

Excerpt *Hot Wheels*
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1. Princess

One Day Earlier

Kung, Haida Gwaii: 11 May 2076

Raven Rocksong curls in repose. Migrating sunrays fall on facial skin. The radiant heat begs a response. Her eyelashes open, and the glare overwhelms the exposed retinas. She bolts upright, kicks blankets aside.

Logs in the downstairs stove, which stoked evening warmth, have since cooled to tepid ash. Foot bottoms greet icy floor as goosebumps erupt on forearms.

Any colder and I'd see my breath.

And what am I hearing outside?

Voices of folks busy and about.

It's way past dawn. I've overslept
and breakfast has come and gone.

Crows are poking at fern shoots, scavenging for litter beneath the spruce boughs. The view through the window glass is marred with watermarks and splotches of grime.

Another of my errant chores.

If Headpa notices he'll say

I'm not grateful for glass that
cost two yellow-cedar carvings.

Oh well, the scrub can wait
for when I'm not so late.

She tiptoes to the dresser whose broad top hosts a water basin and hairbrush.

Water splashes on chestnut skin

and dark-brown eyes. Blood pulses
through arteries. My senses are
awakened to familiar roles. One
more day to breathe and thrive.

She checks her mirror image then alters facial muscles to look older.
She hikes the nightshirt overhead and eyes doughy adolescent curves.
The nightshirt smells off, but not bad enough to wash.

Must be the frequent stints
in the women's sweat lodge
which is fun again, 'cuz I'm not
teased about "little girl" buds.
This past winter, my breasts
have blossomed out at last.

Raven brushes away snarls and recalls yesterday when she watched
the night sky with Jade. He pointed out constellations and two planets
and drew her eyes to bright frisbees slow poking amid the stars.

His eyes stole glances at my curves
and my long black hair. His fingers
strayed to sidelong braids when
he thought I wasn't looking.

Jade Runner has strong arms, large hands and dark piercing eyes.
Gals flit about him like homesick gnats. Before adolescence took hold,
Jade was her loyal companion and go-to buddy for dozens of childish
pranks.

Nowadays we've grown apart.
He hangs out with the fishers,
while I help Goodma in the garden
or do errands for Headpa's carvers.

She rues the fishy odor that sluffs off Jade's skin and clothes. The
smell reminds her of life in Kung where everything centers around
catching and cooking fish. It would take a month in Tsawwassen to
sweeten his rotten aura.

I need his companionship for
the study course in the megadome,

else my parents won't allow it.
That's why I've played on his
fondness for the night sky.
I've almost convinced him
to take the astronomy course.

She often daydreams about wandering among skyscrapers and speaking English with its brisk vowels and rapid cadences. City folk speak at fast clips, unlike Haida's whooshes and hisses that echo wind and sea. A stint in the megadome ought to show me wonders that have nothing to do with fish.

Oddly enough, she hasn't found the right study course for herself. The acquired skills must benefit Kung, like the horticulture course that Goodma took when *she* was a teenager.

Headpa is the band's chief carver of Haida icons which are traded for metal tools, whereas Goodma cares for the village garden where she nurtures plants and herbs. And Jade's headpa is Kung's chief fisher.

Raven is the only child of her family. Jade is the eldest son of his. Both families are revered in the band, so a union between offspring is presumed. She has been dangled as bait, and Jade has been aimed like an arrow at a tender doe.

Easier to stop November rains
than to escape my future,
a life partnership with Jade.

Once she becomes his sidekick, she'll toil in Kung for the rest of her life. She hopes to visit Tsawwassen before she's gone to earth like the roots of a Sitka spruce.

Raven tunnels her legs into Indian hemp trousers. The fit is loose but can be tied snugly at the waist. She dons a mackinaw that has down-filled squares arrayed in two colors like a checkerboard. It looks bulky and hides her curves, but it keeps the cold and dampness out. Deerskin moccasins safeguard feet from scrapes and ward off fungus between her toes. She fastens ankle guards to protect skin from nasty brambles. The cone hat has a stubby visor extending all around. It shades the high sun and keeps rain from soaking her neck or blinding her eyes.

She scampers down the ladder to the ground floor, her bladder crying for release. She heads for the no-frills outhouse which is so typical of Kung. Dig a deep hole and then cover it with a wooden platform and a circular opening. People straddle the hole and drop their crap in the pit. Every week, herbal enzymes are added to kill the smell. But the stink never goes away.

Business done, she cleans with the last handful of peatmoss. Only a few crumbs are left.

Just my luck! I'll hafta
fetch new supplies.

The longhouse has a slanted roof coated with thin-film solar panels. Its walls are made of redcedar logs, one atop another and each notched at the corners for a tight fit.

Last autumn Raven and several youngsters stuffed fresh moss in the cracks. As Raven nears the longhouse, there are clumps of peatmoss still visible, proving the job was well done.

A tall mast rises above the roof on which three blades of a wind-turbine spin quietly. At the crest of the roof, a cistern rises above a flat wooden platform. The cistern holds enough water for the dog days of summer, so long as nobody uses too much. Last summer a [GREENS](#) keeper brought a double-mesh screen to fit over the top. The rainwater drips through, but the screens catch small twigs, dead bugs and bits of dried leaves.

She enters the longhouse. The entire band can fit inside for special meetings or feasts. Most days the longhouse hosts but a handful who work indoors and babysit the nursery.

Across the ceiling are light tubes that brighten the place for those on the spindle, loom or needle bobber. Near the walls are rows of dried bark, fireweed and root fibers hanging from the rafters. When the weather turns mean, elder women will splice and weave the fibers into baskets or clothes. Fishers choose the toughest strands of fireweed and weave them for fishnet repairs.

Granny Warm Bear squats cross-legged on a floor cushion. She's knitting the 2nd-sleeve of a Cowichan sweater. The old woman looks up and shakes her head. "Wonders never cease. The *princess* is awake at last."

Raven cringes, for the gibe is deserved. Granny has plenty of barbed hooks for slackers. They cut deep, but they aren't mean-spirited. Her hawklike nose looks intimidating, but laugh lines on either side betray a kindhearted nature. Every kid in Kung is her favorite grandchild.

Nearby in an ornate basket, Crying Loud slumbers as quiet as a bear in winter.

Must've played out her lungs,
resting up for another wail.

The widow Ingrid has her hands on a swath of fabric. Her foot prods the drive pedal while cloth nudges ahead under the needle bobber. Her facial skin is cracked and lumpy as dried mud. She glances up from the stitch machine, her eyes bland and hollow as a ghost's. Last winter she lost her husband in a hunting accident.

At room center a workstation sits on a small table cluttered with plastic reference cards. Ingrid's son Edgar peeks out from the computer monitor and offers Raven a dubious grin. She returns a venomous scowl that sends him ducking for cover behind the flatview.

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She hasn't forgiven Edgar for being a stinking rat. He may own the best computer skills in Kung, but he got her barred from the computer for a whole month. He conned her to playing a forbidden game that featured adventures in a space colony. She couldn't pass up the chance to explore a [soupcan](#) any more than she could've spurned a handful of hazelnuts.

The game gave her a welcome escape from the usual online fare. Normal webcasts drone on about stuff that folks already know. They're dull orations from elders explaining how to perform fishwife chores. In-between are weather reports and forest-fire alerts. Then more long-winded anecdotes for baking the tastiest fish or preserving berries all winter long. Tips for gathering herbs fall way down the list.

Haida elders filter out programs about life in the megadome or outer space. The hokey games that get past elders are totally useless. Adults don't want kids getting ideas about lures outside of Haida Gwaii. Other than English classes, Raven finds the webcasts dull as raindrops.

Soon as Edgar said "soupcan",

he knew I couldn't refuse,
so I jumped on it like a seagull
after fish offal. My big mistake
was letting him use *my* password.

Edgar stays hidden, unwilling to meet her gaze. A guilty conscience, she reckons as she continues to glare at the metal backing as if her anger can bore right through.

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Raven recalls why she entered the longhouse. "I need peatmoss," she mumbles, more to herself than anyone else.

Granny looks up from her knitting. "Ha! About time you got caught. *You* know where the moss is."

Raven heads for the bin of peatmoss. She tilts the bin and empties most of it in a bentwood box. She hopes Granny won't notice the small bit that's left.

Else I'll be gathering loads of
peatmoss along with the berries.

As she hoists the bentwood box and starts for the outhouse, Granny snarls, "Hold it! You forgot clubmoss spores."

Granny's knee joints crackle as she rises from the cushion of cedar boughs. She waddles to the wall cabinet and picks up a yellow-cedar urn. She pours powdered spores, mixing them with peatmoss.

"You sure don't [wanna](#) give the whole village fanny rash," says Granny.

Raven grins as she imagines pompous adults scratching their butts.

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She trudges to the outhouse and recalls how Edgar suckered her into playing the video game. He didn't mention the game would be charged to Kung's account. Nor did he log himself on, for she was already online. As the keeper of village funds, Headpa spotted the errant charge. He accused her of stealing band money, though the charge was small. It couldn't've bought enough sticklebacks to feed the village dogs. But Headpa scolded her in front of the whole village and revoked her computer privileges.

Edgar never said a word, never owned up to his part in the escapade. His betrayal has come at the worst time. It gives Headpa another reason to block her efforts to study in Tsawwassen.

She dumps the peatmoss for others who'll use the outhouse.

First chore is done.

Who says I'm a slacker?

It's just Headpa's phobia,
his fear I'll run and join
other youngsters who've
left their bands and found
good jobs in the megadome.

I just wanna chance to study.

And maybe score an invite
to visit the soup cans.

Headpa is a throwback. He has championed the old ways ever since the changeover made traditional lifestyles possible. He's thick with the elders of Masset, Sandspit and Haida Town.

She recalls her first childhood memory when she overheard two GREENS keepers jawing with Headpa. They wanted to take away Kung's motorboats and recycle the aluminum. In return they offered to install thin-film solar panels on the longhouse roof. The motors had long since been removed after the supply of fuel had gone dry. Kung had already sold its two pickups, but villagers had kept the skiffs just in case, even though a team of fishers in a war canoe could paddle as fast as powered boats.

She doesn't begrudge the many good effects the changeover has had on life in the archipelago. Haida Gwaiians have more say-so over their lands, but it's a double-edged gift. The cost of self-esteem and revived traditional culture has meant living without power tools. Canoe makers are forced to use axes or hand chisels. Diesel boats, cars and highways have become distant memories. Masset store no longer stocks fancy made-to-order clothes or labor-saving gadgets.

Raven has caught adults griping:

“No more miracle pills for my aches and pains,” one said. “I'd love to chew deviled sweets, right now,” said another. “Easier to make grocery

lists with ballpoint pens,” an elder said. “Disposable razors used to give close shaves without nasty cuts.”

“I hate washing dirty diapers!” complained a new goodma. “Where did the throwaways go?”

Headpa never budes when it comes to enforcing the hard line of adult mandates. He blocks news from [Tsawwassen](#). He claims outsiders are bad influences for youngsters. Whatever his aim, it hasn't worked.

I've asked Goodma about things she saw
when she spent six months in Tsawwassen.
I've asked GREENS on Langara Island
who've showed me the outside world.

Headpa hasn't gotten over the death of his older brother. Ten years older than Headpa, Squirrel Ears earned his name because of his knack of hearing wild game before anyone else. He found work as a lubber on a trimaran that brought supplies to populous coastal communities like Masset. For a while Squirrel Ears worked at a fish farm, then he went and found work in the megadome. His occasional letters gave no signs of distress. It was a total shock when the band learned of his death from a drug overdose.

His brother's tragic fate burns like a fire-pit stone in Headpa's mind. He reckons the same thing will befall any youngster who leaves Kung. He distrusts outsiders, especially city folk. Without good reasons he suspects GREENS keepers of mischief. He pits them with the poachers, loggers or diamond drillers who exploited the islands before the changeover. It doesn't matter if commercial logging, fishing and open-sea fishfarms have since been removed. Headpa rants about the young who've left their bands to seek affluent lifestyles in Tsawwassen or [Big Island](#).

The world is deeper than
what's on a pond's surface.
I wanna dive down and see
Tsawwassen for myself.

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Raven spots Headpa entering the longhouse. She sneaks in behind

him and watches as he waves a battered teapot.

“Warm Bear,” his deep voice booms, “haven't you finished that sweater yet?”

“Humph!” hoots Granny. “Would've finished two moons ago if folks wouldn't barge in so often. I s'poze you want hot tea.” Granny struggles to her feet. “Gimmie your pot, Long Hand. Go take that fresh one off the stove.”

Headpa relinquishes the empty pot and follows her to the Franklin stove.

“Before you go, you might share a cup with your daughter.” Granny nods to the space behind his shoulder. “She's missed breakfast and has lots of berries to gather.”

Nonplussed, Headpa pivots full around. “Raven!” he booms. His tone mellows as he eyes her face. “You stalk like Raccoon in Bear's shadow.” He retrieves the warm pot and holds it out. “Grab a cup, Daughter. I'll pour.”

Raven lifts a tall wooden mug. It has Edgar's mark, and she grins at the irony. Once filled, the mug is warm in her hands. She gulps down half of its contents.

“More?”

“I'm solid,” she blurts in English. Then regrets the slip as soon as the words are out. His anger appears in frowning eyes.

“City-slicker talk,” he growls loud enough to sting her ears.

Raven doesn't flinch. “Someone's gotta read English, so we know how to mix varnish for canoes.”

“That's different,” he grumps. “Just as well you're barred from the computer. You might do some chores for a change. Help prepare the evening feast.” He sighs. “Though I don't hold much hope. The older you grow, the worse you get.”

It isn't the 1st-time Raven has heard this harangue. If it isn't Haida lore, it must be bad. Headpa goes overboard when he harps on the pantheons of eagles, ravens and salmon. He ignores all else.

He loves to load her down with extra chores. Last winter he asked her to sit all afternoon in the carver's hut, painting colored lines on bentwood boxes. After two hours she was bored to death. She couldn't see how the boxes would be more useful with colored lines or not. She

gathered the paints, went outside and painted eagles and ravens on new baidarkas. Headpa chewed her out for wasting pigment, but youngsters and some adults have praised the emblems.

“Something kept you awake last night,” Headpa is saying. “What was it, Daughter? Tell the truth.”

“I went star gazing with Jade,” says Raven, knowing it's the last thing he expects.

Headpa is speechless for a good three seconds. A new record, she judges and files the lapse for future reference. The bewilderment on his face evolves to simple joy.

“Star gazing with Jade?” he echoes. “That's good, Daughter.” He takes a deep breath, his eyes squinting with pride. “A fine young man. Jade is a shrewd fisher. Let's hope you showed respect, behaved like a young woman worthy of his home.”

“Jade showed me how Big Bear circles around but always points at the North Star. We tracked two frisbees and spotted Jupiter and Mars. It was fun.”

He nods absently as if the details don't matter. “I'm proud of you, Daughter. Keep at it. Other young women in the village aren't so choosy as you. They've taken a liking to young Jade.”

She crinkles her nose. “How's the orca coming?”

Never hurts to feign
interest in his work.

“Another week before it's finished,” he says. “There are small details to add. Important delicate touches, else the orca would be dead stone, a mere shadow of itself, not the proud swimmer, our spirit guide.”

“One of your 'spirit guides' scared me half to death. Its tail splashed my face and almost overturned the baidarka.”

“Nonsense, Raven,” he growls. “We don't hunt orcas, so they needn't fear us. When they swim close, they're just curious.”

She has her doubts. Even Jade has shared her concerns about the danger of large sea creatures swamping small craft.

Headpa turns to leave. “I'm back to the carver's hut. I wish you a good day's gathering, Daughter.”

She watches him go, his mind forever fixed on the old ways.

Crying Loud awakes. She thrashes in her crib and lets out a piercing wail that befits her name.

“Headpa's loud voice wakes her every morning,” laments Granny.

Laughing Bough, the infant's goodma, is nowhere around. She leaves her infant daughter at the nursery whenever she goes out with the fishers. Ingrid is absorbed with her stitching. She has become even more withdrawn since her husband's death, no doubt wrapped in her sorrow. Granny shrugs and then returns to her knitting.

Raven is elected by default. She approaches the ornate basket and lifts Crying Loud in her arms. Sniffing for odors, she feels the infant's swaddled bottom. Thankfully it's dry.

She rubs the infant's back and tender scalp until its yelps subside, then shifts from foot to foot, rocking gently. After a while she returns the infant to her basket and shows her a colorful driftwood rattle. Crying Loud grips the rattle in a tiny hand and warbles happily.

“I guess Laughing Bough is out fishing again,” says Raven,

“Must tide her family over while she's away,” Granny says. “Have you forgotten? Laughing Bough will ride in the airship with elder Sophia when she goes for laser surgery.”

Raven recalls seeing white goo on the elder's eyes.

An extra stop at the Lighthouse
before going to Masset. It means
paddlers will need more berries
to go with the dried fish.

“Better start now or I'll never fill a basket.”

“Check the sunny places,” Granny suggests. “You'll find plenty. And don't forget to forage for yourself.”

“I ain't my goodma's daughter for nothing.”

“Don't forget to gather more peatmoss.”

Raven sighs. “Yeh.”

Another chore for my forage.

What I get for sleeping late.

“You'll need a digging tool.” Granny gestures at the cabinet. “You might as well use it for harvesting a bark wedge.”

Raven resigns herself to the inevitable and gulps the last of the tea.
“Basket for salmonberries and backsack for peatmoss. I’ll carry another harness for the bark wedge, if I find one.”

Granny nods approvingly. “Don’t forget to warn the bears.”

“I’d rather sneak-up on ‘em.” Raven smiles impishly. “I’ll bring you a fat bear’s tongue.”

“Crazy girl! Behave and come back in one piece.”

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GREENS (acronym) Graphic Reports on Ecological, Environmental and Natural Sciences. GREENS is a public co-op sponsored by SOAR off-worlders. Dedicated to planetary science, the co-op gathers and disseminates useful knowledge to maximize the noösphere. [Back](#).

soupcan is the nickname for a cylindrical habitat in cislunar space. In plural reference, soupcans are often shortened to soups. These orbiting habitats have six-kilometer diameters and rotate to simulate earthlike gravity. Soupcans were 1st-envisioned by the Russian futurist Tsiolkovski, and later in the 20th-century by Gerard K. O'Neil. [Back](#).

wanna (verbal slang) want to. A bare infinitive verb. [Back](#).

Tsawwassen is a futuristic metropolis (urban plexus) suspended over the Fraser River delta in former British Columbia, Canada. The name may also refer to the quasi-province or Tsawwassen Coastal Preserve (TCP). [Back](#).

Big Island is the current name of former *Vancouver Island*. Two aboriginal tribes disputed the name change. As a compromise they settled for a generic name that offended neither. [Back](#).

frisbee (SOAR acronym) Freefloating Rotational Ingress Satellite for Bulk Export Exchange. 50 satellites move sequentially on identical and eccentric flightpaths. Frisbees are temporary warehouses for people or goods moving between low-earth orbit (LEO) and high-earth orbit (HEO).

Frisbees are massive and heavily shielded, unlike 20th-century satellites which seldom last beyond ten or twenty years. They've reduced travel costs between earth surface and the soupcans.

Superconducting magnetic hoops that equalize speeds between rendezvous spacecraft and frisbees have been proposed in Donald Kingsbury's *The Moon Goddess and the Son*, ©1986. This method may be original with the author. Similar ideas (deployed mass drivers) have been touted in NASA think tanks. [Back](#).

baidarka looks like a one- or two-person kayak. Baidarkas are made of natural, indigenous materials, such as tanned animal hides or hollowed

bolts of yellow or redcedar. The upper covering is usually fitted separately. [Back](#).