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STEH-WAH

Annie tucked a strand of bluebells behind Margaret's ear, and rubbed out a streak of dirt from her small cheek. "*Etánana...* you look like your big sister Gloria."

Margaret smiled back at her, her chubby cheeks turning her eyes into crescent moons. The summer sun settled into her braids, sand peppered in the part and glittered.

While she admired her daughter, a blanket of darkness fell over the river bank. Annie looked up into the sky and sighed—a pack of grey clouds had begun to stalk the sun. She lifted the pail of river water to her hip and climbed the bank, stopping every now and then to dig her fingers into the soil to regain her balance. Margaret followed in her tracks, half-crawling on her knees, growling like a bear. James, only a few months old, was jostled awake by the awkward climb; he was wrapped tightly onto Annie's back, in a blanket that bound Annie's chest into a flat and aching mound of sweat and milk.

Their camp sat on a smooth plateau above the Liard River, which snaked through infinite forests of Pine, Poplar Trees and marshland. A tent of stripped young trees covered in old canvas sat back near the tree line; a food box stood high above the ground on the opposite side of the clearing, and between the two was a fire pit dug deep into the dirt with a blackened frying pan and kettle sitting in the cold ashes.

Annie brushed off dirt and pebbles that had stuck into Margaret's shins. "Help *Mó* find some kindling for the fire. When Gloria comes back from checking the snares she might have *Gá* for us to cook!"

They walked back into the brush, Annie dancing with her shoulders and hips to help calm the baby on her back. James' arms were wrapped tight enough to her body that he couldn't fuss or scratch at his face as he was most likely to do otherwise. His whimpers and grunts quieted once they entered the canopy of the forest, Annie's and Margaret's feet making the mossy ground crunch and whisper beneath them.

"*Mó!* Big stick!" Margaret pointed up at a long branch, high on a Pine, with twigs like splayed, broken fingers.

"*Elé, Babeha....* that one is still alive. The live ones have water inside, and they won't burn good. The dead ones make the best fire." She hunched over, and pressed a rotten twig into Margaret's hand. "Look for sticks like this."

"*Heh Mó.*" Margaret set out like an animal on the prowl, yelling excitedly with every twig she collected into her arms.

Annie smiled back at her, rocking from side to side to soothe James. By next year he will be walking; Annie's first instinct being to chase after him and clutch him to her chest. Gloria will be taken shortly after she turns eight. Margaret and James will be taken even younger. Because of Residential School, none of her children will ever really know her.

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Joseph McLeod was friends with her father. He would come by the house and drink tea with her parents. The first time they met, Annie was twelve years old and had just finished making some bannock. Joseph cut a large hunk off, covered it in a thick layer of lard, and ate it all in three bites. With melted lard spread across his chin, he grinned up at her and she shuddered inwardly. He was very handsome, and was a good hunter but something about the way he looked at her made the bannock she had just swallowed feel like it was backtracking into her mouth. He was younger than her father, but already had a little girl with no mother.

A few months later, Annie's parents were on the trapline, and she was enjoying being old enough to stay behind and take care of her brothers. They were busy playing in the trees back in the bush, and she had just finished filling a small tin bowl with raspberries from the bushes crawling along the brush of the tree line. She was holding the berries in her hands, dipping a cup into the water barrel beside the front door and spilling it over them and onto the dry dandelions below. Bugs the color of leaves crawled up her thumb and onto her wrist. One of her little brothers let out a strangled cry from somewhere in the bushes, and muffled little voices giggled in reply and bodies crashed back through the brush.

Joseph appeared from the side of the house, and smiled at her. "*Nedago Nezu*, Annie?" He was dressed in a dark button-down shirt and tweed trousers; his hair was slicked back with grease, and he carried a pack over his shoulder. He had skin the color of *denetu*, a rich dark reddish-brown root, and straight, clean teeth. His eyes crinkled at the corners, dark lashes almost touching his cheeks when he smiled.

"Are your parent's home?" He stood in the doorway, one foot inside. He watched Annie fidget with a seam in her skirt, while she tried to think quickly.

She felt her knees start to shake. "No... They're on the trapline." She picked a small stem out of the tin of berries and flicked it onto the floor.

Joseph walked into the kitchen and stood beside her. "That's too bad." He looked into her eyes, picked a berry from the tin, put it between his lips and used his tongue to pull it inside his mouth.

Annie felt a strange sick feeling tighten around her skull; it stiffened her back, dug into her throat and made her want to scream. Then he was on top of her on the dirt floor, the smell and taste of spruce gum in her mouth, and dirt in her eyelashes. Afterwards, he kissed her hair, pulled her skirt back down over her knees and left her lying in a heap on the floor.

When night fell, her brothers were asleep as soon as they lied down on the spruce boughs, but she lay silent, clutching an old rag doll to her neck. She cried soundlessly into the flowing fire-colored hair she once imagined it to have.

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Annie sits on the floor inside her closet, with her legs tucked beneath her. She pulls photos from boxes in handfuls, shuffling through them and dropping them into shiny masses on the floor. The rims of her eyes are a vibrant red, tears streak down her cheeks, and run from her nose. They're all pictures of her life with Joseph: sixty years, twelve children, and now an empty bedroom.

Annie holds onto the door frame for support, gets up with a sharp breath, and turns to look down at the piles of snapshots by her feet. She pushes at them with the toe of her slipper, sends those closest to her scuttling into the back of the closet.

She remembers being twelve years old, standing on a riverbank and smiling for a picture being taken by an Indian Affairs Agent. She had just climbed out of her Father's boat, and her feet were bare. The river bank was cool, and a white man with a kind smile gave her a hard rock of candy. She sucked it until it disappeared on her tongue. Seeing that picture would always remind her of that sweet, buttery taste in her mouth and of the river water passing quickly beneath the boat, and the way her fingertips could leave trails on the surface. She was just a *steh-wah*, a little girl.

Now, Joseph was dead, and the picture was nowhere to be found. If only she could find it, hold it in her hands... then she could remember.

The bed creaks as she lies down; she pulls the quilt up to her nose and stares up at the ceiling. It's been one day since Joseph left this world, and all the sleep she has gotten since has brought only nightmares: owls trapped in rabbit snares; rivers with no water... bear tracks circling her tent.

Annie can hear the muffled voices of her children creeping in under the door, talking about Joseph. A great business man... and he started it all from nothing. When someone found out he was orphaned as a baby and raised himself from the age of ten on top of it all, their eyes almost crossed in astonishment.

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Joseph and Annie were married by a transient priest soon after Annie turned thirteen years old. Joseph had just turned 20, and his young daughter Gloria had been without a mother for months her mom had drowned the winter before. Annie was younger than he, but she was mature enough to contribute and could already smoke moose hide by herself. Joseph was determined to do right by her, and her parents were accepting of the arrangement.

When he first took her down river to his camp, she ran away wearing just her moccasins and a threadbare dress, and he arrived at her parents' camp the next morning and found her clutched onto her mother's skirt and howling. Her father, Narcisse, hit her with willow switches and forced her back into Joseph's boat.

Joseph started moving his camp further and further down the river, with Annie running away each time he let her out of his sight. Once the weather got cold at night, and Annie's belly grew too big with pregnancy, she finally gave in and could be trusted to walk along the river bank by herself.

More than just feeding and caring for Gloria, Joseph's little girl, she and Annie became friends. They would sit in the soft silt of the riverbed and make dolls out of scrap pieces of fabric Annie teaching the young girl how to thread the needle. They would set rabbit snares before nightfall, and wait eagerly for the morning.

That spring, under threats by an Indian Agent to take their children unless they moved closer to a town three-days south by boat, they abandoned their camp and began their journey. They had three children with them, including Gloria who pretended the new

baby boy, James, was her own. With every stroke in the river Annie felt her heart grow farther and farther away from her Mother, but crying wouldn't change the current.

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That afternoon, the Catholic Church was filled with people. A Priest with a strong French-Canadian accent spoke at the podium, and read aloud from a shiny new Bible. After he gave the usual service, James got up and headed to the front. He stood only a few feet away from the closed casket. It looked like a giant cake, the lid covered in a fragrant layer of white and yellow flowers.

James reached for a large piece of poster board plastered with old family photos that was balanced against the casket. "My father lived a long, rich life, and I know he left without any regrets. He was a good man and a good provider, and he loved his family..." He motioned to the pictures taken of Joseph and his family as he talked.

The picture of Annie as a young girl standing beside the river boat was tacked onto the bottom of the page. James's words started to swell and echo inside her head, and suddenly Annie gripped onto the pew with her fingernails. A huge emotion she didn't recognize began to rack through her body, making her muscles constrict. She squeaked. Annie squirmed out of her seat, and stood up. A crowd of suits and bolo ties and teary faces looked up at her in surprise. She smoothed out the torso of her dress, stepped over feet and made her way into the aisle, almost tripping on her daughter's purse.

"Mom, are you okay?" It was Margaret... James... her next door neighbor... the guy who owned the grocery store... It was everyone watching her, waiting.

She strode quickly to the front of the church, grabbed hold of the poster board and ripped her picture off the page. She turned, and walked briskly down the aisle, almost at a jog, pushed through the doors and collapsed to her knees onto the sidewalk in a bundle of jagged nerves. She didn't care to acknowledge the mouths gaping in her direction as she left the church.

A roar of wild laughter ripped from Annie's throat and into her palms, both shocking and relieving her. She held the photo of herself as a little girl to her chest and laughed until her stomach muscles ached, until tears ran from her eyes, until all of her energy drained and left her lightheaded. The clear sky above her was ecstasy... rapture.

It was in this way that Gloria and James came upon their mother, and realized how small their grief must have been in comparison.