

Réal Carrière

Age: 22

Cumberland House, SK

The Unknown

A paddle stirs the unknown as a father and son discover a new river that was formerly unseen by man. Like all hunters, this father understands the story of a broken leaf or the struggle behind yesterday's track. In an instant he can visualise the thousands of beavers that have crossed the river and he knows that he could feed his family for many weeks with the invisible life of this river. It is true that the collection of the beavers lazy and industrious movements have been imbued deep into the images of his mind. They remind him of the movement of snow, a white snake's ghost whisper drifting over the endless death of a winter lake. The father took another stroke pushing the canoe deeper along the unknown and that was the exact moment when Columbus stepped onto the first beach of their "new world".

After a few seconds of paddling along the river the father knows that there are enough beaver to support a longer hunting expedition, possibly with his brother or his cousin. The time for that hunt is not now, as the father knows he must return at that exact moment in order to arrive home before it is completely black. However, just before they left the river, the father decided to quickly kill one beaver so he could return home with a small showing of food. In no time the father harvested a beaver with the same technique that had been passed down for generations within his family. His family was known as great beaver killers, it was time to teach his son this simple and ancient technique. The father was not worried about his son's young age because the father had also learned at a young age his family's skill. After hundreds of years the skill, though crude in its origins, was his family's pearled speciality. So with the same amount of care as a mother handling a child, the father soon had a beaver in the canoe.

The son, who recently turned eight, was fascinated with the beaver. Its belly was full. Its fur was brown and red. Its tail seemed masoned with a thousand black bones. Its claws were worn and full of wet river bottom earth. Its teeth were orange and one was

partly broken. In the canoe it seemed soft and full of water. On the ground the son knew it was slow yet like a rock. In the water it was loud, quick, and clandestine, except for the trail of bubbles. The father had paddled the canoe to the last portage and was out of the canoe when he told his son to bring the beaver out of the canoe.

At that place the river was very narrow but it was also very deep. The son, though still a child, was not strong enough to carry the beaver without a great effort. Mainly he dragged the beaver on the edge of the canoe with its belly split between the world of the canoe and the water. Near the end of the canoe, only two steps from land, the father momentarily took his hands from the canoe. The boat was suddenly unstable and the son dropped the beaver into the river. The father started to laugh because his son quickly looked at him with an expression of fear and surprise, a look that the father would never forget.

The father was quite calm at that moment because he knew that with experience the beaver would be floating and even if it were not there it would only sink to the bottom of that small creek. His mood quickly changed when his son, without warning, disappeared into the river after the beaver. The father quickly pushed the canoe aside and though he was slightly worried, he was still laughing. To the father's surprise there was no movement in the water it was as if his son had never jumped into the river. The father waded into the water where his son would have entered the water. However, the father discovered that the water was even deeper than he imagined and though he tried to dive into the water to chase his son, he realized that his son had gone far deeper than even he could swim. Although the father was worried there was some hope in his heart because he knew that his family was also known for their exceptional swimming capabilities.

In the mean time the son was swimming after the beaver. At first the river was dirty but as the son continued to swim the water gradually became clearer until he could see the beaver also swimming just a small way ahead. The son would nearly reach the beaver when, with a quick movement of its tail, it would move slightly out of reach of the son. Although the son knew he loved to swim, he never knew that his natural ability would allow him to swim so effortlessly and quickly.

After some time, the son realized that instead of a watery silence he could actually hear the mumbles of distant voices. At first he assumed that it was the beaver, then he

realized that there were many voices and that they all spoke with words that he could not understand. Listening very carefully he began to recognize some of the words and he repeated these words because he thought that they were in the language of the beaver and that the beaver would understand. So he said, “savage, king, god, gold, religion”, but the beaver did not respond to any of those words.

Further on, the son began to see more than the emptiness of the water. He saw images that he could not explain other but also images from his own life. First there were faces that he recognized like his mother, his sister, and his brother. Then there were moments like killing a squirrel, catching a fish with his hands, or laughing at his brother. Soon there were images that he did not understand like an old man telling stories to children, a woman he could not recognize, a river, trees, shiny rocks, colourful and strange hides, thousands of dead animals, tools that easily cut down trees, sandbars that extended as far as he could see, and a field of ice deep as the earth. In his struggle to reach the beaver the son thought that these images were the dreams of the beaver so he started to tell the beaver everything he saw so the beaver would understand that he understood the emotions of beavers. The beaver continued to swim and did not respond to anything that the son said.

Eventually the son began to feel tired but he knew that the beaver was also becoming tired because he was not losing any ground, this gave him renewed strength. However, he was also starting to lose his breath and knew that he would have to soon turn around to the surface. Soon after he started to think about his lack of breath he knew that he would have to return to the surface. When he finally stopped he realized that the beaver had taken him so deep that he did not know in what direction was the surface. It seemed that every direction was as empty as the other; he knew that the search for the beaver was over and the struggle for his life was about to begin.

When he looked towards the beaver he realized that the beaver was also forced to make the same decision. Using that moment to his advantage the son grabbed the beaver. In excitement he said in Cree, "My father will be happy that I did not let the beaver get away but I do not know which the way is the surface." To his surprise the beaver also spoke Cree and said, “I know the way to the surface but I do not have the energy to return. So if you have the energy I will show you the way provided that you let me free

when we reach the surface". The son saw no alternative so he accepted this proposition.

Working together the water soon became murky and it was obvious that they were very near the surface. The moment before they reached the surface the beaver said, "I have shown you the way it is time to remember your promise, we have worked together now you must let me go." The son let go and just before he ran out of air he broke the surface and faced his father. The father did not smile but he was happy.

The son climbed to the shore and without speaking they continued to cross the portage. The father had made a fire but knowing that they were close and that the son would want to return home, he put out the fire. Eventually the father's curiosity forced him to ask his son what he had seen beneath the water. After describing everything that he saw the son said, "I do not understand what I have seen. Can you help me?" The father replied, "I also do not understand but I know that what you have seen is called 'the unknown'. You will remember what you have seen today and you will tell your children this story. Do not worry my son one day everything you have seen will become known."