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The Land as They Knew It

HE IS GOING TO TELL A STORY, but first he tells us that his Grandpa would shake his head if he seen us sitting around here on fold up chairs instead of on spruce bows and drinking water from plastic bottles. I can hear the water rippling over the rocks in the nearby backchannel. You can hear it, but you can't taste it. You can't taste it because you can't drink the water anymore. You can fish, but you can only eat one fish a month on account of the mercury levels being so high from the two dams they built upstream. If the third one, Site C Hydro Dam, gets built then the levels of methylmercury will skyrocket and the river will be like poison.

"Grandpa would shake his head all right," he says, his eyes veering off to the golden hill just north of us where his Grandpa is buried.

"I used to go and walk up hills just like that one. Me and my Grandma, you know, we would walk everywhere, even in the winter. I was always trailing behind her like a little cub, and she wouldn't stop for me to catch up. That's how I learned how to walk far, because I had to. We would walk up hills in the spring and Grandma would light a fire and put a kettle on and I would just lay there. For hours sometimes, I would lay there and watch those geese flying back home," he said.

These words transport him, his eyes glaze over and I know he is no longer here in the present but he is there with his Grandma under a sky of pale blue adorned by the V formations of geese. I can see him as a little boy, his brown hands cradling his head as he stares upwards. The scent of fire smoke is less like a separate scent and more like his aura, radiating from his being. There was no reason you would resist taking in the simple yet coordinated beauty of birds flying together in

the sky. There was no agenda and you could spend hours watching one flock make their way across the sky and wait for the next to appear, and so he did. His body would leave an indentation in the green grass, just like a large fox or a small coyote would. His Grandma would have taught him by that age to read the grass when it lies low like that. He would be able to tell if a bear had decided to take a nap, or if a sleepy moose had bedded down. But him, he was just like a small coyote staring up at the clouds.

He can no longer go back to that spot where he would watch the geese. Private property. Roads. Fences. Gates with locks. Besides, even if he wanted to, there are no longer expendable hours to spend watching geese and drinking tea. There are things to do, places to go, work to be done, life is so stressful now and time is measured out.

He tells me that his Grandpa signed the Treaty and he was told when he had signed that “everything would remain the same.”

“Look,” this now-elder Grandson says as he sweeps his arm around, “everything has changed. Everything.”

The mourning for what was and the injustice for what is battle each other in his voice, but if you listen close enough you can hear the rumbling undertone of fire and resilience.

We are sitting in a valley that they want to flood for the Site C Hydroelectric Dam. His words are already drowning.

My Grandmother, my Asu, hair like raven wings and eyes like sideways waning moons, looks at her bowl silently. It is swelling with berries, a testament to her skill and swift hands.

“What’s wrong, Asu?” I finally ask her as she stares into the berry bowl.

“Are these berries safe to eat?” she asks in reply, turning her eyes toward me.

I cannot say yes without feeling like I may be lying to her. The oil wells and pipelines circle us like hungry vultures. They leave us nothing. The animals have started to get sick too, showing up with cysts and sicknesses they didn’t have before. They are picking our bones clean now, just over one hundred years after her Grandfather signed the Treaty himself.

“I...I don’t know, Asu...,” I say, almost apologetically.

She asked to pick raspberries too but the raspberry bushes I had picked from as a small girl are long gone. Ate up by gutless machines or locked away behind gates erected in between harvesting seasons. We search and search...and search. I feel the loss of the landscape my Asu once knew sitting between us in the car on the way home.

"I still need to teach those boys how to set snares," she says. "There's a dirt road down this way, just past that curve there. Me and your Grandpa seen lots of rabbits there. When you have time we will go again."

We had tried to go set snares a few weeks before but couldn't find a rabbit trail. I thought of suggesting where we saw lots of rabbits a few years back, where we picked wild strawberries together, but I had been back there recently to see if I could catch the last of the red button-sized berries and saw that there was some kind of well for extraction that went up just behind it.

"Grandpa said that hard times will come and that he felt sorry for us. He said even bread will cost a lot of money and food is going to be so much. He said people will starve. You need to make sure to buy seeds too, so if you need to you can feed yourself," she said as she stared out the window.

Grandpa was a dreamer. The Dane Zaa people were dreamers, they knew things. They would dream of the hunt and travel in their dreams on the trail way between here and the next world. I have heard this particular story since I was a little girl, of the hard times, the big winds, and a possible endless winter. Great Grandpa's voice stretched out over the decades between us and has been warning me.

"Most of you kids don't listen to me. It all goes in one ear and out the other, but what I say is real. Promise me you will tell your son about these things."

"I will, Asu, I will," I say to her.

I grab her deep-brown wrinkled hand, veins popping up like backroads stretching across the territory. I hold it tightly in my own hand. The full picture begins to come together. Asu had never tried to teach us how to set snares, she didn't teach her children either but she was set on teaching this next generation.

My Asu's eyes have long since lost their ability to see most things clearly. At times they cannot discern letters even when aided by a magnifying glass but at that moment I knew Asu's vision had her seeing things coming from a long ways away.

"My boy, look," I say as I point into the valley, "yatwaneh." *Deer.*

"I see it! I see it!" he yells.

"What's the name of the river?"

"Saahgii Nachii!"

"How about the moon?"

"Haklay Eeenzah!"

I smile and run my fingers through his brown hair. He is too young yet to know that there is resiliency and strength present in his small

voice when it speaks in the Dane Zaa language, as it is a language that never found its way into my Mother's mouth but has found a home in his. He now teaches my Mother, his Asu, the language he knows on long car rides through the Peace River Valley. The generations heal each other.

"They want to flood this valley," I tell him. "There's so many animals here that will lose their home if they do."

Hadaa. *Moose*. Suss. *Bear*. Yatwaneh. *Deer*. Noway. *Wolverine*.

"Mom," my son says looking up at me.

"What, Askae?" *Boy*, I ask him using the name my Asu calls him, the name that once belonged to her brother even long after he was a boy.

"Why don't you put some of that stuff in the water? That will stop the flood," he says as a matter of fact.

"What stuff?"

"That stuff you put in the water when you pray."

"Oh," I answer with a soft laugh, "you mean tobacco."

"Yeah, go put some of that in the water."

We take one last look at the valley that stretches out below us, with its gentle green slopes and wide gentle bending river. I feel the warnings of my Asu wrap around my shoulders and they are met with the gentle words of my child.

The past teaches you to be mindful of the future because the future is worth protecting. Correction, it is necessary to protect what we have for the future. I have a son, who will one day bring my grandchild into this world, then my great grandchild will follow, and then my great great grandchild will be brought into this world. Now that child, flesh and blood of mine, may not know my name but if they know the land as I know it then they will surely know me, because the land and I are one and the same.

My body now holds these stories, amongst others, but every story was hard won as I have had to heal and fight to reclaim them. Before I wondered why my life had been so difficult, but now I know it was so that I could be strong, be fierce, and be unafraid of struggle, all the while staying rooted in love. It is like that little boy chasing after his Asu in the bush throughout the winter. It was difficult for his little legs, but it built strength and gave him the ability to carry himself where he needed to. We have been given the strength to stand up, to move forward, and to protect the land and water that cannot speak for itself and because of this our descendants will remember us through the rivers, the valleys, and the moss-covered floors. The land is our people's living memory and in this way, we will never be forgotten.