

Manami no Monogatari

Long ago, in a quiet fishing village by the sea, there lived a young girl named Manami. She was the daughter of a fisherman. Her father loved her deeply, but after her mother passed away, he married a widow with children of her own. This new wife saw Manami not as a daughter but as a servant to work for her and her children.

Day after day, Manami's stepmother gave her endless chores—mending nets, gathering firewood, drawing water from the well, and scrubbing the floors until her hands bled. The other children of the house ran freely through the fields and played by the shore, while Manami laboured from dawn to dusk.

But she never complained. Her heart was full of love for her father, and she believed that as long as she could serve him, her life had purpose. When she carried the weight of water buckets or repaired the fishing nets under the hot sun, she would sometimes sing soft songs to herself—gentle tunes about the sea, the fish in the nets, or the waves lapping the shore.

Her songs floated on the breeze, carried across the village, where people paused to listen. Some said her voice was as sweet as the spring wind, and it made even the hardest tasks seem lighter. Her father cherished her songs most of all, for they reminded him of his late wife's gentle spirit. Often, when he returned from fishing, he would sit outside the house, listening to Manami sing as she worked.

But her stepmother hated the sound of Manami's singing. "Enough of that nonsense!" she would snap. "You are not a bird to sing all day. Get back to your chores!"

Manami would bow her head and obey, stifling her songs, but the melodies remained in her heart, quietly blooming as she toiled.

One summer afternoon, the air was heavy with heat, and the sea was unusually calm. Manami's stepmother sent her to the village market with a basket to fetch oil and dried fish. After completing the errand, Manami walked slowly along the shore, tired from the day's labour.

She knew that once she got home, her stepmother would be at her to prepare the evening meal for everyone, and that only made her feel more tired.

She passed by the docks, where a few fishing boats swayed lazily. Among them was a small, weathered boat belonging to one of the fishermen. Manami glanced around—the docks were quiet, and no one seemed to need the boat just then. Thinking she would rest for just a moment, she stepped inside, curling up in the bow.

As the boat rocked gently, Manami's eyes drifted shut, and she fell into a deep sleep, cradled by the rhythm of the sea.

What she did not know was that, as she slept, the tide crept in, loosening the boat's mooring and pulling it slowly out to sea. The little boat drifted farther and farther from the shore, lost in the widening ocean.

Manami's stepmother noticed her absence as the sun began to sink. She scowled. "She must be slacking off somewhere," she muttered, impatient with the girl's tardiness. Turning to her eldest son, she said, "Go find her. She's probably hiding."

The boy ran off down the shore, but he found no sign of Manami. He wandered along the beach, calling her name, but the only answer was the sound of the waves. As dusk settled, the wind began to stir, and heavy clouds gathered on the horizon. He hurried back to the house just as the first gusts of the storm rolled in from the sea.

When he reached the door, rain began to pour, and the wind whipped the waves into a frenzy. "I couldn't find her!" the boy shouted over the rising storm. "Manami is gone!"

Manami's father, who had just returned from a long day of fishing, heard this and felt a cold knot of fear tighten in his chest. "What do you mean she's gone?" he demanded, turning to his wife.

"She must be wasting time somewhere," his wife said dismissively. "She'll come back."

The fisherman's heart grew heavy with worry. He grabbed a lantern and stormed out into the rain, calling her name into the dark. But the winds howled louder than his voice, and the waves crashed against the shore. They had no choice but to wait until morning.

At the first light of dawn, the fisherman searched the coastline, hoping against hope to find his daughter safe. But all he found was a broken length of rope where an old boat had been tied the day before.

A fisherman on the shore said, "The tide pulled that boat out to sea last night. It's gone now, lost in the storm."

Just then, a child from the village tugged at the fisherman's sleeve. "I saw her, sir. I saw Manami lying in that boat. She got inside and didn't come out."

Hearing these words, the fisherman dropped to his knees in despair. He tore his clothes and wept, for he knew the storm had been merciless, and a small boat could not survive its wrath.

"The sea has taken her from me," he wept, his sorrow echoing over the waves.

Though the fisherman believed Manami was lost, her story did not end with the storm. As the waves carried her small boat far out to sea, gentle currents wrapped around it like loving arms and brought it to a secret place deep beneath the ocean.

When Manami finally opened her eyes, she found herself in a place beyond her wildest dreams. She lay on a bed woven from shimmering seaweed, surrounded by glowing corals and strange, beautiful creatures swimming in the water.

A young man stood before her—his long, black hair drifting like seaweed in the current, and his eyes gleaming like emeralds. His robes shimmered with the colours of the ocean.

"Do not be afraid," he said with a kind smile. "I am Ryo, the Dragon Prince, son of the Dragon Emperor who rules these waters. You were brought here by the sea's will. If you wish, you may stay and find peace in this place."

Manami, who had known only hardship and sorrow on land, felt a gentle peace settle in her heart. She married the prince and remained in the undersea palace, where she no longer had to labour or endure cruelty. The songs she once sang were now welcomed and cherished, drifting through the palace halls like blessings carried on the current. Years passed. Manami's father grew old and passed away, never knowing what had become of his beloved daughter. The stepmother and her children continued their lives, but whispers lingered in the village. Some claimed that, on foggy mornings, they could hear Manami's song—a soft, haunting melody drifting through the sea mist.

The eldest son, now an old man himself, never forgot his stepsister. Though he had been distant and cold to her in his youth, guilt weighed heavily on his heart in his later years. He often sat by the shore, listening to the misty mornings, hoping to hear her voice.

One morning, as the sea lay shrouded in thick fog, the old man cast his nets into the water. As he leaned over the edge of his boat, he heard it—Manami's song, as sweet and clear as it had been on the day she disappeared.

"Manami?" he whispered, his heart pounding with wonder.

Then, through the swirling mist, he saw her.

She stood upon the water, her long black hair flowing like silk, and her robes shimmering like silver moonlight. She looked as young and beautiful as the day she vanished, untouched by time.

The old man reached out a trembling hand. "Is it really you, Manami?"

Manami smiled, a soft and knowing smile. "I am happy now," she whispered.

Before the old man could say another word, the mist thickened, and Manami vanished, her form dissolving into the fog like a dream. Only the sound of her song remained, lingering on the breeze.

The old man rowed back to shore, his heart full of bittersweet sorrow and peace. He told the villagers what he had seen, and from that day on, they believed that Manami had become a spirit of the sea, watching over them from the waves.

Whenever the mist rolled in, the villagers would pause their work and listen, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl whose song had once filled their days with light. And some say that, even now, if you walk along the shore at dawn, you might hear Manami's voice singing softly over the water, her spirit as eternal as the sea itself.