

The Shuksan Descent

By

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Chapter One

A familiar late afternoon breeze drifted over Puget Sound. White caps surfaced and gulls cried out in anticipation of the twilight feed. The snow-capped Olympic Mountains loomed to the west, serving as sentries over the vast national park. Gary took in the view and relaxed for the first time since arriving on site.

It was good having the job completed. It had been dangerous work on steep ground, requiring exact cutting and filling using lumbering heavy equipment. A nearly vertical slope served as the back yard, while the front yard consisted of a small patch of wild blackberries that gave way to a three-hundred-foot drop to the Sound below. The land in the middle was supposed to accommodate an eleven thousand square foot house.

Gary jumped off his excavator, landing softly on the damp soil. He wiped his brow with the sleeve of his Cordura jacket and patted his pockets in search of his cigarettes. He'd taken to smoking bare butt Camels after reading that American Indians, on average, died much earlier than other people. At age forty-two Gary figured that, according to the statistics, he would soon join his ancestors on the happy hunting grounds of the hereafter. He retrieved one of two remaining cigarettes from the crumpled pack.

The cigarette lit easily despite the blustery weather. Taking his first drag, he inhaled deeply and waited for the subtle gratification of nicotine to kick in. He was pleased with the job, but he couldn't help questioning the plan. The steep rear yard slope should be terraced, or at least stabilized with a wall, and the front yard which measured only twenty-five feet to the cliff should be at least seventy-five feet to allow for inevitable sloughing that occurs in the rainy winter months. But none of this was Gary's concern. His job was to clear the site and trench the footings, not to argue with the engineer.

Gary took another drag and saw Franklin making his way up the steep drive, his lanky frame leaning forward with each step.

Franklin was a white guy, one of the hundred or so who lived on the reservation, occupying lands sold by Indians to white folks early in the twentieth century.

Franklin waved without looking up, struggling to make the last fifty yards up the driveway.

"You going to make it, Turtle!?" Gary called across the construction site, settling back on the excavator with a grin.

The Indians on the reservation called Franklin "Turtle" because of his hooked nose. "A

family trait,” Franklin liked to explain. “Like the Hapsburg lip, or the Medici nose.”

But Gary knew Franklin had no family, much less ties to European royalty. As near as the Indians could tell, Franklin had just showed up on the reservation in 1975, a skinny hippie with long hair, looking surprisingly like the popular singer of the day, Tiny Tim. He rarely talked about his family, only occasionally mentioning a sister in Montana. Like many whites that moved onto the reservation, Franklin didn’t quite fit into the outside world.

“What are you doing here, Franklin?” Gary asked. “If you’re looking for work, I’m pretty much finished up.”

“I heard you were working up here and thought I’d just drop by to say hello,” Franklin said, exhaling and leaning forward, placing his hands on his knees. “It’s steeper than the back of God’s head getting up here.”

“It’s a long climb, I’ll give you that.” Gary offered Franklin his last smoke.

“Thanks,” Franklin said. “You must be getting paid well for this one.”

Gary nodded but stayed silent. It was bad luck to discuss pay before the job was done. He wadded the cigarette package into a ball and stuffed it in a pant pocket. Gary never sullied up the work site; it would distract from the artistry of his work.

“That’s Mount Olympus isn’t it?” Franklin asked, straightening up and adjusting the bill of his hat to block the setting sun.

“Yep. On a clear day, this lot will have a view of Glacier Peak. Maybe Rainier, too.”

Gary sensed Franklin was looking for something. “What is it, Turtle?” Franklin sniffed. “Anything left you don’t want?”

In addition to working as a laborer, Franklin was known as a salvager. The land around his old trailer, barely distinguishable from the surrounding piles of construction material, was covered with copper pipe, rusty metal duct work, tiles, two by fours, floor joists, roof trusses, and angle iron.

“I’ve got some soft maple over there,” Gary said. “They’d make some nice furniture pieces. I thought I’d sell ‘em in Seattle, but you can have ‘em.”

“Thanks, Gary.” Franklin reached to shake his hand. “I’ll bring my truck up in the morning.”

Gary nodded lazily, unable to generate the kind of enthusiasm Franklin felt over

salvage deals.

"I guess all the rich white guys are discovering the reservation," Franklin said, scowling at the maze of foundation trenches on the site. "Used to be, people were scared to move out here. You know, scared of drunk Indians and all that. But now it's getting to be like Palm Springs. The tribe should buy all the land back and make this place off limits to whites." "What about you, Franklin?" Gary asked with a wry smile. "You're a white guy."

Franklin shook his head. "I think I got some Indian blood in me somewhere."

"I doubt it, Turtle." Gary put a hand on Franklin's shoulder. "You look pretty white to me. And you better get used to having more people around. That casino is making the Indians rich, too. You're gonna be surrounded by rich Indians and rich white folks in a few years."

"I know it," said Franklin. "But maybe I won't live that long."

"You'll live that long," Gary responded, softly digging a grave for his cigarette. He dropped it in and noticed water emerging from the hillside and meandering down to the foundation trench.

"Listen, Turtle, I can't talk." He pushed himself off the excavator, "I think I'm gonna try to reroute that seep. It won't take long to fix it, and I'll sleep better tonight." "Okay," Franklin said. "I'll see you later. Will you light that brush pile in the morning? Cause if so, I'll watch the fire for you...I appreciate the work."

"Okay, Turtle," Gary said as Franklin grabbed his hand and again shook it with zeal. "You got a deal."

Grabbing the metal swing bar, Gary hoisted himself into the cab, sinking slowly into the padded seat. He turned the key and the cab shook as the engine came to life. He pulled back on the lever and motored toward the hillside, the excavator casting a long shadow across the work site. Coming to a stop at the base of the slope, Gary pulled and pushed the levers. Smoke belched from the exhaust pipe, the motor roared, and the arm pulled down a layer of soil, rock, and clay.

There was nothing obvious to explain the wave of apprehension that washed over Gary, just an unusual flicker of sunlight on a round white object nestled into the sheared hillside, like the millions of smooth rocks tucked into the coastline of the Sound. The

fading sun played on the object, giving it a soft orange sheen.

Gary set the brake and hopped down. He stepped hesitantly, aware that dusk played tricks on the landscape. Depressions appeared as solid ground, sharp stones as soft soil, fallen branches as shadows. But Gary's deliberate stroll was more related to the entombed object than from his fear of stumbling.

Picking up a stick from base of the slope, he reached high to poke at the object. It was definitely hard. A child's ball? Or perhaps an old flowerpot? He doubted it since no school yards or homes had been settled within half a mile of the site. It could be the smooth crescent of an old pipe or conduit. He poked until the tip of the stick broke, then reached higher. The air was cold now. His calves and arms grew tired and vapor belled from his mouth.

And then he saw the tell-tale fissures traversing the cranium. He stopped, shuddered, and stumbled back. Did he read the plans right? Was there a grave mark hidden amongst the topographic lines, elevation calculations, and building lines? He had to check right away.

"Gary!" someone shouted from a distance. He spun around, startled.

It was Franklin returning, pointing at the dirt wall. "Watch out!" Franklin cried. "It's falling."

Gary reached out to catch the tumbling sphere but missed. It struck the ground with a thud, shattering into pieces.

"Good God," Gary exclaimed, stepping back. Teeth, jaw fragments and portions of the human skull rested before him. Primal fear raced through his veins. He stood over the skull in silence. Franklin joined him.

"I...uh...I just wanted to give you my new phone number. I got rid of my land line... I'm sorry I snuck up on you..."

Gary didn't reply. Still gripping the stick, he crouched down to get a good look at the bones. He picked up the largest remaining piece of the skull and held it against the darkening sky. He laid it down, then picked up the jawbone and held it in the palm of his hand, carefully placing the remaining fragments around it.

"This is trouble," Gary said. "Maybe big trouble."

Gary knew the desk jockeys over at Tribal Administration would make a big deal out of the discovery. It wouldn't matter to them if the grave was marked on the plans or not. The bureaucrats would emerge from their computer solitaire games stiff with righteous

indignation, blaming him for not getting the right permits, not discussing the site with tribal elders, not getting some kind of study before digging. They would bring up the fact that Gary was a Montana Indian, not of the Shuksan tribe. And he would be chastised for destroying a grave so that a rich white man could have a trophy home.

“God, please let this be a white guy,” Gary said under his breath.

“You think it’s a white guy?”

“I don’t know. I doubt the tribe’s ancestors would bury an Indian so high up on this bluff. The burial site is down on the beach. But I’ve heard some Indians were buried quickly during the epidemics. This could be an Indian who died from smallpox. I don’t think there are any more bones here. I’ve dug up enough of this site and haven’t found a thing.”

“Is it old?”

“It looks pretty old to me. Man, I wish I hadn’t poked at it.”

“I would have done the same thing. What if it had been an electrical line? You had to expose it to see what it was...”

“Yeah, but why did it have to be a skull? Why not a pelvic bone or femur? It’s like I decapitated whoever this used to be.”

Gary grew silent and gazed at the skull resting on the ground. Was this all that remained of a man who had been murdered and cast aside on the hillside, God knows how long ago? Or a case where something got out of hand? Gary searched his memory for any stories about missing persons or unsolved murders, but anxiety stole his concentration.

“See that water coming out?” Gary said, rising and pointing to the sheer mud wall. “It’s been seeping out pretty good for the past hour or so. That’s one of the reasons I wanted to pull that hillside back a bit, to try and stop the seep. Maybe reroute it. Damn engineers. I should have left the slope alone and let them figure it out.”

“It’s less steep now,” Franklin offered.

But Gary was not in the mood to be consoled. This was going to mean trouble for him. And yet nothing that had happened here was his fault. He had been doing his job. That was all. Doing his job.

“So, are you gonna call the cops?” Franklin asked him.

Gary hesitated. “Yea. I’ll tell them the truth, I guess.” He shook his head.

“You got permits for this?”

“Sure. I got a grading permit. But who knows what I’ve missed. The tribe’s added so

much paperwork for a simple clearing job that you need to be a CPA to do deal with it. They'll be looking for something to justify their office jobs."

"Well then, I think I'll get out of here if you're going to call the cops," Franklin said. "I'm not too popular with tribal police. I'll be back in the morning."

"I wouldn't bother. They'll probably close this place off tonight."

Gary stole one last look at the skull as Franklin walked away. At the very least the discovery would be a costly delay. But in the back of his mind, a small voice warned that he might have done far more than delay a house project. It was his Indian voice that told him so – a voice he tried to ignore, but couldn't.

Chapter Two

Donna usually went to the nearby Alderwood Mall to do her shopping, but today she ventured south to Wallingford Center, a boutique mall in one of Seattle's trendy turn-of-the century neighborhoods.

A full parking lot left Donna no choice but to travel the narrow streets in search of a place for her 1987 Suburban. She sat up straight in the bench seat, side mirrors in full view, determined not to sideswipe any of the cars lining the street. When she finally spotted a Sport Utility Vehicle leaving a parking spot in front of a restored Victorian home, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Donna surprised herself by parallel parking on her first attempt. Jumping out of the driver's seat onto the pavement, she opened the back door to reveal Moses sleeping comfortably in his baby seat facing the dashboard. Although it seemed like yesterday, 13 months had passed since she had brought him home from the hospital in the same seat.

"Okay sweetie," she cooed, unhitching him, and nestling him into the stroller with the swift hand movements of an experienced mom. "We're going to get a birthday present for Eldon. It's a fancy computer game. Wallingford's the only place that has any left."

Moses, groggy, opened his big brown eyes. He was a healthy cherub with a full head of hair and light brown skin.

"Let's go, Cindy, so we can get home before rush hour," Donna called to her eight-year-old who was still in the car, occupied with her coloring project.

"Okay, mommy." Cindy slid down out of the Suburban, her gangly legs in search of solid ground, "I gotta go to the bathroom."

Cindy wore a pink princess dress, story-book style, with puffed sleeves, gathered skirt, white lace belt, and white shoes. Donna brushed the long black hair from Cindy's forehead and straightened her dress and ponytail, kneeling to work the elastic band.

"You look very pretty," Donna said. Cindy beamed, revealing tiny white teeth with two missing, one on the top and one on the bottom. She hopped in place urgently.

"All right. Let's go find you a bathroom," Donna said with confidence, masking her concern there wouldn't be any public bathrooms. Sometimes these fancy malls weren't family friendly. Wallingford Center had served as a neighborhood school for nearly a century before it was ceremoniously converted into a shopping mall in the early eighties, making the cover of the Seattle Chronicle. It was a magnificent place with its imposing

concrete steps and Doric pillars supporting the roof above where heads of mythological gods and gargoyles, weathered with moss and grime, shielded the porch from the sun.

To the people of Wallingford, the building was a monument to a comforting past when a job at Boeing would last a lifetime. But Donna wasn't so sure about the good old days. She wondered how she would have been welcomed in the school. What would it have been like to walk these stairs as the only Indian girl?

Donna hesitated for a moment and then slowly ascended the handicap ramp, Moses in the stroller taking the lead. Cindy rushed to help, grabbing and pushing the stroller beneath her mother's arms.

Together they opened the doors at the top to the splendor of track lighting, plate glass, store displays, and milling shoppers. An oak hallway stretched from one end of the building to the other, waxed and buffed to perfection, lined with shops displaying dresses, handbags, toys, art glass, and electronics. But it was the smell of the mall that gave away its past: the comforting scent of books blended with that of aging wood and lime plaster that seemed to saturate the building.

Donna noticed a few people milling around an espresso cart. A businesswoman in a severely cut pin-striped suit picked at the tiny straws and cardboard cup holders waiting for her coffee while an older pot-bellied man next to her, dressed in jeans and Hawaiian print shirt, waited patiently, arms folded across his chest.

"The first thing we're going to do is find a bathroom," Donna said. "Okay Cindy?" Skirting the waiting line, Donna approached the barista, a young man with a goatee and straight shoulder length hair tied loosely behind his head who told her that he liked her earrings as he waited to take her order.

Donna always wore her Indian motif earrings when she went out, primarily because she wanted people who might otherwise these days mistake her for being Filipino or Mexican to realize that she was Indian.

"Can I get you a latte' or an espresso today?" He skimmed the foam from the surface of a shiny pitcher of milk.

"No," she said. "I'm looking for a restroom."

He wiped his hands on a white towel. "There's the old school bathroom downstairs in the basement over there."

He was nice, Donna thought, pivoting the stroller in that direction, negotiating a

circuitous path around shoppers to the elevator door. She wondered why she felt so awkward. Maybe it was anxiety from being around so many white people— it had been some time since she'd been shopping off the reservation. Or maybe it was just these white people. None of them had any kids. They all looked wealthy. They seemed nice enough, but it was clear that she had very little in common with them.

Cindy ran to the elevator control panel, wanting to be the one to push the buttons. The door opened and they scooted in, Cindy in front to guide Moses' stroller inside. "Now push B," Donna told Cindy who pushed the B button several times, hopping up and down as if to speed up the machine. The elevator jolted, shook, and then started its descent.

Donna was lost in thought as the door opened on the basement level opposite the janitor's office. The elevator was strangely familiar with its mechanical numbers falling into place, and the unique bell signaling each approaching floor. She realized that Shuksan High School had had the same elevator, off limits to students. Only Donna had permission to use it to visit her dad in a basement office, where he was in charge of the janitorial staff.

She had fond memories of visiting her dad there. It was warm, right next to the school boiler and there was an old fashioned gray metal desk covered with pictures of her mom as a young woman. The transistor radio on a book shelf was always tuned to the oldies station, softly playing Big Band music and vocalists of the forties and fifties: Frank Sinatra, Mario Lanza and Keely Smith.

Making their way down the hall to the bathrooms, Cindy running ahead, Donna noticed a series of photographs lining the hallway. Beautifully framed, fastened to the concrete block walls and dated 1912, they depicted scenes of the Wallingford School as it had been.

The photographs looked staged, but that wasn't surprising to Donna. Taking a photograph in 1912 had probably been an extraordinary experience, probably like sitting for a painting. The children sat ramrod straight at their desks, hands folded in front of them, hair carefully groomed, the boys wearing wool knickers, the girls' calf-length dresses. The teachers, all female, wore long dresses, cummerbund, high buttoned shoes, and hair swept back smoothly and tied back.

"Cindy, will you be all right in here by yourself?" Donna asked.

Cindy rolled her eyes in a 'yes.' The teenage years were approaching, thought

Donna.

One of the group photos caught Donna's eye. There was one in which two Indian boys, wearing knickers with their hair cropped short, sat in the front row. She wondered what they were doing in this school. 1912 was the time of forced Indian education in boarding schools. Those two boys must have been raised by whites.

Donna scanned the other classroom scenes. There are the two boys again, seated in what was apparently a science class, their backs straight, their expressions solemn and stoic. But then again nobody in the picture looked happy. Those were the days when teachers used hand slaps and humiliation to maintain discipline.

The subject of the day's lesson must have been mountains. The chalkboard had the heights of Mount Rainier, Mount Baker, Mount Adams, and Mount St. Helens.

Another section of the chalkboard had a list of "Sounds We Like:" hoof beats on the lonesome trail, the splash of a salmon swimming in a shallow pool, waves slapping against a rocky coast, which all made sense, Donna supposed. There had been no radio, no television. She tried to imagine the list today's kids would make. Sounds of the latest computer game, perhaps.

"When are we going to get Eldon his computer game?" Cindy asked impatiently, appearing beside her.

"Let's head up there right now," Donna replied. "Do you remember what he wanted?"

"FX Supersoaaaar!" Cindy said with a grin.

"Well, that's almost right," Donna responded with a chuckle.

Cindy struggled to open the door to the computer game store. A chubby kid with a Mohawk haircut and body piercings walked over to assist her.

"Thank you," Donna said with a smile, pushing Moses over the threshold. "No problem. Can I help you find something?"

"Yes. I'm trying to find the motocross game, MX Flyboys."

"We've only got a dozen or so left, so you're just in time. We'll probably be sold out by closing."

"Great! Donna said. How much are they?" "\$39.99."

"Dear God!" Donna said, eyes suddenly wide. "Is there a less expensive version?" "Well yes, but this is the one everybody's talking about. I could get you last year's version for \$19.99, but whoever you're giving it to won't be happy." "Oh,

he'll be happy," Donna said confidently. "It's a deal."

Eldon can return the game if he wants the newest version, Donna thought as they made their way back to the car. He can save up the difference with his own money. But Donna didn't worry too much about Eldon being upset. He was such a good kid. He had a job working at the Greek restaurant in town after school and would be grateful that she had helped with at least a part of the cost.

Donna sometimes worried about Eldon. He was so beyond his years. Some days he seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders, or at least the weight of the family. He never asked for clothes or school supplies or Christmas presents. She had to badger him just to find out that he wanted this video game for his birthday. He had been like this before his dad died, but it had gotten worse since.

Donna had known she was pregnant but hadn't told Billy as he prepared the boat for Alaska. He was so busy. The last thing he needed to worry about was a third child on the way. It could wait, she had thought.

Her eyes often welled up when she put Moses down for the night.

"What's the matter, Mom?" Cindy asked as they made their way south on Interstate 5.

"Oh nothing, Pumpkin." She forced a smile. "I was just thinking about Dad, is all."

"What about him?" Cindy asked, touching the dashboard with her feet.

"Oh, about how much he loved us."

"You know, Mom, I see Dad sometimes," Cindy said nonchalantly, sliding partly under her belt with her feet now squarely on the glove compartment. She fiddled with the knob with her toe. "I see him in the back yard. When we get home, I wave to him outside my window."

They did not speak again until they exited onto the old country road that would eventually take them to the reservation.

"Well, that's the Indian in you, honey." Donna said, reaching over and brushing her daughter's loose black hair away from her eyes.

Chapter Three

“It’s probably a Caucasian male, and there’s no dental work,” Dr. Dershowitz said, looking through his bifocals and slowly rotating the skull at arms length.

At seventy, Dr. Dershowitz was known on the reservation as Chewy because of his voracious gum chewing habit. He leased a small lot of land from the tribe overlooking the Sound on which he had built a vacation cabin. Chewy was a fine county coroner, and very knowledgeable in paleoanthropology. His cabin contained so many animal bones that kids on the reservation were convinced he had human skulls hidden somewhere in the house.

“Teeth with no fillings and a cranium weathered like this means, to me anyway, that this guy’s been buried for at least a hundred years, and maybe longer,” Chewy said, stroking his white beard and studying the crevasses of the skull as carefully as though he were in a laboratory.

“He’s relatively young, too. Probably thirty or so, judging from the wear on those molars.” He picked at a tooth with a dental tool, eliciting wincing from the assorted police officers. “I’m guessing there’s more of him up there someplace.”

Placing the skull carefully back on the ground, he slipped on his glasses, the frames slipping comfortably under his shaggy, gray eyebrows.

The analysis brought a collective sigh of relief from his audience. In the shadows, Gary leaned on his excavator and watched the tribal police officers rub their hands together, exhaling steam into the chilled night air. Two Tribal Council members fired up cigarettes, helping each other with the lighting responsibilities as they ambled back to their cars. He knew that they were returning to their regularly scheduled council meeting where they would report the coroner’s findings to the rest of the assembly.

Even Chewy looked relieved. Gary thought that it was safe to assume that the last thing he wanted was another murder case. The last few years had been rough with hordes of new suburbanites moving to the county surrounding the reservation, bringing big city problems with them.

It was a surreal scene, Gary thought. The combination of lung vapor, white spotlights, and flashing colored emergency lights gave it the look of a movie set. He saw Turtle slinking his way between the police cars, his long legs stick-like amongst the flashing lights.

Several members of the Cultural Resources Board were huddled near the skull, talking.

Gary felt he should walk over to hear their concerns, because he knew they must have them. How else would they justify their over-inflated salaries?

Gary approached Tony Hammond, the Chairman of the Board, and his huddled staff. "How are you, Tony?"

Tony was thirty-five years old. A short, powerfully built Indian, he had more native Alaskan blood than that of the Northwest Coast. His dark skin, broad shoulders and short, muscular legs gave him an air of authority. He had lived on Metlakatla in southeast Alaska for most of his childhood, speaking Shim-al-gyack, the language of the Tsimshian Indians, leaving as a young adult to be with the Shuksan side of his family. Or so he said. The Shuksan had found it suspicious that a number of long-lost relatives suddenly appeared on the reservation when the casino was built.

Regardless of the reasons for his arrival Tony was an effective speaker, commanding quite a stage presence at ceremonies. He would remind tribal members of their culture, sometimes spicing up admonishments with his native language. Drawing on his traditional upbringing on Metlakatla, he easily won the job of Cultural Resources Chairman, though Gary sometimes wondered if Tony even knew the meaning of the phrases that so easily rolled off his tongue.

"I'm doing great, Gary," Tony said, oozing false sincerity. "Finding this must have really spooked you, huh?"

"Sure did. I wasn't sure what it was when it come tumbling down on me. Tried to catch it like a football."

"Well, we're gonna have to shut the site down for a few weeks, maybe longer. You know, look it over."

"Really?" Gary protested. "Dershowitz says it's a white guy."

Tony waved his hand. "We don't know that for certain. We asked Chewy to take a quick look. We'll have to do a full investigation."

Gary grew irritated. Clearly Tony had made up his mind to make this his opportunity to save the tribe from cultural genocide. Gary gritted his teeth, imagining the painful orations to come at the next council meeting.

"Chewy knows his bones," Gary snapped. "You know he's right."

"Well, Gary. Chewy may be right. I want a better analysis, that's all. And we're going to excavate this site. It may have historical significance. What if it's an important meeting or

trading location? It's my job to make sure we give the place a close look before it's paved over."

Gary knitted his brow. "Jesus, Tony, nobody traded on this bluff. For God's sake, don't give me this crap."

The Tribal Chief of Police approached, probably alerted by their argument.

"Hello boys," Chief Juarez said, patting Gary on the back.

A Hispanic who retired from the Los Angeles Police Department and purchased a lake front home near the reservation, Sam Juarez had found that a life of fishing and golfing was too dull for him. As he told it, his wife had convinced him to apply for a part-time police officer's job on the reservation to keep her from going daft.

It hadn't been long before Sam was asked by the tribal council to fill in temporarily for the previous chief who had been caught having an affair with the court clerk and they never bothered to hire anybody else. With his thick mustache and eyes that seemed to dance when he laughed, Sam was so affable that, during his induction ceremony, the Tribal Chairman had noted that hiring Sam had been an easy decision, particularly since it was difficult to find a veteran police officer who could still laugh. "Gary," he said, undaunted by the fact that neither man had responded to his greeting, "you have to realize this'll be an emotional issue with the tribe. Tony and his crew must have access to the site. You know that. And we've got a couple day's work out here ourselves."

"Look, Chief," Gary replied, welcoming the infusion of reason into the argument, "I don't have a problem with a few days. But Tony is talking about shutting the job down for weeks."

"We may need a few months," Tony interjected smugly.

"A few months!" Gary exclaimed. "That's the problem with you government types. You live in a world where time doesn't matter. You get paid no matter what. The job isn't done, and I don't get paid until the job is done. How about spending some time in the real world where people work for a living?"

"Listen Gary," Chief Juarez interrupted. "It's been a long day. Why don't we all go home and talk about this in the morning?"

"He's right," Tony said. "What's with you anyway, Gary? You're basically done here. I have a hard time believing he won't pay you."

“You know what? He probably will,” Gary said. “But that’s only half my beef with you people. The owner will probably just walk away from this site and go and dig up some other hill. You guys perpetuate the myth that we don’t want white people on the reservation.”

Tony’s silence spoke volumes. Many on the reservation expressed ambivalence, if not disdain for white people owning land there.

Gary saw his former sister-in-law, Ellen, pull up in her old Ford Galaxy 500 station wagon with Gary’s daughter, Emily.

Gary waved them off in disgust. “I got nothing more to say to you people. See you later, Chief.”

Gary’s ex-wife Linda had left several years ago, never to return to Shuksan. Rumor had it she was living in Albuquerque with a Navajo man and struggling with methamphetamine addiction. Gary had watched her decline over the course of six months and was relieved when she finally disappeared. Her sister, Ellen, had since become a fixture around the house. Ellen took to Emily and his older son, Joshua, like a mother hen and Gary appreciated the help.

“What’s going on, Gary?” she asked, rolling down her window. “I heard you uncovered a body. Is that right?”

“Yep,” he said, peering into the car. “Tony’s all stirred up. Hey Kiddo!” he said, directed toward his daughter.

Emily was a beautiful Indian girl, like her mother, but her fine features were partially masked by a pair of thick corrective eyeglasses. Despite this, she was proving herself a gifted athlete, and Gary hoped that in her teens she would play basketball. Her mother’s erratic behavior during the year leading up to her disappearance had failed to prepare Emily for the inevitable vanishing act. However, she was seeing a counselor, and doing remarkably well, something Gary attributed to Ellen’s presence and the support of Joshua, who worked in the casino as a pit boss.

“Jump in the back, Emily,” Gary said. “Let your aunt sit there. I’m gonna drive. We’re gettin’ out of here.”

Ellen slid the column shift into park, grabbed her purse and slid across the bench seat to the passenger side.

“Are you going to leave your car here?” she asked.

"I'll pick it up tomorrow," he said, turning the car around, careful to stay on the graveled construction staging area. He peered into the rear-view mirror for one last look at his work site, crowded with tribal officials, before heading down the driveway.

"What happened, Daddy?"

Emily slid forward and draped her arms over the seat, hugging Gary's shoulders. He clutched her arms gently and placed her hand on his heart.

"I don't really want to talk about it right now, but I've managed to upset your cousin, Tony. I hope he's a forgiving man or Christmas is going to be a little strained this year."

They drove in silence as Gary negotiated the steep driveway, letting the steering wheel drifting this way and that to avoid the ruts.

"Where's Joshua tonight?" Gary asked, breaking the quiet.

"I don't keep track of him. He's your son, not mine. Remember?" Ellen elbowed Gary affectionately. "But it would be my guess that he's at his apartment. Or maybe at work."

"Maybe he could come over to dinner this weekend?" Gary suggested.

"I don't know. It's a busy time at the casino. But I'll ask him if you want."

"That casino is a dead-end job," Gary groaned. "He won't want to spend his entire life working in that place."

"He won't," Ellen said, impatiently. "As soon as he finishes his community college courses, he's applying to the University of Washington. You'd know all this if you talked once in awhile."

"I'll call him," Gary said turning into his driveway. "That would be good," Ellen said.

Gary slid Emily, who was sleeping, out of the back seat and draped her over his shoulder. "Thanks for the lift,"

Ellen waved and slowly pulled away. "Don't worry about it," she said. "Just get that little girl to bed."

Gary slid Emily off his back as though she were a winter scarf and laid her gently on the bed. Taking off her shoes, he covered her up without bothering with pajamas. He wandered back to his room where he untied his boots and fell back on his bed, intending to rest for a few minutes and then get in the shower. But the minutes turned into hours, until at two he crawled under the blankets and dreamed of old men accusing him of not caring

about the Shuksan. After all, he was a Montana Indian, they charged. He awoke feeling frustrated. Because it was not true. Not true at all.