WE SURVIVED THE NIGHT

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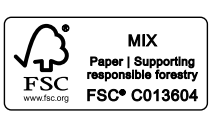

For my mother,
who showed me how

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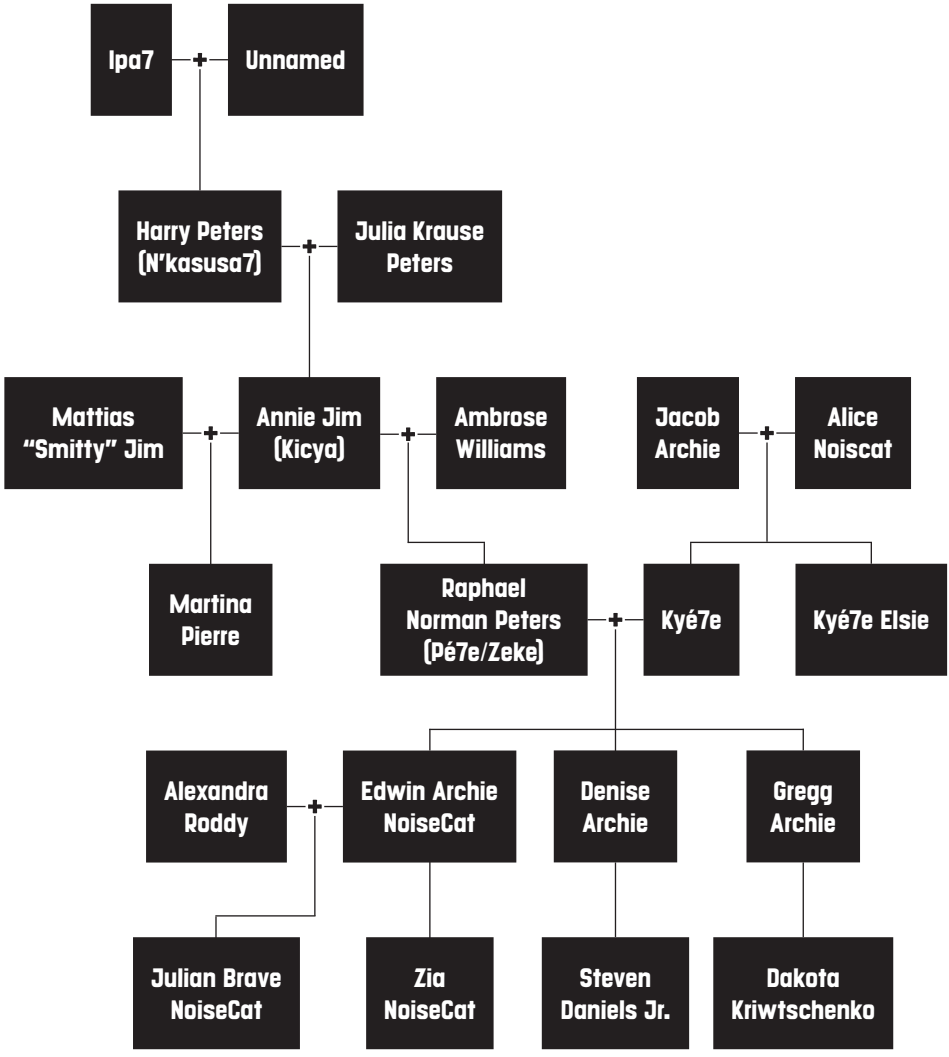

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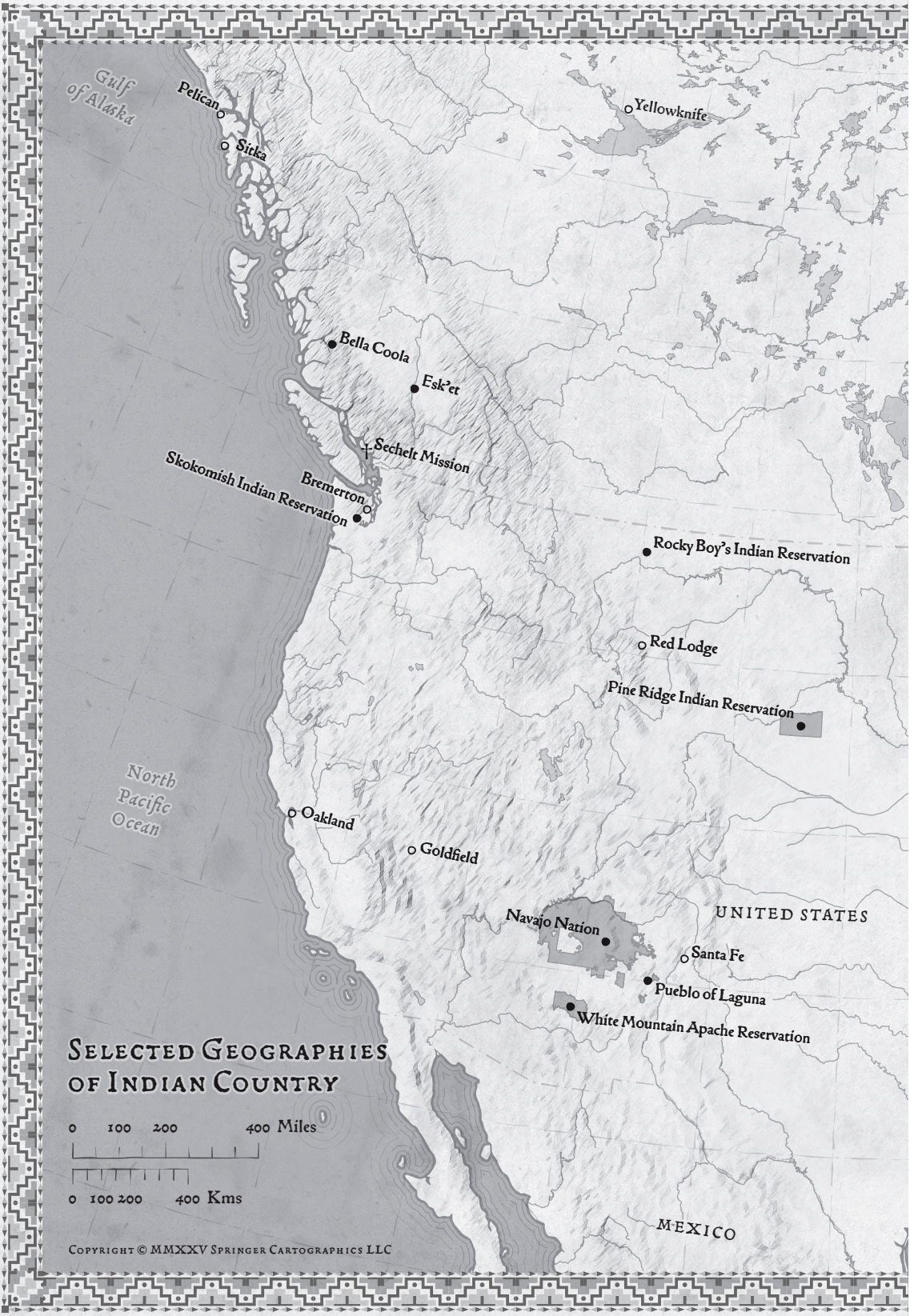


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WE SURVIVED THE NIGHT

IN THE BEGINNING

The noise came from behind the mission. It sounded like a cat. I've imagined it countless times.

At about half past eleven, the night watchman pulled his car around back of St. Joseph's Mission, one of the Indian residential schools in British Columbia, Canada, where my family was sent to unlearn our Indian ways. The four-story building was all white and right angles. Unadorned, save for a big cross looming over the entrance and blue-green trim that, from a distance, made the campus look like a hunk of moldy cheese plopped in the middle of the valley.

In my mind's eye, his carburetor is coughing, the crickets are singing, and there's that tiny, eerie cry. When he killed the engine and stepped out from behind his insect-speckled windshield, the night watchman could hear it too. It was coming from the service wing, a single-story brick annex at the back of the mission. The baby's scream climbed the lone smokestack looming out of that annex and crawled across the school grounds. It was primal. The sound of birth meeting death.

The night watchman flicked on his flashlight. Its beam reflected off his browline eyeglasses. Antonius Cornelius Stoop went by Tony. He wore his brown hair in one of those short-cropped everyman cuts. And he was an everyman. A Dutchman who spoke broken English, Tony immigrated to Canada from the old country. At night, he walked the grounds of St. Joseph's, a ring of keys jingling on his hip and a flashlight in his hand. It was his job to make sure

the Indian kids weren't up to any Indian mischief, like stealing food or running away. He also kept an eye on the mission's prized and profitable herd of Herefords. Undoubtedly, he saw and heard things in his many nights at St. Joseph's, where he worked for more than thirty years until the school was shuttered in 1981. But he said little and kept to himself.

Earlier that evening, Tony attended a meeting of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization, in Williams Lake. To reach the town of Williams Lake from St. Joseph's Mission, about twelve miles, he took Mission Road north to the Cariboo Highway. He turned left, following the road west as it winds above the shores of Williams Lake into the Canadian cow town of the same name.

Both the lake and town take their name from the Secwépemc (Shuswap) chief William. During the Cariboo Gold Rush of the 1860s, William's people were forced out of their ancestral village in what is now the town of Williams Lake. As ranchers turned hunting grounds to pastures and downriver canneries gobbled salmon runs, William's people starved. "The white men have taken all the land and all the fish. A vast country was ours. It is all gone," William wrote in a letter published by the *Daily British Colonist* in 1879. "Good friends to the Indian say that 'Her Majesty loves her Indian subjects and will do justice.' Justice is no use for a dead Indian." In 1894, amendments to Canada's Indian Act made attendance at mission schools like St. Joseph's compulsory for Indigenous children. In a generation, nearly all Secwépemc children and lands were taken.

A 1964 photograph of the Knights of Columbus's "Clergy Night" published in *The Williams Lake Tribune* captures the portraits of seven priests, all seated. The one farthest to the right, Brother Doughty, was convicted on numerous counts of sexual abuse. Another, Father O'Connor, dead center, was a principal at St. Joseph's who rose to the rank of bishop. Convicted of rape and indecent assault in 1996, he was acquitted of the assault on appeal. A new trial was called for the rape. But after O'Connor apologized to his alleged victims, that trial did not move forward.

In 2021, the Williams Lake First Nation opened an investigation into missing students at St. Joseph's Mission. The First Nation's investigators found that under O'Connor and other principals at St. Joseph's, babies conceived by students and nuns—including some

fathered by priests—were aborted or adopted out. Witnesses as well as records in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police archives attested to something even darker: newborn babies cast into the incinerator to be burned with the garbage.

Sometimes I wonder what Tony knew about these men and what happened at their school after dark. It's hard to imagine he spent all those years walking the mission grounds at night without hearing or seeing some of the things that students, prosecutors, juries, and even abusers themselves later acknowledged. But he did tell this story to *The Williams Lake Tribune*, where, seven decades later, investigators found the article and shared it with me.

Because that night, the night of August 16, 1959, Tony followed that wail, flashlight in hand. Sound and light led him inside the service wing to a garbage burner about the size of an office desk, where trash from the mission was turned to ash. He opened it, casting rays of light onto rubbish and soot. Somewhere near the top of the pile was an ice cream carton, repurposed as a makeshift wastebasket and discarded no more than twenty minutes before. Within was a newborn. The authorities called him "Baby X." And he was my father.

In the beginning, there was no death.

Raven and his horde of death eaters—carrion lovers like Maggot, Fly, and Crow—wanted to eat the eyeballs of the dead. So Raven, the paramount trickster of Northwest Coast lore, called together a council of all the animals. On the opposite side of that council sat Coyote, the wandering shape-shifter who ranged across the river-gouged mountains and plateaus of inland legend. Coyote was sent to earth by Creator to arrange the world into its Indigenous state. He had a mixed record and reputation—I doubt any Indian would recommend him for a job. But he loved life, and boy, was his full of stories.

Coyote laid a pipe, ceremonial instrument of truth and peace, before Raven and asked, "Why is it that you wish people to die?"

"Oh Coyote, can't you see?" Raven cooed. "If people live forever there will soon be too many."

"But death will be hard on the soul," Coyote responded. "It will cause pain and be full of questions."

Raven pecked at his thoughts. "What about your enemies? Do

you really wish to see them eat, while you and yours go hungry?" His black horde murmured in agreement.

The animals looked to Coyote for his response. The trickster could be brilliant on his feet. "What if we let death be like sleep?" Coyote shrugged. "People could die for a while, but then come back?"

Raven and his flock cackled. "Let them rot!" squawked Crow.

And if you've ever nibbled on the eyes in a fish-head stew, you can understand why Raven wanted death so bad. Because eyeballs are gooey, umami, delicious. The mood of the council swung toward Raven and his vision for a corpse feast.

Coyote turned tail. "It's agreed," said the furry trickster as he lifted and lit his pipe, holding it awkwardly as far away from his body as possible.

"Careful!" teased victorious Raven. "We wouldn't want you to singe that tail of yours." And all the animals laughed at Coyote's expense. Because he was always catching his tail on fire, turning it black.

Coyote shot his coastal counterpart a look. Maybe it was then that he resolved to get the last laugh. Because after that, he drew breath and exhaled the natural law: "People shall die when their time has come. Their bodies shall be buried. And their souls shall travel the red road to the Land of the Dead." All the animals murmured in agreement, smoked the pipe, and returned home.

When the seasons changed, Raven's daughter fell ill. In his majestic coastal perch, Raven tried to work his magic. But he could not return life and soul to the girl. She was the first to die.

Teary-eyed, Raven flew back to Coyote. "Coyote, I take it back. I don't want death in this world."

But Coyote, that trickster, told Raven, "No takebacks." And Death grabbed hold of the world.

A long time ago, the Interior Salish peoples whose homelands stretch across the rivers and plateaus of the Pacific Northwest used to say we were "Coyote People." By this, we meant we were not only people who told stories about the antics of the trickster Coyote who helped Creator make the world, as many Indigenous nations in North America do. We also believed we were Coyote's descendants. For better—but also, often for worse—a good part of our

wonderfully imperfect world, history, philosophy, and bloodlines came from that prolific trickster, transformer, and shape-shifter.

But that was before the missions. To the world of crosses, paper, and property, our trickster forefather was heathen fairy tale at best and the Devil himself at worst. By the time Dad was born, the memory of Coyote had been so thoroughly stamped out that his descendants rarely if ever spoke his name: Sek'lep. We didn't know we were Coyote People. And we had forgotten the trickster was our ancestor—even though we are still a lot like the guy.

My father, Ed Archie NoiseCat, grew up on the Canim Lake Indian Reserve, a Secwépemc community about sixty miles southeast of Williams Lake, where, like him, I am a band member. Despite its name, the Canim Lake Band doesn't have any lakefront property on the side of the lake that's accessible by paved roads. Instead, our reserve, about a ten-minute drive west of the lake, consists primarily of a verdant wooded rectangle in the Canim Valley roughly one and a half miles wide by five miles long known as "Canim Lake Indian Reserve No. 1." There's a creek that used to be full of kokanee and a road worn down by logging trucks running through the valley. Along that sole thoroughfare, the Canim Lake Band has three dirt road subdivisions of government housing. The standard issue is two stories with two baths, four beds, and far more than four Indians packed inside. Our rez looks the way you might imagine a rez looks: cars up on blocks, free-ranging dogs, horses here and there, the occasional cousin getting around on a bicycle pieced together out of spare parts. It's hard-edged and gorgeous. The kind of place where the same brother who knocked out your teeth will sprinkle dirt and tears on your grave.

Dad never saw a life or future for himself in Canim Lake, only a painful past of mere survival. As soon as he was grown, he got out, made himself into a semi-famous Indian artist, and fathered two kids—my sister and me—in places as far away from the rez as he could get. Then, not long after, he left us kids behind too.

The first time Mom brought me to Canim Lake without Dad, in 1999, I was six years old, and my cousins built me a bike. It had a red frame, silver handlebars, and mismatched tires. Back then, my cousins rode their bikes all around the Canim Valley. They built jumps

in and out of the ditches and woods alongside the dirt roads where they would catch air, twist their bike frames, and look cool as hell.

Our pé7e (pa-ah, grandfather) was still alive back then. He kept heaps of tools and parts all around the carport, backyard, and front yard of the house he shared with our kyé7e (kya-ah, grandmother). Pé7e was always making, breaking, and fixing things as he went about his own mischievous adventures. Because in our little neck of the woods, he was Coyote.

True to the tricksters from whom we are descended, three of my cousins, Brandon, Kyle, and Paul, rummaged through his tools and parts and mechanicked me up a bike, even though not one of them was older than ten. And I couldn't even ride. It was their way of saying, "You're one of us," something I've always wanted to feel. Because as a half-breed who grew up off the rez without the dad who connected me to it, I've never felt like I fully belong.

There's a photo of us four saddled up on our bikes on the dirt road in front of Kyé7e's house. If you look closely, you can see that I'm straddling the frame with my feet planted squarely in the dirt so I don't tip over. My wide grin has a big gap where my two front teeth had just fallen out. Kyle didn't have a bike on hand, so he's holding a spare set of handlebars. Kyé7e has no less than six different versions of that photo in her scrapbook.

Later that trip, not long after we posed for those photos, my cousins took me across that same dirt road into the woods around back of the duplex across the way. In a knot in a fir tree, they'd hidden a tin of snuff. They handed it to me to see if their city cousin could really hang. It felt heavy in my hand, and the cancer warning label looked enormous. The eldest in the group, my cousin Shawn, who could do a 360 on his bike and who Pé7e called Sunshine, stuffed a wad in his lower lip to demonstrate. I took a tiny pinch and put it in my own mouth, imitating my older cousins, who were in turn imitating their older cousins in a daisy chain that probably went all the way back to the arrival of chewing tobacco on this rez—maybe even to a time before there was a rez. It made my tummy nauseous and my conscience guilty. I spat it into the dirt. A couple cousins snickered. Shawn patted me on the shoulder. "It's okay, Jul."

Back in Dad's day, the older cousins also dipped snuff. But the kids rode horses bareback, not bikes. He's got lots of colorful—

and dark—stories of his own. But Dad's childhood memories have always been patchy. He can't name all the places he lived or people who took him in. He can't remember how old he was when he had his first drink or count the fights he's gotten into. He has no memory of the other kids calling him "Garbage Can Kid." He just remembers that feeling.

When Mom visited the rez without Dad for the first time, she put the two of us on a plane to Seattle, rented a car, and drove nine hours north. My parents were getting a divorce because Dad had had an epiphany: He needed alcohol more than he needed Mom and me. At night, he drank. In the day, he drank. And sometimes in the morning, he drank too. He slept in my bed, probably to hide the smell from Mom. Come sunup, he was responsible for getting me to school. I was late every day of first grade.

When my teacher asked, I didn't know how to tell her my dad was drunk and my parents were splitting up. But I did know that at my predominantly white elementary school in a historically Black city, I was the only Indian kid. The only one with a name like "Julian Brave NoiseCat" at attendance. The only one whose dad was the way he was. One year later, the only one with just one parent listed in the school phone book. My classmates couldn't relate. And after Dad got a little too high during a couple of playdates at our house, their parents wouldn't let them come over anymore anyway.

When I was little and Dad was sober, I would hang out with him most of the day in his studio. We'd go on little artist adventures: carve this, pick up that; paint this, deliver that. He'd spoil me with candies, toys, and other presents. I wore my hair long, a "mini-Ed." I have a distinct memory of calling out for "'Addy's" help. When Mom came running, I told her, "No. I said 'Addy!"

After 'Addy left, I started sleeping in Mom's bed. She read *Harry Potter* books aloud as I dozed off. I started calling my first-grade teacher "Snape" in private. Like Harry's dreaded professor of potions, she had my best interests at heart. And like every other millennial, I identified with the Boy Who Lived. When, in truth, the Boy Who Lived was my father.

My mom is white. Out and about, people seldom recognized her as my mother, because she's Irish pale and I'm qelmúcw (Native) brown. Once in a while, when I was little, someone would stop her

on the street and ask what she was doing with "that child." After Dad left, she didn't know if it was her place to take me back to the rez and keep me connected to my family, my people, and our culture. Her own sister told her she shouldn't.

But Mom didn't listen to her sister or her doubts. She followed her gut north to the homeland of her ex-husband. When the two of us pulled up to the Canadian border, I remember Mom handing over what felt like a stack of documents, including my birth certificate, her divorce papers, and a letter from Dad attesting to the fact that she and I may have different phenotypes and last names, but that I was, in fact, her child. Even with documentary truth staring him in the face, the border patrol agent leaned out of his booth, looked me in the eye, and asked, "Is this your mom?"

On the way home from the rez, as Mom and I wound through the canyon above the roaring Fraser River, the main artery of my people's world, I confessed my Coyote sins.

"I did something really bad," I blurted out.

"Oh, my goodness!" Mom responded. "What did you do?"

"I might get cancer," I said, deadly serious. "I might be addicted."

I made Mom promise she wouldn't tell. Then I revealed the secret chewing tobacco ritual that had initiated me into my cousins' little rez biker gang.

Kyé7e used to have a mug with the word "Tsecwínucw-k" written across it. When I'd walk into her house, kick off my boots, and ascend the stairs for our almost nightly Secwepemctsín language lessons together in the summers of 2012 and 2013 when I was nineteen and then twenty, Kyé7e would rise from her living room recliner. Wearing her cozy slippers, she'd shuffle across the room to the kitchen. Peering up into cluttered cabinets from behind rectangular spectacles framed by short-cropped and permed silver-black hair—the look favored by Secwépemc grandmothers—she would retrieve a mug, usually the one that said "Tsecwínucw-k." Then she would fix some tea, almost always the traditional variety called "Hudson's Bay tea" by some and "swamp tea" by us, take her seat across from me at the table, and crack open a photocopied edition of the 1974 language workbook *A Shuswap Course*. Kyé7e

spent the first month of our lessons teaching me how to wrap my Anglophone-wired mouth around the forty-two unique sounds that constitute the Shuswap alphabet. Then she taught me words, phrases, and grammar.

That's how I learned that tsecwínucw-k is a morning greeting, kind of like "good morning" in Secwepemctsín. Except it doesn't mean "good morning." That's "le7 te secwenwen." Instead, "tsecwínucw-k" means "you survived the night." I often wonder what it meant for our people to greet one another and the day with the simple but profound acknowledgment that we are still here. And then I chuckle at the tragicomic sensibility that put "you survived the night," in a language with no more than a few dozen fluent speakers remaining, on Kyé7e's mug.

The first two summers of college, when I lived in Canim Lake, I spent my weekdays learning language with Kyé7e, visiting elders, and listening to stories. I spent my weekends competing as a northern traditional dancer on the powwow trail, driving to celebrations as distant as the Enoch Cree Nation twelve hours northeast near Edmonton, Alberta, and the Pala Band of Mission Indians twenty-five hours south in California. I was offered my first writing gig, penning a short-lived column called Powwow Reflections for *Indian Country Today*. I hung out with uncles behind the chutes at the rodeos, dipnetted for sockeye on the Fraser River, and picked huckleberries with Kyé7e at one of her secret spots.

Every once in a long while, between our language exercises, I would work up the courage to ask Kyé7e about the mission. There are many bone-chilling stories told in hushed tones and private company about St. Joseph's. I used to hear some of these tales retold from time to time around Canim Lake. But even I used to consider them more ghost story than truth. Because my own family never told them. For almost my entire life, I did not know the story of my father's birth. I did not know that those whispers I heard about the incinerator at the mission weren't just rez legends. I did not know that for Dad, me, my sister, and all the NoiseCats who will come after us, this is our origin story. In fact, I didn't even know there was much to know about my father's birth until I was well into my twenties. All I knew was that Kyé7e attended St. Joseph's, that she

finished high school and studied nursing at the Kamloops Indian Residential School 150 miles south of Williams Lake, and that she rarely said a word about any of it.

To this day, I've heard Kyé7e tell only a couple of stories about the mission. One is about how she wasn't supposed to go in the first place. Her parents tried to hide her and her older brother Tommy from the Indian agent and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police when they came to round up the kids at Canim Lake. My great-grandparents sent Kyé7e and Tommy out on the family trapline and told them to stay there for two weeks. At that cabin in the bush, Kyé7e says Tommy treated her like his servant and made her carry all the squirrels he shot. Kyé7e got fed up. Too young to understand how long two weeks was, she marched home to the rez only to be picked up by the Indian agent. Every September for the rest of her youth, she was hauled sixty miles from Canim Lake to St. Joseph's in the back of a cattle truck.

The other story I've heard Kyé7e tell is about how scary life was at the mission, where Kyé7e says little Secwépemc girls called the priests and nuns "kenkeknem," which means "black bear." "Ste7k re kenkeknem," Kyé7e and her little gal friends would whisper to one another when the priests and nuns approached. "The black bear is coming." Then they would stop speaking their language and fall silent. Because the black bear is a predator.

By the time I started writing this book, Kyé7e was the second-oldest person on the Canim Lake Indian Reserve. She's the matriarch at the root of our sprawling family tree and one of the last remaining fluent speakers of Secwepemctsín. I never wanted to trouble her—or my dad, or myself—with these stories. So silence, avoidance, and even denial became my tradition too, a tacit family conspiracy.

But then, ground-penetrating radar identified what appeared to be 215 child-sized graves beneath the apple orchard at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. Many more investigations soon followed, including at St. Joseph's Mission. The spirits of our missing children—Kyé7e's classmates, babies like my father—were coming home. And their truths could not be hidden, suppressed, or ignored any longer.

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My father, Ed Archie NoiseCat, practices the Pacific Northwest's most recognizable art form. He is a carver. Seemingly the most macho of our artistic traditions, carving channels the brawn and dexterity of the artist's hand into the edge of a razor-sharp knife, transforming the mighty stalks of our forests into works of art. Today, immense totem poles and magnificent masks taken and often stolen from the Northwest grace the collections of museums around the world.

And yet, in the artistic traditions of the Salish people, carving is considered secondary to more feminine crafts: sewing, beading, and especially weaving. In fact, the most recognizable carved Salish form, the spindle whorl, is actually an instrument of the weaver. Despite my father's prominence as an artist, our family's most prized pieces are woven by his paternal grandmother, Kicya. So even though I am the son of a carver, it is weaving that inspires me. Because like the writer, the weaver goes out into the world, meticulously gathering up materials, including bark, roots, and wool. She painstakingly processes these, often over great spans of time, until they are made workable. And then she interlaces them according to patterns, mathematics, and imagination into a vessel that will hold some essential part of our life: food, medicine, the body, a child.

To hold the story in these pages, I have turned to the silenced narrative traditions of the Coyote People. Like other Indigenous peoples, the Salish divide oral narratives relating to our history, philosophy, and environment into two categories: lexéy'em and tspetékwll. Lexéy'em are oral histories of recalled events, often from the storyteller's own life and genealogy. Tspetékwll are stories about the creation and transformation of the world, often dealing with the more distant past and the supernatural. This book is partially lexéy'em, relating a series of interlinked stories from my life, family, and genealogy. But it is also tspetékwll, retelling some of the greatest hits from the epic misadventures of the trickster Coyote, who helped Creator shape the world into its present geological, environmental, and cultural forms. The story of how Coyote brought death to the world is one such tspetékwll.

The ideas running through these Coyote Stories are always multilayered. Even though Coyote was a model of qualities not to

emulate, the trickster was behind some of the most significant acts in the creation and transformation of the world. So, while bumbling and treacherous, he was also revered.

The contradictions inherent to Coyote reflect our understanding of the world, which is shaped by people, actions, and forces that are not simply good or evil. Take Coyote's grand heist of salmon from the witches who were hoarding all the fish for themselves, preventing them from running upriver, in chapter 9. On the one hand, Coyote shared those stolen fish with the upriver Indians, creating a world of plenty and an ethos of redistribution and interrelation that sustained healthy populations of both salmon and people for thousands of years. On the other hand, even this Robin Hood–esque act was driven by the trickster's self-interest. Because as soon as Coyote liberated the salmon, he used his newfound wealth and notoriety to broker as many marriages to as many wives in as many villages along the rivers as he could. The Coyote People trace our relationship to the salmon, our right to our fishing spots, and our bloodlines back to that smash-and-grab and the wedding gifts it afforded our trickster forefather.

In these ways and others, the Coyote Stories convey a worldview wherein the complexity of humanity, nature, and life is celebrated, cursed, laughed at, and grappled with all at the same time. Multiple perspectives and interpretations live in these stories. And since this wonderful mess of a trickster is our ancestor, every time we come back to these traditions, we are also talking about ourselves—the best and worst parts of our nature, our supernatural achievements, base desires, wild adventures, tricksterly foibles, and damn good times that we believe ought to be remembered and passed on to our descendants. Because on the most basic level, the Coyote Stories told our people that it was right to remember one another and our ancestors—the good, the bad, and especially the funny.

These Coyote Stories are not mere echoes of an ethnographic past. Not at all. They are commentaries about our present. With each retelling, the speaker pulls forward and pushes back details, adding the values and interpretations of their generation to what they learned from those who came before. In this way, every story connects us to our forebears. They are living representations of who we are and how we ought to live—questions of great consequence

to the Indian world. Because, of course, the world wasn't supposed to have any *living* Indians.

And yet, the Indian world is alive and well. It is vast, with over 1,200 federally recognized Indigenous nations spread across the United States and Canada. It is transnational, with most Indians considering the "medicine line" between the two countries little more than an inconvenience. And it is interconnected. One time I was watching a TV series called *Alaska Daily* with a girlfriend who was Tlingit and Haida. Just a few minutes in, we realized my cousin was the costar, and her cousin designed the costume my cousin was wearing. My ex is from Alaska. My family is from British Columbia. Yet onscreen and on the couch, the branches of our family trees intertwined. As our elders often say at the conclusion of their prayers, "All my relations." Because for us, being related still means something.

Ours is also a remarkably diverse world. In Indian Country, neighboring peoples, reservations, and families may share blood, but that does not mean we share language, culture, or traits. Take the Tsq'escenemc, my kyé7e's people, and the Lil'wat, my pé7e's. Both of my nations are descendants of Coyote. We speak closely related but nonetheless distinct Interior Salish languages. We dipnet fish, feeding ourselves from the same roaring Fraser River. We're stout. We love to laugh so much our elders often have smile lines permanently rippling around their noses and eyes. We were sent to the same Indian residential schools. And yet, my two peoples are different.

The Tsq'escenemc, the people of Canim Lake, have drifted away from almost all our traditional culture and put our faith in the Catholic Church. When a group of Indian activists occupied a patch of land at Gustafsen Lake near our rez in 1995, our chief, Kyé7e's brother Antoine, denounced them. Today, we are actively working to make a treaty with the province of British Columbia that will settle, once and for all, our claims to our ancestral lands.

In contrast, the Lílwat7úl, the Mount Currie Indians, or "The Real Lil'wat Nation" as we call ourselves in our language, maintain many traditional songs and dances. We gather in large circles holding hide-stretched drums to sing for dancers dressed in buckskin vests and skirts, some wearing pelts of bear, deer, and coyote. And

in the 1970s, we fought the Department of Fisheries and Oceans for our fishing rights and blockaded a logging road to stop Canadian Forest Products from clear-cutting our land. The Lil'wat Nation has denounced the same modern treaty process the Canim Lake Band has nearly completed and signed off on. So, even when we eat the same fish, share the same myths, and get taken away to the same mission schools—even when we are blood relatives—our humanity as Indigenous peoples remains deeply particular, entirely distinct, and tied to our places of origin.

This truth is reflected in Secwepemctsín and in all Salish languages. In Salish, the root morpheme—the most basic linguistic unit of meaning—for "land" and "people" is one and the same: "-emc." So, every time we identify ourselves, we are saying that we are our lands, and our lands are us. This is an idea shared by many Indigenous peoples. Because to be Indigenous is to come from a particular place and people—to live and carry forward a human experience connected to generations who came before, often stretching all the way back to the creation of your people and your place. Perhaps all the way back to a time when we were not human, when we were something else—something animal, something supernatural, something more. We are all related, but we are not all the same.

Looking out at that big, diverse Indian world is one of my ways of looking within—just as looking within is a way for me to look out. Ever since Dad left, stories have helped me better make sense of him and what it means to be a descendant and son of Coyote in both the cultural and personal sense. Because in my world, my father is Coyote. He's mythic and elusive. A great creator, terrible demolisher, and downright hilarious hell-raiser. I caught sight of him maybe two dozen times from the age of eight to twenty-three. There were many calendar years when I saw him just once and some when I didn't see him at all. I had to lend him money so he could attend my high school graduation. My mom paid his way to my college commencement. And yet it has always felt like my life and identity are defined by him. And by his absence. How can that be?

How can it be that our humanity—something as fundamental as who we are—is so often shaped by people, parents, and ancestors we rarely if ever encounter? That our people can come to be defined by what was stolen from us? That our path forward so often

demands we uncover our deepest wounds and darkest secrets just to understand who we are and why we persist? If not to heal, then at least to know and name. To see this night has a story and that it is survival. To say my father, like his father before him, was a trickster in the vein of Coyote. And to know I am his son.

THE FIRST DAY

On the first day
of the first year
of my four-year
commitment to
hunger thirst &
total alone,
four days, four nights,
4 x 4, I
sit Indian-style
in the woods on
the rez near that
primordial
storied river
Coyote once
ascended &
then descended.
Four directions
red & yellow,
white & black, my
tobacco tied;
four long-ass days
when Sun lingers
hot & vivid
dry & burning
I sing & dance
pray & wonder:
What happened to
that trickster? Did
He die? Did He
abandon us?
& who & how
am I his son?

COYOTE AND HIS SON

Old-Coyote (he is called "Uncle Coyote" by some) was the ancestor of all the Indians. He had many wives. From some are descended the Thompson, from others the Okanagan, from still others the Shuswap . . .

Like Coyote himself, many of his sons had magical powers. Many of them left descendants. As Coyote travelled over a large part of the world, he left children in many places. The Salish, Kalispel, Nez Percés, Yakima, and Blackfeet, and all the interior tribes, have sprung from Coyote's children. Because these tribes sprang from Coyote, they are called "Coyote People." . . .

The descendants of Coyote spread over the country, and occupied many parts that were not formerly inhabited. At one time they all spoke the same language. It was like Shuswap. Some of them were bad people, but most of them were good.

—"Old-Coyote and the Coyote People"
from Nicola Valley in *Folk-Tales of Salishan and Sahaptin Tribes,* 1917

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FATE HUNTS THE RED MAN DOWN

A golden feast ladle earring dangled from my father's left lobe, its glint partially obscured by his thick mane of shoulder-length jet-black hair. Dad had gotten all dressed up for his first night out at the disco. "I looked cute as fuck," he declared: jean jacket with a little black, white, and red beadwork pattern on the cuff, a big silver dollar belt buckle, and even bigger hair done up in a rockabilly-style spiky super mullet. This was the 1980s, and Dad was a cool cat.

Well, maybe not *that* cool. Dad arrived unfashionably early, around six or seven o'clock. After flashing his ID for the bouncer, a stocky Italian, he discovered the Shadowbrook was no disco. Contrary to what he had been told, the Croton-on-Hudson establishment was just a popular bar with a deejay, dance floor, and relatively young clientele for a New York City suburb. But Dad's disappointment was fleeting. Because as he walked in the door, he was greeted by the bartender, a petite and curvy brunette with wavy locks, chiseled cheekbones, and an enormous smile. "Hey, hi, how are you?" she said as Dad claimed a stool.

The bartender worked as a production assistant at CBS by day, slinging cocktails by night. She was twenty-three and lived at home with her parents to save money and pay down debt. In her bedroom, she had a stack of job listings mailed to her from the central job clearing board of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. She imagined putting her education to use somewhere far, far away from New York—like an Indian reservation. Had she ever been to one? Even met a Native American? No. But the idea had lodged in

her mind, and she could not shake it loose. And then in walks this guy. She poured him beers until closing, and they talked all night.

My father was a rascal and a wanderer. But he did not know any of the epic tales of the trickster Coyote. And he had no clue that Coyote was his ancestor. Even though Dad was a full-blooded child of the Coyote People, he was alienated from his language, which he stopped speaking as a small boy. He did not know any of our people's songs or dances. He didn't know any stories besides the ones he lived. And even those were so painful that he tended to forget them. He had clubbed a few dozen fish and several Indians in his day. But he'd never shot a deer, let alone a moose—his people's favorite. In fact, he hated who he was and where he came from so much that he left it all behind: his family, his rez, and before long, even his name. A long way from Canim Lake, Dad walked into a bar looking for a new woman and a better life, not knowing that though he had ventured far, he was still walking in the tracks of his original ancestor, Coyote.

But who was this Coyote?

Coyote was a trickster whose very name was a trick. Because Coyote was no mere coyote. He was a transformer who, despite his name, assumed the body of a man more often than he took the shape of a canid. More antihero than hero, Coyote was infamous, but not popular. Ever since Creator sent Coyote down to earth to finish what Creator had left undone, Coyote traveled the land, womanizing, creating, destroying, stealing, tricking, getting tricked, dying, resurrecting, and then dying again. Though Coyote was one of the immortals, he was always getting himself killed. Jesus died and then, on the third day, miraculously rose from the dead. Christians honor his resurrection every Easter. Coyote, Creator's prolific and often unreliable apprentice, perished and rose from the dead so many times, the Indians lost count. There are no Coyote holidays. Just Coyote Rocks, stone formations created from the trickster's body littered across our lands, marking his feats and, more often, failures.

Though he was responsible for creating a lot more stuff than Jesus, Coyote was no messiah. He kept himself and his chroniclers entertained as he patched together a world out of repurposed parts

in a long string of botched and half-assed jobs. Traversing material and mythic realms, Coyote was a complicated figure who, like the nations, peoples, and bards who told epic tales of his many misadventures, was constantly reinventing himself. One day, he was the cleverest trickster this side of the Continental Divide. He taught the cannibals not to eat men. He saved the Canoe Creek Indians from almost certain massacre at the hands of Cree raiders and downriver rivals. And he bested Grizzly Bear in a game of wits to preserve daylight and guard the warmer seasons from constant winter. But just as often, Coyote was a fool. He lost his eyeballs to Raven, who stole and probably ate them when Coyote thought it would be cool if he learned to juggle. Now he's got poor vision and rose-berries for peepers. He froze his tail ice fishing and then singed his coat black when he stood too close to a fire trying to save himself from frostbite. And on more than one occasion, he was transformed into stone by Creator for sleeping—and sleeping around—on the job.

A prolific if experimental sculptor of geological transformations bridging past, present, and future, Coyote was a multimedia artist who fashioned works from rock, wood, water, animals, birds, fish, humans, and his favorite: dung. Coyote was revered for this transgressive creativity. But he was also mocked for it. To almost every Indian, the trickster was an example of how *not* to be. Which is funny, because for most of my life, that's how I saw my dad too.

After graduating from high school, Dad built houses on the Canim Lake Indian Reserve. He was good at it. He wasn't the boss—on the rez, that was often his dad, Zeke. But he was usually the guy the boss would finger as the one whose work should be a model for everyone else's. "Little Boss," some of the other guys called him.

Not long ago, the Indian world was one where knowledge, wealth, and power were almost entirely derived from your hands. If you wanted a nicer cabin, you needed to know how to build it. If you wanted to eat, you had to go catch the fish, chase the game, and process the food. And even if you knew which plants could heal, you still had to make the medicine—with, of course, your hands.

Places like Canim Lake used to run on handiwork. To a certain extent, they still do. That's why there are so many vehicles, tools,

and parts piled up in front of uncles' houses on our rez and every other rez I've ever visited. This was and is the edge of capitalist civilization, where paved roads end, dirt roads turn treacherous, and retail is far away. Back in Dad's day, if you had to fix a car or anything else, you better hope you, your cousin, or your partner down the way had the tools, parts, and skills you needed in one of those heaps and pairs of hands.

Dad's dad, Zeke, was the king of heaps and hands. He could do almost anything with them. Dad inherited this gift. His hands are meaty, dexterous, and beautiful, like his father's. He moves them with immense power and unfathomable precision. He creates. When I was a little boy, he built a tree house and sandbox—into a hillside—like it was nothing.

But sometimes, like his dad, he also destroys. One time the working boys were partying on the rez. Dad's cousin Mike came around drunk and lippy.

"What the fuck you guys doing, huh? Little Boss?" Mike slurred. "You think you're so good, Little Boss."

"Fuck off, Mike," Dad shot back. "Leave me alone."

Mike got right up in Dad's face. He was one year Dad's senior. By all accounts, he was one hell of a hockey player and he's still a thick man. Maybe he thought Dad would back down. But as soon as Mike came within an arm's length, Dad swung and—*boom*—his cousin dropped like a sack of potatoes.

Dad travels through the world as a roving fist of justice. If anyone crosses him or his in a way that sets off his sixth sense for oppression and bullshit, Dad transforms into a brawling Indian superhero-vigilante in the mold of Billy Jack out for ass-kicking decolonization. "That was my way," he told me. "I would always pick the biggest guy and kick his ass or die trying."

But in the 1980s, the power of hands and the value of handiwork were declining at Canim Lake as elsewhere. Dad's hands couldn't earn him much on the rez. Though he was one of the best laborers, he made just five bucks an hour. And he was often assigned the most dangerous jobs. When the crew built the gymnasium that still doubles as our band office, the seat of government on our little reserve, Dad was the worker way up on top of the walls, two, maybe three stories above ground, risking back and legs. Still, he got nothing