

Soonchild



SOONCHILD

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WALKER
BOOKS

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For my grandchildren
Benjamin; Daniel; Jacob; Elias;
Ilana; Alisa; Paul; Adam;
Emma; Holly; Samuel; Megan;
Anna; Stella; Marianne



AUTHOR'S NOTE

The North in my mind is partly the one from my childhood, when I used to send away for Canadian Railway maps and delight in the blue expanse of Hudson Bay. This North has since joined up with the one in the BBC's *Kingdom of the Ice Bear* where I met the barnacle-geese children. My dog-handling comes from Google. The ski-doos were gliding around in my unreliable memory and the word was confirmed by Bruce Bergen of Thomas Motors Ltd in Nipawin, Saskatchewan. The stiff nose hairs and brittle eyeballs date from my childhood sledding in Pennsylvania.

"When you boil up a
Big-Dream Brew, you
better be ready to drink to
the bottom of the cup."

NANUQ







Maybe you think there isn't any north where you are. Maybe it's warm and cosy and outside the window the street is full of cars or maybe there's just emptiness and a train whistle. There aren't any Eskimos or dog sleds, nothing like that. But in your mind there is a North.

There's a north where it's so cold that your nose hairs get stiff and your eyeballs get brittle and your face hurts and your hands will freeze if you leave them uncovered too long. A north where the white wind blows, where the night wind wails with the voices of the cold and lonesome dead. Where the ice bear walks alone and he's never lost. Where the white wolf comes trotting, trotting on the paths of the living, the paths of the dead. Where the snowy owl

drifts through the long twilight without a sound. Where the raven speaks his word of black.

In this north there's a place on the shore of the great northern bay with forty or fifty huts and a co-op and some boats and some of those motorized sleds they call skidoos. Some of the people still live by hunting and fishing but many have jobs and buy their food at the co-op.

In the winter it's just a huddle of dark shapes in an endless whiteness under a grey sky. The grey air shimmering where stovepipes stick out of roofs. The smell of far away and the barking of dogs. If you don't live there it's just some place that's noplace.

Some of the spirits of the place have moved away, others have died. Yes, spirits die. They die when they're no longer taken notice of, no longer spoken to. But there are still some who live on the best they can and answer if they're spoken to in the proper way.

This place with the forty or fifty huts and the co-op and so on was Sixteen-Face John's place. Sixteen-Face John was the big fear man. Nobody was as afraid as he was, nobody had so many faces to be afraid with. If a thing was too much for him to face with his first face, he would go to his second one and so on down the line. What I'm saying is that he had sixteen different faces for looking at what scared him. I can't tell you how he did it because he himself didn't know how he did it, it was just what he did.

FACES ONE TO FOUR

John's first face was the ordinary face you'd see him walking around with. That was his Hi face, the one he said hello with. Face Two was What? Face Three was Really? Face Four was Well, Well.

FACES FIVE TO EIGHT

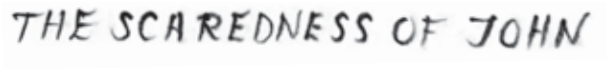
Face Five was Go On! Face Six was You Don't Mean It. Face Seven was You Mean It? Face Eight was That'll Be The Day.

FACES NINE TO TWELVE

Face Nine was What Day Will That Be? Face Ten was It Can't Be That Bad. Face Eleven was Can It Be That Bad? Face Twelve was I Don't Believe It.

FACES THIRTEEN TO SIXTEEN

Face Thirteen was I Believe It. Face Fourteen was This Is Serious. Face Fifteen was What I'm Seeing Is What It Is. Face Sixteen was What It's Seeing Is What I Am.



John never told anyone the names of his faces, that was his secret. Except for two special times in his life he'd never gone all the way to Face Sixteen because he was afraid to leave himself with no face to go to in case of really big trouble. Most things he could handle with faces One to Seven although once in a while he'd have to go as far as Nine or Ten, like the time he almost got trampled by a herd of musk-oxen (Face Nine) or the time when his wife, No Problem, went for him with an axe (Face Ten).

John was scared pretty much all the time. Sometimes he was so scared that he thought he might have to get a helper to take on some of the scaredness but then he'd say to himself, "Come on, John, you can do it, you've always got another face to work with, so stay with it, you are the big fear man."

People used to ask him how he got to be so scared. He told them that he started out scared and as time went on he got a little more scared every day. "There's so much to be afraid of. Listen to the wind, how it's moaning with the voices of the dead, the cold and lonesome dead. They're afraid the same as I am."

What of? they wanted to know.

"They're afraid the world will go away and so am I," said John. "Aren't you?"

No, they said, they weren't.

"Don't you, like, feel it slipping away?" said John. "Like your pants falling down?"

Maybe, they said, John felt that way because his pants were falling down. He had a big belly and a small bottom so that was bound to happen, what did he expect.

"Forget about my pants," said John. "You ever think about what you're seeing?"

How? they said. What did he mean?

"When you're looking at something there's a picture in your eyes of what you're looking at, yes? Like the picture in my eyes right now is the co-op with snow on the roof except for a little black circle around the stovepipe. The heat from the stovepipe is shimmering on the air. There are dog sleds and skidoos parked by the co-op and people going in and out. This is the world in my eyes.

"This world is there and it's there as long as my eyes are open. Maybe it's flickering a little like a movie, I'm not sure. I close my eyes and it's gone, no more world. When I open my eyes it's there again. You'll tell me that world is always there. OK, it's there so far. But what if too many people close their eyes at the same time, or go to sleep and don't dream this world, what then?" That worried John, he didn't like to think about it.

So anyhow, this Sixteen-Face John was a shaman, what

they call an *angakoq*. People would come to him to find out where the good hunting was or wanting him to take away a sickness or make somebody fall in love with them and he would do whatever they needed him to do. He would dream or go into a trance or travel to wherever he had to go and come back with some kind of answer. Or he would go to the animal in him, whichever one was right for the job. Sometimes he got a good result, sometimes not. You win some, you lose some. But John was the local shaman and he did all the shaman work around where he lived.

John came from a long line of shamans. His mother was Stay With It and his father was Go Anywhere. His mother's mother was Never Give Up and her father was Try Anything. His father's mother was Do It Now and his father was Whatever Works. His mother's grandmother was Where Is It? and his father's grandmother was Don't Miss Anything. His mother's grandfather was Everything Matters and his father's grandfather was Go All The Way. They were all shamans and they were all dead but they were still busy with the living because the living are the link between the dead and the unborn and the dead have to work all the time to pass along to the unborn all the things they're going to need. Like Look For It. Like Make It Happen. That kind of thing. Maybe you think you're doing it all by yourself but it's the dead working in you. They simply have no rest, the dead. Life is hard and death is hard, nothing is easy.

Sixteen-Face John's parents and grandparents had taught him how to find good hunting and how to heal the sick and the other things shamans needed to know. They taught him dreams and trances, magic songs and dances. They taught him how to look behind the little round mirror in the eye of the raven, how to hear the blue-green song of the ice bear, and how to travel on the inside of the night, even in the daytime – things that you can't learn from books, they have to pass from one generation to the next by word of mouth.

The most important thing they taught him was how to talk to spirits. In the ice bear, in the seal, in each kind of animal lives the spirit for all the animals of that kind. When a hunter kills an animal the spirit must be spoken to in the right way, it has to be shown respect if the hunter wants his luck to hold. Spirits like a lot of attention, they like to be admired and the shaman has to know how to please them so they'll be friendly to his people.

These animal spirits don't just live in the ice bear and the seal and so on, they live in people too. And not just animal spirits but the spirits of everything else – rocks and oceans and the night and everything there is. Everything lives in everybody, deep down and way, way back where there are no words. Breath and sounds but no words. Where the strangeness is. If you can get your brain out of the way your mind will take you there and

the spirits will talk to you in words. Not everybody can get there. Those who can are shamans.

John was a good shaman because there was nothing he was afraid to be afraid of. You name it and he's looked at it with however many faces it took to see what it was and how to deal with it. Famine, sickness, death, jealousy, love, hate, boils and veruccas, whatever. He did it year after year but after a certain number of years he began to have bad dreams.

Sixteen-Face John dreamt of colours that had no names and all kinds of shapes and sounds shooting past him at great speed. He heard the voices of stones and seabirds and ravens, he heard the voices of the dead of many places and many times. He dreamt of great hollow spaces where all the colours were white and the white was full of blackness that had no time in it. He dreamt of a dry red place where everything was dancing and nothing was alive. In all these dreams he couldn't see his hands and he couldn't hear himself speak, he couldn't take hold of anything and he had no voice.

The dreams were bad enough but the whispering was worse. The whispering was in his head and he heard it when he was sleeping and when he was awake. It was the kind of sound a glacier might make as it slides towards the sea, inching in the night. He couldn't make out any words and he was thankful for that.

John tried looking at the whispering with two or three

faces and he couldn't make out the shape of it but there was something about it that took the heart out of him. It was so personal. It scared him all the way to Face Nine, What Day Will That Be? Then he stopped looking because he wasn't ready to go all the way with it.

There was no doubt in John's mind that whatever was doing the whispering was waiting for him in one of those places where shamans have to go so he thought it would be a good idea to stay out of those places. Naturally when he stopped going to those places he stopped getting the results he used to get and people stopped coming to him. Sixteen-Face John still called himself a shaman but he took to drinking Coca-Cola and watching TV with his feet up and reading magazines with centrefolds in them. The whispering was still there but he made sure there was always a lot of other noise on top of it.

John did a little hunting and fishing and trapping when he had to, with a skidoo instead of a dog sled. He also carved figures out of whalebone and ivory and antler and bone and stone which he sold through the co-op. His wife, No Problem, prepared the skins from his hunting and she made and sold those skin boots they call *kamiks* and those light inner parkas they call *atigis*. Between them John and No Problem made a living.

What John looked like: he wasn't as young as he used to be and he wasn't as old as he was hoping to be. He was shorter than he was tall. His Number One Face had the

kind of smile you right away distrusted. You've already heard about his big belly and his little bottom and his falling-down pants. His most outstanding feature was his smell. It was strong and it was special. Later you'll hear how John met Nanuq and it could well be that John only came out of it alive because of his smell – it made Nanuq stop and ask himself, What kind of man is this?

John was a good carver. The figures he carved were all strange ones, spirits and shamans and weird animals. One thing he never carved was an owl. Mostly he just felt around for what the whalebone or ivory or stone wanted. Around the time this story tells of, he picked up some whalebone, maybe it was from a rib. It was all grey and weathered with the fibres showing and he could feel some kind of shape inside it talking to him.

John said to the whalebone that he would do what it wanted. He didn't do his carving in the house that time, he took the whalebone and his knife and a hand adze and went out on the grey rocks of the shore. With the adze he started feeling for the shape while the whispering in his head got louder and the blade began to move by itself. When the adze had roughed in the shape John didn't like it very much but he took his knife and went on with it and the knife started moving by itself too. When John felt like stopping for a while he tried to put the knife down but he couldn't let go of it so he closed his eyes and didn't look at what the knife was doing until the carving was finished.



When the figure was done he wished he hadn't done it but he told himself that really the adze and the knife had done it by themselves. John had never heard of anybody else making a figure that way and it seemed to him to be an unlucky thing to do. John thought it would be better if nobody saw that figure so he hid it between two big rocks on the shore above the tide line.