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**Nuu-cha-nulth (Ahousaht First Nation)**  
**27 yrs.**

**Quʔušin**  
(Raven)

“Pass the ball, Sam,” the boy with the red shoes shouts.

His name is Justin and everybody at school thinks he’s the best basketball player in Port Alberni, but they’re wrong.

“Like Nash,” I cry. Running down the court I easily dribble past three of the other team’s players and shoot the ball—swish.

“Yeah, except Nash is a team player. You’re a ball hog.” Justin points his finger at me.

I shove him to the ground, hard. “Get out of my face! You’re just jealous of my skills, you and your ugly shoes.”

“That’s enough, boys.” Joe blows his whistle and runs over. “Hey, Sam, why don’t you go sub in Alex, he’s been sitting on the bench a while.”

“Whatever,” I grumble as Joe helps Justin off the floor.

I don’t mind Joe—he runs the after-school basketball program here at the friendship center and lent me a basketball to use on the weekends—but I hate Justin.

Walking off the court I notice some old guy sitting near Alex.

“You’re in,” I sneer at Alex and kick the bench. He quickly runs off, what a wimp.

“How’s your foot, son?” the old man asks.

“I’m not your son!” I yell at the dumb man.

“Well then whose son are ya?” he answers back with a smile on his face.

At school the teachers told us not to talk to strangers but this guy is old and I saw him talking to Joe, besides, I’ll be eleven next month.

“My mom’s name is Mabel; she used to live here when she was young. My dad died this summer. We just moved here from Vancouver,” I tell him; he’s probably never even been to the big city.

“Ahhh.” The old man slowly raises his eyebrows, “You’re George and Anna’s grandson, Sam. I’ve heard about you, I knew your grandparents. My name is Pat.”

“My grandparents died when I was two,” I reply, unimpressed.

“I used to play basketball with your grandpa. We called him Shooter. He never seemed to miss a shot and could dunk the ball too.” Pat nods and glances toward the door as Justin’s dad waves at me.

“Looks like it’s time for you go. Nice to meet cha, Sam.”

“Sure,” I shrug and leave.

“Who was that old fart?” I demand, pushing Justin as we climb into his dad’s truck.

“That’s Pat Joseph, he is an Elder who teaches language classes here after basketball,” Justin’s dad responds, driving down the road to my house.

“What’s an Elder?”

“An Elder is an adult who has lived a long time and is very wise. Elders are respected here and you shouldn’t call Pat an ‘old fart’.” Justin stares at me angrily as the truck stops.

He is such a know-it-all.

“Thanks for the lift, Mr. Cootes,” I mutter, slamming the door.

I hate having to get a ride with Justin but my mom has to work lots so she can’t pick me up after basketball. When I turn sixteen I’m gonna get my own truck and then I’ll leave this town and drive anywhere I want.

“How was your first day of school, Sam?” my mom asks as I enter our house. She is dishing out dinner and still in her work uniform.

“School sucks,” I protest, throwing my bag on the floor. “Do you know someone named Pat Joseph?”

“Pat Joseph? I haven’t seen him in almost ten years. He was really close with your grandpa. How do you know Pat, honey?”

“I met him today at basketball.”

My mom smiles, “I’d sure like to see him again, maybe once we get settled. That reminds me, I talked to Justin’s mom today and she said that you can stay at Justin’s after basketball this week until I get off work.”

“No, Mom! I hate Justin, and I hate school, and I hate this town.” I storm off to my bedroom, putting the ‘Do Not Enter’ sign on my door—all I know is that I am not going to Justin’s house tomorrow.

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“That’s it for today, gang,” Joe calls out, ending the game.

Justin takes a drink from his water bottle and turns to me. “My mom said that you’re coming over to our house after basketball.”

Looking past him I see Pat setting up a few chairs.

“Yeah right, I’m staying here to help Pat. My mom knows him; he was best friends with my grandpa.” I push past Justin and walk toward Pat.

“So you need some help or what?” I pick up a chair and unfold it. “How many people are coming anyway?”

“Always room for one more, Sam.” Pat looks over and waves at Justin’s dad. “Anyone can come at any time. Most days we have over twenty people here, but it might be just the two of us tonight, the fair is in town.”

“I know. I can’t go, my mom said maybe next year.” I grab the big bag beside Pat, “What’s this?”

“That right there is a drum. Have you ever played one, Sam?” Pat takes out the drum, it is shaped in a big circle and has a cool design painted on the front.

I shake my head. “What’s it for?”

“It is the heartbeat of our people.”

Pat starts to bang the drum, thumping it steadily. “I made this drum from deer-hide. The drawing on it is a raven.”

“Do you mean those stupid black birds outside? Why would anyone bother drawing them?” I scowl, thinking of the one that stole my sandwich at lunch today when I was outside playing basketball.

“Did you know that in our language raven is called quʔušin?”  
Pat continues to beat the drum in constant rhythm.

“Quʔušin is known as the trickster and is highly regarded by our people. In fact, we even have a dance to honour the quʔušin. Your grandfather and I danced it together many times as kids. When George was younger, the quʔušin was his favorite animal. Your grandfather loved to have fun and always said that when he died he wanted to be remembered with the spirit of the quʔušin.”

“Everyone I know dies, it’s just me and my mom now,” I whisper quietly.

“But the people who love you are still with you, Sam—they are in here.”

Pat points to his heart.

“Every time we remember, their spirits are with us. By singing and dancing we honour their memory. The quʔušin was your grandfather’s most treasured dance, and mine.” He holds up the drum and starts to sing.

With the drum pulsing strong, Pat’s loud voice echoes throughout the gym. I have never heard a song like this before—I like it.

“You know, since you knew my grandfather and everything, he probably would’ve wanted you to teach me how to do that,” I inform him when the song ends.

“I should hope so, he wrote it.” Pat grins and passes me the drum.

“Really? What do the words mean?” I pound on the drum and my arm shakes with its vibration.

“The song is a story about the quʔušin. The words are in our language and I’ll teach you. I’m here everyday after basketball,” Pat offers as my mom enters the gym.

They talk while I practice on the big drum, my mom looks relieved.

“It’s good seeing you again, Pat.” Mom hugs him and smiles. “Thanks for this; I’ll pick him up every night at six.”

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Today is my birthday and I am allowed to have a party at the friendship center. I’ve hung out with Pat every day after basketball this month and learned all the words to the Quʔušin song; I can sing it almost as loud as him. Everyone from basketball started coming to the language classes too. I even helped Justin learn my grandfather’s song. Pat said that it is a public song created for everyone to have fun—and Justin doesn’t annoy me as much anymore. Pat even taught us the Quʔušin dance that he used to do with my grandfather.

There are a lot of people in the gym; they are all here to watch us perform.

“I made this for you, Sam, happy birthday.” Pat hands me a headband, woven from strips of wood, and I run my fingers along it. “It’s made from cedar bark and you can wear it when you lead the Quʔušin dance.”

“Thanks, Pat!”

I put on my new headband as he gets out his drum. Justin’s dad and a few others come to join us with their drums. They are creating a drum circle.

“Let’s go,” I instruct the other kids from basketball, we all know what to do. Crouching low in the middle of the gym our feet are bare and we are quiet, waiting for the first beat of the drums. As the pounding begins, my teammates fill the floor representing all the creatures of the earth—but I remain still.

I am Quʔušin, the sneaky trickster. With the drums beating in unison, I hear Pat’s voice and start to dance around the others. It’s my job to create excitement and cause mischief. Raising my knees high in the air, my arms spread wide, I tiptoe around the gym tilting my head as I encounter the beings around me.

Our movements tell a story about the quʔušin and as I dance I feel the spirit of my grandfather—I think he is proud of me.

When the song ends my mom hugs me tight and gets all mushy, and then says that we can go out for ice cream.

This is the best birthday ever.

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Today for show-and-tell I showed the class my headband and at recess everyone wanted to try it on. Then in art class Mrs. Clarkson said we had to make something nice for someone special we know so I made a drawing like the one on Pat’s drum.

“Where’s Pat?” I ask Joe as Justin and I walk into the gym. I have my picture of quʔušin with me—I’m going to give it to Pat.

“Something’s happened,” Joe murmurs to the group; he looks sad. “Pat passed away this afternoon. He went to sleep for a nap and never woke up.”

My mom is walking across the gym floor toward me. She should be at work, I have basketball right now and then language class, my mom is not supposed to pick me up until six.

I look around the friendship center, this place was so full of people yesterday and everybody was laughing. Now everyone is sad, some of the boys are even crying. We need Quʔušin to make us smile, we need the trickster.

I dash out the door; I know where to find Quʔušin.

I run as fast as I have ever run and by the time I get to the basketball court outside our school I am out of breath—but I made it.

I see Quʔušin on the fence.

“Come on, you have to follow me. We need you now,” I reveal to the black bird, but Quʔušin does not understand me. I unzip my backpack and take out the crusts left over from my sandwich and start to sing the Quʔušin song.

Walking back to the friendship I sing as loud as I can the words that my grandfather wrote, the words that Pat taught me.

Quʔušin is following me.

I drop my last crumb outside the gym as my mom rushes over.

“It’s ok,” I reassure everyone, “Pat is here with the spirit of the quʔušin.”

My mom has tears in her eyes.

I begin singing the Quʔušin song.

Justin's voice rings out beside me as his dad starts beating the drum—soon everyone joins in. We sing loud, dance together, and with Qu?ušin watching intently over us from the tree branch above, we honour Pat.