

## LEARNING THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there lived a fisherman and his wife in a small village by the ocean. They had ten children, which they felt was quite enough, but it came to be that an eleventh child was born, a little girl. The poor fisherman fretted over how he would provide for this new baby, but his wife said, "Chance will provide," and so the new little girl was named Chance.

Chance was a happy child. More than anything, she loved to go out on the fishing boats and dreamed of the day when she would have her own ship to sail the world over. Time passed, and Chance grew into a tall, straight girl, with hair almost as bright as a persimmon. One evening after dinner, she went to her parents and said to them, "The time has come for me to go out into the world and make my way. Give me your blessings and in the morning I will set out." And so, she went to sleep as she always had, in a big bed with three of her other sisters.

That night, her mother and father could not sleep. They wished to give Chance more than their blessings, but they were poor folk and had nothing, no jewels, no riches, no treasure of any kind. Then Chance's mother had an idea. She took her finest dress, which she herself had sewn from threads that were a hundred shades of blue and unraveled it so it was once again so many threads of so many different shades of blue.

Then Chance's father took the threads and wove them into a stout fishing net, such as any fisherman would be proud to own. In the morning Chance's

mother and father presented this gift to her. Chance was very pleased with her net and set out at once. She travelled a day and a night and found herself on the bank of a wide river. A little ferryboat was tied up at a pier. Not far off, the ferryman himself sat, eating his breakfast.

"Will you take me across the river?" asked Chance.

"A penny is my price," he said.

"I haven't any," Chance said.

"Then you will not see the other side of the river," the ferryman said, "for the water is deep and dangerous."

Before Chance could say anything else, an old woman approached. She too asked to be ferried across.

"A penny is my price," said the ferryman.

"I have nothing," the old woman said, "but my little house lies across this river and I must get home. Surely you will take pity on me."

But the ferryman would not be moved by words or the old woman's tears.

"Come," Chance said, her heart filled with pity, "I will take you across."

"Without a boat?" the ferryman laughed.

"I will make a bridge of my good stout net," Chance said. She tossed the net across the river so that it snagged in the gnarled roots of an old tree on the opposite bank. She pulled the other end tightly and tied it to the ferryman's boat. The net lay flat and smooth, like a bridge.

The ferryman continued to laugh. "That will never hold you. You will both drown in the river, for I will not jump in to save you."

But Chance and the old woman crossed to the other side safely. Just as Chance tried to pull the net free, the ferryman untied it and pulled it to himself.

"Try and put me out of business!" he yelled angrily to Chance.

"My net!" Chance cried. "It was the only thing I had in the world."

"Do not weep," the old woman said gently, "you were kind to me and I mean to reward you. I have no money to give you, but I have travelled far and learned a great deal. I will make you a gift of learning." She stood on tiptoe and whispered some very strange words that did not sound like words at all into Chance's ear.

Chance went on her way. "How will I manage without my net?" she wondered. "How will I fish? What will I have to eat?" She was so worried that she wandered on until she was lost in a forest. There, in the sandy soil at the bottom of a great pine, she lay down to sleep. "My troubles will not seem so big in the morning," she said, and closed her eyes. No sooner had she done so when she heard two women talking.

"You are a long way from home," said the first. "Yes," said the second, "but there is a great storm far out to sea, and I decided to move my family inland until the weather clears."

"That's wise," the first said.

Chance opened her eyes and looked around, but she could see no one at all, except for two snowy-white seagulls. They opened their beaks, but instead of the shrill, shrieking cries of gulls, Chance heard words, clear as day.

"Hello, hello!" Chance cried, and the gulls stared at her, startled to hear their language spoken by such a strange creature.

"She understands us," said the first gull.

"We can understand her," said the second.

"Forgive our bad manners," the first said, "but it's not everyday you find a human who has learned the language of birds."

"And speaks it with such a lovely accent," said the second.

"Is it true there is a storm at sea?" Chance asked.

"Yes," said the second gull. "Many ships will be lost. We have tried to warn the fishermen, but they either ignore us or shoot at us. They cannot understand us."

"If you could lead me to the fishing village, I could warn the fishermen."

The gulls took Chance to the fishing village, which was a place very much like the village where Chance's family lived. The villagers were so grateful for Chance's warning, that they wished to offer her a reward, but all she asked for was a good quantity of grain for the gulls and their families.

The gulls were very pleased with their new friend. "Come," said the second gull, "we will take you home to your nest. Is it far from here?"

"I have no nest," Chance answered.

"No nest?" both gulls said, appalled at the notion.

"Then you must come home and live in my nest," said the second gull.

And so, Chance went to live with the gulls, which was not so very different from living with her ten brothers and sisters. The nest was crowded, noisy, and there was always somebody around to play with. At night, Chance slept under the warm wings of her gull family. Whenever there was a storm at sea, the gulls would tell Chance and she would go into the village to warn the fishermen, always returning with grain for the gulls, bread and milk for herself.

Now, it so happened that the shore where Chance and the gulls made their home was in a kingdom which was ruled by a selfish and cruel young king. He only wanted power and cared nothing for any living creature. The king heard the strange tale of the girl who lived with the seagulls as one of their own and always came to warn the fishermen of storms at sea.

"Bring her to me," the king demanded of his soldiers, for he had to know where this strange girl got her power so he might have it for his own.

The next time Chance went to the village the king's soldiers seized her and brought her to the castle.

"Tell me how you know when there is a storm far out at sea," the king said. "Tell me or I will have you put to death at once!"

"Your Majesty," Chance answered honestly, "the seagulls tell me, and I tell the fishermen."

"The gulls tell you?" the king laughed. "Are these gulls magic, that they speak as men do?"

"No, sire," Chance said, "they speak as gulls always have. I have learned the language of birds."

The king was astounded. He could not stop thinking what he could do if he knew the language of birds. "I could make the birds spy on my enemies!" he thought. "Why, they could even spy on my own people, for a powerful man has enemies everywhere, even in his own house. Anyone who spoke against me would be executed immediately. I would be the most powerful ruler in the land." To Chance he said. "You will teach me the language of birds."

"But the learning was given to me as a gift," Chance explained. "I don't even know how to give it to another."

Her answer only enraged the king. "You will teach me the language of the birds, or as sure I stand here, you will die in the morning."

*If I refuse, Chance told herself, surely the King will have me killed. If I agree, the king will still have me killed, in fear that I might also teach his enemies the language of birds. Well, it is better to be killed later rather than sooner, Chance reasoned, hoping she might form some plan for escape before her execution.*

She said to the king, "It is far too late tonight. You will need a good night's sleep so your brain is fresh to absorb such knowledge. In the morning, I will take you to a magical place in the hills, where a certain flower grows. From

the roots of this flower, I will brew a tea. Once you drink this tea, you will have the wisdom you desire."

"If I do not," the king warned, "you will pay with your life, and I will find your seagull friends and pluck them and roast them for my dinner." He locked Chance up in a high room in the tower and set one of his soldiers to guard her.

As the evening wore on, the soldier saw birds soaring around the tower, swooping and crying, in the most forlorn way. He could no more understand the birds than his master, the king, but it seemed to him they were terribly afraid for their human friend. When the soldier came to bring Chance a dinner of stale bread and water, he saw birds perched on the outside of the high window of the cell and wondered if they had come to say goodbye.

His heart was moved with pity for Chance.

"My master means to kill you whether you teach him or not," the soldier said, "but I cannot bear to see it. I will turn my back and you may run away."

"Then the king will have your life," Chance said. "No, I have a better plan. Tomorrow will find me alive and well and your king will get what he asked for and pay me for the honor as well."

The next morning, Chance, the king, and a great many of the king's soldiers and servants set out for the hill where the magic flower grew. Along the way, the king was rude to his servants and his soldiers alike. All he could think about was how much power and wealth his new-found knowledge would bring him.

Chance picked the flowers and brushed the soil from their roots. With a great flourish, she brewed the tea. In a nearby tree, a family of blackbirds nested.

"What on earth are you doing?" the mother bird said to Chance. "That plant is no more magic than I am. This wicked king will have your head and then bake all the bird folk into pies."

"Nothing of that kind will happen," Chance promised. Listening to Chance talk to the blackbird made the king even more impatient to drink the tea. "Soon I will talk to the birds," he boasted, "and they will tremble in fear at my power!"

"First," Chance said, "we will agree on my payment, your Majesty."

"Payment?" The king laughed. "Yes, of course, whatever you ask, I will pay." Of course, the king intended to pay nothing, for he planned to have Chance put to death.

"You will build me a ship."

"Yes, yes," the king said hurriedly, "but first the tea!"

He grabbed the cup from Chance's hand and drank the steaming brew so quickly that he burnt his tongue. In a tree nearby, a bird sang, and the king listened intently to her song. He heard nothing but what he had always heard, merely a bird singing. In a fit of anger, he dashed the cup to the ground.

"Did you think you could trick me?" he roared to Chance. To his soldiers he called, "Kill her at once!"



"Your majesty," said Chance, as the soldiers made ready to carry out the king's order. "Surely you did not hope to learn everything in one day? This is your first lesson. What's to be gained by killing me now? You will never learn what I know if I am dead."

"Very well," the king said grudgingly and ordered his soldiers to release Chance. "The tea?" he questioned.

"Is only tea," said Chance, "a warm and good drink for a cold morning. You expected magic, so I gave you some. Now that I have your attention, we can begin to do some real work."

"Then how long will it take to learn the language of birds?" the king asked warily.

"I expect it should take a long time, perhaps my whole life," Chance said, "but I am a patient teacher."

"Very well," the king sighed and signalled his soldiers to put down their guns. "Let us begin the first lesson. The only thing I have learned is that you are full of tricks. Very well, teach me."

"Your Majesty," Chance said respectfully, "tell me, how do you hope to learn the language of birds when you cannot even speak to your own kind? You understand nothing about the people in the town or even in your own castle. Begin there. That is your first lesson. Master that, and I will return in a year's time to teach you some more. Everytime you see a bird in the sky, be aware that each one is watching you to report to me how you are getting on. I will know. Disappoint me, and I will not return to teach you."

And so Chance got her ship. With her ten brothers and sisters as crew, she sailed anywhere her heart desired. Every year she returned to visit the young king, to see how he was getting on and to give him another lesson. In between Chance's visits, the king would look up every time he heard the song of a bird, and remember that if he wanted to learn the language of birds, he would have to be a better king. In time, he became a just and kind ruler.

When he was a very, very old man, with a long white beard that his grandchildren liked to tug, it happened that a small gray bird hopped onto his windowsill. It sang the most glorious song, which was very glorious for this bird was a nightingale, and the king wept tears of joy, not only for the beauty of the song, but because, for the first time in his life - he understood. At long last, he had learned the language of birds.