

This is the Place I Come to in My Dreams

I made it through delivering my mother's eulogy, and as I scanned the church filled with the last of my great aunts and uncles who'd driven down to Calgary from Olds, I saw the Elliott tartan of my mother's mother's clan. Then the hired piper played "Amazing Grace." I could no longer restrain myself. Ten years earlier we'd lost my great uncle John Elliott, our patriarch and our piper. Hearing the skirl of the pipes never failed to take me back to him pacing the yard of the Upper Saskatchewan Ranger Station on Alberta's Kootenay Plains, under the watchful binoculars of Roly the fire lookout man on Mount Cline, and to the bafflement of the sled dogs in their pens and the pack horses in the pasture.

After my mother's funeral that Saturday in late spring of 2001, we retreated to my brother's place. The phone rang and my sister-in-law said, "it's for you, from Rocky Mountain House." An unmistakable voice came on the line, somewhat frail—a scrappy London accent even after 60 years in Canada—John's widow and hard-working partner at the ranger station on Kootenay Plains, my Auntie Kathy.

"So, do you ever think of your days on the Upper Saskatchewan?" she asked. The name was our shorthand for the ranger station, Kootenay Plains, and the entire North Saskatchewan watershed. It had been 30 years since we spoke, but I could hear in her voice the deep longing and the need. "Oh, Auntie Kathy. Not a day goes by." Choked, I took a deep breath. "Not a day goes by. In fact, I've finished a book about it. I'll come see you before I go back east." And thus began my many returns to Rocky Mountain House and the memories of the sacred places and people of my youth: John and Kathleen Elliott, the Wesley band of the Stoney-Nakoda people, and especially, Silas Abraham. But I knew the station that once

flourished was now covered by the waters of the man-made lake named for Silas. A lake Silas opposed and that flooded much of the valley where he once lived and hunted.

My connection to my Uncle John was profound. I lost my hearing after pneumonia in infancy and John his in WWII after a German bomb blasted him from his barracks shortly after his arrival in England. John wore large hearing aids, as did I, and had told my grandmother, "they're not doing anything for him in school. Send him up to Kathy and me." It was true, at nine, I floundered. Although I was already bookish, I got into fights and trouble at school and was caught shoplifting, setting fires, and more.

After the Stampede that summer in 1961, I took the Greyhound north to Red Deer and west through all the little towns to Rocky Mountain House. Kathy and John met me, him in his ranger's uniform, and we squeezed into the green forestry truck's cab. Clearwater Car Four was its radio sign. A stick shift and massive Motorola two-way radio dominated the transmission hump as John geared the truck out of Rocky. For a nine year-old boy this was pure adventure. We passed the Alberta Forest Service compound with its helicopter pad. Highway 11 west to Nordegg turned from pavement to wide gravel at Ram River crossing, and as we passed the fenced-off ghost town of Nordegg, I was excited. We dodged construction equipment and soon the boulders that bounced in the wheel wells hushed as the road narrowed again to a dirt track tucked into the rugged front ranges of the eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies. Everything smelled fresh here: the perfume of pines and the musk of river mud. Massive shards of limestone and shale from the ancient seabeds shouldered the sky around us. Scree bracketed the flatirons on the slopes beside us. A wide valley gouged out by advancing ancient glaciers opened up before us, home to the Upper Saskatchewan headwaters. The Bighorn reserve of the Wesley band of the Stoney-Nakoda spread out beside the river below us.

Boreal forest enveloped us now. Standing water and muskeg was everywhere. Small islands floated pockets of scrub bush, I'd later learn from John, that were dotted with Labrador tea, wooly willow, and mountain mare's tail. White spruce with ghostly water marks calibrated the river's summer descent. An active beaver dam rose in a distant backwater. John geared down to ford a small creek and powered up again, swerving to dodge a logging truck from the Edwards Lumber company heading to the sawmill in Rocky. As we slowed near an empty campsite, a black bear snouted an upturned garbage can. John snapped on the Motorola's mike and warned the Nordegg rangers of its presence. We are in the bear's house now; mind your manners, John's tone told me.

Finally, as we thumped over the wooden planks of the black iron bridge at Cline River crossing, we came onto the dusty prairie of Abraham Flats which John said he named after Silas Abraham's old camp there. Nearby, was the ranger station's small grassy airstrip with a bright Shell Oil windsock drooping from a striped pole. Mule deer grazed on the edges of the runway, seemingly oblivious to us, but scattered as we got close. This is where Kootenay Plains began then, before the Bighorn Dam went in, stretching from the Cline River up to Whirlpool Point.

John Elliott named Two O'clock Creek, too. So I know where I am, he quipped. Over the summer, as we patrolled in his truck, he pointed out his handiwork: the fire road gates, the campground at Two O'clock Creek where the David Thompson Cavalcade was held, the stopover cabin at Thompson's Creek near Saskatchewan Crossing where the Clearwater forest district ended and Banff National Park began. Beyond that was the Columbia Icefields and the Howse Pass where the Kutenai (or Ktunaxa), for whom the Kootenay Plains is named, came over the Rockies to hunt the buffalo.

I saw the springs and creeks that flowed from a distant glacier's crowfoot. I rode a helicopter for the first time up to the Cline fire lookout

where John had cleared the mountain top with a chainsaw while Kathy watched the trees topple through her binoculars from the station below. John showed me how to distinguish between fir and spruce by rolling their needles between my fingers: Fir, with its square needles, rolled; spruce did not.

The Upper Saskatchewan Ranger Station was a sizable compound with a modest ranger's house, a large storage garage for firefighting equipment and tools, a bunk house, generator shed, radio shack, weather station, and a greenhouse and barn in a nearby pasture. Out back were the dog pens and beside the house a large vegetable garden. In front, flower beds spelled out AFS—Alberta Forest Service. A flag on top of a varnished pole claimed the territory right beside Abraham's camp and declared who was in charge in the wild backcountry now. This place would be my home for two summers; summers that changed me and formed the backbone of a lifetime of creative work. John taught me what he learned from the forestry school at Hinton and from another less formal school, out on Kootenay Plains and the trails, from the elders, especially Silas Abraham, noted guide and hunter.

The Kootenay Plains was a sacred place, John said, as it had been for indigenous people for more than 5000 years, not long after the last Ice Age and the retreat of the massive glaciers that created the valley. Explorer David Thompson passed through in 1807 as he made his first attempt to reach the Columbia over the Rockies via the Howse Pass. Thompson recorded in his journals seeing buffalo among the deer, elk, bear, mountain goats, and Bighorn sheep. According to historian John Laurie, the buffalo herds likely disappeared from Kootenay Plains by 1869. The Stoney-Nakoda (or *îyârhe Nakodabi*, the Rocky Mountain Sioux) still talk of one herd in the Siffleur wilderness area as late as the 1920s. Those summers I saw everything, except the buffalo, that Thompson noted, including a wolf pack, moose, and traces of cougars.

If John was the stern-faced ranger and peace officer in charge of Alberta Forest Service's Upper Saskatchewan district, Kathy was the station's tough heart. As John's unpaid and unacknowledged assistant, she managed the radio, weather station, sled dogs, and nearly everything else. Even after a life of helping John fight fires and poachers in the bush, Kathy was no cowgirl, and didn't even learn to drive until after John's death at 81. In London, she had been a secretary at a law firm where they wore gloves and hats and smoked at their desks. She survived the Blitz by taking shelter in the "tube" or subway tunnels under the city, as bombs rumbled and rockets screamed above. When she met John she was living with her mum above a cake shop in London, but she fell in love, and, like many war-brides, she left the comforts of the city to come west to be with her Canadian husband. When Kathy arrived in Longview, Alberta in 1946 to join John after the war, he was not in town. He had come in for supplies two days earlier and left again for the Highwood Ranger station. Hitching a ride on a log truck, she made it to the station only to find John and his horses gone. There was also no bread to eat. She'd never baked a loaf in her life, but she walked 14 miles round trip to a surveyor's camp and returned with the cook's recipe, which she never forgot. She baked beautiful bread, John always said.

When I visited Kathy in Rocky after my mother's funeral, she told me how the young women there didn't believe her stories of life in the bush before cellphones, SUVs, and paved roads. At the Upper Saskatchewan, the nearest ranger station was in Nordegg, and in order to call Rocky for firefighting backup or a helicopter from forestry headquarters or the Mounties, Nordegg would have to relay messages, since the radio range was 80 kilometers at best. The Upper Saskatchewan was remote and often the only traffic for days was a logging truck. In winter, the road out was usually impassable beyond Windy Point where the snow plowing stopped. There were no power or phone lines in the bush, and four wheel drives were notorious for breakdowns. Few owned them. Kathy shook her head, "when I tell them how we lived, they don't believe me."

The Upper Saskatchewan Ranger Station was in a new forest service district created in the late 1950s, with the station located at the confluence of the Cline and North Saskatchewan Rivers, and a fire lookout erected directly across the North Saskatchewan on Mount Cline. It was needed because the parched grass rooted in glacial flour, or silt, saw little snow in winter creating an extreme fire hazard in summer. Wild animals had been drawn to the area for over-wintering for thousands of years, which attracted hunters and, unfortunately, poachers too. When John first came to the Upper Saskatchewan, he said forestry wanted the Stoney people and their horses off the Plains and back on the reserve. John's presence created tension because he was the face of government pushing the Stoney people out. And there was talk the ranger carried only one gun on his horse. John had to be careful in the early years, with the nearest help hours away.

Each morning that first summer, I shadowed Kathy on her rounds. After tending to breakfast we checked on the dogs and, sometimes, aided in the birth of their puppies, then to the woodpile where she split wood with a lumberman's double-bitted axe and loaded a contractor's wheelbarrow. She was slight, standing around five feet, but her thin arms were lean and muscular; Kathy may have never considered herself a cowgirl, but she was as tough as any I knew. Some afternoons, she would put up a proper English tea for her and John, but she'd also adapted to this new land. One day while John was weeding the garden, hidden behind a row of beans, a black bear sow and her cub climbed the rail fence, after the ripening raspberries. I was shelling peas for dinner when she grabbed the .303 from the ranger's office and shucked a cartridge into the chamber. Outside she screamed at John who was as oblivious to the bear as the bear was to him. He was deaf after all. Luckily, Kathy's scream warned off the sow and her cubs. For a moment, John looked uncertain who the gun was for.

When I spoke to Kathy after my mother's funeral, I had already begun to think my novel was not finished, yet. *In the Bear's House* started out as a poem, "Two O'clock Creek," about the mystery of rivers and the magic of water appearing anywhere and on time. To research the novel, I made many trips up to Kootenay Plains through Banff on up to the Icefields' Highway, but never through Rocky. I lived in the east and had lost touch with John and Kathy, so I relied heavily on John's own memoir for inspiration—a gift he'd given me years before at a family reunion. The stories of men in the backcountry abound. But Kathy'd been as much a part of my young life as John. Maybe more. And without her voice, at least in spirit, I knew my book would be incomplete. Backcountry women's stories like hers need to be heard. She understood that too and she told me everything she could. And I remembered so much too, including the ranger station's radio call sign: "X78278," I repeated it to her like my old phone number. Kathy beamed.

Kathy warned me much had changed in 40 years. I left Rocky after our first visit and took the now-paved Highway 11—David Thompson route—past Nordegg. Nordegg had been a ghost town with a padlocked gate for years after the coal mine closed in the 1950s, but it was open again. As I passed over the Bighorn River, I saw the turnoff sign for the Bighorn (or Kiska Waptan) Reserve. The highway followed the curves of Lake Abraham for miles and an RV camp and motel clustered around its far end where the Cline River emptied into it. I sped all the way through, without stopping, to the clutch of Banff park's warden's cabins, at what we used to call Saskatchewan Crossing, where Highway 11 meets Highway 93, the Icefields' Highway. Across the North Saskatchewan River was the new Crossing resort, where George Brewster built his bungalow camp in 1948.

Forty years and nearly a lifetime of changes. Lake Abraham was long and high up the valley sides. I thought of John, after hearing old Silas Abraham's recollections, searching out and fencing in, and thus honouring

the graves of the Stoney dead; at first, so they would not be disturbed, but later this allowed the graves to be reinterred on higher ground in anticipation of the lake and the new highway.

The Kootenay Plains changed John in a way no other place did. He had experience in the southern Alberta backcountry as ranger in the Crowsnest Pass where he'd taken a vicious beating by poachers; incredibly, one was a ranger himself. Afterwards, John applied for a handgun permit and seldom went out on patrol without a revolver and a rifle. When I was there, he rarely travelled without them, especially when alone on horse patrol. But the Upper Saskatchewan was more than just a job to him, it was home. John encouraged the return of the Sun Dance. Later, an aging Silas asked John to bring him stone from Whirlpool Point, a sacred place where the Stoney-Nakoda got their pipe stone. The pipe Silas made was a tribute to their friendship and remains in our family. John prized it and kept it in his sideboard, with his war-time mementoes, wrapped in a special cloth. Silas Abraham died at the age of ninety, the year after my first summer there, but his presence remains everywhere on the Plains, at the Bighorn, and in the cutting marks on the pipe. It has been smoked only once. "Helluva a draw," John'd tell anyone who asked. But that wasn't the only reason he never smoked it again. Like the Kootenay Plains from which it came, the pipe was sacred. As was his friendship with Silas. He never shared the pipe with anyone else after Silas died.

Kootenay Plains changed me too, from a troubled young boy. If I could not hear, I could better observe and listen; John and Kathy taught me that. Words are small, actions are bigger. John erected fences around Stoney graves on the Plains to protect them. He hadn't much use for religion, but respected Silas'. Silas and John had started out at odds when he first arrived in the district, but they shared a religion of the backcountry and its creatures. Both men were hunters and lived for the outdoors. John as an eight-year old boy was a gilly or helper in

Scotland for his father, a gamekeeper of a large estate—as an aside, whose story’s strikingly similar to Oliver Mellors’ in D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. The ranger station living room was festooned with the skins of bear, cougar, lynx, and wolverine and the requisite deer and elk heads and antlers. For a poor boy from Scotland, and Kathy a middle class city girl, this was their wilderness Eden. Hummingbirds flitted in the lupine and lilies; swallows and mountain jays raided the berry bushes in the lush garden outside.

John spoke often of Silas Abraham as a legendary guide and elder—whatever happened between them when they first met was never spoken of around me. Over the two summers I was there, we’d visit the Bighorn reserve, sometimes with a small load of fresh garden produce. It was on one of John’s trips I met Silas. By then he was stooped and frail, but still formidable and yet gentle to a young boy. I knew I was in the presence of a great man, half-brother of the legendary Walking Buffalo (also known as Tatânga Mâni or George McLean), founder of the Banff Indian Days, and a renowned speaker who travelled the world as a peacemaker. The Stoney-Nakoda people included me in everything: games, dances, and conversation. I was not treated differently, although I felt different then. No one seemed to notice my thick glasses with the big hearing aids attached to their temples and the plastic tubes in my ears or asked about my “accent,” my speech impediment. I was welcomed into the chicken dances at the Cavalcade and played with the Stoney-Nakoda children at the Bighorn.

I took many trips back to Kootenay Plains during the years I wrote *In the Bear’s House*, and during each trip I was given signs; maybe they were messages from John, or the land itself, or perhaps even Silas, but I brushed them off then. After my mother’s death, and my first visit with Kathy, I was troubled and sad. I returned to the Plains later that

summer, this time with Pam Knott from Banff who can climb a mountain in flip flops. She is Métis and conversant with the backcountry and its signs.

The fall before I reconnected with my auntie Kathy, I was visiting Pam in Banff, when a significant sign presented itself, in this case literally. A mutual friend, poet Charles Noble, showed up at my rented cabin early one morning. He had been knocking on the window and door, but without hearing aids, I was hard to rouse. Charles stood outside with a fellow holding a grey weather-beaten board. Banff photographer and painter Alex Emon had returned from exploring Kootenay Plains two years prior, and later heard me read “Two O’clock Creek” on CBC’s *Daybreak Alberta*. Charles told him I was in town and Alex had a present for me: I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. “2 O’clock Creek,” the original sign. Incredulous, I quizzed Alex on where he found it.

“Not the right place,” I muttered, still in shock. But it had the nail holes I mention in my poem and when I turned it over, there was sap from the spruce tree. “It can’t be,” I said. Local author, Bob Clarke, who had been listening from the next cabin, stepped in.

“Oh no, it’s the right sign alright. I was a catskiner on that road. We moved the creek to take the David Thompson highway through. That sign probably got left behind.” The glacial silt and dryness of the Plains had preserved it remarkably well and it now hangs above my desk as I write this.

During my first visit with Kathy, I asked about the sign. She not only confirmed it was the original, but revealed a family secret. “You must not tell anyone. We buried John at Two O’clock Creek,” and she told me where.

It was the spot Pam and I were looking for as we hiked down Two O'clock Creek across the Plains to where it meets the North Saskatchewan. Across from us was a mountain the Stoney-Nakoda call the Sleeping Chief. We met a young First Nations man walking up from the river. He was searching for sweetgrass for his ceremony at the sweatlodge, he said. Thomas, we learned, was from Edmonton and preparing for a Sun Dance later in the summer. Pam sprinted back up to her car, fetched a braid of sweetgrass she kept for emergencies, and gave it to him. Thomas then led us to a nearby camp. I was self-conscious, and a little embarrassed, in my grieving. And I was the only non-aboriginal. But on Kootenay Plains I'd always felt welcome.

An older man, an elder, offered us cups of coffee and invited us to join in the circle of lawn chairs. Beside him boulders and firewood waited by a fire pit to heat the sweatlodge. Half a dozen young men, some Mohawk from outside Montreal and others Cree from up north, introduced themselves. Behind them, I recognized the saplings lashed together. The frames of a sweatlodge. They'd been there at Abraham Flats near the ranger station, but I had no idea what they were that long ago day. Without John or Kathy's permission, I'd snuck under the barbed wire fence surrounding the bent willow frames and a mysterious abandoned cabin, with an overturned wash basin and a rusty cast iron frying pan lying in the tall grass like the camp had been abandoned quickly. I wondered if that cabin had belonged to Silas Abraham and was ordered fenced in by forestry; why John had named the area where it stood Abraham Flats. And if John was the ranger who shot their horses. Or was it someone else? I remembered a horse hide drying on the fence beside the barn. Kootenay Plains has many secrets.

In front of the young men, I thought I'd masked my emotions, but the elder was prescient, "in times of great sorrow, we return to the places of our youth." Pam looked at me and laughed with her eyes. She didn't have to say it. Yet another sign. The elder invited us to join in

the sweatlodge. I had a plane to catch back to Toronto, I said lamely. In truth, I was afraid of what I'd find. It was too soon. But I thought of Silas Abraham, a man I'd met only once. I remembered his grey braids, and him sitting on a cot in a back country cook tent next to where the Stoney were cutting poles for Alberta Government Telephones. It was a meeting that changed my life. Silas too, like this man in front of me, was an elder. A spirit guide. Finding John's grave could wait.

I'd been shocked at first when Kathy told me that law and order John was buried here, but I was beginning to understand. And I had indeed returned to the sacred places of my youth. And to the sacred people, Silas, John, and Kathy too, who taught me much. My elders John and Silas, once at odds, worked together to honour the ancestors. John was deaf, but insisted he be heard, because above all the deaf wish to be heard. As did Silas. But to be heard, we first must listen. I think that was what Silas and Kathy taught John and thus me. The lesson of the friendship pipe.

Kathy also taught me to be tender as a gift to yourself. I was already too tough for my age, but as I helped her deliver litters of puppies those summers, I listened to Kathy coo endearments to the mothers as they whelped. I learned despite what little I had, of hearing or sight or anything else, I could still make a good life just as John and Kathy made their Eden in the glacial silt. When John had the ranger station's soil tested, he heard from the Edmonton lab—there were zero nutrients. That didn't stop John and Kathy. They gathered buffalo bones and asked everyone in Rocky for their old leather shoes to compost. They made their own soil. In the back country, you either make it or you make do. Silas enjoyed the turnips from the garden John took him, he said. Turnips from buffalo bones and old shoes.

When I returned to fifth grade in Calgary that fall, I spoke less and listened more. Lipreading was fine but eyes and actions said more. And I learned a fierce courage from my auntie and uncle. I made sure now I was heard. Kathy taught me that sometimes a whisper, a coo, or a laugh, was almost always more powerful than a shout or a fist. But sometimes, not.

Knowing these two men, one of them only in spirit, and Kathy, has made all the difference between the further trouble I was clearly heading for, or a life of substance. Since then, I've been blessed with challenge and creation, but most of all love. Kathy's love for John was both ferocious and tender. She'd once raged, "you're a hard, hard man, John Elliott." And as a woman without her own children, she loved me. She phoned after my mother's funeral and offered no condolences; I still had her, after all. She wanted to know if I remembered. Kootenay Plains haunted my dreams for years until I wrote a book with these lines: "... and all the years since I learned how rivers are made/ this is the place I come to in my dreams,/ between the highest point of land and the sky/ so I can drink from the clouds."

After we left the sweat lodge, I was pensive. Pam pulled back onto the highway towards Banff, after we'd paused at Whirlpool Point where John got the sacred grey stone for Silas' pipe, and a thousand year old wind-shaped limber pine, a giant bonsai, stands at the peak. We were nearing the park boundary and stopped one more time for a quick hike past John's old cabin at Thompson Creek, now a caretaker's summer home at the campground. We got up to a grove of pencil-thin aspens and Pam pointed out how they were beribboned with tobacco—offerings to the ancestors. A sacred grove. A sign. "Is this new?" I asked. Pam shook her head and turned back towards the car. I didn't remember it. Maybe I just didn't see it.

The sun dropped low over the ridge. It would be dark when we got back to Banff. Just before the park boundary, Pam braked. A young black bear rose from the river and sprinted across the highway. His coat glistened with water droplets and he shook it off as he ran. Here the river runs fast, cold as ice and jade-green with glacial silt, coursing down to Edmonton and on to Hudson Bay. "It's an omen," Pam laughed. "It's weird. This happens every time you come here." It had been a day of signs and now this. The bear.

We were in the bear's house now with Silas and John, and Kathy too. My Auntie Kathy died in 2010, the year after *In the Bear's House* was published. Suffering from dementia and in a care home, she was not able to read her story, but it got told.

As a young prairie boy, I loved the magic of a high mountain montane teeming with wildlife and history, and a creek that appeared at two o'clock as the sun warmed a distant glacier's crowfoot. How the creek slept at night, after sundown, its water frozen at high altitudes. The Upper Saskatchewan ranger station, that boreal valley, the old road, and the Cline Bridge, on the last curve home. All are gone now, deep under the lake. But if you look carefully, you can find the concrete abutments of the Cline Bridge below the David Thompson resort. And across Lake Abraham, the Cline fire lookout still watches over the Plains.

Kootenay Plains is where I come to in my dreams. Someday I will return to the sweat lodge, and to the sacred places of my youth to drink from the clouds.