

The Cormorant in My Bathtub

By Brooke Rogers

When I was about eight, I went to live with my grandparents at the beach. I had never seen the ocean before, and to this day the memory is vivid. We pulled into the driveway at dusk, and I could see behind the house an exciting expanse of untouched water. I shivered. I could feel the blood beginning to pump through my veins. I felt warm and tingly. The colors of the horizon and the dying sun were a shimmer of pinks and purples. The sun, arrayed in its most beautiful gown, was ready to die valiantly.

From that moment on I was madly in love with the ocean. I lay in the sand for hours watching the cormorants circling over the lapping waves. How I envied those birds, their graceful black bodies circling and diving into the brilliant waters. They did not know fear or sadness; they knew only life, sun, and the ocean. They would plummet into the sea at tremendous speeds, and not once did they miss their prey. There were no failures. Each one always emerged with a silver minnow speared on its beak.

Every day from sunup to sundown I haunted the beach. I never tried to make new friends; I was always alone. I was always dreaming that I would become a cormorant and fly away over the ocean, never to be seen again.

It was a Wednesday night when the tanker sank. The rain was falling in solid sheets, the wind blowing at nearly fifty knots! All the power lines were out; even the glow of the lighthouse was not strong enough to pierce the storm. The captain of the tanker lost his course and ran aground on Lookout Point. The side of the tanker split on the rocks, spilling hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil into the raging sea.

The next day the ocean was calm, but the waves that lapped against the beach were tainted. Riding on the waves were the black remains of the oil tanker's cargo. I watched in horror as helpless sea birds struggled to stay afloat, flapping their wings in frenzied splashes as they tried desperately to free themselves from the clinging oil. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I dashed into the ocean and gathered up as many birds as I could capture. I returned to the house and filled the bathtub with clean, fresh water. Then I pried open as many beaks as I could. I watched helplessly as the birds surrendered to the clinging grease that clogged their nostrils and held fast their beaks. My whole body shook with grief. I lifted their limp bodies and tenderly set them on a towel. Among the dead were three gulls, two sand-pipers, and one brown pelican.

One bird remained in the tub, a black bird who would not give up. He lay quietly in the tub, but his eyes were alert, and he was wide awake. He was a cormorant. To take my mind off the others, I picked him up and began to rub his back with tissue and detergent. It took hours, but the bird seemed to sense that I was trying to help. He lay still and allowed me to wipe every last drop of oil off his glossy back. When I placed him back in the tub he drank deeply, enjoying the strange, sweet taste of fresh water for the first time.

When my grandma found me she did not scold me for making a mess of her guest bathroom. She simply asked if I would like some help burying the dead birds. Without asking, I knew she would let the cormorant stay in her bathtub. The bird was clearly exhausted. He lay motionless with his head tucked under his wing. As we buried the six birds, I wondered what would happen to the seventh.

For a week my grandparents forbade me to visit the beach. I knew that the oil was still thick and that the white sand would never be quite as pure. We had numerous wildlife representatives visit our beach and collect water samples and gather up dead fish and birds. They would often stop and look in on my bird, but they never tried to take him away. I fed him sardines and tuna fish. He ate greedily and slowly became stronger. Sadly, I realized that my new friend would need to leave me.

A few kids in my neighborhood stopped by to see the bird. Grandma encouraged them to stay for tea, and I was surprised at how much fun we had. The more time I spent with the neighborhood kids, the more I looked forward to the opening of school. The water was regaining its purity and soon it would be safe to let my bird go. He would once again be searching the sea for a school of minnows instead of splashing about in our bathtub. Still, I did not like to think about losing him.

Two weeks after the storm, school started. I was excited by new classes and new friends. I was spending very little time on the beach. Instead, I had been playing baseball in the lot behind our house. I felt needed and wanted, the black bird in my bathtub needed me, and my friends wanted me to play third base and share adventures with them.

On the third day of school I returned home to find the bird gone. The door was shut tight, but the window was open and the curtain was blowing in the breeze. On the floor below the window a long black feather rested. I picked it up and stroked the smooth edge as I thought of all the bird had given me.