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TALES FOR LATE NIGHT BONFIRES

By

Gord Grisenthwaite

A Creative Writing Project

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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17 April 2020

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

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ABSTRACT

This Creative Writing project explores interfusional storytelling, a blending of oral and written literatures, as defined by Cherokee Thomas King. The stories and poems in this collection use a number of narrative voices to tell the stories of an nłe?kepmx world I created/am creating. Even the third person narrators have spoken parts in some of the stories; in "Three Bucks," for example, the narrator interrupts a story another character tells because the narrator thinks the teller is taking too long. Both "Snk'yép and His Shiny New Choker," and "Little Trees®" attempt Menippean satire. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines Menippean satire as "[a] form of intellectually humorous work characterized by miscellaneous contents, displays of curious erudition and comical discussions on philosophical topics" (218–19). Because I do not want to simply repeat what has already been done, in terms of interfusionality and Indigenous storytelling, the opening story, "Splatter Pattern," incorporates the first person plural "we" to tell itself.

The artist's statement was a painful experience. I rarely tell my personal story; it is painfully boring and uninteresting to consider, let alone put on paper. If you choose to skip it, well that is just fine with me. But do enjoy the project. "Tales for Late Night Bonfires" will be a book once I round out the collection by adding the novella called "Grandpa vs. Santa Claus," and a short story featuring Jim Morrison, called "Hazel's Last Ride" (You will meet Hazel in "Roadkill").

DEDICATION

To Susan, partner and BFF.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Susan Holbrook.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Karl Jirgens.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Nino Ricci.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Bridget Heuvel.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Molly Philips.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dorothy Jane Kavanaugh.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Suzanne Matheson.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Dale Jacobs.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Sandra Muse Isaacs.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Richard Douglass-Chin.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, Dr. Nicolas Papador.

néx^wm k^wuk^wscéyp ʔes kncémx^w, The Pack A.D., Greta Van Fleet, Dropkick Murphys,

Rancid, Tool, The Raconteurs, Jack White, Green Day, DOA, Dead Kennedys,

Bad Religion Jayne County and the Electric Chairs, L7, and a myriad of bands

whose music fuels me.

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CHAPTER 1 OF COURSE, I COULD BE MAKING THE WHOLE THING UP

Welcome to the most difficult piece of work I have attempted to write in my relatively short career. This project would not have evolved as it has, had I not had the opportunity to complete my degrees at the University of Windsor. The way this part of my life fell together feels a little magical. Initially, I wanted only to cross earning the degrees off my bucket list, and off my list of abandoned dreams. From that minor milestone, a latent dream crystallized; this project is a concrete sample. My main goal was to improve as a writer and find a welcoming community. I found that in Windsor's writing community, and with a few University of Windsor students and professors.

The quality of my writing has improved, but is still a work in progress. My focus has shifted from telling stories well, in order to sell them, although I still want to make a decent living from my work, but now I want to learn more about telling stories, the "real" history of Indians in Canada, and how to address them ethically in my work: in my voice. It had never occurred to me to think about Indigenous literature critically. In so doing, I learned about the vast number of Indigenous writers, and the colonial history of Indigenous writing. Dr. Karl Jirgens introduced me to Thomas King's critical work, and the oral tradition and interfusional writing, which I will discuss a little later. Also, Jirgens and King introduced me to the works of Harry Robinson, a *syilx* storyteller who, along with his editor Wendy Wickwire, mastered interfusional storytelling.

Whether blessed, cursed, or just plain lucky, I had a strong--but raw, very raw--and distinctive writing voice from the beginning. I had no idea what *writing voice* meant, and did

not ask. My English 100 instructor Jean Clifford mentioned it first. She also suggested I consider taking Creative Writing. I thought she was nuts. Guys like me did not write creative stuff; I could not even parse a sentence if you held a gun to my head. Granted, I still cannot parse a sentence without double-checking Strunk & White. I had completed my GED three years after dropping out of high school, and a few months before registering at Capilano College (now University) a guidance councillor at Langara slaughtered my dream/goal of becoming a photographer by suggesting I was not smart enough to make it in the "technical" program their school offered.

Only semi-deflated, I resorted to Plan-B: pursuit of a career as a marine biologist or journalist. It seems everyone of my generation--apparently all of us were influenced by Jacques Cousteau--wanted to be a marine biologist. The Cap College counsellor said finding work as a marine biologist after graduation would prove difficult to impossible, but the world would always need journalists. Throughout my first year as a college student, I paid close attention to the words of newspaper and magazine reporters, and broadcast news readers. Hacks spewing hackneyed words and phrases. But I worked on *The Capilano Courier* for the first two years I attended the college, writing news, reviews, and interviews, and developed strong layout and design skills. It did not feel like work, and I had fun, but I did not see myself hacking out news reports and reviews for the next forty years.

Gently, Clifford persisted, telling me with each assignment, "You should consider Creative Writing." I complied, and I remain eternally grateful to her. For two years I studied Creative Writing with Pierre "Not-So-Worse" Coupey, and took Magazine Article Writing with Crawford Killian. My writing voice skated the surface of the heavy topics it broached in

my fiction. Overall, my work was readable, but forgettable: glib. Only one thing I wrote got published: a short story I wrote in 1986 got published in *Okanagan Life*, three years after I stopped writing. As it turned out, my maternal grandmother had married the father of the magazine's editor. My grandmother showed the editor my story. The editor offered to pay me \$164 dollars. I thought she was nuts, but took her money.

Real Life vs. the Latent Writer

I stopped writing soon after I graduated from Capilano College. Bringing in an income took precedence. Then being a dad and doing dad things took precedence. Then things fell apart. Then I had a crippling accident. Then I got depressed and suicidal. Then I got homeless, depressed and somewhat less suicidal. I quit drinking and smoking, too, and taught myself web design less than two years after the Internet Super Highway's ribbon cutting. Then I taught myself to be a child and youth services worker, and foster/respice parent for high intensity youth and incarcerated boys, including juvenile sex offenders. Then I got homeless. Then I earned a diploma in graphic design. Then I taught graphic design for six years.

My seventeen-year hiatus from writing ended after the 2003 Kelowna firestorm. While homeless again, I started writing, and writing good stuff: The first piece I wrote, for *Touch the Flame: Stories From the Okanagan Mountain Park Fire*, got accepted almost immediately and, according to the editors, required no edits. Five of the first eight short stories I wrote won or made the shortlist in contests, most in the Okanagan Short Story contest, but one story "Mavis Brown," won the 2007 *Prism International* short fiction contest. I thought the email from the editor was a joke, and did not believe it until issue 45:4

arrived, and I saw the quote from my story and my name on the back cover. So I wrote a novel. *Home Waltz* had lived inside me like a persistent virus for twenty-four years. I purged the story during 2008 National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) "contest": fifty-five thousand words in twenty-one days.

However, my temporary gig as a web design instructor became a full-time graphic design instructor gig. The program had an archaic curriculum, so I had to write a whole new one--twenty-one modules--and with rapid changes in web design, and software changing every two years, I spent most of my time learning it, so I could better prepare my students for work. Being crippled, I had only so much physical and mental energy to expend, so chose to limit my writing to curriculum. In spring 2013, after almost a decade of my wife insisting that I was a writer, I chose to acknowledge the fact that I am a writer. Rather than work on *Home Waltz*, I purged a younger, but equally pernicious bug: *I Love You and Other Lies*.

Years Later, the Latent Writer Surfaces

The written voice remained as distinct and readable as it ever had, but the glibness had gone. I wrote stuff that hurt me physically and emotionally. Rather than running from the pain, I waded into it. I think this was the route Coupey had tried to goad me into back in the early 1980s: proprioceptive prose. This written voice changed the inflection of my reading voice when I read a story aloud. After reading a new piece of my work to classmates, one of them asked: "Did you know you read with an accent?"

I did not know.

This *accent* is my res voice, a voice I seldom use away from home. This blessing, curse, or stroke of luck provided me with potential, with promise, but made the act of writing

more difficult; while I could write and read in res voice intuitively, almost every attempt I made to emulate the voice intentionally read like an unpolished draft of a W.P. Kinsella Hobbema story. I practice the voice. I have worked at neutralizing the psychological and emotional barriers that block story's transference from the unconscious to the conscious. So with work and practice, inhabiting story and its voice feels like a natural extension of self.

CHAPTER 2 INTERFUSIONALITY AND THE ORAL TRADITION

Before getting to the meat of this paper, I need to define "oral tradition" and "interfusional fiction." Walter J. Ong defines the elements of the oral tradition in *Orality and Literacy*. Ong's list includes additive, aggregative, redundant or "copious," conservative or traditionalist, close to the human lifeworld, agonistically toned, [e]mpathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, homeostatic, and situational rather than abstract (37–56). Oral stories rely on devices such as repetition of details and sounds, digressions, pauses, facial expressions, gestures, actions, and voice modulation to entertain and make their points. On voice, Lee Maracle, in her essay "Indigenous Poetry and the Oral," writes, "[v]oice, choice of words, sound, tone, diction, style, and rhythm characterize both the poem and the speaker" (307). Maracle argues poetics with no references to poetic theory; her approach is both refreshing and confusing, and in its way, a form of interfusional writing.

Interfusional fiction, as defined by Thomas King in his essay "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial," is "that part of Native literature which is a blending of oral literature and written literature" (13). He specifically cites some of the translations of Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hynes, and Harry Robinson. King, using Robinson's work as the original interfusional text, continues:

The stories in Robinson's collection are told in English and written in English, but the patterns, metaphors, structures, as well as the themes and characters come primarily from oral literature. More than this, Robinson, within the confines of written language, is successful in creating an oral voice. He does this in a rather ingenious way. He develops what

we might want to call an oral syntax that defeats readers' efforts to read the stories silently to themselves, a syntax that encourages readers to read the stories out loud. (13)

I do not know if readers of my work feel compelled to read my stories aloud, but that is the goal. King has had more positive influence on this aspect of my writing than Robinson, but the more of Robinson's work I read, the more I understand and appreciate his storytelling form. I also admire editor Wendy Wickwire's editorial choices and efforts. She and Robinson worked together to shape them into books, although Robinson wanted all of his stories in a single volume. However, Wickwire did not know Robinson's plan until he neared his death in 1990. In her essay "Stories from the Margins: Toward a More Inclusive British Columbia Historiography," she writes:

Because increasing numbers of his listeners over the years could not speak Okanagan, Robinson told all of his stories in English--a translation process he had made consciously to keep his stories alive. He regarded our recording project, especially when it evolved into a book project, as a serious undertaking. He wanted his stories circulated, both in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities; "[The stories I]s not to be hidden," [Robinson] wrote to [Wickwire]. "It is to be showed in all Province in Canada and United States. That is when it come to be a book" (Robinson: January 27, 1986) [sic]. (457)

Robinson had a plan to keep his stories from dying with him, and developed it over the thirteen years he told his stories to Wickwire.

Most of my work before returning to school featured one narrative voice: Q^wóq^wéski? "Squito" Bob, a mixed blood Nl̓eʔkepmx boy--the one true autobiographical detail in this suite of stories. Squito was "born" after reading a bunch of W.P. Kinsella's Hobbema stories.

Clearly, Kinsella had no idea what Indians thought, said, or did. Regardless, his stories sometimes entertained, and I read at least four volumes of them before the humour dried up, and the proverbial water of my anger broke and birthed Squito--perhaps prematurely: a talking preemie of a writing voice, a distinctive, but hollow voice.

My preemie work did not contain much substance. The stories skimmed the edges of story, but barely dipped their toes beneath its surface; they contained no emotional depth, resulting in pleasant-to-read, disposable fictions. They were not the stories I thought I had written. In many cases, I do not think writers who appropriate Indigenous stories intend to perpetrate racist acts deliberately. Ignorance of more correct ways of telling Indigenous stories is not an excuse, but is, at best, lazy, and at worst, deceitful.

The non-Indigenous authors I look at here--Ella Elizabeth Clark, Joseph Boyden, and W.P. Kinsella--are each, arguably guilty of misappropriating Indigenous stories, but each for different reasons. Clark probably wants to educate students, to introduce them to aspects of Indigenous cultures. Kinsella unabashedly exploited Indigenous cultures for profit. Boyden's motives remain unclear, and I have no interest in weighing in on the controversies surrounding them. Here, I focus on his published fiction.

But I will start with Clark, and her version of the *nle?kepmx* story "Coyote and Old Man," and the version of the same story as Robinson tells it: "Coyote Challenges God." The first obvious difference between the two stories is their titles. Clark represents God as the "Great Chief," or "Great Mystery" further diminishing the value of the original story in two ways. Firstly, placing the literal translation of *xe?k'wúpi?*, *Great Chief--God--* inside quotation marks, diminishes its significance. Firstly, the quotation marks imply an eye-rolling, silly-

savages dismissal of Indigenous people's spirituality--the "bunny quote" response. Secondly, failing to recognize the Old Man as God suggests he is not the same god Christians worship, but inferior to it as well. Introducing such concepts into spték^{wł} (Creation stories) runs counter to their original intent. Coyote--trickster--stories teach life lessons. Tricksters mess things up so those hearing the tales can behave differently. Trickster, a self-serving being, does good things by accident, and when he means well, things still go wrong.

The first stanza of "Coyote Challenges God" reads:

Coyote was walking.

And then he see somebody walking ahead of him.

Look like this man is walking from here.

And he walks.

And pretty soon they get together.

And they met.

And he looked at him.

He was an old man, a very old man,

that one he met.

White hair.

Look old. (119)

"Coyote and Old Man" begins:

At last Coyote finished his work on earth. He had conquered Ice and Blizzard. He had killed some monsters and transformed others into harmless creatures of today's world, like marmots and mosquitoes. He had brought salmon up the rivers to be food for his people. He

had shown his people how to make and do any things that made their lives easier and happier.

So the time came when he should meet Old Man.

As Coyote was travelling through the country somewhere southeast of the Columbia River, he met Old Man. But Coyote did not know that this was the "Great Chief," the "Great Mystery," for he looked like any other old man. (27–28)

Allowing even for regional or storyteller variations of the story, some of the differences between oral and written stories show. Robinson's story assumes that the listener is familiar with Coyote and his backstory. He does not begin "Coyote Challenges God" with exposition, and he does not present Coyote as a champion of the people, or their leader (mostly, I think, because Coyote is neither).

Wendy Wickwire, Robinson's editor, prefaces the story with "Coyote travels along and meets an old man. He claims he's the older of the two. The old man invites Coyote into a contest of his power" (119). The passage reads more like an abstract of the story, than prologue. Clark's, perhaps because it is used as a school text targeting non-Native readers, prefaces "Coyote and Old Man" with an abstracted statement on theme, and sets the story's geographical boundaries (from a chunk of south central British Columbia through north central Washington State). Clark also refers to the story as a myth, an element of systemic racism still present in the twenty-first century. *Myth*, in twenty-first century English, not only suggests a fanciful story, but connotes a lie, or untrue story.

To her credit, Clark does not name Coyote as the creator of the "harmless creatures of today's world" (27); he *transforms* them from monsters he has met in battle--although I am hard-pressed to understand how mosquitoes are "harmless." Placing her version of the story

somewhere southeast of the Columbia River situates it on American land, as the Canadian part of the river runs mainly through Ktunaxa (Kootenay) territory. Making the story distinctly American locks it inside hard--though artificial--border, a non-Native concept.

Continuing this line of enquiry deviates from the scope of this defence, and warrants its own study. What follows are snippets from stories by Joseph Boyden, W.P. Kinsella, Thomas King, and one from my thesis project. The examples highlight differences in storytelling, even when the writer does not intentionally invoke Robinson's interfusional storytelling methods. The first, "Legend of the Sugar Girl," from Boyden's linked story collection *Born With a Tooth*, is, like Kinsella's Hobbema tales, a more "Pretendian"--pretend Indian--form:

White men gave Indians a lot of gifts. Guns and outboard motors. Television. Coffee. Kentucky Fried Chicken. Road hockey. Baggy jeans and baseball cards. Rock-and-roll music and cocaine. But there is one gift that no one ever really talks about.

Once there was a young girl. She lived far up in the bush, past the Canadian Shield, so far up that deer could not survive in that harsh place. Her father was a hunter and trapper. Her mother made the family's clothing and cleaned the game that the father brought home, and she stretched and tanned the hides. They traded these pelts at the Hudson's Bay Company post for some of the *wemestikushu's*, the white man's, goods--goods that the *Anishnabe*, [sic], the Indians, found made life a little easier in that cold place. They traded lynx and beaver, moose and marten and snowshoe hare and mink for flour and bright cloth, bullets, simple tools and thread. (183)

The word *legend* in the story's title, used here without irony, tells us the story imitates

an authentic story, or is an "as told to" tale, or reworked from a book of collected stories. *Legend* serves to separate the reader from the story's source, which runs counter to Ong's definition of orality, notably, "participatory rather than objectively distanced" (45–46). The epilogue-like opening paragraph, however, drips sarcasm, playing on well established white-man-bad tropes. Guns and outboard motors leads the list of mostly negative gifts, and does not necessarily fit the overarching theme of bad stuff, such as baggy jeans (a universally egregious crime against fashion and taste), Kentucky Fried Chicken (junk food), and cocaine. Boyden juxtaposes rock-and-roll with cocaine: a sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll cliché that also fails as a joke, because they are easy targets, but they are not solely an "Indian problem," but a bane on the whole of humankind.

Sarcasm and satire--humour, in general--work well in cautionary stories like the Sugar Girl's. Here, the humour feels plugged into the story; it does not emerge from it, heightening its Pretendian feel. Like Clark's story, Boyden's relies on exposition to tell its readers background information, and contextualize it. Turns of phrase like, "*wemestikushu's*, the white man's, goods--goods that . . .," attempt to emulate the repetition of oral stories, as do the repetitions of "and" in the prologue. As a rhetorical device, however, it does not read like spoken story, but the sort of repetition a politician might use in a persuasive speech.

Boyden uses the English possessive *s* with the anishinaabemowinan *wemestikushu*. Failing to take the time to learn the proper plural form suggests a disconnection from the culture and lack of understanding of the language, something of which I myself have been guilty, but it took almost no time at all to learn the proper plural forms for *white men* (the English plural is *Zhaagnaash*, and the French is *Wemtigooshi*); I put the question to

Waubgeshig Rice's Facebook wall, and he answered quickly. When I use *nle?kepmxcín* words as names, I still use the English possessive form. As I learn more of the language, I may switch to *nle?kepmxcín* possessive forms, or equivalents, even though it might alienate some readers.

I have a home community, and relationships within it, and have actively sought language help, both to improve the way I use it in my work, and to learn to speak it. Understanding the language--*nle?kepmxcín*--helps me use it in proper context. These lines from my poem "Yéye?," which is not included in this project, exemplify how I use *nle?kepmxcín* in context:

.....

I'll be happy to see you

and then she calls for her mom

her aunties: *təte?e kn snesmemn*

te? k sɣˀoxˀstemne kn snes

te? k sɣˀoxˀstemne

kn snes (51)

Decolonizing the language by refusing to italicize it was not necessarily a thing when Boyden wrote the stories in *Born with a Tooth*, so criticizing his use of italics serves no useful purpose. Also, his publisher may have insisted on italicizing them. However, he had an obligation to get the language correct, and failed, performing a disservice to his credibility as a writer, and to the community about which he writes.

I asked a native speaker of *nle?kepmxcín* how to say, "Please don't make me go; I

don't want to go." In so doing, I learned that the language has no word for *please*. The concept of *please* connotes begging. Begging connotes weakness. Not only did I learn two new phrases in the language, I learned a little more about my culture. Writing this poem also helped me put my grandmother's stint at St. George's residential school, and death by stroke-induced dementia into context.

Boyden's run as the Great Red Hope of Canadian Indigenous Literature crashed to a controversial end a few years back. He stands as an accused Pretendian, taking money and awards earmarked for actual-Indian writers. I do not know him or his circumstances; I know nothing more than what I have read in popular media, so my opinion of his deeds remains neutral, but I do not think highly of his written works.

W.P. Kinsella, on the other hand, did not once claim even an iota of the blood. He had no qualms about writing his Hobbema stories without any real firsthand research, and famously doubled down on them when criticized for it by another white writer: Rudy Wiebe. Geoff McMaster, in his article "The Troubled Legacy of W.P. Kinsella," reports that in 1990 the two writers fought it out on *Morningside with Peter Gzowski* (n.p.). Kinsella's anger at Wiebe fuelled even more Hobbema stories. Exploration of the irony inherent to their bickering belongs in another forum, another paper. Ironically, my anger over the Hobbema stories impregnated me and induced the birth of my own Indian stories.

However, some of Kinsella's stories are stellar works, especially the novel *Shoeless Joe*, and the collection *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa*. "First Names and Empty Pockets," a short story from that collection, is one of the most memorable stories I read in the 1980s, in part because it features Janis Joplin as the narrator's wife. When Kinsella writes in

the voice of Silas Ermineskin, however, the prose tends to sound semi-literate, failing at both oral and written storytelling.

For example, "Bull," from his collection *Brother Frank's Gospel Hour*, starts: "It ain't very often that my friend Frank Fencepost gets real mail. He sometimes refer [sic] to himself as the King of Junkmail though, because he put himself on every trash mailing list in North America, get bulletins and advertisements from every church, cuckoo-clock maker, stamp dealer, and political party there is" (469). The narrator, Silas Ermineskin, is a writer teaching writing at a local community college, but struggles mightily with English grammar. The general conceit of Kinsella's stories has Ermineskin journalling and writing stories of life on the Hobbema reserve. With respect to orality, Kinsella does not seriously attempt to capture oral storytelling in any way whatsoever. However, Ermineskin's narration reads a lot like TV-Indian dialogue. This example from "Bull" features Frank Fencepost, Ermineskin's closest friend, about to give testimony in a civil case:

"Hey, I don't believe in none of this stuff," Frank say, pushing the Bible to one side.

"But I take an Indian oath to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth."

The bailiff and Frank look up at the judge.

"I believe that will be in order," he say, and sigh.

Frank, he leap down off witness chair. He wearing Eathen Firstrider's beaded buckskin jacket, moccasins, a ten-gallon black hat on top of his braids. Which his girl, Connie Bigcharles, tie for him with bright red ribbon. He shuffle along for a few feet then he crouch over, slap his palms on his legs just above the knees, and start to chant "Hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo," just like a train trying to pick up speed. He dance like that all around the

lawyers' tables, stop to stare down the blouse of the woman who taking everything down on a tiny typewriter. Then he work his way back to the witness stand and sit down again. (475)

Every aspect of this scene feels ripped from an old *Bonanza* script: Indians as comic relief; Indians fooling ignorant white men. I do not know any Cree vocables--the chanty bits of their songs--but I would bet real money that they do not include, "Hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo, Hoo-hoo." In fact, I doubt these sounds even appear in any pan-Indian songs. The systemic racism shown in this segment of "Bull" simply reinforces it under the guise of entertainment.

Generally speaking, having Ermineskin, the Cree writer and college writing instructor, narrate his stories in quasi-hickabilly (perhaps a neologism--yah me!) language makes him sound like a semi-literate idiot. For example: "[Frank Fencepost] stop to stare down the blouse of the woman who taking everything down on a tiny typewriter" (475). Why does Ermineskin not know the stenographer's job title? What provincial court judge would tolerate Frank's actions? Kinsella wants us to laugh at Fencepost's antics, and Ermineskin's sub-literate descriptions. I find it tough to write seriously about Kinsella's Hobbema stories, because venom drips into my words, and I want to mount a soapbox and spew my poison at everyone in hearing range. And while "Bull" shares similarities with "The Legend of the Sugar Girl," each abuses Indianness and storytelling in different ways, and further exploration here would be a fruitless digression.

To be clear, I do not believe writing Indigenous stories belongs solely to Indigenous peoples. However, I despise thoughtless, cliché-ed attempts, and have zero patience for any noble savage drivel, or writers who excrete them. (At some point in my career, I fully expect to face this same sort of criticism from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics.) I would

not write a Cree or Anishinaabe story because I do not know enough about their societies, or protocols. Some of my stories bleed into neighbouring territories, such as syilx, and secwepemc, but I rarely write syilx or secwepemc characters, even though their languages share words with nłeʔkepmxcín, and I have relatives in both nations, which does not give me the inherent right to their stories.

Each nation has its own protocols, and customs. The syilx, for instance, will want to establish a personal relationship before educating me in their customs. Taking shortcuts does not interest me. Also, I already have so much more to learn about nłeʔkepmx culture, the language, and my own family that I do not have time to learn additional cultural practices. Nor do I have any desire to write pan-Indian tales, populated with Generequois noble-savage-sages spewing wisdom culled from New Age healer websites.

CHAPTER 3 I AND INTERFUSIONALITY

When it comes to Indian stories, Thomas King differentiates between interfusional stories, stories that blend elements of the oral tradition, and his "non-Native stories." Both King and I are mixed-blood; he is Cherokee and I am nłe?kepmx. If you are a member of our nation, you are a member of our nation, so I feel no urge to announce myself as nłe?kepmx-Irish-Scottish-English and Canadian. I often wonder if, on paper at least, I have dual nłe?kepmx-Canadian citizenship, until I realize, again, that this nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and First Nations business is hokum. (I doubt that serious Indigenous writers can create works that do not have subtextual or overtly political protests running through them.) Although, back in my drinking days I would walk into a crowded room and loudly proclaim, "Irish-Indian here." I had no need to add a punchline, because in three well-chosen words I disarmed every drunk-Indian and drunk-Irishman joke to which I may have been subjected.

I choose not to have writers narrate any of my stories. Writer-narrators are a cheap, cliché-ed device. A writer-narrator usually writes retrospectively, so first-person present narratives almost always read as contrived, like Kinsella's "Bull." Framing devices, such as the adult remembering a poignant coming-of-age moment of their childhood, tend to bore: Stephen King's novella *The Body*, for example. The adult Gordie Lachance drops in and out of the story, sometimes breaking the fourth wall, sometimes referencing the author's own novels--*Cujo*, for instance--sometimes dropping in the young Gordie's short fictions as chapters. Why? Does this not feel narcissistic?

The narrators in my thesis are "regular Joes," spinning tales around late night bonfires, hence its title. Their voices grew from the voices in my home community, and other parts of NDNcountry I have lived. My own voice has some influence on what and how I write, as well, but it took time and effort to grow the kind of voices I use in this project. Initially, I wanted to develop a voice for s̓c̓uwenáyt̓mx, so I could write a Sasquatch story for my niece Ryann ("Little Trees®"). After taking Dr. Karl Jirgens' Native Literature class, the voice began to develop. A form of it manifested itself in the Uncle Chuckie stories "Roadkill," and "A Wager," in this project. The voice evolved, producing the stories and story-poems in this collection, beginning with "ball lightnin'," "The One About the Boy and the Squirrel," and the voice took on a life of its own in "Snk̓y̓ép and His Shiny New Choker."

I did not inject humour into these pieces. The humour emerges from the characters or their circumstances. The humour in "Snk̓y̓ép," inspired by my cousin Randy Basil's Facebook rants about Greater Vancouver garbage dumped onto our territory, emerges from coyote's pride. The trickster in our stories, at least the ones with which I am familiar, are dark. I opted to base this version of snk̓y̓ép on King's goofier trickster. Coyote, as portrayed by Thomson Highway (166–68), and Thomas King, who, through their stories, have taught me that Coyote can remove and replace his body parts:

Now that Coyote, he beam like a new dad. His smile so big, his mouth fall off from the weight of it. And it sink into the muck. And that muck seep inside. Its stink stick to the tongue, the teeth, and the roof. That mouth cough and gag and spit and cough.

"Hey!" shout that mouth. "Hey, get me outta here!"

So that Coyote put his mouth back in his face. Right back in his face. He spit. He gag.

He cough. He wipe off that muck on the back of a paw, then spit and gag some more. (XX)

Writing in an oral tradition inspired voice, whose first language is not English, is challenging. I do not want them to sound illiterate, stupid, or mocking the peoples of NDNcountry and their challenges. In this passage, I waver between writing, "He smile so big, his ...," instead of, "His smile so big, his ...," but I have almost decided on the latter. It reads better; its sibilant alliteration, along with the repetition of *his*, soothes the ear, and runs contrapuntal to the somewhat harsher sound of the last part of the sentence. Reversing the order of the mouth's actions as Coyote picks it up, sort of rewinds the first action without hitting reverse, e.g.: not like the cartoonish undoing actions by playing the shot backwards.

Mixing or "misusing" pronouns figures prominently in the oral tradition, especially, as Wickwire writes in the introduction to Robinson's *Write it on Your Heart: the Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller*:

"He,' 'she,' 'it,' and 'they' are interchangeable, no matter the antecedent. In most cases, Harry [Robinson] uses the plural 'they,' rather than the singular 'he,' 'she,' or 'it.' This is common in the English speech of native elders, and when one is used to it, it does not cloud the story line" (15).

I experimented with pronoun switching deliberately in "Splatter Pattern," and failed to pull it off. Both Melanie Little and Dr. Holbrook pointed out the confusion I created with the unclear use of "they" as the pronoun in place of "that kid, the boy," especially in the scene where his father wants to run him over. Hopefully, the version you read has solved this problem. A storyteller whose first language was not English might pull seemingly random pronouns off as naturally as Robinson. Inhabiting texts like Robinson's will take time and

study.

Interestingly, Ong compares oral and written versions of the Genesis creation story, and how, by using nine *ands*, the oral--Douay--version is additive rather than subordinate, in the first five verses of the Chapter I. Whereas the 1970 edition of the *New World Bible* uses only two *ands* (37–38). He states that "the Douay renders Hebrew *we* or *wa* ('and') simply as 'and'. [sic] The New American [sic] renders it 'and', 'when', 'then', 'thus', or 'while', to provide a flow of narration with the analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing (Chafe 1982) and that appears more natural in twentieth-century [sic] texts" (37). I admit to being self conscious about repeating *and* in stories, even though its repetition in oral stories is, as Ong has shown us, as old as Genesis.

The passage from "Snk'yép and His Shiny New Choker" includes five *ands* in the first paragraph; however, only one appears in the repeated last paragraphs. My editorial choice exemplifies interfusional writing by conflating elements of both oral traditions and written sensibilities. Snk'yép spitting, gagging, and coughing the muck Snk'yép's mouth plops into works. Immediately repeating the actions works with the rhythms of the section, but is not necessarily the kind of detail an oral storyteller would repeat, especially so soon after the initial actions, except, perhaps to draw laughs from the poop joke.

Repeating details, considered redundant in most written fiction, is a necessary part of the oral tradition, because repetitions help the storyteller memorize the story, students learn them, listeners get the important points.

CHAPTER 4 A MANIFESTOISH CONCLUSION

I have avoided writing trickster tales, or inserting trickster figures into them. If you read for them, however, they do abound in my work--sometimes deliberately, which is kind of a tricky thing to say. With no actual knowledge of nle?kepmx protocols about writing/telling trickster stories, I chose not to. But when "Snk'yép and His Shiny New Choker" came to me, I went with it, and the almost-finished story erupted from my fingertips. The story takes place on modern nle?kepmx territory, in a world and culture I developed/am developing. Most of the stories in this collection take place in modern times, though time as a western concept is largely irrelevant to them.

In the beginning, my stories transformed into interfusional performances without my knowledge. And when I learned of it, I "embraced" the technique. And I practiced reading aloud with different tonal and vocal intonations, never quite satisfied. Even during my long hiatus from writing I attended readings, paying attention to readers' performances. I learned that emotive readers, readers who performed their work, had more audience engagement; their books also sold better afterwards. These last two points interested me. I joined Toastmasters to become a better public speaker. I am on the storyteller track, so when I can afford to rejoin, I will continue to grow as a speaker and storyteller. I also signed on with a speech therapist to improve my speaking voice, which is often soft and weak. Ultimately, I want to entertain audiences with my written work and spoken performances; in the spirit of Eminem, I want to use my words to make myself wealthy.

I believe that hard truths, told ethically, can help bridge the gap between our peoples

and the dominant cultures'. Hope. Despite the fact that I am an aging, first-generation punk wearing a nihilistic public mask, I hold hope for better lives for Indigenous peoples: for humankind in general. In terms of ethics, my characters, even the drunk ones, exude dignity. None of my characters embodies the noble savage lie. So far, none of my stories retells our *spték^{wł}*, although I really want to explore "Coyote Challenges God," not necessarily the entire story, but how does Coyote spend his one-thousand-year exile in the middle of the ocean?

By ethics, I mean I will not write stories that could be categorized as "survivor porn," the kind of story we see on the nightly news where Indigenous individuals are portrayed as whiny victims.

By ethics, I mean I will not write stories that exploit the "drunk Indian," the "lazy Indian," the "shifty Indian," the lying Indian," and especially not the "noble savage" in its many guises.

By ethics, I mean I will not write stories about bingo or lottery "addictions." Although, many stories exist about bingo, and bingo jokes abound in NDNcountry, working in bingo parlours, and playing bingo with both my mother and stepmother, I have seen too much harm, too many negative consequences to write my own.

My stories, no matter how dour, contain hope, or the potential for hope. My stories contain strong women characters. My stories contain honest characterizations of life in NDNcountry--no-holds-barred storytelling, lacking completely in the over emotiveness of tales by others. As I learn more about my own culture and the politics of being Indian in modern times, my stories can only get stronger, and more vital. Or so I hope.

K^{wuk}wscémx^w. Néx^{wm} k^{wuk}wscéyp ?es kncémx^w.

CHAPTER 5 SPLATTER PATTERN

Anyways, a kid, a boy, in town, drags his sorry halfbreed ass up Main Street--Only Street's what most of us call it--carrying on him the kind of sad that attract rain like a pile of crap attract flies. So this kid, this boy, wading in sadness, walk Only Street. Rain fall around that kid, the boy, all the time. Wade in sadness. Wade in rain. Could be in an Elvis song that kid, the boy, living in "Heartbreak Hotel." Now that Elvis, smart dude, get himself a co-writing credit on that song. Song make suicide a groovy thing. But that kid, the boy, don't think that-a-way. No, that kid, the boy, got himself so locked up he don't see them thoughts, don't hear them brain words, can't speak none of it, neither.

But for one.

That one, Me-Who-Looks-At-Me, come from spirit world maybe, come from all the bad stuff growing in that kid's, the boy's, heart. But we don't know for sure.

We hear rumours. Sometimes we hear screams. Sometimes crying.

We know something not right about that father.

We don't know nothing but the rumours.

Father says to us, "You got no clue how clumsy and stupid and weak that kid. Lemme tell you. Just last night, that clumsy kid, tying its shoelaces. Fall off a stool. Fall off a stool and break the fucking wrist. Musta got all that weak from the mother, that kid. Musta got all that stupid from the mother, that kid. Musta got all that clumsy from the mother, that kid."

We think that kid's, the boy's, mother pretty smart to up and leave that father. Pretty cruel to leave that kid, the boy, behind, but.

When we ask that kid, the boy, what happen? He tell us, "O, just clumsy me. O, just weak me. O, just stupid me." Shrug and slosh away that kid, the boy. Slosh away like that turtle with head inside shell. Rain slosh down. Wind catch it, splatter air with grey spray. Wet footprints stain the ground behind him. So few words we think maybe that kid, the boy, wrong in the head. Maybe not enough oxygen inside the mother? Maybe they drop that kid, the boy, on his head?

Maybe?

Who knows. We're not shrinks or doctors.

Maybe?

Who knows. We got our own stuff to worry about.

Anyways, this story not about us. This story tell about Me-Who-Looks-At-Me, someone that kid, the boy, made up. But Me-Who-Looks-At-Me tell us he made up that kid, the boy. Me-Who-Looks-At-Me come in dreams. Night dreams. Day dreams. Dreams inside dreams. Dreams inside the brain pictures behind the words that kid, the boy, says out loud. Me-Who-Looks-At-Me rule dreams. Me-Who-Looks-At-Me the warrior, qéck looking out for the younger brother. Me-Who-Looks-At-Me born way after that kid, the boy, but already older. Way, way older. Maybe more agile, stronger, and smarter, too.

That kid, the boy, wade up Main Street just before dark, slosh by us. We say, "Hey."

Rude one, that kid, the boy. He shrink and throw up a wave like a block, like we take a shot at his head. Water splat like a hawked loogie on the ground in front of us.

That kid, the boy, so rude.

He splersh-splersh down Only Street.

Pick-up zoom over the hill. So fast all four wheels clear the crest. Truck rock left, jerk right. Straighten out, and guns it. Like it not already go fast enough through town. Like it got a lightning bolt up that tail pipe, and gonna jump into some future. Like it gonna flatten that kid, the boy.

Father of that kid's, the boy's, pick-up. Father driving it.

That kid, the boy, stop right in the middle of Only Street. Plenty of time to clear it. But he stop dead. You know we want to say something.

You know we want to save that kid, the boy.

But we, frozen as him, wait and watch.

That pick-up swerve around them. That kid, the boy, split in two. Me-Who-Looks-At-Me second one. Me-Who-Looks-At-Me got a rifle. Bolt-action .303.

They pull back bolt.

Oncoming headlights shine through windshield blood and brain splash-pattern.

Now we give head a shake. Eyes a rub. We just see what we see? We dreaming? That kid let Me-Who-Looks-At-Me kill that father?

Sure, that father maybe not the best, but to kill it like that?

Me-Who-Looks-At-Me hand rifle to that kid. That kid flick safety. Point barrel down. Someone show them right.

Probably their grandpa.

That Me-Who-Looks-At-Me clap hands, look at us and say, "One helluva splatter pattern, huh?"

He grab the boy by the sleeve.

"Gotta be one crazy exit wound! S'go check it out."

The boy feel empty. Like a shell. We see that sometime, soul or whatever check out and go on a TC, cruising Only Street. Zone out, maybe?

Who knows.

Absence seizure, maybe?

We're not doctors.

Me-Who-Looks-At-Me skip to truck. That father hunched over steering wheel like a sleeping drunk, don't move, even when Me-Who-Looks-At-Me poke it with a stick.

Pretty quick them cops show up.

Pretty quick they jump that kid.

Got them face down in the asphalt.

Big splash of water gush from that kid. It sound like them old ladies who cry at funerals.

One cop says, "Fucking kid pissed on me."

One cop says, "Dirty little Indian puked on me."

That kid in cop car, hunched over like that father.

That Me-Who-Looks-At-Me long gone.

One cop says, "Tell me what happened here."

We say, "We dunno. I guess someone shot that kid's old man."

One cop says, "Old man?"

We say, "Shoot his father."

One cop says, "You seen it?"

We think a bit. No right answer. Cop want to hear us say what it look like we should say. Cop won't hear about Me-Who-Looks-At-Me. We can't blame them, can we? Cop make us accessories for saying truth. Seen it happen before.

Truth might let some free, but it imprison many more.

Not always that way. But that way now.

Anyway, that kid will wind up in jail sometime. Jail, or dead. No need to take us with him.

So.

We say, "Yeah. Didn't know that kid had it in them. They usually so quiet. So easy going. So pleasant. Don't know what went wrong. Pretty sad, hey?"

CHAPTER 6
BALL LIGHTNIN

she, maybe three, I guess

no, four she was, down Cisco

over there on the west side

wearing her shiny shoes and Sunday dress

for pickin berries? jeez you, says her gran

better keep it clean, or that Sunday school god'll gechoo

and she cackles

you know the one, that old lady laugh?

but she don't make her change

so yeah, she meant to keep it clean

anyways, I guess she tried

walkin the CP track with her gran

her gran and aunt and her stupid dog

over there, on the west side

at Cisco

near that place Fraser finishes swallowin Thompson

where them two rivers, one all green and sparkly

and the other all dirty, them two rivers roll into one

the three a them and that stupid dog

just comin back from pickin sɔ̀wúsm

yeah, sɣ^wúsm, and wild raspberries, too

anyways, them three and that dog returnin home

her gran haulin a basket a sɣ^wúsm

and her auntie, a pail a raspberries

and that little one chasin that dog a hers

that dog runnin, in a jingle dress made a burrs

and she, that little one? got a smile as stained as her fingertips

and that dog?

yippin up a storm

tail high and waggin, tongue lollin

she races up and back along the tracks

up and back, up and back

then this last time she runs up and up and up

tail folded up under her belly

paws barely touchin them ties

leavin them two-leggeds to fend for themselves

so that girl, she stamps a foot on a tie

calls after her stupid dog that disappeared around a bend

and from behind her, maybe a hundred feet

maybe a little more, her gran shouts, *run!*

and that little girl?

she turns, sees a fireball

ball lightnin, an electric tumbleweed

rollin her way

and that girl?

she runs

her gran and auntie screamin after her

their berries bouncin off the gravel between two ties

and them old women, all in one motion

hike up their skirts and chase the lightnin

chasin that little girl

up them train tracks that little one runs

with that lightnin ball right behind her

then that little one

she zigs off the track

and climbs that scrabbly hill

till Moses' barbed wire fence stops her dead

so down she slides

kickin up dust and pebbles

down the hill

her mouth twisted into a scream she don't let out

or maybe can't

and she crosses them tracks again
jumps a patch a prickly pear
 jumps that cactus all right
 but trips, tumbling down
 rollin like that lightnin ball
poppin out a little cry each time her butt touches ground
and that lightnin chases after her like mad on a mule
and then that lightnin ball fizzles, sputters
spreads that stink a ozone
and dies in a thunderous *boom!*

well! then her gran scoops her up
wheezin and cryin and holdin that child close
and that little one's fancy dress?
all dirty, and torn
her fancy shoes all scuffed and dusty
and that girl cries
 maybe more for them scuffed toes
 and that torn an dirty dress
 than that fireball nearly takin her

her gran carries the girl tucked up under one arm

her basket a sɔwúm up under the other
and her aunt, now all thousand-eyed
watches the hill, the sky

them three hurry home
where that stupid dog's hid
under the house
hidin like a mole
they don't see her for maybe three days

yeah, three whole days

the whole time that girl cries

thinkin her stupid dog got ett by that fireball

thinkin maybe she got ett by that Sunday school god

three days she cries

then that dog?

her fur a messa caked mudd and dust

her jungle dress a burrs

as runed as the girl's Sunday one

all whimperin, hungry

and she jumps up on that little girl

scaredy-tail waggin between her legs

forepaws on that little girl's shoulders

they hold each other

they hold each other tight

that little girl smilin a rainbow

and that stupid dog?

she tries lickin it off

CHAPTER 7 ROADKILL

Chuckie thought the two most important women in Chuckie's life hated each other; well, Edna was a woman, and the other, Hazel, a '61 Impala SS. Edna despised Hazel, but Hazel couldn't hate Edna or anyone else. All 409 cubic inches of her engine loved her two-leggeds, even when she thought Edna a bit burdensome at times. But Hazel, as white as a polished pearl, and as smart and faithful as a purebred Arabian, loved Chuckie the same way she loved the caress of clean thirty-weight on her pistons.

Every now and then Chuckie took a drink; sometimes he took many. When Chuckie had too many, Hazel drove her man and his gang of rowdies home--and only home--no matter where her human charges thought they wanted to go. And Chuckie--drunk, sober, or somewhere in between, like tonight--chuckled and caressed Hazel's steering wheel like his lover's earlobe, and said, "You taking us home to bed, old girl?"

When Hazel pulled to a stop in front of the house, Edna, unasleep in bed, relaxed, and as her head nestled into the pillow, snored lightly.

Her worried frown softened into a less worried one.

Despite his buds' cussing and grumbling, Chuckie, he all soft words and sledgehammer-fists, laughed, sent them on their way. "Catch you for coffee at Rose's in the mornin?"

His buds waved yeah, and grumbled up the res road, yelling at yipping res dogs, who now barked louder, and tried to shake free of their chains.

Chuckie leaned against Hazel's right front fender: "You could teach them a lesson or

two, i'nit, girl?"

After the last of his buds closed their doors to the night, Chuckie nodded. He crawled into bed beside Edna. Her sleep breathing slowed and her less frowny frown smiled, looking kind of heavenly.

Some nights later, while tootling east on a narrow, curvy section of the Canyon (*Ah, Heaven! Wind through my grill at seventy miles an hour!*)--

Crash!

Thunk!

Thud-Thud.

Thud-Thud.

Thud-Thud.

A four-point white-tailed buck bounced off Hazel's right front fender, and landed on the shoulder, more dead than alive.

Chuckie saw a huge dent in Hazel's fender, new paint and trim, at least three hundred dollars in parts, and another year's delay in buying that new gas-powered log-splitter.

Edna saw a freezer full of venison roasts, burgers, jerky, and a hide and sinew for her crafts.

So did Hazel, not that she wanted any of it for herself.

"Put it out of his misery, then into the trunk. Hey, hun?" Edna said.

Chuckie, already reaching into the glovebox for his skinning knife, and nodded. "On it, Sweet-thang."

He frowned at Hazel's dented fender, thanked her, thanked the buck, dragged it up beside that rock that looked like Coyote humping his sister-in-law, and then slit its throat.

Hazel's 409 rumbled to life. She rolled to a stop alongside Chuckie and the dead buck. He heaped the buck onto Hazel's dented fender, and dangled his head over its edge. The buck bled down Hazel's side. Its blood pooled at her whitewalled wheel. While the buck bled out, Chuckie made room for him in Hazel's trunk.

A ways down the highway behind them, Constable Macpherson shut off his cruiser's headlights, and idled to a stop.

He thought himself tricky, sneaking up on them.

Chuckie heard him sneaking up.

Edna heard him sneaking up.

Hazel heard him sneaking up.

Hazel tooted her horn. Chuckie bonked his head on the trunk lid. He said, "Oww!

What the ...?

Edna said, "Talk to your damned car. That bitch got a mind of her own."

"Don't call my baby names. You know she don't like all that rough talk."

Hazel thought *bitch* meant female dog. So when Edna called Hazel *bitch*, she heard *Bitch*, the same way she heard Chuckie call her *Baby*.

"O, I'm so-o-o-o-o-o sorry! But she scared the living piss outta me."

Gravel crunched behind Chuckie.

That cop couldn't walk silent on a cloud, i'nit?

Chuckie grabbed the sixteen ounce ball peen hammer.

And spun around.

Now face-to-face with a large man. That large cop like a rabid weasel.

Constable Macpherson said, the large-weasel cop, said, "What you plan on doing with that hammer?"

Chuckie gently tossed the hammer behind him.

It landed with a dull clunk in Hazel's trunk.

Chuckie smiled. "Thought a bear'd sneaked up on me."

Edna scooted from the car.

The door chuffed closed, and Macpherson shot her a mad-weasel glare.

The buck's bleed had slowed to a trickle: a thinning, steady flow, drizzling down the dented fender. Edna jammed the buck's rear hooves inside the windshield wiper well.

Scooched up beside it. Held its front hooves in her lap. Held them pretty tight.

Macpherson counts three:

the woman? no threat

the man, big, but pudgy? medium threat

behind the wheel, unknown?

unknown, so potentially high threat.

Macpherson said, "You in there. Shut your motor off, and step out of the vehicle.

Right now."

He released the security strap holding his revolver. "Now."

Vroom! Vroom! Vroom! Puffs of black smoke shot from Hazel's dual exhaust.

Chuckie sniffed the air, and thought: "The old girl's runnin a little rich. I better tune er

up."

Macpherson pulled his revolver and pointed it at Hazel's rear window.

Chuckie slides between Macpherson and Hazel. "Whoa there. Just hold on a sec. Ain't no one in the car. Look for yourself."

Macpherson squinted.

He stepped around Chuckie.

Macpherson extended his revolver.

He saw no one in the driver's seat.

Macpherson blinked.

Still saw no one in the driver's seat.

Hazel dropped into drive and lurched forward a few feet. Edna said, "γúú! γúú!" She leaned into the windshield. She prayed. She slapped a hand into the windshield wiper well, fumbling for a finger hold. The buck's four points tappity-tapped like loose valves.

Tappity-taps around Hazel heeby-jeebied Chuckie. Chuckie held his breath and listened: "Nope. That ain't Hazel's tic."

Despite what Macpherson's eyes saw, he tapped on the driver's-side window.

He lived through World War II and the Korean police action.

Nothing shook him.

Nothing.

Macpherson thought, "Nothing gets to me. I've seen it all."

But not a driverless car.

Not a haunted car.

Macpherson thought, "No such thing as haunted cars. Haunted anythings."

But his jaw and revolver hung limply as that driverless car drove away from him.

Real casual. Not too fast.

Hazel stopped a little ways up the road.

Stopped long enough for Edna to slide off the hood and drag the buck into the trunk.

Edna didn't drive. She never needed to. Hazel liked it that way. She did one thing and she did it well: driving. She could do more, probably. But as a '61 Impala SS, driving was enough. Edna slid into the passenger seat and patted the dashboard. Hazel eased onto the highway then sped up the road about a mile and a half.

Stopped.

Edna dragged the buck up the path, leaving a trail behind her that would take a year to go stale.

Hazel popped herself into first and sped up the highway.

Six miles.

Hazel glided to a stop, killed her motor, and waited.

"Don't feel bad," Chuckie said. "She'll do that sometimes. She just get mad and drive off like that."

Macpherson, holstering his revolver said, "Where you going with the roadkill?"

"Not a roadkill. I killed him." Chuckie extended his hands, palms up, fingers splayed.

"Hunting out of season, drunk driving, possession of stolen goods, mischief: these

charges, and any others I can think up between here and the lockup, are the charges you face, Mister Bible."

"I killed that buck on our land. You can't arrest me for that."

"This highway is on Her Majesty's land. You killed the Queen's buck."

"It's my buck. I killed him on our land. See that rock there? The one looks like Coyote humpin his sister-in-law? Our territory begins there, so I got him fair and square."

Macpherson shone his light on the rock Chuckie pointed at.

"It's just a rock, also on Her Majesty's land. Irregardless, deer season's done."

"Maybe for you, but we got the right to hunt to feed ourselves. Anyways, we're standin on Indian land. Check your map."

"I don't need to check anything. What you call your land belongs to Her Majesty. You, as a ward of the Canadian Government, are only granted use of it. My job is to protect what's rightfully Her Majesty's."

"Don't being a ward mean your queen owns me, too?"

Macpherson snarled.

He secured his revolver.

Macpherson handcuffed Chuckie.

He shovelled him into the backseat of his cruiser.

Macpherson fired up his cruiser.

He beetled off after the renegade woman, the renegade car, and the contraband deer.

They sped past Edna's trail, and Chuckie smiled into the cruiser's rearview mirror.

Macpherson growled and backhanded the mirror, knocking it free of its mooring, thunking

off the passenger door.

"Wipe that smile off your face," he said.

"You're in big, big trouble," he said.

He flipped on the cruiser's lights and siren, gripped the wheel, spanked the cruiser into overdrive, and drove.

Hazel slipped into neutral, just in case the cruiser bumped her rear-end. The cruiser screeched to a halt; its front bumper kissed Hazel's left front whitewall.

Macpherson blazed the spotlight on Hazel.

He shone his flashlight everywhere but up Hazel's tailpipes.

Macpherson found no keys in the ignition.

He saw no signs of mechanical tampering.

Macpherson saw no signs of life.

She seemed to be nothing but a '61 Impala SS. He poked the dark bushes with his flashlight's beam. Wind stilled, allowing a blanket of silence to suffocate Canyon.

Macpherson's neck prickled.

Sweat beaded his forehead.

He scuttled back to his cruiser.

Macpherson slammed the door closed, and slapped the door latch down. Chuckie smiled into his shoulder. And closed his eyes to hide their smile. Macpherson pulled a u-ie, and cruised back to town.

While Macpherson checked Chuckie into the lockup, Edna, at her and Chuckie's fish camp, dressed out the buck, hung it from the old maple tree, sent a little prayer to Chuckie,

made an offering to their buck, thanked Hazel, built a fire in the wood stove, then fixed a small batch of bannock. She brewed a pot of strong black tea. She plopped a can of SPAM into a mixing bowl, added three shakes of Tabasco, five squirts of Worcestershire sauce, and ground the mixture into a smooth paste, and then slathered some of it onto a piece of steaming bannock. After her meal, she fell into a fitful sleep on their lumpy old cot.

Hazel pulled into a parking stall beside the police station. She revved her 409 three times, and then shut herself down.

Chuckie curled up on the cell's cold, cement floor. He smiled, then drifted into a peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER 8 THREE BUCKS

Chuckie, Alistair George, Miracle Johnny, Harold Billy and some others stood around Alistair's bonfire one night. Drinking tea, mostly. Maybe a little whiskey in one or two of them mugs. They'd traded stories all night. Each man shared his best hunting story. Miracle Johnny, almost as good a hunter as Chuckie, didn't tell stories as good as Chuckie's.

"This one time I went out. Just me, my three-o-three, a box of shells, and a flask of whiskey."

Old Harold, all screwed-up face, says, "You didn't take any water with you? Into that country? Even I take water with me when I go up them hills."

Sure, Old Harold took a lot of water with him, but he only drank from the jug of wine he kept under a blanket in the bed of his pick-up.

Old Harold didn't hunt or fish any more. Got cataracts. Got rheumatoid hips. Got the shakes.

Miracle nodded. "Well, when I go up into them hills now, I take a lotta water. Only water. And I'm gonna tell you why."

Miracle never started a story in a way that made you want to stop and listen. Chuckie topped up everyone's tea. Harold cradled it for a moment before gulping down three, five mouthfuls. Old Harold needs a bellyful of wine to feel normal. Old Harold thinks everyone needs a bellyful of wine to feel normal. Bellyful of that Jesus blood. Bellyful of holy goodness. But after Old Harold got them yellow eyes, sm?ém said no more wine. Doctor said no more wine. So Old Harold whine, but not touch it now.

Old Harold quieted. Alistair quieted. Chuckie quieted. Even the fire stop crackling. Chuckie sometimes waited before telling the rest of his story. So Miracle wait.

And waited.

Then. "This one time I go into the bush behind Gregory Abbott's. You know the one? Anyways, thick bush sometime. Not now. Fucking clearcut two hundred yards in.

"One time, thick forest for days. Not so much now.

"Heard about a five-point white-tailed up that-a-way. So I go up. See for myself, hey? Don't take long to pick up his trail. Fresh scat, maybe an hour ago. Maybe two. Stalking him so quiet I catch two bull snakes humping. Never heard me coming. Hey-hey!

"About noon now. And so hot them snakes is sweating.

"Sweat just pouring outta me. My gonch feels pissed in, hey."

Alistair said, "Making a swimming hole for your spaeks?, i'nit?"

Chuckie said, "More like a sauna."

Alistair said, "Nah, more like a sweat bath, i'nit?"

Sweat bath. Now that's a good one.

"Anyways, still not getting any closer to him, and I'm thirsty. So I take a snort of whiskey. Before you know it, no more whiskey. Them last few drops stick like a stain to the bottom.

"Still thirsty, but. And now sweating so much. Like someone shoved a garden hose up my ass, and used me as a sprinkler.

"Now, dizzy.

"So dizzy I got to sit. Flop. No shade. Fucking clearcut. No shade anywhere. Fucking

clearcut.

"Little Creek yousta run through here, from a spring.

"No more.

"Fucking clearcut.

"Still three miles to Johnson Creek, nearest water. Johnson Creek now. Was ślíyx.

Now Johnson.

"So time kinda stop. Can hardly hold up my head now. Like too much drink in me. Or bad meat. But no cramps. No q^wnóx^wenek.

"Mouth dry. World all blurry. Felt that way before, fighting in Korea. Got the malaria. And nearly die over there. Malaria just about kill me.

"Not Chinese bullet. But malaria.

"But no q^wnóx^wenek. Just sweat. Lotta sweat.

"Dead soon. Say goodbyes. Húmeł sm?ém. Húmeł Jaws. Gonna miss that mutt Jaws, hey?

"Say syémit. Ask xe?łk^wúpi? keep them safe.

"Then laugh, hey?

"Laugh. If only I had a box of ćált to pour on me. Keep them smémix off, hey?

Laugh. Old Indian drying like a rack of śwén. But no ćált.

"Anyways.

"Little while someone tap my shoulder. Tap-tap-tap.

"He goes, 'Hey, hey, Mighty Hunter, you're not gonna make it.'

"That five-pointer. Muzzle in my face."

So old Miracle hears white-tailed talk. No telling what you hear when you stop and listen.

But there's more to Miracle's story. Listen:

"So that deer. Five-points in my ribs. Ten. You hear about it sometimes. Mad buck gores a guy. Kicks him. Front hooves. Not back ones like mules. Front ones. Kick-kick, kick-kick.

"If this how I go, I go this way. Gored by five-point white-tail. But not gored. Buck says, 'Hang on, Mighty Hunter. Take you someplace cool. Someplace wet. Drink water. Cool down.'

"So I says to that five-pointer, k^wuk^wscémx^w. What else but k^wuk^wscémx^w?

"Anyways, that five-pointer carry me across fucking clearcut. Little k^wyéłps here and there. Everywhere dried syíqm. More grass. Lotta dust. Lotta stumps.

"k^íást that land. k^íást.

"Little bumpy that ride. Five-pointer covers ground fast. Soon ride over. Lotsa shade. But not too cool. Drink some. Soak the head. Drink some.

"Five-pointer gone. Rifle gone. Maybe left in the fucking clearcut. Maybe five-pointer take it. Maybe drop it on the way. After sundown, when a little cooler, maybe follow same path out. Find it then.

"So I put my clothes on branches. Lay in a pool. Rest my head on a smooth rock. Sleep then. Real waterbed, hey? Sleep till sunset. No dizzy-head. No blurry vision. Still no q^wnóx^wenek.

"Still no five-pointer. Still no rifle. Clothes all stink-ed, but put it on anyways.

"Don't see that buck again. Too bad. Got a nice rack, that buck."

Miracle smiled into the fire. He saved that story a good long time. Now it's out there.

Alistair said, "Mm. Good story."

Old Harold said, "Yep."

Chuckie said, "Holding out on us i'nit, Miracle?"

Alistair said, "After that one of yours, Miracle, I don't want to tell mine."

Miracle said, "Tell it. Now I real want to hear it."

"I guess. Anyways, this another hunting story. Happened just this morning. Went up past Reddix. On McCullough's range this morning. So about an hour after sunrise, following that old deer path. Seeing nothing. Not even new poop. Heck, not even old poop."

"Gwan," said Chuckie, "even the blind can see old turds up that-a-way."

Chuckie pours himself another tea, tops up Alistair's. "Shit man! You gonna make shit up, make it believable."

Miracle mugs, "Ayii! Even I seen turds up there. Old ones, maybe from before they chopped most of it done for range land."

"You don't have to listen, i'nit?" Alistair snits. "Anyways, when's the last time you got up that-a-way?"

Now Old Harold chirp, "Long ways to go chasing a rumour, hey?"

So, even Old Harold gave up hunting sometime ago. Arthritic trigger finger. Shakes pretty bad, from them drinking days. But he loves good hunting spílaxm. He'd call bullshit if Chuckie doesn't. Chuckie hunts up there, too. But a spot southwest of Reddix, cos Hazel, his '61 Impala SS, won't drive that road. Too hard on her undercarriage, she says. Don't want no

rocks puncturing her oil pan, she says. Pretty whiny for a muscle car, Chuckie says. But Alistair looks ready to go. So let Alistair finish his story.

"So, I got this feeling and think I should keep on it, even though it a real old trail. You know that trail so old Wind don't follow it any more. But I go up it anyways. Gut says go, so I go. So, I hear a little noise, maybe a hoof scratching out a root. And sure enough, maybe a hundred yards ahead, a three-point muley. Sight them. Then

"Bam.

"Got it. Right between the eyes. Down he drops. Dead.

"Shoulder the rifle. Grab a tag.

"Then up he pops. Like I never hit him at all, hey. So I sight them again.

"Right between the eyes. Bang."

Right here, at this spot in the story, Alistair stops the story.

Dramatic pose.

Dramatic pause.

Maybe he pause a little too long. He has a good story, all right, but don't know when to stop. When to go. Not so great at telling stories, that man.

"Tag falls. Bend over. Pick it up.

"Dang buck up again. Maybe that muley's Jesus. Can't keep a good buck down, i'nit?

"Third time. Now three shots between the eyes."

While Alistair sips tea, let that sink in a bit. Three shots to take down that three-point muley.

Alistair said, "Ever see a moose get up with three 30.06 rounds rattling its skull?"

Again Alistair pause. I don't know about you, but I wish he'd get on with that story. Anything left of that three-points? Alistair hides behind that big enamel cup he has. Sips tea.

Chuckie likes to slow a story down as much as anyone. Likes to give you time to think about what he's said. But even Chuckie's had enough. "That it?"

Maybe Alistair forgot the end of his story. Sometimes that happens.

"No. I got the best part now. Got one in the chamber. It gets up again, it goes down a fourth time. Five minutes I wait. Ten.

"Creep toward clearing. Nothing moving but me. Like I said, not even Wind visit the place. Maybe three yards inside the edge of it lays a three-point muley.

"Dead from a single headshot.

"Five yards past that one, a second three-point muley. Just as dead as the first one. Single bullet between the eyes.

"Two tags. Two bucks. First hunt of the season, and last."

"And then. Pretty strange thing I've ever seen."

"There's a third three-pointer about five yards past the second one."

Miracle says, "You shot three different muley's within seconds of each other?"

"Nope. Four. Musta got two with the last shot."

Chuckie says, "They didn't scatter when the first one went down?"

"That's right."

"I call bullshit. Where's the fourth."

Well, now that Alistair take his story a little too far. Even the best hunter would stop at one buck, at most two. Maybe talk about the big one that got away, kinda like fishing tales

with fur, hey?

"Okay. Maybe I made up the fourth. Hadda make up that one, hey? Make the story better, hey? But check out the shed. See for yourself. It's curing in the shed."

Harold grumps, "Four bucks on three shots? Bah! Even stupid drunk, I wounldenta fallen for that one."

Chuckie says, "Gwan, Dead-Eye, Show us then."

So true to his word, Alistair had thee good-sized mule deer hanging in his shed, wrapped in cheese cloth. The room smelled like rotting blood and decaying meat. Big old freezer hum in a corner. One or two moose meat steaks in that freezer. A couple deer roasts. Some deer and pork sausage. Lots of room for fresh deer meat. Lots of room.

Alistair said, after the men finished inspecting his bounty, "Hey, Miracle? I only got two tags. So you take one. Take one for your family."

"K^wuk^wscémx^w. I'll pick up its tag tomorrow."

Chuckie said, "Want some help butchering it?"

Miracle said, "I could help."

"More the merrier, hey?"

Harold grumbles, "I'd help, but my damn fingers, and damn knees won't let me."

You know Both Miracle and Alistair say to themselves: "Gotta set aside a leg for Harold."

Alistair says, "I got to say, you had the best story tonight, Miracle."

Chuckie slapped Miracle on the back. "Yep. Good story. Yours, too, Alistair. Yours too."

CHAPTER 9
LITTLE TREES[®]

Used to be you tell someone you saw *scúwenáytmx* and they either laugh in your face, or ask where, when, how big--you know, them kinda questions. Only old Billy Alexander--the one runs the res gas station, not the other one THEY say up to no good--never ask them questions. Old Billy Alexander ask only one question: "So, how *is* the old boy?" When old Billy had his sight, he trap up in the bush behind Johnny Pete's place. That bush behind Johnny Pete's place went faster than Old Billy's eye sight. What them city boy loggers leave behind, that big fire in '76 clean up. New growth rise up like a fifteen-year old's first moustache, so scarce them ticks got nowheres to hide.

Anyways, old Billy Alexander ask, "How *is* the old boy?" Got a smile on him like yesterday wash into today and make tomorrow. You only see a smile like that when some *yéye?* look at pictures of her grandkids passed too soon. Old Billy don't wait for an answer. Asks, "Where he at? He okay?"

Up Simon John's. Inside that old barn. You know the one needs a new roof? That old one, still standing? Dunno if he okay. Can't get close enough to tell.

Simon John's old barn make it through three forest fires. You call 'em wild fires nowadays, but in them days: forest fires. Three forest fires, one close enough to bubble the white paint on the west-facing wall. Simon buy that paint to make his new barn white, but the guy at the hardware store say only red for barns on that side of the river. Simon say as long as Chuck Connors can play Geronimo in a damn movie, I can have a damn white barn. The hardware guy, older than them Kendricks & Sons coffee grinders he display in that display

window, damn near crap his drawers, mumble something about rules. The old guy gotta name, but no one say it, afraid saying out loud might make his whole clan move here, and no one wants that. No one. The old guy mumble, How can you afford this much paint all at once? You know you can't put it on a tab or on layaway. Simon, waving a fat wad a cash under the old guy's nose, say, When you ever let one of us run a tab, hey?

Now same old guy own the grocery store, too. He give every family a fifty dollar tab, and lettem run it long as they keep paying. But he don't let you put ten cents worth a nails on a hardware store tab, even if you put up your wedding band as collateral. Now Simon coulda squeeze the old guy's neck shut in one of his hands, but he don't. Don't want his family and friends to lose their tabs and whatever cos a something stupid he done. Instead, Simon said, Whose damn rules?

THEIRS.

The THEM. You never see'em, but THEY got THEIR fingers in every pie. Every last one. THEY the ones put up the money to make the '67 Patterson-Gimlin film. THEY the ones call that '67 Patterson-Gimlin film a hoax. You ask sc̄uwenáytmx--Stew, he prefer you call him Stew, cos that his name. Stew, but not Chicken Stew, and not Abominable, not Yeti, not Bigfoot, not Squatch: Stew, cos that his name. Stew tell you THEY the best thing ever happened to him, his kind. THEY got you so you don't know what to think. Who right? Who wrong? Like that old hair dye commercial ask, Do she, or don't she?

So Simon say, you could take my money, or you could leave it. White paint go with me. I got a red barn and I want it painted white.

Old guy count out what he need for that white paint. Old guy say, THEY come get

Simon. Don't know what gonna happen. Won't be good though. So, Simon fold a single, put it in old guy's shirt pocket. He say, k^wuk^wscémx^w.

He put that white paint on his red barn. He wait for THEM.

Twenty, thirty years later.

He still wait.

Anyways, Old Billy ask, "He okay? It Stew, yeah?"

Not stew. Unless you mean stew on the hoof. Ain't stew in a pot. Too hairy.

"So it scúwenáytmx named Stew then?"

Couldn't say. Didn't ask. Like I say, can't get close enough.

"He stink?"

Stink a nice word for it.

"Take me up there."

Who watch the station?

"Ach. I'll just shutter down. Anyone want gas can go up the road twenty miles. Or wait."

Old Billy walk like a guy with arthritis in both knees and two working eyes. He push open the door to the diner and wave hey to Sam, Charlie, and Peter. Sam, Charlie, and Peter got their usual booth in the north corner. Three a them got their coffee, their trucker's breakfasts, and Charlie got the morning paper. He read headlines and big city people's obituaries. He don't need a newspaper to know about deaths around here. Ones he don't hear about, he sees on the bulletin board outside the post office.

Sam and Charlie look up from their plates. Sam got a forkful a sausage at his lips.

Peter got a triangle a toast oozing egg yolk half a foot over his platter. Charlie look over his paper, just read about a Canadian pioneer helped build the country. Helped settle the land. Started as a scrubland farmer in northern Saskatchewan. Moved west to build the first fishing lodge on the West Coast. Become the first man since Franz Boas to discover and anthropologize coast Indians. The three a them say, yí?a tek sinwénwen, Snə̀m̀nám. Sam and Peter wave. Charlie nod. Easy to forget Old Billy blind.

"Hey, Sarah," Old Billy say. Sarah poke her head out the pass bar window, ask what up, hun?

"Going up Simon John's place for a bit. Maybe one hour. Maybe two. Hard to say."

In the middle of the day?

"Ach, it early yet. No one miss me."

Anyways, Charlie say, from behind his newspaper, anyone want gas, just feed'em your bean soup, hey?

Sarah laugh. Sam laugh. Peter laugh. Old Billy laugh. It good soup, Sarah's bean soup, but it make you bark like snkýép you eat too much.

So up Simon's Old Billy go. Nose and ears his eyes. He see wet fields, hay drowning, skinny cows, and horses want a good grooming and oats, maybe a carrot. Maybe two. Old Billy see himself on his old Indian Scout Streamliner. Like bike set the world land speed record. Old Billy's went fast. Not fast like Burt Munro's, but. In the wind. Old Billy smile, rattling along West Side Road, his head out the window.

Old Billy sniff the air. Bee-line it to Simon's barn. Only fall once, trip over a rake or

something. Left behind by one a Simon's kids or grandkids, that rake. Probably that Perry, that one live in a dream all day long. Dream so much all day, he got none left at night. But that one a worry for Simon.

So, yeah, that Stew stink, all right. Make Old Billy's eyes water.

Old Billy cry different tears, too. Say, "ʔéx k^w n̄, qéck! ʔéx k^w n̄!"

Stew say, Sínci?! Long time no see.

"Yeah, long time."

So they talk long time, them two. Old friends, lotta catching up. They laugh. They smoke. Simon bring them tea. Simon bring them sc̄wén. Simon bring them bannock and wild raspberry jam.

That one, two hours close the gas station, now two, three days.

Now five days.

Old Billy's ears perk. Sarah's truck cough and sputter, shake and rock, maybe stop two hundred yards from barn.

Sarah stand at barn door, say, hey, old man. Time you go to work. People want gas.

Stew say, Feed them that bean soup you got.

Sarah laugh. Old Billy laugh. Stew laugh. He say, Love that soup you make. Bean soup, a good one, that.

Sarah say, Stew, you have a sweat bath and shower. Sweat bath and shower. Two times each, sweat bath and shower. You, too, my s̄x̄aȳwih. Clean up. Put on clean clothes. Then have soup. Maybe trucker breakfast. Maybe chicken waffles.

Simon say he only get ridda smell by burning his white barn.

Old Billy say, "It a good barn yet. Fix that roof and it good another twenty, thirty years. Maybe more."

But that stink make cows' milk all green. Funky.

Stew say, I fix everything after two sweat baths and two showers. Till then, you add a little red food colour. Make that funky milk funky *chocolate* milk. People go crazy for that funky chocolate milk.

"I'll sell it at the gas station. Sarah will put it on the menu. Big seller that funky chocolate milk."

Simon say he think on it.

Stew talk on and on and on about forest going. Forest gone. Complain about how hard it is to hide behind tree no bigger around than his thumb. To be fair, Stew got thumbs like that Sissy Hankshaw. But he make good point. Them trees make good toothpicks nowadays, not good planks.

He say, how can s̄cuwenáʔtmx stay mysterious when no matter how hard you try to hide, an elbow, or big, hairy butt stick out?

So Old Billy back at work. Five days away, and Astrid Johnny waiting at pumps before Old Billy get there at five in the morning.

Bin here waiting two goddamn days. Two days wasted, waiting for you.

You coulda gone to the Esso out Gladwin.

Nope. I never buy gas from a séme?

So you sit at my pump two days?

I'm old, not stupid. Car got no gas, so I stay with my cousin Ruthie on the res. Wait.

Drink tea and gossip. Wait some more. Check to see if you open up. Wait some more.

Old Billy think on Stew's puzzle a good long time. He think on it so hard, sometimes he forget to take money for gas he pump. Sometimes he see Astrid Johnny sitting at the pump, maybe honking the horn, maybe cussing him out. Most take money to Sarah. Some drive off thinking they that Bonnie or that Clyde.

After a long time, maybe six, eight days, Old Billy figure Stew's puzzle. "You thought about losing weight? Trim a hundred pounds off a your butt?" Old Billy laugh. He make a good joke. Old Billy cannot lie; he like big butts. That what make his joke so funny. But Sarah no laugh. But Stew no laugh.

He wait till the sting a their scowls stop burning. "Joking! Holy! But this no joke. How about you work graveyard shift here? You start May long weekend when gas station open twenty-four hours. It busy but not like the old days before that new freeway THEY build."

Before work every morning Stew have two showers.

Then Stew have smudge bath after each shower.

Then Stew have two sweat baths.

Then Stew have sage smudge.

Every morning two times Stew smudge.

His spirit clean and stink free.

Can't say the same about his body, but. Now Stew smell like rain forest: damp moss, mushroom, toadstool, and rotting yellow and red cedar. Not too bad now, just make your eyes

water, and your nose itch, that smell.

He comb his hair. He curl his beard. Stew think he look just like that Jesus fellow. He put on big Hawaii shirt. He put on big dark glasses. Stew think that shirt and them dark glasses make him look like that Big Lebowski Dude.

But that Dude don't wear big Hawaii shirt.

Stew say, That don't change how I *feel* in big Hawaii shirt.

Stew might like it, but that shirt so loud it hurt my ears.

Stew say, Hmmm. Good point that.

So Stew wear his fur. He wear moose hide moccasins Sarah make him. She use most a one moose hide to make them moccasins, Stew's feet that big. Take her five nights and five days. They hug Stew's big feet, them moccasins. His feet don't touch the ground; he hover above it. Stew skate on air like that Bobby Hull fellow. He skate through town so fast you can't say what you seen, or if you seen anything at all. That how fast Stew skate on air.

Stew get to work at eleven, eat the meal Sarah leave him.

He eat out back, rest against a jack pine thicker than toothpick lodgepole pines in the hills he call home. Smella diesel and gas remind himma home, too. Food wrappers and other papers dancing in wind.

Dancing in dust devils.

All that dancing garbage remind himma home.

Bottles and broken glass reflecting streetlight kind a remind himma home.

Back home that glass there don't shine at night.

If Stew don't watch his step, his big feet cut by glass. Too bad he don't have Sarah's

moose moccasins then.

Stew wear a sticky name tag on his chest, left side: Hello, my name Stew. He sit behind counter, watch TV for shenanigans at the pump island, watch for shenanigans behind the building, watch for shenanigans in Sarah's diner.

First night he work alone, no cars need gas. Old Billy stop by around four, with coffee and tuna fish sandwich for Stew. They tell stories till time for Old Billy to start work.

Second night same as first night.

Third night same as second.

Long weekend come and bring with it cars, tens a cars. First one a woman. She pay, her face screwed up, her lips pinched tight, her eyes tearing. Stew know that face. That the light-a-match face. The woman's gas cost thirty-six bucks. She slap down a fifty, run for the door, say, Keep the change!

Second car, also woman driven, fill up. Stew think, why all these women drive alone at night? She open door, fanning one arm across her face, other hand over her mouth.

Stew think she say, Christ, you shit yourself, or what?

Stew know he look like that Jesus fellow. Or what, he say. Mountain musk, he say. I get a little nervous around beautiful womans.

Maybe she blush a little. Hard to say. She don't breathe much across from Stew like that. She pay with credit card. She tell Stew he better get over it. Bad for business, he all nervous stink and such.

At four Old Billy put a salmon sub on counter for Stew. That sub something else: a side of planked spring salmon with red onions, capers, coarse salt, in a giant loaf of French

bread Sarah bake just for the giant sub. She make salad from cewete?, Boston leaf lettuce, and radicchio, and juniper berry vinaigrette.

A good meal, that.

"You know, qéck," Old Billy say, "business ain't like them old days."

Stew stop chewing. He look around, say good bye to tires and wheels on wall, red box of windshield wiper blades, shelves of 10w-30, 10w-40, automatic transmission fluid, little light bulbs in boxes, little light bulbs in hard plastic wrapping, big lightbulbs-- headlights--in boxes, the box of Sen Sen beside the till, and that board growing flat little fir trees called Little Trees[®]. Look like fir, smell kinda like pine, the pine your bathroom kinda smell like, not the kinda pine that once grew in the bush.

Old Billy pat Stew's hand. "I got ideas to make our business grow. Qéck, you wanna help grow business?"

Stew ask, How?

Old Billy say, "You know how every picture, moving or still, we get a scúwenáýtmx all blurry, or look like man in monkey suit?"

Stew nod, not sure he like what Old Billy about to say. Old Billy spend rest a the night and most a the day answering how.

Old Billy pay Maggie Campbell to make giant kilt, and giant Scotch hat with giant white dingle ball on top. Maggie correct Old Billy: red tartan bonnet, tam o'shanter. She ask what clan? Old Billy think a minute, then ten. Old Billy smart, but he don't make important

decisions fast.

Fifteen minutes later Maggie ask, you awake?

"Yeah, still awake. Still breathing. Seem to me Sarah has a great-great-great-great-grandfather from Scotland. A prince from them Highlands. MacDougall. That name mean anything to you?"

Aye, she nods, old time enemies, those MacDougalls and we Campbells. But a prince you say? We dinna hae princes as such.

Old Billy shrugs, "Well that the story she got."

She say, you dinna hae a right to a tartan belonging to any clan not your own.

But she agree to make that giant kilt and giant red tartan bonnet cos it a MacDougall tartan. And Old Billy pay top dollar.

Six-to-eight weeks later the whole province buzzes with news about Scotsquash sighting. The CBC show film with Sasscotch, big hairy beast wearing MacDougall tartan and MacDougall red tartan bonnet tromping over meadows in south central British Columbia.

Stew wear them Little Trees® like Christmas decorations. That smell almost cover his nervous one. People say he look festive. Some people say he look just like Scotsquash. Stew say, he get that a lot, but he no MacDougall, so don't wear that tartan. Some say he look a lot like Sasscotch. Stew say, he get that a lot, but he no MacDougall, so don't wear that tartan.

Everyone nod and say, I see that. Everybody nod and buy postcards from that new rack of postcards by the till where the Sen Sen once sat. The biggest seller got Sasscotch lying on top a wood pile. Look just like that Burt Reynolds fellow in that Cosmopolitan, but in kilt, and beard curly like that Jesus. The next biggest seller got that Scotsquash wielding a

huge two-headed axe near a wood pile stacked higher than him.

Stew wear them Little Trees[®], make Sasscotch invisible, make Scotsquash a mystery.

People everywhere see Sasscotch on farms, hiding in barns. Same people see Scotsquash running across bald mountaintops flipping the bird at passing passenger planes. Same people look at Sasscotch every night at Old Billy's gas station. Can't see Sasscotch through them Little Trees. Can't see Scotsquash through them Little Trees[®].

CHAPTER 10 CATCHING FARTS

Now this story happens about thirteen years ago. Maybe more. It's the one about Yellow at four, and how he learned to bottle cow farts. Before you run off screaming for PETA or Child Protective Services, give it a listen. It might surprise you.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

Okay. Sometimes I tell this story with Edna in it. Edna loves Yellow like her own, if she'd had any. Sis will ask, "Where's Edna?" Cos she'd rather leave her boy Yellow with the both of them, if she has to leave them with her brother and his sm?eméce at all. See, Chuckie and Edna don't have kids, and Yellow, Sis thinks, challenges even skilled parents, better parents than her. So in that version of this story, Chuckie says, "Edna took her mom shopping down the Loop. They'e gonna stay up Deadman's, at her cousin Lily's. Be back sometime."

Sis asks, "Where's Edna at?"

"She took her mom shopping down the Loop. They'e gonna stay up Deadman's, at her cousin Lily's. Be back sometime."

Anyways, the story goes like this.

Yellow, at four, had enough energy to fuel a sun. His mother loved her son as mothers do, but keeping him safe and busy exhausted her, leaving her as tired as a soldier who has quick-marched across Death Valley. Each morning that baby escaped his crib. And his mom, who loves him as mothers do, drags her tired butt and that bouncing baby boy to her brother Chuckie's place.

She cries into her Earl Grey with honey (and spritz of whiskey--the five-year-old stuff, no skimping here, not where his sister is concerned).

"So, Sis," Chuckie says, cos Sister is her name--nineteenth of nineteen children; her parents and grandparents and great-grandparents had run out of names. Too tired. No one in all those generations has less than fifteen siblings. So Chuckie says he and Edna will only make babies if he can name them numbers. No one likes that idea. No one.

"Too soon?" says Chuckie.

Silence.

Chuckie had a number. Eighty-two was Chuckie's number. Not a good number. And an even worse year.

Anyways, Chuckie suggests stringing a coil of razor wire around the top of the crib, "Like you see in them prison movies," he says. Now Chuckie always ends his crazy-talk with a loud laugh, and when no one else joins in he goes, "I was joking, jeez you."

Don't wait for him to say it now.

Instead, he says, "Lookiiiiit. You need rest. The boy needs boundaries. Win-win."

"What I need's a day off. Maybe two."

"What you need's another tea. Whisktea and honey."

"K^wuk^wscémx^w, but no. One's enough."

Now that they've stopped talking all you hear are Chuckie slurping his tea, the dull clunk of he and Sis's mugs hitting the table now and then.

A good silence.

Until you remember four-year-old Yellow wanders his uncle's house untended and

unrestrained.

Yellow somehow has scaled Gran's 120-year-old wooden rocker, precariously balanced atop its back and reaching for the big glass bowl full of shotgun shells. His four-year-old brain knows the boom they make. He likes the boom. He likes the smell of the blue smoke guns fart after they boom. The explosion of glass, the pop of pellets piercing pop cans and plastic jugs makes him squeal and clap his hands. And dance a happy kind of pee pee dance. He likes that Uncle Chuckie will give him his own 12-gauge when he turns twelve. And loves that his mom will let him. Those two twelves make him laugh: twelve-gauge twelve. Words taste like gun smoke I'll hip-shoot bad guys like famous TV Indian Chuck Connors. Blam! Blam! I'll hip-shoot renegade Injuns? renegade Engines? like famous TV Indian the rifleman. Blam! Blam! Tricky Injuns? Engines? and renegades look a lot like Injuns. But don't wanna shoot Indians.

I bet I know what you're thinking. Believe me. Everyone tries telling him the rifleman's a white guy called Chuck Connors.

Everyone.

"Nuh-uh," says Yellow, "no séme? could play Geronimo like the rifleman."

You know, his great-grandfather Beltran, who love them old cowboy movies, went to his grave sorry he let the boy watch them with him. Old Beltran, near the end, say'd he watched them hoping one day the Indians would win.

Here's the catch. Yellow's four-year-old mind doesn't fathom twelve, except that twelve is not tomorrow, and probably not next week, either. But the shotgun shells sit way up high on the big-people-only shelf.

"You hear that?" Sis asks.

"What?" Another mouse in the Corn Flakes?

Another family of raccoons in the attic?

An elk or white tailed chewing new bark off the cherry tree?

No. Chuckie hears it too.

He hears *the quiet!* just as Sis says, "It's too *quiet!*"

Their mugs slam to the table as one.

As one they race to the other room.

As one their mouths freeze in an unyelled no.

How does a lumpy-drawerred four-year-old boy stay atop an old wooden rocker without smashing his head on the floor? How does that frail 120-year-old wood not splinter under his twenty-six pounds of nuclear energy?

That pesky Gravity asks those very same questions.

That 120-year-old wood rocking chair asks those very same questions.

Gravity stomps her foot: "I make the rules around here."

That 120-year-old rocking chair says, "I may be old, but I got a trick or two left in me still."

Yellow's fingers paw at the shotgun shell jar as effective as a declawed cat working the arm of your favourite chair.

Gravity stomps her leaded foot and that old rocking chair shoots out like a curling rock--Hurry! Hurry hard!

Now you might think Yellow would land in a bawling, skin-wrapped heap of four-

year-old, positively charged neutronium.

You might think that.

But no.

Yellow hits the ground feet first, smiles up his cocky little Johnny Twelvegauge smile and saunters off, thumbs hooked into his Pull-ups®. Physics has no lessons for Yellow.

Gravity fails to make her point. That 120-year-old rocking chair says, "Wheee! Do it again! Do it again!"

Well, she ain't dead yet, i'nit?

Anyways, that smile melts Sis's mad like ice cubes in a bonfire. You can't stay mad at the boy. No one can. That boy Yellow, a good boy really, sure got charm to match his energy. Too bad, Sis thinks, too bad he can't use that energy of his to do good.

Then she puts a hand to her mouth, thinks: Damn and double-damn. I'm s'posed to teach him how to harness that power for good. I'm a lousy mother. Too tired to cry and too tired to dam the flood of self-loathing rushing her way, Sis blurts a tear that stinks of lake-bottom water.

Chuckie puts a beefy paw between her shoulder blades--according to Chuckie, that's a hug--and says, "Listen, Sis. Leave the little yard ape here with me. I'll take him fishing or something."

"Don't you dare take him down to River."

"As if. I know better than that." He laughs.

Sis does not. Sis needs a sweat bath, a smudge, and a tea.

But not another whisktea. Like Sis said: one's enough.

Sis grabs Yellow. She plants kisses where his face was. Yellow, a hooked worm of a boy, squirms and fusses. Instead of kissing his mother, not even a polite little cheek kiss.

Chuckie laughs.

You might laugh when I tell you that little shit Yellow presses his lips to his mom's, like a sweet little kiss. All lovey and sweet. Then that little shit blows a giant raspberry.

Right into his mom's mouth.

A sloppy splatter of four-year-old spittle and neutronic germs.

She unhugs Yellow and jumps backwards like that raspberry of his fired from a 12-gauge.

"Sick!" says Sis.

Yellow laughs. Gotcha, Mom, he thinks.

Shoulda seen that coming, Sis thinks. She wipes her mouth and chin with her sleeve. You almost never see her do stuff as rude as that. Almost never.

Chuckie, slow-shaking his head, laughs. Chuckie thinks, kid needs some new material. His schtick's in a rut. But with his trademark grin, Chuckie says, "Better hurry up and get gone. I could change my mind."

Sis looks between her son and her brother and sees her sweat bath.

Out the door she dashes.

In dashes Young Purple. Purp for short. Young Purple, a yellow lab with maybe nine undamaged brain cells--probably born that way; it happens sometimes--likes food more than fetch, more than a good swim, but not more than a belly or back scratch. You know that spot, that one right at the base of the tail. Purp never tires of that.

He'll let you scritch him there all damned day long. Your fingernails will fill with dog dander and what all else. Your hand will stink like unwashed rug. Your hand will stink for days maybe, no matter how hard you scrub it. Purp's superpower almost beats out spəpəplánt's. Almost but not quite.

And Purp, he doesn't care. Maybe he likes you more now that you stink like someone he knows pretty well. You could be his sibling. Purp always wanted a big family, but Chuckie and Edna snipped that dream early on.

Edna says all men's brains in their nut sack.

She says, "Purp left his brains in a tin dish on a steel tray at the vet's."

Chuckie says, "So?"

Edna says, "So you think that's what happened to you, hon?"

"Naaaaaaaaaaaaaw!" he goes. "Naw, just fell on my head a coupla times."

They laugh. They know Chuckie never fell on his head. They know he is pretty bright. Usually.

What's worse: a big-brained dog making 100,000 puppies, or a loveable idiot who doesn't even hump your guests' legs?

I don't have the answer.

You tell me.

And don't you think for one second that Edna thinks Chuckie will hump their guests' legs.

And don't you worry that maybe Chuckie will hump your leg if you visit him and Edna. Cos Edna put him on a short leash.

A very short leash.

Now I'm joking.

If Chuckie humped legs, he'd only hump Edna's. Chuckie hasn't humped Edna's leg since that one time, when they were sixteen. They'd had a few. And Chuckie didn't know better.

So, back to our story.

Think of Sis in her sweat bath singing songs as she pours water on the grandfathers. She softens like steamed willow boughs. So relaxed you could weave her into a basket. But don't. Hard to play mom when you're bound to a bunch of willow sticks, i'nit?

Now over at Chuckie's, Yellow has hold of Young Purple's tail.

"Giddy-yup go, you ornery old varmint! Giddy-yup go, or it's the glue factory for you!"

Purp sits, scratches behind his ear. He doesn't mind that little two-legged hanging off his tail, but wishes he would do what the Creator put him on the planet for: "Scratch my backside, loud two-legged!"

No one in Yellow's world says things like *giddy-yup* or *ornery old varmint*, or *it's the glue factory for you!* He learns such language from the TV. Those movies he watched with his great-grandfather taught him that language. John Wayne. Randolph Scott. Gary Cooper. Burt Lancaster. Henry Fonda. Kirk Douglas.

Mostly John Wayne and Randolph Scott.

And of course that famous Indian actor, the rifleman. Like I said earlier, just try telling Yellow otherwise.

Purp, maybe smart enough to know his little two-legged will not skritch and scratch his itchy spots, so he sighs like an old mutt and plops onto the dusty grass.

Best not ask how Chuckie knows that look.

Chuckie gets a big idea. He winks at Purp. "Keep the yard ape busy a minute, Purp."

Lolling tongued Purp sighs as Chuckie sneaks from the room. The tall two-legged did not say, "treat"; he did not say, "dinner"; he did not say anything worth hearing. He thought about gnawing a deer's tibia. He thought about them scritch the high-voiced two-legged gave when she had long red nails.

In walks Chuckie. "Hey, Nephew. Leave Young Purple alone for a second. Turn on the tube, hey? Let's see if them cartoons is on."

"Scooby Dooby Doo, where are you?"

Yellow chants, "Scooby" all the way to the old TV. Scooby. Scooby. Scooby.

He pushes the on button. Scooby. Scooby. Scooby.

He pulls the on button. Scooby. Scooby. Scooby.

"Uncle! You tricking me?"

Scooby. Scooby. Scooby. He creeps behind the TV. Scooby. Scooby. Scooby. He traces the cord to the wall. Scooby. Scooby. Scooby.

Chuckie, lower lip extended, nods. That boy, he thinks. Pretty smart, that boy.

"Look around, Neph. The power musta went out."

Yellow's whole body collapses into a pout. His face screws itself into a spongeful of tears.

Chuckie says, "You know how we can fix it?"

Yellow knows. You get out the coal oil lamps, the candles, the wooden matches from way up high on the big-people-only shelf, and you curse out the hydro people until them lights come back on. But there's no way his uncle will make him say swears ever again. No goddamned way.

Oops.

Now's as good a time as any to tell you that Chuckie has one cow left in his field. One he and Edna didn't have the heart to sell when they had to scale down their farm some years back. They call her Fred, named after Edna's brother. Anyways, Fred's milk's dried up, so all she does is eat, fart, and sleep.

Chuckie leads Yellow to Fred's field. Along the way he picks up a galvanised two-quart funnel. Fred's field has no gate. She has seen life on the outside and wants nothing to do with it.

Now Chuckie picks up an old whiskey bottle, a length of even older garden hose, and a roll of Duct Tape®.

He tapes one end of the hose to the funnel, and the other to the bottle.

"You see Fred there? Fred makes gas for the generator."

Fred gots no hose. Fred gots no numbers on her face. Fred gots them numbers hided in her mouth? That why you never open your mouth, Fred? Fred gots numbers instead a teeths. Numbers instead a teeths. I want numbers instead a teeths. Numbers teeths. Teeths numbers. She gots numbers instead a teeths? Do cows gots teeths? Never seed cow teeths.

Hey, wait a sec. Wait one sec. Somethin else not right here. Somethin else wrong. Fred don't got Esso painted on her. Don't got Shell painted on her. Don't got PetroCan painted

When he can talk again, Chuckie says, "Hope them Pull-ups® got windshield wipers."

"Why"

"Cos I think you got a lotta spray with that one."

Yellow frowns. Spray? That mean my got superpower farts? Super Fart. *(titter)*
Superfartfart. *(titter)* Suuuuuuuuper fart. *(titter)*

Chuckie sniffs the air over Yellow. Sis would lift the kid up and sniff his butt. So would Edna. But not Chuckie. He would cut a hole in the outhouse big enough to stick his head through, if Edna would let him.

"You got poops in your pants?"

Yellow shakes his head so hard it looks like an airplane propeller. A bright red airplane propeller.

"How bout we change it anyways? Look good for Super Fred, hey?"

Yellow staggers a bit. Maybe shook his head too hard. Chuckie puts the contraption down in Fred's line of sight. She lows and sidesteps away from it. Chuckie thinks, "You remember, i'nit?" Fred, lowing, nods her head.

Chuckie hefts Yellow up. Even at arms length, a huge stink slinks from the boy. He crosses his fingers, sucks in a giant breath. "Be a nugget. Be a nugget. Be a nugget."

Eyes closed, Chuckie sticks a set of crossed fingers under the waistband and puuuuuuuuls it.

One-eye-squinty peek.

Not.

Squint gets a little bigger.

A.

Squint the size of the moon.

Nugget.

Inside of Yellow's Pull-Ups® looks like a Jackson Pollock canvas.

Chuckie thinks, "One good fart, that one." It will be a story he tells when Yellow brings girls home for dinner. It will start, "Then there's the time Yellow here thought his butt had super powers. Hey Neph, member that one? ..." Chuckie will stretch the story out long enough to make Yellow burn red from the tips of his toes to the tips of his hair. In the best part of the story, he will say he had to spray down Yellow's backside with the garden hose, and Yellow howled and squealed and kicked and fussed so much that he got his own poop in his hair, and had to shower under the kitchen faucet, and Chuckie had to wash him down with dish soap. And cos Yellow quack and squirm and flail around, Chuckie oppsed way too much dish soap onto his nephew. Rinse. Rinse. Rinse. Chuckie will tell Yellow's girlfriend, "That boyfriend of yours scream so much, you'd think I was waterboarding him." That story will help make his nephew a man, a good man. Maybe. But till then, Chuckie wrangle Yellow into new Pull-ups® and thinks to tell Edna, when we decided not to make babies, we got it right.

"I dunno. Maybe cos she come down from the sky. Yeah. Down she came with a whomp that rattled your great-grandpa's uppers. Shook the tea from his mug.

"Yup, down she come, made a crater that took out most of the orchard."

"Nooooooo! Mom says Fire took it."

"Your mom's smart, but she don't always remember things right. Now do you want

that story or what?"

Yellow nods an exuberant yes. That's fancy talk for *crazy-happy*.

"So, your great-grandpa and great-grandma run out to see what's the what. And you know what the what is, i'nit?"

"Freddie! Fred! Fred!" says Yellow. " Suuuuuuuuuuuper Fred!"

Fred munches a mouthful of straw. Them two-legged's blah-blah-blahs give her gas. Her tail swish-swishing back and forth, forth and back, swatting away their deer fly words. Go away, let me eat. Fred farts. Yellow laughs, cos, well, fart.

Chuckie laughs, cos. Well. Fart.

"Yeppers."

Fred lifts her tail. Fred shows Yellow exactly why you don't let a cow live in your house, and why the only cow you bring into the kitchen has visited a butcher first. Fred pivots till her backside faces away from them. For good measure she sidesteps three steps.

"Anyways, your great-grandparents walk into that smoking hole and find Fred chewing her cud. Her fur's a little singed is all. Looks up at them with those same big brown eyes gawking our way now."

She side-eyes Chuckie's contraption, too, cos when them really old two-leggeds shuffled Fred's territory, they tried filling her up with jizz from Tony Anthony's prize bull, Barney, after Barney showed no interest in Fred, and Fred even less interest in Barney. Sky-cow Fred and prize bull Barney had no idea what perfect calves they could have made. No idea at all.

Nothing as fancy as a vet with a fistful of frozen Barney-jizz, not even a turkey

baster, just that two-quart galvanised funnel and a lunch bag full of a fresh load from the bull. Fred fears nothing except that funnel. Don't you worry; I will save that story for another time.

"Like Superman?" says Yellow.

At four-years old, Yellow knows more about the comic books and cartoon TV than he does about his own family. And his mother doesn't even own a TV set.

"Yeah, kinda like Supe, for sure, hey? But a cow."

"You tricking me, Uncle?"

"Naaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! And she only has one superpower."

"Her farts are generator gas, i'nit?"

"Yeppers."

"How?"

"Fred won't say."

"She's a cow. Cows don't talk!"

"Sure they do! Anyways, she's a supercow, but."

Yellow wiggles his arse end while chicken-stepping small circles. He sings, "Butt. Butt. Supercow butt-butt."

"Listen, Nephew. I need you to do a real important job."

Yellow stands stone still. Yellow lives for important jobs. Somehow, this important job will fix the broken electricity. Will this one also make him Supercow's Jimmy Olson?

Or maybe even better, Batcow's Robin! Na na na na na na na, Batcow! Pow!

Whizz! Pop! Bam!

Na na na na na na na, Batcow!

"Hey nephew, you get all that?"

Na na na na na na na na. Yellow shakes Supercow, na na na na na na na, Batcow, and all the super villains from his head. He counts them as they hit the ground at his feet: one, two, four, two, six, three, ten, thirty-ten, twenty-eleven, three, four, five His head now empty, Yellow could listen.

"... it takes about three good farts to fill a bottle this size," Chuckie continues.

Yellow na na na na na na na nods.

"Wait! Wait just one god-- --" Na na na na na na na na, oops. "Wait just one second, Uncle."

"What?"

"You tricking me?"

"Naaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Why would I trick you?"

"Cos that's what you do. But that's not it."

"Then what bug's crawled up your butt?"

"No bugs, Uncle. What if Supercow Super Fred poops on me?"

"He he he. You jump clear, unless you like cow-poop baths."

"Sick!"

Now you're about to see why I told that little story about Barney, the two-quart funnel, and Fred. Fred, who has as much superpower as you, circles her back-end away from the little two-legged and the infernal contraption. As uncomfortable as the cold skinny bits of the funnel felt, it didn't hurt her a bit. She simply objected to anyone violating her, no matter how soothing the old two-legged cow's songs and warm hands rubbing her neck, ears, and

throat soothed.

"Supercow! Na na na na na na na na, Batcow! Supercow, stop!" Yellow chants and chicken steps dodging and weaving away from Fred's swishing tail.

Chuckie points his lower lip at Fred's behind. "Good work, Nephew. You almost got her. Remember, you'll get your prey as long as you go slow and patient."

"Slow and patient, Supercow. Slow and patient, Batcow. I will get your magic farts and watch some Scooby TV, Scooby TV, Scooby TV."

"I'ma build a fire. Make fresh tea. You need anything, you holler. Got it?"

Yellow sings and chicken steps toward Fred's back end. Fred pivots her behind away from the boy, side-eying that annoying little two-legged and that infernal contraption.

Chuckie flicks the main breaker back on, plugs in the electric kettle. He enjoys a smoke and a green tea on the back porch.

Yellow creeps toward Fred's backend. Na na na na na na na na, Batcow! The contraption bomp-bomps behind him. Na na an na na na na na, Batcow!

As she sidesteps away from Yellow's grabby little hands and behind him, the bomb-bomping contraction, Fred flicks her tail at the little-two-legged. No no no no no no no no, Naughty Boy!

If necessary, Fred can shuffle around her pen all day and all night. In her head she hums "Putin' on the RITZ®." Silly two-leggeds wearing crackers instead of eating them. RITZ® crackers.

Silly cow doesn't know that *RITZ*® and *ritz* two different words. Silly language, that English.

To keep from tiring of the annoying little two-legged and his infernal contraption, Fred shuffles across her yard, stink-eyes the tea-sipping chain-smoking old two-legged, and lows at the fence until the little one catches up to her. Then she side-steps him humming "Putin' on the RITZ®," and wishing the annoying little two-legged

Hours pass and Yellow is no closer to catching Fred's farts. The contraption drags behind him, bomp-bomping over patches of crab grass. Bomp-bomp-tunking over mossy rocks. The funnel's lip is dented and caked with dung. The Duct Tape® holding the funnel to the hose has shredded, leaving only five or ten threads stuck to the funnel. The bottle holds fast.

Chuckie smokes and sips tea.

Yellow, on a mission, carries on, despite the fact his hands cramp, his feet burn, and he wants to sleep. Yellow never wants to sleep.

Chuckie picks up his nephew. "Good work out here. Good job."

"But Scooby" Murmurs Yellow.

"It worked. You got the power back up."

Chuckie pats Fred's bony back end. He boots the contraption toward the edge of Fred's pasture.

Fred munches her cud. Good, them crazy two-leggeds got something better to do.

Yellow falls asleep on the couch. Scooby and the gang prattle on in the background.

Sis shows up around nine. She has that just-got-laid look to her. Relaxed as her sleeping son.

She expects Yellow to run straight into her arms, crying Mom-mom-

momeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Being a mom's a pretty good gig, i'nit?

Sure is.

The house is quiet. Too quiet, Sis says.

The quiet shakes that beautiful calm, but doesn't break it. Chuckie's better with kids than most fathers Sis knows. Happy and sad, that, thinks Sis. Sad and happy.

She walks around back, sneaks in through the kitchen. She expects Chuckie to meet her at the door. He always does. You just can't sneak up on him.

Go ahead, try it.

The door clicks closed behind her.

No Chuckie.

She peeks into the other room.

Her boy slack-jawed snoring on the couch. Peaceful in the blue glow radiating from the TV set. She settles into the 120-year-old rocker, wraps Edna's woollen shawl around her and falls asleep smiling at her son and brother.

She could ask Chuckie for his secret. He might tell her a story. He might tell her a whopper. He might tell her the truth hidden in whopper-like words.

Best not to ask, i'nit?

You know I could tell you his secret, but like Chuckie, my lips are sealed.

Next morning, all jungle-mouthed and slept-in clothes, Sis makes bannock and scrambled eggs. Sis's bannock, although not as good as Edna's--who's is?--makes your mouth water. Makes you eat one piece more than you should. Well the bannock itself doesn't make

you do anything. You just blame it. It's easier that way.

Yellow can't care less about whose bannock tastes better. Pour Lumberjack Syrup® on it, and it's the best bannock he's ever had. *The best!* A year from now he will fall in love with his Auntie Edna's bannock, topped with Imperial margarine--cos he wants that crown to appear on his head and he will sing, *dah dah dah-daaaaah!* Then check his head for the crown. With or without the Imperial crown, Auntie Edna's bannock is *the bestest of the best.*

Not even grudgingly, Sis will agree. Sis sometimes puts in cinnamon, sometimes sliced banana, sometimes blueberries. Even so, Yellow still says his Auntie's bannock is *the bestest of the best.*

Kids.

Back to breakfast now. Chuckie splits his bannock in half. Inhales the steam. Shovels his scrambled eggs between the two halves. No margarine. No bacon. No sausage. Just bannock and scrambled eggs.

"What'd you two do yesterday? Did you go fishing?" Sis asks.

I'm pretty sure she knows they didn't go fishing. Chuckie probably said they would to tease her. Cos Sis fears Yellow will run off and get swallowed up by River. Take her son the same way She took his father.

"I caught farts for the generator," Yellow sings. Yellow laughs. He can say *fart* at the dinner table and not get swatted upside the head.

"You what?" says Sis.

"Supercow Fred. Na na na na na na na Batcow Fred, ma ma ma ma ma ma ma Mom." He threshes another chunk of bannock. "You know her farts are the gas that keep the

generator running."

"Supercow? Batcow? Magic farts?" She says to her brother through gritted teeth.

Chuckie points at his masticating jaw. He fakes a food orgasm and slows down his chewing. Thinks: food tastes better when you take your time chewing. He stops chewing, swishing it into a bannock and scrambled egg slurry he swallows bit by bit.

"Good bread, Sis. Tastes a lot like Mom's."

Sis nods. Inside her pride fires up its marching band and throws itself a ticker tape parade.

"So, cow farts?"

"Yeah, you know Fred's got super farts."

You can't argue that logic. Okay, you could, but it would make this story longer than it needs to be.

"And you know how she feels about the funnel?"

"Uh huuuuuh." Like you, she's figured out how they spent their day. Her brother's even smarter than she thought. But she wants to make Chuckie sweat. Well try to make him sweat, anyways.

"I couldn't get her to fart in the bottle. But she farted so much the generator worked again."

"The generator?"

"O, Sis, you know I picked it up at the auction." Chuckie has a generator, a small one. Two stroke that runs on a gas and oil mix.

"And it runs on Super Fred's gas."

"Yeppers. I rigged it to, so I wouldn't have to run into town to buy gas all the time."

"Magic, huh?"

"Weren't you listening, Mom? Not magic. Superpowers."

Yellow lifts a cheek and cuts one. A loud one. He sings, "Super farts."

Chuckie and Sis say, "What'd I tell you about farting at the dinner table?"

"It was on accident."

Sis says, "Accident my eye."

"Check your pants, Nephew. I think you crapped in 'em again."

Sis says, "Again?"

"No bigs, Sis. Hey, Nephew?" Chuckie winks at Yellow.

Now Yellow doesn't know about the word *conspiracy*, but he knows what one is. Ha ha ha, ma ma ma ma ma ma ma Mommy.

Sis sighs. She should strong-arm her brother's secret from him. But breakfast. She savours her bannock, and her nipples tingle and pop with the gooseflesh popping the length of her arms. And yeah, her toes curl too.

So, that's the story of how Yellow spent a day catching farts with Fred and Uncle Chuckie.

CHAPTER 11
SNĶÝÉP AND HIS SHINY NEW CHOKER

This one day that tricky Coyote says, "time for me to get out and see what's what."

So out he goes, singing a song about blue skies, and that song so pretty. So pretty them birds stop doing what they do, and them birds sing along. You got them crows, them ravens, and even that Magpie, singing harmony like only them birds can sing, and all them birds hop from pine tree to fir tree to pine tree. So many of them birds singing along that them trees sway, singing, "shhh-shhh, shhh-shhh," like rattles, and become part of Coyote's blue sky song.

Them birds and them trees keep time with Coyote,
singing their beautiful song about Sky so blue.

But Sky? Maybe she think it a sad song. Cos that Sky? She screw up her eyes.

And those eyes of hers? The colour of mid-May afternoon. Them eyes cloud up and spit rain as heavy as hail on Coyote and his chorus of birds, so he bolt for cover, and them birds hop inside Cedar's tight-knit branches, mostly dry and safe, and they laugh at Coyote as he runs for cover.

And he get cover all right.

Inside a perfect, round cave in a nearby mountain.

Scratching his wet head, suspicious, and maybe confused, SnĶýép says, "A mountain? That one must be new. I never seen it before."

(Now you and I, we know that mountain's no mountain.

No, that mountain, just a pile of Big City garbage, a pile of Big City sewage, and Big

City shit dumped on Coyote's land, out of sight of Big City people. But Coyote? I guess he don't know about Big City and Big City shit.)

Coyote says, "This one different from all the rest. Soft and mooshy, got a smell to it. Got a familiar smell to it, but not a smell from around here. And its rocks all pretty, smooth, and mostly shiny. Some of them as white as baby's teeth. Some of them as yellow as ripe corn. Some of them redder than a Great Lakes sunset. And not a single blade of grass. And not a single prickly pair. And not a single sage bush, well, no living sage, anyways. Except some caught head first around that new mountain's base.

(Yeah, just dead tumbleweeds, blown into that mountain of Big City shit.)

So Coyote, he dive over that ring of tumbleweed and into that perfect, round cave-- (That cave? just an old washing machine.)--inside the perfect centre of that huge white rock, half-unveiled in that new mountainside. And that Sky's tears rain down, ting off Coyote's cave, like when it bounce off old Harvey Andrew's tin-roofed shed. Not unpleasant, that *ting ting ting*.

So Coyote curl up,
and slip his nose under his tail.

And that smell there kinda remind him of that mountain, the one holding that cave, this one, keeping him dry.

Sniffing his butt hole, Coyote murmur, "But that can't be. Cos I would know of any creature in my territory big enough to leave behind a pile like that."

Sky's rain song sing him into peaceful sleep.

That Coyote drop into sweet sleep, and dream of chasing his wife's sister again. And

catching her again. And loving her up, in a good way. Again.

They love each other up, them two, Snkýép and his wife's sister. In a perfect, round cave whose walls sing back to them two. Coyote and his wife's sister, their song of lust, and pleasure.

Coyote jolt from his beautiful dream, shaken from sleep by a world-ending rumble. A monstrous hiss and roar. And the world around him, now cast into deep blackness. And now cast inside a silence he hasn't heard since that first time he awoke, and walked this world alone.

So Coyote think he can restart the world,

and maybe do things different this time. Maybe better.

(Coyote must be addled from sleeping with his head too close to his butt, cos you and I, we know that Coyote can't create anything.)

So Coyote suck in a huge breath before he start tunnelling through this new mountain into a world he can remake.

He think about the sort of land he'll make this time. And think about the sort of two-leggeds he'll let in this time. And think about the sort of birds he'll let in this time: more crows and ravens and magpies for sure, together we sing so good. O, wait, maybe not them birds.

Coyote stop his digging, think: "Hey, our song made Sky cry. And what if she cried so much the top of this big, soft mountain bleed onto me while I dream? What if.... What if our song, that one we sang together, buried our old world. And left me alone to start all over

again? Making a new world every time we gather and sing seem a lotta work. And some days I got better things to do. So maybe I won't make them birds after all. Maybe take away their voice. Maybe sour their sweet song."

So Coyote, almost out of breath, dig through shit and stuff, through slime and goo, and finally he break the surface. He wheeze in a huge breath, and see a world almost exactly like that old one.

Sky above, mottled grey and blue, and that Cedar, dripping rain, and full of his old buds. Them crows. Them ravens. And that Magpie, stunned silent as that Coyote shake off that Big City shit, Big City goo.

Coyote, all slick and greasy, says, "Behold! I dreamed a new mountain. And here it stands, right where I dreamed it."

Say them crows and them ravens: "Why you dream yourself underneath of it then? And moan for your sister in-law, hey?"

Draped in his solemn suit, Magpie says: "No dream brought that new mountain. No. A monster like a giant snake, maybe, rumbled through here while you dreamt. And that monster slither through here. Leave a shit on your mountain cave. That huge shit on it, that mountainous turd you just swam through."

"No," protests fast thinking Coyote. "No. That cannot be, for I dreamt this mountain. I did. And I awoke to find it here."

(In it, more like.)

Well, that Magpie, he shed his solemn suit. He shed that suit and laugh. (Wouldn't you laugh at such a silly lie?)

Them crows and them ravens? Them birds croon, "ḡúu, skéw, ḡáxt skéw. ḡúu, ḡáxt skéw!"

Coyote, he sniffs, says, "Fine. Don't believe me."

Magpie says, "It's you not believing me. But go. Follow that trail there. That one there. In front of you."

"This one," asks skeptical Snkǵép. "This funny looking snake trail?"

"Yeah, yeah, that the one," say them crows and them ravens.

"You sure?"

Them ravens sigh. Them crows sigh. Together, them ravens and them crows say, "Why would we lie to you?"

Coyote think on this a minute. Then he think long and hard about him dressed in a long purple gown, trimmed with sable and white rabbit fur. With buckskin pockets. Them pockets got long, swaying fringes. He think to add silver conchos, but change his mind-- Maybe them conchos just a little too much. Don't I look good and royal already?--Wearing a gold hat covered in polished stones from that monster shit. Then he forget all about them royal clothes. Think some more about the monster and his giant shit.

Finally, chest all puffed out, Coyote, says, "Maybe. Just maybe something to what you say, Magpie. Maybe a monster after all. I'll show him. You watch. You'll see."

And them birds? Them crows, them ravens, and that Magpie, they paint on their gravest faces. They make them most serious eyes. But their laughing ones crack that serious paint.

Coyote slip on that new mountainside, that mountain of Big City shit. He slip and

stumble down. Down. Down. Jet a wake of bad smelling stuff.

"You gonna track that beast?" ask Magpie. Snk'yép, he nod. "Then maybe you should roll around in that mess some more, hey? Go deep undercover. Fool that monster so good, maybe make it think you come from its own butt?"

"Hey," says Coyote, "good thinking there."

So Coyote drop and roll around. Coat himself good and thick. Got small stones and pebbles. Them rocks, real light. Real colourful, too. All green, blue, yellow, and red. Some of them rocks dangle from the tips of his fur. Tangled in his fur, his tail. He snip at his tail, thinking maybe it someone else's.

"Behave like you look," says Magpie. "Look at you, all dressed up like you a warrior ready to scrap."

Now that Coyote, he beam like a new dad. His smile so big, his mouth fall off from the weight of it. And it sink into the muck. And that muck seep inside. Its stink stick to the tongue, the teeth, and the roof. That mouth cough and gag and spit and cough.

"Hey!" shout that mouth. "Hey, get me outta here!"

So that Coyote put his mouth back in his face. He spit. He gag. He cough. He wipe off that muck on the back of a paw, then spit and gag some more.

"Now look at you," preens Magpie. "Look at you, teeth like a movie star. Regalia like the finest pow wow dancer. But you missing something, i'nit? You need one more thing. Just one more piece to show that monster you a great warrior. A great chief, and not someone to mess with. Hmm, I see that one thing just a few feet from this old cedar."

Coyote sees nothing, but them smooth, shiny rocks: silver, gold, copper, green, nine

different shades of blue,

even a pink one, or two.

Coyote think, What a guy gotta eat to make his shit so pretty?

"I don't see nothing," says Coyote. "I don't see nothing at all."

Magpie point to a shiny silver rock and says, "Look there."

"Here?" asks Coyote.

He pick up that silver rock, all hollow and coppery on the inside. Hollow and smooth as River's rocks. Got a piece of green paper stuck to it.

"This the piece I need?" asks Coyote.

"Yeah-yeah, yeah-yeah," says Magpie. "That it all right."

Coyote scrunch up his nose, twist his face into a scowl, and he says, Hey, look! A name tag stuck to it. Name of Del Monte Tomatoes #10. You think Del Monte Tomatoes #10 gonna miss it?"

"No-no, no-no," says Magpie. "Old Del got at least nine more. He won't miss that one. So just yank off that name tag."

Them crows and them ravens, hold their breath. And wait.

"That rock," says Magpie, "maybe make a fine choker. And make you a noble warrior. A formidable warrior. A fearsome hunter. Not a creature to mess with. You get that monster running scared, and he never shit in your woods again."

"Yeah-yeah," say them crows and them ravens. "Make him take his dump elsewhere."

Coyote's chest inflate like a blimp, and his smile start to weigh him down, cos it get so big. But Coyote clamp down on that smile. Stop it before it get too big again.

Coyote look at that stone Del Monte Tomatoes #10 lost. He says, "This look like the shed skin of a rock."

"Now it a choker," say them crows and them ravens.

"Of course," says Coyote. "I knew that."

As Coyote slip that old tomato can over his muzzle, he says (his voice, all cop yelling, "put your hands where I can see them"): "Hey, this stone smell like tomato and salt! Smell so good I could eat it up."

(That coyote's own voice curl his own tail up between his legs.)

The serious paint on them crows and them ravens melt off. That serious paint on Magpie? It melt, too. And they laugh tears. Coyote fold back his ears and push that stone over his head, tight around his neck, but not too tight.

"Look at you," says Magpie.

"Ow whoo," say them crows and them ravens.

"A braver warrior I never seen," says Magpie. "And that choker? Wearing your choker like that, no monster could bite your throat. No arrow could pierce it. No blade could slit it."

And Coyote, he tip his head at them ravens, them crows and that Magpie. He shake the muck off a piece of rebar. Heft it like a spear.

"Off to battle," says Coyote. "Off to war. No more monster shitting in my woods. No more monster shitting on my land."

This story ends here, with Coyote armed, and ready for war.

CHAPTER 12
THE ONE ABOUT THE KID WHO SHOT A GREY SQUIRREL

this kid I knew got the blood thirst young
wanted to hunt, he say'd, about five that first time
shoulderin his father's thirty-ought-six
like soldiers he'd seen on the boob tube, some show
Rat Patrol maybe, I guess it don't matter much
coulda been that *Gomer Pyle*, too
kid lived in front a that thing

that boob tube

yeah, I guess I'd say blood thirst
damn kid wanted to kill somethin

not like he tortured the dog, or burned up ants

with one a them magnifying glasses

no, no, nothin like that

so just a kid who didn't know yet

what it meant to hunt

to take a life outta need

so this kid, marchin round the kitchen
barely strong enough to hoist his dad's gun
hoists it on his shoulder all army-guy like

marchin round the kitchen table
knocks over a cup, the salt and pepper shakers
hurtin nothin, except the front sight
dad, hoppin mad, snatches his gun from his son
spends the next two hours tryin to get that sight right
every time that gun miss a buck
he reset that front sight
resets it every time it miss a moose
or that no trespassin sign old Cooter MacDonald hung on his fence
out Potani, that sign facin the road?
like Cooter owns that land he squats on
That Dad, instead a punishin
his kid for playin with his gun
he gets his kid a twenty-two calibre pellet gun
a Crossman twenty-two break-barrel
CO₂ cartridge powered, beaut of a gun
perfect for a kid, one old enough to break that barrel, hey?
kid needed someone to load his gun
needed to rest it on a fence rail, or something
but that kid? he sure could shoot
and one day, out with his father crashin through the bush
after grouse

they stop to take a drink, must a bin one-ten in the shade

at least one-ten, maybe one-fifteen

a heat so dry it shrivels the eyes

and them two, father and son,

they rest against a cottonwood

in shade as hot as a bread oven

the water they brung rises like steam from a boiling kettle

yeah, that hot, but still not the hottest day we ever had

that one happened before my time

that day got so hot, they say'd, so hot River went down five feet

dropped five whole feet between sunup and sunset

that day, the hottest one ever, say'd the old timers,

the ones that would know such things

so this day

the one that father and his boy out huntin grouse

them two sittin under a cottonwood

evaporatin like an inch a water on River's bed

father tellin the boy about his first time out huntin with his father

in winter, snow up to his eight-year old arse

huntin rabbit, maybe grouse, and his own father

hopin to bag a moose someone say'd they'd seen

but they seed no scat, nothin

not a single sign a moose anywhere in them bushes
 all the while he's tellin his tale
 a grey squirrel chews them two out
 that five-year old boy and his dad
yeah, that dad goes,
I seen a hare, bout thirty yards up
nose twitchin, ready to bolt under a deadfall
first one we seen all day, that rabbit
that hare
and me, all tired from haulin this twenty-two
through thick bush, and snow up past my arse
thinkin we grab this rabbit, this hare
we could go home
have some bannock and tea while we warm up
so I pull back the bolt
slip a shell inside the chamber
like I'd done at least two hundred times before
flick off the safety
 here, the kid's father stops his story
 you hear nothin but River's faint roar
 and sweat drippin off nearby trees
 and that grey squirrel chitterin

so worked up, its tail ties itself into a knot
so I pull my gun up, easy as aimin at tin cans
sight that rabbit
that hare
sight a spot right between his eyes
and I take in a deep breath
slowly let it out
all this happenin in the space between two thoughts
just before the last of my air steams out my nose
POP!
that rabbit, that hare drops dead where he sat
so Dad, he takes my rifle
he takes my rifle, then hands me his Bowie knife
and tells me how to dress out my hare
walks me through it
right there in that snow
anyways, we take my hare, that rabbit home
and Mom
she butchers it
chops it up, and throws it in a pot with some onions,
some potatoes, some carrots
and a can a tomato paste we got from the Chinaman's store

while me and Dad we sit near the wood stove

sittin near the wood stove with tea, bannock and jam

listenin to Hank Williams records

tryin to get warm

and that squirrel,

that grey squirrel, louder still

pretty much shoutin over that father's rabbit huntin story

so that boy's father

he goes, *think you're ready to bag your first critter?*

yeah, that boy answers, and after, can I wear his tail on my belt?

that father, he laughs, and says, *sure but you got to get it, first*

he pops a pellet into his boy's gun

gets down on all fours

tells his son to rest the gun on his back

reminds him not to hold his breath

yeah, yeah, I know it, that boy says

and that squirrel, it chitters louder

almost sounds like it's callin out them two-legged trespassers

so the boy sights that squirrel, and his dad

chest all puffed out, smirks

one side of his head ready to tell him, *better luck next time*

the other crowin to his buds about the squirrel his boy

just a boy, barely five, barely talkin and walkin
but a crack shot, just five and his boy bags a squirrel
who would a thought this kid, barely outta diapers
shootin somethin alive
for the first time in his life
could hit that squirrel square between its eyes?
for sure not me, maybe not even his own father
so when that squirrel squeals out in pain
shrieks and drops outta that tree
like a rock off a cliff it drops
and not a drop a blood anywhere
lands on its back
legs up
and spread like they still cling to a branch
little kid squeaks himself
more mouse than cougar now
he and his father gawk at that fallen squirrel
I guess that's when that little kid sees them teats
all pink and swollen and stretched, six a them
six teats, all fat with milk
and that little guy goes, *what's wrong with him, Dad?*
and that boy's father says, *he's a she and got some babies in a nest somewhere*

maybe up in that same tree

and that little boy bursts into tears

he cries so hard that Sun can't melt them tears as fast as he makes them

he says, *sorry, I didn't know you'd die*

I don't want you to die

his father don't say nothin, except, *too late, she's already gone on*

and then he hands his boy a stick

tells him to dig a hole and put that squirrel in it

that father never had a taste for squirrel

can't say I know many who do

and that boy blubbers on his knees gettin

nowhere with that squirrel's grave

so the father snatches up the stick and carves out a bitty grave

pulls his skinnin knife and asks, *you want that tail for your belt?*

that kid?

he shakes his head like you just asked him if he wants a shit sandwich

so they bury that squirrel, cover up her grave with some rocks

and that boy?

he don't let his father talk about it all the way home

and some days later the boy goes

so dad?

so dad, what you think happened to them baby squirrels?

his father thinks a minute

takes his sweet time

searchin for the right words, maybe

but that silence scares the boy anyways

I dunno, hope a raven got em

better than them starvin to death, hey?

yeah, just what that kid needed to know

so that boy?

he puts that gun, along with all the pellets

and that box a CO₂ cartridges

way in the back of his closet

underneath of old teddy bears

and other stuff he'd outgrew

and maybe that boy don't think about killin

and about shootin his gun for a good long time

and maybe one day he did

CHAPTER 13

A WAGER

Yellow hiked eight miles to Uncle Chuckie's fish camp to invite him to dinner. On Friday, of all nights. *Normal people, even most of the old ones, got cell phones,* Yellow thought. *I could text a normal person: cum 4 a meal. 6?*

But not his uncle, who, serenaded by River, sat under that fat maple with some lame western story and sweet black tea in a cracked mug.

Walk eight miles. Pull up a chair. Have tea. Listen to a stupid story.

Have a smoke.

Yet another story.

Six came and went.

Night fell fast and hard enough to make the trees groan under its weight.

"Mom's gonna kill me," Yellow said.

"Why?" Chuckie said.

"Look at the time. She wanted us to eat like an hour ago."

"O, well," Chuckie said. "I could throw a couple a deer burgers on?"

Yellow scowled, tapping his feet like a woodpecker on meth.

"Smatter? Some place else you got to be?"

"Nah," Yellow mumbled. "I guess not. Not now, anyways."

"Trees told me somethin else."

"Trees?" Yellow said, all cocked brow and sneery sigh.

"Sure. They tell me ev'rythin I need to know. Like one a my nephews planned on

getting into some mischief in Vancouver."

Yellow blanched, choked on a breath, and threw up his hands. Chuckie hid behind his cracked mug.

After a time, Yellow said: "Trees! You get all your gossip from trees?"

"No, not all of it. Just the juiciest stuff," Chuckie said.

"Uncle, howm I spost to believe that?"

"I ever lie to you?" Chuckie inhaled deeply, and held his breath.

"All a time." Yellow smiled like he had just snared a rabbit.

"How bout you tell me when you think I lied," Chuckie said.

Yellow paced, lips pursed, shoulders taut. He pointed at his uncle, and gloated at him.

"What about the time you told me Mom's a black bear."

"No, not that one."

"Why not? Cos it's a load of bull?"

"No. It's not my story to tell."

"Not even when you told me it?"

"Yep. Shoulda kept that one to myself."

"I bet you're too chicken to admit you lied."

Chuckie shook his head, topped up his tea, lit a smoke. Had anyone else called him a chicken, Chuckie would have popped him one in the mouth. And the kid had to make a wager, a challenge that Chuckie could not let slide.

He tapped out his smoke into the Nabob can nailed to the maple.

"What's your bet?" Chuckie said.

"I bet you lied about my mom transforming into a bear. And I'm so sure of it, I'll put up my new dip net. Just finished it."

"It any good?"

"At least as good as yours."

"That's pretty big talk, kiddo."

"It's a good one, all right. Even put a carving in the handle. So, yeah, real good. Maybe the best one in the village." Again, the boy gloated. "And when I win this bet, what you givin me?"

"You could keep your net." He laughed through slitted eyes and clenched jaw.

"Right. How bout you pay me a hunnerd bucks when you lose."

"Holy. Cocky kid. That's a lot a money for a dip net. Tell you what. Make it fifty and you got yourself a bet."

"Ezekiel Moses offered me two hunnerd for it."

"Sure he did."

"Yep. Two big ones."

Chuckie thought, *Yeah, two singles, more like*. Chuckie laughed and offered his nephew a smoke from a new pack. They smoked. Yellow tapped ash onto the dirt and ground it in with the ball of his foot.

"So, Uncle, how you gonna get yourself outta this one?"

"I'll tell you after we smoke. Now be quiet, you."

As Chuckie smoked he thought of a way he could both keep his word to his sister, and win the wager. The outcome might anger his sister and her boy, but no one would get

hurt, and he would almost certainly have a new dip net for his trouble. He smiled. After snuffing his smoke out on a rock, he smooshed the butt into the coffee can. Yellow flicked his butt toward River. It tumbled into cracks between some of River's rounded rocks. Smoke meandered up.

"Pick that up. You wanna start a fire?"

"What could it hurt there? It's nothing but rock, sand, and water."

"If even one spark got up into the air, this whole mountain could go up in flames."

Chuckie snapped his fingers. "Like that. Now holster that smart mouth a yours and go get it."

"More like it'll end up in a fish's belly." Yellow slouched toward his discarded smoke, thinking curses he would never say aloud.

"You okay with makin fish taste like ashtray?"

"As if. You worry too much."

"I'd worry less if you acted more like I taught you."

Yellow poked his hand into the crevice and fished around for his still-smoking cigarette butt. A young gopher snake wiggled over his fingers.

"H'ai!" He yanked his hand from the crevice, scraping his knuckles. Blood oozed from his little wounds. Yellow sucked his scraped knuckles.

"You see that? A rattler just bit me."

"Gopher snake. She just danced over you."

"How djoo know?"

"She told me she hadda teach you a lesson."

Yellow pursed his lips and glared at his uncle.

"Don't get mad at me. You threw that cigarette butt. Now get it before somethin bad happens."

Yellow saw black. He jammed his fingers into the cracks between rocks, and with the force of surging River, flipped the ones he could. Before long, both his hands burned with scrapes and tiny cuts agitated by grains of black sand. After some time he found the cigarette butt and squished it into the Nabob can. Chuckie nodded. He saw Yellow's potential, despite his nephew's thick-skulled youth. Yellow, however, looked at his uncle and saw a talking donkey.

"You satisfied now?" Yellow said.

"Almost. There's no point in bein mad at me." Laughing, he gently swatted Yellow's shoulder.

"It was just one butt. It wouldn't of harmed no one."

"You gonna use an ashtray from now on?"

"I guess so."

"Good."

"Now when you going to admit the truth about my mother and gimme my fifty bucks?"

"New Moon in three nights. On that night, paint your face black, wear your darkest jeans and shirt, and your quietest shoes. Not them things you got on."

"Hey. Don't knock my kicks. They're Air Jordans. These babies cost a bundle."

"I don't know what you young people think, wasting money like that."

"Look at you. All of a sudden you in charge of my family's money? Anyways, what

them Tony Lamas cost you? Six hunnerd? Seven?"

"Eight-fifty, but that's different. A bull rider's gotta look good on that bull."

"When you ever ride a bull with them fancy boots on?"

"That's not the point." He thought about giving his nephew another cigarette. Then he thought again.

"Anyways, I need to look good when I'm ballin." Yellow became the picture of Jordan stuffing the net. "Girls like it."

His smile faded. His arms dropped to his sides.

"Hey, Uncle, why I have to dress like Night?"

"Answered your own question, i'nit?"

"Do you even have fifty bucks?"

Chuckie slid a tattered fifty dollar bill from his wallet and slapped it onto his nephew's thigh, perhaps harder than necessary.

"Put it under the door mat. Tomorrow you bring my new net and hang it beside my old one."

Yellow obeyed.

Three nights later the two met where an old deer trail forked from the Petani Road. Both men passed for shadows. Both walked with such stealth the air around them didn't stir, so quietly they didn't disturb the chorus of crickets. Chuckie put his hand flat on his nephew's chest and touched his nose to Yellow's.

"We can head back now, if you want, Nephew." His voice was barely audible over the

crickets', but Yellow heard every word as clearly as his own thoughts. "Your mother be mad if she ever finds out."

"Don't matter," Yellow said, as quietly as his uncle. "She's always mad at me about somethin, anyways."

"She's not."

"Seems like it."

After walking the trail for some time, the men stopped short of a clearing. Now he knew where he stood. His family picked soapberries here, had for hundreds of years. For as long as he could remember, he, his mother, and grandmother camped here every summer, picking berries for days and days. Chuckie pointed into the clearing. The cricket chatter stopped, their song interrupted by another, a prayer in *nle?kepmxcín*, sung in his mother's soft voice. Yellow's heart raced, and his feet urged him back the way they'd come. He pulled close to his uncle, squeezing the big man's forearm. His eyes went wide and round as Owl's, and refused to close; he bit his lip, holding back the scream trying to burst from him when he made out the shape of a dress, hung neatly from a dead fir branch about four feet from the clearing's edge. Chuckie's hand clamped on Yellow's quivering shoulder. He raised the *shhh* sign with his free hand, and admonished Yellow with a look that penetrated the thick night, then he turned away. Yellow edged forward, past the dress, and gaped into the small clearing, stamped flat by generations of deer bedding on it. His naked mother unrolled deer hides and spread them over the clearing floor. Yellow closed his eyes, tight, trying to fill his head with pictures of anything but his naked mother bent over a bunch of deer hides. And failed. She grunted loudly. He peeked as she beat a bush with a long, lacquered stick.

Berries, twigs, and leaves rained down on her and the deer hide mats she had laid. She dropped the stick.

She looked heavenward and cried out, "Xə́łscéme! Xə́łscéme! Xə́łscéme!"

She peeled the skin from her breast, revealing thick black fur. Yellow's eyes would not close. She pulled her hair, and with it her face, revealing a snapping black bear's head. He could not turn away. A glistening black bear, standing on her hind legs, stood over his mother's shed skin. Yellow's feet would not carry him off.

The bear raised her forepaws to the heavens and roared at New Moon. One by one, that bear shook the bushes so hard that less ripe berries, smaller branches, and leaves fell to the ground. Most missed the hides. As soon as the trees stood bare, she devoured everything, unripe and ripe berries, twigs, leaves, and unfortunate bugs who became entangled in her threshing claws.

In short order she had hoovered the ground around the soapberry bushes as clean as the spot on a carpet vacuumed by an Electrolux salesperson. With nothing left to eat, she put her forepaws over her eyes and cried.

Chuckie tugged on Yellow's shirt and led him down the mountain. Once they were safely at the Petani Road, some of the myriad questions bubbling inside Yellow boiled over his lips. Chuckie held his breath, nodded here, frowned there. At last, Yellow sucked in a loud breath and fell silent. Chuckie said nothing for quite some time. Yellow gritted his teeth and tapped his feet in time to his racing heart.

"Well, what you got to say for yourself? Why'd you show me that? Tell me, Uncle. You owe me that much."

"I owe you nothin. I tried gettin you to back off. I showed you the truth. That was our wager." He chewed his lower lip. "Anyways, it's your mother's story to tell, if she chooses to tell it." He pasted on his just-won-the-blackout-bingo smile. "As for me? I'll rest a while, then break in my new dip net. You comin? You could have my old one. It's still pretty good."

He patted Yellow's back, and started the long walk back to his house.

Yellow, a shadow among shadows, stood stone-still, rattlesnake-glaring at the darkness his uncle had disappeared into.

Yellow paced the length of his small room until first light, when his mother returned. He listened to her fitful sleep. At eight, three full hours later than usual, he crept into the kitchen, fired up the wood stove, pulled from its hiding place the pint jar of grease--a jar of liquid gold that had cost him a half-dozen sides of smoked fish--a can of lard, white flour and baking powder, and began fixing breakfast for his mother. Grease-covered bannock, sc̄wén in fish broth, green tea, and Tang, a feast suitable for Christmas.

The smell of bannock frying teased his mother awake. Her tummy grumbled, and a cramp as hard as a transition contraction doubled her over. She wrapped herself in her terry robe, slid her feet into her fur-lined moccasins and shuffled into the kitchen.

"You didn't go to so much trouble for me, did you?" she said.

"And why wouldn't I?"

"Of all days you pick to spoil me, you choose the one I am cursed with a sick stomach."

"Just a sick tummy, Mom?" He leered at his mother. "Look. Your favourite: grease on

bannock. How could you say no to this feast?"

Yellow waved the steaming plate under her nose. She grabbed her stomach and moaned, then dropped into her chair at the head of the table. He sniggered into his cuff, set his mother's plate in front of her. Grease, a treat whose aroma always filled her with joy, now sent her stomach tumbling like a car off a cliff. He placed a bowl of fish broth beside the bannock, and wafted its rich, salty aroma toward his mother's nose.

"I must of eaten something that disagreed with me."

"Maybe a whole lot of somethin that disagreed with you, i'nit?"

"What you getting at?"

"Gettin at? I just wanted to surprise you. Treat you special, the way you deserve."

She tensed, and willed her stomach still. Her eyes narrowed. She scanned his face, his body, his small movements and easy grace as he fussed over his kitchen work. He must have had another growth spurt and become a man overnight, as lithe and sly as his uncle.

"We got no lemon juice, but I hope you like it anyways."

Her stomach pushed tears out the corner of her eyes.

"Somethin wrong?" Yellow said. His mother shook her head, and groaned. He sagged, and then removed his mother's meal from her sight. He brought her a mug of green tea and kissed the top of her head. Her stomach rumbled, shaking her. She farted a fart that made Uncle Chuckie's most belligerent beer fart seem rosy and spring-like. Its stink tsunamied the small kitchen, knocking Yellow back two full steps.

Another fart rumbled past her tightly clenched buttocks. She moaned, excused herself and scuttled off to the bathroom. She slammed the door behind her, hiked up her robe and

dropped onto the seat.

Yellow carefully scraped the grease from his mother's bannock back into the jar, then placed it back in its hiding place.

He put on a Hank Williams record. He cleaned up the kitchen, and put away the food; cold bannock was still bannock. Then he sat at his place at the table and watched the bathroom door like a hunter in a duck blind. Waxen jasmine scent wafted out from under the bathroom door. Every now and then his mother moaned, mumbled, or cried out.

His mother wept into her palms. (*He knows.*) She sat on the toilet until the jasmine scented candle's wick tab was all that remained of it (*he knows*), until her buttocks and right leg fell asleep (*he knows*), and then she sat a while longer.

After quite some time, her stomach ache eased. She leaned against the vanity and tried to wash away her grief. Yellow stood at the bathroom door as it opened. He took his hangover-coloured mother by the arm and led her to her place at the kitchen table like she was a frail old woman.

"Too much soapberries'll do that to you, i'nit?" he said.

"Soapberry? What do you think you know?"

Yellow recounted all he had seen the night before, telling her everythin, excluding his uncle's part.

"So you know everything, then?"

"No. I got two questions: why you transform? You like a werebear, or somethin? And will it happen to me, too?"

She laughed. "Such a man, you! Go make us a big pot of tea and I'll tell you my

story."

He put the kettle on and brewed a big pot of salal tea. Lips pursed, she considered her story and how best to tell it. He tore open a package of saltines and dumped some onto a saucer. Her story came to life in her mind. He filled her favourite cup and put it and the crackers on the table beside her.

"K^wuk^wscémx^w," she said. She nibbled a corner of a saltine. Crumbs flaked from it. She licked the pad of her thumb and daubed them up, scraped them off on the edge of her plate.

Aside from his mother's delicate nibbling, and the wood stove's occasional pops and ticks, they sat in silence. Yellow cupped his mug, but didn't drink. His mother turned invisible. Yellow waited. Time passed. His mother became visible again, and refilled her mug.

"When I was a little girl, an old witch had a large farm at the edge of our village. You know that place as the Hollow."

Yellow shuddered, and squeezed his cup a little tighter.

"Anyways, she had the finest fruit trees in the whole canyon. She grew the blackest, juiciest, sweetest cherries you could imagine. You could get enough juice to fill four glasses from one of her peaches. But no one went on her land. They say'd she'd grind you into food for her dogs if she caught you in her gardens. The only ones that went on it was them she hired to pick." She nibbled another cracker and sipped some tea.

"I guess I was about five, and even though I knew better, I sneaked into that witch's orchard and stole a handful of cherries. I gobbled them down and wiped my hands on a

fencepost, but my chin was stained black, I guess, cos Mom knew right away what I'd done. She prayed while she scrubbed my face and hands, and then gave me such a spanking, and told me to never do it again. That was the end of it, until that witch's peaches ripened."

She sniffled into a tissue. Drew a deep breath.

"Instead of sneaking in and grabbing the nearest peach, I went after a big fat one way up high in an old tree. Now I could climb a tree as good as any boy and never worried about falling, so I scramble up that tree like a squirrel. The farther out I go on this branch, the more it bends and creaks. But my watering mouth and grumbling tummy egg me on. All I see is that giant peach, and I don't hear nothing, not until--just as I grab my peach: *Snap!*--I crash to the ground. My prize, lost, even as peaches hail all around me. I get up on my knees and think it's not so bad because I haven't cut myself or broken any bones, and instead of one peach, I got a whole bunch."

Her son, his jaw hung slack, leaned toward her. She peeled his mug free of his white-knuckled grip, one reason she never could tell him stories before putting him to bed.

"But before I could pick them up, I'm swallowed by a shadow so cold I could see my own breath. When I look up, it's into that old witch's angry face.

"'You destroyed my best peach tree,' she says.

"'I'm sorry. It was on accident,' I say, and start to cry.

"'Nothing happens on accident,' she says to me, real mean.

"'Anyways, it's just one branch and a few peaches,' I say.

"'My best tree. My best peaches,' she sneers. 'And you killed it.'

"She looms over me like a snake about to strike a mouse, pulls me to my feet and

gives me a brain-rattling shake. Shakes me so hard my insides vibrate long after she lets go of me.

"I think you're a little bear,' she says, 'clumsy with greed, and a slave to those worms thriving in your covetous belly, so each month, even through winter, on the night with no moon you will transform into a bear and gorge on whatever food you find outside, until sunlight cracks the horizon.'

"Her words worked on me like poison. As she says them I feel something change inside of me."

Yellow's mother took a sip of tea. She failed to meet her son's curious eyes.

"You know, Mom, this sounds a lot like one of Uncle's stories. If I hadn't of seen it myself, I wouldn't of believed you."

His mother nodded and took a deep breath.

"My brother does know how to tell a tale, i'nit?" she said. She forced her eyes onto her son's. "I wish you hadn't of seen who I am inside."

"That's not you. It's something some old witch put on you."

"No, it's me all right. She just brought it out for everyone to see," she said. "Mom told me I had to go and beg that old hag to take her curse off me. But I chickened out. Anyways, that winter got colder than any winter before. People starved to death, and that old witch stayed warm and full in her house. Come spring, we saw no sign of her. No slaves pruning her trees, no smoke from her chimneys, none of her dogs killing squirrels and chipmunks. No signs of life at all.

"So after a village meeting, Chief and a couple of our best hunters check on her. They

find her dead on her kitchen floor. Seems the old witch ate so much preserves she exploded, popped like a balloon, painting her walls and floor with cherries, peaches, apples, and everything else she'd put up."

"Shouldn't her curse of died with her?"

"I wish! But it don't work like that. They say'd her cellars was crammed full of preserves, most so old even bears and worms wouldn't eat it. Chief and them boxed up some of the good jars for us to eat. Then, as soon as they stepped off that old witch's land, a huge rumble shook Canyon. They dropped them preserves and ran for their lives. And just in time, too."

She smiled. Her son, a full-grown man an hour ago, sat across from her, a wide-eyed four-year old.

"What happened? They live?" Yellow said.

"O, yes! They all lived. The ground opened up and swallowed everything that witch owned, and then it died. Chief and them's hair turned white, and they never slept again, not for the rest of their lives."

"No way. They'd of died from been awake so long."

"We buried the last of them not five years ago. Old Travis John. Anyways, that's why I transform into a bear on the night of the New Moon. I would of told you one day, when I thought you ready. I wish your uncle would of waited, and let me tell you in my own time."

"Don't blame Uncle Chuckie, Mom. I bet him my new dip net that he made up that story about you transforming into a bear."

"Holy! Must be betting with my brother invites bad magic, i'nit? Maybe you're a

witch."

"Mom, don't even joke like that."

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