

**the common pirate parrot****an original yarn fiction by anj medhurst**(inspired by *The Summer Book* by Tove Jansson)

Even right at the top of the channel marker there wasn't a drop of wind and Sophia was glad. She'd started to feel a bit wobbly on the way up, as the rocks below her got smaller and the view across the channel got bigger. Grandmother hadn't even noticed she'd started climbing until she was nearly at the top. What kind of Grandmother doesn't even notice her six-year-old granddaughter climbing to the top of the channel marker and suggest kindly, so as not to undermine her granddaughter's confidence, that it might be wise to head back down again before her knees got quite as wobbly as they were now! She'd consider whether to tell Father about this disregard for her safety when she was back on solid ground.

Meanwhile, as she started to find her head for heights – and her knees stopped knocking together quite so alarmingly – she gingerly raised an arm and waved down to Grandmother, who was now standing on a large flat stone next to the shallow pool looking up at her, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun, the other gripping her wooden stick firmly.

'The view is great up here Grandmother. You should try it some time.'

Sophia's attempt at nonchalance didn't fool Grandmother,

'Only a bloody idiot would climb to the top of that rickety nonsense! Or a brave but foolhardy girl, I suppose.'

Her attempt to convey both concern and admiration, while Sophia clung to the top plank of the structure, did not go unnoticed and Sophia thought maybe she should forgive

Grandmother for the lack of attention that had allowed her to get to the top of the marker in the first place.

‘What can you see from all the way up there?’ Grandmother asked, shifting her weight slightly on the wooden stick. ‘Is your father’s boat still moored off the headland? Is he pulling in the nets yet?’

The channel marker was a tall wooden pole (the kind that a telephone wire might be attached to, if they weren’t at the furthest reaches of the Gulf of Finland on an island that lacked electricity, let alone telephones) with sturdy planks attached like the rungs of a ladder all the way to the top, and Sophia’s feet were on the penultimate ‘rung’ and her torso pressed against the top plank. She twisted her body, uncurling her toes slightly in the process, to look towards the northern tip of the small island, where she could see Father’s small boat sitting perfectly still in the calm water.

‘The nets are still out, and he is smoking his pipe on the deck,’ she called down. ‘The gulls are already circling though, so I think we will have fish for supper.’

‘Well, that is good news,’ Grandmother said, and taking comfort in Sophia’s relaxing demeanour, she lowered herself carefully down to sit on the flat rock and uncurled her fingers from the wooden walking stick, which she’d been gripping rather more tightly than she’d realised!

‘Unless the pirates intercept him on his way back to shore, I suppose,’ she said somewhat quizzically, glancing back up at her granddaughter. ‘Don’t count your fish until they’re in the frying pan. Isn’t that what they say?’

‘Who’s ‘they’?’ Sophia asked, staring out at the open water beyond Father’s boat.

‘Well, the pirates, of course. There’s many a fisherman had to surrender his catch in these perilous waters. The pirate captain usually sends his parrot to do a quick recce, so

keep your eyes open for funny looking gulls, is all I'll say!' Grandmother rubbed her hands gently, as the circulation returned and flexed her feet against the warm granite. She quite fancied a cigarette and reached for the packet she kept secreted among her pinafore folds.

'Don't you dare light that Grandmother, the smoke rings will alert the pirates!'

Sophia was leaning quite casually now, making binoculars out of her fingers and thumbs, and hanging onto the plank with her bent elbows.

'I think you might be confusing pirates with cowboys my dear but you're probably right. We should be cautious until that fish supper is safely landed.'

'Will we have small potatoes with the fish?' Sophia was starting to feel hungry with all this talk of supper. 'I do hope the pirates are still way out at sea because I can see Father starting to reel in the nets. I'm keeping lookout and there are no parrots so far as I can tell. What does a parrot look like exactly, Grandmother? I'm not sure I've ever actually seen one, now I think about it.'

'Well, my dear girl, they are bigger than an arctic tern but smaller than an albatross, and they can be blue and yellow, or green and red, or sometimes just white – which does make them difficult to tell apart from the gulls – but I am almost certain that the parrots that live on the pirate ships in the Gulf of Finland are purple and orange.'

Sophia slowly scanned the horizon before her binoculars came back to rest on Father, still reeling in the fishing net. She could see the little flashes of silver as the fish caught in the net flipped out of the water and onto the deck. Father would plop the smallest ones straight back into the sea, keeping just a few of the larger Herring to bring ashore. If there were lots, he might smoke some in the shed behind the cottage, but the summer was more than halfway through so plenty of fish had already been stored.

Sophia could see her father pulling up the anchor and preparing to turn the boat around. The gulls were losing interest now that the fish were safely out of reach in a bucket, a plank of wood held down with a rock deterring inquisitive beaks.

‘There’s a bloody parrot!’ Sophia’s sudden exclamation gave Grandmother a start (she’d been contemplating trying to get herself back on her feet to have a poke around in the pool with her stick, just in case there might be a crab or two lurking, and she’d almost forgotten about Sophia at the top of the marker).

‘Really? Damn those bloody parrots. Any sign of a ship coming around the headland?’ Grandmother was already hauling herself up with the aid of her stick.

‘Not yet. What colour parrot did you say pirates have? Was it blue and orange, or green and yellow? I think this one is red and purple. Father is almost back at the channel though; I think he’s going to be OK.’

Well, he’s been fishing every summer for more years than I can remember, and the pirates have never got his catch yet. Plus, he’ll have the berries in his pocket.’

‘Berries, what berries?’ Sophia peered quizzically at Grandmother, momentarily distracted from her lookout.

‘It’s a well-known fact that the Common Pirate Parrot loves Buckthorn berries. A seasoned fisherman never leaves harbour without a pocketful of berries. How did you not know that? Have I taught you nothing in all your summers on this island? Grandmother’s face was a contortion of frown and smirk as she gestured towards Sophia with her free hand.

‘I am only six Grandmother’ Sophia beseeched, ‘that’s not really very many summers at all.’

'I suppose you're right,' Grandmother admitted, 'but we must make sure that we get that Pirate Encyclopaedia down from the high shelf as soon as we get back to the cottage. Now, how is your father doing? Is he safely back in the channel now?'

Sophia twisted back towards the open water and raised her hands to her eyes again.

'Yes! He's made it, he's safe, and so is supper! Can we have berries with our fish and small potatoes? And my toes are quite cold all the way up here, so I think I might come down now, if that's OK. Father will need help tying up the boat and you can have a cigarette now the danger of pirate attack has passed.'

Sophia carefully lowered herself back down the marker rungs, noting that although her knees were no longer wobbling, her arms were quite stiff from gripping onto the plank for all that time, and smiling up at Grandmother as she stepped off the bottom plank, she skipped across the smooth, warm rocks and onto the beach where Father was heaving the bucket of Herring over the gunwale.

'Pheh. What a lucky escape! It's such a good job you had the Buckthorn berries to see off that pesky parrot before the pirates made it to the channel!'

Father gave Sophia an enquiring look and ruffled her hair before setting off up the beach with the bucket, slopping water as he went.

'I was thinking we'd have fish and small potatoes with lingonberries for supper, if that's OK with you?' he called over his shoulder.

Sophia thought that was perfectly OK and Grandmother nodded,

'I'll wash the potatoes right away. We've worked up quite an appetite, haven't we Sophia.'

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