

Hamish Hamilton

Upfronts



THE ORENDA

Joseph Boyden



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ONE

Hunted

I awake. A few minutes, maybe, of troubled sleep. My teeth chatter so violently I can taste that I've bitten my swollen tongue. Spitting red into the snow, I try to rise but my body has seized. The older Huron, their leader, the one who kept us walking all night around the big lake rather than across it because of some ridiculous dream, stands above me with a thorn club. These men and the weight they give their dreams. It will be the end of them.

Although I still know only a little of their language, I understand the words the man whispers and I force myself to roll when the club swings toward me. The thorns bite into my back and the bile of curses that pour from my mouth make the group of Hurons watching intently cover their mouths with laughter. I am sorry, Lord, to use your name in vain.

They'd all be screaming with glee, pointing and holding their bellies, if we weren't being hunted right now. With a low sun rising and the air so cold, the noise travels. They are clearly fed up with

the young Iroquois girl who wouldn't stop whimpering all night. Her face is swollen from slaps and when I look to her lying in the snow I fear that they killed her while I slept.

Not long ago, just before light, we'd all paused to rest, the leader and his handful of hunters stopping as if they'd planned it out in advance, the pack of them collapsing into each other for the heat. They whispered among themselves, and a couple of the hunters' eyes glanced over to me. Although I couldn't decipher their rushed speech, I knew they talked of leaving me here, probably with the girl who at that moment sat with her back to a birch, staring as if in a dream. Or maybe they talked of killing the girl and me. The two of us had slowed the rest down all night, and despite my trying to walk quietly, I stumbled in the black through the thick brush and tripped over fallen trees buried in the snow. At one point I'd removed my snowshoes they were so clumsy but I sank up to my hips in the next steps and one of the hunters had to pull me out, biting me hard on the face when he'd finally accomplished the deed.

Now the snow covering the lake glows the colour of a robin's egg as sun tries to break the cloud. If I live through this day I will always remember to pay attention to the tickle of dryness at the back of my throat at this moment, the whine like a bad headache coming. I've just begun to walk to the girl to offer her comfort if she's still alive when a dog's howl breaks the silence, the excitement in its picking up our scent making me want to throw up. Other dogs answer it. I forget how my toes have begun to blacken, that I've lost so much weight I can't support my gaunt frame for long, that my chest has filled with a sickness that's turned my skin yellow.

I know dogs, though. As in my old world, these are one of the few things in this new one that bring me comfort. And this pack's still a long way away, their voices traveling easy in the frozen air. When I bend to help the girl up, I see the others have already left, have disappeared into the shadow of the trees and thick brush.

My panic at being left alone to those chasing me, the ones who will make sure I die a slow death so painful I now weigh taking my own life, is so powerful I know exactly what I must do. And I ask Your divine mercy for this. I will strip naked and I will walk out onto the lake. I calculate how long it will all take. The first ten minutes as the pack races closer and closer to me will certainly be the most painful. My skin will at first feel like it is on fire, like I am being boiled in a pot. There's only one thing more painful than the first minutes of freezing, and it's the thawing out, every tendril of the body screaming for the pain to stop. But I won't have to worry about that. I will lie on the frozen lake and allow the boiling of the cold to consume me. After that first handful of minutes the violent shaking won't even be noticed, but the sharp stabs of pain in the forehead will come, and they will travel deeper until it feels my brain is being prodded with fish spines. And when the dogs are within a few minutes of reaching me, I will suddenly begin to feel a warmth creeping. My body will continue its hard seizures, but my toes and fingers and my testicles will stop burning. I will begin to feel a sense of, if not comfort, then relief, and my breathing will be very difficult and this will cause panic but the panic will slowly harden to resolve and when the dogs are on the lake and racing toward me, jaws foaming and teeth bared, I will know that

even this won't hurt anymore as I slip into a sleep that one cannot awaken from. As the dogs circle me I will try to smile at them, bare my teeth, too, and know that although my eyes are frozen shut that the dogs will begin to eat me, but I'll not feel myself being consumed, will be like you, Christ, as I give my body so that others might live.

This thought of giving, I now see, lifts me just enough to pick up the girl and begin walking her away from the lake's edge. If she's alive after all, won't her people—my pursuers—consider sparing me? I will keep her alive, not just because this is what You demand, but to save myself. The thought of this betrayal of Your wishes feels more an intellectual quandary than what I imagine should physically cause pain to my heart. I'll worry about that later. For now, I follow the others' footsteps as best I can, my thick black robe catching on the woven branches and nettles, the bush so thick I wonder how it is that the men I follow, and the ones who follow me, are not part animal, have some black magic that gives them abilities that are beyond the natural.

You seem very far away here in this cold hell, and the Monsigneur's attempts to prepare me last year before my journey to the new world seem ridiculous in their naivety. You will face great danger. You will most certainly face death. You will question Jesus' mercy, even His existence. This is Lucifer whispering in your ear. Lucifer's fires are cold. There is no warming your body and your soul by them. But Monsigneur doesn't have any idea what true cold is, I realize, as I allow myself and the girl to be swallowed by the darkness of the same trees that the cold sun tries to penetrate.

TWO

A Man Should Feel Happy

I stop to look up because the sun breaks. The puffs of my breath shimmer in the first light. It's you who shimmers, my love, in this first morning light. The sun will illuminate all of it. I know this most of all. The sun will show the Haudenosaunee who chase us exactly where to go, will show them how many of us there are, and what condition we are in, and especially that we drag a Crow with us. The sun today is not a friend. If we all die today, it will because of it. And the sun won't give real heat for three more moons, so the sun is shit today. And that Crow who tries to follow is shit, too. And the girl. Taking her was a bad idea. I knew it yesterday like I know it today. I'm older now, my love, and I still haven't learned to listen when my guts tell me.

I order Fox to set a sinew snare where the path narrows, just high enough to strangle the first of their dogs that follows, howling across the lake, not so far away. With any luck, the others will stop and be hungry enough to tear apart their friend for surely they've

not been eating much at all this last while. I dreamed all of this and spoke of it as the sky began to darken last evening. I know, my love, that yesterday you watched from somewhere above when my group stumbled across the smaller group of our enemy, both parties pursuing the same deer. Luck and the bit of tobacco I'd offered to Aataentsic the Sky Woman the night before allowed me to find our enemy's tracks first, and we followed nimble and fast. By the drag of the Haudenosaunee's snowshoes I knew they were close to starving. And by the lack of dog prints I knew what their last meal had been.

I tied the Crow to a tree and then attacked the other hunting party when we found them in a gully. It was almost too easy. We shot arrows through the first two and the two men left could barely put up a fight when we walked to them. They didn't even seem to care when Fox clubbed down one of the women who bit him hard through his hide. I myself walked up to the biggest man, already singing his death song, and swung my thorn club into his temple, angry he wasn't willing to fight for his woman. I will not forget having to stand on his head to wrench free my weapon. Yes, I'm older, but I'm still strong. The only one as tall as me is that Crow who I can now hear stumbling through the snow and whining, trying to catch up to us. He's a big Crow, thick through the chest and clearly strong, but is he not the most awkward human I've ever met? He is a holy one, though. I've watched him pray to his sky people for hours at a time, thumbing wooden and silver beads that I think I want to possess once I understand their power.

I took no pleasure yesterday in killing the last two women.

They were already so wounded we knew they wouldn't survive the trip home. Even though I ordered Fox to do it, my order is the same as if I myself had done it. Fox cut their throats with his knife so that they'd go quick despite the taunts of Sturgeon and Hawk and Deer to make it slow. When the three called Fox a woman for making the first leave so fast, he positioned the second woman, who was quite pretty, so that the blood from her throat sprayed their faces. That shut them up, and despite feeling badly for these dead, I laughed. For all I knew, it was this group who was responsible for the slow and awful deaths of you, my wife and you, my two daughters. There's been no peace since. I no longer care for peace.

As we gathered the few Haudenosaunee possessions that were worth taking, I caught the sound of a snuffle behind me in a clump of cedar. I didn't turn immediately for I was too tired to have to chase through the forest what was clearly a child. Fox made eye contact with me and then walked away and around behind the cedar, circling it in a wide arc and cutting off the child's escape. He emerged with the girl in his arms, her body as straight and stiff as if she'd frozen solid. She stared ahead with eyes that didn't seem to see but maybe saw everything. Was it this that stopped me from killing her, allowing Fox to suggest that I take her and make her my own child? Despite the pock scars from an old sickness, she's beautiful, and will only become more so in the next few years.

Our group should not have followed our own tracks back out. This certainty of direction gives away too much to an enemy who wishes to learn. By late last night, a much bigger group of Haudenosaunee had found the killing grounds and were following

us. It's not that I could hear them or see them. The cold air took on another quality, though, and the hair at the back of my neck had begun to stick out, tickling me in an annoying way. Like black flies. Yes, it's like black flies, buzzing your ears and waking you from an afternoon slumber. That's when I hurried my pace last night and my soldiers knew then too what we all now faced.

And despite her slowing us down all night, this morning as her people pursue us, I still don't regret taking her. She contains something powerful. This has become more and more clear in the last hours. Even if she does slow us all down, I'm willing to take this great risk because of the promise of what is inside her. And if the Crow is able to not just keep up with my hunters but keep the girl alive, too, he will have proved to me that both of them have something inside them that is worth studying.

Now that the Crow appears through the trees, the girl in his large arms, I decide to push forward. It's a good plan. If the Haudenosaunee catch up, they will catch up to the Crow first, and when they find their child in his arms, they will celebrate her survival with a feast that ends in the consumption of the Crow. Yes, they will send a much smaller party immediately to pursue the rest of us but these odds are better than what we now face. I point out the presence of the snare to the Crow as he stumbles up, breathing heavily.

When the Crow sits in the snow, the young girl stiff again with her eyes staring ahead, my men and I stand. The Crow's confused expression turns quick to anger, and I like this sign very much. Crow has energy left. Maybe he'll make it through today after all.

My four soldiers and I walk to where I see a sharp drop to a creek below. Crouching and leaning back, I slide down the hill on the heels of my snowshoes, feel like I'm flying as I pick up speed to where the creek will offer us a much faster route. I feel happy. A man should feel happy on the day that will be his last.

THREE

Dreams

I dreamed all of this. I told my father but he was too tired, too hungry maybe, to listen. I told my mother, too, and she too, was so tired, so hungry. I see the arrow that strikes my father in the neck before it even flies. I see the red of blood on the snow, how it steams for just a bit before freezing into something that looks like a soup he fed me when the shaking sickness came. Before my mother bites the small man who is like a lynx or maybe a fox and he smashes her head so that she falls to the ground and shakes like she dances in the snow, I have already dreamed her being held roughly by them and finding my eyes as I hide in the cedar. She tells me with her eyes that she is going to do something important, and when she does I am to run as fast as I can and not stop until I find my uncles and my cousins who aren't too far from here. My mother's eyes flash to me that I will run as fast as I've ever run and I won't stop until I find my uncles or I am dead. Her eyes blink to me that if these ones here catch me I will wish I had died already. And then

she bites the man like she is a crazed wolf and he screams out and begins smashing her in the head with his club and she flops in the snow like a pike pulled from a hole in the ice or maybe a rabbit that has been clubbed and shakes toward her death, feet thumping the ground. It is a good thing that my father lies dead on the ground near her with an arrow through his neck or he would not stop until all of them are dead. But he is dead and my mother shakes toward him and my oldest brother who is blind and deaf doesn't see or hear our mother and father dying and leaves the world with them when the big older man clubs him in the head. My whole family shakes on the ground today before leaving me and this is something I've already dreamed, the shaking of my family in the snow, feet and arms thumping, then vibrating, then humming then eventually going still.

I will not shake into my death, I tell myself in my dream, and I tell myself when I am swallowed up in the arms of the fox man, who has sneaked up behind me and is quick as a lynx and so I go stiff and wait for him to smash me on the head. Instead, he carries me to the big man who has struck down my brother, and as I pass the others who are dead, my father, my mother, my father's two young apprentices, their wives who have squirted blood onto the men who laughed at them, I keep my eyes forward and try not to see any of it, pretend I am my brother who cannot see, who I've mimicked since I can remember, that look of seeing nothing and seeing everything. But I do see. I see that my father lies in the snow, a bright ring of red circling his head like a red ring around the moon in autumn, and his arms stretch out from him as if he

is pointing with one to where the sun rises and with the other to where the sun sets, and I see one foot crossed over the other as if he can finally relax now that he has slipped through to the other side. I remain stiff, though, believe that if my body stays still and hard as I can make it that these men will lose interest and they will think I've turned to wood or ice and they will leave me in the snow because the weight of me is not worth carrying, especially when my father's brothers and their sons and their dogs find out what has happened. These men who have killed my family, these men who I've dreamed of, they better start running now, for my uncles and their sons who will pursue them soon will never stop chasing until they are done with it. And so I'll act heavy and stiff and allow my feet and my arms and my head to catch on the branches as these men try to carry me away. If I stay frozen they will be forced to eventually drop me.

This morning my plan has worked and I watch my family's killers leave me soon after my uncle's best dog sings out that he can smell me. But the stinky man, the big one whose face is hairy like a wolf's, he bends down to me, and his black clothes smell so bad that I want to throw up and his breath smells like rotted meat and the wolf hair on his face and the black clothes on his body scratch me and there's no way I can stay stiff and dead anymore and just when I open my mouth to scream, when I begin to swing at his face and claw at his eyes and bite like I watched my mother bite, I see my father, grown tiny and sparkling, hanging on a leather cord from this thing's neck.

It's my father, lying in the snow, a circle around his head and

his arms stretched out and his feet relaxed, one crossed over the other. My tiny father, as the hairy, stinky man bends to me, arcs toward me and I watch him come toward me, his face catching the first morning light and his body meets my lips and his body feels warm and I see now that he's still alive because he is warm and I make a kiss to him as he swings away and the stinky man picks me up and I hear my uncle's dog in the distance sing out once more.

FOUR

Protection

I know that the one called Bird and his warriors can't be that far ahead. I wish to God that they'd wait. The dogs mustn't be far, either, have gone quiet now that they are closer to their prey, to me. The stiff girl in my arms is brutally awkward to carry, and as I follow the Hurons' snowshoe trail to a steep embankment, I pause, trying to calculate the best way down. So steep, this drop, that I wonder if Bird hasn't tried to trick his pursuers and taken another route. I look around for other tracks. Nothing. Christ, please help me. The dogs will come soon, they will howl out my presence, and with that noise will come the men who pursue, with their flashing teeth, their red and black and yellow painted faces and hatchets and clam shell knives to cut off the tips of my fingers in preparation for the true torture. I know all about these ones I've never met. They love to caress their enemies with red coals and razor flint so slow that days pass before Jesus comes to take the victim.

The small of my back spasms as I stand looking out at the frozen stream beneath me. I consider dropping the rigid girl and letting her tumble down to the bottom, feel sick to realize I consider this because if she makes it, I, myself, will survive it unscathed, too.

And then I see the tracks below, Bird's snowshoe tracks, small as pigeon claws, etched along the distant bank and disappearing into thick brush. I lift my charge higher in my arms and step forward to figure the route, feeling steadier now with a small glow of salvation. The toe of my snowshoe catches a bit of branch or rock, something below the white, and I tumble fast, over and over, down the hill, my ribs and left arm hitting rocks at the bottom, where the frozen creek lies.

I stand and feel the shock of snow down my back. The girl is clearly no catatonic. Quick as a hare, she scrambles to her feet and begins to scratch her way up the embankment, its steep incline enough that when she makes it a length no taller than her, she slips back down again. It would be almost comical if not for the glare she shoots back at me, her eyes alight like some animal's. These ones are animals. I have seen with my own eyes what they will do to an enemy. They are all the same, animals in savagely human form.

I sit in the snow of the creek and fit the snowshoes back onto my feet, tying the hide cords as best I remember the Hurons showing me. I stand, think to say something in parting to the girl who still struggles desperate to climb away, and then think better of it. She will not understand my French anyways, and my head is far too panicked to try and speak the Huron tongue, which the one called

Bird claims she understands. I will leave this girl to her people, to my pursuers, and surely this will quell their appetites.

But no more than ten paces along the creek and I realize that to leave without her leaves me without protection. My legs ache so badly and my breath already comes in such short spurts that I know today might be the beginning of my last. The ones behind me are too strong. I turn back and shuffle through the snow to the girl who still frantically tries to climb up and toward her people. She looks to me as my arms reach out, and as I tense for her to scratch at my eyes, she instead goes stiff as if dead and drops to the snow with a thump. I would laugh if I had the energy. I bend and pick her up, struggling now with her scant weight, then turn and drag my heavy and awkward snowshoes along the trail left by Bird.

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