

HE HAD DONE SOMETHING of which her father disapproved, although no one any longer remembered what it was. But her father had dragged her to the cliffs and thrown her over and into the sea. There, the fish ate her flesh away and plucked out her eyes. As she lay under the sea, her skeleton turned over and over in the currents.

One day a fisherman came fishing, well, in truth many came to this bay once. But this fisherman had drifted far from his home place, and did not know that the local fishermen stayed away, saying this inlet was haunted.

The fisherman's hook drifted down through the water, and caught, of all places, in the bones of Skeleton Woman's rib cage. The fisherman thought, "Oh, now I've really got a big one! Now I really have one!" In his mind he was thinking of how many people this great fish would feed, how long it would last, how long he might be free from the chore of hunting. And as he struggled with this great weight on the end of the hook, the sea was stirred to a thrashing froth, and his kayak bucked and shook, for she who was beneath struggled to disentangle herself. And the more she struggled, the more she tangled in the line. No matter what she did, she was inexorably dragged upward, tugged up by the bones of her own ribs.

The hunter had turned to scoop up his net, so he did not see her bald head rise above the waves, he did not see the little coral creatures glinting in the orbs of her skull, he did not see the crustaceans on her old ivory teeth. When he turned back with his net, her entire body, such as it was, had come to the surface and was hanging from the tip of his kayak by her long front teeth.

"Agh!" cried the man, and his heart fell into his knees, his eyes hid in terror on the back of his head, and his ears blazed bright red.

"Agh!" he screamed, and knocked her off the prow with his oar and began paddling like a demon toward shoreline. And not realizing she was tangled in his line, he was frightened all the more for she appeared to stand upon her toes while chasing him all the way to shore. No matter which way he zigged his kayak, she stayed right behind, and her breath rolled over the water in clouds of steam, and her arms flailed out as though to snatch him down into the depths.

"Agggggghhhh!" he wailed as he ran aground. In one leap he was out of his kayak, clutching his fishing stick and running, and the coral-white corpse of Skeleton Woman, still snagged in the fishing line, bumpety-bumped behind right after him. Over the rocks he ran, and she followed. Over the frozen tundra he ran and she kept right up. Over the meat laid out to dry he ran, cracking it to pieces as his mukluks bore down.

Throughout it all she kept right up, in fact grabbed some of the frozen fish as she was dragged behind. This she began to eat, for she had not gorged in a long, long time. Finally, the man reached his snowhouse and dove right into the tunnel and on hands and knees scabbled his way into the interior. Panting and sobbing he lay there in the dark, his heart a drum, a mighty drum. Safe at last, oh so safe, yes safe, thank the Gods, Raven, yes, thank Raven, yes, and all-bountiful Sedna, safe . . . at . . . last.

Imagine when he lit his whale oil lamp, there she—it—lay in a tumble upon his snow floor, one heel over her shoulder, one knee inside her rib cage, one foot over her elbow. He could not say later what it was, perhaps the firelight softened her features, or the fact that he was a lonely man. But a feeling of some kindness came into his breathing, and slowly he reached out his grimy hands and, using words softly like a mother to a child, began to untangle her from the fishing line.

"Oh, na, na, na." First he untangled the toes, then the ankles. "Oh, na, na, na." On and on he worked into the night, until dressing her in furs to keep her warm, Skeleton Woman's bones were all in the order a human's should be.

He felt into his leather cuffs for his flint, and used some of his hair to light a little more fire. He gazed at her from time to time as he oiled the precious wood of his fishing stick and rewound the gut line. And she in the furs uttered not a word—she did not dare—lest this hunter take her out and throw her down to the rocks and break her bones to pieces utterly.