

# Tracking Heaven

Stories from Indigenous Men and Women on Life, the Spirit World and Heaven

As told to:

Richard Van Camp  
Dogrib (Tlicho) Nation  
[vancamprichard@gmail.com](mailto:vancamprichard@gmail.com)

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**The eagle, the drum, us**

I started gathering feathers for this medicine bundle when I was 18. I was volunteering as a Handi-Bus driver in my hometown of Fort Smith, NWT. Due to circumstances beyond my control (Handi-Bus, ice, a huge spruce tree), I was politely fired. After all, it took several Bingo's to pay for the damage the tree and I had created together on the Handi-Bus, and I had lost the trust of the elders.

The good news out of my short career as a driver? I met the most amazing elders in the world: Rosa Mercredi, Dora Torangeau, Seraphine Evans, and Helena Mandeville, just to name a few. I was so hungry then for grandparents in my life that we adopted each other. I would visit them and listen to what they had to say. I ate the best bannock in town, sipped the sweetest tea and watched the afternoon snow turn from a Chevy blue to a sparkling black. I know if it weren't for the elders in Fort Smith, I would not be who I am today. I learned about respect: respect for others, respect for animals, and respect for myself. I listened to my elders tell me about watching one way of life braid with another. They told me about their adventures, their teachings, and their lessons.

I didn't realize it then, but I sure know it now: I was spending time with my heroes.

As I went on to the En'owkin International School of Writing in Penticton, I met other storytellers, other heroes. I shared with them the transcribed stories I had made of my friends in Fort Smith. They were only too happy to share their stories with me. From there it grew. Anywhere I went it seemed like storytellers found me. I recorded their stories and transcribed them as well. All the while, great lessons and wise teachings were passed on to me. I made copies of these stories for friends who needed voices of wisdom, and I realized everyone needs stories. Everyone. They are medicine. I hope you enjoy them and, like myself, go back to them when you need them. They grow on you.

I think Rene Bohnet summed it up best when she said, "Culture is something that cannot be studied. Culture is something that must be passed down."

My friend Samara asked me, "Who is the bigger liar? --The story teller or those who don't tell stories?" We thought about it and concluded: "Silence is a lie."

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Our silence is a lie. Aboriginal people have so much to share. This book of storytellers is a gift from us to you. For anyone out there who is interested in learning about the Aboriginal people of Canada, here are the stories that have changed my life. These stories are for those who are searching and those who are curious about other Nations. This book is intended to both honor the storytellers and the stories they've shared. It is also meant to build bridges between Nations and cultures. This book is for everyone.

If I can spend a decade collecting these stories, I bet you can do the same in a much shorter period of time. I invite you to collect the stories of your heroes. Use a taperecorder, get a camera, borrow a video recorder if you have to. Do it. Do it now. Several of the storytellers I know have since passed on, and I am so grateful I took the time to record what they had to say. Their families are too.

In the words of Okanagan elder, Glen Douglas: “What I have to say, it's not what I know, it's what my elders have taught me. I personally do not know these things, they're all teachings that have been passed on to me. I cannot take credit for any of this knowledge, the wisdom or the skills that I pass on. For I attribute these virtues through all of my ancestors before me.”

These are my heroes, and I'd sure like to meet yours.

I heard a good line the other day: "Sometimes the only way we can keep things is to give them away."

That's how I feel about these stories...

Welcome!

Mahsi cho,

Richard Van Camp

## The Earth, the Animals

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Ric Richardson:

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Long ago, the Creator sent a Great Flood to cleanse the world.

After a time, He sent Wesakechak to bring back the land so that the plants, animals and other people could have a place to live again.

The Creator told Wesakechak that he would find a turtle floating on the water and, if Wesakechak could get some mud and seaweed from the bottom, he could create a land on the back of the turtle where the plants, animals and people could live again.

As Wesakechak floated on the turtle’s back, he found some companions who, he was told, could help with his quest. These companions were an otter, a beaver and a little muskrat, all of whom were comfortable living in and out of water. When Wesakechak told them of his task, they all eagerly agreed to help and decided to begin on the next day.

At sunrise, after some debate, for they all wanted to help, it was decided that Otter should try to dive to the ocean’s bottom to get the mud and seaweed needed. The reason Otter was chosen was because he was a very good swimmer and was at home in the ocean.

Otter then dove from the turtle’s back and swam down and down, as deep as he could. He stayed under the water longer than he ever had before, but could not reach the bottom. When his lungs felt like they would burst, he returned to the surface, barely conscious and drained of energy.

Those on the back of the turtle saw him and realized that he was too weak to swim. They paddled over to Otter and dragged him onto the back of the turtle, barely conscious and in a great deal of pain from his exertions. The companions decided that this was enough for one day and they would try again the next day.

In the morning, it looked obvious that Otter was in no condition to make another attempt as he had not recovered from the injuries he received the day before.

Both Beaver and Muskrat offered to try to find the mud and sewed for Wesakechak. Wesakechak thought about it for a while and then spoke to Beaver. “Beaver,” he said, “with your webbed feet and wide tail, you are a great swimmer. Also, you can hold your breath for a long time.” He asked Beaver to try to reach the bottom of the sea.



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Without a moment’s hesitation, Beaver dove into the water and began to descend as deep as he could. He swam deep and deeper and went deeper even than Otter. He was down under far long than Otter but eventually floated to the surface, unconscious. When Wesakechak and his friends spotted him, they paddled over and pulled Beaver onto the back of the turtle. As he had been drowning, they pumped the water from his lungs and massaged him to make his blood flow. After a long time, Beaver coughed and began to regain consciousness.

Almost heartbroken, he confessed that even though he got deep enough to see the ocean bottom, he was unable to reach it. The companions would wait for the next day to try again.

As day broke, both Otter and Beaver had not recovered and could not move without pain, let alone swim.

Little Muskrat went to Wesakechak and enthusiastically offered to dive to the bottom and bring up the mud and seaweed.

After some thought, and not wanting to hurt his feelings, Wesakechak spoke to Muskrat: “My friend, Otter, who lives in the ocean, was unable to reach the bottom and was injured trying to. As well, Beaver, who has webbed feet, a wide tail and can hold his breath for a long time, could not get the mud and seaweed from the ocean bottom. He was nearly drowned and remains in a great deal of pain still. If you really want to try, you, but don’t feel bad if you cannot reach the bottom.

Muskrat then dove from the turtle’s back. He dove deep and swam deeper. He stayed down longer than Otter had. He stayed down longer than Beaver. He stayed down longer than Otter and Beaver combined.

After he had been down under the water for so long that Wesakechak and the others had almost given up on him, Muskrat floated to the surface, unconscious and barely alive.

When Muskrat was pulled onto the turtle’s back, the others had to work very hard to revive him.

As he lay there coughing and shaking, he opened his hands. In his left hand was some mud. In his right hand was the much sought after seaweed.

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Wesakechak took the mud and built an island on the back of the turtle. He placed the seaweed on the mud. Once he had done this, the island grew very large and the seaweed became plants of all descriptions.

Having seen his, the Creator brought back all of the animals, insects, birds and people from where He had kept them and repopulated the land.

Wesakechak thanked Otter and Beaver for their extreme efforts and they went on their way.

Wesakechak then spoke to Muskrat: “My little friend,” he said, “even though Otter and Beaver tried their best and failed, you made a tremendous effort and succeeded in spite of our doubts. All of Turtle Island is grateful for your deed and for that, I will give you a great gift. Wherever your people live, there will be a plant growing that will be a food to your people. This plant (Rat root) will also be a powerful medicine for all people.

This is the story of how Turtle Island came to be and how we came to have Rat root for medicine. To this day, we continue to use Rat root for colds and many other medicinal purposes and, we still live on Turtle Island.

**On the northern lights:**

When I was young, my father warned me that you should never whistle at the northern lights. He said that the lights were restless spirits that could capture the person who whistled at them.

He told me that when he was young, he’d been told the same thing and, being adventurous, whistled at them at his next opportunity. Almost immediately, he said the lights came down from the sky to where he was standing. He told me that he felt an electric charge and was surrounded by an intense smell of burnt sulphur. While he ran terrified to his home, he decided that he would never try that again.

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As a young adult, I would attend Pow-Wows and often invited elders to tell stories around the campfire. The stories I was privileged to have heard have helped me to deal with situations in my life and have left me feeling greatly enriched.

The northern lights, I was told, were the spirits of those people who, although they had died, could not accept their deaths and move on to the next life. They are doomed to dance in the northern lights in the hope that they may, someday, take over a body in which the spirit has been weakened so much that they will be able to move into it and dominate it.

One example of the severe weakening of the spirit, I was told, is what is called an alcoholic “Blackout.” During a blackout, an individual may act in a manner totally uncharacteristic of his or her normal behaviour. There are no memories of the time spent in a blackout once it is over and none will ever return. It is as if that period of time is lost, even though the person experiencing the blackout was conscious and functioning during that period.

I was reminded of these stories when I was in early recovery from my own alcoholism. I had had numerous blackouts while I was an active alcoholic. Many times, I was told of what I had done while drinking and, even after being told, I had absolutely no memory of the time described. As well, many of the behaviours described were so unlike me that I often believed that the people telling me about them were lying. Through years of drinking, I came to realise that these people were telling the truth when they told me that I had “not been myself” various times while I was drunk.

My use of alcohol had suppressed my own spirit to the point that one of the disembodied spirits, such as those that dance in the northern lights, was able to take over my body for brief periods of time, I believe.

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Fortunately, our spirit is a part of us and belongs in our body. This is why we are usually able to reassert our ownership of our body and push the invader out. The disembodied spirit lacks the connection to our body and cannot be complete.

I have been told that some spirits are so weakened that they cannot push the imposing spirit out. In these cases, since the person can only be complete with its own spirit, the person becomes what is known as insane. The longer a restless spirit occupies a body, the harder it is for its own spirit to reassert itself and take command again.

I was fortunate that I was spared from that fate, but have been advised by many people that I have great respect for that alcohol abuse is only one way of weakening our spirit. Having respect for ourselves and honoring our values helps to keep our spirits strong and free from this particular danger.

Ric Richardson is a Metis carver who lives with his wife, Rose Richardson, in Green Lake, Saskatchewan. I had the privilege of meeting Ric and Rose a few years ago while visiting the schools and communities in the area.

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Lorny Metchooyeah:

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The eagle is said to have three shadows so only certain people can kill an eagle. If you don't know the spirit of the eagle, don't kill it, for you or your offspring will suffer the consequence for the death of the eagle. It is said that if you kill an eagle, you have to kill its remaining shadows.

The first shadow is the easiest to kill. The second and third shadows are said to be the hardest. Why that is, I don't know, for the eagle is not my spiritual guide nor do I have the vision to see the remaining two shadows.

I have tried many times to see how the existence of the three eagle shadows would be but I am not very pleased with my theories. One theory is the first shadow being flesh and blood existence. The second shadow which is cast by the light of the sun. And the last shadow is the ghost or the spirit of the eagle.

It is also said that the eagle flies south for the winter, so if you kill it, it will take you along if its remaining shadows migrate.

My grandfather used to kill an eagle every fall for its feathers. He used the eagle feathers for arrows because it did not get soaked like the other feathers. Grandpa was one of those very few who could kill the eagle. He used to tell us, “It's a dangerous thing. If you don't know it, don't kill it.”

Lorny is from the Dene Tha' Nation from Assumption, Northern Alberta. He shared this story to me in December of 1994.

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Alexi Wah-Shee:

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I was point man up in Ghost Lake, eh? There were ten of us who were doing community hunting...and there was a gully.

So I was asked, “This is your grandfather’s place, your dad’s place. They went hunting down here. You know the area.”

So I said, “Yeah.”

I went up and I saw a whole bunch of caribou on one side of the hill there, eh? One whole herd, but the wind was blowing from us to them and they could smell us, eh? So I went back, there was ten of us.

I said, “Well there’s another gully on the other side of the hill where the wind would, from the caribou to us, change, so they won’t smell us. So we’ll go that way.”

I’m a point man, eh? Across the stream there, and the willows are just like this. Holy smokes, boy! The willows, just tall, just like strings, just like spiderwebs. I got my .303, eh?...And I walked across the stream. I was walking across the stream and I went like this, “Come on you guys. Let’s go.”

You know, ten hunters, lining up and I said, “Come on you guys, let’s go.”

And they said, “Alex, don’t move. Don’t move.”

And I could see their eyes right over my head and I could see their bolt actions--*click click*--“Alex, whatever you do, don’t move. Don’t move.”

I said, “Come on, you guys.”

And I turned around, eh? And I saw this big silver tipped grizzly, boy! Just like that. Right behind my back. Right there.

I couldn’t--I just froze.

And that old man, one of the hunters there, the old man, just lift up his hand and he spoke in his own language...

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And that grizzly just ran over the hills, just put his paws down and ran over the hills. Me, I just sat down on the rock...The old man just spoke up, he talked to the bear: “We’re not hunting you. We’re just a poor people that’s going for caribou hunting to bring back. Just like you. You’re hunting for something else. But us, we got families back home. We’re not hunting for you. So wherever you come from, go back.”

That’s what the old man said. And that silver tipped grizzly, boy--I wouldn’t be sitting here telling you guys stories...

My Uncle Alexi told this to me during the Christmas holidays of 1994.

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Henry Jenson:

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Eight years ago I had been on the Red Road--going back to my roots, to my Indian side, exploring that side. And a lady in Vancouver, I was living in Vancouver, and she said, “I want you to come with me. We're going to go to a ceremony.”

I was just a beginner in this. I didn't know much about anything culturally, spiritually, Natives or myself..

I figured, Well, why not?

And we drove out here to Penticton and we saw a Medicine Man out here. He was having the mid-Summer ceremonies: four days of fasting and Sweats. There were several people, even a white lady, which I was sort of surprised, and there was no one there that I knew besides that woman that I knew that took me there that seemed to know everyone, so I was fairly comfortable and I was just sort of watching and a little apprehensive because I didn't have a clue what they were going to do there. I figured I'll just play it by ear; I'm here to learn; I'm not here to teach anybody. I'll keep my eyes and ears open...

We Sweat that night and I went to lie down and I couldn't sleep. I couldn't sleep at all and, geez, I had an awful night but come the next day I did get some sleep. Then next day was much the same: singing, some ceremonies, some more Sweats, some talking, feasting and some more eating and night come along again and I lay down and tried to go to sleep and I couldn't go to sleep, couldn't sleep at all.

This time something told me go sleep in the mountain. *Go sleep up there*. So that's what I done. I laid down; it was seven o'clock...I found a big flat rock, right on the side of a cliff, overlooking the valley. It was just beautiful. The sun was coming down and I thought I'm going to park myself here tonight, make a little fire. It was tinder dry and I was scared about the fire but it was a big rock and it wasn't going to spread so I gathered some wood. There was a big log about fifty feet away from me, a big old dry rotten log about three feet high.

I came there and stretched out and I was just enjoying myself then it got darker and darker and then pitch black. I been in the woods quite a bit and I'm not terribly scared--I'm not too brave



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about bears, mind you, and I figured I'd stick it through the night and all of a sudden it was about midnight. I hear some rocks sort of coming down that rock base, like shale loosening. I thought it was a family of deer coming down the valley to drink, nothing to worry about. Boy, I see them rocks come down a little harder, a little noisier. I get a little bit nervous now--I'm not the bravest guy in the world--I had just a little tiny fire. I threw some wood in the fire, make it a little bigger so I could see what was going on because I wouldn't go out past the perimeter of my fire.

All of a sudden I'm hearing little, *Mrrrrr maaaa mrrrrr*--little bears! I could tell! And every now and then I'd hear a big bear talking. Holy smokes! It's a family of bears that are coming down this cliff here and that path was right where I was! HA HA!

I figured that was what they come down for was to eat on that big log, that big old rotten log that's got grubs in it. It was like a smorgasbord for them but I didn't know that. Here. I'm in the mountain. I got a skinny little knife and here I'm surrounded by bears. I could hear them; they had noticed me now and they were a little bit upset I was on their mountain and I had a fire going there and they're not too crazy about a fire, and I knew there was little ones and a big one and they get a bit antsy about these things, eh?

Oh boy! I started putting wood on that fire; the bears got closer. It got so I could see their eyes glowing around me; there was a few of them there. Oh I got terrified! I got scared! It really got to me. I got really really really scared to where I felt like running, just running off that mountain and I thought, “Oh, if I run, those bears will just chase me and I can't see in the dark and even though I make it off the mountain, people will know that I run off the mountain and I got a big fat ego and I'm not gonna do that, so I'm gonna sit here, anyways. I'm gonna try.”

So I sat there and I started praying and I'm not a religious man but when you were scared as I was you'd try anything to make yourself feel better! I was really scared! And I started praying. So I prayed and I prayed and I didn't feel better!

I kept putting more wood in that fire and my pile of firewood was coming down; I was really piling the wood onto that fire by this time and a thought come to me: “Sing! Sing your song! Sing an Indian song. You're supposed to be Indian. You're up here doing your Indian trip. Sing an Indian song.”

Well, I didn't know any Indian songs!

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I thought, “Lord, how am I gonna sing an Indian song?”

I'm talking to myself at this time. I'm really losing it. But I tried one anyways; I made one up. I had heard some songs and a little bit of a tempo here and there and I started belting out this little song, you know, and, Jesus, didn't that feel good! I sang some more and the next thing you know I was singing at the top of my voice! Singing away! And it felt really good like praying all of a sudden to a point where I got up from my fire and I stood on that rock and I told them, “Hey wait a minute here. I'm not here to hurt you. I'm just here because I couldn't sleep! I didn't know this was your place. I'm not going to bother you; I'll be gone in the morning; I'm going to go lay down here now; I'll put my knife over there. I won't bother you.”

I went back to my fire, let the fire go down and I sang some more. I sang until I fell sleep--and this is probably the best feeling I've had in all my life, the most peaceful, the most serene, probably the best of everything that I've ever felt was capsulized in that instant when I laid down and I said to myself and to whoever's out there, “I'm ready to go. I'm ready to go. If those bears want to eat me, if those bears are my brothers, as I'm being taught--I've been taught these things now for two years; like I'm one with the universe; bears have spirits, rocks have spirits, trees have spirits and there's a connection between all of us” and I said, “If they want me; so be it! I'm just going to lay here, and I'm not even going to kick or wiggle if they nibble on my toes, or wherever they're going to start” and I meant it!

And when I said that and when I put that into words--Like I said, I haven't had a better feeling since, I've never had a feeling like that and I had never had one to that point, and I did sleep! I laid down and it was the best sleep of my life!

I woke up in the morning and the sun was coming up over the mountain, and I was surrounded by a flock of grouse, the little babies, not the mothers, little things about an inch high, little yellow, little golden yellow birds--maybe twenty of them just all around me just *peep peep peep peep*, just scurrying all over the place. That's what I woke up to!

What a beautiful feeling I had there. And I thought, “Was this all a dream?” No, no this is real and I still had this song in my head. I had a song and a song in our culture is a really special thing to be given in that way and I thought, “Right on!”

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My big ego stepped in and I thought I'm going to come down there, and I'm going to show everyone there that I have a song and I come down just as proud as can be coming into camp with this song and this experience *and I couldn't remember this song!* I couldn't remember this song!

It was just like it never happened and I thought, “God, what happened here?” I didn't say a word to anybody because I was so intent on singing this song to the people, to sort of verify what had happened to me up there.

We went around the day again, went for a Sweat. There was a lady there that came up from Abbotsford, a Medicine Lady. We all Sweat together. Then we sat around the arbour; we were all going to sing. She brought out this drum. She had a cover on the drum and she pulled the cover off the drum and there was a big bear on this drum and it just caught my eye and she started singing this song and it was the same song that I was singing in the mountains! The very same song! I don't know if it was word for word but it was the same! The very same song!

We had another Sweat that evening and I had a chance to talk to her and I asked, “What does that song mean? What is that song?”

She said, “That is a prayer song. When I pray, I sing this song. It's a prayer song.”

And that was it! That just blew me away. It was one of the nicest experiences I ever had in all my life. That was a good one!

Henry Jenson told this to me in November, 1992, in Penticton, British Columbia. Born in 1947, Henry is a Paguis, French, Cree, and Sarcee Metis from South Eastern Manitoba.

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Chris Paul:

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When my dad started his last sweat, he told my uncle about a dream he had about the deer people. They brought him a song...After he sang the song to Uncle, he also told him he had cancer.

The day my mom passed, my Uncle Rich had a dream about the deer people waiting at the treeline. He told my uncle. John broke down. He sang the deer people song. It wasn't long before he left with the deer people.

Just the day after we talked, two deer--a buck, a doe--came dancing out of the forest behind my house. They looked clean...

# Life

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Bernice Kamano:

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My beginning really has no age but what it has is...it starts off with really bad memories. I was taken away from my mother before I was less than a year old. I went back to a convent in Vancouver and the nuns said, “Oh I remember you. On your first birthday you cried and you screamed.”

I guess that is my beginning because that’s the only thing I know about being a baby. Then after that it was foster homes and ugly people, lots of ugly people in foster homes. I remember one home. When you talk about hair you talk about power. And I remember--and it was before I went to school, I have no idea what age it was. I remember walking into the home, and the first thing the people did to me--the woman--was cut all my hair off. I don’t really remember what I felt--probably was anger, but it was something I’ll never forget.

I guess when I was about eight years old; the Children’s Aid Society told me that my mother--the reason I’d been apprehended from my mother was because she had a drug problem. In my heart I never wanted to find her because I never ever wanted to look and only find out she wasn’t alive anymore.

I have a very good friend of mine that works with the youth in Powell River, name is Glenda Monteith. And she was always after me, “Come on, Bernice, find your family. Go do it. Go do it.”

And I used to say to her, “Yeah I know, I know.”

And she used to get angry at me because she said, “Yeah you know but you never do anything about it.” Which is the way I’ve always been. I know but I can’t do anything about it because I’m afraid. I’m going on just what I learned, how I survived as a child. Glenda went to a conference in Qualicum and she met two women, Honey Cook and Cookie Cook. Glenda told them about me and that I understood I was from Alert Bay, my family was from up there and there’s not many people left in my family. I think probably I’m the only Kamano left. Everyone has since passed on.

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Honey and Cookie said they would go back to Alert Bay and find my family and they found my grandfather, and, of course, they knew my grandfather but everybody in Alert Bay used to call him “Peanuts.” Nobody called him by his given name: Victor Kamano.

So I was sitting at my dinner table on a Saturday night. I was getting ready to go to work. I was having dinner with my children. And the phone rang. It was “Hello?”

And I’m going, “Hello?”

“Hi! My name is Victor Kamano and I’m your grandfather.”

I said, “Oh. Okay.”

I think I was probably 27 at the time. The emotions, there were too many.

I said, “Well thank you for calling.” I said, “I will come and see you.”

I didn’t really honestly know what to think about it. I was overwhelmed, scared, everything, I don’t know. So I hung up. I, of course, cried. I told my children what was going on.

So I went to work and told everybody at work what happened and everybody was crying all over the place. It was a difficult night to work!

And about two weeks later my friend Glenda and I went to Alert Bay to find my grandfather and my family.

I met Pinky Hansen who, the first time she saw me, and I told her who I was, that I was Joyce Kamano’s daughter, proceeded to just grab me and hug me. I don’t think I’ve ever cried so much in my whole life. That’s all I did. Pinky would take me around and say, “Well this is your uncle and this is your cousin and this is your auntie.”

And I spent time with my grandfather.

I met a woman in Alert Bay. Her name was Norma Meyers. And she probably was one of the only people that my mother ever kept in contact with when my mother was sick and going through withdrawals. I guess after I was apprehended it was just as devastating for her as it was for me. Norma, at that time, did the best that she could to help my mother but it was very limited. My mother ended up in Kingston Penitentiary, after which she met another man and married and had five more kids...

I know that my mother was living in Niagara Falls and I knew that I had to go and see her. So I went back to Powell River and I made arrangements for someone to take care of my

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children while I flew to Niagara Falls to find my mom and, like I said, my mom had five more children, four sons, and I have a half-sister named Cathy.

When I got to Niagara Falls, my mother’s husband introduced me as a cousin not to upset the family, which is understandable, because I didn’t want to walk into their lives and say, “Hi. I’m your half-sister.”

Anyway, so Cathy and I went to the hospital room and we walked in and my mother looked at me and she looked at Cathy and she said to Cathy, “Who is that?”

And Cathy said, “This is Bernice.”

And my mother just looked at me and started crying. Well, of course, I was crying. And I looked at her, and I said to her, I says, “Please don’t ever think in your whole life--or I hope you’ve never thought in your entire life that I hate you. I love you. You brought me into this world. You gave me my strength. You gave me it, who I am. You are my mother and I love you.”

I understand the life that she led.

And I spent a month visiting with her and with my family. And I promised her I would go back but I never did. I don’t know why I didn’t go back--whether it was my own fear or what it was. I guess when you’ve lived alone all of your life, when you’re alone, a loner, it’s really hard sometimes to make a connection with another person. I mean you can to a degree and then you can’t make that connection. I guess it’s a barrier built in to protect yourself. And having gone through foster home after foster home after foster home, the word ‘family’ is really a word, it’s not really a concept. It’s something you don’t really understand. And maybe that was one of the reasons why I never went back to visit my mother, probably because of a combination of a lot of those reasons.

I do have two daughters of my own who are my world--who’ve always been my world because they’re all I have and I have a son who, unfortunately, didn’t grow up with me but has my innate qualities, if that’s what it’s called, and that’s nice.

My daughter even says to me, “Mom, Flint sounds just like you!”



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My daughters didn't really understand what I was going through when I went to meet my mother because they were quite young. They understand now because they're mothers themselves.

One of the things that I've always wondered is “Where I do get my strength?” because I do have an incredible amount of strength and I believe it's because of who I am and what I am.

The one thing, even though I don't even know exactly the day when my mother died, I do know my mother came to me when she did die because I was in bed and I was sleeping and it was like there was this circle and I will never forget it as long as I live.

This circle, it was a large circle and it was closing and it was closing. And I knew in my heart that I had to jump through that circle in order to keep going or to give me strength, I don't know what it is, but I knew I had to do that in my heart. And I jumped through the circle and as I was jumping through the circle I screamed for my mother.

And for me to use that word ‘Mother’, it's just inconceivable because it's just not a word I ever use except in my own mind. It was not a verbal expression. And my daughters, I guess, at that time, were probably about 12 and 14, came running into my bedroom and they were screaming, “Mom, Mom, are you okay?”

Because my daughters knew that the word ‘Mother’ for me to scream that word ‘Mother’, wasn't a normal thing for me to do. And I guess that was kind of the end. And it wasn't until about a year ago that I actually found out my mother did pass away cuz no one told me because I wasn't really part of the family.

But it was a strange feeling to know that I already knew that she was passed away. I don't know--it's so hard for me to put in place some of the feelings that I have because unlike people that have been brought up in a family environment, growing up with their grandparents and their aunts and their uncles, not knowing how to deal with these emotions...It's almost like it's okay. She's passed away. It's all right. She came to me. I was strong before this experience happened and I still have the same amount of strength. I guess maybe what she was giving to me was she gave me my life and then when she passed away she gave me more life. I love my mother for giving me the strength to be able to do all of this, to rise above it and claim who I am, and be

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who I am and be that person with a lot of dignity and pride which I’ve always had and hopefully I’ll see her in the next life...

I guess being a Native person that’s what it’s all about, to be proud, to be who you are. What happens when you do that is people feel that in you and it’s good. I walk down the street some days and I’m just beaming and people say, “Hey! I really like your smile!”

The one thing that I am thankful for--and whoever God is--is that He made me an Indian!

Bernice shared this with me in Victoria, BC, in March of 1995. She is the mother of Yvette, Zoie, and Flint.

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Mike Mandeville:

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...I guess life was pretty hard up here. I imagine it's pretty easy to verify that cuz I think life's been hard on a lot of people up here...

Nowadays everything is so complicated...My grandmother, she was very different too, a very very quiet person. She spent a lot of time collecting weeds, leaves, certain plants. She'd make what we called potions. A lot of people come around too when they had problems. They would come to her and she would give them something to help them, some kind of medicine. I've never had the opportunity to study what she was really doing as I was pretty young yet, but sometimes I'd tag around. She used to like to talk to us about certain things.

I guess she kind of chose me out of a whole group of kids. For some reason I seemed more attentive, more interested in a lot of things she was doing. A lot of my older brothers and sisters, they were helping out. They'd get jobs, make money, because life was starting to change at a drastic rate. It got to a point where the old bartering systems were starting to fade away. It started to be a cash-only basis...Everybody wanted money because you had to have money to buy certain things. I think money ruined a lot of people's lives...

The average age they started leaving home was 14, 15 years of age...very very young. Some of them were getting married at that age. So the family got smaller very quickly. Because of this, you could see an older generation, a middle generation and a younger generation. I was the tail end of the middle generation so I was on both sides of the fence there. That's probably why I was very fortunate to witness a lot of the events changing the world. I've experienced the old ways and I lived the new ways. I grew up confused on a lot of issues because a lot of the old ways worked so darn well. They couldn't be improved any more than they were. Man still tries to improve improve, improve. Everything is always "New and Improved!" The Creator gave us basic things that didn't need any improving but it seems man is always trying to find better things than what they already have. A lot of times they should stop and think of the things that they have and appreciate it more.

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As I'm getting older, I got myself caught into the new things and the improved things. I went that way a ways and then years went by and I find out that things weren't that way anymore. So I started searching back to the old ways again and it was difficult because it had been such a long time. And the search always goes on. I started finding myself again a couple years ago, maybe five or six years, probably age thirty-five. It's quite an age to be born again. You have to start with your baby steps and work your way back up. I started asking things and inquiring. When I started to inquire about my family roots, where I come from, who I am. One thing I had found out is before I can go anywhere I had to find out where I came from. It's to know which direction I came from, you have to have a base to work from...

Metis people, or what they used to be called back then, Half-breeds, they were treated very differently from the rest of society: semi-accepted in some areas, but they weren't accepted by either side for the longest time. There was a lot of resentment. I could see why with the Native people way back and their resentment toward Whites and all that. A lot of them didn't like the blood mixture. Same as with the whites, didn't like the blood mixture, but that goes on always. That's part of civilization. Look throughout history. It didn't matter where you go, people didn't like people mixing, didn't like Blacks mixing with Whites, didn't like the Italians mixing with the Romanians or the Turks and so forth and so forth, which is kind of a pity because if it wasn't for that, there wouldn't be much civilization... You wouldn't know who was across the lake! You'd have to be a pretty good thinker, I'd say, to maneuver around the politics involved of that certain era...

Nowadays, we have something and afterwards it's no good. It's a throwaway society, eh? Those days, nothing was ever thrown away. You got a shovel; it broke, you fixed it. You didn't just throw a shovel away and buy another shovel. Then again, a lot things were made to last, too, not like today.

When you're growing up, you hear some of the stories you come across, like legends and stories. I remember Grandma sitting there and Jocko would come over, bring over a moose quarter and they used to smoke a pipe. And I would ask, "Why do we do that?" It was a prayer time and so Jocko told me that with the Cree people, it was very important to always respect the animals and a sense of respect was to whenever they went out to go on a hunt they would always

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have a little ceremony first. The hunters would purify themselves. Some would smudge; others had the sweat lodge. They would always have a pipe, smoke a pipe. And this tobacco...I never knew what the weeds were, I was pretty young. He said that they always smoked a pipe, in a prayer, they asked the Creator and also the smoke was to go to the Moose as a sign of respect and I heard a story once about this. There was a lodge and there was three Moose sitting in this lodge and they were sitting around, there was a campfire. They were keeping warm, I guess and all of a sudden this natural pipe was floating into the lodge and all the other moose ran away from it but this younger bull moose took the pipe and smoked it and the older Moose said, "You shouldn't have smoked that pipe. That's all I can say. You shouldn't have taken that pipe."

So the next morning the three moose left the lodge and were grazing out on the land. All of a sudden one heard hunters coming and started to run. The third moose, the one who had smoked the pipe started to follow them. The head moose said, "You shouldn't have taken the pipe." As soon as he said that, there was an arrow that came and hit that third moose.

The third moose, at that time, knew why he had smoken' that pipe. The other Moose stopped and looked back. "See, you shouldn't have smoken' that pipe cuz every time the pipe comes around anyone who smokes that pipe they're about to die."

But the moose who was laying there said to them, "It's okay because the pipe came as a sign of respect. The hunters are doing things the proper way. By smoking the pipe, I gave myself to them. I gave them permission to take me as food to sustain them. Whey they're done with me my spirit will carry on. If they shot me without the proper respect, my spirit would have died, but now my spirit lives."

That's an amazing story...I see that as the circle of life, a proper respect. Years and years later I head the same story. Joseph Bruchac, he's an Abernaque...That story, every time I hear it, it just puts shivers down my spine.

It's funny how you think it's a small world. But there's more to stories than someone telling stories. Now I know for a fact that there's more to it than just a story being told by this old Indian person. It has my curiosity.

*RVC: It called your name...*

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Mike: Yes! ...I truly believe the Creator has a purpose for me. He's telling me which way to go and basically now I'm letting go of a lot of things I used to be so involved with. At one time, the most important thing for me was to make money, make money, make lots of money. And I've made so much, you know, made it, lost it. It seems it's a waste of my life, like I was going down a spiral. There are so many people caught in those ways. It's unbelievable. You see a lot of it. They'll work. They're hard workers. They'll spend every minute living just trying to acquire these materialistic things and it seems like a total waste. They're so self involved that they don't see the beauty out there...they don't stop and look around, see the beauty of nature itself. A lot of them don't even stop to talk to the animals anymore. I had lost communication with a lot of animals.

I remember as a child I used to be able to run through the forest. There's all sorts of life in the wilderness. I feared none of them but as I was growing older I got out of that. I got involved with the self spiral of life. I lost track. I never made time to walk in the forest. Anytime I went back to the forest, I was so nervous. Every little *crack* I'd feel fear. I couldn't understand why. I had lost touch with myself and I had to find myself again. Now I go back to the forest very much now. I'm very comfortable. As I've said, I've walked up to bears many times. I see them. They see me. I go my way. They go theirs. It's no big deal. At one time if I would have saw one, I would have run like a bat out of hell!

But that happens when you lose touch with yourself. I think it's time for a lot of people out there to really, truly find themselves because do you know the legend about the white raven?

*RVC: No.*

It's an old legend. It belongs to the Cree people as well. Many many years ago. Have you ever heard the story about the bird who made meat turn bitter?

*RVC: No.*

Well these hunters would go out and hunt and bring in their catch, you know, help their family. And this bird would fly out from apparently from out of nowhere and would yell out, "Go bitter! Go bitter!" and the meat would go bitter. It went on and on and on. The hunters would try to go as fast as they could and, even still, the bird would catch up and make the meat go bitter.

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So, there was this one hunter, and he went to see this medicine man. His name was Coyote, this medicine man. They asked him about it. He had told them to get the fastest hunters out. "The bird you're looking for," he said, "it's living in a hollow tree, and whenever the hunters are coming by the bird will fly out and make the meat go bitter. What you'll have to do is set a trap. And when that bird comes out you've got to catch it, kill it, and have a bonfire ready to throw the bird into the fire. Once the bird is in the fire there'll be a few birds who will fly out of that. They will go free. You have to make sure that you kill this bird very well. Crush the bones after it has burned. Make sure it has all turned to powder," He said. "There will be a final bird that will fly out of all of this fire and this bird will be a white raven. Once this is done you will only see this bird once and you'll never see it again, but I caution you, the day that this bird is ever seen again, whoever sees the white raven again, this will mean it's the end times..."

Apparently they did all this, got their fastest hunters and the bird flew out. They netted it, brought it down. The hunter beat it with a club and the strangest thing he saw. He said, "The bird was like a raven, but it had a human head, a human face." It really scared him. He pounded and pounded, threw it in the fire, crushed up the bones as the Coyote man told him. Of course there were a few little birds that flew out and, he says, "There was the white raven that flew out." He said once the white raven flew out he knew he had done what he was supposed to have done, but as the legend goes, whoever sees the white raven again, it will be the end times.

I heard a story once of someone who thought they had spotted the white raven. He had possibly thought it might be...

...I believe I have one special task that I have to do. I will find out what it is. As the days go on I find myself getting more and more in touch. Dreams, visions come to me more and more, the same as I had when I was a child. I think I got lost for quite a few years and I just found my path again...

I come across the younger generation and they are all searching. It's harder for them now to go to the elders because a lot of the elders speak in the old tongue and they don't really understand. And sometimes [an elder] has to sit down and talk with them and say, "This is how it is" in an English language to understand each other, thus hopefully encourage them to learn their language. A lot of the Cree language is dying...I know a few words. I know that I'll look it up

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again but right now that's not the most important thing. Maybe these stories have to get out as a priority cuz I strongly believe that there's a lot of aboriginal people who no longer speak their language who have been lost but who have come back. And they've been searching for a long time too, not knowing where to go. Who knows? Maybe I can help them that way.

Mike is a Metis of Cree and French ancestry. He was born in South Porcupine, North Ontario, known now as the city of Timmins. He was born on February 17, 1956. The tape Mike refers to is called Stories from Joseph Bruchac by Joseph Bruchac. The story on the tape is called, "How the People Hunted the Moose."



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Michael Paul-Martin:

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This story originates with the people of Moose Factory, a Cree community located at the southern tip of James Bay in Northern Ontario.

One time, I guess, there were people in Moose Factory who knew, or at least suspected, that this one old guy was midew, a medicine person. His name was Obediah Trapper. And one time when he was in the village--he was away in the woods and muskeg a lot--these two fairly young women happened to be near this old guy. The story goes like this, approximately.

"We hear that you have powers, that you can do things," says the two women.

But really, They were sort of saying: "Bullshit!" The two women were thinking that. Not only that but they were curious, too. And Obediah, the midew, knew what they were up to. He decided to play along.

"Well," he told them, "it's true!"

And they were sort of testing him: "Give us proof!"

They were testing him all right. It was nighttime, and they were at the edge of a lake, or river. So he made one of them face towards the lake, out there, across...he took the palm of his hand and brought it close to her face, and after a second or two he took his hand away. This was at night, in the dark.

Lo and behold, right there and then, she could see right across the lake clear as day! Almost like the weirdo with the advance -techno night vision goggles in the movie, Silence of the Lambs, you know, the guy that chases Miss Starling in the dark towards the end. Except in this here story there's no space age technology, just sheer Mushkego medicinal power.

And after a very short while, Obediah did the same thing with his hand again, whatever it is that medicine people do with their hands. And, by Jesus, she could see again, in the dark I mean.

So that's the kind of powers that illustrate the kind of skills that this guy had...Many Aboriginal people say that when you talk about the way we were before the Europeans came, that's part of it. We lost something. And those are one of the things Native people lost, the ability to go after those powers and keep them as part of survival. Somewhere along the way they

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decided to discard them. So when they insist on regaining control of their lives again-- things like sovereignty and the right to lands and resources--that kind of talk goes beyond just lands and resources and the like, right? They mean it has to cover medicinal power things, too. And if Native people can combine this medicine with the good things learned from the European, especially technological knowledge and skills, they believe that's the kind of thing they're looking for...

These are many stories that the people, the Mushkegowuk (Cree), keep and pass along to the younger generations, and as such, this short medicine story is only one of the many cultural and traditional stories of long ago as well as the recent past.

This story, except for the closing comments, was told to Michael J. Paul-Martin years ago by Ed Faries, Jr. Ed, a close relative of Obediah and many years a boiler maker by trade, resides in Moose Factory, the place where's he's from. Obediah passed away about ten years ago.

Michael, or “Mike,” a poet/writer, was born near Attawapiskat, a Cree community of West Coast James Bay. His first collection of poetry is titled She Said Sometimes I Hear Things by 7th Generation Books.

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Rosa Wah-shee:

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I was born in a place called Nishi, in the bush, where our family lived, all by ourselves. We fended for ourselves. We hunted and trapped. We children were raised there until I got very sick and almost died. That’s when my mother brought me to Rae and I had to be taken to the hospital because I had Tuberculosis. And from there I learned French because the hospital was run by nuns and they all spoke French. I couldn’t get out of bed for two years.

When I was leaving I didn’t know how to walk. Not only couldn’t I walk, I couldn’t speak my language anymore because I was speaking French all this time. Once I learned how to walk I also learned how to speak Dogrib and then I went to residential school after that. But once I learned how to walk I had a lot of adventures.

I wandered every where. I was able to see the plants, the bugs. I’d go from one area of Rae to the other, places I wasn’t permitted to go and where I wasn’t even supposed to be seen. In around Rae, I was supposed to stay right around where we lived but I’d crossed the bridge and I went to the French section of Rae and then went across another bridge by the Hudson’s Bay where people from Lac La Marte and Snare [Lake] would settle every once in a while...

One day I decided I wanted to see my grandmother, but she lived past the French area and over the bridge behind the Hudson’s Bay, and that was quite a distance for a little girl to walk all by herself. And I just decided--I don’t know why--but I wandered over there.

And I could see her from on top of a hill sitting in a tent but all these women were wearing black. They were sitting in black outside the tent. There were rows and rows and rows of women sitting outside listening to whatever was being said. So I walked towards my grandmother. Finally I got to the back row with all the women sitting on the ground in front of the tent and I said, “Grandma?”

And she saw me. I didn’t say it very loud. She saw me. She said, “Come here, my girl. Come here. Come here.”

All these women were looking at me like, “You’re not supposed to be here.” My grandmother kept beckoning me over to her. Finally I got up to the front and she gave me a big

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hug. And she told two women on her side, she said, “Give her some food. Put the food in front of her.”

I was sitting in front of my grandmother with my back to all of the women sitting behind me and I started to eat and she sat me on her lap. She was playing with my hair and she was talking to me and then I said, “I better go. I’m not supposed to be here.”

She said, “Okay, and take this bread with you.”

I said, “Okay.”

So I left and I started walking. And I thought, “Oh am I ever going to get a scolding from my mother. I better walk really fast.”

So I climbed up the hill. I was right on top of the hill and there was this scream like I never heard before. It just made me shiver. And I heard, “ROSSAAAAA.”

It just echoed everywhere! And I just got so scared, I turned around. And I heard it again and it was so loud, I got so scared, I almost squished my little bannock. But it was my grandmother. She was screaming my name and all the women started screaming. There was so much screaming, I got so scared that I started to run. I ran all the way home and when I got home, my mother said, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?”

I said, “I just went and saw Grandma.”

She said, “You went and saw Grandma?”

I said, “Yes! I think something happened to her.”

She said, “Well I better go and see.”

I said, “Well can I come?”

She said, “No. You’re not allowed to come. You stay right here. I gotta go see what happened.”

I was thinking about how my grandmother yelled for me. But then I was also thinking about how beautiful she was. She had silver white hair. It was up to her shoulders. It had fallen on her shoulders. Her face, her eyes, were very very kind. She had a really nice complexion but she was very very gentle with me and she was very caring. But she also had authority. She had authority but she didn’t show it towards me. But I knew she had some kind of authority, I don’t know what it was.

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Anyway, when my mother came back, she announced to my dad and to my brothers that Gramma had just died. I guess before she died, she called out my name. And I suppose that authority she had that I sensed was that she was a medicine woman...

When I was little, I didn't go to school then, I used to tromp all over like I told you. There was this heavy rain one night...I mean, the drops of rain, if you stepped out for about three minutes, you'd be drenched...In the early morning, everything was still wet and my dad had been working on building a new house for us and I wanted to see how he was doing. The sun was high, hot, but everything was still wet and I was always going everywhere barefooted. I had heard about the family next door. There was always talk. I don't know whether it was a story or if it was true. But it was said that the man next door, and his family, the husband, anyway, the father of the family there, was friends with what they used to call Nagha, the bogeyman. I never paid much attention to it. Until that morning when I went walking.

I was walking on the rocks and I went by this man's house. There were footprints outside his window bigger than anybody's feet I've ever seen in my whole life. It was so big. The feet on it, oh, I couldn't imagine. It was really big. I planted my feet on it and it was maybe five times bigger than my little feet it was so big. So then I decided to follow it.

And as much as it poured the night before, I couldn't figure out how come the footprints didn't wash out because it poured really heavy and anything that was out on the rocks would've either got flooded out of there or disappeared. So I followed the footsteps on the rocks. I walked along beside it and it kept on going and going and going. Finally I was going down the rocks and my dad was working and my mother was there, too. And they were leading the same way that I had to go.

Now I was on the ground and I couldn't see the footprints anymore. I went inside the porch of the house and I walked in. There were boards everywhere. My dad was hammering up on the roof. And my mother was outside, somewhere beside him. But I had walked in and there was nobody in there. And I saw the footprints on the floorboards. And it led right up to one of the walls that was supposed to be up to make a room, sort of like a bedroom. And this one foot was up on one of the boards.

So then I said, “It came in here. It came in here.”

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And my mother heard my voice and she said, “What are you doing?”

I said, “I followed these footprints and it comes all the way from--I forget the man’s name--from his house. The man you said was friends with the bogeyman, the man you said was friends with Nagha. That Nagha came in here. It came into our house.”

And she just got really scared. She says, “You get out of here right now. You get out of here. What are you talking about?”

I said, “Well, this person’s footprints is all the way from this man’s house, over the rocks, down the rocks, and it came in here last night, or this morning.” I said, “The rain water never took away his footprints.”

I said, “Who is that man, Mom?”

She said, “You can’t talk about it. You can’t talk about it.”

But I said, “His footprints are up there. You gotta see it. You can’t miss it it’s so big.”

She said, “No, my girl, you can’t talk about it anymore. You can’t talk about it.”

She said that...

My mother was scared it was going to come for me!

My mother told me this story during the 1995 Christmas holidays. She wouldn’t even let me tell you when she was born! My mother used to work at the hospital where Louie Beaver was visited by a bear. I asked her about James Beaver’s story about his brother and she replied:

Well there’s this story that a Beaver, I don’t know whether it was Louie...I believe he was on the second floor. They thought he was going to die. He was very feverish. They say that one night somebody came into his room and was talking to him and had said that they would cure him. And they stayed with him for quite a while during the night. And they said, “Well, I have to go now. By morning you’ll be fine. You won’t be sick anymore.”

And Louie was so sick, he said he was delirious. But he said he remembered that somebody was in his room and it wasn’t a human being. But he thought it was a bear. But he thought it was because he was delirious. And somehow he managed to get out of bed to try and find out who this person was that was leaving his room. So he walked down the hall and there’s the hallway where you can push the exit door open and there’s the patio light and he made it to

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that door and all he saw was a black bear running across the field, running across the potato field...and Louie Beaver was fine the next day.

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Isadore Wah-Shee:

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I know lots of people in Yellowknife...Lac la Martre, got lots of friends, Rae Lakes, especially where I come from...I went all around with them, in the bush, dogteam, fishing. I know them real good. My name is Isadore Wah-shee but they call me “Happy”.

When you get married it's hard, eh? I don't know what day I got married. I dream when I was small. I dreamed about this woman, where I got married. Name was Melanie Wah-shee. I dream about her but I never talked to her. Anyway, I was too busy...

I worked with my Dad, spring hunting. Any place he want me to go, I go with my Dad...then I got tired in the bush. Then one day, on a Christmas, I was having a party...Then that woman I was dreaming about, the one that's my wife, she came in!

My Dad told me, “Don't be lazy.”

I didn't like it, but I listened to my Dad.

The dog team used to haul wood...My dog team listened. When I say, “Whoah” they stop. When I say, “Hah” they go, eh? “March!” Boy, I had a good leader.

[Next Christmas] Then, that time, my girlfriend came here again. She sit beside me then she told me, “I want to talk to you.”

I told her, “Why you want to talk to me?”

She asked me to get married, eh? I said, “I can't get married cuz I don't have enough to get married...How about Christmas? I have to have money. If we have three hundred dollars we'll get married. Anyhow, I'm broke.”

“Okay.”

Then in the springtime, I went down to Yellowknife to work for a lodge: Guiding. I flew down the end of May. I came back September. I make over a thousand dollars. So I was certified. Straight cash! American money! They flew me back to Yellowknife. That time everything was cheap. You know cigarettes? Used to be fifty cents. Beer, fifty cents. Takes long time to last when you put down twenty dollars. Hotel used to be fifty dollars for one night. Taxi from here [Fort Rae]--right now \$120-- from Yellowknife to here.



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“Ace Cab” they called it, “Lucky 7.” Used to be no road from here to Yellowknife. Only Lucky 7. So I don't know how I was going to get there...

There was no boats. There was a barge. One time, used to be Ray Rock Mine. So I put all my stuff in the boat. Big barge, uh? They haul everything, equipment to Ray Rock. You know Marian Lake? From there they haul stuff to Ray Rock Mine. We left about ten in the morning. Came here about two in the morning. Goes slow. Big waves! We stop at the old fort for a while. Boy, big waves. I came back with about thirteen hundred. Then my girlfriend came in saying, “Let's get married.”

I say, “Okay.”

That's where I got married!

This was told to me by my uncle, Isadore, in the J'eiko Motel in Fort Rae, NWT. It was August 27, 1992. Isadore is from the Dogrib Nation. Dogrib is his first language, and it's true: everywhere he goes, people call him “Happy.”

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Dianne Bell:

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So my granny moved in with me lock stock and barrel, with her old bed that she just loved, and her old stuff. She was really eccentric. She had an old nightgown; it was all in shreds. She had all these nice nightgowns that people bought her because she told us this was her last month of life. And she was like Linus with his blanket. We’d have to wash this *thing* and get it back to her. I actually still have one of those nightgowns that she just hated. I still have it and I wear it, you know?

So we did that. She moved in with me and my kids. My twin sister wanted to know if she wanted to return to Alert Bay for her final days.

She says, “No. I’ll only go back in a box. I will never go back to there in life.” And she never did. She left Alert Bay never to return after my grandfather died when I was 15 years old and had been staying in Vancouver. She was one of those off-reserve elders, one of the dispossessed of the reserve. She lost the land she owned for various and sundry reasons. That really affected her. She had no land to return to, no home base and that, in turn, has affected my entire family.

My grandmother said, “Well, my sister will be down soon.” My aunt who’s now 89. “Pearly will be down and she’ll help you kids help me die.”

Very matter of fact.

So my great aunt did move down and lived with me and we shared a bedroom. My granny had her own room and my Dad was around...

My granny’s real special and I’ve written lots of stories about her. When my sister lived with her in Vancouver, she slept with my grandmother. When we were kids, we slept with my grandmother. She liked companions around her all the time.

One night, I had the night duty. I slept with my grandmother, you know, cuz if Gran needed anything she’d nudge me. It was natural for us as we were brought up in lots of ways by our Granny and that’s how they lived. It wasn’t weird or anything. It was life. But when I woke

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up in the morning, my granny told me I was no darn good. She tried to wake me up. I hogged the bed. I wasn't much of a nurse. I was fired!

But it was really comforting, you know, though?

What we used to do, though, was stay awake with her to the end. She refused to go to a hospital so we found a doctor for consultation who would come in and make home visits, an old doctor, and Gran didn't like hospitals. She didn't want to die in a hospital. She wanted to die with us. And that's how we do it in our family. We die with each other. We don't die in strange places. So we respected that wish...

At one point, the kids went off for a number of days. She didn't like that. She said, “I don't want this place to be quiet. I want the kids running through. I want children running through. I don't want things to be quiet.”

She really loved kids and she thought, “Life goes on.” She wanted life around her. But, at the same time, without the kids, it was like Grand Central Station. All her nieces and nephews came by. There was a whole stream of people.

She had nieces that live here that are nurses anytime we needed them, but there was her sister that moved in with us that was five years older than her who knew about dying and what it was like to be sick. [Gran] had terrible terrible lung cancer but then she started smoking that last month.

She said, “Well I'm dying anyway. I may as well enjoy my life. I love to smoke. I'm not going to get better. I'm going to die.”

Which was true. She was going to die.

My aunt said she would last one month and my Gran agreed. And we used to get real bugged with our aunt cuz she'd tell us all these stories about everybody whoever died in the Cook family, how they died, you know, the process and stuff and all the different stages that happened and the different signs when you know the end was near.

And we said, “*Oh Aunt Pearly! You just want Gran to die!*” at the time cuz we really loved our Gran *so* much...

We'd have services downstairs and my mom would bring her little organ and we'd sing our hymns she really liked. That was really special. So we'd do stuff like that. And that's very

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normal for us, to ease people into their death cuz they’re all great Christians, my granny’s generation, my mom’s generation. We have all the hymns in Kwakwala too, in our own language that we sing...

My sister claims that she doesn’t want us around if she’s ever dying or when she dies. She doesn’t want us to arrange her funeral or be around in the death. She’s going to have her will written so we’re not, Deb and I, are not anywhere close by because for us there’s a whole system of protocol when someone’s dying that you go through these different things, you know?

So anyway we used to do that: have little sing songs just for my Granny and talk to Gran, and stay up with her all night. Then we’d go to sleep and wake up and feed her and she didn’t like eating and then she switched to liquid morphine which was when she really started to get pain and we tried radiation therapy. And that was really bad cuz it really burned her--I didn’t really know what radiation therapy was but it *is* radiation therapy where all her lips got burned and she got burns--literally!

So we scrapped that idea. She goes, “No. I’m not going to die that way.”

So she was really in control of her death. And the night she died, she had a big meal. And my Auntie Pearly said, “This is it.”

So Auntie Pearly talked about Uncle Cyril and how he died. He had cancer too. One night, after a long period of not eating, he got his appetite back. He had a huge meal: sausages and corn and potatoes. And, to Auntie Pearly, this was the sign, the big meal. This is it. The end is near.

I thought, “No, we’re not. My Granny’s going to beat the odds and she’s going to live.”

And sure enough she died. She died on us.

But it was like she put a spell on us so that we wouldn’t watch her suffer and go into her death because she loved us. That night I was downstairs reading and I fell asleep on my couch. I never do that. I always go to bed. My auntie Pearly who’s usually up, fell asleep. We all fell asleep and none of us were around when she entered into the process of death. So that was her way of easing us into that so we wouldn’t cry or be in pain...

Not to be unfair to my Granny that’s still alive, but this Granny was *so* special. She never hugged. They never hugged cuz they were really English. They were more English than the English. So they didn’t really demonstrate that but just how she was, hey?

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So Auntie Pearly woke us up in the morning, after we all abandoned our night duty, and Gran was dying. She says, “This is it. It’s almost time. You’re granny’s almost gone.”

Cuz she had the death rattle, it’s called.

So we went to the room and sure enough she’s still breathing, but she’s going to die pretty quick, the death rattle, So out come the hymnbooks. We brought hymnbooks. That’s how we do things...

The family has favorite hymns that people sing when you’re dying or after they die at the funeral. Certain ones that were the favorites because her parents were missionaries.

And then we all started to sing these hymns to my granny as she goes in these final seconds. And then we all started to sing but two sets of us had two different songs that we were singing so we started singing two different hymns. It was really funny. So we were all laughing. My grandmother’s dying! This was her final five seconds of life!

So we’re all gathered in the room. We’re all there. So we resynchronized and then we sing the right hymn and then she doesn’t last for too much longer and then she’s gone. She stops breathing and then she’s dead. Later, she went back in her coffin and was buried in Alert Bay.

And that was really important that whole process, that we would do this even though to most people it would be, you know, in this white world, it’s morbid. But that was really very special that she had no pain, her cancer was starting to spread, she was starting to get really weird growths. But she was the grandmother I had when I was growing up, the granny that never ever changed.

So that was one of my stories. She was just a really neat lady. We grandchildren were the most important to her. And to this day I miss her. I miss her so much...

The whole process of death is quite interesting. My sisters claim I come to life! But it gives me meaning. That’s really important because in this society and now our people are encouraged more and more just to shove people away and just forget about them. And if the illness is really painful or repulsive then it’s not good to be around them. But it’s really important to be with people because they don’t change because they have a terminal illness, you know?

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Diane was born in Alert Bay, BC in 1954. She is half of a twin birth. Debra, her sister, was born an hour earlier. She is of the Nimpkish Tribe of the Kwakutil Nation.

## The Spirit World

“Tracking Heaven” by Richard Van Camp

Anna Tonasket:

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So you want to know about the Little People? I was born and raised in Vernon, BC. We're about 20 miles out of the city of Vernon. That's where I was raised. We had a home that's situated on about 33 acres and half of the land is cleared. The other half still has the trees and the seeya bushes and whatnot. Anyways, there's this creek that runs through our property on an angle. From our new house it's just about--oh I'd say 500 feet from where our old house was. When we were young, my mom and Dad would go to town, to Vernon, and they would leave us by ourselves from the time we were seven or eight because we had what my mother called baby sitters. These baby sitters were what she called "the Little People." As I was growing up, we called them "Jokers."

So my friends would come over. They had no problem coming over during the day or any of my other relatives, but they would not come once it got dark because they said they could hear people in what we called our forest. I was never afraid of the dark. For some reason I felt at ease once it was dark, especially on our own land, on our own property. My sister, my brother and I, we used to go and play in the woods. Mom's rule was, "You be home by dark." But as long as we were within our 33 acres we were home. So we would go out and we would play.

And this one part in the creek when you got close to it you could hear voices. You could hear people laughing. I've never seen one of the Little People. I've only heard them. But my Uncle Angus, he was quite old, and he still lived in the old shack across the road from our place, and he used to come up because we had TV when we moved into our new house when I was six years old. We had electricity so we got a TV. My mom and dad had bought us a black and white TV. So my uncle used to come up in the evenings and he'd watch TV. At 11 o'clock he would say, "Well I'm going to go home." And he'd bid us all good night. My uncle only spoke Okanagan. He never spoke a word of English throughout the whole time I knew him. All he spoke was our language. So he'd tell us good night and, by this time, us kids were supposed to be in bed. Being kids, we'd goof around and stay up and we'd still be awake and we'd hear Uncle leave.



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Well, there was this big puddle about half way down our road. The dirt road was about a quarter a mile long from the highway to our house. About half of the way there was this big dip in the road and when it rained or after the snow melted there'd be this huge puddle and we had what we called Shoppy trees and we used them like California people would use Palm trees we'd sit under them and we'd play. But, anyway, there was this apple tree and these Shoppy trees lined up by this puddle. My uncle could not pass that big puddle. Something would not let him go. And he says it was the Little People. They wouldn't allow him to cross and it was about a hundred feet before the creek crossed the road. But they wouldn't let him pass this big puddle and he would try. He tried so many times to get home. He wanted to go home but something just wouldn't let him. He'd get this chill down his back spine. Like the hair on the back of his neck would literally stand up. He would try and take a step and he just couldn't. He'd end up turning around and coming, spending the night, but if he was bound and determined to go home one of us kids would have to get up, which was usually me as I was the oldest. I would walk my uncle home and nothing would bother us. He would be talking to me in Okanagan saying, “I couldn't get past this spot, you know. How come you can bring me home?”

And I'd tell him, “I don't know, Uncle.”

So we'd go and I'd take him home and then I would come back and I'd go to bed. This went on until my uncle died. It got to a point where he would leave before dusk because anytime after dusk he just couldn't. The only way he could get home is if my dad drove him home and he never liked to ask my dad to drive him because it was within walking distance. So I would get up and I would take him home.

When our house was being renovated we lived with my uncle and my qa'qna, which is my dad's mother and my grand aunt, my grandma's sister, Aunty Elizabeth. Uncle Angus used to always tell us, being kids, and being curious we'd hear things outside and right now we'd [look out the window] to see what's out there, who's out there, and he would come and he'd be yakking at us in Okanagan, telling us: “Don't look out the window. Something will look back at you. Humas are out there.”

Humas means “Bogey Man.” Bogey man's out there. We thought they were just trying to scare us.

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But, anyway, my uncle would see these Little People and they would tease him when he would go to the outhouse, they’d knock on the side of the outhouse. He thought it was us at first. He’d be hollering at us kids, “Leave me alone! I’m in the out house!”

And he’d come back in and he would tell Mom, “Shouldn’t be letting those kids outside. It’s dark.”

And my mom would tell him in Okanagan, “They’re sleeping.”

And Uncle would come and he would check. At first it would baffle him and he got kind of leery and so he said, one time, he said he was sitting in the outhouse and he whips open the door and he was convinced it was one of us kids playing tricks. He whips open the door and he seen this little person. All he could tell us was this little person had big, black, coal eyes. They were just black. But the body was kind of transparent. But he said it looked like a little human, other than the skin wasn’t brown, it wasn’t white. It was just sort of transparent. And he said he could see them running and playing like little kids having fun, always laughing.

One time my cousin Debby had come to visit me. I told her, “Well, I’ll walk you home.”

Her mom phoned and said it was time for her to come on home. So I said, “Okay I’ll walk you home.” But I told her, “But I want to cut through the forest.”

And Debby was scared to death of what we called our forest!

She said, “No. I don’t want to go through there!”

“But it’s the short cut! This is how we’ll get you home faster!”

She said, “There’s something in your woods!”

I said, “There is nothing in there.” We play in there! It’s like playing in our house. She said, “No, no.”

I told her, “Well, if you want me to walk you home we have to go through that way because I don’t feel safe walking by the highway because you never know! We lived like how many miles from town, right? We’re way out in the boonies-or so we thought at the time. So I convinced her we were going through the woods because it was the short way. Anyway, we got about halfway through and, all of a sudden, she grabs me and she’s two years older than I am and she whips me in front of her and she says, “Anna, Anna! There’s something over there!”

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And I’m looking through the dark and I’m listening and I said, “Aww, must be the neighbour’s cow!”

She says, “No, no, Anna. Someone’s running!”

You could see them dashing. They’re hiding from us!

“Aww it’s probably just the Little People.”

Well, of course, she just freaked right out. She wanted to turn around right there and then. She wanted my dad to drive her home. I said, “No, we’re already half way there.”

We only have an hour to go and you’re home. We only had five minutes to walk and we’re off of our property. We could cut through Robert’s field, and the ball diamond, get on the road and you’re home, right?

But Debbie was just petrified. She kept saying, “There’s somebody out there. Can’t you see them?”

Being accustomed to being on my own property and knowing that there were these Little People I was never scared of them. I’ve never come face to face with one, mind you. You could hear them laugh, like kids playing. It sounds like kids playing. And it never bothered me. My thoughts as a youngster was, well, if I can’t see them, right? Because it’s dark, they can’t see me, either. It was comforting to me when it was night-time because that was my way of thinking: if I can’t see them, they can’t see me.

Mom always used to tell us, “I never have to worry about you kids. That’s why I can leave you when Dad and I go to town, we go out”--or whatever they’re going to do in town-- “and I know you kids are going to be fine.”

And they left us a lot and there was just myself and my younger brother and my sister. There was just the three of us except the odd time when some of our cousins would come and stay but, other than that, mostly it was three of us.

...Once Mom and Dad were out of sight, we’d build a fort, we’d wreck it and we’d start all over again and we could hear them. With us it wasn’t actually seeing them. It was like a shadow. Like catching something in the corner of your eye and you look but there’s nothing there. As we got closer to where the creek is on our property you could hear them laughing. I can’t recall hearing words or hearing them talking. All I remember is laughing. They seemed like

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they were happy Little People. And other than my Uncle Angus I’ve never known them to bother anybody but for some reason, like I said, my uncle, he could not go home by himself. A lot of times he would spend a lot of nights on our couch because we’d be sleeping and he wouldn’t want to bother my dad cuz my dad works at four o’ clock in the morning and he’s up at three and he has to travel a distance to go to work so my uncle didn’t want to bother him so he would end up staying and, as soon as it got daylight, well, he’d go home knowing it was safe. He could head home.

Anyway, Debby, she flat out refused to come to my place. If it was after dark and we had to be together; we had to be at her place because she would not go through the woods after that one time. She swore that there was something or someone out there and they were watching us. She could see them, but not really.

And, as I was growing up, I thought she was such a big chicken. She was two years older and she was putting me in front of her. Give me a break!

That’s what I know about the Little People. They never bothered us. And if anything, I guess what they’ve done is they’ve protected us while we were by ourselves because nothing, no one, would come around the house. No one would come. There was this one time my dad would go to the Vernon Vikings hockey games and I wasn’t much of a hockey fan. I liked to watch my dad and I liked to watch my uncles, my family play. This was a non-native team and I never did care, you know, for sports on TV or to watch someone I don’t know play. It never did interest me. It had to be someone I knew before I would sit and watch...So they wanted to go to a hockey game and my bother and sister wanted to go because they had a concession which meant French Fries. So that’s the only reason they went.

I never did go to town, even as a teenager, basically to school and back. Anyway they left and they said, “We’ll be home 11:30-12 o’clock. I said, “Yeah, okay.”

My mom, that one night--usually when they leave it’s, “Bye, Anna, see you later. I love you. Lock the doors, blah blah blah, and keep the lights on.”

My mom always used to tell me, “Keep the lights on.”

But I never liked the lights on. I couldn’t sleep if there was a light on. My sister and I are like day and night. She couldn’t sleep without the lights on. And I would wait for her to go to

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sleep and I would turn the hall light off and the bathroom light off and the bathroom light off and as soon as I would turn everything off she'd wake up!

So, anyway, this one night I was left by myself. Mom and Dad went and Vina and Pierre went to the hockey game. I used to just sit in the dark and listen to my radio or my record player. And I was sitting in the living room one night. That night, it was a Sunday night, and I must have been about 13 years old.

It didn't dawn on me that my mother had been over concerned because that wasn't the first time I was left totally by myself. But for some reason she kept saying, “Make sure you lock the doors.” She showed me where my dad's gun was. My dad showed me where the gun's bullets were. And this is something they had never done. Mom was really apprehensive about leaving me and I kept telling her, “What's your problem? It's not like this is the first time. I mean, how many times have I willingly chose to be by myself.”

That's just how I was. I needed my own time.

Anyway, she gave me all these instructions.

They were gone for a half hour, forty-five minutes, hour maybe, and all of a sudden I seen these lights come up. And, like I said, our house was a quarter mile from the highway. So you could see the headlights, the minute the car turned itself on the property. And I thought someone took the wrong road because the next door neighbours. They had visitors all the time on either side of our property. One was an elder man with three daughters and they had visitors coming all the time and on the other side of us was the Louis family and they were cattle people, rodeo people, so they had cowboys and cattle men coming over to their place and they would be given directions and they would end up coming up to our place and we would just redirect them. But, anyway, I seen this car coming up. I thought, “Aw, somebody got lost again.”

But, as they got closer, I got more and more nervous. I had all the lights off so to them, maybe nobody was home. What I thought was, “They would see no lights. They would turn around and they would leave.”

Well, they parked on the side of the house. And I was scared to look out of the curtains because I thought, "Well, Geez, I can see pretty good out there. They may be able to see in just as good, right? If they see this curtain move, they're gonna know somebody's home." So I was

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trying to look through the slit of the curtain, I was trying to see. There was this dark vehicle parked there and three of what I thought were young men got out. They tried the back door. Locked. Someone came around the front, checked the front door. They started checking the living room windows. We had sticks to block the windows because we had gotten our house broken into a few times and the windows were just really crappy. They couldn't lock very well. So my dad had cut these sticks to match all the windows and they couldn't budge any of the windows. And you could hear them talking. And they were saying, “Well, they leave their kids by themselves. They have a daughter. She's a teenager.”

My heart was just a pounding. I went into the living room closet where my dad's gun was and I went into the kitchen where the bullets were in the kitchen, in one of the drawers. And I was trying to be quiet. And you know how when you're trying to be quiet the house naturally creeks and stuff, eh? And I thought, “Oh my god. They're going to hear me. They're going to break the door down.”

I opened the butcher knife drawer. I got out three of the biggest butcher knives we had, stuck them between the doors and the panel, the side panelling there, and the door, although the door was locked and hearing this guy say, “Well, they have a teenage daughter. They leave their kids alone,” and they were laughing and you could hear bottles clinking. There were actually bottles where this car was parked when my dad got home. Anyway I got scared. So I went and put the butcher knives in the door. I already had the gun. So I went, I got the door open. But being dark, I didn't know if I had the right bullets. I had the .22 gun. There was .22 bullets. There was a .303, a .30-30. There was shotgun bullets. And being scared, I was trying to be quiet and I thought, well if I start making noise they're going to hear. And you could hear them talking. And all of a sudden you could hear, “What's that? Did you see that!? What's that!” Then all of a sudden, “Let's get the hell out of here!”

They jumped in their car. They spun around in our yard. And they took off down the road and you could hear this faint, this faint little laugh.

And my parents got home about midnight, and I was still up. I had to undo the butcher knives because they couldn't get in the house with the keys and mom was yelling, “Anna, it's mom! Open the door! Anna, Anna Jean! Are you awake?”

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And my dad’s banging on the door. And I’m, “Is that really you, mom? Is that really you?”

And I was scared to turn the porch light on.

Mom: “Turn the light on. You’ll see it’s me and Dad!”

So I flipped the porch light on and look out the dining room window and, sure enough, it’s my parent’s car out there so I take the three butcher knives out and my dad walks in: “What the hell’s wrong with you? Why do you have these butcher knives stuck in the door for?”

And my mom took one look at me and I must have been just pale because I was really scared. I kept thinking, “They’re going to come back. They’re going to come back.”

And my mom said, “What’s the matter. What’s wrong? Are you sick? You are so pale.”  
I’m fair to begin with.

Dad said, “Who the hell was here?”

My dad just knew. I don’t know, maybe it was the tire tracks. My dad knew every time someone came to our house. He just knew. He said he could tell by the road. I figure it was the tire tracks.

But he says, “Who the hell was here?”

I told him, “I don’t know.”

And he says, “What did I tell you about inviting people over when we’re not home?”

And I said, “Dad, I didn’t invite anybody over.”

And then I started telling him how this car came up, how these guys were checking the doors, the windows, how I overheard them saying that we get left alone, and that they have a teenage daughter and I said, “And the funny thing is all of a sudden it was like somebody scared them off.”

My mom says, “I knew it.”

I’m looking at her going, “You knew what?”

She says, “I told you. I never have to worry about you kids when I leave you home alone. You have baby sitters. You have people who look out for you.”

She’s talking, like in circles to me, and she says, “I bet you anything it was the Little People that scared these boys away.”

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I told my mom what they had said: “What’s that. What’s that? Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Something had frightened them.

That was the one time, in all my years, I lived in Vernon for 15 years 'til I was 15. And then I moved away on my own. That was the only time I have ever gotten scared. I was scared. I was panic stricken. And I still, to this day, believe it was the Little People that helped me. Mom said they were always there. She never ever worried about us. As long as she knew we were within our property, we were okay. Nothing or no one would bother us...

Anna is from the Okanagan Nation. She told this to me in her home on the Penticton Indian Reserve in the Summer of 1995. She is the mother of Cash, Elliot, Destiny and Harmony. She was born September 19, 1961.



“Tracking Heaven” by Richard Van Camp

**Rosa Mercredi: (1913-1996)**

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Well, it’s not my story. It’s an old time story. The old people, you know?

They were telling us a story cuz we were kids that time, a bunch of kids. So he was telling us there was a dance behind the graveyard. Not this graveyard: some place. So, he dress up, he took his horse, went to the dance. His partner, I guess, he was dead. He told his friend, “My friend, what you’re laying there for?” He says, “There’s a big dance over there. Come to the dance with me!”

He had his big whip, you see. He whipped the grave, you know, to get up. So he went to the dance. He was standing around the dance; he was dancing.

There was this guy there standing at the door all in suit. Standing there.

“Oh my friend, you’re here. I’m so happy,” he says.

[His partner] says to this guy, “I’ll come and talk to you. Tomorrow the same time as you passed there, you pass the same place where I was laying.” He says, “What you said, I’m gonna tell you...”

This guy got scared!

“That’s what I’m telling you,” he says, and he was gone.

*I was scared the other day I was telling you this!*

Anyway, next day, he went to see the priest, that guy. I think he went to see the priest after he was finished when he went home on his horse.

The father told him that he’s not to play with things like that, not to bother a person that’s dead, that’s resting in peaceH he’s gone for good; he’s there. To never tease anybody like that, it’s no good.

Anyway, priest told him, “You have to have a new baby, a new kid, a new-born baby, just born baby. You have it on your right side and you have holy water on your left side with a rosary. As long as you got that kid, he says, he won’t touch you. But it’s not for that kid, you’ll be lying right there with him.”

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He told him what time he’s supposed to go, what time he’s supposed to go there to see that guy, what time he’s passed there and told him to get up, you see. So he went over there at the same time. Well he was waiting for him in a grave.

So he told him, “Friend, my friend, you’re lucky you brought that new born baby. You’re lucky,” he said, “and the holy water and the rosary. If it wasn’t for that baby,” he said, “you see, you’d be laying right there with me today, tonight, but you’re lucky. Don’t you ever do that again to the person who rests in peace. They’re sleeping forever. Never tease anybody in a grave yard.”

That’s what he told him.

That’s the story we heard. We were small that time, us! I was so scared to go home.

Scared, scary, scary!

And this old man. The old Chief Squirrel they called him. His name I don't remember. Pierre, I think...He wasn't old, he was middle aged...He used to tell the boys, “If you want to kill a dog or an animal, if you don't want to keep them, feed them good. Make him eat and then you can kill him, but don't just kill a dog without food. Make him eat lots and then you can kill it.” He says, “If you kill the dog, if you're mean to the dog it goes back to you. You suffer for it. It makes you suffer.”

That's what he told the boys.

I remember I was 14, 13 years old. My brother was young. He wasn't working. He was too young yet to work for the mission. They had a big farm, the mission farm. We used to stay there from the 20th of July to the end of October. We were the last ones to come home, us, my Dad and my brothers. We all used to go over there, you know, put up tents. These people, they're all dead: This Johnny Antoine. He's a Beaulieu but they call him Johnny Antoine. They're always together with my brother. He used to run away from me. I used to chase him. They used to hit the bee nests when I'm coming by and they sting me. You know, they bite me with their little tail there. Me, I'm just yelling my head off. I run home. My brother say, “She's got no business. She chase us all over the place. She's not a boy! Us, we run all over in the bush.”

He says, “She's gonna get lost!”

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So, me, I'm always behind them. Boy, they get mad at me. They take a big willow and they run after me. I run back, you know.

So, anyway, one time, it was in the fall like this, October, they want to get rid of a she-dog...Old Man Antoine-Beaulieu told them to go shoot that dog in the bush towards the River. So my brother, they went over there. He went with him. They brought the dog over there and they shot her, I guess, and they're young, too, them boys. I guess they missed her, something like that. They wounded the dog...The dog got calling every night and my dad says, “I wonder where is this?”

We don't hear the wolves or anything like that. The dogs are always yelling at night. One morning...maybe a week, in the morning, my dad he gets up early, goes for a duck hunt in the morning, he brings a bunch of ducks.

He heard. He says, “Dogs calling, you know, and these dogs they answer her.”

We had a bunch of dogs then, too. So he told the man, Johnny Beaulieu's dad, Antoine, said, “Gee whiz, how come I heard the dog yelling? Maybe they didn't kill that dog!”

So they went back with a gun and she was still alive. Those people, believe it or not, they lost two kids, same year...

How 'bout those girls that were dancing around their graves! That's a true story, too! Those people, they come from Winnipeg, Winnipeg people. They were coming down here. Well, this person here, I call him my Mushum, you see. He married my dad's sister...he talks French, he talks Cree, but he doesn't talk Chipewyan. He talks good English. He looks like a Half-breed, maybe he's a Half-breed, I don't know. He's not an Indian guy, I don't think. He's half cuz he's blonde. He's the one that was telling us about those girls who were dancing in their graves. That's another true story.

RVC: Could you tell that one to me again?

Rosa: Go and sit down. I'm tired!

RVC and Rosa: Ha ha ha!

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That’s the story I got. That’s the story they give me. We used to go and see him every night, to tell us stories...that old man was telling us. They were coming from Beaver hunt. In Winnipeg, someplace... they had their own traplines, I guess...

So he said, he told his partner, “You stay here. I’ll go ahead in a little while.” They hear this noise, you know!

So he says, “Don’t come behind me. Stay here, where you belong. I’ll come back.”

So the old man was gone...He hear something...He hear some voice...so he was happy. “Oh,” he says, “I’m going to run into people. I’ve been out for a long time,” he says, “I never see anybody around. There’s people ahead of me there.”

And he was going to call his partner. He was walking. He heard a person singing a song. He lay in the grass. He was watching...He was crawling in the grass... A girl was dancing there around her grave...She had moose-hide skin dress with the fringes. Oh long hair! Long brown hair, light brown hair, nice looking girl, dancing around there, singing.

He never learned us how to sign that song. He knows what those girls were singing there. He always used to sing that, my grandfather.

So, anyways, he told her sister, “What you’re laying there for? Get up! Lookit, the sun’s coming down,” she said, “Rising sunshine on our graves. Come up! Get up! There’s nobody around. Nobody’s gonna watch us.”

Her sister come out, got up out the grave. They were singing. They were dancing.

Oh, he should have teached us how to sing that!

Oh, they were dancing around and the youngest one says, “Oh my! I smell something!”

“Ha!” The other says, “We’ve been laying in a grave for a long time. I guess it’s us that stinks like that.”

“No,” the other says, “this is fresh. There’s somebody close to us.”

And still the oldest one didn’t listen to her. They were dancing around their graves. Three times now that youngest one said that, “There’s somebody watching us, wearing clothes, somebody’s around,” she said, “watching us, us dancing.”

“Ah!” she says, “there’s nobody around watching us. Who’s gonna watch us from that far. We’re far away from town. Nobody will see us here.”

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So anyway they were dancing around and she noticed, the oldest one: “I think it’s true what you told me, my sister. There’s somebody close to us. He’s watching us dancing here.” And she said, “You can smell something. I bet you there’s somebody sneaking around here and watching us dancing here.”

Nothing! I guess they disappeared. He didn’t know where they went! They were gone.

So he went there, told his partner to come. They got scared, them two.

“Boy,” he says, “pretty girls. Big long brown hair.”

He told his partner, “We’ll go and get our stuff over there and go far away from here.”

And where those girls were dancing. There was nothing, not even a track...

That’s a true story. That guy saw it. And he knows his song too. He sings it for us but I can’t catch on, you know, how he sings. I can’t do it.

"I'm 78 and still I feel young. There's only one thing: We get all wrinkled up. Boy, I hate that. We should stay the way we were born when we were young. But no..."

Rosa Mercredi was a Chipewyan elder I had the privilege to know as I was growing up. She told these stories to me in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories during the five years I knew her. She was born December 28, 1913 in Fort Smith and passed away on January 1, 1996. She had fourteen brothers and sisters. She could speak Chipewyan, French and English and was trying to learn Cree.

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Lorne Simon (1960-1994):

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Well, I'll tell you a few things that have happened to me that I can't explain to you...They all took place in this one room back home in the old house. There's a room that faces the north east and one window faces the east. The other faces the north. I was lying down on my bed one morning and I opened my eyes. The ceiling was red. It was a purple room ,but the ceiling was red, crimson red, and I thought to myself, “Man, it must be a really beautiful sunrise this morning.”

But I just couldn't get up. My body was kind of lazy and I thought, “Geez, I'd like to see that sunrise.”

And when I wished that, the next moment, I was in my sister's room looking out the window and that particular window faced the southeast, so I saw the sun coming up and I watched the sun rise that morning and it was red and orange and really beautiful, but the thing about it was I wasn't there physically. I was just looking out the window. I guess you could call it with my spirit body. Anyway, I was looking at this beautiful sunrise and I could look right into the sun and my eyes wouldn't hurt and everywhere I looked there was a grainy texture to the world. You could see little gray molecules floating all over the place, so that gave it a really soft feeling cuz it didn't hurt your eyes looking straight into the sun.

At that time I didn't know I was looking out there in my spiritual body. I thought I was standing out there. Somehow, I had gotten out of bed and was looking out, but as soon as the sun had cleared the horizon, cleared the woods there. As soon as that happened, the whole circle of the sun was above the treeline. I was back in bed again and boys I felt really good. I felt like I had done something that just made me so excited and happy, and for the rest of that day I felt good. It didn't scare me or anything, I just felt happy about what happened.

I went down that morning. My father was always up early. He was cooking some fish, some potatoes, and he had the tea going. We just sort of talked and I was just happy and, after that, I went off to school...

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Another time a strange thing happened in that same room. This was when my brother, Reuben, was staying in Toronto and I was staying in that room--which used to be his room. Now I was lying there one night. Something woke me up, making a circle between my ankles and my knees, so that woke me up because it was something walking on me and when I looked down there I seen this dog. Well, it looked like a dog, It was black and it had short legs and a long body, sort of like a Daschund. It had long ears, floppy ears, and when I looked at that dog the first thing that occurred to me was, “Oh, this is our dog.”

We had this dog named *Amulcheegwich*--that means racoon. It was a cross between a BloodHound and a Labrador Retriever. Of course, you know how it is when you wake up, you look at something--even if it doesn't look right, you want to explain something right away and your mind will accept the explanation. So here was this dog with really short legs, and I was still willing to believe it was *Amulcheegwich* even though our dog had long legs and, suddenly, I looked to my right and there was somebody sitting at the edge of the bed to my right and the window was open. It was nighttime. The stars were out and this guy had really long hair and I could see it sort of fluttering a bit because the window that was facing the east was open and a little breeze was coming in, sort of moving his hair. I could see the outline of his head really clearly, outlined in silverish gold and his body was funny shaped. He had a really long neck and a long head but very broad shoulders but he looked...he looked almost like Frankenstein wearing this dress coat that doesn't really fit right, kind of big at the shoulders but short at the sleeves. That was the kind of dress coat he had on--as if he had bought it from the Salvation Army or something.

And I'm looking at this guy and I'm thinking, “Oh, this is Reuben--he's just come back from Toronto and he's just came into his own room to see if he could crash out here and he finds me here, right?”

And he decides to just look out the window and think a bit, so I figured it was Reuben cuz my brother Reuben at that time had long red hair, eh? But Reuben is slightly built and this guy had really broad shoulders....anyway, I ignored this and I just explained it away as there was my dog *Amulcheegwetch* there and my brother, Reuben.

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The next minute, this creature turned around and looked at me and when he looked at me his face was a void, there was nothing. There was nothing to the face. It was black; it was empty and then when it looked at me with that face that had nothing, I wasn't scared then. I was surprised more than anything else. Then he reached down and tried to choke me, grabbed me on the neck with two hands and the funny thought that hit me was, “Oh! So you wanna wrestle, huh!?”

That's how I thought about it, eh! I was in the mood to sort of wrestle! I guess if I was scared it would have really hurt me but I was in that mood. I was willing to take on that challenge. I thought it was something funny at the time, which is strange really but I did. When it started choking me, I reached back and started choking him too because I thought he wanted to wrestle and we choked each other for a little while. Then he was gone. There was nobody: no dog, nobody standing there trying to choke me. I was just in bed. Then I went to sleep again so I can't really tell you what that means just as I can't tell you what it meant to be out of my body looking at the sunrise but when things like that happen I feel good about them. It seems like the next day I get so much energy out of them and the third thing that happened was in the wintertime in the same room and again it was from the east.

I was lying in bed and I heard a sound, very far away from the horizon and it came closer and closer and it was like a whirling sound, a twirling sound. If you put a bottle on the end of a string and whirled it around, you'd get that type of sound and it got louder as it got closer. Finally, it reached my room. The sound went right into my room, right through the wall, the east facing room and what it was was a galaxy, like a spinning galaxy. It had all kinds of colours on it. It was spinning around fast and making that sound and each colour had its own sound and it hovered over my bed in the corner there where my feet were facing...It kept spinning. It just sat there and I thought, “Gee, that is really beautiful.”

I was really happy to see something that was so beautiful and I knew it was going to leave and part of me wanted to go with it and a part of me was really attracted to it so, before I knew what I was doing, I started to sit up and I got to be almost sitting up and a thought occurred to me. “What if I go with that? I suppose I'll die.”



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And when I thought that I might die that sort of scared me. Everything changed. Suddenly, I was back, lying prone as I had been before. Then I realised I had never even sat up. My spirit had sat up. I hadn't sat up physically because, in that instant, I didn't fall on the bed or anything. I was just lying on the bed. It was like my awareness had raised itself up and come back up into its own body. When I was lying on the bed, I guess my body and spirit were together again, that thing, knowing I wasn't going to go with it, took off again. It went right out, back east. Except this time when it went through the wall, it went with a bang, a big bang. It sounded like a car hitting the house or a truck hitting the house with a big bang when it went through the wall. Then it disappeared. I could hear it spinning off to the east again. It disappeared, so I jumped out of bed really excited cuz I was sure everybody in the house heard this bang. It was so loud. It seems like it shook the foundations of the house--that was how loud the bang was and I knew there were kids playing down, just below the window because there's ice forming near the house in that particular corner in the winter time and I heard my younger brothers playing hockey there: Conrad, Byron and my nephew, Troy. I guess we must have been ten or twelve, you know, at that time and they were playing hockey, and I had heard them playing hockey all the time that thing was in my room, so I jumped out of my bed I opened the window. I looked outside to where they were. I was about to tell them, “Holy shit! Did you guys hear that?”

But when I opened the window and I looked down there. They were just playing hockey like nothing had happened. So I knew I was the only one that heard it. That was the third thing that had happened in that house, and what that means: I don't know either, but like my Uncle [Mike Francis] says, “I'm still studying.” Ha ha!

Lorne Simon of the Micmac Nation was born in 1960. He was a dear friend. He told this to me in Fredericton, New Brunswick in August of 1993. He died suddenly Saturday night, October 8, 1994, in a car accident. He swerved to miss a deer.

His first novel Stones and Switches (Theytus Books, 1994) came out two months after his death. Set in the Canadian depression of the 1930's, the novel honours the reader with a wonderful story about survival, courage and family in Micmac territory.

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**Seraphine Evans:**

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Suzan Marrie. They called him the root man because he used to gather roots and stuff like that, and he was supposed to cure people and he used them for other purposes too. I don't want to say anything because that's on tape...

This other one was Pierre Tazai. He used to use roots to cure himself and he used to boil these roots and he had this carrot. But there are two different kinds. One was poisoned and the other one wasn't and I guess he took the wrong one. He boiled that one and drank the juice and he gave some to this lady here, Mrs. Wabesca. But she didn't die. She just got really sick...she went to the hospital. But, himself, went into convulsions and died. It's a French name. They called it, “Le Carrot du Morrow.” It means the “Carrot of Morrow” and that's the name of that root.

It was a warm day...Georgette and that Lions girl, Donna Lions, were playing outside. First they were playing in the house and they heard a voice say, “Georgette! Georgette!” Two times like that. Oh she got scared.

She says, “There's nobody here.”

So they ran out, both of them. They were playing outside and they happened to look up in the window. That window, that was facing the garden. That's where my mother and them used to have their room and it was thawing that day. It was a warm day. It seldom happens that way.

The ice was coming down from the roof, they said, and they looked up there. It was just like blood coming down with the ice, with the water. Those girls were saying, “Gee, somebody must have killed a bird up there or something. Look at that,” she said.

That Donna Lions, both of them seen it. After that, they looked again and they seen a face in the window. This face in the window just looked like my grandpa--She never seen her grandpa. She was so small, but the pictures. She said, “Looks just like my old grandpa,” She said--*My Dad*, so then they got scared. They wouldn't come in the house. So they ran over there to the old hostel, where I was working, “Mum, we don't want to go in the house. There's somebody there and we seen a face in the window,” they said.

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When one of the girls came home they went in. They didn't see anyone then. They were scared to go in the house after that...

So, anyway, it was in the early part of February. On the 25th of February, I got a phone call from Saskatchewan. Tina's little boy had drowned in the bathtub. Then I thought, my Dad always said that he never wanted any of his grandchildren or children to drown and then this happened. Maybe that's why they seen this. Even a little fly that was just floating in the basement, he'd take it out. He didn't want that fly to drown.

This Bishop Trocolee, he died now, he had a dream about a beautiful cathedral. He was talking to the fathers about it. He said he'd like to build a cathedral, the same thing like he dreamt, so he drew the picture of it, showed it to them just exactly the way the cathedral is. He never even lived to see it. They started building it in 1958, I think. That's the fall that he died...it wasn't finished until 1961.

This was told to me on September 2, 1992 in John and Seraphine Evans' home in Fort Smith, NWT. Seraphine and John Evans were married in 1936: “Wanna know what we had for our supper? Hamburger and corn and potatoes. There was no turkey. Them days, we didn't have turkey. We didn't know what turkey was. Honeymoon. Wanna know where we went? To [Fort] Fitzgerald. We went riding on the horses. There was no planes, places to go. It was nice. Years ago people never had fruit. In the spring when the boats come in, everybody's rushing to the store to buy oranges and apples and bananas.

Advice to the youth: "Stay off dope, liquor, and go to church."

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**Trevor Evans:**

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Well it started, my mom and my dad were building their log cabin in Fort Smith. They went down to B.C. to visit my Auntie Debbie during the Summer. My mom and dad mentioned that they needed a stove. They were looking for an old cook stove, like an antique cuz my mom likes things like that in the house. My Auntie Debbie says, “Yeah, there's one in town for sale. An old guy on a farm has it and he'll sell it pretty cheap but it's haunted.”

My mom and dad figured, “Oh yeah, sure, whatever.”

They didn't believe it was haunted. So they went there and they seen him. Boy, it was a nice stove, one of those old, old cook stoves, the ones with the oven. They asked him how much he wanted. He said a hundred bucks. So, holy man, they thought that was the cheapest. Sure enough they took it. The old man told them that it was haunted. They took that stove for a hundred bucks and loaded it in the truck and they got back to town, they put it in their house...

My Uncle Charles was working on the roof one night. He was working up there and there was no one else around and he was doing the rafters up there. He's all by himself and, all of a sudden, the oven door to that stove opened up--just *creeeeked* open like that. My Uncle Charles's all by himself and he said he got a real eerie feeling. He left the house right away, come back when there's more people.

At that time my grandfather and grandmother lived in the bush at the Peace Athabasca Delta and they always used to come to town. So they come to town and they used to have their dogs, really nice Black Labs. Their names were “Pluto” and “Bobo”. The dogs had no trouble coming in the house around there when we first started building it, but after we put that stove in they couldn't even drag those dogs in the house. They didn't want to come in.

So, that was fine enough. We were building the house and we were all staying down in the basement, like at the foot of my mom and my dad's bed, me and my sister. We were just young.

One morning, about four o'clock in the morning, my Dad woke up and my mother woke up and it sounded like somebody upstairs was making a fire...my Mom and Dad heard this and

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wondered what the hell? My Dad's dad used to work night shift at Breynat Hall and he used to stop by in the morning and make fire and coffee sometimes. That's what my Dad thought it was. So he got out of bed, put on his jeans, start walking up the stairs. When he was going up there he could hear the fire going really good. You know how a nice fire sounds when the kindling starts going: it just crackles and *crack! crack!*--you know how a good fire sounds. So he heard that all the way up and then as soon as he reached the top of the stairs '*Choo!*' it was just quiet. There was no one around. My Dad said his hair on his neck just stood up. He put his hand on the stove, it was just ice cold...So right away he knew something was wrong and he was just scared. He wanted to get rid of that. So he went back downstairs and he told my Mom and they told everybody and they didn't believe us. Three times this happened. We could hear someone making a fire and there'd be no one there.

Finally, one night, I was sleeping at the foot of my bed. My mom, my dad were sleeping in the bed, my sister and me were at the foot of the bed. My sister woke up and she looked and she could see coming down the stairs was an Indian, looked like an Indian with big long braids, moccasins. He was carrying a handkerchief and he dropped it and he bent down just gracefully and picked it up. My sister stuck her head under the covers and just started screaming. She jumped up and jumped up on my mom and dad's bed. Everybody got up. She seen a ghost she was telling everyone. So that was it. We finally got rid of that stove. We took it out and sold it to Wally Schumann at the second hand store.

We got a hold of Debbie and got her to talk to that old man to find out what the story was behind that stove. It was:

There was this guy who had an Indian wife, and he was really mean to her and finally one day she disappeared and they didn't know what happened to her, and they figure this old farmer cut her up in little pieces and burnt her in the stove.

Trevor Evans shared this with me as he was recovering from an appendectomy in Stanton Yellowknife Hospital. I had been nagging him to tell this story to me for years for the purpose of the book. It was August 14, 1992. He was 19 years old. Seraphine Evans is his grandmother. When I asked Trevor to tell the story, he asked, “Do you want me to spruce it up?”

“No!” I said, “Just tell it the way you’ve always told it. It’s amazing enough.”

“Tracking Heaven” by Richard Van Camp

James Beaver:

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I wanted to tell you a story of my brother. It’s a true story of when he was young. He was sick. He had Tuberculosis. He was sick and he couldn’t get out of bed. He couldn’t move or anything and this old man was visiting my mom. I don’t know what his name was but my mom and them knows him. Well, my brothers know them too, I guess.

Anyways, this old man was visiting my mother and them, and he told my mother, he said, “I’m gonna come see your son tonight. Just leave the door a little bit open and put his bed by the door.”

My mom said, “Okay.”

He said, “I’ll come and help your son.”

So my mother did that that night now, just before they went to bed. She left the door a little bit open at the house and she fixed the bed for Louie and put it by the door. And my mom and them had a little cat, a little small baby cat and it was sitting at the foot of Louie’s bed but my mom didn’t let it out that time, didn’t know it was in the house. So she went to bed and my brother Louie was laying on that bed there by the door and all a sudden the door opened he said, the door opened. He said, “I looked that way and the door opened and this black bear came walking in and he was looking at me,” he said, “that bear kind of turned towards me and that bear said, “I was gonna come and see you, come and help you cuz I know you’re very sick, but I can’t come close to your bed now because there’s that thing at the foot of your bed, and that little cat was in there,” he said, “so maybe I’ll come see you again, another time.”

So that bear got out. He turned around and he got out of the house and he went straight in the bush. So, next day, my mother got up the next morning and went to see Louie there at the door and asked Louie if anything happened and my brother Louie said, “Yeah, a bear came here and he said he was here to help me but he couldn’t come close to my bed because of that little cat that was there.”

That day, they do whatever they do, I guess, and that man came over in the afternoon and talked to my mother and my mother gave him a cup of tea and he sat down and was drinking tea

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and he told my mother, “I came here last night,” he said, “but that cat there, I couldn’t get close to your son. Anyway, your son’s going to go in the hospital. I’ll go and see him there.”

So, at the end of the week, [Louie] ended up in the hospital. My mother took him to the hospital. I think he was on the second floor of the hospital there in that room. Just him alone, he was in there, and people were walking around, nurses and doctors, and he said, “All of a sudden” he said, “I was laying on the bed there and all of a sudden I looked towards the door to the room and that bear came in. That bear came up to me and start touching me all over with his paws. He said, “I’m hear to help you. I’m going to help you,” he said, “I can’t stay very long because I have a couple of friends with me. They’re waiting for me outside. You’re going to be all right. You’re going to be going to the city and I’ll go and see you in the city,” Like in Edmonton Camsell Hospital.

So that bear said, “You’re going to feel good not very long from now” so he got down on his fours and he walked out.

He said there was people walking in the hallway and they never even seen that bear walk in there.

He went out, he said. “I looked out the window just across the road there. I could see a brown bear and a black bear. They were waiting across the road and that bear, I could see him crossing the road and he went over there and then all three of them left together,” he said.

Then, after that, he was in the hospital for a while and they sent him to Camsell because they didn’t know what was wrong with him and all this time he had TB. Like once in a while, nowadays, he coughs up blood, I guess. I don’t know what’s causing that right now. When he was out in Edmonton, that old man went and seen him in Camsell Hospital.

My brother Louie now, he could kill bears but he can’t eat bear meat cuz he’ll get sick again cuz of that help he got from that old man, I guess.

My Uncle Harry was picking berries about four miles out, you know, those Four-Mile Towers? He was picking berries, cranberries. And that old man was walking, coming towards him. He said, “That old man, just laughing, come up to me.”

He said, “What you’re doing?”

He said, “I’m picking berries.”

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My Uncle Harry told him and then that old man said, “Me, I could pick berries too: I’m fast. I could pick berries just like my brother the bear” he said. Then he left.

He said, “All of a sudden, I could see that old man walking through the bush, then he fell down and I was going to check see what happened, you know, how come he fell down and then” he said, “not long from where he fell down,” he said, “I could see a bear, a black bear, got up and he start running.” He said. “Not long after that, that old man came around the corner again. He had a big bag full of cranberries.” He said, “I didn’t even fill up that container I had. I didn’t even half fill it,” he said, “and that old man picked those berries.”

That’s the story about my brother Louie.

My mother was telling us stories like we used to sit around my mother’s bed and she used to tell us stories about long time ago and she told us about this boy. When he was born there were seven wolves running around that house where he was born in. His mom and dad was there. Finally his dad, I don’t know how many days or how long those wolves were running around the house, and the dad got fed up of those wolves howling and all that and that old man finally got fed up so he grabbed his rifle and he went out and those wolves were still running around there and he shot one, shot one wolf. So those wolves, they all took off.

This little boy, now, he started growing up. Then when he learned how to talk, he told his dad, he said, “You know, Dad, those wolves when I was born, they were running around the house. There were seven of them. But you shot one. I could have been able to bring people back from the dead.”

But you know, I don’t think it was meant to be, for his dad to kill one, because there’s nobody else that is more powerful than the Great Spirit or, you know, or they call him God.

I heard that boy now, well he’s grown up, I guess, now, I don’t know how old he is now, but I heard he’s a medicine man too...

James Beaver told this story to me on December 16, 1994 in Fort Smith, NWT. James is Cree and was born September 17, 1959.



“Tracking Heaven” by Richard Van Camp

# Heaven

“Tracking Heaven” by Richard Van Camp

Glen Douglas:

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Okanagan elder Glen Douglas shares his story about being hit by a grenade while serving in the Korean war. This was told to me on Friday the 6th of November, 1992 in Penticton, BC. Glen was 65 then.

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On the 17th of July, 1953, I was sent out on a patrol. There were three of us. We watched a firefight all night long on an outpost out to our immediate front about a mile away and we were to intercept straggling enemy that were leading toward our direction, the mainline of resistance...we were going to intercept them and try to capture them. This was ten days before the Armistice...we met them right in front of our positions, about 300 yards in front of our resistance. There was a firefight.

I remember a hand grenade being thrown, and I seen a hand grenade land right by my feet. It was a concussion grenade, fortunately. Blew me off my feet. My feet went up in the air. Blew me quite high and then over to the right...where we were fighting the rice had grown wild over the past three years, the growth hadn't been harvested. It grew about eight feet and I landed in that thick rice. My patrol members didn't see me. They didn't see me when I got hit. So they withdrew. They ran off the enemy. There were ten of them. I suppose the only thing they had was probably a few rounds of ammo and one hand grenade. I was hit across both legs. I laid there for two days before they found me. And when they did find me they were going to put me in a rubber bag and take me and bury me, and I opened my eyes.

But as I lay there, I remember coming to. I rememberd coming to and I tried to move and I was paralyzed from the waist down. I tried to feel my leg, but I couldn't feel nothing. But as I felt down there I felt blood...I could see I was pretty bloody down there...below my waist...I reached and got my bandolier, my amuntion out of it and I tied it around my leg...my right leg

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and I tied a tourniquet. I took my belt off, my cartridge belt...and I took my bayonet and unhooked it and used my bayonet, my bayonet scabbard, to tie a tourniquet and as I tied the tourniquet, I passed out, lost consciousness...

...It was like a dream and what it was was I was placed. I was told to sit down in a chair and I sat in that chair and it started moving and we moved into a tunnel and as we moved into this tunnel this chair started picking up speed, but I could see on the sides of this tunnel there appeared to be lights quite a ways apart, probably a mile or so apart...but as this thing started moving so fast that the lights were just like one string, one line. That's how fast it moved and all of a sudden it came to a stop. When this thing came to a stop, this chair I'm sitting on was flat ground with a slight incline to my front. And a long ways off was a gate and I heard a voice. It was a beautiful voice, a baritone voice, and it said, "You are welcome to join us. Please follow the path to the gate and join us."

And I stepped off and stood up from this chair-like vehicle and I started walking. As I walked I noticed the grass and the flowers. The flowers I never seen in my life. I started walking and I walked and I walked and I could see a well defined path. It looked like it was manicured. The grass looked like it was cut by hand, every bit of it with flowers on each side of it and I kept walking and walking and pretty soon I looked down, and I was wearing my dress uniform but I had no shoes or boots and, yet, I was walking but I couldn't feel the grass under my feet, but I continued walking...but it seemed I wasn't getting any closer to that gate. But on that gate there was flowers. You could read the word "Welcome" and I walked and I walked and I heard the voice again.

It said, "You too are welcome to join us. Follow that path."

And I knew that person was behind me. I tried to turn around and I couldn't. I tried four times. I twisted with all my might and when I did, instead of seeing anything behind me, I came through that same tunnel back to the other side. But this time, on the way, I seen a bunch of floating bodies: some of them were clothed, some of them were naked, some of them were in caskets, some of them were half clothed, just the tops with the bottoms off, just a shirt on and they were like in water, just floating and they took me through this area and it was like we were underwater, and you could see these bodies floating around, going no place, just hanging in

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suspension and I asked what this was all about and they said, "These are the people who take their own lives. These are the people who take their own lives."

Then we went on and I came to and I opened my eyes, and I was looking straight into the face of the helicopter pilot, and as I opened my eyes I could see the change of his expression. At the same time I seen him move his arm. He had his hand on the controls. I seen him move to the right and another face came right in front of him and he had his hand like that, with his thumb up, telling me to hang in there. And I guess they got fired on. I remember hearing shots, and they took off. They were going to put me in a rubber bag I understand, take me and bury me, but I opened my eyes.

Well, I was conscious for a few seconds. When I opened my eyes, I could see the blue sky with tufts of clouds and I said, "Gee, I must be in heaven." I'd already been there and didn't realize it. This is what heaven looks like and I passed out again.

The next time I woke up I seen a bunch of masked faces with the lights up above us, round lights. I passed out again.

I woke up looking into the Rocky Mountains of Denver, Colorado. I was facing the windows with the hospital facing the mountains and I woke up. And after I woke up, a few seconds later, the doctor and the nurse came by and said, "Oh, you're awake now."

I said, "Yeah, and I'm hungry and I'm thirsty!"

He said, "You're a very lucky man; you're a walking miracle."

I asked him: "What do you mean?"

He said, "Most people have twelve pints of blood, average person, twelve pints of blood and we had to put in eleven pints into you. Most people die when they put in five pints of blood but you, we put eleven pints of blood into you. We had a hard time to find your veins, to expand them, to put the tubes in. You're a very lucky man."

Well, that was just the beginning. I suffered four years, four months, and 26 days while I was in the hospital.

I was hit on the 17th of July, 1953, and I left the hospital on December, 1957...I had a lot of pain, 18 operations on my legs. When I left in 1957, they told me I'd never walk again. I left in a wheel chair. I managed to stay on active duty...I stayed in 22 and one half years. After that

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injury, that last wound, that was my eighth time I was wounded in Korea. I went to fight another war. I went to fight in Vietnam.

And I began to question why I survived. I never knew. It didn't register with me for a while but then I began to question: Why did I survive when so many have died?

Then I began to think about all my other experiences before then, about the things that had happened to me that would be called unusual by many people. Then I began to realize there was such a thing as Divine Intervention. The Creator was protecting me. But then I recalled other things happening that when I was eight years old my father had sent me into the Sweat Lodge to sleep there because I had disobeyed him. I had lied to him. It was not the first time I had done this. In our ways, they send us there to get our vision.

I guess you would call it a vision, but what I had an experience with was a song that came. It told me, "I will be with you the rest of your life."

That's all it said to me: "Don't be afraid. I'll be with you and you'll be with me and you will not understand me until the sun starts falling", and I did not understand that which was 1 o'clock. I didn't understand.

I went on with my military career all through my life. This happened when I was about eight years old. And through my wartime experiences, especially when I was in Korea, I've had many incidents in there that I could have been killed. Yet I survived and I didn't know what it was that kept me alive. I didn't know until 1986 when I had a dream. It told me several things but four times this song it came into my life.

The second time I heard it was when I was 17, going on 18. It was before I went overseas to the Second World War in Europe. I got sick, had pneumonia and they had no penicillin. All their penicillin was on the battlefield. But they give me some sulfa. I stayed in the hospital 30 days. During my crisis in that bout with pneumonia, I seen my entire life in front of me. It was shown. And one of the things that was happening to me was I was in a swing and I was getting higher and higher and it dared me to jump. I didn't know it then, but I know it now that if I had jumped then I would have died. I wouldn't have gone on any farther; I would have been called into the spirit world. But I didn't jump. I didn't let go. I trusted; I had faith in the Creator but I

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never realized it at the time and I went on. I went on into Europe, the European battlefields. Came back safely, didn't have any close calls to speak of but in Korea I had many.

Korea was an entirely different war, different rules. The rules had changed. Well, I went onto Korea into Vietnam. I had some close calls. But I still couldn't make the connection yet between the Creator and my experiences.

But in 1986, with this dream, it showed me many things. As a matter of fact, it was the 24th of May, about 2 o'clock in the morning, the usual time I wake up in the morning when I used to have nightmares. That's when the enemy would hit.

In this dream I was Sweating, all by myself as usual as I have no one else who would join me except my brother who would show up once in a while unannounced...But this dream I had, I was by myself and the stream that ran by the Sweat Lodge. I was in there bathing when the messenger spoke to me and I couldn't see him. The voice kind of sounded familiar. It was something I had heard before but I couldn't see who it was that told me: "Walk with me. I have some things to tell you."

We walked downstream, barefooted, no clothes on. This old man, this messenger, started telling me. He says, "You know who your people are. Your elders have told you a long time ago, but most of the people have forgotten."

He named of all the people of the Salish Nation. He started from the North and he started naming the Shushwap, the Lillooet, the Thompson, the Northern Okanagan, the Arrow Lakes, the Southern Okanagan, the Met-how, the Chelan, the Nespelem, the Sanpoil, the Wenatchees, the Columbia, the Kalispell, the Pend Oreille, the Coeur' d'Alene, and the Flatheads.

"Those are the people that speak the same language or similar as you. You have to remember that. Your language determines the boundaries of your territory."

He told me that I have much of the information already. All I have to do is put it to use...so I started thinking about that...as we walked I'd jump across the creak once and a while. I'd jump across the creak because the path would narrow on one side of the creak...and finally, at one point, the old man had stopped talking. He hadn't said anything for a couple seconds. I jumped across the stream and I ran into some stinging nettles, brushed my legs and I started itching. I started scratching and I woke up.

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To make certain that I didn't forget, I got up; I lived out in the middle of the woods at the time, no electricity; so I lit a lamp and started writing down, taking notes of what had happened. Wrote down all the things that I was told. But before this happened he told me, "You have a purpose in this life, that's why you're here." He said, "Your grandfather told you."

And I tried to remember, "What did Grandfather tell me? What did he tell me?"

And I recalled the last time that I saw him before he died, I came up here to visit him...he lived right across the river here and when I asked him after two weeks of storytelling. I listened to him day and night. I asked him finally, "Why are you telling me all these things?"

And he looked at me and he sat there for a long time. He poured a drink of Pepsi, took a few sips and said, "Check your roots. The other thing I'm going to tell you is you're going to be standing toe to toe with the white government about our rights."

I kind of discounted that, forgot all about it.

About two years ago I was putting down the genealogy of hereditary chiefs and I kept seeing this name, Siwilixkin', while I was putting it in the computer. I kept seeing this name. It came up about two to three times. And I recalled it was his name, too. Then it dawned on me that I had a responsibility.

And although he had three given sons at the time that he could have passed this information onto, he chose me because the others were drinking and he chose me and he gave me the responsibility as hereditary chief and that's when I realized what my real purpose was.

And for all my experiences, and for all the pain I've been through, after all these wars, I guess I used to curse the Creator for not letting me stay in his land. Then there are times I appreciate, then there are times I feel guilty for having survived when so many men have died, very good friends of mine, very good buddies. The people that I trusted that gave their lives so that I could live. I've had many guilts over that and I still do, I still carry that burden on my shoulder.

But now I know that I have done the things my grandfather told me that I'd be doing...and with all the experiences I've had all over the world and all of the cultures that I've experienced and watched and seen what has happened, I started to put all of that together, recapitulating all those experiences and I find that now I'm fighting another kind of war in which the white man

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has taken, as in the words of Chief Dan George, "The white man has taken all of my weapons away; the only weapons I have left is the word."

I guess that's my battle now.

In this, the Okanagan, there has been young people who have been arming themselves to go to war, and I've had a hard time to convince, to persuade them, that once they've fired that first shot that from that day on if they love to sleep, they'll never get another chance to get a full 6 or 8 hours of sleep.

And if they keep coming to meetings late like they always have, they'll be late for their own funeral because they'll have been late for the battle...

They [the non-Natives] want our land. The only thing they have in common with us is they build their houses and villages on the land. We are part of the land; We are part of Mother Earth, just as the water is the forests, the mountains, the rocks, the Grandfather Sun, the Grandmother Moon; we are all part of this creation in that we, as the human people, when we were first created were designed to be the caretakers of Mother Earth. We are the ones...

Our major leaders in the past have been asked to define aboriginal rights and they can't do it because they want to be so technical. But it's so simple; aboriginal rights are the rights to survive. How do you survive? Food, clothing, water, shelter. That's it, in short: no more, no less. That's what I've been fighting for...

What I have to say, it's not what I know, it's what my elders have taught me. I personally do not know these things, they're all teachings that have been passed on to me. I cannot take credit for any of this knowledge, the wisdom or the skills that I pass on. For I attribute these virtues through all of my ancestors before me...

So with that I will conclude by stating in all of the things that have been passed onto me and I pass on to others I hope that they keep an open mind. For the human mind is like a parachute; it must be opened before it can work. Thank you.



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Pauline and Barrie Clarke have agreed to share their incredible story about the loss of a brother and the traditional adoption of another. This is an awesome story of fate that, I hope, will renew your belief in the circle of life.

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Pauline Clarke:

On the shorelines of Davin Lake, Saskatchewan, stands a lonely but not forgotten cross, a cross that was laid there in memory of a loved one who passed on.

It was in the early eighties. My family lived on a trap line in north-eastern Saskatchewan. We would live there throughout the summer and move back into the community when school season started. Life on the trap line was simple but you had to be tough to survive. There were six children in my family, myself being the youngest. My mother and father were hard working people and they did the best they could to raise us with whatever they had. They always taught us to be proud of what we had, never envy others and always be respectful. Now life was not always simple. When we had to move back to the community we were faced with social problems like alcoholism and domestic abuse.

My brother, Barry, and I were the closest to each other because we were the youngest in our family. He was three years older than I was. We basically grew up hand in hand. When times were tough we always stuck by each other. I always knew that I could count on my brother whenever I needed him. I rarely ever turned to my older siblings; they were in their own worlds. I trusted Barry more because I knew he would protect me from being hurt or scared. A vivid memory that always comes back to me is a time when we were afraid. I was even more afraid because there was a fight breaking out at home, and I hid underneath the bed. My brother came to me and he said, “Don’t be scared, Sister. I will always be here to take care of you.” Of course, he said this in Cree: “Kawitha sikisi nisimis kapi kikakitapamitin.”

We went about our adolescence going to school in the community and then returning to the trap line in the summer months. Barry had to move away from the community in order to attend high school in Laronge because in those days the grades only went up to grade 9. So Barry moved into town. By this time my parents were sober and had been for a couple of years. It was in late October when he phoned home to tell the parents that he wanted to come home because he was lonely. He wanted to go back to the trap line. So, in the beginning of November he came back home and my father prepared for their trip to the trap line. A couple days before they left, Barry did a lot of visiting. He made sure that he visited every one of his friends. Before he walked out of the door he made sure he said farewell to all of us and he left.

A few days later he got into an accident that took his young life.

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My father says that they were out hauling logs for their camp in the shores of Davin Lake. They stopped by the end of the lake on the last bay. Barry was carrying a loaded gun on one side and a log on the other. The shores on the lake had ice along the shores and it was slippery. Barry tripped and fell, shooting himself right through the heart. My dad had to carry him to the boat and drove him to the other side where the road was. When he got to land, he had to carry him over his shoulders and walked three kilometres to the main road. He said he tripped over so many times but the only thing he could think about was saving his son and getting him to safety.

The first vehicle that came up to my father was Sasktel, so they phoned for a chopper to come down but it was too late. When my brother took his last breath, my father said he smiled and pointed up towards heaven.

The devastation I felt when I heard my brother was hurt was overwhelming. I had not yet heard that he actually died. I thought he was just injured and I couldn't bare the thought of him having serious injuries. I cried, I felt so sorry for him. When I got home I was even more surprised to find the police, priest and close family friends surrounding my mother. My father hadn't arrived from the accident yet. I went to my mother and she hugged me and told me that my brother was gone and that he was not going to be coming back. I broke down in tears. I could not believe he was dead, gone. I remembered Barry saying he would always be there and that he would protect me, and, as a child, I really did believe it and I depended on him. I could not believe he was gone. He had broken his promise and I felt resentful. I was a hurting child. It took me days to come back down to reality. What killed me the most out of the whole thing was that when my dad first walked in the house all by himself, I waited for Barry to follow after him but he did not. My father walked in alone that day. He walked straight into the room and cried like a baby. I had never heard my father cry before. It was so painful to see such a strong man cry. That was my first experience with death and I did not like it. It was like hell.

After the accident, my father made a trip up to the lake to post up a memorial cross where the accident happened. I, of course, did not go. I was still too weak to go. I knew that if I went then that I would not be able to control myself. I felt I was not strong enough at the time.

The community felt the pain. Losing a young boy who was friends with everyone, it just made the community sad. I became a really angry teenager. I did not care about myself or any one else. I just wanted to stay mad at God. I blamed God for taking my brother away. I didn't pray when I was forced to go to church. All I thought about was awful things about God. I was the prime enemy. I had no respect for my body. I did solvent abuse with my friends. We would start in the day and end it at night; sometimes it lasted for twelve straight hours.

When I did this I was able to see my brother. When you inhale solvents your mind starts to hallucinate and you usually see something that you are thinking about. So I did this

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for a while. I was able to see and talk to my brother. Once I was introduced to alcohol I quit inhalants and started a new addiction. I always had to have something to keep me out of the reality I was living in. I couldn't let my brother go. I had so much pain inside I was afraid to come out with it.

Barrie Clarke:

My name is Barrie Clarke. I am a professor of geology at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Most people, including my students, don't spell my name correctly. Even my good friends write “Barry Clarke”, or “Barry Clark”. I'm quite used to seeing different spellings.

In the summer of 1994, I was doing geological mapping in the Davin Lake area. My normal way of operating was to cruise shoreline in a boat, stopping to examine outcrops of rock. One day in July, my assistant, Andy Henry, and I entered an otherwise ordinary bay of Davin Lake and saw a large white cross on the distant shore. Immediately, I forgot all about the geology of the shoreline. In all my 30 years of doing field geology, I had never seen a cross in the woods before. I was drawn to it like a magnet, and I soon found out why. Andy was in the back of the 16-foot aluminium boat. I was in the front. Andy put the bow of the boat into the shore right in front of the cross. Andy could see the writing on the cross, but was not able to read it. I was just staring and speechless, so Andy asked, “What does it say?” I replied, “Andy, it has my name on it!” (The spelling of my name wasn't quite right, but, of course, I'm quite used to that.) Now, it would be a very strange coincidence for anyone to find a cross in the remote woods with their name on it, but in my case, this was even stranger. The last movie I had watched on TV before coming to Saskatchewan was about a brother and a sister. The brother had been killed in an accident but had returned to the land of the living as a spirit without knowing that he had died. He did what he came back to do, and then at the end of the movie his sister took him to his grave and showed him his name on the headstone. Then he realized that he had died in the accident. For a few moments there at Barry's cross, I was very bewildered. I wondered if the same thing was happening to me. Had I died doing field work at Davin Lake? Was Andy taking me to my memorial? It was the most peculiar feeling I have ever had. I didn't know what was true anymore. Was I dreaming? I briefly lost my connection with reality.

When my reason took control of my emotion, I began to develop a very strong sense of empathy toward my young namesake. I very much needed to find out who Barry Clarke was and what tragic event had happened at this place. I wanted to find out who had so lovingly erected this cross. Had anyone ever found the cross except me? It almost seemed as if the cross was put there so I would find it. These questions had to wait several agonizing weeks until we were finished our work. Eventually I left the field and returned to places where I could search for answers to some of my questions, but all I was able to learn was

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that Barry had been a resident of Southend. So, when I returned to Halifax, I wrote a letter (next page), bought a bouquet of dried flowers, and sent them simply addressed to “The Clarke Family Who Lost a Son at Davin Lake in 1987, Southend, Saskatchewan, S0J 2L0”, and hoped that the package would reach the right people.

Pauline Clarke (continued):

It was in 1994 when I went for a mail run at our local Hudson Bay store. Our post office has General Delivery so there are no separate mailboxes. I was in the line up when the employee invited me to the back. She showed me this parcel which wrote “To the Clarke Family who lost their loved one in Davin Lake in 1987.” It had B.Clarke, Halifax Nova Scotia, as the return address. The employee knew that it belonged to my family so she gave it to me. For awhile, I thought, “Oh my God. I think my brother is alive.” Then I realized that I really did see him in his casket and, yes, I did see him getting buried six feet underground, so I knew it wasn’t him, even though the hand writing looked like his. So I went home with the parcel.

When I got home my parents were in the living room watching television. My mom knew that there was something going on when I walked in. She asked me what was going on, so I told them to sit down because I had some news. So I sat them down and told them about our package. I opened it up and there was a bouquet of dried up roses, a letter and a sympathy card. I started reading the letter but could not finish it right away. The letter came from this man named Barrie Clarke from Halifax, Nova Scotia, a geologist who works at Dalhousie University. He wrote that he was mapping the Davin lake area in 1994 when he came upon my brother’s memorial cross. This is what the letter said:

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**Dalhousie University**

**Department of Earth Sciences**

Halifax, Nova Scotia

Canada B3H 3J5

(902) 494-2358

FAX (902) 494-6889

August 15, 1994

Dear Clarke Family,

Please forgive me for writing, and probably reminding you of a very sad time in the past. This summer, while I was mapping in the Davin Lake area, I found the cross that you had erected in memory of your son Barry. At first I was very startled to see 'my' name on the cross, but ever since then I have felt deep sorrow for my namesake, and for you too. The cross was a very strong indication to me of how much you loved him, and how much you must miss him. I mourn for young Barry who was not able to live his life to the fullest. Also, as a parent myself, and with one son just a year older than Barry would be now, and I can imagine the pain that all of you experienced in losing him.

I hope you will accept the enclosed flowers in memory of young Barry. Please lay them at his resting place for me, or keep them yourselves, whatever you wish. I also sincerely hope you have now all found peace.

Yours respectfully,

Barrie Clarke

Pauline Clarke (continued)

He was so stunned to see his same name on this cross, in the middle of nowhere, he immediately felt a deep connection to our family. I wasn't able to complete the reading. I fell down and I cried. I felt a cold rush of air flowing through me. It was something new, something I never felt before. I felt the inner peace that I had longed to feel for many years. I had finally been set free. I knew even before I finished reading the letter that it really came from my brother. I remembered how he told me he would always be there for me. I knew right then and there that he was always there. He never

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left me or my family. He made sure I was okay before he left; he left me with sober parents and an adopted sister the same age as he was. I wasn't aware of it until the parcel came to us. He was always there. He never broke his promise. For years I felt angry for nothing. It was time to let him go in peace. It took me awhile to come out with the pain I had been carrying for years, but I did it and it felt great. I never felt so free in my life. It was time to start living again.

I went to school and I made sure that I would graduate and do the things my brother Barry never had a chance to do. I always knew he was right into the music so I started singing. I wanted my brother's spirit to live within me. I completed my grade twelve and went on to University. I took up several jobs throughout the years. I'm still in University striving for a degree in Political Science with a certificate in Indian Communication Arts, and I will be done soon.

Ever since Barrie sent us the package in 1994, we have been in close contact with each other. My family accepted this man into the family. We usually communicate through snail mail and now e-mail. We recently met in Regina. We met at Red Lobster, got there at the same time. It was a wonderful meeting: we talked a lot about Barry and how he lived, what he liked to do and about our most amazing experience. I truly believe in fate and the power of the great beyond. I believe in a love so strong it can break all negative forces.

I told Barrie about my trip to the accident for the first time all these years. It was last month. I had never been there before and I finally went. It was still sad for me, especially when I had to listen to my dad describe how the accident happened and what they went through. I prayed all through the time we were there. I could sense my brother's spirit there. That is where my brother loved to be, the trap line, and that is where he died. The trap line was where we felt peace. As we were leaving the site, an eagle followed us. I was even more amazed when I went to the site. How could someone from so far away come over here and find this cross? It was almost as if it was meant for Barrie to see, so that years later we would connect and form a lasting friendship in memory of my brother Barry.

Thank you. Mahsi cho.

Barrie Clarke:

As you can see, my package did arrive and it resulted in the development of a warm bond between the two Clarke families, even though they were very far apart. Then, one day in the summer of 2002, I finally met the entire Southend Clarke family at Davin Lake. As we sat around the campfire talking that evening, I felt as comfortable as if I had known them for my whole life. There is much more to this connection than just a chance discovery of a white cross in the woods  
Thank you.

“Tracking Heaven” by Richard Van Camp

**THE TIME I FELL TO MY DEATH AND THREE GUARDIAN ANGELS FLEW DOWN  
FROM HEAVEN AND CAUGHT ME IN THEIR ARMS**

By Tomson Highway

You know, I was told by an elder once that, from the Native point of view, there is no death, only “a going away.” Death, in other words, is only a journey, a voyage to another dimension of existence, another level of energy, if you will. When you die, that is to say, you go to another place, another position, on that great circle that is the life, and the rhythm, of the universe, a place from which you will rise again in another form at some other time, whether as a blade of grass, a leaf on a tree, a bird, or even something as simple as a ray of sunlight that falls on a naked human arm, a gust of wind, a rhythm, or a certain spark, an electrical bolt of pure energy. Which is why this Earth that we live on is, in and of itself, a miracle, a place of magic, a sacred space. Something like that. That’s where I want to start my piece...

Last August of 2004, I was at a small party at the house of dear friends (of which I have about 3,000 on six continents, thanks to my three angels; it helps, of course, to be 53, not 23). The house that hosted this party was in Toronto, a house I had been to many times before, meaning to say that I knew, quite well, the structure and design of this house (including its stairways!). I must say, however, that I had just come to this party from performing a show, a cabaret where I was the featured pianist, and I therefore had shoes on that I never otherwise wore--my “show shoes” I call them--dress shoes, in other words, that have uncharacteristically slippery soles (I bought them in Turkey some two years ago). So *that* was one factor – that the soles of my shoes were extremely, unusually slippery. The second factor was that it was very late at night, perhaps two in the morning. And so we, of course, had been drinking. And smoking.

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Factor number three was that I had just given my all at this cabaret – my own music, my own lyrics, myself at the piano -- for almost two hours non-stop, me acting as MC at the same time, so I was very tired. No. I stand corrected: I was exhausted because, in part, it had been the last show of several and this, in effect, was the wind-up celebration to a highly successful undertaking. My friends and I, that is to say, were all in an excited, overly-exhausted state. And factor number four was that we were on the deck at the back from which, in order to get to the washroom, one had to walk down these stairs that were not only extremely steep (you know, one of those stairways in these renovated old houses that are so steep they look like step-ladders), stairs that were not only extremely narrow, that were not only carpeted with a rather slippery carpet (especially for the kind of shoes I was wearing)...but these stairs, on top of all this, were unlit. They were almost completely in darkness.

So, at one point in the early hours of the morning, on my way down that stairway, I slipped and I fell from the top to the bottom *of that stairway*. I took a spectacular plunging, five-metre dive, and fell right smack on my head. It was the same kind of fall that paralyzed Superman (the actor, Christopher Reeve, that is) for life and eventually killed him. It was the same kind of fall that another man my age had that same week, a famous British literary agent based in Edinburgh, Scotland and who died on the spot, at his own home no less. And me? You know what happened to me? I walked away from that fall. Not only that but I played another show at another theatre (from the first one where we had played) just two nights later, wearing sun-glasses to hide one huge black eye, but, it made me feel like Ray Charles sitting up on that stage banging that keyboard.



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All I remember from that fall is waking up in the CAT-scan machine at St. Michael’s Hospital some six hours later. For the first half-second that I was awake, I thought I was in a coffin. And I remember this white light all around me. And then I remember having my face stitched by the most gentle of doctors. At that moment, no one knew – for the four friends from the party were there with me – no one knew if I would ever move a finger again in my life.

Me? Never in my life have I felt so at peace, with myself, with the world, and with life. I think that’s what death must be like, you know, the most peaceful, beautiful feeling on Earth. I think, when you die, that you just kind of float away. And it’s over. I don’t think it’s traumatic in the least, not for the person who’s dying. Who it’s traumatic for, quite on the other hand, is those people whom one leaves behind. But for you personally? I think you just float off into a most exquisite, unutterably beautiful...well...I don’t think words exist for the concept in any human tongue. The experience, ultimately, is inexpressible.

Anyway, that fall happened back in August of 2004. It is now late February of 2005. So I’ve had time to think about it all. And I’ve thought about it a lot. And you know what I feel it was all about? I think that through some weird, unexplainable sort of *synergy* -- some mystical exchange of energies, that is to say -- that my three guardian angels flew down that stairway with me that night, my father, my mother, and my brother. And, let me tell you, these were fine, fine spirits all three of them when they were alive, quite extraordinary, in fact. And I think that there, at the bottom of that stairway that night, they caught me. And laid me down to rest ever so gently. Because it was *not* time for me to go.

I didn’t break an arm, a wrist, a hand, or a finger. I know: I’m a piano player. For piano players, and musicians in general, things like fingers and hands and wrists and arms are of the

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essence (which is why we make such bad fighters!). I didn't break my nose. I didn't even break, or even scratch my glasses. It seems they just sort of went flying and landed in a nice soft place. I didn't crack my skull. Most important of all, however, I didn't break my neck, which I could very easily have done. All I ended up with was eight small stitches, three on the bridge of my nose. And five tiny ones in my right eyebrow so that the scar there is not even visible. And, two nights later, I walked on to the stage of that theatre. And played for almost a thousand people. My singer sang like an angel. I know, I saw and heard her from five feet away. My sax player played like one. And I? Well, I just played my best, even if I could see the keyboard of my grand piano with one eye only. And I thanked, as I played, over and over again, my three guardian angels, my wondrous trio of spirit guides, my late father, my late mother, and my late younger brother.

There's a lesson to be learned here, I think. And that is this: how very important it is to take care of those around you while they're still here with you. Because, after they're gone, after they've traveled on to that other place on that great circle, *they* will take care of *you*.

And *that's* my miracle.

Tomson Highway,  
Banyuls-sur-mer, France  
20 February, 2005

Tomson Highway is the son of legendary caribou hunter and world championship dogsled racer, Joe Highway. He was born in a snow bank in northern Manitoba (god's truth!), where it meets Saskatchewan and what is now called Nunavut, in December yet! Today, he makes his living writing plays, novels, and music. His best known works, of many, are the plays, THE REZ SISTERS, DRY LIPS OUGHTA MOVE TO KAPUSKASING, and ROSE as well as the novel, KISS OF THE FUR QUEEN which spent some weeks on Canadian bestseller lists. He divides his year equally between a cottage on a lake in northern Ontario (Sudbury area) and an apartment in the south of France. Trained extremely well at an early age as a classical pianist, he still plays the instrument, most frequently in cabaret form (his own words and music) sometimes solo, sometimes with singer and musician friends in Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

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George Kodakin, a Slavey elder from Deline’, said these last words as he slowly passed away. He died on April 29, 1992 at 4:45 am.

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They are bringing down the Holy Cross for me. What we have in life and life itself is not easy for us in this world. Be strong and remember the word of God. Hang on to it because that’s all you would have and [there is] a long road ahead of you. Love one another as I have loved you. Help out each other with everything. Do you see those clouds in the blue skies? They are not clouds beyond that; it is a most beautiful place you can ever imagine. There are thousands and thousands of people gathering for a feast. They are setting the table. A plate was set for me, but I told them to wait. I was the only one invited, and it does not include any of you. Do you hear the songs? They already sang two songs for me and they are the most beautiful songs you ever heard. That’s it. We are going to a big house. They are waiting for me. From there we are on our way. That’s all I have to say. Now I have to say good-bye.

Mr. Kodakin’s last words were given to me by the community of Deline’ in the Northwest Territories. I asked for permission from the family to use this as a final story in the book. Mary Kodakin, George’s daughter, agreed. George's words are what inspired this entire collection of stories. I thank the Kodakin family for allowing the world to read these words. Mahsi.

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Richard Van Camp is a proud member of the Dogrib (Tlicho) Nation from Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. He is the author of two children’s books with the Cree artist George Littlechild: *A Man Called Raven* and *What’s the Most Beautiful Thing You Know About Horses?* He has published a novel, *The Lesser Blessed*, which is now a feature film with First Generation Films; his collections of short fiction include *Angel Wing Splash Pattern*, *The Moon of Letting Go and Other Stories*, *Godless but Loyal to Heaven* and *Night Moves*. He is the author of four baby books: *Welcome Song for Baby: A Lullaby for Newborns*; *Nighty Night: A Bedtime Song for Babies* and *Little You (now translated into Cree, Dene and South Slavey!)* and *We Sang You Home*, and he has two comic books out with the Healthy Aboriginal Network: *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Path of the Warrior*. His graphic novel, *Three Feathers*, is about restorative justice; his new novel, *Whistle*, is about mental health and asking for forgiveness and his graphic novel, *The Blue Raven*, is about mental health. His graphic novel, *A Blanket of Butterflies*, is about peacemaking where a grandmother is the hero of the story and his latest graphic novel, *Spirit*, is about suicide prevention. Cinematic adaptations of his work include “Mohawk Midnight Runners”, by Zoe Hopkins based on Richard’s short story, “Dogrib Midnight Runners” from *The Moon of Letting Go*, Kelvin Redver’s adaptation of “firebear called them faith healers”, and Jay Cardinal Villeneuve’s adaptation of “Hickey Gone Wrong”, based on Richard’s comic book with Chris Auchter and “Three Feathers”, which is available for viewing in Bush Cree, Dene and South Slavey as well as English, based on his graphic novel.