

**INDIAN**

*richard wagamese*  
**HORSE**

a n o v e l



Douglas & McIntyre

My name is Saul Indian Horse. I am the son of Mary Mandamin and John Indian Horse. My grandfather was called Solomon so my name is the diminutive of his. My people are from the Fish Clan of the northern Ojibway, the *Anishinabeg*, we call ourselves. We made our home in the territories along the Winnipeg River, where the river opens wide before crossing into Manitoba after it leaves Lake of the Woods and the rugged spine of northern Ontario. They say that our cheekbones are cut from those granite ridges that rise above our homeland. They say that the deep brown of our eyes seeped out of the fecund earth that surrounds the lakes and marshes. The Old Ones say that our long straight hair comes from the waving grasses that thatch the edges of bays. Our feet and hands are broad and flat and strong, like the paws of a bear. Our ancestors learned to travel easily through territories that the *Zhaunagush*, the white man, later feared and sought our help to navigate. Our talk rolls and tumbles like the rivers that served as our roads. Our legends tell of how we emerged from the womb of our Mother the Earth; Aki is the name we have for her. We sprang forth intact, with Aki's heartbeat thrumming in our ears, prepared to become her stewards and protectors.

When I was born our people still talked this way. We had not yet stepped beyond the influence of our legends. That was a border my generation crossed, and we pine for a return that has never come to be.

These people here want me to tell my story. They say I can't understand where I'm going if I don't understand where I've been. The answers are within me, according to them. By telling our stories, hardcore drunks like me can set ourselves free from the bottle and the life that took us there. I don't give a shit about any of that. But if it means getting out of this place quicker, then telling my story is what I will do.

It was social workers at the hospital who sent me here. The New Dawn Centre. They call it a treatment facility. The counsellors here say Creator and the Grandmothers and the Grandfathers want me to live. They say a lot of things. In fact, they talk all the time, and they expect us to do the same. They sit there with their eyes all shiny and wet and hopeful, thinking we don't see them waiting. Even with my eyes on my shoes I can feel them. They call it sharing. It's one of our ancient tribal principles as Ojibway people, they claim. Many hearts beating together makes us stronger. That's why they put us in the sharing circle.

There are at least thirty of us staying here. Everyone from kids in their late teens to a few in their thirties, like me, and one woman who's so old she can't talk much anymore. We sit in circles all day. I tire of talk. It wearies me. It makes me wish for a drink. But I endure it, and when my counsellor, Moses, ushers me into his office for one-on-one time, I endure that too. I've been here a month, after six weeks in the hospital, and that's the longest I've been

without a drink for years, so I guess there's some use to it. My body feels stronger. My head is clear. I eat heartily. But now, they say, the time has come for the hardest work. "If we want to live at peace with ourselves, we need to tell our stories."

I can't tell mine in the circle. I know that. There's too much to sort out and sift through. And I've noticed the younger ones getting all twitchy in their seats the few times I've tried to speak. Maybe they don't believe me, or something about what I'm saying pisses them off. Either way, I can't talk there. So Moses gave me permission to write things down. So I will. Then I'll get on with life. Somewhere.

Our people have rituals and ceremonies meant to bring us vision. I have never participated in any of them, but I have seen things. I have been lifted up and out of this physical world into a place where time and space have a different rhythm. I always remained within the borders of this world, yet I had the eyes of one born to a different plane. Our medicine people would call me a seer. But I was in the thrall of a power I never understood. It left me years ago, and the loss of that gift has been my greatest sorrow. Sometimes it feels as though I have spent my entire life on a trek to rediscover it.

I wasn't there the day the first Indian horse came to our people, but I heard the story so many times as a boy that it became real to me.

The Ojibway were not people of the horse. Our land existed as an untamed thing, lakes, rivers, bogs and marshes surrounded by citadels of bush and rock and the labyrinthine weave of country. We had no need of maps to understand it. We were people of the *manitous*. The beings that shared our time and place were lynx, wolf, wolverine, bear, crane, eagle, sturgeon, deer, moose. The horse was a spirit dog meant to run in open places. There was no word for it in the old talk until my great-grandfather brought one back from Manitoba.

When the sun was warm and the song of the wind could be heard in the rustle of the trees, our people said that the *Maymaygwayseeuk*, the water spirits, had come out to dance. That's the kind of day it was. Sparkling. The eyes of the spirits winking off the water.

My great-grandfather had wandered off into the bite of the north wind one day near the end of winter, headed west to the land of our cousins, the Ojibway of the plains. His name was *Shabogeesick*. Slanting Sky. He was a shaman and a trapper, and because he spent so much time out on

the land, it told him things, spoke to him of mysteries and teachings. They say he had the sending thought, the great gift of the original teachers. It was a powerful medicine, allowing vital teachings to be shared among people separated by tremendous distance. Shabogeesick was one of the last to claim its energy before history trampled it under foot. The land called to him one day and he walked off without a word to anyone. No one worried. It was something he did all the time.

But that late spring afternoon when he walked back out of the bush from the east, he was leading a strange black animal by a rope halter. Our people had never seen such a creature, and they were afraid. It was massive. Huge as a moose, but without antlers, and the sound of its hoofs on the ground was that of drums. It was like a great wind through a fissure in rock. People shrank from the sight of it.

"What manner of being is this?" they asked. "Do you eat it?"

"How does it come to walk beside a man? Is it a dog? Is it a grandfather who lost his way?"

The people had many questions. None would approach the animal and when it lowered its head and began to graze on the grass, they gasped.

"It is like a deer."

"Is it as gentle as *Waywashkeezhee*?"

"It is called a horse," Shabogeesick told them. "In the land of our cousins it is used to travel long distances, to bear loads too heavy for men, to warn of Zhaunagush before he can be seen."

"Horse," the people said in unison. The big animal lifted its head and whinnied, and they were afraid.

"Does it mock us?" they asked.

"It announces itself," Shabogeesick said. "It comes bearing great teachings."

He'd brought the animal back on the train and walked it thirty miles from the station to our camp on the Winnipeg River. It was a Percheron. A draught horse. A working beast, and Shabogeesick showed the people how to halter it, to rig it with straps sewn from cedar roots and trading post rope so it could haul the carcasses of moose and bear many miles out of the bush. Children learned to ride on its broad back. The horse pulled elders on toboggans across the deep snows of winter and allowed men to cut trees and haul the logs to the river where they would float them to the mill for money. Horse was indeed a gift and the people called him *Kitchi-Animoosh*. Great Dog.

Then one day Shabogeesick called everyone together in a circle on the teaching rocks where the Old Ones drew stories on the stone. The people were only ever called to those sacred stones when something vital needed to be shared. No one knows where that place is today. Of all the things that would die in the change to come, the way to that sacred place was perhaps the most grievous loss. Shabogeesick had brought *Kitchi-Animoosh*, and Horse nibbled at the succulent leaves of the aspen while my great-grandfather spoke.

"When the horse first called to me, I did not understand the message," Shabogeesick told them. "I had not heard that voice before. But our cousins on the plains spoke to me of the goodness of this Being, and I fasted and prayed in the sacred sweat lodge for many days to learn to speak with it.

"When I emerged from the sweat lodge this Horse was

there. I walked with it upon the plains and the Horse offered me its teachings.

"A great change will come. It will come with the speed of lightning and it will scorch all our lives. This is what Horse said to me under that great bowl of sky. 'The People will see many things they have never seen before, and I am but one of them.' This is what he said to me.

"When the Zhaunagush came they brought the Horse with them. The People saw the Horse as special. They sought to learn its medicine. It became a sign of honour to ride these spirit beings, to race the wind with them. But the Zhaunagush could only see this act as thievery, as the behaviour of lesser people, so they called us horse thieves.

"The change that comes our way will come in many forms. In sights that are mysterious to our eyes, in sounds that are grating on our ears, in ways of thinking that will crash like thunder in our hearts and minds. But we must learn to ride each one of these horses of change. It is what the future asks of us and our survival depends on it. That is the spirit teaching of the Horse."

The People did not know what to make of this talk. Shabogeesick's words scared them. But they trusted him and they had come to love *Kitchi-Animoosh*. So they took good care of him, fed him choice grains and hay that they traded for at the rail line. The children rode him to keep him fit. When the treaty men found us in our isolated camp and made us sign our names to the register, they were surprised to see the horse. When they asked how he had come to be there, the People pointed at Shabogeesick, and it was the Zhaunagush who called him Indian Horse. It has been our family name ever since.

All that I knew of Indian died in the winter of 1961, when I was eight years old.

My grandmother, Naomi, was very old then. She was the matriarch of the small band of people I was born to. We still lived a bush life at that time. We had little contact with anyone besides the Zhaunagush at the Northern Store in Minaki, where we took our furs and berries, or the odd group of wandering Indians who stumbled across our camps. If there was ever a sign of an approaching stranger, our grandmother hurried my brother Benjamin and me off into the bush. We would stay there until the stranger departed, even if that took a day or so.

There was a spectre in our camp. We could see the shadow of this dark being in the lines of our mother's face. She would sometimes sit huddled close to the fire, clenching and unclenching her fists, her eyes dark moons in the firelight. She never spoke at times like that, never could be comforted. I'd walk to her and take her hand but she didn't notice me. It was as if she was under the influence of a potent medicine no shaman had the power to break. The spectre lived in the other adults too, my father and

my aunt and uncle. But its most chilling presence was in my mother.

"The school," she would whisper then. "The school."

It was the school that Naomi hid us from. It was the school that had turned my mother so far inward she sometimes ceased to exist in the outside world. Naomi had seen the adults of our camp taken away as children. She'd seen them return bearing a sorrow that could not be reached, and when my grandfather died, she took her family back to the land, hoping that an Ojibway life might heal them, ease their pain.

Besides my brother, I had a sister that I never met. Her name was Rachel, and the year before I was born she disappeared. She was six.

"The Zhaunagush came from across the water," our grandmother told Benjamin and me one time when we were hidden in the trees. "It was the end of August and we were coming back to the river from the summer camp near One Man Lake. Our canoes were full of berries. We planned to go to Minaki to sell them and buy supplies for the winter. We were tired.

"I never thought they'd come in the dawn. Me, I always thought the Zhaunagush slept late like fat old bears. But they walked into our camp and I pulled my robe up over Benjamin who was so small and hid him from their view. But they found Rachel and they took her away in their boat.

"I stood on the rocks and watched them. Them, they had a boat with a motor, and when they rounded the bend in the river I thought how fast things can vanish from our view. Her screams hung in the air like smoke from a green

fire. But even they finally vanished and all that was left was the wake from that boat slapping at the rocks at my feet.

"That's all I carry of her now—the wet slap of water on the rocks. Every time I hear it I remember the dawn the white men came and stole Rachel from us."

So we hid from the white men. Benjamin and I developed the quick ears of bush people. When we detected the drone of an engine we knew to run. We'd grab the old lady's hand and scuttle into the trees and find a place to secret ourselves away until we knew for certain that there was no danger.

I learned English at the same time I learned Ojibway. My father taught me to read from Zhaunagush books, taught me to form the sounds the letters built with the tip of his finger as my guide. They felt hard, those white man words; sharp and pointed on my tongue. Old Naomi fought against it, trying to throw the books in the fire.

"They come in different ways, them, the Zhaunagush," she said. "Their talk and their stories can sneak you away as quick as their boats."

So I grew up afraid of the white man. As it turned out, I had reason to be.

In 1957, when I was four, they got my brother, Benjamin. The old lady and I were gathering roots in a glade back of the trees that stood against the river. The men and my brother were at the foot of a rapids setting gill nets. The airplane came out of the west, and we did not hear it soon enough. Naomi and I made it to a cleft in the rocks, but the men and my brother had nowhere to go. The plane cut them off, and we crawled up out of our crevice in the rocks

and watched as those men from the plane lowered a canoe and forced my family's canoe to the opposite shore. They had guns, those Zhaunagush. I think that if they hadn't, my father and my uncle would have fought them off and we would have run into the back country. But they took my brother at gunpoint and pushed him up into the plane.

My mother collapsed on the long, flat rock that reached out into the river at our camp. No one could move her. She lay there for days, and it was only the chill of the first autumn rains that got her up on her feet and back to the fire. She was lost to me then. I could see that. She was gaunt and drained from days of weeping, a tent of skin over her bones. When Benjamin disappeared he carried a part of her away with him, and there was nothing anyone could do to fill it. My father tried. He never left her side for weeks. But now that she had lost two children, she would not speak anything except "the school," the words like a bruise in the air. So he left her—and he and my uncle paddled off downriver to sell the berries. When they returned they brought the white man with them in brown bottles. Spirits, Naomi called them. Bad spirits. Those spirits made the grown-ups move in strange, jerky ways and their talk was twisted. I fell asleep to evil laughter. Sometimes my mother lurched to her feet and danced around the fire, and the shadow she threw against the skin of the tent was like the outline of a skeleton. I clutched my robe tight to my throat, lay across the space my brother once filled and waited for sleep to claim me.

On clear nights the old woman and I would sit on the rocks by the edge of the river. The stars pinwheeled above

us and we would hear wolves calling to each other. Naomi told me stories of the old days. Told me about my grandfather and the medicine ways he carried. Good medicine. Powerful, Ojibway medicine. The river wound serpentine, radiant in the light of the northern moon. In its curling wash I sometimes thought I could hear songs sung in Ojibway. Honour songs, raising me above the hurt of my brother's absence. That voice sustained me, as did the firm, warm hand of Naomi on the thin blade of my shoulder.

After Benjamin disappeared my family left the bush and the shores of the river. We canoed out one day and left the camp behind. My grandmother came too though she'd argued against the move. My mother seemed almost weightless by now. I was always surprised that she left footprints. There was nothing to her but air. Her eyes were empty and she walked bent over like an old woman.

My father bore it all in stoic silence. But there was an angry arc when he swung an axe, a more vicious slice of the knife when he skinned out a deer. This energy, so heavy and thick, was the opposite of my mother's.

Both my parents had taken to the Zhaunagush drink, and we left the bush in pursuit of it. We followed the whiskey to the transient camps of the half-breeds who gathered on the discard lands around sawmill towns, waiting for the bits of work that were sometimes tossed their way. Indian work. That's what the mill folk called it. Men and boys would plow off into the bush to cut deadfall trees and haul their lengths to cleared stretches where the skidders could get to them. It was their job to clear the bastard trees that made dropping the prime timber more difficult for the white fallers. There were no chainsaws. The breeds and the



Indians cut everything by hand with Swede saws and axes. It was brutal work for little pay and what was paid out was drunk off quickly. There weren't many kids in those camps. Most of them had been spirited away by the government men. The fact that no one ever came for me was more a testament to the invisible nature of our lives than to any good luck. I hauled a wagon around the rutted, muddy roads that led through the tent village and out to the desolate edges of the town where the poor whites lived, to sell firewood we kids broke by hand. Broke-wood breeds. That's what the Zhaunagush at the mills called us. Broke-wood breeds.

Our lives became the plod from one tent village to another. Sometimes there'd be an abandoned tarpaper shack that we could call home, but for the most part we lived with others as displaced as we were, in canvas tents strung in a circle around a central fire. We'd share the warmth and whatever food we had. I learned to snare rabbits and steal chickens. I grew to hate the stink of sulfur at the same time I learned to endure the stench of roasted dog, the bite of the pine gum tea washing down the lard sandwiches that were our staple. Naomi told me stories, kept me away from the adults when they were in the grips of the drink. She showed me how to skin the squirrels and woodchucks we could sometimes catch in those thin woods.

We settled in at Redditt in the winter of 1960. There was a lot of work for the men there. We managed to buy a wood stove for our tent and passed the deep snow moons in a comfort we'd forgotten could exist. With this infusion of hope, my father drank less. There was more money for food, and I stopped snapping off the ends of the branches

that stuck up out of the snow to haul about in my wagon. By spring I'd grown taller, elastic and wiry.

That spring we gathered mushrooms and greens and wild onions. A stream led from a bog lake to the main river, and my grandmother showed me how to lay out a burlap bag and haul in the suckers that ran up the creek to spawn. I learned to clean them with swift swipes of a knife and use the guts for bait on night lines I set out to drift in the current of the big river. We smoked those fish. Sometimes we'd slap thick coats of clay around them and bake them in the fire. My grandmother used the ribs of them for needles to sew buttons on my battered shirts. It began to feel as though we might forge a life for ourselves there on the edges of that rough-hewn town. Summer came. My mother sat with us at the fire most nights, even though she still carried such a deep sadness.

Then Benjamin walked out of the bush. He'd run away from the school in Kenora. People he met told him where we'd gotten to, and he'd followed the rail line north, and then the road. It was sixty miles to Redditt and he'd walked all that way. He was bug-bit and thin, taller than when we'd last seen him. His hair was cropped close to his skin and his ill-fitting clothes were made even looser by the weight he'd lost on his journey. For a moment no one knew who he was.

"Mother," he said.

My mother burst out of her despair in a gale of tears and laughter.

There was great celebration. My brother sat by the fire and was fed our thin stew and my grandmother mixed up bannock that she baked on a stick over the fire. I stood by his side while he chewed. He was different. Not only in size. There was a wariness in his eyes and a hardness to the set of his chin. His hands shook some when he tore off bits of the bannock. "Saul," he'd greeted me, nodding firmly. It was odd to see the expressions of a grown man on a boy's face. Then he coughed.

The cough racked him, and he bent forward. The hump of his back rose and fell with the effort. The grown-ups

shrank back a step, fear on their faces. Only my grandmother stepped up to attend to him. She leaned him back against her bosom and cradled his head. His coughs subsided gradually. When they left him finally, his face was red and there were tears in his eyes. I could see how much smaller the spell had made him. He huddled close to my grandmother and put a hand to his mouth and worked at breathing regularly. "The coughing sick," she said to us. "He got it from the school."

Over the next few days my brother rested. It would be years before I knew the full name of what he had but the TB my brother carried in his lungs spread anxiety throughout my family. My mother retreated into her woe again. My father drank hard. One evening my grandmother coaxed everyone to the fire and spoke to us.

"There is not much time," she said. "The coughing sick is in Benjamin hard, and I think that soon the Zhaunagush will come to find him. When they do, they will find Saul and we will lose them both."

We needed to go where the government men could not find us, my grandmother said. We needed to get back to living in a proper way. We needed to take Benjamin to a place where the air and the land could ease his spirit.

"He is twelve," she said. "Saul is seven. They are old enough now to dance the *manoomin*, the rice, in the old way. Their grandfather would have wanted this for them. We will go to Gods Lake."

No one argued. In the firm words of the old woman there was no room for discussion. We began to prepare for the trip. My father used his last paycheque to buy three old freighter canoes that he and my uncle and grandmother

patched with spruce gum heated over the fire. The old lady quietly traded my father's whiskey for a rifle and shells and a pair of heavy metal washtubs. We packed our tents and what food we could and set off to paddle our way to where Gods Lake sat in the thickest part of the bush country. Grandmother knew the country and she guided us through the portages to the Winnipeg River, then north past Minaki, then east again beyond One Man Lake. The journey took us ten days. Benjamin and I sat in the middle of one of the large canoes with our grandmother in the stern, directing us past shoals and through rapids and into magnificent stretches of water. One day the clouds hung low and light rain freckled the slate-grey water that peeled across our bow. The pellets of rain were warm and Benjamin and I caught them on our tongues as our grandmother laughed behind us. Our canoes skimmed along and as I watched the shoreline it seemed the land itself was in motion. The rocks lay lodged like hymns in the breast of it, and the trees bent upward in praise like crooked fingers. It was glorious. Ben felt it too. He looked at me with tears in his eyes, and I held his look a long time, drinking in the face of my brother. When he coughed I put a hand to his back.

"In the Long Ago Time before the Zhaunagush, a group of hunters set out to find moose late one fall." My grandmother's voice carried over the water, and the other two canoes pulled even with us so the adults could hear. "They went the way we go now, and they'd never seen such strength in the country. The rocks seemed to sing to them.

"In those times our people relied on intuition—the great spirit strength of thought—and the hunters found

a portage at a flat place not far from where we are now. It led back into country marked with ridges. It was very hard to walk, but they followed a small creek through a cut in the land until they felt the land close off behind them like the flap of a wigwam. They could feel the stillness in their bones, and some of them were afraid. But the need for meat for the coming winter was so strong they pushed on.

"Finally the creek led them to a hidden lake. The shoreline was narrow and the curve of the lake's bowl was steep, except for one section that sloped upward gradually out of a tamarack bog. The hunters knew there would be moose there and they were heartened. They began exploring to find the place where it would be easiest to dress their game. The water of that lake was black and still, though, and the silence that hung over it made them nervous. The hunters had the feeling of being watched from the trees.

"Finally the men came to a spot where a cliff spilled gravel downward to form a wide beach. There were shallows for landing their canoes near a good stand of trees and thickets of willow. It seemed a perfect place to make their camp. They beached the canoes and stood on that gravel shore and looked around them. The air did not move. It felt hard to draw a breath, and their feeling of being watched was stronger.

"As they started to unload, the hunters heard laughter from the trees and the low roll of voices speaking in the Old Talk, the original language, unspoken but for ceremony. But no one was there. As they splashed through the shallows in a panic trying to get their canoes back into the water, laughter rolled openly from the trees. The hairs on the back of those hunters' necks stood straight up, and

they trembled as they paddled back to the head of the portage. By the time they made it back to their home, every hair on their heads was white.

"The people called the place *Manitou Gameeng*, and it became Gods Lake when the Zhaunagush missionaries heard the tale. No one could stay there; whenever anybody tried, a powerful presence would overwhelm them and they would run away. But Solomon had a dream. In that dream our family were harvesting rice at Gods Lake and we were content and settled and the sky was a deep and cloudless blue. So we went there one spring. We made a ceremony on the rocks at the base of that cliff and we sang old songs and said prayers in the Old Talk and prepared a feast and carried Spirit Plates into the trees and left them there. We made a sacred fire and we burned the last of the food and your grandfather climbed high up the face of that cliff and laid a tobacco offering there.

"The air thinned and the breeze began to blow and there was peace. But no one else has been able to go there since. They are still chased away. Only the Indian Horse family can go to Gods Lake. It is our territory. The rice that grows at the southern end is ours to harvest, and we will gather it in the traditional way as another offering to the Old Ones."

The story spooked us. Even the adults, who had heard it many times before, grew silent. I wondered what would become of us there. I wondered if the spirit, the *manitous*, of Gods Lake would look upon us with pity and compassion, if we would flourish on this land that was ours alone.

We made Gods Lake in the early afternoon of a day in late summer. It was a great bowl of inkpot black sunk into the granite and edged with spruce, pine and fir. At its shoreline, as my grandmother had told us, were tall cedars, a tamarack bog and a wide shallow bay at the southern end, where manoomin grew in abundance. The air was still at first. But as we paddled toward the northern end, where the grey-white cliffs spilled their gravel down to form the beach, a breeze came up and we could hear bird sounds from the reeds and shallows. A pair of eagles watched us from the top of a ragged old pine. A mother bear and two cubs broke apart at our approach and galloped up through the bracken and the meadow to disappear into the trees at its edge. It was warm and the sky above us was festooned with small clouds.

We pitched our tents in a glade in the trees. Every morning I could flip back the flap of the tent my brother and I shared and see the water and the opposite shore, the mist off it dreamlike. There were game and fish and berries and we ate like we never had before. Everyone seemed to take to the promise of this place. Ben rallied enough to help me with gathering firewood, setting the night lines and

tramping up to the top of the ridge where we would sit and just look out over the land. The gods of Gods Lake seemed pleased that we were there, and as the weeks dwindled off to the far edge of summer, our camp was light-hearted and peaceful.

I tramped up the ridge alone as my brother slept in the tent late one afternoon. From there it seemed as though the entire world was a carpet of green pocked with bald grey places where spires and shoulders of rock rose through the trees. The sky was a clear and endless blue. A faint breeze eased over the lake. I'd come to favour a small jut of pink granite that looked like the bottom of an overturned canoe. From it I could see in every direction, and I loved being surrounded by all of that amazing space. As I sat there with the warmth of the sun spilled over me, I closed my eyes. I could hear the breeze in the trees. There was a tempo to it. Slow. Measured. My breathing slowed to match it. That's when I heard my name. It was whispered so softly, I thought at first that I'd imagined it. Then I heard it again. My eyes flew open and I looked around. No one was there, only the branches of the trees bouncing easily in the breeze. Frail clouds had fanned out across the great canopy of blue sky. I stood and walked to the edge of the ridge and looked down. The drop was steep.

"Saul." It came to me long and stretched out so that it didn't really sound like a word at all. But I heard it nonetheless. "Saul."

When I looked down at the lake again, I saw people. They were busy in canoes setting nets. A group of women waded in the shallows gathering cattail roots, and laughing children splashed at minnows. A few young men walked

out of the trees carrying deer carcasses on poles, and now I could see a camp of a dozen wigwams at the foot of the great cliff. Women were scraping hides stretched out on poplar frames while children ran around them. A pair of elders sat beside a fire, and as I watched, one of the men looked up at me and nodded. He raised his black bowl pipe in my direction.

Then, suddenly, it was night. The fire at the centre of the camp burned high and in the flickering light I could see people dancing. Someone played a hand drum and the song they sang pierced the darkness where I stood with high, jubilant syllables of praise. The fire sent the fragrances of cedar and sage and roasting meat up to me and I felt a great hunger. The moon was full in the sky. As the rhythm of the drum and the song slowed, it became a social dance and I heard laughter clear as the call of night birds.

Then it was the deep of night and in the dim blue light of that full moon the camp slept. The fire had dwindled to lazy smoke curling up and over everything. A pair of dogs slept close to it. At the foot of the rock beach, canoes bumped and jostled in the light push of wavelets breaking on the stone. The man I had seen earlier by the fire was standing on the beach and he was singing. He held a long stick with a glowing end, and I could smell sweetgrass, tobacco, cedar and sage as he set the stick down on a flat rock and fanned the smoke up and over himself with a long feather fan. In the song that rose up to me I heard fragments of the Old Talk. The man raised his arms up high with his fingers splayed. When he'd finished singing, he bowed his head. Silence lay heavy over everything. I shivered. A long time passed, and then out of the west came

the wail of a wolf song. The wolf song rose higher and higher and as it reached its crescendo I saw the face of the old man in the face of the moon. He stared back at me and the light in his eyes comforted me. Then he closed his eyes slowly and everything changed again.

Now it was morning. The fog rising up off the lake moved across the rock beach to envelop the camp. A rumble shook the ground at my feet and I heard the sound of rock cascading.

I fell to the ground as the rumbling grew louder. A cloud of dust rolled over me. When the rumble had subsided, the silence was so deep it scared me. I crept to the edge of the ridge and looked over. The face of the cliff had collapsed, and the camp was gone. Vanished. Even the trees had been scraped away and the beach was strewn with boulders. The chalky smell of rock dust brought tears to my eyes and I stood there weeping, my shoulders shaking at the thought of those people buried under all that stone.

"Saul," I heard behind me.

I turned and my grandmother was standing there with her arms spread open. I fell into them and cried into her bosom.

My grandmother never explained it, but there really was no need. I knew now why Gods Lake belonged to our family: because part of our family had died there, and their spirits still spoke from the trees. Somehow, knowing that was a comfort to me.

Ben and I learned from the women how to fashion elaborate braids out of red willow bark. There was a design to the weave, and grandmother watched us to make sure we made them correctly.

"Before the changes the Zhaunagush brought, the people would make *mamaawash-kawipidoon*, rice ties just like these. Each family had their own braid tied their special way so that they could be recognized in the rice beds. Each head of rice is tied with these." She talked as she worked. It was as though her hands could think on their own. "We make a ceremony out of the gathering. It teaches us to remember that rice is a gift of Creator."

"It is a gift from God," my aunt said quietly.

The old woman replied slowly. "No matter how you make the address, the sender remains the same."

"We should pray with the rosary and give thanks the proper way," my aunt said. "This way is wrong."

"Blasphemy," my mother agreed.

"That school gave you words that do not apply to us," my grandmother said. "Out here there is no need to keep the spirit bound to fear."

"We were taught to be God-fearing," my mother said.

"One who loves does not brandish fear or require it." The old woman stopped her braiding to look at my mother and aunt, but they kept their heads down and continued with the ties. "Here in this old way you may rediscover that and reclaim it as your own."

I didn't understand the words they spoke that day. I only knew that it felt right and good to do the chore we did, the simple ceremony of making rice ties. When we were finished, my grandmother and Ben and I paddled out in a canoe and she showed us how to tie the heads of the rice so it could be harvested more efficiently. She used a long, forked pole to push us around the rice beds. In the slow, steady motion of the canoe, my brother and I followed our grandmother's directions. I didn't realize until later, when the tent flaps were down and I could hear the voices of the adults over the snap of the fire, that my brother had not coughed the entire time. He slept quietly that whole night.

WHEN THE RICE MOON came, Ben and I were put in charge of digging a pair of shallow firepits and gathering firewood. Then we dug another, larger, slightly deeper pit a few yards away from the fires and lined it with a canvas tarpaulin. On the day of the harvest we started the fires early in the morning. In the dawn chill my grandmother sang in the Old Talk, her voice reverberating off the water and echoing back from the face of the cliff. She sprinkled fresh cedar on

that fire. My brother and I hauled the crisp air deep into us and tried to join in the old woman's song even though we did not know the words. Ben coughed and had to stop. My parents and my aunt and uncle hung back near the trees, the toe of my father's boot tracing circles in the dirt.

After we'd eaten, the adults paddled off to the rice beds. Ben and I tended the fire and when there was a good bed of embers we propped the metal wash basins my grandmother had brought across stout green logs to heat them. We knew what would go on in the canoes. She'd told us.

"The men will pole the canoes through the stocks. We women will pull the heads of the rice down with a stick. Then we'll knock that stick with a swing of another one and the rice will fall into the canoe."

The solid clap of sticks travelled back across the water.

"We keep on knocking that rice until the canoes can't hold any more. Then the men will guide us back here to the fires."

We heard a shout after about an hour. In the distance the canoes emerged from the rice beds, so low in the water I thought they would sink. The women were sitting on the bottom. We could see the rice piled up over their legs, which they'd covered with thick pants to ward off the bite of the rice worms. My grandmother and mother and aunt paddled lightly. The men stood at the sterns and used the tip of their paddles to ease the canoes forward. It seemed to take them forever to travel the breadth of the lake. When they got closer I waded into the water to help pull the bows of the canoes as close to the beach as they would go. I helped the women out and the four of us hauled the canoes up onto the stone shore. Once my father and uncle

had hauled the canoes out of the water, we began throwing rice into the metal washtubs.

When the tubs were filled the men carried them to the fire and the women took the canoe paddles and sifted the rice. The smoke curled up and around them and they rubbed at their eyes. As they worked, my father and uncle walked into the bush and returned with two long poles that they stripped of bark and propped up in holes they'd dug at the sides of the deeper, canvas-lined pit. When the rice had parched sufficiently over the heat, my grandmother signalled for Ben and me to take up our positions beside the men.

"In the old days, it was important for boys to learn to be men, to be responsible. This dancing of the rice was one of the first ways they did that," my grandmother said.

"Rice is sacred. When Creator sent the Anishinabeg, the Ojibway, east from the Big Water to find their homeland, we were instructed to stop when we came to the place where food grew on the water. This country of rice was the place we found.

"You boys will crush the hulls of the parched rice from the seed with careful, steady steps. I will use your grandfather's rattle as I sing the ricing song. The poles beside the pit will help you keep your balance."

Our grandmother came to smudge our feet with the sacred herbs and mumble a prayer. When she took up the rattle and began to sing, Ben and I stepped into the pit. The rice pods shifted crazily under our feet and we struggled to keep time with the song. The dried seeds in the rattle sounded like hulls of rice. The crunch of the pods beneath

our feet took on a beat that we struggled to maintain. When she had determined that the batch was hulled, our grandmother signalled us to stop.

After Ben and I climbed out of the pit, my father and uncle lifted the tarpaulin and poured the rice out on a blanket set on the rocks near the shore. My mother and aunt loaded flat baskets with rice, turned to face the breeze and began flipping the rice into the air. I watched as the breeze caught the rice and blew the crushed hulls away. Then the pit was loaded again and Benjamin and I began to tread the fresh batch. We worked that way all morning, legs burning. Benjamin tried to hide his coughing from the adults. I wanted to call out, but he looked at me with his fist held to his mouth and shook his head.

The sun was high when we stepped into the pit for the last of the load. My brother splashed himself with water and wiped at his face. He leaned harder on the pole, doubling over with coughs that shook him mightily. He managed only a few strides before the coughs hit him again. A spume of blood flew out of his mouth and sprinkled the rice at our feet. Benjamin leaned on the pole and fell onto his side on the edge of the pit. I yelled.

We dragged my brother from the pit and laid him on a blanket in the trees. He couldn't stop coughing and his lungs made a wet, slushy sound. Finally my grandmother said we should move him.

My brother was limp and hot and he felt thin in my hands. Empty. When we laid him on the spruce boughs in the tent he seemed to sink into them, as though the land were already reaching out and claiming him.



We took turns bringing him water, the old woman and I. The others stayed away. We could hear them talking by the fire, but my grandmother was too busy making teas and potions, using roots she'd found by searching the nearby bush, to pay them any mind. I could feel the chasm between the three of us and the others as if it were a living thing. There seemed no way to cross that distance. It was the first time I recall being afraid of my parents. They stoked the fire and sat in its shadow. The moon rose. When I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, I leaned against my grandmother outside the tent where my brother hacked in the darkness, and fell asleep.

He was dead by morning.

My mother's keening by the river was eerie. My father stood at the fire rubbing his hands together and mumbling to himself. My aunt and uncle sat with their arms around each other while she said the rosary and wept. It was my grandmother who prepared my brother's body. She took water from the lake, dipped cedar boughs in it and washed him. I could hear her singing in the tent. The tightness in my throat almost made me cough too. No one came to ask me how I was. Instead, when the old woman finished with her ministrations, she came out of the tent and called us all to the fire.

"We will honour him in the old way," she said. "We will carry him to a high point and lay him in the breast of the earth with his feet pointed east facing the morning sun. That way his spirit can follow the sun as it makes its journey across the sky and begin his Spirit Walk."

"Heathen," my mother spat. "He is my son. We will take him to the priest."

"They will not honour him."

"You do not honour him," my mother cried. "You brought him to this forsaken place. You told us by coming here that we would return to how things were. But those

ways are gone. Those gods are dead. We need to take my son to the priest so that he can be returned to the bosom of Christ."

"Your grief has blinded you." My grandmother held out the bowl that contained the sacred medicines but my mother slapped it away.

"You have no say. He is my son. He will have the rites of the Church. We'll take this rice that cost him his life and we'll sell it and buy him a coffin and he will have a proper burial. Not out here. Not stuck in some hole in the earth."

My mother walked to my father and took his hand and led him away from the fire. My aunt and uncle followed. We could see them all talking by the water. My father came back alone and stood across the fire from the old lady.

"We'll take him to the priest now," he said. "There's a lot of the day left and we can get a good start."

"You know what your father would have said?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I have not heard his voice in a long time."

"He would have said that all gods are one."

"She won't hear that."

"Do you?"

My father pinched his lips together and rocked on the balls of his feet. I could sense the struggle in him. "Kaween. No. I guess I don't," he said. "She said to tell you that you could either come with us or not."

"I won't come."

"We'll be gone a spell. Can you look after Saul? Better he waits here with you."

"He'll be fine with me. There's food. We have snares and the net."

"All right, then."

"All right."

The adults packed two canoes with the bags of rice. They left a small sack for us. They gathered their clothes and other food for the journey, and when they were ready to leave they came to the fire. At that moment my parents seemed like strangers to me. Maybe it was the grief over my brother's death that made them move so deliberately. Sometimes I think that if I had yelled something it would have all been different. But no words were in me. I watched my uncle and my father carry my brother's body from the tent wrapped in a blanket and lug it to the canoe. They set him in the middle, leaned back against sacks of rice. I cried. I wept harder than I ever had. I wanted to stop this, wanted to bring them all back beside the fire and hear my grandmother's guiding voice telling us stories and showing us the direction we should go together. As they eased the canoes out into the shallows, my grandmother pulled me close to her and put a hand on my head.

Even now when I think back to that day, I can see the shimmer of the wake they left behind them, the vee of it and the divergent lines that lapped at the shoreline. I can still see the bent back of my father paddling, the slumped form of my mother in the bow waving at the water with her oar. I can see the canoe that held my brother's body as it passed the rock cairn and slid out of my view forever.

The adults didn't come back. When the autumn began to turn I could tell the old woman was worried. That terrified me. The sky turned to the pale, washed-out blue of late October. Geese were in flight and my grandmother used some of the shells to bring down a few. We plucked them and slow roasted them over a green wood fire along with the fish I'd gill netted. She showed me how to use moss and thin strips of sod from beneath the trees to line the edges of our tent, and then we padded the floor extra thick with spruce boughs against the frost. As the nights became colder, ice appeared at the edge of the water. I set snares in the woods but they came up empty. We woke to snow one morning. The old woman walked off into the trees alone with her pipe and her rattle. I could hear her singing and praying. I sat by the fire and waited, and her keening echoed back from across the water as though others were with her in the trees. She came back and sat beside me and we drank tea.

"We can't wait for them," she said.

"What will we do?"

"We have to take the canoe and go down river to Minaki. My brother's son Minoose lives there. We can stay with him through the winter if we have to."

"Where did they go?" I asked.

She set her cup on the log and took out her pipe and loaded it and sat and smoked and stared at the fire. "I don't know," she said, finally. "I asked the grandfathers and the grandmothers for vision, but they have moved beyond the reach of the Old Ones now."

"Will we find them?"

"I don't know. But here we will die."

*Keewatin*. That's the name of the north wind. The Old Ones gave it a name because they believed it was alive, a being like all things. Keewatin rises out over the edge of the barren lands and grips the world in fierce fingers born in the frigid womb of the northern pole. The world slows its rhythm gradually, so that the bears and the other hibernating creatures notice time's relentless prowl forward. But the cold that year came fast. It descended on us like a slap of a hand: sudden and vindictive.

We loaded the canoe with the last of the geese and the fish. We were freezing. The old woman made me pile on clothing and she cut shawls for us out of the canvas of a tent. She'd made boots for us out of the same cloth and we tied them to our feet with rope around our ankles. It was snowing. The pellets were like comets whirring in from space. I remember thinking I could hear them. It took all we had to cross the lake to the portage. The old woman's face was strained with the effort of paddling into the teeth of that wind. The whitecaps slapped up at our hands. But we made it, and when we hauled the canoe up and into the shelter of the trees, the absence of wind made it feel like we were stepping into a dwelling.

"We'll have to walk the supplies out first," she said. She took our canvas shawls and fashioned them into sacks and we piled everything into them and slung them on our backs. The walk along the creek was hard. Frost covered the rocks and we slipped often. The air froze our hands into claws where we gripped the rope that bound the canvas. We had to breathe through our mouths because the ice crystals froze our nostrils together. When we reached the shore of the river the old woman took my hands and put them up her skirt and held them between her thighs to warm them. I wasn't embarrassed. I put my face against her belly, and when we had rested we walked back to the canoe. She made a harness out of rope and I walked the front of it while she hoisted the stern with a stick of alder, and together we slumped up the length of that creek and got that long canoe up the portage. It taxed us completely. She turned the boat over and we lay beneath it with the canvas slung over us and the snow hissing through the air outside. When I woke she had a fire going and I could smell goose fat and strong tea. We ate without speaking and my grandmother kept her eyes on the river. The water was black with the cold. We edged the canoe closer to the fire and tilted it and she put spruce boughs on the ground and over the hull to form a lean-to, and that's where we slept that first night. We could hear wolves and the snapping of branches in the trees and she pulled me closer. The land around us was like a great being hunched in the darkness. In the morning there was an inch or more of snow and we had a breakfast of cold fish and tea. Then we set the canoe to the water and pushed off west to where the river swung south and then east again toward the railroad town of Minaki.

She sang while we paddled. Her songs sounded like prayers. I hoped they were. The cold was intense. Mist came off the water and everything was grey with the frost. The only sound was the peeling of the water across our bow. The humped shapes of boulders on the shore wore cloaks of white. Trees with new snow heavy in their branches looked like tired soldiers heading home from war. The glisten of ice. When my hands became too cold to paddle I put them in my armpits to warm them and the old lady paddled us forward. The snow began again in mid-afternoon.

It was falling straight down and spinning, plummeting, the wind dying off. Snow piled up in the belly of the boat. When the snow became too dense to see, the old lady eased us to shore between a pair of stones the size of wigwams.

The cold was an awesome beast. As I plowed through the knee-deep snow to forage firewood I could feel the beast tracking me, waiting for the exhaustion to fell me so it could feed on my frozen flesh. The fire we built against it was tiny. The wood hissed and I feared the flames would wink out. But the old woman humped off into the bush and came back with arms filled with fir branches, and when she threw them on the fire it blazed high and hot and crackling. Snow fell like pieces of stars through the night.

We ran out of food on the third day. By then the water was too cold to swallow. I could feel my teeth crack when I tried. My grandmother cut a swatch of buckskin from her moccasin and told me to suck on it like a soother. It tasted like moss, but it offered a little moisture. At a bend in the river we came across a deer standing at the shore. The old woman raised her rifle but she was shivering too much to aim. The buck raised its nose and watched us. That night

she fed me a soup of spruce gum, berries dug from the snow, moss and stones.

Both of us dozed off in the canoe that fourth day. The river sent us shooting into a gap strewn with boulders and we woke with a shock when we hit one full on. The belly of the boat split at the nose and water poured in. We scrambled over its side into water thigh deep. My grandmother grabbed my hand and we pushed on toward shore. The water felt like knives of cold steel. When we made shore we turned and watched the canoe spin lazily in the current and then drift away, the bob of the last of our supplies heartbreaking.

The snow was even deeper now. The old lady waded through it, tugging me into a thick copse of cedars. She tore branches from them and piled them on the snow and made me lie down in them. She took off her canvas shawl, laid it over me and covered me with more cedar boughs. When I closed my eyes the dark was luxurious and I turned to it and let the sleep come. I felt slow and lifted on billows of air. Drifting. In my mind I saw the shores of Gods Lake as it was in the late summer. The sky was high and cloudless and easing toward sunset. I was drifting in the canoe a hundred yards from shore, and there were the shadows of my family, my people, dancing around a fire, and there was singing and the sound of a drum and the vague stir of laughter from the trees. I was weightless, boneless and very, very tired. The old woman slapped me awake.

"Gods in the trees," I said, dreamily. My voice seemed to come from far away.

She slapped me again and I came to in the bracing push of the freeze. She'd cut sod and trundled it back. Together

we gathered branches and made a small domed frame above the boughs on the snow, then covered it with the rest of the cedar and the sod patches. It wasn't very big but there was enough room for us to crawl in and pull the canvas shawls over us. Our body heat kept us warm.

That night I fell asleep to my grandmother's voice. She told me stories of the Star People who had come to our people in the Long Ago Time and brought teachings, secrets of the cosmos and the basis of our spiritual way. When I woke halfway through the night she was still talking, but her voice was weaker. The old story took me off into sleep again. When morning came she looked tired. Worn away. We were hungry. We stood shivering in the snow. She followed the shore of the river with her eyes.

"There was a trail your great-grandfather cut that led from those rapids through the bush to the railroad tracks south of here," she said. "Can you see it?"

I squinted at the impenetrable wall of trees. There was nothing to indicate a trail. But I closed my eyes. I could hear the hiss of the river coursing past the rocks. I hauled in a deep lungful of air and raised my head. I felt snowflakes land on my upturned face.

"Saul," I heard from the trees.

When I opened my eyes, I could see a slight bellying in the snow. It arced southward to a break in the trees so slight it was nearly invisible. "There," I said.

We plowed through the knee-deep snow around the marshes that bled into the river. The roofs of beaver houses showed far back in the reeds. We walked all that morning. My grandmother stopped every now and then to lean

against a tree and catch her breath. I could see how old she was. Her skin looked pasted to her bones, made so leathery by the deep freeze that it looked as though it might snap off in chunks.

"Over that next ridge," I said and pointed. "There's a long gap that leads around a beaver lodge lake. The railroad tracks are on the other side."

"You can see it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. She clutched my arm.

The sun was square in the sky when we made the foot of the ridge. My grandmother drew me close and pulled her canvas shawl over me. My feet were blocks of ice. The rope that held my canvas boots on had broken, so she took the rope fastening hers and tied them back around my ankles. Then she dug through the snow for clumps of moss to tie around my hands as mittens.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Got my gumption to keep me warm," she said. "We have to keep moving."

We made the railroad tracks within an hour or so. By then the wind had shifted and picked up intensity. It blew snow right into our faces. It drifted up between the ties. Lifting my legs over the ties was hard work, and at one point I fell over and lay there, too tired to get up. I felt her lift me. My eyes were heavy and my skin burned. I felt her stumble as she carried me, and I could hear her wheezing with the effort. I don't know how long we walked that way. After a while her steps grew shorter and she weaved. Then she fell too. When I opened my eyes I could see slats of painted wood behind her. We were on the platform of the

railroad depot at Minaki. All around us was whirling snow and the white expanse where the tracks ran west to Manitoba and east into the frozen heart of the bush.

"We'll rest a minute," she wheezed. "Then we'll find Minoose."

I tucked my head in against her chest. She held me and we lay there in the darkness shivering. I could feel her tremble. Wrapped in the cracked canvas of an old tent, I huddled in the arms of the old woman and felt the cold freeze her in place. I understood that she had left me and I lay there crying against the empty drum of her chest.

After a while I heard shouts and the clump of feet. The wind bit into my face as the canvas shawl was pulled away.

"Jesus. There's a kid here."

Somebody lifted me up and I felt the old woman's arms fall away. I reached out to her, shouting in a mixture of Ojibway and English. She stayed slumped in the corner, her hair coated with snow. Her hands were cupped as though she was still holding on to me. I wanted to pull her to her feet so we could keep on walking. But instead I was borne away. A car door opened and I was lifted inside and set on the seat with a blanket thrown over me. The heat and the exhaustion pulled me under in a hot, red current.

If our canoe hadn't hit that boulder we would have made it to Minaki. We would have found Minoose and sheltered there, and my grandmother would have found a way to keep me with her. Instead, she was gone. Frozen to death saving me, and I was cast adrift on a strange new river.

They took me to St. Jerome's Indian Residential School. I read once that there are holes in the universe that swallow all light, all bodies. St. Jerome's took all the light from my world. Everything I knew vanished behind me with an audible swish, like the sound a moose makes disappearing into spruce. We'd driven two days to get there. Two nuns and three of us kids crammed into the back seat of a battered old Chev. A little girl who cried most of the way, and another boy. We spent the trip without talking, taking turns at the window watching the land flow by. It seemed boundless. Every curve in that road, every crest of a hill, even the cut of the trees against the night sky held me spellbound. I barely slept.

I was lonely for the sky, for the feel of it on my face.

The school was a four-storey red brick building with a cupola bearing a tall white cross as its only adornment. There were no trees around it, only ground shrubs. A wagon wheel leaned against a rock beside the large wooden sign that read *St. Jerome's Indian Residential School*. A gravel driveway curved toward the front entrance of wide concrete stairs with white-washed balustrades and double

doors of frosted glass. Two wings of the building thrust back behind. Beyond were sheds and barns and fields speckled with the rubble of furrows poking up through the thin snow. The entire property sat in a clearing at the top of a ridge with bush at its edges.

Inside, the smell of bleach and disinfectant, so strong it seemed to peel the skin off the inside of my nose. The floors were hardwood, sallow from decades of mopping and scrubbing. The walls were a sickly green. At every landing were doors of frosted glass so the light was pale and gave off a feeling of cold even though the radiators pulsed heat outward in waves. The linoleum on the steps was cracked in places but scrubbed to a dull sheen.

The fourth floor was one big room with windows at each side. Between them was a sea of cots, all folded and tucked in exactly the same manner. Regimented, though I didn't learn that word until much later.

The other boy and I were marched by a gruff priest to the back of this dormitory and ordered to strip and climb into tubs of nearly scalding water. After a minute the priest made us stand and threw handfuls of delousing powder over us. It bit at the corners of my eyes as he sat us in the tubs again to rinse it off. Then a pair of nuns scrubbed us with stiff-bristled brushes. The soap was harsh. They rubbed us nearly raw. It felt like they were trying to remove more than grime or odour. It felt as though they were trying to remove our skin. When it was over they handed us clothing and watched us while we dressed. The wool pants scratched at my skin. They were a size too big and had to be held up with a belt cinched tight. The shirt was stiff and

white. The shoes were thin leather with laces and smooth, slippery soles. They made us walk awkwardly. Next, we sat in chairs with towels around our shoulders while the nuns shaved our hair down to nubby crew-cuts with electric clippers. I watched my long, straight hair land on the floor, and when I looked at the other boy he was crying. Huge, silent tears.

Back downstairs, we were made to stand in front of a desk in an office with windows looking out over the fields. We stood there a long time. Then the door opened and a priest and a large, reddish-faced nun stepped in.

"I'm Father Quinney and this is Sister Ignacia," the priest said. "This is our school. Well, more properly, it's the Lord's school, but he's put us in charge."

"Saul," Sister Ignacia said. "That's a fine biblical name. We won't need to change that. But we're going to have to do something about Lonnie Rabbit. I think Aaron is more suitable. From now on you are Aaron Rabbit. Do you understand?"

"But Lonnie is my dad's name," the boy said.

"Well, the Lord God is your father now and he wants you called Aaron."

"But I got a father."

Sister Ignacia strode out from behind the desk to stand directly in front of Lonnie, who looked down at the floor. "Your father is the Heavenly Father. You will learn that here. Your human father has nothing to offer you anymore."

"He's a trapper."

"He's a heathen."

"He's Ojibway."



"He is unbaptized and impure of spirit. When you use the word *father* at this school, it is your Heavenly Father you make reference to."

"I don't want no other father."

"You have no choice."

"I'll run."

The Sister smiled. It was chilling because there was no laughter in her eyes. They were a cold, pale blue, like the eyes of a husky, and when she reached behind her and brought a leather paddle into view she had a terrible calm about her. The paddle was blunt and wide and drilled with holes across its face. She cradled it in both palms, and with a blur of motion she twisted Lonnie around by the collar and pushed him to his knees. He screamed as the paddle struck his back. The nun yanked him to his feet as though he were a rag toy and struck him repeatedly behind the knees and on the back of the thighs. It sounded like she was beating a hide. Lonnie squirmed and struggled but her grip was incredible. She kept hitting him until he collapsed. Father Quinney stood with his hands behind his back and watched.

"Obedience is the measure of our worthiness." She spun Lonnie around to face her. "Here you will learn to be worthy. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," Lonnie said.

"Yes, Sister."

"Yes, Sister."

"That's a good boy." She reached out to lay a hand on his face. He flinched. She smiled again with the same ghastly lack of feeling. "At St. Jerome's we work to remove the

Indian from our children so that the blessings of the Lord may be evidenced upon them."

"Industry, boys," Father Quinney said. "Good, honest work and earnest study. That's what you'll do here. That's what will prepare you for the world."

Sister Ignacia took us each by a hand and, with a firm nod to the priest, led us from the office and out into the school. Her hands like dried birch bark. Her face composed; the slight press of a grin at the edges of her mouth. Beatific. That's another word I learned much later. As the Sister walked us through the school that first day, she had that saintly look on her face. The whistle of the leather still hung in the air. She was a large woman, tall, and I'd never known such terror.

In what seemed like an instant, the world I had known was replaced by an ominous black cloud.

At St. Germ's the kids called me "Zhaunagush" because I could speak and read English. Most of them had been pulled from the deep North and knew only Ojibway. Speaking a word in that language could get you beaten or banished to the box in the basement the older ones had come to call the Iron Sister. There was no tolerance for Indian talk. On the second day I was there, a boy named Curtis White Fox had his mouth washed out with lye soap for speaking Ojibway. He choked on it and died right there in the classroom. He was ten. So the kids whispered to each other. They learned to speak without moving their lips, an odd ventriloquism that allowed them to keep their talk alive. They'd bend their heads close together as they mopped the halls or mucked out the barn stalls and speak Ojibway. I learned that ventriloquism eventually, but in the beginning they saw me as an outsider.

I didn't mind that. I was sore inside. The tearing away of the bush and my people was like ripped flesh in my belly. Every time I moved or was forced to speak, it roared its incredible pain. And so I took to isolation. I wasn't a large boy and I could disappear easily. I learned that I could draw the boundaries of my physical self inward, collapse the

space I occupied and become a mote, a speck, an indifferent atom in its own peculiar orbit. Maybe it was the hurt itself that allowed me that odd grace. Maybe it was the memory of my grandmother's frozen arms around me or that last glimpse of my parents disappearing into the portage at Gods Lake. I don't know. But in my chrysalis of silence I turned to Zhaunagush books and language, finding in them a path beyond the astringent smell of the school. The nuns and the priests took me for studious and encouraged me to vanish even further into my self-imposed exile. It was easy.

You couldn't be a kid under that regime. There was no room for any kind of creativity to flourish. Instead, to survive, we mimicked the cloister walk of the nuns, a relentless mute march from prayer to chapel to physical labour.

Arden Little Light was a skinny Oji-Cree kid with a bad limp from where a trap had sprung closed on his ankle. His family lived so far back in the bush they couldn't get him out to a hospital. So the break in his bone had healed all ragged and calcified, leaving a ring beneath his skin like the bumps on a sturgeon's back. He always had a runny nose and he wiped it with the sleeves of his shirts. The nuns tried to get him to use a hankie, but he was a bush kid and he couldn't break the habit. They tied his arms behind his back. He sat in the classroom with snot running down his face. When he cried and made a goopy pool on the floor, they stood him up and strapped him and sat him back down after scraping at his nose with a coarse rag. As we bent our heads to our books we could hear him huffing, trying desperately to suck the snot back. But it was a medical condition and there was no relief. They began standing him at the front of the chapel, the classroom, the dining

room with his hands wrapped behind him, making us witness the seeping track of the snot that bled down his face and neck into the collar of his shirt. He was six years old. He was from a people who had forged survival out of the bush as hunters, trappers, fishermen. That way of being was tied directly to the power they felt everywhere around them, and he'd been born to that, had learned it like walking. The nuns found him hanging from the rafters of the barn on a cold February morning. He'd wrapped his own hands behind his back with twists of rope before he'd jumped. They buried him in the graveyard that crept up to the edge of the bush. The Indian Yard. That's what the kids called it. Row on row of unmarked graves. Row on row of four- and five-foot indentations like a finger from Heaven had pressed them down. Dips in the earth. Holes they fell into.

Sheila Jack. They'd brought her all the way from Wik-wemikong on Manitoulin Island. She was twelve. In the old way of her people, she'd been raised by her grandmother and been taught the traditional protocols of the medicine way. Her grandmother was a shaman, and Sheila would take her place one day. When she arrived at St. Germ's the kids were in awe of her. She walked into the school quietly, humbly, regally almost. It quieted us. We'd never seen anyone so composed, so assured, so peaceful. Something in her bearing reminded us about where we'd come from. We surrounded her like acolytes and that enraged the nuns. They thought Sheila was thumbing her nose at them and they set out to break her. They made her memorize the catechism and recite endlessly at the front of the classroom. If she made a mistake they struck her with a ruler, a strap or

a hand and made her start over. She recited during meals, while she worked, while she walked. She wasn't allowed to speak to us. Her voice was consigned to the repetition of the texts. They woke her up from sound sleep and made her stand in the dormitory and say the words. When she began to mumble to herself we thought she was still at it. Then we began to notice that her words had no meaning. She'd walk the halls of St. Germ's muttering incomprehensible phrases and then burst out with a wild laugh, hitting herself with stinging slaps to the face before she returned to her vacant-faced mumbles. She lost the composed grace she'd arrived with. She got wild-eyed. Finally, she wandered away into the bush. The nuns found her three days later, knee deep in a bog, reciting, giggling, reciting again. That's what she was still doing when the car came and took her away to the crazy house.

Shane Big Canoe. They brought him to St. Germ's wrapped in ropes. When they untied him, he promptly ran away. I remember standing along the rail of the stairway with a dozen or so others when they brought him back. Two burly men from town had wrestled him into Father Quinney's office. We heard slaps, the whack of fists on flesh, the sound of wrestling and the crash of furniture. Then silence. When they walked him out past us, Shane's head was down and he didn't struggle. He plodded like an old man propped up by the elbows. They led him to the basement and locked him in the Iron Sister for ten days. It was called Contrition.

"I wouldn't want to be him," one of the kids whispered.

"No one comes back from there the same. Ever," said another.

"Perry Whiteduck said it's in the furthest darkest corner and the rats come at night and try to get you."

"He's gone. Right?" a girl asked.

"Yeah. He's in the Indian Yard."

"He didn't come back from his second trip there."

"He said it was so cold you breathe ice fog."

Shane Big Canoe was thirteen. His family was Metis from Saskatchewan and he was eight hundred miles from home. When he came out there was no more fight in his eyes. He held his raw-boned hands with their big knuckles in front of him, wringing them. He kept his head down, staring at his shoes. They'd find him at nights in the dormitory, huddled tight against the door where a sliver of light showed at its crack. It was the only place he could sleep. Close to that skiv of light, the glow of it on his face.

St. Germ's scraped away at us, leaving holes in our beings. I could never understand how the god they proclaimed was watching over us could turn his head away and ignore such cruelty and suffering.

One afternoon, during some rare unsupervised time, a dozen of us escaped to the bottom of the ridge the school sat on. A small creek ran along the base of the ridge, curving up out of an inkpot lake and into a larger one. The creek was narrow, maybe three feet across, and shallow. It was a sucker creek. The fish swam up it to spawn in the bigger water and we went down there with burlap bags we'd taken from the barns. We could see the fish pushing up that water. It was thrilling. So much life, so much desperation, so much energy. We stood for a long time and just watched. Then some of us cut saplings and bent them around the inside lip of those sacks. We lowered the sacks into the water and pulled them up dripping and filled with fish. We watched the silvery, brown flash as they flopped out onto the bank, their puckered mouths flapping like wet kisses from fat aunties, their tails flipping and slapping against the ground. We pushed them back into the water and pulled up another sack. We did that four times. The fourth time we stood quietly, each of us lost in our thoughts, as the fish struggled for air, for life, for freedom. When we bent finally and took the fish in our hands to set them back into the water, most of us were crying. We

turned as a group and began the long, sloping walk back up the ridge to the school. We walked with our hands cupped around our noses, breathing in the smell of those fish, pushing the slime of them around on our faces. We had no knives to clean them, flay them. We had no fire to smoke them over. We had no place to store them, no way to keep them. When they lay gasping on the grass, it was ourselves we saw fighting for air. We were Indian kids and all we had was the smell of those fish on our hands. We fell asleep that night with our noses pressed to our hands and as the days went by and the smell of those suckers faded, there wasn't a one of us that didn't cry for the loss of the life we'd known before. When the dozen of us cried in the chapel, the nuns smiled, believing it was the promise of their god that touched us. But we all walked out of there with our hands to our faces. Breathing in. Breathing in.

I saw kids die of tuberculosis, influenza, pneumonia and broken hearts at St. Jerome's. I saw young boys and girls die standing on their own two feet. I saw runaways carried back, frozen solid as boards. I saw bodies hung from rafters on thin ropes. I saw wrists slashed and the cascade of blood on the bathroom floor and, one time, a young boy impaled on the tines of a pitchfork that he'd shoved through himself. I watched a girl calmly fill the pockets of her apron with rocks and walk away across the field. She went to the creek and sat on the bottom and drowned. That would never stop, never change, so long as that school stood in its place at the top of that ridge, as long as they continued to pull Indian kids from the bush and from the arms of their people. So I retreated. That's how I survived. Alone. When the tears threatened to erupt from me at night I vowed they would never hear me cry. I ached in solitude. What I let them see was a quiet, withdrawn boy, void of feeling.