

Chapter 1) By the Bay

Those who dwell among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. The more clearly, we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe, the less taste we shall have for destruction. —Rachel Carson

There is a tiny village called Oyster Bay set on the edge of a pristine estuary, on the southern coast of Washington state. All around Oyster Bay is an area rich in wildlife, old growth forests, mudflats and salt marshes. It is remote and yet not removed from human drama and conflict.

Alberta Evans grew up in this rain drenched oystering town. She lived in a tall white house. It was built in 1898 for an unremarkable state senator. In the 1970s when Alberta's family moved in, it was tired and cracked but had intriguing elements from its glory days. It had a golden oak front door inset with leaded glass and stained-glass thistles in the center. On the rare sunny days, the light would leave purple and green patches on the tile entryway. The eaves of the second story curved slightly upwards on the end like a Japanese pagoda. In the living room, there were leaded glass windows that wrapped around the room and sent rainbows over the tops of the bookcases. What was extraordinary was the number of built-in bookcases throughout the house. They all had doors with leaded glass windows and keyholes for keys that Alberta had never seen. There were two bookcases on either side of the fireplace that were at least six feet tall. There were other built-in bookcases throughout the house.

Her parents must have had thousands of books! There were old anatomy books with color plates and a 1941 edition of Roger Tory Peterson's *A Field Guide to Western Birds*. There were leather-bound copies of the usual English classics; Hardy, Dickens and the Bronte Sisters. There was an old leather-bound copy of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* with gilt printing on the outside and an inscription of love from Alberta's father to Alberta's mother.

Dozens of Pogo Possum books that her mother had collected and were off limits to her. Cartoon possums and alligators with porkpie hats were intriguing but she was not allowed to take them from the shelf.

Alberta was both fascinated and overwhelmed by Rachel Carson's books, *Under the Sea Wind*, *The Sea Around Us* and *Silent Spring*. Sometimes, in the evening, her mother read bits out loud as though they were poetry. Rachel Carson's warning of a poisoned world

where no birds sang imbued Alberta with a deep longing to listen to all the local birdsong and chatter. In time, she could name certain birds by only their song. That opening dystopian vision of a poisoned world was a springboard that set her on a quest to learn more. It was after she first heard the opening chapter of *Silent Spring* that she adopted the *Field Guide to Western Birds* as her own and carried it in her bag. She never returned it to the bookshelf. The books may have been stored behind glass doors, but they didn't go unread. They were tickets to a thousand different times and places and fed her inquisitive young mind.

The old house had ample nooks and crannies to steal away and read but her favorite place was high up in a massive western red cedar tree that grew at the front of her house. The house was set back from the road and a brick pathway made its way to the front porch. Tufts of spongy moss grew between the bricks and lichen coated the fence. From high up in the cedar tree, she could see anyone coming or going into the house without being noticed by anyone else. She could read undisturbed or be hidden from her sister's critical eye.

Alberta needed a refuge. The tree was perfect. There were several sets of branches that formed a series of human sized nests. She used these as natural blinds for bird-watching. The cedar boughs sheltered her from wind and rain and made her virtually invisible. Sometimes, she would climb up her tree to just think or settle herself when she was hurt or angry. Often, she brought books with her to read or a journal to write in. She carried these things in a well-stained cotton bag that she slung across her body as she moved up and down the old red cedar. At the highest climbable point, she could see over the trees below and look out at the bay. Sometimes the fog and mist would obscure her view, but she could always smell the sea air mixed with the rich loamy scent of the surrounding forest. High up in her cozy aerie, she felt a part of the natural world and endlessly grateful to be there.

