

It was a long while later that Alfie first heard it. Neither had caught a fish, nor even felt a suggestion of a bite. Both were silent, and deep in concentration. Alfie was sitting there, hunched over the line, gazing intently down into the clear blue-green of the sea below, the fronds of weed waving mockingly up at him. That was when he heard something calling. The sound seemed at once strange to him, out of place somehow, not right. Alfie looked up from his fishing. It came from the island, a hundred yards or so away, from somewhere near the shore, a soft cry, a whimpering. A seal pup perhaps. But it was more human than that.

“YOU HEAR THAT, FATHER?” Alfie said.
“Just gulls, Alfie,” Jim replied. And, sure enough, there was a young seagull on the beach, scurrying along after its mother, neck outstretched, mewling, begging to be fed. But Alfie realised soon enough that wasn't at all the sound that he had heard. He knew gulls better than any other bird, but he had never before heard a young gull cry like that. The crying he had heard was different, not like a bird at all, not like a seal pup either. It was true that gulls were known to be good mimics – not as good as crows, but good enough. Alfie was perplexed, and distracted now entirely from his fishing. The two gulls, mother and fledgling, lifted off the beach and flew away, the young bird still pestering to be fed, leaving the beach deserted behind them, but not silent. There it was again, the same sound.

“Not gulls, Father. Can't be,” he said. “Something else. Listen!”

It came from somewhere beyond the shoreline altogether, from the direction of the old Pest House, or from the great rock in the middle of the island. Alfie was quite sure by now that no gull, however clever a mimic, could possibly cry like that. And then it came to him. A child! A child cries like that! Gulls didn't cough, and Alfie could hear quite clearly now the sound of coughing.

“There's someone there, Father!” he whispered. “On the island.”

“I hear it,” Jim said. “I hear it all right, but it don't seem hardly possible.”

Retrieving Information

- 1) Use a dictionary to find the definition of:
 - a) fronds
 - b) intently
 - c) perplexed
- 2) Find and copy a word that shows the noise that Alfie hears is a sad one.
- 3) What is the relationship between Jim and Alfie?

Making Inferences

- 4) How do you know that Alfie spends a lot a time out on the coast?
- 5) Have Alfie and Jim just arrived or have they been out for a while? How do you know?
- 6) Why do you think that Alfie whispers to his father at the end of the extract?

Writer's choices

- 7) Why do you think the writer has started with the line, “It was a long while later that Alfie first heard it.”? What mood does this create?
- 8) Why do you think the author describes the weed as “waving mockingly”?

Challenge question

- 9) Why might Jim think that is not possible for a child to be on the island?