

THE HOWLS BEHIND THE WAVES

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I knew my mom died having me, but Auntie never said anything about my dad, and I about hoped out my heart, hoofing it beside the surf, expecting a letter from him. I climbed Na'ah Rock and looked up the beach, waiting for Johnny Pederson to bring the mail around Nesika Head, and that's why Otter Jack had called me Puffin Ellie instead of Jean Ellie. When I had started to sit on top of Na'ah Rock every mail day, Otter Jack said I would watch sweepers as long as a puffin would stand and guard her nest tunnel, and when I finally saw what I had to, I might fly off my rock like old-time Puffin Girl and dive down into an under-ocean cave and meet the wild-booming women beneath the waves.

I was going on nine, and I could whip any boy at school at memorizing, but I didn't see what Otter Jack meant. He said Puffin Girl had breathed beneath water, singing with Surf Women, and they lit candlefish around their cave, and all the smoke came up to the beach, making Indians out of fog, and then fog-soldiers pointed fog-muskets from fog-horses, marching the fog-Indians across Nesika Head, and so the real Indians had known the whites would push them out of their Seal River homes someday.

I paid it no mind.

I gave it none of what Auntie called credence.

Otter Jack might be the last Seal Indian ever, but I waited for Johnny and his wind-worn face, his eyes blue and watery and patient, his lashes soft and kindly, and then the tide got lower, and he rode around the point in his buckboard, whipping Nellie and Blackie, and I dashed down and ran at him, and he turned his team, and a howler broke against a wheel. A big-banging crack! A leap of spray! The wagon smashed down, the horses broke free, and Johnny slid through surf-mud, holding reins, hollering and bouncing until the horses stopped high on the beach. He got up sandy and mucky, chin and nose bleeding, and then his wagon knocked against a demon log, and its front corner sank in the waves. A broken wheel!

A howler swamped the canvas bag on the bed, and Johnny waded angry to it. "Damn you, Ellie! I told you a-hundred times! Don't run right at us!"

"That log hit the wagon, not me. I only wanted my letter."

"Letter? You're a bastard, Jean Ellie! Everyone knows but you! You got no dad! You're illegitimate! You'll never get no letter!"

I ran away barely breathing, his words pounding my ears, slamming after me, and I threw myself down in the sand-grass just before the river, and Auntie heard me gasping, and she called from below the bank, sitting on a beach chair just above the tide-mud where I had left her.

"You all right, Jean Ellie?"

I ate a snuffle, and Auntie swung around in her wide-brimmed hat, and Antosia looked too, lifting her rake, and crabs fell pinching down her apron, but no one beat pain like Antosia. She stood out in the mud almost to the river water, tough-boned like Johnny, and she grabbed each crab slow, dropped them one-at-a-time into wood crates and then raked some more.

"Are you crying up there, love?" said Auntie.

"I got wind in my nose."

Auntie climbed the bank and leaned above me, eyelashes long and up-curved, black tucker and white collar tight against her gulping. "Did you get in Johnny Pederson's way?"

"No."

Antosia came close too, looking down the river at the ferry--only Johnny and his mailbag were on the scow, not his horses or wagon, and Auntie wrung her hands, and I got up, watching them close.

"Johnny called me a--"

I couldn't say it, and I hoofed off again, and Antosia spoke low in her man voice behind me. "Easy, Ettie, she has to bear it, or she'll never mind anyone."

"Will to!" I said.

"Hold your tongue and stay right here beside this bend, or you and I will row right over to Mister Pederson," said Auntie.

"Easy, I told you, let her figure it," said Antosia.

I stopped at the bend and climbed a half-dead spruce leaning above river-mud, and I watched them argue it. They had been best friends a longtime before Auntie had come to get me at the church nursery in Washington D.C. They had left Philadelphia twenty years ago, and they got here before the cannery or log mill, and they put up cabins with boards from a schooner wreck. And by the time the wool mill and schoolhouse was built, their husbands went off, and now Antosia lived in the house behind ours, tending the cow that gave us milk and the chickens that scratched up arrowheads and Indian skulls from the dirt.

Auntie and Antosia kept at it, poking faces at one another like bully roosters, making considerations about me, and I slipped down soft, a tree snake, and then I slunk along the bank, a coon sniffing quiet after shrimp.

An ocean steamer stood spiffy across the river, its steam stacks giant above Front Street Wharf, and I waved at Mister Buckhorn and his boys, but they were busy chaining logs off rail cars, donkeying them onto the ship.

Our south-Oregon timber was bound to undo the California earthquake! Fires had burned up San Francisco, but our trees would remake their skyscrapers, trolley cars, theater palaces, movie houses, dancing halls too.

* * *

Myrtle Keefer hollered from the channel past the river-mud, "Hey, Ellie, somebody wrecked the mail wagon!" She leaned against the rail of her papa's launch, and Mister Keefer turned his boat closer, a silk top hat high on his head, his side-whiskers all barbered and tall, his mouth down-turned.

Millie jumped up beside him in a feather-spray pompadour and a fancy catalogue dress, "They say you begged yourself a letter, Ellie!"

Mister Keefer whispered to little Mae, and she yelled too, "They say you dug down in Johnny's bag for it!"

I ducked behind huckleberries, lay flat in my gingham, and their laughs and engine passed real slow, and I felt hot and weak, cold and hollow, black and sucky inside.

I closed my eyes and decided I was a deer. I sprang from the riverbank. I leapt left and smashed through ferns, and I jumped right, and my tail flashed white. I zigzagged around deadfalls and through woods and came into a stump field, and I heard a splash, and I froze, spreading my nose and ears, and I wanted to paw and stomp the ground.

Suddenly Otter Jack shouted to himself, sloshing in a creek. "Bitch of an unbought daughter!" He turned from a bank, holding a lamprey against his overalls, and he put his mouth over its head. He bit down, and the eel stopped squirming, and he sucked a finger, looking up, and I waved, and his face sank into worry, his moustache curving bushy and white against his wrinkles.

I pushed down through bushes to him--because it was only me--Ellie who always helped him carry stove wood when he brought his cart to Auntie's--who sat quiet to watch the exact ways he dipped his squaw net in the surf--who begged Auntie until she would sell his salmon with Antosia's crabs to the cookhouses and ships and hotel.

"Where Auntie?" He knifed the eel open edgy.

"I'm lost, Otter Jack."

"Auntie know you gone off?" He tossed away the gut-string mad. "Sheriff find you here, who you think he blame?"

He tossed the eel on top of others in his dugout and stared down ugly, and I got in his canoe and sat and looked up the creek at water flowing through a blaze of sun and then pouring green and smooth through a tunnel of granddaddy cedars lofty and dark and cool. "You live up there?"

"You know I live in any one place, they run me out." He got in with a thump, nearly tipping me. "I stay out a' their way, they let me `lone. You be the same, Ellie. They just crows. They scream n' hop at one `nother over nothing more'n a dead dog-shark. They steal their own eggs--anything."

"Well, they're building up San Francisco again, ain't they?"

"Earth thunder make `em pay blood money because they steal land, kill Indians, make so many sky towers."

"Skyscrapers," I said.

He grunted and swung us into the current and quit paddling. He just steered, singing in his old Seal language. He stretched out words in his throat, groaning scratchy like seabirds, hooting gruff like owls, screaming harsh like hawks, and then he twittered bubbly and fast like the little wrens in the creek bushes. He sang like I wasn't even there, like only the trees and birds listened, and I got swollen and slumpy inside, goose-bumpy like some girls get from preachers, and then I saw my boots on top of his eels--holey and muddy and patched with cowhide, not laced-up walking shoes like the Keefer girls wore.

"Sing another?" I said.

"Puffin song 'nough."

"Well, what about that eel? Did it bite you?"

He breathed no behind me, and then the woods gave way, and *The T'Vault* was steaming out past the river-mud, its red paddlewheel dripping blue-gold splashes down into the Seal--Johnny's bag was on board and heading just fine to Philo's Landing, I bet.

"Otter Jack?"

I thought he breathed yes.

"What's an un-bought daughter?"

"Eel bit me, and I got mad."

"But what *was* one?"

"Sometimes husband got wife without paying for her, and then they have to hide their daughter, so rich man won't take her for a slave. Sometimes the bitch of an un-bought daughter get traded all 'way to the Columbia."

"Always?"

"Sometimes she find luck. She dream it, but she can't tell it. She hide it in a stump or a knothole."

"How do you hide a dream in a tree?"

He smiled and quit talking. He slid us against alders, and I got out, and he dug beneath his eels and tossed a couple candlefish at my feet, the little oolichan so silvery and slippery-looking they seemed like they might still leap out alive. Their lips curled up snarly, and their fins were waxy, leaky like kerosene beneath my nails, and I stuffed them in a pocket, and then I flashed silver too, squirming away through bushes. I ran down the bank of the Seal, racing on sand, and Auntie came calling and hugging me. She glanced crying at Antosia and some man, and I wiggled from her arms and wiped her tears from my face, they stung so hot without stopping.

"Oh, Eugenie!" Auntie cried, meaning my mom. "Forgive me for taking my eyes off Ellie!"

"I got lost!" I said. "I didn't mean to! I saw Otter Jack!"

"Just now?" The man leaned handsome above me, wearing driving gloves, a fedora, a snake-skinny tie, a tweed suit from the east.

"This gentleman came just in time, just as we missed you," said Auntie.

"He came all the way from Washington D.C.," said Antosia.

He took my hand dignified like he might kiss it, and his eyes searched me up and down, blue like Johnny Pederson's, blue like mine, and he set his lips important, crinkling his chin-dot, and I decided he was my dad, standing tall and spare, finally finding me.

"Yes sir, just now! I found Otter Jack's cabin, I'd say!"

"Please to meet Doctor Brown, Ellie," said Auntie.

"From the Bureau of American Ethnology," said Antosia, "an anthropologist. He drove clear down from Kernville today, looking for where Otter Jack lives."

"Not on any reservation!" I said, and then the man leaned above me like a beach crow, his eyes got sideways and sly, and I decided he was a fake, a cheat. "I won't tell you!" I said. "Never!"

He strutted past me light-footed, flapping his suit-shoulders straight, and he followed my footsteps toward the creek.

* * *

Auntie's and Antosia's lots were the last two in town, tucked against the dunes, hidden behind shore pines and fenced with cedar slats and sprawly-crowned cypresses, so the sand wouldn't blow in and bury both the houses and gardens and Old Miss Mare and everything else.

And the next morning rain pounded so loud on Auntie's roof she grabbed my ear and dragged me to the door until I saw the water pouring down eaves into our barrels. "After church, clean every jug in the shed. Fill them and carry them back--and not a speck of dirt or sand left in any barrel." She twisted and pinched my ear. "Next time you might run off, remember your mother's watching from above, and the cougar wastes no time after he screams."

"Otter Jack probably cleared out all the cougars."

A swat in my seat! A hiss of disgust! Auntie marched off to put on her tailored dress, and Antosia gave me an umbrella and walked me beside the mud road. She held my hand, sighing constrained and careful until we got past the stable and hotel, and then I neighed and galloped up sidewalk-planks to the porch of Gearhardt's. The store was Sabbath-closed, and I tippy-toed along a bench, a high-wire girl from San Francisco, and Antosia came up under the roof too, giving me her cow-look brown, pleading, and I hopped down and balanced along a crack between floorboards.

"What about Johnny calling me that word?"

"It came out of his mouth, not yours, so you smile it away, or you ignore it."

"Well, what about church? Did you and Auntie ever go to the same one? Sit in the same pew? Before I was here? Did you and your husbands ever take the wagon together to St. Mary's? Or to Methodist Episcopal?"

Antosia roiled beneath her gray-flannel dress, pulled at her doily-laced ruche, swiped her hair thick-palmed. "Auntie will tell you when you get old enough."

I climbed onto the porch's rail and hung onto a post. "How old?"

"Auntie will say--Ellie, get down!"

I twirled around one-footed, and a river-horn blasted--*The T'Vault* was bringing worshippers from Philo's Landing, knocking against the wharf, and the bumps bounced through the dock and up through the town's wooden sidewalks and clear up into the rail and my legs. "I'll see if Johnny's bag really made it!" I said. "I'll `tend church with Auntie!"

"No, I promised Auntie I would walk you all the way to St. Mary's."

But I was already off the porch, peeling off shoes and stocking, and I ran to the steepest part of the street, and I slid down through mud as runny as corn-cake batter, deeper than my shins. I cut into an alley and then turned and yanked up my hem and slid down Orford Street, and Mister and Missus Keefer stepped out of their millinery behind their house, and I slid past and skidded onto Front Street, and Myrtle snorted from their carriage in front of their new cement walk.

"Injun' Ellie!" yelled little Mae.

"What did your father write you?" yelled Millie.

"Is he going to marry Aunt Ettie?" yelled Myrtle. "Or Antosia?"

They tittered, and I jumped onto the foot board, and Myrtle stayed in back with her sisters, tipping down her rose-wreath hat, and I climbed in and stared across the front seat, and she got up, glaring back green-eyed and all aghast. She wrinkled her nose, and I screamed against it, "Un-bought soldier whore!" She shrank, going white beneath her

freckles, and I turned to Mae. “Un-bought baby bitch!” Mae burst into tears, and I screamed against Millie. “Un-bought cur!” Millie flew back, hands on ears, eyes rolling up, pompadour falling, and I jumped into the mud again, and I high-tailed it, feeling the heat of their hate behind my sprinting.

I looked back, and Missus Keefer was fussing over her red-haired angels, and Mister Keefer was puffing himself big in his topcoat. He grabbed his horse whip, and then there was only mist, only soft-hitting drizzle and the goopy street between us, and he watched me the way I had seen gulls look at upside-down crabs, their eyes sliding oily and sleepy-like, and I refused to run, I just stepped hasty, and he gulped, biding his time, and I scooted behind people coming off the wharf and then shot beneath it.

I scrambled fast like a crab, racing beneath the cannery and lumber docks, and I crawled onto a boom and tucked myself up on a big log, hiding behind a piling, and then church bells rang from the top of town, and no one came.

I crawled out, and the sky was high and warm and white, and I snuck home, and no one was waiting, and the howlers rumbled low and lonely out past the river, holding back their stampeding steps like they were barely breaking, just swelling and pulling their churn forever beneath themselves.

I put on overalls and left a note.

Sorry, I couldn't decide which of you to go to church with. I tried and tried and couldn't. Be back with the skiff after tide, promise.

Love, Jean Ellie.

P.S. Sorry, the water jugs was too heavy to lift.

* * *

The tide ran so high it shoved me across the river sideways, and I tied the boat and climbed the dunes, and a Tin Lizzie was parked on the beach. Balloon tires! A rain roof! Headlights like crab-eyes! Travel trunks on running boards! No one around it anywhere!

I got in and stood behind the wheel, the first girl ever to drive up the coast to the top of the world--to a town where everyone had a dad, no one mocked anyone, and I never got mad, I never lied, because everyone treated everybody else nice, the way Otter Jack treated me.

I stepped on the clutch pedal, pulled out the throttle, and a gull landed right beside the car, peering at me, and then he looked crafty at the surf, making that biding gulp, and he raced down at foam, and then hundreds more flew up, diving into waves, floating, pecking swells. The candlefish were running, the gulls gorged, I should have known. But see? I wouldn't need to pack much food, not any camp torches either.

Some bird bobbed clumsy on a breaker, twisting itself funny, and then it waddled crooked up onto the beach--a puffin gnawing its wing!

I had only seen puffins dead in fishnets before, all with silly white eye-masks on black faces, their orange bills funny and fat, and now this puffin pecked oolichan from surf-mud, and she gulped and flapped, and only one wing worked, and she bit at the other, and her little blond hair-curls shook confused beside her head.

Wasn't she a mama puffin, needing to feed babies?

I did some thinking and then walked deliberate from the car, and Puffie ran toward the surf, and I dropped down, grabbing her, and my arm hurt. Her bill had my wrist, and I pushed it off, got a hand around it, and fish gruel squirted out, and I got up, her feet kicking me strong. But I had her good, she had to concede it. I kept her bill shut, holding her close, afraid I might crush her, and she growled and then blinked quiet, eyes yellow and gleaming, red-rimmed like some sad clown, black-dotted, expecting to die. I soft-talked her, and whitewash swamped my lap, and she made a miserable burr-noise all the way to the skiff, and I put her down deep in a crab crate, and I saw some new kind of fish line tangled around her bad wing, cutting into a leg, and I closed the lid, wanting to go get Auntie's sewing scissors before she came home. But I took up the oars, and the tide bonked us right back against the bank, and I planned different. The tide hurried us up the river to the mouth of Otter Jack's creek, and I turned the skiff into it, and I got to the cedar tunnel, and then the waves rumbled far-off, and the surf-sounds swept chilly into the tree-shadows, and the harder I rowed, the more I hummed. I quit the oars and pushed hair tufts behind my ears and put up my hand like a mask, and I growled and burred, becoming an old-time puffin singer, and I smelled like a seabird too, like a whole colony-rock stinking of bird dirt. The skiff drifted, and Puffie made no sound. I peeked in the crate, and a cannon ball hit the lid, and I sat on it, afraid I had made her jump and break her skull, and then the creek got slack, and I saw a float house across a slough, and strings of oolichan drying, hanging in front. A face came to the door-window--white as a ghost, nothing but bone! I flew off the crate, it crashed, I ran through water chased by foot-splashes. I got on the bank and hid behind a woodpile, and a voice moaned, and I got lifted, and the bone-face came fierce and close, eyes wet-black beneath their holes, and the mask dropped, and arms hugged me and made me still--Otter Jack stood above me, white rings around his eyes, a white spot on his nose. "You all right, it was stuck to my face is all," he said.

The fake man was kneeling and pressing Puffie against the bottom of the skiff. "It's only a face casting," said Doctor Brown, "plaster of Paris used to measure anatomical dimensions."

"Leave my puffin alone!" I said.

He held a knife above her, worked it down, and *whoomp-floomp-boom!* Puffie flew above the creek as straight as a train on a track, gone in a half-second.

"You brung her from the beach?" said Otter Jack.

I nodded proud, and Doctor Brown smiled grand. "Half of mankind couldn't have done it, not one person in one-hundred. You must be a pretty smart young lady."

"Smart as a fox," said Otter Jack. "Best in Seal City. Brave as a bear. Stubborn as that bird."

I jumped against him. "I sang! I did it! You wanna hear?"

* * *

Otter Jack gave me a grizzly robe, and I put it on to be warm and dry, and I looked through the eye-holes, shaking the mouth and fangs, and Doctor Brown hooked his fingers beside his face, growling at me, and then he fiddled lonely with his notebook.

“My little girl...my daughter...she’s so many miles away...I won’t see her until at least November.”

He picked up his pencil, but there was only room for two at the table, and I sat on the floor in the corner, pretending to be dog-tired and sleeping, the fur smelling rooty, scraping leathery and warm against my skin.

Otter Jack stepped creaky, looking out his door. “We carry her into her boat and row her home.”

“We don’t have time,” said Doctor Brown. “The ladies will look here. I’ll say words for you and Ellie.”

“Won’t matter.”

“Yes, I think it will. Please, I must go back to Siletz tomorrow and make words with Depoe Charlie on Tuesday. You and I barely got started, and then we had to stop.”

Silver tapped the table twice, two dollars! Auntie gave only four bits for two carts of Otter Jack’s wood!

Otter Jack sat down, and Doctor Brown recited names in English and trade language, and Otter Jack said them in Seal. He sang a bear song I had never heard, repeating each part slow like Miss Barnes explaining sums at school, and then Doctor Brown rolled out a map, tugging his chin-wrinkle time and again.

“Seal Island Rock ain’t out there anymore,” said Otter Jack. “It was the first rock, and Seal people n’ Puffin people come out the cracks--Otter people, Bear people too. White man blow it up. He made it into jetty. Why he knock down so much?” He mumbled low, but I seen him nod. “His women got teeth inside?”

Doctor Brown wrote feverish.

“Grizzly Girl get berries one side a’ this creek, Black Bear Girl on the other,” said Otter Jack. “They laugh mean at one another, and Grizzly Woman n’ Black Bear Woman go out n’ wrestle on the beach. They turn into surf rocks just other side a’ Nesika Head, and they still growl, but you don’t hear ‘em from that tin ‘traption a’ yours.

“See how I hang oolichan? They live way out past the rocks, and I point their heads this way, so they come back, don’t stay in ocean.”

Doctor Brown flipped pages backward, reciting again. “Renewal.”

“That word gone for Seal Indians.”

“How did the tribe say ‘again’ or ‘waight’?”

“Tribe just white word, don’t match.”

“Once more, please, can you say your words for ‘our’ and ‘nesika’? ‘Father’ and ‘pa’pa’? ‘Mother’ and ‘na’ah’?”

Otter Jack scowled ugly, saying the Seal, and I went out. Otter Jack had got hog stubborn--why? I got my overalls from where he had hung them, and I slipped down into his dugout behind his house, and then I put on my overalls and slid my hand inside and explored extra-close.

Maybe only Keefer girls had teeth.

The water sighed secret through the slough, hissed beneath the float logs beneath the house, laughed across ripples--someone watched?

Plunks and splashes! Oars in the cedar tunnel!

“Ellie, oh, Ellie!” Auntie and Antosia!

“You here, Otter Jack!” Mister Keefer too!

I shoved off from the house, paddled behind a logjam, was already running across a deadfall when Doctor Brown hollered out the door. "I made Ellie my assistant!"

* * *

I ran through skunk cabbage and woods and across all the dunes and into broom brush, and I hoofed it slow along game trails, saving wind, and then I crawled along some creek-trickle and slid down a rock and came out smack against Nesika Head--seabirds swarmed on top, flying circles like bees at their hives, and I figured Puffie looked down and knew me.

A dynamite blast! Foam leapt! I leapt! It was only the slow-rumbling breakers, spraying sudden against the point.

A shout! "Ellie, stay!"

Antosia and Otter Jack slid down from the creek, and I gave them a big-beans glare and started down the beach toward Na'ah Rock, but the Tin Lizzie was already coming past it, and the car stopped, and Auntie got out, raising her vine-maple switch, and Mister Keefer dipped a bucket in the surf and stirred in some lye with a drift stick.

"I insisted she stay." Doctor Brown pulled off goggles and a scarf, looking like some aviator in the newspaper. "I delayed her."

"She ran before that." Antosia knelt down, squeezed my shoulders, stared at me deep. "And you said those things, Ellie."

"Not before Myrtle and Millie made fun of me!"

"Forget Myrtle and Millie and Mae. It's better Auntie teaches you now, so you won't get beat all the time."

"Let me get beat if I want!"

"No." Antosia spun me, and Auntie slung me across her lap, sitting against Nesika Head, and her switch sang down, and I became the silence of seals, and finally Auntie got stiff, ceasing, and I looked up, and Otter Jack and Doctor Brown were a good ways off, leaning against the car, maybe looking at the sun falling. Auntie stood me up, her jaw set stingy, her eyes dewy, and Mister Keefer dipped a rag in suds and bore down on me with his man-teeth and red side-whiskers and stone-brown eyes.

"Be decent to her," said Antosia.

"Every time a rat gets out of her hole, she spreads her venom," said Mister Keefer.

He pushed the rag against my lips, and I tore it away, and he pulled the back of my hair, shoving the bucket against my mouth, and a gush rushed in, and I heaved and hacked, and more water came in and in and in, and I gagged and bucked.

Screams! A big-ringing bang! The bucket flew! Antosia snatched and hurled it away, and the ground shook, and she was down, and Mister Keefer swung blows on top of her, his fists knocking bone, and he flew up sudden. Sand and arms everywhere! He hit the rock, and I jumped, seeing his head snap, and he flopped in front of Auntie, and Antosia hunched above him, hands ready like claws, but he just lay there, and his mouth and nose didn't move, not his chest either.

Doctor Brown dropped to Mister Keefer and poked his head and neck and wrists, and then he just rubbed his thumb across his fingers, feeling something, thinking.

Otter Jack looked toward town. "Two *bur-dash*. One hifalutin`fessor. One girl without no white father."

“And an Indian without a pass from any agency,” said Doctor Brown.

Otter Jack and Doctor Brown dragged Mister Keefer by his arms, pulling him along a rim of mud around Nesika Head, and Auntie and Antosia sat me in the Lizzie’s backseat, lifting me a canteen of freshwater, their fingers heavy on its mouth, feeling something too--but their eyes felt nothing--the same as mine.

Otter Jack and Doctor Brown came back, and then I was just cloudy, taking in the whoosh and whine of the surf, the wail, and oh, I was bad, I was awful. The Lizzie popped and kicked, knocking my whip-sores, and Doctor Brown nursed her along, hugging Nesika Head, sputtering through foam, and then we were on the next beach, and everything was behind us, and mostly dusk and fog-wisps and black-stacked rocks was in front, Grizzly Girl and Black Bear Girl and other Indian spirits turned solid. The Lizzie got up her speed, and then there was just darkness, just Auntie and Antosia and blankets around me, wind forever banging doors and handles and seats. My sores bounced, my bones rattled, and my feet pounded in and out of glows and shadows, because little fires burned waxy on candlefish, and I swam below with Puffie, and she was as big as I, and we pecked and ate the oolichan flames and all. We shook white masks and shell-money necklaces. We flew through water, and waves rumbled from our wings, rising and sinking sudden. The beach rolled. Gearhardt’s Store swayed and tipped, and windows crashed across its porch. An earthquake! A steeple shot down the street like a log tree off a yard line, and house-walls and stair-steps came next, rolling and smashing, and the whole town rocked. The wharf jolted, and the cannery and mills splashed into the river, sinking to their roofs, and plaster and teeth floated down, and Puffie and I caught fangs and attached them to our shell-money, and Mae and Millie and Myrtle looked nice at me, and we lifted our dresses, kicked up our legs and showed them bare all the way!

Oh, the blue-green ripples! The pa-lunking of water! Myrtle laughed friendly with me! Millie did too! Mae too! We caught hats sinking down--pompadors tipped with bluebird wings and tanager tails and parrot plumes and ostrich sprays and bunches of hummingbirds. We waved the hats and made more ripples. We sang howls, yowls, rumbles, sweeping grumbles, and there was a pounding, a chugging, a whistle, a blow, and flames leapt from the school, its bell tower, Mister Buckhorn’s barn. Flames licked our shed beautiful, climbing Antosia’s walls, Auntie’s, mine, and I lay beneath a ledge, just looking up at the fire pulsing red above the water, and Mae slid close beside me, beaming, and the top of our cave broke apart, and a white head came down as big as a stagecoach--a gull! It had red whiskers, a snarly nose, rat’s teeth! Its mouth snapped at me, and I woke and bounced up beside Otter Jack.

We were on a train, and he sat in the tweed jacket and snake-skinny tie, the fedora low on his eyes, his gaze looking blank at yellow pines winging fast past our window.

“Where’s Auntie and Antosia?”

“Three cars down. Anyone ask, we don’t know `em. Brown buy us tickets. Give me suit. Go the other way.”

“Which way?”

“Don’t know. Auntie give you pill from him, so you sleep n’ stay put.”

“We going home?”

“No, Ellie, our homes be burned by the Keefers and everyone else by now. We going to Canada.”