

*Seven Grandmothers*

I know I should've listened to all their warnings but, holy, the look on the nun's face when I blew up her mailbox is ever worth it! Even after the thirty-fourth strap, I remember her eyes bursting out of her skull, like when you push on a fish eye to test if it's fresh, and I start laughing into strap thirty-five, thirty-six, all the way to forty. The old bag gets tired by then and puts the strap back in her desk and grabs me by the chin.

“You should have listened, Randolph.”

“You should have listened too, that's not my name! It's Minonegig-inniw, and don't act like you don't know that or that you don't know our language cause you've been with us much longer than any of us cared to have you!”

She slaps me and tells me that she's called the Indian Agent, Blockhead, and tomorrow I'm getting paddled over to St. Agatha's. And me, cause I'm real stupid apparently, I say I'm surprised that they're gonna paddle me over, that's so very heathen of them. Another slap.

I'm twelve years old. My name is Minonegig-inniw, Happy Otter Man, and I'm getting sent away because I can't keep out of trouble.

My pals are waiting outside the schoolhouse for me, hiding from the nuns. When I see them I show off my red and stinging hands and I say: “None of you would be a real warrior in the old days. Look at you, hiding like a bunch of women!”

They crowd around me and touch the edges of my hands. My best friend, Baapi-mukwa, has wide and shiny eyes.

“You're so brave,” he whispers. I shrug.

“Wasn’t that bad. She’s just an old cow.”

I wish my girl was here my beautiful Zhaawani-noodin, but she’s probably at home, her little eyebrows pushed together while she cleans partridge. When I tell them I’m getting sent to St. Agatha’s they look at each other, real quiet. We all know the stories. My sister hasn’t been the same since she came back last summer, her hair all short, speaking like a white girl, when she speaks at all. But only the kids who cause the most trouble get sent there so I gotta act like I’m proud and I am, a little. My chicken friends? They’ll be here, with the nuns, on the reserve, learning like good little Indians.

But me, I’m not scared. Like my Nokomis always taught me, you gotta be brave. She had these seven little stones she kept in a medicine bag around her waist. They were perfectly round, and she said she found all of them at the bottom of that sacred river on the other side of the bay. One for each of the Grandfathers, or, Grandmothers, as Nokomis calls them. Each of the stones, they had a Grandmother teaching and I guess Nokomis learned from them all her life. My sister, she’s Minaadendamowin, she knows respect. A little too much respect, if you ask me. Me, I’m Zoongide’ewin. I’m the brave one. Nokomis said Zoongide’ewin means you got a strong heart. And that’s me.

Nokomis is dead now, and she was buried with those little seven stones, but when I walk home through the bush, I keep telling myself that. I got a strong heart. I got a strong heart.

When I tell Nigashi about St. Agatha’s, I expect her to hit me. Instead she just sits down. Nigashi, she’s Gwayakwaadiziwin. She’s honest. She says: “Well you musta gone and done something real stupid.” But she puts poultice on my hands and doesn’t say much else, which is strange for her, so I know she’s hurting.

Nhoos is out moose hunting and my sister just went back to St. Agatha's a few weeks ago, so it's just me and Nigashi. She tells me not to worry about my chores, with my useless hands, so I just sit at our table and drink some milk.

Finally, she says something: "Miskosipii, she says you won't get no milk over there. Hardly no meat either. Mush, she says. Alls you eat is mush."

Miskosipii is my sister, but we don't say her real name when she's around. She says we gotta call her Virginia now. Stupid name. None of us know why she got sent to St. Agatha's anyways. She's a good kid, not like me. Never talked back to a nun, never looked one in the eyes, always speaks perfect English, keeps her clothes neat and clean, never complains. She's real pretty though. Maybe the nuns got jealous and decided they don't wanna teach her no more.

I wish Nhoos was here. He's Nibwaakaawin, he's got wisdom, real smart. Whenever I'm out in the bush with him, he'll point out any old plant or tree and tell me everything about it. He's old school, like my Nokomis, that's his mom, he knows how to get the animals to offer their lives for us. He even taught me how to blow up that mailbox! He knows everything about medicine, too. He made that poultice that's cool and soft on my hands right now. If he were here and he knew I was going to St. Agatha's, he'd tell me exactly what to do.

But I won't even get to say goodbye to him.

Maybe by the time I get back, at the start of next summer, I'll be like Miskosipii. Short hair. Quiet. Never speaks Indian, no more pranks, no more tricks. No more Happy Otter Man. Just Randolph.

Maybe I am a little scared. But I watch Nigashi make dinner and I tell myself, I gotta be brave. I got a strong heart. I have to have a strong heart for her. Be a warrior. So I says: “Well at least I’ll get to see Miskosipii. Tell her the news. I bet she’ll laugh when I tell her how I got sent there!”

Nigashi shakes her head, softly, her little silver earrings tinkling. “She says they keep the boys and girls separated.”

I try again: “Well, maybe I should just go hide in the bush then. Maybe go over to that sacred place across the bay. I bet Blockhead won’t look there for me. Nhoos can help me set up a camp. It’ll be real old school.”

“Minonegig-inniw,” she says. “Blockhead’ll think we hid you. Your father and I will get sent to his jail.”

I guess that’s that then. Well, how bad can St. Agatha’s be? I’ve survived the nuns at the day school. Miskosipii changed so much because that’s just who she is. Not me. I’ll be the same.

We have supper and Nigashi tells me to remember how fresh meat tastes. I say I will and I make myself remember everything: her long black hair tied in a bun, her dark eyes, the steady light of the candles on the table, how full and warm I feel. After supper, I think about going to visit Zhaawani-noodin, but I know she’ll cry and I guess my heart isn’t strong enough for that. Zhaawani-noodin, she’s Debwewin, she’s the truth. Her heart is true and she listens to that above all else. Why her heart tells her to go with me, I’ll never know.

That night I have dreams of Nokomis’ stones and the river on the other side of the bay. I guess those dreams are gifts from Gzhemnidoo, so when I wake up at dawn I put

out a little asemaa, a little tobacco, in thanks. Nokomis and Nhoos would be proud of me. It'll be the last time I get to do that.

I let Nigashi brush out my hair and braid it. When she's done she rests her chin on my shoulder, her soft cheek pressing against my neck. She's so warm and I grab her hand. "I don't want to go," I whisper. I don't know if she hears.

"Minonegig-inniw," she says, but I hear a car humming and she stands up. I let go of her hand and I try really hard not to grab at her skirt.

Someone knocks on the door and Nigashi answers. It's Blockhead. I can see his fat, square face. He looks bored. He talks to Nigashi, tells her that I have to go to St. Agatha's cause the nuns won't teach me no more, I'm too much trouble for them. She doesn't invite him in. She doesn't say anything. All she does is cross her arms over her chest.

Blockhead sighs, all dramatic, and shoves Nigashi to the side. He walks right up to me grabs my wrist. So I punch Blockhead in the gut but he twists my arm.

"Come on, Randolph. Time to go."

I start swearing at him in Indian, cause I know it makes him mad. I punch him a few more times but he's brought back up. Eugene and his rat-faced brother Hector are with him and they grab Nigashi so I shut up and I stop fighting.

She looks me in the eyes. She says one word. "Mashkawiminjimenim." Remember. Remember strongly.

Blockhead drags me out of the house. In Indian, we have no word for goodbye. So I just yell: "Giwaabimin!" See you later, my beautiful mother.

I'm standing on the beach. The water is glass, the stillest I've ever seen it. Blockhead and Eugene are pushing the canoe into the water. Me and my pals stole the motorboat last week and no one's been able to find it. We dumped it right in the middle of the bush, tore off the motor and hid it in one of our old hunting stands, way up in the trees. Did that ever take a long time! Stupid heavy thing, but Blockhead will never think to check there. Next to the blown up mailbox, that was probably my best trick. Now Blockhead's gonna have to paddle all the way out of the bay and to the other side of the lake.

The bottom of the canoe scrapes against the thousands of rocks. Hector is holding my arm tightly. I look at all those rocks. I gotta remember them, I gotta remember the water, remember the Grandfathers and Grandmothers in the rocks, those powerful Underwater Ones at the bottom of the bay, everything my parents and Nokomis taught me, my name. I think of an otter playing and splashing in the water, and that's me. I'm Minonegig-inniw.

The canoe is in the water and Blockhead yells at Hector. We walk to the edge of the shore and I look down one last time. I see a little black stone, perfectly round, as if shaped by the waters of a sacred river. I twist out of Hector's hand and pick it up and put it in my pocket, then run to the canoe.

As Blockhead paddles away, I put my hand in my pocket and rub the stone. A little Grandmother to keep me safe, to help me remember.

My Nokomis, Zaagidi'win, so full of love. Nhoos, Nibwaakaawin, who knows everything and shares it with everyone. My sister Miskosipii, Minaadendamowin, so quiet and gentle in her respect that the nuns decided to hurt her. Nigashi, Gwayakwaadiziwin, who's probably braver than me because she's so honest. Zhaawani-

noodin, Debwewin, a little woman with the truest heart I know. Even my chicken friend Baapi-mukwa, he's Bekaadiziwin, he's humble and patient, even with me.

And me. Minonegig-inniw. I'm Zoongide'ewin. I got a strong heart. I'll need all of the Seven Grandmothers that Nokomis taught me, but I've got a strong heart.

The canoe glides across the water. I'm stuck between Hector and Eugene, Blockhead steering behind me. In a few hours I'll be at St. Agatha's. They'll cut my hair, get rid of my clothes, maybe I'll lose my little Grandmother, and they'll start calling me Randolph. But I'm gonna be a warrior. I'm gonna remember. I got a strong heart.

I got a strong heart.