

Joseph James:

Hiding from those who touch our hearts

My Dear Family:

The last time I was in touch with you was to arrange my mother's funeral (Elizabeth James). That was three years ago.

Please forgive me if you thought that I did not want anything to do with you since then.

I have very much wanted to write to you, to see you. It is just that it is very, very hard for me to face those things or persons who are the most able to touch my heart.

Please let me tell you from the beginning.

When I was seven years old I found out that I was adopted. The people who adopted me were good to me, they both loved me very much, but I soon learned that their families (as kind as they were) always considered me, "Alfred's adopted boy," or "Caroline's adopted boy." I was treated well, but I was always "adopted," not one of their "flesh and blood" kin.

I was "welcomed" but never felt really welcome, I felt like a small intruder in a big house, like a mouse scurrying around in the middle of the night.

As I grew older, I began to wonder who my real parents were, who were my real family, my own "flesh and blood" kin. I did not ask very often, but I asked until I started getting a few answers.

My adopted mother finally told me my real mother's name, and that she was Eskimo, from Anvik. This was hard for me to take as I had been raised thinking that I was Indian. I had lived on an Oregon reservation for a while.

So I went to Portland, Oregon and talked a lady judge into letting me have a copy of my real birth certificate.

I was terrified. Here I had what I needed to find my real mother, and my real family; but did they want me to find them? Would I really be welcome or only "made welcome." Was I wanted back?

I was young, I did not understand much then. My fear was that of a child, in a man's body.

So like a child, I hid in the darkest place I could find, the Oregon State Pen. Just days after I got hold of my real birth certificate, I broke the whiteman's law and was sent to prison.

Still, not realizing that I had "hid," I wrote to my mother. She wrote back.

I was happy to hear from her. It was explained to me that her mind had been injured a long time ago and that she was not as able as most people, but I did not care. I was just happy to know that she was alive.

While I was in prison, I told her that I would come up to see her as soon as I could. I could not tell her that I was in prison, just that I had things to take care of first.

But I told the people who were taking care of my mother where I was, and why I could not come up to Alaska right away.

They were nice people; they meant well when they sent my mother down to see me. Only, they did not tell me what they were doing.

I was sitting in my cell, in the pen, when my counselor called me to his office. He told me that, "your mother is here to visit you." I thought that he was talking about my adopted mother, so I said, "It is not Sunday (the regular visiting day) so why is my mother visiting today?"

Then he said, "Your REAL mother is here."

I was stunned! Here I was, a common criminal, in prison, and I was going to see my REAL mother for the very first time. It was impossible, I could not let her see me like this, the shame was too great, I would have rather died.

I knew that she was "retarded." I had been told. I knew she didn't care if I was in prison or not. I knew that she only wanted to see her long lost "baby." I knew all of this, but reason failed me; I shook, my hands became sweaty, I couldn't speak, I couldn't see. I could only sit there, stunned and shake my head. No! No! No! No! No!

The people who took care of her had really meant well, they had tried to do good, but they should have told me, given me time to get ready.

I was so sad, I had sent my own mother away. I had refused to let her see me. I was deeply ashamed. I had no more respect for myself. What a terrible thing to do to your own mother, and her only having a five-year-old's strength of mind.

So many times after that, even after I got out of prison, I had wanted desperately to write her, to explain, to tell her how sorry I was to have sent her away, to have shamed her so cruelly, so thoughtlessly.

I couldn't. Sons who treated their mothers as rotten as I had, did not deserve to have mothers who loved them. And I knew that the rest of her family knew what I had done.

How could I ever be welcome after everyone had seen what I did?

I did not write anymore, but I never forgot her. She was always in my thoughts, but I did not write. Then I came to Alaska with the idea of setting things right.

That was my intent anyway, but the closer I got to where my mother was, the smaller my resolve got.

I hid again, in prison, only this time it was an Alaskan prison. I hid several times; I went to prison again, and again. It was nice in prison, I couldn't go see her. And those nice people couldn't send her to see me again because this time they never knew where I was.

Then one day I was just casually talking with one of the staff at the Eagle River Correctional Center. I told him about my real mother. Then he said, "I think I know of her; she was staying with some friends of mine in Texas."

My God! She was clear down in Texas and I still couldn't hide. If I was at the South Pole, I would expect to find a note under a rock, "Your mother is still waiting; go see her."

But Mr. Maxwell (the staff I was talking to) took the time to talk to me. He explained things to me, helped me to start thinking right. So I said that I would try again. Mr. Maxwell then went to the trouble of locating my real mother. She was in a care center in Seward. My time in prison was almost up so I decided to wait until I was out (on work-release).

After I got to the work-release center, I called the place in Seward. They said, "Why, your mother is in the ANS hospital on 3rd Avenue in Anchorage."

So I called there and was told that my mother had a real bad heart problem, and might not live much longer.

I had to go see her. No matter how badly I had messed things up before, I knew that I might never get another chance.

She was so happy to see me. The first thing she said was, "I have been praying for such a long time that you would finally find me."

I was so happy, I forgot about the past. Already I was planning to take her home when she got better, back to her home, on the Yukon/Kuskokwim.

She wanted to see my family, to visit with us in our home. So I asked both doctors, "Can she travel? Will it be all right? Are you really certain?"

They both said yes.

So that weekend I took her home for few hours. She looked so frail, I was worried about her, but the doctors had said that it would be all right.

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Then I brought her back to the hospital, and she was so happy. She looked all tired out from the trip but the doctor had said, "nothing to worry about."

I drove back home, my wife had decided that she wanted a divorce. So I went back to the work-release center.

Two days later my wife calls and tells me that the doctors have been trying to get ahold of me; my mother, my real mother had died, just two hours after I had brought her back to the hospital, from her visit with us.

Apparently the strain from the trip had been too much for her heart. I kept as much of my promise to her as I could, I arranged for her to be buried near her home, at Kalskag. I couldn't go to the funeral though, because I did not have enough money to fly there.

Besides, the only thing I managed to accomplish after spending 17 years searching for my mother was to "kill" her.

I knew my old pick-up had hard springs. I knew that it was slow in getting anywhere. And I should have turned around as soon as I had seen my mother getting tired.

Funerals were becoming a dime a dozen. My adopted mother had died in Oregon, only a month-and-a-half before.

If I hadn't been in prison, maybe I could have taken care of my adopted mother in Oregon.

So then I did what I always did: I hid again.

I gave my wife \$50 and said, "File the divorce papers; ain't nothing going on in my life that's any of your business anymore."

I should have told her how sorry I was for being such a rotten husband. I should have asked her to wait just a while longer. I shouldn't have just shut down all my feelings, just go dead inside.

It took about a year, but I am hiding again, in prison. I feel comfortable here. I don't think I like it, but I certainly can't mess up very many things, and it will be 20 years or more before I have to face all my aunts, uncles, brothers, cousins and other relatives of my real mother's.

And know what is the funniest part? I never broke the laws that I was accused of. All I did was take advantage of the opportunity to hide again.

I refused a lawyer. I didn't cross-examine the witnesses. I even helped the Prosecuting Attorney place the most red-neck jury possible. The jury hated me from jump street. Being found guilty was a cinch.

So why am I telling everyone all this? I don't know. I don't really want out of jail. And even though I am not guilty of what I was charged with, I'm still able to suffer for "killing" my own mother, for driving my wonderful wife away, for all the things I seem to do no matter how good my intentions are.

So why? Well, maybe there is someone else out there that you know, who is going through the same sort of things as I have. Maybe you could talk to him. Maybe it might do some good. I know that there comes a day when talk will not help anymore. Catch him before he gives up, before he quits trying, "just on more time."

And as for my mother's family, I know you will read this, and I only hope that you will understand why I am hiding from you.