

# King Tide

---

*Elisa Carlsen*

Righty, from Surf Pines, hitched a ride to my house in the back of an 89' silver-blue Toyota T-100. She was one of six free chickens my neighbor Rudi called to tell me about. He knew a guy who knew a guy and was offering to give me and my partner a ride to get them. We sat in the back on black vinyl pull-down seats, squashed in, knees touching. Nearing our destination, Rudi adjusted the rearview mirror to look at us, squinted, and dourly said, "Get ready for a change in weather. It's always miserable in Surf Pines." And just like that, we passed through its gates into a thick fog bank and were immediately ten degrees colder. Through the thick, gray fog, we meandered on a narrow road up and over the coastal dunes.

As we pulled up to the house, we could tell that these chickens came from money. Their owner greeted us with a warm smile. He walked us to the immaculate coop with newly oiled cedar shake shingles and fresh shavings on the floor. He began handing us chickens. Picking up a gray and white speckled one, he said, "Here's Righty. She's a Barred Rock with a right-leaning comb. And Lefty, well, she's the reverse of Righty." He stuttered as he held up one of three Rhode Island Reds. "And um, here's one of the red ones. Yeah, uh, I can't really tell them apart. You can name 'em, I guess." The last to go was Pepper, a beautiful Australorp with jet-black feathers and alluring confidence. He was reluctant to give her up. He held her for a long time, patted her head, and softly said goodbye.

Driving back under heavy gray skies, we leaned into an April storm. I turned around to check on our new chickens. Ruffled at 45 miles per hour, they bobbed their heads up and down and lifted their legs one at a time, unsure of their footing in the bed of the truck. They seemed worried. I looked at my partner. She was beaming. Responsibility comes naturally to her. I stared out the window and swallowed the sadness welling inside of me. I was hopelessly stuck on the North Coast of Oregon, heading home to a soggy river valley with six more reasons why it would be hard to leave.

I used to be good at leaving. Now I live in a place of impenetrable beauty of evergreen valleys where wind-sculpted Sitka grow in standing water, and the low-lying hills are layered in fir and stratified in cool greens and battleship grays. Everything everywhere, including me, is blended in a wash of fog and rain. It is a place where the absence of light, which is different than darkness, comes from being under the constant weight of water. I am under the water too, stuck in its mud for six years, lulled to stay longer by something not in the land but of it. After a long visit, a friend of mine hugged me goodbye and whispered, "*Oh, by the way, there's a water spirit on your*

*property that's in love with you. It doesn't want to let you go.*" I believe her.

I am not an ocean person. I was born in the high desert. I dream about dry land. I came to the coast brokenhearted after quitting a job where I helped the government develop a plan to kill thousands of cormorants nesting on an island at the mouth of the Columbia River under the umbrella of "salmon recovery." I was deeply ashamed of myself for my role in this project. Living in a place as mournful as the North Coast of Oregon can be, in some ways, was penance for me. In a very hasty moment, I spent all my money on a hundred-year-old, saltbox-style farmhouse with soft, weathered shingles on nearly three acres of rain in the Youngs River Valley, perched above Battle Creek Slough.

On my first night in the new house, I watched the fog rolling in from a patchwork of dikes that holds back the Youngs River from its miles-wide natural floodplain. Coyotes called from their dens up and down the valley. I thought about my life and how it was like a river's life – how I'd been formed by the force of things in my way, how I'd gotten lost in the meanders and ended here, at my lowest level, run out of ground. As I stood on my property, twenty-two feet above sea level, in a place that pulls rivers down from mountains, I thought about all the energy I spent getting here. In the dissipating light, I held my breath and wondered how my new home would change me. I had no choice but to accept that it would. I was stuck in the very dark, very deep Clatsop muck – housebroke and out of moves.

Pepper was the one with all the moves. That beautiful Australorp was confident for a reason. There was no doubt she was the top chicken. The unnamed reds submitted to her and positioned themselves to do her bidding. Righty, a big but gentle chicken, was at the bottom of their social order. One day Pepper chased her into the wire fencing, and she injured her foot. Hobbling around the coop, the others sensed weakness and rushed over. Pepper watched as the reds took turns jumping on Righty's back and pecking the back of her head. As I rushed to stop them, she looked at me with rusty speckled eyes, tilted her head to one side and then the other as if to say – *what's the point?*

I spent late summer dangling from a ladder with a brush and pail, painting the barn red. Giving Righty a break from the other chickens, each morning, I'd let her out of the coop, and she'd follow me to the barn. She stayed so close to the ladder that by the end of the first day, she had four tiny barn-red paint drops on the base of her tail feathers. During breaks, we shared watermelon slices and listened to FM radio. Within weeks she gained weight and grew her feathers back. "Righty," I whispered to her one bright blue afternoon, "*maybe the point is not to suffer?*"

Not long after I finished the barn, I saw her favoring her right leg. In two days, she was so weak she could barely move. I put her in a basket and carried her to the garden, where we enjoyed a rare clear day, the kind that made living here make sense. I expected her to die that night. I did

not want her to suffer, but after googling how to kill a chicken, I knew I couldn't do it. We put her in our studio and committed to caring for her. I spent mornings with her pulling Tarot cards and listening to my favorite Leonard Cohen songs. We were this way for over a month – me in a state of not wanting to say goodbye, her in a state of trying to.

Goodbye came several weeks later when we buried her during a break in the rain behind the barn. Through tears and short breaths, I offered wisdom from the first law of thermodynamics – *our energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only change form...and so, we must change*. On her breast, we placed two ounces of sesame seeds, handfuls of mealworms, dried sage, and the deck of cards. A storm crept up the valley, and we returned to the house. Along the way, nudged between a stone and the fence, I noticed the Queen of Cups card lying on the ground. It must have fallen out on my way to the barn. I picked it up and put it in my back pocket. *Funny, I thought - the suit of Cups represents emotion, and emotion is water. And water, it feels like, is all I've been.*

All my water turned to snow when I went home to Nevada to be at my sister's side as she took her last breath the morning before her 48th birthday. Climbing the stairs to her house the day before she died, I looked up at the Sonoma Range. A mid-December storm capped the mountains white. They were as I remembered them, looming with rocky peaks and long canyon folds. Once inside, I took in the air of her house, the scented candles, and the smell of burnt coffee. Then I saw her in her hospice bed and realized that everything I knew at that moment in time was all I would ever know about her. That thought traveled down my legs, numbed my feet, and made it hard to stand and nearly impossible to step toward her to say goodbye. Time has passed, but some days I feel as though I'm still standing there.

Every winter, I promise myself, will be my last winter in Astoria. I've made six promises. This January, an atmospheric river brought five inches of rain over a few days. That storm combined with a *king tide* (the highest tide of winter) and caused Youngs River to swell. The dikes built a hundred years ago to drain the wetlands for cattle were not high enough to hold the surge of water. For nearly three hours, I watched the river spilling over the top, scouring the embankment, and filling the valley with a broad but shallow lake. I grabbed my phone to call a neighbor who runs cattle and is on the board of the local water district. In the six years I've been his neighbor, I've talked to him for less than five minutes.

"Hey, it's Elisa, your neighbor on Youngs River. I'm just letting you know the berm on Battle Creek is overflowing. I wasn't sure if you needed to move your cows. There's a lot of water coming down."

"Oh yeah. I just talked to Ted (another commissioner), and he said it's all over the valley. Water everywhere." He spoke slowly in declarative sentences. "It's a little early, I guess. High tide isn't until one, which isn't for another hour or so." He calmly said, "Yeah, this

happens every now and then."

"Oh," I say, not quite believing him.

"Yeah, with that extra storm surge, it's just really pushing the water in." He added, with a slight chuckle, "What can you do - you know? You can't really hold back the tide."

"No. I guess not." I laughed, but afterward, I wondered if he could appreciate the irony of his words. Or maybe he's forgotten he represents the expense of efforts made by men like him for hundreds of years to do just that.

The saltwater push of the king tide inundated the historic floodplain of Youngs River. Old channels were rediscovered, filled, and overflowed as the river dissipated its bridled energy to flood the lowlands. The dusky geese scattered to look for dry land. Gulls came in to replace them and float on ephemeral ponds. The emerald green of agrarian pastures turned a shallow blue. I watched two men brave the rescue of an old excavator that nearly flooded. I felt ecstatic from the disruption to the imposed order. I watched as one thing surrendered to another – rock to the river, river to rock, field to the pond, property to tide, and on *until I could see the act of surrender becoming one of creation*. I saw the story play out in the landscape before me, its force unfolding constantly. I could see it in myself and in my sister. I thought of the six years I've lived here feeling stuck, resisting but incapable of moving – like a river held back. Joy overwhelmed me as I saw it finally rushing over and finding its ground again. I spilled as the river spilled, and together, we flooded the valley.

As night came, the shallow water in the dark fields reflected the lights from distant homes. As usual, my thoughts turned to my sister – I wondered what I would tell her about this dark and glorious land she'd never seen. First, I'd tell her a story about my favorite chicken to try to get her to laugh. But what I'd want her to know is how terrified I was of every heavy night that came to me in this river valley, that this land has drained me, and how badly I had wanted to come home. Lastly, I would tell her that if I've learned anything from living here, it's that we are from the same river, and a river doesn't end when it reaches the ocean; it turns into the tide, becomes a wave, and goes home to a great blue dream.