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Recovering Ground

Sara General

The path to the council house is worn down by the feet of heavy hearted men. That morning as the sun was rising, my father sat outside for a long time and my mother moved about my sister and me with an unusual grace and tenderness.

Hands rough from work reached out to straighten my shirt. “Go on then.” She told me. “Behave. And listen.”

The world is not so big a place as we imagine it to be. As I move along the path, I think about my home. It is bursting with something I cannot put name to, found somewhere between the colour of light through the green of the trees and the humour of birds protecting their nests. The land is warm in the summertime and untouchable during the winter, when snow played with the gravity between the soles of your feet and the soil.

It is as much a world to discover your self in as it is to be discovered. I kick a stone from the path and feel how it tumbles away from me. I know this day is different and I am different in it. A breeze drifts through my hair and I pull at my shirt. All, all, all of the world is changing with every step, and for a moment I want to turn back, to look away from what is coming. There are some things a child does not want to ever see. There are some things a man does not want to see, and I was heading towards both of them.

A rabbit darts across the path and I reach to my side, recalling that I have brought no weapon with me. I curse and laugh and continue on, thinking, *you are a lucky rabbit.*

By the time I reach the council house, I forget why I am there, my throat is dry and my thoughts are racing with the idea of me exploring the mountains with naught but a bow and a musket with bigger game than rabbits. *Game enough for the whole clan,* I think.

I see my father talking with some other men. They see me and nod, and I raise my hand. A child’s gesture, the unmistakable wave of youth.

The merest trace of a smile touches the corners of their mouths. I help myself to some water and some of it drips down my face.

Inside I sit down and wipe my forehead. And wait.

It seems to me that this day has lost some of its splendour. I think about my slingshot and wish I had brought it with me to mend. *Then I’d go back for that rabbit.*



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I tap my foot against the ground of the longhouse and look around, remembering the last time I was here for a gathering. Only then there was music, and the faces were lit with happiness, the familiar smell of smoke was mingled with laughter and feet shuffling the ground, the shake of the rattle. It had been a good night. I am not so young anymore. I see a pretty face and it makes me smile.

It's not until the Younger Brothers arrive that I realize there will be clouds in the sky when I return home. Their faces are hard as stone and their eyes are dark. And as they enter and take their places an inconsolable sadness fills my whole heart.

The meeting is well underway by the time I can shake the feeling that has come over me. I realize that the angry murmuring that I have been hearing is not a movement within me, but is coming from the Chiefs and men around me.

I try to block out what they are saying, thinking of my mother and sister, the rabbit, and the mountains.

But I feel their words like arrows to my soul, and I hear the fear in their voices.

My father once told me that, when we ourselves are not enough to uphold the laws of our peace it is left to him.

"I am the one whose name has disappeared behind his duty. Whose life has been dedicated to the trust of that which to us, is most sacred. The Great Law."

I look up at my father and for the first time that day he is looking back at me.

I will be good, I think. I will be a good man and a good husband. I will be a good father. I will make choices that see my family through hard times, even though right now I don't know what those will be.

He holds my gaze as they cover the fire, his eyes pierce through me as though to say, *Remember!*

If I have thought that a boy could do anything to have changed the days that had come before this one, I would have done it, I try to tell him. And I will do what I can to be the change in the future, wherever we are bound for, I swear. But this day has been thrown in no one's favour, and it is done now.

My son...



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You will not understand I think why I brought you to Council that day. What father would want his child to see the failing of his own people?

I tell you now, that a father who loves his son would not set him a path that was impossible to follow. He could carve out all he could, but a finished path, well, such a path does not exist. A father can give his son the truth, and if you saw only our good, I feel that you would not know what to do when you saw our bad.

I have told you before that I am hidden beneath my duties-even as you will be one day. I am Tadadaho, son. And it is my job to watch over the Great Law. As fierce as my own heart has been, it too, falls behind my duty.

We have treated with the British, and we while some of us have managed to stay out of the affairs of the state, there are others of us who have not been able to maintain our neutrality, and we have quarrelled. It is irreconcilable for now, boy.

Like the fire of our Council the future has been covered, hidden from my eyes. There is blood on the ground now, and I grieve for the tears that will soon follow it.

You are bound to Upper Canada now and what you will find there I cannot say. Our alliance with the British came at great cost. It was there that day, in the long house. You felt it, I saw you shiver beneath it. It was a moment that was both a beginning and an end. That kind of place you will find several times in your life. The sun does this too you know, it both sets and rises and in those moments I hope you will remember that dark times are always followed by light.

Our British allies come with words and intentions, both good and bad. But you would not measure a bear by his words so remember, a man can't be measured this way either. They see us as children you know, but mark well your own father and your own feelings as a father. A parent can see the path that their children weave and a parent wants those paths to be filled with happiness and peace. A parent will do all that they can to see that path secured.

They do not expect us to endure, I think. But our will is strong and it is found deeper in us than they know.

I see in your eyes that you are not an angry man. I see it now and I saw it then. This is good. Like your name, Haga hi: yo. He has nice eyes...good eyes.

You did not want to see then, your eyes were in the woods looking for that damned rabbit and the kind of glory that young men yearn for. But use them now. Use them to find a future by the river that you go to now, embrace it and rebuild what we have lost here.



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The Council fire, symbolic of the ongoing government of the Confederacy of Six Nations was covered in 1777 when the League of the Iroquois was unable to find consensus on where to side in the War of Independence. In the end, after being unable to maintain neutrality most chose to ally with the British.

In 1784 Sir Fredrick Haldimand granted to the Crown's allies, Six Nations, six miles on either side of the Grand River from the mouth to the source as compensation for the loss of homelands in New York State.

The tract of land equated to roughly 950, 000 acres. Today Six Nations sits on less than five percent of their original holdings and continues to seek justice to aid them in building the kind of future that every parent wants for a child; a future that does not require being once more divided to achieve.

Author Statement

Six Nations has endured a long and difficult relationship with the British Crown and then the government of Canada.

It struck me when I began thinking of what I would write about the incredible wealth of history that our people have. They have come to light in varying degrees through the recent activities in Caledonia, and sometimes with a different perspective attached to them.

This story is about a moment I believe pivotal to Six Nations people. It demonstrates our ability to survive even after not being able to find peace with one another, since it involves the failing of the Confederacy to reach consensus.

It is the kind of story that might change with the telling.

It is not the kind of story, I think, that many people would like to remember, but oddly enough, it is the story that brought us to Canada, and it may aid us yet by helping us face the reality of our situation and who we are now.

Thank-you for considering my submission.