

Monkey Beach

Eden Robinson



VINTAGE CANADA

A Division of Random House of Canada Limited

for Laura Robinson and Dean Hunt

*in dreams I hear you laughing and
know that you are near*



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PART ONE

Love Like the Ocean

Six crows sit in our greengage tree. Half-awake, I hear them speak to me in Haisla.

La'és, they say, *La'és*, *la'és*.

I push myself out of bed and go to the open window, but they launch themselves upward, cawing. Morning light slants over the mountains behind the reserve. A breeze coming down the channel makes my curtains flap limply. Ripples sparkle in the shallows as a seal bobs its dark head.

La'és—Go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can't remember what. I had too much coffee last night after the Coast

*It is possible to retaliate against an enemy,
But impossible to retaliate against storms.*

HAISLA PROVERB

Guard called with the news about Jimmy. People pressed cups and cups of it into my hands. Must have fallen asleep fourish. On the nightstand, the clock-face has a badly painted Elvis caught in mid-gyrate. Jimmy found it at a garage sale and gave it to me last year for my birthday—that and a card that said, “Happy B-day, sis! How does it feel to be almost two decades old? Rock on, Grandma!” The Elvis clock says the time is seven-thirty, but it’s always either an hour ahead or an hour behind. We always joke that it’s on Indian time.

I go to my dresser and pull out my first cigarette of the day, then return to the window and smoke. An orange cat pauses at the grassy shoreline, alert. It flicks its tail back and forth, then bounds up the beach and into a tangle of bushes near our neighbour’s house. The crows are tiny black dots against a faded denim sky. In the distance, I hear a speedboat. For the last week, I have been dreaming about the ocean—lapping softly against the hull of a boat, hissing as it rolls gravel up a beach, ocean swells hammering the shore, lifting off the rocks in an ethereal spray before the waves make a grumbling retreat.

Such a lovely day. Late summer. Warm. Look at the pretty, fluffy clouds. Weather reports are all favourable for the area where his seiner went missing. Jimmy’s a good swimmer. Everyone says this like a mantra that will keep him safe. No one’s as optimistic about his skipper, Josh, a hefty good-time guy who is very popular for his generosity at bars and parties. He is also heavily in debt and has had a bad fishing season. Earlier this summer two of his crew quit, bitterly

complaining to their relatives that he didn’t pay them all they were due. They came by last night to show their support. One of my cousins said they’ve been spreading rumours that Josh might have sunk his *Queen of the North* for the insurance and that Jimmy’s inexperience on the water would make him a perfect scapegoat. They were whispering to other visitors last night, but Aunt Edith glared at them until they took the hint and left.

I stub out the cigarette and take the steps two at a time down to the kitchen. My father’s at the table, smoking. His ashtray is overflowing. He glances at me, eyes bloodshot and red-rimmed.

“Did you hear the crows earlier?” I say. When he doesn’t answer, I find myself babbling. “They were talking to me. They said *la’és*. It’s probably—”

“Clearly a sign, Lisa,” my mother has come up behind me and grips my shoulders, “that you need Prozac.” She steers me to a chair and pushes me down.

Dad’s old VHF is tuned to the emergency channel. Normally, we have the radio tuned to CFTK. He likes it loud, and the morning soft rock usually rackets through the house. As we sit in silence, I watch his cigarette burn down in the ashtray. Mom smooths her hair. She keeps touching it. They both have that glazed, drawn look of people who haven’t slept. I have this urge to turn on some music. If they had found the seiner, someone would phone us.

“Pan, pan, pan,” a woman’s voice crackles over the VHF. “All stations, this is the Prince Rupert Coast Guard.” She repeats everything three times, I don’t know why. “We have an overdue vessel.” She goes on to

describe a gillnetter that should have been in Rupert four days ago. Mom and Dad tense expectantly even though this has nothing to do with Jimmy.

At any given moment, there are two thousand storms at sea.



Find a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map, across the Hecate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast. This is Princess Royal Island, and it is famous for its kermode bears, which are black bears that are usually white. Princess Royal Island is the western edge of traditional Haisla territory. *Ka-tee-doux Gitk'á'ata*, the Tsimshians of Hartley Bay, live at the mouth of the Douglas Channel and surrounding areas just north of the island. During land claims talks, some of this territory is claimed by both the Haisla and the Tsimshian nations—this is called an overlap and is a sticky topic of discussion. But once you pass the head of the Douglas Channel, you are firmly in Haisla territory.

Early in the nineteenth century, Hudson's Bay traders used Tsimshian guides to show them around, which is when the names began to get confusing. "Kitamaat" is a Tsimshian word that means people of the falling snow, and that was their name for the main Haisla village. So when the Hudson's Bay traders asked their guides, "Hey, what's that village called?" and the Tsimshian guides said, "Oh, that's Kitamaat." The

name got stuck on the official records and the village has been called Kitamaat ever since, even though it really should be called Haisla. There are about four or five different spellings of Kitamaat in the historical writings, but the Haisla decided on Kitamaat. To add to the confusion, when Alcan Aluminum moved into the area in the 1950s, it built a "city of the future" for its workers and named it Kitimat too, but spelled it differently.

If your finger is on Prince Rupert or Terrace, you are too far north. If you are pointing to Bella Coola or Ocean Falls, you are too far south. If you are pointing in the right place, you should have your finger on the western shore of Princess Royal Island. To get to Kitamaat, run your finger northeast, right up to the Douglas Channel, a 140-kilometre-long deep-sea channel, to its mouth. You should pass Gil Island, Princess Royal Island, Gribbell Island, Hawkesbury Island, Maitland Island and finally Costi Island. Near the head of the Douglas, you'll find Kitamaat Village, with its seven hundred Haisla people tucked in between the mountains and the ocean. At the end of the village is our house. Our kitchen looks out onto the water. Somewhere in the seas between here and Namu—a six-hour boat ride south of Kitamaat—my brother is lost.

My mother answered the phone when the Coast Guard called. I took the phone from her hands when she started crying. A man told me there had been no radio contact since Saturday, two days earlier. The man said he'd like to ask me a few questions. I gave him all the information I could—that Jimmy had phoned

us from Bella Bella on Friday. He told us that 36 hours' notice had been given for a Sunday opening for sockeye salmon in Area 8. Josh had been planning to move the seiner closer to his favourite Area 8 fishing point. No, I didn't know where the point was. Jimmy had said that since it was a boring sit-and-wait kind of job, the crew was splitting up. The three senior fishermen in Josh's crew were staying in Bella Bella and taking a speedboat to join the *Queen* early Sunday. Jimmy had the least seniority so he had to go with Josh.

The man told me that Josh had called his crew in Bella Bella to say the engine was acting up so he was stopping over in Namu. When the crew arrived at the Area 8 fishing site, they couldn't find the *Queen of the North*. They searched all afternoon. No one in the fishing fleet reported seeing the *Queen*. No one knew if she'd gone down or if she'd just broken down and was holed up somewhere. Area 8 was large, the man said. There had been no mayday, but he didn't say if this was a good or a bad thing. Did I know of anything else that could be helpful? No, I said. It wasn't really a lie. What I knew wouldn't be particularly useful now.



There are no direct flights to Namu from the Terrace-Kitimat Airport, so Mom and Dad are traveling to Vancouver on the morning flight. From there, they're flying into Bella Bella and then going by boat to Namu to be closer to the search. I shouldn't have told them about the crows. At least I didn't tell them about the dream: the night the *Queen of the North* disappeared, I

saw Jimmy at Monkey Beach. He stood at the edge of the sand, where the beach disappeared into the trees. The fog and clouds smeared the lines between land and sea and sky. He faded in and out of view as the fog rolled by. He wore the same clothes he'd had on the day he left, a red plaid shirt, black jeans and the John Deere baseball cap Dad had given him. I must have been on a boat, because he was far away and small. I couldn't see his face.

When we were kids, Dad would tell us about B'gwus, the wild man of the woods. They were stories that Ba-ba-oo had told him. Jimmy's favourite was the one where these two trappers go up into the mountains near Monkey Beach. At one point, they had to separate because the trail split. They put a Y-shaped stick at the crossroads. The trapper who finished his line first would point the stick in the direction of their camp.

The first guy who finished checking the traps heard something big moving in the bushes ahead of him. He caught a glimpse of light brown fur through the leaves and thought it was a grizzly. Keeping his gun pointed in the direction of the shaking bushes, he left the trail, moving backwards as quietly and quickly as he could, thinking that if he stayed downwind, it wouldn't notice him.

So he wasn't paying attention to what was behind him when he broke into a clearing. He heard a grunt. He spun around. In front of him were more than twenty very hairy men. They looked as surprised as he was. They were tall, with thick brown hair on their chests, arms and legs. Their heads were shaped oddly, very large and slanted back sharply from the brow.

One of them growled and started towards him. He panicked and bolted back into the bushes, and they began to chase him.

They were fast. He was quickly cornered at the foot of a cliff. He climbed up. They gathered at the bottom in a semicircle and roared. When they followed him up, he raised his gun and, knowing he'd probably have only one shot, picked the leader. The trapper shot him in the head, and the creature landed with a heavy thump at the bottom of the cliff. As the other sasquatches let out howls of grief, the trapper ran.

After he reached the beach and realized that no one was following him, he made his way back to camp. His partner wasn't there. The sun was setting, and the trapper knew that he was going to have to wait until morning before he could go after him.

He broke camp, put all the stuff into their boat, anchored out in the bay and spent the night wide awake. At first light, he headed up the mountain. When he got to the crossroads, he saw his partner, battered, bloody and most definitely dead. Before he could get to him, the howling started all around, and he turned and ran.

"You're telling it wrong," Ma-ma-oo had said once when she was over for Christmas dinner. Every time Dad launched into his version, she punctuated his gory descriptions with, "That's not how it happened."

"Oh, Mother," he'd protested finally. "It's just a story."

Her lips had pressed together until they were bloodless. She'd left a few minutes later. Mom had kissed Dad's nose and said family was family.

Ma-ma-oo's version was less gruesome, with no one getting shot and the first trapper just seeing the b'gwus crossing a glacier, getting scared and running back to the camp. Me and Jimmy liked Dad's version better, especially when he did the sound effects.

Either way, when the trapper got back to the village, he had an artist carve a sasquatch mask. At the end of the story, Dad would put on a copy that his father had carved and chase us around the living room. Jimmy would squeal in mock terror and pretend to shoot him. If Dad caught us, he'd throw us down and tickle us. Ma-ma-oo frowned on this. She said it would give us nightmares. Sure enough, Jimmy would crawl into my bed late at night when he thought I was asleep and curl into my side. He'd leave before I awoke, tiptoeing out.

Jimmy took the story as if it were from the Bible. He bought himself a cheap little camera one day, and I asked him why he was wasting his money.

"I'm going to make us rich," he said.

I snorted. "How? You going to blackmail someone?" I'd been watching soaps with Ma-ma-oo and knew all about cheating husbands and wives who were photographed in awkward positions.

Jimmy shook his head and wouldn't tell me. "Want it to be a surprise."

All that week, he begged Dad to take him to Monkey Beach.

"How come?" Dad said, getting annoyed.

"Because that's where the b'gwus are," Jimmy said. Dad raised an eyebrow.

Jimmy squirmed. "Please, Dad. Please. It's important."

"Jimmy," Dad said. "Sasquatches are make-believe, like fairies. They don't really exist."

"But Ma-ma-oo says they're real," Jimmy said.

"Your grandmother thinks the people on TV are real," Dad said, then glanced at me, rolling his eyes. After a moment, he leaned in close to Jimmy, whispering, "You don't really want to get eaten, do you? They like little boys."

Jimmy went pale. "I know." He looked at me. I rolled my eyes upward.

Only when it looked like Dad wasn't going to give in did Jimmy pull out a copy of the *World Weekly Globe*. He showed us page 2, where it said that the *Globe* would pay up to thirty thousand dollars to anyone who got a picture of a sasquatch.

"We'll be rich!" Jimmy said, so excited he began to hop. "We can go to Disneyland! We can get a new car! I bet we could even get a new house!"

Dad stared at him. He patted Jimmy's shoulder. "If you finish all your chores this week, we'll leave on Friday."

Jimmy whooped and ran to tell Mom. I giggled. He was only a year and a half younger than me and he was still such a baby.

"Well," Dad said with a wry smile, "cockle season's starting anyway."

Dad's uncle Geordie and his wife, Edith, dropped off equipment for the trip that night. Jimmy was furious that they were coming with us until they both promised that he was the only one that would be taking pictures. They were, Uncle Geordie assured him, coming along only for the cockles.

We left early Saturday morning. It took forever to get going. Me and Jimmy watched cartoons while Mom made herself up in the bathroom. She never left the house without at least wearing lipstick, and even though no one was going to see us, she got up extra early to do her hair and makeup. Dad was adamant that when we built our new house, she'd get her own bathroom.

I poured myself some Puffed Wheat and pushed them around my bowl, feeling time crawl slowly across my skin, an agonizing eternity of waiting for Mom to get ready. She finally came downstairs in carefully pressed jeans, a white shirt and jean jacket, and with a blue kerchief over her hair. Dad wiped his hands on his pants before he kissed her good morning and said she looked great.

At the docks we had to wait for Aunt Edith, who was bringing fresh bread. Mom had mortally offended her a few months earlier by buying her a bread machine for Christmas. Dad tried to warn her, said she'd appreciate an electric knife a lot more, but Mom insisted because she knew Aunt Edith's arthritis was getting worse. Just recently, she'd had to cut her long hair into a bob because she couldn't braid it any more. Uncle Geordie conceded that Edith did use the machine for the kneading part, but everything else was still done the old-fashioned way. Her bread was absolutely the best: cotton-ball soft inside, so tender the butter almost made it dissolve, with a crust as flaky and golden brown as a croissant's. Mom later got back in her good books, at Ma-ma-oo's birthday party, by baking a slightly tough, heavy loaf and then casually asking what Aunt Edith thought she'd done wrong.

Uncle Geordie's ratty old truck pulled into the bay, and Mom shooed me and Jimmy inside the cabin, where we fought over the captain's seat. Dad had bought the gillnetter, *Lulu*, for two hundred dollars. *Lulu* was long and heavy and so slow that the only way we'd run into anything was if it was trying to hit us. When we went anywhere, I could count the logs on the beach, the trees on the mountains, the waves in the ocean. Her only saving grace was that she was big enough to give us tons of elbow room. But the smell of the old boat was so strong that we'd have it in our clothes for weeks after we got home.

Uncle Geordie came on board first. He looked fierce, with his eyebrows hanging over his eyes and his hollow cheekbones and his habit of frowning all the time, but whenever he baby-sat me he carved me little seiners and gillnetters out of corks. I told him he should sell them, but he always shook his head. Once we were under way, I sat in his lap while he explained the tides to me and let me steer *Lulu*. The engine was as loud as a jackhammer, and everyone had to yell to be heard. When I got bored of steering, I lay on the lower bunk under the bow and read a *True Stories* I'd filched from Mom's bedroom. She said nine years old was too young to be reading trash, so I hid it behind my comic-book covers.

Only when I was on the boat could I eat Spam. Dad fried it until it was crispy and served it with hash browns and ketchup. Uncle Geordie roasted marshmallows for us, and Aunt Edith brought out some canned crabapples.

Mom forced Jimmy to come down for lunch and

snacks, and he'd come scrambling back to use the PortaPotti, but he stayed on the bow most of the time, his camera ready in case any sasquatches appeared on the beach, scanning the shore for anything that looked like a large hairy monkey. Mom wanted him to take pictures of the mountains, but Jimmy wouldn't—he didn't even relent when some porpoises came and played around the bow.

Dad and Uncle Geordie jigged while Mom and Aunt Edith took turns at the wheel. Dad wanted some halibut, and Uncle Geordie said he wanted something fresh so bad he wouldn't even mind a sea cucumber.

The summer had stretched itself into early September. When we finally arrived, the day was sweltering. I loved going to Monkey Beach, because you couldn't take a step without crushing seashells, the crunch of your steps loud and satisfying. The water was so pure that you could see straight down to the bottom. You could watch crabs skittering sideways over discarded clam and cockleshells, and shiners flicking back and forth. Kelp the colour of brown beer bottles rose from the bottom, tall and thin with bulbs on top, each bulb with long strands growing out of it, as flat as noodles, waving in the tide.

Dad and Uncle Geordie shoved the skiff into the water and rowed most of the gear to the beach. We stopped on the north side of Monkey Beach, where the shore is flatter and the beach a little longer than a football field. As they were rowing back to the gillnetter, Uncle Geordie yelled excitedly for Dad to give him the net, then grabbed it and dipped it into the water and brought up a crab.

Aunt Edith clapped, then hollered, "Get me one with eggs!"

Uncle Geordie waved at her.

"Hurry up!" Jimmy yelled across the water, swatting horseflies away from his face. "Jeez, they're taking long."

"Put some bug dope on," Mom said to him.

Jimmy leaned over the railing to dip his hand in the ocean. His legs dangled in the air. "The water's still warm."

"Don't even think about it," Mom said, hauling him back in.

"It's not that far," he said.

"Your camera would get wrecked, dummy," I said.

Dad and Uncle Geordie caught two more crabs before finally rowing the rest of the way back to us. I was anxious to start hunting for cockles, bending down and looking for places where the sand bubbled. Those suckers moved fast. I'd always liked it when they stuck their tongues out, until Mom told me those were really their legs. As soon as we touched shore, Jimmy leaped off the boat and ran for the woods. Years of babysitting instinct kicked in, and I sprinted after him. Mom and Dad were shouting in the background, annoyed. I tackled Jimmy, and we both fell flat in the sand.

Mom caught up to us and pulled Jimmy to his feet by his ears. "What do you think you're doing, young man?"

"Making us rich!" he said. "I—"

"Lisa," Mom said to me, "stay with him and make sure he doesn't get into trouble."

"But—" Jimmy and I said at the same time.

"Don't argue with your mother," Dad said, "or you can both go back on the boat."

Jimmy almost started crying. He was getting older though, less prone to throwing himself on the ground, kicking and screaming. When they started to set up a little camp, I dragged him down the beach to look for shells.

We slept on the beach that night. We roasted more marshmallows and some hot dogs on the fire. Aunt Edith boiled hers, saying her stomach wasn't what it used to be, and Uncle Geordie fell asleep without eating, snoring so loud that he sounded like the gillnetter.

In the morning, Jimmy was gone. Dad and Mom hunted one way up the beach, and Aunt Edith and Uncle Geordie went the other. They shouted Jimmy's name. I was supposed to stay at the camp, but I heard something crack in the trees.

"Jimmy?" I said.

I heard someone start to run.

"I found him!" I shouted. "I found him!"

Without waiting to see if anyone had heard me, I started to run after him. I'd catch glimpses of a brown shirt and hear Jimmy up ahead, but I couldn't catch up to him. I chased him as hard as I could, until my side ached as if I'd been punched and I gasped for air. I could hear him ahead of me. I stopped, leaning over, consoling myself with the spanking Jimmy was going to get when we got back.

Suddenly, every hair on my body prickled. The trees were thick, and beneath them everything was hushed. A raven croaked somewhere above. I couldn't hear anyone calling for Jimmy. I could hear myself

breathing. I could feel someone watching me. "Jimmy?"

The sweat on my body was stinging cuts and scratches I hadn't been aware of before, was drying fast, making my skin cold. I turned very slowly. No one was behind me. I turned back and saw him. Just for a moment, just a glimpse of a tall man, covered in brown fur. He gave me a wide, friendly smile, but he had too many teeth and they were all pointed. He backed into the shadows, then stepped behind a cedar tree and vanished.

I couldn't move. Then I heard myself screaming and I stood there, not moving. Jimmy came running with his camera ready. He broke through the bushes and started snapping pictures wildly, first of me screaming and then of the woods around us. Jimmy was wearing a grey sweatshirt. I stared at him, and he stared out at the bushes.

"Where are they?" he said, excited.

Doubt began to set in: it had happened so fast and had been so brief, I wondered if I'd just imagined the whole thing.

"Did you see them?" Jimmy said. "Which way did they go?"

"Who?" I said.

"The sasquatches!" Jimmy said.

I thought about it, then pointed in the direction of our camp, and Jimmy started running back the way I'd come. I stayed for a moment longer, then turned around and left.

On the way back, Jimmy looked tired and scared. He stayed close to me. I didn't want to spook him, so I

didn't tell him about the man I'd seen disappearing behind the tree.

"Did you follow right behind me?" he said. I nodded.

He sighed. "I thought you were asleep."

Jimmy got tanned, I got a lecture and we had to sleep on the boat that night instead of on the beach. Jimmy cried and cried, quietly. I knew he thought I was asleep, so I pretended to turn over and flop my arm across him. He didn't move. His breathing steadied, he sniffed a few times, then he curled into me and went to sleep. I watched the stars as the gillnetter bobbed. I cringed when I imagined myself telling people I'd seen a b'gwus. They'd snicker about it the way they did when Ma-ma-oo insisted they were real. But if the *Globe* did pay a lot of money for a picture, I'd probably given up a chance to make us rich.

I sigh. Maybe dreaming about Jimmy standing on Monkey Beach is simply regret at missed opportunities. Maybe it means I'm feeling guilty about withholding secrets. It could be a death sending, but those usually happen when you are awake.

God knows what the crows are trying to say. *La's*—go down to the bottom of the ocean, to get snagged in the bottom, like a halibut hook stuck on the ocean floor; a boat sinking, coming to rest on the bottom. The seiner sank? Mom and Dad are in danger if they go on a boat? I should go after him? I used to think that if I could talk to the spirit world, I'd get some answers. Ha bloody ha. I wish the dead would just come out and say what they mean instead of being so passive-aggressive about the whole thing.

My mother gets up and pours herself a cup of coffee. She used to kick me out of the house when I smoked, but now she doesn't care. All the same, out of habit, I go out to the back porch even though Dad is smoking in the kitchen. The wind has started up, it's fast and cold, making whitecaps on the channel. It keeps blowing my lighter out, even when I cup the flame carefully. Mom bought me wind chimes last year for my nineteenth birthday, the expensive kind that sound like little gongs, and they're ringing like crazy. For Christmas, she bought me a box of smoker's chewing gum, foul and every kind of vile. I've tried tossing them in the garbage, but she sneaks them back in my desk.

The first puff flows in and I sit back, leaning into the patio chair. In addition to all that coffee, I smoked for hours last night. My throat hurts and is phlegmy. The sun is low and the light is weak, but it makes the water glitter. The ocean looks black where there's no light and dark green where the sun hits. A wave of lovely dizziness hits as the buzz kicks in. I have a moment of dislocation. I can separate myself from my memories and just be here, watching the clouds, ocean and light. I can feel my own nausea, the headache I'm getting, the tightness in my chest.



I stood beside a ditch, looking down at a small, dark brown dog with white spots. I thought it was sleeping and climbed down to pet it. When I was near enough to touch it, I could see that the dog's skin was crisscrossed

by razor-thin cuts that were crusted with blood. It had bits of strange cloth tied to its fur. The dog whimpered and its legs jerked.

Someone tsk-tsked. I looked up, and a little, dark man with bright red hair was crouching beside me.

"Your doggy?" I said.

He shook his head, then pointed towards my house.

"Lisa!" Mom yelled from our front porch. "Lunchtime!"

"Come see doggie!" I yelled back.

"Lisa! Lunch! Now!"

Later, I dragged Mom to the ditch to see the dog. The flies had found it. Their lazy, contented buzz and the ripe smell of rotting flesh filled the air.



Dad opens the back door and I jerk awake, making our rusty patio furniture squeal.

"Wind's picking up. You coming in?" he says.

"I'm going to sit for a while," I say.

"It's getting cold."

"I'm okay."

Dad comes out and sits beside me. He pulls out his own pack of cigarettes and lights up. He holds the pack out for me and I take one. He stopped bugging me about smoking a long time ago. He's like Uncle Mick that way, not one for arguing.

I had my first cigarette about six or seven years ago. Tab and I had snuck behind the gym. She'd carefully pulled a squashed Marlboro out of her lunchbox. Giggling, she'd told me she'd stolen it from her

mother. She'd showed me the elegant way to smoke, the cigarette low between your first two fingers, taking ladylike puffs and blowing the smoke upward. Much later, when Mom found out that I smoked, she'd blamed Uncle Mick for my nasty habit, until I pointed out that Dad smoked too. He'd glared at me. "What?" I'd said.

My Uncle Mick used to smoke a brand called Sago. I tried them and they made me high on the first puff. He liked to roll them himself, a habit Mom found even more disgusting than smoking. When cigarette prices went up, Dad tried to buy loose stuff, but Mom handed him a fifty-dollar bill and said she'd rather buy the damn things herself than have him smoking hippie weeds.

Dad gets up and goes inside. He comes back out with two blankets and hands one to me.

Sometimes I want to share my peculiar dreams with him. But when I bring them up, he looks at me like I've taken off my shirt and danced topless in front of him. The memories are so old that I used to think the little man and the dog in the ditch were a dream. I'm sure that was the first time I saw the little man. That was the day before the tidal wave. The next time was when I was six. I woke up with the eerie feeling that someone was staring at me. I clutched my ratty teddy bear, Mr. Booboo. When I finally got up the courage to peek out of my blankets, I could see by the moonlight that there were no monsters ready to grab me and drag me into dark places and do terrible things to me. My eyelids were pulling closed and my death grip on Mr. Booboo was loosening when my jewellery box

fell off my dresser. I jolted awake, heart thudding so hard I couldn't breathe. My jewellery box's tinkling, tinny music played, but I heard it only somewhere in the distance because I was staring open-mouthed at the red-haired man sitting cross-legged on the top of my dresser.

His crinkling face arranged itself into a grin as he rolled backwards and stood. He tilted a head that was too large for his body, put one stubby finger to his lips and went "Shh." Frozen where I lay, I couldn't have made a sound. His green plaid shirt jingled with tiny bells as he bowed to me, then he straightened until he was standing again and stepped back into the wall.

I didn't move from under the covers until Mom knocked on my door and said it was time to get my lazy bones out of bed. I told her about the little man and she gave me a hug and said everyone had bad dreams and not to be scared of them—they were just dreams and they couldn't hurt me.

"But he was here," I said.

She smoothed my hair. "Some dreams feel very real. Come on, let's get breakfast."

Dad came into the house as I was eating my cereal. He plopped a bulging burlap sack on the kitchen floor beside Mom. He looked very pleased with himself as he said, "Happy birthday, Gladys."

She opened the sack and peered inside. "Albert, you are just too romantic." She pulled out one of the cockles and balanced it on the back of her hand. "Next year, I want a diamond this big."

"I can take them back," he said, his smile growing fainter.

"Don't be silly," she said, standing on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "I'm just teasing. It was very thoughtful."

He wasn't looking reassured until she kissed him again. When he leaned in for a bigger kiss, I felt it was time to make gagging noises so they wouldn't get too mushy in front of me.

"Go watch cartoons with Jimmy," Mom said.

Jimmy had parked himself two feet from the TV and right in the centre and he yelled out "Mom!" when I shoved him over.

"Lisa!" Mom said.

"He's hogging the TV!"

Later in the morning, while Mom checked the seals on the jars of cockles, the doorbell rang. I jumped up to get it. When I opened the door, I was looking up at a tall, deeply tanned man with black hair pulled back in one long braid.

"Hey, short stuff," he said. "Your mommy home?" Mom came up behind me, stopping suddenly. I turned in time to see her smile freeze. "Oh my God."

The man held out a single pink salmonberry flower. "Surprise."

She kept staring at his face, mouth opening and closing soundlessly.

"Did I get the day wrong?"

"No, I, I thought you were . . . I mean, we heard the standoff went, um, well, badly and we thought . . . Mom nervous was a new experience for me. I stared as she blushed and stepped back. "Come in," she said. Then to me, "Go get your dad."

The man had a loping, bowlegged walk that made

the fringe on his buckskin leather jacket sway as he strolled into the house.

"Dad!" I yelled. "Dad! There's a man here!"

"I said go, I didn't say scream," Mom said, turning a darker shade of red. "Now go get your dad."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Dad said as he bounced up the basement steps. "How many times have I told you not to yell—" He stopped at the entrance to the hallway. The man took two steps and bear-hugged Dad so hard he lifted him off the ground.

"Look at you," the man said, thumping him back down and holding him at arm's length. "I heard you had settled down, but I didn't believe it."

"Jesus," Dad said, leaning over like he'd been punched in the stomach. "Jesus."

"You okay, Al? What's the matter? What?" the man said.

Dad put his shaking hands over his face and stayed bent over, shuddering. It took me a moment to realize he was crying.

"Go away!" I shouted at the man. "Get out! Go away!"

"Stop it, Lisa," Mom said.

"Al?" the man said.

Jimmy came running into the hallway. "Daddy?"

Dad wiped his face and said, "It's okay, it's okay."

I pushed myself between them and glared up at the man. "You go away."

The man knelt down and smiled at me. "You know who I am? I'm your uncle Mick."

"No, you're not. Uncle Mick's in jail."

The man burst out laughing. After a minute of silence on everyone else's part, he said as he stood up, "You thought I was in jail? Why the hell'd you think I was in the big house?"

The look Mom gave him was so dark that if she'd given it to me, I'd have been running for my room. Instead, Mick started laughing again. Dad was blinking faster and staring at the floor. I thought Mick was making fun of him and, in an absolute fury, pulled my foot back and gave the man a good, hard kick to the shins. He was howling and hopping so fast that none of my other kicks landed as nicely. Then Dad grabbed me around the waist, picked me up and said, "Enough now." To Mick, he said, "You want some coffee?"

Mom poured three cups of coffee, and we all sat at the kitchen table. Dad sat at one end, Mom at the other and Mick in the middle. Jimmy stood behind Mom's chair and wouldn't come out to say hi. I had a death grip on Dad's neck and wouldn't let go, even when Mom told me to bring Jimmy into the living room.

"No," I said.

"Lisa," Mom said in her warning tone that meant I was going to get a talking-to when we were alone.

"That's what we get for naming her after you," Dad said.

"You named her after me?" Mick said.

"Michael, meet Lisamarie Michelle," Mom said dryly. "It was supposed to be a touching tribute."

Uncle Mick reached to shake my hand and I lunged to bite his arm, but he pulled it back just in time. My

teeth snapped together so hard it hurt, like biting down on aluminum.

"Lisa! That's enough!" Mom said.

"Don't like you," I said to Mick.

"God," Mom said.

"Hey, I'm a good guy, not a bad guy," Mick said, not the least bit mad. "I'm your daddy's brother."

"I was surprised, that's all." Dad said, giving me a squeeze to get my attention. "Come on, say you're sorry for kicking your uncle."

"No," I said.

"You think I'd hurt your daddy?" Mick said. "I'd never hurt him."

"You better not," I said.

Mick started grinning again. "You should have named her Agnes, after Mother." When I scowled at him, he added, "'Cause she's a delicate Haisla flower too."

"Mother," Dad said, almost letting me go. "Jesus."

"What? Is she still mad at me? Man, she can hold a grudge."

"Mick," Mom said, "she thinks you're locked up somewhere."

"Why does everyone think that?"

"They phoned us," Dad said.

"Who?"

"All your friends. They said you were shot and the FBI took you away."

Mick's eyebrows went up. He turned to confirm this with Mom and she nodded.

He sat back in his chair and laughed so hard that the coffee came back up his nose and he started choking. Mom pounded his back. "You could have written.

You could have phoned. But no, that would have been too much trouble—"

"Okay, Gladys, now you're hurting me," Mick said, and she stopped hammering. "Jeez, I been kicked and walloped and yelled at, and I haven't even been home a half-hour. I was safer hiding out in the boonies, for Christ's sake."

"Oh, boohoo," Mom said, sarcastically. "You had us thinking you were being tortured God knows where."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"You never do it on purpose."

"Enough, enough," Dad said. "Let's just figure out a way to tell Mother without giving her a heart attack."

While Dad and Mick went off to tell Ma-ma-oo the good news, Mom hauled the sack of cockles to the sink and began shucking them, popping cockles into her mouth, humming as she chewed. I was disgusted, imagining the cockles cold and slimy, and said so. Mom laughed, then said the best part was the cockles wiggling in your mouth.

I was afraid to sleep because of the little man's visit the night before. I lay awake with a stranglehold on Mr. Booboo and the lights turned on. Mom came by, and I pretended to sleep and she shut the light off. My bedroom is above the kitchen and when Mick and Dad returned, I could hear the murmur of conversation, but not the actual words. If I had got out of bed and pressed my ear against the register, I could have heard them, but I was too scared to leave the sanctuary of my covers. I heard the front door open and then Aunt Trudy shrieked. She cried and cried until Uncle Mick said she was ruining his second-best shirt. I fell asleep

to the sound of Mick's whooping laughter and the smell of coffee and cockle stew.

Now that I think back, the pattern of the little man's visits seems unwelcomely obvious, but at the time, his arrivals and departures had no meaning. As I grew older, he became a variation of the monster under the bed or the thing in the closet, a nightmare that faded with morning. He liked to sit on the top of my dresser when he came to visit, and he had a shock of bright red hair which stood up in messy, tangled puffs that he sometimes hid under a black top hat. When he was in a mean mood, he did a jerky little dance and pretended to poke at my eyes. The night before the hawks came, he drooped his head and blew me sad kisses that sparkled silver and gold in the dark and fell as soft as confetti.

The morning after Mom's birthday, as she was jar-ring the last of the cockles and I was using my blanket as a sleigh down the steps, she asked Dad to take me with him when he went for groceries. The road from Kitamaat Village to town is an eleven-kilometre strip of concrete that winds north along the coast and over steep hills like a roller coaster. It was finished in the late sixties and is patched every year when spring and fall floods eat away at the portions near the cliffs. Before the road was built, people went to town by boat. The town docks were across the channel, so even today, when people go to town, they say, "I'm going across."

The town of Kitimat, with its different spelling, has a fluctuating population of about ten to twelve thousand, while the village has between seven and eight hundred people. Most people from the village who

work in town travel this road twice a day and know its hairpin turns so well that they say they can drive it blindfolded. After getting his second speeding ticket in a month, Dad was one of those who pushed to get the speed limit raised from fifty kilometres an hour to sixty. When the safety inspector from the department of highways came out to test the road, he drove back and forth four times in a car laden with instruments, then announced that the road wasn't even safe to drive at fifty kilometres on dry pavement and the speed limit should actually be lowered to forty kilometres an hour.

Dad was driving too fast that day, but I liked the speeds that sent you straining against the seat belt. We stopped at the bank first. "Jesus," he said when he looked at his updated bankbook.

"Is something wrong?" the teller asked.

"I think there's been a mistake. There's a couple more zeros here than there should be."

"Oh," the teller said. "Is your brother Michael Hill?"

"Yes."

"He dropped by this morning. He said he owed you some money. He had your account number."

Dad shook his head. "He doesn't owe me anything. Could you give me the exact amount he put in?"

"You want to take it out?"

"Yes."

"All of it? You're sure?"

"Very."

The teller handed Dad a fat envelope, and instead of driving to the grocery store, we stopped in front of a long, run-down series of town houses.

"Stay in the car," Dad said.

"Don't want to," I said.

"Lisa, once, just once, don't argue with me. Okay? Stay in the car and don't move—"

"Well, howdy stranger!" Uncle Mick's voice boomed. I looked up and he was standing bare-chested in a pair of shorts on the porch.

"Stay," Dad said.

He walked up to Uncle Mick and held out the envelope. Mick shook his head. Dad tried to push the envelope into Mick's hands, but Mick lifted his arms above his head and dodged out of his way. Dad chased him until the door opened and a blonde white woman in a terry-cloth bathrobe started talking to Dad. They shook hands. Mick disappeared inside, came back outside wearing a flannel shirt, kissed the woman on the cheek and passed Dad as if he didn't notice him. He came straight to the car, with Dad following behind him.

"Hey, Lisa M," Mick said, opening the door and sliding into the backseat. His legs folded up almost to his chest, and he had to keep his head at an angle or he'd hit the roof. "You want some ice cream? Your daddy's taking us to Dairy Queen!"

"Yay!" I said, bouncing up and down on the seat. "Ice cream! Ice cream!"

"Hey, Al," Mick said when Dad got to the car. "Maybe we should take my truck. I'm getting claustrophobic back here."

"Ice cream! Ice cream! Ice cream!"

"Settle down, Lisa," Dad said. "We're not getting ice cream."

"Sure we are," Mick said. "You said we should go for coffee and I pick Dairy Queen. Do you want to go to Dairy Queen, Lisa M? Hmm? Ice cream! Banana splits! Strawberry sundaes!"

"Mick," Dad said, turning in his seat to glare at his brother.

"See?" Mick said, punching his shoulder. "You're outvoted." When Dad didn't say anything, Mick leaned back. "Don't worry about it, man. I figure it's the least I owe you."

"You should invest it," Dad said.

"I am," Mick said. "You're my Bank of Al. Come Christmas, I'll be bumming off you and living in your basement, you'll see."



I unpacked the box of extra dishes we had given to Mick as a housewarming present. Mom put groceries in his cupboards while Dad looked through Mick's tax forms. A few days after he started work at the logging camp, Revenue Canada had sent their own welcome-back package—a bundle of forms for each year he'd been missing, with instructions to file immediately or face an audit. Jimmy stayed curled up in Dad's lap, thumb firmly in mouth. Dad gave an exasperated sigh and put down the papers he was holding. "This is a mess. It'll take me a few weeks to figure it out."

"I don't see why we have to file at all," Mick said. "The whole fucking country is on Indian land. We're not supposed to pay any taxes on or off reserves."

"God, don't start again," Dad said.

"This whole country was built on exploiting Indians for—"

"Mick," Dad pleaded.

"Look at this." Mom was shaking her head. "Nothing but Kraft. How does he stay healthy?"

I helped Mom by finding some wieners in the fridge. We began making a macaroni-and-wiener casserole.

"I'll make you a warrior yet," Mick said, punching Dad's shoulder.

"Enough, enough. You'll wake Jimmy."

"Tell your brother about the dishes," Mom said to Dad.

Dad started telling Mick about the tidal wave. I remembered that day very clearly. Late July, a bright, sunny day. Normally, you would still see people playing soccer on the field, or visiting with other people in the village, or picking up their mail—even after the warnings on the radio. You could expect a half-dozen or so tsunami warnings a year, and all they amounted to were some whitecaps. This time the evacuation order was real, and the fire station alarm was jangling in the background as Mom and Dad frantically ran to get clothes, bottled water and camping gear. Me and Jimmy were waiting in the car, with Jimmy screaming because Mom and Dad were upset and hiding it badly. Mom wanted to save her Royal Doulton and Dad said, "That's just dandy. People are going to say hey, aren't those the Hills floating by? They're dead, but damn they have nice dishes."

"If my dishes stay," Mom shot back, "so do your golf clubs."