

Potato Mountain

Noah rose before the sun, trying not to disturb Justine. She heard him go, but said nothing. It was something he had to do for her and she was grateful. He saddled up Rocinante in a temper, ready to challenge the fates that were threatening his wife. It felt right to take the quiet old grey mare which Justine had named and raised. He rode out of the Bar 5 Ranch, his twelve-year-old border collie Angus keeping pace alongside. The dog lagged behind as Noah, lost in his thoughts about Justine, urged the horse into a canter.

Non-indigenous people call Justine and me old-timers. First Nation people call us elders. I prefer the latter — it seems more respectful.

Elders have a long time to think about life and death and what lies inbetween.

He realized he'd forgotten both his surroundings and Angus, so he slowed. There were hours yet to go and he would need to pace himself, not just for the dog's sake. Knowing the land as well as he knew himself, it was easy to fall into the lines of it, to forget about his journey. Looking around and realizing where he was, he reined in Rocinante and waited for Angus to catch up.

I was brought up out here on the shores of Tatlayoko Lake. I could simply travel down that path...

But he knew he couldn't. Not today. Not even if there was time for the brief detour to the meadow where, in the beginning, he had watched Justine ride by without being able to reach out to touch her or speak her name. His confrontation with Bordy over Justine that night long ago had ended with the report of a rifle rising above their shouts, with Bordy lying dead, killed by the spirit of the Chilcotin. The circle of elders on Potato Mountain had understood that. His love for Belle, his adoptive mother, called him to revisit that old life in his thoughts, to pay his respects, but that was a separate journey for another day.

Today, he had an urgent mission. He was travelling now as *deyen*, if also as Justine's husband. He may have thought of himself as white back then, but he knows who he always has been. He was and is Wawant'x, even if he still carried the name the priest had given him.

Angus caught up with him, panting.

"Sorry, boy," Noah smiled. "We'll take it easy from here on out."

He rode on slowly, old Angus taking his time following, as if to hold him to his word.

I'm going on eighty years old, born before World War II. Then, all Canadians poured all their energy into fighting for liberty and freedom. All Canadians sacrificed for the greater good. There were the dead and wounded in the armed forces overseas, there was the rationing and the hardship at home. After the war came the glorious flourishing of wealth for many and the wonders of innovation in social structures and infrastructures for most, which brought us leisure and a new social order.

The irony was that while Canadians were fighting for freedom in Europe, their government continued taking freedom away from the First Nations. Our children were taken away and put in residential schools. Yes, Canada also interned the

Japanese-Canadians during the war, but didn't take their children away from them.

He started the steep climb up the mountain. In some ways, he was lucky to have grown up as white. In so many others, he was saved by finding his Indigenous heritage.

For Natives, there was no money for education, for job creation, for training, for infrastructure. The government wanted them off the land and shoved them onto postage-stamp-sized reserves. If it hadn't been for young — now old — lawyers like Tom Berger arguing for fifty years before the courts, we would probably still be limited to those reserves. Well, most of us still are.

He stopped again to give Rocinante a breather. Angus stopped as well, panting. Noah motioned the dog to a nearby stream.

“Water, Angus.”

The dog trotted off to get a drink as Noah slowly scanned the landscape. The eastern sun was striking the mountains across the lake. It would be best to get some distance in before the midday heat.

“Angus!” Noah called. “Time to ride.”

He rode on at a slower pace. However urgent the destination, the journey always matters.

This was the land where he'd been rescued and which had rescued him from a life as an outlaw. After he'd found his mother, she'd prepared him for a greater role among the Stoney, the people of the mountainous West Chilcotin. Ta Chi and Antoine, who had been *deyen* before him, over fifty years ago, had named him Wawant'x.

He was appointed *deyen* of clan Raven by Antoine.

He fell in love with Justine Paul.

I found my Aboriginal heritage when I met my birth mother. And again when I married Justine.

Justine had brought colour to his life, colour that went into the paintings she inspired him to create. It was her insistence that

he paint the transformation story of the T̓s̓ilhqot'in people. All the acclaim that followed, all the praise, was nothing compared to the stories of his people making their way through the world.

His greatest creation, though, was shared with Justine. Their love reflected in each of the four children they had together, but he had only fully recognized its magnitude when he saw Justine embrace Mary as her own child. Mary, the daughter created the one night he had strayed. Mary, who soon after finding out Noah was her father, had to deal with the murder of her mother. Justine had held and comforted Mary while he was trapped in the complexity of the moment and his own shame.

Riding on, he thought of what life would be like without Justine. There would be no colour, no laughter, no sharing.

Overcome for a moment by his dark thoughts, he paused and remembered who he was, remembered where he was going and why. He was going to Potato Mountain to ask Ta Chi to intercede with the Creator, to save Justine's life.

Ta Chi, as she had borne me into this life, bore me into the Indigenous ways of survival on the Chilcotin plateau, saving me. I will invoke her spirit. I will implore her to save Justine.

Four hours later, after pushing Rocinante up the steep climb, he was at Ta Chi's gravesite on Potato Mountain. Angus whimpered and, after padding a circle in the grass, settled down to rest in the shade a short distance away. He knew this time, this place, was not for him.

Noah stood silent, letting the dust and the air and his mind settle. The ride was long and he felt it in his bones, but had to leave that behind him. Once he felt clear, he took a carved hardwood dowel and a mixture of tobacco, sage and cedar from a pouch on his belt. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, then knelt. Dowel turning on wood, the friction created heat that fired the mix. Smoke began to rise. He carefully pulled an eagle feather from the inside of his vest.

“My mother who gave me life, then saved my life, I honour you. I light this smudge and, with this feather, cleanse myself with the smoke.”

He brushed the smoke towards himself. He let his focus shift to the land, to Ta Chi’s spirit and to the woman he loved.

Mother, for Justine.

Last June, on returning to the ranch from a ride with their grandson, Justine had complained to Noah of a sore hip. He had treated her with a liniment recipe given to him by Ta Chi, which seemed to relieve her symptoms, though they returned by morning. Over the next few weeks, each night Noah applied the balm and each day the pain came back. Although Justine had told Noah, “I think Ta Chi’s remedy is helping,” there was the time he was returning to the house from his studio and saw her taking extra-strength Tylenol through the kitchen window. When he came into the kitchen, she’d quickly hidden the bottle.

Help her, Mother.

He had sat down at the table afraid of the conversation he knew had to come next. As a nurse, Justine had often reminded him that those in the medical profession make the worst patients, that they were often the last to seek care. But, as always, she had been waiting for him.

“It’s time I saw someone about my hip,” she’d said in her professional voice. “I’ll make an appointment with Dr. James.”

He’d realized then that she’d been holding back, wanting to let him as *deyen* cure her, her faith in him ever stronger than his own. He’d taken off his battered hat, the one he wore when painting, and ran his fingers through his thinning hair, smiling at her wisdom and her concern for him, even through her own pain.

Help her, Mother.

Dr. James had been kind and efficient, but could only prescribe pain relief and refer Justine to a physiotherapist. After two

treatments, the therapist had sent her back to Dr. James. He'd taken X-rays, probed her hip joint and scheduled her for a hip replacement. The earliest available date for surgery was a year away and, in the meantime, he'd given her a stronger prescription.

Some days were better than others. She had always taken an interest in the ranch and there hadn't been a day gone by she didn't ride her horse, but now the pain mostly confined her to the house. She'd done a bit of cooking and sewing and some reading. They'd played cribbage and she was still quite competitive.

Noah had worried, but without showing it. She had waited for treatment to be strong for him and the least he could do was return the favour. He'd encouraged her by telling her that all this would be behind her after the operation.

By late August, the pain was getting worse. They'd returned to the doctor and seen his locum, a woman a year out of medical school. She'd looked at the X-rays and arranged for Justine to take a CT scan on an expedited basis, then return in a week's time. They'd flown to Vancouver for the scan. A few days later, the locum had called and told Justine that she'd made an appointment for her with Dr. Jill Heather, an oncologist in Kamloops, to review the results of the scan.

Help her, Mother. Help her.

Elizabeth, their daughter, had gone with them to Kamloops. That was when Dr. Heather had told them that Justine had cancer. The oncologist had been tight-lipped about the prognosis until Justine pressed her, reminding her that she was a nurse.

"I think you should take chemotherapy for the next three months on a weekly basis," the oncologist had said matter-of-factly. "This may check the advance of the cancer and give you a few more years."

They'd all fallen silent at that, until Elizabeth spoke up.

"And it may not?"

"There's the possibility that if it doesn't," the oncologist had breathed in deeply, "then it could be a few months."

Help her, Mother. Help her.

They'd returned to the ranch the next day. That night, Noah, visibly upset about Justine's diagnosis, had spoken to her in bed.

"Dear," he'd said haltingly, "I am going to Potato Mountain tomorrow morning. To Ta Chi's gravesite. To speak to her and to the Creator for your recovery. Modern medicine is fine, but you mean too much to me to place all our faith in it alone."

Justine had smiled in the dark at her husband. She knew her only chance to be by his side, to watch their grandchildren grow for even a few years more, was to allow her doctor to confront her cancer and perhaps to control it. As T̂silhqot'in, she also knew otherwise.

"Thank you, Noah," she smiled warmly. "Say hello to Ta Chi for me."

Hear me, Mother, and think of Justine, my wife.

Noah continued the smudge ceremony while he spoke and, after he cleansed himself, wafted the smoke over Ta Chi's grave.

Grant her a few more years with me free of pain. For I love her and need her by my side.

He waited for some answer while thinking of the times that he and Justine had visited this sacred place. The sparrows had always been Ta Chi's answer. Sure enough, they chirped in the bush nearby and Noah was comforted. His anger subsided.

He stood and bowed his head. Having done all he could do for Justine, he mounted Rocinante and turned toward home. Angus rose from his circle of grass and heeled. It was then that he saw Big Momma moving towards the twin lakes. He reined in Rocinante and watched her at a distance foraging for berries. She caught his scent and raised up on her hind legs looking in his direction. He marvelled at the magnificent grizzly. Big Momma was a legend amongst the T̂silhqot'in and a talisman to Justine. She would be pleased he had made a sighting.

Before he could descend the mountain, Noah heard — then saw — a helicopter in the sky. Angus barked once before taking a