

My loneliness combined with my fear in the year after my mother's death so that a plan began to form in my mind. During one of my fits the face of a boy came to me. There was no doubting that he was my relation. His nose was mine, his eyes carried the same sharpness. His ears stuck out from his head. I realized I was seeing you, Nephew, that you needed me as much as I needed you. In the long, quiet hours of the bush, the thought of you kept me company.

From what I knew, you were only four or five winters. The nuns could not have damaged you too much already. You needed to be out of that place as much as I had needed it when my mother took me. It would be a relatively simple thing to sneak you from there. They would not concern themselves too much with one little boy. Children ran away from there all the time. And even if they decided to search, no *wemistikoshiw* lived who could find me.

That winter was especially long and cold, and in the nights that seemed to stretch on forever, I convinced myself of what I needed to do. Many problems presented themselves to solve, the biggest one being that I didn't know what my own nephew looked like or even his name. Surely they would have given him one of their names, and I had to find it out. A greater problem still was whether I'd even be able to force myself to go back to that place again.

I struck out by canoe just after the blackflies died off. Now that mid-summer had arrived the rivers would allow me a silent and untraceable route of escape once I found you. Not only this, but I knew from my brief stay in the residential school that most of the children were allowed to return to their parents for a short while in this season, and I hoped this would make finding you much easier. If what I'd heard was true, my sister was in no condition to keep you, and you'd be lonely and likely willing to leave if I invited. And that is how I finally decided. I would not take you by force. I would ask my nephew if he wanted to come with me. If you said no, I would respect it. If you said yes, I would bring you with me to be raised in the old ways.

I travelled for three days, paddling from first to last light. As I had remembered, the smell of the town came to me long before I could see it. A copse of pine stood near the school, a place in which I could hide and watch. I had to rely on the vision of you I'd brought back from the other place. It felt fresh in my memory. I just needed to look for the boy with eyes like mine and ears that stuck out. How hard could it be?

I entered the town at night, fighting off the fear of coming face to face with the Frenchman again, even though I knew full well he was dead. It wasn't his physical body that frightened me. Just as I remembered, the pines near the school offered protection, facing the blank wall full of windows, the top floor the place where all the children slept. I took steps to make sure I would not be discovered, carefully hiding my canoe and covering my tracks, building a shelter of pine boughs far away from the trail that ran through this place. A cooking fire was out of the question, and so I'd brought enough smoked fish and meat to last me a number of days. I settled in and waited, my body full of jittery anxiety for what I would find.

As I had expected, only a few children remained in the summer. They came outside to play at the same time every morning, as carefully watched over by one of the nuns as goslings by a mother goose. Six boys of similar age played with one another. I watched them from a distance. By the second day I'd made my guess which one was my blood.

In the afternoons, an old nun, the one I was sure went by the name Magdalene and who had taken such a dislike to me, went out in a canoe with the little boy, and while he paddled her up and down a stretch of the river, she fished from the front. He was a small boy, and her weight was great enough that the canoe did not lie level on the water, but he tried hard as he could to take her to the places she pointed at. It didn't take long before he tired against the current and her weight, and when he rested she would turn around and smack

him hard on the head with her paddle. She was a horrible fisher, banging about in the canoe and demanding he paddle her to places where no fish would want to feed. But he was patient, and did not give up or complain. I had no doubt it was you.

Two days later I watched while the children played. They kicked a hide ball back and forth to one another, and I moved close to the edge of the trees. You were one of the children and you were closest to me, and I waited patiently until the ball was over-kicked and you were the one to pursue it. When you were within earshot, I made the sound of a grouse, just loud enough that you could hear. Your ears perked as I knew they would. After kicking the ball back to the others, you crept into the trees. I made the sound of the grouse again, and you came closer.

"Nephew," I whispered. You stopped short, tensed to run. "Do not be afraid. You are the son of the one they call Anne." I spoke in Cree, for my English was not good enough. But you understood. You nodded. "I am Niska. I am your Auntie." You followed my voice, and I watched as you saw me for the first time. Your eyes widened. I realized then what I must look like, my hair long and black and wild, my body covered in hides.

"What do you want of me, Auntie?" you asked. You spoke Cree with a *wemistikoshiw* accent. You were bold.

"I came to ask if you would prefer leaving here and going into the forest to live with me."

You did not hesitate. "Yes, Auntie."

I smiled, and as I did I realized it was my first smile in many months. My eyes watered.

"Meet me here tomorrow." You smiled too, then turned back and joined the others, chasing the ball.

When you came the next day, I explained that we'd leave in the afternoon, that I would paddle up to the canoe while you fished with the nun.

"But why can't we leave now, Auntie?" you asked.

"There is something I have waited many summers to do," I said. "And I would be honoured that you would be a part of it along with me."

Later that day I waited in my own canoe underneath a thick overhang of willow. As I knew would happen, you appeared on the river, Nephew, paddling the fat nun Magdalene. When you were across the river from me, I called out the sound of the whiskeyjack. You turned toward it. There was no question whose blood you were.

I listened as the nun shouted out directions. You steered the canoe closer to me. I waited, and, not wanting to miss the moment when she was no more than two arms' length away from me, I let out a great wail, the wail of years of hurting, so that the old nun stood, then stumbled and rolled out of the boat and into the water. I slipped out of the willows in my canoe, and in the English I remembered said to her, "*You* paddle home." I took my paddle and clipped her sharply on the head for emphasis. She stared up at me from the water, terrified, her black robe billowing around her, her thin grey hair plastered to her forehead. I motioned for you, and you jumped in my canoe. Do you remember, Nephew? We left that place slow and smiling.

The months that followed were the happiest in my life. We spent our days wandering and trapping and hunting in the bush. Amazingly, you had very little knowledge of any of it, and so I taught you everything I could. You learned quickly and naturally, and your ability to walk invisibly and to shoot was obvious.

One afternoon in late autumn, when the frost in the morning was heavy on the ground and the last of the geese were flying south high on the currents of air, the familiar tingling in my toes and fingers came to me. We followed a river that promised moose, and I wanted to warn you of what was to come, but was too late. The piercing pain shot through my temple and I collapsed to the ground. As I drifted off to the other world I could hear you calling out to me and crying.

I do not know how long I was gone, but as I gradually returned from that place, you remained hovering over me with a tear-stained face.

"Were you dead, Auntie?" you asked me. I smiled and shook my head. "Your eyes were open, but they did not see. You said words I did not understand."

"Don't worry," I said. "When you are old enough I will explain."

That winter and the following summer and the winter and summer after that were plentiful and very happy. You adjusted to the ways of the bush better than I had hoped and became a talented hunter and reader of signs. I taught you all I knew about the bush, the best way to snare rabbits and how to use their fur for protection against the cold brutality of winter, how to weave and walk in snowshoes through the deep snow, how to approach a moose downwind and even how to snare one, how to make your own clothing and moccasins, what plants and herbs were edible and which had healing properties.

But as always happens, the good times bled into harder times and our third winter together proved long and difficult and very cold. Some days were so difficult for us that you cried with hunger and I was reminded of my own childhood, of that winter long ago when my father still lived. Once or twice late at night as you slept fitfully by the fire, I even found myself questioning if I had made the right decision in taking you from that school. At least there you had a full stomach and warm bed. My fits began to come back to me more often, and they were something you could not understand, but at least became used to, for you realized I always came back from that other place. What I didn't tell you, Nephew, was that I brought back with me the knowledge that soon a visitor would come to us, a visitor with a request I could not ignore.

O N A T O P A N I W I W
F i g h t e r

THE STORY AUNTIE TELLS me brings a smile to my lips. I remember that nun who liked to switch me. I can still see the look on her face when Auntie scared her into the water and struck her with the paddle. I smile at Auntie and this makes her eyes bright. Niska is a good woman. She is a good and crazy woman.

The sun is warm on the river, and I no longer feel guilty that I do not help paddle. She has the current and we are in no rush. I lie back and run my hand over the rough wool of my pants, feel the nub of my leg through it. The skin covering it is still a burnt red and puckered and so ugly that I can't look at it. When I first realized I'd lost my leg, I stared at the wound for days, watched as blood seeped through the white bandage, life leaking out of me in a trickle. Maybe it was then that I decided to die. I know that was when I discovered why Elijah loved the morphine, and the nurses were generous with it.

I struggle to stay awake for a while, the canoe rocking me on a fast part of the river so that I'm reminded of the trains Elijah and I rode to join the army, the trains moving further and further south until we came to that frightening place called Toronto. I remember how we lined up in rows of soldiers in new uniforms, how we ate and marched together. The barracks were just like the ones in the school of my childhood. We children had lined up just like soldiers to be

inspected every morning and evening. Elijah and I were always together in my short time at the school. He protected me and I protected him.

We schemed after our switching in front of the other children. We lay in our beds beside one another, whispering late into the night, going silent when we heard the nun making her rounds with her candle.

"We will run away from this place," I would say to Elijah in our tongue. "We will take a bit of food from the pantry each day, just enough that it won't be noticed. We will find a place to store it, and when we have enough, we will leave late at night and be so deep in the bush by morning that no one will ever be able to find us." This was before I knew you existed, Auntie.

"We will need more than just food," Elijah would whisper back. "We will need an axe and some matches. We will need extra clothes and shoes for summer and boots for winter."

I was surprised Elijah needed so much. "Where will we keep it all?" I asked. "The nuns can smell too good. They will find it. They find everything."

"We will hide what we take near the river, and we will steal the canoe that always sits by it," Elijah answered matter-of-factly.

"But the animals will eat our food," I said, and this kept Elijah quiet for a long time.

A rumour floated from ear to ear amongst the children that two boys had once run away from here and were never found. The other rumour was that the next year, little bones, too small to be an adult's, were found in the barn by the school.

"We will hide only the things that can't be eaten by the river, and we will hide the food somewhere here in the school," Elijah said finally.

I doubted this plan would work. The nuns found everything we tried to hide. But I said nothing. I wanted the plan to come to life.

"One of the nuns keeps a rifle," Elijah said as I was falling asleep. "She keeps a good rifle and lots of bullets. I have seen it in her room."

This information made me open my eyes. "Really?" I asked. He nodded. That settled it. I was kept awake wondering if Elijah had really been in her sleeping place. We were all strictly forbidden to go anywhere near it. Elijah was not good enough at sneaking that he wouldn't be caught trying to get in. It wasn't until a long time later that I found out he'd really been in her room. And though Elijah and I were forever planning our running away, it remained just whispers in the dark before sleep.

Niska hums a song to herself as she paddles. The sun on my face makes me sleepy, and the tide of memory pulls at me again, this time taking me to France. I struggle against the pull. I do not want to go there right now. Instead, I try to figure out what day today is in the English way of keeping time. It is high summer, but what day, what month? I slip into a light sleep, remembering that in the way that they keep time, it has been a year now that Elijah and I have been here. I am a different man. I am thinner than when I left Canada, and harder in so many ways.

The late winter and early spring brings cold rain that turns to snow but does not stay. The engineers constantly work, and Elijah has explained to me that I must decide to be either a carrier of bags full of wet mud or a hunter. All winter I have suffered this miserable thing called depression. To make it all worse, I cannot forget that girl, Lisette. For weeks after I left her I was a mud carrier. My mind could not focus in the field, and that is dangerous when what you hunt hunts you as well. But now I am sick of mud. The idea has grown in my head all winter, so that now I cannot shake it. If I can see her again, my depression will go away. I think of ways to accomplish this, to see her again. But she lives far away from Vimy Ridge. Lisette was my first woman. When I see her again, I want to be able to tell her stories of adventure. And that is why I am again Elijah's spotter in the field.