

## **April 1, 2019**

### **This Never Happened**

I lived on an island we often referred to as “The Edge of the World” because it was so remote.

The First Nations Tribes up there were called “Bands”. There were two main Clans: one in the North, one in the South. The bands were comprised of Clans and the Clans made up of families. Eagles & Ravens were the two top tiers from which all the other clans descended, married into, etc. Each Clan had its “House” and each House had a Chief, and each Clan had its Chief.

Traditions were thousands of years deep and in all directions, far. Their reputations, even among other bands from other places, was one of a fierce people, who never forgot their culture, despite every abuse colonial governments came at them with.

They maintained their language, their skills of carving, seafaring, fishing, dance, song, art & healing. Spiritual warfare is never spoken about, but people walked softly & wide around certain people, certain graves. The unknown has kept to itself.

The islands were magical. You’d see, hear and learn things there you’d never find anywhere else. The animals would talk, and they’d tell you when you were being stupid.

“Silly Woman!” An Eagle once yelled at me, her voice as clear as any. She turned to her mate, “Help her find her way!”.

I was lost on the beach (ya think it can’t happen, but it does). He never said a word, but he flew ahead of me, about fifty yards ahead at a time, and waited until I caught up, and then another fifty yards, and another, and another, until I was at the place where the truck was parked, and he flew in.

*(I felt both silly and blessed. Mostly silly. But I was happy to no longer be lost. The tide was coming in, and the beaches at high tide left no room for lost wanderers. )*

Potlatches were both political & spiritual. It’s where the clans gathered to do the business of unity, of settling doubts, honoring, celebrating. All the things that needed to be done in the ways they have always been done. Outsiders, even if invited as guests, missed 99 % of what went on at these celebrations, simply because they do not have the 10,000 years of social weaving, unity, language, songs, stories to make it all more than just entertainment when the drumming, singing, dancing & feasting began.

Potlatches & Pole Raisings are where you’d see the finery come out. The Button Blankets, Cedar Hats, Masks, Regalia, that represented stories, clans, families. The Button Blankets were status symbols of the highest order. The motifs were of the clan you were from or adopted into. Elaborate, and made by stitching tiny and tinier abalone

buttons onto a heavy wool cloth that was contrasted with Red or Black or Blue. If you received your Button Blanket, it was because someone put in a thousand hours to make it for you.

The Cedar and Spruce Roots hats were made by only the most skilled artisans whose hands followed the patterns that had been laid down for thousands of years... from the harvesting of the cedar bark or the spruce roots, to the stripping, the weaving, all done as it has always been done. The culture flowed through the people the way currents flow through oceans. Every part of nature, from the skies to the bottom of the seas, to the tips of mountains and hidden caves and valleys, all flowed through the People.

Our Untrue Story takes place at one such Potlatch at a time that never was. You must not believe a word of this. But many of you will, to one degree or another, because it is based on a real place, real traditions, and by all counts *could*... and for that reason, somewhere on down the line, you might forget and think you remember that it happened, but it never did.

The Potlatch began in the Great Hall. The people gathered from the North & from the South, and some from the Mainland. All the Chiefs were seated in the place of Honor. All the Elders were in their places at the front... Honored Guests, visiting from other lands, and sometimes politicians, also seated but behind the Elders. The tables were end to end filled with every kind of food the Islands could offer: Salmon, Venison, berries, Halibut Stew, baked goods, pies & cakes, fresh buns, all prepared by the hands of the women & their families. Some brought the goods with them, and the rest was prepared in the community kitchen. These feasts were built to go on for days, even if some of the honored guests were not.

The drumming started, and the dancers entered, singing and swaying their songs of welcome... their blankets bearing the emblems of their clans, moving to the steps of songs thousands of years old. Those who wore cedar hats or headbands, felt the strength of the forests, connected to their minds, their spirits the way cedar connected to the people for tens of thousands of years.

And then it happened. The lights went out. (This is where the story diverges depending on whom you never heard it from. I will tell it to you as it was never told to me, and do my best to not confuse you any more than I was when it never happened.

The lights went out and the great hall was plunged into darkness, little flecks of light, like embers from a fire, seemed to whirl around, like a tiny tornado, in the center of the room, casting a weird amber light upon the center of the room. All that could be seen was shadows of the people in front of you, turning to your left or right, was only darkness. All eyes were drawn to the center.

The drumming continued, the singing continued. The dancers entrance flowed as the darkness was in its way, in motion, surrounding the Great Hall in a warmth and a comfort, like sleep, like dreams. Dancers sang & swayed, twirled in slow circles until

they ringed the perimeter of the open space. The circle in motion made it look as if they were going both East & West, North & South at the same time. Dizzying to behold.

A bright light descended from the ceiling, whirling & twirling until it took the shape of a button blanket, wrapped around the shoulders of a woman, dancing in the center. I wasn't told that she danced in the ancient way, and tiny sparks of light flew about her as she slowly turned & swayed to the songs. I wasn't told that she was an old woman, who danced with the strength of a young woman.

The dancers held to the perimeter, but she beckoned them to come closer, and they did.

The men dancers came in next. Their heavy foot beats, stomping, leaping, the clacking of their masks punctuated the air like a flight of Ravens in the forest, chattering their magical stories to be carried by the breezes, by the winds and in the stands of trees so thick that the four directions become one. "Tell your children who they are!" "Remind them!"

Still, the women swayed, & twirled, and the lights came up or everyone's eyes had adjusted to the darkness, everyone disremembers it differently. But there she was, dancing in the center, beckoning the dancers to come closer in. And they did. There was no fear, only the beauty of the dance.

She weaved among the dancers, the women first, and leaned in...

And that's where everyone didn't see what they saw, and everyone saw it differently.

As it wasn't told afterwards: "She was an old, old woman! She looked like my Nuni! And she said something I will never forget!"

Another said: "She looked like my young daughter, whom I missed so much! She smiled at me and my grief both came and went in an instant!"

Some saw her Cedar Hat, some saw her Spruce Roots Hat, and some saw only a Cedar Headband that she wore. Nobody saw her, but everyone saw her.

Another said: "She looked like my best friend, whom I have missed for so long..."

She was an old Grandmother, and young child, an old friend, a long lost loved one... every person saw something different. But they all saw a woman, except for those who didn't see anything at all.

Her hair was jet black, steel gray, pure white, smooth as silk, swaying like seaweed, covered in moss... there was only one woman, but she was not there.

She whirled past the men dancers in their Eagle & Raven Regalia. The tips of their feathers barely touched her button blanket, and their masks lit up and clacked and snapped as she moved by.

“I saw the oldest woman in the world!” one man didn’t say. “Her skin the color of Copper, her hair streaming like starlight!”

“ I saw nothing, but I heard my Chini’s voice remind me to take care of my family...”

And on and on... everyone didn’t see something different. Her Button Blanket was to each of them, their clan’s motif.

Everyone saw something different, but everyone knew they had seen the same event.

No one is clear on how it ended. The dancing & the drumming went on and on it seemed like forever. The Great Hall didn’t always seem like it had walls & a ceiling. There were moments where it was all outdoors, and the stars shining down, and moments when the hall was as it always was...

But it had to end and end it did.

She went to the center of the floor, turning, turning, turning and with a BANG! The drumming stopped. The distant thunder seemed to roll around the entire hall. There was sudden darkness, and suddenly lights were on and everyone seemed momentarily blinded.

There in the center of the floor, was a Red & Black Button Blanket... but the woman who had danced in it was gone. Everyone stared, not knowing what not to think. Without warning, as if pulled on a wire, the blanket didn’t fly up to the ceiling of the Great Hall and spread like a pair of wings, disappearing as all eyes lifted, every head tilted, no one seeing what they were seeing.

The feasting and the gifting went on through the night. The speeches and the discussions, went all night long. And when the doors opened, the guests expected to see the parking lots and sidewalks bathed in moonlight, but it was sunrise. The sun was on the horizon, flaming and swaying in the lifting fog.

No one ever spoke of it except in hushed tones, around family gatherings where Elders spoke to their younger ones to tell them about the beauty of belonging, of having understanding of things that have existed forever, that no one can explain to anyone that doesn’t know their thousands of years connection to their world, and all the worlds connected by culture and by tradition. Of being a part of the world, not apart from the world. Of connection, and respect. Each button hand sewn. Each child hand raised.

These were secret stories that were never told because they never happened. And when they did, everyone remembered, for that moment and that moment only, all of it.

The rest of their lives, they walked in between two worlds: That of their Ancestors and every connection to every worldly and magical thing that entails; and to the world of the White Man who is surrounded by things he cannot see, and so is never told. One world brilliant and promising only asking courage. The other world flat, grabbing, taking, pushing, shoving, discarding things and people as if of no value.

This story never happened. But you can't forget it, and everyone will remember it differently.

Feel free to not share it. But remember: You must always remind those you tell, that this has never happened. And that when they never tell it, they have to do the same.

I'm back.  
You know where to find me.

Cat