

**THE OLD WAGON ROAD: TAKING FIELD NOTES  
FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC WORK IN A NORTHERN  
NATIVE COMMUNITY**

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

The author has spent many years working with Dunne-za people in British Columbia. This paper explores the realm of the ethnographer as he learns, and grows in one community, sharing the lives of a few people for a brief period, trying to comprehend from a multitude of experiences. The objective of ethnography is understanding; the objective of this paper is to communicate the process of learning to understand in order to interpret as an ethnographer.

L'auteur a passé plusieurs années à travailler avec les Dunne-za en Colombie-Britannique. Cet article explore le domaine de l'ethnologue à mesure qu'il apprend et grandit dans une communauté, partageant la vie de quelques personnes pendant une brève période de temps essayant de comprendre à partir d'une multitude d'expériences. L'objectif de l'ethnographie est de comprendre. L'objectif de cet article est de communiquer le processus d'apprendre à comprendre afin d'interpréter les faits comme un ethnographe.

## INTRODUCTION

(For Tommy Attachie)

*The Old Wagon Road* describes moments in the life of a northern Indian community. It describes these moments from the point of view of my own involvement with the community and its people. I began to work with the Beaver Indian People as an anthropologist, but found myself learning from them as well as about them. *The Old Wagon Road* reflects both my anthropological understanding of their culture and my personal understanding of moments we experienced together.

A moment in Indian Time includes every other moment shared in the individual and collective memories of individuals, community, and culture. Communication within a small native community relies extensively on a background of shared experience and unstated mutual understandings. Every moment is meaningful in relation to all the other moments that have gone before. Communications within a particular moment refer back to the unstated understandings that connect people's lives together. The moments described in *The Old Wagon Road* include and refer to all the moments I have shared with Beaver Indian people over more than twenty years.

*The Old Wagon Road* is a very personal statement. It reflects my own experience and, more significantly, it reflects intimate, unguarded, and special moments in the lives of people in a community I have known for a long time. I have chosen to write about these experiences now because whatever I have written about culture in the abstract and Beaver culture in particular, is ultimately based upon a communication of personal experience. *The Old Wagon Road* is thus a complement to the more formal, objective and "cultural" anthropology I have written before.

I have subtitled the piece "Talking Field Notes" in that it looks at the shared life of a community from the datum of a particular moment that is preserved as an audio document. Elsewhere (Ridington, 1983 ; 1985 ms) I have written about the work in audio anthropology I have done with Howard Broomfield and Jillian Ridington. *The Old Wagon Road* is the first chapter in a longer work called *Trail To Heaven* that describes cultural and interpersonal issues that were mutually understood but also in conflict during the evening of April 2, 1982.

As I studied these audio documents in writing *Trail To Heaven*, I became especially aware that the meaning of particular events continually refers back to mutual memories and sometimes conflicting interpretations of other events from the past days, weeks and years. My own memories and interpretations are as much part of the event's reality as are those of the other participants. Over time, past events resolve into a pattern that is understood mutually and guides ongoing interaction. Much of what I am able to say now could be modified by the unfolding of future events. The moment of Indian Time is continually being created. It is continually in process.

*The Old Wagon Road* describes some hard times in the lives of people I

know and respect. It describes their strengths in relation to their moments of anguish. It describes their triumphs and their adherence to the spiritual values that have always given them strength. These values are reflected both in the traditions and teachings of their Dreamers and in their integration of these teachings into Christianity. I hope the reader will take what I have written as a teaching rather than as a curiosity. I hope the people who revealed their lives to me will recognize that I have also revealed myself in what I have written about them. I hope they will be tolerant of any misunderstandings or inaccuracies in what I have written.

## THE OLD WAGON ROAD

In the evening of April 2, 1982, a Friday, we drove out the old wagon road people used to take from their cabins to the store at Cecil Lake. The Mennonites who live past where the road crosses the Osborn still keep it open with their tractors and 4X4's. In the 60's they used to go to town on tractors, even in 40 below weather. The Beaver Indian People went to town on big sleighs the size of a small pickup truck when it was cold. In the summer they went by wagon.

I travelled the old road by wagon once in the summer of 1966. I rode with Tommy Attachie and his dad, Murray Attachie, in the wagon that still sits out behind where the Attachie house used to be on the Doig River Reserve, 50 miles northwest of Ft. St. John, British Columbia. Tommy and I rode in the back of the wagon. Murray drove the team sitting next to Tar Davis. We were going out to pick up a big bull moose Tar had shot the previous evening. I have a picture of us standing in the wagon holding up wine jugs full of water for the hot dusty day on the road. Tommy rode in the back of the wagon because he had burnt his leg when he rolled into a fire coming off the drunk after the stampede at Ft. St. John. He could not ride a horse or walk very far but the wagon ride gave him something to do on the move.

As the old wagon lurched and bounced its load of meat and meat eaters down the road on our return to Doig, Tommy and I played a game of startle. He would remain quiet with the patience of a tree, then jump toward me with a word or gesture. I replied with whatever came to mind. I remember once calling out the name of Black Bear, Sas in Beaver. It was an exchange of Bonding like arm wrestling. It said that Tommy and I were friends and would respect one another for who we were. It also revealed that beneath the placid surface of a slow day's journey were sudden edges. Through the game, Tommy tested my sensitivity to the inner world of his dreaming. Tommy was 23 years old in 1966. I was 26. Tommy began to speak of the world of his dreams. His dream life revealed and explained the edges that cut across the path of his life as it appeared to be on the surface. His dreams explained the fire and his burned leg.

Tommy told me he knew from dreaming that an enemy with power in his mind had attacked him and driven his body toward the edge of the fire when his dreaming mind was clouded by alcohol. While Tommy's body struggled to restore itself, the enemy continued to direct his mind's power against Tommy.

The recovery did not go smoothly. There were infections that undermined his strength. Tommy focused all his life's energy on dreams in which he could confront the enemy. He drew upon powers that were the secret legacy of his training in the bush as a child. I knew he was referring to his medicine powers but it was not appropriate for him to reveal these to me at that time in our relationship.

Finally, he was able to identify and confront the enemy. The confrontation took place in a dream. They faced one another squarely, mind to mind. The edge between them was the possibility of death. Tommy knew he had the power to kill the enemy. He opened his mind to reveal that knowledge to him. Tommy also knew he did not wish to kill. He did not want to take that man's burden on his own destiny. He thought of the Creator. He thought of what the Dreamer like Charlie Yahey said about the Trail to Heaven, Yagatunne. A person who killed would be too heavy from the wrongs done by his enemy to follow the trail of song up to heaven. When his trail on earth came to an end his shadow would have to walk by night back along the trail he took by day during his life. Tommy opened his mind to the enemy as he thought of what the Dreamers said. Faced with the combination of Tommy's power and his adherence to the Dreamers' teaching, the enemy retreated. After the dream confrontation, Tommy began to recover. Soon he was well enough to ride in his father's wagon.

As Tommy told me the story of his medicine fight and the teachings of the Dreamers, he began to sing some of their songs. These songs are sent down by the Dreamers in heaven to those who remain on earth. People who have died and are light enough of spirit may follow the turns of the song trails upward. Those who have done harm to others fall back to earth as shadows. Sometimes people come together to dance to the Dreamer songs. They dance together along a common path that circles the fire. They circle the fire together like the sun that circles the sky in its daily and yearly movements. They circle like the swans and geese that bring with them the turn of the seasons. They circle together to dance away the bad feelings that separate them. The Dreamers say that each turn around the fire takes away from the time a person might have to walk back as a shadow along his tracks. They say that dancing together brings people closer to their relatives in heaven.

Tommy's voice rose and fell like the turns of the old wagon road. I thought of the horse trail that lay under the wagon road and of the older foot path that was still real in the memories and stories of people like Tommy's Grandmother. Tommy accompanied his songs with a regular rhythm. He tapped his right hand against the left palm held up as if it were a drum. The beats were like the fall of human feet on the trail. The Dreamers say that a good person can grab hold of a song's turns with the mind. I remembered that Tommy said he thought of heaven when he revealed the power in his mind to the enemy. Thoughts of heaven seemed to flood over us, like the beam of sunlight that reaches down to earth from between the hunched shoulders of a turbulent sky. Thoughts of the old people and their trails that lay beneath our own swirled around the hard dry old wagon, as it creaked and bounced its way through the quiet poplar forest and down toward the crossing place on the Osborn.

We were bringing food home to the people. It was a happy time. Tommy's leg was getting better. His enemy had backed off and Tommy was riding in his father's wagon singing Dreamers' songs. The wagon was heavy with the quarters, ribs, head, hide and various other parts of a large moose that had given itself in a dream to Tar Davis, who spoke little but hunted as if he were born to it. I was with these people as a different kind of hunter. I carried a tape recorder, notebook and camera rather than a rifle. I recorded the songs and oratory of Charlie Yahey, the Dreamer, of Old Man Aku, who was already a strong hunter and family man in the first decade of the century and of Tommy's grandmother, Nachi, who knew the trails people traveled before they had horses. On that summer day in 1966, I studied the territory of Tommy's experience with my mind alone. I hunted for the inner meaning of the stories I was told.

By the Spring of 1982, the old wagon road was a pickup road. On the night of April 2, the ruts and ruin of the last summer's gumbo were still frozen solidly in winter's embrace. Even a little highway car like my Diesel Rabbit could make it through, by riding astride the frozen furrows where Mennonite and Indian pickups lurched and skidded their way through the muskeg patches. The car passed easily over the Osborn on a bridge of ice and snow that painted the river into the surrounding snowscape. In the world beyond the Doig River reserve, the Falklands Island conflict was about to become headline news. The summer's devastation of Beirut had not yet come to mind. I was on sabbatical leave from teaching anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. I had returned to Doig with my friend and colleague, Howard Broomfield, an audio artist and documentarian. We were continuing an ongoing project of documenting how the Beaver people were adapting to the transformation of their old hunting way of life into something different, but also something fundamentally familiar.

The evening began with a slide show of pictures I had taken during previous visits to Doig. People of all ages crowded into the steamy pungent warmth of the house that had belonged to Tommy's grandmother. After she died, Tommy's brother, Gerry, and his wife Bernice, took it over. With every slide that came on the screen, a chorus of voices called out the names of people and recollections of times the pictures brought to mind. The only silence came when I showed pictures of Mackenzie, Tommy's best friend and cousin who had died of exposure a year before. Tommy did not come to the slide show. He lives alone in a house set back from the others. He likes to think of himself as an old man. The boys call him Old Man Red. His house is "The Mansion on the Hill" after a song by Hank Williams. It is also known as the Tommy Attachie Personal Care Home, because from time to time it is the refuge of younger unmarried men and boys. Howard and I were staying at Tommy's, but spending much of our time visiting other people in the village.

Gerry's house is a major social centre at Doig. Gerry is as sociable as Tommy is withdrawn into the solitude of a world that continues to feature fierce struggle with dark and hostile forces, alcohol and sharp edges that periodically cut his life into ragged slices. Gerry likes to drive around in vehicles. He has a truck, a van and a car. He likes to watch TV. He has been to meetings and conferences

Ottawa and Vancouver. He has many friends among the white people who live in the areas important to the Doig River band. He is proud that there is a town on the Peace River named Attachie after his grandfather, Old Man Attachie, who died in the terrible flu of 1919. Gerry was 17 when I first met him in the Spring of 1966. He wanted to be like Elvis Presley and Cassius Clay. There is still a bit of Elvis in Gerry's self image, but he has also matured into a responsible family man. He is now Chief of the Doig River band. With the death of Murray and Alice, the parents of all nine Attachie children, Gerry has taken on the role of step-parent for his younger brothers and one of his sister's children, as well as beginning his own family with Bernice. Gerry and Bernice go to the Rose Prairie Christian Evangelical Church. It provides them with many important social contacts in the white community. They go to town often, but do not visit the beer parlour or liquor store.

When I first met Gerry, he told me about having been very ill a few years before. In hospital with a high fever, he experienced his shadow leaving his body. He told me that he looked down on his body from above the bed. Then the Old People in heaven communicated with him. They told him to go back down and join his body. After the fever broke, Gerry came back to the world of Elvis and Doig. In 1966 he had a single long white hair growing from his eyebrow. Charlie Yahey, the old Dreamer I had been recording, told him not to pluck it. In 1982 the long white hair is gone. Gerry is a father and a Christian but he also continues to believe in the Dreamers. He knows that the trails of the old people still exist beneath the roads he travels by car.

After the slide show, people in Gerry's house settled down to watch Dallas on TV, but Gerry was restless. After watching for a short time, he suggested that we drive out the old wagon road to hunt. Although we might have chanced upon a moose on the road, Gerry really wanted just to go for a drive in the moonlight. Our expedition consisted of Gerry, me, Howard Broomfield, Gerry's 18 year old brother, also named Howard, and Howard's 16 year old cousin-brother, Glen. It was still very cold on the evening of April 2, 1982, perhaps 25 or 30 degrees below zero Celsius. Snow squeaked underfoot and under the tires of the little car. Sounds carried in the thick still air as they do under water. The Diesel chortled loudly as it idled to warm up. We piled into the car, loaded with guns, camera, binoculars and tape recorder. A waxing gibbous moon shone brightly enough over the snowscape to cast shadows.

Even just outside Gerry's house I felt very far away from Dallas. At first the old wagon road was rough from frozen ruts and we travelled slowly. It became smooth as we descended into the cut made by the Osborn and crossed over its unseen liquid presence hidden beneath a painting of ice and snow. Above the river we broke out of the low land and its forest cover, onto an open country cleared of its ancient thickly standing poplars by the Mennonites when Tommy and Gerry were kids. We broke out of the forest's shadows and its old memories, into a blaze of light undulating in ribbons and waves like a celestial incandescent surf on the shore of our northern horizon. This was the aurora, Ya Diskwonchi, "lights in the sky." The Beavers say these swooping, swarming presences are spirits who will dance and come down close to the edge

of earth, if you whistle to them. We stopped the car in the midst of stubbled fields that were waiting still for the touch of sun to release their greening. The moon blazed her silver-mirrored light into the snow crystals that lay without number in every direction. She appeared to be swimming, shimmering in a sea of animated spirits that hovered above and around where we stood and whistled deep in the night's clear cold air.

Howard brought out his microphone and tape recorder to take the sounds of our rapturous engagement with these changing spirit beings. I caught sight of them through the eye of my camera. The lights in the sky seemed to respond to us as we responded to them. They did not so much change form as suggest form. They were animated presences of light and movement, rather than shapes with edges and centres. The whistling seemed to intensify their animation. It made us think of life as a spirit of light and motion. It made us think of the old people, who lived and moved along the trails now overlain by roads and fields. It made us think of the light and movement we experience in dreams.

On flat roads between huge fields we drove quickly and quietly, leaving fresh tracks in the light powder of fresh snow that lay on top of the road's compact snow surface. We drove for close to an hour, at one point following the fresh tracks of a lone wolf that was following the road in the course of its own hunting. The place where we stopped to turn around must have been nearly fifty miles away from Doig. It was a gentle wooded hill, that rose like a piece of the past held dear in memory out of the recent transformations of the cleared fields. Gerry said the place is called Old Spruce Tree Hill. He said that Johnny Chipesia, the first Beaver Indian I came to know in the summer of 1959 when I was nineteen, knew this place when he was a child before the flu of 1919. Johnny Chipesia knows all the old trails of this place. He knows where the people of an older time used to make their camps. Spruce trees grow up to their full height on the hill because forest fires always go around it. Johnny's father, Old Man Japasa, had power from the wind and rain. Once, before the flu, he called on his power to extinguish a fire coming toward their camp. The old spruce trees have withstood settlers as well as fires. They stand as they have always stood, a place of refuge and security. The Dreamers say the world's centre is a place where one tall spruce tree stands apart from the others. The spruce tree is an old woman of knowledge. Her presence is revealed through many stories. I had a sense of being close to her on the hill that is circled by fire. On the evening of April it was circled by the aurora's cold fire, circled by a lone wolf, circled by frozen fallow fields, circled by memories going back before any of us were born.

We stopped the car in a clearing where an oil rig had driven its hopeful pipe deep into the earth a decade before. Now, only the capped dry well marked the clearing's centre. We made tracks in the snow, watched Jupiter and Saturn, caught in the rim of spruce trees that guarded the clearing, begin their final descent toward the horizon. We puffed clouds of warm breath toward the moon, stomped our feet, took turns with the binoculars and then began our return to the distant warmth of the houses at Doig. The drive back made Gerry think of his memories. As we passed places he knew, Gerry told us who had camped

there and when. I thought of the stories he knew from his grandmother. At one place we stopped the car. Gerry pointed out the meat drying racks and lean-to poles of an old summer camp, standing empty and bare like the cold Bones of a past that has receded into the abstraction of memory. "This is the place where Eskama used to camp." She was Gerry's grandmother's sister. She raised Gerry's wife, Bernice.

When I first came to Doig in 1966, Bernice was a little girl. I stayed with Eskama and her husband, Jack. I remember Eskama sitting among the summer's blush of fireweed, unfolding fresh moosemeat with her knowledgeable knife, into thin wide sheets that she hung to dry on poles, like the ones that stood here silently beside the lonely tracks of a wolf on the move. The old camp spoke of memories Gerry and I shared. Gerry also remembered being in the old campsite more recently. During the past summer, he and Bernice came over to the old camping place by car. They did not bring tents or camping equipment. They spent the night sleeping next to Gerry's enormous 1972 Chrysler New Yorker. During the night, they woke up and saw a Grizzly bear close to where they were sleeping. After that they tried to sleep in the car but could not get to sleep. Finally they drove back to Doig.

The drive that night out the old wagon road was bounded on one end by Dallas, and on the other by a capped oil well on Old Spruce Tree Hill. In between these two points we felt part of the sky spirits dancing. I wrote in my journal:

The sense of place is very strong. Gerry knows it all. We are scooting over the trails they took with wagons each summer and earlier on pack and saddle horses and on foot. The driving is a restoration of that relationship. Gerry pointed out tent frames and drying racks where they camped when Eskama and his grandmother were alive - where they camped in more recent summers, where they saw a Grizzly bear last summer when they were sleeping on ground beside the car and had to get up and drive home in the night. It was a story-telling lesson for Glen and Howard who went with us.

When we returned to Doig, Howard and I squeaked our way up the snowy path to Tommy's house, the Mansion On The Hill. Just about everyone and every thing at Doig has a name taken from popular culture, as well as a nickname in Beaver, and an official name used by outsiders. Tommy, the old man, is both Old Man Red, and Mahzon, his Beaver name. Even though he is 3 years my junior and I have known him since his early 20's, I sometimes find myself relating to him as I did to the old people I knew 15 years before. Tommy is more like the old people, than he is like the free-wheeling, jet-setting Gerry, although both know and respect the Dreamers and their songs.

Tommy's fierce fascination with the dark side of his nature that is released by alcohol has made it impossible for him to establish a lasting relationship with a woman. He lives alone because in his moments of ecstasy he turns the hunter's

determination against those closest to him. His house is The Tommy Attachie Personal Care Home, where younger men visit and stay during the times when Tommy honours the sharing and caring part of his nature, but it is also his Mansion on the Hill, his solitary preserve. Tommy is a teacher who knows the stories of his grandmother and the songs of the Dreamers. He has a fine loud clear voice, and he knows the names of the Dreamers who brought back each song down the Trail to Heaven, Yagatunne. Young men come to him to learn and listen, and to practice their own mastery of the tradition.

When Howard and I creaked up the frozen wooden steps to Tommy's porch, past his black dog Saniwich, and entered the candle lit warmth of his mansion, we found him in a benign and expansive frame of mind. The spirits of ya disk-wonchi, the northern lights, seemed to flow into Tommy's house with the cloud of cold air that created a momentary halo of mist around us, as we stood at a point of transition framed in the doorway. Moosemeat was cooking in a fry pan on top of the crackling airtight heater, whose sheet metal sides resonated like a tin drum. Tommy was not alone. With him were Delmer, a young man who had spent his early years in white foster homes, and Leo, Bernice's older brother. Delmer had brought two dozen beer and a bottle of Silk Tassle whiskey back from town, but the mood was gentle. It was a time for eating and sipping, and perhaps singing, rather than for the fierce isolation of a major drunk. It was the Tommy Attachie personal care home at its best.

During the five days we stayed at the care home, Tommy was gracious and learned in his attention to the dreamers' songs. The enemies that I knew still raged within his mind seemed to have retreated, as they had during the time when Tommy and I bounced and rattled along the old wagon road behind his father's team. Younger men were coming to him to listen and sing the songs. Tommy told stories about his early life that Howard and I recorded. He seemed to be getting over two recent traumatic events, the death a year before of his close cousin, Mackenzie, and the break-up the summer before that with Matilda, the only woman he ever seems to have really loved. During the summer of 1981, I had seen Tommy nourish the enemy within in response to his grief. Our conversations then resonated with the struggle between attack and defense that raged within him. Only the dreamers' songs seemed to keep him from falling wholly into the vortex of his worst fears and cravings.

In early June of 1981 Tommy had confided some of his torment to me. We were in the King Koin laundromat in Ft. St. John. Our clothes swirled and tumbled next to one another. All around us, the ordinary world of white people was busy with its own orderly facade. The other people in the laundromat did not see Tommy. They saw only a slightly disreputable, possibly drunk or hung-over, heavy-set Indian man of indeterminate age, whose missing front teeth testified to the violence and poverty of his integration into their world. We had spent the previous day together interviewing an old man named Jumbie, who is very dear to me. Jumbie had been in the Peace Lutheran Care home in town for several years, but I had known him as a hunter, singer and storyteller, when I lived close to him between 1965 and 1970. Jumbie was very old, and lived almost entirely in a world of dreams. Jumbie had touched Tommy and told him,

"You be like me." Tommy said this meant that Jumbie saw into his mind's power to dream ahead. Tommy had told Jumbie that he knew about Mackenzie's death before it happened, but could not prevent it.

The thought of Mackenzie and of death seemed to release a flood of fierce anguish in Tommy. His eyes locked onto mine and the laundromat seemed to fade into a hazy, half-forgotten shadow world. "I can defend myself with thunder and wolf," I heard him say. The grip of his eyes reminded me of the strength in his hands. "You know, Robin, I love you guys, you and Howard. That's the power. I could kill you if I wanted to but I love you so much I can't do it." In my own mind I heard Tommy, talking about the love and violence bound up in his sense of self. I knew that Howard and I stood for some part of Tommy about which he felt both love and violence. Tommy let go of the eyes that bound us together. The laundromat began to creep back from around the edges of my vision. Tommy spoke the name of the first Dreamer, Makenunatane, whose name means "his trail goes over the edge of the world." He spoke the name of his successor, Maketchueson. He spoke the name of Jesus. Then he made a solemn cross with his hand in the air, and concluded with "praise the lord," spoken as he has heard it chanted by evangelical Christians. Tommy said, "Jumbie touched me on both ears." He touched me as Jumbie had him. He repeated, "Jumble said, 'you be like me!'"

The clothes continued to tumble behind us like psychedelic soap operas. The white people continued to move as slow-motion shadows in and out of the walls. I remember thinking, "This is like something that might happen in the Dreamtime of Australia." Tommy had reminded me that he is an aborigine, a person with roots in the mythic, dreaming, power places of this continent. Tommy was transforming the laundromat into a dream for me. He began to speak about Mackenzie. I remembered that Mackenzie and Tommy were raised together. Their grandmother, Nacheen, lavished her stories on the two boys. Mackenzie's father was Alice's brother. That made them cousins, of the kind that would allow them to marry each other's sisters. They could call each other Klase, brother-in-law. Tommy was born on January 10, 1943. Mackenzie was born on April 4, 1942, the length of a pregnancy apart. They were like light and dark halves of a single being.

Tommy's voice took me back to a time when he and Mackenzie were young. The old people used to send kids out into the bush alone. They sent them out to get power from the animals. I had known, since the time we were together on the old wagon road, that Tommy had power. Now was the time he chose to reveal more of himself to me. The old people knew that Tommy and Mackenzie were complementary halves of a whole. The old people sent them out into the bush together. The two boys were afraid. They knew the stories of the animals. They knew about them, but they did not yet know them. The animals must have been waiting for them. At the proper time, they revealed themselves. The boys may have slept on their tracks. They may have dreamed of them. They may have seen their animals and followed them. They may have played with their pups. Coyote was the animal that came to Mackenzie. Wolf came to Tommy.

The old people listened for Tommy and Mackenzie in their dreams. When they heard the boys crying they knew it was time to come and get them. The boys they found in the bush were different from the ones that had left camp together. They were shy and wild like their animals. The sounds of people talking and the smell of smoke were foreign to them. The old people treated them like babies. They took them back to camp and washed them. Then they turned the boys loose to grow in their own ways.

Tommy's eyes fixed on mine again as he brought himself to confront the loss of his light half, the partner who could flirt with his sisters. After Mackenzie died, Tommy told me, he walked down to the bridge over the Doig River. It was early spring, not long after breakup. He took off his wide-brimmed, brown felt cowboy hat. He took off his jeans jacket. He took off his riding boots. Then he climbed over the railing and jumped into the cold high muddy waters of the Doig River.

The Old people heard the kids crying in their dreams. They came to where they were in the bush and found them. They treated them like babies. They washed them.

Now, Mackenzie is gone, and Tommy wanted to throw his life away. He was half drunk when he hit the water. He went down and down into the water. He went down until he hit bottom. He went down to the river's muddy bottom, like Muskrat who brought the first dirt that became the world. The cold and shock made him gasp for breath. His lungs filled with water. The water was moving quickly, after having been locked in the cold of winter. Tommy's body was rushed along by the current. It scraped and bounced along where the river bed became rough with silt and gravel. Then, in a swirl of different energy, the river pushed him up to its surface. Tommy partly came to. He tried to breathe. He tried to swim, but in another caprice, the river pulled him down again to its darkness.

The hot soapy water of the laundry continued to pull and swirl at Tommy's clothes. I could feel their wetness and the turbulence of their motion as they whirled around and around behind the sealed glass door. I could feel the turbulence of the Doig river in spring flood, pulling one half of the two boys toward the other. I could feel Tommy next to me making the words of the story with his breath. I could feel his breath, his life close to mine and far away from the King Koin laundry. I could feel his body, as it swept and circled with the dark cold eddies of the river.

Finally, the river drew Tommy close to shore. He saw the branch of a tree reaching out from the river bank. He stretched his arm to touch the branch. He fixed his watery eyes upon it. For a moment the river seemed to stop its noisy turbulence. For a moment Tommy's eyes cleared and focused. His vision came into focus on the drooping tree branch. There were ants on the branch.

As he reached out in a time out of time, the ants extended to Tommy the power of their own teeming vitality. They tried to help him. They talked to him. Once before, when he was a child, they had talked to him. That time and this time merged into a single moment. Tommy became the swarming power of ants everywhere as he had been then and would be forever more. He knew them

as they came to him. He knew them as he knew himself. He knew as well that he was very heavy, too heavy for even the ants to pull from the water.

Tommy thought about what they could do for him. He remembered that he could call them, by singing the song they gave to him when he was a baby. He knew that he could take a dry ant and send it into someone. He could send it into their eyes, their nose, their ears. He could enter their body through any opening an ant would be able to find. Tommy knew he could do that, but he thought of the Creator. He thought of the Dreamers and their songs. He knew he could not use his power in that way. Ants look small. They seem to be weak but there are many of them. They are everywhere. They can help people, as well as harm them.

Tommy thought about how he could use his power from ants to help his family and friends if they were in trouble. Then he let go of the branch. The ants had moved across to his arm. They were thick like mosquitoes. They covered his arm. They touched him where he had reached out to renew contact with them, but Tommy was still heavy with grief and loss and cold water and despair and alcohol. He went down beneath the water for a third time.

When he floated up to the surface once more he felt as if he had died and come to life again. He felt like muskrat must have felt, when he floated to the water's surface with the world under his fingernails. The ants were gone as a dream is gone upon waking. It remains real but it has gone to a different place. The ants were real to Tommy, as his dreaming is real. They were real like the child within him, the twin child missing its complement. He felt like one of the Dreamers, who returned to the body he left on earth while his spirit was flying along the trail to heaven. The body to which his spirit returned was bruised and waterlogged. It spit up brown water and bright red blood from the lungs. The river floated Tommy's shivering, gagging physical vessel toward a gentle shore and gently gave it the world.

As a result of his ordeal, Tommy came down with pneumonia. He was still weak and coughing when he told me the story of his brush with death, in the warm soapy atmosphere of the King Koin laundry. He was hurt, but healing, just as he had been when we rode the old wagon road together in 1966. The edge of his life remained the possibility of death, brought closer now by the loss of Mackenzie, his complement. This time he had come very close to the edge in his confrontation with the enemy within.

The wet warm agitation of our clothes stopped. They began to spin like dervishes. When they finished spinning, I trundled them over to the drier. Tommy had taken his departure. I could expect to find him later in the beer parlour of the Fort Hotel, or passing a jug in the little park next to the liquor store. I retreated to the car to write down my notes on Tommy's revelations.

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