

A FISHY TAIL – by Simone Riley, November 2020

There was once a mysterious land, deep beneath the ocean waves, called Aquatania. Within this strange underwater realm, Morphelia was not only Queen of the Mermaids, but also Protector and Guardian of all the other creatures that inhabited the Sea. She was sometimes called the 'Wise-Woman of the Watery Depths', for she knew many things, and she was an expert in the art of Metamorphosis – having the power to change people, including herself, partly or wholly, into other things - but always and only for wise and good reasons.

Morphelia had one daughter, a mermaid called 'Mira', who was exceptionally beautiful, and exceptionally vain. As the daughter of a Queen, Mira thought she was rather special. Her behaviour towards the other sea creatures was not only aloof, but also unkind.

She laughed at the Octopus who could never find a set of eight matching shoes to wear; she laughed at the Whale because he had a hole in his head and kept having to empty himself of water; she laughed at the Lobster who wanted so desperately to be able to play the piano but couldn't; she laughed at all the Star Fish who were constantly anxious, believing that they should really be living in the sky; she laughed at the Dog Fish who had a split-personality disorder and suffered endless confusion; and she laughed at the Lone Shark because no-one ever wanted to be his friend.

How she laughed.

Her Mother, Morphelia, decided it would be a good idea for Mira to learn how to socialise, as well as to learn about her environment, in the hope that it might encourage her to stop laughing at her fellow sea creatures. She sent Mira to The School of Fish, which was situated in an underground cave surrounded by beautiful coral. Classes often involved watching David Attenborough films about the nature of the world below the sea, and on the day that Mira attended, there was a special lecture on climate change and its effect on the oceans, presented by a visiting Polar Bear.

Mira laughed at the Jellyfish sitting in front of her who couldn't stop wobbling; she laughed at the Squid who kept spilling her ink all over her school book; she laughed at the Electric Eel who was unable to work properly as there were no plug sockets at the bottom of the sea; she laughed at the Clown Fish, just because of his name; she laughed at the fat faced Puffa Fish; she laughed at the flat faced Skate Fish; and she nearly laughed her head right off at the thought of the visiting Polar Bear teetering on the top of a melting iceberg due to global warming.

How she laughed.

When she returned home, Morphelia asked Mira what she had learnt. "I learnt that lectures are boring and that all my class-mates are ugly and stupid", Mira replied.

Morphelia was angry. "You have obviously learnt nothing at all! Appearances mean nothing – beauty comes from within – if someone has a beautiful soul it will shine through regardless of their looks – and however beautiful you appear to be on the surface, if your behaviour is ugly, then that will also shine through, like a big bright beacon of ugliness. It is *you* who is ugly and stupid – being so horrible to others and not caring about anything except yourself - I suggest you go and look at yourself in the mirror!".

Mira looked at herself in the mirror.

What had happened to her long beautiful auburn locks? She was bald, apart from a few straggly strands of hair, and her face had become slightly disfigured. What had happened to her beautifully soft smooth skin? The top half of her body now looked rough and slightly scaly, but not in a good way – not at all in keeping with her magnificent mermaid tail.

"Is this your doing?" she screamed at her Mother. "Yes" said Morphelia – "and you are going to stay looking like that until you learn to be nice. And what's more, as you clearly took no notice of the Polar Bear's lecture on climate change, you will go and help your fellow sea creatures with the 'Ocean Clean-up Campaign' that has been organised. Then perhaps you will see some of the environmental problems that we are facing due to all the pollution in the sea".

Mira sulked and wailed and thrashed her tail.

The Ocean Clean-up Campaign was very well organised. The plan was to collect as much plastic and other rubbish from the sea as possible, and deposit it in the nets of passing trawlers in the hope that it would be taken back to where it came from. There was an army of Swordfish whose noses were perfect for pronging pieces of litter on the sea-bed; the larger pieces were dealt with by the Hammerhead Sharks who bashed things until they became more compact and manageable; and Sea Urchins were rolled along the ocean floor trapping all the smaller objects in their spiny coats. Piles and piles of human rubbish were formed, which would then be taken by all the other sea creatures, near and far, to fishing nets cast into the sea by fishermen all over the world.

Mira didn't want to help. She didn't think that manual work was suitable for the daughter of a Queen. She looked on, pouting like a fish, with her slightly scaly arms folded, and she sulked and wailed and thrashed her tail. She watched all her fellow sea creatures working so hard, to-ing and fro-ing, carrying all the rubbish to the

nearest fishing net; a huge group effort to save the sea, their home, from hazardous objects and substances. Mira watched the fishing net getting fuller and fuller.

When the fishermen started to pull it back up, it was so heavy that they thought they had caught a whale. Just as the huge floating mass was nearing the surface, Mira broke off a piece of sharp coral, swam towards it at great speed, and slashed the net wide open. All the rubbish tumbled back down through the water and back onto the sea-bed. All that work. All that effort. Completely undone.

How she laughed.

Morphelia was furious. "How could you be so nasty to your fellow sea creatures when they are working so hard to save the environment that is *your* home as well as theirs? Don't you care about *anything*? You think you are *better* than all of the other sea creatures just because you are my daughter? Well you are not! Go and look at yourself in the mirror".

Mira looked at herself in the mirror.

She still had her magnificent mermaid tail, but the top half of her was now entirely Fish. Her lips looked reminiscent of some sort of botox disaster, and she had big googly eyes on either side of her head. It would be a while before she could wear her Dolce & Gabbana sunglasses again.

"I suppose this is your doing?" she screamed at her Mother. "Yes" said Morphelia - "and you are going to stay looking like that until you learn to be nice. And what's more, as you clearly have no regard for your home and no compassion towards others, I am going to give you another task, which will be your last chance to prove that you can change your ways. There are often small boats that travel across the seas, full of humans who have had to flee from their own homes due to all sorts of troubles and disasters. They are risking their lives travelling this way, but they have no choice. You are to go in search of these vessels, and guide them to the safety of the shore".

Mira sulked and wailed and thrashed her tail, but she really didn't want to be stuck with her latest new look, so reluctantly, she decided that she would at least try.

She based herself in the English Channel between Calais and Dover, as she had been told that this was a particularly treacherous route, often taken by the human travellers.

A small dinghy came into view, so full of travellers it was nearly bursting at the seams. Mira swam towards it, in order to show them the way to the shore. It was night time, the traveller's eyes were tired, and in the darkness, Mira's presence went

un-noticed. She wailed a bit and thrashed her tail a bit. The travellers looked towards her this time, but didn't understand what she was trying to tell them, particularly as they were not used to fish that could speak. She should have just grabbed the rope attached to the little boat with her big botox lips and pulled the travellers towards the distant land now looming on the horizon – but instead her anger got the better of her, and Mira thrashed her tail in frustration with them, so violently that it caused the dinghy to capsize. None of the travellers knew how to swim. Down, down, down they fell through the water, as if in slow motion, down into the darkest depths of the sea. All of them drowned.

How she laughed.

Morphelia was incandescent with rage. “You are beyond comprehension! You must be a complete psychopath! I cannot believe it possible that you are my daughter! How can you laugh at such a terrible terrible thing? Those people had caused no harm to anyone, they were fleeing in terror from wars, from bombs, from poverty, from torture, from death, from destruction, from ongoing nightmares, from their decimated homes – they were just dreaming of a better place – a new start, a second chance, a future – and instead of helping them, you have taken all of those things away from them. You have no heart, not a smidgen of kindness in your soul. I am disgusted with you. You are no longer welcome here in the sea – I am banishing you to the land, where you will go and work in a fish and chip shop – and what's more, you'd better take another look at yourself in the mirror before you leave”.

Mira looked at herself in the mirror.

Horror of horrors. Her top half remained a scaley googly eyed botox lipped Fish, but her bottom half had become Human, with legs! “Oh My Goddess!” she exclaimed in disbelief, “Instead of being a beautiful Mermaid I am now the opposite. I have become a Maidmer! How very horrible”.

“I know this is your doing,” she screamed at her Mother, “How could you be so cruel?”. “It is you Mira who is cruel” replied Morphelia, “and you are going to stay looking like that until you learn to be nice, just as you will not be able to return to Aquatania again until you learn to be nice”.

Mira could sulk and wail, but she could no longer thrash her tail.

She was so furious with Morphelia for doing this to her that she didn't even say goodbye.

She left her home pretending to herself that she didn't care, and that she would have much more fun on land, away from her Mother and away from everything else that she had thrown scorn upon – but secretly, she was just a little bit afraid.

The fish and chip shop that she was to go and work in was owned by a very old friend of Morphelia's, a friend from many moons ago. Mira didn't like the idea at all, but it had all been arranged, and she knew that if she disobeyed her Mother, she could end up being stuck as a Maidmer for a very long time, possibly even forever.

Mira swam and swam, which was much harder work with human legs.

After some time, she found herself back in the English Channel, and eventually the White Cliffs of Dover came into view. A group of little fish returning to France from a day trip passed by in the opposite direction. They couldn't believe their eyes at the sight of the Maidmer; "C'est horrible! C'est horrible!" they all squealed in unison.

It was getting dark by the time Mira eventually reached the shore, and she was thankful that there was no-one around to witness her arrival, particularly as she was naked from the waist down. In the human realm, fish didn't have to wear clothes (so her top half was ok), and animals didn't have to wear clothes, and birds didn't have to wear clothes, and insects didn't have to wear clothes - but it was different for humans. It was not only considered very rude, but it was actually *illegal* for a human to be seen with no clothes on in a public place! Mira gathered up some soggy kelp from the sea shore and fashioned herself a skirt in an attempt to make herself look more presentable. On her way to the fish and chip shop, she passed an antiques emporium, which had a large ornate mirror in the window. She caught sight of her reflection. Googly eyes, botox lips, fish head, human legs, and now the addition of an ill-fitting slimy skirt of dangling seaweed.

What *on earth* did she looked like?!

Mira started work the next day. The fish and chip shop had been struggling for a while, but the news spread quickly that there was now a Maidmer working behind the counter, and more and more people came to witness the surreal sight for themselves. Many of them believed that Mira possessed exceptional theatrical costume and make-up skills, and that it was all just a humorous 'stunt' to attract attention and drum up business.

How they laughed.

Day after day, what seemed like hundreds of customers came in for their fish and chips, and they all pointed, and they all laughed, and they all made unfunny jokes about Mira's appearance.

Mira didn't laugh.

Every night she went to bed exhausted. Every night she lay her scaly head on the pillow and cried herself to sleep. Her salty tears reminded her of the sea, where she belonged, and she wondered how many tears it would take to create an ocean.

Day after day, she wondered if any of the fish being fried were people that she knew.

Night after night she had terrifying dreams, in which she heard the screams of little baby mermaids coming from the deep fat fryer, and all the fish fingers pointed at her in an accusatory manner.

Mira feared she would go mad.

The days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months, until one Friday evening when an ugly old crone entered the fish and chip shop. One of her eyes was slightly hanging out, dribble was running down her chin, and she was wearing a blonde wig, stuck together with dirt. Her clothes were an eclectic mix of fabulous finds; a vintage whale-bone corset which was broken in several places, a skirt constructed from an old lobster pot with the bottom missing, fish net tights adorned with a few trapped bottle tops and metal ring pulls, a cloak knitted from a collection of shredded plastic bags, a pearl necklace, and strange turquoise pointy shoes. The aroma that accompanied her was a heady mix of stale fish and sewers.

The crone approached the counter, peered over it and looked Mira up and down.

How she laughed.

"You're even uglier than I am!" said the crone.

Mira didn't laugh - because she had to admit that this was probably true. She remembered laughing at all the other sea creatures, and she hung her fishy head in shame.

"A Maidmer!" exclaimed the crone, "what went wrong?"

"Everything" replied Mira, "Everything went very very wrong, and it was all my own doing", and she hung her fishy head in shame.

The crone looked around the fish and chip shop, and noticed the overflowing waste bin in the corner, full of greasy paper and soggy leftovers smeared with tomato sauce. "That bin needs emptying" she said, making her way towards it. She picked up the bin, turned it upside-down, and emptied the entire contents all over the floor.

How she laughed.

What a mess. What a horrible horrible mess.

Mira didn't laugh - she remembered the time when she cut the fishing net and all the rubbish collected by her fellow sea creatures spilled back onto the floor of the ocean. She hung her fishy head in shame.

"I come from a place far away", said the crone. "I had to flee from my country, many years ago now, as I was in fear of my life. There was a raging war, and many bad and terrifying things happened. My house was burnt to the ground, and I was

separated from my family. Recently I made contact with some of my long-lost relatives – they were due to come and join me, but they all drowned trying to get here”.

The crone started to cry, and her dodgy eye fell out and rolled across the floor.

Mira retrieved it and gently placed it back in the crone’s eye socket. “I am so, so sorry”, she said. She remembered the time that she caused the boat full of travellers to capsize, and she hung her fishy head in shame.

The crone stopped crying, and ordered a medium cod and a small portion of chips. Mira gave her a large cod and an even larger portion of chips. She also gave her all the money that she had been saving for a rainy day. “Take this” said Mira, “It’s not much, and it won’t bring back your family, but perhaps, for once in your life, you will be able to treat yourself to something special.”

The crone nodded wisely, and smiled to herself as she left the fish and chip shop.

When Mira went to bed that night, she lay her scaly head on the pillow, but she found that she couldn’t cry herself to sleep, because she was just far too awake. Her mind was racing with thoughts of the crone, and the ways in which she had reminded Mira of her own past behaviour. She was truly ashamed of herself, and truly, truly sorry. She longed to return to her home in the sea, so much so, that she decided to go for a moonlit swim, to remind herself of what it felt like.

Mira swam and swam, which was still hard work with human legs, but the further she swam, the easier it seemed to become. Further and further she swam.

A group of little fish returning from a day trip to France passed by in the opposite direction. “What a magnificent tail!” they all squealed in unison. Mira, at that moment, realised that a transformation had taken place, and that she was now, once more, a Mermaid, just like she used to be. Then, from the deep watery depths of the ocean, Morphelia appeared.

Mira was overcome with emotion. She was so pleased to see her mother again, and she began to tell her about the crone, and all the things that she had realised as a result of meeting her. “I know” said Morphelia, “It was me in disguise. I came to see how you were, and to decide whether it was time for you to return to Aquatania – and you passed the test. You showed me kindness and compassion, despite my horrible appearance, and I could see that you were truly truly sorry for everything that had happened in the past. I donated the money that you gave me to the Ocean Clean-up Campaign”.

On arriving home, Mira found that all her fellow sea creatures had organised a huge party for her, in celebration of her return. Despite the fact that she had been so unkind to them in the past, they were all pleased to see her. They knew she was

truly truly sorry, and they forgave her, knowing that life is too short to hold grudges.

Mira was very very happy. She didn't know why she had been so horrible in the past. She loved her mother, she loved her home, she loved her fellow sea creatures, and she loved her life as a Mermaid. She decided to set up a special page on facebook, where she would share all sorts of information, and educate people all over the world, about environmental conservation, and anything and everything to do with life in the Ocean.

Mira called her facebook page 'Celebrate the Sea', and it still exists to this day.

<https://www.facebook.com/MiratheMaidmer>