

1862

THE FOG IS THICK and waist high. Moisture sits in the air, heavy and damp, and both the ocean and the sky are a deep slate gray. Gulls cry in the distance and, up on the point, a bald eagle screeches from the top of a tall cedar tree.

Yisella shivers, and draws her cape in close to shield against the cold. But she knows it's more than the damp that makes her shiver. Wind whips the surface of the water and sends a salty spray into the air, stinging her face. She narrows her eyes, and stares at the distant horizon, reassured now that nothing is out there. And yet, the dream will not fade.

Yisella pushes through the mist, keeping her basket close at her side. She has been lucky this morning — the basket is

full of butter clams. She and her sister, Nutsa, will carefully dry the clams and prepare them for trading with the people who live across the water. These people also provide the rare and soft goat wool that Nutsa helps to spin for warm woollen blankets. Their mother, Skeeppla, weaves the best blankets in their village. The best blankets in all of Quw'utsun'. Skeeppla is known throughout the valley and all the way across the water. Yisella is proud of her village and its status among the island people.

As she makes her way over the rocks, the fog begins to clear. The first few rays of sunshine warm her hands and face as she nears her village of Tl'ulpalus. When she is closer to the village, she sees that several of the elders have gathered near the biggest longhouse. They are all admiring the freshly carved welcoming figure that's just been erected. Yisella joins them, carefully placing her basket at her feet.

The new welcoming figure is taller than any of the other carvings. The cedar tree, cut down and sacrificed for the figure, now stands straight and strong once again, its reddish hue rich against the colourless sky. His arms are outstretched to the sea in a gesture of friendliness, while his gaze scans the beach in front of him.

As Yisella makes her way over the driftwood, heading for the cedar-plank house where she lives, she turns for one more look. The arms of the welcoming figure cast long shadows upon the shore. He stands silent and still on this land warmed by the sun.

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# Cowichan Bay



MY NAME IS HANNAH. I live with my dad on a houseboat, the third one down on the left, dock five. I like the sea and I like falling asleep to the sound of waves slapping against the side of our houseboat. I sleep in a loft above my father's writing room. Yep, there's only room for my bed, my dresser, and a small table I use for drawing and homework — stuff like that — but that's okay. It's cosy and sunny, and when I lie on my stomach on my bed I have a perfect view of Cowichan Bay and all the neighbouring boats. I like the view best in the early morning, just as the sun is beginning to rise. The water is usually still, and the smells of coffee and hot

muffins often drift over from the Toad in the Hole bakery, which sits on the shore. Skinny cats slink down the docks looking for boat decks to nap on after a long night of prowling behind the restaurants and bait shops. The first few cars headed for the larger cities, like Duncan or Nanaimo, begin to appear on the old road that snakes in front of the shops.

Our houseboat is made of scraps. Really. But it looks pretty cool. The cedar shakes were split from some logs taken off my dad's friend's property, and the windows were salvaged from a restaurant just before it was torn down. That's why my bedroom window has the words "Bird's Nest" written on it. That was the name of the restaurant. The rest of our houseboat is made from odd bits of lumber that Dad got from an old sawmill and Mr. Petersen's barn. We have a wood burning stove in the front room, and there's a funky winding staircase leading up to my sleeping loft. Dad built it out of twisted bits of driftwood. But the front door is definitely the best part. It's made of maple, and has a fern and periwinkle stained-glass window made by my Aunt Maddie.

My dad carved the posts and lintel out of clear yellow cedar. It took him almost a year to finish that doorway. It's full of carvings of all kinds of living things you might see in and around Cowichan Bay: sea stars, gulls, anemones, crabs, you name it. If you can find it on our beach, it's probably carved into our doorway. My favourite carving is the one on the top left, a little otter floating on his back in a bed of kelp. Sometimes in the mornings, when I'm watching out

my Bird's Nest window, I've seen an otter just like the one on our door. He often floats on his back, too, between dock six and seven, and he's always curious about Ben North's fishing boat.

I could stay watching for a long time, wrapped up in my quilt, but then Dad usually bangs on the stair railing with a wooden spoon and yells, "Come on, Hannah, you'll miss your bus!" He says this almost every school morning and, of course, I always remind him that I never do.

The school bus stops just outside the Toad in the Hole bakery, so if I'm organized and ahead of time, I run down the dock and up the stairs and push through the screen door of the Toad where Nell is baking the last of the day's bread. I love Nell. She's pretty old, at least fifty. She has this crinkly face and wild grey hair. And she makes the best bagels I've ever had. If I'm really lucky, she'll push a hot cinnamon bagel straight into my hand before the bus comes.

The bus ride takes about twenty minutes and I usually sit at the back because I'm one of the first on. No one talks to me that much. I know that lots of kids think I'm kind of weird — probably because my hair is red and corkscrew crazy. And I live on a homemade houseboat with a father who writes in his sweatpants all day. Or maybe it's because my favourite shoes are boys' Wal-Mart black-and-white basketball high-tops, and everybody knows it isn't cool to wear those when you're a twelve-year-old girl. But I don't care. Not that much anyway. My running shoes are my

favourite things, along with the lime-green knitted slippers Mom made me just before the accident. They're pretty ratty now and have tons of holes in them, but I wear them all the time because they remind me of her. I did have a best friend, Gwyneth, a while back. She was great. She made these amazing electronic gizmos and was a total science geek, and she never once made fun of my shoes! But she moved to Ontario six months ago so right now I'm kind of without a best friend. Michael and Wesley live two docks over on a big fancy houseboat, but they're more into fighting with sticks and playing zombie video games than exploring the woods with me.

I have this feeling when I get up this morning that it's going to be a different kind of day. Not an ordinary, go-to-school, come-home, eat-supper, do-homework, go-to-bed kind of day. Nope, I feel like something is going to happen. Don't ask me why. I just get these feelings sometimes. Dad says I'm "clairvoyant" like Aunt Maddie. I'm not entirely sure what that means, but I think it has something to do with being a vegetarian and wearing sandals in the winter.

But this is different. Like when I look out my window, everything looks really clear and blue, and sharp. What's even more strange is that I don't feel like lying in bed until the last minute, or writing one single word in my journal. And that's not normal for me. I get up right away, get dressed, and leap down the stairs to the kitchen where my dad is

hanging over the counter, staring intently into the coffeepot.

“What are you looking at?” I ask him.

“The elixir of life,” he tells me, scratching his head.

“Huh?”

My dad is always saying bizarre stuff like that and quoting famous dead people.

“The elixir,” he goes on, “the tonic, the stuff of life, the ambrosia of the modern world, the—”

“Oh.” I cut him off. “Coffee. Got it. Are there any waffles?”

“Waffles? Oh really? Her ladyship desires waffles, does she? On a school day, no less. Whole grain with fruit? Freshly squeezed juice to accompany your meal, madam?”

I get the message and reach for the Cheerios and milk. I decide that I’ll visit Nell on the way to the bus and see if she’s feeling particularly generous with the tomato-basil bagels. I’m just about through my cereal when Chuck, our orange tabby, jumps onto the table and starts in on what’s left in my bowl. I don’t really mind. Neither does Dad. I know some people who would totally freak out to have an animal on the kitchen table eating out of a bowl. Sometimes, when we have company, Dad goes into his “proper parent mode” and says things like, “Shooo! Chuck! What the devil are you doing, you crazy animal?” But more often than not, he’ll give me a wink when no one’s looking. Actually, for a parent, he’s pretty cool. He does a lot of “wrong” stuff. Like sometimes, he lets me stay up late on a school night and read his work, and eat chocolate chips straight out of the bag. And

once we had a food fight with spaghetti, and the tomato sauce ended up on the ceiling. He doesn't care about stuff like mud on your shoes or grass stains on your clothes.

Yep, things are a bit different at our place — Chuck is crazy too. For a cat, anyway. He'll eat anything. Cereal. Cold tea. Carrot sticks. Even cold mashed potatoes. And then he'll go to sleep in the laundry basket, on his back with his legs in the air. This morning I only have to fling him off the table once before he gets it and retreats to the laundry room.