

My stomach grumbles with hunger and I want a cigarette and I need a break from staring and am about to nudge Elijah from his rest when I spot movement right behind a distant mound, just a flicker of something in my scope. I train my eye on it and wait with breath held. It might only be a large rat scurrying for all I know. And then I see him. The top of a soldier's head bobs above the cover of their secondary trench for a moment before disappearing again. I watch as shovelfuls of dirt appear over the side. He is working hard on fixing his section of trench and doesn't realize he's visible to anyone. I nudge Elijah and he opens his eyes calmly.

"There," I say in Cree.

Elijah looks through his scope, his rifle aimed in the direction of where I point. I peer back through my scope and we both can tell that the soldier is standing on duckboard. He's taken a break and his head is a target now as he wipes sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. He has no idea that he can be seen, and as I look at his face, young and pimply and scowling from the work, I begin to whisper to Elijah that he's got a good shot if he wants it, when the sudden concussion of his rifle makes my body jump involuntarily and the familiar whine in my left ear so close to his rifle begins immediately. The young soldier's face is a red smearing explosion that exits the back of his head in a spray before he crumples from sight.

Elijah smoothly ejects the old shell casing that flies out with a clink of metal on metal, then he loads in a new round. The image of the soldier's head exploding makes my stomach churn. I retch a little and spit up bile from my empty stomach, my throat burning and the acrid smell of my own insides making me retch a bit more. I look over to Elijah.

Elijah stares through his scope still, smiling to himself. "I got him, didn't I?" he whispers.

"You did," I answer.

K I P W A H A K A N
C a p t i v e

I KNOW THAT Xavier wants to talk to me. He goes so far as to let words come out of his mouth when he sleeps. He says very little when he's awake. I'm not able to make out more than the odd sentence when he is sleeping, though, and sometimes when he dreams he speaks aloud in English. I can't help but smile a bit when he does. As a child he was so proud that more than once he claimed he would never speak the *wemistikoshiw* tongue. And now he does even in his sleep. He cannot speak to me yet, and so I decide, here on the river, that I will speak to him. In this way maybe his tongue will loosen some. Maybe some of the poison that courses through him might be released in this way. Words are all I have left now. I've lived alone so long that I realize I'm starved to talk. And so, as I paddle him gently with the river, I talk to him, tell him about my life.

After the death of my father, your grandfather, Xavier, our people were directionless. Flakes of snow in swirling wind. Some went back to Moose Factory and never really left it again, became homeguard Indians where they learned to stomach the *wemistikoshiw* food and ways. You could tell you were approaching Moose Factory on the river by the stink of sewage and refuse piled up onshore. And they all wondered where the diseases came from.

A number of us chose to risk starvation and to go into the bush instead, roving bands who went back to the old ways as little fami-

lies, retreating into the muskeg a century, hunting with bows and vine snares when there were no more bullets to be had. My mother showed me the magic deep in the bush that is as real, as alive as the flashing glow of the *Wawahtew*, the North Lights. She spent the next years teaching me some of it.

Their killing my father was a hard and bitter seed lodged in the pit of my stomach that bloomed over the years into a dark flower of anger. My mother recognized what grew in me. In her own way she tried to teach me not to use it in negative ways, for to do that was to enter a spiral near impossible to escape. I listened to her, but on those nights when I was shaking with the cold and my stomach ached dully with hunger, the black flames of that heat were comforting. I pictured pursuing those police with my skinning knife, tracking down each one and gutting him like I would gut a skunk, spitting my hate into his gaping belly.

The Hudson's Bay Company had instilled in the Cree a greed for furs that nearly wiped out the animals, and because of this the time finally came when even the most experienced of the bush men and women were faced with the decision to move to the reserve or die of hunger.

I remember the first day walking into Moose Factory, the bowel-loosening fear and confusion of a prisoner being led into the prison for the first time. There were eight of us. My mother and Rabbit and me, and an old man and his family who were friends to my parents. The old man had broken his leg a number of years before and had never had it set properly so that he dragged it behind him uselessly. His wife helped him, along with their three grandchildren, the children younger than my fifteen winters. It was mid-winter and cold, the sky an aching blue. Our dogs pulled our sled and our few possessions and even they were twitching and afraid surrounded by all the strange smells. We were a ragtag and defeated enemy, and the fat proctor was smug in announcing our surrender.

"So ye all come for handouts now, do ye?" He spoke to all of those gathered in the Company store, white and Indian. "Do ye bring furs to trade me, or are ye like the rest of them devils that expect to live on credit?" My uncle sent his grandson to retrieve the few marten and beaver pelts we'd managed to snare that winter. The proctor shook his head when he saw their condition. He gave us a little food and we scattered around the reserve to different relatives who had room for us.

I watched as the other children around me went off to the residential school across the river. One day Rabbit asked our mother that she be allowed to go and join her friends. My mother gave in to Rabbit's wish. Your mother, Xavier, only wanted a better life than the one we could offer her.

The nuns gave the children funny haircuts, the girls' bobbed to above their shoulders so that their faces looked round like apples, the boys' cut very close to their heads so that their ears stuck out. Even though the walk was not far, the parents were not allowed to visit the children. My mother told me this was so that the nuns could work their spells without interruption. When the children came back, they were different, speaking in the *wemistikoshiw* tongue, talking back to their parents, fighting and hitting one another, crying in the middle of the night for reasons they could not explain. I wondered what happened to them over in that place and was thankful that I was not sent there.

Then one day I was. Word had filtered through to the Company men that there was an Indian girl wandering Moose Factory who was not yet old enough to marry but who was as uncivilized as an animal. A priest arrived at our cabin on a day when the first signs of spring were showing. A greasiness was in the snow, the breeze did not hold warmth but hinted at it. He came with a soldier from the fort in the case that the odd-sounding Cree that came from his bearded mouth was not good enough. My mother stumbled a little when he told her

I was to come with him to learn about God. "She is all I have," my mother said to the priest in English. It surprised me to hear that she could speak it at all.

"It is for the greater good of God that she come with me," the priest answered. "She will be clothed and fed and kept warm." Nothing my mother could say would change what was about to happen, and she knew it as well as I did. And so I did the only thing I could do. I ran. But the soldier surprised me with his quickness, catching up to me not a hundred yards from our cabin, throwing me to the ground roughly, trying to hold my arms. I fought like a lynx then, scratching at his eyes with my fingernails, biting him through his thick coat so that he screamed in shock and pain. I punched and kicked until I had nothing left, until the soldier dragged me away from my mother.

The building was large and white, bigger than the Company store, bigger than any structure I'd seen. They had us sleep in long rooms, on rows of cots, and because I was older and knew very little of their language, the nuns paid very close attention to me. They kept me away from my sister. They didn't want me changing what they had taught Rabbit, who they now called Anne.

The nuns would wake me in the middle of the night and drag me to a brightly lit room where I was made to repeat words over and over until I pronounced them correctly. When I was caught speaking my tongue, they'd force lye soap into my mouth and not give me anything else to eat for days. I watched as the younger children were beaten with switches and forced to eat food from the floor like dogs, but something in my eyes must have warned the nuns not to do the same to me. Every waking moment I planned my escape, sneaking bits of food into my scratchy dress pocket when no one was looking, noting the places where the warmer clothing and tools were kept that would serve me in the bush.

The one in charge, Sister Agnes, took an immediate dislike to me in those first few weeks. She personally cut my hair, making it shorter

than the rest of the girls'. It took all that I had not to strike out at her to prevent her from doing it, but I knew to choose my battles carefully. They were going to remove the black hair that reached to my waist as a symbol of *wemistikoshiw* authority, of our defeat. She sat me in a chair, other nuns hovering in expectation of a fight, but I sat and smiled serenely as she tugged at my hair, pulling it hard to get a reaction from me that wouldn't come. When she was done and my scalp ached, I refused to look in the mirror that they shoved in front of me. I did not want to give them the reaction of shock and sadness that they so wanted. I'd already planned my answer to their actions.

Deep that night when even the most vigilant nuns were sleeping, I crept down to the basement to the room where they sheared us like sheep and found the clippers used for the boys. I cut the rest of my hair from my head so that all that was left was a stubbly field.

I lay awake in my bed all the rest of that night, rubbing my hand over my scalp in anticipation of the approaching dawn. In the morning the nuns walked up and down our rows, pulling our covers from us and shouting at us to get up. When that moment finally came and I was left exposed, the room went silent, and child and adult alike stared at me. One of the nuns whispered *devil*, and knowing better but not being able to help it, I smiled at this word.

They dragged me from my bed then and pulled me down to the basement, locking me in a room with one window high above me. That was when I thought of my father and his last days. I wouldn't let the same cloud cover me.

After a week of talking to no one and of being given a single bowl of porridge to eat each day, I began to have strange visions. Sister Agnes had told me that I would not come out again until my hair grew back. My hunger, combined with the thought of being in this little room with the single high window, caused the shaking to come to me, something that hadn't happened since my father died. It felt like a warm current running up my back and filling my head until I

grew dizzy. Then my jaw tightened and the tremors ran through my legs and lower torso, building in intensity until my whole body quaked and I fell to the ground. My vision turned red and that was the last of my consciousness. There was no more room around me for this world then, only glimpses of the other place and of what it took me a long time to realize was the future.

I saw the bush once more, summertime or maybe autumn, with the sun high. A beaver dam that had not been abandoned, a new lodge of freshly woven branches. I sat in a canoe with a young man paddling ahead of me. I did not recognize him. His hair had been short like mine but was already growing out. On a bend in the river, a large moose, a bull, stood on the shore. The same excitement that always comes with spotting one, especially one so large, swelled in me. But we did not take it. We drifted silently by with the current.

Sitting alone in the room, I realized that I was not going to be able to escape it. The window was too high, and the door that locked me in was solid. My hair had grown to a soft down, and still I did not regret my actions. I waited and dreamed and plotted.

One night I awoke to a soft scratching at the window. I looked up and saw a shadow hovering by it. Before the panic even had a chance to grip me, the window crackled with a tinkling of glass. I crouched behind the bed and watched as the rest of the window was smashed out. With a flourish of long hair, my mother stuck her head in, and in the language I had not heard in weeks she told me to throw her my bedsheet. I stood and did as she told me, all the sleep quickly gone. She twisted the sheet and threw one end down and told me to grab it. She then hoisted me up and pulled me through the window, where I smelled the first fresh air in a long time. Spring had come while I sat in that room.

"*Ashtum*," she said. "They have probably heard us. We must go now."

I wondered where we were going, but that soon became apparent when she led me to our two dogs, both tied to travois with all of our

possessions bundled on top. "Did you see Rabbit?" my mother asked. "Will she come with us?"

"She is called Anne now," I said, and watched the understanding cross my mother's face.

We led the dogs out of Moose Factory at that part of night when it was darkest, and I did not look again upon that place for another two years. My mother and I walked out of there and back into the time of our ancestors, living on what the land would give and slowly becoming wild like the animals around us.