

The Secret of Roan Inish

Adapted from the novel *The Secret of Ron Mor Skerry* by Rosalie K. Fry, and the film *The Secret of Roan Inish*, directed by John Sayles.



Long ago, but not so long that the grass, and the rocks, and the salt-sea waters do not remember, a little girl was going home.

Aboard a ship that carried her from the mainland of Ireland to a small patch of isles off of the country's coast, she inhaled deep the familiar air which had welcomed her at her birth.

Once, her family, 4 generations thick, had lived and worked and played together on a tiny green land in the bay known as Roan Inish. There they cared for the land, the surrounding water, and the creatures that lived alongside them as though they were kin, for indeed they were.

But as time went on, her father and the other young people of the isle began to grow restless, and found themselves craving the bustle and opportunity offered by cities on the mainland. And so they decided they would pack up their belongings and their families, pile them high in their small fishing boats, and head for broader shores somewhere far away.

Fiona, for that was the little girl's name, had suffered and taken ill in the years they spent in the city's smog. Concerned for the health of their daughter's lungs, as well as the joy in her heart, her mother and father agreed to send her back to live with her grandparents, who still dwelt and fished near their original home.

The sea winds smelled of home to Fiona, but they also smelled of grief and loss, for home meant those things, too.

Gazing into the green waters, Fiona remembered the terrible day her family left the island with the clarity of a mountain spring.

There was no more room on the big boat to fit her wee brother, the baby Jamie, who was snug in his strange wooden cradle that appeared to most more like a boat than a bed for a child. And so he was left alone on the beach, with the promise that the family would return to collect him once the trawler had been emptied on the other side. The seal clan, who lived on a rock nearby, sighed deeply and watched mournfully with their dark eyes as the family lifted anchor and made for the mainland.

Not long after they had set off, they watched in terror as a gentle tide slowly came to shore and carried Jamie in his cradle far away into the waters beyond the island.

In a panic, members of the family readied one of their small fishing boats and rowed frantically after the cradle – but it moved with the speed of a lithe and swimming thing, and before they could reach it, Jamie was gone from sight.

Fiona was suddenly woken from her memory by the sharp cry of a gull above her head. In their own language, they called to her a greeting and announced her arrival to the surrounding waves.

Not long after, a round and slippery shape with large, dark eyes and long whiskers emerged from the surface of the water to gaze at the child on the boat. This shape was followed by another, then another, then more, which swam briskly alongside the ship and stared into Fiona's face. Seals, bigger than any she could remember seeing before, gave her their silent greeting from their place in the water.

But before she could give a "hello" of her own to her newly arrived companions, the boat made landfall, and she was hurried onto the dock, and up the winding sandy path which led to her grandparent's house.

Grandmother was waiting on the doorstep for the child as Fiona skipped up the path and into her arms. Grandfather was close behind, and Fiona's cousin Rory.

Together the four went into the kitchen, where Grandmother had tea set on the table, with plates piled high with Grandfather's freshly baked oatcakes smeared with butter and apple jelly. The ravenous child ate her fill, and had pancakes, scones, and eggs when her stomach continued to growl.

Finally, when the table had been emptied and the washing was done, the family gathered around the fireplace to tell stories before the sun went down.

Grandmother remarked, "This is the nicest thing to happen to us since the happy days of Roan Inish."

Fiona felt her heart sparkle at the mention of her birthplace – indeed, the birthplace of everyone sitting in this room.

“We are very close to Roan Inish here, aren’t we?” she said.

“Aye,” said cousin Rory. “On clear days like today you can see it from the window.”

Seeing the gleam in Fiona’s eyes, grandfather beckoned the child to the window and sat her on his knee so she could look out across the bay to where a small cluster of lands lay within the green water.

“There is the rock with the lighthouse upon it, do you see?” he asked.

She nodded.

“And there is the flat sandy isle near which we lay our lobster pots, do you see?” he asked again.

She nodded.

“Now peer between them and tell me what you can see.”

Fiona told her family of the vibrant green band which she could see dappled in sunlight and mist, and they laughed to know that she had seen their beloved old home.

The room then filled with sadness as the longing for Roan Inish crept into all of their hearts.

“No one lives there now,” sighed Grandmother.

“No one save the seal clan,” said Rory.

“I wish Jamie could see it,” said Fiona.

At this her Grandparent’s eyes grew wide, and their faces very still. A tear slid down Grandmother’s cheek, who hurried out of the room to conceal her grief. Grandfather put his hand on Fiona’s shoulder and lovingly, but sternly, said:

“Best not to talk about Jamie, my love.”

And before Fiona could ask why, she was hurried off to bed.

The excitement of the day and the welcome of the islands meant it was still long before the child could sleep. Restless, she gazed out the window at the Roan Inish, feeling the call of the green land and the greener waters in which it lay.

Then, magically and before her eyes, Fiona saw a twinkling little light appear on the small island's shore, and she slept deeply to think there was life on that island still.

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The next morning, Fiona awoke to Grandmother busy in the kitchen. After a hearty and lovingly made breakfast, Grandmother pushed a large thermos of piping hot tea into the child's hand, and sent her down to the beach where Grandfather was spreading pitch on the skin of his fishing boat to patch the leaks which had sprung the day before.

The two sat down to have their tea together, and grandfather leaned back on a rock to light his pipe and gaze out amongst the islands.

"Grandfather," said Fiona. "I want to talk about Jamie."

Grandfather sighed a deep sigh, and his eyes grew misty with memories and grief.

"The very waters of Roan Inish run deep within our family's veins," he said softly. "Jamie was the price we paid for abandoning our home."

Fiona crossed her legs and stirred the simmering pitch as Grandfather spoke.

"Long ago, only a few new cottages stood on the island. In them lived our ancestors, lived and worked alongside the creatures of the sky, earth, and water as though they were family, for we knew then that they were.

The first of our clan, a young man named Lir, one day set out to fish on the far side of a neighboring island. He took his boat, and anchored it among the rocks while he hopped between the mussel-crusting boulders.

He was halted in his tracks at the sight of a seal, bigger than any he had seen before with eyes as dark as the deepest waters. It moved unlike any animal, writhing on the rock as though filled with the waves of the ocean itself.

Then, the maw of the beast opened and birthed forth first the head, then the neck, then the shoulders, then the rest of the strangest woman young Lir had ever seen. He knew then that he had witnessed a selkie, one of the ancient seal people and guardians of the sea, who wear the skin of a seal in the water, but shed it and become something like a human so they may walk and rest on the land.

And he knew from the stories that a human may capture the heart of a selkie if they come to possess their skin, for a selkie cannot go home to the sea without it.

Blind to any sense of rightness, young Lir crept between the rocks until he could reach the skin, which he snatched under his coat and hid away from sight. Then, he made himself known to the selkie woman, who had lost her powers to this human man, and sadly agreed to go with him.

The selkie woman longed for her ocean home, and the freedom to come and go as she pleased, which was a wish not granted by Lir. But soon she birthed the first of their children, and took comfort in teaching the babe the ways of her people: how to gather sweet seaweed for soup, how to hunt crabs among the rocks, and how to lie in the sun and pray at once to the water and the fire of the world.

When first the child was born, she challenged Lir to carve them a cradle which could float like a dinghy on the surface of the sea. The selkie woman would carry the cradle to the water and let the waves of the ocean rock all of her many children to sleep, with the wind and the cry of the gulls as their lullaby. Every child since has been rocked to sleep in that same cradle, on those same waves, all the way down to your wee brother Jamie.

Many years later, one of the selkie's children came to her, saying they had found a strange fur coat at the bottom of an old chest in the shed where the family kept their fishing nets. At once the selkie woman leapt to her feet and ran to the chest, knowing that in it she would find her long-lost skin. By the evening, the selkie had said her goodbyes to her children, and returned to the sea which she missed with all her heart.

From then on, when the waves were slow and the sea was calm, her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren could sometimes see her watchful eyes above the water, keeping a vigil on the little island.

This is how our family became entwined to the sea. Our family is not a perfect one, and our story is not always happy, but from then on the seals and the island of Roan Inish knew us as kin.

The day that we left the island was the day that we forgot our kinship with this place and these creatures, and that day the sea took payment for all our neglect when it took wee Jamie. These years past, I fear the island has forgotten us, as we have forgotten them."

Fiona saw the sadness in Grandfather's eyes, and felt the ache deep in her own heart, but noticed that it eased a little when she remembered how the seals had watched her so intently on the boat the day before.

That night, Fiona dreamed of living in her own seal skin, of diving and swimming and sunning her fat body on the wet rocks, and she felt the love of the ocean once more.

In the morning, Rory and Grandfather invited Fiona to come to Roan Inish with them on their daily fishing trip, and happily she agreed to go.

They set out with gear in tow and sandwiches for each for the day's work. As they got nearer to the island, Fiona saw an increasing number of seals swimming silently below the boat, welcoming them cautiously home. One enormous gray seal, who Grandfather called the Domhainfharraige, emerged from the water and slapped their great flipper on the surface in greeting.

The work of fishing was long and tedious, and Rory and Grandfather left Fiona on the shore of Roan Inish with the promise that they would return to collect her before the moon rose. Delighting in the feeling of that familiar sand beneath her feet, the child ran to remember and explore her old home.

Each of the cottages, which bordered the sandy beach, was still standing and sturdy, but the windows were dusty and the thatched roofs were full of holes and moss. Peering through gaps in the grime, she could see the hearths were dusty and choked with long-abandoned cobwebs. The gardens, which Fiona remembered working in with her parents when she was small, were wild and overgrown, but still full with delicious roots, leaves, and flowers.

She tried every door she could find. Most were difficult to open, and screeched and fought her with the age of their rusty hinges. All save the last cottage in the row, which swung open easily as though the family within had never left. This was the cottage she had shared with her parents and her brother Jamie.

Instead of the cold hearth she expected to find, the ashes of a recent fire sat in the otherwise clean stone basin. Curiously, a low driftwood table set with fresh shells of mussel and clam lay beside, just like the ones she and Jamie used to make.

Running from the cottage, she saw what she thought were a set of wee footprints in the sand, but before she could get a closer look, a wave came and washed them beyond recognition.

The fishing had gone quickly that day, and Rory and Grandfather came soon after to take Fiona home.

The following morning, when Grandfather and Rory went out in the boat, they left Fiona behind, since Grandfather could tell from the cold and foggy air that a storm was on its way.

Disappointed, Fiona sat at the dock, holding a thermos of hot soup from Grandmother and kicking her feet against the rock wall.

Then, in the distance, she heard the sound of creatures swimming in the nearby tide.

She called to the creature, and a loud slap against the surface of the water resounded in the fog. She knew then it was the Domhainfharraige and their friends, come to see her.

She scrambled down the dock to get closer to the seals, but could not see them. So she descended into a small dinghy which was moored there too, and paddled with her hands to the ends of its rope, but still she could not see the seals. From behind her, the sound of gnawing and fraying came, and all at once the rope was broken and she felt the boat drift away from its dock and into the mists.

At first Fiona was afraid, with no oars with which to steer herself, until she felt the presence of the seals, her kindred, guiding the dinghy through the mists, and she knew she was safe.

After a long time adrift, the little boat made landfall, and she hauled it up onto the beach, where she found herself standing before the cottages at Roan Inish.

Grateful to the seals, she turned and asked them to come ashore with her, but they barked in response and would not leave the water.

Shivering from the fog, Fiona then made her way back to her family's cottage, and lit a fire in the stone pit. She ate some of the soup her grandmother had given her, and spread the woolen shawl between her and the cold floor, and went to sleep.

And as she slept, Fiona dreamed. She dreamed of an ancient time when her family knew better the selkies as their kin, when they fished alongside one another and sunned on the rocks together. She dreamed of her mother, who sang to Fiona and wee Jamie in their boat-cradle before herself collecting her skin and returning to the sea. And she dreamed of her brother, sitting at the low driftwood table in the corner of the cottage, having his tea of mussels and crabs with the Domhainfharraige.

When she awoke from her dreams, the fog had cleared and the sun was shining on just the island of Roan Inish. Fiona left the cottage to explore the flower-speckled and grassy hills which rolled behind the homes.

The child drank water from a nearby freshwater spring. She basked in the sun and delighted in the ocean breeze that swept through her hair. She gathered a bouquet of wildflowers – sea thrift, heather, sea campion, bird's-foot trefoil, buttercups – humming happily to herself as she went.

Suddenly she felt eyes upon her. She looked up, and found herself staring into the face of a wild-looking and stark-naked child of about 5 years, who clasped a bouquet identical to hers in his fist. At once, she recognized the face of her brother.

"Jamie!" she cried. "Here you are! You *are* alive! I've found you at last!"

But the little boy did not recognize his sister, and fled down the hill quicker than Fiona could ever hope to run. She followed helplessly behind him, but watched to no avail as he sat himself in his cradle-boat and paddled quickly around the far side of the island, and out of sight.

Fiona sat long on the beach and cried. As evening fell, Rory and Grandfather returned from their day of fishing and were surprised to see the child on the beach. They collected her in their boat, and she told them of the encounter with her brother.

Rory looked astonished, then excited, but said nothing, deferring to the opinion of Grandfather.

Grandfather only looked grim, and said, "Best not to tell your grandmother a word of this, my love."

Fiona understood that her Grandfather didn't believe her, and cried more in frustration as the three made their way home.

After supper, Fiona was sitting by the fire with tears streaming silently down her cheeks. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Rory with a gentle smile on their face.

"Come to me tomorrow," they said. "I'd like to hear more about Jamie."

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Fiona woke late, and that morning came into the kitchen to see a look of sadness on her Grandmother's face. She told Fiona that earlier their landlord had come by, and told them that he needed them to leave their home before the better part of six weeks were out. A man from another country had offered him a lot of money for the place, and so he was turning the family out.

"We've spoken to all our friends already," Grandmother said. "But there seem to be no empty homes on the island. It seems we will be forced to join your father on the mainland and live in the city. I fear for all our hearts if we were to leave the sea."

Grandmother then rose to go milk the cows, and her seat was quickly filled by cousin Rory. Fiona told them what Grandmother had told her, and then of Jamie, and of her dream on the island.

Rory's face changed quickly throughout the story, from grief, to wonder, to determination.

"We'll just have to return to Roan Inish," they said.

The pair hatched a plan, and set about gathering the few supplies they would need to heal the cottages and make them warm and liveable again. Fiona relished the idea that bringing her family back to the island would not only give them a home, but also bring them closer to her lost brother.

For days, Rory and Fiona went to the island and worked to repair their old homes. Their grandparents were busy packing up their house, and did not notice the two were gone so often.

The stone structures were still strong and needed simply to be cleaned and painted. The grasses which they used to thatch the roofs grew in abundance on the island, and they felt it sigh with relief to be harvested by familiar hands. Driftwood lay plentifully on the beaches, which they used to repair the doors and window frames. The stones they lashed to twine and slung over the thatching to keep it secure in the sea wind rested close by in the hills. They tamed the gardens, cleared the narrow pathways, and lit roaring fires in each cottage to dry them out and brighten their walls once again.

All the while, Fiona never touched Jamie's driftwood table and mussel-shell cups. And every day, the seals would gather and bark to one another as they watched Rory and Fiona at work.

The day came when the work was done, and the two decided it was time to bring their family back to Roan Inish.

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It was three days before they were to leave their home, and the air was again electric with an impending storm. All of the grandparent's belongings lay in boxes, in baskets, wrapped in paper and straw for a journey they knew not yet to where.

The cousins were biding their time for the right moment to tell the grandparents of their work. Too soon, and they might not be persuaded to go. Too late, and they might not believe them.

But the time was ripe that morning, and they could feel it as boxes, baskets, and paper inched reluctantly closer to the door.

"I will go and tell Grandfather," said Rory. "You go and tell Grandmother."

Fiona found Grandmother sitting at an empty kitchen table. She laid her small hand on hers, and told her gently of her encounter with Jamie, and the work she and Rory had done.

Grandmother looked astonished, then frightened, then incredulous, and dismissed Fiona's story with a snort. She waved her hand and tutted, then muttered something about needing to check the packing of the teacups, and left Fiona alone.

Moments later, Rory came in and shrugged their shoulders in their cousin's direction. They had fared no better with Grandfather.

"We'll try again tomorrow," they said.

So the next day, Rory and Fiona went to their grandparents and again told them their stories. This time, when Fiona pleaded with Grandmother, she became angry and scolded Fiona for trying to trick her with her nonsense.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” Rory said.

On this day, Fiona once again sat beside her grandmother and pleaded with her to just come to the island and see. What harm could there be in having a look? How long had it been since Grandmother had seen Roan Inish?

Grandmother remained completely silent and refused to look at Fiona, busying herself with the washing.

The next morning, Fiona walked slowly downstairs, discouraged that their grandparents seemed to have no interest in the work she and Rory had done. And so it was to her surprise to find Grandmother sorting purposefully through the packed boxes, and gathering food and blankets and other necessities into a pile.

Grandfather and Rory came inside as Fiona crossed the threshold into the kitchen, and all of them stared at Grandmother, who paused to feel the eyes of her family on her.

“What’s going on, love?” Grandfather said, confused.

“Do you want us to go to Roan Inish with no food and no blankets?” she spat back. “Unless you do, come and help me pack.”

After a stunned silence, the rest of the family sprang into action, delighted at last to be making the long-awaited journey back to the island.

As Rory and Fiona cleaned and gathered the last little belongings from the corner of the house, Grandfather took the things Grandmother was packing down to their little boat, and prepared to row to the island which they all knew would once again be their home.

They reached Roan Inish that evening, and not a moment too soon, as the promised storm winds grew rougher and wilder the closer they got to the beach. The old people gasped to see the work the children had done, and ran about the cottages despite the weather to admire the new paint, the beautifully thatched roofs, the clean gardens, and the newly swept stone floors.

Their belongings inside, their things unpacked, Grandmother then brought Fiona and Rory out into the weather and down to the rocks on either side of the beach to gather sweet seaweed for the soup.

She told the children how the selkie woman had taught the first of her children which seaweeds to take and which to leave to make the most delicious broths and stews, and how each generation had passed this knowledge to the next.

The storm winds raged and the rain began to pour the moment they brought their harvest into the cottage, which was now warm from a fire roaring in the stove. Grandmother hung her great black cauldron above its flames and showed the children how to make the ancestral soup. Later, Grandfather showed them how to bake his favorite scones within the dimmed coals.

They ate, cozy by the fire and warmed by each other's company and the feeling of finally coming home. But Fiona felt the chill of the storm all too close to the windows of the house, and worried for her brother. She went to the window to keep watch on the angry waves, which grew angrier by the second.

"This storm's a mean one," remarked Grandfather. "A worse one I've not seen in a fair while."

"Jamie's out there," said Fiona. Her words were met with silence, and a deep sigh from Grandfather.

All the same, she kept watch, and her vigilance was soon rewarded.

Dark shapes began to appear in the waves, leaping and diving effortlessly in the surf. Huge seals, selkies, the Domhainfharraige and the rest of the seal clan of Roan Inish, coming to greet their returned kin. And as Fiona watched, a shape unlike the others appeared on the water: a curious little boat with the shape of a small boy inside.

"Jamie's here!" shouted Fiona, and ran for the door. But Grandmother caught her arm and held her back. She knew that gentleness was needed if the boy was to return to them.

"Remember, child," she said softly. "Jamie has grown up with his seal family. He is as wild as they, and mistrustful of anything human. We must be careful not to frighten him."

Slowly, slowly, the family opened the door and stood under the thatched overhang out of the rain to wait for the boy. They watched this naked and shivering child haul his cradle from the waves, accompanied on either side by the great, gray seals.

Jamie ran halfway up the beach before he saw the humans standing in the doorway of his home. He stopped in his tracks, and his eyes grew wide with alarm. He turned, and ran back to the rough but familiar waters, and the seals he trusted as his family.

But the seals knew that the humans had come to make good on their promise and return to friendship and love with their clan, and with the island of Roan Inish. And they knew that the time had come to return the human child to the embrace of his family which walked on the land.

And so, when the boy ran towards them, they barked back and in their language told him it was time for him to leave. Baffled, but obedient, Jamie backed away and turned cautiously away from the waves, peering through the storm at the four figures gathered beneath the thatch.

It was Grandmother who alone took the first cautious steps in his direction. Silent, she crouched and opened her arms wide to the child, her shawl spread warmly like the welcoming wings of a great bird. In a sudden moment of remembrance, Jamie ran to her, and let himself be gathered up into her arms. And so the family was once again whole, with each other, with the island, and with the watchful seals.

Grandmother went at once with the wee Jamie into the cottage to feed him hot soup which she was sure he had not had in all the years he was with the seals. Fiona stood for a moment in the doorway and watched, gratefully, as the seals returned to the water. They took with them the strange boat-like cradle, nudging the aged thing along the sand with their noses, and guiding it through the water held fast between their sleek bodies.

Together near the fire, Fiona held her brother to her and whispered human words she knew he would not understand, but needed him to hear anyway.

“I’m your sister, Fiona,” she breathed. “This is our cousin, Rory, and our Grandmother and Grandfather. We’re all going to live here together again. We love you very much, and are glad to be home.”

Jamie looked into his sister’s eyes and gave a faint smile.

“Home,” he whispered, and smiling fell asleep.