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The Dry Season

David P. Reiter

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Abstract
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This caretaker was a guinea fowl, probably a male, judging by its speckled arrogance. I leaned over the coloured vases lining the window sill, and mistook it at first for a mottled peacock. Women are always asking me about the identity of birds, as if a travel journalist like me naturally knows such things. When they see one catching the currents overhead, they marvel at how it soars, the sun flashing against the hues of the underbreast. So it has to be named.

'Oh, it's a hawk of some sort,' I might say, though it might as easily have been a falcon or some winged Valkyrie. 'But beautiful? I've heard their business is tearing off heads!' A crusty note on the sliding glass door had been my welcome: *if no one's around, make yourself at home - Ned & Alice.* How could I have been anywhere else but on an island? Since it was already sprinkling, I needed no more of an invitation than the smell of a smouldering wood-stove. Inside, I eased down on a nearby lounge and slipped gratefully out of my backpack and camera bag. The fire was still alive but quickly smothering in a feathery white ash.

I'd stamped around so much trying to warm up that no one else could be in the adjoining five bedrooms, unless they were sleeping like boulders. So I grabbed a hatchet blackened by charcoal dust and split some kindling from a wicker basket loaded with cedar chunks. A bit knotty, but dry.

I suppose that was what brought the guinea fowl around to investigate.

'Are you Ned or Alice?' I asked it, through the window, as the fire crackled away in the background.

The bird edged down the handrail toward a hoary garden, but inched back as I sagged into a mildewy chair to thumb through the pile of...
magazines and books scattered down the length of the long common room. What magazines do guests read when they're under a guinea fowl's surveillance? Now it was eying me emeraldly as a librarian.

'Slake your talons, Alice,' I said, palms up. 'I swear I'm a paying customer!'

When I phoned ahead for a reservation at the hostel, my editor had laughed.

'I doubt you'll have any trouble,' she said. 'It's not even steelhead season yet, Philip.'

'But it's the middle of summer.'

'Which only means less rain, not warmth, my dear.'

'Why are we doing the Queen Charlottes, then?'

'Our readers love to visit them - over a cappuccino. You know damned well that no one ever actually goes there.'

'But what about the Haida, Sandra? Aren't people just dying to see the only native group who never signed a peace treaty with the Feds?'

She smiled. 'Not really. Your average yuppie prefers to watch televised natives as they pirouette around loggers about to chainsaw through the thighs of virgin forest. Or read about it in National Wildlife.'

'Pirouette, eh? I thought you hate New Journalism.'

'Ours is a balanced magazine,' she intoned. 'I keep my dirty denim ideas to myself and you go off to write about arts and crafts.'

'I'm really looking forward to it, you know.'

'The rain?'

'No, the people. I can't wait to see them weave baskets from spruce roots. And carve argillite in a hovel.'

She looked at me. 'You might learn to like it. Watch out for the women, though.'

'The Haida?'

'No, sweetheart. The native women have had more than enough of the presents White men bring. You'll meet two kinds of White women on that island. One's out looking for space and the other's already spaced out. But the bottom line is that both are extremely dangerous away from home.'

I bristled for show, though I enjoyed these rare intra-deadline intimacies. 'Why do you always assume I need to be looked after?'

'Because you're a nice guy, Philip - too nice for your own good. And because I can't imagine a better unattached male to brunch with at harbourside on a sunny Sunday. How's that?'

I snapped shut the cool metal clips on my briefcase. 'You'll do.'
Though the fjords of the Inland Passage ferry trip were tempting, I had to fly to save time. I'd already decided to gamble by passing up a rental car, since I was determined to get close to the natives. So hitching was the way to go. After all, why would anyone living hand-to-mouth want to chat with a shiny Corolla?

When I arrived in Sandspit, a grey-haired chap chewing a toothpick eyed me as I hesitated at the terminal's exit doors. He wore a fisherman's sweater and scratched at his nose intermittently as though it were peeling from the sun.

'Need a lift to Charlotte City?' he asked.

I didn't know if he was offering transport by wheels or water, since the town was on another island across the bay. 'You drive the limo?' I asked.

'Might call it that,' he snorted. 'Follow me.'

The mud caking the sides of the limousine mercifully masked the rust. Which probably gave Luke an excuse not to wash it. The muffler coughed as he drove at a steady 30 km, usually half on the other side of the road. Utility trucks swerved past on the shoulders, spitting gravel. Local journalist snuffed out in freak collision yesterday. Funeral Wednesday. But the other passengers, doubtlessly locals, took no notice. Finally, I just closed my eyes on the curves.

As the ferry plied its way across Bearskin Bay, I got a better angle on the mountains. They were green, all right, but most had been clear-cut, as though a giant combine had swathed along some reckless diagonals. Forests around here were certainly going the way of virgins. I felt grateful then for my focus on arts and crafts.

Who said that we only write about things that matter?

My lift to the hostel was with a father and his daughter. The car was so crowded with groceries and supplies after my pack was added to it that I had to carry the girl, about eight years old, on my lap. She giggled and squeezed both my legs tight for balance. Henry and his wife had just taken up a farm, though they'd lived on the island all their lives. A Texan had offered twice as much for the land, but then the deal had fallen through.

'What do you raise?' I asked.

'Spruce cones,' he said, as casually as if they'd been pigs. 'Ship the seeds to the Japanese for planting. Lots of money in it.'

I stared out the window at the lush undergrowth, the cedar and spruce scrub, the clouds spilling down over the mountains to the steely Hecate Strait. A fine mist began to bead on the windshield.
'Vancouver sunshine,' I quipped.
Henry smiled. 'And this is our dry season. You should see the wet.'

The rain was pelting down when Ned came in, the sleeves on his light work shirt rolled up, exposing thick forearms. He slicked back his dark hair with one hand and shook hands with the other. From his stocky build, I gathered that he was at least part Haida.

'You the guy from B.C. Nature?' he asked. 'The one who phoned last week?'
'Thought you might be full this time of the year,' I apologized.
'Might still be. Last week we were turning them away. Just depends.' He looked at the cup I was holding. 'What're you drinking?'
'Coffee. Of course, I'll be happy to pay--'
'Hell, no. If you got it out of the tin by the stove it's common stock anyway. But I thought you might want something stronger. I mean it is raining.'
I couldn't deny that.
'And Alice gives me shit when I'm not hospitable,' he continued. 'So you'd better keep me company while I clean the clams for supper.'

Home was just up the path from the bunkhouse, a double-wide trailer with a deck around two of the sides. A cedar eagle perched on a railing, wings flexed. Someone had spattered it with red, white and blue paint.

'Bald eagle?' I asked.
'Yeah,' he said. 'I carved it. With a chain saw.'

_A chain saw?_ I took a second look. The breast could have been more streamlined, but overall the eagle wasn't half bad. So Fate had already delivered me a chain saw carver. Sandra would be ecstatic.

Ned was a bit short on ginger ale, so our water glasses were filled with barely diluted Johnny Walker. I'd just finished my first and Ned was well into his third by the time Alice got home. She was a nurse, and her white uniform and nylons made her skin seem all the paler. She set a bag of groceries on the table before she noticed me.

'If this is Thursday you must be Philip,' she smiled, offering me a thin hand like some lacy southern belle. 'Don't mind me. It's the infernal shift work. You lose track of the days.'

'Hope you brought some mix,' said Ned, prodding the bag.
'Yes, I brought some mix,' she mimicked and then tried to kiss him. 'Sends me off to the salt mines, and then beats me if I forget his mix. What a brute!'

'Better pour the next round before Philip dries out,' Ned said, gently brushing her aside and getting up. 'I'll start the coals for the clams.'
'You will come for supper?' Alice asked me. 'There's nothing to do but be sociable in this blasted rain. And Betty will want to meet you.'

'Not that you'll have much choice,' said Ned, from the doorway. 'That woman's a story in herself.'

As we nibbled on barbecued clams and fried chips, something about Betty reminded me uncomfortably of days as a student at Simon Fraser during the witch-hunt against Marxist professors. Most were Yanks who felt guilty about missing out on the Vietnam protests down at Berkeley and UCLA. And they were supported by a batch of American students determined to initiate us Canadians into the finer points of agitation. A crack group invaded the university Senate chambers, smearing the walls with pig blood - or what they claimed was pig blood. Another band decorated the mirrors of the administration's bathroom with faeces, probably not pig's. Stand-ins led to sit-ins led to sleep-ins led to love-ins. When the police finally dragged us out of the President's office after two nights of occupation, a smell of semen hung in the air like dying petals.

Betty could have been there. Maybe she had been there.

She hadn't cut her hair since then. It was brown and fine and nearly down to her waist. The tee-shirt was as tight as I remembered, although her jeans now seemed suspiciously more like Eaton's than K-Mart. Her figure was just as boyish. But one eye had taken on a nervous twitch.

She had a child.

I counted backwards. If Trevor was thirteen, as he claimed to be the instant I set eyes on him, hi, my name is...and I'm thirteen, he might have been conceived on one of those fluffy floral lounges in the President's outer office during the shadowy hours before we'd been expelled. He seemed to bear the scars.

Sandra, happily childless, claims that parents get the kids they deserve. If so, Betty's sins must have been manifold.

Trevor had his mother's number. He paid her absolutely no mind. She screamed directions; he ignored her. The louder she screamed, the more soundly he tuned her out. Not that I could blame him. Betty screamed when he drowned his chips in catsup. She screamed about how he stuffed his mouth with clams. She screamed about the subversive angle of his fork and knife. She screamed until the corners of her mouth seemed in a perpetual tremble.

Through it all, Trevor looked away. Until Ned whispered, ever so faintly, that the boy just might want to do this or that. Then it was done.

'When can we go on a deer hunt, Ned?'

'Who said anything about hunting?' Ned said, winking at me.
'You promised!'
'What about the truck?'
'I cleaned it before supper.'
'You didn’t sweep out the back.'
'Oh, I forgot!'
Ned shook his head. 'Show respect for what you shoot, boy. A messy truck insults the spirit of the deer. And did you ask your mother about going out?'
Trevor wheeled around to face Betty. 'Mom?'
'You know I hate guns,' she said. 'We'll discuss it - later.'
Back in the bunkhouse I deposited my chattels in the bedroom furthest away from Betty and Trevor’s. Even as I unrolled my sleeping bag the coils underneath the mattress squeaked ominously. But it was still early. I remembered my magazine back in the common room near the woodstove and went out to fetch it, thinking I might curl up by the fire for a while. I was just settling onto the lounge when Betty slipped out of the bedroom. She wore a man’s khaki shirt, with brass buttons on the shoulders, and jogging shoes coated with dried mud. Her legs were bare.
'He’s asleep already, thank God,' she announced, bending over the woodstove and rubbing her hands. 'I guess it’s the air.'
'The air?'
'You know, getting away from the city and all the pollution. Clears the lungs.'
Her legs, below the tail of the shirt, were quite tanned. Obviously not from Queen Charlotte beaches.
'Los Angeles?' I asked.
She turned around, smiling. 'It shows?'
'Had to be either L.A. or the Bay Area.'
'So you know the city?'
'Well enough to hate it. But assignments sometimes take me down there.'
I felt a bit like Clark Kent disrobing to expose his identity, as she sank down next to me, tucking her legs under her, the front of the shirt riding up to expose her knees. Sandra’s words began to nag away at the back of my mind, but I wasn’t about to beat a retreat as yet. We can be just as territorial about fire as land.
'How exciting!' she said. 'Do you interview famous people?'
'Not often. I once interviewed Robert Redford and John Denver when they were heli-skiing up at Blue River.'
'Oh, wow,' she said, licking her lips. 'I just love Robert Redford.'
'What about John Denver? Don’t you love him, too?'
'Not since he put in those security guards around his place at Aspen.'
Country Roads my ass - the bastard's got a record company for a soul. But Redford's wonderful. I especially admire his stand on environmental issues and human rights. He should run for Congress.'

'Give him time.'

I could tell my irony was wearing a bit thin, so I stoked the fire.

'Who's your source up here?' she asked.

'I've got a few folks lined up. Mostly basket-weavers, jewelry-makers, carvers. I've already had a session with Ned about his chainsaw work.'

'Far out,' she said, scratching her nose.

I hadn't heard that expression since before Bobby Kennedy was shot. I thought of bringing up Chief Dan George to see if I could make her faint, but then I remembered he too was dead. Betty would probably know that. Though she might have suggested a seance.

Next morning she waited in the bathroom after her shower for me to come stumbling in. I have no idea for how long. But her timing was perfect. Just as I turned the knob, there she was, wrapped in a tea towel. The steam had long since died down.

'Oh!' she said, fumbling to cover her breasts. A bare gesture.

I looked away and mumbled an apology, wondering how Redford would have handled things if he'd just come around a corner and bumped smack into Streisand's bosom. Before they were the way they were, of course.

'No lock on the door, I guess,' I said, easing past her. 'Sorry.'

'Wouldn't matter,' she whispered. 'I don't believe in them.'

Yanks, I thought. Everything's a matter of faith.

To prove how avant garde I could be, I shuffled into the urinal and began to pee, leaving the door open for acoustical effect. 'You live in L.A. and you don't believe in locks?'

She shouted over the toilet flush. 'If someone really wants in, he'll get in. Why compoud the damage?'

'Dead-bolts locks can be romantic, too,' I said, preparing a basin of hot water for my shave. 'They make it easier for you to play hard to get.'

Her eyes darkened, and she tightened the towel around her.

Maybe I've been around Sandra for too long.

Somehow Alice had slipped in during the night and left a carton of eggs and a slab of bacon on the kitchen counter with a note, enjoy! A happy face scrawled at the bottom of the page. As I gulped down my granola, Betty related yolk colour to phases of the sun - a pale yellow
high noon apparently was symptomatic of hens cramped from air in cages, while sunset orange intimated fowls with barnyard freedoms.

Thankful that one person could eat more quickly than two, I finished, grabbed my camera gear and headed straight for the highway, lest Betty, with Trevor in tow, try to tag along. It had slackened off to a mere drizzle, and everything along the path down to the road had that weedy, green smell of rainforest. Scraping my boots free of mud on the pavement’s edge, I heard the ocean pounding the nearby beach. I prayed for sun.

Sandra’s words, on the way to the airport, came back to me. ‘You’re nuts to take the per diem, Philip. Why not just book into a proper motel?’

‘It’s easier this way. You know I always lose half of the receipts. Besides, I never get any sleep in those places.’

‘Maybe I should buy you a teddy.’
‘I raised my eyebrows. ‘Maybe you should just come along.’
‘And do what? Hold your bloody microphone all day? I think I’ll just settle for brunch.’
‘Coward.’
‘Romantic.’
‘Who says I’m a romantic? I haven’t written a poem for years.’
‘What about the tent, then?’ she said, motioning to my pack leaning against the back seat.
‘You don’t miss a thing, do you?’
‘I suppose you’re planning to camp?’
I nodded. ‘If the weather’s fine, why not? They let you sleep on the beaches. Think of the surf. Starry, starry nights.’
‘I rest my case.’
But I could see she was thinking of them, too.

As I walked along a dirt path in Haida Village to my first interview, a breeze that must have swirled first over the polar icecaps blew in from Masset Inlet, making me shiver. A German Shepherd pup eyed me from the long grass of a vacant lot. I took a picture of a house, pink paint peeled back to weatherboard, a window scrawl declaring Jesus Saves. Who? A crew of kids dashed up in shirt sleeves and dusty jeans and begged to have their photo taken. Class of ___? I let the tripod do the work, framing me as vortex to a whirl of brown eyes and black hair.

Sam was one of the old guard argillite carvers, discovered, almost against his will, by a scout from a Gastown boutique specializing in native arts for the rich. Sam was amazed at first that someone would
be interested in buying what he usually carved for fertility ceremonies and the like or to simply potlatch with friends. So, for years, he took what the agent offered. Until his oldest son returned from the city one day with an itemized list of the prices his carvings were fetching in the shop - six or seven times what Sam had been paid.

Sam got very angry.

He became a born-again capitalist. After enticing a few other carvers to leave their work with him (on a modest commission, of course), he opened Sam's House of Argillite in Haida Village, and distributed leaflets to all the motels and restaurants in Sandspit and Charlotte City. His come-on was that visitors could watch him at work before they browsed around the shop. And the tourists came. They were amazed by the implacable black stone. And even more amazed that Sam shaped it purely with hand tools. They delighted in watching the argillite dust sift down to the work bench as Sam etched out an earlobe here or polished a nose there. It was simply ethereal for them to dabble in the black dust and feel it like silicon between their fingertips.

Sam's miniature totem poles began to sell like Korean umbrellas during a monsoon. Most sought after were the mythic figures with long tongues.

He showed me earrings and pendants and brooches and cuff links and tie tacks, killer whale bookends and turtle paperweights. And then he showed me his art.

One decorative plate depicted phases in the creation of the earth. Raven, a prominent actor in the piece, brooded over an ovarian void with eyes of sparkling abalone shell.

'It's better in the dry season,' Sam said, holding the plate proudly in his lap, as I snapped his photo. 'Tourists stay away in the rain. The men worry about rolling their cars off into the ditches, the women fret about their shoes and hair, and all the kids get muddy.'

Sam crowed on about his boys. Harry, the oldest, had already been commissioned by the university's Museum of Man to carve a giant totem pole from red cedar, while Tom taught jewelry design at an art school. I asked if he'd taught them. He shook his head.

'If you leave them alone,' he said, 'they find their own way.'

I couldn't help but think of Trevor.

The clouds cleared away enough by evening for a sunset and the breeze died down. Ned met me on the path up to the hostel. I asked if he knew Sam.

'Know him? Practically grew up with the guy. He's a cousin, or something.'
'Or something?'
Ned paused. 'Let's just say my aunt found it hard to stay home alone on those long winter nights. Did Sam show you his boat?'
'No.'
'Well, that's his first love now. Chartering for deep sea fishermen from the States. In the off-season, he offers overnight champagne cruises. From what I hear, the bunks below deck get quite a workout!'
'When does he get to carve?'
'Mostly in the wet season, I suppose. Or when a journalist comes by.'
'Touche.'
'Never mind,' he said. 'I'll take you up clamming to North Beach in a few days. Tide'll be low and the weather'll be fine for your pictures.'
'I thought the forecast was for more rain.'
'Those bastards don't know for nuts,' he said, dismissing science with a wave of his hand. 'You'll see. Besides, I'll need a break from the kid by then.'
'Didn't he go with Betty today?'
'Where could he go?' he snorted. 'She slept in all day. While he stuck to me like honey on a bear. Finally had to dig up some worms and pack him off fishing.'
I laughed. 'Maybe he thinks you're his daddy.'
'Well, he's not the only one who's after a man,' he said, elbowing me. 'Wouldn't let any moss grow on my heels, if I was you.'

Though I'd lugged along a few groceries for supper, Alice quickly made it clear that she had other plans. She'd organized a seafood barbecue - salmon, trout, oysters, clams, etc., etc. - and invited in a few neighbours, at least one of whom was cosy with the local arts council. She was sure I'd get on well with Jim.
'He's one of our better artists,' she said, already busily setting the table. 'That's one of his paintings up there on the wall.'

If Emily Carr had accepted a commission from Weyerhauser to bronze their logging operations, she might have produced such a canvas. Feet firmly planted in undergrowth, chainsaw about to chew into the trunk of a virgin spruce, a logger, untouched by debris, braces himself for a Promethean assault. The leaves and needles around him want to swirl surrealistically but don't quite manage it. The frame is gilded baroque.
'Impressive,' I said.

So I put my steak in the fridge and set aside my plans to transcribe the tapes from the interview with Sam. Such trivia would just have to marinate for another day.
After a mug of beer that Ned slipped him and a plateful of food, Trevor quickly passed out on a lounge, snoring with the vehemence of a grown man. Jim had a blond surfie look about him, but you couldn’t help liking the guy. He divided his time between painting and managing experimental tree plots for one of the big lumber outfits.

‘You probably think I’ve sold out to Mammon,’ he said.

‘Oh, no,’ I said, still forking smoked oysters. ‘I’ve never even met the guy.’

‘It’s like meditation,’ he went on. ‘Even better sometimes. I get my best ideas when I’m clipping away at the undergrowth.’

Betty was getting inspired, too. I was grateful to Jim if only because his presence seemed to make it difficult for her to decide how to divide her attention between us.

‘I just love pastoral scenes,’ she told him. ‘Though Monet has always struck me as being slightly bourgeois. How long have you been into landscapes?’

Already into her third scotch, she leaned against my arm as though I were a hitching post. When I braced her a bit with my arm, if only to avoid the embarrassment of having her fall over backwards, I could feel Alice’s eyes on us, sensing muck in the air. Ah, yes. Those journalists. Might have known...

The bushfire was now crackling around my toes. High time, I decided, for me to air my tent.

Since we were already on the subject of landscapes, I found it easy to turn the conversation around to camping, which Jim snapped up like a poet offered a royalties check.

‘I’ll come by in the morning,’ he said. ‘I know just the perfect place. Only ten minutes from here if the weather gets miserable again.’

‘Far out!’ said Betty, squeezing me around the waist.

‘It could be a bit further than that,’ I said to Jim, stiffening. ‘I don’t mind walking.’

As the water for my coffee boiled on the little camp stove early next evening, I stretched with the pleasure of solitude and debated which direction I should stroll in along the beach. The sky was mercifully blue and the waves rolling in from the east off the Hecate Strait were gentle, more like those you’d expect to be lapping at the bank of a humble lake.

I’d pitched the tent among some adolescent spruce just up from the beach, and I had my battery lamp and writing materials all organized for later, after I’d taken the sunset pictures. And Ned had promised a full moon tonight, so I was also looking forward to snapping a few nice
silhouettes. More for myself than the article; Sandra couldn’t expect to get all the good stuff.

After I’d prepared for the worst, Betty didn’t ask to come along as Jim and I prepared to set out for the beach that morning. She surprised me even more when she avoided moralising Trevor about what appeared to be signs of a hangover. When I stepped into the kitchen to say good-bye, she seemed to take it with philosophic calmness, and her smile had the atmosphere of toasted English muffins and freshly squeezed orange juice. I felt almost embarrassed by my blatant enthusiasm for the escape.

‘Don’t be a stranger,’ she said, trimming away char from the edges of her bread.

North of my camp, the beach curved off toward the Tlell River and then a jagged point, growing vague in the gathering mist. Between the river and the point, I could barely make out the shadowy hulk of the Pesuta, run aground ages ago by a band of Spanish pirates, only a splintery bow exposed above the sand. I knew then that I should walk south, saving the wreck for the next day. Tragedy always seems all the more dramatic in the softness of morning light.

Later, as I set up the tripod, I glanced back toward the tent and the trees beyond. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt as though someone, screened by undergrowth, was watching me. I expended the film on the sunset and the cool, dry light of the moon, then crept back to the tent, fully expecting to be interrupted during my transcriptions, or once I finally switched off the lamp and unzipped the sleeping bag. With Trevor somehow safely anaesthetized back at the hostel, Betty would appear, offering some sexless excuse to snuggle down with me. But though I listened for footfalls and snapping twigs, I heard nothing but the surf rolling innocently into shore. If Betty was there, something was definitely holding her back.

It wasn’t until the next day, on my way to North Beach, that I found out what it was.

Alice sat between us, re-fitting some netting around an aluminium frame for crabbing, as Ned slushed his four-wheel drive through the last boggy stretch before the beach.

‘You missed it,’ Ned said to me, clearing his throat. ‘Got a call from Les. He’ll be staying at the hostel for a few days.’

‘Who’s Les?’

‘Betty’s boyfriend from last year.’

‘Won’t that be fun,’ Alice chimed in. There was so much heat coming out of that bunkhouse last summer that the whole island felt it!’ She
turned to me, grinning like a pixie. ‘You’ll have to come for supper again to watch the action.’

‘No, thanks,’ I said, having no desire to act as short leg of an isosceles triangle just for her amusement. ‘I’ve got too much work.’

‘Oh, but you don’t understand,’ she said. ‘Les won’t be alone, you see.’

‘He’s been kayaking around the lower islands with her for the past six weeks,’ said Ned, with a wink. ‘Name’s Gail.’

‘So you must come,’ said Alice.

The rhombic possibilities didn’t seem nearly as threatening at that moment for some reason. Away from home, when our own lives are a bit parched, how we delight in the drizzly soap operas of others.

‘Well, maybe just for dessert,’ I said.

I snapped nearly two rolls of film at the beach to make sure I got it right. Ned was an old hand at razor-clamming. He’d even fabricated a special shovel for scooping out the sand.

‘You’ve got to be fast,’ he said, pointing to a tiny air hole puckering above the surface of the sand. He dug down quickly, tossed the shovel to one side, then plunged his arm down the hole up to the elbow and came up with a fat clam. ‘You can’t see the neck now,’ he said, handing me the clam. ‘But once they sense you disturbing the sand, the little buggers’ use is to dig down at six inches a second. You miss more than a few that way!’

And he did.

Meanwhile, Alice splashed around in the surf, harvesting a bumper crop of crabs, often pairs of them at a time.

‘Summer’s mating season for them,’ she said, carefully extricating two from the net and dropping them into a pail. ‘So you get two for the price of one.’

Even so, one crab lost a claw in the struggle. I picked it up off the sand and threw it into the pail. Waste not, want not.

‘How’s the taste?’ I asked her, wondering if the effort of procreation might not sap the crabs’ sweetness.

‘Never better. And the shells are nice and soft this time of year since they’ve just shed, so it’s easier getting at the flesh. But don’t take my word for it.’

Seven of us at supper made short work of the day’s take. Clam shells and cracked crab appendages littered the table. The food was a fine distraction - no one had to talk. Trevor sensed the undercurrent of tension in Betty, though, and was being a pain.
'We've only got two days left,' he whined. 'If you don't let me go hunting with Ned tomorrow night, I'll never get my deer.'

'The deer are not yours, my dear,' said Betty. 'They belong to the island.'

'You won't let me go!'
'I didn't say that.'
'You will let me go?'

She managed a smile, more for the others around the table than for him. 'I'll think about it. But only if you stop bugging me. Mommy's had a very hard day.'

Trevor opened his mouth for one final protest, but when she raised a finger like a red flag in warning, he fell silent.

'There are plenty of deer, anyway,' said Gail.
'I beg your pardon?' said Betty, turning to her.

Gail hadn't said much up to that point. Maybe she'd decided it would be more politic to first test whatever atmospheric pressures might remain between Les and Betty. Which may have explained why she sat closer to me than Les at the table. She struck me as the kind of woman that more modestly attractive women like Betty have nightmares about, especially when they're engrossed by a man. A petite though athletic figure (aerobics? squash?), faultless complexion, seductive blue eyes.

Diet food companies pay a high bounty for her. Corporations are eager to promote her to prominence in their newsletters and Equal Opportunity reports. Macho males perish in glacial crevasses pursuing her. That kind of woman.

'Les tells me,' Gail continued, 'that the population of Sitka whitetails is quite secure here.'

Betty turned to him. 'You told her that?'

He looked down at his lap and rubbed his nose with an index finger. 'I guess I did.'

Les was not at all what I'd imagined. Shorter than Gail, he was somewhat chunky, balding, with a dark beard so full that it seemed to give his face an unbalanced look. He wore wire-rimmed glasses with lenses so small he must have found it difficult to focus on anything higher or lower than a few degrees off the horizontal. His voice had the begrudging huskiness of a detective who always holds something back. Glancing over at Gail from time to time during the meal, he seemed a bit unsure about her.

'They've got no natural enemies here,' he went on. 'The deer, that is.'

'Except us,' snapped Betty.

'Yes, of course,' he said. 'Even so, the islands are inundated. Protecting them's a crock.'
Betty could see she was losing. So could Alice, who tried to suppress a sardonic smile. Ned was doing his best to concentrate on cleaning meat out of another crab. Trevor, arms folded with determination, was waiting in the wings for his opening. Just before Betty looked at me, I reached for the wine cask and began to fill glasses.

'That’s not what you said before,' Betty said, turning back to Les. 'When you were...here last summer.'

Les nodded thanks to me for the refill and shifted in his chair. 'I didn’t know as much then as I know now. The Haida say that we have to change with the seasons.'

'Yes,' said Gail, with a coolness that surprised me. 'Les is quite an expert on the seasons - and the Haida.'

'I'll drink to that,' said Ned, suppressing a burp and lifting his glass. 'To the Haida, that is.'

In a reflex, we all raised our glasses.

All of us, that is, except Betty.

I thought it odd at breakfast next morning when Les asked Betty to go for a walk with him. He did it, though, only after Gail nudged him in the ribs, a gesture Betty and I couldn’t help to see. Betty hedged at first, puzzled, eyes searching Gail, then shrugged and got up. Trevor, determined to latch onto Ned, stormed out the door first. After they left, Gail laughed.

'Ah, to be a sparrow on a branch over that arid little chat,' she said, helping me clear the dishes.

I was still trying to figure her out, so I said nothing.

'You’re wondering why Les brought me here, aren’t you?' she said, suddenly.

She caught me off guard again. 'That’s your business.'

'The hell it is. I saw you last night...watching us. You didn’t say much, but I saw it in your eyes.'

I swirled the soap suds. 'I’m a writer.'

'That’s a pretty lame excuse. You enjoyed the show, didn’t you?'

'What do you mean?'

'You’ve set up camp on the beach, but you couldn’t resist sleeping here last night so you didn’t have to miss a single scene.'

'My hostess invited me.'

'Sure, Philip. Sure.'

I picked up a handful of knives, washed and rinsed them clean. The sun glinted on them through the window before I put them in the drying rack. I fought back the schoolboy impulse to spread the blame any further.
'All right,' I said. 'So why _did_ he bring you?'
'No one brings me anywhere. I asked him to.'
'Even after you found out Betty would be here?'
'Especially after that. He gave me a few lines when we were together in the kayak. I was sure he'd used them before, so I decided to see what he was really made of. You can tell a lot about a man from the women he sleeps with. Even more from the way he tries to extricate himself when he gets bored but can't just run away.'

She was wiping the dishes dry as quickly as I could wash them. I felt myself gradually speeding up, like a runner being paced. She went on to tell me how she and Les met for the first time on the plane to Sandspit, seated together by chance. When he asked her why she was travelling to the Charlottes, she explained that she was on holidays from her job as a systems analyst and was keen on spending some time with the Haida. She'd dreamed of it for years.

'It meant a lot to me, that dream, but I guess he must have found my naivete amusing,' she said, bitterly. 'He laughed at me. But he must have also felt a male obligation to put me in my place. A few minutes later he offered to take me along in his kayak, so I could see "the real Haida".

'Was that his first "line"?'
'Yes. And I've never forgiven him for it.'
'Why?'
'Because he showed me that the _real_ Haida are dead. They're lost in the stones of abandoned villages, in the broken pottery and the totem poles that rot on the ground. Their descendants are impostors, more White than anything. Hucksters.'

I thought of Sam and the other artists I'd interviewed over the past week. Was she right? Was anything the Haida were doing for _them_? Or was it all for _us_?

'Was that the real reason he asked you along?' I asked.

She started stacking the dishes back in the cupboard. 'Of course not. But then he never realised why I agreed to go.'

'Until last night?'

She smiled, and hung the dish towel up to dry. Then she walked over, gave me a dry kiss on the corner of my mouth and walked slowly to the doorway. 'Since when does a writer need all the answers?' she said.

I hadn't noticed her perfume, a spicy fragrance, before that.

Sandra and I decided on the liver pâté. On impulse, I ordered the guinea fowl stuffed with wild rice, though I was tempted by the venison.
'Now don’t get me wrong,' Sandra said, setting her wine glass down, and leaning across the table. 'Having dinner with you doesn’t mean I’ve agreed to escalate. It’s just that you’ve seemed so...well, abstracted the last few days.'

'I’ll meet your deadline,' I said.

'I know that,' she said, lightly stroking my hand. 'Tell me, did that snot-nosed kid ever get his deer?'

I nodded. 'Ned took him out the next night. Smeared his forehead with the blood.'

'And the mother?'

'She didn’t scream. Didn’t say a damned thing.'

Sandra looked down at her glass. 'And what about you?' Did you bag a deer, too?'

I paused, enjoying her discomfort. 'No. Not even a bit of moss.'