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Winnipeg, MB

Sagkeeng First Nation

27 years old

Oshkabaywis

The crowd turned to look at me as the announcer let them know that it was time to stand for the opening hymn. I raised the heavy cross as high as I could without it falling over and hitting one of the parishioners on the head. The idea of this made me smile and I had to hold back a chuckle because I imagined it happening but this was not the time to be thinking of funny things, I had to be serious as I walked down the aisle towards the alter. I picked my mother out of the crowd and knew that she was watching me, she loved it when I served as an alter boy.

I looked different from the rest of the alter boys that were dressed in their angelic white robes. The other three boys that joined me in the procession all had blue eyes and varying degrees of blonde to brown hair whereas I with my long black and braided hair, dark complexion and brown eyes looked anything but pure when I adorned the long white robes. My mother had suggested that I join the training to become an alter servant after she read the advertisement in the weekly church bulletin. I had some doubts about the whole idea but felt as if I could do the job because I had watched the service over and over for years already and the job was always the same. Little did I know that there were other unspoken rules that I had to learn before I was able to perform this service for my church. I was the tallest one of the four boys who showed up for service that day so I ended up being the priests right hand man, I led the procession, carried the cross, held the bible for the priest as he read the passage for the sermon and brought the challis and sacrament over for his blessing. The other boys had minor roles to play but mine was one of the most important. This was my first attempt to fit into this church community since we moved to the city after leaving the only home I had ever known on our reserve.

As the priest lectured on and on I let my mind wander to daydreams of what I could be doing back home on the reserve on this Sunday afternoon. I wouldn't be able to skip out on

church I knew that but instead of going home like we were going to do so today; if I was back on the reserve I could easily just run free after the service let out and continue exploring the outdoors which was my favorite thing to do out there. After each visit I ventured farther and farther into the wilderness where there was always new things to explore. Suddenly there was this current of energy that coursed through my entire body and the feeling of something that could only be described as pure joy followed making me want to laugh out loud. Pray, came a voice inside my head; so I obeyed and began to give thanks for everything in creation; just like my mother had taught me to do and as I did so the feeling intensified. What was this incredible sensation and where did that voice come from?

The sensation eventually subsided and the service dragged on and finally finished, mom waited outside of the dressing room for me so we could begin our walk home. Even though it was cold, mom and I were dressed for the weather. I always loved walking outdoors and today was a clear sun shiny day. The blanket of snow that covered the ground sparkled everywhere creating a beautiful glittery scene that felt almost too perfect to step on.

I walked ahead of my mother carving a path in the freshly fallen snow. “Your uncle Ben will be coming in to give us a ride to go and visit your Kokom for the week” she announced.

I stopped in my tracks and turned to look at her. “What? For real?” I squealed with delight; it was almost as if she had read my mind instead of listening to the church sermon. We lived in the city for a few years now and the adjustment period was over but as a reserve kid at heart, I still longed for the place that no matter where I lived I would always call home. It seemed like an eternity before uncle arrived to take us on the long road trip that would lead us home. Each familiar twist and turn on the highway brought us that much closer to our destination. The harsh prairie winter had set in deep in this part of the land and the wind howled around everything that was able to survive the sub zero temperatures. Wisps of snow carried by the wind curled across the road as we travelled, making the drab grey pavement that we were on appear non-existent at times.

The car pulled up in the driveway of the old familiar worn down red and white house. Standing in the front window anticipating our arrival was the careworn face of my elderly grandmother. I tore through the front door at full speed not even bothering to take my snow covered boots off. I ran straight into her open arms, breathing in her familiar scent that took me back to other winter nights where the comfort of Kokom’s welcoming house always took away

the cold that had settled deep within my bones and she always had bannok ready to soothe the hunger that staying outdoors all day had created.

“There’s my big handsome grand-boy” Kokom greeted me. “Your mom must be feeding you well because you’re getting fat,” she observed as she poked me in the gut.

“I love you too Kokom” I said as I left her embrace and looked around the house. Everything that was familiar was still there in the same spots that I remembered and knowing this brought a comforting and safe feeling that only Kokom’s home could provide.

Mom came in the door carrying some of the luggage that was in the car. “A little help would be nice” she commented. She carried the bags of food and clothing into the spare room that would be ours for the week. Uncle Ben came in after her with the rest of what was in the car in his arms. He dropped them on the floor of the kitchen and walked over to give his mom a kiss on the cheek. “Honestly Will” mom said to me as she entered the room again, “you should slow down, we have a whole week to spend out here. You are not missing out on anything.”

Her words fell on deaf ears, I had already situated myself next to the window that faced my grandmother’s backyard. Beyond the line that hung the clothes to dry in the summer was the vast forest where I would spend the majority of my time. Silently, I mapped out where I had been and where I was hoping to venture out to this time. It was getting close to supertime and the light in the sky was fading. I needed to move fast if mom was ever going to let me out to explore. I waited until she was in the bathroom to make my escape.

I already had my winter gear on, so I made my move. “Mom, I’m just going outside for a bit” I yelled. “I’ll be back for supper” and with that I took off out the front door and kept on running around to the backside of the house. The paths and trails that were in the bush in the summer were now not even visible from the snow that had fallen over the winter. The only sign that there had ever been trails were the space between the bare branches that left walking room between them that only a person could fit through. I made my way slowly through the empty bush, walking was now a bit more difficult because I had to trudge through the deep snow. With each step my boot would sink until I was knee deep in the white mass that covered and suffocated everything.

“I’m not going to get anywhere at this rate” I told myself. “Lets pick up the pace a bit” and with that I began my attempt to run. I took the most visible snow trail that I could find, moving as fast as I could. The bare tree branches clouded my way and I moved past them

without bothering to safely get them out of my way. SNAP. Ouch I thought, as one whipped back and stung my face, the branches always stung more and the pain lasted longer in the cold. I could feel the sweat beginning to pour down my face as I continued to run through the forest. My heartbeat fast in my ears, take the next trail on the right, came the same voice from church. I had been down that trail before and wanted to go a different way so I continued going forward. RIGHT! The voice came again, more insistent this time. SNAP, a bigger branch hit the side of my face once again. Man, I thought, okay, I'll go right. So I turned and continued down the familiar path. I better head back to Kokom's soon, I thought, my mom was going to have a fit about my supper being cold. I slowed my pace in order to catch my breath and laid down in the snow, I looked up to the sky and the blue purple of night had set in quicker than I thought it would; the brightest of the stars were beginning to shine. My heartbeat was fast at first and I breathed deeply in and out to make it subside. But it didn't, instead it quickened and became louder, so loud that I thought my heart was going to explode, only there was no pain, no anxiety. It took me a while to realize that the sound I was hearing was not my heartbeat but was the faint sound of a drum in the distance.

This sound sparked my curiosity. I quickly got up and surveyed the trail in front of me. Towards the east was where the sound was coming from and in that same direction there was a billow of smoke that arose from the bare branches that also reached for the sky. "There are no houses or cottages this way" I said to myself. I followed the trail and the sound until I reach a little clearing. What I was now viewing had not been there the last time that I was in this area of the bush. A short, round shelter of some kind was set on the edge of the clearing, it had what looked like willow branches tied together and bent to form its round structure, overtop of it was layers and layers of brown and heavy canvas. In the middle of the clearing was a pit and in that pit there was a fire burning with a log pile and axe not too far to the side. The fire wood that was burning crackled and popped as the flames danced around giant stones that had been placed around and over the fire wood. The sound of the drum faded and I held my breath as the canvas on the shelter began to shift revealing a doorway that also faced east.

An elderly man poked his head out of the shelter doorway and crawled out of the round shaped hut. He straightened up and stretched as he walked over to the fire and looked up to notice me.

“Boozhoo, Aniin” he greeted me. “I didn’t know that I had an audience, otherwise I would have sung prettier for you” he said as he began to laugh at his own joke. I observed this man for a moment and he had the same long black hair that I did, only his had white hair scattered throughout the braid. He wore what looked like a bathrobe only furrier and had moccasins on his feet. There was an air to his presence that was calming and gentle and his face was aged but friendly. He smiled at me and motioned for me to sit on a log that was near the fire pit. “Is this my new oshkabaywis (helper)?” the man asked himself. “I have waited a long time for you my boy” he told me.

Part of me wanted to get up and run straight home right away while making note not to come by this part of the woods again. Stay. Listen. Again the instructions came and calmed any nerves that were feeling rustled after stumbling upon this stranger alone in the wilderness. “Do you live out here in that tent?” I asked him while pointing to the low, circular building.

He chuckled. “I see I have much to teach you. That is a sweat lodge” he informed me. “Not a tent and I do not live in it. It is there for when we conduct our ceremonies. I built this lodge myself and come here when I feel I need to be alone to pray.” He walked over to me and placed some tobacco in my hand. “Come” he instructed taking me by the hand and leading me to the fire.

I watched him as he held his handful of tobacco in the air and whispered a prayer into the winds. He then threw the tobacco into the fire and motioned for me to do the same. This was something new to me but I did as he instructed. So I whispered, “God grant me reason and understanding to learn what lesson that you are trying to teach me here today.” With that I threw my tobacco into the fire and watched as the tiny pieces scattered and burned up once touching the flaming hot stones.

“I just finished my first round and your welcomed to join me for the next one” he said while reaching into the lodge to pull out another robe similar to his. “Change into this and we can get started, if you feel like leaving after I have sung the next song, you can do so, but if you want to stay and learn what I have to teach you, you must stay for all four rounds and I will answer any questions that you may have after that.” He drank some water from a canister that was sitting next to the lodge. “Are you going to come in?”

GO! I nodded at this man and followed him into the darkness of the shelter. He showed me where to sit while passing me a towel and gave me a drum to hold in my hand. He went back

outside and I could hear the banging of rocks as a long pitchfork came through the doorway carrying two large, bright red rocks that were lit from within. He placed the rocks into a hole where there were already a few other rocks in place that were darker in color than the fresh out of the fire ones. The temperature in the lodge increased, instantly bringing sweat out of any exposed skin. He did this five more times before finally coming into the lodge and taking off his robe, revealing shorts and a bare chest underneath.

“What I just did will be your job after today” he told me. “Now will you close the door after I have made my way to where I sit?” He made his way across from me while crawling in a clockwise direction. Once he came to a rest, I reached for the heavy canvas outside of the door and shut out any daylight or light from the fire that was outside that up until now had filled the lodge. Utter and total blackness surrounded us so that I could not tell whether or not I had my eyes open.

The old man began to beat his drum so I decided to follow his lead and beat the one he had given to me. Then he began to sing a song in the language that his people, our people had used in prayer for thousands of years. The sound of his voice hit me like a tidal wave, I had heard this song before, or had I? Its familiar melody and undeniable beat brought about the energizing sensation that I had felt earlier in church that day. The amazing, wonderful feeling of true happiness burst through my entire being as I too began to sing the familiar song that I had never heard. The words came naturally to me and tears of joy came to my eyes as I realized what it was like to truly feel like I was in the right place at the right time. This is where you belong came the voice from within me. The old man and I finished our song and he instructed me to open the door.

“That was a pretty powerful round” he laughed. “You felt it too, didn’t you?” I nodded quietly. “Creator works in mysterious ways and he sent you here to me so that I can teach you the way that was meant for our people. At the beginning of time Creator gave each nation their own bundle filled with ways that he wanted that nation to give him thanks. The way of the church that is not our way, that does not mean it is wrong but it was not meant for us” he explained. “The lodge, the medicines, the ceremonies and the stories, those are our way. There was a time not too long ago where our ceremonies were banned and outlawed, so those who had the teachings continued to practice by coming deep into the forest where the law could not find us. This is how our ways survived” he continued. “A while back I prayed to Creator that he

bring me someone so that I may share my teachings with them. Plus it gets a little lonely out here” he joked. “It was no accident that you came to find the lodge here today and I hope that you will come back to learn all that I can teach you, so that this way, our way can continue.”

I thought about what it was that he had just told me. I also remembered the intensity of the energy that filled my being and the whispers of the voice that instructed me to come upon this part of the forest. This whole experience was new to me and I felt as if there was more for me to learn that I could not wait to discover. “I will come back” I told him. “As long as I can and as often as I can, I will come back.”

The old man looked pleased, “good to know” he said. “Come let’s finish out last two rounds” and with that said he led me back into the sweat lodge.

Author’s Statement

Hello, my name is Maria Starr and I am a 27 year old member of Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba. I have been studying to attain my Bachelor of Social Work degree from the University of Manitoba for some time and I hope to graduate by this year.

I came up with the idea for this story based on a discussion that was brought up in class one day. One of my classmates pointed out the fact that in every First Nation community there is usually a church with a steeple and cross that is visible from a far distance; a constant reminder of the religious presence that once invaded but has now made its home in the community. While on the other hand one would have to look around to find the presence of a sweat lodge or any other ceremonial places within a community; a reminder of the fact that those types of places had to go into hiding for their survival. I have chosen to write about both of these subjects in this story and about how the main character who is actively involved with one point of view, discovers the other. It does not take place in any set time but is rather something that I feel others like myself have had to go through at some point in their lives.

I did not have the opportunity to be introduced to the beautiful aspects of my heritage until I became a university student and was around people who were traditional that were willing to share their knowledge. The inner peace that I felt after participating in the different ceremonies that I was introduced to was something new and refreshing for me. I will never be able to forget the teachings of the church because they helped to turn me into the person that I

grew up to be and at the same time there are teachings from elders that I have received that have shed new light and understanding into different life situations that I have encountered. In the end it is about balance and taking what teachings I need to in order to find a solution for whatever encounter I am facing. Above all it is the same God/Creator that made us all and that is the fact that enters my mind when I am questioned as to what exactly my belief is.