

Translated extract from

**Nikolaus Heidelberg**

***Wenn ich groß bin, werde ich Seehund***

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**Nikolaus Heidelberg**

***When I grow up I'm going to be a seal***

Translated by John Reddick

I never had to learn to swim: I could do it from the very beginning.  
We lived by the sea in a house set apart from the village. Mum, Dad and me.  
Dad went away with the men to catch fish. Mum worked in the house and the garden.  
I helped her, and when I'd done my jobs she let me go swimming again.

Because the really big shoals of fish lurk far from land, Dad was often away for days at a time. In the evenings Mum and I would talk about the sea.

Usually I would bring her a pretty pebble or an unusual shell, and then she would tell me about all the other things that lived in the sea: mermaids, shrimp-girls, real lampreys, lordly seacows, princely squid, deathly jellyfish, underwater bishops, sea trolls, pearlfishers, sea squirts, john dorys, kissmouth snakes, langoustines, regal newts, common winkles, aristocratic anchovies, plumed octopuses, sea ponies and whales with entire villages on their backs...

I couldn't see how she knew all this, as she never went in the water. She wouldn't even paddle. I asked her once, and she told me that fishermen's wives should never swim. "Pity", I said.

When Dad came back from a trip I didn't have to help and was allowed to spend the whole day in the water.

One evening Mum and Dad sat down together and drank a lot of wine. Then they went to bed, and there were loud snores from Mum. I couldn't sleep, and suddenly I heard Dad get up and sneak out to the tool shed on tiptoe. From my bedroom window I saw him come back to the house with a shiny bundle.

Then he crept back into bed, and soon he was snoring too.

Next morning he went off to sea again, so I had a quiet look for the shiny object. I couldn't find it.

"You can go swimming now", said Mum, "I'll tidy the shed on my own."

That's what she always did: each week she gave one room a really thorough clean. Kitchen, sitting room, hall, loo; then her and Dad's bedroom upstairs, the bathroom, my room, and the lumber room; after that the cellar, and the shed outside. Then the same thing all over again.

But it was me that found the shiny thing. The sofa in our sitting room had a special compartment for storing bedding, and Dad had hidden the thing in there between the blankets: it was a shimmering, oily seal skin, rolled up into a bundle.

I knew straightaway what was what. Mum had obviously told me all about the seals that go up onto the land, slough off their skin, and turn into humans. Then they hide their skin and guard it with their life so that they can return to the sea once they've had enough of being human.

I carefully put the skin back into its hiding place and waited for the evening to come.

After supper Mum wanted to tell me a story about an ancient shipwreck that was home to three regal moray eels, each of them more beautiful than the other. But I interrupted her: 'Could the story wait until tomorrow? I've something really important to tell you.'

'That's fine', said Mum. 'It's a riddle', I told her, 'and you have to work it out.'

'That's fine too', said Mama.

'Ready, steady, go!' I said.

"Can you guess

what it is?

Not a fox,

not a hare. And - it's shiny.'

'Is it animal or is it human?' asked Mum.

'Both.'

'Where do you find it, land or sea?'

'Here, there and everywhere.'

'Does it swim or does it walk?'

'Sometimes one, sometimes the other.'

'Then I know what it is - it's you!'

'Wrong!'

'Then I give up.'

'It's Dad!'

'What?'

'I've found his skin. Dad's a seal!'

'I'm afraid he isn't, my little one', said Mum, then she gave me a kiss and took me up to bed.

'But I found his skin, it was inside the sofa!' I said.

'Lots of fisherman have such things, but it doesn't mean they're seals', said Mum. 'Sweet dreams!'

'Sleep well!'

'Of course I will, you too', said Mum.

Next morning Mum had disappeared. I looked for her everywhere in the house and in the garden and even in the sea.

Just before midday Dad returned home. I ran to meet him. 'Mum's gone!'

He immediately ran into the house with me and checked the sofa. The skin had gone! He picked me up and held me in his arms for a long time.

That was in the spring. Now it's summer, and we live all alone. Dad doesn't go to sea so often any more. We cope quite well.

Every so often I find two fresh mackerel on the big stone down on the beach. I don't think Mum's coming back.

I'm going to be a seaman when I grow up. Or a seal.





Schwimmen habe ich nie gelernt, ich konnte es schon immer.





Wir wohnten am Meer in einem Haus abseits vom Dorf. Mama, Papa und ich.





Papa ging mit den Männern fischen. Mama arbeitete im Haus und im Garten.





Ich half mit, und wenn ich fertig war, durfte ich wieder schwimmen.



Weil die großen Fischschwärme sehr weit draußen vorbeiziehen, war Papa oft tagelang weg. Abends redeten Mama und ich vom Meer. Meistens brachte ich ihr einen schönen Stein oder eine seltene Muschel mit, und dafür erzählte sie mir, was es unter Wasser noch gab: Meerjungfrauen, Krabbenmädchen, echte Neunaugen, Hofdugongs, Tintenprinzen, Todesquallen,



