

The Magic Drum: Healing Lost Love

Interview with Annie Jacobsen



What mythic story has had the biggest impact on you, Annie, and what was it about?

The Inuit story known as *The Magic Drum* drew me in the moment I read it. It is the story of an Inuit woman who doesn't really want to get married, but is drawn in by two suitors who convince her to marry them. They turn out to be polar bears. They drag her across the ice, throw her into the freezing ocean under the ice and abandon her. Under the ocean her flesh is eaten by sea creatures until she is nothing but a skeleton. Finally, she makes her way out and on to the vast expanses of snow.

She is totally alone and afraid, but decides that she must fend for herself now. She makes her own small igloo and in the morning is amazed to see that caribou hides, along with another, larger igloo have been provided for her. In her loneliness, she goes walking across the ice and sees small figures in the distance who turn out to be hunters. She is desperate to talk to them, but when she runs up to them they are terrified of her because she's a skeleton. They run away and she realizes that she will simply have to stay alone and wait.

One day an old man approaches her igloo. One of the hunters has told him about the terrifying skeleton woman, and since he is close to death, he decides to visit her. She invites him in, feeds him and asked him to make her a drum. He is glad to do so. When he finishes the drum, she blows out the lights in the igloo and dances while he plays the drum. When she lights the candles again, she has been transformed into a beautiful young maiden wearing lovely clothes. Again, the drum is played, this time by her, as the old man dances. When the lights are



lit, he has become a handsome young man. They journey back to his village. No one recognizes them, but he tells them that he is their father and that this beautiful young woman, who was the skeleton woman, is now his wife.

(to read Laura Simms retelling of the full story of *The Magic Drum*, go to <http://www.humanity.org/voices/folklore/inuit/>)

Why was The Magic Drum such a particularly powerful story for you, Annie?

I really identified with the total aloneness and devastation that the skeleton woman felt. She was stripped of all she had, and taken right down to the bare bone. I fully imagined her terror under the icy sea, when the fish were eating her flesh, destroying all of her beauty. I wrote twenty-three poems, retelling the story, and I called them *Skeleton Woman*.

When I first read the story, I had just come through a divorce and was still dealing with my feelings of loss and betrayal. I desperately wanted a new love and I thought I had found the perfect partner. He was intelligent, charming, sexy, adventurous and well off. However, he, too, was just coming out of a divorce and wasn't at all ready for a relationship with me. We would see each other, have a marvelous time together and then he would tell me that he couldn't be in a relationship yet. I was trying to reconcile my desperate longing with an understanding that I might have to wait a long time for the right relationship.

I was seeking love and, although I don't think I knew it at the time, a new connection with the creative. I was in a mid-life crisis. I wanted a new marriage, love and security and I also wanted the freedom to pursue my writing. I had been kicked out of my old world and I wanted to find a new one.

Is there a particular scene that depicts where you were in your life when you first found the story?

I was sitting in my igloo still waiting for the right man. The Inuit woman in the story has had many suitors but none of them have been right. When the two young men appear and ask her to go with them, she has hope. She sees them as her *last* hope for happiness. I was enthralled with the man who had come along in my life. He was like one of those suitors – strong, exciting, adventurous.

*The last two brothers come blaring in
through the snow door.
She thinks their eyes are candles.*

*They sit like the others
only they are smiling light.
The thongs unlaced at their chests
reveal landscapes –
nipples are tiny mountains
polished and dark.*

*Arms big from paddling
stir up the air around her.*

*Clumsy hands cuff her hair, feed her meat
until the bones in her chest
become a cage against which
her heart flings itself.
Yelping. A hungry dog.*



The loss of him was devastating. And swift. In the story, the Inuit woman follows the young men out of the igloo and instantly they turn into polar bears. They drag her across the ice and throw her into a hole in the sea. Within moments, she has lost everything.

I felt the same thing when my love very quickly abandoned our passionate relationship after a couple of months. I felt as if I had finally lost all hope. I remember driving around one night in my car, crying, feeling nothing but blackness and cold, the same kind of blackness and cold that I had imagined the Inuit woman felt as she entered the icy sea. It was the one and only time in my life that the idea of suicide entered my mind.

*Falling
she knows the shock of the sun
shrouded by Arctic night,
the panic of the puny stone
tumbled by a furious spring river,
the rage of flesh
pierced by an indifferent arrow.*

*Falling into a universe
of black, unbearable water
the slits of her eyes are sewn shut
by icy lashes.*

I had lost my hope for love. Soon after, I was diagnosed with cancer. The Inuit woman's flesh is eaten by the sea creatures and she is left with nothing but bones. I felt that too. My body was being ravaged like the Skeleton Woman's and I had come face to face with death.

*A walrus eats her eyes,
carves with his tusks
the remains of her cheeks.
His needle whiskers pierce
the last bloody scraps
of her lips.*

*Seals, smiling like children,
slide off ice floes,
dive to her,
devour her blackening toes.*

*The sea waves
the tattered rags of her body
and then, like a hand
gathering slippery reeds,
claims her.*



***The Skeleton woman treks through the
and she finds her way back up again,
following a pale glimmer of light. Was there a light for you, Annie, a way through the frozen sea?***

sea

At first I was deeply shocked by the cancer diagnosis, and then in a state of panic and fear. I knew that my life would never be the same. I knew that the cancer was a wake-up call but I really didn't know what I was going to do. I wanted to stop working at my college teaching job, but was terrified about the loss of money and security.

*She walks the ocean floor,
thin as a bone knife,
slices through
the sun's fractured radiance
toward a narrow crevasse,*

*glimpses a split second of
blue.*

Climbing out is easy

At that time I was also in Jungian analysis and I spent about three years trying to understand what had happened with my relationship. I was in a state of profound grief about my life and most of it was projected on to the loss I had experienced in being rejected by my love. I had projected on to him all of my dreams for myself: he was adventurous, optimistic, prosperous, creative, active in the outer world, confident, helping others. I think that the thing I loved about him most was that he seemed to be following his own star. He'd left a comfortable position in the corporate world as the CEO of his own very successful company and had followed his heart into adventures and into doing work that he believed would make a difference in the lives of others.

I felt that I'd been locked into expectations of being a certain kind of wife and mother, living a lifestyle that I couldn't afford in an affluent part of the city that didn't nourish me in any way. I, too, wanted to follow my own star, but I didn't know how to and I felt obligated to go on supporting my children in the same driven ways that I always had.

Like the Skeleton Woman, who runs after the hunters in her need, I ran after my love several times and was each time given a tiny bit of hope and then rejected again. Like her, I finally realized that I had to simply sit by my igloo and wait. I had to try to do my own work, to heal my broken heart. I began writing the Skeleton Woman poems around this time and began thinking about moving to a new neighbourhood.

*...her hands
have not forgotten.*

Her fingers become knives.

*She cradles out
a snow block from its bed,
places it at the foot
of the circle she draws
with her toe.*

*She bends, cuts, lifts.
There is only now
only building this igloo.*

*Her arms and legs are one
with the falling snow.*

*"I need warmth,"
she murmurs to the white wind.
"I need skins and furs
to cover me."*

*At last, drifting into sleep
inside her own small igloo,
she hears her voice
as if already in a dream:
"I need warmth."*



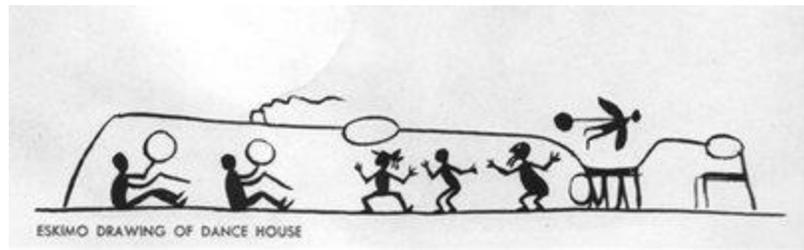
The igloo seems like such a powerful, stabilizing place for the Inuit woman. She's still a skeleton, alone, but she's providing for herself and being provided for. Did you experience that?

Yes. From there I was able to look back, and look forward. The moment the Inuit woman followed the young suitors outside of her warm and comfortable igloo, everything changed. For me, I think everything changed when I left my marriage. I could have stayed in my igloo with the values of the “father,” compromising my life, denying myself happiness and nourishment for the sake of my children and my financial security.

I saw that for a few years I pursued relationships that would have put me right back in the same position. Even my last love, whom I saw as the one who would finally bring me salvation, would have wanted me to become the typical “wife.”

In the “igloo” I was terrified of being alone and of eventually being financially destitute. I wasn’t at all sure I could support myself and my children on my own. My fantasy was that my love would give me financial security, adventures in accompanying him on his trips around the world, a social network and the time to write without having to make my own living. But, like the Skeleton Woman, I had to learn to build my own igloo. I had to have faith, as she discovers, that the universe would take care of me.

But that time in my life was terrifying. I was so afraid that I would never find another partner, that I would sink into poverty, that I might die of cancer. But there was also a part of me that was elated by my new freedom and full of courage to find my own life, even though I wasn’t quite sure what it was.



I knew I was a fighter. I also knew that I had to do this for my children. That, somehow, my courage in dealing with the cancer and in finding my own sustaining and fulfilling path would be the greatest gift I could give them and myself.

So what was the drum, Annie? What was the drum that put flesh back onto the Inuit woman’s bones?

I knew that I had to keep on doing creative work. Even though I had great doubts about my abilities as a writer and I felt that it was too late to start writing seriously, I kept on with classes and I finally made the leap into fiction from poetry. I’d always resisted writing fiction. I was afraid that I couldn’t do it. It seemed big and overwhelming, unlike poetry, where I could sit down and write a poem in a morning. Writing my first short stories was painful. They weren’t very good. I was starting all over. And yet, something in me wouldn’t let me stop. I had to begin saying yes to my own creative needs.

*In the black belly of the igloo
she beats the drum
he has made.*

*His heart rises and falls
into the swelling sound
a whale
crashing down into dark waters.*

*Her legs brush his arm
bony wings of a spirit bird.*

*Her skirling voice
lifts them
to a place beyond
the end of the sea.*



*He is drowning in sound
when her dance ends.*

Annie Jacobsen is author of the novel *Watermelon Syrup* (2007), as well as short stories, poetry, and an unpublished novel. In the later years of her life she lived in Toronto with her two children, taught writing workshops, and practised as a Jungian psychotherapist.

Annie died in May 2005, after completing her *Skeleton Woman* poems and the manuscript for the novel that became *Watermelon Syrup*. The book, a tale of a young Mennonite woman from Saskatchewan, was carried to publication by Annie's friend, novelist Jane Finlay-Young, and author Di Brandt.

A Personal Note about Annie

Annie was a dear friend of mine, and a great inspiration to me and many other writers and artists. To give you a portrait of Annie, and the spirit she left in the world, I'd like to share a little story. It came to me in the form of a dream that I had in March of 2005, a few months before Annie died. I shared the dream with Annie in a letter I wrote to her that same month.

I had gone to a movie theatre and met a woman who was sitting beside me. We weren't very interested in the movie, so we left, and went to her place. She was a native woman who wanted to know if I was native too, and I said, yes, I was. In the dream, the question felt equivalent to being asked, "Are you real? Are you true to yourself?"

We went to her apartment. She went into her bedroom, reached under her bed, and drew out a big square box made of white cardboard. I sat on the bed beside her, and she told me she had a terminal illness. She wasn't upset about it, which surprised me. She seemed to be taking it in stride. She said that she kept her treasures in this box and suggested that we both put keep a treasure box. That way, we could share what had been important to us in our lives.

I thought that was a great idea. Then she said, "Look, there's something I want you to see." She took some papers out of the box. She had drawn something on several big sheets of paper. "Here's one of my treasures," she said. "I drew this a while ago."

It was a drawing of a stick girl who was walking on a line, like a life line. There were captions underneath, like a storyboard. In the beginning she was surrounded by a teeming web of life, birds, trees, sun, clouds, moon and stars and hills and rivers and flowers. But as she moved along her lifeline, the richness disappeared. The line lost all its ups and downs and became no more than a flat line, a career path. The captions didn't describe what was experiencing. They described the things she had to do for a living. "I go to university, I graduate with a bachelor's degree, I get a job in a cafeteria..." and so on. The drawings turned into abstract symbols with little meaning or content. This flat line went on for PAGES, and after a many pages of this and no more than this, I burst into tears.

"Is this your life?" I asked, overwhelmed by grief. "Is this what you TREASURE?"

"Yes," she said. "Absolutely."

"Why?"

Because I've DEPICTED it, she said, smiling sweetly. "It's the DEPICTION I treasure."

I woke up out of the dream in tears. But I was also teeming with life, with her life, nourished by her wisdom and artistry.

Annie understood the transforming power of a dream, and, in fact, she did a whole television series on dreams. She worked with many of us on our dreams, and she helped me to validate and deeply respect the insights that came to me from the imaging mind.

I first met Annie in the early 90s when she came to our newly formed writing group, to lead us through a process known as "proprioceptive writing." I can still see her sitting at the head of a long gleaming table, explaining how to get under the deep layers of our writing by asking ourselves, "What do I mean?" I was shocked by the place I dove to that writing session. I never forgot her beauty and her fearless willingness to engage whatever material wanted to come up.

After, I didn't see Annie for years, and then some time toward the end of the 90s I went to visit her in her house in Rosedale, when she was still living in a wealthy Toronto neighborhood. We met like old friends, sat in her living room, sipped tea, and shared stories about our healing journeys. We'd both been to hell and back and now we were examining the topography. For Annie, the depths had been icy and cold. She

told me about being Skeleton Woman, stripped to the bone under the frozen sea, abandoned by love and nature.

There were flowers around her again, I noticed, a spray of multi-colored roses in a vase. Her blond hair had grown back and she was radiant again, sworn to being here in a new way, allowing her fertile garden to grow, unhurried, without worry or force. I left with her Skeleton poems in my arms, anxious to know more details about where she had been and what she had found in her icy underworld. I felt a fierce kinship.

Later, in a workshop I held on healing through stories, Annie shared the story of *The Magic Drum*. I will always have the picture in my mind of her sitting before our little group with her drum, wearing a fur hat and holding the plastic skull she found in the woods that fall. She had drummed the flesh back onto her bones, and she drumming up a lot of inspiration around her.

I have many treasured pictures of Annie that remind me, practically daily, of her love and her daring to make everything—no matter how hard or difficult—into art. I still see her sitting across from me in Kensington Kitchens restaurant, calmly telling me her prognosis, which was not good. She had run out of options for cancer treatment. Her beautiful face wavered through the film of my tears. I wanted to bawl my eyes out and we were holding hands and I was full of fury and fear yet she was showing me how to meet this and telling me that she felt like the fool in the Tarot, stepping off the cliff...

I have many pictures of Annie in my treasure box. A line runs through them, a *life* line—Depict everything. Live your life, whatever you're given. Engage the elements, no matter how cold and forbidding. Build your igloo and the caribou will provide.