

JOSEPH BOYDEN

THREE DAY ROAD

A NOVEL



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,

Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,

Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue,

Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:

80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin,

a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 2005

Published in Penguin Books 2006

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Joseph Boyden, 2005

All rights reserved

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 0 14 30 3707 2

CIP data available

Printed in the United States of America

Set in Perpetua

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

J A C O B

k i n a n t e h i

A M A N D A

k i n a n i n i k a m o w i n

*We walk through the snow, follow our trail out to the traplines by the willows. I lead, sleepy. Bitter air. Sharp in the lungs. Elijah walks in my tracks. The sun is coming.*

*I break through the crust with each step. Too cold last night. Elijah tries to be quiet, but his feet sound heavy.*

*Elijah and me, we are the same age. We have lived twelve winters.*

*The trees moan and crack. The sound is like dying.*

*"Do you think we have snared anything?" Elijah asks.*

*I stop, look back at him. "Stay quiet."*

*Tracks everywhere around us here. Footprints in the snow. Shallow prints. Scoops of shadow in the white.*

*Up ahead, the dark line of it hangs in the air. My heart beats faster.*

*"Have we caught something, Xavier?"*

*A marten has sprung our willow trap. It dangles above the snow as if floating. Up close I see the rawhide noose around its neck. Its fur is thick. Auntie will be proud.*

*Elijah pushes past me, reaches for the marten, grasps the long body in his mittens. He turns to me and smiles. The marten begins to twist and snarl. Elijah lets go, shocked. We did not realize it is still alive.*

*We stand back and stare as the marten struggles in the air. The black eyes focus on me. It does not want to die.*

*"What do we do, Xavier?"*

"You must club it."

Elijah finds a stick and approaches the animal. He looks back at me.

"Do it."

He hesitates, then swings the stick. The animal screams out. The sound frightens me.

"Harder!"

Elijah swings again, and again the marten squeals. My stomach feels sick. I pick up a heavier piece of wood, step up, and give it a sharp blow to its head. The hide noose snaps and the marten drops to the ground. It doesn't move. I club its head once more.

Elijah stares at me.

"We had to do it," I say.

"We had to," he repeats. "Our first night out alone and we have already taken an animal. Your Auntie will be impressed."

I nod and smile.

I untie the noose from the marten's neck, take out my knife and begin to skin it. I make sure to be careful, to not damage the fur, to keep the body intact. I want Auntie to see that I do not waste.

Elijah watches. His eyes miss nothing. He takes off one mitten and bends down to touch the marten's naked body. "We are great hunters, aren't we, Xavier?"

"Yes, Elijah," I say.

"We are great hunters and best friends, yes?"

"Yes," I say.

## E K I W A N I W A H K

### R e t u r n i n g

FOR MANY DAYS I've hidden in the bush by the town, coming out when I hear the call, watching carefully for him. This is an ugly town, far bigger than Moose Factory, even. This is a town I have not been to before, a place to which I will never return. More *wemistikoshiw* than I want to see walk the dusty streets in their funny clothes, dressed as if for colder weather, though the sun above us is high and full of summer heat.

I hide well during the day, but when the sound of it reaches my ears I have no choice but to come out and walk among them. They stare and point and talk about me as if they've not seen one of me before. I must look a thin and wild old woman to them, an Indian animal straight out of the bush. Soon I will have only enough food left to get us home, and so I've taken to setting snares around my camp. The rabbits, though, seem as afraid of this place as I am.

Where it comes to rest is just a wooden platform with a small shelter to hide in when the weather turns. The road that leads up to it is covered in dust. Automobiles, just like the one Old Man Ferguson back in Moose Factory drives, rush there at the same time every other day. I have watched them pour what smells like lantern oil onto the road, but still the dust floats up so that it coats the inside of my nose and bothers my eyes. At least I can hide a little in the dust, and not so many of them can see me.

The place where I go is covered in soot so that I feel the need to bathe each day that I return from there without him. I have stopped sleeping

at night, worried that the words were wrong, that he will never come, that I will die here waiting.

Again today I hear the call. Again today I wait for the others to get there before me, before I step among them.

The old ones call it the iron toboggan. As I watch this thing approach, whistle blowing and smoke pouring from the chimney in the summer heat, I see nothing of the toboggan in it. More frightening than the crowd of people around me is the one bright eye shining in the sunlight and the iron nose that sniffs the track.

Too many people. I've never been around so many *wemistikoshiw* at one time. They walk and jostle and talk and shout to one another. I look out at the spruce across the tracks. Blackened by soot, they bend in defeat.

I stand back in the shadow of the shelter and watch as the people in front of me tense, then move closer to the track as it approaches, not further away as I would have expected. The women in the crowd look nothing like me, wear long dresses made of too much material and big hats. They hold bowed cloth shields above their heads. The men are dressed in black and brown and grey suits, and the shoes upon their feet are shiny, so shiny that I wonder what kind of animal the leather has come from. All of the men wear hats, too. All these people wearing hats in summer. I do not understand much of the *wemistikoshiw*.

It whistles like a giant eagle screaming, so close now that I must cover my ears.

I have paddled by myself against the big river's current for many days to get here. No mind. My one living relation died in a faraway place, and I am here to greet his friend Elijah. Elijah Whiskeyjack is as close to a relation as I still have, and I will paddle him home.

Joseph Netmaker brought the letter out to me. Winter had just started to settle itself into the country. Joseph walked on snowshoes from the town. "This is for you, Niska," he said. "It is from the Canadian boss, their *hookimaw*."

As soon as I saw the brown letter, the English words written upon it, I knew what it contained. I sat down beside the fire and stirred at it with

a stick while Joseph read, first out loud and in his stumbling English, then for me in our language.

"Serial No. 6711. Deeply regret to inform you, Private First Class Xavier Bird, infantry, officially reported died of wounds in the field, November 3, 1918. Director of Records."

I waited for more, but that was all. When Joseph left, I was alone.

Many moons later, when the winter ice was leaving and travel was difficult, Joseph came back with another letter. He explained that it was in reference to Elijah, and that Old Man Ferguson had given it to him to give to me since I was the closest thing to a relation that Elijah had.

The letter said that Elijah had been wounded, that he had only one leg now, that he had tried to rescue another soldier, was given a medal for bravery. It said that although weak, he had healed enough to travel and was expected to arrive in the same town from which he and Xavier had left so long ago.

I had Joseph explain to me how the *wemistikoshiw* calendar worked, what month I was to be there, and I made careful preparations to journey by canoe to that town where Elijah would arrive. I left early in the summer and paddled up the river. It was difficult. I am older now, but I travelled light. Joseph had asked to come along, but I told him no.

I went alone.

I watch the beast pull up and give one last great sigh, as if it is very tired from the long journey, smoke pouring from its sides. People wave from the windows and people on the ground wave back, just as I have watched them do for days. Then men and women and children who have arrived start stepping down into the arms of others. I see a few soldiers and search among them for Elijah's face with his sly grin. The crowd begins to thin, and once again I do not see an Indian soldier with one leg.

I am turning to leave when I see through one of the windows the silhouette of a man inside. He walks slowly along the aisle, on crutches, in a uniform, a small bag slung over his shoulder. I step away from the shadow of the wall.

He wears a hat, just like the *wemistikoshiw* do, but this one is of their army and I cannot see his face for his looking down as he slowly makes his way down the steps on his crutches. He is an old man, I think. So skinny. This cannot be the Elijah I know. One leg of his pants is pinned up and hangs down a little way, empty.

When he is off the steps I begin to back away, thinking it is not him. He looks up and I see his face, thin and pale, high cheekbones, and ears sticking out from beneath his hat. I stumble a little, the blood rushing away from my head. The ghost of my nephew Xavier looks at me.

He sees me at the same moment, and I watch as his eyes take a long time to register what they see, but when they do he begins to rock back and forth on his crutches. He falls to the ground. I rush up to him, kneel beside him, grab his warm hands. He is no ghost. I hold him to me. His heart beats weakly. I am struck suddenly that he is very ill.

"Nephew," I whisper. "You are home. You are home."

I hug him, and when he opens his eyes, I look into them. They are glassy. Even in the shadows of the station his pupils are pinpricks.

"I was told you were dead, Auntie," he whispers.

"And I was told you were, too," I say.

We sit on the ground for a while, both of us too weak for the moment to get up. We are crying, looking at one another. A small group of *wemistikoshiw* gathers and stares at us. I help Nephew up so that we can get away, get to the river where he can drink water and I can better protect him.

We do not stay in the town long. It makes me too nervous. Automobiles, they are everywhere. We must cross the dusty road that they travel upon before we can get to the river where I keep my canoe. Nephew walks slowly on his crutches, his eyes cast down. People stare at us, at him. There was a time before he left that he would have stared back, he and Elijah both, not intimidated by them.

What of Elijah? If they made a mistake about Nephew's death, maybe they made one about Elijah. I want to ask, but will wait until he is ready to speak.

We try to cross the road but an automobile honks like a goose and swerves around. I watch carefully and must wait a long time until I can judge that we can cross safely.

I lead Nephew down to the riverbank. I have left the canoe a good walk down the rocky shore. I tell him that it is best for him to wait while I go ahead and get it. He doesn't respond, just sits heavily on the bank. Quickly as I can, I make my way. I am silly to worry about leaving him alone for a few minutes. In the last years he has experienced more danger than anyone should experience in a hundred lives. But I worry anyway.

As I approach him in my canoe, I can see that he has his jacket off and is holding his thin arm in one hand. I get closer and see that he has stuck something into his arm, something he pulls out just as he looks up and sees me. His body has gone relaxed and his eyes look guilty for a moment, but as I get to where he is they are like the dark river in the sun.

I feel better once he is in the canoe and we are paddling away from the town. It smells the same as Moose Factory, the scent of burning wood not quite masking another decaying smell below it. He paddles for a while, but he is listless.

I tell Xavier to lie back on his pack and rest, that we are heading north and I have the current with me for once and it is easy going. He does not seem to hear me. I touch my paddle tip to his shoulder. He turns. I say it again and he watches my mouth intently. He lies back without speaking, and I paddle us back into the bush, looking every once in a while at his thin face in the sunlight, this face that has grown old too quickly. He sleeps, but his sleep is not restful. He twitches and his hands shake. He calls out and this wakes him up. He sits and dips his hand in the river, runs it across his face. His shirt is soaked through with sweat. He is very sick. Some fever is burning him up from the inside. I push down the river in silence.

I take my time, find it pleasant not to have to work constantly, not to fight the current. Only a couple of days ago I battled with every stroke until my arms were dead things and my lower back felt broken. Now paddling home I have the luxury of the current that runs north with me to the Great Salt Bay, to the place the ones who took my nephew call Hudson

Bay. It cost me a week of hard work to make my way up the river, but with the wind and weather in my favour, the river is a three-day paddle home. I have many questions for Xavier, and I am like a child inside, waiting to ask them. But I am patient. I am good at waiting.

We do not get far before the sun lets me know that it is time to prepare a camp. I want to go easy with him anyway. No rush. It is summer.

The insects are heaviest just before and during dusk, and so I look for an island in the river that will afford us some relief from them. Ahead, a good one appears with a sandy beach and dead wood scattered about for a fire.

We beach the canoe and I busy myself collecting wood. Nephew tries to help but his crutches sink into the soft sand and he grows frustrated. I want to cry, watching him from the corner of my eye as he bends and tries to pick up wood and then finally sits and pulls rocks to him slowly, making a fire circle.

I cut long saplings with my axe and drag them to him, tie them together at one end and construct the frame for a small teepee. I pull a length of canvas from the canoe and tie it to the frame. The sky right now looks like it will give a starry night, but the wind tells me something different. We are not so far away from the bay that a storm can't rush up on us. Once I have dragged our few belongings into the teepee, I pull food from a pack and lay it out. Nephew has gotten a nice fire started.

On one rock I place salted fish, on another some moosemeat and on a third, blueberries picked fresh from the bush. I take a stick and sharpen its end. Nephew stares at the river. I lace a length of meat onto the stick and heat it by the flame. He turns his head in recognition when it begins to warm and its scent comes up.

"I have not smelled that in a long time," he says, smiling shyly. These are the first words he has said since the town.

I give him some food, but he doesn't eat. His skin is the colour of cedar ash in the setting sun.

That night I crawl into the teepee, tell him to sleep when he is ready. He stares at the fire.

Hours later, I awake to a light rain tapping on the canvas. I open my eyes and listen to it. The fire smoke in the rain is a pleasant scent. I realize I lie here alone. Even with the weather, Nephew has not come in. I peer outside. The fire sizzles and pops, and my fear returns when I see he doesn't sit beside it.

There is no sleep the remainder of the night. I toss in my blanket. My body hums with Nephew's pain and with the realization that he has come home only to die.

I watch my body shiver in the cold rain. The morphine is very good, though, a warm blanket that wraps about me like a moose robe. I will lie here and listen to the hollow breathing in my chest, wait for dawn to come, and I will fight the sleep that pulls at me. I do not want to sleep and be taken back.

I stare up at the rain that falls down, flickers of lightning cutting through it every few minutes. My body floats above itself. Oh, this medicine is good. I hear my breathing, how the air floods in slowly then recedes from me like waves on a beach. I listen to myself breathe, and I close my eyes. After a time I can hear others breathing heavy all around me. I want to tell them to go quiet. Lightning, another flare, pops up out of the darkness and throws a white light on us and on the ditch we lie in, our uniforms soaking up the cold water. Elijah is not near. So long has Elijah been around that he is like a part of my own body.

Where is he?

The big guns echo. They shake me.

I crawl with the others up to broken buildings on the edge of the town. Me, I'm so tired I'd rather sleep here on my belly away from the buildings that attract all their shells. The darkness makes me feel safe.

Tomorrow we will go into the trenches. But tonight we're told to go to that town. We have no choice. The *crack crack crack* of rifles keeps us in the ditch and the flares go up and nobody knows who's firing into the night. The rifle fire sounds maybe fifty yards away, to the left and front.

"Are those our fucking signal flares?" Sergeant McCaan hisses. "Can somebody tell me? Are they?"

The one called Fat whimpers like a dog. The others around me breathe too loud. A good hunter will hear us. Another *crack* of rifle fire. Puffs of dirt spray on my head.

"Ross rifles," I whisper over to McCaan, and he looks at me, swearing more, the words louder and angrier. It's our own rifles firing at us.

Suddenly McCaan crouches and begins screaming at the top of his lungs, "Quit firing on your own, you bastards!" and I reach up and pull him down as rounds buzz by his head.

## TAKOSHININANIANIWAN

### Arrival

RAIN PATTERS ON THE SAND all around me tonight, slowly soaks through the wool of this uniform I still wear, the animal scent of it pulling me back to the battlefields. I do not ever want to go there again. Auntie rests in her little teepee, but me, I can't. When I do, the dead friends I don't want to see come to visit. They accuse me of acts I did not perform. Of some that I did. We all acted over there in ways it is best not to speak of. Especially Elijah. He is the truly skilled one. But at one time I was the better marksman. No one remembers that. Elijah, he is the blessed one.

Where is he? We spent the whole war together only to lose each other in the last days. A shell landed too close to me. It threw me into the air so that suddenly I was a bird. When I came down I no longer had my left leg; I've always known men aren't meant to fly.

They gave me medicine for the pain, and I learned how to fly in a new way. The cost this time is that I can no longer live without the medicine, and in a few days there will be none left. Their morphine eats men. It has fed on me for the last months, and when it is all gone I will be the one to starve to death. I will not be able to live without it.

This is all too much to figure out. Elijah is missing. Auntie is not dead after all. I received a letter in France one year ago saying that she was gone. Nothing in the world makes any sense any more. I lie back on the sand and let the rain tickle my face. The campfire hisses. I should sit closer by it, but the light hurts my eyes.



We hear a voice in the distance shouting back, and the rifles stop their noise and the voice becomes clear, shouting out to stop all firing.

We make our way up, ready to jump back down, holding our arms in the air and climbing out of the ditch. McCaan's face glows red in the Very lights falling near us. I'm glad I'm not the one who will face his anger. Elijah walks beside me. He's laughing at all this. I don't find it funny.

It is another Canadian company holding the edge of this town, just over from England, too, and as they hand out cigarettes they explain that at this place there seems to be no clear front and that Fritz is all around. McCaan has marched up to their officer and I can tell that he wants to beat the man, but he's a lieutenant and so McCaan must hold all his frustration in. We're given directions to a place we can sleep, and as I march away with the others into the night I wonder what kind of sign this is that the first time I am under fire it comes from my own side.

We are sent to an old farmhouse billet, and upstairs through the glass-less window is a good view of the horizon where the drumbeat of artillery keeps constant and the horizon glows like a wood stove with the door open. The beds in here are long gone and most of the walls are torn down. We lie on straw, so many of us squeezed in shoulder-to-shoulder that I worry the floor can't hold our weight and we'll be sent crashing down to the ground below. The lice crawl over me so that I can't fall asleep for the itching. Sitting up, I search for them in the seams of my uniform, picking them out and cracking them with nails that have grown long for the purpose.

I'd much rather be outside on the cool grass, me, but the officers won't allow it. We've been over here in this place that some call Flanders and others call Belgium for three weeks now. I felt stupid and small when Elijah had to explain that Belgium is a country, like Canada, and Flanders is just one small part of it, like Mushkegowuk. I'm still uncomfortable with the language of the *wemistikoshin*. It is spoken through the nose and hurts my mouth to try and mimic the silly sound of it. I opt to stay quiet most of the time, listening carefully to decipher the words, always listening for the joke or insult made against me. These others think that I'm something less

than them, but just give me the chance to show them what I'm made of when it is time to kill.

This is the closest we've come to the front. It's close enough that I can smell the burn of the cordite, and the guns are louder than I thought anything could be, even thunder or waterfalls. The urge to admit that I want to be home and not in this ugly place hovers close, but I must push the thought away.

For a time this was almost what I pictured it to be from all the stories the others told. Green fields and pretty girls waving to us from windows and doors in the towns we marched through. Then we were shipped further north on old trains and walked through towns smashed to pieces as if by giant children. I saw my first dead body in one of these places, not the body of a soldier but of a small boy, naked and bloated in the sun, a great chunk of his head gone. The child confused me. What did he have to do with any of this? Where was his mother?

I'm confused by many things, by all of this movement, by the loss of my sense of direction here. The rain began soon after I saw the boy, is continuous now so that it has become a part of my world.

Every day we practise drills in it. Bayonet drill, grenade drill, shooting drill, marching drill. My skin is always wet so that I feel like a frog or a fish. All this rain makes keeping my rifle clean and working difficult.

Rain. We lie in the farmhouse, scratching, and I listen to rain and to Sean Patrick and Grey Eyes talking quietly to one another.

"My girl back home wanted to marry me," Sean Patrick says. He is the youngest of our section and is from a place in Ontario not so far away from where I live. I wonder how they let him into this army. He looks like a gangly moose yearling not yet weaned from his mother. All knees, bigger ears than mine.

Sean Patrick keeps talking. He loves to talk. "That's the only way I was going to get to see her naked. But I told her that I didn't want my wife being a war bride. 'You're too good for that,' I says. 'I'd just as soon wait till I get back to marry you.'" He scratches at the collar of his unbuttoned tunic. "We all know this war isn't going to last long anyway." I see Sean

Patrick turn to Grey Eyes when he says this. Sean Patrick needs others to tell him he's right. "Truth is, I didn't agree to it because I was mad at her that she wouldn't do it with me. I'm only just turned seventeen, and that's too young to marry."

Grey Eyes laughs quietly in the dark.

"You really an American?" Sean Patrick asks.

"From Detroit," Grey Eyes answers. "I got me a girl back home, too. Her name's Maggie, and she's a real looker."

"Oh yeah?" Sean Patrick says.

"Red hair, a figure like Aphrodite. I promised her I'd marry her, too, once I get home."

I was there when Grey Eyes told Elijah his girl's name was Jamice and that she had hair as golden as a wheat field. I'm not sure about this one, the one who's befriended Elijah.

I fall asleep to their voices and to the sound of the guns pounding back and forth in the distance, thinking about Sean Patrick, who's not seventeen winters but fifteen. And that one, Grey Eyes. Him, he's a liar.

The next day, we stand in front of the farmhouse at attention all morning. I don't know why they make us do this. Late April clouds gather in the distance. Elijah stands next to me, moving his feet about so that Sergeant McCaan shouts at him to be still. I can see that McCaan doesn't want to shout at him, doesn't want us standing here at all. The one who tells McCaan what to do is named Lieutenant Breech. The enlisted men call him Bastard Breech. He stands in the shade and watches us all morning. He carries an ash stick with a bullet tip and whips it against his leg when he wants McCaan's attention.

The clouds continue to gather and still we are told to stand there as the rain comes from the sky and soaks all of us until we shiver. The men begin to talk when the downpour is thick enough that Breech heads inside.

"We are to go into the front lines today," one near me says.

"Bout time," Sean Patrick answers.

McCaan tells him to hush.

Elijah leans toward me. "Now we get to hunt," he says.

I don't respond, am too worried that Breech might be watching.

The rain falls harder and soon I can't tell the guns from the thunder. The men shift and moan. Our packs weigh more than half our weight. The men around me are like the horses I've seen here, skittish. I hear someone behind me talk about officers taking our own soldiers behind the lines and shooting them for the slightest disobedience. Another says that the Canadians just took a beating at a place called Saint-Eloi and now our battalion's to go in as reinforcement. The rumours continue until they become the truth. We will go into the front lines today.

And then the rain stops. The sun comes out, and so does Breech. We sag under our packs. The one called Fat whines. They call him Fat because he really is. Fat as a beluga. I stand and suffer and watch the steam rise up from us as if we are all on fire, smouldering slowly under the weight of Breech's stare.

I am hungry but we are forced to stand here. The time to eat our day meal passes. It is only after that that Breech gives McCaan the order. We are to begin marching. A great cheer comes up from the men, and it all suddenly makes sense to me. The ones who order us are as crafty as wolves. To have men cheer as they march off to the front is not an easy accomplishment. This army orders itself very carefully, I see. I think about this as we march along a crooked road filled by mud and puddles, the sounds of the guns getting closer with each step.

As the others break into a song, the sun settles down behind us so that we walk upon our own shadows. They sing a song I don't know and even McCaan sings out in his thick and raspy voice. From what I can tell it's about a girl and her smell and not a lot of it makes sense. Me, I won't sing their songs. I have my own songs.

I try to remember one of my own but the English words all around stop it from coming, so I hum instead and soon I notice that someone else is humming, too, but it is out of tune and grows louder and louder until the hum is a scream and, with no other warning, thunder and a wave of heat coughs me up from the earth, the river and the exploding trees flashing through my head. And then I'm landing hard on the ground

shoulder first and it's raining rock and softer globs of red dirt that it takes me a moment to realize are the flesh and guts of men. In the muffled sound that can get through to my ears that feel full of cotton I hear horses screaming and men shouting and another shell lands, this time in front of me, and men are crawling and scratching at the mud trying to get to the side of the road and past it, anywhere that might offer shelter from the splinters of flying metal. I want to crawl too but can't move, and I feel the tug of hands at my shoulders and I'm being dragged through the mud and pushed under an overturned wagon, and Elijah's face looks down at me, asking in Cree, "Are you all right?" I nod and Elijah's eyes are full of sunlight like he's smiling. He crawls back out and returns a little while later with Grey Eyes and Sean Patrick and we all huddle under the wagon and listen as the shells creep a little farther away with each boom and shudder, like they are live beasts sniffing and pounding the dirt in search of men's flesh to rip apart.

Once the shelling has gone quiet, we make our way out and survey the damage. I'm surprised to see that very little looks different than it did before. There is the same mud and puddles and torn-up wagons and piles of bricks. The only real difference is the bitter smell of cordite and the sweeter smell of blood that is as rich in the air as if we'd just butchered a large moose. We do what we can to help the wounded, and it is not long before stretcher-bearers appear to cart off the dead, and the living who can no longer walk.

After dark an officer appears and tells McCaan to move the platoon farther to the west along a narrow winding dirt track. I can tell McCaan doesn't like the order. Lieutenant Breech is off to a briefing and has left McCaan in charge with the order to get the platoon to someplace in the darkness. Breech and some others will be there waiting. McCaan's too smart to complain to the officer but his stiff body says how he feels as he listens to the little man with the moustache wave his thin cane toward where the last light fell, squeaking in a high voice what sound like complicated directions. "Tonight then, sir?" is all I hear McCaan say, and Elijah and me, we give each other knowing looks. A long march still ahead. This

Belgium is far more confusing than I ever imagined. Nobody seems to know where to find this Saint-Eloi.

"How many miles from the front line do you think we are?" Elijah asks in Cree.

"Maybe three or four still," I say. "Hard to tell. I don't understand yet the sound of the big guns."

One time when we were little more than boys, we were out following moose tracks in the deep snow and got lost from one another. When dark was close and I was beginning to worry that I'd be out alone in the cold all night, I aimed my rifle at a tree two hundred yards in the distance toward where I could best figure Elijah had headed. I fired it and listened carefully for a couple of minutes until the thin pop of a rifle answering far away came back. In this way we located one another and at the same time learned the sound of the rifle and how to track it through distance and time. To simply aim a rifle in the air when lost in the bush will not help. The sound travels up and around and seems to come from everywhere. Focus on the sound. I listen carefully now for the sounds of the big and little guns. I try to learn them.

McCaan grumbles to himself and then, after the little officer has disappeared, shouts out for us to shoulder our packs. "Tiny fucker wants us to march into dangerous land after dark knowing full well we have no goddamn idea where we are. Like fucking virgins into the mouth of a lion!" I like it when McCaan swears. His voice almost sounds like it is singing.

Night swallows us. The flash of big guns comes from what seems to be all sides. We are lost. The road we've been sent on has become smaller and smaller until now it is nothing more than a dirt path cutting through little ponds of stinking water. We follow the man in front and try not to lose him. To lose the one in front means to be lost in this swamp that we walk through, water and the sound of night animals feeding on all sides, thick mud sucking at boots, threatening to pull them from the soldiers' feet with each step. I wonder if my moccasins in my pack would be a better choice right now. This mud is not all that different from the mud of the Moose River.

Tonight's the kind of night to just sit under and wait for it to end. But we can't do that with enemy patrols that might be anywhere near. For all I know the platoon has slipped behind the enemy and is in his country. When I think this I feel a little ball of panic in my stomach, and the sound of wings of large birds in the swamp rustling and pecking and feeding is suddenly the sound of the green-skinned Hun sliding through the mud on their bellies, slipping closer, scratching their way, the points of their helmets ready to impale me in the back.

"We're lost," I whisper in Cree to Elijah.

Elijah doesn't answer. Black wings suddenly beat up all around us, the tips touching my head, and Fat screams out, "I fell. Help me!" Men scramble and they follow his voice and with a tremendous tug he is freed from the sucking water beside the little track that we perch on. In Fat's hand he holds a human arm, I can see in the faint light, and when Fat realizes what he has pulled from the mud below him he begins to scream, until McCaan walks over and the sound of a loud slap rings out in the thick fog and stink of the night.

McCaan whispers out to all of us to regain our wits, that this is our first true test as soldiers and that for all we know we may be in enemy territory and that from this moment on our lives hang in the balance. "You are acting like rabbits," he says. "It is time to act like wolves," and these are the perfect words. I can almost hear the backs of the men around me stiffen and the hairs on their necks bristle and it is exactly this, to be the hunter and not the hunted, that will keep me alive. This law is the same law as in the bush. Turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival.

We tread along more slowly now, listening to the noise around us, watching for the flash of big guns in the distance, trying to judge who and how far away they are. My eyes have adjusted to what little light there is. The horizon glows like there will soon be a sun but as best I can tell, the glow is in the north. Fat's breathing is the only sound that echoes when we stop and listen. Like a horse's breathing, I think, lungs as big as a horse's, but a horse with a cold. He coughs and sputters and whines till McCaan tells him to shut his bloody trap.

When we are very still, the sound of clinking metal and maybe voices travels through the thickness of the fog that has crawled to chest level all around. The fog is so thick that when we drop down we disappear completely as if into water. McCaan whispers something and the whisper travels from man to man until it reaches us. He wants Elijah and me to come to him. We crawl over and he says, "Leave your packs here, boys. I want you to advance slow and silent like I know you can and figure out for me whether that is friend or foe over that little ridge."

We nod and slip our packs from our shoulders and I see Elijah slips his coat off too, so I do as well. I pick up my rifle and check the action and snap off the safety with my thumb. Elijah slips into the fog and I follow quick so as not to lose him. I listen for Elijah's quiet step and dip blindly into the fog, surfacing every little while by standing straight up to get my bearings before slipping back down again. I count off two hundred paces and I've lost Elijah, but know that he will be cutting to the left and will expect me to go a little to the right, just like we do when tracking moose. The ridge is a hump in the distance, only maybe one hundred and fifty paces ahead. Suddenly I hear the low warbling whistle of Elijah and answer it with my own. We both advance slow. I wish now I was wearing my moccasins and not these heavy boots.

Near the base of the ridge I pause and listen again. It is not a ridge at all but the lip of a large shell crater. Laughter is clear now and so is the clinking of metal cups. I see the dim flicker of a small fire. Whoever it is thinks he cannot be seen or heard in the fog and in the hole, but he is very wrong.

A voice rises up. The voice isn't English. I lie closer to the ground and strain my ears. If they have a sentry, he might be coming this way or might have his rifle pointed at me right now. I roll into the thicker fog and head left toward where I know Elijah will be. "It is not English they are speaking," I whisper in Cree when we are side by side and have retreated a safe distance into the fog.

Elijah nods. "I think it is the Belgian tongue," he answers. "What colour are the Belgian uniforms?"

"I saw one yesterday on a dead soldier that was lighter than the French's," I answer.

"We'll have to go up the ridge and see."

We crawl back into the mist and when we reach the lip I-signal for Elijah to go first while I cover. Elijah crawls up and peers over the edge, then signals for me to follow. I crawl to Elijah and peer down to where four men sit around a small fire with cups in their hands, as if they are a thousand miles from battle. Two have long moustaches that droop over their mouths. One is old and another looks no older than twelve winters. They wear a dark grey uniform, and round helmets with a ridge along the top sit by their feet.

Elijah suddenly stands up and walks down to them, rifle at his side but still ready to fire if need be.

"Hello!" he says loudly when he is in their midst. The men jump and two of them fall off their seats. "I am Canadian! Hello!" The men, once they've gotten over the shock, relax a little. Strange guttural words pour out of the mouth of one. Elijah just nods and smiles and repeats, "Yes! Yes! I do not understand! I am Cree Canadian!"

I stand up and click the safety back on my rifle and join Elijah. Once again the men in the crater look startled and I just nod and smile and take an offered cup. The cup's half full with wine and it tastes bitter in my mouth but I like the warmth and listen as Elijah asks them, "Where are the Canadians?" Two of the soldiers point and respond in English worse than mine that they are to the west of here, very close.

Elijah tells me as we make our way back to the company in the fog that best he could figure, the Canadians are only half a mile away.

Elijah reports to McCaan, who looks very relieved, orders the troops to pick up their packs and tells Elijah and me to lead them in the right direction. Thinking back on my first test I'm very proud of myself as we move silent and straight through the muck and find our battalion.

Just a short walk from there and we are encamped in the cover of woods, and I'm surprised by the size of the battalion and how well it conceals itself. It was not until we were right upon them that we realized we'd found the group. Sentries called out and McCaan answered and we

were taken in among the others. No fires are allowed so close to the front, and in the darkness I begin to make out forms of tents and men lying on the ground in blankets or sitting in small groups talking quietly to one another. They ignore us like we are ghosts floating by, and in the darkness with the shadows thrown across their faces and the long stare of eyes in cigarette glow I realize that these are the veterans of the last year's horrible fighting, that it's these men who are the walking ghosts. My first small trial is suddenly nothing in their eyes or in my own.

McCaan asks where the canteen is and we are directed to a large kitchen wagon. Inside, the smell of cooked food makes me realize I've not eaten in a long time. We pull out our bowls and fill them with stew that is burnt but tastes as good as fresh game right now. I clean my bowl with a chunk of stale bread that moistens a little with the dipping, and as soon as I finish my last bite the exhaustion falls across me and all I want is to find a place to stretch out and roll up in my blanket.

Our platoon keeps its distance from the others, the ones who have just been relieved from days on the front lines. My group is not a part of them, I realize, as I lie on my back on the hard ground of the woods. I stare up into the night sky and just as I drift off to sleep I can see exactly where I am clearly etched on the blackness broken by skeleton trees above me. This is where my life has led me. It's as clear as if I've been walking a well-marked trail that leads from the rivers of my north home across the country they call Canada, the ocean parting before me like that old Bible story nuns forced upon me as a child, ending right here in this strange place where all the world's trouble explodes.

I'm up the next morning before first light and reveille. A few men sit in a loose circle, blankets over their shoulders, talking quietly, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. After a while one waves me over. I sit with them but they do not talk to me directly or ask my name. I can follow most of what they are saying. They talk of lost friends, of a winter battle where many died, of successful trench raids on the Germans. Bad fighting at Saint-Eloi through March and April, but now all's quiet there. None of them talk of home or what was left behind.

Finally, one of them asks me where I come from.

"Near Moose Factory," I answer, and the man knows where that is.

"So you're an Indian, then?" he asks. I nod. "You're pretty short for an Indian, ain't ya?" The others laugh. "All the Indians around from where I come from are taller than you. But I guess that's the way the prairies grow 'em."

"Your battalion's just arrived, hasn't it?" the second one asks. I nod. "They'll be sending you up to the front lines today then, I reckon."

"We lost a lot of men last month," the first one says. "Fritz's getting more accurate with the big guns. With that kind of aim they don't need no offensive. They'll just blow us to kingdom come and that'll be the end of it."

The second man speaks up again, says, "A fella like you had better learn quick to keep his head down. Hun snipers are deadly accurate. There's one about, whose signature is shooting a man through the neck. How many has he got now, Smithy?"

The one named Smithy hasn't said a word till now. "At least a few dozen," he answers. "That I know of, anyways."

"Smithy here's a sniper himself—ain't ya, Smithy," the first one says.

Smithy doesn't answer, doesn't look like he even heard the comment. I look at his rifle lying down beside him, at the notches cut into the stock of it.

"Smithy's gotten thirty-three confirmed kills, and many more unconfirmed," the second one adds quickly. "Most in our regiment. Most of any Canadian. Or Brit for that matter."

Smithy shakes his head and looks away. He is small and skinny. He's going bald. He looks like a Hudson's Bay Company man I know back in Moose Factory who teaches Sunday school to the children who live on the reserve and not in the bush, the homeguard children. "That ain't true at all," Smithy mumbles. "There's another Indian feller goes by the name Peggy Ojibwe, I think." He looks over at me. "He's got close to a hundred kills but no officer wants to give him credit since he likes working alone." Smithy suddenly stops talking and looks embarrassed that he's said so

much. "Peggy's salt of the earth," he adds as an afterthought. "Every Canadian enlisted man knows he ain't no liar."

There's a long lull in the conversation. I guess they're thinking about what Smithy just said. I'd like to meet this Peggy.

"You sure don't say much," the first one says to me after a while. "You're a lot like Smithy here. Man of few words, eh?"

The second one laughs.

I smile. "I don't know much English, me," I say.

"You don't need to know much," Smithy says angrily, "for the job you been sent here to do."

I nod but know enough not to smile again.

After a time I go back to my sleeping place and lie on my back, stare up at the tree branches standing out black against the lightening sky. I close my eyes, and when I open them again it is Niska's face above me. She shakes me lightly in the new morning.

"You are shivering," she says, and asks me to sit by the fire.

shells keeps our heads down and when someone up the line slows down or stops, the ones behind bump into him. It is hard going. The bottom of the trench is covered in duckboards that keep our feet out of the mud and water that collects at the bottom. Normally, McCaan told us earlier, we'd come in at night, but the fog allows for us to move during the day. We were taught in training that everything happens at night. Digging and repairing, raids on enemy trenches, scouting and laying out of wire. "Darkness is your best friend," McCaan says over and over. "Not to learn that lesson will kill you, boys."

When stretcher-bearers come by, we squeeze to the side of the trench. I try not to look at the men being carried away, but occasionally I glance down at a face that is either contorted in pain or marked with a yellow *M* that means he has been given the medicine and is dreaming of the other place. It makes me think of Grey Eyes, and in thinking of that one I think of Eljibab, too, who has become withdrawn and focused and serious since we came here. I see how Eljibab's eyes glow, how he is feeding off the fear and madness of this place. He makes a good soldier. McCaan is very happy with him, I think.

Finally we reach the front trench. At least this is what those in front whisper. This trench looks the same as the others we've been working our way through for hours. But the soldiers here sit in twos and threes in holes in the walls, their faces thin and dirty so that their eyes look too white and big. Other men hold tall metal boxes against the wall and peer into them, watching what the other side is doing. These are the periscopes we were shown how to use not long ago. McCaan stops us and goes out in search of an officer.

The one named Gilberto lights a smoke. His thick arms are covered in black hair as shiny as a bear's. He'd scare me if his eyes didn't crinkle kindly at the sides when he smiles.

Graves, the oldest of us, hisses at him, "Stomp that out, man. Fritz will see your smoke and lob a few right on top of us. Worse yet, an officer will come along and do far worse."

Gilberto is big and wide-shouldered and grows fruit back home. I like

## M O N A H I K E W I N A

### T r e n c h e s

I LIE STILL BY THE FIRE and even the scent of warm bannock does not make me hungry. My guts are cramped like ropes bind them. My eyes ache in the sun that rises across the river, and the mist hanging over the water reminds me of the mist in early morning France. It's a heavy mist this morning, almost as thick as fog. The day will be warm.

Niska nudges me, her eyes questioning. She looks older than when I left, her hair mostly grey now. She's thinner, too, but wiry strong still. "I said that we will take our time on the river today," she says.

I watch her mouth to understand. All I am hearing this morning is a dull roar like rapids in the distance.

"Do your ears trouble you?"

I nod to her. My hearing leaves me more than it is with me any more.

The relief of taking a syringe from my kit and readying my arm washes over me almost as sweetly as the medicine itself. With Niska loading the canoe, facing away from me, I slip the point in the vein at the crook of my bruised elbow and lay my head back with a sigh. The struggle to keep memory away is no longer worth it, and minutes later as Niska helps me into the canoe and I settle against my pack, I let my mind go where it wants. She steers us into the current.

The mist still hasn't lifted much. McCaan tells us what a good thing that is. Sean Patrick and Fat are in front of me, and we crouch and move along a communication trench that leads us to the front trench. The whistle of

him because his English is as poor as mine. He drops the cigarette immediately and two soldiers sitting in a dugout beside us laugh at us as they light up their own.

"The action left Saint-Eloi a white back," one of them says, fitting the butt of his cigarette neatly into the place where his front tooth should be. "The dance is on the Somme now."

McCaan returns with an officer who is tall and hunch-shouldered and looks like he wants to cry. He speaks so quietly that I notice McCaan must lean toward him to hear, and they look for a moment like two old grandmothers telling secrets. The officer holds a long club with a heavy end and bangs it on the toe of his boot. McCaan motions to us and we begin to walk, heads bent, through men sitting and sleeping or talking in low voices to one another. Once in a while we pass a few snipers who have their Ross rifles ready behind squares of iron. A little door in the iron slides open and the sniper fires his gun before closing the square again, and then I hear the *ding* of German bullets hitting the plate. It is like a game, I think, but one that you don't want to lose.

We find the stretch of dirt and mud that is our new home and immediately start working to make it into something livable. Little shallow caves are dug into the sides as places to stretch out and sleep. We each claim what we can, and Fat begins complaining because there's not one big enough for him to fit in, so I grab his shovel and help him to dig out something larger. When I'm done I find Elijah, and we agree silently to share a space.

The rest of the day is busy and the men are nervous. We listen for the different types of shells, and McCaan introduces us to a corporal named Thompson. He's not much bigger than a big child, but his face is old. It's impossible for me to tell what age he is.

Thompson does a lot of explaining, but me, I can tell he doesn't like strangers much. "You hear the *thunk* of a mortar land close to you, know you can run away from it if you're quick. It's the only bomb you can do that with. The big shells you can hear coming from a long way off and just pray that they aren't heading for you. Now listen careful, boys, it's the smaller shells, the whiz-bangs, that are the most damaging, the ones that sound like

a mosquito whining in the distance. You hear that coming and you dive flat into the earth and bury your nose deep as you can into the mud."

We listen wide-eyed and careful, and as if to emphasize Thompson's point, shells whine and roar and explode not so very far away. When one sings over us that is exceptionally clear, Thompson says, "Now that's Fritz's version of our eighteen-pounder. Blow a hole the size of a ditch into the earth."

Another shell flies overhead, this one whistling like a teapot come to a boil, and then it's gone. "That's the whine you've got to learn to be fearful of. Shell's only a four-incher but deadly accurate and efficient."

He stops talking and puts his hands in his pockets. Then he turns from us and walks away whistling

We look at each other. "Now that's an odd one," Fat says.

I know, though, to listen carefully to what Thompson teaches me.

In the late afternoon when we've reinforced our section of trench, Elijah and I lie on our backs and watch the aeroplanes above us soar and dive and fight one another. They are close enough that we soon learn to tell the shape of our own grey-and-black aeroplanes from those of the Germans. They swoop like ospreys and puff out little bits of black smoke. Once in a while a plane will falter, then spin down to earth and disappear over the hump of the trench.

"I wish I could fly like that," Elijah says to me in Cree. "I wish I could fly like that, like a bird," he repeats, staring up like a little boy. "Maybe a pilot will take me up sometime."

"Me, I'm happy to stay on the ground on my belly in the dirt," I answer. "Thinking about falling from up there makes me sick."

Every night near sunset we are all ordered to stand-to, rifles at the ready, our heads just below the crest of the trench. We stand on what McCaan calls fire-steps, crouched, waiting for a German attack. This is ritual at dawn and at sunset, when both sides like to attack each other best.

This evening, McCaan squats beside me and smells of sweat and tobacco. He stares into a periscope over at the German lines and swears a lot because he has only the weak light the setting sun throws from behind



us and can't see much of anything. He's jiggling around his periscope so much that he attracts a swarm of Hun bullets. I want to shout to McCaan to drop his head but the English words don't come in time, just a stream of Cree, but it's too late.

McCaan flies back onto the duckboards. The periscope is smashed beside him. I think that he has been shot in the head, because he doesn't move, but then he gets up groggily as if he's just woken up from a deep nap. One eye is so puffed that it is already shut closed, blackening by the second. He picks up the periscope and stares at it, muttering to himself. A bullet hole is punched neatly through the front, and the metal in back is ripped open. A medic rushes up, but McCaan pushes him away. A confusion flashes in his eyes that I've not seen before.

WE SPEND OUR FIRST MONTHS in and near Saint-Eloi. I like the nights best there. When evening falls the flares go up. Red and green, they illuminate the sky around us in the strangest hues of colour. These are the signal flares both sides use. It is as if I'm dreaming, staring up at this painted sky, shells whizzing above my head and once in a while crashing around me.

Corporal Thompson, the one who knows all the sounds, has taken over most of our training. He's been in the trenches since almost the first day. Tonight he will take five of the new soldiers out to get them accustomed to working in no man's land in the dark. As Elijah and Sean Patrick and Gilberto and McCaan and me sit waiting and smoking, Thompson appears as if from the wall of the trench, and I realize that it is the hole where he sleeps.

"Corporal Thompson," McCaan says.

Thompson nods to him sharply, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. He is short enough that he doesn't need to hunch over in this trench. "Yes, Sergeant," he answers.

"How do you feel about taking us up above to give us a little taste of no man's land?"

"Very good, Sergeant," Thompson answers, and disappears into his hole.

Thompson reappears with a small bag strapped by his side. I see that he doesn't carry a rifle.

As if Thompson knows what I think, he says, "Not much good a rifle will do you up above when you're working. It will only get in your way." The others of us in the party unshoulder ours and lean them against the trench walls. "I want two of you to hold onto them, act as sentry while the rest of us work."

McCaan and Gilberto are the first to pick theirs back up.

"This way, gentlemen," Thompson says, and moves along the duckboards with almost silent steps. He leads us to a ladder, then climbs it, peering over the top before disappearing onto the earth above. First Elijah goes, and I follow. The others are close behind. I wait for the zing of bullets to come any second, but see that Thompson has led us to a place of mounds and craters where we seem to be covered from direct fire.

A white flare goes up nearby and Thompson, on his belly, goes very still so that I have a hard time seeing him just yards away. I follow his lead, looking at the scarred landscape all around without moving my eyes. Under the bright glow of the flare it is strangely peaceful, rock-strewn and muddy and silent so that it isn't difficult to forget I'm in the middle of a terrible place. In the dimming light I make out a grinning face next to me. It belongs to a soldier long dead, but I cannot tell from which side. His face is frozen in a perpetual smile, as if he is chuckling at what he knows.

When the light has died, my eyes have a hard time readjusting to the darkness. Thompson crawls up to me. I hear him rather than see him in the black that's descended.

"Blind as a bat right now, ain't ya?" he says close to my ear. "Next time keep one eye closed when a flare's up. It'll help your eyes adjust back faster."

I hear him scuttle away. My night eyes are back in time to see him stop in an especially large crater. He motions for the rest of us to come close.

"They say a shell never falls twice in the same hole, but don't believe them," he whispers. "I've seen it happen. But in a pinch and there's no other choice you are safest in a freshly blown crater." He pauses, listening.

I listen too, and a sound like scratching comes to my ears. I listen as carefully as I can and to me it sounds like mice chewing through something. Elijah listens as well, and we look to Thompson to explain.

"That's our engineers below us digging," he says. "They're digging tunnels toward the Hun lines. They'll fill those tunnels with explosives underneath Fritz. When the time comes—boom!" He spreads his fingers, lifts his hands.

Elijah and I look at each other in disbelief. Thompson seems to be a serious one, so I have no choice but to believe him. "From this point forward," he says, "keep a close eye for Fritz. He's been busy here again. Look at our barbed wire. Make sure that it hasn't been cut. Note places that look like they've been mucked with. That's where Fritz crawls through."

We slip out of the crater one by one and make our way parallel with our own line, stopping often to listen. It is a quiet night. Even the constant shelling seems to have moved away from us. We make it to the stretch of barbed wire in front of our own position and Thompson examines it carefully. He motions and points to a place that has been cut through. We have no rolls of wire with us. Someone will have to come out later and fix it.

We turn and go back the way we've come. In another crater Thompson explains to us in a hushed whisper that he doesn't want to go farther down the line tonight. Our group is close to the point where the new companies are dug in, and the sentries will be nervous and inexperienced enough to mistake us for Germans and shoot at us.

When we are within yards of where we first emerged, I feel relieved. The others slip back down into the safety of the trench and I am standing, about to follow Elijah down the ladder, when a flare pops up and hovers right over me. I'm frozen there in full view and turn my head and get my first look at the German line. It is much closer than I had assumed and I realize how exposed I am now that the flare is dropping right above me, illuminating the ground like it is morning.

But still I do not move. I stare at the enemy for the first time. No faces, just a line of mounds behind barbed wire. I hear the bullet whip past my temple before I even hear the *crack* of a rifle, and all around me the ground

sends up splats of mud and dirt and I feel an impact on my hand and it goes numb as other bullets whiz by very close. I dive like an otter toward the trench and before I know it I'm sailing down the wall and land hard on my side on the duckboards at the others' feet, the wind knocked out of me.

"You'd better lose that habit quick, Private," Thompson says, staring down at me, then walking away casually as I struggle to find a breath.

McCaan bends down and sits me up. My chest relaxes a little and I gulp some air. I clutch my hand to my chest. McCaan takes my numb hand into his own and looks at it for a moment. "No Blighty for you on your first night out," he says. "You're just hit by a clump of mud knocked up from a bullet. It'll be sore for a while is all. Teach you a good lesson."

Back in our section of trench I lie in my little cave. My mind races with what's just happened, the sneaking about in such a dangerous place, being shot at for the first time. It is real. All of this is suddenly very real. The other side wants to kill me, and I've never even seen their faces.

I won't see it. It will just appear. The bullet so close to me tonight could have been a little more to one side. It is thrilling and horrifying at the same time. My hand begins to ache. I listen to Elijah carry on in English and laugh with Sean Patrick and Gilberto and Grey Eyes and Graves. Already Elijah is telling of his exploits. I hear him making this story bigger, more dangerous, though he wasn't even the one shot at.

I watch the flashes of an artillery barrage far down the line. The night sky is on fire.

us in closer together so that we collected each other's warmth. And sometimes his stories were all that we had to keep us alive.

I steer the canoe into the faster current and let us drift with it, using my paddle only as a rudder. The mist is disappearing now and I can see a long way down the bank, can keep an eye sharp for the movement of animals along the shore. Nephew cries out but then goes silent again. The sound of it, the animal fear at the very bottom of that cry, makes me think something I haven't thought about in a long time. It is the story of my childhood. Now I tell it to you, Xavier, to keep you alive.

The snows were settled in so deeply that winter had become a part of us. This was long before you, Xavier, when I was still a child. Thirty Anishnabe lived on the traplines that season, half of us children. All the past winters we'd survived in much smaller numbers. This time we had no choice. Three families' hunters had been taken away the autumn before, two by the North-West Mounted Police, one by Hudson's Bay Company rum.

I was a young girl with waking dreams of all the trouble that was to come into my life, sharp pains like ice arrows through my temples that dropped me to my back and caused me to convulse. Except for Rabbit, the other children avoided me. Damaged is what I was to them, but they wouldn't say this to my face. I was lean and bony with knotted black hair that I refused to let my mother comb. If they thought I was crazy, I let them. Laughed at them.

Autumn had been promising, many geese and ducks shot, four beaver families snared, and many grouse and sturgeon. But no moose, and the old women among us immediately began their chatter that no moose early in winter meant starvation later. Me, I think it was their idle complaints, their greedy talk as they chewed their hides and drank their tea, that put a curse on us. And in the harsh North Country near what the *wemistikoshiw* call Hudson Bay, shaking a curse once it settles upon you is like trying to shake a fat bloodsucker from your hand.

Early winter, the time of the blowing moon, sat upon us. Our hunters came back wide-eyed and frozen, reporting to my father the absence of animals, even of tracks. They worried by my family's fire. I know all this

## N O O H T A A W I Y

### M y F a t h e r

XAVIER TWITCHES AND MOANS in his sleep. I arranged it so that he lies back in the canoe, his head on his pack. I found him this morning on the beach, shivering and half conscious. What happened over there has wrecked him. He thinks I don't see him putting those needles in his arm. They are a part of what's killing him. But something far worse is consuming Xavier from the inside. It's this that I must figure out how to remove. I wish it were simply a matter of finding the right root in the bush. This is a sickness I've not had to face before. I must figure out the right cure or I will lose him, and he's the last of my family.

The river water is black this early in the morning before the sun has a chance to warm it and the light to turn it the colour of tea. My father used to tease my mother and younger sister and me, telling us that we were the colour of the river water in high summer but that in winter we turned as pale as the Hudson Bay traders and he was afraid he'd one day lose us in the snow. My sister—your mother, Xavier—we called her Rabbit. We'd look at my mother's brown face as her eyes narrowed in laughter and then look to my father smiling back. He was the last great talker in our clan. He told stories softly so that you had to lean close to him to hear, so close you could smell the smoke in the hide ribbon my mother weaved into his hair, the scent of his neck like the wind coming off the Great Salt Bay. I used to imagine that he weaved his stories all summer, his words forming invisible nets that he cast over us on the long winter nights, capturing us and pulling

because I watched them from the corner of our *askihkan*, hidden under my father's moose robe, quiet and observant like a hungry lynx.

By the end of that month, all of us scrounged for food. The women peeled tamarack bark for tea, dug through the deep snow in hopes of finding a few dried fiddleheads. The men continued to go out on the traplines and to hunt, returning silent, their blank stares scaring us children.

I was nearing the time of my strawberry ceremony, when the women closest to me would keep me in our *askihkan* all day, talking to me, praying, telling me stories, preparing me for my first blood of womanhood. Until the spring came, I was allowed to wander. But I wanted nothing of that. I wanted to stay close to my father, to watch over him.

When talk began that soon we would be forced to boil our moccasins, a group of hunters returned with a small black bear slung on a pole between them. Some of the old ones among us were bear clan and muttered bitterly. Who would dare disturb a brother's winter sleep? They brought the bear directly to my father. I hid in my usual place and watched as he spoke with them about where they'd come across the den, how they had recognized it in the deep snow.

Marius, the oldest hunter, spoke first. "We followed its tracks." My father looked puzzled, but he remained silent. Marius continued. "At first I thought I was mistaken, but there they were for all of us to see. We followed them." My father and the four hunters sat silent for a long time, staring at the crackling fire. "The tracks ended near a cliff by the river," Marius said after a while. My father waited.

"They just stopped," one of the younger hunters blurted. "We walked with them, and in the middle of an open field they just stopped." The others stared at him.

"We'd been led to a den," Marius went on, as if the young one hadn't spoken at all. "We could see its indent on the side of the cliff. But the tracks stopped short of it at least the length of a tall man. Clearly the den had not been disturbed since autumn. We dug and we roused the bear and took it quickly. We wouldn't have disturbed it, but we were hungry." My father nodded and again they all stared at the fire.

I looked over at the bear hanging from the pole, tied by its hind paws so that its nose pointed to the ground and its tongue lolled out. Normally they would have skinned and quartered the animal where they took it, but this time was different. The bear was thawing now near the fire. I smelled the musky smell of piss. I could see from where I lay that it was only a little taller than me.

The young hunter spoke again. "All of this is not good!" His name was Micah. He had a pretty wife who'd had her first child the summer before. I thought he was handsome, and I blushed whenever he was around.

"Do we continue to starve or do we eat the animal that has been delivered to us?" my father asked. "If no other game is found in the next day, the choice will be apparent."

I listened to this as the wind threw itself against our *askihkan*. An early storm wind, young and strong. Even I knew that. There would be no hunting for the next day at least.

The following afternoon my mother and father prepared the bear for us. Normally we did our butchering outside, but the bear was our brother, and so he was invited in. Nothing was rushed. Nothing was to be wasted for fear of angering him. The knife used couldn't touch anything else. Any of the hair that the bear shed was carefully collected from the floor and clothing, and burned in the fire, whispered prayers drifting up with the stinking smoke. My parents carefully laid the animal on his back on freshly cut spruce boughs, talking to him, whispering prayers for what seemed like hours. They rocked back and forth on their haunches, my father sprinkling bits of powder into the flames that brought into the room a sweet smell I recognized as cedar. I was alarmed when at one point my father began to cry. I'd never seen this before and was frightened, but I remained beneath his heavy moose robe.

When the prayers were finally done, the bear was pulled up on the pole by his hind paws once again and a large cooking pot placed below him. My father took his knife and ran it along the bear's stomach. With a ripping sound the *askihkan* filled with the powerful smell of insides. The guts filled the pot. Then he and my mother cut along the inside of

the bear's legs and gently peeled the fur from his body, cutting carefully where they had to separate flesh from fur, until the animal hung there naked. He looked like a small, thin man dangling from his feet, blood dripping from his head. For the first time I realized why we were told the bear was our brother.

For many nights after, I was jolted from sleep by dreams of this bear—man waking from his death slumber, bending up to untie his feet and then jumping onto the floor, eyes bulging from his fleshy skull, pacing on two legs between the bodies of my sleeping family, sinew of white muscle glistening in the moonlight as he searched for his fur.

With the skinning and cleaning done, the hunters who'd killed him were invited in to prepare the meat for roasting. He was a winter bear, grown thin in his sleep, and although young, was tough already. But we were hungry, and all thirty of us crowded in and ate until every part of the animal was gone—his meat, brain, heart, kidneys, liver; his bones cracked open for their marrow and carefully collected to be boiled down later. We ate until our stomachs grew taut as drums, until beads of sweat dotted our foreheads and our cheeks flushed red. My father warned all of us that not a scrap should be wasted. Even the smallest piece of gristle that no one wanted was collected in a bowl and added to the bones or burned in the fire over prayers. We were always careful not to waste for fear of insulting an animal, but this time stood out to me. I did not understand my father's concern, his eyes following everything, anxious. Later I would come to understand.

The young hunter Micah took his new baby girl from his wife's lap, then chose a bit of flesh and put it in the baby's mouth. "Your first taste of meat," he said to the child, who hesitantly, then hungrily began to chew. We all smiled at the expression on her face, but then she turned red and began to gasp. Micah shook her upside down to try and dislodge the meat. Like lightning my mother grabbed the child, sticking a finger in her throat so that she gagged and threw the meat up. I saw the meat drop to the floor. I glanced at Rabbit, but she did not pick it up and place it in her bowl. No one else seemed to have noticed.

We didn't taste fresh game again for a very long time. It got so that I would remember the tough bits of gristle that I had not wanted at the feast and my stomach would grumble moodily.

The real cold settled in with the moon of the exploding trees. This was the time of the year that we depended on the hare to help us live. Its hides were sewn together and worn fur-side-in from our feet to our heads. Its meat was tender. We ate the stomachs that were filled with bitter greens to stave off the coughing disease and the yellow disease. But like everything else this particular winter, even the hares began to abandon us. The hunters continued to return with very little or nothing at all. Marten partially eaten by wolves, the odd grouse, a skinny and starved beaver. Some of the men began to complain about what we already knew, that there were too many of us for this part of the bush to sustain. They were going to head off with their families in hopes of surviving. In the end only the headstrong young Micah and his wife and baby walked into the bush alone.

The next day broke bright and cold as any I'd ever felt. The children who had energy played a game where they let spit drool from their mouths and measured how fast it froze once it hit the air. Micah pulled a toboggan with their few possessions, his wife with her child slung in her *tikonoggan* walking behind in the track that he cut. Although his wife did not speak a goodbye or look back to us, we all knew that she did not want to go, that it was Micah alone who had made the decision.

From what we were to find out later, they travelled the day through deep snow, Micah stopping along the way and wandering off to find animal tracks. When dusk threatened they'd only made it a few miles and had set up camp by a creek where he hoped to find tracks in the morning. He didn't. They pushed on.

Micah and his wife and their child made their way west. They moved inland and away from the Great Salt Bay only a few miles at a time, Micah searching for tracks. On the fourth day he made a difficult shot at a snow-shoe hare bounding toward a tree line, and later watched proudly as his wife cooked it. A good enough sign for him. As they ate the hare he declared that this place marked where they would build their winter shelter.

For a while, anyway, we thought Micah's decision to head out on his own must have been right. That or he was dead. We did not see them for many weeks. From what his wife was later able to explain between her fits and in words that we understood, many tracks crisscrossed the area, fox, marten, wolf, lynx, hare. It was as if Micah had discovered that place in the forest where all the animals had come to winter. But for all the tracks he followed, Micah did not see a single animal.

At night, the *Wawahew*, the North Lights, flickered so brightly they awoke the baby from her sleep. Strange sounds echoed from the forest, groaning and shrieking. Micah said the trees were popping in the cold, or wolves were snatching rabbits. His wife claimed to us that they'd found tracks near their lodge early in the morning after those long nights, tracks that resembled a man's but much larger, holes in the snow gouged where claws instead of toes had dug in. Tracks of the *windigo*. By the time she told these stories, though, Micah's wife had become unreliable, had become something else. At that point she was only trying to save herself.

Out in the bush, their situation became more desperate. Micah blamed himself for his inability to find an animal despite so many tracks. The baby's hunger cries suddenly stopped. Instead now she stared reserved from her *tikonoggan*, her eyes like the eyes of an old person. Micah grew desperate enough to dig through the snow, chop through the ice and try to catch fish. He spent long hours with a line of sinew and a bone hook, constantly stirring the water of the small hole with a stick so that it would not freeze up. The cold was the brutal kind, bullying. His wife begged Micah to give up his fishing but he refused. "I will not return to our lodge until I can feed you" is all he would say. He caught nothing. He began to stay by the hole through the night, too, a small fire to warm him.

At first light one morning, the wife bundled up her child and herself and went to check on Micah. She found him sitting in the snow, his fire long burned out, a grimace carved on his face. The wife sat and mourned her dead husband, her tears freezing on her cheeks. The baby stared listlessly.

The two of them somehow survived the cold of that day. As dusk settled she made the promise, whispered just loud enough for the forest to hear,

that if she and her baby survived the dark, she would feed the child well the next morning. Later, when we tried to get this from her, all she could do was growl and whimper at us. But that morning the sun did rise, and with the last of her strength she collected wood and started her cook fire. She drew her knife from her shawl and leaned toward her husband. He was keeping his promise to feed her and the child.

None of us knew any of this at the time. We continued on best we could. Even the smallest and sickliest game was a welcome change from the roots and bits of dried fish we still had left. The hunters came to my father and asked him to divine. He prepared his fire. When all was ready, he had the hunters bring him the shoulder blade of the last moose that had been killed, a young bull. I watched as the men huddled around the fire and my father prompted them to discuss in detail the day they'd taken the animal.

"What was the weather like?" he asked, holding the shoulder blade in his scarred hands. "Was the moose feeding on red willow? Tell me exactly where you found the tracks. Tell me everything. Leave nothing out." The men described the day, the tracks, the location. My father placed the shoulder blade in the fire and urged them to talk on, to say everything.

After a time, he took a small cup of water and dipped his fingers into it. He leaned over the fire and dripped water onto the shoulder blade. He studied it carefully, then dripped more. "Keep speaking," he urged the hunters. "Describe the river, the animal's movements, everything."

The men continued to talk and my father continued to drip water onto the heated sheath of bone, the water sizzling, then disappearing. Soon cracks began to appear in the bone. The men talked on, reminiscing about the day, the place, how they felt as they tracked the wounded moose silently so as not to panic it, deep into the bush. They did this until the fire died down.

My father removed it from the fire, still hot so that I didn't know how it was that his hands weren't burned badly. The others gathered around him as he explained the map of cracks and splits. "This is the Albany River," he said, pointing to a long, thick split. "This is where the Wakina Creek pours into it." They nodded and listened carefully. "You will find

a moose here, close to that creek. Leave early tomorrow morning." They smiled and rose to leave.

In the days that the hunters were gone Micah's wife and her baby returned. She appeared with the sunlight behind her, walking steadily, powerfully on her snowshoes so at first we mistook her for a man. Her face was flushed and healthy-looking. Her eyes sparkled.

All of us children gathered around to talk to her, asking questions. Had Micah found game, was he still on his lines, had she any food in the large pack slung across her back? At first she didn't answer, just stared at us quizzically, as if she didn't know who we were or what we were saying. When we began to wonder what was wrong, she finally spoke. "Micah is back in the bush," she said, smiling. "He has supplied me with more meat than I can eat."

We children jumped around at word of this, energized for the first time in weeks. "Give us some! Give us some!" we shouted.

"I will cook some for you," she said. As she walked away I swore she'd grown taller.

My mother and father knew something was wrong. My mother's father was Ojibwe, and my mother had seen this once before. So had my father. He told some of the young men to keep an eye on Micah's wife and to take away her pack. Later, I heard her screams from where I lay hiding under my father's moose robe, dreaming of roasted meat. The men entered her *askikhan*, and it took four to hold her down.

Even then they barely managed. My father ordered her bound and guarded day and night. He then sent out a search party to see what had become of Micah. My parents already knew, though. They'd seen the contents of her pack. My father strung it high in a tree for the *manitous* to watch over.

The next days we listened to her fall into madness. She begged and pleaded in a child's voice, first for Micah to help her, then for her child to be brought to her. At nighttime her voice went hoarse so that she sounded like some monster growling in a language we did not understand. None of us slept. We became tense and restless. Some days she turned back into her

old self and talked normally. This is when she confessed everything, explained to us what had happened. She said that on the night before she cut into Micah's flesh, a strange man-beast came out of the bush. He threatened to take and eat her child if the wife did not feed it the next day. "It was not my fault. Don't you see?" she pleaded. "I was only trying to protect my baby." And then she'd cry again, her sobs turning into angry growls as she began to quake and squirm so fiercely that we thought she'd break her ropes and attack us.

The baby cried constantly. One of the other women who was breast-feeding agreed to nurse it. We couldn't trust Micah's wife any more. The child sucked hungrily on the other woman, who became worried the child would drain her of all her milk. When the woman tried to remove it, the baby bit hard and the woman screamed in shock. My father had to pry the child's mouth from her bloody tit.

Micah's wife and the baby were turning *windigo*. The children in camp stopped sleeping, cried in fear, no longer felt their hunger. We'd grown up on stories of the *windigo* that our parents fed us over winter fires, of people who eat other people's flesh and grow into wild beasts twenty feet tall whose hunger can be satisfied only by more human flesh and then the hunger turns worse. I listened to the adults of the camp talk nervously among themselves, their voices interrupted by the wife's growls and mad language. They talked of my father's reputation as a *windigo* killer, of how as a young man he became our *hookimaw* after killing a family of them who roamed near where we trapped, a family who had once been part of the caribou clan but had turned one hard winter and begun preying on the camps of unsuspecting Cree. "He must kill *windigos* once again," the adults whispered to one another. "We are too weak already and Micah's woman's madness can surely spread in these bad times." My father knew this too, and made preparations to act as his own father had taught him.

Micah's wife must have sensed what was coming. She pleaded and begged, screamed and howled, whispered to the children to untie her ropes. On the day that my parents called for her, it took five men to carry her to them. Once again I hid under my father's moose robe. My stomach

ached with what I thought was hunger but the ache turned to a dull throb when my father sprinkled crushed cedar into the fire and muttered prayers. Micah's wife watched him with eyes sparkling, her body shaking, her mouth gagged now. The baby lay sleeping beside her.

He didn't take long to do it. His eyes looked sad. He leaned down and whispered something I could not hear into her ear. She immediately went slack and her eyes reflected fear and then expectation as he straddled her chest. My father covered her face with a blanket and placed his hands on her neck. He looked up above him and the muscles of his body tensed. Her feet quivered, then went still. At the moment when the quiet came like a shadow into the room, I felt warmth between my legs. My father turned to the baby. Again he wasted no time. He covered the sleeping child's head with a corner of the blanket, placed a hand about its small neck and, looking up once again, squeezed until the life left it.

He sat silent for a long time after, staring into the fire, his back to me. "I allowed you to watch, Little One," he said when he finally spoke, "because one day I will be gone and you might have to do the same." The ache in my stomach was gone. When he went outside I placed my hand between my legs and then brought it to my face, stared at the little smear of blood on my fingers, hoping to see some sign of what awaited me.

Within days, our hunters returned with as much moosemeat as each of them could carry. They'd found a large bull where my father had told them to look. Something unwanted had left us. A thaw settled in the very morning we prepared the feast. Winter's back had been broken. Colour came into the children's faces. The adults once again walked with purpose.

More than ever I kept to myself now, too old to play with the children, too young to be accepted by the adults. From that time on, I realized long after, the rumours about me began, talk fuelled by full stomachs, whispers of half-truths that grow wings as they leave the speaker's mouth and flit around like sparrows, landing where they please. I had been witness to brutal deeds that no child should see, I'd been struck mute by shock, my womanhood had come to me like a tainted thing, a sick animal, at the

moment it should not have. I heard all of this and it pushed me deeper into my shy silence. My fourteenth year had come, that time when the wisdom of the world begins to show itself but cannot be expressed in childish words. So I chose not to speak, always watching. What the gossips did not realize was that I wasn't afraid of my father's actions, his gifts. I desperately wanted to possess them for myself.

WHEN THE SNOWS RECEDED, the clans came together at the mouth of the Albany River not far from where the *wemistikoshiw*, the pale ones of the Hudson's Bay Company, had built a post. It had been a poor winter for furs, the bad side of the seven-year cycle, which did not make the company men very happy. Those Cree who did have furs were treated well, given flour and sugar for their bellies, rum that loosened their tongues. Some began to talk.

All the clans that had gathered already seemed to know the others' winter hardships and triumphs. Unspoken law said Cree business remained Cree business and was not to be discussed with the *wemistikoshiw*. But rum is a sly and powerful weapon. I've watched it drown our people all of my life. In the month of the frog moon when the fishing is at its best, the rum drinker George Netmaker, father of Joseph, brought an important message to my father. What my father had done over the winter seemed to have angered the Hudson's Bay Company men, and they demanded he come to them to discuss his actions so that they might decide whether or not he should be considered a murderer. We laughed at this. Wasn't it the *wemistikoshiw* who were on our land? Was it not they who relied on us? My father ignored the news.

For the most part, our lives continued as they always had. Hunting, fishing, trapping, socializing late into nights that stayed bright, storing up on food and laughter, preparing as best we could through the brief summer for winter's return. This was my summer of bitter happiness, moods sweeping over me like summer thunderstorms. I hated the changes, the monthly blood, the sprouting of breasts. I was appalled and mesmerized by what I was becoming.



As we prepared that autumn for the path of the geese to cross ours, the *wemistikoshiw* came with many rifles. They were North-West Mounted Police, and their uniform buttons shone brightly in the sun. Their leather boots squeaked with each step, and their strange words broke harshly from thin, tight lips. George Netmaker translated. They had come for my father. He was to sit in their circle to discuss if what he'd done last winter violated their laws. He was to go with them now and wait in one of their jails because we were a people who would not sit still, and who knew if we might run away and never return?

My father was led away with his big hands bound behind him as our women wailed for the future. To take the *hookimaw* who was to lead us into the bush for the long winter was unimaginable. Ignorance. Malice. I cursed them with everything I had as they receded with my father into their own world.

Most of us survived the winter and returned in spring to the Albany River where news awaited that my father was dead. But I had already known this. The convulsions had come back to me in our winter camp, convulsions that I thought had left with my childhood. I saw it all. The tiny room with no windows that they locked him in, no natural light or fresh air or game. I saw how within a week he'd stopped talking, how within a month he'd stopped eating. I saw how they kept his body from us, how they buried it underground, a place where he'd surely be unhappy.

My mother carried on with my education, teaching which roots and leaves could heal and which could kill. Rabbit never seemed interested. What my mother could not teach me was something that I already had. The vision to see little parts of the near and far future, have moments to come wash over me, left me drained and shaken so that I could not stand. Once I considered this a gift. I no longer feel so sure.

I had the power and watched it slowly recede. I am the second to last in a long line of *windigo* killers. There is still one more.

At the time of my birth the *wemistikoshiw* were still dependent on us. Like little children they came for handouts. When the winters grew too cold we gave them fur to wear against their skin and dried moosemeat for

their empty stomachs. When the blackflies of spring threatened to drive them mad we taught them to use the green boughs of the black spruce on their fires. We showed them where in the rivers the fish hid when summer grew warm and how to trap the plentiful beaver without driving them away forever. The Cree are a generous people. Like forest ticks the *wemistikoshiw* grabbed onto us, growing fatter by the season, until the day came when suddenly it was we who answered to them.

Long past my father's death I remember how they laughed at me, a woman living alone in the bush and trapping animals after all my relations had gone to the reserves. Their laughing came less often as season after season my furs continued to be the thickest, the most plentiful.

The world is a different place in this new century, Nephew. And we are a different people. My visions still come but no one listens any longer to what they tell us, what they warn us. I knew even as a young woman that destruction bred on the horizon. In my early visions, numbers of men, higher than any of us could count, were cut down. They lived in the mud like rats and lived only to think of new ways to kill one another. No one is safe in such times, not even the Cree of Mushkegowuk. War touches everyone, and *windigos* spring from the earth.