

Extract – She Down There

They climb aboard, Howie starts the outboard and shifts the tiller to turn them seaward. The boat lifts and cuts a frothing white wake over the still water. Todd settles next to Howie up at the console. Claire sits at the stern, hugs her box with one hand and squints at the raven, who is following with slow, deliberate flaps.

They clear the cove and ride the wide, easy swells of the exposed seaward shore to the north. Claire's nostrils flush with the crisp ocean air, which carries the unmistakable fresh-cut watermelon perfume of *Melibe*, the hooded sea slug. The delicate, transparent creatures will be clinging to eelgrass in the shallows, exposed by the tide.

'Stop the boat!' Claire is pointing at the dense spread of kelp they're passing to starboard.

Howie looks over his shoulder, pulls back the throttle. Claire has to snatch the gunwale to prevent spilling the box as the boat slows suddenly.

'What is it?' Todd asks.

'Thought I saw a sea otter. Over there.'

'Impossible.'

'Seriously ... in that thickest clump.'

Howie brings the boat to the edge of the kelp bed, and the glistening brown fronds lift and drop with the surface of the water as the wake makes its way through it. The stillness hangs in the air.

'You must have imagined it.'

'It's just. I could have sworn ...'

'There have only been five sightings of sea otters since the early seventies ... in the whole of Haida Gwaii.' Todd shakes his wrist, looks at his dive watch, and back at her when she speaks.

‘I’d like to spread the remaining ashes here, if that’s all right?’ Her face flushes.

‘Sure. Go ahead.’

The two men watch as Claire kneels by the warm outboard and spills the rest of her grandmother into the water, bangs the back of the box, then submerges it. She lets it go and swirls her hands through the grey cloud spreading on the surface and dissolving down into the kelp.

Claire looks up through her tears and sees her grandmother’s last breath, the finest dust, hanging like the exhale of a sea creature. She searches beyond this for the otter. But there is nothing.

‘Goodbye, my Náan. Goodbye.’

Claire remains kneeling, staring blankly into the clear water. She runs her eyes down the kelp stalks, all the way to the seafloor where they are rooted to the rocks, and where small fish swirl between the wafting weed of the forest understorey. And she remembers the first time she looked underwater.

She’d been with her father and Náan, somewhere off Skidegate, or HIGaagilda as it’s called in Haida. On her father’s boat. She must have been seven or eight. He’d finished diving and was shifting the crates of urchins around when Claire had grabbed his mask and leaned over the side to peer into the water. The two adults had cracked up when she whipped her dripping head out and announced loudly, ‘It’s so beautiful! I saw a big orange starfish, like the sun. It had lots of legs. I want to go down there. Can I? Please ... can I?’

Claire wipes her face, fills her cheeks and blows out. She turns around to face the men. Without making eye contact she tells them, ‘I’d like to dive right here.’ This time there is no flush.

Todd’s eyes narrow, ‘Are you sure you’re okay to dive?’

‘Yes.’ Claire wipes her face. Lifts her chin.

‘Fine. We’re not far from where I planned to do this one anyway.’

Howie eases the boat to the edge of a thick kelp bed, where the water shimmers shades of emerald. He kills the engine and steps forward to drop a steel anchor from the bow. The splash is followed by the clattering of the anchor chain and the quiet zing of the line running through the bow roller. He leans down, grabs the line as it slows, lets out another few metres before tying it off around a cleat.

The raven flaps toward the nearby shore and swoops into the tree line to land heavily on the bough of an old spruce growing out over the intertidal. He caws loudly, and Claire looks across at him. The raven cocks his head, studies her face a second time - sees the full force of life in those dark, almond-shaped eyes. They narrow.

Claire mutters as she turns away, ‘Why are you so interested in me?’

Howie looks to Todd, who shrugs.

She and Todd move about the deck of the boat in a familiar routine – adjusting the dry suits they’ve stepped into, readying gear. In the stillness, the sound of metal on metal rings out as Claire shifts a scuba tank against the aluminium hull. Standing up straight, she twists her hair into a tight bun and pulls the hood of her dry suit over her head, shoving the stray hair into the sides with a few deft movements.

‘Do you think they’ll listen to us?’

‘Why wouldn’t they?’

She forces a smile. ‘I don’t know, I just don’t trust them. We’ve been here two weeks now and it’s pretty obvious to me they should extend the national park into the sea, and—’

He cuts her short, ‘It might seem obvious. But let’s wait and see what the data tells us.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

‘Good. Now let’s get down there and gather some information, shall we?’

Will I forever be his student? The thought announces itself, blinking. Like a seal lifting its head out of the water. Claire sniffs, reaches for her fins by her feet.

She and Todd sit on the gunwales on opposite sides of the boat while Howie helps them shoulder their tanks. They inhale from the regulator mouthpieces, clenched between their teeth like bits, to test their air. The short, sudden release of compressed air startles the raven. He settles, fluffs his feathers, doesn’t take his eyes off Claire.

Todd holds a tape measure and a clipboard with waterproof paper and a pencil on a string. Claire balances an underwater video camera on her knees. They spit in their masks so they won’t fog up, lean down to swirl some seawater in them, then pull them over their heads. Claire jams her neoprene gloves into her armpits to work her fingers further in. Her eyes meet Todd’s behind the glass of his mask. They exchange nods, inhale, and in unison fall backward off the boat.

The raven launches into the air and his scratching caw recedes until there is misty silence once more throughout the forests and over the sea. With slow wingbeats, he heads back to the clearing. The sun breaks through the swirling white, and he looks down to see an otter bobbing on her back like a cork, her body wrapped in glistening kelp. She holds a spiny urchin on her furry stomach, and in her front paws a rock, a little bigger than the urchin. With a few swift blows, which submerge her body enough to send ripples out onto the calm water, she smashes the urchin, drops the rock, and feeds with relish on the orange flesh.

Claire gasps as the water hits her cheeks. Ocean’s cold fingers creep over her scalp, wetting the bundled hair. She is in her embrace again. Floating on the calm surface, she looks down to follow the kelp stalks stretching to the reef below. Rays from the sun, which has broken through again,

angle into the emerald depths like thin columns of translucent alabaster. Claire comes back to the boat and holds on to the side, looks under it to where Todd's finned legs swirl as he hangs off the other side. Simultaneously, with the instinct and ease that comes from being both lovers and dive partners, they release air from their buoyancy jackets and drop down through the water.

She pinches her nose with gloved fingers, blows gently to equalise the pressure on her eardrums. Down they go. To the reef. To her beloved sea creatures. Into the soup of life, which now includes her suffusing Náan.