

GRANDMOTHER'S SKULL



mother and father, two sons and one daughter lived by the great River Kobuk. Once they had been part of a large tribe with many families, but disease and war had killed all the others. Now they were only one family, and they knew no one else.

The sons were skillful hunters. There was plenty of game in the woods — caribou and bear, wolverine and fox. The family always had enough to eat. They never thought to travel down the river and visit the people by the sea.

The daughter's name was Neruvana. One day she went to fetch some water and saw a person who seemed to be growing from a tree trunk that was floating down the river. It was a young man paddling a kayak. She was astonished, for she'd never seen a kayak before, nor any person other than her mother and father and brothers. She ran home and told her family about it.

They all went down to the river to greet the stranger. Neruvana's father invited him to their house and made him welcome. That night they sat for hours talking to the young man. He told them he was from the people by the sea.

"What are you looking for?" the father asked him.

"I am looking for a wife," the young man answered with a smile.

The stranger stayed for many days. He went hunting with the brothers. He was a good hunter, and the family never grew tired of listening to his stories about the people who lived by the sea. One evening, after a month had passed, the father took the stranger aside.

"If you are really looking for a wife," he said, "you can marry my daughter. As you

know, we are the last of our people, and I have no other hope of finding a husband for her."

The stranger agreed to this, and he and Neruvana were soon married. At first they were happy, but after a few weeks, Neruvana's new husband became restless.

"I'm taking my wife reindeer hunting," the young man told her family. "We'll travel upriver in my kayak, and we'll be back when we've filled the boat with meat."

They traveled far upriver and made camp in a place Neruvana had never seen before. Each day her husband went out hunting and left her by herself. Sometimes he would be gone for two or three days at a time. Once he was gone for more than a week. She had no idea where he could be and was terrified that something might have happened to him. But at last he came back and told her it was time to go home to her family.

They paddled down to the house, and the young woman called to her mother and father. But no one came to the river to greet them. She ran ashore to find out what had happened, and when she came to her house, she saw a terrible sight. All of her family — her mother and father and two brothers — had been murdered. Someone had stabbed them to death as they lay sleeping.

Screaming and weeping with grief and horror, Neruvana ran back to the shore to find her husband. But when she came to the bank of the river, she was shocked to see her husband paddling quickly away. She shouted to him, and he called back that he would land, yet he continued paddling downstream. She ran after him along the bank.

"My husband, come back! Please come back!" she pleaded, but the strange young man only paddled more rapidly away from her, and soon the river carried him out of sight.

Neruvana thought she was having an awful nightmare, but she could not wake up from this bad dream. She stumbled back up the river toward her old home, not knowing where to go or what to do.

After a time, she came to a place where there was high, soft grass. In exhaustion and despair, she fell to her knees and sobbed until she was empty of tears. Finally she could cry no more, and she fell asleep.

When she woke, she heard a soft voice calling her name. At first she thought she must be dreaming, but again and again she heard the same voice.

"Neruvana," the voice called, "Neruvana, dig me out!"

Neruvana looked around and discovered that she was lying by an old grave. The voice was coming from beneath the earth. "Neruvana, dear child, dig me out!"

Neruvana began to dig. She used a stick and her bare hands to scratch through the earth, until at last she dug a little skull out of the ground. She held the skull in her hands. Magically, it spoke to her.

"Neruvana," the skull said, "do you know who I am?"

Neruvana shook her head.

Grandmother's Skull

"I am the skull of your grandmother. Now that you have dug me out of the earth, you will not die, for I am here to protect you. First, dear child, you must make yourself a shelter, for night is coming."

Neruvana placed the skull tenderly on the ground and gathered branches to make herself a shelter for the night. When she finished, the sun had already set and she was shivering with cold.

"Little granddaughter," the skull said, "we are freezing. Fetch some dry brushwood and make a fire."

Neruvana did as the skull asked, and that night she slept warm and safe beside the fire.

The next day, the skull told her to make herself a house out of tree trunks and earth. She followed the skull's instructions carefully, and by the end of the day, she had built herself a small house that was sturdy enough to shelter her through the long winter.

"Now you have a house that will keep you warm and dry," the grandmother's skull told her. "But you must have food, or you will surely die. Tomorrow you will learn how to hunt."

Neruvana's grandmother told her how to make weapons for hunting and how to build traps for catching rabbits and beaver. She knew all the best places for setting traps and told her where to find the caribou.

Neruvana became as skilled a hunter as her brothers had been. She built a storehouse for meat and soon filled it. She scraped and dried the skins of wolverine and fox to make warm clothes and blankets.

The winter snows came and covered the ground. The trees bent low under the heavy weight of ice and snow, and the river froze. The grandmother's skull taught Neruvana how to catch fish by chopping a hole through the deep ice on the river.

During the long, quiet nights of winter, Neruvana's grandmother told her many stories. She told her about the days of her own childhood, when many people lived by the river. She taught her the secrets of the animals and all the things she would ever need to know to live in the woods by herself.

One day the skull asked her a question. "Dear child, do you know who killed your father and mother and brothers?"

Neruvana had grown wise from listening to her grandmother's stories night after night. "I believe it was my husband who killed them," she said. "But I still don't understand why or how."

"He is an evil man, my granddaughter, not fit for the responsibility of marriage or fatherhood. He easily grew tired of his marriage to you, and he thought that if he killed your family, he could return to his own people and they would never know of his marriage. While you were camping in the woods, he traveled by foot to your family's house and killed your mother and father and brothers while they were sleeping. Then he re-

Grandmother's Skull

turned to fetch you and his kayak. He took you to your parents' camp and left you there, thinking you would die of hunger.

"My own husband was like him. That is why I took pity on you and my spirit returned to earth to help you. In the spring your husband will come back, believing you dead, and try to take this beautiful country for himself and his people. My grandchild, you must not allow him to live on the land of your ancestors. In the springtime, when the river thaws and the hunting begins, he will lead some of his people to this place. They will come in their kayaks. When they come, we must be ready for them. Build a shelter by the river. Every day, we will watch and wait. When your husband comes, we will know how to welcome him."

The winter passed. The sun's warmth soon melted the snow, and the river ice burst with the current and the heat. The land came to life again and everything turned green as spring arrived in the forest.

One day the grandmother said, "Today is the day your husband will come, dear child. We must be ready."

Neruvana took her grandmother's skull down to the hiding place and waited. It wasn't long before she saw many boats coming around the bend in the river. The travelers were people she didn't know, and she let them pass. Then, at the end of the line of boats, she saw her husband.

The young woman burst from her hiding place and stood tall on the bank of the river. "Boats! Boats!" she cried in a strong voice.

Her husband looked up and saw her standing there. His mouth fell open in surprise. "My wife! You're alive!" he called, and started paddling toward her.

"Now is the time," the grandmother's skull whispered, and Neruvana hurled the skull into the river. Immediately the water began to bubble and boil, making whirlpools that seized her husband's boat, dragging it down to the bottom of the river. But the skull came rolling back to the bank as if nothing had happened and lay at Neruvana's feet.

"Neruvana," her grandmother told her, "your husband is dead now. He can never hurt you again. Take me back to our house and bury me where you found me. Now you are free to go where you will, for I've taught you all you need to know to survive in this world. If you like, follow these people who passed by in the boats. They are good people, and you can find a place with them. Or perhaps you would rather follow the paths of this forest to where they lead you. Wherever you go, dear child, remember your grandmother is always near you."

So Neruvana buried her grandmother's skull and continued on her way. Whether she settled with the people of the sea or traveled on to some farther country, no one can say for sure. But wherever she went, she carried her grandmother's wisdom with her.