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## Real People

Misplaced, disjointed, unbelonging. That's how I feel sometimes when I am surrounded by my new people in my new province. I am a misfit, a swimmer with stingrays, a gutter of smelts and eels, a salty scallop-shucking, dolphin-eared East Coaster who has come to join the flatlanders. There is no water. I drive along the highways, my head an independent entity, swiveling far to the left and the right of me, painfully stretching to see beyond the tree line. Is that water? Back home, the water is always just beyond the trees. I am drowning.

This truly is the land of opportunity, however. I am very fortunate and have managed to become a highly trained consultant in this wonderfully accepting, generous place. I am flying to Yellowknife. Wow. Before I came to this bighearted land in 1992, I applied for many jobs there and received enough reject letters to wallpaper my dilapidated living room. Now I am the trainer of their trainers, defying my destiny as I soar toward the Great White North.

Butterflies are controlling the plane from the pit of my stomach. To maintain my sanity, I am glued to the window, searing holes in the thick cloud cover as I frantically search for land. Finally, the puff-filled enemy succumbs to my efforts and there is a clearing. Are we landing? What is that? The earth is swaying hypnotically for as far as I can see. Can it be? Yes! It is water; beautiful, rippling, welcoming water. Ahhh, I can breathe again.

There are people to greet me. They are holding my name, in bold black letters, on a sign above their heads. I smile and as I walk toward them, they begin to speak to me. What language is that? It is foreign to me but has the quality of a tinkling crystal chime. It is melodic, entrancing. A man reaches toward me and I watch as my hand disappears into his warm, comforting bear-sized paw. "Welcome to Yellowknife. Let's eat." We laugh and I have a strange familiar feeling as we all pick up my bags and head to the door. Do I know these people?

All four of us climb into the cab of his well-worn 1975 Chevy pickup truck. My bags go hurling through the air, barely making it into the open back, where they bask in the sun that barely sets this time of year. I am next to the bear, who speaks to me in questions although he asks nothing. He is telling me about his city in perfect English with an enchantingly lilting native accent. The two women on my other side are listening intently, smiling widely at me and although they are silently on-lookers, they make me feel like I am worth a million bucks. They appear to be sharing an inside joke and their secret flirts with gut-busting laughter that lives just beyond their kindly penetrating, sparkling eyes. They emanate triumph, hardship, truth, and survival. They are so real and offer all that they are to me, openly and unabashedly. I am captivated by their essence, their being and although we are sardined together, there is nowhere else on earth I'd rather be.

We chat as we thrust through the dust-filled streets and then come to a jilting stop in front of the smallest house I have ever seen. It is covered in license plates from all over the world and deceptively appears to be floating on their magnificent, waltzing water mass. People pour out to greet us. Giggling children swim around me, hooking my bags and reeling them into the house. There is a sea of tender smiling faces encouraging me with eyes that share the same secret, to enter their abode. The air is filled with melodic crystal chimes and tinkling laughter. Inside, I am greeted by the delicious aroma of freshly-fished arctic char and many more friendly dark-eyed faces that magnetically lure me to join them. I am humbled. An obvious stranger in their mesmeric land, a pallid white ember amongst their fervent red flames, I am accepted as if I am one of their own. My heart is bursting as I melt into them. Although most of them do not speak my language and I do not speak theirs, we are communicating passionately through universal messages of kindness and acceptance. There is something mysterious in this land, in these people. I can smell it, feel it, taste it but I cannot name it. It encompasses me and I surrender to its peacefulness and calm. For the first time since I was ripped from my beloved East Coast, I feel like I am healing, like I am home.