

Brother A

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Dear Reader:

This story is fictional, and is based on themes from the reality of one non-status Indian. He represents an incredible journey five hundred years in the making; of one transition after another. First, came the visions of the “others” coming from across the great salt sea in large wooden “canoes.” The “Grandfather Nation” of the Algonquians, the Delaware told our ancestors about great changes of territory, war among nations, that the starvation times were coming. It was hard to believe. West of Lake Winnipeg, the great bison herds could be heard huffing, puffing, and running free from water hole to sweet grass hills in such great uncountable numbers. On the entire great fishing stretches from the Red River, beyond Lake Winnipeg, every creek, river, and lake teemed with fish down to the deep holes in the Saskatchewan River where huge sturgeon grew old. Fishing weirs were built over centuries till they carried the name of the fish caught there.

How could that change? The seasons still changed and provisioning preparations for trading and local consumption were being made century after century. Then came the reports of hordes of starving new people coming by the boatloads to the South and now to the North. Then, they came inland stripping food from river banks, shooting with explosive devices from a distance at all range of animals. They even brought their own moostosask that ate all the grass and grains that had to be grown to keep them fed for slaughter. They carried clucking birds and gathered the large eggs, but they had to grow corn in large fields that they had cleared by the boatload by enslaving black-coloured men, women and children. The captives did not want to come, so iron chains were put on their necks and feet, and they were made to endure the terrible journeys

across the great salt water. It was rumoured that they gave these “slaves” to the Cherokee who took them as gift horses and everyone grew rich without having to pay for their labour or share the fruits of that labour.

Then it was heard as far away as the Council Bluffs on the Mississippi River, where it was told by runners from the eastern coast that removals were happening; death from calamities. The hungry ones broke through the Cumberland Gap into Pawnee and Shawnee territories. The leader, a man called Andrew Jackson, declared “every man for himself and all he can carry away.” We could not hold them back as hungry men shot their way into the territories. They ate everything we sustained ourselves with, leaving nothing to renew itself. The Sioux held on, and the Apache were hunted like animals by bands of psychotic murderers who called themselves Americans. We call them the Kitchi-Mohkoman, men who use the long knife to kill anything that moves.

We had our pemmican wars. We knew that the Blackfoot, if they felt like it, chased us out of their territory up to three hundred miles till we recognized a common enemy. At that point, each tribe held territory for dear life and soul. We knew now without a doubt that these new people wanted the land without caring what sustained the life they found. Those were the starvation years when the buffalo was hunted down to almost the last moostos. The buffalo people nearly starved where they stood as game of any kind dwindled to almost nothing.

When these strangers came to stay, we were wearing mink, ermine, fine beaver, muskrat, lynx and fox as garment trimmings. Our war bonnets were of the finest eagle feathers, the roaches for our heads traded briskly in the markets. Our garments were exquisite. We were able to buy pottery from the far south. The Spanish-speaking Indians sold us silver and jade, and turquoise jewellery. In the nineteenth century, we were able to afford horses. Dogs we traded with the Dene who traded with the Inuit. We pounded corn from growing nations like the Mandan-Hidatsi into maize. It was precious.

Our only sougoh came from berries and maple syrup. We did not know how sick the 20th and 21st centuries would make us with sugar and animal fat bought in a store. Macha poh, dirty water has given us other health horrors. Fire water and chemically-

laced tobacco is killing us, but those are choices. Ever since we started speaking only white men's languages, we no longer have access to the realms of thought that kept our logics in working order. We moved to the rhythms of the earth and paid attention to our immediate environments. We named inanimate and animate beings with respect. Now we watch endless moronic television filled with packed garages of empty cultures. Again those are choices.

Our Great Patriot chiefs wanted us to look long and hard upon the new people. We recognized this common enemy. This man is armed with destructive power wanting to harvest, dig for every last resource on earth. He has no future, half the time he does not even have children. But he hides under a democratic cloak of mutual greed and every government paid for by the people pays homage to greed and excess, and he calls it "progress" and "personal success."

The following story is about the great transition for sub-arctic people. We found one common enemy for all the human family on earth. We reacted wherever the news came. We learned a new more deadly type of warfare. The atom bomb. Other bombs were dropped on civilian population. We saw civilization crawl back to its darkest side of treachery and madness. We paid the price and paid the ransom to the devil.

The following story is one man's journey from that dark place back to the open waters of the wasay-ack.

Prisoner of Wars

Brother A

He ascended the worn-out steps of the oldest church hall on the reserve. The worn-out scruffy wooden steps reminded him of other steps in all his fifty years of climbing stairs. Tired to the bone, fatigued in spirit, more than emotionally spent, he was wondering about his moral fibre. He thought of his immortal soul compared to his weary mortal countenance. Another person upon studying him saw a powerfully-built man, a bush walker, with work-worn big hands, dark intelligent eyes, short cut very black hair, and the classical facial features of an Indian man. Even now he was handsome.

Inside the entrance to a larger hall, the smell of fresh brewed coffee and the pungent odour of steaming black tea mixed with the smell of fresh bannock. It welcomed him home. Quickly, he removed his well-worn baseball cap. He looked around and to his surprise he recognized everyone from the post office, the pharmacy, the five and dime store, the grocery stores, all public walks of life. They were all the sectors of the working world and citizens from the two divides, Indians and the others. He was in a place he needed and wanted to be.

Every early morn he picked up his packsack, packed a bannock and a bottle of water. He was gone an hour before the others began to stir from their feather robes. His robe was outside airing out. That was his routine as a young boy. He was driven to hunting small game scouting for bigger game. He was not a big talker; just a presence you could not ignore. As he cut through the village pine forest to emerge into the fire guard which was as close to the reserve as possible, he doubled back to the shallow lake that was favoured by ducks and geese. Deer came to drink there. Other smaller critters also came.

By the time he was fourteen, he was an excellent forager, gathering herbs and rare plants that he gave to his mother. She thanked him always. When they moved into the deeper wilderness areas, he did the same. He could cross any terrain with caution and

expertise. He guided his brothers as well if his father was away working on the trails to other northern villages. They could rely on him.

When they hunted together, they slept in a big sleeping tent. The storytellers spoke of ancient times, ancient battles won and lost. They had no battle scars yet. When they returned to the main encampment, they showed their trophies of sorts, cleaned guns and counted shells. Gone were the bows and arrows, but they used the lance. The lance was a sharpened steel rod fashioned and immobilized to a sturdy piece of wood with rawhide and varnished to a dull smooth finish.

Brother A's Community

Brother A belonged to a large clan of Maskekowiyniw, mixed bloods from as far south as Arkansas, some were traders, but always they followed the river close to their woodlands and numerous lakes. The forest and wilderness were their kingdoms, their harvesting and feasting grounds. They moved effortlessly it seemed where others stumbled. They were hunters and gatherers with all its implications of personal responsibility. When foreign governments came in the nineteenth century, they split the clan along lines called *Indian Act* Indians and non-status Indians. Then, without taking responsibility for that action, they sent letters from a place among the Odawa Nation called Ottawa. They sent the odd courier scared of mosquitoes, bears, and large mammals with paper that usually resulted in more loss of land, more regulations about where they could move. They hired people to do the writing. No one seemed to do the thinking. Hence, this non-status Indian with a French borrowed name, roamed the domain as religiously as ever.

By breakfast, he reported other movement of animals, the colour of the waters, even its rise and fall. He had the eyes of an eagle his mother said. When the immediate family moved to an encampment to either hunt, trap or gather provisions, he led the scouting. His father told him he had the making of a "King Trapper."

His father never owned any land. However, he built a fenced-in compound, two long homes, and made a home. In his growing years, the family spent time with the mother's relatives, all status Indians. They were identified by their speech, a slight "g" to their "k," and they had great difficulty in pronouncing "p" and "b." The "ci" sound in English requires effort. Their mother had attended residential school, and acquired two languages, English and French. She understood Salteaux and all the Cree dialects. In Brother A's time, there were no schools because the provincial government had no money to provide teachers. He remained illiterate, but for what his parents could teach him. His father never went to a school, but he could read Cree syllabics. He was much older than his mother, and he learned to read before the language was forbidden and the books were taken away. His parents had Cree prayer books that they hid under the bed. They hung onto for the future.

Brother A could read the forest floor, scan the sky, and predict a change in the weather with great accuracy. In the wilderness that was an art form and a necessary set of tools.

His coming of age story is centered in the forest that encased the community. All paths came through the forest marking the way to the Hudson's Bay store, the police station, the post office, and the two opposing Christian churches. These were European-based churches; of course, they imported ancient war wounds. In spite of all that clanging of old chains, mother spun her stories of saints from the spirit world. The saint had been heroic in their faith. Before he fell asleep, Brother A was comforted by the sound of his mother's voice recounting why each person named was declared a saint.

As he came through that same forest one early morning, he saw the figure of a woman he knew to be the wife of a man who worked away from home for months at a time. His thoughts centered on the man. He thought it must be hard to go "out there," still a very hostile set of towns to make a living. Leaving everything familiar and friendly must be discouraging. He said nothing about seeing the woman to his mother. A week later as he sauntered home, he saw her again. What was she doing on the village

path? Where was she going or was she coming from another place? These two questions required two seconds of his thinking.

On their next encounter she spoke to him. She said something about seeing him often on this path so early in the morning. He nodded without making a sound. This time he mentioned seeing her to his mother. She is coming from her sister's place; she hates being alone at night. He thought so little goes on in any village that is not known by somebody as to their motive or intent. He closed the book on that one. Except he now encountered her so often, he did not mind exchanging words with her.

It was August, almost time to leave deep into the wilderness for game fowl. She invited him for an early morning tea. He was a bit early going back home. He thought somehow it seemed wrong not to accept her invitation. He thanked her for the hot tea and left. She was really alone. Her home was surrounded by the pine forest. No one could be seen from her front window. He was not given to idle conversation. He was more a listener of ideas.

She must have bided her time because now she asked him to come at a certain hour, in broad daylight. He kept quiet about the invitation. As chance would have it, the three village spies, all girls aged ten to twelve saw him on the path that day. They followed him as discreetly as possible for three giggling spies.

“Ah, he entered so and so's home,” a few minutes later they saw her pull shut her front window curtain as tightly as possible. They were good spies: they followed him for a few days till there was no doubt that Brother A was seeing the lonely wife of so and so. Within that time, she told him that she had received a letter saying her husband was returning home to her. He was dismayed with this news, and it was time for duck hunting season preparations. He was going to miss her. But he knew she would not miss him in return.

He tried circumventing his mother's direct looks. His foraging habits continued, but he stayed closer to home to do other tasks. He heard via his mother, the village midwife, that the woman had delivered a very healthy girl late in the spring. He went

out and never thought of her again. The spies went to see the newborn but were not able to pinpoint the “clan” look.

Brother A and Okimhaw were as different as night and day. Okimhaw spent time at the reserve day school like he was on parole. He was an eager learner, and the mother wasted no time asking her relatives to allow the school teacher to take him in. He could go to learn books, but he could not have the biscuit rations. His mother appealed to her sister who asked for a ration of biscuits to keep at home. From this ration, after school hours, the non-status children got their biscuits from their aunt. Brother A had no time for this, he asked as politely as possible to be left alone. The school benches were hard and crowded. He fell asleep during class so he got reprieved, but his mother found time to teach him Cree syllabics and the ABCs from her treasured prayer books. Okimhaw mastered those too. Brother A marvelled at his younger brother's ability to stay awake and focus through that damned rote learning.

When the dreadful time came, he and his four brothers never left their region. They were able to sustain themselves and earned enough of the little-available money. There's not so much of it around. The Great Depression had the continent in the dark clouds of dust storms. Most travel became useless as poverty was also in the towns. At their closest otenahk, they could stay on an island where they could camp as hotels did not let them in. When they ventured into the closest rooming houses with baths and toilets, even those were not open to them. They found out Chinese restaurants allowed them to eat on the premises. They developed a taste for that cuisine as strange as it looked. When they went to enlist into the Canadian Army, their English and French was not understood. Their Cree language no one knew, though it was the language of their region. Okimhaw, the quick learner, became their interpreter then they were separated, and were put on trains to get into combat training for city fighting.

They took leave of each other remembering aloud the shaman's words about his visions. They had hunter abilities that could not be taught by that training. They understood that the terrain and the technical training was easy. They learned battle

formation, and signalling in combat areas. Learning everything about surviving while everything is exploding around you, made them combat ready for England.

Brother A, who hated confined spaces, became a prisoner of war. He spent three years at ----- . No matter how descriptive one can become about the camp, it was foremost a prison. Its guards were all Nazis; the barbed wire marked the exact extent of the camp. Black bread and dubious water were the food, and the whereabouts of the camp was unknown unless Germany was on your map of dreams. Home was a distant dream for a person who came and went with the seasons. His first night in prison he tried to sleep, but he wrestled with demons carrying weapons, setting off explosives and dropping bombs.

Then he heard his mother's voice after saying, "i-mamatik!" between dry sobs. She was telling a story, and he was a great listener. The demons became quiet. Her spirit had come to keep him alive even in this dreadful place. The prisoners organized themselves according to rank and went about with purpose. Games were conjured to break the monotony of time. Never far from their thoughts was the escape, an errant Allied bomb dropped on their heads, a Nazi going more crazy and killing them all. As the guttural and harsh tones of the language became distinct, he discovered their phrases were strung together in the same structure as Cree. To his dismay he was singled out for a special guard. In the middle of a war, the Camp Commandant had deemed him a possible escapee organizer.

His twelve-hour guard was an eighteen-year old upper class Dutch citizen. The family had assets that were seized by the Nazis because in the fifteenth century a Jewish ancestor had converted to Christianity. What was this rich young man doing guard duty in a stinking prison camp? This young man spoke English.

With his broken English Brother A, out of unnatural curiosity, asked him two questions. "Are you a Nazi?" No answer, no salute either. Next, "How did you get this detail?" No real answer, but he told him about two SS showing up at their estate with papers for him to enlist. They told his parents if he does not go willingly he had two choices, the Russian front or guard duty at a prison of war camp for English prisoners.

The guard asked him, "How did you join the army?"

"Like everyone else, there was a war and we came." He cut away.

Their ideology, their backgrounds, their belief systems, their life circumstances were alien pieces of each other. If he ever became familiar enough to discuss aspects of what made him a Non-status Indian in Canada, he would reveal far too much. If he became vulnerable, his fellow prisoners could suffer or places he had been could be blown away. The deep listener in him raised all the right red flags. In the end, they talked about the bomb blasts that were getting louder, closer and tore up the night sky. They were all targets at night. The sound of his mother's voice never left him.

His foraging habits paid off—no root, no small source of protein escaped his eye and snares. The prisoners learned to boil grass picked for every molecule of nutrient. He made something out of things their experience had missed.

The Nazis figured he was planning an escape. He was working on survival. That activity with its attention to detail and opportunity did fill his working hours. In his idle time, he rummaged for things to make other tools. He did have a dream of a great escape. He wore a war bonnet with a long train of eagle feathers, white bone chest armour, a German silver bandolier of bullets, a bear claw necklace, arrow-arm bands of beaded leather, and the leggings were of white caribou hide with clan markings. He held a war shield, a steel lance and he was dancing in a Sun Dance. The singing was in the very blood that flowed in his brain. He awoke to the starkness of the moment and knew he was so different he could never blend into any crowd not of his colour.

The three years were set for survival. At the same time, the questions they had asked in their youth about themselves came to meaning. Why did the "Redcoats" come to Batoche? To make war now had context. To kill us would have seemed out of context for a people who had so little and asked for so little or nothing. They were told in detail about the killing of all their horses by the soldiers. They were not told about the hangings, but for one fellow the government in far away Ottawa had insisted was an enemy of the settler state. The name was kept hidden like the Cree prayer books. Till the

name was spoken on melancholy nights when the nation's patriots were named and prayed for.

He recalled his mother speaking in reverend tones about St. John of the Cross who was kept in solitary confinement. St. John found the Presence coming to him in great compassion. The Holy Presence let him know he was not abandoned and not to despair though he could not sit or stand in the cage the inquisition authorities had fashioned for him. Out of that little cage came some of the most beautiful human prayers to be recited, pondered upon by upon by contemplatives through the centuries. He had been a recipient of that knowledge and it quieted his soul. This does not mean he understood it, he felt the profoundness of it.

Then the sounds of real war came pounding up and down the land. The ground shook as if to get away from the wretchedness. Now he experienced real fear. They were tied down ducks. Tethered to this place by barbed wire, machine gun turrets aimed at them, they had to pray for deliverance amid the crisis of staying alive before starvation set in.

They were liberated. A rehabilitation process began, but staff shortages attending to other war wounds left the men shortlisted to go home. With no visible wounds he arrived home. There was a great weeping and great joy at his safe return. The happiest was the youngest brother, all his brothers returned. Okaimhaw had great visible facial wounds. William had lost all hearing in one ear. The two most changed had lost aspects of themselves as the pound of flesh war that had been demanded of them was paid. They had no visible scars.

Very soon out at camp, Brother A exhibited nightmares where bombs fell and he screamed in pain from the sound. By intense consultation on how to ease his cycle of disturbing nightmares, his father informed him that he had to return to an otenake to be near doctors. He thought he was being turned away and condemned to death. However, his father, always a quiet and forceful speaker, told him what he needed to do. He had to make a life in the nearest town. If ever these nightmares dissipated—they were

threatening his well being—he could return to this rather arduous life of deep forests and many kinds of open water.

The down river journey of ninety miles was the loneliest he had ever endured. He did have some dry heaving sobs that he alone could hear. He had no place to stay but on Indian Island or Dress Up Point. Here he could set up camp, get water, make fire. The town seemed to be busy from the wharf to the railway station. As it turned out, it was a depot for all goods going to points north by whatever means possible. He could find work because labourers were in short supply. He found work with a road-building gang. They were all rough customers, no one could claim gentrification. He kept to himself.

Movie night existed. Indians in certain sections, white folk sat among themselves. He joined the Indians to watch the Hollywood movies, sometimes about Hollywood's idea of “real Injuns and fake cowboys.” Once in a while, really good movies were shown, one night he sat next to a white lady because the Indian section was full right next to the white section. This movie was so long it had an intermission then everyone rushed out for more food, smokes, et cetera. He found himself in the bright lights next to a very nice looking woman. She excused herself to get past him. He took a better look.

Shorty there after, he made it his business to find room and board in town where he could bathe, keep his clothes clean and stay healthy. By asking around, he found a Métis family who did not slam the door in his face. They just named their price and asked him where he worked. They seemed satisfied with the information. The place was clean. The woman of the house did the cooking. Better yet, the spoken language in the house was Cree. So a kind of routine set in; of work, home, movie night, walking by the river or crossing the river to the reserve where social gatherings convened. He could go there. He blended right in.

It was there he met her again with her parents, a very Indian lady from that reserve and her mixed blood, very white-looking father. Greetings were exchanged, information garnered. He could dance to any tune. She was his age and rendered a widow by the same war he had endured in prison. Her husband never got off the beach

in Normandy. Her quiet nature attracted him, but she carried a melancholy air too. No one in his right mind could fill that space.

It took a long time, the parents liked him and got used to him. She held back. He was not going anywhere. With patience he helped lift the shadows of grief.

“Choose life,” he implored her. “I will never be able to replace your loss, but I can support a new way of being.”

She had to believe him. He told her of his recurring nightmares and how he had to work around them so he could function by day. He was sincere and honest. There was no fanfare at their wedding, a quiet ceremony, a celebration for two people who had survived losses.

They did discuss the kind of meanness that gripped the town's people. Children had to be raised where he worked, she did not want him to go away to work. They saw a small community growing south of the town. It had no community centre, no stores but most of the people were mixed bloods. They shopped in the town, but withdrew at night.

So it did evolve; one small house with a porch. They always had a vehicle. He built a bigger house. The children attended school in town. High school burst in on them. He told his wife that the despotic centre of improvident behaviour had to be endured. The girls wanted clothes like everyone else. They had choices from two catalogues. The moaning and groaning never really stopped, but both parents got deaf. They had real issues on their hands.

It was a crazy cycle he was on. Once or twice a year, he went on a binge of blotto drinking. The nightmares increased with stress and age. He never lost his joy, but the pitiful, trembling curled up specimen of drink and drool broke their spirit. Finally, in a great confrontation, they spelled out their terms. He had to get to the exact root of this cycle. It was destroying him and hurting his wife in her helplessness. He remembered why he had to leave home. He was not going to lose this one.

So he climbed those steps and repeated stories from his past. The prison years of paralyzing fear of bombs. The years hearing and not responding to racial slurs, fearing

for his children's lives in such a hostile environment, all these different events were like an offbeat instrument playing over and over again in his brain. He could understand the evil of racism as an ultimate streak of greed. But he had to face who he was. An Indian man hated for being alive, walking and working in town. He had absorbed the hatred as body wounds. The bombing had been the catalyst for his pain or reign of terror for his heart and soul.

Even in the freedom of growing up in his region, the restriction placed on him by government policy had forced him into servitude not of his choice. He had overcome so much without knowing it on pure guts and willpower that the handy self-medication of wine and spirits were mere gaps put into place that where all the truth that had to be faced. He was willing to go to Red Earth Mountain to face the mountain cat. He had to rip the wolverine of alcohol addition from his chest. So he had wounds to show for it.

They told him what to do. As soon as the cycle manifests itself and before the headache comes take two painkillers and sleep twenty four hours. The worst episodic dreams will pass and you can function almost right away. The memory has the deepest pathways in the brain. The day he took the advice he was not sure. But he awoke twenty-four hours later with no after effects.

He had no headache. There were no terrible stories of what he had said or done in his usual stupor. He was so relieved. At the same time, he was told this was what he had to do as long as the symptoms came around. He was a wounded warrior. They had no name for this in English. But the annals of warrior stories, rituals of cleansing had been performed on men who had killed or had been kept captive, perhaps tortured. There was a theory: a chemical imbalance came from the fight or flight impulse. The annals said it took six months before one was fully human again. Isolation and rest were the antidote to shattered nerves.

Time did pass. The hardest thing was burying Okimhaw. He recalled their life together, and now he felt the full weight of the lost years. He participated in the rituals of the naschiganiwin. The next generations filled the mourning house, the church, at the graveyard, a Canadian Legion Guard of Honour stood at attention. No one cried. The

eagles, came, circled and went straight back to the sky. A warrior was now at rest. Brother A touched the grave stones of this mother and father. Peace descended on his heart and soul.