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WHERE THE CRAWDADS SING

A NOVEL

DELIA OWENS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Also by Delia Owens

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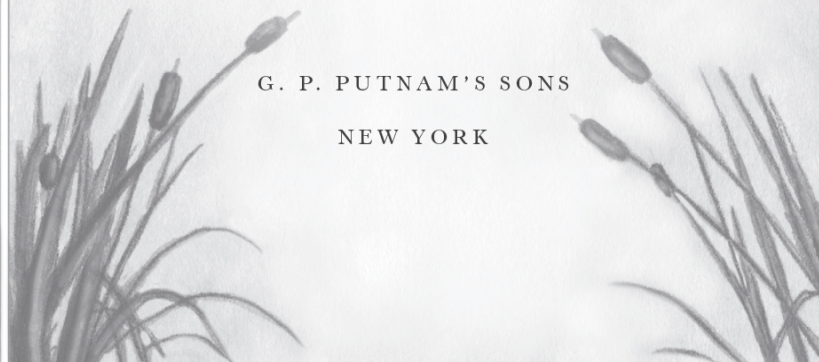
*Where
the
Crawdads
Sing*



DELIA OWENS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

NEW YORK



PUTNAM

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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Version _1

To Amanda, Margaret, and Barbara



*Here's to'd ya
If I never see'd ya
I never knowed ya.
I see'd ya
I knowed ya
I loved ya,
Forever.*

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PART 1

The Marsh



Prologue

1969

Marsh is not swamp. Marsh is a space of light, where grass grows in water, and water flows into the sky. Slow-moving creeks wander, carrying the orb of the sun with them to the sea, and long-legged birds lift with unexpected grace—as though not built to fly—against the roar of a thousand snow geese.

Then within the marsh, here and there, true swamp crawls into low-lying bogs, hidden in clammy forests. Swamp water is still and dark, having swallowed the light in its muddy throat. Even night crawlers are diurnal in this lair. There are sounds, of course, but compared to the marsh, the swamp is quiet because decomposition is cellular work. Life decays and reeks and returns to the rotted duff; a poignant wallow of death begetting life.

On the morning of October 30, 1969, the body of Chase Andrews lay in the swamp, which would have absorbed it silently, routinely. Hiding it for good. A swamp knows all about death, and doesn't necessarily define it as tragedy, certainly not a sin. But this morning two boys from the village rode their bikes out to the old fire tower and, from the third switchback, spotted his denim jacket.

1.

Ma

1952

The morning burned so August-hot, the marsh's moist breath hung the oaks and pines with fog. The palmetto patches stood unusually quiet except for the low, slow flap of the heron's wings lifting from the lagoon. And then, Kya, only six at the time, heard the screen door slap. Standing on the stool, she stopped scrubbing grits from the pot and lowered it into the basin of worn-out suds. No sounds now but her own breathing. Who had left the shack? Not Ma. She never let the door slam.

But when Kya ran to the porch, she saw her mother in a long brown skirt, kick pleats nipping at her ankles, as she walked down the sandy lane in high heels. The stubby-nosed shoes were fake alligator skin. Her only going-out pair. Kya wanted to holler out but knew not to rouse Pa, so opened the door and stood on the brick-'n'-board steps. From there she saw the blue train case Ma carried. Usually, with the confidence of a pup, Kya knew her mother would return with meat wrapped in greasy brown paper or with a chicken, head dangling down. But she never wore the gator heels, never took a case.

Ma always looked back where the foot lane met the road, one arm held high, white palm waving, as she turned onto the track, which wove through bog forests, cattail lagoons, and maybe—if the tide obliged—eventually into town. But today she walked on, unsteady in the ruts. Her tall figure emerged now and then through the holes of the forest until only swatches of white scarf flashed between the leaves. Kya sprinted to the spot she knew would bare the road; surely Ma would wave from there, but she arrived only in time to glimpse the blue case—the color so wrong for the woods—as it disappeared. A heaviness, thick as black-cotton mud, pushed her chest as she returned to the steps to wait.

Kya was the youngest of five, the others much older, though later she couldn't recall their ages. They lived with Ma and Pa, squeezed together like penned rabbits, in the rough-cut shack, its screened porch staring big-eyed from under the oaks.

Jodie, the brother closest to Kya, but still seven years older, stepped from the house and stood behind her. He had her same dark eyes and black hair; had taught her birdsongs, star names, how to steer the boat through saw grass.

“Ma’ll be back,” he said.

“I dunno. She’s wearin’ her gator shoes.”

“A ma don’t leave her kids. It ain’t in ’em.”

“You told me that fox left her babies.”

“Yeah, but that vixen got ’er leg all tore up. She’d’ve starved to death if she’d tried to feed herself ’n’ her kits. She was better off to leave ’em, heal herself up, then whelp more when she could raise ’em good. Ma ain’t starvin’, she’ll be back.” Jodie wasn’t nearly as sure as he sounded, but said it for Kya.

Her throat tight, she whispered, “But Ma’s carryin’ that blue case like she’s goin’ somewheres big.”

• • •

THE SHACK SAT BACK from the palmettos, which sprawled across sand flats to a necklace of green lagoons and, in the distance, all the marsh beyond. Miles of blade-grass so tough it grew in salt water, interrupted only by trees so bent they wore the shape of the wind. Oak forests bunched around the other sides of the shack and sheltered the closest lagoon, its surface so rich in life it churned. Salt air and gull-song drifted through the trees from the sea.

Claiming territory hadn’t changed much since the 1500s. The scattered marsh holdings weren’t legally described, just staked out natural—a creek boundary here, a dead oak there—by renegades. A man doesn’t set up a palmetto lean-to in a bog unless he’s on the run from somebody or at the end of his own road.

The marsh was guarded by a torn shoreline, labeled by early explorers as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” because riptides, furious winds, and shallow shoals wrecked ships like paper hats along what would become the North Carolina coast. One seaman’s journal read, “rang’d along the Shoar . . . but could discern no Entrance . . . A violent Storm overtook us . . . we were forced to get off to Sea, to secure Ourselves and Ship, and were driven by the Rapidity of a strong Current . . .

“The Land . . . being marshy and Swamps, we return’d towards our Ship . . . Discouragement of all such as should hereafter come into those Parts to settle.”

Those looking for serious land moved on, and this infamous marsh became a net, scooping up a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors, and fugitives dodging wars, taxes, or laws that they didn’t take to. The ones malaria didn’t kill or the swamp didn’t swallow bred into a woodsmen tribe of several races and multiple cultures, each of whom could fell a small forest with a hatchet and pack a buck for miles. Like river

rats, each had his own territory, yet had to fit into the fringe or simply disappear some day in the swamp. Two hundred years later, they were joined by runaway slaves, who escaped into the marsh and were called maroons, and freed slaves, penniless and beleaguered, who dispersed into the water-land because of scant options.

Maybe it was mean country, but not an inch was lean. Layers of life—squiggly sand crabs, mud-waddling crayfish, waterfowl, fish, shrimp, oysters, fatted deer, and plump geese—were piled on the land or in the water. A man who didn't mind scrabbling for supper would never starve.

It was now 1952, so some of the claims had been held by a string of disconnected, unrecorded persons for four centuries. Most before the Civil War. Others squatted on the land more recently, especially after the World Wars, when men came back broke and broke-up. The marsh did not confine them but defined them and, like any sacred ground, kept their secrets deep. No one cared that they held the land because nobody else wanted it. After all, it was wasteland bog.

Just like their whiskey, the marsh dwellers bootlegged their own laws—not like those burned onto stone tablets or inscribed on documents, but deeper ones, stamped in their genes. Ancient and natural, like those hatched from hawks and doves. When cornered, desperate, or isolated, man reverts to those instincts that aim straight at survival. Quick and just. They will always be the trump cards because they are passed on more frequently from one generation to the next than the gentler genes. It is not a morality, but simple math. Among themselves, doves fight as often as hawks.

• • •

MA DIDN'T COME BACK that day. No one spoke of it. Least of all Pa. Stinking of fish and drum likker, he clanked pot lids. "Whar's supper?"

Eyes downcast, the brothers and sisters shrugged. Pa dog-cussed, then limp-stepped out, back into the woods. There had been fights before; Ma had even left a time or two, but she always came back, scooping up whoever would be cuddled.

The two older sisters cooked a supper of red beans and cornbread, but no one sat to eat at the table, as they would have with Ma. Each dipped beans from the pot, flopped cornbread on top, and wandered off to eat on their floor mattresses or the faded sofa.

Kya couldn't eat. She sat on the porch steps, looking down the lane. Tall for her age, bone skinny, she had deep-tanned skin and straight hair, black and thick as crow wings.

Darkness put a stop to her lookout. Croaking frogs would drown the sounds of footsteps; even so, she lay on her porch bed, listening. Just that morning she'd awakened to fatback crackling in the iron skillet and whiffs of biscuits browning in the wood oven. Pulling up her bib overalls, she'd rushed into the kitchen to put the plates and forks out. Pick the weevils

from the grits. Most dawns, smiling wide, Ma hugged her—"Good morning, my special girl"—and the two of them moved about the chores, dancelike. Sometimes Ma sang folk songs or quoted nursery rhymes: "This little piggy went to market." Or she'd swing Kya into a jitterbug, their feet banging the plywood floor until the music of the battery-operated radio died, sounding as if it were singing to itself at the bottom of a barrel. Other mornings Ma spoke about adult things Kya didn't understand, but she figured Ma's words needed somewhere to go, so she absorbed them through her skin, as she poked more wood in the cookstove. Nodding like she knew.

Then, the hustle of getting everybody up and fed. Pa not there. He had two settings: silence and shouting. So it was just fine when he slept through, or didn't come home at all.

But this morning, Ma had been quiet; her smile lost, her eyes red. She'd tied a white scarf pirate style, low across her forehead, but the purple and yellow edges of a bruise spilled out. Right after breakfast, even before the dishes were washed, Ma had put a few personals in the train case and walked down the road.

• • •

THE NEXT MORNING, Kya took up her post again on the steps, her dark eyes boring down the lane like a tunnel waiting for a train. The marsh beyond was veiled in fog so low its cushy bottom sat right on the mud. Barefoot, Kya drummed her toes, twirled grass stems at doodlebugs, but a six-year-old can't sit long and soon she moseyed onto the tidal flats, sucking sounds pulling at her toes. Squatting at the edge of the clear water, she watched minnows dart between sunspots and shadows.

Jodie hollered to her from the palmettos. She stared; maybe he was coming with news. But as he wove through the spiky fronds, she knew by the way he moved, casual, that Ma wasn't home.

"Ya wanta play explorers?" he asked.

"Ya said ya're too old to play 'splorers."

"Nah, I just said that. Never too old. Race ya!"

They tore across the flats, then through the woods toward the beach. She squealed as he overtook her and laughed until they reached the large oak that jutted enormous arms over the sand. Jodie and their older brother, Murph, had hammered a few boards across the branches as a lookout tower and tree fort. Now, much of it was falling in, dangling from rusty nails.

Usually if she was allowed to crew at all it was as slave girl, bringing her brothers warm biscuits swiped from Ma's pan.

But today Jodie said, "You can be captain."

Kya raised her right arm in a charge. "Run off the Spaniards!" They broke off stick-swords and crashed through brambles, shouting and stabbing at the enemy.

Then—make-believe coming and going easily—she walked to a mossy log and sat. Silently, he joined her. He wanted to say something to get her mind off Ma, but no words came, so they watched the swimming shadows of water striders.

Kya returned to the porch steps later and waited for a long time, but, as she looked to the end of the lane, she never cried. Her face was still, her lips a simple thin line under searching eyes. But Ma didn't come back that day either.

Jodie

1952

After Ma left, over the next few weeks, Kya's oldest brother and two sisters drifted away too, as if by example. They had endured Pa's red-faced rages, which started as shouts, then escalated into fist-slugs, or backhanded punches, until one by one, they disappeared. They were nearly grown anyway. And later, just as she forgot their ages, she couldn't remember their real names, only that they were called Missy, Murph, and Mandy. On her porch mattress, Kya found a small pile of socks left by her sisters.

On the morning when Jodie was the only sibling left, Kya awakened to the *clatter-clank* and hot grease of breakfast. She dashed into the kitchen, thinking Ma was home frying corn fritters or hoecakes. But it was Jodie, standing at the woodstove, stirring grits. She smiled to hide the letdown, and he patted the top of her head, gently shushing her to be quiet: if they didn't wake Pa, they could eat alone. Jodie didn't know how to make biscuits, and there wasn't any bacon, so he cooked grits and scrambled eggs in lard, and they sat down together, silently exchanging glances and smiles.

They washed their dishes fast, then ran out the door toward the marsh, he in the lead. But just then Pa shouted and hobbled toward them. Impossibly lean, his frame seemed to flop about from poor gravity. His molars yellow as an old dog's teeth.

Kya looked up at Jodie. "We can run. Hide in the mossy place."

"It's okay. It'll be okay," he said.

• • •

LATER, NEAR SUNSET, Jodie found Kya on the beach staring at the sea. As he stepped up beside her, she didn't look at him but kept her eyes on the roiling waves. Still, she knew by the way he spoke that Pa had slugged his face.

"I hafta go, Kya. Can't live here no longer."

She almost turned to him, but didn't. Wanted to beg him not to leave her alone with Pa, but the words jammed up.

"When you're old enough you'll understand," he said. Kya wanted to holler out that she may be young, but she wasn't stupid. She knew Pa was the reason they all left; what she wondered was why no one took her with them. She'd thought of leaving too, but had nowhere to go and no bus money.

"Kya, ya be careful, hear. If anybody comes, don't go in the house. They can get ya there. Run deep in the marsh, hide in the bushes. Always cover yo' tracks; I learned ya how. And ya can hide from Pa, too." When she still didn't speak, he said good-bye and strode across the beach to the woods. Just before he stepped into the trees, she finally turned and watched him walk away.

"This little piggy stayed home," she said to the waves.

Breaking her freeze, she ran to the shack. Shouted his name down the hall, but Jodie's things were already gone, his floor bed stripped bare.

She sank onto his mattress, watching the last of that day slide down the wall. Light lingered after the sun, as it does, some of it pooling in the room, so that for a brief moment the lumpy beds and piles of old clothes took on more shape and color than the trees outside.

A gnawing hunger—such a mundane thing—surprised her. She walked to the kitchen and stood at the door. All her life the room had been warmed from baking bread, boiling butter beans, or bubbling fish stew. Now, it was stale, quiet, and dark. "Who's gonna cook?" she asked out loud. Could have asked, *Who's gonna dance?*

She lit a candle and poked at hot ashes in the woodstove, added kindling. Pumped the bellows till a flame caught, then more wood. The Frigidaire served as a cupboard because no electricity came near the shack. To keep the mold at bay, the door was propped open with the flyswatter. Still, greenish-black veins of mildew grew in every crevice.

Getting out leftovers, she said, "I'll tump the grits in lard, warm 'em up," which she did and ate from the pot, looking through the window for Pa. But he didn't come.

When light from the quarter moon finally touched the shack, she crawled into her porch bed—a lumpy mattress on the floor with real sheets covered in little blue roses that Ma had got at a yard sale—alone at night for the first time in her life.

At first, every few minutes, she sat up and peered through the screen. Listening for footsteps in the woods. She knew the shapes of all the trees; still some seemed to dart here and there, moving with the moon. For a while she was so stiff she couldn't swallow, but on cue, the familiar songs of tree frogs and katydids filled the night. More comforting than three blind mice with a carving knife. The darkness held an odor of sweetness, the earthy breath of frogs and salamanders who'd made it through one more stinky-hot day. The marsh snuggled in closer with a low fog, and she slept.

• • •

FOR THREE DAYS Pa didn't come and Kya boiled turnip greens from Ma's garden for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She'd walked out to the chicken coop for eggs but found it bare. Not a chicken or egg anywhere.

"Chicken shits! You're just a bunch of chicken shits!" She'd been meaning to tend them since Ma left but hadn't done much of anything. Now they'd escaped as a motley flock, clucking far in the trees beyond. She'd have to scatter grits, see if she could keep them close.

On the evening of the fourth day, Pa showed up with a bottle and sprawled across his bed.

Walking into the kitchen the next morning, he hollered, "Whar's ev'body got to?"

"I don't know," she said, not looking at him.

"Ya don't know much as a cur-dawg. Useless as tits on a boar hog."

Kya slipped quietly out the porch door, but walking along the beach searching for mussels, she smelled smoke and looked up to see a plume rising from the direction of the shack. Running as fast as she could, she broke through the trees and saw a bonfire blazing in the yard. Pa was throwing Ma's paintings, dresses, and books onto the flames.

"No!" Kya screamed. He didn't look at her, but threw the old battery-operated radio into the fire. Her face and arms burned as she reached toward the paintings, but the heat pushed her back.

She rushed to the shack to block Pa's return for more, locking eyes with him. Pa raised his backhand toward Kya, but she stood her ground. Suddenly, he turned and limp-stepped toward his boat.

Kya sank onto the brick 'n' boards, watching Ma's watercolors of the marsh smolder into ash. She sat until the sun set, until all the buttons glowed as embers and the memories of dancing the jitterbug with Ma melted into the flames.

Over the next few days, Kya learned from the mistakes of the others, and perhaps more from the minnows, how to live with him. Just keep out of the way, don't let him see you, dart from sunspots to shadows. Up and out of the house before he rose, she lived in the woods and water, then padded into the house to sleep in her bed on the porch as close to the marsh as she could get.

• • •

PA HAD FOUGHT GERMANY in the Second World War, where his left femur caught shrapnel and shattered, their last source of pride. His weekly disability checks, their only source of income. A week after Jodie left, the Frigidaire stood empty and hardly any turnips remained. When Kya walked into the kitchen that Monday morning, Pa pointed to a crumpled dollar and loose coins on the kitchen table.

“This here’ll get ya food fer the week. Thar ain’t no such thang as handouts,” he said. “Ever’tang cost sump’m, and fer the money ya gotta keep the house up, stove wood c’lected, and warsh the laundree.”

For the first time ever Kya walked alone toward the village of Barkley Cove to buy groceries—*this little piggy went to market*. She plodded through deep sand or black mud for four miles until the bay glistened ahead, the hamlet on its shore.

Everglades surrounded the town, mixing their salty haze with that of the ocean, which swelled in high tide on the other side of Main Street. Together the marsh and sea separated the village from the rest of the world, the only connection being the single-lane highway that limped into town on cracked cement and potholes.

There were two streets: Main ran along the oceanfront with a row of shops; the Piggly Wiggly grocery at one end, the Western Auto at the other, the diner in the middle. Mixed in there were Kress’s Five and Dime, a Penney’s (catalog only), Parker’s Bakery, and a Buster Brown Shoe Shop. Next to the Piggly was the Dog-Gone Beer Hall, which offered roasted hot dogs, red-hot chili, and fried shrimp served in folded paper boats. No ladies or children stepped inside because it wasn’t considered proper, but a take-out window had been cut out of the wall so they could order hot dogs and Nehi cola from the street. Coloreds couldn’t use the door or the window.

The other street, Broad, ran from the old highway straight toward the ocean and into Main, ending right there. So the only intersection in town was Main, Broad, and the Atlantic Ocean. The stores and businesses weren’t joined together as in most towns but were separated by small, vacant lots brushed with sea oats and palmettos, as if overnight the marsh had inched in. For more than two hundred years, sharp salty winds had weathered the cedar-shingled buildings to the color of rust, and the window frames, most painted white or blue, had flaked and cracked. Mostly, the village seemed tired of arguing with the elements, and simply sagged.

The town wharf, draped in frayed ropes and old pelicans, jutted into the small bay, whose water, when calm, reflected the reds and yellows of shrimp boats. Dirt roads, lined with small cedar houses, wound through the trees, around lagoons, and along the ocean on either end of the shops. Barkley Cove was quite literally a backwater town, bits scattered here and there among the estuaries and reeds like an egret’s nest flung by the wind.

Barefoot and dressed in too-short bib overalls, Kya stood where the marsh track met the road. Biting her lip, wanting to run home. She couldn’t reckon what she’d say to people; how she’d figure the grocery money. But hunger was a pushing thing, so she stepped onto Main and walked, head down, toward the Piggly Wiggly on a crumbling sidewalk that appeared now and then between grass clumps. As she approached the Five and Dime, she heard a commotion behind her and jumped to the side just as three boys, a few years older than she, sped by on bikes. The lead

boy looked back at her, laughing at the near miss, and then almost collided with a woman stepping from the store.

“CHASE ANDREWS, you get back here! All three of you boys.” They pedaled a few more yards, then thought better of it and returned to the woman, Miss Pansy Price, saleslady in fabric and notions. Her family had once owned the largest farm on the outskirts of the marsh and, although they were forced to sell out long ago, she continued her role as genteel landowner. Which wasn’t easy living in a tiny apartment above the diner. Miss Pansy usually wore hats shaped like silk turbans, and this morning her headwear was pink, setting off red lipstick and splotches of rouge.

She scolded the boys. “I’ve a mind to tell y’all’s mamas about this. Or better, yo’ papas. Ridin’ fast like that on the sidewalk, nearly runnin’ me over. What ya got to say for yo’self, Chase?”

He had the sleekest bike—red seat and chrome handlebars, raised up. “We’re sorry, Miss Pansy, we didn’t see ya ’cause that girl over yonder got in the way.” Chase, tanned with dark hair, pointed at Kya, who had stepped back and stood half inside a myrtle shrub.

“Never mind her. You cain’t go blamin’ yo’ sins on somebody else, not even swamp trash. Now, you boys gotta do a good deed, make up fer this. There goes Miss Arial with her groceries, go help carry ’em to her truck. And put yo’ shirttails in.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the boys said as they biked toward Miss Arial, who had taught them all second grade.

Kya knew that the parents of the dark-haired boy owned the Western Auto store, which was why he rode the snazziest bike. She’d seen him unloading big cardboard boxes of merchandise from the truck, packing it in, but she had never spoken a word to him or the others.

She waited a few minutes, then, head low again, walked toward the grocery. Inside the Piggly Wiggly, Kya studied the selection of grits and chose a one-pound bag of coarse ground yellow because a red tag hung from the top—a *special of the week*. Like Ma taught her. She fretted in the aisle until no other customers stood at the register, then walked up and faced the checkout lady, Mrs. Singletary, who asked, “Where’s ya mama at?” Mrs. Singletary’s hair was cut short, curled tight, and colored purple as an iris in sunlight.

“Doin’ chores, ma’am.”

“Well, ya got money for the grits, or don’t ya?”

“Yes’m.” Not knowing how to count the exact amount, she laid down the whole dollar.

Mrs. Singletary wondered if the child knew the difference in the coins, so as she placed the change into Kya’s open palm she counted slowly, “Twenty-five, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, eighty-five and three pennies. ’Cause the grits cost twelve cents.”

Kya felt sick to her stomach. Was she supposed to count something back? She stared to the puzzle of coins in her palm.

Mrs. Singletary seemed to soften. “Okay, then. Git on with ya.”

Kya dashed from the store and walked as fast as she could toward the marsh track. Plenty of times, Ma had told her, “Never run in town or people’ll think you stole something.” But as soon as Kya reached the sandy track, she ran a good half mile. Then speed-walked the rest.

Back home, thinking she knew how to fix grits, she threw them into boiling water like Ma had done, but they lumped up all together in one big ball that burned on the bottom and stayed raw in the middle. So rubbery she could only eat a few bites, so she searched the garden again and found a few more turnip greens between the goldenrod. Then boiled them up and ate them all, slurping down the pot likker.

In a few days she got the hang of fixing grits, although no matter how hard she stirred, they lumped up some. The next week she bought backbones—marked with a red tag—and boiled them with grits and collard greens in a mush that tasted fine.

Kya had done the laundry plenty with Ma, so knew how to scrub clothes on the rub board under the yard spigot with bars of lye soap. Pa’s overalls were so heavy wet she couldn’t wring them out with her tiny hands, and couldn’t reach the line to hang them, so draped them sopping over the palmetto fronds at the edge of the woods.

She and Pa did this two-step, living apart in the same shack, sometimes not seeing each other for days. Almost never speaking. She tidied up after herself and after him, like a serious little woman. She wasn’t near enough of a cook to fix meals for him—he usually wasn’t there anyway—but she made his bed, picked up, swept up, and washed the dishes most of the time. Not because she’d been told, but because it was the only way to keep the shack decent for Ma’s return.

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MA HAD ALWAYS SAID the autumn moon showed up for Kya’s birthday. So even though she couldn’t remember the date of her birth, one evening when the moon rose swollen and golden from the lagoon, Kya said to herself, “I reckon I’m seven.” Pa never mentioned it; certainly there was no cake. He didn’t say anything about her going to school either, and she, not knowing much about it, was too afraid to bring it up.

Surely Ma would come back for her birthday, so the morning after the harvest moon she put on the calico dress and stared down the lane. Kya willed Ma to be walking toward the shack, still in her alligator shoes and long skirt. When no one came, she got the pot of grits and walked through the woods to the seashore. Hands to her mouth, she held her head back and called, “*Kee-ow, kee-ow, kee-ow.*” Specks of silver appeared in the sky from up and down the beach, from over the surf.

“Here they come. I can’t count as high as that many gulls are,” she said.

Crying and screeching, the birds swirled and dived, hovered near her face, and landed as she tossed grits to them. Finally, they quieted and

stood about preening, and she sat on the sand, her legs folded to the side. One large gull settled onto the sand near Kya.

“It’s my birthday,” she told the bird.