

SEDNA

Long ago, an Inuit man lived alone with his daughter, Sedna, in a skin-covered tent on the shore of their lonely land. Sedna grew to be a beautiful maiden whom many young men wished to marry. However, no matter who approached her father and asked for her hand, he was not appealing to Sedna, so she refused to marry him.

Meanwhile, in another land across the water, a proud seabird—a stormy petrel or a fulmar—looked upon the female birds in his community with disdain and decided, instead, to choose a human wife from among the Inuit people. He flew over one Inuit household after another until he found the woman of his choice. Then he set about preparing for his conquest. He fashioned a striking sealskin parka to adorn his human form, and he built a swift kayak for his long journey.

Once the warm winds of spring caused the ice to break up, the bird-man kayaked to Sedna's homeland. He wore his magnificent parka because he was going to woo the most beautiful Inuit maiden to become his wife.

As he expected, the bird-man found Sedna by the shore of the sea, busily working at her tasks. Without beaching his kayak, he attracted Sedna's interest by calling to her from the water. Then, once her eyes reseed upon him, he sang, "Come with me, my dear, to the land of my people, the land of the birds. There you will live in a beautiful skin tent, and you will sleep on the softest bearskin mat. My people will bring you whatever you wish. With the feathers they bring you, you can make your clothes. With the oil they bring you, you can light your lamp, and with the meat they bring you, you can cook your food. For my part, I will make you a necklace of ivory as a token of my love. Marry me, and put an end to cold, put an end to darkness, and put an end to hunger!"

Sedna was immediately impressed by such a handsome man. She loved the stranger's beautifully dark and intelligent eyes. She admired his magnificent sealskin parka. And she longed for the luxury that he promised her in his song. At last, a suitor had come whom she could not resist.

Sedna ran to the tent, collected her few belongings in a sealskin bag, and announced to her father that she was leaving to marry the man of her choice. She did

not care that the stranger was a bird-man, and no argument of her father's could convince her not to go. So Sedna returned to the stranger in the kayak, who had now beached his craft on the shore, climbed into the bow of his boat, and went off with him.

So it came to pass that Sedna became the wife of the well-dressed, promising stranger. The sea journey was difficult and tiring. When the couple finally reached the land of the seabird people, Sedna found that the bird-man's song had been nothing but a ruse to win her. Instead of having a tent made from beautiful skins, she had to live in a tent fashioned from smelly fish-skins that made so poor a cover that every blast of wind and flake of snow found its way inside. Instead of sleeping on a mat of the softest bearskin, she spent sleepless nights on the hard hide of the walrus. And instead of having tasty meat to eat, she had to eat whatever raw fish the seabirds brought her.

Sedna did not care that her husband loved her. She spent her long days and longer nights remembering all the suitors whom she had rejected with her proud heart. She would sing longingly to her father, saying, "Oh, Father! If you only knew how miserable I am, you would put your kayak into the water, paddle to this dreadful land, and rescue me from this terrible people! My tent does not shelter me; my bed does not comfort me; and my food does not nourish me! Oh, how I want to go home to my own people!"

In this way it came to pass that, once again, it was spring. Once the warm winds caused the ice to break up, Sedna's father paddled off in the direction that he had seen the stranger take his daughter, for he wanted to visit Sedna in her husband's homeland. He arrived to find that the bird-man was away fishing and that Sedna was home alone.

When Sedna's father saw how she was living, and when he heard Sedna's tales of her life among the arctic seabirds, his heart filled with rage. As soon as her husband returned, Sedna's father killed the deceitful bird-man who had enticed his daughter to come to this dreadful place. Then he took Sedna away with him in his kayak and paddled as quickly as he could toward their homeland.

It soon came to pass that the other seabirds returned to find that their friend had been murdered and that his wife had disappeared. Crying mournfully over their friend's death, they set out to sea in order to find and punish Sedna.

The seabirds did not have to fly far over the sea before they spied Sedna and her father in their kayak. Quick as the wind, they swooped down upon the water, stirring up a terrible windstorm as they violently flapped their wings. Their bodies darkened the sky, and the winds caused the waters of the sea to rise above the kayak in mountainous waves. The small boat was doomed to swamp and sink in such a sea!

Sedna's father knew that he was about to die unless he could think of a way to save himself. "This is no fault of mine!" he exclaimed to himself. "If Sedna had accepted a husband from one of our own people, this never would have happened! If I get rid of her, the seabirds may take pity on me and call off the storm-winds that are threatening my life!"

Sedna's father then grabbed his daughter and threw her overboard into the icy waters of the sea. "Take her, seabirds, if you really want her!" he shouted. "And let me return safely home!"

Having no wish to die an early death, Sedna swam to the surface and grabbed onto the edge of the kayak with her freezing fingers. Despite the tumult of the waves, she desperately hung on for her life!

Sedna's father, crazed by his own fears, took his sharp fishing knife and cut off Sedna's fingers from her nails down to the first joint. As her fingertips fell into the waves, her nails became whalebone, and her flesh became whales. They quickly swam away, very much at home in the tumultuous sea.

Sedna still had no wish to die an early death. So she once again grabbed onto the edge of the kayak, this time with what was left of her freezing fingers. Despite the tumult of the waves, she desperately hung on for her life!

Sedna's father, now more determined, took his sharp fishing knife and cut off Sedna's fingers from her first joint to the middle joint. As her bones and flesh fell into the waves, these pieces of her fingers became ringed seals. Like the whales, they quickly swam away, very much at home in the tumultuous sea.

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Sedna's father, now even more determined, took his sharp fishing knife and, with two blows, first cut off the last of Sedna's fingers and then cut off her thumbs. As her bones and flesh fell into the waves, these pieces of her fingers became bearded ground-seals, while her thumbs became walruses. Like the whales and the ringed seals, the walruses quickly swam out to sea. However, the bearded seals swam in search of the nearest shore on which to make their home.

Watching the scene from above, the arctic seabirds flew away once Sedna's father had chopped off the last of her fingers and her thumbs. They knew that Sedna could no longer hang onto the kayak and so they were satisfied that she would drown. Their departure caused the winds to subside and calm waters to return.

Sedna's father then helped his daughter climb back into the kayak, and he paddled her back to their home. All the way home Sedna's heart pounded with rage against her father, and she thought and thought of how best to punish him for what he had done to her.

As soon as they arrived, they were greeted by her huskies. "That's the way!" Sedna exclaimed to herself. That night, when her father was asleep, she called her dogs into their tent and encouraged them to feed upon her father's hands and feet.

Her father awakened in agony and hurled a curse upon himself, his daughter, and her dogs. To his surprise, the earth began to rumble with a low roar. And as it rumbled, it began to shake. At first it shook so that one might hardly feel it. But then it shook more and more violently. Suddenly, the earth gave way beneath their home, engulfing daughter, father, dogs, and tent. Down, down, down they fell into the land of Adlivun, the Underworld. There, Sedna became its ruler and the supreme power in the universe.

From that day to this, Sedna lives at the bottom of the sea, where she rules over the living and the dead. Her hair remains in two fat braids, just as she wore it in her earlier life. However, she no longer has the fingers that are necessary in order to comb it. And so the animals that she created respond to her commands by giving themselves to those who are good and by hiding from everyone else.

Sedna insists that the Inuit people cook sea animals and land animals separately. To disobey this taboo angers her, and whenever Sedna becomes angry, her braided

hair becomes tangled. She then withholds her animals from the Inuit hunters and creates the storms that swamp their kayaks and claim their lives.

Whenever this happens, the Inuit people must perform special, solemn ceremonies to win back Sedna's affection. Their shaman must make a spirit pilgrimage to her home beneath the sea, where he combs the tangles from her braided hair and pleads with her to forgive his people for breaking her taboos and to provide them with meat once again. Sedna is so happy to have the shaman's help that she generously rewards him and his people. Then, once again, the Inuit hunters find the animals that they desperately need in order to have food, clothing, and shelter in their harsh world.