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Age 22

### Sweetgrass

The buffalo had vanished from the plains over the last few seasons, and the people of Chief Sweetgrass's small village were cold and starving. No matter how many warriors and hunters Chief Sweetgrass sent out to find food, none would return to the *shaapuhtuwaan* with anything more than a few small grouse. Sweetgrass ventured out alone every night, waiting for the moon to shine on that secret buffalo herd, waiting for the stars to guide him, waiting for the warm moment when he could return home to his village. He stayed vigilant all night, only pausing to pluck another dandelion root for chewing.

Chief Sweetgrass grew more and more concerned for his tight ribbed people as he watched them run their fingertips over the caribou hides stretched over their *miichiwaahps*, as they remembered times when they had more than just dried skin. Sweetgrass knew his people would not all survive winter. But, Sweetgrass also knew that people from the far south had come to trade with his enemies, the Blackfoot, giving them whiskey and guns, helping them hunt more efficiently. Sweetgrass only wanted to help his people—he wanted all of these hard, hungry years to fade out of memory.

When the last howls of winter subsided, Chief Sweetgrass could no longer wait for the stars to guide him. So, he sought the Governor in Upper Fort Garry. Once Sweetgrass had arrived, he told the Governor the story of the Cree village, the story of their triumph and their demise as the old ways changed and the buffalo disappeared. Sweetgrass pleaded with the Governor to stop the people from the far south from coming to trade with the Blackfoot; he pleaded that the government help feed and shelter his people.

Before Sweetgrass became chief, he had no name. He came from a small Cree village and a small, poor family. One day a group of Cree warriors galloped back into the

village with fresh buffalo. The boy-with-no-name felt ashamed that he could not help his village and his family in this way, that he could not track the buffalo without a horse. So, he decided to steal a horse from the Blackfoot camp to the south.

That night his moccasined feet carried him swiftly over tall prairie grass and moonlit foothills. And, as he ran into the endless starry night, his mind drifted into misty dreams, dreams of a brown mare hurtling across the plains, lifting him off the ground as he clung, tight fisted, onto the coarse mane.

The boy's pace slowed as the sun crept back over the horizon, as he finally saw the blood dried into the leather of his moccasins. His chest heaved and worn leather clung to the sweat on his shoulders. The-boy-with-no-name wondered if he could reach the horse that galloped through dreams, if he could bring hope back to his village and their *shaapuhtuwaan*. The warmth spread as fast as the light that day, and the-boy-with-no-name found shelter in a shallow valley.

The following night he felt the steady hands of stars on his back, waking him and guiding him forward. The smell of cooling grass entered his nostrils and his battered feet felt renewed, his thirst quenched. As he ran he felt the earth holding up his feet, the stones rolling out of his path. The-boy-with-no-name ran all night.

That morning, as he slowed down, the earth revealed a deep valley cradling many horses that grazed on fresh, dewy grass. The-boy-with-no-name knew that the Blackfoot camp must be near by, that he was in danger of being spotted. He crept down the valley toward a cluster of bushes, remembering what the stars told him—the glowing advice given between short breaths.

He had barely entered the bushes when a Blackfoot warrior passed by. As the azure sunrise filled the flat land with warmth and light, the boy-who-had-no-name slid an arrow into the notch, and, with the stars in mind, aimed at the Blackfoot.

Chief Sweetgrass talked with the Governor for days. Eventually, Sweetgrass was asked to go to the east and meet with the Queen. He was sure that his people could be helped if he could convince the Queen to stop the southerners from trading with the Blackfoot. He was sure that this is what the stars would tell him to do. Sweetgrass told the Queen the only story he knew. He told her about his poor Cree village, about the shining years of hope and prosperity, and about the steady decline. The Queen listened intently and nodded at all the right times until Sweetgrass had finished his long story. Then the Queen embraced Sweetgrass and told him that everyone who lived on her land would be looked after, that she would provide for him if he would sign a small contract.

Sweetgrass was relieved and he rejoiced for the future happiness of his village. He was reassured by the Queen's kind words and felt that his presence in the East had helped everyone in the West. The Queen gave him the gift of a polished gun after Sweetgrass had signed the treaty.

The sky stood still for Sweetgrass as he travelled home, and the stars remained hidden behind thick, wet clouds. The path was dark and straight. Chief Sweetgrass saw the rolling prairie grass without the buffalo and he was not worried, because he knew the Queen would provide for his village. Yet, he still missed seeing the herds of buffalo roaming the wide fields, ready to offer his people food and protection. When Sweetgrass saw his village on the horizon, he picked as many berries as he could hold and quickened his pace in anticipation of the soft, familiar voices of his people.

That night Chief Sweetgrass entered the village with news that they would be helped, that everything was taken care of. Later, Chief Sweetgrass was killed for giving away all of their land.

The-boy-who-had-no-name could not believe that he had stolen a horse that would help him feed his family, his village. But, the boy had not just stolen one horse—he had stolen more horses than he could count. He clutched the long, thick hairs in balled

fists as he was swept across the wet grass on the back of a strong, brown mare. The mare was soaked in sweat that frothed under the boy's legs, and tears rushed out of the boy's eyes as the wind cooled the hollow between skin and leather. The boy was in the middle of a pack of horses with the memory of his victory burned into his mind—the flight from bushes, the leap onto the bare back of a kneeling horse, the other horses escaping behind his slim silhouette.

The clouds seemed to open up for him, parting the sky into a single blue strip pointing straight back to his village. He felt a path glisten in the painted sky, and his name waiting for him back home.

His village waited for him outside their *shaapuhtuwaan*, and when they saw the horses they rejoiced, cheering him with all the breath of their lungs. He gave his poor mother as many horses as she could lead, and the rest he gave to anyone who asked.

As the horses found their new caregivers, one of the Cree warriors asked the boy—who-had-no-name how he came by the Blackfoot scalp that hung between his knuckles.

The boy had not realized that he was holding this scalp, and raised it towards the sky to look more closely at it. Blood-stained sweetgrass drifted down off of the severed scalp and the village cheered again and proclaimed that that the boy become Chief, that the boy-with-no-name be named Sweetgrass.