

BELLA COOLA

The Rainforest Brought Them Home

Return

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Morning rose silently around him. The booming glacier melt falls, cascading forty feet from him, dreamed him to this place. Always thundering their power to destroy and their insistence upon infinity, they spoke now of retribution, of hurt, of their own bleeding and of his burden.

It had not rained during the night, but the cold mist off the falls charged the air, and the sour smell of decaying cedar logs welcomed him back to the ancient rainforest. He lay still, awake and not awake under his green tarpaulin shelter as dawn filtered slowly through the mist to grant him one more day; one more day to search for an undiscovered entrance into the earth's inner heart where some new wisdom might lie in waiting, a wisdom subsuming all the fragmentary and inadequate wisdoms of the past, so that the hurt, the human-made gash across the face of the earth, could be healed.

He saw, in his own dream place, his nights and days of years past in this forest, this very refuge, where fears and ego needs clinging tightly to his inner spirit like glistening black barnacles on a seashore rock would fall away, where he could open himself to the timelessness of the forest, and to its pulse. But there was no refuge on this day, no safe haven in this remote rainforest called the Skowquiltz, for the Skowquiltz itself was now threatened with clear-cut logging.

In his waking dream, he heard Norval, his ally and mentor, speak to him. 'This is the big one, Peter, the one we can't lose. So get going. You need to be at the longhouse by dark.'

Pushing himself up to a sitting position, he steeled himself for the grim task of making battle plans with Norval, Roy and Duran, tribal members of Nuxalk Nation

working to protect their ancestral lands and sacred sites in the British Columbia rainforest. Norval had dropped Peter off near the falls then took the Zodiac up river to meet Roy and Duran at the longhouse they built on BC Provincial Government land last year.

“Re-inhabiting their ancestral lands, they called it,” Peter remembered, “laying claim to what was once theirs, and what they now will fight to protect.”

Hearing a sharp movement up the slope away from the falls, Peter sat still several minutes, listening for a confirming noise, perhaps a shuffling bear’s grunt. When none came, he pushed his sleeping bag off his legs.

“And then there’s Sarah,” he said to himself, frowning and brushing his hair with his hands, “trying to lay claim to a future that she wants to be hers, or ours. But I can’t let the Skowquiltz be cut, I just can’t.”

Grabbing his boots, he quickly rubbed a handful of pungent cedar needles inside them.

Then, as if he had heard another movement in the distance, he turned his head quickly to look behind him. Feeling like he had stepped out of his waking dream, out of the silent stream that was carrying him to the longhouse like a log in the river, he closed his eyes until he felt the stream again, felt that necessary force knock him down once more and sweep him toward the longhouse.

He opened his eyes, stood and surveyed the thick and heavy cedar, fir and spruce boughs sheltering the land, felt his bare feet sink slowly into the deep green moss, and he knew once again the claim this forest had laid upon him.

* * *

Sarah put the phone down on the kitchen counter, and checked her grocery list to make certain she had ordered everything.

“Brown germinated rice, sticky and good for chopsticks; apples, kale, carrots...oh, the hell with it. I’ll find out what I ordered when I go to pick it up.”

She threw the list in the trash can then kicked the can sharply, sending the metal lid clanging around in circles on the floor. When it finally came to a stop, Sarah turned back toward the counter, looking for distraction from her anger. Instead, she spotted the blue-handled kitchen scissors Peter had used to chop off parts of his hair in what he

thought was a slightly humorous, slightly serious ritual preparation for his reconnaissance trip with Norval.

“Using *my* kitchen scissors to disfigure himself, adding insult to injury, damn him. And cutting your hair like that; isn’t that what people do when someone *dies*?”

The hurt she had felt when he disregarded her needs, her need for him to stay home, to stay away from another risky action in the forest now that their lives were changing, or now that her life was changing anyway, ballooned into anger and tears when she saw the bright blue scissors lying on the pale white speckled tile counter, as if left there to taunt her. She grabbed them and threw them across the kitchen and living area, bouncing them off the heavy glass sliding door to the cedar deck.

“Damn you!” She yelled, bringing her throwing arm back across her breasts, and raised one hand to her face to calm herself.

“Why can’t he understand I need him to stop putting his body on the line? What’s so hard to understand about that? We’ve done our share and more for the last thirty years, dozens of times, blockading logging roads, hanging banners from tall trees, living in trees for weeks at a time, getting arrested... It’s enough. He needs to pay more attention to *us* now, it’s time for that.”

Walking across the open floor of the A-frame they had lived in since leaving the US for Canada, she picked the blue-handled scissors up off the floor and was instantly overwhelmed with a feeling of futility, of how impossible it was to know how those thirty years of close partnership could only add up to throwing scissors and crying. She had tried over and over to explain what was going on with her, her changes and her need to shift out of the mold they had created for themselves here in Tofino, on Vancouver Island, to something new, something more appropriate for the last third of their lives. Ever since their trip to Kentucky where she met Annetta and received a spiritual healing, she had believed he did understand and was more open to working with her to alter their path.

All of that belief came crashing down when he chopped his hair and set off for Bella Coola in spite of her protestations. He had completely forgotten her, or had become repossessed by his old self from their anti-war days, the old zeal for justice burning bright again, blinding him to any other need in his life.

Sarah dropped the scissors on the rough wooden coffee table where they lost their power to taunt lying among the clutter of newspapers, a pair of faded red house slippers and several pages of the book Peter was working on. She picked up the pages and flipped through them quickly, then tossed them back on the table.

“That’s what he should be doing now, finishing the book that he says is the most compelling, the most important that he has written, not off with Norval for the hundredth time.”

She looked around for the mobile phone.

“I need to talk with someone, now. I can’t deal with this alone. I wonder if Annetta would be willing to talk this late. Two hours difference between here and Kentucky. Or is it three? Either ten or eleven there. That’s too late to call. Moria. I’ll call Moria. She’s in our time zone.”

She caught her reflection in the glass door, and stopped to look closely at herself.

“Tired, not happy. Cranky, but not finished,” she said with a faint shake in her voice.

She saw the damp darkness under her eyes from crying, but what held her most was the look in deeper in her eyes.

“Lonely. A bit lost, maybe. Well, get over it soon, girl. You’re not about to give up because of this setback. Too much has gone between us these thirty years to let it slip away. He’ll be back soon, and then we’ll have the talk to end all talks. No more shrugging me off this way. This must change.”

Sarah pulled her hair out of a blue scrunchie and let it fall down her back. She shook her head to loosen it up, feeling a bit stronger, recovering some of her usual confidence, and seeing how the new gray in her dark brown hair underscored the wisdom she had earned through so many extraordinary experiences they had found on this Pacific coastal island.

She shifted her vision to the forest beyond the glass door, toward the coast of Vancouver Island and Clayoquot Sound where the bush pilots landed and where Jack would be flying Peter back from Bella Coola in a few days.

“Come on home, Peter, come on home,” she said softly as she began gathering her hair back up in her hands and walking back toward the phone.

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Walking around the cluster of a dozen or so two hundred-foot tall Sitka spruce trees that had sheltered him overnight, Peter stopped in a shoulder-high thicket of undergrowth to pick a handful of black, smelly and sweet stink currant berries. As he reached carefully around a prickly devil's club bush, he remembered Norval once telling him that it had many traditional uses by his tribe.

"What exactly did he say, Peter wondered. Something about purification, both physical and spiritual, but what? Let's see, an infusion of the inner bark is used to purify, and the outer bark is worn as an amulet for protection. And something else..."

Peter again sensed that something was moving in the distance, but this time he felt connected to whatever it was, as if his own movements triggered those of some unseen being shifting positions to stay out of his sight.

Then he remembered: Devil's club was considered sacred, a link between the profane world and the spirit world.

"That's it, he thought. And something about being a protective force. But the very thing that can protect you has needle-sharp spines--some say poisonous--along its stem. You can't simply grab a handful of it on the run. So you have to prepare, harvest a piece of the stem before you need it."

Peter stood still, and looked around the forest as if for the first time, smiling.

"That's the centerpiece of your theology, isn't it?" he said aloud. "Act with clear intention and respect for creation and it will provide what you need. And here it is, staring me in the face, waiting."

Turning back to where he had been picking berries, he smiled and whispered, "Devil's club, the stem of theology. I like that."

He pulled a knife out of a worn leather holster on his belt, opened the heavy steel blade and scraped the spines from the thick lower stem of one of the plants. Grasping the large, flat, pale green leaves carefully to avoid the spines, he sliced the stem at its base and just below its leaf cluster and stuffed it into the top of his backpack. Closing the knife blade, he stood still again for several minutes, hearing nothing but his own heartbeat.

“So much for the forest fear.” he thought, “Always the duality, the human-created goblins creeping into the stillness. Is it ever possible to be alone in the deep forest without opening the door to every trickster of the unconscious? Probably not. But now I am armed.”

He walked back to the roaring falls for one last chance to feel the plunging ice-cold water shake the earth and the cold spray pelt his face. The forty-foot blade of blue-white water sliced the air, and the thunderous vibrations pulled him deeper into an awareness of the great mystery behind everything, into the same unanswerable questions he felt watching distant galaxies spin in the night sky.

After several minutes, he stepped back and pulled a black skullcap off his head, squeezing it dry. Running his fingers over his unevenly chopped hair, the hair that he and Sarah had quarreled about, he felt the tension that still lay in his stomach.

That she became so alarmed over his prank had surprised him. She had moved in close to his face, holding him fast with her green eyes wide and intense, and asked “What’s next, Peter, wearing a hair shirt under your slicker?”

It wasn’t enough for him to say that Norval, Roy and Duran asked him to help scout the ancient valley to look for signs of logging. She had simply replied as she bent even closer, “They can do that without you. You can’t personally intervene in every threat,” her voice gaining strength and her hot breath spilling out over his face. “You can’t put your body in front of every logging truck. You’ve been there--we’ve been there--dozens of times. There are others who will carry on. You have a book to finish, one that you keep saying is the most important project of your life, and here you go off on a completely unnecessary and possibly dangerous trip.”

Then there was the gut punch, when she paused and looked directly at him with a mixture of sadness and frustration blanketing her face.

“And,” she said, her voice softer and breaking slightly, “after all these years, and all we have been through together, you’re not taking my concerns seriously.”

Her words had pierced him, and remembering now triggered his guilt, and remorse. Several hundred kilometers from home, his uncertainty gnawed at him. Sarah had given voice to the very thing he was trying to avoid.

He pulled the skullcap back over his hair.

“Maybe this is my clumsy way of trying to find an answer, he thought, by just doing the same thing over and over until it no longer works. It’s certainly no longer working for Sarah.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling regret at not having been able to make her understand everything going on inside of him.

“Not particularly smart, handing these decisions over to fate. What was it that Norval said about fate? It’s nothing but a set of compelling circumstances you create for yourself? Maybe. Or maybe it’s just an unwillingness to make the really tough decisions.”

Peter yanked his backpack straps tight, until he could feel them cutting into his shoulders.

“Here I am, though; no turning back now. I have to know the valley will always be here, untouched and wild. I have to know that.”

He started hiking away from the falls again, ducking under the heavy spruce boughs and jumping over the cedar roots protruding from the wet earth. The familiar feel of a heavy pack on his back and a long trek ahead of him reminded him of their early years in Tofino, adjusting to the radical relocation they had made in moving to Canada. Peter smiled at the outright militancy that had propelled him and Sarah into the lockdowns, the roadblocks and tree-sitting, getting them both arrested over and over, and once landing Sarah in jail for three months.

“It was good,” he thought, as he bent forward into his hike, “good to be on the front line with our bodies. It tempered us, gave us a new understanding of our power to force change, at least some of the time.”

“But now we are at another decision point about how we work. Especially Sarah. Something very elemental going on with her. Mourning losses from our past, and needing me to mourn with her, to change as she changes. ”

Stopping for a quick, final glance back at the falls, he felt a quickening of his heart and knelt to look closely at the trail. He carefully ran his fingertips over a palm-sized depression: four toes and a large heel pad.

“Timber wolf,” he said. “Of course she would be watching, probably five or six cubs hunkered down behind her, lots of green eyes burning through the morning mist. Eyes like Sarah’s.”

He stood and looked around and seeing no further signs of his wild companions turned swiftly up the path, smelling the faint, sweet smell of half-digested berries in a pile of bear scat just off the trail at the crest of the slope. He felt his blood quicken with the certainty of his mission, with the sense of connection to the wolf and the bear, and the trees swaying gently in the wind.

A raven screamed from its spruce perch some fifty feet above his head and he looked straight up to call back.

“Sarah, Sarah!” he called, shocking himself into momentary silence and freezing him in his tracks.

“Oh hell, what have I done?” he said quietly to himself. “I’ve left her stranded, to go off on my own, to come here, again, without our usual heart connection, our usual understanding of each other. What the hell...”

The wind picked up slightly and the thick spruce and hemlock boughs moved against him, brushing his face and neck, and he felt their insistence, their call to him.

The raven screamed again and flew away with a thundering of wings.

He turned back to the trail and pushed ahead. Everything was pulling at him, wanting him. He felt it pull at his blood, his heartbeat thundering in his ears.

“Sarah, good god, Sarah, why aren’t you here with me? This could be our last battle together, then we could go anywhere, do anything, once the Skowquiltz is safe. It has to be. I can’t live without it, Sarah.”

The undergrowth around him formed a thick wall, and he stayed on the path until he came across a large piece of deadfall, a one hundred fifty foot long Douglas fir lying in the direction he needed. Hoisting himself up its five foot diameter height and testing his boots on the damp bark before taking off, he navigated carefully between the thick branches and broken stubs sticking out at all angles. The noise of his own movements along the trunk filled his ears and he no longer listened for the sound of any other force afoot in the chilly fall air.

As he moved toward his destination, he began to anticipate the worst--finding a legion of small, orange plastic flags along the ground, and neon pink paint flashes on tree trunks--the undeniable signs of the imminent clear-cutting of another sacred grove.