Name: _____ Date: _____

The White Seal

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 2003 words

Every summer, hundreds of thousands of fur seals swim north out of the cold gray sea to a beach called Novastoshnah, on an island in the Bering Sea, because nowhere else in the world has such fine flat rocks for a seal's nursery. Sea Catch, a huge old male with a mane on his shoulders and the scars of a hundred fights, always arrived before the rest and spent a month battling for the best place beside the water. He never ate a mouthful while he stayed on the beach, and his temper was therefore dreadful. By the time his wife Matkah came ashore, soft-eyed and sleek, he had won his forty-fifth fight of the spring and could hardly lift his head.

Soon afterward, in the middle of all that bellowing and scuffling, Matkah's baby was born. He looked like any newborn pup, with a big head and pale watery eyes, but his mother studied his fur for a long time without speaking. "Husband," she said at last, "our son is going to be white." "Nonsense," snorted Sea Catch. "No seal has ever been white." "Then this one will be the first," said Matkah calmly. She named the baby Kotick, and she crooned him the old seal lullaby that warns every pup never to swim before he is six weeks old.

Kotick spent his first summer with thousands of other pups on the warm sand, tumbling and napping and playing, while the mothers came ashore from deep-sea fishing and called for them like sheep. When he was old enough, he went down to the sea, and the first wave that carried him out of his depth would have drowned him if the next had not thrown him back. After that he learned to lie in a rock pool and paddle gently while the water lifted him. Now and then a thin fin like a shark's came drifting along the shore, and he knew it belonged to the killer whale, so he raced for the beach like an arrow.

In the autumn the seals left the island for the open ocean, and Matkah took her son along to teach him how to feed himself. She showed him how to sleep on his back on the rolling swell, with his flippers tucked in and the tip of his nose just above the water. She taught him to feel the weather coming in a tingle on his skin, and she let a school of wise porpoises lead them across the Pacific. Kotick learned to chase halibut along the sea floor, to dart through the portholes of sunken wrecks, and never to stop and stare at a boat. At the end of six months, he had never once set a flipper on dry land.

The next summer he swam back to the beaches where he was born, among hundreds of friends who had grown into young bachelors, the holluschickie, who spent their days rolling in the new grass and telling stories of their journeys. Together they danced the Fire-dance in the breakers, when the sea glows on a summer night and every seal leaves a burning trail behind him. Kotick's fur was almost pure white now, and the others stared. "Where did you get that coat?" a big young seal demanded. "I didn't get it," said Kotick. "It grew." He was about to roll

the questioner over when two men came walking out from behind a sand dune.

Kotick had never seen a man before, so he coughed and lowered his head in alarm, and the two men belonged to the village by the beach, and they had come to choose which seals to drive away to the killing grounds. When they saw a white seal they stopped short, because the older man was sure it was the ghost of a villager lost in a gale. "Do not look at him," he muttered. Instead they rattled a pair of bones in front of a herd of young bachelors, who stood still, puffing and staring, and then they marched them slowly inland. Kotick was the only seal in the whole crowd who asked what was going on, and nobody could tell him, so he followed.

The walk took an hour, because the men would not let the seals hurry, and then the drove was left to cool in the damp moss while Kotick watched from behind. When the men with the clubs came up, Kotick saw enough to understand. He did not stay to the end. He turned and galloped for the sea, with his whiskers bristling in horror, and he flung himself into the surf at the edge of the beach and cried, "They are killing all the holluschickie on every beach!" An old sea lion looked up lazily. "They have done it for thirty years," he said, "and they will go on doing it, unless your people can find an island where no men ever come."

"Is there such an island?" asked Kotick. "I have followed the halibut for twenty years," said the sea lion, "and I have never found one. But swim to Walrus Islet and ask old Sea Vitch. He may know something." Kotick swam there at once. Sea Vitch was a huge, fat, long-tusked walrus with no manners at all unless he was asleep, and he did not care to be woken by a small white seal. "Go and find out for yourself," he grumbled, and he shut his eyes. Kotick bobbed in the surf. He knew that Sea Vitch had never caught a fish in his life but only grubbed for clams, so he shouted, "Clam-eater!" as loudly as he could.

All the gulls on the rocks took up the cry, and soon the whole islet rang with it, until the old walrus rolled from side to side, grunting. "Go and ask the Sea Cow," he growled at last, "if he is still alive." "How shall I know him?" asked Kotick. "You will know him," screamed a gull, "because he is the only thing in the sea uglier than Sea Vitch!" Kotick swam back to his own beach, but nobody there sympathized. The seals said that men had always driven off the young bachelors, that it was simply part of life, and that Kotick should not have gone to look. None of them had seen what he had seen, and besides, he was white, which made him different.

His father advised him to grow up, find himself a nursery on the beach, and be left in peace like other big seals. Even gentle Matkah shook her head. "You will never be able to stop it, Kotick," she said. "Go and play in the sea." So that autumn Kotick set off alone, determined to find the Sea Cow, if such a creature existed, and a safe island with firm beaches where no man could come. He swam from the North Pacific to the South. On every good beach, however, he found either the smoke of a whaling ship on the horizon or the old bones of seals, which showed that men had been there before him, and men who come once always

come again.

He searched for five summers, resting each winter at Novastoshnah, where the bachelors teased him about his imaginary islands. He nearly baked on the dry rocks of the Galapagos, and he was nearly smashed against black cliffs in a storm, and everywhere the sea people told him the same sad story. Seals had lived there once, but men had killed them all. Kotick's heart almost broke, and on his way home he rested on a green island, where he met an ancient seal who was dying. He caught fish for him and poured out all his troubles. "I shall go back to my own beach," he said at last, "and if they drive me away with the others, I will not care."

"Try once more," whispered the old seal. "I am the last of a lost nursery far to the south. Long ago it was said along the beaches that a white seal would come from the North and lead his people to a quiet place. I shall not live to see it, but others will." Kotick took heart. "I am the first white seal ever born here," he thought, "and I am the only seal, black or white, who has ever gone looking for new islands." When he reached home that summer, he was a full-grown bull with a curly white mane, and Matkah begged him to settle down. "Give me one more season, Mother," he said. "The seventh wave always runs farthest up the beach."

So Kotick set off for the western sea, following a huge school of halibut, until one night near Copper Island something bumped him in the weeds and made him jump like a cat. Browsing among the kelp were enormous creatures, twenty or thirty feet long, with shovel-shaped tails and foolish heads. They bowed solemnly to one another and waved their front flippers like fat men making speeches. They were unlike any creature he had ever met. Then he remembered what the gull had screamed at him so long ago on Walrus Islet, and he knew that he had found the Sea Cow at last.

The sea cows could not answer his questions, because they could not talk, so Kotick followed them as they drifted slowly north, and he nearly bit off his own mustache with impatience. Then one night they sank like stones and swam far faster than he had ever imagined, straight into a dark hole at the foot of a cliff. It was a very long swim, and Kotick desperately wanted air before he rose, gasping, into open water at the other end. Around him lay the finest beaches he had ever seen, with long flat rocks for nurseries and soft sand for playgrounds, and out beyond the shoals no ship could come within six miles.

When he reached home six days later, the first seal he met was the one who had waited for him, and she knew at once from his eyes that he had found his island. But the old seals and the bachelors only laughed at him. "You cannot order us off our nurseries," said a young seal who had just married, "when we have fought for them and you have not." Kotick lost his temper. He had never fasted through a summer as the old seals did, and his long swimming had kept him in perfect health, so when he rushed at the young seal and then at the biggest bulls on the beach, one after another, nobody could stand against him.

Sea Catch watched his son sweep through the nurseries, his white mane standing on end, and he gave a roar. "He may be a fool," he bellowed, "but no seal on the beaches fights better! Do not touch your father, my son. I am with you!" At night, with the Northern Lights flickering through the fog, Kotick climbed a bare rock and looked at the scattered, battered seals. "Now you know what I can do," he said. "Who will follow me through the Sea Cow's tunnel?" A murmur ran down the beach like a rising tide. "We will come," answered thousands of weary voices. "We will follow Kotick, the White Seal."

A week later nearly ten thousand seals swam north in a long line, with Kotick at their head, and the seals who stayed behind called them fools. But the next spring, when the two groups met on the fishing banks, the travelers told such tales of the beaches beyond the Sea Cow's tunnel that more and more seals left. It did not happen all at once, for seals are slow to change their minds. But year after year the old nurseries emptied, and the quiet beaches filled, and Kotick sits there still, growing bigger and stronger every summer, while the young bachelors play around him in the sea where no man comes.

Questions

1. What made Kotick different from the other seals?

A. He was white
B. He was much older
C. He could not swim

2. Why did Kotick leave the beach and go exploring?

A. He wanted to find an island where men never came
B. He was chasing a whale
C. His father told him to go

3. Why did the other seals not help Kotick at first?

A. They had not seen what he had seen, and they were used to things as they were
B. They were too busy fishing
C. They did not like the sea

4. What does the old seal's story of a white seal do for Kotick?

A. It makes him laugh at the walrus
B. It gives him the courage to keep searching
C. It sends him home for good

5. The sea cows' tunnel led to a beach no ship could come within six miles of. Why does that matter?

A. It keeps the seals hidden and safe from men
B. It makes the water colder
C. It was too shallow for fish

6. When the other seals laughed, Kotick "lost his temper." What does that mean?

A. He misplaced his belongings
B. He became very angry
C. He fell asleep

Words to know

holluschickie: young male seals
porpoise: small, dolphin-like whale
walrus: tusked sea animal
mane: long neck fur
bachelors: young unmated males

Answer key: The White Seal

1. A. He was white
2. A. He wanted to find an island where men never came
3. A. They had not seen what he had seen, and they were used to things as they were
4. B. It gives him the courage to keep searching
5. A. It keeps the seals hidden and safe from men
6. B. He became very angry