

# Song of the Sea Bird



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The old man sat on a driftwood log in front of the tent at the family's summer camp. Lifting the white canvas flap, he took the black, boiling pot from the wood stove to pour a cup of coffee. Returning to the bench, he lit his pipe.

Every summer, for as long as anyone knows, his family left the village when the ice was gone. They pitched a tent at the summer camp on the narrow gravel spit.

Here, they took in the year's supply of salmon. And they hunted the migrating white whale and seal. In the fall, the family folded its tent, packed the stove and caribou bed rolls. Their small skiff filled

with gunny sacks full of dried fish and barrels of white whale and seal meat, they returned across the bay to the village for the winter.

Altogether, more than 40 families were on the spit this summer. Grandpa remembered that the first summer he came here with his grandmother, aunt and uncle, no more than 10 families made camp on the beach.

Thoughts of the first ancient summer season were on his mind as he puffed on a bowlful of Prince Albert. At the distant roar, the old man looked across the water at a silvery jet plane climbing steeply toward high clouds at the far side of the bay.

The white walls of canvas

popped in the summer breeze behind him as he watched the silver bird bank to the south, blinking and twinkling out of sight, its roar finally fading into the whistling of the west wind.

It was a beautiful midsummer day. The wind was strong enough to keep away the mosquitoes and flies, but not so strong as to take away from the warmth of the sun. Small green and blue and red skiffs bobbed in the whitecaps off the spit as fishermen plucked plump chum salmon from their nets. The old man's son and daughter were in one of the boats, tending their net.

Somewhere down the spit was his grandson, Sonny. He was deep in the tall, wonderfully mysterious

grass that grew along the ridge of dirt in the middle of the spit. "Perhaps he is looking after Alfred," Grandpa thought.

Alfred was the name Sonny had given to the squirrel his cousin George had maimed two weeks earlier with his BB gun. In some secret place in the deep grass, Sonny was nursing Alfred back to health in a nest created from a Blazo box.

The old man fingered the blade of his hunting knife and chose a piece of driftwood of just the right size and hardness. He began to carve a little man for Sonny to add to his collection of small, wooden companions.

A small, very unhappy little boy showed his feet in the corner of the old man's eye as he was bending over his work. Grandpa could see that Sonny had been crying.

"What's the matter, Sonny?" Grandpa asked, beckoning the boy to his knee.

Sonny wiped his eyes with the cuff of his jacket, trying to show courage, but not succeeding too well. "Grandpa, Alfred's gone. I went to bring him his food and water and he wasn't in his box. I can't find him anywhere, Grandpa."

The tears began to flow freely again.

Grandpa put one hand on the boy's shoulder, squeezing him gently, and tousled his thick head of hair with the other.

"Sonny," he said softly, "Alfred is a squirrel. He is an animal.

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# ● Song

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Some creatures are meant to be free. Sometimes, animals like Alfred can never be your pet for very long. Dogs can be tamed, but some creatures are never supposed to be tamed."

"Sonny," Grandpa asked, "Is Alfred your friend?"

"Yes, Grandpa."

"You should be happy that you

made him well, Sonny. It's time now that he is with his own kind. Just think, each time you see a squirrel, you tell yourself it might be Alfred. And, smile and say hello to your friend."

"Yes, Grandpa," Sonny said, not entirely convinced.

Grandpa rubbed the back of the boy's neck and messed his hair again. "Let me tell you a story, Sonny."

"Yes, please, Grandpa."

"Many years ago, when I was a

young boy about your age, people used to call me 'Sonny,' too," Grandpa began.

"Really, Grandpa?" Sonny asked.

"We used to come to this same place when I was small," Grandpa added.

Grandpa began telling this story to the sad little boy sitting at his knee.

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On any other morning it would have been different. Sonny would

have been awakened at the smell of freshly brewed coffee and oatmeal mush in the tent. Grandma would be tending the small wood stove in the corner, pouring sourdough with a splatter into the pan for hotcakes. The white canvas walls of this summer house would be bright with morning sun, popping in the west wind, calling Grandma and Aunt May and Junior and Sonny to meet the new day.

The boy would be drawn from  
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his dreams and the comfort of his caribou-skin bed and spruce-bough mattress. If he gave Grandma a warm kiss, he might even get a taste of hot coffee from the black, bubbling pot, instead of the usual cocoa.

Today was different, though. It was dark and cool, the sun hidden somewhere beyond the fog and misty rain. The white canvas was gray in the dark morning, fabric still in the damp air. Grandma and Auntie and Junior were still soundly asleep. Junior was snoring like a fat metal cable in an angry winter storm. Grandma and Auntie were in a more dainty and polite slumber, drawing deep breaths and exhaling with pursed lips, like somebody opening a can of soda-pop, "Ooooh-pup; Ooooooah-pup."

Sonny quietly left the warmth of his furry bed, lifted the tin lid from the half-drum wood stove, threw in some straw and driftwood, started the fire and put on a tea kettle of water. The dry gravel on the floor of the tent cracked as he moved about, but the rest of the family was not disturbed, and continued to make the music of peaceful slumber. Thinking about Grandma's sourdough hotcakes, Sonny coughed a little, then cleared his throat. Still, no one moved.

Sitting on a stool before the stove, he put on his boots, made a cup of cocoa and bit loudly into a slice of pilot bread, shuffling gravel about with his boots. Aunt May rolled over, and let out a determined "Oooooah-Pupp!"

Sonny's belly growled, with pancakes on its mind.

After a second cup of cocoa, he untied the canvas flap, put on his parky, and staggered outside on sleepy legs to the beach to look

over the new day.

The damp chill made him zipper his parky and reach for his gloves. The shape of the neighboring tent at the camp could hardly be seen in the fog. Not one single ripple lapped up to the beach from the smooth, silver gray sea. Nothing moved in this silent morning. The floats on Junior's fishnet wandered off into the fog like the spine of a sleeping sea monster.

Sonny picked up a round flat rock, which looked uncomfortably like a sourdough pancake, and skipped it thirty times in a row out to sea until it disappeared into the mist. He put his hands in his pockets and walked slowly down the beach toward the end of the spit, kicking a dried, bleached starfish along ahead of him.

No one will hunt today, he thought, so it is best everyone sleeps. A mile below the summer camp, Sonny heard the first live sound of the day. A bird was crying. It was a

troubled, worried sound from the grass in the middle of the spit.

Sonny moved up the beach, dropping to his hands and knees, slithering through the wet grass without a sound. Quietly, carefully, he crept toward the creature's sound. It was a painful, plea-like cry, unlike any animal noise he had heard ever before. "Caaaao-Oh! Caaaoo-Oh!" the bird cried. He was right on top of her before he saw her as he slowly parted the tall grass.

She was a beautiful sea bird, tan and white, with dark freckles along her head and back. Sonny winced and squinted his eyes when he saw the wound. Blood oozed from torn flesh, dribbling down across her white breast. He was filled with a little boy's pity, and was reaching down to scoop her into his arms when she quickly turned her head, looking him square in the eye.

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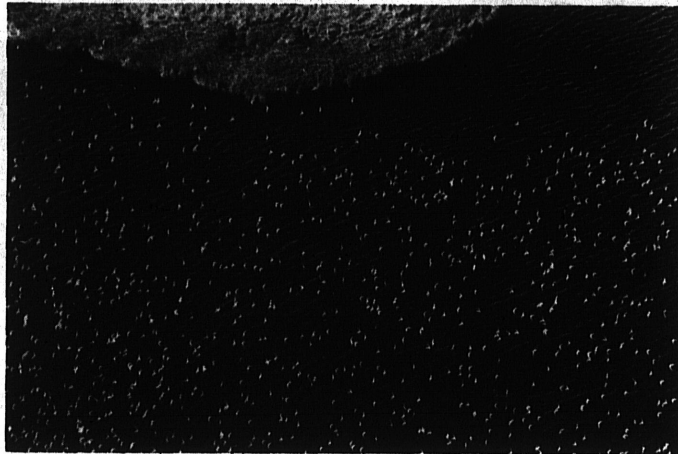
"It hurts so much. Won't you please help me?" she said.

Sonny turned and ran, straight toward the beach, nearly tumbling into the calm sea before coming to a halt at the water's edge. He knelt down to wash his face in the cool, salty ocean, and heard the call again. "Caaao-Oh!"

He stood, ready to run to the comfort of camp and his caribou bed.

Something caught his eye against the gray sky. A hawk was approaching the spit, moving steadily toward the sound of the wounded bird. "Caaaao-Oh! Caaaao-Oh!" she cried.

The young boy hesitated for an instant at the water's edge, looking first to the tall grass, and then at the hawk. Quickly he ran back up



the beach, through the damp grass, and scooped the little sea bird into his arms. The hawk circled once, giving an angry screech, and wandered off.

Sonny looked down at the feathery bundle, shook his head and said, "I think I awoke too early this morning, little one. I thought I heard you speak to me."

The sea bird set her head on the boy's hand, turned upward and said, "Thank you for saving my life. That old hawk nearly got me the first time. He was coming again to finish me off."

It took Sonny a time to find his tongue. Finally, he said, "I have never heard a bird speak before."

The little sea bird blinked her  
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eyes at the boy. "All animals can talk. Most humans do not want to listen, except for kind young boys like you. My name is Dawn. I am a sea bird and live on a rocky island in the middle of the ocean. What is your name?" she asked.

"I am called Sonny, most of the time. I live in the village on the other side of the bay. Except during the summer, when we are here. You are a very pretty bird."

Sonny wet his handkerchief and began to clean the wounds at the bird's breast. Dawn winced and closed her eyes at the pain. She told

Sonny of the way of life of the sea birds, and of the journey that brought her to this summer camp.

"I was born at the other side of the sea the spring before last, along a high cliff in a place that is called Siberia."

Sonny made a bandage of his handkerchief, tied it gently over the bird's wounds. "Does it hurt very much?" he asked Dawn.

"Yes, but it is not so bad. It is much better than when I was first wounded. Not all pain is bad. This pain tells me that now the healing has begun."

Sonny set her tenderly in the tall grass, and ran back to camp. There he found an empty Blazo

box and a soft rabbit pelt to line it with. He found his fishing pole, baited it with a small knot of red yarn, and caught a half-dozen smelt at the beach.

Grandma wondered at the boy's energy on this cool, dark day. She was more surprised when Sonny didn't seem to notice her sourdough pancakes browning on the wood stove. He asked for a cup of berries and hurried down the beach with the Blazo box and string of smelt.

Dawn made soft, quiet cooing sounds while Sonny set her into the cozy nest in the box.

Each day of the next two weeks was a pleasant one for Sonny and Dawn. Sonny awoke early each morning, caught a few small fish and picked a handful of berries for the little bird. Dawn told him stories of the land across the sea, and of her journeys to distant places on the edges of this vast ocean. She told stories of men and women of many tribes, and of islands she had visited where seals were as many as the pebbles of the gravel beach.

Dawn sang songs to Sonny; songs that sea birds sing during travels over the sea. This was one of the songs she sang to the boy:

*Dawn's Song*  
*I am a creature of rare beauty*  
*Just as God intended.*  
*If my feathers be brighter than*  
*yours,*  
*Please don't feel offended.*  
*My wings were made for travel,*  
*Island to island, sea to sea,*  
*To journey through the seasons,*  
*A sea bird spirit, soaring free,*  
*that's me.*  
*Here and there, time to time,*  
*I may make a friend,*  
*Sea birds, though, are meant*  
*to soar*

*My journey has no end!*  
*I chart my course through sun*  
*and storm*  
*Guided by a northern star,*  
*Our time together is so nice*  
*But soon I'll wander far.*  
*When I take my leave, dear*  
*friend,*  
*Please don't feel such sorrow,*  
*For sea birds come and sea*  
*birds go,*  
*I may be back tomorrow.*

Sonny sniffled, and erased a tear on his parky's corduroy sleeve as Dawn finished her song.

"Please don't leave," he said.

"I cannot be a sea bird if I am to stay too long," she said. "My soul belongs to the sea and the sky. It belongs to you, too, in a way. Next spring, look to the heavens when the west wind blows. I'll be there, soaring on a sea bird's wings and singing my song for you. From this day on, all sea birds will be your friends."

The evening sun slipped low over the purple mountains behind the narrow, long spit. The breeze grew stronger and more steady, whipping up whitecaps across the bay. If anyone were to look from the row of white, flapping tents of the summer camp, that person would see a small figure of a boy facing the sea, lifting a tiny feathery bundle in his arms to the bay. Dawn spread open her delicate wings, facing squarely into the west wind. Her song was in Sonny's head as he watched her till she was gone. He stood on the beach in the west wind long after that, until Grandma found him and led him home.

Grandma sipped her tea, and Sonny his cocoa before the wood stove that night. She was sewing beads on a pouch for her grandson

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to keep safely his summer treasure of sea shells and odd rocks. He put more driftwood in the stove, taking off mukluks to warm little feet. Then he told her the story of Dawn.

Grandma looked at Sonny long and intently. Finally she said, "You are a very special boy to have such a friend. The sea bird only talks to special humans."

Early the next morning, Sonny left his caribou bed as soon as he

awoke. It was a fine day. Blue-white backs of the beluga whale moved across the water, weaving amid whitecaps, chasing plump chum salmon toward the mouth of a nearby river. Far out to sea, he saw a bird on the horizon. Dawn's song played through his head.

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Grandpa tapped his pipe against the bench. His Prince Albert was finished with his story.

Grandpa nodded and smiled as a sea bird flew low nearby. It hovered a moment in the west wind

and sang a little song at the old man and the boy. When it was done, the freckled tan and white creature dipped and flew off out to sea, slowly rising, disappearing into the low evening sun.

In the tall grass along the ridge of the spit behind the tent, a squirrel chattered, laughing happily.

Sonny smiled. "Goodnight, Grandpa," he said as he lifted the flap of the tent.

Later that evening, curled in the warm caribou bed against the cool fall evening, Sonny looked up and

saw that Grandpa was awake, puffing on his pipe.

"Grandpa, we're different from squirrels and sea birds, aren't we? You and me, we belong to each other, right?"

"Yes, Sonny. You and me belong to each other, always." Grandpa then added, "But all of us, people and squirrels and sea birds, we are all creatures, Sonny."

Through the white canvas, far out to sea, a bird called, and behind the tent, a squirrel chattered as the day ended.