

Residential School

The Shaman

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The four brothers had been out hunting together. Since this was late autumn they were in dead earnest to kill at least three moose for the clan. When they had reached that number, they heard the shouts of their father and the shaman; they had come looking for them out in this wilderness. Nothing unusual about that. However, when they had made a fast camp for tea and bannock, their father urged them to accept the ministrations of the shaman.

The shaman was a good old soul. His father had been the most successful and credible shaman who lived in the region. During the caribou hunts, he had accurately told them where to find the elusive animals which moved incessantly and fast. He had saved the people from starvation since their range of hunting had been limited during the troubles. When he was named as the shaman he had been declared an enemy of the state. Evidently, they packed him off to an insane asylum. Jail was preferred but an asylum served a different purpose.

His son, as a young child had been absorbed into their clan adoptive system. He grew into an adult as an older uncle to them. They respected him. The people grew accustomed not to talk to strangers about how they really did their thinking. So the shaman instructed them to unload his cariole, the hard ground had allowed him to bring his dog team. They made a clearing, cut down firewood, and fetched pails of water. They found some loose rocks they could manoeuvre in and out of a fire. They worked silently as this was their style out in the forest. Once the sweat lodge was made, they were urged to enter the sweat. Their father remained outside to maintain an outdoor

firing of the stones and to fetch the pails of water. They had not eaten yet; so officially they had fasted.

They said their ancient prayers then, the shaman took over. There was no preparation for the visions that came and went. The noises emanating from the bowels of the earth, snatched out of the highest winds, the sound of fission among the stars gripped all their reality. Then the shaman started to speak. They were so alarmed by the words describing the visions, they spoke and exclaimed in tongues. One of them had learned some Russian words from the Russian hermit living in the region. Their exhortations for heavenly help were said in all the languages they knew. They wanted God to understand them. Then in some great exhaustion the shaman said, "It is enough, this is torture." Their father helped gather the shaman's belongings. He told him to get in the cariole. The dogs knew the way home.

The brothers now had to collect their senses and wits. They could not speak. They finished packing for the journey home. With this much raw meat, the wolves would be coming shortly. As they drank their last cup of tea, they seemed deep in thought. Then Okimah spoke as he always did.

"On the radio they call the enemy Nazi. It is a German word."

William said, "I want to get married before Christmas. If not then, right after the New Year."

Okimah, "You are only twenty."

William, "Shaman did say we would all come home, but two would be permanently hurt. He did not say which ones."

Okimah managed a tight smile. "He did not say how badly either ..." Then he said, "Let's go boy-sahk."

These men were not into queries of introspection. They were Indians. Their philosophy in life was straight forward. The situation one finds himself has to be graded as good, bad or indifferent. In a good situation you thanked God. In a bad situation you made sure you did not add to the trouble. In an indifferent situation, when you approached a fork in the road you took time to scout around before making a decision

about your next move. Being impulsive can get you killed. Their present environment had taught them that.

At seven in the morning, in early December, just long enough to have the banns read for their congregation, a small wedding party, came out of the church. A young bride of seventeen emerged looking the sweet young and eager girl she was. William looked solemn. There was very little time for celebration. The bachelors were leaving first toward Prince Albert. The married ones were going toward Manitoba and only officials knew where they were going to be stationed. Some of the Indians leaving their reserves were leaving them forever as the Indian registry dropped them from the pay list and banned them from their home. The non-status Indians had already lost everything and the Métis never had any respect as human beings beyond their own societies. In the army they wore the same uniform; they all marched the same way so you could not pick them out by their walk. But they were all good snipers and their Indian languages allowed them to use wireless at will. No one understood them. They entered inside enemy lines with pistols, grenades and maps in the middle of the night raids. The Métis who spoke a kind of French and some of English became adept at being neither French nor English. Among themselves they could talk. They could endure everything except the pea soup fog of England, the channel, and coastal France. They ate mutton morning, noon and night, and drank gallons of tea. They walked the English countryside, the towns, and the cities, rode the Tube and saw the Buckingham Palace. The Queen was beautiful. At a Highland Castle they cajoled a ghostly apparition who dragged his heavy chains to frighten the bejeez out of them.

Okimah by his very nature toured East London and marvelled at the scruffiness of mean city streets, and then Hitler bombed it every night for extra horrors. The ordinary people suffered, this the Aboriginal people understood. So they kept chewing that mutton. For eighteen months some endured the frequent soundings of over there, any day. Vera Lynn sang and sang "Till we meet again." They met some very black men coming from places called the Caribbean. Those men were going to be officers. They were right-smarted compared to the bush fighters. And they danced every chance they

had. They rubbed elbows with the Mohawks and real Frenchmen. Everyone was waiting while they honed their killer instincts.

Okimah did not have to be an Okimah. His colour, his accent kept him a private just as well as his pay remained low. He preferred to walk and he was a long distance runner. He loved to play soccer and found he was a natural leader. He noticed how people graded themselves into fur piles. He figured out that to live in such a small country you really had to know your place. Those above him knew him to be a great tracker and his sense of direction was superb. He found himself to be chosen for sniping abilities and excellent night vision. He drew French-speaking comrade at arms.

Chamberlain was a little impulsive. If stopped by night patrol, this comrade did all the talking. He could not control his bush Cree accent in French but he could imitate an English accent by pretending he had a mouthful of marbles. As luck would have it, they dropped behind enemy lines into the French countryside to pretend they were out and about in their French berets and walking sticks. They had been out all night spying on enemy lines. They had to be ready to eat their pieces of paper. Then one night they were dropped too close to the enemy already on high alert. Chamberlain who flattened himself against a tree was anxious to get away. Okimah motioned to him to stop moving. No—Chamberlain had to take one more quick look. The next thing that Okimah saw was Chamberlain's teeth flying in every direction. It was a direct hit. Okimah could hear and then see the German sniper sitting in a tree. He prayed for invisibility, he did not go near Chamberlain as he was trained to do. After a very long while he could see the sniper come down to see his target. He kept still. When he saw the sniper leave and turn his back to him, he moved toward the coordinates as planned. He made it.

Second brother was not so lucky. He drew the landing at Green Beach.