

THE SEAL'S SKIN

BY LANCE NIXON

THERE WAS A man named Halli who lived on the rugged coast of Iceland. He raised a few sheep and grew a little hay in the meadows. He caught fish in the sea, and he climbed the jagged cliffs for seabird eggs. His house was a frame of driftwood covered with thick turf, with a tall ridge leaning over it to shield it from the wind that blew almost always.

Sometimes the fish buyer in the town would say to him, when Halli piloted his little boat along the coast to sell his catch, "Why don't you move to the village, Halli? Surely it's no kind of a life out there on your own in the wild. Wouldn't you rather go out to sea with the other fishing boats for company?"

But Halli would reply, "Ah, but I do have company—there's music in that place. I don't know where it comes from, or who makes it, but it's the finest of singing I hear sometimes. Usually I don't understand a word of it, but sometimes I think I do—about ancient kings and queens, and lands under the sea."

So time went on, and seasons passed. And one year, on the twelfth day of Christmas, when a squall was pounding the coast, Halli woke and looked at the red sliver of sunrise and thought he'd walk down beside the sea.

Illustrated by Alida Massari

text © 2021 by Lance Nixon, art © 2021 by Alida Massari





There, where the tide was whooshing and thumping against the mouth of a cave at the waterline, he heard it again—music. Only it was much louder this time, and there was also a sound as of feet dancing.

He had to get his feet wet to do it, but Halli waded into the mouth of that grotto where the sea came in. He peeked around a wall of rock, and there he saw them—the Sea People. He'd never seen their like before. The





men were handsome and the women were beautiful, and they all wore the finest gowns and robes. But this was the funny thing, their clothing was all the color of kelp and seaweed. Halli watched them a good while. There was grace and beauty in their dancing. They would clap their hands together like seals, and their singing was like the sound of whales and wind and seabirds.

Then, as Halli crept even closer, he saw a strange thing—a pile of seal skins, lying there on a rock like a pile of coats at a country dance. Halli picked up the most beautiful seal skin of all, tucked it under his arm, and crept quietly out of the cave and so back up the steep path to his own house.

Next day the storm had gone. The sea was calm, and Halli went down to the cave once more. And there on the shore, sitting on a stone with her face in her hands, weeping, was a beautiful young woman. Every now and again she'd lift her eyes and look out to sea and weep some more. She wore seaweed for a robe but nothing else.

Then Halli took the long coat off his shoulders and put it on the young woman's shoulders. He offered her his hand and spoke gently to her. He led up the path to his house above and offered her coffee and barley porridge and rye bread. He gave her some of his mother's old clothes to wear, for though he'd lost his mother years before, he still had her finest clothes in a big cedar chest where she'd kept such things.

Halli understood at once who the woman was. For it is widely known in northern lands

that seals are descended from the soldiers of Pharaoh's army who were drowned in the Red Sea when Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt. They are the Sea People, and only once a year—some say the twelfth day of Christmas and some say at Midsummer's Eve—they lay aside their seal skins and take on human form once again.

Halli had put the seal skin in the same cedar chest where he kept his mother's old things. He had a key for it and he kept it with him.

The woman of the Sea People was very clever and learned to speak Icelandic quickly, though she also sang the most beautiful songs in another tongue. Sometimes Halli would ask her what the words were about, but she could never say. She would get tears in her eyes and shake her head when he asked.

She saw that Halli needed help with his farm and she quickly lent a hand at this and that, feeding the sheep, helping Halli cut the hay. She was especially good at knowing where fish could be found when she went out with Halli in the boat.

Now Halli prospered, and every time he sold fish, he was sure to buy gifts for the Sea Woman. After a time, he asked her to marry him. Because he was kind and good to her, she said yes.

They were happy together for many years. They had seven children. The woman of the Sea People sang them the most beautiful lullabies Halli had ever heard. Only at Christmas time, the time of the year when Halli had found her, she would grow sorrowful for

I DIDN'T KNOW
SEALS COULD TALK.




AND SING,
AND CLAP!
LA-LA-LA!



BRAVO!



MEWY WHEE!



reasons she couldn't explain and stand at the window and look out to sea.

One year Halli took his children to church at Christmas time. The Sea Woman stayed home, for she was feeling poorly. Halli's oldest daughter was old enough to wear one of her grandmother's best shawls by then, and so Halli had opened the cedar chest to get it out for her. But as it happened, he

forgot the key in the lock when they left for church.

The Sea Woman saw the key in the lock. For long she had wondered about what else was in that chest, so now she opened it. And there, underneath the dresses and the few pieces of jewelry that had belonged to Halli's mother, she saw what she recognized at once: a seal skin. She gave a glad cry. She took the seal skin and ran toward the sea. But even as she ran, she was weeping for Halli and their children.

Her longing was too great. She put on the seal skin. She flung herself from a rock into the surge of deep water below.

And when Halli and his children came walking along the path by the sea later, a seal thrust her head out of the water and wailed, in good Icelandic, "Woe is me! Ah, woe is me! Seven children I have on land, and seven in the sea!"

Halli's heart was broken, so great was his love for the Sea Woman. Some people claim Halli got to see her again the twelfth day of Christmas each year, but the truth of that is hard to say. It's also told that a seal would come alongside Halli's boat when he was out fishing and lead him to this or that place where fish could be found.

But whether that is so or not, it's a certain thing that when Halli's children walked by the sea after this, a seal would swim alongside them and toss them seashells and jellyfish and bright stones and old coins from sunken ships. And some people say she still sang to them—that woman of the Sea People.

For Halli's seven children all learned the most beautiful way of singing and were famous for it afterward. It was music that made listeners think of tides and waves and seabirds, of ancient kings and queens, and lands under the sea. 🐙



Whispers in the Wind

by Charles Ghigna

Wind whispers to the sky,
"Autumn's passing by."

Wind whispers to the trees,
"I come to stir your leaves."

Wind whispers to the moon,
"Winter's coming soon."

Wind whispers to the doe
A lullaby of snow.

