

## Skin

Daniel Draper

She was born with a caul, but at least she was human. At the birth I shut my eyes, terrified. The metallic smell of blood mixed with brine and earth under Sandra's screams and I only opened them once I heard the midwife's surprise. It was a surprise without horror. I'd never seen a caul before. It wrapped around her tiny head like a giant extra eyelid. If we rushed, our baby's skin would peel off with it. The midwife sliced at the nostrils so our girl could breathe and little white ridges of extra skin bunched together over her hair. I looked at Sandra. I thought, if she panics, you can panic. I had questions that were too personal to ask, even though I'd witnessed the birth. Sandra's face was distant, reminding me of a church statue above salvation's doors. She had blanched eyes, and her mouth was turned downwards, as if mourning. I'd never been happier.

The midwife cooed and gasped at the rarity of it, congratulating us like a judge on a baking show, marvelling at what we could rustle up given such unique ingredients. Roman lawyers would buy stolen cauls for luck, she said, joking that we should sell it. Neither of us laughed. Sandra gently held our miracle in one arm and in the other caressed the sleeve with its small slit, the only thing stopping our daughter from suffocating before she had a chance to open her eyes.

When the midwife insisted we keep it for posterity, Sandra's eyes refocused, glistening as they met our daughters'. They were the same deep chestnut, and just as wet. Her newly uncovered cheeks were so full they threatened to evict her nose. Sandra told the midwife to get rid of it and I exhaled, unaware I'd been holding my breath.

We were married two summers ago. The wedding had been family only, taking place in the shallow lapping of the coast. It was sunset, long after the fishermen had gone home. She wore a sheer white dress and had shells in her salted hair, while I was wearing the tweed jacket that I'd tried on in a charity shop to make her laugh. We'd giggled amongst other people's cast-offs and I told her I loved her for the first time.

Her brothers and mother had stepped out of their skins completely, pale and naked against the rocks, standing knee deep in the water. My mother had deemed it a power move on their part, which she matched with a hat that you could have set sail in. My brother officiated and we celebrated with a picnic on the rocks, my new in-laws doing their best to answer questions about life underwater as my family tried to explain what weddings meant to humans. Our fathers refused to come, their opposition being the only thing they had in common.

Sandra said they had always found the skin restrictive, but it was the only thing that would keep them warm in the depths. She didn't like to talk about things from before us, and I certainly couldn't visit, but every time she went I felt the goodbye pinch in my throat. What

if she decided to stay? I could have hidden the skin, but that felt too cruel. We keep it preserved in seawater, by my surfing stuff in the garage.

We had no idea how pregnancy would work, and there was no chance of asking the doctor, but things were good. The inside of her changed as I had nightmares of baby seals screaming. I knew there were bones and a little heart in there as I lay my hand on her belly at night, but I couldn't stop thinking about the skin. The outside on the inside. Skin within skin under skin.

We brought her home and named her, and life went on. Sometimes I come home and Sandra is in the garage with the skin in her arms, the baby beside her. There's a soft grief in the way she tells her stories that I can't bear, so I leave them to it. She didn't tell her parents about the baby. She said it was cruel to dangle a grandchild just out of their reach, even though I'd always said they were welcome to visit, particularly in the cold winters. Apparently I didn't understand.

I tried to be romantic and booked a day off work without telling her. I made her breakfast and brought it to her in bed with the skin. I'll take care of the baby, I told her, you go visit your folks for the day. Her head fell and she started a low hum that broke into a wail. I didn't know what I'd done and she couldn't stop screaming long enough to tell me. I took myself over to the moses basket, not wanting to panic the little one. She wiggled in my arms but stayed silent, listening to her mother's heart breaking. I spent the day holding them both, alternating as needed, and fell asleep between them in exhaustion.

It was dark when Sandra woke me up. She was feeding the baby, her soft crying worse than the wailing. She told me her skin didn't fit anymore. She couldn't go back into the sea. She couldn't feel currents and whirls of darkness surround her, and she couldn't say goodbye to her mother or introduce our daughter. She'd been telling the stories as lullabies, watching pudgy fingers try grasp the skin, instinctively placing it over her tiny head. We'll save the skin, I said, and when she was old enough, she could take it. Visit. Explain. It was fixable.

Before Sandra could explain why I was wrong, our daughter unlatched and gave us a gurgled smile as she slipped between waking and sleeping. Sandra beamed, and in my throat a hiccup of love bubbled and burst with such force that for a moment I was convinced I was drowning.