

The Runner

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The breath was coming in even and cold. The lungs took in the air and expelled the spent air in puffs of small, dense clouds. The route was well worn along the canal, other runners ran past him the other way. No one running this day could be out of shape; this was city air, the going can be hard. He was an evenly-paced runner even on the inclines. He was near his high-rise apartment building now, and he felt invigorated. The wind had risen ever so slightly causing little running snow shapes—the kind that whips the snow into swirls like whipped cream. He entered his apartment, a conventionally furnished place of a spartan professional man. He rested for a minute and turned on his message machine. A voice cracked in, something about “Phone this government office as soon as possible.” He saved the message and went into the shower. His coffee was brewed by the time he started to get dressed for the day.

The phone rang and he smiled. It was mother, the usual chat was carried on, and she ended with, “Be careful my boy.” They always spoke in Cree, and her soft voice reassured him like a favourite chiming clock. He prepared a simple breakfast while he listened to Aaron Neville’s “Like a bird on a wire,” a Leonard Cohen song.

He grabbed his car keys on his way out, the government phone number in the inside pocket of his custom-made navy suit. The sun was now a small distant orb struggling to gain height. He drove out of the parking lot, and sang his thanksgiving song for another day of life.

His office was in the Justice Department, not the best four walls. Nonetheless, it was a place where he could toil and pour over documents belonging to various government offices requiring a lawyer's eye for detail. He fished out the phone number. It was a deputy minister's office to a cabinet minister. A senior bureaucrat had died, and all sensitive papers had to be retrieved, and sent to the archives. All current papers were to be labelled; personal papers were to be gathered to be given to family. He had drawn the duty at random. He checked the address, he could walk there. Everything could wait here.

His office had the same pile of documents from the late afternoon of the previous day. He crossed a windy stretch of wide-open space. It had an imposing look in warm weather. Right now it was plain cold. He hurried out of the frigid air.

The room he was shown was a well-appointed office where the staff appeared to be busy. Banker boxes were there and other receptacles were on hand. He paused for a minute as he hoped the man was resting in peace. He worked quickly on the desk, which was closest to the person, and was probably untouched by staff. The desk was neat, everything in its place. One folder appeared without a label. Inside was an old-looking letter. The writing style sent a shock to his brain. The paper was flimsy, and it was five pages in number, which was spread out so his fingers were not all over it.

He was transported back home in an episodic memory. The letter writer was famous now, written about in books, locked forever in the shameful history of the Ewing Report—a subject for rich dissertations. The Glenbow Museum brought up or simply acquired his papers and photos. Even in death there was so much to say.

This letter described in detail a very puzzling, almost fatal, incident.

James had not appeared at the family home for a few days, though Dad had waited for him three days in a row. James was tutoring him in public speaking. Mother and Dad had discussed the said missing tutor without doing what he, the listener, could not yet talk about. Why didn't they just go see why he was not coming? He was too young to remember any more details, but he remembered enough to know the parents were worried.

The government offices and government employee dwellings were just behind the RCMP buildings. On the fourth evening, at the appointed hour of 8:00 PM, James had appeared. He was wane in colour and slow in movement, and he appeared injured with facial bruises. The flimsy papers explained to this friend what James remembered that night.

James was up late translating French text into English. The translation was from Marcel Giraud about the Métis. He gave up around midnight. His housemate was still out. Around 4:00 AM, James was awakened by a curious noise. He failed to hear it again to figure out what it was. By this time, he had to go relieve himself. He did remember leaving his room, but nothing after that.

He woke up at the bottom of the cellar stairs, staring up at the open cellar door. He tried hollering. Finally, the roommate appeared and shouted, "What are you doing down there?" James had a sharp wit. He gathered himself up and said, "Resting!" He was livid. He had no broken bones, but he was bruised heavily about the face, and he was black and blue all over. The cellar was deep, and he had tumbled head first, literally ass over tea kettle. The roommate, realizing the nature of the accident, pointed out the fact that he had walked over the cellar door, and the ring to pull the trap door was on the other side. Whoever had left the cellar door open had to pull hard on that ring as the trap door was heavy and unwieldy. It was hard to pen even for a strong man. If this was a joke,

it was deadly. James and his roommate studied the situation. He told his roommate to say nothing.

“I will stay until I feel better. I have pulled some back muscles. One of us was the target.” James went back to his translation work wearing his balaclava to keep the cold to a minimum. By the time he had to tutor Dad, he was merely philosophical about the incident. We all have to go some day. Dad worried for his friend. But he had been exhorted to say nothing. The rest of James' story is in a book with an excellent bibliography.

He disappeared in a northern lake. There was no body or bodies to be found. He had one of the best minds that this hapless country had ever produced. Killing him would have been easy. People do disappear, but not even any bits of clothing were found. Two theories emerged: James was old and out of shape for prospecting. He had made the trek into the bush after reaching the site by canoe. The canoe was found floating up right and empty. Its mooring rope had been loosely tied to a weak tree branch as if a child had the important task of securing the canoe. Both men drowning (a First Nations man went missing too) is possible except that the canoe was found afloat, still tied and empty. The other theory: James became ill and the much younger partner panicked, tried to get help, and turned over the canoe into the frigid water.

Every able bodied man and boy had searched under fallen trees for any trace of human remains. Planes flew low over clear water lakes for any sign at all. The trails were cold, the searches were called off and the two missing men were deemed as having met with their great misfortune by way of an accident. Those were the accepted facts. Any lingering doubt had dissipated into a closed case. The mind is the greatest trickster. It convinces weak men they are strong. Truth becomes relative in the mind of a liar. He had to be prudent about whatever speculation he was tempted to indulge in.

The lawyer thought for a few seconds barely stopping at his task. Was he meant to see this letter? His job as a lawyer was not a token even though glass ceilings did exist in the oddest places. He earned his degrees with plain hard work. Opportunity did knock, and he had to compete like everyone else. His Anglicized name made a few eyebrows shoot up when he entered a room. His dark skin and facial features screamed Indian. He knew he was a damned good lawyer. His credentials started in Saskatchewan, continued on at Harvard and lastly Columbia. This opportunity to work in the nation's capital had come from a national search that he had applied for. He was qualified and he took this job. He had never been afraid of book learning.

As soon as his parents realized his powers at focusing were above average, they encouraged him to take on intricate tasks. At times, it meant mending nets and other times tackling the lattice work of a snowshoe. He could break trail early in his boyhood, and very soon had his share of three powerful sled dogs. He had to look after them winter, spring and summer, and fall. After completing tasks, he did his homework at the kitchen table. When he found it necessary to use the coal oil lamp for longer stretches, he purchased his own by delivering barrels of water for fifty cents.

Self-efficiency was one of his major traits of self reliance. Consequently, the parents did not worry when he went away for high school in one of the hostile satellite towns. Roughing it with ten other boys from reserves and villages, he learned to mind his business even when they stole his toothbrushes and toothpaste. He boiled his toothbrush before he put it in his mouth. He scoured the town for odd jobs, did them, and banked his money. He paid for his first-year university fees that way and scored a scholarship. One of those bozos had the nerve to comment how lucky he had become to be doing so well. This comment came after meeting that fellow at the corner gas station where he was waiting to

catch a ride back home. He had a car by then and was heading back to the city. Yes, he would have given him a lift though the latter smelled of sour pickles, two days of sweat, and stale beer.

By now, he knew what discipline of study he was going to pursue. There was a branch of international law in the financial world that seemed like a good challenge. When he told his parents his long range plans, they wanted to know how long it was going to take. Seven years he thought, if the money held out. At twenty-two years, he already had the makings of an elder. The calm intelligent face looking directly at them never showed hidden agendas or the anxiety of self doubt. It will take seven years they agreed silently.

“I will phone you,” said his mother. They now had a phone system and hydro.

Dad said, “I will meet you in the city if you don't have time to get home.” They owned a truck for their mud and gravel roads. The solemn looks they showed would be the extent of their emoting. However, he felt a strong undercurrent of concern.

Upon his arrival in this capital city, he checked out its dwelling possibilities. After Manhattan, this was going to be easy. He had selected this upscale apartment building because it had a door man and cameras at the front entrance. The underground garage was another thing altogether. Anyone could slip in once the doors opened. He took note of that and outfitted his new car with a steering wheel lock.

The next morning, after seeing the letter, he looked directly at the twin tower facing the same canal. The windows, probably in the bedroom, faced the huge windows of his apartment. He noted that he had to buy aluminum blinds as soon as possible. Next, he cased the crooks and crannies of the living room, not much there yet. He didn't even own dust catchers, but two prints he had

purchased at MOMA showed off their vivid colours on one wall. He was going to have to set traps, snares and wait for the big bad wolf. He chuckled to himself, one month in this city and you are already paranoid.

In his now long gone youth, he always was the one who felt any sense of foreboding. Time for a little offering to the ancients; he selected a spot away from the fire alarm and sprinkler system. He asked for guidance and protection. This town was going to drive him crazy as a fox, or worse downright squirrely. It would not take long to feel their presence, and thoughts or insights would come. He was comfortable doing the invocations. Then his mother phoned.

"I smell sweet grass," she said. He smiled. She always did whenever he made an offering for guidance and protection. She never asked. "Is anything wrong?" she just wanted to remind him to be thankful.

He thought, "I have to phone Ralph." He had a classmate named Ralph in international financial law. Ralph became a Medicine Man and worked at the provincial jails and the penitentiaries. He had a law degree, but his main work was untwisting the minds of troubled youth, sorting the deviants from the plain unlucky who had no money and no smarts to stay out of jail. His advocacy work kept him short of cash, but rich in the knowledge of human behaviour, and the quirks of those lacking cultural upbringing. A long time ago, he told Ralph to start writing a book just on Aboriginal people and their needs.

He phoned him from a phone booth. Ralph was waiting for his call, no point asking why he knew. The advice was simple: "Watch your back. Start digging around. Who else received that letter?"

James was cautious and smart with friends all over the world.

"He trusted very few people, but find them if you can guess who they were." He paused, "he had a sister who was a nun. He kept correspondence with her."

“Weren't those letters read?”

“Yes, but very well archived. Sure he had no luck with the clergy and religious, but his sister was one of very few confidantes.”

“Look around to see how many real enemies with real money James made. That means the major governments of the continent! All the major organizations with the gas and oil business in Aboriginal country! Poison the water, drain the lakes, fill them with chemical waste, and walk away. Dig for uranium, find it, and wait for somebody to buy trainloads of yellow cake. We have been there when dam employees let go of excess water. Just a few Indians down the river, no harm there; that is the attitude. Catch a few excess kids, ship them off to the buggers looking for free labour when the kid is big enough. No problem, who will notice!”

“Okay, okay stop. I got the message.”

“Start in Montreal, look up the crude on the Arctic Institute. That is one of the most exclusive clubs on the continent. Their job is to make governments look innocent in the same way that churches got into the residential school business. Starve the kids. Make them work for their board and room, and tell them everyday how the taxpayers of Canada are paying for their lives. I'm dealing every day with the lost souls of that debacle. Remember, it went on and on for over a century, while the settler state imported more tax payers. It was quite a racket.”

He made no comment, Ralph backed off. “Thanks, I got the picture.”

Ralph was smarter than him at every turn. When he became a Medicine Man, he knew he was making the right choice in vocation. A magazine, periodical shop was near his apartment building. He needed to read something completely different to give his mind something else to do. He went to scan their

titles. Nothing caught his attention, but out of the corner of his eye a mousey looking woman seemed to be watching him.

The city was full of that kind of women, but he would remember her face and those flickering eyes. Her clothes were nondescript; the sensible shoes looked well worn. He left quickly and waited around the side of the building. She was tracking him. She doubled back but he was gone.

He went out for dinner in a Japanese restaurant where the lights were muted. He had a good view of the front entrance. His server was a breathy sounding very pretty Japanese woman. He stayed focused on the entrance. The order came and when two burly muscle men came in, "ah ha" he thought. But they were there to eat, and took no notice of him because they were trying to chat up the server. It was time to get busy. He was indulging in some serious paranoia.

He had a friend in the Arts Council office. This fellow knew every bit of gossip, names, and a catalogue of their interests. They lived in separate societies because of their interests and professions, but their friendship grew out of their backgrounds. His friend was from Fort Chip. An orphan, taken up by the infamous Alberta Child Welfare system, he and a younger brother came as a package, and were abused as a unit. This friend had to spend time alone once a year. He figured out that he would die in therapy because nothing took away the worst of his memories. It was never about him, but how helpless he felt when his brother was being abused. What saved him were his writings, abstract paintings, and stage performances. It was a pleasure to spend a few hours with him after a day of dealing with dry language contracts and interpreting government policy. His intuition had a shamanistic quality to it, and it was like watching a magician pull rabbits out of a hat. He decided to book a dinner with this friend, and share

a laugh or two. He had to be careful that no one else was caught up in whatever intrigue was floating around.

He assigned himself for tasks. Find out who was the decision maker between 1948 and 1955 at the Arctic Institute. Was it functioning as an entity? Find the academic connections to the giant grants that flowed toward oil and gas exploration. Profits were made by all energy sources including the nuclear business. Dam building was going full blast and was displacing whole Indian villages. None of these industries are clean. Even if they pay compensation, they miss the mark of true compensation by 90%. What was the long range benefit for these industries if destructive tools like ready addictions were made available? Firewater worked once, so did ordinary diseases. Even a bad water supply in the first five years of a child's life will guarantee a shorter life span. A cousin remarked once that for a buck for a bottle of bad wine, people just died sooner at very little cost to governments. When the statistics were rolled out, everybody's eyes glazed over and yawning soon followed. The biggest yawners are government bureaucrats and workers. The media, always the extra dirty shirt, found ways to give the general public the worst possible news as the only news.

He had a whiff of what was afoot when he went home to find out that illicit drugs are being made available by the carload, and were being driven by grandmas making delivery runs for family members who are gang members. Among his other beefs was the inability of most police forces to identify what was going on. Kids who don't want to go to school roaming the streets during much-bingo hours are a sure sign of trouble. The fire starters are all identifiable, so are the sociopaths. For all his education, he was astounded by how much trouble his relatives can get into without ever leaving the community. From the local clinic, Tylenol was prescribed for everything. The biggest fools crushed and heated the pills and injected the residue from diabetic needles and syringes. It

was not against the law: it is poor people getting a minute's worth of rush to the brain. The needles can be dirty with a life time of hepatitis. The poverty is crushing; it can make you deaf and blind. He knew Providence worked in making the right choices for himself.

He could not lose his cool by attracting attention to himself. All the background research is contained in annual reports. The volumes can be ordered or he could ask for them at the archives. "I'll hire a student, pay him to gather the material and ..." Then he remembered an obscure little green book published by Black Rose with a fine bibliography. He took the book to his office the next day and copied the bibliography. He contacted the closest university's research department in graduate studies and found a student. He asked for the student to be discreet about what he was doing with the material. He had a post office box, and he asked her to deliver items as soon as she found them. He found items delivered within a day. He read fast and sorted what he needed.

She returned the reports as soon as she got them back. He had made an enticing deposit on her services. Within ten days, he had something to work with. He paid promptly. If there was a puzzle among all the papers he would ferret it out. He reread the definitive book first written on the "accident." He also knew reams of papers are produced, and the author has to form a narrative that has some coherency. But it is like Métis Scrip papers and the *Indian Act* papers, such as pay lists; what appears on the margins provides analysis because biases and reasons for dismissal are mentioned. Otherwise, it is only numbers. Some children's names are omitted, or were marked as child born or as a girl or a boy. No names, just a notation as a family member. The Canadian government's written records for Indians are in shambles. The only real work was in the accounting and most of that is suspicious.

The Métis Scrip records are worse. Deceased members were assigned scrip, which was allegedly sold by the family. Scrip ended up in settler hands for very little money. The Hudson's Bay Company also paid its retired employees with land scrip it never owned. The Bay had a franchise like McDonalds. In estate law, you can buy a spot to do business in the area. You do not own the area where your suppliers and clients live. The Hudson's Bay Company managed to do that in Indian Territory. The government of the day reassigned whole families out of Aboriginal land, totally impoverishing the family by separating them from kin. The country is large and needs taxpayers to support the governments of the day. That was the rationale. Indians and Métis were expendable. Responsibility could mean seaming twine for fishing; five bucks a year on the national debt to the Indians left standing. For the Métis, who cared?

One of the things said of the Third Reich is that Himmler could brazen anything out. As a sociopath, any lie was handy, and the craziness that existed at the head gave Himmler, a very able bureaucrat, full rein to be exploitative by all means possible. Governments run in such a manner seem to blunder along till it dawns on somebody that the madness is the design.

He just started working in this government maze when it occurred to him that the first hints of having to plan an escape route were there. In the definitive book on James, the government of that day did everything to keep costs down in Indian Country. Medicine was denied, omitted, or was unavailable. People were sent home early from the hospital to save money. But they did have the money to hire somebody to study who were the main workers for the Métis. James was identified early in that history. All the bureaucratic crazy-making machinations are in the book. What was left out? Even if he did all the research, all the players had changed.

All the senior bureaucrats had been schooled in the same way. Among the regions, tribal members in power vied to make no waves. Power brokers have money to bribe, get ride of Native leadership by promoting CEO positions, the most able and effective leadership. Another way is to flatter the potential leadership through recognition and national honour rolls. Howard Adams wrote the book on that. In his time, friends like Ralph averted that fate by sticking to the hardest and meanest jobs. Then there were the artists who looked deep into their cultures and worked the magic amid the oppression. Mainstream society does not understand any of it. It is relegated to Indian stuff, and it all looks the same.

What frontier is left? The settler state has no soul, no love of the land at all; it looks the same for six frozen months. Who exemplifies features unique in the country? Can it be frozen like human eggs to be regenerated when needed? What brings prestige to a country with no ideas of its own? Who is the most different, most colourful now that television is cast in living colour? Who can be the filler in the same dull news of white collar crime? We can go to garbage as a country when roving gangs of drug dealers, pimps, and other real criminals provide good secure jobs in provincial jails. We can film man-made chaos in the streets of prairie towns and cities.

Wow, was he ever on a rant! It matched the best of John George Diefenbaker when he shook his curly and wavy head about! And he did not even attend Indian conferences, where it is guaranteed that someone will lose their new cool and demand therapy from an engaging crowd.

Now he was being mean spirited. Before the ancients came in to give his head a shake, he took his braid of sweet grass and inhaled its aroma. His head cleared, but he was aware that his internal organs were shaking. His indulgence in the litany of shame had to be curbed. That too leads to the bear trap of

depression. Perhaps it was time to visit a spiritual leader who lived within driving distance from the city. He would be expecting him anyway.

In his years of preparing his mind in law, he had chosen to spend time with spiritual leaders and advisors. Within his Catholic faith, their numbers were dwindling. That is the cycle. But he had found a spiritual director that he was seeing on amiable terms. Books had been written as commentary by scholars of the Old and New Testaments, century upon century. The book itself spoke of his thirst for the presence of the deity. That became a source of education for his soul.

He had driven away from the freeway unto a side street when he had to manoeuvre over speed bumps. What if the letter was a metaphor for those speed bumps? It was an interesting idea. Did he have a framework for all his speculative thinking and doing? One wishes to get there as soon as possible. Ego was written all over this one. He was above all a scribe. The careful scribe is a slow mover.

There was also a good reason why he was unattached to anyone, even superficially. Women looked on him with an eye for the esoteric, for potential power brokerage, and a bountiful expense account. When he thought that he impressed someone, they were assessing the cost of his wardrobe. These were educated women who could choose any topic for inspired and lively discussion. Somehow, he was too busy and too focused on the subject he was studying. Worse, his mind had no place for the niceties of social chatter. He was a social dud.

Two things were left to do. The nuns' archives had to be located, and James and his sister's correspondence had to be found. Then he had to find the letter posting James to Uranium City away from his formal and informal education programs for Aboriginal people. James had resigned from the DNR.

Who breathed the biggest sigh of relief after that? Who was disappointed when James had resigned and stayed in the area to prospect? Those were the open questions.

The community development archives would have the answers to the first question. Now the latter required a human behaviour psychologist at home in two world views. He had the name and telephone number. In a way, if this had been a contest, James won.

The educated class of Indian Territory had work to do. It started in the 1920s by four obscure Métis people of vision. *Indian Act* Indians have their heroes, Loft, Sioui, a long venerable list in the 20th century. He wrote a memo to himself: Crime in Indian Country has to be viewed from the tribal clues of human behaviour.

Then he was able to unlock the larger question. James, a diabetic with respiratory ailments and an arthritic ankle, could have become seriously ill in a cold damp isolated place. His last letter spoke of a need for a prolonged hospital stay to address his growing medical problems. Except what happened to the younger, more fit Hallkett? Why did they leave the campsite unprepared for a long haul to their first and only cut line? It seems that James wanted to see how long they could last the first time and find their way back. James, a wood cutter of long experience and a field officer who often went in the wilderness, got lost after cutting a line? The book says the canoe was found pulled up on shore and was tied. That part makes sense. What about the Indian Special Constable who said that the canoe was in the water, and was tied loosey goosey to a tree branch? Is that oral contradiction in the Inquest report? The inquest itself lasted one day with very little new known evidence. Everything is wrong with the evidence, especially with the plane landing in the wrong spot. Exactly how far did the two

men go? James was a smoker, but what about Abbie? James had bone structure problems in his ankle. He walked miles without the signs of a walking stick.

The clues were wide spread: directions of the cut line, found in November are in dispute. Since the site of the claim post was found in November, no search was made because winter had set in. In the book, competent bushmen are described as trappers and prospectors. How about, hunters, trappers, fishermen and berry and plant pickers? How many prosecutors' cases are lost because the evidence is poorly written in the first place?

This part tries hard to turn the page to accidental death by accidents waiting to happen scenarios. The purpose of the book does not penetrate the internal political thinking of Lac La Ronge. It had become inhabited by DNR employees who wanted very few Natives working among them. Some were alleged to be vicious. At the same time, the realm of poison by character assassination, and the lack of true analysis of a given situation might have presented one person capable of cutting through all the rubbish and gibberish, which were events political in nature. Did acrimony run into plotting murder? In the book, the last sentence sounds elegant and seems true: "recognition came later." Except very quickly after the announcement of death by accident, all of James' diaries, papers, photographs, and contacts to a very big world were sold. The biggest haul was made by Glenbow on the surface evidence. How about the cost of liberation itself to the all consuming need to control everything so that all the profits flowing could go into the deepest waiting pockets?

By the early 1970s, the McCord Museum, located across from the McGill campus, had a display of James' memorabilia.

He asked himself: "How could the lives of two disappeared men cast shadows twenty years into the future with an outcropping of bulging

unanswered questions?" Maybe he could be in this apartment a while longer, he rather liked it.

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