A TWIST IN COYOTE'S TALE

by

Celia M Gunn

RED CLOUD

All-encompassing, the drumbeat; pervasive, insistent.

The mist-filled clearing is pale with first light; hunched by the sacred fire sits a lone drummer, a shadowy figure.

He gets up, begins to walk in my direction, the throb of his drum filling my head, my whole being, compelling me to walk down the low ridge to meet him.

The mist eddies, swirls; beyond, darkness like the edge of the world. Unseen, encircling trees rustle, whisper....

Shocking-red, the drummer's jacket; raven-black, the hair flowing thick and loose over his shoulders; hollow-cheeked, hawk-like, his face is dark, lined. Ageless.

So close we could touch. I know, yet do not know him....

His coppery face a mask-like grimace, almost a sneer, the Native American thrusts the drum and stick towards me, jerking them at me, imperatively challenging: "You take the drum! Now you call the people!"

Stumbling backwards, I shake my head, waving my hands in negation. "No! I've never drummed! I don't know how!"

Hands pushing at thin air, I woke up, my heart pounding. It took a few moments to remember where I was; pulling back the curtain from the window of my camper-van, I looked outside. The early-morning mist was gone and the clearing was bright with sunlight; a thin blue wraith of smoke curled over the sacred fire. Nobody was to be seen. As my heart calmed, an excited curiosity began to replace the feeling of panic. My dreams were often vivid but this one carried an immediacy new to me.

Had I been told this powerful dream would herald an intense involvement with a group of Native American people that would profoundly affect my life and being for the next six years and beyond, I doubt I would have believed it, even though I sensed something special was going on.

It was summer solstice; I was camped at the Rebirth of Mother Earth Medicine Wheel Gathering, near the Arrow Lakes in south-eastern British Columbia, Canada. A Native American-led gathering was a new experience for my children and me; unsure what it might involve, the previous afternoon I had chosen a campsite on the periphery of the growing encampment.

At the time unaware of the significance of the year, 1987, [1] I had been sensing something in

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[1] According to Jose Arguelles, the year of the Harmonic Convergence, signifying a global spiritual awakening and part of the Great Count of the Mayan Calendar which ends at the winter solstice of 2012. I believe this is not a prediction of the end of the world but a crossroad for human consciousness, whose choice of direction the Maya could not foresee. It is a prophecy found in cultures across the globe. (See Geoff Stray, Beyond 2012: *Catastrophe or Ecstasy: A Complete Guide to End-of-Time Predictions.* Vital Signs Publishing 2005.)

my inner planes beginning to actively seek expression. A month before, visiting a friend in Toronto and missing my children on Mother's Day, I had joined in a Mother Earth Day celebration taking place on Algonquin Island, one of a small string of jewels a short ferry-ride from the harbour. Under the soft blue, lightly-feathered sky of a warm May day, watched over by the slim, commanding presence of the telecommunications tower, several hundred people – singles, couples, families; Rastafarians, Hare Krishna devotees, punks, rockers, bikers, musicians, poets, artists, craftspeople, environmentalists, old and new hippies and a throng of children – danced, sang and drummed together, peddled handcrafted wares, shared ideas and food and filled the day with laughter and creativity.

A single mother, I had been inspired by the harmonious, colourful experience and sense of an extended family, and wanted to find something similar my own little family. Only a few days after returning home to Vernon, in the North Okanagan area of British Columbia, a two-line announcement in a local advertising rag caught my eye: a "Native-led Rebirth of Mother Earth Medicine Wheel Gathering" was taking place at Edgewood the following month, only a couple of hours' drive away. The reference to Mother Earth seemed to continue a theme; "Native-led" and whatever a "Medicine Wheel" might be further spiced my interest, for despite a life-long interest in the Native American way of life and having lived in Canada for twelve years, I had only recently befriended a Native family.

The day before leaving for the gathering, I had had a sense of needing to be alone and for the first time since moving there, climbed up into the hilly ranch-land above our home. It was a hot, windless day; after a three-hour ascent through coarse tufted grass and scratchy sage-brush I reached a massive rocky outcropping overlooking the city and stopped to rest.

It was not the hazed overview of the valley that held me there for the next timeless period, however, but an incredible sight that at first made me think I was suffering heat-stroke. Like spots before my eyes, several large birds were gliding lazily on outspread wings, just beyond the cliff-edge. Twelve, I counted, fleetingly wondering if a dying creature were somewhere below. But these were no vultures – their sleek heads gleamed white. They were eagles, bald eagles; effortlessly, majestically coasting the invisible currents above a blue-grey-green checkerboard. Drawn in by their grace and beauty, I felt myself weaving in among them. Never had I seen anything like it.

Native American traditional wisdom teaches that the natural world communicates with us; that encounters and experiences with birds, animals, trees, wind, water, the mineral kingdom, even modern technology, all carry message and meaning. Everything has spirit, and spirit speaks to spirit. While aware of the concept, my understanding was limited. I knew it was no accident that I had been witness to such an awesome sight, but only in hindsight did I recognise it as a synchronous precursor of what I was unknowingly about to become part of: a gathering of eagles.

The following day, a two-hour drive over the Monashee mountains in the heat of early afternoon and a further one-hour sidetrack into the village of Edgewood, where a couple of amused locals, clearly accustomed to this mistake, sent us back up to the main highway to a turnoff marked by balloons, left me feeling less confident. The track was rough; billowing clouds of dust chased us as we rattled over a cattle-grid and past hayfields, more turnoffs, woods, with no sign of any human activity. I had been about to give up when I noticed a small hand-painted sign: a rainbow-crowned "Rebirth of Mother Earth", pointing out a narrow, rutted track almost hidden among the trees. Gratefully, I turned off into the shade. We crawled along a green tunnel for a few hundred feet, then the track burst out into a clearing.

All my misgivings fled. Before me lay a dreamlike vision: an immense, sun-filled meadow speckled with wildflowers, edged with freshly-greened young trees and protectively enclosed by dark, thickly-forested mountain slopes. Bright and unexpected, a crescent of tipis graced the far side of the clearing. A painful twist in my chest brought tears to my eyes.

Following the track round the edge of the clearing, I found it hard to take my eyes off the tipis. Coloured streamers had been tied to the top of the poles, which opened out like a fan; the heavy canvas covers were hitched up at the base, exposing thick woody ankles. Separate from the crescent and situated where it would receive shade much of the day from the only trees in the meadow, two towering pines, stood a small tipi. Down one side swooped a beautifully hand-painted golden eagle, wings outspread, fierce yellow beak agape and black claws wide; on the other reared a brown horse, black mane and tail flying. Red and yellow lines snaked round the base and yellow hand-prints climbed over the entrance, which yawned darkly open.

Scattered in the shade of the surrounding trees were a few tents, less than I had anticipated, making me wonder if there was much interest in this kind of event. Thinking I would simply observe what went on, I set up our little camp in the shade on a small rise behind the tipis, well back from the main area. Hot and restless after the long drive, my kids clamoured to go swimming so we set off to find Whatshan Lake, which I had noted crudely sign-posted on a fork in the trail about a half-mile back.

As I slowly drove back down the little ridge, from among the trees to the right appeared a robust, elderly Native man wearing black-framed glasses, striding down the bank towards my moving vehicle, one hand raised in what seemed like a greeting. Thick, iron-grey braids framed his round, weathered face, bright with a smile that matched his size. Something made me stop, turn off the engine and get out, and we met in front of my vehicle. Taking my hand, he shook it firmly and began to speak, a flow of words in a language I'd never heard before. His hand was large, the skin warm, dry, rough. Then to my surprise, still talking, he opened his arms, smiled broadly and enfolded me in an enveloping hug.

It felt uncannily comfortable.

The unfamiliar resonance of his words had a beguiling elegance. I breathed in the musky, smoky aroma of the rough wool of the red plaid lumberjacket pressed against my cheek, part of me wondering at how easily I allowed this elderly Native stranger such intimacy. He then grasped me gently by the tops of my arms and held me at arm's length, smiling, still talking away. Sunlight glinted off his glasses; liquid, warm brown pools, his eyes gazed into mine.

It was as if he knew me, but how could that be?

"Thank you," I had said when at last his words fell away. "I don't know your language so I can't understand your words, but you've made me feel very welcome. This is a beautiful place, I'm happy to be here. We're just going to cool off in the lake." Not knowing if he understood, I indicated three little faces watching impatiently from the van. He smiled and spoke again briefly, his breath sweet as dry grass crushed in the sun, then stepped back and waved us on our way.

If this was how Native people welcomed newcomers, I had thought, I need not feel uneasy about being here.

Whatshan Lake appeared accessible only through a private campground. Exploring further, another turnoff took us up along a narrow, winding gravel road through a tunnel of greenery. Crossing a rickety old bridge, far below I glimpsed a creek; something told me to check it out, and we found a faint, steep trail leading down into the narrow little ravine. A couple of minutes of scrambling upstream brought us to a perfect swimming-place: enclosed by high, sheer rock-walls, a pool fed by the silvery threads of a waterfall lacing the far rock-face. It was not very large – I could swim the perimeter in a few minutes – but its ice-cold, shadowy greenness hinted at glacier-source and great depth. Above, the filtered, flickering light of the lowering sun played

through the greenery. Peaceful yet poised, the atmosphere pervading this wild and secret place whispered of enchantment.

By the time we returned to the gathering-place, a motley collection of tents had appeared, looking like exotic blue, orange, green and silver beetles foraging under the trees. Strung out alongside the track were cars, campers, converted buses; the buzz and hum of new arrivals continued as daylight fled. The atmosphere was charged with a feeling of festivity; the colourful clothing everyone seemed to be wearing reminded me of the hippy-sixties. Children swarmed everywhere, happily running round and shrieking as if just set free. The busiest area was a communal kitchen, set up in an old barn on one side of the clearing, one of many dilapidated lean-tos and outhouses. I learned the site had used to host an annual barter fair.

Central to it all, somehow oblivious, stood the tipis: massive, mystical guardian-elders, eerily aglow, their hearth fires an erratic heart-flutter in the darkness.

Round the sacred fire in the middle of the meadow, a growing group of people were gathering, drumming and chanting Native American songs which continued long into the night, as soothing to sleep as waves washing upon the shore.

And next morning, the slow, solid thump of a drumbeat had gently roused me. Drowsily wondering if the drumming had gone on all through the night, I had raised myself on an elbow and looked out the window of the camper.

First light. Early-morning mist enveloped the clearing, shrouding the tipis, which were haunted by ethereal, pale-blue wisps of smoke. By the sacred fire sat a figure, a lone drummer, swaying to his beat.

How appropriate to welcome the dawning of a new day this way, I had thought. I should get up and join him, to set the tone for the day.

Lying back, I had promptly fallen asleep again, to be taken into the most vivid and intense dream I had ever experienced.

"Take the drum, call the people." What people? It made no sense, the people were already here. Anyway, I had refused. Because of embarrassment, panic. I found myself wishing I could go back, accept the drum and see what happened next. Perhaps a Native person could help me with the meaning of this powerful dream.

Within a couple of hours, however, I realised there seemed to be very few Native people around and anyone with any air of authority was busy organising the day's activities. By late morning a number of workshops had been posted. Putting my dream aside, I chose to start with the basics by attending a workshop explaining the Medicine Wheel.

This turned out to be led by a non-Native woman but she seemed to know her subject, teaching not only the symbolic meaning of the Wheel and the four directions but also how to use it as a divinatory tool. As an intriguing conclusion, she also told us about how coming into contact with the Native American way of life had profoundly affected the way she had since chosen to live.

I had no idea that I might be hearing personally prophetic words.

In the afternoon, I chose to take the kids to the hand-fasting of a couple who had met at a previous gathering. Dressed in a white cotton shift, a young blonde woman held the hand of a bearded, long-haired young man draped in a crimson blanket and waited in the centre of a circle of witnesses until they were joined by a striking figure, Chief Wobay Kitpou. A Native elder, small and heavy-set, he had risen to the occasion and was wearing a slightly-askew buffalo headdress, many ostentatious pieces of silver and turquoise jewellery, moccasins and one item of clothing, a loincloth tied tightly beneath his heavy, naked belly. After the ceremony, the couple retired into a tipi and after a couple of raunchy jokes, the chief amused us with a string of stories

and songs.

Back at our camper, we were eating when it struck me that it had become strangely quiet, like the stillness before a storm. The clearing seemed oddly deserted. Then two people hurried into the biggest tipi, another rushed out and within minutes brought back an older bearded man with cropped grey hair. Something was wrong, seriously wrong, I could feel it. A few minutes later a young woman wearing a long, tie-dyed skirt and a loose white blouse came hurrying by, wisps of ash-blonde hair straggling across her face, caught in the wetness on her cheeks. I waved her to stop. "What's going on?"

Her face was pale and blotchy, her eyes red and puffy. "He's gone!" She wailed like a banshee: "O-o-h, he's go-o-ne."

"Who's gone, what do you mean?"

"O-o-oh, Red Cloud...." She waved an arm blindly towards the tipis below us. "No-o-o, no-o-o, he can't-" She broke off, seemed to come back into herself. "They're down there now, trying to revive him." Her mouth reformed into the "o" of an incipient wail.

I had no idea who she was talking about but the image of an aged body being abusively thumped and jolted back to a life already departed flashed powerfully, distastefully, into my mind's eye. "Why don't they allow him the dignity of his departure? Surely he knows when it's his time to leave?"

The words were out of my mouth before I thought, but they seemed to have a calming effect. The young woman looked at me properly for the first time. "You're right. He would know." She turned away and headed slowly down towards the tipis.

Feeling calm and detached – as I might, given the death of someone I didn't know – I watched a knot of people gather at the tipi; about twenty minutes later an ambulance came rolling across the meadow and parked beside it, looking oddly out of place. Watching felt intrusive, macabre, but I couldn't turn away. Within minutes, a stretcher bearing a deathly-still form draped in white was carried out of the tipi and loaded into the vehicle.

For a long time after the ambulance had left, the entire camp seemed frozen. Curiosity eventually drove me down to the tipis where I chanced on the young blonde woman again. Although it felt intrusive, I tentatively asked: "This Red Cloud – it was a heart-attack? Who was he?"

"Founder of the Rebirth gathering ... visionary." She stared at me, clearly appalled by my ignorance. "You must have seen him around. The Native elder with the glasses and the red jacket." Tears brightened her eyes. "God, he cared so much about Mother Earth. He'd even pick up other people's cigarette stubs from the ground and put 'em in his pocket. He hated littering.... He had a stroke awhile back, lost English, but his Native tongue, he kept that."

She was describing the red-jacketed Native elder who had hugged me so warmly less than twenty-four hours earlier. I was left speechless.

Not until late that night when I lay reflecting on the fullness of a day of Medicine Wheel teachings, laughter and joy at the hand-fasting, Native songs and stories, the sudden shock of death and the slow, despondent pipe ceremony that had later taken place at the Medicine Wheel, did the hawk of perception strike like a sudden shaft of sunlight.

In my dream, the drummer had been wearing a red jacket. As had the Native elder into whose warm hug I had bent like a willow, in whose demeanour I had sensed an underlying recognition. Who turned out to be the founder of the gathering. Was there a connection?

A shiver ran icily through my body. Viewing death as a natural step in the journey of the spirit, the collective grief had brushed over me like the touch of a feather, but now I began to feel the loss. Would I ever find out why Red Cloud had singled me out and so warmly greeted me? It had been more than a welcome; he had barely stopped talking. What had he been saying?

Into the darkness of the night I sent out my questions: had it been Red Cloud, visionary, who appeared in my dream-state with the challenge, the order? What did it mean to take the drum, call the people? What was it I had turned down?

The next day dawned bright and clear; the last day of the gathering, although the sacred fire would be kept alive for a full seven days and a core group camped there for a moon. The mood was subdued and there were no more workshops but it seemed the gathering would continue; other Native Americans seemed to appear out of nowhere and "Native-led" became an extraordinary reality, touching me personally and inspiring me to become directly involved with the gathering.

Something more profound than I could ever imagine had been set in motion. The personal vision – communication between an individual and the Creator – of a spiritual Native elder and the gathering he brought into manifestation as a result of that vision would have a fundamental and permanent effect on many lives, bringing forward issues on levels both personal and political that had long called for redress. His life-purpose fulfilled, red-jacketed Red Cloud passed over into the spirit-world at the nascence of a far-reaching turn of events which he had in effect seeded: a magical process of renascence on the inner, personal and outer, group levels.

UNDER THE SKIN

Sometimes it seemed it was only the memory of the Medicine Wheel gathering, a glowing sustaining light, which kept me going through the chain of trying events that followed over the next couple of months: my elderly VW camper off the road with a broken transmission, a replacement proving difficult to locate, or afford; our bicycles stolen; a pernicious health problem; a supposed friend letting me down badly. Burn-out from almost six years of over-zealous commitment to the principles of co-operative living was also a factor, but attempts to move were frustrated by the lack of a vehicle. It was like being in a logjam; feeling powerless, battered and bruised, eventually I caved in, began to cry and found myself unable to stop. Never having experienced such lack of self-control, I retreated to bed to nurse a flood of emotionality and self-pity. It was the first time my children had seen me like this; as a single parent I had always steeled myself to be a tower of strength for them. Now they took over, comforting me with little pats and words I had often given them.

Eventually emptied, exhausted and ashamed of such a display of weakness, I sent them off to play. Left alone in a benumbed state, all I was feeling began to tumble from my lips like the ranting of a mad-woman. Part prayer, part plea, with all my heart I called for renewal of the hope, the sense of purpose I had felt the last day of the gathering – dream within a dream it now seemed: the drama, the sense of mystery and magic; and an encounter with another, striking Native American, which had affected me more than I realised.

The following day, shaky and weak, I called in sick at the fitness centre where I worked and was mixing some new music for my classes when the doorbell rang. I heard one of my kids open the door, a short silence, then Sivan, the oldest, rushed into the living-room. Her stage-whisper was breathless, as if she'd run a mile: "You'll never guess who it is!"

Strangely detached, my mind took an unaccountably imaginative leap and I coolly responded: "Bob ... from the gathering?" And then could only gently shrug and shake my head as she asked with a puzzled little frown: "How did you know?"

I had no idea how I knew, or why this Native man I had briefly met two months ago had come calling.

Two silhouettes stood in the doorway. Breathless from the fluttering in my solar plexus, I held out my hand in welcome. Bob's hand, dark, slim, smooth and warm, grasped mine firmly. His eyes were hidden by the same sunglasses he had worn at the Rebirth gathering; a wide smile

creased his cheeks as he inclined his head slightly in greeting and again his memorable, rich, almost lazy, drawl delighted my ears: "Hey there, how ya doin'? We almost didn't make it." He laughed. "Found your place okay. We drove in but I didn't see your 'bus'. Thought you wasn't home so we turned an' we was almost gone when I seen your boy, runnin' out the house. Remembered him from Edgewood."

Giving silent thanks to my son, I gushed: "Come in, come in. I'll make coffee. We're going to eat soon; you're welcome to join us."

Stepping over the threshold, Bob indicated the dark-haired young man, hands tucked in his jean pockets, shyly grinning behind him. "This here's Virgil, one of my boys – one of the good 'uns! We was on our way to take him to his school ... real good school, in Washington State. Thought we'd make a trip of it."

Recollecting Bob had told me he was from an American Reservation in that state, I shook the boy's strong, broad hand, a little taken aback by his size. Slight and slim, Bob was about my height but Virgil, who looked to be fourteen or fifteen, was showing indications of impending height and a powerful build. His t-shirt, with a picture of a colonial soldier standing guard above the words "Washington, D.C.", was stretched tightly across a muscled chest and broad shoulders; as he stepped inside, I could see he would soon tower over his father.

A faint, evocative fragrance accompanied them: wood-smoke, transporting me to another place, another time. A gaggle of little neighbourhood children, my two younger ones among them, stared silently from the drive, and for a moment I saw through their eyes: entering my "little twentieth-century box" as Bob would later call it, a classically-handsome representative of the Native American race: smooth tanned skin; high brow and prominent cheekbones; dark eyes and cleft chin; gleaming, immaculate, slim black braids secured with leather ties; and a large, pale claw on a leather thong at his throat. A striking contrast to my blonde hair and blue eyes, the red dress I happened to be wearing.

Leading the way into the living-room, I recalled some of the things Bob had told me at the gathering and casually remarked over my shoulder: "I remember you saying you travel a lot through your ancestral lands but Vernon is kind of a long way from there. And from Washington State.... How come you're over this far west?"

"I came because you called."

My heart gave a sudden thud. Everything seemed to stop, although my body kept moving, step by automatic step. For I had indeed "called", with all my heart and strength, only the day before. But not by phone. And not him specifically, I was sure. Yet the day following my "dark night of the soul", the response to my prayer seemed to have uncannily arrived in the shape of this person. How on earth could he have "heard" my call? At the gathering, he had said that if I ever needed help, I need only call, he was only a few hours away, but I had taken for granted he meant by conventional means, through the wires. Although I had witnessed him doing something extraordinary and sensed he was somehow special. Who – or what – was he? How – and why – should he have "heard"? And in what way could he ever help me?

In time, I would look back on this stage as analogous to the transitional period of labour, Bob as a kind of midwife. Then small, sleepy and attractive, the city of Vernon in the picturesque North Okanagan had been a perfect location to raise small children alone; the housing co-operative had not only provided a secure, affordable roof over our heads but satisfied my principles about land-ownership. After six years in the big city, I had never regretted leaving Vancouver, where both daughters had been born. Lately, however, I had been feeling as if Vernon – my son's birthplace – were trying to squeeze me out, even as it grew larger.

As in a dream, I busied myself in the kitchen. It was partially open to the living-room and I could hear Bob chatting easily with Sivan, then eleven, who was opening up to him in a way I did not recognise. My other two little ones then came in and I heard their childish voices in response to his. This was surprising and pleasing, for all three children were reserved and wary of the men who occasionally appeared in my life. Bob's tone was warm and light, sometimes gently teasing, in what I was to learn is the natural Native manner that instinctively stops short of offence. I noticed how he waited until they took their accustomed places at the table before seating himself and his son and only when they had all taken food did he serve himself. Natalie, then six, insisted on sitting next to him and finally asked her burning question: "Can you show me how to turn into an animal?"

"Natalie!" I chided. Where had she got such a notion?

He just chuckled and turned to the awed child. "Not me. But some of them ways're still known to the old folk."

As I washed up, Bob came into the kitchen. "Better get some coffee brewin'." He smiled. "We got a lo-o-t of talkin' to do. Could take a-all night. Then me 'n' Virgil, we gotta be on our way, first light."

To my ears, the eliding vowel sounds were a delightful signature of Bob's way of speaking, played over many times in my mind since our encounter. Intrigued, I settled Virgil in the television room, which doubled as a guest room, with a stack of videos and dressed the two younger children in jeans and sweaters so they could play outside. A delicately-scented, welcome respite from the heat of a summer's day in the Okanagan – classed as semi-desert – early evening also heralds the arrival of mosquitoes and their irritating agenda. Then I made coffee, wondering what on earth could we have to talk about that would take all night.

It was like a university course crammed into six or seven hours, with short breaks to get the children bathed and to bed, and make fresh coffee, again and again, although I had no need for any stimulant; I had never felt so alert, so alive. Nor had I ever found it so easy to remember so much; everything Bob proceeded to tell me seemed to blaze itself like a fiery brand into my memory. In a way, it was like being reminded of something I already knew, a sort of re-collecting. The wealth of information and depth of insight into the Native American way of life that Bob encapsulated throughout that timeless, scintillating night was a priceless gift, one I would increasingly appreciate during the ensuing years: a foundation of vitally-pertinent knowledge that would serve me in many ways.

"I been travellin' the lands of my ancestors, an' one of the things I learned: when I say 'my people', it's not just the people I come from," he began, sitting down at the other end of the couch. "It's the people I meet – somethin' about them just fits. We visit, an' we find we hold a lotta things in common, an' we respect each other, don't matter where they come from. I call these people, 'the people of my heart'. That's what I mean when I say 'my people'. Over that way," a wave of his arm indicated the south-east, "in the place they call Grand Forks, my uncle used to have land there. There's a people live there now ... come over from Russia, they told me, round the turn of the century. Maybe you heard of 'em; they call themselves Doukhobors. There's others I met that live over near Castlegar an' in the Slocan Valley."

The names were not unfamiliar; a year earlier I had made a trip through south-eastern British Columbia, and had learned of the people who had built the unique cubed wooden houses that peppered the Kettle Valley region.

"I visit with these folk. They sure know how to make a man feel welcome. Good food, an' they always feed you up a storm. Man, I get so full I can hardly move! An' they like to visit;

they never make you feel like you have to leave."

His smile and soft drawl were like a caress. Hoping he felt that way in my home, I reflected how I would not want this attractive, gentle-spoken man to leave, either.

"Yeah, they sure know a lo-o-t about hospitality." The long vowel sound slid through me, smooth as a snake. "That's what it's like among us Indians, kinda like an unwritten law of hospitality. You share the best you got, treat your guest like a king. Then you know when you go visit, you get treated the same way. Why," he smiled broadly, "in the old days, I heard they'd even share their wife! Not," his soft, rolling chuckle tumbled like water over pebbles, "that I'd take anything for granted!"

A fluttering commenced in my stomach. Was this some kind of veiled suggestion? "Well, I can see the point." I smiled wryly. "Might liven up a dull marriage. And improve the gene pool. As long as the wife had a say!"

Our eyes met then, and held for a long breathless moment. His were dark, warm, dancing. Powerful surges of a hot and heavy, dizzying feeling pulsed through me.

"In our way," he said, a little nod accompanying his words, his eyes still on mine, "the woman always gits her say. An' usually her way! Least that's how I'm told it was in the old days, an' it hasn't changed all that much since then. Women always made 'most all the decisions."

Was there a double meaning? Or was I reading between the lines when there was nothing there? Struggling to contain my trembling, calm my thudding heart, I absorbed the information and tried to stay on track. Was he saying that his was a matriarchal people? But what about the "people of my heart"? The silence stretched out of time while a tumult of thoughts and emotions vied for my shaky attention. My eyes dropped to the ostentatious brass belt-buckle at his waist: a cowboy astride a bucking bronco. When I looked up again, Bob was gazing out the window. Wisps of cloud tinged with hints of peach and apricot feathered the deepening blue sky; the faint voices of children at play drifted through the open window.

"Them Doukhobors, I got a re-al respect for them people," he resumed. "They work hard, put up all their own food. Pretty near self-sufficient. They respect the land, an' they know how to care for it, just like the Indian did. They burn off the old dead growth, just like my ancestors did when it got too thick in the forest. To keep it clear for the game, an' feed the earth. You should see them old folk tellin' the fire to go this way, that way." Gracefully, his hand swept from side to side. "They respect their elders, an' they listen to 'em.... They got their own religious beliefs. An' they been at odds with the government.

"They remind me of the Indians an' what's all been done to us. They suffered religious persecution an' had their kids taken away from them just like the Indian did. An' they got some kind of an agreement with the government, kind of like a treaty I guess, but they're still havin' to fight for their rights. Same old story, the government never can stick to no treaty!" He broke off and stared into space. When he resumed, his voice was tight. "There was nothin' wrong with them treaties. Nothin', 'cept they never stuck to even a one of them! Ev'ry single one was broken." His eyes flashed black with anger. "They never once kept their word, not spoken or written!" A pause, then his voice softened: "Your word rides on your breath ... your breath, breathed into you by the Creator. My ancestors didn't know what it meant, to break your word ... lie about spirit...."

A prickling crawled over the top of my head. It was the most beautiful way of describing integrity, and so simple. A sigh escaped from deep within me.

"When the Europeans came, they was met with peace in our heart. The trappers – some of 'em took Indian wives an' learned the ways to live good, live right. But more came, an' more.... Started pushin' the Indian people round: 'go here, don't go there' ... on the land the Creator give

us! Priests, sayin' the Indian ways was no good. Think of it; some of their ways must've been real strange to the Indian ... men in black skirts. But we believe: 'live and let live'. We don't tell people how to live or what to believe; that's not the Indian way. The only way's the Creator's, and we was given the right to choose our own path....

"The settlers; the military. They brought diseases, alcohol." Emotion broke his voice and he jumped to his feet, strode across the room and threw open the door to the fading light. A subtle scent of damp clay earth, of drying grasses and pine – the unique aroma of the Okanagan – breathed into the room. Quietly, Bob spoke to the darkening sky: "It didn't even have to be no war. Those diseases: smallpox, influenza, even the common cold.... Back then, Indians was a strong and healthy people. They bathed in the creek all year round, even in winter. An' they used the sweat-lodge. Body and spirit were strong....

"*Qu'il-tsin* ... in my language, sweat-lodge."

The first word I had heard in his mother-tongue: essentially a holy-word. Feeling privileged, I tried to echo it and he smiled as we bounced the half-swallowed sound back and forth.

"They didn't know disease," he continued. "They lived out in the open, travellin' the trails an' waterways of their fathers an' their fathers before them. Huntin' the game that ran the forests and valleys, fishin' the lakes an' rivers. Gatherin' roots an' berries. Plants grew here like in a garden, like the Eden in your Bible.... Eatin' natural foods put here by the Creator, an' not," his voice twisted, "processed white-poison handed out by the government." He shook his head. "They went with the natural order of things, risin' with the light, to bed with the dark ... unless.... You heard of tipi-creepin'?" Throwing back his head, he laughed.

The term was self-explanatory, making me grin and feign nonchalance as a rush of trembling warmth again flooded my body.

"We're the red race, you know! We're a red-blooded people!" He broke off his smile and sighed deeply. "... They was tuned to the rhythms of the seasons an' their world revolved round that rhythm. They'd scatter in the summer accordin' to age an' ability, in preparation for the drawin'-in of winter, then come back together 'n' share. A life of sharin'. A simple way of life.... Sure, they must have known hard times and hunger, but a life of huntin' an' fishin' ... the mountains, the lakes ... the water clean, the air pure.... Hell, when work is play, that's when you're really living!"

Filing this great truth away, I thought how rare it was to think of a job as play, to be able to really live, in modern society.

"Kept their numbers small. They had natural ways to do that. Reckon there was never more than about two, three thousand of us Arrow Lakes people at any one time."

The name of his people had been a constant in my mind since he had told it to me at the gathering. I wondered if they had been named for the great lake system of the region or vice versa.

"I was told there was twelve clans," he continued, "each about two hundred strong. *Kum-sin'kin*, that's 'clan'. They had a strong an' stern tradition an' it was strictly adhered to. They knew 'bout livin' in balance: what they'd learned over time, watchin' those first teachers, the plants, the birds, the animals. Leave enough of the roots an' berries so's there'd be enough for the other creatures, enough that they'd grow back for the next year. Not take too many deer an' never the does, else there'd be a shortage of deer-meat after. Leave enough fish so's they'd spawn for the next year. Not stay too long in one place so's it'd get polluted, the game hunted out or learn to stay away." His tone changed and a small crease appeared in his brow: "Then came those times of great change. When those European sicknesses hit 'em, their bodies never had no time to build up a resistance. The old ones an' the little ones, they'd be the ones that got sick an' died first."

Aware of the tragic decimation of Native peoples since European contact, it struck me like a hammer-blow that I was sitting with a descendant of the few survivors of my ancestors' contamination. Great plagues had swept through historic Europe; in turn, black deaths had been inflicted on the New World. A sense of disgust at my race bubbled up in me.

Bob got up, paced back and forth, the subject clearly painful as a raw wound, his anger showing white as bone: "There was Indian doctors but there'd never been anythin' like this. Indian doctors'd've been helpless against this great evil: people dyin' by the tens, hundreds; looks like the medicine man lost his power - the white man had the new and powerful magic...." His distracted gaze seemed to be reaching back to the horror of those times. "No matter what the medicine man tries, everythin' he knows ... people fallin' sick an' dyin' like flies. His power gone, maybe he's already dead himself.... Families left to rot in the lodge where they died – no-one able to carry out the traditions for them, their last rites....

"The whole fabric of their lives was torn apart. You can see how they'd fall into superstition. So much useless ... lost ... forgotten in the face of this evil.... Like Spirit deserted 'em ... foundation ripped out from under."

His face was a pale, hard mask, his eyes obsidian. My chest ached painfully with a deep empathy that was closer to the bone than I could have imagined.

"They say the white man gifted 'em blankets purposely infected with smallpox. Eighty percent died, that's what the records say. I gotta degree in Native American history. I read the books, studied what's been written. Four out of five, an' there wasn't that many in the first place.... The settlers, when they come, they just had to push a little, the Indian was already on the edge. The ones that survived was herded onto the poorest pieces of land signed by the government, got given some farmin' tools an' were left to get on with it.

"The way my ancestors passed for thousands of years – the lands where we was put by the Creator – got split by an imaginary line, an' my forebears was told to belong one side or the other."

I realised he was talking about the International Boundary.

"The ones on the south side was put into a concentration camp they called the Colville Reservation, along with remnants of other tribes. Thirteen non-treaty tribes, some of 'em traditional enemies. Hoped we'd be at each other's throats, I guess, finish off the job for them.... Then they even took back half of that land, an' white folks're still buying it up."

As it happened, I had recently learned about a fundamental difference between Reservations in the United States and Reserves in Canada, when I had made an enquiry about renting a house on the Okanagan Band Reserve on the west side of Okanagan Lake near Vernon and learned that while non-Native people could obtain a lease to build there, they could never own the freehold. In the States, Reservation land can be sold to non-Natives.

"They took the little ones away from their parents to the mission schools," Bob continued tersely, sitting down again. "Priests and nuns whipped their language, their way of life, their identity out of 'em. They wasn't allowed to come back, they lost touch with their parents and their grandparents. If disease hadn't already killed 'em off, the ones that remembered the old ways....

"There's many ways to destroy a people; you don't have to go in an' murder 'em all outright.... Those kids grew up without a family, not knowin' a mother or a father. They never learned, so how could they do it in their own turn? An' people wonder why our kids today are in such trouble. Parents don't know how to parent, to discipline, how to say 'no', so kids don't know how to discipline themselves, how to say 'no' to themselves.... Believe me, I know what I'm talkin' about - I got seventeen children!" he announced with a sudden grin.

I was taken aback. Despite him having arrived with a son, I realised I found it hard to think of

him as someone's husband.

Taking a deep breath, Bob clenched his fists and stared out into the darkening velvet of the sky. "An' if I want to walk the land of my grandfathers this side of the line, or bring my kids here, first I have to give white people pieces of paper to prove I am who I say I am, an' that I have the right to be here. A piece of paper that says I have the right to hunt an' fish in my own ancestral lands! An' they have the right to turn me away." He shook his head, and plunged back into history: "They took away a people's whole way of life. Stopped the salmon comin' up the Columbia when they built the dams, the Grand Coulee, the Chief Jo; took away the staple of the Indian's way of life. They say the chief of the Sanpoil, he died of a broken heart when he saw the waters risin'.... What the white man does, because he's afraid of the dark! Places where we gathered our food drowned, an' our villages, our burial-grounds.... Well, least our ancestors are safe under there from those archaeologists! They can't dig 'em up an' stick 'em in no museum now!"

In the silence that followed, I felt an echo of the feeling that had surged up in me when he had told me at the gathering about human remains having been dug up from an ancestral burial-ground and taken to a museum. The strength of my reaction, raw outrage, had surprised me; until then I had never given much consideration to what might lie behind old bones on display at a museum. If anything, I thought of them impersonally, as a discarded shell.

"Alcohol, drugs," he muttered, bringing my attention back. "There's many ways to get us to do ourselves in. You ever been to a Reservation? It's not a pretty place."

Only recently had I visited a Canadian Reserve, the Okanagan Band Reserve, which I would learn was relatively well-managed and prosperous. The Native neighbour I had recently befriended, whose children were favoured playmates of my children (because, as Natalie put it, "They're always so nice") was of Okanagan descent; when her mother had died she had returned to live on the Reserve. Her partner, a big, quiet, thoughtful and well-read man originally from Germany, had told me about a generation of Germans who had a powerful feeling for the Native American life-way, which he believed stemmed from romantic teachings during his childhood in Germany and the influence of a series of books by Adolf Hungry Wolf.

At that moment, I recalled a Sunday excursion some nine years earlier: driving along the north shore of the Fraser River in North Vancouver, I had passed a series of run-down, ramshackle dwellings lined up along the highway at the foot of the misted mountains, their yards filled with junk. A sense of depressed desolation had hung over that little Reserve.

Since emigrating from Israel to Canada in 1975 with my first husband, my life had been wrapped up in work, children, and the collapse of my marriage. I began to realise that not even seeing for myself the conditions under which Native people lived had awoken me to the terrible truth of the high standard of living I was enjoying: it was built on the back of the rape and repression of the indigenous peoples and the unsustainable extraction of natural resources.

"In the old way," Bob was continuing, "the village was the political entity, anything bigger was unknown. Villages'd co-operate with each other, an' groups would share tasks. A council of six elders – women, I was told – oversaw decision-making. But the government set up a system of tribal councils, with elected officials. 'Elect your own representatives! Do it our way! An experiment,' they told us. Well, I don't want to speak badly of those elected people. But while some people genuinely want to help others, there's always some that want status, power. A tribal council violates our constitution and by-laws by not consultin' with the elders before important decisions are made."

But elders are the guiding force, I wanted to cry out. Another illusion was being dispelled.

"But we're not stupid!" His voice was tight. "If there was no treaties made, we're still a sovereign nation! We haven't forgotten our hereditary lineage. Nothin' to do with elections, nothin' to do with white men's pieces of paper! But I guess the plan is for enough time to pass that the lines get forgot....

"But we haven't. An' we won't go away. We've not only survived, we're comin' back. We're gettin' us a white-man education. There's Indian teachers, lawyers. We're comin' back! An' Ol' Man Coyote – he's back, an' he'll play one of his little tricks. The white man's tables'll be turned on himself – he'll be his own *heyoka*!"

We sat in silence as the storm of his emotions passed over. I hadn't heard the Native word before but it was easy to guess: it was about us – white people – doing ourselves in with our own cleverness. Ol' Man Coyote I knew to be the trickster, teaching us whether or not we want to learn; the cosmic joker who shows us the foolishness of believing we know what we are doing; the wild card.

It was like being in a dream: how incredible, wonderful, to be sitting in companionable silence in my home with a handsome Native American. My fascination – if that's what it can be called – with the race had been part of my make-up for as long as I could remember. Childhood games of cowboys and Indians - I had always wanted to be the "red Indian", a scout, and still carried the scar on my eyebrow, a mark gained clearing the way for the others. I had read everything about them I could find in our small local library; watching cowboy movies, I always rooted for the Indian. Like most people, my knowledge was second- or third-hand, a Hollywood-embossed mix of truth and illusion coloured by my own romantic imaginings. Now the truth was being set before me. More than ever I felt the pain of being part of the race that was clearly still perpetrating genocide upon what I viewed as a great and noble race; labelled a stone-age culture, yet highly civilized by the only standard that mattered in my eyes: the extent to which they communicated with, co-operated with and utilized nature without precipitating drastic ecological change. Clearing my throat, I said: "I often feel so ashamed of the race I've been born to. The arrogance, insensitivity, cruelty-"

To my surprise, Bob laughed. "Oh, don't mind me! I get riled up easy! Anyway, don't you remember? We had a contract. We thought it'd be of more use to have you in a white skin this time round!"

Totally taken aback, I forgot my useless apologies. Not only did Bob, a Native American, seem to be taking reincarnation, a concept I had thought of as Buddhist, for granted, but he was implying that prior to a life being taken up, some kind of spirit-agreements were made about what was supposed to happen in the next life. It was an appealing idea but a huge leap for me; that we might live many lives was something I had only recently begun to take seriously and I had not got as far as imagining that a life might be planned for in advance of taking it up. Although now I thought about it, most people felt a sense of some deep purpose, some special thing to do in their life. Where would such an idea come from?

And who was this "we"? From the way he had said it, it was not just he and I who had got together in spirit to make these arrangements; others were involved. Unless, with his teasing tone, he was joking. The thought darkened my elation. Was it all just romantic New Age yearnings?

Thrilled and torn at the same time, I escaped to make fresh coffee and see the children to bed; mundane tasks which let me put the whole issue to the back of my mind, where it sat, titillating and somehow comforting.

"Good to see a woman, carin' for her little ones." Bob said as I returned. His voice took on a soft, caressing tone: "You're a mother. I envy you. You carried those little ones; they came through you into the world. You carry life.... Life is sacred an' only through a woman can life come into the world. Only a woman has that power, to bring life into the world. Man is here to provide for that life, protect it. But only a woman can carry it. Woman holds the intelligence of life."

I didn't really understand the last bit, but his words reminded me of the gathering and the first time I had seen him.

The evening after Red Cloud's death, I had learned that a pipe ceremony was being conducted at the Medicine Wheel. Strange to say, it was the first I had heard of the great construct, marked out by stones, which lay in a neighbouring clearing. By the time we got there the ceremony was underway, buried in the midst of an immense circle of people – perhaps the entire encampment. From the periphery, I could make out a small, grey-haired elder and several others in the centre but barely see what was going on or hear a word. The children became restless; I picked some yarrow and was showing them how to rub it on their skin as a defence against mosquitoes when I sensed a kind of shift, a subtle change in atmosphere.

The pipe ceremony seemed to have ended. A slight figure with long, black hair, wearing blue jeans, a brown waistcoat and Apache boots, was now speaking; the way he stood and his graceful gesticulations reinforced my impression that he was Native American but I couldn't remember having seen him that day. Tantalizing snatches about the sacredness of the planet and of woman reached my ears, something I had never heard before from a man, which rekindled in me a light of optimism about the future, an innate sense – or I would not have had children – that had been eclipsed by the seeming downward spiral the world was riding. Later, I would find out that almost every woman there had immediately fallen in love with this speaker.

Bob got up and walked slowly across the room, his eyes seeming to look beyond the confines of the walls. "The Creator gifted woman with the right an' the ability to carry life. We all come onto the Earth through a woman, no other way. You got to respect that; how can you live, an' not respect what that means, not respect your mother? But you see it all around. Women treated bad. Right from when they're just little 'uns. Used, abused; I seen how people treat even their own mothers.... I don't know how they can live with themselves when they treat their own mothers like that! The one that bore them, brought them into the world."

Never having felt positive about being a woman – a seeming impediment, a handicap, in our society – I felt a little caged bird in my chest begin to sing.

"They treat Mother Earth the same way. Like any mother, She gives her children everythin', all they need: nourishment, shelter, comfort, beauty. She don't ever ask for nothin' back. But her children – they take an' take, more'n they ever need, without respect. An' they hide it away for themselves, forget the teachin's 'bout sharin'. They even end up buryin' food, an' burnin' it. They tear into their Mother, rip Her up, strip Her ... poison the Mother that gives them life. They never think 'bout balance, 'bout givin' back.

"They try an' control Her, manipulate Her, change the way She is. They think they know better than the Creator how She should be! Treat Her like an enemy, somethin' to be feared, 'stead of the paradise She is.... Well, now She lies bleedin' under their feet. An' you can be sure, like any good mother, She knows when to say, 'No'! An' when She says, 'No', we'll all hear Her! We'll all feel Her then!" Pausing, he took a deep breath. "But here I go again, ain't no use getting' all riled up."

As Bob sat down again on the other end of the couch from me and took a drink of coffee, I closed my eyes. Only too aware of my race's fear of raw nature, its self-arrogated dominion over the natural world, its need to control and subjugate the earth, its greed to wrench wealth from her bowels, all as foreign to the soul of the traditional Native American as our polluting technology, I didn't know what to say. Then the thought struck me: how would Mother Earth say "No"? Through the prophesised Earth Changes?

Before I could ask, he resumed: "They say my people came from the north. I read what the

scientists wrote. But it's not that way – we came from the south." His words carried the weight of authority. "Remember. Remember what I'm telling you: we came from the south. All the old ones tell us this....

"I don't know why it all went wrong, how we forgot what we all knew one time. Once, people knew how to walk gently on Mother Earth, in balance. I was told we had it right once – must've been the golden times some people speak of." He laughed wryly, as I recalled reading about a Golden Age, a Golden Dawn.

"But who'm I to question the ways of the Creator? For some reason we fell off the path. All those old teachin's, they got lost, hidden away. Or messed up, contaminated....

"They say now that a woman in her time of the month is unclean. A woman'd go off to the moon-lodge for four days – people started thinkin' it was because she was unclean, she'd contaminate the food or other things. But the way I was told, she went off because it was her time of power. How could they forget that? An' once you know that, how can you not see it? Ev'ry moon, a woman bleeds an' there it is: the outward show of her creative power, far greater than anything a man could have. Maybe the men got jealous – that old poison – or maybe they just got afraid. Maybe it was the priests polluted the teachin'." He sighed deeply. "Woman went off for those four days so's not to be round the men, not handle their food ... an' especially not their medicine things! Power of her moon-cycle is so strong, it'd upset the balance; she'd knock their medicine right out the picture!" Tipping back his head, he laughed, then continued: "Her female relations'd take over her work an' she'd go be with the other women in the moon-lodge. 'Sisters in the moon', I heard them called...." He grinned in a shy sort of way. "Guess they kinda knew how to time it to be in there together."

"Sounds a great idea to me," I smiled. "I'd certainly appreciate four days with no responsibilities for home and family, especially at that time of the month! That's one tradition we should bring back at once!" Embarrassed that it had sounded like I was working with him, I quickly added: "And you're right about those 'sisters': that happened when I worked in the same room with five other women for almost two years, and three of us who were close friends-" I broke off, realising this might be an embarrassing subject for him. But his words had cast new light on a terribly misjudged condition and I could not resist excitedly adding: "I never thought to look at it this way. Right from the start, that time was an embarrassing inconvenience. Like a sickness. God, at school, we all even called it 'the Curse'."

Bob did not look at me and continued as if I had not spoken: "That's why a woman always walked a little behind the man. He'd be like a shield. If she walked in front of him, her power'd knock him over! Like an eclipse...." he mused. "An' when a woman don't bleed no more, she becomes an elder. The creative energy stops its outward flow, turns inward. Held inside, it becomes wisdom. An' them women elders'd be in that moon-lodge, sharin' with the younger ones, passin' it all on: how to be with a man, how to raise a family. Just as they'd learned it from their elders."

I was impressed. Viewed with such distaste and negativity by contemporary society, menopause and old age were bathed in a wholesome new light.

"You know I like to tease," he continued. "Them old women'd say: 'Don't tease. You never know the threshold for another.' A man might tease his wife, meanin' no harm, but don't see she's finding it hurtful. She gets resentful an' there you go, the beginnin' of bad relations, maybe the beginnin' of the end. An' the little 'uns – you gotta be re-eal careful with little 'uns. They live in the now; they don't understand teasin' but they can sense when they're bein' belittled an' it don't do their hearts no good. It's a real fine line." Folding his arms across his chest, he sighed and leaned back, looking toward the window. "I been tellin' you all this woman stuff. It's not my place to do that. You gotta meet with some of the old ladies I know. They're good people.

My mother, she knows the old ways. It was 'cause of her that I went to that gatherin'. She told me to go. I wasn't interested, but she calls me an' says: 'They're practisin' medicine in our ancestors' lands an' no-one asked permission. You go on up there an' see what they're up to.' I didn't want to go, not one bit, but I always end up doin' what my ma tells me, so I went in the end."

Intrigued, I found I could not ask how she had known.

"It was strange," he mused, "the way that old fella, the one that passed over...."

"Red Cloud?"

"Yeah. Red Cloud. He didn't know Manny 'n' me for anyone but Arrow Lakes and he greeted us like we was some long-lost relatives and says: 'At last, you finally got here.'"

That this might have significance and that there might be a connection between Bob's reception and my own warm welcome passed me by at the time.

"When did you get there?" I asked.

"Afternoon of the Saturday. Next thing I knew, he'd passed over."

Later, I would be told of the rest of the circumstances: after meeting Bob, Red Cloud had sent his partner, Tiger Lily, off for a walk, gave away his T-shirt, eating-dish, ring and other personal items, returned to his tipi and succumbed to the heart-attack.

"An' then they was askin' me to do the eulogy," Bob continued, "which was strange, 'cause I knew nothin' about him."

This I remembered well, for it was when my so-called observer position had seemed to come adrift. Having heard about the ceremony in advance and wanting to see and hear everything this time, I had taken the children to the site of the sacred fire early, as surrealistically-long shadows fingered across the meadow. Beyond the silver birch, jagged-toothed granite peaks glowed rose-gold as a large, solemn circle of witnesses formed round the fire. Then, accompanied by another Native man, the speaker who had caught my attention at the pipe ceremony the previous evening appeared on the opposite side of the circle. My breath caught in my throat: the two men looked like they might have stepped in from the previous century, or out of a movie about Apaches. They sat down, cross-legged on the grass as the grey-haired, bespectacled elder who'd led the pipe ceremony shuffled forward on the arm of a young, attractive blonde. Not his daughter, I could tell, but found it hard to believe she might be the partner of such a bent, skinny, grizzled old man with the most impressive beak of a nose. He had led a workshop on alpha and beta brain-waves the previous day, something which seemed to me rather odd for a Native elder to be teaching.

Even from where I sat, the elder's words were but a mumble as he packed the ceremonial pipe and raised it to the sky before having it lit by his companion. Four times he drew on the pipe, blowing the smoke in each of the cardinal directions. Then it was passed reverently round the circle, each person either drawing on it or touching it to either shoulder in turn, as I did in mine.

When the pipe ceremony had come to a slow, meditative end, the handsome Native man stood up and approached the sacred fire, his exotic appeal a dynamic contrast to the elder's. Like the previous evening, he was wearing jeans, a navy-blue shirt, a dark leather waistcoat and tanned, knee-high Apache boots. Gracefully he carried himself, his back straight, his step light. Hooked behind his ears, two slim, shining black braids fell over his chest. Only the sunglasses detracted from the overall effect.

His companion remained sitting. Not good-looking in the conventional sense, his weathered,

dark, broad features were strangely attractive: truly primitive, in the meaning of "first". His face was broad, nose wide and flat, lips full; the lines carved into his features whispered of millennia, of suffering, of ancient wisdom. Flowing over his shoulders, his hair was thick, blue-black and cut in spikes on top. He could have come from the pages of National Geographic: ageless, timeless.

The speaker told of his respect for the vision of the founder and the importance of gatherings that brought people of different races together in respect and harmony for the healing of the planet, then continued, eloquently spinning a vision of the sacredness of woman, of Mother Earth and our responsibility as human beings. Some of it I had heard the evening before, but this time I began to feel light and tingly, as if I might melt in the earth. Eventually his words flowed to an end and he stood in silent meditation for some time, etched in memorable stillness against the delicate greenery of the silver birch. There was a long, dark, narrow feather in his right hand, held close against his leg: flight feather of an eagle, I guessed.

Placing his other hand on his hip, he raised the feather to point into the glowing embers of the sacred fire, his lips moving soundlessly. Then he slowly raised both arms, open to the deepening heavens, and stood as if frozen, head tilted back, arms widespread, feather dramatically extended. I could see the heave of his chest as he took a slow, deep breath; the words that passed his lips were directed skyward, as if following the path directed by the feather. The soft flow of alien sounds, a guttural catch, made me shiver. Perhaps at some level I knew it was the first time in many, many decades that the ancient language of these lands had been uttered in this sacred place.

With a swift, controlled movement, he again pointed the feather down at the sacred fire, his left arm still raised, hand open to the sky. The stream of words fell away until his lips moved soundlessly, then with a slight flourish of the feather he lowered both arms and moved clockwise one quarter round the fire, and repeated the ritual. No-one moved – I barely breathed – as he prayed through the remaining three directions.

As his words sank away for the last time, a breeze snatched at the edge of the crescent of birch, turning the leaves silver-bellied up to dance, trembling. Gaining in strength, it trailed round the clearing in a clockwise direction, causing the young trees to rustle and whisper. Then it dropped, and with its passing I realised what an unnatural wind it had been. Not a steady breeze or a gust announcing a change in the weather, but a breath like the passing of a spirit.

Sitting beside me, Sivan grasped my hand. "Mum, did you see that? Did you see what happened? Every time he pointed the feather at the fire, the smoke went in the direction he pointed! Did you see?"

I had seen but it had not registered. My whole body prickled as I whispered back: "Yes, I saw."

Nor could I forget. Feeling compelled to personally express my appreciation for the inspiration and sense of hope I felt his words had given me, I had looked out for the Native man but not until a couple of hours later did I find him, sitting with a group of people I realised were the organisers of the gathering. Waiting until there was a gap in their dialogue – several minutes at least – I managed to catch his eye.

Or did he catch mine?

"Sorry to intrude, but I just wanted to thank you for your words today, which helped me enormously." Glancing at the others, I felt chilled by their looks. "Please excuse me." Turning away, I found I was trembling.

Behind me, I heard: "Think we're done here." Suddenly, the Native man was beside me. "Come an' sit with me awhile."

Numbly accompanying him as he led the way to the grassy rise overlooking the tipis, the

meadow and the sacred fire, I had hardly been able to believe what was happening. Nor had the next intense half-hour been any less dreamlike as we sat side-by-side and he told me how he regularly travelled the lands of his ancestors, and described their extent and how his people had been forced onto the Colville Reservation in Washington State. The geography was unfamiliar to me; I had never heard of most of the places he mentioned. In fact, my ears were buzzing so loudly I could barely hear him; my face was burning so I did not dare look at him and I was trembling with a sort of combined pride (which I did not like) and amazement at being so singled out, and something else I could not name.

And there it was, sitting on a little bench of land overlooking the encampment of the catalytic Rebirth of Mother Earth Medicine Wheel Gathering that – almost in passing – I first heard about the issue that would galvanise so much on the inner and outer planes over the following years: "Over that way," his arm had gracefully indicated the Selkirks, "in the Slocan Valley, some of my ancestors was even dug up, stuck in a museum." He shook his head. "How can they continue their spiritual walk? Their bones have to return to dust in the place from which they sprung, else they wander the earth, lost, unable to take the next step on their path."

Something in my chest had twisted and spread like fire, rising hot and choking into my throat. It was not heartburn; I had never felt anything like it and was reduced to making a sympathetic noise. For several minutes we sat in silence, while for my part I tried to rationalise the unexpected reaction, the deep feeling, I realised, of outrage....

Had this ever been explained to the museum officials? Someone had to tell them, they would give them back: spiritual beliefs would be respected, surely. I stole a swift look at my new-found companion, who was gazing over the clearing, perhaps beyond. His profile imprinted itself on my whirling mind, the red bandanna round his throat a punctuation mark.

"Gotta get back to those others, I guess," he said quietly.

Watching his graceful walk carrying him away and totally unaware of the profound and far-reaching effect this personal exchange would have upon me, I had felt a chill, a strange sense of emptiness: I did not even know his name.

The nebulous but intense feelings sparked by that first personal encounter had since grown into a kind of steady, burning longing, and on being again with Bob in the immediacy of my home, listening to his words, they were being fanned into fierce life.

"Yeah, my mother, she sent me to that place," Bob continued. "She knows the old ways, speaks the language. She's Lakes. Me, I'm half Lakes, half Coeur d'Alene."

"What is the name of your people?" I asked.

"We call ourselves Lakes Indians. Some call us Arrow Lakes Indians." He laughed. "Last count, we had about fourteen names! You'll see us called 'Senatcheggs' in that place, Edgewood. They got a plaque there that says we're extinct! An' a totem pole. A totem pole.... Guess they watched a few too many movies! But we're still here, more'n they'd guess-"

On a single track, I persisted: "Your people's name for yourselves, in your own language?"

Obligingly, he enunciated a word that I could only reproduce as a sorry shadow, which I tried to sound out: "*sin-eye-kst*", the half-swallowed central syllable reminiscent of the Hebrew letter *ayin*. Bob added that it was their name for the Dolly Varden, the char that inhabit the high, clean lakes in the area, and that a tribe might be named for its most important resource.

The following year I would visit the plaque and totem pole at the small community of Edgewood on the banks of the Upper Arrow Lake. Financed by B.C. Hydro at the time of the construction of the Hugh Keenleyside Dam at Castlegar, which created the great body of water that the Arrow Lakes have become on this section of the Columbia River, the plaque had been

laid as a tribute, a dedication to the drowned villages and lands of the "... Senatcheggs, now extinct", the "... Lakes Tribe of Indians ... who made the Arrow Lakes their home". Carved by a local, the totem pole had been intended to represent their fishing, hunting and gathering life-style; sitting at the top is Coyote, their "mythological god". Despite ensuing events and many requests for the record to be set straight, to the best of my knowledge both plaque and pole are still there at time of writing.

"Well, you don't seem very extinct to me." I only just managed to hold back from touching him in jest. And even though I had a sense that my next question might be forward, I was simultaneously so vitalised and comfortable that I felt I could ask him anything. It was as if I had known him for a long time, or from long ago and we were renewing this earlier acquaintance. "I must ask you – and I hope it's not bad manners – what's your name? Your Indian name, I mean, in your own language?"

"A label to hang on a cage of bones...." Thrilled by the kind of poetic language that feeds my soul, I barely heard the next alien sound. He repeated it: "*Kee'ha-hes'ke'*."

The "h" was aspirated like the "ch" in the Scottish "loch"; the final sound seemed swallowed. After trying it out, I asked what it translated to.

"My grandfather," he smiled, "he named me for the time I was born. The time of the laughing thunder. That's what it means: Laughing Thunder."

SILVER-STRANDED WEB

Being told his – to me – real name was the most wonderful gift; as far as my deeper feelings were concerned, he was not and never had been a "Bob". "Laughing Thunder" was poetry to my soul: elemental name, powerfully elemental man.

"It was a happy time for the people, the time of the laughing thunder," he continued. "In the spring they'd hear it an' know it for the time the salmon would be entering the river, beginning their long journey up from the sea. They'd hear the thunder: Boom-boom-boom-boomm," his voice imitated a diminishing cadence of rolling thunder, "an' know food was on its way, times of plenty ahead.... A good time to be born."

A strange sense of inevitability made me press him further: "So, in the spring, your birthday. What date, exactly?"

Somehow I was not surprised to learn his date of birth was the same as mine, except I had followed him into the world eleven years later.

Eleven I knew to be a powerful destiny number, but what about the sharing of a birthday? Hadn't I read somewhere that according to astrology it was not auspicious for a relationship? But what was I thinking? Married men had always been taboo to me. There was no denying the powerful attraction, but beneath the turmoil was a sense it was on another level than physical, and deeper than the feeling of connectedness I usually experienced with Taurean men. Later, I would learn that if two people have common traits, a shared birthday basically facilitates understanding and agreement.

The passage of almost a half-century was belied by his smooth, unlined face, lithe body, hair black as night. Revelling in what I saw as an amazing, powerful birth-connection, I impetuously tucked my chilled bare feet under the warmth of his thigh. "What an amazing coincidence," I said breathlessly. "I like having been born at that time of year."

He nodded absently, not seeming to notice the new intimacy of our position. "Our story ... the story of the people, it's like the Salmon story. Like Salmon, *Ti-tigh*, we leave the ocean – the spirit-world – and enter the great river. The great river we call life." He placed his palms together as if in prayer. "Like Salmon, we struggle upstream, meetin' up with obstacles – shallows, rapids, waterfalls, great boulders...." His hands punctuated his words with snaking, leaping movements. "We leap forward, fall back; like Salmon, battered and bruised, we push ourselves on, over, round....

"Where the water's slow, pooling, then Salmon rests and gathers strength for the next tough passage. In the same way, we get our quiet an' peaceful times, like little vacations, though I reckon there seems to be less 'n' less of 'em in these times of change! But we're pulled, like by a magnet, back to the source. Like Salmon, we can sense it, almost smell it...." Fine nostrils flared, eyes closed, he tilted back his handsome head. "Followin' the most subtle an' irresistible scent, carried on the currents ... calling us back to where we come from. Back to the source.

"We are the Salmon Story."

Enchanted by the powerful allegory, I imagined the magnificent great fish; a strong, vital force; a silver flash up tumbling falls; a sparkling spray of water thrusting through churning rapids; almost invisible, resting in clear backwaters. My own bruises were forgotten in the vibrancy of the refined energy suffusing my body and I wondered at how at ease I felt with this man I barely knew: Laughing Thunder, born of a different race, culture, religion.

"Some day," he began anew, "I'm gonna set up somethin' like that gathering. But it won't be the same; I'll do it in a traditional way. Whole families together. I don't like to see the little ones shunted off separate from their family. I see them out there all together, granma an' grampa too, learning how to live in a simple way, sharin' an' learning the old ways....

"There's so much to be learned from the elders. In the old way, they was the ones who raised the children. 'Kids shouldn't be raisin' kids!' they'd say and send the parents off to do their thing: hunting, gathering ... finding themselves. The grandparents raised the grandchildren."

"Interesting teaching," I could not help remarking. "Nowadays they're too busy jetting off to Florida or playing golf. At least in my race.... Would you take over the Medicine Wheel gathering, involve those people?" The idea of a truly traditional camp really interested me.

"Got my own ideas where to set up," he said. "Been checking it out. On the Arrow Lakes, near a place called Renata. We'll get set up on a piece of land there. We been negotiating with the folk there.... Them people at Edgewood, they can go on doin' what they're doin'. They're doin' it how they see fit, but it's not the way I'd do it."

"So if they're not doing it right, don't you find it offensive? Why not show them, help them?" I asked.

Shrugging, he said: "It's not for me to do that. Who knows what's right for them? Like I say, they're running it how they want." He chuckled. "I can only look at the shape of their heads an'

love 'em!"

All are equal in the Eye of God was what he was saying, essentially, but in a much lighter way. Little did I know how soon these words would become a sort of grounding mantra for me.

"We all're at the place we need to be," Bob continued. "It's a certain type of person gets attracted to these things. When they're at the right level, they'll find their way to the traditional people. In the meantime, some of them intellectuals, an' them space cadets," he laughed wryly, "an' them that challenge the traditional teachings, they'll find folk like that old man – Grey Wolf or whatever he calls himself – he's like a red herring, a cushion for the elders. When you get to the traditional people, you don't go arguin' with them about the teachings."

So the old man who had led the pipe ceremonies was called Grey Wolf, and that was how he was seen by Laughing Thunder. Having little idea of what he meant, I remained silent.

"But one thing I don't like is how they treat that place they call the 'hippie hole'. Swimmin' there naked. That place was sacred to my people."

I knew he meant the secret, deep pool we had found the first afternoon, after Red Cloud's welcome. Perhaps swimming there had been a sort of baptism. I also remembered the intrusion of some youthful members of the gathering who had stripped off and rowdily horsed around in the nude, breaking the peaceful sanctity of the place and embarrassing my children so we had had to leave.

"An' the sweats," he continued. "There was some things went down there.... Us Arrow Lakes, we sweat different to how they set it up, but when they asked me to lead a sweat, how could I say no? I seen the size of their need. So many people showed."

I nodded, not because I understood what he meant about the set-up but because I had been one of over fifty people who had shown up for that sweat, the first after Red Cloud's death. It would have been my first experience of the ceremony and although I had little idea of what to expect, I had been intent on it ever since the announcement about who would be leading it. The sweat-lodge could only accommodate twenty at capacity, "double-packed", as he had called it, and as we all stood around waiting for what would happen next, he had quietly said that those who really needed to be there would know who they were. Without understanding why, I had been one of those who turned away, and had sweated later with an all-women's group led by a non-Native woman.

"The energies in a sweat-lodge," Bob said quietly, "you have to know people're there for a cleansin', a renewal. It's a powerful spiritual experience, the heat, the dark, the prayers.... People come in an' pour all the dross out of themselves. You gotta have a leader that knows what's going on an' how to handle it." His voice lowered. "I was told some women in their moon came in, even though they was told.... We had to go back an' clean it up."

I knew he meant spiritually and on reflection realised this was an example of what he meant about challenging traditional teachings. Habituated prejudices and the interpretation of modern science have each in their own way obliterated the symbolic meaning of woman's monthly flow of blood. While feminists – perhaps most modern women – might feel slighted at being prohibited from a sweat in their moon-time, if they appreciated the meaning of moon-time power, they might spare the men. In time, I would understand that traditional customs lose their meaning when they are taken out of their spiritual context, and that a taboo is a spiritual statement which might also have practical relevance; breaking it causes disharmony, usually because of an off-balance response.

Darkness had long fallen. The house was still, hushed. I renewed the coffee, moving as in a dream-world, beyond need or even thought of sleep. Bob got up to stretch. "You ever been over that way?"

I knew where he meant. "Two years ago a friend took me over to visit some people in

Burton, on the Upper Arrow Lake. It's pretty wild over there. Rained most of the time." I recalled the vast, sombre, leaden, white-capped waters; the massive, soaring, naked peaks; the drifting mists pierced with dark spikes of evergreen; most of all, an oppressive loneliness pervading the long, narrow valley, which did not seem to invite habitation. "The people I met lost their organic garlic crop two years in a row. It rotted in the ground. They were about to move away."

"Wasn't always that way there. Creatin' a big body of water changes the weather, attracts more water. Rains more there now than it used to. You can see where the orchards've rotted in the ground. The old folks that stayed'll tell you 'bout it.... Guess those people didn't feel so good, bein' told they had to move on. Compensation don't give you no roots."

Fleetingly I wondered if the sense of desolation was because of the uprooting of people. At the time, neither of us had any idea that an Arrow Lakes Indian Reserve had once existed almost directly across the lake from that small community.

"'S's drier, warmer, down where my ranch is." Bob spoke more lightly as he sat down again and to my surprise and delight, took hold of one of my feet and began to rub it into warmth. The contact was electric; I had a hard time keeping my equilibrium. "It's in the mountains. But I got no power, no runnin' water. Don't want 'em neither. An' probably wouldn't get 'em; never been much good 'bout settlin' bills!"

"There's certain things about twentieth-century life I like too much to give up. Like hot baths, and my stereo," I laughed, despite basically agreeing with him about public utilities.

"Plenty of ways to have those things without payin' through the nose, and no pollution. There's people I know found ways to make the wind, the sun, even a little creek work for 'em. I'd like for you to meet some of these people."

My heart sang; the tingling sensation in my foot suffused my whole body. There would be more, then; this was an on-going connection.... Was it about an alternative community? Was this the beginning of something I had held in my heart since my teens: the creation of a sustainable, non-invasive, co-operative community? Only with an element I had never before considered: Native and non-Native people working together? As soon as the thought hit me, I wondered how I had ever imagined it would be possible without the knowledge, experience and wisdom of the First People.

"The Arrow Lakes was used for hunting an' fishin'; people lived at the mouths of creeks," Bob continued after a while. I wanted to talk about the idea of a community but instinctively felt I should go with his flow. "Next valley over to the east, the Slocan's not so wild and steep, not so hard for a people to cling to. There was bigger settlements there, all the way down to where the Slocan meets the Kootenay, up far's Kootenay Lake an' down where it joins with the Columbia, an' on down past Trail ... you know, where that operation, Cominco, sure creates a God-almighty pollution!"

Wondering where this was leading, I nodded. I barely knew the area, rivers or towns, but the great blight on the landscape, the zinc and fertilizer plant Cominco, largest of its kind in North America, had inscribed itself on my memory: a massive, ugly sprawl of dull-grey and bright-orange, rusting labyrinthine pipes, storage vats, flues, spewing chimneys and floodlights, seen under a deceptive icing-sugar sprinkle of snow en route to Alberta the previous year. Apparently in the 1950s it looked like an atom bomb had been dropped on the area; the devastating effect of the pollution is still evident in the stunted growth of trees and high local incidence of stomach cancer. Upstream, north of Castlegar on the Lower Arrow Lake lies another noisome eyesore, Celgar pulp mill. I knew that fish pulled out downriver from these two behemoths are too tainted to eat but had yet to learn how, in the short space of fifty years, one of the principal rivers in the world has been killed.

Bob's words recovered a quiet intensity: "North end of the Arrow Lakes there's a place called Arrowhead, where my grandfather's buried. I got to find his restin'-place, an' make sure it's taken care of. Else how can I face him, when I cross over the other side? How can I look him in the eye, when he asks me if I took care of his restin'-place?"

His hands had stopped massaging; again the air seemed charged with a strange electricity, an imminence.

"When I find my grandfather's restin'-place an' take care of it," he continued. "When my own bones lie there.... Then I can proceed on to the next level. I know I'm ready for the next stage; I'm completin' my purpose in this life. Then I'll proceed on to the next level. Not just me – all the rest of the soul-family'll get pulled up an equal amount. An' everyone else. The actions of the one affects the rest. We don't get the opportunity to do that too often but it's a responsibility at the times of great changes. We got the choice as well as the chance to make the leap."

Spellbound by his words as much as the thrill of his hand resting on my foot, into my mind's eye came the image of Salmon, approaching a mighty fall of water – the greatest spout yet encountered – and as he was sucked into the cauldron of waters boiling at its foot, my mind yawned open, a great mouth of darkness within which gleamed a bright hook of understanding, to which I could not put words. Every cell in my body seemed to be sparking. I had never heard anyone talk like this, but in a deep, inner place, I recognised, understood, assimilated ... a natural, profound knowing-without-thinking that left me trembling on the outer as well as the inner.

"I reckon we'll get it right. It's about time!" Bob said with a chuckle, reeling me back in. "There'll be enough of the 'heart people', them that care about living in right relation with each other and the land. Don't matter the colour of skin or what belief they follow, they want the same things in life: get set up on a piece of land, be self-sufficient, live peacefully with themselves, each other, the land.... Learnin' from what was good in the old ways, takin' what's good from the new. No polluting technologies, there's plenty inventions around already if only they was allowed to come out.... A place where the little ones like yours can grow up healthy, strong an' free; where they can run wild a little, stretch their wings. The elders teaching them, showing them their place in the order of things, so's they know who they are an' where they come from. Then they'll know where they're goin'....

"Clean air, clean water.... I always say, if you take care that the water is clean, then everything else'll fall into place.... Doin' it together, not in separateness, where a person grows lonely an' fearful and acts from that place. A community maturin' in co-operation. If you enhance what helps others, then it's easier for them others to adapt. We've all gotta change. From survival of the fittest to continuity of the most useful and co-operative.... Nothin' to do with government. Soon enough, that whole world that's been set up – it's gonna come tumblin' down round our ears...."

Words failed me; this was exactly how I thought, these were my ideals.

After some reflective moments, he continued: "My ancestors, they got overrun too. I was told the old ways was already lost, we fell off the path, before the white man came. But we can learn from them. We been through it before and it's comin' round again. Creator's giving us another chance to get it right."

My mind was spinning. Not only was he speaking of the prophesised time of great changes almost upon us, about which I had only recently learned, but of a way of life long in my heart. Was it at last the time for the blossoming of a whole new way of being and living, beyond race, colour, creed; in peace and harmony, in balance with ourselves, each other and our beautiful planet? A way to break free from the bleak reflection of the fear-based cultural values of western

society; a destiny calling on the highest sense of spirit, of love, forgiveness, tolerance, respect and appreciation for the life we have been gifted, in all its myriad forms? In those exquisitely scintillating moments, I was convinced I had finally met someone who envisioned a meaningful option to the present horror of destroying everything on the planet that did not serve the paranoid needs of a species that had forgotten its origins; someone who saw a practical way forward.

This new way of life would shine like a light. A new, higher consciousness, one of conscientiousness, compassion, co-operation, would be birthed. And then perhaps the headlong rush into doom would wind down, even stop. There was no need for any devastating Earth Changes if we made the changes ourselves.

Utterly thrilled to hear the articulation of deeply-held personal beliefs, dreams and ideals after years of attempts at such a way of life, I was ready to join with whatever Bob proposed. Experience of communal life in England, a kibbutz in Israel in my idealistic early twenties and the housing co-operative had persuaded me that the only way co-operative living might succeed, would be if survival were the bottom line. But with the elective participation of committed people of two races, anything was possible.

Had I been aware of the time-span Bob had in mind, I might not have thrown myself in so wholeheartedly. Imagining it would take about five years to set up such a community and all we had to do was pull together some like-minded, committed people and settle on ancestral Arrow Lakes territory, out in the wilds (I fantasised we would set up a sort of psychic barrier so Big Brother wouldn't notice), some four tumultuous years later, expressing my frustration that our Salmon-story seemed to be running up too many side-streams, I was set straight: "I see things fifty years down the line." A wide, flat sweeping motion of his hand encompassed a half-century. "But aren't you learning a lot?"

By then I had learned so much I felt my head might burst.

Looking back, I wonder at my naiveté. Yet had I been less of a romantic dreamer, less propelled by an unconscious need to "belong" to something cohesive, something with meaning, I might not have got involved with what happened next at all. And perhaps what followed was not so much about creating an ideal community as about the raising of consciousness. Perhaps there are those capable of making a fantastic, giant (salmon-like) leap in consciousness in these powerful times of change, one beyond the scope of our limited imagination; one which would, as Bob had intimated, quantitatively and qualitatively elevate the collective consciousness.

"An' I know who'll be there," Bob resumed, bringing me back to the room, "because when I look into a man's eyes, I see deep into his soul. I see all what's layin' there. I know what's movin' him."

Self-consciousness covered me like a blanket. Seemingly aware of the effect of his words, he laughed and said: "I better stay on track! Like I said, we've a lot of ground to cover." Getting up, he stretched and swept his arm in an eastward direction. "... That valley I spoke of, the Slocan. You know," he chuckled, "they call it 'The Valley', like it's the only one.... There's a lot of good people live there. Maybe you'd like it over there. It's cleaner, the water, the air. There's less people live there. But it's cooler. An' more rain than over this way."

"That's okay by me." Why was I responding as if I had to reassure him that I would like it? "I used to like the dry and hot weather here, especially after Vancouver, which may be picturesque but you pay a price for living at the foot of mountains: day after day, greyness, drizzle. It got pretty oppressive at times, especially once I learned about acid rain. But we've been here five years and the Okanagan summers seem to be getting hotter and hotter. Sivan – my eldest – recently said the sun sort of stings her skin. I feel it, too. Makes me wonder what they haven't

told us about the ozone-layer, the greenhouse effect....”

Initially I had loved the Okanagan, an easily-accessed landscape of sparsely-treed, gentle-sloped, grassy hills dotted with wild sage, scrubby Oregon grape and lanky sumac, which blazed into life in spring with sudden yellow bursts of wild sunflowers before softening into a blue haze of wild lupins; the long, hot summers, dramatically punctuated with loud, wild thunderstorms; the warm air redolent with the distinctive dry, sweet scent of baked clay earth and crushed pine needles; the golden grasslands of late summer; the lakes, Okanagan and Kalamalka, the former named for the indigenous people, the latter meaning “many-coloured”. Even the winter, while colder than at the coast, was relatively dry and temperate. However, just as I had welcomed the changeable weather in Vancouver after almost four years of the relentless burnt-ochre of the desert, the cloudless skies and blazing sun that comprise eight months of the year in Jerusalem, I was again yearning for moist air, the breath of forests. And some isolation....

“Look where I came from originally,” I added, perplexed by my seeming need to reassure him. “England’s pretty notorious for rain and the north-east, where I grew up, never got very warm. Anyway,” I finished firmly, “I’d welcome the change; it’s getting too hot for us here.” Considering the burn-out I was feeling, this was true in more ways than one.

Bob swept his arm in an arc which encompassed my living-room and said with a wry smile: “Take a lot to get you moved!”

Not for the first time I felt embarrassed about my material possessions. What I owned was average for a family of four and I felt it was important to have an attractive environment for growing sensibilities. Various pieces of furniture had already proven useful as an investment against financial uncertainty, but I would have preferred to live more simply. “A five-ton truck’d get me anywhere!” I laughed, knowing I would walk away from it all if he said the word; except my children and the camper-van. Which, I remembered, was laid up.

“What do you do?”

Taken aback by this new track, I hesitated. It was difficult to know how to respond. Mother? Jill-of-all-trades? If he meant job-wise, why should it be relevant? I decided to go back to the beginning: “Well, I trained as a teacher....” Why was I even mentioning it? In the sixteen years since I had obtained the qualification in England it had been used only as an avenue to other employment, primarily in publishing, and since the birth of the children, various part-time, casual jobs. “But I’ve never actually-”

“A teacher ... a teacher,” he interrupted. “I didn’t know you were a teacher.” He was stroking his chin, staring at a spot on the floor. Something made me remain silent instead of correcting him. Nor did I tell him anything else about my chequered work-history.

Within less than three months, I would look back and wonder about the true extent of this man’s powers. Was he capable of spontaneous precognition? Or was it an actual ability to shape events?

Walking over to the window, Bob stared out into the blackness of night. Silence lay between us for a long time; I had a sense of him being somehow very far away. In the reflection I saw his eyes were closed, his lips almost imperceptibly moving. Suddenly he turned round, folded his arms over his chest and stared straight at me.

“You will hear many things about me,” he said abruptly. “Many people will tell you things. There are those who say that I take advantage of women. But we each make our own decisions. I cannot make anyone do anything they don’t want to do. Nothing will happen that you do not

wish. Each of us is free to make our own choice.... And to those people who say such things about me, I say: 'Your suspicions are of yourself!'

"You will hear other things. But I'm telling you this: I am not a medicine man. No matter what they say, I have never claimed to be a medicine man. I am simply a man on a spiritual journey." His voice softened. "My grandmother cried when they cut down the Old Ones, who know all the songs. The Song came before the words, came from the very deep.... The Song that is everywhere around us, that is given us by the wind in the trees ... *Ska-ool*. They speak to us.... Song sings through us. What will grandfather say now, to the child who asks where the songs come from? Without songs, where will we be?

"You must learn how to listen, how to truly hear. Your *Sumix* will help you on this path, when you can truly pay attention."

Spellbound, I could only stare back at him, the poetic, magical, enigmatic words an anchor in a storm of whirling emotions and spinning mind, silencing any residual doubt I might have had. Where this Native man led, I would follow. Where he pointed, I would go. What he said and did, I would remember and record.

The type of people of whom he was speaking might say I was totally taken in, but spirit knows which way to move, which form to take, to experience and fulfil its purpose in life. Maybe I was but one of many women who fell immediately and deeply in love with this man. Or perhaps not so much with Bob, as with Laughing Thunder: not the man, but the spirit that moved within the man. Despite my enthrallment I sensed something far deeper than physical attraction at work, something which I could not begin to put into words.

After a long silence, without another word Bob got up and left the room. I heard him go upstairs and then the sound of the shower. Without thought, simply in my body, I sat there, feeling the pounding of my heart, the racing of blood in my veins, watching the paling sky. Then I went upstairs and into my bedroom and lay down, rigid with tension, trying to extract myself from the chaos of my feelings. Hearing him come out of the bathroom, I went to ask if he wanted breakfast.

We met at the top of the stairs and the next few moments, minutes, hours, dissolved into a blur.

Whether I touched him or he me, whether any word crossed his or my lips, I cannot remember, but suddenly my arms were around his slender body and he was pulling me close. Intoxicating, the honey-sweetness of his breath; his lips a feather-touch on mine, a gentle tasting, a tentative seeking, an unbearably tantalizing, unending intimate connection.... My legs, lower body grew hot and weak, melting. Dizzy, I felt I might swoon but could not stop, did not want to, ever....

The cold wetness of a freshly-washed braid against my fingers startled me. Like a drowning person, I gasped: "Wow ... I would never have guessed a red man could kiss like that!" And could have curled up in embarrassment, in dismay at the clumsy joke, the implied racism ... the broken moment ... I pulled back.

To my amazement, Bob seemed to be aglow: his skin a burnished gold, his eyes filled with light so for a long incredulous moment I saw into the warmth of their dark depths. His smile gentle, he brushed back the hair from my cheek and it dawned on me that he was caught in the first rays of sunrise, reaching in through the window behind me. Before I could say another word, he turned away and went downstairs. After some blank seconds, I followed.

He was nowhere to be seen, not in the living-room nor the room where his son was still deeply asleep, nor the kitchen. Then I noticed the back door was ajar.

In the middle of the garden, barefoot on the dewy grass, full of grace, straight-backed, arms raised in the direction of the rising sun, stood Laughing Thunder. Man on a spiritual journey, whose eagle feather directed the smoke of the sacred fire....

I could not stop myself watching, admiring, then it struck me that, only a couple of weeks ago, in the same place he was now standing, I had done something not dissimilar.

Heavy, dark clouds had been noticeably gathering several miles away down the lake and, in a fey mood, I had danced and sung to the blossoming storm, calling it, using as an offering some old trade-beads that had apparently once belonged to a Native American elder. Thinking of an Native American called Bob and how, if anyone knew storms, he must, I had closed my eyes and visualised myself flying down the lake, through the threatening storm, over the miles and miles of scrubby sage-brush desert landscape to where I imagined he might live, touching him on his shoulder – a feather-breath – then zooming back home. Feeling fulfilled and slightly foolish at the same time, I had gone back inside.

The majority of thunderstorms travelling up Okanagan Lake veer away up the north arm when they reach the division of the waters some two or three miles away. I was inside, washing dishes, when the first great crack had rattled the windows.

This storm chose to break directly over the house.

At that moment Sivan had come rushing inside, yelling, "You did it, Mum! The storm's here!"

I had been unaware that she and a friend, playing outside, had spied on my strange ritual, but how she knew or what might be going on was far from my mind as I ran outside into the stinging, freezing downpour. Above me, the storm-centre swirled, convulsed. Feeling a wild exhilaration, I revelled in the awesome power of the elements, my dress clinging wetly like a second skin as I danced and yelled back at the rumbling peals ... of Laughing Thunder, I was now sure ... as Mother Earth was cleansed.

Had he felt me then? I could not, would never ask.

Waking his son, Bob left without eating or any word as to what might happen next, carrying with him, I felt, a part of me. I felt cut adrift and lost again but knew this made little sense and closed my eyes, visualising a fine silver silken strand, a spider-web filament, spinning out between us as the geographical distance widened. I knew we were connected: part of an unbreakable thread of the intricate, invisible tapestry that ever trembles with cause and effect, beyond time and space. He had told me that all I had to do was truly listen, to pay attention.

But to what? The wind in the trees? And that other strange word in his language, something that would help me: *Sumix*. What had that meant?

After a stay out at High Farm on the west side of Okanagan Lake where one of my friends fell from her horse but was not hurt, the children and I return home.

The front door is ajar. Sure I had locked it, I try to go in but it won't open any further. Peeking through the gap, I see a jumble of shoes is blocking it, but by pushing forcefully I manage to get it open, just as an immense, shaggy grey dog silently bounds up and stops beside me.

It's an Irish wolfhound, powerful, wild-looking, its great whiskered head level with my chest, mouth a fanged, panting grin, eyes a tawny glow: a breed I like, but a twist of fear makes me hesitate. The hound determinedly pushes past me, lopes into the living-room and sits down, intelligent eyes gazing at me expectantly.

The front door has skewed open, is hanging off one hinge. I notice that the window-blinds are weirdly on the outside of the house. There must have been a break-in! Fear of the hound forgotten, I rush into the living-room.

Everything seems to be in place. But oh no ... empty shelves.... My stereo, my entire collection of albums and cassettes are gone! Ah, my beloved music! Anything, everything else, but not my music! In their place, a cheap radio. Yet I know I have to let go.

The children have followed me inside. I turn to tell them what has happened and glimpse a familiar red-green-blue logo from the kitchen window: a Tilden rent-a-truck, parked outside. Going into the kitchen to see it better, I am taken aback to see someone sitting - of all places - at the children's play-table. Arms folded, his legs stretched out, a gentle smile playing at his mouth, it is Bob.

I start to gasp out my dismay about the burglary but before I can say a word, he grins and says: "It had to be something to make you see."

And I see: my sound system and all my music are stacked in the back of the otherwise-empty truck.

"And I've been having all these dreams," he adds quietly.

Our eyes meet, link. Warmth envelops me. "Yes." Somehow I know those dreams, for: "I sent them."

He seems to accept this. My children and others I don't recognise come into the kitchen and crowd round us; one sits on his knee.

"The loneliness was too great," he says, putting his arm round the child's shoulders.

"For me too," I breathe softly, a powerful, scintillating burst of happiness flooding my body. This cannot be a dream. I pinch myself to make sure. Can feel the pinch - it is real! I check outside again. Yes! The truck is really there!

In no time at all, arrangements to vacate the house are completed and I am packing my possessions. Everything flows easily, smoothly; I have to keep stopping in my busy-ness to bask in the glow of this incredible, delightful reality, these exquisite feelings.... And again experience that penetrating, enveloping eye-contact, as his softly-spoken words permeate my being: "And although I will not be with you all the time, I will be the one in you, and for you, as a husband...."

Oh, dream come true!

But what's happening? It's becoming darker ... and darker.... Is night falling? How, in the middle of the day?

Eyes wide open to darkness, I found myself in bed and with a sinking feeling realised it had been only a dream after all. Even the pinch, so sharply painful, had been a fantasy; the pain of awakening was reality. I could have wept.

For weeks Bob had occupied most of my waking – and now dreaming – thoughts; all my yearnings seemed to have been encapsulated in this vivid dream, which had an immediacy and clarity like the drum-dream, three months behind me. Bob's closing dream-words resounded through my mind: beautiful sentiments ... but with a strangely-familiar ring.

I was sure they were like words attributed to the resurrected Christ. What were they doing in my dream? I wanted to be able to take them literally, to be living that dream; the feeling of disappointment stayed with me for days.

At the time, I knew that the most commonly-acknowledged function of dreams is the processing of immediate and past emotional issues; that images and strange symbolic events conjured up by the subconscious are recognised as aspects of the psyche. But soon I would come to appreciate that in the timelessness of the dream-state, there can also lie the gift of precognition.

A long, slow month had dragged by since Bob's unforgettable visit. Summer was over and a replacement transmission had been located and installed in my camper-van, thanks to my mother's generosity. Interpreting the wordless language of spirit as a directive, I decided on our second and last camping trip of the year: to visit "Bob's valley", as I called the Slocan Valley. While preparing, I reflected on how strange it was, the way things had unfolded: my plan for the summer had been a westwards trip to visit friends and relatives on the coast and the Gulf Islands. Which meant we would not have been at home for Bob's unexpected visit. In fact, I probably would not even have felt the need to "call".

Clear-skied, sunny and bright; my mood matched the weather as we wound our pioneering way eastwards, with no plan other than to see the Valley and perhaps find the burial-grounds Bob had told me about – they had to be well-known locally. Perhaps, I mused, I would have help: special, otherworldly kind of help. A couple of days before I had dropped a line to the post office box number in the States that Bob had given me, asking for guidance. I knew it would not reach him in time, but then part of me did not expect things to work that way.

Leaving orchards and farmlands behind at the little community of Cherryville, we threaded our way ever more steeply upwards through increasingly-thick forest cover into the hushed stillness of the Monashee Mountains. Knowing now that Monashee is Gaelic for "secret place of the fairies", I was all the more aware of the mystical, haunted atmosphere pervading the dark forests, seemingly devoid of human habitation. Yet man's hand had been cruelly at work here: unsightly clearcuts marred my daydreaming.

Beyond the pass, forested mountainsides gentled into woods and meadows; a glimpse of a roof or a driveway signalled the return to so-called civilisation as we descended toward the Arrow Lakes, preceded by the long shadow of the van. Passing the turn-off to the village of Edgewood, I remembered the plaque dedicated to Bob's "extinct" people; when we passed the gravel road leading to the site of the Rebirth of Mother Earth gathering my heart warmed and for the next few miles I thought back to the beginnings of this journey.

A final great swooping curve, and the highway suddenly and shockingly disappeared into a mighty body of water. The little yellow ferry cutting across the deceptively still Upper Arrow Lake looked like a child's toy, dwarfed by perfectly-mirrored, dramatic up-thrusting heaves of granite rock tenaciously coated by a ragged evergreen mantle: the Selkirks, which towered over the scattering of houses, restaurant and gas station comprising the tiny town of Fauquier on the far shore.

Passing over the drowned village of Needles – for which the ferry was named – I thought about its inhabitants being moved on when the Hugh Keenleyside Dam was built, flooding the

valley. Beneath the vibrating deck I could imagine a shadowy darkness lanced with dim, flickering shafts of light; empty, collapsed shells of houses; the muffled toll of a submerged church-bell mourning yet another harnessing of the great Columbia River. Heavy, dull-grey smudges of cloud were gathering at the north end of the valley and the air was noticeably cooler as we docked, a reminder of what Bob had said about the effect of drastically changing an environment. Disembarking, we joined the little rush-hour of ferry-traffic, a chain of scurrying ants skirting the eastern shore of the lake at the oblivious feet of the mountains, and found a spot to camp just south of the little mill-town of Nakusp, unknowingly only a few hundred feet from another Arrow Lakes burial-ground, drowned along with the village of Needles.

The following morning I was woken by the drumming of rain on the roof and the whimpering of Nicolas. Earache, and not the first time; familiar with the routine, I drove straight to the emergency department of the tiny local hospital. By the time we emerged it was close to midday. A uniform greyness awaited us: the lake hazed by drizzle, the mountains shrouded by low-hanging cloud. Cold and dispirited, worried by Nick's malaise and frustrated by the change in weather I considered returning home.

But I have never believed in turning back.

After a simple brunch we headed east on a black, shining ribbon of highway fringed with crumpled, burnt-orange bracken. It narrowed as it climbed, snaking between a gauntlet of dark evergreens under an oppressively-low grey shroud; the only bright note in the dreariness an occasional sudden lutescent fountain of birch.

Rosebery ... Hills ... New Denver ... Silverton. The little communities through which we passed were ghost towns in the mist; the Slocan Lake, invisible; on the far shore, the vast mountain range known as the Valhallas was truly the kingdom of the gods: unseen, unknown. The only break in the monotony was when, heart in mouth, we crept along a single-lane stretch of highway clinging to the sheer side of a mountain above the hidden lake. The drop-off hinted at a great height; to my relief we met no other vehicle for the long five minutes or so it took to get back to two lanes. Yet I appreciated the bottleneck: it had to limit the amount and type of traffic that accessed the valley from the north.

Neither Slocan City, at the foot of the lake, nor neighbouring Lemon Creek seemed to exist other than as a roadside sign. Much like Bob's people, I thought. Paying scant attention to places I would soon come to know intimately, I stopped in the tiny community of Winlaw to consult the map and buy some treats for the children. Since Bob's valley seemed reluctant to reveal itself, I decided to push on to the city of Nelson – an hour further – and look up a couple Bob had introduced me to at the gathering, who were about to move there from Montreal and were seeking his input for a potential wilderness school.

The valley narrowed; a massive, sheer rock-face encroached on the left side of the road. Mentally ahead of myself, I peripherally noticed a break in the drizzling mist to the right of the long sickle-bend I was negotiating and a corresponding curve in the river below, where it was crossed by a narrow bridge. On the roadside, a hand-painted sign caught my eye: "Vallican Whole".

It was fortunate that no other vehicle was on that part of the road at that moment for, seemingly of their own volition, my hands wrenched at the steering-wheel to take the turn-off.

My stomach lurched: the angle was too acute. I came to a sudden stop with the front end of the van inches from a pine-tree clinging to the edge of the cliff and the back end sticking out across the road. Thankful there was no other vehicle in sight, I swiftly reversed, compensated and turned down the unpaved road, heart thudding in my chest. The attraction had been compulsive, irresistible; what was going on?

An old, single-lane Bailey bridge took us across wide, clear, fast-flowing waters. Reaching a

T-junction on the other side, the same impulse took me left past a house with a collection of brightly-painted old farming implements in the front yard. The trees closed in briefly, then at the far side of a golden-grassed meadow I saw a handsome, two-storey log-house: someone's dream-home, sheltered by a small stand of fir and built from what I guessed from the warm honey-glow to be cedar. Again the trees closed in; the road wound on. It was like driving beneath an old grey blanket. Another side-road snaked away between the misted evergreens, but despite a feeling about it (had I exhausted the gentle voice of intuition?) I decided to stay on the main route, passing some more log buildings, one of which, due to its rambling construction and prominent location, I guessed must be a community building. The road began to climb, becoming narrower, increasingly rutted and pot-holed. Then the electricity poles came to an end.

Obviously I had reached the end of the line. What was I doing here?

An approaching pick-up pulled up to allow us passage. As we drew alongside, I asked the young couple what lay beyond.

"Coupla lakes, but without a four-by-four you probably won't get far.... We been up huntin' grouse." On a rack behind their heads were two rifles.

As they drove away I found myself thinking of the film "Deliverance". What had possessed me to come this way, out in the sticks? Turning round with some difficulty, I drove back to the highway and on to Nelson.

Spread out on the lower slopes of a mountain hidden by pale banks of mist and clouds, west arm of Kootenay Lake at her feet, the "Queen City of British Columbia" put me in mind of a mini-San Francisco. The steeply-inclined streets were lined with colonial-style listed heritage buildings and there was a similar laid-back ambiance. Finding a health-food store, I asked if any wilderness school had started up in the area but was met with blank looks. It seemed like the whole area was closing me out.

Darkness was beginning to fall. Kokanee Creek, a large provincial campground, lay on the east side of the city but it was too early to camp; a soak and supper at the hot-springs at Ainsworth, some twenty miles further on the shores of Kootenay Lake, seemed a good idea. The uniform-grey tedium of the winding, forty-minute drive was soon forgotten in the pleasure of the reviving warmth of the pools and the fun we had in the caves. By the time we set up camp, it was late and very cold.

Frost laced the windows of the camper when I woke next morning. Outside, chinks of bright, autumnal-blue sky peeked through a canopy of russet, copper and gold. It was a heart-warming sight; cosy under our duvets, we waited for the sun to take the edge off the chill then went to explore.

Preferring to camp off the beaten track, a designated campground normally would have been a last resort for me, but the time of year meant we had the place practically to ourselves. The children rode their bikes through crisping mounds of fallen leaves down to the sandy beach. Kootenay Lake extended a ruffled steely-blueness far into the distance, where a jagged row of massive, serrated teeth, the Purcell Mountain range, scraped against a patchwork of clouds. Above us towered the Selkirks, thickly, darkly coated with evergreen. Totally veiled the previous day, it was a majestic wilderness that took away my breath and made my heart soar. Following the children, exploring nature trails, enjoying late wildflowers and gradually building up an appetite, I felt renewed and glad I had not simply continued on round the loop beyond Ainsworth to Kaslo, over the pass to New Denver and so back home. Given the remarkable change in weather, Bob's valley would get another chance. A hot breakfast in Nelson seemed part of the equation but the city was deathly quiet early on a Sunday morning; nothing seemed open on Main Street and within minutes we found ourselves outside the sleepy little city.

No turning back.... The highway curved along a precipitous mountainside; below, unseen the

day before, Kootenay River curled sleek and slow, hemmed in by a series of hydroelectric dams. Turning north at the junction to the Slocan Valley, I noticed a couple of cars parked in front of a sprawling log building and a colourful hand-painted sign: “Rose’s Restaurant”.

We ordered a full breakfast: eggs, bacon, pancakes, toast. As the teenaged waitress was putting the laden plates onto the table, I suddenly thought to ask if she had heard about an archaeological dig in the valley.

“Oh, you must mean Vallican,” she said. “My dad owned land there but he had to give it up when some finds were made. It’s about fifteen minutes north from here; there’s a sign that says Vallican, I think. Follow the road to the left then turn into the subdivision. You could just drive in there and ask someone.”

The same road I had impulsively taken the day before and the other one I had chosen to ignore. And of all the people I could have asked, I had picked on the daughter of the man who had owned the site. Oblivious to my astonishment, she told me she was leaving to study at university in Alberta the next day.

Another day and I would have missed her. It was almost too much. Whose hands had been at the wheel? Was this what it was like, to receive guidance?

In all its mountainous splendour, the Slocan Valley now revealed itself: a forested, rocky grandeur, not overpowering but enclosing, protecting. From the south, the turn-off to “Vallican Whole” was easy to negotiate.

What did the sign mean? Vallican: a place to be made whole?

Again the log-house at the back of the meadow caught my eye then I turned a corner, and nothing was ever quite the same again. Directly in front of me, centred above the gravel road, a great up-thrusting peak stopped me in my tracks. Darkly-silhouetted against the clear blue of the sky, it stood apart from and towered above the surrounding ranges. A sense of awe crept through me; as I crept on down the road I was put in mind of the mountain in the movie “Close Encounters of the Third Kind”, not only for its appearance but its magnetism.

Following the waitress’s directions, I turned into the subdivision and soon realised that even if I had followed my intuition the day before, it was unlikely I would have found anything. A few driveways disappeared among the pines then the road came to an abrupt end. I was about to give up when I caught sight of a newly-built house tucked away among the trees, where a couple about my age were working on a garden with their two young boys. In a friendly manner, they directed me onto a narrow, sandy track, barely visible among the undergrowth.

The slender branches of young birch and cottonwood screeched along the sides of the van; I stayed in first gear until a right-angle bend brought me round to another unpaved road in the subdivision, which obviously headed back to where I had started. It seemed I was going in circles.

Why was Bob’s village still proving so elusive? I stopped and turned off the engine. As far as I could tell, there had been no evidence of any site. Perhaps this was not meant to be. Then I heard the chock of an axe, coming from a secluded barn-shaped house almost totally hidden among the trees.

Should I ask again? Why were things not just falling into place? But I had come this far.... Thinking to give my interest in the site more authority by introducing myself as an ex-teacher, I related my quest to the wood-chopper.

Although I was unaware of the concept, synchronicity was doing its magical work: the small and friendly bearded man turned out to be the secretary of the local society that acted as steward of the “Vallican Archaeological Park,” a designated heritage site. Enthusiastically he told me about its discovery and the unearthing of the nine-hundred-year-old skeleton of a young girl.

Barely able to contain my excitement, I let myself be directed back along the narrow track. As I drove away, I thought it strange that neither of us had made any mention of the Arrow Lakes people. Nor had I told him how I came to know about the place.

Back at the right-angle bend I finally caught sight of the signs, posted high on the trees at intervals along the edge of the main wood:

"*This heritage site is protected by the Heritage Conservation Act of British Columbia. It is unlawful for any person to knowingly destroy, desecrate, deface, excavate, move or alter this site.*"

Parking on a small, grassy area on the bend, I explained to the children where we were and they went off to explore, but I was in such a state I found myself unable to enter the site, dark and mysterious under the shadowy evergreens. It was a holy-place; it felt wrong to intrude upon it. For a long time, I sat meditatively on a tussock of grass beside the track, clearly part of a long, wide swathe of land cleared some years ago and since self-regenerated with cottonwood, birch, pine, fir. Wild strawberries, Oregon grape, service-berries and a myriad of delicate plants and seeding grasses carpeted the earth between the young trees. Sweetly-resinous, the air was soft and warm; the pale sky was streaked with wisps of cloud. All around, massive, hazy-blue, the mountains basked benevolently in the sun. In a far-distant cleft, my wandering gaze caught sight of two tiny specks, wheeling, spiralling.

A thrill ran through me. They could only be eagles. Recalling the striking, mysterious dance of the eagles above Vernon and what had followed, it seemed especially significant, a reminder that I had been guided. As if Bob were here with me.

As if I had walked into a dream.

Feeling utterly at peace, I lay back on the warm earth and closed my eyes. But for the drowsy hum of an occasional insect, it was absolutely quiet. Bob's valley; the village and burial-ground he had spoken of, found....

I must have dozed, for suddenly an hour had passed. Hearing the children among the trees, I climbed a narrow, stony path to the top of the next terrace, most of which seemed to have been cleared at about the same time as the swathe below, and took some photos.

As we were leaving, I had the sudden idea to stop at the bearded wood-cutter's home to give him my details and ask him to let me know about any kind of development at the site. He promised to mail some literature then went on to tell me about the Valley, as if it had a capital "V", just as Bob had said. It sounded like a remarkable place, having attracted musicians, writers, artists, environmentalists, ex-hippies, counter-culturalists, back-to-the-landers, conscientious objectors, a variety of religious groups. "... And many strong women," he added, raising his eyebrows and staring intently at me.

You won't get me that way.... The spontaneous thought that popped into my head surprised me.

There was a brief silence, then almost as an afterthought he said, "We've got an alternative school here, for which I'm treasurer. The Whole School. It's housed in a big wooden building further down the back-road, our community hall."

"Yes, I noticed it." The meaning behind the signpost "Vallican Whole" seemed a bit of a let-down: he explained that the building had been a hole in the ground for a long time, while the community fought to come to an agreement about the style of the building.

For two days after we got home my feet barely touched the ground. Then came the call. Not

an otherwordly direction this time, however, but a male voice, through the wires: "You probably don't remember me: Laurie?"

"Oh, but I do!" My stomach lurched, filled with a butterfly-trembling. The wood-cutter. Was something already happening at the site? "I just got back the photos I took there. In fact, they're in my hand right now."

On top was a view of the burial-ground, though I didn't know it at the time. I had just been showing the pictures to a visiting friend, the one in my Bob-dream who had fallen from the horse. A sense of inevitability began welling up in me.

Laurie laughed. "You must have a twenty-four-hour developing place in Vernon – there's not one in Nelson yet." He paused. "Well, you'll probably think this is weird, coming out of the blue, but ... you don't think you'd be interested in a part-time teaching position at the Whole School, our alternative school, here in Vallican?"

So this is what this is all about, I thought, as a "Yes" crossed my lips without hesitation.

"You see, on Friday the Steering Committee recognised the need for a part-time teacher and on Sunday you turned up on my doorstep...."

I was barely listening, remembering a Native man central to my life, musing: "A teacher ... I didn't know you were a teacher...." It was too weird to think about.

Job interview, acceptance and all the stressful details of a major move flowed so smoothly that I never doubted the wisdom of taking this opportunity, although I would have moved heaven and earth if I'd had to. For it was not only about a recent, magically-prophetic dream but the chance to realise another long-held dream. At the time of my educational training, the famous experimental alternative school in England, Summerhill, was reaching its height; its radical philosophy seemed to mirror my personal theories about education but the thought of applying to teach there had been too intimidating. The philosophy of the Whole School was remarkably similar; I felt I now had the capacity to fulfil a dream shelved for sixteen years.

Only six weeks after Laurie's call I was teaching at the Whole School and living – of all places – in the log-house at the back of the meadow, with the grouse-hunting couple – of all people – acting as agents for the owners. Apparently it had been standing empty since sold months before; tracking down the new owners in Toronto turned out to be straightforward and they immediately agreed to rent it to me. It was as if the house had been waiting for me; later, my landlady would tell me my voice had sounded inexplicably familiar.

Yet throughout it all there was a sense that the teaching was but part of what was unfolding. As soon as we settled in, it became clear there was an "other" kind of life in and around the house. Never before had I been aware of such activity: sudden darting movements from corners across the room, along the walls or just outside the window; small, dark, unformed shapes, commonplace, unthreatening. Becoming familiar with the forty-acre property, I discovered its southern boundary met with the designated heritage site; learning to recognise the signs, I found features – groupings of hollows in the earth – indicating that other parts of Bob's Indian village were located on this property as well. The strange activity in the house began to make sense, and kept me constantly aware of the ancient Indian village just below us, which had a sort of presence, simultaneously magnetic and soothing, arousing feelings in me similar to those aroused by a cathedral. As I would soon find out, many other people felt the same way about this magical place, seemingly nothing more than a forested area and a scattering of hollows in the ground above a clear and winding river.

The distinctive peak that had stopped me in my tracks on first sight was now part of daily life. A previous owner had cleared a swathe of trees so that Frog Mountain was visible from the house, and each day on the way to school, all the way down the back road, it towered above me.

Once the snows came, the reason behind the name was made all the more clear.

Our nearest neighbour was beyond sight and earshot; the back-road little-frequented. Each evening as the light faded, deer guardedly grazed the meadow on their way to the river; coyotes sang and danced, shadows in the twilight. I learned the rewards of caring for a woodstove and discovered the wonder of moonlit snowy walks in a silent, forested world overlaid with silver. Following meandering deer-trails along the riverbank, I became intimately familiar with the Indian village. The peace, quasi-solitude and closeness to the wild spoke deeply to a part of me I had neglected for many years.

The first friends I made were the couple who had initially directed me to the site: friends who would soon prove a tremendous support, for despite the extraordinary circumstances that had brought me here, things would not continue at all smoothly.

The signs were there from the outset, when to my consternation at the first parent-teacher steerage meeting I was given the responsibility of academic subjects – English and mathematics – for the older children. It was a majority wish; there was little I could say. The school had been closed for a few years; I imagined people just had to find their alternatively-shod feet and decided to do my best to make this happen. For a while, the Whole School became central to my life.

Twelve children, ranging in age from four to twelve, attended the school; the other teacher, there for a year already, was an art specialist. As directed, I began working with the older children, using materials I found in the basement and backrooms of the rambling building. I also came across sheaves of papers and mountains of books from the school's inception in 1973 and the following years and set about researching the methods implemented and the materials used, swiftly learning that there did not appear to have been much of what I called progress in the academic field since that time; it seemed as if education had taken several steps backwards from a child-centred, creative, imaginative mode into one dominated and controlled by market forces, and fear.

One of the positive things about working as a teacher is immediate involvement in the community. Shortly before Christmas, at wood-cutter Laurie's seasonal "barn-that-turned-into-a-house" party, I finally met someone else connected to what I felt was the underlying reason for my coming to Vallican: the president of the Vallican Archaeological Park Society. Enthusiastically I told him of my interest in the Indian village, sparked by two Arrow Lakes' descendants.

Looking down his aquiline nose at me from a cold, blue-eyed height, Rick was abrupt: "No. It belonged to the Kutenai."

These were the indigenous people for whom the area was named, although I had understood them to be a neighbouring Band situated on the east side of Kootenay Lake. Despite a tightening in my chest, something made me stay quiet; after all, I had only one man's word to back mine up and there was no way I could convey the integrity and authority of that man and his word. Turning away from what I saw as a closed mind, I found myself thinking this was going to be a long journey.

Wherever it came from, that thought would prove terribly accurate.

The encounter depressed me. For the first time feeling out of place, I left the packed, boisterous room, intending to slip away unnoticed into the night. I was lacing-up in the boot-room when Laurie's wife came to see me out. As the door cracked open to darkness, Bridey whispered: "You know, he thinks you were 'sent'." She nodded, as if to indicate her agreement.

Thinking I knew them both by now, I was deeply and pleasantly surprised. I would never have expected Laurie to think this way, or his wife to express such a thing.

"I think that, too." Although not for the purpose that lay in their minds, I was sure, and could not say. Yet when would that purpose reveal itself? Or was I just fooling myself?

I had not long to wait for an answer. The day before school broke up for Christmas, very early in the morning, I woke to the sound of a vehicle approaching the house and got up to see a rusted white hatchback slithering along the icy rutted track. Somehow I was not surprised when it stopped and Bob got out.

I may have appeared calm but inside I was quivering. How had he known to come here? And was it my imagination or did he look different? Pale, he appeared tense, distracted, exhausted.

These were not questions I felt I could ask. He offered to help while I got the younger children ready for school and went with Sivan down to the basement to light the woodstove. Minutes later she came rushing back up, eyes wide. "Mum! I've never seen anything like it! He talked to the fire, and when it took hold he thanked it. He laid the wood in ever so gently, one piece at a time, right inside the stove. And he thanked each one. He put his whole arm into the flames, Mum, and didn't get burned!"

My heart glowed. Laughing Thunder was with us.

He did not want breakfast, nor was my stomach was any state to cope with food. I asked how things were and he said difficult things had been happening on the Reservation. He did not elucidate and I felt unable to press him further. I wished desperately I could take the day off but we had to leave then. The rest of the day passed in a blur.

As promised, he returned in the early evening, seeming more relaxed. Over supper, I told him about the amazing series of events that had led us to live beside his ancestral village, but he only nodded absently, as if it was to be expected.

When I mentioned that the village was a designated heritage site, his dark eyes flashed and anger suddenly spilled over, controlled but intense, as he heatedly and at length denounced the marginalisation of the Native people. Devastated with empathy, I said, "It makes me feel so bad, all these things that have happened, are still happening. This is your land. In fact, I shouldn't even be here, I wasn't even born on this continent-"

"Oh no!" He said strongly, suddenly so calm that I was taken aback. "You've come home! And why I'm here is linked to you. We will keep in touch...."

Enigmatic but deeply reassuring, these final words before he left would become like a mantra during the following difficult months: I had come home; we were linked; we were in touch, on a subtle level. How else had he known where to find me, this amazing man? It seemed he was with me all the time, just as he had promised in my dream.

SKY-WOLF

In despair, I knelt down and ground my fists into the powdery snow, the thin edge of my voice piercing the stillness: “Why am I here?! Why did I come to this place?! I can’t stand it any more! Why on earth did I come here?! I need help.... Help me before I go out of my head!”

My cry was swallowed into blue-green shadows; silence swooped back like an owl’s wing. Only the tall evergreens, their branches heavy with snow, responded: ghostly showers of fine white powder drifted noiselessly to the ground.

Falling forward, I plunged my face into the snow, welcoming its cold caress and the steely taste melting on my lips. Into the earth, I whispered: “Please help me. What am I doing here? Why did I choose this?”

Lying still in the flinty light, my misted breath the only movement, I looked up at the mountains. No longer inspiring, the guardians seemed ponderous, remote, impervious. Leaden, the afternoon sky hung as a callous backdrop. The cold seeped through my clothes. I waited. Nothing happened.

It was madness, to come out and behave like this. Wondering what had possessed me, I got up and on legs stiff with cold trudged back home through the darkening woods, following a winding deer-trail stamped out by delicate cloven hooves. Below, the silver-backed river curved by in sleek silence. The warm honey-glow of the log-house did nothing to cheer me. Drained and chilled to the bone, I pushed open the back door. Nobody was home yet. I was glad of the chance to be alone.

Sivan was in Vancouver, spending Christmas vacation with her father; Natalie and Nicolas had been taken to see a movie in Nelson by their father, who had turned up unexpectedly a couple of days earlier to visit over Christmas. It was the first day Nick had been able to go out since he had fallen ill with shingles; we were both exhausted, but the brief respite from his care made little difference to me. Old, familiar, painful and unresolved issues between his father and me were beginning to erupt and I could see he would overstay the time-span to which I had reluctantly agreed. There was also of a sort of nervous tension affecting me, as I was realising I was not at all suited for the job which had brought me here. My philosophy, values and aims, although in line with the original tenets of the school, were not what the parents wanted. Compromise followed compromise; I felt I was fighting a losing battle for their confidence while failing the children, myself and my own children.

The extraordinary circumstances that had brought me here were forgotten as I began to question the wisdom of leaving the security of the housing co-operative and a decent income working as a fitness instructor and free-lance proofreader in exchange for a tenuous rental and low-paying, stressful employment in a school disliked by my children. Sivan resented having been taken away from her friends in Vernon and I now had little time for all three kids. It

seemed my decision had been based on a selfish flight of fancy. I had left Vernon on the wings of a dream, expecting a new, exciting and fulfilling life; the reality was the erosion of a dream, a host of new difficulties and the same old problems dogging me.

The Christmas break might have offered a chance to draw breath, rest and re-evaluate the situation, but on the first night – the night after Bob left – Nick fell ill. Chickenpox had been doing the rounds; he developed shingles. Apparently there was no treatment for a four-year-old with this distressing illness; all I could do was support him, day after day, night after night, through recurring attacks of acute pain and increasing weakness. A third of his slight weight lost, he had just turned the corner when his father had turned up.

Reflecting in a detached manner on all these circumstances, I stoked the woodstove and settled into the birch-wood rocking chair, placed so I could look up to the westward cleft in the mountains where two eagles had majestically spiralled the thermals, only three months ago. How excited and optimistic I had been then, riding on the words of an attractive, charismatic Native American and the wonder of finding his ancestral village. Where was all the magic now?

Defined on one side by a forest-spined ridge which thrust upwards then fell away, on the other side of the cleft loomed a rocky, snow-draped, rounded peak I had dubbed "the Ringmaster", because in it I could see the curling moustache, bunched cheeks, amused black eyes and surprised brow of a jovial face. I looked to him now – he always made me smile – but could raise no emotion. My mind strangely empty, I stared vacantly into the eagle-cleft as the light faded.

It had been a windless day, grey and still, so the weird movement in the sky made no sense: the clouds, an odd sickly yellow-grey, began to twist oddly, to swirl as if the eye of a storm hung there. Before my incredulous eyes a form began to take shape.

As if a lens were being adjusted by some almighty hand, a face came into focus: an old, benevolent-looking Native American man, gazing into the distance. After a few moments it sort of dissolved and then another form began to manifest: facing away from me, the upper torso and head of a young Native man, the edge of his face just visible, a thick braid coiled over one naked shoulder. Then he too faded.

Gradually, tantalisingly, the clouds regrouped and a third image began to appear: two immense shining eyes ... luminous brow ... shaggy, pale smoky-yellow ruffs of hair ... shadows of pricked ears ... long pale streak of muzzle, dark smudge of nose....

A massive wolf's head filled the sky, eyes and brow lit with an eerie, silvery brightness, intent on some otherwordly distance.

Transfixed, I stared at the fabulous luminescent image for a timeless span, no thought in my mind. Then the image began to blur around the edges. I jumped up to get a pencil and a piece of paper from the table where the children had been drawing and just managed to get some semblance before the wolf's head merged back into the clouds.

I was trembling, my mind racing. Never before had I experienced anything so real and yet so ethereal. Was this what Native Americans called a vision? But I had not gone out into the mountains on a quest. I had not fasted or prayed, night after night. But I had cried out for help. Could a vision happen like this? What did it mean? Or had it been my imagination? Why had I not thought to get my camera? Looking at the all-too-real sketch, I recalled one of the more unusual questions asked at my job-interview: which animal I would most like to be, and why.

Wolf, I had immediately, unhesitatingly responded; for its beauty and grace, spirit and intelligence; for the family and clan life of the wolf-pack; for the ability to work in a team yet howl alone at the moon, lone-wolf-song that seemed to resonate in my blood, my bones....

Now a Sky-Wolf had been put before me. Feeling strangely exhilarated and renewed, I knew

something of great significance had just occurred. From the depths of my being I had asked for help and I had been presented with a response – not a Native man on my doorstep this time but an incredible cloud-formed vision. I had never experienced anything like it; it sang to me, song without words. What could it mean? There was no-one I felt I could ask. Except maybe Bob. But when would I see him again?

Not understanding at the time, I had forgotten the deeper levels of which Bob had spoken during that long night in Vernon: the *Sumix,* the energy or force that lies at the foundation of the Native American spiritual way, also known as the totemic guide or guardian spirit that "walks" with a person, a symbolic representation of the person's subtle energy.

Nor had I any idea that I had thrown myself down and cried and beaten my fists directly upon the resting-place of Bob's ancestors. Some of whom, lost wanderers, were not at peace.

It seemed like my life was falling apart, but I was actually on the brink of an intense, arduous, magical part of my journey: a journey that would bring me to play a small part in the coming-home of the disinherited, fragmented Arrow Lakes descendants and those same people to play a large part in my own coming-home, to myself.

I may have thought I came to Vallican through choice, but I would soon begin to question the freedom of the will, and wonder about the power of the ancestral spirits, beyond space and time, spinning out the threads of the greater Plan.

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Hi dear Reader! You have just read the first six chapters of *A Twist in Coyote's Tale*, the true account of my six years' involvement with the Sinixt First Nation (Arrow Lakes Indian Band) and their struggle for tribal sovereignty and cultural preservation. Increasingly guided by a living shamanic tradition and the great wisdom of Native American philosophy and spirituality, I gradually came to realise my own unique identity and place in the dance of life. Coyote, the trickster-teacher, played no small part in this.

I initially began writing this book to recount some of the magic, mystery and wisdom of the Native American way of life and tell the story of the Sinixt First Nation, but in the writing came to realise that some of my experience might resonate with your own life-journey, perhaps bringing to you some of the clarity and inner peace that now bless mine.

Mitakuye Oyasin (All My Relations)

Celia M. Gunn
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400 pp, which include a section of photographs and maps

For information on how to order *A Twist in Coyote's Tale*, please email celiagunn@aol.com