

CHARLIE, MY LITTLE BIRD FRIEND

Many years ago, I had a friend who was a seagull, a beautiful white bird with a bright yellow beak. I first met him one early summer day when I was strolling on the beach, looking for seashells that had washed up on the shore. I was just picking up a pink and white conch. That is the kind of sea shell which, when you place it against your ear, gives a sound much like that of the ocean. As I bent down to pick it up, I heard the happy sound of a seagull flapping his wings. He hovered above me for a while and then found a pole near me on which to perch. "Hello," I said to this fine creature.

He gave me a soft squawk in reply.

"I shall call you Charlie," I suggested. "Is that OK?"

Another soft squawk told me that the seagull had accepted my suggestion.

Charlie and I sat around together for just five minutes or so on that day. He must have had an appointment somewhere else, because he suddenly looked quite distracted and then flew off in a rush.

I returned the next day, at the same time, to the spot where I had met Charlie, hoping that he would return. I was so happy when he floated down and landed on his perch. "Hello, Charlie," I called out, and he returned my greeting. I figured that this bird had other engagements, but before he left I promised to return the next day. I also told him that I would wear a yellow hat, so that he could easily recognize me from high up.

I returned on the third day, this time sporting a bright yellow hat and waited near the familiar pole. I was there scarcely a minute before Charlie arrived. We had a lot to talk about. Of course, I had only a rough idea what he meant by his various squawks, but he was certainly holding up his side of the conversation. I also suspect that he had only a rough idea about what I was telling him. I told him that I was a pupil at the local elementary school, enjoying my summer break – he squawked in acknowledgment – and that I liked to play baseball – Charlie squawked warmly in approval. I guessed that he liked to watch baseball games. We continued like this for weeks on end, meeting every day, as good friends can do.

Fortunately, I had been coming to the seaside early in the morning. So when it was time for school to resume, I could still stop to wait for Charlie, at our agreed time, on the way to school. For several weeks into the school year, we continued to meet and to discuss what was on our minds. But then one day he wasn't there. Had he already flown south for the winter, I wondered.

I continued to come to "the perch", as I had started calling our meeting point, for another couple of weeks. Then I decided to wait until warm weather would return.

I remember the day the following spring when I saw the skies dense with birds of various stripes. So I rushed down to the seaside the next morning, heading over to the perch. To my delight, Charlie was already there, squawking happily to see me. We continued to meet on an almost daily basis – there was an outing to the mountains with my parents that summer – for several months. And then it was time for Charlie to fly south again for his winter holiday.

This continued for another four or five years, by which time I was starting secondary school. I saw Charlie for the last time one September, when a flock of his fellow seagulls stopped by. He squawked his usual "farewell" and then left with his friends. As he flew up, he turned to me with one last and, I thought, somewhat sad squawk. I never saw him again, even though I made several visits to the perch the following summer. Where he ended up I don't know. But he gave me the gift of friendship and of happy memories of time spent together. I shall always treasure these memories.

THE MAGIC LILY PAD AND THE PICKERELWEEDS

Even an ordinary lily pad is already a very special place. Lily pads can be found at the knee-deep shallows of ponds. There, you can find small painted, spotted turtles and yellow-eyed bull frogs sitting on the larger lily pads, with dragonflies and damselflies landing on the smaller lily pads, while bees buzz around. You might even see a few beetles sunning themselves on lily pads when the weather is right. Time stands still where there are lily pads and you can literally sit there for a full day, without growing any older. You can try this some time.

On the bottom side of a lily pad you can typically find a crimson carpet, with some moss animals living there, as well as tiny snails and flatworms. Don't eat the flatworms, since they are not good for you. You might also find tiny white eggs stuck on the lily pad's underside. These belong to flattened oval insects known as whirligig beetles, that fly around at night. During the day, they rest. When they are full-grown adults, they often have a metallic green or bronze color. But you shouldn't eat these either, since they are also not good for you.

So, as you can see, there is some magic even to the typical lily pad ponds. But there is a pond high in the mountains, where condors fly by, which is special. Here the pickerelweeds glow at night (and sometimes by day) and the two-foot-tall cattails (they look like reeds but are not reeds) make a sound something like humming or singing. The scientists who have climbed to the top of the mountain to study these cattails are not sure how or why they make this curious sound, for which some of the scientists have coined a new word. Combining the "sin" from singing with most of the word "humming", they came up with the word "sinumming". That, they say, is what the cattails do. But there is more. Intermixed with the sinumming cattails and the glowing pickerelweeds, with their five inch wide leaves and violet-blue blossoms, there are a lot of lily pads. But only one of them is magical. Scientists say that, if you can figure out which lily pad is magical and very gently rub the lily pad with your thumb, you will instantly be transported to

another dimension, where you can have four wishes. Whatever you do with your first three wishes, you might want to save the fourth wish to get back to the pond where you found the magic lily pad.



WILLY THE PIGEON SAVING THE ANTS

Willy the pigeon was a kind-hearted old bird, who was admired by all the other pigeons. They respected his wisdom as well as his generosity. Whenever he found a morsel of bread or a piece of cake, he immediately cooed to the other pigeons to come and share the meal with him. Sometimes there would be a spat between a couple of pigeons, but, when this occurred, Willy could always be relied upon to act as a friendly go-between and help to sort out the problem. He was a peacemaker and a wise old bird. His feathers were, of course, classic pigeon-grey, just like the other pigeons, and he kept himself very clean, bathing in the public fountain in the town square or in the local stream.

One day, Willy was out taking his morning stroll when he noticed a group of maybe about 200 or 300 ants who were marching in a circle. They were not carrying anything or going anywhere. Ants, you see, tend to follow the ant in front of them. As long as the lead ant heads somewhere, everything is fine. But when the lead ant comes up behind the last in a line of ants following him, there can be a danger that they end up just walking around in circles until they become sick. Willy had seen this once before and knew just what to do. First, he approached the ant circle very slowly, so that he would not scare any of the little creatures. Then he cooed to them in a very friendly way, almost purring like a cat, so that they would feel relaxed and safe. And then, he took one of his legs, placed it close to the ant circle, and began to scratch the ground with his claws. This quickly got the attention of the ants, and broke up their circle. The ants had been in a kind of trance, but the wise old pigeon had woken them out of their trance. The ants shook themselves a little, to wake up, smiled at Willy with gratitude, and then got in a line to march home again. As they marched off, Willy cooed a march tune to help them keep in step.

WHY THE SUN IS HAPPY

A long long time ago, the sun was very sad.

She would wake up in the morning every day, rise in the eastern horizon, look around for friends, and find no one.

"I'm all alone," the sun said to herself (speaking English, of course). "I'm all alone."

And the sun moped around a lot.

She was so sad that heavy clouds moved in, covering her up and shutting off her sunshine.

She was shrouded in clouds for many weeks.

Then, one day, while the sun was scratching herself with solar flares, the moon made himself visible in the afternoon sky.

"Hello," said the moon. "You are very bright. You make me happy."

"Thank you," the sun replied. "That's so nice of you. What is your name?"

"I am the moon," he answered.

"Where did you come from?"

"I've been running around the earth for as long as I can remember," the moon replied, "but I usually come out only at night."

"What is night?" the sun asked curiously.

"Night is darkness, and it is what we have when you go to sleep in the west," the moon explained. "But at night I see thousands of stars like yourself – far in the distance. Millions of light years away."

"You mean I'm not the only star?!" the sun exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. "I thought I was all alone."

"No," the moon said. "You have lots of company, but as far as I can see you are the biggest and the brightest. You are the only star that can light me up!"

"Oh, moon!" the sun sighed. "You have made me so happy, knowing that I have so many cousins in the night sky. I hope that you will visit me again."

The moon promised to do so and since that day, he has come to visit the sun from time to time, and they have talked about

many interesting things, such as when flowers bloom and how much grass sheep eat each every year.

And ever since that magical day, the sun is smiling all the time. What a happy sun!