

Sleepwalker

by Katrina Dessavre

I may as well have been sleepwalking. Either way, I had no opportunity to admire the moonlight flooding into the long corridors, illuminating the stag heads and painted cheeks of long-dead ancestors. All night, I kept my attention at my feet to catch the occasional tentacle emerge out of my watery robe and reach for a porcelain vase. I had to pause to let the long, eel-like creatures slither back into the edges of the fabric when their long tails dragged behind. Each time I passed by a bedroom door, I held my breath, afraid that one of the faint cannonball sounds that surfaced from the deck of a tiny ship would wake a light sleeper. But even when a squinting face peeked out from a door or around a corner, all they saw with their unfocused, dreamy eyes was a girl in a long blue gown with the deadpan stare I assumed belonged to sleepwalkers. It was the maid's looks that unsettled me most, a simmering animosity that showed itself in a rotten grape on my breakfast plate, or a chilled bed when I returned to my room just before dawn, trying to catch a few remaining minutes of sleep, and found a window open. I couldn't blame them, of course. They were the ones who had to run through the hallways and soak a week's worth of towels to dry the path of sea water I left behind.

But what was I supposed to do, lying awake at night, staring at the blue robe draped over the back of a chair, watching the velvety material turn from a light, robin's egg to the color and texture of a stormy sea. It was dripping, that robe, making a puddle on the floor, and unless I started walking with it my entire bedroom would flood by morning.

The first time it happened I woke up to a carpet that squelched under my slippers. The maid who comes in to start the fire looked at me like I was the sea monster. They're here, I should have said and pointed at the robe. But I didn't know that until the following night, when I saw the bottom edge start to drip and decided that the only way to avoid the flooding was to disperse the damage.

So I started walking. During the day, I took to hiding in the kitchen, as I found the maids becoming unbearably hostile. I was friends with the cook, a large, jolly, red-faced woman with her sleeves digging into her elbows and a perpetually sweaty brow. One day it glistened more fiercely than usual.

She told me she was preparing a new delicacy for dinner. Eel soup. She had found the specimen slithering up the side of the well in the yard and grabbed it before it could escape. A little thing, she said, but it would flavor the broth wonderfully. She was so proud of herself, shaving pearlescent scales over the sink, and I had to force myself to smile, stiff and white-faced.

