

# Slipping Off the Sealskin: Examining the Nuances of Intimate Partner Violence in Selkie

## Mythology

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The waters of the Atlantic Ocean that lap gently at Scotland's shores are home to multitudes of marine life, from the hyper-evolved apex predator *Orcinus orca* to millimeter-long bottom-feeding sea slugs. The Scottish coast itself is a haven for the world's seal population, with roughly 40% of all gray seals dwelling there and a staggering 90% partaking in a seasonal migration to breed on site. Given their prevalence in the region, it is unsurprising that seals hold great symbolic significance in Scottish culture: thought to represent phenomena ranging from balefully bewitched sailors to the restless souls of those lost at sea, seals and their ilk feature in several of the country's characteristic myths, the most notable of those being the legend of the selkie. Selkies are hybrid beings who gallivant through the waves as seals but possess the power to shed their pelts to take the shapes of human women when on land. If they are to return to their native habitats, they must retain and slip back into their seal skins, which are perpetually at the peril of being pilfered by lustful fishermen and held hostage to force the selkies into marriage. These unions are often fraught with conflict and strife, as the selkie is forever searching for her hidden sealskin to liberate herself from the confines of human domesticity and retreat back to the embrace of the ocean.

Women have faced coercion into sexual and domestic servitude for as long as the fraught state of gender relations has had means to be meaningfully recorded. Centuries after the inception of the selkie story, misogyny and relationship violence persist as societal problems that transcend cultural and geographic boundaries. The particular narrative commonalities of selkie lore--romantic entrapment, implied sexual assault, and enforced isolation--not only share compelling parallels with but also offer valuable perspectives on what is commonly referred to in sociological scholarship as *intimate partner violence* (IPV), loosely defined as "...behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours" (WHO 2022). The inclusion of these tropes can not just be read as archaic attempts at romance, but re-contextualized as signifiers of deeper conversations about partnership and pain that the fabricators of the fables lacked the psychosocial lexicon to have. Selkies, then, can be framed as early harbingers of the damaging potential of IPV, primitive coping mechanisms for women who likely had no resources with which to manage deeply distressing circumstances; this interpretation is also supported by current IPV terminology, which offers concrete vocabulary to describe the previously established frequently referenced incidents ubiquitous to the selkie tradition. Though they are confined to the seas of fiction and fantasy, selkies serve as useful archetypal tools to encourage critical insight into the

pervasive social issue of IPV, illustrating the ebb and flow of entrapment and liberation in present-day discussions of gender, power, and politics.

*The Selkie Wife* is a tale born from the cradle of oral tradition, dubiously dating back to the early 9th century at the onset of Norse immigration to the Orkney islands. References to seal folk pre-date the advent of the written word, with the particular yarn of *The Selkie Wife* not recorded textually until it began to appear in collections of local folklore beginning in the 1800s. A modernized translation provided by Scotland's Traditional Arts and Culture Foundation draws from several popular iterations of the narrative to present it in a condensed format whilst still maintaining the integrity of the ever-changing original legend. Like most incarnations of the legend, the TRACS revitalization chronicles the plight of an unsuccessful fisherman who encounters a gaggle of selkies cavorting on the moonlit coast; frightened by his presence, they slip back into their sealskins, one of which he finds deserted on a rock. The fisherman snatches it in a fit of avarice before being confronted by its owner in her human shape, who is deeply distraught at the loss of her pelt. Her tearful supplications do little to sway him, as he rationalizes his use of emotional blackmail by assuring her that she will find happiness and fulfillment as his wife. Now forcibly landlocked, the selkie woman reluctantly agrees to marry the mariner, and is spirited back to his cottage and wed to him before the month's end. From there, she settles into an uneasy domesticity, spending an indeterminable amount of years as his wife and bearing seven of his children, existing in a liminal state of unease until she discloses her origins to her youngest child. Familiar with widespread stories of selkies, her son fetches the sealskin from its hiding place and returns it to his mother, who kisses him goodbye before disappearing into the water. The fisherman is described as "heartbroken" at this development, spotting his former wife in her seal form on his way home from a trip, finding his nets forever filled with fish for him and his brood.

A perfunctory analysis of the myth reflects a romantic tragedy: the happiness and fair fortune of the sailor only lasts as long as the sealskin can be hidden, slipping through his fingers as his lover is wrenched from him as proof of their inherently irreconcilable differences. With his children as the sole mementos of his wife's tenure on land, he is rendered forever incomplete by the loss of her, reduced to fleeting glimpses of her as a seal to sate his loneliness. While the traditional interpretation holds its own cultural and contextual merit, a reframing of the selkie woman as the protagonist of the story significantly alters its implications and refreshes its present-day relevance. Her initial appearance finds her "laughing and playing and singing" (Ferguson 2018) amongst her brethren, blissfully unaware of the mariner's marauding male gaze. She appears to want for nothing, utterly un-self-conscious in her revelry; it is even described as routine, a ritual in which the selkies "...now and then cast aside their skins, and took on human forms to play onshore" (Ferguson 2018). She is unconcerned with any possibility of a romantic liaison; her primary priority is communion with her kin and the pursuit of terrestrial pleasure. Despite

being a historically hazardous destination for selkie-kind--*The Selkie Wife* is one of many fables that chronicles a seal woman's unwilling capture--the beach holds considerable allure for the species, as the selkie woman her kin are illustrated as deriving great enjoyment from their gathering at the story's onset. Gould wryly remarks,

Raising their heads from the water and looking toward shore in the few hours of summer darkness, the seal maidens see lights shining through the windows of houses. Firelight entices sea people... It's the jewel they don't find at the bottom of the sea... These preferences are not limited to humans and sea people. Out in the wild, fur-bearing seals climb up on boulders, or at least ice floes, to give birth to their young in early summer, and land is where they mate some weeks later (Gould 286).

The shore is a carnival of temptation for the maiden, one that she unabashedly indulges herself in--she is, essentially, "taking back the night", a specific set of actions synonymous with IPV prevention and sexual assault survivor advocacy. The Take Back the Night movement gained substantial traction in the seventies after the murder of Philadelphia native Susan Alexander Speeth, a young microbiologist who was stabbed to death walking home a mere block from her residence. Her death, along with rising concern at over fifty similar incidents in the area that year, sparked an organized effort to defend "...the essential right of women to walk alone at night without fear of being raped, harassed, or otherwise harmed<sup>1</sup>" (TBTN 2025). Take Back the Night would later expand its mission to include general support for all survivors of sexual assault and IPV, an ardent defense of the selkie-esque desire to explore and delight in one's environment without the threat of male violence. It is a staunch rebuke of the "asking for it" mentality so pervasive in conversations about survivors' rights--why *shouldn't* the selkies take the opportunity to revel outside of the ocean's embrace? Do they not partly belong to the earth, in both their seal and human shapes, and therefore possess the right to relish their time free from harm and harassment? Even amidst their revelries, through, the selkies are aware of the ever-present specter of the human man: when they spot the fisherman, they "...quickly dived into the sea, and slipping beneath the rolling waves, they disappeared" (Ferguson 2018), a "crossing of the street" to a safer side. The heroine, though, is not as swift as her sealish peers, and happens upon the mariner after he has her discarded sealskin in his clutches. Upon finally possessing the coveted pelt, the fisherman's initial thought is, "No one will ever believe I've seen the Selkies unless I show them this" and then "I could make a pretty penny if I sell this" (Ferguson 2018). The mysticism of the selkie skin is no match for the seductive promise of absolute control, social capital, and potential profit; as the sailor perceives the selkie's human body as "exquisitely beautiful", he decides that "...he must keep her with him." Withholding an object--or

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<sup>1</sup> As it has evolved as an organization, Take Back the Night has amended its mission statement to reflect the reality of IPV and sexual assaults happening at all times of day in various environments.

form of currency-- that grants its rightful owner bodily the agency to dictate their actions falls under the umbrella of coercive control, which is described as "...making a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour" (WAFE 2025). Without her seal fur, the selkie woman is *completely* dependent on the sailor: she lacks any method of communicating with her family, is exploited by being deprived of a resource essential to her well being, is unfamiliar with human customs and therefore reliant on the fisherman's physical and financial support, and is regulated to living on land and engaging in human as opposed to seal behavior, constrained by limitations of her simian form. While the theft of the sealskin is clearly an act of abuse, the figurative waters are muddied slightly by the fisherman's clear remorse for and tenderness towards the selkie: her tears "nearly caused the fisherman's heart to break", and he assures her that she will be happy as a bride on land. The selkie is undeterred by his saccharine persuasions, insisting that she "...could never be happy on land and my folk will be so worried. I must go home" (Ferguson 2018). Her pleas are ignored as the fisherman refuses to relinquish the sealskin, thus compelling her to agree to the marriage and accompany him back to his cottage. The fisherman exerts this example of coercive control and ignores the selkie's entreaties for the return of her skin because the *benefits* of imposing his will--dominion over a creature of legend, a beautiful partner to parade around town, and an additional person to assume responsibility for the domestic labor of his household--outweigh the "cost" (the selkie's sadness, his feelings of distress at causing her pain) of enacting the violence. This subconscious cost/benefit analysis is a core tenet of *social exchange theory*, which attempts to explain the occurrence of intimate partner violence by theorizing that

...human interaction is guided by the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of punishment and costs...individuals will use force and violence in their relationships with intimates and family members if they believe that the rewards of force and violence outweigh the costs of such behavior (Gelles 2).

Social exchange theory categorizes IPV with other forms of family violence, citing that sociocultural sanctioning of said abuse contributes to the reward of power and control it yields, along with "...an absence of social controls that would bond people to the social order and negatively sanction members for acts of violence" (Gelles 1982). While the seafarer clearly expresses sympathy for the selkie, the temptation of what he stands to gain by capturing her allows him to convince himself of the merit of his actions; furthermore, on a beach bereft of any witnesses (as the rest of the selkies have fled by the time of the heroine's confrontation with him), there is a complete lack of social control or any party to disparage him from doing so, enabling him to undertake the thievery without any sort of meaningful consequence besides a slightly guilty conscience. The social exchange has been made, with the selkie woman the undoubtedly shortchanged party in the transaction. Thus the skinless, homeless, resourceless selkie

capitulates to his whims and leaves her once celebratory seacoast in metaphorical shackles, bereft of any leverage in or understanding of a land almost totally unfamiliar to her.

The pair are married within the month, with the selkie beginning to “settle to life on land” shortly afterwards; the fisherman, intensely paranoid, “...for many weeks kept the sealskin with him, for he feared his bride-to-be would steal it and slip away” (Ferguson 2018). Affection alone is clearly not a sufficient enough incentive for the selkie maiden to consent to permanent residence on land, but she is soon described as having “grown to love” her captor and goes on to have seven of his children. The phenomenon of survivors of abuse (such as kidnapping and sexual assault) developing bonds and growing to empathize with their captors is referred to as “Stockholm Syndrome”; however, the condition is conspicuously absent from all editions DSM and often has its legitimacy heavily debated in the psychological community, as methods of research are often conflicted and inconsistent. Moreover, there is little nuance in *The Selkie Wife*’s assertion that its titular character grows accustomed to her new role as the mariner’s partner and mother to his children, only that she would sometimes be found “gazing wistfully out to sea” (Ferguson 2018). Therefore, it is impossible to accurately project any kind of formal condition resulting from her capture onto the selkie, but lack of a diagnosis does not negate the importance of the circumstances of the marriage and subsequent childbearing. Though she “loved these lads and lassies with all her heart”, the seal woman is undoubtedly coerced into the marriage and by extension into sexual intercourse. The term “consent” refers to the voluntary agreement of a proposal, with the caveat that it cannot be given “...under pressure of intimidation or threat. Unequal power dynamics, such as engaging in sexual activity with an employee or student, also mean that consent cannot be freely given” (RAINN 2025). This definition validates the unethical slant of the selkie’s situation, as intimidation and an unequal exchange of power were the only factors that ensured her surrender to the sailor; consequently, as she is an unconsenting participant in the marriage, the question of whether or not she willingly partook in the process of creating her seven children arises. Marital rape--the act of sexual intercourse with one’s spouse without their consent--is a well-documented trauma that women have endured from the institution’s inception, one that has recently been coined as a term and recognized as a violation; up until the late twentieth century, consent was widely assumed to be the default state of a married woman, and rape more property theft than breach of bodily autonomy. Scotland would not fully reckon with the concept until the 1989 case of *Johnson Davis Stallard v. H.M. Advocate*, which entailed an anonymous woman pressing charges for sexual assault against her husband, with whom she was cohabitating with at the time of the attacks. The court ruled in the survivor’s favor, citing that “...wives were no longer bound to suffer excessive sexual demands on the part of their husbands” (Ferguson and McDiarmid 13) and therefore signalling a significant shift in nuptial culture and perceptions of womens’ perceived “duties” in marriage, though an explicit condemnation of martial rape itself would not come for

another twenty years with the passing of the Sexual Offences Act of 2009. Even as the selkie myth is only roughly datable--centuries old, yet impossible to pinpoint the exact year of birth--the overlap with the lack of legal protections for married women is significant. There is no recourse for the selkie in this affair, just as there was little for women in exploitative marriages prior to the eighties: as she is married to the sailor, she is expected to play the role of a wife. This is not just true sexually but socially and emotionally as well--the theft of the sealskin is tantamount to a complete crippling of one's ability to be autonomous, and marriage (and all that it entails) is merely a method of enabling the principal crime. The confines of the role of wife--sexual subservience, intermittent pregnancies, and total deference to the preferences of the husband--are not defects of the patriarchal construct of marriage but deliberately designed *feature* of it, a guarantee of the selkie's compliance and inability to escape what the seafarer (and larger male society) deem to be her "duty". The reclamation of one's pelt in this culture of female suppression, especially in the context of a union further tainted by IPV, is to regain one's self-sovereignty and determination against overwhelmingly negative odds. The selkie wife wins back her rights at the conclusion of her tale, managing to defy both IPV statistics and conventional narrative cliches by recognizing and recovering a long-denied asset to her much-awaited freedom.

The protagonist of *The Selkie Wife* is reunited with her sealskin by virtue of her offspring. It is during a state of deep rumination, when she is described as observing "Far in the distance...on the slick, black rocks, a band of seals playing and barking. She sighed deeply, and her eyes filled with tears" (Ferguson 2018) that her youngest son rushes to comfort her. The carefree harbor seals represent a community and a state of being she has lost access to: she lacks the emotional and physical means to connect with any semblance of support for herself. She cries because she has endured the loss of her family as well as the violation of "...a larceny of love, a robbing of one's spirit, a weakening of the sense of self...a distraction, a break, and interference or interruption of something vital...their art, their love, their dream, their hope, their belief in goodness, their development, their honor, their strivings" (Estes 176). Social ostracization is also a major factor in the enactment and continued condition of IPV, with Websdale surmising that "...rural family life, gender roles, and patriarchal ideology generate acute forms of sociocultural isolation that render women particularly vulnerable to battering and passive policing" (Websdale 39). By this definition, the selkie is supremely susceptible to IPV, as she is whisked away into a rural setting, confined by archaic gender roles (being expected to both perform domestic labor and to reproduce with the mariner), and harmed by the patriarchal ideology that prioritizes the constructed glory of male conquest over female welfare. Her children (who are half-selkie themselves) are the only individuals whom she is *able* to socialize with, and it is through this critical connection that she rediscovers her ability to self-actualize and remove herself from her restrictive marriage. She accomplishes this by revealing the abusive nature of her relationship: having had her mental health



previously overlooked by her husband, the selkie is empowered to speak her truth to someone who is invested in witnessing it. She explains, “I’m sad because I was born in the sea. It’s the home to which I never can return because your father has hidden my sealskin” (Ferguson 2018). She makes no effort to justify the fisherman’s actions; as soon as she is presented with the opportunity, she succinctly expresses exactly how exploitative the arrangement is to her and how much she is deprived of without possession of her pelt. Her son, recognizing his mother as a selkie, recalls seeing his father relocate the sealskin’s hiding place, and fetches it from the fireplace to present to its rightful owner. The selkie woman, overcome, “embraces” the sealskin, reunited with a long-denied crucial aspect of her selfhood; she is finally able to return home, for “Once a selkie finds her seal skin again, neither chains of steel nor chains of love can keep her from the sea” (Sayles 1994). And it is chains of love that cause her sorrow: she tells her son she will “always love” him before assuming her former physique and fleeing back into the waves. The selkie woman’s display of conviction is of unusual notability in the aforementioned scene, as a sense of responsibility for a child is often observed as a considerable factor in the decisions many women make to stay in relationships even amidst occurrences of IPV. Merely having children before the age of 21 (the selkie woman’s own age is not specified, but she is described as fairly youthful while still fertile) can render women “...twice as likely to be victims of domestic violence as women who did not” (Caspi and Moffitt 1999). A collaborative study between the University of Varcoe and Canadian organization Women in Action further specifies that

Women who are abused actively make decisions about their lives, and consideration for their children figures prominently in those decisions. Researchers (e.g., Henderson 1990; Hilton 1992; Humphreys 1995a, 1995b; Irwin et al. 2002) have documented that women’s concerns about their children influence their decisions, and have illustrated that women both stay in and leave abusive relationships partly because of what they believe is best for their children...according to the NVAWS, 35% of battered women fail to report their victimization to authorities so as to protect their partners, their relationships, and/or their children (Irwin and Varcoe 5).

Whether or not the selkie woman would have stayed married to the fisherman for the sake of her children if she had somehow regained possession of her sealskin earlier can only be speculated; her actions post-reclamation simply serve to further confirm her initial unwillingness to partake in the relationship. However, her tearful reassurances to her son are not the exclusive indicators of her continued concern for her land-dwelling kin: she is shown to be deeply conflicted at leaving them, as the fisherman later “...noticed a sleek young seal gazing at the boat, a strange expression on her face and then he heard that seal cry, a plaintive sound as she disappeared under the water” (Ferguson 2018). Even after years of imprisonment and disconnect from her culture, family, and selfhood, the selkie woman lingers in local waters, scarcely miles from where she was first captured, to ensure the continued prosperity of her

children. This is the sustained state of affairs afterwards as well, for “...a seal would often spend ages swimming close to the shore, and they never went hungry, for the fisherman’s net was always full of large, gleaming fish” (Ferguson 2018). The heroine of *The Selkie Wife* returns to both the physical and spiritual state of “home” whilst still honoring her commitment to motherhood--motherhood, but not wifehood<sup>2</sup>, as she is never depicted shedding her skin again despite taking great pains to secure the appropriate resources for her family. She finishes her tale finally liberated from her harmful marriage, yet still beholden to her terrestrial children, all of whom exist as a result of the initial theft of her beloved pelt. Like most women who survive dissolution of abusive relationships, her supposed “happy-ending” is a liminal state rife with heart-wrenching complexities as she endeavors to rebuild her identity and sense of independence in a life altered by intimate partner violence.

*The Selkie Wife*, while one of the most prominent folk tales to feature the creatures, is far from the sole Scottish story involving them. They appear in ballads such as William’s Sharp’s “Song of the Seals”, (in which they bemoan the duality of their natures as the long for both land and sea) and in stories such as “The Lighthouse Keeper”, in which a lonely mariner nurses a sick seal back to health to subsequently have her rescue him and reveal herself as a selkie. Their presence is not confined to archaic texts and fireside legends, either; they also occupy artistic space in modern media, ranging from films like *The Secret of Roan Inish*, which chronicles the efforts of young girl living in a remote fishing village to trace her selkie ancestry and locate her lost sibling, to commanding the title of a Tori Amos song, “Selkie”, in which Amos uses mythological metaphor to process the loss of a lover. Characteristic to these references are selkies co-mingling with humans and questing after their lost skins, often to varying outcomes. *The Selkie Wife* itself continues its particular dialogue-- concerning IPV, women’s issues, and coercive control--in a novel retelling by Rose Sutherland entitled *A Sweet Sting of Salt*. Sutherland’s revitalization reinterprets the events through the eyes of Jean, a midwife living in a rural fishing village. Awoken one night during a violent rainstorm, Jean finds the wife of one of her neighbors struggling through labor, petrified and unable to speak a word of English. Jean saves the mysterious woman, whose name is Muirin, and her baby, all while unravelling the mystery of her lack of language, sudden pregnancy, and alarming reticence towards Tobias Silber, her husband who keeps her in extreme seclusion at his remote cabin. As Jean continues to teach Muirin English, it is revealed that Muirin was abducted by Tobias and forcefully kept away from her family, but cannot run away from him without her “treasure”; Tobias attempts to thwart Jean’s outreach to Muirin at every juncture, slandering her to the townsfolk and slaughtering her livestock to keep her away from his wife. At the novel’s climax, Jean and Muirin make a

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<sup>2</sup> The sailor himself expresses a modicum of regret and self awareness in the wake of his marriage, as he “...felt his heart break in two. But he understood that his son was a loving boy who was braver and more generous than he himself had ever been” (Ferguson 2018), yet emphasizes that he was unlikely to have ever made the choice to allow the selkie her freedom.



break for the shore and are nearly killed by Tobias, but they manage to subdue him and leave with Muirin's "treasure" in a locked box. Jean is aghast when she discovers that it is a sealskin, irate at having risked her own life and killed a man for object she deems fairly worthless; she whisks herself away to the ocean in a fit of emotion and almost drowns, but is pulled out of the water by a seal, who is later revealed to be Muirin, reunited with her rightful pelt. Muirin discloses her identity as a selkie to Jean and explains the event of her capture, presenting Jean with her sealskin and reassuring her that she would stay with her if asked. Jean, without hesitation, asserts that "it wouldn't be love" if Muirin only remained with her because Jean possessed her pelt, and encourages her to keep it and her freedom. The story concludes with Muirin and Jean raising her son Kiel together, with Muirin embarking on daily fishing trips as a seal with the rest of her family, a fully liberated citizen of both the land and sea.

*A Sweet Sting of Salt's* primary departure from its source material is the restructuring of the sapphic relationship between Muirin and Jean. This serves as a clever method of inversion: not only does Sutherland's selkie successfully slip out of her marriage, but also enters into a more balanced relationship of her own volition, one that allows her to travel between environments as she pleases. This serves as a rejection of both the forced binary paradigm of land or sea for her selkie predecessor and the implication that a life affected by IPV must be eternally defined by the sorrow of experiencing it. She and Jean do not merely refute the patriarchal paradigm that women must be content in marriages regardless of their willingness to enter them, but entirely deconstruct it by exemplifying a romance that is unburdened by toxicity and the negative repercussions of hegemonic masculinity; it is also conspicuously bereft of a male party to plunder and abuse the selkie herself. This artistic liberty compliments Sutherland's ambition to reframe the narrative with consideration for elements that were present merely in the background of the original yarn, as she recalls "...thinking about the old folktale of the selkie wife...had really bothered me as a child. Viewing it with fresh eyes, as an adult, the deeply disturbing implications that are generally glossed over in that tale really leapt out at me" (Dumpleton 2024). The "deeply disturbing implications" that Sutherland references are implied throughout *The Selkie Wife*, but significantly expanded upon in her longer novel, specifically the allusions to IPV. While Jean retroactively realizes the breadth of the abuse Muirin endures, she immediately notices the extent to which she is alienated within the village with no one but her abuser, Tobias, to interact with:

How was it that Jean hadn't heard the woman was with child? But then, Tobias had his house out further along the coast than she did...Muirin would have been dreadfully isolated out there, and most likely lonely, aware from her family and friends, other people who spoke her tongue. Jean was their closest neighbor, and she'd not spared a thought about the stranger (Sutherland 2024). This is the selkie's defining dilemma: locked in a form unfamiliar to them, they lose the ability to correspond with their peers with the loss of their pelts, as well as any realistic avenue for escape from the

rule of their husbands. Even though Muirin makes her discomfort with Tobias clear to Jean--“...grabbing her hand so suddenly... Muirin shook her head quickly, furtive, her eyes gone wide and pleading” --she is limited by the constraints of language, speaking “...a few rolling words in her own tongue, breaking off” (Sutherland 33). The selkie wife suffers a similar affliction, albeit in a more abstract fashion: she is shown to be able to converse effectively with the fisherman, enough to eloquently implore him to return her skin to her, so she does not experience the linguistic strife that pains Muirin so acutely; however, she is still prevented from meaningful socialization with others both familiar (her seal family) and foreign (the rest of the village<sup>3</sup>), her husband and children the primary individuals with whom she has consistent social contact. Just as in the first telling of the myth, this enforced seclusion is a method of abusive control, compelling the seal women to be entirely dependent on the whims of their husbands. Therefore, Jean’s advocacy for Muirin is an asset that the prior selkie wife did not have access to but could have benefitted greatly from in a culture with which she was so unaccustomed--Jean’s first request of Tobias is to address the linguistic discrepancy and subsequent confinement that so plagues her wayward patient: “I think she {Muirin} may be feeling isolated, all the way out here with only you for company...she ought to make some friends...A person needs to not be in the same four walls all the time. To see people. To talk...you must start speaking with her, properly. She needs to be able to communicate” (Sutherland 54). Jean observes Muirin’s emotional state and understands that Tobias’ excessive management of her negatively affects her mental and physical health; she perceives Muirin’s circumstance in a way that no one does for the selkie wife. Tobias, much like his seafaring predecessor, also feels sympathy for his captive bride, but fails to grasp the enormity of the damage his actions cause to her: “I suppose? Though there’s hardly a need...’ He seemed genuinely baffled. Jean was struck by the notion that...while men might not have been terribly different from women in theory, they seemed to have some rather peculiar blind spots when it came to socialization” (Sutherland 55). And it is socialization (or lack thereof) that begets the rest of the abuse both selkies endure: their social networks (usually reduced to the fisherman and their children) can either further enable their mistreatment or provide them critical support to mitigate it (mostly in Muirin, and later on the selkie wife’s, case with Jean and her youngest son respectively). Bellotti et al.’s findings document the importance and varyingly ambivalent effects of social networks for survivors of IPV as well, citing

...when women first disclose abuse or when the network starts suspecting it... In some cases, people around them acknowledged that women were victims of violence and helped them define

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<sup>3</sup> There are no mentions of other human characters in *The Selkie Wife* besides the mariner and his children with the selkie. While this can easily be attributed to the tale’s succinctness and narrative inconsistency, it is also notable that it depicts the selkie “gazing wistfully” out to sea and expressing feelings of sadness, implying that her life with the mariner is far from completely idyllic. *A Sweet Sting of Salt* merely expands on the existing subtext.

the situation as domestic abuse; in other cases, they minimised the situation, did not fully believe the victims, or even considered them partially responsible for the abuse (Bellotti et al. 2).

The duality referenced by Bellotti et al. are present in both iterations of the narrative: the selkie wife's struggles are minimized by the fisherman, who blithely assures her of her contentment on land, assuming his assessment of the situation to supersede her lived experience; it is not until she confides in her son that the seriousness of her position is fully honored. Muirin, meanwhile, finds an immediate ally in Jean, who, even when ignorant of the full breadth of her abuse, understands the ways in which her relationship confines her and campaigns for her husband to change his behavior to facilitate a more fulfilling life for her. It is this divergence that is critical to the examination of *A Sweet Sting of Salt* as an expansive retelling of *The Selkie Wife*, as it marks a critical difference in both the tenure of the abuse of the selkies and the ways in which they escape said abuse. It also underscores the importance of positive social networks to survivors of IPV: how many years of trauma could the first selkie wife have been spared if single person from the village had noticed her awkward, lurching gait on land, or the salty tang of tears in her eyes at the sight of a seal colony? The original *Selkie Wife* story offers one potential pathway to liberation for its heroine; Sutherland, centuries later, constructs a different response to the rhetorical questions posed in the source material.

As Muirin and Jean's friendship blossoms, Tobias' methods of keeping her under constant surveillance escalate in their fervor and frequency: he forbids Muirin from even going near the water, whisks her away from the shore when he sees her communing with her seal kin, citing the "danger" they pose to her as his reasoning, and compromises Jean's reputation as a midwife by construing her affection for Muirin as untoward to the rest of the town, labelling her a "fox in the henhouse". Jean becomes increasingly concerned for Muirin, ignoring the danger Tobias poses and sneaking to homestead to see her, visits in which she gains deeper insight into the intricacies of both the relationship itself and the circumstances that led to Muirin's capture. Muirin and Jean's connection--along with her burgeoning proficiency in English--brings a greater depth to her character, which in turn allows Sutherland to extrapolate on concepts that were reduced to implications in the novel's predecessor, most prominently so the issue of marital rape. Where the coercive elements of the selkie's sexual union with the sailor are readable though close examination in the original, Sutherland addresses it directly in the text: as Muirin is able to express being "stolen" by Tobias, Jean feels "A dreadful curdling sickness...a thick, oily bitterness at the back of her throat" (Sutherland 174) when she considers the conception of Muirin's child in the context other kidnapping. Muirin "...looked at Jean with her big dark eyes. 'Am wife,' she said simply, resigned. 'Wife does'" (Sutherland 174). The most prominent exposure Muirin has had to wifehood is the violence of her abduction and subsequent sexual submission to Tobias; her understanding of the role, much like the previous selkie wife's, is defined by the trauma she had endured at the hands of

a husband that is societally understood and self-identifying as “loving”. Moreover, Muirin, like the previous selkie heroine, cannot leave him without her sealskin, claiming, “Is not word for, in English? But mine is, so I go to him, try to tell him ‘Give me back’. And he took me, too, put in boat and take away. Bring here for wife, his” (Sutherland 170). The absence of sufficient vocabulary to describe her predicament is notable: in addition to underscoring exactly how trapped Muirin is by her inability to adequately communicate, it also highlights the magnitude of Tobias’ transgressions against her, violations so severe that the mechanics of language are inadequate tools to express them. This same lack of specificity in both description and categorization is a long documented woe of IPV research as well: the ever shifting criteria has ranged from the pre-1970s definition of it as physical violence within a marital relationship to the implementation of Duluth’s Power and Control Wheel, which introduced elements of emotional, economic, and coercive control as tactics of abuse. Challenges of *measuring* IPV also abound in common studies: discrepancies on perceptions of what violence and abuse entail, the difficulty of accurately documenting often nebulous and qualitative data, and failures to report demographic differences often result in wildly biased and inconsistent sets of statistics. Shifting dialogues on the parameters of what actually causes and entails IPV add additional confusion and liminality to the topic, as they are also still debated within contemporary sociological scholarship, diverging into two macro-level theoretical frameworks: the Family Violence and Feminist perspectives. The Family Violence perspective attributes the construction of the family unit as inherent to the causation of IPV, which is categorized with elder and child abuse and observed as occurring with relative symmetry between male and female perpetrators. The Feminist perspective cites IPV as a symptom of patriarchal hegemony that cannot be accurately measured or understood bereft of gender as a cornerstone of analysis, and that IPV is separate from family violence as well as enabled by the historical construction of inequality between men and women; this theory also rejects gender symmetry on the basis of victimization statistics and the inclusion of rape and sexual assault as aspects of IPV. Decades of formal study have failed to produce a concrete consensus; the definition of what intimate partner violence is and how to measure it continue to evade academic stratification, as liminal and sinuous as the forms of the selkies of legend. Just as Muirin grapples with the magnitude of the mistreatment she has endured, scrambling to find the language to encapsulate what she has experienced, IPV itself defies conventions of categorization, slipping through the metaphorical grasp of academia just as selkies slither through the waves, neither wholly human nor wholly seal. Selkies are emblems of the complicated nature of IPV not only through the trials they endure but by virtue of their very nature, one that luxuriates in liminality and evades typical modes of self-expression. Where *The Selkie Wife’s* titular character is punished for her liminality, though, landlocked as a human until she is able to escape, Muirin ends her novel free to peruse terraquatic environments as she pleases and to maintaining control over her body, relationships, and dominion.

Leaving an abusive partner can be a volatile and complex process for women who have endured IPV, fraught with uncertainty and increased risk of further violence. A 2005 study on the topic of returning to said abusive relationships found that “...the majority (66.3%) reported that they had separated from and returned to their abusive partners at least once, and of them, 97.1% indicated that they left and returned multiple times” (Griffing et al., 3); furthermore, amidst the difficulties of escaping a union corrupted by IPV, the likelihood of experiencing more severe abuse escalates when one attempts to leave, with behavioral data reflecting that “...63% of the attempted/actual femicide victims in current relationships who...reported stalking behaviors...was significantly less than the 83% of victims reporting the relationship was former... For controls, relationship status was not significant, with 45% of the women in current relationships reporting stalking, compared with 59% in former relationships” (MacFarlane et al. 5). The recorded data indicates a truth already revealed in the tale of *The Selkie Wife*: that exiting an unhealthy relationship, even when one has the ability and desire to, presents a knotty emotional conundrum that offers few definite answers or solutions to those involved. Muirín’s own exit from Tobias’ tyranny reflects the aforementioned statistics: as she withdraws from him further, the fervor and frequency of his attempts at suppression increase, as he resorts to locking her in the house during the day and setting snares for Jean to stumble into should she go near his homestead to see her. Jean arranges a boat to take them both away during a spring thaw, but is intercepted by Tobias while searching for Muirín’s sealskin, which she refuses to leave without. Tobias then discovers Jean’s shawl in Muirín’s room and realizes their intentions to escape; furious, his prevention efforts quickly escalate into life threatening violence. Even as Muirín deters him by shattering an oil lamp and lighting the house on fire, he pursues the two women, intent on killing them for their defiance all the while defending his entitlement and abuse:

Tobias grabbed a handful of her hair, and Jean’s ragged breath caught again as he jerked her head back... ‘You thieving little redheaded *bitch*. A cunning little vixen, aren’t you, stealing into a man’s house, into his *bed*...what’s mine is *mine*!’ ‘You *stole* her!’ Jean gasped out. ‘She doesn’t belong to you!’ ‘She’s my *wife*!’ His voice rose, and Tobias yanked Jean’s head back even harder, straining her neck, forcing her to look at him, holding her in place. ‘I was a good husband. I did *everything* for her, and it was perfect, just like in the tales...she never would have left me, she never *could*...(Sutherland 322).

Tobias’ commonalities with the fisherman of legend--and with other male perpetrators of IPV-- become startlingly apparent as he expresses his beliefs: just as the mariner assures the selkie that he will “...keep you warm by the fire; I’ll feed you all the fresh fish you could ever wish to eat; I promise you will live a happy life on the land” (Ferguson 2018) and that he will be a sufficiently doting partner, Tobias assumes Muirín’s contentment with his husbandly performance merely because he does “everything” for her,

regardless of his indifference towards her wishes to return to her family. She is his wife and therefore his possession, just like the seal pelt: her autonomy is irrelevant because her status as woman (and as a selkie held captive) supersedes any humanity she may be afforded by the men who seek to capture and tame her. Tobias, too, invokes the auxiliary insurance of hiding his captive's sealskin as collateral to prevent her from deserting him, all the while maintaining the perception of himself as an ideal spouse. He has no intention of letting her leave peacefully, informing Jean that he will frame her death as an accident before hiding the sealskin forever. Muirin rushes to the rescue by lethally bludgeoning him with an oar, giving Jean an opportunity to escape and drag his body to the nearby pond to avoid culpability. Once they retrieve Muirin's pelt, Jean is at first dismayed by its seemingly mundane nature: "All of this, for *that*? *That's* what meant so much to you that you'd risk your life? We could have been away the minute he left! But you needed *that* stinking thing? Are you *mad*? Kiel could have been killed! You could have been killed! I could have been killed" (Sutherland 330). Unaware of Muirin's selkie nature, she views the sealskin as a tertiary concern, a trinket worth far less than the safety of Muirin and her son. Troubled, she leaves her home and flees to the shore, where she sees Muirin wading out to sea; assuming she needs assistance, Jean rushes into the water after her but is overcome by the tide, and nearly drowns before being rescued by a Muirin in her seal shape. When she awakens, she is surrounded by Muirin and her selkie family, all in their human bodies, who provide the full context of Muirin's capture to Jean: Muirin, introducing her niece and nephew to the shore, explored a strip of beach she assumed to be private, save for an overturned boat. Tobias, hiding under the boat, waited until she departed to pilfer her seal pelt, upon which Muirin discovered she "...couldn't raise a hand against him while he had it" (Sutherland 339). She was then coerced into marriage with him, her family ignorant of the fate that befell her; she recalls Jean as the only individual unwilling to submit to Tobias in her subjugation. Upon the conclusion of her recollection, she lays her sealskin across Jean's lap, asserting that "Would stay, I, if you ask Jean" (Sutherland 345), offering herself wholly and completely to her. This revelation comes even as Muirin harbors significant pain and trauma from her previous relationship; despite being deeply affected by IPV, she is willing to trust Jean with an invaluable aspect of herself. Sutherland, though, defies narrative conventions and reaffirms her stance on consent, coercion, and power dynamics in relationships with Jean's response: "'No,' she said, and the word split her heart in two... 'It's yours. It's your magic, not mine. I wish you would stay; I *want* you to, but...I love you, but I can't hold you here. I won't. You're free, and you don't belong to me, or to anyone. If you stay, stay because you *want* to. It's not love if you aren't free to choose it" (Sutherland 345) The contrast between Jean's source of sorrow and the original fisherman's is deliberately constructed: where the sailor despairs at selkie's tears but cannot bring himself to respect her choices, Jean desperately wishes for Muirin to stay with her but is unwilling to compromise her autonomy to keep her sequestered on land. Muirin simply smiles at Jean and replies, "Knew you



would say so, I”; the novel’s final scene depicts Jean walking with Muirin’s son Kiel on the shore, running to meet Muirin as she emerges from the sea as a seal, placing her love “...in an open hand” (Sutherland 345). Unlike her predecessors of legend, Sutherland’s selkie has circumvented the interterrestrial conundrum posed by returning to the sea while leaving a family on land: she is given the option to stay, therefore eliminating the conflict between resigning oneself to a life of submission or abandoning one’s children in the pursuit of a more equitable existence.

The ultimate plight of the selkie entails the deprivation of agency in romantic relationships, forced compromise of essential aspects of identity to survive in a hostile environment, and the resulting emotional disarray that accompanies extricating oneself from intimately exploitative situations. Selkies experience the previously referenced incidents of IPV on a potentially literal level, as most of their strife is caused by the theft of their pelts and the subsequent exile from their native waters and family communities; they are hyper-stylized avatars for real women affected by various forms of IPV. While most human women are not bound to their homesteads via dispossession of magical sealskins, they are subjected to coercive control, marital rape, and social isolation in relationships in which IPV is especially prevalent. The selkie wife of popular myth is mostly voiceless throughout her narrative until she speaks of her sorrow and mistreatment and is freed from her coerced commitment; Sutherland breathes new life into both the story and the dialogue surrounding it by centering Muirin’s experience in novel, extrapolating on inferences of IPV suggested in the primary folk tale. Thus, in both of their main incarnations, selkies are survivors of behaviors that are considered criteria for intimate partner violence by modern sociological standards; through a distinctly folkloric perspective, they are unusually effective ambassadors for navigation of deeply complex social issues, issues that are as slippery and definitively difficult as the terrestrial and aquatic forms they in turn inhabit.

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