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Tell Me a Story

By: Hanna Waswa

"Chomish, Grandfather, tell me a story." The young child looked hopefully at the old man, his face illuminated by firelight.

He smiled down at his grandchild, and spoke in the old language. "Where is your father? He is a great storyteller, much better than I am."

"The emshiigooshee, white men, are celebrating their new year at the fort, and he is with them. He did not answer when I called him." The boy's Ojibway was strong, and he spoke it well.

His smile gone, the grandfather pulled the child into his arms. "Aha. I will tell you a story. Who would you like me to tell of?"

"Tell me a new story, Chomistj."

"I have told you all my stories, young one."

"Tell me a new story, Chomish."

The old man looked into the sky thoughtfully. "I will tell you a story of my youth, when I was not much older than you."

Mukoonch, Little Bear, ran through the crowd of people. He saw the members of his family, and his friends. All the children ran down to the lake. He laughed and ran faster, determined to be the first to the water's edge. He passed many of his friends, and ran out into the water. He stopped only a few feet in. He yelled and waved at the approaching canoes. This was to be an exciting day. The chief also came down to the water. He watched gravely as the giant canoes came closer towards the shore. The emshiigooshee leader sat in the middle of the great canoe. He wore grander clothes than the other emshiigooshee, though much soiled from many day's travel. He sat still as his guides jumped out of the canoes and pulled them close to shore. The children all swarmed around the canoe. Nothing so exciting had happened there for a long time.

The chief welcomed the emshiigooshee. *Mukoonch* was not close enough to hear the formal greetings, he crept closer. If he would learn what was happening, he could impress his friends later. He listened to the elders speaking.

"We are honoured to have you here, friends. Come, we will have a feast in your honour:"

The emshiigooshee leader said something in a language *Mukoonch* did not understand. The translator stood nearby. He spoke now. "He says to tell you he will meet with you tomorrow. He says he is tired and wishes to go to the fort." The men from the fort arrived now, and *Mukoonch* was shuffled out of the way. He did not protest. They



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lead the emshiigooshee leader up to the fort. Mukoonch was more interested in what the guides had to say. He listened as the chief asked for news about the other bands they must have passed on the way. The guides nodded and replied in a dialect somewhat foreign, but understandable. "The emshiigooshee are going from band to band to sign treaties with them. They will give you money for the use of the land you hunt on."

The elders murmured amongst themselves at this. "The emshiigooshee are strange. We should wait to see what they say tomorrow."

The white man's guide smiled and laughed. "You will see tomorrow. I speak the truth." He sobered a little. "Some of the other bands were not happy with the deal they received. Think carefully before you agree to anything."

The next day, the emshiigooshee met with the elders. Mukoonch played with his friends. He did not know what transpired in the meeting, nor did he realize the significance of the day. Later, the chief came out with the emshiigooshee. The white chief came and said words to the Ojibway. His translator repeated his words. "Today, you have all been provided for by the White Father in Oltawa, by the signing of this Treaty 9. We will have a feast to celebrate."

The boy pouted. "That was not a good story, Chomish."

"It is an important story. I am old, and one of the few who remember that day.

Remember It is part of your history. Remember how the emshiigooshee did not allow us to bargain with them for a better agreement. They tricked us out of our culture that day."

The weathered man smiled, his lined face happy for his grandchild. Inside he wanted to frown and tell the boy how bad things had gone from there. How the emshiigooshee had taken away the dignity of the Ojibway.

The boy considered these words. "I will go ask some one else. Maybe they will have a story for me." The boy pulled away from his grandfather's arm. He wandered over to where his auntie sat. She lay inside the *mutogaahn* teepee, near the fire. He sat down beside her. "Boozhoo-"

"Speak english, you little heathen."

The boy stumbled over the unfamiliar words, but answered her in the language she demanded. "A- Auntie, story tell me."

She looked up at him. Her words slurred together. "What is there to tell of? Everything after the emshiigoshee came is not worth speaking of. We have nothing! I



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remember when we lived happily, when I trapped with my father. That is worth re-telling."

Achitamoo, Squirrel, ran with her dog. They ran over rocks and fallen twigs easily, neither missing a step. *Achitamoo* could run anywhere without falling. Her feet fell lightly, without missing a step. The dog barked happily, and she laughed. They ran back into their camp. Her father was preparing to move the camp further out on the land, further along his trapline. He was one of the few trappers left in the area.

"Come, *Achitamoo*, help me load the canoe."

She picked up one of the big bundles and began pulling it to the canoe.

"Oh no, you will take a smaller one, let me carry the big ones."

"I can do it," she complained.

"False pride is not something you should have, *Dahnis*, Daughter. If something is too big for you, ask for help."

"Yes, Father." She loaded the small bags into the canoe. Soon they finished.

"Is that everything, Father?"

"Yes, *Dahnis*. We will go now." He set her in the bow, and gave her a paddle.

"You can help me paddle today."

She took the paddle, excited to try. He put the dog in the canoe and pushed the canoe out of the sand and stepped easily into the stern. They paddled up the river.

"Those were the good days. When no emshigooshee bothered me. Before I had never seen any of them. Soon after, I was taken to a residential school." She brought a bottle to her lips and drank. The boy knew what she drank caused people to act in strange ways.

"What residential school, Auntie?"

"Go ask your cousin. He has just come back from there."

The boy wandered away from the mutogaahn, unhappy at the stories he was finding. They did not seem happy, or even hopeful.

"Cousin! What residential school?" He came upon his cousin quietly. His cousin jumped and swore mightily in the emshigooshee language.

"Do not sneak up on people like that!" Then he shuddered. "Residential school is a horrible place."

The boy could barely understand his cousin. The young man could only speak the emshigooshee language.

Henry stood at the gates of hell. They shoved him in and lead him to a room full of women in Mack robes. They looked at him, unimpressed. They sent him to another room, where a man in a black robe cut his hair, though Henry begged him not to. His hair littered the ground.

They sent him to work every day. If he did something wrong he was beaten. When he spoke his language, they struck him over and over, saying they would "beat the heathen from him."



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He and a friend decided to run away. They could not endure what was happening to them. Henry was sick of the beatings and never-ending work. His friend was having worse things done to him by a nun, though Henry's friend would hardly speak of what she did to him. They wanted it to stop.

Late at night, they crept out. The gate was not a problem. They climbed to the top of it. Suddenly, giant hands pulled them back. They struggled in the hands of the giant priest. He tossed them on the ground and began laying his fists into them. Henry caught a blow to his chin. His head snapped back and a tooth fell out. He remembered no more.

His friend never came back. The nuns told the other children that he had killed himself. Henry knew they were lying.

"That is residential school. They beat you until you cannot remember who you are, and sometimes do worse things." At the look of fear on the boy's face, the young man forced a smile and said, "Maybe you won't go. Nobody wants to see you there."

The child nodded, still terrified at the thought he might go there. His cousin reassured him again. "Don't worry. If you are good they don't take you." The boy smiled in relief. His cousin felt better for having told the lie.

Two seasons later, the boy was taken to the residential school. His grandfather died soon after. His cousin committed suicide within a year. His aunt and Bathes never saved themselves from alcohol.