

## **The Sea Lion Lost from the Sea!**

Once upon a time there lived a sea lion who had lost the sea.

He lived in a country known as the barren lands. High on a plateau, far from any coast, it was a place so dry and dusty that it could only be called a desert. A kind of coarse grass grew in patches here and there, and a few trees were scattered across the horizon. But mostly, it was dust. And sometimes wind, which together makes one very thirsty. Of course, it must seem strange to you that such a beautiful creature should wind up in a desert at all. He was, mind you, a sea lion. But things like this do happen.

How the sea lion came to the barren lands, no one could remember. It all seemed so very long ago. So long, in fact, it appeared as though he had always been there. Not that he belonged in such an arid place. How could that be? He was, after all, a sea lion. **But as you know, once you have lived so long in a certain spot, no matter how odd, you come to think of it as home.**

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There was a time, many years back, when the sea lion knew he was lost. In those days, he would stop every traveler he met to see if he might help him find his way back to the sea.

But no one seemed to know the way.

On he searched, but never finding. After years without success, the sea lion took refuge beneath a solitary tree beside a very small water hole. The tree provided refuge from the burning rays of the sun, which was very fierce in that place. And the water hole, though small and muddy, was wet, in its own way. Here he settled down and got on as best he could.

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Had you journeyed in those days through the barren lands, you might have seen the sea lion for yourself. Quite often in the evening, he would go and sit upon his favorite rock, a very large boulder, which lifted him off the burning sand and allowed him a view of the entire country.

There he would remain for hours into the night, silhouetted against the sky. And on the best nights, when the wind shifted to the east, a faint smell of salt air would come to him on the breeze. Then he would close his eyes and imagine himself once more at the sea. When he lay himself down to sleep, he would dream of a vast, deep ocean. Twisting and turning, diving, and twirling, he would swim and swim and swim. When he woke, he thought he heard the sound of breakers.

The sea was calling to him.

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The sea lion loved his rock, and he even loved waiting night after night for the sea breezes that might come. Especially he loved the dreams those memories would stir. But as you well know, even the best of dreams cannot go on, and in the morning when the sea lion woke, he was still in the barren lands. Sometimes he would close his eyes and try to fall back asleep. It never seemed to work, for the sun was always very bright.

Eventually, it became too much for him to bear. He began to visit his rock only on occasion. "I have too much to do," he told himself. "I cannot waste my time just idling about." He really did not have so much to do. The truth of it was, waking so far from home was such a disappointment, he did not want to have those wonderful dreams anymore. The day finally came when he stopped going to his rock altogether, and he no longer lifted his nose to the wind when the sea breezes blew.

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The sea lion was not entirely alone in those parts. For it was there he met the tortoise. Now this tortoise was an ancient creature, so weathered by his life in the barren lands that at first, the sea lion mistook him for a rock. He told the tortoise of his plight, hoping that this wise one might be able to help him. "Perhaps," the tortoise mused, "this is the sea." His eyes appeared to be shut against the bright sun, but he was watching the sea lion very closely. The sea lion swept his flippers once against his side, gliding to the end of the water hole and back. "I don't know," he said. "It wasn't very deep." "Isn't it?" "Somehow, I thought the sea would be broader, deeper. At least, I hoped so."

"You must learn to be happy here," the tortoise told him one day. "For it is unlikely you shall ever find this sea of yours." Deep in his old and shriveled heart, the tortoise envied the sea lion and his sea. "But I belong to the sea. We are made for each other." "Perhaps. But you have been gone so long now, the sea has probably forgotten you." This thought had never occurred to the sea lion. But it was true, he had been gone for a long, long time. "If this is not my home, how can I ever feel at home here?" the sea lion asked. "You will, in time." The tortoise appeared to be squinting, his eyes a thin slit. "I have seen the sea, and it is no better than what you have found here." "You have seen the sea!" "Yes. Come closer," whispered the tortoise, "and I will tell you a secret. I am not a tortoise. I am a sea turtle. But I left the sea of my own accord, many years ago, in search of better things. If you stay with me, I will tell you stories of my adventures."

The stories of the ancient tortoise were enchanting and soon cast their spell upon the sea lion. As weeks passed into months, his memory of the sea faded. "The desert," whispered the tortoise, "is all that is, or was, or ever will be." When the sun grew fierce and burned his skin, the sea lion would hide in the shade of the tree, listening to the tales woven by the tortoise. When the dry winds cracked his flippers and filled his eyes with dust, the sea lion would retreat to the water hole. And so the sea lion remained, living his days between water hole and tree. The sea no longer filled his dreams.

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It was in May that the winds began to blow. The sea lion had grown used to the wind, and at first he did not pay much heed at all. Years of desert life had taught him to turn his back in the direction from which the wind came and cover his eyes with his flippers, so that the dust would not get in. Eventually, the winds would always pass.

But not this time. Day and night it came, blowing across the barren lands. There was nothing to stop its fury, nothing to even slow it down. For forty days and forty nights the wind blew. And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, it stopped. The sea lion lifted himself to have a look around. He could hardly believe his eyes.

Every single leaf had been stripped from his tree. The branches that remained, with only a twig or two upon them, looked like an old scarecrow. And I do not need to tell you that there was no longer any shade in which to hide. But worse than this, much worse indeed, was what the sea lion saw next. The water hole was completely dry.

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Three weeks after the wind ceased to blow, the sea lion had a dream. Now, as I told you before, there were other nights in which he had dreamed of the sea. But those were long ago and nearly forgotten. Even still, the ocean that filled his dreams this night was so beautiful and clear, so vast and deep, it was as if he were seeing it for the very first time. The sunlight glittered on its surface, and as he dived, the waters all around him shone like an emerald. If he swam quite deep, it turned to jade, cool and dark and mysterious. But he was never frightened, not at all. For I must tell you that in all his dreams of the sea, he had never before found himself in the company of other sea lions. This night there were many, round about him, diving and turning, spinning, and twirling. They were playing.

Oh, how he hated to wake from that wonderful dream. The tears running down his face were the first wet thing he had felt in three weeks. But he did not pause even to wipe them away, he did not pause, in fact, for anything at all. He set his face to the east, and he began to walk as best a sea lion can.

“Where are you going?” asked the tortoise.

“I am going to find the sea.”

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