

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.