’s really my own, I guess... Our own? Yes. More likely, that.

I should have been more honest with Louise⁠—but how could I? A double life is a double life, anyway you look at it.

\* \* \*

“Henry,” she said, frowning to turn her dimples inside-out, eyes smouldering behind their brown, “Henry, there’s a seal in the backyard.”

“What does it want?”

“I thought I’d ask you.”

I lowered the newspaper.

“What do you mean by that crack?”

MacAlister was barking his fool head off in the kitchen. I’ve always disliked that dog, and the feeling is mutual, but now he was really getting on my nerves.

“What do you mean?” I repeated, but she just let my question hang there and turned away.

She left the room and I followed her.

“Shut that overfed Husky off, so I can hear myself think, and answer my question: What do you mean you thought you’d ask me what a seal wants in our backyard?”

“You know what I mean!”

In the kitchen, she soothed MacAlister by rubbing behind his hairy ears.

She lisped as she talked to him. It was sickening:

“Shush now, Mac. You shush now. There’s some very important people-talk going on now, and I want you to be still.”

He wagged his tail, shut his muzzle, aimed for the table, went beneath it, turned himself around, and then lay there with his head on his paws, glaring up at me.

“Well,” I asked.

“Would you be willing to come out into the back yard with me, to look at the seal?”

“Of course. Why shouldn’t I?”

So we went out, and there was a seal beside the swimming pool. It turned its head in our direction.

“Well? yourself,” said Louise.

“Well⁠—what? What are you welling me about? What’s going on?”

“What do you think of that seal?” she asked.

“She’s just an ordinary seal. Probably escaped from some circus⁠—or something.”

Louise began to cry.

“That proves it!” she sobbed. “That proves it! That’s it! That’s all! That’s just about the damned limit, Henry!”

“What is?” I puzzled. “What in hell are you talking about?”

I eyed the seal uneasily and the compliment was returned.

“You said ‘she’! How do you know whether it’s a girl seal or a boy seal?”

“Well⁠— It⁠—just⁠—looks like a girl seal, that’s all.”

“Nuts. You know.”

“Are you feeling all right, Louise?”

“No! I’m not! ⁠—Business trips, that’s where you say you’re going. Then you come back in two or three months, without a word as to where you’ve been, without even an unusual pack of matches in your pocket, without any indication at all as to what you’ve been doing.”

“I use a lighter, and I write to you. I’ve told you that my work is confi⁠—”

“No! You’re lying. And you don’t write to me because you can’t. Somebody else mails all those letters for you⁠—and they’re never dated, and they’re so general in everything they say... You write them up in advance, then you have some friend send them.”

“That’s not true,” I said weakly.

“Come this way.” She took my arm and led me nearer the pool. The seal did not move, but she continued to stare at me, as if studying me for some indication...

“I’ve noticed your reaction to trained seal acts at the circus. I’ve seen you cry during them!”

“I happen to think it’s inhumane to keep an intelligent animal like that prisoner, and to make it perform.”

“No, Henry, it’s more than that. ⁠—And there’s this big thing you have about being afraid of the water. You won’t even take a bath. You always shower. You won’t swim or anything...”

“I have a phobia.”

“You’re trying to raise your son with one, but you don’t have it. You don’t! You’ve read him the story of the R. M. S. Titanic every night I can remember, and you tell him about all the drownings within a hundred miles. I even think you make some of them up. You warn him about sharks, sting-rays, electric eels... Poor Jimmy is scared stiff of water, because you want him to be.”

“Crap! You have him sleeping in a room without windows, because you’re afraid of the night outside... It’s the same thing.”

“No, it isn’t. ⁠—That time we had the accident, went off the bridge... It was over sixty feet deep and there were treacherous currents. You say you can’t swim⁠—but you got me out of that car and back to the surface, and the police said it was practically a miracle.”

“A man can do many strange things under stress...”

“No, Henry. I thought I was unconscious, thought I’d dreamed it⁠—but I was carried to the surface by a great gray seal!”

“Aw, come on, Louise!”

“...And that time in the coffee shop, when that guitarist was singing a ballad⁠—The Great Silky of Shule Skerrie, it was called⁠—boy! did you ever rush out of there!

“Henry,” she said quietly, “I think that you are leading a double life. You are a silky, and you are being unfaithful to me,” she said.

“I told you that I never go near other women on those trips⁠—”

“Exactly,” she agreed, pointing at the seal. “I think that bitch, or cow, or whatever you call it, is your⁠—mistress!”

So what could I do, remembering a similar argument just a week ago, conducted about twenty fathoms under the Bay?

I attacked.

“Do I ever ask where you go, what you do when I’m away⁠—or on those occasions when you stay out all night and come back hung over the next morning? I do not, and it happens just about every month. Now you come up with this nutty bit about a folksong, and me being a seal-man, and⁠—well, I think you ought to see an analyst.”

“There is one way to check everything out, Henry,” she said.

“What’s that?”

She pushed me into the pool.

So that’s how it all came out. To make matters worse, Madeleine was mad as hell as soon as the change occurred and she recognized me. She plunged in and swam up to my side.

“So I was right, Henry. You’re one of those were-men that the story-tellers sing about, far out on their rim-rocks, late in the day when it is cold and the sky begins to darken: You are a seal in the sea and a man upon the land. ⁠—Whatever will we tell the puppies?”

“Tell them any damn thing you want,” I barked back, “but for God’s sake, keep them in the water!”

So there I was, chewed out upon land by Louise, and in the water by Madeleine. It’s no fun being a silky, I’ll tell you that. It may sound pretty romantic at first, but when they finally catch up with you there’s all hell to pay. I am hounded upon land, harassed within the sea...

And Madeleine bites, but Louise doesn’t. So I climbed back out of the pool and, as I dried off, resumed my humanity.

Only, all of my clothes were floating out there in that kidney-shaped insect trap, with the pump which is always breaking down and costing me twenty bucks at a crack to have fixed (and then me not being able to use it!).

I wasn’t about to go in there after them, so I stood there, indignant and pink.

“That, Louise, is just too damned much!” I told her. “What would the neighbors think if any of them saw me turn into a seal in our swimming pool?”

“I don’t care!” she said. “You lied to me!”

In the meantime, Madeleine came up and bit me on the ankle.

“Stop that! Or I’ll sic the dog on you!”

That was a bluff. I couldn’t really do that to Madeleine, but I had to say something to make her let me go.

“Okay,” I said to Louise, “are you jealous of a seal?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“But it’s not the same,” I told her, “as being with another woman. Really it isn’t. Whenever I’m a seal⁠—well, it’s a different me: It’s not the same body. You wouldn’t sleep with me in my seal form, would you?

“And Madeleine wouldn’t touch me now⁠—except to bite me, that is, because she’s mad. But that’s diff⁠—”

“Henry,” she said cooly, “I don’t think that I’ll be sleeping with you in any form.”

“Aw, now, honey⁠—wait a minute...Louise!”

But she was stalking away, toward the house.

“ ‘Madeleine’!” she said. “It even has a name!”

“Would you want me to take up with a nobody?” I asked. “Just pick up with someone and not even ask who she was?”

She slammed the screen door in my face and MacAlister came up and growled at me through it.

Madeleine flopped up behind me, said:

“Fishing trips with the boys, huh!”

“Aw, Mad. Don’t⁠—”

But she bobbed away, graceful and gray, and dived into the pool, leaving me there alone and cold and with a sore ankle.

I growled back at MacAlister and entered the kitchen.

The bedroom door was closed, but not locked. Louise was crying inside.

“I forgive you,” she said, when I touched her shoulder, “but Jimmy⁠—oh Jimmy!”

“What about him? So long as he stays away from the water he’ll never know, never get the itch. And it’s a recessive gene, I think. His kids’ll probably all be normal.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“What then?”

“What is he?”

\* \* \*

So we’re sitting here beside the pool. Madeleine has gone away in a huff, but I’ll make up with her later. It’s almost time now.

I’ll have to admit I’m a little frightened.

But it’s as much Louise’s fault as it is mine.

It is! Damn it! She could have mentioned a few things herself...

As soon as that big old moon pushes its face up above the nextdoor neighbor’s TV antenna, we’ll know.

We’ll watch and see how Jimmy behaves under his first full moon⁠—if it affects him in the same way as it will his mother.

...If it does, we’ll push him into the pool and see what happens next.

Wolves can swim, everybody knows that.

Now I know why MacAlister doesn’t like me.

Oh my son! What have we done to you?

Notes

This amusing tale of were-ness precedes by 30 years the plethora of such stories in bookstores. The Great Silky of Shule Skerry is a tale of the Silkies, or seafolk, enchanted creatures who dwell in the sea. Silkies can doff their seal skins to pass on land as mortal men and father children with human women. A lengthy ballad by the same title contains the line from which the story’s title is taken: “Alas, alas, this woeful fate...”

Zelazny also began writing a stage play that involved silkies (“The Great Selchie of San Francisco Bay,” included in volume 1) but never completed it; this story may have inspired the play.

One fathom is a depth of 6 feet.