When I was a girl growing up in the village, my grandmother taught me songs. *Blonde Indian*, *Blonde Indian*, she sang, while I danced and sang and shook my hands. *Blonde Indian*, *Blonde Indian*. I had light-colored hair when I was a girl. She told me about the spiders that lived in our barewood house, that they were friends who carried stories, and if I listened carefully, I would know what my friends had come to tell me. An only child, I had few other friends. She told me about the Taku Wind howling over our heads on dark winter days, that it was my grandfather letting me know I couldn’t come outside and play on those days when he sang his song too loud.

My other grandfather, the one whose white man name I carried, was gone for long months at a time, fishing. When he came back, he made biscuits, holding the baking sheet over his head before dropping it loudly onto the floor and sliding it into the oven of our wood-burning stove. He brought butter to melt on our biscuits, a rare treat—fresh baked biscuits and melted yellow butter.

When we sat at the table to spread butter on our biscuits, my grandmother talked to me about my cousin, the brown bear. She taught me that when I wandered too close to the edge of the forest, picking berries into the Hills Brothers coffee can she hung around my neck by a thin dirty string, I was to talk to my unseen cousin. *Don’t bother me, cousin! I’m only here for my share! I’m not trying to bother you!*

*Be kind to me, cousin!*

She taught me to dig fast for clams on the rich beach, watch for their squirming spit, run fast, dig fast, place my treasured clams carefully into a pail, fill the pail and carry it home, wet hungry beach sand sucking my untied shoes. Scrub the uncomplaining shells in fresh cold water. Watch her cook the sea-flavored clams. Drink the juice. If there is still butter left over from grandfather’s last visit, melt a little butter into the broth. Otherwise, maybe some seal oil. Eat the clams with seaweed and salmon eggs. Chew on some dryfish. Drink some Hudson Bay tea. Then, fresh
berries I may have picked that very day, berries that my cousin the brown bear had so kindly allowed me to take from the edge of the forest, from where he quietly watched.

Grandmother taught me that all our relatives and friends, even the forest, can hear every word that we say. That is why we must always be careful with our words, she said. Always show respect. Remember who you are. Watch your words carefully. Even the forest can hear you.

Even the forest can hear.

My mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis not long after I was born. For the first few years she was an intermittent patient at the Public Health Hospital across the creek from our old house. Every few days, my grandmother walked me through a field of wildflowers and dewdrops to a window in my mother’s quarantined world. My mother and her companions — other tubercular Native women and their nurses — wore white half-masks tied to their faces. They peeked through the window and laughed, their faces framing my mother’s hidden smile. Above the masks their eyes squinted laughter; beneath the masks their smiles sparkled through the cotton as they waved. I played in the light rain around the corner from the shady morning side of the building while my grandmother and mother talked. When it was time to go, I said goodbye and watched my mother act out the mask-covered words — “I!” — “love!” — “you!” And I waved and smiled back before we left.

“When you’re picking berries,” Grandmother said, “always make noise. That way the bear will go away before you see him.” She went about her chores, guiding clothes through the wringer washer, stirring stews of fish or deer meat bubbling on the stove. She showed me how to pick out delicate parts of the fish head, how to peel half-formed salmonberry shoots for a tender new taste of green, how to talk to my cousin the brown bear.

“If he comes up to you, don’t run. Talk to him. Remind him that you’re his cousin. Tell him you only want enough berries for you and your family. Tell him you only want your share.”

Brown bears and people have often intermarried, hence we are cousins.

We must never eat brown-bear meat; for us, it would be like eating a person. We must always show respect, even when we kill them. Other things should never be killed at all. “You should never kill spiders. They’re good luck. They protect you. They tell you secrets,” she instructed. “Never kill a spider. It’s lucky when they live in your house.”

Bears were my cousins and the wind was my grandfather. I had no sisters or brothers and I had few friends, but wild plants grew on the hill beside our old house, and a creek led up the mountain behind me, and seaweed and crabs danced in the ocean channel at my feet. I never questioned that I belonged.

Blonde Indian, Grandmother sang and sometimes danced with me while I dipped my head and shook my hands. Blonde Indian. When you don’t act right, she said, people will laugh at you. Never forget who you are. Sometimes she took me into South Franklin Street bars and passed me from lap to lap. I showed off by counting in Tlingit and dancing. Tltx’ — Ditx — Nas’k — Dax’xson. Men and women who smelled like Tokay gave me wet winey kisses and handfuls of change. Everyone laughed.

Blonde Indian, Grandmother sang. Listen to our story, the spiders thoughtfully whispered. Don’t come too close, my bear cousin fondly warned.

In summer, we boarded a slow ferry to travel with lapping waves around and through the islands of Southeast Alaska, where our people had lived for generations, to a cannery in Hawk Inlet, where my grandmother worked, sliming fish. A row of one-room houses lined a wooden walkway; Native women, heads covered with wrapped scarves tied in flower-decorated knots at the tops of their shiny foreheads, called to one another, sweeping wooden stoops and stopping to tease and flirt and gossip. Smokehouses balanced along the beach added a delicate hint of alder to the salt water air and southeast breeze. Late in the summer we traveled back to our house at the edge of the village in Juneau, where my grandfather readied himself for fall fishing, preparing to be absent until at least the beginning of winter. He would return late in the year, pulling from his
pocket a yellow plastic rabbit wearing funny eyeglasses and blue britches, giving me a new bunny trinket each year to add to my collection of wonderful things not to be found in Juneau.

For the remainder of the winter, Uncle Buzz and Uncle Skip ran in and out of the old damp house, raising their voices, grabbing leftover stew or pilot bread and disappearing again, sometimes for days. Aunt Ida lingered behind her bedroom door until evening, when she appeared with a strong smell of sweet perfume, looking like a cotton-candy dream in a bright red jacket of rayon fluff that shed puff trails into the air and onto the wooden floor all the way to the plain front door, where my other grandfather, the Taku Wind, warned us to stay inside.

The hill behind our old house at the edge of the village was my comfortable retreat in the summer; in winter, the floor under the table hid me from my uncles’ commotion, from my grandmother and grandfather’s noisy arguments, from visitors’ overwrought pinches on my stumpy cheeks. When my grandmother enrolled me in school, I was forced to dig around under the cot in the unlit closet where I slept, rummaging for a skirt or underpants or a shirt. Unwashed, I made my way out of Village Street onto the paved sidewalk, around a wide corner and halfway up the hill to a basement room that housed stiffly folded chairs, a basement room where dainty little girls and clean little boys stared at me when I entered, always dirty, always hungry, always late.

Grandma was a slender woman who wore her long silver and steel colored hair wrapped at the back of her head. During the winter, when my grandfather was home for the longest period of time, she powdered her face and drew careful eyebrows in arching lines above her snappy dark eyes. During our Hawk Inlet summers, she spent long days in the cannery while I explored bear trails and nibbled on salmonberries or waded on the beach, investigating tide pools where I imagined new worlds and made pets of trapped minnows.

My mother became a disembodied memory, a signature on regular letters, a scowling/smiling face on infrequent photos, a name in a story my grandmother occasionally told. After my mother was sent by her doctors north to a hospital in Seward, Aunt Ida kept communication open and constant through the mail, letters and black-and-white photos unfailingly supplied to my recuperating mother, now missing half a lung. In photos sent by return mail, my mother brushes her thick, raven-colored wavy hair while she sits on top of a tucked-in hospital bed, her face now metal framed but still smiling through the window of the photo. Her perpetual frown forms a scowl suggesting not anger but fierce courage. In the snapshot of my imagination she shows off to her fellow patients and hospital staff the latest funny picture of her growing baby girl as I pose my way through the years. In my imagination, her loving smile and proud scowl are finally and always unmasked.

My mother stowed those old photos buried in a closet in an unpacked box until years later, back home in Juneau at last, she handed them to me with no explanation. Pictures show a little girl clinging for the camera, as in my memory in earlier years I had clowned for my mother in front of the window on the afternoon side of the government hospital near the village, around the corner from the shady morning side where a tubular slide propelled itself out of a door on the second floor, down which I imagined myself sliding but never would.

I moved back and forth between my grandmother’s house in the village and my Aunt Erm’s house across the channel, on the beach side of the road to Douglas, a mile or so from the bridge. Aunt Erm grew a garden, and she cooked in the kitchen of Saint Ann’s, the hospital for white people to which, in a few years, my then-cured hardworking mother would take her eight-year-old only child to be treated for rheumatic fever, an infection of the heart that eventually leaves lifelong scars on the unsuspecting, untried beating muscle.

Aunt Erm’s garden was a wonder of chives and carrots, turnips and spinach, strawberries, nasturtiums, and radishes, everything to be eaten or smelled or pulled from the soft, damp, cool, clinging, good-smelling earth, wiped on the side of a little girl’s yellow-fringed fourth-of-july cowboy skirt, bitten and tasted and years later richly remembered. Aunt Erm and her white man husband, Uncle George, kept chickens and rabbits that scurried and clucked and ended up crisp and steaming in bowls filled with buttered noodles and parsley on the Sunday dinner table, along with exotic
other foods like gravy and cake that Aunt Erm cooked at her job in the white people's kitchen at the hospital.

In my grandmother's house back across the channel, we ate deer meat and porcupine my uncles poached from land that once belonged to our powerful ancestors, the Kaagwaantaan. We were a warrior clan, but the land was no longer ours. If we wanted deer meat, my uncles had to sneak the deer's carcass to the edge of the trees near the road and wheel me in a wagon in the dark evening, innocently perched on a pile of burlap to cover the deer. When we wanted to boil soup bones, my grandmother sent me to ask for meat scraps from the market. We cut and fried halibut cheeks from the fish heads covering the dock near the cold storage where my grandmother and grandfather sometimes found work sliming fish. Salmon heads for boiling came from the same place. My favorite part was always the softly gristled nose separated by a delicate simmer from the wide-eyed gaping head picked from the cold storage docks. It was past these docks that I sometimes walked on my way to the white people's school.

In first grade, when the chore was learning to read, the lady teacher organized the class into three groups according to reading proficiency. The lowest were Seagulls. Bluebirds were the highest. The girls in the Bluebirds were freckled and clean. I worried that I would have to grow freckles and wear pastel angora sweaters before I could become a Bluebird. I feared I would never be good enough.

Dick, Jane, and Spot live in an oversized, brightly shuttered house with Mother, a yellow-haired woman with white skin and smiling red lips who waves a morning goodbye across the manicured lawn to Father, dressed in a business suit and stepping into a shiny new car. On the next page, Mother dawdles in the kitchen and hums while she bakes chocolate chip cookies and a fine roasted beef. Dick and Jane and Spot frolic with a bright red ball in the sunny yard. Spot is a small, mostly white, frisky dog with a black spot around his right eye. It is a clever, playful name. Dick neatly tucks his striped, colorful shirt into belted trousers. I sense that Jane is a Bluebird.

We laid our heads on our desks and listened to classical music every Monday. On Thursdays we learned about art. On Fridays we sat quietly and listened to Mrs. Green read fairy tales and other fables designed to convey life's truths, most of which I didn't understand but only accepted.

Castles and rosebushes were as foreign to me as my classmates' angora sweaters.

My favorite story to ponder was The Princess and the Pea. What is the nature of a princess? I wondered later in life, that something so ambiguous can define you? What makes a woman so precious, so unusual, that she can confidently complain of a trifle, demand and receive such extraordinary favor? Even at my Seagull beginning, I knew I could never balance myself on a pile of twenty mattresses. And I had already learned the stern lesson from my grandmother that a well-born Kaagwaantaan will not complain.

When I walked to school one cloudy morning, the dirt street where in the evenings I played kick the can with other village children was dotted with puddles. Plain, unpainted old houses faced one another along the way; here and there a rack of deerskin leaned against the steps to someone else's uninviting front door. At the end of Village Street I could climb stairs up a steep, berry-filled hill, which would let me turn around at the top of the stairs for a look down at the village. Or I could climb other stairs that began farther up Willoughby Street behind rattletrap apartments and past Native and Filipino houses perched here and there along the hillside. Or I could walk all the way around a wide corner on the paved street and not climb stairs at all. I could walk almost all the way to the cold storage docks past men in yellow rubber suits cutting fish and throwing unwanted fish parts onto the wooden docks where I was often sent to collect the heads for that night's boiled soup. Big men balanced on slimy tables threw cuts of halibut into bins and onto the floor. They shouted and cursed, never looking at one another. Never looking at the little girl sent by her grandma to collect the evening meal.

If I walked past the cold storage on my way to first grade, my path circled the corner gas station, where I could step hard on a dull-red tube stretched across the cement and listen for a bell. White men in greasy blue coveralls glanced without interest as I reached myself to flee, having been warned by my friend Paul that I would be arrested if I stepped on the cord hard enough to make a noise. Going this way would take me halfway back up the hill to the basement room where I attended makeshift school, learning to read.

I walked the long way, skipping past Thibodeau's Market, not open yet.
Even if it were open, I couldn’t go in without money in my hand. The people in the market always watched their customers, staring and moving up and down the aisles for a better view. Running past the old apartments, I saw a friend from first grade. “Wait up!” Paul called. “Look what I got!” Paul lived in the pale-green apartments at the foot of the stairs. His black hair was cut short and stood straight up on his head. I had never been invited into his home, but I had often heard noises from inside. Paul’s father and mother lived at home, and they yelled a lot. My grandma almost never yelled except when my grandfather was home from fishing and they drank too much Tokay wine. Then they both yelled and got mad and threw chairs. But most of the time my grandfather was gone and our house was quiet.

Paul’s outstretched hand held a salmonberry, green and hard. He popped it into his mouth. “Those aren’t good yet,” I pronounced. “You’re not supposed to eat them ’til they’re soft. They’re not good like that.” He dug in his pocket and pulled out another handful of green berries. I chose the brightest one and sucked on it as we walked.

We looked inside Stevenson’s Market, halfway up the street. Mr. Stevenson had once given me half of a heavy, thick-skinned ball he said was called a cantaloupe. You have to eat it with a spoon, he told me. The soft orange flesh was a juicy surprise. When I had eaten all of the orange flesh, I scraped the green rind with my teeth until the coarsely lined skin was all that was left. I chewed the dry-tasting skin into an unpleasant pulp and buried the whole wad in shady dirt at the side of our old house, hoping it would grow like the plants in Aunt Ern’s garden.

This morning Mr. Stevenson was busy helping a customer, a man we’d seen walking down the street carrying an umbrella over his head. “Do you know what that’s called?” Paul whispered, still sucking on sour green salmonberries. “That’s called an umbrella. White men use that to walk down the street with. They don’t like to get wet when it rains.” We looked at the spiky round contraption dripping on the market floor. It swayed and wanted to roll. I stepped close to the counter so I could look at the pictures under the glass. A fat-faced white man smiled up from a poster. I Like Ike, I read.

Crabapple trees grew at the top of a steep, rocky hill next door to the store. Although we’d never seen her, we knew that a mean old lady would run out and shoot us with a BB gun if she caught us picking her apples. We climbed quietly up the muddy hill just enough to get a look at the nearest tree. “They’re not ready yet,” Paul whispered. “It’s still all flowers. They’re not even apples yet.”

We half-slid down the wet trail. I slipped on a patch of grass and fell face-first onto a pipe sticking up from the wet ground, hitting it with my forehead. For a moment I watched bright light and darkness take turns blinking behind my closed eyes.

Paul ran. I covered one eye with a mud-stained hand. Blood ran down my wrist, down my arm, down my elbow onto the ground. Holding my face, I walked around the corner and halfway up the hill to the basement classroom where first grade was held that year. Children sat in their chairs ready to read.

Every day Mrs. Green separated the children into Seagulls, Wrens, and Bluebirds. I was still a Seagull. I’d watched all the girls but one move over to the Wrens, and then I watched most of them move over to the Bluebirds. The only other girl besides me left in the Seagulls was Lorraine. She was from the village too. But Lorraine was different. At playtime, when the first graders walked up the hill to the big school, and everyone ran from one side of the big gym to the other, playing red rover and dodgeball, Lorraine spun around and spun around, full skirt describing a circle, arms held out like Popsicle sticks, black eyes behind thick glasses close to the gym and to the world. Lorraine didn’t play with other kids. She didn’t read. That was why she was still a Seagull. But I could read as well as any other girl in the class, even better than some. And I would play if they asked me.

Almost all the other girls were already Bluebirds. Their pink-silk buttoned blouses and woolen winter coats were different from my own unwashed wrinkled cottons. Their scrubbed faces and pigtailed hair made mine feel dirty and drab. Bluebirds moved comfortably and confidently in a world I ventured into timid and alone. At the end of the school day, they were driven back to their picture-book houses for afternoon chocolate chip treats. Like Dick and Jane, they enjoyed snacks of apples and
cookies fresh from a clean oven. Fairy-tale spells granted them sugar-coated cookies and homemade cakes decorated with frosting and sprinkles, while I skipped down Village Street hoping for dryfish.

Two girls were still Weens, but they lived close to the village and sometimes went to school with dirty clothes, as I did almost every day. Like me, they didn’t always have money for the Weekly Reader. Their moms never baked for the bake sales; my mother was still in the hospital. My grandfather was the only one who baked in our wood-burning stove, and he baked only when he came home from fishing. His flaky biscuits would never suit a bake sale.

We were supposed to advance to the next group when our reading improved, but I suspected that I would also have to dress like Jane and live in a house like hers and have a mom in a white apron rolling cookie dough and decorating cakes for the bake sale and a dad who walked around town holding a dripping umbrella above his head so he wouldn’t get wet in the rain.

Everyone stared when I came into class and walked over to the teacher. “I fell down,” I whispered.

“Well be careful, now. Try not to drip on the floor. You’d better go up the street to the other school and see the nurse.” Mrs. Green shuffled me out the door. “Go on now, dear,” she told me. “Go see the nurse. I can’t do anything for you with a cut like that.”

I walked up the hill holding my eye. The blood now covered my fingers. I could feel it starting to dry. I still hadn’t cried. Kaagwaantaan children were strong. My grandmother always admonished. Remember who you are, she told me daily. Kaagwaantaan children don’t cry.

At the big school I wandered the empty halls until I saw the nurse’s office. I presented myself to the lady in the white dress, the same lady who had pinched me and the rest of my classmates with a needle a few weeks before when we lined up for shots. The nurse lifted my hand and frowned. “I can’t do anything about this. You’re going to need stitches,” she said.

“Better go to the native hospital, they’ll take care of you there. Go along now.”

She guided me out the door. I walked the length of the empty hall still holding my eye. Down the steps and out the building. I could go down the street the way I’d come or I could step down either of the stairways. Or I could walk the long way past the governor’s mansion. I walked in the direction of the governor’s mansion, looking down on the village with one good eye, down on the dirt street where I’d walked a while ago. If I saw my grandma I would go down the stairs and show her my eye. But Village Street was empty.

Grandma didn’t read well, but sometimes she let me read to her about Dick and Jane and their dog, Spot. I showed her the pictures. Grandma was not as intrigued as I by the green lawn in front of the big white house, the red bouncing ball that Spot so happily chased, the sparkling kitchen where Dick and Jane’s mom smiled with bright red lips and yellow hair. Sometimes I read from a storybook brought home from school. In it were fairy tales about little girls who had trouble with witches and stepmothers. Alongside the stories were pictures of girls and boys and witches and stepmothers, and pictures of princes. They all looked like they were related to Dick and Jane.

The meaning of the stories was difficult to sort. The most puzzling story was also my favorite, one in which a spoiled, complaining girl, balanced throughout the night atop a pile of mattresses, in the morning was found to be bruised on her fair and delicate skin. Her grumbling brought the recognition that she was after all a princess—she must be, for none but a princess would have had her sleep disturbed by a pea so cleverly placed beneath twenty mattresses. A glistening crown was perched atop her yellow hair, a prince dressed in fluffy sleeves and tight pants claimed her hand, and they went to live in a castle with a lawn not unlike Dick and Jane’s. It was a mystery how balancing on a pile of mattresses and complaining of a pea would make a princess out of a petulant girl. The answer to this puzzle might cast light on how I could become a Bluebird.

But I didn’t learn from those textbook stories the lessons my grandmother already knew. She warned me that no matter what a book or a teacher or anyone else said, I would never be a Bluebird. Nor a Wren. Nor a Seagull. “Never forget,” she told me daily, “you are Eagle. Not Raven. Not Seagull. You will always be an Eagle and a Wolf. You will never be a Bluebird.”
Past the governor's mansion and down the stairs to Capitol Avenue, through the fenced path across the electric company's property, part of which had once belonged to our family, over a field of wildflowers and bees, into the Native hospital where my mother lived on a forbidden floor in a quarantined ward, I resolutely walked, holding one hand over my eye.

The doctor stitched my eyebrow after the nurse tenderly cleaned it. They told me that my mother knew I was downstairs and was sending me her love right now. They washed my hands and sent me home, where Grandma exclaimed over my stitches. She poked my eyebrow to gauge how much it hurt.

“Did you cry?” she asked.
“No, Grandma,” I told her. “I didn’t cry.”
“Good.”

The next morning I found a wrinkled skirt under the wooden cot where I slept, and I tried to smooth it after I put it on. I poured canned milk in a serving-size cardboard box of Rice Krispies my grandfather had given me the last time he came home from fishing. I listened to myself chew. I touched my eyebrow. I wiped my mouth.

On the way to school I saw Paul and showed him my stitches. He gave me a handful of green salmonberries. I took them to be nice. They made my mouth water and my eyes wrinkle when I bit them. When Mr. Stevenson saw my bandage, he gave us each a stick of chewing gum. We skipped out the door, bypassing the mean lady and her crabapple trees.

The teacher glanced at me. One of the mothers stood near her, holding her daughter’s hand. Nancy, the little girl’s name was. We never played together. Nancy tugged away from her mother’s hand and ran over to me, her freckled nose wrinkled into a smile. Nancy’s eyelashes were red and very pale, like her hair and her skin. She wore a pleated skirt and matching sweater set. Her fingernails were clean, her anklets trimmed with pink scallops on their edges. I was ashamed of my own gray wrinkled socks. I hid my dirty hands.

“Do you want to come to my birthday party?” Nancy asked. “I’m having a party tomorrow and I’m inviting all the girls in the class. Do you want to come?”

“Okay,” I said. “I can come.”
“Good! Here’s where it is.” Nancy handed me a drawing of the way to her house. “It’s the blue one up the hill from the high school. Number three five one. Tomorrow at three o’clock. Bring me a present!”

All day I worried about the party. Other girls giggled and whispered, but nobody said anything to me. Lorraine wouldn’t talk, so there was no one to ask. I wasn’t sure what you did at a birthday party. I didn’t know what to bring for a present.

The next morning, I sat on the hill behind our old house and picked yadna, peeling the strings and biting the green wild celery. I went inside and showed my grandmother the map to Nancy’s house. I had decided on my last small box of Rice Krispies as a present.

“I’ll walk with you part of the way,” Grandma said. We set out up the hill, walking past Evergreen Bowl and through the cemetery. We stopped at the family plot to say hello to my great-grandmother and to my Uncle Benjamin, who had died when he was still a baby. When we walked up the hill and found number three five one, a blue house, Grandma said she didn’t like being in the neighborhood and disappeared back down the hill. I sat on the stone wall at the edge of the lawn a distance from the front door and watched a few cars stop. Women and little girls climbed out of the cars holding bright packages with ribbons and bows. I hadn’t wrapped my present. Mothers and daughters walked up the pavement and into the house.

I had brushed against one of those mothers at a bake sale. She smelled like an open can of vegetable soup. Her daughter, an unfriendly girl named Barbara, had brought to the bake sale a cake made of magic, frosted with whipped icing and festooned with multicolored sprinkles. When someone said that Barbara had decorated the cake herself, I was as amazed as though I’d been told she could fly. It was one more secret thing that only people who were different from me knew how to do: unknowable, enchanted people who prepared and ate unknowable, enchanted food.

Barbara was the only one who noticed me waiting. She stuck out her tongue and made an ugly face, holding her mother’s hand and pulling away. Barbara couldn’t read nearly as well as I could, but she was already a Blue-
bird. She and her mother were among the first to go into the blue house. She carried a bright package, and her mother’s shoes clicked on the pavement as they hurried up the walk.

After a while I followed my grandmother’s footsteps back down the hill, picking at my bandage as I walked. I thought about the gaily wrapped presents and mothers dressed in angora sweaters and high-heel shoes, long slender fingers with red-painted nails delicately holding their daughters’ clean hands. I walked down the hill and back to our old house. The closer I got to the village the happier I felt. Now I could eat my last box of Rice Krispies for tomorrow’s breakfast. Before long, I was skipping.