



FIRST PERSON

## The official reports of my father's death don't tell his whole story

LISA BIRD-WILSON

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO

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I sit on three unread reports from the coroner – a coroner’s report, an autopsy report and the transcripts from the inquiry into my father’s death – and instead of opening them, I revisit a narrative about my father’s death-story, a decades-long compilation of ideas, anecdotes, and partially related fragments, as yet untainted by the new information in the documents. I’m compelled to write down what I know because once I look at those reports, there is no unknowing. I’m also afraid to see what they contain.

Coming to terms with my father’s death means coming to terms with his life as an Indigenous man in a country built on Indigenous bones.

Before Treaty Four was signed, a mixed band of Cree, Métis, Halfbreeds and Saulteaux followed Cree leader, Ka-nêwonaskatêw, whose band was known as apisci-kâhkâkî, or magpies. I wonder if my father knew he was part of a legacy handed down by a mischief of magpies.

### **After Mom died, there was just one thing I couldn’t give away**

My father lived in a northern B.C. town far from his home on the Prairies, displaced from the land of his magpies, adrift in the world and longing for the sky. If I squint I can nearly see him.

In 1974 my father, Eddy, was either training and/or working as a steamfitter in Prince George, B.C. He lived with his older brother, my uncle Roy, and Roy’s wife Bev.

At a downtown bar one evening, Eddy got into an argument with some men, some kind of magpie swaggering drunken exchange that ended in a fight. I’ve been led to believe, through indirect means – a tip of the head, a particular turn of the mouth, a raised eyebrow – that Eddy was a bit of a fighter and also a bit of a drinker. Also, one crumb I’ve clipped up in my sharp magpie beak suggests the whole thing started over drugs, as in, maybe Eddy was selling drugs and something went wrong. On this topic, much has been said without saying much.

The skirmish occurred outside, on the street, in March – winter weather in Prince George. Despite Eddy’s best efforts at self-defence, multiple men attacked and beat him. When I think about that moment – Eddy in serious trouble, real peril – I imagine two things happened. One, Eddy’s mind took him to remembered moments of joy – here I imagine my father at Indian Sports Days on the reserve, his eyes squinted up in his head as he grins into the midday sun. Or holding hands with my mother – both of them so young, untainted by the world. And second, I believe at that moment of assault, it began to lightly snow, big gentle flakes so Eddy would be less alone, the sky his secret witness.

As he lay on the ground, critical injuries to his head and face, his boots, jacket and wallet were stolen. Remarkably, he didn't freeze to death and was found the next morning unconscious in the snow.

My father was taken to the hospital in Prince George, the same hospital where his brother was taken a few years earlier to die at 27. I was told, in one version, that my father felt he would also die young. Eddy, this wild magpie of the Prairies, had barely lived but already he pondered his own death.

At the hospital, Eddy was stabilized, but in a coma. He couldn't be identified. The hospital referred to him as Mister X.

Meanwhile, Roy and Bev went looking for Eddy. They contacted police and hospitals, but the connection between Mister X and Eddy wasn't made, mainly because Mister X, so badly disfigured by his injuries, was misidentified as a person of Asian descent, rather than Indigenous.

I envision him in that hospital bed, powerless to raise his wing and protest, "No. Apisci-kâhkâkî, call me by my real name."

Eventually, the police asked Roy and Bev to go to the hospital to see if Mister X was their missing relative. They hung back at the door, peered into the room, saw the unrecognizable face and said, "No, that's not him."

Finally, the authorities released the only photo available of Mister X to the media – that of his battered and beaten, severely swollen face. The nightly news made a plea for someone to come forward if they recognized the Asian man.

Roy and Bev asked each other, could it be? They watched the news several more times, pondered the picture of the Asian Mister X. Ten days had passed since Mister X had been found on that snowy street.

Just as Roy and Bev were preparing to go to the hospital again, Mister X woke up from his coma. He couldn't speak but his magpie body was young and agile, only 28 years old, and so the nurses began to get him moving. He was propped up in a chair, a strap around his chest and a tray clipped in front of him to hold him in place. This is how Roy and Bev found Eddy, and this time, they recognized him.

"Oh Eddy, what's happened to you?" Bev cried, distressed and nearly hysterical. Eddy had so much swelling in his brain that he was forever altered, and Bev could see it in his eyes – not

quite focused – in his posture – not his cocky magpie self – and in his smile – missing.

The nurse reprimanded Bev: “Stop it! Get ahold of yourself. He can hear you. He understands.”

Roy and Bev left the hospital and some time after they had gone, Eddy, now back in his bed, just let go – eyes open to the sky, a magpie finding home. Of feather and bone after all.

These are the facts as I understand them, the narrative I’ve built, the pieces I’ve assembled from the limited interactions I’ve had with Eddy’s family over time.

Eddy, my father, often feels like an enigma, but maybe that’s a mistake. Eddy is a truth – one fact of Indigenous people – men, women and children over centuries of colonial imposition and settler violence. But so are resilience and spirit and joy part of his truth. I remind myself that while his story speaks of Indigenous trauma, it also includes hope, because another story-fragment is that Eddy was rarely without a smile – cherished photos attest to this fact.

I wonder, if by remembering with care, backward over time and space, I can arrive at a complete rendering of my father.

I sit on top of the coroner’s documents like a bird on three trembling eggs and I begin to see that Eddy has bestowed upon me a gift: discovery, the presence of possibility. Dreaming him will bring me to terms with my own existence and that of my children, to a place where we can carefully smooth our feathers, rearrange our garments, rub the dust from our eyes and inhale a fresh puff of air.

Eddy cannot live without me – without my imaginings – and of course I, and my children, can’t exist without him. In this way of forward-and-backward assemblage, none of us can live without each other. Magpies always remember.

*Lisa Bird-Wilson lives in Saskatoon.*

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