



Through Black Spruce: A Novel

By Joseph Boyden

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A haunting novel of love, identity, and loss-from the internationally acclaimed author of *Three Day Road*

Beautifully written and startlingly original, *Through Black Spruce* takes the considerable talents of Canadian novelist Joseph Boyden to new and exciting heights. This is the story of two immensely compelling characters: Will Bird, a legendary Cree bush pilot who lies comatose in a remote Ontario hospital; and Annie Bird, Will's niece, a beautiful loner and trapper who has come to sit beside her uncle's bed. Broken in different ways, the two take silent communion in their unspoken kinship, revealing a story rife with heartbreak, fierce love, ancient feuds, mysterious disappearances, murders, and the bonds that hold a family, and a people, together. From the rugged Canadian wilderness to the drug-fueled glamour of the Manhattan club scene, this is thrilling, atmospheric storytelling at its finest.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Following up on the success of *Three Day Road*, Boyden delivers the powerful story of former bush pilot and Cree native Will Bird. The novel opens with Will in a coma, with his niece Annie, who just returned from an eight-month excursion in search of her sister, by his side. Narrated by Will and Annie, the story backtracks to tell of Will's fight to keep his bush-country Indian life alive and protected while he suppresses painful childhood memories (and befriends an old bear). Annie, a skillful hunter and animal trapper, dictates her escapades after rushing off to New York City in pursuit of her sister, Suzanne, a model who has shackled up with a member of the narcotics-smuggling Netmakers family. As Will struggles to survive and Annie reintegrates into the isolated bush, the two stories dovetail as the Netmakers cross paths with Will. Though the incongruously melodramatic denouement doesn't fit with the richly textured narrative preceding it, the novel as a whole is an intelligent, multilayered accomplishment, and well worth reading. (Mar.)

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About the Author

Joseph Boyden is a Canadian of Irish, Scottish, and Metis roots. He divides his time between northern Ontario and Louisiana, where he teaches writing at the University of New Orleans.

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ALSO BY JOSEPH BOYDEN

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(short stories)

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AMANDA

Nisakihakan

WILLIAM AND PAMELA

Kotakiyak Nicishanu

1

GILL NETS

When there was no Pepsi left for my rye whisky, nieces, there was always ginger ale. No ginger ale? Then I had river water. River water's light like something between those two. And brown Moose River water's cold. Cold like living between two colours. Like living in this town. When the whisky was Crown Royal, then brown Moose River water was a fine, fine mix.

You know I was a bush pilot. The best. But the best have to crash. And I've crashed a plane, me. Three times. I need to explain this all to you. I was a young man when I crashed the first time. The world was wide open. I was scared of nothing. Just before Helen and I had our oldest boy. The first time I crashed I was drunk, but that wasn't the reason I crashed. I used to fly a bush plane better with a few drinks in me. I actually believe my eyesight improved with whisky goggles on. But sight had nothing to do with my first crash. Wait. It had everything to do with it. Snowstorm. Zero visibility. As snow blinded my takeoff from the slick runway, I got the go-ahead with a warning from the Moosonee flight tower: harder snow coming.

An hour later and I'd made it a hundred miles north of Moose River on my way to pick up trappers not wanting but needing to come in from their lines. A rush to find them with night coming. I had a feeling where they'd be. Me, I was a natural in a plane. But in snow? One minute I'm humming along, the next, my fuel line's gummed and I'm skidding and banging against a frozen creek. The crazy thing? Had I come in a few feet to the left or right, blind like I did, I would have wrapped my plane around black spruce lining the banks. Head a mush on the steering. Broken legs burning on a red-hot motor. The grandparents sometimes watch out. *Chi meegwetch, omoshomimawak!*

My plane wasn't too damaged, but this was a crash nonetheless. And I emerged from the first true brush with it. The long darkness. No need to speak its name out loud.

Soon as I forced the door open, the snow, it stopped falling. Like that. Like in a movie. And when the cloud cover left on a winter afternoon a hundred plus miles north of Moosonee in January, the cold came, presented itself in such a forceful way that I had two choices.

The first was to assume that the cold was a living thing that chased me and wanted to suck the life from me. I could get angry at it, desperate for some sense of fairness in the world, and then begin to panic.

Or my second option was to make up my mind that the cold, that nature, was just an unfortunate clash of weather systems. If I made my mind up this second way, that the physical world no longer held vengeance and evil just beyond the black shadow of spruce, then I'd try and make do with what I had. And when I realized what an idiot I was for ending up here all alone without the proper gear—just a jean jacket with a sweater under it and running shoes on my feet—I'd get angry, desperate for some sense of fairness in the world, and begin to panic.

Me, I preferred the first option, that Mother Nature was one angry slut. She'd try and kill you first chance she got. You'd screwed with her for so long that she was happy to eliminate you. But more than that, the first

option allowed me to get angry right away, to blame some other force for all my troubles. The panic came much quicker this way, but it was going to come anyways, right?

And so me, I climbed out of my cockpit and onto the wing on that frigid afternoon in my jean jacket and running shoes, walked along the wing, fearful of the bush and the cold and a shitty death all around me. I decided to make my way to the bank to collect some firewood and jumped onto the frozen creek.

I sank to my chest in that snow, and immediately realized I was a drunken fool. The shock of fast-flowing ice water made my breath seize, tugging at my legs, pulling at my unlaced running shoes so that the last thing my feet felt was those shoes tumbling away with the current.

By the time I flopped back onto the wing, my stomach to my feet had so little feeling that I had to pull my way back to the cockpit with wet fingers, tearing the skin from them when they froze to the aluminum. My breath came in hitches. When I tried my radio, and my wife finally picked it up, she couldn't understand me. She thought I was a kid fooling around on his father's CB and hung up on me.

Like I said, panic came quick. I could waste more time and the last of my energy calling back, hoping to get Helen to understand it was me and that I needed help now, but how to tell her exactly where I was? They might be able to find me tomorrow in daylight, but not now with the night closing in. And so I did what I knew I had to do. I crawled out of the cockpit again, onto my other wing, and threw myself off it, hoping not to find more water under the snow.

I hit hard ice this time, and it knocked the little breath left out of me. My jeans and jacket were already frozen worse than a straitjacket, and the shivers came so bad my teeth felt like they were about to shatter. I knew my Zippo was in my coat pocket but probably wet to uselessness.

Push bad thoughts away. One thing at a time. First things first. I crawled quick as I could, trying to stand and walk, and I frankensteined my way to the trees and began snapping dry twigs from a dead spruce.

After I made a pile, I reached into my chest pocket, breaking the ice from the material that felt hard as iron now. My fingers had lost all feel. I reached for my cigarettes, struggled to pull one from my pack, and clinked open the lighter. I'd decided that if the lighter worked, I'd enjoy a cigarette as I started a fire. If the lighter didn't work, I'd freeze to death and searchers would find me with an unlit smoke in my mouth, looking cool as the Marlboro Man. On the fifteenth thumb roll I got the lighter going. I was saved for the first time. I reached for my flask in my ass pocket and struggled to open it. Within five minutes I had a fire going. Within fifteen I'd siphoned fuel from my tank and had one of the greatest fires of my life burning, so hot I had to stand away from it, slowly rotating my body like a sausage.

The darkness of a James Bay night in January is something you two girls know well. Annie, you're old enough to remember your grandfather. Suzanne, I don't know. I hope so. Your *moshum*, he liked nothing more than taking you girls out, bundled up like mummies, to look at the stars and especially the northern lights that flickered over the bay. He'd tell you two that they danced just for you, showed you how to rub your fists together to make them burn brighter. Do you remember?

My first crash ended good. My old friend Chief Joe flew out to me the next morning, found me by the smoky fire I'd kept burning all night. We got my plane unstuck and had a couple of good drinks and he gave me a spare pair of boots. Then Joe went to find those trappers and I got my gas lines unfrozen and flew home to Helen.

Joe quit flying soon after that. He was ready for something else. Me, I kept going. I had no other choice. A wife who wanted children, the idea of a family to feed coming to us like a good sunrise on the horizon. I

made my choices. I was young still, young enough to believe you can put out your gill net and pull in options like fish.

The snow's deep here, nieces. I'm tired, but I have to keep walking. I'm so tired, but I've got to get up or I'll freeze to death. Talking to you, it keeps me warm.

2

DUMB

They keep him on the top floor, the critical one. I can smell the raw scent of him. It lingers just under the soap of the birdbath his nurse Eva gave him earlier. I'm close to his ear, close enough to see a few grey hairs sprouting from it. "Can you hear me?" I'm gone eight months, then home for a day, only to have this happen. "Eva tells me to talk to you. I feel stupid, but I'll try for a few minutes before Mum comes back. She can't catch me, though." She'd take it as a sign of me weakening, of finally becoming a good Catholic girl like she's always wanted.

I stand up, see white outside the window, a long view of the river and three feet of snow, the spruce like a wrought iron fence in black rows against the white. So cold out today. The sky is blue and high. No clouds to hold any heat.

Dr. Lam wanted to fly him down to Kingston but was concerned he wouldn't make the journey. He'll die down there. I watch as snowmobiles cut along the river, following the trail from Moosonee. Their exhaust hangs white in the air. February. The deadest month. The machine that helps him breathe sounds like the even breath of some mechanical sleeping child. A machine hooked up to his arm beeps every second or so. I think it is the machine that tells the staff that his heart still beats.

I hear the pad of footsteps entering the room and I turn, expecting my mother, black hair eight months ago mostly white now so that when I first saw her nothing made sense. But it's Eva, so large in her blue scrubs, all chubby brown face. I always thought nurses wore white uniforms and silly-looking hats. But in this hospital they dress like mechanics. I guess that's what they are.

Eva checks his vitals and jots them down on his clipboard. She turns him on his side and places pillows behind to prop him up. She told me it is to prevent bedsores. A month now he's been here and all they can tell me is he remains in a stable but deeply catatonic state. The chances are slim that he'll ever wake again. The injuries to his head were massive, and he shouldn't be alive right now. But is he really alive, lying there? I want to ask Eva as she rubs his legs.

"Come help me, Annie," she says. "Do the same to his arms. Keep the circulation going. It's vital."

"Ever weird," I say, standing on the other side of the bed, holding his arm in my hands, kneading it.

"What is?"

"Touching him. My whole life I can't ever remember touching him at all."

"Get over it." Eva breathes heavily as she works. She huffs and puffs. I've known her all my life and she's always been fat. Bigger than fat. She is my apple-faced, beluga-sized best friend. "Have you been talking to him?" she asks.

I shrug. "That's even more weird," I say. "It's like talking to a dead person."

"You better apologize, you," Eva says. "You will upset him with talk like that."

When Eva moves on to the next room I sit back down and stare into his face. He looks half the size as when I left last year. The doctors had to shave his long black hair shot with grey. And he looks older now than his fifty-five years. He has so many faded scars on his head, white zigzags against salt-and-pepper fuzz. I can picture him waking up and grinning, his two missing front teeth making him look like a little boy. Mum says he lost all the weight when he went out in the bush on his traplines last summer and autumn. I knew something was very wrong when she said he went out to trap in summer. What was he hunting? A tan?

As if I've beckoned her, my mum appears, sitting down in the chair beside me. She passes me a Styrofoam box. "Eat," she says. "You've gotten as skinny as him, Annie."

"I'm not hungry," I say.

"They need to check on him," Mum says, rubbing his head like he's a gosling.

"Eva was just here, Mum. Trust her. She knows what she's doing."

"My show's on," she says, picking up the remote.

I've got to get out of here. The woman drives me mad with her talk shows and the cheap psychology she gleans from them. She's even nuttier now that my sister hasn't come home. Suzanne has been gone two years. Everyone in this place, even my mum, believes she is dead. But I hold out and hope.

It's so cold outside, the battery on my snowmobile drained again. I yank on the starter cord until my arm feels like it's going to rip off my body. I flip the choke a couple of times once more, crank the throttle, and on the next pull it rattles to life. Pulling my moosehide hat tight over my ears, I roll out onto the river, the wind so cold my eyes water and the tears freeze on my cheeks. Goddamn it's hard to be back here.

A couple of people coming over on their machines from the Moosonee side flip waves to me, but I pretend I don't see them. I need a new ski-doo. I've stuffed enough money away from my adventures in New York to get one. Maybe a Polaris. Maybe a Bombardier to keep it Canadian. The trail leads off Moose Factory and onto the river. Moosonee squats on the other side's bank, its church steeple fingering the sky. The houses run their wood stoves so hard that the smoke hangs white and thick just above, not wanting to dissipate.

I steer right and away from town down the river to the bay. A fifteen-mile trip to my camp. My family's old goose camp. When I get there, I know I'll stare out at the frozen white of James Bay stretching off to Hudson Bay, just as I've been doing every day since I came back, and truly know I'm living on the edge of the world.

The tide's coming up, pushing slush along the river's banks. I stay closer to the middle. It's so wide here I have a dozen snowmobile trails to choose from. As kids, Suzanne and I would try to swim across but tired before crossing a fraction of it.

I think my cabin's on fire when I approach, smoke pouring out of the open windows and door, but then I see Gordon sitting dejected in his parka outside on a snowbank. When I stomp inside, I find the wood stove's flue shut tight. I flip it open and watch the smoke in the stove turn to fire again. Coughing, I grab the pen and paper from the kitchen table, march outside, and hand it to him. "What the hell were you thinking, shutting the flue?" I ask. The poor bastard's hands are almost blue in the cold. "And why aren't you wearing any mitts?" I sit down on the snowbank, peel my mitts off, and shove them at him.

His writing is close to indecipherable, his hand shakes so bad. *You told me to shut if house got too hot.*

"I told you to shut the *damper* when it got too hot," I say, "not the flue." I'm not angry at him anymore, something more like stunned aggravation in my voice. The poor bastard. I help pull his lanky frame out of the snow by yanking him up by the parka. I lead him inside to the smoky warmth.

Although I had planned to, I don't go back to the hospital the next day. Northern Store is paying big for marten hides this year, so I decided to run a trapline to teach my city Indian, Gordon, a little bit about the bush. We could have taken my snowmobile, but I have him out on snowshoes today, and he's getting better, remembering to drag his heels and point the toes of the snowshoes up when he walks. The exercise is wicked, having to push through the deep drifts, the world frozen solid but us working so hard that we have to be careful not to sweat. We cut along a creek, checking boxes nailed five feet up the good spruce, baited with pieces of goose, a snare wire to grip the marten's furry neck when it sticks its hungry head in. I've got over a dozen traps along this stretch. All of them are empty. Maybe we'll have to try a new place.

Gordon and I could have moved into my mum's when I came back here, dragging him with me, but I knew that setup would all fall apart in a few days. She hates that I'm so far from town, living like a savage on the edge of the bush. She worries a seizure will come while I'm driving my ski-doo and I'll fall off and die. I've lived with these fits my whole life. Still, she worries. I considered renting a place in Moosonee but figured I had a perfectly good camp, and besides, I can't stand all the stares I get in town now that all of this has come down.

I sit in the snow by the frozen creek and light a cigarette. No way I'm going to come back home just to gain weight and get all depressed. The sky is a high blue, and it's so cold today, the world is silent. I offer Gordon a smoke. He takes one. He's not much of a smoker, him, but I've learned he likes one once in a while.

"So, Gordo," I say, looking at his thin face, the sparse whiskers around his mouth frosted white. "What do you make of northern living?"

He nods his head all seriously. Some days I wish he could speak, but there's something nice about having a friend who never talks back, who's always forced to listen.

"Would you rather be on the streets of Toronto, or do you like it better here right now?"

He shrugs, and then points with his mittened hand at the ground he sits on.

"I'm torn," I say. "Maybe we'll head back to NYC after spring goose hunt. I'm going to keep in shape, get more work."

He nods.

I know what the cold will do to my skin, dry it out and wrinkle it so I look twice my age after one winter. I'm moisturizing three or four times a day now, won't let it happen. Jesus, listen to me. My uncle Will, he'd get a kick out of me now. His tomboy niece is really just a sissy girl.

"Let's go, Gordo," I say, pulling myself up. "More traps to check. Not much light left."

3

FOR YOU

Moosonee. End of the road. End of the tracks. I can sense it just beyond the trees, nieces. It's not so far away through the heavy snow. That place, it can be a sad, greedy town. You fall into your group of friends, and that's that. Friends for life, minus the times you are enemies. Not too many people around here to choose

from for friends, or for enemies. So choose right. In this place, your people will die for you. Unless they're mad at you. If you are on the outs with a friend, all bets are off. You don't exist. I'm down to my last couple of friends and have been for years. Maybe it's like anywhere, but we're some vengeful bunch. I blame it on the Cree being a clan-based people. Each clan has its own best interests in mind. And whenever you have your own best interests in mind, someone gets left out and gets angry.

I need, though, to back up a little, me. For you, Suzanne. For you, Annie. I am the one who watched out for you from a distance since your earliest years when your father left your mother to do whatever he went to do. I am the first to say I was not perfect at this job. But I worried for the both of you.

In my waking world, I was not worthwhile. I hadn't been for years. Booze will do that to a man. But booze is not the root of the problem. Just a condition. When you lose something, something that was your whole world, two choices present themselves. Dig through the ash and burnt timber, through the bits of ruined clothing and blackened shards of dinner plates and waterlogged photo albums that was the sum of your life, and find something inside you that makes you want to go on. Or you allow that black pit that is born in the bottom of your belly to smoulder, and spend your days trying to dampen it with rye.

I am a keeper of certain secrets, just as your mother, Lisette, is the keeper of her own. Me, I don't know where this comes from. The Mushkegowuk people love nothing more than to chatter like sparrows over coffee in the morning, over beer at night. There's something unifying, something freeing about rolling around in the dirty laundry of your neighbours, picking it up and pointing out the stains, sniffing it almost gleefully for the scent of grief.

I need to share a secret with you. Just one right now. But it's the one that hurts the most. Your grandfather, Annie, he wanted your ability for visions but only gained it partially. He didn't want or care for what you have, Suzanne, your beauty, your charisma. But I wanted the gifts that both of you girls possess. Wanted them full on. I fancied myself a chief in an earlier life, a man of the people, leading them through troubled times, photographed like Sitting Bull, my profile stern in its wisdom. But I didn't get your gifts. Or maybe I did, only just a little. Not enough.

Months before I watched you, Annie, leave with your friend Eva to go to Toronto, something happened that maybe pushed us all over the edge. Suzanne, you'd been gone from home over a year at that point. Many moons, eh? Too many. Where'd you go? Call your mother. She worries.

I need to tell you both about that night. Me, I like drinking at my own kitchen table, having friends come over. We can smoke in the house and drink as much as we want. I rarely drank anywhere else. Me, I'd become a homebody over the years when I wasn't out in the bush. I'd even watch TV once in a while when I got bored. History Channel. Bravo. Discovery Channel. One show called *Crime Scene Investigation*. Good stuff. But one night, Joe invited me over, so I went. Joe, we call him Chief, Chief Joe Wabano, although he's never officially held the title. He's got the big belly of a chief and the paycheque from driving tugs up the bay to the isolated communities. And when he gets drunk, he likes to let people know exactly what he's thinking.

I must have been bored that night. My truck wouldn't start so I walked the few miles into town to see Joe. Cold spring evening, and I remember how good it felt to walk, buzzed already from a few lonely drinks at home, the stars up above winking at me. A car passed me as I made it to the bridge by Taska's, and as it slowed I saw it was Marius driving, two big white friends stuffed in with him. Suzanne, you and Gus were missing at that point, had dropped off the face of the world, it seemed. The Netmakers were blaming us, and we blamed them. But I didn't think twice about all that at the time.

Me and Joe and his woman, we phoned Gregor, the white school-teacher and famous pervert, to join us when

we got into our drinks pretty good. But it was a weeknight, and he had to teach the next morning. Too bad. Gregor would have driven me home if he'd showed up. I remember feeling restless at Joe's, like I knew a snowstorm was coming and I was unprepared. You've got that gift, Annie, but much stronger than me, a gift that pops up in our family once in a while. It comes with your seizures, the ability to see into the future, and maybe, if you develop it, to heal. But you're going to have to work on it, and it's not like you can enrol at Northern College to learn what you need. Me, I pity your road. It's lonely. Few people will ever appreciate your gift.

I stayed as long as it took to drink a handful of rye and gingers before I told Joe I was tired out. When I saw he was tired, too, I told him walking home would be good for me. I walked Ferguson Road along the Moose River, the water flashing its nicest bits in the moonlight to my left, the black water pushing itself down into James Bay. I cut across the bridge again and onto Sesame Street, nicknamed for all the kids that live and play on it summer and winter.

I thought I felt the grandfathers in my step that night, the town behind me now, the scent of the dump up ahead on the gravel road. A crisp night that whispered of summer. The flash of headlights somewhere far down the road to my back made me want to step into the bush. I knew, nieces, but I didn't listen to my gut. I kept walking. The car gunned it behind me, then slowed when I saw my own shadow on the gravel ahead. It passed, then turned and came back so that its lights blinded me. Three men climbed out, the car idling. They stepped into the headlights. Three big men.

"Wachay there, Will." I recognized Marius's voice. My stomach dropped out from me. "Something I've been meaning to ask you," he said. I could tell by the voice that he'd had more to drink than me. "Where'd that little bitch niece of yours disappear to with my brother?"

"Don't you call her that," I said. I felt sparks behind my eyes. Marius walked toward me and I clenched my fists. I knew what was coming, nieces, but I didn't know at the time why it was coming. I'd done nothing to him. He got up close enough to me I could smell his leather jacket. He looked back to his friends as if to say something and then used the momentum of turning back to swing his fist into my face, white light filling my eyes as his knuckles squashed my nose. I fell backwards like a tree.

I lay on my back, the gravel sharp beneath my head, the sky above me like it was full of northern lights, and watched as the two white guys with him stared down at me. I could tell even by their silhouettes that they were ugly like only white guys who've been raised like dogs can be. They began to kick me, and I remember the sound of my ribs cracking, of my head being shocked so that I worried I'd die.

Those Mohawk down south claim that a warrior doesn't cry out when he's tortured then slow-roasted over a fire. I'm no Mohawk, me. I screamed with each kick, my head splitting open, the blood choking down the back of my throat until my cries became gags. When his friends were done, through my eyes swelling shut I saw Marius bend down. He straddled me, sat on me with his full weight and leaned to my ear, whispered with his stinking breath, "I can kill you any time I want. And I will, one day soon." I felt his breath on my earlobe.

I don't know how long I lay there. Something, someone maybe, told me that I eventually had to surface if I was going to live, and believe it or not, it was a tough decision to make. For me, my life's been hard, and sometimes I'm so tired out from losing the things I love that it feels easier to just give up and slip away.

A voice I knew, the voice of my father, talked to me, and in my head I saw him squatting beside me in the black, on his haunches, his one real leg bent under him, his wooden prosthesis straight out in front like one of those fancy Russian dancers.

“It’s not you that you live for,” he said to me in Cree. “It can’t be. It’s the others.” Not very specific, but I knew who he was talking about.

“What do I got to give to anyone?” I asked. I could tell he was looking down at me, staring at my wounds. He didn’t answer my question.

When he got up to go, I did too. I did the same as he did, floating away from the ground and becoming a night mist that dissolved into the black sky.

But this is not how I entered into the dream world, nieces. I just got a taste of it then. I didn’t enter the dream world for many more months. After the beating, I remember emerging from my hibernation slow, blinking my eyes to the light of bright sun through a window beside me, the whoosh and hiss of some machine standing guard by my bed. I remember not smelling so good, me. Something like rot. The beep of another machine when I closed my eyes to the light. My head thumped. I dreamed I was a sturgeon on river’s bottom pushing up stones with my nose for crayfish. I remember being prodded by doctors, and I remember slipping back down to the bottom of that warm river.

When I was a boy, I used to sleep in a long, white room in Moose Factory, the same island that holds the hospital. My school used to be the biggest building on the island before they built the hospital. It was whitewashed and scrubbed clean with wood soap and the greasy sweat of Indian kids. The boys, we slept in one long room upstairs above the dining hall. The girls, they slept in a room beside us above the laundry room and kitchen. Me, I dreamed of slipping into the girls’ dormitory in the middle of the night and learning how to make babies. All the boys did. Some of my friends claimed they managed to learn this way, but me, I don’t buy it. I did learn how to French kiss during recess once, though, with a skinny girl named Dorothy.

I healed over time. We all do. Your mother, she came to visit me in the hospital after the beating. She would bring a book with her and try to read it to me so that I was forced to pretend sleep. She’s a good woman, your mother, but she’s been weakened by Oprah.

When I went home, my two remaining friends in the waking world, Chief Joe and Gregor, they came to visit more regular than usual. As spring progressed, we got into some drinking on my porch while looking out over the river for beluga whales. Gregor, he came to Moosonee twenty years ago to teach at the high school for a year and never left. Gregor, he’s not exactly white. He’s as dark as me and came from a country in eastern Europe or something. Eastern something, I can’t remember. All I know is the place has changed its name so often I don’t know it. But he keeps his accent, especially when he’s drunk. He sounds kind of like Dracula, which can be funny. Funny and creepy sometimes. You get used to anything, though, after a few years.

I remember how Gregor and Joe sat with me on my porch like I was some new celebrity. Spring is the time when the belugas come this far up, the dozen miles or so from the bay, to make babies and gorge on whitefish. Gregor spotted a beluga, ghost white in the dark river about a hundred yards out. I’d been watching it swim, back and forth, for a while. If I was an Inuit, I’d be getting in my boat and going to get dinner. But I’ve tried beluga. Too fatty. Not a good taste at all. Like lantern oil. Give me KFC any day.

“Look now, boys. Vales!” Gregor said, standing and pointing out, rubbing his thighs. On numerous occasions, Gregor had almost lost his teaching job due to inappropriate behaviour, especially with his female students, like asking to hold their hands so he could check the fingernails for dirt or touching their hair when they answered a question right. He says these are European behaviours. He’s what Lisette calls lecherous. But he’s a funny one, him. “My god,” he said. “Beautiful vales.” He stared sad at the beluga as another spouted and appeared close to it. Joe took another beer from the case by his foot.

“Look at us,” I said. “Three fat guys on a porch. Does our life need to be this way?” And that’s when I made the mistake of sharing with them that my beating made me realize I needed a big change in my life. I needed to get in shape. I was going to start jogging.

“You’re reacting to the violence perpetrated against you,” Chief Joe said, just like a real chief, using words he wasn’t too sure of. “You try running, your heart will explode and you will die. I don’t want you to die. What you need now is another drink and some serious counselling.”

4

LEARNING TO TALK

Eva’s working the early shift at the hospital, so I’m up before the sun, pulling on my winter gear. I’ve stuffed the stove with wood and turned the damper down. “I’ll be back before you need to put more wood in,” I say to Gordon, “so don’t mess with it today, okay?” He lies with his eyes open on his bunk across the room. I don’t know if he ever sleeps. “If you’re bored, you can chop wood. Just don’t cut your damn foot off.”

At the hospital, I stop in the cafeteria for a coffee, look at the exhausted faces of the night-shift workers. This is one depressing place.

Up on the top floor, I sit beside his bed and sip on my coffee, flip through a magazine. I look at him, his face calm, mouth turned down. He twitches once in a while, and this always startles me. I keep expecting to look at him and find him staring back. He lies here in this room hovering close to death because of me. Even if this is only partly true, he is here because of me.

My mother typically arrives mid-morning, so I plan to briefly cross paths with her out of respect, then get a few more supplies at Northern Store before heading back. I think I’ll begin a new trapline today. Eva barges in, after I’ve already closed my magazine. I heard her heavy breathing while she was still halfway down the hall. There are a couple of girls I know in ads in that magazine, and the feeling that I’m missing out washes over me.

“Morning, Annie.” She reaches to me and touches my hair.

“Any news on him?” I ask, pointing with my lips.

“Same old, same old, sis.” Eva busies herself once more taking vitals. “I’m worried his muscles are atrophying. You should do the exercises on his legs and arms I showed you.”

I nod.

“I noticed that bony ass of his is beginning to bruise. I’m going to shift him again.”

I watch her do this, help where I can. His body is warm. Although he doesn’t much look it, he’s still alive. “Maybe I should read to him, or something,” I say.

“That would be a start. But wouldn’t it be more interesting for him if you talked of some of your adventures? Of our adventures, even?”

I shrug.

When I’m back alone with him, I hold his hand. My heart’s not in it. “Can you hear me? Do you want me to read a magazine article to you?” I feel foolish. “Well, if you’re not going to respond, then I won’t say

anything at all.” I look at my watch. A little after eight. At least two hours to kill before Mum gets here. I stand and pace. The seconds tick by with the beep of his monitor. This will drive me crazy.

“What do you want me to say?” I stop and look at him. “I’ve apologized a hundred times.” Suzanne’s the one who should be here. “I bet you believe she’s still alive,” I say to him. “Nobody else around here does but you and me, I bet.” I am the only one who holds out hope. I worry I hold on only because I am so angry with my sister. He’s here in that bed, and I’m forced to be standing here, because of her. Maybe all this is partly my fault, but she’s the real one to blame.

Two hours still. Would anybody really know, really care, if I just left? I sit down beside him and pick up the magazine again, flip through it once more and stare at the fashion ads. A close-up of a white girl with porcelain skin, holding a jar of face cream to her cheek. A handsome man and a longhaired woman ballroom dancing across another page. I drop the magazine. “Should I try to explain how we ended up here?” I ask. His mouth twitches. “Should I at least tell you my side of the story?” His hand sits limp on the white sheet. “I won’t get up and leave you. I’ll just do it. I’ll tell you a story.”

I think of what I can possibly say to him that he doesn’t already know. But I can hear Eva’s voice telling me that isn’t the point. The point is that there’s comfort in a familiar voice. Medical journals sometimes discuss this.

“I don’t know where Suzanne is,” I tell him. “But I know where she’s been. I saw those places myself.” Where to begin? Begin with my sister, I guess. “Listen carefully, you, and I’ll tell you what I know.”

I lean close to his ear so that if anyone outside were to walk by they wouldn’t hear me. I’ll share this story with him but no one else.

Where do I start? My mother’s Christian friends, the real Biblepankers, they say Suzanne’s dead, that she couldn’t handle the pressure of success. She won’t be back to this world because she’s in Jesus’ bosom now. Their saying that didn’t surprise me. Those ones, they’re the doom-and-gloom club. It’s the old men, the true Indians, the ones who smile at me sadly and turn away in the Northern Store, who know something of the truth.

I think Suzanne’s troubles, they started with boys. Don’t they always? I tried to convince myself growing up that boys were gross and worthless. Snotty little things. But I was a tomboy. When I was a kid I secretly wished I’d been born a boy.

Everyone knew, though, that the boys couldn’t resist Suzanne. But you want to know something? They couldn’t resist me, either, especially when I hit those shitty years of puberty. Maybe it’s my father’s height. Maybe it’s my mother’s Cree cheekbones. The boys have liked me since adolescence, and when I didn’t giggle and run and come right back again like a puppy, like the other girls, the names started and the teasing grew.

The air’s so dry in here. I take his hand in mine. It feels soft as tissue paper. The gesture doesn’t feel natural, but I force myself to hold it and not let go.

I glance at my watch. Fifteen minutes have passed. I’ve barely noticed. My hand begins sweating in his dry palm. Hey, you know what? Maybe there *is* something I can tell you that you wouldn’t know about me.

No way I could defend myself from the horny little bastards, the Johnny Cheechoos and Earl Blueboys and Mike Sutherlands who waited for me after school, crouching behind the walls of the Northern Store, ready to follow me and ask me if I’d kiss them, and when I was a little older, if I’d blow them.

Marius Netmaker, he once had something for me even if he was six years older and had a pitted face from chicken pox, a big belly from eating too well too often. But he was strong and unpredictable. A bull moose. You weren't the only one to learn that.

Here's something I can tell you. When I was fifteen, Marius approached me one day when the snows had left and the sun made small flowers bloom along the road. School was done for the day. I stood by the fence separating the schoolyard from the dirt road, ready to run to my freighter canoe and the freedom of the river. The blackflies had just started coming out. I stood by myself, but close enough to Suzanne and a couple of her girlfriends to hear their talk about boys. Marius had picked some of the flowers from the roadside and walked up and tried to hand them to me, not able to look me in the eye. Suzanne and her girlfriends watched all this like ospreys. Marius mumbled a few words that I couldn't make out.

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