

THE SEAL - 1889

A Selkie Story by Eleanor Grandin

One April evening - it only took two minutes at most - I became myself again. I'm not sure now how it came about. The children weren't there so it couldn't have been them. Suddenly I saw my skin, that I had been searching for, twelve years going on thirteen. The fur shone and it was very soft, so the man must have looked after it. I picked it up and ran for the sea, slipped into my skin, then swam and swam for deep water fearing pursuit. The man was there watching me. At the time I didn't care, I was in the sea and felt it supporting me and running past my whiskers. I did a backwards somersault in a big slow circle and began to feel I was home. With closed nostrils I spiralled through the caressing ocean.



I was caught all those years ago in the way it always happens, through pleasure-seeking and ignoring the risk. A young seal then, I came with a group of us to a moonlit beach that looked perfect for dancing. How we loved to leap with long human legs. We checked first to make sure no people of the land were about, then shed our skins and danced and danced in the intoxicating moonlight. Did we post a lookout? Of course not, who could have borne to watch the others dance and not join in? But there was a watcher – the man. When we returned for our skins mine was not there. The man had stolen it and told me that now he had it I must stay human and marry him. And so it was, he kept my seal self from me by force and guile. I could not even blame him at the time, he did it from wanting me which flattered me when I was young and silly. He was not malicious, just unimaginative. He couldn't understand that he had stolen my self and thought that he would make me happy as a human woman. Then the children came and he thought that they would keep me on land, though he still kept my skin hidden as double surety.

He was a good husband and a better father to our children than I was a mother. I am thinking now that perhaps he gave me back my skin in the end, I don't remember finding it. He may have come to realise that it had been wrong of him to trap me and force me to be a woman for nearly thirteen years.

Life on the island was very hard for me at first. Though I soon learned to cook the food, everything else was slow to come. My efforts at spinning, weaving and knitting were laughable. I could see that hands should be able to master them but somehow the clothes came out knobbly and lumpy. One or two of the other women were patient in showing me where I was going wrong, but my improvement was slow. My good muscles made the runrig work and peat-digging easier for me than for most so I helped them in return with theirs. Most of the neighbours regarded me as odd if not worse. A person cannot just appear on an island and cause no surprise. The man made up a story that he had found me friendless on the mainland, married me and brought me across to the Isle of Arran in his boat. Perhaps half of them half-believed it. Mostly I was considered uncanny, eldritch, which I am, but they thought that something to be feared. 'Selkie' they called me, but I am seal.

The only time I was really happy with them was at ceilidh. The dancing thrilled me still and the one way I outshone my neighbours was with my songs. My own songs were all of sea-longing which they were unable to sympathise with. They feared and hated the sea and rightly so – they are the people of the land. But I quickly had their songs and they were always asking me to sing them. One night I remember clearly, I had been singing even more than usual that evening and so enjoyed it. The man generally became passionate after ceilidh and I usually roused to him, but this night I had not. He was quickly asleep and I lay smelling the peat and soot of the smooored fire and the rain in the thatch. The wind around the house sounded like the sea and I longed for the excitement of struggling up on to seaweedy rocks for the autumn breeding. I wanted the feel of a heavy male's wet fur, the salt taste of him and oh, those bites on the neck, the sweetness of them. The man twitched and I wondered what he was dreaming. When my own dreams came they were of singing whales and I was dancing with an octopus.



When I woke in the morning I knew I would go. Before that night I had thought myself that love of the children might keep me on land even if I found my skin. But I knew then that love is not enough, I would go to the sea.

And now I am here, in deep peace. That first evening in the sea I felt no desire to hunt but I had to smell and taste everything, enjoy the almost weightlessness and the push of water on my flanks as I swam through it. Most of all I had to look at everything anew. The familiar sights of my youth struck me through and through. Things I had barely glanced at then I gazed at now. Watching the movements of the different kinds of seaweed as the tide pulled at them was like a new experience. It seems banal to be struck by the variety of animals. It is plain to everyone that corals and anemones, crabs and lobsters, cuttlefish and starfish and all the fishes are very various and beautiful, but I used to ignore them thinking they would always be there. I looked and was happy.

The next day was for deciding what to do. Deep down the decision was probably already made, but I needed to think it through and be sure. The pull of the children was strong. If I stayed here I would always be trying to see them which did nobody any good. A deserting mother is not welcomed back and I didn't know what the man would have told them about my disappearance. He might have softened it in

some way, so contacting them was a bad idea. It was better to put distance between us. I decided to go north where the Atlantic was fiercer and the songs of whales were better heard. That meant starting out by going south around the Mull of Kintyre before turning north for the Hebrides. There was no hurry, I rested frequently and spent time catching fish, loving their raw taste.

When autumn came I was far enough north, chose the island I wanted, and went in to breed with many others. I was fit and fat by then. We all enjoyed ourselves but after a while, as always, the excitement died down and we began to go about separately. From the changes in my body I knew there was a pup inside me so I was well satisfied. I swam around the island to choose a good birthing place for when I should need it and found a very suitable cove. It would not be for a long time yet but feeding was good in the area so I stayed around. After much travelling during the summer I felt no desire to move far. The songs of whales were loud here as I'd known they would be. The humpbacks were moving south to breed and singing about a swimming crab they had met at the surface of the deep ocean. It was a surprise to me as I had no idea that there were such creatures as ocean-going crabs. There was a clear picture of it in my mind as I listened to their song. They seemed half amazed and half amused. Though equally amazed I couldn't join in the amusement, I knew too well what it felt like to be living in the wrong place and felt for it, condemned to swim at the surface when it should have been walking on the sea-bed. I sang back to the whales but there was no reply, they probably couldn't hear me.



In the next bay there was a black house, but the man there launched his fishing boat from that bay and I never saw him come over to my cove. Several other seals I saw were attracted by this cove and that confirmed my decision. The woman from the black house would sometimes come over to my cove, probably collecting duileasg, cruagean or other seaweeds and perhaps shellfish. After being bent double for a while she would stretch her back and sit looking out to sea singing quietly to herself. When she noticed me watching her she would sing more loudly. Then I realised that whenever she saw me she would change to one particular song as if she had chosen it for me. It was a simple song and I soon

had it, though I had never heard it on Arran. Nor had I heard of anyone there singing to a seal. Each time she came she chose her singing spot a little nearer to me on the rocks and I swam in a little nearer to her. Though I was hesitant at first it began to seem churlish not to sing back to her. She seemed unsurprised and looked quietly into my eyes as I finished the song.

"That was beautiful, sad though, full of something lost" she said.

"Yes, it is a song of sea-longing sung by seals on the land".

Her surprise that I could speak was obvious but she remained calm.

"You're a selkie"

"So people of the land call me, but I am a seal"

"With a human's voice"

"Well yes, but I have a seal's voice too"

"It sounds as though you do not want to be human"

"No, I shall never shed my skin again, I was a human woman for too long"

She looked at me so gently that I told her my whole story. Not that it was unusual, it is the story of many selkies. But they say that if goodness is stronger than love, in the man finding the selkie's skin, it will not happen.

"I am more cautious now" I said.

"Teach me your song of sea-longing". So I did.

"Bheir mi hiu ra bho naile bho
Bheir mi hiu ra bho ho ro i..."

She had it quickly as I guessed she would.

"The words have no meaning, do they?"

"They have to a seal, but are not really translatable. They speak of the beauty and feel of the sea and the desire to be diving in it"

"I shall think of you when I sing it"

"Thank you – I should like that. Will we sing together the song you always sing to me?"

"We certainly will. Not today though, I must hurry home to my wee boy"

"Farewell, until another day"

"Aye, farewell".

It was many a while before she came again. There was much work on a croft and not much time for herself as I knew well. I thought they had two cows although I had not seen them recently. We had just the one on Arran. The croft here seemed to have potatoes on the rigs and perhaps oats, my view from the sea was not good. There were quite a few hens.



The first thing I asked her when she returned to the shore several weeks later was which island this was.

“It’s Eiriosgaigh” she said.

“Eriskay – it’s a very musical name”

“It is, perhaps you and I might write a song about it?”

“We could, that would be our song. Shall we sing your song now?”

We did and enjoyed it so much we sang it again.

“Ionn da Ionn do, Ionn da odar da
Hi- odan dao odar da”

She looked at me a little shyly.

“It is called ‘The Seal-Woman’s Sea-Joy’.”

“Oh, that is why you always sing it to me”

“Yes, I was hoping you might be a seal-woman”

Seals don't smile very well, but I think she understood my face.

“There are stories of them all along the coast, but I have never met one before.”

“That you know of.”

“Aye, there's that.”

“You have been to a lot of the coast then?”

“When I was young. I've not left the island since I married, a good while ago now. But before I married I was always away, with the other girls, gutting herring in the fishing ports. We went all up and down the east coast, though Aberdeen mostly. Some of the girls had been as far south as Yarmouth. I was never farther south than Seahouses. Do you know that I had never seen a tree until I went away to the herring? It was hard work for long hours, but we enjoyed ourselves. With working-songs, all types of songs, and stories – the more frightening the better – you know how it is when you're young. I always believed the selkie stories, or wanted them to be true. At last I have met a selkie.”

“It was a brave thing to do, to leave the island and work so far away.”

“The first time I was frightened, you don't know what to expect. But with a few of us together it was not so bad. And we had to earn the money, you see, to get rubber seaboots for the men. Many lives are lost at the fishing, but we could prevent losses from lung disease if we could keep their feet dry. I was so happy on the day I finally had enough money to buy my father a pair. It was something I could do you see. He had risked his life for years to feed us all.”

I stupidly asked her “What were their seaboots made from before you got the rubber ones?”

She didn't reply. I was sorry to have embarrassed her. The boot seams must have leaked, a seamless sealskin has always kept me dry. To cover the awkwardness I quickly asked her how long she had been married.

“Going on thirty years now.”

“So long? you must have married young, I think. And the wee boy?”

“Yes, he'll be six soon. It looks strange I know. But he came to us very late. Despite all my prayers to St. Collum Cille, we thought we could never have children. When at last he answered my prayers I didn't even realise it, thinking only that the change of life was upon me. But no, it was a lovely healthy boy, so handsome and with the sweetest nature – oh, but, don't all mothers think so?”

“No, ...I .. no.”

“You said you'd a boy and a girl? I'm thinking you must miss them sorely.”

“Yes and no. I love them as people, but not with that overwhelming love that mothers feel. There was certainly that for the first few months, but after that I got frustrated with them, that they weren't adult yet. And I pitied them for having such a mother, but the man got my blame for giving a seal human children.”

“You seem very human to me, in some ways.”

“But not in that, to their detriment. I have a pup in me now, though it is small still. When it is born I will give it my all for two months at most then it's on its own. Though I wish it well I will do no more for it.”

“Your pup will have a good mother.”

We met when we could and sang or were quiet together. It was easeful company. So it came as a shock

one day to hear her shouting

“Help...help...”

I swam into the cove at my, considerable, top speed. She was looking out to sea, standing in the place where we always met. Her man was not at sea in his boat so I knew she was calling to me, though astonished that she thought I could help her.

“Whatever’s wrong?”

“My husband’s trying... my wean, the boy... the waterhorse has come.”

She was running back to her boy before I could ask further. But nobody hesitates when the waterhorse appears. I swam fast around the headland into the bay where her house was. It didn’t seem likely that the waterhorse would be in its ‘handsome young man’ shape. That would not serve it at that house. It would know that the man and woman were strong, so it would go for the boy. What shape it would take to lure a small boy into the sea I could not guess.

A slow and tiring shuffle got me onto the shore where I worked my skinning spell. Above the high water mark I hid my pliant fur among the rocks. My strong long legs took me fast towards their house. There was the waterhorse, it had taken its land horse shape, thin and green, but shining and beautiful. The boy was already on its back looking happy and fey. The man was standing between it and the sea, he looked strong but I doubted he could stop it for long. I ran to it and grabbed at the boy, but pulling him was no use. The magic of the waterhorse held him tightly on its back.



My mind was going in all directions at once searching for something to try.

“Counter-magic...spell...sortilège, no that’s further south...stone circle...spirit Orca...curse the thing.”

My only power was skin-shedding, so I threw that at it as hard as I could. I thought that its lustrous deep green hide would make a beautiful warm coat for the woman. But the spell didn’t work, the vile creature knew what I was trying to do and turned its sharp pointed-teeth smile on me.

The anger of defeat made me reach with my long fingers and haul hard at the boy. My spell had worked on him instead, his clothes stayed stuck to the waterhorse but his smooth body was in my arms. The waterhorse lashed its hooves at me but, at that moment, I heard the man’s voice singing my song of sea-longing. How clever of him, the creature turned at once towards the sea. I could feel its desire for the turquoise, green, blue in my whiskers. Holding the naked boy tightly to me I turned my back on the sea and ran and ran towards the house. The woman was running behind me but she was slow. The man sang on, but all I could see was the safety of the house. When we reached it the boy started to cry

and I left him to his mother. She only had attention for him so I went quietly from the house, I knew she would come and sing to me later.

Outside the house the man was walking slowly towards it and there was no waterhorse. His song had returned it to the sea. Although he looked at me, his eyes were unfocussed and I doubt that he saw me.

Back at the shore I retrieved my fur skin. I had not given it a thought, my fear was gone. There now. I shall live forever and fill the world with strong white young seals, and sing every song there ever was.



THE END