

RAISIN WINE

A Boyhood in a Different Muskoka

James Bartleman

[A DOUGLAS GIBSON BOOK]



McCLELLAND & STEWART

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For my parents, Maureen and Percy Bartleman.

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“We live our life as the tale is told.”

–Psalm 90

ONE

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Voices in the Wind

THEY LIVED IN A THREE-ROOM, two-storey house on a one-acre lot overgrown with trees in Port Carling, a small village in Ontario's cottage country. The mother, who was Indian, had long been familiar with the dwelling. As a child in the 1920s and 1930s, she had spent time with her extended family in the tiny local enclave known as the Indian Camp where native people from her distant reserve gathered the summers to fish and to sell handicrafts to tourists. In those early days, she used to cross the street whenever she approached it, for a villager had hanged himself on a backyard apple tree and it was rumoured that his tormented spirit had taken up residence in the long-deserted house.

Certainly the building gave every impression of being haunted. Their glass shattered by stones thrown by schoolchildren over the years, two large windows stared down at passersby on the street like the Windigo, sinister eater of human flesh and evil spirit in Chippewa mythology – at least in the imagination of the impressionable native child who had heard too many tales of monsters at home for comfort. Her fear was that the resident ghost would float out of one of the black and eyeless sockets to seize her and do her in. She never dreamed that one day the house would become her home.

During the Great Depression, the Indian girl, now a young woman, married a white man, a hard-working unskilled labourer, scarcely older than herself. And other than a fondness for home-brew (raisin wine was his favourite), he was a good husband. After their initial shock, for white men did not marry Indians in those days, his parents accepted their Indian daughter-in-law. The war came. The army rejected the husband because of a bad heart. The mixed couple, with their growing brood of half-breed children, drifted from town to town until they arrived in the village of her youth the year after the war ended. Their children were now four in number and the family lived in a tent on wasteland near the dump for the summer and in an uninsulated summer cottage for the winter. Desperate for a home of her own, the mother remembered the abandoned house.

The years had not been kind to it. Now known in the village as “the old shack on the hill,” it had neither indoor toilet nor electricity. Likewise, rainwater leaked through the much-patched tarpaper roof, the wooden pillars that served as foundations were rotting away, and the house leaned perilously to one side. But the unpainted, weather-beaten exterior walls that had turned barnwood-black with age were solid, the walls of the one room occupying the ground floor were clean, and the partitions of deep-brown hemlock studs covered by thin boards separating the two upstairs bedrooms were clean and dry. The mother shrugged off her fears of the Windigo, persuaded the owners to let her purchase the property by making small monthly payments, and moved her family into the new home in the

spring of 1947.

~~The mother may have put the story of the hanged man and ghost behind her, but her son, to whom she had confided the story, had not. Not that he was really afraid. He was, after all, seven years old and had been told by his father that ghosts did not exist. Nonetheless, he was never at ease at night when he had to visit the outdoor privy some distance behind the old house in a grove of sumach trees. In fact, anyone, even someone with a less active imagination than the boy's, would have found the experience spooky. Flashlights were a luxury the family could not afford, and the boy's only source of light as he stumbled along the path was from coal-oil lamps inside the house that filtered out through the ancient single-pane windows casting eerie shadows on the ground outside. To make matters worse, the boy was convinced that he could hear ghostly moaning sounds whenever he passed the apple tree where the neighbour had hanged himself. His unease turned to fear on moonlit nights since at times he thought he saw the victim, a rope around his neck, swinging in the obscurity among the branches of the apple tree. And his fear turned to terror on pitch-dark windy ones since the moaning from the restless spirit then seemed to reach new levels of despair.~~

Once back inside the house, the boy felt brave – at least in the company of his family when it gathered together in the evenings before going to bed. There was safety in numbers in that crowded room serving as kitchen, dining room, and living room. A wood-burning cookstove, a supply of drying wood, and a sink occupied one half of the space. A row of rubber boots was neatly lined up just inside the front door. Behind the stove, screwed into the wall, were rows of clothes hooks holding the coats and hats of the family members. An oilcloth-covered kitchen table, six hardwood maple chairs ordered from Eaton's catalogue, and an old couch filled the other half. Off in a corner was the icebox with its two standard compartments—one for milk, butter, meat and vegetables and the other for blocks of ice, cut out of Lake Muskoka in the dead of winter and delivered door-to-door throughout the year by a local farmer.

In addition to the boy, a crying baby, a quarrelsome younger sister, a bossy older brother, an overworked mother, and a preoccupied father filled every available space. This did not include a dog and cat who cohabited reluctantly with a baby raccoon the father had rescued and which he was raising with more open affection than he gave to his own children. The clamour was such, the boy reassured himself, that the ghost in the apple tree, if it really existed, would never dare enter the house.

Upstairs in bed, when the other family members were asleep, he was not so certain. Despite the comforting presence of his brother and sisters in their shared bedroom, the boy was worried. For when the house was silent, he thought he could hear the sounds of the moaning from the afflicted soul through the old building's exterior walls. Having heard his parents say that death by suicide was unnatural, the boy thought the spectre must be guilt-ridden at having taken his own life.

And deepening his anxiety, he was preoccupied by a story of an encounter with supernatural evil told in all sincerity by a cousin of his mother. This cousin, a quiet Indian trapper with dark brown skin and piercing black eyes, often came to the house to spend the evening with the family bearing carcasses of beaver and muskrat as gifts for the mother to cook. On a recent visit, he had been more taciturn than usual and had looked so often at the window and with such a deeply troubled expression, the boy's mother had asked him what was wrong.

Speaking in a barely audible voice, the cousin confessed that despite being warned repeatedly by the preacher on his reserve that gambling was wicked, he had played cards for money late into the night at the home of a neighbour. Outside, it was a cold, dark, moonless night. Inside, six friends sat around the kitchen table, illuminated by a solitary coal-oil lamp whose thin yellow glow reflected off the glass of the bare windows, devoid of curtains and blinds. Four were playing and two were watching.

and waiting their turn to join in.

~~Along one wall in the shadows was a bench and on the bench were the coats of the guests along with a dipper and a pail of fresh, cold drinking water drawn from the well and carried in earlier in the evening by the host. A box of leghold traps was stuffed in the corner together with a pair of snowshoes. The room was comfortably warm, heated by a fire in a huge and ancient box stove centre on the worn linoleum covering the floor. Beside the stove was a wooden box filled with dry white birch firewood. The mellow scent of roll-your-own cigarettes and chewing tobacco blended comfortably with the smell of woodsmoke leaking from cracks in the cast-iron firebox and with the odours that lingered in the room from the family dinner earlier in the evening: fried whitefish, boiled potatoes, and bannock, the traditional Indian flatbread eaten with every meal.~~

On another wall, barely visible in the dim light, was a large sepia-tinged photograph in a standard military-issue picture frame of the host's brother, smartly dressed in full military uniform. The Canadian Army had provided similar photographs of new recruits to their families in the Great War – as the First World War was known in those days – and proud parents across Canada had hung them in places of prominence in their homes. There were many such pictures on the reserve. More than a quarter of a century earlier, the young man in the picture and the men playing cards that night – together with almost all the eligible men from the community, including the boy's great-grandfather – had travelled to the closest town and enrolled in the Canadian Army. From there they were shipped to the huge Camp Borden military base for basic training and then by fast troop transports to England, and on to the trenches of the Western Front.

The culture shock had been enormous. Teenagers and men whose first language was Chippewa and who had spent their lives in the bush or on the lakes as trappers and fishermen were thrown together with white farmers, factory hands, office workers, private schoolboys, and British immigrants, most of whom had never met a native person. In short order, the native soldiers proved themselves as snipers and forward artillery observers, even transmitting coordinates back to the guns in their native languages to foil German code-breakers seeking to intercept Allied battlefield communications. For the duration of the war, at least, the natives were treated as equals, and bonded with their white compatriots.

Many of the native recruits, including the young man in the picture, had lost their lives in showers of mud and steel during the numberless battles of the war in Northern France and in Belgian Flanders. The others, some shattered in body and spirit, had come home to get on with their lives and to grow old. Now the picture of the young Indian soldier, frozen in time but with eyes that met and followed visitors around the house, languished largely forgotten on the wall. And when from time to time the host opened the lid of the stove and threw in a stick of white birch firewood, the paper-thin bark covering would burst into flame with a flash of light that cast the shadows of the players onto the photograph of the long-dead soldier, who looked out at his former comrades-in-arms with deep, brooding melancholy.

The mood in the room was subdued, but there was an ample supply of raisin wine to drink and the card players were enjoying themselves trading jokes in the soft tones of their mother tongue. Suddenly the cousin sensed the presence of something vile and corrupt. He glanced at the window and was horrified to see the devil, horns, tail, and all, peering in and smiling. Satan, the trapper was convinced, was showing his satisfaction at catching sinners whose immortal souls, after the death of their bodies he would drag, screaming and pleading for mercy, down to hell. And in hell – according to the Bible-thumping preacher who loved nothing better than to frighten his charges in his weekly sermons by quoting from the Book of Revelations – they would suffer fire, brimstone, and untold miseries throughout eternity.

The cousin shouted a warning to the others before dashing coatless out the door and fleeing to his

own house. He had a distinguished record fighting overseas and was not easily spooked. But he nevertheless swore that he would rather return to artillery barrages, hand-to-hand combat in the trenches, and poison-gas attacks than face the devil again.

The mother looked worried but the father had trouble suppressing a smile as the visitor earnestly and haltingly, for English was not his first language, unburdened himself of his angst. The boy, on the other hand, was shaken, although he did his best to hide his disquiet. Indian relatives had told him that for centuries native fishermen had left offerings of tobacco at a sacred rock that bore an uncanny resemblance to the head of an Indian chief on an island in Lake Muskoka, the largest of the lakes in the district, to appease spirits that inhabited the waters. He knew that his Indian grandfather would not think of fishing without first propitiating the god of the lake. Another relative now deceased was reputed to have had the ability to turn himself into a Bearwalker, a feared supernatural being in traditional native religion. His own mother had told him that a guardian spirit, from a dear uncle on the reserve who had died shortly before he was born, was watching out for him from beyond the grave. The story of the trapper seemed to be a confirmation that an invisible world existed in which good and evil spirits struggled to influence the destiny of the living.

Listening to the solemn words of his mother's cousin, who was clearly in despair since he was certain a horrible fate awaited him after death, the boy's throat constricted involuntarily until he nearly choked, and his skin erupted in goosebumps. In his innermost being, in that part of the psyche where logic does not penetrate, he believed the story of his mother's cousin unconditionally and was afraid the devil would find some reason to come looking for his soul as well. After the guest had departed, however, and as his mother looked on with quiet disapproval, the boy joined his father in laughing at the trapper. What superstition! How could any modern person believe such nonsense!

Listening from the safety of his bed to the moaning coming from outside, however, the boy regretted making fun of the trapper and came to the conclusion that what he was really hearing were cries of pain as the devil tormented the soul of the suicide victim. Then, paying closer attention, he believed he could make out other voices in the wind – native voices.

His mother had told him that long before the arrival of the white man, and not far from where their house was located, native people had built on the Indian River – just below the rapids that they called Baisong, or Thunder – a thriving community they named Obajewanung, or Gathering Place, complete with comfortable log cabins and fields of potatoes and corn. When missionaries had pushed into their territory and tried to convert them, they had rebuffed their efforts and remained faithful to their traditional native spirituality and practices. Their success had been their undoing. When the district was opened for settlement late in the nineteenth century, the government of the day, on the lookout for good places to locate settlers, lost no time in sending surveyors to Obajewanung to carve their lands into lots and to order the people to vacate their homes and leave.

The Indians made a desperate appeal to be allowed to remain in their ancestral homes but to no avail. Not having embraced Christianity, they received no support from the churches. In short order they were moved against their will to a rocky, inhospitable island in the Georgian Bay, where they were forced to return to the hand-to-mouth existence of their forebears, living in tents and relying on hunting and fishing rather than on agriculture for survival. The settlers then moved in and occupied their homes and fields. The graves of their ancestors were ploughed over, the names Baisong and Obajewanung were forgotten, and the long narrative of what had recently been the most important First Nation community in Muskoka was ignored when the history of early settlement in the district was compiled.

Tossing and turning, the thought came to the boy that the souls of these long-dead people might

have returned from the Indian spirit world and now were pleading with him, as someone with roots in both the native world and that of the settlers, to become their champion when he became a man and to rectify the injustices done to them so many years ago. That did not reassure him. He was as much afraid of wandering souls with noble causes as he was of tormented ghosts and the devil.

The boy tried to push his fears to one side and deal with the issues logically, just as his father would. He wondered if more Indians than whites believed in ghosts, lost souls, spirits, and the devil. The answer was yes, and he believed in them as well, did that mean he was more Indian than white? Would his father be disappointed in him if that turned out to be the case? Would he call him a “superstitious Indian”?

On the other hand, would his mother be upset if he took the side of his father? Would she think that he was betraying his native roots? She had, after all, been hurt when he had laughed at her cousin’s belief. It was all very confusing, and he did not want to choose between his parents. More than anything else, however, he passionately needed to free himself from his crippling fear of ghosts, spirits, and the devil. Fighting instinct with logic, he told himself fiercely that they simply did not exist. He hoped that his mother and her people would understand.

The sounds of the moaning in the trees and the voices in the wind came to an end.

TWO

The Call

THEN THE BOY'S GREAT-GRANDFATHER came to visit. He was a long-retired preacher of a small fundamentalist denomination, highly regarded within his church, who despite his great age was still on the road spreading the gospel. The son of a well-off farmer in Southern Ontario, he had abandoned his farm and inheritance more than seventy years earlier, when Ontario was still in the horse-and-buggy era, after receiving a call from God to carry the word of the Lord to the people. His photograph, an ancient daguerreotype taken some time in the latter part of the previous century, adorned one of the walls of the family's downstairs living quarters. It revealed a handsome young man with premature greying hair striking a heroic Napoleonic pose, one hand inside his jacket on his chest and the other holding a Bible.

But while the other members of the family held their distinguished relative in awe, the boy's father had no use for him. After a few glasses of raisin wine, he could be induced to recount in detail, and with ever greater exaggeration with each retelling, an incident from his early childhood that had marked him for life. The clergyman had visited his family home, and as was the custom in his devout Christian family, everyone knelt down to pray. The old gentleman, however, had a phenomenal memory and was able to quote the Bible at extraordinary length, a feat that earned him the admiration of the faithful, but which led to inordinately long prayers.

The boy's father, then only five, fell asleep during one such session. This provoked the wrath of the preacher whose moral code was based on the harsh strictures of the Old Testament and who believed in using strong measures to discipline the young. With a leather razor strop he grimly whipped the bare bum of the child who, as he grew up, neither forgot nor forgave. The boy's father told his children that he became an atheist at that moment. Although he always laughed when he told this story, he was not joking. The boy, for his part, was secretly happy that the lashing his father had received had turned him into an opponent of corporal punishment where his own children were concerned.

The boy's mother broke the news of the impending visit to his father late one evening when she thought all the children were asleep. The boy listened intently, having no trouble hearing their whispering voices through the thin walls. His mother told her husband she had received a letter from the old clergyman announcing his wish to use the family home as a base to preach to the fifty to sixty Indians who were spending the summer as usual at the Indian Camp. Even before his father spoke, the boy knew what his response would be.

“No! No! And no! I don’t want that old hypocrite in our house!”

~~His mother, on the other hand, was a peacemaker. Forced to make compromises all her married life to fit into the white man’s world, it was second nature for her to try to persuade her husband to welcome the visitor.~~

“But, he’s your own grandfather. We can’t turn him away.”

Listening to their heated discussion, the boy knew how it would end. His mother would get her way by ignoring his father and doing what she thought best. His father would grumble but do nothing to stop her, aware that her judgment was usually better than his. He would also devise a plan to deal with his unwelcome relative in his own way.

The boy was happy. He looked forward to meeting his father’s grandfather, and knew he ran no risk of receiving the same sort of punishment his father had suffered so many years before. The old man was now more than ninety and would not be able to catch him if he tried. He was also confident his mother would protect him should he transgress his great-grandfather’s rules. Just to be on the safe side, however, he decided to make a determined effort to stay awake during prayers, whatever their duration.

Late one Sunday afternoon, the mother and her two boys waited expectantly outside the village post office where the local bus delivered and collected its daily load of passengers. The boy and his brother ran to greet the white-haired old gentleman wearing a parson’s collar who slowly descended the steps of the coach. The young clergyman in the photograph was gone and in his place was a patriarch with snow-white hair and gentle deep blue eyes. He smiled benignly at his half-breed great-grandchildren, asking them their names and shaking hands gravely with the mother. The boys then led him back to their home, all the while fighting for the honour of carrying his battered black suitcase.

From his observation post on the front porch, the father saw them coming. Not wanting to greet and make small talk with his grandfather, he slipped out the back door before they arrived, making for the bush behind the privy. There, a group of local reprobates joined him for a good, old-fashioned Muskoka raisin wine party, which had been timed to coincide with the arrival of his unwanted guest.

Of course, not just anyone was invited to the father’s fête. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that not everyone would have come if invited. For in addition to being hierarchically separated into social classes based on wealth, with the merchants on top, the labourers below, and skilled workers in between, the villagers were unofficially divided into castes based on their drinking habits. The castes were three in number: the virtuous, the elite minority on top; the respectable, the great majority in the middle; and the reprobates, those left over at the bottom. But in contrast to the United Kingdom, the model for Canada’s class system, and India, where the caste way of life originated, in democratic Canada people could move easily between classes and castes. All one had to do was to become more or less well off, or more or less virtuous, or more or less respectable. Many labourers occupied the exalted position of the virtuous. Many merchants were reprobates.

This informal caste system, which no one talked about but which existed in one form or another throughout the Ontario of the day, had emerged some years earlier as a result of the public passions and divisions over the morality of drinking. People clung to their divergent beliefs on booze with the same passionate intensity that they display today in the cultural wars between pro-and anti-abortion rights advocates and supporters of gay marriage and their opponents. Provincial governments were afraid to touch the subject and left it up to municipalities to decide for themselves whether they would be “wet” or “dry,” by means of local-option plebiscites.

The villages and towns surrounding Port Carling were wet. Port Carling was dry. Within the

village limits, there were no bars, taverns, or restaurants that served alcoholic drinks and no government outlets that sold bottles of beer and spirits. Many of the citizens took great pride in this state of affairs, believing it was a reflection of their intrinsic moral superiority over the degenerates elsewhere in the district.

Naturally, like Canadians everywhere, most villagers drank, even if they differed among themselves on the where, how, and what of consumption. The virtuous and the respectable bought their beer and spirits in far-off towns where they were not known and then sipped their drinks in solitude behind closed curtains in their homes or in the backrooms of their business establishments. They disagreed in one major area of drinking doctrine only. The virtuous, afraid they might be seen by their neighbours, never visited the nearby wet communities to imbibe in their beer parlours. The respectable, however, were prepared to take a chance. And if they had too much to drink and made fools of themselves, as occasionally happened, they would comfort themselves in their hangover remorse with the thought that at least they had sullied the purity of someone else's community rather than their own.

The virtuous and the respectable liked to think that they shared similar views on drinking issues even if at times the virtuous had their doubts about the respectable. Both looked down on the reprobates, disdained imported store-bought wine as the beverage of foreigners, regarded Canadian vintages as the last resort of scoundrels and skid-row bums, and would not be caught dead drinking homebrew. Little old ladies from these worlds, it was true, occasionally broke the rules by quietly preparing batches of dandelion wine, but they drank it, they said, only for medicinal purposes.

Members of these castes never, ever put their empty booze bottles out with their trash to be picked up by the garbage collectors – who considered it part of their civic duty to let everyone know who was drinking what, when, and how much. Instead, late at night, after checking to be sure the coast was clear, they carefully inserted their empties in the garbage cans of their neighbours. In a pinch, members of both castes might turn to the village bootlegger for clandestine supplies of beer and spirits. Being from the virtuous caste himself, he understood their need for utter discretion, and quietly made home deliveries.

The reprobates, a minority in the village, did not care what gossip was being spread about them by the garbage collectors, proudly put their empties out in their own trash, frequented the beer parlours in neighbouring communities, did not worry if they acted silly after drinking too much, shamelessly consumed wine as well as beer and spirits in their homes, tried their hands at brewing up raisin wine from time to time, called their virtuous and respectable neighbours hypocrites, and agitated loudly and without success for the repeal of the regulations that kept Port Carling dry. They likewise were good customers of the bootlegger.

As for the native people, no one cared about their opinion. In class terms, they were invisible since they were so poor. As to caste, they would have been the untouchables had they lived in India. With few rights – they were not allowed to vote in provincial or federal elections and were barred by law from purchasing or possessing any sort of alcohol – they actually occupied neither class nor caste. They were forced to make raisin wine or to turn to the bootlegger for beer and liquor and to pay exorbitant prices for his illicit supplies.

The boy's father was a natural member of the reprobate caste. He had strong opinions on everything and loved poking fun at twaddle. He had no car to permit him to visit beer parlours in wet communities. And he did not have the money to buy from the bootlegger. He thus made raisin wine and held parties attended by other reprobates and his native friends.

They all came very willingly to the *soirée* he organized on the occasion of his grandfather's visit. Everyone had a great time guzzling homebrew, eating pickled eggs and mouth-burning salami sausages, and vying with each other in telling bawdy jokes and funny stories late into the night. The

father was a natural storyteller and he kept his guests laughing with his embellished accounts of his days as a hobo and of his conversion to atheism. He also kept them amused by drawing on his stock of stories about Stephen Leacock, Canada's best-known humorous writer in the first half of the twentieth century. His knowledge was first-hand – his mother had once worked for the famous writer as a cook and his sisters had been maids at the Orillia summer home of the author during the Great Depression. Leacock had even saved him from drowning – or claimed to have done so. The boy's father's irreverent description of the farcical rescue effort – involving an old launch, a seasick passenger, and a resourceful handyman – was the hit of the party.

Someone brought a guitar. Through his bedroom window, the boy listened to the festivities, enjoying in particular the maudlin renditions of their favourite tunes, especially the old nineteenth-century American ballad of the working man – “Frankie and Johnny” – the unofficial theme song of the reprobates.

*Frankie and Johnny were Lovers.
O my gawd, how they could love,
They swore t'be true to each other
Just as true as the stars up above,*

He was her man, but he done her wrong.

As raw alcohol, yeast, brine, hard-boiled eggs, hot peppers, indifferent meat, and garlic came together in the stomachs of the revellers, a nauseous mixture of unmentionable gases erupted in sulphurous blasts from both ends of the digestive tracts of host and guests alike in a storm of belching and passing of air that added immeasurably to the general hilarity.

As dawn approached, the guests drifted away to face the wrath of their wives for drinking too much, staying out so late, and returning home smelling as if they had spent the night sleeping in a pigsty. The father wove his way unsteadily down the footpath past the privy to the darkened house, highly satisfied with himself for having behaved so badly on the first night of his grandfather's visit. He hoped the racket made by him and his friends had kept the old man awake. Perhaps his grandfather would be so scandalized he would leave the village on the first bus out in the morning. Pushing open the screen door, a happy, tipsy grin on his face, he was looking forward to a good sleep for what remained of the night in his own bed.

His wife, however, waiting in the dark, had bad news.

“I have given your grandfather our bed and the old couch is mine. You can sleep on the floor. By the way, the old man is stone-deaf. He took his hearing aid out when he went to bed and didn't hear any of the shouting and carryings-on of your band of drunken louts.”

Dejected, the father staggered outside looking for somewhere else to sleep, eventually crawling into a small hutch he had helped the boy construct for his pet rabbits. In the morning, when the boy went to feed them, he found the door open and his father stretched out on his back on the straw bedding sound asleep and smiling – with a rabbit on his chest.

The boy shook him awake. His father stared at him with bleary eyes until the world came into focus. Then he found out that it was harder to exit a low-ceilinged rabbit hutch sober than to enter one after having had too much to drink. After much muttering and writhing in the confined space, pushing with his elbows, pulling with his hands, and twisting with his torso, he eventually extracted himself

from his prison and rolled out onto the tall dew-covered grass and weeds. He then scrambled to his feet, and without a word to his son, set off hurriedly for the back door of the house, anxious to leave for work on time.

The preacher grandfather may have had his moral code, but his nonconformist and raisin wine-drinking grandson had one of his own. The boy knew it well: never discipline children with razor strops, belts, or the back of one's hand; be kind to animals; and always report to work on time. Of the three, the third was the one that he repeated most frequently to his sons, whom he expected to follow in his footsteps one day as labourers.

“When you grow up and start work, my boys, remember these words of wisdom from your old dad: drink as much as you want at night, but never stay home from work the next day to sleep off your binges.”

It was a matter of the highest principle, therefore, for the father to report to work and to be on time, no matter how awful he felt. Struggling down the path and into the house, he removed his shirt, dragged his body to the sink, turned on the tap, and took enormous swallows of ice-cold water to quell his hangover thirst. He then pushed his head under the flow, re-emerged, gasped for air, and noisily washed his face and chest. As he picked up a towel to dry himself, his eyes met those of his grandfather, who was sitting at the kitchen table. Neither spoke. The old man's face registered sadness, disappointment, and resignation.

The boy's mother, for whom respect for elders was central to her aboriginal culture and who genuinely liked her husband's grandfather, went out of her way to compensate for the boorish behaviour of her husband and to make the old man welcome. She cooked his meals, pressed his black clergyman's suit, washed his white shirts, and served him frequent cups of hot water – tea and coffee being forbidden in his religion. She also made arrangements with her relatives for him to preach at the Indian Camp and encouraged her children to attend the open-air services under the giant white pines along the Indian River bordering the reserve.

The boy, who did not know what to expect but who was caught up in the excitement of the preparations, could hardly wait to hear his great-grandfather speak. The first evening, freshly scrubbed in honour of the occasion, he ran down the narrow pathway leading from the business section of the village to the Indian Camp to secure for himself a choice place. The people turned out en masse, dressed in their best clothes. Those who had them occupied aluminium lawn chairs; those who did not sat on wooden boxes. The boy joined a group of his friends sitting on the ground in front of the makeshift pulpit, nonchalantly mentioning that he just happened to be related to the preacher.

His great-grandfather, accompanied by his mother, then emerged from the cabin of a relative. His mother stood quietly at the rear of the crowd as the old patriarch walked slowly to the front, a smile on his face and his Bible in his hand. He was in his element, having addressed thousands of similar gatherings in his time. The native people, who likewise had attended numerous revivalist and camp meetings on their home reserves, knew what to expect.

The patriarch did not disappoint them. Punching the air with his fist, he called upon sinners to repent and passionately described how as a young man he had become a Christian through a life-altering and fervent religious experience. Those present, he said, could be saved as well, if only they would open up their hearts. There was much sympathetic nodding of heads, but no one took him up on his offer. Instead, someone asked whether she could lead the people in the singing of gospel hymns in Chippewa. He, of course, had no objection, and the crowd who knew the words of most Christian hymns by heart, sang song after song late into the night in the soft language of their ancestors, ending with the beautiful “Abide with me, Fast Falls the Eventide,” sung first in Chippewa and then in English as a courtesy to the old preacher.

*Pe we je we shin Ta ba ne ga yun,
Ah zhe mah ke pung ge she mo ke zis;
Ne je ke wa yug ne nuh guh ne goog,
Keen dush ween ka go nuh guh ne she kan.*

*Abide with me: fast falls the eventide,
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide;
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

So it was that for a week the people gathered to listen to the boy's great-grandfather and to sing hymns. The youngster was transfixed by the dramatic scenes, certain that he would never forget them no matter how long he lived, and he basked in the reflected esteem the Indians accorded to his great-grandfather. Even the boy's father, who as a matter of principle refused to attend the services, was attracted by the festive atmosphere and each night hovered in the background, trying to engage his friends in gossip.

Then, just before he left the village, the old clergyman called the boy to him, asked him to kneel, blessed him, and told him that he was destined to replace him one day as a preacher.

The prediction touched off great anxiety in the boy, for his great-grandfather, as he had frequently told the people in his sermons at the Indian Camp, had been converted in a traumatic scene like Paul on the road to Damascus. Would the same thing happen to him? If so, when would the call come? How could a mere boy cope with the profundity and awesome power of the Lord? How could anyone, let alone a child, bear to face the creator one-on-one? Worst of all, the boy suspected that he had too many personal failings to be a preacher. He was not even certain what it meant to be a Christian, and was even less sure that he was one.

Night after night, the boy wrestled with these questions against the background sound of the now soulless, lonely, and impersonal wind outside his bedroom window. One night, he awoke, paralyzed by dread and consumed with fear. The silence was somehow deafening and the bedroom was filled with light that was blinding and incandescent. The boy told himself he was dreaming and that there was no logical explanation for what he was experiencing. He knew, however, that he was in the presence of the divine and was being asked to believe, to declare himself and to follow in the footsteps of his great-grandfather.

Too terrified to decide, the youngster made no commitment. After what seemed like an eternity, the light slowly faded. The boy, unable to accept his destiny, was left with an overwhelming feeling of spiritual failure, emptiness, and disappointment.

Shortly thereafter, he started attending Sunday school – an unlikely development given his father's views on religion. But his father worked hard six days a week, ten hours a day. With a pick and shovel he dug ditches, smashed stones with a sledgehammer, and drilled holes in rock for dynamite charges with a gang of men replacing rusted and damaged pipes in the village's antiquated water-distribution system. His only days off were Sundays, which were also when his wife's Indian relatives came to visit. Anxious to be rid of his squabbling children, if only for an hour or two while he held court at home, the father packed the lot of them, with the exception of the baby, off to the local church, accepting the risk that in the process they might become contaminated by religion.

Not having gone to church before, the boy paid close attention to the Sunday-school teacher who she talked about faith, saying one either had it or not. Only those with faith would go to heaven. The

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