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## Silence Speaks a Thousand Words

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The unforgiving kiss of winter stung the sunken cheeks of the eight men as they awkwardly shuffled onto the gallows, protected only by their coarse prison garb. Winter comes early on the prairies, like a vice, its long icy finders grip the land squeezing all life into hiding. The wind, once a soothing cool in the oppressive heat of summer, turns vicious, biting into the most stalwart and turning the land into a frozen tundra. It was cold that day so late in November as the haggard prisoners took their final steps, their bodies gaunt and weak from malnutrition.

A crowd of angry, jeering spectators had gathered, driven out of their warm homes by their self-righteous need to see these savages die. The papers had printed the grisly details over and over about the Frog Lake massacre the past spring and the people were crying for justice.

Wandering Spirit stood tall, seemingly unhindered by the shackles around his hands and feet. His face held no emotion as he looked out over the crowd of spectators. He was unafraid of the hatred painted on the faces of those before him. He looked down on them and he felt pity. How could they understand the plight of his people? How could they understand that he had been fighting for the survival and the future of his children? Wouldn't they have done the same?

He slowly closed his eyes, trying to block out the icy chill that penetrated every pore of his weary body. He allowed his mind the luxury to drift back to another time and place. He had been a young man once, his body muscled and lithe, his eyes dark and piercing. The stories, whispered in hushed awe around crackling fires, told of the many Blackfoot he had killed, more than any other warrior in his band. The chief had once given Wandering Spirit a bonnet made of an entire lynx pelt, wrapped until head and tail met and adorned with five eagle plumes. He had worn it proudly. To him, it was a symbol of his ability to protect his people. To others, it evoked awe and fear.

Wandering Spirit breathed in a long, shaky breath and the memories of a life that once was drifted into his mind. He remembered standing on a grassy hill near his people's camp, the tall grass gently swaying around his legs, the cacophony of birds and insects filling the silence, and the warmth of the midday sun embracing him. He remembered looking out over the gentle roll of the hills that stretched on endlessly. They seemed alive as the prairie grass that covered them moved in waves up and over the hills, dancing to the orchestra of the wind. Wandering Spirit breathed in deeply, certain he could smell the richness of that prairie soil, still damp from morning's heavy dew. How he loved the land.



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He was jarred back to reality when he heard Bad Arrow speaking in a hoarse whisper. Was it already time for their last words? He hadn't heard what the first two men said. Bad Arrow's voice rose as he continued to pray to the Creator for his family. Wandering Spirit knew Bad Arrow was thinking about the young son he would leave behind and to what end?

Wandering Spirit closed his eyes again trying to shut out the fathomless gray in the scene that surrounded him and he silently sent up his own prayer to the Creator.

“Do you hear me? Do you feel how my heart aches for my people and not for myself? I have accepted this death prepared for me. I only ask that you protect my people; Watch over them, Great Spirit, as the journey ahead of them will be long and hard.”

Unbidden, whispers of a life that once was filled his mind. He saw a group of about 20 tipis, standing like proud pinnacles on the expanse of the prairie, thin threads of smoke acting as spires as they trailed into the sky. He could see racks of bison meat drying in the sun. It had been a successful hunt and his people were preparing the meat, a process that would take weeks. He could see children running between tipis, laughing, as their mothers scraped the bison hides.

There was a sudden sharpness in his chest at the memory. How strong and proud his people had been. It seemed so long ago and yet the memories remained strikingly clear. Life had changed so quickly, the change had spread like a prairie fire leaving behind a charred and seemingly lifeless landscape.

Wandering Spirit remembered standing among his people, their tipis showing sign of wear. The women had tried to patch the worn bison hides as best as they could but weakness from hunger had stripped them of their vitality and strength. The atmosphere around the camp was solemn and the tension stifling. People moved about the camp their shoulders slumped and their faces drawn.

He had gone to see Chief Big Bear, already an old and tired man, to plead with him to allow Wandering Spirit, war chief, and his warriors to do something, anything. The chief told him that there had been talk that bands in the east had made treaties with the government, surrendering their land for promises of a new war of life. The chief's voice had been sombre and that night, in the shadows of firelight, Wandering Spirit noticed the deep lines that etched age into the chief's face. He knew the chief did not want trouble with the white man. He also knew that the chief remained wary of the promises they made in these treaties. When it had come time to me with the government Wandering Spirit had stood behind the chief when he refused to leave his mark on that piece of paper that promised his starving people life again in exchange for their freedom.



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Wandering Spirit shivered and shifted his weight. The boards beneath his feet felt cold and strange and he yearned for the softness of the earth. Little Bear began to speak his last words, his raspy voice crying out in anguish about the plight of their people and the desperation that had driven them to make a stand. Wandering Spirit knew the desperation that Little Bear spoke of instantly. When the chief had left that gathering with the government, the paper still missing his mark, Wandering Spirit had felt a surge of hope. Maybe now the chief would listen to him. His heart ached to fight back instead of waiting for hunger and weakness to overcome him and his people. His warriors had done what they could to overpower the hunger that had clawed at the peoples' empty bellies.

They had set up camp on the Frog Lake Reserve, near Fort Pitt, the autumn before and the previous winter had not been easy on the haggard and wearied people. Many succumbed to the death that they had been fighting off so valiantly. Wandering Spirit's band had traveled from the plains of Montana where they had come back starving and empty handed.

Wandering Spirit and his warriors had spent that exhausting winter snaring rabbits and other small game, distributing the meagre portions among the people. Some took it with a fleeting look of gratefulness in their sunken eyes while others, their flesh hanging on their bones remained curled up inside their tipis too weak to even notice. He had gathered all that he could find of value in the camp that could be spared and had taken it to the store on the settlement nearby to trade for food.

Wandering Spirit felt his body tense as he remembered what Thomas Quinn, the Indian agent, had scornfully told him, "No work, no food." He knew Quinn was suggesting that the chief needed to put his mark on the paper if he expected anything from the government. He had walked away from Quinn that day empty-handed. But, as his people grew weaker, Wandering Spirit's rage had grown stronger 'till it burned in him like a powder keg ready to explode.

Iron Body was crying out in anger now, his words sharp and condemning. Though the people who had gathered to watch him die would not understand his words, his tone conveyed his anguish. Wandering Spirit couldn't help but steal a sideways glance at the brave warrior that he had fought beside almost all his life. Iron Body's face was contorted with rage, his eyes shut tight and his face pointed towards the sky. Wandering Spirit notices, for the first time the long thick ropes that hung like deadweights behind each man. Wandering Spirit's stomach tightened and he felt Iron Body's angst as if it was his own.

Even as his own stomach gnawed in hunger and body grew weaker, Wandering Spirit approached the chief, hell bent on being heard.



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“We need to stand up and fight or we will soon be too weak to do anything but curl up and die. No more waiting. The people are desperate and the warriors restless.”

The chief had listened to him in silence, his craggy face remaining emotionless and Wandering Spirit remembered feeling sorry for him. It was at that moment that Wandering Spirit had realized it was up to him to do something and that he had to make the next move. He was the raw chief after all. He had gathered his warriors, on that sunny cloudless spring day, and they headed for the Frog Lake settlement.

Miserable Man’s final war cry, feared in the heat of battle, echoed in sharp contrast to the sombre scene before them. Wandering Spirit saw Thomas Quinn’s face again. He and his warriors had come to the settlement to try to get food for the starving people. But Quinn refused to cooperate. Even with a gun trained on him, Quinn sneered at Wandering Spirit and his warriors with contempt and superiority, and tried to grab Wandering Spirit’s gun. Quinn was quick and strong but misjudged the distance between him and the gun. The shot sounded like an explosion and Quinn’s face contorted in a look of sheer surprise as the bullet tore into his body. Wandering Spirit remembered Quinn’s body falling hard to the ground and then standing over the man who had wielded so much power over the destiny of his people. He had watched his blood pour out onto the earth, somehow knowing that in that moment he had lost his life as well. Eight more men had died after Quinn that day and still his people went hungry.

The man beside him began to sing, pulling Wandering Spirit from his memories. Walking the Sky’s last song stirred the warrior’s heart. He exhaled and his body slumped forward slightly; his shackles suddenly unbearably heavy. After Walking the Sky, he was the only man whose last words remained unspoken.

His heart cried for his people and he saw them as they were – strong and resilient and Wandering Spirit knew they would survive. They would find a way to stand proud again. He opened his eyes and saw the sea of people looking up at him expectantly, waiting to hear what this last man had to say before the rope was put over his head and he breathed his last.

Suddenly there was a break in the clouds and a single beam of sunlight beckoned. Wandering Spirit stood tall, imagining he was wearing his war bonnet and holding his bow and arrow, his body strong again. He could feel the gentle breeze of the prairie wind on his body and the sweet smell of sage and sweetgrass in his nostrils. His words dissipated in the sunlight. Wandering Spirit closed his eyes, the strength of his ancestors coursing through his body. He did not feel the rope around his neck, heavy and chafing. His burden had lifted. It did not matter what he said. His last words were embodied in the life he had lived.



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On November 27, 1885, eight men were hanged in Battleford in Canada's largest mass execution in history. Six of the men: Broken Arrow, Little Bear, Iron Body, Miserable Man, Walking in the Sky and Wandering Spirit, were hanged for their involvement in the death of nine men at Frog Lake on April 2, 1885; the other two for an unrelated incident. Of the six, Wandering Spirit was the only one that had no final words. Yet his spirit lives on in each one of us as we continue to fight, not with words but with our lives, for the future of our children and our grandchildren. Eksoi.