

Bella Coola: The Rainforest Brought Them Home

By Earl James

List of Characters and Three Excerpts

Peter – American ex-pat in British Columbia, anti-logging advocate, writer

Sarah- American ex-pat in British Columbia, anti-logging advocate

Norval – Nuxalk Nation member, mentor of Peter

Ted- Environmental advocate and lobbyist in Washington, DC; old friend of Peter, Sarah, Moria

Anna – International law and environmental advocate in Washington, DC; Ted’s lover

Moria – Therapist in Oregon, friend and sometimes counselor to Ted, Sarah, Peter

Roy – Young tribal member of Nuxalk Nation, in league with Norval

Duran - Young tribal member of Nuxalk Nation, in league with Norval

Harold – Troubled Nuxalk Nation member, lives on margins of society

Gerald- Nuxalk Nation member, gallery owner in Vancouver

Bobby - Cherokee activist in Kentucky, partner with Annetta

Annetta – Cherokee healer and activist in Kentucky, partner with Bobby

Everret – Lodge owner and activist in Kentucky, friends with Bobby and Annetta

Lee Ann – Everret’s partner, half Cherokee, friend of Annetta and Bobby

Randy – Peter’s NYC publisher; African-American

The following three excerpts will introduce you to Anna, Randy, Bobby and Annetta, and will give you glimpse of their personalities and some sense of their roles in *Bella Coola: The Rainforest Brought Them Home*.

1. Anna

I was born in 1962. On my twentieth birthday I was yanked over the threshold toward maturity by one of those events that seem to come out of nowhere. On a bright, hot January day, I was sitting on the seaside balcony of a Gulf Shores motel, contemplating my life choices after a few beers with college friends who had come south with me to escape the Wisconsin winter.

All day long I had been feeling like something was weighing down on me, pushing me in a direction not of my choosing, and I didn't like it, not wanting to open to that unknown, or to what might be stalking me, even across these white sands.

I had my bare feet propped up on the stinging hot whitewashed wooden balcony rail, watching clumps of people skitter like crabs back and forth from their Kelly green umbrellas to the turquoise, white-tipped waves, and I was resentful of their cheeriness.

It was one of those times when everything you have done catches up with you and demands an accounting, or demands to know where you are going, sort of like it needs to know which clothes to pack for the trip, and I didn't have an answer.

To make matters worse, I was stuck between some inner voice telling me that it was time to let go of childish things, and a sharp fear of setting out in my own small boat alone, so to speak.

The usual corporate career choices seemed like so many flyblown fish on the beach, reeking of decay and early death. And most other career options had been made subservient to some economic force that I didn't like.

Then there were the impossible choices, the ones you didn't even want to acknowledge because just to look at them meant engaging the cosmic forces of good and evil, and you could be torn apart by a deep attraction for that epic struggle.

So that was what I was seeing over my red toenails lined up on the white railing: the dead, the subservient, and the impossible.

Just then a seagull screamed and landed awkwardly on the rail only two feet from me, balancing with some difficulty and staring at me with a stunned look. For what seemed like a small eternity I stared back. The bird had weeds or something hanging from its mouth and a stream of bright red froth oozed slowly out of its loosely closed beak and dripped off the weeds.

I screamed and yanked my feet back from the rail and tried to roll out of the canvas chaise and couldn't and it was like a nightmare when you can't get away from something hideous and deadly because your legs won't work. Finally falling to the deck, I kicked blindly until I smacked the uprights of the rail, and the impact on the bottom of my feet opened my eyes again and there it was, still wobbling and staring stupidly at me. I grabbed the chaise and tried to pull it over myself for protection, slamming it against the

rail, and the seagull lurched and made a failed attempt to fly away, falling straight down to the sand instead.

As I lay there breathing fast with the remnants of panic in my throat, a wave of sadness and anger surged up inside of me. I rolled slowly onto my side, pulling the chaise over me like a blanket, and started to cry the kind of crying that makes you nearly unconscious--convulsive, terrified crying.

After what seemed like a long while I felt totally drained. Slowly, I began to sense that the bird had been a messenger from somewhere, or that I had called for it to come to me with its sickness because I couldn't accept what I must without its intervention.

My head throbbed and my throat burned. I stood slowly, weak-kneed, and the chaise fell and clattered woodenly. With my hands lightly touching the rail for balance, I looked out to the vast swells of green water rolling toward me from the farthest curve of the earth. I tried hard to smell the warm and salty sea wind from that distant place as it touched my face, craving its comfort, but it smelled bitter instead, and heavy with its own grief.

Screaming children gathered around the dying seagull below. I looked down and a distant voice in me said I should tell them to get away from it but I couldn't move my lips. A rotund, sunburned white woman with scarlet lipstick shooed them away and looked up at me accusingly.

I looked back at the mysterious curving of all that green water in the distance and the cold fear returned. There was no escape. I was twenty years old, and it was time to accept the bruised reality that I had been born into the arms of a diseased mother, with medical waste washing up on eastern beaches and black tides of crude asphyxiating her shore life with increasing regularity.

There were very few choices in front of me. Just two, really: fight, or die. And it was time to choose. I remember clearly that my lightheadedness and weak legs briefly joined forces with my despair and voted for some kind of death, painting it as a comforting thing, the end of pain and fear. I'll admit it was attractive for a while. If I had been more than fifteen feet off the ground and knew that I would die upon impact, I might have been tempted to join the seagull.

But while those feelings contended for my heart, I remembered the bird's stunned and helpless expression as it clung to the rail, as if looking to *me* for an answer, and the tears returned, only this time they were tears of love and sadness and hurt and anger, not fear or despair.

And that's how I started my twentieth year of life, neck deep in the confusing mix of anger and love and unable to turn off either spigot. It was pure hell.

* * *

2. RANDY

May 20

Randy grabbed the wet chrome handle on the back door of NYC 8G25 as the wind whipped through the wind tunnel of West 125th Street. Ducking into the cab following his meeting at the Apollo Theater, settling hard on the thick cracked plastic seat cover, he could smell the damp scent of everyone who had jumped in and out of this cab in the rain over the last several hours.

“Where to, bro?” asked the cabbie in a thick and throaty French West African accent.

“Seventy-fifth and Amsterdam, bro,” Randy replied heartily, chuckling at the cabbie’s assumed familiarity.

“Sevn-fif and Am-str-dm,” repeated the cabbie slowly, still learning to pronounce English.

“Correct. Excellent,” said Randy, watching him without seeming to. The young dark-skinned man tripped the meter, his large eyes vacantly alert in a face whose most pronounced feature was the skull that lay beneath. Sharp ridges defined eye sockets set widely above large, rounded cheekbones, pulling the dully glistening skin taut as his head easily turned left and right surveying the traffic in a smooth, fatigued movement.

“We’re beginning to look all the same,” Randy thought, “the world’s large coastal cities, swarming with every conceivable genetic variety of the species. Did it matter anymore? Did it ever, though haven’t people always been captive of the delusion of once upon a time the people of New York, Liverpool, Mumbai, wherever, were all of a single creed and color and temperament? Except us slaves, of course.”

Following his driver’s gaze outside into the thicket of bleating taxis and delivery vans, he watched pedestrians shouldering their way into the rain with dark glances and quick darts between whomever looked like they would yield to a sharp movement, black and yellow and red umbrellas swaying to an unknown music, reflections on the yellow hood sliced into shards by the metronome movements of the windshield wipers.

“There’s that orange tint showing through the taxi yellow again, but only when it’s wet,” he thought. “Is it only my color blindness creating that effect? Or can I replay my childhood fantasy that my rods and cones are among the elite few that can distinguish true colors. True colors. Let me see your true colors, please. Do I really want to see everyone’s, anyone’s, true colors? Is it possible not to see them, sooner or later? Or am I only seeing what I am equipped to see, the rods and cones of my mind creating their own version of your true colors?”

There was little question, he knew, about the colors of Dieter Closson, or simply, the Dutchman, as he was known in the office. The Dutchman’s on his way over, the Dutchman cometh, or rather, returneth--the Dutch West India Company redux--except that today it was probably partially owned by humans living right here and incorrectly thinking of themselves as almost indigenous to this island that has played host to so many variants on the theme of humanity.

Trailing centuries of the mythology of the Dutch Trader like a long black cape, Dieter was the face of the conglomerate that had swallowed up his small publishing house, for what reason no one could understand. The house would make little more than a dent in the corporate finances regardless of its own small profit or loss, swimming as it was in a sea of unrelated ventures in logging, paper and shipping.

“Modern day vertical integration,” thought Randy, “except that it’s all too clear that publishing is not at all the highest goal of DBH, so it’s even more of a puzzle as to why we were acquired. Perhaps, as was speculated widely in the office, perhaps a small publishing house provided the company with a mask to place over its more rapacious corporate face, an exotic hardwood veneer over the soft pine underbelly. Or as I like to believe, owning a publishing house is just the wistful fulfillment of one aging corporate director’s lost dream grudgingly yielded to by a CEO paving his own road toward a lucrative bailout should things go wrong.

“Seeing it this way was almost literary in itself,” he thought, “a scene from a novel tracing the battered arc of human desire through several generations and iterations of international trading companies surfing the gritty orange foam of profit margins.

“Which then makes me what kind of character in this novel? Originally relishing the business side of publishing, seeing myself as the hardheaded one who made certain

that the self-identified erudite editors stayed within the bounds of fiscal sanity with their projects, as they liked to call their desire to discover the next great American literary voice.”

The taxi careened around a corner and flew up a ramp onto the Henry Hudson Parkway overlooking New Jersey across the Hudson River.

“Now CEO and Editor in Chief of a cipher on the conglomerate’s vast spreadsheet, I canoe my way downstream to meet the face of the invading force, to meet Dieter the Dutchman for lunch at the Shark Bar Restaurant (*Southern & Soul, Cajun & Creole,*) three-oh-seven Amsterdam Avenue, for sweet candied yams, a soul roll and Louisiana pan fried crab cakes. Or maybe grilled Alaskan salmon, to celebrate Dijkstra, Bijl & Hendrik’s recent acquisition of BC Logging’s operation in British Columbia. Should I tell him about the contract we have with an eco-activist writer from Tofino? Probably not. Would he really care, or do I want him to care? No, absolutely not. But it will come out of course, when it is published, if it’s ever finished. That will be the test of DBH’s commitment to publishing!

“Do I enjoy all of this, compromises and all, this particular massing of energy that propels me, that shapes me, or that I shape, directing my canoe down the island toward this meeting, riding the current of the moment into the dark green still waters where the succulent fish flesh lingers to feed, to be snared and itself eaten? Yes, yes, I do. The familiarity of the current, the worn seat plank of the canoe, the tactile surface of my wet trench coat and the rituals and body language that get me from the *maitre’d* to the table just after Dieter has settled heavily into the booth. Following the current, riding the surf is the key, knowing where the energy is headed and staying just ahead of it.

“As much as I like to revile Dieter in the office, I like the fact that I might know him as well as I know myself, and that is what keeps me from being exploited, from being acquired, and allows me to enjoy the moment, the food and the show that he will put on over his rib eye steak with citrus herb butter. If D gets testy or pushy, perhaps inching toward editorial control of the house, I can always bring up the rumor that DBH has violated a UN arms embargo on Liberia by purchasing timber illegally logged there. Perhaps small leverage since the rumor already exists in some quarters, but it’s not something DBH wants shouted out all over New York, the house being owned by a

timber criminal, and having that picked up by the media and investors and customers. Being the New York wing of the conglomerate gives us some degree of threat capability.

“Conflict lumber. Naming always turns perception down a different avenue, snapping our combined consciousness like a whip against the bare and heavily welted backs of the corporate barons. Do they wear their welts like dueling scars, taking pride in the public PR beatings which seemed to always shield the company from true reparations of any kind, reparations to the land, the sea, the downtrodden. Was there any conflict lumber coming out of British Columbia? Not technically, of course, but conflict is in the eye of the beholder and our activist author and the truly indigenous will know of conflicted logging all right.

“Well, good timing. There’s the Dutchman leaving his yellow-orange canoe ahead, taking his sweeping stride toward the door of Shark Bar. Heavy in the hindquarters, broad shouldered, his blond hair half-heartedly swept back over the small balding spot. Looks about the same as on his first visit to introduce himself in January.

Randy handed the cabbie his fare and tip, slipped out and walked slowly to the heavy glass exterior door. He smiled to himself as he paused outside, deliberately giving Dieter a bigger head start toward the booth, just to see if he could time his own arrival as Dieter was sitting down, as he had imagined it a moment before.

* * *

3. Bobby and Annetta

Bobby kicked at a clod of dirt under the wooden bench.

“I know I am venting and talking more about a cultural analysis than about our friends and colleagues, but that’s the problem, isn’t it, how to hold both worlds. And in fact, I’m getting tired of holding both worlds, or at least these particular two worlds.”

“Which two worlds are you talking about exactly?”

“The two extremes, the ancient ones talking to me and the daily world of nineteen ninety-eight in Kentucky, USA. It feels like a trap, Annetta, a trap where we have to constantly defend our people and ways from cultural obliteration, instead of being free to venture forth to create that world we dream of and talk about.”

“Bobby, that makes it more important for you and me to hold onto each other, to dig into the land for our home together, to trust the land to receive and hold us. Our people, they cling to one another and lift each other up. If one falls we all fall, when he rises, we all rise. It’s what always has helped our people survive.”

“Yes, but it’s when I work to stay connected to the old ways, when I see our ancestors looking at me for something, that I cannot contain the anger and cynicism. And you were just complaining about...”

“It’s different, though, isn’t it, being tired of one thing,” said Annetta, “of feeling like my giving, my healings is in fact giving too much away. But that’s not giving up on everything that makes up our culture and our history.”

“I don’t know if it’s any different, and I’m not saying I’m giving up on our culture anyway, just that I am questioning whether I should keep that double vision all the time.”

“Well, what do you see, Bobby, when you see double?”

“Superficial things like the old ways of talking about time as ‘the month of shedding leaves’, or describing a year by its most significant event, like ‘the fish kill year’, instead saying nineteen ninety, for when there was the big die off in Fishtrap Lake. It feels childish, yet it’s compelling, and it...”

“Actually, that’s wonderful, isn’t it? Isn’t that the connected way, naming things by cycles of nature, or events that everyone in the community remembers? Our ancestors

would understand that language, that referencing. Time is insignificant. It is what happens in time that matters, right?”

“Maybe it is okay except when it starts to take over my thinking. I can’t start talking like that when I am lobbying some wrinkled old dude at the state legislature.”

“No I suppose not, but...”

“And I haven’t done that, but the thing is, lately I’ve been greatly tempted, sort of out of anger, or as a way of saying ‘You don’t belong here, this is not your land’, and yet that sounds so retro, so much like, well, like part of the trap.”

“Retro? Trap? Tell me more, please, this is getting interesting.”

Bobby picked up the dirt clod, stood, threw it hard down the slope and turned back to Annetta.

“It’s like that anger is a necessary link to our ancestors, Annetta, and at the same time a hindrance to where we are trying to go.”

“Where is that, Bobby? Where are we trying to go? Tell me.” said Annetta, her leg bobbing more and more energetically.

“You know what I mean. Some kind of future free of all the ancient recriminations and oppressors where being Indian is not something that has to be defended all the time, where it’s accepted and honored, and most importantly, where whatever wisdom we have earned is woven into the makeup of the new world.”

“That sounds nice, Bobby, but are we really trying to go somewhere else, or just change the place we’re in now. And good luck with going someplace new anyway.”

“So you don’t see that as a real future?”

“I don’t know, Bobby. Perhaps I can only see such things if they happen in the here and now, however briefly, when we are surrounded by the right kind of people, like we were here this week. Wasn’t it like that here?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

Bobby sat down close to Annetta.

“But now it’s over, isn’t it? Now it’s...”

“You and I keep the coals burning, Bobby, until we find the right conditions to start the fire again.”

“Nice Indian stereotype, girl.”

“Sometimes they are true.”

“Maybe. Maybe the only thing that creates the right conditions is a common threat.”

“If that’s the case,” said Annetta, her eyebrows raised in mock surprise, “that future you want looks much more realistic then, doesn’t it?”

Bobby smiled and the tension began to drain from his face.

“Maybe so. Maybe I’ll be happy all day someday. Or maybe I’ll just live in that piece of the forest we build on twenty-four seven and not come back out.”

“No you won’t, no you won’t, you’re too committed to triggering the big change to do that, aren’t you, Bobby? I know you better than that, and I won’t let you anyway. And I won’t want you lying about all day, so I’ll boot you out, dear one.”

Bobby laughed and wrapped his arms around Annetta.

“You are mean, girl!”

“No I’m not, you know that, but I will be if you drop out and become cranky and bitter all the time instead of your strong and loving self, you hear?”

“Um.”

“Um yourself, Bobby.”

Bobby pulled her close, pushing his face into her hair and breathing deeply as he kissed the back of her neck. This physical connection, this trust, always brought him back to the present moment of his life, to the acknowledgement that this awareness of her ever present offer of love and compassion, and his acceptance, was all that mattered right now, all that existed in the midst of memories of the past and anxieties about the future. It was this moment out of which the future grew, and the blood quickened in his body as he yearned for more of Annetta’s love, pulling her tighter and holding her breasts.

“So Bobby, what’s going on with you now, lover?” Annetta asked playfully. “What are you needing from me?”

“Just you, I just need you.”

“You know you have me, don’t you? But maybe we should wait until we get home for more.”

“Let’s go upstairs.”

“I think Lee Ann and her mother are cleaning the rooms, and I still have to pack up so we can leave soon. We don’t have far to travel, we won’t have to wait for long.”

Annetta pulled away slowly and kissed Bobby’s cheek.

“I’ll go pack and say goodbye to Lee Ann.”

“I’ll be here when you’re ready,” said Bobby. “Hurry.”

As Bobby sat on the porch bench watching the sky, a rumbling thunderstorm moved in over the river valley, briefly hammering the tin roof with pea-sized summer hail and electrifying the crisp, cool air before beginning to move out slowly. A quiet drift of light rain began covering everything with its silence. Bobby watched the earth once again gently reclaim its domain with a patience beyond human comprehension.

Holding his eyelids almost closed and scanning the wide vista before him, in the far distance against the Osage orange trees along the river he could just make out what looked like four of his earliest ancestors walking through the rain in their animal skins, carrying large bundles on their backs. Three adults, one child; their images flickering in and out of the muted browns and greens of the landscape. As he regarded them solemnly, they paused and looked toward him for a short while, as if trying to see through the rain and through the centuries, wondering about the images they saw flickering against the foot of a heavily-wooded mountain, and then they turned back to the trail they were following and disappeared into the trees.

“So the ancestors come again,” he thought, “now, after my closeness with Annetta, and then leave, all too quickly. What were they trying to say? Did they ever know, in their time, what lay before them, or did they just stumble along day by day like we do? Where did they come from to get to this land, and what kind of life did they leave behind?”

Trying to recapture the image, he closed his eyes and saw instead his own face looking back at him and speaking to him in some ancient pre-Cherokee language that he didn’t understand.

“I know that you are trying to speak to me now,” he thought, “but why do I see myself doing the talking, and why not in Cherokee, or even English, so I can understand? Talk to me! I am here, listening, waiting.”

He looked out at the tree line again as it began to disappear in the growing rain.

“It’s always like this, connected, but not enough to hear, not enough to know them the way I want to, the way I need to. Maybe that’s all I can expect, having been pulled away from my ancestral traditions as a child. Or maybe it’s the only kind of connection that is necessary, just to know they are out there, watching. Is that enough?”

He stepped down off of the porch into the soft wind and cool rain, heading toward the river, eager to walk through the space his ancestors had just occupied, and his heart swelled with love and anger. Love for his people, and anger over their being starved, murdered, cheated, then pushed out.

He knew the Cherokee had been a warring people at times, as had most indigenous tribes, defending their hunting grounds from incursions by nearby tribes, raiding others for horses. Some had even held slaves. And when pushed westward, his people had conducted fierce raids against the Washiki, or Osage as the Europeans called them, sometimes killing women and children. His anger at the suppression and exile imposed upon his people by the white government had long polarized his thoughts and feelings, making it difficult to sort out the good from the bad of his own people.

“If they had not been brutally oppressed and pushed west by the whites,” he wondered, stuffing his hands forcefully into his jacket pockets, “would they have committed those heinous acts anyway when their own growing population created a need for more land, more hunting and farming grounds? Or were they taking displaced revenge upon the Osage for their own subjugation by the white government?”

“Today, the Trail of Tears would be called ethnic cleansing, perhaps even attempted genocide, with much international outcry echoing through the halls of the United Nations and on the airwaves.

“Could this long and terrible history between the races ever have been different?” he wondered. “Was there any one aspect of European contact that had undermined their ability to co-exist, or was it just the usual human motivations of greed, fear and power? But asking that is just applying twentieth century psychological concepts to a radically different culture.”

Bobby pulled his jacket close as the wind picked up and the rain began to seep under his collar. He was about twenty yards from the river now, and he imagined the ancestors, the people who came before they were the Tsalagi, maybe before they were

Ani Gaduwagi too, waiting under the trees for him, handing him a medicine bag when he approached, nodding at him and then disappearing into a light fog hanging over the river.

“Maybe the answer I seek will be in that medicine bag, and maybe it will come to me in a vision,” he thought.

Standing on the river bank in the shelter of the trees and watching the slow movement of the muddy, brown water between the steep banks, Bobby turned to look back at the faint image of Yellow Mountain Lodge.

“It’s almost impossible to know what to hold onto from the past, how to stay connected to my people’s traditions and way of being in the world,” he thought. “While being all too human, they lived by certain codes of honor, with deep respect for the earth and its creatures, and with a strong connection to the animating spirit, especially before contact. And here I stand in eastern Kentucky, where many of them hunted, raised crops and grew families for hundreds of years until being pushed out, scattered and decimated. Now, I live a completely different life, but somehow I carry the history, and I feel the reality of living in an alien society.

“Annetta is right about needing to stay connected to that other world. It’s where I feel at home, even though I’ve never lived there. She’s usually right about what’s essential for integrity. Her perspective on this latest ancestral vision will be interesting. But what do they have to do with the future anyway, with the social and environmental chaos approaching? Will they show up for me then?”

He shook his head and shoulders, trying to return to the present, trying to see the future only in terms of building that house with Annetta. That was what seemed real, and within their control.

But he knew also that the vision of his ancient ancestors calling to him and the vision of a radically changed world ahead would both stay in his head and heart, each pulling at him, each demanding more from him.

Bobby walked back toward the lodge, head down against the wind and rain, feeling strong and determined. He knew that he and Annetta would go on together, two people seeing double, two people becoming something new in the world, something rare and vital for whatever was to come.