

Amoco Cadiz

by Kate Brown

Once she knew her vocation, Sarah listened to news readers all the time. She studied their methods, got to know the ups and downs of their voices, like most teenagers learnt lyrics. Looking in the mirror, she attempted to improve upon the performances of the professionals. She became a professional herself. She rose to the top. When Sarah announced to the world that oil had spilt into the Gulf of Mexico, she wore a sombre expression. Her fans were surprised when, half way through the broadcast, their newsreader started to cry.

She'd liked the name of the tanker. The Amoco Cadiz. Apart from practicing to be a newsreader, Sarah liked the sound of words for themselves. She also liked the idea of helping baby birds and dragged her twelve year old sister, Mary, down to the beach intending to force her into the role of assistant. But baby birds so heavy with oil they couldn't move, baby birds that were dying, didn't make Sarah feel the way she'd thought they would. The birds were ugly, not just with oil, but with fear. She mooched back up into the village to hang around outside the *buvette*. Mary was the one who plunged her hands into the oil and rescued anything that moved.

Sarah pretended to go with her sister and help on the beach. Their parents wouldn't let Mary go alone. Sarah hung out with two French boys she'd met the day before. One of them took her on the back of his moped. If you didn't go too close to the beach, you couldn't see the oil and you could pretend you couldn't smell it. On the back of the moped, Sarah decided that this was what it was like to feel happy. Coming back to the village, an ambulance overtook them, nearly knocking them off the narrow road. Sarah still felt happy.

The ambulance was parked right beside the beach. The door slammed shut. It sped away as fast as it had come. The siren wailed, hurting Sarah's head. She sneezed and rubbed her eyes. The old lady who ran the *buvette* stepped towards her, out of the crowd. She

tried to put her arms around her. Sarah ran. The smell of oil reached up and grabbed at her throat. She started to retch.

An oil soaked cormorant was perched on a rock, looking out to sea. Sarah sat down beside it. It hopped a step away from her but it couldn't flap its wings to fly. The two halves of its beak were stuck together with tar. Sarah picked the cormorant up, put it on her lap, and stroked it. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't. She stroked the bird harder and harder, wishing it would purr, like a cat.

