

The Seagull and the Swan

A Fable



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I THE SEAGULL

Once upon a Now, there was a lonely seagull. He stretched out his wings, extending the tips, letting the wind currents run beneath his feathers as he swooped and soared, bobbing up and down like a cork on the ocean. He looked down at the waters, watching the shimmering snickets of light that burned in their collective nests. The light danced: a sylph lustre.

The seagull knew that he had to fly, had to eat. He even knew that he was a seagull, the label that the manthings had applied to him.

He gently flapped his wings and rotated them at an angle. The only sound that he heard was the wind under

his feathers. If he flew down lower he would hear the swell of the unquiet ocean; higher and it would be the soft passing of the clouds as they wended a weary path that seemed to go nowhere. Sometimes the clouds gathered together, communicating in their own language – a language that no one else could understand. As they held their communion, one or two might become angry, turning the mood black, and their fellowship would break, dissipating with a terrible roar and the fragments of friendship would tumble to earth. Sometimes there was only mild annoyance and the fall would be light; there were others when the clouds showed vicious annoyance, bellowing in terrible torrents and battering the seagull with stinging blows so that he would fly his hardest to try to avoid them. He was no part of their arguments.

But not today; the high clouds were gently murmuring amongst themselves.

The seagull let out an involuntary ‘caw’, not to call anybody, but to break the monotony of listening to the wind.

He had not always been alone, of course, but he did not remember when this had changed. There had to have been a mother bird to lay the egg, to have nurtured it, to

have watched it and protect it before it hatched. Someone to feed the fledgling and to teach ... what? He did not know what was taught and what was instinct. Where did they go? As the time passed, they had vanished. Once upon a time before now ...

So, the seagull flew alone. He had always been alone.

Alone, except for the Voice.

II THE VOICE

Once, in a time before Now, the Voice had come to the seagull. It was not always there, not all of the time: it came and went. The seagull didn't know where it went – perhaps there were other gulls out there, lonely like him, and the Voice needed to speak to them. Or perhaps the seagull was simply not able to hear, or listen, or understand ...

Today the Voice was little more than a whisper as the seagull gradually descended towards the sea.

Keep flapping, keep flying, dead straight.

The seagull continued to dip towards the sea. The waves were talking louder now, grumbling to themselves.

The dying sun cast a spectrum of colours across the waters; red, pink, yellow, and in between were tiny silver sparkles. The seagull flew low, ignoring the complaining of the waves, but if the Voice was speaking to him, he couldn't hear it any more.

He was flying so low that he was almost touching the water, focusing on the droplets of silver. In a well-practised manoeuvre, he dropped his head, allowing his beak to touch the water before snapping and pulling himself up to a higher altitude, rewarded with a writhing fish in his beak. He snapped hard against the slippery skin and then in another well-practised manoeuvre he gulped down the fish and tasted the oils, tasted the flesh and gave a 'caw' of satisfaction and continued to fly dead straight as the Voice had commanded.

The seagull focused on the orb in the sky that touched the place where the sky met the sea. He had been flying for some time now – he had no use for time, to know how long he had been seeking this meeting place of the sky and the water. There was only the Now. What did it matter what had happened before? He couldn't change it: the Voice had told him that. But the Voice had mentioned something about how doing things in the Now would affect things that followed the Now. The

Now was always there. The seagull was always there; there was nothing else: just the seagull and the Voice.

Watching fingers of orange spreading out across the sea, and the sky ablaze with colours, the clouds blushed, while the sky darkened and the pinpricks of light gradually managed to poke their way through the veil of the sky. Once again, the seagull rose on the air currents and maintained a steady level between the muttering sea and the whispering clouds in case the Voice tried to speak to him again. When there were no words, no thoughts, no inspiration, the seagull gave another squawk, calling to the Voice to let It know that he was ready and waiting for instruction. Only the silence answered. Again, the seagull was alone. His only companion, if that is what It was, was an ethereal voice that came and went as It chose. A fair-weather friend.

The seagull paused, mid-flap, causing him to twist awkwardly and beat his wings harder to recover. The reason for his hesitation was a question:

What was the Voice?

The seagull didn't remember when he had first heard the Voice; sometimes he thought It had always been there in the Time before the Now, but there were other times that he wondered if what he thought were vague

memories were nothing more than dreams. Like the Time before the Now, the dreams could not be changed, but the Voice had told him that he could learn from his experiences.

Or perhaps the Voice only existed in the Now and he had only dreamed what had been said before.

He wondered if the Voice only existed in his head, or whether it was outside, talking to him in the same way that the clouds, the winds and the seas communed with each other. The Voice spoke to him in a strange language, but the seagull understood.

He soared higher, watching the orb of fire dipping further and further down as the skies continued to darken. The lush hues of the skies had started to fade. The immaculate artist of the sky had lost its inspiration.

For a moment alone it seemed that the waves had stopped grumbling, the clouds had ceased their swishing secretive words and even the winds no longer whispered to each other as they waited in anticipation for the answer.

Only the sound of silence: so the seagull flew alone.

The dark was a comfort to the seagull. Once the sun had set, he flew by the light of the moon, waning, as if hiding

away in embarrassment. However, he was less aware of being alone. The Voice had told him the legend of the Flock, where thousands of gulls communed. The seagull had sought them for ... how long? He had flown, following the path of the orb, occasionally landing in the sea to rest his weary wings, but he always followed the path of the orb. Until tonight, that was, the Voice had been clear: *dead straight*.

But now the Voice was silent; the skies were silent. The seagull exhaled in frustration.

If the Voice had told the truth about the Time before the Now, and there truly was a Flock, then how had he become separated from them? He didn't remember ever being a part of the Flock, but now he remembered what the voice had said about them. How they communed in the same way as the elements, how they cawed with laughter and were never alone. He craved their company. Loneliness was knowing that there was something else out there, and knowing that something was missing. The seagull lacked company; thus, he was lonely.

He did not normally mind flying at night, but now, with the total absence of familiar stimuli, even the moon seemed jaundiced. Oppressive.

Keep flying, dead straight.

The seagull dropped down to sea level, then stretched out his webbed feet as he skimmed across the water, then floated gently on the throbbing seas. His wings were exhausted, but the Voice had been adamant: *Keep flapping.*

Again, the seagull wondered why – why did he have to keep flying, dead straight? The Voice had told him to, but did he have to listen? After all, the Voice only spoke to him when It chose to. Suppose he chose to fly in the opposite direction to that which the Voice had suggested instead? Did he have that choice, or would the Voice never speak to him again? Or perhaps the Voice had suspected that he might question the instruction and *meant* for him to fly that way anyway. Was the Voice offering him advice; was he being offered free will, or had it all been pre-ordained?

As usual, the Voice didn't answer.

The seagull bobbed and tucked his beak under his wing and closed his eyes. His heart felt so heavy that he believed that he would sink beneath the sea. But as he rested, there was an unfamiliar sensation; a stinging pain around his eyes, and a droplet of salty water slithered down his yellow beak.

The seagull was crying; crying for something he had never known, never experienced, something that he

knew was missing from his life. He was crying for the company he had never had.

Despair is the worst thing to affect anything: a total loss of hope. A longing for something that seems impossible to achieve. And without the Voice to guide him, the seagull felt lost, lacking any direction.

Keep flapping, keep flying, dead straight.

The seagull had already received this instruction and knew that he already had two options, to accept blindly and follow the Voice's advice, or to rebel and fly in the opposite direction. There was a third option, of course, and that was to just float and wait to see where the waters carried him.

The seagull nestled his head further under his wing, feeling his heart growing heavier, feeling the loneliness weighing him down. The lethargy was overwhelming. He felt that he didn't have the strength even to flap his wings, to lift himself out of the water. When you have reached the depths of despair it is hard to climb from it; even a single beat of the wings to try to pull yourself away from it is difficult. The seagull's wings felt like they had rocks attached to them. His head felt so heavy that he thought he would never crane his neck again, never fly, just wallow in loneliness and be carried by the waves.

Beneath him, the ocean continued its communion and the seagull felt that they were talking about him – objecting to carrying the dead weight that rested on them.

There was a momentary surge in the waters, forcing him upwards. The seagull, who believed he could sink no lower into despair, now believed that even the waters were rejecting him. He wondered, if he managed to draw all his strength for a final push and fly to the clouds, whether they would become angry with his presence, become black and angry, and chase him away with their stinging darts.

And what of the clouds? Was there anything beyond? Was that where the fabled Flock resided. If he found them, would they accept him as one of their own, or would they also reject him? He exhaled again feeling a longing in his heart, but lacking the energy to move.

He remembered a Time before the Now when he had seen a beautiful arch of vivid colour reaching from horizon to horizon. He had flown in search of the celestial arch, but it had always kept a frustrating distance from him. Still, even from this distance it was one of the most beautiful images that he had ever seen, like the floods of colour that spilled across the skies and the seas

when the orb concealed itself behind the horizon and the oceans turned dark except for the moonlight rippling across the waves. And then there was the blaze of light as tendrils of fire spread across the sea.

But even these thoughts of beauty were not enough to bring the seagull to raise his head, which sank lower under his wing. Instead, they only filled him with more longing for something that was missing in his life. Even closing his eyes very tightly was not enough, for there were still clear images of a veil of celestial colour, and beyond it was the thought of a flock of seagulls welcoming him.

The ocean continued to ebb, and he felt himself drifting, perhaps in a straight line, perhaps round in circles. The seagull no longer cared. Aside from the wistful longing of the Flock, two thoughts pervaded his mind. How did he know about things from the Time before the Now? He knew of manthings; he knew that he had hatched and must have been taught the necessity of eating and flying. Was it instinct? Had he been taught by other birds that had since abandoned him? Or had it been the Voice? What was the Voice? Was It an instructor or an extension of his mind?

Too hard a question, the seagull thought as his head sank

lower, so that his beak trailed in the water.

Mind racing, yet still slow and cumbersome, the seagull slept.