

The Carver of Grand Isle

by Marilyn Helmer

- 1 “Gram,” Jake called, “I’m going for a walk.”
- 2 “Hold on a minute, Jake.” Gram came into the room with something in her hands. “This is for you.” She handed him a piece of wood. “Grandpa was working on it when he took sick,” she said in her matter-of-fact way. “He wanted you to finish it.”



- 3 “Me?” Jake stared at Gram. “I can’t finish it. I can’t carve like Grandpa. Don’t you remember? He was going to teach me this summer.”
- 4 Gram took a knife from her apron pocket and held it out to Jake. “This was your grandpa’s special one,” she said. “His favorite for carving.”
- 5 Jake took the knife. It felt solid and heavy in his hand. How often he’d held it, wishing it were his own. But not this way. Not with Grandpa gone.
- 6 “I can’t do it, Gram,” Jake said. “I can’t learn to carve without Grandpa’s help.”
- 7 “You’re going to have to teach yourself, just the way Grandpa did,” said Gram. “Remember what he used to say? ‘Follow your heart. Carve what it tells you to.’”
- 8 Tears welled in Jake’s eyes at the familiar words. He slid the knife into his pocket. “I’ll be back in a while,” he said quietly. Then he flung the knapsack over his shoulder and tore out of the cottage. Up the beach he ran, feet floundering in the dry sand, until his sides ached.
- 9 Finally, winded, he slowed and looked back. The cottage was far behind. As he stopped to catch his breath, his eyes went to the carving clasped in his hands.
- 10 Like all of Grandpa’s carvings, it was a remarkable one. The gull’s wings were spread so wide that Jake could almost feel the wind beneath them; its tail feathers were so detailed, he felt he could pluck one. But the carving wasn’t finished. The gull’s feet were still buried in the wood, making it look as if it were struggling to fly free.
- 11 What was Gram thinking of, asking him to finish Grandpa’s gull? Sure, he’d done a bit of carving before, but it had never amounted to much. Grandpa had tried to teach him, but Jake couldn’t quite get the hang of it. He remembered trying to shape the wood, smooth and perfect, just like Grandpa had done, but he’d ended up flinging the knife aside in frustration.

- 12 Grandpa hadn't reprimanded him. Instead, he'd measured his hand against Jake's. "My hand is as big now as it will ever be," he'd said. "But yours will grow, Jake. Next summer, it'll be plenty big enough to hold that knife properly."
- 13 Grandpa had been right. His hands had grown bigger and stronger, as Grandpa had promised. And now summer was here. But Grandpa wasn't.
- 14 Suddenly, the sky came alive with squawks and squalls. Jake looked up. A flock of gulls circled overhead.
- 15 Jake shaded his eyes, searching for the special gull, the one he'd named Spirit. It was impossible to pick him out of the flock when he was in the air. With his wings spread, Spirit soared on the wind currents as gracefully as the other gulls. But when he landed, you knew he was different. He had one lame leg, so he couldn't walk and run like the others. Instead, he danced in odd little skips and dips. Jake liked the way the lame gull moved, different from the rest. He'd named him Spirit because it was the bravest name he could think of.
- 16 Jake reached into his knapsack and pulled out the bag of bread. The gulls landed quickly. Jake's heart soared. Sure enough, there was Spirit, dipping and skipping among them. Jake scattered the bread, and the gulls rushed forward, grabbing and snatching. Spirit came too, but his lame leg slowed him down.
- 17 Jake waited until Spirit was alone. Then he broke up the biscuit he'd saved from breakfast and threw it right to him. Spirit feasted on it while the others were busy with the bread.
- 18 Jake remembered Grandpa's words: "Follow your heart. Carve what it tells you to." Jake reached into his pocket and took out the carving knife. Most of the gulls had flown away now, but Spirit was still there. Jake studied Spirit's legs as he dipped and skipped over the sand.
- 19 He held the knife poised over the wood. *Dare I?* he asked himself. *I'll never be able to make the legs as*
- good as Grandpa could have. What if I ruin it? Should I just let it be?*
- 20 Jake looked back at Spirit. Suddenly, he felt a tingling in his fingers: an excitement, a sureness, a strength that made him want to go on. As his own heart beat faster, he could feel life, like a heartbeat, in the wood. The half-carved gull wanted to be set free.
- 21 Jake held the knife with a steady hand. Pale curls fell onto the sand as he carved away the wood that was holding the gull captive. For the rest of the afternoon, Jake worked. Finally the carving was finished, and the gull stood free.
- 22 Jake held it up, examining it. His heart sank. The legs weren't right. One was shorter than the other, and the foot turned inward. Grandpa would never have carved it like that.
- 23 A squawk made him look up. Spirit dip-skipped across the sand. Jake's eyes grew wide. The legs might not be perfect, but they looked just like Spirit's. Sure, you could tell where Grandpa's work ended and Jake's began. But it didn't matter, because together he and Grandpa had brought the gull to life and set it free. The carving felt alive in his hands.
- 24 Jake jumped to his feet, shouting a cheer into the still sea air. Startled, Spirit rose again in a flurry of beating wings. Jake watched him soar, proud and free. Then he took off, running back down the beach. He burst through the cottage door. "Gram!" he shouted. "Come see."
- 25 As Gram came from the kitchen, Jake held out the carving. "It's finished," he said. "I'm calling it Spirit."
- 26 Gram reached for the carving. She turned it over and over, examining it. A smile broke across her face, and she closed her hands around it. "Jake, I do believe that I can feel its heart beating," she said.
- 27 As she opened her hands again, the gull seemed to soar.

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Test Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1. **What is the best meaning for the word *reprimanded* as it is used in paragraph 12?**
 - a. praised
 - b. established
 - c. scolded
 - d. assisted

2. **What overall effect does Spirit have on Jake?**
 - a. Spirit reminds Jake that he will never be as good a carver as his grandfather.
 - b. Spirit inspires Jake to begin carving and to believe that perfection doesn't equal happiness.
 - c. Spirit inspires Jake to stand alone and believe that he doesn't need to be part of a group.
 - d. Spirit reminds Jake of the loss of his grandfather and causes great sadness to fill Jake's heart.

3. **How does the author's point of view influence how events are described in this story?**
 - a. By giving details about Spirit's actions, the author reveals that Jake doesn't want to work on his carving.
 - b. By focusing on the details of the incomplete carving, the author shows how excited Jake is about finishing what he and Grandpa had started.
 - c. By including a description of Jake's thoughts and actions, the author shows how Jake is able to overcome his internal conflict.
 - d. By focusing on Grandma's desire for Jake to be as good a carver as Grandpa, the author reveals Jake's weaknesses.

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Test Questions (*continued*)

4. What can you infer from Jake's actions in paragraph 8?

- a. Jake is crying out of frustration because he doesn't want to finish the carving.
- b. Jake is overcome with sadness and wants to be alone for a while.
- c. Jake is overwhelmed with trying to be as good a carver as Grandpa was.
- d. Jake is afraid to carve because he knows his hands are too small for the knife.

5. How do Jake's feelings change from the beginning of the story to the end?

- a. He loses confidence in ever being a great carver.
- b. He believes he is a skilled carver.
- c. He is no longer sad about Grandpa's death.
- d. He is content with not being a perfect carver.