

Seal Dog

An old woman stared out to the sea. Her eyes constantly searching for small city tucked away amongst the deep hills, the tops of which were just visible across the wide expanse of water. The dawn's chill crept into her bones, but she searched steadfastly until just as the sun peeped its bald head above the horizon. Gulls took off into the air and gave out loud squaks. It was time for her to go.

She slowly climbed the hill up to the village where she lived and worked. The blanket that she used as a coat, slipped off her shoulders and she had to stop and adjust it many times. At the top of the hill waited her little dog. It wasn't her dog, really. It was a stray she treated kindly and fed scraps.

"We are both old stray dogs," the old woman often told him. As the woman passed the little dog, he turned and followed her.

The old woman was very poor. Old enough to have stopped working many years before, she could not afford to. She might be able to live off of begging and the kindness of a few old friends, but she had a dream. This was not her native village. She grew up in the city across the waves and more than anything, she longed to visit the place once again and to see the grand spring festival.

She had moved to this tiny village when she married, but her husband had long ago died leaving her with a small run-down house and no family.

Near the end of the short main street, lived and worked the baker. It was for this place that the old woman headed in the early morning hours. The baker was a kind man and took pity on the poor old woman. He paid her to wash the pans and keep the kitchens neat, but her knarled old hands and stiff old legs meant she worked very slow. He could have any of his children do the same work in a quarter of the time. But the old woman worked very hard and did a good job, so he paid her a modest amount, all he could afford, and made sure she had her pick of the day old bread.

The old woman liked the work. She knew she moved too slowly for the young baker, but she worked hard. Nothing would stop her from earning her money honestly. The young baker's family was kind to her too. The older kids made up stories saying she was a witch and it delighted her old heart to give them a scare when they wanted it most. The youngest boy, too young to be scared of witches, would often sit by her knee and listen to her stories of her girlhood in the city and the lovely spring festival.

Hers wasn't a bad lot and she was never unhappy, but she knew her life was drawing to a close and the pull of her memories became stronger and stronger.

In the afternoons when she was finished with work. She would walk back to her little house, with its leaky roof. The little stray dog would follow her inside and wait patiently while she sorted out the stale bread and pulled out for him the best bits.

In her home the old woman now only lived in one room. The roof in the second room had collapsed at one time or another and she only went in there now to visit her secret stash. She had found along the shore a small zinc boat, the bottom nearly rusted through. With her small savings she had paid a tinker to repair the boat. The job was too large for him, he said, but he could make her sea worthy for small trips. Anything else would be dangerous. But she paid him no mind.

It took her many years, but she had saved enough money for a small outboard motor and enough gasoline to take her across the sea. She had nearly saved enough pennies now to buy the waterproof tub that would hold food and water enough to last her the two or three days journey.

Her heart swelled at the prospect. For in two weeks time the Spring Festival would begin and this year she would be there to see it. One last time.

The little dog looked at the old woman curiously as she surveyed her goods, nodding and smiling to herself. "And you will go with me, little stray." She said to the dog, who, appearing to understand her, tucked his sleek black tail and backed out of the room. "For I know what you are." She called after him.

After another week, the woman set out one afternoon. She walked to the general store and bought the waterproof box she had been dreaming of. She also bought some salted meat and boiled potatoes and two bottles of water. The grocer was amazed that this poor woman, notoriously poor in all the village, could produce enough money to pay for such expensive items.

The next morning, the old woman told the nice young baker that she would not be coming back. He looked incredulous and asked her where she would be going. "I'm going to the city across the sea, to see the Spring Festival once more." She left holding a large bag of left over bread. The nice young baker was too polite to laugh, but he thought the woman had finally lost her mind.

A half hour later he knew she must have lost her mind, but was also impressed with her tenacity. For the old woman walked through the main street holding her little stray dog with a rope in one hand and in the other hand she towed a small boat with a shiny motor. The boat was being towed on a small brace made from splintered wood and discarded wheels from children's toys. The old woman smiled broadly to all that greeted her.

For, not being a native of the village, the people there liked her and thought of her as one of their own. She had been living in the village longer than many of them had been alive, had always been kindly and desperately poor.

As she reached the hill that would take her to the boat launch, the little dog began to pull back. He did not like the sea. The old woman coaxed him, but he would not budge. The baker offered to take the boat down to the water and his youngest son held the end of the boat so that it would not go down the hill too fast.

The boat successfully launched. The old woman headed down the hill with her dog. The whole village had turned out by now to see the old woman off. The baker was a kind man, so he helped the woman in and yanked the motor cord hard. Sputtering to life, the motor came alive. Sending one hand up in a final goodbye to the village folk, the old woman sped away. Faster, some thought, than they'd seen her move in years.

The little stray dog, cowed under the bow, staring mournfully at his betraying mistress. The old woman felt alive with the wind on her face and the prospects ahead of her. "I know what you really are little dog. No need to be sheepish from me. I knew from the minute I saw you. I knew that the stories from my girlhood were true."

The little dog poked his nose out and looked the old woman in the eyes. She could see in his fearful eyes, in clear flashes, a colony of sea dogs, the joy of swimming after fish, the fear of being hunted, the hunters relentless. She saw the little dogs relief at never having to go to sea again after he found a home in the village.

"I am sorry little dog. But you've been a friend to me, and I think I have been to you. I couldn't bear to leave you behind and I know that you really belong here, in the sea."

The old woman and little dog were well out to sea by this time. The old woman carried no compass, she knew instinctively in which direction she needed to go. After a few hours among the lapping waves, the little dog became quite brave and danced along the bow, barking at passing fish and shadows of fish. When he looked back at the woman, his eyes laughing, she thought she heard him say "This is not how I remembered it."

The old woman, mostly to keep herself entertained, told the dog his story as she had been told as a small child sitting on her papa's knee.

Seal dogs used to be found all up and down the coast. Tucked in colonies among shallows in the cliffs. Being a lot smaller than real seals, they could tuck themselves into the smallest of rocky spaces, hardly being seen from the boats at sea. Seal dogs, in the water, look just like little black or brown seal pups—same size and everything. But on land they become dogs, skinny wirey hounds just like any other. I said that in the water they look just like seal pups, but with front legs that they tuck up under them as they swim. Seal dogs are far faster and much more clever than their seal brethren. Their fur, when in seal form, is so soft and warm that it is coveted by all the furriers. But seal dogs are very hard to hunt, being so clever. After all they could just get out of the water any time they pleased and become worthless dogs. It didn't work for the hunters to dunk the dogs in water, they only changed when they chose to. All this made the hunters covet the hunt of them. It was the challenge more than the money and it was their downfall.

Seal dogs are not to be found much these days. After all the hunters had hunted them for years you rarely saw any colonies. Seems you could find a colony every couple of miles when I was a boy, but I never see them now.

I asked my Papa why their would be dogs who turned into seals. Why didn't they just stay seals or just be dogs? He laughed his belly laugh at me. Its because they want the best of both worlds, he told me. They want the freedom of the seas of swimming fast unhindered, but they also want the warmth of the sun, to run in the wind, and scraps from the table. I even heard of some being taken in as pets, enjoying the hearth fire and left-over stew, only to disappear for days at time into the water of the dividing seas. When God created the Seal dog, he must have asked them "do you want to live on the land or in the sea?" And the Seal dog couldn't make up its mind. They are like our dyed-in-the-wool sailors—always longing for a dry bed, but never leave behind their sea legs.

"That is you my little friend," the old woman told the dog. "I knew what you were the moment I saw you. A little stray that's lost its fold. Just like me." The dog lifted its dark ear flaps at her in a quizzical manner before he turned back to the wind.

The woman was used to going without sleep. As the years had begun to weigh heavily on her shoulders she found that sleeping became less and less necessary. She was always tired, but her mind too active to take a rest. She hoped now that she could go two nights without sleeping. For she believed it would take her two days and two nights to reach her destination. Even if she nodded off, she would keep her body still, her arm holding the rudder steady.

The night passed quietly, despite the noisy motor. The old woman counted the stars as she had in boredom as a girl. Now she counted with enthusiasm. The little dog, tired of the cold wind on its face, tucked himself under the bow, shielded from the wind and went to sleep.

Sometime just after dawn, the woman noticed the water in the bottom of the boat. She saw that the bottom of the boat has sprung several leaks where it had already rusted through. The old lady sighed and began to bail. The dog was unhappy by this turn of events and perched himself as far away from the water as he could.

By midmorning the old woman could not keep up with just one hand. She tied the rudder with a bit of rope. And tied her waterproof bucket around her waist and with extreme effort began to bail with all her might. Her plan seemed to be working until at the woof of the dog, she turned to see the rudder had come untied. The boat took a hard turn and tipped over. The old lady felt done for, sinking to the bottom of the sea. A soft yank around her middle made her remember that she was tied to the waterproof barrel. She surfaced and put her arms around her lifesaver.

The little dog paddled around her, yipping in an accusatory manner. "I think we are done for dog." The old woman told him. The dog continued paddling behind her. Then the noise of his paddling stopped. The old woman feared her pup had drowned and turned as fast as she could to see what she could do. But she could not see him.

About ten feet away, the pup surfaced. But a dog he was no longer. His fur had turned black and sleek. His ears had flattened to his head. He still wagged his tongue and yapped like his old self, but he was reborn. He swam to the old woman and ducked his head under her arm. She felt the rope collar she had tied around his neck the day before. She felt around for the length of rope she had used as a leash. Finding the end, she tied it to the rope already around her waist. She double checked the knots, as only the daughter and wife of fishermen could.

With a bark to announce the start, the seal dog began to swim towing the old woman. The old woman held tightly to her waterproof barrel, but as the seal dog began to pick up speed, she found that she needed to really hold on. After a few tries, she found the best position was facing away from the seal dog with the barrel in front of her.

The seal dog swam uncommonly fast. The old woman wondered if she were being towed faster than her little motor boat had been carrying her. She had a lot of time to wonder now that she no longer was actively sending herself home.

The water was cold and chilled her bones, but the bright sun on her face let her believe that its warmth was making all of her body equally warm.

The little seal dog swam and swam. The old woman stopped him twice to feed him some of the dried meat stored in her waterproof barrel. She ate only a little bread and took some water.

During the long day, the woman wondered as she hadn't in many years. She wondered if she would make it in time for the spring festival. She wondered how many years it had been since she had left her home city. She thought about her husband and the bright day they had set off from the city for his village. How many years ago? In the long years of saving for her home trip she had forgotten to take account of time. She wondered how long ago, really, it had been since her husband had died. Died of a fever, she remembered. The baker's father was not yet the baker, she believed, but she just didn't know. The stray dog, now her seal dog, had come along in not much time after that. Had it really been so long? She wondered. Had the dog been with her for so long?

Her mind started to drift from the unaccustomed usage. She began to drift off into sleep, but forced herself awake. If she slept now, she would take the seal dog down with her. As the sunset, she strapped her arms to the barrel, so that even if she slept, she would not slip under. She counted the stars as they appeared and wished off the cold that ached in her bones. The seal dog swam and swam with purpose. Sometime in the night, the old woman slipped off into unconsciousness.

In the morning light, the woman awoke. She was on the shore laying amongst some very uncomfortable rocks. There was something very heavy weighing her down, but before she could look to see what it was, she was licked in

the face by a very happy dog. She sat up, not quickly, but as fast as she could, and looked around. She was on the shore. The dog was her stray dog again. She was still strapped to her waterproof barrel.

As she unstrapped herself she that she was just on the other side of a small harbor. A small harbor that she remembered running along as a girl waiting for her father's boat to return. Warily she stood up and untied the dog from her waist. It took her longer than it should for her fingers were stiff as ice and she felt cold all over.

Free of the dog and dragging her barrel, the old woman went along to the harbor. Just past the point where the old docks were, there were large shiny new metal docks with huge boats in them. That wasn't there when I was a girl, the woman thought to herself. Sitting on one of the old docks, she had some breakfast and fed the last of the dried meat to the dog who ate it happily.

Afterwards they walked to town. The woman was bitter cold still and wanted to find some warm, dry clothes. She had no money left with her so decided to sell her lifesaver, her waterproof barrel.

It took her hours to find a shop that would buy it. She recognized none of the streets and only some of the alleyways. She was shooed out of many a shop. The shop owner's tsking at her appearance and her wares. Despair was not in her nature, but she was becoming very saddened. Cold and tired, this is not how she thought she would find her hometown. She had arrived the day before the festival's start. The seal dog had swum much faster than she could have arrived by motor boat. She was pleased with him and often looked down on him with a smile and much love.

At last the woman found a store that would buy her barrel. But they wouldn't give her much for it. She wound up trading it for a warm cloak and a few dollars. Much less than she had paid for it only a few days before.

When she went to buy food with her few dollars she found that she couldn't afford much and what she could afford, she gave mostly to the dog.

Around eventide, she heard a great ruckus down on one of the main streets. She walked down to the street. She saw a large float, filled with early spring flowers that young children were flinging into the crowd. A bright poppy landed on the old woman's unkempt hair. Another old woman next to her, jumped a few inches off the ground and caught a blue cornflower, beaming.

The old woman asked the stranger about the float, "What is this parade float a day before the festival?"

The stranger looked at the old woman with disdain and shrewdness, then explained that it was the opening ceremony for the spring festival, which was to begin the next day.

“Don’t the coming-of-age girls do the flower toss the morning of the festival as the horns follow behind? That was always how it used to be, when starting the Spring festival.”

The stranger explained that this was how the festival began since before she was born. She quickly added that she’d heard of that old custom to herald the beginning of the festival but now it was the horns singly. The stranger finished her sentence quickly and turned up the street.

The old woman looked down at her dog. “Did you hear that? They do things differently now.”

The old woman and her dog wandered the streets. The old woman had it in her head that she would find the apartment loft where she grew up. She wandered up and down lanes and streets into the dark of the night. At last, too tired to move any more, she found a nook, just out of the wind, in an alley and huddled up for warmth.

“You are a good friend to me, aren’t you little stray.” The old woman talked to the dog. The dog was tired too and curled around the woman’s feet and slept.

It was another long night for the old woman. Her bones ached with chill that she could not get comfortable, let alone warm. Her comfort was knowing that her little friend could sleep so well.

At the first light, she began to walk again. She had renewed vigor and was determined to find the loft before the start of the festival. The stray dog got up sleepily, yawned, and followed behind. Her legs were stiffer than even the day before and several times she tripped, falling on her already achy knees. But she kept going, up one street down another, until at last she found the statue of the Forgotten Mayor. The statue had no name even when she was a child and now it was crammed between three large buildings, hardly to be seen.

The Forgotten Mayor gave her new hope and she turned to the west. She had lived up the hill, three blocks, from the statue. Now she knew how to get home. As she climbed the hill, she visited some fond memories—the last time she had descended the hill in her wedding finery, the time she was 12 and she’d ran up it so fast to tell her mama that papa’s ship was safe, and even long before that when she had scraped her knee racing to the bottom with her neighborhood friends.

The apartment loft was nearly how she left it. Painted white now, with some slight changes. “Look little stray, its nearly how it used to be.” The old woman climbed the steps and sat on the landing at the top. She looked out over the city, her dream satisfied at last. She leaned her aching back against the door and as she heard the horns declare the beginning of the festival she slipped into unconsciousness reliving all the Spring festivals as one deliriously happy festival.

Several hours later, the current occupants of the loft came up the stairs. The couple were full and happy. The young woman shrieked when she saw the old woman laying as if dead on her landing. The husband, eagerly

following, was equally shocked. Not knowing what to do with a dead woman on their doorway and not wanting to take responsibility for the dead, the husband unceremoniously pushed, then carried the body down the stairs. Checking down the street to make sure no one was watching, he dumped the old woman's body over the low fence into the street.

The old woman slowly opened her eyes. Her stray dog hadn't abandoned her and she raised her hand to give him a scratch behind his ear. "Thank you my friend." Then old woman passed on.

The dog waited for a few minutes to make sure she wasn't coming back, then turned and trotted down the hill. He carefully missed any person who came near, making his way back to the sea.