

This piece is exactly 1222 words. It is unpublished and has been offered nowhere else.

I had a non-fiction piece in the Northern Review, a poem in the Antigonish Review, short fiction in eight anthologies, non-fiction in two, wrote a national column for 20 yrs in the Anglican Church paper and another for 12 years in The Mystery Review. I've had personal essays and features published in newspapers in the U.S. and Canada, journal articles on literary topics and a chapbook with more memoir and poetry. I'd like to submit this true account to Ricepaper.

Thank you. Rose DeShaw 370 Barrie St Kingston On K7K 3T3 (rdeshaw570@gmail.com)

WHEN THE ANCESTORS MADE A MOVE ON OUR SOULS

My mother was dead. My father phoned me long distance.

Her passing was peaceful and not unexpected. Nevertheless, she was gone. I wanted to go somewhere quiet and think before packing for the Okanogan where they lived.

But despite the cost of the call, my father remained on the line. *"Remember what I told you about Lost River?"* he said next, apropos of nothing. *"That Native runner, Pete Sookenna, who was found dead in less than an inch of water?"*

What? Why, of all times would he be bringing up the spirit cliffs near Bering Strait, Alaska where we'd both been born? He met mother when she came up on the boat to teach school. But this wasn't about her but rather a certain isolated place high in the York Mountains that had haunted my cynical father his whole life.

What did Lost River have to do with her death? I'd been there once as a baby on the icy river, wrapped in beaver pelts, lying in the bottom of a walrus skin oomiak. When we got to the mine site, my father threw me to the Inuit standing on that rocky beach without knowing which end of the bundle he threw was screaming. No Native there would venture past the beach.

Above that deep arctic river, limestone cliffs twisted like no earthly northern rock. A ceaseless wind cried through every crevice. 'Willowa' my father called it, the voices of ancestors hanging around to steal away the souls of the living.

"When Pete died, he was carrying the mailbag to Teller, stepping from rock to rock, as he'd done a thousand times. Missed his footing, struck his head and...drowned." I could hear the skepticism in his voice. *"Days later, when he was found, The Mailbag Was Missing."* He emphasized each word in that last sentence, drawing it out slowly. though he'd never been one for dramatics. *"My adoption papers were in that mailbag,"* he said into the silence that followed.

I sat in my darkening kitchen with the phone in one hand, reminding myself I was still in my old bookshop in Ontario where I lived over my business like the queen. He was adopted? Why this story now? My father was a scientific man, precise and methodical, polishing each word before he spoke, like the ore he dug from the frozen tundra.

The reason for his out of character belief about Lost River being haunted was coming clear. It was not Pete's death, murdered by the ancestors, soul stolen along with presumably the mailbag. Though it was anyone's guess what spirits would want with an old leather satchel filled with land deeds and other legal papers.

My father's personal documents in there were the point of all this. Mother had known his secret and never told. Now she was dead, along with the couple who had adopted him, whom I'd known as my grandparents. So he had to look around for someone else to share the secret he'd been forced to carry and defend his whole life, like a child soldier. What was it?

The answer looked back at me from a family portrait on the wall. I reached my hand to the kitchen light switch. Out of the frame my father, brother and sisters looked back, olive skinned, dark-haired, brown eyes. I was right in the center, pink-cheeked and blue-eyed on my green-eyed mother's lap.

With the scarcity of European babies in the isolation around the Bering Strait, coupled with vast epidemics of flu and smallpox that left orphans on the doorsteps of every Aboriginal village and camp, his origins were pretty clear. My childless grandmother had held out her arms, despite her husband's edict: if the child was given the family name, no one could ever know his true heritage.

That lie was to be maintained forever, defended against the speculation and gossip on which such lies gorge themselves, bloat beyond recognition. My father, his parents claimed, was a full-blooded Dane, their descendent, raised as a European to represent them and direct the Natives who worked his parent's mine. As a Dane he would attend university, marry and raise a family without a word betraying the secret that ate my childhood alive from the center out.

Sometimes that festering sore seemed bigger than the universe, spurting out the nightmares that crowded our house, twisting my family like balloon creations, every which way but loose. No friends were allowed over if they had any suggestion of Native features. No languages could be spoken that might label us less than European, no clothing bought outside the pages of Sear's catalogue. Never an explanation as to why.

We were haunted as though the ancestors had found that leaving our souls behind was the greater torment. Tonight my father had put a name to his secret. I called my sisters and brother. No, he'd said nothing unusual. I didn't tell them what I'd heard. We talked about mother and meeting up tomorrow.

I put the phone down and got out ingredients for a meatloaf. In the old days I would've greased the pan with seal oil, stirred ancient eggs into ground-up wild game with seasonings off the land. Why me, I wondered? Why did he tell me?

I opened the oven door and slid the pan inside. *Because of the child*, my mind answered. *The child you adopted yourself*. I reached blindly for a kitchen chair to steady myself, remembering and put my head in my hands. I tended to just think of my children as my own without singling out the one that had come from someplace else.

Many years ago our newspaper had carried a picture of a child placed for adoption. Big brown eyes, olive skin, dark hair. I couldn't get that face out of my dreams. When it turned out that my husband felt the same way, we'd applied to take her and been accepted.

Then I broke the news to my father and mother, threatening, in the same breath that if they ever in any way gave this child the slightest feeling of being unwelcome or not equal with our others, I would cut off all contact and never speak to them again. With his great big secret over our heads like a dirigible in flames, they promised and I was satisfied.

Innocence or maybe ignorance groping in the dark is probably how such mammoth steps clomp down time's stone passages to defeat evil. Maybe I'd always known his secret at some level. It deserved a series of warning labels, among them 'destroyer of families.' By just such insinuation do the devious ancestors slither in to steal away your soul.

Simply, I fell in love with a child's picture in the paper and adopted. I had no thought of making a point nor banishing those moaning spirits that hung about dripping hate like underground waters carving stalactites from what should have been warm human flesh.

My father told me his secret the night of my mother's death because he saw, as I had not, that his journey had begun again with the hand of my brown-eyed child's in mine, this time with a hope of getting it right.

In his own taciturn, solitary way, he was cheering me on.