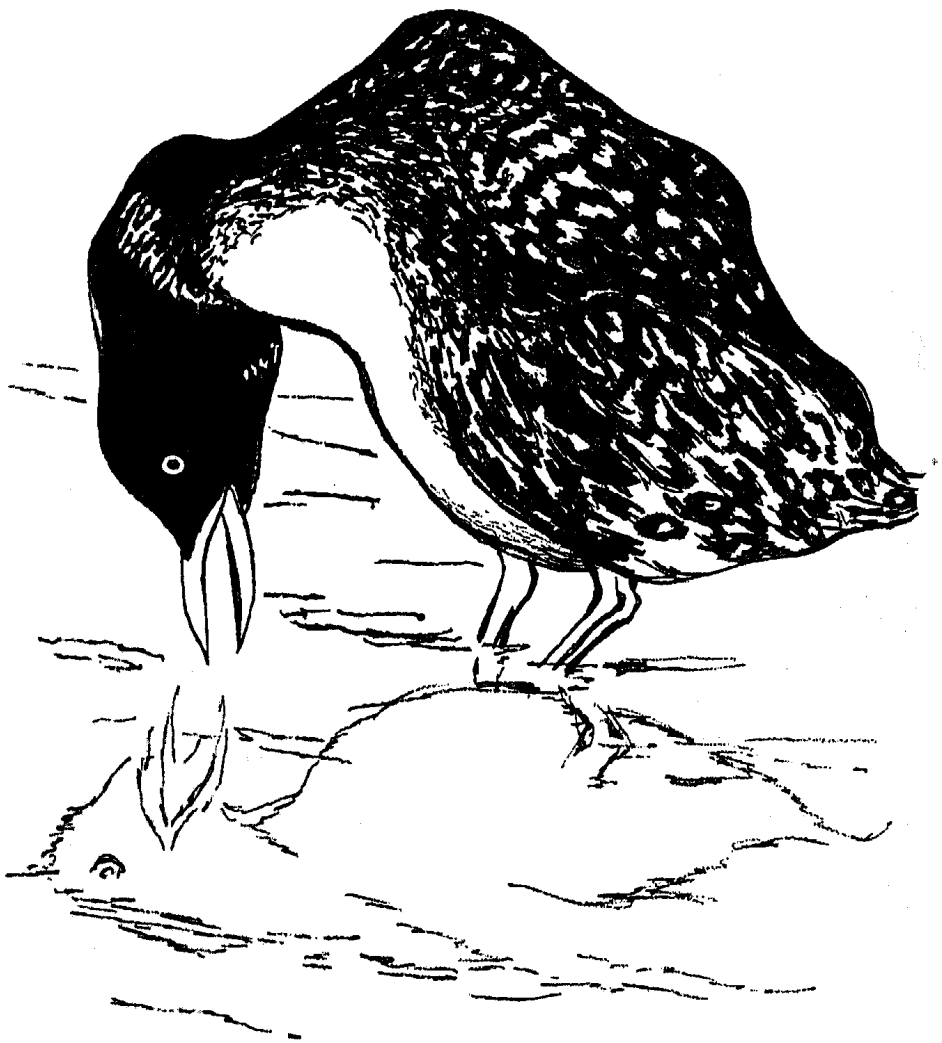


Loon Woman

A BACK country, rough and remote, a place of hills and woods, of clear streams and reed-rimmed lakes—this is Loon Woman's country. Except for a few fishermen and hunters who find their way there, and an occasional family which lives in a clearing in the forest, it is as lonely of people now as it was in Loon Woman's time. The villages cluster now, as anciently, alongside the river only after it has reached the rich lowland valley and collected all the little streams to itself and become muddy and broad and slow.

You may sometime be in Loon Woman's country, and you may see this thing which I will tell you of and which repeats itself from time to time. A hunter stands half concealed in the reeds by one of the lakes. Dark wings

beat clumsily over his head and a female loon lands on the lake, calling her raucous call. It sounds like crazy laughing mixed with crazy crying, and it reminds the hunter of Ishanihura who lived long, long ago and who came to be the Loon Woman. The hunter watches the loon. She paddles to shore and settles herself on the sand, where she gazes at her own upside-down image in the still lake-mirror. She preens her black-grey feathers and goes into an awkward dance, standing on one foot and shifting stiffly to the other and back again, turning her neck from side to side and pulling her head forward so that the band of white around her throat stands out. To the hunter, the band looks like a string of human hearts, old and shrunken and bleached to whiteness, and he remembers that Ishanihura wore a necklace like this one. Though he makes no sound, the air over the lake becomes alerted. Taking alarm, the loon dives. Too late. The arrow has already pierced the band of white and entered her heart. She goes under and comes up dead. The hunter retrieves his arrow and throws the bird aside where scavenging buzzards promptly find it. All this he does because he hopes thus to keep Ishanihura's ancient evil from his people.

This is Ishanihura's story:

In the beginning, Ishanihura was a young girl like any other. She grew up, one sister among nine brothers, beloved and cared for. The first-born was a son, Makikirèn, a gentle child, and so beautiful that his father and mother

sighed when they looked at him; they knew it is hard to guard such beauty. Ishanihura came next, as self-willed and passionate as her elder brother was beautiful. After her came eight more boys, and the earth-covered house in the clearing in the lonely hills was full.

The parents tried to teach their children the way of life: what to believe, what to do, and what not to do. The children knew how the world was created and about the beginnings of things. They learned the People's history, its songs and stories, and they learned the language of women. Ishanihura and her mother spoke only this language, and the father and brothers used it when speaking with them. Ishanihura learned to cook and to gather and store seeds, to make flour, to sew, and to make baskets. From their father the boys learned the language which men use among themselves; and they learned to hunt and trap and fish, to build shelters and houses, and to fashion tools.

It was a good life and it was the way. The father and mother should have been happy; but during the peaceful summers of childhood, their children playing nearby, the parents continued to feel an unease they could not name. Makikirèn grew tall and straight and ever more beautiful, and, because they felt him to be somehow threatened, they were much given to keeping him out of sight and away from the others and to sending him for longer and longer visits to his grandparents downriver. More and more, as he grew up, he travelled by himself, until one day he found his way up to the sky floor, where he made

friends with the Sky People. From that day, he spent much of his time there. Perhaps the sky floor was closer to the earth in ancient times than it is now, for we know that the wild geese and other high flying birds flew easily up into the sky world and that there were people like Makikirèn who came and went between earth and sky by way of the sky pole; and all this cannot be so easily done today.

To his sister it seemed that Makikirèn had quite disappeared from home. She questioned her mother about him at first, but with time it came to seem natural for him to be away. She no longer asked where he was.

Ishanihura reached the age of the once-a-moon periods, the age when a girl becomes a woman. She lived alone during her moon periods in a small earth-covered house, built for her alongside the big family house. Never a very happy or sunny child, she was more than ever restless and moody and discontent, and her parents thought that soon, very soon, they must arrange to have her visit the villages in the lowlands where, staying with her grandparents, she could make friends with her cousins and with girls her own age, and meet the young men of the lowlands. A husband would be chosen for her from among these men, sons of her parents' friends. Ishanihura was not much interested in meeting the lowland people, and as yet there were only vague plans with no time fixed for her going.

Behind the earth-covered house and some distance away in the trees there was a spring, and below, a shaded

pool fed by the spring. Here Ishanihura and her mother came to fetch water and to wash, and here her father and brothers came naked from the sweat house for their after-sweating plunge. It was a quiet woodland place, and Ishanihura liked to sit by the water looking into its dark depths and dreaming her own strange dark dreams. She was sitting so one day, running her hand idly through the water, when a single long human hair curled along one hand and arm as she raised it from the water. She took an end of the hair and held it out straight, wondering whose it was: not hers or her mother's, because it was too coarse; not her father's, because his was not so long as this one. Since no one but her family swam here, it must belong to one of her brothers.

Which brother?

She measured the hair against her own long hair. They were the same length.

Which brother?

She stroked the hair slowly between her fingers, down its length and down again while the day went from sun to shadow. Her mother called to her, and she wrapped the hair around one of the ties which held her own. As she stood up to go she saw her reflection in the pool, and, watching this dark, distorting image, she danced a strange stiff dance, flapping her arms and turning her head from side to side until her mother called again and Ishanihura ran quickly home.

After the evening meal, Ishanihura's father went to the sweat house for the night, taking the two older boys with

him. Makikirèn was never with the family these days. Ishanihura and her mother and the boys left at home sat by the fire for a while, and the children coaxed their mother to tell them a story.

She told them the long story of how the world was made, with valleys and mountains, springs and rivers and lakes, plants and trees, and finally, all the animals. From far above the earth, Eagle, the Creator, looked down upon it and it seemed complete, except that it had no people. Eagle called his two children to him, a son and a daughter, telling them to go down and live on the earth that there might be people there. They went and they were alone on the earth, just the two of them. The boy said to his sister, "Let us sleep together!" She did not answer him. Five times he asked her and after the fifth time, she said, "Why do you ask such a thing? You are my brother." He said, "We are alone. There are no other people. If we sleep together here, there will be children born and we will no longer be alone. That is why our father, Eagle, sent us down here." Then his sister consented and they slept together and created children. When they had done this, Eagle assigned his grandchildren to special places, some to one fold of hills, some to another, and there they lived and became the different people, like people today. A marriage of brother and sister, the mother went on to say, happened only once, only in the very beginning, during the creation.

The children listened to the story, and as they listened Ishanihura stroked and parted and smoothed the hair of

her youngest brother. Sitting just outside the circle of firelight, she unwound an end of the hair she had found and rolled it between her fingers. She could feel that it was coarser than this youngest's. She slid along between the next two boys, stroked their hair, parted it and compared it with the hair from the pool. It was coarser than theirs. By this time the older boys were coaxing her to come and smooth their hair, too. She did this and she could tell that theirs was more like the hair from the pool. Secretly, she unwound it and measured its length against theirs, but theirs was shorter by a thumb's length. The hair must belong to one of the boys who was with her father.

She would have to think of some other way to find out which one, now that those two were old enough to sleep in the men's house. She did not see very much of them anymore, and, ever since she had had her separate house, they had been less easy with her. They wouldn't think of asking her to comb their hair now, and her mother would, she knew, disapprove if she offered to.

The next time she went to stay in her house of the moons, she sat alone as the sun went down and the woods grew dusky, dreaming her strange and lonely young girl dreams; and tonight the hair that had clung to her arm from the pool wound and wove through her dreams. To know whose hair it was that she carried wrapped around her own! She heard her father and her older brothers praying and singing in the sweat house. They would, she knew, be going to the pool soon. And as she listened to

them, she thought of a way to learn what she so much wanted to know. The night was clear with only the dark illumination of the stars, and Ishanihura slipped out of her house and hid close to the pool.

The sweat house door opened as she expected, but only one person came out. There followed the light sound of bare feet running on the earth and a shadowed figure passed so close she could have touched him. The runner raised his hands straight over his head, the fingers together, spearlike, and Ishanihura watched as he made a running dive, smooth and splashless, almost without sound. He dived and came up and swam the circle of the pool two or three times. Then he pulled himself out onto the bank and sat by the pool's edge, wringing out his long hair and wiping the glistening drops down his arms and body and legs. This done, he went quickly, lightly, back up the hill, disappearing into the shadow, into the night.

When he was gone, Ishanihura crawled cautiously to the edge where he had sat to wring out his hair—cautiously, because the others might follow him. And there, as she had hoped, she found another hair. Still cautious, still crawling, she went back through the dark toward her own little house, this newest hair wound around her neck. Once inside, she stirred up the fire and in the firelight unwound and measured and compared her two hairs from the pool. They were identical. She held them up and watched them as they waved in the air before her eyes, and it came to Ishanihura that she must have the one

whose hair was the same length as hers—the swift-moving, shadowed one, the one who swam alone.

She frowned as she sat by the fire.

Which brother?

And why did only one brother come?

Well, she would soon discover which. She need only be careful and watchful a little longer. So thinking, Ishanihura wrapped the precious hairs with her own and slept. Hers was not an easy sleep. Through her dreams there came and went the young girls of her mother's stories: girls who had left their little houses against the rules and custom. Some of them were bitten by snakes and died at once; some of them lived long enough to bring shame and sorrow to their families, and then died; and there was the one who cut herself and sucked her own blood and liked the taste so much, she ate more and more of herself, becoming nothing but a head—a Cannibal Head—which devoured her parents and her brothers and sisters and then rolled horribly over the earth with an insatiable need always to eat human flesh, more and more and more.

With morning and awakening, Ishanihura forgot her dreams and remembered only her desire. Night found her again in her hiding place by the pool. But that night the two brothers and her father came together, and none of the three moved or dived or swam or sat as did the shadowed one of the first night's watching. Ishanihura could barely contain her disappointment.

She was more than ever restless and unhappy and evasive during the days which followed until she went again for her time in her little house. Again she hid in her place by the pool as soon as it was dark. She waited a long time, watching the moon rise over the silent forest, and when at last there came to her ears the remembered beat of bare feet on the earth, the pool lay full in the light of the moon. Ishanihura had to crouch low to be hidden in the sparse shadow of a pine tree. Again she watched the noiseless dive, the quiet circling of the pool, the sitting by its edge and the wringing out of the hair. Shadowless and shining in the clear moonlight, the drops glistened as they were wiped down the gleaming body, and Ishanihura saw that the swimmer was Makikirèn: Makikirèn the beautiful. Now Ishanihura knew which brother it was. She knew who was the swift-moving, shadowed one, the one who swam alone.

When Ishanihura returned to the big house, she seemed almost happy, and the father and mother thought that perhaps all might yet be well. She slipped away sometimes and she was evasive about where she went and why she liked to go off alone, but, at last, she was willing to plan for the trip downriver, the trip for choosing a husband. Getting clothes and food ready and making plans suited Ishanihura, for she meant to go on a journey as soon as she could manage it—not quite the journey her parents were thinking of.

While these things were going forward inside the house,

Ishanihura was learning, outside, and bit by bit, the pattern of Makikirèn's goings and comings, the signs by which her father showed that he was expecting him, the sounds which told her he was nearby. She learned that he came home several nights of each moon to the men's house, sometimes talking and sleeping there with his father and brothers, sometimes staying only for the singing and praying, always leaving before daylight.

A new buckskin skirt and new sandals and her mother's finest mink cape were laid out ready for Ishanihura to wear. Her father explained the route she should take: she would of course go west, but then one must choose, he said. To follow the streams is sure but long, to cut over the mountains is steep and rough. Ishanihura interrupted him, "But I can't go alone. I must have someone with me!"

"Of course. You surely knew that your father expects to go with you!" It was her mother who spoke. Ishanihura's face darkened and she said, "No! My father will not know the right words to say . . ."

"Very well, my child," her father agreed gently. "I will stay here and your mother will go with you."

"My mother cannot talk to strange people. I do not wish my parents with me!"

"Then it must be one of your brothers."

"Yes! One of my brothers!"

The little ones offered to go. "Take us, elder sister!" they said. "We'll fish for you, and trap rabbits for you. Take us!"

"You are too young," Ishanihura said to them. "What would people think if I came with you?"

The older boys offered to go with her. She made an objection to each, refusing them all until at last her father said, "What is it then you want, Ishanihura?"

"I want Makikirèn to take me to the west."

"We don't know where Makikirèn is . . ."

"He is sick sometimes . . ."

"Makikirèn is far away . . ."

"He is with the Sky People . . ."

They spoke thus until Ishanihura screamed at them, "You do not speak the truth! Makikirèn is in the sweat house now! He is here. He is not sick and he is not with the Sky People! He will take me else I will not go, I will not have a husband!"

These words carried plainly to Makikirèn, who had been drawn to the house by the sound of Ishanihura's excited voice. She stopped when she saw him.

"Quiet yourself, my sister," he said to her; and to his parents, "And do you not be troubled. Let it be as she wishes. I shall go with her to the west. Who should take his sister if not her elder brother? Is all ready for the journey?"

"All is ready, elder brother."

"We shall go with the first dawn then." So it was settled and the family slept; but only Ishanihura was happy with that night's settlement.

With the first dawn, Makikirèn and Ishanihura were on their way, their carrying-baskets heavy with salmon flour,

acorn bread and pounded manzanita berries, for it was a long and lonely journey, three full turnings of the sun at least, from the earth-covered house in the hills to the lowland villages.

Makikirèn was in the lead, and as the sun stood high in the sky, Ishanihura found the pace he set a wearying one. At last she put down her heavy carrying-basket and said, "Let us rest, my husband."

Makikirèn stopped. "What did you say, my sister?"

"I said let us not go so fast, elder brother."

Makikirèn kept the lead, but he went more slowly. Ishanihura, half afraid of him, half afraid of herself since her blunder, said nothing more to him, contenting herself with repeating over and over again in a sort of whispered chant to herself, "May the sun go down over the edge of the world soon! May the darkness come soon and stay long!"

At last the sun sank below the edge of the world. Their forest way was dusk and they could go no farther. The afternoon had become increasingly overcast and by sundown there were a few drops of rain. They put their baskets on the ground and, working quickly and skillfully, Makikirèn had a little bark shelter built and a fire going by the time it began to rain in earnest, and Ishanihura had supper cooked. They ate, sheltered and warm inside, while the rain came down harder and harder outside in the surrounding dark.

Makikirèn sat by the fire after supper while Ishanihura took ferns which she had gathered earlier and spread

them for their beds, hers in the shelter where they were sitting, his in a separate lean-to he had made for himself. Blowing toward her brother's eyes as she worked, she murmured a charm. "Hi – waa!" she whispered so softly he did not hear her. "May your sleep be heavy. Hi – wa – a – a!"

When Makikirèn went to his bed he was already half asleep, and as soon as his breathing became regular and heavy, Ishanihura pushed gently against his lean-to, hoping it would go over. He stirred and she whispered to him, "Elder brother, your hut is leaking. You can't sleep there. I have room. Come and sleep closer to the fire."

"No, no, I'm all right here," he answered sleepily. "I'll sleep here."

Ishanihura said no more but waited in silence till the fire gave no more light. Then she went quietly into Makikirèn's hut and lay down beside him, saying in a low voice, "Let me sleep here—my hut is leaking."

The charm she had murmured held him sleeping, his will subject to hers. He moved over to make room for her on the bed of ferns, and she lay quiet for some time. There was only darkness and the dripping of rain on bark outside and warmth within. When Makikirèn felt a woman's arms around him and felt himself being drawn over her, he dreamed. In his dream, the Sky Maiden whose lover he was came down the Sky Pole to sleep with him this night in the forest. And so it was that Makikirèn slept on, lost in his dream, and Ishanihura's desire was the only thing strong and alert and awake in the forest; and for

that night, in a world filled with darkness and sleep and rain, she had fulfillment of her desire.

With dawn the rain stopped, and Makikirèn wakened clasped close in a woman's arms. It seemed to him that he was lying in a bed of ferns on the sky floor with the Sky Maiden and he turned to look at her. The woman sleeping at his side was his sister.

He stared at her, thinking back on the night just past, and as he recalled it all, despair filled his heart. Evil would come of this night, he well knew. Makikirèn restrained a first impulse to jerk away from his sister. Now at last he was awake, wholly awake, and he must think what to do; there must be no more dreaming. Thinking thus, he breathed softly on his sister's eyelids, whispering, "Hi – waa! May your sleep be long and your waking slow! Hi – wa – a – a!" Gently he unclasped her arms from around him and slipped out of the lean-to. Outside he found a piece of old pithy alder wood which had been protected by boughs and was dry. It was a medium sized log but so old that it was light and soft. He held it to himself to give it warmth from his body, then carried it inside and laid it where he had lain, and placed Ishanihura's arms so that they enfolded the alder log as they had enfolded him.

Outside once more, Makikirèn stood for a long moment, his hand on his sling, his expression thoughtful. He was remembering that his sister was one of whom it is said she carries her heart in her heel, and this is because even a tiny wound between the ankle bone and the heel is fatal

to such people. He could kill her as she lay, secretly, so none would know. With her death, the evil she intended and had begun would also die and there would be an end to it. Makikirèn knew this, but he could not bring himself to do it. Instead, putting away his sling and dropping the pointed rock he had picked up a moment before, he turned his back on the woodland shelter and retraced his steps eastward to the earth-covered house, moving ever more swiftly as the distance widened between them until, once well away, his walk quickened to a trot and then to a run.

It was scarcely mid-morning when the father heard the quick running steps with their familiar cadence. He stepped outside the house to look, and a distraught Makikirèn stopped before him.

"Where is your sister?"

"Back there, back where we camped. She'll be coming home, following me. I left her where we spent the night."

"But . . . why?"

"She wanted me—and in the darkness it was as she desired. I couldn't wake up. I dreamed . . . I dreamed it was someone else. And then it was light and I left, I ran away . . ."

"A-ah-h!" And the father looked to be an old, old man as he sat down heavily on a nearby rock.

"I am afraid!" Makikirèn went on. "I do not know what she may do."

"Yes, there is no reason in her. It will go hard with us."

"What can we do, my father?"

"I do not know. I know only that I must take you all away from here, away from her." The mother had come from the house, hearing them, and he turned to her, "You agree, my wife? You know the custom?"

"I know the custom. Who better?" And the mother covered her face with her hands.

"It is decided then. But where shall we go?"

"Let me lead you up to the sky," said Makikirèn. The children had gathered round their mother and they urged her now, "O, let us go! Let our elder brother lead us to the sky!"

"Come with me to the sky," Makikirèn repeated. "We shall be safe there and the Sky People will let us live with them."

His father said, "We will go with you to the sky as soon as we've made an end to all that is here."

Without more talk, the father and his nine sons tore down the earth-covered family house, the men's house and Ishanihura's little house, and set fire to them and all they contained.

Ishanihura slept on and on in the little woodland shelter. When the spell at last released her she lay half asleep, half awake, recalling the night just past, sure in her belief that Makikirèn must love her and cling to her as she to him. Indeed he must, so her sleepy thoughts went, for now in the full light of day her arms were about him and she felt the weight of his body on hers. She stretched as she came wider awake and something stiff rolled to one

side. Opening her eyes she saw that she embraced a forked trunk of pithy alder. She flung it from her crying in a choked voice, "O-O-O!" She rolled back and forth scattering the ferns which had made their bed and the bark lean-to which had sheltered them. Still crying, she got up and danced around and around the dead fire, an ugly awkward dance, tearing her hair and screaming, "O-O! I'll kill you—I'll kill you! You'll not cheat me. I'll kill you—kill you—kill!" She saw fresh footprints leading away from the fire to the east. "Ah—you've gone to warn our brothers, have you—I'll find you!" And crying and calling, running and stumbling, she started back over the trail she had followed with such strange high hopes only a sun's turning ago.

In the clearing to the east Makikirèn was saying, "Come! There is not much more time. I can hear, far off, my sister's running feet and her voice as she cries for me. Let us go quickly." Makikirèn led and the father came last, turning after each step to blow on the footprints behind; they were walking through the ashes of their home and there would be nothing to show which way they had gone. Makikirèn took them to the Sky Pole. Tall and straight, reaching from earth to sky, it stood among the trees below the pool. "Let me go first, follow close after me," he said. "You mustn't try to turn back once you are started, and if you look down you'll get dizzy and fall. Keep looking up at the sky floor and you'll be all right. Ready?"

"Yes! Yes! Let's climb to the sky!" The boys were impatient to start up.

"Come behind me, my mother. Put your hands and your feet where you see me put mine. You boys and you, my father, do the same and we shall soon be there!" Makikirèn started the climb, slowly, carefully. His mother followed him, holding where he had held, stepping where he had stepped. Behind her, one after another, came her eight sons, the father following at the end. They climbed steadily, silent except for an occasional "Coming?" from Makikirèn and an answering "Coming!" down the line from mother and children, the father answering last.

The sky floor was not far away now and Makikirèn could already see the opening in the sky, when the thud of running feet and the cries he had heard earlier as the merest breath of sound grew loud and near and came from directly underneath them. Ishanihura was home.

She stopped before the charred mass which was all that was left of the three houses. The trees around the spring were blazing and the fire spreading below the pool. Ishanihura had run home, all the long way through the forest, in a frenzy of humiliation and hate, but now, as she stared at the ruins of her home, panic began to come into her. Where were they, her mother, her father, her brothers, Makikirèn? Where could they have gone? Not a footprint could she find though she searched all around the smouldering circle of ashes. Were they in the fire? She took a stick and stirred it, and as sparks flew up she followed with her eyes their whirling, swirling course, up,

up toward the sky floor. She tipped her head far back to look, and there, straight from earth to sky, was the Sky Pole, and far, far up the pole were people climbing, climbing. She knew those people. She counted—there were eleven of them, and one was a woman, her mother! They were her family!

The fire was burning all around the Sky Pole so that Ishanihura dared not try to reach its base. She stood close to the flames and called up to her family, "O, my father—do not leave me! Little brothers—come back, come back! I want to come with you, elder brother! Wait for me! Wait for me!"

Far up the pole, Makikirèn kept saying over and over, "Do not listen—do not look down. We are almost there. We are safe!"

But Ishanihura's voice came again to her mother's ears, "O, my mother! Why do you too leave me?"

"You are right my child, my one girl, what indeed do I do, leaving you alone?" Thus the mother spoke, and she looked down and saw Ishanihura. Lost in pity for her unhappy child, she continued to gaze down upon her, and as she gazed a great weariness and vertigo overcame her; she ceased to climb after Makikirèn; her hold loosened and she slipped and fell. Fell down, down from the sky to the earth, brushing from the pole and carrying with her in her fall her eight sons and her husband. Makikirèn had already stepped out onto the firm sky floor. He turned to reach a hand to his mother. There was no one on the pole. Far below in the flames he saw his brothers and his father

and mother, and, circling the flames, dancing and screaming, was his sister.

Makikirèn turned away and walked on into the sky world, a terrible grief and bitterness in his heart. "The old ones are right. I should have killed her in the beginning of this thing!"

Ishanihura circled the fire, around and around, dancing her strange stiff dance and calling out her own name, its repeated rhythm setting the beat of her dance, "Ishanihura! Ishanihura! I-shan-i-hu-ra!"

The fire burned down to embers and she found the charred bodies of her family—all but Makikirèn's. She poked and raked until she was sure that his was not there. She took their hearts, their withered and whitened hearts, and strung them like beads of a necklace and hung them around her neck, leaving all else to be consumed in the hot embers.

The fire finally burned itself out and Ishanihura looked around. Where there had been trees and houses and a pool there was desolation, emptiness. "What shall I do? Where shall I go?" she asked herself, and after a while the answer came to her. "I must go to the north. Makikirèn will be in the north. I shall look and look until I find him. Then I shall have his heart, too!" And Ishanihura, the string of hearts hanging about her throat, wandered off toward the north.

Many winters came and went. Makikirèn married his Sky Maiden and came back with her to the earth, where

they made themselves a home beside a lake far to the east of his old home. They had two sons who looked as he had looked as a child, and they were a happy family.

From time to time Makikirèn went north to hunt or to trade for treasure. Sometimes in the woods there he heard a strange, crazy, screeching cry. People said it was the Loon Woman who lived near one or another of the lakes. A fisherman told him of having seen her once. He said she was thin and mad-looking and that she wore a string of hearts around her neck as a necklace. People were afraid of her, and those who saw her ran away from her before she could come close or talk to them. Makikirèn wondered much about her—there was something familiar in her cry.

Then late one spring day, Makikirèn's two boys came running home, sure that the Loon Woman was at their own lake. He questioned them. They were frightened and he let the older boy tell him one thing and then the younger, until they were quieted. They were playing, half-hidden, in the reeds at the lake's edge. The Loon Woman came out of the forest and went to a bare sandy stretch of beach. She wore some sort of a necklace that bobbed up and down when she moved. She sat down where she could see herself in the water and leaned over, watching, as she turned her head and flapped her arms, stiff like bird's wings. And she kept singing something over and over in a screechy sort of voice. They could not understand it but it was like "I-shan-i . . ."

"What else did she say?" Makikirèn asked the boys.

"She saw us looking at her and she stopped singing—

and stared and stared—and she said 'A-ah-h,' like that. That is what she said." Makikirèn signalled his younger son to be quiet while the older one went on. "She said, 'You are Makikirèn's sons!' I said, 'Yes, we are. How do you know that?' 'Because I am your aunt and I have been looking for your father for a long, long time.' She screamed at us, 'Take me to your father! Where is your father?' Then we ran—we were too fast for her. She tried to catch us, but we got away from her. We were afraid of her. Tell me, my father, why did she say she was our aunt? Is she really our aunt?"

"I do not know," Makikirèn answered his son. "But you did right to run from her. Stay at home with your mother until I find the Loon Woman."

Makikirèn went to the lake before the first dawn. He stood half concealed in the tall reeds where he could see the lake shore. With the rising sun, the Loon Woman came to the lake from her forest sleeping-place as he hoped she might. She looked and listened, but she heard nothing, and nothing moved; she seemed to be alone. Makikirèn watched as she preened herself before her upside-down lake image and did a stiff and awkward dance fingering her necklace. He could see her plainly, and he saw that she was Ishanihura, his sister, and that the necklace she wore was truly a string of human hearts. He thought of his father and his mother and his brothers, and he thought of his two young sons. He made no sound, but the air over the lake became alerted and Ishanihura looked up in alarm. Too late; the arrow had already left

the bow. Ishanihura saw her brother, the released bow in his raised hand, but in that instant, his arrow buried itself in the flesh of her foot between the heel and ankle bone, and she pitched forward into the lake. When she came to the surface, she was dead. Makikirèn recovered her body and had just brought it to shore when his sons joined him. "Were you not to wait at home until I came?" he asked them.

"Our mother said we should come now. She thought we could help you."

"So you can, since she wishes it."

"This is the one we saw!"

"You described her well."

"She is the Loon Woman?"

"Yes."

"She was our aunt?"

"She was my sister."

"Why did you kill her?"

"Because of an evil she did and would have done again. I will tell you it when you are old enough to sleep in the men's house."

"What are the ugly beads she is wearing? They look like dried hearts!"

"They are dried hearts." Makikirèn counted them. There were ten. He lifted the necklace from around Ishanihura's neck and wrapped it carefully in clean bark.

"Should we not bury our aunt?"

"Yes, at once, here in the forest." The boys helping, he carried Ishanihura's body far into the forest, burying it

away from where the children played or their mother picked berries or gathered seeds. When this was done, Makikirèn took the necklace home where he gave the hearts separate burials in the graveyard beside his own earth-covered house, the graveyard where he and his wife would sometime lie. He performed the ritual of purification for the boys and himself, and afterwards he stayed long in the sweat house alone, praying and thinking sadly of his sister. And during this time of prayer and thought, Makikirèn willed that the loon bird should forever remind his sons and his sons' sons after them of the Loon Woman.

That is why you may see a hunter kill the loon when she dances her crazy dance and calls her crazy call. And you will know he is remembering Ishanihura and is protecting his people from her ancient evil, as Makikirèn willed he should.

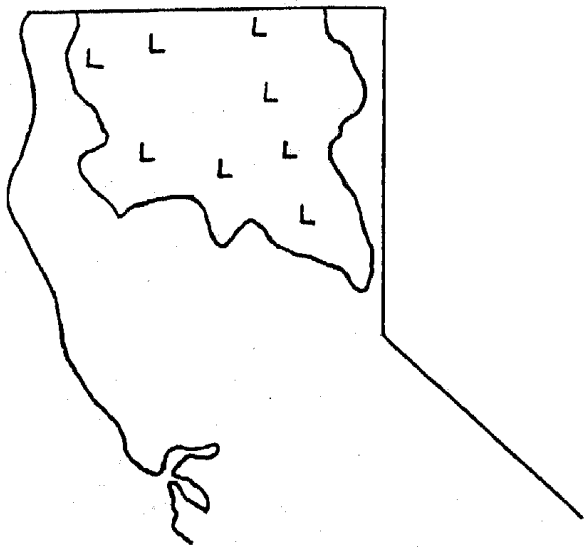
2. LOON WOMAN

"Loon Woman" is a terrifying and portentous tale of a sister who, in love with one of her brothers, publicly forces him to go away with her and brings disaster to herself and to her family. It has been found among eight different peoples, geographically contiguous in interior northern California: the Modoc, Yana, Shasta, Achomawi, Atsugewi, Maidu, Karok, and Wintu.

Incest is the core of the story and its universal aspect which relates it to all peoples and all times. Humankind constitute but a single species, but for all their biological and genetic uniformity, peoples have proliferated so variously in their cultures that there remain only a few traits which can with confidence and apparent truth be called universals. One of these few is prohibition of sexual intercourse between father and daughter, mother and son, or between brother and sister. Such a relation has been regarded by all peoples at all times as incestuous and abhorrent no matter how differently and variously blood relation beyond the nuclear family has been construed. The apparent exceptions, the enjoining to marriage of a brother and sister of the blood royal, or at the time of creation to begin the peopling of the world, give subtle emphasis to the universal norm by their rarity and specialness. Many of the creation myths which rely upon this device for populating the world, specify predecessors of modern man who are either different from him, half-gods or animal gods or immortals like the Wogè of the Yurok and the Ikharéya of the Karok.

The strong social pressure against the incestuous relation, and the ever recurrent impulse to it, have been the subject of oral and written literature over and over again. Its dramati-

zation served Greece's greatest tragedians so well that it not only became the subject of some of their most enduring plays but carried over into the modern diagnostic vocabulary of psychoanalysis. It continues to reappear in all stages of literature including the present—witness William Faulkner for example, or the poet Robinson Jeffers. And it turns up again and again in native Indian myth, all over North America.



But nowhere outside its own limited boundaries does any story resemble "Loon Woman." The story comes to us uneasy in the relation of its parts, a jig-saw puzzle, only partially assembled, of pieces old and new, some intrinsic to it, some belonging to other story configurations. There are extant not more than fifteen recorded versions, one never quite like another. All have the core of the story, but those pieces which would

have come to inhere to the core, given more organization and a fuller molding, are sometimes present, sometimes missing. Nor had the paring away of extrinsic episodes been seriously begun. The interrupted and half-finished state demonstrates one sort of story formation actually in process—much as the archeologist sees in the roughly shaped pot in the hands of the potter struck down at his task, and in the wares set out for sale or barter, how the ancient Pompeiian shaped a pot, and what his wife took home from market.

It is not possible to say what the age of the "Loon Woman" story is. Curtin was the first to record it, a Modoc version, around 1893. It was as formed, and as unformed, then as when Dr. Demetracopoulou recorded it from the Wintu in 1929. This was to be expected: its cultural and story milieu was pretty much shattered before 1893. It may well have been a "young" story. I like to think of it as in a formative stage.

Formative, in a sense, it certainly is, but it need not also have been newly made. It has an ambitious plot. Storytellers must have differed in their capacity to handle it and audiences in their reactions to it and their preferences as to how it should be told. Some versions have a second part which I do not retell, or analyze here. Occasionally this part is long and much elaborated, explaining how, after Loon Woman's death, her parents and brothers are magically restored to life. The added part is in another emotional key, and its inclusion suggests constraint and a possible wobbliness in handling the difficult material of Loon Woman's own story. The added part returns teller and listener to concepts familiar and undemanding.

Nor can one with any certainty infer age from distribution. Dispersal over a wide area is at least presumptive evidence of

age, but limitation of area is not nearly as good evidence of recentness. "Loon Woman" may well have had only limited appeal. The Karok version from which I borrow Loon Woman's name, *Ishanihura,* as well as her brother's name, *Makikirèn,* and the episode of the macabre dance and song of Ishanihura at the fire which was consuming the bodies of her family, did not include the bringing back to life, which is not surprising. But neither does the Karok version have the distinctive, eerie abnormality of mood and character adhering to the story in the area of its fullest realization. The Karok may have found it not to their taste; certainly they were competent to handle it had they so wished.

There are only about ten story elements in "Loon Woman," and all but three of these are familiar in other contexts and areas, yet there clings to her story an aura of the special and unique. The familiar discrete events tend to take on a changed significance, to have been given a twist which alters their connotation. This is true for the brother-sister incest theme. There are brother-sister incest stories from all over North America, sometimes to account for the peopling of the world, sometimes as part of the Coyote-Trickster sort of outlandish behavior, sometimes, as in "Loon Woman," with awareness of perversity and a fear born of this awareness. But Ishanihura, the Loon Woman, guards with *secrecy* her guilty feelings and plans, and this new factor of secrecy changes the story from one of moral disapproval and some fear, to one of sheer terror. Also, Ishanihura overrides all efforts to control or divert her, publicly forcing her brother to accompany her as would a husband, and this *public* insistence is unheard of in other tales; indeed it is almost out of the experience of its narrators to imagine even in mythic behavior.

Revenge for a wrong done is, of course, an old theme; the particular form of the revenge on Ishanihura remains peculiar to this story except that the old Achilles heel motif is used unchanged. In some versions, the revenge episode, like the added part of the bringing back to life of the hearts of Loon Woman's family, is elaborated into magic and myth of familiar emotional limits, and again it would seem that the narrator is escaping depths too deep for him or his listeners. But the revenge which is the preferred one, and which accords best with the story, is a brief and circumstantial shooting with an arrow in the vital part, as Dr. Demetracopoulou says, much as an actual loon is shot and its body recovered from the water.

The hiding away from the world of a beautiful child, whether the eldest or the youngest, and I believe always a son, is an old motif and a favorite one on the Northwest Coast, among other places. I have the impression that, since this is accomplished differently in each version, and remains one of the least limpid of the elements in the story, that the narrators of "Loon Woman" had not settled upon an implicit meaning for it in their own minds.

Another of the elements widespread in North America is that of the substitution of a log for a person. It is subtilized sometimes as in "Loon Woman" by making the log a piece of old alder that is of no more weight than that of a man, and by using a forked piece. In "Loon Woman" the brother substitutes the alder for himself in order that he may escape his sister, who has become fearful to him. It is the association of log substitution and *fearfulness* that is unique to this particular story. It is only the turn of the screw from joke or

convenience to terror, but it is a turn which makes all the difference.

The flight-to-the-sky motif would be expected to occur wherever the sky is understood to be a habitable part of the world and within reach, and so it does. But it is only in "Loon Woman" and in one other Shasta story in the center of the loon-story area that disaster follows from looking down while *ascending* to the sky. Elsewhere, and logically enough the prohibition is against looking down while descending. Again an old concept is given a new twist.

Hurrying the sun is not a widely dispersed element. The Washo have it as do the Modoc, but it is only within the loon-woman area that the hurrying is done for *amorous reasons.*

So much for the elements found in other places and other tales. The all-important incident of the finding of the single hair with the current of following events; the killing of Loon Woman, that is to say, the specific revenge; and the explanation of the white band of feathers which encircles a loon's neck as a necklace of human hearts—these are the three elements which were invented for "Loon Woman" and do not occur otherwise. And they are the crucial elements.

The motif of a single hair floating on the water and coming to the attention of a young girl who measures it and finds it to be exactly the length of her own and who then fixes on the hair as a symbol of the desired lover leads ever so quietly to the dark, turbulent depths of the drama to follow.

The second invention, the necklace of human hearts, the hearts of her own father and mother and brothers which Ishanihura strings around her neck, sufficiently sums up the intervening horror and passion and violence, and forecasts

retributive punishment before there can be a final ending to the tragedy.

Klytemnestra showed an equal violence, but Klytemnestra was a woman wronged. There is rather something Dostoevskian in the sheer audacity and psychopathology of the evil which possessed Ishanihura. That the stark story woven of the single hair and the heart necklace was beyond the imaginative sophistication of the peoples of its origin does seem strongly probable in view of the length and detail of the added parts which, unlike the story proper, are at a level consonant with the run of their other recorded myths and tales.

Nor is this saying more than that the originators, probably the Wintu, once had in their midst an imaginative artist who was appreciated if not wholly understood. His people did what they could with the story he created; and they passed it along to their neighbors.

It is a powerful story, strikingly imaginative. It invites comparison with the Greek tragic sense. It sets one to reviewing the dramatic motifs and devices of the Greek myths, upon which a curious difference emerges. The Greeks were as interested in dramatizing the terrible and far-reaching effects of incest as were the Indians of North America. But, whereas in native America it was usually brother-sister incest, in Greek myth it was father-daughter, mother-son incest. I have no theory as to what this means. Its interest is probably more directly psychological than literary; it must surely indicate something of the orientation and "set" of the cultures. I regret that I can offer the observation here only as a cultural *curiosum*.

"Loon Woman," in my judgment, is the story from native California which most strongly suggests the tragic drama both

in subject matter and in style. Its realism is too drastic, its passion too explosive for another medium than that of the stage tragedy.

3. BUTTERFLY MAN

"Butterfly Man" is a tale which, like "Dance Mad," comes single and unimitated in a literature for the most part heavily influenced by surrounding peoples and containing bits and pieces from beyond the barrier of the Sierras to the east, and from as far away as the Pacific coast to the west, with interchange between the nearby Wintu, Yana, and Washo.

The story was recorded by Dr. Roland Dixon sometime before 1902 in the course of a series of linguistic and ethnological trips to the Maidu, whose home is in northeastern California in the valley and hills between the Sacramento River and the Sierras and cut through by the Feather River.

"Butterfly Man" is a cautionary tale. It has the brevity, the barrenness, the inevitable retribution for wrongdoing which are the properties of cautionary tales wherever they are found. They also have a way of being pan-human.

It has always been my suspicion that the cautionary tale which survives does so for reasons other than its moral, which, if the story be interesting, is taken in stride: the coda, as it were, proper to the form.

Dr. Dixon gives no hint as to what "Butterfly Man" may have meant to the Maidu. So far as we know, he recorded it as it came along with Coyote stories, and the "Cannibal Head" story which has travelled rather widely. He gives no indication that he felt it to be at all special.