

Seagull

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While mothering in sub-Arctic isolation in the company of black bears, Laurie Sarkadi developed a new relationship with nature—one she chronicled in her critically acclaimed story *The Bear Within*, appearing in the 2006 anthology *Dropped Threads 3: Beyond the Small Circle*. Nature continues to teach in this excerpt from her story *Seagull*.

I AM STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE RAGGED HIGHWAY THAT PASSES MY HOME when a wildlife officer offers me a seagull egg sandwich. The road winds its way northeast from Yellowknife for seventy-five kilometres, then just ends. If you don't heed the giant stop sign, you'll drive into a river that parts the sub-Arctic forest in all its stunted, natural glory. Today is our annual highway cleanup day. Our job is to warn vehicles to drive with caution so they don't injure volunteers wrestling garbage from the ditches. I've never been an egg salad fan, but I am intrigued. I stammer before accepting, weighing whether to tell him that seagulls have become spiritually symbolic of my dying mother.

The sandwich is soft as clouds. Chewing feels superfluous. The egg is mostly white, the bread a puffy brown and nothing falls out.

"This is incredible!" I say.

He shows little reaction when I tell him my Mom has this crazy brain disease and lives in Ontario and I think seagulls are trying to teach me how to make sense of losing her bit by bit, year after year. We are leaning against his white pickup truck, its pulsating red light casting an eerie glow on our faces.

The common seagull, or herring gull, has a long yellow beak with a red dot on its lower mandible. Newborn chicks look at their mother and peck at the red dot, which prompts her to regurgitate her food for feeding. Dutch naturalist and Nobel Laureate Niko Tinbergen noted that the colour

red draws a pecking response from the chicks, whether it's attached to a mother bird or not. Red stripes on a stick caused chicks to go into frenzy. Through millions of years of evolution, red simply came to mean mother.

He tells me there are maybe two more weeks left for eating seagull eggs. When he was a young Dene growing up in Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories, he would gather duck eggs, then seagull eggs, for his mother each year around this time. June. They would gorge themselves on them, until one day she would just look at him and say, "No more eggs." And he'd start to fish.

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ONE YEAR EARLIER I HAD RETURNED to the sylvan shores of the small lake where I live, a changed woman after watching my mother's sixty-five-year-old body turn to cement before my eyes. We had first noticed that she was changing around her sixtieth birthday, mistaking her sudden apathy and lethargy for depression. Within two years she'd given up everything she'd once enjoyed—skiing, golfing, biking, spending time with her grandchildren. My brother and I had a heart-to-heart with her, pointing out that she had a lot more years to embrace life. "No," she corrected us, without remorse. "Just five more."

Three years into that accurate proclamation, no amount of peering into her brain or her spine had afforded medical specialists the information they needed to diagnose why she could no longer make her legs, arms, or throat work. It would take her ten minutes of concentration with me lifting and coaxing her feet to climb four steps.

When a Dene medicine woman from Yellowknife told me she would be in Ottawa to give health clinics for federal civil servants, I booked my Mom in for an appointment. It was a long shot, but just maybe she could exorcise my mother's medical demons. The six-hour drive from my mother's house to Ottawa was a crash-course in the hurdles facing the handicapped. Each pit stop was an arduous ordeal to extract her from the car and assist her in a walker through doorways, grocery aisles and stairs to the nearest bathroom, where we'd struggle anew to complete the task. Once, her walker could not squeeze through the narrow aisles of a small grocery outlet, and the washroom was too far for me to risk walking with her alone. "Oh, if only we had a cane or something, Mom, we could do it!" My mother slowly lifted her fingers off the walker to point to an old-

fashioned milk can loaded with new canes grazing my thigh. We laughed.

We arrived at our downtown Ottawa hotel at midnight. The street felt dangerously quiet. A large set of cement steps led up to the check-in. "Just wait here, I won't be long," I told my Mom, who was by now desperate for a bathroom. But I *was* long, because I learned that getting to our room required climbing those stairs, exiting down another set, walking to a different building, then climbing two more flights. There were no elevators. "But my mother just can't do that. Isn't there anything else?" I cried. Then, astonishingly, she appeared beside me. Somehow she'd left the car and pulled herself up along the railing and into the hotel. Her walker was on the sidewalk. She looked at me as if to say, 'Well, best be moving on, Laurie.' Her eyes widened with fear when the hotel clerk raised the possibility of carrying her. Virtually any bending caused her to cry out in agony. Lifting those fragile bones was out of the question. It took us an hour to reach the room and its toilet.

On the morning of my forty-fourth birthday, we walked into the clinic in the basement of the Health Canada building in Ottawa. It is fashioned after a traditional aboriginal healing circle lodge. Everyone who enters has sweet-smelling smoke wafted over their bodies by someone waving an eagle feather over a small pot of dried herbs and grasses. Smudging. Removing negative entities and clearing the way for good ones.

My mother lay on a table. The medicine woman began manipulating her hips and legs while her helper massaged and rubbed, commenting on how beautiful my mother was and how she was glowing and getting better. Mom did not cry out in pain, and her cheeks began to redden with the blush of someone who has been exercising. They put smooth rocks on her in strategic places and kept the sweet smell of sage from a smudge pot burning. After years of hastened, cold, loud prods in sterile hospital rooms, she looked peaceful and accepting of these practices, without a hint of scepticism or fear.

At the end, the medicine woman said she would call in the spirits. She took out her Dene drum made of bearskin and began singing a prayer song. I closed my stinging, tired eyes and listened in the darkness. When she stopped, Mom looked rested, but had shed none of her physical ailments. Later, she asked me in her gurgly whisper if I'd seen any spirits.

"No, I had my eyes closed."

"I did," she said. "An old man with a long white beard and white robes.

He was sitting on a heating vent beside me, looking down.”

I was astounded to hear her speak so casually of this encounter. “Maybe he’s a spirit guide, coming to help you,” I mused.

She screwed up her mouth up in disgust. “Well, he’s not doing a very good job!”

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I WAS THINKING ABOUT ALL OF THIS AT HOME, staring out over our lake on a sultry, sun-baked June evening. It was incredibly hard to leave my mother and step-father who had yet to secure homecare and were about to leave their beautiful country home to move closer to services in the city. Were it not for the needs of my own three children, I would not have left. I took some comfort in knowing my brother would arrive soon to help with the imminent move.

These thoughts were interrupted by the unmistakable sound of gunshot at a nearby park across the lake. Our dogs weren’t around, and I silently hoped they hadn’t fallen victim to some yahoo with a shotgun. It wouldn’t be the first time.

When my husband came home from work, he suggested we take advantage of the lake’s perfect stillness by going for a cruise on our “motor dock,” a homespun wooden platform atop six plastic industrial barrels propelled by a small motor. We sat in Adirondack chairs, and my husband steered using a long piece of black PVC pipe attached to the motor’s tiller.

The word *glorious* came to mind as we inched our way through the perfect reflections in the lake, its marshy shoreline an uninterrupted melange of pine, birch, and Pre-Cambrian rock, its striated greys splattered with orange and green lichens. A perfect dry heat pushed my slinking body even more comfortably into the contours of the chair. I sipped my drink. The only people we saw were a young couple, sitting arm-in-arm at the park where I’d heard the gunshot.

In this complete privacy, in this glory, we discussed euthanasia; at which point we would consider life no longer worth living, and how we would both expect the other to hasten the process if we ever got in an unmoveable state, similar to my mother’s. The conversation was particularly poignant for me, as there was still a possibility her illness was genetic, perhaps a mutation of the dementia that had beset my grandmother and great-grandmother. Still, I felt lighter, hopeful, having

talked aloud my fears to both the one who had pledged to stay with me forever, and the gentle, learned ears of nature.

As we were returning home we passed the small island respected by our lake community as a bird sanctuary. I noticed a seagull on her nest at the point. Her mate took chase, hovering and squawking to distract us from the nest. It’s common for the Arctic terns of the island to dive-bomb passersby, but this was my first experience with a seagull. He flew so close I covered my head and crouched down. The encounter infused me with adrenalin. I felt beautifully awake. Revitalized.

“That was strange,” I said. We carried on in silence until we were nearing the park. I noticed another gull bobbing peacefully in the water just as my husband veered the motor dock sharply in its direction. “Where are you going?”

“There’s a red spot on that seagull,” he said. “I want to check it out.”

I noticed it too, a red spot near its wing. The gull was floating calmly and made no attempt to move away as we approached.

“Blood,” my husband said, confirming his suspicion. “It’s been shot.”

My first thought was that it was unfortunate we didn’t have a gun to kill the bird. Then, I wondered what was my rush to take its remaining time on earth? What misery was it to be spared? It showed no apparent distress. The gunshot had penetrated its wing at the point where it joins the body, so it could not fly, but it was still capable in its other element, water. Clearly, it was now more vulnerable to predation, more susceptible to infection and disease, less able to scavenge for food—in essence, old before its time. But perhaps, if the bird were female, it would still be able to sit atop a nest and bring warmth to its offspring, protected by a faithful mate.

Or float conspicuously at a distance, drawing attention to itself and away from the nest. Maybe giving over its life in the process, but sparing its family at least one strike, one key strike, from a predator. I had watched a mother ostrich act as such a decoy in the Kalahari Desert, feigning a broken leg in order to make herself look like easy pickings to our vehicle as she ran limping in the opposite direction from her young.

Easy pickings. Maybe that’s what I couldn’t stomach. Vulnerability. I was still haunted by something we had seen on the way into work early one morning. It was April, when the first warm breaths of spring thaw the shallow ponds along the highway by day, only to have winter ice reclaim them after sunset. With no other open water, the inaugural wave of migrating ducks settles temporarily in these ditches. We discovered one

such migrant frozen solid, its bill dipped partially into the ice as if searching for food, striking a perfect pose, except that some opportunistic carnivore had ravaged its neck. Years later, upon discussion, my husband said the bird would have been sick and died first, the water freezing around it only after its body heat had escaped. But for the longest time, I envisioned that bird being trapped in ice and eaten alive.

“Here, you steer,” my husband asked of me as we approached the injured seagull.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I’m going to whack it on the head,” he replied, pulling the long piece of PVC pipe off the tiller.

It had not occurred to me to capture the bird and nurse it back to health. Such efforts are more common in southern Canada, where people are largely removed from nature and “captive wildlife” doesn’t seem such an oxymoron—although my neighbour once discovered two newly-hatched flickers that had fallen out of their nest and raised them until they were old enough to migrate, even cutting up mice to feed them. With dedication, there can sometimes be rehabilitation, and even release.

My husband is a hunter. Not by trade or nature, but he has embraced the wholesome benefits of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and we in return enjoy wild meat free of mad cow and *Listeria*. He has developed the stomach to kill. I have not. My plan was to look away.

Try as I might, I could not steer the rigid rectangle towards the bird, which watched my erratic movements but made no attempt to leave. Eventually my husband took over the job of both steering and whacking, and I moved to the other side and covered my ears. The slightest, most gentle spray of pink water droplets fell upon my arm, and I felt a paralysing melancholy settle over me. How could this outing start out so glorious, turn even to euphoria, only to take such a cruel, bloody twist? Where could I go to escape thoughts of death?