

## a small one



IT WAS A BAD SIGN to almost lose her son the night before Riel arrived. He was miles away yet, but Josette could feel him, a spider at the outer edge of its web and her a fly in the centre, waiting. She laid a hand to her son's forehead and stared at him a long while in the light of a candle that flashed shadows up the walls. Only hours ago she had boiled water to bathe his lifeless body, yet here he breathed, black lashes upon his cheek mocking existence. The priest would say it pleased God to raise him up again.

Air in the backroom was stale, humid. When she blew out the candle, the bundled shapes of her four sleeping children faded into darkness. Even the whippoorwills were silent in the trees behind the house, just a yard of luminous moon glancing off the sod roof and sweated heat rising in the eaves.

Out on the porch, she lifted her dress around her thighs and let the front door swing wide to clear the smell of vomit and fever. She closed her eyes, whispering prayers to the Cree spirits for rain. A full moon

rose in a sky pricked with stars—Thunder Moon her people called it—the colour of ripe wheat, lurid and immense. Mosquitoes buzzed at her neck; she could feel the strange touch upon her skin, flickering wings and then some low dull sound near the barn that made her turn and drop her skirts. But it was no more than night wind stirring the trees. Norbert's four sled dogs had disappeared, only a skunk scent that rose from the parched fields, the sunburnt pigweed, and her grandfather's voice in her head.

*Drought smell's not far off from death.*

Wahsis cried out, but he had settled by the time she reached the backroom door. She wanted to wring a fresh cloth with river water for his brow but when she went to the pail, found that her eldest daughter had forgotten to fill it before dark. The scar ached between her legs, a tear the midwife had sewn closed with a beading needle less than three years ago. Josette touched herself there, not in desire—she had put that away from her—but in memory of how Wahsis had been yanked from her womb. The blood had rushed out like a river at spring melt. To save her life, the midwife pushed her hand in and worked it to the place the baby had come only moments before.

When the bleeding finally slowed, the midwife met her eyes, fist still in her body and said, "The next one will kill you."

Josette picked up the pail and went down the porch steps, the earth nearly as bright with moon as it was that day with sun. The handle abraded her palm. Her long black skirts trailed in the dust of the yard, now in dead grass, almost soundless. Once her husband had admitted that he craved the sweet mystery of her, that he lived there. He said it was something like hunger. She was captured, like one of the animals in his traps, the wild escaped from it, leaving only what it showed to the world.

Near the bluff, she passed a hallowed place, pickets stark against the sky, and small wooden crosses darkening over bones, now powdered and mute. She imagined taking out her knife, drawing it down the blue veins of her wrists. The blood would drip from her arms and sink into the dirt as Eve's had in the first days of creation. Blood in shame for her sin, blood for the mortal stain left on woman.

Heat issued from the earth, a smell of wolf willow and sweet grass on the sloping trail to the river. A high-pitched snarl came from below; most likely a pack of dogs, some Norbert's, were hunting down the bank. Stars flared in an arc above her head, the path of light on the river sure as his hands had been, pressing her in a more urgent manner than before, and her rising from the body with helpless judgement. At the river's edge, she stood in the reeds, the hem of her skirt and her moccasins wet and cool in the lapping damp. The current seemed languid. Last week, a Hudson's Bay steamer on its way to Prince Albert had its hull ripped out by rocks and lay stranded not far upstream from here.

When she waded in, the river pulled at her knees. One version of her kept walking until it caught her skirts and carried her under, but she thought of her children lying up in the house. She lowered the pail, let it fill, and brought it up the trail. Yards from the barn, four spectres gleamed and hovered, staring sightless to the night sky, blunt vertiginous snouts that had once snuffed prairie grass. Their empty eyes sought stars. As she grew closer they revealed themselves: buffalo skulls on each fence post of her garden, the bones bleached white as a stone from years in the sun. The fence was purposeless. No rabbit would bother with carrots and potatoes reduced to the earth by weather.

She put her hand to the paddock gate and looked south. Smoke still coiled from the Dumonts' summer kitchen chimney, the front meadow awash in moonlight. Louis Riel would stand there tomorrow before the feast tables. How could she face him? She wouldn't. It was men he had come to see, and he'd take no mind of her or any other woman. The Old Crows would stand there too, urging him to taste their *boulettes* and bannock, close to peeing themselves that the great Métis hero was finally among them. The Old Crows, who did not fear for their lives when their husbands came to bed.

She set the pail by the door and dipped a cloth to lay on Wahsis' brow, her wet skirt cool against her legs. She let herself down next to him, hot, tired, ready to sleep, but no sleep would come. *Ôyêhâ*, she whispered in Cree, to the one no longer there. A light had gone out in her when she'd found her daughter, still and cold, taken in the night. She had carried that wasting body out of the house, arms heavy with

more than the weight of her. So many died they were expected not to mourn.

Through the thin straw mattress, a loose set of planks that served as a floor, and the hard-packed dirt below, the sound of a horse came long before it galloped into the yard. On the other side of the room, Cleophile's eyes flicked open.

"Go back to sleep," Josette whispered. Her daughter turned to face the wall. Josette lay stiff on her side, listening. She counted the moments, Norbert leading his mount to the barn. Now removing its saddle and bridle. Rubbing it down. Of late, her husband had sat on the porch staring out at the dry fields, ignoring her when she dared speak, then taking off on his stallion, coming back with the horse foaming and close to death. He would not feed the dogs for days until they were half-starved and looked at the children as prey. He might be on the edge of one of his headaches that would keep him in bed for days.

He might be on the edge of something else.

When he looked at her in a certain way, she knew what was coming, sometimes even sparked his anger to control one small thing.

His great shadow appeared at the door. "Cleophile," he said, his voice slurred. "Unsaddle the horse."

The girl roused herself quickly. She slipped her bare feet into moccasins and walked past Josette, her eyes down.

When Cleophile had closed the front door, Norbert said, "Come out."

"Wahsis is still sick," Josette said, her back rigid.

"He's asleep. Come out."

When she did, Norbert had struck a match to a candle and was sitting at the table, his face bloated with drink. Her eyes lighted a moment on a blooded cut at his lip. Two dead rabbits lay in front of him, their necks twisted from the snares.

Norbert saw her looking at them and said, "I do not neglect my duty."

She had watered the backfields by hand while he drank himself stupid in Batoche, and he expected her to praise him. This man she'd once loved, tall and thickly built. A jutting chin and dark hair that

twisted at the scalp and fell across his eyes prompted the women to call him fine-looking, when they didn't think she was near enough to hear. Then their voices would hush. "*Tant pis*—that one's not right in the head."

"Make a fire," he said.

"The house is hot," she said in a quiet voice. "Wahsis burns with fever."

"A small one."

She turned, fingernails digging at her palm. He needed to see her move through the room and then blame her for stirring his desire. She lighted a few sticks of kindling in the stove to keep the flames low. Cleophile came in and went to the backroom without looking at either of them. She closed the door behind her.

Josette gathered the collar of her dress close around her throat and turned to face Norbert. Then she was kneeling, struggling with the ceinture fléchée that held up his pants, praying he was too drunk to care how he arrived at his relief, but he pushed her hand away. She got up and faced the table, offering her backside. He wrestled with her skirts, his frustration mixed with mounting excitement. If she closed her eyes, she could will a kind of want that would make it tolerable, a desire she once had for him. Finally, he exposed her and spit into his hand.

She did not make a sound as he stabbed at her, tearing the small scabbed gashes. He pulled away and put a knee to her ribs, turning her as he would a calf for branding. She was winded, her chest bruised, and could feel the limp bodies of the rabbits beneath her. His face went slack with desire as he looked down between her legs, as a man would after months on the trail, spurring his horse upon seeing home.

"Michel Dumas says his wife lets him have it when he wants."

Norbert entered the place she'd kept from him, and she bit down on her tongue, felt the midwife's stitched scar splitting open like wood to the axe. He held her shoulder with one hand, was drunk, had killed to prove his worth and would not be turned. If she fought him, the children would hear. She turned her face to the candle, a lone flame guttering in a sudden draft, its small heat making the air shudder.

"Spill outside of me," she whispered, but he buried himself deeper,

his back rounded and hard. She thought she would not stand another moment when he finished with a whimpering cry.

Josette got off the table and lowered her dress around her ankles, resisting the urge to clean the mess between her legs. At her back throbbed a dull, hammering ache made worse by the sight of the rabbits, their legs shamefully distorted by death, glassed eyes staring.

He pulled up his pants, spoke of riding out at dawn to meet Riel on the trail, and wanted something to eat from what she had cooked for the feast. She looked at the floor, wooden slats that he had found discarded in someone's midden heap and laid so poorly they shifted, revealing crude gaps of beaten earth. Norbert was tying his ceinture fléchée, and its long fringe flicked the back of her wrist. The feel of it, like a lash, or something that would finally bury her.

"I have made nothing."

Norbert snatched at the rabbits once, twice, finally getting his hands on them and swept them off the table. She closed her eyes as the broken bodies fell at her feet.

"You will cook for him," he said. "And be there when we bring him in."