

Fragment from a Paper Story

by A.J. Grace-Smith

While Leif was still very young, his emotions were very easy to read, for they appeared on his parchment coloured skin, named in his mother's writing. When he was seventeen, Leif fell in love. She was a pretty maid, one of the college servants who kept his master's chambers clean. Leif liked the way her hair kept trying to escape from the prim little cap she had to wear. He longed to touch her skin, count the the freckles that dusted her face, her neck, her arms, and elsewhere. But it was her eyes he loved the most, blue-green like the sea on a bright morning. He thought they must see right through people, into the very depths of them, and so he hoped that she might look into his heart.

One day, when the girl - I think her name was Lily - had finished the dusting, and set the fire ready for the evening, Leif caught her by the hand before she could go. He had never touched her before. The small bones of her hand were so delicate under her work-worn skin. Wide blue green eyes stared up into violet ones. He saw that she was shocked. And though she held herself so still, he knew by the tremors in her hand, in her arm, that she wanted only to run away from him. Into her other hand he pressed a small sheaf of papers; he had poured his heart out in letters, as his mother had done before him. He had written poetry - some of it very good, not your usual adolescent outpourings - and it was all for Lily. But when her fingers first crumpled, then dropped the papers, his heart began to break. All the love he felt for her then began to appear on his face, and on his body. The word LOVE, over and over in blue and black ink, pulsating on his parchment skin like living tattoos. One final act of foolish hope: he leaned down to kiss her cheek, but she ducked away, blush stained. He let go of her hand.

'I'm sorry sir,' she whispered. 'I can't read. It wouldn't be right.'

She stooped at his feet then, gathering the scatterlings of his heart where she had dropped them. Her hands, when she pressed the papers back into his, were gentle. Her eyes were kind. For a moment, hope flamed.

'I must go, or the porter'll be cross with me. I'm sorry.'

LOVE faded from his skin, hope from his heart. The papers he thrust into the fire, igniting flame with a thought, and a gesture. Watching his words wither into ash, he wondered if burning might hurt less than heartbreak.

