

When the girl from the Peruvian freighter walked for the first time through Port Annie, on the twenty-second day of constant rain, it's true old Magnus Dexter collapsed in front of his daughter's house, but who could blame him? One glimpse of this walking miracle was more than even some younger men could take, and Dexter was a feeble creature after all. As he muttered to his daughter while she held his head up off the spongy grass, life could offer him only disappointments after this: he might as well just cash it in right now. Still, he somehow found the strength to raise himself for a final peek at that girl's incredible walk before she turned the corner to cause a stir on someone else's street.

Everyone noticed her, of course, but no one could provide a name. She was the girl who came in from the sea, or as Eva McCarthy put it, "that cormorant with the cheeky behind."

"A seabird is what she is, but that rear end of hers thinks she's the Queen of Sheba."

Mrs. Landyke had her opinion too: "Something that big wave washed up, and look at the beachcombers come out to gawk."

Even the sun had shown itself — a miracle for sure!

The seabird walked past nearly every doorstep; she seemed determined to visit every street in town. And oh, what a marvellous walk! As George Beeton said, with a walk like that she'd be a fool to stop. He'd already forgotten about the giant wave that had left long strips of kelp hanging from his service-station pumps and patches of salt-water foam

on his floor; he was under a car draining its oil when she passed his open door, stepped on the rubber cord to ring his bell, and kept on going. He tripped over the half-filled pan, stumbled through the oil he'd spilled, and rushed out onto the concrete to watch her go. "Holy Toledo!" he shouted, to bring the others running. But all life at the service station had already come to a halt. Everyone watched the incredible walk of the girl who'd come in from the sea. Such a spring in her step, George thought, such gorgeous legs, such beautiful hips! He did not even notice, as the woman in the Mercedes waiting for gas was noticing, that her skin was the deep uncertain colour of cinnamon, that her eyes were as dark as those long loose curls that she tossed like a mane as she passed. He noticed only that walk, and wished with all his heart that she would stop and turn around and come back to his service station so that he could watch her walk away from him again.

She walked the waterfront, from one end of the little town to the other. She walked the streets that sloped uphill from the inlet, past the houses with their tiny squares of lawn and gravel driveways and faces watching from the windows. She walked past every shop that faced the square. And everywhere she walked, the dangerous fragrance of some exotic flower seemed to float behind her like a scarf unravelling in the air. "What a show-off!" grumbled Rita Rentalla, herself Port Annie's most accomplished practitioner in the art of turning heads. From the doorway of the hotel beer parlour known as the Kick-and-Kill, she watched with alarm as that fascinating outsider sashayed past — so brazen, and at the same time so apparently unaware of the commotion she was causing on every side!

In the public library she stopped just long enough to glance at the titles down the rows of books, though never pulled one off the shelf. According to Larry Bowman, the librarian, she only touched them here and there with her slender fingers with their long, beautifully tapered nails and seemed to size them up suspiciously out of the corner of her eye, as if she were calculating by some inner mathematics the entire contents of each book, the number of times it had been read, and the kind of secrets it concealed about the people of the town. Then, swinging on her heel, she gave the librarian a wink that caused the whole world to lurch,

as he put it, and bounced out the front doorway of the library. Click, click, click, her heels tapped the pavement. Such calves, he exclaimed, and had you ever seen such delicious insteps?

No one had, of course, and no one could talk of anything else. What was she doing here? What kind of woman lived on a freighter with all those men? Had anyone heard her speak, was she South American, what was she looking for? What could she possibly find of interest in a place like this, miles from anything else except mountains and bush, a few houses perched on the steep side of a narrow inlet with nothing to look at but rain and the fuzzy green slope of the facing hill? And why didn't her legs ache from all those miles she'd covered; why wasn't she crying and rubbing her arches and complaining that nobody knew how to make shoes that didn't kill your feet?

No one approached her, of course, no one stopped and asked her, lady, what are you doing here, because everyone knew that Port Annie, like other towns on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island, was full of people whose past was none of your business and whose reasons for being here had to be respected in silence. Still, this universal respect was hardly enough to stamp out natural curiosity. After all, she hadn't exactly picked the most inconspicuous way to make her entrance. That Peruvian freighter had just started up the inlet when an enormous wave heading south from an Alaskan earthquake picked it up, carried it forward like a giant trophy past the town, and set it down in the middle of a log boom floating beside the Mill. Just the tail end of a gigantic wave that had nearly worn itself out, but still it had swept in with enough force to leave salt water and sand, stunned fish and shreds of tortured driftwood on the streets and front yards of houses for two rows up the hill. Long strips of kelp and seedy knots of seaweed lay in doorways, starfish and blue mussels bloomed like brilliant flowers in the spongy grass, and periwinkles spilled themselves like tiny jewels across the roads. When that seabird walked the streets she might just as well have been walking on the bottom of the ocean; it was only natural that every eye should follow her.

According to a song the children had once made up, the dark water of the inlet was where your nightmares came from. Nonsense, of course,

according to Eva McCarthy, but still you just couldn't take any chances. Tiny Eva followed that seabird around for most of the day — a half-block behind on her skinny legs, pretending to look for dimes in the weeds — but she found out absolutely nothing at all, except that the girl from the sea must have had a cast-iron bladder at least, while poor Eva had to pay two visits to the washroom at George Beeton's service station.

"No sense of style," was the opinion of Mrs. Barnstone, who was an expert when it came to matters of taste. The lineup behind her in the grocery store could just stand and wait while she tightened one of the rollers in her hair. "Who wears high spiky heels like that nowadays, she'll break her neck. And did you get a look at that too-tight skirt?"

"And can you imagine living on a freighter at all?" Angela Turner said, behind the till. "A person would go crazy with nothing to do through week after week after week."

Mrs. Barnstone lifted her heavy eyelids and pursed her mouth, calling up a fickle British accent to give her words some weight. "Oh, I imagine she was busy enough, dear. She doesn't seem to be travelling with a chaperone. I should imagine she's come ashore for a bit of a rest."

And Papa Magnani was astounded. His fat fingers went wild in his thinning hair. "Such a beautiful woman!" he yelled over the phone to his equally astounded wife. "She come into the rec centre here and walks all around — oh, Rosa, can I tell you how she walked — she stops, looks thisaway looks thataway. She eyes up the rafters with her white hand playing the piano on her hip — I tell you, Rosa, you had to be here — and then she watches those boys dribbling the basketball up and down the floor until they're so rattled they have to stop and pretend their shoelaces are undone. And then, oh Rosa, then she sees me standing here behind my counter like an old fool and starts to walking over this way. 'Yes ma'am,' I say, 'you're the lady off the boat,' and she shows me those perfect teeth in her smile and heaves a look around like she wants to buy the place — oh the hair when she throws it, why am I tell you this Rosa, where are the words? Then the next thing I know she's gone. Oh Rosa, Mamma, if you could be here to see!"

Of course, even while he was reporting to his bedridden wife, Papa Magnani's eyes were still on that girl, who was moving around in the gravel pit next door, looking over the boarded-up trailer that had tried

once to become a church. He could remember when the company built a real church there, a tiny place of worship for anyone who wanted it, but the first mudslide had knocked it off its foundations years ago and the second slide had smashed it flat. No one ever bothered attending services in the trailer that had been dragged in for a replacement, so someone nailed sheets of plywood over the broken windows and put a hefty padlock on the door. No use yanking on the lock there, either, Papa Magnani told the seabird in his thoughts, because no one even remembers who's got the key. "Besides, why would a girl like you want to get into a church? God already gave you everything you need."

High above the trailer, the battered wooden hull of a fish-boat floated in the lower branches of a Douglas fir, but the seabird gave it no more than a passing glance — as if such things were everyday fare in her life.

Not even Fat Annie Fartenburg, the founder of this town, could have caused such a stir. Not even if she'd come down from that hotel room where she'd kept herself locked up for the past twenty years and started walking the street. This gal was a mystery, a phenomenon, an insult. And who would ever have thought it would be Jenny Chambers, that ex-stripper with pink hair, who'd come up with the perfect solution, and so simple too? Maybe chewing gum with her mouth open helped her to think. "So what's the matter with old Bourne, that he hasn't invited her onto his radio show? She's managed to strut through the whole blessed town, and still nobody knows a thing." Jenny was on her way home from picket duty, dragging herself up the steep rainy hill, hot and sticky inside her transparent raincoat, and of course she had to stop in at the Corner Store to catch her breath and tell Mrs. Landyke her idea.

And Mrs. Landyke, who never thought anything ever went through Jenny Chambers' head except visions of that crazy Slim Potts she lived with, or the trouble those eight rotten brats were always getting into, threw up her chubby hands in delight. "You're a genius, Jen, because of course he's exactly the one. With his ways, if he can just get her behind a microphone he'll soon have her spilling the beans. No one can resist him." If he stuck a microphone in Mrs. Landyke's ruddy face and asked her the time of day she'd tell him her whole life story, that was the kind of effect he had on her.

"I could resist him easy enough," Jenny said, tossing a package of

Spearmint on the counter. “When he looks at me I can feel his eyes just chilling my bones. When he comes up from the inlet in his crazy old rags with his white hair all whipped up by the wind he makes my flesh crawl, like one of those spooky guys in a fairy tale.” But still, she had to admit he knew his business, and if anybody could find out about that cheeky so-and-so of a woman he could.

Here was proof, if anyone doubted, that a town like Port Annie needed everyone it could get, even a has-been stripper who’d come in to perform at the Kick-and-Kill and decided to latch onto some local beanpole with eight kids instead of moving on to another town. “Sometimes he has coffee with the mayor, who’s a persuasive man,” said Mrs. Landyke, stepping back to let the drawer of her till slide out beneath her heavy bosom. “I’ll put a bug in his ear.”

Mayor Weins was happy to oblige and no beating around the bush either. But first, just let him holler at these children playing in the puddles. “Hey you kids. See how fast you can get all those dead fish and rotten garbage thrown back in the sea! Because if it’s still here when those nosy health people come in to poke around they’ll jab you full of needles and maybe throw everybody into jail for letting ourselves be contaminated by that crazy wave.”

Stupid kids, they only stared with their mouths open. He’d have to get after them later, the town looked terrible with all this litter scattered everywhere. Even the hotel had ribbons of kelp plastered against the walls and strips flapping like streamers from the windows — a disgrace.

“So what’s the matter with you, Bourne, that you still haven’t invited her onto your show. And don’t play innocent, please, you must have noticed. The young lady from the freighter is the one I’m talking about. No one in town seems to be able to find out a thing, but you could do us all a favour — get her into the studio and start that beautiful mouth talking. People might even listen for a change instead of turning to another station.” Though to tell the truth he never listened to any station at all himself, and didn’t particularly want to be seen here in public like this, either squeezed into this booth with a weirdo like Bourne who had the nerve to pretend he didn’t know what the mayor was talking about.

And he might as well have been talking to himself, of course, he might